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Norman R. Shapiro, ed. and trans., *French Women Poets of Nine Centuries: The Distaff and the Pen*. Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. xlvi + 1183 pp. Intro. Roberta L. Krueger, Catherine Lafarge & Catherine Perry. Foreword Rosanna Warren. Notes, bibliography, and indexes. \$85.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 13: 978-0-8018-8804-5. ISBN 10: 0-8018-8804-2.

Review by Vicki Mistacco, Wellesley College.

When it comes to French literary history, women poets constitute a minority of a minority. Doubly marginalized, as poets and as women, they scarcely appear in anthologies, pedagogical manuals and histories of French literature of the last century and a half. If one were to go by these authoritative sources, one would conclude that the only French women poets who produced anything worthy of note would be Marie de France in the twelfth century, Christine de Pizan in the waning years of the Middle Ages, Pernette du Guillet, possibly, and Louise Labé in the Renaissance, followed, after a three-century dry spell, by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore and, in the early twentieth century, Anna de Noailles. Their presence is equally minimal in specialized anthologies focusing on more recent poetry.[1] Presenting over 600 poems by fifty-six poets from the Middle Ages on, in *French Women Poets of Nine Centuries: The Distaff and the Pen* prize-winning translator of French poetry and theater, Norman R. Shapiro effectively dispels the long-standing notion that French women poets were few and far between.[2]

As anthologies of French women's poetry go, this one is unique in scope, stance and depth. Domna Stanton's 1986 *The Defiant Muse* limits itself to just one to three poems by some thirty-eight women and all the poems were chosen for their feminist themes.[3] Jeanine Moulin's earlier ground-breaking compendia, *La Poésie féminine du XII<sup>e</sup> au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (1966), *La Poésie féminine: L'Époque moderne* (1963) and *Huit siècles de poésie féminine* (1975), on the other hand, adopt a resolutely non-feminist stance, the *féminine* in the titles reflecting her unabashedly stereotypical notions of gender.[4] Women's typical subjects, she argues, are love, nature, religion, "l'amour conjugal" and "le sentiment maternel" (general introduction, 1966, p. 37). In her view, the absence of a long tradition of women's poetry accounts for the technical flaws in their poems and, if there are few women poets of note, it is because women's need to procreate supersedes their need to create.

Shapiro's selection reflects no such biases: he claims that he was "not spurred on by any ideological or proselytizing fury, but guided by the desire to bring to light—in faithful English versions—a variety of texts whose very existence was, in large measure, unsuspected even by specialists" (p. xli). In that, he has surely succeeded. Even as a specialist and author of an anthology of French women's literature myself, I made many delightful and moving discoveries in this collection.[5] Along with the familiar names mentioned above, readers will discover poems by women better known today for their contributions to other literary genres, women such as Marguerite de Navarre, Madeleine de Scudéry, Marie-Catherine Desjardins de Villedieu, and Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis. They will discover the little-known poems of famous social reformers Marie-Pape Carpentier and Louise Michel.

They will also encounter a host of poets whose names have all but disappeared from collective memory: among them, the sixteenth-century religious poets Anne de Marquets and Gabrielle de Coignard;

Ronsard's honorary "adopted daughter" Madeleine de l'Aubespine, whose authorship, once debated, is now supported by recent scholarship; the seventeenth-century lyric poet Antoinette Deshoulières, who, much appreciated for her idylls and *Réflexions diverses*, was regularly featured in literary histories and anthologies well into the nineteenth century; Fanny de Beauharnais, whose feisty feminist "Aux hommes" will come as a revelation to many ("Fier d'une fausse liberté,/ Sexe, qui vous croyez le maître,/ Soyez, au moins, digne de l'être," p. 454); Marie-Madeleine Joliveau de Segrais, author of the pithy "L'aigle et le ver," no doubt the most succinct fable ever written ("L'Aigle disait au Ver, sur un arbre attrapé:/ 'Pour t'élever si haut, qu'as-tu fait?' 'J'ai rampé,'" p. 512--Shapiro admits that his translation "By crawling" cannot do justice to the satirical implications of the original, p. 513); Marie-Amable de la Férandière, author in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries of witty and mischievous fables; Louise-Geneviève Gillot de Saintonge who, along with opera libretti, penned merry drinking songs in the final years of Louis XIV's reign; the precocious Sabine Sicaud, whose intimate and remarkably mature *Poèmes d'enfant* (1926) were acclaimed by Anna de Noailles and who died, after a painful illness chronicled poignantly but un sentimentally in her poetry, at the tender age of fifteen ("Vous parler? Non. Je ne peux pas./ Je préfère souffrir comme une plante," p. 1066).<sup>[6]</sup>

