

*Article about French literature written by Renate Stendhal and published in the LA Reviews of Books on December 16, 2012.*

## **L'Amour (Oh La La) L'Amour is Strange**

DID THE FRENCH INVENT LOVE? Or would it be more true to say that love is endlessly reinvented every moment, in every culture, every epoch? What the French did is what Arabian and Persian cultures had done before them: invite the beastly, sexual part of human nature into culture. The French cultured and cultivated love from the Middle Ages onward until it became *l'amour à la française* — a reason for national pride. The clichés of French sexiness, French charm, French people's ease about their own and their presidents' affairs are hard to dispute; they go together with the well known sensuous importance in France of food and flirtation, verbal brilliance and fashion. There has been a recent flurry of books by Americans attempting to decode the better sex lives of the French and the enduring mystery of French women. (Among them, *What French Women Know: About Love, Sex, and Other Matters of the Heart and Mind*; *Entre Nous: A Woman's Guide for Finding Her Inner French Girl*; *All You Need to Be Impossibly French: A Witty Investigation into the Lives, and Little Secrets of French Women*; *French Women Don't Sleep Alone*; *The Skinny, Sexy Mind: The Ultimate French Secret*; and *La Seduction: How the French Play the Game of Life*.) Marilyn Yalom's new study, *How the French Invented Love: Nine Hundred Years of Passion and Romance*, reaches beyond the stereotypes by focusing on literature, making an erudite, elegant, and charming case for France's love "invention."

She begins with language itself:

We English speakers often turn to French expressions for the vocabulary of love. We refer to tongue-locked embraces as "French kissing." We have adopted the words "rendezvous," "tête-à-tête," and "ménage à trois" to suggest intimacy with a French flavor. Our words "courtesy" and "gallantry" come directly from the French, and "amour" doesn't need to be translated."

Readers are implicitly invited to extend the list themselves with other piquant adaptations and derivations — *risqué*, *raffiné*, *déshabillé*, *décolleté*, *amour fou*, and *femme fatale*, to name a few. A former professor of French, Yalom weaves her literary thread through 900 years of French love stories, from such notorious lovers as Abélard and Héloïse to Sartre and Beauvoir, from troubadours like Chrétien de Troyes with his legendary *Lancelot* to Marguerite Duras's *The Lover*, Michel Houellebecq's *The Elementary Particles*, or Catherine Millet's *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.*

An essential ingredient of *l'amour à la française* is the insistence on sexual pleasure. Yalom cites a recent statistic culled from a study in which a French and an American group were asked whether "true love can exist without a radiant sex life." Of the American group, 83 percent agreed with this statement; only 34 percent of the French agreed, Yalom writes: "A 49 percent difference in opinion on the need for sex in love is a startling statistic! This French emphasis on carnal satisfaction strikes tighter-laced Americans as deliciously naughty."

Another crucial ingredient of French love includes "the darker elements that Americans are reluctant to admit as normal: jealousy, suffering, extramarital sex, multiple lovers, crimes of passion, disillusion, even violence. Perhaps more than anything, the French accept the premise that sexual passion has its own justification. Love simply doesn't have the same moral overlay that we Americans expect it to have."

Yalom's literary examples of French passion and naughtiness are told in a relaxed, conversational tone that mixes her analyses of books and history with anecdotes about her own experience living and teaching in France. She points out, for example, that *Dangerous Liaisons* is still required reading for all French youngsters at school and that the age of sexual consent is 15 in France, 18 in America. The French, who love to talk, naturally love to talk about love, and Yalom captures poignant and amusing stories of French *mentalités* (ideas and attitudes) about love and passion. She tells about friendly consensual arrangements of marital infidelity by both husbands and wives, and doesn't shy away from adding her own opinion on scandals like the recent Strauss-Kahn affair or the public protest against then-President Sarkozy's pronouncement that *La Princesse de Clèves*, a French classic from 1678, had become irrelevant to the education

of French students: “As president Sarkozy’s popularity declined among the French, sales of *La Princesse de Clèves* soared.”

Yalom, a senior scholar at the Clayman Institute for Gender Research at Stanford University, pays ample attention to the literary and cultural contributions of French women throughout the centuries. Rather than credit the obvious names of great French literature — Proust, Molière, Racine, Rousseau, Flaubert, etc. — the author provides reason to believe that the *mentalités* of French love have been thought up and laid down — “invented” — very much by these women.

