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Aurora Wolfgang, *Gender and Voice in the French Novel, 1730-1782*. Burlington, Vt. and Hants, England: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2004. 209 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography and index. \$79.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-7546-3702-6.

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In *Gender and Voice in the French Novel, 1730-1782*, Aurora Wolfgang challenges the assertions made recently by Robert Darnton and Carla Hesse that feminist scholarship has overestimated women's contribution to Enlightenment culture. Building on the work of feminist scholars, especially Dena Goodman's analysis of the importance of the *salonnière* to Enlightenment culture, Wolfgang endeavors to demonstrate the centrality of the "female voice" (p. 1) to the rise of the novel in France. She is quick to point out, however, that this feminine voice must be understood as a rhetorical construct, available to male and female authors alike; she thus insists on the conventionality or literariness of so-called women's writing. Following in Joan DeJean's footsteps, she traces the advent of this voice to seventeenth-century aristocratic women writers who championed "natural eloquence" (p. 12) over classical learning. Wolfgang charts the ascent of first-person narrative fiction and links it specifically to the increased popularity of female-centered novels often written by women. She thus inserts women's cultural production squarely within the public world of the book trade in France and thereby stakes a powerful claim for women's significance as producers of Enlightenment culture.

Ultimately at stake, Wolfgang reasons, is the contentious issue of how to appreciate women's contribution to Enlightenment culture. She writes: "Did women indeed have a significant role in the cultural life of the Old Regime? Or were they simply marginal players whose roles have been overblown by feminist scholars? How do scholars measure the importance of women writers' contributions, and are those contributions momentous enough for us to re-imagine the master narratives that have excluded them?" (p.12). These are the questions that the present work seeks to address.

Wolfgang's approach to her material is two-pronged: she offers careful stylistic analyses to describe various "feminine" writing strategies, and she makes good use of reception history to bolster her larger claims about women's contribution to Enlightenment culture. Through a stylistic examination of four well-known, eighteenth-century novels, Wolfgang charts the rise and later eclipse of the feminine-centered novel. She employs Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the "literary field" to analyze Pierre Carlet de Chamblain de Marivaux's *La Vie de Marianne* (1731-1741), Françoise de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une péruvienne* (1747), Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni's *Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd* (1757), and Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782). Each novel offers a historically specific instance of the "female voice"—rococo, philosophical, sentimental, and libertine—while at the same time deploying a style whose characteristics were imagined to be "feminine"; that is, "a so-called 'natural' and transparent writing style, a refined analysis of love, and an examination of social manners" (p. 2). By concentrating on literature as a social practice, Wolfgang marshals diverse types of evidence to demonstrate how feminine-centric novels came to find great popularity and cultural legitimacy during the eighteenth century. She examines the cultural institutions, namely the salons, which supported and nurtured the "feminine voice;" she rehearses the debates that pitted the so-called Ancients against the Moderns; and she makes excellent use of history-of-the-book scholarship. Despite the eventual decline of the female-centered novel during the early years of the nineteenth century, Wolfgang concludes that this type of prose fiction occupied an important, but still largely overlooked, place within the cultural practices that shaped the French Enlightenment.

Before launching into her analysis of the four novels, Wolfgang contests the empirical data used by Carla Hesse to support the claim that women only contributed marginally to the cultural life of the ancien régime. In *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern*, Hesse uses data culled from various bibliographies to argue that women's writing accounted for approximately two percent of all published material in the decades preceding the French Revolution. Hesse argues that the Revolution ushered in a new era for women writers, as women began publishing in unprecedented numbers. Wolfgang disputes both Hesse's numbers and her conclusion. Using S. Paul Jones' *A List of French Prose Fiction from 1700-1750*, she demonstrates that, during this fifty year period, women's fiction accounted for on average 13 percent of works cited.[2] Then using the same source as Hesse, *Bibliographie du genre Romanesque, 1751-1800*, she calculates that women's fiction represented 15.5 percent of the total production of prose fiction during the second half of the century.[3] Wolfgang contends, moreover, that the explosion of women into print documented by Hesse during the Revolution confuses political ephemera or printed documents with publications such as novels, plays or poetry. In sum, Hesse's numbers are, according to Wolfgang, inflated and "misrepresent women's true participation in the life of letters before and after the Revolution" (p. 11). These are indeed fighting words.

