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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Raylene L. Ramsay. *French Women in Politics: Writing Power, Paternal Legitimization, and Maternal Legacies.* New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003. xviii + 318 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57181-081-6; $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57181-082-3.

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Published on H-Women (October, 2004)

The Second Sex Strikes Back

In *French Women in Politics*, Raylene L. Ramsay examines a wide array of writings that chronicle women's slow, frustrating, and ongoing struggle to acquire political power in France. Political histories, socio-political surveys, interviews, autobiographies, and fictional writings by and about French women all serve as the lens through which Ramsay tries to explain why the birthplace of the rights of man has been so stingy in doling out those same rights to the Second Sex. Through these same texts, Ramsay also seeks an explanation for why the closed gentleman's club of French political life suddenly sprung open at the end of the twentieth century with the passage of an ambitious parity law. Ultimately, Ramsay concludes, the answer to this puzzle lies in the texts themselves. "The writing and the circulation of these stories [by French women striving for a political voice] have indeed 'made a difference' in women's penetration into almost all of the sacred places of the political universe" (p. 252). By writing about their own, others', and even imaginary experiences in political life, French women have, after centuries of struggle, finally managed to establish women's legitimacy within the political sphere.

Ramsay's book introduces an English-speaking audience to a number of fascinating narratives by women who have weathered the storms of French political life. Through a close reading of this corpus of literature, Ramsay concludes that women who have risen to positions of power in France have been forced to rely on powerful men (or, in Ramsay's terminology, they have depended on paternal legitimization). This is but one reason for the bitterness expressed by so many women who served in government and helps explain why French women have turned to writing in order to formulate an alternative basis of political legitimacy, one rooted in women's unique life experiences. Their writing, in turn, has been these women's most important legacy, for with it they have finally begun to win over a mass public to the idea that women have something unique and valuable to contribute to political life.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that a scholar of French language and literature would come to the conclusion that written texts are important, but Ramsay's conclusions are not limited to the realm of literary theory. On the contrary, Ramsay makes sweeping claims about the political and historical importance of the written word. Most controversially, Ramsay claims that the successful passage of the 2000 parity law in France depended largely, if not entirely, on a nationwide mental shift brought about by the writings examined in this book. In making this claim, moreover, Ramsay admits that she is going out on an academic limb: "The attempt made to examine texts from different disciplines without established credentials in all of their methodologies–those of history, or political and social science, for example–will leave this study open to criticism" (pp. xvi-xvii). Indeed, this book makes for frustrating reading for the historian. In particular, Ramsay's analysis comes up short in matters of causation, context, and evidence.

In terms of causation, Ramsay argues that women's writing of the past thirty-some years has helped to alter the French "collective unconscious." This unconscious, she argues, was long defined by "traditional feminine essentialism" which has "constituted a major impediment to women's assumption of power" (p. 9). Through their writing, French political women began chipping away at the baseline cultural assumptions that associated female sexual difference with domesticity. By the 1990s, she writes, "parity seemed to be benefiting from a change in public opinion long resistant to feminism and to any modification in the balance of power" (p. 67). But did the texts Ramsay describes play a role in the decision-making process of the people in power? Were these texts generally discussed in academic circles or widely reviewed in the popular media? What audience did they reach?-

Ramsay does show that the parity question itself received widespread media attention, but she does not link journalists' coverage of the issue with earlier or contemporary women's writing. Ultimately, this book has little to say about the presumed audience of women's political writing in France at all. Many or all of the texts analyzed here may have swayed public opinion in France, but in failing to address the influence of the texts themselves, this book does not prove the point.

Next, this study sticks fairly closely to the texts under consideration and has relatively little to say about the historical and political context in which they were written. Yet, Ramsay does hint that context matters, as when she mentions, in passing, that equality measures adopted by the European Parliament, Commission, and Court have helped French women to battle for greater equality at home (p. 259). One wonders what those measures were, and how or if they have contributed to changing French political culture. The book passes with similar brevity over questions of women's education and training. Ramsay tells us that women are gaining access in "increasing numbers" to the prestigious École Nationale d'Administration, the traditional stepping stone to higher public office in France (p. 2). Readers are left wondering just how dramatic an increase this represents, and if the expansion of women in higher education in France has also altered the context of these debates. In short, it is hard to know how much importance to accord the texts in question without first knowing more about the broader historical context that led to their production and consumption.

Ramsay's book does not meet the standards of the historical profession when it comes to the utilization and presentation of her evidence. Among other problems, Ramsay repeatedly offers statistics (for example, pp. 69, 80, 90) and provides quotations (for example, pp. 92, 180, 230) without citing her sources. Ramsay is also prone to bend her evidence to fit her argument. For example, at one point Ramsay criticizes Jean Pascal, a conservative politician who wrote a history of women in the French legislature, for utilizing "authoritative scholarly neutrality … charts and encyclopedic structure" to "efface the personal agenda (Catholic religion) and politics (conservative) behind the writing of his history/story" (p. 25). She draws a contrast between Pascal's scholarship and the more subjective and personal style adopted by the politician and author Huguette Bouchardeau, by the journalist Laure Adler, and by "women's history in general" (p. 25). Yet, in a subsequent chapter she mentions, in a much more approving tone, that "both Bouchardeau's and Pascal's histories present statistical charts and carefully document descriptions of the female candidates who have won political office" (p. 42). Why does she assume that Pascal's charts and documentation are merely a cover for a political agenda while Bouchardeau's are a matter of careful scholarship?

In short, *French Women in Politics* raises some intriguing questions about women's agency (or lack thereof) in transforming contemporary political culture in France. Analytically, however, this book does not provide answers that are likely to satisfy many historians. In introducing English-speaking scholars to the large and growing corpus of women's writings in France, Ramsay nonetheless does historians a service by pointing to a rich body of source material calling out for more focused and contextualized analysis.

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Citation: Mona L. Siegel. Review of Ramsay, Raylene L., *French Women in Politics: Writing Power, Paternal Legitimization, and Maternal Legacies.* H-Women, H-Net Reviews. October, 2004.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9843

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