Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

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Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Philosophers, and Other Creative Writers Who Died between 1800 and 1899, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

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Project Editors

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Preface

Since its inception in 1981, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (*NCLC*) has been a valuable resource for students and librarians seeking critical commentary on writers of this transitional period in world history. Designated an "Outstanding Reference Source" by the American Library Association with the publication of is first volume, *NCLC* has since been purchased by over 6,000 school, public, and university libraries. The series has covered more than 450 authors representing 33 nationalities and over 17,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical reaction to nineteenth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *NCLC*.

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Every fourth volume of *NCLC* is devoted to literary topics that cannot be covered under the author approach used in the rest of the series. Such topics include literary movements, prominent themes in nineteenth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

NCLC continues the survey of criticism of world literature begun by Thomson Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*) and *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*).

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An *NCLC* entry consists of the following elements:

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the list will focus primarily on twentieth-century translations, selecting

those works most commonly considered the best by critics. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication. Lists of **Representative Works** by different authors appear with topic entries.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included. Criticism in topic entries is arranged chronologically under a variety of subheadings to facilitate the study of different aspects of the topic.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

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Each volume of *NCLC* contains a **Cumulative Author Index** listing all authors who have appeared in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *NCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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Berstein, Carol L. "Subjectivity as Critique and the Critique of Subjectivity in Keats's *Hyperion.*" In *After the Future: Postmodern Times and Places,* edited by Gary Shapiro, 41-52. Albany, N. Y.: State University of New York Press, 1990. Reprinted in *Nineteeth-Century Literature Criticism.* Vol. 121, edited by Lynn M. Zott, 155-60. Detroit: Gale, 2003.

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Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis
1746-1830

(Born Stéphanie-Félicité Ducrest de Saint-Aubin; became comtesse de Genlis and marquise de Sillier) French novelist, essayist, playwright, historian, short story writer, nonfiction writer, and memoirist.

INTRODUCTION

Genlis is known as an innovative and controversial figure of the French Enlightenment both for her personal life and her literary works. As an educator of French nobility and a proponent of women's education, Genlis broke new ground for women by challenging gender roles in French society during the eighteenth century. Scholarly response to her works has varied widely for centuries, with some critics lauding her as an inventive author and courageous early feminist and others faulting her as hypocritical and didactic.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Genlis was born in Burgundy, France on January 21, 1746. Her father, although a nobleman, was plagued with financial difficulties. Her childhood education consisted of lessons in acting, dancing, and music, and she became an accomplished harpist. She married Charles Alexis, comte Bruslart de Genlis, in a secret ceremony in 1763; her husband's family did not approve of the union, and Genlis spent two years away from court, where she was not welcomed until after the birth of her daughter, Caroline, in 1765. Genlis gave birth to another daughter, Pulchérie, in 1766, and a son, Casimir, in 1768. She became widely known in French society for her personal charm and artistic talents, and in 1769 she met and fell in love with the duc de Chartres, who later became Philippe-Egalité. Although Philippe was engaged to be married, and later was married, he and Genlis carried on a romantic affair for many years while Genlis lived with his family and served as the tutor of his children, including Louis-Philippe, who later became the King of France. Genlis developed a reputation as an expert on education, and published several books based on her teaching experience. In 1785, she traveled to England, where she met several literary notables including Horace Walpole, Edmund Burke, and Fanny Burney. That same year, the title of marquise de Sillier was conferred upon Genlis when she and her husband inherited land at Sillier upon the death of her husband's uncle, the marquis de Puisieux. Prior to the French Revolution, Genlis held a salon attended by such reformists as Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre and Antoie Barnave; her support for Philippe-Egalité and his party forced her into exile in 1791. Both her husband and Philippe-Egalité were executed in 1793. Subsequently, Genlis spent several years in northern Europe, supporting herself with her writings, and in 1798 she adopted a German boy, Casimir Daeker. In 1802 Napoleon Bonaparte enabled Genlis to return to Paris and open a salon; she received an annual stipend from the Emperor until 1814 in exchange for regularly supplying him with her writings on a variety of topics. Genlis eventually became reconciled with the family of Philippe-Egalité, and they supported her financially for the remainder of her life. Genlis died in Paris on December 31, 1830.

