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Madeleine Dobie, *Foreign Bodies: Gender, Language, and Culture in French Orientalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. xiv + 234 pp. Notes and index. \$49.50 US (cl). ISBN 0-8047-4104-2.

Review by Jennifer Heuer, Middlebury College.

In this suggestive work, Madeleine Dobie investigates the connections and disjunctions between Orientalism, gender relations, and colonialism. She contends that the “Oriental woman” is at the origin of many contemporary representations of “Islamic woman” or “Middle-eastern woman.” Her primary interest, however, is less the modern evolution of this image than its role in the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Dobie is influenced by Said’s *Orientalism* but also by many of his critics; she seeks to nuance or correct his interpretation in several ways. She challenges Said’s depiction of a homogenous discourse by showing that some of the most vocal proponents of both colonialism and Orientalism were not part of the dominant society or dominant discourses of nineteenth-century France. She also interprets Orientalism not simply as prelude to later colonial conquests but also in relation to contemporary colonialism. She argues for the importance of displacement, claiming that “eighteenth-century Orientalism seems to me not a properly colonial discourse, but on the contrary, the negation or displacement of a discourse on the colonies” (p.18). In this light, she notes the fascination with the Orient in French literature and the comparatively little attention paid to existing colonies, including those in the Antilles and West Africa, and to the problem of slavery within French colonies before the 1760s. Dobie contends that while nineteenth-century Orientalism was much more closely tied to imperialist conquests, it also continued to manifest a “high level of displacement and aestheticization” until after 1871 (p.21).

Dobie also relates writings about Oriental women to changes in domestic gender relations within France, especially in the eighteenth century. Here she draws particularly on Habermasian theories about the public sphere and on Joan Landes’s interpretation of how this sphere was gendered. Throughout the book, she also argues that Oriental feminine figures were often intertwined with representations of the difficulty of language and advocates a “double reading” that reveals both the geopolitics of Orientalist discourse and the ways in which specific texts complicate or subvert it.

The first two chapters focus on Montesquieu. Dobie begins with the *De l’esprit des lois* (*Spirit of the Laws*, 1748) because it is often cited as the first sustained critique of both slavery and colonialism. She contends that it did present influential moral and economic arguments against slavery and colonization. But Montesquieu limited his discussion of colonies almost exclusively to the Spanish and Portuguese empire and surreptitiously transposed the problem of slavery to the Oriental context. Dobie analyzes the structure of Montesquieu’s argument, especially his claims that the “true origins” of slavery are political despotism and warm climates; she shows that the association of these factors with Orientalism is intensified because Montesquieu’s general analysis of slavery is immediately followed by a chapter on “domestic slavery,” i.e. polygamy and the enclosure of women. She also contends that Montesquieu rejected Oriental gender roles but was nonetheless concerned about the erasure of sexual difference within France. She connects Montesquieu’s fears with changes in the biomedical understanding of

sexual difference analyzed by Thomas Laqueur and with the contemporaneous expansion of the public sphere.

The second chapter develops this theme by addressing Montesquieu's 1721 *Lettres persanes* (*Persian Letters*) and focuses more explicitly on problems of language. Dobie contrasts the *Persian Letters* to *Arsace and Ismenie*, a highly politicized Orientalist fiction Montesquieu wrote in the early 1740s. She argues that both works use the idea of unveiling of women as a metaphor for political crisis, but *Arsace and Ismenie* does so with more confidence, in part because it addresses enlightened monarchy and the complementarity of the sexes within a couple, rather than despotism and polygamy. However, Dobie also maintains that the ending of the *Persian Letters* textually subverts its own point that the harem breeds dissimulation in contrast to the harmony promoted by more socially advantageous European gender relations. Montesquieu describes Roxane's perfidy as itself a veil and deprives the reader of the certainty that the truth has been definitely reestablished with the novel's denouement. Dobie further argues that Roxane appropriates disruptive "new languages" or ways of speaking.

The third chapter also focuses on the mid-eighteenth century. Dobie analyzes the Oriental tale, especially Crébillon-fils's *Le sofa* (*The Sofa*, 1742) and Denis Diderot's *Les bijoux indiscrets* (*The Indiscreet Jewels*, 1748). In the first work, a man is turned into a sofa and voyeuristically observes the women in the house. Dobie calls attention to the tale to argue against the apparently common perception that eighteenth-century fiction, unlike nineteenth-century fiction, does not represent material contexts. Such attention to material culture may not surprise historians who have explored the growing preoccupation with consumer goods in the eighteenth century.<sup>[1]</sup> She links the novella's focus on gender, publicity, and intimacy to changes in social relations and material culture, especially the shift from the bedroom to the salon and dining room as sites for entertaining. She notes that *canapés* or sofas were associated with the Orient after their introduction in the late seventeenth century and were also associated with women's power in the salon, and contends that Crébillon-fil's story plays on these connections. Diderot's tale is similarly voyeuristic; it features a bored sultan's use of a magic ring which makes women's genitals talk. Dobie accepts the feminist critique that the tale reduces female subjects to talking bodies but claims that critics have neglected the fact that these were also Oriental bodies. She argues that "Diderot's critical perspective is informed by a sustained reflection on cultural as well as social difference" (p.107).

