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Dena Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009. xi + 386 pp. Figures, illustrations, notes, and index. \$79.95 U.S. (cl); ISBN 978-0-8014-4761-7. \$29.95 (pb); ISBN 978-0-8014-7545-0..

Review by Joan Landes, Pennsylvania State University.

A generation has now passed since the publication of Stephen Greenblatt's and Natalie Zemon Davis's influential works on self-identity in early modern Europe. In their wake, scholars have probed further the contours of what Greenblatt so memorably termed "self-fashioning" by men and women of different social ranks and religions.[1] Dena Goodman's latest book makes a strong entry into this historical sub-genre, while enhancing our understanding of eighteenth-century elite French women's lives. In addition, she draws upon a wider range of methodological resources than in her previous work, most notably by incorporating visual evidence. In important respects, she also modifies the account of gender relations and suggests a very different feminist encounter with Jürgen Habermas's theory of the oppositional (bourgeois/liberal) public sphere from what she previously advanced in *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment*. [2]

*Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters* was initially conceived as an exploration of the material culture of women's letter writing in eighteenth-century France; and the book retains valuable features of such an investigation, including the reprisal in four of its chapters of materials originally published in several recent articles. Beginning with French and Dutch imagery of the letter-writing woman and her male counterpart, Goodman investigates the spaces and furniture of writing, the implements employed in it—inkstands, pens and paper—and the shops supplying these materials to a burgeoning new class of female consumers. While appreciative of and aiming to contribute to the ever-expanding literature on female authorship, Goodman emphatically eschews an exclusive focus on published female authors, noting: "Among women more than men, the gap between the ability to write and being a published writer or author grew, even as literacy rose over the course of the eighteenth century" (p. 8).

Goodman instead orients her study toward the more mundane practice of writing letters, an activity engaged in by growing numbers of otherwise ordinary, but notably literate women of aristocratic and commoner background. Such women had acquired a requisite level of education, as well as the material means and leisure time necessary to devote themselves to the (often daily) activity of correspondence with mothers, friends, husbands or suitors, and other kin. Letter writing was an accomplishment, much like harpsichord playing or dancing, which enhanced a girl's attractiveness on the marriage market. Moreover, the acquisition of such skills set a girl apart from the mass of French women. As Goodman recalls, literacy was unevenly distributed in the kingdom of France by gender, class, and geography, vastly favoring the city over the countryside and the north of the country over the south. Moreover, although literacy doubled in the century before the French Revolution, by 1789 only roughly one in four women as against almost one in two men could sign their names. The education that prepared a girl to be a letter-writing woman provoked cultural anxieties over whether it might lead women to turn away from the vocation of motherhood. Rousseau not only found the writing woman unattractive, but in *Émile* he even referred to the little girl's "natural repugnance" to writing (p. 113).

By itself, letter writing makes for a fascinating subject. Indeed, Goodman introduces the reader to aspects of the quotidian lives of women (of great and more modest wealth) eclipsed in histories dwelling on social and political discourses or labor processes and working environments. From this broader canvas, she analyzes the letters written by four women to friends and family members, only one (Marie-Jeanne [Manon] Phlipon, later known to history as Madame Roland) being among the truly illustrious or “exceptional” women of the age. In their stories and many others told throughout the book—including a lovely account of two daughters of a creole planter from Île Bourbon (present-day Réunion) in chapter two—we discover a great deal about the subjects and purveyors of female education, the bonds of motherhood and sisterhood, and woman’s place in the expanding consumer economy of urban France. The book’s closing analysis of four correspondences offers Goodman a window into what it meant to be a woman, how women confronted the choices that womanhood entailed, and how they achieved some measure of autonomy as women.

Emboldened by her discoveries concerning the multiple activities associated with letter-writing, Goodman advances a strong claim about the latter’s role in the formation of women’s gendered subjectivity, or what we might otherwise call the self-fashioning of the female self. While literary critics and historians have explored the gendered forms of authorship among the comparatively few women of this age who wrote for publication, Goodman widens her lens to view the manner in which girls without celebrity came to adulthood by a distinctly feminine route. Above all, she asks how girls and women came to understand themselves as (sexed) human beings possessed of moral agency and individual consciousness. Pushed to the extreme, this is a tricky argument. It implies that, prior to this (modern) age in which letter-writing became so widespread, girls were not fully individuals (in the Kantian sense of achieving full moral consciousness); or, alternatively, only girls of a certain class position, with the means and leisure to pursue an activity encouraging self-reflection rooted in relations of reciprocity, could achieve (modern) individuality. But a more measured formulation, as Goodman clearly intends, involves historicizing an otherwise universalistic philosophical claim. Yet the resort to history is somewhat problematic, given the inherited weight of overarching narratives concerning the rise of individual freedom in the West, in which subjectivity and class identity are inextricably linked.

