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Éliane Viennot and Nicole Pellegrin, eds., *Revisiter la "querelle des femmes." Discours sur l'égalité/inégalité des sexes, de 1750 aux lendemains de la Révolution.* Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2012. 24 € (pb). 206 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, index and tables. ISBN 978-2-86272-603-8.

Review by Christine Adams, St. Mary's College of Maryland.

As Éliane Viennot points out in the introduction to this book, "De la fin du Moyen Âge au premières décennies du XXe siècle, l'Europe d'abord, puis le monde qu'elle influençait ont été le théâtre d'une gigantesque polémique sur la place et le rôle des femmes dans la société" (p. 7). These disputes that emerged during the Middle Ages and Renaissance were given the name the *querelle des femmes* in the 1880s as scholars rediscovered the voluminous writings that both attacked and defended women. This book, the result of a 2008 colloquium and part of a series organized by the Société Internationale pour l'Étude des Femmes de l'Ancien Régime (SIEFAR), traces the drumbeat of misogynistic discourses on women over the course of the long eighteenth century, always buttressed by appeals to "nature" and often couched in scientific language. Viennot traces the elements of *querelle des femmes* from the Middle Ages through the twentieth century and tries to understand the philosophical and historical roots of the vitriolic attacks. The defenders of women were also prolific, but seldom able to dominate the discourse. Eighteenth-century philosophes were no more "enlightened" concerning women than their predecessors. Women lacked "génie" and creativity, and if an individual woman demonstrated those qualities, she was a "monstruosité." Viennot posits that the intensity of the attacks that emerged during the late Middle Ages was linked to the emergence of education as a means of social mobility. As women became potential economic and political rivals to men in this new world, men had to find a way to contain that challenge. Thus, she locates this "guerre des sexes" in a specific historical context. The individual essays in this particular volume set out to explore the theme for the period of the Enlightenment, Revolution, and its immediate aftermath.

These essays test Viennot's hypothesis from the perspective of a wide variety of disciplines, including history, art history, literature, political science, sociology, and philosophy, some more original and thought-provoking than others, but all offering constructive insights into the question at hand. Interspersed between the individual essays are the primary source texts, both feminist and anti-feminist, that the authors cite, which could make this a useful teaching tool for French-speaking students. These attacks on women by philosophes and revolutionaries, sloppily defended as "natural," are hardly news to historians of feminism, but they still have the power to exasperate, as yet another *homme politique* airily "mansplains" that "Les fonctions privées auxquelles sont destinées les femmes par la nature même tiennent à l'ordre général de ce qu'il y a entre l'homme et la femme" (Jean-Pierre-André Amar, *Discours*, 9 Brumaire an III, p. 57).

In the first essay in the volume, Sandrine Lely examines eighteenth-century debates over women's ability to produce great art. The Académie royale de peinture was hostile to the idea of admitting women to its ranks in the seventeenth century, and the role of female painters became a subject of intense debate in the eighteenth century. Lely examines the various texts related to public expositions of the Salon de peinture, especially the commentaries on exhibits, and discovers that critics frequently

blamed the bad taste of women for the “décadence” in eighteenth-century French art, with its frivolous themes and artificiality. While some argued that women could contribute to progress in the arts, most believed that women lacked the necessary “génie.” The revolutionary regime carried these critiques to their logical conclusion, refusing to admit women to the Société républicaine des arts, which replaced the Académie de peinture in 1793.

Huguette Krief expands on this theme, placing her analysis in the context of more general debates over equality versus individual genius. Would republican men, who believed in the equality of individuals as well as merit, accord the same respect to women? Not likely—republican men were no more feminist than those who wrote under a monarchical regime. Krief argues that the evidence shows, in fact, that debates over the course of the century “répond à une stratégie nettement formulée d’exclusion des femmes des arts, des sciences et des lettres” (p. 62). While most philosophes dismissed the likelihood of female genius (which, if it did exist, was against nature), some, like Condorcet, defended the possibility. Even talented women such as Sophie Cottin accepted the dominant discourse. She was, Krief argues, torn between “la conscience d’être une femme d’esprit et la volonté de protéger son statut de femmes vertueuse, puisque les deux choses sont présentées comme incompatibles par les penseurs misogynnes” (p. 66). Still, in a hopeful sign, women such as Fanny de Beauharnais and Félicité de Genlis did celebrate the originality of women writers, and defended the possibility that women were, like men, able “à manifester du génie et à accéder à la perfection” (p. 76), opening the path to more “Enlightened” views on women.

