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The Wondrous Orientalism of Lord Dunsany: Traditional and Non-traditional Orientalist Narratives in *The Book of Wonder* and *Tales of Wonder*

Alyssa House-Thomas
Signum University and the Mythgard Institute

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Abstract

In this study of Lord Dunsany's "Oriental" fairy tales, House-Thomas divides Dunsany's technique and aims into "traditional" Oriental tales, of the sort Edward Said describes in his theories of Western Orientalist art and literature, and non-traditional, post-modern tales in which Orientalism is turned upside-down and the West is turned into the Other. This paper won the Alexei Kondratiev Student Paper Award at the 2012 Mythcon in Berkeley.

Additional Keywords

Dunsany, Lord. *The Book of Wonder*; Dunsany, Lord. *Tales of Wonder*; Orientalism (literary theory); Said, Edward. *Orientalism*



THE WONDROUS ORIENTALISM OF
LORD DUNSANY: TRADITIONAL AND
NON-TRADITIONAL ORIENTALIST
NARRATIVES IN
The Book of Wonder AND
TALES OF WONDER

ALYSSA HOUSE-THOMAS

I AM CERTAINLY NOT THE FIRST SCHOLAR TO NOTICE Orientalist elements in Lord Dunsany's fantasies,¹ but I believe a focused study of the different *kinds* of Orientalism employed by Dunsany in the construction of his literary corpus has so far been lacking. This paper will examine two main categories of Orientalism, traditional and non-traditional, as they appear in two representative collections of Dunsany's short stories: *The Book of Wonder*, originally published in 1912, and *Tales of Wonder*, also known as *The Last Book of Wonder* and first published in 1916. As we shall see, some of the tales in these two collections include Oriental themes and language which fall directly under Edward Said's explanatory model of Orientalist cultural discourse. These occurrences of Orientalism I label traditional, and their structural functions include the building of adventure drama, the creation of humor, and the evocation of a textual aesthetics of exoticism. Others of Dunsany's "Wonder" tales, however, demonstrate an Orientalism which seems more postcolonial than colonial, ahead of its time in inviting readers to reflect on such issues as how social narratives about the cultural Other are constructed and deployed, and how the perspective of the cultural Other may inform us about our own way of life. These manifestations of Orientalism in *The Book of Wonder* and *Tales of Wonder* I label non-traditional, and they are the ones I particularly wish to draw attention to in considering how Dunsany's Orientalist literary fantasies by turns lie in continuity with and transcend Western Orientalism, as that system of thought and discourse is commonly construed by the postmodern academy.

¹See, for example, Newman 29; Anderson 11; Rateliff, 239-40 n. 28; Lennon 209; Maume 14. [Also Sheley in this issue. -Ed.]

Orientalism: Definition and Context

First: what is Orientalism as construed by the postmodern academy? Edward Said wrote the foundational work on the subject, describing the word "Orientalism" in his 1978 book of the same title as a multivalent term which has been used to designate the academic project of area studies on Africa, Asia, the Near East or Middle East, dealing with such aspects as language, mythology, and geopolitical relations; or, alternatively, a "style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and [...] 'the Occident,'" a way of defining the West in contradistinction to the East and vice versa (Said 2-3). In addition, Said argues that a third meaning for "Orientalism," which comes historically from the confluence of the other two, is "a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient" which consists of Westerners "making statements about [the East], authorizing views of it, describing it [...] teaching it, settling it, ruling over it" (Said 3). This "corporate institution," according to Said, has been operative since the end of the Enlightenment, most actively since the growth of Western imperialism in the late eighteenth century. Thus it is fettered to European, and to a lesser extent, American, colonial interests in Oriental geopolitics. Orientalism in the academic and hemispherical senses feeds a cultural system which, as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 3), cannot be divorced from political issues. Nor, it is Said's argument, can this cultural institution of Orientalism be divorced from the processes of thought itself, because the way human beings think about the world is conditioned by the sociocultural structures they are born into. It is Said's contention that Orientalist discourse, a system of received Western thoughts and ideas about the Orient, places such "limitations on thought" that "no one writing [...] on the Orient" could possibly remain unaffected by it (Said 3).

So, who writes on the Orient, and what do they write? Along with academic and more purely political texts dealing with the Orient, such as encyclopedias of Western knowledge about Islam or reports on colonial uprisings, Said identifies a distinctly literary brand of Orientalism which includes creative works and travel guides by such canonical Western authors as Sir Walter Scott, Lord Byron, Victor Hugo, Gérard de Nerval, Gustav Flaubert, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (Said 99-100). Literary Orientalism "has roots in [...] previous epochs" (Al-Dabbagh 8) going back through Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra* (Al-Dabbagh 5), to medieval epics like the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Poema del Cid* (Said 63), to ancient Greek dramas such as Aeschylus's *The Persians* and Euripides's *The Bacchae* (Said 56). However, the "Golden Age" of European literary Orientalism started as a part of the early- to mid-nineteenth century Romantic movement, but then, crucially, continued in

the same vein past the accepted end of the Romantic period, through the end of the nineteenth century and even into the early twentieth (Al-Dabbagh 8).

