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Cyril Francès, dir. *Le Politique et le Féminin: Les femmes de pouvoir dans les Mémoires d'Ancien Régime*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2020. 320 pp. Notes, references, and index. €68.00 (hb). ISBN: 9782406097600; €29.00 (pb). ISBN: 9782406097594.

Review by Susan Broomhall, Australian Catholic University.

This collection highlights many of the new directions that are emerging in historical analyses of women's relationships to politics and power. It does so not only through the questions and case studies that authors explore, but also in its tensions and omissions, which collectively present opportunities for future inquiries in this field.

The focus of this collection is women operating in Ancien Régime France, although studies span the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Some chapters investigate the actions and agency (experiential and rhetorical) of queens who were also authors of narrative productions (Jeanne d'Albret and Marguerite de Valois), others analyze queens as subjects in such texts (Anne of Austria). Studies of Francophone historiography written by women outside of France, including Christina of Sweden and Catherine II in Russia, provide interesting counterpoints of rulers contributing within structures of institutional power different from those of France, although in shared intellectual and literary traditions of such reflective writing. Some authors focus on subjects in positions of institutional power, and others on those working in contexts of influence such as salons or in roles at court (La Choin, du Maine, Maintenon). Essays present interpretations of the meanings of narratives about women and about power and the political, and the authors, both women (Motteville, La Guette, d'Orléans-Montpensier, Dunoyer, Sophie de Hanovre, Genlis) and men (La Rochefoucauld, cardinal du Retz, Saint-Simon), who constructed them. A further group of chapters considers the power of particular historical narrative-making forms, such as memoirs, letters, and histories, to make authoritative meaning of the past, generally as experienced and negotiated by women as authors (Staal-Delaunay, les Mancini, Villedieu, Germaine de Staël through to Henriette and Pauline Guizot de Witt).

Among the challenges for this collection are a sense of coherency, and shared identification of the issues at stake in the analyses to follow. At one level, every chapter reflects the key words and focus expressed in the title, but what these concepts mean and how they interrelate is shown to be highly diverse in the hands of the collection's authors. This is stimulating but also at times frustrating because the authors do not always share common ground that would make coherence, conclusions, or simple comparison possible. What do, or might, *le politique*, *le féminin*, and *femmes de pouvoir* mean as they are treated in this work? Moreover, how do they relate to each other to create questions that drive the essays and motivate the collection? These are not simple

relationships, but as a starting point it would be helpful for readers to have been presented explicitly the conceptualizations employed by each author, and the questions that emerge from these interpretations.

The division of the collection into three sections suggests attention to the formal institutions of political power of the period and women's relative proximity to its center. A first section studies those women *au cœur du pouvoir* in chapters on *figures de souveraines*. A majority focus on female-authored texts, including some that were composed by the sovereigns themselves, in studies that primarily consider questions of representation of women in or of power. The second section groups chapters under the rubric of the *frontière du pouvoir féminin*, in studies of women and forms of power deemed *entre public et privé*. This section contains analyses that are oriented towards representations of the locus of, and access to, power for women, sites that range from the physical to the rhetorical, including memoirs themselves. A final section presents analyses *face au pouvoir*, entailing *luttres, écarts et marginalités*. These essays examine forms of struggles for women, as subjects in memoirs who could be narrated as wielding power, and as authors who could produce histories of women and power. Narrative-making texts generally form the basis for assessments about women and/or power through these three lenses but are also themselves assessed for their role in producing and responding to such modes of perception.

Power then is a critical aspect of analysis throughout this collection. Individual authors appear to assume there is shared understanding of this term with readers and within the volume, but what is meant by this concept is often very different across chapters. For example, some authors focus upon specific forms of political engagement and authority, which are sometimes in relation to other key concepts such as sovereignty, monarchy, and rule. Other chapters refer to political institutions, usually in relation to formal structures of government. Yet others tackle power through ideas of influence and questions of political or authorial agency, or simply autonomy of action and self-direction. Furthermore, some authors employ adjectival qualifications such as official/unofficial, public/private, political, literary, from the margins, partial, limited, "castrated," essential and even real, in relation to their analysis of power or of *le politique*, and women's interaction with, or use of it. Very few authors interrogate these choices explicitly.

Alongside these complex and dynamic definitions of the core focus of essays is the secondary challenge of the connection or relationship of these ideas to women, or to *le féminin*. Here too multiple variations exist, as the chapter titles (listed below) demonstrate. Some authors are interested in *femmes de pouvoir*, others in *femmes fortes* or *femmes illustres*. Alternatively, some chapters focus upon *le pouvoir au féminin*, while others discuss *le pouvoir de femmes*, and still others *le pouvoir féminin*. Occasionally, a number of these terms are used within a single essay. These choices imply differing conceptualizations about the relationship of power with gender, women, or the feminine. Are politics, political culture, or power itself to be understood as gendered? Is the employment of any of these forms or contexts of power shaped by the gender of its agents or by contemporary gender ideologies? These are questions that might have been profitably explored by individual authors in their papers, but perhaps more so by the editor in an overarching analysis from the perspectives and evidence that the volume brings together.

A further set of questions arise for this reader in relation to the collection's attention to the genre of memoirs. What is the genre's authorial and historiographical power? What is, or could be, the specific role or capacity of memoirs in narrating the power, or simply the experiences, of women of power, or powerful women, or simply *le politique* or *le féminin*, or the relationship between

these? How are memoirs a form of influence and power in their own right as authoritative interpretations of the past? Whose narratives of the past are authorized or validated as memoirs, and which are removed from further historiographical contribution precisely because they were produced as memoirs? How might the power dynamics of memoirs produced as first-person narratives be distinct from those third-person accounts, and are there patterns to the choices for men and women as authors and subjects? How does the perceived, or articulated, reader of the memoir shape the presentation of these elements? Who can speak and be heard in memoirs, in what contexts, for whom and about what? In some chapters, memoirs are placed in comparison and contrasted to letters and histories. What did memoirs do or offer as a genre for women as authors or subjects that was different from these other historical narrative-making genres? Some of these questions are addressed, often obliquely, by individual chapter authors, and these are, after all, my questions that emerge from the studies included here, which are perhaps not those of the authors or editor. Perhaps more important than responding to these specific questions would be offering the reader a clear sense of what it is that the volume as a whole advances in relation to the existing scholarship.

These many questions are a testament to the stimulation that this volume provides to its readers. Perhaps a good collection should always leave the reader wanting a little more. However, in this case, a little more sharpening of the key concepts might have produced a more analytically productive contribution to the field. Alongside this, it is notable that many authors engage in only a limited way with existing scholarship beyond the contemporary texts, so that the essays are primarily close interpretive readings of texts that require the reader to situate in the literature on that text, author, or subject, and in the relevant scholarly analysis of women, politics, and power. There is little sense that the authors are in dialogue with each other, even where their studies pertain to the same text, author (for example, Saint-Simon's *Mémoires*) or subject (Anne of Austria, the focus of three chapters), which produces interpretations that in some cases would seem to challenge those of others. It would have been interesting to see conclusions respond to those of other relevant essays. References to non-Francophone studies and scholars, regarding both specific texts and core concepts, are scarce and somewhat dated.

However, readers will certainly find many insights related to the specific texts or historical individuals of interest to their own studies among this collection's seventeen essays. Such close attention to these texts and to women as authors and subjects of history is very welcome as an invitation to further study.

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