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H-France Review Vol. 22 (October 2022), No. 170

Mathilde Bedel, *Mirabilia Indiae: Voyageurs français et représentations de l'Inde au XVIIe siècle*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2021. 349 pp. Appendices, glossary, bibliography, and indices. €35.00 (pb). ISBN 9-78-2406121534.

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For well over a decade, scholars of French literature, especially those working outside of France, have joined forces with historians, philosophers, and social scientists in an effort to elucidate France's relationship to the world outside the hexagon. Susan Suleiman's and Christie MacDonald's edited volume *French Global: A New Approach to French Literary History* is an example of this interdisciplinary, collaborative work that re-orient's our perspective and understanding of even the most canonical works of France's literary canon. [1] Mathilde Bedel maintains, however, that India has been neglected: "Cependant, si l'Inde a été un objet de recherches passionnant pour la plupart des domaines des sciences humaines, il apparaît que la critique littéraire concernant la période pré-coloniale de la première modernité a négligé cette source d'intérêt" (p. 13). Her goal is to examine as literary artefacts a wide swath of "récits de voyage" produced by an eclectic group of French travelers to India in the seventeenth century in order to unearth a common narrative. Using a "croisement interdisciplinaire des méthodes," Bedel purports to unveil "le portrait de *l'homo indianus*" (p. 13) painted by seventeenth-century French travelers.

Bedel's corpus is extensive. Her appendix lists little known texts from the beginning of the seventeenth century alongside widely diffused and translated works such as those by François Bernier and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier from the second half of "Le Grand Siècle," works that have long attracted scholars. Bedel contends that reading them all together allows for a more complete vision of how Europeans saw and recounted India in the seventeenth century. In her view, everyone who wrote about India had the same goal: to describe the mores, customs, religion, political system, and the experience of Europeans in India. In an appendix, she specifies when these figures traveled to India, the length of their stay, regions and cities visited, the first publication of their narrative, and the *motif du voyage* for their journey indicating, for example, "*médecin*" for François Bernier, who spent a decade in India, and "*curieux au service du roi ou Espion*" for a certain Jean Mocquet, who spent eight months in Goa. This appendix should be read as the author's personal interpretation of the situation of many of these travelers. Specialists of the period, and Bernier's own contemporaries, would find curious or even disagree with Bedel's reduction of Bernier's *motif* to "*médecin*," for example. She herself focuses on his position as a *libertine* philosopher. Her classifications require some interpretation: François de La Boullaye-Le-Gouz is listed as "*ambassadeur de France*," which is questionable as such an official position did

not exist at the time—he was, however, sent to India by Colbert in 1664 to negotiate trade—and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier’s *période de voyage* is listed as 1638-1642, which is incorrect.

The *table des matières* provides a good overview of this study. Bedel focuses on the content of these texts, which she situates in a long line of European travel narratives starting in antiquity. In the common narrative constructed by Bedel, India is either “*paradis*” or “*enfer*” and the “*sensations fortes*” (p. 29) travelers felt are primarily negative, as illustrated by her chapter and section titles: “une Inde tragique,” “un déni interculturel,” “l’effacement de l’Hindou,” “la fourberie des brahmanes, les descriptions religieuses horribles,” “Une poésie diabolisée pour une interprétation au prisme de l’horreur,” and “L’éléphant comme figure parabolique d’un ensauvagement débauché” are a few representative headings.

Bedel’s study is grounded in the premise that Europeans, specifically the French, would have considered themselves superior to any foreign culture. Her study is composed of three distinct parts. In part one, titled “La Vision française d’une Inde tragique,” Bedel focuses on how travelers expressed their encounter with Hinduism and its practices, especially the rite of sati. In the second section, titled “L’Inde comme laboratoire littéraire français: Le jeu des passions entre écriture du visible et histoires secrètes,” the author examines how these texts contain characteristics of other genres such as tragedy, epic, and the novel and its *histoires secrètes*. She offers examples of how travelers situated themselves in their own narratives, “l’émergence de l’écriture du moi.” The final section, “L’Inde icône: Une Imagologie indienne” examines how animals are portrayed and ties them to philosophical questions. In this third section, Bedel also briefly examines “Le récit de voyage en Inde: un prétexte fictif pour la critique de cour libertine.” At the end, she tacks on “le voyage au féminin. Réécrire l’expérience viatique au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle: une émancipation féminine.”

