

**Altered Narratives: Female Eighteenth-Century
French Authors Reinterpreted**

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Preface

by Servanne Woodward

It was with doubts and uncertainties that in 1988, Nancy K. Miller introduced *The Politics of Tradition: Placing Women in French Literature* (Yale French Studies no. 75). She questioned the feminist practice of introducing women authors to the French literary “canon”: speaking of the new French field thus created, she was expressing “anxiety about the adequacy of its own maps: the old treason of new traditions” (Miller, *Politics* 6). Miller was then worried about blindly repeating some of the questionable practices of literary canon formation. In 1995, Miller seems more secure about the pedagogical practices of her colleagues. In her recent edition of *French Dressing: Women, Men, and Ancien Régime Fiction*, she advocates “reading in pairs” or “repairing the tradition” as practiced by American pedagogues who select matching pairs of canonical male authors and women writers (Miller, *Dressing* 3-42). Indeed, the writers of any gender converse among themselves across centuries and countries. These exchanges render temporal, national, and gendered borders relative. Nevertheless, just as historical delimitations of power still justify the grouping of literatures by nations, so bodies of literature can be divided along lines of gender.

In 1988, Joan DeJean pointed out that while “writing in a canonical economy,” it was difficult to justify the introduction of women writers “to the audience of *Yale French Studies*” (DeJean, *Politics* 1). In her 1991 *Tender Geographies*, DeJean still feels uncomfortable with the canonical economy: “Recent American experiments with canon revision frequently remind us of a basic pedagogical truth: women authors are granted authoritative status only when they can be considered exceptional, beyond their sex, and when they can be integrated into educational programs and reading lists without disturbing the traditional literary landscape” (161). More than the remapping of French

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literature seems to be involved. The traditions and politics to be considered address the continental divides that exists among French and U. S.-based critics, for instance, along with the different status accorded to women in France and in North America, their political and economic powers in the realms of public and family life. The economy to be scrutinized applies to more than the “canon” or the authors commonly published, purchased, and ordered by professors eager to balance tradition and innovation in the curriculum of their institutions. Since arts and literature departments are overwhelmingly patronized by female students—“clients” as most North-American universities now call them—it has become necessary and profitable to offer courses allowing students to trace female involvement on the literary scene. Consequently, since there is an increasing number of female literary critics, it is not surprising that a field comprised almost exclusively of male authors is being questioned. The general concern is that women authors’ visibility is missing from the critical topography of French literature, which is thereby grossly distorted.

In her collection of articles bearing on English literature, *Men Writing the Feminine: Literature, Theory, and the Question of Genders*, Thais E. Morgan states: “The interaction of writing and gender is complex and fraught with cultural significance when the author projects a voice from the imagined perspective of the opposite sex” (Morgan, 1). Jonathan Culler confirms this point of view as he observes that “for any particular feminist position or reading, one can admit that it could have been produced by a man, but it would seem to me tendentious and appropriative for a man to call what he is doing feminism” (“Five Propositions” 187). According to Culler, no author perceives writing as neutral: social accountability, responsibilities, and identities are engaged in the act of writing and signing a given piece.

Although authors have been reading and befriending each other across gender lines, literary critics have reduced the general conversation among them to male voices, excluding women from the dialogue. The current volume,

Crossgender Narratives from the French Eighteenth Century: Alternative Endings and New Versions by Authors of the Other Sex, focuses upon women's continuous involvement. In Mme de Grafigny's *Peruvian Letters*, Zilia proposes to her suitor a friendly, learned dialogue about the philosophical volumes contained in her library. This conversation is deemed preferable to a marriage.

