History, Literature, and the History of French Literature

Robert A. Schneider and Whitney Walton

It is something of a scholarly oddity that historians, who have long been accustomed to borrowing from such disciplines as economics, sociology, and anthropology, have only lately turned to literature. For history and literature were once conjoined. Indeed, until late in the nineteenth century the writing of history was considered primarily a belletristic activity; Theodor Mommsen received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1902; and even in our day such French historians as Fernand Braudel, François Furet, and René Rémond have been ushered into that sanctuary of French language and literature, the Académie Française. To be sure, the estrangement between the two disciplines has been overcome somewhat in recent years, especially with the so-called linguistic turn and the emergence of cultural history: many historians are now conversant with literary theory, and many have attempted to apply the techniques of textual analysis to their own sources and documents, even when they are not strictly of a textual nature. With the rise of the New Historicism, the rapprochement has worked in the opposite direction as well, as scholars of literature delve into the historical realities that inform and mark their texts. Of course, even before these moves, historians routinely and—at least in the view of literary scholars—often naively consulted works of literature, either as evidence for their analyses or as illustrations of their findings. But literary history is another matter. This has largely been the preserve of literary historians

Robert A. Schneider is professor of history at Indiana University and editor of the *American Historical Review*. He is author, most recently, of *The Ceremonial City: Toulouse Observed, 1737–1780* (Princeton, NJ, 1995) and editor, with Robert M. Schwartz, of *Tocqueville and Beyond: Essays on the Old Regime in Honor of David D. Bien* (Newark, DE, 2003). He is completing a study of writers and intellectuals in the age of Richelieu. Whitney Walton is professor of history at Purdue University. She is author, most recently, of *Eve's Proud Descendents: Four Women Writers and Republican Politics in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA, 2000) and is working on a history of study abroad between France and the United States in the twentieth century.

French Historical Studies, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Summer 2005)
Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies

Downloaded from https://read.dukeupress.edu/french-historical-studies/article-pdf/28/3/377/411899/FHS028-03-01SchneiderFpp.pdf
by guest
on 19 June 2018

and biographers. The *historicity* of literature is a subject that, with few exceptions, has interested historians little.

It might be argued, however, that, given the importance and prominence of writers and literature in French public life, historians of France have every reason to pay more attention to the history of literature. One need only reflect on the various ways literary culture has so decisively marked French history across the centuries: the importance of such institutions as the Académie Française and salons during the ancien régime; the outpouring of writings by female authors in the wake of the French Revolution; the political prominence of such nineteenth-century writers as George Sand, Alphonse de Lamartine, Victor Hugo, and Emile Zola; the centrality of language and literature in France's self-imposed *mission civilisatrice*; the near-cult status of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and André Malraux in recent times; or the literary strivings of heads of state or government like Napoléon Bonaparte, Léon Blum, Charles de Gaulle, François Mitterrand, and others. Recognition of the centrality of literature in French history is such that a hallowed resting place for many of its writers, the Pantheon, is indisputably one of France's "lieux de mémoire."

Although the articles in this special issue of *French Historical Studies* treat a wide variety of subjects, from single authors and texts to literary sociability, we hope that together they contribute to an understanding of the importance of literature as a historical phenomenon and writers as historical figures in the course of French history from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. In different ways, they all help us understand the role and prominence of literature in France's public life. Even the two articles focusing on single authors, Kathleen Kete's "Stendhal and the Trials of Ambition in Postrevolutionary France" and Patricia Tilburg's "Earning Her Bread: *Métier,* Order, and Female Honor in Colette's Music Hall, 1906–1913," reveal these writers as fashioners of emerging sensibilities, as influential contributors to the public discussion of changing core values. A time-honored, even hallowed aspect of "high" culture, literature also clearly participates in the continual dialogue that goes into constructing a culture in the more anthropological sense of the term. A comparison with the prominence of the history of science in current historiography might be appropriate. For just as the history of science is now familiar even to historians outside the field, so the history of literature should be more a part of historians' stock of common knowledge. Just as historians of science have long abandoned the triumphalist view of science as an inevitable progression of great

Downloaded from https://read.dukeupress.edu/french-historical-studies/article-pdf/28/3/377/411899/FHS028-03-01SchneiderFpp.pdf
by guest
on 19 June 2018

discoveries, so a more historically attuned understanding of literature eschews a celebratory treatment of timeless texts and "great" writers. Finally, again like the history of science, a historical treatment of literature sees its place in the wider culture as problematic in virtually every respect—its distinctiveness as a practice is historically conditioned; its ability to generate meaning depends on the existence of comprehending readers; its relation to agents of power, either social or political, is complex.

