

Woman readers and women's reading in Europe

nineteenth to twenty-first century

Author-s:

[Isabelle MATAMOROS](#) [1]

Abstract

In Christian Europe, learning to read and having access to books was for a long time reserved for a small elite that was majority male. With the rise of literacy in most European countries at the beginning of modern times, the readership became feminized. Reading, a tool of knowledge, represented a first step toward emancipation for many women. However, during the nineteenth century, reading practices reveal numerous gender inequalities: the reading of women, whose morals had to be preserved, was particularly monitored. It took until the turn of the twentieth century, women's access to higher learning, and the appearance of mass culture for mentalities to evolve. Today, the relation to books has been completely reversed, as the world of books is generally considered as feminine, with women reading the most in Europe.

Article

In the early nineteenth century, the world of books underwent major transformations (technical progress, better diffusion), with women taking part in this reading "revolution." This can be explained by the slow and unequal rise of women's literacy, which was higher in Northern and Protestant Europe (Denmark, Finland, Prussia), and hovered around 25% in France at the beginning of the century. Conversely, in Eastern Europe the entire population was practically illiterate, both women and men.

Nevertheless, disparities between the reading practices of women and men endured everywhere. In both Catholic and Protestant lands, in small schools or Sunday schools attended by young children, women learned rudimentary reading rather than writing. They had to know how to read and recite the usual prayers, and had to content themselves with books of piety (Bible, *Saints' lives*, *Of the imitation of Jesus Christ*, etc.). They were rarely encouraged to pursue studies, as avid readers were seen as being deviant. In the absence of control, there were fears of creating *précieuses* or bluestockings, or on the contrary witches and the possessed, who would absorb the content of books erroneously. In 1801, the French pamphleteer Sylvain Maréchal (1750-1803) published a provocative *Projet d'une loi portant défense d'apprendre à lire aux femmes* (Bill forbidding the teaching of reading to women).

Some social circles, such as the nobility, were more favorable to the literary education of girls. Thanks

to the Enlightenment and dawning Romanticism, a very well-read woman enjoyed a distinct status in Germany, Italy, and France. These *salonnières*, avid readers who often took up the pen, fueled debates regarding the literary novelties in their correspondence and salons. That of Germaine de Staël (1766-1817) in Coppet, Switzerland, became a hub for literary Europe, as did the Berlin salon of Rahel Levin-Varnhagen (1771-1833). On the opposite end of the social ladder, acquiring a literary culture was more difficult, but not impossible. The Italian Angela Veronese (1778-1847) or the Frenchwoman Suzanne Voilquin (1801-1877), the daughter of a gardener and a hatter, respectively, present themselves as passionate autodidacts of reading in their autobiographies.

Fashion magazines emerged in Europe to target this new female audience, such as the *Journal des Luxus und der Moden* (1786-1816), collections for ladies, conduct books, or home economics manuals, all of which were “female” genres that exploded during the second half of the nineteenth century. However, beyond this editorial segmentation, female readers showed curiosity for science, current events, and philosophy. Reading became a difficult-to-control part of everyday life, and some moralists and doctors grew alarmed by women’s supposedly immoderate taste for reading. The topic of the female reader alone in the intimacy of her room, absorbed in her book, appeared recurrently in painting throughout the century. Scientific and pseudo-scientific works multiplied in France, Spain, and England, incriminating an incorrect manner of reading arising from “women’s nature,” which was sensitive, impressionable, and not very rational. Doctors specializing in “women’s illnesses” saw unmonitored reading as a decisive cause of hysteria or deviant social behavior (suicide or adultery). For example, in his treatise *On the Preservation of the Health of Women* (1851), the Englishman E. J. Tilt (1815-1893) recommended forbidding women from reading novels in order to avoid stimuli that could trigger hysteria.