MAJOR WORKS

Genlis's books on education include *Théâtre à l'usage des jeunes personnes* (1779-80; *Theater of Education*), a collection of educational plays for children, *Les veillées du château ou cours de morale à l'usage des jeunes personnes* (1784; *Tales of the Castle; or, Stories of Instruction and Delight*), a collection of stories treating morality, and *Adèle et Théodore; ou lettres sur l'éducation* (1782; *Adelaide and Theodore, or, Letters on Education*), an epistolary novel that relates Genlis's theories on education and her recommendations for practical applications of these theories. In *Adelaide and Theodore* Genlis addresses Jean Jacques Rousseau's ideas on "natural education" as expressed in his *Emile, ou de l'education.* Genlis concurs with Rousseau on several points, but deviates from his views in her assertions that children should be taught by their parents, and that girls and women should be educated in the same manner as boys and men. Genlis expands on the idea of women's education in *Discours sur la suppression des convens de religieuses et de l'éducation publique des femmes* (1790), in which she calls for replacing convent education for girls with a boarding-school education that includes in its curriculum such subjects as government, mythology, history, physical exercise, and gardening. The subject of social welfare, particularly regarding the treatment of orphaned children and public education, also figure prominently in Genlis's works. In her essay *Discours sur l'éducation de M. le Dauphin et sur l'adoption* (1790), she encourages wealthy families to adopt children (particularly

daughters) and in *Discours sur l'éducation publique du peuple* (1791) she outlines a plan for free public education for all French citizens through the age of sixteen or seventeen. Many of Genlis's fictional works, such as the novel *Le siège de La Rochelle ou le malheur de la conscience* (1807; *The Siege of Rochelle; or, The Christian Heroine*) and *Les mères rivales, ou la calomnie* (1800; *Rival Mothers; or, The Calumny*), feature the social problems encountered by women and children in eighteenth-century society, including poverty and abuse. In addition to her works treating education and social issues, Genlis produced several well-received historical novels, such as *Madame de Maintenon pour servir de suite à l'histoire de Madame de La Vallière* (1806; *Madame de Maintenon*) and *Mademoiselle de Clermont* (1802), as well as her ten-volume *Mémoires inédits sur le XVIIIe siècle et la Révolution française* (1825-28; *Memoirs of the Countess de Genlis: Illustrative of the History of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*) and over one hundred other works, including essays, novels, short stories, and manuals.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

During Genlis's lifetime, her affair with Philippe-Egalité was general knowledge; many critics admonished her for daring to advise readers on moral issues while she herself engaged in an illicit affair, and also disparaged her works as pretentious and radical, particularly because she was a woman. Modern critics have asserted that Genlis's concept of "female virtue" departed from that of her contemporaries, pointing out that while Genlis did not differ from the general consensus that women should be educated in domestic issues to aid them in their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, she also considered self-education in academic and social subjects, independence, and self-confidence to be hallmarks of "virtue" in women. Other commentators have focused on Genlis's wide influence on both her literary contemporaries and later writers, particularly women writers. The connection between Genlis's writings and the works of George Sand, who remarked on the impact Genlis's novel *Les Battuécas* (1816; *Placide, A Spanish Tale*) had on her during her young life, has been discussed by several critics.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Théâtre à l'usage des jeunes personnes. 4 vols. [published anonymously; *Theater of Education*] (plays) 1779-80

Adèle et Théodore, ou lettres sur l'éducation. 3 vols. [published anonymously; *Adelaide and Theodore; or, Letters on Education*] (novel) 1782

Les veillées du château ou cours de morale à l'usage des jeunes personnes. 3 vols. [published anonymously; *Tales of the Castle; or, Stories of Instruction and Delight*] (short stories) 1784

Discours sur l'éducation de M. le Dauphin et sur l'adoption (essay) 1790

Discours sur la suppression des convens de religieuses et de l'éducation publique des femmes (essay) 1790

Discours sur l'éducation publique du peuple (essay) 1791

Leçons d'une gouvernante à ses élèves, ou fragment d'un journal qui a été fait pour l'éducation des enfants de M. d'Orléans. 2 vols. [*Lessons of a Governess to Her Pupils; or, Journal of the Method adopted by Madame de Sillery-Brulart (formerly Countess de Genlis) in the Education of the Children of M. d'Orleans, First Prince of the Blood Royal*] (essays) 1791

Les Chevaliers du Cygne ou la cour de Charlemagne. 3 vols. [*The Knights of the Swan; or, The Court of Charlemagne*] (novel) 1795

