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Helynn Hollstein Hansen. *Hortense Allart: The Woman and the Novelist*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998. 294p.

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Though little known today, Hortense Allart, a contemporary of George Sand, was a high-profile figure in Parisian intellectual circles during the first half of the nineteenth century. Her determination to carve out a career as a serious writer, despite being an unwed mother with few financial resources, would make her noteworthy even in our time. But during the early nineteenth century, when bourgeois French women were expected to be models of virtue and domesticity, Allart was decidedly unconventional. Helynn Hollstein Hansen's book is a fascinating study of this pioneering feminist. The chapters discuss Allart's novels in chronological order, telling the story of the life circumstances surrounding each work. Since most of her fiction was strongly autobiographical, this information is of great importance. Allart's many works of nonfiction — including histories of Florence and Athens, a treatise on Cicero, and essays on religion and on French government — are glossed over rapidly. Overall, Hansen focuses more on Allart's life than her fiction, although detailed plot summaries and some commentary on each work are included. She draws on a number of sources, including three previous studies of the author, and the letters of Allart, Sainte-Beuve, and George Sand. Above all, what emerges from this study is the portrait of a complex and contradictory personality who lived and breathed the spirit of Romanticism; though determined to remain independent, she never ceased to search for a soulmate.

Unlike Sand, who wed at an early age, Allart objected to the constraints that marriage imposed upon women under the Code Napoléon. As a young woman, she refused to marry, bore two children by two different men, and campaigned in her novels and essays for more liberal divorce laws — a stance that was, for the time, quite radical. If she opposed marriage, Allart certainly was a proponent of free love, and apparently had a remarkable libido. A list of her attachments reads like a *Who's Who* of the nineteenth century. She chose her many lovers for their intellect and passion; among the most famous were Chateaubriand, Sainte-Beuve, and the British diplomat Henry Bulwer-Lytton. A loyal friend as well, she was deeply fond of George Sand and Marie d'Agoult, a novelist who is now best known as Liszt's mistress. Her affection for both women was unswerving, even though the former criticized her behind her back as "*une écrivaine*," and the latter seduced Bulwer-Lytton while he was still carrying on an affair with Allart. Hansen stresses Allart's absence of rancor towards those who had wronged her — it simply did

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not enter her mind to dwell on such matters, perhaps because she was more concerned with the plight of women in general. Ultimately, Sand was won over by this generosity of spirit and became one of Allart's strongest supporters, writing a highly complimentary preface to her friend's autobiography, *Les Enchantements de Prudence* (1872).

The book is generally well researched and nicely written (despite an unfortunate number of typographical errors, particularly in the French citations), and the author shows a flair for piquing our curiosity and building suspense — attributes that are most welcome in a scholarly work. At times, the book takes on a deliciously gossipy tone as the author recounts revealing anecdotes about Allart's personal relationships. We learn, for instance, that the aging Chateaubriand conducted himself like a schoolboy during their trysts, amorously kissing her feet while she read his poetry aloud to him. And we shake our heads as we read that Allart later left him in favor of the dashing young Bulwer-Lytton, while somehow managing to maintain a cordial relationship with her former lover. Her correspondence with Chateaubriand was so intimate that when she published portions of it in her autobiography, it caused a sensation in the French literary world, provoking Barbey d'Aurevilly to attack her personally for revealing that the revered author of *Le Génie du christianisme* had feet of clay. (Barbey's villification of Allart led her son Marcus to challenge the latter to a duel, but readers will have to read Hansen's book to learn of the outcome of this bizarre affair.) Suffice it to say that Allart lived an exceedingly rich life, full of controversy and adventure, and died well satisfied that it had been worthwhile. In a letter written late in life to Sainte-Beuve, she affirmed: "*Si je rencontrais sur mon chemin une fille délicate, spirituelle et forte, je lui dirais de faire comme j'ai fait, de suivre noblement la nature*" (261).

Hansen's book convinces one that Hortense Allart was a significant figure in nineteenth-century French literary history. There can be no question that she deserves to be better known today, both as an early crusader for French women's rights, and as a writer and thinker who knew and interacted with some of the most important authors of her time. It is certainly to be hoped that more studies will be made of this remarkable woman.