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Kelly Ricciardi Colvin, *Gender and French Identity after the Second World War, 1944-1954: Engendering Frenchness*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. vii + 247 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$114.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 9781350105553; (e-PDF) 9781350031128; (e-book) 9781350031135.

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According to Kelly Ricciardi Colvin's *Gender and French Identity after the Second World War*, the "late" granting of women's suffrage didn't (seem to) make much difference in French political life. She purports to explain why. As a back-cover blurb puts the critique: "This book explores the ways in which culture was used to limit the power of the female vote." Providing a preliminary answer, the author asserts that post World War II cultural "imperatives" (p. 2) ordaining domesticity and "pleasing" men undercut the spaces created for women by the granting of women's suffrage in 1944. The theme of women's "confinement" leaps forth from the author's introduction: "The addition of women to the official body politic manifests quite differently with a focus on culture" (p. 3). The French "identity" of the title turns out to be primarily that of women, although attention is sporadically paid to the "restoration" of French virility.

Colvin addresses this question by exploring segments of the print culture of the times, which, she argues, "forced" women back into the home. She designates as culprits state institutions and "the media," especially women's magazines, and primarily the newly-founded weeklies, *Elle* (fd. 1944) and *Marie-France* (fd. 1945). In Colvin's view, both promoted a constricted view of femininity. "The book," she declares "also reveals how femininity functioned as a limiting political force in postwar France." Furthermore, "there was a very narrow definition of proper feminine performance, one that hinged implicitly on narratives of female confinement. This book takes as its subject the articulation of that confinement" (p. 4). It presents women primarily as victims of French culture.

By her frequent use of the term "confinement," Colvin points her finger at domesticity and a "return to the home"—though she says little about the historical context that made producing babies essential to mitigating France's postwar demographic crisis. "Confinement" and "constricted" are, of course, highly judgmental words; clearly this author finds such domestic strictures distasteful. She resists putting herself in the shoes of an ordinary, though literate, French woman reader of magazines who has just lived through a traumatic period marked not only by the experience of German occupation but also by the rationing of essential items (foodstuffs, textiles, paper, fuel, etc.), scarcity of other basic goods and high prices for those that

could be found, the destruction of some 300,000 dwellings, and the relative scarcity of adult French men.

The titles of chapters one and two set the tone for the author's emphasis on victimization and victims. Each draws on a different type of evidence, though articles and stories from women's magazines predominate.

Chapter one, "The Revictimization of France," focuses on the interpretation of a poem, several images by Paul Colin, and lastly--and in particular--on Charles De Gaulle's inspired 1944 bisexual invocation of Jeanne d'Arc, supplemented by the V-E Day sermon given in Orléans by the conservative Catholic archbishop Mgr. Cazaux, who had once served as a priest in Domrémy, Jeanne d'Arc's home village. Here the author's interpretation appears forced. It seems unlikely that the victimization and "confinement" of women was on anyone's mind on V-E Day in 1945 or immediately thereafter. Indeed, the subsequent constitution of the Fourth Republic would specifically endorse women's equality with men and would grant their right to work as well as their right to vote--and to run for office. These were no small achievements in the circumstances, yet such important contextual facts remain unmentioned.[1]

In contrast to chapter one, chapter two (entitled "Women as Victims"),[2] focuses on a dozen or so accounts by and about actual female "victims"--French resistance heroines subsequently prisoners at Ravensbrück, etc.--published in the immediate aftermath of the war. The author emphasizes that these women were generally lauded for caregiving, nurturing, even motherliness, as well as extreme generosity in adverse circumstances. They were praised for their refusal to reveal sensitive information under torture, and they took pride in maintaining their French form of stylish beauty, in deliberate contrast to their frumpy German prison guards.

All this the author considers "private sphere" behavior. None of these examples suggest, to me at least, a sense of victimization. They can be interpreted instead as a subtle form of resistance, as efforts to retain the outward symbols of French femininity. Displaying patriotic vanity (as it were), even in the concentration camps, is not the behavior of victims. In reality, even women's comportment was deemed essential for the future of the French nation. In contrast, however, the author indicates that male victims were portrayed as and applauded for doing their duty to the nation, including dying for the nation; the patriotic heroism of men was publicly acknowledged and admired. This chapter concludes by invoking "the kiss" of a Frenchwoman, the embrace of "La France" by men, which (she argues) carried a strictly gendered symbolic meaning, one forbidden to women. That women could not symbolically "embrace" the nation, the author argues, effectively closed off public opportunities for women. What this chapter conveys to me is simply that national gender relations are deeply rooted in sexual difference and evolve slowly. There is no reason to expect them to do otherwise, particularly after a six-year-long traumatic national experience.