Goodman roots her theoretical position on these matters in the proposition that moral autonomy, as several contemporary feminist theorists have elsewhere insisted, entails not only self-consciousness but also an appreciation of the individual’s social embeddedness. From this perspective, individuality cannot be an absolute condition of being but instead amounts to a relative achievement within a wider field of human relationships.[3] Thus, Goodman appeals to philosophers Diana T. Meyers’ concept of “autonomy competency” and Charles Taylor’s approach to autonomy, according to which reflexivity is the distinctive feature of a modern conception of the self. She anchors such philosophical arguments in the more historical claims of Michel de Certeau and Walter Ong: notably in Certeau’s appreciation of writing’s role in forging individual subjectivity and, above all, in Ong’s contention that “more than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness” (cited in Goodman, p. 2).[4] “As a conversation in writing,” Goodman asserts, “correspondence is dialogue with reflection. If, as Taylor concludes, we become persons as interlocutors, we become modern persons as correspondents” (p. 3).

However, Goodman remains most indebted to the early contribution of the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, whose critical theory feminist philosopher Maria Pia Lara has elsewhere characterized “as an effort at normative reconstruction that is rooted in empirical development.”[5] As in her previous book on the Republic of Letters, Goodman borrows Habermas’s identification of letter-writing “as the dominant practice through which men and women of the eighteenth-century both came to know themselves as individuals and to develop what he calls ‘human’ relations with one another” (p. 3).[6] Following Habermas, Goodman is interested in how the intersubjectivity of letter writing oriented “the new subject it constituted outward,” and she concurs with his view that “publication of ‘private’ letters was thus the first stage through which private persons entered into the new public sphere that was both discursive and intersubjective.” Yet, Goodman now faults Habermas for failing “to consider what it

meant for women, who were routinely praised for their ‘natural talent’ as letter writers and encouraged to develop it, to be denied full participation in this new public sphere for which letter writing prepared them” (p. 4). In this simple—and, arguably, self-evident—observation, Goodman begins a nuanced shift away from her previous reconstruction of Habermas’s theory and her evaluation of the positive role played by enlightened (salon) publics in the specifically modern articulation of gender relations.

Goodman is well known as a proponent of Habermas’s model of the bourgeois/liberal public sphere, and, equally, as a vocal opponent of Habermas’s feminist critics for stressing women’s exclusion from it. Indeed, her interpretation of Habermas’s account of the public sphere in relation to the role of the salon and the impact of gender on the articulation of public and private spheres in eighteenth-century France has been especially influential among historians of France on this side of the Atlantic.[7] She targets what she characterizes as a false opposition between public and private spheres in *ancien régime* France by other scholars.[8] She regards the eighteenth-century salon as an institution of the “authentic public sphere” within the private realm, a space in which private people come together as a public through the public use of their reason. She also maintains that Enlightenment salons were not burdened by the practices of masculinist privilege obtaining elsewhere in old regime France, attributing to the revolutionaries (and virtually ‘ab ovo’) the destruction of a public role for women: “It was the authentic public sphere that was dissolved in the revolutionary process, and with it, a public role for women.”[9] In contrast, other scholars of eighteenth-century French salons have questioned Goodman’s over-estimation of a wholly progressive function to Enlightenment salons and their hostesses. They have located the latter within the precincts of elite amusement, disputing Goodman’s argument that they were spheres of critical reason, serious work, or enlightened, liberal and oppositional politics, inscribed within the “authentic” public sphere.[10] From a comparative perspective, questions can also be raised. Outside France, women in other European, colonial and newly post-colonial societies like the new American republic were also denied political equality and access, although they were not subject to the same demands of Rousseau-inspired revolutionaries.

In *Becoming a Woman*, Goodman once again grounds her argument in the project of Enlightenment feminism. To Habermas’s feminist critics, she maintains, “there is more to modernity than the public and the political ... And as Habermas himself shows, what distinguished the new public sphere of the eighteenth century was the privateness of the individuals who constituted it... Letter-writing women became conscious of themselves as gendered subjects in the gap between a common experience of privateness and the differential positions defined by gender in the public sphere” (p. 4). Her study of the letter-writing woman is intended to explore the intimate private rather than the public sphere, although as before she quarrels with any strict divide between public and private spheres during this age.

