

Guentner on Brun (2014)

Brun, Friederike. *Lettres de Rome (1808–1810)*. Trad. H el ene Risch. Ed. Nicolas Bourguinat and H el ene Risch. Strasbourg: Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 2014. Pp. 151. ISBN: 978-2-86820-585-8

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With this French translation and edition of *Briefe aus Rom* (1816), H el ene Risch and Nicolas Bourguinat introduce to a new public a compelling narrative by a German-language woman writer and poet from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century: Friederike Brun (1765–1835). A Protestant, raised in Denmark of German parents, Brun frequented cultivated milieus, allowing her to engage with well-known literary figures of the day, such as Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, Christoph Martin Wieland, Friedrich Schiller, and Karl Viktor von Bonstetten. Spending considerable time abroad, she was among those her exiled friend, Germaine de Sta el, gathered around her at Coppet. A European intellectual like Sta el, Brun was well-aware of the intellectual, ideological, and political currents of the French Revolution and its imperial aftermath.

It is perhaps the Napoleonic context of the *Lettres de Rome* that will be of most interest to French scholars of the long nineteenth century. Brun lived in Rome from 1808 to 1810, and witnessed firsthand the occupation of the city by French troops. She recorded her observations first in journal form, and then in letters sent to her brother, a Lutheran bishop in Denmark; these she published in 1816, after Napoleon’s defeat. To do otherwise, she writes in her *Avant-propos*, would have been a “d eclaration de guerre,” as Sta el’s own fate likely made clear to her. Although published after Waterloo, Brun’s *au-jour-le-jour* writing creates a suspenseful drama, as news stories, whether accurate, fictional, or exaggerated, caused anxiety among Romans and members of the expatriate community alike, at the same time that they were enduring the imperial regime’s tactics of subjugation.

Brun’s eyewitness account of the Italian campaign details in particular the repressive strategies employed by the French regime to undermine the temporal and spiritual power of the Church. The atmosphere of persecution, fear, and suspicion created by Napoleon’s condemnation of the *non-jur es* clergy and hierarchy is reminiscent of that in Paris during the Terror, Brun writes. She deconstructs the myth of Napoleon as hero as she sets up Pope Pius VII, the legitimate leader, and Lucien Bonaparte, the wise family man, as foils for the Emperor. In her narrative, the Pope’s principled, passive resistance to the unprovoked aggression of a despot makes him the authentic hero. Similarly, contrasting with the folly of his brother’s limitless ambition, Lucien Bonaparte’s contentment with private life, and his peaceful role as a *pater familias*, illustrates, for Brun, true nobility. Among the many anecdotes of Roman life she includes, one stands out in suggesting the tension of appearance and reality in occupied Rome. When, against the Pope’s wishes, the French military attempted to force the people of Rome to celebrate Carnival, they refused. The elaborate preparations made by the French regime came to naught, as elegant masked balls and street parades remained empty of costumed revelers: Romans from all classes had succeeded in making the powerful regime look petty and laughable.

The short introduction written by the two editors provides biographical details, and information on the historical period, the history of the writing and publication of Brun’s letters, and the principles guiding the translation itself. Their translation is taken from the modern German edition of *Briefe aus Rom* (2000), and the editors indicate that the original German text is available online. While the German text is thus relatively accessible to readers, it would have been helpful to have those of her poems Brun inserted in her letters in the original German as well as in French translation. Bourguinat and Risch characterize the work as inherently political, containing elements of journalistic reportage and historical synthesis. Copious, informative notes have been provided to accompany the letters themselves, thus facilitating a full understanding of Brun’s observations and comments.

A perceptive essay by Bourguinat, “Commentaire: du voyage f eminin au manifeste politique,” follows the letters. Bourguinat analyzes the hybrid nature of Brun’s text, discusses other women travel writers in Europe, compares the *Lettres de Rome* to other works by Brun, examines the conditions under which this unaccompanied foreign woman writer could participate in Roman social life, sketches the publication history of travels to Italy, especially those including visits to Rome, and evaluates the unique contribution Brun made to this tradition, writing as a woman, a Protestant, and a Northern European at a particularly charged moment of history. Given the anti-Napol eon thrust of Brun’s text, an important context is missing: that of women writers’ response to the Emperor and his regime. For this, Bourguinat could have relied upon the collection of essays, *Women Against Napoleon* (2007), especially since it includes an excellent article on Brun’s *Briefe aus Rom* by Kari Lokke. In general, however, this edition’s critical apparatus does an excellent job of making Friederike Brun’s *Lettres de Rome* easily accessible to Francophone readers, while Brun’s text itself constitutes a salutary antidote to the heroic myth created by French artists,

such as Jacques-Louis David, and by French writers, including, above all, Stendhal.

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