

EASTERN IMAGERY IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH POETRY

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Abstract. The eighteenth century witnessed a significant expansion of English literary engagement with the East, particularly in poetry, where Oriental imagery became a powerful aesthetic, philosophical, and symbolic resource. This article examines the representation and function of Eastern motifs in the poetry of Thomas Gray, William Collins, and selected contemporaries, situating their work within the broader cultural context of Enlightenment curiosity, imperial expansion, and early Orientalist discourse. Through close textual analysis, the study explores how Eastern imagery was employed not merely as exotic ornamentation, but as a means of interrogating emotion, imagination, morality, and the limits of rationalism. By drawing on Persian, Arabic, and Asian symbolic traditions—often filtered through translations, travel literature, and classical analogies—eighteenth-century poets reshaped English poetic language and sensibility. The article argues that Oriental imagery in this period functioned as a transitional aesthetic bridge between neoclassical restraint and Romantic emotional depth, contributing to the evolution of English poetic forms and themes.

Keywords: Eastern imagery; Orientalism; eighteenth-century poetry; Thomas Gray; William Collins; exoticism; imagination; English literature; Enlightenment aesthetics.

Introduction

The eighteenth century occupies a complex and transitional position in the history of English literature. Traditionally associated with neoclassicism, reason, balance, and formal restraint, the period also reveals a growing fascination with emotion, imagination, and the unfamiliar. One of the most striking manifestations of this shift is the increasing presence of Eastern—or “Oriental”—imagery in English poetry. The East, as imagined by eighteenth-century poets, was not a geographical reality alone but a symbolic space: a realm of sensuality, mystery, emotional excess, spiritual depth, and imaginative freedom.

Poetry proved to be a particularly fertile medium for this engagement. Unlike prose genres that often pursued ethnographic description or moral instruction, poetry allowed writers to appropriate Eastern images freely, transforming them into metaphors for internal states, philosophical ideas, and aesthetic experimentation. Poets such as Thomas Gray and William Collins turned to Eastern motifs to expand the expressive range of English verse and to challenge the dominance of classical Greco-Roman models.

This article focuses on **Eastern imagery in eighteenth-century English poetry**, with particular attention to **Thomas Gray** and **William Collins**, two poets whose work exemplifies the aesthetic and emotional potential of Oriental motifs. While neither poet can be described as an Orientalist in the later nineteenth-century sense, their poetry demonstrates an early literary Orientalism shaped by translation culture, travel narratives, and Enlightenment curiosity. By analyzing their poetic use of Eastern landscapes, figures, symbols, and emotional registers, this study seeks to demonstrate how Eastern imagery functioned as both an aesthetic device and a conceptual framework for poetic innovation.

Discussion

1. The Rise of Eastern Imagery in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry



The increasing presence of Eastern imagery in eighteenth-century English poetry cannot be separated from broader cultural developments. Expanding trade routes, diplomatic contact with the Ottoman Empire, colonial encounters in India, and the circulation of translated Eastern texts (notably *The Arabian Nights*) profoundly shaped European literary imagination. For English poets, the East represented an alternative symbolic order—one that contrasted with the rational, structured, and historically familiar world of classical antiquity.

Poetry allowed writers to idealize and aestheticize the East without the obligation of accuracy. Oriental settings could evoke vast deserts, opulent courts, prophetic figures, and mystical landscapes—elements that enabled poets to explore intense emotion and imaginative freedom. Importantly, Eastern imagery also served as a **counterweight to Enlightenment rationalism**, offering a space where passion, melancholy, and the sublime could flourish.

Within this context, poets like Gray and Collins did not attempt cultural representation in a modern sense. Instead, they used the East as a **symbolic language**—a poetic shorthand for emotional extremity, spiritual insight, and imaginative transcendence.

2. Thomas Gray: Eastern Imagery and the Poetics of Melancholy

Thomas Gray is best known for *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, a poem deeply rooted in English pastoral tradition. Yet Gray's lesser-known works reveal a strong attraction to Eastern and exotic imagery, particularly in poems that explore fate, death, and the sublime.

In *The Bard*, Gray employs imagery that evokes Eastern prophecy and ritualistic intensity. The figure of the bard resembles the Eastern seer or prophet—isolated, visionary, and endowed with supernatural insight. The poem's elevated tone, invocation of curses, and emphasis on destiny reflect a conceptual borrowing from Oriental traditions, where poets and prophets often occupy sacred roles.

Similarly, Gray's fascination with the sublime—terror mixed with awe—aligns with Eastern imagery as filtered through eighteenth-century sensibility. Desolate landscapes, shadowy figures, and mystical voices echo descriptions found in contemporary accounts of Eastern deserts and ruins. These images serve not to describe the East itself, but to **intensify emotional resonance**, particularly melancholy and moral reflection.

Gray's use of Eastern imagery is subtle rather than decorative. It enriches his philosophical concerns, allowing him to move beyond classical restraint toward a more emotionally charged poetic mode. In this sense, Gray anticipates Romantic interests while remaining firmly rooted in eighteenth-century poetic discipline.

