

LADY HESTER STANHOPE AND THE ROMANCE

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OF THE EAST

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When Lady Hester Stanhope bade farewell to England in 1810 and departed for the Orient, she entered into an Ottoman empire that had already undergone several stages of interpretation at the hands of European writers. The first stage was fear fortified by a sense of awe at the splendor of the Ottoman court. Roughly speaking, the westward expansion of the Ottomans, beginning really with the invasion of the Balkans, invigorated by the siege and fall of Constantinople in 1453 and culminating in the siege of Vienna in 1683, inspired dread of what Richard Knolles described as the "present terrour of the world". European kingdoms were pervaded by a not unnatural fear of the Ottomans, a fear which the battle of Lepanto in 1571 somewhat diminished, but which only conclusively abated by the beginnings of the eighteenth century when the western frontier of the Ottoman empire closed. The decline of Ottoman military strength relative to Europe transformed the image of the Ottomans in the West. From being an object of fear, the Ottoman empire was gradually annexed into a European literary imagination bent on mapping out an exotic and the erotic East. In the process, the Orient became the site of European fantasy.

No one, perhaps, better symbolizes this European fantasy of a romantic Orient than Lady

Hester Stanhope. Stanhope was concerned, above all else, with encountering, and ultimately becoming a part of a romantic Orient. This romantic Orient symbolized a last stand for an array of quite disparate individuals hounded out of a Europe torn by industrial and revolutionary turmoil. Stanhope was one of these. Born on 12 March 1776, she was the eldest daughter of Charles, third Earl of Stanhope by his first wife who was the daughter of Lord Chatham. Stanhope's father had the reputation of being both an eccentric and a Jacobin — in any case, he succeeded in alienating himself and his family from the regular society of British aristocracy. Her uncle was William Pitt and he looked kindly upon his niece who cared for him during his last years. On his deathbed in 1806, he managed to procure for Stanhope an annuity of £1200. Four years later, Stanhope embarked on the Grand Tour of the East in the company of a young physician by the name of Meryon (who would publish her memoirs after her death), her brother James, and a number of servants. After visiting Istanbul and Jerusalem, she embarked on an expedition to Palmyra in 1813 and there, she claimed, she was crowned "Queen of the Arabs" by the Arab Bedouins. Stanhope settled in Mount Lebanon in a village called Jun (Djoun) in 1817 and there she lived until her death in 1839.

1 Richard Knolles, *The Generall Historie of the Turkes, from The first beginning of that Nation to the rising of the Othoman Familie: with all the notable expeditions of the Christian Princes against them Together with The Lives and Conquests of the Othoman Kings and Emperours unto the yeare 1610* (London: Adam Islip, 1610), 1.

Stanhope's views of the Orient indicated, on one level, a conventional modern nineteenth-century European denigration of the non-European at the same time as they revealed an immense fascination for a timeless essential Orient. For example in a letter she wrote in 1814 she described the Christians of Mount Lebanon in the following terms: "such a set of rascally profligate people I hardly every knew. All are totally devoid of feeling or spirit, & are only to be governed by fear ²". She insisted that the Maronite Patriarch who had come to pay her a visit "was vastly civil & is not himself unsensible or disagreeable, but his people are horrid, & they eat as priests generally do ³". And she wrote of her cook, Ibrahim, that "he is a Turk, but has no fanatic notions, only he does not like the women to make a noise, & make all that Christian bother that you know some of them do, and this again I approve, for nothing [is] so disgusting & vulgar [as the] merriment & blessings & compliments which have neither weight with Heaven or Earth ⁴". She also, however, insisted that "I am an Arab ⁵". In the Orient, she travelled, dressed and entertained visitors as if she were an Arab man, serving them coffee and greeting them with kisses on the cheeks. She bestowed furs on her favourite guests following Ottoman practice. Furthermore, she immersed herself in astrology and adopted many of what she considered to be Islamic religious convictions. She was enamoured both by the roman-

tic simplicity of the "wild Arabs" and by the urbane and sophisticated manner of the Ottomans. Of the Arabs she wrote in 1827, "They are the boldest people in the world, yet are endowed with a tenderness quite poetic, and their kindness extends to all the brute creation by which they are surrounded. For myself, I have the greatest affection and confidence in these people ⁶". She also described the Ottomans in the following manner:

'A real Turk is a manly, though rather violent, kind-hearted being, and, if he has confidence in you, very easy to deal with. I have often wondered at their gentlemanlike patience with low, blustering, vulgar men, who give themselves more airs than an ambassador, because chance has placed them in as consul or agent in some dirty town not equal to a village in France; men who, in fact, in Europe, would scarcely have their bow returned in a street by a man of condition. It is the general conduct of these sort of people that has given the Orientals such a false idea of Europeans ⁷'.

To understand her excoriations of the Christian inhabitants of Mount Lebanon, it is important to understand that for Stanhope they intruded on her vision of a romantic East. In her view, the Christians of Mount Lebanon, not she, were the outsiders — they (and the other inhabitants of Mount Lebanon) seemed unable to accept her will to romance in the midst of grinding pover-

2 James Hogg, ed. *Romantic Reassessment: Studies in the Romantics* 81 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1978), 116.

3 *Ibid*, 120.

4 *ibid*, 113-114.

5 Charles Meryon, ed., *Memoirs of the Lady Hester Stanhope*, 3 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1845), 1, 63.

