

**Linda E. Merians.** *Envisioning the Worst: Representations of "Hottentots" in Early Modern England.* Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001. 289 pp. \$46.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87413-738-5.



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Linda Merians sets out to show that the English literary image of "Hottentots" as the most beastly of peoples was constructed in order to show up the English/British as the best of all peoples in the world. Merians traces this image from published accounts of the earliest contacts between English sailors and Khoekhoe people at the Cape of Good Hope in 1591, through the adoption of the word "Hottentot" from the Dutch in 1670, to the early nineteenth century when Britain colonized the Cape. By then disparaging remarks about actual Khoekhoe people had more or less disappeared in published accounts of "exploration," but the figure of the "Hottentot Venus" herself appearing in England and France helped perpetuate the word "Hottentot" as a general synonym for an ignorant yahoo.

Merians shows how the disparaging image was generated by English travelers' disgust with Khoekhoe habits of eating "guts and garbage" and of wearing dried intestines around their necks. Few English travelers made observations at the Cape after Dutch colonization, but earlier tales were repeatedly elaborated and used as moral exemplars in popular compendiums of ocean voyages and scholarly geographies, and even by such writers as the philosopher David Hume.

Historians of southern Africa may already be familiar with the pre-1652 sources from R. Raven-Hart's mag-

isterial collection of primary texts, *Before Van Riebeeck: Callers at the Cape from 1488 to 1652* (1967). To these Merians has added a plethora of quotations from later secondary sources, which are of more historical-literary value rather than adding much to our knowledge of events in Africa. We see, for example, how the stories of Corey, who went to England in 1613, and of an unidentified Khoekhoe youth raised by one of the Van der Stels, were twisted and used as exemplary tales of moral turpitude. (Strangely, there is no mention in this book of the career of Eva/Krotoa, the young woman who lived in the Van Riebeeck household.) Hence Daniel Defoe, father of the English novel, could damn "Hottentots" as "the worst and most savage of all savages."

The gentle reader may well be disturbed and pained by the continual ranting and raving about nasty "Hottentots" in minor literary works of the eighteenth century, but may conclude that there is an element of lust and longing mixed into the repulsion being expressed. There are plenty of other interesting small points in Merians's narrative for readers to chew on. Thus, for example, we notice that the ironic litotes of the term "Hottentot Venus" was presaged as early as 1714 in *The Spectator*, which put English Beauty and the Female Hottentot at opposite ends of the scale. Merians also makes the interesting observation that as "Hottentots" became more

familiar as real human beings to English audiences in the nineteenth century, they were replaced by “Bushmen” as “humanity’s most beast-like society.”

*Envisioning the Worst* is clearly a “tunnel” work of literary criticism rather than historical exposition of larger contexts. The book confines itself to English-language texts, without delving into the Dutch and French texts from which the English tropes were being derived, and thus one is at a loss to distinguish the English from other European images of the “Hottentot.” Raven-Hart’s book certainly gives the impression that the English, before 1652, were better received than the Dutch by the Khoekhoe. After the English were precluded from the Cape by the Dutch, did they then vent their frustration in literature on all the inhabitants of the Cape, “Boor” and “Hottentot” alike? As for their interest in Khoekhoe female genitalia, this appears to have been more particularly a French and later eighteenth-century obsession (while the English were more impressed by the “heavy arses” of Khoekhoe women). See the water color sketch of his girlfriend Narina’s *labia minora pudendi* contained in Francois Le Vaillant’s *Voyages* (1790), suggestively translated into English as *Travels into the Interior Parts of Africa*.<sup>[1]</sup>

Even among the English, did the Khoekhoe really get the worst press notices of all “remote” peoples? Merians contrasts the relatively favorable image of Native Americans in English literature, a people much better known than the Khoekhoe to the English. But it is difficult to think of a people more disparaged than the Tierra del Fuegians, who were hardly ever seen by Europeans. As for the Australians, the least seen of all prior to the late eighteenth century, the English buccaneer William Dampier in 1688 called them brutes without graceful features and “the miserablest people in the world.” By con-

trast, he said, “The Hodmadods of Monomatapa, though a Nasty People, yet for Wealth are Gentlemen to these.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Here one may remark that there seems to be some unexplained correlation between being better known and better thought of, and lesser known and worse thought of. Merians never really follows up her hypothesis of the English envisioning the worst in order to feel themselves the best. (Could it be transference of an opinion about contemporary Americans?)

Can one treat literary sources as true reflections of more widely held cultural attitudes, when they contain so much individual artistic irony and satire? The writer Horace Walpole called the great Dr. Johnson a “Hottentot,” and the fictional Lady Bellaston called Squire Weston one in the novel *Tom Jones*. Insensitive and hurtful harassment to be sure, if indeed a Khoekhoe person was present at the time, yet in context it can be seen as off-hand humorous allusions to strange people not present, such as are made every day in any culture.

Readers may quibble with some of the chronology of Merians’s narrative as well as with strange errors like the “Bushmen” at the Cape being (northern Kalahari) !Kung, and “Cupido” being a missionary (rather than a slave) name. But *Envisioning the Worst* is a valuable compilation and interpretation of shameless ethnic stereotyping that should be found in every Africanist library.

#### Note

[1]. For French pornography of the time on Africa, see David Beach, “The Marquis de Sade: First Zimbabwean Novelist,” *Zambezia*, 8:1 (1980): pp. 53-61.

[2]. Quoted in Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore* (London, 1988), p. 48.

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