

A Visual History of Women's Emancipation

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During the Belle Époque, the women who took on “men’s work” – doctors, journalists, and lawyers, but also coach drivers and postal workers – met with incredulity, hilarity, and more generally hostility. Postcards began to spread as a medium during the rise of early feminism and offer a striking representation of these reactions.

Reviewed: Juliette Rennes, *Femmes en métier d’hommes, cartes postales 1890-1930* (Saint-Pourçain-sur-Sioule: Bleu Autour, 2013), 217 p., 29 €.

In a beautifully illustrated book in square format (22 by 22), Juliette Rennes presents and analyses 314 postcards, mostly from a personal collection, and shows the contrasting reactions that arose at the turn of the 19th century as women began to enter professional spheres that had previously been reserved for men.

After initial studies in literature, the author completed a doctorate in political science and is currently a lecturer at the EHESS. For several years now, she has conducted research on the history and sociology of gender and professions, with a particular focus on controversy surrounding demands for judicial equality. Her publications include a book based on her thesis entitled *Le Mérite et la nature. Une controverse républicaine, l’accès des femmes aux professions de prestige, 1880-1940* which came out in 2007 with Fayard Press. *Femmes en métier d’hommes* – prefaced by Michelle Perrot, a pioneering figure in the history of women and gender¹ – exemplifies this much noted study and allows a wider public to retrace a journey of emancipation through the images analysed.

Postcards – the media of the Belle Époque

Postcards began to flourish precisely around the time that the first female higher education graduates requested access to jobs that had previously been reserved for men. Between 1900 and 1914, several hundred thousand were printed every year. At a time when press photographs were rare and of mediocre quality, these postcards were a real media form. They staged urban and rural workers in their professional activities and struggles (strikes, meetings, demonstrations, and riots) and echoed the concerns of the time. As post was collected and delivered at least three times a day in large towns and cities, these cards were also a way of passing along messages of all kinds, in all social backgrounds. The golden age of early feminism therefore corresponds to the golden age of the postcard. And this is where the relevance of Juliette Rennes’s approach lies.

During the Belle Époque, publishers created series of postcards such as “The emancipated woman” and “The woman of the future”. They were smutty and burlesque in tone and

¹ Her publications include coediting, with Georges Duby, *Histoire des femmes en Occident* (Paris: Plon, 1991-1992), 5 t.

presented military women of all ranks, rural guards, mistresses of arms, journalists, and deputies. They were either big bosomed and squeezed into uniforms that were ill suited to their shape or wore alluring clothes in stark contrast with the helmets and kepis on their heads. The mismatch between their body shape and their professional attire was intended to indicate that they were not apt to hold such positions. The mischievous expressions and smiles of these emancipated women jarred with the serious nature of the duties they were supposed to embody, thus informing (and reassuring?) the postcard's recipient that this was all nothing but a joke, a masquerade.

The difficult battle for access to prestigious professions

While women campaigning for access to the bar met with staunch opposition from the National Bar Council – which was equally hostile to foreigners and naturalized citizens – publisher Jules Royer brought out a series entitled “The female lawyer”. An actress with a small baby in tow played the role of a lawyer who had to regularly interrupt her defence speech to breastfeed, change a nappy, and calm down her progeny. Curly, untamed locks escaped from beneath her cap reinforcing the idea that women were irremediably positioned on the side of nature and not culture, and could not be lawyers.

These fanciful representations are cleverly presented alongside the photo postcard published at the request of Jeanne Chauvin, the second female doctor in law in France and the first to ask for admission to the bar in 1897. She poses in clothes that contrast strongly with those worn by her parody counterparts: long sleeves and a loose-fitting dress hide her figure, while her hair is drawn back below a plain cap. This particular profession no doubt met with the strongest resistance because it served as a springboard for the political careers to which women could not yet lay claim, as they did not have the status of active citizens.