Précis de la conduite de Madame de Genlis depuis la Révolution, suivi d'une lettre à M. de Chartres et de réflexions sur la critique [*Short Account of the Conduct of Madame de Genlis since the Revolution: To Which is Subjoined: A Letter to M. de Chartres, and the Shepherds of the Pyrennees, a Fragment*] (essay and letter) 1796

Les petits emigrés ou correspondance de quelques enfants. 4 vols. [*The Young Exiles; or, Correspondence of Some Juvenile Emigrants*] (novel) 1798

Les voeux téméraires ou l'enthousiasme. 2 vols. [*Rash Vows; or, the Effects of Enthusiasm*] (novel) 1798

Les mères rivales, ou la calomnie. 3 vols. [*Rival Mothers; or, The Calumny*] (novel) 1800

Mademoiselle de Clermont. 2 vols. (novel) 1802

La Duchesse de La Vallière. 2 vols. [*The Duchess of La Vallière*] (novel) 1804

Alphonsine ou la tendresse maternelle. 2 vols. [*Alphonsine; or, Maternal Affection*] (novel) 1806

Madame de Maintenon pour servir de suite à l'histoire de Madame de La Vallière. 2 vols. [*Madame de Maintenon*] (novel) 1806

Le siège de la Rochelle ou le malheur de la conscience [*The Siege of Rochelle; or, The Christian Heroine*] (novel) 1807

Alphonse ou le fils naturel (novel) 1809

De l'influence des femmes sur la littérature française comme protectrices des lettres et comme auteurs (nonfiction) 1811

Histoire de Henri le Grand. 2 vols. (history) 1815

Les Battuécas. 2 vols. [*Placide, A Spanish Tale*] (novel) 1816

Les parvenus, ou les aventures de Julien Delmours (novel) 1819

Mémoires inédits sur le XVIIIe siècle et la Révolution française. 10 vols. [*Memoirs of the Countess de Genlis: Illustrative of the History of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*] (memoirs) 1825-28

CRITICISM

Ellen Moers (essay date 1976)

SOURCE: Moers, Ellen. "Educating Heroinism: Governess to Governor." In *Literary Women,* pp. 211-41. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1976.

[*In the following excerpt, Moers discusses Genlis's ideas on the education of women and examines the roles of mother and female educator within Genlis's personal life and works, as well as the works of other female authors.*]

> We come now to the last form of Heroinism; that which we call Queenship. The Commander over Men; she to whose will our wills are to be subordinated, and loyally surrender themselves, and find their welfare in doing so, may be reckoned the most important of Great Women. She is practically the summary for us of *all* the various figures of Heroinism: Priest, Teacher, whatsoever of earthly or spiritual dignity we can fancy to reside in a woman, embodies itself here, to *command* over us, to furnish us with constant practical teaching, to tell us for the day and hour what we are to *do.*
>
> —Carlyle

I

> At sixteen, a boy raised by a loving mother is a creature apart. He belongs in a way to no sex; his thoughts are as pure as an angel's; he does not have that puerile coquetry, that unquiet curiosity, that shadowed personality which often mar a woman's early development. He loves his mother as a daughter does not and will not ever love her. . . . It is the ideal of love. . . .
>
> I find that poets and novelists have been insufficiently aware of the subject for observation, the source for poetry offered by this swift and unique moment in the life of man. It is true that, in these sad times, the adolescent no longer exists. What we see today is the ill-kempt and ill-taught student, infected by some vulgar vice. . . . He is ugly, even if naturally beautiful; he wears disgusting clothes, he doesn't look you straight in the eye. He devours filthy books in secret, and for all that the sight of a woman frightens him. His mother's caresses make him blush—as if he felt himself unworthy. The world's most beautiful languages, the great poems of humanity are for him merely a source of indifference, revolt and disgust; . . . his taste is depraved. . . . It would take years for him to lose the fruits of this detestable education, to learn his own language by forgetting the Latin which he barely knows and the Greek that he does not know at all, to form his taste, to acquire a just idea of history, to lose that stamp of ugliness that the wretchedness and the brutalising slavery of the school years have imprinted on his brow, to gain the look of frankness and to carry his head high. Only then will he love his mother. . . .
>
> —George Sand