Due to her desire to cover so much territory, *Mirabilia Indiae* reads like a series of short conference papers, suggestive, but each meriting further exploration. The book consists of three parts, each sub-divided repeatedly. Bedel sets out a premise for each section and sub-section of the three major parts, and then focuses on passages from one or two texts she views as representative of a particular theme. To give one example, the first part contains three subsections, which in turn are divided into two or three sub-sections, which are further divided into three to four short sub-sub-sections each composed of two to three pages. Under the general title of the *Première partie*, the third subsection after “Le Portrait des Hindous au prisme des peurs françaises” and “La représentation funeste d’une mort envoûtante comme topos du sacrifice des veuves hindoues” is “Entre Catabase et Pastorale,” which contains two subsections: “Entre Paradis et Enfer: L’Inde comme terre initiatique pour le voyageur” and “Les récits de captivité en Inde pour une poétisation de l’Enfer.” “Entre Paradis et Enfer” is then further divided into three more sections: “Le paradis terrestre ou le point culminant d’une pastorale en Inde,” “La déconstruction d’un cadre utopique par François Bernier,” and “Les Pérégrinations macabres dans le récit de voyage.” Bedel covers all these topics in just ten pages. The majority of the titles and subtitles could be thesis topics themselves, and indeed many have been. Her effort to construct a common narrative from such disparate and varied texts results in a book that is very disjointed; the only thread uniting the sections is that these travelers were French, went to India in the seventeenth century, and wrote something about India. Many of the texts do not fit the definition “récit de voyage.” François Bernier, for example, never used the title “Voyages.” It is problematic to consider all these texts as one corpus and consider all these writers as “travelers” when each had a different status, experience, and purpose. Some were minor adventurers or

merchants at the beginning of the seventeenth century, others spent only a very short period in India. Still others, such as Bernier, Tavernier, or Challe, were recognized by their contemporaries as having composed influential and authoritative texts on India. Some accounts were published during the seventeenth century, others not. What was the conversation among these figures and texts? Bedel might have looked at Melchisédech Thévenot's compendium of travel narratives to establish the "horizon of expectations" for travelers to identify ways these writers and texts might have been in conversation with each other. Nicholas Dew's important study of these networks, *Orientalism in Louis XIV's France*, could have provided a useful roadmap.<sup>[2]</sup>

In *Mirabilia Indiae*, texts and authors are homogenized in order to establish a common narrative. The qualifiers "globalement" and "la plupart" permeate this study. Bedel asserts that there is "un ethnocentrisme partagé par la plupart des voyageurs" (p. 46). It is difficult to get a sense of what is distinctive about these narratives that would explain the second half of the title "Voyageurs français et représentations de l'Inde au XVIIe siècle" (my emphasis). After reading this study, one has the impression that these Frenchmen were no different from the nineteenth-century Englishmen who visited a world they had colonized and wrote to justify imperialism. In Bedel's study, all travelers, be they merchants, philosophers, mercenaries, doctors or "curieux," reacted to the same things in India—caste, religion, elephants, women—with a similar sense of relief that they could eventually leave this inferior place. Bedel also homogenizes their reasons for writing of their experiences, making no distinction between Bernier publishing a letter he wrote to his friend Chapelain as part of his four volumes on India and the merchant Jean-Baptiste Tavernier's account in which he offers minute descriptions of precious gems and how to negotiate with India's diamond merchants. Bedel writes "Plus globalement, les voyageurs français du XVIIe siècle, trouvent dans le récit de voyage un intermédiaire qui leur permet d'introduire la culture hindoue en France" (p. 15). These travelers "développent un ensemble de stratégies littéraires visant à convaincre le lecteur sédentaire de l'importance d'établir un réseau commercial franco-indien" (p. 289). Readers who are familiar with even some of these texts know that it is difficult, indeed problematic, to speak "globally" of the authorial intentions of such an eclectic corpus. Bernier, for example, did not go to India to establish trade. It is equally problematic to choose passages out of such a huge and diverse corpus to construct a common narrative. Bernier is the most studied of the travelers in Bedel's corpus; scholars often underscore that the philosopher is an early example of cultural relativism, as opposed to someone whose descriptions of sati, for example, "se trouvent indirectement influencées par la culture occidentale et orientent fortement le lecteur vers une condamnation d'autrui" (p. 73), which Bedel identifies as the common narrative regarding sati. Bedel does grant the last figure in her corpus, Challe, some degree of "*jugement interculturel*" (p. 85) but does not suggest that Challe might have been influenced by Bernier, whose text, published over twenty years before Challe went to India, is known for its author's reflections on cultures. While Bedel states that she will revive the conversation among all these travelers, in reality she draws passages from individual texts to construct her own narrative. When she does attempt to recreate conversations, her choices seem random, as when she compares Montaigne and Challe.

