
H-France Review Vol. 22 (March 2022), No. 40

Susan Mokhberi, *The Persian Mirror: Reflections of the Safavid Empire in Early Modern France*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. xi + 223 pp. \$78.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780190884796.

Review by Junko Takeda, Syracuse University.

The publication of Susan Mokhberi's *The Persian Mirror: Reflections of the Safavid Empire in Early Modern France* on the three hundredth anniversary of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* is very timely. Her full-length interdisciplinary study of Franco-Persian engagement in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries explores the understudied topic of how French writers, artists, diplomats, and crown perceived and represented not only the Safavid Empire, but Persia and its history more broadly. Using a wide array of source material—paintings, engravings, fiction, missionary accounts, travel narratives, translated manuscripts of Persian poetry and literature, archived diplomatic correspondences, and court memoirs—Mokhberi discusses “how the French developed a distorted vision of Persia” across the reigns of Louis XIII and Louis XIV (p. 2). Scholars have assumed that Montesquieu's publication in 1721 began the trend of deploying Persia as a looking glass to observe and critique French politics and society, but Mokhberi unearths the history of French intellectual, artistic, and diplomatic engagement with Persia that predated the *Lettres persanes* by over a century. By calling attention to this neglected history, and by showing that French engagement with Persia differed dramatically from that with the Ottoman Empire, about which much more is written, she complicates our understanding of France's engagement with Muslim empires in early modernity.

The *Persian Mirror* begins with a rich discussion of how French connections with Persia developed across the seventeenth century, as Catholic missionaries imagined Shiite Persians as France's potential allies with the Habsburgs against the Ottoman Empire. This anti-Turkish, ultra-Catholic *dévo*t proposal failed to gain traction at court. The Valois, then Bourbon monarchs maintained their anti-Habsburg alliance with the Ottoman sultans for several centuries. But due to their literary and academic influence, these missionaries succeeded in popularizing a particular vision of Persia over time. Cast in opposition to the Ottomans, Persia appeared as an Islamic empire that was more religiously tolerant and compatible with French Catholicism. While Capuchins established missions in western Asia, their works on Persia gained an audience in France among those critical towards France's pro-Ottoman policies. Notable Protestant writers like the Huguenot Jean Chardin also reprised these assessments to criticize the growing specter of religious intolerance and absolutism in France.

Mokhberi then examines the ways in which French court society absorbed ideas about Persia across the period. While Orientalist scholars brought Arabic, Turkish, and Persian manuscripts

to France to develop studies in languages, astronomy, and history, larger audiences were captivated by popular translations and fairy tales like André du Ryer's *The Rose Garden* or François Pétis de la Croix's *Mille et un jours*. Rather than imparting anything objective, this literature functioned as primers for French *honnêteté* or as commentaries on French courtly and royal extravagance. Louis XIV himself used Persian imagery, employing Charles Le Brun to produce his series of Alexander in Persia to symbolize himself as the classical Greek hero. With each example, Mokhberi reiterates the driving argument of her book captured in her title: that French representations "did not necessarily correspond to the contemporary realities of Safavid government," but rather "set up Persia as a mirror to France" (p. 43).

The next four chapters of the book take the reader through a sequence of diplomatic engagements between Louis XIV's France and Shah Soltan Husayn's Persia: the embassies of Pierre-Victor Michel to Isfahan between 1706 and 1708 and Mohammad Reza Beg's Persian embassy to France in 1715. In chapter three, she demonstrates how Michel, a secretary-turned-ambassador, achieved France's first treaty with the Persians by recognizing that "Persia and France shared similar institutions and mutual tools of credentials, ceremony and notions of prestige" (p. 63). When she discusses Reza Beg's visit to Paris and Versailles, she shows how visits from Asian emissaries differed in scope and substance from those of European visitors. The stakes were high as the French court had to navigate the balance between bending ceremonial protocols to fit foreign codes of behavior without undermining the French king's or the state's prestige. But when diplomacy involved conflicts, as chapter five reveals, they did not arise, Mokhberi argues, from "Orientalism and cultural misunderstanding," but from their common goals of projecting their monarchies' rank and grandeur (p. 65). Following chapters reiterate her point that the French saw Persian emissaries like Reza Beg "as a mirror to French culture and civility" (p. 112).

