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Ina Baghdiantz McCabe, *Orientalism in Early Modern France: Eurasian Trade, Exoticism, and the Ancien Régime*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008. 409 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$105.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-84520-374-0.

Review by Julia Landweber, Montclair State University.

Ina Baghdiantz McCabe opens the first chapter of *Orientalism in Early Modern France* with the following story. Sometime around 1525, a teenage orphan arrived in Paris with the ambition of becoming a university student. Things did not go well: that first night he was befriended by several men who stole all his clothes and money, and soon after he contracted severe dysentery. After a year in a hospital for the sick and poor, he left to do farm work in the region of Beauce, south-west of the capital. Restored to full health, he returned to the city and at last enrolled in the University of Paris. Even then, his opportunities seemed limited. With no money, rank, or patron to assist him, the boy was only able to gain admittance by becoming a domestic servant in the Collège Sainte Barbe, charged with “sweeping and taking filth away,” duties which left very little time for learning (p. 19). Not a promising start for young Guillaume Postel, the man who would eventually earn his place in history as France’s original Orientalist and one of the great Renaissance intellectuals at the court of King Francis I.

Postel matured into a fascinating figure, a cosmopolitan scholar who was also a religious mystic, for whom the desire to understand Christianity’s true origins necessitated studying both the new Protestantism and the emerging discipline of Orientalism. He was a man of decidedly murky origins (although he claimed to be born in Normandy, McCabe speculates that he actually might have been a transplanted Portuguese Jew). His classmates at the Collège included none less than Ignatius of Loyola and John Calvin, both of whose ideas would have a profound effect on his future thinking. His genius with foreign languages, including Hebrew and Greek, would earn him an important place in the first two embassies sent from France to the Ottoman Empire in 1536 and 1547. From these diverse experiences, Postel cobbled together a most unusual philosophy of tolerance, which in turn drives the first half of *Orientalism in Early Modern France*: “In Guillaume Postel’s writings, there was to be no East or West, and no divisions between Christianity and Islam; he had a universal vision of a united world at peace, albeit one with a clear hierarchy: France was at the helm of the universe” (p. 15).

While the maturation of Postel’s orientalist ideas occupies much of McCabe’s first two chapters, he is just one of a galaxy of talented thinkers whose life and ideas are featured in this rich study devoted to the question of how Eurasian trade and Orientalism shaped early modern France. McCabe’s prior publications established her as an expert on the Eurasian silk trade and early modern entrepreneurial networks.<sup>[1]</sup> By tracing the economic influence of thinkers such as Postel and his scholarly descendents, and thereby connecting the exchange of goods with the exchange of ideas, her new book adds an intellectual and cultural dimension to the history of early modern French trade with the East. The “Orient” of the title refers mainly to the realms of Islam, and more specifically, to the world encompassed by the Ottoman Empire, this being a study of France set between the sixteenth and

eighteenth centuries—although French relations with the Far East of India, Siam, and China, as well as the West Indies and Americas, are also addressed.

McCabe provides a compelling argument about the nature and consequences of relations between France and the “Orient.” Her vision, one that is shared by a growing body of scholarship produced in the last ten years, is significantly less combative than Edward Said’s thesis of eternal Western opposition to and oppression of the East introduced in his classic 1979 work, *Orientalism*.<sup>[2]</sup> She writes, “Early Orientalisms [sic] had an immense impact on French culture and on French institutions, not on the ‘Orient.’ It is argued here that if the Orient was an object of study, it was France that was the subject of transformations. France shaped itself while engaging the world” (p. 2). McCabe seeks to tie the intellectual development of academic Orientalism (and the related discourse on luxury and despotism) with the concrete realities of French-Asian trade and exotic imports. To this end, she asserts that far from being a purely intellectual movement with nefarious imperial implications, as per Said, “the importance of Orientalism to the development of early [French] science should be recognized” (p. 23). Her conclusion reiterates these points: “Orientalism before the very end of the eighteenth century was first and foremost about France, a form of very active political participation in domestic issues” (p. 293).

As one might surmise from the above, this book’s contents are tremendously broad. Very much to her credit, McCabe marshals (more or less) an amazing depth of detail in the service of her argument. The book is organized into an introduction, two parts of five chapters each, and an epilogue. The theme of part one, “One Nation, One World Under French Rule,” derives from Guillaume Postel’s radical vision for a universal government. Chapters one through five “argue in different ways that France’s trade relations [with the Orient in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries] were closely tied to the very diverse and often contradictory textual production [of Orientalism]” (p. 3). Opting to begin at the beginning, chapters one and two focus on the context in which Postel became “the first Orientalist” (p. 15). Chapters three through five respectively consider the conflation of the East and West Indies in the French imagination, the connections between scholarly Orientalism and the development of new scientific knowledge under the reign of Louis XIV, and the perceived relationship between the Turks and the Huguenots.

