

H-France Review Vol. 11 (April 2011), No. 94

Heidi Bostic, *The Fiction of Enlightenment: Women of Reason in the French Eighteenth Century*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2010. 270 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$59.50 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-87413-074-4.

Review by Bonnie Arden Robb, University of Delaware.

In this book, Heidi Bostic examines works by three women writers of the eighteenth century—Françoise de Graffigny, Marie Jeanne Riccoboni, and Isabelle de Charrière—pointing out that “after a long oblivion, [they] have become part of an emerging new canon of eighteenth-century literature alongside the men—such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau—who have dominated reading lists and public perception” (p. 21). Nevertheless, contends Bostic, despite the increasing critical attention accorded these and other women, their works remain consigned to the margins of Enlightenment. Bostic attributes this to a failure to take women’s intellectual contributions seriously, claiming that “today we remain in thrall to some of the same negative characterizations faced by women during the eighteenth century: that they were intellectually inferior to men, that their texts were mere transcriptions of their own lives, that their work did not really matter” (p. 20).

Bostic argues that Graffigny, Riccoboni, and Charrière deserve to be recognized as Enlightenment thinkers, suggesting that such recognition will open up important and useful new understandings of Enlightenment. Indeed, she explains that the title of her book, *The Fiction of Enlightenment*, is intended as a double provocation. “First, what passes under the name of Enlightenment in much current critical discourse is a fiction, or a caricatured construct. Second, works of fiction can illuminate the historical and philosophical phenomenon called Enlightenment” (p. 17). She rephrases the canonical question “What is Enlightenment?” to ask “What counts as Enlightenment?”

Her book’s subtitle, *Women of Reason in the Eighteenth Century*, announces her underlying premise. Reason was not the exclusive domain of men in the Enlightenment; women’s claims on reason must be taken into account. Chapter one, “Women, Enlightenment, and the Salic Law,” reviews the terms of the eighteenth-century *querelle des femmes* and the stakes of the debate on women’s aptitude for reason. Bostic notes that the *Encyclopédie* gives different definitions of *raisonnable* for men and women and that, as the *Encyclopédie* author himself explains, the meaning of the word “deviates slightly when it is applied to woman”—whereas a reasonable man is defined as one whose behavior is in conformity with reason, a reasonable woman is defined as one who does not let herself get carried away by the reigning spirit of gallantry (p. 39). As Bostic evokes the eighteenth-century obsession with women’s reputation, the legal and economic dependency in which women lived, and the inadequate education available to them, she sets these in the context of women’s purported incapacity for higher reason, as well as of the general disapproval of learnedness in women and proscription against their participation in public life. She alludes also to the eighteenth-century conception that, although sensibility and the passions were complementary to reason in men, women possessed a greater sensibility that was detrimental to their reason. The vigorous disparagement of women writers, attacked on moral grounds as neglectful of their motherly duties and on literary grounds as incapable of producing anything but the sentimental (or even, somewhat paradoxically, incapable of producing anything without borrowing from men’s work or passing off men’s work as their own), “suggests the threat that these women posed to the values of the status quo” (p. 54). Observing that the traditional values attacked by the *philosophes* did not include

the sexism that permeated social institutions, Bostic elucidates women writers' questioning of the status quo as an Enlightenment project through her examination of women's contributions to the debates on reason.

For the most part Bostic chooses to look at genres other than the novel, noting that the role of women writers in the rise of the novel has been well documented. She eschews the practice of "reading in pairs" in favor of "reading in context," as she seeks to situate each work "not as a direct response to one man's text, but rather in dialogue with and helping to shape the context of an entire *ethos*" (p. 63). Citing the need for new paradigms of Enlightenment and a move beyond still-persistent canonic structures [1], Bostic calls for "no more Enlightenment as usual" and insists on the importance of "taking women's texts seriously" (p. 64). While many scholars have of course done that (and Bostic's discussion amply references their work), Bostic here defines "seriously" in terms of a readiness to examine the relationship between women and reason while fully entertaining the idea that women could be considered Enlightenment thinkers.

