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Bonnie Arden Robb, *Félicité de Genlis: Motherhood in the Margins*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008. 298 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-87413-999-0.

Review by Denise Z. Davidson, Georgia State University.

A fascinating and influential author and educator, best known perhaps for her role as tutor of the future king of the July Monarchy, Louis-Philippe, Félicité de Genlis's (1746-1830) life and views straddled the worlds of aristocratic, *ancien régime* France and the new order of the early nineteenth century. Born into an impoverished aristocratic family, Félicité had an unusual childhood. Her mother, Madame du Crest (we never learn her first name in the book), who was largely absent during her daughter's first years, later encouraged Félicité to perform in plays at their own and other people's homes. In one such performance, Félicité played the role of Cupid, and then continued wearing the costume for months, and she frequently donned boy's clothes until she and her mother left their first home to stay with various friends and relatives in 1765. As the family's financial situation worsened, Madame du Crest profited from her daughter's musical talents by having her perform for pay in aristocratic households. These early experiences contributed to Genlis' lifelong focus on performance, her sense that one's life and the performance of that life were essentially the same thing. Trying to be virtuous, and encouraging others to lead virtuous lives, meant as much as actual moral behavior. The emphasis on life as a process, and the idea that "all the world is a stage" are the leitmotifs of Genlis's life and writing as they come across in Bonnie Arden Robb's engaging new study of this prolific author of novels, prescriptive literature, literary history, and numerous other genres.

Félicité de Genlis: Motherhood in the Margins combines biographical information with analysis of Genlis's writing. The book is arranged in nine short chapters. Aside from the first two, which focus on Genlis's childhood and early married life, each chapter connects a stage or event in her life to one or two of her literary productions. This structure suits the argument Robb develops in the book, namely that Genlis used her writing to work through moral issues raised in her own life. Robb's argument, though convincing, does not seem particularly new or surprising. Robb includes a quotation which suggests that Genlis herself interpreted the process and goal of her writing similarly: "Les écrivains moralistes, ainsi que les prédicateurs, sont obligés de conformer leur conduit aux principes qu'ils établissent dans leurs ouvrages" (p. 237). Robb continues by paraphrasing Genlis's interpretation of her own writing: "Of what good are study, reading, and literary endeavors, she asks, if such noble occupations don't temper one's character and morals? Thus being a writer/moralist obligated but presumably also engendered the practice of moral principles. Writing and living were intertwined . . . Genlis's life was on the line, when she wrote" (p. 237).

In addition to drawing attention to how writing could function as a way for Genlis to try to lead a moral life, Robb's argument serves to counter the criticisms voiced by Genlis's contemporaries and more recent scholars who focused on Genlis's supposed hypocrisy in preaching morality while herself leading a life of dubious virtue as the mistress of the duc de Chartes (later to become the duc d'Orléans and later still "Philippe Egalité"), while she lived in the Palais Royal with her husband and children and served as the governess of his children. Rumors also circulated that two of the children Genlis adopted were actually her own children fathered by the duke. Robb discusses these accusations, and concludes that we

cannot be sure about the origins of those adopted children, but these kinds of questions are not at the heart of her analysis.

Robb emphasizes several key themes in Genlis's life and works, all revolving, as the title suggests, around motherhood. These themes are illegitimacy, adoption, and education, especially musical education. Genlis herself was an accomplished harp player, and her adopted son Casimir became a well known harpist himself. The theme of "margins" runs throughout the book, as well, as suggested by the titles given to the two parts of the book: "Models of Motherhood: Experiencing Maternity and Exploring Its Margins" and "Labors of Literary Motherhood: Engendering Marginal Genres." The chapters in the first part discuss Genlis's actual experiences of motherhood, along with her literary representations of illegitimate and adoptive mothers and children. The second part analyzes Genlis's literary treatment of mothers in some of her later works, including historical novels and works of literary history, particularly *De l'influence des Femmes sur la littérature française comme protectrices des lettres et comme auteurs* (1811). One of her better known publications, Genlis's study of French women of letters "asserts not only that women have exerted influence but, more fundamentally, that literature is an empowering domain for women" (p. 197). Here, too, we see how Robb's argument dovetails Genlis's own interpretation of her and other women's literary careers.

Robb's argument that Genlis's literary productions and her life's concerns were intimately linked is one that Genlis herself would no doubt have agreed with, and it is easy for twenty-first century readers to accept as well. My criticism of the book is that such an argument is perhaps a bit too simple; Robb could have tried to ask bigger questions and done more to put Genlis into a broader context. Did other women writers of this period view their work similarly? Did women writers understand the function of their writing differently than male writers? The subject of Robb's study—an intelligent, prolific female author whose life and works are full of both obvious and subtle contradictions that reveal many broad social and cultural patterns of this turbulent period in French history—begs a broader analytical scope. Several recent works by historians could have helped Robb answer these bigger questions, most obviously Carla Hesse's *The Other Enlightenment*, which discusses Genlis at length, while putting her literary career in dialogue with those of other women of her generation.^[1] Still, Robb's study is a useful first step in drawing attention to the great potential of Genlis as a subject of scholarly analysis. Robb's discussions of Genlis's literary works are insightful and convincing. The book also includes four pages of color illustrations, including a beautiful photograph of Casimir's harp, which is now owned by a physicist who lives in Colorado. Robb's study deserves the attention of all who are interested in the issues of female authorship, motherhood, and childrearing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not only because of Genlis's own experiences and views which shed light on prevailing attitudes at the time, but also because of how her ideas influenced later educational theorists and writers of fiction.

NOTES

[1] Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001). In the section of her book that treats the legal debates surrounding adoption, Robb could have also benefited from the details on divorce and family law contained in Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). On the conservative tradition of which Genlis was a part, Robb would have also gained important contextual information, along with some treatment of Genlis herself, in Darrin McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

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