Our present author Lord Dunsany was born in London in 1878, and completed his most whimsical and lyrical fantasies of gods and Oriental-inspired magic, a style S.T. Joshi distinguishes sharply from the cast of his later writings, before World War One broke out in 1914 (Joshi 4-6, 84). That Dunsany belongs in the same category as the European Romantics, despite his relatively late date, is evident if one compares and contrasts his artistic goals and his emotional reactions to the Orient with those of the French Romantic Gérard de Nerval, who was born seventy years before Dunsany. Nerval's personal idea of the Orient, like that of many Oriental enthusiasts, had been constructed from the received stereotypes of institutionalized Oriental discourse (Said 94), including the location in the Orient of typical Romantic dreams of the sublime—"unimaginable antiquity, inhuman beauty, boundless distance" (Said 167). In an 1843 letter, Nerval regretted the mental replacement of his own imaginary, ideal Orient with the physical reality of the Eastern countries and lifestyles he was forced to encounter when he traveled abroad:

I have already lost, Kingdom after Kingdom, province after province, the more beautiful half of the universe, and soon I will know of no place in which I can find a refuge for my dreams; [...] it is Egypt that I most regret having driven out of my imagination, now that I have sadly placed it in my memory. (qtd. in Said 100)

Nerval and his fellow Romantics were the latest in a long line of artists participating in what Said calls a "textual attitude" to the Orient (Said 92), the portrayal of the East in Western art and literature along certain culturally agreed-upon lines such as those facets of the sublime just mentioned, resulting in Westerners' imaginative construction of the East as a spiritually numinous and materially rich region. From the seventeenth century forward, however, European colonization had enabled travel to formerly "off the map" Eastern lands on an unprecedented scale, and literary artists, encountering in the flesh that about which they had previously written, often found the Orient that they could visit by ship and train disappointingly inferior to their timeless, sensual literary-imaginary Orient. They experienced a distressing disruption in their ability to hold their "dreams" in the literary Orient once the physical Orient had become terra cognita (Said 100-1).

Lord Dunsany did much traveling himself in Africa and India. Like Nerval and other Romantic writers, Dunsany faced the task of reconciling the physical realities of the East he encountered in his journeys with the set of received Orientalist ideas and images which he had been using ever since his 1905 debut work *The Gods of Pegāna* to aid in portraying his imaginary worlds. It

might seem important to note that most of the works written in Dunsany's early, fantastic style, including *The Book of Wonder* and parts of *Tales of Wonder*, were composed *before* the majority of his physical exposure to the Orient, placing Dunsany in a similar epistemological position to Nerval and other European Orientalist writers.² Prior to about 1912-14, Dunsany's experiences in the Orient included three years' military service in Gibraltar and South Africa (Amory 26), and a 1908 boating trip down the Nile with side excursions to the pyramids (Amory 51-61), but he had not yet "become a world traveler" as S.T. Joshi calls him (Joshi 6), had not yet carried out multiple big-game hunting expeditions in Africa (Amory 92-100, 202-3), become the distinguished guest of the Nawab of Rampur and the Maharajah of Gwalior (Amory 216-20), or traveled by way of Cape Town, Mozambique, Cairo, and Istanbul to take up the Byron Chair of English Literature in Athens, Greece (Amory 247-51). But as it turns out, direct experience of the Orient, whether early or late in his authorial career, did not cast as great a reflection in Dunsany's writings as we might expect it to. According to his biographer Mark Amory, Dunsany acknowledged the influence of the physical East on his stories, but "[w]hat he liked best in his work was least realistic and therefore not to be pinned down geographically"; his most important influences were "fancies drawn from conversation, china dragons or Kipling" rather than his own adventures with "sunlight and desert and wandering men" (Amory 26).

Already by the time some of the contents of *The Book of Wonder* were composed, in 1910, Dunsany had begun turning away from imaginary-world fantasy, his output "gradually [...] yield[ing] to the real world, although still retaining elements of fantasy and the supernatural" (Joshi 5). S.T. Joshi attributes this significant change in Dunsany's style in large part to his primary-world travels in Oriental regions (Joshi 6), mustering in support of the hypothesis Dunsany's statement about one of his Eastern journeys, "I wrote nothing in these days, for I had no need to," and also these lines from Dunsany's 1944 poetry collection *A Journey*:

I told a Turkish lady I had dreamed
Long of the East, but mosques now visited,
Domes, spires, gates, gardens, songs and legends, seemed
More lovely than I ever dreamed. (qtd. in Joshi 6)

Dunsany, interestingly, had a reaction to the physical Orient which was antithetical to that of Gérard de Nerval, though with much the same results.

² *The Book of Wonder* was published in 1912, but its material was composed around two years earlier. *Tales of Wonder* was published in 1916, but again, "almost all" its material was composed before 1914 (Joshi 84).

Nerval was so disenchanted by the physical Orient that he once said “For a person who has never seen the Orient [...] a lotus is still a lotus; for me it is only a kind of onion” (qtd. in Said 101). By contrast, Dunsany’s perception of the physical Orient found more of loveliness, more of the quality of “songs and legends” in it than he had achieved in his own flights of literary fancy. Rather than becoming disenchanted by direct experience of the Orient, he became more enchanted the more he saw of it (Anderson 11), but he also appears to have found it less and less apt as a subject through which he could evoke literary wonder, when he could satisfy his wish-fulfillment needs with the “wondrous sights of the real world” (Joshi 6).³

