Genius Envy

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Women surged as professional writers during the Romantic era. Their rise as poets, in particular, alarmed the conservative men who would uphold the French literary tradition by adopting the biology of the creative mind. The caricature reproduced here from Daumier's 1844 _bas-bleu_ series suggests the laden narrative of literary women's reception (fig. 3). Mesmerized yet uneasy, the exclusively male audience beholds the towering woman, who identifies herself in the caption accompanying the image: “L’auteur! . . . l’auteur! . . . l’auteur! . . . —Messieurs, votre impatience va être satisfaite. . . . vous désirez connaître l’auteur de l’ouvrage remarquable qui vient d’obtenir un si grand, et je dois le dire, si légitime succès . . . cet auteur . . . c’est môa!” Positioned to disturb the gender hierarchy, the author’s masculine head replicates the hard, vertical line of the adjacent column, belying her soft, feminine curves. Masculinity does not overwhelm, but rather cohabits with femininity in the same body. Daumier’s portrayal of the woman author unwittingly shows how creativity exceeds the normalizing force of conceptual categories marked off by sex.

The various terms used by critics throughout the nineteenth century to identify women as poets capture the struggle over the source and meaning of the verse they produced. Those critics who used the word “poète”—also spelled “poëte,” which draws from etymology the sense of “maker” or “creator”—recognized the originator apart from the woman, thus unsexing creative voice. Interestingly, both supporters and detractors used the wording “femmes poètes.” This label, often written with a hyphen (a sign that both divides and connects), suggests the ambivalence that thickened poetic women’s reception: femininity was not entirely reconciled, or was rendered incompatible, with creativity. Similarly, the wording “poètes femelles,” like “poètes femelles,” evokes the gender binary; the space between the terms represents an ideological gulf between creators and females.
“Poétesse,” derived from “poète,” though initially not pejorative in designating a poetic woman acquired the sense of a second-rate muse lacking in originality. Antagonistic critics added envy on the part of women to the physiology of male genius, anticipating the Freudian analysis of femininity in relation to a masculinity complex. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the protopsychoanalytic bent of literary criticism fused with the discourse of degeneracy. The chiasmic linkage of mental fertility and reproductive infertility associated with poetic women resurred as the history of reception repeated itself in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Archival evidence shows women’s contributions to poetic production together with their male counterparts’ in both mainstream and nonmainstream venues throughout the nineteenth century. How, then, can one account for women’s virtual erasure from the nineteenth-century poetic canon? In this chapter I map the discursive categories used by literary critics in response to the rise of poets from the ranks of women writers, highlighting two major backlashes. The first of
these, in the 1840s, reduced Romantic era women to one and the same “poetess,” wholly effusive and artless. The second reactionary period coincided with the battle over female education that gathered force from the 1860s onward. Conventional readings of Marceline Desbordes-Valmore from the same period engendered her token status as the century’s only woman poet. Other women’s aesthetic and intellectual achievements thus faded from the French poetic canon established at the century’s close.

(Mis)placing Women in Poetic History

During the first half of the century, individual poems by women appeared alongside men’s in newspapers, magazines, and keepsakes (a type of literary album popular at the time), such as L’Almanach des Dames (1802–40), Almanach Dédié aux Dames (1807–30), and Hommage aux Dames (1813–35). Collections devoted to women’s poetry also proliferated: Guirlande des dames (1815–29), Les femmes poètes (1829), and Le génie des femmes (1844–46), among others. Women also succeeded in publishing individual volumes and collected poetic works. The rise of the sentimental novel, however, began to stiffen the competition in the book market. This shift in literary tastes occurred under the July Monarchy (1830–48) as the upper bourgeoisie gained a strong political foothold along with moral clout. By the 1840s, literary physiologies, a genre made popular by Balzac, flourished, and the satirical figure of the bas-bleu eclipsed the favorable reception poetic women had enjoyed.

Why adopt the term bas-bleu to designate the woman of ideas in nineteenth-century France? Thus the popular novelist and journalist Frédéric Soulié opens his Physiologie du bas-bleu (1841), a source for Daumier’s caricatures, and follows with this answer: “[J]’aime ce nom, qui ne signifie absolument rien, par cela seul qu’il dénonce cette espèce féminine par un mot du genre masculin” (5–6). As a category for thinking of women as authors, bas-bleu conveys a biologistic ideology via a grammatical error between feminine and masculine pronouns, linking intellectual women’s misplaced ambitions with depravity and disease: “[D]u moment qu’une femme est Bas-Bleu, il faut absolument dire d’elle: il est malpropre, il est prétentieux, il est malfaisant, il est une peste” (Soulié, Physiologie du bas-bleu, 6; emphasis in original). It remains to be seen “si les Bas-bleus sont des femmes,” adds Soulié, fusing the methods of naturalists and physiologists who study the functions and vital processes of living organisms in order to categorize various “species” of literary women, not only according to class but also in relation to their milieu, appearance, manners, and marital status (19).

In the history Soulié traces of the bas-bleu from Staël to the mid-1840s, the “bas-bleu poète” enjoyed popularity during the Bourbon Restoration. This period followed Napoleon, whose military campaigns had depleted, if not wounded, France: “À ce moment, la lyre a pris un développement effroyable, et, Corinne
vivante, en chair et en os, s’est promenée dans les rues de Paris. . . . Toute cette nation, fatiguée du fracas des armes et du canon, frémissait d’une douce émotion à sa moindre parole” (Physiologie du bas-bleu, 35). Alarming yet appealing, the surge of poetic women lulled the beleaguered nation into Romanticism. For Soulié, all of these poets were one and the same. Anonymity cuts short the history of Romantic era poets in Soulié’s physiology, as does his conclusion: “Le Bas-bleu est toujours le même” (109).

The critic Paul de Molènes matched Soulié’s totalizing approach to women’s poetic aspirations. Addressing the readers of the Revue des Deux Mondes in 1842, Molènes asks: “Comment, en effet, concilier l’idée que nous avons de l’existence du poète avec celle qu’on doit se faire de la vie des femmes, d’après les données de la nature et les notions du sens commun?” (“Simples essais d’histoire littéraire,” 49). For him, however innate women’s poetic sensibility might be, the domestic realm in which women are expected to dwell—together with their maternal instincts—contradicts the freedom to nurture their creativity. Even male geniuses, he observes, often do not produce “une longue suite d’enfans” (50). Though Molènes’s analogy generalizes the struggle over re/productive energy between the brain and body, he tips the balance against intellectual and creative women: “Comment appeler une créature dont le sein, destiné à allaiter des enfans et à renfermer les joies maternelles, demeure stérile et ne bat que pour des sentiments d’orgueil?” (53). Medical preoccupations with the effect of mental work on reproductivity inflect the terms “femme poète” and “poète femelle,” used interchangeably by a critic who entangles all “Sapphos” in a woman’s body, which lacks the seeds of genius.

Yet Molènes unwittingly helps modern readers to recover poetic women’s texts by citing some of them at length. His close readings aim to dissociate women from the art of poetry, but instead he has preserved their names and selected works while demonstrating the differences among them. For example, he describes Tastu as displaying prosodic control and distinguishes her from the passionate Desbordes-Valmore, whose elegies he likens to love letters with no universal appeal. Whereas Delphine de Girardin and Colet created bold personae, further observes this critic, Ségalas treated contemporary topics, such as France’s conquest of Algiers in 1830. However, as Molènes concludes, all women lack the divine inheritance of genius: “nées pour mettre au monde autre chose que des volumes de vers” (75).

With similar assumptions, in 1843 the critic Charles Labitte called women “poètes minores” whose uninspired verse could not compete with the lyrical genius of Lamartine and Hugo (132). Like Molènes, Labitte invokes the analogy of mental exertion and disease in females to pathologize poetic women: “[L]a poésie devient, chez eux qui ne sont pas ses vrais élus, une carrière maladive et dangereuse” (138). Metaphors of disorder alternated with those of pathology from mid-century onward. Critics of both sexes filtered women’s poetic creativity through religion’s faltering authority and/or science’s ascendancy. Those advancing maternalist arguments imbued with bourgeois ideology had girls’ higher education in mind.
Representative of the orthodox stance promoted by some women is *Les femmes illustres de la France* (1850), a primer for young French women by the prolific Catholic writer Madame la comtesse Drohojowska (née Symon de Latreiche). Drohojowska considers the genius debate from a religious perspective, evoking the original division of labor: “Aux hommes, Dieu a donné l’amour du bruit et de la gloire. À eux les vertus éclatantes, les mâles conceptions du génie . . . et aux femmes, dans le calme et le saint recueillement du foyer domestique, que de vertus aussi sont destinées! vertus cachées et modestes” (*Les femmes illustres*, 1). Because the first woman initiated the trespass against God, stresses Drohojowska, she received the harsher punishment and was cast out of Eden as “l’esclave de l’homme plutôt que sa compagne” (2). Once named by Adam, Eve forsook her own desires to become the mother of humanity, fulfilling divine design.

Drohojowska continues by stating that, though the rare genius among them protests, females are born to be mothers. For her, even a writer remains, above all, a woman “[qui] n’outrepasse ni ses droits ni ses privilèges, puisque c’est la loi naturelle, émanant directement de Dieu, qui l’a faite la première ou plutôt la seule véritable institutrice de l’humanité” (*Les femmes illustres*, 15). In celebrating the women of France who extol such moral virtue, Drohojowska endorses the idea of the “womanly woman writer,” disseminating the bourgeois values of motherhood and self-sacrifice. This ideal worked to limit women’s creativity to the embodiment of femininity, a woman’s poetic “tradition” passed on from readings of Desbordes-Valmore as its archetype.

