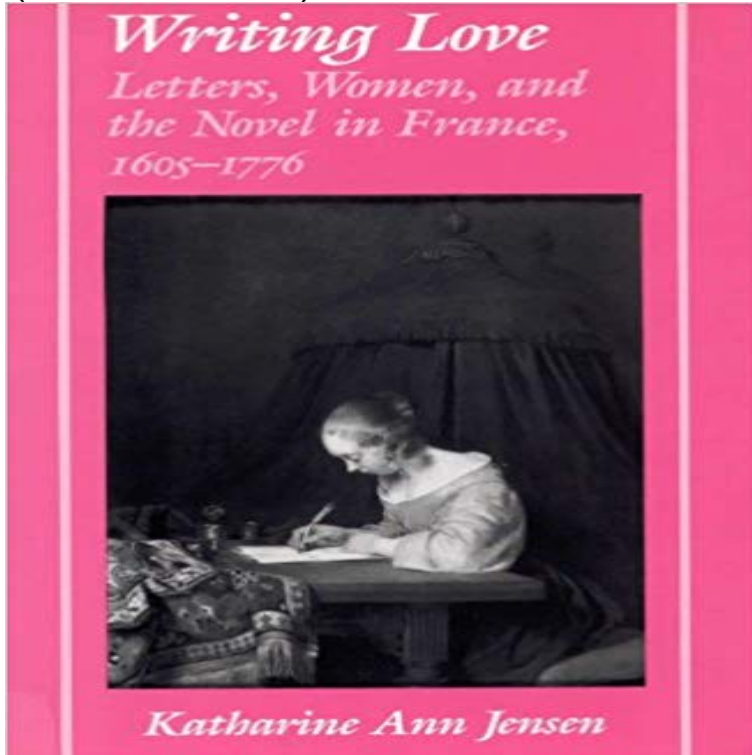


Writing Love: Letters, Women, and the Novel in France, 1605-1776 (Athene Series)



In this compelling new addition to Sandra M. Gilbert's *Ad Feminam: Women and Literature* series, Katharine Ann Jensen examines the cultural form of the love letter and its intersection with the novel in the works of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French women writers. Traditionally, French literary history has focused on eighteenth-century male writers Rousseau and Laclos as the master artists of the epistolary novel. That emphasis on one century, one gender, and one epistolary form obscures the history of women's writing in France. In the seventeenth century, the love letter was viewed as a feminine literary form in which a woman's passionate and emotional nature found its logical expression. Such emotional writing was criticized for its structural and grammatical imperfections, rendering it in the eyes of men invalid as true literary material. However, men often wrote under female pseudonyms, composing letters of seduction and betrayal that were published as true accounts. Jensen contends that men disguised their words as women's words because writing as women allowed them to experiment with narrative fiction at a time when men's writing was rigidly defined by classical rhetoric. She further argues that men were able to moderate women's linguistic strengths by limiting their epistolary expertise to a social, rather than literary, practice, thereby maintaining literature as an almost exclusively male province. Jensen argues for a tradition of women's writing by examining both the love letters and novels of such writers as Desjardins, Ferrand, Graffigny, Riccoboni, and Lespinasse. In her novel *Les Desordres de l'amour*, Desjardins (Madame de Villedieu) creates an ambitious, letter-writing heroine. Through an analysis of the textual similarities between the heroine's letters and Desjardins's personal love letters to her unfaithful lover, Jensen

concludes that Desjardins rewrites her own unfortunate epistolary relationship. Jensen draws similar conclusions from an examination of the personal letters of Ferrand in relation to her novel *Histoire des amours de Cleante et de Belise*. In order to chart the legacy of seventeenth-century feminine epistolarity, Jensen goes on to consider the works of eighteenth-century French women writers. Like Desjardins's novel, Graffignys *Lettres d'une Peruvienne* and Riccobonis *Lettres de Mistress Fanni Butlerd* present letter-writing heroines who overturn the conventions of seduction and betrayal in order to claim their independence and desire to write. This desire correlates to Graffignys and Riccobonis's own writing ambitions, thereby asserting the ability of women to write self-consciously, rather than emotionally, and to create narrative fiction rather than cyclical letters of love and suffering. Jensen demonstrates that these assertions constitute a significant break with seventeenth-century ideas about feminine letter writing that inextricably bind women to a supposedly natural language of sexual and literary disempowerment. This important and insightful book will prove a valuable addition to the libraries of scholars in French seventeenth- and eighteenth-century studies, feminist studies, epistolary fiction, and novel and narrative studies.

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