DeJean notes in 1988 that a "lack of practical gains" can be observed in French studies by comparison to English anthologies of literature by women, such as Gilbert and Gubar's *Norton Anthology* (DeJean, *Politics* 3). The situation seems unchanged in 1991, when she complains that French women authors are unavailable in cheap anthologies or paperback editions (*Displacements* viii). Anyone trying to teach a course on eighteenth-century French women authors had to stop short after Mme Le Prince de Beaumont's *Beauty and the Beast*, and Grafigny's *Peruvian Letters*. The Modern Language Association published French and English editions of Isabelle de Charrière's *Letters of Mistress Henley Published by Her Friend*, and Grafigny's *Peruvian Letters* (actually renamed *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*, to deemphasize the kinship previously implied with Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*) in 1993. There are also MLA editions of Claire de Duras' *Ourika* in 1995. DeJean is the editor of the last two volumes. The Parisian "Librairie des Femmes" does produce interesting texts that cost too much for a course (such as Olympe de Gouges' *Le prince philosophe*). Occasionally a small French press publishes some women of the eighteenth century. In 1995, the "Ombres" press (Toulouse) gave us Mme de Genlis' *Iñes de Castro*.

Little seems to have changed since DeJean's 1988 declaration that "only when their [women writers'] status as part of the curriculum no longer seems noteworthy enough to merit a number of *Yale French Studies* will we be able to feel that we have made a difference" (*Politics* 3). A cynical observer might reflect that if women authors gain critical recognition, it may simply be due to literature's loss of

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status, rather than to any notions of equal partnership. Whatever the case may be, in their 1991 bio-bibliographical dictionary for *French Women Writers*, Eva Martin Sartori and Dorothy Wynne Zimmerman set out to present female authors with the assumption that “the names of many of the writers included here will be familiar to students of literature, for they have long been included in the French literary canon—indeed, they are part of the literary canon of Western civilization” (“Preface” ix). The volume was successful enough to appear in paperback in 1994. Its entries are limited, and yet it serves the purpose of supporting introductory research into the corpus of female writers currently viewed as legitimate.

What critics hope to find in women writers is an oppositional discourse, an experimentation in resistance. It is difficult to define feminine thought as purely oppositional to the Enlightenment, although female writers seem to opt for seventeenth-century models: Corneille, Mme de Lafayette, and Fénelon. That Grafigny is writing her *Peruvian Letters* in the context of Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* is a common item of knowledge which has been recently found worthy of reexamination. It seems that the *Peruvian Letters* may be a reaction to *Candide* as well. Grafigny also gained much information through her friendship with Voltaire, who writes in D’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* (in the article “IMAGINATION”), that women’s imagination is equivalent to dogs’ in that it is purely reproductive and fanciful. In his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, Voltaire (introduced to science by his mistress, Emilie du Châtelet) is less misogynist. He opposes two different types of imagination in mankind (imaginative versus reproductive). In his *Dictionnaire*, Voltaire thus abandons his women and dog equation as well as the division of genders in creativity. Julie de Lespinasse, whom Diderot praises (as he does his daughter) for thinking “like a man,” was once proposed as a member of the French Academy because she was a partisan of the “philosophers” or “Encyclopedists,” as is evident in *Le rêve de d’Alembert*.¹

Elizabeth Blood shows how French women writers

adapted to the theater in order to participate in the public debate launched by Palissot over the social role of philosophers. Her contention is that Mme d'Arconville (1767), Mme de Gléon (1787), and Olympe de Gouges (1788) “redefined the role of the 18th-century woman of letters.” Moreover, women authors of the French eighteenth century often found an ally in Cartesian logic. Beaumont paid lip service to Rousseau while closely following precepts formulated by Fénelon—apparently more conservative than her contemporaries. Beaumont was famous and respected well into the nineteenth century and throughout Europe. Her *Magasin des enfants* was immediately translated into several languages. It seems that women writers were quite officially an integral part of the literary and educational scene.

Some of them were indeed far from marginal. In 1961, the *Yale French Studies* volume aimed to assess, in DeJean's words, “the potential impact of noncanonical literary figures who found their initial audience outside contemporary centers of organized literary influence” (DeJean, *Politics* 1). In the eighteenth century, the status of women-authored texts varied greatly, and so did their publishing strategies, as we will see in this volume. Their styles are often limited by private “feminine genres.” They can write to their friends and family, they may even educate young children, and they adopt the novelistic genre that had fallen out of style by the beginning of the century. The epistolary, didactic, and novelistic genres are fruitfully adopted by male writers. Women's writing strategies are most intriguing. Not only do women face censorship (as their male counterparts do), they are also particularly bound by social ethics. Women authors tend to create heroines who express themselves in a tautological fashion: for instance, in the novel bearing her name, Ourika religiously hides behind the black veil that conceals the black pigment of her skin. The black veil is a normative color in the convent, but it also displays the blackness it hides. The “veil” excludes her from full membership in French society. Indeed, Grafigny presents a Peruvian princess quite seduced by the works of

