

Book Reviews

YANNINCK RIPA, *Women and madness: the incarceration of women in nineteenth-century France*, transl. Catherine du Peloux Menagé, Feminist Perspective Series, Cambridge and Oxford, Polity Press, 1990, pp. 175, £29.50 (0-7456-0454-4).

We meet a parapraxis on p. 86: "There is a clear analogy to be drawn between asylums and hospitals and indeed it was a truism for the madwoman." Read asylums and *prisons*, as the context makes clear. Ripa moreover suggests more than once that the French "special doctors" were a specially backward lot by the scientific standards of the day.

Would she say the same of their colleagues abroad? Certainly, Ripa thinks that "there are common attitudes to madness throughout our Judeo-Christian civilization" (p. 43). But elsewhere she shows, more convincingly, how nervousness about politically-active women was not the least interesting legacy of the events of 1789, 1848, and 1871, and, more generally, that the mad-doctor's discontent with civilization acquires a certain edge in a country that remains unique in the Western world for that history of violence in the streets.

Surprisingly effective are the quotations from such unpromising-sounding sources as the entry 'Femme' in Panckoucke's *Dictionnaire abrégé* (1821-6): women, "cannot exist in their own right and are forced to use the people around them to strengthen their own lives" (p. 58). Ouch. Ripa is one of the few psychiatric historians to ask, simply, whether the experts *believed* the astounding rubbish they wrote—she's not sure. More familiar, for example from Roy Porter's writing about John Haslam, is the related notion of how the language of the committal forms can unveil for us the "hidden anguish" and "fantasies" of their medical authors (p. 13). From this point of view, Ripa writes, only "borderline" cases that "show the boundary between normality and madness" are described in the book. Now this is back-door retrospective diagnosis, and that always leads to trouble: here, most notably, in Ripa's assumption that post-partum insanity can be "excluded from the discussion because of [its] physiological basis" (p. 53), which she seems to identify with puerperal fever. Her cool accounts of how society made horrors out of puberty and menopause show that Ripa could have done better by childbirth.

This is a model of *haute vulgarisation* that wears its learning, and a lot of work in the Salpêtrière archives, lightly. Lapses into ellipsis and sometimes sheer incomprehensibility are forgivable in a book that has so many interesting things to say about menstruation, washerwomen, and the novels of Eugène Suë (rich sources of madwomen, they were banned from at least one asylum library). The chapter 'Outcasts from the family' utilizes admission and discharge registers to show how *La ronde des folles* (the book's French title) was circumscribed by the impossibly self-contradictory agenda laid down for working-class women of all ages by their male relatives and employers in an oppression more crushing than any government, or anguished asylum superintendent, could hope for.

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SALLY G. McMILLEN, *Motherhood in the Old South: pregnancy, childbirth, and infant rearing*, Baton Rouge and London, Louisiana State University Press, 1990, 8vo, pp. xiii, 237, £23.70.

In the American South between 1800 and 1860, Sally McMillen maintains in this engaging study, motherhood was both more celebrated and more perilous than in other regions of the country. On the one hand, Southern culture prided itself on rigorously delimited gender roles, and singularly glorified motherhood as women's "sacred occupation". On the other, maternal mortality rates were higher there than in other regions. McMillen attributes this partly to the unhealthy climate of the South, and partly to southern physicians, who, she asserts more than establishes, clung tightly to traditional heroic practices at a time when their colleagues elsewhere were more open to innovation and change. Against this backdrop, McMillen traces in moving detail how white women managed pregnancy, childbirth, infant feeding, childhood illness, and, all too often, maternal bereavement. While women sometimes are portrayed here as passive victims of the expectations of a patriarchal society and the ignorance of their doctors, as often they are cast as active players, embracing motherhood as the most significant cultural role society afforded them and making choices about how they would fulfil this role.