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Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001. xvi + 233 pp. Appendices and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-691-07472-0.

Review by Lisa Jane Graham, Haverford College.

Carla Hesse's *The Other Enlightenment* offers a timely and important response to Joan Scott's *Only Paradoxes to Offer*.<sup>[1]</sup> Together, the books allow us to measure the impact of two decades' worth of feminist theory and cultural history on our understanding of the Enlightenment and its relationship to modern assumptions about gender and authority. Both Scott and Hesse develop their arguments through series of case studies designed to highlight the contours and contradictions of the feminist project at historically charged moments. They construe feminism broadly as a process of self-creation, of political subjects for Scott and moral subjects for Hesse. These concerns give each argument its distinctive flavor and force.

In her preface, Hesse defines her position as "liberal not radical feminism" (p. xiv) to distinguish it from Scott's, which represents the dominant model in the field. From the radical perspective, the French Revolution of 1789 drew on Enlightenment theories of sexual difference to shape a definition of citizenship that was socially restricted and exclusively masculine. Scott and other scholars identify this paradox between an Enlightenment language of universality and a politics of exclusion as the fundamental dilemma of modern democracy and contemporary feminism.<sup>[2]</sup> Hesse seeks to refute this negative view of the revolutionary legacy by recovering alternative strains of Enlightenment discourse which she calls "the other Enlightenment." Created by women as a "distinctive poetics of self-making" (p. xiv), this other Enlightenment allowed them to demonstrate their reasoning capacity and moral autonomy despite their ongoing legal and political subordination.

Hesse understands modernity as a heightened awareness of oneself as a self-creating subject whose most characteristic manifestation occurs in the experience of writing as an author for a public. This definition guides the organization of her evidence. She divides her book into two parts, each consisting of three chapters that proceed chronologically from the late Enlightenment through the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods. In part One, Hesse explores the role of women in print culture and how it evolved during the tumultuous revolutionary era. Having established the entry of women into the literary marketplace, Hesse tracks how female authors used this authority to intervene in the aesthetics of self-representation (pp. xii-xiii). For Hesse, becoming modern involves public recognition of women's moral and creative capacity as much as tangible gains such as the vote. Her goal is to establish the truth of this assertion by examining selected women writers.

Chapter One approaches the revolutionary rupture of 1789 as an important shift in the relationship between the spoken and printed word. Hesse argues that within the political culture of the Old Regime, women enjoyed a privileged relationship to oral culture. Mocked and revered for their hyperbolic speech forms, such as the *preciosité* of the *salonnières* and the *poissarde* slang of market women, women played a recognized role in the political rituals of the monarchy. As literacy rates accelerated in the second half of the eighteenth century, however, print displaced speech as the authoritative form of communication. Yet

literacy proceeded unevenly for men and women, and by the 1790's, illiteracy was a predominantly female phenomenon. The breakdown of censorship during the Revolution followed by the legalistic bent of the republic reinforced the hegemony of the printed word. As eloquence lost its authority, so, too, did the women who deployed it. With public life shaped by writing, women who wanted to participate had to take up their pens or lose their voices.

Having prepared the stage for the arrival of women writers, Hesse moves in her second chapter to identifying their presence in print from 1789 to 1820. The evidence in this chapter is supplemented by an appendix where Hesse has compiled a bibliography, "French Women Writers, 1789-1800." This appendix is a useful research tool for scholars interested in French history and literature as well as women's writing in modern times. To cite one example, the proportional presence of women in print doubled between 1789-1820. Thus, the commercial expansion and liberal policies of the early Revolution allowed women of varying social backgrounds to compete in the literary marketplace and contribute to the public discussions about their status in the republican polity. The prescriptive texts that have informed the anti-republican interpretations of this period were, according to Hesse, responses to women's heightened cultural presence, not reflections of their actual condition. Hesse embraces the free market as a liberating force for women authors because success or failure was determined by a book's content and not its author's sex. For Hesse, the commercialization of French cultural life initiated and sustained the "public exercise of female reason" in the new society (p. 55).

In Chapter Three, Hesse builds on her earlier work concerning copyright laws during the French Revolution to trace the emergence of modern authorial identity as a process marked by gender difference. At stake in these emerging definitions was the relationship between the moral possession of ideas and their legal status as property. Where male authors acquired both sets of rights, their female counterparts were granted moral autonomy without property rights. Under the Napoleonic Code, married women required the consent of their husbands to publish. These differences persisted well into the twentieth century when married women finally acquired financial independence in 1967. For nearly two centuries, women were free to write but not to publish (p. 74). The legal debates over property, divorce, and authorial rights all focused on the question of a woman's intellectual autonomy. Hesse sees the outcome as a Kantian, as opposed to a Lockean, solution, where women were granted moral autonomy while remaining juridically subordinate. She concludes that despite the ongoing legal battles and constraints, the participation of women in print culture increased during the nineteenth century, albeit at an uneven pace with men.

