
H-France Review Vol. 5 (July 2005), No. 69

Michèle Fogel, *Marie de Gournay: Itinéraires d'une femme savante*. Paris: Fayard, 2004. 397 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. 25€ (pb). ISBN 2-213-61890-9.

Review by Katharine J. Lualdi, University of Southern Maine.

Scholars have long appreciated the dynamism of print culture in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France and how it shaped, and was shaped by, the shifting political, intellectual, and religious landscape of the period.[1] The role of women in this culture, however, particularly in the sixteenth century, is less well understood, for women made up only a tiny fraction of published authors at the time. Typically scholars have focused on a few exceptional women with widely available texts.[2] Marie de Gournay (1565-1645), the self-proclaimed *filie d'alliance* of Michel de Montaigne, clearly qualifies on both fronts. During a literary career spanning five decades, she not only oversaw the publication of multiple editions of Montaigne's *Essais*, but was also a prolific author, with a novel, poems, translations, treatises, and more to her credit.

As her extensive endnotes and bibliography attest, Michèle Fogel is keenly aware of the historical and historiographical tracks left in Marie de Gournay's wake. In the past twenty years, innumerable books, articles, and even two international colloquia have examined Marie de Gournay's life and legacy from a variety of perspectives, notably how she enhanced Montaigne's literary influence and established her own voice as a talented feminist writer. Michèle Fogel implicitly draws on this research to paint a portrait of Marie de Gournay as a woman who dared to cast herself as a *femme savante* in the male-dominated *monde des lettres*.

I emphasize here the word "implicitly" because Fogel provides few explicit interpretive or methodological signposts in her narrative, leaving her readers largely on their own to tease out its broader meanings and conclusions. Furthermore, in light of the significant number of recent writings on Marie de Gournay, two important questions come to mind, which Fogel fails to address: why write a biography of Marie de Gournay in the first place, and why now? With that said, the book still holds considerable appeal and value. Well organized and brimming with engaging textual analysis and evocative details, the book offers insight into how one extraordinary woman interacted with the new public sphere and literary field of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century France.

On the one hand, Fogel's biography heeds tradition by adopting a strictly chronological format. Divided into twelve chapters, the book begins in the 1580s when Marie de Gournay first read Montaigne's *Essais* as a naïve yet precocious teenager, and concludes with her death in 1645 as a well-seasoned eighty-year-old international literary figure. On the other hand, in her introduction Fogel suggests that her goal is not simply to walk through Marie de Gournay's life in homage of her literary achievements. Rather, Fogel's intent is to root these achievements in their culturally and historically specific time and place. For this reason, Fogel does not limit her sources to Marie de Gournay's publications; she also draws on a wealth of notarial records to uncover the nitty-gritty of Marie's private history (p. 18).

The ensuing twelve chapters reveal the benefits of Fogel's strategy. By combining Marie de Gournay's public and private personas, Fogel illuminates the fluidity between literature and everyday life. Certainly, Marie de Gournay's sheer force of will and ambition drove the formation of her authorial sense of self, layer-by-layer, year-by-year, but so too did broader social, political, and financial forces. In this sense, although Fogel does not use the word "self-fashioning," one hears echoes of Stephen

Greenblatt nonetheless. As he has argued, in the sixteenth century there was “an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process.”^[3] Greenblatt situates literature at the core of this process because, according to his paradigm, through its use of language, literature functions as “a manifestation of the concrete behavior of its particular author, as itself the expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped, and as a reflection upon those codes”^[4]. As portrayed by Fogel, Marie de Gournay embodied just such dialectic between inner and outer, self and society.

Chapters one through four center on the “birth” of Marie de Gournay’s public identity beginning not with her physical birth but instead her exchange of letters with one of the most celebrated literary figures of the day, Justus Lipsius (1547-1606). While visiting Paris in 1588, she came across a collection of his letters, which included words of admiration for “un sage français,” Michel de Montaigne. By this time, Marie had immersed herself in his *Essais* for more than two years. Lipsius’ praise helped to convince Marie’s mother to allow her to meet Montaigne, who coincidentally was also in Paris. In her letter to Lipsius, she presented herself as a future author who shared his esteem for Montaigne, whom she called “her father.” She signed the letter not with her family name, Marie Le Jars, but rather with Marie de Gournay. The “de Gournay” referred to the *seigneurie* purchased by her father in Picardy, which after his death in 1578 was to be passed on to his oldest son. Marie had no claim to this name but assumed it nonetheless as a way of staking out her own identity and securing the social marker inherent in the title. Likewise, by claiming Montaigne as her “father,” she legitimized her intellectual ambitions through their association with male authority. Lipsius’ response, addressed to “Marie de Gournay, noble virgin,” contributed to Marie’s self-construction and two years later, introduced her to European literati when it was included in a new collection of his letters.

