2013

Vérité et amour by Claire Legendre

Michele Schaal
Iowa State University, mschaal@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/engl_pubs
Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, and the French and Francophone Literature Commons

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/engl_pubs/9. For information on how to cite this item, please visit http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html.
Vérité et amour by Claire Legendre

Abstract
Vérité et amour is Claire Legendre’s ninth publication and seventh novel. It is a first-person narrative made up of 89 brief chapters. Francesca, the narrator, moves to Prague with her husband—nicknamed “vice-consul” and whose name readers never learn (20)—shortly after Nicolas Sarkozy’s election. The novel ends during the “printemps d’érable” in Québec and on the night François Hollande is elected president (the final chapter, “Le changement,” undeniably echoes the latter’s campaign slogan). Because of its episodic structure, Vérité et amour reads like a cathartic diary where Francesca depicts her life abroad: the dissolution of her marriage, her becoming a free-lance teacher of French, her making friends, or her unfulfilled affair with a student, Roman Svoboda. Some chapters take a third-person perspective and focus on auxiliary characters. However, they might be interpreted as the narrator’s projections.

Disciplines
Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | French and Francophone Literature

Comments
Vérité et amour by Claire Legendre (review)

Michèle A. Schaal

Women in French Studies, Volume 21, 2013, pp. 111-113 (Article)

Published by Women in French Association

DOI: 10.1353/wfs.2013.0015

For additional information about this article

http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/wfs/summary/v021/21.schaal.html
Choked by the heat... A saffron veil consumes / Everything, burning, musing
on a flume’s / Invisible, torrential acid course...” (105). Shapiro takes commendable liberties with syntax and diction that usually make this poetry ring true as a tapestry of sound and sense. Some readers may find that his transpositions shift Noailles’s voice at times to unfamiliar terrain, as in the latter example when a “torrent” in French becomes a “flume” in English in order to incorporate a rhyme with “consumes.” Compound nouns and adjectives, in particular, depart from the original’s plainer style. While some of these shifts can come as surprises, others make for seamless reading and ensure a smooth flow. Shapiro’s skill is such that, in college-level courses, his choices should spark fuller dialogue of poems’ meanings and discussion of their literary-historical ties.

Noailles’s daring perceptive élan, set within an appealing array of forms and accompanied here by essential background information and occasional footnotes, fills the reader with a sense of discovery and poetic use of words, as when in “Space” [« Espace »], one of the Derniers vers (1933), evening’s “star-swept void thrills the wise heart with wonder” (371). Minor caveats notwithstanding, Shapiro revives with great intelligence an individual voice gradually earning fuller representation in the literary canon. At once a bold creative feat and an accurate representation of “the variety and breadth” (19) of Noailles’s poetic output, A Life of Poems is a must-have for library and personal collections that instructors would likely find useful as well.

Aaron Prevots
Southwestern University

CREATIVE WORKS

Vérité et amour is Claire Legendre’s ninth publication and seventh novel. It is a first-person narrative made up of 89 brief chapters. Francesca, the narrator, moves to Prague with her husband—nicknamed “vice-consul” and whose name readers never learn (20)—shortly after Nicolas Sarkozy’s election. The novel ends during the “printemps d’érable” in Québec and on the night François Hollande is elected president (the final chapter, “Le changement,” undeniably echoes the latter’s campaign slogan). Because of its episodic structure, Vérité et amour reads like a cathartic diary where Francesca depicts her life abroad: the dissolution of her marriage, her becoming a free-lance teacher of French, her making friends, or her unfulfilled affair with a student, Roman Svoboda. Some chapters take a third-person perspective and focus on auxiliary characters. However, they might be interpreted as the narrator’s projections.

Vérité et amour centers first on Francesca’s experience of expatriation: managing—or not—a new foreign language and culture, her (in)ability to see beyond her national lens and habits, or her feeling of cultural superiority. Initially unemployed, Francesca also discovers boredom, depression, and betrayal as her husband cheats on her. Expatriation actually allows Legendre to reflect on the meaning of national identity—both for oneself and when abroad—since Francesca suddenly realizes she has a specific nationality:
Je suis devenue française en 2007. Avant je ne m’étais jamais posé la question, tant la France va de soi lorsqu’on y baigne depuis toujours. Après, une fois que vous avez passé la frontière, vous êtes français. Pour tous ceux que vous rencontrez, vous n’êtes presque plus que ça (10).

Now out of her context, Francesca confronts her own clichés on the Czech Republic but also the ones applied to her as a Frenchwoman. In the end, she understands that it is being an “étrangère” that enables her to better understand otherness, including her own (298).

In *Vérité et amour*, readers find again several trademarks of Legendre’s writing. Nearly all her publications draw on autofiction and, similarly to Francesca, Legendre is originally from Nice, blond, and has spent several years in Prague. The novel, however, is also highly politicized—even its title is taken from a speech by Vaclav Havel. Furthermore, Legendre has her protagonist constantly reflect on current and past political events such as the 1938 Munich agreement, the Treaty of Lisbon, or the Russia-Ukraine gas dispute. While abroad, Francesca attempts to write an “essai sur l’Europe” (30). *Vérité et amour* appears Legendre’s actual take on the matter. Starting from her narrator’s personal experiences and political interests, Legendre provides her interpretation of contemporary Europe and ponders the meaning or possibility of developing a transnational identity. Yet, she also underlines how certain ideals cannot translate for cultural and historical reasons. Active in French left-wing circles, Francesca bitterly realizes that, in the Czech Republic, communism does not stand for an egalitarian society. For her friends and students, it has rather meant and still means oppression.

As Legendre’s former publications, *Vérité et amour* is also highly intertextual and comprises over 100 explicit references to both classic and popular culture. Nearly all chapter titles are taken or adapted from international literature, cinema, phrases, songs, TV series, cultural icons or political events. These chapters feature either explicit or hidden intertexts. Chapter 20, “No sex last night,” is based on Sophie Calle’s and Greg Shepard’s eponymous film in which they document their troubled relationship. Legendre rewrites the latter documentary title—somewhat comically—by having her protagonist fail to arouse desire in her husband. Francesca’s frenetic refreshing of her mailbox in waiting for an email from Roman Svoboda namely recalls Annie Ernaux’s *Passion simple* (1991).

Finally, as in her other fictions, she interrogates women’s contemporary gendered identities. Legendre first underlines how expatriation remains predominantly masculine since Francesca is a “femme d’expat” and not a “femme expat” (14). Similarly to such spouses, she understands she is not the subject but an object in this relocation (15). *Vérité et amour* also features a staple element in Legendre’s exploration of gender: seemingly liberated women are still defined or define themselves through heterosexual love. Both herself and Kalandra—one of her students and a brilliant journalist—believe in rampant clichés of romantic love and become victims of their partners.

A reflection on foreignness, an intricate intertextuality, a political
consideration of contemporary European politics, as well as a questioning of women’s gendered identities, *Vérité et amour* truly confirms Legendre’s talent and establishes her as one of France’s best (expatriated) writers.

Michèle A. Schaal  
Iowa State University

**Works Cited**
