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Module: The MENA in English Literature

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Course Title: Victorian Travellers to MENA

### **Nineteenth-Century Realism**

The nineteenth-century perception of the MENA region in English literature is composed of Romantic poems and novels as well as autobiographical travel books and even epistolary poems with the aim of faithfully describing the people and places visited by their authors.

### **Victorian Travellers to MENA**

The French colonization of Algeria in 1830 and the presence of the French army encouraged travellers together with the development of steamships which brought North Africa within easy access of Europe. North Africa soon became a sanatorium for wealthy consumptive Victorians.

Poet **Thomas Campbell** (a Scot born in Glasgow) was the first to visit Algeria in 1834 in the aftermath of the French occupation and his visit was under the escort of the French soldiers. He wrote his impressions in the form of letters sent to his friends back in Britain and collected later as ***Letters from the South*** (1837). He also composed poems such as "Epistle from Algiers". His vision was influenced by his French hosts.

#### **Thomas Campbell *Letters from the South* (1837)**

Epistle, from Algiers, to Horace Smith  
Dear Horace! be melted to tears,  
For I'm melting with heat as I rhyme;  
Though the name of this place is All-jeers,  
'Tis no joke to fall in with its clime.

With a shaver from France who came o'er,  
To an African inn I ascend;  
I am cast on a barbarous shore,  
Where a barber alone is my friend.

Do you ask me the sights and the news  
Of this wonderful city to sing?  
Alas! my hotel has its mews,  
But no muse of the Helicon's spring.  
My windows afford me the sight  
Of a people all diverse in hue;  
They are black, yellow, olive and white,  
Whilst I in my sorrow look blue.

Here are groups for the painter to take,  
Whose figures jocosely combine, -

The Arab disguised in his haik,  
And the Frenchman disguised in his wine.

In his breeches of petticoat size  
You may say as the Mussulman goes,  
That his garb is a fair compromise  
'Twixt a kilt and a pair of small clothes.

The Mooresses, shrouded in white,  
Save two holes for their eyes to give room,  
Seem like corpses in sport or in spite  
That have slyly whipped out of their tomb.

Unlike Campbell who sided with the French, Colonel Scott who had fought in Spain and refused to continue serving “the cause of despotism.. and cold-blooded murderers”, decided to join the Emir Abdelkader against the French and gives an account of his first-hand acquaintance and life with the leader of Algerian resistance to the colonizer.

**From Colonel Scott’s *A Journal of the Residence in the Esmailia of Abdelkader and of Travels in Morroco and Algiers* (1842).**

I therefore retired from the service, with the full intention of proceeding to Tegedempt to join the Emir Abd-el-Kader, whose glorious resistance against the united power of the French nation, inspired me with admiration, at that time only considering him in the light of an Arab chief (Introduction p.vi).

On my arrival at the court of the Emir, I soon became so great an admirer of His Royal Highness’s liberal policy, that I considered I should render him a far more important service by remaining at the Esmailia, and giving the world at large a correct account of the state of his country, than by being engaged at his side in active service (vii).

Like Colonel Scott, travellers **Wilfrid Scawen Blunt** and **Lady Anne Blunt** (the grand daughter of Lord Byron) who were journeying to the Middle East and Arabia looking for studs for their horse breeding, and who came to Algeria again in the early 1870’s, were more critical of the French, having developed anti-imperialistic ideas and sympathizing with the Arabs. They shared the lives of the Bedouins and lived under their tents and readily commended the Arab virtues of hospitality and honour as reported in his *Diaries* (1919) and in *The Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt* (1907).

He translated the Mu’allaqat as *Seven Golden Odes of Pagan Arabia* (1903) and with his wife edited her *Bedouin Tribes of the Euphrates* and *A Pilgrimage to Nejd* based on her journals.

Scawen Blunt's work *The Desert Hawk: Abd el Kader and The French Conquest of Algeria* begins by W.M. Thackeray's poem: "Abd-El-Kader at Toulon or, The Caged Hawk".

**From W.M. Thackeray's "Abd-El-Kader at Toulon or, The Caged Hawk"**

... Weep, maidens of Zerifah, above the laden loom!  
 Scar, chieftains of Al Elmah, your cheeks in grief and gloom!  
 Sons of the Beni Snazam, throw down the useless lance,  
 And stoop your necks and bare your backs to yoke and scourge of  
 France!

