

## A LIMITED FEMINIST RESPONSE

*Bookseller Stephen Lunsford discovers an unrecorded limited edition of the first work to use the word "feminist."*

PREPARING MY FALL catalogue, I started doing some research on a book by Alexandre Dumas fils found in a small lot of French literary classics I had purchased. Turning to some standard references, I was surprised to learn that this work supposedly contained the first use of the word "feminist." More surprising, however, I could find no mention in the usual sources of any library holdings of this very limited edition of the essay—no one, not even the Bibliothèque nationale, had any record of this particular edition.

The book, titled *L'Homme-femme; Réponse À M. Henri D'Ideville*, was published in Paris by Michel Levy Freres, 3 rue Auber, in 1872. It's a large format octavo, measuring 25 cm x 16.5 cm, runs to 177 pages, and is in its original orange printed wraps with a period protective glassine cover. On the verso of the half title is printed the limitation shown here. An especially nice touch, this copy is inscribed "A Mme Cheramly" by "A Dumas fils" and dated April 1873.

Alexandre Dumas fils, illegitimate son of Alexandre Dumas, came to fame principally after the publication of his novel *La Dame aux Camélias* (1848), the story of a courtesan who, to compress a longish story here, chooses death over love for a man above her social class. Dumas' fortune and fame soared after the 1852 production of *La Dame* as a play (known as *Camille* in English), and it inspired Verdi's classic *La Traviata*, first performed in 1853. Dumas fils continued to write popular dramatic and other pieces very often imbued with strong moral and social subtexts relating to the changing role of women in society.

In *L'homme-femme*, he champions the cause of one M. Dubourg, who was sentenced to five years in prison for murdering his wife after discovering her dalliance with a lover, though he, Dubourg, was himself having an extramarital liaison at the same time. The essay sparked a furore of argument, and was reprinted 37 times in its first year. And on page 91 we read, sure enough:

*"Les feministes, passez-moi ce néologisme, disent, à très-bonne intention d'ailleurs: Tout le mal vient de ce qu'on ne veut pas reconnaître que la femme est l'égal de*

*l'homme et qu'il faut lui donner la même éducation et les mêmes droits qu'à l'homme; l'homme abuse de sa force, etc. etc."*

Dumas continues with strictures on what he views as the legitimate concerns of *les feministes*, namely an interpretation that views the feminine as essentially different from the masculine. But, more to the point, Dumas feels it necessary to apologize for introducing a neologism—and we know how concerned the French are in letting untested words creep into their language. So it

would appear that to Dumas, at least, the word *feministe* was new to the language. But the mystery of this limited edition issue, and why no reference or institution has any record of its existence, remained. So I dug a little deeper.

The classic detailed reference work for French literature of the period is Vicaire's *Manuel de l'amateur de Livres du XIXe siècle*, where, in Tome III page 475, is recorded the work as described above, "Ed. originale," but with a different publisher's imprint,

and in 18 mo format. And further Vicaire states, "Il à été tire 25 ex. sur pap. de Hollande et 1 ex. de format gr. in-8 sur vélin pour l'auteur." Close, but not the same. It would seem that Vicaire did not actually see a copy of this limited edition, since a) he provides a different publisher's imprint; b) his description of format as "gr. in-8" or large format octavo fits my copy and not only the single copy on vellum (which Vicaire assumes, or knows, is "pour l'auteur"); and c) he has failed to note the five copies on *papier de Chine* clearly stated in the limitation. Perhaps Vicaire received an abbreviated verbal statement from the publisher or even Dumas himself of the limitation; or perhaps he saw the single copy on vellum, been informed only of others on Holland, and simply assumed the 25 were in the same format as the trade edition.

And thus "feminism" is launched with a bibliographical anomaly. Pace Gloria Steinem. As for Mademoiselle Cheramly...

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CETTE ÉDITION SPÉCIALE

EST TIRÉE SEULEMENT A

25 Exemplaires sur papier de Hollande.

5 — sur papier de Chine.

4 — sur peau de vélin.

TOUS NUMÉROTÉS

N<sup>o</sup> 15