The Persian Mirror inspires a host of questions and should serve as a springboard for further research on early modern Orientalism, globalization, connected histories, and trans-imperial movement. If orientalist musings about Persia oscillated between the positive and negative, as Mokhberi has shown, what were the implications of these perceptions on the ways the French treated Persians and the various populations of Armenians, Georgians, Caucasians, and South Asians within their empire? Here, Sebouh Aslanian's recent microhistory of Martin Marcara Avachintz's struggles with the French Compagnie des Indes's anti-Asian and anti-Armenian stereotyping comes to mind.^[1] Mokhberi's study echoes the arguments of Ina Baghdiantz McCabe, who diverges from Edward Said by claiming that seventeenth-century French Orientalism was not always imperial.^[2] But recently, scholars have crafted new definitions of empire that consider seventeenth-century commercial competition and engagements that did not involve forceful territorial acquisition and settler colonialism.^[3] As Elizabeth Cross and others have recently demonstrated, an examination of trading companies in Asia can reveal that they were "not merely economic actors but sites of political conflict and intellectual ferment, as ministers, shareholders, and jurists fought over their geopolitical aims, their sovereign prerogatives, and their financial bottom lines."^[4] Engagements between France and Persia involved navigating dynamics of political, commercial, and personal power, as Mokhberi shows in her study. So, can we reconcile her definitions and dynamics of orientalism with these emergent definitions of early modern imperialism?

Mokhberi's work can also be brought into conversation with new studies on the history of early modern race and race-making. While the French crown did not colonize Turkey or Persia, its diplomatic and commercial engagements played out in imperial competitions on a global scale

and overlapped with the development of colonial projects in the Americas and the Caribbean. Favorable musings about Persia emerged while the French enslaved Muslim Turks to labor on the French king's galleys in the Mediterranean.[5] How did these contemporaneous engagements reinforce one another or help the French monarchy cement new claims to power across the world? If missionaries' virulent anti-Turkish and anti-Sunni writings coincided with the appearance of anti-black characterizations in the seventeenth century, as Sue Peabody and many others have written, what larger conclusions can we draw concerning the transformations in thinking about race, empire, and France's place in the world across the period [6]? That new books such as Mokhberi's arouse such questions shows how the field of early modern French history is moving in exciting, global directions.

NOTES

[1] Sebouh David Aslanian, "A Life Lived Across Continents: The Global Microhistory of an Armenian Agent of the Compagnie des Indes Orientales, 1666-1688," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 73 (2018): 19-54.

[2] Ina Baghdiantz McCabe, *Orientalism in Early Modern France: Eurasian Trade, Exoticism, and the Ancien Régime* (New York: Berg, 2008).

[3] For French entrepreneurial imperialism in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Persia, see Junko Takeda, *Iran and a French Empire of Trade, 1700-1808: The Other Persian Letters* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020).

[4] The citation comes from p. 456 of the following work by Elizabeth Cross, who offers new commercial definitions of empire and imperialism: See Elizabeth Cross, "India and the Compagnie des Indes in the Age of the French Revolution," *French Historical Studies* 44 (2021): 455-476; and Danna Agmon, *A Colonial Affair: Commerce, Conversion and Scandal in French India* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2017).

[5] Meredith Martin and Gillian Weiss, *The Sun King at Sea: Maritime Art and Galley Slavery in Louis XIV's France* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2021).

[6] Sue Peabody, "A Nation Born to Slavery': Missionaries and Racial Discourse in Seventeenth-Century French Antilles," *Journal of Social History* 38 (2004): 113-126; Noémie Ndiaye, "Rewriting the Grand Siècle: Blackface in Early Modern France and the Historiography of Race," *Literature Compass* Vol. 18/10 (27 December 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12603>.

Junko Takeda
Syracuse University
Jtakeda@syr.edu

Copyright © 2022 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 redistribution/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 republication 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