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Jane Donawerth and Julie Strongson, Eds. and trans., *Madeleine de Scudéry: Selected Letters, Orations, and Rhetorical Dialogues. The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe.* Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004. xxxi + 174 pp. Bibliography and index. \$25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-226-14404-6.

Review by Nancy L. Locklin, Maryville College.

Madeleine de Scudéry is an impressive example of the “other voice,” a voice that has been lost or ignored. A popular novelist and a member of seventeenth-century Parisian salon culture, Scudéry offered a clear and credible response to those who believed women to be inferior in intellect and eloquence. Scudéry was a professional author who possessed a charming wit as well as a knowledge of history and a mastery of rhetorical forms. It is a shame that her work has been relatively unknown. There are few modern editions devoted to her or her work, and many of those that exist are out-of-print and hard to find.[1] Thus, Donawerth and Strongson’s edited selection of Scudéry’s writing provides a welcome introduction to an engaging early modern author.

The book includes excerpts from three of Scudéry’s major works: *Lettres amoureuses* (1641), *Les femmes illustres; ou, Les harangues héroïques* (1665), *Conversations sur divers sujets* (1680) and *Conversations nouvelles sur divers sujets* (1684). I chose to read the selections before reading the volume editors’ introduction, and I must say it was fun to do so. Much of Scudéry’s work stands alone nicely and will appeal to even a casual modern reader. However, the volume editors’ introduction does provide some much-needed context, especially for the letters.

The *Lettres amoureuses* contain excerpts from a long-running dialogue between two fictional women, as well as a number of model letters which would have served as templates for female letter-writers of the seventeenth century. These model forms include business letters, letters of condolence, and so forth. As the editors explain, such letter collections were common during the Renaissance, and Scudéry has replicated and adapted the form for a female audience. The amorous dialogue between friends is especially significant, according to the editors, because it is an early example of the passionate and intimate language which will come to mark female friendships in literature for centuries to follow. Specialists are sure to find this section fascinating. The non-specialists, on the other hand, may find these letters tedious. My mind wandered as I read through these letters, and I could not help but think of modern young lovers on the telephone, arguing over who will be the first to hang up. Such exchanges are no doubt meaningful to the participants, but are often tiresome for outside observers.

The orations of illustrious women, by contrast, are informative and satisfying. Scudéry used the oration form for many reasons. First, it was a typical rhetorical exercise that, like the letters, she adapted for women. Second, it allowed her to address the *querelle de femmes*, a debate about the status and worth of women which had raged in one way or another since the Middle Ages. Many authors, especially female authors, challenged widespread misogyny through works of praise for heroic and brilliant women. Scudéry participated in the debate by writing speeches in which maligned or forgotten historical figures defend themselves. In this way, Scudéry herself sought to restore the lost, “other voice” in history and she presents the speeches as having come from the ancient women themselves. For example, the first oration is from Mariam, the wife of Herod the Great of Judea, who defends herself against charges of treason and infidelity before being executed for these crimes. Scudéry introduced the oration in this way: “Here, then, is the defense of this unfortunate beauty, who had more graciousness on her tongue than I do. Listen to her speak, I beg you, and observe her noble pride, the true characterization of the humor of Mariam” (p. 56). The speech to follow is, of course, entirely of Scudéry’s invention. As such, the orations also serve as a platform from which Scudéry can present her views on every subject within the context of her historical tales. Through Mariam, Scudéry explores the meaning of marriage, the nobility of women, and the importance of social rank. Mariam’s defense against the charge of infidelity, for example, is that she is descended from the royal line of Judea going back to the Maccabees. Surely, a woman of such notable lineage would never stoop to having an affair with someone from an inferior station.

Honor is an ever-present theme in the orations, and Scudéry defines women's honor in a variety of ways. Sexual honor is clearly part of a woman's worth, as is demonstrated by the emphasis on fidelity and the consideration due to a husband. At the same time, sexual honor is by no means the only, or even the most important, form of feminine honor. Scudéry's illustrious women include wives and mothers who also define themselves as queens, generals and scholars. According to Scudéry, Sophonisba and Zenobia both boasted of their military valor, as well as their courage and noble lineage.[2] Sophonisba and Zenobia, however, serve to illustrate different perspectives on honor, as the former chose to take her life rather than surrender and the latter accepted capture knowing that her enemies could never completely defeat her. As Zenobia states in this fictional piece, "those who would live in glory should die as reluctantly as possible . . . I was certain I would see nothing around the chariot I followed (in the triumphal procession) except the men I had once vanquished and witnesses to my valor and my virtue" (p. 82).

The final oration in this collection is a speech by Sappho addressed to Erinna in which Sappho praises women as scholars and writers.[3] Sappho serves here as a model for women and encourages them to seek education and to write verse. "How feeble and of short duration is the reputation that is based on beauty," she says (p. 93). It is clear from this and the earlier pieces that Scudéry, and perhaps her counterparts in the salon, saw female honor in terms that were far richer and more complex than we could have thought possible. Since so much of our knowledge about early modern attitudes has come from the male perspective, it has been easy to assume that sexual honor was all that mattered to women. Evidently, that is not the case.

