

Suzanne L. Marchand

Louisiana State University
President German Studies Association

Orientalism and the Classical Tradition in Germany

Berlin Program GSA Distinguished Lecture
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Report



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President, German Studies Association

Boyd Professor of History, Louisiana State University

Opening Remarks: Elke Löschhorn, International Affairs, Freie Universität Berlin

Introduction and Moderation: Paul Nolte, Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut, Freie Universität Berlin

Commentary: Christian Jansen, FB III Geschichte, Universität Trier

It was a particular pleasure this year to have Suzanne Marchand, President of the German Studies Association and Boyd Professor of History at LSU, deliver the annual Berlin Program Distinguished Lecture. Her visit to Berlin underscores the transatlantic cooperation between the North-American GSA and the Freie Universität that the Berlin Program is founded on, and is also felicitous given the seminal role research groups at the FU have played in her field of intellectual history or *Wissenschaftsgeschichte*.

In her talk Professor Marchand described the formation of *Orientalistik* in the German-speaking world and its close relationship with the ever-popular study of ancient Greece. Critical of disciplinary histories that cull off one field and focus only on its internal debates, Marchand emphasized the importance of seeing Oriental philology in relation to larger cultural movements and the histories of other academic areas. As she puts it, Orientalism, like Classical Studies, was the child of Christian humanism, but one that was left behind when Classicism became secular around 1790. Her argument centered on two flowerings of the discipline that book-ended the 19th century, both of which were characterized by Orientalist philology not becoming disconnected from religious considerations as Classicism had. The field owed much to the proficiency in text-critical scholarship brought about by Enlightenment philhellenism, but challenged the same by asking the unpopular question of just how much ancient Greece was indebted to the East.

Despite the decipherment of hieroglyphics and cuneiform, and Friedrich Schlegel's 1808 promise that Sanskrit contained the origins of "everything, everything...without exception," interest in Orientalism remained lukewarm through the mid-19th century and those few intrepid scholars who devoted their lives to it had difficulty finding academic posts and thus a sustainable living,

and were viewed as eccentrics. To be an Orientalist meant choosing otherness, turning away from Greece and Europe. In order to avoid a variety of pitfalls that accompanied this step, including challenges aligning Eastern pre-history with Western and particularly biblical chronologies, the separation of myth from historical “hard fact,” and to shield themselves from theologians' attacks, Orientalists of this period tended to stick to (dead) language study. Here they had plenty of work to do, as Marchand characterized even the narrow focus on grammatical issues meant cutting a path through a dense thicket of linguistic confusion, stopping at every step to reinvent the axe.

Then, in the age of high positivism suspicious of Greek sources and the humanist philologists who had established them, and with the beginning of state-funded archaeology after 1871, there was a resurgence of interest in the East. This continued to gain steam toward the end of the century when, in the Wilhelminian crisis of faith there was a collective search for a new spirituality as well as a predilection for essentialized concepts such as “Chinese wisdom” or “Persian purity.” Publishers scrambled to keep up with a large public appetite for works scholarly and otherwise, and growing anti-Semitism fueled the search for a pre-history untainted with Judaism as biblical scholarship was.

The 1890s brought new academic specializations, and the fascination with the origins of religions typified this Orientalist renaissance as it had a century before, the study of religious texts persisting into the 20th century among its most prominent scholars. Still, for a number of reasons also including racial prejudice, Orientalism never managed to supplant Graecophilia in Germany or even permanently make its way into the standard secondary curriculum.

In identifying significant disciplinary interrelationships involving *Orientalistik* and laying out the diverging foci, motives and accomplishments of a dazzling array of individual scholars at work in it, Marchand's talk achieved a historicization of the trope 'classics' as well as a transculturalization of German history. True to Professor Nolte's designation of her as a “splitter,” not a “lumper,” Marchand's talk diverged decisively from the persistent discourse on Orientalism following Edward Said's 1978 thesis that the study of the East was pursued under the sign of imperialism. While it is true that the field benefited from the second wave of European conquests as they provided German scholars with increased ability to travel to remote locations and access to source material, the particularly German form of colonialism in this regard was not so much the conquest of modern-day territories as the possession of the ancient past, the oldest texts, the dead Orientalist languages--“*je älter, desto interessanter*.” As the speaker emphasized here and in the discussion, this was undertaken for a wide variety of reasons apart from colonialist aims, and by researchers who likely identified primarily as “Christian,” “Jewish,” “woman,” etc., rather than the unified “European” as Said's thesis assumes. Many pursued issues mainly relevant within their academic fields or a neighboring one, for instance the “improvement” of the bible; others may have initially had imperialist interests but changed their views after extended contact with other cultures. The presentation came to a close with the 1931 quote by Carl Heinrich Becker, who clearly sought contact with, not conquest of, the East:

“We console ourselves, for the most part...with the superiority of our cultivation which we consider to be qualitatively 'higher.' One reveres the uniqueness of the Greek Geist, but with closer contact with this Asian world one cannot help raising the suspicion that our feelings of superiority are built on the quicksand of ignorance.”

Despite Marchand's joking characterization of herself as “a historian of men in grey suits” the subject was clearly met with great interest, as the talk and reception were attended by a broad crosssection of the FU community.

Report written by Tove Holmes, June 2014

Tove Holmes (Ph.D. in German Studies, Johns Hopkins University) teaches in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at McGill and is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies. Her areas of expertise include German-language literature, culture and thought from the 18th century to the present with an emphasis on the late 18th and 19th centuries, perception, intermediality and visual studies, science and intellectual history, as well as cultural, literary, and epistemological approaches to nature and environment. At the Freie Universität Berlin, she is working on a study on Literary Environments.

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