

Online Reviews

Cottom, Daniel. *International Bohemia: Scenes of Nineteenth-Century Life*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp. 353. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4488-5

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Although the term bohemia typically conjures images of eccentric, starving artists like those of Henry Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1851)—the “Bible” of bohemia—in his ambitious work Daniel Cottom also evokes less obvious figures such as Dracula, Sherlock Holmes, wandering Jews, *grisettes*, and mulattoes (ix). He explores the way the notion of bohemia transmigrated around the world, where each new country that embraced it refashioned it according to its own socio-historical dictates in the second half of the nineteenth century. Cottom theorizes a bohemia that exists as a “symptom of modernity” that developed in bitter response to the unrelenting promotion of work and capitalism (282). But, he argues, bohemia also serves as “an attempted alternative, escape, and cure” to modern discontents through its privileging of nostalgia and artistic camaraderie (282).

Cottom's work features a preface, seven chapters, and a conclusion. In chapter one, Cottom explores the tenets of French bohemia as a counter culture born in the 1830s and 1840s and promoted by George Sand, Félix Pyat, and Murger. While the boundaries of this community of artists who stereotyped themselves as outcasts and impoverished vagabonds were fluid, bohemians still defined themselves against the poseurs who imitated them. They also rejected the working class and Jews, whom they “generally perceived as” foreign intruders (29). As for women, although Sand enjoyed equal status with her male comrades, most of the bohemian women depicted in memoirs of the period appear chiefly to service “men's desires” (27). The *grisette*, a “sexually available working-class girl” seems to serve the same function, for she is always exploited as a prop in masculine dramas and then ultimately abandoned, as Cottom contends in chapter two (41). Cottom rivets readers with his exploration of the way the Victorian novel “rejects” the *grisette* as a defense against this figure because she “is viewed as bearing the truth of modern desire” (56). Although Cottom examines several English and American novels, he claims that Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* (1860) is the greatest of the “repulsing” works because “it is the most generous in appreciating the enchantment of the pleasure-loving *grisette*” (59). Even if Eliot may have bucked social convention in her personal life, she refuses to allow her heroine, Maggie, “to be the *grisette* she was born to be” (63). Cottom speculates that in doing so, Eliot attempted to “rewrite her own history” (64).

In chapter three, Cottom insists that bohemia posited itself as “a kind of manifesto on the nineteenth-century culture of work,” with key players such as Murger trying to “get out from underneath this culture” (83). Along with *Scènes*, Cottom examines the way Alfred de Vigny's *Chatterton* (1835) transformed the life of eighteenth-century English poet Thomas Chatterton into “a legendary bohemian ancestor” (89). By promoting the bohemian ideals of a right to idleness and to pursue dignity through art and literature, Murger and his fellow bohemians struggled with the conflicts that arose from the valorization of work in the fast-changing modern world.

In chapter four, Cottom explores the legendary life and writings of Alexandre Privat d'Anglemont, who “fully lived” Murger's “myth of bohemia” (124). As a spendthrift bon vivant, Privat charmed his literary comrades in Paris with his witty banter and explored the urban wonders of Paris (121). Moreover, as “racially distinct from other Europeans,” Privat could aptly depict the horrors of

slavery and colonialism. Cottom illustrates the important way Privat does so in his writings about the miserable fate of an Incan king brought to Paris and the Senegambian legend recounting the origins of slavery.

Cottom addresses the American and Italian brands of bohemia in chapters five and six. When he labeled America as the birthplace of Bohemia, Jules Barbey d'Aureville meant it as an insult to the country he viewed as the "land in which the outcasts of all nations found refuge" (146). This barb, however, offers Cottom the perfect opportunity to explore the way the American version "turned Barbey's reactionary spleen into notes of joy, excitement, and pride," particularly in Walt Whitman's poetry (147). Shortly before the outbreak of the Civil War, newspaperman Henry Clapp, Jr. promoted two varieties of bohemia in his *Saturday Press*: one epitomized by the Poet-Poser Whitman—America's "symbolic native son"—and the other by Ida Clare—the Queen of Bohemia: an actress, journalist, and novelist. Meanwhile in Italy, writers translated bohemia into the word *scapigliatura* which Cottom explains had come to signify "disorderliness, dissoluteness, and libertinism in general" in the 1860s (188). He focuses on the works of impoverished Milanese journalist Iginio Tarchetti, who criticized the ways modern capitalist ideologies contaminate friendships and love.

In chapter seven, Cottom concludes that bohemia expired in England. He argues that Bram Stoker, in *Dracula* (1897), his tale of a foreign-born blood-sucker terrorizing London, "represents the fantasized origin of the bohemian." In contrast, Arthur Conan Doyle's character, Sherlock Holmes, "is this figure's fantastic end" (229). Because Holmes can solve any crime, the bohemian, no longer a social outcast, has become "absolutely central to social order" (262). Holmes, then, represents the twilight of bohemia.

Overall Cottom's work offers a thorough theoretical overview of the notion of bohemia around the world. His text, although vast in scope and at times dense, entertains the reader with colorful anecdotes about the exploits of prominent bohemians—real and fictional alike. Graduate students and generalists in French, English, and comparative literatures will find his explanation of the origins of bohemia enlightening and will undoubtedly glean from his well-documented findings new sources of inquiry and research.

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