How should we understand the historicity of literature? The subject has been explored by many scholars, literary historians and historians alike, who have offered a variety of explanations for the prominence and development of literature in French history. Clearly this is a question that suggests different answers for different periods. We can start, as this issue does, with the sixteenth century, for it was then that a vernacular literature, spurred by the combined forces of humanism and court culture, really emerged. Benedict Anderson has emphasized the importance of vernacular languages in fostering early notions of nationhood and has offered the Ordinance of Villiers-Cotterets in 1539, which declared French the official language of the realm, as prime evidence of the special French connection between language and national identity.[1] But, as Timothy Hampton argues in *Literature and Nation in the Sixteenth Century*, this royal ordinance, imposed on the officialdom "from above," hardly sufficed to create a truly national language. "The domain of the literary, through the rise of new forms of authorship and new genres, is where the dignity of the vernacular is affirmed, and where the most enduring . . . products of print culture are generated," he writes. "Literature . . . mediates the encounter between administrative vernaculars and everyday language."[2] Thus the so-called Pléiade poets self-consciously engaged in a collective project to forge a literature that would both appeal to and edify courtiers and aristocratic patrons—coaxing them to a more appreciative view of "letters"—and rival the hegemonic Italian literary achievement in renown and excellence. As Michael Wintroub shows in our first essay, this project had as one of its chief patrons the king himself, who championed "letters" over the time-honored aristocratic calling to "arms." The much-maligned Henri III suffered for his less-than-"manly" choice.

1 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, 1991). On this subject see, most recently, Paul Cohen, "Courtly French, Learned Latin, and Peasant Patois: The Making of a National Language in Early Modern France" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2001).

2 Timothy Hampton, *Literature and Nation in the Sixteenth Century: Inventing Renaissance France* (Ithaca, NY, 2001), 19–20.

Downloaded from https://read.dukeupress.edu/french-historical-studies/article-pdf/28/3/377/411899/FHS028-03-01SchneiderFpp.pdf
by guest
on 19 June 2018

If the sixteenth century saw the emergence of a vernacular literature, the seventeenth witnessed the development of a true literary field. At least this is the view of two scholars who have applied Pierre Bourdieu's concept of a "field" to their treatment of French classicism. For Bourdieu, both culture and society can be understood as a system of different fields, each with its own internal dynamics and hierarchies, each relating in different ways with other fields, each emerging under different historical circumstances.[3] In *Naissance de l'écrivain,* Alain Viala argues that the early seventeenth century saw the emergence of a specifically literary field, owing to a set of conditions that both depended on the patronage and protection of the Crown and noble elites and, paradoxically, endowed writers with a degree of independence and autonomy. Indeed, it was this tension between dependence and independence, subservience and autonomy, that marked French vernacular literature as a form of expression characterized by indirection, dissimulation, and a mannered linguistic code.[4] More recently, Christian Jouhaud has taken issue with Viala's interpretation. Jouhaud argues that literature, on the contrary (but also, in its own way, somewhat paradoxically), achieved its new elevated legitimacy only through royal and ministerial power. It was through royal patronage and in royal service—through what Jouhaud calls the politicization of literature—that writers became true men of letters, thus capable of creating a literary language that mimicked the discourse of reason of state in its value-free, all-purpose utility.[5]

While the period of so-called classicism clearly witnessed the emergence of French literature, it cannot be said that writers had yet achieved the degree of independence and authority that allowed them to speak in their own, potentially critical, voices. Paul Bénichou, in his classic study *The Consecration of the Writer, 1750–1830,* locates this transformation in the eighteenth century. Before that time writers enhanced secular life with entertainment and advice on worldly virtues, while the church monopolized the spiritual realm and the Crown the lawgiving function. It was during the Enlightenment that writers began to challenge traditional authorities and claimed for themselves "the highest level of criticism and edification, laying down laws for a world

[3] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature,* ed. Randal Johnson (New York, 1993).

[4] Alain Viala, *Naissance de l'écrivain: Sociologie de la littérature à l'âge classique* (Paris, 1985).

[5] Christian Jouhaud, *Les pouvoirs de la littérature: Histoire d'un paradoxe* (Paris, 2000). For an appreciative critique of Jouhaud's book, see Robert A. Schneider, "Political Power and the Emergence of Literature: Christian Jouhaud's Age of Richelieu," *French Historical Studies* 25 (2002): 357–80.

