

BOOK REVIEWS

Marie-Christine Pioffet. *Espaces lointains, espaces rêvés dans la fiction romanesque du Grand Siècle*. Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2007. Pp. 285.

Marie-Christine Pioffet has performed a service of great value for those scholars interested in the history of the novel, early modern France, and the problems of geography and its depiction in a period of expanding global horizons. In discussions of dozens of seventeenth-century novels and *nouvelles*, from the works of Madeleine de Scudéry and Marin Le Roy de Gomberville to far less well known *réécits* such as François Du Soucy de Gerzan's *Histoire africaine de Cleomede et de Sophonisbe* (1627-1628) and Eustache Le Noble's *Ildegerte reine de Norvège, ou l'amour magnanime* (1694), Pioffet offers meticulous accounts of the source materials – geographies, atlases, and travel narratives—that inform these portrayals of far-away lands. Pioffet has scoured the literally tens of thousands of pages of the works she examines for every possible description of the physical world, and discovers, in contrast to much received scholarly wisdom concerning the early French novel, that these authors often drew very precisely on new forms of available geographic knowledge.

In fact, unlike many contemporaneous travel accounts to the New World and other distant parts of the globe which, as Pioffet shows, often tended to exaggerate and sensationalize the geographic features of unknown worlds in an effort to fascinate and entertain, seventeenth-century novels, constrained by requirements of decorum and verisimilitude, often present far more sober and surprisingly accurate portraits of topographic features and geographic scale. In a lengthy introduction Pioffet shows how many novelists reflected at length on the problems of integrating rapidly accumulating knowledge of world geography with the often competing demands of narrative economy. Seven chapters follow, each of which examines the portrayal of a different region of the world, including the Americas, northern and southern Africa, the Middle East, China, Persia, Scandinavia, and the *Îles fortunées*. In each case, Pioffet begins by examining maps and geographic accounts of each region before turning to the novels that recast them with varying degrees of narrative emphasis. One of the principal merits of these comparisons is that they give lie to the notion that geographic depiction in prose fiction of the seventeenth century always either conforms to poetic convention or presents merely an exoticized France “in disguise.” As Pioffet writes with respect to the Persia of Scudéry's *Artamène, ou le Grand Cyrus*, “On ne peut guère concevoir toutes les descriptions toponymiques comme un simple miroir de la France sans verser dans la caricature” (141).

Scudéry's handling of geography exemplifies Pioffet's larger argument, which is implied rather than directly stated: the early modern novel is a fertile environment for observing the impact on aesthetic forms of evolving concepts of world and location. Pioffet might have explored more fully the epistemological implications of the shift she identifies from a reliance on imaginary, even mythological worlds to a concern for mathematical principles in geographic depiction. But this is not her purpose. Instead, Marie-Christine Pioffet seeks to demonstrate how and where early modern French novels drew in increasingly sophisticated ways on the geographic erudition of their contemporaries—and this she expertly does.

JEFFREY N. PETERS
University of Kentucky