Bostic devotes a chapter to each of the three authors in turn. In chapter two, her presentation of two little-known plays by Graffigny makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the author, even if Graffigny's philosophic status is already well established today. Identifying the motif of the mask as central to Graffigny's views on women's reason in these plays, Bostic offers analyses that focus on the "social functioning of reason" (p. 56). "La Réunion du bon sens et de l'esprit," an unpublished one-act play in a *commedia dell'arte* vein written sometime before 1733 (thus some fifteen years before *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*), presents a critique of French society, with "Madame Raison" ably defending herself against accusations of inconstancy or "coquetry," a rationalist (Cartesian) philosopher showing himself ridiculous for rejecting the real world, and young Angélique asking "que faire pour être raisonnable?" as she struggles to deal with men's gallantry. The play *Phaza*, a *féerie* (performed in a *théâtre de société* in 1753, published posthumously in 1770), features the fairy Singulière who, indignant at women's subordination and seeing education as an equalizer, arranges for princess Phaza to be raised believing she is a boy. The results constitute a critique of both women's and men's education. Although the dénouement is a conventional marriage, the fairy's project and the intervening cross-dressing along with a *mise-en-abyme* masquerade ball prefigure, suggests Bostic, twentieth-century theories of gender as masquerade and performance. Bostic aptly relates this as well to eighteenth-century literary transvestism. Examining Graffigny's comments on the experience of being a woman writer (including her gloss of a line from Molière's *Femmes savantes*, "Je veux être homme à la barbe des gens"), Bostic discusses Graffigny's view of authorship as a cross-gender masquerade.

Bostic's analysis of works by Riccoboni in chapter three centers on the idea of reason as remedy. Asserting that "the traditional view of Riccoboni as a sentimental novelist single-mindedly focused on critiquing men and their deceptive behavior does not stand up to scrutiny" (p. 146), Bostic supports her claim. She first examines *L'Abeille*, an essay Riccoboni contributed in 1761 to a periodical entitled *Le Monde*. Although it was submitted anonymously, correspondence indicates that the volume's editor, François de Bastide, suspected that the article was written by a woman. Bastide's foreword, announcing that *Le Monde's* goal was to furnish examples of a true philosophical spirit, indicated his recognition of the status of the piece, but Bostic reveals that the review in the *Correspondance littéraire* failed to mention Riccoboni's article. Bostic's comments are insightful, evoking Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1723) as well as Francis Bacon's more positive imagery in *Novum Organum* (1620), as she illustrates that Riccoboni's *L'Abeille* used the ideals of Enlightenment philosophy—tolerance, social progress, faith in experience, and reliance on reason—to critique social injustice in the denial of women's reason and their poor education, and to envision remedies. Turning then to two of Riccoboni's novels, Bostic directly confronts the sentimental-only label long attached to them. She sheds new light on the relationship between the rational and the relational in *Histoire du marquis de Cressy* (1758), the "tragic example," and *Lettres de Mylord Rivers* (1776), the "positive example." Bostic's fine discussion of the former focuses on Mme de Cressy's suicide, observing that although suicide was an uncommon plot element among women writers and that female suicides were generally viewed as irrational, Riccoboni represents the

poisoned cup of tea as a remedy and demonstrates that “a calm decision to die can be infused with reason” (p. 124). In her approach to *Mylord Rivers*, Bostic disputes critics who have seen the novel as “entirely an affair between men” (p. 134) as she convincingly shows the importance of the women characters’ role as letter writers and provides evidence of their philosophical commentary and recourse to reason as they deal with social inequalities.

