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Colette Cosnier, *Les Dames de Femina. Un féminisme mystifié*. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009. Viii + 308pp. Illustrations, bibliography, contents. 20 Euros. ISBN 978-2-7535-0812-5.

Review by Lenard Berlanstein, University of Virginia.

The historian of feminism during the Belle Epoque has an intricate situation to explicate. Progress on women's rights was a matter of that proverbial glass being half empty or half full. There is now wide agreement among scholars that the old order was becoming more fragile. Mary Louise Roberts has characterized the change in terms of domesticity being understood as a choice rather than fixed destiny. [1] However, the great majority of women were choosing domesticity, more or less as it had long been. Thus, the break with the past was not, alas, a clear-cut *breakthrough*. New models and directions were "in the air" and "provoking thought," which is not to say in the least that they succeeded in subverting masculine hegemony. Colette Cosnier's thoughtful and well-researched book on *Femina*, a popular women's fashion magazine that appeared bi-weekly in 1901 and sold remarkably well down to the Great War, provides an important reflection on the difficulties of documenting "progress" for women. The content of *Femina* was odd in that its pages commingled abundant coverage of women who were breaking the codes of their gender with fashion and high society reporting. *Femina* is worthy of the careful examination that Cosnier accords it, first, because of the inherent complexity of its content; and secondly, because it was an important site for establishing the boundaries between femininity and feminism in Belle Époque France.

Cosnier, a professor of French and comparative literature at the University of Rennes, denies the argument, advanced principally by myself, that *Femina* was a progressive publication, the commercial success of which indicated a certain mainstreaming of feminism in the Belle Epoque. [2] Her reading exposes to wilting criticism the magazine's own claim that it was helping women understand the wider roles and accomplishments to which they might legitimately aspire outside the home. Cosnier shows how, again and again, articles took back as much as they first proffered in terms of advancement. In Cosnier's opinion, *Femina* always accorded preference to conventional models of femininity—particularly "La Parisienne"—while merely flirting with unconventional models. She shows that a program for "modernizing" female expectations, which came up often in the pages of the magazine, was so balanced with reassurances that feminine charm would prevail that the push for change was superficial. In the end, Cosnier proposes that gender orthodoxy was the primary ascription and modernity was just the hook used to tease readers. She concludes that far from being an instrument for teaching women to re-imagine themselves as beings worthy of more than a domestic destiny, as I have claimed, *Femina* encouraged conformity and belittled feminist ideas.

Cosnier's reading is close and usually unfailing, but she does have a blind spot, in my opinion, regarding *Femina*'s advocacy of progressive change for women. An article in one of the earliest issues proposed that "the young woman today is no longer, and perhaps should no longer be, what she once was. Life is harsher for men. He needs a companion who is stronger, with wider intellectual horizons, and with more robust health. Women in America, Britain, and Germany are more accomplished than those in

France. Let us have the courage to say this.” [3]. *Femina* denounced “feminism” for distorting femininity yet praised what I have called “modern femininity;” that is, approval for women to expand their horizons because the “eternal feminine” as understood at the time was outmoded. Now, Cosnier dismisses the appeal to modernization of women as marginal to the content and intentions of the magazine. Although she does not systematically explain why the call for reform was present at all, her understanding seems to be that it was a reluctant concession to the times. Feminism and change were in the air, so a minimal response was required on the part of any women’s publication that wanted to stay timely.

While I agree with the author’s conclusion that *Femina* was more a reflection of change than its agent, I hold that the ideology of “modern femininity” was much more central to the publication than she accepts. The magazine drew on a system of representations that has greater interest than Cosnier admits. More often than not, the quest to promote modern femininity was the basis for selecting stories to cover. The pages of the magazine were filled with women engaged in activities that were unorthodox at the time—competing, winning awards, and being conspicuously public. The publisher, Pierre Lafitte, a sporting enthusiast, even established an annual prize in 1910 for the female aviator who flew the most miles. [4] On the other hand, motherhood was almost ignored, as Cosnier admits (p. 49). Though the magazine perpetuated the view that “feminism” required women to renounce their womanliness, it claimed to be a champion of “the feminine movement” which amounted to a celebration of women’s accomplishments outside the home. Lafitte, a high society figure who is not remembered for his progressive political views, may have been flagrantly inconsistent in advocating in favor of modern femininity, but it is certain that he identified with the quest in the abstract. At the banquet celebrating the publisher’s admission to the Légion d’honneur, Lafitte had the female novelist Daniel Lesueur, known to the reading public as an advocate of enhanced “female energy,” speak on how much France would benefit from a modernization of women’s psychology. [5] Thus, *Femina* did have a running critique of the eternal feminine, though it might have become muddled by the persistence of gender essentialism. An article highlighting the actress Georgette Leblanc for her serious study of Plutarch, Pascal, Rousseau, and Nietzsche also quoted her as stating that “the wisdom of a woman is never as mature as that of a man.” [6] As much as *Femina* expressed a preference for French over foreign models of femininity, there was an undeniable current of anxiety that France was falling behind and needed to catch up, partly through asking women to be more modern.

