Narrating Ancient Egypt

The Representation of Ancient Egypt in Nineteenth-Century and Early-Twentieth-Century Fantastic Fiction

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1. Introduction

‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’
(Shelley “Ozymandias”)

When Hosni Mubarak stepped down from his presidency on February 11, 2011, his defeat became known as ‘the fall of modern pharaoh’.\(^1\) The pharaoh as a symbol of power in connection with Egypt is obvious and universally understood. However, while the term “pharaoh” signifies great power, and the “fall” represents the loss of this power, the reference to the ancient tradition of pharaohs ruthlessly ruling Egypt simultaneously criticizes the regime and characterises it as antiquated. The notion of comparing a modern leader with a historical institution reflects nostalgia – a longing for the past and the need to connect and contextualise topical with historical events.

Today, ancient Egypt is viewed as a former great empire with a highly developed culture, which has long ceased to exist and whose concepts are outdated and yet intriguing. This concept of ancient Egypt was of special concern for Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. While ancient Rome and Greece had shown great interest in ancient Egypt and incorporated numerous of Egypt’s deities and cultural concepts into their own culture, this fascination lessened throughout the following centuries. The crusades rekindled European interest in Egypt – an interest which was of a political nature (cf. Asbridge 265; Hornung Das Geheime Wissen 89). A renewed European fascination with ancient Egypt developed after the Napoleonic Campaign of 1798, Nelson’s victory over the French army, and the subsequent influx of Egyptian art and architecture to Europe. Egypt was one of the most important strategic locations, granting access to the Dark Continent. Both the military aspect of controlling Egypt and the scholarly interest in the art and architecture of the ancient Egyptians were important catalysts for the increasing European fascination with Egypt.

With the publication of Dominique-Vivant Baron Denon’s Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt (1803), the Description de l’Égypte\(^2\) (1809–1829) and the

\(^{1}\) cf. Tisdall “Hosni Mubarak: Egyptian ‘Pharaoh’ Dethroned Amid Gunfire and Blood”; Shehata “The Fall of the Pharaoh”; Vick “Egypt’s Last Pharaoh? The Rise and Fall of Hosni Mubarak”.

\(^{2}\) The whole title of the collection is Description de l’Égypte ou Recueil des Observations et des Recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte Pendant l’Expédition de l’ArméeFrançaise, publié par les Ordres de sa Majesté.
numerous Egyptian objects which were shipped to England as war booty and which found their way into private collections and museums offered Europeans immediate contact with the ancient culture. The deciphering of the hieroglyphs by Jean François Champollion in 1822 finally gave way to a century of European and American Egyptomania. The term ‘Egyptomania’ can be roughly defined as the recurring interest in ancient Egypt, its art, architecture, culture and religion. It is reflected in the increasing number of Egyptian objects in collections and exhibitions, in the development of Egyptology as a field of study, in “Egyptianising” architecture of both buildings and graveyards, the creation of diverse Egyptianising commodities such as tableware, furniture, and jewellery. The prominence of Egypt in Western and particularly in British culture is also reflected in literature. Egypt, both ancient and modern, features in numerous fantastic stories of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The frequency of Egyptianising elements is striking enough to justify a closer look and analysis of the genre and to discuss the possible reasons for the extensive use and purpose of ancient Egypt in the writings of the time. This book explores why Egypt features so prominently in fantastic literature during that period and in how far works of Egyptianising fantastic literature can be read as critical texts which comment on the Orientalist mind-set of Europe, and especially Britain. Furthermore, this work will discuss the essential aspects of imperial self-esteem and politics as well as the historical developments which led to great changes during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This book aims to show how the image of an ancient culture was shaped not only by science, archaeology and historical research, but also by contemporary media, subjective travel reports, and imagination in a

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4 The term “Egyptianising” refers to the inclusion, depiction and interpretation of elements of ancient Egypt in literature, art and culture.

