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At Home in the East: Orientalized Homes in Romantic-Period Literature

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ABSTRACT

This essay maps the presence and import of orientalized domestic spaces in Romantic-period fiction by focusing on Phebe Gibbes's *Hartly House, Calcutta*, T. S. Surr's *A Winter in London*, Maria Edgeworth's *The Absentee* and "The India Cabinet," Mary Russell Mitford's "Rosedale," and Charles Lamb's "Old China." Ranging from the 1780s to the 1820s, this corpus allows us to identify a line of representations exoticizing the British house/home in order to throw into relief personal and collective projects, desires, and anxieties. By imagining orientalized domestic spaces, these works mirror the gradual diffusion of a taste for oriental interior decoration in Romantic-period Britain and, relatedly, the sociocultural pressures exerted by its imperial ventures in Asia. Thus, orientalized houses/homes function as fraught locations between East and West, as well as between word and space, or privacy and publicness. As this essay demonstrates, by questioning exoticized domestic spaces from different angles, this fictional corpus problematizes Romantic-era appropriations of the East and the possibility of its containment and control inside a domestic sphere where familiarity and intimacy blend perturbingly with encroaching forms of alienness.

"The splendour of this house, as it is modestly styled, is of itself ... sufficient to turn the soundest European head" (Gibbes 6). Thus the protagonist of Phebe Gibbes's *Hartly House, Calcutta* (1789), the aptly named Sophia Goldborne, introduces the palatial residence that receives her on her arrival in the city that had been the capital of British India since 1772. A lively blend of fictional travelogue and *Bildungsroman*, the novel affords a useful point of departure for an examination of the ways in which Romantic-period literature imagined orientalized domestic spaces and the desire to inhabit the East or an adapted version of it. As the dwelling of the Anglo-Indian family hosting the protagonist, Hartly House is the epicenter of her adventures in the "city of palaces," where she frequents Anglo-Indian society, discovers local culture, forms a sentimental attachment to a young Brahmin, and wins the heart of a husband with whom she eventually returns to England. The first description Sophia addresses to her correspondent back home is that of "Hartly Mansion," her picture of its exterior intriguingly organized through intersecting lines:

The centre part of the building is much higher than the rest, and terminates in a point at the top, forming an obtuse angle (if I may properly so call it) when the projecting lines are downwards; and extend to the wings on each side; the roof whereof covers a most magnificent hall, or saloon, the whole length and breadth of this central space. (12)

50 Sophia's geometrical depiction of the building turns it into a diagram where familiarity and alienness intersect. Clean lines are indexes of Palladian architecture and the neoclassical idiom of Calcutta's main official buildings situated along the Esplanade, some of which Sophia describes in subsequent letters, such as the Writers' Building, the headquarters of the East India Company's junior clerks (or writers) and
55 "the monument of commercial prosperity" (34). Formally akin to this architectural type, Hartly House is a domestic adjunct of such imperial-colonial structures. However, to some extent, the lines traced by the protagonist are also "othered" by features that interfere with Palladian-neoclassical canons, such as the "white composition, called *chinam*" covering the outside, or the fact that the house is
60 "ornamented at back fronts with balconies, or verandas" and further eye-catching features that result in "a striking effect on an European beholder" (12–13). To Western eyes, the house is both recognizably familiar and surprisingly other. A sample of imperial architecture, it is a fascinatingly hybridized object, a sign of the implantation of Western cultural patterns in India, as well as of their "disorientation" through admixtures with local, native forms.
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The theme of empire is pervasive in a novel set at the time of Warren Hastings's governorship (1772–85) and one that consistently extols Britain's imperial greatness. From the start of her explorations, Sophia adopts the language and attitudes of an imperialist. When she refers to India as "this golden world" (38), she has in mind the literal meaning of gold, since she waxes lyrical over the bags of "gold mohrs" with which her father regularly provides her (14). She also humorously invokes Alexander the Great as her model (128), aspires to have an elephant at her disposal like the local nawab (154), and becomes a sentimental version of an oriental despot when she demonstrates her appreciation of native servants by saying that she would like to
70 "wring their hearts" (137). She takes to styling herself a "Belate Be Bee" ("the English Lady" [137]) and is perfectly at ease in the colony's public and domestic spaces. Besides palatial Hartly House, she praises the local custom of building retreats "called *Bungilos*" (37), rapturously describing "Hartly Bungilo" as a *locus amoenus* of interior coziness and exterior picturesqueness. Posing as a trend-setter and a promoter of exotic taste, Sophia aspires to introduce the Indian garden-bower into England: her
75 "British villa" will sport both "these bowers" (136) and a pagoda (135). A figure of intercultural contact and a cultural trader, she plans to familiarize her compatriots with a domestic-related Eastern structure, a garden intended as an extension of the house's interiors, which anticipates John Claudius Loudon's theorizations of the suburban villa with garden in the 1820s and 30s.¹ As the novel ends with her landing at Portsmouth, we are not told if Sophia brings her exoticizing plans to fruition. Nonetheless, her projected cross-breeding of Indian garden and British residence points to a cultural osmosis that is significant both in the context of Romantic fictions of orientalized interiors and the desire to live (in) the East, as well as in relation to the
80 gradual penetration of oriental features into the domestic spaces of the imperial metropole.
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While hinting at the introduction and acclimatization of Eastern features, Gibbes's novel more broadly gestures towards the intensification, in the Romantic decades, of an "oriental obsession" in building and interior decoration.² Taking its cue from this conspicuous yet circumscribed phenomenon linked to returning nabobs and a world of wealth, privilege and fashion, this essay argues that inhabiting the East is a recurrent, and *variously* significant, imaginative activity in Romantic-era literature. In this frame, the written page becomes a crucible of spatial imaginings encrusted with personal and collective desires and aspirations. To be sure, the idea of inhabiting an Eastern cultural geography was nothing new: the most recent antecedents were eighteenth-century *turquerie* and *chinoiserie*, the latter, as David Porter observes, a style that problematically destabilized the "boundary between cultivated and vulgar taste, fine art and the fripperies of fashion" (23) and emphasized "concerns about substance and authenticity" (27). Undeniably indebted to earlier phenomena, Romantic-period manifestations differ from them because of the increased political, economic and cultural pressures of Britain's Eastern empire, and the concurrent diffusion and "trickling down" of an oriental taste that gradually became more affordable, even if only aspirationally, and visible.

