

REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN THE FRENCH IMAGINARY

Historicizing the Gallic Singularity

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ABSTRACT: This article, the introduction to the special issue “Representations of Women in the French Imaginary: Historicizing the Gallic Singularity,” frames the work of contributors Tracy Adams, Christine Adams, Jean Elisabeth Pedersen, Whitney Walton, and Kathleen Antonioni by analyzing two especially important contemporary debates about French sexual politics, one popular and one academic: (1) the international controversy over Catherine Deneuve’s decision to sign a French manifesto against the American #MeToo movement in *Le Monde*; and (2) the mixed French and American response to the work of Mona Ozouf in *Les mots des femmes: Essai sur la singularité française*. The five articles in the special issue itself bring new breadth and depth to the study of these and related debates by exploring a range of different French representations of women in a series of key texts, topics, and historical episodes from the rise of the Middle Ages to the aftermath of World War I.

KEYWORDS: Catherine Deneuve, feminism, French exception, gender, #MeToo, Mona Ozouf, power, sex

This interdisciplinary special issue of *French Politics, Culture & Society* presents five articles by historians and literary critics with a common interest in one particular aspect of what scholars across a range of fields have identified variously as “the Gallic singularity,” “the French singularity,” or even “the French exception”: the idea that French men and women have a distinctly different way of organizing social and political relations between men and women than the men and women of other countries, especially the “Anglo-Saxon” countries of England and the United



States.*¹ Eric Fassin, who may have been the first to coin the phrase “Gallic singularity” in the context of the related debates over whether cultural commentators might characterize French gender relations as especially good or especially bad relative to those of these other countries, has focused much of his comparative attention on the analysis of the transnational French and American discussions of topics such as sexual harassment and date rape in the relatively recent period from the 1990s to today.² Karen Offen, who has devoted much of her own scholarly attention to the study of French feminisms in a series of larger nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and American contexts, has recently argued for the existence of a distinctive tradition of French discussion and debate over “the woman question” that has its origins at least as early as Christine de Pizan’s publication of *Le livre de la cité des dames* in 1405.³ Our articles bring new breadth and depth to the study of these and related issues by exploring a range of different French representations of women in a series of key texts, topics, and historical episodes from the rise of the Middle Ages to the aftermath of World War I.

The Gallic Singularity: Contemporary Debates

One of the most recent popular manifestations of the debate over “the Gallic singularity” has been the international controversy over Catherine Deneuve’s decision to sign a French manifesto against the American #MeToo movement in *Le Monde* in 2018. One of the most important academic incarnations of the debate over “the Gallic singularity” remains the mixed French and American response to the work of Mona Ozouf in *Les mots des femmes: Essai sur la singularité française*, which appeared in France in 1995, in English translation in the United States in 1997, and in an augmented French edition with a new afterword in 1999. Reconsidering the controversies over Deneuve’s participation in the collective manifesto that appeared in *Le Monde* and Ozouf’s position in the significant “Essay on French Singularity” that appeared as the closing chapter of *Les mots des femmes* not only offers an important context in which to understand the new articles about different approaches to the study of “the Gallic singularity” that appear in this special issue of *French Politics, Culture & Society*, but also suggests some important points for the comparative study of France with other countries and cultures more generally.

Catherine Deneuve made headlines on both sides of the Atlantic by joining her name to a manifesto that Sarah Chiche, Catherine Millet, Catherine Robbe-Grillet, Peggy Sastre, and Abnousse Shalmani had drafted for the “Débats” section of *Le Monde* in January 2018. This open letter,

which initially appeared in the online version of the paper on the morning of 9 January, featured the signatures of one hundred prominent French women protesting what they saw as the excesses of the #MeToo movement under the headline and summary description “‘Nous défendons une liberté d’importuner, indispensable à la liberté sexuelle’: Dans une tribune au *Monde*, un collectif de 100 femmes, dont Catherine Millet, Ingrid Caven et Catherine Deneuve, affirme son rejet d’un certain féminisme qui exprime une ‘haine des hommes.’”⁴ By the end of the same day, the online edition of the *New York Times* had begun its coverage of the resulting national and international controversy over the initial piece under the headline “Catherine Deneuve and Others Denounce the #MeToo Movement.”⁵

The manifesto itself opened with two sentences that laid out the core of the authors’ argument: “Le viol est un crime. Mais la drague insistante ou maladroite n’est pas un délit, ni la galanterie une agression machiste.”⁶ Although the authors saluted “la suite de l’affaire Weinstein” for provoking “une légitime prise de conscience des violences sexuelles exercées sur les femmes,” they also expressed their concern that “cette libération de la parole se retourne aujourd’hui en son contraire.”⁷ They criticized the public outcry in response to the Weinstein affair as a form of “puritanisme,” and they warned that current arguments about “la protection des femmes et ... leur émancipation” might have the unintended consequence of working to “mieux les enchaîner à un statut d’éternelles victimes, de pauvres petites choses sous l’emprise de phalocrates démons, comme au bon vieux temps de la sorcellerie.”⁸ The editors of *Le Monde* highlighted the significance of this portion of the piece when they adapted a section from the closing sentence of the introduction as the headline for the teaser on the first page of the newspaper’s print edition: “‘Les femmes ne sont pas de pauvres petites choses.’”⁹

French feminists were quick to respond by publishing new manifestos and open letters of their own. On 10 January, for example, the website for FranceInfo featured a counter-manifesto from Caroline de Haas with the signatures of over thirty additional French feminist activists. The new heading read: “‘Les porcs et leurs allié.e.s ont raison de s’inquiéter’: Caroline De Haas et des militantes féministes répondent à la tribune publiée dans *Le Monde*.”¹⁰ By 11 January, over two hundred additional feminists had signed a second manifesto through *Mediapart* that appeared under the title “Les féministes peuvent-elles parler?”¹¹ In addition to speaking for themselves, they also represented a range of feminist organizations that included the Chiennes de garde, the Effronté.es, Paye ta Shnek, FIT, Check tes privilèges, Antisexisme.net, Féministes contre le cyberharcèlement, Mémoire traumatique et victimologie, En Avant Tout(e)s, Stop harcèlement de rue, the A.G. me too, the Collectif féministe des étudiantEs du