**Is a Woman Poet Born or Made?**

In 1861, two years after Desbordes-Valmore’s death, Charles Baudelaire, the most celebrated French poet of the mid-nineteenth century, gauged her achievement against the tenets of Romantic lyricism. If cries and sighs, spontaneity, and instinct, “tout ce qui est gratuit et vient de Dieu, suffisent à faire le grand poète,” argues Baudelaire, then “Marceline Valmore est et sera toujours un grand poète” (*Œuvres*, 146). If one reads closely, however, her greatness diminishes because she lacks artistry, or in Baudelaire’s words, “ce qui peut s’acquérir par le travail” (146). As Baudelaire’s appraisal shifts from Desbordes-Valmore’s originality to her femininity, his gender bias surfaces along the lines proposed by Barbara Johnson: “When they are not excluding women poets altogether, the guardians of poetic taste often enforce their views by singling out one woman writer, praising her extravagantly, and using her as a pretext to denigrate the work of other women” (“Gender and Poetry,” 164; emphasis in original).

By virtue of the womanly persona Desbordes-Valmore constructed, however strategically not laying claim to genius, she avoided what was considered “monstrosity” or “masculinity.” This made her the exception to all other poetic women, who are grouped by Baudelaire as “ces sacrilèges pastiches de l’esprit mâle” (*Œuvres*, 146).
In Baudelaire’s tribute to Desbordes-Valmore, however, the concept of femininity absorbs her creativity: “Mme Desbordes-Valmore fut femme, fut toujours femme et ne fut absolument que femme; mais elle fut à un degré extraordinaire l’expression poétique de toutes les beautés naturelles de la femme” (146–47). His portrayal of Desbordes-Valmore, yet to include any of her texts, evokes the ideal woman embodying gentleness and compassion, on the one hand, and a blend of female passion with motherly devotion, on the other: “la soupeless et la violence de la femelle, chatte ou lionne, amoureuse de ses petits” (147). This maternal yet animalistic image associates woman as poet with reproduction, eliding sensuality and sexuality to privilege Desbordes-Valmore’s transcription of “l’éternel féminin” (147; emphasis in original).

The “woman poet” endorsed by Baudelaire is heartfelt, the carrier of sentimental rather than aesthetic beauty: “[Desbordes-Valmore] a les grandes et vigoureuses qualités qui s’imposent à la mémoire, les trouées profondes faites à l’improviste dans le cœur, les explosions magiques de la passion. Aucun auteur ne cueille plus facilement la formule unique du sentiment, le sublime qui s’ignore” (Œuvres, 147). For Baudelaire, Desbordes-Valmore’s vigor meshes with her passion and feeling. Sublime but artless, her poetry emanates spontaneously from the heart. After impressing upon readers the span of Desbordes-Valmore’s poetic collections, from 1818 to 1860, he cites only four lines of verse from her posthumous Poésies inédites (1860; reprinted in Œuvres poétiques [1973]), two from the same poem, “À celles qui pleurent.”

Though a keen reader of Desbordes-Valmore, Baudelaire eclipses the socially engaged and reflective poet. His uneven rendering makes Desbordes-Valmore’s work fit a script of femininity. As Gretchen Schultz observes, “[Desbordes-Valmore] is all that the homme de génie is not” (Gendered Lyric, 49).

In 1862, Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly evaluated Desbordes-Valmore’s posthumous collection in his first series on poets, widening the gap between the woman, “qui n’a jamais joué au génie androgine [sic],” and the poet of genius (Les poètes, 146). Barbey d’Aurevilly separates the agony of Staël’s Corinne from the figuration of her genius and uses this paradigm to reduce Desbordes-Valmore’s writing to pathos. While Baudelaire used the term “cri,” like “soupir,” metonymically to assess Desbordes-Valmore’s Romantic sensibility, Barbey d’Aurevilly amplifies the trope to separate her “poésie du Cri” from works of poetic originality (148). To emit a cry, uttering inarticulate sounds, as the expression of grief or suffering, usually accompanied by tears, relates to sentience rather than to thought. Barbey d’Aurevilly’s binary thinking, which equates a woman’s body with her poetic “cry,” conveys the sense of being overcome by emotion and thus unable to speak with clarity or eloquence.

To capture the instinctive nature and energy of Desbordes-Valmore’s “cris pathétiques,” Barbey d’Aurevilly recalls the abandon and spontaneity with which the actress Marie Dorval performed on the Paris stage. Such effusion was the hallmark of Romanticism and had no aesthetic value from the perspective of the
Parnassian school emerging at that time, which emphasized form. The veiled question about Desbordes-Valmore concerns genius, whether “cette femme, d’une passion si grande et si naturelle, a réellement assez de langage pour faire fond de poète aux sublimités de l’émotion,” as Barbey d’Aurevilly states (Les poètes, 150; emphasis in original). Does her example disprove history? The critic approaches this from Corneille’s alleged statement describing women as failed poets: “Je ne sais pas ce qui manque aux femmes . . . mais pour faire des vers, il leur manque quelque chose” (151).

This notion of lack, later related by Barbey d’Aurevilly to intellectual women’s envy of the male genius, inflects how he reads Desbordes-Valmore’s Poésies inédites back into her poetic history.

Barbey d’Aurevilly stresses how the Romantic turn of Lamartine’s classical expression in 1820 overshadowed Desbordes-Valmore’s elegiac writing, which he criticizes as formally loose “vers libres” (Les poètes, 153; emphasis in original). At the time, the poet Paul Verlaine had not yet attributed to Desbordes-Valmore the innovative hendecasyllabic verse that would be practiced by Symbolist poets in the 1880s and ’90s: “Marceline Desbordes-Valmore a, le premier entre les poètes de ce temps, employé avec le plus grand bonheur des rythmes inusités, celui de onze pieds entre autres, très artiste sans trop le savoir” (Verlaine, Les poètes maudits, 59; emphasis in original). For Barbey d’Aurevilly, attuned instead to how Desbordes-Valmore’s early work embodies femininity at the level of form and content, her Poésies inédites demonstrates more prosodic control and includes topics beyond the domestic sphere. But, in the latter, Desbordes-Valmore does not display the work of true genius because “la femme, dont la gloire est de refléter ceux qu’elle aime, ne peut jamais avoir de profonde ou de saisissante originalité” (Les poètes, 154).

Focused on the thematic division of Poésies inédites (“Amour,” “Famille,” “Foi,” “Enfants et jeunes filles,” “Poésies diverses”), Barbey d’Aurevilly ascribes the volume to personal biography. The critic names fourteen poems from the collection, which show formal and thematic range. He quotes at length from “La fileuse et l’enfant” (“que les âmes tendres et chrétiennes diront divine”) to represent the arc of Desbordes-Valmore’s legacy: “Tout n’y est-il pas des meilleures qualités de cette femme, adorable par moments, qui n’est pas un poète, mais une femme qui, pour le coup, a passé bien près de la poésie, en nous passant si près du cœur” (Les poètes, 158). By representing Desbordes-Valmore as a sentimental woman, but not as a poet in the robust sense of the word, Barbey d’Aurevilly confirms his view of women as poètes manqués. He describes her contemporary Delphine Gay de Girardin and her trajectory in analogous terms, illustrating how deeply gender mattered in the canons of literary criticism.

From Poète to Bas-Bleu: Girardin

Barbey d’Aurevilly’s chapter on Girardin’s complete works (published in 1860–61) recalls her poetic debut with a dual image: “le génie de Corinne et la beauté de
Lucile Edgermond” (Les poètes, 294). To encapsulate how the young Delphine reconciles her gift with conventional feminine qualities by balancing pride with modesty, he cites her verse, albeit out of context: “Mon front était si fier de sa couronne blonde! / Anneaux d’or et d’argent, tant de fois caressés! / Et j’avais tant d’espoir quand j’entrai dans le monde, / Orgueilleuse et les yeux baissés!” (294). This stanza, restored to its original context, outlines instead the quandary elaborated in Girardin’s poem “Désenchantement” (1834): “Oh! les brillants succès de poète et de femme, / Succès permis et défendu” (Poésies complètes, 338). The speaking subject mulls over the uneven reception of women as poets, presaging the retreat from poetry inscribed in the last lines: “Jamais on ne rendra le sublime prestige / Au poète désenchanté” (340). Here Girardin is self-conscious as a writer, and she reiterates the difficulty of being a “femme de génie, et femme comme il faut,” as expressed in her poem “Napoline” (96). For readers today, Delphine Gay’s reflective texts disclose how she, like other poetic women, embedded in her creative writing a counterdiscourse of dissent.

Barbey d’Aurevilly’s account pulls the trajectory of Girardin the poet-turned-prose-writer through categories rather than through close analysis, demonstrating how conservative critics often read women’s works at a distance from the texts themselves. The young Delphine had waxed poetically and thus fit the category of a “bas lilas, c’est-à-dire qu’il y a en elle de la femme encore, de la grâce de femme!” (Les poètes, 295; emphasis in original). She had not yet entered the literary profession, which made her an “auteur dans le sens laborieux et disgracieux du mot, et le bas-bleu, cette affreuse chose, apparaît dans son foncé terrible” (295; emphasis in original). However, Barbey d’Aurevilly considers her forays beyond topics related to a woman’s lived experience as failed, a point he underscores by applying sexual differences to poetry: “C’est que pour l’homme et pour la femme, en raison d’organisations combinées pour des fonctions diverses, la poésie n’est pas aux mêmes sources” (299). Motherhood being a principal subject for women, he adds, the childless Girardin could not become “une Valmore” (300). Barbey d’Aurevilly reads the influence of the reproductive organs on the mind à la lettre to suggest that poets inhabit their texts the way they inhabit their body.

