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Pamela L. Cheek, *Heroines and Local Girls: The Transnational Emergence of Women's Writing in the Long Eighteenth Century*. Haney Foundation Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. x + 280 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$79.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780812251487; \$79.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780812296365.

Review by Annalisa Nicholson, University of Oxford.

The glossy cover of Pamela L. Cheek's award-winning book depicts two women in a loose embrace, one looking directly at the viewer while the other gazes at a point beyond the frame. Their white translucent attire draws out the rosininess of their cheeks and the glint in their eyes, affording each a discernible vivacity. This image is a detail from Adélaïde Labille-Guiard's *Autoportrait avec deux élèves* (1785), in which the artist painted herself seated, brush poised, in front of her two students, Marie-Gabrielle Capet and Marie Marguerite Carreaux de Rosemond. The closeup of Capet and Carreaux de Rosemond is an apt cover illustration for Cheek's book, capturing an artist-based version of its focus: the development of women's writing in the long eighteenth century as an endeavor grounded in femiocentric communities and collaborative practices.

Offering a richly detailed literary history from the late seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century, Cheek investigates "women's writing" as a category of literature that emerged during this period and its capacity to create "a transnational concept of women's identity" (p. ix). In each chapter, Cheek shows how women writers centered women's experiences in their works, from struggles to strike out against the expectations of their families to disastrous trysts and unwanted pregnancies. With narratives that resonated with female readers across Europe, women's writing became a highly successful genre across national and international markets, buoyed by the rising numbers of women translators and their transnational networks. Blending historical discussion of the book trade and literary circles with close readings of selected texts, Cheek's book sits at the crossroads of gender studies, book history, and literary criticism to provide an extraordinary overview of women writers and their works.

In attending to the transnational dimensions of eighteenth-century women's writing, Cheek builds on several studies, notably Julie D. Campbell and Anne R. Larsen's edited collection *Early Modern Women and Transnational Communities of Letters* and Carol Pal's *Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the Seventeenth Century*, both of which threw a spotlight on the hitherto underappreciated scope and influence of early modern women's writing.<sup>[1]</sup> Complementing these approaches, Cheek reveals the multifaceted transnational aspects of her corpus, which emerge in the mobility of its authors (like Frances Burney and Germaine de Staël),

the corresponding mobility of female characters, and the international readerships that such works acquired. Inevitably, Cheek does not cover every inch of this transnational terrain; as acknowledged in chapter one, attention is chiefly given to women writers working in French, English, Dutch, and German with a general inclination toward Western European literary networks and readerships. Yet Cheek still gives space to Eastern Europe in this study by registering the translations of Western European women's writing into Eastern European languages including Russian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Polish, Hungarian, and Czech.

Preceded by a concise foreword, each chapter is structured in a roughly chronological manner and deals with a particular theme in women's writing. Chapter one operates as a lengthier introductory chapter. In it, Cheek lays out the scope of the book, arguing that, between the *romans héroïques* of Madeleine de Scudéry and the novels of Jane Austen, women's writing became a recognizable category "that encouraged women to see, or allow themselves to see, the writing of other women as having a special authority for them, as speaking to them" (p. 11). Leaning on the language of attachment, Cheek taps into recent attention to the affinity between readers and literature, most notably by Rita Felski in *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, to probe both the character and popularity of women's writing. [2] As part of this inquiry, Cheek deploys Pierre Bourdieu's notions of "capital" and "habitus" to establish a compelling narrative: that the success of women's writing depended on an idea of womanhood as a "shared condition" (p. 19). This spurred women to read texts authored by other women that often centered on the trials of their literary heroines to remain both virtuous and independent in the face of patriarchal oppression. At once behavioral models and identifiable characters, these texts produced what Cheek dubs "the capital of virtue" as a fundamental value within eighteenth-century literary markets (p. 38).

Chapter two pushes a refreshing and urgent claim about the history of transnational approaches to women writers. Against the backdrop of the *querelle des femmes* and debates over women's cultural participation, Cheek recounts the proliferation of works compiling women's achievement, especially literary achievements, from the classical era to the early modern present that appeared in the wake of Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris* (ca.1355-1359) and Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* (ca.1404). In their attempts to evidence women's worth, these works simultaneously detemporalized and deterritorialized their subject's activities, displacing the women from their networks and from the specificities of their lived environments. With this commentary, Cheek reveals the premodern tradition of transnational approaches to women's history, which celebrated selected women as rare and singular examples of literary ingenuity, and therefore national pride, to be acknowledged by men and imitated by women. The transnational, then, is neither wholly new nor unquestionably productive. Such a deliberately stifling tradition was eventually subverted by women writers themselves. Madeleine de Scudéry's *Les femmes illustres* (1644) gave voice to the exceptional women that it treats through first-person conversations. Madame de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678) shifts the focus onto the female consumer so that, having listened to her friend, Mary Stuart, relate tales about the conduct of other women, "the princesse de Clèves interprets other female lives, internalizes them, and devises her own model of virtuous conduct" (p. 73). In both these works and across their larger literary oeuvres, Scudéry and Lafayette repurposed the trope of women exemplars to enrich the emotional depth of their female characters.