Mirail, OUT'rageantEs, the Collectif féministe Gras Politique, and the Collectif SDF Alsace—Femmes sans-abri.¹²

The feminists who signed these petitions rejected both the explicit accusation of puritanism and the implicit suggestion that there was a preferable range of sexual behaviors that was specifically and appropriately French. Perhaps most important of all, they refocused attention on a different understanding of the distinction between seduction and violence. In the words of Caroline de Haas: “Les violences ne sont pas de la ‘séduction augmentée.’ D’un côté, on considère l’autre comme son égal.e, en respectant ses désirs quels qu’ils soient. De l’autre, comme un objet à disposition, sans faire aucun cas de ses propres désirs ou de son consentement.”¹³ In the words of Hourya Bentouhami, Isabelle Cambourakis, Aurélie Fillod-Chaubaud, Amandine Gay, Mélanie Gourarier, Sarah Mazouz, and Emilie Notéris, the authors of the manifesto that appeared on the *Media-part* blog, “disqualifier la légitimité de la lutte contre le harcèlement sous prétexte de vouloir sauver le plaisir d’un certain arrangement des sexes à la française consiste à sauver le confort d’un système protecteur des positions de pouvoir entre les sexes.”¹⁴

Deneuve herself responded with a new open letter in *Libération* in which she clarified her position, defended herself against claims that she was not a feminist, and apologized to victims of sexual harassment and sexual assault. She started by arguing that “Rien dans le texte ne prétend que le harcèlement a du bon, sans quoi je ne l’aurais pas signé.” Referring to an aspect of the letter in *Le Monde* that had not gotten as much media attention as its striking defense of a certain view of sexual freedom, she highlighted her concerns about artistic censorship: “J’ai enfin signé ce texte pour une raison qui, à mes yeux, est essentielle: le danger des nettoyages dans les arts. Va-t-on brûler Sade en Pléiade? Désigner Léonard de Vinci comme un artiste pédophile et effacer ses toiles? Décrocher les Gauguin des musées? Détruire les dessins d’Egon Schiele? Interdire les disques de Phil Spector? Ce climat de censure me laisse sans voix et inquiète pour l’avenir de nos sociétés.”¹⁵

Speaking directly to those critics who had accused her of antifeminism, Deneuve highlighted her commitment to feminism and her opposition to conservatism by recalling her willing participation in an iconic earlier moment of the women’s liberation movement in France: “On m’a parfois reproché de ne pas être féministe. Dois-je rappeler que j’étais une des 343 salopes avec Marguerite Duras et Françoise Sagan qui a signé le manifeste ‘Je me suis fait avorter’ écrit par Simone de Beauvoir? L’avortement était passible de poursuite pénale et emprisonnement à l’époque. C’est pourquoi je voudrais dire aux conservateurs, racistes et traditionalistes de tout poil qui ont trouvé stratégique de m’apporter leur soutien

que je ne suis pas dupe. Ils n'auront ni ma gratitude ni mon amitié, bien au contraire." She closed by stressing her solidarity with women who had been victims of sexual violence and apologizing if her words had hurt them: "Je suis une femme libre et je le demeurerai. Je salue fraternellement toutes les victimes d'actes odieux qui ont pu se sentir agressées par cette tribune parue dans *Le Monde*, c'est à elles et à elles seules que je présente mes excuses."¹⁶

The controversy over the manifesto that appeared in *Le Monde* is only one of the most recent of many important incidents in which cultural commentators in France, the United States, and elsewhere have raised questions about how to understand contemporary French sexual politics, whether they are the same as or different from those of other countries and cultures, and whether they are better or worse.¹⁷ One of the most substantial academic debates about these and other related questions remains the one that began shortly after Mona Ozouf published *Les mots des femmes: Essai sur la singularité française* in 1995.¹⁸ Ozouf focused the body of her work on "the French singularity" on the portraits of ten significant French women: Marie du Deffand, Isabelle de Charrière, Marie-Jeanne Roland, Germaine de Staël, Claire de Rémusat, George Sand, Hubertine Auclert, Colette, Simone Weil, and Simone de Beauvoir.¹⁹ In her introduction and conclusion, however, she used her work on this selection of "ten women's voices" to make a series of controversial assertions about the striking contrast that she saw between French feminists and "other feminists" in other countries, "Anglo-Saxons in particular."²⁰

Although Ozouf's closing chapter for *Les mots des femmes*, "Essay on French Singularity," made reference to the history of women's suffrage and the woman question in locations as varied as the United States, England, Germany, Scandinavia, and Turkey, she devoted the bulk of her analysis of "the original course taken by feminism in France and its distance from the Anglo-Saxon model" to what she saw as the comparison and contrast between French and American feminism alone. Although she acknowledged that French thinkers such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray had already pioneered a "feminism of identity" that focused on women's special qualities as women, for example, she reserved special criticism for the work of a series of "American feminists of difference" that included Adrienne Rich, Carol Gilligan, Carole Pateman, Susan Faludi, and Marilyn French.²¹ "One has only to enumerate the articles of faith of the new American religion of femininity to measure the distance between the two countries," she argued. "The first article is that there is a feminine 'we,' a group collectively identifiable as victims. Every woman is a victim, every man a tormenter."²²

Ozouf closed her "Essay on French Singularity" by praising France as "a particular society, where the demand for equality among individuals

remains fundamental, but can be combined with an emphasis on differences, which are always held to be subordinate." She also identified the French understanding of equality and difference as the privileged basis for the many pleasures of sex and love: "These differences can be experienced without anxiety and can even be used with felicity; people can play on the resources of seduction and the ambiguity of amorous relationships; in short, they can run the infinite gamut of romance."²³ Rejecting American "differentialist feminism" as a form of thought that would require "the individual" to "express its particular relation to a group (a sex, an age, a race, a sexual preference)," she devoted the final lines of *Les mots des femmes* to the praise of the ten French women whose work she had featured as an alternative: "The words they have bequeathed to us, written by women, written about women (but not exclusively), were not written for women. They were written for everyone, in the hope of exchange and in the certainty of a language held in common and of a shared consciousness."²⁴