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philosophers and Parisian artists. Yet, it is not so clear whether she gives in to the civilizing process, although she settles in France and prizes above all her well-stocked library. Beaumont vindicates women's status by reaffirming their domestic roles. Paradoxically, she emphasizes the subservient nature of their duties to deny their likeness to servants. In Beaumont's logic, women must entertain their husbands and fuel their marital conversations. Therefore, women must cultivate their minds, learn how to be accountants, and read. The Beast gives Beauty the key to a large library. Crossgender continuations of texts by male or female authors belong to this type of subtle transposition of perspectives bound in sameness. It is at this juncture that we may best observe gendered perspectives and interaction.

Of central interest to this volume is the dialogical aspect of literary creation, as it traverses lines of gender, nation, and even occasionally of genre. This collection explores the affirmation of self within the given spheres of gender and nationality. In 1991, Miller and DeJean edited *Displacements: Women, Tradition, Literatures in French*, a volume which closely resembles the 1988 *Yale French Studies* issue 75. In her section of the "Editors' Preface," DeJean notes a "continental drift" stemming from a shift in critical theory: "In the 1970's while French was virtually the universal language of literary theory, French studies were a major influence on the American university scene. In the 1980's however, that situation has been reversed....French literature seems well on the way to acquiring a different history in this country from its official version in France" (*Displacements* vii-viii). DeJean describes U.S. pedagogues as dependent on a colonial France, that refuses to supply its American colonies with texts written by women authors. French publishing policies would enforce the *status quo* with regards to the national literary canon. However, another case could be made for the current trends of critical theories imported world-wide from the States, dictating, for instance, what and how France should study its literature. But the recent visible events of the French political scene are

intriguing. There is the 1994-96 efforts by the French Ministry of Education to shut down the Parisian centre for women's studies directed by Hélène Cixous (as obsolete or host to a majority of foreign students!)² The March 1996 *PMLA* (3.2) issue is partly answering this French crisis from the US perspective: in the forum on interdisciplinarity, George Yudice and Juliet Flower MacCannell reflect on disciplines and the creation of Women Studies Departments and centers within the American political-economical agenda and the context of institutional structures and practices (275-76, 295-96). On the French political stage, François Mitterand's burial had an interesting wife/mistress side-show, the blonde and the brunette, intertwined by the TV news camera between the numerous international heads of states who had come to honor France's ex-president. This item of gossip was somewhat quaintly reminiscent of the Ancien Regime. How can the progress of women's status be recorded in the France of the late 1990's? Comparatively, Women Studies have a healthier life in the Canadian and American scholarship and curriculum, partly due to students' demand.

This volume is resolutely optimistic, and anchored in the factual influences, harmonies, and struggles among authors of both sexes, in the undeniable fold of textual kinship. It could stand as an ultimate "pairing" and "repairing" of European thought.

Sylvie Blais compares various continuations and remodelings of Grafigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*. At first sight, it would seem that the authors are involved in one of the heated debates over the relative faithfulness of the sexes. Marivaux treated the theme in *La dispute*, and Diderot in "Ceci n'est pas un conte." Grafigny's Zilia is so faithful to Aza that she could not possibly marry her new suitor, particularly in the context of another fashionable debate on marriage, touched upon in the correspondence between Grafigny and Devaux. What remains most prominent and undisputable is Grafigny's opposition to a plot which would

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marry Zilia either to Aza or to the French captain.

Grafigny is involved in the social debates of her time by Roberts' subplot which involves incest. Antoinette Sol and Marie A. Wellington treat this topic. A historical perspective gives more prominence to Aza's insistence that he marries a Spanish lady because Zilia is too close a parent according to his newly acquired Catholic faith. Sol and Wellington shed new light on feminine resistance to marriage. The alternative friendship women offer the suitors is ironically viewed by George Sand in Sylvie L. F. Richards' and Lauren C. Pinzka's studies. Could it be that women dread the "moment of truth" as described by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*? Beauvoir evokes Michel Leiris who characterizes the carnal act as a bullfight antithetical to the "precious" culture women inherited from the princess of Clèves. A politic of avoidance would situate women's perspective on marriage. The physical aspect of sexual encounters would be rejected by women.