Downloaded from https://read.dukeupress.edu/french-historical-studies/article-pdf/28/3/377/411899/FHS028-03-01SchneiderFpp.pdf
by guest
on 19 June 2018

undergoing renewal."[6] Though contested in the postrevolutionary era, this august role survived the reaction against the Enlightenment that marked the early nineteenth century. Indeed, it was only confirmed, even in some ways magnified, by romanticism; writers in France never entirely lost the authoritative aura, even as they accepted a lesser stature than that originally aspired to by the eighteenth-century *philosophes.* Bénichou writes that romantic literature "was the bearer of a new way of seeing the world, [and] also a new way of seeing the writer."[7] That is, the otherworldly inspiration of romantic writers lent them the spiritual authority in society and politics that Bénichou terms a consecration.

For Priscilla Parkhurst Clark, the centralization of the French government, and hence of cultural resources, contributed significantly to the unique position of literature in French history and politics. Nonetheless, she asserts that nineteenth-century writers positioned themselves in opposition to those market forces they considered antithetical to the aesthetic value of their work. Like Bénichou, Clark notes constant struggle among competing visions of traditional, liberal, and radical authors that contributed to the dynamism of literature in France, aided by the spread of education and a broadening of the social basis of writers in the late nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, the heirs to Hugo and Zola took on the mantle of the public writer who aims his writings not at a specific readership but at the vast public at large in a culture defined by near-universal education, high rates of literacy, a popular press, new forms of mass media, and various causes célèbres. For Clark, this public writer ultimately becomes the "intellectual," epitomized in the post–World War II era by the figure of Sartre, who united philosophy, action, and writing in his work and life and assumed a leading role in the habitually fragmented literary community.[8] As François Hourmant shows in the issue's final article, the image of the writer-intellectual—its evident serviceability as a consecrating and legitimating device—had great appeal for politicians as well, in Hourmant's case, Mitterrand.

All these scholars seek to explain the status and power of literature and writers at various points in French history. In a sense, they are responding to the question Tocqueville posed in the third part of *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* when he asked why and how men of

6 Paul Bénichou, *The Consecration of the Writer, 1750–1830*, trans. Mark K. Jensen (Lincoln, NE, 1999), 9.

7 Ibid., 338.

8 Priscilla Parkhurst Clark, *Literary France: The Making of a Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

Downloaded from https://read.dukeupress.edu/french-historical-studies/article-pdf/28/3/377/411899/FHS028-03-01SchneiderFpp.pdf
by guest
on 19 June 2018

letters in the eighteenth century had achieved such authority over public opinion. For Tocqueville, this authority was both unnatural, usurping the traditional role of a politically engaged aristocracy, and deleterious, fostering the kind of speculative and abstract thinking that proved ruinous for the Old Regime.[9] While the scholars just mentioned do not necessarily share Tocqueville's judgment that the prominence of men of letters in French society is a problem, they do see it as problematic—that is, something to explain with historical specificity. In doing so, they strive to overcome the disciplinary boundaries that separate historical and literary scholarship. This is not always easy, as the editors for this special issue discovered in reviewing the numerous submissions from scholars in literature, history, cultural studies, and other disciplines, for the conventions of research, referencing, analysis, evidence, argument, and length vary considerably among disciplines, notably between literature and history. The six essays collected here combine textual and historical (or sociological or economic) analysis and chart the contribution of literature to French history from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Persistent through them are the issues of power and politics and how literature and writers engaged with rulers or regimes, or transformed them.

The issue begins and ends with articles that, interestingly, show literature as a part of the self-fashioning of heads of state. The first, "Words, Deeds, and a Womanly King," by Wintroub, presents a revisionist portrait of the last of the Valois and in the process demonstrates the rising but embattled status of letters and learning during this era of religious warfare. Rather than dismiss the charges of effeminacy and homosexuality against Henri III as pure slander, Wintroub links these criticisms to a shifting balance in the long competition between "arms" and "letters" as the primary markers of noble status. He shows Henri consciously engaged in a project of self-presentation that aligned him with a new model for the courtly aristocracy, one in which eloquence and learning were paramount. But this model hardly met with universal approval. At odds with traditional warrior values, it also struck an ambivalent chord even for some learned commentators, who associated learning and eloquence, at least for rulers and warriors, with debilitating effeminacy. The image of the effeminate, homosexual, weak, and vacillating Henri was, in short, less the result of his actions in the religious wars than a matter of his partisanship in a cultural campaign.

