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RICCOBONI'S 1768 LETTER TO THE *MERCURE DE FRANCE*: RECLAIMING A WOMAN WRITER'S LITERARY LEGACY

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One day during the second half of February 1768, in a period about which relatively little is known due to an eight-and-a-half-month gap in her published correspondence,¹ Marie Jeanne Riccoboni (1713-1792) was reading the February issue of the *Mercur de France*² when she spotted her last name in the "Annonces de livres" section (129). This was not uncommon. Initially she had published several novels anonymously, including the 1759 bestseller *Lettres de Juliette Catesby*, as well as a continuation to Marivaux's *La Vie de Marianne* and multiple periodical contributions as "L'Abeille." More recently though, she had published under her own name a French translation of Fielding's *Amelia* and several more novels.³ This time, however, her name did not appear as the author of a book but rather as an author in one. The *Mercur de France* published a book review of *L'Esprit des femmes célèbres du siècle de Louis XIV, et de celui de Louis XV, jusqu'à présent*, a two-volume anthology of French women writers that had been published anonymously not long before by Pons-Augustin Alletz, a prolific writer of anthologies and dictionaries.⁴

The *Mercur*'s book review is very negative, calling *L'Esprit des femmes célèbres* "superficiel" (129), "très imparfait" and "très défectueux" (131). It considers the anthology a reductive, sketchy work that insults French women by "réduire à vingt-cinq ou vingt-six seulement, le nombre de celles qui ont acquis de la célébrité dans les lettres, sous les deux règnes de Louis XIV & de Louis XV" (126) and by subsequently spending too few pages on each of them. It is in the context of the latter argument that Riccoboni's name appears: "Les femmes auteurs, dont on donne l'esprit dans ces deux petits volumes, n'ont assurément pas lieu de se louer des bornes étroites, dans lesquelles on le renferme. On réduit [...] à vingt-huit celui de Mde Riccoboni" (128-9). In addition, the *Mercur* contends, Alletz made several mistakes in his anthology such as identifying Madame de Caylus as the sister rather than mother of the Comte de Caylus (129), and including as an author Madame du Montier, who was in fact a fictional character created by Madame Leprince de Beaumont (130).⁵ The *Mercur* concludes that "pour mieux connoître l'histoire, le génie, l'esprit des femmes qui ont écrit dans notre langue, il faut recourir à d'autres sources" (131) and indeed devotes more than a third of the review to highly recommending precisely such an alternative source, the *Histoire littéraire des femmes Françaises* by the Abbé de la Porte, scheduled for publication the following April (127).

The scathing review of *L'Esprit des femmes célèbres* in the *Mercure de France* did not surprise Riccoboni for she had already read the book before its review appeared. She knew therefore that while the author had lauded her oeuvre profusely, stating that she “laisse loin derriere elle les Scudéri, les Villedieu, les d'Aunoi, les Lussan, &c” and even calling her a “Rivale de la Fayette” (2: 413), he had in fact attributed all her work to her mother-in-law, Elena “Flaminia” (her stage name) Balletti Riccoboni, a talented Italian actress and author in her own right.⁶ In response to the appearance of *L'Esprit des femmes célèbres* but before that day when she read its review, Riccoboni boldly went public in a relatively unknown letter dated February 6, 1768⁷ in order to rectify this capital error. She addressed the letter to Pierre-Antoine de la Place (1707-1793), the editor of the *Mercure de France*, and he printed it in the periodical in March 1768, the month following the publication of the book review, presumably because he received it after the deadline for the February issue.⁸

Riccoboni's intrepid initiative deserves scholarly attention not only from so-called *riccobonistes*, but also in the larger context of women's studies. In her letter, Riccoboni publicly corrects the book's author while also criticizing the *Mercure's* book review with apparent foresight since it does not mention the error.⁹ In thus reclaiming her literary legacy in a predominantly male public forum, she confronts issues related not only to public and private, but also to gender and genre, while at the same time shedding light on the little-studied relationship between her and her mother-in-law Flaminia. I will examine how in this letter, Riccoboni defends and negotiates her precarious professional status as a best-selling woman writer in male-dominated Enlightenment France and will analyze the nature of the “power with a feminine touch”¹⁰ she uses to do so.

