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Jennifer Tamas, *Au NON des femmes: Libérer nos classiques du regard masculin*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2023. 336 pp. Appendix. €23.00 (pb). ISBN 9782021514292; €16.99 (eb) ISBN 9782021514308.

Review Essay by Hannah Frydman, University of Washington

In *Au NON des femmes*, Jennifer Tamas sets out to show a broad public—one that includes American students and French feminists, in addition to a broader French-speaking audience—that the Ancien Régime and its literature has something to say to us today, that it is not just a dusty archive of old white men and the origin of rape culture. Instead, she argues that it contains an important “archive du présent” (p. 26) that she works to reconstitute across a prologue, an introduction, seven chapters, and an epilogue that explore the presence in classic texts (primarily written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) of sexual awakening (and knowledge of male violence), consent, withholding, rape, *galanterie*, libertinage, refusal to compromise, and other issues related to women’s sexual agency and oppression, topics of critical importance for our present.

If the list of topics hasn’t already made it clear, Tamas reconstructs this archive for the present of #MeToo, a present that saw itself—much as the Women’s Liberation Movement before it, with its declaration of Year Zero of Women’s Lib—as the beginning of a fight against sexual violence. As such, Tamas’s book serves as a way of recuperating a past in which women have long been speaking out against “les violences sexuelles, les insultes misogynes, les repréailles à l’égard de femmes insoumises” (p. 30). If #MeToo saw the world finally (if, it now seems, only momentarily) listening to women, Tamas shows us the value of extending our ear to women saying “no” in a variety of ways that we are now well-positioned to hear but that centuries of (mis)interpretations have almost totally silenced.

The “male gaze” (p. 72) that Tamas has to pierce to recover this reservoir of women’s refusal has taken almost as many forms as women’s “nos,” infiltrating the work of centuries of rewriters and critics, ranging from the Brothers Grimm and Disney to academic scholarship. So Tamas shows that women were saying “no” in the classics, but she is also saying no to a broad swathe of her contemporaries regarding how they think about these texts. To give a few examples, the male gaze looks like Perrault and the Brothers Grimm colonizing the “savoir féminin” of oral folk tales (p. 72), such as the tale we now know as Little Red Riding Hood (it was Perrault who gave her this head covering (p. 75)), which, from the pen of these men, has come down to us as a warning tale of girlish innocence and sexual danger, but which, in women’s oral tradition, was a story of women’s agency, of becoming a woman, in which the young girl escapes from the wolf (p. 80). The male gaze also looks like the way that *La Belle et la Bête* has, in filmic representations from Cocteau to Disney, come to be seen as a story of Belle’s captivity and her eventual yielding to the beast, despite the fact that, in Madame de Villeneuve’s 1740 original, the story centers on the “consentement volontaire” of a Belle who is, in fact, free to leave (p. 188). Similarly, cinematic representations of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* turn rape into seduction, even

though, according to Tamas, Laclos clearly distinguished this “*vraie résistance*” from a libertine “*fausse résistance*” used to preserve women’s reputations (p. 223).

The male gaze also comes from literary critics. For example, Tamas calls into question the way that “l’intérêt des critiques littéraires masculins pour la *frigidité* de la princesse [de Clèves] éclipse le point de vue de la jeune femme” (p. 250). Tamas reminds us that “toute personne qui fait l’effort d’entrer dans le livre sait à quel point la jeune femme est dans un perpétuel combat contre elle-même pour tenter de maîtriser les émois qui ne cessent de l’assaillir” (p. 262). In other words, the Princesse de Clèves feels many desires and emotions, she simply says “no” to them. However, both male characters in the text and male scholars (and politicians, like Nicolas Sarkozy in his famous denigration of Mme de Lafayette’s novel) refuse to listen to a woman saying no. Frigidity is easier to stomach.

