

Global Capitalism and Nineteenth-Century Literature

Romances of Free Trade: British Literature, Laissez-Faire, and the Global Nineteenth Century.
Ayse Çelikkol. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 189 pp.

Reviewed by **Elsie B. Michie**, Louisiana State University

<1>*Romances of Trade* demonstrates that nineteenth-century literature both reflected and was shaped by discussions that surrounded the repeal of the Corn Laws and the British economy's dramatic shift away from protectionism between the 1820s and the 1860s. Identifying free trade as a global movement in tension with the formation of nationalism that has been so much discussed in criticism of the nineteenth-century novel, Ayse Çelikkol isolates a series of figures in texts ranging from Walter Scott's *Guy Mannering* (1815) to Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1855-57) that capture the desires and fears elicited by that boundary-crossing experience of unlimited trade. In her epilogue, Çelikkol identifies her work as combining a critical approach that analyzes literature's relation to political economy (she cites the work of Regenia Gagnier, Mary Poovey, Claudia Klaver, and Gordon Bigelow) with one that analyzes literature's relation to geography (she cites the work of Tanya Agathocleous, James Buzard, Paul Young, and Lauren Goodlad). *Romances of Trade* insists that key terms that have been used to think about nineteenth-century British identity — cosmopolitanism, individualism, subjectivity, and community — take on new resonances when read in the context of the global movement of goods that was incarnated in the free trade movement.

<2>The book's strengths lie in the wide range of material it covers and Çelikkol's careful research and reading methods. Throughout *Romances of Free Trade* the argument is historicized, as Çelikkol examines the foundations of nineteenth-century thinking about capitalism in the writings of Immanuel Kant, David Hume, Adam Smith, and Bernard Mandeville. She then demonstrates the impact debates about free trade had on eighteenth-century economic concepts, citing nineteenth-century thinkers like John McCullough, James Mill, John Stuart Mill, and Nassau Senior to support her argument. While the bulk of the book is devoted to literary analysis, each chapter also turns to writings of the period that discuss free trade directly. One of the real pleasures of *Romances of Free Trade* lies in its ability to make readers aware of the ways in which literature echoes and reframes those debates. Çelikkol makes visible the importance and prevalence of the term free trade in works both familiar and unfamiliar. As a whole, the book creates an archive of references to free trade, including novels by Scott, Charlotte Brontë, and Dickens, but also writings by Captain Marryat and Harriet Martineau, little known Victorian melodramas, free trade poetry, and periodical articles.

<3>Though *Romances of Free Trade* is not explicitly divided into sections, its argument, which moves through the history of the period, effectively develops in stages that reveal the role gender plays in nineteenth-century thinking about free trade. Chapters Two and Three focus on male authors who create adventurous male characters whose depiction underscores “the centrality of individualism to the imagination of global intercourse” (56). Both chapters deal with the early stages of the Corn Law debates and with writers, Scott and Marryat, who explicitly expressed support for British protectionism. Yet both men’s novels convey a fascination with the unbounded movement of free trade. In Scott’s *Guy Mannering* and *Redgauntlet* (1824), smugglers embody a “global mobility . . . based on the individual prerogative to trade without state interference” (40). In Scott the sea becomes “a specific kind of fictional space that resists the values or structures of the nation state” (38). Similarly in Marryat’s *The King’s Own* (1830) and *Snarleyyow* (1837) “the topos of the sea foregrounds rebellion and independence” (50). Such topoi allow the author to evoke the freedom of economic movements that cross national boundaries and are not limited by the protectionist rules exemplified in the Corn Laws and the policies that insisted that England trade only with its colonies.

<4>Chapters Four and Five shift gears by turning to look at the way in which free trade was embodied in female figures. They think less about individualism and more about ideas of community and social interaction that were both fostered and threatened by the global movement of goods and capital. The arguments here focus not on the “radically autonomous individuality” (63) that was important to the book’s earlier chapters but on “the fragile, if not impossible balance between autonomy and solidarity” (78). Beginning to consider the era in which the Corn Laws were repealed, Çelikkol stresses nineteenth-century thinkers’ modifications of eighteenth-century conceptions of political economy: “the imagined sexualized subject of the nineteenth century . . . had the capacity to address what *Homo economicus* obscured: the socially embedded nature of exchange” (85). In “Dawn Island: A Tale” (1845), a story included in Martineau’s *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-34), the body of a pregnant woman adumbrates the advent of free trade that will bring fertility to an otherwise sterile island economy. In three plays, Thomas Serle’s *The Ghost Story* (1836) and John Lettsome Elliott’s *Three to One* (1850) and *Five to Two* (1851), promiscuity expresses anxieties about what might happen with the breakdown of national barriers made possible by free trade.

<5>In Chapters Six and Seven, Çelikkol takes up the canonical nineteenth-century literature that she had not addressed since the initial Scott chapters as she turns to Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens. The Brontë chapter draws together the gendered threads of the arguments made earlier about Scott and Marryat and about Martineau, Elliott, and Serle. In discussing the merchant figures in *The Professor* (composed in 1846) and *Shirley* (1849) — Hunsden and Robert Moore — Çelikkol returns to the image of the deracinated individual she discusses in both Scott and Marryat. But she also weds that focus on a radical individualism that is implicitly masculine to a focus on female figures who are associated with community by showing how women in both novels — Frances Henri and Caroline Helstone — soften the male adventurer, revealing him to be part of a British community that can be enriched by the global movement of free trade. While the Dickens chapter convincingly reads of *Little Dorrit* in relation to Karl Marx’s imagery of endlessly circulating capital, its argument is less sharply focused on free trade than any of the preceding chapters.

<6>While Çelikkol dramatically and persuasively demonstrates the importance of free trade to all the texts she analyzes, her generic argument, that these issues were addressed primarily through the form of the romance, felt less fully worked out than her historical argument. Romance elements seemed to come and go and to change shape from chapter to chapter. In places they were extremely important, as in the analysis of Martineau's surprisingly unrealistic short story; in other places the connection seemed more tenuous. Romance introduces interesting temporal issues that could be further explored. As Çelikkol herself notes in the book's introduction, literary criticism, even of materialist critics like Fredric Jameson, has tended to read romance as an alternative to capitalism. Çelikkol's intervention is to insist instead on "the congruence of romance and modernity" (17). Yet by the middle of the book she also acknowledges romance's evocation of "premodernity" (69) and its "complex relation to the past and the present" (69). Many of the texts discussed in *Romances of Trade* are set in the past or evoke figures from the past or from past eras, like that of Dutch economic dominance, to represent free trade. It would be interesting to think more about how and why free trade is symbolized through nostalgic rather than modern figures. It is in some sense precisely the antique valence of this imagery that made the references to free trade so difficult to unearth and Çelikkol's project of revealing them so valuable.

<7>The book's argument also seems still to be evolving in the arena of defining precisely how literature engages with economic issues. Çelikkol uses a range of terms to reference this relation: "resonant" (8), "metaphorical" (30), "reflects" (35), "microcosm" (53), "mirrors" (58), "affiliates" (59), "metonymy" (64), "homology" (113). These terms suggest a certain fuzziness in thinking about the relation between history and literature, a slippage that, I think, many of us encounter in engaging in multi-disciplinary projects like *Romances of Trade* that move consistently between non-fictional and fictional texts. Çelikkol's book already does a great deal. There is not space within it for her to consider the problem of romance and nostalgia nor the complex mechanics of literary representations. Those are potential topics for further consideration. For now critics can simply enjoy *Romances of Free Trade*'s ability to open a new window for considering Victorian literature's relation to political economy and globalism.