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Giada Alessandroni, *Amongst Women: Literary Representations of Female Homosociality in Belle Epoque France, 1880–1914*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021. viii + 236 pp. $63.95 (pb). ISBN 9781800790643; $63.95 (eb). ISBN 9781800790650.

Review by Melanie Hawthorne, Texas A&M University.

In "L'amitié feminine," part of her short story collection *La dame à la louve* (1904; New York: MLA, 2021), Renée Vivien (Pauline Tarn, 1877-1909) recounts the biblical story of Ruth and Naomi to refute the claim that "les femmes sont incapables d'amitié. Jamais il n'y eut de David et Jonathan parmi les femmes" (p. 112). Such friendship, suggests Vivien, surpasses love itself. It is "l'albe dévouement, la passion blanche" (p. 114). But if Vivien had to make such an impassioned case, it is because indeed it has been all too easy to overlook the theme of friendship between women and its representation in French literature. This is the lacuna--expanded to encompass homosociality more generally--that Giada Alessandroni proposes to fill in *Amongst Women*.

Alessandroni's study of female homosociality in Belle Epoque novels is part of a larger ambition to fill in the silence by doing for French women something akin to what Alan Bray did for men.[1] As Alessandroni is quick to point out, however, homosociality (social experiences with the same, versus the "opposite," sex) is not at all the same thing as homosexuality (though obviously there can be an overlap), and indeed homosocial relations might in fact be quite actively hostile. Her scope is therefore not limited to friendship alone. Yet, since friendship has so often been construed as an exclusively male virtue throughout French literary history (think Montaigne and La Boétie), the need to restore the gender balance is self-evident.

By the nineteenth century, there is finally enough material to make this a viable project, so Alessandroni takes as her corpus "female-authored, middlebrow fiction during the period 1880-1914" (p. 2). All these qualifiers of course need explanation and a rationale (why only middlebrow, for example), so the introduction carefully sets out and explains these parameters. The author is careful to explain that she does not intend to write social history (these are literary *representations*), but she is interested in how the discourse of the chosen texts fits with the dominant ideology of the period, which is a recurrent concern in each chapter.

After this overview, Alessandroni launches into her detailed textual analyses in a series of four chapters that compare and contrast specific Belle Epoque novels. The first, "Female Friendship and the Body," looks at female friends and the way they read nonverbal cues such as body language, set against the backdrop of the way women have so often been defined by (reduced to?) their bodies. Here, homosociality indeed takes the form of friendship, the situation often

associated with homosocial relations. The novels in question are two *romans de mœurs* by Daniel Lesueur (Jeanne Loiseau), *Justice de femme* (1893) and *Lèvres closes* (1898), along with one by Marie-Louise Compain, *L'un vers l'autre* (1903). Although Allesandroni drills down deep in her analysis, the conclusions she draws are mixed. On the one hand, the novels appear to confirm certain Belle Epoque ideas about women and the female body. On the other hand, the way female friendship is represented can also be read as a challenge to, and subversion of, that discourse.

Friendship as a form of homosocial experience gives way to mentorship in the second chapter, "Female Mentorship and the Making of the *Femme Moderne* in the Female *Bildungsroman*." Here, Alessandroni situates the discussion within the larger context of female didactic writing, which has a long history in France. As she notes, the characters in these Belle Epoque novels are often a stand-in for the author herself, who has a message to impart and does so by staging fictional conversations between two women in which one advises the other. Such didacticism has often had conservative overtones, instructing women on their proper role and place in society, but in these novels, the clash between social duty and individual happiness is mediated, with depictions of women who find happiness in a marriage of equals or satisfaction in meaningful work that happens also to benefit society. The novels featured in this chapter exemplify a kind of female Bildungsroman, or novel of development. They are *La Cruche cassée* by Gabrielle Réval (1904), *Les Cervelines* by Colette Yver (1903), and *Hellé* by Marcelle Tinayre (1889). Alessandroni argues that a "mentoring function [...] seems to be inscribed in the figure of the femme nouvelle" (p. 80). The *femme moderne*, on the other hand, might include a mentoring role, but might equally be the antithesis of a mentor, as is the case in the Hellé character of Mme Marboy. Alessandroni further borrows the distinction between "vertical" homosociality, which characterizes "relationships that allow women to challenge traditional institutions and exert forms of power" (p. 81), and "horizontal" (or "normative") sociality, which exists alongside the social order without threatening it (p. 81), to nuance the assessment of different kinds of mentoring. Alessandroni concludes from her analysis that the writers in question create strong traditional mentors, but also mentors who contribute in a more subversive way to female empowerment and emancipation, helping to shape a new generation of women (p. 117).

