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And What About French Women Writers?

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Only a little over three decades separate the founding of the ASECS Women's Caucus at the meeting of the International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies in New Haven in 1975 and the preparation of this volume devoted to "The Future of Feminist Theory in Eighteenth-Century Studies." Such a short time, however, has been enough to transform the landscape of English eighteenth-century literature. There is no point in citing sources, since readers for this volume know full well that no history of any national literary tradition available in 1975 wasted any space on women writers. In 1975, the Enlightenment was purely an affair between men. And now, three and a half decades later, the call for papers for this special issue makes the well-justified claim that there are no longer any neglected English women writers and wonders if, in eighteenth-century studies, "anything remain[s] for feminist theory to do." For English eighteenth-century studies, in other words, three short decades contain a triumphal story, one on which colleagues in English are able to look back with a sense of satisfaction over a job well done: English literary history will never again be able to write women out of the story of the long eighteenth century. Would that those of us in French studies could share their satisfaction.

And yet we have good reason to remember New Haven in 1975 with great fondness. The meeting was presided over by Georges May, and its success was widely perceived to be a success for the field of French studies as well—indeed, perhaps even too much of a good thing. In the spring of 1975, I distinctly remember my eighteenth-century colleagues in English commenting that French subjects had been too prominently represented on the program for the meeting. There was concern that French—perhaps riding on the coattails of literary theory, then an almost exclusive French preserve—was becoming too powerful a player on the eighteenth-century scene.

I offer this anecdotal evidence for a reason: given this conjuncture—the founding of the ASECS Women's Caucus at a moment of particular prominence

for French—one might have expected the intervening decades to have been at least as kind to the French women writers of the age of Enlightenment as they have been to their counterparts across the Channel. The reality of the place today of French women writers in the story of the Enlightenment is, however, far less sanguine.

True, there has been some notable progress. One work by a woman writer—Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (1747, 1752)—has gone from near invisibility to full canonic status during this time. Graffigny's correspondence is being published for the first time, and in a superb edition. The *œuvres* of Riccoboni and Charrière have received a good deal of critical attention, and Charrière's complete works now exist in an excellent critical edition. Beyond, however, these few, highly visible cases, almost no women writers have moved in any way onto the screen of French studies.

A number of factors have contributed to produce this situation. To begin with, so-called French feminist theory, unlike its Anglo-American counterpart, was famously and spectacularly unconcerned with actual women writers, even more so those from earlier historical periods. In addition, scholars in France for a long time followed this lead and did little to resurrect the past. There have been some recent signs of a change of heart but hardly a groundswell of interest.

And yet the stakes are truly important. If we consider the span of the long eighteenth century, the number of women writers who were celebrated in their day, forgotten in the nineteenth century, and who today deserve a measure, often even a large one, of canonic status is significant indeed. And yet almost no progress has been made in winning for them any renewed visibility. I am going to use a single, very basic criterion as a measure of what I mean: in many different courses, both undergraduate and graduate, I constantly want to include works by women writers—not at all simply for the sake of representing women, but because their works are the best examples of the phenomenon that interests me. More than nine times out of ten, I am left feeling that the best I can do is hardly good enough. A work by any male writer of in any way comparable talent will be available in one of the standard paperback series (Garnier-Flammarion, Folio, and so forth) that are affordable and easily available in the United States. To date at least (and there is no indication that this is about to change), women writers have been given no place in the best-known and respected mass-market series.

Only the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* is published in a major series (GF)—and then only because it is used in an anthology on “epistolary love novels.” On the few occasions when the work of a woman writer can be found in a modern edition, that edition, printed by a small European publishing house, can hardly be used for teaching purposes. Think, for example, of Charrière's *Lettres de Lausanne* (1785) in the des Femmes edition, or of Villedieu's *Mémoires de la vie de Henriette-Sylvie de Molière* (1671–74) published by Desjonquères: both are pro-

hibitively expensive by the time they reach the shelves of university bookstores in this country. A series published in the United States, *Texts and Translations by the MLA*, includes a handful of titles from the long eighteenth century; it is nonetheless clear that publication in French in this country can never become a significant phenomenon. And there you have it: hardly enough to feel we're in the same league as our colleagues in English.

