

Cherchez la femme

Cherchez la femme:
Women and Values in the Francophone World

Edited by

Erika Fülöp and Adrienne Angelo

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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To Natalie and John,
whose friendship, patience, love, and support are truly
invaluable.

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INTRODUCTION

ERIKA FÜLÖP AND ADRIENNE ANGELO

The present collection offers a selection of essays inquiring into the nature of aesthetic, linguistic, cultural, and social values created, informed, or reformed by women in the French-speaking world from the Middle Ages until today. All three concepts in our title—woman, values, and the Francophone world—have generated much discussion and controversy in their own right as well as in relation to one another. Is womanhood simply a question of biological gender, a role assigned by society, or a role performed on the basis of personal choices as well as external influences? Are there universal values? Do the specific values traditionally associated with one or the other gender have any genuine basis or are they fully arbitrary? Can we escape such stereotypes and the related automatic value judgments at all? Even the concept of Francophonie is a tenuous one, and when speaking about a “Francophone world” the question arises as to where we can draw its limits, and if there is a common basis at all to the very different cultures it embraces.

Without entering into any of these debates in general terms, by “women” we will simply refer to the fact that all the essays in this collection revolve around female writers, artists, historical figures, or fictional characters. The “Francophone world,” on the other hand, sets the linguistic limits of our scope, inasmuch as we look at female figures in France, French-speaking countries, and texts written in French. The central concept of value remains nevertheless the point where we have a less solid basis for definition or consensus. It is precisely this problem that we propose to tackle by highlighting the multiplicity of perspectives without which, we believe, no justice can be made to the complexity of reality—in the present case, of the past and present of women. The values at the focus of this collection are those which cannot be quantified but represent respected and/or desirable principles, attitudes, structures, and achievements. Throughout the history of all civilizations at least until very recently, such values were determined and sanctified almost exclusively by men, including the values traditionally associated with women, such as corporeal beauty, purity, motherhood, or social sensitivity and empathy. Traditional Western

morality in particular, which came to be regarded as the ultimate measure of values and which European colonizers endeavored to spread across the globe, is based on the paternal figure of a transcendental power, mirrored in men's image, power, and leadership in earthly life. Any social, cultural, or aesthetic value had to comply with, and find a place in, this basic structure if it was to gain a position as part of the mainstream system of values.

Women of all times have experienced the narrowness of the limits set forth by these terms, and stood up against it in words, art, and/or actions that escape such stereotypes. The following essays, written by eminent female scholars and artists, offer an insight into the variety of literary and cultural moments and the ways in which women contributed to the destabilization of the established values and to the introduction of new ones—or on the contrary, highlight how male authors used schematized female figures to support and reinforce the existing order. In certain cases, the new values created or promoted are embodied by the artistic product which we inherited, in an idiosyncratic world, or a language that provides new perspectives on reality; in other cases, they take the form of ideas and observations made from the positions into which society placed women of different origins, or the form of political actions aimed to change the status quo.

A surge of other recent volumes of research in the arenas of women's studies, French feminist theory, and French cultural studies have addressed similar issues, though from different perspectives. That an increase in scholarly engagement with these topics appears to be a theoretical zeitgeist of the contemporary period should perhaps come as no surprise. It does, however, attest to the urgency feminist scholars have heeded in providing theoretical material to address these critical voids and gender imbalance. Indeed, in view of the increased recognition women have achieved as authors, artists, and filmmakers from the first wave of feminism (both in France and in the United States) and, especially, through the second wave of French feminism following the events of May 1968 and climaxing in the 1970s, the marriage between feminist theory, literary studies, and cultural studies is a most fortunate and productive pairing. For those interested in an excellent overview of the development of French feminism in general, the editors direct the reader's attention to Kelly Oliver's and Lisa Walsh's *Contemporary French Feminism* (Oxford Readings in Feminism) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and to Roger Céléstin's and Eliane DalMolin's *Beyond French Feminisms: Debates on Women, Politics, and Culture in France, 1981–2001* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

Some indispensable titles that complement the scope of *Cherchez la femme* include critical anthologies dedicated to understanding women's role in society and the development of feminism within French society and culture. Diana Holmes's and Carrie Tarr's 2006 edited work, *A "Belle Epoque"?: Women and Feminism in French Society and Culture, 1890–1914* (Oxford: Berghahn), remains of great importance for scholars whose interest lies in examining feminist ideas at the turn of the century. The title of Kimberly A. Yuracko's work, *Perfectionism and Contemporary Feminist Values* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003) also foregrounds the concept of values in relation to feminist thought. Yuracko's study, however, is anchored to the concept of perfectionism in relation to individual female choice and gender inequality. Natalie Edwards's and Christopher Hogarth's edited collection *This "Self" Which Is Not One: Women's Life Writing in French* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010) investigates the plurality of identity that appeals to female practitioners of life writing. Melissa Purdue's and Stacey Floyd's collection, *New Woman Writers, Authority and the Body* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), looks at *fin de siècle* literature written by women writers whose narratives foreground the restricted role of women in society.

