

French salons/American saloons

DIANA SCHAUB

If a man's word is his bond, what of a woman's? Are the words of women—whether promises or not—less credible or less weighty? Mona Ozouf does not think so. She proposes to take women at their word, not all women (that might indeed be foolhardy), but certain select women. In *Women's Words: Essay on French Singularity*,[†] Ozouf listens attentively to the conversation of ten French women of letters, five of them born before the Revolution (Mesdames du Deffand, de Charrière, Roland, de Staël, and de Rémusat) and five after (George Sand, Hubertine Auclert, Colette, and the two Simones, Weil and de Beauvoir). Relying mainly on memoirs and correspondence, she listens in particular to what they have to say about themselves as women and about the larger questions of female destiny and autonomy.

Ozouf's biographical project gives rise to a perplexing question: Why is the French take on what used to be called “the woman question” so distinctly different from the Anglo-American? Why was French feminism so little occupied with suffrage, and why is it today so comparatively mild and so much less man-hating? According to Ozouf, French feminists, even academic feminists,

lack the militant thrust that transforms female unhappiness into a badge of honor; they do not adopt an aggressive tone. They do not oppose men, collectively guilty, to women, their collective victims.... The ordinary discourse of feminism in America ... is unacceptable in France, where we have difficulty believing that violence is lurking behind every exchange between men and women or that mere verbal insistence on the part of men is sufficient to constitute rape.

The book concludes with a fascinating “Essay on French Singularity,” promised by the subtitle, in which Ozouf attempts

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to account for the unique path of French feminism. It is a journey for which Montesquieu and Rousseau serve as philosophic escorts.

In taking seriously "women's words," Ozouf finds herself between two camps and in opposition to both. To her rear are the traditional male practitioners of the genre of the woman's portrait, authors such as C.A. Sainte-Beuve and Jules Michelet, whose sentimental and idealized sketches rarely delve into their subjects' recorded thoughts. Sainte-Beuve is explicit about his disinclination: "He argues that the woman's portrait escapes the genre of literary 'criticism,' which is too brutal a word, he thinks. One has only to love, to sympathize, to produce a few light pages." Oddly enough, contemporary vanguard feminists are equally dismissive of distaff dialectics, since they believe that whatever women of the past said, it was necessarily subject to male determinations and thus inauthentic. While one group swathes female authors in the diaphanous robes of the eternal feminine, the other regards them as held within the straight-jacket of patriarchal false consciousness. Neither really bothers to listen to women's reasonings.

OZOUF'S desideratum is to understand the author as the author understood herself. Although she does not use that formula, her more nuanced version is every bit as challenging of contemporary assumptions. Here is her elegant defense of her method:

It is these immediately original voices I wish to make heard. That supposes first of all that I capture them as faithfully as possible, thus breaking with the violent prejudice that disqualifies what men and women say they do, as if they were always and everywhere the least well placed to understand their own actions, as if we had to take their words for dissimulation or naiveté. For although it seems reasonable not to take witnesses at their word, to suppose that they do not always know the truth about their own lives, and to question their lucidity, it seems unreasonable to refuse them that truth while granting it generously to the most mediocre of their interpreters. Before giving in to the movement of mistrust and arrogance, let us wager that there is something to cull from what they truly have to say.

It is a wager she wins. The portraits themselves—engaging mixtures of incident and reflection—are beautifully crafted (and beautifully translated by Jane Marie Todd).

Much depends on her choices. Henry James, reviewing the English translation of Sainte-Beuve's *Portraits of Celebrated*

Women, felt there was “something sad and spectral in the sight of these poor old French ladies, summoned from their quiet graves, deep in the warm and comfortable soil of oblivion, and clad afresh in the chilly drapery of our American speech.” James’s sensibilities would be even more offended today when so many academics spend their careers in history’s proverbial dustbin gleaning what they can from the mute inglorious Miltons and, more especially, the lady Miltons, presumed to have been forcibly muted. But Ozouf (whose most recent book is on Henry James) would, I believe, meet even his rigorous standards. She improves greatly on Sainte-Beuve’s decemvirate by selecting women worthy of posterity and publicity. Her women are all “exceptional”—women who felt the conflict between fame and love in their lives, but who in their deaths could not be understood to prefer the “soil of oblivion.” Indeed, Ozouf’s ladies seem delighted to be back in society again. They are luminous.