5 This book works with the term “Egyptianising fantastic fiction” to establish the sub-genre within fantasy or fantastic literature. All Egyptianising stories analysed for their auto-critical content and the interrelation between the Other and the Self are defined as such.
society with a general Orientalist mind-set. English nineteenth-century and
early-twentieth-century fiction was chiefly concerned with the Empire, and espe-
cially the last years of Queen Victoria’s reign and the early twentieth century saw
an increase in the publication of imperial literature. Archaeological discoveries
and the first translations of Egyptian texts offered the world a glimpse into a past
which had been considered lost or had been entirely unknown. While ancient
Egypt had occasionally appeared in literature throughout the centuries preced-
ing the nineteenth, the number of fictional and nonfictional texts and treatises
featuring Egypt was rather small. William Shakespeare’s Egyptian tragedy Antho-
ny and Cleopatra was most certainly inspired by Thomas North’s 1579 translation
of Plutarch’s οἱ βίοι παράλληλο (English: “Parallel Lives”, commonly referred to
as Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans). Plutarch (approximately 45–125 CE),
together with Herodotus (fifth century BCE) and Diodorus Siculus (first century
BCE), was considered to be one of the most reliable sources concerning ancient
Egypt until the translation of Egyptian texts and the development of Egyptology
finally offered new insights into ancient Egypt. Due to these often embellished
and awe-inspiring narratives on ancient Egypt by the classical authors Egypt was
commonly regarded as a mystical and strange place (cf. Moser 193). This mys-
ticism and ambiguous image of ancient Egypt was aided by the sparse factual
knowledge about the ancient culture and the vivid imagination of travellers and
those who read these travel reports, in addition to the often ambiguous represen-
tation of Egypt in the Bible. At the same time, ancient Egypt served as a fantasti-
cal idea and ideal of a formerly great empire, which simultaneously conveyed a
vision of loss and frailty, and a sense of doom, and served as a reminder that no
matter how great an empire is, history has shown that it will eventually decline.
Egypt was simultaneously a real and an imagined place; a perfect ingredient to
create Gothic stories and magical events in connection with it.

6 Further tragedies inspired by Plutarch’s work are Julius Caesar and Coriolanus.
7 Even after the translation of Egyptian texts and Victorian treatises on ancient Egypt,
the classical accounts were still considered to be great authorities, which inspired es-
pecially those scholars who were interested in the pyramids of Giza. Vyse, Perring,
Taylor and Smyth all used Herodotus’ account as the basis for their research (cf. chap-
ter 5.6.2).
8 All references to Egypt in the King James Bible were selected and listed on the website
kingjamesbible.org.
Not only the recovered language and subsequent translations of ancient texts fascinated the British, but the sudden heightened interest in exploration and travel fed scientific facts as well as fantasies and rumours to an eager Europe. ‘Facts’ need to be understood herein as convention, because many of the ‘facts’ which were stated about ancient Egypt were informed guesses, subjective opinions and experiences, generated by the lack of a systematic study of archaeology and Egyptology before the late nineteenth century. As Edward Said argues, facts are subject to interpretation:

All knowledge that is about human society, and not about the natural world, is historical knowledge, and therefore rests upon judgment and interpretation. This is not to say that facts or data are nonexistent, but that facts get their importance from what is made of them in interpretation [...] for interpretations depend very much on who the interpreter is, who he or she is addressing, what his or her purpose is, at what historical moment the interpretation takes place. (Said Covering Islam 162)

The image of the Orient, and in this special case, Egypt, was subsequently expanded and adjusted. The interest in ancient Egypt and the Orient was encouraged further by Edward Lane’s translation of Arabian Nights in 1841, offering a glimpse into the supposedly genuine world of the exotic east. Giovanni Battista Belzoni, an Italian traveller and excavator who worked for the British, published his immensely popular Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries Within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs, and Excavations, in Egypt and Nubia and of a Journey to the Coast of the Red Sea, in Search of the Ancient Berenice; and Another to the Oasis of Jupiter Ammon in London in 1820. Edward Lane’s Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians (1836) and Sir John Gardner Wilkinson’s Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians (1837) were certainly the most widely read and influential modern texts concerning the creation of a general idea of modern and ancient Egypt.

Eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century travel reports and treatises on modern Egypt generally avoid mysticism and any connection to the supernatural, merely commenting on certain practices of modern Egyptians which seemed strange, exotic or underdeveloped to the Orientalist. Despite the factual narrative of the works on modern Egypt and its ancient culture, ancient Egypt

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9 Nineteenth-century Egyptomania was of course not exclusive to Britain, but affected most European countries as well as northern America.
10 Pasha Muhammad Ali opened up the country for tourists in the 1820s, allowing European and American tourists to travel to Egypt (cf. Murray Milestones in Archaeology 168).
has always been considered a somewhat magical place and the source of secret knowledge. Since the Rosicrucians\textsuperscript{11} located their origin in Egyptian mysticism, the concept of an esoteric and mystical Egypt remained until the twenty-first century. Especially the late nineteenth century saw numerous attempts at attesting a magical quality to ancient Egypt. However, this concept did not only shape the representation of ancient Egypt in Victorian times, but it is still reflected in our contemporary perception of this ancient world. This can be seen in the large number of fictional and nonfictional texts published during the twentieth and twenty-first century in which Egypt almost always has magical or supernatural qualities.\textsuperscript{12}

Egypt’s importance in the nineteenth century lay in its political and cultural significance to Britain and France. Egypt’s occupation by the French, and later by the English, not only detracted Mamluk power. As Napoleon’s troops triumphed over the Mamluk army in the Battle of the Pyramids on July 21, 1798, they helped to secure Egypt for the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, the British occupation destabilised the Ottoman rule, shifting the power over the Arabic world towards Europe. Presenting both a point of interest for military strategy allowing access to Africa, and, with the construction of the Suez Canal (1859–1869) a much faster route to India, ensuring Britain’s status as the greatest sea power in the world, Egypt was a decidedly important country. Egypt furthermore became accessible beyond the scope of the Anglo-French conflict, and numerous British wealthy citizens spent their winters in Egypt to avoid the unhealthy London air and climate.\textsuperscript{13} Modern Egypt simply became an extension of Britain, in which the citizens of Egypt were seen more as a nuisance than the rightful owners of

\textsuperscript{11} ‘Rosicrucians’ is a collective term for the members of numerous secret societies and orders which have their origin in the 17th century and whose founder is Christian Rosencreutz. The importance and popularity of the Rosicrucians and other secret orders and societies increased at the end of the nineteenth century.

\textsuperscript{12} For two contemporary examples of texts on magical Egypt, see Eleanor Harris’ \textit{Ancient Egyptian Magic and Divination} for a modern take on the practicality of Egyptian magic, Wilbour Smith’s series on mysterious ancient Egypt, \textit{The River God} (1994), \textit{The Seventh Scroll} (1995), \textit{Warlock} (2001), and \textit{The Quest} (2008) and Zilpha Keatley Snyder’s \textit{The Egypt Game} (1967), to name only a few.

\textsuperscript{13} British citizens were not the only ones taking the opportunity to winter in Egypt. Contemporary accounts and stories, such as “An Unprotected Female at the Pyramids” by Anthony Trollope, Guy Boothby’s “A Professor of Egyptology” or Rider Haggard’s diary entries depict Egypt as a place of international touristic interest, naming Italians, Germans, French, Dutch, US Americans and other travellers from all over the “Western” countries.
the land. This attitude is strongly reflected in most travel literature of the time and also reappears in several of the fantastic texts. The role and representation of these ‘natives’ will be a recurring topic in this book, providing grounds of comparison between the Western view of ancient and modern Egypt.

Modern Egypt was seen as part of the ‘Orient’, and looking at contemporary sources it becomes clear that the major European colonisers, namely France and Britain, saw a chance in returning some of Egypt’s former glory by bestowing their own culture and knowledge on the country. At the same time, European travellers viewed modern Egyptians with distaste and distrust. In 1829, Champollion received a letter from the French physician Étienne Pariset:

The more I think about it the more I am astonished by the antiquity of Egypt, its wisdom, genius, knowledge, power. And the more I see, the more I am convinced that modern-day Egypt should be placed at the centre of the type of nations that one should mistrust and flee from. (Pariset qtd. in Colla 100)

Apart from the need of the coloniser to restore ‘order’ to Egypt – an opinion which is in fact reflected in several of the Egyptianising texts – another aspect that is presented is criticism of British practices and ideas by the authors. In this book the term ‘Egyptianising literature’ is used to describe and define fiction which features aspects of ancient Egypt, which describes it and makes use of it. In order to avoid misunderstandings and complications, the term ‘Egyptian literature’ is used for literature that was in fact produced in Egypt.

Voltaire (1694–1778) already used the Orient as a geographically and culturally distant place to reflect on and criticise European conditions and ideas in his 1747 work *Zadig, ou La destinée, Histoire orientale* (cf. *Europa und der Orient* 327). While it is important to note that all Victorian texts reflect the general

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14 Giuseppe Verdi’s Egyptianising Opera *Aida* had its world premiere at the Khedivial Opera House in Cairo on Christmas Eve 1871 and it clearly depicts the European romanticized view of Egypt. Incidentally, the Egyptian characters were exclusively Europeans to depict their superiority over Nubia.

