

Courtney Sullivan. *The Evolution of the French Courtesan Novel: From Chabrilan to Colette*. London: Palgrave Macmillan Publishers, 2016. ix +127pp.

Sullivan's first monograph focuses on the courtesan novels of Celeste de Chabrilan, Valtesse de la Bigne, Liane de Pougy, and Colette, who wrote during the mid-nineteenth century into the beginning of the twentieth. She introduces these women as more than just *demi-mondaines* 'courtesans,' underscoring how their work challenges the idea of courtesans as dirty, contagious, depraved, and man-eating femmes-fatales, an image depicted in the literature of dominant contemporaneous male writers like Dumas *frères*, the Goncourt brothers, Eugène Sue, and Emile Zola.

The first chapter serves as an introduction to the first three aforementioned courtesan authors. Sullivan presents de Chabrilan as a woman who strove to write and wanted to sell her work rather than her body. She shows de la Bigne's motivation to publicly display social injustices and portrays de Pougy as a woman who promoted her writing through her associations with journalists in order to earn money and fame. Sullivan describes all three women as liberated in their writing, thinking, socializing, dress, and finances—all practices that challenged the values of the times about women's desires and men's authority.

In her second chapter, Sullivan argues that despite their fame, the *demi-mondaines auteures* constituted an illicit group rejected by the noble and bourgeois classes and offers a unique perspective on their experiences that place them in the sub-genre of the *roman populaire*. All criticism and intertextual references by the *demi-mondaines* writers of the times started with Dumas' *La Dame aux Camélias* (1848), written prior to their own novels, which presented a cruel portrait of Marguerite Gauthier, impersonated by the fictional Violetta Valéry. Dumas rejects the courtesans and prevents the male reader from recognizing his own social responsibility as well as his role and actions in her downfall. These female authors particularly challenged Dumas' portrayal of Gautier as an unrealistic and harmful stereotype that romanticizes the repentant courtesan and glorifies her impoverished downfall.

Sullivan portrays de Chabrilan, de la Bigne, and de Pougy as sharing the same characteristics that distinguish their writings from the male ideology in which they write. For example, they do not agree with the male ideology that portrays prostitutes as "fallen women." Instead, their characters are equipped with intellectual abilities and independence that put them at odds with the bourgeois society they live in; they are all active readers who deride Dumas and rewrite his story; they decry the double standards of a hypocritical society that protects men but not women; and finally they do not offer heterosexual love as the only way for a woman to fulfill her destiny.

All courtesan novels analyzed here use intertextuality, engaging with Dumas's work as a counterdiscourse in order to transform the notion of a degraded woman into a driven one who declares her own right to talk about men's damaging representations of her own kind. For example, de Chabrillan's *Sapho* (1858) serves as a model for de la Bigne's *Isola* (1876), whose main character is an engaged, active reader who also seeks vengeance and post-mortem social rehabilitation. De Pougy uses intertextuality in *L'Insaisissable* (1897) and *Myrrhille* (1899) to steer the perspective from a degraded courtesan to an injured but driven woman in her own right in order to present men's damaging representation of women.

As the book progresses to the third chapter, Sullivan claims that the discourse in de Pougy's *Idylle Saphique* (1901) and *Les Sensations de Mlle de la Bringue* (1904) constitutes a chronicle of proto-feminist issues and a counterdiscourse to male authors. These works depict the dangers courtesans endure such as harassment, humiliation, and psychological damage which had largely been overlooked by male authors. At the same time, Sullivan proposes that de Pougy's writing in *Idylle* (1901) served as therapy for the female author, who worked through trauma and ultimately escaped to Brittany, away from prostitution and death.

In the fourth chapter, Sullivan's compelling argument is that male writers, envious of the popularity and financial successes of courtesans' writings, co-opted the personas of the *demi-mondaines*, parodied them, and spread doubt about their authorship and lives by integrating harmful representations of them in their work. For example, Rigolboche, a well-known dancer, becomes famous with de Chabrillan's *Adieux au monde* (1854) where she is portrayed as a celebrity. Ernest Bloum and Luis Huart presented their own version of Rigolboche to attain fame themselves by co-opting the identity of Marguerit Badel, her real name, and creating a parody of her. Subsequently, several other authors criticized Badel. De Pougy's bestsellers about the courtesans were followed by Victor Joze's own versions. Ultimately, male authors claimed that books and pamphlets written about courtesans were a bad influence on bourgeois women.

In the fifth chapter, Sullivan describes the way Colette presents the *demi-mondaines'* lives beyond prostitution and youth and continues in the tradition of de Pougy in countering heterosexual love as a norm. Colette's last two novels, *La Fin* (1926) and *Gigi* (1944), mark a radical shift from the stereotype of self-sacrificing and doomed women that had prevailed up to that moment. She bypasses her predecessors' idea of a repentant *demi-mondaine* since her main character opts for a life beyond prostitution, remorse, and guilt.

In the conclusion, Sullivan discusses de Pougy's life after quitting prostitution and looks into the twenty-first century, incorporating Elena Ferrante and Virginie Despentes, contemporary authors who continue to echo important themes concerning women writers, identity, gender, and sexuality. For example,

Ferrante argues in *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (2014) that male writers offered their own version of women, while in Desportes' work, issues of the problematic boundaries between marriage and prostitution and those about sex workers' agency versus exploitation are still present. Courtesan novelists pioneered these discussions on sex work and its de-stigmatization in literature, film, and theory over a century ago, anticipating a body of twenty-first century scholarship that grapples with problems of rape and exploitation still at the core of our society today.

Zoe Petropoulou
St. John's University