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Scott, Maria C. *Stendhal's Less-Loved Heroines: Freedom, Fiction, and the Female*. Oxford: Legenda, 2013. Pp. 142. ISBN: 978-1-907975-71-4

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Maria C. Scott's dense little monograph (131 pages, including a bibliography and short index) on Stendhal's less-loved heroines, namely Mina, Vanina, Mathilde, and Lamiel, makes for engaging reading. As the title suggests, the author gets personally involved and defends these fictional characters almost as if they were friends, women whose company she would like to keep, and she wants us to love them too. The style is alert, the tone optimistic, and while she necessarily has her work cut out for her convincing us that less-loved characters are lovable, her writing has the type of energy that makes readers love Stendhal.

Freedom is at the center of this discussion. Although Scott makes much of narrative plotting where female characters' agency is stressed, the motivating force of her argument is essentially a pure Sartrean defense and illustration of freedom: the characters' freedom within the confines of their plot, the author's narrative freedom, and the reader's interpretative freedom. But, while very didactic in her Sartrean allegiance (especially in the introduction), she can also take a step away, as in chapter one, "Mina, Vanina, and The Logic of The Strange Step," to offer us a more nuanced and historical approach of Stendhal's concept of freedom, based on his reading of *philosophes* such as Destutt de Tracy, and on his letters to his sister Pauline. What emerges is a flagrant discrepancy between his fearless fictional heroines with their aristocratic disdain for public opinion on the one hand, and on the other, the cautionary advice he offers Pauline not to act like them for fear of being deprived of whatever happiness she, as a woman, can expect from living in a century in which public opinion unfortunately reigns, especially over women.

Scott offers an interesting historical argument in defense of both existentialism and her overtly non- or post-feminist approach to the least-loved heroine, Lamiel, in the third and last chapter, "On Not Taking *Lamiel* Seriously." *Lamiel* was in fact first published in 1971, after the fall of existentialism, and before feminism became a bit too "serious." Seriousness is, in her opinion, a major liability according not only to existentialist philosophy, but also to Stendhal's *recherche du bonheur*, as "esprit de sérieux" is what kills both freedom and joy, since it takes freedom to find "le bonheur." Scott's critique of seriousness permits her to mark her distance from earnest feminists, in particular from Beauvoir whom she finds too cautious, and to pick up the torch of existentialism, the unjustly underappreciated philosophy.

The author's devotional attachment to Sartre's existentialism makes her underestimate Beauvoir's more subtle approach, especially in her defense of Mathilde (in chapter two, "Mathilde and the Paradox of Authenticity") whom, according to Scott, Beauvoir admires for her "mitigated form of freedom." Here Scott loses sight of important driving elements such as the socio-historical context and in particular the class factor. For example, she pokes fun at Julien's class-sensitive "debilitating seriousness" in order to praise Mathilde's carefree and unserious attitudes.

Ironically, an unintended effect of Scott's desire to stress female narrative freedom and agency—mostly in characters from less-read fictions such as *Vanina Vanini*, *Mina de Vanghel*, and the unfinished *Lamiel*—is that these complicated narratives call for lengthy plot summaries, and plot summaries, like excessively complicated plots, tend to be boring.

Even in *Le Rouge et le Noir*, which needs no plot summary, narrative complications (for which Stendhal apologizes, calling them “les landes du récit”) create in the reader the kind of *ennui* that, even if it gives Mathilde her admirable motivating force, makes us, like Julien, shy away from her and her incessant plotting and turn to Mme de Rênal’s sense of pure, momentous joy.

Thus it is brave of Scott to propose herself as the defender of these unloved female characters. This book is enjoyable, its author pugnacious, and like the heroines themselves, daring and unfair, daring to be unfair, allowing the reader to object, agree, or disagree. At times, she and her mannish heroines are closer to Baudelaire’s or Barbey’s devil-may-care haughty dandyism than to Sartre’s ponderous existentialism, as they unabashedly display and exercise, for the reader’s pleasure and relief, their own *plaisir aristocratique de déplaire*.