Tw'as not in fight they bore him down; he never cried amàn;  
 He never sank his sword before the PRINCE OF FRANGHISTAN;  
 But with traitors all around him, his star upon the wane,  
 He heard the voice of ALLAH, and he would not strive in vain.

They gave him what he asked them; from king to king he spake,  
 As one that plighted word and seal not knoweth how to break;  
 "Let me pass from out my deserts, be't mine own choice where to go,  
 I brook no fettered life to live, a captive and a show." tolerate

And they promised, and he trusted them, and proud and calm he  
 came,  
 Upon his black mare riding, girt with his sword of fame. belt  
 Good steed, good sword, he rendered both unto the Frankish  
 throngcrowd,  
 He knew them false and fickle—but a Prince's word is strong.

How have they kept their promise? Turned they the vessel's prow  
 Unto Acre, Alexandria, as they have sworn e'en now?  
 Not so: from Oran northwards the white sails gleam and glance,  
 And the wild hawk of the desert is borne away to France!

Where Toulon's white-walled lazaret looks southward o'er the wave,  
 Sits he that trusted in the word a son of Louis gave.  
 O noble faith of noble heart! And was the warning vain,  
 The text writ by the BOURBON in the blurred black book of Spain?

They have need of thee to gaze on, they have need of thee to grace  
 The triumph of the Prince, to gild the pinchbeck of their race.  
 Words are but wind, conditions must be construed by GUIZOT;  
 Dash out thy heart, thou desert hawk, ere thou art made a show!

Thackeray shows familiarity with the events and geography of Algeria and ability to present an atmosphere of sympathy with the subject fraught with

Oriental imagery from Arabian tales. His aim is to vindicate the Emir and clear his name from the propaganda of French colonialism.

Wilfrid Scawen Blunt also wrote *The Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt* (1907) where he clearly sides with the revolt of Urabi and in which we can find a description of Algeria.

**From *The Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt***

The following winter, that is to say the early months of 1874, we spent in Algeria. Here we assisted at another spectacle which gave food for reflection: that of an Eastern people in violent subjection to a Western (4) ... This was worst in the settled districts, the colony proper, where the civil administration was taking advantage of the rebellion to confiscate native property and in every way to favour the European colonists at the native expense. With all my love for the French ...I found my sympathies in Algeria going out wholly to the Arabs...The great tribes of the Sahara were still at that time materially well off, and retained not a little of their ancient pride of independence which the military commandants could not but respect. We caught glimpses of these nomads in the Jebel Amour and of their vigorous way of life, and what we saw delighted us. We listened to their chanting in praise of their lost hero Abd-el-Kader, and though we misunderstood them on many points owing to our ignorance of their language, we admired and pitied them. The contrast between their noble pastoral life on the one hand, with their camel herds and horses, a life of high tradition filled with the memory of heroic deeds, and on the other hand the ignoble squalor of the French settlers, with their wineshops and their swine, was one which could not escape us, or fail to rouse in us an angry sense of the incongruity which has made of these last the lords of the land and of those their servants (5).

**Wilfrid Scawen Blunt in *My Diaries: Being a Personal Narrative of Events, 1888-1914* (1919), describes “A Visit to Tunis”**

After an excellent breakfast, Terence took me to the bazaars, which are more beautiful and more purely Oriental than any I have seen, and then to the Bey's town palace, built, but on a large scale, in the same style as his own little house, which I have just described. In contrast to all this we then passed through the French quarter, mean, noisy, and with stinks beyond description, whereas the Arab town is sedate and clean and quiet. I have never anywhere seen a contrast so entirely in favour of Islam (154).

“28<sup>th</sup> October (Sunday) – Back to Tunis, Terence tells me the agricultural colonists here are of a superior class to those of Algeria, there being some young Frenchmen of good family among them. These are opposed to annexation, and take the part of the natives as against the encroachment of the officials, but the town colonists are for making Tunis a French Province. The worst of all are some from Algeria, where they are all rabid against ‘les Arabes’ (156).

Another early Victorian traveller to MENA was **Alexander William Kinglake**, a Scotsman. In 1834 he decided to visit Turkey and the Levant despite the plague that was raging in Turkey and Egypt (there were drastic quarantine measures taken).

At Semlin, he crossed the river Save to Belgrade, entering upon Ottoman territory. From Cyprus, he sailed to Beirut and then went to Nazareth, Jerusalem, then to Cairo and finally to Damascus. When he returned home at 26, he started composing *Eothen* which was an immediate and major success. He later made several travels, notably to Algeria in 1844, but never wrote another travel book. He wrote "The Invasion of the Crimea" after fighting there himself. "The Charge of the Light Brigade" by Tennyson is also about this war, but as a needless sacrifice.

