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Ellen R. Welsh, *A Taste for the Foreign: Worldly Knowledge and Literary Pleasure in Early Modern French Fiction*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011. xxviii + 224 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$70.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-61149-062-6.

Review by Sara E. Melzer, University of California, Los Angeles.

This important book challenges the dominant view of French literary history that the nation's elite culture in the seventeenth century was self-contained, self-sufficient, with little interest in what was happening outside of its borders. To question this traditional image, Ellen Welsh begins by observing that over 20 percent of narrative fiction published in France during this period took place in foreign lands or featured foreign characters. Focusing on several different categories of the novel and narrative prose of the long seventeenth century, Welsh establishes not simply the fact of the foreign in French fiction but she also analyses the important cultural work it produced, opening up undiscovered modes of perception and thought. Interest in the foreign was not a superficial exoticism, but represents a profound phenomenon, she convincingly argues.

In the first chapter, "Fiction and the Aesthetics of Foreigners," Welsh confronts the most important problem facing the novel and prose fiction: their quest for legitimacy as a genre. Although these genres were enormously popular, they were disdained by early modern France's official literary culture, cast out as an "alien Other" (p. 3). This disdain resulted from several factors, two of which were the following. The French Academy criticized fiction as a "fabulous invention," as seductive lies that would weaken the minds of its readers (p. 1). This moral danger was compounded by the perception that the novel was akin to a bastard child, lacking legitimate ancestors in the classical world.

Given that the novel was a genre on the defensive, Welsh centers this chapter on the defensive arguments that apologists made to legitimate it. In a fascinating analysis, Welsh places the notion of the foreign at the center of this defensive discourse. Apologists had to evoke the foreign because the novel could not admit to a home-grown origin, thus forced to distance itself from its own vulgar local roots to find its ancestry elsewhere. The nation's own medieval tradition was insufficient to serve as a worthy origin because its stature was inadequate, dwarfed by the overwhelming prestige of ancient Greek and Roman culture.

Apologists for the novel located two important foreign origins. First, many argued that the novel did in fact have legitimate roots in Ancient Greece and Rome, asserting that French modern fictions were heirs to the *Odyssey* and the *Illiad*. This strategy was linked to a version of the *translatio studii*, a traditional line of argumentation that saw the Greeks and Romans as passing on their literary heritage to their supposed descendents, the French. Beginning with Jacques Amyot's 1547 translation of Heliodorus' *Ethiopica*, Welsh shows how he and others saw this text as constituting an important link in the chain from ancient Greece to France. His translation of this "Greek novel" provided the quintessential model for the genre of the novel. In his theoretical preface to this translation, Amyot argued for a classical parentage of the novel. Such a heritage meant that the novel was thus worthy of an important place in the nation's literary culture.

However, a more interesting origin for the novel posited a very different foreign lineage. This defensive strategy remapped the *translatio studii* by pushing its origin back in time and locating it in the East. Welsh cites the preface to the bilingual Greek and Latin edition of Achilles Tatius's *Kleitophon and Leukippé* (1640), to show how the classical scholar Claude Saumaise (or Salmasius) proposed that the novel first emerged in Persia and then traveled through Asia Minor and then Arabia before arriving in Europe. Pierre-Daniel Huet made a similar, but more elaborate argument in a treatise that was attached to the comtesse de Lafayette's *Zayde, histoire espagnole* (1670-71). Welsh's larger argument in this chapter is that foreignness was pivotal to the defensive discourse because it provided an essential third term to bridge conflicting needs, negotiating the tensions between the classical and the vulgar, the familiar and the fantastic, the ancient and the modern.

The second chapter, "Armchair Conquests: Heroic Romance and the Cartographies of Desire," addresses the question of why most scholars have tended to dismiss the importance of the foreign setting in the novel. For these scholars, the foreign locales are vague abstractions that are interchangeable, suggesting that they are simply superficial lures, without deep roots in the authors' visions of their world. Arguing against this assumption, Welsh first discusses the prevalence of books about geography and other forms of mapping, as well as discourses of navigation and travel during the 1620s through the 1660s, the period in which Madeleine de Scudéry, sieur de Gomberville and Marin le Roy, the three major heroic romance authors featured in this chapter, wrote. Their romances both alluded to and incorporated discourses of discovery and conquest that were well known to the French reading public based on the dominant travel narratives and other non-fictional genres. Welsh then analyses how these narratives were linked to empire-building, observing how many, if not most, heroic romances depicted geographies associated with empire.