Goodman is certainly right to insist that there is more to modernity than the public and the political. In a larger respect, however, she seems to want to have it both ways. On the one hand, she would remain loyal to her earlier version of Habermasian feminism, such that the Enlightenment benefited rather than limited women’s emancipation. On the other hand, she now appears as a (sympathetic) critic of Habermas—and, by implication, of the very same Habermasian or Enlightenment feminist model she earlier defended—insofar as it fails to account adequately for the gendered constraints imposed on women’s full emancipation. This book steps back behind the curtain of strictly Rousseauist, republican, or revolutionary views of femininity to explore insightfully the ways in which women’s autonomy as moral subjects was damaged, curtailed and monitored by the reigning norms of femininity, which, it must be added, were as profoundly modern as the forms of individuality to which women otherwise aspired.

Part one, “Images,” brilliantly sets the stage for what follows. It begins with a critical meditation on a portrait by the French woman artist Adélaïde Labille-Guiard of an unidentified, fashionably dressed letter-writing woman of the late 1780s, posed in the act of writing a letter to her children whose first words are legible: “à mes enfants / à l’amitié elle vous protégera”—too my children, I commend you to

friendship, it will protect you” (p. 21). Goodman counterposes this image to multiple instances of the genre of letter writing women in Dutch and French genre painting from the mid-seventeenth through the eighteenth century, in which the woman is the recipient of the (illegible) letter, which is invariably associated with love. Moving from Vermeer to Fragonard or Dutch seventeenth-century to French eighteenth-century images, Goodman sets the stage for the originality of Labille-Guiard’s portrait of the letter writer, in which neither allegorical treatment nor erotic themes of the classical narrative of letter painting are present. The artist posits a present daughter, rather than an absent male, whose absence through marriage it anticipates. Moreover, “by taking the portrait of the [male] writer as her model, rather than the epistolary woman of genre painting, Labille-Guiard found a new way to represent the new, modern woman, defined by her sensibilité and maternal love and idealized by Enlightenment men of letters such as Rousseau and Diderot” (p. 55).

Part two introduces the institutions and pedagogical practices of girl’s education. In the first of three rewarding chapters, Goodman surveys the debates over female education, pedagogical techniques, convent education and private boarding schools. In the second she addresses instruction in penmanship and orthography as a disciple of the body in Foucault’s sense. She sets the frequent complaint about eighteenth-century women’s poor spelling against a wider campaign for phonetic reform of the French language, which drew upon gendered understandings of speech and writing. For example, “the new orthography promoted by the philosophes was based on the *written* usage of contemporary men of letters (themselves) rather than on the *spoken* usage of women of *le monde* and *la cour* ... [and] was also embedded in the relationship they sought to establish between themselves and the reading public they often figured in their texts as an elite woman” (p. 122). Moreover, “whereas seventeenth-century commentators had praised ladies for the naturalness of their epistolary prose as an extension of their conversation, eighteenth-century successors ... used the wedge driven between speech and writing to turn praise into admonition and polemic into pedagogy. The perceived differences between men and women no longer open up possibilities of reform.... More and more, they simply marked weaknesses or inadequacies of women relative to men that pedagogy was meant to address” (p. 130). The third chapter in this section addresses the paradox of an epistolary education that claimed to be teaching women what came naturally to them. Manuals offered models of modern and practical sorts of letters, of different style conforming to matters of business to letters of friendship and sentiment. In addition, “by the eighteenth century, men and women had their complementary modes of both speech and writing: conversation and correspondence for women; oratory and literature for men” (p. 141-142). A morally charged line had been drawn between letters and literature on gender lines, and literate women were taught the protocols of femininity through family and schooling.

Part three, “The World of Goods,” introduces the fashionable commercial vendors who supplied the epistolary paraphernalia that women required: pens, ink, paper, seals and sealing wax, desks and inkstands. In chapter five, Goodman traverses the shops of *marchand-merciers* and explores the pleasures of shopping for writing supplies. Making excellent use of decorative art collections inside and outside France, she also appraises the styles and types of objects that were designed for the fashionable world of writing implements. In chapter six, “The Writing Desk: Furniture of the Modern Self,” she expands upon the scholarship of Annik Pardailhé-Galabrun and others concerning how the growth of privacy in the eighteenth century was instantiated in and supported by the development of new spaces or rooms and the fashionable furniture that filled them. We learn, for example, that the writing desk or table had become the personal furniture of the letter writer and how to distinguish different styles of furniture making or to assay what features signified the furniture used for writing letters in contrast to the *bureau plat* or larger desk employed by men as a working space. As Goodman remarks, “in principle, no woman had a *cabinet de travail* or owned a bureau because working women were not admitted into the ranks of professionals, and ladies were not expected to engage in work. In practice, there was no such thing as a *femme avocat*, and ... a *femme savante*, *femme de lettres*, or *femme auteur* was considered an ‘exceptional’ woman, if not an aberration or a monster” (p. 230). Moreover, she observes, “as public and professional writing was masculinized, personal writing was feminized” (p. 238); and more and more the popular

