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Françoise, Literary Critic: Editorial Reach and Discursive Strategies

CHANTAL SAVOIE

THE SUBSTANTIAL INCREASE in the number of women of letters in French-Canadian society at the turn of the twentieth century, and more particularly in the Montréal area, is suggestive of an era that constitutes a historical turning point for women's literature and its place in the literary field. The massive emergence of women of letters in journalistic literary practice at the end of the nineteenth century marks the moment when women entered the public sphere. This publicity, in the Habermasian sense of the word,¹ is inseparable from the two great social mutations that affected French-Canadian society in general at that time and particularly influenced the destiny of women of letters: urbanization and the development of the media. If the pull of Montréal, newly promoted to the status of economic metropolis, was felt by all actors in literary life at the turn of the last century, it influenced still more the trajectory of women writers and was especially evident in the development of niches for women in the mass media.

Yet the literary activity of women during this period still goes largely unrecognized, not only in the major surveys of Québec literature but also in works dealing more specifically with the literary practices of women. The restriction of the corpus of women's writings to works that have appeared as books, and the overriding importance accorded to texts belonging to the dominant genres of poetry and the novel have greatly contributed to this lack of attention. Furthermore, to date, journalistic writings by women of letters at the turn of the twentieth century have been looked at, on the one hand, as testimony to an era and, on the other, as part of the newspaper column genre, traditionally regarded as marginal, if not minor, within literary studies.

However, no study until now has attempted a transversal reading of literary criticism, a significant part of the work of women columnists

in daily newspapers and women's magazines. The circumstances of the birth of criticism by women as practiced at the turn of the last century remains little known, despite the fact that, for some thirty years, the emergence of criticism by women in literary and cultural studies has prompted a rereading of women's texts and a reevaluation of the place of those texts in literature as an institution. In French Canada, at the turn of the twentieth century, the emergence of women's pages in major daily newspapers and the birth of women's magazines enabled a certain number of literary women to enter the public sphere by signing columns in various periodicals. In this vast production, heterogeneous by nature and most often dealt with as such, a certain number of writings dealing specifically with literature stand out. This literary criticism, while adhering to the practices of the women's column, takes advantage, in a way, of the legacy of the French *salonnières*, transposing it to the media platforms to which Canadian women of letters then gained access. These were the circumstances in which a women's literary expertise asserted itself and literary criticism by women in French Canada was gradually born.

The literary criticism engaged in by women in newspapers and periodicals at the turn of the twentieth century, at a key moment in the evolution of mediated public space, gives a quantitative idea of the presence of literature in the media and helps bring to light a significant landmark in the history of women's letters. It is from this twofold perspective, I feel, that women's literary criticism is deserving of special attention. In fact, this article belongs to a broader context of research that is examining women's literary expertise at the turn of the last century (1893-1919) in order to circumscribe its forms and modalities, while situating it in the sociocultural and literary context that fostered the emergence of a critical voice for women.

The particular trajectory of journalist Robertine Barry (1863-1910, pseudonym Françoise), a columnist for *La Patrie* (1891-1900) and subsequently director of *Le Journal de Françoise* (1902-09), provides unique insight into the evolution of the discursive strategies used by literary women according to the various media platforms they have occupied. Françoise was a pioneer of women's journalism in French Canada, and her exemplary trajectory distills the elements of the route taken by women in the world of literature at the turn of the twentieth century. Born in Isle-Verte in the Témiscouata region in 1863, Françoise grew up on the North Shore of the St. Lawrence River. She attended board-

ing school, first with the Sisters of Jesus Mary in Trois-Pistoles, then the Ursulines of Québec City, before settling in Montréal. She began writing her “Monday Chronicle” (“Chronique du lundi”) in *La Patrie* in 1891. A self-taught journalist,² she made a living writing in newspapers and magazines. In addition to her presence in the public sphere as a writer, she was active in a variety of associations: professional, patriotic, charitable, and promotional of women’s interests. On the strength of this visibility, both in the media and in public associations, Françoise entered the world of books by publishing simultaneously, in 1895, an anthology of short stories, *Fleurs champêtres* (Flowers of the Field), and *Chroniques du Lundi*, a self-published selection of her Monday chronicles.