One of the most visible debates over Ozouf's book took place in the pages of *Le Débat*, where the editors published a collection of short pieces by Bronisław Baczko, Elisabeth Badinter, Lynn Hunt, Michelle Perrot, Joan Wallach Scott, and Mona Ozouf herself under the heading "Femmes: une singularité française?"²⁵ One of the most interesting aspects of the roundtable is the way in which it assembled an international group of respondents that included scholars both from France and from the United States. Another is the range of ways in which each of the participants accepted, expanded upon, questioned, or rejected the distinction that Ozouf had tried to draw between these two countries.²⁶

On the complimentary side, for example, Baczko praised the book and its closing essay both as a work "[qui] apporte des réflexions particulièrement stimulantes sur l'histoire de l'idée féministe en France, sur l'émancipation des femmes et sur le féminisme contemporain" and as a work "[qui] ouvre un débat salutaire sur un certain discours néoféministe *politically correct* qui se veut à la fois démystificateur et identitaire."²⁷ Badinter, who took a more complicated view of the book when she expressed both her wish that Ozouf would have compared France to other countries besides the United States and her wish that Ozouf would have acknowledged other versions of American feminism besides the "differentialist" version that she took as her primary focus, nevertheless also stated that she was "pleinement d'accord avec elle pour considérer qu'il y a une différence" between "des rapports entre hommes et femmes aux Etats-Unis et en France."²⁸ Badinter described the difference in similar terms to Ozouf's by explaining that "le rapport entre hommes et femmes en France est plus doux, plus solidaire, plus empreint de séduction que dans d'autres cultures européennes," and she also sought to explain it in psychological terms by

arguing that “les hommes français ont moins peur des femmes que les hommes anglo-saxons.”²⁹

Even Hunt, who argued that she would have liked to replace Ozouf’s focus on the inescapable force of “la différence sexuelle” with a focus on “le passage du temps” and “l’inéluctabilité de la mort,” two qualities to which “tout le monde est sujet, indépendamment de son sexe,” also accepted Ozouf’s portrait of American feminism as the work of “une lectrice scrupuleuse.”³⁰ Although Hunt acknowledged that the “vues extrêmes” that Ozouf had chosen to analyze “n’expriment qu’un des nombreux courants du féminisme américain,” her major concern was not so much the nature of Ozouf’s choice as the way in which Ozouf had chosen to explain it: “Le problème du féminisme américain ne tient pas au féminisme, comme beaucoup l’ont conclu, mais à son caractère proprement américain, plus précisément à une mentalité largement partagée, profondément antihistorique, volontariste et d’un égocentrisme forcené.”³¹ In Hunt’s view, the key distinction between the United States and France was the distinction between a misguided “foi américaine dans le moi absolu” and a deeper European understanding of “la contradiction de beaucoup la plus grande de la culture occidentale, à savoir que l’autonomie individuelle et les contraintes qui pesaient sur elle ont été—ne pouvaient être que—découvertes simultanément, et que cette découverte a commencé au XVIIIe siècle, puis n’a cessé de s’amplifier depuis.”³²

On the more critical side, Perrot distinguished between Ozouf’s portraits of ten French women, “une guirlande de portraits, savamment tressée, qu’on a envie de goûter comme on fait d’un bouquet coloré et odorant,” and Ozouf’s “Essay on French Singularity,” “un texte plus polémique, dont les références ... étayent l’intime conviction de l’auteur plus que sa démonstration.”³³ Perrot questioned Ozouf’s distinctions between the United States and France, especially Ozouf’s assertion that men and women had a more harmonious relationship in France, by arguing that “les sphères n’étaient guère moins séparées en France qu’aux Etats-Unis, mais elles l’étaient autrement. Le public était tout aussi masculin, et le privé était moins féminin.”³⁴ She also criticized Ozouf’s generalizations about the radicalism of American feminism by observing that “le féminisme américain ... est infiniment complexe et divers,” criticized Ozouf’s generalizations about the timidity of French feminism by referencing the work of a series of “jeunes historiennes” whose scholarship had demonstrated “la précocité, l’ampleur, la récurrence des protestations des féministes, la variété de leurs modes d’expression et l’étendue de leurs revendications,” and criticized Ozouf’s “douce et plaisante histoire” as “une histoire sans affrontements, quasiment sans agents.”³⁵ In the closing lines of her review, she suggested that Ozouf’s book might have become so

popular among French readers because it appealed to their national self-regard: “Au-delà de ses qualités intrinsèques, de la beauté de portraits attachants, superbement dessinés et écrits, il conforte l’image d’une France sexuellement pacifiée, où les hommes et les femmes, au-delà de leurs désaccords, savent parler d’amour.”³⁶

Joan Wallach Scott, the most critical reviewer of all, opened her review by characterizing Ozouf’s book as “pétri de contradictions.”³⁷ Like Perrot, she questioned Ozouf’s contrast between American and French feminism by stressing “la diversité, passée et présente des féminismes américains et français.”³⁸ Evoking the examples of French feminists Jeanne Deroin, Hubertine Auclert, and Madeleine Pelletier, she argued both that “quant aux arguments sur la construction sociale du genre, ils ne sont ni nouveaux ni d’un déterminisme rigide, et il s’est de longue date trouvé des Françaises pour les défendre” and that “les analyses de l’intérêt mâle et de la domination masculine ne sont pas d’avantage propres au féminisme américain contemporain.”³⁹ Highlighting what she saw as the problematic political consequences of Ozouf’s methodological approach, she observed that “la manière dont M. Ozouf présente le féminisme américain comme une menace subversive pour la France crée l’illusion d’une féminité française unie alors que conflits et différences ne manquent pas entre femmes et féministes de ce pays.” She closed by telling readers that “ils devraient considérer l’essai de M. Ozouf, non pas comme l’histoire d’un pays où la bataille des sexes n’a jamais été engagée, mais comme un document partisan dans les combats politiques sexués (*gendered*) de cette fin de siècle.”⁴⁰