An official guidebook for practitioners of *fin’amor*, or refined love (what we today would call “romantic” love) was fashioned in the 12th century at the court of Marie de Champagne, one of the earliest patronesses of art and love. Andreas Capellanus’s *The Art of Courtly Love* (*De arte honeste amandi*) set the tone by declaring the lovers equal in all regards while at the same time raising the woman to a superior position. The courtly Lady was supposed to be worshipped and addressed as if the Knight (in shining armor) were her feudal subject, ready to always, even for a whole lifetime, submit to her will. It did not matter that she was usually married; the sentiments between husbands and wives could never qualify for *fin’amor*. One of the 13 precepts for the ideal lover in *The Art of Courtly Love* is this: “In giving yourself to the pleasures of love, do not exceed the desire of your lover.”

This chivalrous style of courtship and love, Yalom explains,

was predicated on desire so intense that it could not be bound by the conventional rules of society. Passion took precedence over everything, including ties to husbands, family, overlords, and the dictates of the Catholic Church. Not surprisingly, the church reacted vigorously to the adulation of profane love; at the beginning of the 13th century, it even tried to suppress it through the arm of the Inquisition. But before that time, the cult of courtly love created the trio of familiar stock characters: the husband, the wife, and her lover.

Her lover? This is a fascinating reversal of the expected patriarchal “trio of familiar stock characters” — the husband, his wife and his *maîtresse*. Yalom has brilliantly mined some of these themes before, in *Birth of the Chess Queen*, and *A History of the Wife*. Here she offers plenty of thoughtful suggestions (“open to debate”) that the French refinement of *fin’amor* shows

the touch of powerful women and patronesses of the arts at French courts. The idea that knights — warrior-men — could be tamed and trained to be elegant lady's men striving for artful perfection as lovers, is what Yalom rightly calls a paradigm shift.

“Moreover,” she writes, “the 12th century inaugurated a tradition of French women writers, who took up the theme of love from their own perspective. To name a few of the best known during the past 900 hundred years: Marie de France, Christine de Pizan, Louise Labé, Madame de La Fayette, Madame de Staël, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, George Sand, Colette, Simone de Beauvoir, Violette Leduc, Marguerite Duras, Françoise Sagan, Hélène Cixous, and Annie Ernaux. Many of these women openly expressed sexual longing, as in Labé's cry that she was ‘burning’ from love.”

The author does not discuss the controversial question of whether (or how much) sex was involved in courtly love, or whether the famous 12th-century “love trials” where male *courtoisie*, ardor, and polite restraint were judged by juries of up to 70 women, existed only in the literature of the time. We are free to speculate that those rule-setting ladies, eternalized in songs, ballads, and chivalric romances, must have been quite different from the passive, disempowered “second sex” the 20th century has identified. French history took the new concepts of *fin'amor* to ever more short-lived and democratically disseminated forms of gallantry, libertinage, dissolution, and cynicism. (Yalom refuses to “inflict” de Sade on her readers, which “may speak to intellectual cowardice. So be it.”) But courtly love with its refinement of male desire and female capacity for passion left its lasting mark on French culture.

One can debate whether the iterations *l'amour* went through in 900 hundred years were re-inventions or simply variations on the same theme. These are presented in chapters that refer to different erotic moods — comic, tragic, sentimental, romantic, neurotic, and existentialist. Yalom's instructive literary tour through time highlights particular erotic dispositions of the French: the cultivation of young men's admiration for, and sexual attraction to, older women; the long history of highly educated, influential courtesans; the societal success of a woman like Julie de l'Espinasse, 18th-century muse of the encyclopedists, whose letters confessed her tormented simultaneous passions for three men. Another “*grande amoureuse*,” a century later, was George Sand, a devoted mother who had multiple lovers, wrote several dozens of successful books and

freely walked around in men's clothes. Then there is the relative freedom French culture afforded gays and lesbians at the turn of the 20th century, making Paris a magnet for expatriates like Gertrude Stein.

In the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein tells a quintessentially French anecdote about the five-year-old son of her concierge. Setting eyes on the aggressive "Blue Nude" by Matisse on her studio wall, the boy "cried out in rapture, oh là là what a body of a woman." A hundred years later, Yalom hears about an even younger French boy who "looked up from his toys and carefully said, 'Mommy, you have such pretty lips.'"

"The French eroticize everything," Yalom writes. And this continues to fascinate and baffle Americans. In short, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.