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An Orientalist Poem of a Şan‘ā' that Never Existed

presented by Daniel Martin Varisco

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The American Poet Henry George Boker (1823-1890)

Yemen is famous for its extensive and vibrant poetic tradition. Yet there are few poems written by Westerners about Yemen. This is no doubt due in part to the paucity of travelers to Yemen during the time of the Imams, compared to the plethora of verses on the bible lands of Egypt and Palestine. The following poem was written by George Henry Boker, a renowned playwright and poet in Philadelphia, who was appointed by President Ulysses S. Grant as U.S. Minister to Turkey (1871-1875) and Russia (1875-1879). Although he never visited Yemen, he wrote the poem *Prince Adeb* about Şan‘ā' at the time that the Ottomans were in Yemen. Ironically it was published in 1864 before he went to Turkey and this was in a book of poems about the American Civil War, which is available at <https://archive.org/details/poemsofwar00boke/page/n7/mode/2up>. This long poem is an iconic example of old-style Orientalism, inventing a versified Yemeni city that never existed except in the poet's fanciful mind. As you read through the poem you will not find anything remotely like the city of Şan‘ā' at the time. There are no golden domes in the city; no orange trees abound in the Imam's palace; no hundred steeds in the stable. It is a tale of

revenge and passion, a clone of Thomas Moore's 1817 classic *Lalla Rookh*. Boker may have received his Bedouin-laden information, scant as it was, about the Middle East from his friend Bayard Taylor, who traveled to Egypt and Palestine in 1851 and was also a poet.

The major 19th century American poet William Cullen Bryant included "Prince Adeb" in his massive *A Library of Poetry and Song*, which is available in several editions from the 1870s at [archive.org](https://archive.org/details/libraryofpoetrys00bryarich/page/502/mode/2up). <https://archive.org/details/libraryofpoetrys00bryarich/page/502/mode/2up>. Boker was part of a group of poets, including Bryant, with whom he is pictured below.



George Henry Boker (top left), historian George Bancroft, poet and traveler Bayard Taylor, and poet William Cullen Bryant in 1879.

Prince Adeb

In Sana, O, in Sana, God, the Lord,
Was very kind and merciful to me!
Forth from the Desert in my rags I came,
Weary and sore of foot. I saw the spires
And swelling bubbles of the golden domes
Rise through the trees of Sana, and my heart
Grew great within me with the strength of God;
And I cried out, "Now I shall right myself, -
I, Adeb the despised - for God is just!"
There he who wronged my father dwelt in peace,-
My warlike father, who, when gray hairs crept
Around his forehead, as on Lebanon
The whitening snows of winter, was betrayed
To the sly Imam, and his tented wealth
Swept from him, 'twixt the roosting of the cock
And his first crowing, - in a single night:
And I, poor Adeb, sole of all my race,
Smeared with my father's and my kinsmen's blood,
Fled through the Desert, till one day a tribe
Of hungry Bedouins found me in the sand,
Half mad with famine, and they took me up,
And made a slave of me, - of me, a prince!
All was fulfilled at last. I fled from them,
In rags and sorrow. Nothing but my heart,
Like a strong swimmer, bore me up against
The howling sea of my adversity.
At length o'er Sana, in the act to swoop,
I stood like a young eagle on a crag.
The traveller passed me with suspicious fear:
I asked for nothing; I was not a thief.
The lean dogs sniffed around me: my lank bones
Fed on the berries and the crusted pools,
Were a scant morsel. Once a brown-skinned girl
Called me a little from the common path,
And gave me figs and barley in a bag.
I paid her with a kiss, with nothing more,
And she looked glad; for I was beautiful,
And virgin as a fountain, and as cold.
I stretched her bounty, pecking like a bird,
Her figs and barley, till my strength returned.