Marriage, which involves sexual union, is fatal for poetry, even for men, Barbey d’Aurevilly further asserts, “car la poésie veut presque des prêtres” (Les poètes, 300). For women, marriage is all the more lethal because it replaces the work of poetry: “Evidemment pour moi, Mlle Delphine Gay aurait eu du génie,—le génie, par exemple que ses amis . . . lui ont attribué si longtemps,—que ce génie serait mort de son mariage. Seulement avait-elle du génie?” (300–301). For Barbey d’Aurevilly, Girardin falls short of genius for reasons other than the alleged incompatibility between females’ procreative and intellectual energies. In his view, her attempt to treat contemporary topics in Improvisations (Œuvres complètes, vol. 1) proves “l’impuissance radicale de toute femme poète, quand il s’agit de chanter quoi que ce puisse être, en dehors de la maternité et de l’amour” (301). But Girardin is more than an elegist, he admits. To support this point, Barbey d’Aurevilly notes
that Girardin’s narrative poem “Magdelaine,” consisting of nine cantos, has “une
vigueur d’invention encore plus étonnante pour un cerveau de femme, dont le
destin est d’imiter” (303).

For Barbey d’Aurevilly, the allegory “Napoline,” a narrative poem divided into
four chapters, is Girardin’s best work, with the womanly woman outshining the
woman of genius. Had Girardin not become a professional writer, a bas-bleu,
he concludes, she could have made her mark as “UNE poète, cette chose si rare que,
pour la dire au féminin, il faut faire une faute de français” (Les poètes, 304). Barbey
d’Aurevilly’s study exemplifies the irony of literary criticism that aimed to
show why women had no poetic history and yet preserved their work for posterity.
At whatever moment and from whatever distance nineteenth-century critics read
women (as) poets, whether staying close to the text or close to their own context,
they recorded women’s names and their works (via the titles, excerpts, or full
 citations). The same holds true for their successors in the early twentieth century,
discussed later in this chapter.

Recovering Women’s Poetic Work

Archival evidence forms a retrospective framework for unearthing the body of
poetry produced by women in all its diversity and for evaluating the discourses
that determined its reception. Some nineteenth-century anthologies fill in gaps
created by critical studies of the time by adding names to the record. For example,
the fourth volume of Eugène Crépet’s anthology, Les poètes français (1863), includes,
along with Desbordes-Valmore and Girardin, Tastu and Ackermann. Though this
selection greatly underrepresents women’s contributions, ample introductions treat
the four women’s trajectories in the context of their works. Other poetic collec-
tions, such as Le Parnasse contemporain (1866–76) and the multivolume Antholo-
gie des poètes français du XIXe siècle (1887–88), both edited by Alphonse Lemerre,
feature a greater number of women alongside men. In the second volume of Le
Parnasse contemporain (1869–71), for example, one finds Colet, Blanchecotte, and
Siefert, as well as Nina de Villard de Callias and Madame Auguste Penquer. The
third volume, published in 1876, includes Ackermann, Blanchecotte, Colet, and
Siefert, as well as Mélanie Bourrotte and Isabelle Guyon. Lemerre’s Anthologie adds
to this roster, among others, Ségalas, Daniel Stern, and Madame Alphonse Dau-
det. These and other compilations that document women’s success as poets
provide a fresh gloss on the second of Arthur Rimbaud’s 1871 lettres du voyant in
which he appraised women as future poets. This letter, unpublished until 1912,
illuminates how literary archives at once provide and obscure evidence. Women’s
absence, like their presence, shapes understanding of the French poetic past.

On 15 May 1871, the young Rimbaud, only seventeen at the time, redressed
nineteenth-century French poetry to position his own visionary poetics. He wrote
to his friend Paul Demeny: “Quand sera brisé l’infini servage de la femme, quand
elle vivra pour elle et par elle, l’homme,—jusqu’ici abominable—lui ayant donné son renvoi, elle sera poète, elle aussi! La femme trouvera de l’inconnu! Ses mondes d’idées différeront-ils des nôtres?—Elle trouvera des choses étranges, insondables, repoussantes, délicieuses; nous les prendrons, nous les comprendrons” (Œuvres complètes, 252). Reminiscent of the nineteenth-century illuminists who carried forward Saint-Simonian ideals, the aspiring poet imagines himself a seer and links women’s social and poetic liberation. His use of the future tense implies that French women have not yet emerged as poets. Yet Rimbaud was aware of Desbordes-Valmore, whom he encouraged Verlaine to read. As I discuss in chapter 6, Rimbaud’s correspondence is the source of an excerpt from a poem by Siefert, whom he strongly recommended to his mentor Georges Izambard. Given that Rimbaud was familiar with Lemerre’s editorial projects promoting poets, he could also have mentioned other female contemporaries to Demeny. Why did Rimbaud dwell on women’s creative potential rather than on their actual writing? Could one attribute this oversight to an unwitting association of women’s rise as poets and the advent of Romanticism, a movement indebted to classical form yet imbued with an exaggerated pathos scorned by Rimbaud?

That passage from the lettre du voyant, often cited by modern feminists, does not explicitly engage with the way women had already marked French poetic history. However, near the beginning of the same missive, Rimbaud declares, “Je est un autre,” encapsulating his theory of the self or the “I” in poetry (Œuvres complètes, 250). His dictum, which gestures toward the unconscious origins of the creative impulse, can be read as a figure for the heterogeneous voice of the poetic text. This experimental paradigm also relates to the dialogism that Siefert explores (see chapter 6), which opens up multiple subject positions and identifications, regardless of a writer’s sex. Despite this perspective and Rimbaud’s gender-neutral language, it is nonetheless clear that, in affirming that women would become poets—“elle sera poète, elle aussi!”—he did not envisage the separate canon of “feminine poetry” that would obscure the scope of individual women’s creativity.

My examination of reception has thus far shown that primary and secondary sources form a repository of cultural memory that tells a different story about the literary past than does traditional history. Text and context remain intertwined. Their interaction shows how women continued to raise the stakes of the dominant narrative of reception by thinking creatively and critically. The issue of educational equality, related to “brain sex,” stirred the backlash against poetic women that would intensify during the 1870s on both sides of the Atlantic. By the early 1860s in France, Paul Broca, a comparative anatomist, neurologist, and anthropologist, had established the view that the smaller female brain correlated with intellectual inferiority. Hostile readers drew this discourse into literary criticism, alleging that women lacked higher cerebral function (notably reason and creativity) and thus could not produce works of originality.

In 1874, the British psychiatrist Henry Maudsley summarized the chief stance (not only in Europe but also in America) that contemporary movements for
improving the higher education of women and raising their social status ignored
the effect of superior mental training on females. “There is sex in mind as distinctly
as there is sex in body,” Maudsley asserted, and because of this, educational reformers
needed to heed the difference between the male and female brains (“Sex and
Mind in Education,” 468). Given their physiology, women were equally sensitive
to mental labor and “morbid irritation of the reproductive organs” (469). Maudsley
emphasized the “excessive educational strain” on American girls in reports by
American doctors, like Harvard’s Clarke (discussed in chapter 1), in making his
ultimate point: “[I]t cannot certainly be a true education which operates in any
degree to unsex her; for sex is fundamental, lies deeper than culture, cannot be
ignored or defied with impunity” (477).

Biology’s grip on the qualities of the mind had nonetheless loosened as science
made strides toward understanding human reproduction. By 1876, embryology
had confirmed the sexes’ mutual, generative role, thus refuting the long-standing
theory that male seed governed physical and mental conception. Traditionalists,
however, held fast to the primacy of sperm in reproduction and artistic creation.
Under the French Third Republic, intellectual fertility remained tied to procreative
infertility in literary analysis that measured women’s deficient as well as excessive
creativity against normative femininity.30

“Women who write are no longer women”

From the 1870s onward, France witnessed an even greater movement of women
writers than the one Sainte-Beuve had observed in the 1830s. As literacy rates rose,
the popular novel thrived, and self-described “ouvrières des lettres” responded en
masse to public demand.31 Opponents of this movement purported that there were
brain differences between the sexes to analyze all women who took up writing.32
Barbey d’Aurevilly’s Les bas-bleus (1878), a study of twenty-six literary women,
including Staël, Sophie Gay, Girardin, Sand, and Colet, develops the protopsycho-
analytic bent of bas-bleu criticism.33 His introduction, which restates Baudelaire’s
portrayal of the bas-bleu as “un homme manqué,”34 reflects the contemporary
synergy between physiology and psychology: “[L]es femmes qui écrivent ne sont
plus des femmes. Ce sont des hommes,—du moins de prétention,—et manqués!
Ce sont des Bas-bleus. Bas-bleu est masculin. Les Bas-bleus ont plus ou moins
donné la démission de leur sexe” (Les bas-bleus, xi; emphasis in original). No
longer a woman but not yet a man, continues Barbey d’Aurevilly, “[c]’est la femme
qui fait métier et marchandise de littérature. C’ est la femme qui se croit cerveau
d’homme et demande sa part dans la publicité et dans la gloire” (xii).

In Barbey d’Aurevilly’s analysis, the act of picking up a pen, an acte manqué (a
socially maladjusted behavior that manifests an unconscious wish), projects phal-
lic desire.35 Women’s writerly ambition, born of penis envy avant la lettre, robs
them of femininity: “La première punition de ces jalouses du génie des hommes a
Their attempt to lay claim to genius, “cette immense virilité,” not only strains the brain but also stimulates in women the bodily habits of men (xvii). Further still, the surfeit of *bas-bleus* in France could lead to social hermaphroditism, “où l’homme se féminise et la femme s’homme, et quand ces fusions contre nature se produisent, c’est toujours, pour que l’ordre soit troublé davantage, la femelle qui absorbe le mâle jusqu’à ce qu’il n’y ait plus là ni mâle ni femelle, mais on ne sait plus quelle substance neutre,” Barbey d’Aurevilly argues (xix). Faced with female overeducation, Maudsley had also wondered whether it might be “in the plan of evolution to produce at some future period a race of sexless beings, who undistracted and unharassed by the ignoble troubles of reproduction, shall carry on the intellectual work of the world” (“Sex and Mind in Education,” 477).

