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Suellen Diaconoff, *Through the Reading Glass: Women, Books, and Sex in the French Enlightenment*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005. vii + 268 pages. Bibliography and index. \$75.00 US (cl). ISBN: 0-7914-6421-0.

Review by Jennifer Heuer, University of Massachusetts.

Through the Reading Glass focuses on the practice of women's reading in eighteenth-century France. Suellen Diaconoff argues that a "quiet revolution" made reading, rather than speech, a means of empowerment and self-transformation for women. She implies that this revolution may be at least as important for women as the political upheavals of 1789. Diaconoff writes as a literary scholar, and some historians may contest her claim that "women's embrace of book culture...is the most important arena in which to judge their contributions to social change" (p. 20). She nonetheless advances important arguments about what, and how, educated women read and the role that reading played in their lives.

Diaconoff's sources include memoirs, historical romances, short stories, love letters, novels, fairy tales, and the feminine periodical press. Except for the periodical press, she focuses on individual women authors and particular works within each genre, rather than addressing these genres more broadly. In each case, she connects the theme of reading to that of virtue. Diaconoff rebuts scholars who have argued that the eighteenth century was dominated by a Rousseauian (and later, republican) discourse of virtue that necessarily oppressed or excluded women.^[1] She contends that women writers appropriated the idea of virtue and used it to legitimate women's reading and writing.

Chapter one provides an overview of women's reading practices. Diaconoff concentrates first on the physical spaces where women read, or were imagined to read, juxtaposing the library and the boudoir. She bases part of her analysis on contemporary paintings that showed women overcome by reading or that made other visual connections between books, domestic spaces, and women's sexuality. *Through the Reading Glass* includes at least fifteen such images, though the reproductions are of uneven quality.

Diaconoff briefly discusses literacy rates and women's limited access to public and private libraries, and then turns in chapter two to Manon de Roland's detailed account of both what she read and how she read. Diaconoff relates this not only to Roland's self-education and self-discovery as an intellectual, but also to her understanding of virtue and sexuality. While Roland is often blamed for using literature to define the roles she played in life, she argues that the eighteenth-century writer actually used books as inspirations for ways to appeal to her readers. This became especially important for Roland, whose autobiography, written on the eve of her execution, was an essential means for her to communicate with readers whom she would never meet in person.

Chapter three, "The Romance as Transformative Reading," examines Félicité de Genlis's writings, including her memoirs and her proposed reading program for young girls. Like Roland, Genlis saw reading as means of self-improvement and an apprenticeship for her writing. Diaconoff chooses to focus on a particular oeuvre in Genlis's large body of work, *The Duchesse de la Vallière* (1804), in which Madame de Genlis relates the life of Louise de la Vallière, one of Louis XIV's royal mistresses who abjured the court in her early thirties and became a nun. Diaconoff argues that Genlis chose this genre and theme partially to inspire and transform her readers and to lead them to reflect on their own lives.

Chapters four and five focus on letters. In Chapter four, “The Project of Desire,” Diaconoff analyses Isabelle de Charrière’s love letters and short epistolary fiction, and concludes that the writer understood desire as central to the reading experience. However, especially in her fiction, Charrière sought less to eroticize desire than to intellectualize it. Diaconoff concludes that Charrière advanced an alternative to Rousseau’s ideal of reading; for her, readers were to be inspired not by sentimentality but instead by the ability to estheticize pleasure.

Chapter five, “Reading Rape,” turns to the real and imagined letters of Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni, the most popular novelist of the eighteenth century. Diaconoff looks first at Riccoboni’s 1751 epistolary novel, *Lettres de Milady Catesby*. She notes the layers of readers in the novel and their roles, including the narrator herself (who describes her own readings), the letters’ intended recipient, the narrator’s suitor (who reads her letters over her shoulder while she writes), and the reader of the novel. *Lettres* depicts a scene in which the suitor d’Ossery rapes a young girl, but nonetheless ultimately marries the novel’s narrator. Diaconoff argues that although the ending may seem weak, Riccoboni actually provides a strong critique of social expectations. Her correspondence with Choderlos de Laclos after the publication of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* in 1782 also reveals her insistence that reading should be about virtue and superior understanding rather than irony and intrigue.

