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Efterpi Mitsi, Greece in Early English Travel Writing, 1596–1682

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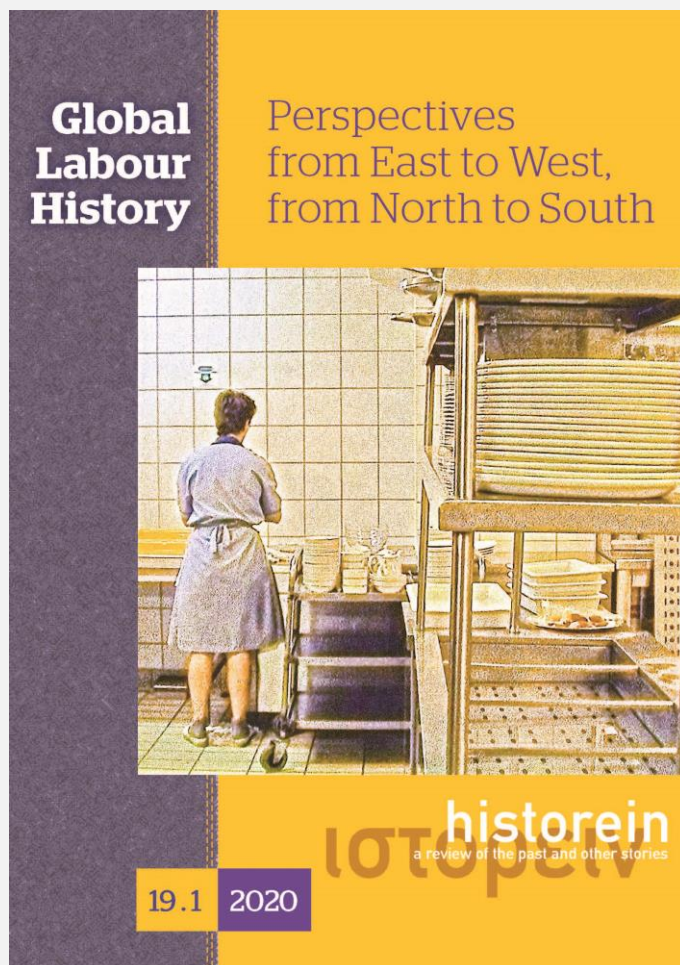
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Efterpi Mitsi

Greece in Early English Travel Writing, 1596–1682

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 206 pp.

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Efterpi Mitsi is one of Greece's most prolific scholars of early modern English literature. Characterised by good sense, a thorough command of sources and clear, straightforward prose, her work is testimony not only to her own enthusiasm for her chosen field, but also to the current good health of early modern English Studies in Greece. The volume under review is no exception, being a rich treasure trove of carefully researched and well-presented information. It is also evidence of a burgeoning interest in a nation which, in the wake of its debt crisis of 2009–2010, has become a modish subject of academic fascination, its recent fall reawakening enquiry into the millennial tragedy of Greece. Cradle of democracy and western philosophy, literature and art, quite how the splendour that was Greece lost its shine and fell into ruin remains something of a mystery to many outside the Hellenic peninsula. This fuzzy gap in the collective European historical imagination is in sharp contrast to the well-known story of the decline of Rome, and one of the welcome side effects of Mitsi's book is the contribution of its microhistories to filling in that macrohistorical void. Predictably, but no less fittingly, the ambivalent trope of the ruin is central to a narrative in which a politically, socially and morally dilapidated present evokes a glorious past.

Why Greece should have become Europe's notionally peripheral carrion whereas Italy remains one of its darlings is explicable in terms of the latter's resurgence from the ashes of history during the Renaissance, which reinvented ancient Rome as the metonymy of European classicalism and exemplar of European imperialism. Greece may have given us Apelles and Phidias and Alexander, but all the plaudits went to Italy while Greece, suffering beneath the Ottoman yoke, was forced to look eastwards and would not rejoin the European train until romantics like Lord Byron championed its cause during the Greek War of Independence and inveighed against Lord Elgin's looting of the Parthenon friezes. Greece's only claims to Europe's attention are fated, it seems, to rest on its ruins, whether archaeological or economic and financial.