Looking at the Deneuve and Ozouf controversies suggests several important points for the study of the so-called “Gallic singularity,” especially the idea that French men and women enjoy more harmonious gender relations and more pleasurable sexual relations than the men and women of other countries. First of all, it shows how a wide variety of different contemporary French cultural commentators can define their positions on gender and sexuality both in terms of consistency with previous French traditions and in terms of contrast with opposing foreign traditions. In the case of the letter that Deneuve signed in *Le Monde*, for example, the authors suggested a conflict between French and Anglo-American patterns of sexual behavior when they presented their position as a defense of sexual freedom against what they saw as the “puritanism” and “Victorian morals” of the #MeToo movement. In the case of the discussion around *Les mots des femmes*, similarly, Ozouf, Bacsko, and Badinter all agreed both that there was a special French tradition of sociability between men and women and that it represented a distinctively different pattern of behavior from that of American, “Anglo-Saxon,” or even other European men and women.

Second, however, it also shows how important it is to consider not only the differences between countries and cultures, but also the differences within countries and cultures. In the case of the letter that Deneuve signed in *Le Monde*, for example, the *New York Times* reported both approval and disapproval from women in the United States, and *Le Nouvel Observateur* reported the “duel de tribunes” between the open letter that Deneuve signed and the open letter that de Haas wrote in France.⁴¹ In the case of *Les mots des femmes*, similarly, the individual readers who participated in the forum in *Le Débat* offered compliments or criticism independent of whether they were themselves French or American. Badinter and Hunt both praised the work; Perrot and Scott both challenged it. If some of the participants in these debates have stressed the difference between France and the United States, then, others have stressed the importance of political ideas, intellectual approaches, and cultural behaviors that exist on both sides of the Atlantic.

Some of our articles in this special issue of *French Politics, Culture & Society* present “the Gallic singularity” as a real feature of French gender relations with roots in the medieval, Renaissance, and early modern past. Others of them approach belief in one form or another of this supposed “Gallic singularity” as a rhetorical device that allows different cultural commentators to make different points for different purposes depending on their own preoccupations and those of their audiences in different decades. Rather than seeking to impose a common definition or come to a common conclusion, however, we hope that readers will better appreciate the richness and complexity of the topic by considering its many possible meanings as they consider our individual contributions singly and together.

The Gallic Singularity: Historical Perspectives

Karen Offen, who has just published two magisterial books on the history of French debates about “the woman question” over the long period from 1400 to 1920, has recently observed that “no disagreement was more central to French society over time than that over the ‘proper’ relations of the sexes.”⁴² Offen’s initial list of key “elements that seemed specific to French culture” includes “(first and foremost) the extraordinary sociopolitical significance, or ‘influence,’ overtly attributed to women by men and by other women—and which provoked their formal and repeated exclusion by men from political authority since the end of the sixteenth century.”⁴³ As our own articles focus on a number of specific moments in this same long historical period, we further highlight both the complexity of the different ways in which women have wielded political and cultural authority and

the complexity of the different ways in which men have tried to define the appropriate extent of that authority in their own terms.

Tracy Adams, who focuses on the medieval and early modern period, identifies “the Gallic singularity” with “the [contemporary] narrative that the French relationship between the sexes, however turbulent, is more emotionally rewarding than its American counterpart.” Looking for the historical origins of this contemporary cultural narrative, she starts by highlighting the twelfth-century legal and literary dimensions of the related cultural pattern that she calls “the equal-not equal paradox,” the distinctive combination of “intertwined assumptions that women were as competent as men of their same rank but legally inferior to them.” Her analysis of Chrétien de Troyes’s *Chevalier de la charrette* (1176–1181) highlights the distinctive way in which de Troyes, unlike German or English authors, brought Lancelot and Guinevere together as an example of the model mutually desiring couple. Her analysis of Christine de Pizan’s *Livre de la mutacion de fortune* (1402), *Livre de la cité des dames* (1405), and *Livre des trois vertus* (1404) likewise stresses the way in which de Pizan described the differences between men and women in terms of a “collaboration between men and women [that] makes peace possible” between the sexes. Arguing for the compatibility between de Pizan’s positive representations of women as female regents and the creation of the Salic Law, which barred women from direct royal inheritance in France, she stresses the positive potential of “the Gallic singularity” for women by focusing on the almost two-hundred-year period from the death of Louis XI in 1483 to the start of the personal rule of Louis XIV in 1651 as a key period during which no less than “five female regents ruled in a kingdom where they were legally prohibited from doing so” and “the number of ruling women was higher in France” than in England.

Christine Adams, who defines “the Gallic singularity” in somewhat different terms as the idea of “the perceived harmonious relations between the sexes in France that was cemented in women’s soft power and civilizing role,” turns our attention from the figure of the medieval and early modern female regent to the figure of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century royal mistress. Although she acknowledges that “certainly, kings in other countries had mistresses,” she also argues both that “the position that official mistresses—what the French called the *maîtresse en titre*—had managed to carve out for themselves in France since at least the sixteenth century suggests that the relationship women were able to forge with powerful men in that country was unusual” and, further, that “in the royal mistress, we see many of the attributes that observers have long claimed for French women and their relationship to men writ large.” In the first part of her article, she highlights the characteristics of beauty, charm,

grace, emotional intelligence, good taste, style, and political acumen as the most important of the many special “attributes that [both] created a mythology around them [royal mistresses] and allowed them to play this essential role with its cultural and political implications.” In the second part of her article, she explores how and why nineteenth-century and even some twentieth-century historians have participated in their own construction of “the Gallic singularity” by underestimating the roles these women played as patrons of the arts and political advisors to the king, by praising them only for their most “feminine” characteristics, or by criticizing them for their “unfeminine” interest and influence in politics. She concludes by calling, with Tracy Adams, for a new approach to the study of French royal mistresses that will do better justice to “their very real political power and their centrality in the rise of the French state.”