The three chapters that comprise the second part of Hesse's book focus on celebrated female authors whose work confronted the relationship between literary creativity and sexual difference. Chapter Four traces the prolific career of Louise de Kéralio (1758-1822), which spanned the late Enlightenment and Revolutionary eras. Kéralio acquired literary fame in the 1780's for her five-volume *Histoire d'Elisabeth, Reine d'Angleterre* and a twelve-volume *Collection des meilleurs ouvrages français composés par des femmes*. Both works attest to her desire to integrate women into the writing and making of history while exploring the nature of political authority, in particular queenship, and the compatibility of women and power. These concerns resurfaced during the Revolution when sovereignty was radically redefined and Kéralio took up her pen as a political journalist. Yet whereas she had been respected as an *historienne* prior to 1789, she found herself viciously attacked as an *amazone* (p. 92). She responded by lauding domesticity for women and retiring from public life for fifteen years. After the revolution, she returned to fiction but imbued it with the moral and political agendas she had previously explored in her histories. For Hesse, Kéralio's career reveals that as women were pushed out of contemporary politics and written out of history, they reclaimed fiction as a genre to subvert republican plots of domesticity.

Chapter Five focuses on the literary career of Isabelle de la Charrière (1740-1805) whose ideas crystallized in the post-Thermidorean debates over education and moral philosophy. This intellectual climate was shaped by the publication of Kant's ethical writings in French in conjunction with the

morally dubious legacy of the Terror. Secular philosophers worked with government leaders to design social policies and institutions that would educate individuals in their duties and regenerate society. Their efforts culminated in the founding of the National Institute of Arts and Sciences in 1795 that would direct not only curriculum but cultural production more generally to ensure moral content and counter the corrosive effects of the market (pp. 109-111). Charrière's novel, *Trois Femmes* (1795), was written as a feminist protest against both the authoritarian cultural policies of the government and the sexism inherent to Kant's theory of moral autonomy. Hesse argues that the novel asks whether categorically dependent individuals such as women are obliged to respect rules that they are barred from making. In response to this exclusion, the novel's heroines constitute an outlaw community held together by an ethics of contingent reasoning that allows them to survive in a world of categorical imperatives. Hesse emphasizes that the aesthetic form of the novel reinforced the moral critique insofar as narrative thrives on contingency and indeterminacy.

The final chapter expands on the power of fictional forms to show how female authors developed representational techniques in response to the oppressive biological theories that effectively undermined their claim to intellectual competence or moral autonomy. In the early nineteenth century, biological theories of sexual difference fueled attacks on women who refused to conform to their narrowly defined roles as mothers. Writers such as Madame de Staël and Madame de Genlis responded to this hostility by asserting the right to cultural self-representation through literature. Fiction allowed them to imagine other roles for themselves as well as to present a public image that they determined rather than the ones prescribed by law and science. Hesse identifies these "anti-mimetic representational strategies" (p. 145), where language invents rather than describes, as a distinguishing feature of French women's writing as exemplified by the fictional works of Simone de Beauvoir. Like her predecessors, De Beauvoir continued the project of becoming modern by denaturalizing the concept of a woman in order to free women to create the terms of their existence in fiction and society.

Throughout her concise but lucid book, Hesse insists that fiction does not elude reality but enables women to envision alternatives that may or may not be enacted. The book rehabilitates Kant's notion of moral autonomy, but not its corollary of women as dependents, to reveal the subversive, if not emancipatory, power of writing. As with most men in the late eighteenth century, women were excluded from political participation and few of the authors Hesse studies advocated these rights. Yet, they unanimously demanded moral autonomy despite their diverse social, political, and national backgrounds. Writing allowed them to pursue this claim by thwarting their opponents in law, science, and philosophy with narratives designed to display their own intellectual acumen and moral integrity.

While the book makes a persuasive case and offers incisive readings, some of the claims do not square with the evidence. For example, how can Hesse reconcile her account of Kéralio's career in chapter Two with her argument that the commercialization of culture opened opportunities for women? Kéralio was a respected author before 1789 who was then attacked as a *vieille fille/amazone* during the Revolution. She switched from writing history to fiction due to social pressure and rigid roles of gender and genre after the revolution. This last point opens up the more problematic issue of Hesse's application of capitalism to the period in question. While the early years of the French Revolution may be described as economically liberal, the ensuing regimes did not pursue this policy consistently. Hesse needs a more precise definition of capitalism to justify its explanatory weight in facilitating female authorship in the post-revolutionary world.

On a final note, Hesse's assertion that "the capacity to create became a sign of the capacity to judge, and hence to govern" (p. 156) is more elegant than persuasive. It is clear that writing gave women confidence and recognition as well as the chance to participate in public discussions. Nevertheless, the link between "creating" and governing" requires evidence of how these authors and their arguments influenced struggles for suffrage and political rights in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Perhaps,

Hesse or someone else will pick up the story where she has left off, since her book has set an agenda for research, identifying questions for the future while putting old ones to rest.

## NOTES

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

[2] Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, pp. 3-5.

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