Gender in French—in all Western languages, excepting only English—is free of sexual connotation, purely arbitrary: the female apple, the male tomato. Or so says the grammatical rule; but not, in my reading at least, the great women writers of France. My notes are full of significant instances where a Mme de Staël, a George Sand, a Simone Weil will, at a moment of heightened sexual self-consciousness, choose a word for its gender, and for the train of adjectives, pronouns, and endings resonant in sexual consequence that follow after her choice. What a resource the French woman writer has, denied to her English colleague, when, especially in a love scene, she can choose freely among such words as person, heart, soul, spirit—a list which alternates between feminine and masculine gender in the French. No grammarian will ever convince me that it was not by choice that Colette summed up her final passionate tribute to her mother's influence by calling her *un personnage*: "il n'a pas fini de me hanter"—he has never stopped haunting me. Had Colette called her mother a person—*une personne*—rather than a personage, *she* would have been the one to haunt. Pronouns can be liberating for the French women writers; while for the English, from Mary Wollstonecraft to Gertrude Stein, they can impose awkwardness and obscurity on her prose.

The French language, however, imposes one sexual burden on the woman writer that English does not: in the role-words, such as doctor or professor. Since no gender normally attaches to such words in English, one can say and write Dr. Helene Deutsch or Professor Marjorie Nicholson without forcible linguistic reminders of whatever sex-typing persists in English-speaking society. But the women I know in France today who are doctors and professors are admittedly sensitive to the wisp of irony that clings to the clash of genders in their titles. "Bonjour, madame le professeur," one says; or, "Merci, madame le docteur." And when an alternate feminine role-word does exist it is far more often pejorative, far more nastily ironic in French than in English—words like *peintresse* or *poétesse* for ladies who play at painting or poetry. A friend of mine who edits a scholarly Romance language journal reacts to the inferior status often implied by a feminine role-word in French when she bridles at being called *l'éditrice* of her journal; she is quite good enough to be known as *l'éditeur.*

In English there is only the word *editor,* which does for either sex, as do singer and dancer. In the latter cases, French has feminine role-words in good standing, without pejorative connotation, surely because for centuries women have sung and danced in France. For the same reason there is a female word for the schoolteacher, *l'institutrice,* she who deals with little children on the lower levels of education. But there is no such female equivalent for the professor, he who deals with older students and deeper subjects; and *"Docteur,"* as the grammarian Maurice Grevisse lugubriously puts it, "when designating a person promoted to the highest grade of a university faculty, has no feminine form."

To browse through the twenty fascinating pages that M. Grevisse gives in *Le bon usage* to feminine gender is to absorb linguistic footnotes to the march of history. For example, in the eighteenth century and earlier *peintresse* was not a silly but a useful word, surely because there were many distinguished women painters in France; and in our own century, journalists have flouted lexicographers in their use of the word *ambassadrice* to refer not to the wife of an ambassador but to a Clare Boothe Luce. Grevisse does not, unfortunately, discuss the role-word of most importance to literary history, that for the male and female people who have written novels. There is a feminine form in French for novelist; but *la romancière* does not appear in the more scholarly dictionaries I have consulted. When I come across the word in a French text I am never sure how much of a pejorative sense clings to the feminine gender (how much indeed to "woman novelist" in English, where "lady novelist" has never recovered from the onslaught of W. S. Gilbert?). I would wager that Nathalie Sarraute is more often *le romancier* while Françoise Sagan is more often *la romancière* in French criticism today; and I doubt if anyone dares call Simone de Beauvoir *une romancière.* When Sainte-Beuve used *la romancière* in his 1850 essay on Mme de Genlis he put the word in italics, thus indicating that it was newer and slangier than *le romancier,* and that the creation of a female form of the word novelist was a response to the crush of women like Mme de Genlis into the field of novel-writing, which marked the latter eighteenth century in France as it did in England.

Sometimes role-gender in French is so far from merely arbitrary, so awash with sexual connotations, that a change in gender wholly transforms the sense of the role it touches. Take *master* and *mistress*: in English these words are still recognizable as male-female variations of the same role; but not in French, especially not to literary people. *Maître, mon maître* is the honorific title which the aspiring man of letters reserves for his literary master, as Maupassant addressed Flaubert; but when a young French writer says he has *une maîtresse,* a mistress, he is hardly referring to his participation in the naturalist movement. So Flaubert himself, when in middle age he turned to that grand old lady of French letters, George Sand, for literary discussion and maternal affection, addressed his wonderful letters *"Ma chère maître"*—my dear-lady master—to Mme Sand. They were both aware of all the warmth and all the cool irony of that form of address. The word *not* spoken between them—*la maîtresse*—carried implications sexual as well as literary, for Flaubert was a son-lover by temperament, and George Sand was a mother-mistress all her life.

