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Courtney Sullivan, *The Evolution of the French Courtesan Novel: From de Chabrillan to Colette*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. ix + 127 pp. Bibliography, notes, and index. \$54.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-137-59708-3; \$39.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-137-59709-0.

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There is no dearth of documentation regarding the volume of novels, treatises, and physiologies about demi-mondaines written by nineteenth-century Frenchmen, particularly after 1840. To cite these authors amounts to a *Who's Who* of French letters: Balzac, Dumas père and fils, the Goncourts, Flaubert, Huysmans, Mérimée, Musset, Maupassant, and Zola, not to mention such lesser lights as Alhoy, Barrière, Delvau, Lorrain, Murger, and Sue, to name a few other members of the fraternity. Add to the roster opera (*La Bohème*, *La Traviata*, *Carmen*), theater, newspapers, and caricature and we have a discourse of extraordinary density surrounding the subject of venal women. Whether the *grisette* with a heart of gold typical of romanticism, or realism's grittier *lorette* whose hardness of heart is surpassed only by her business acumen, or, finally, the insatiable courtesan who, preying on defenseless men, devours fortune upon fortune, the same dismal doom is visited upon them all. The exception to these representations is George Sand's 1846 novel *Isidora* in which a fallen woman is rehabilitated and, more extraordinary still, lives to tell the tale. But as in so much else, Sand's is a lone voice.

Until the last fifteen years or so, literary criticism revolving around this type of fiction has centered on male-authored representations of venal women. Even feminist critics have largely ignored the few known autobiographical writings penned by sex workers and have, moreover, tended to deny outright the existence of a literary production. The oversight is perhaps understandable given the strength of the stereotype established through sheer volume of repetition as well as the fact that the entire nineteenth-century society seemed to conspire in denying the authenticity of such fiction that did exist.

Recent scholarship has begun to take seriously the claims made in memoirs and autobiographical writings of nineteenth-century prostitutes and courtesans. And finally, a few scholars have examined the novelistic production of individual women authors, attentive to different representations of the demi-monde which are articulated in a new voice. What the new scholarship has revealed in the novels of these women writers—Céleste de Chabrillan, Valtesse de la Bigne and Liane de Pougy—is fiction that challenges the dominant discourse by calling into question the double standards of a society that affords scant protection and few employment opportunities to women while allowing men to indulge freely in the same sexual behaviors for which these women are blamed.

Whereas literary readings thus far have focused on single authors, Courtney Sullivan's *The Evolution of the French Courtesan Novel: From de Chabrillan to Colette* addresses all three of the above-mentioned writers. By doing so, Sullivan makes a persuasive case for the existence of an actual counter-discourse forged through time by these women writers, a counter-discourse deemed sufficiently subversive that male authors attempted to co-opt it in order to "set the record straight." Sullivan ends her study with an exploration of Colette's *Chéri*, *La Fin de Chéri*, and *Gigi*. Although Colette, unlike the other three, was not

a courtesan, Sullivan sees in Colette's fictional representation of courtesans the culmination of an itinerary: "Colette circumvents the paradigm of the repentant and doomed demi-mondaine" (p. 104).

The Evolution of the French Courtesan Novel maintains that these novels constitute in themselves a sub-genre of the popular novel. In her reading, the "courtesan novel" is distinct from the feminist romance (another recognized sub-genre) in part because it centers on the figure of a sex worker but also because of the vehemence with which it denounces society's hypocrisy. According to Sullivan, there are five elements that courtesan novels share. First, they each relate the protagonist's "fall." This might take the form of a seduction based on promises of marriage and subsequent abandonment or, as in the case of *La Sapho* by Chabrillan, a homeless young woman being lured into what is, unbeknownst to her, a brothel. Second, the main character has a marked penchant for independence. Next, the protagonist is depicted as an active reader and woman of learning who consciously re-writes Dumas fils's *La Dame aux camélias* or his *La Femme de Claude*. Fourth, the protagonist criticizes the hypocritical double standards of the culture that ostracizes women for the same behaviors men can exercise freely. Finally, the courtesan expresses a desire for vengeance against those who have abused her and who have held her in contempt. None of these novelists portray their profession in a romantic light. Instead the emphasis is placed on the harassment and exploitation they suffer from and on the dangerous and humiliating nature of sex work.

