

Margarete Zimmermann. *Salon der Autorinnen: Französische dames de lettres vom Mittelalter bis zum 17. Jahrhundert.*

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Margarete Zimmermann sets out to respond to a slightly revised version of Villon's question "où sont les dames d'antan?" ("where are the women authors of yesteryear?"), and to provide a German-speaking audience with a broad overview of French women writers from the Middle Ages to the beginning of the seventeenth century. In so doing she has written a work in the best tradition of feminist literary history. Her metaphor of the salon, although usually associated with the seventeenth century and writers such as Madeleine de Scudéry, calls up a locus in which women played multifaceted roles — as writers, critics, and patrons — and allows Zimmermann to explore these roles in the preceding centuries.

Some thirty women ranging from Baudonivia, a seventh-century nun, author of the *Vita Radegundis*, an early piece of hagiographic literature, to Marie de Gournay, whose protofeminist tracts were published in the 1620s and 30s, appear in this volume. Most students of French literature will know a few of these writers: for example, Marie de France, Christine de Pizan, Louise Labé, and Marguerite de Navarre. Specialists in French literature will certainly be familiar with others: Hélienne de Crenne, Catherine and Madeleine des Roches, and Gournay. And certainly, medievalists or Renaissance scholars will recognize the others, such as Anne de Marquets and Nicole Liébault, even if they may not be able to cite their works. Zimmermann also paints with a wide brush to allow a variety of genres, including, but not limited to, writers of memoirs, letters, poetry, and philosophical tracts.

What makes this study particularly useful in terms of the range of French women writers during this period is the contextualization of these writers within a history of women and writing. Some of these problematic areas are dealt with in the first two chapters, “Auf der Suche nach den Autorinnen vergangener Zeiten” and “Männliches Mittelalter?” The former offers a brief overview of the history of works dealing with French women authors, many of which could be counted as mere catalogs. She notes the women who themselves contributed to the tradition before the twentieth century, citing in particular Madame de Genlis’s *De l’influence des femmes* (1811) as an early critical study of this topic. Zimmerman places more recent works within the context of feminist criticism. In “Männliches Mittelalter?” Zimmermann examines issues in medieval misogyny, including the *Roman de la Rose* and Christine de Pizan’s critique of this text. She also explores roles women played outside of the household, reminding us of the importance of woman patrons, such as Marie de Champagne, and the significance of convents as cultural sites. Similarly, the introduction to the sixteenth century deals with many major issues of the period: for example, the rise of print culture and women’s roles in publishing, the *Querelle des femmes*, and humanism, among others, while a second chapter is devoted to the beginnings of literary salons.

Given the scope of Zimmermann’s study, most of her sections are relatively brief. It is clear that the goal of the work is not to present each of her subjects in depth, but rather to offer a cogent, sophisticated assessment that treats major issues related to the author, and to pique the reader’s interest. Whenever appropriate Zimmermann also delves into the vagaries of literary history — how women writers celebrated during their lifetimes often disappeared from the canon. Not surprisingly, longer discussions are devoted to the more well-known writers, who have made their way back into the mainstream of French literature: Marie de France and Christine de Pizan for the Middle Ages, and Marguerite de Navarre and Louise Labé. To this group Zimmermann adds Marguerite de Valois, whose letters and memoirs, as well as her role as patron, were overshadowed by what Zimmermann refers to as the black legend surrounding Marguerite’s life. She remarks that with the possible exception of Louise Labé, no sixteenth-century author had been so maligned for reasons pertaining to her sexual adventures. Zimmermann’s method here is one that is replicated in her discussions of other figures. She debunks the myths and revalorizes writers unjustly overlooked.

I note that even if one does not read German, thumbing through the pages of this book can prove worthwhile. Zimmerman has included numerous plates, including images of the authors and of their texts, as well as other images of women from the period. Especially telling are the manuscript illuminations of Baudonivia, Marie de France, and Christine de Pizan, among others, that emphasize a woman’s role as writer and reader. Further, the appendix includes quotations in the original French and Latin. Here, the non-German reader can find short excerpts, introducing them to the writers — excerpts that may not be easily available in every library. Finally, the extensive bibliography — some thirty pages — provides sources for anyone interested in pursuing further research in this area.

Zimmermann's volume provides an invaluable tool to access French women writers from the medieval and early modern periods.

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