

*Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245-1510*. Kim M. Phillips. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780812245486

In *Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245-1510*, Kim Phillips, of the University of Auckland, continues her scholarly investment involving transnational encounters. Her overall project intervenes in the broad application of Edward Said's *Orientalism* since 1978, and it centers on the idea that European perceptions of the East are distinct because they are "precolonial" in the era c. 1245-c. 1510. More specifically, Phillips argues that late medieval Christian European cultural history is informed by encounters with Asia but it diverges from Orientalist readings that often omit medieval works because they are prior to when "concerted colonialist ventures were initiated" (3). Phillips asserts that commonalities in Christian travel narratives on the "distant East" are informed less by notions of superiority and more by curiosity, wonder, and even pleasure in "horrific" customs. In that sense this text resembles the celebratory, multicultural understanding of difference that she finds in her sources. She reiterates examples of "Otherness," such as widow self-immolation in India or Odoric's description of a Chinese restaurant, but also "Sameness and Similarity" through experiences with food scarcity (118, 150). A strength of this text is Phillips' variety of literary sources. Her male European travel writers include not only self-authored eyewitness pieces by John of Plano Carpini, but also more imagined or embellished accounts by Sir John Mandeville or Marco Polo. Undoubtedly, this project encounters the difficulties of what is lost in translation, ciphering through different versions of remaining manuscripts, and establishing cultural geographies that range from China, Mongolia, India, Burma, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia (9).

With that in mind, *Before Orientalism* is organized into two parts: the first considers theory, context, and the genre of travel writing. The second explores how their own cultural

perspectives on foodways, gender, sexuality, civility, and the body shape European views on the East. As the title suggests, Phillips acknowledges Edward Said's theory of Orientalism in particular representations but primarily engages with scholarly discourse that offers a critical perspective on its broad application. The first chapter is brief but dedicated to problematizing the utility of Orientalism in medieval times. Phillips constructs a case against what may superficially seem like an appropriate usage of Orientalism to unpack European travel writing about Asia. She highlights Said's three definitions of Orientalism: the study of Asia from a European academic perspective, categorizing broad cultures into the "Orient" and "Occident," and the "ideologically loaded discourse by which western societies have extended, developed, and justified political, economic, and other domination over eastern territories" (15). Phillips agrees with scholars who critique Said's emphasis on the Middle East and Egypt, rather than East Asia. She also takes issue with his reductive binary relationships that overgeneralize and render diverse groups as East or West. Lastly, Phillips finds this theory less applicable due to Said's periodization or primary relevance to eighteenth century European Latin Christendom to Islam v. medieval Europe at large. Thus, Phillips' work engages with studies of precolonial Middle Ages, where notions of Western superiority are not abundant, as recapitulated in the Afterward. As a reader who is not a medievalist historian but is interested in the theoretical conceptions of Orientalism and its critiques, I find this project is less interested in a rigorous discussion of theory or extending the genealogy of Orientalism and more focused on the range of experiences depicted in the medieval primary sources.

The next chapter provides contextual background for the travel writers. Their content and motivations range based on factors such as religious background, like the missionary Odoric of Pordenone. They include practical advice, such as Francesco Balducci's guidebook for

merchants making a long distance trip to Cathay. They also consider audience reception in what tales they include, and Phillips comments on the circulation of these “bold new textual voyages” (49). Chapter Three is a call to broaden the conceptualization of the genre of travel literature. Whether the writing’s veracity is based on imagined second hand accounts or first person narratives and ethnographic or geographic in nature, what remains relevant is that travel writing “takes travel as an essential element for its production” (51). It can be applied across different cultural eras and spaces. Though a bounded, political European identity v. Christendom in the Middle Ages changes over time, Phillips argues that “Eurocentricism of a secular sort was not entirely unknown but not a dominant motif” (63). Her textual evidence suggests notions of similarity in Eastern encounters, admiration, wonder that ranges from practical governing techniques to spiritual ambitions, a utopic notion of possibility and knowledge gained from travel, as well as Otherness. Again, the specificity to medieval travel writing hinges her argument for precolonial conceptions of Asia.

The second part of *Before Orientalism* considers areas often examined by cultural anthropologists. As an interdisciplinary text that is a cultural history with anthropological considerations, she engages with intersecting lenses such as food studies, gender, sexuality, notions of civility, and race as understood through the body. For example, Phillips highlights recurring constructions of Asian femininity in Chapter Five. Identifiable as types, travel writers portray women as erotic objects in India or “sexually alluring” in China. They are often depicted as women warriors in Mongolia; this creates distance from European women but brings Mongolia into a familiar European narrative of virago characters (108).

Of particular interest is Phillips’ appropriate pairing of foodways, an area of study growing in popularity, with travel writing. In Chapter Four, she highlights Caroline Walker

Bynum's application of foodways to medieval history. Food reveals concerns over food scarcity and death. It is used in religious rituals. The food selection and preparation evoke notions of civility. It also reflects mistrust of foreign foods consumed by political enemies. And one example of foodways that takes all these concerns into consideration is cannibalism (74).