Welsh describes the narrative strategies of these fictions which transform the heroes' epic journeys into experiences of discovery. The fictionalized space of empire was animated by a spirit of discovery where the reader and the hero encounter new geographies together. Not only do the readers participate vicariously in this discovery, but they are also made to experience the pleasure of the conquest, possession and domination over these new lands. In this sense, the reader becomes not simply an armchair traveler, but also an armchair conqueror. What is being conquered, however, is not simply foreign land, but also the subjective "interior terrain of emotions that constitutes the novel's defining themes" (p. 49).

Chapter three, "Cosmopolitan Seductions: City Guides and Parisian Novels," changes the perspective by featuring Paris as seen from the perspective of outsiders. These outsiders are both French provincials as well as foreigners. These novels from the 1660s through the 1680s induce their readers to identify with these outsiders and see this wondrous place through their admiring eyes. Representing Paris as the ultimate place of cosmopolitanism and prestige, these novels uphold Parisian lifestyles as the model to be emulated by foreigners and provincials alike.

Welsh presents a twist on the argument that Benedict Anderson made in his seminal *Imagined Communities*, in which he contended that the novel, coupled with the news media, worked together to represent and create an imagined community of the nation.[1] Analyzing the novellas of Jean Donneau de Visé, Antoine Furetière's *Roman Bourgeois*, and Jean de Préchac's *L'Illustre Parisienne*, Welsh explores their curious double perspective: they create the illusion of an imagined community that both includes the outsider narrator/reader and yet also excludes this figure. On the one hand, these Paris-centric novels promise to teach outsiders about the worldly ways of Paris life. Conjuring up the possibility of inclusion, these novels suggest that outsiders can become insiders once they are educated and imitate the sophisticated ways of the inhabitants of this magical city. On the other hand, these novels undermine this promise by ridiculing the ungainly efforts of these outsiders to imitate Parisian ways of being.

Chapter four, "Secret Agents, Foreign Courts: International Voyeurism in Memoir Fictions," examines another genre that Welsh calls "secret memory fiction" (p. 85), which turns a "spy-like gaze" on the private life of important public figures in international relations (p. 86). She focuses on two fictional memoirs of the late seventeenth century: Gatien de Courtilz de Sandras' *Mémoires de Monsieur le Comte de Rochfort* (1687) and Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville, comtesse d'Aulnoy's novel, *Relation du voyage d'Espagne*, and her *Mémoires de la cour d'Espagne* (1690-91). These novels offer up the imagined secrets of courtiers and princes, giving the readers the pleasure of deciphering the secrets of foreign courts. Drawing from the discourses of international relations, this secret memory fiction reveals how transnational personal affinities supplant national affiliations as the basis for satisfying social relationships.

Chapter five, "Consuming Curiosities in Extraordinary Voyage Fictions," takes up the subgenre of early modern prose fiction known as the extraordinary voyage, which includes imaginary voyages and utopia fictions that manufacture an exoticism, trading on an aesthetics of curious and seductive objects. Beginning with the Medamothi episode of Rabelais' *Quart Livre*, this chapter develops its argument by analyzing the poetics of curiosity and exotic objects from five extraordinary voyage novels: Savinien Cyrano de Bergerac, *Les Etats et empires de la lune et du soleil* (1657); Gabriel Foigny, *La Terre Australe connue* (1676); Denis Veiras, *L'histoire des Sévarambes* (1677); Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, *Histoire des Ajaouiens* (1682); and Simon Tyssot de Patot, *Voyages et aventures de Jacques Massé* (1710). These novels both represent foreignness and manufacture it by creating a consumer and aesthetic pleasure associated with the exotic. Here she analyses the novels in relation to the scientific and moralistic discourses on curiosity, as well as to related cultural practices in order to trace the emergence of a world curiosity.

