James Watt, *British Orientalisms, 1759-1835*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. vii + 285. £78.99. ISBN 9781108472661.

As in his previous monograph about the Gothic, James Watt's new book focuses on the latter half of the eighteenth century and early decades of the nineteenth century. Watt immediately situates his argument in opposition to recent scholarly work that suggests Britons' engagement with the East was more cosmopolitan and open to difference than previously understood. He acknowledges the value of these studies of encounter at the same time he argues for a qualification of these claims by showing the complexities of the historical situation and the often contradictory and changing perspectives held by writers. His book takes as its focus these conflicting perceptions of self and nation as England became more entangled in the East.

While the premise of the book seems unsurprising – that Britons did not share a single ideology regarding England's engagement with the East – Watt provides a welcome addition to conversations about Orientalism. Watt suggests that his approach 'illuminat[es] the dynamics of cultural contestation in the period, too, helping to thicken accounts of the influence of scholars such as [Sir William] Jones, or the reception of the *Arabian Nights* and other 'tales of the East' (9). The subtle reference to Clifford Geertz's methodology of thick description clearly reflects Watt's own more literary-specific approach. Monographs often feel a bit repetitive but Watt's inclusion of diverse texts, pairing canonical with lesser-known works keeps the reader interested and adds to our understanding of the historical milieu. Indeed, the diversity of literary genres forms an important part of Watt's argument, highlighting how literary form can reinforce specific ideologies.

With an introduction, seven chapters, and a brief conclusion, Watt manages to cover an impressive number of texts and conversations over a 75-year period. The first chapter explores how 'the Oriental tale' (Samuel Johnson), 'the informant narrative' (Oliver Goldsmith), and 'the story sequence' (James Ridley) responded to the expansion of Britain's empire with the Seven Years' War, each demonstrating an awareness of a national impatience to expand while at the same time questioning the effects of increasing exposure to the Other. This first chapter sets up Watt's larger narrative of writers who demonstrate inconsistent views across their own writing while also differing from their peers. Watt's second chapter focuses on how prose fiction in the 1770s and 1780s provided an avenue to share information about the East with those in Britain. From corruption and despotism to a positive economic and nationalistic spirit, the writers (including Charles Johnstone and Mariana Starke) again demonstrate warring perspectives. The third chapter continues the discussion of Oriental despotism by concentrating on the ubiquitous idea of the degradation of women and immorality of seraglios, emphasised in adaptations of the *Arabian Nights*. British writers used such ideas to provide a 'recuperative function for Britons, allowing them better to appreciate their own freedoms' (119). Watts offers Elizabeth Hamilton's *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* as a counterpoint, questioning Britons' claims of moral superiority. Chapter 4 focuses primarily on Sir William Jones and his influence on others, complicating his avowed openness to the literature and culture of India (and his role in a 'rediscovery' of India) by questioning his silence on the violence and suffering offered by imperialism. Using Robert Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer* and Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh*, among others, Chapter 5 shows how Orientalist poetry negotiated complex political interests. Watt takes a turn to 'Cockney Orientalism' in Chapter 6, looking at Leigh Hunt and Charles Lamb, who relied on second-hand accounts and demonstrated a benign sympathy with Orientalism. Watt problematises these views by considering Hunt's exclusion of China and Lamb's employment with the East India Company.

Finally, the picaresque fiction discussed in Chapter 7 explores how writers in the early nineteenth century used informant narrators to share the 'real' character of 'Orientals' and the resulting criticisms of that approach.

Watt concludes his book with Thomas Babington Macaulay's racist paternalism. In contrast to many of the earlier writers who saw an opportunity for cultural exchange, Macaulay sees nothing to be gained in that regard, instead typifying the nineteenth-century British view of the Other as needing guidance. Yet, once again, Watt complicates the narrative by exploring several responses that challenge Macaulay's view, including Leigh Hunt, who desires the fictional, escapist Orient of literature and rejects the social reality. The idea of a relationship between the expanding British economic imperial interests and an expansion of cultural knowledge posited by writers at the beginning of the period is effectively negated by the end of the book; thus, the pleasurable, constructed Orient (and any implied sympathetic openness) becomes thoroughly divorced from any kind of real contact zone.

Overall, Watt's book offers a well-researched, thoughtful expansion of British Orientalisms in the decades leading up to Victoria's vast empire.

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