
In her literary-critical dialog, The Progress of Romance (1785), Clara Reeve traces the novel to its ancient and Eastern romance origins, acknowledging the proliferation of prose (and verse) fiction across temporal, geographical, and cultural boundaries. The Progress marks one of the first English attempts to narrate a literary-critical history of the novel, and the scope of Reeve’s project illustrates just how capacious that history could be. At the end of the eighteenth century, Reeve reached many of the same conclusions already advanced by the French clergyman and scholar Pierre Daniel Huet in the Traité de l’origine des romans (1670), again subordinating the novel to a broader literary history. For Reeve, as for Huet, this history begins in antiquity; the novel is born of the ancient Mediterranean and its transcultural commerce. Whereas the idea of “progress” might strike us as teleological, Reeve’s appendix signals the open-endedness of her work: she concludes with a history, also doubling as an oriental tale, first mediated by its medieval Arabic author and subsequently by its French and English translators. By advancing “The History of Charoba, Queen of Egypt,” from the thirteenth-century Egyptian History of Murtada ibn al-Khafif, Reeve eschews the exclusionary preference for the English novel—particularly of the domestic realist variety—that would be exalted by future generations of critics.

In France and in England, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries alike, writers such as Huet and Reeve remind us, in their accounts of canon formation, that the category of the novel emerges only after the fact. Especially in the earlier part of the period, distinctions between “romance,” “novel,” and “history” were by no means clear, and the resulting fictions happily embraced generic fluidity and hybridity with seeming abandon. The apparent unruliness of prose fiction troubled eighteenth-century critics and continues to confound their twenty-first-century counterparts. Although sales of other genres, especially history, far outpaced those of the novel, and
French translations were almost as widely read as English fictions, subsequent scholarship has enshrined the novel as the dominant literary form, insisting on its English origins and turning a blind eye to the messy and even difficult narratives—proliferating throughout the period—that refuse to conform to the domestic realist paradigm. Where Reeve insists on the polyglot origins of the English novel, critics have returned to *The Progress of Romance* for primarily two reasons: to exploit its rich treasury of soundbites on the early novel and its now famous practitioners, and to champion the novel as the supreme fictional invention of British Enlightenment culture. (Aravamudan, despite his indebtedness to Reeve, occasionally falls prey to this type of misreading.)

In *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel*, Srinivas Aravamudan follows in the footsteps of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century critics, on both sides of the Channel, in order to remind us of a moment at which an alternative genealogy of the novel was—and continues to remain—possible. This genealogy profits from the generic capaciousness of early novelistic fiction, with its dynamic overlap among the categories “romance,” “history,” and “novel,” in order to broaden our understanding of the eighteenth-century imagination. The model of prose fiction Aravamudan offers decentralizes the English novel and the domestic subject in order to recall the prolific contributions to fiction subsequently effaced by the story of the novel’s so-called rise. Aravamudan’s careful attention to the profound literary influence of the imaginative East(s), in France as well as in England, is a salutary reminder that our current history of the novel is but one narrative thread, its conclusions far from inevitable; that the emergence of new (or the transformation of existing) genres does not necessarily ensure that “newer” equals “better”; and that we must evaluate eighteenth-century fiction on its own merits, setting aside our particular aesthetic standards. We would do well to acknowledge, as does Aravamudan (echoing Reeve), that “novels did not arise organically by a crypto-Darwinian ecology of agentless modernity within which they were a species superior to their less evolved counterparts. Rather, novels were actively promoted into prominence over other forms of fiction that were scapegoated” (25).

