

---

H-France Review Vol. 12 (November 2012), No. 156

Sara E. Melzer, *Colonizer or Colonized: The Hidden Stories of Early Modern French Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. 344 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-4363-5; \$75.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-0-8122-0518-3.

Review by Micah True, University of Alberta.

The relationship between France's colonial history and its literary and cultural identity generally has not been well accounted for in scholarship. As Melzer remarks in the opening pages of this pathbreaking book, "[m]ost scholars of France still view colonization largely as peripheral to France's own cultural identity, which is seen as enclosed within an insular, self-protective bubble" (p. 14). Focusing primarily on the famous Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns and drawing on the insights of postcolonial theory, Melzer reconceives France's literary and cultural history in light of two "colonial stories": the colonization of the Americas by the French and the oft-overlooked history of their Gallic ancestors as a people colonized by both the Greeks and Romans. Melzer considers France's past roles as both colonizer and colonized in parallel, bringing fresh insights to both and showing how they combined in the early modern period to influence France's emerging cultural identity to a degree that has not previously been appreciated.

The book is divided into three parts, comprising a total of eight chapters. Part one consists of two chapters and explores "France's colonial relation to the Ancient World" (p. 25). Chapter one reads the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns as a "colonial battle," a memory war over the legacy of France's Gallic ancestors. At stake was the status of the French relative to the Romans: "Were the Romans an 'us' or a 'them?'.... Were the elite imitating models from their civilizers or from their former colonizers?" (p. 34). The moderns—generally speaking, adherents to the idea that French culture could surpass its Ancient models—promoted a pre-colonized Gaul as France's most relevant ancestor, arguing that it possessed a sophisticated culture that was forgotten in the wake of its colonization. Their opponents in the Quarrel—usually called the ancients—argued that the best that French writers could do would be to imitate the superior cultures of the ancient Greeks and Romans. They followed those models in conceiving of the Gauls as barbarians who were civilized only through Greco-Roman influence. The fact that the ancients prevailed on this question is reflected in the standard historical conception of France, which begins only after the Gauls "had been cleaned up and made semipresentable" by the Romans (p. 36). Their victory also has served to obscure the memory of the Gauls' subjugation by recasting their relationship with their colonizers as a process of civilization. Chapter two argues that despite the apparent victory of the ancients and the accompanying suppression of France's colonized past, traces of this history "erupted in disguised, fragmentary form" (p. 55). Melzer shows that imitation of models from antiquity had unsavory implications for French culture. By imitating cultures that were hostile and disdainful toward all outsiders, French thinkers relegated themselves "to the position of the outsider, the barbarian *other*" (p. 71). Melzer reads early modern French "defenses"—such as Du Bellay's famous *Défense et Illustration de la Langue Française*—as efforts not only to promote French language and letters in relation to the examples of antiquity, but also as traces of the memory of the Gauls' colonization and attempts to defend against their alleged barbarity.

In part two, Melzer turns her attention to the other French colonial history with which her book is concerned, the colonization of the New World. Chapter three serves as an overview of the *relation de voyage* as a genre, prominently including the famed *Jesuit Relations* from New France. Beyond its importance for illustrating Melzer's point that early modern France had a well-developed colonial discourse that is not accounted for in the usual conception of its cultural history, the chapter could stand on its own as a useful introduction to travel narrative. It examines the general characteristics of such texts, their influence on other literary works, readership, et cetera. Chapter four examines how such colonial texts portrayed the efforts of the French church and state to integrate the inhabitants of the New World into French culture through intermarriage and other means, a process that Melzer refers to as assimilation. The sanitized version of the Roman-Gallic relationship that had come to dominate France's understanding of its own history provided a model for the notion that the inhabitants of the New World could be, and wanted to be, "civilized"—assimilated into French culture in much the same way the Gauls had previously been "civilized" by outsiders. In practice, however, the French often had to adopt Amerindian languages and practices in order to get by in the New World. Such accommodations raised the specter once again of France's alleged barbaric history, suggesting that the real result of contact with Amerindians might be degeneration into barbarism.

Part three comprises the book's final four chapters, and develops Melzer's argument that colonial discourse about the Amerindian Other and cultural debates about France's relationship to Greco-Roman antiquity were inextricably intertwined in early modern France. Chapter five serves as a brief introduction to the three chapters that follow, which argue that the Quarrel furnished at least three competing strategies (Melzer calls them escape routes) for transcending the limitations imposed by France's own colonized past and continued idealization of ancient Greek and Roman cultures. Understandings of France's cultural history that ignored its colonized past and positioned it as an inheritor and imitator of Rome trapped French thinkers in a vicious circle, since doing so involved imitating the thinking of colonizers who saw France's Gallic ancestors as barbarians. In this context, obvious and inevitable differences between French and Ancient cultures would seem to imply that the French fell short of their Ancient models, particularly in light of colonial discourses that positioned Amerindians as akin to the French. Each of Melzer's final three chapters traces one strategy that French thinkers and writers used to try to shed this haunting legacy of barbarity. Each strategy was "...mainly focused on France's relationship to the Ancient World [but] was mediated through the New World" (p. 134).

