

H-France Review Vol. 10 (July 2010), No. 98

Jennifer Popiel, *Rousseau's Daughters: Domesticity, Education, and Autonomy in Modern France*, Durham, University of New Hampshire Press, 2008. 284 pp. Illustrations, notes and index. \$50 U.S. (cl.), ISBN 978-1-58465-723-3.

Review by Rebecca Rogers, Université Paris Descartes, UMR Cerlis.

Historians of women have long debated the characteristics of domesticity, as ideology and norm and more recently as a set of cultural practices that both determined women's lives and offered opportunities for them to participate more widely in public life. Underlying these analyses lies an engagement with the notion of separate spheres, that quintessential expression of the division between the sexes, perhaps most famously expressed in Rousseau's pedagogical novel *Emile* (1762). Jennifer Popiel's engaging new book enters the scholarly discussion through an exploration of domestic education scrutinizing the writings of the Genevan philosopher with care in her concern to understand his role in the "invention" of the domestic mother in the final decades of the eighteenth century and the first three decades of the nineteenth century. More specifically, she argues that by examining "the cultural and intellectual content of domesticity we can see if Rousseau's promotion of education for domesticity and self-control is in any way compatible with liberal ideals" (p. 9). The answer is a resounding yes. Jennifer Popiel writes: "this study emphasizes that an increased focus on child-rearing, individuality, and self-control was already culturally prominent long before the French Revolution emphasized civic education or abolished primogeniture, and indeed, that revolutionary legislation was founded on a general expectation of domestic nurturing" (p. 13).

Framed as a study in cultural and intellectual history--not social history or educational theory-- the book seeks to understand the cultural and political valences of domesticity through a variety of sources. Beginning with a study of the works of Rousseau himself, Popiel argues convincingly for the importance of *Emile* in the philosopher's oeuvre and in comparison to the writing on education of Locke. In particular, she emphasizes how Rousseau shifts the terms of Enlightenment discussion about education from the reform of society to the remaking of society. The goal of this remaking then is to create the autonomous individual, the moral man, not the political man. The necessary regeneration of self and society began, in Rousseau's writing, within the family. By emphasizing the moral, rather than the political objectives of this educational project, Popiel shows how the relegation of Sophie to the home and family is not as misogynistic as many have argued. Following a recent vein of scholarship that has begun to reevaluate Rousseau's writing and influence, she argues that Sophie is expected to exert the same self-control as Emile and that her role within the family is to create political, active, and independent individuals. By insisting on women's natural and decisive role in the physical and moral order, Rousseau opened a "space ...into which nineteenth-century maternal and domestic education of both sexes could easily enter" (p. 51).

This initial chapter probing Rousseau's contribution to the intellectual debates about Enlightenment education is followed by three more unusual chapters that explore the material and print culture related to childhood, women, and domestic education. In line with the arguments which are so clearly laid out in the introduction, Popiel emphasizes throughout how clothing, parenting and advice manuals, toys, and children's literature all urge women to train children in self-control and to take up their allotted and

gendered role in society. Chapter two, entitled “Freeing the body, educating the mind: childhood in clothing and toys” focuses mainly on early childhood and changing attitudes toward clothing, the body and the mind. Fashion journals testify to a new concern for movement and physical liberty, while parenting manuals and pedagogical texts similarly emphasize the need to have children play. Both boys and girls are the object of Popiel's analysis as she notes the new focus in the second half of the eighteenth century on children's bodies and behavior. The conclusion of this chapter argues that “Material culture...demonstrates the trend away from traditional hierarchies and toward increasing gender distinctions. No longer were physical shaping and placement into the social ladder the most important goals of childhood. Instead the training of modern, rational and gendered individuals in self-control offered a new vision of the world” (p. 88). The focus on sources that address mainly the literate elites raises some doubts about the validity of this claim, but certainly Popiel is correct in arguing that the years before the Revolution witnessed a new attention to the child's body and behavior that historians of the body have long noted.[1]

Advice manuals and domestic motherhood are the objects of the third chapter which focuses more specifically on women's roles in raising children. Popiel points in particular to the development of books on home economics and child-rearing that teach women how to inculcate the appropriate values. Bad mothers are frequently the object of these manuals, the women who send their children away to wet nurses, for example, or those who were too preoccupied with their social duties to love their children. Combined with the children's literature examined in chapter four these sources highlight the ways domestic mothering entered the print world and proposed new models of behavior. Once mothers had laid the groundwork raising healthy and moral individuals, primers, fables and particularly didactic tales by authors such as Sophie Renneville or Alida Savaignac “taught girls to suppress their passions and desires so that they might become autonomous within the sphere of their own home” (p. 135).

