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Jamie Trnka

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## German Studies Association

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### Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The German Discovery of the World: Renaissance Encounters with the Strange and Marvelous* (Studies in Early Modern German History) by Christine R. Johnson

Review by: JAMIE H. TRNKA

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Christine R. Johnson. *The German Discovery of the World: Renaissance Encounters with the Strange and Marvelous* (Studies in Early Modern German History). Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008. Pp. 304. Cloth \$45.

Christine R. Johnson seeks to counter the standard, Baconian analysis of the Iberian circumnavigation of Africa and the conquest of the Americas, which asserts that European “discoveries” were radically different from and proved incommensurable with existing European ways of categorizing and manipulating information about the world. Instead, she argues, Germans mobilized and subsequently modified classical accounts of the foreign to accommodate new empirical knowledge. Early modern thought thus proved more flexible than existing accounts suggest.

Most impressive is Johnson’s analysis of how new and wide-ranging knowledges were rapidly assimilated through translation and paratextual commentary into existing European frameworks. In a significant example, she carefully attends to how Indian and American goods (most importantly herbs and spices) were differently received and contextualized in diverse, local arenas and intra-European debates. Her discussion of medicinal herbs and spices aptly demonstrates how new discoveries were selectively incorporated into German thought on humanist medicine. Revisiting “the well traveled intersection of moral and economic thought” (132), Johnson argues that spices were embedded in existing Christian Scholastic thought on trade and profit, notions of a closed economy (wealth as a zero-sum game), and the emergence of protoindustrial structures in the mercantile system. In her account, arguments in favor of economic self-sufficiency and against dependence on foreign trade inform the exclusion of tropical spices—familiar to Europeans from ancient texts—from medical manuals at the same time as previously unknown plants from the Americas were domesticated and widely incorporated into the same manuals. The “foreignness” of medicinal plants was thus neither absolute nor inherently threatening, but a flexible category assigned positive or negative connotations in concert with a wide range of economic, moral, and cultural factors. Tropical spices from the East Indies could be represented as decadent and even dangerous, while American plants could be made to appear accessible and controllable.

As a corrective to scholarship on the marvelous in sixteenth-century colonial encounters, Johnson’s study brings empirical representations to bear on existing narrative and pictorial representations of the Iberian discoveries. Her attention to the mundane arenas of cosmography (mathematical geography), accounting as a universal system of quantification and equivalences, and the intersection of medical, moral, and economic knowledge is a welcome contribution. She demonstrates the flexibility of existing categories to accommodate new experiences and the advantage of assimilating the new in such a way as to make it accessible and subject to European control. In this respect, she makes a compelling argument against analyses that privilege newness, difference, and the incompatibility of Renaissance knowledge with the Iberian discoveries.

More engagement with scholarship on travel literature would have grounded and strengthened her claim to intervene substantially into early modern German

discussions of sameness and difference. Johnson demonstrates that colonial discoveries were by no means incommensurable with European epistemologies that favored categories, equivalences, and universal laws. However, an erasure of difference does not a similarity make. In her insistence on the ability of existing scientific frames and practices to assimilate new empirical knowledge of Iberian discoveries, Johnson overstates her argument against alterity as an organizing structure of Renaissance thought. Her evidence suggests a more nuanced conclusion: namely, that a radical alterity is *by itself* inadequate to the task of explaining real historical practices of making differences commensurable through abstraction and quantification. A reassessment of the idea of commensurability that dismisses incommensurability or radical alterity does not overcome the rigid opposition that Johnson's careful research uncovers, but merely reverses it.

To take one example, her opening account of German compilation and circulation of Iberian travel narratives is weaker for failing to engage with a rich secondary literature on travel. While not focused exclusively on the Renaissance, widely read studies including Susanne Zantop's *Colonial Fantasies* (1997) and Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (1992) would have provided a more nuanced account of how travel narratives function within and inform larger social imaginings of the colonial world. Fleeting references to Walter Dignolo's *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (1997) likewise point to a more critical examination of cartography and language as constitutive for difference even as they assert the sameness/universality of European scientific categories. At moments such as these, Johnson's analysis begs to be taken to the next level through a more rigorous and multidimensional interpretation of her rich evidentiary base.

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Austra Reinis. *Reforming the Art of Dying: The ars moriendi in the German Reformation (1519–1528)*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007. Pp. viii, 290. Cloth \$114.95.

Dying was a precarious matter in early modern central Europe, and the dying were attended both by clergy and by lay persons when clergy could not be found. These last hours posed grave perils for the soul, because the suffering patient could easily despair or assume a theologically incorrect attitude that might result in eternal damnation. Late medieval theologians, who taught that salvation depended on acts of free will and was therefore uncertain, prepared manuals or *Sterbebücher* for use by those who consoled the dying, and the purpose of these late medieval *ars moriendi* pamphlets was “to keep [dying] people in tension between the two extremes of despair and false security” (246). Reformation theologians, those who preached salvation by faith alone, followed in the tradition of the manuals but modified their content to remind the patients that “salvation had been made available through the work of Christ on the cross and could be appropriated through faith” (247). Salvation was a certainty for the faithful, but individuals had to remain faithful in