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Faith E. Beasley, *Versailles Meets the Taj Mahal: François Bernier, Marguerite de la Sablière, and Enlightening Conversations in Seventeenth-Century France*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018. xiii + 349 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4875-0284-3.

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In recent years, scholars have strengthened our understanding of East/West relations in the early modern period. Studies by literary scholars, such as Kate Marsh's *India in the French Imagination*, explored connections between France and India in the eighteenth century.[1] Faith Beasley's *Versailles and the Taj Mahal* takes us further back to the seventeenth century to reveal the significant impact Mughal India played on French thought. Beasley engages her readers in a novel interpretation of an oft-cited European source on Mughal India, the works of François Bernier, the French physician and traveler. As a literary scholar, Beasley investigates Bernier's texts and their relationship to the seventeenth-century French salon, a public largely overlooked by historians. Beasley shows that French salon culture produced discussions about India that challenge prior conceptions of the early modern French-Indian relationship and Louis XIV's France. Her work is in tune with recent books, such as Sanjay Subrahmanyam's *Europe's India*, that show the diversity of European views of India but also speak to a larger body of work that has shown wide variations in relationships between European countries and the rest of the world through engaging with a variety of previously ignored sources such as diplomatic texts, literature, theater, travelogues, images, and material culture.[2] *Versailles and the Taj Mahal* further complicates standard notions of East versus West and early modern Orientalism by exploring the link between the French world of the salon and India.

Chapter one details the relationship between Bernier and the famed salon of Marguerite de La Sablière, whose gatherings brought together a diverse group of intellectuals to engage in conversation and generate new knowledge. Scholars have associated Bernier with the esoteric intellectual world, especially his exchanges with Melchisédech Thévenot, the natural scientist and compiler of texts on the Orient. Beasley turns our attention to another side of Bernier's world, his relationship with La Sablière and her salon milieu. La Sablière's salon served as "one of those most exciting and vibrant places for the intellectual and worldly community throughout the 1670s" (p. 37). Her salon inspired some of the most famous authors and thinkers of seventeenth-century France, such as La Fontaine and Lafayette, as well as Bernier. Philosophers like Pierre Bayle marveled at La Sablière's own intellect and, as Beasley reminds us, she was an "intellectual luminary" of her time (p. 38). In past scholarship, Bernier's connections to La Sablière's salon have been overshadowed by his contacts with the male-

dominated academic world rather than the salon world featured in the book under review.

After his travels in India, Bernier lived with La Sablière at her home in Paris on the rue Neuve des Petits-Champs, and it was there that he composed his texts. His choice of editor and titles for his work reflected a conscious decision to relate to the world of the salon rather than to the more erudite scholarly world (p. 40). Most interestingly, Beasley shows that Bernier's texts were not just meant to transmit knowledge about India, but actually sought to engage, stimulate, and provoke conversations and new ideas in the salon world. Toward that end, Bernier's descriptions concentrated on similarities between France and India. From his descriptions, his public could debate the flaws and merits of India and, likewise, those of France. Connecting Bernier to the salon explains previously misunderstood aspects of his work such as a well-known letter to Colbert that criticized India and contained contradictory information regarding the country. In that letter, Bernier condemned India for lacking a concept of private property, thereby leading to the country's ruin (pp. 78-79). This critique is inconsistent with descriptions by other travelers and even those of Bernier himself, who had described property of a wealthy merchant class and even the king himself. Beasley suggests that Bernier's letter to Colbert, which Bernier had published, was meant to stimulate conversation for his salon public (p. 79). Bernier discussed a lack of private property to warn his readers of what could happen if the concept was threatened. He purposely crafted his descriptions of India to provoke and inspire his readers.