Year after year, therefore, I teach male writers in real books—and their female counterparts in photocopies. And this is a best-case scenario. In all too many cases, unless the French National Library has decided to make an early edition (generally not the first) available online on *Gallica*, I have no option at all, no way of obtaining a photocopy master. Thus, I continue to repeat what I fear is becoming by now a kind of useless ritual chant: I pronounce for my students the names of women writers I consider so extraordinary that I would kill to be able to teach their works—and at this point, it is clear that my dream of putting together any of my ideal courses is just not going to happen.

This is how that chant goes, the roll-call of great, neglected French women writers of the long eighteenth century. I begin with names from the turn of the eighteenth century: d'Aulnoy (arguably the French novelist most influential in England during the crucial first decades of the eighteenth century, certainly the French novelist whose works were most available to an English audience), Murat (my vote for the most talented stylist), L'Héritier (the most serious scholar and the most openly "feminist"), Du Noyer (whose influence on the development of proto-journalistic prose all over Europe should not be underestimated), Caumont de La Force (very influential in Germany and perhaps the most innovative formally), Bédacier Durand (*La Comtesse de Mortane* [1699] alone should guarantee her rescue from oblivion), and La Roche-Guilhem (clearly a heroine all over Protestant Europe, to judge from the publication history of her works throughout the eighteenth century).

I then move on to Tencin (whose *œuvre* was considered for decades the equal of Lafayette's), and Gomez (*Crémentine, reine de Sanga* [1727] is a personal favorite; much of her extensive production was long and widely reedited), before arriving at the extremely prolific Riccoboni. We will only begin to be able to assess Riccoboni's contribution when a variety of works that give a sense of her range—to begin with, her remarkable first novel, *Lettres de mistress Fanni Butlerd* (1757)—become easily available. Charrière presents a similar case; she produced a true *œuvre*, and we need to have works of different kinds accessible in order to demonstrate her range to students.

Then, we come to the numerous cases of women writers who published only one or at least one work so remarkable that having it available would change our perception both of eighteenth-century women's writing and of the eighteenth-century novel's history. Any specialist will have candidates in this category; here are just my four top choices: Albert's *Confidences d'une jolie femme* (1775), Belvo's *Lettres au chevalier de Luzeincour, par une jeune veuve* (1769), Fon-

tette de Sommary's *Lettres de Mme la comtesse de L**** (1785), and Poulain's *Lettres de Madame la comtesse de la Rivière à Madame la baronne de Neufpont, son amie* (1776). All these were successful enough to have been reedited several times, yet they are now so little known that websites and rare book dealers routinely misidentify their first editions.

Finally, having all these works available in editions we could use in our courses would be only a start. Many of these women had remarkable lives; that we know so little about them for certain is nothing short of scandalous. Did d'Aulnoy actually spend time in England and in Spain? Why was Murat kept under house arrest for years in a provincial château? I could keep asking such questions, but I think you get the point.

Only when we are able to answer all basic biographical questions such as these, only once we have an accurate picture of the publication history of all major works (how often each work was republished and where, since printing in French took place in so many countries in the eighteenth century), only then will we be ready to produce a real history of French women's writing in the long eighteenth century. And only then will we have the foundation on which truly solid critical studies can be based. Only then will we begin to be able to feel, along with our colleagues in English, that we have done our job.

I believe that the long eighteenth century in France may well have been the most illustrious period—ever, anywhere—in the history of women's writing. This is a priceless heritage that should not be left largely untapped.

Is there a future for feminist theory or feminist studies in French? Not only should there be a future, but it should be glorious. That future can only come about, however, once we have made the full story of the involvement of French women writers in the long history of the eighteenth century as available to readers today as it was to their counterparts in the eighteenth century. And making that happen will require a lot of work from all of those who are still committed to French women's writing.