small personal writing desks or *secrétaires* took on a feminine cast as well. “As the repository of the owner’s most valued thoughts, actions, and desires, the secretary was a stand-in for its owner; violating a woman’s secretary was thus a metaphor for rape” (p. 241). As the furniture of the modern self, the *secrétaire* “represents the transformation of the secretary from servant to material extension of the writer’s body, and of writing into the direct expression of the self in communication with a trusted other. For the woman who owned and used it to write and store her letters, as well as the materials necessary to produce them, the secretary contributed to the reintegration of mind and body and thus to the integrity and expression of the self that we know as modern” (p. 244).

The letters presented in part four of *Becoming a Woman* poignantly return the reader to the book’s overriding concern: to what extent did eighteenth-century women achieve individuality? To what extent were women full subjects—agents of their own will? Whereas in *The Republic of Letters*, Goodman focused on the female “governors” of men of letters within the salon as part of the authentic public sphere within the private realm, in *Becoming Woman* she follows women even further into the interior, intimate spaces of the private sphere. In their stories, she discovered—to borrow from her portrayal of the dilemmas faced by Manon Phlipon, the future Mme Roland—“the gap between the novel sense of privateness that eighteenth-century women not only could but were encouraged to develop through the practice of letter writing, and the gendered possibility of moral agency in the public sphere.... The paradox of womanhood, as Manon lived and expressed it, was to find true freedom only in the restrained space of the cabinet. She found solace and meaning and even happiness in the practices of privacy, but these same practices led her to understand that for her they were a dead end, a tautology, leading nowhere but deeper inside the self or, at best, around the endless circle of correspondence between friends. Worse still, the very practice of reflection that she maintained was the source of all happiness, and especially her own, was really a masculine practice, and, as such, an illusory vocation for her” (p. 272). To be sure, Goodman also claims that despite all of this, Manon exercised through writing “a form of agency, a form of freedom that she learned to value in its contrast to the constraints of her life as a woman” (p. 272). But, then, Manon was truly an “exceptional” woman of her age.

Apart from her later celebrity during the Revolution, what set Manon apart from other women of her age was that her marriage to Jean-Marie Roland was “a love match freely chosen by both parties and arranged by no one but themselves” (p. 298). What she shared with other women, claims Goodman, was an ability to exercise “epistolary reasoning”: “Writing created a space for women to lay out the issues, options, and dilemmas about which they had to reason and on which their future happiness depended ... What made these women modern was not the freedom to follow their hearts into marriage but the reasoning they used to sort through the possible paths to happiness through marriage with which life presented them” (276-77). Yet her marriage turned out to be a disappointment, as a consequence of the gender structures that determined individual choice: “For the lack of ‘parity’ or equality that Manon complained of was integral to the script for companionate marriage that Rousseau had written in both *Émile* and *Julie*: the husband was supposed to be the master and the wife his dutiful second” (p. 301). The problem for a woman was how to be free and married? Paradoxically, women of the age were offered “freedom as human beings, but happiness, purpose, and value only as wives and mothers” (p. 303). Manon was at one with the other elite women of the 1780s featured in this book, ladies who developed “both autonomy and gender consciousness through the education they received, not despite it” (p. 333).

In the end, Goodman does indeed bestow a new twist upon her previous version of a Habermasian-derived Enlightenment feminism, one that is less optimistic or perhaps more realistic since it is grounded in the lives of more than just a few prominent salonnières. Even so, the women featured here are those with the necessary means and leisure to become epistolary subjects. For them, as Goodman states, “far from being a form of complacency, in the late eighteenth-century epistolary was perhaps the most important medium of women’s aspirations. Unlike conversation, correspondence allowed them to retreat to a space of privacy in which to reflect, and from which they could, as Manon Phlipon so

eloquently wrote, launch themselves through time and space beyond the limits of their daily lives. The epistolary matrix of women's writing presupposed a reader as the very pretext for writing and shaped the sort of subjects they would become through it" (pp. 334-335). As to the question of whether eighteenth-century women achieved individuality, Goodman would answer that women became subjects in and through their gender. That, in turn, exacted a price for which women paid dearly. In the end, Goodman finds "modern subjectivity in the world women inhabited and the words they chose to use rather than assuming that the only path to modernity is the one forged by men" (p. 337). But if so, have we not come full circle? Did the models of individuality and freedom associated with male subjectivity offer women anything more than a compromise formation, insofar as gender was articulated in and through the roles that women were expected to perform within the sphere of domesticity, intimacy, and, yes, privacy—all of which were deeply encoded within the liberal utopia of freedom?

