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Gender and Voice in the French Novel: 1730-1782 (review)

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four books, the first two with thirty-nine poems apiece, the second two with forty-one. The thematic arrangement is not quite so neat. Book II on subjects drawn from the Old Testament balances Book III on subjects from the New, but the first book is on Nature and her Creator, and Book IV on ‘diverses grâces et divers états’. His style is that of an older generation — Voiture, Racan, Benserade or Godeau would have recognized their influence — and he seeks to instruct by pleasing rather than by stirring. For the English reader, the notion of Christian madrigals would place him neatly. This is not, then, a major discovery like that of Alan Boase of Sponde or Herbert Grierson’s of George Herbert. But it is a useful extension of what Terence Cave has called devotional poetry into a later French period, and to Drelincourt’s own annotation of his work Gœury has added a thorough and learned apparatus of notes. Our New World colleagues would be particularly struck by sonnet 7 of Book I, ‘Sur la Découverte du Nouveau Monde’, with its reminder of the eighth-century papal excommunication of Vigilius for having taught the existence of the antipodes.

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Gender and Voice in the French Novel: 1730–1782. By AURORA WOLFGANG.
Burlington — Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004. 209 pp. Hb £45.00.

The last twenty years have seen many revisionary accounts of eighteenth-century fiction, and especially women’s writing, by American feminist scholars. Aurora Wolfgang’s book nevertheless makes a valuable contribution. In part this may reflect a more general recent turn away from modern revedication and towards the recognition of cultural differences and historical specificity. Wolfgang’s Introduction is still a little aggressive. We are told straightaway that the success of the new fiction, which ‘liberated authors [...] from the constraints imposed by the classical [...] style of the previous half-century’, prompted a ‘backlash’ by ‘conservative critics’ who ‘fiercely contested’ and ‘dismissed the “feminine” style found in the novel’ (p. 1). Alongside this biased binarity is reification and teleology (‘the novel’s struggle for recognition and prestige’ nevertheless may not have ‘advance[d] women’, pp. 1–3). More neutrally there are several tables of statistics, which are particularly interesting on the percentages of female-authored and of anonymously published fiction. In any case, the argument set out in the lengthy initial chapter is much more complex. First-person feminine voicing by novelists of both sexes — so uniquely prevalent in this period — reflects not just a new sensibility and intimacy but a ‘feminised’ culture of sociability. The feminine rises with ‘mondanité’ and particularly with the Modern side in the Querelle. Its expression is in conversation, correspondence and the salon as a space of discussion and of patronage. (The importance of oral performance and ‘salon writing’ is rather underplayed.) Broadly aristocratic, this ‘feminine’ culture, however, gives way increasingly from the mid-century to a new professionalism of ‘philosophes’ and authors, and a public sphere increasingly gendered as masculine. All this is well documented here, and seems to me very persuasive.

The diachronic account underlies the sequence of chapters that follow, each centred on a specific work. The first, Marivaux’s *Marianne*, serves to illustrate

female-voicing and its association with ‘natural’ writing. Graffigny’s *Péruienne* shows the attempt by a woman writer to unite the sentimental female narrative with the social critique and the scholarly footnoting that are usually seen as male. Even at this mid-century high point, however, tensions are evident. Zilia retreats into her chateau with its separate spaces of library and mirrored temple. Female writing is seemingly reconfinned with Riccoboni’s *Fanni Butlerd*, which has been taken to show that a woman can only write her own sentimental life. Wolfgang finds on the contrary another fictional model of female artistry. (But does publishing one’s love-letters like Fanni, let alone merely translating a few like Zilia, make one an ‘author?’) Finally Laclos — claiming to show the harsh social reality that the ladies with their tender imagination are spared — gives us three emblematic women. Cécile is the victim of pleasure and Tourvel of passion (thus of their own ‘biology’). Merteuil, who has the unwomanly and therefore monstrous ambition to control the pleasures of her body, is punished by disfigurement, which ‘writes her soul’ upon it. Like much else in these chapters, this is nice criticism (although one might argue that Laclos gives the moral victory to Tourvel and the foolish Valmont, the adherents of love and ‘illusion’). In her Epilogue, Wolfgang cites Mmes de Staël and de Genlis both reflecting that women of the privileged classes had more freedom before 1789 than since, albeit at a price. There is always a price.

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CHARLES PALISSOT: *La Comédie des ‘Philosophes’ et autres textes*. Présentation d’OLIVIER FERRET. Publications de l’Université de Saint-Étienne, 2002. 320 pp. Pb €25.00

In some respects, French theatre of the eighteenth century has been rather slower to attract the attention of scholars than the novel, and even some of the major figures such as Diderot and Sedaine are only now receiving due critical scrutiny. Among the lesser lights, the name of Charles Palissot has never been entirely forgotten; although he was a prolific author, whose works ran to seven stout octavo volumes in the 1778 Liège edition, he owes his fame (or notoriety) mainly to the unforeseen effect of his satirical comedy *Les Philosophes* (1760). In *Le Neveu de Rameau*, Diderot, outraged at the way he had been portrayed in the work, poured unremitting scorn on Palissot and his circle of backbiting scribblers and hacks; hence, if Palissot’s name means anything today, it is largely because it was immortalized in vitriol by one of the principal victims of his pen. The scandal provoked by the play has led commentators to look at it afresh from time to time, in the hope of rediscovering some unsuspected merit in it, but to little avail. If the style is sometimes elegant, the vindictive bitterness behind the writing overwhelms any other qualities it may possess. Olivier Ferret quite rightly makes no exaggerated claims for the artistic worth of *Les Philosophes*; his aim is, rather, to provide the text of the work with footnotes, variants and emendations where necessary, and to situate it in the polemical context of the wider struggles between the *philosophes* and their enemies. To this end, his edition offers, in addition to the play itself, no fewer than twenty parodies, commentaries, rejoinders and other ephemera