

H-France Review Vol. 8 (June 2008), No. 92

Rachel Mesch, *The Hysteric's Revenge: French Women Writers at the Fin de Siècle*. Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006. xii + 268 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$69.95 U.S. (cl) ISBN 978-0-8265-1530-8; \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8265-1531-5

Review by Jean Elisabeth Pedersen, Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester.

Rachel Mesch's *Hysteric's Revenge* explores the question of "how fin-de-siècle French women writers confronted a culture very much threatened by their intellectual and creative potential" (1). Building on the prior work of French literary scholars, [1] historians of reading, [2] and historians of gender [3] to consider the significance of a dozen different controversial novels by a mix of canonical and non-canonical writers, Mesch offers new readings of these select texts to help demonstrate "the relationship of fin-de-siècle French women writers to both the male-authorized literary trends they wrote against and the feminist criticism they pointed toward" (p. 24). Reacting to the ways in which late nineteenth-century male medical experts, social novelists, literary critics, and cultural commentators all tended to label independent women as hysterics, Mesch presents the novels and memoirs of Colette, Gyp, Rachilde, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Anna de Noailles, Liane de Pougy, Odette Dulac, Marcelle Tinayre, and Renée Vivien as examples of what she calls "the hysteric's revenge," a series of important literary works that successfully "refuse fin-de-siècle scientific and literary discourses" in order to "present the relationship between the female mind and body as a productive and edifying aspect of female identity, rather than a dangerous and potentially debilitating one" (p. 21).

The book's opening chapter sets the stage by analyzing Emile Zola's complex portrayal of prostitution in the naturalist novel *Nana* as "a fascinating example of the nineteenth-century tension between the male mind and the female body," a place where "the strength of Zola's literary science is posed against the mystery of the female subject" (p. 26). The remaining four chapters focus on the variety of ways in which women resisted the domination of the masculine scientific and literary gaze by writing their own versions of their own stories. Chapter two, for example, sets Zola's treatment of a fictional courtesan, *Nana*, against the life and literary work of a real courtesan, the best-selling novelist Liane de Pougy, author of the autobiographical *Idylle saphrique* (1901). Chapter three compares Zola's naturalist novels *La faute de l'abbé Mouret* (1875) and *La bête humaine* (1890) to a pair of women's naturalist novels, Marcelle Tinayre's *La maison du péché* (1902) and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus' *Marie, fille-mère* (1908). Chapter four moves from the study of naturalist novels to the study of decadent novels by focusing on Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) and *La jongleuse* (1900). Chapter five, finally, establishes the importance of women's "sentimental sexological novels" (p. 157) as an alternative to men's sexological case studies by analyzing Anna de Noailles' *Le visage émerveillé* (1904), Gyp's *Autour du mariage* (1883), Colette's *L'ingénue libertine* (1909), and Odette Dulac's *Le droit au plaisir* (1908) as "novels in which women writers embrace the separation between pleasure and procreation as an opening into a bold examination of female sexuality" (p. 155), examples of "a tentative yet significant step toward the renunciation of patriarchal relationships" (p. 189), an important "means for women to claim control of their bodies by determining their own meanings in defiance of gender-biased medical doctrine" (p. 189).

Like such "new biographers" as Jo-Burr Margadant, Mary Louise Roberts, Whitney Walton, and Elinor Accampo, Mesch is particularly interested in exploring the ways in which women combated the prejudicial power of discriminatory stereotypes by creating their own alternate self-representations.[4] In chapter two, for example, she compares courtesan Liane de Pougy's *Idylle saphrique*, lesbian poet

