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Politics and Persian Mythology in Irish Poetry

IN 1809 LORD BYRON was prevented by the Napoleonic wars from taking the European Grand Tour. He instead sailed south, through the straits of Gibraltar and across the Mediterranean, to tour Greece and Turkey. On his return he published the first two Cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812), a poem whose hero follows in Byron's wake eastwards. Gratified by the acclaim *Childe Harold* received, Byron next published two action poems set in Turkey, *The Giaour* (1813) and *The Bride of Abydos* (1813). These fluent 'Turkish Tales', as he called them, sold very well and whetted the public's appetite. On the day Byron's next Turkish tale, *The Corsair*, came out in 1814, it sold 10,000 copies.

There was one problem. For two and a half years Byron's friend, Thomas Moore, had been composing a poem set in the Persianate cultures of Mughal India and Persia (as Europeans then termed Iran). Moore was alert to differences between Turkish and Persian culture. But to the general public, both cultures were simply eastern. When sales of Byron's Turkish poems rocketed, Moore fretted that Byron had stolen his opportunity.

Byron tried to allay Moore's fears. 'Stick to the East!' he wrote to Moore in May 1813. 'The little I have done . . . is only a "voice in the wilderness" for you; and, if it has had any success, that will only prove that the public is orientalising, and pave the way for you.'¹ When, six months later, Byron proceeded to pave Moore's way further with *The Corsair*, he knew very well that Moore would be alarmed. So Byron dedicated *The Corsair* to Moore and plugged Moore's forthcoming poem. None but the Irish lyricist Moore could do 'so much justice' to scenes set in Persia, he declared, eliciting three pieces of evidence. First, 'The wrongs of your own country, the magnificent and fiery spirit of her sons, the beauty and feeling of her daughters, may there be found'. In other words, the Irish and Persians shared a similar history and temperament. What is more, 'wildness, tenderness, and originality are part of your national claim of oriental descent, to which you have already thus far proved your title more clearly than the most zealous of your country's antiquarians'. According to Byron, if the Irish had inherited their sensibility from the Persians, Moore himself was the principal heir.

Extraordinary as these claims sound today, they had considerable purchase in Britain and Ireland in the 1810s, as the first part of this article explores, while the following section investigates the use Moore made of these notions in his poem. Byron perhaps knew Moore was exploiting these notions, for the tone of his dedication has an ambivalence and irony which suggest he himself was sceptical about the soundness of claims for historical connections between Ireland and Persia. But where Byron speaks with conviction is in his assertion that Moore's poetic sensibility shares common ground with the Persian poetic sensibility. As the final part of this article explores this incisive remark illuminates what is, from an aesthetic perspective, the most interesting aspect of

Moore's poem.

By the late-18th century, a tradition of tracing the roots of the Irish to the East was entrenched in Ireland. It had foundations both in classical sources and in native Irish sources dating from as early as the 9th century. Legends of the eastern origins of the Irish famously emerge in *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, a set of legends collected during the 12th century and popularly known as 'The Book of Invasions'.² But from the late 1770s and 1780s, Irish antiquarians such as Charles Vallancey had produced a body of scholarship intended to *prove* that the original inhabitants of Ireland were emigrants from the East.

As Marilyn Butler long since demonstrated, often such arguments were political. Edward Ledwich, together with the English John Pinkerton, asserted that the Scoti, the ancient inhabitants of Ireland and Britain, are the Scyths mentioned by classical Greek sources and that they emigrated from the Middle East to Ireland via eastern and northern Europe. This theory appealed to those who saw Ireland as essentially barbarian and improved only through the arrival of the Vikings and the English settlers. In contrast, Vallancey, Sylvester O'Halloran and Joseph Walker argued variously that the Irish originated in today's India, Iran and Iraq and emigrated to Ireland by sea, via Carthage and pre-Roman Spain – that is, via the Phoenician trade-route of classical authors. The Phoenician theories show an Irish line of descent that is separate and opposed to the classical, imperial English line of descent from the Middle East via Athens and Rome. Such arguments could be used to endorse Irish nationalist aspirations.³

Debates about the ancestry of the Irish soon found a focus in the controversy which raged through much of the 19th century over the origins of Ireland's round towers, the tall, narrow, cylindrical towers seen today scattered across Ireland.⁴ Some held that monks built the towers. Others, including Vallancey, argued that the architects were Phoenician immigrants from the Middle East, who had originally used similar towers for religious ceremonies, such as Zoroastrian fire-worship.

