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Nicole Cadène, *“Mon énigme éternel”: Marie-Edmée..., une jeune fille française sous le Second Empire*. Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2012. 370 pp. Notes and bibliography. 28 € (cl). ISBN 978-2-85399-850-5.

Review by Christine Adams, St. Mary's College of Maryland.

Nicole Cadène closes her analysis of the life and afterlife of Marie-Edmée Pau with a justification of her text: “C’est cela que j’ai tenté de faire: rendre à Marie-Edmée son corps païen, et, ce faisant, la libérer de la honte. Pour que son journal inédit puisse enfin être publié. Que Marie-Edmée soit enfin reconnue pour ce qu’elle est: un grand écrivain” (p. 339). In the end, Cadène more than does Marie-Edmée justice, but I would have so appreciated some orientation to the subject of this book earlier in the text. I was 125 pages into the nearly day-by-day recounting of Marie-Edmée’s life before I really began to grasp Cadène’s purpose and method, whereupon the narrative began to take on a form that was more than a thick description. Eventually, I was drawn in and came to understand the task that Cadène had set for herself, and even to admire the way in which she had chosen to approach her topic. But some direction to the life and significance of the subject of this study early on would have provided me with a roadmap and an easier assignment.

Marie-Edmée Pau was a gifted artist and writer from Nancy in the Lorraine. The greatest influences in her youth were her widowed mother, Emma, her brother Gérald, and the relatives they frequently visited, especially in her youth. Marie-Edmée seems in many ways a typical young provincial bourgeoisie in nineteenth-century France, her life focused on family and religious activities, including a devotion to the cult of Mary and charitable works. Cadène pieces together Marie-Edmée’s life primarily from a journal that she began to keep in August of 1859 at the age of thirteen and a half—a journal of 2600 pages in eight volumes. Marie-Edmée’s female domestic world would not strike the modern historian as unusual, and Cadène burrows deeply into that world, especially in the first third of the book.

However, among the detailed descriptions of family visits, voyages to Chartres and Romémont, and particulars that sometimes read as a verbatim account of a not-very-interesting life, certain unique elements in Marie-Edmée’s life and manner of thinking begin to emerge, and she takes shape as a contradictory and unusual young woman. In addition to the journal, Marie-Edmée keeps a notebook in which she makes mention of her eclectic reading interests and the philosophical questions they raise. The variety of texts she reads is impressive, including Christian thinkers such as Saint Augustine and Francis de Sales, Greek philosophers, moralists and philosophers, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century romantics, contemporary female writers, and historical actors (p. 30). She attends university classes and demonstrates intellectual curiosity and a wide range of interests, for both literary and historical figures. Marie-Edmée, who inherited Republican sympathies from her dead father (a Protestant), greatly admires Napoleon, but reserves her greatest veneration for the young heroine of Lorraine and France, Joan of Arc. As Cadène writes, “Pour une jeune Lorraine, le modèle est d’autant plus prégnant, et Marie-Edmée désigne bientôt Jeanne d’Arc comme son ‘génie de prédilection’” (p. 32). She develops a deep interest in the travails of Poland suffering under the boot of Russia, and especially in members of the

Polish diaspora, such as Adam Mickiewicz and Henriette Ponstovoïto, and eventually strikes up a friendship with C. Różycki, a Polish refugee.