Jean Elisabeth Pedersen, who shifts our attention from the study of French attitudes toward monarchy to the study of French attitudes toward democracy, focuses her article on the study of Alexis de Tocqueville, one of the most influential interpreters of the United States to France and of France to the United States. Pedersen connects her approach to the study of “the Gallic singularity” through her observation of the ways in which Tocqueville commented both on the “outrageous flirtatiousness” that he thought young American women enjoyed compared to young French women and on the “repressed flirtation” from which he thought American wives suffered compared to French wives. Although Tocqueville expressed his preference for the French sex/gender system when he wrote his letters home to France from the United States in 1831, he stressed his admiration for the American sex/gender system when he published the two volumes of *Democracy in America* in 1835 and 1840. Pedersen explores the significance of this apparent contradiction by situating Tocqueville’s work in comparison and contrast to that of two especially relevant French political and literary figures: Germaine de Staël, whose work Tocqueville acknowledged as an important precursor to his own, and Gustave de Beaumont, whose work Tocqueville identified as an important complement to his own. She concludes by arguing that Tocqueville’s contradictory attitudes toward American women stem from the same ambivalence that he displays in his mixed attitudes toward American democracy itself, and she highlights his distinctive combination of ideas about the complex relationship between the United States and France as itself a form of “Tocquevillean singularity.”

Whitney Walton focuses on the work of a different French writer who also took a special interest in the similarities and differences between women in France and women elsewhere, the prolific late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century woman of letters Arvède Barine. Walton, who

combines the analysis of Barine's published books and articles with that of her readers' private correspondence in reply, identifies Barine's individual "contribution to the creation and distribution of ideas about the Gallic singularity" with Barine's popular vision of "the historical and cultural distinctiveness of French women as an ideal blend of femininity, accomplishment, and independence." Walton devotes the first of the four parts of her article to an examination of Barine's self-presentation as a writer who was also a housewife rather than a feminist, a New Woman, or a woman of letters. In the second part of the article, Walton explores the "extensive, contradictory, and complex" ways in which Barine's articles and reviews affirmed the domestic, legal, and social well-being of French women in contrast to more strained relations between women and men in other countries; advocated the maintenance of French marriages over the introduction of the free unions that attracted support from Olive Schreiner, Thomas Hardy, and Ellen Key; encouraged French women to improve their domestic skills rather than seek masculine careers; and supported moderate French feminist reforms over the radical suffrage activism that she identified as the work of women in the United States and England. Walton focuses the third part of her article on Barine's work as a historical biographer with a special interest in the lives of women such as the Duchesse de Montpensier and the other female leaders of the Fronde uprising, "women in the past who violated norms, exerted influence if not power, and practiced masculine behaviors without undermining their femininity." In the fourth part of the article, Walton presents the positive responses that Barine and her work elicited from both men and women alike, as well as their differing interpretations of Barine's feminism or antifeminism. She concludes that Barine "constructed a model for women that combined companionate marriage and capable domesticity with opportunities in education and careers. In her own life and in her writings and histories, Barine sought ways for women to lead meaningful lives, fulfill their individual potential, and enjoy marriage and motherhood in a 'French' tradition."

Kathleen Antonioli, finally, brings us to the opening years of the twentieth century with a dual focus on the ways in which the French novelist Colette represented herself and on the ways in which French literary critics evaluated her work in the decades before and after the four key years of World War I. Antonioli not only identifies "the myth of 'French singularity'" as the result of a range of French writers' common interest in general topics such as "femininity, antifeminism, [and] a 'natural' approach to the relationship between men and women," but also argues that "one specificity of the Colette-flavored femininity, perhaps distinct from Ancien Régime or Revolutionary femininity, is a deep connection to

irrationality and instinctiveness" that emerged in the postwar moment. In the early sections of her article, she analyzes the work of a number of early twentieth-century French book reviewers to highlight the ways in which "traits associated with Colette's writing before World War I (nature, instinct, femininity, and antifeminism) became nationalized far more strongly after the war." She connects reviewers' new postwar praise of "Colette française" and "Colette patriote" with their simultaneous postwar rejection of earlier works by women such as George Sand, whom they now criticized as both excessively masculine and entirely outdated. In the final section of her article, she highlights both the ways in which this literary history helps to explain Mona Ozouf's selection of Colette as a key figure of French femininity in *Les mots des femmes* and the ways in which other scholars in France and elsewhere have nevertheless found feminist themes in Colette's life and work. She concludes that "the redefinition of Colette and her work as specifically and prototypically French is not just a moment in the construction of French femininity. Instead, Colette is a privileged figure in the creation of the version of French femininity that remains, for some, prevalent today."

Each of our articles focuses on a significantly different period of French history. Tracy Adams, for example, explores the medieval, Renaissance, and early modern foundations of the courtly love tradition, the creation of the Salic Law, which excluded women from direct royal inheritance, and the institution of the practice of queen regency that enabled women to wield certain forms of political power nevertheless. Christine Adams focuses on the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, when women who became royal mistresses could serve as the advisors to kings in a new and different way. Jean Elisabeth Pedersen focuses on the early years of the July Monarchy, when Alexis de Tocqueville left the liberal monarchist France of Louis Philippe to explore the democratic United States of Andrew Jackson. Whitney Walton explores the *fin de siècle* and the *Belle Époque* through a focus on Arvède Barine, who developed her own distinctive form of relational feminism in contrast to the renewed suffrage activism of women in France, England, the United States, and elsewhere. Kathleen Antonioli analyzes the critical response to Colette in the years after World War I, a moment when France had to reckon with the emerging world power of the United States in a different way.

On the one hand, it is fascinating to see the persistent recurrence of certain sorts of ideas about women and their proper place in relationship to men in so many different formulations of "the Gallic singularity" over such a long span of time. Tracy Adams, for example, shows how sources as various as medieval French customary law, early French feminist theory, and early modern French political practice could sometimes accept women

as equals to men, but only if these women were serving as substitutes for men in cases where men could not serve themselves. Christine Adams stresses the extent to which the same royal mistresses who might win positive recognition for their cultural authority as key patrons of the arts could also attract hostile criticism if they tried to intervene as royal advisors in political affairs. Jean Elisabeth Pedersen, Whitney Walton, and Kathleen Antonioli all show how nineteenth- and twentieth-century French figures as various as Alexis de Tocqueville, Arvède Barine, and Colette remained fascinated with women's place in the aristocratic society and court culture of the Old Regime even after the long series of successful challenges to that regime that emerged from the French Revolution onward.