Literary representations of orientalized domestic spaces, part of this discursive and material context, must also be addressed with the same caution required by correlated contemporary phenomena. Porter has correctly warned against reading exoticism in eighteenth-century literature and arts exclusively as a trope "reflecting and often celebrating Britain's rising imperial power" (6). Reinforcing this kind of caveat, John Potvin notes that, as combinations of external structures, interiors, and interior decorations, orientalized spaces are "the result of an ongoing, endless series of hybrid becomings, always in the process of taking *place*," and thus "unfinished products ... responding to the impacts and trajectories of global, regional and local economies, cultural forces, subjective needs and consumer impulses" (6–7). With such pointers in mind, this essay examines Romantic-period figurations of orientalized domestic spaces as semantic and ideological flashpoints placed between word and space, as well as at the nexus of intimacy and publicness. In doing so, it aims to reappraise them as major textual locations for the problematizing of the "heraldic" function of the appropriated East (Leask 8, 22, 70), and the dynamics of the containment of otherness and its subversive potential; the domestic as a nexus blending familiarity and intimacy with encroaching alienness; and the interrelations of space and material objects with national, class, and gender identities.

As if fulfilling Sophia Goldborne's plan to orientalize her British villa, early nineteenth-century fiction of fashionable life presented orientalized domestic spaces as emblems of privilege, luxury, display, and self-display. Works like Thomas Skinner Surr's *A Winter in London* (1806) and Maria Edgeworth's *The Absentee* (1812) transplanted the exoticized spaces of *Hartly House*, *Calcutta* to London, placing center stage the conspicuous consumption of the metropolitan upper classes, though with different stresses and aims.

With nine editions in its first year of publication, Surr's *Winter* was a remarkably successful product by a prolific author who worked as a clerk at the Bank of England (Jones 160). The novel is fairly standard fare, presenting several of the main features of romance—the foundling, disguised identity, *anagnorisis*, and *deus ex machina* interventions (Jones 169). Interestingly, however, its engaging sketches of high life

anticipate the silver-fork school of the 1820s and 30s in several respects, not least the *à clé* element. Aiming to entertain while delivering a moral message within a conservative ideological frame, Surr's novel conjures up a scene of upper-class consumption in an orientalized domestic space pivoting on the figure of the Prince of Wales and future Prince Regent. Published the year after Trafalgar, its events take place in 1804–05. Though not overtly political, the narrative promotes loyalist and patriotic messages, while also registering the ambivalent condition of a country where the dazzling spectacle of life among the *ton* contrasts with a surrounding context of war, political crises, and economic downturns. In book 2, the lengthy exploration of an orientalized interior in the London residence of the Earl and Countess of Roseville reads like an escapist fantasy deployed along a sequence of oneiric projections removing the characters to a seemingly timeless Eastern “elsewhere.” In fact, the orientalized interior intended for the masquerade that gives the chapter its title is charged with tensions that gradually come into view, as the narrator replaces the dreamlike horizons of the *Arabian Nights* with the realistic prospect of London's aristocratic-commercial nexus: “No longer let the descriptions of entertainments recorded in the *Arabian Nights* be regarded as fabulous, when the nobility, and even the merchants of London, can charm away the hours of winter with such fêtes as these” (Surr 2: 215). As the Rosevilles' residence becomes a site of entertainment and display, orientalized interior luxury provides the principal ingredient for this spatial masquerade. The house/home becomes a “metamorphosed” place (2: 216) as well as a place of disguise connoted by inauthenticity and insincerity.