The first of these escape routes, examined in chapter six, is imitation. Drawing on the example of French schools, which emphasized all things Roman to the point of excluding French language and literature, Melzer shows how imitation was generally understood as a civilizing process that would make the French practically identical to their esteemed Ancient models, and therefore no longer barbarians. Melzer finds in colonial discourse the hint of an ugly subtext to this strategy. In New France, Amerindians reportedly desired to imitate their French interlocutors and were thus voluntarily subjugated, raising the question of whether imitation of ancient Greeks and Romans represented the same to the French. Although Melzer does not claim that France's elite consciously understood this possibility, the example of the New World at least hinted at the limitations of imitation as a means of equaling the models of antiquity. Differences between French and ancient Greco-Roman cultures inevitably persisted and could only be interpreted, within this imitative framework, as a failure by the French to live up to their models. Though superficially a path out of France's presumed barbaric heritage, imitation could not, according to Melzer, ultimately succeed because its models "...had no place for the French as true equals, but relegated them to the position of barbarian *other*" (p. 172).

Chapter seven extends Melzer's discussion of imitation, but from a different point of view. French *relations de voyage* of the time often insisted on the kinship and similarity of Amerindians to the French in order to make their eventual conversion seem plausible, and as a way of justifying French colonial activity in apparent defiance of papal rulings that had reserved the New World for the Spanish and

Portuguese. That argument caused, in Melzer's words, a "crisis of similarity," in which France's fears about its own potential regression to its alleged former barbarous state were exacerbated by the reported similarity of the Amerindians to their French colonizers (p. 26). Melzer uses the famous Quarrel of the Cid—over whether Corneille's famous tragicomedy adhered to classical norms—to show how the French classical ideal, as defined and enforced by institutions like the French Academy, was at least in part a response to this crisis of similarity with cultures presumed to be barbarian. Melzer argues that by creating rules for how the French should imitate the Ancients, the Academy could "...insulate the human against a regressive slide toward the *sauvage*" (p. 188). The same phenomenon could also be seen as an effort to take control of France's relationship to its Ancient models, to frame "borrowing as an act of colonial conquest" (p. 192) and thereby reverse the power dynamic that implied France's inherited status as barbarian. The classical ideal, Melzer argues, "offered a crucial first step toward decolonizing from the Ancient World...by viewing a later moment as an improvement over the first..." (p. 177). This escape route, which had the advantage of shielding French culture from the specter of barbarism raised by both of its colonial relationships, would nonetheless fail because it still operated within a binary relationship to antiquity. Writes Melzer, "...the elite sought independence by simply reversing the original power dynamic without changing the underlying structure. To truly escape the bind, the French elite needed a third element that would allow them to think beyond a polar opposition to the Ancients" (pp. 197-198).

Chapter eight examines a final escape route from barbarism, one that included just such a third pole and that Melzer deems more successful than those considered in the previous two chapters. She argues that the moderns, partly drawing on a strain of thought that trumpeted the rise of commerce as civilization instead of situating civilization in the past, found a way to define France's relationship to its Ancient models that did not imply its own barbarity. According to Melzer, the Amerindian Other, and especially its definition as *sauvage* (meaning wild or uncultivated) rather than barbarian (meaning irrevocably Other), facilitated a shift from the common conception of history as a process of degeneration. Drawing on Du Bellay and Fontenelle, Melzer shows how an agricultural metaphor implied by the concept "*sauvage*" was put to work in conceiving of history as progress along an evolutionary continuum. Through cultivation, people could transcend their natural state and become cultured. In Melzer's estimation, this escape route allowed the moderns to "...dethron[e] the Greeks and Romans and negotiat[e] a new, independent path to greatness and new understanding of what constitutes civilization" (p. 217). And yet, even once it had found a way to transcend its colonized past, France still found itself reliant on this former relationship. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Melzer notes, "France trumpeted its ties to the Ancient World as a justification for extending itself beyond its seas" (p. 219).

Melzer's conclusion relates her arguments about early modern French culture and colonization to recent debates about the so-called colonial fracture and memory wars—the continuing exclusion, in at least some quarters, of France's colonial history from accounts of its culture and efforts to remedy that omission. In addition to making an important argument about early modern French history, literature, and culture, Melzer's book shows that contemporary France's debates about its own colonial legacy have a long history, and are rooted in the struggles over French identity that stemmed from the two colonial stories that it traces.

The book is an impressive achievement. Scholars have begun to study the relationship between France's colonization of the New World and its emerging cultural identity, as well as how France's colonized past shaped its early modern culture.<sup>[1]</sup> But Melzer's book is the first, to my knowledge, to study these two colonial relationships in parallel. She does so in thorough and rigorous fashion, drawing on authors, texts, and debates far too numerous to list here. One small regret that this reviewer has is that Melzer relies on the century-old Thwaites edition of the *Jesuit Relations*, which has been surpassed in accuracy and scholarly rigor by Campeau's *Monumenta Novae Franciae*.<sup>[2]</sup> Melzer, however, is far from the only scholar who opts for the older, more accessible edition, so it would be unfair to criticize this choice too

---

harshly. Despite the complexity of its subject and vast corpus, Melzer's argument is easy to follow thanks to the book's logical organization and clear prose. The book is thoroughly researched, the analysis is careful and nuanced, and the over-arching argument that France's colonial histories are not as separate from its culture as they sometimes seem is compelling indeed.

#### NOTES

[1] For just two examples, see Brian Brazeau, *Writing a New France, 1604-1632: Empire and Early Modern French Identity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) and H el ene Merlin-Kajman, *La langue est-elle fasciste? Langue, pouvoir, enseignement* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

[2] On the relative merits of the two editions, see Luca Codignola, "The Battle Is Over: Campeau's *Monumenta* vs. Thwaites's *Jesuit Relations, 1602-1650*," *European Review of Native American Studies* 10/2(1996): 3-10.

Micah True  
University of Alberta  
[mtrue@ualberta.ca](mailto:mtrue@ualberta.ca)

Copyright   2012 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172