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book review of

Having It All in the Belle Epoque: How French Women's Magazines Invented the Modern Woman by Rachel Mesch

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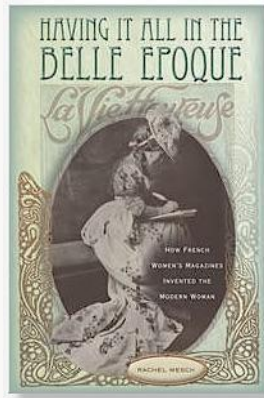
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Rachel Mesch,
Having It All in the Belle Époque: How French Women's Magazines Invented the Modern Woman.
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Rachel Mesch, Associate Professor of French at Yeshiva University, examines themes present in two women's magazines *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* for the first ten years of their existence from 1901 to 1911. The book reveals a potent French femininity in these magazines, shaped by the medium of photography combined with texts written in the spirit of literary salons and a vast array of commercial products marketed specifically to women. The book draws important themes from the pages of these photographic magazines: marriage and divorce, childrearing, work-life balance, the connection of the female writer with both feminism and orientalism, suffrage, and the absence of women in the Académie Française. These magazines were designed to integrate aspects of women's lives that in scholarship are usually treated separately—domestic aspects versus public roles—something that Mesch points out are still not fully reconciled in our own time.

The structure of Mesch's book is engaging; each of the seven chapters opens with a compelling brief example to frame the chapter's thematically-arranged content. For instance, a quote from an advertisement for Cinderella powder and soap drawn from *Femina* helps to quickly contextualize the intimate relationship the magazine intended to cultivate with its readers, whom *La Vie Heureuse* called *chères lectrices* and sometimes *charmantes lectrices*. A later chapter opens with reader's reactions to the ending of Colette Yver's novel *Princesses de science* (1907), which Mesch expands using Rachel Blau Duplessis's strategy of "writing beyond the ending" meaning that French readers were in the habit of debating authors' chosen endings and proposing their own versions in the popular press, including *Femina*.[\[1\]](#)

The first half of the book reveals the view of feminine modernity shaped by *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse*. This is accomplished by, first, examining the magazines' relationship with its audience (intimacy was cultivated through the use of specific language as noted above, and also the use of opinion polls and surveys). A second method of shaping feminine modernity by the magazines is found in their illustration of women writers, including George Sand, as both celebrities and feminine role models, although in the case of Sand this meant some creative reconceptualization. A chapter is devoted to Myriam Harry and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, writers who were depicted in the pages of the magazines in a very specific way, trading on their mostly tangential "oriental" connections (the former spent her childhood with her European parents in Ottoman Palestine; the latter's Egyptian husband had translated *Arabian Nights* into French). Like art nouveau, orientalism's tropes included the sexualization and objectification of women, but in the pages of *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse*, these "exotic" women writers were shown fully clothed and, therefore, quite disconnected from the way these trends were normally depicted. In the chapters contained in the first section of the book, Mesch also couches the magazines' development in the context of the broader mass culture landscape and examines the specific role of photography in shaping the idealistic vision presented in the pages of *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse*. A chapter providing a transition from the first to second part of the book reflects on women writers' self-understanding of their public image and their limited agency in its creation.

The second half of the book treats the reception and influence of the magazines. Here the content is compared to popular novels, both those aimed at women and those with a mixed audience. It was in these contexts that the magazines' intent seems not to have been grasped. Jean Lorrain's 1908 *Maison pour dames*, a novel about a fictional women's publication, *Le Laurier d'Or*, was a thinly-veiled satirization of *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse*. Another provocative example of the reality outside of the idealized bubble of the magazines is revealed in the 1908 media coverage of Marcelle Tinayre's response to rumors that she might receive the Legion of Honor. The recipients were usually men; even Sarah Bernhardt would not receive it until 1914. But what caused a scandal was Tinayre's reaction in several interviews that she would not wear "the pretty ribbon and the pretty cross" in public, indicating, as Mesch puts it, her ". . . discomfort being thrust into a traditionally masculine role: the decoration would attract uncomfortable attention to her in public" (158). Tinayre's reluctance was interpreted as irreverence towards the Legion of Honor, and it resulted in a backlash against women writers. Mesch closes the volume with gentle agitation for women writers' inclusion in the Académie Française. *Femina* established a contest for the readership to elect forty women to their ideal "Academy of Women" and published a fictional spread of women marching to the Academy across the Pont des Arts. Mesch contrasts this approach with that of the publication *Je sais tout* (1907), which published an illustration of "the most famous women writers holding the number of books they've written" and a 1954 spread from *Elle* featuring seventy prominent female novelists.