Recurrent in eighteenth-century masquerades, Turkish and to a lesser extent Persian, Indian, and Chinese costumes signify appropriation of alien cultural codes and hybridized identity-making, as well as relating to theatricality and illusionism (Ribeiro 217–48). Surr's novel conveys these concerns through questions of correctness of design and costume, and therefore the creation of verisimilitude and the troubling possibility that the illusion may appear more real than reality itself. Crafted by famous (and historic) set designers—Carbonel (also known as Cabanel) (Nicoll 366), Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg, and Robert Kerr Porter (2: 221)—the Rosevilles' exotic “charade” (2: 313) is just that: a hyperreal simulacrum that takes over both place and bodies, since the Earl and Countess of Roseville, “habited in exact costume as a Moorish prince and princess,” welcome their guests in a faithful reproduction of “the rich alhambra of the Moorish kings” (2: 215–16). The scene then shifts to an Egyptian temple, the “gardens and pavilion of a Turkish seraglio” (2: 217), and a gallery transformed into the Arabian desert at night, complete with howling beasts and wandering bedouins.

The Prince of Wales sanctions the taste and veracity of the Rosevilles' illusionistic Eastern-style interiors and garden. A *connoisseur* and promoter of orientalist interior decoration at Carlton House (and later at Brighton's Pavilion), he vouches for their accuracy, applauding the “tastefulness” and “correctness” of the scenery and decorations (2: 227). He guarantees the orientalized house as an effective simulacrum of the East, indistinguishable from the original: as the narrator notes, the “reality itself, of which this scene was a representation, could scarcely excite more voluptuous ideas in the imagination of a beholder” (2: 217). More specifically, the prince surveys the scene from a pavilion in the garden—a rotunda, the roof of which is “supported by pillars of

gold studded with precious stones” and decorated with “the luxuriant representation of every species of oriental fruit, foliage, and flowers” (2: 218). In the center are sofas “with cushions of white satin” (2: 218) placed on a dais “covered with beautiful Persian carpets” (2: 219), similar to the throne of an Eastern potentate. This allusion, however, is not intended as a reference to political despotism, as in the later satirical cartoons depicting the Regent as a monstrously bloated Chinese emperor (Kitson 226–28; Cohen-Vrignaud 121–31); rather, here it signifies a successfully accomplished act of appropriation of Eastern material and symbolic elements, a self-satisfied statement of their assimilation and our control over them. Endorsed by the prince placed at its center like a Turkish sultan or a Chinese emperor, the orientalized house stands for an East that—in parts, at least—is under British rule. Thus, the Rosevilles’ metamorphosed dwelling intimates broader, transcontinental vistas and the dynamics of possession and domination powering Britain’s Asian expansionism.

At a cursory glance, Surr’s narrative can be written off as an even too easily legible and formulaic portrait of fashionable exoticizing, akin to the fictions of consumption and self-display in contemporary periodicals such as the *Lady’s Magazine* or Rudolf Ackermann’s *Repository of Arts, Literature, Commerce, Manufactures, Fashions and Politics*. After all, the explicit aim of the Rosevilles’ orientalist extravaganza is to produce enjoyment and pleasure, so that their guests may “laugh and be merry” (2: 227). Yet, at a deeper level, their house in oriental masquerade also sets in train some none too reassuring overlaps between original and copy, authenticity and imitation, interior and exterior domestic spaces, center and periphery. These superimpositions are visible in the *mise en abîme* distribution of reproduced exotic geographies, as one orientalized space leads to another and then another, in a fugue-like pattern. The orientalized house is what James O. Young terms an *insigne*, “something like a coat of arms,” announcing the fulfilled appropriation of an “other” cultural item (58). However, the overlaps it contains undermine any straightforwardly triumphalist imagery of possession, introducing uncertainties that point towards full-blown anxieties of dispossession.

Surr’s exoticized domestic spaces are early literary manifestations of the kind of “Regency orientalism” that, James Watt notes, privileges an ornamentally plethoric East inspired by “aristocratic magnificence and splendour” (159) and offering an experience of “absorptive pleasure” (182). It reached its literary climax with Thomas Moore’s poem *Lalla Rookh* (1817) and its architectural one in the Brighton Pavilion commissioned by the Prince Regent to John Nash in 1815. Yet, as Surr’s novel suggests, premonitory signs appeared in pre-Regency and pre-Waterloo culture. In *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration* (1807), Thomas Hope promoted comparable, albeit less excessive, blends of oriental styles, whereas George Smith’s *Collection of Designs for Household Furniture and Interior Decoration* (1808) featured more extravagant suggestions for orientalized rooms (Tuite 393–94). In turn, Ackermann’s *Repository of Arts* (1809–28) showcased oriental-style interior components, such as curtains, chairs and sofas, offering apparently more accessible versions of Regency domestic orientalism and making them (at least visually) available to the aspirational middling ranks.

