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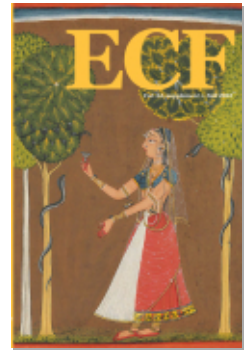
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## Women and the History of Ideas in the Global Eighteenth Century

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Eighteenth-Century Fiction, Volume 34, Supplement 1, Fall 2022, pp.  
604-607 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press



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# Women and the History of Ideas in the Global Eighteenth Century

*Intelligent Souls?: Feminist Orientalism in Eighteenth-Century English Literature* by Samara Anne Cahill

Bucknell University Press, 2019. 244pp. \$34.95. ISBN 978-1-68448-097-5.

*Novel Cleopatras: Romance Historiography and the Dido Tradition in English Fiction, 1688–1785* by Nicole Horejsi

University of Toronto Press, 2019. 296pp. \$77.00 ISBN 978-1-4426-4714-5.

Review by Angelina Del Balzo, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey

Arguably one of the most fertile intellectual currents in eighteenth-century studies is the field of what has been called “the global eighteenth century.” Since the path-breaking work of Srinivas Aravamudan, Betty Joseph, Suvir Kaul, Felicity Nussbaum, and others, the global eighteenth century has ceased to be solely a subfield of academic study and has come closer to being the historical foundation all scholars must reckon with across disciplines. In the last five years, books with geographical orientations and theoretical frameworks as diverse as Ashley L. Cohen, *The Global Indies* (2020); Humberto Garcia, *England Re-Oriented* (2020); James Muholland, *Before the Raj* (2021); Daniel O’Quinn, *Engaging the Ottoman Empire* (2019); and Lenora Warren, *Fire in the Water* (2019) have argued for an eighteenth century shaped by transcultural encounters and imperial power. The two 2019 monographs reviewed here focus on English empire as a comparative project that was central to the development of English fiction. The Ottoman and Roman empires, Samara Anne Cahill and Nicole Horejsi’s respective topics, both served as cultural interlocutors that Britons used to first imagine a potential futurity of empire and later to measure their imperial ascendancy.

These books are both histories of ideas where women were some of the central intellectual forces. *Intelligent Souls?* (a single-book review of this title, by Humberto Garcia, also appears in this *ECF* issue) is the history of an erroneous idea about Islam that is crucial to understanding contemporary white feminism’s persistent failings to incorporate Islam broadly and Muslim women specifically into its movements. *Novel Cleopatras* articulates a literary history of what Horejsi calls “romance historiography,” combining two forms that remain extremely and opposingly gendered in today’s book market, and analyzes how women writers were central to the development of debates around genre and empire. Neither author has restricted their book to exclusively women writers, but some of the most compelling

readings focus on the way that women were responding to a European literary tradition with an increasingly global perspective.

Cahill's project is twofold: one, to trace white feminist Islamophobia before Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), often erroneously cited as its beginning; and two, to show how this Islamophobia was used to argue for women's status as full British subjects. What Cahill calls "misogynistic mortalism" describes a belief attributed to Islam and to other non-Protestant religions that has more history in Christianity: namely, that women are thought not to have souls, and so to have no life after death. Using Joyce Zonana's term "feminist orientalism" to describe the "displacement of 'the source of patriarchal oppression'" from England (and later Britain) onto Muslims, Cahill shows how "one of history's great ironies that a famous and long-lasting Islamophobic trope initially had nothing to do with Islam," but that the growing imaginary of the Eastern world lay the groundwork for this conflation (Cahill, 21). *Intelligent Souls?* takes this widely debated iteration of Islamophobia and follows the intellectual trail to its comparatively arcane origins in the Trinitarian Controversy in the seventeenth century. While Islam might not have been the direct source for these ideas, it is also not a randomly selected religious interlocutor; the Trinitarian debates of the late seventeenth century coincided with a proliferation of publishing on Islam in the wake of the Ottoman defeat by the Hapsburgs and the Treaty of Karlowitz, with many of those published texts turning away from the more rigorous and language-informed research of the earlier century. What was essentially an intra-English Protestant debate was still informed by the larger global context in which these English writers found themselves. Cahill tracks these tensions across the eighteenth century, offering insightful readings of how Islamophobic rhetoric informed the work of so many writers in the period, including Penelope Aubin, Eliza Haywood, Samuel Richardson, Tobias Smollett, Samuel Johnson, and Charlotte Lennox.