In the second chapter of the book, Wolfgang offers a useful overview of the cultural institutions from which a distinctly "feminine" literary style would emerge. According to Wolfgang, seventeenth-century salons gave rise to an idealized form of communication (which she qualifies as feminine) that valued "natural" and "spontaneous" expressiveness, cooperation, wit and pleasurable exchange. By contrast, the Church, universities and academies in France remained male-centered bastions of tradition and classical learning. Wolfgang thus revisits the seventeenth-century debates about language and literature which pitted the pro-Latin, academic-minded classicists against the pro-French, salon-inspired *mondains*. In the end, the *mondain* camp would carry the day as French would eventually become the language of literary and intellectual life in France. In addition, the minor genre of the novel, first practiced by aristocratic women writers, would supplant tragedy and the epic in the literary marketplace. For her part, Wolfgang wants to insist upon the pre-eminent role played by the *salonnière* and women writers in bringing about this cultural shift. Extremely popular writers such as Madeleine de Scudéry and Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette promoted an analysis of love and desire--what later generations would call subjectivity--in their writings while perfecting a new language of "naturalness" and "spontaneity" inspired by salon conversation. During the eighteenth-century, this emergent "feminine" language opened up new avenues of expression for both male and female writers alike. The novelistic exploration of intersubjectivity, the emphasis on sensibility, and belief in the importance of communication all hark back to the sociability forged in the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century salon.

In chapter three, Wolfgang offers a detailed analysis of the vicissitudes of the feminine voice in Marivaux's *La Vie de Marianne*. While several scholars have already explored the subversive role of femininity in these pseudo-memoirs, Wolfgang contends that no one has fully appreciated "the polemical nature of the heroine's style" (p. 67). The war between the Ancients and Moderns rages on in the pages of this work. Through his protagonist, Marivaux champions an oral, spontaneous, seemingly artless form of writing that recalls the seventeenth-century salons as well as the meandering novels of Scudéry and is resolutely feminine. Not only does Marivaux adopt and refine the language of the *précieuses* but he draws a startling analogy between Marianne the coquette and Marivaux the author. To be effective, the coquette and the writer must make their creation seem effortless; their labors must be hidden so that their art appears unrehearsed, natural and guileless. Marivaux thus mobilizes the "feminine voice" to experiment with "a more freewheeling, playful, and apparently spontaneous writing as an alternative to established forms of literary expression" (p. 89). With this literary transvestism, Marivaux challenged classical aesthetic principles and angered traditionalist critics who felt such work threatened the very fabric of the nation. For Wolfgang, *La Vie de Marianne* clearly demonstrates the persistence of the seventeenth-century "feminine voice" into the mid-eighteenth century. It also displays a militantly pro-woman stand while foreshadowing the wildly popular feminine-centric novels by such writers as

Françoise de Graffigny, Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni, and Rousseau. Marivaux also contributes to the codification of stereotypical views on femininity that will be taken up with a vengeance in the second half of the century.

In chapter four, Wolfgang explores the interplay between the sentimental novel and philosophical tale in Graffigny's *Lettres d'une péruvienne*. For three hundred years, Wolfgang notes, scholars have debated whether the novel fits into one tradition or the other. Instead of choosing sides, Wolfgang argues that both traditions are equally important to Graffigny's project and that they are, moreover, linked by her extensive use of the scholarly apparatus of footnotes. The larger question that this chapter offers a partial response to is whether women could be *philosophes*. Wolfgang contends that Graffigny's purpose in penning her novel was to gain admittance to the wider world of *les gens de lettres*. According to Wolfgang, the two most valued rooms in Zilia's dream house, the French library (masculine reason) and the Temple decorated with images of Peruvian virgins (female rectitude), are "architectural metaphors" of the female writer's and would-be *philosophe's* predicament (p. 124). Although Graffigny attempts to integrate the two genres—the text of sensibility and the philosophical tale—a gap nevertheless emerges which her erudite footnotes seek to bridge but cannot. In the end, the footnotes serve as much to hold the two genres apart as to bring them together. For Wolfgang, the novel mirrors the achievements and limitations of Graffigny's own career as an eighteenth-century woman intellectual. She was enormously successful and, despite much evidence to the contrary, persisted in believing that meaningful communication between the sexes was possible.

In chapter five, Wolfgang tackles the vexed question of the "myth of distinctively feminine style" that became increasingly codified as the eighteenth century progressed (p. 130). She uses Riccoboni's *Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd* to exemplify the double-edged challenge that a woman writer faced when employing this style. In her analysis of Riccoboni's novel, Wolfgang explores the paradox of "feminine style" which purports to be "true," "natural," "spontaneous" and, above all, a sincere representation of the heroine's feelings (p. 132). Yet at the same time, the novel's protagonist seems to take considerable pleasure in (and thereby foregrounds) the act of self-writing. As we saw in Marivaux, Riccoboni both stages authenticity—the "authentic" female voice—and underscores the artfulness of the heroine's letter-writing labors. In this respect, Riccoboni's novel departs from the typical love and abandonment plot, found notably in *Lettres portugaises*: instead of dying or entering a convent, the heroine "writes back" or makes public, through the publication of their letters, Alfred's bad behavior. The popularity of Riccoboni's novel ensured that her novels would be remembered by posterity. However, her success also came at a cost, what Wolfgang refers to as the "biographicalist" reading of her text. In other words, it has always been assumed that *Mistress Fanni* was a thinly disguised autobiographical text. This presumption, which haunts women's writing in general, deprives female-authored texts of the same level of creativity or genius accorded to men. Women's creative efforts thus become entrapped within their biological sex.