3. William Collins: Oriental Imagination and Emotional Expression

William Collins represents a more explicit and experimental engagement with Eastern imagery. His *Odes* demonstrate a pronounced interest in exotic settings, allegorical figures, and imaginative freedom. Collins frequently invokes the East as a source of poetic inspiration, associating it with passion, music, and visionary power.

In *Ode on the Poetical Character*, Collins explicitly references Eastern landscapes as the birthplace of poetry itself. The poem describes imagination as a force nurtured by "Persian" and "Arabian" scenes—spaces of fire, sun, and emotional intensity. The East becomes a mythic origin of poetic creativity, contrasting sharply with the perceived emotional restraint of contemporary English society.

Collins's Oriental imagery is also deeply musical. Eastern instruments, rhythms, and ceremonial settings appear as metaphors for poetic harmony and emotional depth. This reflects a broader eighteenth-century belief that Eastern cultures possessed a more instinctive connection to art and feeling—an idea that, while romanticized, enabled poets like Collins to challenge neoclassical constraints.



Importantly, Collins uses Eastern motifs to express **emotional excess and vulnerability**, particularly melancholy and enthusiasm. These emotional states were often viewed with suspicion in Enlightenment culture, yet Collins legitimizes them by associating them with ancient and exotic traditions. The East thus becomes a **poetic alibi** for emotional exploration.

4. Eastern Imagery as Symbolic Space, Not Cultural Reality

It is crucial to emphasize that Eastern imagery in eighteenth-century poetry functioned primarily as **symbolic space**, not as accurate cultural representation. Poets relied on second-hand sources—translations, travel accounts, classical references—often blending Eastern, biblical, and classical elements into a single imaginative geography.

This symbolic East allowed poets to explore themes that were difficult to address directly within English social and moral frameworks. Desire, despair, prophetic rage, and spiritual ecstasy could be displaced onto distant landscapes, making them aesthetically acceptable. In this way, Eastern imagery performed a psychological and ideological function, enabling poetic experimentation under the cover of exoticism.

At the same time, this symbolic use contributed to the formation of early Orientalist discourse, in which the East was constructed as emotional, irrational, and mysterious in contrast to a rational, orderly West. While this binary would later be criticized, in the eighteenth century it served as a productive—if problematic—literary strategy.

5. Other Poetic Voices and the Diffusion of Oriental Motifs

Beyond Gray and Collins, Eastern imagery appears throughout eighteenth-century English poetry in various forms. Poets such as James Thomson, Samuel Johnson, and later pre-Romantic writers occasionally employed Oriental settings and references to evoke grandeur, moral reflection, or philosophical distance.

Translations and imitations of Eastern poetry also played a role. Adaptations of Persian and Arabic verse introduced new metaphors, rhythmic patterns, and symbolic registers. Even when filtered through European sensibilities, these texts expanded the imaginative resources available to English poets.

Eastern imagery thus became part of a **shared poetic vocabulary**, contributing to shifts in tone, theme, and form. Its influence can be traced forward into Romantic poetry, where writers like Byron and Shelley would engage with the East in more sustained and explicit ways.

6. Eastern Imagery and the Transition Toward Romanticism

One of the most significant implications of Eastern imagery in eighteenth-century poetry is its role in the transition from neoclassicism to Romanticism. By privileging imagination, emotion, and the sublime, Oriental motifs undermined the dominance of classical symmetry and rational clarity.

Gray's melancholy visions and Collins's imaginative odes anticipate Romantic preoccupations with individual feeling and visionary experience. The East, as poetic construct, provided a **testing ground** for these emerging sensibilities. Through Oriental imagery, poets learned to speak a new emotional language while remaining within acceptable literary frameworks.

Thus, Eastern motifs were not marginal embellishments but central contributors to literary change. They helped reshape English poetry's thematic concerns and expressive possibilities.

Conclusion

Eastern imagery in eighteenth-century English poetry represents far more than an exotic decorative trend. In the works of Thomas Gray, William Collins, and their contemporaries, Oriental motifs function as powerful symbolic tools that enable emotional exploration, aesthetic innovation, and philosophical reflection. The imagined East becomes a space where poets could



transcend neoclassical restraint, experiment with the sublime, and articulate states of mind that resisted rational categorization.

By examining Eastern imagery as a poetic strategy rather than a cultural depiction, this article has demonstrated how eighteenth-century poets used Oriental motifs to negotiate the tensions of their time—between reason and passion, tradition and innovation, restraint and imagination. These poetic engagements with the East contributed significantly to the evolution of English literature, preparing the ground for the Romantic movement and shaping enduring literary attitudes toward otherness and imagination.

Ultimately, the Eastern theme in eighteenth-century English poetry reveals the period's dynamic literary consciousness: one that sought renewal not by rejecting tradition outright, but by enriching it through imaginative encounter with the unfamiliar.

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