

THE EVOLUTION OF THE FRENCH COURTESAN NOVEL: FROM DE CHABRILLAN TO COLETTE, by Courtney Sullivan. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 127 pp. \$69.99 cloth; \$54.99 ebook.

Courtney Sullivan's *The Evolution of the French Courtesan Novel: From de Chabrilan to Colette* explores the autobiographical fiction of nineteenth-century French courtesans—high class, expensive, stylish prostitutes—who were significant figures in the period's literary imagination. They provided sexual pleasure for men who could afford them, and (in life no doubt, as well as fiction) they served to represent and embody male fantasies and fears and possibly those of women readers. The fictional courtesans created by male authors fall mainly into two categories, of whom the most memorable representatives are Émile Zola's *Nana* (1880) and Marguerite Gautier of Alexandre Dumas fils's *La Dame aux Camélias* (1848, [*The Lady of the Camellias*]). If the *Nana* figure is desirable to the point of threatening male sanity, monstrous, devouring, narcissistically indifferent to the suffering she causes, the "Camélias" prototype is the fallen woman who acknowledges her own betrayal of the feminine ideal and sacrifices herself for the wellbeing of her lover. Either way, she is doomed and in most denouements punished by death.

Sullivan's book outlines the phenomenon of women who worked as courtesans and "wrote back" to these depictions of their lives, presenting their lived experience of prostitution to counter the mythology so successfully established by male novelists (p. 60). This variation of the courtesan novel was partially known from earlier feminist research—for example that of Janet Beizer, Melanie Hawthorne, and Sullivan herself—but had not yet been so clearly defined. Sullivan argues for the existence of a subgenre of the female-authored courtesan novel, delineating its main features in her first chapter before going on to examine the work of Céleste de Chabrilan, Valtesse de la Bigne, and the better-known Liane de Pougy as an intertextual chain of courtesan writing, before turning to Colette's novels with their depiction of the *demi-monde* of the Belle Époque. Sullivan identifies the key attributes of this female-authored subgenre: courtesans are endowed with intellect and agency rather than being venal monsters or hapless victims, and in particular, they are portrayed as active readers. The novels articulate a critique of the sexual double standard and show how it, rather than women's own moral failings, has led to the protagonists' prostitution. Chapter three extends to male writers who attempted to co-opt the considerable success enjoyed by the courtesan writers through literary impersonation. Ernest Blum and Louis Huart's *Les Mémoires de Rigolboche: Ornés d'un portrait photographié* (1860, [AUTHOR: is it possible for you to provide an English translation of this title? It can go within these brackets.]) and Victor Joze's *Les Usages du demi-monde* (1909, [AUTHOR:

is it possible for you to provide an English translation of this title?]), for example, were purported to be the memoirs of successful *demi-mondaines* but were in fact penned by professional male writers, motivated by an odd mix of commercialism and desire to parody and discredit the originals. Sullivan's final chapter on Colette—a bestselling novelist of the Belle Époque—shows how radically her portrayal of the world of sophisticated prostitution rewrites an androcentric mythology and how the seeds of this revisionary narrative were already present in earlier work by courtesan writers.

The argument for intertextual influence between these women authors is persuasively made, both in the sense that the earlier writers (Chabrilan, de la Bigne) are shown to have enabled and be reflected in de Pougy's more famous fictions and memoirs—thus indirectly also being echoed by Colette—and in the sense that the female writers can be seen to take issue in their texts with the powerfully mythified male-authored version of their own lives. The application of Suzette Henke's concept of "scriptotherapy" [AUTHOR: what page number does this term first appear on?] to the writing of these courtesans is also convincing. Sullivan aptly demonstrates how these writers, despite the need to observe certain verbal proprieties in order to be published, register the sheer psychological and emotional brutality of their profession and the lasting impact it had on them. The recurring trope of the "fall," usually the result of seduction or rape by a more powerful man, negates any notion that their profession is freely chosen, and the risk and reality of physical violence, the repugnant sensations of intimacy without desire, the fear and the consequences of unwanted pregnancy all figure eloquently in these narratives—their inscription in words perhaps a means to work through and survive painful experience (p. 17).

Some elements of style are unfortunate distractions from the book's otherwise engaging argument. It is peppered with typographical errors, including in the title of Pierre Louÿs's famous 1894 work *Les Chansons de Bilitis* (Songs of Bilitis), which is given as *Chanson de Blitis* (p. 115). There are awkward transitions between the framing prose and quoted passages, the occasional clumsy translation, and cases of odd syntax that interrupt the flow of reading. As a larger issue, it is not quite clear if the works treated here constitute the entire corpus of the subgenre or if they are, rather, representative of a wider phenomenon. But what the book argues is important, interesting, and based on solid research into the texts and their social and literary contexts.

This study situates courtesan writing as part of a project of personal survival and as a significant dimension of the literature of the long nineteenth century. As Colette so vividly shows, many courtesans survived the negative impact of prostitution with some serenity, pragmatically exploiting male desire to live happily ever after without contracting the fatal disease,

broken heart, or desperate remorse that were their fictional lot in most texts written by men. They made the best of their lives in a profoundly unequal, patriarchal world.

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