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Juan Manuel Ibeas-Altamira, *La Pédagogie dans le boudoir. Heurs et malheurs de Félicité de Genlis*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2021. 234 pp. Illustrations, bibliography and index. €29.00. (eb). ISBN 9782406125365.

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“Pour éclairer, tu te consumes” (p. 8). Readers of Juan Manuel Ibeas-Altamira’s *La Pédagogie dans le boudoir* first encounter Félicité de Genlis through an engraved portrait from 1789, captioned with her motto.^[1] In introducing its main character with this phrase, the book reminds us that the key metaphor of the eighteenth century could bear different meanings. Genlis embodies one which, while now forgotten, or perhaps more accurately obfuscated, was nevertheless arguably at least as influential as those put forward by her more celebrated male counterparts.

The book, which openly states its ambition to reinstate a crucial, yet little-known character at the forefront of literary history, is part of a very recent boom of scholarship on Genlis, including the 2020 exhibition at the Musée des Arts et Métiers in Paris and Martine Reid’s brand-new biography.^[2] Both works have highlighted Genlis’s complex relation to the Enlightenment *philosophes*. While she sometimes harshly criticized their attacks on religion, she shared many of their concerns regarding the formation of individual conscience and drew inspiration from them in her work as a teacher and pedagogue. However, she differed from them in a key point: she was able to implement what she preached on a full scale, taking responsibility for the education of the Orléans progeny, as well as her own and a swarm of adoptive children.

Ibeas-Altamira’s originality lies in the steadfastly literary character of his inquiry. Studying Genlis in relation to Laclos, Sade, and Hugo rather than Diderot or Rousseau, he aims to grasp the point at which an individual biography intersects with popular fictions and collective systems of belief. He argues that by fueling libertine imaginaries before and during the Revolution and, in response, shaping the moralistic expectations of the Empire and Restoration audiences, Genlis played an instrumental role in shaping the cultural legacy of the eighteenth century, creating a vital link between the age of Enlightenment and the time of Romanticism.

Since the book takes the form of a literary biography, I will briefly recall the facts usually known about Genlis before analyzing how Ibeas-Altamira draws on various types of literary sources to give a fuller picture of her life and works. I will finally examine the theoretical issues raised by his endeavor.

Félicité de Genlis lived many lives over the course of over eighty years (1746-1830).^[3] A gifted musician and accomplished harpist, this offspring of impoverished provincial nobility rose to prominent ranks in the circle of the Orléans branch of the royal family. She briefly was the mistress of the duc de Chartres, better known as Philippe Égalité, while holding a long-time sway over his impressionable, uneducated wife. This dual commitment allowed her to be appointed “governor” of their children—Ibeas-Altamira interestingly highlights she insisted to keep the male form of the title. Her talent as a writer buttressed her social ascension and ambitions as a pedagogue. The success of her moralistic writings, such as the *Théâtre de société à l’usage des jeunes personnes* (1779) or *Adèle et Théodore* (1782), ensured her literary reputation. The Revolution, which she initially supported, forced her to flee in Switzerland and Germany, and made her lose to the guillotine both her husband, Sillery, who sided with the Girondins, and her former princely lover. She returned to France as a (cautious) supporter of Napoleon and sustained herself for three more decades thanks to a successful career as a novelist and memoirist. A few months before her death, she witnessed her former pupil, Louis-Philippe, ascend to the throne.

How is it possible that such an influential figure almost completely disappeared from literary history? Extant scholarship has emphasized how nineteenth-century critics and historians, while decisively shaping our understanding of literature, effectively cancelled women’s contributions to literary history. In the wake of Martine Reid, Ibeas-Altamira names in his foreword the usual suspects responsible for obliterating Genlis’ work: Sainte-Beuve, Gustave Lanson, Baudelaire, the Goncourt brothers.^[4] However, Ibeas-Altamira rightfully adds that this was only part of the problem. The twentieth century, too, ignored Madame de Genlis, who was vilified by feminists such as Élisabeth Badinter. This lifelong self-proclaimed defender of religion and morality did not fit the canonical vision of an eighteenth century that was “assoiffé de Lumières et de libertinage” (p. 17). As a result, she remains understudied today, beyond a few scholarly articles by eminent specialists such as Reid or Marie-Emmanuelle Plagnol-Diéval. Her work is not taught or performed and, in the past fifty years, we can count only two recent English translations or re-editions of her work, although she was probably the most widely translated female author throughout Europe in her time.

