
H-France Review Vol. 17 (October 2017), No. 180

Adrianna M. Paliyenko, *Genius Envy: Women Shaping French Poetic History, 1801-1900*. University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016. x + 352 pp. Bibliography and index. \$99.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-2710-7708-6; \$37.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-2710-7709-3.

Review by Katherine Lunn-Rockliffe, Hertford College, University of Oxford.

This is an important book, which succeeds admirably in its twin aims: first, to explain how nineteenth-century French women's poetry came to be seen as primarily sentimental, with Marceline Desbordes-Valmore the exemplary figure, and, secondly, to contest this received view by constructing an alternative canon of women poets characterized by their extreme diversity. While much work has already been undertaken to recover these lost voices, by the author as well as scholars like Aimée Boutin, Christine Planté, and Gretchen Schultz, there have been very few synthetic works with the scope of this one, which considers how these neglected poets positioned themselves in relation to the dominant tradition. Gretchen Schultz's *The Gendered Lyric* tackled the broader sweep in a theoretical study of the role of gender in poetry by both men and women, but the originality of Paliyenko's study is to draw on a wide range of contemporary critical material and journalistic sources in order to reconstruct the original critical debates in considerable detail.^[1] A particularly compelling part of her argument is to show the extent to which male critics systematically insisted on pigeon-holing women poets in terms of their gender whilst the women in turn found an array of ways of refusing to define their poetry in these terms.

The book's two aims are closely interlinked. The first part, "Reception Matters," shows how nineteenth-century male critics, wedded to a binary view of gender, expounded a reductive view of *poétesses*. It surveys the varied strategies adopted by women seeking to evade this perception. In particular, it explains how Desbordes-Valmore, who wrote some of the first Romantic verse in French, came to be the best-known French woman poet of the nineteenth century. While Desbordes-Valmore has rightly attracted scholarly attention, Paliyenko persuasively demonstrates that her reputation is to this day shaped by the myth forged by her male contemporaries that she was the archetypal female poet, being sentimental and preoccupied above all with the themes of motherhood, love, and family. The second part, "Women Thinking Through Poetry and Beyond," consists of portraits of five distinctive and neglected women poets and details the circumstances shaping the reception of each.

Genius Envy is about reception more than it is about the notion of genius. Paliyenko's eye-catching title is inspired by a line from Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Les Bas-bleus*, the title of which is itself symptomatic of how women writers were labelled. *Les Bas-bleus* describes women writers as "jalouses du génie des hommes" and expresses the fear that they are adopting the habits of men: "la femme s'hommasse" (pp. 50-51). The phrase "genius envy" thus sums up the misconceptions that determined the reception of women poets. Although the introduction and first chapter discuss the sexing of genius and usefully record how being a woman was seen as incompatible with genius, much of the book is more concerned with how women defined themselves as creators, although the notion of genius intermittently and tantalizingly resurfaces in their aesthetic thought.

The first part, on reception, has three chapters, explaining the background to the reductive stereotyping of women poets throughout the century. Chapter one, “Un/sexing Genius,” explains the origin of the myth that genius has a biological basis, and draws on medical sources to set the aesthetic debate in context. Examining interventions from women in the Romantic era, it emphasizes that Staël uncouples sex from genius but that Sand’s stance was more ambivalent.

Chapter two reconstructs the debates of the Romantic period, and shows that although women regularly published verse alongside their male counterparts, critics tended to caricature the former as “bas-bleus.” Resituating Baudelaire’s often-cited account of Desbordes-Valmore in its original context emphasizes the extent to which it articulated the received idea of her as a model woman poet. Paliyenko’s examination of nineteenth-century anthologies shows that women featured prominently, although critics were often hostile to them, and literary histories such as those by Brunetière and Lanson tended to erase their work altogether. She identifies the 1920s and 1930s as a key moment for canon formation. This chapter shows just how entrenched the narrative about genius being incompatible with being a woman became.

Chapter three retells the history of nineteenth-century poetry by exploring how women positioned themselves in the tradition. It re-examines the reception of Desbordes-Valmore from the perspective of the women poets who variously engaged with and ignored her work. Women did not refer to each other using the categories used by male critics, often being much less concerned with class and gender, and positioning themselves in relation to male poets rather than to other women. Paliyenko traces the increasingly difficult climate for women poets in the period after 1830, following the decline in the market for sentimental poetry and the increasing commercialization of writing. She unpicks the complex relationships between individual women, considering their use of epigraphs and correspondence, and questions whether there was such a thing as a united sorority of poets. In the Romantic generation, Paliyenko charts connections between Desbordes-Valmore, Tastu, Mercœur, Ségaldas, and Waldor. From the 1850s, poets like Blanchecotte, Siefert, and Ackermann tended to look past Desbordes-Valmore or openly contested her as a model. Paliyenko concludes that few women discovered their voices through links with female peers and many resisted attempts to present *poésie féminine* as a unified category.

Part one is a wide-ranging and highly readable explanation of the conditions that determined the reception of women’s poetry, and the only minor quibble would be that it occasionally lapses into a series of rhetorical questions when recording facts it is unable to explain. While Paliyenko acknowledges that the received view of Desbordes-Valmore is inaccurate, her main concern is not so much to cast new light on a poet who already has her place in the canon as it is to show how her reputation shaped the way subsequent generations read poetry by her successors and that this model still defines criticism and anthologies being produced today. Part two complements this account with a fascinating gallery of five poets, illustrated with extensive quotations in French. Their names are familiar but their work will only be known to the initiated, and for this reason the chapters take the form of introductory surveys to the authors and their works.

