Laurence Sterne in France by Lana Asfour
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Virginian plantation, serves as an example to discuss the ambivalent meaning of domestic space. Jefferson’s extended female family who also lived in it—especially his well-educated daughter and granddaughters—understood this space as attractive and comfortable, as well as much too demanding and time-consuming to manage, and therefore in conflict with their intellectual hunger and desire for learning (Elizabeth V. Chew). In a different context, that of Renaissance Florence, female portraits of young women from prominent families, dressed with sumptuous clothing, bore an ambivalent meaning too. While calling for female visibility, they projected models of femininity which bore a distinctive meaning. They were signs of family status and wealth, which were fundamental for establishing useful family and marriage alliances. In the deeply patriarchal and highly mercantile Florentine system, elite women—their dowries and social capital—were constructed as assets (Carole Collier Frick). The built environment is also the female, maternal space epitomized by the womb. We, twenty-first-century scholars, have the task of reconstructing this maternal space in early modern texts—a challenging exercise which can also be undertaken through polemically rewriting these texts (Naomi J. Miller).

‘Pedagogy’ starts by examining the impact and success of museum exhibitions about early modern women, and the centrality of material art objects for engaging a general public, against the threat of self-referential academic discourses (Julia Marciari Alexander). It then proceeds by highlighting the merits of historical relativism and feminism, for teaching and understanding early modern women’s texts (Susanne Woods). It finally describes the drawbacks of the transformation of liberal arts colleges from female to mixed institutions, a process which is actually taking place in the USA, and ultimately aims to defeminize—or remasculinize—those once all-women higher-education institutions (Allyson M. Poska).

Perhaps the volume would have benefited from a more coherent structure and clearer distinction between its parts, the titles of which are sometimes vague. However, it has the unquestionable merit of showing the richness and complexity of interpretations which are now in place in the study of early modern women and gender, while drawing our attention to some still unexplored connections between past and present world cultures.

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Silvia Evangelisti


Clearly, Laurence Sterne is a well-travelled figure. As readers of The Shandean journal will know, one recent trend in Sterne studies has concerned the reception of his work by early readers from around the globe, including such far-flung places as Russia and Japan. After Continuum’s 2004 collection of essays, The Reception of Laurence Sterne in Europe, edited by Peter de Voogd and John Neubauer, Lana Asfour’s book narrows the geographical focus. She investigates the periodical reviews, translations, and imitations of Sterne’s fiction in late eighteenth-century France, surveying diverse French writers and thinkers, including Diderot, Voltaire, Jean-Baptiste Suard, and Julie de Lespinasse. Asfour has an intention similar to Sterne’s desire ‘to take in all Kinds of Readers’ (Letters of Laurence Sterne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), p. 393). Her account would appeal to a wide range of readers including researchers interested in Sterne’s novels, eighteenth-century fiction, the art of translation, or French literary culture.
During her Continental journey, Asfour expertly guides the reader and clearly explains French literary tradition, as well as the critical terms employed by French critics, before an in-depth investigation of Sterne’s reception. In this well-structured account, there is a full and lucid explanation of an intellectual milieu which may be unfamiliar to a Sterne specialist. However, at times, Sterne becomes lost in France as Asfour is more concerned with revealing French social, political, and literary attitudes than providing new ways of reading The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy or A Sentimental Journey. While including a number of new insights into Sterne’s fiction, such literary analysis is not Asfour’s primary focus. Possibly, this study would have gained relevance for Sterne scholars with the inclusion of translations of key quotations; literature specialists not fluent in eighteenth-century French may not appreciate the full significance of Asfour’s source material and may feel slightly excluded by lengthy French passages.

Academics struggling with this linguistic barrier will none the less perceive parallels between French and English literary culture, parallels which would support Asfour’s claim that ‘national cultures can never exist in isolation’ (p. 126). Interestingly, a number of these French perspectives on Sterne can be usefully compared to the English interpretation of his novels during this period. Indeed, the French portrayal of Tristram Shandy, as the literary embodiment of ‘originalité’ (p. 17) by an eccentric Englishman who flouts the classical rules of literary composition, echoes the early English portrayal of Tristram Shandy as a novel and witty oddity, an extension of the author’s quirky Shandean personality. Similarly, French translators, like eighteenth-century English anthologists, attempted to restructure and cleanse Sterne’s chaotic and bawdy novel. In a more elusive connection, Asfour’s interesting claim that ‘theories of translation began to privilege the original author’ (p. 84) could relate to the English copyright debate. As discussed by Hilary Jane Englert’s essay in The Secret Life of Things (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), the advocates of perpetual copyright in England sought protection for publications that expressed an author’s original, individual personality. Correspondingly in France, there was the movement towards faithful, word-for-word translations of Sterne’s publications at a time when French critics acknowledged the distinctive originality of his authorial voice.

Overall, Asfour’s investigation illuminates a number of little-known yet fascinating French literary sources, with only one drawback: the need to introduce these obscure publications occasionally leads to some superficiality, a descriptive rather than analytical approach. Nevertheless, the author should be congratulated. So far, Laurence Sterne in France is the most accomplished monograph on the afterlife of Sterne’s fiction.

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This volume collects papers delivered during a conference on ‘The Institution of Translation in Europe’ held at the University of Provence in 2006. Perhaps as a result of its origins, the book is rather uneven in its structure and quality. The title, in particular, is potentially misleading: most of the articles are in fact devoted to Anglo-French cultural relations and to the role played, in the history of that connection, by translations from English into French. Additionally, the subdivision into three sections—‘Translation Methodology’, ‘Translation of Literary Texts’, and ‘Historical Perspectives’—is only partly enlightening since, in practice, most contributions display a literary focus and a historical approach.