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The Arab Influence in Robert Browning's Poetry: The Arab Culture in Browning's Poetry

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Abstract

Robert Browning is one the famous poets of the Victorian era. He wrote a lot of great poems in addition to many other literary forms. Upon reading his poetry, one may feel the taste of the Arabic flavor, I mean the Arabic influence. Browning, like many 19th-century poets, was exposed to Arabic literature wrapped in what is known as the literature of the Orient. The following paper is going to explore the Arab influence on Robert Browning's poetry. Few famous poems have been chosen to trace the Arab impact on Browning's poetry. Our focus will be on the content more than the form, mainly, wisdom and other cultural affairs.

Keywords: Robert Browning, Victorian Poetry, Arabs, Literature, Influence, Arab Culture, Browning's Poetry

Introduction

From the eighteenth and, perhaps earlier, to the nineteenth century, the Arabs with their culture have been the center of interest to western people. The attraction of the West to the Arabs of the Middle East came as a result of several factors mainly the translation of the Arabian Nights, (a collection of charming fables, fairy tales, romances, and historical anecdotes, by Sir Richard F. Burton 1821–1890 in 1888), and many other contacts including trade, colonization, and economy. After the English had been fed up with the literature of their adoration of nature, fairy tales, and classics, the English wanted something exotic, and their attention went toward the literature of the Arabs. Nasir (1976), a researcher in Victorian affairs, "confirms that it is not easy to find a person who had never read the Tales [the Arabian Nights], in his youth and does not remember them still" (p.54). The Eastern culture and that of the Arab in essence were a great source of influence on Western literature. Eliot concludes, "For almost all our good things, … our religious and philosophical ideas, our very nursery tales and romances have traveled to us from the East." (Eliot, 1896, p. 175). Robert Browning (1812- 1889) is not a special case, he shares his

contemporaries in showing his interest in Arab literature. Whitcomb (1922) realized Browning's interest in Arab Wisdom, mysticism, and ethics, together with their religion and other cultural things (Whitcomb, 1922, p. 17).

Khattab, (1983), has closely examined more recently the number of references to 'things Oriental' in Browning's poetry, such as the themes, the imagery, and the atmosphere as purely Oriental (p.116). This paper is going to show the Arab influence in Robert Browning's poetry, especially, that point referred to culture, in 'Browning Upon Arabia', Jaouad (2018) confirms that Browning gave much attention to the literature of the Arabs including their history, philosophy, and culture. He concludes that Browning aims "to produce poetry that is sensitive to its Eastern resources and devoted to confirming the interrelation of Northern and Eastern knowledge in pursuit of a new form of transcendental humanism, one that places 'mere man's nature' at the center."(p. xii) Browning was introduced to Arab literature at his home by his family, "For Browning, ancient Egypt, and contemporary India came to represent the world. Together, they formed a literary Orient, essentially derived from books he had read from his father's library. Fascinated with its torrid climate and exotic landscapes, Browning characterizes his East not by its culture, but by its unfamiliar geography" (Jaouad ,2018 , p.32).

In Paracelsus, (1835) Browning "configures ancient Egypt as a land that exudes a quaint aroma that haunting yet 'faint sweetness from some old / Egyptian's fine worm-eaten shroud / Which breaks to dust when once unrolled." (Jaouad,2018, p.32) The poem 'Saul' (1890) "provides another example of Browning's continued exploration of the roots laid out in Incondite. The 'first-born' is now an adult named David, singing to Saul in the poem, praising the beauty of a full physical life, in a voice, tone, and even words that echo back to his juvenilia:

Oh! Our manhood's prime vigor! No spirit feels wasted,
Not a muscle is stopped in its playing nor is sinew unbraced.
Oh, the wild joys of living! The leaping from rock up to the rock,
The strong rending of boughs from the fir tree, the cool silver shock
Of the plunge into a pool's living water, the hunt of the bear,
And the sultriness showing the lion is couched in his lair" ('Saul,' IX. 68–73, Vol. IV, p. 250, emphasis added) (Jaouad, 2018, p.32).