The major drawback with *Mirabilie Indianiae* is the lack of contextualization. Passages are lifted from texts and divorced from the original works, from the author's personal experience, as well as from their seventeenth-century French context. There is little attempt to establish the networks of circulation of these writings and their authors. Bedel does recognize, as other scholars have done before her, how Bernier's letter to Colbert can be read as a commentary on the minister's economic policies, but such historical contextualization is rare. The result is a

series of conclusions that associate these texts and their authors with the negative stereotypes of the colonizer, and this at a time when India had yet to become a colonial subject. Bedel writes that “la noiceur de la peau est associée à un manque de Raison flagrant” and gives the impression that this negative assessment, among others, was shared by many in her corpus (p. 64). Occasionally scholars who know these texts may find the readings questionable, as when Bedel writes that Bernier’s account of his voyage to Cashmere illustrates “son idée principale: démontrer la supériorité de l’Europe sur cet espace indien et la création d’un nouveau lieu utopique grâce à l’union de ces deux nations [India and France]” (p. 111), an interpretation that is in stark contrast to the cultural relativism Bernier specialists have identified in his writings. When she discusses “l’élaboration narrative du mythe du grand moghol” (as the section is entitled), she gives the impression that Bernier composed a work called *Aurangziade*, which she italicizes, when this was never the case (p. 176). In the bibliography, she also attributes a work published in 1671 called *Mémoires* to Bernier, which does not exist. The correct title is *Suite des Mémoires*; the first two volumes were not titled *Mémoires*. Bedel’s vision of the Indian context is also questionable. She maintains that Indians were pleased to have Europeans organize hunting parties to help them manage beasts and were accepting of what she views as the “mission civilisatrice” of seventeenth-century French travelers.

Bedel also excludes from her study the reception of these texts. She contends that “malgré leur part de fictionnalisation, tous les voyages étudiés sont reconnus authentiques au moment de leur parution et encore considérés comme tels par la critique moderne,” yet she offers no history of the reception of these texts, which were published sometimes decades, even centuries apart (p. 18). She makes curious assumptions about the relationship between the writers she treats and their intended audience, writing, for example, that the French public wants horror stories about India, and writers wanted to please them. Bedel states that all literature of the period strives to provoke “la pitié, la terreur, ou le rire” (p. 219). What about curiosity? Admiration? Pleasure? There is no sense of the diversity of the reading public or ways the public encountered and engaged with these texts, all subjects that are at the forefront of French literary studies today. Bedel subjects these varied texts to the same form of deconstructionist, close reading. The insularity of her approach extends to her critical corpus. The author is in dialogue primarily with French specialists of travel narratives; there is little engagement with the considerable body of interdisciplinary scholarship devoted to France, India, travel narratives, and literature during this period that exists in English.

Bedel concludes that the French, even in the seventeenth century when India was one of the world’s powers, denigrated India, or used it to nourish their own fictions, and were for the most part happy to flaunt the superiority of their own culture at the expense of India. The disdain for Indians she identifies in these texts is evident when, for example, she writes “Le pachyderme est humanisé alors que le peuple indien doit être maîtrisé, comme s’il était lui-même animal” (p. 238). Bedel reads these seventeenth-century texts through a twenty-first-century post-colonial lens; in the common narrative she constructs from their writing, these travelers encountered an “oriental despot,” disgusting mores and religious practices, and transmitted “la figure stéréotypée de l’*homo indianus*...un être rusé, et obnubilé par sa religion” to their reading public. This study comes to the conventional conclusion that the relationship between the west and east has always been one of exploitation and domination.

Bedel establishes her common narrative by reading these texts through a lens informed by postcolonial narratives and modern-day assumptions of how the early modern world would have

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viewed India. While the common narrative as she constructs it may exist, it should be acknowledged as one thread among many of a complex conversation between India and France in the early modern period. This is a conversation that deserves to be resurrected and interpreted in its own context.

#### NOTES

[1] Susan Suleiman and Christie MacDonald, eds., *French Global: A New Approach to French Literary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); *French Global: Une nouvelle perspective sur l'histoire littéraire* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014). These volumes contain a chapter titled "Versailles Meets the Taj Mahal" (in the French edition, "De Grandes cultures se rencontrent: Conversations indiennes à l'époque classique").

[2] Nicholas Dew, *Orientalism in Louis XIV's France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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ISSN 1553-9172