Mitsi's book illuminates one century of Greece's benighted existence beyond the

European footlights and probes expertly its culturally, geographically and existentially liminal status as a nation caught alternatively between East and West or between a glorious past and an ignominious present. It does so through her presentation of the testimonies of five early modern travellers, one Greek, three Englishmen and one Scot. In this sense, Mitsi goes far beyond the narrower limits of her stated aim of showing “how travel became a means of collecting and disseminating knowledge about ancient Greek sites but also to analyze the construction of Greece and the Greeks in the travelogues within a specific historical and cultural framework” (5–6). Much more than simply recovering for students of early modern travel literature a relatively neglected geopolitical territory and “question[ing] conventional modes of understanding” that literature (6), Mitsi’s book provides much food for thought regarding the historical configuration of Europe’s political and cultural identity.

After a first introductory chapter providing basic information about late Elizabethan trading and political relations between England and the Ottoman Empire, setting out the chief goals of the book and reviewing previous work in the field, Chapter 2 presents us with the life and some of the writings of Christophorus Angelos, a Greek religious exile who arrived in England in 1608 and, after a spell at Cambridge, would teach Greek at Oxford until his death in 1638. His autobiographical pamphlet of 1617 narrates his ordeals in Ottoman Athens, while other works stress the ties uniting England and Greece via Constantine and his Bythinian mother, Helen, and affinities between the English and Greek churches. Thus, for practical reasons of survival and national origin, Angelos purveys a conciliatory view of Anglo-Greek relations whereas others are disjunctive. The chapter also offers a tantalising glimpse of the not inconsiderable community of Greek exiles in England and only disappoints in the disproportion between the lengthy analysis of the drawings that accompanied Angelos’ pamphlet, *The Praise of England*, and the attention to its contents.

Chapter 3 focuses on two English travellers to Greece – or, rather, through Greece – since Greece was almost always a staging post en route to Turkey or the Holy Land, never the final destination. Fynes Moryson and Thomas Dallam both visited some of the Greek islands, the former in 1596 as part of his well-known “Itinerary” (1617), the latter on his way in 1599 to Constantinople, where at Queen Elizabeth’s behest he was to present Sultan Mehmed III with the mechanical organ he had designed and built himself. Moryson travelled, as it were, for pleasure, Dallam for business, but neither was spared the physical privation and hardship of early modern travel. A key event in Moryson’s journey was the death of his brother, which took away his appetite for visiting monuments. Dallam’s account is perhaps of greater interest: a victim of both Protestant and Muslim iconoclasm and precursor of cultural theft, he emerges in his narrative not only as viewer but also as viewed, noting how his own alterity becomes the cause for wonder among the islanders of Zante and Chios. Thus, Dallam’s account is further testimony to the incipient cultural relativism which characterises much late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century travel

writing. The chapter also alludes in passing to the large numbers of Englishmen stranded for one reason or another in the eastern Mediterranean and forced to “turn Turk” in order to avoid persecution or slavery.

Chapter 4 considers poet, translator and “Christian humanist” (95) George Sandys’ description of Greece and the Greeks in *Relation of a Journey* (1615). Unlike the other travellers dealt with in this volume, Sandys keeps a lower profile and uses classical texts to restore some sense of the glorious past of what had been reduced to ruin. Mitsi argues that this is symptomatic of Sandys’ broader view of history as a cyclical process and his moral dread of tyranny and decay; also, echoing Pollard,¹ that as a consequence of the citational nature of Sandys’ text, his actual journey is transformed “into a voyage of the imagination” (93) – but isn’t any journey necessarily imaginary once consigned to words and read by a third party? Of more interest is Mitsi’s view of Sandys as a “(proto)orientalist” who “foreshadows the desire of western travellers in the following centuries to establish a genealogy of European civilization through the ‘orientalization’ of Greek culture” (106).

