
H-France Review Vol. 2 (February, 2002), No. 36

Jo Burr Margadant, Ed., *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2000. x + 298 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$55 US (cl), ISBN 0-520-22140-0 (cl); \$19.95 US (pb), 0-520-22149-9 (pb).

Review by Charles Sowerwine, University of Melbourne.

This splendid collection addresses two major issues. On the one hand, it gives us keys to understand eight highly significant women writers and activists by offering fresh and vibrant new interpretations based in most cases on new research. The choice of subjects provides a spread of types of engagement and covers all major periods, though with an emphasis on the earlier part of the century, so the collection makes a major contribution to our understanding of the gender issues across the century. On the other hand, it makes a significant theoretical contribution. All six pieces, as well as Jo Burr Margadant's insightful introduction, use effectively the idea of performance to elucidate the public careers of these remarkable women. This in turn offers a handle for historians on the difficult issue of the multiplicity and instability of the subject, AND the construction of numerous selves, which we now recognize as much more characteristic than the very nineteenth-century idea that one was oneself, that there was only one such self, and that it was largely immutable or at the most evolved slowly.

Analyzing these women in terms of performativity is an excellent idea, since they were all, perforce, performers. Writing, speaking, agitating are all public performances that require presentation of public selves. No doubt this truth has been recognized since Richard Sennett's classic *The Fall of Public Man*.^[1] Sennett, however, was not concerned with gender issues (as his title suggests). Stephen Greenblatt's more recent *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* provides more inspiration for this collection, but despite more gender sensitivity does not address the problem women faced in self-fashioning.^[2]

We can recognize, with the authors of this collection, that women faced a greater burden than men in public performance and that this burden was peculiarly heavy during the nineteenth century. Although we are beginning to nuance simplistic notions of public/private dichotomies, we nevertheless recognize that the hegemonic model for well-to-do women was an image of domestic concern. This did not mean, of course, that such women were doing the dishes. Rather, the roles they were expected to be seen as performing were domestic, nurturing and affective, to be performed in private. The only public woman admitted in this model was the prostitute.

Since the eighteenth century, Reason and the public sphere had been associated with men, while Nature and the private sphere were linked to women. That was the basis for their exclusion from citizenship. In the new society, women were assigned the subordinate, domestic and nurturing gender roles articulated in Rousseau's writings. Political power was assigned to men who actively created wealth. These tendencies were worked through during the Restoration (1814-1830), developed in the July Monarchy (1830-1848), and fought to a finish in the Revolution of 1848 and the Second Republic (1848-1852). The Third Republic (1870-1940) was thus the *apogée* of exclusive masculine performance in the public role. As Robert Nye puts it, "the division of the social world into gendered public and private spheres was completed and legally sanctioned, confining women to the private realm but permitting men to roam over both."^[3]

Thus the dilemma for women wishing to manifest themselves in the public sphere: how to create a public self or selves which projected a private self performing affective roles linked to the home and motherhood. This is the lived side of the paradox that Joan Scott dissected so incisively in *Only Paradoxes to Offer*. [4] Indeed, the two works complement each other marvelously, Scott showing how feminists had to balance their theories on a knife edge to justify representing women in a culture of notional equality, Margadant's group showing how women activists had to balance their performed lives on a knife edge between the projection of rational public selves and natural private selves.

The book consists of six chapters, five dealing each with one woman and one comparing three women, plus Margadant's introduction, a model of the genre. It opens theoretical perspectives and draws out the theoretical and substantive threads common to the six chapters. It also provides context, demonstrates the significance of these women's performances, and offers an up-to-date discussion of recent historiography in the areas of performativity, biography, and the creation of selves.

Margadant also provides the first of the six substantive chapters, a discussion of the efforts of the duchesse de Berry during the 1820s to perform royal motherhood in ways consonant with new expectations. As Margaret Darrow showed in a seminal article, to which Margadant refers, [5] noblewomen returned from exile repentant of the sins of their mothers and determined to implement the new cult of domesticity. The duchesse, only seventeen years old when she arrived in Paris in 1816 to consummate her marriage to the duc, demonstrated a similar sense of romantic sentiment and readiness to be seen to be a wife and mother of the new kind. The duc too had developed a romantic affective sense outside court life. The couple strolled arm-in-arm, operated as a couple within the highest Parisian social circles, and even used the intimate form of address (*tu*), shockingly in many eyes, including those of the king, whose sense of appropriate marital relations was anchored in old regime Bourbon etiquette. They were a continental anticipation of Victoria and Albert.