Chapter two defines the sub-genre and discusses Chabrillan, its originator, and her novel, *La Sapho* (1858), showing how Valtesse de la Bigne's *Isola* (1876) uses her predecessor's novel as an intertext and explicitly mentions Chabrillan's *Mémoires* as well. Further, the protagonist, Isola, engages in a critique of Dumas fils's *La Femme de Claude*. Bigne's successor Liane de Pougy was more prolific in her courtesan fiction, authoring four novels: *L'Insaisissable* (1898), *Myrrhille ou la Mauvaise Part* (1899), and *Idylle saphique* (1901) which alludes to her lover Natalie Barney and intimates (in a parody of *La Dame aux camélias*) that the path to rehabilitation may lie in lesbian love. *Les Sensations de Mademoiselle de la Bringue* (1904) concludes Pougy's series of courtesan novels, some of which include derogatory mentions of Zola's *Nana* (1880) and frequent references to Valtesse de la Bigne's *Isola*.

It is with some disappointment that one learns that these novels (with the exception of *Les Sensations*) end in the death of the heroine and sometimes with a religious conversion: "These writers indeed conclude their works with the death of their protagonists since they ostensibly cannot envision a society that would reintegrate a courtesan, however reformed she may be" (p. 39). What the protagonists do succeed in doing, however, is denouncing the hypocrisy of society, representing the sex worker from her point of view, unveiling the seamy and humiliating aspects of prostitution, challenging the damaging stereotypes of courtesans, and, on the psychological front, exacting some measure of revenge. Taken together, in Sullivan's reading, these novels constitute a counter-discourse that threatened the prevailing stereotype of the venal woman.

In what becomes a kind of discursive battlefield, several male writers fight back. Chapter four of *The Evolution of the French Courtesan Novel* treats two sets of faux memoirs by male authors impersonating women. The first is the enormously successful *Les Mémoires de Rigolboche* by Ernest Blum and Louis Huart which went into six editions, followed by Victor Joze's *Les Usages du demi-monde* in 1909. In Sullivan's reading, these writers cashed in on the success of the courtesan novels of Chabrillan, Pougy, and Bigne by co-opting female identities while at the same time discrediting the sub-genre itself. Sullivan points to *Rigolboche's* over-the-top depiction of the heroine's fall as ridiculous beyond belief, the representation of the courtesan as stupid and illiterate (if they are illiterate, how can they write?) and as grasping and greedy. These pseudo-memoirs proved to be so successful that they launched a phenomenon known in Europe and the United States as "la rigolbochomanie." The very existence of this phenomenon suggests that the representational stakes were high.

Courtney Sullivan's book ends with a consideration of Colette's three novels featuring courtesans: *Chéri*, *La Fin de Chéri*, and *Gigi*. While the inclusion of these novels in the sub-genre is understandable to the

extent that the courtesan figure is allowed to age and live out her life, they do not conform to the definition that Sullivan herself has given of the sub-genre. Their author was not a courtesan. There are no accounts of a fall. (On the contrary, the young Gigi successfully resists the advances of her suitor and family friend, Gaston.) Certainly the central female characters are presented as being cultivated but their central preoccupation is hardly to avenge themselves on a hypocritical society. What is in fact remarkable about *Chéri* and its sequel is the complete absence of opprobrium surrounding the demi-monde. This world is simply presented as a given with no value judgements attached. It is in this sense, perhaps, that these three novels represent a satisfying end point of the trajectory of the courtesan novel even if they do not, strictly speaking, contain all the requisite elements. As Sullivan explains, “Colette’s three works ultimately mark a radical shift in perspective on the courtesan because they exhibit a complete departure from the stereotype of the self-sacrificing but doomed woman” (p. 89).

The Evolution of the French Courtesan Novel concludes on a plus-ça-change note with a consideration of the speculation surrounding the “real” gender of the author of the Neapolitan novels penned by Elena Ferrante (a pseudonym). By way of conclusion, Sullivan is pointing out that even today female authorship is open to being questioned.

Courtney Sullivan deserves much credit for having seen and explored the relationships and commonalities in the works of these several women writers and for having established a genealogy among them. Whether or not a handful of novels constitutes a sub-genre might be debated (particularly in light of the fact that Colette’s three novels diverge from Sullivan’s own model). Nonetheless, by establishing a set of characteristics common to the “courtesan novel,” other scholars may now uncover more fiction belonging to this category. It is not impossible that the concerted attempts to discredit challenging representations of venal women succeeded in casting some of the fiction that does exist into the shadows.

The Evolution of the French Courtesan Novel makes an important contribution to feminist approaches to French literature. Not only does Sullivan’s study postulate a new category, but it makes a convincing case for the construction of a discourse that counters, in a way that was apparently threatening to male writers, the hegemonic male discourse surrounding fictions of the sex worker. The book would have benefited from more thorough proofreading (there are typographical errors on pages 6, 10, 19, 38, 50, 54, 63, 74, 77, 109, 115, and 116) but overall, it is a pleasure to discover the existence of a discursive field opposing the tired and redundant litany of male-generated stereotypes of the courtesan.

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