

The Eastern origin of the ancient novel has been the subject of study for long centuries. One of the first ‘modern’ treatises on ancient prose fiction, published by Pierre-Daniel Huet in 1670, ascribed an Eastern origin to the ‘romance’, and even by the standards of the multicultural present, Huet’s treatise was astonishingly open to the idea that influences from the East contributed to the novel’s beginnings. Huet’s account of prose fiction was extremely influential, and ensured that the question of literary provenance would remain central in subsequent debates about the ancient novel. But why did the treatise insist on Eastern origins, and how do the contexts surrounding its publication explain the direction taken in his analysis?

Huet believed that the novel had an Eastern origin because the authors came from places such as Syria and Phoenicia and because the inhabitants of ‘Eastern Nations’ were addicted to lies and invention. The moment of transfer with the Greek-speaking world took place in Asia Minor, for it was the Ionians, and especially the Milesians, who learned the art of making ‘romance’ from the Persians. The Greeks then improved the art that they acquired both from the Milesians, during Achaemenid rule, and from the Persians, after the conquest by Alexander the Great. In writing about Eastern origins, Huet may have used cultural stereotypes and been wrong in his chronology (e.g. he spoke of Arabic influence on the Greek novel), but he also related literary genealogy to travel and colonialism and thus explored the links between literature and cross-cultural contact.

For a further explanation of Huet’s claims about Eastern origin, I suggest that we understand the connections that were developing between Europe and Asia in his own time. The ‘Oriental’ matter in Huet’s treatise was made possible because of French and wider European activities in the Near East and Asia, and Huet’s work would have looked very different without the writings of traders and political agents who participated in missions outside Europe. France had colonies in North America, the Caribbean, West Africa, and South Asia, in the seventeenth century, and the French East India Company, which was established at the time that Huet was composing his work, was fiercely competitive with other European trading companies. A sense of this wider context can be gained from Huet’s writings, namely, his *Histoire du commerce et de la navigation des anciens* and *Le grand trésor* (a study of the colonial Dutch trading companies). Both books, which were widely read, approved of the opening up of the world, in very different historical eras, through cultural contact, trade, and commerce.

Huet wrote his treatise when a particular history of overseas European rivalries was taking shape and when the ‘worlding’ of the Orient entailed that Asia could begin to break free from its biblical and classical attachments. He recognized why tales about star-crossed lovers, pirates, shipwrecks, travellers, and ancient empires spoke to readerships in seventeenth-century Europe, and he put into place a literary history that still shapes discussion of the ancient novel today.