One of the most fascinating chapters of the book, chapter two, draws on the relationship between Jean Chapelain and Bernier. Chapelain was "one of France's leading intellectuals and Colbert's main advisor on all things literary" (p. 91). Chapelain was a principal member the French Academy, authoring many of the Academy's rules, but also involved in the salon milieu (pp. 92-93). During Bernier's travels in India, Chapelain corresponded with Bernier and, as Beasley notes, served as his guide and mentor. Chapelain found Bernier particularly trustworthy, as he was not a self-interested merchant and not a missionary motivated by conversion. Instead, Bernier could be trusted because of his pure pursuit of knowledge (pp. 96-97). Chapelain instructed Bernier to immerse himself in the intellectual world of India and communicate what he discovered to his French readers. Beasley demonstrates that India was perceived not just as a supplier of luxury goods but considered "an advanced civilization whose culture had the potential to be very valuable among Europeans, even French, intellectuals" (p. 100).

Above all, Beasley shows that Chapelain and Bernier shaped perceptions of India through engagement with the female-run salon, a feature unique to seventeenth-century France. Beasley reminds us that the unique intellectual culture of France—the only one to include women—allowed Bernier to process India differently and explains Bernier's positive portrayal of the harem and powerful women like Nur Jahan and Jahanara, who wielded significant political power (p. 103). Unlike Bernier, merchant-travelers criticized the empress Nur Jahan because she thwarted their attempts at trade. They attributed the advancement of these females to male weakness. By contrast, Bernier praised them for having been chosen on their own merit and *esprit*. Through Bernier, the Mughal harem could be differentiated from the Ottoman and Persian harems, which were associated with suppressing women's influence and authority (p. 134). Beasley attributes Bernier's vision of the Indian harem to his salon climate, where he was surrounded by women of *esprit*. Bernier not only praised the contributions of the Indian harem but defined it as an exotic equivalent to Versailles in royal refinement (pp. 131-33). This was

one of the ways in which India became a model of comparison for the French court.

Positioning Bernier's texts in his salon milieu explains connections between his works and other seminal French seventeenth-century texts, such as the comtesse de Lafayette's novel, *La Princesse de Clèves*, one of the most controversial and best-selling books of the seventeenth century. Beasley carefully draws out the similarities between the styles of Bernier and Lafayette, both influenced by the salon, since the two authors sought to shape new knowledge through stirring conversations about female agency and diversity. Here again, Beasley offers explanations for peculiar insertions in seventeenth-century texts, such as Lafayette's digression about the death of Henri II. Catherine de Medici, Henri's queen, had predicted her husband's sudden death through astrology, but her prophecy was dismissed as nonsense. In her story, Lafayette pointed to the possible merits of astrology. La Sablière's salon had discussed Cartesian philosophy and, through Bernier's texts, alternate ways of seeing the world. Bernier's writings introduced Indian astrology to the salon in a tone that suggested openness to its possibilities and merits. Lafayette drew upon aspects of Bernier's India to promote openness to diverse ways of thinking and embracing of female power (p. 158). Once again, Beasley explains a seemingly random nod to India in Lafayette's text: the *canne des Indes*. In the text, the princess uses the reference to India and the harem to signal female agency (p. 156).

Beasley ends the chapter by contrasting the French vision of India, embodied in authors such as Bernier and Lafayette, with Dryden's English version. Dryden reinterpreted Bernier's texts to reject salon culture and its positive association with female agency. In Dryden's India, females were stripped of their power to "emasculate" their king. Beasley argues that Dryden wrote in reaction to Bernier's portrayal of India. Bernier's India was a place "shaped by female influence and open to difference" and meant to "inspire creativity and new knowledge" (p. 169). Described by Dryden's pen, India became instead "a warning to those who might look favorably on female agency" (p. 169). Beasley's complex reconstruction of the contentions between authors shows how different European contexts produced different descriptions of India.

Chapter three analyzes the influence of Bernier's India on Jean de La Fontaine, another resident of La Sablière. Bernier had described the religious diversity of India, and this resonated at La Sablière's residence and, therefore, in the texts of La Fontaine and Lafayette. India was different from neighbors such as Persia in its religious tolerance. Issues of religious tolerance and diversity obviously resonated with Louis XIV's subjects, and members of La Sablière's salon, who witnessed their king's increasing attempts to stamp out religious division by enforcing uniformity. La Fontaine, much like Lafayette, used references to India to evoke diversity and difference, thereby indirectly challenging the king's actions. Invoking India stirred conversations and debate, the hallmark of salon culture. India served as the salon's muse in its quest for new knowledge (p. 210).