With its peculiar mix of playfulness, indulgence, and geo-political resonances, this imagination of orientalized interiors takes center stage in the early chapters of Edgeworth’s *The Absentee*. One of her “Tales of Fashionable Life,” this novel was

acknowledged by Walter Scott as one of Edgeworth's Irish works that inspired him to continue developing his own prose fiction. It was after reading *The Absentee* that he went back to the temporarily abandoned *Waverley* (Connolly 24), a connection that presents some intriguing echoes also in terms of houses and domestic spaces. Tracing Edward Waverley's formative adventures through alternate excursions into romance and history, Scott's novel progresses by way of a sequence of houses and residences—Waverley-Honour, Tully-Veolan, Glennaquoich, Holyrood, and eventually Tully-Veolan again. Similarly, following Lord Colambre's eye-opening pilgrimage from London to his family's Irish estates, Edgeworth's novel also features a gallery of houses: first, the London residence of Colambre's parents, Lord and Lady Clonbrony; then, in Ireland, Mrs. Raffarty's Tusculum, Lady Oranmore's residence, Halloran Castle, the widow O'Neil's cottage, and Castle Clonbrony. This house-centered focus serves the novel's *tour de force* denunciation of absenteeism and its ills (instigated by unscrupulous agents, and made worse by women's excessive conspicuous consumption), while reinforcing its vigorous plea in favor of the landlord's presence on, and involvement in, the estate. The fact of residing in the home and house, that is in the nerve center of the estate, is crucial in a novel celebrating the figure of the "great resident Irish proprietor" (261), a beneficial influence capable of generating untold advantages for the tenants and their families. Thus, the novel sets store by the neatness of the cottages on the Colambre estate, properly managed by the virtuous Mr. Burke; yet it also casts houses as emblems of the condition of Ireland, as in unfinished or out-of-scale dwellings such as Tusculum, and as summarized by Count O'Halloran's remark that Irish gentlemen "never are, but always to be, blest with a good house" (121).

Tellingly, it is an orientalized house that inaugurates the novel's series of emblematic domestic spaces. Unlike in Surr's *Winter in London*, though, its interiors signify the wasteful expenditure of Anglo-Irish absentees and are subjected to unremittingly savage criticism. This highly conspicuous and legible use of the exoticized house has not gone unnoticed. Clara Tuite has drawn attention to "interior decoration as an allegory of internal colonialism" in *The Absentee* (385), a point that Claire Connolly sharpens further by remarking that the novel cultivates "the significance of objects in a national literature founded upon a movement between the diachronic axis of history and the synchronic one of culture" (62). In other words, objects, not least the exoticizing paraphernalia of the Clonbrons' London residence, condense the novel's contrasts between history and culture, past tradition and a modernity repeatedly indexed through the term "fashion."

Edgeworth focuses on the exotic metamorphosis of a domestic interior, as the Clonbrons' London residence is transformed for a lavish entertainment that her ladyship hopes may give her an entrée to the capital's most select circles. As in *Winter in London*, accuracy is paramount as the test of a correct appropriation and domestication of the East. But, in what reads like a parodic reprise of the Rosevilles' masquerade, it becomes the means for demolishing the Clonbrons' *mise en scène*, since their London house in Eastern costume reveals, *a contrario*, the genuine values of the Irish house/home. In the process, the orientalized domestic space contributes to the reorientation of the novel's epicenter from the imperial metropolis to a colonial periphery that is the pivot of a collaborative imperial-colonial relationship. If the novel ultimately tracks the shift from absenteeist "Londonomania" (199) to a return to the

original *oikos* (house and estate), this transition starts from the artificial, orientalized dwelling.