In terms of the globalization of these concerns, Stacey Weber-Fève's work, *Re-hybridizing Transnational Domesticity and Femininity: Women's Contemporary Filmmaking and Lifewriting in France, Algeria, and Tunisia* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010) focuses on female filmmakers who showcase the domestic sphere in their films to challenge traditional representations of women's roles in the family and, by extension, society. Another important text that focuses on feminism in the context of intercultural practices and globalization is Silvia Pilar Castro Borrego's and Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz's *Cultural Migrations and Gendered Subjects: Colonial and Postcolonial Representations of the Female Body* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2011). Nancy Fraser's and Sandra Lee Bartky's anthology, *Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays on Difference, Agency, and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) joins in critical dialogue American and French feminist scholars to read a "revaluing" of French feminism within the context of American feminist thought. An important question asked by their volume remains key in this consideration of globalization and feminism: how do cross-cultural feminist encounters foster a global sense of feminist values?

Importantly, *Cherchez la femme* provides a varied perspective on how values have been interpreted, showcased, and appropriated by female artists and writers. Thus, the present volume differs from the cited rich works for the array of subjects, historical periods, and authors examined.

While constituting a cross-section of the key issues the mentioned studies and collections address, with its focus on rethinking cultural and aesthetic values in relation to women as artists, writers, and readers, the present volume proposes to contribute to the scholarly and critical “rebirth” of reexamining values from a female perspective.

The five papers of the opening section, *Feminisms: Values and Theory*, offer a glance into the richness and complexity of that which is likely to first spring to mind when it comes to women and the values they represent or promote, and which is often misunderstood as one homogeneous trend, feminism. The plural form used in the section title suggests the great variety, in both time and space, of the ideas and ideals that women have theorized and fought for, and of which this selection can give only a taste. Addressing authors associated with French or Francophone feminist trends in one way or another from the late nineteenth-century to the present day and from three continents, this section is representative of the disparate history of feminisms and of the inner tensions of both womanhood and women’s cause(s).

The first two articles in this section, by Adeline Soldin and Chelsea Ray respectively, approach the first wave of French feminism from the perspective of two authors whose work is particularly interesting precisely in light of the contributions these authors made to the undermining of clichés attached to women, while deliberately distinguishing themselves from the mainstream of the movement. **Adeline Soldin’s** paper on Rachilde offers an entry into the subject through the portrait of an influential woman writer of the time who actually refused the feminist label, despite her attitude in many respects similar to feminists’. Focusing on Rachilde’s 1928 pamphlet *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe* and taking into consideration the irony that renders it ambiguous as a statement, Soldin’s essay unravels Rachilde’s reasons for her idiosyncratic approach to the socio-political issues addressed by the combative first-wave feminism. Soldin argues that the major factor that kept Rachilde apart from the movement is her focus on the individual both as a woman and as an artist, which nevertheless did not stop her constant criticism of gender stereotypes in her literary works from powerfully contributing to the feminist cause.

Chelsea Ray’s essay explores the contribution to feminism of another prominent figure of early-twentieth-century Parisian social and cultural life who did not actively participate in the movement, Natalie Clifford Barney. Ray reads Barney’s *Pensées d’une amazone* in light of the views of two radical feminists of the time—Arria Ly and Madeleine Pelletier—concerning women’s sexuality. While Ly and Pelletier implicitly and

inadvertently adhered to masculine values by advocating female virginity, Barney's overt endorsement of lesbian love, both physical and spiritual, Ray argues, opposed both patriarchal discourse and its female ideal. The paper demonstrates that through redefining the concept of purity as an inner quality, rather than an attribute of the body, and emphasizing artistic creativity as an alternative fulfillment to procreation, Barney started the work later continued by second- and third-wave feminists toward a genuine revision of the dominant male-oriented discourse on sexuality.