Renée Vivien's *Une femme m'apparut* (1904), and music hall dancer Colette's *La vagabonde* (1910) as examples of "autobiographical novels" (p. 43) that "attempt to control their authors' images" (p. 42). At a time when canonical male novelists and poets such as Honoré de Balzac, Emile Zola, and Charles Baudelaire had already contributed to the creation of a powerful literary tradition that eventually stigmatized lesbian sexuality as a symbol of fin-de-siècle decadence, Mesch successfully shows how de Pougy, Vivien, and Colette not only valorized their own experiences of "Tout Lesbos" but also defended their authority as independent intellectual women by finding ways to portray the psychological dynamics of lesbian relationships in a sympathetic light. Ironically, however, Mesch somewhat obscures the potential of her own analysis here by framing it in some of the very same masculine categories that she argues these writers were attempting to resist. Mesch's title for the chapter is "memoirs of the *filles publiques*" (p. 41), her choice of epigraph is a quotation from novelist Albert Cim that associates "women of the pen" with "women of the club, [and] of the street" (p. 42), and her heading for the opening section on de Pougy identifies the author simply as "Zola's worst nightmare" (p. 44). While Mesch is certainly right to argue that "public female roles were associated with sexual promiscuity in fin de siècle discourse" (p. 42), her assertion that the "public imagination" of this period made "little distinction in social status ... among the performer (dancer or actress), the courtesan, and the woman writer" (p. 42) rather begs the question of whether individual readers actually did see de Pougy's, Vivien's, and Colette's particular life choices and literary works in such interchangeable terms. Given that part of Mesch's analytic project is to explore how women writers represented themselves, it would also be useful to know more about whether de Pougy, Vivien, and Colette actually accepted the prevailing association of prostitution, theatrical performance, and female literary production, or whether they saw the courtesan's bedroom, the cabaret stage, and the creative writer's study as separate worlds instead.

Although Mesch does offer brief biographies of all of the women whose works she discusses, she generally focuses almost all of her critical attention on the close reading of the nine authors' novels themselves. As I read her work, I constantly wanted to know more about these writing women's lives, their social and cultural influences, their literary and political intentions, and the range of ways in which reviewers and other readers received their work. When Mesch introduces the naturalist novels of Marcelle Tinayre and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus in chapter three, for example, she notes that Tinayre was "a self-described feminist who spoke out on women's rights" (p. 84) while Delarue-Mardrus "considered herself antifeminist and refused any connection to the women's rights movement" (p. 99). Despite her mention of this fundamental difference between the two authors' political positions, however, Mesch never addresses the question of how such opposing attitudes might have inflected the stories that Tinayre and Delarue-Mardrus told, or what it might mean that their respective novels *La maison du péché* and *Marie, fille-mère* are still apparently similar enough to pair together in genre terms as examples of "two women's adaptations of naturalist tropes" (p. 22). A footnote in the middle of the same chapter reveals that both authors figured among the group of twenty-two women who reacted to the misogyny of the all-male jury for the Prix Goncourt in 1903 by working together to form the all-female jury for the new Prix Fémina in 1904 (p. 99, 224n42). It would have been fascinating to know more about how these two particular writing women agreed or disagreed when they expressed their literary tastes and other opinions in that forum as well. Finally, while Mesch concludes that the "dissonance in the way women's books were received [by male critics and female readers] seems especially true for those who voiced their challenges through what were traditionally patriarchal literary discourses" (p. 118), this plausible claim would be much more convincing if Mesch had been able to include more specific examples of the ways in which male critics, female critics, male readers, and female readers responded to the particular novels she discusses both here and in her other chapters as well.

Some of the most intriguing areas of Mesch's work in this book come in the passages where she compares the particular ways in which her authors wrote about sex and sexuality with the broader range of ways in which male sexologists such as Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebbing, fin-de-siècle feminists such as Nelly Roussel and Madeleine Pelletier, and modern feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, and Monique Wittig have addressed the same topics (pp. 23-24,