In his first major published work, 'Pauline': "A Fragment of a Confession (1833), Browning lays out his conception of the East, not only as a place of renewal and rejuvenation but as a symbolic spiritual experience, a quest. The poet's quest, his flight of fancy, so to speak, is expressed through familiar Sufi bird imagery. Coincidentally, there is also a first Arab reference in this text:

And I said 'Are ye strong? Let fancy bear me
Far from the past!'—And I was borne away,

As Arab birds float sleeping in the wind,
O'er deserts, towers, and forests, I being calm"
(Jaouad, 2018, p.33).

In 'Paracelsus', Browning is fascinated with the Arab culture, and their religion: "The Renaissance, especially in Italy, came to embody the felicitous encounter of the ancient with the new, the East with the North , in myriad productive and enriching ways." (Jaouad,2018, p.33). Browning "reimagines and transfigures Paracelsus as an inspired, Godchosen seeker of arcane and mysterious knowledge, who will journey to the ends of the world to satisfy his unbounded curiosity:

'Think, think!
The wide East, where all Wisdom sprung'

Unconcerned about the perils he might encounter along his way, he ultimately seeks to test himself: 'I go to prove my soul!'(I. 785–787, Vol. 1, p. 105). The knowledge he seeks and obtains is perforce eclectic and syncretic, the product of many traditions:

[…] I possess
Two sorts of knowledge; one,—vast, shadowy,
Hints of the unbounded aim I once pursued:
The other consists of many secrets, caught
While bent on the nobler prize" (III. 921–927, Vol. 1, p. 183) (Jaouad,2018, p.33).
"Browning presents Paracelsus's quest as a parable, with the moral that
knowledge for knowledge's sake does not necessarily lead to wisdom:
'Let men / Regard me, and the poet dead long ago / Who loved too
rashly; and shape forth a third / And better-tempered spirit, warned by
both' (V. 885–888, Vol. 1, p. 265) Upon Upon Arabia p.34

This new, 'third spirit,' tempered by both science and the trifecta of love, beauty, and art, can build a bridge across temporalities and geographies, encompassing and transcending both North and East." (Jaouad ,2018, p. 34). Jaouad comments Paracelsus enunciates Browning's vision of man's true place in the universe, proclaiming that knowledge is to be sought within:

'to know, / Rather consists in opening out a way / Whence the imprisoned in dignity
may escape, / Than in effecting entry for light / Supposed to be without'
(I. 733–737, Vol. 1, p. 103) Browning Upon Arabia, p.34.

Here, 'splendor' is man's dignity 'imprisoned' by man's limitations; by 'may escape,' Browning/Paracelsus refers to man's 'destiny.' Beginning with Paracelsus, Browning creates a gallery of characters who tend to seek rather than find, picking up, like

the Arab physician Karshish, crumbs of knowledge and shards of wisdom throughout their travels and encounters" (Jaouad ,2018, p.34). Toward the end of Part V, Browning reprises the book-burning scene to foreground Paracelsus's 'third spirit,' an original intellectual project that parallels and yet depart from the historical Paracelsus's itinerary.

This particular scene illuminates Browning's Paracelsus's relationship to the Arab sages. His friends question whether he indeed burned the books of his predecessors, as the historical Paracelsus presumably did, but Browning's Paracelsus deflects the question to yet another controversial personage, Martin Luther. Paracelsus answers the question of whether he burnt the books:

I remember. Here's a case, now,
Will teach you why I answer not, but burn
The books you mention. Pray, does Luther dream? (Jaouad ,2018, p.34)

Browning in Paracelsus portrays many famous Arabs like Avicenna
"as a medical doctor and alchemist, the protagonist Paracelsus
was well versed in the theosophy of Avicenna and Rhasis, especially about the question
of the soul and its development, a lifelong preoccupation
of Browning's" (Jaouad ,2018, p.36).