Chapter 5 takes on the eccentric Scot William Lithgow, like Fynes Moryson a traveller by vocation, but unlike him, Dallam and Sandys, a visitor to mainland Greece as well as the islands. As did other early modern travellers faced with travel writing’s conventionally fraught relations with veracity,² Lithgow converts his own body, inscribed with the marks of his travails, into his principle token of truth (while blithely plagiarising other travellers to Greece). Mitsi brings this out well enough but is less convincing on Lithgow’s purported forging of a Scottish Protestant self-image in opposition to English and Greek (and other) other-images. What was the English other-image Lithgow reacted against if, on the one hand, they were effeminate in their penchant for Ionian currants but, on the other, were represented by a most admirably manly diplomat at the Porte, Sir Thomas Glover, while a certain John Smith rescued the Scot from arrest in Crete? As for the Greeks, they oscillate between the boundless generosity of the Athenians and the dissembling shiftiness of stereotype. This illogicality is the consequence of Mitsi’s occasional tendency to apply over-determinist theoretical frames to erratic, eclectic and often self-contradictory primary material. Belonging as it does to Palgrave’s *New Transculturalisms* series, the book’s forays into theory respond more, perhaps, to the editorial line than to the contents of the texts it discusses. But it is surely stretching things to convert, following van Heijnsbergen,³ Lithgow’s garrulous, incontinent and heterogeneous work into a tidy narrative of Protestant self-justification. Earlier, apropos of Dallam’s organ, Mitsi quotes one critic⁴ to the effect that the vibrations caused by musical soundwaves blur the binary of self and other, a bizarre claim which bears little scrutiny (76). On the same page, she quotes another to the effect that in the early modern period identity was “not an object but a process”, particularly so in the eastern Mediterranean. It is questionable that any authority for the truism of identity as process needs citing, also that identity is more or less a process depending on geographical location; while how identity could ever have been conceived of as an “object” is a complete mystery.

Allied to this occasional resort to questionable theory is an understandable drive to over-read the texts themselves. Thus, “by humanising the organ ... Dallam foregrounds his own gifts to the foreign culture, his talent, craftsmanship and music, in addition to his own adaptability, as the qualities that enable the social interaction of the traveller” (69); or, “the image of the divers [of Symi] searching the bottom of the Aegean Sea for shipwreck treasures is a visual parallel of [Sandys’] own desire to dive deep into the past and salvage its broken pieces for the present” (111). Which critic of early modern travel writing has not been misled by the natural and growing affection they feel towards their chosen texts to find literary gold in unpretentious dross?

The chapter on Lithgow ends with a lengthy discussion of his and Thomas Coryat’s exploits at Alexandria Troas, the inauthentic site of the Troy of legend which was also visited by Dallam and Sandys. This material is attractive but somewhat expands the book’s geographical scope.

The final chapter entails a leap of almost 70 years to George Wheler’s *A Journey into Greece* (1682), the narrative of one of the first journeys to take Greece as its final destination rather than a port of call. After a succinct account of Arundel’s and Buckingham’s antiquarian plundering in the 1620s, Mitsi introduces Dutch-born Wheler and the other members of his party, among them Francis Vernon (missing from the chapter title), who can justly claim to be the first English traveller to show a genuinely historical and scientific interest in the archaeological heritage of Athens, as recorded in his 1676 letter to the Royal Society, which Mitsi discusses at length. A botanist, Wheler innovates by including careful descriptions of plants as well as his own maps and drawings; he is also less disparaging of the Greeks than earlier travellers, perhaps, as Mitsi suggests, because the English identity was by then more self-confident, perhaps because under the scientific revolution, in which Wheler was a minor participant himself, inherited prejudice and stereotype were giving way to objectivity and openness.

Mitsi’s book suggests a number of lines of enquiry for pursuit by interested scholars, for whom it will provide an excellent starting point. While providing much information about Greece, the focus is very much on each of the travellers, their biographies and texts. In this sense, readers looking on the strength of the book’s title for a synoptic account of Greece as seen by English travellers arranged into thematic chapters (antiquity, geography and nature, economy, politics, society and customs, women, etc.) may be slightly disappointed. Readers with an interest in the historical and biographical sitedness of early modern English travel writing about Greece will, in contrast, be amply rewarded.

¹ Lucy Pollard, “‘Every stone tells a story’: The Uses of Classical Texts by Seventeenth-century English Visitors to Greece and Asia Minor,” *Classical Receptions Journal* 4, no. 1 (2011): 54.

² See, for example, Jonathan P. A. Sell, *Rhetoric and Wonder in English Travel Writing, 1560–1613* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 145–54, and Sell, “Embodying Truth in Early Modern English Travel Writing,” *Studies in Travel Writing* 16, no. 3 (2012): 227–41.

³ Theo van Heijnsbergen, “William Lithgow’s ‘Fierce Castalian Veine’: Travel Writing and the Re-Location of Identity,” in *The Apparelling of Truth: Literature and Literary Culture in the Reign of James VI: A Festschrift for Roderick J. Lyall*, ed. Kevin J. McGinley and Nicola Royan (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 223–40.

⁴ Jennifer Linhart Wood, “An Organ’s Metamorphosis: Thomas Dallam’s Sonic Transformations in the Ottoman Empire,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 15, no. 4 (2015).