The third chapter, "Female Communities in Schoolgirl Fiction," tackles the impact of the vast topic of the educational reforms undertaken by the French Third Republic and the implications they hold for female literacy, independence, professional opportunities and achievements, and the creation of various kinds of female (homosocial) community at the turn of the century. The goal of the chapter is to "investigate which aspects of female homosociality are more prominent within this new literary genre and in which ways the fictional relations occurring within this world of the Third Republican school [...] influence those characters' sense of self and their development" (p. 129). To carry out this investigation, Alessandroni focuses on Yvette Prost's *Salutaire orgueil* (1907), Thérèse Bentson's *Yette* (1880), and Gabrielle Réval's *Les Sévriennes* (1900). The interest of Prost's novel lies in the way it illustrates how class and gender served to isolate middle- and upper-middle-class girls in a single-sex environment where they were prepped to serve as companions for bourgeois men, despite the Republic's stated intent of reducing class difference and promoting equality. Prost's heroine is encouraged to be proud and competitive, however, rather than humble and empathic, the opposite in some ways of the announced egalitarian goals. Yet, insofar as these characteristics are not typically associated with the feminine roles normally prescribed for women, they challenge contemporary ideas of womanhood. Bentzon's novel features an unruly and tomboyish girl, the eponymous Yette, whose story (Alessandroni asserts) is "designed to show that even the least docile of young girls can be made meek" (p. 142). In this

way, Bentzon "confirms the ideas found in Belle Epoque conduct books for girls and supports traditional discourses on female relationships and identities" (p. 146). Not all schoolgirl fiction is as subversive as one might suppose. The final novel draws heavily on Réval's own experiences at the Sèvres school, the newly formed elite teacher training college. Here, the students can't help but contribute to the subversion of the definition of femininity. While Alessandroni finds nuance and complexity in how female relationships are depicted in this new educational context, the challenge to dominant ideology is there. The difficulty is that while many contexts might "*allow* [...] for a rewriting of gender identities" (p. 158, emphasis added), it is harder for the critic to pin down the context(s) in which writers actually choose to exercise that option and what the effects might be.

Alessandroni is correct that reading these schoolgirl novels "simply as fictionalized memoirs or historical accounts of the authors' lives" (p. 158) does not do justice to the ideological and literary aspects of the texts. And certainly, "schoolgirl fiction served as a forum for discussion" (p. 158). But Alessandroni's tone overall is dominated by concessives: a typical structure of her argument consists of pointing out that *although* x, also y (on the one hand this, on the other hand that). Her attention to even-handedness is worthy, but it tends to flatten the analysis and dull the incisiveness of her study.

The final chapter concerns "Female Rivalry and Love Triangles." As Alessandroni is at pains to point out, not all female homosociality generates warm, fuzzy feelings of sisterhood, and rivalry, too, is a form of same-sex social interaction. It's an aspect that Belle Epoque ideology was happy to emphasize, reflecting a male-centered assumption that since the attentions of a man must be the most desirable thing in the world, and since women must compete with other women for this reward, women must inevitably view their peers as rivals in that activity. Perhaps, too, dominant men found it agreeably flattering to imagine themselves as the object of such desire, and viewed with dread the prospect that women might instead come together and work to change their subordinate situation. There is no shortage of examples of rivalry and betrayal among women in the history of French literature, but Alessandroni sets out to reassess the theme in novels of the Belle Epoque, an analysis informed by theories about (love) triangles by René Girard and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.[2] Yvette Prost's *Salutaire orgueil* (1907) is again one of the novels scrutinized, along with Daniel Lesueur's *Nietzschéenne* (1908) and Colette Yver's *Princesses de science* (1907).

