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Carol Mossman, *Writing with a Vengeance: The Countess de Chabrilan's Rise from Prostitution*. Toronto, Buffalo and London: Toronto University Press, 2009. xiii + 195 pp. Notes, works cited, index. \$50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8020-9691-3.

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Writing with a Vengeance: The Countess de Chabrilan's Rise from Prostitution offers a new perspective on the history of prostitution in nineteenth-century France by drawing on the voice of one of its most successful venal women, one who would go on to become a popular and best-selling writer. In this vibrantly written work, Carol Mossman introduces readers to both a fascinating historical figure and an unexplored female author who offers an important vantage point through which to reconsider key questions in nineteenth-century French history and literature. However, because of the ambitious scope of this project, which navigates between biography, literature and history, the study is not always able to answer some of the important critical questions it raises for scholars in these fields.

Céleste Vénard's story of sexual humiliation started in 1840, when the sixteen-year-old asked her mother to accompany her to the police prefecture so that she could register as a prostitute in the city of Paris. After working in public brothels, Céleste was eventually rescued by a wealthy patron and thus began her unlikely ascent within the Parisian demi-monde. She earned the nickname La Mogador, ensuring her wealth and notoriety, and went on to marry the Count Lionel de Chabrilan, much to his family's chagrin and despite their best efforts to prevent this union. Following his tragic death, she supported herself through the rest of her life by writing successful novels and producing and acting in plays, having secretly taught herself to write before her marriage.

Mossman describes the central aim of her project as "an exploration of Céleste de Chabrilan's novelistic production, paying particular attention to the opportunities to reconfigure identity afforded through the complex mediation of the writing process itself" (p. 4). This description, however, does not do justice to the scope of Mossman's project. The consideration of Chabrilan's literary corpus does not begin in earnest until the final chapters. Rather, the book is part biography, part cultural history, part literary analysis. It attempts to bring into as sharp a focus as possible the uniqueness of the countess's life trajectory, and specifically the fact that one could begin one's life as a prostitute in nineteenth-century France and end it as a countess with dozens of successful publications to one's name. Mossman seeks to add the prostitute's own voice to the copious nineteenth-century literary and social discourse on prostitution, a voice whose absence she criticizes. The testimony of prostitutes themselves does exist, argues Mossman, despite the fact that, in her appraisal: "recent historians of the subject and literary scholars appear determined *not* to hear the few voices which do cry out" (p. 13). [1]

The book is divided into two parts. "Part One: Chabrilan's Contexts: Biographical, Historical, Literary" juxtaposes three lenses onto the worlds of nineteenth-century prostitution. The first chapter, "The Wages of Shame," lays out the details of Chabrilan's fascinating story, based primarily on her own four-volume *Mémoires*. We learn of Céleste Vénard's début at the bal

Mabille, where she earned her famous sobriquet, of her experience as an equestrienne, of the events leading up to her marriage with the Count, and of her struggles after his death. Vénard taught herself to write in 1851, when creditors sought to claim her property to pay off Lionel de Chabrillan's debts. They assumed he had financed her, when in fact she had been loaning him money for some time. Vénard soon found that writing could be a compelling weapon. As she wrote in her memoirs: "à force de répondre aux attaques dirigées contre moi par mes adversaires, de faire des notes pour ma vie, notes indispensables à mes procès, je finis par prendre goût à ce griffonage ».[2]

In January 1854, the penniless Lionel proposed marriage to his longtime lover. Fleeing his family's outrage, the couple escaped to London to wed and then continued to Australia. There the new Countess confessed to her husband that she had written her autobiography, recently published as *Adieux au monde: memoires de Céleste Mogador*. Through her close friend Alexandre Dumas's connection to Napoleon III's cousin, she managed to block the book's publication. But this was only temporary, nor did it succeed in protecting her reputation in their new home, as she had hoped. In Melbourne she was excluded from any official invitations received by Lionel, and her memoirs (several dozen copies of which had been released before publication was halted) were immediately reviewed in the local papers, to her great humiliation. After returning to Paris, the countess lost a battle to halt further publication. The *Mémoires* were released and quickly sold out. By this time, however, Chabrillan had already embarked upon a new literary career, publishing her first novel in 1857, *Les voleurs d'or*. The Countess notes that when Lionel finally obtained copies of her writing, he was surprisingly supportive. But he fell ill during a voyage back to Australia and died in 1858 at the age of forty, leaving Chabrillan in an even more precarious social position.