Bostic’s analysis of Charrière is centered on the motif of the book and on literacy, the latter referring both to the ways in which women are “read” by others and to the ways in which they must “read” society in order to survive and succeed. She again chooses to examine genres other than the novel and in so doing arrives at perspectives that lead her to question interpretations, particularly of *Lettres de Mistress Henley*, put forward by others. Insisting that “what we know of Charrière and her work does not suggest that she would simply give reason over to men” (p. 158), Bostic argues that Charrière’s oeuvre belongs to the lineage of the Kantian *sapere aude* (although not his categorical imperative).^[2] In *Portrait de Zélide* (composed 1762), a literary self-portrait, the young Belle van Zuylen presents herself as highly sensitive but at the same time endowed with reason and a lively wit. Problematizing the social pressures on women to be “good” (i.e. “se taire quand on a raison”), she weighs her public reputation but tends to prioritize personal happiness. The work occasioned a minor scandal, including the accusation that the author was being deliberately provocative in an effort to be considered an intellectual. The issues of intellect and education are prominent in the play *Elise ou l’université* (1794, written in French, translated into German), in which the well-educated daughter of a university professor has the reputation of being a coquette. Asserting the link between coquetry and literacy in her analysis of the heroine (called Eugénie in the original French play), Bostic identifies a double definition of “coquette” as both “flirt” and “savante,” related to the dual desire “to please and to shine” (p. 172-73). Charrière critiques social convention in her characterization of Eugénie’s father, buried in his books but “illiterate” when it comes to singlehandedly raising his daughter or to speaking out on social issues. She pointedly writes a marriage of inclination for Eugénie, whose supposed flirtatiousness is put behind her, but whose intellect is admired and encouraged by a fiancé capable of finding love and learning compatible. With an analysis of the essay “Des Auteurs et des livres” (1796), Bostic brings to light a fascinating, unpublished text in which Charrière offers anecdotes, literary reviews, and advice to readers and authors alike.

With her astute analyses, Bostic convincingly makes the case for eighteenth-century women of reason as Enlightenment thinkers. Also vital to the success of her project is the care she has taken to place her study in the broader context of debates on the definition of Enlightenment as well as to situate it relative to current feminist theories. Her concluding chapter provides a useful summary of both as she insists on the important shift in perspective that eighteenth-century women’s voices would bring to those discussions. Lamenting the “fiction of Enlightenment” created by the caricature of narrow definitions adopted by some critics, Bostic urges a fuller interpretation of the Enlightenment project, with recognition of difference and diversity as “core Enlightenment values.”^[3] Echoing Pauline Johnson’s view of the Enlightenment as a “radically incomplete, open-ended project of cultural criticism”^[4], she points out that Enlightenment ideals bolster arguments against sexism and that when Graffigny, Riccoboni, and Charrière “submitted gender bias to the same scrutiny that men applied when denouncing other traditional sources of arbitrary authority, ...^[they] embraced the ethos of Enlightenment more fully than their male contemporaries” (p. 198). Bostic skillfully discusses the relationship between the issues raised in their works and those of today’s feminist critiques of reason and feminist standpoint epistemology. Her argument for the continuing relevance of those issues is also supported by pertinent visual illustrations that punctuate the book. This extraordinarily ambitious study, bringing to bear scholarship in literature, history, feminist theory, and gender studies, constitutes an important contribution to our understanding of the Enlightenment as it seeks to “redress ^[a] blind spot in the Enlightenment intellectual heritage” (p. 20). It deserves a wide readership.

NOTES

[1] Bostic cites Madelyn Gutwirth, "ASECS Women's Caucus Response," in Alison Conway ed., *A History of the ASECS Women's Caucus 1975-2005* (American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, 2005), pp.9-10.

[2] Bostic's discussion endorses Emma Rooksby's interpretation of *Three Women* as a response to Kant's categorical imperative, with the choices made by the three women undermining the idea of the universal validity of moral dictates. Emma Rooksby, "Moral Theory in the Fiction of Isabelle de Charrière: The Case of *Three Women*," *Hypatia* 20/1(2005): 1-20.

[3] Dena Goodman's identification of this "key but overlooked Enlightenment value" is cited. Dena Goodman, "Difference: An Enlightenment Concept," in Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hanns Reill eds., *What's Left of Enlightenment? A Postmodern Question* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp.129-147.

[4] Pauline Johnson, "The Antinomies of the Age of Enlightenment," in Pauline Johnson ed., *Feminism as Radical Humanism* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994), p.44.

Bonnie Arden Robb
University of Delaware
brobb@art-sci.udel.edu

Copyright © 2011 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 re-publication 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.

ISSN 1553-9172