

Claude La Charité and Roxanne Roy, eds. *Femmes, rhétorique et éloquence sous l'Ancien Régime*.

Collection "l'école du genre," nouvelles recherches 7. Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2012. 420 pp. €35. ISBN: 978-2-86272-608-3.

This rich and wide-ranging collection of essays raises — though it does not resolve — the question of whether women's persuasive writing in Old Regime France demonstrates a kind of eloquence that differs significantly from classical rhetoric, which boys studied in *collèges* alongside grammar and logic. Claude La Charité, in his introduction to the volume, calls this feminine eloquence a "douce subversion de la rhétorique de l'école" ("a sweet subversion of the rhetoric of school," 9).

Given women's presumptive exclusion from academic instruction in rhetoric, the first section of the book considers to what degree women did, nonetheless, have access to the tools of rhetoric in the Old Regime, as well as other kinds of related instruction they received. Contributors analyze and assess recommendations, warnings, and models for women in texts by male writers ranging from Friedrich Dedekind (the sixteenth-century German Lutheran pastor and humanist) to Michel de Montaigne, to Erasmus, Vives, and Lipsius, to the champions of illustrious women Symphorien Champier, Jean Du Pré, and François du Billon, to dramatist Pierre Corneille, and, finally, to Gabriel-Henri Gaillard, whose *Rhétorique française à l'usage des jeunes demoiselles* (1745) was the first pedagogical text on rhetoric written specifically for women. Analyses of directives and models in texts by female writers include works by Louise III (wife of Henri III), Hélienne de Crenne, Madeleine and Catherine des Roches, Marguerite Buffet, and Isabelle de Charrière.

The book's second section examines evidence of women's rhetorical strategies in epistolary texts. Again, contributors discuss letters from a wide variety of women, particularly French queens and princesses, but also Madame de Sévigné, Louise d'Épinay, Marie-Jeanne Phlippon (the future Madame Roland), and even Venitian poet Veronica Franco. The third and final section deals with persuasive writing in other genres, mainly by women, but also written by men specifically for women (such as works designed to persuade Calvinist princess Catherine de Bourbon, sister of Henri IV, to convert to Catholicism) or aimed more broadly (such as the presentation of distinctions between rhetorical and conversational eloquence in the seventeenth-century salon written by Antoine Gombaud, the chevalier de Méré). In addition to religion and eloquence, topics in this section include women's right to define themselves, women's legitimacy to govern (that is, rejections of Salic Law), women's superiority to men, anger, and education.

This volume will appeal not only to theorists of rhetoric, but also to scholars interested in feminist epistemological challenges and in women's writing more generally. Such a collection is long overdue: it is the first major work in French to consider the relationship between feminism and rhetoric, although studies in English have proliferated since the 1990s, as Diane Desrosiers explains in her

informative essay outlining the current state of scholarship. The book's main strength is its broad focus, considering the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries and including analyses of works not only by celebrated writers like Marguerite de Navarre, Madame de Sévigné, and Isabelle de Charrière, but also, for example, letters of lesser-studied princesses of the Renaissance, of Louise-Bénédicté de Bourbon, Duchesse du Maine — who, we learn, longed for entry into the prestigious *salons* of the Marquise de Lambert — and of the future Madame Roland a decade and a half before she perished on the scaffold. The transnational dimensions of the work, including essays discussing the abovementioned Dedekind and Franco, and Louise d'Épinay's collaboration in the 1770s with Friedrich Melchior, the Baron von Grimm, and correspondence with Ferdinando Galiani, are also worthy of note. Indeed, the book's strength is also its major weakness: the collection is so wide-ranging that it risks losing focus at times.

Whether or not these essays, taken together, provide evidence of a specifically feminine eloquence — and contributors come down on both sides of this question — they provide ample documentation of the diversity of women's engagement in the debates of Old Regime France, as well as the effectiveness and variety of their persuasive strategies. They also lead readers to consider the underpinnings of classical rhetoric from feminist perspectives and to pose important questions about the presuppositions of these structures.

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