Antoinette Sol investigates a disputed authorship between an author and his wife, and between two countries, France and England. Crébillon's *Les heureux orphelins* (1754) and Haywood's *The Fortunate Foundlings* (1744) raise "problems of textual authority, authorship and gender." Blood perceives that women authors compete against male authors for public space. Wellington describes the two versions of the "comte de Comminge" story (1735, 1764) in terms of literary "marriage," but Sylvie Richards describes George Sand "righting" Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* with *Indiana*. Pinzka compares Mme de Duras' intimate epistolary genre in *Olivier* with Stendhal's romantic narrative in *Armance*, which hints at a settlement between men and women. However, it is not clear whether it is based on gender segregation or its floating assignation. *Post mortem* reunion is often the subject of the plot (in *Comminge*, and *Olivier*). In hindsight, it is not very certain that Wellington's figure of literary "marriage" is quite idyllic. There, the feminine character gains more independence in the male-authored text, enough to bear more responsibility for

the destitution of Comminge.

It seems that women's poetics tend to be more thesis oriented and more philosophical. Their stories are often unbalanced in terms of characters' development. Their stories bear visible traces of symmetrical but oppositional sketches pitting self-possession and virtue against self-indulgence and lust, feminine strength against male weakness, sentiment against reason, idealism out of choice against idealism out of impotency, active passivity against thwarted conquering. The male authors propose apparently more rounded characters, a maneuver which destructures those role distributions. They tend to redeem the male characters and spoil the merits of the feminine.

The remodeling of successful story lines tend to evolve towards realism. In Pinzka's study, anatomical details are hinted at. Parody (as is Sol's contention) or burlesque rewritings continue the debate which opposed this latter genre (traditionally liked to men) to the precious circles in the seventeenth century (tied to upper-class women). Story lines by women authors appear situated somewhere between the novel and the philosophical tale. They are transformed into genres which give more weight to the (limitations of the) body: theater; parody—insofar as it is linked to the comic vein—; the novel, understood as insight into the interactive psychology of well-rounded characters. This tendency is present in Mme de Vindé's modification of Mme de Grafigny as well, where a more realistic context is introduced for Zilia who is not allowed to retire in her secular Peruvian convent. This ideal heroine is invited to join French society, and perhaps a socio-cultural *status-quo*. The philosophical-moral tale is inserted in a (realistic) novelistic setting. In a sense, Zilia is "tried out" by the novelistic genre, as Tencin's female character is tried out by d'Arnaud's theater. Wellington suggests that her unidimensional characters gain realism because of their adaptation to theater—to living art.

The fact that several authors were redeeming themselves from a previous scandal may explain the strange

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opportunistic alliance between social acceptability and oppositional narratives in several of the texts. There are indications (as in Zilia's tales) that women are to be less involved with their libraries than with their marital or idyllic love, a theme which turns sour with George Sand who might be writing from the powerful masonic circles always active in political and mystic spheres. The shift from philosophical tales to genres and plots grounded on the here and now may be reflective of a battle of the sexes over the public arena and the status of the philosopher—if not of philosophy. This point is suggested by Elizabeth Blood's study.

Notes

1. Le rêve de D'Alembert's female interlocutor is Julie de Lespinasse. Her proposed nomination to the Académie appears in an unpublished communication entitled "Les Académiciennes," by Marie-France Hilgar (University of Nevada-Las Vegas), read at the Pacific Ancient Modern Language Association annual meeting (November 3-5, 1995), indicated in the *Pacific Coast Philology* 30.2 (1995): 183.

2. Hélène Cixous keeps asking for the help of Canadian and American colleagues to oppose the closing of her Center for Women Studies. My latest electronic Mail to that effect came as a general announcement via Philip Stewart, head of the French section for the American Association for the Eighteenth-Century Studies, in early April 1996.

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