Continuing the theme of letters in aristocratic culture, Antoine

9 Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Garden City, NY, 1955), 138–48.

Downloaded from https://read.dukeupress.edu/french-historical-studies/article-pdf/28/3/377/411899/FHS028-03-01SchneiderFpp.pdf
by guest
on 19 June 2018

Lilti in "Sociabilité et mondanité: Les hommes de lettres dans les salons parisiens au XVIIIe siècle," engages with current discussions, especially among historians in North America, about the place of Parisian salons in the culture of the Enlightenment. Lilti takes issue with recent interpretations of eighteenth-century *ruelles* (as salons were then called), namely, that they constituted an egalitarian, subversive alternative to the court and so helped forge a protorepublican sociability. On the contrary, he argues, salons were part and parcel of an aristocratic world that included the academy as well as the court. They were seen as strategic avenues for writers to secure aristocratic patronage, contacts at court, and entrance into the academy. The language of friendship and politeness was not hypocritical but rather reflected asymmetrical patronage relationships that nevertheless benefited both aristocrats and writers. Writers' integration into this aristocratic and courtly world ultimately led Rousseau and other like-minded radicals to offer an alternative image of the autonomous writer accountable only to the reader. Such a writer would espouse a truly "patriotic" discourse, addressing not merely a particular readership of salon and court habitués but the whole nation.

The function of literature in legitimating power is clear in Mechele Leon's "The Poet and the Prince: Revising Molière and *Tartuffe* in the French Revolution." Leon shows how revolutionaries reinterpreted the relationship between Molière and Louis XIV, and altered the text of *Tartuffe* dealing with royal intervention and the law, to appropriate both the playwright and the play for the Revolution. Arguing that revising the history, that is, the relationship between Molière and Louis XIV, was easier than altering the play, Leon demonstrates the resistance of Old Regime culture in the face of revolutionary efforts to eradicate it and start anew. She relies heavily on Furet's interpretation of revolutionary government, that it was arbitrary in its denouncements and arrests, which is why audiences readily accepted the arbitrariness of the play, applauding the hypocrite's success and then immediately the arrest of Orgon, his victim. Leon clearly shows how a writer's reputation and his text were reconfigured to accommodate a new, national identity and new political needs, but, perhaps more interestingly, she also shows how difficult and messy this accommodation was.

Leon's contribution exemplifies an important theme of contemporary literary scholarship in a historical context: the study of how texts were received, read, and interpreted. The next two contributions return to the more traditional concern with what authors were trying to say and accomplish with their texts. In "Stendhal and the Trials of Ambition in Postrevolutionary France," Kete focuses on a postrevolutionary struggle

Downloaded from https://read.dukeupress.edu/french-historical-studies/article-pdf/28/3/377/411899/FHS028-03-01SchneiderFpp.pdf
by guest
on 19 June 2018

between the traditional values of a hierarchically ordered society and competitive individualism. She accesses this struggle through the fictional and autobiographical texts of Stendhal (1783–1842), read alongside contemporary medical works on ambition. Medical science viewed ambition as a form of madness, verging on the pathological, and Kete finds evidence of this view in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (1830), the story of the rise and fall of the supremely ambitious Julien Sorel. Invoking the medical authorities familiar to Stendhal, she clarifies the rapidly changing mental states of the fictitious Julien throughout the novel, especially at its end, when he shoots his former lover and is tried and executed for the murder attempt. Kete then links this fiction of destructive ambition with Stendhal's own struggles to avoid a fate like Julien's. According to Kete, Stendhal resolved the problem of ambition by conceptualizing his writing as a vocation, thus evading the fatal connotations of individualism through the invocation of a spiritual devotion to craft. Nonetheless, in both fiction and personal narrative, Stendhal participated in a social transformation toward modern, liberal individualism. In this essay Kete avoids the common and ideologically charged interpretation of Julien as social rebel and instead grounds him, and his author, more firmly in early-nineteenth-century culture. In so doing, she also deploys the methodology of the New Biography, presented in an earlier special issue of *French Historical Studies*.[10]

