

Jeanne Chiron, Nathalie Grande, Ramona Herz-Gazeau, Julie Pilorget, Julie Piront (dir.), Les Parisiennes. Des femmes dans la ville (Moyen Âge–XVIII^e siècle), Arras (Artois Presses Université) 2020, 264 p. (Études littéraires), ISBN 978-2-84832-469-2, EUR 20,00.

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There is something distinctive about Paris. It's a city that has always suffered under countless clichés, stereotypes, fantasies and even legends. Likewise, a multitude of truisms surrounded its inhabitants, especially its female residents, and that continues today. Instead, this collection, bringing together sixteen essays and seventeen authors, wants to explore who the women of Paris were, in all their diversity, and so dispels the usual image of the Parisian woman.

This interdisciplinary volume paints a portrait of the women of Paris from the Middle Ages to the 18th century, through the authors' examination of a wide range of material. In the first part, the focus is on historical sources. Judicial registers, police records, letters, newspapers, archives of religious institutions and other »mutilated« documents help to shed light on the visibility of these women in the city, on how they occupied the space, both physically and spiritually. The authors draw a picture of women who filled the urban space with their independence, determination, creativity, and resistance. They also highlight aspects of female experiences that have thus far received little attention. The second part of the book focuses on literary narrative and fiction. Through the lens of contemporary authors, the researchers in this part highlight the figure of the Parisian woman, how she was perceived by contemporaries.

Frédérique Le Nan opens the first part with the only medieval essay in the collection. She examines the unknown female public writers in 14th-century Paris. Through fascinating detective work, she shows the surprising existence of these professional scribes who wrote letters and administrative deeds for their clients. A fragment of parchment discovered in the chapter house of the Notre-Dame archives, dated 1396, mentions a certain Jeanne, *l'escrivaine* – the writer. Far from being an isolated case, the author came upon another document from 1316 in which yet another Jeanne appears as a writer. Was she one of these female illuminators and embroiderers who worked with letters or was she too a public writer? The question remains unanswered but does not fail to arouse curiosity.

Aurélia Pouch also draws a picture of other quasi unknown professionals, the theatre actresses. In the 17th and 18th centuries,



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Parisian theatre was thriving, and actresses were shining. To the reader's surprise, we learn about the equal remuneration of men and women. Certain troupes even counted as many women as men, underlining their crucial role in theatre and thus their visibility. A few of these actresses became celebrities, inspiring authors and entertaining a captive audience.

But in Paris, there was also a plethora of women who worked with their hands. Sylvain Leteux draws the portrait of a particular type of retailer, the *tripeuse*, the female tripe seller. A thankless job at the bottom of meat occupations, these women worked with the least noble parts of the animal and were often represented with filthy hands and dirty clothes. Performing a job that remained unregulated, these retailers were almost always female. Their knowledge passed from one generation to another in a milieu that remained largely endogamous.

Besides the working female Parisians, the first part of the book also depicts the world of feminine religious institutions and charitable organizations. Alison Vermelle's essay delves into the world of the *trésorières de prison*, a charitable initiative in the spirit of the Lumières, assisting those imprisoned, both financially and spiritually. These women principally helped artisans and shopkeepers imprisoned for debt and excluded criminals and prostitutes from their assistance.

In early modern Paris, female religious communities were legion. Some communities were fully open to the city and its inhabitants, while others lived in total seclusion. The order of the Très-Sainte-Annonciation, in the Marais, was among the latter (Marie-Élisabeth Henneau and Julie Piront). While many religious communities made exceptions, allowing visitors from good families to enter and talk to them openly – despite seclusion – the sisters became famous for refusing to open their doors to princesses and aristocrats. The sisters somehow became »visible« because of their »invisibility«. Intransigent, they considered their duty of seclusion as constitutive of their identity and resisted pressure to break the rule.

The Augustinian nuns of the Hôtel-Dieu hospital also demonstrated much resistance. Safia Hamdi sheds lights on a bitter conflict between the sisters in charge of the hospital and its board of directors in the 18th century. Deeply attached to their traditions and their conception of charity, the sisters refused to comply with new decisions and regulations. They fought hard to keep their place and their influence within the hospital. But both their resistance to new practices and their conception of assistance were increasingly perceived as harmful to the sick. Ultimately, they lost their battle with the administrators, but they did achieve a victory in maintaining the Hôtel-Dieu in the centre of Paris.

The second part of the book moves away from historical sources and focuses on literary narrative and fiction depicting the women of Paris and their representation. Unlike the first part, this lacks even the slightest bit of exoticism and surprise. Among the



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contributions worth mentioning, Catherine Pascal's essay is of interest. The author examines the figure of the female player. In the 17th century, games to trump boredom were especially popular among women. Mme de Sévigné even wrote that her daughter was crazy about gaming.

Other essays in this part examine how certain authors represented the women of Paris. Furetière (Claudine Nédelec), Marivaux (Laurence Sieuzac), but also a female author, Madame Du Noyer (Isabelle Trivisani-Moreau), paint a picture of Parisian women oscillating between fantasy, stereotype, and reality. In an enthralling essay, Sieuzac describes Marivaux as an anthropologist dissecting Parisian society. His portraits of Parisian women are stereotyped and deeply sexualized. By turns, he depicts the »coquette«, »galante«, »précieuse«, or the »savante«, all conventional female figures of the early modern cities.

Many themes are tackled in this book. While the first part insists on the visibility of women in Paris through their unexpected occupations and resistance to change and authority, the second part offers a more expected perspective through literary testimony. This part lacks coherence and surprise. Alongside the introduction by Arlette Farge, it would have been worthwhile to consider a conclusion binding together this rich volume. These limitations aside, this book is a solid, formidable study that will be of considerable benefit to all who study and seek to understand not just Parisian women but urban women in general.



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