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Rhetoric and Silence: The Turkish Tales' Heroines

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The Turkish Tales are rightly considered "major poems in [Byron's] development as an artist".¹ In them he first gave form to the figure of the Romantic Hero who would later reach perfection with Childe Harold, as well as experimented with new structural techniques. My consideration of the Turkish Tales, though, concentrates on the female figures, who are generally viewed as weak and passive, and I argue are anything but.

Naturally, the Tales feature Byronic heroes who pursue great enterprises. But the dramatic climax in each 'tale' is achieved, in my view, by matching the male protagonist with a female counterpart of equal weight who, though she may appear at first as a voiceless companion oppressed by the prevailing patriarchal order, is anything but a compliant subject who would accept her fate without a fight. Some would argue that in The Turkish Tales "the passive woman dies easily".² Yet, reading through the Tales we see that these women are not at all passive: They voice their desires; they actively pursue happiness and demand their share of it from the male hero. Indeed, they die just because they are not passive, just because they challenge the patriarchal order.

If the Romantic heroines that preceded the Tales are all women who are totally dependent on their brave and self-assured male counterparts, the new female protagonists are given their own independent voices. Though Leila in *The Giaour* (published in 1813) is portrayed as a passive figure with no clear individual voice, when in disguise – as a Georgian page – she actively pursues her passion and sheds the chains of social restrictions.³ Structurally, she resembles Francesca, who in *The Siege of Corinth*, the last tale, talks only as a vision, an illusion, and thus transforms the Tales in a chiasm: Leila and Francesca open and close the series; and Zuleika, Medora and Gulnare are in the middle: Each of them is a new stage in the process of establishing a new female order.

In *The Bride of Abydos* and in *The Corsair* the heroines claim more and more space in the text and begin to assert their will, which does not necessarily coincide with that of their lovers'. Soon after giving voice to their desires, the two women share a similar fate: both end up dying of broken heart, because without the Byronic hero at their side there can be only death and silence. Speech – or the heroines' ability to express themselves through words – is dependent on the presence of male counterparts: in their absence they grow silent and die. However, the opposite is also true: the Byronic hero exists only in relation to a female figure. Her voice, speech and songs are as essential to the hero's own being. Consequently, the heroine's silence and death lead to death (Selim), exile (Conrad) or death-in-life (the Giaour).

In a passionate outburst, though carefully constructed according to rhetorical rules, Zuleika asserts her right to love Selim and to her own language. Medora, whose song stirs Conrad's heart, prepares for a reversal of roles and triggers Conrad's crisis. In the same tale, Gulnare, by taking her destiny into her own hands and killing Seyd, establishes herself as a possible substitute for Conrad. In her we find both male and female prerogatives: she is both beautiful and sweet, yet cruel and violent. She succeeds in giving rhetorical justification to her acts through a passionate and shrewd oratory. In so doing she upstages the Byronic corsair, not only in deeds but in words as well. Gulnare/Kaled in the fourth tale, *Lara*, brings to completion the fusion of male and female roles. In the last tale, *The Siege of Corinth*, the protagonist becomes herself a work of art, a symbol of beauty and innocence of unearthly quality. Her last speech, as a vision, transforms her into sheer poetry.

We can safely argue, then, that although initially the female figure is characterized by absence, silence and immobility, she soon demonstrates her ability to construct what is defined by classical rhetoric as an "ideal speech." Indeed, an ideal speech is based on certain arguments which possess "an inherently

1: Robert Gleckner, *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press 1967 p.138.

2: Malcom Kelsall, "Byron and the Romantic Heroine", in *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, Andrew Rutherford (ed.) London: Macmillan, 1992.

3: Indeed she is associated with silence, immobility and death. She is defined by her absence ("Leila there no longer dwell"), by being not a body you can touch but a pure form of "light and life".

persuasive character".⁴ Consequently, before getting set to deliver her speech, made up by well built exordium and peroration, the heroine in the Tales relies on inventiveness in formulating her arguments to support her case.