Dictates with regard to reading sought to preserve modesty and innocence: an honest girl did not read novels, or only read moral novels, which were bestsellers across Europe; and she did not read alone in order to avoid reverie, or even worse onanism. Reading practices helped produce gendered identities, and the books that were read had to reflect gendered models. This moral code became more flexible after marriage, although after the publication of Flaubert’s novel in 1857 (quickly translated in numerous European countries), there were fears of Emma Bovarys who would confuse fiction and reality, and fall into adultery.

These moral obstacles were joined by material obstacles. In order to read, one had to have access to books. Aside from reading rooms, where female readers could rent novels or newspapers at low cost, the public libraries that opened in most European cities—genuine “citadels of knowledge”—remained symbolically difficult for women to access due to tradition and morals. Women were also excluded from most literary clubs and societies, which kept up a bourgeois and male sociability throughout the century. This inequality prompted Russian and Polish female students in Paris during the 1860s to

petition for the implementation of all-female evening sessions as the Sainte-Geneviève library.

After 1850, women's literacy caught up with that of men in Scandinavian countries, Germany, France, and England, but it lagged far behind in Italy, Greece, and the Iberian Peninsula. Only 10% of Spanish women knew how to read in 1870. In traditionally Catholic countries, while elementary education for girls from the working classes improved, moral censure continued to have an impact in the early twentieth century. In France, the essay entitled *Romans à lire, romans à proscrire* (Novels to be read, novels to be banned) by l'abbé Béthléem (1869-1940), was a bestseller that went through numerous editions up through the 1930s. In Italy, the Catholic press of the time continued to list various pathologies risked by female readers: chlorosis, deviation of the spine, hysteria. On the other hand in the USSR, where women benefited from massive literacy campaigns during the 1920s, the weekly *Rabotnitsa* (The Woman Worker) advocated their emancipation through work and involvement in social life.

It took until the interwar period for women to call for unhindered reading, which was essential to freedom of thought and construction of the self. With the opening up of universities to women, the sharing of knowledge became less strict, even though obstacles endured: Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) recounts in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) how in the England of prestigious universities, student libraries were still forbidden to unaccompanied women.

After the Second World War, offerings became more diverse, and reading became a primarily female and more working-class practice in most European countries. Women's, fashion, and celebrity magazines as well as cheap books (Livre de poche in France, Harlequin from Canada, introduced in Europe during the 1970s)—symbols of mass culture—facilitated access to reading, all while conveying paradoxical representations. While they encouraged women to be in charge of themselves, they also solidified traditional roles. The women's press tended to establish the model of the "perfect housewife," even though certain titles, such as *Damernas Värld* (Women's World) in Sweden, offered a modern image of the woman combining family and professional life.

Since the 1970s, the world of books has been perceived—both for enthusiasts and professionals—as being feminine. Positions in book industry, libraries, or publishing largely became feminized over recent decades. Reading groups attract women in particular, as does the writing of literary blogs on the Internet. On a European scale, women frequent libraries more often, and indicate that they are readers more often than men: in 2016, 81% of Finnish women read one or more books over the course of that year, as opposed to 64.5% of men; the numbers total 69% of Hungarian women and 61% of Greek women, as opposed to 53% and 36.8% of men, respectively. However, European studies on culture attest to practices that remain highly gendered: women read more novels, men read more newspapers or essays; women read for pleasure, men seek firstly to be informed. Finally,

certain literary genres, such as the sentimental novel, continue to leave a “bad impression,” with few men admitting to reading them.

Bibliography:

Cavallo, Guglielmo, Chartier, Roger (eds.), *Histoire de la lecture dans le monde occidental* (Paris: Seuil, 1997).

Flint, Kate, *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).

Lyons, Martyn, *Readers and Society in 19th Century France: Workers, Women and Peasants* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

Traduit par:

Translated by Arby Gharibian

Source URL:

<https://ehne.fr/en/article/gender-and-europe/educating-europeans/woman-readers-and-womens-reading-europe>

Links

[1] <https://ehne.fr/en/auteur/isabelle-matamoros>