An analysis of the writings on Canadian and foreign literature signed by Françoise in her Monday chronicle (*La Patrie*, 1895-1900), her “Coin de Fanchette” (Fanchette’s Corner) (*La Patrie*, 1897-98), and her two columns (“Bibliographie” (Bibliography) and “À travers les livres” (Through books)) in *Le Journal de Françoise* (1902-09) reveals various phases in the emergence of a public feminine discourse on Canadian letters. This is the path I will retrace here, in four stages, stressing the different springboards used by Françoise to construct her competence as a literary critic.

Literature in the Monday Chronicles

Françoise’s Monday chronicle in *La Patrie* (1891-1900) is the earliest column signed by a woman in a major French-Canadian daily newspaper, and it gave impetus to a genre in which she had followers for many years. The literary subjects in Françoise’s chronicle quite naturally find their place among a set of varied concerns and pretexts.³ Françoise takes up literary subjects every two or three months during the first years of her chronicle. The frequency of literary subjects increases appreciably, however, in the course of the years 1898 and 1899, Françoise’s last as a contributor to *La Patrie*.⁴

While Françoise’s literary interests vary from one column to the next,⁵ two major tendencies can be discerned in her handling of subjects. The first is the clearly meliorative character of her commentary. The works covered in her Monday chronicles are, without exception, praised to the skies. In this, Françoise does not seem to be overindulgent in a specifically feminine way, but to be in line with the dominant tendency of the columnists of her time.⁶ Encouragement and praise are

indeed the order of the day, as if there were doubt about the ability of our young literature to withstand frank judgement, the most skeptical might say, or as if each published work in itself constituted progress, the more candid are liable to think.

The second tendency found in Françoise's literary columns is the construction of a position of modesty. Françoise multiplies marks of humility, even inferiority, when she speaks of books or authors. She points out the arbitrariness of her opinions, for instance: "Je ne donne ici que ma *pauvre petite* opinion, et je n'ai pas la prétention de l'imposer à personne" ("I'm just giving my *poor little* opinion and don't mean to impose it on anyone") (2 Mar. 1896, 1; emphasis added). She admits to having limited skills in versification: "Je m'y connais *peu* en poésie, je l'avoue *humblement*" ("I don't know *much* about poetry, I *humbly* admit) (14 Jan. 1895, 1). Finally, she kowtows before important authors: "Un livre ayant Arthur Buies pour nom d'auteur, ça ne se recommande pas, vous savez, du moins, par une *petite* chroniqueuse comme moi." ("A book by Arthur Buies needs no recommendation, you know, at least not from a *lowly* columnist like me") (2 Dec. 1895, 1).

This humility, particularly evident when Françoise comments on the works of recognized Canadian and foreign authors, is not absolute, however. She sometimes shows much greater assurance, particularly when a topic leads her to discuss moral issues rather than the value of works or authors. And in moral matters, her judgement seems much less conventional than with regard to literary value. As evidence, I will quote an excerpt of her defence of George Sand — a blacklisted author, no less — against the attacks of Hector Garneau, who blamed Sand for abandoning Musset:

Mon excellent confrère, dont les études et les appréciations littéraires sont fort goûtées, a longuement traité le sujet qui passionne actuellement les écrivains français: la trahison de George Sand envers Alfred de Musset. M. Garneau déclare d'abord qu'il va juger cette question avec impartialité; c'est un sentiment qui l'honore, car, le sexe fort nous a peu habituées à une justice tout à fait désintéressée.... On prétend [donc] qu'il était impardonnable à Georges Sand d'avoir abandonné un homme de génie. Et n'avait-elle pas du génie, elle aussi, cette femme qui fut l'un des plus admirables écrivains de son siècle? (7 Dec. 1896, 1)

(My excellent colleague, whose studies and literary assessments are much appreciated, has dealt at length with the topic that is cur-

rently all the rage among French writers: George Sand's betrayal of Alfred de Musset. Mr. Garneau begins by saying that he will judge the matter with impartiality. I honour the sentiment, because the stronger sex has done little to accustom us to entirely disinterested justice. . . . [Thus,] it is claimed that it was unpardonable for George Sand to abandon a man of genius. And did she herself not have genius, this woman who was one of the most admirable authors of her century?)