15 Britain and British interests are in the focus of this book, however, if not noted otherwise in order to stress differences, the propositions and remarks on Orientalist practices and ideas include those of American and Australian authors whose works are discussed in this book.

16 Translation: *Zadig, or The Book of Fate*. Further European enlightenment thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Montesquieu, Immanuel Kant, Gottlieb Herder, Oliver Goldsmith and Diderot also criticised the European approach to colonisation and dehumanisation of the colonised. For further reading, see Srinivas Aravamudan’s *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (2011).
world view and ideology of the West, several of the Egyptianising texts are very self-aware of this practice. Egyptianising fantastic fiction therefore can, with few exceptions, be read as self-critical and self-aware. It is a subversive literature which on the one hand reflects the Victorian weltanschauung, and on the other hand criticises it. Egyptianising fantastic fiction presents a special case within nineteenth century literature, in whose context the notion of representation has to be addressed. What roles does representation play in the genre of Egyptianising fantastic fiction? What is represented and by whom? Does the representation of the Other by the Self annihilate the Other? Power relations and the practice of interpretation and erroneous or subjective attribution of qualities all need to be analysed and discussed with a focus on the interaction between the Self and the Other.

This book embeds Egyptianising fantastic fiction into the context of Neo-Gothic literature of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, this book will explore in how far it is possible to speak of Egyptianising fantastic fiction as a sub-genre within the genre or mode of fantastic fiction as proposed by Tzvetan Todorov in his The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre (1973) and Rosemary Jackson’s Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion (1981). The question of what particular elements of Egypt are portrayed, represented and used in Victorian fantastic fiction will also be answered.

The book is structured into five larger units which are subdivided into smaller chapters. Chapter 2 offers an introduction into the construction of ancient Egypt by the West both in reality and in fiction. Using Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism as a foundation for the discussion, the Western perception of ancient and modern Egypt will be explored. Following the description of the Western conception of the Orient and ancient Egypt, the practice of Othering in relation to ancient Egypt and its representation in fantastic literature is explored. The interference of Western thought and ideology is one of the major focal points of this book, which analyses in how far Western thought and stereotypes17 have led to the creation of a sub-genre in fantastic literature and what its political and social significance might have been. The Victorian fantastic narratives set in ancient Egypt offer an insight not only into the representation of ancient Egyptians, but also into the description and mind-set of the British protagonist. Edward Said’s theories on ‘Orientalism’ have to be taken into account and will be discussed

17 For a detailed discussion of the creation and importance of stereotypes in the discourse of colonial fiction, see Homi Bhabha “The Other Question”, 18–36 and Stuart Hall’s “Stereotyping as a Signifying Practice”, 257–268.
in detail. At the same time it is helpful to look at the process of creating and representing the *Other*. In this particular context, the creation of Ancient Egypt as the *Other* and the literary technique of creating it as a mirror image, a *doppelgänger* of the *Self* will be discussed.

Chapter 3 offers a concise overview over the most important Egyptianising texts which are analysed with regard to their depiction of ancient Egypt, beginning with Jane Loudon’s *The Mummy! A Tale of the Twenty-Second Century* (1827), covering the most representative Egyptianising novels and short stories of the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, and concluding with Algernon Blackwood’s occult short story “A Descent into Egypt” (1914). Moreover, the chapter explores the evolution of the genre of Egyptianising fantastic fiction by disclosing how the texts are interrelated.