In the final chapter, Wolfgang analyzes how Choderlos de Laclos explodes the myth of the "authentic" and "natural" female voice by brutally unveiling the artfulness which adheres to the rhetoric of transparent sincerity. To this end, Wolfgang offers a stylistic exploration of the novel's three central female figures: Cécile, the Présidente de Tourvel, and the Marquise de Merteuil. The virginal, convent-educated Cécile functions as a kind of *tabula rasa* upon whom others write—in the case of Valmont quite literally. Her prose reflects her uncultivated, naïve and indeed amoral character. By contrast, the Présidente de Tourvel is the sentimental heroine par excellence; she personifies virtue and its inevitable undoing. Her doomed state is reflected in her usage of "if causes and conditional tenses" which simultaneously invoke and repress (fateful) desire (p. 171). While the Présidente's unfortunate demise served "to reassure the audience of the powerlessness of women to control their own fate," La Marquise de Merteuil proved exceedingly unsettling to those very same readers (p. 172). The Marquise's style

differs radically from either Cécile's or the Présidente's: hers is "direct, forceful, and rational" (p. 173). She uses logic and an iron will to execute her various schemes with unnerving aplomb. Unlike the other female characters, she is solely motivated by self-interest and lays claim to a radical sense of autonomy. Yet because the Marquise writes from her "head" and not her "heart" (as the good but doomed heroine should), she will be cruelly punished by social ostracism and disfigurement. Wolfgang concludes by arguing that Laclos' novel mirrors social anxiety: "what if women's heartfelt letters were actually heartless constructions of women writers who mastered the ability to disguise their real motives behind invented transparency?" (p. 179). The novel answers the question by turning this woman author into a monster.

Wolfgang's most significant contribution lies in her attempt to demonstrate that women were not only passive interlocutors (readers, hostesses, and correspondents) of Enlightenment culture but also active participants in the creation of it. Of course, Dena Goodman makes precisely this point in *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment*.^[4] What Wolfgang adds to Goodman's thesis, however, is a consideration of the role of women authors in the rise of the novel. Building on and synthesizing the work of other feminist scholars, Wolfgang is able to argue convincingly that women's intellectual labor in both the salon and literary marketplace contributed significantly to the development of the first-person prose narrative which became widely popular throughout the course of the eighteenth century.^[5] Wolfgang offers a model that other researchers interested in this debate would do well to follow. Her decision to position women writers within the context of larger intellectual debates (or the "literary field" as Bourdieu called it), the juxtaposition of male and female writers, and her careful stylistic analyses provide new and interesting insights into Enlightenment cultural practices. Her argument would, however, have been stronger if she had included in her analyses some of the women authors mentioned early in her book such as Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, Marie-Catherine Aulnoy, Claudine Alexandrine Guérin de Tencin, Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot Gallon, dame de Villeneuve, Madeleine Poisson de Gomez, Louise Florence Pétronille Tardieu d'Esclavelles, marquise d'Épinay, and Stéphanie Félicité, comtesse de Genlis. While Wolfgang does a fine job in contributing to the scholarship on Graffigny and Riccoboni, the choice to concentrate on these two well-known and thoroughly-studied authors could, inadvertently, reinforce the reader's sense that there were in fact few women novelists of any significance during the eighteenth century. Wolfgang's data contradicts this assumption, but the analytical focus of her book does less to dispel Hesse's and Darnton's claims. To be fair, no one book could possibly set aside two hundred years of literary history that has excluded women's intellectual labor from Enlightenment historiography. Wolfgang's book points in an important direction, but we still need to know more about those women novelists who produced somewhere between 13 and 15 percent of eighteenth-century French narrative fiction. Surely their contribution to Enlightenment culture was as significant as your average grub-street scribe.

NOTES

[1] Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[2] S. Paul Jones, *A List of French Prose Fiction from 1700 to 1750* (New York: Wilson, 1939).

[3] Angus Martin, Vivienne Mylne, and Richard Frautschi, *Bibliographie du genre romanesque français 1751-1800* (London: Mensell, 1977).

[4] Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).

[5] Particularly important to Wolfgang are the works of Joan DeJean, *Ancients Against Moderns: Cultural Wars and the Making of the Fin de Siècle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and *Tender Geographies: Women and the Origin of the Novel in France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Nancy K. Miller, *The Heroine's Text: Readings in the French and English Novel 1722-1782* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); and Susan Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992).

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