'Sordello' (1840), "Although set in Italy, Sordello could have been written within earshot of the East, a nineteenth-century European 'Orient,' an anachronism that Browning uses as a parody to decry a slanted and reductive vision of the East and to deride Romantic-Orientalist aesthetics heralds form over matter, one that promotes idealism and individualism devoid of objective and historical consciousness. In a thinly veiled attack on Wordsworth's aesthetics and especially his 'new wisdom of nature,' the philistine Naddo mockingly advises Sordello to emulate poetry clothed in the Romantic-Orientalist garb in vogue at the time:

Shall I school
My master' added Naddo, 'and suggest
How you may clothe in a poetic vest
These doings, at Verona?
Have you groped
Our wisdom in the wilds here?—thoughts may be
Over-poetical for poetry.
Pearl-white, you poets liken Palma's neck;
And yet what spoils an orient like some speck
Of genuine white, turning its own white grey? 28 (1864, pp. 2, 821–822,
emphasis added)" (Jaouad ,2018, p.37).

Browning in 'Sordello' shows more traces of the Arab East for it "contains many

references to the East and exhibits Eastern topoi and characters, especially those of Arabic and Persian origin. In Sordello, Browning exhorts his contemporary readers to learn 'Arab lore,' since it 'Holds the stars' secret'29 (1800, 4.600). By mastering Arabic, they will also master the language of astrology and science. Splendid in its breadth and depth, Sordello's knowledge is as vast as his ambition. Moreover, his quest is altruistic, devoted to the development of the soul and the betterment of humanity. As such, Sordello, like Paracelsus, incarnates Browning's humanist ideal:

So seemed Sordello's closing truth evolved
By his flesh-half's break up; the sudden swell
Of his expanding soul showed Ill and Well,
Sorrow and Joy, Beauty and Ugliness,
Virtue and Vice, the Larger and the Less,
All qualities, in fine, recorded here,
Might be but modes of Time and this one sphere,
Urgent on these, but not of force to bind
Eternity, as Time—as Matter—Mind,
If Mind, Eternity, should choose assert

Their attributes within a Life.30 (p. 320, 6.464–474, Vol. 2)" (Jaouad ,2018, p.38). The Arab wisdom can be seen in Sordello, "The ultimate goal of the quest for wisdom is what Sordello calls the 'sages' way,' or completeness in oneself. Paracelsus and Sordello also seek complete knowledge, one that can unite the alchemist-poet and the man within them. In the last line of Sordello, Browning proclaims:

But the complete Sordello, Man and Bard,
John's cloud-girt angel, this foot on the land,
That on the sea, with, open in his hand,
A bitter-sweetling of a book—was gone" (p. 180, 2.690–693, Vol. 2)

"A seeker of eternal wisdom and an avatar of ancestors from both East and West, Sordello also finds himself caught in an impasse: He lived in the same way he died, 'under the stress of choice.' Sordello thereby continues Browning's interest in the metaphysical issue of the developing soul, an experiment Browning later fleshes out in some of his distinctly Eastern poems" (Jaouad ,2018,pp. 32- 38).

In his beautiful poem Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli (originally called Rudel and the Lady of Tripoli), published in 1842, Browning talks about what is called courtly love, or spiritual love, love based on the spirit rather than the body. originally, such ideas of love came from the Arabs who referred to it in their poetry as 'Zajal, or lyric in English. Rude fell in love with an Arab lady from Lebanon. The poem "represents not only the mystical East, the Levant, but also the meeting place where love can transcend cultural, ethnic, and

religious barriers and identities. The story of the troubadour Rudel presents a rare instance in Northern poetry of what today we call cross-cultural encounters, but also of a special sort of love—a love at first hearing, when the ear loves before the eye. Rudel fell in love with a woman whose beauty he had heard of but never seen. The theme of 'love from afar' (amor de lonh or amour de loin) is an especially well-rehearsed topic in Arabic poetry from early on. Every Arab schoolboy remembers these famous lines by Bashar Ibn Burd:

'The lover sees with the heart, / Not
with the eyes does one see in love, / and through the heart only the
ears can hear.' Browning himself experienced in 1845 a similar love affair
by hearsay. He fell in love with Elizabeth Barrett Moulton-Barrett, his
future wife, before setting eyes upon her" (Jaouad ,2018, p.42):
Dear Pilgrim, art thou for the East indeed?
Go!—saying ever as thou dost proceed,
That I, French Rudel, choose for my device
A sunflower outspread like a sacrifice
Before its idol. See! These inexpert
And hurried fingers could not fail to hurt
The woven picture; 'tis a woman's skill
Indeed; but nothing baffled me, so, ill
Or well, the work is finished. Say, men feed
On songs I sing, and therefore bask the bees
On my flower's breast as on a platform broad:
But, as the flower's concern is not for these
But solely for the sun, so men applaud
In vain this Rudel, he not looking here
But to the East—the East! Go, say this, Pilgrim dear!40 (p. 238, III.
22–36, Vol. 3) (Jaouad, 2018, p.43).

