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Nicholas Dew, *Orientalism in Louis XIV's France*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. xv + 301 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$110.00 (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-923484-4.

Review by Julia Landweber, Montclair State University.

Nicholas Dew has produced something unusual with *Orientalism in Louis XIV's France*. His study examines exactly what the title indicates, and yet its focus is almost entirely other than what readers may initially expect. How is this possible? Most historians interested early modern Orientalism (more about that difficult term below) have tended to focus their research in recent years on the extra-European history of political, economic, cultural, and social encounters between Europeans and non-European “others” from the worlds of Islam, India, and East Asia.[1] Therefore a new study of the subject which almost never leaves Europe, and indeed only rarely strays beyond the geographical confines of Paris, is unexpected. Dew is unabashedly curious about the intellectual world of seventeenth-century French *scholars* of the East, as opposed to the larger constellation of diplomatic and mercantile parties engaged in East-West interaction. A set of queries posed rhetorically in the epilogue reveals the motive behind the restricted geographical emphasis of this study, as well as Dew's tight focus on the most traditional aspect of early modern Orientalism, its European scholar-inventors. Dew ponders:

“How could late seventeenth-century Europeans establish reliable knowledge about distant cultures and places? How could the reader, based in a library or ‘cabinet’, and connected to the rest of the world only by a network of correspondence, be sure of any of the tales that travelers brought back from the Indies? How could European readers improve their patchy knowledge of the geography of Asia? How could they gain access to the technical, scientific, medical, and religious learning contained in Oriental libraries?” (p. 235).

The curiosity displayed here—at once particular and wide-ranging—is at the heart of this book. Dew answers his own questions via case studies concerning three individuals (Barthélemy d'Herbelot, Melchisédech Thévenot, and François Bernier) and two publications (d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale*, and the *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*), who and which would later be remembered as collectively establishing the field of Orientalist studies.

A word about the words “Orient” and “Orientalism” (here defined simply as “intellectual engagement with ‘Oriental’ cultures” (p. 5)). Although seventeenth-century usage of “the Orient” was geographically flexible, “European scholars from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment often asked...similar questions...and used a similar conceptual tool-kit, when studying cultures as diverse as Egypt and China” (p. 7).[2] While recognizing the archaic and politically freighted quality of these terms, Dew defends their use in the present study. He seeks to recover a field of scholarship quite different from and prior to that of the high Enlightenment and the nineteenth century made familiar to several generations of modern readers through Edward Said's influential work.[3] To distinguish his subject from Said's, Dew coins the phrase “baroque Orientalism,” to identify the period of “Orientalism before empire, [when] Europeans were not the dominate powers” vis-à-vis the Ottoman, Safavid, Mughal, and Qing empires (pp. 6-7). Dew argues that in order to fully comprehend what made late

eighteenth-century Orientalism significant, it is not enough to simply nod to the seventeenth-century precursor texts (and their authors) upon which the later scholarship was founded. We need to understand the history of seventeenth-century Orientalist scholarship on its own terms, and within its own context.

Having established his thesis concerning how to approach baroque Orientalist scholarship, Dew moves into decidedly newer territory by adding a fascinating layer of argument about the eclectic nature of seventeenth-century learned communities in Western Europe. Dew's Orientalist scholars turn out to have been intimately involved with another cast of intellectuals usually treated as "foreign to Oriental studies," namely, early modern scientists (natural philosophers or *savants*, in seventeenth-century parlance). In fact, the seventeenth-century Republic of Letters did not separate humanism from science as we do today. For Dew, that commingling of topics is significant, because ultimately his subject is nothing less than the birth-history of modern scientific (meaning accurate) knowledge acquisition.

In the remainder of the book Dew systematically makes his case through chapter-length analyses devoted respectively to the intellectual travails of d'Herbelot, Thévenot, and Bernier, and to the convoluted production and publication histories of the *Bibliothèque orientale* and the *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*. One by one, each individual or book is situated within the intellectual world of seventeenth-century Paris, with enough tangential context provided to give the reader a sense of how the Paris scene fit within the larger European Republic of Letters. Through close readings of a wide assortment of personal papers and correspondence, Dew offers new interpretations of the differing significance of key seventeenth-century Orientalist scholars and texts to contemporaries versus how they were remembered or used by their intellectual successors.

