

Vantine on De Falco (2012)

De Falco, Domenica. *La Femme et les personnages féminins chez les Goncourt*. Paris: Éditions Honoré Champion, 2012. Pp. 328. ISBN: 978-2-7453-2389-7

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Domenica De Falco's study of female characters in the works of Edmond and Jules de Goncourt is an overdue addition to scholarship on the brothers' writing, given the prominence of female protagonists and central female figures in their work. Their misogyny is evident, but De Falco is right to insist that "cette misogynie est si manifestement exprimée qu'elle devient suspect et rend extrêmement nécessaire d'en démonter les implications si l'on veut essayer de comprendre la place qu'ils occupent dans leur siècle" (17). The scope of her work goes beyond most previous scholarship in the area by combining detailed analysis of eight specific novels with a broad analysis of the Goncourt's representation of women across their novels and to a lesser extent their *Journal*. She effectively examines the complexities of their female characters, which cannot be reduced to superficial or entirely predictable portraits of the nineteenth-century woman, and she provides a thorough account of the relevant cultural context, giving particular attention to the pervasive misogyny that permeated historical, scientific, and medical discourse of the period.

After an introduction in which De Falco provides a succinct overview of major scholarship on the Goncourts, part one examines their representation of women as bodies: perpetually ill bodies suffering from various forms of pathology (cardiac weakness, mystic neurosis, hysteria); prostituted bodies treated as merchandise; and bodies displayed as spectacle. On this last point, De Falco provides an interesting analysis of how the narcissistic spectacle of their bodies allow the model, Manette Salomon, and the actress, La Faustin, to exercise control over others around them, especially men, and thereby to triumph. In part two, she discusses the Goncourt's treatment of women's "parures," and particularly their clothing, which is used to seduce and to disguise, but which is also a point of access through which a more profound understanding of their female characters may be gleaned. In De Falco's analysis, it is again Manette and La Faustin whose feminine strength can be seen through their relationship to clothing: for Manette this is shown through her refusal to adorn herself with needless vestimentary decorations, whereas with La Faustin it is her capacity to relish the roles she takes on, costume and all, as a consummate artist. Part three explores the manner in which the Goncourts' fictional women express themselves both through speech and silence. The brothers' female characters, argues De Falco, are perpetually torn between excessive speech and internally or externally suppressed speech. However, she identifies an exception to this pattern by turning to female conversation as reported in the *Journal* through their accounts of Princesse Mathilde and her salon.

Throughout the book, De Falco provides new insights into the Goncourts' work. The first part, however, is the most thorough, with its six chapters spanning a hundred pages, whereas the second part squeezes ten chapters into seventy pages, leaving one feeling that some sections could have been combined while others deserve to be expanded further; the third part falls between the other two in its pacing.

Curiously absent from De Falco's bibliography is Barbara Giraud's monograph on *L'Héroïne goncourtienne: entre hystérie et dissidence* (2009). Giraud is particularly interested in the manner in which the Goncourts appropriate scientific discourse through literature, and she argues that, despite itself, their *écriture artiste* expresses a critical vision of women's place in society and challenges the normative discourse of Second Empire institutional authority (specifically, in the realms of family, religion, prison, and art). Similarly, De Falco ultimately seeks to invert the received understanding of the Goncourt as merely misogynistic: "Sans prétendre les réhabiliter complètement sur une question 'épineuse', nous avons montré, à la fin de chaque partie de notre travail, le renversement de cette logique de régression, de dégradation, de 'déchéance' de la femme" (291). While some reviewers found Giraud to rely too unquestioningly on Foucault in her reading of women in the works of the Goncourts, such theoretical considerations are largely absent from De Falco's study, which might indeed have benefitted from the additional perspective contemporary feminist theory would provide. It is understandable that De Falco chose not to include the numerous female figures from the Goncourts' historical writings, as she is careful to explain, since they are a different kind of text. Yet, she also acknowledges that an equally detailed analysis of the Goncourts' account of these historical women is ultimately needed to fully appreciate the complete spectrum of their literary representation of women. Let us hope, then, that others will continue to build on De Falco's valuable work.

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