As Cahill states in the introduction, the book's *raison d'être* is Wollstonecraft's "Mahometan strain" of misogynistic mortalism. Cahill threads a tricky needle admirably: she contextualizes and takes seriously Wollstonecraft's thinking without letting her Islamophobia off the hook. Wollstonecraft uses Islam as a counterweight to what she sees as the hypocrisy of Englishmen, who treat women as Muslims do without having the religious doctrine as an excuse. Cahill hammers home the political stakes of her argument and narrows in on the longstanding effects that this specific Islamophobic idea has had in the years after the *Vindication*: "Because misogynistic mortalism had been mapped onto Islam since the 1690s, Wollstonecraft was able to imagine that she knew

what life must be like for Muslim women. Because she believed she knew what their life was like, she was able to dismiss their intelligence, unique perspective, and possible differences from herself without ever inquiring about them" (194). As she highlights in the epilogue to the book, the white saviour feminism that developed in Wollstonecraft's wake has not only served as justification for military intervention in majority-Muslim countries but has also allowed Islamist governments to undermine local feminist movements by associating them with Western imperialism. On both ends, the losers remain Muslim women.

*Novel Cleopatras* (which was previously reviewed by Gillian Dow in *ECF* 34, no. 1 [2021]: 120–22) traces back even further than Cahill to the English novel's classical heritage, in which Virgil's *Aeneid* served as a model for rewriting the epic tradition using the framework of romance, as it appears in the Dido episode of the *Aeneid*. Horejsi shows how women were not completely excluded from classical thought, despite the limitations on their formal education. Romance historiography, as defined in *Novel Cleopatras*, necessitates widening the trajectory of the novel geographically as well as generically: when defined against the realist novel that traces its genealogy domestically, romance and its descendants draw on a global tradition: the *Aeneid* is joined by other international sources such as Plutarch's *Lives*, the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, and histories of the Ottoman sultans. Horejsi opens perhaps surprisingly not with the classical figures of Cleopatra and Dido but with the story *Inkle and Yarico*, the popular narrative that first appeared in the mid-seventeenth century, was fictionalized by Richard Steele in the *Spectator*, and eventually became a popular comedic afterpiece on the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century stage. By applying her Dido frame—with the enslaved Amerindian woman as the Dido to the English merchant Inkle's Aeneas—to one of the most popular romance/tragedies of Caribbean slavery, Horejsi foregrounds the global stakes of her argument around genre in the period. The generic hierarchy of epic, history, and romance in these classical debates was embroiled in the contemporary discourses of empire, as "generic hegemony can easily serve as a script for other kinds of domination" (Horejsi, 191).

In the first part of *Novel Cleopatras*, book 4 of the *Aeneid* with its tale of Dido is investigated as a fusing of the romance and epic traditions. Virgil's *Aeneid*, in many ways a retelling of the *Odyssey*, is the next major contributor to the epic tradition after Homer. The epic, with its stories of great men and civilizations written in languages almost exclusively read by elite men, was coded as masculine while the romance tradition,

as later described in Clara Reeve's *The Progress of Romance* (1785), was associated with women. Dido disrupts this binary, a figure of romance (a mythological character with a doomed love) appearing in one of the major empire-defining epics. This argument is further developed in the second part, which traces the way that histories of the real-life Cleopatra are told through romance, destabilizing the generic divisions between "masculine" history and classics with "feminine" romance and the novel. In Horejsi's framing, Cleopatra is the historical version of Dido, "driven from history into romance—transformed from the politically savvy queen of Egypt to Antony's foredoomed seductress" (7). The fusing of romance and history allowed writers like Charlotte Lennox and Reeve to show how only modern romance has opened space for classical narratives to be told in a way that centres women's experiences.

One of the most compelling interventions of both these monographs is the way they incorporate collections of texts not normally included in narratives of the development of the British novel. Cahill's readings of Anglican tracts and pamphlets show how the language used by advocates for women's education and political personhood came from religious orthodoxy battles that were not primarily concerned with women's emancipation. Horejsi is one of the few Anglo-American scholars to argue for romance as a contemporary—not progenitor—of the realist novel, as they were read and written well into the realist novel's mid-century heyday. Both *Intelligent Souls?* and *Novel Cleopatras* gesture to the next phase of scholarship in the global eighteenth century, where even arguments not primarily about transcultural representation centre the ways that empire, slavery, and other global encounters shaped literary discourse.

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