
Review by Jeffrey D. Burson, Georgia Southern University.

Studies of the Catholic Enlightenment abound in recent years. Once a peripheral (and in some sense controversial) subject as recently as the turn of the twenty-first century, attempts to understand how Catholic writers, readers, and other eighteenth-century figures engaged with the socio-cultural revolution of the Enlightenment have become quite common. In its inception, Catholic Enlightenment studies focused mostly on elite writers (theologians and their dealings with High Enlightenment philosophes). In recent years, the field has considerably broadened to include women, lay as well as clerical writers, Jesuit missionaries, so-called Grub Street and establishment figures, and a variety of different individuals from across the ideological and theological divides of the eighteenth century (French Jansenists and some Jesuits, Benedictines, and French nuns). Enlightenment Catholicism is now recognized by many (if not most) authors as both encompassing a breadth of often clashing theological perspectives and outlooks on the unfolding of major Enlightenment debates and as an indispensable part of increasingly dense networks of global exchange and empire.\(^1\) The study of Enlightenment Catholicism is also now very much an interdisciplinary affair, having become the concern of cultural and intellectual historians, philosophers, theologians, and specialists of French literature. Often and understandably, however, studies on the Enlightenment Catholicism remain lamentably anchored within the discursive parameters of their respective disciplines. The collection of essays under the direction of Isabelle Tremblay represents an admirable and, in most ways, highly successful attempt to bring historical and literary scholarship on Enlightenment Catholicism into a more constructive dialogue, while calling for greater attention to the genre of the late eighteenth-century novel and its role in the popularizing and transforming of the Catholic Enlightenment on the eve of the French Revolution.

Isabelle Tremblay’s stirring and insightful introduction to the volume situates her collection’s endeavor within the context of two problems. First, she challenges the arguably excessive zeal for pluralizing the Enlightenment that has been characteristic of the historiography until very recently. Second, Tremblay confronts what she calls “the reductionist approach of literary history,” which still too often tends to reinforce the teleological focus on Enlightenment as tending toward anticlericalism and secularization (pp. 1-2). In addressing this problematic, Tremblay draws heavily on the scholarship of (among others) Helena Rosenblatt, Monique Cottret, David Sorkin, Ulrich Lehner, Darrin McMahon, Didier Masseau, and Jeffrey Burson to
the effect that many Enlightenment writers proceeded as though faith and reason were innately compatible (pp. 2-4). In quoting Ulrich Lehner’s observation that “Catholicism and modernity remained in dialogue until the reign of Napoleon” (p. 4) and taking a cue from Zeev Sternhell that even the emergence of Counter-Enlightenment ought more profitably be seen as a kind of alternative modernity rather than anti-modernity, Tremblay effectively treats the Catholic Enlightenment novel as a genre of late eighteenth-century apologetics situated at the margins of a more radically secular late Enlightenment and a burgeoning Counter-Enlightenment. And yet, late Enlightenment and emergent Counter-Enlightenment, she contends, shared many arguments and sources, and both tendencies claimed to be “true philosophy” at war with superstition (pp. 4-7). In Tremblay’s view, Catholic Enlightenment (“Lumières catholiques”) represented the “grounds of understanding” (“terrain d’entente”) between the more anticlerical Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment (p. 8). Tremblay’s argument rests on a capacious definition of Catholic Enlightenment as “encompassing the work of any author (lay or cleric), statesman, monk, secular clergy, philosopher, or apologist from within Catholic Europe who participated in burgeoning networks of publication and eighteenth-century sociability with a view toward integrating eighteenth-century science, philosophy, philology, or political thought into their understanding of Catholic reform of church and society” (p. 8). This definition, however imperfect, has the advantage of momentarily sidestepping evident and no less significant divisions at the heart of Enlightenment Catholicism. Tremblay’s use of this definition permits her to accomplish the goal of emphasizing the “plural and diverse” nature of “the French Enlightenment,” which, she argues, must include a Catholic Enlightenment (p. 9). However lacking in “unity and consensus,” Tremblay argues that the Catholic Enlightenment nonetheless occupied with “difficulty” “a space midway between extremes,” and often performed a kind of cultural “mediation” between opposed but nevertheless irreconcilable values, even if that reconciliation was not achieved, in large measure due to the polarization of the revolutionary era (p. 9).

