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Mary D. Sheriff, *Enchanted Islands: Picturing the Allure of Conquest in Eighteenth-Century France*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2018. xiii + 279 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780226483108; \$10.00 to \$55.00 U.S. (ebook). ISBN: 9780226483245.

Review by Katrina Grant, Australian National University.

Mary Sheriff's final book, published posthumously, is the culmination of over a decade's work and, as noted Keith P. Luria who with Melissa Hyde saw the manuscript through to publication after Sheriff's death in 2016, a lifetime's fascination with islands. This book traverses many of the areas in which Sheriff's work contributed so much to the study of art history: feminism, sexuality, gender, travel and cultural exchange, and a close study of the visual (and broader) culture of eighteenth-century France. The book takes as its subject the idea of the enchanted island and the enchantresses who occupied them. This narrative is an ancient one, Circe in the *Odyssey*, who transformed men into swine is one of the earliest. In the same epic, Calypso offered a more pleasant but ultimately similar entrapment. The idea of idyllic enchanted islands and their resident enchantresses was given particular prominence from the sixteenth century through two epic poems, *Orlando Furioso* (1516) by Ludovico Ariosto and *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581) by Torquato Tasso. These poems—perhaps less well known or read now than they deserve to be—became a key source for the arts for the next two centuries or more. Both stories trace the adventures of Christian knights in their battles against the Saracen enemies. They are set in the time of Charlemagne and the First Crusade, respectively, but were framed by fears current in 1500s Europe about the rising power of the Ottoman Empire. At some point within both stories a knight, Ruggiero in Ariosto and Rinaldo in Tasso, is distracted from his duty and entrapped upon an island, which typically took the form of a garden, a place where pleasure rules and all worldly cares are forgotten. Both Ariosto's and Tasso's poems were tremendously popular and widely translated, and this story within a story became a source for visual arts, opera, ballet, and numerous retellings in prose and verse, and thus, the idea of the enchanted islands entered the cultural imagination of Europe.[1]

Sheriff's book examines the way in which these narratives were rewritten, made visual, made dramatic, in late seventeenth and eighteenth-century France. She ranges across different domains from painting to literature, from opera to material culture, and, from royal fêtes to the exploration of the Pacific. She engages with a broad range of critical texts from Sigmund Freud to Alfred Gell and explores ideas about islands, enchanted nature, nature and otherness, and, nature and magic as a means for exploring human experience. This approach makes perfect sense when examined through the lens of a shared subject, and it provides the reader with a richer

understanding of the interconnectedness of French culture across genres. The book is organized around a series of case studies focused on themes. It begins with an analysis of the idea of islands and follows this with a close look at the concept of enchantment and its role in constructions of gender during the *ancien régime*. This is followed by an examination of the significant role played by enchanted islands in the performance of royal power. Chapters four and five turn to the transformation of specific narratives, first Calypso and Telemachus through the writings of François Fénelon, for example, and then the transformation of Armida and Rinaldo in ballet and painting. The book concludes with a chapter on two real islands that were viewed through the conceptual framework of imaginary islands. There is much to discover in Sheriff's book. Her light touch with sources, the careful weaving together of explication with critical examination, and her skill at exploring and describing paintings and visual culture more broadly, means that although the book is just over 200 pages it is a challenge to sum up. It is worth looking, albeit briefly, at several key themes that emerge, which are key to understanding the fascination with the idea of the enchanted island: gender, pleasure, and otherness.

In her examination of enchantment, Sheriff is on familiar ground looking at the intersection of art, culture, sexuality, and gender. The popularity of the narrative of the enchantress during this period makes it a key vehicle for understanding attitudes towards gender and women's sexuality, yet, as Sheriff explores, it is a complicated myth, capable of conveying very different messages. In the late seventeenth century, there was a very real debate over the existence and efficacy of magic, beginning with the Affair of the Poisons in 1678, which revealed an "extensive criminal underworld of magic operating in Paris" (p. 38), including key figures at court like Louis XIV's mistress Madame de Montespan, and which resulted in an edict by the king in 1682 that declared all magic to be fraud. Yet, as Sheriff explains, this edict hardly quelled the widespread belief in sorcery, and self-declared magicians and sorceresses continued to be employed by all levels of society with the intention both to help and to harm. She traces the shift in the use of language in official dictionaries published in the eighteenth century, from declarations of the enchantment of a group of people, to accounts that describe groups of people as believing themselves to have been enchanted. She notes the fact that the Catholic Church had a hand in keeping alive belief in magic and sorcery due to the important link between belief in magic and belief in the devil. Other practitioners walked a fine line between new science and experimentation and charlatanism. For example, the comte de Saint-Germain, under the protection of Madame de Pompadour, set up a laboratory to experiment with new dyes for the French textile industry, and he also predicted the future in his magic mirror, claiming to know the secret to immortality. As the book explores, the debate over magic, its existence, its efficacy, and its presence in society is one that was more often than not linked to women.