The title of Mesch's book is misleading in three significant ways. First is the use of the term *Belle Epoque*, which usually refers to a period in France between the Commune (1871) and the beginning of World War I (1914). Mesch examines only a ten-year period at the very end of that range. Second, the title implies that a larger number of women's magazines will be treated, and, while several other publications are mentioned in passing, the book's focus is on two rival publications *Femina* (which launched in 1901) and *La Vie Heureuse* (launched in 1902). Third,

the title makes a claim that the magazines treated in the book invented the modern woman when in fact both women of leisure and women of letters were defined in illustrated journals decades earlier than Mesch's focus.[\[2\]](#)

Another shortcoming is in the book's glancing treatment of art nouveau, which the magazines' design and typography consistently display. The vast majority of the illustrations are of pages from the two magazines that feature photography and text. *Femina*, for instance, has elaborate framing elements and typography in the art nouveau style. Mesch mentions art nouveau and includes several texts on the subject in the bibliography (Victor Arwas, Deborah Silverman, and Gabriel Weisberg) but delves minimally into the interconnection of the movement with representations of women. Also not addressed is the uneasy incorporation of design elements traditionally combined with sexualized and objectified versions of women into journals that were intent on reconceptualizing the modern woman as "having it all," meaning having both a family and a life outside of the strictly domestic sphere. Mesch does not problematize these juxtapositions in depth or deal with the many floral elements as connected to the longstanding connection of woman as closer to nature and therefore subject to domination and control by men.

The study is more archival than theoretical in nature, although importantly Mesch references the work of Jürgen Habermas and Roland Barthes.[\[3\]](#) Mesch also uses sources across several fields, including literature, theater and, to a lesser extent, art. The use of photography to create a sense of celebrity for the women depicted in *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* is underpinned by the work of Peter Hamilton and Roger Hargreaves.[\[4\]](#) Mesch's sources on orientalism include Edward Said, but notably absent is recognition of the much more recent problematization of the term by Homi K. Bhaba and Gerardo Mosquera.[\[5\]](#)

A significant additional issue goes mostly unmentioned in the study—social class. The women who contributed to, and were depicted in, *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* had attained leisure status and were encouraged to emulate the wealthy classes. Mesch's study implies that women from lower classes had access to the journals through public libraries, while glossing over their inability to actually participate in the activities publicized in the magazines or purchase any of the many products that were advertised there. The book inadvertently implies that modernity was restricted to women of just one social class, which of course was not the case.

Having identified these drawbacks, the study still has significant value, because these two magazines have been little studied, and the book presents what could be considered a more "normalized" view of women working within patriarchal structures and embracing aspects of femininity that feminist studies typically dismiss in favor of more overtly radicalized examples of women who dressed like men. Mesch describes what happens in the pages of *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* as ". . . the gorgeous conjugation of new equalities with traditional values" (7). Mesch makes it clear that the publications, which are both preserved at the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, did not characterize themselves as feminist and rarely used the term *femme nouvelle*; the editors of *Femina* stated "We'll leave to others the work of masculinizing women and robbing them of their delightful charm" (5). Mesch uses just two examples of this other type of visual culture—Honoré Daumier's *Les bas bleus* (1844), showing a female writer abandoning her child to drown in the bath, and an illustration from *Le Grelot* (1896), depicting

a woman next to her bicycle, a cigarette in her mouth, barking at her husband shown washing dishes, to have dinner ready upon her return from the Feminist Congress.

Mesch states her intent to “. . . flesh out the figure promoted by *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* as an alternate means of expressing resistance to gender norms during the Belle Epoque” (19). Earlier she states “For legions of Belle Epoque women (. . .) the magazines represented a vibrant universe, an alternative reality in which certain kinds of feminist fantasies were normalized, made both accessible and desirable (. . .) thus gently moved women forward by vividly describing before them a compelling future in which their success was given” (9). A good example of this is provided by “At Home” photography depicting feminine writers at their desks, which were placed firmly in domestic environments where flowers and elegant furniture balanced stacks of books and papers. Mesch’s study will likely meet some criticism by scholars who might consider the work of the women (and men) in the magazines to be, at best, a soft feminism. But a scholarly focus on statistically fewer overt feminists ignores the feminine majority during the period of Mesch’s study. A consideration of the wide spectrum of feminist influence—both “hard” and “soft”—results in a fuller understanding of gender dynamics at the beginning of the twentieth century.

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Notes

[1] Rachel Blau Duplessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

[2] For instance *Le Monde Parisien* (1878–84); *La Vie Parisienne* (1863–1939), *La Caricature* (1880–1904), and *Le Courrier Française* (1884–1913), to name just a few.

[3] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into the Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989); Roland Barthes *Mythologies* (New York: Noonday, 1972).

[4] Peter Hamilton and Roger Hargreaves, *The Beautiful and the Damned: The Creation of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Photography* (London: Lund Humphries, 2001).

[5] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978). Mesch also uses Clay Lancaster, “Oriental Contributions to Art Nouveau,” *The Art Bulletin* 34, no. 4 (December 1952): 297–310; and Mahmut Mutman and Meyda Yegenoglu, eds., *Orientalism and Cultural Differences, Inscriptions*, no. 6 (Center for Cultural Studies, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1992).