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French Orientalism: Culture, Politics, and the Imagined Other

Desmond Hosford and Chong J. Wojtkowski

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In 1798, Napoleon I launched his Egyptian Campaign and opened what has become recognized as the canonic period of French Orientalism, which extends from the late eighteenth through the early twentieth century. As defined by Edward W. Said (Orientalism, 1978), Orientalism is intrinsically Eurocentric and places the Orient in opposition to the European West as the quintessentially foreign Other. In this sense, the Occident supposedly defines itself by gazing at the East as its inverse image and purportedly asserts a geopolitical dominance materially confirmed through imperialism and colonization. Although Europe may cast the Orient as the archetypal Other, this necessarily entails deep conflict since the Orient is also frequently posited as the source of Western civilization, which prohibits the articulation of a complete separation between Europe and the Orient. Nevertheless, according to French Orientalist discourse, the East had fallen into barbarism, inertia, and languished, awaiting the mission civilisatrice by which France followed a heroic undertaking of universal enlightenment. The canonic approach to Orientalism has drawn much criticism, which calls for reexamining the notion of French Orientalism, broadening the scope of enquiry, and exploring the history and ideological strategies behind French formulations of the Orient from the Middle Ages through the twenty-first century. Such an expanded field of investigation reveals that the canonic Orientalist paradigm is not universally applicable, particularly regarding material from before the late eighteenth century. New theoretical, literary, historical, philosophical, and cultural perspectives provide the opportunity to deploy, question, subvert, and resituate canonic Orientalist theories, revealing the continuing evolution and relevance of French Orientalism as a notion with global stakes and material consequences. Because of its broad scope and variety of theoretical approaches, this volume will interest scholars and students from a wide spectrum of disciplines, including literature, gender studies, history, theater, art history, music, cinema, and cultural studies.

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