Before lifting the curtain on the Clonbronzys' extravaganza, Edgeworth narrates its planning stage, a moment that serves the novel's dual aim of satirizing conspicuous consumption and display, as well as reincorporating it into a positive socio-economic frame through a little, and easily missed, side scene centered on a seemingly marginal character, Grace Nugent, the Clonbronzys' orphaned niece. In this opening scene, the cartoonish designer Mr. Soho conjures up a variety of decorative possibilities: *You* fill up your angles here with *encoignières*—round your walls with the *Turkish tent drapery*—a fancy of my own—in apricot cloth, or crimson velvet, suppose, or, *en flute*, in crimson satin draperies, fanned and riched with gold fringes, *en suite*. (12–13; original emphases). The *you* is obviously Lady Clonbrony, but it can also include the readers, who find themselves in a dual position as addressees (both of the fictional text and of the discursive type it mimics, that of contemporary fashion magazines) and are therefore awarded (virtual) stakes in the scene. This superimposition of space and self resembles what happens in contemporary periodicals dedicated to fashion and design, as exemplified by Ackermann's *Repository of Arts*. From the outset, its plates and accompanying letterpress covered orientalized fashion (the issue for April 1809 predicted "a profusion of Turkish turbans, Janizary jackets, mosque slippers" ["Fashions" 250]) and interior decorations (the issue for July 1814 featured a detailed "Design for an Ottoman couch" with Egyptian caryatid end-figures ["Design" 56]). This parallel orientalizing produces a neat dovetailing of ornamentation aimed at transforming body and space, person and dwelling. Moreover, the eclecticism in Ackermann's *Repository*, where the oriental blends with medieval, classical, French or Italianate styles, is reflected in Mr. Soho's speech, where neoclassical elements (Apollo's head with golden rays or griffin paws and tripods) merge with the Turkish drapery, Statira canopy, seraglio ottomans, Alhambra hangings, Trebisonde trellice paper, Chinese pagoda paper, and ancient Egyptian decorations like the hieroglyphic paper and sphinx candelabra (13–14). The "[e]xpence of the whole" is "[i]mpossible to calculate here on the spot" (14), pontificates Mr. Soho, making plain an ominous divergence between domestic economy and the economy of the estate.

The designer is interrupted by the arrival of the voluble and unpolished, yet ultimately well-meaning Sir Terence O'Fay, who shifts the conversation to the rich heiress whom Lady Clonbrony would like her son to marry. Significantly, "[d]uring the matrimonial dialogue," Lord Colambre's cousin, Grace Nugent, who is deeply moved by the topic, engages in some revelatory displacement activity: "She was very diligently trying the changes that could be made in the positions of a china-mouse, a cat, a dog, a cup, and a brahmin, on the mantel-piece" (26). That she plays with these china figurines is not a marginal or random, but rather a strategically deployed detail, to which I will return.


The novel then moves on to Lady Clonbrony's gala and its "splendid reception rooms": the Turkish tent, the Alhambra, the pagoda, and the rest (27). Structured as a processional exploration similar to Surr's room-by-room description, the scene sees Lady Clonbrony comically introducing her candelabra, trellice paper, and ottomans to "my lady *this* ... and my lady *that*" (27). By this inversion of conventional subject-object hierarchies Edgeworth shrewdly highlights the disruption of the natural order of things brought about by the Clonbronzys' absenteeism. In turn, the parade of

“eastern magnificence” (28) has the opposite effect from that intended by her ladyship. “[R]esolute not to admire” (34), her snobbish guests laugh at the attempts at accuracy in the rooms, mocking her ladyship’s aspiration to correctness and appropriateness: “now I may boast I’ve been in a real Chinese pagoda” (36), a voice woundinglly remarks. Also Lady Clonbrony’s English extraction, which she repeatedly invokes in her moments of misguided self-affirmation, is called into question and reduced to costumery similar to her gala attire and the décor of her rooms.

A site of irresponsible expenditure, the orientalized house casts London as the hub of a diseased economy, where capital from Ireland (and, allusively, from the East) powers a hypertrophic process of centripetal hoarding, squandering, and displaying. Tellingly placed *in* the house, the Clonbronys’ “eastern magnificence” makes explicit Lord Colambre’s worries over his parents’ finances, as well as conveying concerns over the imperial metropole. Far from being a hodgepodge of “multi-ethnic orientalism” (McCormack and Walker xix), the oriental décor of the Clonbronys’ residence presents specific imperial connotations: the Chinese vases reference the Celestial Empire; the Alhambra is synonymous with Granada as the last remnant of the Cordovan caliphate; the seraglio ottomans are linked to the Ottoman imperial court and the Topkapi palace in Istanbul; and the Statira canopy alludes to the Persian princess who became the wife of Alexander the Great, the “conqueror” of India. Though heavily satirized, this accumulation of imitation Eastern interiors is a mosaic of allusions to historical empires, both Eastern and in the East, symbolically contained in a London house concentrating the spoils of commerce and empire, a familiar topos in long-eighteenth-century writings from Alexander Pope’s *Windsor Forest* (1713) to Anna Letitia Barbauld’s *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812).