Bernier's India served to broaden minds, but this "liberating force" posed a challenge to the Bourbon monarchy (p. 221). In chapter four, Beasley suggests that Louis XIV's restrictions on Indian textiles served as more than a measure to protect the French economy from foreign competition. Printed or painted textiles from India, called *indiennes*, had proved immensely popular, and French elites continued to wear them despite Louis XIV's decrees against them. The king banned the importation and even the imitation of painted fabrics by French companies. His bans hurt importation but also French companies, by preventing them from copying and producing cottons. Beasley argues that these royal bans did not serve purely

economic interests but also constituted a measure against competing ideas, embodied in India and Indian cloths (p. 247). In addition to textiles, Beasley cites Louis XIV's use of diamonds and mirrors as recognition of India's influence on seventeenth-century France (pp. 250-268).

Versailles and the Taj Mahal vividly shows how the salon's particular use of India challenged Louis XIV's effort to create a unified French dominant culture. Readers learn how India symbolized diversity: the antithesis of absolutism's goal of uniformity (p.211, p. 220). India served as a mediator, through which the salon could raise new questions potentially challenging the theories underlying the French monarchy. Beasley provides a striking example of how a specific Asian country, India, could be interpreted by French readers in response to their own institutions and ideas. She shows the varieties and nuances in the views of foreign places and argues that the French salon was instrumental in creating a specifically French version of India. Further, she demonstrates that foreign lands could be connected intellectually despite little real contact (p.19). Although India and Louis XIV did not have direct diplomatic contact through ambassadorial visits, India forged a unique place in seventeenth-century France that was distinct from the image of India in, for instance, England or the Netherlands.

This book also provides examples to dismantle notions of European superiority in the early modern period. Not all Frenchmen saw themselves as superior to Indians. Salon affiliates sought to learn from India and appreciate differences. They even marveled at India's religious tolerance, diversity, and craftsmanship. As Beasley shows, India did not serve as an inferior "other" (p. 20).

This book skillfully raises tensions between the nature of absolutism and foreign influence. Yet, perhaps, in the sections on material culture, Louis XIV appears too much the absolutist monarch in "his attempts to erase this new taste as he constructed an image of French cultural superiority" (p. 268). Analysis of diplomatic events have shown how Louis XIV likened himself to Asian emperors through imitation. Thus, how can scholars reconcile Louis XIV's attempts to erase foreign influence with the French court's overt attempts to imitate and liken the king to Asian emperors, especially during diplomatic ceremonies? The book does not address these inconsistencies inherent in the French royal projection of Asian luxury that extended beyond the French-Indian context. The main object of the book, however, the analysis of texts through the context of the salon, relates a previously unknown history between France and India in the seventeenth century, thereby making an important contribution to the study of early modern orientalism. Knowledge of India mediated through the salon transformed French thought, literature, and politics even in the absence of direct physical contact. The story of the pre-colonial relationship between India and France reminds us of the singular imprint that each Asian country made in Europe. Moreover, it shows that, in the early modern world, no single European response to Asia can necessarily be conflated with another.

NOTES

[1] Kate Marsh, *India in the French Imagination: Peripheral Voices, 1754-1815* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009).

[2] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Europe's India: Words, Peoples, Empires 1500-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017). There are many examples of novel approaches to European

relations with Asia. Here are only a few examples: Nicholas Dew, *Orientalism in Louis XIV's France* (Oxford: University Press, 2009); Ellen Welch, *A Theater of Diplomacy: International Relations and the Performing Arts in Early Modern France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Jan Hennings, *Russia and Courtly Europe: Ritual and the Culture of Diplomacy, 1648-1725* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Meredith Martin, "Mirror Reflections: Louis XIV, Phra Narai, and the Material Culture of Kingship," *Art History* vol. 38 no. 4 (September 2015): 652-66. David Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014); Larry Wolff, *The Singing Turk* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

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