This argument was potent. In 1770, the French scholar Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron translated the *Zend-Avesta*, the holy book of the Parsees, containing the creeds of Zoroastrianism, demonstrating Persia's pre-Islamic history and culture to the French and British.⁵ Previously, Persia had interested Europeans principally for its Shi'a government and culture. Now its ancient Zoroastrian culture attracted interest. After Duperron, to suggest the round towers of Ireland were built by Zoroastrians was to suggest the Irish were descended from one of the most ancient people on earth – and were perhaps of more venerable stock than the English.

Accompanying the claim that the Irish originated in Persia was a notion that the Irish poetic sensibility was close to that of the Persians. From the mid-17th century, a small number of European scholars had been reading, translating and commenting on a considerable body of Persian and Arabic poetry. In 1739, the historian Thomas Salmon had remarked that

Poetry seems to be a talent peculiar to the Persians, and in which they excel more than in any other part of literature. Their invention is fruitful and lively, their

manner sweet, their temper amorous, and their language has a softness proper for verse: one who did not understand a word of Persian would be charmed with hearing their verse recited, the very tone and cadence are so affecting.⁶

The English poetry of the early-18th century, Augustan poetry, places high weight on elegance and decorum of form in narrative poems. It is not surprising therefore that English scholars should have seen Persian poetry, with its lyrical forms and themes of love and devotion, amorous and mystical, as, by contrast, inherently wild, fanciful and sublime.

In 1757, with no knowledge of Persian, the English poet William Collins had drawn on Salmon's account to publish three popular poems he called *Persian Eclogues*. These poems – which inspired numerous European 'oriental' imitations – imitate what Collins conceived as the Persian poetic style: impressionistic, untamed and sublime. Irish poetry, with its old (and, by the 19th century, eroded) bardic tradition, and the predominance of song in the 18th century, was likewise seen as musical, lyrical, beguiling and tender; a poetry of suffering. On this account it seemed to manifest the key Persian poetic characteristics. Collins, for example, referred to the *Persian Eclogues* as his Irish Eclogues, as Byron indeed recalls discerningly in his dedication to Moore, remarking, 'Collins, when he denominated his oriental, his Irish Eclogues, was not aware how true, at least, was a part of his parallel'.

For Byron, Irish poetry resembles Persian poetry in its 'Wildness, tenderness, and originality', qualities exemplified in Moore's poetry, in particular Moore's *Irish Melodies* (1808-34), songs set to adaptations of Irish harp music for piano and drawing room instruments – flutes, violins. Their words are musical, mellifluous and lyrical, their moods tender, sentimental and nostalgic: here, the 18th-century cult of sensibility attains a peak. And by Byron's reading, here Moore closely approaches the Persian poetic sensibility.

Byron's dedicatory celebration of Moore's talents and achievements offered the latter excellent, free marketing for an anthology of original 'Persian' lyric poetry. Yet the poem Moore eventually published another three years later, *Lalla Rookh* (1817), does not capitalise on the notion that Moore's poetic sensibility was more or less Persian. True, there are droll echoes of the Irish Moore in the character Feramorz, a Persian-speaking minstrel from the annexed region of Kashmir. Numerous journal entries from the 1810s attest to the fact that Moore, through deftly-staged, dramatic exits from London drawing rooms after emotive performances of his *Irish Melodies*, provoked feelings of delight and devotion in his audiences. In an amusing parallel, at first sight of Feramorz the Moghul princess Lalla Rookh finds herself thinking of Krishna, the Hindu divinity whose powers in love and poetry a footnote glosses as 'The Indian Apollo', and whom the princess imagines as 'heroic, beautiful, breathing music from his very eyes, and exalting the religion of his worshippers into love'.

But *Lalla Rookh* for the most part shies away from lyric form, turning instead to decorous narrative verse. Moore was trying to make his name, and the critics of the day



Title page and frontispiece.

From Lord Byron, *Tales and Poems*.

London: William S. Orr and Co., 1848. Illustrated by Henry Warren.

State Library of Victoria, RARES 821.7 B99T.

esteemed epic (with its heroic couplets and narrative verse) and epic-romance more highly than the lyric. Moreover, the poem is political, and initially its political approach was dialectic rather than suggestive; it favours allegory and a discursive form to which the notion of progress through change over time is fundamental over the ellipses, similes and subjective impressionism of the lyric. Only when concerns about sales drive Moore to include lyric songs does he realise the potential empathy with his Persian subject-matter that Byron had anticipated.

