
H-France Review Vol. 19 (December 2019), No. 278

Diana Holmes, *Middlebrow Matters: Women's Reading and the Literary Canon in France since the Belle Époque*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018. 244 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-78694-156-5.

Response by Diana Holmes, University of Leeds.

I welcome Rachel Mesch's attentive, engaged review of my book, and her endorsement of its scope and the corpus of mainly women-authored novels that I chose to make my case. At the same time, I think she rather misreads parts of my argument on the middlebrow.

Why, she asks, reclaim the significance of women writers for French literary history and criticism by placing them in the much maligned category of the middlebrow, especially when the very concept of middlebrow is foreign to French culture, and indeed untranslatable into French? Why not just dispute their implicit relegation to middlebrow status? But my point is that when we unpack what "middlebrow" means, or what is implied by the critical disdain that attaches even now to bestselling fiction for a mainly female audience (think Anna Gavalda, Tatiana de Rosnay, even Amélie Nothomb), what we find is a (post-) modernist orthodoxy of disregard for those qualities of the novel that explain its resilient popularity with what Todorov once termed "non-professional" readers. It was not my intention to "rescue" generations of women writers--out of print, out of mind, or valued for anything but their mass appeal--from the taint of middlebrowness, but rather to question why certain literary qualities have been so systematically downgraded and in what ways this downgrading is gendered.

Mesch makes the valid point that if modernism largely defined its own intellectual potency and oppositional stance as masculine, whilst mainstream culture became demeaningly feminised, such characterisation can of course be challenged. Indeed, one would only have to point to the significant number of avant-garde, formally innovative women writers and artists who themselves have often been sidelined by the master narrative of cultural history. However my book does not, as Mesch puts it, "accept modernism's genderings." It highlights the ubiquity of such gendering, particularly in French culture--the "difficult" experimental text aligned with masculinity whereas the merely pleasurable read is seen as feminine--thus challenging its validity, but rather than go on to try and prove that women writers too can be "difficult" (a worthy aim, but one quite well covered elsewhere in feminist criticism), it seeks to re-examine the meaning and value of the pleasurable, immersive read. Far from "confining" (Mesch) Colette, for example, in the category of the middlebrow, I foreground the innovatory formal qualities of her writing--her 'modernism'--but aim also to redeem that dimension of her greatness that is less often celebrated: namely the capacity to engage, move, and thus no doubt enrich the

worldview (not least by challenging conventional views of gender) of a huge general readership, and not only a highly educated elite, throughout and beyond her career.

Mesch also asks sound questions about my chapter on the interwar period, the central focus of Anglophone middlebrow studies (which have, if only recently, become 'a thing'). In the UK particularly, the 1920s and 1930s saw a profusion of widely read, compelling and socially relevant fiction by women, much of this thankfully reclaimed from oblivion by the UK feminist publishers, Virago and Persephone. Despite my best efforts to discover an equivalent phenomenon in France, there seems to be a real discrepancy between the two cultures, even though the social and economic situations of women on either side of the Channel were, in so many respects, markedly similar. Mesch sees this difference as proof of the ineffectiveness of trying to apply an Anglophone lens to French culture—but on the contrary it seems to me a worthwhile project to ask what was different in the cultural context of France that limited (even more than in Britain) publication by women authors, and the development of an identifiable and commercially viable audience for female-authored middlebrow fiction. The answers lie in material infrastructure, and in political and cultural forces particular to France, but also lead on to the admittedly speculative, but surely valid question of what ordinary French women readers were consuming at that period and to what extent their reading fulfilled functions similar to those provided by the wave of British middlebrow.

Rachel Mesch has herself published illuminating scholarship on the Belle Epoque period, which highlights especially the role of high-end women's magazines in constructing the relatively new figure of the professional woman author.^[1] She would like me, understandably, to have paid more attention to the reception of the authors I present as middlebrow in the women's press, particularly in my chapter on the Belle Epoque as "birth of the middlebrow." There is, of course, always more that one might have done in each chapter of what is a chronologically wide-ranging study. But Mesch's contention that women authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century "were not seen as middlebrow at all" seems to me wide of the mark. They were perhaps not seen in this way by the women's press, nor indeed by certain sectors of the male literary establishment, but (as I think I show) many if not most literary journalists, critics, and prominent formers of cultural taste were hostile or patronising to the *dames de lettres* who threatened the male monopoly of the literary scene, a fact borne out by the rapid consignment of most of this stellar generation of women writers to—at best—footnotes of literary history, once World War I brought the belle époque (and the hopes of women's suffrage campaigners) to a grim conclusion. The fact that the women authors themselves mounted a spirited resistance to all attempts to marginalise or collectively label them, and made valiant efforts to, as Mesch puts it, "change the structures of intellectual authority," does not alter this.

In the conclusion to her review, Rachel Mesch disputes whether the "relative pleasure (women's novels) may have brought readers" has any real relevance as we try to reclaim the impact and importance of women's voices for French (and indeed world) literary history, and for the present literary scene. I admit that it is hard to measure or provide definitive proof of something so subjective as pleasure, but I would defend the validity of this line of enquiry. In order for a book to have impact, it must be read—and to be read by a large non-professional readership produces a different kind and scale of impact from that effected by a work read essentially by an audience of peers (though this also matters). What determines large-scale reading—produced by the sharing of books through word-of-mouth recommendations, library borrowings, the giving of books as presents, reviews in the mainstream press, nowadays on-line and face-to-face book

clubs—is, it seems to me, very often a novel's capacity to absorb the reader into its fictional world (to provide the pleasure of getting lost in a book), and at the same time to offer a sense of relevance, of some small or large shift in one's perception of personal experience and the social world. It is this that the concept of middlebrow can usefully capture and to which literary studies on the whole have paid remarkably little attention—although I am able to draw on that often overlooked, but significant strand of literary theory that sees imaginative immersion in fictional stories as an experience that enriches knowledge, in ways that are cognitive, as well as moral and emotional. Middlebrow is certainly not the only category that can help us to "better understand a century of women's popular writing," as Mesch puts it. Literary criticism, and in particular feminist criticism—which is intrinsically socio-cultural, indeed political, as well as aesthetic—is a collective enterprise to which debate and the recognition of "interlocking frames" (to use Mesch's term) are crucial. One such frame is the concept of middlebrow which, as I hope to have shown, offers a useful and productive frame for the revisionary reading of cultural history.

NOTE

[1] Rachel Mesch, *Having It All in the Belle Epoque: How French Women's Magazines invented the Modern Woman* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2013).

Diana Holmes
University of Leeds
D.Holmes@leeds.ac.uk

Copyright © 2019 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 redistribution/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