The heroine's mastery of "inventio"⁵ goes together with her ability to manipulate the loci communes,⁶ that is commonplaces: a doctrine based on the knowledge and use of "familiar maxims and accepted principles".⁷

The most effective orator will therefore be the one who knows best how to select and appeal to such 'popularities' and apply them to uphold his own cause. The skill required, [...] is that of knowing how to relate our views of popular opinion (*vulgi opinione*), how to make use of assumptions that are generally accepted (*publice recepta*) and how if necessary to make straightforward appeals to the prejudices of our audience.⁸

The heroines' oratorical skill is measured according to their ability to appeal to the passions and manipulate the emotions of their listeners, since only if "we move our hearers emotionally can we hope to move them to our side".⁹ The 'exordium' then is carefully constructed, as to appease the hero, to capture his attention and get him to listen carefully. However, though the first aim of orators is to "conciliate" their listeners, and the second "to instruct them", their "third aim must be to excite and agitate them".¹⁰

In order to "conciliate" her listener the Turkish Tales' heroine must establish a good ethos by (1) manipulating his emotions, (2) promising to disclose some important fact that can benefit him, or (3) managing to "provoke hatred of [her] antagonists".¹¹

To manipulate the hero's emotions she has to give an impression of modesty and appear "calm, placating, courteous and humane".¹² She must employ the figures of *syngnome* – hoping to earn a commendation of her acts – and *parrhesia* – that is, contriving a "tone of humble submission and modest insinuation",¹³ speaking candidly of what she feels while almost apologizing for daring to speak. While plucking "the fairest flowers of Eastern land" (1.280) to calm Selim's pain, Zuleika opens her speech with two offerings, the flowers and the nightingale's song:

He loved them once [*the flowers*]; may touch them yet,
If offered by Zuleika's hand [*conciliate by showing modesty, and use of syngnome*]
[...]
"This rose to calm my brother's cares
A message from the Bulbul bears;
It says to-night he will prolong
For Selim's ear his sweetest song;
[...]
With some faint hope his altered lay
May sing these gloomy thoughts away. (ll. 287-94) [*conciliate by showing modesty*]

Likewise, Medora, by offering Conrad her soothing music and her sensual company – to entice him to stay – tries to put him in a receptive frame of mind and establishes a good ethos through both *syngnome* and *parrhesia*:

Be silent, – Conrad! – dearest – come and share
The feast these hands delighted to prepare – [*conciliate by putting Conrad in a
receptive frame of mind*]
Light toil! To cull and dress thy frugal fare! [*conciliate by showing modesty*]
See, I have pluck'd the fruit that promised best,
[...] thrice the hill
My steps have wound to try the coolest rill; [*syngnome*]

4: Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996, p. 111.

5: "among the [...] task of the orator, the mastery of invention is both the most important and the most difficult of all." *Ad C. Herennium* 1954, II.I.I, p.58. As quoted in Skinner 111. From now onward reference to this text will be made parenthetically.

6: Skinner 113.

7: Skinner 117.

8: Skinner 117.

9: Skinner 124.

10: Skinner 121.

11: Skinner 131.

12: Skinner 130.

13: Skinner 133.

[...]
Think not I mean to chide – for I rejoice
What others deem a penance is thy choice. (Canto I) [*parrhesia*]

Each of Zuleika's offerings, however, is rejected by Selim – to which she reacts with feigned modesty, parrhesia and a new offering.

Rejection of the flowers:

"What! Not receive my foolish flower?
Nay then I am indeed unblest:
[...]
And know'st thou not who loves thee best? (ll.295-8) [*modesty and parrhesia*]

Rejection of words and of the nightingale's song:

Since words of mine and songs must fail,
Ev'n from my fabled nightingale. [*modesty and parrhesia*] (303-4)

New offering of a kiss:

Come, lay thy head upon my breast,
And I will kiss thee into rest, (ll. 301-2)
[...]
But is Zuleika's love forgot? [*parrhesia and aporia*]