In this way, *Enlightenment Orientalism*—like many of the very fictions it considers—aims to complicate and re-orient critical discussions of eighteenth-century prose fiction, drawing attention to the veritable cornucopia of literary variety that participates in the Enlightenment Orientalism of Aravamudan’s title. The titular term, as Aravamudan explains it, is meant to describe a particularly “nebulous form of transcultural fiction that interrogated settled assumptions” (4). Further differentiating “Enlightenment Orientalism” from its nineteenth-century successor, Aravamudan describes his subject as a “fictional mode for dreaming with the Orient,” a “Western style for translating, anatomizing, and desiring the Orient” (8). Aravamudan thus coins the titular term, in part, to reconsider the dynamics of Orientalism in an earlier historical context largely beyond the scope of Said’s scholarship on nineteenth-century
France and Britain. Characterizing transcultural fictions as an emblem of “Enlightenment Orientalism” instead of “pre-Orientalism” allows Aravamudan to forestall a teleological narrative in which eighteenth-century orientalism inevitably leads to its more familiar nineteenth-century counterpart. The paradox of an Enlightenment Orientalism also generates the productive doublenesses that underwrite Said’s argument: “inside and outside the nation, self-critical and also xenotropic, philosophical and also fantasmatic” (8), the fictions of Enlightenment Orientalism both undergird and undermine ideas about the self in eighteenth-century France and Britain.

The argument unfolds across five chapters organized in two parts. The first part, “Pseudoethnographies,” demonstrates the possibilities of the naïve foreigner as a rhetorical pose for interrogating the relationship between self and other. Chapter One lays the groundwork for Aravamudan’s claims by recalling the counterhistory of the novel suggested by Huet and Reeve, by reminding readers that eighteenth-century English Orientalism “was positioned more as receiver and consumer than as producer” (50), and by tracing the early history of the wildly popular Arabian Nights’ Entertainments and its tremendous cultural influence on both sides of the Channel. Noting that the trope of the ethnographic observer allows writers to create hybrid fictions of cultural critique, Aravamudan poses the following question: “What would it be like if a particular person, steeped in specific cultural prejudices, were immersed in a totally different environment?” (110). Turning to Giovanni Paolo Marana’s Turkish Spy (1684–97) and Montesquieu’s Lettres persanes (1721) in France, as well as George Lyttelton, Oliver Goldsmith, and Elizabeth Hamilton in England, Aravamudan shows how the defamiliarization associated with the viewpoint of the foreign observer encourages readers to see themselves and others anew, expanding rather than delimiting the scope of fictional possibility. The resulting “self-reflexivity” born of cultural and generic interchange—oriental tale, epistolary satire, periodical writing, social and pseudoscientific commentary—has the power, even in the context of more conservative fictions, to pose a serious challenge to received wisdom. As Aravamudan concludes, “such comparative representations go beyond the stereotype and put forward a radical epistemological skepticism of everything, including their own status” (110).

In the second part of the book, Aravamudan moves from the surveillance chronicle and secret history to the “transnational allegories” represented by the fables of Fontenelle, Bidpai, Swift, and Voltaire; by the libertine fictions of Prévost, Crébillon, and Diderot; and by the Eastern inflected works of Manley, Haywood, Frances Sheridan, and Smollett. Chapter Three enlarges the scope of the preceding chapters on pseudoethnography by exploring fictions of cultural contact that frequently leave the human realm behind. Turning from the intimacies of spy fiction and secret history to “interplanetary reflections” and “orientalist beast fables,” Aravamudan pursues questions of epistemology in the defamiliarizing strategies of
cosmological realism (Fontenelle), the animal fable (Bidpai, Swift), and the complex satires of Voltaire. In ways subtly and not so subtly orientalized, eighteenth-century writers subordinate earth to the universe and humans to animals, achieving a more dramatic decentralization of self than the foreigners’ tales of Part One. In this way, Chapter Three’s accounts of orientalist fabulism anticipate the insights that come to fruition in the discussion of “libertine Orientalism” in Chapter Four, represented especially by Diderot’s *Bijoux Indiscrets* (1748), in which the “indiscreet jewels” of the title euphemistically refer to female genitalia magically endowed with the power of speech. Offering what Aravamudan calls “a sustained meditation on the science of sexuality conjured through a libertine framework” (187), *Bijoux Indiscrets* demonstrates how attempts to comprehend other subjectivities repeatedly fail; as Aravamudan notes, “the paradox of empiricist sexual discourse experimented with by Diderot reveals that behind the direct objectival or referential narration preferred by science obtains an untranscendable horizon of more language—and endless interpretation—and the search for a language of truth only forces attention back to the language of lies that keeps obscuring truth” (199). The force of sexuality, like the scope of the interplanetary voyage and the inscrutability of the beast fable, becomes an argument for a “humbling rather than triumphalist view of the rise of realism” (205), a position Aravamudan takes in the final chapter. Writing of the prose fictions of Manley, Haywood, Sheridan, and Smollett, Aravamudan concludes his decentralization of the novel by arguing for the importance of the nonrealist and the fanciful. Referring, for example, to Eliza Haywood’s fascinating *Adventures of Eovaai* (1736; now available in an excellent Broadview edition), he makes a compelling case for revisiting the range of peculiar fictions that histories of the novel tend to ignore. “Using Haywood’s wildly fantastic tale,” he argues, “we could arrive at newer genealogies of eighteenth-century prose narratives that do not play off realism against fantasy, history against fable, or bounded nations against unbounded fictions” (217).

