Reimagining the Nineteenth Century through Medieval Fantasy: An Orientalist Portrayal in *House of the Dragon*

Review by Safiyya Hosein

The medieval fantasy series *Game of Thrones* (2011-19) became a cultural phenomenon after its debut in 2011. Despite widespread backlash from its large fanbase over the final season, HBO launched a spinoff prequel series titled *House of the Dragon* (2022-), which delves into a civil war within the infamous ruling family, the Targaryens. Although the world is primarily modeled on a medieval European setting, it incorporates elements from the nineteenth century—especially those tied to the British Empire. Most notably, its orientalist aesthetics closely resemble Victorian-era illustrations from *The Arabian Nights*. This review explores the visual legacy of *The Arabian Nights* as a lens for understanding how Victorian-era conceptions of "the East" and empire are integral to the world-building of the *Game of Thrones* universe, as seen through *House of the Dragon*.

Translated by Richard Burton (and others) in the nineteenth century, *The Arabian Nights*—also known as *One Thousand and One Nights*—was often published with elaborate illustrations. Released during the height of British colonial rule in the East, these illustrated editions granted English publishers a sense of authority over Eastern imagery and narratives. Given that these aesthetics have shaped Western representations of the East in popular culture for over a century, *The Arabian Nights* holds a powerful and enduring visual legacy that, as Katherine Bullock and Steven Zhao observe, "remains strong, systemic, and encoded deeply enough into Western culture" (450). This legacy continues to be replicated in contemporary televisual productions such as *House of the Dragon*. While the narratives of Scheherazade were fantastical, Victorian pictorial aesthetics

used to illustrate them often portrayed peoples of the East as "inferior, quaint, exotic, backward, and barbaric Oriental subjects" (Bullock and Zhao 446).

To understand *House of the Dragon*, we first need to contextualize it through *Game of Thrones*, which is based on George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-) novels. The HBO series is known for its graphic violence, political intrigue, and fantastical elements, centering on a number of aristocratic families vying for power over the realm of Westeros—a fictional continent modeled largely on medieval Europe, particularly England. Set several hundred years before the events of *Game of Thrones*, *House of the Dragon* traces the rise and fall of the Targaryen dynasty, a family that ruled Westeros for centuries due to their unique ability to control dragons—creatures that serve as a powerful metaphor for modern weaponry within a medieval setting.

As civil war erupts within the Targaryen family—setting dragons against dragons—an emissary of the reigning king, Aegon II, is dispatched to Essos, a region located in the eastern part of this fictional world. In season two, episode eight, titled "The Queen Who Never Was," this emissary, Tyland Lannister, negotiates with the Triarchy, the rulers of three major eastern cities, for assistance from their armada. Securing this fleet is crucial for King Aegon's faction, the Greens, as they attempt to break a naval blockade imposed by the opposing faction, the Blacks, led by one of Aegon's sister's allies. What makes this episode particularly striking are the orientalist elements used to depict the eastern cities, imagery that closely mirrors what Edward Said described as the West's construction of the East as exotic, decadent, and fundamentally "other" (72). The opening scene of Tyland's negotiations is saturated with such tropes: it begins with a strategically placed monkey wandering into a lavishly tented area, evoking a sense of both spectacle and primitivism. Tyland sits on an ornate rug atop the desert floor, facing representatives of the ruling Triarchy, who are adorned in turbans, harem pants, and embroidered vests. These visual cues both reinforce

stereotypical portrayals of what Linda Nochlin calls the "mystical East" (3) and recall the exoticized imagery found in illustrated editions of *The Arabian Nights*. The scene is particularly reminiscent of an illustration from an 1897 edition translated from Burton, featuring artwork by Albert Letchford from the story "Ali Shar and Zumurrud" (Fig. 1). In this image, a group of men sit on the floor, adorned in various types of headwear, surrounded by lavish settings. Both parties are attended to by servants who wave large fans over them, while the Triarchy negotiators assert their dominance through remarks steeped in sensory excess, referencing their tapestries and perfumes. The *mise-en-scène* reproduces the orientalist binary that positions the East as theatrical (Said 63) and indulgent in contrast to the rational, austere, and ultimately superior West (7).

