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**Abrams, Barbara. *Forensic Storytelling and the Literary Roots of Early Modern Feminism, ReSisters*. New York, London: Routledge, 2024.**

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This important archival study opens up the rich possibilities of what Abrams' calls "forensic storytelling." This strategy of scholarly engagement is the author's new way into the story of early modern women's writing as a literature of resistance in 18<sup>th</sup> century France. Or, in Abrams' terms, a legacy of French "reSisters." In this study Abrams focuses on the story of the incarceration of three French women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The stories are themselves forensic as is the forensic data she uses to make her case about these women's lives and their relationship to the literature of early modern feminism. Abrams interrogates the factums, the letters, notes, and arguments that these women put together to plead their own cases at the time. Scouring the archives at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Abrams brings us into the worlds of three of these women. Investigating their words, and their evidentiary files, she tells their stories, but she also places them in a broader context, both historical and literary.

As I read this book, Barbara Abrams's meticulous archival research constitutes in literary and historical terms, forensic expertise that resonates with the work of the American Academy of Forensic Science (AAFS); their work relates to any science used for the purpose of the law. Moreover, as they explain, the forensic scientist is often called upon as an expert witness in court but that this expert witness, "as opposed to the ordinary or 'fact' witness, is someone who is "permitted to testify not just about what the results of testing or analysis were ('facts'), but also to give opinion about what those results might mean."<sup>1</sup> She testifies to not just what is in the archive but is that scholarly expert who is uniquely positioned to tell us what this evidence means. This is precisely what she does in her aptly titled, *Forensic Storytelling*. She digs out and helps illuminate an extraordinary cache of French 18th century women's writing, a whole genre that has been overlooked as such, and, to date, only partially studied. On this score, Abrams is both gracious and eloquent in the ways she both appreciates and builds on prior scholarship. This is not about conquest as much as it is about a broadening, an opening of this work to new questions and novel perspectives that build from prior scholarly inquiry. She enhances and expands those studies to

reimagine what these women's writings can teach us about their gendered efforts at making their own cases. She shows us how they wrote to demand justice and freedom from their confinement writing even directly to the King to make their cases. More on all of this in what follows.

In another way, "forensic" is a useful way of thinking about the role of these women's files in what was then 18th century French literary culture and its fascination with epistolary plays and novels about women who were in trouble with the law and suffered for it. As this book makes vividly clear, these fictional works seem to have been rooted in the lives of actual French women. Their letters, memoirs, and legal arguments, the materials Abrams found in the archives, were, as she makes clear, the basis of much of this popular literature of the time. Given this, Abrams insists on recognizing the archival records of these women's cases, and especially their letters as influential literary works of the period.

Using a feminist lens, Abrams offers compelling readings of these women's writings showing us how they each expressed their agency in fighting for their own lives. As she explains, these historical women's writings, the cases they argued for themselves, their pleas for their freedom from their confinement in prisons, workhouses, and convents constitute an early feminist literature. These enlightened literate women, women trained in convents and salons of the period used these skills to resist the injustices foisted upon them. This powerful argument is not a singular tale, but rather a range of arguments posed by the different women at the heart of this study. In radically different ways, the cases of three of these women are the subject of the three main chapters of this book. Instead of critiquing the nature and the merits of their prose, as such and remarking in any simple way about the merits of their writing, Abrams reads symptomatically. She shows us what the evidence before her tells us about the conditions of the women writing these documents and the urgency of their efforts. The cases include Mlle. Mare-Madeleine Bonafon who wrote a scandalous novel, Mme Geneviève de Gravelle, a spinster who became a nuisance after repeatedly asking for a pension and compensation for helping make an important match at court, and finally Angélique (Glucka) Schwab who insisted on converting and being confined in a convent rather than marry.

With this in mind, although assessments of the quality of some of this writing are crucial to the first case of Mlle. Marie-Madeleine Bonafon, the chambermaid/playwright as they make clear that

she was a capable writer and could well have been the author of the controversial novel, a sendoff of the King, the book that got her in trouble in the first place.

In the second case, the poor quality and the voluminous nature of the writing of Mme. Geneviève de Gravelle were themselves crucial to appreciating this woman's story. In fact, the excess and the sloppiness of de Gravelle's prose and even her handwriting are, as Abrams argues, symptomatic of her fierce efforts to save herself by any means necessary. In other words, Abrams makes a compelling case for rereading even poor prose as a part of this woman's efforts to save her own life. As we learn, de Gravelle was desperate, and that desperation in and of itself is evident in her dossier, driving her frenzied writing and rewriting, her ample files. Instead of dismissing this writing, Abrams shows us how to read it otherwise and explains what these writings tell us about this woman's agency. De Gravelle's desperation becomes palpable, and people have to pay attention to her even when they reject her claims, she refuses to be forgotten.

In the third case, the seemingly obvious story of a Jewish woman (or once Jewish woman) Angélique (Glucka) Schwab who ends up in a convent becomes something else entirely. Although it might seem obvious that she was there as a forced convert, this is not the story Abrams uncovers through her forensic analysis. Rather, as Abrams show us, it seems that Glucka did not want to marry the man her father and her community had decided she should marry and given this, she pleaded with the King to help her escape her marital fate. She decided to convert and retreat to a convent with the help of the King.

