

**Middlebrow, Religion, and the European Enlightenment: A New Bibliometric Project,
MEDIATE (1665 – 1820)**

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It is over a century now since the publication of Daniel Mornet's pioneering article on "Les enseignements des bibliothèques privées (1750-1780)", in which he sought to identify, on the basis of French library auction catalogues, the best-sellers of the eighteenth century.¹ The simple question Mornet asked—what did French men and women read during this period?—was part of a larger historical project addressing issues of historical change. How did the ideas that (according to Mornet) laid the intellectual groundwork for the French Revolution gain widespread acceptance, and how could they be linked to specific books and networks of readers and writers? The questions and methods Mornet helped formulate introduced a welcome new approach—the history of the book—into scholarship and had a remarkable impact on eighteenth-century studies specifically.² Yet there has to date been no other attempt to systematically analyze the enormous corpus of extant eighteenth-century library auction catalogues preserved in France and elsewhere,³ and to identify the mass of books actually read during the Enlightenment—despite the existence of powerful new digital tools that would allow us to exponentially improve on Mornet's findings. Some of the most suggestive book history studies in recent decades have focused on the uniquely preserved archives of a single publishing house, the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel (STN), that was active between

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¹ Mornet, "Les enseignements des bibliothèques privées".

² Including the work of Roger Chartier and Robert Darnton, who both referenced Mornet directly, and the debates their work has spawned. Chartier, *L'ordre des livres* and *Les origines culturelles de la Révolution Française*; Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers*; Mason, *The Darnton Debate*.

³ Despite regularly repeated calls to do so, e.g. Bougé-Grandon, "Vers la création d'une base de données" and Masseau, *Les ennemis des philosophes*, 6. An early exception was however Krijn, "Franse lektuur in Nederland".

1769 and 1794;⁴ these, however, provide a view of the circulation of books in eighteenth-century Europe that is far from representative. The result is that, today, Enlightenment studies largely continue to privilege a history of ideas approach that encompasses a relatively narrow corpus of well-known texts and conceptual frameworks. On the one hand, intellectual historians focus on a small number of progressive philosophers and public figures felt to relay the ideals of the Enlightenment movement, or even, more teleologically, to announce the revolutionary upheaval at century's end. On the other hand, historians of the book have similarly restricted their vision, tending to foreground subversive or forbidden texts that also fit into the paradigm of the Enlightenment as the period that inaugurated radical change, typically viewed from the perspective of the secularization theory of modernity.

In addition to an overemphasis on the history of ideas, Enlightenment studies also long suffered from a geographically limited, Paris-centred scope—not unlike Mornet's own. Yet recent studies on literary history have argued for the importance of taking into account not only national but also transnational contexts, with particular attention to the unequal power relations between various players in the literary field—i.e. to also interrogate centre-periphery relations in studying the spread of new books and ideas.⁵ Not only have Enlightenment studies as a whole undergone a global turn, with concepts such as the global or Atlantic eighteenth century now at the foreground of scholarship. In the field of book history, too, attention is increasingly being paid to interactions between different geographical regions.⁶ This has led historians to question whether the diffusionist narrative of the Enlightenment as a movement spearheaded by an international group of intellectuals, including most notably the Parisian *philosophes*, truly reflects the historical reality of the Enlightenment as perceived from below.⁷ Were the writings of this intellectual coterie really as influential, beyond elite circles, as they held themselves? The impact of progressive intellectual debates beyond Paris, London and Berlin, and beyond court and elite circles, among “ordinary” readers, can only properly be measured when set off against the influence of other writings (including pre-1700 texts reflecting a more traditional, conservative worldview) among those same readers. The radical Enlightenment, as even its most ardent defenders admit, was the work of a small, avant-garde group: when viewed next to the moderate movements that most likely dominated the eighteenth-century intellectual field, it appears not to be representative of the cultural mainstream at all.⁸

Indeed, a mounting body of evidence suggests that the anti-clerical, even anti-religious view of Enlightenment proposed by the *philosophes*—and by French republican historiography after them—was perhaps not the view commonly accepted by readers on the ground. Studies of books listed in French and Dutch probate inventories, for example, point to the persistence of a basically religious worldview among most eighteenth-century readers, even those belonging to social and educational elites.⁹ Works of Christian apologetics are similarly present in the majority of eighteenth-century French library auction catalogues,¹⁰ while in terms of sheer numbers alone, the absolute production of religious books in this period actually grew.¹¹

⁴ Including the work of Darnton for books circulating in France, Jeffrey Freedman for Germany, Renato Pasta and Anne Machet for Italy, Marie Béguin-Knoepfler for Poland, and Jerom Vercruysse for the Austrian Netherlands. The most complete overview of the STN data is provided by Burrows and Curran, *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe Database*, <http://fbtee.uws.edu.au/stn/interface/> (accessed September 6, 2016).