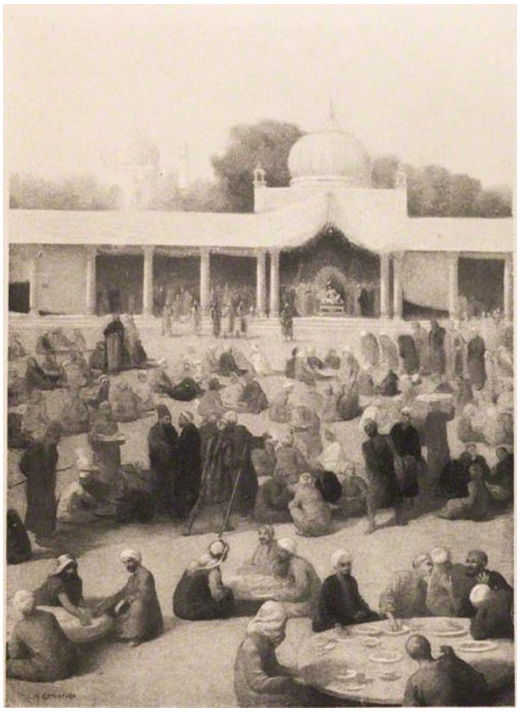

Fig. 1: Albert Letchford, illustration for "Ali Shar and Zumurrud," 1897. In *The Arabian Nights*, translated by Richard Burton, H. S. Nichols, 1897, between 330 and 331.

At the end of the scene, the Triarchy declares that they will assist Tyland if the commander of the fleet, Lohar, agrees to the deal. When Lohar walks into the tent, we realize that he is a woman but is gendered as a male because of his leadership within the Triarchy. As part of the negotiations, Tyland agrees to a mud wrestling match with Lohar. In a later scene, the spectacle unfolds, culminating in Tyland's unexpected victory. Following the match, Lohar jokingly proposes that they celebrate by eating the flesh of their enemies—a comment that visibly terrifies Tyland. Lohar then laughs and dismisses the remark as a joke, a moment that underscores the cultural disconnect and reinforces the scene's performative exoticism. In a later exchange, Lohar

expresses such admiration for Tyland that he offers one of his wives for the purpose of copulation, hoping she might bear Tyland's child. Again, these scenes are layered with orientalist tropes: the first evokes the enduring stereotype of the Eastern "savage" (Said 117), while the second reinforces the image of the East as a site of female subjugation, echoing the harem fantasy and portraying the region as "irredeemably different from, more backward than, and culturally inferior" to the West (Nochlin 9). Lohar's characterization further reinforces this stereotype—though portrayed as male due to his authority and dominance, his identity and cultural role are filtered through a Western gaze that both exoticizes and denigrates at the same time. The depiction is a curious one, as it is likely less about promoting progressive views on gender and tolerance than about reinforcing colonial perceptions of the east as a "feminized" land—a critique found in both Edward Said's work (138) and Mohja Kahf's analysis (8). In Lohar's depiction, eastern leaders are subtly portrayed as less masculine than their Westerosi counterparts, reflecting a medieval worldview in which men were expected to present as male, women as female, and any deviation was deemed unnatural or wrong.

Throughout *House of the Dragon*, the Triarchy is portrayed as a persistent menace, extending even to neighboring cities like Pentos, which evokes Ottoman influences in both clothing and architecture. While not part of Westeros, Pentos is situated close enough to the continent to invoke symbolic connections and cultural allusions. In season one, episode six, "The Princess and the Queen," the exiled Prince Daemon and his family are approached by the Prince of Pentos, who offers them protection and luxury in exchange for the potential use of their dragons should the city come under attack from the Triarchy. Though Pentos is sometimes likened to Mediterranean city-states such as Genoa or Venice, it is also marked by references to spices, slavery, and concubinage. Framed through an orientalist lens, these features position Pentos as yet

another manifestation of the exotic East—sensuous, threatening, and fundamentally "other" to the rational West.

Finally, while *Game of Thrones* and *House of the Dragon* draw heavily from British medieval history, the Targaryen conquest and rule of Westeros, along with Daenerys Targaryen's campaigns in the East, evoke a broader narrative shaped by British imperial ideology. Although the series does not explicitly romanticize the era of British imperialism, it implicitly conveys a civilizational superiority, particularly in its portrayals of cultural contact with groups coded as "other." For instance, the Dothraki are rendered as a violent, nomadic tribe, marked by exoticism and brutality, echoing colonial stereotypes of non-Western peoples. Similarly, the Children of the Forest—depicted as the aboriginal inhabitants of Westeros—mirror Indigenous populations who are nearly extinct by the time that *Game of Thrones* takes place. These representations participate in a familiar imperial narrative structure: one that marginalizes or mythologizes the colonized while centering the legitimacy and dominance of the conquering force.

Overall, the orientalist aesthetics first popularized through nineteenth-century illustrated editions of *The Arabian Nights* play a significant role in the world-building of both *Game of Thrones* and its spinoff series, *House of the Dragon*. At its core, *The Arabian Nights* is a collection of folktales that were translated and lavishly illustrated during the height of British imperialism, shaping Western perceptions of the "Orient" as exotic, decadent, and otherworldly. *House of the Dragon* exemplifies what Abderrahmene Bournane describes as the "ongoing exoticization and perception of the Orient" (236), reimagined through a medieval fantasy lens that subtly evokes a nostalgia for imperial dominance.

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