

H-France Review Vol. 4 (April 2004), No. 44

Colette Cosnier, *Marie Pape-Carpantier: Fondatrice de l'école maternelle*. Paris: Fayard, 2003. 415 pp. Figures and notes. 25.00 € (pb). ISBN 2-213-61527-6.

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

This book is a revised and expanded edition of Colette Cosnier's earlier book, *Marie Pape-Carpantier: De l'école maternelle à l'école des filles*.^[1] In it, Cosnier pays homage to an author and pedagogue celebrated for her advanced ideas on the education of children in the mid-nineteenth century. Cosnier had access to an abundance of writings by Pape-Carpantier that highlight debates about the education of children--and, in particular, poor children and girls--that reverberated over the course of the century. She acknowledges her debt to Jean-Noël Luc's important work, *L'Invention du jeune enfant au XIXe siècle: De la salle d'asile à l'école maternelle*.^[2] Cosnier's work focuses on Pape-Carpantier and the key role she played in the transformation Luc traces from the early *salle d'asile* to the professional *école maternelle*.

In many ways, this is a traditional work of women's history, an effort to rescue from obscurity a "pédagogue aussi célèbre en son temps, aussi connue dans toute l'Europe que Fröbel ou Pestalozzi" but who "est tombée dans l'oubli au XXe siècle" (p. 11). Cosnier regrets the fact that Pauline Kergomard is today considered the founder of the *école maternelle*, and that little recognition is accorded the woman she sees as its true founder. Having attended an elementary school in La Flèche that Pape-Carpantier herself directed in the early nineteenth century, the author feels a special link to the subject of her biography, one that manifests itself in an almost hagiographic treatment.

Cosnier first traces Pape-Carpantier's difficult childhood (in rather melodramatic fashion). Her father, a sergeant in the National Guard, was killed by a *chouan* band while on patrol during the period of the Hundred Days in May 1815, before Marie Carpentier's birth. Her mother, now a poor widow with small children, worked long hours to support her young family. Marie attended school until the age of eleven and then left to work beside her mother. Hence, she received little formal education. But Marie was an autodidact whose love for writing would eventually lead her to a career in education, as would the benign influence of Jean-François Philippe de Neufbourg, a professor at the *Ecole royale militaire préparatoire de La Flèche*. Neufbourg was well versed in scholarship concerning the education of youth, and he shared this knowledge with Marie, who referred to him as her "*vénéré maître*" (p. 28). However, most of the details of her youth are obscure. (Cosnier relies heavily on a biographical article by Bessie R. Parks, published in *The English Woman's Journal* in 1862, for information on Carpentier's childhood.)

In 1834, at the age of nineteen, Marie Carpentier was asked to assume the direction of the *salle d'asile* in La Flèche. For a woman, there was relatively little prestige (or prospect of a comfortable salary) attached to this job. The *salle d'asile* was a charitable institution for children from the ages of two to six years. Originally conceived as a place for poor working mothers to leave their children, the *salle d'asile* became a site of debate as well. Was it a type of day care, to keep poor children off the streets so that their parents (especially mothers) could work? Or rather, was its function to offer a rudimentary education to these poor children? And if so, what kind of education should they receive? Should these very small children be put to work to prepare for the hard and grueling life of manual labor ahead? As Cosnier points out, "Selon que l'on considère les salles d'asile comme une institution charitable ou comme un établissement d'enseignement, les avis divergent sur ce qu'on doit apprendre aux enfants" (p. 46). A royal ordinance issued in 1837 defined the *salles d'asile* as "des établissements charitables où les enfants des deux sexes peuvent être admis jusqu'à l'âge des six ans accomplis, pour recevoir les soins de surveillance maternelle et de première éducation que leur âge réclame," and laid out the vision for the

“ideal” *salle d’asile* (p. 67-68). However, few schools achieved this “ideal” status, since municipal governments were unwilling to provide the necessary financial support, as Pape-Carpantier’s experience in La Flèche illustrates. Still, municipal authorities obviously appreciated her work in La Flèche since she was chosen to replace her future father-in-law, Claude Pape, at the larger *salle d’asile* in the city of Le Mans in 1842. This promotion of sorts came after a three-year period of retirement from teaching, during which she became a celebrated writer of poetry.

This disagreement over the appropriate function of the *salle d’asile* made the position of *directrice* a politically sensitive one. Marie Carpentier saw her role as “pédagogue” and not simply as “gardeuse” (p. 54); and certainly not as a taskmaster to force small children to labor. And it was clear that her true vocation was not simply to serve as the director of a *salle d’asile*; rather, she was interested in teaching children and teaching others to teach children. Consequently, she left Le Mans for Paris in 1847 to direct the *Ecole normale maternelle* which would train teachers and directors for the *salles d’asile*—or the *écoles maternelles*, the name that Pape-Carpantier preferred to use.^[3] At first, the *Ecole normale maternelle* (under the Second Empire, the name of the school would change to “*Cours pratique des salles d’asile*”) struggled to attract students, but it eventually became an important institute for training the teachers of very young children. As director of the *Ecole*, and as a celebrated author on pedagogy, Pape-Carpantier became increasingly well known and created important ties to governmental figures, most notably, Victor Duruy, French Minister of Public Instruction from 1863 to 1869. Her prominence was underlined by her important role in addressing teachers at the *Exposition universelle* of 1867, and by her appointment to the position of *inspectrice générale* des salles d’asile in 1868.