Margadant tells two stories in parallel. One is of how the duchesse (and the duc) sought to perform their roles as royal spouses in ways that would draw favor from the Parisian elite, largely attuned to the changes in affective culture which had occurred since the Revolution. These changes the king and his court of returned exiles had entirely missed and continued to reject. Margadant here argues that the restored Bourbon monarchy failed to perform socially as modern royalty and that this failure contributed to its downfall by alienating support from elites.

The other story is that of the duchesse's struggles to legitimize her son's position as heir to the throne. (After the death of Louis XVIII in 1824, were his successor Charles X to die, the duc d'Angoulême was next in line for the throne, but he was childless and impotent. The duc de Berry, his younger brother, thus fathered the only successor of the next generation.) Legimitising his claim, however, proved difficult because the duc had been assassinated six months before the birth of his son. These struggles ended with the downfall of the Bourbon monarchy in 1830, AFTER which the duchesse undertook the great performance of her life, attempting unsuccessfully in 1832 to lead an insurrection and restore the Bourbons to the throne.

The next essay, Susan Grogan's on Flora Tristan, does the same from less promising materials. Indeed, this essay is a *tour de force*: it offers a fresh perspective on a woman already the subject of many biographies in recent years. [6] Grogan has already published a superbly engaging biography of Tristan. [7] What was left to do? Grogan uses one performance to illuminate Tristan's methods and self-perception, one of many and one of the last at which she sought to persuade workers to form the one big union which was the object of her greatest work, *L'Union ouvrière* (The Workers' Union, 1844). This, however, is a performance of which we have both Tristan's version and the police account. Grogan explodes this performance to let us see how Tristan viewed what she was doing and what effect her performance had on others.

Tristan was a consummate and self-conscious artist, as were most of the women discussed in the collection. She not only looked on her lectures as performances, but lived police interruptions, arrests and even trials as performances, "playing," in her words, "the role of the princess" when not playing the role of the activist, to the point of ordering champagne to ensure that the police inspector was angered enough to play the appropriate role as villain of the piece (pp. 72, 81). With Grogan's essay, we reach the dynamics that Tristan used to resolve the problem of public performance as a woman activist, agitating in the most dangerous fashion of all eight women in the collection, for her activism touched both gender and class sensitivities. How would she have performed on the barricades of 1848 had she not died so prematurely later in 1844?

From Tristan's unionism, Whitney Walton takes us to mainstream republicanism in a chapter devoted to three significant women writers of the mid-century: George Sand, Marie d'Agoult, and Hortense Allart. This piece fits neatly with Walton's major work on the subject [8] but opens the issues at the heart of this collection. These women faced squarely the dilemma that Scott has illuminated: they were profoundly committed republicans -- indeed, d'Agoult inscribed Sallust's adage, "It is beautiful to do well by the republic," on the wall of her salon (p. 99) -- but they were women and the republic was defining itself as masculine. Walton gives us a neat account of recent literature on this question (p. 101), typical of the way the whole volume remains accessible to all those interested in gender issues as well as in French history.

Walton analyses the autobiographical writings of the three women to discover for us how they forged positions as republicans without challenging the republic's patriarchal underpinnings. One key to this is their representing their fathers as having "sanction[ed] their daughters' involvement in politics and their support for republicanism" (p. 106). Another is their playing with gender roles so that they could present masculine and feminine selves simultaneously. Their most intriguing cultural work, however, was their attempt, as Walton puts it, to reconfigure "the power relationships and division of labor... within the limits of the heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family," thus providing a third way for republicans who did not wish to follow the socialists (p. 125). It would be easy to dismiss such efforts, but most of us live in worlds given to us, as Marx put it. Writers who offer women (and men) "the power to determine the gendering, or ungendering, of republicanism," without demanding that they sacrifice the structures within which they operate, deserve our consideration and appreciation.

While Walton's three women are major figures whose representations of themselves give us a starting point for understanding their efforts as republicans, Clotilde de Vaux has been the victim of Auguste Comte's cult for her. Mary Pickering's insightful essay on de Vaux involves the kind of detective work that historians still love. She rescues de Vaux from oblivion while showing how she struggled to find roles to perform. Theoretically in favor of the dominant model that women should be respectable wives and mothers, de Vaux struggled to conciliate her support for this model with her burning desire to be an independent, creative spirit. At the same time she had to struggle against impossible odds. Her husband gambled their fortune away and disappeared, leaving her bound to a man she would never see again but could never divorce (abolished by the returning Bourbons in 1816, divorce would not be legalized again until 1884). Her mother, jealous of her relationship with Comte and her potential for success, put other obstacles in her path. Most of all, Auguste Comte, the founder of sociology, transferred to her all his affective needs in his old age.

