
H-France Review Vol. 13 (July 2013), No. 93

Mary McAlpin, *Female Sexuality and Cultural Degradation in Enlightenment France: Medicine and Literature*. Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2012. xii + 195. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). 978-1-4094-2241-9.

Review by Pamela Cheek, University of New Mexico.

Mary McAlpin focuses her study on what she dubs the French eighteenth-century's "*ingénue*," the girl on the verge of puberty who, she argues, served as "bellwether" of "cultural degradation" in French Enlightenment literature and medical writing (p. 51). The poster child for McAlpin's study is the iconic girl in "The Broken Jug," painted by Jean-Baptiste Greuze in 1772-73 when a new cultural anxiety about poorly regulated adolescent imagination and budding sexuality began to peak. The melancholic yet aware gaze cast by Greuze's young girl connotes a loss of sexual innocence while also communicating "the sharp and sudden gain in rationality said to accompany this 'loss'" (p. 5) of virginity.

In an approach characterizing her methodology throughout *Female Sexuality and Cultural Degradation in Enlightenment France*, McAlpin interprets Greuze's depiction of the girl as participating in a larger discourse of sexual hygiene heavily influenced by the vitalist theories emanating from the Montpellier School of Medicine in the second half of eighteenth century. The first two chapters of the book provide a lucid explanation of how vitalist thought used the problem of sexual development to displace mind-body dualism and advocated that the rising pressure of sexual fluids in the adolescent body be carefully managed to protect individual and social health. In the subsequent four chapters, the vitalist-informed discourse of social hygiene serves as a means of explaining the representation of a number of famous Enlightenment literary *ingénues* and their degenerate counterparts: Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Julie in *Julie, or the New Heloise*, Choderlos de Laclos' triad of Cécile Volanges, Madame de Tourvel and Madame de Merteuil in *Les liaisons dangereuses*, Madame Roland's autobiographical self in her *Private Memoirs* and the ambivalently figured Charlotte Corday, and Sade's Justine and Juliette.

Following Michel Foucault's claims in *The History of Sexuality, Part I: An Introduction*, the "hystericization of women's bodies" and the "pedagogization of children's sex" in the deployment of sexuality as a form of state hygiene or "biopower" have become a much worked over, if fertile, terrain. Nonetheless, McAlpin is to be credited for sticking closely to her task of detailing the discourse surrounding the adolescent girl while ably synthesizing recent scholarship on vitalism, the relationship between vitalism and literary sensibility, social hygiene, Enlightenment ideas about woman and women's education, and the literary texts under consideration. [1]

McAlpin begins by arguing that vitalists shifted the ongoing debate about the causes of cultural and individual variation in two ways that ultimately merged diagnosis of (and prognosis for) social ills and individual illness and entailed attentive scrutiny of the adolescent girl as the linchpin in healthy reproduction. First, where theories of climate as the determinant of gender relations and of national character had dominated in the first half of the century, notably in Montesquieu's work, the vitalists developed an account that would be popularized in the writing of Rousseau among others. As McAlpin writes, "For the vitalists, the complacent assumption that the temperate climate was indeed ideal for the

development of human civilization was undone by the belief that this very suitability had led the Europeans to cross the line, to divert too far from the natural path and thus to fall victim to an ever-accelerating process of degradation" (p. 18). Thus, reformers looked to cultural mores as the immediate cause of European decline and sought to apply remedies to social behavior. Second, vitalists revived and modernized the Galenic notion of humors "to suit their fascination with sexual difference." Instead of a Cartesian body separated from a non-physiological mind, or a materialist body containing a mind governed by levers and pulleys, the vitalist body coursed with "two versions of the same fluid, the male and female genital humors [that] were absolutely distinct in nature and, just as significantly, were the most dramatically transformative of the body's vital forces" (p. 24).