Chapter six changes genres to look at fairy-tales. Diaconoff criticizes the common interpretation of such tales as simple stories of female victimization. She contends that the “fairy tale is not only representative of Enlightenment idealism concerning virtue and the educability of human beings...but also an unexpected source internally and externally for a discourse on books and reading” (p. 152). She concentrates on the story of Beauty and the Beast, especially a version of the tale written by Gabrielle Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve in 1740-41. Diaconoff highlights the centrality of reading in the story, from the recurrent scene of Belle (Beauty) in the library to the tale’s depiction of fairies who consulted a magical book of “true history.” More generally, she suggests that Villeneuve’s fairy universe offers a vision of an alternate social order dominated by powerful female figures.

The final chapter examines the emergence of a periodical press for women. Diaconoff insists on the importance of the enterprise of journalism by women and the creation of a female forum of exchange. After briefly examining periodical literature written by men for women, she turns to works produced by women. She looks closely at the *Spectatrice* (1728-29), the *Nouveau magasin français* (1750-51), the *Courrier lyrique* (1787-89), and the *Journal des dames* (1759-79). Drawing on, and to some extent challenging, Nina Gelbart’s study of the *Journal des Dames*, she argues that such journals were revolutionary less because of their political positions than because they legitimated women as a specific interest group.[2] Nonetheless, Diaconoff focuses on the ways in which authors often implicitly challenged male authority and sought to transform women.

If Diaconoff often seems to celebrate her subjects and their strategies of empowerment, she also insists that eighteenth-century women should be understood in their own terms, rather than by applying modern conceptions of feminism. Instead of searching for a political subversiveness in their writings, she suggests that the real revolution is to be found in women’s discourses of reading.

Indeed, she often observes how eighteenth-century practices and tastes differed from ours, noting—for example—that earlier adolescents seemed to read differently and more seriously than their modern counterparts. Nonetheless, historians may find her treatment of historical context slippery, in part because the book is organized around individual writers and genres, rather than chronological developments. Diaconoff often treats the eighteenth century as a block. While she provides publication dates and draws on various historians’ work to establish long-term trends in literacy rates and

subscriptions to periodicals, the author is more interested in the stories that writers told than in their immediate context.

Changes in reading practices are inherently harder to date than political events. Historians may, however, want to know more clearly when this “reading revolution” occurred, at least in relation to changes over the course of the century and to the French revolution. In this light, it is surprising that Diaconoff does not mention Carla Hesse’s book, *The Other Enlightenment* (2001).^[3] Both scholars have worked on women in the French Enlightenment and focus closely on some of the same authors, particularly Isabelle de Charrière and Madame de Genlis. Like Diaconoff, Hesse argues that “becoming modern” involved acknowledging women’s moral and creative capacities as much as, or more than, it did fighting for political rights. Yet Hesse actually places this shift after, rather than before, the French revolution. She argues that the proportional presence of women in print doubled between 1789 and 1820, and that writing (and implicitly, reading) fiction became a particularly important forum for women’s expression in the post-revolutionary world. In contrast, Diaconoff’s revolution takes place over a long and ill-defined eighteenth century.

Historians may also question the representativeness of some of these cases. Do Madame de Genlis’s other works present similar themes to the *Duchesse de la Vallière*? What about Riccobini’s other novels? More generally, how much can one extrapolate a general “reading revolution” from the accounts of a few prolific but exceptional women? This is nonetheless a thoughtful analysis both of individual women writers and of the potential of reading to affect women’s lives. Diaconoff’s “reading revolution” may not be as widespread or as revolutionary as she contends, but she offers intriguing ways of rethinking women’s relationships to the Enlightenment.

NOTES

[1] For example, Dorinda Outram, “Le langage male de la vertu: Women and the Discourse of the French Revolution,” in Peter Burke and Roy Porter, eds., *The Social History of Language* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 120-35; and Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988).

[2] Nina Gelbart, *Feminine and Opposition Journalism in Old Regime France: The Journal des dames* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

[3] Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women became Modern* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

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