Direct experience of the Orient, then, had a dampening effect on Dunsany’s imagination of Oriental-inspired secondary worlds, just as it did for other literary Orientalists, although his obvious appreciation of the physical Orient sets him apart from less open-minded compatriots like Nerval. Despite this difference in attitude, Dunsany’s literary projects in the pre-World War One early phase of his writing career connect him firmly to the tradition of literary Orientalism. Like a nineteenth century Romantic, Dunsany was interested as a writer more in the ideas which were commonly attached to the Orient, such as “splendor, cruelty, [and] sensuality” (Said 4), than in making a realistic literary portrayal of Oriental regions and their customs. Analyzing Dunsany’s story “East and West” in *Tales of Three Hemispheres* (1920), John D. Rateliff writes, “Never mind that China was at the time of writing undergoing civil war and revolution; for Dunsany it is the ideal of China, ancient and infinitely patient, that matters” (Rateliff 133). For Dunsany’s artistic purposes, the placidity and timelessness he associated with China came to supersede contemporary China’s social and political struggles. Angelee Sailer Anderson likewise comments on Dunsany’s habit of capturing the East in brief, dramatic images: “in giving us a sense of the Middle Eastern, [Dunsany] does not bombard us with details of geography and culture,” but focuses on “the fleeting yet indelible image which would impress us if a troop of Middle Eastern personages passed by” (Anderson 11). The epitomizing technique naturally favors broad concept over nuance, and Dunsany’s use of it contributes to the idealized quality of his Eastern settings, a stylistic feature he shares with many other Orientalist writers. Most crucially, like innumerable authors from the nineteenth century “Golden Age” of Orientalism and its other incarnations as well, Dunsany often invested Oriental elements in his stories with predictable, conventional functions sanctioned by the common Western discourse of Orientalism. To examine how traditional Orientalist themes and language operate in Dunsany’s short fantasy, we will look at three stories as

³ “All fantasy is, in the most literal sense of the term, wish fulfillment—or, perhaps more precisely, the concretization of wish fulfillment” (Joshi 3).

exemplars: "A Story of Land and Sea" (*Tales of Wonder*), "Chu-bu and Sheemish" (*The Book of Wonder*), and "The Wonderful Window" (*The Book of Wonder*).

Traditional Orientalism in Three Dunsany Tales

"A Story of Land and Sea" is a rollicking pirate adventure, with a twist: for much of the narrative, Captain Shard's ship *Desperate Lark* sails not on the high seas, but on the high sands! To escape the pursuing forces of five navies Shard steers the *Desperate Lark* into the Mediterranean Sea and up to the coast of Africa—and then continues sailing her right on over the Sahara:

At a place where the desert rolling up from mystery and from death, yea from the heart of Africa, emerges upon the sea, no less grand than her, no less terrible [...] she heeled over a little, then righted herself, and slowly headed into the interior of Africa. (Dunsany 99)

From the start Africa is associated with "mystery" and "death," described as a continent "grand" and "terrible." This imagined Africa is familiar territory to readers of Rider Haggard and Conrad; it is a place for adventure to happen to European visitors. Exotic beauty enters the picture with the "large and clear Algerian stars" Shard's crew steers by (Dunsany 100). There is some anxiety among the buccaneers about what will happen if the wind drops and they become stuck in the Sahara (Dunsany 101), one of the worst nightmares available to the generations raised on tales of colonial officers stranded in inhospitable climes. Shard's men enact a contingency plan by raiding a nearby town's oxen (Dunsany 102), which is a routinely piratic move in context but also consistent with the colonialist position that Europeans have a right to exploit the resources of peoples they encounter (Said 108).

After several weeks of relatively uneventful travel followed by a long stop-over, action suddenly commences: "Arabs in white robes on good horses" bearing "swords and scimitars [...] [and] strange long muskets" attack the stationary ship (Dunsany 106-7), "their leaders [...] evidently set on driving off the oxen" (Dunsany 107). The battle is fierce and when the dust settles, Shard's crew find that they have "unhorsed a hundred Arabs," "captured a horse[,] and found quaint weapons on the bodies of the dead Arabs and an interesting kind of tobacco" (Dunsany 108). In typical Orientalist fashion, the Arabs are portrayed as warlike and aggressive, their accoutrements "quaint" and "strange"; they are the very picture of Said's Oriental Other (Said 40). An impending rematch with the Arabs, now on camels and armed with small shot as well as long lances, creates drama as Shard's crew try desperately to become water-borne again, a feat they achieve in the nick of time by dropping the *Desperate Lark* over a bank into the Niger River (Dunsany 111-16).

Groups of Arabs dominate the story's action, but as characters they are merely an occasion for the protagonists to have a good fight and a white-knuckle race to the water. Their deaths are not noticed except en masse, a hundred unhorsed at once (Dunsany 108), and they are described exclusively from the perspective of Shard and his crew. The text is not interested in their individuality, and only glancingly in their motivations, portraying them as greedy for water and cattle (Dunsany 104, 107). The function of the Arabs, as of their setting in a fantastic Africa—an Africa which the closing "Guarantee to the Reader" assures the audience does not match the geographical Africa in its particulars (Dunsany 117)—is to produce an atmosphere of adventure, a place for Europeans to test themselves against the elements and hostile natives. Dunsany's tale thus continues in the Orientalist literary vein which both casually entertained the citizens of European colonial powers in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries and ensured the filling of colonial service posts by promising adventure in the far-flung corners of the world. As Benjamin Disraeli wrote in his 1847 novel *Tancred*, "The East is a career" (qtd. in Said 5), both for fictional gentlemen of fortune and for the real young men from colonialist nations who would read their stories. In portraying Northern Africa and its denizens as full of exciting danger and mystery, "A Story of Land and Sea" employs Oriental tropes in one of their traditional functions, the building of a specific textual and a broader societal narrative about the East as the home of adventure.