Jaouad says this poem shows Browning's interest in the East. "Besides the theme of spiritual rebirth, often linked to the East, reprised by Browning in several texts, the poem also communicates the irresistible call of the Orient, the journey eastward in the mystical sense. This is the Orient of the heart and the spirit:

'To the East—the East! Go,' whose call we hear echoed in
Gérard de Nerval's Aurélia: 'Où vas-tu? me dit-il. Vers l'Orient!'41 Like
Browning's, Nerval's pilgrim represents a modern nineteenth-century
incarnation of Rudel"(Jaouad ,2018 , p. 43).

"The East acts as the Pilgrim's guiding star, inexorably turned toward the Levant for redemption just as the Sunflower faces the sun for its efflorescence and survival. Both

human and divine, the inaccessible woman, the Lady of Tripoli, represents the Sun of love. Implicit in Browning's pronouncement that the 'Arab's wisdom [is] everywhere,' is an exhortation to the reader to look for this 'wisdom,' but also throughout his works. Besides Rhasis, Avicenna, and Averroes, the other illustrious embodiment of this Arab wisdom in Sordello is the figure of Haroun al-Raschid whose caliphate, in contrast to Charlemagne's Europe, stands for enlightenment and humanism. His a gift to Charlemagne of various automata, including a water clock in P.43. year 807, represented the first exchange between North and East, initiated by an Arab and Muslim king, both Commander of the Faithful and a patron of science and art:

The Caliph Haroun's man of brass receives
A meal, ay, millet grains and lettuce leaves
Together in his stomach rattle loose—
You find them perfect next day to produce
But ne'er expect the man, on strength of that,
Can roll an iron camel-collar flat
Like Haroun's self "!42 (1840, 5.435–44)(Jaouad ,2018, pp, 43,44)

In his love poem 'A Pearl, A Girl' found his book, Asolando, published in 1889, Browning explores Arab wisdom, perhaps inspired by the Arabian Nights. Through the poem the poet refers to many Arab names like Aladdin and others, he also mentions Bulbul, the famous bird that appeared in the Arabian Nights. Browning refers to this poem as An 'Eastern Scroll':

A SIMPLE ring with a single stone,
To the vulgar eye no stone of price:
Whisper the right word, that alone—
Forth starts a sprite, like fire from ice,
And lo, you are lord (says an Eastern scroll)
Of heaven and earth, lord whole and sole
Through the power in a pearl. (1-7 lines)

'Solomon and Balkis' shows the Arab influence in Browning's poetry, "Browning blends the Talmudic and Qur'anic versions of this legend as well the names of the protagonists. The Queen of Sheba is addressed by her Arabic name Balkis"(Jaouad ,2018, p.45).

In "An Epistle" (1855) Browning writes a letter in form of a monologue, Karshish, the Arab physician is the speaker, and Abib the listener, the dialogue was centered on religious topic, doubt, and faith, a very important and common subject to both and West and the Arab East, where the speaker, Karshish, communicates his knowledge and experience to his listener, Abib. a reader of the poem comments: Browning "uses the voice

of the Arab physician Karshish to express his own fears, doubts, and concerns regarding the intellectual and spiritual system he finds himself in….. Browning's choice of the Arab voice is: culturally, spiritually, and morally indicative" (Saeed & Dabbagh, p. 2).

