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**Mary Louise Roberts**, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France*. Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2002. xi + 353 pp. Notes, illustrations, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-72124-8.

Review by Siân Reynolds, University of Stirling, Scotland.

Visitors to the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand in Paris will have seen the romantic portrait of the founder of this library of women's history. Alongside other high-profile individuals whose lives challenged convention in about 1900--Séverine, Gyp, Sarah Bernhardt--Marguerite Durand emerges as a central figure in Mary Louise Roberts' impressive study of the French "New Woman."

The same author's first book, *Civilization Without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Post-War France 1917-1927*, has deservedly become a key work in French cultural history. The gap of eight years since its publication has marked a move by Roberts into an earlier period, here explored with immense thoroughness. Like the earlier volume, Roberts' new study is exceedingly well documented and scrupulously footnoted. It is based on wide reading within the cultural production of fin-de-siècle France relating to the subject, such as novels, plays, newspapers, documents, as well as all the serious secondary literature. One may not always agree with all Roberts' interpretations, but it is clear that they are arrived at only after careful reflection based on textual evidence. Let me also say straight away that her book is packed with fascinating material (my copy is full of post-its and underlinings) and written with bravura, even if the text often makes for some dense reading.

Roberts' point of departure is once more male anxiety about women getting out of line. In inter-war France, the focus was on "the modern woman" and her unwillingness to have children; in 1900 the threat came from "the New Woman," a phenomenon originating outside France, and indeed viewed by many French people as something of a foreign body. Roberts chooses to concentrate particularly on journalism and the stage, which were rapidly developing as cultural spaces at the turn of the century, in order to watch her *femmes nouvelles* going through their paces. Her seven chapters, whose titles are not always self-explanatory, cover respectively: the cultural construction by French men of the New Woman; Marguerite Durand's particular kind of "blond-haired feminism" (this is a slightly altered version of Roberts' chapter in Jo Burr Margadant's collection, *The New Biography*, [2000]); the subversive potential of Durand's all-women newspaper *La Fronde* (1897-1903); a comparison between New Woman and Jew as targets for prejudice; the contrasted self-construction of pro-Dreyfus journalist Séverine and anti-Dreyfus novelist Gyp; the combined celebration and contumely addressed by the press to Sarah Bernhardt, then at the height of her fame; and a final brief consideration of the *cabotin(e)* or "play-actor" on the stage of fin-de-siècle commodity culture, drawing notably on the plot of Maupassant's *Bel-Ami*.

Such a summary of the areas surveyed does little justice to the subtlety of the cumulative argument, outlined in chapter one. Roberts sets out to think through a new reading of feminism, arguing most centrally that the contradictory content of *La Fronde* and the strategies of its founder operated in particularly subversive ways, which she associates with role-playing and "acting up." Just as Marguerite Durand claimed that 'feminism owes a great deal to my blond hair', the "bewildering" illegibility of *La Fronde* as neither single-mindedly feminist nor frivolously feminine, but a bit of both, is read retrospectively as disruptive. Writers for the paper included almost every Parisian woman of talent at one time or another, hence the great variety of tone and approach. Roberts turns this near-cacophony, which has sometimes puzzled historians, into a triumph of the subversion of gender roles. The *frondeuses* might mimic or parody male journalism (by adventurous use of reportage, for example) then go on to host late-night parties at their elegant, flower-decked offices, while wearing low-cut dresses. Durand herself would accept gallantly-offered masculine help in the Senate press-box, thus distracting attention from the pioneer nature of her presence there. In other words, they sought to thwart expectations of what "feminism" or "new womanhood" was about. Roberts supports her case by reference to a variety of examples—one being the striking metaphor of the four calendars (revolutionary, Russian, protestant and Jewish) printed on the paper's masthead—a gift to republicans, relativists and disrupters alike.

Roberts concludes that the emergence of a mass readership for newspapers—even if *La Fronde's* circulation reached only a brief peak of 50,000—and a larger audience for the theatre (or at any rate for such performers as Sarah Bernhardt) meant that the women in her study were "much more influential than we would at first suppose" (p. 247). They made it possible for an alternative view of "being female" to emerge in France, in ways that might never have happened if the male-imagined theatrical caricatures of the New Woman described in chapter one had prevailed. Pointing out that French playwrights of the 1890s had presented pale and unfocussed versions of Ibsen's Nora, seeking "herself" but usually drifting into the arms of adultery, Roberts draws on Maurice Donnay's (to me unknown) play of 1913, *Les Éclairieuses*, to indicate that the terms of the debate had changed: its characters display relaxed views of extra-marital sex, for example, and make much of their chosen professions. In the interval "something" had happened: to quote the jacket, "thanks to the adventures of women like these, conventional domestic femininity was exposed as a choice, not a destiny". The *éclairieuse*, Roberts suggests, was "the newer New Woman," keeping "work and love in healthy balance" (p. 42). Interwoven into this central narrative are many suggestive ideas and parallels: chapter four, for instance, compares New Woman and Wandering Jew as unsettling outsiders and incidentally provides fascinating insights into *La Fronde's* coverage of the second Dreyfus court-martial at Rennes in 1899 (though it appears that Roberts is not quite as sure-footed in her comments on the Dreyfus case as elsewhere, to judge by her analysis of the cartoons she reproduces).