Probably the best known of Lord Dunsany's short stories, "Chu-bu and Sheemish" employs another form of traditional Orientalism, the use of colonial tropes for the creation of humor. "Chu-bu and Sheemish" is the story of two idols worshipped by an unspecified primitive people. Chu-bu, the elder idol, is "furious" when Sheemish, "a palpably modern idol [...] just carved" is one day brought into his temple by the priests, and the people begin to worship Chu-bu and Sheemish equally (Dunsany 49). The rivalry of the two petty gods builds over the course of the story, until, in a spectacular and accidental climax, Chu-bu and Sheemish simultaneously command an earthquake which brings the temple down on both their heads (Dunsany 51). Side-by-side they lie in the rubble, unattended, until found by a Western traveller journeying far from home, "beyond the hills of Ting" (Dunsany 52). Sheemish is broken and so left where he lies, but Chu-bu is carried back to adorn his finder's mantelpiece, there to remain looking "helpless," "with his hands and toes sticking up [...], lying upon his back," doing nothing but occasionally helping his new guardian in a polite game of cards (Dunsany 52).

Nothing in the tale pins the national origins of Chu-bu and Sheemish to an Oriental people in Africa or Asia, but it is a safe bet given the context of the Western European, probably British, narrator who takes Chu-bu home as a

curiosity from foreign lands. As we have just seen with “A Story of Land and Sea,” the “corporate institution” of Western discourse about the Orient (Said 3) includes negative as well as positive associations; hostility and cruelty, of land and people, typify the imagined East as much as dreamy splendor. In “Chu-bu and Sheemish” we can see Dunsany invoking further negative stereotypes about the non-European Other, irrationality and ineffectuality. Said, drawing from writings by British imperial theorists Arthur James Balfour and Evelyn Baring, Lord Cromer, summarizes a short list of traits commonly attributed to the East in the “essential relationship” of West to East, “one between a strong and a weak partner”: “The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (Said 40). Chu-bu and Sheemish’s childlike jealousy, and their limited vocabulary and lack of creativity in insulting each other—“‘Dirty Chu-bu,’ ‘Dirty Sheemish.’ ‘Dirty Chu-bu,’ ‘Dirty Sheemish,’ all night long” (Dunsany 51)—combined with their lack of ability to actually overcome one another except through mutual destruction, certainly makes them seem ridiculous, depraved, weak figures. The idols’ ultimate destinies, one broken and forgotten, one the pathetic property of a Western explorer, reflect the racist and ethnocentric rationales historically put forward to support Western European imperialism. Easterners are childlike, wicked, and incapable of acting in their own best interests; Western intervention is necessary to save Eastern peoples from themselves, or to pick up the pieces after they have already made a mess of self-government (Said 31-42).

Along with this political ideology, academic Orientalism of the eighteenth through mid-twentieth centuries privileged Westerners with regard to the discovery, interpretation, and preservation of non-Western cultural artifacts, a process Said calls “truly scientific appropriation of one culture by another” (Said 42). Again, the justification was that Easterners were by nature incapable of managing their own material and cultural heritage. Thus, Chu-bu’s finder thinks nothing of carrying him home and displaying him on a Western mantelpiece, perhaps a thousand miles from his country of origin, the local sphere he was god of. Better that fate than to be lost under a heap of rubble in some primitive land, in the mind of Dunsany’s representative Western explorer.

“Chu-bu and Sheemish” is on the surface a light-hearted little comedy, characteristic of Dunsany’s “light touch” and “witty way of expressing his ironic worldview,” which comes to the fore so prominently in *The Book of Wonder* that “humor beg[ins] to compete with wonder as the main effect he [is] trying to achieve” (Rateliff 88). The ridiculousness of the tale’s two main characters is played for laughs. The humor would not have succeeded as it did, however, were Dunsany unable to count on his audience’s familiarity with such widespread Western ideas as the “natural” tendencies of non-Western peoples to stupidity and fecklessness, the corresponding impotence of their non-Christian

divinities, and the duty of Europeans to remark on and act to correct these deficiencies. The creation of humor in “Chu-bu and Sheemish,” the story’s main point, is achieved through the invocation of traditional, culturally-sanctioned Orientalist tropes, so traditional Orientalism is in this tale, as in “A Story of Land and Sea,” a key building block of the narrative and arguably its *raison d’être*, even if the story Dunsany produced with it is not overtly political.

A third story-building function Dunsany finds for traditional Orientalism, besides the creation of adventure drama and of humor, is the evocation of a textual aesthetics of exoticism. This is probably the most common type of Orientalism in Dunsany’s entire canon, and, as we have already noted, it is a mode of imagination he shared with the Romantics, many of whom were more interested in the fictional Orient built up by centuries of artistic and literary production than in the actual Orient itself. The whole cadre of associations Westerners had made with the Orient—ethereal beauty, decadence, humans and landscapes in primitive states, etc.—created a body of ideas and images which were considered desirable, beautiful even, because they were so different from mainstream Western European experience. The root of textual, aesthetic Orientalism is Said’s second definition of “Orientalism,” the hemispherical system of thought which draws a sharp dichotomy between “us” and “them” (Said 2-3). The East is beautiful because it is a repository for those things ordinary Western Europeans have heard about but don’t necessarily have in their own lives: ancient monuments, goods like silk and jewels, unfamiliar animals like camels and parrots, and religions other than Catholic or Protestant Christianity.⁴ As Nerval’s comment about lotuses and onions demonstrates (see above), once physical familiarity with the Orient is achieved, for many the glamor of its previously-exotic features fades. Dunsany’s tales tap into Western delight in the unfamiliar by using Oriental images and themes as short-hand for the exotic, and then applying them in such a way that the exotic is always held at a distance, never becoming too well known, too trite. A good example of the technique may be found in Dunsany’s story “The Wonderful Window.”