On the other hand, however, it also seems clear that the various political figures and cultural commentators whose works we explore in our articles all used their ideas about different versions of "the Gallic singularity" in very different ways depending on when and why they were writing. Jean Elisabeth Pedersen, for example, shows that Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, which he published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840, expresses his ideas about the French aristocracy that he identified with the past, his observations of the American democracy that he identified with the present, and his criticisms of the Saint Simonian socialists who were writing in France at the same time. By comparing Tocqueville's ideas with those of Germaine de Staël and Gustave de Beaumont, she also shows both how ambivalent he was about the progress of democracy and how unusual he was among French cultural commentators of his time when he ultimately chose to reject the earlier traditions of what he saw as a distinctive French sex/gender system in favor of the emerging possibilities of what he presented as a distinctively American one.

As Tracy Adams, Christine Adams, and Whitney Walton each show in their own contributions to this special issue, many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French writers also simultaneously adopted traditions they had inherited from their past and recast those traditions in light of their current circumstances. Although Chrétien de Troyes introduced the love story of Lancelot and Guinevere into the French literary tradition as early as 1180, for example, Tracy Adams suggests that readers may only have started to understand Troyes's work as a distinctively French story about the nature of "courtly love" after literary historian Gaston Paris invented that phrase to describe what he saw as the central topic of Troyes's story in 1883. Christine Adams, similarly, indicates that most of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians who wrote about royal mistresses exhibited their own distinctive commitments to different kinds of sexual politics when they either "downplay[ed] the extent of the royal mistresses' influence" altogether, "suggest[ed] that mistresses were

interested in politics as an extension of personal relationships and desires that all women share,” or “criticized them as profoundly misguided ... in their political choices by essential and destructive feminine qualities.” Whitney Walton argues that when Arvède Barine wrote her biographies of the Duchesse de Montpensier in 1901 and 1905, by contrast, she was particularly interested in exploring the positive role of a relatively independent woman of the Old Regime, “a woman of action who controlled her own destiny within the constraints of her time.”

Kathleen Antonioli gives an especially good example of how ideas about what constitutes “the Gallic singularity” can change over time as successive generations of cultural commentators adopt such ideas as their own, adapt them to suit their new historical circumstances, and put them to new political and cultural purposes. She points out that, for the French critics who redefined Colette as a quintessentially French and feminine writer in the years after World War I, “*la Française* exemplified by Colette is no longer ... the witty *salonnière*, trading barbed flirtations with Voltaire. Instead, she is closer to a plant, secreting her writing out of the pores of her feminine body, rather than producing it with her intellect.” Colette herself referred to the positive power of women in the Old Regime when she told Walter Benjamin in 1926 that “if you want a woman’s power then make her into a queen—give her the famous *royaume secret*, which she rules not from the throne room, but from the bedroom.” When critics reviewed Colette’s work, however, they both responded to the gender anxieties of the 1920s and expressed their own gender anxieties as well by representing her not as a woman whose cultural influence was comparable to that of a powerful royal mistress but as an important French writer with a distinctive style of “natural, instinctive femininity.”

Ferdinand de Saussure once argued that linguistic phenomena could be understood either diachronically, with regard to their origins in the same space at an earlier time, or synchronically, with regard to their usages across different spaces at the same time.⁴⁴ Eric Fassin has made a similar distinction in his observation that scholars who are interested in the study of French and American debates over sexual politics have the choice of considering “deux manières bien distinctes d’appréhender l’historicité” in which “la première privilégie le passé; la seconde, ce qui est en train de se passer.”⁴⁵ Some of our articles identify striking continuities that describe French attitudes about one form or another of “the Gallic singularity” from the Middle Ages to the present day; others focus more attention on the specificity of debates over different manifestations of “the Gallic singularity” in different decades. We leave it to the readers of this forum to decide what patterns they see and which approaches work best for them as they read our articles, and we hope that they will find merit in each of them.

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Notes

* This forum began as a roundtable for the annual meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies that took place in Washington, DC, in April 2017. Tracy Adams conceptualized the session under the original title “Women in the French Imaginary: Historicizing the ‘Gallic Singularity;’” Christine Adams issued the call for papers over H-France; Kathleen Antonioni, Whitney Walton, and I successfully submitted additional papers to go with Tracy’s and Christine’s initial pieces; and Karen Offen chaired the resulting panel. I found the discussion over the course of the roundtable itself so stimulating that I then proposed that we work together on a special journal issue where we could present the results of our work to a broader audience. I thank Herrick Chapman for welcoming us to the pages of *French Politics, Culture & Society*, and I especially thank Herrick Chapman, Karen Offen, all my fellow contributors, and all our anonymous outside readers for the many thoughtful comments and questions that have made each of our articles stronger both singly and together. I hope that everyone who consults this issue of *French Politics, Culture & Society* will enjoy reading our articles as much as we enjoyed writing them.

1. For key usages of these phrases in debates over gender, see, for example, Mona Ozouf, *Les mots des femmes: Essai sur la singularité française* (first edition, Paris: Fayard, 1995; augmented edition, Paris: Gallimard, 1999); the contributions of Bronisław Baczko, Elisabeth Badinter, Lynn Hunt, Michelle Perrot, Joan Wallach Scott, and Mona Ozouf to “Femmes: Une singularité française?” *Le Débat* 87 (1995): 118–146, http://le-debat.gallimard.fr/dossier_revue/femmes-une-singularite-fran-aise/; and the discussion of these and other pieces on this theme in Eric Fassin, “The Purloined Gender: American Feminism in a French Mirror,” *French Historical Studies* 22, 1 (1999): 113–138, doi:10.2307/286704. Other scholars have identified the French exception with specific phenomena in a wide range of additional areas from politics and economics to culture and society. See, for example, Emmanuel Godin and Tony Chafer, eds., *The French Exception* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2004); and Tony Chafer and Emmanuel Godin, eds., *The End of the French Exception? Decline and Revival of the “French Model”* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). On the history of French usages of the phrase “Anglo-Saxon” to describe England and the United States, see Emile Chabal, “The Rise of the Anglo-Saxon: French Perceptions of the Anglo-