Michèle Schaal's study then takes us forward in time to the twenty-first century. Schaal addresses the work of one of the most controversial female authors of the contemporary French cultural landscape, Virginie Despentes. Schaal's analysis of Despentes's novels and theoretical writings draws out the connections of the views they convey with American third-wave feminism, which admittedly had a determining influence on Despentes's works. Sexuality, gender, violence, and social differences are a constant preoccupation in her fiction, whose popularity and sensationalism, Schaal suggests, do not lessen the seriousness of Despentes's feminist project. On the contrary, the marginality of her fictional characters and the brutality they enact or have to face draw attention to the issues at the focus of prominent contemporary feminists such as Irigaray, Butler, or Rebecca Walker as part of the author's endeavors to "provide French literature and society with an updated, 'proletarian,' feminist discourse."

The last two chapters in this section, finally, broaden the perspective in geographic space, moving beyond Metropolitan France. **Raylene Ramsay's** introduction to the fascinating yet little known work of Déwé Gorodé, the first and to date only Kanak woman writer, sheds light on the additional difficulty inherent in making a stand for values as a woman outside Western culture. Gorodé's endeavor to reconcile her conflicting commitments to a tradition that constitutes the basis of a unique Pacific identity in face of colonial oppression, and to women's rights and the liberation of female sexuality in face of patriarchal oppression, results in a cognitive dissonance that makes her position and writing elude easy categorization. Ramsay's readings of Gorodé's poems and fiction extricate the experiences and influences that urge the writer to renegotiate the diverging values attached to tradition and to the emancipation of women respectively, and highlight the potential of these multilayered texts to reflect the complexity of the questions concerning the possibility of a feminine Kanak identity.

Katie Billotte then looks at recent events and the current state of the feminist cause in another former French colony, Haiti. She evokes the

tragic death of the three leaders of a budding Haitian feminist movement, Myriam Merlet, Magalie Marcelin, and Anne Marie Coriolan, in the 2010 earthquake. In the presentation of the life, endeavors, and achievements of these women educated in France and Canada but brought back to Haiti by their sense of duty and belonging, Billotte emphasizes the greater and different challenges faced by women and feminism in developing countries where poverty, illiteracy, and underprosecuted rape are the actual issues to begin with, before one can think of more indirect forms of oppression. Based on an overview of the obituaries of Merlet, Marcelin, and Coriolan published in France, Quebec, and Haiti, the article concludes that although the West paid too little attention to the loss of these prominent female figures of Haitian politics, the coverage in the country's own media gives place to hope that their efforts for women's rights is valued and will be continued.

The essays in the second section, *Incarnating and Establishing Values*, reexamine a number of writers and/or literary and philosophical works from the medieval period through the nineteenth century that have been often ignored, neglected, or forgotten. By offering a series of portraits of women who either came to embody existing cultural values or contributed to the establishment of new ones at key moments of European intellectual history, these papers reinscribe feminist values in these texts.

The first two papers in this section, by Kate Robin and Marcelline Block respectively, revisit the fifteenth century to explore the female utopia constructed by Christine de Pizan. **Kate Robin** provides a stimulating analysis of Christine's poetic world and reads her poetic gestures in *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* and *Le Chemin de longue étude* as a contribution to feminism well before the birth of the concept itself. Christine's recourse to the imaginary, in addition to providing the narrator/author comfort at the time of writing, creates an opening for the transmission of Christine's dreams, hopes and ideals for womankind. Robin sees the intermingling of the natural and the supernatural and the real and the imaginary as a key factor in uncovering histories that have been erased or overwritten by the dominant patriarchal discourse. This mélange of conscious and unconscious states thus contributes to both the "magical" construction of Christine's imaginary worlds and to a new image of reality. Naming Christine an "intellectuelle-maçon," Robin contends that Christine's imagination has granted her a certain mobility to find and construct her space and place in the world and to transmit her philosophy to the women writers and artists who have followed her legacy.

Marcelline Block offers a comparative study of *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* by focusing on the legend of Queen Semiramis, a figure included

both in Christine de Pizan's work and in Paul Valéry's "Air de Sémiramis" (1920), as well as in his 1934 melodrama *Sémiramis*. Despite the tension between Valéry's alleged misogynistic tendencies and what Block terms Christine's "protofeminism," Block argues that both writers evince admiration for this legendary female figure, especially regarding her architectural prowess and constructive and governing genius. Block explores the importance of Queen Semiramis's role in constructing the very foundations of Christine's fortified gynotopia. Valéry's fascination with this woman of legend appears in the ways she is transformed in his writing: in his poem, she is described as a she-king and seems able thus to transcend historical and gendered representations.

