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Mélinda Caron. *Écriture et vie de société: les correspondances littéraires de Louise d'Épinay (1755-1783)*. Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal. 346 pp. \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-2-7606-3781-8.

Review by Susan Grayson, Occidental College.

Meticulously researched and documented, Mélinda Caron's *Écriture et vie de société: les correspondances littéraires de Louise d'Épinay (1755-1783)* examines the influence of Parisian salons on Enlightenment thought and social life. *Écriture et vie de société* offers a nuanced portrait of the intellectual and social interactions at the salons. Enlightenment scholars such as Antoine Lilti, Francis Steegmuller, and Jeremy L. Caradonna, among others, are divided on the character of these soirées. Were salons public or private spaces, writing clubs, parties for the rich, or laboratories where genuine or would-be philosophers would plot the French Revolution? [1]

The exchange of letters, the dialogues, and the discussions both fictional and based on real events, established the intellectual tenor of Épinay's salons. Not exclusively an epistolary writer herself, Épinay worked most closely with some well-known participants in salon life: Voltaire, Denis Diderot, Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, and even Jean-Jacques Rousseau before the rupture of his friendship with her. She contributed to articles in the *Encyclopédie* and she reviewed plays anonymously for Friedrich Melchior Grimm's clandestine journal *Correspondance littéraire*, available to his readers by subscription. [2] Nevertheless, her written works from the salons, her articles, and her pieces in Grimm's publications remained unattributed in print.

Épinay understood that women were not taken seriously as writers or as philosophers. Women's participation in salons was tolerated, but their intellectual activity was not deemed worthy of publication: "Les textes qu'elles écrivent circulent, certes, mais sans être imprimés, l'impression étant jugée inconvenante pour les femmes... Dans ce contexte, celle qui rechercherait une écriture plus savante et un rapport à la langue plus érudit serait condamnée par la moquerie" (p. 96). Thus choosing to display their knowledge instead of their personal attributes subjected them to ridicule. Female salonists were expected to preserve their reputations as social and sociable beings (pp. 96-98) and to conform to the conventional view of female writers as "natural," sentimental creatures and civilizing forces (p. 96). Socio-political criticism remained the province of male philosophers, notes Caron, whereas women writers were relegated to less serious, unpublished literary genres like bagatelles and personal letters.

Letters are at the center of Caron's study. Read silently in private or aloud in public, circulated, copied, or saved as the authors' "posthumous projection" for an "imagined posterity" (, letters

serve to build and reinforce a network of social and intellectual contact among both salonists and hosts: “Aussi la représentation qu’ils y offrent d’eux-mêmes doit-elle être approchée en fonction de cette projection de leur correspondance dans une postérité imaginée” (p. 229). Letters also convey the shifting definitions of public and private, of polite and indecent conversations or correspondences, and of performativity (p. 225) instead of documented events in the salons (ch. 5, “Sociabilité épistolaire,” pp. 228-9). Thus, *Écriture et vie de société* shows the blurred and blurring boundaries between personal truths and embellishment in the Age of Reason, a problem seen in Rousseau’s *Confessions* (1782-1789) and in Pierre Choderlos de Laclos’s *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782). Blurring weakens the truth pact implied in self-writing, as applicable to Rousseau as it is to abbé Ferdinando Galiani and, perhaps, to Épinay herself. Blurring also questions the economic, intellectual, and gender “hierarchies” that value some epistolists over others.[3] Caron returns to the question of truth and fiction in self-writing in chapter 4, “Dialogues fictifs et conversations.” This chapter offers Caron an opportunity to explore performativity, truth, and the binaries of spoken versus written language. We need only think of Rousseau’s essay on the origins of language and of presence and absence, or the meaning of letters and language in the theories of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault.

As host and participant in both verbal and written salon activities, Louise d’Épinay holds a double cultural passport, to paraphrase Susan Sontag’s “Illness as Metaphor” [4], at once inside salon culture through her friendships and festivities, and somewhat outside of it, in her criticism of the extravagant materialism of her peers (p. 122). Galiani, for example, wants to attract subscribers: “Quoique le projet de Grimm [*Correspondance littéraire*] ne soit pas dicté par une volonté d'accroître son public, il est néanmoins mû par une semblable volonté de séduction et d'adhésion” (p. 122). Mme d’Épinay, by contrast, shows the difference between the idealized private salons of gallant atmosphere and the outside world, “critiqué pour sa duplicité, son inconséquence et sa superficialité” (p. 122). Despite her privileged background, Épinay does venture into social criticism as she questions the moral values of her equals, a choice all the more daring because bluestockings invited mockery (pp. 94-5).

Caron considers such questions indirectly in the introduction of *Écriture et vie de société*, where she summarizes the material of each of its five chapters. More importantly, however, she announces what this reviewer finds an ingenious perspective on the salon: the “privileged angle” of the book, she says, is the practice of sociability, i.e., the maintaining of social ties through writing (p. 19). She continues: as defined in the *Encyclopédie*, “sociability,” does not mean “sociable” in this context (p.19). It refers to the behavior of the privileged man “who reconciles [his] happiness with that of other people” and “subordinates his private advantages” for those of the common good (p. 19, trans. mine). Scholars will recognize in this explanation the eighteenth century ideal of the common weal that takes precedence over the individual’s benefit. As the title of *Écriture et vie de société* suggests, Caron emphasizes the link between writing and sociability in the salons. She intends first to “sift through the representation of sociability and to detect the presence of its practices in a text” (p.19, trans. mine); and second, the reverse: to show how Épinay sought to create and maintain social links through her writing practices. Caron’s point is that for Mme d’Épinay, writing and sociability are co-equal and reciprocal.