* * *

All this is by way of introduction to an historic event important to literature, to pedagogy, and to heroinism: the official change in title from *la Gouvernante* to *le Gouverneur* which marked the climax of power in the career of Mme de Genlis, the eighteenth-century writer and educator. From *Gouvernante* to *Gouverneur* is a change as momentous in French as it is in English, for *Governess* is in the nursery, and *Governor* rules the world. And the educating heroine, as the writings of Mme de Genlis were among the earliest to show, stands for the heroinism of power.

Because the children that Mme de Genlis taught were of royal blood—one became a king—her title (as well as her method) was a matter of considerable deliberation in her day. Its change to the masculine gender signified in a large sense the establishment of the woman as educator and, in a narrow sense, that she was eminently qualified to govern male princes as well as female princesses. To Mme de Genlis's pedagogical fictions, which are the most severe and the most elegant of the genre that I have read, a whiff of royalty still clings, and the peculiar charm that emanates from her central persona, *la femme enseignante*—Sainte-Beuve's phrase, the teaching woman—is worth trying to define. There is a seductive coldness about her, an amalgam of the stiff unapproachability of the very old with the supple grace of the very young. "Her imagination has remained fresh," as George Sand wrote of Genlis, "under the frosts of age."

The educating heroine is a domestic figure, not a hireling; she teaches in the home, and it looks very like a palace. In her professional capacity, this figure has nothing to do with the weary teachers and exploited governesses of women's literature (from Charlotte Brontë to Sylvia Ashton-Warner). Educating heroinism, from Genlis onward, is more a rank than a profession, and more often than not is embodied in what is the greatest of all the ranks: the Mother. For women writers fascinated by power, the place to look, as feminists are often too rushed to notice, is motherhood; but it is a kind of motherhood that male writers are often too slow to recognize.

In her dazzling array of talents and accomplishments, the educating heroine exhibits none of that thrust toward ceremonial glory and public applause that accompanies the genius of a Corinne. She is in fact the most severe of anti-Corinnes, the proponent of reason over feeling, of prudence over spontaneity, of private influence over public celebrity. ("The *exhibiting,* the *displaying* wife may entertain your company," wrote Hannah More in *Coelebs in Search of a Wife,* "—but . . . you will want a COMPANION: an ARTIST you may hire.") The educating heroine is not an artist on display. Heard more than seen, and feared as much as admired, she is sometimes anonymous to the point of invisibility, a narrative presence which controls and dominates behind the scene.

In the work of Jane Austen, the author eludes us: that is one of the reasons many have coupled her name with Shakespeare's when saluting Austen's rare quality. But where with Shakespeare we are still searching for clues to his occupations, travels, and acquaintances, with Jane Austen we know quite enough about her life to satisfy our curiosity about her non-literary, non-domestic activities with a single word: none. Instead, our curiosity is all about Austen's temper and mind. When did she laugh, and when grow serious? What did she hold as a moralist? Where did she stand—we want the answer almost in a physical sense—in relation to her characters? It is very difficult to know.

For example, near the end of *Emma,* Mrs. Weston has a baby that turns out to be a girl. Mrs. Weston, the heroine's genteel and now well-married former governess, remains a friend and neighbor to Emma, who rejoices in the sex of the child, for Emma is "convinced that a daughter would suit both father and mother best. It would be a great comfort to Mr. Weston as he grew older . . . to have his fireside enlivened by the sports and the nonsense, the freaks and the fancies of a child never banished from home." Good God! Was Jane Austen so little a feminist that she did not protest her own lifelong imprisonment at home? Is she with Emma here or against her, as her heroine takes the paternalistic view of the spinster daughter's doom? Impossible to know. Emma goes on to think of the daughter's mother, once her own governess:

> and Mrs. Weston—no one could doubt that a daughter would be most to her; and it would be quite a pity that any one who so well knew how to teach, should not have their own powers in exercise again.
>
> "She has had the advantage, you know, of practising on me," she continued—"like La Baronne d'Almane on La Comtesse d'Ostalis, in Madame de Genlis' Adelaide and Theodore, and we shall now see her own little Adelaide educated on a more perfect plan."