Moving from romance to realist novels, chapter three turns to depictions of "ravishing" in mid-century women's writing. Surveying texts that insert scenes and discussions of violence toward women, Cheek brings in the concept of gaslighting to describe and underscore resistance to

women's claims and fears of rape and harassment. For example, the mockery of Arabella in Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752) by several characters over her fears of abduction and rape appears shallow given the circumstances of her life. In turn, this failure to recognize Arabella's vulnerability surely increases her potential exposure to violence. As Cheek articulates, Lennox's work and similar texts "suggested that ravishing was not the work of a single malevolent man but of a culture as a whole" (p. 88). The stories that women were writing were not only narratives about distinct and individual characters but reflections of wider cultural norms, too.

Having established common motifs, chapter four explores the motivations behind these recurring tropes and themes. Cheek dismantles the assumption that repetition in women's fiction from the mid-century onwards should be read as imitations of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie* (1761). Rather, Cheek shows how women writers identified, circulated, and adapted a shared repertoire of tropes to form an international community of practitioners. Engagement in this community enabled participants to converse with fellow women writers through their texts and crystallized major features of the genre. The chapter lingers on the genre's pedagogical undercurrents, which paralleled the value that the Enlightenment placed on education. Texts sought to educate girls, usually through written dialogues, mirroring the indirect conversations between authors of these works that were initiated by the authors' participation in a shared repertoire. Works like Sarah Fielding's *The Governess* (1749) and the posthumous publication, in 1755, of the letters and memoirs of Françoise d'Aubigné, marquise de Maintenon adapted the tenets of salon culture and proposed a model of learning in which discussions between female characters aided their moral development. The influence of such works was boosted by the growing industry of translation in which "translation choices were organized by the assumption that different national and cultural settings provided alternate tests of virtuous womanhood while women understood the meanings of other women, regardless of linguistic difference" (p. 155).

Chapter five takes up the terms of the book's title, drawing on the tension between a heroine chafing under the yoke of a Europe-wide gendered oppression and a local girl faced with the specific hardships of the region or nation in which she lives. Isabelle de Charrière's *Lettres neuchâtelaises* (1784) supplies the most pertinent example of this narrative device. The young seamstress's apprentice, Julianne, becomes pregnant by the attractive Henri and confides her secret in Marianne, a well-born client of the dressmaking shop, with whom Henri is in love. The stakes are extraordinarily high since Neuchâtel, the Swiss canton in which they reside, is famed for its draconian practice of exiling women who fall pregnant out of wedlock, deeming the pregnancy (or more correctly, the sexual relations outside of marriage that caused the pregnancy) to be a serious criminal offence. To spare Julianne from this fate, Marianne plans for her to give birth in secret and for the child to be adopted. Marianne's acts of compassion evoke her sense of kinship with Julianne as they are both women subjected to Neuchâtel's ruthless regulation of deviant female sexuality. However, as Cheek demonstrates, Marianne is also elevated to a savior-like role that sees her help Julianne avoid the harsh penalties for her unlawful pregnancy, specifically the displacement from her home and dismissal her from her position, heightening their unequal social statuses. Analyzing this and similarly themed works, Cheek stresses that the coupling of heroines and local girls in women's writing "staked the claim that culturally specific rites of subjection informed but did not circumscribe the exceptional women" (p. 177). Local girls exposed the perils of patriarchal societies; heroines displayed paths by which women could rise above oppressive institutions.

In the concluding chapter, Cheek gathers key ideas from the previous pages. Returning to Bourdieu, Cheek sets out the habitus of eighteenth-century women writers, which comprised conversational sociability, conversancy with modern European languages, and a regional or national mobility prompted by the movement of their parents or husbands. This multilingual and cross-cultural habitus contributed to the transnational position of women writers in the literary field. Even as they adhered to the codes and aesthetics of their respective national literary fields, they could also enter the global literary field by dipping into the capital of virtue and the shared repertoire of motifs in their works.

Overall, the book represents an impressive intervention in the study of eighteenth-century women's writing. Its ambitious grappling with around fifty women writers in Anglophone, Francophone, Germanophone, and Dutch-speaking traditions generates thoughtful and persuasive arguments about the larger patterns in women's writing and in eighteenth-century literature as a whole. Unsurprisingly, this approach can leave the reader wanting more, especially as Cheek sets up tantalizing encounters with canonical and less familiar texts. Nonetheless, Cheek's remarkable conclusions emphasize the importance of this type of study for conceptualizing the emergence, trajectories, and motifs in women's writing across a lengthy timespan and for establishing new frameworks for conversations in literary studies.

#### NOTES

[1] Julie D. Campbell and Anne R. Larsen, eds., *Early Modern Women and Transnational Communities of Letters* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); Carol Pal, *Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[2] Rita Felski. *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

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