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Gerry Boyle

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jealous of genius

Adrianna Paliyenko unmasks 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 women 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 “poëtesse” 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.
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.”

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