Critics’ (patriarchal) interpretations have compounding effects, even on the scholarship of those of us who hope to offer feminist readings within our work. As scholars, we develop shorthand for understanding our disciplines. As grad students, preparing for exams, it is much easier to grasp onto a reductive version of a text that can easily be mobilized to prove a point about literary history, criticism, or historiography. We do not read closely, we often don’t have the time, with the effect that the male gaze can become sedimented, fixed quietly in commonplace interpretations. Tamas shows us that the male gaze has left its imprint on our interpretive tools and the readings they have created and that we continue to build on.

Tamas wants to go back to the texts themselves, to help us break out of this sedimentation of what generations have told us the texts say. By turning to less famous texts by women and to women’s oral traditions overwritten by male written culture, as well as re-reading texts by men in which female characters say no or resist—texts we have been taught, across several centuries, not to truly read—and questioning the cliché (trafficked even by feminists like Beauvoir) that women before a certain time were incapable of being geniuses (pp. 23-24), Tamas creates a new, feminist vision of the canon of early modern French literature. This new canon, or, to use Tamas’s terms, our restored *matrimoine* (p. 14), is made up of “parcours de vie et d’histoires éblouissantes qui nous sont *nécessaires* pour comprendre notre monde et vivre ensemble” (pp. 261-262).

The “we” and “our” here and in the book’s title seem to refer primarily to the French public (and, perhaps secondarily, to American students of French literature) rather than the transatlantic academic one of which I am a part. “Notre monde et vivre ensemble” are the world created by the French educational system. Tamas makes it clear that, above all she aspires “à ce qu’un plus large public change sa réception des classiques et des figures littéraires” (p. 323), especially by changing the way that “une école républicaine inclusive,” which she sees as “une véritable arche de Noé,” would transmit knowledge about French culture that “puisse déconstruire nos préjugés et éveiller nos consciences” (pp. 311-312). Beyond simply inspiring academic re-readings of the classics, Tamas wants these new interpretations to shape France’s famously centralized education system and thereby the French population more broadly.

Thus, despite Tamas’s call that we disentangle ourselves from current interpretations that see the past through the male gaze or discount it as misogynist by re-connecting with the original, historical texts, this is not another case against presentism. In fact, nothing could be further from

the truth. Throughout the book, Tamas insists on the resonance between past and present, starting from the present. She writes, “en partant du présent pour remonter au passé, je propose de déconstruire les erreurs simplificatrices et la mémoire sélective qui sont aux sources de nos représentations actuelles” (p. 28), going against the grain of academic common sense. The choice to move from Helen of Troy to #MeToo and Madame de Merteuil to Hillary Clinton seems aimed at making the case for the present power of these texts, especially for non-academic readers, who are arguably the target readers of this book. For this historian, however, the presence of twentieth- and twenty-first century figures in the book did not, on their own, serve as a clear argument for re-reading “our” classics today. It was not clear to me, for example, how drawing upon Hillary Clinton’s supporters’ refrain, “*I’m with her!*” (p. 209), illuminates how Laclos makes us side with Madame de Merteuil and against the patriarchy or how the fact that nearly three-quarters of all rapes are still committed by someone known to the victim means that *Les Liaisons dangereuses* “n’a pas pris une ride et le message reste d’une triste actualité” (p. 213). While such juxtapositions may help readers see correspondences between past and present, see how classic texts do not simply uphold and promulgate patriarchal ideals, they also seem to flatten the complexity of both literature and the past.

Early in the book, Tamas reminds readers of the queerness of Ancien Régime society, of the way it “n’était en rien fixe dans ses pratiques sexuelles et, à bien des égards, elle était peut-être beaucoup plus fluctuante que la société d’aujourd’hui” (p. 29). This is an important reminder, but one that is not drawn out in the chapters that follow. The similarities between past and present, between Helen of Troy and Marilyn Monroe, as sex symbols and rape victims (chapter four), drowns out the differences between them, differences that could have powerful political potential. It is certainly useful to show a longer history of women’s refusal of sexual oppression, but I was continually left wondering how this longer history should change our understanding, how it might inject something new into feminist thought today, how seeing these refusals is in fact “necessary” for understanding contemporary culture, besides for the reminder that women have also said “no” (p. 262).