If there is any fault to be found in a timely reading of this kind, it lies in the argument’s scope. By staking its claim against the novel, the argument appears to capitulate to the novel’s terms and thus to reify its generic dominance. Aravamudan’s focus on prose fiction as he aims to dismantle the supremacy of the domestic realist novel often creates the appearance of reinforcing the teleology that his deft readings seek to undermine. That Enlightenment Orientalism produces alternative “lines” or “flights” of inquiry on “parallel” tracks to the novel (e.g., 55, 57, 165, 202) does not suggest an anti-teleology so much as a complementary linearity. This opposition—Enlightenment Orientalism vs. domestic realist novel—reproduces itself in many of the central questions that frame the argument and its individual chapters: “Was the Enlightenment always doomed?” the introduction asks. “Did all previous curiosity about the East inevitably lead to negative forms of Orientalism?” (3). The recurring “either/or” structure posited at such moments sometimes flattens the complexities otherwise championed by the argument. Aravamudan’s readings are strongest when
they illuminate the fluidities, even the paradoxes, that Enlightenment Orientalism self-consciously cultivates.

*Enlightenment Orientalism* joins other contributions to the field of eighteenth-century studies that seek to enlarge the cultural boundaries of the period. Recent work by Ros Ballaster, Robert Markley, Felicity Nussbaum, and Saree Makdisi hints at the scope and variety of Enlightenment engagements with the East, offering exciting possibilities for future study. Aravamudan makes clear the stakes of such a project, noting the costs of a literary-critical bias that centralizes the domestic realist novel, even in the face of contemporary evidence to the contrary, at the expense of other forms. As certain novel fictions become *the* novel, the horizon of eighteenth-century studies also constricts, divorced from a more expansive historical context and limited to the geography of Britain. The rich examples that fill the pages of Aravamudan’s study speak for themselves: we have only begun to comprehend the extent and significance of the faraway and the elsewhere in the long eighteenth century.

By encouraging readers to move beyond familiar narratives of the novel’s origins, *Enlightenment Orientalism* challenges scholars to confront their own expectations about the novel, prose fiction, and indeed the field of eighteenth-century studies, implicitly exhorting readers to join in the act of resistance suggested by the book’s title. Aravamudan makes plain: the story of the domestic realist novel and its putative “rise” is too comfortable and too easy. “From the perspective of Enlightenment Orientalism,” he states, “generic solutions in favor of a singular outcome eschew the harder task of making available a variety of perceptions about the relationships between particular national realisms, comparative externalities, and universal aspirations” (75). We must strive to evaluate eighteenth-century fiction on its own terms in order to guard against the wish fulfillment of revisionist history.

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WORKS CITED


