

# Kaplan, Marijn S. Marie Jeanne Riccoboni's Epistolary Feminism: Fact, Fiction, and Voice

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## Book Reviews

Kaplan, Marijn S. *Marie Jeanne Riccoboni's Epistolary Feminism: Fact, Fiction, and Voice*. New York: Routledge, 2020. 174 p.

Drawing on her own previous work and that of Susan Sniader Lanser, Jane Gurkin Altman, and Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, among others, Kaplan posits that Riccoboni's contribution to the feminist Enlightenment cannot be properly assessed without reading her epistolary facts and her epistolary fiction together (1). She divides her study into two main sections, one devoted to Riccoboni's fiction (five chapters organized chronologically around each of her epistolary novels) and the other (two chapters) to her correspondence. A lengthy (44 p.) appendix provides transcriptions of the nineteen letters (the original French text and English translations) discussed in part II to le comte de Maillebois, Denis Diderot, Diderot's son-in-law Abel François Nicolas Caroillon de Vandeul, Antonio Carara, Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Louis de Boissy, Pierre Antoine de la Place, Jean François de Bastide, Denis Humblot, Philip Thicknesse, and David Garrick, of which only the latter two figure in James C. Nicholl's 1976 edition of Riccoboni's letters.

In Chapter 1, Kaplan demonstrates why *Lettres de Fanni Butlerd* (1757) should be viewed as an autobiographical work detailing the relationship between Riccoboni and the comte de Maillebois, who broke off their relationship to marry another woman. She does this by way of a diachronic analysis of Riccoboni's "increasing textual ownership" of the novel compared with fictional changes made in later editions (24). In Chapter 2, Kaplan looks first at how *Lettres de Juliette Catesby* (1759) lays the foundation of a "feminist poetics of voice" for Riccoboni's final three epistolary novels, then turns to the underappreciated *Histoire de Miss Jenny* (1764), taking to task eighteenth-century (male) critics who seemed to find a minor male character's unhappy ending more troubling than the extraordinary mishaps that befall the eponymous heroine (5). Kaplan's astute conclusion is that Riccoboni crafts "an unexpected proto-feminist outcome" for Miss Jenny that bears a resemblance to the one created by Graffigny for Zilia in *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (1747) (5). Chapter 3 opens with remarks on *Lettres d'Adélaïde de Dammartin* (1767) but is primarily concerned with *Lettres de Sophie de Vallière* (1772) in which Riccoboni affords her heroines "the conventional closure provided by marriage" but only in "a (con)text in which they (and the female voice) can survive it," that is, in the company of female friends (55). Chapter 4 focuses on *Lettres de Mylord Rivers* (1777), Riccoboni's only polyphonic novel, the only one in which the protagonist/main letter writer is male, and the one which, for Kaplan, represents "the culmination of [Riccoboni's] epistolary feminism" (5). *Lettres de Mylord Rivers* is under scrutiny as well in chapter 5, which features a fascinating discussion of the ways Percival Stockdale subverts Riccoboni's proto-feminism in his English translation. Among other examples, he substitutes the word "Humanity" for Riccoboni's "égalité" (in "À la honte de votre sexe, l'égalité, la franchise, la bonté sont des qualités peu propres à le fixer"), inserts a new paragraph contradicting her assertions about stoics (80), and adds a note attacking Riccoboni for creating a character who evolves—in his view, implausibly—from coquette to perfect wife (76).

The first chapter of part II showcases the connections between some of the letters that Kaplan has unearthed and identified as Riccoboni's (including one on female suicide) and her epistolary feminism, then analyzes the letters to Carara, Diderot's son-in-law, and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. Finally, chapter 7 engages with the letters (heretofore unexamined by modern scholars) that Riccoboni wrote to Thicknesse and her better-known ones to Laclos.

As one of the leading Riccoboni scholars in the United States, Kaplan knows her subject's work and the scholarship on it backward and forward, which makes the frequent self-referentiality (e.g. "Having published on Riccoboni for 15 years, I have omitted from this book my own prior in-depth analyses of certain topics..." [4]; "Although [*Lettres de Sophie de Vallière*] had not generated much modern scholarship, this changed after I published its scholarly modern edition in 2005" [44], etc.) not only unnecessary (as is, for that matter, the note thanking a fellow critic for permission to quote from her book [40]) but a bit tedious. The study could have benefitted from better editing to eliminate repetition, with some instances in very close proximity (e.g. "her literary success allowed her to live off her pen" then eight lines down, "Riccoboni left the theater to live off her pen [...] after the publication of several best-selling novels" [1-2]; "Out of the novel's forty-six letters [...] twenty-nine [...] include both sexes" [58], followed on the next page by "twenty-nine of the novel's forty-six letters are between members of both sexes" [59]; and, most egregiously, "This chapter examines how theory and praxis in Riccoboni's epistolary novel are optimized in her final novel *Lettres de Mylord Rivers* [...]. Susan Sniader Lanser calls it 'entirely an affair between men'" and, on the same page, "Susan Lanser called the latter 'entirely an affair between men' [...]. I argue here that the theory and praxis of epistolary feminism are optimized in *Lettres de Mylord Rivers*" [57]). The title listed in the table of contents and on the first page of chapter 5 does not match the one that Kaplan references in her introduction. Readers may not be convinced by Kaplan's proposal that "Orrery likely forms a partial anagram of Riccoboni with the 's' sound in d'Ossery, reminiscent of a hissing snake, replaced with an r for Riccoboni, *raison* (reason), and the positive connotation of *or* (gold)" (68). These foibles aside, Kaplan makes a compelling case for Riccoboni's fearlessness in asserting her right to publish as a woman writer and on her own terms (113) and for her status as one of the most significant French representatives of the feminist European Enlightenment (111). Riccoboni scholars and anyone interested in manifestations of feminism in the eighteenth century will welcome Kaplan's latest book.

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Lewis, Philippa. *Intimacy and Distance: Conflicting Cultures in Nineteenth-Century France*. Cambridge : Legenda, 2017. 187 p.

Dans son ouvrage souvent fascinant et habilement rédigé, Philippa Lewis examine la notion d'intimité et ses prolongements dans les sphères littéraire et socioculturelle de la France du dix-neuvième siècle. Plus précisément, l'auteure cherche à démontrer que « an awareness of intimacy as both a social and literary mode was [...] strengthened in nineteenth-century France and, rather than becoming a purely "private issue" [...], remained a compelling part of the collective cultural consciousness, widely written, read, and talked about » (p. 7). L'étude est divisée en six parties et examine les « cultures » de l'intimité, la gêne que pouvait ressentir les écrivain.e.s devant cette dernière, les rapports entre l'intimité et l'ironie dans les journaux intimes, le caractère intime des récits de voyage et de la critique d'art, ainsi que le discours sur l'amitié dans la critique littéraire.

Lewis convient d'emblée que son entreprise s'avère quelque peu hasardeuse, en raison surtout de la plasticité sémantique des termes « intimité » et « intime ». Force est d'avouer qu'il n'existe aucune définition de ces mots qui fasse l'unanimité ; au surplus, la notion d'intimité a souvent donné lieu à des usages anachroniques chez les critiques. Pour cette raison, l'ouvrage de Lewis « pays closer attention to specifically nineteenth-century articulations of intimacy » (p. 9) et « argues that the appeal of intimacy was [...] always