By the time she wrote her letter in February 1768, Riccoboni had indeed become a best-selling author: her first three novels (1757, 1758, and 1759) had all been published in multiple editions¹¹ and had provided her with sufficient funds to retire from the theatre—her first career was as an actress—at the end of the 1761 season, which gave her an additional standard pension of 1000 *livres* per year (Nicholls 13). At that moment, she started to publish under her own name (i.e. her husband's name), no longer in need of the protection that anonymity afforded women writers. Her act of public self-identification as an author did not imply, however, that society also readily accepted her as such.¹² Charles Palissot, for instance, wrote a 1764 satirical poem entitled *La Dunciade* in which he discusses which women writers were chosen by “Sottise”: “Elle y viendra cette Ric-b-ni, / Qui n'a point fait le Marquis de Cressi, / Qui n'a point fait les lettres de Fanni, / Qui n'a point fait Juliette Catesbi” (1: 103). A footnote to the novels listed says “Jolis Romans, que beaucoup de gens refusent à l'Auteur dont ils portent le nom” (1: 187). Palissot, echoing the sentiment of many of his contemporaries, tells women writers “Ne quittez point l'aiguille de Pallas, / Pour le compas de la grave Uranie” (1: 102), meaning that they should stay at home, in the private sphere, and not reach for the stars, literally and

figuratively, in the public sphere.

Riccoboni was acutely aware of this gender-based dichotomy between public and private. In her first novel, *Lettres de Fanni Butlerd*, she showed how women writing private letters in the private sphere could fall victim to the men who abandoned them. Proposing a creative solution, Riccoboni empowered abandoned Fanni, having her expose her lover's betrayal to the world by publishing her correspondence with him.¹³ Much later in life, she would experience the dark side of a similar "dangerous liaison" when Laclos decided to append to the 1787 edition of his novel by that name the private correspondence he had exchanged with Riccoboni about his female villain, Madame de Merteuil.¹⁴ In yet another example of her understanding the potential power of women entering the public sphere by choice and in a perfect *mise-en-abyme*, Riccoboni published anonymously *Fanni Butlerd's* last letter in the *Mercure de France* in January 1757, right before the novel came out. It was called "Lettre Traduite de l'Anglois. Mistris Fanni à Milord Charle C... Duc de R..." and intimated that its author was a real woman going public. The *Mercure* added, "Cette éloquente traduction est l'ouvrage d'une Dame [...] La cause de son sexe est en bonne main" (19). Little did the *Mercure* know that it would make public a non-anonymous, non-fictitious letter from Riccoboni a few years later, confirming that the cause of her sex was indeed in good hands.

In fact, much of Riccoboni's contact with the outside world, especially the world beyond Paris, took place through letters. The very private author did not visit society much, preferring to stay at home with Marie Thérèse Biancolelli, the fellow actress with whom she lived from the mid-1750s until her death, once separated from her husband (Nicholls 16). Nevertheless, she exchanged letters with some of the greatest luminaries of the Enlightenment such as David Hume, David Garrick, Diderot, and Laclos.¹⁵ Through her correspondence, and the fact that six out of her eight novels also feature a female letter writer, Riccoboni illustrates the so-called gender/genre connection that exists between eighteenth-century women writers like her, Graffigny, and Charrière, and the epistolary genre.¹⁶ The connection dates back to the seventeenth century, when women's letter writing was praised excessively and became one of the few literary genres sanctioned for women;¹⁷ it inspired many male authors to impersonate and appropriate the female voice,¹⁸ including Rousseau, Diderot, and none other than Laclos, an interesting example given his above-mentioned real-life letter appropriation. In summary, when writing her 1768 letter to the *Mercure*, Riccoboni defies social conventions for women by entering the public sphere, yet uses a genre that was acceptable for women. The letter, rare in that she personally submits it for publication, recalls *Fanni Butlerd* by using the public sphere and publication in order to expose male wrongdoing and to further the cause of the female sex.