⁵ For example, Casanova, *La République mondiale des lettres*.

⁶ See for example Freedman, *Books Without Borders*; Howsam and Raven, *Books between Europe and the Americas*; Kennedy, *French Books in Eighteenth-Century Ireland*; Ogée, *Better in France?*

⁷ See among others Emma Rothschild's proposal to study “the middling Enlightenment”. Rothschild, “Inner Shuddering in the French Provinces”.

⁸ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 445 sq.

⁹ Kruiif, *Liefhebbers en gewoontelezers*; Marion, *Les bibliothèques privées à Paris*.

¹⁰ Masseau, *Les ennemis des philosophes*, 99.

¹¹ Martin, *Une religion des livres*.

Thus, Simon Burrows' study of the French *permissions simples* registers from 1777 to the Revolution reveals that works by well-known Enlightenment authors "are massively outnumbered by religious works, whose print runs are often listed in the 3,000 to 9,000 range", leading him to hypothesize that "on the very eve of the French Revolution, [religious publishing] probably accounted for in excess of half the output of French printed books."¹² Further afield, in his study of the Russian Enlightenment, Gary Marker likewise detects "a coherent pattern of reading" in sales and circulation patterns whereby demand for devotional and pedagogical works outstripped demand for the works of the best-known French Enlighteners.¹³ These pieces of evidence, taken together, confirm Daniel Mornet's intuition over a century ago—unfortunately never followed up by systematic research—that it was authors who were *not* radical or subversive who produced the most widely disseminated texts during this period. Studying the Enlightenment from the perspective of reception rather than production, in other words, might reveal a very different intellectual conversation than most accounts currently do.

A New Bibliometric Project: MEDIATE

In order to gain a more complete picture of the circulation of books, and hence ideas, during the Enlightenment, in September 2016 a team of researchers based in the Netherlands launched an ambitious new digital humanities project, MEDIATE (*Middlebrow Enlightenment: Disseminating Ideas, Authors, and Texts in Europe, 1665 – 1820*), that will be financed until 2021 by the European Research Council.¹⁴ Taking up the challenge issued by Mornet, this project aims to study the Enlightenment from a reception viewpoint, studying not only the circulation of books in eighteenth-century Europe but also their readers, and using sophisticated digital tools—including large-scale document digitization, data retrieval, and the construction and interlinking of several book history databases—to do so. In its first phase, building on an existing corpus of 3,750 book sales catalogues printed in the Dutch republic between 1599 and 1801, located in over fifty libraries across Europe,¹⁵ the project will create an Open Access database comprising metadata and, in some cases, fully searchable full-text versions of several thousand printed catalogues of booksellers' stock and private libraries sold at auction during the eighteenth century, in the Netherlands, France, and the British Isles. These catalogues contain information on books circulating in Europe in Latin, French, Dutch, German, English, and several other languages, and thereby represent an extraordinarily rich primary source for research on the history of the book, libraries, as well as the history of ideas. In a second phase, moving beyond this quantitative focus, the MEDIATE project will address eighteenth-century readers and the reception of works by producing a series of prosopographic studies of library owners and their networks in different national contexts, as well as a number of case studies documenting the reception among specific readers and reading communities of particular kinds of books. The MEDIATE database will, from the outset, be integrated with a number of other digitally-supported bibliometric projects, including the *Mapping Print, Charting Enlightenment* (MPCE) database (a follow-up to the FBTEE or *French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe Database, 1769-1794*), that privilege other types of book history

¹² Burrows, "Charmet and the Book Police", 49, 50.

¹³ Marker, *Publishing, Printing, and the Origins of Intellectual Life in Russia*, 210.

¹⁴ Montoya, ed. *Middlebrow Enlightenment: Disseminating Ideas, Authors and Texts in Europe, 1665 – 1820* (MEDIATE), www.mediate18.nl (accessed September 6, 2016).

¹⁵ And including collections in the Netherlands, Germany, Great Britain, France and Russia. For a full list of libraries, see Bostoën, Lankhorst, Montoya and Van Delft, eds., *Book Sales Catalogues Online - Book Auctioning in the Dutch Republic, ca. 1599-ca. 1800*, <http://primarysources.brillonline.com/browse/book-sales-catalogues-online> (accessed September 6, 2016). Digital scans of the catalogues are also available on this platform.

sources.¹⁶ This will allow us not only to counter the biases inherent in printed auction catalogues as a source. It will also create a unique aggregation of eighteenth-century book history datasets that will allow users to map the circulation of books among an unprecedented cross-section of readers in Europe, and to draw historically plausible conclusions about the movement of ideas during the Enlightenment.

