

Reviews

Elena Butoescu. *Literary Imposture and Eighteenth-Century Knowledge: The Tradition of the Literary Faker in England from Marana to Goldsmith*. Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2019. Pp 475. ISBN 978-606-697-092-1 (paperback); ISBN 978-606-697-093-8 (ebook).

Starting life as a PhD dissertation heavily documented at Cambridge University Library, the Bodleian Library and the University of Leeds, Elena Butoescu's book is at once topical and riveting. It zooms in on the eighteenth-century understanding and multifarious meanings attached to imposture and forgery, two "time-honoured" practices whose deontological and, above all, legal relevance can hardly be overlooked in the present copy-paste age. More specifically, the author's aim is to delve into literary forgery, which admittedly emerged in eighteenth-century England as a result of colonial expansion, the proliferation of print culture, the ever-increasing growth in literacy and, last but not least, of the dissemination of knowledge to the masses, an endeavour unstintingly upheld by the Royal Society. By regarding literary imposture as a genre *per se*, Butoescu makes a substantial contribution to "fakery studies," integrating writers such as Giovanni Paolo Marana, Daniel Defoe, George Psalmanazar, George Lyttleton and Oliver Goldsmith in the tradition of literary hoaxes, be they understood as plagiarism, imitation, adaptation, false translation or mere invention of historical facts. Importantly enough, Butoescu never loses sight of the way in which literary fraud made its own contribution to the rise of the novel, pleading for the inclusion of imposturous texts in the field of literary studies.

Butoescu's argument revolves around a complex question she is addressing in relation to a historic and cultural milestone she takes as

her point of departure: “What do literary fakers tell us about late seventeenth and eighteenth century knowledge and the advancement of learning in England after the ‘crisis of the European mind’?” (426). Paul Hazard’s analysis of the crisis of faith and the crisis in understanding the world – which led to the rise of the modern science – enables Butoescu to further explore the questions of “truth” and “nature” (11) in tandem with travel accounts or oriental fables that challenge the late seventeenth-century epistemological and aesthetic norms. Most of them are satires disguised as travel accounts or epistles narrated by a foreign observer who ridicules Western society and politics by transforming Orient into a satirical tool. Such literary imagology exercises were initiated by Marana in 1687 and perpetuated until a new type of forgery, i.e. compilation, was augured by Goldsmith in his *Citizen of the World* (1762). Working with this timeframe, the author seeks to record the critical reception of impostors, not their cultural behaviour, since, argues Butoescu, literary forgery is “a reaction against the canon and the establishment” (20). This original perspective adds to the author’s endeavour to trace a genealogy of literary conventions employed in the novels of the period under scrutiny, particularly because a neglected writer like Marana has been considered by critics to be pivotal in producing and spreading knowledge in Europe.

The book’s introductory chapter is a veritable *tour de force*. It invites readers on a conceptual journey on which they are able to understand the relationship between authorship, authority and the history of copyright and ownership. The chapter also outlines the creation of a universal language meant to solve the crisis of authority and thus to advocate the utopian Enlightenment ideal of a universal language shared by all nations. Its connection with imposture is revealed by the case of Psalmanazar and his invention of a Formosan alphabet whose letters are similar to the Greek, Latin and Hebrew ones. The relation between imposture and the invention of the canon in the eighteenth century is very well scrutinised, although the author should have explained in more detail what criteria were devised to account for the selection of emblematic texts in a context in which the supply-and-demand principle underlying the literary market of the time allowed for the illegal multiplication of original editions, pirated editions or the illegal reproduction of translations and imitations. Concepts like “forgery” and “plagiarism” are minutely tackled

and seen both in conjunction with the 1709 copyright law enforced under the reign of Queen Anne and the unstable status of the eighteenth-century reader who was still deprived of any accurate means of detecting literary forgery.

A foray into the history of literary imposture from the eighteenth-century to the present, with clear semantic demarcations between imitation and plagiarism, is the subject of Chapter 2. Butoescu stresses that criticism has treated literary forgeries as mere “curiosities of literature,” to use the words of Isaac D’Israeli, and that fakers were unmasked a century later. The blend of historiography and legal matters helps Butoescu examine fraudulent fictions as “crimes of writing” (30), a phrase attached by twentieth-century critics like Susan Stewart. Siding with K.K. Ruthven, who claims that literary imposture should be included in the study of literature because it helped the latter improve its narrative techniques, Butoescu has recourse to Gérard Genette’s notion of “paratext” so as to focus, in a more applicable manner, on the persuasive power of prefaces, digressions or other rhetorical devices in Chapter 3. Marana’s *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy* is a telling example, since it “launched the tradition of the foreign observer type of writing in Europe”, on the one hand, and “anticipated the tradition of the fraudulent literary translations in the English language” (Butoescu 31-32), with Defoe and Psalmanazar as the most conspicuous successors of Marana.

A sequel to the previous section, Chapter 4 shows how books circulated from France to England in the early eighteenth century and centres on fraud taken as imitation, translation and adaptation. The various English translations of *The Arabian Nights* and their impact on literature, anthropology and history, as well as the copying of fragments from Montesquieu by Lyttleton or even from one’s own work by Goldsmith determine the author to contend that literary fakers promoted an alternative way of spreading knowledge not only of remote lands, but also of the socio-political affairs of their own country.

The last chapter discusses “the cultural paradox of the Enlightenment” (36) created by literary forgery as a critique of the status quo, which influenced canonical novelists such as Defoe, Swift or Sterne. Butoescu insists on the culturally subversive nature of fraudulent fictions in which the narrators are Europeans dressed in Eastern garments. This

“internal” critique performed by disguised storytellers targets issues such as Christianity, rationality, printing and the eighteenth-century “sincerity crisis” (Novak 116). Concurrently, Butoescu expounds on an “external critique” advocated by literary critics deeply involved in heated debates on both literary imposture and the fertile ground that nourished it between the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries. By connecting what Srinivas Aravamudan has termed as “the chronotope of the spy” (51) with “the chronotope of the literary faker” (Butoescu 38) who actually poses as a fake narrator, Butoescu offers us a counter-image of the Enlightenment, showing how the oriental tale and the surveillance chronicle, or the foreign observer type of writing, were shaped by imitations, translations and transnationalism. They attest to a non-Anglocentric rise of the novel, a hybrid genre which, according to Butoescu, “ignores its literary forefathers” (427). I personally refute such a statement, since the much debated rise of the novel in England has long been examined through the lens of genre theory. Margaret Anne Doody’s *The True Story of the Novel* is a perfect example in this case.

Dense yet easy to read, Butoescu’s book is an indispensable critical source based on anecdotal history, which successfully deconstructs the grand narratives about the Enlightenment paradigm. It is the first book to approach such an exciting topic in Romanian culture and also a fruitful dialogue with our present times, when forgery of all sorts has become the order of the day.

DRAGOȘ IVANA,
University of Bucharest, Romania

Works Cited

- Aravamudan, Srinivas. “Fiction/Translation/Transnation: The Secret History of the Eighteenth-Century Novel.” *A Companion to the Eighteenth-Century English Novel and Culture*. Ed. Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.
- Novak, Maximillian. “Sincerity, Delusion, and Character in the Fiction of Defoe and the ‘Sincerity Crisis’ of His Time.” *Augustan Studies: Essays in Honor of Irvin Ehrenpreis*. Ed. Douglas Lane Patey and Timothy Keegan. Newark: U of Delaware P, 1985.