The novel does not dwell at length on this episode. Guests arrive, mock, and leave: “The company ate and drank—enjoyed themselves—went away—and laughed at their hostess” (Edgeworth, *Absentee* 40). After Lady Clonbrony’s party fails to secure her a place in the highest ranks of London society and adds to the family’s debts, the action shifts to other locations, following Colambre’s journey across Ireland and the houses and residences he visits there. Yet it would be wrong to write off the gala as merely a grotesquely humorous moment concluded in itself and separate from the rest of the plot. The orientalized house is more than an opportunity for leveling sarcasm at orientalist consumerism or demonizing the Orient as a signifier of sterile and toxic luxury—and this is where the figurines rearranged by Grace Nugent become relevant.

The mantelpiece bibelots are miniaturized indexes of the transformative process beginning at the gala. They show that orientalist display is in the house even before Soho begins to cast his consumeristic spell on Lady Clonbrony. They also indicate that the significance of orientalist details is not limited to the episode of the gala. When Grace plays with them and moves them around, because of her role as the novel’s salvific figure and bearer of virtue, these actions symbolically foreshadow the overall reorienting and rearranging of the Clonbrony family. And the key moment testifying to Grace’s power to reorient the absentee clan happens when she finds the solution to Lady Clonbrony’s absurd but significant reason for refusing to return to Ireland: her hatred of the yellow damask chairs in the drawing-room at Clonbrony Castle, which Grace offers to replace with her “painted velvet chairs” (202). Fittingly, the conclusion seals the family’s reorienting with a reference to the new chairs in the “new hung”

drawing-room (266). Marking the consummation of the Clonbronzys' rearrangement, the chairs bring the plot to a close as the "symbols of the new possibilities opened up by 'the example of a great resident Irish proprietor'" (Connolly 25). A renovated *status quo* is finally established thanks to Grace Nugent, who replaces Lady Clonbrony (in whose mind "there was no ing; all objects, great and small, were upon the same level" [Edgeworth, *Absentee* 257]), thanks to her skills as a wise orientalist interior decorator first, and then as the rearranger of the Irish interior. Ultimately, Grace ensures that everything is in keeping at the level of local-national and peripheral-metropolitan interrelations, and may remain so.

A problematic node at the novel's outset, the orientalized interior resonates in the final return to order, as Edgeworth interlinks Mr. Soho's lavish designs with the miniature dimension of the mantelpiece figurines. These objects encapsulate the significance of the orientalized interior, which resurfaces in the conclusion in neat, if implicit, circular fashion. Equally implicitly, they point to the gradual spreading of oriental(ist) items in Britain's domestic spaces. If very few might afford Mr. Soho's transformations, more could purchase oriental figurines and china cups, whether genuine or imitated, and this trickling-down process, together with its implications, was registered by literary texts in the 1820s.

First published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in December 1824 as "Rosedale and its Tenants," and later reprinted in the fourth volume of *Our Village* (1830), Mary Russell Mitford's prose sketch "Rosedale" records this growing phenomenon in a narrative which, like Surr's and Edgeworth's novels, is pervaded by theatricality, disguise, and metamorphosis. Although the name "Rosedale" points to an English rural idyll, in the cottage "[e]very room is in masquerade: the saloon Chinese ... the library Egyptian ... They sleep in Turkish tents" (282–83). Moreover, as in Surr and Edgeworth, also Mitford's mildly tongue-in-cheek description defines the oriental masquerade as playful yet laden with dangers, which she highlights through expressions of superabundance ("full of jars and mandarins and pagodas," "swarming with furniture crocodiles and sphinxes" [282]), confusion (the shifting and mixing of "properties," a term associated with the stage, leading to "all manner of anomalies" [283]), and the grotesque and non-human ("squat Chinese bronzes," "Egyptian monsters," "supernatural ugliness" [283]). Ostensibly "built to be lived in" (283), Rosedale turns out to be uninhabitable, no tenants ever settling down in it. Thus it represents the opposite of homely coziness, one of the pivotal principles in *Our Village*, also disseminated by publications such as Ackermann's *Repository* in a series of essays "On the Comfort of Houses" (June 1813) about the importance of blending elegance and practicality. Artificial and unnatural, Mitford's orientalized *cottage ornée* brings city consumerism to a rural context, generating a laughable but perilous infusion of Eastern features into English countryside living. Everything in it is "out of place," not "in keeping" (283)—a recurrent key phrase, seen also in Edgeworth's *Absentee*, which conveys a troubling suspension of correct arrangements and, by extension, of a balanced dispensation. Moreover, the fact that Rosedale can be rented intimates that orientalized interiors are, to some extent, if not more widely available and affordable, at least more generally associated with the middling ranks.

