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Literature, Geography and The Poetics of Space

Tracing Historical Narratives Across Literary Landscapes

Sara Ansaloni & Eleonora Gioia (Eds.)

1. “Oriental” travel narratives in French 18th-century epistolary novels

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Abstract

In French 18th-century epistolary novels, the “Orient” was the most exploited “exotic” theme. In these novels, characters from different “Oriental” countries travel to France and other European countries to observe other cultures and customs that they later describe through the letters they send to various correspondents. But what is the “Orient”? For the French of that time, the “Orient” was roughly made up of four countries: Turkey, Persia, India, and China.

My work aims to analyze “exotic” narratives in 18th-century epistolary novels. First, I would like to focus on how different “Oriental” countries and populations are portrayed in some of these works, and the influence that said works, along with 17th-century non-fictional travel accounts, had on the readers of the time. Then, I would like to present the different “Oriental”

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fashions in French literature: the Turkish, the Persian, the Chinese, and the Indian vogues. In order to do so, I would like to analyze one epistolary novel per trend. I would start with the *Mémoires turcs* (1743) by Claude Godard d'Aucour, which portray a Turkish man traveling to France following the example of the Turkish spy of Marana's *L'esploratore turco* (1684) – known in France as *L'Espion du Grand Seigneur* and *L'Espion turc* – which is the first epistolary novel with a foreign traveler as its protagonist. To describe the long-lasting fashion for Persia, that was inaugurated by 17th-century Tavernier's and Chardin's travel accounts and by Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721), a masterpiece of the epistolary genre and the “exotic” literary field, I would use Abbé de Rochebrune's *L'Espion de Thamas Kouli-Kan dans les cours de l'Europe* (1746), where a Persian traveler is sent by his sultan to Europe to spy on different countries. An epistolary novel that exemplifies Chinese vogue, that lasted throughout the 18th century with a peak in 1760, is Marquis d'Argens's *Lettres chinoises* (1739), where multiple Chinese correspondents exchange letters while traveling around Europe and Asia. For the Indian craze, that reached its peak in 1750s, I would like to analyze Louis-Antoine Caraccioli's *Lettres d'un Indien à Paris* (1789), where an Indian traveler describes his experience in France and in other European countries to his friend, family, and wives. Finally, I would like to show how these fashions and different interests in epistolary travel narratives corresponded to specific historical situations and to the geopolitical relations that France had with these “exotic” territories in the East over the 17th and the 18th century. For example, the French interest for Turkey was not exclusively due to its geographical



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proximity and the trading exchanges between the two countries, but also to the Ottoman Empire's presence in European affairs. As for Persia, Mehemet-Effendi's embassy to the French court, and the story of the usurper Thamas Kouli Kan helped make Persia popular. Concerning China, it was made know by Jesuit missionary who were sent there to evangelize the country, while the interest in India corresponded to France's presence in the Hindu peninsula through French East India Company.

Keywords: *Orientalism, Epistolary Novels, 18th Century, French Literature, Travel Narratives*



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