Lidia Radi continues this inquiry into underexplored female figures and their importance to history with an analysis of *Le Soulas de Noblesse sus le coronnement de la Royne de France Claude*, written one century later by Guillaume Michel, dit de Tours. *Le Soulas*, the last piece in Michel's *Le Penser de Royal Mémoire*, stands out from the rest of this work dedicated to Francis I: while the general tone of *Le Penser* is determined by the serious argument that the king should undertake a crusade against the Turks, *Le Soulas* is a joyous celebration of the new queen who embodies Christian virtues. Radi provides a close analysis of the place and function of *Le Soulas* in relation to the wider context of *Le Penser* and highlights the coherent message of the whole collection. She argues that Michel's strategies serve as a means of presenting the important role of the queen as the salvation of the people, the kingdom, and the king, and inviting the royal reader to form a new vision of the monarchy based on the values embodied by the queen.

The title of **Adriana Bontea's** study, "Femmes par l'esprit," is taken from Montesquieu's posthumously published *Pensées*. Bontea's essay engages with the usually disregarded role of women in the constitution of knowledge in seventeenth-century France, from which the official canon retains only the names of male figures, such as Montesquieu, Descartes, or Malebranche. Bontea recuperates the historical and anthropological meanings of Montesquieu's phrase, a *formule* that has been ignored by both historians and philosophers since, as Bontea contends, the context in which it first appeared projected an unfavorable light on the valorization of the feminine. Bontea explores a number of fundamental ruptures in this philosophical vein and sees in Montesquieu's formulation an attempt to highlight the correlation between society and the presence of women, a link that had otherwise been effaced and made invisible to and throughout history.

Cécile Champonnois examines the parallel lives and careers of two women, Marie-Anne du Boccage and Mary Wortley Montagu, whose travel correspondence of 1763 and 1764 generated much interest at a time in French history when epistolary literature reached its acme. Among other sources, Champonnois cites Grimm and Voltaire as examples of influential contemporary figures interested in these women's correspondence. Witty and successful, Madame du Boccage and Lady Montagu gained renown both for their place in literature and their place in society. Champonnois retraces their great success in a literary domain reserved for men and outlines how their writings highlight the need for women's education and pay homage to the intellectual qualities of women whom they met in their travels. Through a presentation of the various ways in which these two women promoted the cause of women, Champonnois shows the interest of their life and endeavors for contemporary feminist thought.

We move to the nineteenth century in **Sarah Ruddy's** analysis of the figure of the suffering woman in the oratorio tradition. Ruddy provides a thorough overview of this musical tradition in France centered on Biblical women, notably Eve, Judith, Ruth, Rebecca, the Virgin Mary, Marie-Magdeleine, and saints, including Joan of Arc and Geneviève. Through music that is at times compellingly dramatic, these works, Ruddy notes, reflect and perpetuate ideals of Catholic femininity and designate appropriate roles for women in Church and society—roles that place women in the position of sufferer. Ruddy turns to Catherine Clément, who writes in *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* that “opera ... is created for the representation of suffering,” in order to position the oratorio within this operatic tradition. Outlining operatic suffering and focusing on the spectacularization of woman's appearance and role in these performances, Ruddy argues that oratorios assigned meaning to women's suffering, both on stage and in everyday life, thereby justifying and sanctifying it.

The third section, *Writing (and) the Body: Corporeal Values* turns to the value of the body, too often overlooked or underestimated in Western culture, which traditionally relegates the corporeal to a secondary position behind the spiritual. At the same time, patriarchal discourse has established a strong association between the feminine and the bodily-sensual, as opposed to the intellectual values primarily defined as masculine. While looking at the role of the body in the creative process and products of female artists, the essays in this section argue against such a simplifyingly gendered distinction and highlight the deep roots of spiritual and cultural values in the life of the body.

The opening paper of this section by the poet and literary critic **Béatrice Bonhomme** discusses the work of the contemporary French poet

Marie-Claire Bancquart. Bonhomme outlines the fundamental role the body plays at two levels in Bancquart's writing: first, poetry appears rooted in the physical experience of the body, as a written reaction to fleshly existence. Second and consequently, the preoccupation with the body becomes an explicit central concern of Bancquart's texts. Bonhomme emphasizes that associating this aspect of the poet's work to her gender amounts to following a false stereotype, and she evokes a number of twentieth-century male poets who made explicit their similar experience. Bancquart's personal past, with long years of her childhood spent motionless with her whole body in plaster, waiting to recover from the tuberculosis attacking her bones, remains nevertheless unique, and Bonhomme's own poetic writing in this French essay articulates the way in which poetry emerges from the cross-fertilization in language of the power of suffering, solitude, and death, and a world to be perceived, welcomed, and (re)created.