Notwithstanding his claim that this is not primarily a "research study" or "scholarly work" (p. 1127), Shapiro has produced an erudite volume. He has gone to great lengths to unearth many of these texts for the benefit of today's readers: among his varied sources are contemporary periodicals, "evanescent collections" (p. 286) and early literary histories, such as Joseph de Laporte's *Histoire littéraire des femmes françaises* (1769). The book is divided into three parts, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, each introduced by a specialist--Roberta L. Krueger, Catherine Lafarge and Catherine Perry, respectively--who provides the necessary historical and literary contexts. A generous sampling of poems, elegantly presented with the original and translation on facing pages, lends depth to the reader's perception of each poet's *oeuvre*. The critical apparatus--footnotes, bibliographical notes, and an extensive final bibliography, in addition to the general introductions and Shapiro's brief presentations of the individual poets--is grounded in the latest scholarship. Both he and Krueger, for example, deal evenhandedly with the controversy generated in 2006 by the publication of Mireille Huchon's *Louise Labé: une créature de papier* which cast doubt on Labé's authorship.<sup>[7]</sup> Huchon argues that the volume attributed to Labé is the product of a literary hoax perpetrated by Maurice Scève and other male poets in her circle. Without discounting this thesis categorically, Krueger frames the debate in the age-old practice of attributing women's writing to men, and, in his open-minded introduction to Labé, appropriately skeptical regarding other details of her biography, Shapiro nonetheless asks the very pertinent question: "what personal satisfaction perpetrators would derive from a hoax so well conceived and so convincingly carried out that their talents would lie unappreciated for centuries, if, in fact, they were ever to come to light at all?" (p. 133).

Besides the desire to make these poems available to the modern reader, the selection was guided by another--more hedonistic--principle: the pleasure of translation. Shapiro admits that "like any translator, I confront my tasks with a certain self-serving pleasure: the joy of meeting and surmounting the challenges that every work presents; a pleasure that transcends all the disinterested scholarly and missionary zeal that would, no doubt, provide a more idealistic excuse" (p. xli). As a result, we are faced with a necessarily eclectic assemblage of poems. In her foreword, Rosanna Warren writes that in assembling these texts, Shapiro "has implicitly rewritten literary history" (p. xxxv). This has indeed been a function of French literary anthologies as far back as the very first one worthy of that title, the *Recueil des plus belles pièces des Poètes françois, tant anciens que modernes, depuis Villon jusqu'à M. de Benserade* published in 1692 by Barbin.<sup>[8]</sup>

But, apart from showing that women produced, from the very beginning of French literature, good, often

superb, poetry in a wide variety of genres and veins, what exactly is the story Shapiro is telling? This anthology, rich and welcome as it is, suffers, in my view, from the lack of an overarching historical narrative, a lack manifest not only in the selection of poems and poets but also in Shapiro's introductions to the individual writers. Shapiro evidently confided the task of literary history to Krueger, Lafarge and Perry. Indeed, in their scholarly, richly documented and critically up-to-date introductions, they do a fine job of supplying a sense of the evolution of women's poetry, of its changing critical reception and of the sociocultural contexts in which they wrote, including the obstacles they faced as women wielding a pen, obstacles implicit in the anthology's subtitle, *The Distaff and the Pen*, which goes virtually without comment by Shapiro. It is telling, however, that to illustrate their historical narrative, Krueger and Perry, in particular, are forced more than once to refer the reader to poems and poets not included by Shapiro: the medieval mystic Marguerite Porete, for example (p. 8), or Marie Krysinska, the first to break with traditional French prosody by writing in free verse as early as 1882; "if only for this reason, she should appear in the pantheon of modern French poets," affirms Perry (p. 527).<sup>[9]</sup>

