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Blanche El Gammal, *La Ruritanie ou l'Europe introuvable*. Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2025. 253 pp. Notes, references, and index. €16.00 (pb). ISBN 9-78-2383772880.

Review by Georges Van Den Abbeele, University of California, Irvine.

"Ruritania" is the name given by Anthony Hope for the fictive land that serves as the backdrop for his 1894 novel, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, an immensely popular work that has constantly remained in print and been frequently adapted to stage and cinema. Ruritania is also, accordingly, the name given to an entire genre of literary works spawned in the spirit of Hope's classic tale, a genre that thrived from the Victorian era up through the eve of the Second World War. Blanche El Gammal's work traces the vicissitudes of this genre across dozens of primarily French and English works of the period, identifying its key features, themes, casts of characters, and plot structures. The book is richly furnished with plentiful images, illustrations, maps and multiple appendices that provide helpful scholarly resources regarding authors, titles, locales, and key historical events and figures that elucidate the genre. The book thus builds on and contributes mightily to earlier studies, especially Vesna Goldsworthy [1] and Nicholas Daly,[2] as well as her own two previous books on the Orient Express, whose storied rail trajectory is often reimagined to traverse many of the fictive lands evoked in the literary works concerned.[3] In this regard, she also brings to the fore the significant francophone dimension of Ruritanian literature, an important corrective to the exclusively Anglo-oriented perspective of previous scholars. Indeed, among her most significant findings, is her tracing the roots of Hope's Ruritania all the way back to an episode in Eugène Sue's 1843 *Mystères de Paris*, that features the character of Rodolphe, ruler of an imaginary Grand-Duchy called Gérolstein, and whose adventures have led him to come live incognito in Paris.

The principal characteristics of the genre are clearly laid out: a fantasy romance set in some imaginary kingdom, duchy, or principality located somewhere in central or eastern Europe. Politically, Ruritania represents the final literary flare of a fading nobility with its romanticized tales of palace intrigues, swashbuckling heroes, secret loves across forbidden lines, and rulers either abducted, returning in disguise, or seeking ways to abdicate, weary as they may have become of state office. While given a contemporary timeframe, the customs of the country are presented as distinctly antiquated and inept at addressing some current crisis. Enter a foreign visitor, English or American or French, often a double of the ruling figure, who skillfully applies his Western ways to save the country and while typically a commoner in his home society finds himself rewarded with marriage to a beloved princess in his adopted land, and thereby wholly accepted into the aristocratic elite of this imaginary country. Hence, the fairy tale aspect of the plot. And while this reliably entertaining narrative structure appealed to a wide swath of second-tier writers, one also finds a surprising number of well-known authors similarly

attracted to dabbling in the genre: Eugène Sue, Alphonse Daudet, Arthur de Gobineau, Jules Lemaître, Jules Verne, Guillaume Apollinaire, Jules Romains, Roger Vailland, and Marguerite Yourcenar, on the Francophone side; and George Meredith, Robert Louis Stevenson, Bram Stoker, Noël Coward, H. G. Wells, Evelyn Waugh, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Agatha Christie, and George Bernard Shaw, among Anglo-Americans.

Although El Gammal never mentions it, the fictional locales of Ruritania suggest a parallel with the similar genre of utopia, also based in imaginary geographies. But the difference between the two genres could not be more stark than that between narrative adventure in a fairy-tale setting and the systematized description of an alternative socio/political/cultural organization. While utopias are famously found nowhere and definitely off the map, as it were, only stumbled upon by those fictively lost at sea and without clear topographical memory of how they got there and how they returned, Ruritanias are figured as readily accessible to travelers, that is, as imaginary but embedded in an imprecise real, not some faraway island but a recognizable land to be found somewhere within the general confines of Mitteleuropa or the Balkans, but served with a convenient railway stop along the path of the Orient Express. As El Gammal perceptively notes, there is always a strong sense of the familiar in Ruritania even if its exact geography eludes precision.

Nineteenth-century versions of Ruritania, El Gammal shows, tend to be in the Germanic lands of central Europe, the so-called "Mitteleuropa," while the turn of the twentieth century occasioned a distinctive turn toward the Balkans. The cause for this shift is plausibly linked to the contemporaneous Bismarckian absorption of the scattered panoply of small Germanic states into the larger Prussian-dominated empire, on the one hand, and the recession of both Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman imperial power, on the other hand, leaving in-between a growing number of unclearly defined and unstable Balkan states, whose multiple wars and unrest foreshadowed--and indeed precipitated!--the cataclysm of the First World War. Ruritanian fantasy would seem to depend on the shifting fortunes of empire in eastern Europe and thus the plausible existence of possible small entities rising in their stead.

As El Gammal cogently demonstrates, even such a well-defined genre as this one changes over time as well as according to provenance. Fantasy romance in the Belle Époque gives way in the interwar years to two differing trends. Among the English, a more somber, even tragic dimension arises as the fantasy lands of the Balkans become increasingly viewed as places of danger and high risk. For French writers, ludic parody dominates instead with a risible emphasis on fakery and imposter characters. For El Gammal, this divergence stems from British overextension in Balkan ventures, while the French tendency is marked by the repercussions of the Poldevia hoax, when a right-wing coterie from the *Action française* baited the political establishment with the circulation of a false letter asking for urgent French assistance to save Poldevia, written by dignitaries of this so-called country (whose name humorously amalgamates Poland, Moldova, and Slovenia). Widespread embarrassment was generated when many leading French political figures publicly asserted their unequivocal support for Poldevia before discovering there was no such country and that they were the unwitting victims of a hoax.