So when rich Sana lay beneath my eyes,
My foot was as the leopard's, and my hand
As heavy as the lion's brandished paw:
And underneath my burnished skin the veins
And stretching muscles played, at every step,
In wondrous motion. I was very strong.
I looked upon my body, as a bird
That bills his feathers ere he takes to flight,-
I, watching over Sana. Then I prayed;
And on a soft stone, wetted in the brook,
Ground my long knife; and then I prayed again.
God heard my voice, preparing all for me,
As, softly stepping down the hills, I saw
The Imam's summer palace all ablaze
In the last flash of sunset. Every fount
Was spouting fire, and all the orange-trees
Bore blazing coals, and from the marble walls
And gilded spires and columns, strangely wrought,
Glared the red light, until my eyes were pained
With the fierce splendor. Till the night grew thick,
I lay within the bushes, next the door,
Still as a serpent, as invisible.
The guard hung round the portal. Man by man
They dropped away, save one lone sentinel,
And on his eyes God's finger lightly fell;
He slept half standing. Like a summer wind
That threads the grove, yet never turns a leaf,
I stole from shadow unto shadow forth;
Crossed all the marble court-yard, swung the door,
Like a soft gust, a little way ajar,-
My body's narrow width, no more,- and stood
Beneath the cresset in the painted hall.
I marveled at the riches of my foe;
I marvelled at God's ways with wicked men.
Then I reached forth, and took God's waiting hand:
And so he led me over mossy floors,
Flowered with the silken summer of Shiraz,
Straight to the Imam's chamber. At the door
Stretched a brawn eunuch, blacker than my eyes:
His woolly head lay like the Kaba-stone
In Mecca's mosque, as silent and as huge.
I stepped across it, with my pointed knife

Just missing a full vein along his neck,
And, pushing by the curtains, there I was, -
I, Adeb the despised, - upon the spot,
That, next to heaven, I longed for most of all.
I could have shouted for the joy in me.
Fierce pangs and flashes of bewildering light
Leaped through my brain and danced before my eyes.
So loud my heart beat, that I feared its sound
Would wake the sleeper; and the bubbling blood
Choked in my throat till, weaker than a child,
I reeled against a column, and there hung
In a blind stupor. Then I prayed again:
And, sense by sense, I was made whole once more.
I touched myself; I was the same; I knew
Myself to be lone Adeb, young and strong,
With nothing but a stride of empty air
Between me and God's justice. In a sleep,
Thick with the fumes of the accursed grape,
Sprawled the false Imam. On his shaggy breast,
Like a white lily heaving on the tide
Of some foul stream, the fairest woman slept
These roving eyes have ever looked upon.
Almost a child, her bosom barely showed
The change beyond her girlhood. All her charms
Were budding, but half opened; for I saw
Not only beauty wondrous in itself,
But possibility of more to be
In the full process of her blooming days.
I gazed upon her, and my heart grew soft,
As a parched pasture with the dew of heaven.
While thus I gazed she smiled, and slowly raised
The long curve of her lashes; and we looked
Each upon each other in wonder, not alarm, -
Not eye to eye, but soul to soul, we held
Each other for a moment. All her life
Seemed centred in the circle of her eyes.
She stirred no limb; her long-drawn, equal breath
Swelled out and ebbed away beneath her breast,
In calm unbroken. Not a sign of fear
Touched the faint color on her oval cheek,
Or pinched the arches of her tender mouth.
She took me for a vision, and she lay

