Features
Don't seek, find; LITRARY CRITICISM

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Louis de Mailly

LES AVENTURES DES TROIS PRINCES DE SERENDIP SUIVI DE VOYAGE EN SÉRENDIPITÉ

Edited by Aude Volpilhac, Dominique Goy-Blanquet and Marie-Anne Paveau 234pp. Thierry **Marchaisse**. €18.

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The Peregrinaggio di tre giovani figliuoli del Re di Serendippo was first published in Venice in 1557. Translated "from the Persian" by the pseudonymous Cristoforo Armeno, it had its roots in ancient Oriental tales. It was taken up twice in France (in 1610 and 1712) before the Chevalier de Mailly (1657-1724), a soldier turned man of letters, published a new translationcum-adaptation in 1719. His version has now resurfaced, neatly edited by Aude Volpilhac.

Set in "happy times when kings were philosophers", it tells how the enlightened Emperor of Serendip (possibly Ceylon is intended) gives his three sons advanced lessons in the art of kingship. To complete their education, he sends them abroad. During their travels, they encounter the ruses des hommes and the malices des femmes familiar to readers of Arabian tales and Old French satires, to which a modern twist is given. Arabia is shown to be institutionally disagreeable: honest women are enslaved, kings callously murder their subjects, and sensuality, cruelty, violence and decadence are the ways of the world.

Thus far, Mailly serves the requirements of the Oriental tale, the vogue for which was stimulated by Galland's translation of the Arabian Nights (1704-17). Hiding behind a front of cruel caliphs, cunning viziers and wily muftis, such stories satirized abuses of France's absolute monarchy and monolithic Church, and struck an early blow for the cause of Enlightenment. But Mailly fails to make good on the promise of a Voltairean "philosophical" tale avant la lettre. He soon wearies of both satire and Armeno's picaresque verve, and invents tales of his own. These prove to be dull specimens of the equally fashionable conte galant which staged games of love, analysed sentiment and made fine distinctions - what is the difference between inconstancy and infidelity? - as a way of showing how individual feelings and social proprieties may be reconciled. A third of the way in, the Orient fades, the characters lose their charm, the narrative slows to a dribble, and the flat, imageless prose unfolds like the tedious sands of a dreary desert.

But this feeble squib was an acorn book. In 1754, Horace Walpole found the kernel of an enduring idea in an early episode which tells how, when faced with a request to find a lost camel, the princes describe it exactly by drawing conclusions from what they have observed. One prince recalls that only the grass on the right side of the path the beast had followed had been grazed. From this random fact he concludes that it was blind in its left eye. It was to prove more than an early example of the experimental method of scientific inquiry which had been generalized by 1750, for Walpole noted with delight that during their travels, the princes discovered, by accident and reason, any number of things they had not been looking for. He called the phenomenon serendipity.

Dominique Goy-Blanquet chronicles the growth of the idea not in France but in the Anglo-Saxon world where it was, but not for a century, taken up by T. H. Huxley, who saw its value as an approach to scientific thinking. The thought of searching for one thing and stumbling across another (Columbus looking for India and discovering America) was wryly accepted as an amusing occurrence. The French did not warm to the idea. They recognized the thing, but had not found a word for it (both trouvaille and the Québecois fortuité overstress the role of chance) even by 2009 when it was still not lexicalized. Perhaps they found the awkward syllables of "sérendipité" too hard to pronounce, though a more plausible culprit is surely Gallic resistance to happenstance, lateral thinking and other eccentricities of Anglo-Saxon empiricism.

Marie-Anne Paveau concludes the edition with a fascinating essay on the epistemological implications of the concept. She reports that serendipity is now widely and modishly established in popular culture,

even in France, as a name for restaurants, boutiques, a cocktail, even a pop group. But as part of an ars cogitandi she insists that more than accident is involved. Serendipity works only for minds made receptive by curiosity and sagacity. The unforeseen has become a useful adjunct to more formal methodologies. She brings us news of the Journal of Serendipitous and Unexpected Results and to induction and deduction (as used by the princes) she adds abduction and retroduction. She also wisely adds another condition: enquirers should not flinch from looking foolish. The man who invented the Post-it note was trying to find a strong glue, but ended up with a tacky substitute in which he saw, not failure, but an opportunity.

Serendipity has ceased to be a quirky phenomenon and is now entering the methodological armoury of the physical, natural, life and computational sciences. But how accidental are accidental discoveries? Must serendipity remain a game of Serene Dip, or can it be annexed and programmed? Can search engines, which use random data to generate results, be regarded as pathways to "manufactured" serendipity? And are their random links ever random? Could probability theory be used to generate happenstantial encounters? Or should we heed ancient wisdom and accept that seeking does not always mean finding? After all, if we ask the way, we shall never get lost.

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