Sheriff proposes a shift in eighteenth-century France, away from the previously dominant idea of a diabolical and frightening witchcraft to one of the "Gentil Sorcier," who tells fortunes, enables love, or enchants with beauty (p. 49). These portrayals, in text and in art, range from the popular play *La Sorcière* (1799) by Antoine André Ravrio, in which young women are portrayed as jealous, credulous, and susceptible to manipulation due to their obsession with false sorcery, to portraits of Madame de Montespan depicted as a "seductive and beautiful enchantress" (p. 50), which were widely shared as engravings. There remained a strain of representation of a different kind of enchanter, Antoine Coypel's portrait of La Voisin, the woman executed during the affair of the Poisons (as a poisoner, though, not a witch), shows a plump, middle-aged woman, surrounded by a demonic garland of lizards and frogs in place of flowers. Carl Van Loo's depiction of the actress Clairon as Medea shows a woman who, driven by anger and madness, has killed her children,

and it echoes the final destructive rage of enchantresses like Armida and Alcina. As Sheriff points out, not only were women portrayed as more credulous and more deceptive, but the very “motors of superstitions were gendered feminine” (p. 58). Superstition was also cast as a woman and attributed to the weakness of the female mind.

One of the most interesting threads of discussion in the book is the focus on how the idea of the enchantress and the enchanted island was used to explore the tension between pleasure and responsibility. Sheriff delves into what might be called the politics of pleasure. The enchantment narrative in Ariosto’s and Tasso’s epic poems (in both poems they are relatively short sections) seems to have been seized upon for its capacity to explore how a hero, be they a mythical knight or a real early modern prince, could fall prey to hedonism and neglect his duties as a ruler. We see this in some of the earliest Italian versions of the story that were played out on stage for the Medici dukes and then princes. In 1625, for example, a version of the tale of Alcina and Ruggiero was played out as part of an equestrian ballet at the Villa Poggio Imperiale, commissioned by the Archduchess Maria Magdalena.^[2] The story apparently chosen in part as an instructional tale for a visiting potential suitor Prince Władysław Sigismund of Poland, upon whom the archduchess wished to impress the importance of making a correct alliance through marriage. Again and again, this narrative was chosen for events that celebrated marriage and duty or for events that celebrated love and pleasure. Sheriff looks in detail at the ways in which the story of the enchantress and her island was performed in fêtes and ballets as a symbol of royal power in France. In these “composite spectacles,” she argues, “the enchantress and her powers of entrapment became intertwined with notions of masculinity, femininity, Frenchness, enchantment, and power” (p. 74).

The story, as it was generally performed, set up the enchantress as an adversary to the king. Her illegitimate seizure of power was set against his legitimate claim, which would always triumph in the end. In these productions, the enchantress might represent a real woman who was perceived as too powerful. Sheriff notes that “under Louis XIII Armida appeared at a time when he was at odds with his mother,” and their struggle was symbolically represented in the *Ballet de la Délivrance de Renaud*, 1617 (p. 74). At other times, the narrative of the enchantress mostly focused on love, as when Madame de Pompadour played the role of Armida, while Louis XV performed his heroism in a private production known as the Fête at Seine-Port. Indeed, throughout her many representations the female sorceress is never a simplistic villain. She is often sympathetic, always transformative, and as capable of love as she is of anger and destruction. *Les Plaisirs de l’isle enchantée*, the famous *fête* of 1664 staged by Louis XIV at Versailles, is linked by Sheriff to a range of themes, from love to war and from peace and conquest. She notes that this extravagant *fête* was one of the may excesses that would bankrupt France, and that it would later be looked back on with disillusion towards the later decades of Louis XIV’s reign. This is a society where pleasure is tricky. It is not rejected wholesale (by most), yet it is recognised as dangerous. Emerging from this dilemma was the idea that it was the king, a man, who must dictate the terms of pleasure, and not the woman. The king could take pleasure but also control or even destroy it.