At the time Byron published *The Corsair*, he and Moore were in the midst of a sharp, sustained satirical in-print attack on the government and crown of the United Kingdom. A chief point of attack was the prohibition against Catholics standing for Parliament. Byron had attacked this prohibition in the House of Lords in April 1812. Moore's laments for Ireland's better days in the *Irish Melodies* subtly (sometimes less subtly) plead for the removal of the prohibition (termed Catholic emancipation). When Byron said to Moore in the dedication, 'The wrongs of your own country, the magnificent and fiery spirit of her sons, may there be found' – in Persia – the first readers of *The Corsair* would have followed the allusion to Westminster's discriminations against Ireland's Catholic masses.

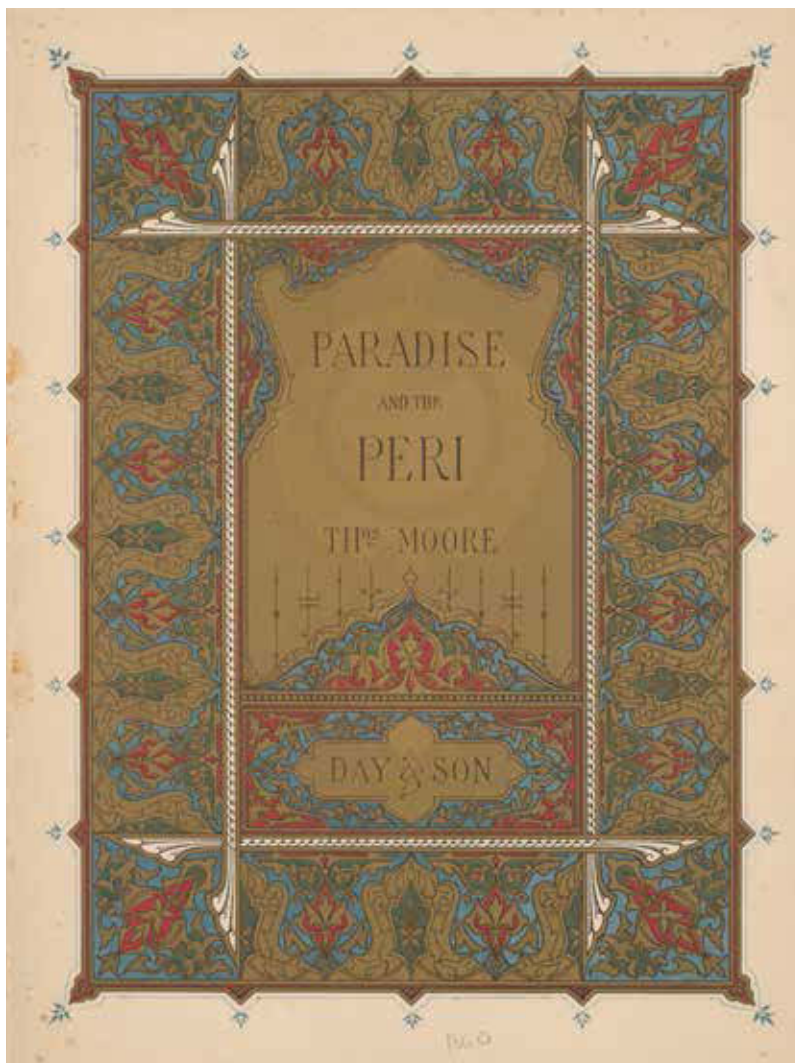
It was to critique this very aspect of the UK political system that Moore set a verse romance in the Islamic world. The third tale told by the minstrel, for example, portrays the tragic love between the leader of the last of the independent Zoroastrian Persians and the daughter of the commander of the conquering Muslim Arabs at the time of their invasion of Iran in the 7th century. Feramorz tells the tale in answer to Lalla Rookh's questions about the origins of the ruins of Parsee towers she passes on her journey to meet her bridegroom – towers whose depiction in the poem recalls Ireland's round towers and contemporary notions of the Zoroastrian origins of the Irish. In this context, the tale's celebration of the Zoroastrian leader's nobility in the face of Arab oppression implicitly attacks Britain's intolerant rule of Ireland. At least some of Moore's contemporaries understood the attack; Lady Holland refused to read Moore's 'Larry O'Rourke'.

To a considerable degree, *Lalla Rookh's* Persianate settings are a means to an end, just as in the 18th century Montesquieu and Voltaire had critiqued the French rulers through portraits of Islamic sectarian conflicts. But Moore undertook several years of research into his Persianate settings. He read widely in and about Persian literature and developed, in some points of interpretation of the Qur'an, a knowledge more detailed than that of many scholars today, whilst so apt are the poem's portraits of Persia and Mughal India that Persians and Indians as well as European travellers acclaimed it as a guide to the regions. When Moore's reading ranged into Persian literature, it inspired a far deeper influence in *Lalla Rookh*.