Her political interests further reveal feminist leanings. For example, she defends the political efficacy of women, citing historical examples such as Elizabeth of England and Maria Theresa of Austria in arguments with her more traditional aunt and uncle. As Marie-Edmée turns eighteen, she paints a picture of herself as “une âme masculine emprisonnée dans un corps de femme, corsetée dans une éducation de jeune fille” (p. 75). Her journal entries throughout her teenage years represent an interior dialogue and an effort to understand herself. In “un saisissant autoportrait” that Cadène argues “justifierait à lui seule qu’on la range parmi les grandes diaristes de son siècle,” Marie-Edmée identifies and elaborates on the three key traits that define her: “La première, qui est, je crois la base de mon caractère, mon sens, c’est-à-dire le principe de l’impression soudaine, cette nature-là est une Antiquité grecque . . . Ma seconde nature est protestante . . . C’est une violente disposition à tout désirer avec excès, à ne plus m’arrêter sur les bornes du possible . . . Enfin je suis catholique par la grâce de Dieu”; in Cadène’s analysis, “traduit en termes psychanalytiques, cela pourrait correspondre au moi, au ça, et à un surmoi tyrannique” (p. 61). Marie-Edmée is a young woman in search of her own identity, with elements of the feminine and masculine, at a difficult time for a young woman ambivalent about her place in the world. As Cadène notes, “Le Second Empire représente probablement l’une des périodes où les différences entre les sexes sont les plus marquées, les identités de genre les plus contrastées” (p. 87).

But it is her relationship with Marie-Paule Courbe, a young sculptor she meets when they are both twenty, in 1866, that most fully reveals the contradictions that Marie-Edmée experienced in her life, and that her family tried hardest to conceal. Neither Marie-Paule (whom she calls Mary in her journal) nor C. Różycki is named in the published version of her journal. With Mary, the reasons for this reticence are obvious; her journal (despite the numerous pages removed by a zealous censor) makes it clear that she and Mary shared a passionate romantic relationship, even if it is not clear whether that relationship passed into the realm of the physical. Marie-Edmée tries on numerous occasions—unsuccessfully—to end her relationship with Mary, but their shared passion and, presumably, their artistic interests bring them back together again and again. Certainly, her intense religiosity would militate against the consummation of a lesbian relationship, despite her obsession with Mary for a period of several years.

Marie-Edmée and Mary are both serious artists, and Marie-Edmée, significantly for a young bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century, attempts to employ her literary and artistic skills to help support her family, despite the disapproval of some members of her extended family. Her drawings and portraits in particular draw interest and admiration; she places her work on display at various salons in Nancy and elsewhere (she travels frequently, including trips to Paris, Versailles, and Orléans), and publishes some sketches and paintings in a variety of journals. The editor Pierre-Jules Hetzel, among others, expresses interest in her engravings, but eventually rejects her work for reasons that remain unclear. Although Marie-Edmée is pressed by financial concerns to promote her work, it is also clear that she had a vocation—one that her mother and others support, but which other potential mentors discourage, most notably the celebrated Père Dupanloup, bishop of Orléans. When she presents him with her illustrated children’s book (eventually published as *Histoire de notre petite soeur Jeanne d’Arc*), he fears that her embrace of certain “pagan” elements in the legend of Joan will interfere with his efforts to have her canonized. These various encounters leave her full of doubt about her talents, but she continues to publish her artistic works and, eventually, becomes an art instructor, beloved by a number of her students.

The Franco-Prussian war shapes the final year of Marie-Edmée’s life, as well as the narrative that will take hold after her death. In the aftermath of the defeat and during the occupation of Nancy by the Prussians, both Marie-Edmée and her mother devote themselves to the care of wounded soldiers who flood the city. Her brother, as a result of an injury during the fighting, suffers the amputation of his hand; Marie-Edmée travels to the front, and obtains the release of Gérald, who nonetheless insists on

returning to the fight as a captain in October of 1870. The defeat of France in January 1871 compels her once again to search for her brother, who has disappeared into the fog of war. Her health already compromised, Marie-Edmée sets off, eventually arriving in Switzerland before giving up and returning to Nancy on February 25. News from Gérald arrives March 6, but too late for her to comprehend; Marie-Edmée dies on March 7, 1871, at the age of twenty-five.

