

Deconstructing Stereotypes: On Western Views of Persia

Corinna Dziudzia

Abstract:

Farzad Boobani's study *Orientalist Imaginings. Representations of Persia in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* provides a detailed examination of the topic. In a number of close-reading analyses the author shows his deep knowledge and understanding of literature. Moreover, the study displays the complex relations between different interests and representations of the Orient in English literature.

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The Western look on the Middle East is often times desirous. Probably it is not by accident that in the cold times around 1800, in years without summers, oriental fairy tales spread in northern Europe and grabbed the attention of writers and readers. But the European fascination for the East has darker sides, an envy that longs for such fairy tales as the riches of the Orient, including warmer climates and libertine sexualities as well as resources and political influence. The Orient fires the imagination of both artists and strategists, but even the Urtext of all Oriental tales, *1001 nights*, is a Western fabrication set upon the Persian oral tradition. Besides the fact that the 'Orient' is a construct, Persian literature favors innovations in English literature as the study assumes, for example, that it's through translations that English adaptations become possible.

Farzad Boobani's thesis about *Orientalist Imaginings. Representations of Persia in Nineteenth-century English Literature* aims at different aspects: "It is, then, at the intersections between these literary, scholarly, and political interests that *Orientalist Imaginings* aims to place Persia and to examine its representations in a rather vast textual archive that subsequently emerged in nineteenth-century Britain." (6) The point of departure for the study is a revised positioning of Edward Said's understanding of orientalism. Furthermore, the theoretical framework includes notions of imagology that aim to explore the ways in which images of the other are codified in texts and how this codification contributes to the invention and distribution of stereotypes. Moreover, the intersections gain a superordinate dimension: The past Western literary, scholarly, and political view on the East is reflected by an Eastern scholarly one through the author of the study, supplemented by a huge number of citations from current scientific studies, from both East and West.

One of the main questions of the study is not only how Persia is represented in English writings but also what this reveals about Britain. In five chapters the study tackles romantic orientalism, Persia in romantic and Victorian writing as well as Persia in fictional and travel writing, arguing mostly chronologically, but allowing "simultaneous consideration" rather "than a strictly chronological study" (3), followed along thematic and generic lines within the chapters. The occupation with *Orientalist Imaginings* seems to lead directly into the main discourses of the 19th century, opening up the thinking of a time between (political) desires that also touches upon and promotes chauvinistic as well as racist views.

At the same time the study is to be understood as a detailed and profound introduction to a less known area of English literature that probably had a great influence on and a strong connection to the actual, discussed topics in the readers lives in the 19th century. The close-reading analyses of the variety of texts presented in the study will certainly be insightful for readers on their own merits but also in the way they are integrated into the overall argumentation that concentrates not only on different fictitious genres (beside drama) but also on more realistic genres like travel literature. Overall, the author shows not only his deep knowledge of the English writing of the 19th century but also provides insights into the Persian literary, historic-political traditions and developments, therefore offering different perspectives on this complex topic. Insofar as English orientalists were leading in Europe, they also had an impact on other scholars, like German Romanticists, as well as generations of writers up to now. At the same time the author of the study manages to illustrate that the Persian vis-a-vis actually also has a European tradition from ancient times on. It is these segments, where the author shows his overall insight into literature, which are the most enjoyable parts to read and profitable beyond a particular interest in the specific topic.

Finally, two main paradigms are carved out in chapters four and five of the study, that form the core of the considerations contrasting the 'imaginary' Persia of romantic und Victorian poetry to the 'real' Persia of travellers and novelists. These paradigms are named 'romanticist' on the one hand and 'realist' on the other and can be understood as observable tendencies. But clearly the study lines up against simplifications since the main result is that the findings are diverse. Persia is not represented – as had prominently been suspected before – homogeneously, but as culturally different and in various facets. This, for publications to come, all the more opens up the question, what would the Persian view of Persia be in contrast? Moreover, are there Persian views on Britain, probably literary views on British Orientalist Imaginings?