In chapter three, the author addresses what she terms "The War for Love." The premise here is that women in post-occupation France lapped up the advice that the new women's magazines supplied, which was advice on how best to catch--and keep--a man. "Ultimately, love in the postwar period was women's responsibility; women had to make men happy in order to have families and avoid social ostracism, and magazines worked to help them achieve this fulfillment" (p. 50). This placing of the burden on women, the author insists, was

quintessentially French, in contrast to an English emphasis on “mutuality.” It’s unclear to the reader who was in the lead here? The magazine’s advice writers? Their advertisers? Or their readers? Colvin premises her critique on the assumption that such articles could and did affect women’s behavior. Who knows whether this actually worked? Was the situation for women in other war-torn countries on the continent so much different? What Colvin does make clear, however, is that what she calls “the heteronormative family” (p. 49) was at issue here. This chapter provides no information on the actual demographic situation in France, where in fact a huge demographic disparity existed between adult women and men. An authoritative report by the Sûreté Nationale (cited only in chapter six) asserted that in 1945 more than 60 percent of the French electorate would be female.[3] This fact alone could explain the emphasis in these women’s magazines on pleasing your man, since men of marriageable age were in very short supply. Demographic disparities make a fundamental difference in how “heteronormative” families can come together—or not—and of course, the subsequent birth rate.

There is no doubt that a huge prescriptive literature burgeoned in the years immediately after 1945, directed at women (and probably also at men) to fuel the growth of France’s consumer economy. What remains unclear in this book is whether (and if so, how) these messages changed over time. Here the author treats the years 1945 to 1954 as a bloc, although she does hint that these emphases declined as the years passed, but most of the evidence cited comes from 1945–46. These cited prescriptive messages could also be read as encouraging a particular form of female agency. The magazines did not treat female readers only as objects to be manipulated or ordered about, but encouraged them to consider options and make successful choices as to how best to foster love and preserve marriages. Curiously, a considerable number of the most prescriptive stories about love and marriage *à la française* from *Elle* (all from 1946) are signed by an otherwise unidentified man—a certain André Lang. I admire Colvin’s fortitude as she combed through these women’s magazines, seemingly in search of articles that could confirm her thesis, yet there is no comparable discussion of articles that might confute it. I am concerned about the absence of broader historical context, and of other related topics such as women’s employment or women’s political participation or potential. It seems unlikely that these women’s magazines said nothing about such subjects. Further, the author says little about the editorial differences between *Elle* and *Marie-France*, though my impression is that *Marie-France*’s articles were more focused on “domesticity” than were those in *Elle*. Rather, the vision projected by *Elle* in the mid-1940s seems consistent with a more general tendency, noticeable among most earlier French feminists as well as those who did not claim the label, to encourage women to become fully-realized and empowered women and not poor imitations of men. One could even argue that, despite Colvin’s criticism, the plaudits for so-called womanly qualities—generosity, compassion, etc.—were meant as positive appraisals, acknowledgements of traits admired by all (if not consistently enacted by all), and certainly not intended to “confine” or “disempower” French women. Indeed, the prescriptions documented here seem as much intended to challenge and empower women, as to push them into a “constricting role.”

In chapter four, “Looks,” Colvin highlights the many messages that urge women to focus on bodily presentation: cultivating beauty by artifice (notably, via cosmetics), dressing with elegance, and making an effort to be well turned out at all times, primarily in order to retain their husband’s interest. She invokes the influence of Christian Dior’s 1947 “new look,” a return to femininity marked by tight waists and long skirts. Efforts to impose a certain vision of French “femininity” dominate the author’s narrative, even as she sporadically addresses the importance of such a vision for the reinforcement of French virility. She might have quoted

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who famously observed in Book 5 of his treatise *Émile* (1762), “When the time comes that women are no longer concerned with men’s well-being, men will no longer be good for anything at all.”[4] If Colvin is correct in her analysis, the postwar prescriptions she invokes seem wholly aligned with (perhaps even inspired, explicitly or implicitly by) Rousseau’s venerable playbook.