In formulating its central working hypotheses and conceptual framework, the MEDIANTE project drew on a previous study, on the eighteenth-century reception of women authors, that analyzed a corpus of 254 eighteenth-century printed private library auction catalogues sold in the Dutch Republic before 1800.¹⁷ Because of the Dutch Republic's central role in the eighteenth-century book trade, this corpus was assumed to be significant in tracing broader book ownership patterns in Europe.¹⁸ Surprisingly, it emerged from this preliminary study that the most often-listed works were not only those of the well-known Enlighteners, but also a host of lesser-known religious-pedagogical authors. The second most frequently listed French eighteenth-century author, after Voltaire, was the prolific governess-author Marie Leprince de Beaumont, whose works were present in fully 50 percent of all the library catalogues studied (By comparison, Rousseau's were present in 43 percent, and Diderot's in 27 percent.).¹⁹ In addition to Beaumont's, another name kept cropping up, that of the one-time *gouverneur* of the duc de Chartres (future King Louis-Philippe), Stéphanie-Félicité du Crest, comtesse de Genlis. Genlis's educational works were present in 32 percent of the libraries—with the real figure likely somewhat higher, since the cut-off date of the corpus of catalogues was 1800, while Genlis continued to publish until the 1820s. These figures are corroborated by the findings of the MPCE – FBTEE database, that also show the quantitative importance of works by these two authors, who figure in the top twenty of most listed authors in the sales records of the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel (excluding the STN's own publications, that necessarily trouble the statistics) both in terms of supply and of sales.

Follow-up research focusing on these two figures—that, it was hypothesized, might be representative of a larger category of eighteenth-century authors—confirmed the picture of remarkable publishing success and international impact. Thus, it emerged that Beaumont's works were more widely circulated in eighteenth-century Russia than those of better-known *philosophes* such as Rousseau. Her major work of pedagogy, *Magasin des enfants* (1756), was published with financial help from the imperial court, and was integrated into the new Russian state educational system Catherine the Great sought to create, combining Enlightenment rationalism with utilitarian religion. Beaumont's works influenced the founder of the first girls' school in Russia, Maria Fedorovna, were translated by cadets at the State Infantry Cadet School, laid the basis for the Russian philosopher Andrey Bolotov's educational innovations, and enjoyed a rich (manuscript) circulation well into the nineteenth century.²⁰ In addition, they were translated into over a dozen European languages, including English, Spanish, Portuguese, German, Danish, Czech, Dutch, and—reaching into the Ottoman Empire—Greek, Bulgarian, Romanian, and Serbian. Further afield still, translations and re-editions appeared in Russia and colonial Mexico.²¹ For Genlis, a similar picture holds. Continuously re-edited and translated

¹⁶ Burrows and Ensor, eds., *Mapping Print, Charting Enlightenment*, <http://fbtee.uws.edu.au/mpce/> (accessed September 6, 2016).

¹⁷ Montoya, "French and English Women Writers in Dutch Library Auction Catalogues."

¹⁸ Berkvens-Stevelinck, *Le Magasin de l'univers*.

¹⁹ Van Dijk and Montoya, "Madame Leprince de Beaumont, Mademoiselle Bonne en hun Nederlandse lezers".

²⁰ Montoya and De Gelder, "The View from the Periphery".

²¹ For an overview of the reception history of these authors, see Van Dijk, ed., *Women Writers Database*, <http://resources.huylgens.knaw.nl/womenwriters> (accessed September 6, 2016). Given her immense commercial success in the eighteenth century, Beaumont is herself now the object of a large-scale Franco-German research project, EDULUM, currently being carried out at the universities of Augsburg and Lorraine under the direction respectively of Rotraud von Kulesa and Catriona Seth.

into several languages, imitated or reviled by a generation of authors, and cited by the likes of Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, Pushkin and Tolstoy, her works were known from France to Scandinavia, from Russia to colonial New England, and across social classes.²²

But besides the names of Beaumont and Genlis, several other now-forgotten authors figured prominently in the library catalogues, suggesting that these two names might be just two peaks emerging from a submerged archipelago of eighteenth-century religious-pedagogical best-sellers unknown to us today, and that the kind of works they produced might in fact have dominated many eighteenth-century readers' book purchases—if not actual reading habits. Other authors that appear in some ways similar to these two figures might include popularizing authors such as Louis-Antoine Caraccioli, the abbés Gabriel Gauchat and Noël-Antoine Pluche in France, Samuel Formey and the German Philantropins in Germany, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi in Switzerland, or even (as a perhaps exceptional case, outside the immediate geographical scope of the MEDiate project) Benjamin Franklin in colonial New England. All these authors published texts that sought to transmit the ideas of the Enlightened elite to a more popular audience, often—but not always—couched in a traditional religious language. Such texts ranged from Formey's *Conseils pour former une bibliothèque peu nombreuse mais choisie* (1746) to Pluche's multi-volume, best-selling *Spectacle de la nature ou entretiens sur les particularités de l'histoire naturelle* (1732), that sold more than 20,000 copies in a twenty-year period, and acquainted successive generations of readers with the latest insights of natural history, presented within a resolutely physico-theological framework.²³