Despite playing the intellectual novice, Françoise seems already able to assume a certain moral ascendancy. This combination of intellectual humility and moral authority characterizes Françoise's discourse on literature in her weekly columns in *La Patrie* through to the end of the nineteenth century. It was the first phase in Françoise's career as a literary critic.

Replies to Correspondents

Apart from her Monday chronicles, *La Patrie* provided Françoise with a second editorial space, beginning in 1897. Every Saturday, she answered readers' questions in a column entitled "Réponses aux correspondants" ("Replies to correspondents") on the page entitled "Le Coin de Fanchette" ("Fanchette's Corner"). This second editorial space and the Monday chronicles appeared alternately every week from 1897 to 1900. Answers to readers were immensely popular at the turn of the twentieth century, and the journalist's side of this public correspondence in major daily newspapers was signed exclusively by literary women.

Although the "Replies to correspondents" column by Fanchette is, in a way, the forerunner of the "lovelorn column," its content went far beyond sentimental matters. Thus, it shares with the Monday chronicles the characteristic of dealing with literature, among other subjects. The proportion of literary subjects cannot easily be determined given the volume of mail, which appears to have grown exponentially. Nevertheless, literature came up very regularly in questions from readers, often in several letters a week. The letters were signed by men and women, clearly of all ages.

Fanchette, a nickname for Françoise, affirms that she answers all of the letters she receives from subscribers to *La Patrie*, and it is reasonable to think that her column reflects fairly accurately the place occupied by literature among the concerns of the well-to-do classes at the end

of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The questions asked of Fanchette concerning literature are of several types: she is asked to suggest “recommendable” books; readers wonder whether a given book or author is blacklisted; they ask where books or certain magazines can be bought; they ask Fanchette for her opinion on various current issues (the Dreyfus Affair, for instance). Finally, readers submit texts under a pseudonym (as they do their letters), most often poems, which Fanchette comments on and occasionally publishes when she deems them of sufficient merit.

It is, of course, the latter aspect that will be considered here. While the impact of various literary competitions on literature has been scrutinized, and we have learned more and more about the role of certain formal associations and more informal literary networks,⁷ no attention has been paid to this very special mentoring by columnists or the effect it had on literary activity in French Canada. The scope of this article will be limited to the approach taken by Françoise when commenting on the texts of her correspondents. It was naturally a role that gave her an opportunity to strengthen her judgement, but, most of all, it had a lasting effect on how she used discourse to assume literary authority.

If Françoise systematically showed her humility when commenting on Canadian works, her special position as a columnist commenting on unpublished poems presented under pseudonyms allowed her, on the one hand, to make more confident judgements and, on the other, broadened the register of her judgements: “les sentiments sont bons, mais les règles de la poésie ne sont pas observées.... Je ne crois pas votre talent poétique encore très prononcé” (“the sentiments are good, but the rules of poetry are not observed.... I do not think you have yet shown a marked talent for poetry”) (29 May 1897, 3). “Les règles de la prosodie sont bien observées, mais n’y a pas beaucoup de travail dans ce genre de poésie; le rythme est léger et bien facile. C’est un peu naïf aussi et je ne vois pas beaucoup d’idées neuves” (“**The rules of prosody are well observed, but there is not much work to do in this kind of poetry; the rhythm is light and very facile. It’s a bit naive and I don’t see many new ideas**”) (23 Oct. 1897, 9). Or again:

vos poésies ont vraiment du souffle et du talent. ... Votre “Fantaisie” est superbe, j’avais presque l’envie de la publier dans “Le coin de Fanchette”, et vous savez que ce n’est pas un mince honneur que je lui ferais là, à mon avis du moins; j’y remarque toutefois un défaut que je me hâte de vous signaler, pour que l’ayant corrigé, ce mor-

ceau soit parfait. La dernière ligne de chaque strophe ainsi que la première ligne de la suivante contiennent deux rimes masculines et les règles de la prosodie le défendent. (23 Oct. 1897, 9)