Barbey d’Aurevilly stays close to a biologistic line of thought, which assumes primary Darwinism, in pursuing the question of a woman’s capacity for creative work: “Et comme il ne s’agit ici que de littérature et d’art, est-elle d’organes, de cerveau, et même de main, lorsqu’il s’agit d’art, capable des mêmes œuvres que l’homme, quand l’homme est supérieur?” (*Les bas-bleus*, xxi). For him, femininity edges out creativity in all women’s writing: “Les femmes peuvent être et ont été des poètes, des écrivains et des artistes, dans toutes les civilisations, mais elles ont été des poètes femmes, des écrivains femmes, des artistes femmes” (xxii). Here, in *Les bas-bleus*, the term “poète femme” reverses the syntax of “femme poète,” used by Barbey d’Aurevilly in *Les poètes* (1862) in reference to Desbordes-Valmore and the young Delphine Gay. The orthographic variation “poëte” recalls the Greek *poiēsis*, “a making,” which underscores the link between poetry and creation, synonymous with originality. The cerebral difference assumed by Barbey d’Aurevilly fills the blank space that separates the categories of “poëte” and “femme,” from the Latin *femina* (belonging to the female sex).

Women’s texts, continues Barbey d’Aurevilly, offer proof as evident as natural history that “elles n’ont ni l’invention qui crée ou découvre, ni la généralisation qui synthétise. . . . Elles restent donc incommutablement femmes, quand elles se montrent le plus artistes” (*Les bas-bleus*, xxii). In his view, it remains to be seen whether any of the writers he proposes to engage will escape the law of inferiority also inherited from Christianity (xxiii). For him, the discourses of science and religion present a united front against granting women equal authority in cultural production.

Advocates for female intellectual development built on the momentum created by Victor Duruy, the national minister of education, who founded secondary courses for women in 1867, gaining more ground in 1880. That year, the Camille Sée law provided *lycées* for girls. The following year, Jules Ferry, the minister of education and president of the Council of Ministers, established free education and, in 1882, mandated secular and compulsory education for children aged six to thirteen. However, this legislation did not represent a commitment to intellectual equality, but rather the republican agenda: national unity and competent citizenry.
Sex in Mind and Education

Curricular reform of classical education under the Third Republic, which relegated Latin and Greek to a minor role in comparison with the French literary tradition, was geared toward maintaining traditional gender roles. Though French literature was considered appropriate for girls, texts were carefully selected to provide moral training for future homemakers and mothers. The call for pedagogical manuals still expressed the danger of “allowing girls to cultivate their mental space” (Gale, “Education, Literature and the Battle over Female Identity,” 111). Some women’s poetry survived in the more inclusive manuals of the time, such as Les femmes de France: Poètes et prosateurs (1886), edited by Paul Jacquinet, the inspector general for state education. Though many works had yet to be exhumed from library shelves, for Jacquinet, the corpus he had uncovered substantiated the authority women had acquired by the 1880s. The renaissance of poetry in the nineteenth century, he believed, owed much to women displaying creativity and artistry far superior to that of previous centuries: “Les femmes ont déployé dans ces concerts assez d’imagination, de sentiment et d’art pour qu’une part distincte et bien à elles leur soit acquise dans l’histoire de la renaissance poétique de notre temps” (xvii–xviii). Jacquinet named Tastu, Desbordes-Valmore, Girardin, Ackermann, and Blanchecotte in observing how powerfully nineteenth-century women had shaped the century’s poetic output. However, he emphasized that their legacies alone did not encompass women’s poetic production in all its forms. Interestingly, in Jacquinet’s manual, which was focused exclusively on women’s contributions to France’s intellectual history and intended for girls in the écoles normales supérieures (originally established to train teachers), poets outnumber prose writers in the section devoted to the nineteenth century.

Another collection from the same period reveals the state’s strong hand in forming a national curriculum. Gustave Merlet, a professor and member of the High Council on Public Instruction, published the Anthologie classique des poètes du XIXème siècle: Cours élémentaires et moyens (1890) in response to the council’s December 1889 mandate that “une Anthologie serait désormais obligatoire dans toutes les classes, en particulier pour les cours élémentaires et moyens” (i). The adjective “classique” in the anthology’s title relates not to classical Latin or Greek, but to the making of a modern canon consisting of contemporary “classics” or “great works.” In structuring his anthology thematically, per the letter of the mandate, Merlet selected nineteenth-century poets of both sexes, who “célébrant la famille et la patrie, idéalisent la vie domestique, populaire, et nationale, de manière à toucher les cœurs et à frapper vivement l’imagination” (i–ii). Unique for the time, this pedagogical tool reflected a newly created coeducational system that matched, at least in principle, the century’s poetic evolution.

The education of girls and the teaching of a national tradition worked both for and against women’s writing at a key moment of canon formation. Although ped-
agogical manuals and anthologies of the time expanded the place of women’s production, including that of poets, literary histories greatly reduced the range of women’s work, often erasing their poetry altogether. In 1889, the critic Ferdinand Brunetière limited French women’s influence to the epistolary genre, and in a later book (1913) he excluded their work from the evolution of nineteenth-century poetry. Likewise, Gustave Lanson’s *Histoire de la littérature française* (1895) silenced nineteenth-century women as poets.

However patchy the official historical record, the cultural memory of poetry produced by women is thick, as suggested by critical studies such as Henri Marion’s *Psychologie de la femme* (1900). Marion, a professor of education at the Sorbonne and a self-professed naturalist, knotted with biology the narrative that excluded women from the body of “great works” that formed the pedagogical canon at the twentieth century’s turn. Marion invokes Maudsley’s claim that “le sexe est plus au fond que toute culture,” arguing that education would not fundamentally alter female nature (4). Marion’s wide-ranging volume recaps the cross-fertilization of modern scientific ideologies and literary criticism, as elucidated by the interaction already discussed between the discourses of medicine and reception. Marion suggests the intellectual equality of the sexes in countering the categorical sexing of the mind: “La raison proprement dite, au sens étroit et philosophique du mot, n’a pas de sexe: c’est la faculté des principes” (197–98). Yet he maintains a cognitive difference by depicting women’s imagination as too lively and thus lacking “puissance” and “fécondité” (205). Marion draws the discourse of physiology into the reception of women as creators, meeting some resistance, however, in the realm of poetry: “Mme Ackermann compte comme poète aux yeux de tous les connaisseurs. . . . Mme Desbordes-Valmore a eu de grandes parties du génie poétique” (206). However, Marion concludes that work of such originality is not the goal of female education: “de nous aider à éléver des hommes et des citoyens” (306). Nationalist ideologies, which reinforced educational and curricular reforms that were based on sexual difference, carried through to canon formation well past the turn of the century. That women’s contributions to poetic production during the nineteenth century in France survived the construction of a “woman’s tradition” from rival masculinist and feminist perspectives is another irony of their reception history.

**Between Literary Criticism and History**

The Parnassian poet Catulle Mendès’s 1902 report on poetic production during the nineteenth century for the minister of education and fine arts represents the paradoxical way that hostile critics have marginalized women, yet recorded their contributions in detail. The first part of Mendès’s volume is an essay of two hundred pages, which reviews the history of French poetry to contextualize the century’s chief movements: Romanticism, Parnassianism, and Symbolism. The second part,
covering more than three hundred pages, offers a dictionary of principal poets. Replete with bibliographies, critical references, and a chronology spanning the century, this part of Mendès’s report provides the histories of some forty women. However, Mendès does not treat the few women in his body of analysis as central to the century’s poetic evolution.

Desbordes-Valmore elicits one of Mendès’s longer commentaries. In the second part of his volume, Mendès restates Baudelaire’s 1861 essay as well as conservative reviews by Sainte-Beuve, Hugo, and Alfred de Vigny: “[I]l y eut Mme Desbordes-Valmore, la chère et douleureuse Marceline, la seule femme qui soit poète sans cesser d’être femme, qui n’ait pas été un ‘travesti’ de la littérature, celle par qui ont été exprimées, en leur naturel de sexe, les piétés, les douleurs, les forces, les faiblesses de l’âme féminine,—la seule Femelle de la poésie française” (Le mouvement poétique français, 77–78). Mendès lingers at greater length on his contemporary Krysinska, conceding that her early poems (1881–82) may have resembled what the Symbolists later theorized as vers libre. Nonetheless, in placing her in the category of the “poëtesse,” associated with artlessness, Mendès emphasizes that her work falls short of a true poet’s: “En vérité, je pense que, satisfaite d’être célèbre pour l’aimable spontanéité de ses vers (puisqu’on dit que ce sont des vers), Marie Crysinska [sic] fera bien de ne point prétendre à la gloire d’avoir été une novatrice” (152). Women’s poetry should be considered like their physical beauty, concludes Mendès, “un charme de plus dans la maison” (201).