Out of these many pieces of evidence, a larger picture is thus emerging of a European (and possibly broader) publishing phenomenon that scholarship has, hitherto, almost completely neglected. How can we understand this remarkable international publishing success? And how can we explain the fact that these popularizing authors are so surprisingly absent from most Enlightenment historiography (with the notable exception of the growing body of German scholarship on *Popularaufklärung*)? The answer may be related to the fact that these authors sought to intervene in public debate, but also sought an ideal of moderation, and set themselves up as cultural mediators rather than leaders. They were part of a cultural mainstream that could, in some respects, be described as culturally progressive but often politically conservative. Going even further, it might be hypothesized that the new (political) freedoms the Enlightenment brought about could only be implemented once a more conservative, bourgeois culture of self-restraint and civic responsibility had been put into place—a new culture that these texts helped to create. In other words, these religious-pedagogical authors offered prime examples of quiet cultural mediation—crucial, yet hitherto largely overlooked in the historiography of the Enlightenment.

The central hypotheses of the MEDiate project are, then, firstly, that the two authors unearthed by the preliminary study are representative of a much larger corpus of widely-read pedagogical, popularizing and often religiously-coloured writings that can usefully be described as constituting a “middlebrow” category of literature in eighteenth-century Europe. Secondly, the project posits that these texts played a key role in shaping Enlightenment ideas among a larger European reading audience, both by directly *transmitting* elite ideas to non-elite audiences, and by helping shape a *new reading audience* and a new set of cultural attitudes. Underlying these hypotheses are two framing concepts: that of middlebrow and of the religious Enlightenment.

²² Bessire and Reid, *Madame de Genlis*; Reid, “Madame de Genlis dans le champ éditorial de son temps”.

²³ Burson, “The Catholic Enlightenment in France”, 87.

Middlebrow Culture and Religious Enlightenment

To better understand how these texts functioned within the eighteenth-century literary field,²⁴ the concept of middlebrow culture, first developed in English and American literary criticism,²⁵ can provide a useful—if not altogether unproblematic—heuristic tool.²⁶ For these texts belong neither to the high Enlightenment studied by the history of ideas, nor to the popular, “low” reading material studied by historians of the book, including both works of popular devotion and the chapbook literature of the *Bibliothèque bleue*. While the most radical philosophical writings, at one end, were actively consumed only by a small elite of readers, almanacs, chapbooks, catechisms and prayer-books, at the other end, reached even peasant, non-literate audiences.²⁷ Both the high Enlightenment and, to a lesser extent, popular reading material, have been addressed by scholarship. What is missing, however, is a plausible account of how these two kinds of texts might be related to one another. In diffusing Enlightenment ideas among a broad reading audience, I hypothesize that a crucial role was played by a middle tier of publications, composed of religious-pedagogical writings such as those of Beaumont and Genlis, and targeting a non-learned, largely provincial and sub-elite audience that also included women and children. These texts combined ideas from the literature of the high Enlightenment with discursive structures and cultural traditions associated with more popular, often religiously-coloured reading material, thereby ensuring their accessibility to a broad swath of readers. Their mediating role was, therefore, a multi-directional one: not only did they bring Enlightenment ideas to a non-elite audience, they also drew on non-elite, non-metropolitan cultural models and needs in reformulating the aims of the Enlightenment. This class of publications, in other words, meets several of the criteria proposed by literary scholars to define the category of middlebrow as this arose in a later age and geographical context. These defining traits include commercial success, sometimes coupled with a mercantilist vocabulary; an overtly moralistic discourse; female authorial overrepresentation; accessibility to a non-elite reading audience; popularizing vocation and themes perceived as part of a middle-class ethos; and a supposedly “middling” literary quality, at least in the eyes of influential literary and cultural gatekeepers.

The most easily quantifiable feature of middlebrow is of course its commercial success. The publishing history of these texts suggests they should be viewed not within a narrowly national context, but as a European publishing phenomenon. These authors are significant not only as individuals, but more importantly, as part of a larger literary system of widely-read eighteenth-century authors unknown to us today. In order to understand their full cultural impact, we need to view their texts as part of a complex set of relations between higher- and lower-prestige texts, geographic regions and languages, and between authors closer and farther away from centres of cultural authority. As Franco Moretti has argued, literary and intellectual historiography is commonly based on limited selections of material, or on a small corpus of well-known or canonized works, yet these represent, at best, no more than 10 percent of the total. “A field this large”, he writes, “cannot be understood by stitching together separate bits of knowledge about individual cases, because it isn’t a sum of individual cases: it’s a collective system, that should be grasped as such, as a whole.”²⁸ As he goes on to demonstrate, a literary system like this can be understood only by using digital tools allowing scholars to gain an

²⁴ Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the literary field, by foregrounding the relational nature of literary valuations and status, has been an obvious if often unacknowledged source of inspiration for scholars working on middlebrow. Pollentier, “Configuring Middleness: Bourdieu, *l’Art Moyen* and the Broadbow”.