*Eothen* means "of the east". Kinglake does not just describe what the desert looks like, but what journeying in the desert feels like. This is the East itself, as he claims. Yet, he is an Englishman in the East, there is a background of English scenery even in the desert, which contains hegemonic attitudes especially when he mentions civilization in the desert.

### **From Alexander William Kinglake's *Eothen***

I hired my horses and mules (for I had some of both) for the whole of the journey from Beyrout to Jerusalem. The owner of the beasts (who had a couple of fellows under him) was the most dignified member of my party; he was, indeed, a magnificent old man, and was called Shereef, or "holy"-a title of honour which, with the privilege of wearing the green turban, he well deserved, not only from the blood of the Prophet that flowed in his veins, but from the well-known sanctity of his life and the length of his blessed beard (41).

#### CHAPTER XVII-THE DESERT

Gaza is upon the verge of the Desert, to which it stands in the same relation as a seaport to the sea. It is there that you charter your camels ("the ships of the Desert"), and lay in your stores for the voyage.

...From morn till eve you sit aloft upon your voyaging camel; the risen sun, still lenient on your left, mounts vertical and dominant; you shroud head and face in silk, your skin glows, shoulders ache, Arabs moan, and still moves on the sighing camel with his disjointed awkward dual swing, till the sun once more descending touches you on the right, your veil is thrown aside, your tent is pitched, books, maps, cloaks, toilet luxuries, litter your spread-out rugs, you feast on scorching toast and "fragrant" tea, sleep sound and long; then again the tent is drawn, the comforts packed, civilization retires from the spot she had for a single night annexed, and the Genius of the Desert stalks in.

For several hours I urged forward my beast at a rapid though steady pace, but now the pangs of thirst began to torment me. I did not relax my pace, however, and I had not suffered long when a moving object appeared in the distance before me. The intervening space was soon traversed, and I found myself approaching a Bedouin Arab mounted on a camel, attended by another Bedouin on foot. They stopped. I saw that, as usual, there hung from the pack-saddle of the camel a large skin water-flask, which seemed to be well filled. I steered my dromedary close up alongside of the mounted Bedouin, caused my beast to kneel down, then alighted, and keeping the end of the halter in my hand, went up to the mounted Bedouin without speaking, took hold of his water-flask, opened it, and drank long and deep from its leathern lips. Both of the Bedouins stood fast in amazement and mute horror; and really, if they had never happened to see an European before, the apparition was enough to startle them. To see for the first time a coat and a waistcoat, with the semblance of a white human head at the top, and for this ghastly figure to come swiftly out of the horizon upon a fleet dromedary, approach them silently and with a demoniacal smile, and drink a deep draught from their water-flask-this was enough to make the Bedouins stare a little; they, in fact, stared a great deal-not as Europeans stare, with a restless and puzzled expression of countenance, but with features all fixed and rigid, and with still, glassy eyes. Before they had time to get decomposed from their state of petrification I had remounted my dromedary, and was darting away towards the east.

Kinglake introduced a major Oriental image full of mystery and fascination, that of the desert, which will continue to figure prominently in English literature about North Africa and the Middle East.

Travellers to the Orient include translator of the *Arabian Nights* such as Edward Lane, who wrote *Manners and Customs of the modern Egyptians* and Sir Richard Burton who went disguised as a Moslem to perform pilgrimage. He wrote *Pilgrimage to Mecca and Al Madinah* where he describes his feat of penetrating the Holy Land of Islam, suffusing the depiction with *Arabian Nights* imagery of fantasy and imagination.

#### **From Burton's *Pilgrimage to Mecca and Al Madinah***

I may truly say that, of all the worshippers who clung weeping to the curtain, or who pressed their beating hearts to the stone, none felt for the moment a deeper emotion than did the Haji from the far-north. It was as if the poetical legends of the Arab spoke truth, and the waving wings of angels, not the sweet breeze of morning, were agitating and swelling the black covering of the shrine. But, to confess humbling truth, theirs was the high feeling of religious enthusiasm, mine was the ecstasy of gratified pride.

He ushered in spy figures of the 20th century such as T. E. Lawrence the British agent of the Arab revolt against the Turks during WWI who was known as Lawrence of Arabia.