


2023

Review of *Figurations of the Feminine*, by Siobhán Mcllvanney

Tonya J. Moutray
Russell Sage College, Troy, NY, tonya.moutray@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo>

 Part of the [Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Moutray, Tonya J. (2023) "Review of *Figurations of the Feminine*, by Siobhán Mcllvanney," *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830*: Vol.13: Iss.1, Article 17.

<http://doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.13.1.1340>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss1/17>

This Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830* by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.

Review of *Figurations of the Feminine*, by Siobhán Mcllvaney

Abstract

A review of Siobhán Mcllvaney's *Figurations of the Feminine*, by Tonya J. Moutray

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Siobhán McIlvanney. *Figurations of the Feminine in the Early French Women's Press, 1758-1848*. Eighteenth Century Worlds, Liverpool University Press, 2019. 270 pp. ISBN: 978-1-78694-188-6.

Reviewed by Tonya J. Moutray
Russell Sage College, New York

Excavating the voices of women writers across four governmental regimes (1758-1848), Siobhán McIlvanney foregrounds the feminist significance of French women's periodicals, their increasingly diverse readerships, and their proliferation and dissemination at a time when there was increased public debate about women's lives and their value in society. Whether editors, writers, or readers, educated women in the middle and upper classes were actively constructing the very notion of womanhood by producing, writing, or reading a genre published specifically for their consumption. The periodicals themselves contain a variety of genres within them—essays, short fiction, fashion (engravings and reports), advertisements, letters to the editor, etc.—and thus demonstrate the multiple ways that readers may have engaged with the material. The key framework that coheres across the chapters is the increasing significance of women as consumers and producers of the various figurations of womanhood, including those deployed across the turbulent political landscape of revolutionary France. Within the chapters are many overlapping themes, including motherhood, marriage, education, politics, women's legal rights, and the domestic and public spheres that women inhabited. Because each chapter focuses on the lifespan of one or more of the journals, McIlvanney is able to map each upon the larger trajectory of national upheaval and the struggle for women's rights.

McIlvanney's primary research, mostly conducted in the archives at the Bibliothèque Nationale and Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal in Paris, demonstrates thorough and meticulous attention to the details of the journals both as material objects and as written and illustrated texts in society. Positioned as the first English language study to examine the various figurations of womanhood in the French popular press over this time period, there are no English translations of the textual examples from the journals, which could be a barrier for some readers. There is a tension in the work between actual and *figured* women though McIlvanney asserts that the readers and writers of journals remained "relatively homogenous . . . They are on the whole white, heterosexual and with a degree of disposable income" (19). There was a serious limitation in readership due to the fact that only one-third to one-fourth of women were literate in the mid eighteenth century. There is more to explore regarding how the works may have been shared through reading aloud or other forms of cultural and textual transfer. However,

both the readers and the representations found within the journals grew more complex over time as costs for purchase were reduced and women from across the social classes improved in literacy.

Before examining the periodicals themselves, McIlvanney clarifies the historical and cultural contexts relevant to women's journals, including the rise of the literary *salon*, the French Revolution and its aftermath, and prominent women's voices during the period, including Madame de Genlis, Madame de Staël, and Olympe de Gouges. The French Revolution affected journal production, which was banned by the National Assembly from 1792 until 1796. Publishers were threatened that they would go "from printing press to guillotine" (49). With the emergence of the Directory in 1795, journals that escaped censorship tended to focus on fashion, a topic not without political significance. McIlvanney foregrounds the "naturalist" notion of gender articulated by Jean Jacques Rousseau, and which is seen in many subsequent examples from the journals themselves. She contends that some women felt empowered within this essentialist construct and were enabled to further advocate for themselves as wives and mothers. By the early nineteenth century, the bourgeois model of the wife/mother as a sacralized symbol of patriotism had taken hold. The Orleanist regime of the 1830s and 1840s saw the expansion of fashion journals and the press in general, as well as examples of women's calls for reform in a tenuous professional and personal landscape. One striking example of the uncertainty of women's rights is that the ability to divorce, granted in the early years of the Revolution in 1792, was banned again by the government in 1816. It would not be legal to divorce again until 1884.

Next McIlvanney digs into the actual journals, beginning with the earliest journal of the period, an elite publication for mostly upper-class women, *Le Journal Des Dames* (1759-1778) discussed in the second chapter. With a nine-year stretch of women editors in charge, including Madame de Beaumer, the first and most radical of them (and a previous contributor to the journal), *Le Journal Des Dames* demonstrates how gender was used "as a tool for solidarity" in its facilitation of a "dialogue of political consequence" (86, 89). Although censored and suspended for five years beginning in 1769, the journal figured women as professionals and intellectuals, even as it played into some gendered tropes. However limited in its impact across classes as a coterie publication for an elite audience, *Le Journal Des Dames* provides a starting point from which McIlvanney can examine topics such as education, marriage, and sexuality, as well as return to questions of production and audience.