Freighted with its awkward French, the sentence is uncharacteristically out of balance; that is perhaps why we feel that Austen is here, for a fraction of a second, off her guard. We seem to catch her in the act of rueful self-examination, when her own role as novelist and moralist is at issue—here, as throughout *Emma,* the role of surrogate mother who engages to teach "on a more perfect plan." *Emma* is a novel like no other in the Austen canon, the most abstract, the closest to allegory in its names and locations; it is the only one to carry the name of its heroine—and that a heroine Austen was sure "no one but myself will much like." Emma is uniquely placed, by wealth and social position, to order lives, plan marriages, regulate society, and construct characters through the play of her lively imagination. She seems to have been ironically conceived as stand-in for the novelist herself, the arrogant romancer, the woman who arranges lives in order to teach the world how to go "on a more perfect plan." This doubling of role, where the narrator-novelist is also the educating heroine of her own tale, is a visible rather than (as in Austen) an invisible feature of the Genlis fictions.

But the educating heroine that Jane Austen knew, in Genlis and elsewhere, is always right; while her own Emma is always wrong, her imagination faulty, her arrogance unjustified, her rule meddlesome, for she herself is the product of bad teaching. *Emma* is a cautionary pedagogical tale in the Genlis tradition, a tradition which Austen, as was her way, satirized as she brought it to perfection. The mocking point of the little scene quoted above is that Mrs. Weston has botched the job of raising Emma; she is no Baronne d'Almane; she will teach her own daughter no better, whatever Emma thinks, for having practiced on a surrogate. ("She will indulge her even more than she did you," says Mr. Knightley, "and believe that she does not indulge her at all. It will be the only difference.") And so will it continue to go down through the generations of women, Austen seems to be saying in a rare mood of self-mockery; so will it go in fiction as in life, those tight interlacings of women teaching women, their plans ever better, their results ever faulty.

Surrogate motherhood may seem an odd term to apply to Jane Austen or any childless writer, but in fact most of the literary women who wrote of motherhood as a focus of power had no children of their own. They include the spinster, such as Willa Cather; the childless wife, such as Virginia Woolf; and the young woman, such as Mary Wollstonecraft *before* motherhood descended upon her—a condition of life which perhaps, except in the case of the strongest-minded, blurs the sharp sight and weakens the firm grasp that educating heroinism requires. "To cure those faults by reason, which ought never to have taken root in the infant mind," wrote Wollstonecraft in the preface to her *Original Stories,* is a task that "requires more judgment than generally falls to the lot of parents." A similar view is reflected in the long gallery of incompetent mothers portrayed by Jane Austen; from Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* to Mary Musgrove in *Persuasion.* "I hope I am as fond of my child as any mother," says Mary to her spinster sister Anne, the heroine of *Persuasion,* "but I do not know that I am of any more use in the sick-room . . . I have not nerves for the sort of thing. . . . You, who have not a mother's feelings, are a great deal the properest person. You can make little Charles do anything; he always minds you at a word."

Surrogate motherhood was the role we know Jane Austen played with greatest relish in real life, as maiden aunt to her beloved nieces. "She shone most brightly as an aunt," writes R. W. Chapman, the great Austen scholar, and he goes on to reflect on her creation of

character. "There is something, in the role of the consummate aunt, not unlike her relation to those young people who owed their existence to her genius."

Long before *Emma,* when Austen was still in or barely out of her teens, and just beginning to sport with her nieces and her characters, she made fun of the literary role of "consummate aunt." "My Dear Neice," she wrote to little Fanny Austen in a mock dedication,

> As I am prevented by the great distance between Rowling and Steventon from superintending your Education myself, the care of which will probably on that account devolve on your Father and Mother, I think it is my particular Duty to prevent your feeling as much as possible the want of my personal instructions, by addressing to you on paper my Opinions and Admonitions on the conduct of Young Women, which you will find expressed in the following pages.—
>
> I am my dear Neice
>
> Your affectionate Aunt
>
> The Author.

Outside of Jane Austen, there is otherwise not much fun in educating heroinism—certainly nothing to laugh at in the story of and the stories by Mme de Genlis.