The final chapter on “Education and Politics” examines how debates about education acquired more political goals in the period of the Revolution and early nineteenth century and in this process a new focus on schooling emerged. Nonetheless, as legislators and pedagogues urged the creation of schools, Popiel argues, mothers continued to hold pride of place within an ideological system that left moral education for the young in their hands. The chapter traces the various revolutionary measures and then moves on to consider the Guizot law of 1833 which culminates the study. This law that required all communes of 500 inhabitants or more to open a primary school for boys is generally perceived as seeking to moralize and discipline the poor. In Popiel's reading however the focus on religious and moral instruction in this law was “fundamentally about social integration and the creation of a state that matched one's own civic vision” (p. 162). And the vision that underlay the new polity was grounded in the family where mothers reigned supreme. A year after the passage of the Guizot law, Louis-Aimé Martin published his well-known treatise, *The Education of Mothers: or the Civilization of Mankind by Women* that serves to conclude this study. Waxing eloquent about the importance of maternal love and education, Martin described the role of women in inculcating self-control in order for all to enjoy liberty. This text, like the lithographs, the toys, advice manuals, and children's literature all serve then the author's argument that “ideas about individuality, gender, and self-control were formed not only in the salons of Enlightenment France but also at the skirts of the domestic mothers of the nineteenth century” (p.179).

While I enjoyed reading this book, admired the consistent effort to study girls *and* boys, and was quite fascinated by the source material, it raises a number of questions about scholarship in this field of intellectual/cultural history. Popiel takes care from the outset to write this is not a social history, presumably meaning, there will be no exploration of archives or institutions in this investigation of domestic motherhood. Possibly this caveat is also meant to justify the absence of any forms of quantification: numbers of home economic treatises published, chronology and quantity of advice manuals under exploration. This vision of cultural history, however, appears oddly uninformed by “the new cultural history”, now some twenty years old, with its emphasis on representations *and* practices,

norms and reception.^[2] Obviously attention to mothering practices requires a search for other sources, correspondences, memoirs, household accounts, etc. and this would have produced another book.^[3]

But rather than ask for that other book, I wonder about the decision to treat the interesting collection of sources exploited here with such unsystematic attention to authors, publishing dates, re-editions, audience or chronology. Why are some authors frequently cited, while others such as Mme de Genlis, only briefly mentioned despite evidence of their influence?^[4] Readers are given excerpts from one of the “most popular authors” of advice manuals (p.109), William Buchan, presumably an Englishman since the book has a translator, but no evidence is given for his popularity and I, for one, have never heard of him. As a result, Popiel misses an opportunity to ground her analysis of cultural objects and formations in a specific social and political context. The reader cannot help wondering whether discussions about motherhood really changed so little over the revolutionary decades. In stating that Gacon Dufour is the foremost home economist of the Restoration, the reader familiar with her angry refutation to Sylvain Maréchal's provocative *Projet d'une loi portant défense d'apprendre à lire aux femmes* (1801) would love to learn more about her conversion to home economy, and indeed about the publishing market for this subject which still awaits its historian.