Female doctors also came up against hostile reactions from the medical profession. They were only allowed to become students at teaching hospitals in 1881 and only able to take the entrance exam for public hospital interns in 1885, against the wishes of the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine in Paris, and of the doctors and surgeons of the hospitals. It took all the persistence and stubbornness of doctor Madeleine Pelletier – unfortunately barely mentioned in the book – to open up asylums to female interns in 1903. Female doctors were less mocked than lawyers given that women were traditionally linked to caring for others, but they nonetheless gave postcard publishers the opportunity to allude on an obscene mode to the acts they might have to carry out on male patients. Others chose to better underline the incompetence of female doctors by caricaturing them as kindly magicians concocting fanciful potions.

Well-known women were not left aside by publishers either. Postcards circulated with photographs or drawings of actresses, artists, writers, and famous journalists such as painter Rosa Bonheur, violinist Marie Hall, and journalist Séverine, as well as Colette, Anna de Noailles, and Sarah Bernhardt. Women of science, treated with deference, were portrayed through the figure of Marie Curie, Nobel Prize winner in physics and chemistry, who was the subject of several hateful press campaigns with anti-Semitic undertones despite having been born into a Catholic family. The conservative right wing could not accept that a woman should hold a chair at the Sorbonne and be head of a research laboratory, much less a woman who was left-wing, free-thinking, and of Polish origin.

When her affair with physicist Paul Langevin became public knowledge, the attacks by members of the far-right political group “Action française” became even stronger. Meanwhile, the left-wing working-classes expressed disappointment that their heroine failed to live up to the image of secular saint conveyed by the postcards that represented her as a model scholar, wife, and mother. Advocates of female emancipation specifically used this image to counter the main argument of those opposed to women’s work, i.e. that it was impossible to reconcile motherhood with a career. This argument appeared in a series of postcards showing husbands grappling with domestic chores under the disdainful eye of wives dealing with more noble occupations. Such a role reversion was so unimaginable that it could only be dealt with on a comical mode.

Female workers, between tradition and modernity

Working-class women, labouring in factories, mines, or fields, were not subject to any mockery however. On the contrary, the sketches or photographs on the cards showed their difficult postures and working conditions, testifying to women’s muscular strength and unveiling the important role they played in the country’s modernisation and industrialisation.

Sea workers, Corsican shepherdesses, and resin tappers were also photographed with a measure of respect. Oyster gatherers, prawn and mussel catchers, and fish carriers posed with their working instruments in short skirts or trousers. They were presented to tourists as a local curiosity, but one that did not threaten the sexual division of labour, as these activities had long been the remit of women.

However, the senders’ comments, identified and analysed throughout the book by J. Rennes, were largely unkind: they expressed thinly veiled disgust at the virility of the women’s poses and outfits. The bourgeois tourist therefore regarded the almost exotic figure of the working-class woman with disdain.

Female drivers of coaches or motor-driven taxis met with a particular degree of incredulity and hilarity. The instruments of this profession – whips, reins, and mastery of the technical and mechanical gestures necessary to drive horse-drawn and then automobile carriages – represented a real attack on the “natural” order of the sexes. The *Figaro* of August 5th, 1905, stated that: “Female chauffeurs earning a living in this profession are as implausible as female astronomers or female engineers”. They were either presented as devoid of all femininity, mannish, in their inelegant uniforms or, on the contrary, they suddenly bared their charms for all to see following a collision that sent them head over heels. In all cases, the aim was to make people laugh at their expense.

Taking control of their image

Finally, Juliette Rennes suggests that women played an active role in this interplay of representations. And not only famous and recognised women or feminist activists like Nelly Roussel, but also the more humble women already mentioned, those who pinned up posters, sold newspapers, and worked in the mines and at sea; the women who, through the poses they struck and the proud looks in their eyes, expressed a desire to be in charge of their image and their destiny.

And there is much to be said about the extraordinary Juliette Caron, who was the only woman to work as a carpenter, according to the caption on the cards that she designed and sold

herself. Wearing a corduroy suit, a cap, and high flat-soled boots, she appears all at once frail, graceful, and strong as she stares straight at the camera lens with an air of defiance.

By re-appropriating their image, these pioneering women – whether they held “prestigious” or manual occupations – made the postcard into something other than a tool for derision; they turned it into a medium through which they could stake a claim.

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