How does Riccoboni manipulate the male-dominated public forum of the *Mercure de France* to correct Alletz's mistake and reclaim her literary legacy? First of all, she crafts her letter very carefully, using deliberate language.

Although the book was published anonymously, Riccoboni may have known its author's identity. Louis XV had granted the "privilège du roi" already on December 31, 1766 (2: ii), but the fact that the book's imprint is 1768 and that its review appeared in the February 1768 *Mercure* issue, makes it likely that it was not published until late 1767. It had, however, obviously been planned for some time and Riccoboni, being both in a literary milieu and in the book, may therefore have heard who wrote it. Even so, she does not mention Alletz by name, asking de la Place to "faire corriger dans le Mercure l'erreur d'un article du livre intitulé *l'Esprit des femmes célèbres*" (52) instead of attributing the error to its direct source, the book's author. Contemporary public opinion would have judged a personal, public attack from a woman on a man extremely harshly, if not dismissing it outright; Riccoboni therefore also omits the author's gender. In addition, her use of the words "faire corriger" in that sentence illustrates that she is aware of the performative power of language. She does not ask De la Place to correct the error himself, but rather relies on the performative power of her letter which will correct the error merely by identifying it publicly. The letter then no longer requires a response, its publication alone fulfilling Riccoboni's request.

Although Riccoboni thus uses the powers of language and publication to her advantage, she does not forget that according to the prevailing customs of her time, women should not venture from the private sphere into the public sphere. Therefore, she states specifically that she feels "une extrême répugnance à faire cette petite querelle" (53), stressing her reluctance ("répugnance") to go public while simultaneously trivializing it ("petite querelle"), for while Alletz had confused her with Flaminia, he had praised her extensively in his book. In accepting his praise, Riccoboni displays two other qualities greatly prized in eighteenth-century women, modesty and self-effacement. Alletz wrote that "Il seroit assez difficile de trouver un sujet parmi son sexe qui écrive mieux que Madame Riccoboni. Personne ne raconte avec plus de grace & de légèreté. Il y a dans son style de la dignité, de la noblesse, de l'élégance, un choix heureux d'espressions, une manière neuve d'exprimer ses idées & de peindre le sentiment" and he even granted her "un esprit philosophe,¹⁹ qui réfléchit finement & judicieusement" (2: 414). Furthermore, he claimed that Riccoboni surpassed Madame de Lafayette "par l'invention, par la légèreté, le feu, le style de sentiment" (2: 413). In her letter, Riccoboni modestly refuses to accept this flattering portrait of herself and insists on Lafayette's superiority:

[J]e n'ai pas la vanité d'y reconnoître mes traits, encore moins celle d'adopter le titre de *rivale de la Fayette*. Madame de la Fayette fut toujours ma maîtresse & mon guide; l'honneur d'approcher d'elle, de la suivre, même à quelques [sic] distance, est la louange que je voudrois mériter, & seroit un prix bien flatteur de mes foibles essais. (53)

While thus acknowledging that she considers herself part of Lafayette's legacy of French women writers, Riccoboni establishes a clear separation and hierarchy

between the author and herself. She refuses to see herself as superior to Lafayette²⁰ by referring to her multiple bestsellers as “mes foibles essais” and these being the closing words of her letter, the final impression Riccoboni makes on the *Mercure de France* readers is one of modesty and self-effacement.

