

Nathalie Freidel. *Le Temps des "écrivaines": L'Oeuvre pionnière des épistolières au XVIIe siècle*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2021. 290pp. 32€. Review by LARRY W. RIGGS, BUTLER UNIVERSITY.

This is, in every way, a superb work of scholarship. The author defines her task clearly: "C'est donc un travail de réhabilitation et de réévaluation . . ." of seventeenth-century French *épistolières* (265). The book's voluminous documentation bears witness to the admirable completion of the project. Beautifully written and produced, the book includes a clear, useful introduction and a concise, lucid conclusion. The study's two major parts—"Et Pourtant, Elles Ecrivent," and "Femmes en Réseaux," are subdivided into economically composed, tightly focused sub-sections. There are a number of images of handwritten letters, a well-organized index, and an impressive bibliography. The footnotes are numerous and informative, and they often complement the main text substantively.

Freidel has obviously mastered the book's subject; she surveys thoroughly both primary and secondary sources. She elucidates convincingly the limitations imposed on the education of young women and the role of letter writing—including the exchange of handwritten missives—in women's effort to create for themselves a space of cultural legitimacy and influence. The *écrivaines*—the epithet evokes both their lack of literary status and their determination to contribute to its achievement by women—were true pioneers in the opening and cultivation of letter writing and exchange as a literary territory for women. The book will be of interest to a wide readership: scholars and general readers in gender studies, seventeenth-century history and cultural studies, the history of information media, the origins of modern culture, and other fields.

Very early in the study, Freidel alludes to Molière's *L'Ecole des femmes*. This is appropriate to Freidel's purpose for three major reasons. First, the play's evocation of paranoiac male control of a young woman—convent education, virtual house arrest, forced reading of moralistic texts designed to inculcate female subservience—exemplifies what Freidel says about young women's education and status in seventeenth-century France. Secondly, Agnès, like the *écrivaines* studied in this book, expresses resistance to masculine control and begins to be

a *femme habile*, a subject, rather than an object, when she *writes*. Her attachment of a note to the stone that the grotesque patriarch orders her to throw at her suitor brilliantly dramatizes rebellion from within the appearance of obedience. Third, Molière himself was engaged in the battles over authorship: his detractors, out of professional jealousy, or cultural conservatism, or with some other motive, praised his skill as a theatrical performer precisely in order to diminish him as a writer, or to deny that he was an author, at all. As printed text became a nexus of power, profit, and influence, literature and authorship defined a domain in which political, personal, commercial, religious, and gender interests collided and competed.

Arnolphe, the caricatural patriarch in Molière's play, laments the fact that Agnès was taught to write, since she has used that skill to undermine his control. Freidel rightly emphasizes that, in seventeenth-century France, young women who were educated at all were typically taught to read, but *not* to write. Clearly, they were to absorb texts, not to produce them. Here, again, *L'Ecole des femmes* is relevant and eloquent. Not only does Arnolphe demand that Agnès read the lessons in female subservience taught by the *maximes du mariage*—virtually identical to an actual moralizing handbook of the time—but, he thunders, “Imprimez-le-vous bien.” It was not enough that women not write; they should be, in effect, living copies of the published strictures defining virtue as internalized misogynist ideology. The figures who vilified Molière in the *Querelle de L'Ecole des femmes* and opposed him throughout his career represented the same interests and institutions that produced documents analogous to the *maxims du mariage*. The play dramatizes powerfully the link between awakening female desire and the ability to write.

In her meticulous study of handwritten letters, Freidel describes the struggle women had to wage with the very *materiality* of writing. They had to begin by learning to use quill, ink, and paper to form the letters of the alphabet. They had to learn to leave spaces between words. Handwriting itself, in addition to being a skill women had to acquire on their own and/or in cooperation with other women, was subject to a system of rules that women were not taught. In order to serve as the basis of a feminine practice of writing, the letters had to be legible, as well as coherent and interesting. The women who pre-

pared the way for the *épistolières* who did achieve the status of authors, Madame de Sévigné most notably, had to learn from scratch how to write, and then how to write in a way that permitted, gradually, the accumulation of some cultural capital. Freidel herself, along with her fellow scholars in the study of gender in the constitution of modern culture, is continuing to work toward full critical appreciation of all the *épistolières*.

Writing itself was not the only form of cultural capital of which women's "education" deprived them. Freidel emphasizes that women were also not taught Latin, which was still the principal repository of all the elements of what counted as culture—science, philosophy, literature, etc—and they were thus denied access to all the models, tropes, genres, ideas, and the very language in which those resources were stored and from which they had to be retrieved. This was the currency in which exchanges among male scholars and writers were conducted. Skillful participation in this system of exchanges defined authorial legitimacy. It was, as Freidel shows, a *patrimony* inherited only by educated men. As she also notes, women were excluded from what were referred to as the *ars oratoires*, which were an integral element of the culture of antiquity that educated seventeenth-century men inherited. It was therefore included in the cultural capital that made them privileged subjects and "legitimate" authors.

Having evoked powerfully the obstacles that women had to overcome in order to write at all, Freidel devotes the book's second part to the networks—*réseaux*—that grew with the exchanges of letters among *écrivaines*. The collective nature of this enterprise is impressive, and it was crucial. As Freidel puts it, this was a "démarche collective qui permet à un groupe, par le biais épistolaire, de se doter de capacités nouvelles" (265). The letter-writers gradually, and in the ramifying context of a shared enterprise, took effective possession of a set of tools of which they had long been deprived. That deprivation had been essential to their oppression and their isolation as individuals without cultural participation or significance, to their non-existence as subjects of written communication. Thanks to this long collective effort, Madame de Sévigné's generation "a été la bénéficiaire de la reconnaissance sociale acquise par ces prédécesseuses et de leur affirmation d'un certain mode de présence sur la scène des lettres" (268).

Freidel's meticulously documented analysis makes two powerful and essential points: first, that the early letter-writers' practice provided models which could be emulated and improved upon by later practitioners; second, that these models eventually constituted a fund of cultural material somewhat analogous to the larger, "official" one from which male writers had always drawn.

Freidel's study permits—indeed, it pretty much demands—reconsideration of the entirety of seventeenth-century "feminine" writing. Not only letters, but novels, and, in fact, all of what we know as *préciosité*, can and should be understood as the laborious construction of a new body of significant cultural material, as an effort to create a fund of cultural capital produced by, and culturally empowering for, women. The *salons*, too, can be appreciated in this light. Models, themes, references, rhetorical tropes, discursive rules, and other tools of strategic communication were included in this fund of cultural capital. Topics for discussion in the *salons*, and the linguistic conventions governing such discussions, were derived, in large part, from the corpus of "female" writings.

Like Agnès in Molière's play, the writers studied by Freidel conducted their insurgency from within the confines of a deeply unequal, indeed a virulently misogynistic, society. Letter-writing, like being the hostess of a *salon*, was regarded as an essentially domestic activity. The presence of an acknowledged male author provided legitimacy to a salon and a kind of reflected status to its hostess and female participants. This seemingly paradoxical aspect of female ambition is dramatized in Molière's *Les Femmes savants*. The conventions of *préciosité* can be seen to define female empowerment in terms that actually inhibit the expression of female desire. However, by describing so well the trajectory of female writing in the seventeenth century, beginning with the *degré zero*, Freidel enables us to see that significant progress was achieved. She also makes it possible to perceive some of the ways in which misogyny and disempowerment of women still operate today.