The chapter “Métamorphoses,” which traces the creation and decline of the cult of Marie-Edmée, is in some ways the most fascinating of the book. With the death of her daughter, Madame Pau transforms herself into “la mère de Marie-Edmée,” and devotes herself to cultivating and spreading the legend of her daughter. This gives rise to the image of Marie-Edmée as a young, virginal and patriotic Frenchwoman, a perfect symbol of Alsace-Lorraine violated by the Prussians. Poems dedicated to Marie-Edmée begin to appear as early as 1871, and editors rediscover her drawings. Antoine de Latour finds and publishes her illustrated history of Joan of Arc, and Marie-Edmée becomes the embodiment of the spirit of Joan, daughter of the Lorraine, “une Belle au bois dormant de la Revanche” (p. 313). With the editorial assistance of Marie-Edmée’s mother, Latour goes on to publish the journal—the edition that became the basis of Philippe Lejeune’s *Le Moi des demoiselles, enquête sur le journal de jeune fille*, the work that originally sparked Cadène’s interest in Marie-Edmée.[1]

The journal was significantly abridged for publication to focus on Marie-Edmée’s spiritual life, her moral perfection, and to de-emphasize her relationships and social life. In short, it was to create a portrait of the idealized young religious woman who dies young. All references to Mary were eliminated from the published journal. However, Cadène asserts that it was not Madame Pau who censored the original journal, from which a significant number of pages were removed. (In fact, about 11 percent of the seventh book of the journal was destroyed). She argues “il est exclu qu’elle ait censuré le journal, précisément parce que celui-ci revêtait pour elle une valeur sacrée, et qu’à travers lui, elle retrouvait sa fille . . .” (p. 314). She suggests instead that it was Marie-Edmée’s beloved brother Gérald, who inherited the journal from his mother, who was responsible for some of the redactions, as well as some unknown person who wanted to disassociate Marie-Edmée from any hint of scandal.

For a while after the publication of Marie-Edmée’s journal, she was a national heroine, the patriotic young French woman of Lorraine, celebrated for her brave actions during the Franco-Prussian war, nursing soldiers and searching for her brother. But her memory faded as the fame of Joan of Arc (beatified in 1909 and canonized in 1920) replaced that of her biographer and illustrator, and as the fame of Marie-Edmée’s brother Gérald, a member of the Conseil de Guerre and a general, eclipsed her own. The Great War of 1914–18 overshadowed the war of 1870–71, and created new myths and heroes—more so than heroines.

This is in many ways a difficult text to grasp, in part because Nicole Cadène made a conscious effort to allow Marie-Edmée’s journal to shape the narrative; on p. 296, she writes, “sa plume, jusqu’ici, guidait la mienne.” I came to appreciate the way in which the topic unfolded; the story of Marie-Edmée’s youth, her relationships, her embedded position in the bourgeois society of Nancy as well as its artistic and literary circles, her intellectual and religious interests, the revelation of her relationship with Mary, and more, but I cannot pretend that it is an easy read. It is, however, a heavily researched and learned text, a densely woven cloth of French life under the Second Empire, with a fascinating subject at its center, and its many strands have much to offer historians with very different interests. And there is genuine satisfaction in this successful effort to shed light on a woman whose complex personality was effaced for so long through the efforts of agenda-driven biographers who flattened her into a two-dimensional figure representing a specific type of nineteenth-century religious and patriotic icon. In the words of Cadène, “Marie-Edmée pourrait ainsi être comparée à une phare exposée à la tempête. Son intelligence, sa sensibilité, ses qualités d’observation et d’expression éclairent de leur faisceau le sombre océan des rapports de genre, mettant en lumière la violence symbolique exercée par la société du Second Empire sur ses membres, les jeunes filles surtout. Cette violence s’exerce jusque dans la postérité: ironiquement,

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celle qui espérait rencontrer dans l'avenir une compréhension impossible à trouver maintenant fut érigée en parangon de l'ordre qui la niait" (p. 337). Thanks to Nicole Cadène, posterity now has a much fuller picture of Marie-Edmée Pau and her world.

## NOTES

[1] Philippe Lejeune, *Le Moi des demoiselles, enquête sur le journal de jeune fille* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1993).

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