Geneviève Guétemme then offers a glance at Béatrice Bonhomme's own poetry through its interaction with the visual context in which Guétemme's own work as a visual artist embeds it. We see Bonhomme's two pieces, "Nidification de la lumière" and "Paysage du corps," dense with contrasting images of dead and living bodies, appearing on Guétemme's photos of two faces, an adult and a child respectively, both with their eyes closed. Brought together in a diptych, the texts and images come to contribute to one another's meaning, while also keeping their own—here partially hidden—identities. The essay addresses in particular the moment and space of encounter between text and image, and the play of oneness and distance generated by their symbiosis on a single surface. Reflecting on the respective powers of text and image, their relationships to death, their productive potential, and the betweenness of the spaces they open, Guétemme's paper elaborates the complex dynamics of the threshold between image and text, between the material and the immaterial.

The other two chapters in this section move from poetry to fiction to provide two different and complementary perspectives on Amélie Nothomb's work. **Áine Larkin** enquires into the value of the body in Nothomb's novel *Robert des noms propres*. She interprets the young protagonist's experience with ballet as a metaphor for a complex mother-daughter relationship. In her analysis of the implications of devoting one's life to this most beautiful corporeal art, which requires the dancer to subject her body to pain and deprivation in the search for perfection, Larkin brings together the questions of dominance, desire, selfhood, suffering, and self-fulfillment through their inextricable roots in the life of

the body. Nothomb's story of a conflict between motherhood and professional vocation, her fragmented depiction of the body, and her realistic though ironic approach to anorexia, Larkin argues, grasp the fundamental dilemmas of contemporary Western womanhood—in which Nothomb gives the body the role of the most sensible adviser.

Erika Fülöp's paper closes this section with another, more general approach to Amélie Nothomb's writing. Interested in the image of a prolific writer with an inexhaustible enthusiasm and energy for the pains and pleasures of writing, Fülöp looks at Nothomb's autobiographical texts and interviews to unravel the forces that propel the writer. She distinguishes four major factors which seem to have determined Nothomb's birth and life as a writing subject: pleasure, language, hunger, and excess. Retracing the story and interplay of these motifs, Fülöp suggests that the Nothombian desire to write is best understood in terms of a fundamental urge emerging from, and belonging to, the very life of the body. The recognition of the value of this arch-desire, partly due to its preserving and productive power, in combination with the capacity to enjoy language and with the inclination to excess, generates the possibility of experiencing the pleasure of writing as a flux, or flow, of nonterminating *jouissance*.

What does it mean for woman to write her life story? What narrative form is appropriate? What can, cannot, and should not be said? How can certain textual strategies of life writing—from autobiography to autofiction, to epistolary or journal writing—also function to showcase the greater cultural and social implications for such a gesture? Is it possible to show too much? How much can and should remain hidden? How should one read these life stories? What are some new tendencies and trends in contemporary French and Francophone women's life writing that allow for a recasting of philosophical and narratological values in light of these writers' engagements with the Other? These are some of the questions under consideration in the four essays that comprise the final section of this collection, *Life Writing and the Other: Values of Identity*. The essays in this section focus on twentieth- and twenty-first-century examples of women's writing in France, Algeria, and Québec.

Laurie Corbin opens this final section with her chapter dedicated to the autobiographical writings of Colette, Marguerite Duras, and Assia Djebar. While much has been written in recent decades on women's autobiographies and on their differences from the traditional autobiography described by George Gusdorf and Philippe Lejeune among others, Corbin reads these particular writers' life narratives in terms of new values of femininity and a new call to the reader. By focusing on the trope of the mirror, Corbin's analysis foregrounds the strategies of revealing and their

paradoxical capacity to conceal. Such hide and seek figuratively mirrors women's position as object of the gaze in society. Citing Irigaray's concept of women "remaining elsewhere," Corbin further conceptualizes life writing as a mirroring that allows Colette, Duras, and Djébar to be unseen and unknown, in a different place from where the reader assumes them to be. Finally, Corbin sees in the mirror motif ways in which the writer not only sees herself, but also addresses the reader. Such a direct address also challenges, she contends, the value of writing one's identity.

