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Lesley H. Walker, *A Mother's Love: Crafting Feminine Virtue in Enlightenment France*. Lewisburg, Penn: Bucknell University Press, 2008. 251 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$52.50. U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-8387-5685-0

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In *A Mother's Love*, Lesley H. Walker offers readers a vision of the “remarkable mother figure” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, emphasizing domesticity, virtue, and maternity even as she also insists that women’s public presence, demonstrated by both literary and artistic production, was central to reframing cultural ideals. She notes that feminist scholars have been rightly suspicious of the claim that women were full participants in a new social discourse that gave them authority even as it required sublimation of one’s own personal goals. This is why critics often have been frustrated by activist women like Mary Wollstonecraft and Madame Roland for their privileging of the domestic sphere over the public sphere.[1]

Despite Walker’s similar frustration with their model, as evidenced by her frequent use of the term “masochism” to describe heavy-handed demands for self control, Walker believes that much of our dissatisfaction stems from viewing the domestic home from within our own incorrect and “predigested paradigms.” From a modern view, the “protective cocoon” of private life exists primarily to give “aid and succor to the commercial and civic activities of a husband” (p. 194) rather than itself being a constructive part of society. In order to contest the assumptions inherent in this vision, Walker calls our attention to the fact that eighteenth-century fiction had, for the greater part of its history, an astounding “lack of confidence in the sustainability and hence desirability of the heterosexual love match as such” (p. 35). Her book demands that we engage with a different artistic vision, that of mothers as agents whose most important relationships were with their children, especially daughters. Through their maternal influence, they could see the home as “a contestatory space where radical social transformations might occur” (p. 194), though not necessarily in ways that we would find liberating today.

Chapter one, “Rethinking Domesticity in Eighteenth-Century France,” explains Walker’s intended analysis of “maternal discourse” and offers us a hint of the impressive distribution of sources and disciplines that offer context for her study. In this introduction, Walker outlines how careful examination of the narrative of domesticity in its broader context (and not merely as a product of Rousseau’s misogyny) gives shape to a maternal figure whose virtue and self-sacrifice could re-order a world that was desperately in need of reform. Art and literature from the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries offer a point of entry into a common but often baffling domestic mindset. We are told that, while many contemporary scholars have seen the home as a place opposed to the political, we should instead avoid oversimplification of what was a very complex space. Instead, she urges scholars to engage in “a reframing of the debate about women’s contribution to *ancien régime* culture that includes a reconsideration of the domestic sphere” (p. 16). As modeled by Walker, this reconsideration recognizes that the language of virtue challenged the status quo. “This emergent theory of domesticity at once respected age-old prejudices at the same time that it dislodged them” (p. 39). In short, while virtuous

motherhood was not only—or obviously—liberating, the tension between progressive and traditionalist elements within the supporting paradigm offered a space for action.

Chapter two continues an analysis of this tension. “The Diligent Mother” explains how the logic of Catholic reform, represented particularly well by Fénelon, mixed with progressive ideas in order to produce a powerful, yet subordinate, maternal figure who lived a life of self-knowledge and moderation. Women took the ideas and promoted them in a higher register, arguing that private virtues were actually the most authentic virtues, arising not from social esteem but self-determination. Art also promoted the idea that the mother, a paragon of Christian virtue, was the foundation of real reform insofar as she molded the family, and by extension society, into the proper moral shape. The tenderness that mothers showed, however, continued to exist alongside a deep-seated suspicion of passionate love. As Walker convincingly notes, this is a fiction where “lovers always leave you in disgrace and husbands all too frequently disappoint.” (p. 62). Men cannot be trusted, nor are even the good men likely agents of social transformation. Instead, feminine virtue is the primary agent of social change and appropriately selfless individuals had the possibility for substantial agency.

Chapter three, “When Girls Read Rousseau or a Rake’s Progress,” combines the problems of the previous two chapters in order to arrive at an explanation of why feminist historiography has tended to emphasize Rousseau’s work and cast him as the villain who caused women to be excluded from the public sphere. [2] In Walker’s account, Rousseau is hardly unimportant, but neither is he singular or visionary. Instead, he promotes an idea already popularized by his predecessors, one in which women were responsible moral agents and, as mothers, used sacrifice in order to bring about the newly reformed society. While this is one of the shorter chapters of the book, it provides a central conceptual bridge between the first and last halves of the book. It moves the reader from the Christian virtue of Fénelon to Madame de Staël’s repudiation of many of those same values in her novel *Delphine*. In some sense, then, Rousseau still does a great deal of important work for the book, for his consolidation and popularization of these virtues allowed women to blend the fictional sacrifice of Julie to their own sacrifices in the real world. Just as Rousseau’s heroine needed to struggle against her sexual desire in order to become a fully responsible moral agent, other women tied their own suffering, read through Rousseau’s novel, to their growth as moral individuals. And yet, unlike what we might expect from a clear-thinking reader of Rousseau, the women who linked their sacrifice with social change also saw themselves as part of a public project. In what seems like a contradiction in terms, Madam Roland imagined a necessary public of daughters, moved to imitate Roland’s heroic virtue as she had been inspired by Julie’s. Domestic reforms could remake the nation by their public witness as well as their private influence.