The tension between their historical perspective informed by feminist criticism--their feminist canon, if you will--and his idiosyncratic view surfaces repeatedly. Perry points out (p. 529) that a writer such as Delphine Gay de Girardin did not simply author superficial, narcissistic poems like "Le bonheur d'être belle" (pp. 624-29), she also composed political poems denouncing the government's brutal repression of an 1834 uprising by silk workers in Lyon, as did Marceline Desbordes-Valmore; however, these poems will not be found in this anthology. Nowhere is the discrepancy of point of view more apparent than in the contrast between Perry's careful initiation into the ways one might profitably approach nineteenth- and twentieth-century poems written by women and the opening sentence of the very next introduction by Shapiro to the nineteenth-century poet Victoire Babois: "If [Marguerite-]Victoire Babois spent her long literary life writing elegy after elegy, it is perhaps because, delicate in health and unlucky in love, both conjugal and maternal, her existence was not a very happy one" (p.539). This is precisely the kind of straight autobiographical reading negating women's artistry that feminist criticism has taught us to question. After Perry's thoughtful and passionate appeal to view these poets as poets, as artists, this opening sentence comes as a shock. The remainder of Shapiro's one-page introduction to Babois only serves to make matters worse. While noting here the "typically unsympathetic" bias of the antifeminist critic Alfred Marquiset, he nonetheless proceeds to cite his *Les bas-bleus du premier Empire* as a reliable source of information about the poet, just as he quotes Marquiset's "snide comments" (p. 453 n. 2) in introductions to Fanny de Beauharnais and Marie-Emilie Maryon de Montanclos (p. 441 n.1).<sup>[10]</sup> One can only wonder why.

In short, Shapiro's reading of the poets in the anthology is insufficiently gender-inflected. He misses many opportunities to foreground issues of particular significance for women writers, such as their signature, the distaff/pen alternative or the gender expectation of modesty which leads them frequently, especially in early modern times and the Ancien Régime, to profess their humility, even their inferiority, in an effort to mask the transgression inherent in their writing and search for poetic glory (see, for example, poems by Jeanne d'Albret, Marie de Romieu, Madeleine de Scudéry, Elisabeth Guibert, and Marie-Amable de La Férandière). It would have been useful for Shapiro to point out that this was for the most part a *topos*, a strategy and a pretense. Otherwise he risks giving the impression that they really did consider themselves to be of mediocre talent and/or inferior to their male counterparts.

More could have been done as well to relate the poets to female, as well as male, poetic influences and to a female literary tradition. Given the enormous personal commitment this anthology represents and Shapiro's evident sympathy for women poets, it is surprising that the introductions and footnotes are

occasionally marred by condescending remarks and the indiscriminate repetition of critical clichés. These sorts of comments typify the early literary histories and the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century criticism by men that contributed precisely to women's virtual *exclusion* from the literary canon. Thus, we hear that Scudéry's prose is "long-winded" (p. 274) and Genlis' inspiration is "seemingly inexhaustible, if rather lackluster" (p. 476); we are told that a poet switches her rhyme scheme "for no apparent reason" (*passim.*) and, via an unsubstantiated quote attributed by Sanche de Gramont to the notoriously misogynist Goncourt brothers, that "even though Fanny [de Beauharnais] would welcome any capable man into her bed, even into her eighth decade, she maintained a special place in her heart for sixteen-year-old boys" (p. 452).<sup>[11]</sup> How the latter observation helps us appreciate the Enlightenment themes in her poetry remains unclear.

A word about the translations is in order. Shapiro is a gifted translator. For the most part, he has successfully sought to emulate the meter and rhyme scheme of the original, while respecting the poet's tone and themes as well as the lexicon of the period. He is especially good at capturing the tone and sprightly rhythm of fables. The reader interested in issues of translation will find much to reflect upon in this volume; footnotes addressing the challenges faced by the translator abound. The preface lays out his philosophy of translation as a "collaboration" producing "a new work" capable of standing on its own (pp. xl-xli). The careful reader may be slightly put off by the frequent insertion of filler words, "but oh!," "and, lol," "betwixt/between," "not a jot" and the like, in order to make the rhyme. There is also an occasional false note, as in this translation from an epistle by a pregnant Marguerite de Navarre probably to her brother king François I: "Rebuke me not, for then,/ Often I find that I must puke"; this is hardly the same linguistic register as the original "Car s'il cuide prendre la plume en main,/ Ung mal de cuer le remect à demain" (pp. 106-07). Shapiro's translations are often longer than the original; this is unfortunate in the case of Marie de France's "Laüstic" where the reactions of the two male protagonists are expanded in the translation, whereas the original *lai* exemplifies Marie's characteristic economy of means and her emphasis on the female protagonist (pp. 28-37). Finally, there are rare misreadings: the potential "quelque autre amour nouvelle" Pernette du Guillet imagines in "Chanson II" would not be hers but rather the lover's (pp. 122-123).