* * *

Born in 1746 with a name out of a Radcliffe novel (Stéphanie-Félicité Ducrest de Saint-Aubin), Mme de Genlis was of noble birth—the only woman of that class in this book—and of a very early generation of women professionals. She was six years older than Fanny Burney, thirteen years older than Mary Wollstonecraft, twenty years older than Mme de Staël, twenty-one years older than Maria Edgeworth, twenty-nine years older than Jane Austen, fifty-eight years older than George Sand, all of whom read her. By marriage at the age of sixteen she became a *comtesse* (de Genlis) and eventually a *marquise* (de Sillery). By the age of twenty-one she had two children and was ready to go to work: as mistress to the Duc de Chartres, heir to the house of Orléans; as lady-in-waiting to his wife; as brilliant star of a Paris salon. Of how many Frenchwomen before and after her could a similar account be given, as well as a sketch such as those supplied in abundance by her contemporaries of Mme de Genlis's beauty, charm, and intelligence. But she was something more than a salon woman. She had one marked peculiarity, from youth to death, her mania for teaching. Mania is Sainte-Beuve's word for Genlis as educator: "cette verve de pédagogie poussée jusqu'à la manie."

The house of Orléans to which Genlis was attached was the cadet branch of the ruling Bourbons, and when she resided with the family it was at the Palais-Royal, within walking distance of the Louvre. (In her day, none but the mob walked; today the tourist strolls through the enclosed gardens of the Palais-Royal and tries to spy out the windows of the flat where Colette lived a century and a half later.) There, in the mid-1770s, Mme de Genlis began her fame as an educator: she organized science courses for the court and wrote the first of her educational plays for its entertainment. In 1777 she was named Governess of the duke's infant daughters, given a regular salary, and provided with the secluded rural establishment which her educational theories demanded, a pavilion on the grounds of the convent of Belle-Chasse, just outside Paris.

Eight years and fifteen published volumes later (including her most important pedagogical fictions) Mme de Genlis achieved her ambition: the royal sons were given to her care, their governors dismissed, and she, a woman! (there was much satirical commentary, some of it salacious) was named their Governor. She hired masters for special subjects, and plotted an elaborate educational strategy for the children which turned every moment of the day and evening, every lesson, meal, excursion, and pastime, to the training of intellect, body, and character. She was always in residence, and always in command—a word justified by the published documents of Belle-Chasse, including her letters to her little princes and princesses, written in the evening to assess and reward or punish the behavior of the day.

For this position, Mme de Genlis relinquished her brilliant social existence at the Palais-Royal (and perhaps her sexual activities as well). To maintain her independence, she is said to have refused a chair in the Académie Française; in the same year, 1785, she journeyed to England to be honored by Oxford. Influence over royal children was at the time a matter of more than ordinary public concern. Whether kings were to be men or divinities, whether Bourbons or from the house of Orléans, was about to be decided in France on the scaffold, as well as in the school-room.

On the eve of the French Revolution, the children's father was elevated to Duc d'Orléans. For his role during the Terror he was awarded the title by which he is still best known (but not much honored) of Philippe-Égalité. The duke denied his Orléans blood, voted the execution of the king, and before long went to the guillotine himself, as did a lesser nobleman, the husband of Mme de Genlis. But she survived, sometimes in flight, sometimes in exile, as loyal protector and tutelary genius of the children of the house of Orléans, one of whom came back to France—after Terror, directory, consulate, empire, Waterloo, and restoration—to rule as the so-called Citizen King Louis-Philippe in the 1830s. Meanwhile, Mme de Genlis lived to the age of eighty-four through four distinct periods of French history, and established herself as a scribbling woman of prolific versatility (she wrote more than one hundred works) and sufficient qual-

ity to merit a study of her *Oeuvre* by Sainte-Beuve. His essay remains the best introduction to Mme de Genlis.