The author's self-effacement extends to Flaminia as well. Saying “Je n'ai pas l'avantage d'être *Helene Baletti*,” Riccoboni corrects her name, age, marital status, and citizenship, and subsequently sketches a most flattering portrait of her mother-in-law. Calling her by her Italian maiden name, she describes her as famous in Italy, knowing both Greek and Latin, and having been admitted to all Italian academies allowing women²¹ for being a talented poetess whose poems are “forts, harmonieux, remplis de noblesse & d'imagination” (52). While still alive, Flaminia has now retreated from society due to “L'amour du repos, une piété solide, qui n'est en elle ni le fruit de l'âge, ni l'effet du désœuvrement” (52). Riccoboni concludes by saying that Flaminia has read no novels other than hers and would therefore undoubtedly be horrified to be “accusée de s'occuper d'un amusement si frivole” (53). By disparaging her own writing yet again, Riccoboni finally gets to the crux of her letter: “par égard pour elle, je me crois obligée de désabuser le public” (53). She does not go public in order to take credit for her work but rather to prevent her talented, respected mother-in-law from being wrongly accused of frivolous authoring. This is the ultimate “power with a feminine touch”, for such self-effacing, altruistic reasons might just justify a woman going public, even in eighteenth-century France.

In addition to using deliberate language, modesty and self-effacement, Riccoboni avails herself of humor as a tool to reclaim her literary legacy. Instead of stating outright that her mother-in-law is credited with all her achievements, Riccoboni describes the error as a “méprise qui m'ôte le titre de Française, & me donne à peu près le double de mon âge” (52) and by thus diverting readers, deflects attention from her much bolder, actual claim. Alletz mentioned Flaminia's correct city of birth, Ferrara in Italy, and year of birth, 1686, thus making Riccoboni an 82-year-old Italian instead of the 54-year-old Frenchwoman she was, although technically, Flaminia had become a French citizen in 1723 (Crosby 18). In case this age-related hyperbole did not appear frightening enough to the mostly male readership of the *Mercure de France*,²² Riccoboni also appeals to the traditionally more masculine principle of patriotism, claiming that she has been stripped of her citizenship. She inserts a separate paragraph entirely devoted to correcting her citizenship status: “Née Française, sous le règne de *Louis XV*, je ne tire mon origine d'aucune nation étrangère ; & sans que la prévention où [sic] les préjugés aient la moindre part à mon amour pour ma patrie,²³ je n'ambitionne point l'honneur d'être adoptée par une autre” (53). Although we may wonder whether “*Louis XV*” is a misprint since she was actually born during the end of Louis XIV's reign in 1713, Riccoboni manages to establish her French citizenship in triplicate in the first sentence alone.²⁴ In order to emphasize her current patriotism, she then mentions her love for France explicitly and states that she does not wish to be adopted by

another country. Even if they did not approve of a woman going public to reclaim her “frivolous” literary legacy, patriotic Frenchmen might tolerate it as an emphatic and impassioned defense of French citizenship.²⁵

It is interesting to note that Riccoboni’s appeal to male patriotism, strategic use of modesty and self-effacement and negotiation between the public and private spheres all recur fourteen years later in her 1782 epistolary exchange with Laclos about his *Liaisons dangereuses*, which he subsequently appended to his novel. The correspondence consists of eight letters, four by each letter writer. Riccoboni initiates the exchange in order to criticize Laclos for his creation of the marquise de Merteuil, the villainous heroine of his newly published novel. Rather than attacking his portrayal of female depravity directly, she wonders in her first letter why he would want to “donner aux étrangers une idée si révoltante des mœurs de sa nation et du goût de ses compatriotes” (686-7). In her second letter she reinforces her patriotism by saying that “C’est en qualité de femme, Monsieur, de Française, de patriote zélée pour l’honneur de ma nation, que j’ai senti mon cœur blessé du caractère de Madame de Merteuil” (689). By implying that his creation is anti-patriotic and challenges French national interests, she hopes to make him reconsider it.

