H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Madeleine Dobie. *Foreign Bodies: Gender, Language, and Culture in French Orientalism.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. xiv + 256 pp. $49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-4104-0.

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Published on H-Gender-MidEast (June, 2003)

History, Genealogy, and Double Readings of "Oriental Woman"

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In *Foreign Bodies: Gender, Language, and Culture in French Orientalism*, Madeleine Dobie brings a fresh perspective to the list of academic publications inspired by Edward Said's 1978 *Orientalism*. In performing a genealogy of the figure of the "Oriental woman" in French literary and visual culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Dobie fills an important gap in Orientalist scholarship: "Although … a number of critics have turned their attention to the politics of the Orientalist tradition, none has examined the figure of the Oriental woman as a central category of Orientalist representation" (p. 3). It may seem surprising that this figure has not received greater attention in the past, but there can be little question as to the pertinence and importance of this figure in the present. The Oriental woman, "the Other" not only in the category of race, but gender as well, suffers from the double alterity embodied in this blanketing, all-encompassing label that effaces differences among women from diverse Eastern nations, cultures, and religions.

The figure of the Oriental woman furnishes a focal point around which Dobie constructs a rich historical study. She launches convincing critiques of Said, Roland Barthes, and even Michel Foucault for occasional historical oversights and (often unwitting) avoidance of historical complexity; she simultaneously places historical contextualization at the center of her concern. This is a refreshing point of view that stands out in contrast to other contemporary interpretations that privilege "the theorization of literary construction of alterity over the analysis of the historical evolution of French policy and the changing interplay between this policy and the literary sphere" (p. 4). This emphasis on the inevitable interaction between the political and the literary, between diplomatic action and artistic creation, ultimately debunks some well-established myths concerning the nineteenth-century avant-garde writers G=rard de Nerval, Gustave Flaubert, and Th=ophile Gautier. While these three individuals are usually considered oppositional writers, Dobie makes the crucial observation that they all "wrote as explicit advocates of colonial expansion," at one time or another (p. 15). Her insistence on these writers' "overt complicity with colonial policy" (p. 156) takes one step further the influential model of "Discourse/Counter-Discourse" in Richard Terdiman's 1985 text. While she finds his model helpful, Dobie makes clear that Terdiman's attention to the ways contestatory counterdiscourses are absorbed into the "dominant discourse" is insufficient to describe the complex "intermediary positions" occupied by French Orientalists.

The title, *Foreign Bodies*, represents a term from biomedical discourse that refers to a foreign entity, usually a virus or a bacterium, within the confines of the host. It is no accident that this term has a negative connotation, and Dobie explicitly mentions metaphors of contagion and disease that reveal the anxiety experienced in the face of foreignness and its threatening, destabilizing impact on the self. The Oriental woman, the "other's other," is a particularly destabilizing figure because of what remains hidden (p. 61). The first of two epigraphs at the beginning of the book is significant: "Neither you nor I nor anyone, no ancient and no modern can know Oriental woman for the reason that it is impossible to visit her." This quotation, taken from an 1862 text by Flaubert, hints at the "mysterious" nature of the Oriental woman, a major factor in the figure's seemingly endless fascination for Western writers. The continuing focus in contemporary France on the veil, "the primary signifier by means of which Islamic women are represented," reflects lingering ethnocentrism and xenophobia in French culture (p. 28). Recent interactions between political leaders and the Islamic community in France have focused on the veil, confirming Dobie's assertion that this "cultural marker" occupies, perhaps today more than ever, a cen-

tral position in politics and national policy (p. 65). The author does not limit her analysis to the physical aspects of the veil, but extends her examination to address the "philosophical model of the veil as a barrier to truth and knowledge" in Enlightenment France (p. 28).

Dobie refuses to engage in an "either/or" reading practice that either focuses on politicized criticism or enacts a close textual reading. She advocates instead a "double reading" that takes into account geopolitical power and resistance to that power, a reading that acknowledges the context of culture and history, and affirms a plurality of possible interpretations on different levels. She insists that this reading is not a deconstructive one, although it arguably has much in common with the practice of deconstructionists.