²⁵ For the concept of middlebrow as applied in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglophone literary history, see among others Brown and Grover, *Middlebrow Literary Cultures*, and Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*.

²⁶ Unfortunately, the space limitations of this article do not allow me to address the complex issues involved in projecting a normative, twentieth-century category onto eighteenth-century material. For a more detailed discussion, I refer readers to my essay “Madame Leprince de Beaumont et la littérature ‘médicre’ (middlebrow)”.

²⁷ Chartier, “Lectures et lecteurs ‘populaires’”.

²⁸ Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, 4.

overview of an enormous range of books: a range that, in the case of the MEDIANTE database, will document literally millions of individual copies of titles circulating across Europe during the course of the eighteenth century.

One reason for the transnational success of the works of authors like Beaumont and Genlis surely lies in the prestige of French models in eighteenth-century Europe. These texts were incorporated into teaching practices throughout Europe, where they functioned both as basic readers to teach pupils the French language,²⁹ and as manuals transmitting the elements of religion, science, geography and history.³⁰ In the Dutch Republic, translations and adaptations of Beaumont's works were produced by the educators Anna Barbara van Meerten-Schilperoort and Elisabeth Bouée de La Fite, who used these texts in schoolroom settings and went on to produce pedagogical works of their own clearly inspired by their French models. As late as the 1860s, Tolstoy was still using Genlis's *Nouvelle méthode d'enseignement* (translated into Russian by his mother, the countess Maria) in the school for peasants' children that he created on his estate Yasnaya Polyana.³¹ Significantly, movements of influence appear to have worked in many directions, both from the (Parisian) "centre" to regional and European "peripheries", and from the periphery to the centre.³² Beaumont was based in Normandy, Lorraine, London and Burgundy, and her work was influenced by English authors, by her Austrian patron Joseph II, and by the Russian court that financed her first major work. Centre-periphery relations also conditioned the valuation of these works, as for example when one of the Parisian *philosophes*, Grimm, dismissed Beaumont's works by sneering that "since the philosophical spirit has never reached the Austrian border, I have no doubt that [her novel] *Le roi de Bungo* will appear a great work in Vienna".³³ As commercial authors, middlebrow writers responded keenly to non-metropolitan models and needs, and adopted various means to grant legitimacy to their non-elite, provincial audiences in their publications. Despite her own aristocratic origins, Genlis rhetorically positioned herself in a non-Parisian, provincial setting, thereby underlining her distance to the urban elite.³⁴ In addition, middlebrow authors targeted specific groups of sub-elite readers such as women, children, and provincial readers. The values they reflected—including female domesticity, the usefulness of education, sentimental appeal, and economic self-reliance—helped shape the ethos of a specific social class, the bourgeoisie, that was coming into its own during the eighteenth century.

A second feature explaining the commercial success of middlebrow literary works is the explicitly moralistic discourse they adopted. In the eighteenth-century context, this moralism was couched in religious terms, as these texts' middlebrow status depended on their positioning themselves within the religious field of eighteenth-century Europe in close proximity to the works of popular devotion that were the staple fare of most ordinary readers. Many (but not all) of the authors the MEDIANTE project targets appear to belong to the movement scholars have called "religious Enlightenment", or an Enlightenment that, while bearing features of traditional religiosity, also sought to modernize religious experience.³⁵ Thus in Beaumont's works, the question-answer format recalled the genre of the catechism, while the seven pupils in the *Magasin des enfants*, following traditional allegorical structures,

²⁹ Janssens, "Les Magazines de Mme Leprince de Beaumont et l'enseignement privé et public du français".

³⁰ For French uses of Beaumont's works, see Sonnet, *L'éducation des filles au temps des Lumières*, 224-25.

³¹ Polosina and Montoya, "Madame de Genlis dans la littérature russe du XIX^e siècle".

³² See also Butterwick and Davies, *Peripheries of the Enlightenment*.

³³ "Puisque l'esprit philosophique n'a jamais approché des frontières d'Autriche, je ne doute point que [son roman] *Le roi de Bungo* ne paraisse à Vienne un grand ouvrage." Cited in Kaltz, *Jeanne Marie Leprince de Beaumont*, x, n. 16.

³⁴ The fact that her works were reprinted in the eighteenth century in both North and South America also reflects her expressed intent to position herself on the periphery of the radical discourse of the *philosophes*.