Riccoboni employs her modesty and self-effacement strategically again as well in an effort to convince Laclos that his creation of Merteuil is ill advised. In her second letter, she downplays her literary production and the respect others might have for her by stating that “Je le [auteur] suis de si peu de choses qu’en lisant un livre nouveau je me trouverais bien injuste et bien sotte, si je le comparais aux bagatelles sorties de ma plume et croyais mes idées propres à guider celles des autres” (689). This is followed in her third letter by a derogatory comment about her age.²⁶ “Un militaire [Laclos] mettre au rang de ses privations la négligence d’une femme [Riccoboni] dont il a pu entendre parler à sa grand’mère! Cela ne vous fait-il pas rire, Monsieur?” (692). And in her final letter, she denigrates her opinion of his work by calling it “celui d’une cénobite ignorée” (698). In the end, even though Riccoboni realizes she has not succeeded in convincing Laclos, she nevertheless insists that he has not persuaded her either: “[...] je vous tromperais en feignant de me rendre à vos sentiments. Ainsi, Monsieur, après un volume de lettres, nous nous retrouverions toujours au point d’où nous sommes partis” (698).

For a period of five years after the initial correspondence took place, Laclos did not append it to his novel. When he did, however, in 1787, the perils related to women going public—or being made public—became immediately apparent. In one of the 1787 manuscripts of the novel, the correspondence is followed by a letter to Laclos from Duchastellier in which the latter thanks him for sending the book. Duchastellier states he was interested in the epistolary exchange, but disappointed in Riccoboni’s attack on Laclos: “je ne connais rien de si misérable que ses objections, de si frivole que ses comparaisons, de si faible que sa logique” (Laclos 901). He then expands his criticism to include the entire female sex: “On n’a jamais vu un homme se plaindre de ce qu’on faisait tort ou injure à

son sexe; maintenant, on ne peut plus dire du mal d'une femme réelle ou supposée, que toutes les autres ne prennent l'alarme" (901). Laclos becomes not only the hero in this letter but even the defender of (male) Reason: "Quoi qu'il en soit, Monsieur, vous avez tout l'avantage dans cette controverse [...] Vous avez défendu la raison contre les femmes avec autant de grâce que La Motte défendit le paradoxe contre les mêmes ennemis" (902). In the end, Duchastellier even manages to shift the blame for publishing the correspondence to Riccoboni: "Et, s'il y a eu de l'indiscrétion d'imprimer ces lettres, il n'y a personne que Madame Riccoboni qui puisse s'en plaindre..." (902). Thus, through her private letters being publicized by Laclos, Riccoboni inadvertently exposes herself to criticism of herself, her logic, her reasoning, and her entire sex.

Riccoboni's little-known letter offers insight into her relationship with Flaminia. She attempts to reclaim her literary legacy by distinguishing herself from her mother-in-law, most notably in age and national origin, but also by omitting altogether what they share i.e. an acting career at the Théâtre Italien (Crosby 18, 21) and Antoine François Riccoboni (1707-1772),²⁷ Flaminia's son and Riccoboni's husband. Admittedly, both women had retired from the stage and from at least the mid-1750s onward, Riccoboni had been a daughter-in-law in name only, since she had separated from Antoine François, and was living with Biancolelli. So in order to achieve her goal, Riccoboni, a professional woman herself, publicly expresses admiration for Flaminia's professional (not personal) achievements in Italy (not France). Their contemporaries largely shared her admiration, but did not always like Flaminia personally. Thus Casanova (1725-1798), who met her in 1750, describes her as unpleasant and arrogant in his *Mémoires* (547), and Charlotte Aïssé (1693-1733) accuses her in a 1726 private letter (published later) of causing her rival Silvia to be beaten by her husband—provoking a miscarriage—after Flaminia revealed Silvia's affair to him (9).