On one hand, to anyone familiar with Romantic-era literature, Mitford's cottage inevitably reads like a toned-down version of the nightmarish oriental interiors in

Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821, 1822). There, the Eastern drug transports the subject into "Chinese houses with cane tables, &c.," where "[a]ll the feet of the tables, sofas, &c. soon became instinct with life" and "the abominable head of the crocodile, and his leering eyes, looked out at [him], multiplied into a thousand repetitions" (74). Though cast in a comedic and satirical register, the orientalist hodgepodge of *Rosedale* suggests the abysses of terror into which De Quincey's narrative forces us to peer. On the other hand, the cottage is a scaled-down realization of the interiors in *Winter in London* and *The Absentee*, and one that functions much like the ornaments on the Clonbronzys' mantelpiece. By narrowing her focus on a smaller space, Mitford enhances the satiric tenor of her denunciation of this orientalist invasion of the domestic through a greater, because more compressed, sense of jumble. And, by this token, her sketch testifies to the penetration and presence of the East in British homes, now not only in the theatricalized settings of upper-class residences but also in the more circumscribed, everyday contexts of middling-rank dwellings.

A related but slightly dissimilar representation appears in Edgeworth's tale "The India Cabinet," from *Continuation of Early Lessons* (1815), about a child's fascination with a drawer containing "a set of Chinese toys" (1: 237), among which are clockwork mechanisms that hark back to the age-old notion of *automata* as among the most astonishing marvels—or indeed *mirabilia*—of the Orient (Truitt 14–15). The charm is broken when the child's older brother declares that, in contrast to these silly "Chinese tumblers" (Edgeworth, "The India Cabinet" 1: 240), their father has shown him much more useful "large *real* machines" (1: 245). As the worlds of (Eastern) romance and playfulness and (Western) realism and pragmatism collide, the balance is tipped in favor of the mechanized advances of British industrialization. Watt sees Edgeworth's drawer of marvels as proclaiming "the frivolousness of things Chinese" (209). Yet, there may also be a more serious side to it, if we read both cabinet and drawer as miniaturized and domesticated versions of the museum or repository of artefacts from India and the Far East more generally that was opened in 1800 by the East India Company at its London headquarters of East India House at 12–21 Leadenhall St. Located far from the fashionable West End, this venue was initially little patronized, but became a favorite attraction in 1808 when it acquired "Tipu's Tiger," the musical automaton representing a tiger mauling a European soldier, which soon became one of the most popular sights in London (Sweetman 94, 163; Fournier). In Chinese-box style, just as the Oriental Repository inside East India House gathered artefacts from Asia, Edgeworth's India cabinet houses the drawer full of Chinese toys, a parallel between real and fictional spaces, which once again illuminates the geo-cultural and geo-political import of Romantic-period orientalized domesticity.

The headquarters of the East India Company was also where Charles Lamb worked as a clerk from 1792 until his retirement in 1825. More than just a workplace, the Leadenhall Street building was significant for his identity as a writer: his earliest publication were four sonnets in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Poems on Various Subjects*, which he signed as "Mr. Charles Lamb of the India House." This connection between the East and the house gains particular prominence in his essay "Old China" (*London Magazine*, 1823), a notoriously puzzling text, since it places the East in the foreground but mostly records the nostalgic memories of a London-based couple of ageing cousins (Bridget

and Elia—that is, Charles and his sister Mary). Moreover, though porcelain stands for the East in the essay, it is unclear whether Lamb is writing about original china or British-made china, and thus an adapted, ersatz version of genuine Asian wares. As with much of his essayistic production, “Old China” reflects Lamb’s process of *reductio ad cotidianum* through an “empirico-materialist” ironic approach aimed at capturing the contours of a kaleidoscopic reality (Bugliani 111, 112). This ironically quotidian register characterizes the intersection of East, house, and domesticity in “Old China,” informing the ambiguities that make it a text particularly open to divergent interpretations.

Peter Kitson terms “Old China” a “plangent essay” originating from the contemplation of a “whimsical chinoiserie object” (171), “that world before perspective—a china tea-cup” (Lamb 780). Lamb outlines China as a dimension beyond the norms of physics and perspective, while his indulgence in a “pleasant, whimsical, and dream-like irrationality” relates to childhood, memory, and the process of self-development (Kitson 172). Karen Fang, instead, draws our attention to the cup as a domestic, everyday version of Coleridge’s pleasure-dome in *Kubla Khan* (60–64); whereas, for David Porter, Lamb’s treatment of the imaginary horizons opened up by Elia’s musings on the cup provides readers with “comforting assurance” that Western norms ultimately neutralize the irregularities of the Chinese object and its cultural context (3). Relatedly, as Watt notes, Lamb’s cup signals that Chinese or China-inspired artefacts were “everyday objects for people across the social spectrum” (209). As a result, much like Mitford’s *cottage ornée*, the porcelain vessel reflects actual transformations in the availability and consumption of domestic orientalism, while also offering a complex version of the connections between container and contained, East and West, center and periphery.