And yet, Ibeas-Altamira claims, now is the right moment to read Madame de Genlis, for two reasons. Firstly, there is a pressing aspiration to a more egalitarian literary history, which means no longer leaving aside half of humanity. Secondly, evolving theories of reading have finally given us the theoretical framework appropriate to fulfill this task. In Genlis’s particular case, in Ibeas-Altamira’s own words, “postmodern” theory allows readers to grasp the full significance of her work. These two calls can be answered by following a “postmodern methodology,” according to Ibeas-Altamira (p. 20). Unfortunately, the author does not clarify what he means here by “postmodern,” leaving the reader to infer it from the rest of the book. Interestingly, he does not oppose contextualization to interpretation.^[5] Studying figures such as Genlis in the light of the whole gamut of writing forms practiced by her contemporaries (from canonical literature to collections of literary gossip, including memoirs, letters, and journal articles) is indispensable in order to move beyond the simplistic, monolithically derogatory view left by nineteenth-century critics. In cases like hers, theoretical deconstruction enhances, not opposes contextual reconstruction.

Ibeas-Altamira thus chooses to examine how Genlis’s biography is interwoven with her writings, because both were constantly associated in the eyes of her audience, and she deliberately played on that. The book recounts her trajectory as informed by three main successive ideological and

literary paradigms: firstly, Laclos's version of libertinage; then Sade's; and finally, the defense of Christian beliefs. This overarching structure roughly unfolds an account of Genlis's work before, during, and after the Revolution. However, each of the three chapters is organized in a thematic, rather than chronological, fashion. The first chapter identifies a deep connection between Genlis and Laclos. Anecdotally, it bears noticing that Genlis's own mother published a now-forgotten novel titled *Le danger des liaisons*, twenty years before Laclos' famous *Liaisons dangereuses*.^[6] But the similarities between the two writers go well beyond a shared interest in the perils inherent to living in high society circles. More deeply, five motifs tie together Genlis's works to Laclos's novel in the context of the public and private conversations of the time: the figure of the self-educated woman, harp playing, the perversion of pedagogy, the fantasy of a virile female teacher, and family quarrels. Genlis may have served as an inspiration for the ingenue Cécile (also a harp player), as well as the *rouée*, Merteuil, whose famous biographical letter LXXXI features striking, if unexpected, parallels with her *Memoirs*. Drawing on contemporary accounts such as Brissot's, Ibeas-Altamira reads *Les Liaisons dangereuses* as a novel driven by its author's hatred of a woman who competed with him to control the mind of the duc d'Orléans.^[7] He thus interestingly challenges the idea of Laclos as a feminist author. In his reading, the seeming attack on privileged and abusive libertinage put forward in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* conceals a concerted effort to debase the idea of womanhood and the female education as embodied in Genlis.

Yet the attack could be even more open, as shown in the second chapter which is devoted to Sade. Ibeas-Altamira reads *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* and *Histoire de Juliette* as rewritings of Genlis's work and personal story, as well. He recalls that Sade's detestation of the Orléans clan did not prevent him from avidly reading *Adèle et Théodore* while in jail. His stories of kidnapped children retrained to serve as sex objects, his characters of weak mothers helplessly witnessing their progeny methodically alienated by all-powerful masterminds of perversion, strikingly echo many of the accusations thrown at Genlis. She was repeatedly accused of abducting the Orléans children, alienating them from their true mother, and organizing orgies in her boudoir. However, Ibeas-Altamira suggests that Sade's elaboration of these attacks goes beyond their original satirical purpose, gaining hermeneutic value in revealing aspects of Genlis's experience, as well as of her work. Ibeas-Altamira claims that when the magnitude of the Revolution troubled everyone's sense of reality, Genlis was more significant, to herself and to Sade, as a "*fantasme*" than as an actual person (p. 149). Thus, he proposes to read Juliette's flight abroad to avoid Saint-Fond's revenge after she refuses to organize a mass murder, in Sade's *Histoire de Juliette ou les prospérités du vice* (1797), as a literary translation of Genlis' sobering decision to emigrate when her initial enthusiasm for the Revolution morphed in horror after the September massacres. More deeply, the blatant parallels between the two authors raise an inevitable question: is there a Genlisian version of Sadism? What if Sade was just the other side of the coin to Genlis's religious and moralistic fervor?

The third chapter argues that Genlis, in her post-Revolutionary work, successfully fought back against these accusations of hypocrisy. While Laclos and Sade, the two great names of libertine literature, masterfully summarized all the criticisms directed against her in an attempt to cancel her production, she managed to impose, in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, an Enlightenment-infused pedagogical project, focused on taming the imagination, fighting wastefulness, and increasing productivity. She owed her enduring success to her obstinate defense of religion, which she considered the main bulwark against the perils of political turmoil—thus meeting the expectations of an audience eager to "control the social order" in order to dismiss the memory of the Revolution (p. 156). The first section of the chapter examines how

Genlis became an essential cultural reference throughout the Empire and Restoration, widely read throughout Europe although also serving as a foil to most male writers, from Hugo to Stendhal. The second and last section focuses on Genlis's reception in Spain, as an example of the international circulation of her work. The book's conclusion emphasizes Genlis's strategic use of devotion, interpreting her advocacy of religion as a means to secure the only form of expression left to women in a newly misogynistic era. It ends with a chronology which further emphasizes the significance of Genlis's life.