From its very first line, “The Wonderful Window” cues readers that they are in for a tale of the unexpected: “The old man in the Oriental-looking robe was being moved on by the police” (Dunsany 53). The gentleman’s Oriental-looking robe, and the “Arabic writing” on the package he carries, effectively

⁴ Perhaps the long and fruitful interchange between Orientalism and Fantasy as a genre stems from just this quality of Orientalist thought, its emphasis on the alien. “The best fantasy,” argues Angelee Sailer Anderson, “impresses us with the ideas” of familiar objects such as trees, stones, fire, and wine—Tolkien’s idea of Recovery from “On Fairy-Stories”—“while at the same time impressing us with ideas of things we may never encounter” (Anderson 10). Much literary and artistic Orientalism fulfills the second condition perfectly, and may address the first. Dunsany’s “A Tale of London” does both; see below.

signal to the audience and to the main character Mr. Sladden that something beyond everyday experience is about to happen. As the narrator observes, "Merely the fact that the dirty piece of paper that wrapped the old man's parcel was covered with Arabic writing was enough to give Mr. Sladden the ideas of romance" (Dunsany 53). This is an important sentence, because it tells us that Dunsany was aware of the immense imaginative power inherited Orientalist discourse could wield in evoking emotional response from those conditioned by it. Mr. Sladden does not have to meet the old man to get into the mood of romance, that funny mood which even "a touch [...]—a mere suggestion of it—would send his eyes gazing away as though the walls of the emporium were of gossamer and London itself a myth, instead of attending to customers" (Dunsany 53). Mr. Sladden will go on to purchase a magical window from that old Eastern man, a window which will give him a glimpse into an otherworldly city, like and unlike the medieval cities of his own world's past. But Mr. Sladden does not need a magical window, only a robe and Eastern script, to have an aesthetic and emotional experience, in short a response to art, directed at his own extrapolations of romance from Oriental cues. Nor does Dunsany's narrator need to definitively answer whether "the strange old man [...] with his faded yellow robe and his great beard, and his eyes on far-off places" remained in London or if he "ever came again to Baghdad," or to elaborate "what dark hands kept on the circulation of his twenty-five-and-six" (Dunsany 54). The mere mention of Baghdad and "dark hands" is evocative, because they are exotic. Dunsany could expect that for his Western readers, depictions of the Orient familiar enough to provoke predictable responses, but still never pinned down, never glimpsed too closely, would provide a literary-aesthetic experience above and beyond considerations of plot.

Dunsany's understanding of this principle, that when it comes to evincing awe of the unfamiliar, less is more, is mirrored by the narrative trajectory of "The Wonderful Window." Mr. Sladden's window is broken just as he is observing a crucial moment in the city's history, and he, like the readers of the tale, is left in a position of uncertainty. "He has never been able to buy such another window, and has not ever since, either from books or men, heard any rumour at all of Golden Dragon City" (Dunsany 57). Golden Dragon City, known yet perpetually unknown, is thus a perfect metaphor for the imagined Orient and for the traditional project of literary Orientalism Dunsany often shared in, creating art which would appeal aesthetically to Westerners because of its cultivation and management of the exotic elements of the imagined East.

On Reading Non-Traditional Orientalism in Dunsany

Now that we have examined several examples of Dunsany's traditional Orientalism, where Orientalist elements function to add adventure drama,

humor, or exotic-aesthetic appeal to his short fiction, I would like to shift the focus to some instances of non-traditional Orientalism in *The Book of Wonder* and *Tales of Wonder*. This is likely to be the most controversial part of my argument, so first I would like to establish the limits of my claims. I do not wish to argue that Dunsany's intention in employing non-traditional Orientalism was early postcolonial social critique, that he turned traditional Orientalism on its head in a self-aware fashion specifically for the purpose of raising a similar awareness in his readers. Dunsany was certainly capable of social critique, writing polemic essays which included "laments on the decline of purity in English, condemnations of the laxity of modern poetry, and protests against the cruel practice of cutting off dogs' and horses' tails" (Joshi 9), as well as stinging satires exemplified by his 1917 play *Cheezo*, an attack on chemical additives in modern food and the evils of the modern advertising industry (Joshi 11-12). However, one must carefully balance the assertion made by S.T. Joshi, who after careful study of the Dunsany literary corpus believes that it represents "an exhaustive criticism of the world as [Dunsany] saw it" (Joshi 3), with certain facts about Dunsany's background and beliefs.

Born into a noble Anglo-Irish family in an era of British imperial dominance, educated at Eton and Sandhurst, and holder of a lifelong allegiance to the Crown over the desire of his fellow Irish for home rule, Dunsany was brought up in the values typical of the British upper class in the period. "Instead of prizing Celtic equality and the Kingdom of man upon earth, he came to believe in British Imperialism and the world-devouring destinies of the British Empire," wrote a contemporary profiler of Dunsany (qtd. in Amory 22). His political views were those of "an Edwardian, aristocratic Tory" (Maume 19). He was unapologetic about the historical facts of British imperialism, and even wrote in support of an ends-justifies-the-means approach to Empire in some of his nonfiction (Maume 23). "The world as [Dunsany] saw it" had imperialism in it. As for his views on art, especially in the fantasies of his early, pre-World War One period, readers can see manifested Dunsany's abiding belief in "the artist's obligation [...] as creating an unreal, otherworldly beauty" (Maume 18-19). Like J.R.R. Tolkien,⁵ Dunsany "complained constantly of those who worried 'meanings' out of tales that were simply themselves," decrying allegorization of literary art (Amory 180). The critic is accordingly well cautioned not look too hard for subversive anti-Orientalist messages in Dunsany's tales, first on the grounds that he was a staunch supporter of colonial imperialism, and second that he is known to have felt that an overt, crafted meaning or message could seriously detract from the artistry of a literary work (Amory 46-7).

⁵ See Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* Foreword xvii.