6 Meryon, *Memoirs of the Lady Hester Stanhope*, 1, 61.

7 Meryon, *Memoirs of the Lady Hester Stanhope*, 1, 60.

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ty and plague that afflicted early nineteenth-century Mount Lebanon. They also did not belong to the Orient of her imagination, which in her own understanding had to be utterly different from the English, that

is to say Christian West: the Orient had to be mysteriously exotic to be sure, hence Muslim, but at the same time manly, noble, and generous in a way that could be explained to her European acquaintances. In a sense, her letters from the Orient constitute a *Persian Letters* in reverse. Like Montesquieu's fictional Persian aristocrat, Usbek, she is a member of her country's elite. But unlike Usbek, she is disaffected (many of her British contemporaries claimed she was mentally unsound) from the outset of her voyage due to her precarious financial position. She travels not West but East. And unlike Usbek, but in common with the French poet Alphonse de Lamartine and others who undertook contemplative voyages to the Orient in the early nineteenth century, she finds in the East a solitude and a warmth lacking in Europe. Her object is to escape Europe, to escape the "folly and uselessness of modern ideas and calculations" as she put it in a letter to her physician in 1823 ⁸.

Stanhope's letters, which spanned the decades of her residence in the East, were tantamount to a rejection of the rationalism of Montesquieu's Enlightenment. "I have been thought mad — ridiculed and abused; but it is out of the power of man to change my way of thinking

upon any subject," she wrote. "Without a true faith, there can be no true system of action. All the learned of the East pronounce me to be an ulema min allah, as I can neither write nor read; but my reasoning is grounded according to the laws of Nature ⁹". Her goal was not to return to the West and to explain the Orient to a European readership (or return to the East to explain the West to a Persian readership as Usbek was wont to do), but to defiantly announce and celebrate her liberation in the Orient. "Never will I be brought to England" she announced, "but in chains ¹⁰". Her aim in escape was not to objectively describe an exotic Orient — as Montesquieu purported to be doing in his introduction to *Persian Letters* — as much as to permanently relocate into a different world. She allowed herself one concession, to keep alive the memory of a passing age of aristocracy by having servants and service sets brought over from England, (but even these she had to eventually forego due to her financial difficulties) as well as a garden landscaped very much to suit the tastes of a British aristocrat. She infused this memory of a dying, properly aristocratic Europe, with what she claimed was the revitalizing spirit of a romantic Arab and Oriental East ¹¹.

Stanhope's pretension to being a "Queen of the Arabs" was patently absurd, for she scarcely merited a mention in local Arabic chronicles; and her romantic Orient, ultimately, was every bit as contrived as Montesquieu's depraved East. Of this there can be no doubt. Alexander Kinglake recognized as much when he reflected on his visit

8 Charles Meryon, ed., *Memoirs of the Lady Hester Stanhope*, 3 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1845), 1, 9.

9 Meryon, *Memoirs of the Lady Hester Stanhope*, 1, 9.

10 Meryon, *Memoirs of the Lady Hester Stanhope*, 1, 19.

11 Duchess of Cleveland, *The Life and Letters of Lady Hester Stanhope* (London: John Murray, 1914), 279.

with Stanhope. "I can hardly tell why it should be," he wrote in *Eothen*, "but there is a longing for the East, very commonly felt by proud people when goaded by sorrow. Lady Hester Stanhope obeyed this impulse¹²". Moreover, Stanhope seemed to draw on an inexhaustible supply of bitterness furnished to her by her own aristocratic contempt for a new more democratic age that radicals in revolutionary Europe had threatened to inaugurate. She urged the French poet Lamartine to let her believe that he was "as aristocratic as I am: it would grieve me to number you amongst those young Frenchmen who raise the popular fury against every person who has been exalted above others by providence, by nature, and by the community at large; and who pull down the edifice with the view of erecting out of its ruins a pedestal to their invidious meanness¹³". However, to admit the material or personal foundations of Stanhope's romantic Orient, to strip it, in effect, of its romance, should not obscure Stanhope's liminal position in a genealogy of knowledge about the Orient.

Stanhope was on the cusp of a new era of modernization. In her own manner — courageous to some, pathetic to others — she created in Mount Lebanon an illusory refuge from the tribulations of a world on the verge of modernity — a home to imagination as Lamartine brilliantly put it to Stanhope herself¹⁴. It was an escape that was doomed by the logic of modernization itself. For

as Stanhope attempted to withdraw from and to disengage from modernity, modernity came to her. It besieged, and ultimately triumphed over her romantic Orient. As she sensed her impending death, she felt ever more betrayed by Britain after her annual pension was revoked by Lord Palmerston on the grounds of her massive debt and alleged financial irresponsibility. Stanhope began to wall herself into her house and renounced her British subjecthood. She embarked on her last futile act of defiance to isolate herself from what she perceived to be the corruption of Europe. She disliked the English, she wrote to Palmerston, "because they are no longer English — no longer that hardy, honest, bold people that they were in former times". And then she added, "There is no trifling with those who have Pitt blood in their veins upon the subject of integrity¹⁵". She died soon after. The British consul in Beirut immediately organized her burial. He brought with him an American missionary, William Thomson, who recorded the loneliness of her final resting place. "In her mountain nest, and all alone," he recalled in his best-selling *The Land and the Book*, "she dragged out the remnant of her days in haughty pride and stubborn independence¹⁶". The Orient of Stanhope's imagination died with her in 1839.

12 Alexander Kinglake, *Eothen* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1919), 86.

13 Alphonse de Lamartine, *A Pilgrimage to the Holy Land* (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1978 [1838]), 115.

14 *Ibid.*, 111.

15 Meryon, *Memoirs of the Lady Hester Stanhope*, 3, 280-281.

16 W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book* (NY: Harper and Brothers, 1859), 1, 113.