McIlvanney identifies women's education as an issue at stake in *Le Cabinet de Modes* (1785-1793) and *Le Journal des Dames et des Modes* (1797-1839) in chapter three. Girls' and women's education in the eighteenth century was primarily for the wealthy, and usually home- or convent-based. Yet agitation for women's education would lead to increased access and literacy rates into the nineteenth century. While *Le Journal Des Dames* promoted women's education for their own sake, the focus later shifted to the "natural" role of women as educator of children. Edited by Pierre de le Mésangère, a former priest and teacher, the journal also promoted the acquisition of domestic skills in the fine arts, including needlework. Book reviews, including those authored by Madame de Genlis, elevated the literary profile of the journal. *Le Cabinet des Modes*, a journal popular in England, and which underwent three title changes, was primarily male-authored, and did not include relevant political content. This suggests that the aims of the editors were to censor women's exposure to political content, even the very reality of the French Revolution.

McIlvanney argues that some French journals democratized fashion in that they suggested that good taste could be bought rather than inherited. At a time when a "mobile consumer culture" was emerging, expanding the possibilities of self-representation through fashion, *The Journal des dames et des modes* dominated the market from 1800 to 1818 (101). In chapter four we learn that *Le Journal de femmes* included fashion reports and engravings, revealing the financial necessities incumbent upon publishers to sell copies. There is also mention earlier in the book of the English consumption of French journals and their influence upon English women readers and the periodical press in England, a growing field with recent works such as Jennie Batchelor's *The Lady's Magazine (1770-1832) and the Making of Literary History* and *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1690-1820s: The Long Eighteenth Century* edited by Jennie Batchelor and Manushag N. Powell, published in 2022 and 2018, respectively. Though not the primary focus of the study, McIlvanney analyzes some of the pre- and Revolutionary-era fashion plates and reports encountered in the journals, pointing to their transnational impact and growing dissemination in England. This material is scattered throughout and could be the focus of a more sustained examination.

Changing notions of marriage as a companionate union are of concern in *Le Courier de l'hymen* (1791), *Le Journal de femmes* (1832-37), and *Le Conseiller des dames* (1847-92). These publications posit the French housewife as transmitter of "national and civic value" (149). *Le Courier de l'hymen* was the first French publication to include dating advertisements, some from individuals seeking a marriage partner on their own terms, some from fathers on behalf of daughters. The journal reveals a contradictory mix of writers, male and female,

utilizing both sexist and radical tropes in representing women and their roles. One of the most interesting sections of chapter four, these early dating advertisements reveal how real individuals navigated courtship on their own terms. Written by women for women, *Le Journal Des Femmes* and *Le Conseiller des dames* extend the theme of self-development to women's education, focusing on the knowledge and skills in subjects necessary for housekeeping and instructing children. These include botany, cooking, needlework, and the domestic sciences. The home was seen as a microcosm of society, and as such, women's place within it was firmly entrenched and valued. This chapter provides some of the best examples of this notion of a "collective identity" among women that McIlvanney argues such periodicals promoted (241).

The final chapter takes up the most political and feminist figurations found in the period, short-lived as they may have been. *Le Étrennes nationales des dames* (1789) advocated for women's sexual wellbeing and made women writers and artists more visible. *L'Athénée des dames* (1808) promoted the development of women's intellectual abilities and economic independence; there is also an awareness in the work of internalized and systemic sexism which had impeded women's progress. Rejecting domesticity as a key figuration of womanhood, *Le Femme libre*, the journal put forth by the utopian Saint Simonian quasi-religious women's community, foregrounded the importance of women's economic independence and represented women—even mothers—outside of the traditional structure of marriage. The journal published only female authors, figuring women as working professionals within the public realm. *La Voix des femmes* (1848) written and published solely by women, took on the cause of the right to work after the government decreed in February of 1848 that unemployed men must be prioritized. Ceding to the complaints put forward in the journal, the government set up workshops to provide women with opportunities for professionalization. McIlvanney uncovers the most radical of the journals here, positioning them as the apex of feminist journalism in the period—and rightly so—as they represent women's most direct articulations for social change.

The work is a welcome addition to scholarship on the history of women's periodicals in France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sections of the work could be of use in courses with a focus on women's history and/or women's literary production. For graduate and post-graduate work, the book is a tremendous resource for scholars of French periodicals or women's journalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Figurations of the Feminine in the Early French Women's Press, 1758-1848* enables us to see how the figure of the female reader of periodicals took shape over this ninety-year span, as women's journals widened their audiences across the social classes and positioned themselves as

representing the collective interests of women during a time of turbulent political crisis.