In considering (again) Prost's novel, Alessandroni argues that what might look like female sacrifice (when one of the rivals renounces her claim) can be reframed as a form of empowerment, so that renunciation entails gaining rather than losing something. (She also pursues a discussion of the similarities between this novel and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in an interesting comparative aside.) As one might expect from the title, *Nietzschéenne* is "one of Daniel Lesueur's most socially engaged and intellectual works" (p. 182), in which the author attempts to show how Nietzschean theories about the will might serve to stiffen women's resolution. Unlike *Salutaire orgueil*, where two single women compete with each other for the same man as future husband, Lesueur's novel presents an adulterous triangle, with an already married couple threatened by the intrusion of a mistress. Rather than presenting one woman as winning and the other as losing in this competition, however, Lesueur offers an alternative resolution: The two women end up collaborating, putting their man's interests first in a twist that also suggests how the subordination of personal happiness for the sake of a social, collective good is best for everyone. Once again, such ambiguity can be read either as opting for traditional female virtue (self-

sacrifice) or as depicting women as “strong, smart, and self-reliant” (p. 191), morally superior to their male counterparts, thereby having it both ways.

Princesses de science, as the title suggests, once again foregrounds “brainy” women (“cervelines”), this time women in the medical profession, a field only recently opened to French women at the turn of the century. At first, the love triangle in question here makes the heroine’s career aspirations the intrusive element that threatens to break up the marriage, but when the protagonist opts for her career, her husband indeed turns to another woman for the attention his wife refuses him, making for a more traditional kind of adultery plot. Again, it is the women who come to an agreement without the husband’s input in order to save the marriage, and it is female integrity (and yes, self-sacrifice) that ultimately saves the marriage. “While female knowledge and power are once again aimed at the reinforcement of the status quo and not at its subversion this unbalancing of gender hierarchies still threatens strict gender divides by putting women in a superior position” (p. 196).

In sum, then, the same issues dog the depiction of love triangles in these Belle Epoque novels as those noted in previous chapters: How are we to read these slippery texts that seem to say that subversion is all in the eye of the reader? The texts don’t commit, and neither does Alessandroni, other than to note suggestive trends: “The neutralization of female rivalry and the reinforcement of female homosocial bonds, the rewriting of the Other Woman and the heightening of female agency, the creation of a feminine economy of generosity and sacrifice based on the exchange of men” are all, finally, just “interesting elements” (pp. 207-8).

Alessandroni addresses this tendency to have it both ways in her conclusion, where she refers back to the difficulties of reading “the troubling silences between the lines” (p. 209), i.e., inferring that which is not explicitly said. On the one hand, any claim about the blank space between the lines of a text can be only speculative at best. The space is by definition empty, and no irrefutable proof of any one interpretation can withstand a challenge. The tendency to hedge about such interpretations is therefore understandable. Too much assertiveness might seem rashly overconfident. But always staying on the safe side, avoiding the risks of bold claims, does not always make for reader satisfaction. In the end, Alessandroni opts for claims that are weaker than they might have been, as illustrated by her conclusion that “the novels carry out a sort of quiet subversion” (p. 211). The choice of language is illustrative. Any subversive power that might be detected is attenuated by the qualification that it is only “sort of” challenging to the status quo, and the adjective “quiet” that modifies that potential subversion commutes its power even as it allows its existence. As a claim for what might be possible through fiction, such a mild statement is hard to refute. The strength of this book, then, lies in the in-depth attention to a wide range of lesser read but deserving novels, rather than in any sweeping revision of how Belle Epoque novels are seen.

NOTES

[1] Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[2] See for example René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press,1966) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

Melanie Hawthorne
Texas A&M University
m-hawthorne@tamu.edu

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