(your poems truly show inspiration and talent.... Your “Fantaisie” is superb; I almost felt like publishing it in “Le coin de Fanchette”, and you know it is no small honour that I would be granting it, at least in my view. I note, however, a fault that I hasten to point out to you, so that, once it has been corrected, your piece will be perfect. The last line of each stanza and the first line of the following one contain two masculine rhymes, and that is prohibited by the rules of prosody.)

It is easy to see that in the new editorial space of “Fanchette’s Corner,” Françoise is more familiar with the rules of versification and that her remarks on style are both more precise and less relativized by opinion markers. The greater air of authority in the answers to correspondents is, of course, made possible by the internal rules of her public correspondence: the texts commented on by Françoise have none of the attributes of recognition — neither signature, nor network affiliation, nor publishing contract. Naturally, this anonymity does not lift Françoise’s obligation to rally with those in higher positions in the intellectual field of her time. However, it is impossible to tell how accurate her judgement is, because the few works by correspondents she publishes are good. So she exercises her judgement in a space halfway between the private world of correspondence and the public arena of mass-circulation newspapers. In these new, very special, conditions, Françoise was able to take a further step in her quest for literary expertise. Modesty seems to have migrated from the columnist’s rhetoric to the diminutive form of her pseudonym.

International Interlude

Between the moment when she stopped writing for the women’s pages in *La Patrie* and the moment when she founded her own women’s periodical in 1902, Françoise represented Canadian women at the World’s Fair in Paris in 1900. On that occasion, she signed one of the first texts on Canadian women’s literature, entitled “Les femmes canadiennes dans la littérature” (“Canadian women in literature”), published in *Les femmes du Canada : leur vie et leurs œuvres* (Canadian women: their life and works) (1900).

Her seven-page article is of interest not only because it marks an important date in the history of women's letters in this country,⁸ but also because it shows new strategies in Françoise's discourse on literature. First of all, the article distinguishes itself from Françoise's previous writing by its historical perspective. She examines Canadian women's literature from the beginning of the colony, when the Hospitalières and the Ursulines set up their education programs for girls. She then highlights the resistance to public writing by women, the better to evoke the traditions of intimate writing, which she indicates was marginalized more by its nature than by its literary quality. Her use of the rare biographies of women authors, her combing through histories and anthologies of literature,⁹ and her inventory of women's writings in the fields of biography¹⁰ and history¹¹ show a concern for method and for rigour that set the article apart from Françoise's usual work as a columnist and liken it to more scholarly endeavours.

The conditions of her initiation into a more scholarly type of writing seem to include the fact that Françoise chose as her subject a hitherto little-known side of Canadian literature: writing by women. The circumstances were right, of course.¹² But, in addition, Françoise was dealing with an area in which very few others could claim to be as well versed as she was. Among other things, she could draw on the feminine solidarity of a huge network, first that of the Montreal Local Council for Women (MLCW, founded in 1893), then that of the National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC, also founded in 1893).¹³ It is thus in this third stage that women's literary expertise asserted itself.