³⁵ Albertan-Coppola, *Christianisme et Lumières*; Lehner, *The Catholic Enlightenment*; Masseur, *Les ennemis des philosophes*; Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment*.

represented the seven vices to be tamed by the educator. Genlis's *Théâtre à l'usage des jeunes personnes* likewise drew on older Catholic schemas of the vices and virtues: the first play, *Agar dans le désert*, illustrated the theological virtue of faith; the second portrayed the theological virtue of charity, and so forth. Middlebrow authors thus built on older traditions of popular religious literature that scholarship still needs to properly address.³⁶ But besides these traditional allegorical structures, these works also fit easily into David Sorkin's characterization of religious Enlightenment as a movement with four defining features: a concern with natural theology; religious toleration or a supra-confessional purview; transnational impact; and an explicit engagement in the public sphere, in some cases combined with state sponsorship of religion. These authors explicitly attempted to reconcile a traditional, faith-based worldview with the new ideas of the *philosophes* and the Enlightenment's valuation of reason. Beaumont's *Magasin des enfants*, for example, offered a compendium of the most up-to-date scientific knowledge, ranging from the natural sciences to literature and geography, while the contributors to her periodical *Nouveau magasin français* (1750-1751) included prominent scientists such as Voltaire's collaborators Claude-Nicolas Le Cat and *Encyclopédie* author Albrecht von Haller. These authors championed the ideals of reason, toleration and social utility of Enlightened modernity. Yet they also grounded their works in their Christian faith, sometimes using the same vocabulary as the *philosophes*, invoking reason and even *philosophie* as a source of knowledge. The "light" they were spreading thus encompassed both the light of revelation and of reason—a complex negotiation between the various meanings given to the central metaphors of the Enlightenment that was germane to the Enlightenment itself.³⁷

As David Sorkin has further argued, the religious Enlightenment transcended national and confessional boundaries. Middlebrow authors' synthesis of reason and faith was realized in their concept of natural theology, or the idea that a personal observation of nature and attentiveness to one's own inner conscience, unfettered by religious dogma, could bring one closer to God—even if dogma might well make an appearance at a subsequent stage. Because of this natural theology, scientifically studying the wonders of the natural world would both reveal the greatness of God's creation and become an instrument of salvation. Summing up this union of faith and reason in the programmatic preface to her *Magasin des enfants*, Beaumont urged, "we have two means [to teach children], religion and reason: the two must never be separated, and I flatter myself that I have combined them in *Le magasin des enfants*".³⁸ The idea of an innate faith, or a natural religion shared by all human beings, regardless of ethnic or national provenance, also opened up these works to a larger, multi- and inter-confessional audience than their Christian or even specifically Catholic provenance would suggest. What is indeed striking in the contemporary reception of these works, across Europe, is that readers invariably noted their moral or religious value, *despite readers' own very different confessional backgrounds*, that covered the whole spectrum from Catholic to Anglican to Russian Orthodox. This supra-confessional appeal may help further explain the international publishing success of such middlebrow works, and appears then to be one of the dimensions of the "Catholic modernity" or "Catholic Enlightenment" that scholars are beginning to uncover in the historical

³⁶ On these traditional allegorical structures, see Montoya, "Livre de piété ou roman?"

³⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the Catholic and / or religious Enlightenment elements in the works of Beaumont and Genlis, see both my "Livre de piété ou roman?" and "Madame Leprince de Beaumont et les 'Lumières religieuses'".

³⁸ "Il faut [les enfants] convaincre incontestablement, de la nécessité de pratiquer ce que vous exigez, & vous les verrez se livrer de bon cœur à tout ce que la raison, & non votre caprice, leur ordonne. Nous avons pour cela deux moyens, la religion & la raison: il ne faut jamais séparer ces deux choses, & je me flatte de les avoir unies dans le Magasin des enfants." Leprince de Beaumont, *Magasin des enfants*, vol. 1, xv.

archive, overturning centuries-old clichés linking true modernity only to Protestant Reform and the ensuing, supposed secularization of the Age of Light.³⁹