Comte practiced emotional blackmail on de Vaux, but she needed his support and indeed his money. So the story that Pickering tells is one of a prolonged struggle in which de Vaux managed to retain her independence and her ideals while making use of Comte. This essay, fascinating though it is, carries less of the collection's underpinning notion of performativity. The last two essays, however, like Margadant's and Grogan's, return us to this central question in exciting ways.

Mary Louise Roberts gives us a fine chapter on the prominent feminist of the Belle Epoque, Marguerite

Durand. Durand was a successful actress who had married a wealthy man, gone into journalism, and then in 1897 began publishing *La Fronde*, the world's first daily newspaper written, "directed, administered, edited and typeset [only] by women." [9] Durand's greatest achievement, however, was to represent feminism as acceptable to mainstream republicans by her performance of her assigned role as a beautiful woman and sophisticated hostess. It would be easy to dismiss Durand as a '*mondaine*' and to dismiss her feminism as superficial, as I once did and as did more radical feminists of the day, like Madeleine Pelletier, who recalled thus her first encounter with a journalist of *La Fronde*: "a lady with a plunging neckline received me with condescension. . . . I didn't appear wealthy, obviously, with my 20 franc dress; and that was much more important than whatever my article might contain." [10]

Durand did indeed dress the part of the wealthy socialite and invitations to parties at *La Fronde* specified "*toilette de soirée décolleté*" [evening dress, low neckline] (p. 192). Dismissing her feminism would, however, be facile. Durand's consummate performance may have done more to build a mass feminist movement than many marches and congresses. In a culture which, then as now, prided itself on its success at heterosexual romance ("as a land of gallantry, coquettishness, and amour," as Robert Nye has put it), [11] to remain imprisoned in the "bluestocking" or "old maid" image was to cut off much potential audience. "Feminism," Durand declared in her own newspaper in 1903, "owes a great deal to my blond hair. . . . I know it thinks the contrary, but it is wrong" (p. 171). By her performances she attracted mainstream republicans, men and women. Roberts, sensitively, does not claim that she converted others to feminism so much as that she made conversion possible.

Roberts reminds us that Durand, like the others, had to negotiate the pitfalls of performing without losing respectability. Indeed, only Tristan is comparable to Durand in the level of performance and the stakes for which she played. Roberts explains perceptively how "Durand's years as an actress clearly shaped her identity and politics" (p. 176) and shows neatly how the acting profession posed acutely for women the dilemma of respectability. Like Tristan too, Durand played against all odds, for her position as "a journalist, a divorcee, and an embattled mother" was comparable to Tristan's. Yet she managed to achieve respectability as journalist and hostess while performing roles that, as Roberts argues, one would associate with the new woman (p. 182). Roberts suggests that by pushing the spectacle to extremes, as when she posed with a pet lion for her protest candidature for the 1910 Paris municipal elections, Durand managed to dazzle so as to distract from these potentially contradictory roles. And Roberts makes a good case that, as one provincial subscriber wrote, Durand helped to "end feminism's 'period of ridicule'" (p. 194).

The last essay, by Elinor Accampo, maintains the high standard of its predecessors. It deals with Nelly Roussel, the most eloquent and spectacular campaigner for birth control in the decade and a half before the outbreak of World War I. Roussel had to walk the same tightrope at even greater heights because her subject matter was, by implication, sex. Like Durand, she performed and superbly, but she performed as a lecturer, moving audiences to tears. To achieve this effect, she had to make audiences believe that she was a devastatingly beautiful young woman, a faithful wife and a devoted mother, campaigning not against motherhood but for motherhood by choice.

Roussel, like Durand, made use of her beauty. Indeed, she chose an alluring photograph for the frontispiece of one collection of her speeches, using images of herself with her little daughter (in which she was no less alluring but more maternal) for others. She made sure that she presented herself as the perfect wife and mother. I at least bought the images she projected, though I always wondered what other roles she was playing. Accampo has satisfied my curiosity. Sensitively and gently, Accampo suggests that Roussel harboured many different and conflicting sentiments about the roles she performed or projected. During her frequent, prolonged absences on lecture tours, she mentioned the children rarely. The one mention Accampo quotes is hardly in the sentimental vein of Roussel's public performances. Referring to 'your son' (not ours), she tells her husband: "Dirty little Nono! Ignoble kid! Who always profits from my absence to do such things, because he knows that I am the only one who

whips him conscientiously" (p. 236).

Accampo's interpretation enriches our knowledge, not only of the many aspects of Roussel's lives and performances, but also of the birth control movement in the heady days before the draconian laws of 1920 and 1923 cut it short. (These laws provided severe penalties for advocating birth control, diffusing information about it, and providing it as well as for any involvement in abortion.) It closes most satisfyingly an unusually rich, perceptive and satisfying collection.