I enjoyed this book greatly, but I do have some reservations, prompted partly by the decision to include Sarah Bernhardt as a banner-carrier, and partly by a slight unease at the distance Roberts seeks to put between her focus and anything "sociological" (p. 8), for which I tend to read "socio-historical." To take Bernhardt first, the theatrical metaphor in a broad sense is tempting and often convincing. It must have seemed irresistible to include *la divine Sarah* in the line-up: there are many cross-references linking her to the *Fronde* group and the Dreyfus Affair. Yet the Bernhardt chapter, full of extraordinary material though it is, seems to me not to sit very easily with the overall argument. Not only was Sarah Bernhardt of a different generation—born in 1845, she was already fifty before the term "New Woman" was coined—but she was also a *monstre sacré* in a specifically theatrical mould mature long before 1900, rather than a representative of recent "cultural change" in France. Noteworthy, her photograph on the jacket dates from circa 1864, the year of Marguerite Durand's birth.

At one point, for example, Roberts claims that "(w)hen George Sand dressed like a man, it sparked debate in select circles but created no real, national impression. When Bernhardt cross-dressed in Hamlet, thousands of people saw her on stage and millions more read about it in the paper" (p. 247). To be a bit pedantic, one might say that George Sand (1804-1876), an often misunderstood but very

feminine and indeed maternal character, could herself be seen as a pioneer New Woman, whose lifestyle, cross-dressing and all, was notorious and much discussed throughout Europe, not just in select circles. However, the fair point being made here is one about the much wider audience at the turn of the century for "gender subversion." It is true that by 1900, there were women who felt free to imitate Bernhardt (p. 168), whereas very few had imitated George Sand, but nevertheless, as Roberts herself recognizes, the theatre had long been seen as a "harmless setting" (p. 177) for inversion of values. And Bernhardt was after all an actress—one of the most famous, talented and, yes, outrageous of all time, yet in some ways a licensed exception to the rules, as actors have always tended to be.

This is contentious. George Sand (1804-1876) was a remarkable pioneer, who wrote for a broad market and became notorious throughout Europe for her lifestyle—cross-dressing and all. Bernhardt was an actress—one of the most famous, talented and, yes, outrageous of all time—but as such she fitted into a long tradition of being a licensed exception to the usual rules.

What I think I am trying to say is that while the women in the study are unquestionably fascinating individuals, they are perhaps made to carry an excessive explanatory burden by the sub-title of the book. I think my problem is probably one of terminology. Can we really refer to the "New Woman" in fin-de siècle France at all? The expression, coined in 1894 in an Anglo-American context, usually referred to a generation of young women, not necessarily an exclusive elite, who had received an improved education in all-girl schools. Science, art, music, organized sports, travel, white-collar and professional jobs, everyday mobility—especially by bicycle—were all part of their expanding horizons. After all, journalism and the stage, the two activities singled out here, were fields where women had already been present for some time. The twin streams of Bohemian, cigarette-smoking art students and fresh-faced cyclists (i.e. the "sociological phenomenon" of the New Woman) prefigured the college-educated backpackers of later decades in their openness to the world, rather than to Parisian society.

Roberts is of course well aware of all this and rightly refers to such a context at the start of her book. Thereafter, though, she concentrates on her chosen individuals and their unconventional lives, rather than exploring what seems to me the quite interesting point that the "Anglo-American" form of new womanhood just did not catch on in France. To some extent, (and I realize that Roberts might reply that I'm falling into the same trap as the uptight feminists of the day) the efforts of a Marguerite Durand could be read as an admission of defeat. These Parisian celebrities—as all those in the book were, or became, in their "*toilette de soirée décolletée*" (p. 68)—had little in common with the ambitious secretaries who could identify vaguely with Vivie in Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession*, nor presumably did they resemble the serious adolescent girls in the French provinces who were to become the nurses and drivers of World War I.

One could almost argue that the 1890s term "New Woman" was not exactly applicable in France, or at any rate not to these women. Perhaps we ought to find some other term. They were advanced, outrageous, argumentative, sexy and flirtatious, and well-connected to powerful males and the media who were fascinated by them (why does the name Germaine Greer keep coming to mind as I write this?). Disruptive they undoubtedly were, and they made their mark. Their stories make for lively reading, and they certainly contributed as well to the kind of feminism to be found in France in later years, though they are not the whole story. And I wholeheartedly agree that the cultural impact of *La Fronde* went well beyond its circulation and short existence, though I am not sure that the neat formula of the *éclairceuse* quite does the trick (oddly enough the term later came to mean "girl guide").

The cultural history of fin-de-siècle France, as practised by French scholars, has recently been enriched by some admirable socio-historical studies, mostly focussing on Paris, by Christophe Charle, and Christophe Prochasson among others. However, those authors have had strikingly little to say about gender or the "battle of the sexes" as it was once called. Mary-Louise Roberts has now provided a book, also largely Parisian in focus, which rectifies the balance in a lively and provocative way. It will be

valued by all students of the period for offering a sophisticated and thoroughly gendered analysis of cultural change as viewed through the lives of some remarkable women. I would now welcome further developments drawing on both these approaches: some historical exploration of the wider 1900 generation of French women, perhaps in a trans-national context, in order to see what there was about them that was truly "new."

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