Similarly, Tilburg's work on Colette (1873–1954) shows another author's involvement in a different social and political transformation, the valuation of work and the emergence of early feminism under the Third Republic. Interestingly, she too presents an author struggling with issues of craft, vocation, and bourgeois values. In "Earning Her Bread: *Métier*, Order, and Female Honor in Colette's Music Hall, 1906–1913," Tilburg analyzes autobiographical and fictional texts by Colette, notably *The Vagabond* (1911), to reveal her rewriting of bourgeois femininity through the republican ideal of work. Imbued with the secular morality of work inculcated in primary schools under the Third Republic, Colette transformed this implicitly masculine ideal by applying it to the dance hall and especially to women performers, including herself. Contrary to popular opinion of the time, which held that dance hall performers, particularly women, were loose, slatternly, and easygoing, Colette presents them as faithful wives and mothers, clean, orderly, and extremely hardworking. Tilburg persuades readers that in

10 A. Lloyd Moote and Jo Burr Margadant, eds., "Biography," special issue, *French Historical Studies* 19, no. 4 (1996). See also Jo Burr Margadant, ed., *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, CA, 2000).

Downloaded from https://read.dukeupress.edu/french-historical-studies/article-pdf/28/3/377/411899/FHS028-03-01SchneiderFpp.pdf
by guest
on 19 June 2018

this way Colette challenged another republican ideal, the domestically centered bourgeois woman, since class privilege allowed such women, even encouraged them, to be idle and self-indulgent. Thus Colette, in asserting the honorableness of her own career as a performer and writer in terms of the republican ideal of work, represents an alternative, superior model of femininity to that of bourgeois domesticity.

The final essay in the issue, Hourmant's "François Mitterrand: Portraits d'un président en écrivain," indicates that literature and politics (broadly defined) remained inextricably entwined in the contemporary period. It also links, through literature, the monarchical and republican traditions of French history. Hourmant charts Mitterrand's literary and political development in three phases: as an apprentice, as a writer-president, and finally as a consecrated writer-monarch. Building on de Gaulle's precedent of literary aspiration and the disenchantment of writers and intellectuals with the Communist Party after the revelations of the 1950s and 1960s, Mitterrand cultivated literary support and started writing while engaged in the long preparation for his presidential candidacy. According to Hourmant, Mitterrand thus positioned himself as combining politics and writing, action and contemplation, power and art, and he presented this position as more authentically French than Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's technocratic presidency in the 1970s. This led to his election in 1981, and Mitterrand's consolidation of his writerly credentials further enhanced his presumption to a particularly French assimilation of power consecrated by literature. The fulfillment of Mitterrand's carefully plotted political and literary career was his "immortalization" after death by commemorations that hailed his writing as more enduring than his politics. For Hourmant, Mitterrand represents a long tradition in France of combining power and literature, and indeed a somewhat shorter one of consecrating the republican presidency as a new monarchy.

With Hourmant's portrait of Mitterrand as a politician who used literature to consecrate his position as a statesman, we come full circle back to the sixteenth century and Henri III's embrace of "letters" as the necessary accoutrements even for a warrior king. Beyond the bookends formed by Wintroub's and Hourmant's articles, the contributions in this issue seem to have little in common—and it would be foolish to pretend otherwise. They all cross the boundary separating history and literature, of course. And they all implicitly argue for the importance of literature and writers beyond the strictly literary "field"—that is, as elements and as figures of public life. It would hardly be justified to claim that this is something particular to French history; clearly the literary traditions of other countries are just as valued and prominent. It is hard, however,

Downloaded from https://read.dukeupress.edu/french-historical-studies/article-pdf/28/3/377/411899/FHS028-03-01SchneiderFpp.pdf
by guest
on 19 June 2018

to think of comparable figures in British or German history to Voltaire, Hugo, or Sartre, just as it is difficult to find equivalents elsewhere to the Académie Française—or, for that matter, to *Apostrophes*! But while comparative analysis is useful and desirable, it is not always necessary in making historical assertions. What explains the shifting and evolving importance of literary culture in France's public life? To echo once again Tocqueville's plaintive question, why have the French conferred so much authority and prestige on writers over the centuries? Perhaps it is fitting to conclude simply that the relative place and position of literary culture remains a legitimate and, in some ways, an unexplored theme that historians, French and others, ought to pursue more deeply. Or, to put it differently, we should try to explain to ourselves why we immediately "get" de Gaulle's retort to the suggestion, in the wake of large-scale demonstrations led in part by the popular philosopher, that he simply place Sartre in custody: "On n'arrêt pas Voltaire!"

Downloaded from https://read.dukeupress.edu/french-historical-studies/article-pdf/28/3/377/411899/FHS028-03-01SchneiderFpp.pdf
by guest
on 19 June 2018