The last verse combines the parrhesia with an aporia which introduces, in the middle of Zuleika's peroration, a doubt about Selim's love for her. After a dramatic pause ("Ah! Deem I right?"), Zuleika carries on her speech with a clear statement ("Without thy free consent – command-/ The Sultan should not have my hand!" ll.315-16), and a series of rhetorical questions leading to a conclusion that will deeply affect Selim:

Think'st thou that I could bear to part
With thee, and learn to halve my heart? [*first rhetorical question*]

Ah! Were I severed from thy side,
Where were thy friend – and who my guide? [*second rhetorical question*]

Years have not seen, Time shall not see,
The hour that tears my soul from thee:
Ev'n Azrael, from his deadly quiver
When flies that shaft, and fly it must,
That part all else, shall doom for ever
Our hearts to undivided dust! [*conclusion that "excite" and "agitate" Selim*] (ll. 317-26)

Zuleika's peroration is proven successful by Selim's reaction. Her words excite, agitate and inflame him:

He lived—he breathed—he moved—he felt;
He raised the maid from where she knelt;
His trance was gone, his keen eyes shone
[...]
With thoughts that burn—in rays that melt.
[...]
"Now thou art mine, for ever mine, (ll. 327-47)

Gulnare's skills are even greater as we can see when she uses different rhetorical approaches according to her listener, Seyd or Conrad.

In order to establish a good ethos with Conrad, in the second part of *The Corsair*, she promises to show him the way to save his life:

'Corsair! Thy doom is named – but I have power [*synynome*]
To soothe the Pacha in his weaker hour. (Canto II, xiv)

And later, well into her peroration, she points at Seyd's "perfidious, cruel, [and] disgraceful"¹⁴ conduct, while commending herself through the use of *syngnome*:

The crime – 'tis none to punish those of Seyd –
That hated tyrant, Conrad – he must bleed!
I see thee shudder – but my soul is changed –
Wrong'd – spurn'd – reviled – and it shall be avenged –
Accus'd of what till now my heart disdain'd –
Too faithful [*syngnome*], though to bitter bondage chain'd.

Since "one of the chief goals of the peroration should be 'to set [*the audience*] on fire, and heate them earnestly against the wicked offender'",¹⁵ Gulnare points out that killing Seyd would be an act of pre-emptive justice:

Those tyrants, teasing, tempting to rebel,
Deserve the fate their fretting lips foretell.
I never loved – he bought me – somewhat high – [*syngnome commending herself*
while stressing the 'impiety' of Seyd]
I was a slave unmurmuring; [...]
[...]
Mine [that is her life] too he threatens; [...]
When wearier of theese fleeting charms and me,
There yawns the sack – and yonder rolls the sea!
What, am I then a toy for dotard's play,
To wear but till the gilding frets away? (Canto III, viii)

Like Zuleika's, like Medora's, also Gulnare's offerings are rejected each time, both by Seyd and by Conrad. Gulnare has actually more space and more speeches, and in all of them she tries, unsuccessfully, to manipulate the emotions of her audience.

It is worth pointing out that the rhetoric employed by the Turkish Tales' heroines is quite different from that used by other Byronic heroines (see the ironic wit of Donna Julia in *Don Juan*), just as it is different from the plaintive complaining of a "nagging housewife"¹⁶ or a "happy slave".¹⁷ The heroine uses rhetoric craft to try to get what she wants – yet regularly fails. Her failure, however, is not due to a flaw in her "discourse," since it effectively works on the reader, but rather to the hero's character which does not allow him to either follow or accept the rhetorical logic: he's a man of action who must follow his preordained mission.

With all her rhetorical skills – or perhaps because of them – the Tales' heroine must die. Silence is the natural outcome of her failures. And death is the result of her determination to talk and to act based on her individual judgement.

She is, then, not so much "the passive woman [who] dies easily" but rather the defiant woman who refuses to fade away and die easily.

14: "We can hope to provoke hatred of our antagonist 'if we can point to some base, proud, perfidious, cruel, arrogant, malicious or disgraceful act they have committed'" – Skinner 131.

15: Skinner 127.

16: Kelsall 53.

17: Kelsall 53.