Tamas’s simultaneous desires to attend more honestly and closely to the texts of the past and to read them through the present leads to some interpretations that felt to me like political tightrope walks. Perhaps the most important case was that of the concept of *galanterie*. From the beginning, Tamas celebrates the successes of the #MeToo movement, but bemoans feminist interpretations and “détestation” of *galanterie* as the foundation of rape culture (p. 39). If the introduction to the book is titled “La galanterie française, une culture du viol?” the question is quickly answered and that answer is a resounding “no.” For Tamas, this is a misunderstanding of *galanterie*. According to her, *galanterie* was instead the result of a reaction against the (sexually) violent culture of the sixteenth century, of a co-creation by men and women who “rêvent de nouveaux rapports” (p. 55), much in the way that today’s “discours féministe ne cesse de s’interroger sur la possibilité de créer de nouvelles représentations amoureuses,” even if “les perceptions du plaisir, de la douleur ou de la réputation ont changé” (p. 55). Without aligning herself with *galanterie*’s feminist critics or with Catherine Deneuve and the ninety-nine others who signed the 2018 *tribune* in *Le Monde* against the supposed excesses of #MeToo and in defense of a *galanterie* that “n’est pas une agression machiste” (p. 58), Tamas wants us to see that, during the Ancien Régime, *la galanterie* “vise une conversation agréable entre les sexes” and to domesticate and thereby make place for “le refus féminin” (p. 60). The fact that *galanterie*’s ideal version was, in practice, frequently corrupted should not, she argues, lead us to

write it off, because doing so would be to ignore women's "contribution au jeu social et littéraire" (p. 58).

If we accept this history of *galanterie* (and I, as a modernist, have no reason not to), I still think the defense of even this ideal *galanterie* comes with certain dangers that are perhaps inherent in the kind of relationship between Ancien Régime and contemporary world that structures the book, namely, the obscuring of the historical changes that occur in between, especially in the nineteenth century, which is more or less absent in these pages. It does not go without saying that something co-created by women to protect themselves and give them some power several centuries ago could not have devolved into serving as the bedrock of rape culture today. Even if we want to disentangle *galanterie* from what we might think of as societally acceptable forms of rape—the sexual violence that the term rape culture draws our attention to—and to push back against feminist critiques of *galanterie* that see it as synonymous with sexism, it would seem to me that that would still require deeper analysis of the differences between seventeenth-century past and twenty-first century present. If *galanterie* was a step forward for women in the extremely violent past, this structure could now, centuries later, play a role in undergirding oppressive ideas about gender difference, gender norms, and compulsory heterosexuality. If, that is, *galanterie* was once "un féminisme" (p. 58), that does not mean that it remains one today. Defending *galanterie* in the past, Tamas's analysis risks obscuring gendered power. Sexual violence is not the only way women are oppressed and the stylization of relations between men and women, despite, for Tamas, representing "un patrimoine culturel d'une rare beauté" (p. 61), might nonetheless be something that requires critique today. At the very least, we might need to consider the repercussions of the fact that it is not the fluidity of the seventeenth century that has come down to us, but rather an idea of seduction (in its modern sense) as a game between men and women with distinct roles for each.

While this *dix-neuviémiste* would have liked to see more interrogation of how the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (beyond Marilyn Monroe) shaped our perception of the Ancien Régime's classics, as well as more of an engagement with a tradition of women's and gender history, which has done much over the past fifty years to critique the place of the male gaze in the writing of the past, Tamas succeeds in her hope that "nous regardions nos classiques autrement" (p. 318). This is a point that is of broad utility. I think we can all use a reminder to go back to our sources, to read from a minoritarian point of view, and to treat our discipline's guiding and oft-cited works with a critical eye, conscious of the way that patriarchal alignments and assumptions have worked their way in, even in the work of feminist thinkers.

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