Establishing connections between historical context and textual practice makes this study an unavoidable reference. Whether in the case of Montesquieu's *De l'Esprit des lois* or his *Lettres persanes*, whether in the instance of the Oriental tale by Diderot or Cr=billon-fils, whether in the example of Nerval's *Voyage en Orient* or Gautier's *Le Roman de la momie*, Dobie demonstrates with aplomb the interplay between context and text. Her approach is wide-ranging and creative, drawing adeptly from psychoanalysis in her detection of "foot fetishism" in the writing of Gautier, and in her description of the phenomenon of "displacement" in the works of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, and others.

Studying its emergence and its evolution (or lack thereof) accomplishes the important gesture of turning the "timeless" image of the "Oriental woman" on its head. Dobie's attention to context reveals the changing nature and focus of French colonial policy; far from static, it developed and adapted in application and scope to varying circumstances. *Foreign Bodies* addresses the crucial question of which Orient is included in stereotypical references to the East, and makes careful note of the neglect of Algeria among the "famous travelers" of nineteenth century. The glaring absence of this country in travel writings of this period is curious, especially since this part of the Maghreb constituted the primary focus of French foreign policy and mercantile interest after 1830. The delineation of omissions such as this one contributes to the author's goal of disengaging Orientalism from "colonial" discourse. While she continually returns to the historical context of colonization, she effectively demonstrates that Orientalism is at once related to and distinct from colonialism, and that to confound the two is to misunderstand the complex interactions–and lack of interactions–of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is important to highlight the fact that this study of Orientalism focuses on an often overlooked historical period that merits attention precisely because it predates and thereby differs from the most common era of study: the latter part of the nineteenth century.

The book's subtitle underscores the important place Dobie accords to language. She highlights "Oriental women as 'veiled figures' of linguistic alterity," while calling attention to a "textual 'cognizance' that language is not simply the transparent medium of ideology, experience, and identity" (p. 8). This connection between unknowable woman and the unforeseen potential of textuality as a linguistic construct contributes to an intriguing reflection that runs throughout this critical study. In *Foreign Bodies*, the author not only calls attention to the language component of the French colonizers' "mission civilisatrice," she also points to the unmanageable, unwieldy nature inherent to any idiom, even–and especially–those imposed on another culture.

Foreign Bodies is a timely work, for it addresses the very issues that have occupied critical reflections worldwide over the past months. Indeed, the questions at the forefront of this study resonate with the current international climate, marked by "continuing polarization of relations between East and West, Islam and Christianity" (p. 2). The conclusion juxtaposes popular cultural representations of the past and geopolitical tensions of the present to demonstrate both "the enduring power and the broad cultural scope of Orientalist discourse" (p. 184). Films like the 1999 box-office hit *The Mummy* constitute what Dobie sees as a "displacement of American anxieties regarding Islamic terrorism" (p. 184). The fact that this film is a remake of an earlier cinematographic production is not inconsequential; nor is the fact that it was followed, after the composition of *Foreign Bodies*, by a sequel titled *The Mummy Returns* (2000). This practice of returning to and reviving cultural myths highlights the pervasive nature of such myths over time. In reaction to the ever-increasing problem of caricaturized representations of "Oriental despots," the solution is not to move "beyond Orientalism," Dobie suggests, but instead to seek to "modify historically determined representations from within" (p. 184). With *Foreign Bodies*, we have a well-written scholarly study that provides an example of just such a modification. Dobie employs precise language and gives careful explanations to frame well-supported arguments that serve to refashion our collective conception of the past and inspire us to reconfigure our understanding of the present.

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Citation: Alison Rice. Review of Dobie, Madeleine, *Foreign Bodies: Gender, Language, and Culture in French Orientalism.* H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7683

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