Chabrillan wrote eight additional novels between 1859 and 1885. During this time she also went on to write twenty-six plays, which she also sometimes acted in and produced. Unfortunately, little is known about her life in the theater. Mossman does tell us that, with Prince Napoleon's help, she was permitted to take over management of the Folies-Marigny theater, a privilege rarely allowed of women. Given the weight allotted to Chabrillan's writing in the latter part of this study, I wondered why Mossman chose not to discuss any of her plays, several of which appear to be readily available at the BNF. What was the relationship between these works and the novels? As Mossman acknowledges, the boundaries between the demi-monde and the world of the theater were fluid throughout the nineteenth century. Actresses like Sarah Bernhardt faced similar challenges to Chabrillan in their efforts to earn respectability. If Chabrillan acted in and produced some of her own plays, one wonders whether the more nebulous social capital of the theater may have held a different literary valence for her than the novel. If writing was crucial to her own need to redeem a shameful past, as Mossman argues, was the theater seen as part of this redemption or a force against it, linking her back to the demi-monde?

In chapter two, "Worlds Apart: Mapping Prostitution and the Demi-Monde," Mossman places Chabrillan's memoirs in historical context by offering a history of the French demi-monde and the policies that kept it in place. In this section she refers to Chabrillan as Mogador, since this was her identity during the period in question. Passages of the memoirs are interspersed to support the historical detail, offering a compelling first-person voice. Commenting on municipal regulations that prohibited prostitutes from going out in daylight, Mogador wrote: "Je ne suis plus une femme, je suis un numéro; je ne suis plus ma volonté, mais le règlement d'une carte" (p. 47).[3] Mossman turns to the work of historians like Alain Corbin and Laure Adler to provide a fuller picture of the world of the demi-mondaine and, in the process, uses Mogador's words to add color to these scholars' accounts.[4]

Mossman's third chapter is devoted to offering a kind of catalog of nineteenth-century French depictions of the prostitute. It moves through the *physiologies* of the 1840s, Eugène Sue's *Mystères de Paris* (1842-3), Balzac's *Splendeurs et misères de courtisanes* (which serves as a point of reference throughout the book), George Sand's *Isidora* (1846), Huysmans's *Marthe* (1876), Edmond de Goncourt's *La fille Elisa* (1877), Zola's *Nana* (1880) and Jean Lorrain's *La Maison Philibert* (1904). This is a lot of ground to cover and Mossman articulately describes the various relevant figures in each texts. But the terms upon which these works are being discussed are not entirely clear. As a literary scholar myself, I found this chapter somewhat frustrating. There have been several important and extremely influential critical works laying out complex ideas about representations of female sexuality in nineteenth-century France, and the prostitute in particular. At the start of her chapter, Mossman references two of these: Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot* and Charles Bernheimer's *Figures of Ill Repute*, as classics to which she is indebted, but she does not explain what this theoretical debt might be.[5] She also does not mention Janet Beizer's *Ventriloquized Bodies* or refer back to Jann Matlock's *Scenes of Seduction* (mentioned in the introduction), both of which are key critical texts for considering gender issues around representation of the prostitute.[6] Bernheimer, Matlock and Beizer lay some essential critical groundwork about the way that they are bringing together literary and historical texts. Mossman does not situate her own readings in any of these contexts. As a result, the nuances of these separate works are lost, as are many of their authors' distinct preoccupations and narrative strategies. This seems to me a missed opportunity. Without any theoretical framing for the relationship between nineteenth-century literature and history, the rich and disturbing French literary exploration of the prostitute is presented as an additional form of background for the facts of the countess's life, rather than a context through which to read her own efforts at self-representation, which will be presented in the last three chapters of the book.

In part two, "Chabrillan and the Uses of Fiction," Mossman devotes one chapter to Chabrillan's *La Sapho*; one chapter to the ten novels written between 1857 and 1885; and a last chapter to Chabrillan's last novels. Mossman's exposition and analysis of Chabrillan's literary development is twofold in purpose. It makes an argument for Chabrillan as a writer, in order to demonstrate her work as "a magnificent achievement for someone who was semi-literate until the age of twenty-seven, who was an autodidact, and who could stand in the shelter of no literary tradition" (p. 134). It also demonstrates how Chabrillan worked through her own self-hatred in her writing. "With each novel on her itinerary, the ex-Mogador will make limited progress toward self-pardon [...] as the Countess's fiction works through the paralyzing questions of remorse, retribution and responsibility" (p. 130).