The first chapter presents useful charts of the letters sent to Mme d’Épinay from correspondents, principally from Galiani (pp. 49-53, 69-72). As impressive as the charts are, they tend to be a visual distraction and might be less disruptive if added as an appendix to the text. Caron further examines the situation of women writers, intellectuals, and hosts. In her second chapter,

“Galanterie et mondanité,” she reflects on the status of well-educated and philosophically-minded women writers of the age, who, like Mme d’Épinay, hosted the *soirées* and perpetuated the art of sociability. She explains the important distinction between *galanterie* and *mondanité* and notes examples of good behavior, bad behavior, and the surprising moment at which guests abandon social graces and cross the line into vulgarity.

In chapter 3, “La Distinction,” Caron reflects on the necessity of conforming to the rules of politeness, for the knowledge and the practice of etiquette were essential to social prestige (p. 124). This topic leads her to consider elitism, a concept from sociology and political science. Elitism is characterized by the concentration of power in the hands of the few and insists on “the representation and mastery of behavior” (p. 125, trans. mine). Etiquette, Caron continues, maintains social hierarchy and order. It also serves to remind people of social inequality (p. 127).

Epistolarians understood that some letters, even if addressed to and intended for one recipient only, were circulated with or without their permission and at times were copied by hand in order to be discussed at other *soirées*. The use of coded names or names consisting of a first letter and asterisks could signify the correspondents’ desire for anonymity, although the salon crowd knew which names to attach to which guests. Coded names suggest to this reviewer that written representations of the self hover between truth and fiction.

Mélinda Caron makes a useful distinction between libertinage and gallantry in this chapter, the latter being a euphemism that distracts Épinay’s readers from assessing the real behaviors of the salonists and the conduct of their fictional characters. One particularly interesting dialogue recounts the views of two young women and the criticism of decadence that distracts from one’s Christian duty to care for the less fortunate through good works and more virtuous living (pp. 190-191). At the same time, says Caron, being an aristocrat means “engaging in dissipation” as a solemn duty. Their dialogue artfully establishes their views regarding husbands, lovers, and social life. Widowhood leaves a wife with “enviable autonomy” (p. 196). Thus, despite her privileged background, Mme d’Épinay does venture into social criticism as she questions the moral values of her peers (pp. 94-5).

Caron devotes much of the book—perhaps too much for enthusiasts of Enlightenment literature—to l’abbé Galiani, an Italian economist, cleric, diplomat, and good friend with whom Mme d’Épinay corresponded. Chapter 5, entitled “Sociabilité épistolaire,” includes a surprising exchange of letters, some humorous, some sad, in which Galiani and Épinay compare bodily functions and, according to Caron, comfort each other as they write of their illnesses and physical suffering. Perhaps digestive processes made for good reading at the time, but the subject and tone appear to this reviewer a strange indulgence for a man of the cloth, even one as worldly and seemingly self-centered as Galiani. The discussion (pp. 268-9) verges on bad taste, another curious choice in an era when manners were essential to social acceptability. However inured to coarse language we may be in 2018, were these issues considered fit for private missives or public readings if they were intercepted (p. 270)?

In her writings about women and the education of girls, her granddaughter among them, Mme d’Épinay appears to step away from her social persona and address the aforementioned questions. In chapter 4, “Dialogues fictifs et conversations,” Caron reveals subtler forms of Épinay’s critical views in the imaginary dialogues of two fictional aristocratic women (*L’amitié de deux jolies femmes*), whose differing views on the luxury, indolence, and worldliness of their milieu eventually

lead them to end their friendship. The tug of war between self-indulgent consumerism and Christian modesty (pp. 184-85) became obvious in the dictates of sumptuary laws and the careless behaviors of married libertines who talked about adultery with surprising nonchalance. Was this fictional discussion a useful disguise for Louise d'Épinay or a kind of *roman à clef*, based on real people identifiable by their peer group?

To return to the tension between historical and fictional renderings of aristocratic life, social criticism appears most convincingly in the dialogues of two fictional aristocratic women whose differing views on the materialism, indolence, adultery, and decadence of their milieu eventually lead them to end their friendship. Does this work undermine Épinay's credibility as a social critic who benefits nonetheless from her privileged social position and communications with such Enlightenment figures as Grimm, l'abbé Galiani, and other philosophers? *Conversations d'Emilie*, based on her granddaughter's education, shows Épinay's concern for the development of intellect, memory, self-knowledge, and serious, purposeful study in young girls (pp. 202-7). Mme d'Épinay maintains that young girls must learn to cultivate their minds by reading and studying instead of pursuing meaningless amusements and remaining in ignorance.

Caron undertakes an even deeper analysis of women's roles in Enlightenment intellectual life by examining in detail first the correspondence between Mme d'Épinay and the abbé Galiani and, second, Épinay's *Conversations d'Emilie*. This section offers a welcome look at femininity and feminism. Fortunately, it is one of Caron's many discussions on the topic.

Mélinda Caron's *Écriture et vie de société: les correspondances littéraires de Louise d'Épinay (1755-1783)* is a work rich with information and insights. It is densely written and thus not a quick read, but it is well worth the time.

## NOTES

[1] Jeremy L. Caradonna, "Review of Antoine Lilti's *Le monde des salons: Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Fayard, 2005." Accessed, August 13, 2018. <https://www.jeremycaradonna.com/Review%20of%20Antoine%20Lilti.pdf>

[2] Francis Steegmuller, "The Abbé Galiani: *The Laughing Philosopher*," *American Scholar* 57, no. 4 (1988): pp. 589-97.

[3] Caradonna, "Review of Antoine Lilti's *Le monde des salons*."

[4] Susan Sontag, "Illness as Metaphor," in *Essays of the 1960s & 70s*, ed. David Rieff, (New York: The Library of America, 2013), pp. 677-729.

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