Chapters one and two establish the "fragility of French Orientalist studies" under the patronage of Colbert (p. 40), pressing home how insecure baroque Orientalists could be compared to Said's nineteenth-century subjects. Chapter one reconstructs the struggles of d'Herbelot to locate a secure institutional base in which to pursue his monumental work-in-progress, the encyclopedic *Bibliothèque orientale* (only published posthumously, and itself the subject of chapter four). Chapter two follows the similarly frustrating experiences Thévenot faced while trying to edit and publish an important Arabic text, Abulfeda's *Geography*. However Thévenot had better luck than d'Herbelot in realizing his other major project, the *Relations de divers voyages curieux*, a published collection of travel accounts to rival and augment the compilations of Englishmen Purchas and Hakluyt. In chapter three, Dew makes his lone foray outside Europe to argue for contextual and philosophical connections between court cultures in Mughal India and Louis Quatorzian Paris, as reported in the travel account of François Bernier. These three chapters situate baroque Orientalists within a particular set of social networks and intellectual programs which combined active engagement in the new science with participation in a more general "culture of curiosity." Thévenot and Bernier especially shine as generalists whose cases "highlight the importance of 'Oriental' knowledge for the intellectual culture of the period" (pp. 82, 84).

Dew argues that hindsight has blurred historical interpretations of key books as much as it has the memory of early Orientalists' careers. He allots two of his five chapters to the "making of" history of a pair of books, treating them almost as actors in their own right in the creation of modern Orientalism. In the interest of not giving away the entire book, I will concentrate here on chapter four. Chapter four, more than any other portion of the book, confirms Dew's argument about the need to interpret baroque Orientalist products within their own historical context. D'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale* had a very peculiar reception history which has influenced interpretations of it ever since. Upon its publication in 1697, its format and contents seemed so unusual that reviews were mixed as to whether it was a "world-changing" work of erudition, or so weak that booksellers could scarcely give it away for free (p. 173). Decades later it was rediscovered by Enlightenment philosophers writing their own world histories, such as Voltaire and Edward Gibbon. They simultaneously found it an invaluable source for facts and stories about the East, but also disapproved of its encyclopedia-style organization. Later still it would

be fingered by Edward Said as a prime example of Westerners attempting to master the Orient “through the filtering ‘grids and codes’ imposed by the Orientalist,” and by confirming “readers’ prejudices” (pp. 173-74).

Dew is most interested in the long-forgotten reality that the *Bibliothèque orientale*, so influential in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, almost never saw print in the first place, and was virtually ignored during most of the first century of its existence. Most of chapter four is devoted to recovering the quite unusual history of its creation, and using that history to reinterpret some of its later uses. In particular, Dew challenges Said’s interpretation of the alphabetic order as a Western imposition or filter placed on Oriental knowledge. D’Herbelot’s most important source was a seventeenth-century encyclopedia, the *Kashf al-zunun*, or *The Uncovering of Ideas: On the Titles of Books and the Names of the Sciences*, by noted Ottoman scholar Katib Chelebi. In other words, far from imposing an alien system on a silently protesting Orient, d’Herbelot borrowed an Eastern structure to help Europeans better grasp this important new world of knowledge. Moreover, further challenging Said’s reading, Dew finds that regardless of d’Herbelot’s intent, “if the *Bibliothèque orientale* was a scientific instrument, it was one that did not work very well. It was unable to impose meaning on the reader; it was instead a place of possibility, a place for readers to lose themselves” (p. 204).

In *Orientalism in Louis XIV’s France*, Dew analyzes a strikingly similar subject to Ina B. McCabe’s recent book, *Orientalism in Early Modern France*.^[4] Both focus their monographs on Orientalists active during the seventeenth century, and both authors’ theses depend upon the surprising intertwining of early Orientalism and the social history of the scientific revolution in Louis XIV’s France. McCabe’s book appeared recently enough that Dew was unable to read it prior to finishing his manuscript (see p. 12, n. 24). McCabe demonstrated a similar tendency toward biographical depth on a number of seventeenth-century orientalists, but there the parallels in their books’ contents end. McCabe aimed for an almost encyclopedic gathering of information, bringing in figures great and small alike for brief cameos, whereas Dew chose to focus his research on the deep analysis of a much narrower set of individuals. By happy fortune, Dew’s subjects barely overlap with McCabe’s; in consequence, the two works complement each other nicely. Read together, their theses essentially reinforce one another, and indicate that a consensus has been reached in terms of a new post-Saidian interpretation of “baroque Orientalism.”

NOTES

[1] For example, see Eric R. Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Glenn J. Ames and Ronald S. Love, eds., *Distant Lands and Diverse Cultures: The French Experience in Asia, 1600-1700* (London: Praeger, 2003); Molly Greene, *A Shared World: Christians and Muslims in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Daniel Goffman, *Britons in the Ottoman Empire, 1642-1660* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998).

[2] In the seventeenth century, authors disagreed as to whether the term “Orient” referred exclusively to Asia Minor, or to the entire Islamic world; also debated was whether it encompassed North Africa or India, and whether its usage extended all the way across East Asia.

[3] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

[4] Ina Baghdiantz McCabe, *Orientalism in Early Modern France: Eurasian Trade, Exoticism, and the Ancien Régime* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008). Full disclosure: I also reviewed McCabe’s book for *H-France Review*, Vol. 9 (October 2009), No. 124.

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