In her discussion of the “birth” of Marie de Gournay, Fogel probes beneath the surface to uncover just how instrumental Marie was in creating her self-image through language. According to Marie’s account, she first discovered the *Essais* while in “exile” in Gournay in 1585-86. In fact, notarial records reveal that at this time, the family was still living in Paris, and did not take up permanent residence in Gournay until 1587 (p. 25). So why did Marie suggest otherwise in her personal history, *Copie de La Vie*? Because, according to Fogel’s interpretation, Marie did not want to sever the association between her name and the family estate, where she had spent many hours reading the *Essais*, and where eventually Montaigne himself came to stay in the fall of 1588 (pp. 24-34). This place was thus part of her intellectual journey and meeting of minds with Montaigne. While together there, they poured over the most recent edition of Montaigne’s work, with Marie often acting as scribe, and he cultivated her self-understanding and confidence as a woman capable of engaging in a man’s world through the power of the pen.

Despite the intensity of Marie de Gournay and Montaigne’s friendship and collaboration in 1588, its full impact remained largely invisible for many years to come. After the death of her mother in 1592, she and two of her siblings fled to Cambrai to escape the French religious wars raging in Picardy and elsewhere at this time. Upon her return to France, her family was embroiled in an acrimonious inheritance dispute, which when it was finally resolved in 1596, left Marie with limited resources and fragile social connections. Both of these factors—her ever present need for money and her social vulnerability as an unmarried woman—posed many challenges to her literary ambitions. Yet at the same time, the settlement of her family’s estate allowed her the freedom and flexibility to forge her own way along many different routes.

These routes are the focus of chapters five through twelve. Those readers interested in a detailed analysis of specific works by Marie de Gournay should turn here. Fogel begins in chapter five with Marie de Gournay’s official entrance into the literary world with the publication of the *Proumenoir de*

Monsieur de Montaigne in 1594, followed a year later with her first edition of Montaigne's *Essais*. Both texts provide Fogel with convincing examples of how Marie de Gournay wed her own voice as a female author to her efforts to defend the intellectual value of Montaigne. After his death in 1592, Montaigne's widow had given Marie a copy of the *Essais*, which Montaigne had been preparing for a new edition. In doing so, Montaigne's family signaled its acceptance of her as his adopted daughter and literary heir. Marie clearly sought to capitalize on this connection by including "par sa fille d'alliance" in the title of the *Proumenoir*. In her long preface to the 1595 edition of the *Essais*, she invested her status with concrete meaning and authority, repeatedly casting herself as his daughter, and he as her father, their souls fused as one (pp. 107-125).

Since the *Essais* remained one of the constants of Marie de Gournay's literary career (she edited eleven different editions in her lifetime), they form a common thread running throughout Fogel's biography. Yet she clearly does not want to cast Marie de Gournay in Montaigne's shadow, as many of her contemporaries and later biographers did. Thus, in addition to her analysis of many of Marie de Gournay's published works (see below), Fogel describes Marie's hands-on approach to her editorial responsibilities, and the ways in which it left an indelible mark on the textual content and layout of the *Essais* (pp. 115-118, 209-213).

Yet Marie de Gournay's journeys in the literary world were not without troubles. She was still a woman asserting her intellectual voice and capabilities in a male forum, often against the backdrop of profound social and political unrest. Fogel uses a variety of sources to explore these struggles, which ranged from vitriolic attacks by male literary figures to notarial records documenting Marie de Gournay's mounting levels of personal debt, and the ways in which she responded to them. One strategy was to openly court royal favor, which she did with the publication of her poem, *Bienvenue de Monseigneur le duc d'Anjou*, written to celebrate the birth of Henri IV's third son in 1608 (pp. 164-167). Her courtship ultimately brought the sweet reward of a royal pension in 1618 (p. 213) and more significant still, royal *lettres patentes* in 1633 granting "la Demoiselle de Gournay" exclusive rights to reprint the *Essais* (pp. 276-79). Another strategy was to confront contemporary debates head on to showcase her intellectual acumen and keep her name in the public eye. She did just that in 1610, for instance, in her defense of the Jesuits in *Adieu de l'âme du roy de France* (1610) (p. 167-171), and again in 1622 with her *Égalité des hommes et des femmes*, a systematic assault on the prevailing belief in women's intellectual inferiority (pp. 189-202). Even if such literary confrontations carried some risk, they succeeded in cultivating a public image of her as a "virgin," as Lipse had labeled her many years before, who gave birth to literature instead of children—a woman above yet bound to her sex.

Upon her death in 1645, her critics and admirers alike agreed that Marie de Gournay was an extraordinary woman who had lived in an extraordinary age. Lured by the immense body of available sources, Fogel deftly follows this lead to uncover Marie de Gournay in all her complexity and uniqueness. But the reader is left to wonder how Marie de Gournay fit into the broader picture of early modern female print culture. A few passing references to Mesdames des Roches aside, Fogel makes little effort to view Marie de Gournay in relationship to other contemporary female authors, and how their authorial strategies may have overlapped. Fogel thereby misses an important opportunity to enrich our appreciation of Marie de Gournay further as an individual and as a product of her times.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *L'Apparition du livre* (Paris: Éditions A. Michel, 1958); and Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987).

[2] Two important exceptions to this generalization are Elizabeth C. Goldsmith and Dena Goodman, eds., *Going Public: Women and Publishing in Early Modern France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995); and Susan Broomhall, *Women and the Book Trade in Sixteenth-Century France* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

[3] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 2.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Katharine J. Lualdi
University of Southern Maine
klualdi@maine.rr.com

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172