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The Greek Dream by Monsieur de Choiseul: The Travels of a European of the Enlightenment by Frédéric Barbier (review)

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Book Reviews

Frédéric Barbier, *The Greek Dream by Monsieur de Choiseul: The Travels of a European of the Enlightenment*. Paris: Arman Colin. 2010. Pp. 294. 40 illustrations, 2 maps. Paper \$25.99.

Frédéric Barbier takes us on a long journey, that of a French aristocrat of the Age of Enlightenment, “a man with a dream,” a vision of a Europe in the process of construction, inspired by a “Greek antiquity not only idealized but accomplishable in modernity” (15). Barbier offers us a biography on a figure of the first generation of French Philhellenism. Biographies of male and female travel writers of the past centuries are extremely rare, such as Sture Linnér’s (1965) book on nineteenth century Swedish traveler *Fredrika Bremer i Grekland* (Frederika Bremer in Greece), translated and published in Greek in 1997. Barbier provides the first biography of Count Marie-Gabriel-Florent-Auguste de Choiseul-Gouffier (1752–1817; henceforth, Choiseul), a fervent admirer of ancient Greek civilization.

Barbier’s book consists of nine chapters, in addition to the author’s acknowledgements (11–12), an epilogue (269–275), and a portrait of Choiseul (277), followed by a bibliographical appendix (279–286), an index (287–297), and a table of 40 illustrations (299–300) from *Voyage pittoresque de la Grèce*, which include three illustrations of the women of Sifnos (105), Tinos (144), and Constantinople (265). By focusing on one specific traveler, here a French aristocrat during the Enlightenment, Barbier contributes to the research of other scholars on Philhellenism, while also shedding light on the spirit of the time. Through the travel accounts of Choiseul—*Le voyage pittoresque de la Grèce* (published in three volumes in 1782, 1809, and 1824)—Barbier illustrates the major social changes marking the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries: the French Revolution, Napoleon as First Council, the Congress of Vienna and Treaty of Paris, the Conservative Order and Counter-Enlightenment, the uprisings in Greece, and so forth. The intense concern of France in the affairs of the Near East and the imminence of the liberation of the Greeks is brought out by many travelers like Charles Nicolas Sigisbert Sonnini

de Manoncourt (1751–1812), a French nobleman, in his publication *Voyage en Grèce et en Turquie* (Sonnini 1801). During this period of social and political transformations, many western travelers like Choiseul visited and explored Greece—and not only for pleasure, profit, and culture. American and European volunteers participated in the struggle for Greek independence, producing, among other things, a body of travel writing about Greece (Larrabee 1957). Philhellenism in France had reached its peak during the Greek insurrection between the years 1820 and 1830, as illustrated in Emile Malakis's dissertation (1925) on French travelers to Greece from 1770 to 1820.

Barbier's book, written in French, begins with a quote from Choiseul's *Discourse préliminaire du voyage pittoresque en Grèce* (Choiseul-Gouffier 1789–1824, 9), which is indicative of the philhellenic spirit of his time: "I left Paris to visit Greece, as I wanted to satisfy a passion of my youth and see the most famous places in antiquity . . . the illustrious and beautiful *topos* of Homer and Herodotus." Many Western scholars and travel writers were convinced that Greece would soon experience a reawakening and a *New Hellas* would be created, free of Ottoman domination. Royalists, liberals, romanticists, classicists, and ordinary individuals all entered the philhellenic ranks. Scholars, both men and women of letters, joined with the poets in drawing attention to a "Greece in bondage" (Malakis 1925).

Barbier's introductory chapter, "Europe, Greece and the Orient," is a welcome contribution, as it deals with the political conditions of Choiseul's world. Choiseul was a Hellenist and Philhellene with a vision enabled by the advantages provided through his social position as a member of the nobility (36–60). Choiseul's originality, the author argues, is that he integrated the unexplored lands of Greek antiquity into the established travel model of his time, along with an instructive album of new images (maps, illustrations, and so on) (52). Barbier also argues that Choiseul's interest in Greece "was not simply a question of fashion" (51), the trend of the times, but something more profound: a passion, a life of meaning, and a calling, which included a scholarly orientation and a political goal (36–60). However, Barbier should have also mentioned that it was not Choiseul alone who accomplished this. Prior to Choiseul, the *Voyage Littéraire de la Grèce* by Pierre Augustin Guys (1771) was among the first works to arouse interest in modern Greeks. Guys traveled extensively and spent 20 years in the Near East. His *Voyage Littéraire* established a new departure in travel literature. Many travel writers follow his style of comparison, taking pleasure in comparing Modern Greeks to their ancient counterparts. After Guys's broad and sympathetic account that brought the Modern Greeks to the foreground, Choiseul raised his voice to champion the cause of Greek liberty.