Pushing the boundaries in writing one's life story is the subject of **Lucie Lequin's** essay, which discusses the role of the obscene as an expression of protest against an oppressive but superficial ideal of decency in the work of four female Canadian novelists, Ying Chen, Nelly Arcan, Marie-Sissi Labrèche, and Catherine Mavrikakis. The presentation of the body, pain, sexuality, and death allows these authors to transcend the borders of "decency" and thereby to articulate a protest against their protagonists' respective social conditions. Lequin examines the meaning and implications of obscenity, and notes that in order for something to be deemed obscene, it is always tied to a provocative game of hide and seek. In contemporary Québécois literature, Lequin considers two irreconcilable demands: endangered intimacy and an absolute need for visibility and vengeance. Suffering is always a part of this ostentation; living with societal injuries demands an outlet for expression in order to heal. Citing Mylène Tremblay, Lequin highlights this necessity to speak in these four writers' projects as evidence of their refusal to embrace a modesty that they deem artificial and alienating. Thus, the obscene becomes the very space of protest and through its writing these writers attenuate their angst, awaken others to their plight, and attempt to find redemption.

The "ghost" of Emmanuel Levinas who haunts Sylvie Germain's writing is explored in **Amy Allen Sekhar's** essay. Sekhar considers Germain's apparent obsession with evil ("le mal") as a marker of Germain's ongoing engagement with Levinassian ethics. By examining Lévinas's notion of the *face-à-face* (the Self-Other encounter) in relation to Germain's works, Sekhar presents a phenomenological notion of alterity as an overpowering presence that shapes the trajectory of Germain's fictional philosophy. Faced with a number of twins, doubles, and doppelgängers in Germain's corpus, one is always trapped, as it were, in an untenable ethical encounter Sekhar asserts that Germain transforms this encounter with the Other in a moment of fusion—a move that necessitates "reciprocal responsibility." To center her analysis, Sekhar artfully explores two texts—*Jours de Colère* and *Tobie des Marais*—that not only showcase this coupling at the narrative level but also bear an uncanny

textual resemblance to each other. Bearing in mind another important aspect of Levinassian ethics—the Third party as mediator in the Self–Other encounter—Germain, Sekhar suggests, ultimately seeks to disturb such a vision of justice and succeeds in facing down the spectre of her teacher.

Adrienne Angelo closes this section with a reading of Nathalie Rheims’s fictional works and broaches the question of unstable literary representations—oscillating between prose, poetry, epistles, and photographs—to explicate how poetic language serves as the only viable space in which the loss of a loved one can be successfully faced and how self-knowledge through poetic language may be attained. Despite Rheims’s impressive literary output—she has published one work per year since her inaugural text *L’Un pour l’autre* was released in 1999—her works have not elicited much scholarly attention. Angelo cites the complexity of Rheims’s engagement with death as a possible reason for this critical silence. To fill this void, Angelo provides a psychoanalytic reading of the work of mourning in *Lettre d’une amoureuse morte* in order to then sketch out similar postmortem encounters in *Lumière invisible à mes yeux*, *Les Fleurs du silence*, and *Journal intime*—three works in which the ramifications of emotive writing foreground the writer’s encounter with herself and/as Other.

SECTION I:
FEMINISMS:
VALUE AND THEORY

CHAPTER ONE

EXPLORING THE AMBIGUITIES OF FEMINISM WITH RACHILDE

ADELINE SOLDIN

As a prolific writer and influential literary critic during a period that coincides with the first wave of the women's movement, Rachilde offers a tantalizing case study of one woman's discovery and embracement of free expression. Rachilde is especially intriguing from the perspective that, although she earned a reputation as a bold and unconventional female writer who forged a place for herself among the prominent (mostly male) writers of her time, she consistently reminded her public that she was not a feminist. The most blatant testimony of her position on women's issues is found in her 1928 publication, *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe*.¹ Through a close reading of this text, I aim to make some sense of what many view as Rachilde's incongruous stance regarding women and to raise questions about her attitude towards feminism as a woman and as a writer. What did feminism mean to Rachilde and why was she opposed to it? What values, if any, did she share with feminists of her time? Did she contribute to the feminist movement—intentionally or not—in ways less conspicuous than those who openly endorsed the cause? Through this examination of Rachilde's prickly relationship with feminism, I hope to shed light not just on Rachilde's apprehension vis-à-vis feminism, but on others' as well.

Before beginning this study of *Pourquoi*, it will be helpful to mention dominant interpretations of Rachilde's fiction with regards to feminism, as well as other non-fictional work in which she directly criticizes the movement. In recent decades, many scholars have come to examine Rachilde's avant-garde fiction in the framework of gender studies and queer theory as the author often toys with male/female role reversals and atypical sexualities. On the one hand, as numerous studies have demonstrated, we can read her representations of virile, eccentric women as a means of empowering women. Rita Felski, for example, esteems Rachilde's heroine, Eliante, from *La Jongleuse*, as the "exemplary modern