She was a woman writer (*une femme-auteur*) like so many others, wrote Sainte-Beuve, but of a special character:

> Charming and brilliant in youth, she did not limit herself to a single taste or talent . . . ; all the arts of pleasing, all the crafts and skills (for she did not omit the *métiers*) made her a living Encyclopedia, who prided herself on being the rival and antagonist of that other *Encyclopédie*; but what gave spirit and life to all her multitudinous occupations was a single vocation which tied them together, gave them order and direction. Mme de Genlis was something more than a woman-writer, she was a woman-teacher (*une femme enseignante*); she was born with that mark on her brow. To some, God says *Sing*; to others, *Preach.* To her He said, *Profess and Teach.* Never was a firmer denial given to the words of the Apostle: *"Docere autem mulieri non permitto"*—or, "I do not permit women to teach," as Saint Paul said to Timothy. Even had she wanted to, Mme de Genlis was simply not at liberty to obey this precept, so powerful and irresistible was her vocation from her earliest years. She manifested from infancy an instinct and an enthusiasm for pedagogy, in the best sense of the word. It had been ordained, from her birth, that she would be the most graceful and the most dashing of pedagogues.

In the history of pedagogy, Mme de Genlis has a distinct place as an innovating follower as well as opponent of Rousseau. (She had some interesting ideas, for example, about "living language" training from infancy; about the games with which to introduce children to natural science; about a regimen of spartan austerity then "revolutionary," in every sense, to the raising of the aristocratic young, and credited by Louis-Philippe as contributory to his survival through the years of his exile, a stretch of which he spent in America.) But in literary history she belongs with the women writers who created the novel. She wrote what Joyce Hemlow, the biographer and editor of Fanny Burney, calls "courtesy books," the elegant portmanteau term Hemlow uses for moral tales, educational fictions, and pedagogical treatises. Insofar as Fanny Burney has the honor of being the first major woman novelist, so far do the "courtesy books" of the eighteenth century deserve an honored place, as Hemlow demonstrates, among the several kinds of writing that in confluence gave rise to modern fiction.

The term "courtesy books" locates us at once on that point of converging lines where criticism has fixed the novel as Burney made it and Austen brought it to perfection, where manners and morals meet. But in their humdrum guise, they suggest all that can be dreariest in the printed book, those improving works which conscientious mothers read and force on their resisting offspring. They have always been written to be read aloud by parent to child and parsed between them, thus falling somewhere in that no woman's land between children's books and adult literature. It is much to the credit of Mme de Genlis, and to her imagination as well as her style, that more than a flicker of life remains in her pedagogical fictions, even in translation. (The contemporary Thomas Holcroft translation is unusually fine—perhaps the reason why Maria Edgeworth never published her own translation.) "What a surprising talent that woman has," wrote the English rival to Mme de Genlis, Hannah More, "of making everything that passes through her hands interesting! the barrenest and most unpromising subjects she 'turns to favor and prettiness.'"

Jane Austen probably read ***Adèle et Théodore*** in translation, for in *Emma* she gave the title in English; she read ***Les Veillées du Château*** in French. These are the two most important of Mme de Genlis's books, published one after the other in 1782 and 1784 and meant to be read together, for the first, subtitled *Letters on Education,* is an epistolary novel designed to explain the circumstances and theory of Genlis pedagogy; and the second, always translated as ***Tales of the Castle,*** is a string of educational tales designed to show her method in action. The Mother writes the letters, the Mother tells the tales; she is the dominating persona of both works as both narrator and heroine. For her portrait of the Baronne d'Almane, the mother figure cited by Austen, Mme de Genlis was accused of inordinate self-esteem, but she did not at all resemble that lady, Genlis later wrote. Mme d'Almane was a woman grave, serious, and circumspect, "d'une prudence parfaite," and "I am not at all like that, not even today, when I am twenty years older."

The Baroness d'Almane, whom I shall call "A" for convenience, and because it suits the Genlis style, astonishes her Paris friends, at the opening of ***Adèle et Théodore,*** by her sudden move with her family to their isolated château in the country. Actually it is mature deliberation, as she proceeds to explain in her letters, which convinces her that four years of rural retreat from "the world" are what she requires for the proper education of her children, Adèle and Théodore. Her principal correspondent is the Comtesse d'Ostalis (or "O"), a young married woman of twenty-one, already the mother of twins and pregnant, at the start of the novel, with what turns out to be a son. The relationship between "A" and "O" to which Jane Austen alludes is interestingly complex: they are friends as well as relatives, teacher-pupil as well as colleagues in the educational enterprise, and also mother-daughter. "A" is thirty-two; married at seventeen, she was an "ornament of the world" for fifteen years, but to her grief long remained childless. At twenty-one, "A's" desire to begin to raise children had grown so strong that she "adopted" her orphan niece, then ten years old, and began to prac-