Phillips recognizes the use of anthropophagy as an ideological weapon against the "uncivilized" Other who is barbaric enough to consume human flesh. However, she hopes to reveal why one makes allegations of cannibalism rather than a debate over their veracity. In this chapter, Phillips contextualizes the long history of anthropophagy employed by both human and non-human hybrids. Common themes relate to unclean habits, intrafamilial consumption, cannibals having dog heads or being a species of monsters, survival to avoid starvation, and eating an enemy in warfare (90). In the case of Marco Polo's alleged anthropophagy accounts in *Divisament dou monde*, she mentions the Tibetan, Kashmiri, and Chinese city of Fugiu as examples that are not rooted in other historic European literature. The accounts vary but they "practice necromancy and devilish arts and eat prisoners condemned to die" or "enjoy good hunting and spices but also eat crude foods and human flesh" (98). Phillips highlights how these cannibals are all viewed as exceptional cases in their respective cultures. They are figuratively "Others" due to their foodways but literally outsiders, Mountain dwellers or foreigners in Eastern cities. Though Phillips tries to temper potential reactions to anthropophagy, one has to wonder about the impression these cannibalistic tales have on European constructions of "uncivilized" peoples in the East and the ideology surrounding colonialism.

Phillips is aware of the potential criticism arising from a text that examines European encounters with the distant East that is not about colonialism. Her introduction includes scholarly definitions of formal colonialism driven by relationships of domination, possession, migration,

missionary, and mercantile interests. Though she admits the flexibility in such a description and that less formal colonial aggressions exist, her work still relies on prescribed boundaries. Philips asserts that, excepting religious matters, “it is difficult to identify examples of European colonialist ambition toward the distant East before the late fifteenth century,” and though encounters may have set the path for colonialism, the aspiration to possess comes later. She clearly articulates this argument by claiming it is “my firm view is that the themes of conquest, possession, and a secular sense of superiority were not universal or dominant in medieval travelers’ tales of distant Easts” (200).

A limitation of this seems to be that Phillips hinges her definition of colonialism on widespread, formal ambitions of expansion and militarism in the name of empire building. Europeans may be interested in gaining knowledge of different Eastern peoples but still conceive of them as racialized Others. Some of the logics of colonialism still seem present. For example, the study of microaggressions in areas such as Critical Race Theory broaden definitions of racism beyond overt examples to everyday or even “unintended” expressions that still affirm racial hierarchies. With that in mind, an opportunity for future work could include the ways that imperial or (pre)colonial microaggressions (even in medieval eras) construct affective structures of superiority and contestations over power. Even if European travel writers did not dominantly express overt colonial desires or, at best, wrote of “monstrous” Asian bodies to encompass “the plurality of God’s creation,” these xenophobic remarks can still be considered a form of colonial or Orientalist thought (196). Furthermore, though depictions of Asian bodies varied based on author, “humoral-climatological theories of bodily difference,” or “pragmatic curiosity,” portrayals of Asians as having more European features are still accompanied by negative descriptions of dark skin, “flat ‘apish’ nose,” or “linear eyes,” and “evil disposition...skilled in

diabolical arts” (177-178, 183). Comparing a human face to a barbaric animal seems to imply inferiority. Though precolonial under formal definitions, they still contribute to formulations of Asians as uncivilized, inferior Others that reinforce later deployments of colonialism.

As a reader whose background is in Asian American and American Studies, it is unsettling and problematic to see repeated employment of terminology like the “distant Orient,” “tales of oriental lands,” or “oriental plentitude and extravagance...[with] pleasures of alien horrors” used outside of textual references or direct quotes (74). Phillips continuously references the medieval conception of the geographic and cultural space known as Europe without its modern political connotations or geographic boundaries. If she is willing to use the term “Europe” to reference a medieval space, under the same logic, why not consistently use the term “Asia,” instead of the “Orient,” omitting its modern associations? That said, one way she circumnavigates the parameters of Orientalism or colonialism is that she acknowledges the nonlinear ways that precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial histories happen simultaneously across time and space and offers evangelization efforts as a potential form of ideological colonialism. And at the end of this text, when describing race and bodies in Chapter Eight, Phillips switches from the term “oriental bodies” in one sentence to “Asian countries” in the very next without discussion or rationale (173). Her use of “Asian” in this chapter is striking considering her exhaustive use of “oriental” for the last seven chapters. Stronger justification for repeatedly employing these pejorative terms outside of historic literary references should be foregrounded in greater detail in her opening “Notes on the Text” section.

Overall, Phillips genuinely attempts to find medieval European perceptions beyond its more modern sensibilities of superiority through diverse depictions of Asian encounters. She provides an interesting intervention in what might superficially seem a likely application of

Orientalism or colonialism to medieval travel writing. Phillips not only argues for a precolonial conception of Asia via European writing during the Middle Ages, she extends the limits of a contemporary genre like travel literature, and provides a fascinating reading of anthropological topics in this cultural history.

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