155-156, 166-167, 187-188, 196). In chapter five, for example, Mesch argues that the “sentimental sexological novels” of Anna de Noailles, Gyp, Odette Dulac, and Colette not only “offered an alternative to the sexological case study and the popular medical hygiene text” (p. 156) but also “allowed women to address issues that were not being raised by contemporary feminism and that would not be considered in a feminist context until much later on” (p. 157). Mesch’s argument here is clearest in the case of Odette Dulac’s *Le droit au plaisir*, a novel whose very title claims sexual pleasure as a woman’s right. Dulac’s heroine Marcelle de Rouvray not only describes her wedding night as a painful disappointment, but also rejects the diagnosis of the doctor who tries to tell her that unsatisfied female sexual desire is simply a symptom of hysteria. Although Marcelle ultimately conforms to the codes of bourgeois sexual morality by rejecting the alluring possibility of an adulterous affair in favor of the faint hope of legitimate sexual satisfaction with her husband, she never stops developing the genuine criticism of society’s sexual double standard that forms the substance of the letters she continues to share with her childhood friend Claire Prelly. Mesch concludes by suggesting that Dulac’s creation of the fictional friendship between Marcelle and Claire demonstrates the possible existence of a real community of fin-de-siècle female readers and writers whose common interest in the topics of sex and sexuality mark the beginnings of what Mesch repeatedly characterizes as a “modern feminist sensibility” (pp. 22, 189), a way of looking at the world that focuses less on the search for women’s civil and political rights than on the disruption of gender norms by what Mesch describes elsewhere as “the questioning of sexual relationships, the subversion of heterosexual norms, and the embrace of sexual pleasure” (p. 22).

As a historian of feminism myself, I was most intrigued by Mesch’s suggestion that “the [fin-de-siècle] novel may have offered a freer space for [feminist] protest than feminist activism” (p. 24). Especially because Mesch herself acknowledges that most of the novelists she studies did not actually think of themselves as feminists at all (pp. 23-24, 173-175, 194-196), I would look forward to another book that could explore the complicated relationships between feminist activists and female novelists in fuller depth. [5] In the meantime, Mesch’s exploration of the plots, themes, key characters, and important images in this selection of nine writing women’s autobiographical, naturalist, decadent, and sentimental sexological novels serves both as an interesting extension of previous scholarly work on the fin-de-siècle discussion of gender, sex, and sexuality and as a useful complement to previous histories of the fight for women’s rights under the Third Republic.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); Patricia Ferlin, *Femmes d’encrier* (Etrépilly: Christian de Bartillat, 1995.); Alison Finch, *Women’s Writing in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Diana Holmes, *French Women’s Writing: 1848-1994* (Atlantic Highlands: Athlone Press, 1996); Jennifer Waelti-Walters, *Feminist Novelists of the Belle Epoque: Love as a Lifestyle* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

[2] See, especially, James Smith Allen, *In the Public Eye: A History of Reading in Modern France, 1800-1940* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991); Martyn Lyons, *Readers and Society in Nineteenth-Century France: Workers, Women, Peasants* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Anne-Marie Thiesse, *Le roman du quotidien: lecteurs et lectures populaires à la Belle Epoque* (Paris: Le Chemin Vert, 1984).

[3] See, for example, Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990); Jo-Burr Margadant, ed., *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000); Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin de Siècle France* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the*

Rights of Man (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[4] See Margadant, ed., *The New Biography*; Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*; Whitney Walton, *Eve's Proud Descendants: Four Women Writers and Republican Politics in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2000); Elinor Accampo, *Blessed Motherhood, Bitter Fruit: Nelly Roussel and the Politics of Female Pain in Third Republic France* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

[5] Since the publication of Mesch's work, a number of new essays on the continuities and contrasts among the varied positions of select feminist activists, New Women, and female novelists have already started to appear. See, for example, Diana Holmes and Carrie Tarr, eds. *A 'Belle Epoque'? Women in French Society and Culture, 1890-1914* New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007); Venita Datta, "Superwomen or Slaves? Women Writers, Male Critics, and the Reception of Nietzsche in Belle-Epoque France" *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 33 (Fall 2007): 421-427.

Jean Elisabeth Pedersen
Eastman School of Music
University of Rochester
jpetersen@esm.rochester.edu

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the [Editor-in-Chief of H-France](#). ISSN 1553-9172