With her sleep's smile unaltered, as in doubt
Whether real life had stolen into her dreams,
Or dreaming stretched into her outer life.
I was not graceless to a woman's eyes.
The girls of Damar paused to see me pass,
I walking in my rags, yet beautiful.
One maiden said, "He has a prince's air!"
I am a prince: the air was all my own.
So thought the lily on the Imam's breast;
And lightly as a summer mist, that lifts
Before the morning, so she floated up,
Without a sound or rustle of a robe,
From her coarse pillow, and before me stood
With asking eyes. The Imam never moved.
A stride and blow were all my need, and they
Were wholly in my power. I took her hand,
I held a warning finger to my lips,
And whispered in her small, expectant ear,
"Adeb, the son of Akem!" She replied
In a low murmur whose bewildering sound
Almost lulled wakeful me to sleep, and sealed
The sleeper's lids in tenfold slumber, "Prince,
Lord of the Imam's life and of my heart,
Take all thou seest, - it is thy right, I know, -
But spare the Imam for thy own soul's sake!"
Then I arrayed me in a robe of state,
Shining with gold and jewels; and I bound
In my long turban gems that might have bought
The lands 'twixt Babelmandeb and Sahan.
I girt about me, with a blazing belt,
A scimitar o'er which the sweating smiths
In far Damascus hammered for long years,
Whose hilt and scabbard shot a trembling light
From diamonds and rubies. And she smiled,
As piece by piece I put the treasure on,
To see me look so fair, - in pride she smiled.
I hung long purses at my side. I scooped,
From off a table, figs and dates and rice,
And bound them to my girdle in a sack.
Then over all I flung a snowy cloak,
And beckoned to the maiden. So she stole
Forth like my shadow, past the sleeping wolf

Who wronged my father, o'er the woolly head
Of the swart eunuch, down the painted court,
And by the sentinel who standing slept.
Strongly against the portal, through my rags, -
My old base rags, - and through the maiden's veil,
I pressed my knife, - upon the wooden hilt
Was "Adeb, son of Akem," carved by me
In my long slavehood, - as a passing sign
To wait the Imam's waking. Shadows cast
From two high-sailing clouds upon the sand
Passed not more noiseless than we two, as one,
Glided beneath the moonlight, till I smelt
The fragrance of the stables. As I slid
The wide doors open, with a sudden bound
Uprose the startled horses: but they stood
Still as the man who in a foreign land
Hears his strange language, when my Desert call,
As low and plaintive as the nested dove's,
Fell on their listening ears. From stall to stall,
Feeling the horses with my groping hands,
I crept in darkness; and at length I came
Upon two sister mares whose rounded sides,
Fine muzzles, and small heads, and pointed ears,
And foreheads spreading 'twixt their eyelids wide,
Long slender tails, thin manes, and coats of silk,
Told me, that, of the hundred steeds there stalled,
My hand was on the treasures. O'er and o'er
I felt their bony joints, and down their legs
To the cool hoofs; - no blemish anywhere:
These I led forth and saddled. Upon one
I set the lily, gathered now for me, -
My own, henceforth, forever. So we rode
Across the grass, beside the stony path,
Until we gained the highway that is lost,
Leading from Sana, in the eastern sands:
When, with a cry that both the desert-born
Knew without hint from whip or goading spur,
We dashed into a gallop. Far behind
In sparks and smoke the dusty highway rose;
And ever on the maiden's face I saw,
When the moon flashed upon it, the strange smile
It wore on waking. Once I kissed her mouth,

When she grew weary, and her strength returned.
All though the night we scoured between the hills:
The moon went down behind us, and the stars
Dropped after her; but long before I saw
A planet blazing straight against our eyes,
The road had softened, and the shadowy hills
Had flattened out, and I could hear the hiss
Of sand spurned backward by the flying mares.
Glory to God! I was at home again!
The sun rose on us; far and near I saw
The level Desert; sky met sand all round.
We paused at mid-day by a palm-crowned well,
And ate and slumbered. Somewhat, too, was said:
The words have slipped my memory. That same eve
We rode sedately through a Hamoum camp, -
Adeb, prince amongst them, and my bride.
And ever since amongst them I have ridden,
A head and shoulders taller than the best;
And ever since my days have been of gold,
My nights have been of silver, -God is just!

From William Cullen Bryant, editor, *A Library of Poetry and Song*. New York: J. B. Ford and Company, 1874, pp.503-505.



San 'ā' in the Late Ottoman Era