Nonetheless, Patrick Maume has studied the tension evident in some of Dunsany's works between his support for imperialism and his apparent disagreement with the tenets that undergirded it, "the claims of European civilization to political, economic, and religious superiority over indigenous peoples" (Maume 21). Maume argues that Jorkens, the protagonist of several late-period Dunsany short story collections, at times "directly parodies the imperial hero" (Maume 24). He also interprets the takeaway message from the 1935 Dunsany novel *Up in the Hills* to be that "all human beings are pagan savages in origin and nature," a perspective which belies the rhetoric of European supremacy (Maume 29). Maume's work makes it clear that some elements of Dunsany's fiction do not sit easily with traditional Orientalist positions current in the culture of his day, ones he himself used elsewhere in his writing, including in the stories we have examined thus far.

Henceforth I wish to observe and comment on the essential deviance of a few occurrences of Dunsany's nontraditional Orientalism, without claiming anything about Dunsany's intentions with regard to promulgating an anti-Orientalist message. With C.S. Lewis, I hold that there is a distinction between an author's intention and his or her book's meaning. A book's meaning is determined by what many readers reading carefully and thoughtfully over the course of several generations find its salient themes to be, not by what its author intended it to mean (Lewis 56). Dunsany's stories may have meaning or application beyond what their author intended, and messages we perceive in them may not be the same as those their original audience, Dunsany's contemporaries, may have perceived, just as the messages *we* perceive may not be the same as what future generations will derive from the same texts. Hopefully, there is some overlap, and therein lies the stories' meaning. If we as twenty-first century readers whose thoughts are conditioned by a changed, postmodern understanding of cross-cultural issues find messages relevant to the world we know today and to our own postmodern discourse in Dunsany's works, that is not to say either that Dunsany was a postmodernist, or that his nontraditional Orientalist works definitively have a postmodern meaning. It is merely the case that they speak to postmodern sensibilities, and may be in the process of acquiring a postmodern meaning to the extent that they invite readers to reflect on such issues as how social narratives about the cultural Other are constructed and deployed, and how the perspective of the cultural Other may inform us about our own way of life. To examine how Dunsany's texts may meditate on these non-traditional Oriental themes, we will turn to three representative stories: "A Tale of London," "The Watch-Tower," and "How Ali Came to the Black Country," all from *Tales of Wonder*.

Non-Traditional Orientalism in Three Dunsany Tales

"A Tale of London" is a piece which provides an interesting imaginative study in how the cultural discourse that is Orientalism may have come to be, by means of a curious reverse—the depiction of Occidentalism, in the moment of its creation. An Eastern Sultan from "the very furthest lands that know Bagdad [sic]" wishes to be entertained by a story-telling art which, like the literary Orientalism discussed above, relies on an aesthetics of the exotic. So, he summons his hasheesh-eater, commanding him: "dream to me now of London" (Dunsany 61). The hasheesh-eater does spin a tale of dreams indeed. Some of the features of London he describes to the Sultan are readily recognizable features of London as it was in Dunsany's day, such as traffic on the river Thames, white pavements, and wooden houses with copper roofs (Dunsany 61-2), but all these are distorted through a glamor which ascribes mythic qualities to the city and its denizens. The personal wealth of the citizens, so great that they shower bracelets, golden necklaces, and pearls down to street musicians as a reward, is a prominent feature (Dunsany 61), as is their magnificent material culture, with "ebony palaces" and "alabaster pavings," merchants' rich clothes that make them appear like butterflies in the streets, and lanterns made from the semiprecious stones chrysochryse and amethyst on every avenue and balcony (Dunsany 61-2). The sensuality of the descriptions clusters thick as the hasheesh-eater weaves a dream of ships on the Thames "with violet sails bringing incense for the braziers that perfume the streets," streets which are filled with people dressed in "overcloaks of green and vestments of azure" (Dunsany 62) passing gracefully on their way under spires of gold stretching into an unbelievably blue sky (Dunsany 63), every evening enjoying golden sunsets and soft dulcimer music (Dunsany 61). To top it off, Londoners apparently have camels, "pure white," and also ride in ivory chariots drawn by surpassingly swift horses (Dunsany 62).

It is obvious that these traits are the same ones Western Orientalism, particularly the literary Romantic kind, ascribes to civilizations of the East: prosperity, epicureanism, unreal beauty. By having the hasheesh-eater romanticize London in this way, "A Tale of London" calls attention to the human tendency to romanticize and mythicize an unknown Other culture, inflating real knowledge with wish-fulfilling fancy for the sake of aesthetic pleasure. The hasheesh-eater's talk of camels and chariots, incense and dulcimers also provides a clear picture of the unknown elements of an Other culture being filled in by, in this case completely wrong-headed, extrapolation from the subject's own culture. "A Tale of London" challenges readers to reflect on the truth-untruth dynamics of Orientalism and all other stereotyping systems of unknown or partially known groups, by suggesting that many stereotypes have their origin either in self-focused wish-fulfillment fantasies, or in the construction of the Other in one's

own image. As the enormous difference between the hasheesh-eater's London and the London familiar to Dunsany's Western readers demonstrates, both these methods of creating an image of the Other may result in a widely distorted picture.