Where El Gammal is at her most impressive is in her analysis of names, with two full chapters, one on toponyms and the other on anthroponyms, decoding the real places and persons that serve as models for the onomastic play so characteristic of the genre, where German, Slavic, and even Latin lexemes are mixed and matched to create new names that sound plausibly like existing ones. Thus, the interchangeable prefixes and suffixes that lead to verisimilar sounding yet semantically unlikely names

like Steinbach, Glottenburg, Graustark, Marsovy, Borisgrad, or the more creative Herzoslovakia, Poldevia, Ixsanie, Tcherchella (Cherchez-là), or Ruritania itself, a composite of rurality and Britannia, a fitting name perhaps for this exotic familiar. Person names likewise tend to spin off well-known aristocratic lineages: lots of Rudolf's and Otto's, but also Othon, Ottomar, or Ottokar. But while the author dazzles by her interpretive unraveling of the game behind these names, one is left wondering exactly what the consequences are for such proper names, words whose ordinary linguistic function is less to convey meaning than simply to designate or refer. Does the ersatz nomenclature of Ruritania, whose plausible-sounding names belie their referential nonsense, merely provide another kind of *effet de réel*, or are we dealing less obviously with a sly wink to the more observant reader? What exactly does it mean for a reference to be imaginary? Of course, this is a question not only for geographical fictions such as Ruritania but for almost all literary texts to the extent that the naming function is often diverted from its indexical aims.

Like all good studies, this one raises as many questions as it answers. While El Gammal's comparative Franco-English approach is a welcome development, a mere handful of references to Dutch and German works raises the larger issue of exactly how widespread the Ruritanian current was. What would the work of writers from other European countries bring to the table? Alternatively, what would it mean if what El Gammal felicitously calls "Ruritanomanie" were essentially a western European phenomenon, linked to those imperial powers--France and England--whose holdings were overseas colonies rather than the more traditional but less stable land empires of eastern Europe: Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Turkey. Indeed, one is hard put not to view this exoticizing and inevitably condescending depiction of Ruritania as but a reflection of western European arrogance, or as El Gammal astutely deduces, a form of proximate Orientalism that already prefigures its full-blown application as soon as one crosses the Dardanelles to Istanbul, the final stop of the Orient Express.

Another question and suggestive avenue for further research involves the apparent end of the Ruritanian vogue. The last two examples of the genre, as presented by El Gammal, are Hergé's *The Scepter of Ottokar* (part of the Tintin comic-book series, and here featuring the Ruritanian lands of Syldavie and Bordurie) and Georges Bernard Shaw's satirical play, *Geneva*. Both were published in the fateful year of 1939, and both are thinly disguised allegories of the immediate menace of fascism, whose villains bear the readily decodable names of Müssler (Mussolini + Hitler) for Hergé, and Battler, Flanco, and Bombardone (or Hitler, Franco, and Mussolini) in Shaw's case. The impending Second World War would forever alter the perception of Central and Eastern Europe to the extent that the most protracted and ferocious battles would take place there along with the most unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust. Compared to these, the D-Day invasion and liberation of Western Europe can appear, despite the loudness of Anglo-American and French historical voices, as a relatively late and brief tenth-month diversion, as per the Russian perception. And the postwar Iron-Curtain division between NATO and Warsaw Pact, oddly the precursor condition for the subsequent establishment of the European Union, only sealed the fate of Ruritania as a now utterly implausible locale with no mystery, no romance, no fantasy. If Ruritania represents a kind of *Europe introuvable*, readily imagined if not precisely locatable, postwar Europe inevitably meant its definitive disappearance and its no longer being able to be found at all, even in fictional form.

Or does it appear elsewhere? No longer in the crumbling empires of the East but perhaps now in that loud collapse of the West known as decolonization. From Cold War espionage thrillers to postmodern experimental fiction, contemporary literature (and film) is stocked full of imaginary African, Middle

Eastern, Asian, and Latin American states, where the old Ruritanian elements are updated with dictatorial coup d'états, greedy corporate manipulations, rebel usurpers in the bush or in disguise, and of course sexual intrigue of all kinds. Ruritania, it seems, lives on as an ongoing source of literary anxiety as well as fantasy, both clearly situated but not exactly findable in a now globalized frame, no longer interconnected by the iron tracks of the Orient Express but by the more ethereal pathways of air travel or telecommunications. Perhaps we can hope for such a continuation of El Gammal's magnificently written and researched, as well as thoroughly engaging and most thought-provoking, book.

NOTES

[1] Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination* (London: Hurst, 2013).

[2] Nicholas Daly, *Ruritania: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[3] Blanche El Gammal, *L'Orient-Express. Du voyage extraordinaire aux illusions perdues* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2017); *L'Orient-Express raconté par les écrivains* (Paris: Phébus, 2021).

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