Domesticated by analogy, female creativity merged with womanliness and did not threaten either the literary tradition or the social order. The poetic embodiment of unbridled feminine sensibility, however, aroused hostility. This antipathy comes into greater relief in various studies at the turn of the twentieth century, including the retrospective account of women’s Romantic inheritance by the poet and critic Charles Maurras, also the principal spokesman of the reactionary Action française. In “Le romantisme féminin: Allégorie du sentiment désordonné,” first published in Minerva (1 May 1903), Maurras scorns turn-of-the-century poets Renée Vivien (1877–1909), Gérard d’Houville (1875–1963), Lucie Delarue-Mardrus (1874–1945), and Anna de Noailles (1876–1933). He alludes to their nineteenth-century predecessors, naming only Desbordes-Valmore, then reads each poet closely. Maurras’s appraisal targets their collective expression as “le romantisme féminin,” but associates each writer’s foreign origin or sexual orientation with perversion and anarchy. Along the latter axis unfolds the Romantic revolt against classicism, on the one hand, and the censuring of Romanticism as a form of excessive, unnatural femininity, on the other. In his view, “sous le nom d’originalité, pour principe d’art,” creative individuality had supplanted classical mimesis (“Le romantisme féminin,” 215). By “le romantisme féminin,” Maurras does not mean the poetry Romantic era women produced, which he obscures, but the womanish sensibility that usurped traditional French genius: “Au lieu de dire que le romantisme a fait dégénérer les âmes ou les esprits français, ne serait-il pas meilleur de se rendre compte qu’il les effémina?” (218).
For Maurras, while Hugo’s genius exemplifies “un mode de sensibilité aussi féminine que celle . . . d’un lamartinien,” Lamartine’s demonstrates “cette vérité que le Romantisme entraîna chez les mieux organisés un changement de sexe” (“Le romantisme féminin,” 218). In repudiating the male Romantic legacy by correlating it with excess femininity, Maurras also mocks turn-of-the-century women’s poetry: “Leurs modèles les avaient, plus ou moins, volées de sexe. Ils s’étaient mis à écrire et à penser comme il est naturel que pense et écrive une femme. Depuis qu’il retombe en quenouille, le romantisme est rendu à ses ayants droit” (219). Maurras imputes to modern feminism a neo-Romantic movement of poetry saturated with sentiment and tinged with sensuality. In formulating a separate category of female genius, he extends his subtitle, “allégorie du sentiment désordonné,” to equate “le génie féminin” with anarchic immorality. Maurras’s contemporary Alphonse Séché uses the same formulation, albeit to promote women’s poetic writing. The ambiguity of constructs such as “le génie féminin” and “la poésie féminine” discloses the semantic shifts underlying literary criticism and the recording of history. This reflects how the power of any discourse depends on context, demonstrating another dimension of the paradox of reception.

**Anthologies and the Poetic Canon**

In prefacing his two-volume anthology, *Les muses françaises* (1908–9), Séché argues that, to date, anthologies of French poetry that aimed to show that art makes no distinction between the sexes had placed men and women together but in so doing had grossly underrepresented the latter. To address this lacuna, he collected women’s poetry from 1200 to 1891. His anthology provides detailed biographies and selective bibliographies for each poet and an appendix of critical views of so-called *poésie féminine*. If ambiguously framed by such paratextual material, however, anthologies devoted to women risk upholding the separate “female tradition” that women, as poets, questioned or explicitly contested, especially during the nineteenth century. From this perspective, Séché’s indiscriminate terminology contradicts his aim to celebrate the scope of women’s poetic work. The word “muses” in his title suggests the passive role traditionally assigned to women as the source of a male artist’s inspiration. Séché’s alternate use of “femme-poète” and “poète” in referring to the poets he uncovers further muddies his perspective by tangling and untangling women’s relationship to creativity on the basis of sex.

Séché believed that women were poised to garner a prominent place in French poetic history. Given the substantial body of poetry women had produced and the greater freedom they now sought, their expression would shift even more from personal subjectivity to lyricism tempered with artful reflection, acquiring, in Séché’s view, “cette impartialité qui a été l’honneur et le génie des grands poètes et des grands romanciers” (*Les muses françaises*, 12). No moment was more propitious for women writers, he notes, and thus *Les muses françaises* was timely and
needed: “une éclatante affirmation du génie féminin” (13). Here, in Séché’s preface, the adjective “féminin” does not mark off the “inferior sex” from genius, as in Maurras, but designates the poetic creativity or “génie” displayed by women across the centuries.

Nevertheless, the significant body of work anthologized by Séché competes with the authority of the paratexts surrounding it, both his prefatory assessment and that of critics he solicited to offer their opinion on “la poésie féminine.” Their views, appended to Séché’s anthology, carry forward the nineteenth-century nature-versus-nurture debate over genius, together with the reading of nineteenth-century women as poëtesse versus poets. Although a couple of critics cited by Séché affirm that poets of genius would emerge or perhaps had already emerged from the ranks of women, most of them pass on variations of the theme that women have no poetic history and thus no future as poets. For example, Marcel Ballot maintains two separate canons of poetry, but blurs the line between them by adding that women could become “great” poets: “Qui sait même si elles ne nous l’ont pas donné?” (quoted in Séché, Les muses françaises, 2:355). Jules Bertaut’s sweep across centuries of poetry confirms, to the contrary, “l’absence parmi elles, de tout génie” (2:356). His commentary reproduces the contemporary debate: The source of this inferiority was not females’ lack of education, their lower social standing, or even the hostility greeting their literary aspirations, but a cognitive deficit. In Bertaut’s view, the mind of the poet of genius and that of a woman are diametrically opposed, “car le génie est nécessairement objectif, au lieu que la femme est, par nature, entièrement, irréductiblement subjective” (2:357). It would require more than education for women to develop the capacity for genius. The latter, stresses Bertaut, would demand a complete transformation of their nature, which he does not consider possible or even desirable.

With a comparable tone, Ernest Charles insists that there is nothing original about “la poésie féminine contemporaine” and places Noailles and her cohort in Valmore’s sentimental shadow: “Les femmes-poètes de notre temps ont exprimé avec une abondance effrayante des sentiments que Marceline Desbordes-Valmore et que la plupart des poètes contemporains ont exprimés avant elles” (quoted in Séché, Les muses françaises, 2:358). Unlike Charles, who alleges that no woman has exerted any influence as a poet, his contemporary Émile Faguet, a member of the Académie française, observes that Sappho, Corinne, Marie de France, Labé, and Desbordes-Valmore had produced poetic masterpieces. By focusing on the sentimental genius displayed by women, however, Faguet overlooks the intellectual legacy represented by Ackermann, for example, an achievement on par with the work of Lamartine and Vigny.

The literary journalist and poet Fernand Gregh contests the master narrative of reception more productively than does Faguet by rejecting gendered categories of poetry informed by the sexing of the creative mind. In recalling the aura surrounding genius, Gregh underscores that one can neither explain nor predict when great poets emerge: “Il n’y a pas de poésie féminine. Il y a la poésie. Certains et
certaines y excellent, d'autres non. On ne peut donc parler d'un avenir spécial de telle poésie, masculine ou féminine. La poésie a toujours tout l'avenir. Il naîtra toujours de grands poètes, hommes ou femmes, des Hugo, des Musset, des Louise Labbé [sic] ou des Marceline Desbordes-Valmore. Où? Quand? Cela git sur les genoux des dieux, et nul ne peut prophétiser là-dessus" (quoted in Séché, Les muses françaises, 2:360–61; emphasis in original). Unlike Gregh, Edmond Pilon narrows the category of “feminine poetry” to the dolorous and maternal strand of Desbordes-Valmore’s production, which he gleaned from Baudelaire’s reading. From this perspective, he places in Valmore’s shadow the turn-of-the-century poets Noailles, Hélène Picard, Cécile Perin, and Nicolette Hennique, insisting that they produced nothing original. For Paul Reboux, apart from Sappho, whose poetry is masculine, women could not become great poets. Similarly, for Édouard Trogan, women would remain muses or the embodiment of poetry itself. The only such collection until the early 1960s, Les muses françaises sheds considerable light on how unevenly twentieth-century critics evaluated women as poets, expanding, contracting, or altogether erasing their achievements in the nineteenth century. Discerning readers of Séché’s anthology, such as Irène Chichmanoff, however, weigh the original poetic corpus it restored against the inconclusive critical literature.

**Reading Women Back into Poetic History**

Chichmanoff acknowledges Séché as a principal source of her doctoral thesis, “Étude critique sur les femmes poètes en France au XIXe siècle” (1910). Unfortunately, her thesis had very limited circulation and thus minimal impact at the time. Considered retrospectively, however, it places French women’s poetic works during the nineteenth century in their original context. Chichmanoff’s revisionist study highlights women’s diverse achievements, drawing parallels with, or departures from, their male counterparts: “Elles ont triomphé avec eux et les noms . . . de Girardin, de Mme Desbordes-Valmore, Colet, Mercœur, Siefert, et surtout de Mme Ackermann ne périront pas” (22). Women advanced as poets during the early decades of the century, observes Chichmanoff, using the label “femmes poètes” to designate the leading group: “Ne peut-on pas dire que ces femmes poètes ont fait ce que les hommes n’osaient pas faire, à une époque où la littérature allait changer d’inspiration et de direction?” (29).

Chichmanoff argues that poetic women succeeded from 1800 to 1830 because they excelled in cultivating emotion, a principal feature of the Romantic aesthetic Baudelaire emphasized: “Dans ce domaine-là, elles peuvent atteindre au génie, elles peuvent être inimitables, témoin cette Desbordes-Valmore qui avait instinctivement trouvé les plus beaux accents d’amour qui soit dans la poésie lyrique” (quoted in “Étude critique,” 69). Desbordes-Valmore was not the only poetic innovator to emerge from the ranks of Romantic era women, however. This period, which valorized sentimental genius, as Chichmanoff describes, was “favorable à la poésie
féminine” and saw “l’éclosion d’œuvres de femmes que l’on pouvait considérer comme absolument originales et novatrices” (69). By the term “poésie féminine,” Chichmanoff does not mean a separate category of poetic expression. Rather, by this, she designates women as poets and shows that they treat not only matters of the heart, such as love, marriage, and maternity, but also philosophical topics with universal appeal. Individual women’s histories developed alongside close readings of poems and brief bibliographies enrich, yet also disprove, some of Chichmanoff’s broader claims.