The tension between public, private, and women’s visions of the world becomes even more explicit in chapter four, “The Erotics of Motherhood.” Even as female novelists, building on Rousseau, saw passion as a danger when attached to heterosexual courtship and marriage, so too female painters began to embody the maternal ideal as a passionate relationship between mother and daughter, with both willing to suffer in order to maintain their unique relationship. As Walker explains, novels still presumed that romance was dangerous and that heterosexual passion was “unstable, fleeting, and dangerous” (p. 105). This could result in decisions that seem inexplicable by contemporary standards. More than once, for example, a daughter marries her mother’s former lover despite her lack of attraction for him, killing both the mother and the daughter’s passion in one fell swoop. Only self-control and sacrificing maternal virtue, not to mention the exclusion of the father or the passionate lover, could offer a true vision of happiness. Similarly, genre paintings of *maternité*, which contemporaries saw as erotic when produced by men, became depictions of chaste but true happiness when painted by women. Marguerite Gérard and Elisabeth Vigée Lebrun’s paintings gave power to this discourse by emphasizing the joys of maternity. In fact, as women and mothers they invested their own work with a double influence: *maternities* invented and reshaped the understanding of the mother’s role and, with its

growing importance, offered painting mothers power as female authorities in a locale where men no longer had pride of place or even emotional influence.

In fact, once men were excluded from the *maternities*, they also were expelled from the domestic interior. In chapter five, “The Good Mother or the Sex Born to Suffer,” Walker uses images, essays, and novels to analyze the uniqueness of women’s interiority and sensibility. Central to the influence of women was feminine suffering, depicted, planned, and even carried out by women for and on themselves. “This conviction that suffering can be thus regulated or instrumentalized is a hallmark of enlightened motherhood” (p. 135) and in fact, became the mark of the mother alone. Men, as those depicted in David’s *Brutus* (1787), are stoic and almost inhuman in their lack of pity for their own flesh. The women, in anguish, experience and inspire pity. Both components are necessary for a complete human understanding of the moment, and only the existence of the weeping mother allows us to see a horrible deed, the murder of one’s son, in a sentimental and thus moral context. While a simplification of *Brutus* or the literary conventions under consideration seems to conform to a public/private split, the projects also show how intertwined they are. The mother has extraordinary power because of the relationship between pity, suffering, and family ties. Without her, there can be no moral community and indeed, no public. If Roland served as a public example for future mothers and Vigée Lebrun depicted the obvious and natural shape of the mother-daughter bond, Madame de Genlis made the public link between maternal affection and social activism fully explicit.

Chapter five offers us a hopeful look at the future; Chapter Six describes the waning of the moment of possibility. In “Nostalgia and Maternal Loss,” Walker explains how the placement of the virtuous daughter within the home becomes fully idealized and essentially mythical in its power. Instead of providing a pathway for mothers to influence daughters and society as a whole, nurturing love offered the foundation for complete male citizens, who then regretfully moved beyond the feminine project. Motherhood fell out of fashion, even as the Enlightenment was eclipsed by Romantic ideals. While men still appear in the novels with faults that make them untrustworthy and dangerous, maternal agency and mother-daughter relationships no longer constitute the solution. Instead, “virtue is no longer about actively forming a daughter in one’s own image; it is redefined as passive suffering and willful ignorance of man’s capacity for wickedness” (p. 180). Strong female characters, like Staël’s Delphine, can no longer harness their passions and serve a public function as the face of moral reform. Instead, we find that an independent woman has become, at least novelistically, a natural impossibility. Readers are left resentful and dissatisfied, but no closer to finding a place in a hostile world and indeed, perhaps farther than before. And yet, Walker suggests that this literary frustration is not matched in the visual arts or in the political realm. While the domestic sphere might not be a contested space where mothers would reproduce virtuous daughters, they could be inspired to seize the political stage themselves and not just envision a reformed world, but act in favor of their ideals.

Walker has indeed offered us a remarkable mother, one who believed that the personal was radical in its implications. She has also traced a story that allows us to explain the coexistence of beliefs that we often find contradictory without assuming that there were two “selves,” a public and respectable one alongside a private and subversive self. This alone is a significant achievement. But I would like to suggest that she has led us even further. The argument that heterosexual love matches were not particularly valorized in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries pushes open a new space for historical and literary analysis. The retreat to the domestic interior was not, in this analysis, because women were subordinating themselves to their loving husbands, but instead a result of the fact that women remained suspicious of the ideal of companionate marriage.

While we might still see this impulse toward self-sacrifice as masochistic, it hardly indicates emotional coercion or a hopeful misunderstanding of male-female relations. Additionally, by marking out the ways in which *tendresse maternelle* was popularized and then, publicized, Walker reminds us that the domestic mother was also public and saw her public presence, be it as a producer of art, a moral arbiter, or a

paragon of virtue, as fundamental to her ultimate success. If literature and art demonstrated how public esteem belonged to the meritorious, then every female reformer and instructor of fellow citizens could know that a public presence was not an unnatural role. These two components together comprise a substantial contribution to current scholarship. While domestic fiction could not maintain its potency in the face of nineteenth-century social change, it had already traced the outlines of a story where women and girls remarkably clear-eyed about the power relationships in their society and knowing that they were acting at a disadvantage, self-consciously carved out important spaces for themselves.

NOTES

[1] Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988); Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1999); Madelyn Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

[2] Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, introduction to Samia I. Spencer, *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Mary Seidman Trouille, *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau* (Buffalo: State University of New York Press, 1997).

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