individual,”² and Jennifer Waelti-Walters describes her novels “as astringent criticisms of the socially accepted forms of love between men and women, of the roles allowed to women in their relationships with men.”³ On the other hand, some scholars perceive her depictions of rebellious women as a refusal of gender equality because they perceive this subversive behavior as ultimately punished, allowing the status quo to triumph. In this vein, Dominique Fisher claims that, even though Rachilde’s portrayal of lesbians blurs sexual and gender boundaries, “la lesbienne alimente souvent chez elle une misogynie et un antiféminisme notoires.”⁴ While I do not intend to resolve this dispute here—if it is even resolvable—I would like to signal that this striking variation in interpretations indicates a certain level of ambiguity in the message Rachilde conveys through her fiction. I propose to demonstrate that the equivocality surrounding gender in her literature is a reflection of her own uncertainty regarding feminism.

Frequently, when seeking clarification on social matters evoked in an author’s texts, one tends to look at the author’s personal life for more information. In Rachilde’s case, if one considers her choices and her accomplishments, one might assume too quickly that she wholeheartedly supported women’s equality. At a young age, she appropriated the name Rachilde (a pseudonym for Marguerite Eymery), disguised herself as a man and rode on horseback to the local newspaper to have her articles published. Around the age of fifteen, she refused the marriage her parents had arranged for her, and, instead, fled to Paris to launch her writing career.⁵ She quickly penetrated the popular literary circles of the French Decadent movement and, between 1880 and 1889, published twelve books, including such well-known and appreciated works as *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), *Nono* (1885), *A Mort* (1886), *La Marquise de Sade*, and *Madame Adonis* (1888). Rachilde continued to publish novels, plays, literary reviews, and other writings until 1947, six years before she died at the age of ninety-three. She did eventually marry and have one child, Gabrielle (named after her mother), both in 1889. She remained married to Alfred Vallette, founder of the *Mercure de France*, for fifty years, working and writing alongside him until his death in 1935.

Bearing in mind these facts, as well as Rachilde’s infamous *cartes de visite* labeled “Rachilde, *homme de lettres*,” and her official request to the Parisian *préfecture de police* to dress in male attire, it is difficult to imagine why she would argue so adamantly against women’s rights. As Diana Holmes frames the question in her analysis of Rachilde’s antifeminism:

Why should such a courageous, non-conformist woman, living in an age of feminist activity and claiming for herself the freedoms feminism sought, have been so resolutely opposed to feminism?⁶

To begin answering this question, let us turn briefly to an article published almost thirty years prior to *Pourquoi*, entitled “Questions brûlantes,” in which Rachilde addresses the feminist movement, the Lord Alfred Douglas affair, and the theme that loosely links the two: love.⁷

In brief, this article emerges as a long string of interwoven conceits revolving around a traveling pleasure-train and military hierarchies, all of which serve to describe Rachilde’s place among her fellow compatriots and literary peers. She claims to have procured herself the most delectable spot for which no one else cares, “celle du milieu, la place de la vieille dame aimant la lecture.”⁸ From this disposition, she venerates true, spiritual love associated here with literature, art, and Lord Douglas. On the opposing side, she places all carnal activity—which she deems “superflue” and “facultative”⁹—with socialists, moralists and, certainly, *les émancipatrices* fighting for “l’amour libre.”¹⁰ In beautiful, elaborate, even ostentatious prose (befitting her extravagant contentions), she claims that these *émancipatrices* are bemoaning over nothing, and, in the process, spoiling life and love for the small group of chosen few who might one day experience genuine love (we assume this would mean Lord Douglas, but Rachilde?); that is, love that is spared of any need for physical interaction. In a move to avoid confronting the issues of marriage and divorce, childbirth and abortion, prostitution and rape, Rachilde makes a specious argument for abstinence: an ideal that can prevail only in fiction. Moreover, according to Rachilde in the following passage, women are already free:

Emanciper les femmes? Pourquoi faire, mon dieu? Toute femme intelligente, ou douée seulement de la puissance de raisonner, s’émancipe quand elle le désire, et pour ce qui lui convient elle n’a nul besoin de voter ni de s’occuper des différents genres de gouvernements, qui crouleront bien sans ses sollicitudes. Ne perdez pas de vue, bons réformateurs, que la femme est supérieure à l’homme de par la force même de sa patience, qui userait des rocs. Elle n’a pas besoin d’égaliser l’homme dans ses idioties pour le suivre dans ses meilleures études. Elle peut, si elle veut, gagner *de la vie*, sinon *du luxe*. On risque de demeurer, souvent, quarante-huit heures sans manger, mais rien ne vous trempe le caractère comme de crever la faim de temps en temps. Croyez bien que si je ne connaissais pas tous les avantages de ce régime je n’oserais pas en parler.¹¹

In this sardonic attempt to express her true opinion on women's rights, she vacillates between mocking women for not being as astute as she who knew how to escape from her childhood home and make a living for herself, and denouncing government and all other male-operated and male-dominated conventions that reign in her society. Yet, at least one tenet of this institution, which expects women to provide meals for the family, seems to have left Rachilde with a bitter taste in her mouth.