Le Journal de Françoise

An examination of *Le Journal de Françoise* (1902-09), a semi-monthly women's magazine founded and directed by Robertine Barry, reveals Françoise's ease as a literary critic. Among the many articles she wrote for her magazine, Françoise most often kept for herself¹⁴ the two literary columns, entitled "À travers les livres" and "Bibliographie." For these columns, she wrote numerous reviews of recent works published at home or abroad.¹⁵

Françoise's decision to keep the columns for herself, when she had numerous male and female collaborators, is in itself eloquent, even if we still find traces of the rhetoric of humility that characterized her early criticism. But it is her discourse on the various works she deals with that

reveals a growing legitimacy, at least with regard to women's literature. This relative authority, acquired over the years, but clearly perceptible in the article for the World's Fair, now enables Françoise to stand up to other opinions regarded as authoritative in the field.

Her expertise in the field of women's letters is particularly evident in a series of articles in which Françoise scrutinizes recently published works on Canadian literature¹⁶ in order to gauge the accuracy of their handling of literary works by women. Françoise's comments on *Essais sur la littérature canadienne* (1907) by Camille Roy, the work that gave scholarly literary criticism its start in this country, provide the most eloquent example (see Barry, "Essais"). After duly praising Roy's work, Françoise narrows the scope of her commentary and, "Parodiant la parole d'un philosophe : 'je suis femme et rien de ce qui regarde les femmes ne m'est étranger'" ("Parodying the words of a philosopher: 'I am a woman and nothing that concerns women is foreign to me'") ("Essais" 102), she focuses on the passages in which Roy deals with the works of Laure Conan and her colleague Madeleine. Françoise questions Roy's judgement regarding two specific aspects. The first is general in nature: she contests Roy's hesitation to place Conan's novel *L'Oublié* (*The Forgotten One*) (1902) into the category of historical novels, affirming that he did not read the preface by Abbot Bourassa properly. The interest of this remark is twofold. Firstly, Françoise contests the classifying done by the founder of scholarly literary criticism. Secondly, she argues in favour of a special status for Laure Conan, whom she would like to see outside the ghetto of women writers — low in legitimacy — taking her place in the genre of the historical novel — higher in legitimacy. Apart from showing a certain ease in using metadiscourse — dialectically, no less — her remarks reveal a consciousness of the issues raised by the female ghetto regarding legitimacy in the long term, which is worthy of interest even from a contemporary feminist perspective.

The second time she questions Roy's judgement, her commentary appears even more daring, because it focuses on the efficacy of narrative strategies, thus entering into textual analysis and even approaching the consideration of certain aesthetic issues. Finding that Roy criticized Laure Conan for being too sober in her descriptions, Françoise, perhaps realizing that she has reached the limit of her expertise in this area, appeals to a recognized critic to support her point of view: "À l'appui de ma faible autorité, je cite René Bazin, qui, dans les 'Questions littéraires ou sociales' soutient que 'la longue description est fautive en

littérature, parce qu'elle est incompatible avec l'action" ("In support of my modest authority, I quote René Bazin, who, in 'Literary or social issues' argues that 'lengthy descriptions are wrong in literature, because they are incompatible with the action'") ("Essais" 103). Of course, this argumentative strategy shows that Françoise's authority is still relative, but this time her modesty may be more affected than real. Be that as it may, her argumentative strategy incontestably shows she has method and increased ease in the field of literary criticism.

Conclusion

This analysis of the evolution of Françoise's discursive strategies according to her various media platforms has allowed us to observe different means of the emergence of feminine critical discourse on French-Canadian letters. Her path, from modesty to specialization, as it were, certainly shows evolution. From one platform or article to the next, Françoise establishes and constructs her competence in the field of Canadian literature. But it is above all the springboards that enable her to do so that are worthy of attention.

The two main springboards of her feminine literary expertise appear to be morals and sex/gender. First, at a time when women did not yet have access to higher education, Françoise seeks to convert her moral expertise into intellectual capital. Once she has been "successful" at this, she acquires more specifically cultural and literary capital. This she uses first in a new niche, where competition is weak: Canadian women's literature. It is in these conditions, and more specifically in passing from the more traditional role of guardian of morals to that of defender of the literary rights of her sex, that women's literary criticism in French Canada was born.