Chapter 4 analyses Jane Loudon’s seminal Egyptianising novel *The Mummy! A Tale of the Twenty Second Century* with regard to its major themes, its representation of ancient Egypt and its role as the defining work for nineteenth-century Egyptianising fantastic fiction. This text is very important as it represents a link between the Romantic image of ancient Egypt as well as the classical sources concerning ancient Egypt which were considered to be the most reliable, and the newly rediscovered ancient Egypt, which slowly emerged through the translation of the hieroglyphs as well as scientific explorations, travel reports and exhibitions. The novel perfectly reflects the image of ancient Egypt as perceived by a young woman who moved in literary and artistic circles and who was aware of the presence of ancient Egypt in the context of the British Empire. At the same time she makes strong use of the Gothic tradition, but strives to write a ‘better’ novel than Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. It is almost a recension of *Frankenstein*, taking the main plot and moral questions and amplifying it with topics which seemed not only to be of her personal interest, but reflect topical themes of Regency England. Political instability and the question of the succession of George III and the possibility of the future reign of Princess Victoria are reflected in the novel. Ancient Egypt itself does not exactly seem like an obvious choice for a novel such as Loudon’s, but considering the popular practice of the public unrolling of mummies and the recent deciphering of the hieroglyphs is likely to have presented the perfect basis for Loudon’s idea about resurrecting an ancient Egyptian character. In addition to that she was most likely to have read the ancient Greek and Latin sources on Egypt as well as Belzoni’s *Narrative* as elements of these narratives feature prominently in her novel.

Chapter 5 explores the major recurring themes in Egyptianising fantastic fiction in several subchapters. The section takes a closer look at the use of language
and the issue of communicating with the Other, followed by a discussion on the recurring theme of body transformations in Egyptianising texts. Furthermore, the frequent appearance of vampiric elements is analysed, succeeded by a discussion of the use of sleep and dreams in the presented texts.

Chapter 6 consists of two subchapters which are concerned with the depiction of magic in Egyptianising fantastic fiction and the appropriation of ancient Egypt by the West in the form of the origin of Western esoteric movements and the Victorian urge to link ancient Egypt with modern Britain.

In contemporary fantastic fiction and popular culture, ancient Egypt still carries the same attributes which were established in the nineteenth century. It is considered to be a place in which magic was likely to have been practiced, in which gods have the power to interfere with everyday life, and a place where modern civilisation was developed and where wisdom and secret knowledge were hidden from those who were not initiated and did not understand hieroglyphs. The image of ancient Egypt is especially visible in films like *The Mummy Lives* (1995), *Legend of the Mummy* (1997), which is an adaptation of Bram Stoker’s *The Jewel of Seven Stars, Tale of the Mummy* (1998), *The Mummy* (1932, 1999) and its sequels as well as *The Scorpion King* (2002) and its sequels. The film *Stargate* (1994) and the SCI-FI’s series based on the film (1997–2007) borrows heavily from Egyptian mythology and the ABC series *Lost* (2004–2010) features ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, art and elements of magic. The twentieth century saw the publication of numerous Egyptianising texts of which many belong to the mode of the fantastic. Edward Frederic Benson’s “The Ape” (1920), “Bagnell Terrace” (1928), “Monkeys” (1934), Clifford Ball’s “The Goddess Awakes” (1938), Larry Brand’s *Birth Pyre* (1980), Robert Arthur’s “Footsteps Invisible” (1968), Elisabeth Ogilvie’s *The Face of Innocence* (1970), Nick Bantock’s *The Gryphon, In Which the Extraordinary Correspondence of Griffin & Sabine Is Rediscovered* (2001), Donna Boyd’s *The Alchemist* (2001) all feature elements of Egyptianising fantastic fiction which were established in the nineteenth century. The trend of setting a story in ancient Egypt, which started in the nineteenth century, is extensively reproduced in twentieth- and twenty-first-century fiction. A concise list of historiographic fiction featuring Egyptianising elements has been compiled by Noreen Doyle on her website *Egyptomania.org*. The popularity of texts including either an ancient Egyptian setting or a setting in modern Egypt which includes

18 James P. Allen, Wilbour Professor of Egyptology and Chair of Egyptology and Ancient Western Asian Studies at Brown University and avid *Lost* – fan, actively participated in the discussion and analysis of Egyptian elements in the series (cf. Scottberg).
archaeological excavations can be explained with the extensive translation of ancient Egyptian texts and the need to narrate the translated stories by modern authors on the one hand, and the excitement which followed the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamen on the other hand. Examples of these works are Agatha Christie’s detective novel *Death on the Nile* (1937), the play *Akhnaton* (1937), and *Death Comes as the End* (1944), as well as Elisabeth Peter’s mystery series about the female Egyptologist Amelia Peabody (1975–2010).

Ancient Egypt and Egyptianising elements have therefore remained a popular topic of Western literature and film, whose origin can be found in nineteenth-century literature. This book explores the establishment of these elements in nineteenth and early-twentieth-century literature in connection with historical events as well as cultural and social changes which mark the Victorian and Edwardian age.