Another defining feature of modern-day middlebrow literature that has been explored by literary scholars is its vexed links to class. As Erica Brown and Mary Grover write about twentieth-century middlebrow, the cultural authorities engaged in the 1920s in the project of constructing the modernist esthetic, a new form of “high” literature produced by a self-conscious, self-designated intellectual elite, polemically and significantly opposed it to “‘strap-hanging’ typists commuting to and from the new suburban wastelands of interwar Britain.” Brown and Grover go on to demonstrate that the term “middlebrow” has been subjected to a variety of rhetorical uses that need to be carefully examined, especially as these imply that middlebrow may in many cases be synonymous with middle-class. “The term ‘middlebrow’ itself”, they note, “is the product of powerful anxieties about cultural authority and processes of cultural transmission. It is a nexus of prejudice towards the lower middle classes, the feminine and domestic, and towards narrative modes regarded as outdated.”⁴⁰ Now in eighteenth-century France, cultural critics obviously did not use the term “middlebrow”, but they did insistently reference the middle-class values of these authors. Significantly, this was also a status these authors sometimes assumed themselves, explicitly espousing commercial values and choosing middle-class protagonists in their works. Thus, Beaumont foregrounded middle-class characters such as the father in “La Belle et la bête” (“Beauty and the Beast”), a merchant who proudly showcases his own class allegiance. In addition, the titles of her books drew on images of commerce: after the *Magasin des enfants*, she published a whole series of other *magasins* or storerooms of pedagogical knowledge, ranging from her *Magasin des adolescentes*, *jeunes dames* and even *pauvres, artisans et domestiques*. Voltaire ironically referred to Beaumont as a “shopkeeper” (*magasinière*),⁴¹ and another influential critic, Joseph de La Porte, wrote that “[this] title may have been inspired by the genius of the English nation, singularly devoted to commerce.”⁴² Beaumont emphasized her own economic autonomy in the preface to her *Magasin des enfants*, remarking that “if it was up to me to distribute marks of honour, I wouldn’t hesitate to erect a statue to the first man who had the courage to raise himself above that ridiculous prejudice that makes people look down on commerce and agriculture.”⁴³ She further made enemies of the party of the *philosophes* by criticizing Rousseau for refusing to accept payment for his work, a stance she considered akin to worldly pride and neither befitting a good Christian nor a self-conscious bourgeois. Leading Parisian critics in turn spoke condescendingly of her lack of literary style or, as they significantly put it, her lack of “style noble”.⁴⁴ As the literary historiography of the Enlightenment came to be written, authors like Beaumont were increasingly written out of it because of this crucial class flaw.

Yet these texts’ aim was primarily pedagogical, and their very lack of style was part of their attractiveness to a non-elite reading audience, as authors sought to render their works accessible, using them as a platform to popularize knowledge. Thus Beaumont contrasted her own authorial stance to that of a learned “doctor” (*docteur*) or intellectual:

Although a doctor might do his best to reduce himself to the level of his readers, despite himself he would let escape some great, fine or

³⁹ Heft and Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?*; Lehner, *The Catholic Enlightenment*.

⁴⁰ Brown and Grover, *Middlebrow Literary Cultures*, 1.

⁴¹ Voltaire, *Correspondence and related documents*, vol. 118, 47 (letter D15202).

⁴² “[Ce] titre peut lui avoir [été] inspiré [par] le génie de la Nation Anglaise, singulièrement adonnée au commerce.” La Porte, *Histoire littéraire des femmes françaises*, vol. 4, 364.

⁴³ “Si j’étais distributrice des marques d’honneur, je ne balancerais pas à accorder une statue au premier homme qui a eu le courage de s’élever au-dessus du préjugé ridicule, qui fait mépriser le commerce et l’agriculture.” Beaumont, *Magasin des adolescentes*, vol. 1, xxv.

⁴⁴ Bérenguier, *Conduct Books for Girls in Enlightenment France*, 144-45.

learned phrase, and it would be Greek to three quarters of those for whom I write. I have made no effort to put myself at their level, since it's my natural state; I write nothing, I think nothing that a person of good sense, without having studied, could not write or think. I know only my catechism, but I know it well.⁴⁵

Like a work that is in some ways similar, but much better remembered, Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*, the corpus of middlebrow writings' "real significance is not that it proclaims the virtues of capitalism, but rather that it linked high and popular culture ... communicating the virtues of the common man to the elite and the benefits of scientific, literary, and historical knowledge to ordinary folk."⁴⁶ This popularizing vocation is closely tied to a final defining element of both middlebrow literature and religious Enlightenment, their civic engagement. Genlis's best-selling collection of moral tales *Les Veillées du château ou cours de morale à l'usage des enfants* (1782) illustrated the child's progression from childhood to adulthood, from personal virtue to civic or political virtue, and from a state of isolation—the countryside to which the characters of the frame narrative had originally withdrawn—to the city, as following the last tale, they moved back to Paris, thereby re-entering the political realm. Despite the explicitly Catholic framework of this text, the virtuous citizenship Genlis described was largely a secularized, bourgeois one. Just as interesting, perhaps, is the fact that this collection had originally been conceived as a *miroir des princes* for Genlis's own pupil, the young Louis-Philippe d'Orléans, who later assumed political power as the first *roi bourgeois* or middle-class king of the French. Thus, there are lines still to be drawn from eighteenth-century middlebrow Catholic notions of virtue to ideas and practice of statesmanship in the nineteenth century.