The final group of selections, the rhetorical dialogues, come from two sets of *Conversations* published in the 1680s. In these conversations, groups of fictional characters discuss a wide range of subjects. The editors have selected excerpts on the subjects of good conversation, wit, and the writing of letters. Such conversations were a common format for early modern writers, and Scudéry has adapted the setting in order to give advice to women on manners and entertainment in good society. Much of her advice is surprisingly useful to a contemporary audience. For example, in her piece entitled "On speaking too much or too little," Scudéry notes that "there is one thing in language which is universally condemned by everyone, and that is obscurity and pompous nonsense, since truly whoever is listening desires to understand what is told to them and whoever is speaking is obligated to make himself understood" (p. 109). In her piece on writing letters of condolence, Scudéry explains that "the best one can do on these occasions is to make letters of consolation very short, for to be reasonable requires simply that you demonstrate to the person you are writing that you share in his or her grief, without going into long complaints or grand eulogies and without employing all the morality and all the eloquence uselessly" (p. 144). Finally, there is a wonderful exchange in the piece "On Wit," in which the characters discuss whether or not it is either permissible or witty to make fun of people (pp. 123-24). This conversation provides a fascinating perspective on modern debates about humor and sensitivity to people's feelings.

Equally telling are those elements of conversation which reveal Scudéry's views on social order and the monarchy, ideas perhaps more alien to a modern audience. A large portion of the piece, "On Wit," is devoted to the praises of Louis XIV as the perfect king. As the editors inform us in their introduction, Scudéry, along with her brother, had expressed sympathy for the rebels in the Fronde. However, while her brother was forced into exile, Scudéry managed to remain in Paris and enjoyed a long tenure in the salons of the city. The volume editors note that women such as Scudéry often thus benefited from a double standard that held men solely responsible for the political opinions of their families. Even so, it is possible that expressions of loyalty to the king in this dialogue were intended to deflect any suspicions about her loyalties. At the same time, Scudéry's feelings on the importance of class and social order are probably heartfelt because they are a constant theme in her writing. For example, she laments the trend among some elites to speak in "vulgar" terms. On the topic of accents, one of Scudéry's characters states that ". . . a foreigner is much less blamable for keeping the accent of his own country than a man or woman of quality who speaks like their servants" (p. 115).

Scudéry's views on women are worth mentioning. As she is credited in this volume for playing a role in the defense of women against intellectual misogynists, it is interesting to note how frequently she expresses annoyance with other women. While praising heroes and queens, Scudéry saves her strongest criticism for the vain, shallow, silly, and tedious women around her. Even her mostly female characters seem to agree that conversations are dull unless there are men involved, and that women on their own are apt to discuss nothing but clothing and romance. Perhaps, though, Scudéry is hoping that women can be trained out of this habit by following the rules of conversation erected within these dialogues.

The volume editors' introduction is thorough and easy to follow. Donawerth and Strongson do a fine job of placing Scudéry's work into context without allowing their article to dominate the book. They outline Scudéry's life and explore the issues of the *querelle de femmes*, women in the rhetorical tradition, and Scudéry's fascination and connection with the ancient poet, Sappho. The editors also briefly address a few of the controversies surrounding Scudéry's life, and her treatment at the hands of other scholars. However, they dismiss in one footnote the idea that Scudéry's brother either authored or collaborated on some of these pieces. Late in the introduction, they go so far as to say that Scudéry supported her brother with her writing. It seems to me that any serious question of the authorship of these pieces deserves a little more attention than this. At the very least, I would have liked to have seen the issue addressed directly so that Donawerth and Strongson could explain why they consider the issue of authorship settled.

The editors translated the selections from the earliest printed editions, as there are no extant manuscripts. They chose a good range of works and seem to have put the utmost care into presenting their translations. A couple of their footnotes to the translations, however, are unnecessary and even intrusive. Here is one striking example: in the final dialogue, "On the manner of writing letters," Scudéry's characters try to convince a friend to write more letters, and the corresponding footnote, complete with an exclamation point, compares this to a modern-day drug intervention (p. 141).

In spite of my minor complaints, I believe the book is a significant contribution to scholarship on seventeenth-century France, literature, and women's lives. Madeleine de Scudéry should assume her rightful place among the writers of her day, and this text is a step towards accomplishing that.

NOTES

[1] Among the available works are Scudéry's *The Story of Sappho* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), which is also part of "The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe" series; Delphine Denis, *La muse galante: Poétique de la conversation dans l'oeuvre de Madeleine de Scudéry* (Geneva: Éditions Slatkine, 1997); Joanne Davis, *Mademoiselle Scudéry and the Looking-Glass Self* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1993); and Nicole Aronson, *Madeleine de Scudéry* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978).

[2] Sophonisba was a Carthaginian noblewoman of the third century, B.C.E. She was the wife of Syphax of Numidia, and she poisoned herself shortly after the Carthaginians were defeated by Masinissa and the Romans. Zenobia was the queen of Palmyra in Syria in the third century C.E. When her province was finally defeated by the emperor Aurelian, Zenobia was paraded in triumph and allowed to retire to a villa in Campania.

[3] Sappho was a Greek poet who lived in the seventh century B.C.E. Erinna was a Greek poet of the fourth century B.C.E., though she and Sappho were thought to be contemporaries by scholars of the seventeenth century.

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