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REVIEW

Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Readings of the Medieval Orient: Other Encounters. By Liliana Sikorska. Walter de Gruyter, 2021. Pp. xxviii, 235.

Reviewed by Mirosława Buchholtz (Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland)

Liliana Sikorska's latest monograph is a nexus of stories, ideas, dilemmas, and theories that define our times. In it, she poses questions and tests out answers that are both literary and political, but never partisan. The ideas are played out against a wide panorama of global history. Although the historical lens is crucial in this book, one has a sense that the author consults the "Magistra vitae" mainly to help her reader understand the world, or much rather its Western conceptualizations – as they are today – and, in fact, as they have been for years. While walking the reader through century after century of encounters between people labeled as representatives of the West and the East, the author has an eye on the current state of affairs and keeps in mind the question of how conflicts and misunderstandings have been generated in the first place. Deep down, the ambition of this impressive study is to get at the roots of current intercultural relations, transmitted, as it becomes evident in the course of reading, through persistent popular images.

This is a book of "literate labor" (Legassie 2017: viii) that ensues from and intertwines with travel. Liliana Sikorska's study is, in a way, a travel book, which at times turns into an account of pilgrimage, as the ethnographic curiosity of the minds she explores gives way to the study of systems of belief. The Medieval and then nineteenth-century representations of Islam studied in this book allow the reader to understand the relations between the Christian West and the Muslim East in the past and to this day. Sikorska admits in the preface that the concepts of East and West are flawed and overgrown with preconceived notions. The simple opposition obliterates the complexity and diversity behind the rough geographical and religious labels, but it is nevertheless inescapable as a shorthand for deep-rooted prejudice (xxiv). The study demonstrates how the binary opposition came into being, how it has been reinforced over the centuries since the Middle Ages, and how real it still remains today (128–130).

Close scrutiny of carefully selected examples of fiction and non-fiction helps Liliana Sikorska to mark out the main turning points on the road and to show nuance in seemingly obvious juxtapositions. In her study, Sikorska moves back and forth between literature, history, and anthropology, to expose the mechanisms that have led to the Western (mis)conception of the East. In a panoramic manner, she traces conceptualizations of the East from the medieval through the nineteenth-century debates on the East, to the present. Throughout her study, she exposes, again and again, the persistence of medieval models in reading the Orient. She aims to set things right – especially in the department of the elusive "latent" (as opposed to "manifest") Orientalism – at least among her academic readers.

The monograph is divided into two parts, each with an introduction of its own, and perfectly balanced with three chapters in each part. The focus in Part One is on the Orient as it was depicted in nineteenth-century travel narratives and historical works. Before this story begins, however, Liliana Sikorska outlines the medieval idea of travel either for the purposes of trade or as pilgrimage and penance. In Chapter 1, she traces the rise of the "oriental obsession" (see Sweetman 1988) in Western art and literature from the sixteenth century onward. The rich erudition of this account does not lend itself to a summary. Sikorska leaves no stone unturned in her study of literature and travel writings. The latter, as she rightly points out, "always oscillate between fact and fiction, and their reception does as well" (37).

In Chapter 2, Sikorska juxtaposes two travel narratives published some three decades apart: Richard Burton's *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah* (1855), and Charles Montagu Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (1888). What distinguishes Burton's *Personal Narrative* is his attempt "to understand the Orient not in terms of lack but of difference" (68). Like Burton, Doughty spoke Arabic, but – in contrast to Burton – he never pretended to be a Muslim (70), though "among the Arabs and for safety reasons, he wore oriental clothing" (82). The unremitting anxiety about the possibility of an anti-Christian attack is never banned in Doughty's account. His writings thus confirm and reinforce the deep-seated convictions of his time about the superiority of the white race and its civilization (79). Drawing a vivid and justified parallel, Sikorska concludes that both Burton and Doughty fashioned themselves as "knights-errant searching for their own Holy Grails – the genuine tomb of the Prophet, in the case of Burton; the biblical sites, in the case of Doughty" (83). The cultural value of their accounts is enormous, though – as Sikorska argues – they are best read as examples of the Victorian quest romance, that is, "as personal, subjective, and literary expressions of individual experiences and views, reclaimed through the adventure mode, rather than objective and comprehensive travel accounts, presenting unchangeable truths about the land and its native peoples" (83).

Chapter 3 zeroes in on Western attempts to write the history of Islam in a scholarly manner, commensurate with the growing interest in the Orient. Sikorska reads Simon Ockley's *The History of the Saracens* (1708–1718) and Arthur Gilman's *The Saracens* (1886) against two biographical works: Samuel Green's *The Life of Mahomet: Founder of the Religion of Islam and of the Empire of the Saracens* (1840) and David Pryde's chapter on the life of Mohammed in his *Great Men of European History* (1881). She discovers in all four texts "a curious mixture of admiration and resentment" (87), as well as "the amalgamation of esteem and antipathy, objectivity and subjectivity" (103). The travel accounts of Burton and Doughty serve as a point of reference in this chapter as well. As Sikorska points out in the conclusion, the historical and biographical texts were "not an empirical record of facts but the interpretation of events adulterated by their pro-Western bias" (117). In emphasizing the political dimension of the spread of Islam, the four authors contributed to "the formation of anti-Muslim imperial ideologies exposed by twentieth-century writers and novelists" (117), whose works are discussed in Part Two of the monograph.

