
H-France Review Vol. 20 (May 2020), No. 77

Christie Margrave, *Writing the Landscape: Exposing Nature in French Women's Fiction, 1789-1815*. Cambridge: Legenda, 2019. 306 pp. Acknowledgements, abbreviations, quotations and translations, illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-781887-04-2.

Review by Giulia Pacini, William & Mary.

Christie Margrave's *Writing the Landscape* examines the representation of gardens and wilder spaces in French novels by women of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The book argues that Sophie Cottin, Barbara Juliane von Krüdener, Stéphanie-Félicité du Crest Genlis, Adélaïde de Souza, and Germaine de Staël conveyed their socio-political beliefs and frustrations through metaphorical landscape description. Margrave's study grants well-deserved attention to an important, yet frequently ignored corpus of women's fiction and therefore contributes both to the history of women's writing and to our understanding of French Romanticism.

Closely following in the critical footsteps of scholars such as Joan Hinde Stewart, Aurora Wolfgang, and Kirsty Carpenter, Margrave examines the socio-political discourse embedded within this corpus of sentimental fiction. She shows how women authors chafed at the restrictions placed upon their sex, often expressing a desire for freer roles and spaces of their own. These writers created female characters who sought solace and relief in (relatively) natural or wild settings. In this regard, Margrave's analysis finds inspiration in Stephen Bending's classic argument that "the shaping of physical space is the shaping also of identity, and [...] gardens are microcosms, speaking of and reacting to a world beyond themselves" (p. 8). By refocusing Bending's thesis on French literary descriptions of natural and designed landscapes, Margrave argues that the verbal composition of a physical space served similar functions for woman writers wanting to stake out their identities and ideas about the world.

Margrave starts by underscoring a well-known paradox in late eighteenth-century thought, a philosophical contradiction which, she argues, ultimately moved women writers to articulate their criticism of contemporary society through the medium of landscape description. Women had long been associated with Nature and therefore had often been seen as different from, if not inferior to, allegedly more cultured and rational men. Yet the renewed interest in (and value attributed to) the natural, which emerged in the second half of the century, did not necessarily translate into a revision of women's abilities and roles. On the contrary, even as they were praised as mothers and educators of a future generation of French citizens, at the turn of the century women were banished from the public sphere and their subordination to men was legally enshrined in Napoleon's Code Civil of 1804. Margrave argues that women authors of this period

were aware of the paradoxes inherent in this discourse and that they exploited its ambiguities to open up debate. They dialogued in particular with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, often espousing his ideas about the value of domesticity and motherhood, but also exploiting the clichéd association of women with Nature to imagine and design unique spaces for individual self-expression. In this, they may well have been inspired by Julie's garden in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, but they also imagined larger landscapes that extended beyond the physical and mental confines of the patriarchal household and of French society as a whole. Margrave thus comments on the enduring power of Rousseau's philosophy, as expressed in particular in his treatise on education *Emile* (and, I might add, the *Lettre à d'Alembert*), but more importantly she shows how women resisted dichotomous representations of the sexes and their own concomitant relegation to the domestic sphere. Gardens and other wilder landscapes, she claims, offered convenient and polemical "spaces of mediation" in which female characters could (more or less appropriately) engage in gender-bending and address some of the most pressing social and political issues of their times (p. 172). It was in--and through the writing of--these polemical "middle spaces" that women tried to negotiate existing tensions between the highly gendered domains of nature and culture and the private and public spheres (p. 111).

