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## The Evolution of the French Courtesan Novel: From de Chabrillan to Colette (book review)

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SULLIVAN, COURTNEY. *The Evolution of the French Courtesan Novel: From de Chabrilan to Colette*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. ISBN 978-1-137-59708-3. Pp. 127.

“Can a woman retain a sense of agency all the while selling her body?” asks Sullivan (111). Her outstanding volume is the first to show that French courtesans of the nineteenth century were fully-fledged masters of the pen who wrote against the depiction of the demi-mondaine as a flashy, status-seeking prostitute, a femme fatale, or a self-sacrificing, consumptive harlot with a heart of gold. By doing so, their texts strove to carve a place outside of a discourse dominated by male writers such as Dumas fils, the Goncourt brothers, Eugène Sue, and Émile Zola. Indeed, in their rewriting of the classics such as *La dame aux camélias* (1848) and *Nana* (1880), Sullivan reveals how the courtesan writers Céleste de Chabrilan, Valtesse de la Bigne, and Liane de Pougy—all highly successful in their lifetime but forgotten today—countered prevailing stereotypes of venal women as man-eaters by creating independent and well-read protagonists who vividly depict the dangers, harassment, humiliation, and psychological damage endured by sex workers. Sullivan begins her study by making the case for the courtesan novel. This sub-genre of popular fiction written by renowned French demi-mondaines from the Second Empire through the Belle Époque challenged the portrayal of Marguerite in *La dame aux camélias*, showing that Dumas’s work creates not only unrealistic stereotypes of courtesans but also harmful ones. Sullivan defines the courtesan novel sub-genre by outlining its characteristics, then shows how these writers use intertextuality to effect an important shift in perspective from the traditionally degraded demi-mondaine to the injured but driven woman who declares her right to write against men’s damaging representations of her kind. In another chapter, Sullivan demonstrates how de Pougy’s writing served as a sort of therapy for working through trauma. She explores de Pougy’s depiction of the aspects of sex work that make her feel vulnerable and objectified as a plaything: abusive johns, pregnancy, and mental and physical exhaustion. The attention the courtesan novels garnered and the sales they generated unnerved some male authors so eager for publicity that they wrote phony memoirs under female pseudonyms. Sullivan explores this curious phenomenon in her book, examining the male writers’ motives for stealing the demi-mondaine’s identity and reworking her stories. In the last chapter, Sullivan demonstrates that while Colette did not write out of personal experience but rather out of sympathy for the courtesans, she nonetheless created intriguing and sympathetic portraits of demi-mondaines in works that share interesting parallels with the themes of the courtesan novel genre, particularly in the way each protagonist’s intellectual prowess and desire for independence cause conflict with her lovers. The conclusion encourages new areas of inquiry like portrayals of prostitutes in film and the exploration of the themes of the courtesan novel in the works of contemporary authors like Virginie Despentes. While dialogues on sex work and efforts to de-stigmatize it promise to resurface in

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literature, theory, and film for years to come, this trailblazing book proves that the courtesan novelists pioneered these issues well over a century ago.

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