In Part Two of the study, the reader is invited to explore "'The Dark Reservoir of Hurt and Hate' in Contemporary Literature in English". The analogy that Liliana Sikorska draws in the introduction between Pope Urban II in 1095 and President George W. Bush at the turn of the third millennium (121, 125) is typical of her panoramic method. She has an eye for detail, but she also discerns complex interconnections and causal interrelations on a global scale. In Part Two, the readers are transported into the late twentieth century, but they remain also at the same time partly in the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century. Medieval literature, Sikorska argues, and especially the Saracen romances, "reproduced the prevailing Christian belief in the so-called enemies of Mankind: the World, the Devil, and the Flesh" (123). As it turns out, these medieval tropes have preserved their significance to this day and serve as a lens through which contemporary fiction and non-fiction can still be fruitfully read. In Chapter 4, "the World" at the Western doorstep are the immigrants – not only the first but also subsequent generations – as portrayed in David Caute's novel *Fatima's Scarf* (1998), which Liliana Sikorska reads alongside Hanif Kureishi's autobiographical texts: *My Ear at his Heart* (2004) and *The Rainbow Sign* (1986). In her careful analyses of these texts, Sikorska exposes the persistence of the age-old antithesis of the godly and the worldly in Europe to this day, even though the binary opposition belongs, historically, to the medieval Saracen romances. Such broad analogies allow Sikorska to read, for example, the rhetoric of the 2004 American Presidential elections and the choice between Bush's "Godly America" and Kerry's "Worldly America" as an echo of the medieval antithesis (149).

"The contemporary terrorist (d)evil" is the (anti)hero of Chapter 5, and – like the barbaric "world" at the Western doorstep – he also has his provenience in the

Middle Ages. Liliana Sikorska illustrates this point in her reading of two texts: Ed Husain's memoir *The Islamist* (2007), which tells the story of pre-9/11 radicalization and then the withdrawal from fundamentalist movements, and Mohamed Laroussi El Metoui's novel *Halima* (2005), which focuses on the last years of the Tunisian fight for independence. As Sikorska points out, not only sociologists and psychologists but also contemporary authors tend to view Islamism as "terrorism's unfortunate twin sibling" (179). It seems that in exposing these widespread mental habits, Sikorska seeks to encourage her readers to move on beyond medieval conceptualizations. "Reading terrorism as the modern-day personification of the devil", she argues, "takes us back to the original irreconcilable, albeit stereotypically presented, forces: the progressive West and the traditional East" (179). As stereotypes persist, perspectives remain ever more irreconcilable, and, as a result, "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" (179).

The danger of "the Flesh" figures prominently in Chapter 6, in which Liliana Sikorska focuses on two novels: Brian Moore's *The Magician's Wife* (1997), set in late nineteenth-century Algeria, and Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* (1999), which is set in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Egypt. Both novels subvert the tradition of medieval and then also Victorian romances in that they feature white women who fall in love with Arabia and Arab men. It is no longer "dark Muslim men [who] yearn for white Christian women" (184) or "native women [who] become lovers and helpers of the valiant white men" (123). Gender roles are significantly reversed in these (and many other) twentieth-century stories of the nineteenth-century heroines. "Characteristically", Sikorska explains, in the two novels, "the women's romantic involvements are set in the nineteenth century, the time of colonialization and Arab nationalism, the time of the emergent discourses on races" (184). Burton's and Doughty's accounts again come in handy as a point of reference for the twentieth-century takes on the nineteenth-century colonial intercourses (197–200, 205). As it turns out, Moore and Soueif reverse the conventional encounters between the Occident and Orient in yet another way: "it is not the Arabs but the Europeans who are the barbarians" (211).

What sets the discussion of personal choices on a different level is the explanation that in addition to "the literal meaning of being the source of sin, the body in medieval literature had a metaphorical meaning and was used to illustrate abstract notions such as the state and the nation" (182). Thus the "sins" of the body-qua-flesh inescapably threaten to taint the social body as well, and – so it seems – vice versa. In Liliana Sikorska's study, individual stories always add up to a large picture of social and political relations on a global scale. She traces the migrations and transformations of the medieval ideas of the Orient encoded in crusading literature, but she does not stop there. From her wide

panoramic perspective, Liliana Sikorska proves that "contemporary culture is shaped by medieval traditions of reading the stranger" (219). As a corrective to the reductionist politics of Orientalism, Sikorska embraces the discourses of both the West and the East. This is only one out of several crisscrossing bridges that she constructs in this study. Other bridges span the distant past and the current state of affairs, different academic disciplines, different genres, and, finally, perhaps most importantly, academia and the world.

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