The book is thematically organized, with five chapters focused on women's attitudes towards matrimony, motherhood, madness, death, and authorship respectively. Chapter one discusses Cottin's, Staël's, and Souza's descriptions of perfectly arranged gardens, claiming that these authors evoked pastoral or utopian notions of order and happiness to critique the failings of contemporary French society and the institution of marriage in particular. Not surprisingly, the creation of these escapist gardens was often represented as a risky act for women (many female characters were doomed as a result). Souza's *Adèle de Sénange* stands out as an exception within this literary tradition insofar as it offers a more optimistic image of reform within marriage, a compromise that ultimately grants a certain degree of agency to women. Chapter two analyzes the portrayal of infant mortality and child abandonment in Krüdener's *Valérie* and Genlis's *Les Mères rivales*, illustrating the ways in which a symbolic language of plants and landscape representation could express intimate emotions and articulate a critique of unrealistic Rousseauian ideals of motherhood. Chapter three continues this train of thought as it explains how Cottin's *Malvina* and *Mathilde* imagined the natural world as a place for feminine rebellion and liberating forms of madness. The characters in these novels find a rare freedom to express themselves in the expansiveness of open gardens and Palestinian desert spaces. Such landscapes might "[mirror] the wild, mental depravity of the prisoner" confined within Europe's patriarchal medical establishments, yet they also served as imaginary spaces of protest and resistance (p. 147). A reading of Krüdener's *Valérie* suggests, then, that a restrictive gendering of roles and social spheres could be damaging to men as well. Chapter four develops these same ideas, with a focus on natural deathscapes in Cottin's *Claire d'Albe* and *Amélie Mansfield*, as well as in Staël's *Corinne* and *Delphine*. In these novels, wild waters provide "middle spaces" wherein characters are able to denounce social conventions and to reclaim their freedom of expression and individuality--unfortunately through death and the act of suicide (p. 172). Chapter five continues previous analyses of *Malvina* and *Corinne* to examine representations of wild and melancholy Northern spaces. Through their intertextual references to Ossianic myths and landscapes, these works highlight the difficulties facing independent-minded women writers and educators.

Ultimately Margrave identifies four different landscape typologies: "tamed nature, nature cultivated to look untamed, wild nature, and natural deathscapes" (p. 23). She claims that the first was particularly popular in the earlier decades of the eighteenth century when it allegorically

signified women's attempts at (re-)constructing harmony and a place for themselves even within an established patriarchal system. Later, wilder landscapes spoke instead of women's more intimate passions, often signifying their resistance to the gendering of power and sometimes representing their madness or their struggles with the fact of human mortality. Finally, descriptions of memorials or deathscapes allowed women authors and characters to imagine breaking down the spatial and temporal borders between the worlds of the living and the dead, and as such they evoked the possibility of escape towards a place of greater freedom.

Margrave concludes that the act of writing the landscape was a subtle political gesture: within the novels she studies, natural spaces served as a stage for larger and frequently polemical arguments about women's uneasy relationships to the public and private world. It was through this writing that women authors reclaimed a voice that was denied to them elsewhere. For the socially marginalized, melancholic, or visionary characters of this literary tradition, as for the authors themselves, an "escape into nature" was "a means to expose and confront the everyday reality and emotional suffering faced by women in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Empire" (p. 29). Margrave also argues that these marginalized works by women authors were central to the development of Romanticism. She rightly notes that this movement emerged earlier than is generally stated and that it was heavily shaped by women's writings. After all, as Chantal Bertrand-Jennings has pointed out, if François-Réné de Chateaubriand's René had a reason to be disillusioned after the conclusion of the revolutionary and Napoleonic period, women did so all the more--and at least as early as 1793--as their initial social and legal freedoms were progressively curtailed.

Writing the Landscape's strengths lie in its close literary analyses of lesser-known works by women. Margrave clearly states that the stakes of this book are not ecocritical: she is not interested in the history of environmentalist praxis or ethics, nor does she choose to engage the history of gardens or designed landscapes (the book offers only brief mentions of these authors' material practices or interests in the natural world). This work asks to be read as a literary and intellectual history characterized by a "socio-political approach" (p. 29). To this effect, however, more contextual information might have been useful, at the very least to discuss the existence of minority views about women's roles in society, as well as to examine more fully women's participation in the French Revolution and the experience of emigration. All these topics would have allowed for a more nuanced representation of women's lives at the time while also offering a deeper understanding, perhaps, of why these women writers were so independent-minded and interested in studying spatial movement and possible forms of escape. One might also wonder how these novels intersected (or not) with other literary genres and philosophical conversations about humans' relationships to nature (writings in the French Georgic tradition and eighteenth-century physiocratic discourse, for example). Would answers to these questions give more clues as to the representation of labor and agency in these novels? Last but not least: Did these authors ever grant agency to the physical, non-human, world (if so, how)? And did they ever imagine nature's language to be anything other than merely symbolic?

These are exciting questions for future study. In the meanwhile, Margrave's *Writing the Landscape* should be of interest to scholars working on French literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The book rightly calls our attention to a corpus of women's writing that deserves more critical attention, and it renews our understanding of how--far from being insignificant green backdrops--landscape descriptions could serve as focal points within a novel.

Giulia Pacini
William & Mary
gxpaci@wm.edu

Copyright © 2020 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 republication 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