Also a feature of the magazine’s system of representations was the abundant use of celebrity culture to illustrate women’s accomplishments. *Femina* was an innovator in encouraging its readers to identify with famous women, who until quite recently had experienced a priori condemnation for being public. [7] When an actress was finally admitted into the Légion d’honneur in 1904, no publication did more to celebrate the breakthrough in the recognition of talented women. [8]

Cosnier, however, places the emphasis on all the backsliding, which is a crucial point in terms of the volume of newsprint but does not define what was distinctive about the publication. Take, for example, her treatment of the memorial article on Clémence Royer, a free thinker and the translator of Darwin into French. After noting that Royer was a “feminist” (quotation marks in original), the columnist Marc d’Ourlac opined that “whatever opinion one could have about the work of this illustrious woman...her character and talent command respect. Not all women may like her doctrine, but all women should be proud of her.” [9] Cosnier interprets this statement as a model of conservative tact, which she defines as saying as little as possible about what might be controversial (p. 291). In my reading, the article is an endorsement of Royer as a woman who expanded the boundaries of femininity, just as “modern femininity” required. *Femina* often called upon its readers to respect sisters who broke the mold even if they did not see emulation as desirable.

Cosnier rightly insists on the failure of nerve, realism, and consistency in *Femina*’s coverage of gender bending females. One of the values of reading *Femina*, I would argue, is to come to grips with the forms

of articulating claims for women's rights in ways that did not look like feminism as it expresses itself today. For example, the magazine offered a number of positive reports on women enrolled in higher education. One that commented gratefully that "science has not completely driven out coquetry" at the École normale supérieure at Sevres was characteristic in tone. [10] The reporting reads today as offensively patronizing. Yet, it is important to recall that *Femina* published in an age that was moving toward new attitudes, but neither fast nor thoroughly. The nurturing and submissive nature of women had far more the status of an unshakable truth than of a questionable prejudice at the time. Furthermore, the man or woman who did not think that a woman's ability to please was her greatest attribute was still in a minority. Under these conditions, insisting on the conventional femininity of women who did achieve outside the home was not an expression of disrespect. According to Mary Louise Roberts, even Marguerite Durand, whom Cosnier sometimes holds up as the feminist model that the staff of *Femina* failed to attain, embraced this mode of claiming dignity for accomplished women and sought to make "female charm" a weapon in the struggle for women's rights. [11]

If "modern femininity" was in fact the ideology of *Femina*, how should we account for the backsliding and positive evocation of traditional female charm that Cosnier documents so thoroughly? Was it a concession to the readers? The opinions of *Femina*'s readers are not entirely an unknown because the magazine sponsored many surveys on revealing issues and received thousands of replies. Cosnier interprets the responses as indicating a readership that rarely transcended the conventional. [12] Another influence may have been the politics of advocating change in a society with a majority favoring the status quo. A common strategy was (and still is) to disguise what was new by appealing to conservative symbolism. (Witness Michelle Obama as America's "first mom.") Finally, we have to consider the outlook of the publisher and the writers responsible for the content of the magazine. Pierre Lafitte was obviously not committed to a far reaching theory of women's rights. He wanted change that allowed for the continuity of "femininity." His staff of writers, even the ones that we label "feminist" today, had limited hopes for real change. The novels that they penned when not writing for *Femina* dramatized the price that women would pay for nonconformity more than the promise of liberation. [13] Ultimately, the readers, the publisher, and the columnists imbibed a confusing mix of ideologies. Femininity had lost little of its prestige; yet, there were also the competing claims of modernity. Both Cosnier and I would attribute to *Femina* the status of a paradigmatic text of the time because it illustrates this dilemma well. Though the number was on the rise, not many French people knew enough about "feminism" to allow them to cut through the confusion and contradictions so as to ask the intricate questions that would liberate women from conventional gender prejudices.

*Femina*, heretofore not known or studied as much as deserved, has a great deal to teach about the possibilities for, and restraints upon, women's progress in Belle Epoque France. By exposing the persistent power of traditional claims about female identity and the hesitations about posing new standards of femininity, Cosnier's examination of the magazine is highly illuminating even as it skirts the "half empty/half full" conundrum.

## NOTES

[1] *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de Siècle France* (Chicago, 2002).

[2] Lenard R. Berlanstein, "Selling Modern Femininity: *Femina*, a Forgotten Feminist Publishing Success in Belle Epoque France," *French Historical Studies* 30 (Fall 2007): 623-649.

[3] *Femina*, April 1, 1901, 98-99.

[4] *Ibid.*, June 15, 1910, 342.

[5] *Ibid.*, Feb. 1, 1907, 55-56.

[6] *Ibid.*, March 1, 1901, 53.

[7] Lenard R. Berlanstein, "Historicizing and Gendering Celebrity Culture: Famous Women in Nineteenth-Century France," *Journal of Women's History* 16 (No. 4, 2004): 65-91.

[8] *Femina*, Sept. 1, 1905, 396; Jan. 15, 1906, 46.

[9] *Ibid.*, March 1, 1902, 73.

[10] *Ibid.*, March 15, 1901, 73.

[11] *Disruptive Acts*, 99.

[12] I argue for a readership that was actually more receptive to change in "Ready for Progress: Opinion Surveys on Women's Roles and Opportunities in Belle Epoque France," *French Politics, Culture, and Society* 27 (Spring 2009): 1-22.

[13] Jennifer R. Waelti-Walters, *Feminist Novelists of the Belle Epoque: Love as a Lifestyle* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1990).

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