

## **Oriental Renaissance or Orientalism?**

The advent of Romanticism coincides with the rise of Orientalism and gives birth to a complex and powerful aesthetic movement that reformulates the limits of the European imagination, taking it to the frontier where the unconscious and even the monstrous claims the title of the natural.

### Key Texts

Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, 1950

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 1971

Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978.

### Key Concepts

Imaginative Geography:	Islamic Orient	(middle east)
	Indian Orient	(east)
	Chinese Orient	(far east)

The meaning of Orient: antiquity, origin, foreign, strange, other, exotic, mystery, mystic, spiritual, romance, primitive, savage, monstrous, grotesque, awesome, terror, sublime, sensual, erotic, feminine...

### Romantic Orientalism

The Oriental Renaissance begins with the discovery of Sanskrit, “the America of languages” (Schwab) which gives birth to Comparative Philology, the pre-eminence “science” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the precursor of modern linguistics. The legacy of Comparative Philology:

- **Historical linguistics:** (proto-) Indo-European placed at the origin and apex of the global linguistic hierarchy
- **Ethnographic linguistics:** language connected to *volk*, and “Aryan” (Indo-European) placed at the apex of the ethnographic hierarchy of mankind (identification of a language with a people and diagnosis of peoplehood by criterion of language; main theorists: Herder and Schlegel in Germany; Coleridge in Britain)
- **Language theory and poetics:** influence of Sanskrit promoted organic theory of language (Romantic ideas about language as spontaneous expression or overflow, the divine or natural innateness of language and meaning etc. challenged Lockean materialism and skepticism; Herder’s notion of “primitive poetry”; Wordsworth)

## British Orientalism

The Orientalism of British Romantic literature can be traced back to the first decade of the eighteenth century, with the earliest translations of *The Arabian Nights* into English (from a version in French, 1705–08). The popularity of *The Arabian Nights* inspired writers to develop a new genre, the Oriental tale, of which Samuel Johnson's *History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (1759) is the best mid-century example.

Like Gothic novels and plays, **Oriental tales feature exotic settings, supernatural happenings, extravagant events, characters, behavior, emotion, and speech.** Gothicism and Orientalism offer escape from everyday reality but they also force confrontation with the alien (the non-human as other) and the foreign (the other as non-human). Pleasurable terror and terrifying exoticism are kindred experiences, with unreality and strangeness at the root of both.

The Orientalist Gothic tale is a (pre-Freudian) attempt to map the unconscious and the Orient/non-West (the unconscious as the Orient, the Orient as the unconscious; in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a fine example of Imperial Gothic fiction, it is Africa instead of the Orient that represents the unconscious); as such the Oriental Gothic tale contributes significantly to the development of the Romantic aesthetic of the sublime.

### Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*

- Orient as setting: Xanadu, pleasure dome, garden (exotic, lush, primitive, foreign, other, sublime)
- Orient as characters: KK (oriental despotism; extravagant, spectacular); dulcimer damsel (romance, erotic)
- Orient as form: opiate dream, fragmented form, irregular stanzas, rich sound effects