Chapter four is a rich discussion of Anaïs Ségaldas, who, although she is known as a poet of motherhood and family, tackled subjects which had a much broader historical significance. Paliyenko concentrates in particular on her writings relating to colony and race, which tend to be dismissed as mere exoticism but which display interesting tensions in their representation of women. Paliyenko charts Ségaldas’s shifting approach to this subject matter throughout her career and contextualizes it with reference to a range of other writings which relate gender to race, including *Ourika*, *Indiana*, and stories by Letelier. In the Romantic period, anti-slavery and feminist arguments often overlapped, but Ségaldas’s position emerges as complex. A work like *Les Algériennes*, about France’s conquest of Algiers in 1830, shows events from the perspective of both the French and the Algerians, yet also juxtaposes nationalism and feminism. The chapter digresses to consider the intersection of gender and race in a number of contemporary works by

women and touches on some fascinating areas, discussing depictions of how the practice of slavery put French Creole women (white women born in the colonies) in a position of exercising cruelty and also examining the Romantic topos of “la belle Créole.”

Chapter five presents Malvina Blanchecotte, a worker poet who emerged in the Second Empire. Male critics have tended to highlight her gender and class, and yet she herself actively questioned categories. Paliyenko shows how she positions her voice as being “in between,” refusing the identities conventionally associated with being either a woman, a worker, or a poet, as is particularly obvious in the way she describes herself as “ouvrière et poète,” with the first term grammatically feminine and the second masculine (p. 137). The chapter brings out the way she associates poetry with thought, as being beyond socially assigned identities. The chapter includes a detailed discussion of her collection *Rêves et réalités*, including lengthy quotations which effectively convey the tone and sheer intensity of her writing. Blanchecotte is shown to adopt a variety of different personae that allow her to explore conflicts without any of the voices being directly identified with her biographical self. Her creativity is defined as much by her marginality as her femininity, which also enabled her to write about the Commune from a neutral perspective.

Chapter six presents Louisa Siefert, a poet of the 1860s and 70s, who is often seen as combining feminine sentiment with a technical control typically characterized as masculine, apparent for example in her use of the sonnet form. Although critics still tried to pigeon-hole her as a woman poet, Siefert herself was less preoccupied with gender politics. Paliyenko charts her development from the early collection *Rayons perdus* to her later more detached work *Les Stoïques*, showing how she was admired by the Parnassians and included in *Le Parnasse contemporain*. She analyzes how Siefert’s poetry celebrates thought and creativity as an antidote to a debilitating illness and represents a transmutation of pain. She explores how Siefert forges what she describes as a “dual style,” mingling personal and impersonal concerns (p. 171). This chapter relies much more than the previous ones on a close reading of the verse to conduct its argument, and the premise that the tensions between thought and feeling are played out in the very texture of the verse is convincing, even if the analysis is sometimes weighed down by repeated assertions of the dualism.

Chapter seven concentrates on Louise Ackermann, a philosophical poet who started writing in the 1830s but did not publish a full volume until 1874. Ackermann was an intellectual poet who engaged with science, reflected on the creative mind, and was interested in the question of genius. As in the previous chapter, the analysis sometimes relies heavily on dichotomies such as reason and imagination, naturalism and pantheism, materialism and idealism. It is striking that these binary oppositions come to the fore in the discussion of an author who so studiously resists the gender binary. Given that the chapter forcefully underlines the universality of Ackermann’s poetic voice and her belief that writing as a woman was simply to be human, this corpus would seem to invite the kind of critical approaches developed for poetry blending thought and feeling such as that by Victor Hugo.

Chapter nine introduces Marie Krysinska, the innovative free verse poet of the 1880s, showing how she questions the myth of masculine creativity by portraying biblical and mythical women in such a way as to highlight both the physical desires they arouse and their own inner thoughts. Above all, it tells the compelling story of how Krysinska was systematically written out of the manifestoes and early histories of free verse, and how she forcefully contested this exclusion in her own critical writings, arguing precisely and vociferously that she published poems in free verse earlier than the male poets who claimed the invention as their own. This chapter returns to the theme of genius, which Krysinska theorizes as lying beyond gender.

In part two, the analysis sometimes seems compressed, as is inevitable in a work that opens up so much new ground. As the separate chapters make a point of dealing with such different kinds of poetry, they necessarily take slightly different critical approaches. The account of Ségalas is more concerned with

theme than form, the chapter on Blanchecotte allows the extracts to blaze off the page and eclipse all commentary, whereas Siefert and Ackermann require closer textual analysis. However, the very impossibility of fitting all these authors into a single mold underlines their differences. That the material at times seems telescoped is a sign of its considerable richness. The reader is left longing to know more about the individual poets and it is obvious that this will be a fertile area for future research.

This is a valuable book that will become a significant point of reference. Along with studies like Margaret Cohen's *Sentimental Education of the Novel*, it makes a major contribution to our understanding of the cultural context in which women were writing.[2] Where Cohen was concerned with reconstructing the codes of the sentimental novel, a genre overshadowed in literary histories by male-dominated Realism, *Genius Envy* examines how poetry by woman came to be sidelined in the course of the century as a whole. In so doing, it questions conventional assumptions about gender and genre, showing that women wrote far more than just sentimental verse. The conclusion sets out just some of the ways in which the book's insights could be extended, calling in particular for more critical editions of complete poetic works by women, which should show the contexts in which their poems were published individually before being collected, and thus give a fuller sense of the women's tradition. Paliyenko has opened up new horizons, and this book will certainly invite, provoke, and make possible further work in an important field.

NOTES

[1] Gretchen Schultz, *The Gendered Lyric: Subjectivity and Difference in Nineteenth-Century French Poetry* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press).

[2] Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

Katherine Lunn-Rockliffe
Hertford College, University of Oxford
katherine.lunn-rockliffe@hertford.ox.ac.uk

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.