So, what conclusions can we draw from this first example of Rachilde's sharp witticisms with respect to women's social status? In Catherine Ploye's detailed analysis of "Questions brûlantes," she asserts that this article illustrates Rachilde's disregard for, and misunderstanding of, the circumstances troubling her fellow citizens while allowing her to boast her own success:

Le point de vue de Rachilde est à tout moment celui de l'intellectuelle individualiste qui, ayant réussi à s'imposer dans un monde à prédominance masculine par ses seuls talent et volonté, et en dépit de bien des obstacles, nie les réalités sociales et économiques auxquelles se heurtent beaucoup de ses contemporaines.¹²

One certainly cannot overemphasize the value Rachilde places on individual creativity and aestheticism. These principles seem to compose what one might define as her personal manifesto, influenced tremendously by the Decadent movement. However, to say that she denies the obstacles facing woman at the turn of the century would ignore the sarcasm emanating from the passage quoted above, and most notably in the final two sentences. While Ploye rightly aligns "Questions brûlantes" with "l'esthétique fin-de-siècle," she overlooks Rachilde's few surreptitious confessions to the difficulties facing women, which become more prevalent in *Pourquoi*.¹³

Rachilde knew what being a mother, a wife, and a professional writer entailed, or at least the latter two since she sent her daughter to live with and be raised by her own, mentally disturbed mother in Périgueux. Clearly, she chose to concentrate her efforts on writing, not on mothering. In this text, Rachilde takes a passive attitude towards social struggles, advocating women to follow their dreams, to thrive within their imagination, and forget about social equality, as she appears to have done herself. Rachilde contends that a woman does not need to be a man's equal in terms of his stupidities in order to follow him in his brightest studies. In other words, she advocates women to abandon all the absurdity of politics and governing—leave it to the founders: men—and to search for satisfaction in intellectual efforts and achievements.

Is this a naïve position to take? Maybe. But, it conforms well with Rachilde's artistic aspirations that incite her to paint an extraordinary, even shocking picture before our eyes. As an artist, she commands: she becomes active and powerful in her writing. This is not to say that she remains entirely passive in reality, but that is not where she seeks authority. She is not concerned with politics, but rather moving her readers and finding personal fulfillment in the aesthetics of her art. As Ploye reminds us, "le ton provocateur de Rachilde dans 'Questions brûlantes' vise davantage à l'effet produit (choc, rire, surprise...) qu'à l'efficacité rationnelle des arguments."¹⁴ The stupefaction and even disgust that she elicits represents the success she pursues, the potent image she evoked having aroused the public. Maintaining that this approach fulfills her needs, she recommends that other women employ a similar method. In fact, Rachilde supported young, aspiring female authors who demonstrated promising talent, like Colette.¹⁵

Shifting the focus to *Pourquoi*, one of the first questions one must ask when undertaking such a study is: How seriously should we take this piece of work? Rachilde repeatedly draws attention to her skewed perspective and questions the validity of her opinions and assertions. In the first chapter, entitled "Excuses," she inaugurates her text with an apology for the "prétention de ce titre," a title she claims not to have chosen herself, and acknowledges the fact that most of her contemporaries are probably not interested in hearing her opinions on her modern feminist compatriots.¹⁶ She then declares explicitly that she does not have a lot of confidence in her argument anyway, whatever it may be:

Je vais donc tâcher de m'expliquer à moi-même et d'expliquer au public: *pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe* puisque le malicieux et subtil André Billy me l'a demandé. Cependant je fais mes réserves au sujet de la valeur de mes arguments.¹⁷

These initial remarks evince Rachilde's awareness of both the fallacy and inconsistency linked with such a proclamation from her, as well as the hostility it might inspire. Furthermore, framing André Billy as the true culprit suggests shame on Rachilde's part and, hence, a desire to exculpate herself from blame. Of course, the purpose of the title is to stun the public and attract their attention—and maybe nothing more.

In addition to Rachilde's repeated efforts to discredit her contentions and downplay the urgency of the problems facing women, the reader must unravel an entanglement of jest, irony, inconsistency, and sincerity in her work. After excusing herself in the first chapter, she focuses mostly on her upbringing and education, and women's career choices in chapters two,