The final chapter takes us away from France to the islands of Nouvelle Cythère and Saint-Domingue (modern day Tahiti and Haiti). Sheriff notes in her introduction that her fascination with the idea of the island really began with these islands and their place in our imaginations. The shift of focus from art and culture to the history of exploration and cross-cultural engagement highlights the different ways in which myths and stories told through the arts shape

attitudes and actions beyond them. Sheriff recounts the way in which the encounters of French explorers, such as Louis Antoine de-Bougainville in his *Voyage autour du monde* (1771), traversed the real and the imagined in their accounts of “first contact” with island-based societies and cultures (p. 181). Islands, real islands, were perceived as naturally beautiful but morally dangerous. In this telling the enchantress was now represented as being the other to the European. Sheriff locates the origins of Western ideas of the paradisiacal “island escape” with this moment in French history, with Bougainville’s voyage (p. 184) and his descriptions of “a paradise of guiltless sexuality” and the site of a rediscovered “golden age.” By renaming the island Nouvelle Cythère, an allusion not to the real Greek Kythera but to the “mythic space laid over that island” (p. 185), Bougainville took the first step in French appropriation (eventually leading to its status as a possession of the French). Sheriff examines the role played by art in shaping these human encounters with a global world, stating that “when he arrived at Tahiti, Bougainville’s internal landscape was crowded” (p. 195). Yet, this was not simply appropriation, it was also a process of mirroring. Sheriff cites the work of anthropologist Greg Denning to explain the way in which Bougainville and others cast a place like Tahiti in the role of a more familiar enchanted island. This conception gave explorers from Europe a framework by which to understand and explain the different societies they found in Pacific to their audiences back in France, and, in turn, led them to misread actions and misunderstand Tahitian social norms. For example, the French were both excited and troubled by the (apparently) freely offered sex in Tahitian society. They struggled with ideas of duty and the promise of pleasure, often casting their own emotional responses in terms of enchantment. Tahiti and its people were explained in terms of a golden age, a society that was closer to nature and uncorrupted by civilisation. Sheriff contrasts this reading and representation of Tahiti with that of Haiti, which was presented not in terms of a golden age, but as a site of debauchery. The non-European women were again represented as enchantresses, however, they were instead associated with black magic, lasciviousness, and even diabolical possession. The importance of these stories in framing social attitudes is often described in terms of a shared imagination, a term that neatly encapsulates the way in which we read and make sense of the real world through the complex mix of stories to which we are exposed by art.

At the beginning of her chapter on “Domains of Enchantment” Sheriff notes that “to explore enchantment is to cross several lines of enquiry,” from belief in magic, to shifting meanings in language, technology, art, and the “passion of love” (p. 37). The topic may indeed have demanded this approach, but, it is Sheriff’s choice to craft a study that focuses upon an idea, a theme, and a key narrative for this moment in French history and to explore these across a range of domains that has resulted in this incredibly rich study. Not only are the ideas and critique in this particular study of value, but so is Sheriff’s generous approach to understanding the history of ideas. It can be tempting to stay safely within the walls of one’s own discipline (art, literature, etc.) but this study shows the value of taking a more expansive view. Sheriff’s early death is an inestimable loss to the scholarship of this period. Yet, as a final testament to Sheriff’s scholarship, this is an important book with potential to inform a range of research and ideas well beyond the art history of eighteenth-century France.

NOTES

[1] In his anniversary year in 2016 there were some useful accounts of the impact of Ariosto, see for instance Marina Cogotti, Vincenzo Farinella and Monica Preti, *I voli dell’Ariosto: L’Orlando Furioso e le arti* (Milan: L’Officina Libraria, 2016).

[2] Kelley Ann Harness, *Echoes of Women's Voices: Music, Art, and Female Patronage in Early Modern Florence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

Katrina Grant
Australian National University.
Katrina.Grant@anu.edu.au

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