Riccoboni may intentionally have kept her opinion of Flaminia private while praising (only) some of her professional achievements in public, conscious of the repercussions of publishing a private document. In her private correspondence, she barely mentions Flaminia but is not shy about her terrible relationship with her mother (Nicholls 134, 151, 227), stating in 1767 that "elle n'est pas [...] douce et caressante, mais je ne lui dois pas moins des égards" (Nicholls 101).²⁸ Significantly, this word reappears in her public letter with respect to Flaminia: "par égard pour elle, je me crois obligée de désabuser le public" (53). According to the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (4th edition, 1762), "égar" means "Considération, circonspection, attention, marques d'estime," feelings based on respect, not love. Riccoboni thus feels a strong sense of duty towards both her mother and her mother-in-law, which explains why when Flaminia dies, she writes in a letter to David Garrick dated January 2, 1772: "[Je] prends le deuil aujourd'hui [pour] le porter six mois. Ma belle-mère âgée de 86 ans est morte" (Nicholls 228). Six months was the

standard length of time to remain in mourning for a parent (Delpierre 80).

It is thus upon her death that Flaminia finally enters Riccoboni's private correspondence. Rather than mourning her absence, however, Riccoboni discusses only her death and its effect on her,²⁹ and this in a practical, non-emotional and even critical manner: instead of making a comment about the deceased, she adds to her letter to Garrick: "Nous allons nous battre mon mari et moi à qui restera" (Nicholls 228). Later that month, she downplays her mourning in a letter to Liston (Nicholls 229) while expressing concern in February that Flaminia's death has been mistaken for her own (Nicholls 235). In May, she calls Flaminia's will "ridicule" (Nicholls 244) because it is costing her penniless husband money *she* has to pay.³⁰ In the end, Riccoboni's private opinion of Flaminia appears to differ greatly from the one conveyed in her public letter.

A fitting postscript to Riccoboni's letter and to this essay, the *Mercur de France* published an obituary for Flaminia in its March 1772 issue, stating she had passed away on December 30, 1771.³¹ The obituary lists Flaminia's accurate biography and mentions that she has left a son who "sous la double qualité d'acteur & d'auteur [...] digne émule de son pere, fit encore plus, pour la gloire de son nom, en épousant Madame Riccoboni, aujourd'hui vivante, & qui, par un grand nombre d'ouvrages charmans fort au-dessus des Scuderis & des Villedieux, se place au moins à côté des Lafayette & des Sévigné" (182), comparing the daughter-in-law to the same authors to whom Alletz had erroneously compared Flaminia four years earlier. In addition, the *Mercur* says that "Honorée par ses propres talens [...] & par ceux de sa belle-fille, Madame Riccoboni, la mere [...] ne devoit plus rien avoir à souhaiter sur la terre" (182). The fact that both women are restored to their appropriate positions and that the *Mercur* specifies that Flaminia is "Madame Riccoboni, la mere" in order to avoid repeating Alletz's mistake, demonstrates that Riccoboni has indeed successfully reclaimed her literary legacy in a predominantly male public forum, using her "power with a feminine touch."

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Appendix

Lettre de Mde Riccoboni à M. de la Place

A ma prière voulez-vous bien, Monsieur, faire corriger dans le *Mercur* l'erreur d'un article du livre intitulé *l'Esprit des femmes célèbres*. Auteur des ouvrages que l'on a mis sous le nom de ma belle-mère, je me plains d'une méprise qui m'ôte le titre de Françoise, & me donne à peu près le double de mon âge.

Je n'ai pas l'avantage d'être *Helene Baletti*. La veuve de *Louis Riccoboni*, connue en France sous le nom de *Flaminia*, célèbre dans sa patrie, possédant les langues grecque & latine, s'est fait estimer ici des gens de lettres qui ne sont

plus : son génie pour la poésie l'a placée en Italie dans toutes les Académies où l'on admet les femmes d'un mérite distingué. Les vers que l'on a d'elle dans sa langue sont forts, harmonieux, remplis de noblesse & d'imagination. L'amour du repos, une piété solide, qui n'est en elle ni le fruit de l'âge, ni l'effet du désœuvrement, l'éloigne du monde. N'ayant jamais lu de romans que les miens, elle seroit sans doute très mortifiée d'être accusée de s'occuper d'un amusement si frivole, &, par égard pour elle, je me crois obligée de désabuser le public.

