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Maria C. Scott, *Stendhal's Less-Loved Heroines. Fiction, Freedom, and the Female*. Oxford and New York: Legenda, Research Monographs in French Studies 37, Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2013. 131 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$75.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 978-1-907975-71-4.

Review by Martine Reid, Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines.

The critical approach devised by Maria C. Scott is original on a number of levels. The author is well aware that the question of Stendhal's fictional heroines has been dealt with many times before, not least by authors as prestigious as Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva. She therefore decides to take an innovative stance on two points. First, she chooses to look at heroines that have curiously been subject to little, or only summary, critical attention—her book therefore focuses on four little-loved figures, whether by critics or their author: Mina, Vanina, Mathilde and Lamiel. Second, she develops a critical lens combining existentialism and the question of gender so as to offer the most accurate account possible of the singular nature of these “four Amazons” (p. 7), who reconcile freedom and a concern with inventing a mode of life and conduct for themselves that is satisfying to them (the reasons why Gina is not included in this list are convincingly outlined at the end of the introduction).

Despite the brevity of this three-chapter book (the first two heroines are examined together), it nonetheless manages to demonstrate the relevance of both the chosen theme and the tools used to examine it. The analyses provided are incisive, the topic is well documented (something to which the final bibliography testifies) and the arguments put forward are generally likely to convince the reader. Maria C. Scott's knowledge is not limited to the texts she chooses to analyze and she evidently possesses true erudition concerning Stendhal, proving herself just as at ease with the author's intimate writings as she is with the various essays he produced throughout his career. She also displays the same knowledge of his correspondence, a hefty corpus that it is always wise to link to Stendhal's fictional work given how “encombrant” or burdensome he can be an author, to quote Gérard Genette in his famous essay. “Tout se tient” (everything holds together), wrote Genette again, and it is indeed impossible to offer an account of part of Stendhal's work without calling upon the oeuvre as a whole.[1] As well as her excellent grasp of this oeuvre, Maria C. Scott's knowledge of the related secondary literature also commands respect: nothing seems to have escaped her. She begins, in particular, with a very subtle analysis of Beauvoir's position regarding Stendhal, underlining both its contradictions and blind spots. This approach, where no critic is taken simply at face value, can also be seen in other passages of her work, for example when it comes to reading in detail, where she takes inspiration from Naomi Schor's work and revisits the question of realism.

The author calls upon numerous references of various kinds but this does not detract from the relevance and originality of her approach, which is fuelled by a variety of ideas without any of them acting as a smokescreen. On the contrary, Maria C. Scott proves that she can understand a point of view, explain it, use it and, where necessary, critique it or demonstrate its lack of relevance. Her very detailed analysis of certain passages, particularly when discussing the two versions of *Lamiel*, also allows her to develop her ideas without ever losing sight of the text inspiring them.

In this regard, the chapter devoted to Mathilde de la Mole entitled “Mathilde and the Paradox of Authenticity” is particularly praiseworthy and constitutes the heart of her demonstration. The author proves herself highly skilled in unpicking various key notions in Stendhalian poetics ranging from playfulness and sincerity to social constraints and freedom, or to being “natural.” Of course, Mathilde is not alone in struggling through the contradictions imposed upon Stendhalian characters in general, and on Julien in particular. However, she struggles as a woman—a figure that Stendhal delights in idealizing—and is admirably capable of holding her own when it comes to being with others and showing/hiding her feelings. Mathilde is both serious and playful, both lucid and determined, and she stages her life without any restraint, far better than Julien. In this respect, she no doubt represents—more than the other heroines discussed here—the absolute freedom that individuals can create for themselves, whatever their sex, and this is no small thing.

Lamiel’s situation is more complex because, as the novel is unfinished, it is difficult to decide the exact direction that Stendhal would have chosen to give to his narrative. However, one can only agree with the premise that there is an irrepressible sense of joy in both the novel and the character, an amused way of looking at self and world without ever being taken in by the latter, which can shed retrospective light on all the author’s novels. Maria C. Scott rightly underscores here both how Lamiel is capable of inventing herself while amusing herself and the importance of the comic dimension to Stendhal’s work, inherited notably from his inordinate love of the theatre (the collective volume by Daniel Sangsue on the topic of the theatre would have been a welcome addition to the bibliography).^[2]

When reading these three chapters, the reader may sometimes be tempted to qualify some points or express small reservations about others. Similarly, at times certain observations can seem a little arbitrary and one would like to see these further developed or specified. The use of existentialism as a conceptual tool proves its limitations on occasion, and the literary dimension proper sometimes disappears in favor of pure explanation of behavior. However, the coherency of the approach cannot be faulted and this is not without merit.

To conclude, Maria C. Scott’s work can be considered as highly suggestive in the sense that, upon closing the book, one cannot help continuing to contemplate the various hypotheses put forward. Freedom, joy and self-invention are such essential imperatives for Stendhal, who had no qualms in referring to himself as “Mr. Myself,” that one is tempted to extend the book’s premise to his other fictional characters. In itself, this is a powerful testimony to the fact that this critical work has more than earned its place on the shelves among the rich collection of Stendhalian criticism to date.

NOTES

[1] Gérard Genette, “Stendhal,” in *Figures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 155.

[2] Daniel Sangsue, *Stendhal et l’empire du récit* (Paris: Sedes, 2002).

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