The dissociation evident in this study between cultural and social history may also explain the rather remarkable absence of social categories in this study of domestic motherhood. Occasionally Popiel recognizes that the new more liberating clothing styles were not worn by most children of this era (p. 84), but the fact most mothers could not read much less afford the advice manuals or children literature under discussion is never explicitly addressed. As a result, the reader cannot help but wonder how the masses of peasant and working-class mothers acquired the lessons in moral conduct that allowed them to exert influence on their children within the family. The Guizot law of 1833 left girls out of the legislator's purview, a point Popiel fails to mention. The suspicion that legislators, school directors and moral reformers endlessly repeated concerning the moral failings of families suggests that the discourse about domestic motherhood needs to be understood as an *appeal* for maternal influence, not a given. Explicitly recognizing this positioning would have strengthened the argument of the book and made more comprehensible the decision to focus on primary schooling in the final chapter. Just as bourgeois women philanthropists mobilized in the late 1820s and 1830s to create *salles d'asiles* precisely because they perceived working-class mothers to be incapable of providing the moral or educational lessons necessary for their children, the State stepped in with the Guizot law. Popiel insists repeatedly that domestic motherhood shaped individuals for autonomy thanks to lessons in self-control, but were the lessons really so grounded in practices for Guizot to be sanguine about the early childhood training within poor families?

Like many dissertations that become books, this study combines many engaging features of the young scholar, most notably the voice and the enthusiastic reappraisal of Rousseau, with somewhat exaggerated claims for novelty. The need to position one's work as new, leads to an insistence on originality, such as when Popiel argues that previous studies have failed to distinguish between education and instruction, or that her argument about the rhetoric of domestic motherhood makes us rethink current historical perspectives (p. 25). For historians of education or women's historians, the pretense of innovation here will appear belabored given the past twenty years of scholarship. Indeed, the copious footnotes testify to the contrary, although Popiel is more familiar with English language studies than the considerable scholarship in French that makes similar arguments. Obviously publishing strategies demand novelty, but the real novelty here is less in the overall argument than in the range of sources Popiel explores to make her argument and the time period under consideration. By drawing attention to these sources, she unquestionably highlights a discourse that has not received sustained attention for this particular period. Still paying more careful attention to the conditions of production of this discourse and their positioning within particular political and social *configurations* (to borrow the terminology of Norbert Elias with whom Popiel begins the book) would have strengthened

the arguments made. Analysis of the rhetoric surrounding such a slippery notion as self-control would also have helped; what exact terms are employed in French? *contrôle de soi?* *maîtrise de soi?* *la maîtrise des passions?* All this said, however, *Rousseau's Daughters* remains a well-written, attractive, and enjoyable introduction to the “invention” of domestic motherhood prior to the Revolution.

NOTES

[1] For a general overview of scholarship in this field, see Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, Georges Vigarello, eds., *Histoire du corps*, and particularly the volumes I, *De la Renaissance aux Lumières*, ed., G. Vigarello, and II, *De la Révolution à la Grande Guerre*, ed., A. Corbin, (Paris: Seuil, 2005).

[2] See, in particular, Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of Berkeley Press, 1989).

[3] See, for example, Christine Adams, *A Taste for Comfort and Status. A Bourgeois Family in Eighteenth-Century France*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2000). The classic such study for England is Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes. Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago, 1988).

[4] For an exploration of similar themes and sources, see Isabelle Brouard-Arends, Marie-Emmanuelle Plagnol-Diéval, eds., *Femmes éducatrices au Siècle des Lumières*, (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007). The work of these literary historians on women writers and educators has led to a renewal of interest in pedagogical writings of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. See, for example, this very recent dissertation, defended after the publication of Popiel's *Rousseau's daughters*, Sonia Cherrad, *La littérature éducative au miroir des Lumières. Etude du discours pédagogique féminin de la seconde moitié du XVIII^e siècle (1756-1801)* (thèse de doctorat de littérature française, Université de Rennes II, 2009).

[5] Among the authors which are curiously absent from the footnotes and bibliography, one notes in particular the work of Gilbert Py, *Rousseau et les éducateurs. Etude sur la fortune des idées pédagogiques de Jean-Jacques Rousseau en France et en Europe au XVIII^e siècle* (Voltaire Foundation: Oxford, 1997), that of Dominique Julia, *Les trois couleurs du tableau noir. La Révolution*, (Paris: Editions Belin, 1981) and the extensive work of Georges Vigarello on the body, education, beauty, etc.

Rebecca Rogers
Université Paris Descartes, UMR Cerlis
rebecca.rogers@parisdescartes.fr

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.