Moving from the artistic to the political, Éliane Viennot takes apart French attachment to the myth of the Salic law. The Salic law, which supposedly emanated from the Salian Franks, excluded women from succession to the throne. Viennot methodically demonstrates that this law did not just “appear” out of nowhere to justify the transfer of the French crown to the Valois, but had to be carefully constructed: “Ils lui avaient trouvé une date de naissance (les années 420), un père (le roi Pharamond), des circonstances (la préparation du texte par quatre “légistes”, ou quatre “grands”), et une application immuable, qui faisait des derniers rois de France les descendants directs du premier—ce dont aucune monarchie ne pouvait s’enorgueillir” (p. 79). The false claims were “secrets explosifs, que la communauté savante se faisait un devoir de protéger” (p. 81) because denouncing the tissue of lies would have challenged the legitimacy of the Valois and Bourbon regimes. But what, asks Viennot, was the reaction of the supposedly skeptical and questioning historians of the Enlightenment, who developed a rich historiography that challenged other accepted verities and who did not hold the monarchy in such awe? In fact, she finds that not only did they do little to challenge the misogynistic myths that had governed succession to the throne, but they also denigrated, diminished or simply ignored those queens who had exercised authority as regents. Male writers continued to lend legitimacy to the idea that women had neither the right nor the ability to rule, underlining the monopoly of men on public power.

Was education a possible path to equality? Certainly, the revolutionaries thought so, and Caroline Fayette takes on the debates over the education of women. Here, Fayette grapples even more explicitly than Krief with the possible definitions of equality in a meritocratic society, as well as the contradictions in the ideals of equality versus “complementarity” based on sexual difference. She suggests that the debates over education during the Revolution opened a space to contest and potentially destabilize what she calls “la rhétorique du déterminisme naturel” used to defend the inequality of the sexes. Unfortunately, this challenge was ultimately unsuccessful in improving women’s status, and she goes on to suggest that during “la période directoriale et consulaire, dans la contexte d’une recherche de stabilité qui mettrait fin à la Révolution, certains discours ont tenté de résoudre les contradictions posées par le principe d’égalité en affirmant la nécessité politique de fonder, grâce à l’éducation, le nouvel ordre social sur la complémentarité des rôles sexués” (p. 99).

Martine Reid focuses her attention on both the essays and fictional works of three female writers: Félicité de Genlis, Germaine de Staël, and Constance Pipelet (de Salm). All, she notes, continued after

the Revolution to grapple with “une question continûment posée et plus que jamais d’actualité, celle de la place des femmes dans un domaine d’activité pensé, considéré et vécu par ses protagonistes comme masculin” (p. 113). However, she arrives at the conclusion that none of the three was particularly audacious in defending the position of women writers. While all evinced unhappiness at the unfair treatment and even ridicule of female authors, their arguments too often fell back on the same essentialist, ahistorical arguments deployed by their male antagonists. Pipelet ended her *Épître aux femmes* with a maternalist vision, while Germaine de Staël “ne plaide pas autant en faveur d’une quelconque égalité mais imagine une sorte de partage des activités littéraires selon le sexe” (p. 117). Reid is happier with the arguments of Genlis, who asked women “à lutter contre les idées reçues dans ce domaine et à être solidaires les unes des autres” (p. 118). Still, she underlines the fact that none of the three authors could move beyond a fundamental idea: “les femmes font de la littérature en tant que femmes, c’est-à-dire, différemment des hommes...” (p. 123). As a result, none truly fought for equality, “mais au contraire pour l’exercice de la littérature dans le respect de la différence sexuelle imposée par une société où le masculin est en position dominante” (p. 123).