The subsequent period of Romanticism (1830–50), which Chichmanoff characterizes as “à la fois pittoresque et déclamatoire,” anticipated the Parnassian turn from sentiment to sensation (“Étude critique,” 69). She considers this era, in which the focus shifted from personal lyricism to objective description of the external world, to be less favorable to women who tended to copy their male counterparts’ labored style.

The women selected by Chichmanoff to represent these two decades, among them Ségalas, the later Desbordes-Valmore, Girardin, Colet, Blanchecotte, Ackermann, and Siefert, were nonetheless innovative. Though Chichmanoff registers individuality among poetic women of different generations, she comments that “[une femme] met toujours de ses sentiments dans son art,” adding that most women could not achieve the objectivity championed by the male Parnassian poets (101). These claims limit her discussion of women’s poetic expression during the second half of the century. From 1850 to 1900, she identifies “deux grands poètes féminins,” Ackermann and Siefert, ignoring, for example, the unique way Blanchecotte bridges subjective and objective lyricism and how Krysinska theorizes her own foundational vers libre.

As Chichmanoff underscores, Ackermann explored the reaches of philosophy with unique force: “Aucune femme, dans aucun temps, n’a poussé si loin l’esprit philosophique, la profondeur de l’idée, la hardiesse de l’inspiration. On peut même dire que la littérature française n’a pas de poète philosophique plus complet, plus original que Mme Ackermann” (“Étude critique,” 103). For Chichmanoff, Alfred de Vigny and Sully Prudhomme also rank as great philosophical poets, but do not surpass Ackermann, whose Poésies philosophiques represents “un coup de génie” (104). Siefert also has a distinctive trajectory in Chichmanoff’s revisionist history; her poetry deepens Romantic lyricism: “cette poésie du cœur déçu et douloureux dont Mmes Desbordes-Valmore et Blanchecotte avaient déjà su exprimer de si profonds accents” (117).

By virtue of Siefert’s formal mastery and greater reflection, Chichmanoff continues, “l’expression de cette poésie a acquis dans ses mains une précision, une netteté, un réalisme auquel le mouvement naturaliste a beaucoup contribué” (“Étude critique,” 117). Here, Chichmanoff implies a continuum linking poetic women, but it is not an overarching assumption of her study. Though Chichmanoff, like other critics, invokes Desbordes-Valmore to position some of her female successors in French poetic history, she also situates women’s accomplishments in relation to men’s and even more broadly. In Siefert’s lyrical rendering of stoicism,
Chichmanoff recognizes “une véritable conception de la vie, une philosophie, un pessimisme d’une portée universelle” (118). This intellectual element in women's poetic work, highlighted by Chichmanoff and others, disputes the centrality of sentiment traditionally used to categorize “la poésie féminine.” So, too, the multiplicity of voices Chichmanoff recalls from the century’s end helps to recover other trajectories that have informed the broader history of French poetry, a history that includes women's shaping of their poetic work on their own terms.

The legacies sketched by Chichmanoff include those of the philosophical Daniel Lesueur, nom de plume of Jeanne Lapauze, née Loiseau (1860–1920); Jean Bertheroy, pseudonym of Berthe-Corinne Le Barillier (1868–1927), whose inspiration was historical and picturesque; Rosemonde Gérard (1872–1953), described as having poetic verve; Lydie de Ricard (1850–1878), characterized as the most Parnassian of all nineteenth-century women (“Étude critique,” 126); Thérèse Maquet (1858–1891), whose work Chichmanoff considers deliciously sentimental and musical (127); and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, who embodies “la poésie féminine contemporaine et la femme contemporaine, dont le caractère est la franchise dans le désir et la passion” (130). Whereas a number of Chichmanoff’s contemporaries used the latter assessment to criticize such poetry, as seen in Maurras and others, she extols in Delarue-Mardrus “un vocabulaire tout nouveau, absolument original” (130).

Chichmanoff cites space limitations and the year 1900 as her study’s end point and simply lists another seventeen poets. In contradistinction to Séché, she places Krysinska in this secondary group of women, whose work she considers less original but deserving of mention. In sum, however, for Chichmanoff, the body of poetry produced by nineteenth-century women is superior in quantity and quality to the poetry of previous centuries. According to her, the number of women who emerged as poets in France from 1890 to 1910 was twice that of the Romantic generation. She stresses the hostile social and ideological environment these women encountered, citing Mendès’s 1902 report. Though Chichmanoff does not endorse two canons of poetry, she notes that many nineteenth-century women tended to be conservative “pour la pensée et pour la forme,” except perhaps Krysinska, whose boldness she attributes to “son sang polonais” (“Étude critique,” 153).

In closing, Chichmanoff returns to the question unresolved by the critics that Séché surveyed. If women do not inherently possess genius, can they acquire it? For her, nineteenth-century French women’s poetry offers compelling evidence of creativity. It also raises the deeper issue at stake in forming the canons of criticism, notably the construct of “genius,” both its meaning and attribution. As she puts it, “Avant de se désespérer du génie de la femme, il faudrait que tous les âges s’entendent sur ce mot et sur ceux à qui on l’attribue” (“Étude critique,” 153). To underscore this final point, Chichmanoff quotes Fernand Gregh: One cannot predict the birth of great poets, whether from the ranks of men or women.

However, few critics of the time disputed the claim that women demonstrated no capacity for poetic genius, even in the recent past. A cluster of studies of contemporary women’s poetry, intersecting with Chichmanoff’s, silenced the multiple
voices recovered in her project until the latter part of the twentieth century. Subsequent studies in the late 1920s buried the expansive production uncovered by Chichmanoff, whether diagnosing women’s surge during the Romantic period, categorizing all women’s poetry in the nineteenth century as sentimental, or reproving their verse in the early twentieth century as perversely sensual. Nevertheless, in reiterating that women had left no mark, critics and historians alike unwittingly provided modern readers glimpses of those women remembered as gifted poets.

“So accurately does history repeat itself”

However narrow or broad a sampling one considers, the critical literature shows how the dominant narrative of reception history repeats itself, thus conflating women’s poetic past, present, and future. In 1909, the critic Paul Flat broached the genius question by prefacing his study of contemporary women writers (the poets Noailles, Delarue-Mardrus, d’Houville, and Vivien and the novelist Marcelle Tinayre) with Schopenhauer’s claim some sixty years prior: “Que peut-on attendre de la part des femmes, si l’on réfléchit que, dans le monde entier, ce sexe n’a pu produire un seul esprit véritablement grand, ni une œuvre complète et originale dans les Beaux-Arts, ni, en quoi que ce soit, un seul ouvrage de valeur durable” (Nos femmes de lettres, i). The only exception for Flat was the philosophical Ackermann (v). In Flat’s view, Schopenhauer’s “diagnosis” was still accurate regarding contemporary women as not having evolved poetically. Flat thus deems the sensual expression of carnal desire as monstrous and characteristic of all women writers: “La Femme littéraire est un monstre au sens latin du mot. Elle est un monstre, parce qu’elle est anti-naturelle. Elle est anti-naturelle parce qu’elle est anti-sociale . . . c’est qu’elle reproduit . . . la plupart des ferments de dégénérescence qui travaillent notre monde moderne” (218; emphasis in original). This discourse of degeneracy echoes the bas-bleu criticism that emerged in the 1840s and 1870s. Flat reflects his own context and Schopenhauer’s influence in judging the upsurge of women writers at the turn of the twentieth century from the perspective of the German philosopher’s notion of the will in the world. The pursuit of literary culture threatens women’s maternal instincts and thus modern society.

In prefacing La littérature féminine d’aujourd’hui (1909), the literary historian Jules Bertaut exposes the male angst generated by modern women writers: “[L]e succès de la littérature féminine actuelle a été foudroyant, il nous a tous surpris, il nous a tous mortifiés, il nous a tous un peu humiliés” (i). One can see here recognition mixed with the scorn of the previous century. However extraordinary women’s success as poets and novelists at that time, it was temporary, as Bertaut describes, “une mode, un snobisme qui passera comme tous les snobismes et qui ne comptera pas plus dans le développement de notre art national que la vogue de
la crinoline ou celle du corset droit” (2). In his view, women writers’ popularity in 1909 owed much to the fact that their readers were primarily women who lacked discernment.53

Bertaut places all women’s writing in a single category, fusing the criticism of their prose and poetry with their sex: “Qu’elles fassent des romans de mœurs, des romans psychologiques, des romans historiques, de la poésie romantique, de la poésie parnassienne ou de la poésie décadente, la femme de lettres est avant tout la Femme, c’est-à-dire un être d’une certaine sensibilité, d’une certaine intelligence, d’un certain goût et d’un certain tempérament, caractères qui varient fort peu selon les individus et qu’on est toujours assuré de retrouver en chacun d’eux” (La littérature féminine, 16). For Bertaut, love remains the essence of women’s poetry, varying little from the sentimental Desbordes-Valmore to the sensual neo-Romantics d’Houville, Delarue-Mardrus, Noailles, and Vivien, among others. Passionate excess, symptomatic of psychological imbalance, however, characterizes the style and content of the latter contemporary verse (303). Only those women authors who preserve the cult of the family avoid such excess, Bertaut concludes, and with this he prescribes the “cure” for women’s future poetry.