Again, historical context is so important. Pleasing your man in order to hold him was not a new idea in post-1945 France, but recourse to a practice as old as time itself. Keeping in mind the fact that adult women vastly outnumbered men in this postwar period, and that men could “play the field” with relative impunity, was this advice as stupid as some might think nowadays? Even so, consider how hard it must have been, in this time of scarcity and continued rationing, for women to meet such standards, much less to afford dressing chez Dior, or even daubing on expensive cosmetics. How the pursuit of beauty may have affected what women did with their newly-acquired vote is another story. Indeed, that thread of argument seems to have disappeared from the book. Throughout, the author’s arguments reflect the heavy hand of recent Anglo-American cultural studies.

In chapter five, “Disreputable Women”, twice as long as the other chapters and seemingly out of place here, the author sharply switches focus. Perhaps a better title for this chapter would be “Despicable Women,” since the real subject is how the press excoriated a few French females who violated accepted standards of civilized behavior. These individuals, including spies, prison guards and torturers, committed horrific acts against their own countrymen and women. The author titillates her readers by emphasizing the presumed connection between torture and sexual pleasure. Oddly, the question of sexual pleasure has not come up so far in this book, even in the earlier discussions of how to please your man. This chapter highlights specific individuals: one such is Denise Delfau, who betrayed and encouraged torture of captured members of the resistance at the Gestapo cell on the rue de la Pompe. She was tried in late November 1952, by an unnamed court, on unnamed charges, resulting in an unspecified verdict. Then comes the case of Violette Morris, a notorious and presumed transgender woman athlete who worked hand-in-hand with the Gestapo. The following section on female spies, highlighted by the Carré trial in 1949, appears entirely voyeuristic. It seems obvious to this reader that these “disreputable women” were not among the readership targets of the women’s magazines nor were they domesticated or confined. It is also clear that they cannot and must not be allowed to stand in for the women of achievement in this period, who probably also did not seek out the advice of the women’s magazines. There were important women in France’s political, social, and economic life—and they did take advantage of the granting of women’s suffrage. Yet in this book we learn nothing of those who did enter political life, such as Germaine Poinso-Chapuis, and if—or how—the women’s magazines assessed their contributions.

Arriving finally at the disappointingly short chapter six, “Women as Voters”, the author returns to the initially stated concerns of the book—and, once again, cites early postwar evidence from the women’s magazines. She then points to “a lag in women’s postwar feminism and activism in France” (p. 167). One might ask: how could it be otherwise, in a nation that is attempting to put itself back together, and where many of the pre-war leaders of most venerable Third Republic feminist organizations (Maria Vérone, Ghénia Avril de Sainte-Croix) had either died before the war and occupation, or, like the somewhat younger Jewish president of the *Union Française pour le Suffrage des Femmes* (UFSF), Cécile Brunschvicg, were forced into

hiding. Brunschvicg survived and cast her vote in 1945. However, with the granting of women's suffrage the UFSF, like its counterparts in Great Britain and the United States, morphed into an organization for women voters--the *Union Française des Électrices*, which surprisingly is not discussed here.[5] Nor is the founding congress of the WIDF (Women's International Democratic Federation) in Paris in 1945 referenced, although by the early 1950s it took over much of the international women's rights agenda. One could also point to the rise of new indigenous women's organizations, notably the consumers' organizations studied by Rebecca Pulju, which politicized a number of issues important to homemakers and mothers.[6] In short, this chapter is mainly notable for what is not discussed.