Née Française, sous le règne de *Louis XV*, je ne tire mon origine d'aucune nation étrangère ; & sans que la prévention où [sic] les préjugés aient la moindre part à mon amour pour ma patrie, je n'ambitionne point l'honneur d'être adoptée par une autre.

Je sens une extrême répugnance à faire cette petite querelle à un auteur qui devoit s'attendre à mes remerciemens. Son éloge est un tableau brillant par les couleurs ; je n'ai pas la vanité d'y reconnoître mes traits, encore moins celle d'adopter le titre de *rivale de la Fayette*. Madame de la Fayette fut toujours ma maîtresse & mon guide ; l'honneur d'approcher d'elle, de la suivre, même à quelques [sic] distance, est la louange que je voudrois mériter, & seroit un prix bien flatteur de mes foibles essais.

J'ai l'honneur, &c.

Marie de Meziac, Riccoboni.

Ce 6 février 1768.

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Notes

¹ Riccoboni wrote a letter to David Garrick on November 14, 1767 and again on July 27, 1768, but a gap exists in her published correspondence between these two letters (Nicholls 117-25). The letter discussed here was written during this interval.

² The February issue of the *Mercure de France* did not receive its "approbation", the right to be printed, until February 12, 1768 (214). For the March issue, the date was March 4, 1768 (214). Riccoboni had an ongoing relationship with contemporary periodicals and the *Mercure de France* in particular. *Le Monde comme il est* had published her *Abeille* as well as an early version of her *Lettres de la comtesse de Sancerre* in 1761; for recent analyses see the article by Katherine Astbury, the book by Heidi Bostic (p. 106-50), and my 2008 article. In January 1757, the *Mercure de France* had published anonymously the last letter of *Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd* and in the 1780s it would publish some of Riccoboni's stories; see my 2011 article.

³ She had published anonymously *Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd* (1757), *Histoire du marquis de Cressy* (1758), *Lettres de Juliette Catesby* (1759), *Suite de la Vie de Marianne* (1761), and *L'Abeille* (1761), and under her own name *Amélie. Roman de Mr. Fielding* (1762), *Histoire de Miss Jenny* (1764), *Histoire d'Ernestine* (1765), and *Lettres de la comtesse de Sancerre* (1767).

⁴ Since 1747 Alletz (1701-1785) had published *Précis de l'Histoire sacrée, Ornaments de la mémoire, ou les traits brillants des poètes français les plus célèbres, Modèles d'éloquence, ou les Traits brillants des orateurs français les plus célèbres, Victoires mémorables des français, Dictionnaire portatif des conciles, L'Agronome ou le Dictionnaire portatif du Cultivateur, and Abrégé de l'histoire grecque*.

⁵ Madame Leprince de Beaumont published *Lettres de Madame du Montier* in 1756.

⁶ In order to avoid Alletz's confusion between the two Mesdames Riccoboni, I will refer to her as "Flaminia".

⁷ Since the letter is not part of Riccoboni's published correspondence, I am reproducing it in the Appendix. The letter's date proves that Riccoboni had read Alletz's book before she saw its review in the *Mercure*.

⁸ Having assumed the editorship of the *Mercure de France* in February 1760, De la Place edited this issue as one of his last. In the June issue of the same year, we read that "M. de la Place, dont le nom & les ouvrages sont si avantageusement connus, ayant désiré de quitter les occupations assujettissantes du Mercure, à cause de sa santé qui exige du repos, elles viennent d'être transportées *par brevet* au Sieur Lacombe" (3). De la Place was indeed a writer and translator, but Riccoboni would undoubtedly not agree with the above positive evaluation of his work. In a letter dated March 26, 1776, and addressed to Robert Liston, she wrote: "Mr Le Tourneur et ses associés viennent de donner deux volumes de leur traduction de Shakespeare ... le poète chéri de votre nation, dépouillé des plats ornemens dont La Place avoit cru le parer [en 1745], aura plus de grâce aux yeux des François" (Nicholls 363).

