

Thomas Burke's Dark Chinoiserie: Limehouse Nights and the Queer Spell of Chinatown. By Anne Veronica Witchard. Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009. x + 292 pp. \$99.95 cloth.

Thomas Burke's Dark Chinoiserie: Limehouse Nights and the Queer Spell of Chinatown reads Burke's "Limehouse" fiction as part of "the tradition of literary *chinoiseries*" (4) in English from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth. As a "single-author study," this extensively researched project persuasively demonstrates Burke's significant contribution to fin-de-siècle British literature and cultural myth-making. But perhaps the book's more striking accomplishment is how it offers a new model of single-author or single-text scholarship, treating its object not as an isolated case study but as a crux of cultural activity—an articulation of numerous concerns, desires, and obsessions that the book traces both across genres and media forms and along a broad timeline covering several centuries. Few readers with a casual familiarity with Burke and his 1916 collection of stories would be likely to identify *Limehouse Nights* as such an important cultural moment, but Witchard successfully repositions the text from the margins of British culture to its core. In doing so, she also makes a compelling case for the importance of *chinoiserie*, which she reveals to be not merely a transient

aesthetic “craze,” but an essential vein of modern British culture and identity, as dynamic and complex over time as that identity itself.

Until recently, the term “chinoiserie” was used almost exclusively by historians and art historians to identify a particular eighteenth-century movement in decorative arts. Building on recent scholarship in literary and cultural studies that examines the significance of notions of China and Chineseness in modern Western cultures—including, notably, the work of David Porter and Robert Markley—Witchard expands the term to refer to “a wide ranging phenomenon that began in the fourteenth century and which has continued in various manifestations ever since” (12). Contrary to the conventional belief that the movement reached its apex in the late eighteenth century and rapidly petered out during Victoria’s reign, Witchard argues that chinoiserie continued to flourish throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, albeit in different forms that have served different ideological purposes.

The book, organized in five chronological parts, each comprising several chapters focused on individual texts, themes, or genres from that era, unfolds as a genealogy of literary genres in the age of popular entertainment. Part 1 succinctly summarizes the first century or so of China’s presence in English culture as an object of fascination, mapping a general trend from “enchantment” to “disenchantment” over the course of the eighteenth century. Part 2 traces the development of early modern travel narratives into Victorian spectacles of pantomime and burlesque by focusing on the various manifestations of the “Aladdin” tale, which became “a vehicle for thinking about China and Chinese people” (23). Part 3 shows how the late imperial fascination with “darkest London,” particularly Chinatown, generated new kinds of popular fiction, including the “Yellow Peril Thriller” and “Limehouse Tale,” that blurred the line between sensational propaganda and ethnography. Part 4 considers Burke’s Limehouse fiction “as a peculiar intersection of the literary and the populist, just as these determinants were coming into play” (6), shedding light on how chinoiserie itself disrupts the emergent distinction between high and low culture at the turn of the twentieth century. Part 5 focuses on the “nympholeptic desire” (8) that structures Burke’s tales: an erotic fixation on young girls that was initially received uncontroversially, paling in comparison to the scandal of the stories’ scenes of interracial love, but which became more problematic in the later twentieth century, especially following the 1955 publication of Nabokov’s *Lolita*. This concluding section demonstrates that the “queerness” of Burke’s fiction shifts in different cultural contexts, making his stories a barometer of changing cultural mores and anxieties.

Rather than present a unified argument for Burke’s role in modern culture, the book demonstrates the richness of Burke’s fiction as a nexus of cultural problems and fantasies interacting and evolving from the early mod-

ern era to the present. In Witchard's treatment, *Limehouse Nights* serves beautifully as a critical vehicle that provides insight into how ideas flourish in culture both synchronically across media and diachronically across eras. As a study of popular culture in the early twentieth century, *Dark Chinoiserie* offers a trove of information on the proliferation of chinoiserie in this era as well as an account of the deep roots of such seemingly fleeting forms of entertainment as the pantomime or the Yellow Peril thriller. As a contribution to the study of chinoiserie more broadly, the book usefully addresses the question of how the relatively "benign" (33) chinoiserie of the early eighteenth century, when European representations of China were dominated by enthusiastic and laudatory Jesuit reports, turned into the viciously racist and xenophobic chinoiseries of the early twentieth century, popularized by Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu fictions and the stereotypes disseminated through theatrical and cinematic minstrelsy. Approaching this question through Burke's fiction offers us a unique perspective, because, as this study demonstrates, his work is both the quintessential Limehouse fantasy, efficiently incorporating and reorganizing more than a century's worth of British chinoiserie into easily consumable stories of working-class London, and a *strange* deployment of this fantasy, eschewing the straightforward racism of the Fu Manchu model for a more self-contradictory fantasy of a world both squalid and sumptuous, both frightening and alluring—and, perhaps most importantly, both foreign and British. The greater complexity of Burke's version of Limehouse, Witchard suggests, makes it a more accurate representative of British chinoiserie in general, which is similarly self-contradictory and dynamic, especially when viewed as a phenomenon that has persisted in multiple, shifting forms over time.

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