Reviewers must find some shortcomings. I would have preferred another title. *The New Biography* distracts us from the gender specific nature of the project here. Moreover, the essays are not really biographies so much as analyses of performances, analyses to which the biographical elements are necessary but secondary. Indeed, basic biographical information, even birth and death dates, is hard to find and in some cases missing. And while the University of California Press should be commended for the format and illustrations, they deserve a conscientious whipping for the admittedly widespread practice of putting the notes at the end of each chapter. If we can't have footnotes, let's have endnotes at the end of the book, with page references. And if we are going to have notes for each chapter, let's have the bibliographies that way instead of collapsed at the end. At least that way we could easily find the books associated with a particular essay.

These shortcomings won't stop anyone from reading this collection with great pleasure. Go for it!

LIST OF ESSAYS

- Jo Burr Margadant, "Introduction: Constructing Selves in Historical Perspective."
- Jo Burr Margadant, "The Duchesse de Berry and Royalist Political Culture in Postrevolutionary France"
- Susan Grogan, "'Playing the Princess': Flora Tristan, Performance, and Female Moral Authority during the July Monarchy"
- Whitney Walton, "Republican Women and Republican Families in the Personal Narratives of George Sand, Marie d'Agoult, and Hortense Allart"
- Mary Pickering, "Clotilde de Vaux and the Search for Identity" Mary Louise Roberts, "Acting Up: The Feminist Theatrics of Marguerite Durand"
- Elinor A. Accampo, "Private Life, Public Image: Motherhood and Militancy in the Self-Construction of Nelly Roussel, 1900-1922"

NOTES

[1] Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

[2] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

[3] Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (New York, 1993), p. 47.

[4] Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[5] Margaret Darrow, "French Noblewomen and the New Domesticity, 1750-1850," *Feminist Studies* 5 (No. 1 (Spring) 1979): 41-65.

[6] In addition to Grogan's own superb biography, see Doris and Paul Beik, *Flora Tristan, Utopian Feminist: Her Travel Diaries and Personal Crusade* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Évelyne Bloch-Dano, *Flora Tristan: la femme-messie* (Paris: B. Grasset, 2001); Maire Cross and Tim Gray, *The Feminism of Flora Tristan* (Oxford, Providence: Berg, 1992); Dominique Desanti, *Flora Tristan: la femme révoltée* (Paris: Hachette, 1980); Sandra Dijkstra, *Flora Tristan: Feminism in the age of George Sand* (London; Concord, Mass.: Pluto Press, 1984); Pierre Leprohon, *Flora Tristan* (Antony: Éditions Corymbe, 1979); Gerhard Leo, *Flora Tristan* (Paris: Éditions de l'Atelier, 1994). In addition, chapters on Tristan can be found in many books, including Gen Doy, *Women and Visual Culture in Early Nineteenth-century France, 1800-1852* (London; Washington, D.C.: Leicester University Press, 1998); Marie Maclean, *The Name of the Mother: Writing Illegitimacy* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994); Donna Dickenson, *Property, Women, and Politics: Subjects or Objects?* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1997); *Wollstonecraft's Daughters: Womanhood in England and France, 1780-1920*, edited by Clarissa Campbell Orr (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1996).

[7] Susan K. Grogan, *Flora Tristan: Life Stories* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1998).

[8] Whitney Walton, *Eve's Proud Descendants: Four Women Writers and Republican Politics in Nineteenth-century France* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[9] Charles Sowerwine, *Les femmes & le socialisme: un siècle d'histoire* (Paris: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1978), p. 76; cf. Charles Sowerwine, *Sisters or Citizens? Women and Socialism in France since 1876* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[10] Charles Sowerwine and Claude Maignien, *Madeleine Pelletier, une féministe dans l'arène politique* (Paris: Éditions ouvrières, 1992), p. 67; for Pelletier, cf. Christine Bard and Jean-Christophe Coffin. eds., *Madeleine Pelletier: logique et infortunes d'un combat pour l'égalité* (Paris: Côte-femmes, 1992); Felicia Gordon, *The integral feminist--Madeleine Pelletier, 1874-1939: feminism, socialism, and medicine* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990); Scott, *Only paradoxes*, Chapter 5.

[11] Robert A. Nye, "Sexuality and the Singularity of French Feminism," *Australian Feminist Studies*. 15 (2000), p. 326.

Charles Sowerwine
University of Melbourne
c.sowerwine@unimelb.edu.au

Copyright © 2002 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 redistribution/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 re-publication 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