The author discusses Choiseul's contributions and diversity of interests, which include the study of Modern Greek culture, geology, topography, ancient coins, monuments, sites, and inscriptions, as well as the political and military conditions in the Ottoman Empire after the war with Russia together with the morals and character of the Turks and the subjugated peoples of Ottoman society. Barbier depicts Choiseul as the perfect representation of the aristocratic ideal of the Enlightenment, namely, a man of many talents and identities: reformer, scholar of Hellenism, sociologist, historian, archaeologist, political analyst, accomplished diplomat, nobleman, great lord, antiquarian, young liberal, dignitary, travel writer, and passionate admirer of ancient Greek civilization.

Could Choiseul have been an expert on all matters and in so many disciplines, as the author makes him appear? In fact, what Barbier succeeded in doing is connecting all these social roles and identities to Hellenism. Choiseul the philhellene is the matrix, the center of gravity for all these identities, which were facilitated by his privileged social status and the political conditions of his time. Choiseul's passion for ancient Greek civilization—along with his dream for a new Greece and Greek independence—was so profound that he directed his life through the unexplored territories between Athens, the Aegean Sea, Constantinople, and Russia (51), spending a great part of his wealth and depriving his wife and five children of his presence. Being a man of the Enlightenment, Choiseul was interested in everything he could discover and learn about Greece: ethnography, politics, economy, navigation, geology, and natural history.

In 1776, he embarked on his first journey, at the age of 24, to explore the Greek lands. Leaving his wife and children for more than nine months, Choiseul sailed on board the *Atalante*, a royal frigate, the French "king's elegant ship" (56–57), which was under the command of Joseph Bernard de Chabert, appointed by Versailles to lead an expedition charged with the mission of mapping out unexplored territories (the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean). Having been allowed passage on the *Atalante* owing to his social rank, Choiseul explored the southern Peloponnese, Cyclades, and other Aegean islands, before moving on to Asia Minor. Choiseul set out on his journey with a scientific and scholarly orientation along with a political goal of exploring the situation in the Aegean between the Ottoman Empire and Imperial Russia. He engaged three friends in this mission—his secretary and engineer Fran Kauffer (1751–1801), the architect Jacques Foucherot (1746–1813), and the artist and engraver Jean-Baptiste Hilaire (1753–1822)—along with his loyal butler Chartier (59–60). The result of this long journey was the

publication of the first volume of *Voyage pittoresque de la Grèce* in 1782, which included a philhellenic preface.

Choiseul's first volume was a great success throughout Europe, facilitating his intellectual and political career. He became a member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in 1782 and in 1783 a member of the Académie Française. The following year he was appointed French Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in Constantinople (1784–1791), taking advantage of this opportunity to continue his travels to Greece and work on his next volume. What he had originally considered to be a planned and temporary departure turned into an exile of 18 years. While working on the continuation of his book, major social transformations were taking place in Paris, changing the course of Choiseul's life: the French Revolution followed by Napoleon's rule. Louis XVI, following the decision of the Convention, ordered Choiseul to leave the Ottoman capital for the French embassy in London. Being a royalist, he refused and resigned his post, taking refuge in the court of Catherine II of Russia. Another envoy was sent to replace him in Constantinople, and his wealth and property in France were confiscated. Chapter 8 covers his last years in Constantinople, his self-imposed exile in Saint Petersburg, and his financial ruin as well as that of his wife, among other things. Consequently, the other two volumes of *Voyage pittoresque* could not be published without a delay of about 20 years. Choiseul returned to Paris in 1802, when Napoleon granted amnesty to exiled nobles, and embarked on a new entrepreneurial venture: establishing the first museum of antiquities in the French capital. However, his sudden death in 1817 prevented the completion of this project. In 1809, he published the second volume, while the third was published posthumously in 1822.

One of the most interesting aspects of Barbier's book revolves around Choiseul's collection of antiquities: the 26 containers removed from Athens and sent to Marseille in 1787, which included the "Choiseul Marble" (206), one of the most beautiful fragments of the Parthenon frieze discovered by Louis François Fauvel (Choiseul's representative in Athens). Choiseul had obtained a *firman* (sultanic edict) to remove antiquities from the Acropolis, which he then sent to France. As a result, Choiseul amassed a collection that included 327 sculptures, 46 inscriptions, and various other artifacts that he had planned to exhibit in France.