Elia’s “almost feminine” fascination with old china is focused on the house and particularly the “closet” of “any great house” he visits, where the genuine or imitation exotic objects are stored and treasured (Lamb 780). Likewise, the entire essay is virtually contained within this space in another Chinese-box layout of embedded locations: the cousins’ cozy London house, which contains the china closet of the great house mentioned at the start of the essay, while in turn both contain the china objects and their fancifully floating landscapes and figures. As the essay unfolds, the material becomes airy and intangible, and Bridget’s memories of the cousins’ earlier life in London (their evenings at the theater and walks around the city) rise to the surface. Placed within the cup’s uniform, depthless “lucid atmosphere” (781), the suspended, grotesque Chinese figures flout the norms of beauty, gravity, and perspective. Similarly, Bridget’s recollections tumble out uncontrollably, conveyed by an unstoppable stream of language—what Elia calls the “rhetorical vein” of “her speech” (785). In other words, the figurative mode of the East bears upon, and shapes the expression of, the cousins’ memories of their past experiences and their present domestic scene. *Tout se tient* in an essay where disconnects are only apparent.

Lamb’s references to the cousins’ increased wealth are also significant. Besides referring to their better quality of life (“live better and lie softer” [785]), they make plain their increased purchasing possibilities, and therefore the fact that they can afford refined china objects and take part in practices of acquisition, display, and use of the East. Thus the essay seems to settle on a picture of domestic peacefulness and comfort, where the “good old days” fondly remembered by Bridget in fact appear to

be less ideal if compared with their current enjoyment of a “well-carpeted fire-side, sitting on this luxurious sofa” (785). But the essay’s puzzling conclusion interrupts any idyllic prospect. Elia stops Bridget short and brings her back to the china cup—from memory and London, back to the object and the East. The china closet symbolized by the cup takes over again. As the cousins’ faces are reflected on the polished surface and luminous atmosphere of the porcelain, the warmly protective English domestic space also mirrors itself in it, and is indeed contained within the Chinese dimension, once again in *mise en abîme* fashion. Ironically, however, another uncertainty upsets this conclusion further: since we do not know if the cup is Chinese porcelain or British-made china, we witness yet another movement of regression and dispersal of the British house/home into a space that could be a simulacrum of the Orient, rather than the real thing.

If we now pull back from the details of Lamb’s tea-cup to the wider orientalized interiors of the earlier texts, it is clear that we are in the presence of a meaningful inversion. The grand orientalized designs in Surr’s and Edgeworth’s novels are located in a British domestic structure that controls and tames their troubling exoticism. The same applies to Mitford’s “Rosedale,” where the bizarrely exotic *cottage ornée* is embedded in the English countryside, in “our village,” as well as within the familiar atmosphere and benign tone of Mitford’s narrative. In Lamb’s essay, instead, the East metaphorically encases the London house/home, the cousins, and their metropolitan memories, as they are all captured in the enameled, depthless surface of the china cup that reflects them. “Our” domestic space no longer contains the Eastern object: now it is the Eastern cup that visually and symbolically subsumes the house/home and its inhabitants.

In tracing these textual metamorphoses of orientalized interiors, we have moved away from Gibbes’s *Hartly House*, *Calcutta* and its protagonist’s self-assured, joyful plan of creating an Indian garden-bower in her future British villa. The desire of, and pride in, living (in) the East conveyed by Sophia Goldborne’s intention ripple across to Surr’s *Winter in London* and Edgeworth’s *Absentee*, where, however, the anxieties attendant on cross-cultural transition and admixture are increasingly discernible. These novels, and the shorter pieces by Mitford, Edgeworth, and Lamb, mine a variety of expressive modes (from the serious to the comic, from romance to realism), forms of attraction and fascination, the desire to appropriate and consume, as well as the fear of being invaded and consumed, within imagined milieux from the grand to the everyday, the large-scale to the minute.

The variegated but essentially homogeneous narrative I have outlined oscillates between a fully possessed East located in the house/home and anxieties of dispossession of the domestic space by the East inside it. Within the orientalized dwellings examined here, there coalesce, on one hand, an awareness of imperial primacy reinforced by a complacent enjoyment of the appropriated, heraldically exhibited components of other cultures, and, on the other, insecurity and uneasiness over the tenability of that primacy and enjoyment. As domestic space becomes the point of convergence of a centripetal flow of signs of otherness, it simultaneously turns into the place where “our” original signs are dispersed. Bearing witness to this dual process, the orientalized Romantic houses and homes examined here are crucibles of contending issues and thus acutely problematic sites of imaginative themes and ideological concerns.

Notes

1. For a wide-ranging examination of London's suburban aesthetics and landscaping projects, see Simo.
2. On oriental fashions in interior design in the Romantic period, see Morley and Sweetman.

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