

# CSWS

## Research Matters

### Genre Trouble: Genre and Gender in Eighteenth-Century France

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When prose poetry emerged in eighteenth-century France, it created quite a stir in the republic of letters, causing what some would call “*genre trouble*” (recognizing the French term *genre* to mean both genre and gender in English). In my forthcoming book, *Prose Poems of the French Enlightenment: Delimiting Genre* (Ashgate Publishing), I not only explore *poèmes en prose* by Fénelon, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, but I bring to light little known prose poems by women authors, such as Mme Dufresne (*Idylles et pièces fugitives*, 1781) and Marie-Uranie Rose Monneron (*Annamire, poème en trois chants*, 1783). I also draw attention to Lucile de Chateaubriand’s



three prose poems, which first appeared posthumously in the *Mémoires d’outre-tombe* of her famous brother. These authors were experimenting with a new form, and its poetic worth was hotly debated by critics. To fully understand eighteenth-century French literature, one must consider the phenomenon of these hybrid texts, who wrote them, and why.

Throughout my book, I uncover an increasingly overt agenda that allied prose with the principles of freedom and equality defended by the philosophes, while versification remained associated with authority and superiority. Many welcomed the unseating of the “monarchy of verse” and encouraged more provocations. Others, like Voltaire, denounced and resisted the unraveling of genres as a bastardization and a devaluation of high poetry. As prose poems questioned the supremacy of verse, they exposed arbitrary aesthetic rules that came to symbolize the excesses of absolutism. Yet authors and critics struggled and disagreed for a long time on granting equality and freedom to prose, causing confusion. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, male and female authors alike came to value the creative power of prose, and welcomed prose poems as a destabilizing category that would advance the cause of modernity in favor of equality.

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In the course of my research on translations of classic and foreign poetry as essential catalysts for the renewal of prose—now a chapter in the book—I became especially fascinated with the early modern scholar Anne Dacier (1647–1720) and dedicated two articles to her groundbreaking translations from Greek and Latin into French prose to prove that her understanding of Homer’s poetry was far more innovative and modern than estimated by past and present criticism. My new essay, begun under the auspices of a CSWS grant, “Across Genres and Gender: Anne Le Fèvre Dacier, a Reformist Translator in Late Seventeenth-Century France,” nuances the position Joan DeJean attributes to Dacier in her *Fictions of Sappho*. While DeJean acknowledged Dacier as the “foremost early woman Hellenist,” she focused exclusively on Dacier’s manipulative promotion of an unhappy heterosexual Sappho.

As my research continues to unfold, I wish to address the paradox of why Dacier might have decided to favor this “heterosexual scenario.” My hypothesis is that Dacier’s priority to revitalize lyric poetry by giving access to its Greek sources trumped historical accuracy. It was more important and urgent to convey the beauty of the lyric than the gender of its author Sappho. However, the reactions of Dacier’s contemporaries to her “manly”

scholarship betray the degree to which she herself disturbed gender stereotypes. I examine the complex links between Dacier’s status as a female translator and the gendered language in the art of translation itself. I emphasize the high degree of gender consciousness in Dacier’s act of translating and in her readers’ act of reading a woman’s translation. I will bring to the fore how Dacier made the notes to her translations the locus for her self-reflection about genre and gender.

If I see Dacier bridging the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, similarly I consider the work of Germaine de Staël (1766–1817) as the cornerstone between the European eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, exposing the tension between classicism and modernity. At the moment, while on sabbatical in Paris, I am researching the symbolism of a musical instrument (invented by Benjamin Franklin), the crystal harmonica, to which Germaine de Staël refers when trying to define for the first time the new movement of Romanticism in 1801. With my article in mind, I was fortunate this past October to attend a marvelous performance of Donizetti’s bel canto opera, *Lucia di*



*Lammermoor* (1835) with French soprano Natalie Dessay, at the New York Metropolitan Opera—a rare occasion to hear the glass harmonica’s high-pitched notes suggestive of Lucia’s tragic descent into madness. In the article I want to bring to light the symbolic connection between

the glass harmonica, madness, and early romantic notions of “femininity,” as exemplified by the following verses by William Hayley: “Woman, I say, or dame or lass, / Is an *Harmonica of glass*, / Celestial and complete [. . .] / When rightly touch’d, its very tone / Is ravishingly sweet.” Not only did Staël, like Dacier, defy gender stereotypes as a politically influential and independent author at the turn of the century, she proposed “to trouble” French classical genres by welcoming Northern influence and thinking of prose in musical rather than rhetorical terms.

While walking through Paris and noticing disembodied female allegories—from Justice to the Marseillaise—versus statues of great men on their pedestals, I think of my work as building neither statues glorifying gender nor generic figures but an ongoing creative understanding of the men and women of the Enlightenment.