⁹ This may lead us to speculate whether Riccoboni's letter was also published at least in part to correct the *Mercure*'s own oversight in not mentioning the error.

¹⁰ This essay was originally written for a session at the 2011 MMLA conference entitled "Women and Power in Ancien Regime France."

¹¹ This was also the case for *Amélie*. See <http://riccoboni.net/listeeditions.php>

¹² Riccoboni's companion of more than thirty years, Marie Thérèse Biancolelli, said the following about this in a letter to La Harpe after the author's death: "Dès qu'elle fut connue, on lui disputa ses ouvrages; c'est la règle surtout à l'égard des femmes" (cited by Stewart, 6).

¹³ See Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook's article for an insightful analysis.

¹⁴ For analyses of this correspondence, see the articles by Antoinette Sol and Janie Vanpée.

¹⁵ The first two are included in Nicholls's work.

¹⁶ Modern scholarship often analyzes how the authors used the genre in a feminist manner. See for instance Elizabeth MacArthur's article and mine from 2004 and 2005 (*Women In French Studies*).

¹⁷ See in particular Katharine A. Jensen's article.

¹⁸ *Writing the Female Voice* edited by Elizabeth Goldsmith studies many examples of this phenomenon from various countries and centuries.

¹⁹ For a modern interpretation of Riccoboni as a philosopher, see the book by Bostic.

²⁰ See also Joan DeJean who says: "Riccoboni understood Lafayette's lesson about the vulnerability of the woman who ventured alone onto the literary scene" (124-5).

²¹ Rome, Bologna, Ferrara, and Venice (*Mercure de France* mars 1772: 180).

²² For a rich new study on eighteenth-century French women writers, including Riccoboni, and growing old, see Stewart's 2010 book.

²³ This reference to French prejudice against other nations recalls the "Avertissement" in Françoise de Graffigny's novel *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (1747): "Mais toujours prévenus en notre faveur, nous n'accordons du mérite aux autres nations qu'autant que leurs mœurs imitent les nôtres, que leur langue se rapproche de notre idiome. Comment peut-on être Persan?" (3).

²⁴ She may truly not have been happy with the alleged Italian affiliation, for in a letter to her friend Robert Liston dated April 1760, she writes: "Sauvez-le des Italiennes, ce sont des oiseaux de proie dont les serres sont cachées. Rien de si caressant et de si intéressé que ces femmes artificieuses" (Nicholls 158).

²⁵ Historically, this was a good time to appeal to patriotism. France had lost its colonial empire in the 1763 Treaty of Paris that ended the Seven Years' War and was trying to re-establish itself as a counterpart to victorious Britain.

²⁶ Riccoboni was 68 at the time, Laclos merely 40.

²⁷ For the role of marriage in her oeuvre, see the article by Ruth Thomas. For her own negative experience with marriage, see my 2005 article (*Atlantis*).

²⁸ Her mother died in 1769. On Riccoboni's relation with her mother and the role of (substitute) motherhood in her work, see my 2005 article (*Women In French Studies*, special issue).

²⁹ The one exception to this appears to be an anecdote Riccoboni tells Liston in 1773 about Flaminia's teeth (Nicholls 313).

³⁰ Despite their separation, she continued to provide financial support for her husband and his bad behavior until his death (Nicholls 12), which occurred less than five months after his mother's.

³¹ In a footnote to a January 2, 1772 letter by Riccoboni to David Garrick in which she mentions Flaminia's recent death, the editor of her correspondence dates it back to December 29, 1771 (Nicholls 229). Joseph de la Porte supports December 30 (180).