The letter is a kind of enlightenment to the Victorians from an Arab Middle East physician "It is highly significant that Browning was broad- minded enough to choose the eloquent, loud and clear Arab voice to awaken his Victorian audience. The noble Arab voice has its own distinguished place in Browning's poetry" (Saeed & Dabbagh, 1855, p.16) in his dramatic lyric "Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli," (1842). A passionate love story where Geoffrey Rudel, Prince of Blaye fell in love with a pretty middle Eastern princess from Tripoli demonstrates Browning's great and real Arab influence. This love story is perhaps taken from the courtly love common in Arabic poetry. however, some critics suggested that the poet learned a lot from the troubadour literature with a clear influence of Arabic literature and some suggest that Browning learned a lot about the Arabic famous kind of poetry called Lyrics or in Arabic called 'Zajal' (Khatab, 1984, p.18).

Browning read some Arabic poetry. in 1878, C. J. Lyall writes to Browning: Dear "Sir I venture to send you copies of some translations of old Arabic poetry which I recently printed in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in the hope that some people might read them with pleasure"(Khattab, 1984, p.13). In 'Ferishtah', (1884) the Dervish is created to resemble that of the Arabs, a simple man with deep mystical knowledge telling religious anecdotes. "This stereotypical figure of 'dervish' shows how Browning constructed this fictional Orientalist world and placed himself in it under the mask of an Eastern character… The poet also sets a contrast to the characteristically rational social structure of the West by representing the mystic East in this work." (292) Browning uses many images such as palms, social occasions habits, and ways of living as symbols of the Arab world. Dowden thinks that Browning's references to many Arab images and illustrations in many of his poems such as 'The Metidja to Abd-El-Kadr', and 'Ferishtah's Fancies and others are bowered from Arab sources (Dowden, 2007). Love poems with Sufi conception used by Browning might be considered another Arabic strong element in Browning's poetry. "Sufism as a concept combining love and religion as 'the love of God' is of an Eastern origin. Browning's personal opinions were overlapping with the Sufist philosophy at the time he was writing this work… Ideologically, Browning represents the East as a cradle of spirituality and mysticism" (Belenli, 2017, pp. 298-299).

Within the Muslim world, a dervish is also known to be a wise man who tells people stories with moral messages. Throughout the work, which consists of twelve poems, Dervish Ferishtah is a remarkably exotic figure in that he is highly sensitive. He has a deeply mystical and reflective voice as he tells stories and teaches youngsters lessons. This stereotypical figure of "dervish" shows how Browning constructed this fictional Orientalist world and placed himself in it under the mask of an Eastern character. This image serves Browning's aim of conveying his own ideas on certain philosophical and spiritual issues.

(Belenli, 2017, p. 292) …….The poet also sets a contrast to the characteristically rational social structure of the West by representing the mystic East in this work (Belenli, 2017, p. 292).

Browning constructs his ideology by using Oriental materials and conveys his messages under the disguise of this Persian sage in the The Oriental setting of Ispahan and Nishapur (Belenli, 2017, p. 293). The stereotypical images of palms, turquoise, Eastern exotic cities, and groups of young children gathering around a man to hear a story are frequently used in Orientalist literature. The interpretation of these representations as exotic by Western cultures is mainly interrelated with these images' nonexistence in the West. These objects or places are simply different, alien, or new to Western cultures, and thus they raise the feeling of curiosity in those who are unfamiliar with them. Browning probably chose to create such a setting in his work partly because Orientalism was almost a trend in nineteenth-century British society, and even in Europe. As a highly intellectual literary figure, the poet must have realized the fact that a fictional travel account of an imaginary dervish's travels within the Islamic world could provide a fascinating, mysterious taste to the nineteenth-century reader who was barely knowledgeable about the places described in this work. This exotic embellishment would certainly help Browning attract the attention of his potential reader more easily (Belenli, 2017, p.293).

In Browning's poems which contain Oriental material such as "An Epistle, Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, The Arab Physician," "Through The Metidja to Abd-El-Kadr," and especially Ferishtah's Fancies, it is the "illustrations" and "imagery" (Dowden, 2007) that are often Oriental, not Browning himself. Another feature that marks those poems as Oriental is that the atmosphere is "purely oriental" (Khattab, p. 45).