Unfortunately, Barbier does not focus on this aspect of our hero's life, only briefly referring to it. Barbier neglects to examine Choiseul's darker side, specifically his passion for collecting antiquities with an activism that would have made him an equal of Lord Elgin, if circumstances had been more favorable. Fauvel's adherence to "moral principles" restricted him from taking anything

other than the antiquities or fragments that had already fallen to earth (205). Choiseul's frustration with Fauvel was evident when he wrote on 2 August 1786, "Pourquoi ne pourriez-vous pas enlever une Caryatide, s'il y en a une bien conserve?" (Why cannot you remove a Caryatid, if there is one well preserved?; Zambon 2007, 75). Later, Choiseul was quite serious when he wrote to Fauvel in 1789: "Enlevez tout ce que vous pourrez, ne négligez aucun moyen, mon cher Fauvel, de piller dans Athènes et son territoire, tout ce qu'il y a de pillable . . . continuez, n'épargnez ni les morts, ni les vivans" (Remove everything you can, do not neglect any opportunity, my dear Fauvel, to plunder/loot in Athens and its territory all that is lootable/plunderable . . . continue, spare neither the dead nor the living; Zambon 2007, 76).

Not only does Barbier ignore Choiseul's involvement in plundering antiquities; he also skirts the issue of foreign collusion in antiquities appropriation. In March 1802, Choiseul returned to France with the help of Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand to recover part of his fortune that had been confiscated by the revolutionary regime. This included the antiquities he had sent to France in 1787, with the exception of a fragment of the Parthenon frieze attributed to Phidias—a single fragment out of the 115 total pieces—which was exhibited in the Louvre. Another valuable piece that Choiseul was not able to repossess was the metope from the south frieze of the Parthenon (Block VI), which was initially intercepted and blocked in Athens but later made its way to London in June 1803. During this period, Louis François Fauvel and Giovanni Battista Lusieri (the latter being Lord Elgin's agent in Athens) were struggling mercilessly to get their hands on each other's antiquities. Elgin sought the assistance of both Admiral Horatio Nelson and Talleyrand to intervene on his behalf to outmaneuver Choiseul, but his requests fell on deaf ears. The only explanation that Barbier gives for his blatant omissions is that the topic concerning "Choiseul's collection has been well studied by art historians, and we need not return there" (206). This controversial period in Choiseul's political career is neglected in Barbier's book and deserves greater attention.

A final missed opportunity for scholarly analysis can be seen in chapter 7. Here Barbier makes a brief and superficial reference to Lady Elisabeth Craven (1750–1828), who is considered to be perhaps the second most acknowledged woman travel writer of the eighteenth century after Lady Montagu (1689–1762). As an ambassador in the Ottoman capital, Choiseul took up residency in the Palais de France on the northern shore of the Bosphorus. Lady Craven, who was Choiseul's guest at the Palais de France (177), refers to his collection of antiquities and plans to have miniature models made and exhibited in Paris (206).

She also refers to the ball Choiseul gave in her honor on 30 April 1786, as well as their visits to “the mosques of Saint Sophia, Sultan Ahmet and Sulemaniye” on 9 May 1786 (192). Three days later, taking advantage of Choiseul’s voyage to Broussa for health reasons, Lady Craven boarded the *Tarleton*, an English frigate of 14 canons, to explore the Greek islands (192–193). Although Barbier mentions these factual details, he neither expands on them nor contextualizes Lady Craven’s interactions as part of the genre of travel literature; in fact, Barbier does not seem to deal with female travel literature in general. The author appears to ignore women’s travel accounts, although the discourse presented in them is also illustrative of the philhellenic movement of the period (Kamberidou 2016, 2017).

Thousands of European and American women also explored, visited, or worked in Ottoman territories since the seventeenth century, providing additional evidence and an alternative discourse on Hellenism—one that included a female perspective. They published to get heard, to protest, to profit, to promote a cause, to share their experiences, and to show their readers how easy it was for women to explore lands considered dangerous for their gender. Women travelers from England, France, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Austria, and America, like their male counterparts, provided their services, volunteered, lobbied, and raised funds for food supplies and clothing to support the Greek Revolution. Along with the relief activities of the 1820s and 1830s, the great interest in Greece produced a strong desire to send teachers and missionaries. European and American women—educators and philanthropists—worked for the advancement of female education. They even established schools for the preservation of Hellenic cultural heritage (Kamberidou 2017).

Regrettably, Barbier does not deal with this literature to contextualize his account of Choiseul. Nevertheless, this book is worth reading and a welcome addition to the growing body of scholarly works drawing attention to the Greeks during the eighteenth through nineteenth centuries and the travelers who encountered them. Certainly, a great number of books have been published on Western travelers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but individual biographies are extremely rare. Barbier’s contribution could inspire the publication of more such biographies and firsthand accounts of travel writers, especially of women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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Despite Greece’s historical position as a literal crossroads of Mediterranean cultures and the region’s staggering variety of fundamentally hybrid musical genres, the last several decades saw relatively little English-language scholarship on music making in the Greek Aegean. For reasons bound to the institutional and political history of their discipline, ethnomusicologists and other