- American World in the Long Twentieth Century," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 31, 1 (2013): 24–46, doi:10.3167/fpcs.2013.310102.
2. For Fassin's use of the phrase "Gallic singularity," see Fassin, "The Purloined Gender," 117. For his contrast between the "sunny" version of "the French exception" as the positive "empire of women" and the "darker" version of "the French exception" as the exclusionary "power of men," see Fassin, "The Purloined Gender," 117 and 120. For Fassin's work on a range of transatlantic debates over topics related to sex, gender, and sexuality, see Eric Fassin, *Le sexe politique: Genre et sexualité au miroir transatlantique* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2009).
 3. See Karen Offen, *The Woman Question in France, 1400–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and Karen Offen, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic, 1870–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). For some of the most important of Offen's many earlier works on the history of French feminism in comparative perspective, see Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs* 14, 1 (1988): 119–157, doi:10.1086/494494; Karen Offen, "Women and the Question of 'Universal' Suffrage in 1848: A Transatlantic Comparison of Suffragist Rhetoric," *NWSA Journal* 11, 1 (1999): 150–177, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4316636>; and Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).
 4. "Nous défendons une liberté d'importuner, indispensable à la liberté sexuelle," *Le Monde*, 9 January 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/01/09/nous-defendons-une-liberte-d-importuner-indispensable-a-la-liberte-sexuelle_5239134_3232.html. Although Deneuve was only one of many signatories to the manifesto, and the manifesto itself was only one of four contributions on the general topic of "violences faites aux femmes" that eventually appeared in the "Débats et Analyses" section of the print edition of *Le Monde* on 10 January, the conversation in France, the United States, and elsewhere focused almost exclusively on Deneuve, the manifesto that she had signed, and the version of the manifesto that appeared online. For one account of how *Le Monde* came to publish the manifesto, see Franck Nouchi, "L'instant Deneuve: retour sur une tribune polémique," *Le Monde*, 13 January 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/01/13/l-instant-deneuve_5241146_3232.html. On the immediate international reaction to the piece, see Stéphanie Le Bars, "Féminisme: la 'tribune de Deneuve' fait réagir au-delà des frontières," *Le Monde*, 11 January 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2018/01/10/la-tribune-de-deneuve-fait-reagir-au-dela-des-frontieres_5240067_3224.html.
 5. Valeriya Safronova, "Catherine Deneuve and Others Denounce the #MeToo Movement," *New York Times*, 9 January 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/09/movies/catherine-deneuve-and-others-denounce-the-metoo-movement.html>.
 6. "Nous défendons une liberté d'importuner," paragraph 1.
 7. *Ibid.*, paragraph 2.
 8. *Ibid.*, paragraph 3.
 9. They followed up with a description of what readers could expect to find inside, a collection of essays on related themes that included not just the manifesto itself but two additional opinion pieces as well: "Dans *Le Monde*, un collectif de plus de cent femmes, dont Catherine Deneuve, s'inquiète du

- 'puritanisme' apparu après l'affaire Weinstein. La protection des femmes ne doit pas 'les enchaîner à un statut d'éternelles victimes.' Le féminisme n'est pas 'la haine des hommes et de la sexualité.' Pour la romancière Belinda Cannone, l'égalité adviendra le jour où 'l'entreprise de la séduction sera réellement partagée.' Olivier Roy analyse les racines de la violence masculine." See *Le Monde*, print edition, 10 January 2018, 1. The three pieces themselves, along with a cartoon by Serguei, appeared on pages 20 and 21 of the print edition under the banner title "Débats et Analyses: Violences faites aux femmes." See Nouchi, "L'instant Deneuve."
10. The subheading read "Une trentaine de personnalités et membres d'associations réagissent, mercredi 10 janvier, sur franceinfo, aux arguments du texte de 100 femmes défendant la 'liberté d'importuner' des hommes après les mouvements '#balancetonporc' et '#Metoo.'" See "'Les porcs et leurs alliés ont raison de s'inquiéter,'" *FranceInfo*, 10 January 2018, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/societe/droits-des-femmes/tribune-les-porcs-et-leurs-allie-e-s-ont-raison-de-sinquieter-caroline-de-haas-et-des-militantes-feministes-repondent-a-la-tribune-publiee-dans-le-monde_2553497.html.
 11. See "Les féministes peuvent-elles parler?" *Mediapart*, 11 January 2018, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/les-invites-de-mediapart/blog/110118/les-feministes-peuvent-elles-parler-0>.
 12. See the signature lists for "'Les porcs et leurs alliés ont raison de s'inquiéter'" and "Les féministes peuvent-elles parler?"
 13. "'Les porcs et leurs alliés ont raison de s'inquiéter.'"
 14. "Les féministes peuvent-elles parler?"
 15. "Catherine Deneuve: 'Rien dans le texte ne prétend que le harcèlement a du bon, sans quoi je ne l'aurais pas signé,'" *Libération*, 14 January 2018, https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/01/14/catherine-deneuve-rien-dans-le-texte-ne-pretend-que-le-harcelement-a-du-bon-sans-quoi-je-ne-l-aurais_1622399.
 16. "Catherine Deneuve: 'Rien dans le texte ne prétend que le harcèlement a du bon.'"
 17. When Nafissatou Diallo accused Dominique Strauss-Kahn of sexual assault and attempted rape in New York City in 2011, for example, Eric Fassin published an article in *Libération* that raised the question: "Le DSKgate n'est-il qu'un écho du Monicagate, et de tant d'autres histoires sexuelles à répétition, depuis les années 1980, qu'en France on a coutume de juger étrangères?" The *New York Times* presented eleven opinion pieces on a series of related topics when it published a round-table on the question: "Are French Women More Tolerant?" See Eric Fassin, "La fin de l'exception sexuelle..." *Libération*, 17 May 2011, https://www.liberation.fr/france/2011/05/17/la-fin-de-l-exception-sexuelle_736199; Room for Debate, "Are French Women More Tolerant?" *New York Times*, 18 May 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/05/18/are-french-women-more-tolerant>; and, for further analysis, Eric Fassin, "Au-delà du consentement: pour une théorie féministe de la séduction," *Raisons politiques* 2, 46 (2012): 47–66, doi:10.3917/rai.046.0047. For a contemporary history of French and American debates over sexual politics that highlights a number of other incidents, including the Clarence Thomas affair and the campus debate over date rape, see Fassin, *Le sexe politique*.