Aside from receiving the attention due them, they help us by delivering a sentimental education of sorts, one that highlights the diversity of female character. Ozouf says that she herself (rather like Montesquieu’s Persian travelers upon encountering the women of Paris) became convinced “not of the fixity of a shared female destiny, but rather of the inventive variety of individual paths.” To speak of female multiformity is not to deny the existence or force of nature, but it is to say that these are daughters of Eve, engaged in complicated relations with God, man, and devil. Each has her own view of, and experience of, love, marriage, and motherhood. Some were happy, others “tumultuously unhappy.” Ozouf includes hedonists and ascetics, rebels and the peaceable, “the nasty and the conciliatory, the obstinate and the absentminded, the prosaic and the imaginative, the tender and the despotic.” Her portraits have the reality of characters in good novels, who become our companions and guides (sometimes by negative example). All of which is to say that Ozouf herself is a sure and knowing judge of human character. In telling these lives so deftly, she better equips us to lead our own lives. As a stylist, she may not quite equal Sainte-Beuve, but she far surpasses him as a moralist, being more in the mode of Plutarch.

Surveying the wide array of opinion among her French heroines, Ozouf discerns a few commonalities: the importance of conversation (to a certain extent, a conversation with one another across the generations) and writing (“a talisman against the mediocrity and monotony of female existence”), a faith in female education, and the “keen awareness of the present

moment" and "recuperative genius" that is part of "the feminine art of managing time." They shared as well the encounter with the works of Rousseau.

Despite some quarrels with him, on the whole they responded enthusiastically; Ozouf ventures to say that Rousseau "changed the lives of all these women." One is astonished by the distance between these bluestockings-of-old and contemporary feminists—for Rousseau is today the most reviled of the DWEMs (dead, white, European males). Of their receptivity, Ozouf says:

These women did not at all see Rousseau as a man who tirelessly justified their dependence, but, on the contrary, as the man who imagined a remedy for it, by substituting a voluntary dependence for a dependence to which women simply submitted. The social subordination of women was in their eyes sufficiently illustrated by the degrading practice of marriage—their own marriages very often—in which young women could not dispose of their persons according to their own inclinations. The subject of *La nouvelle Héloïse* is precisely how one makes that unbearable dependence a willful master achievement.

Regardless of their French predilection for taking lovers, these women were drawn to the Rousseauean ideal of conjugal bliss in a union combining love and friendship.

SO what difference does being French make? Is French singularity summed up in that quintessential French phrase: *vive la différence*? Well, yes and no. Ozouf does believe that the French graciously accept and enjoy sexual difference. Paradoxical as it may seem, however, she suggests that their ease comes from not making too much of it, from subordinating sexual difference to an overriding conviction of human equality. French feminism, heir to the Revolution, is universalist and individualist. As Ozouf explains:

If we grant Frenchwomen the force of this primary conviction—they see themselves first as free and equal individuals—we understand that, sheltered by such a conviction, they can experience sexual difference without resentment, can cultivate it with joy and irony, and can refuse to essentialize it.

By contrast, Anglo-Saxon feminism is drawn to extremes, either denying any differences (and seeking to assimilate women to men) or fetishizing differences (in the manner of the female chauvinists of both conservative and radical stripes). In other words, in France, equality feminism and difference feminism

are not at odds, since equality is understood quite abstractly and not as a demand for literal sameness. Difference, moreover, is not conceived in political terms. Differences are precious rather than empowering. Unlike the American feminists who have embraced an identity politics founded on claims of victimization and calls for group rights, women in France don't think of themselves as a persecuted collective. Ozouf suggests that American feminism's abandonment of universalism owes something to America's being "a land of minorities, where the women's movement has established alliances with other sexual and ethnic minorities." (It would be extraordinarily interesting to trace the influence of the black struggle on the women's movement; they do seem to move in tandem, from early feminism and abolitionism through the women's movement and the civil-rights movement to Black Power and radical lesbian separatism.)