Mihrab Shah, Shah Abbas, Dervish Ferishtah, and a melonseller as a fervent Eastern tradesman are examples of the stereotypical Oriental figures in the work. The titles of the poems evoke the Orient, too. "The Sun," "The Melon-Seller," "Two Camels" and "A Camel- Driver" are only four of them which create images of the East in the reader's mind. The Orient of the Orientalist texts is usually depicted as a sunny, hot place; melon is an exotic fruit which grows in warm weather, and therefore it can be assumed to be an Oriental fruit; camels bring to mind the deserts of the Eastern lands. These symbols represent the Orient from the Western point of view (Belenli, 2017, p.297).

In this poem a Romantic and contemplative type of questioning of human apprehension and perception of the world is evident. Therefore, in a seemingly Orientalist poem what Browning actually does is to discuss human nature in a philosophical dimension, from a spiritual perspective. Apart from the Oriental objects and the Oriental setting, there is another Oriental aspect that Browning employs in the work. It is the love lyrics that he adds to the end of each poem which can also be associated with Sufi literature, representing Browning's ideas about love as a medium between God and man. Jones argues

in line with this issue that, for Browning, "[t]he meeting point of God and man is love. Love ... is, for the poet, the supreme principle both of morality and religion" (Belenli, 2017, p.143).

Browning's "East" is associated with spirituality, hence his philosophical and moral issues could only be discussed behind an Eastern mask. So while he was primarily aiming to deliver spiritual, philosophical, moral, and religious themes, His Feristah's Fancies stands as an example of fictional oriental literature. This poem reflects and represents the East. "According to William Clyde de Vane, Karshish as a poetic creation was one of the most admired by Browning, his originator. The poem itself was composed after some relics from Palestine, dating back to 66 A.D. was on display in the Italian Museum while Browning was visiting there. These items attracted the poet's attention, inspiring him to compose a poem focusing on a theme related to Palestine. Apart from the Gospel of John 11:1-44, no texts can be said to have any direct relation with the contents of the "Epistle". Karshish and Abid, the Arab physicians in the poem are imaginary characters. The other inspiration for Browning was the well-known book DAS LEBEN JESU by Levi Strauss (De Vane, 199-200). Our analysis of the poem will prove that it owes something to the Book of Proverbs by King Solomon, too. According to R. Tilak, "characters like Cleon, Karshish, Sludge, and … the Bishop … stand out with startling vividness and plausibility" (Saeed & Dabbagh 1855, p. 37).

The influence of the Arabs in English literature may go back to the Middle Ages as a critic suggests: "the English literature is also influenced by the Arab literature in the middle ages. The Arabian Nights was influential on many writers in the English literature. The mainspring of the influence on English writers caused a renewal and development of English literature. The translation movement helped to make the Arab culture influential on the civilizations around, including the influencing on the English literature. The Orientalists contributed to transfer the Arab Culture to Europe via translation of the Arab literature to their languages, and more. Other results are mentioned in the conclusion of the paper based on the literature" (Alshammari 2013, p.3).

For Browning, the East means most the Arabs who "become a prototype of the humanist and a projection of nostalgia for a lost 'Renaissance,'… Browning considers the category of 'Arab' a dynamic, protean, and hybrid identity often observed paternalistically and derisively from a Western perspective… the East, especially the 'Arab East,' to produce poetry that is sensitive to its Eastern resources and devoted to confrming the interrelation of Northern and Eastern knowledge in pursuit of a new form of transcendental humanism, one that places 'mere man's nature' at the center" (Jaouad, p.3. Introduction). Browning looks at the East, "As a chance for renewal and spiritual inspiration, as his character Paracelsus rationalizes, 'Think, think! the wide East, where all Wisdom sprung…" (Paracelsus, I. 785–787, Vol. 1, p. 105). (Jaouad, p.3. Introduction)

In brief, the Arab ways of life, their thinking, and their unique culture found their

place in Robert Browning's mind, the great poet of the Victorian era. He communicated to his readers the most important and the most common sophisticated poetic topics in the Arab world; courtly love, the Arab precious wisdom. The fascinating and unique Arab culture attracted the poet and made their way to his famous poems. He learned from the Arabs and wrote to the British and the world about what the Arabs have been proud of through their great and long history which is the intellectual ideas of their popular religion, and their simplicity in life and thinking.

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