Her concluding chapter, "L'utile et l'agréable in the Age of Orientalism," explores how the novel takes an important turn with Galland's *Milles et une nuits* and examines how it alters the stakes of fictional representations of foreignness. Focusing on the inherent tension between the two goals of the novel, to be useful and to please, Welsh argues for the importance of pleasure in the reading experience.

This is an impressive book on many different levels. First of all, the scholarship is remarkable. Welsh has read a vast number of novels, and very long novels at that--and many that have been consigned to obscurity. The simple fact of bringing these novels and literary debates about them together into a coherent and meaningful whole is in itself a great service to scholarship. But what is even more impressive is how thoughtfully and lucidly she weaves this body of knowledge together. Given the vastness of this material, Welsh could have easily fallen into a boring, mechanical approach to her subject, but she does not do so. Having focused on the importance of pleasure in the reading experience, Welsh successfully applies the same principle to her own act of writing. When I first received my copy of the book, I was disappointed to see it focused on so many novels I had not read, but I quickly changed my mind when I began to read. Welsh writes well and is keenly aware of the challenges that face scholars who concentrate on texts which their readers may not have read. My delight and pleasure in reading this book is a true tribute not only to Welsh's stylistic abilities, but also to the sharpness of her nuanced, well-articulated insights.

Her conclusion is good and solid, following logically from her primary interest in the novel and would be most satisfying to specialists of the novel. But since my scholarly interests are not in the novel *per se*, I personally would have liked a conclusion that opened out more broadly. Her work is stimulating precisely because it resonates beyond the novel. To my mind, her concluding thoughts do not do justice to the exciting implications of her own analyses. For example, in chapter one, where she discusses the novel as a genre on the defensive, it would be interesting to extend her analysis to the many defenses of the French language where, I would argue, the foreign also plays a similar role.

Another interesting issue that her argument raises is the problematic status of elite France's cultural relationship to both classical antiquity in the Western world and to the East. Welsh assumes too easily

that the elite viewed the Greeks and Romans as foreign. However, their status as “foreigners” was an issue that was hotly contested in the early modern era. Logic would, of course, now dictate that the Greeks and Romans were in fact foreign. But the elite’s dominant discourse in the early modern era about the Greco-Romans denied their status as foreign and instead posited them as an “us,” as “fathers,” aligned with the French as members of the same family. It was precisely against this assumption of an imagined sameness that other members of the elite rebelled, asserting the foreignness of the Greeks and most especially the Romans, to justify claiming independence in what could be called a cultural de-colonization.[2]

Conversely, the standard literary history has typically portrayed the East in an opposite fashion, as the quintessential Other. However, as Welsh shows here, the East conjured up in these novels suggests a shared heritage, portraying this part of the world as allied with France, as not constituting an Other. While Welsh does make this point, she does so quite elliptically. Nevertheless, her analysis rightly suggests that elite France’s cultural relationships to both the East and the West were much more complex than the nation’s literary history has acknowledged.

To provide yet another example of the implications of Welsh’s argument, in chapter three, her analysis of the double perspective about the outsiders’ relationship to Paris resonates strongly with the standard colonial narrative about the promise of assimilation that can never be fulfilled. While the reader, like the colonized, is invited to become part of Paris’ imagined community by imitating those at its center, these outsiders are also alienated from that center so that they are always “almost but not quite” part of that community, as Homi Bhabha has famously observed.[3] While outsiders are handed the fiction of inclusion once they learn to imitate the colonizer, they are then ridiculed for not imitating it correctly.

In sum, many of her analyses reverberate with a broader set of narratives. I intend this comment not as a critique, but rather as an indication of how provocative and resonant her analyses are for scholars whose main interests lie in allied fields. Welsh has written a highly rewarding book that constitutes a major contribution to seventeenth-century French studies.

## NOTES

[1] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York City: Verso Press, 1983).

[2] For a development of this dynamic, see Sara E. Melzer, *Colonizer or Colonized: The Hidden Stories of Early Modern France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

[3] Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man,” in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 85-92.

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