Although Ozouf acknowledges that radical feminism has some French founders and partisans, she insists that French "differentialists" (like Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray) are confined, and very narrowly, to the academy. Even there, their influence is negligible, in part because their language is so impenetrable. Ozouf testifies that in France,

no woman (or man) has proposed to rewrite the universal history of letters, arts, and sciences from a strictly female point of view. No woman would imagine interpreting the great works as androcentric; no one would undertake to read Racine and Montaigne as representatives of a white male ideology.... French feminism has resisted the complete revision of the lexicon and of syntax undertaken in certain American universities.

Education has not been a site of contestation. French women, despite their slowness in getting the vote (in 1945, later than women in Turkey and India), have been in schools and universities in force for a very long time (by 1924 men and women in France received identical secular educations), and in the salons for centuries before that. For them, the act of matriculation has meant a genuine joining (being born again from the womb of the alma mater). They have entered without destroying, unlike a fair number of American university women who have toted the Trojan horse of "curricular transformation" into the hallowed precincts.

Ozouf wonders whether radical feminism has had more purchase and more punch in America precisely because of America's republican tradition of rather strict sex segregation and "domestic reclusion." She rightly notes that radical feminism is

not of recent vintage but was already visible to Henry James in the 1870s, "incarnated in the emblematic figure of Olive Chancellor." Whereas France had salons where the sexes freely mixed for repartee and romance, America had saloons for men and sewing circles for women. When these straightlaced and rather grim American women entered public life, they found plenty to object to. Female suffrage promised to tidy up (via temperance and antiprostitution measures) a pretty coarse public square (remember those spittoons in the halls of Congress). That reformist impulse continues. American feminists, members of an admirably direct and can-do people, continue to reform and transform themselves, their men and children, the institutions of public and private life, and whatever else they can get their hands on, including God him/herself.

IN France, despite the Revolution, something of the vivacious and civilized spirit of the *ancien régime* always remained. Tocqueville feared that these old habits of easy familiarity would take on new forms under the revolutionary impulse of extreme democratization. He "worried that the mixing of the sexes in French society might be pursued to the point of indifferentiation," with men and women sharing the same rights and duties, resulting in, as Tocqueville memorably said, "weak men and disorderly women." He much preferred the American practice of separate spheres, thinking that "the exaltation of female difference ... protected democracy from itself," by arresting democracy's tendency toward homogeneity (in sexual terms, androgyny).

Ozouf regards Tocqueville as mistaken, for it is in France, not the United States, that relations between men and women are healthier. On her reading, France possessed, and was lucky to possess, three different models of women's participation: "social mixing, domestic reclusion, and an egalitarian sharing of tasks and functions." The synergy between them has turned out to be positive, allowing for a firm belief in the equality of individual rights coupled with a recognition of, and delight in, gender differences. One gets the impression that the voice of this moderate feminism owes much to what Montesquieu called "the general spirit" of the French nation—a nation marked above all by its "sociable humor," a nation flirtatious and gallant, in which the feminine tone predominates, establishing politeness and taste.

But Ozouf wonders how long French women can hold out against the particularist feminism of America, especially now

that it has joined forces with the postmodern attack on "truth." Will French women sacrifice their aspiration to universality in order to shut themselves up within the bounds of subjectivity? Will they trade the art of conversation for the tiresome monologues of identity politics? Ozouf's final lines make clear her hopes for the future:

Spending time with the ten ladies of this book has armed us against such a belief: the words they have bequeathed to us, written by women, written about women ..., were not written for women. They were written for everyone, in the hope of exchange and in the certainty of a language held in common and of a shared consciousness.

Women's words can speak to men, and French singularity testifies to universality.