18. See Ozouf, *Les mots des femmes* (first edition, 1995); and Ozouf, *Les mots des femmes* (augmented edition, 1999). For one especially important analysis of the debate around this work, see Fassin, "The Purloined Gender."
19. For the quotations in this article, I have used Jane Marie Todd's translation of Ozouf's work for the University of Chicago Press. See Mona Ozouf, *Women's Words: Essay on French Singularity*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
20. Ozouf, *Women's Words*, ix, xi.
21. *Ibid.*, 267–280, quotations on 274, 275, 276.
22. *Ibid.*, 277. Ozouf's concerns about American feminism foreshadow Chiche, Millet, Robbe-Grillet, Sastre, and Shalmani's concerns about the #MeToo movement in some especially striking ways here. In particular, Ozouf criticizes the American feminist definition of rape as a definition "elastic enough to include not only the use of force or threats but also any effort at seduction, even verbal insistence." The cosigners of the manifesto in *Le Monde*, similarly, express their concern that men have been "sanctionnés dans l'exercice de leur métier, contraints à la démission, etc., alors qu'ils n'ont eu pour seul tort que d'avoir touché un genou, tenté de voler un baiser, parlé de choses 'intimes' lors d'un dîner professionnel ou d'avoir envoyé des messages à connotation sexuelle à une femme chez qui l'attirance n'était pas réciproque." See Ozouf, *Women's Words*, 277; "Nous défendons une liberté d'importuner," paragraph 4.
23. Ozouf, *Women's Words*, 281–282.
24. *Ibid.*, 283.
25. "Femmes: Une singularité française?"
26. For an important earlier analysis, see Fassin, "The Purloined Gender."
27. Bronisław Baczko, "Égalité et exclusions," *Le Débat* 87 (1995): 118.
28. Elisabeth Badinter, "L'exception française," *Le Débat* 87 (1995): 123.
29. Badinter, "L'exception française," 124–125.
30. Lynn Hunt, "Temps et contrainte dans la vie des femmes," *Le Débat* 87 (1995): 128, 126.
31. Hunt, "Temps et contrainte dans la vie des femmes," 126–127.
32. *Ibid.*, 127.
33. Michelle Perrot, "Une histoire sans affrontements," *Le Débat* 87 (1995): 130.
34. Perrot grounded her assertion in the study of how men and women occupied space in the nineteenth century: "Ainsi, dans la maison, dont ils décidaient des aménagements et même de l'ameublement, les hommes avaient au XIXe siècle beaucoup plus de lieux propres que les femmes. D'autre part, la société étant peu monosexuelle, les femmes ne disposaient que de peu d'espaces d'amitié ou de rencontre." See Perrot, "Une histoire sans affrontements," 134.
35. Perrot, "Une histoire sans affrontements," 132, 134, 133.
36. *Ibid.*, 134.
37. Joan Wallach Scott, "'Vive la différence!'" *Le Débat* 87 (1995): 134.
38. Scott, "'Vive la différence!'" 136.
39. *Ibid.*, 137.
40. *Ibid.*, 139. For Scott's further critique of Ozouf's work, see Joan Wallach Scott, "French Seduction Theory," in Joan Wallach Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 117–140, published in France as Joan Wallach Scott, "La séduction: une théorie française," in Joan Wallach Scott, *De l'utilité du genre* (Paris: Fayard, 2012), 157–189. For Ozouf's replies to Scott and others, see Mona Ozouf, "Le compte des jours," *Le Débat* 87 (1995):

- 140–146; and Mona Ozouf, “Postface,” in Ozouf, *Les mots des femmes* (augmented edition, 1999), 399–421.
41. See, for example, Safronova, “Catherine Deneuve and Others Denounce the #MeToo Movement;” and “‘Liberté d’importuner’ contre ‘apologie du viol’: duel de tribunes sur l’ère post-Weinstein,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 10 January 2018, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/societe/20180110.OBS0391/liberte-d-importuner-contre-apologie-du-viol-duel-de-tribunes-sur-l-ere-post-weinstein.html>. Coverage of the divisions in France reached the United States as well. See, for example, Aurelien Breeden and Elian Peltier, “Response to French Letter Denouncing #MeToo Movement Shows a Sharp Divide,” *New York Times*, 13 January 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/12/world/europe/france-sexual-harassment.html>.
 42. Offen, *The Woman Question in France*, 1. See also the companion volume, Offen, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic*.
 43. Offen, *The Woman Question in France*, 9. Offen also mentions a number of other “distinctive element[s]” including especially “the strategic importance accorded to biomedical thinking in French society as Catholic theological justifications for gender arrangements were challenged and reconceptualized by secular, even anticlerical, thinkers,” “the political and ideological emphasis on educated motherhood that paradoxically accompanied a precipitous nineteenth-century drop in the French birth rate,” and “some of the peculiar traits of French republican national identity during its formative period, especially in its legal, educational, and economic aspects.” For the period between 1870 and 1920, she also highlights the importance of “the close relationships that existed between women’s rights advocates (of both sexes, who will become known in the 1890s by the neologism ‘feminists’) and a number of important republican political figures.” See Offen, *The Woman Question in France*, 9; and Offen, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic*, 6.
 44. See Ferdinand de Saussure, “Loi synchronique et loi diachronique,” in Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, vol. 1, ed. Rudolf Engler (Wiesbaden: O. Harassowitz, 1967), 203–212.
 45. Fassin, “Au-delà du consentement,” 47.