

Carroll on Norris (2003)

Norris, Anna. *L'Écriture du défi: Textes carcéraux féminins du XIXe et du XXe siècles. Entre l'aiguille et la plume*. Birmingham, AL: Summa Publications, 2003. Pp. 217. ISBN: 1883479398.

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In this carefully researched study, Anna Norris examines the social, political and historical institutions and discourses that prevented recognizing former female prisoners' writing as literature and their authors as full-fledged writers. Some of the women in question were already authors before their incarceration, but Norris argues that most of these women would not have become authors if not for their experiences in prison. While the status of prisoner did not generally detract from a male's status and success as a writer (think the Marquis de Sade), for former female prisoners the status of prisoner superseded all other social identities. The female prisoner was not typically rehabilitated by her experience in prison and she remained a delinquent in the public eye. Her identity as a delinquent clashed with the traditional roles of wife and mother reserved for women.

Norris aims to answer the following questions: Why was the status of writer denied to these women and why, therefore, deny these texts of all historical, social, cultural, and literary value? Why was their speaking out and their uncommon character judged as too subversive? Finally, Norris's goal is to familiarize readers with these women's writing and have readers recognize these women as full-fledged writers. Some books and articles have been written about these female prisoners and their writings, but Norris claims that these secondary sources approach female prisoners from a sociological or anthropological point of view and never from a literary point of view. Examples of earlier studies include: Elissa Gelfand's *Imagination in Confinement* (1983), Barbara Harlow's *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention* (1992) and Sidonie Smith's *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (1992).

Norris brings to light the lives and writings of former prisoners: Madame de Campestre, Marie Cappelle Lafarge, Marguerite Steinheil, Anne Huré, Albertine Sarrazin, Nicole Gérard, Béatrice Saubin and Gabrielle Bompard. Norris presents a brief biography of each prisoner and a description of her writings. Most of the works discussed are in memoir form but some are novels. The texts are gynocentric and confront dominant patriarchal discourses. These texts deal with female-specific issues such as: social pressure exerted on women, marriage, female sexuality, lesbianism, female bodily problems, rape and sexual harassment. Each of these texts critiques and blames French society for creating the conditions leading to the author's imprisonment.

Norris does an excellent job of telling these women's stories. At times however, she falls into the very historical and sociological traps she set out to avoid. She posits that female prisoners' writings received attention in order to satisfy the public needs for voyeurism and sensationalism. In her explanations of why nineteenth and twentieth-century French society refused to recognize these women as writers, Norris reproduces the sensationalism associated with their crimes and imprisonment. Rather than treating female prison writings as stand-alone texts, Norris reads these texts through the filters of social, cultural, and historical discourses and institutions. At the end of Norris's study, it is still unclear how to read these female prison writings as literature.

The bulk of Norris's study focuses on the myths and representations of the female prisoner and how these myths prevented them from publishing their writing and otherwise making their voices heard. Norris provides a history of punishment and the prison system in France, and of psychoanalytical and psychosexual theories regarding female prisoners. She posits that the scarcity of published prisoners' texts derives primarily from the historical shift from punishing the prisoner's body to punishing the prisoner's mind, soul and spirit and its accompanying injunction to silence. Because so little has been written about these female prisoners, Norris's study fills an important gap in nineteenth and twentieth-century French literary studies.

Finally, Norris concludes that despite feminist critique and the development of women's literature, female prisoners' texts still are not given much consideration as literature because they are autobiographical in nature. As Norris points out, these autobiographical writings typically defy genre classifications. The issue of genre classification is underdeveloped in Norris's study. Norris identifies tensions between women's or feminist canons, minor literature and the French canon of literature, but she fails to discuss adequately the advantages and disadvantages of classifying female prison writing in any of these categories. In order for readers to accept female prison writing as literature worthy of study, Norris has to identify potential and actual points of insertion and contact with existing genres. Norris would have done well to analyze these writing not only in terms of broad themes, but also in terms of common images, tones, styles and aesthetics. In spite of these caveats, I recommend *L'Écriture du défi* for nineteenth- and twentieth-century social, cultural and literary scholars.

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