In part two, “Consuming the Exotic,” McCabe explores the cultural and political consequences Eurasian trade had on the way French society viewed itself in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Chapters six through eight focus chiefly on the gradual adoption of coffee in France, intermixed with a history of the domestication of other exotic goods such as oriental plants and, in particular, Chinese silk and porcelain. Chapter nine examines how French royals—Louis XIV in particular—utilized imitations of Oriental splendor to project an image of power, and more broadly, how oriental fashions and the importation or imitation of oriental cloth influenced European dress in the early modern period. Finally in chapter ten, “Orientalism, Despotism, and Luxury,” McCabe addresses the complicated intersection of these three ideas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a crucial component of a study devoted to understanding the interplay of economic trade, intellectual movements, popular culture, and political ideas. In the final half-century period of this study, the French nobility seemed to be in a race to impoverish itself through the consumption of exotic luxury goods, while a new breed of wealthy merchants and artisans aped the ways of the nobility and a slew of pamphlets condemned society’s elevation of luxury and commerce at the expense of virtue. In the end, oriental goods and oriental despotism become irretrievably linked in the political imagination of the French Revolution when “patriotic consumption and abstention from foreign goods became a citizen’s ultimate duty” (p. 289).

*Orientalism in Early Modern France* is a work of great erudition. In the introduction McCabe tells us she first envisioned this project nearly 30 years ago (p. vi). It has clearly been a fruitful incubation period: in the intervening years she has identified and read an extraordinarily immense collection of primary printed sources, especially but hardly exclusively focused on works by Orientalists. I consider myself moderately well versed in this field, yet for every name I recognized, McCabe discusses in detail the

lives, works, and interconnections of at least a half-dozen authors I had not previously encountered. Perhaps in consequence, “sprawling” is the best way to describe this historical narrative of early modern French Orientalism. Yet while I hesitate to criticize anyone who has read so widely on her topic, I wondered a little at the absence of significant manuscript sources. To take but one small example, the archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs contains important unpublished material on the 1669 Ottoman embassy to France, yet she overlooks it in favor of the published diary of Olivier Lefèvre d’Ormesson, which she calls the “best source” on the subject (p. 187).<sup>[3]</sup> This imbalance is further illustrated by the bibliography, which devotes only one page to primary unpublished sources (admittedly, there are some additional archival sources cited in the end notes), but lists eighteen pages of primary published sources.

McCabe’s study also relies upon an impressively broad reading of secondary sources, although again a gap appears which should not be there. She asserts that this book is a pioneering effort on the subject of “the orientalization of France and the resistance to it [which] deserve study” and that “there is scant literature on the adoption of oriental goods, manners, fashions, techniques, and modes of thinking by European societies” (p. 6). This claim is surprising, given her otherwise deep knowledge of modern scholarship on early modern Orientalism. While McCabe’s book is a welcome addition to the field, a respectable historiography most certainly exists on the subject—though little of it appears in her bibliography.<sup>[4]</sup> On a related note, I was also struck by the absence of illustrated matter (which of course may be due more to the limitations of publishing costs than anything else). Despite the wealth of pictorial sources in this subject, there is only one illustration in the entire book (cover and p. 167), and it happens to be one which has already been widely reproduced elsewhere: taken from Sylvestre Dufour’s *Traitez Nouveæ & curieux du café, du thé, et du chocolat*, it shows a Chinese man drinking tea, a Turk drinking coffee, and an Aztec drinking chocolate.

Despite these lacunae, McCabe has produced an excellent reference work for the researcher in quest of detailed factual information about myriad aspects of early modern France’s intellectual, cultural, and economic relations with the Orient. For someone beginning work on the topic, or even a more advanced researcher, *Orientalism in Early Modern France* should be required reading for learning about early modern French Orientalists; it is a veritable compendium of who’s who on the subject. In the course of the book McCabe argues her thesis convincingly, although sometimes the highly detailed accumulation of facts threatens to bury her point. All told, this is an ambitiously wide-ranging book with exceptionally interesting content.

## NOTES

[1] Ina B. McCabe, *The Shah’s Silk for Europe’s Silver: The Eurasian Silk Trade of the Julfa Armenians in Safavid Iran and India (1530–1750)* (Atlanta, GA: Scholar’s Press, 1999), and *Diaspora and Entrepreneurial Networks 1600–2000*, co-edited with Gelina Harlaftis and Ionna Minoglu (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

[2] See for example: *Turcs et turqueries, XVI–XVIIIe siècles, préface de Lucien Bély* (Paris: Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2009); Eric R. Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); and Michèle Longino, *Orientalism in French Classical Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002).

[3] Nicolas Le Dran, “Mémoire sur le cérémonial observé en France en 1669 à l’égard de l’Aga Soliman,” Archives des Affaires Étrangères (Paris), *Mémoires et Documents*, Turkey, vol. 10, doc. 4 [1720].

[4] For example, McCabe overlooks Pierre Martino, *L’Orient dans la littérature française au XVIIe et au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1906, reprinted Geneva, 1970); Alexandrine N. St. Clair, *The Image of the*

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*Turk in Europe* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1973); Aileen Ribeiro, "Turquerie: Turkish dress and English Fashion in the Eighteenth Century," *The Connoisseur* 201, May 1979, no. 807: 16-23, and *The Dress Worn at Masquerades in England, 1730 to 1790, and its Relation to Fancy Dress in Portraiture* (New York and London: Garland, 1984); Perrin Stein, "Madame de Pompadour and the Harem Imagery at Bellevue," *Gazette des Beaux Arts* 123 (1994): 29-44; and Julia Landweber, "Turkish Delight: The Eighteenth-Century Market in Turqueries and the Commercialization of Identity in France," *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History*, vol. 30, 2004: 202-211, and "Celebrating Identity: Charting the History of Turkish Masquerade in Early Modern France," *Romance Studies Quarterly*, 23 (3) 2005: 175-189.

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