

2020

## Writing the Landscape: Exposing Nature in French Women's Fiction 1789-1815 (Book Review)

Juliana Starr  
*University of New Orleans*, [jstarr1@uno.edu](mailto:jstarr1@uno.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.uno.edu/fl\\_facpubs](https://scholarworks.uno.edu/fl_facpubs)



Part of the [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Starr, Juliana. "Writing the Landscape: Exposing Nature in French Women's Fiction 1789-1815." (Book Review) *Women in French Studies* 28 (2020): 147-48.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English and Foreign Languages at ScholarWorks@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Foreign Languages Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

**Margrave, Christie. *Writing the Landscape: Exposing Nature in French Women's Fiction 1789-1815*. Legenda, 2019. Pp. 306. ISBN 978-1-78188-704-2. \$99. (cloth, paper, and eBook).**

Scholars of European Romanticism have almost entirely overlooked the influence of French women writers of the First Republic and First Empire. In reaction to this oversight, Margrave's excellent monograph resituates the dominant themes of French Romanticism, firstly, as developing earlier than the 1820s and, secondly, as much more than a male phenomenon.

Over a hundred years before Virginia Woolf called for "a room of one's own," Margrave argues, French women writers Mme Cottin, Mme de Krüdener, Mme de Genlis, Mme de Souza, and Mme de Staël had already identified such a space as a platform for their voices and those of their heroines. This space was not a room or building that they possessed, but rather was to be found amid the natural landscapes they created within their fictional works. By employing images of natural landscapes strategically to re-establish a platform for the female voice—their own, at the same time as that of their literary heroines—they exposed and confronted the restrictions placed on their sex, challenged the prevalent eighteenth-century argument that a woman's essence defines her existence, and thus carved out a vital place for themselves in literary history. For Margrave, this vital place has not yet been accorded the attention it merits because the novels themselves have largely been forgotten, but also even where scholarship has recognized the works of women writers of this era, it has overlooked their portrayal of landscapes.

Comprised of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion, the book examines precisely what social and creative restrictions women writers exposed through a "landscape of one's own" (5). The chapters show four broad categories of landscapes: tamed nature (such as French gardens), nature cultivated to look untamed (such as English gardens), wild nature (such as seas and mountains), and natural deathscapes (places where heroines perish), all used to highlight the plight of women in relation to different socio-political debates—for instance, those regarding marriage (Chapter 1), motherhood (Chapter 2), madness (Chapter 3), death or suicide (Chapter 4), and authorship (Chapter 5). Women writers employ these landscapes to achieve three major ends: to create symbolic depth for their controversial arguments, to enable their heroines to rebel against and/or escape from oppression, and most importantly, to provide a platform from which the female voice may be heard. This latter aim permits otherwise impossible discourse to be established between characters, between heroine and reader, and between author and reader. By re-establishing autonomy, highlighting self-expression, celebrating the figure of the melancholic wanderer, the social misfit, the grief-stricken, the mad, the suicidal, and the figure of the writer-poet, all in the heart of natural landscapes, these authors exerted an influence on the literary

Romanticism that soon captured the French imagination, at the same time as they challenged the dominant patriarchal discourse and gender dichotomy of their day.

This well-researched and beautifully written book provides fresh contributions to the fields of Women's Studies and French Romanticism by demonstrating the vital importance of these largely forgotten women writers of the First Republic and First Empire.

**Julianna Starr**

**University of New Orleans**