If one is looking to acquire a sense of French women's poetry over nine centuries, this is an excellent place to start. If one is looking to understand the evolution of the woman poet's cultural status or her evolving relation to literary tradition, both male and female, then one must supplement this reading with other, more gender-oriented, anthologies and studies. Nevertheless, this pioneering volume deserves a home in the library of any reader interested in French poetry, women's and comparative literature, or the art of translation.

## NOTES

[1] Many have voiced this lament, among them, most recently, Christine Planté, "La Place problématique des femmes poètes," in Martine Reid, ed., *La place des femmes dans la critique et l'histoire littéraire* (Paris: Champion, forthcoming). And many have sought to enrich our perceptions of women's contribution to poetry for specific periods. See, for example, Christine Planté, ed., *Femmes poètes du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle: une anthologie* (Lyon, Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1998) and the following bilingual anthologies: Martin Sorrell, ed. and trans., *Elles: A Bilingual Anthology of Modern French Poetry by Women*. "Epilogue/Afterword," Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995), Michael Bishop, ed. and trans., *Women's Poetry in France, 1965-1995: A Bilingual Anthology* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Wake Forest University Press, 1997) and Serge Gavronsky, ed. and trans., *Six Contemporary French Women Poets: Theory, Practice, and Pleasures* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997).

[2] *French Women Poets of Nine Centuries* has been awarded the 2009 National Translation Award by the

American Literary Translators Association, and, from the Professional and Scholarly Publishing Division of the Association of American Publishers, the 2008 PROSE Award for Best Single Volume Reference in the Humanities and Social Sciences and the 2008 PROSE Award for Excellence in Reference Works.

[3] *The Defiant Muse: French Feminist Poems from the Middle Ages to the Present: A Bilingual Anthology* (New York: The Feminist Press), 206 pp. The insistence on a feminist thematic leads to the unfortunate exclusion of such poets as Louise Labé whose feminist subversions were more formal than thematic.

[4] All published in Paris by Seghers. We owe a further—rather quirky and unscholarly—anthology to Régine Deforges: *Les Cent plus beaux cris de femmes: anthologie* (Bagneux: Le Livre de Paris, Coll. “Club pour vous Hachette,” 1981). Deforges recently published a revised and expanded version of her 1993 anthology, *Poèmes de femmes des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Le Cherche-midi, 2009), 277 pp. Her anthologies are not cited by Shapiro or Planté and, as far as I have been able to determine, they are not taken into account by other scholars.

[5] *Les femmes et la tradition littéraire: anthologie du Moyen Age à nos jours. Première partie: XII-XVIII siècles; Seconde partie XIX-XXI siècles* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006 and 2007).

[6] *To Speak, to Tell You?*, a new bilingual edition of Sicaud’s poems, translated by Shapiro and introduced by Odile Aryal-Clause, was published in 2009 (New York: Black Widow Press).

[7] (Geneva: Droz).

[8] Emmanuel Fraisse, *Les Anthologies en France* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), pp. 37-38, esp. p. 38: “Car, dans la radicalité de son projet, le *Recueil* de Barbin établit les linéaments d’une ‘histoire littéraire par les textes.’”

[9] The list of omitted poets could, of course, be expanded indefinitely, especially, as Shapiro himself acknowledges, for the twentieth century. Nevertheless, some surprising absences should be noted: Malvina Blanchecotte, Louisa Siefert, Joyce Mansour, Vénus Khoury-Ghata, Marie-Claire Bancquart, Andrée Chérid, Anne-Marie Albiach. Only one living poet is included: the Belgian Liliane Wouters.

[10] (Paris: Champion, 1913.) Other critics not especially sympathetic to women’s writing appear without comment as useful references: Laporte, *Histoire littéraire des femmes françaises* (Paris: Lacombe, 1769), Alphonse Séché, *Les Muses françaises* (Paris: Louis-Michaud, 1908), Paul Flat, *Nos femmes de lettres* (Paris: Perrin, 1909), Jean de Gourmont, *Muses d’aujourd’hui: essai de physiologie poétique* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1910); and Jean Larnac, *Histoire de la littérature féminine en France* (Paris: Editions Kra, 1929), as well as several books by Charles Maurras who despised what he called “le romantisme féminin”: see especially his “Le romantisme féminin: Allégorie du sentiment désordonné” reprinted in *L’avenir de l’intelligence* (Paris: A. Fontemoing, 1905). These figure among a host of books by men on women writers that exist in great part, it has been shown, to vilify their subjects.

[11] When he is passionate about a poet, however, as he is about Marie Dauguet, such irregularities are seen as manifestations of her originality.

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