McAlpin inserts the vitalist account into the sexual genealogy provided by Thomas Laqueur in *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. While girls and boys were all but indistinguishable in childhood, at puberty, genital humors (the superior male semen and the lesser but more exquisitely sensitive female substance) began at last to engorge the body and differentiate the sexes into fundamentally different kinds. Negative social forces—worldly contact with dangerous seducers, exposure to novels, sexual images and illicit acts that whipped up the imagination—might induce the premature release of fluids (including the tell-tale "white flowers," a noxious vaginal discharge), disastrously weakening the individual when he or she was most in need of preserving vital force within the body. Adolescent girls were particularly at risk because they were simply more vulnerable and sensitive to external influences than boys, but also because the infusion of male semen catalyzed the transformation of girl into woman and brought on "the sharp and sudden gain in rationality" visible in the eyes of the girl in Greuze's painting. Delaying this infusion until the girl had reached the right age and was united with and married to the right partner yielded the sanguine "new woman" who would deliver healthy children and regenerate the social body. "Adolescence," McAlpin concludes, "has perhaps never since been portrayed as such a difficult, dangerous, and yet ultimately exhilarating time for both children and their parents than when it first appeared as a medical and social phenomenon in the eighteenth century" (p. 25).

Relying on the vitalist account of the risks attending female puberty, McAlpin goes on to read a number of literary portrayals of *ingénues*, weaving into her discussion non-literary works on women's education and sexuality such as Diderot's *Supplement to the voyage of Bougainville*, Rousseau's "Sophie" section in book V of the *Émile*, and Laclos' "On Women and Their Education." A chapter on Rousseau's Julie explores the meanings attending the idea of *la petite vérole* or smallpox, a disease thought to lurk in the body and await expression. That smallpox barely leaves a scar on Julie's face while it disfigures Madame de Merteuil in the conclusion of Laclos' novel registers the difference, McAlpin suggests, in the suitability and timing of the two women's first sexual experience as well as in the relative strength of their vital forces at the point when they lose their virginity. According to McAlpin's reading, Laclos figures Merteuil's choice and philosophy of libertinism not as the decision made by an independent and reasoning Cartesian mind, but rather as a symptom of "a physical aberration with profound consequences for her existence as a sexed being, in keeping with the physiology of puberty and female sexuality that reigned during the late eighteenth century" (p. 112).

In contrast, Laclos presents Cécile Volanges as a representative type—the healthy adolescent urban and privileged girl in full bloom exposed too early to pernicious mores and dangerous influences. In her most striking discussion of literary *ingénues*, McAlpin explores how, in the "Private memoir" written in prison prior to execution, the medically savvy Marie-Jeanne Roland relied on vitalist explanations of female puberty. Her description of her fourteen year-old self might have been pulled straight from the pages of a vitalist hygiene manual. Her forehead was graced with "y-shaped veins" that lit up "at the slightest emotion," and she had "a wide and superbly furnished chest" and bore an "open, frank, lively and sweet look" (p. 163). Roland presented herself as a model of the new woman, one whose flourishing health and innocence had allowed her to negotiate successfully the perils of adolescence, including the sexual aggression of an apprentice who masturbated against her. In a short conclusion, McAlpin points

out that Sade incorporates vitalist theories into his accounts of the libertine production of degenerate women in fulfillment of his perverse vision that natural law favored cultural degradation. In *Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue* and *Philosophy in the Boudoir or the Immoral Teachers*, adolescent girls are subjected to sexual violence at precisely the point in their development when they are most vulnerable to its negative effects.

Even as she identifies how portrayals of the literary *ingénue* were dominated by the vitalist account of female puberty, McAlpin assumes rather than elucidates the relationship between the two terms in her subtitle, medicine and literature. Why did novels incorporate the vitalist language of social hygiene as consistently as she argues that they did? Was it merely to compensate for the argument that they represented a singular danger to adolescent girls? Why did vitalism attack the novel while employing its devices and giving the novel's favorite character, the *ingénue*, a starring role? Nonetheless, McAlpin's close accounting of the symptoms of vitalism on the body of the novel clarifies the degree to which the adolescent girl played a starring role in an Enlightenment discourse of cultural degradation that fueled both the development of imaginative literature and the medical attempt to explain the relation between the social and the individual as a function of the imagination's work on the body.

NOTES

[1] McAlpin relies heavily on the following works in particular: Elizabeth A. Williams, *A Cultural History of Medical Vitalism in Enlightenment Montpellier* (Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2008); Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Sean M. Quinlan, *The Great Nation in Decline: Sex, Modernity and Health Crises in Revolutionary France c. 1750-1850* (Aldershot, U.K. and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007; and Liselotte Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex: Woman's Nature in the French Enlightenment*, trans. Patricia Selwyn, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

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ISSN 1553-9172