Although these specific arguments posed by Isabelle Tremblay’s introduction would come as no surprise to most specialists, the focus of the essays in this volume on sentimental novels as vital sources for the study of the Catholic Enlightenment breaks new ground. It does so, first, by attempting to bring the study of eighteenth-century Francophone literature into dialogue with historical scholarship, and second, by endeavoring to elevate the centrality of the sentimental novel to the history of the Catholic Enlightenment. This focus is long overdue, and, in my judgment, an extremely important intervention for several reasons, many of which Tremblay highlights in her introduction. First, the explosive popularity of sentimental novels is one well-established symptom of what is now recognized to be a wide-ranging revolution in sentiment—a transformation in the history of emotions that, as Lynn Hunt has recently argued, informed individual self-fashioning, expressions of empathy, and the cultural valence of natural rights theories. Second, the popularity of the sentimental novel intersects with an apologetical shift in the second half of the eighteenth century, paradoxically signaled by Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Profession de foi du vicaire Savoyard (1762). Rousseau’s own sentimental novel pointed toward the human heart—metaphorically natural affections—as the principal source of connection to the divine, and to true natural religion (p. 10). Despite their many criticisms of Rousseau, Catholic writers slowly adopted this sentimental apologetic in a way that foreshadowed, not only Counter-Enlightenment polemics, but the thrust of Chateaubriand and early nineteenth-century French Romantic Catholicism. Third, the writers of sentimental novels, including those Tremblay studies as part of the Catholic Enlightenment, were frequently women, and until very recently thanks to the work of Ulrich Lehner and contributors to his recent volume, the contribution of
women to Enlightenment Catholicism has generally been neglected (pp. 10-12). Tremblay’s edited volume further moves the contributions of women from the periphery to the center of Catholic Enlightenment studies in France. In short, this “cult devoted to sentiment” (p. 11) is not merely a bridge between Enlightenment and the French Revolution. It is also a bridge between Catholic Enlightenment and Romantic Catholicism. Tremblay’s introduction and the contributors to her volume collectively advance a compelling argument that the rise of the French novel and the centrality of women authors to that endeavor were, unsurprisingly, as important to the late eighteenth-century evolution of the Catholic Enlightenment as they were to the unfolding of the Revolutionary and immediate post-Revolutionary period in general.

The twelve contributions to this volume provide readers with a wealth of densely researched and expert literary analysis of a wide range of sentimental, pedagogical, and apologetic novels, many of them by important female authors worthy of far greater attention than they have received from historians and literary scholars. For example, the concentration on Madame Leprince de Beaumont in essays by Isabelle Tremblay, Alicia C. Montoya, and Ramona Herz-Gazeau in the second part of the volume are uniquely insightful and complementary (pp. 107-169). Nevertheless, historians may be a little dismayed by the uneven coherence of the volume, and the inconsistency of individual authors’ engagements with the wider history of late Catholic Enlightenment. Most of the authors approach their subjects in ways that remain perhaps more typical of Francophone literary scholarship than of cultural historians. Thus, anyone seeking a wealth of admirably executed and intricately close textual analyses of individual novels will not be disappointed. But readers who may be seeking a more even and consistent engagement with the major contextual issues promised by Tremblay’s introduction will most certainly come away intrigued and inspired, but still somewhat unsatisfied. This criticism, however, does not detract from the scholarly merits of the individual essays themselves, nor from the important plan de recherche regarding the importance of the Catholic Enlightenment novel toward which Isabelle Tremblay’s volume points us. The virtues and lacunae of this volume will most certainly and profitably instigate further research. Overall, Tremblay’s volume ambitiously contributes to significant new direction in the interdisciplinary study of the Catholic Enlightenment—one that is more attentive to gender, the history of women writers, and the importance of the novel as a genre of Enlightenment Catholicism.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Isabelle, Tremblay, “Introduction: Lumières catholiques en roman”

I. De la galanterie religieuse à l’apologétique Romanesque ou la recherche d’une alternative conciliatrice

Valentina Denzel, “La galanterie des Contes indiens (1715) de François-Augustin de Paradis de Moncrif, un parcours entre catholicisme et philosophie des Lumières”

Marilyse Turgeon-Solis, “Les Entretiens de Clotilde (1788), ou la symétrie inverse du roman antimonastique”

Fabrice Preyat, “Le roman du Sacré-Cœur: tradition et modernité dans Cruzamante, ou la Sainte-Amante de la Croix (1786) de Marie-Françoise Loquet”
II. Le roman pédagogique, nouvelle avenue de la piété

Marie-Laure Girou Swiderski, “Morale et passion dans les romans de Mme d’Arconville”

Isabelle Tremblay, “La foi et la raison, notions complémentaires dans les *Lettres de Mme Du Montier* (1756) de Mme Leprince de Beaumont”

Alicia C. Montoya, “Livre de piété ou roman? Sur quelques ouvrages pédagogiques de Mmes Leprince de Beaumont et Genlis”

Ramona Herz-Gazeau, “*Le Triomphe de la vérité* (1748) et *Les Américaines, ou la Preuve de la religion chrétienne par les Lumières naturelles* (1769) – lecture comparative de deux romans apologétiques de Marie Leprince de Beaumont”

III. Les romans des Lumières catholiques, efficaces et célèbres?

Paul Pelckmans, “Il n’appartient qu’au Christianisme de faire de vrais philosophes…” Une lecture du *Vrai point d’honneur* (1774)

Nicolas Brucker, “Un roman social catholique au siècle des Lumières: *Le Conte de Valmont* (1774) de l’abbé Gérard”

Marco Menin, “Bernardin de Saint-Pierre et l’énigme du mal: la double théodicée de *Paul et Virginie* (1788)”

Jan Herman, “Lenglet-Dufresnoy et la devotion romance”

NOTES


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