

*H-France Forum* Volume 14 (2019), Issue 4, #1

Jeffrey N. Peters, *The Written World. Space, Literature, and the Chorological Imagination in Early Modern France*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018. vii + 272 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$34.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-8101-3697-7; \$99.95 (cl). ISBN 978-0-8101-3698-4; \$34.95 (Kindle). ISBN 978-0-8101-3699-1.

Review Essay by Anna Rosensweig, University of Rochester

It is an exciting time to be a *dix-septième*. For a long while, studies of seventeenth-century France focused on the *Grand Siècle*'s status as a cultural high-point with tightly circumscribed "rules" of poetic expression on the one hand and constraints of political protocol on the other. The aesthetics of classicism and political theory of absolutism functioned in seventeenth-century studies as the twin ideological lodestars that shaped which questions could be asked and which conclusions could be drawn. During the last two decades, however, scholars of seventeenth-century France have called radically into question this portrait of the period, loosening the ideological grip of both classicism and absolutism.[1] In so doing, they have given us access to a richer, more complicated seventeenth century and opened up new avenues of inquiry.

In *The Written World: Space, Literature, and the Chorological Imagination in Early Modern France*, Jeffrey N. Peters contributes brilliantly to the collective effort of pluralizing the seventeenth century by reframing the relationship between literature, poetics, and geographical space in this period. As Peters explains, many canonical works of French seventeenth-century literature, such as Boileau's *Art poétique* and Racine's tragic theater, "would appear to have precious little to do with geographic space."<sup>(6)</sup> Thought to express ideals that are abstract rather than concrete, universal rather than particular, these works often seem "cut off from the material features of the physical world."<sup>(6)</sup> And yet, Peters argues, these works demonstrate an abiding concern with the shifting landscapes of natural philosophy, cartography, and cosmology. Identifying this set of concerns, Peters maintains that the production of the literary, or, more broadly, the poetic, can best be understood as what he calls "an event of cosmological making"<sup>(27)</sup>, that is, an event during which the imperceptible becomes perceptible, and something emerges from nothing.

*The Written World*'s cosmography of seventeenth-century poetics offers fresh insight into the work of many of the period's most canonical authors: Boileau, La Fontaine, Molière, Corneille, Racine, D'Urfé, Madeleine de Scudéry, and La Fayette. One strength of Peters's analysis is his ability to link these works to a common set of concerns and shared sense of what literature is and does, while at the same time carefully attending to their specificities and differences. Another strength of *The Written World* is that Peters tends to write with rather than against existing scholarship, even when calling into question some entrenched critical orthodoxies. A good example of this tendency is the chapter on Racine, which focuses on *Andromaque* and *Bérénice*. In this chapter, Peters demonstrates how the widespread notion that Racine's tragedies are abstract, disembodied, and largely space-less, paradoxically helps us to understand how these tragedies evince an early modern conception of space as something that exists beyond human perception but that nonetheless shapes how humans may come to know their world. In other words, if space in Racine's theater seems abstract, it is due to a particular conception of space and its knowability,

rather than to a lack of any conception altogether. During the seventeenth century, Peters explains, a shift occurred in natural philosophy from *place* as a specific location to *space* as a vast, indeterminate expanse. “*Space*, as the new term for what had been called *place*, is no longer the defining, ontologically primary, principle of being. Instead, it becomes the imperceptible, potentially infinite, pretext for the description of material bodies, definable only as what it is not, in terms of what becomes in and from it” (122, original emphasis). Peters brings into view how Racine’s *Andromaque* and *Bérénice* are preoccupied with questions related to this emerging idea of space, such as how and where do beginnings take place, and what is the process of becoming? For example, Peters notes how Racine situates the captive queen of *Andromaque* between “the ruined Troy of the past and a reconstituted Troy of a possible future.” Pyrrhus’s palace in Epirus, where Racine’s tragedy takes place, and where *Andromaque* remembers her past and imagines her future, is thus not an abstract location, exchangeable for any other, but instead a kind of indeterminate third-space, where something might emerge from nothing.

For Peters, the intersection of poetics, natural philosophy, geography, and cosmology that unfolds during the early modern period can best be explained through what he calls the “chorological imagination.” Peters derives the chorological imagination from Plato’s concept of *chora* as articulated in the *Timaeus*, which Plato uses to explain the origin of the world as such, as well as the relationship of form to copy and of idea to matter. *Chora*, for Plato, is the site where form and copy meet, but it is neither form nor copy, nor is it really a site, but rather, something more difficult to pin down. As Peters writes, *chora* is, “neither concept nor body. Instead, it produces a kind of thought. *Chora* [...] is an effable principle of cosmology that gives shape not only to the universe itself, but also to the stories that tell of the word and its becoming.”(19) Peters deftly explicates this concept, drawing on the *Timaeus* itself, as well as theoretical engagements with *chora*, most notably those of Jacques Derrida. [2] While the critical turn from Plato’s *chora* to the early modern chorological imagination is one of the elements of *The Written World* that I find most intellectually exciting and provocative, this move also raises a methodological concern. I will devote the remainder of my remarks to examining what I take to be the limits and possibilities of this approach.