In the essay by Sabine Arnaud, we see a shift in emphasis from the intellectual possibilities of women to the physiological assessments that emerged by the early nineteenth century. She notes that “Vers 1750, les catégories abondent pour parler de troubles convulsifs ou d’évanouissements: passion, affections, vapeurs hystériques, vapeurs hypocondriaques, ou vapeurs convulsives glissent de textes en textes. En 1820, toutes ces expressions sont rassemblées au profit de deux catégories médicales distinctes: l’hystérie et l’hypocondrie, la première étant réservée aux femmes” (p. 131). In short, the diagnosis of emotional disorders narrowed primarily to hysteria, and this was labeled a feminine disorder. How and why did this happen? For Joseph Raulin, a physician practicing medicine in the mid-eighteenth century, it was not unusual that a man—especially an aristocrat, by nature more sensitive and fragile—would suffer from “vapeurs.” As a result, he rejected the term “hystérie” in favor of “affections vaporeuses.” Other physicians followed his lead. By the nineteenth century, however, the somewhat vague and gender-neutral term “affections vaporeuses” had been replaced in favor of “hystérie” or “hypocondrie,” and the texts describing the symptoms of hysteria now focused exclusively on women of all social classes. In 1818, Jean-Baptiste Louyer Villermay, who would become a member of the Académie de médecine in 1821, codified the term “hysteria,” devoting nearly fifty pages to its definition in the *Dictionnaire des Sciences Médicales*. He also located the source of the malady in the uterus (hence the term “hystérie”). According to Arnaud, he affirmed “la validité du discours scientifiques [de] la différence entre la pathologie des hommes et des femmes,” (p. 138) and with this shift “Le nom organise la relation à la maladie, l’énigme disparaît; on lui substitue une loi sémantique; le diagnostic se fige en délimitation de la cause” (139). While men could be hypochondriacs, they could not be hysterics, and the disorders of women emanated from their sex and sexuality.

The Revolutionary period changed not only ideas on gender and sex, but also on the family and the role of women and men within it. The debates over divorce suggest that perhaps liberty and equality could be brought to the family as well as well as to individuals. However, the debates over divorce, which was legalized in 1792, lasted until its repeal in 1816. Anne Morvan argues that these debates turned on the question of hierarchy within the family as well as the role of the family as the basic unit in society. Rousseau, who had also supported hierarchy within the family, argued that the inequality of the sexes was based on human nature. However, Toussaint Guiraudet and Louis-Gabriel de Bonald emphasized instead society’s need for inequality within the family. Guiraudet, a Republican politician, argued that the family was the “unité élémentaire” of society, and that “le bon fonctionnement social dépend exclusivement de l’organisation familiale” (p. 153). Paternal authority was key to a strong republican government, as the father would serve as intermediary between the family and state to help maintain order. Bonald, a fervent monarchist, also saw the family as the primary social unit whose chief goal was the production and conservation of men, a goal that required different and complementary functions for each member of the family. Morvan asserts, “le discours sur l’inégalité entre hommes et femmes trouve avec Bonald une nouvelle figure théorique, non plus fondée en nature, mais inscrite dans une science de

la société” (p. 159). Subordination and hierarchy were necessary to the smooth functioning of both home and society. Thus, republican and monarchist essentially agreed on the gendered social and political role of the family.

Geneviève Fraisse’s concluding essay examines what she calls the three “figures” of feminist thought: “querelle, procès, controverse.” First, “La querelle annonce l’existence d’une polémique sur l’égalité des sexes où s’affrontent des arguments invoquant les qualités morales et la hiérarchie des valeurs” (p. 163). The theoretical works of Christine de Pizan are among the earliest in this genre, followed by Marie de Gournay and Poulain de la Barre. More philosophical than historical, the *querelle* affirmed that “L’esprit n’a point de sexe.” The “procès,” as Fraisse defines it, emerged in the context of the Enlightenment and especially during the era of the French Revolution. In this context, “la dénonciation de l’inégalité et la demande d’égalité entre les sexes nécessitent d’une part des lois nouvelles, d’autre part de plaidoiries ou plaidoyers en acte” (p. 165). These arguments for female equality relied less on philosophical concepts and instead placed male domination on trial. While the more abstract *querelle* defending the good qualities of women did not end, the revolutionary debates over republicanism and democracy “ont créé un espace de revendications permettant un affrontement réel autant que des aspirations concrètes en droit civil et politique” (p. 165).

And yet, neither of these approaches, according to Fraisse, brought together the theoretical and the historical (why are women subordinate to men) with the practical (what are the best strategies to end female subordination). *La controverse*, according to Fraisse, accepts the premise that women deserve equality, but disputes the means of reaching the goal. In this vein, she examines the debates over *parité*: all sides in the debate agreed that women deserved equal representation, but disagreed on the means to achieve it. Recent debates over prostitution in France also focus on strategy: will its suppression create greater or less liberty for women? According to Fraisse, *la controverse* reflects “Sûreté des principes, finitude de leur réalisation . . . Elle en fait la synthèse rhétorique et la forme politique contemporaine de l’émancipation des femmes” (p. 168).

Fraisse’s essay is an elegant ending to a useful and thoughtful essay collection. Two more volumes treating the *querelle des femmes*—from 1400 to 1600 and 1600 to 1750—are due to appear. We can only hope that those essays will be equally stimulating.

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