In reviewing the bulk of Chabrillan's fiction writing, Mossman seamlessly weaves together storylines and characters, demonstrating the evolution of Chabrillan's thinking and analysis around the key identity issues with which she was consumed. Through her own writing, Mossman argues, Chabrillan was able to provide herself with the forgiveness that her society could ultimately not afford her. Given the extent of the historical context offered earlier, I was particularly struck by the lack of literary context in these chapters, specifically some exploration of the relationship between Chabrillan's writing to that of other nineteenth-century women writers (the male tradition was covered in the previous chapter). If not an actual prostitute herself, the much reviled nineteenth-century *femme de lettres* was often considered another kind of "public woman," and the association of these two figures was not uncommon.[7] Many women writers of the late nineteenth century were working explicitly against similar dynamics of an objectifying, sexualizing, hystericizing male gaze.[8] While Mossman does mention George Sand's work (particularly *Isidora*), I would have liked to see this analysis developed more, as it was a clear influence, providing the literary tradition whose absence Mossman notes.[9] In general, then, I would have liked to see Chabrillan's writing itself—a central focus of the book—brought into dialogue with the nineteenth-century texts and contexts that

Mossman discusses in the earlier sections. However, this may be my own literary bias and Mossman may well have been attempting to broaden her audience by minimizing emphasis on the critical contexts of this particular field.

In recounting Chabrillan's unfamiliar story, Mossman succeeds in introducing readers to a fascinating character whose life offers myriad windows into crucial axes of nineteenth-century culture. This ambitious effort cannot be expected to comprehensively cover all the ground it evokes in its movement between biography, history and literature. It introduces literary and historical scholars to a figure who should be of great interest for both, and invites researchers to find ways to integrate this first-person voice into their consideration of these central issues for nineteenth-century French studies.

NOTES

[1] Mossman cites assertions in Laure Adler's *La vie quotidienne dans les maisons closes: 1830-1930* (Paris: Hachette, 1990) and Jann Matlock's *Scenes of Seduction: Prostitution, Hysteria and Reading Difference in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) that prostitutes themselves had left few of their own traces.

[2] *Adieux au monde: Mémoires de Céleste Mogador*, 4 vols. (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle, 1858, second edition) vol. 4, p.175.

[3] *Adieux au monde*, vol. 1, p.131.

[4] Alain Corbin, *Les filles de nocé: misère sexuelle et prostitution au XIXe siècle* (Paris : Flammarion, 1978).

[5] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984); Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). It seems worth mentioning that Bernheimer and Brooks had their own dispute about the terms through which to critically discuss female sexuality in the nineteenth century. See Charles Bernheimer, "Response to Peter Brooks," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991): 868-74; Peter Brooks, "Response to Charles Bernheimer," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991): 875-877.

[6] Beizer's book, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994) is not concerned with prostitution in particular, but rather with narrative voices which hystericalize the female body. By limiting her focus to prostitution, Mossman does not fully engage with the broader critical questions surrounding the representation of female sexuality in nineteenth-century France, including the close associations between prostitution and hysteria, despite acknowledging madness as a theme for Chabrillan ("Madness, well known to be a female literary and operatic affliction, proves a useful narrative tool for Chabrillan" [p. 141]).

[7] See Albert Cim's dedication to his 1891 novel, *Les Bas-bleus*, which he dedicated to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Jules Barbey d'Aureville (author of his own misogynist treatise, *Les Bas-bleus*) "qui, tous les deux, ont si éloquemment célébré les femmes d'intérieur et si vigoureusement fouaillé toutes celles qui—femme de plume, de club ou de rue—n'aspirent qu'à devenir 'publique.' »

[8] Admittedly, one finds more examples of this towards the end of the nineteenth century. But Mossman does discuss male-authored novels from that time in her treatment of the literature of prostitution. It might have been interesting for Mossman to consider, for example, the work of the courtesan, Liane de Pougy, who was very much influenced by Zola and likely served as one of his models for *Nana*. Mossman references Pougy's memoirs but may not have been aware of her 1901 autobiographical novel *Idylle saphique*, where the main character is a prostitute confronting self-loathing in a way highly reminiscent of Chabrillan.

[9] One of Chabrillan's main characters in *La Sapho* is named Lélia, the name of the courtesan Pulchérie's sister and alter ego in Sand's novel *Lélia*. While Mossman discusses Sand's *Lélia* in an earlier chapter and notes Chabrillan's interest in Sand, she does not explore the possible significance of this central character in Chabrillan's own *La Sapho*.

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