By placing in dialogue Plato’s *chora*, the critical reception of *chora*, and the early modern chorological imagination, Peters’s study not only enriches our understanding of the spatiality at the core of early modern poetics, but also provides an excellent model of scholarship. *The Written World* attends to the historical specificity of the literary works it examines, without restricting itself to some of the more traditional ways of accounting for the ancient world’s influence on the early modern period. For example, while Peters carefully locates bibliographical links between ancients and early moderns throughout the book, his central argument is not that the early modern chorological imagination can be explained by seventeenth-century authors’ explicit engagement with Plato’s *Timaeus*. On the contrary, Peters notes that while strains of Neoplatonism persisted throughout the seventeenth century, this period was also marked by vehement critiques of Platonism. Peters argues that the chorological imagination’s emergence is conceptual, rather than bibliographical or narrowly inter-textual. In other words, the chorological imagination is not limited to the reception of the *Timeaus*, but instead encompasses literary works that adopt a mode of thinking consistent with the questions raised by *chora* as a concept.

Given how Peters situates the relationship between Plato’s *chora* and the early modern chorological imagination, I do not expect him to account for every aspect of *chora* and its reception

in post-structuralist theory. However, there is an aspect of *chora* that I am surprised *The Written World* does not address, namely, *chora*'s positioning of the feminine. As Peters notes, Derrida's reading of the *chora* details how this concept both contains and complicates many of Western philosophy's constitutive binaries, such as form and copy, *logos* and *phone*, the material and the immaterial. Other critics have emphasized how *chora* participates in another such binary: the masculine and feminine. Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, noting how Plato—in his attempt to define the undefinable—compares *chora* to womb, mother, and nurse. *Chora* codes as feminine. [3] If *chora* is no place, has no place, and cannot be expressed, then the feminine also exists as a set of negations. Irigaray and Kristeva demonstrate how Plato situates feminine *chora* as that which is necessary for but necessarily excluded from patrilineal modes of generation, succession, and transmission. [4]

In *The Written World*, Peters refers to Irigaray and Kristeva's respective accounts of *chora* and its questions. He notes how Irigaray locates a generative power in a *chora*-like interval, and how for Kristeva, the pre-verbal and the rhythmic exist outside of *logos* in a way that resembles *chora* (108-109). Peters also includes references in footnotes to the work of Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz, both of whom (among others) have written about Irigaray and Kristeva's writing about *chora*. [5] In neither the main text nor the footnotes, however, does Peters mention the problem of feminine exclusion. Perhaps Peters objects to the coding of *chora* as feminine and thus to the implications this coding entails. Given that the early modern chorological imagination is not necessarily limited to *chora* as expressed in the *Timeaus*, as Peters persuasively argues, perhaps this imagination does not necessarily carry with it Plato's exclusion of the feminine. Or, perhaps the question of sexual difference is simply not relevant to the early modern chorological imagination. I would be willing to entertain any of these possibilities, but would have liked to see the issue addressed, especially given how important Irigaray and Kristeva's work has been to feminist interpretations of Plato.

If the issue of sexual difference lies beyond the scope of *The Written World*, Peters's book nonetheless opens up questions related to sexual and other forms of difference that mark the seventeenth century, such as what we would now call race. For example, while reading I wondered what implications the emerging conceptions of space, and the chorological imagination might have for our understanding of empire and colonial domination during this period. Throughout the *Written World* Peters beautifully and powerfully demonstrates how space that appears unmarked in fact contains within it historical, ideological, and cosmological specificity. By following Peters's lead, we may arrive at a deeper understanding of how social and political difference informed early modern constructions of the world and of how humans moved through it.

[1] See, for example, Hélène Bilis, *Passing Judgment: The Politics and Poetics of Sovereignty in French Tragedy from Hardy to Racine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016); Juliette Cherbuliez, *The Place of Exile: Leisure Literature and the Limits of Absolutism* (Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 2005). Claire Goldstein, *Vaux and Versailles: The Appropriations, Erasures, and Accidents That Made Modern France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Katherine Ibbett, *The Style of the State in French Theater, 1630–1660*, Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009); John D. Lyons, *Kingdom of Disorder: The Theory of Tragedy in Classical France* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999); and Ellen McClure, *Sunspots and the Sun King:*

*Sovereignty and Mediation in Seventeenth-Century France* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

[2] Jacques Derrida, *Khôra*, in *On the name*, trans. David Wood et al., (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1995), 89-127.

[3] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985); Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, (New York: Columbia University Press), 1984.

[4] Irigaray and Kristeva differ in how they understand the implications of this exclusion of the feminine. For a detailed analysis of the differences between their accounts, see Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (Place: Routledge, 1993, 27-55).

[5] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 27-55; Elizabeth Grosz, “Women, *Chora*, Dwelling,” in *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995).

Anna Rosensweig  
University of Rochester  
[anna.rosenseig@rochester.edu](mailto:anna.rosenseig@rochester.edu)

© 2019 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

*H-France Forum* Volume 14 (2019), Issue 4, #1