**Charles Johnston, Daniel Sanjiv Roberts (ed.) *The History of Arsaces, Prince of Betlis* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), 237pp. €49.50.**

The Limerick born Charles Johnston’s (*c.*1719-*c*.1800) *The History of Arsaces, Prince Betlis*, first published in 1774, presents the eventful story of Selim, an adventurous hero, who leaves the safety of his homeland to go in search of knowledge of the world, only to be finally rewarded with more intimate and familial knowledge. Johnston’s *History of Arsaces* terminates with Selim’s realisation that “… true wisdom consisteth in the humble obedience to the will of heaven, without arrogantly presuming to scan its ways”.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, the narrative journey that Selim undertakes is nowhere near as crystalline as the hero’s concluding maxim. In turning to *The History of Arsaces*, Johnston’s reader is confronted with a novel that weaves together, albeit not always successfully, a complex fabric of genres, which include ‘romance’, the ‘oriental tale’, ‘political fiction’, ‘travel writing’, ‘spiritual narrative’ and ‘history’, in its broadest sense. *The History of Arsaces* is also interesting for what it can tell us about the history of the novel; the text, as Daniel Sanjiv Roberts notes, registers “… various new and allied senses developing in the period”.[[2]](#footnote-2) What once made Johnston’s work an outlier in many respects – its instability of textual voice, its mix of genres and its densely imbricated narrative – now arguably makes the novel and its author worthy of renewed critical attention.

Roberts’s comprehensive introduction argues succinctly and expertly for the importance of Johnston’s *The History of Arsaces* within the arenas of British, and indeed Irish, eighteenth-century fiction. As Roberts notes, “Twentieth-century scholarship has largely ignored *The History of Arsaces* while comparable novels of the eighteenth century such as *Gulliver’s Travels* and *The History of Rasselas* have been given a prominent place in literary histories”.[[3]](#footnote-3) While Roberts is certainly right to situate *The History of Arsaces* in relation to these canonical works by heavyweights Swift and Johnson, this new and handsomely produced edition does much to illuminate the significance of *The History of Arsaces* is in its own right. Roberts’s edition serves to make accessible, what is undoubtedly, a nuanced text; his judicious notes help the reader to navigate a novel, which although is at times fantastical, tasks itself with offering incisive commentary on the political culture of the latter part of the mid-century period. Readers familiar with the author will come to *The History of Arsaces*,perhaps,expecting political engagement, as Johnston is best known as the author of the popular anti-Wilkite it-narrative, *Chrysal; Or, The Adventures of a Guinea*, first published in 1760.

Yet, unlike *Chrysal*, which featured identifiable satirical targets, such as the infamous libertine politician and editor of *The North Briton* (1762-63), John Wilkes, the political satire at the heart of *The History of Arsaces* is not so easily sketched out. One of the real triumphs ofRobert’s editing, to my mind at least, is the way in which his textual notes offer the reader a ready access to the text’s multiplex political layering. For example, in Section VIII of Book I, Volume I, we find Selim enslaved under the warrior people, the Bedouins. During this time the young hero attempts to inculcate moral changes in Bedouin society; in particular, he tries to improve the society’s treatment of women and the relations between the sexes more generally. As Selim recounts:

‘The charge of making innovations in their established customs, was looked upon to be so atrocious a crime, that they resolved instantly to put a stop to it, by the most exemplary punishment, in order to deter any future presumption of the kind;[[4]](#footnote-4)

The word “innovation” is particularly loaded here, and the reader is reminded in Roberts’s detailed notes, that the charge of “innovation was repeatedly leveled against the British parliament by American supporters in the events leading up to the war”.[[5]](#footnote-5) The foreign terrain explored by Selim in the novel is expansive, and truly oriental in its conflation of vast stretches of the Middle East with India and beyond, yet Roberts’s balanced interventions, help to orientate the reader towards the Anglo-American political messages that are being drawn upon this canvass. Most impressive is the way in which this edition, in its totality, works to restore Charles Johnston as a significant mid-century Irish satirical voice, aligned it would seem, with contemporary political satirists, such as Arthur Murphy (1727-1803).

Roberts’s concluding biographical note on Johnston reveals how “… standard accounts of Charles Johnston’s life and literary career are inaccurate”, before offering some notes which “… sift through the available evidence, extracting neglected information from earlier sources and incorporating new evidence from the archives”.[[6]](#footnote-6) It is clear from reading this excellent edition of *The History of Arsaces* that Charles Johnston is deserving of more sustained critical attention. Without a doubt, Roberts’s erudite, engaged, and intelligent editing has provided the scholarly foundation for this necessary work.

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1. Charles Johnston, Daniel Sankiv Roberts (ed.) *The History of Arsaces, Prince of Betlis* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), p. 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid*, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid*, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid*, p. 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid*, p. 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)