

Garval on Mesch (2013)

Mesch, Rachel. *Having It All in the Belle Époque: How French Women's Magazines Invented the Modern Woman*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. Pp. xii + 256. ISBN: 978-0-8047-8424-5

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Rachel Mesch's fascinating, lavishly illustrated study opens a window into the surprising world of the Belle Époque French women's magazines that, in the dozen or so years preceding the Great War, tackled questions still at the heart of debates over women's place in society today: how to reconcile femininity and feminism, life and work, conventional expectations and new opportunities. Taking a cue from the groundbreaking illustrated periodicals she studies, Mesch makes her case through lively analysis of both text and image, notably sixty-three figures, drawn largely from the pages of *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse*, depicting women alpinists, automobilists, lawyers, and, in particular, writers. Along the way, she brings to light a pivotal, unjustly forgotten chapter not only in women's history and literary history, but also in the development of early mass culture, celebrity culture, and visual culture.

During the Belle Époque, Mesch contends, *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* envisioned a novel *femme moderne* who could "have it all," unlike the existing, much-maligned model of the *femme nouvelle*. The standard bearer of progressive womanhood since the 1890s—and avatar of the earlier *bas-bleu* ridiculed by Daumier, Barbey d'Aurevilly, and others—the *femme nouvelle* was commonly criticized for sacrificing women's traditional domestic, conjugal, and maternal roles in favor of professional ambition and political activism (notably feminism, and particularly suffragism). In contrast, the compelling if idealized figure of the *femme moderne* somehow managed to enjoy a successful career, stylish attire, and a satisfying home life complete with a loving husband, cherished offspring, and tasteful décor.

Having it All is split into two parts: "Readers and Writers" and "Texts and Contexts." The first half "examines the ways that Belle Époque literary feminism constructed, in text and image, a shared fantasy of modern femininity" (27). Chapter one explores the carefully cultivated relationship between these magazines and their *chères lectrices*, who were encouraged to identify with the paragons of new womanhood served up to them in each issue. The following two chapters explore further the iconography of the *femme moderne* as disseminated in the pages of *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse*. Established writers like Colette, Gyp, or Séverine posed hard at work, while shrouded in a reassuring veil of home and family. Emergent media darlings like Myriam Harry or Lucie Delarue-Mardrus sparkled in orientalist images that, while enticingly exotic, were also strategically sanitized and domesticized. Finally, chapter four considers how Delarue-Mardrus and Marcelle Tinayre developed critical perspectives on the very magazines that propelled their success, urging their readers toward greater independence and intellectual engagement without fundamentally calling into question the magazines' project of framing the *femme moderne*.

The second half of the book moves beyond the rarefied, somewhat utopian realm of women's magazines and into the broader culture in order to gauge their reception and influence. To this end, chapters five through seven and the conclusion explore: the dynamic relationship between these magazines and women's popular fiction; Jean Lorrain's parody of the women's press in his posthumous *Maison pour dames* (1908); the brouhaha surrounding Marcelle Tinayre's apparent false modesty in demurring over a nomination for the *Légion d'honneur*, which she never received anyway (her insistent reservations, much like Sartre's later refusal of the Nobel Prize, garnered her far greater publicity than she would have enjoyed as a more cooperative laureate); and, along similar lines, the renewed discussions about allowing women into the *Académie française*.

As Mesch concedes in her conclusion, it is not clear what real impact these magazines had, aside from imagining the figure of the *femme moderne*. But this vision, while far from fully realized during the period, held great promise for the future. *Having It All* takes us on a remarkable journey into lost time, worthwhile both in itself and for the insights it offers into issues that continue to preoccupy us today.

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