

John Michael Archer. *Old Worlds: Egypt, Southwest Asia, India, and Russia in Early Modern English Writing*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. ix + 240 pp. \$49.50. Review by GALINA YERMOLENKO, DESALES UNIVERSITY.

John Archer's *Old Worlds* joins the growing body of colonial and cultural materialist studies of early modern Europe. Through eyewitness travel narratives, second-hand compendia of geographical and historical knowledge, and literary texts, the book explores the discourse of "decline" of the Old World non-European civilizations—i.e., the emergence of racial, sexual, and gender stereotypes about Egypt, Southwest Asia, Russia, and India—in early modern English writing. Archer's work does much to address the current lack of attention toward pre-eighteenth-century writings about Africa and Asia in current scholarship. Although Western scholarship on early modern Russia is rather well developed, and despite Russia's never having been part of civilized antiquity, Archer adds Russia to this list as an anti-model to the rest of the old worlds, an inheritor to the old anti-civilization of Scythia.

The book's major claim is that the English views of the old Eastern civilizations underwent radical reinterpretation during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—from the veneration of them as cradles of learning and civilization, in the classical and biblical traditions, to a racist and supremacist perception of them as morally degenerate and decadent "peripheries." Reading early modern texts against classical authoritative sources on geographical and cultural knowledge allows the author to show the rewriting of "European traditions about a plural antiquity from the English perspective, with consequences for developing notions of racial and sexual difference" (19).

Archer connects this shift with the nascent capitalist expansion of early modern Europe and the ensuing new "international division of labor"—a claim largely informed by the neo-Marxist methodology, such as the world-systems theory of Wallerstein and Braudel with its interest in the "disposition of social relations across a geographical area" (5). At times, however, it is unclear to what

extent Archer relies on or critiques the world-systems theory. Wallerstein's claims that race is the "product and expression of the international division of labor between core and periphery" (9) and that such division legitimizes the exploitation of some groups by other groups within the system (6) underlie Archer's main argument. On the other hand, the validity of the world-systems theory for studying early modern Europe's role in the Old World is undercut by the author's critique of Wallerstein's rise-fall cyclical model (see 7; 68). Relying on a large body of recent cultural studies, Archer would modify the otherwise workable world-systems theory, advocating that "changes within economic systems be ascribed to chaotic, and sometimes violent, restructurings rather than regular cycles" and that the "'rise' and 'fall' model should be conceived as a restructuring of preexistent world economies" (7).

Early modern restructuring, argues Archer further, was taking place along gender lines: while the consumption of foreign luxury goods by European women was made synonymous with the process of "civilization" in early modern imagination, the colonized cultures (particularly oriental women) were more and more associated with corrupt and sterile sexuality (cf. 7-8).

Modeling, or "the systematic imagining of the world, and of the old worlds of Africa, South Asia, and Russia, in European texts" (11), forms the second methodological concept informing Archer's study. The idea of modeling provides a useful corrective to the systematic models of Wallerstein and Braudel in that "the analysis of models and systems in cultural theory can be used to expose the interests they inevitably perpetuate and partly serve" (18). Archer proposes that some aspects of the world-systems theory be combined with the critique of global models.

Overall, Archer's book is a meticulous study of a vast number of primary and secondary sources, and the author's erudition on the subject is very impressive. He skillfully combines ample research data with his own insights and delights the reader with in-depth discussions of—among other things—the Egyptian sphinx, the etymology of the word "slave" in various languages, the location of Eden, and the Hindu practice of *sati*.

The combination of travel narratives with literary texts in Archer's study raises, however, a few concerns. While the changes in perception can be more objectively traced in travel accounts and geographical narratives, establishing such clear-cut shifts in literary texts can be fraught with uncertainty. To what extent do early modern literary texts—known for their complexities and ambiguities—reflect, confirm, or go against the mainstream views?

This uncertainty is particularly noticeable in chapter 1, which shows how the mixed, complex view of Egypt in geographical compendia of antiquity was rewritten in the first decade of the seventeenth century to associate this region with decadence. While discussing the classical sources (Herodotus, Diodorus, and Heliodorus) in great detail, the chapter rather briefly overviews a few early modern travel accounts on Egypt (cf. 38–42), and the weight of the argument is placed almost entirely on Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*. Archer's reading of Cleopatra as "Egypt" invokes gender, sexual, and racial stereotypes, but does not show definitively that the play confirms the model of degeneration. The author argues that Egypt was reconstructed in early modern English travel and geographical accounts as a land of monuments and a "place where gender relations were inverted" (60), but he also admits elsewhere in this chapter that Shakespeare's play both "registers the tendency toward degeneration in the early-seventeenth-century discourse on Egypt" and contains "the signs of the other, still mainstream version of Egypt and its antiquity" (45). At the end of this chapter, the reader is left with the impression that Shakespeare presented the dead Cleopatra as a wonderful piece of work (61) and that early modern English fantasy of Egyptian empire was not altogether unattractive. Hence, the author's statements that *Anthony and Cleopatra* "coincides" with the shift in representation of Egypt and that it "both confirms and challenges the way Egypt was coming to be regarded during the period" (20) sound rather inconclusive. Another concern, in this regard, is whether Renaissance narratives of decline should always be viewed as narratives of moral or sexual degeneration.

It appears that literary texts, such as Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* or Milton's *Paradise Lost* (chapter 2), transcend the clear-cut model of the old world's moral degradation. Although *Paradise Lost* regards all despotism as oriental (99), it also suggests that the glorious Babylonian paradise cannot be regained, not so much because of the region's fall into degeneration, but because of the fallen language and the impossibility to find "one's way back to Paradise through human knowledge about the external world" (91). Moreover, Milton's poem resists the very culture of consumption and commodification that contemporaneous travel accounts celebrate (98-99). As the author shows, in the figure of Milton's Satan—a veritable Renaissance traveler and explorer (86)—the poem criticizes the new imperial drive of the Restoration England, with its commercial ambition and hunger for territory (99).

The portrayal of Russia as "other"—in terms of race, sexuality, and gender in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, and John Fletcher's *The Loyal Subject*—in chapter 3 is likewise uneven. English perception of the uncivilized Scythia and of early modern Russia had remained essentially unchanged: Russia inherited Scythia's uncertain status, in the antique tradition, as both a civilization and anti-civilization. The author focuses more on English "anxiety of influence"—the anxiety of a growing empire about the barbarous Russia's limitless space and lawless excess. Early modern Russia provided such a vast collection of vices for early modern English imagination—servility, barbarism, crudity, drunkenness, darkness of skin ("Russian blackness"), overuse of face painting by women, and sodomy, to name a few—that the author's claims about their literary representations become at times overwhelming. When Archer stresses early modern English associations of Russia with sodomy, are we to assume that Sidney's comparing himself to a "slave-born Muscovite," in *Astrophil and Stella*, also carries this association?