The actual uses to which Louis-Philippe put his *gouverneur's* writings finally raise the crucial question, that the MEDIATE project equally seeks to explore, of the relation between middlebrow publications, their European circulation, and concrete reading practices. While there has been a lot of emphasis in Enlightenment studies on the history of ideas and the philosophical content of eighteenth-century books, there has been less attention paid to related reading practices—particularly, perhaps, as these conditioned how new ideas impacted older, religious worldviews. The actual uses to which books were put—ranging from mere possession (the book as status or social symbol), through fetishistic uses to various reading practices—have not yet been fully explored for this period, despite evidence that the same book could be put to very different uses by different readers and interpretative communities.⁴⁷ How, in other words, did reading practices on the ground relate to the ideals of the Enlightenment, and to what extent were those reading practices shared by specific communities of readers? One of the few works to frontally address this question in recent years, Philippe Martin's *Une religion des livres*, convincingly argues that the new, intensive ways eighteenth-century Catholic readers used religious books—incidentally calling into question Engelsing's extensive reading revolution thesis—fed into practices of individual piety, marked by increasing interiority, thereby making possible eighteenth-century religious change.⁴⁸ Although Martin hardly uses the term "Enlightenment" in his study, the process he describes may well have been

⁴⁵ "Un docteur aurait beau vouloir se rapetisser à la taille de ses lectrices, il lui échapperait malgré lui du grand, du beau, du savant, et ce serait du grec pour les trois quarts des personnes pour lesquelles j'écris. Je n'ai nul effort à faire pour me mettre à leur portée, c'est mon état naturel; je ne pense rien, je n'écris rien, qu'une personne de bon sens, sans étude, ne puisse écrire ni penser: je ne sais que mon catéchisme, mais je le sais bien." Beaumont, *Les Américaines*, vol. 6, 284.

⁴⁶ Pencak, "Poor Richard's Almanac", 288.

⁴⁷ Chartier, "Lectures et lecteurs 'populaires'", 338.

⁴⁸ Martin, *Une religion des livres*.

one of the many ways in which reading practices shaped secularization—conceived not so much as a retreat of religion from public life, but rather, a transformation of religious practices made possible by specific kinds of interaction with the printed word.

The exact uses and mechanisms through which middlebrow works were incorporated into existing (religious) reading practices remains thus an important topic for further research. A suggestive clue, however, is provided by a recurring image in the works of Beaumont and Genlis: that of the reading scene. Reading, listening and telling are represented as a collective, social activity, reflecting the authors' civic aim to form future citizens through education. This collective, semi-public dimension of reading needs to be critically contrasted to another image that was increasingly propagated in the eighteenth century, that of the solitary female reader, in an intimate, domestic setting, as in one of the high Enlightenment's most iconic images, Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *Jeune fille lisant* (c. 1776). This last image is strongly ideological, for it suppresses the social aspects of reading, as well as the participation of different groups in the reading process. At the same time, it reduces women's reading practices to the private domain, thereby bypassing the societal, collective aims of an author like Beaumont.⁴⁹ Any study of the eighteenth-century social history of books that takes the concept of middlebrow seriously will therefore have to engage with the competing images and conceptualizations of the reading act that are implied in the battle for cultural authority between middlebrow and high Enlightenment authors. Middlebrow, indeed, invites us to consider collective reading practices, on the analogy of a speech act, as a reading act, or agency through reading. The reading scene appears then as a modernization and transformation of an older, religious form of reading, akin to the medieval *lectio divina*, that is not passive, but seeks to push readers to concrete action in society, and demonstrates once again the importance of studying not only books, but readers and their culturally and historically grounded reading practices.

Conclusion

The authors described here as representing a distinct category of eighteenth-century middlebrow authors were engaged in creating a set of holistic, universal values for a new, ideal society, in which the opposites were united that others had considered irreconcilable: reason and faith, high and low culture, male and female practices, private and public, geographic centres and peripheries. Middlebrow works helped shape values identified with the bourgeois public sphere, participating in a European-wide movement of cultural democratization that was one of the defining features of the Enlightenment. Yet middlebrow's cultural inclusiveness also generated powerful anxieties about cultural authority among the elite, metropolitan intellectuals who were concurrently engaged in a campaign to establish themselves as the legitimate gatekeepers of "the" Enlightenment. Studying the Enlightenment from the viewpoint of reading audiences, attending to the mediating middle in middlebrow, therefore provides a new narrative in which the fragmentation of the Enlightenment into a myriad of opposing movements (radical, moderate and anti-Enlightenment, French versus English, etc.) can be articulated in a new framework.⁵⁰ Not only does it provide new, relational concepts with which to rethink societal change during the eighteenth century. It also suggests the continuity of a basically religious worldview, forcing us to rethink both the secularization theory of modernity, and the role of religious traditions in the construction of "a secular age."⁵¹ Enlightenment ideas, it seems, had to first be absorbed into an existing religious framework in order to be acceptable to large groups of readers in Europe. Middlebrow pedagogical-religious works provided the crucial instrument for this movement of ideas, both intellectual and geographical, and the

⁴⁹ Long, "Textual Interpretation as Collective Action".

⁵⁰ That has been decried by several scholars, such as Edelstein, *The Enlightenment*.

⁵¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

MEDIATE project intends to create the sophisticated digital tools needed to finally uncover this long-neglected player in the European Enlightenment.

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