Readers who have no previous familiarity with Genlis would be well advised to start their reading with this chronology and keep it open as they tackle the rest of the book. Due to its great variety of sources, *La Pédagogie dans le boudoir* can be at times a confusing read, especially if you have no previous knowledge of its subject matter. Ibeas-Altamira's "postmodern" methodology serves as a stimulating safeguard against the temptation to write a hagiographic account, common to those who seek to rehabilitate overlooked figures.[8] The downside of this approach is that Ibeas-Altamira's argument mainly relies on drawing parallels, which sometimes appear insufficiently buttressed. One of the most recurring phrases of the book is "ce n'est pas sans rappeler." Very often, the author merely hints at the connection between two facts or two passages, without analyzing it in depth. Interesting points, such as Genlis's admiration for Madame de Maintenon, are mentioned several times but never elaborated upon. As a result, the book constantly oscillates between literary analysis, the research of sources, and social history. This is not to suggest that the three should not be combined, but it would have been helpful to articulate precisely when and how each of these analytic methods interacted with one another.

Moreover, it seems that Ibeas-Altamira could have gone even further in the direction announced by its title, which explicitly points out the disturbing parallel between Genlis and Sade. There is a very thin line between Genlis's insistent training to respect virtue and religion and the marquis's fantasized attempts to debase the vulnerable as mere instruments subject to the whims and wills of a powerful intellect. Surprisingly, the second chapter of the book does not reference Christophe Martin's recent analysis of Genlis's *Zélie ou l'Ingénue*, a chilling rewriting of Molière's *L'École des femmes* which bears many parallels with the long-planned incest recounted in Sade's tale, *Eugénie de Franval*.[9] Is Sade then speaking the truth of Genlis's educating project? Is her work as a pedagogue aimed to foster the autonomy of the pupil, or is it just a laboratory of submission?

These uncomfortable questions take on a new pertinence as the French intelligentsia starts to question the pro-Sade lens that has dominated it for several decades.[10] One may regret that Ibeas-Altamira does not situate his work in the context of these debates, since he asserts his ambition to make the voice of women heard by breaking with traditional methods of scholarship. *La Pédagogie dans le boudoir* nevertheless remains a valuable reading for the sheer amount of information it unearths and the methodological questions it raises. It highlights that reconsidering female figures such as Genlis in all their complexity forces us to reconsider our vision of the Enlightenment legacy and, more broadly, our teaching of literature.

NOTES

[1] The book contains several other illustrations (pp. 51, 57, 98). This worthy exception to Classiques Garnier's usually draconian ban allows us to see directly how Genlis was perceived by her contemporaries. For instance, a telling piece of satirical pornography aimed at arousing

patriotic fervor while discrediting women's participation to the Revolution can be found on p. 98 of *Le Grand débandement de l'armée anticonstitutionnelle* (1792).

[2] The museum exhibited ten reduced-scale model workshops made at the command of Genlis, based on the plates of the *Encyclopédie*, for the education of the d'Orléans children. See the exhibition catalog, *Top Modèles. Une leçon princière au xviii^e siècle* (Paris: Musée des Arts et Métiers, 2020). See also Martine Reid, *Félicité de Genlis. La Pédagogue des Lumières* (Paris: Tallandier, 2022).

[3] This account relies on the chronology provided in the book (pp. 187-209) and on Martine Reid's biography.

[4] Reid indicts, for instance, Gustave Lanson, whose *Histoire de la littérature française* (1895) harshly criticizes the very small number of women writers it includes and bears no mention of Genlis.

[5] On this debate, see Joseph North's *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017). For the French perspective, see Jean-François Massol, Gersende Plissonneau and Béatrice Bloch, eds., special issue, *Recherches & Travaux* 91 (2017), particularly the article by Florence Boulerie, "Le *Traité sur la tolérance* ou l'actualisation impossible."

[6] A fact also recalled in greater detail by Reid, see Reid, *Félicité de Genlis*, pp. 25-26.

[7] Although this claim may not seem supported by chronology, Ibeas-Altamira suggests that Lacos and Genlis were acquainted much earlier than is usually believed, through their common friend, the Chevalier de Saint-George.

[8] It is interesting, in this respect, to compare this book with Reid's more positive biography. Ibeas-Altamira accepts as facts what Reid rejects as slander (for instance the idea that "Paméla" and "Herminie," two English girls raised by Genlis at Bellechasse along with the Orléans children, were in fact her own, fathered by the duc d'Orléans).

[9] Christophe Martin, "Éducatrices négatives." *Fictions d'expérimentation pédagogique au xviii^e siècle* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012), pp. 269-282.

[10] See for instance Hélène Merlin-Kajman, *La Littérature à l'heure de #MeToo* (Paris: Ithaque, 2020), pp. 106-109, as well as Michel Onfray's polemical yet informative pamphlet, *La Passion de la méchanceté* (Paris: Autrement, 2014).

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