The poem invokes Persian literature in the first instance to provide authentic local colour. On its first page the narrative declares that Lalla Rookh is 'described by the poets of her time as more beautiful than Leila, Shirine . . . or any of those heroines whose names and loves embellish the songs of Persia'. Such literary references remind readers of the fact, relatively recently discovered by the mass of British and Irish readers in the early-19th century, that Persian literature has a long pedigree, and that one of its foremost themes is love. Layla, a note explains, emphasising the literary influence of this story, was 'The mistress of Mejnoun, upon whose stories so many Romances, in all the languages of the East, are founded'. A further note stressed the influence of Persian poetry of the 11th to 15th centuries, pointing readers not versed in Persian to accounts and translations in D'Herbelot, Gibbon and Ouseley's *Oriental Collections* of 'the loves of this celebrated beauty [Shirine] with Khosrou and Ferhad'.

Later, the poem integrates references to eminent Persian writers and literature into the fabric of the narrative. The Chamberlain thus behaves according to the dictum of the 13th-century poet Sa'di, 'Should the Prince at noon-day say, It is night, declare that you behold the moon and stars.'

Persian literature also inspires parts of *Lalla Rookh's* plot. 'Paradise and the Peri,' the second story told by Feramorz, portrays one of the Peris of Persian mythology. The Qur'an describes Peris as a type of fallen angel; the seminal poet Ferdousi portrayed them in the epic *Shahnama* ('Book of Kings') in the early-11th century. 'Paradise and



Title page.

From Thomas Moore, *Paradise and the Peri*, the second tale within *Lalla Rookh*.

London: Day and Son, 1860, designed by Owen Jones.

State Library of Victoria, RARESF 821.75 P.

the Peri' cites both texts in the course of narrating a Peri's attempt to return to heaven by offering up an earthly act of devotion. The story deeply appealed to 19th-century European sensibilities. 'Paradise and the Peri' inspired exhibitions of paintings, an opera by Schumann and a ballet. In the 19th century, then, via Moore, the Peris of the early Persian poetic imagination moved into mainstream European culture.

But Persian poetry's most significant influence in Moore's long poem is as the

source of inspiration for similes, metaphors and tropes. Thus Feramorz comments on the fidelity of the Arab-Muslim heroine Hinda to the Zoroastrian Hafed,

Sooner shall the rose of May
Mistake her own sweet nightingale,
And to some meaner minstrel's lay
Open her bosom's glowing veil

The love between the nightingale and the rose is a pervasive theme in Persian literature. By the early-19th century its origins were well-known to educated French and British people; in 1813 the poet Samuel Rogers, writing to Moore to enquire how his poem was going, asks teasingly, 'Are you now . . . in the shape of a nightingale, singing love-songs to Rose in the gardens of Cashmere?'⁷

The pathos of the trope apparently appealed to Moore, who enlisted it repeatedly. 'What is it to the nightingale, / If there his darling rose is not?' Feramorz asks plaintively in a later tale. What makes Moore's use of the trope interesting is the care he takes to point out precisely where his conceits originated. A note to the description of Hinda declared that the following lines by the poet Jami (d. 1492) inspired the conceit: 'The nightingales warbled their enchanting notes, and rent the thin veils of the rose-bud and the rose.'⁸ Moore cited as his inspiration for the question he had placed above Jami's lines, 'You may place a hundred handfuls of fragrant herbs and flowers before the nightingale, yet he wishes not, in his constant heart, for more than the sweet breath of his beloved rose.'⁹

Ever since *Lalla Rookh*'s first publication, various critics have viewed its literary quotations and citations as a parade of research that attempts to compensate for a lack of poetic voice. But Moore's citations of Jami seem, rather, the expression of a talented poet's excitement at intimating – despite barriers of language and culture – points of convergence with a tradition other than his own. This excitement reaches aesthetic fruition when Moore discovers in Persian poetry common ground with his own tradition. He makes this discovery – and his engagement with Persian poetry becomes most fruitful – when he drops narrative poetry in favour of the lyric.