The influence of a trajectory like that of Françoise on the subsequent stages in the evolution of women's critical discourse in Canadian literature was not felt for some time, however. Women of letters at the turn of the twentieth century had the benefit not only of exceptional circumstances (economic liberalism, the development of the mass circulation press, the absence of specialized literary columns, etc.), but also of a relative telescoping of the journalistic and literary fields that momentarily favoured versatility. The specialization of the two spheres and the autonomy they gradually acquired, in the early twentieth century and from the 1920s on, created a new situation and relegated women

to marginal status again. People would speak, only later, of the birth of women's literary criticism around the figure of Jeanne Lapointe at Université Laval in the 1950s and 1960s, and of literary feminism in the 1970s. The preliminary steps toward literary expertise taken by the women of letters of the last century have thus remained off the linear beaten track of traditional literary history. But a true history of women's literature cannot leave the dead ends and discontinuities out of account. This brief study of the discursive strategies of Françoise is intended as a contribution to that history.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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NOTES

¹ In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas gives an account of the various stages in the development of the bourgeois public sphere, the conditions of the emergence of public opinion, and the essential role the latter plays in reconciling the political interests of states and the private interests of individuals, particularly through moral discourse. See, in particular, chapters IV ("The Bourgeois Public Sphere: Idea and Ideology") and V ("The Social-Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere").

² When Françoise began her career (1908), women had access neither to classical education, nor to university.

³ It also bears mentioning that the literary page or column as such had not yet stabilized in form in daily newspapers at the end of the nineteenth century.

⁴ I believe that a relationship can be established between the larger proportion of literary subjects taken up by Françoise over these years and the fact that, in 1895, she published two works (an anthology of her Monday chronicles and *Fleurs champêtres*) that attest to her interest in entering the literary field more directly.

⁵ Certain types of subjects recur regularly: major French-Canadian works by known authors (and Françoise does not fail to point out publications by her journalist colleagues); current major successes (books and plays); and women's literary culture (encouragements to read up on a subject, take classes or attend lectures, suggestions for reading, presentations of famous women of letters).

⁶ This is the moment when a desire for a more scholarly, more “accurate” criticism made itself felt, when the emergence of such criticism was deemed essential to Canadian literature, which, while young and promising, still needed informed advice to become a “great” literature.

⁷ I am thinking especially of the work of Pierre Rajotte, Michel Lacroix, Manon Brunet, and others.

⁸ It bears repeating that, if the place of women in Canadian literature was beginning to raise interest, this article by Françoise, published not in a periodical but in a book, appeared before Camille Roy testified in 1902 to the increased presence of women in Canadian literature, and well before Georges Bellerive published his defence of women authors (*Brèves apologies de nos auteurs féminins*) in 1920.

⁹ E.g., *Le répertoire national* by James Huston (1848).

¹⁰ E.g., *La vie de la Vénérable Mère d’Youville* by Berthe Jetté (1900).

¹¹ E.g., *Histoire de l’Hôtel-Dieu* (1751) by Françoise Juchereau de Saint-Ignace; *Histoire du Monastère de Notre-Dame de Angès* (1881) by the Hospitalières; *Histoire des Ursulines de Québec* (1866) by the Ursulines.

¹² They include the popularity of women’s pages in newspapers and the growing number of published works by women, attested to, at least partially, by the article’s section on contemporary writing (not dealt with here), which mentions Félicité Angers, Joséphine Marchand-Dandurand, Marie Gérin-Lajoie, Adèle Bibaud, Anne-Marie Duval-Thibault, Marie Beaupré, Colette, Gaétane de Montreuil, Françoise and Madeleine.

¹³ On this subject, see my article on women’s associations at the turn of the twentieth century.

¹⁴ A few other signatures can be found at the foot of these two columns, including that of Louis Fréchette, who occasionally sat in for Françoise.

¹⁵ In France especially, but also in the United States.

¹⁶ Those by Camille Roy and by Charles ab der Halden. She also reviewed a lecture by Élie Auclair on the same subject.

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