In my view, it seems hazardous to attempt to document a specific, single strand of discourse, whether about gender identity as intrinsic to national identity or anything else, without paying close attention to the broad spectrum of opinions, the force-field in which that discourse--and counter-discourse--is situated. It seems even more hazardous to make pronouncements about the effectiveness (not solely the existence) of prescriptive messaging without engaging squarely with its reception. If there had been indeed such a thing as "essential femininity" (p. 173), then what was the need for all these prescriptive messages? The notion incarnated in Beauvoir's famous sentence, "On n'est pas née femme, on le devient," reflects a centuries-old French effort to shape and channel femininity and masculinity.[7] Why, then, should we be surprised to find this effort recurring in postwar France? On the other hand, one must understand the French inflections of this tradition. The main currents of prewar feminism in France featured campaigns for rights for "embodied women," "womanly women," not for abstract individuals.[8] Even the women of the far left in 1945 France emphasized such themes. At the June 1945 founding congress of the *Union des Femmes françaises* (UFF; the women's arm of the French Communist Party), Claudine Michaut (who is not mentioned by Colvin) laid out the "duties of French women," among which were "to give children to France, to found a home, to raise her children morally, to inculcate in them a taste for work, filial respect, love of country and a civic sense; [her duties] are thus above all those of the woman--mother of a family, honest, a quality worker, a citizen informed about and conscious of the national interest." [9] Are these duties confining? Or are they challenging?

Colvin's *Gender and French Identity after the Second World War* does illuminate a narrow range of efforts to shape gender identities in France during the post-World War II era; but it should only be read in tandem with other recent books that address related issues in French women's history during the same period. For instance, Pulju's pioneering book on women and the rise of mass consumer society, coupled with Sarah Fishman's excellent study *From Vichy to the Sexual Revolution: Gender and Family Life in Postwar France* (which spans a longer time period) provide readers with a very different perspective on women's activism and their efforts to occupy cultural and political space. This is true also of the opening chapter of Lisa Greenwald's new book, *Daughters of 1968: Redefining French Feminism and the Women's Liberation Movement*. [10] Pulju specifically points to the ways in which, in the late 1940s, the French government encouraged a new role for women as consumers--at the very fulcrum of economic development. It seems fair to say that many married women must have found this emphasis to be empowering. For the first time the state publicly and copiously acknowledged women's labor in the home as work. Their functions as keepers and dispensers of family income and as economic decision-makers were treated as serious sociopolitical roles and as a badge of their newly acquired citizenship. I would not call this "confining"--unless one insists that anything having to do with persuading women to focus on making life pleasing or comfortable for others, or

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dissuading them from taking jobs outside the home is, by definition, “confining.”

## NOTES

[1] Less than 10 percent of the notes to chapter one refer to primary sources; most dialogue with other secondary works or provide additional authorial remarks.

[2] The 79 notes for chapter two include a mere dozen that refer to primary sources or contemporary publications. The same is true of the ensuing chapters. The book’s bibliography lists several dozen periodicals and newspapers consulted, but only a few of those show up in the endnotes.

[3] See endnote 1 for chapter six: “Les femmes et les problèmes politiques à la veille des élections,” 24 avril 1945, Rapport de la Direction générale de la Sûreté Nationale, de la Direction des RG, AN F 7 15588. Colvin cites this reference, secondhand, from an article by Sandra Fayolle in *Cahiers d’histoire*, no. 94-95 (2005), p. 224.

[4] See the excerpt from *Émile*, retranslated in vol. 1 of *Women, the Family, and Freedom*, ed. Susan Groag Bell and Karen Offen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983), doc. 10, p. 45.

[5] Cécile Formaglio, “*Féministe d’abord*,” *Cécile Brunshvicg (1877-1946)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014), p. 296.

[6] See Rebecca Pulju, *Women and Mass Consumer Society in Postwar France* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[7] Karen Offen, “Before Beauvoir, before Butler: ‘Genre’ and ‘Gender’ in France and the Anglo-American World,” in *On ne naît pas femme; on le devient: The Life of a Sentence*, ed. Bonnie Mann and Martina Ferrari (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 11-36.

[8] For additional insights on the French publications of the 1940s and 1950s, which continued to debate the woman question, see the epilogue in Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700-1950: A Political History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 380-87 and 391-92. For the earlier context, see my *Debating the Woman Question in France* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[9] “Les Trois Devoirs de la femme française: Rapport de Madame Claudine Michaut - 1er Congrès de l’U.F.F.,” *Femmes françaises*, no. 41 (5 July 1945); as translated by Karen Offen in *European Feminisms, 1700-1950: A Political History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 382-83.

[10] See Pulju, *Women and Mass Consumer Society* (cited above), Sarah Fishman, *From Vichy to the Sexual Revolution: Gender and Family Life in Postwar France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), and Lisa Greenwald, *Daughters of 1968: Redefining French Feminism and the Women’s Liberation Movement* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018).

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