The remaining two chapters engage the nineteenth century. In chapter four, Dobie analyzes travelogues, especially Nerval's *Voyage en Orient* (*Voyage to the Orient*, 1851). She argues that Nerval feminized the Orient in a new way, reflecting attitudes towards colonial expansion prevalent in oppositional circles in the 1830s and 1840s. Here she provides a salutary reminder of the left-wing advocacy of colonialism in the nineteenth century, arguing that it is a common but ahistorical projection to see supporters of ruling regimes as the most fervent supporters of colonialism.<sup>[2]</sup> She characterizes Nerval's travelogue as "one of the earliest, boldest statements of the new sexualization of colonial discourse" that "established a set of defining metaphors of miscegenation, erotic union and cultural unveiling that strongly influenced subsequent thinking on colonial relations" (p.129). She focuses on an episode in which Nerval's narrator buys a Javanese slave woman and tries to teach her how to speak and write French by having her repeat "I am a little savage." When the woman discovers the meaning of the phrase, she rebels against the process. Since the episode is entirely fictional--Nerval's traveling companion, rather than the writer himself, actually purchased a slave, and Nerval disapproved the purchase--Dobie suggests that it indicates Nerval's awareness of the contradictions of colonialism even as he advocated it and his unease with political and sexual miscegenation.

The final chapter examines Théophile Gautier's writings, especially his stories about female Egyptian mummies which fetishized a mysterious, ahistorical "Oriental woman." Dobie emphasizes the ways in which Gautier, like Nerval, explicitly endorsed colonialism. But Dobie also underscores the continued importance of displacement in Orientalism, arguing that while mid-nineteenth-century literature

acknowledged the European presence in the Orient, it did not engage the military and political repercussions of this presence. Gautier's tales of ancient Egypt reveal a "modernist aesthetic that asserts art's autonomy from social and political forces" (p.34), which Dobie connects to the more general aestheticization of colonial experience.

Dobie is a professor of literature, and historians may find the book's structure and forms of argument influenced by her discipline. Though her strategy of "double reading" is often illuminating, her arguments about language seem particularly pitched at debates within literary criticism. She deliberately chooses to focus on a few key works generally considered part of the French literary canon rather than to provide a more comprehensive overview of representations of Oriental women in the period. Arguing that it is impossible to "present detailed textual analyses, theoretical arguments, and historical coverage in a single study" (p.32), a claim intellectual historians might dispute, she also does not seek to provide a continuous overview of the relations between Orientalism and French colonial history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, the first three chapters focus on works published in the first half of the eighteenth century (1748, 1721, 1742 and 1748 respectively); the final two chapters jump to the mid-nineteenth century (works published in the 1840s and 1867). While there may be literary or practical rationales for this choice, it is a curious move given her argument that French writers paid increased attention to the problem of slavery and colonial rule after the 1770s, even if Orientalism continued to involve a high level of aestheticization in the nineteenth century. Her interpretation of Orientalism as a displacement for the realities of the colonialism would be nuanced by a closer look at the dynamics of the intervening period.

While Dobie provides key background for some of the works she examines—her analysis of Nerval's and Gautier's politics and connections to colonial projects is particularly intriguing—there are a number of points where further context would be helpful. For example, she does not consider whether or how censorship, especially during the Old Regime, might have contributed to the "displacement" she discusses and to the tendency of authors to discuss exotic Oriental lands rather than to directly criticize or discuss French colonial practices.

While agreeing with the critics of Joan Landes's 1988 book that the exclusion of women from the public sphere was not uniform, Dobie accepts the argument that the public sphere was gendered masculine without fully engaging in an analysis of how such a "public sphere" should be defined. More importantly, she also does not sustain her analysis of gender and public life systematically through the nineteenth century. Finally, although it might have taken another book, it would also be enlightening to consider whether the same dynamics of displacement and aestheticization were at work in contemporary British Orientalism, or how contemporary French images of African or black women compared to those of Oriental women, especially after the 1770s.[3]

In short, *Foreign Bodies* is a provocative book, revealing both intriguing connections and disconnections, but historians are likely to find it suggestive rather than conclusive.

## NOTES

[1] Among others, see Daniel Roche, *The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture in the 18th Century* (Leamington Spa, U.K. and New York: Berg, 1987); Cissie Fairchild, "The production and marketing of populuxe goods in eighteenth-century Paris," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 228-247; Colin Jones, "Bourgeois Revolution Revivified: 1789 and Social Change," in *Rewriting the French Revolution*, ed. Colin Lucas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 69-118; and Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1995).

[2] On both left and right support for colonialism in the period, see Michael Heffernan, "The Parisian Poor and the Colonization of Algeria During the Second Republic," *French History* 3, no. 4 (1989): 377-403. Other scholars have also called attention to the advocacy of imperialism by socially or political marginal individuals and groups in Europe; this is especially true for work on imperialist feminists. See Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of Empire: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), and Lora Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884-1945* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

[3] There is some work that would make for interesting comparisons. On England, see Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996). On images of black women, see T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1999), which similarly neglects comparisons with Orientalist discourses.

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