

The Passion for Tales: an Introduction to Ros Ballaster's Fabulous Orientals (2005)

Ros Ballaster writing about her book *Fabulous Orientals* and *Fables of the East*, published by Oxford University Press, October 2005

Narrative moves. Stories migrate from one culture to another, over vast distances sometimes, but their path is often difficult to trace and obscured by time. *Fabulous Orientals* looks at the traffic of narrative between Orient and Occident in the eighteenth century, and challenges the assumption that has dominated since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) that such traffic is always one-way. Eighteenth-century readers in the West came to draw their mental maps of oriental territories and distinctions between them from their experience of reading tales 'from' the Orient.

In this proto-colonial period the English encounter with the East was largely mediated through the consumption of material goods such as silks, indigo, muslin, spices, or jewels, imported from the East, together with the more 'moral' traffic of narratives about the East, both imaginary and ethnographic. Through analyses of fictional representations - including travellers' accounts, letter narratives, prose sequences of tales and dramatic texts - of four oriental territories (Persia, Turkey, China and India), my book demonstrates the ways in which the East came to be understood as a source of story, a territory of fable and narrative.

Fabulous Orientals is structured according to territory rather than genre. Each section opens by re-narrating an oriental story in which a feminine character serves to 'figure' western desire for the territory she represents: the courtesan queen of the Ottoman seraglio Roxolana; the riddling Chinese princess Turandocete; and the illusory sati of India, Canzade. The book goes on to explore the range of fabulous writings relating to each territory in order to illustrate how certain narrative tropes can come to dominate its representation: the conflict between the male look and female speech staged in the seraglio in the case of Turkey and Persia, the inauthenticity and/or dullness associated with China and its products such as porcelain, and the illusory dreams that are woven in the space of India and associated with its textile industries.

This is the first book-length study of the oriental tale to appear for almost a century. Informed by recent historiographical and literary re-assessments of western constructions of the East, it develops an original argument about the use of narrative as a form of sympathetic and imaginative engagement with otherness, a disinvestment of the self rather than a confident expression of colonial or imperial ambition.

Fabulous Orientals is accompanied by a companion volume, an anthology of representative oriental tales entitled *Fables of the East*. This is the first anthology to provide textual examples of representations of oriental cultures in the early modern period drawn from a variety of genres: travel writing, histories, and fiction. Organized according to genre in order to illustrate the diverse shapes the oriental tale adopted in the period, the extracts cover the popular sequence of oriental tales, the pseudo-oriental tale, travels and history, and letter fictions. Authors represented range from the familiar - Joseph Addison, Horace Walpole, Montesquieu, Oliver Goldsmith - to authors of great popularity in their own time who have since faded in

reputation such as James Ridley, Alexander Dow, and Eliza Haywood. The introduction addresses the importance of the idea of 'fable' to traditions of narrative and representations of the East. The selection has been devised to call attention to the diversity in the ways that different oriental cultures are represented to English readers. Readers of this anthology will be able to identify a contrast between the luxury, excess, and sexuality associated with Islamic Turkey, Persia, and Mughal India and the wisdom, restraint, and authority invested in Brahmin India and Confucian China.

Fabulous Orient; Fictions of the East in England 1662-1785 by Ros Ballaster hdbk (ISBN 0-19-926733-2) and *Fables of the East: Selected Tales 1662-1785* edited by Ros Ballaster hdbk (ISBN 0-19-926734-0) (ISBN 0-19-926735-9), both from Oxford University Press, October 2005

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