For all Moore hoped that *Lalla Rookh* would be his 'grand opus', he was diffident about the achievements of his narrative romance, in marked contrast to his ease in relation to the *Irish Melodies*. Hedging his bets, he marketed *Lalla Rookh* by including songs for which his musical publisher sold piano scores. It was an astute move. The songs proved popular for even longer than the poem itself. Indeed, the popularity of some of them, above all, 'There's a bower of roses by Bendemeer's stream' endured through the greater part of the 20th century. Where the *Irish Melodies* combine wistfulness, politics and lyricism, however, 'Bendemeer's stream' combines wistfulness and lyricism not only with Persian colour but also with a subject explored in both the Persian and English poetic traditions.

In 'Bendemeer's stream' Moore again enlists the Persian trope of the unattainable love between the nightingale and the rose.

There's a bower of roses by Bendemeer's stream,
And the nightingale sings round it all the day long;
In the time of my childhood 'twas like a sweet dream,
To sit in the roses and hear the bird's song.
That bower and its music I never forget,
But oft, when alone, in the bloom of the year,
I think – is the nightingale singing there yet?
Are the roses still bright by the calm Bendemeer?¹⁰

Here rhythm, rhyme, simplicity of language and mellifluous lyricism combine to idealise both childhood as it is remembered as an adult and the distant banks of the river which runs through Persepolis in Iran.

But Moore goes further, drawing on Persian sources to intensify the link the song creates between place, nature and memory. Susan Scollay points out that in some Persian renditions of the tale of the love between the nightingale and the rose, the rose gives the nightingale her scent on a handkerchief, with the words:

Keep this in memory of me
Oh my beloved, my perfume is in this
Handkerchief so never lose it.¹¹

Moore likewise invokes the conceit that the handkerchief, with its memento of the rose, contains the rose's soul:

Some roses were gather'd, while freshly they shone,
And a dew was distill'd from their flowers, that gave
All the fragrance of summer, when summer was gone.

And then, suddenly adding depth to the short narrative, as he does so deftly in many of the *Irish Melodies*, he extrapolates

Thus memory draws from delight, ere it dies,
An essence that breathes of it many a year;
Thus bright to my soul, as 'twas then to my eyes,
Is that bower on the banks of the calm Bendemeer!

For all the musicality and dexterous lyricism of the song, this graceful extension of its argument is its most significant moment. The argument that moments of intense feeling, especially those of childhood, inspire memories which, recollected later in tranquillity, illuminate our souls, providing redress, a guiding light, and a deep connection to the landscape in which we originally experienced the emotion is one most familiar to readers of English poetry from the work of the English romantic poet, William Wordsworth.¹² In 'Bendemeer's stream,' however, Moore frames this argument not in the imagery of the English landscape which we are accustomed to associating with Romantic lyrics, but rather, in the landscape of Iran, which he views through the lens of a trope from Persian poetry. And although Bendemeer and the trope of the nightingale and the rose may be unfamiliar to English language singers and readers, the fluid and

varying lyricism of the words completely habituates the foreign references in the English ear. Here, then, Moore uses the lyric form to fuse Persian and English insights into the roles of memory and intense emotion in knowledge and fulfilment.

By this means Moore enduringly popularised Persian poetic themes, devices and scenes for English language singers and readers. In Moore's wake, it seems hardly surprising that his song should fuse these Persian and English lyrical insights. For, one way or another, in both the Persian and the English lyrical traditions these themes recur. Their recurrence suggests that the lyric form itself, whether approached in Persian or in English, encourages this type of insight. Indeed, the long popularity of Moore's song surely reflects the fact that while the setting and imagery evoke a distant, idealised time and place, its argument, that the memory of moments of delight in love or devotion can illuminate the spirit, is natural and fundamental to the lyric form in both Persian and (at least from the Romantic era onwards) in English.

Moore's achievement was to recognise the common ground between the way in which the lyric form works in both languages and to fuse the two traditions so seamlessly that today it is difficult to regard the logic of the sentiment in his song as anything other than natural. Moore thereby assimilated his Persian material to a far deeper degree than Byron anticipated, or than Byron himself achieved in relation to Turkish poetry in his own Turkish tales. But the significance of Moore's achievement is unlikely either to have escaped or to have surprised Byron, who so greatly admired Moore's lyrical talent and whose own attempt to identify with another nation in the *Hebrew Melodies* of 1815 was inspired by the *Irish Melodies* and perhaps by discussions of Moore's work in progress, *Lalla Rookh*.



Thomas Moore, *Paradise and the Peri*, the second tale within *Lalla Rookh*.
London: Day and Son, 1860, designed by Owen Jones.
State Library of Victoria, RARESF 821.75 P, p. 29.