In each of these instances Abrams brings together the history of 18th century French women and the literature by and about these women. As a French literary scholar of the 18th century, Abrams offers a window into the time period. Through careful and insightful close readings, as well as elegant translations of the handwritten archival texts at the heart of this book, she makes these women's lives accessible to scholars and students alike. Not only does she supply readers with the French and the English translations of key texts from these women's case files, but we also see the text in a robust array of photographs of these very documents.

As a scholar of religion, Jewish studies, and gender who has worked with Holocaust and traumatic memory, and the way these legacies are manifest in the objects that remain, physical evidence of violent crimes and the forensic stories they tell, I am moved by the way Abrams writes about the

physical files, the way these women's stories have been preserved in the archive, scraps of paper, the playing cards and torn and used pieces of paper that they sometimes had to use when paper and pen were denied them often by the King himself, or the way that these factums, legal portfolios, include scraps of fabric, small samples that suggest a hopeful desire to be released and in at least one of these cases, one woman's attention to what she might wear in the event of her freedom. In one instance, Abrams calls attention to a carefully tied silk ribbon that held together the personal writing of another one of these women. These details, the handwriting, the quality of the paper and pens that they used, all speak to a kind of forensic archeology of knowledge, the buried traces of the specificity of the material presence of these now long-gone women.

Each of these case studies is a small gem, a window into a long-gone world. Given my own scholarship, I want to conclude with a brief discussion of the case of Angélique (Glucka) Schwab to appreciate the kind of forensic analysis that Abrams performs throughout the book. In describing this case, she presents the broader context of Jewish life in France, and more specifically in Paris at the time including a brief description of Monsieur Bautry, “a special agent of the King and appointee to the police task force” who became the “Jew-finder” assigned to keep control of this community in Paris (120). Abrams brings us into the world of the Schwab family again in order to more fully consider how Glucka became Angélique. This is a very messy story that demands some conjecture, but again in Abram's account these hypotheses are expert opinions about what the evidence might tell us. And, only after an exhaustive search of the archives for some cues as to why and how this woman who grew up a Jew in Paris ultimately died a Christian in a convent, do we learn some of the reasons why she did this. Sadly, despite her efforts to break free from her family and the marriage she seemed not to have wanted, Angélique died an early death. This happened not long after she had used her remarkable skills as a writer and a thinker to rearrange her entire life to get to that convent even having gone so far as to enlist the help of the crown.

Chapter 5, “What's in a Name?” is devoted to this case and is very much about “patriarchal authority.” As Abrams puts it, we learn how Angélique Schwab deployed “the dynamics and mechanisms of patriarchal authority and feminine resistance” (118). As in the other chapters of this book, here again, Abrams “weigh[s] the historical documents and evaluate[s] the information therein to gain a better understanding of the ability of women with limited choices to achieve a

degree of autonomy” (118). The evidence at hand include testimony from a brother, Angélique’s memoirs, letters from the magistrate, the clergy, and the court (119) Abrams places these materials within the historical context of Jews in Eighteenth-century Paris noting the particularly precarious status of Ashkenazic and Alsatian Jews, even quite wealthy Jews like the Schwab family, often referred to as “Jews from Metz” residing in Paris at this time. Abrams then takes readers into the network of these Jewish families using all she learns to attempt to explain how it might have been possible for Glucka to imagine using confinement and conversion as a way of getting out of her prospective marriage. Building on work by the French historian Leon Kahn, Abrams offers a range of possible causes. These include the story of Abraham Schwab, a relative whose file Abrams found through her forensic detective work in the archive’s catalog alongside Angélique’s, a famous scandal in its own right. It turns out that Abraham, convicted on charges of financial fraud found himself imprisoned with another Jewish man, his cellmate Nathan of Morhange. And while incarcerated, Nathan converted to Christianity. One possibility is that Glucka knew this story from her family and that Nathan inspired Glucka to become the Catholic, Angélique. Other possibilities include the idea that she might have been attracted to Catholicism, although we do not know exactly how she would have learned about it. Or “she may have met and fallen in love with a Catholic man” but again, we are not sure how she would have met such a man given the ghettoizing of the Parisian Jewish community. And finally, as Abrams argues so compellingly, that ultimately, Angélique may have “sought out pathways to block her father’s authority and the match that was awaiting her” (138). As Abrams makes clear certainly some combination of these factors, but most especially this final argument may best explain this particular case. Given all of this, it is especially sad to learn that Angélique was baptized in May of 1731 and became ill and ultimately died only a year or so later. This is but a small taste of the rich stories Barbara Abrams tells in this compelling book. I urge others who do not necessarily work to 18<sup>th</sup> century French to take a closer look at this significant slim volume, especially scholars of gender and those working in Jewish studies among others.

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<sup>1</sup>“What is Forensic Science? And “What do Forensic Scientists Do?” *The Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS)*, <https://www.aafs.org/careers-forensic-science/what-forensic-science>. Accessed 7/21/2024.