"The Watch-Tower" engages with another facet of broad sociocultural narratives about the Other, their incredible temporal endurance. As we have observed, Orientalism, though it may have shifted a little in its emphases over time, has a tradition stretching back before the common era, and some of its ideas and rhetoric have lingered into Dunsany's time, and ours. "The Watch-Tower" situates its narrator in Provence, where he meets a spirit, "an old man with a horn," who continuously repeats the words "Beware, Beware!" (Dunsany 127). When asked what there is to beware of, the spirit answers, "'Of what should a town beware [...] but the Saracens? [...] When the walls are in ill repair the Saracens come: it was ever so'" (Dunsany 128). The ghost is the spirit of the tower, the combined essence of the tower's many guardians, eternally on guard against the Muslim invaders of France in the Middle Ages. He does not respond to the narrator's arguments that "the Saracens don't come nowadays," that "there has not been a Saracen either in France or Spain for over four hundred years" (Dunsany 127-8). He cannot accept the narrator's proposition that times have changed, that the Saracens "cannot come, and men fear other things." In the narrator's modern world, where European nations are defended by "terrible engines of war, both on land and on sea" and possess "railways that could move armies night and day faster than horses could gallop," the Saracens are a complete non-threat, a historical anachronism (Dunsany 128). But the tower's guardian spirit is unswayed. "He answered, 'In time all these things pass away and there will still be the Saracens'" (Dunsany 129). The story closes with the spirit retreating up the "broken steps" of his tower, looking alertly to the south, as he always has done, but "not seeing clearly because of the rising mist" (Dunsany 129).

This brief piece provides a poignant reflection on the stubborn survival of sociocultural narratives about the Other, the capacity of stereotypes and the memory of cross-cultural frictions to far outlive their origin and become actively counterproductive in organizing human experience. Sociocultural narratives, residing in the corporate mind and perpetuated through the socialization of successive generations, last much longer than any physical artifact: "In time all these things pass away and there will still be the Saracens" in the minds and hearts of the French people. A series of incursions by Muslim forces into the territory of the Franks was a temporary national trauma in the eighth century, remembered for much longer than that in collective memory (Lowney 124). The national epic of France, *La Chanson de Roland* [The Song of Roland], was written around the year 1100 and commemorates the brave defense of a mountain pass

by Charlemagne's knights against attacking Saracens in 778. It is seldom remembered except by trained historians that the historical event the poem's climax is based on was actually an attack by Basque raiders on Charlemagne's forces, "not by the Muslims so roundly vilified in the epic" (Lowney 124). But legends die hard. There was in fact a period between 711 and 732—really quite brief in historical terms—when Islamic invaders actually did pose a threat to Frankish sovereignty, coming within two hundred miles of Paris before being roundly repulsed by Charlemagne's grandfather Charles Martel (Lowney 124). Memories of this time became a centuries-long rallying cry against the fearsome Moors and Saracens (the terms were used interchangeably), the whipping boys of the Middle Ages and early modern period. In cultural memory Charlemagne, not his grandfather, became the greatest defender of Christian Europe against the permanently threatening Saracens, and a whole body of Western European literature and art sprang up which extended the imagined Saracen threat forward in time (Lowney 117), from Spanish paintings of Santiago Matamoros, or St. James the Moor Slayer, to the Englishman William Shakespeare's early seventeenth century play *Othello*. These portrayals were fed by medieval and early modern Europeans' anxieties about the cultural and religious differences of the Oriental Other, their Muslim neighbors and sometime-allies in Islamic Spain (Lowney 124), coupled with their lasting fear that the powerful Islamic empires of the medieval period would once again turn their attention to the north and make another attempt to take Europe through the Pyrenees, a peril which never materialized.

Dunsany's narrator says that there have been no Saracens physically in France for four hundred years by the time the story takes place, but the figure must actually be closer to one thousand years. The difference serves to highlight the period of six-hundred-odd years between Charles Martel and the late Middle Ages where cultural narratives about the need to beware the Saracens were a widespread and urgent part of the French mindset. The spirit of "The Watchtower" cannot see clearly, not just because of the mist (Dunsany 129), but because his ingrained prejudice blinds him. His crumbling tower with its "broken steps" (Dunsany 129) represents an old view of the Oriental Other that has been perfectly anachronistic since the birth of the modern era, but really not even a very useful depiction of reality from long before that, as it limited medieval Europe's trade with a rich, flourishing society through xenophobia and the fierce cultural memorialization of past hostile encounters, instead engendering a ruinous Crusading zeal (Lowney 138). In this day and age where we monitor the news for updates on the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, and where we must have a national dialogue to decide whether or not a mosque can be built several blocks away from the site of the former World Trade Center, Dunsany's story is a powerful reminder that venerable sociocultural narratives about the Other do not

have a set half-life, but can persist and persist, as detrimental to cross-cultural relations in the present as any atomic weapon.

"How Ali Came to the Black Country" provides a third instance of Dunsany's nontraditional Orientalism. In this piece Dunsany upends the traditional Orientalist view of the West as wise and rational, and the East as foolish and irrational, which we have previously seen operating in "Chu-bu and Sheemish" (Said 40). Shooshan and Shep, two Englishmen, seek the advice of the Persian sage Ali concerning the state of England, which they know has something the matter with it (Dunsany 144). Journeying with Shooshan and Shep to the Black Country, the Midlands, Ali observes the myriad problems of England, how "a smoke has darkened the country, and in places [...] the grass is black, and how even yet [English] factories multiply, and haste and noise have become such that men have not time for song" (Dunsany 145). All is not lost, says Ali to the people of the Black Country. He knows the root of their problems, "even the devil Steam" (Dunsany 145), and he has a remedy to offer them. But the Midlanders will have none of it. They will not let Ali capture Steam in a bottle and then throw that bottle, stoppered with Solomon's seal, into the sea, as Easterners would a dangerous genie (Dunsany 146-7). The Midlanders value what they call "prosperity" over the chance to get back "the woods and ferns and all the beautiful things that the world hath, the little leaping hares [...] at play, [...] music on the hills again, and at twilight ease and quiet and after the twilight stars" (Dunsany 146). Aid refused, Ali returns to Persia, leaving the English to "that place where the earth was torn up and burnt [...] where factories blazed all night with a demoniac glare" (Dunsany 147). A second call for help from Shooshan and Shep a decade later, this time about the devil's spawn Petrol, goes unanswered; as the comfortably lounging Ali says, "And shall a man go twice to the help of a dog?" (Dunsany 147).