Bertaut’s contemporary the vicomte Hervé de Broc questioned the critical trend in 1911: “Si l’on prétend frapper les femmes d’incapacité littéraire, de nombreux exemples protestent en leur faveur” (Les femmes auteurs, 1). In redressing women’s absence from the French poetic past, Broc names from the nineteenth century Dufrénoy, Desbordes-Valmore, Tastu, Mercœur, Élise Moreau, and Ségalas. Brief commentaries on highlights from their work nuance his preface, which assumes all women’s poetic legacy to be sentimental. This enables modern readers not to lose sight of the fact that the Romantic generation as well as later poets explored a broader range of themes; some of these poets also experimented with various forms. Other twentieth-century critics related women’s poetic writing to their physiology. Their accounts place “la poésie féminine” in the shadow of their male counterparts’ genius, past and present, further reducing the footprint of women who emerged as poets in the nineteenth century.

What “Women Poets” Want

In introducing Muses d’aujourd’hui: Essais de physiologie poétique (1910), Jean de Gourmont,34 the literary editor for Mercure de France, adapts the lexicon of evolutionary science to aesthetic developments: “La sensibilité n’évolue pas, mais seulement les formes qu’elle suscite” (14). Gourmont adds physiology to the synergy between poetry and music, which he traces to Verlaine and also associates with Wagner: “Nous restituer la sensation même, la vibration nerveuse, c’est ce que doit faire la poésie” (18). From his paradigm of males’ poetry as the transposition of sexual desire, Gourmont forms the corollary for females: “la nécessité d’une vibration eurythmique qui régularise son équilibre nerveux” (24). Women’s verse
releases strong emotions and thus restores balance (from the Latin *eurythmia*) to their nervous system. Gourmont claims to have read nearly all the “poétesses” writing in his day, which would have been quite a feat, according to one author’s statistics. He observes that most contemporary women’s poetry remains too close to the feeling or physical sensation it describes to be considered art (28). The sensual, rather than strictly sentimental, accents of women’s current poetic expression, however, await “un grand poète pour être fixés en art” (30). For Gourmont, the exception to this rule is Desbordes-Valmore, whose prosodic experiments inspired Verlaine: “Il faut comprendre que Verlaine, par exemple, loin d’être un novateur, fut au contraire l’aboutissement de toute une poésie féminine. Mme Desbordes-Valmore est une sorte de précurseur de Verlaine” (30). Generally, however, Gourmont does not consider women innovative. He describes their poetry as devoid of “toute culture intellectuelle,” applying Buffon’s definition of genius as “une longue patience” only to males (238). By stating that “le génie de la femme poète est une spontanéité,” natural and artless, Gourmont, too, perpetuates the critical topos of the Romantic “poetess” (238).

At nearly the same moment, Jean Dornis, pseudonym of Mme Guillaume Beer (née Elena Goldschmidt-Franchetti), published a less truncated account of the recent poetic past in *La sensibilité dans la poésie contemporaine* (1912). Dornis’s psychological analysis of French poetry since the mid-1880s compares the sensibility of contemporary male and female poets. In her view, many of the latter write through the desiring body, in contrast to Desbordes-Valmore’s allegedly chaste embodiment of femininity as presented by Baudelaire and others, whose views Dornis recaps from Mendès’s 1902 tome. Dornis considers Desbordes-Valmore’s legacy among the Symbolists, evoking Verlaine’s tribute to her as well as Krysinska’s role in *vers libre*’s history. Dornis argues against the discourse of male genius that has governed the reading of and writing about women’s place in poetic history. However, her study eclipses their contributions by not referencing more women from the nineteenth century (whether of the Romantic or post-Romantic eras). The concurrent forming of the modern French canon also precipitated poetic women’s fall into oblivion, as did studies that evoked their rise as a monolithic and
unduly sentimental group in the 1820s, instead of examining the diversity within individual women’s œuvres and between their bodies of work.

**Against the Canon**

The retrospective study of women’s place in French poetic history in the 1920s and ’30s takes on a fuller meaning against the backdrop of the canon of “great works” emerging during those years. Éditions Conard, established in 1902 to publish the collected works of nineteenth-century authors, was adding to its list modern editions of the works of Baudelaire, Dumas, Maupassant, Flaubert, and Balzac. With a similar aim, in the 1930s the independent editor Jacques Schiffrin launched the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, a series of complete works by “classic” French authors (still published by Gallimard). During this key period of canon formation, Marcel Bouteron published *Les muses romantiques* (1926). A literary historian and member of the Institut de France (which includes the Académie française), Bouteron was also a specialist on Balzac, whose works he was editing for Conard at the time.

Bouteron invokes Balzac’s *Illusions perdues* to position his own account of women’s place in the Romantic heyday. Metaphors of disorder and disease tinge Bouteron’s portrayal of women glutting the literary scene: “[T]outes les variétés de muses ont, au temps du Romantisme, envahi le Bois Sacré, à la manière d’une épidémie” (*Les muses romantiques*, 14; emphasis added). In his view, women as writers had not succeeded in gaining a place in the French literary tradition because their excessive emotion and melancholy delimited their collective production. Bouteron retains only Desbordes-Valmore among the poets. His role as an elite reader of literary history overlaps with the dominant discourses constituting her sentimental legacy: “Dites-moi si vous connaissez ailleurs que dans un cercle de raffinés, de lettrés, beaucoup de lecteurs de la tendre Marceline? Et pourtant cette femme n’est-elle pas la poésie même? N’a-t-elle pas, dès 1819, publié des *Élégies* qui, au moins autant que les *Méditations* de Lamartine, marquent le début du romantisme sentimental?” (105). Her work anchors the Romantic movement in French poetic history as much as Lamartine’s. Despite this fact, had male readers such as Baudelaire, Verlaine, Montesquiou, and especially Lucien Descaves not promoted her canonization after her death, argues Bouteron, referring to the public celebration in her honor in 1894, “peut-être le public ne s’aviserait-il pas d’y reconnaître des chefs-d’œuvre?” (105). That Desbordes-Valmore’s collected poetic works were not published in a modern edition until 1973 exposes her dual status as the one and only “woman poet” of the nineteenth century and yet a minor Romantic.

Already forgotten were Valmore’s contemporaries Waldor, Mercœur, and Ségalas. As Bouteron states, these were “des noms vieillots sur les titres de livres qu’on n’a jamais fait qu’entr’ouvrir ou même que l’on n’a pas du tout lus” (*Les muses romantiques*, 105). In the next line, however, he recalls some of their works, as if from memory: “*Enfantes* de Ségalas, *Poésies du cœur* de Waldor, *Poésies* de Mercœur,
Bouteron's *Muses romantiques*, like other studies consulted for this book, exemplifies the paradox of literary criticism that relegates poetic women to the margins of the canon it helps to form but, in so doing, helps posterity to discover and study them anew.

Alexandrine Baale-Uittenbosch's *Les poétesses dolentes du romantisme* (1928), which purports to contest Romantic era women poets' absence from literary history, further illustrates this double edge in women's reception as *poètes manqués*. Baale-Uittenbosch proposes to explain why, apart from Desbordes-Valmore, most of the women forming the spectacular poetic movement of the first half of the nineteenth century virtually vanished from the official record. She reiterates the critical view that their success partly stemmed from the exuberant spirit of the age: “L'époque romantique 'n'ayant guère le sentiment de la mesure, ni le goût de la sobriété,' les femmes sont parvenues à exciter un véritable enthousiasme pour leurs écrits” (21). Almanacs, keepsakes, and albums also contributed to poetic women's visibility at that time. However, “dans un temps de névrose romantique où il fallait être pâle, fatal, poitrinaire et lys penché,” the surfeit of “muses” who cultivated a melancholic persona devalued in turn all women's poetry (30). Baale-Uittenbosch counters such imposture by concentrating on the thematic diversity of women's poetic writing across the century. A veritable gold mine of primary texts, amply documented and contextualized with secondary references, Baale-Uittenbosch's volume is an invaluable resource for scholars today. However, her account of women's poetic originality, or rather lack thereof, has a blind spot: the constructed maleness of genius.

In turning from women's rise as poets during the Romantic era to their descent into oblivion by the turn of the twentieth century, Baale-Uittenbosch invokes the sentimental source assumed to limit women's innovative capacity. She cites the writer Antoine Rivarol, whose stance calls to mind the two sexes of genius later elaborated by Lamartine: “Le ciel refusa le génie aux femmes pour que toute la flamme pût se porter au cœur” (Les poétesses, 163). Because women ostensibly write according to impulse, argues Baale-Uittenbosch, they neglect the art of poetry at which their male counterparts excel. Her final analysis, punctuated with pejorative labels, echoes masculine opinion on the inferior poetic sex: “Tout en ayant eu la même conception des thèmes lyriques, nos auteures n'ont pu égaler les grands poètes. *Auteures* de second ordre, elles forment un cortège de *poëtae minores* qui ont balbutié ce que les Maîtres ont chanté d'une manière autrement profonde et artistique, les laissant dans l'ombre de leur gloire rayonnante” (265–66; emphasis in original). The production she recovered notwithstanding, Baale-Uittenbosch fails to introduce a new narrative of women's poetic past. Such a narrative was Jean Larnac's stated purpose in *Histoire de la littérature féminine en France* (1929).

In publishing a comprehensive account of “la littérature féminine” through the ages, Larnac aimed to settle, once and for all, whether women could produce works of genius: “Est-il vrai que les différences physiologiques qui opposent la femme à l'homme conditionnent des différences intellectuelles que le temps et la
volonté n’effaceront jamais?” (Histoire, 5). In Larnac, one finds condensed the physiology of genius invoked by literary critics to construct male versus female canons. As Elaine Marks observes, “The masculine is inevitably the sign of intelligence, reason, effort, abstraction, production, muscles, and normality; the feminine is just as inevitably the sign of sensitivity, inspiration, spontaneity, emotion, reproduction, nerves, and abnormality” (“1929: Jean Larnac,” 888–89). Larnac’s view of the nineteenth century passes on the one-woman poetic tradition I examine in greater detail in chapter 3, reinforcing the myth that, “après [Desbordes-Valmore], la poésie féminine sembla morte” (Histoire, 201). For Larnac, from 1850 to 1870, only Blanchecotte, Siefert, and Ackermann warrant any mention. And only Ackermann receives a closer look because of her intellectualism, which he considers “un sentiment, non une construction de l’esprit” (203). In his view, one could only speculate whether access to education would deepen women’s future literature.