The debate over the appropriate function of the *salle d’asile* (or *école maternelle*) eventually became part of a larger discussion about the education of young children, as Fröbel’s vision of child education and the kindergarten became known throughout Europe. Pape-Carpantier was much attracted by the ideas of Fröbel, although Cosnier makes claims that Pape-Carpantier’s contributions were every bit as important and original as those of her German counterpart. Certainly Pape-Carpantier wrote extensively on pedagogy throughout her career, and her books met with wide acclaim from many. In fact, her *Conseils sur la direction des salles d’asile* (1846) won the prestigious Monthyon prize in recognition of its contribution to the education of poor children (p. 138). However, as Cosnier points out, her books were controversial as well, mainly because Pape-Carpantier was perceived by some as a free-thinker, insufficiently religious for an instructor of very young children. This was a charge that would dog Pape-Carpantier throughout her professional life. Her increasingly controversial reputation would eventually lead to her dismissal from her position as *inspectrice générale des salles d’asile* in 1874. Pape-Carpantier’s fall from favor and fears of poverty following the loss of her job until her death in 1878 underline the vulnerability of working women in the nineteenth century.

Cosnier clearly regrets the fact that she lacks many sources that could illuminate Pape-Carpantier’s private life as wife and mother. However, she has a rich trove of documents that provide the basis for an analysis of Pape-Carpantier’s public life, and most notably, her writings on the education of children. Cosnier cites close to thirty works by Pape-Carpantier in her bibliography, in addition to numerous essays that were published in *L’Ami de l’enfance* and *L’Education nouvelle: Journal des mères et des enfants*, among other journals. She carefully analyzes the texts, looking for insights not only to Pape-Carpantier’s clearly progressive views on the education of children but also for the perceived influences of *fourieristes*, Freemasons, and feminists on her world view. For example, Cosnier sees in Pape-Carpantier’s celebration of geometry in *Le Secret des grains de sable* clear evidence of freemason influences; according to Cosnier, geometry was the “Science en l’honneur chez les maçons” (p. 244). Likewise, Pape-Carpantier’s frequent use of the term “initié” signals for Cosnier an immersion in freemason ideals (p. 124). Sometimes, she fails to make these links very clear to the reader; in making the case that Pape-Carpantier’s celebrated *Conseils sur la direction des salles d’asile* shows the influence of Fourier and his disciples, Cosnier writes simply of “la couleur fouriériste” of the work (p. 125). Pape-Carpantier was part of a network of radical thinkers that included Jules Delbrück, Marceline Desbordes-

Valmore, and the Milliets; Cosnier sees evidence that their ideas had an enormous impact on Pape-Carpantier's writings and methods and also suggests that these connections account for the hostility that many conservatives felt towards her.

This book's strength--its richness of detail--is also its weakness. Cosnier does a fine job placing Marie Pape-Carpantier in the context of the intellectual, cultural, and political currents of the nineteenth century. The charitable milieu of the *salles d'asile*, the influences of the *fourieristes* and the freemasons on educators like Pape-Carpantier, contemporary debates over the education of girls--all are explored in minute detail. Perhaps too minute--the thread of the narrative and the focus on Pape-Carpantier herself are sometimes lost in these detours. Cosnier is clearly engaged by the texts and the ideas of Pape-Carpantier, and quotes from her books and articles extensively. Once again, perhaps too extensively. Cosnier wishes to prove conclusively the influence of ideas associated with Fourier and the Freemasons on Pape-Carpantier, but the textual analysis becomes repetitious over time. And the lack of an index makes use of the book frustrating to anyone seeking specific information.

Still, this is a useful book for anyone interested in a woman who clearly played an important role in shaping the education of children in nineteenth-century France. Marie Pape-Carpantier is a woman who deserved rescue from obscurity.

NOTES

[1] Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993.

[2] Paris: Belin, 1997.

[3] The name *école maternelle* was used by the government of the Second Republic, and although officially dropped in 1850, it was frequently used in place of *salle d'asile*, and formally adopted in 1881. Raymond Grew and Patrick J. Harrigan, *School, State and Society: The Growth of Elementary Schooling in Nineteenth-Century France--A Quantitative Analysis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991): 187.

Christine Adams
St. Mary's College of Maryland
cmadams@smcm.edu

Copyright © 2004 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 4 (April 2004), No. 44

ISSN 1553-9172