Comparing the industrial-age British people to a dog is a strong statement from Dunsany in condemnation of mechanized industry. "How Ali Came to the Black Country" is a story that undeniably has an intended message, and it is a recurrent preoccupation of Dunsany's writings—"the single overriding theme that unites nearly the whole of Dunsany's work" as S.T. Joshi calls it, "the need for reunification with the natural world by a repudiation of industrial civilization" (Joshi 2). But other themes may be drawn out from the parable, including an implicit respect for the wisdom of Eastern philosophers and the more general message that the cultural Other may, by virtue of difference from oneself, have a valuable perspective to offer. Ali is from Persia, possibly an allusion to Rumi the thirteenth-century Persian mystic, a historical wise man of the East. Dunsany's Ali also possesses the seal of King Solomon, carrying the precious thing close to his person in "a little bundle of silks" but demonstrating his willingness to offer it up for the good of the community he visits (Dunsany

144). Solomon's seal is surely a marker of Ali's personal sagacity and, importantly, symbolizes the wisdom of his earnest advice to lock Steam away for the public good. King Solomon, another Eastern wisdom figure, was renowned for his judiciousness, as in the Biblical tale of the baby and the two mothers (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1 Kings 3.16-28). Solomon was known for accurate discernment of right from wrong and for providing practical solutions to the dilemmas people brought to him. The presence of the seal in Dunsany's story invites readers to compare and contrast Ali with the Biblical king. Ali, like Solomon, has everything that is needed act as public problem-solver: a clear understanding of the problem, a potential solution, and the willingness to carry it out. Because of the Midlanders' shortsightedness, however, his wisdom cannot avail them. It is as if the feuding mothers, after hearing Solomon's pronouncement that the baby should be cut in half to end their argument (1 Kings 3.25), turned their back on the king and wandered back to the marketplace still squabbling.

In its very premise the tale depicts a nation of weak, backward Westerners, of whom Shooshan and Shep are the spokespersons, appealing to the solidity and clarity of Eastern wisdom traditions to help them manage their affairs. It is a striking reversal of the common Orientalist trope which equates the West with knowledge and potency, the East with foolishness and ineffectiveness in self-management (Said 40). The impression of the irrational, "depraved" and "fallen" (Said 40) West is further strengthened by the Midlanders' rejection of good advice and insistence on pursuing material goods, even when they create a hellish land and lifestyle by doing so. In addition to confirming Patrick Maume's case for Dunsany's disagreement with notions of Western superiority, "How Ali Came to the Black Country" suggests that non-Western perspectives, which are heavily underprivileged by traditional Orientalist discourse—recall Said's characterization of Orientalism as a system which empowers only Westerners in the matter of "making statements, authorizing views [...] describing [...] teaching" (Said 3)—may actually contain knowledge that would be valuable to Westerners. The cultural Other, by bringing a different historical development and different values and priorities to the table, may have a thing or two to teach a subject culture about itself. By modeling this "mirroring" function in the figure of Ali, Dunsany's story provides an implicit argument for the benefits of cross-cultural dialogue, a practice traditional Orientalism would not recognize any use in.

Conclusions

In this study I have endeavored to contextualize Dunsany's Orientalism by uncovering his chronological and ideological ties to the broad "corporeal institution" (Said 3) of Orientalism especially in its literary and Romantic forms,

at the same time showing that, although Dunsany like all human beings was a product of the sociocultural complex he was born into, he did not always simply adopt and propagate completely conventional Orientalist discourse in his own works. A considerable number of his fantasies, to be sure, employ traditional Orientalist images and ideas in some of their traditional roles within Western Orientalist literature, such as the creation of adventure narrative, humor at the expense of the Orient, and an aesthetics of the exotic aimed at the artistic pleasure of Westerners. Others of Dunsany's works, however, demonstrate non-traditional handling of Oriental story elements, including meditations on the creation and continuation of sociocultural narratives about the Other, and the rehabilitation of the Other perspective as a legitimate source of knowledge. I do not claim that Dunsany was a militant anti-Orientalist in either personal beliefs or writing style, which would be a foolish assertion given his documented support for Empire and his insistence on art for art's sake rather than communication of a point, in addition to the perceptible traditional Oriental foundations of much of his canon. It is possible that the non-traditional Orientalism which occasionally breaks through in some of Dunsany's writings may have heralded the gradually receding grip of the Orientalist mindset in the twentieth century, as Western European imperialism drew closer to its end. Even if it signifies nothing more than a passionate, sensitive thinker creating twists on the expected, culturally-familiar depictions of the Orient so as to give his audience an experience of wonder, that in itself is wonder enough, proof of an exceptionally gifted storyteller at work. Dunsany's short fantasies are, as he wished them to be, beautiful for their own sake. If they have ever inspired readers, in Dunsany's time or ours, to critically examine the nature of reality as it is categorized, described, and transmitted by individuals and societies—well, then, that is the blessing and the stamp of myth.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ALYSSA HOUSE-THOMAS is a graduate student in the Language and Literature program at Signum University and its sister institution the Mythgard Institute, an online center for scholarship in the literatures of fantasy and science fiction. Alyssa's academic interests include the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, Old English and Norse literature, and fairy tales.

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