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jealous of genius

Adrianna Paliyenko unmask an effort to diminish the work and roles of 19th century women poets

By Gerry Boyle '78

It was the fall of 1989. Then an assistant professor of French newly arrived at Colby, Adrianna Paliyenko had a chance meeting with a student on the steps of Miller Library.

“Her name was Paula Henriques,” Paliyenko said. “She was in my seminar on French poetry of the 19th century, and she asked me, ‘I know they hired you because you specialize in poetry. So who were the women recognized as poets in the 19th century?’”

Paliyenko, who had recently completed her Ph.D. in French literature and culture at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, had to think. “I stood there on the steps of the library and I said, ‘Well one comes to mind, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore. Other than Desbordes-Valmore, I can’t think of any. That’s really odd.’”

So odd, in fact, that the question would ultimately propel Paliyenko, Charles A. Dana Professor of French, into a research project that would take more than a decade, involve a cadre of student research assistants, and result in her book *Genius Envy: Women Shaping French Poetic History, 1801-1900*, published by Penn State University Press in 2016.

This seminal work is being hailed by literary scholars—and has prompted a call for translation into French as soon as possible. The book unmasks a decades-long effort to marginalize woman poets by linking genius to the male sperm cell, and women’s creativity to masculinity—in effect, minimizing their mark on literature and culture.

It isn’t that French women poets of the 19th century were overlooked. In some spaces they were treated as equals to men, published side by side in anthologies, attracting serious consideration and criticism. But years after their work was hailed as significant, there often was a more subtle, insidious, and deprecating treatment at work. “I don’t resolve the contradictions,” Paliyenko said. “I expose them.”

Mining primary documents, she tried to transport herself as a reader back to that time, she said, to find the ways the poets’

works were received as they were published. “I try to drop the 21st-century filter,” she said, “and get a sense of the woman and the writer.”

In her research, Paliyenko discerned that women artists in post-revolutionary France were being subjected to a new “science-based” scrutiny, one that used biological theories (accepted at the time but preposterous today) to assign true genius to men. She chose five representative women poets and writers whose projects span the century to show how in different ways women refuted the idea that “genius has sex” in their critical writings and creative practice.

French women poets were up against considerable obstacles, she found, including the masculine gender of the word poet itself. As more women wrote poetry, the word “poétesse” was coined, itself a step in the process of marginalization. While their work may have been praised contemporaneously—and perhaps because it was praised—critics retrospectively began to postulate that *les femmes poètes* were literally inferior by nature.

“They were increasingly ridiculed, mocked, and then vilified because it gets tied to reproduction,” Paliyenko said.

Repoussant mon c
Mais toi, fier aman
De ma passion t'ém

Tu la sentis vraie et
Ainsi que dans l'art
Était contenue une
Ton cœur s'attendr

oeur d'un cœur
t des choses idéa
nut l'immensité!
t tu compris en elle,
t, ta passion, à toi,
essence éternelle;
it, et tu revins à moi!

homme et de poète
s lui tu marchas;

ue l'idéal échapp

mais n'est saisi

plane deva

nfuit la poésie

nos bonheur

ue l'imp

e qui te n

The theory was this: the male sperm is the vessel for energy and life, the theory goes, while the uterus merely allows the sperm to grow. “If you don’t have sperm, you have no genius,” Paliyenko recounts. “Why? Because sperm is said to be the seed of genius, the theory being that the male brain absorbs sperm to conceive life. Women can’t have genius because they don’t produce sperm themselves.”

Women were said to shrink their ovaries if they redirected blood to their brain, she said, thus making them less useful for their primary purpose—procreation. “It makes us laugh today but imagine the power of this thought.”

That power isn’t lost on today’s readers, including Paliyenko’s decade’s worth of research assistants. In addition to loving the challenge of their task (“Looking through the *Bibliographie de la France*, I felt like Indiana Jones hunting for treasure,” said Sarah Fensore ’13), they realized that the marginalization of women is ongoing. “Famously,” noted Annelise Wiersema ’10, “J.K. Rowling of Harry Potter fame was told to publish the books as ‘J.K.’ instead of her first name, Joanne, so readers would be more likely to think of her as a male author.”

“It’s still out there,” Paliyenko said. “It’s rhetoric. ‘You’re not a true poet. It’s not your fault. You don’t have the biologically right equipment to do it.’”

Speaking for earlier writers in *Genius Envy*, Paliyenko strips away this reframing of the legacy of women poets of that time and in the process rights a centuries-old wrong. The book is a scholarly work, and readers who don’t read French will miss much of the primary elements. But Paliyenko notes that the drive to put creative women in a lesser place is not something we can relegate to the past, and that the exploration of the subject should continue.

She writes, “In women’s poetic writing ... genuinely creative work not only generates new forms and aesthetic ideas but also raises questions that reshape the way we think.”

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—Adrianna M. Paliyenko,
Charles A. Dana Professor of French