## NOTES

[1] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983); idem., *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1975); idem., "Boundaries and the Sense of Self in Sixteenth-Century France," in *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, ed. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellbery (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1986).

[2] Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996).

[3] Diana T. Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). In addition, Goodman cites Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, eds., *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Other feminist authors to be considered in this regard include Seyla Benhabib, Jessica Benjamin, Eva Feder Kittay, and Maria Pia Lara.

[4] Diana Meyers, op. cit.; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 134; Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 174-75.

[5] Maria Pia Lara, *Moral Textures: Feminist Narratives in the Public Sphere* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1998).

[6] See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).

[7] Dena Goodman, "Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime," *History and Theory*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (February 1992): 1-20.

[8] As illustrative of the problem of drawing a false opposition between public and private spheres, in "Public Sphere and Private Life," Goodman singled out my *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988). Her disagreement is not with the latter's conclusion that women were excluded from the public sphere that developed out of the French Revolution, but rather over what she considers the private aspect of the bourgeois public sphere of which the Enlightenment salon was a part. However, what struck me at the time—and continues to impress me today—was the salon's double character. As an institution, it was neither wholly modern nor wholly traditional, neither entirely public nor entirely private. After all, one participated in salon

life by invitation. In many ways, it remained an *ancien régime* institution, with the same aura of privilege cast by other predominantly aristocratic institutions. In that respect, it differed importantly from other institutions of the modern public sphere, such as the press, the museum, reading societies, or even the art Salons mounted by the Royal Academy of Painting, which had a public audience. Therefore, I do not agree with Goodman's idealized proposition that the salon stood out among all *ancien régime* institutions for its decidedly non-masculinist cast or that domestic (private) space offered a safe haven under absolutism, which she construed as self-limiting: for having "respected the patriarchal authority that was supposed to reign in the home," such that "the domestic space of Enlightenment salons protected *salonnières*—as it did *philosophes*—from the limited power of the monarchy ... staking out the territory beyond its reach" (Goodman, "Public Sphere and Private Life," p. 18).

[9] Goodman, "Public Sphere and Private Life," p. 16. For a related argument, see the contribution of Keith Michael Baker, "Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France: Variations on a Theme by Habermas," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992): 181-211. In contrast, see Joan B. Landes, "The Performance of Citizenship: Democracy, Gender and Difference in the French Revolution" in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[10] Jolanta T. Pekacz stresses their conservative orientation on both the cultural and the social plane and sees the salon as an outgrowth of the rules of *honnêteté*: "The very existence of a *salonnière* was founded upon the agreement that the only 'public' role allowed for a woman (that is, the role outside the strict sphere of domesticity) was that of the provider of propriety and good manners. From this perspective, the salon can be seen as an institution deeply rooted in the *status quo* and, paradoxically, interested in maintaining it." (Pekacz, *Conservative Tradition in Pre-revolutionary France: Parisian Salon Women* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 12) According to Antoine Lilti, "si on définit l'espace public, à la façon d'Habermas, par l'usage public de la critique par des individus privés, il faut bien convenir que les salons n'étaient plutôt des espaces de consécration propres à la bonne société." (Lilti, *Le Monde des salons: Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), p. 334) Lilti challenges Goodman's claim that "women gave the salons a republican form of government. In fact, salon sociability was at odds with republican principles and republican values as they were defined in the eighteenth century. Salons were mostly organized as little courts, revolving around the hostess, and ruled by the ideals of *politesse*, witty conversation, social distinction and *galanterie*." (Lilti, "The Kingdom of *Politesse*: Salons and the Republic of Letters in Eighteenth-Century Paris," in *Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts* 1, no. 1 (May 1, 2009): <http://rofl.stanford.edu/node/38>, p. 10) For more on the salon and aristocratic sociability, see Steven D. Kale, *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004) and Steven D. Kale, "Women, the Public Sphere and the Persistence of the Salon," *French Historical Studies* 25: 1 (Winter 2002): 115-148.

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