At this juncture, Larnac reflects on genius that “souffle où il veut. Nulle culture ne peut le provoquer” (Histoire, 224). For him, however, the absence of women from literary history disproves the trend to unsex genius, which he traces back to Staël. Because women write from the heart, he argues, their writing lacks the objectivity that true literary art requires: “Les femmes n’ont pleinement réussi que dans la correspondance qui n’est qu’une conversation à distance, la poésie lyrique et le roman confession, qui ne sont qu’un épanchement du cœur. Elles n’ont produit rien qui compte dans tous les domaines qui exigent de l’auteur un complet détachement de soi-même et dans ceux qui ne se fondent pas sur le concret” (257). The want of reflection would always limit “le génie féminin,” Larnac concludes, using this category not to celebrate women’s achievements, as Séché had, but to mark a sexual difference that creative females could not transcend (279).

Fernand Gregh’s Portrait de la poésie française (1936) diverges from the traditional lines of criticism in various anthologies and literary histories, exposing how cultural context determines the labels used to record poetic history. In writing the history of modern French Romantic poetry, Gregh asserts that Desbordes-Valmore should precede Lamartine. That he calls her a “poétesse” has no bearing on her work of poetic originality, “un des plus beaux triomphes du don sur la technique, et du génie sur le talent” (66). Gregh’s appraisal contests the prevalent sexing of genius but not the singling out of Desbordes-Valmore, which, as already mentioned, obscures the other women whose poetry diversified Romantic production. Along with Desbordes-Valmore’s contemporaries Tastu, Delphine Gay, Mercœur, and Ségalas, Gregh puts Ackermann in a minor category of poets, doubly marginalizing her, as both a woman and in Valmore’s shadow. Yet, in describing her as “l’éloquente madame Ackermann, volcan rationaliste, dont quelques strophes sont parmi les plus mâles de notre poésie” (142), Gregh expresses how the ideological power of her poetry, like that of other women, engages us not in the criticism of sex, but in the creative work. Indeed, the vagaries of literary reception from the nineteenth century through the twentieth form a thick nexus. The critical force of
rival narratives beckons us, time and again, to read women's absence from poetic history against the grain.

Critical Displacements

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir argued that women have no poetic legacy because their production reflects no creative agency. Instead, patriarchal thought defines women as the “other” to men: “Les femmes ne se posant pas comme Sujet n'ont pas créé de mythe viril dans lequel se refléteraient leurs projets; elles n'ont ni religion ni poésie qui leur appartiennent en propre; c'est encore à travers les rêves des hommes qu'elles rêvent” (Le deuxième sexe, 1:235). Here, the adjective “viril” means “strength” and “energy” and, in the context of Beauvoir’s argument, evokes the idea of a strong feminocentric tradition that would pass on myths (in the sense of narratives) of women’s own making. Familiar with French literary history, Beauvoir was in a position to reconsider the “woman poet question.” However, at the close of each volume of her revisionist cultural history, which disputes the second sex narrative, she cites Rimbaud on women’s poetic future, thus reburying their rich past. It remains to be seen, she reiterates, whether women will become poets, for they have just begun to liberate themselves from the idea of being physically and intellectually inferior to men, a deep-rooted sense of lack that has prevented their creative achievement. She, too, denies that there have been women among the poets who shaped the French tradition.

Beauvoir returns to the question of women’s relationship to creativity in the 1966 lecture “La femme et la création.” For her, the chief impediment to women’s self-perception as creators is the idea that “les femmes d'autrefois n'ont rien fait de supérieur” (474). In theory, Beauvoir rejects the inherited canons of criticism with her final statement: “[I]l ne faut pas qu'elles se laissent intimider par le passé, parce que d'une manière générale, dans ce domaine-là, comme dans tous les domaines, jamais le passé ne peut servir de démenti à l'avenir” (474). In practice, however, she questions neither the record nor the categories of analysis used to evaluate women’s poetic work, as does Jeanine Moulin who, that same year, published the volume of her anthology devoted to women’s poetry from the twelfth century to the nineteenth, La poésie féminine.61

A question raised by Moulin’s title and aspects of her prefatory overview of women’s writing in relation to gender prescriptions is whether her anthology leaves in place the principal construct used to isolate women in the “poetess” tradition.62 In addition, the epigraph to her volume, a passage from Rimbaud’s lettre du voyant, carries forward from the future tense of his remarks the view that women have yet to become poets in the fullest sense of the term. More directly than Beauvoir, however, Moulin targets gender as the principal difficulty that has plagued the writing and reading of women’s poetic history. Though Moulin does not espouse feminism, she questions the literary past, as suggested by the query heading the
volume: “Existe-t-il une poésie féminine?” (La poésie féminine, 13). She broaches the problem of separating the woman from the poet. For her, women’s poetic expression “reflète une pensée, une sensibilité, et une attitude devant la vie, propres aux femmes” (13). To put her remark another way, poetry is a form of discourse or a way of thinking.

In her lengthy preface, Moulin acknowledges the social conditioning that underpins women’s verse, which often reflects the female experience. She also pulls in the biological blueprint determining “la poésie féminine,” which leaves her open to criticism. However, in commenting on the diversity of women’s modern poetic trajectories, which Moulin could also have drawn from their contributions in the past, she questions the construct of “feminine poetry”: “Peut-être, un jour, n’existera-t-il plus de poésie féminine?” (La poésie féminine, 64). Thus, Moulin envisages reading women’s poetry beyond gender. Nevertheless, Donna Stanton presented her own 1986 anthology of French women’s feminist poems from the Middle Ages to the modern era as a corrective to Moulin’s anthology, which “iterates the stereotypes of femininity and the clichés of feminine writing that pervade traditional literary histories” (Defiant Muse, xvii–xviii). It should be noted that Stanton’s single volume, tracing feminist thought in women’s poetry across the centuries, cannot match the scope of Séché’s and Moulin’s collections.

Any compilation risks being reductive, a risk that increases in response to the volume’s critical framework. A modern compiler’s reading of the historical record to determine women’s presence in or absence from the poetic past may distort the reading of contemporary poetic production as well. In Elles: A Bilingual Anthology of Modern French Poetry by Women (1995), for example, Martin Sorrell introduces the “substantial body of poetry written or published by French women during the last twenty years,” which he hopes “may persuade future historians that this was something of a golden age” (1). For Sorrell, this body of work contrasts with “almost three centuries of apparent infertility,” separating the distant voices of Christine de Pisan, Marguerite de Navarre, and Labé from the “richly romantic and Romantic Marceline Desbordes-Valmore” and “Louise Ackermann . . . full of pre-modernist angst” (1; emphasis in original). Louis Simpson’s Modern French Poets: A Bilingual Anthology (1997) reduces the record even more. Simpson chooses Desbordes-Valmore as the only excellent and innovative “female poet” of the nineteenth century: “Throughout the span of time I have measured there were very few women in France whose poetry even approaches the excellence of the poetry of Desbordes-Valmore. . . . [T]he poetry women wrote in France in the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth is unadventurous in form and style. It is sentimental. In short, there is nothing modern about it” (xx). Yet the basis upon which Simpson selects Desbordes-Valmore contradicts why her reputation as a sentimental genius endured to the exclusion of all other women of her century. If by “sentimental” Simpson means Romantic, what would he call Desbordes-Valmore’s effusive lyricism, which Baudelaire considered her greatness? What,
moreover, does he consider modern about Desbordes-Valmore, who did not figure for Stanton as a “defiant muse”?

The double meaning of femininity has allowed misogynists to applaud Desbordes-Valmore and feminists not to embrace her completely. Desbordes-Valmore’s “very success in constructing an unthreatening poetics of sincerity, which enabled her to maintain a place in the French poetic canon as a ‘romantique mineur’ . . . has tended to render her unusable and invisible for feminism,” Johnson argues (“Gender and Poetry,” 170). That Desbordes-Valmore’s reputation as the only “woman poet” of her century survived well into the twentieth century partly explains the slow recovery of other women’s contributions, with the restrictive category of la poésie féminine being another principal factor. But, as Jean-Paul Somoff and Aurélien Marfée stated in “Les muses du Parnasse” (1979), “[Desbordes-Valmore] ne fut pas la seule à pouvoir rivaliser avec les plus grands poètes” (6). In 1987, Évelyne Wilwerth reiterated the point with emphasis: “Mais, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore résume-t-elle à elle seule la création poétique [des femmes] du XIXe siècle des femmes? Non!” (Visages de la littérature féminine, 181).

During the 1990s, scholars amplified the record of the poetry produced by women across the nineteenth century. For example, Femmes poètes du XIXe siècle: Une anthologie (1998), edited by Christine Planté, features 19 of 70 major poets plumbed from the archives. An index lists another 120 women not featured in the anthology. The body of scholarship has also broadened to include poets other than Desbordes-Valmore, though, apart from Krysinska, principally through scholarly articles. In calling for a new history of nineteenth-century French poetry that would include women’s contributions in all their diversity, thus encouraging commensurate study, I seek in this book to illuminate the strategies women developed for intervening in the dominant narrative, which not only belittled their aesthetic ambitions but also barred their entry to the canon. Chapter 3 prepares a new critical direction by expanding Desbordes-Valmore’s trajectory and reception from the perspective of women who engaged with, or ignored, her poetic work, starting with the Romantic period, which reveals how actively women thought about their relationship to creativity and, in so doing, rethought the notion of genius.