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Renee Winegarten, *Accursed Politics: Some French Women Writers and Political Life, 1715-1850*. Chicago: Ivan R.Dee, 2003. vii + 288 pp. Illustrations, chronology, notes, and index. $27.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 1-56663-499-7.

Review by Lisa Jane Graham, Haverford College.

Renee Winegarten's book aims to reach an educated, not an academic audience, and this review evaluates it on these terms. While Winegarten's notes reflect recent historical scholarship, her book does not engage these arguments in sustained discussion. Some important feminist studies of women in France by American scholars such as Dena Goodman, Carla Hesse, and Joan Scott, are noticeably absent, reflecting, perhaps, Winegarten's stated "distaste for ideology and theory" (p. 23).[1] Can one write a book about the relationship between women writers and politics in France from the Enlightenment through the Revolution of 1848 and remain neutral? The six women selected by Winegarten (Alexandrine de Tencin, Manon Roland, Claire de Duras, Félicité de Genlis, Germaine de Staël, and Georges Sand) confronted social prejudice and legal constraints as they forged their careers. However, most of their names would be unfamiliar to non-specialists, and their works are difficult to find in modern French editions let alone translations. Their collective story inevitably acquires political charge if only because of its disappearance. While Winegarten's book may disappoint on the level of argument, it nevertheless offers vivid and informed portraits of these women and their world.

In the prologue, Winegarten explains that the book grew out of "a lifetime's love affair with French literature and civilization" (p. 5). The six writers thus chosen act as guides through the literature, with a chapter devoted to each author. They all wrote professionally during an era of political and cultural upheaval in which women were excluded from political participation. Yet, through their publications and their connections, both personal and intellectual, each used her pen to address, and at times influence, the political issues of her day. Winegarten does not view her six authors as forming a cohesive group since their social and ideological backgrounds diverge widely. Her book highlights their idiosyncrasies and distinctive, at times contradictory, attitudes.

Winegarten opens with a discussion of Rousseau's distrust of women writers and his continuing influence throughout the nineteenth century. Ironically, all of her subjects read Rousseau voraciously as part of their enlightened education and internalized his negative image, which made them reluctant to acknowledge their ambitions or talents. Some felt guilty for falling short of the domestic ideal of womanhood so pervasive in post-revolutionary France and enshrined in the Napoleonic Code. Yet, each enjoyed celebrity in her day, even if she refused to publish, which makes the ensuing lack of recognition all the more surprising.

Chapter one focuses on Madame de Tencin (1682-1749), whose career took shape in the ebullient decades of the Regency and the early Enlightenment. Forced into a convent at age eight, Tencin fought to earn her release from her vows and succeeded in 1712 when she was thirty years old. This experience displayed her resourcefulness in resisting both conventions and bureaucratic procedures. Tencin's personal and political life provoked scandal from her involvement with John Law's Bubble to her abandonment of her illegitimate son, Jean Le Rond d'Alembert. Her lovers, such as the abbé Dubois, drew her close to the throne and helped advance her brother's ecclesiastical career. She led a salon where she gathered luminaries from all fields including Duclos, Fontenelle, and Marivaux along with *philosophes* such as Montesquieu. After sketching her life, Winegarten examines her novels, which blended autobiographical details with psychological insight, adventure, and intrigue. Tencin moved in circles dedicated to reforming the monarchy; like many, she found Louix XV a disappointing figure for her work. She learned how to operate within the system of court intrigue to advance her interests and those attached to her. Such was power for men and women under the Old Regime.

The next chapter traces the career of the revolutionary, Madame Roland (1754-1793) who was executed during the Terror. Roland grew up in a Parisian milieu of artists and intellectuals. Her parents insisted on educating her so that she would have the "ability to think for herself" (p. 66). Extensive reading of Rousseau shaped her puritanical morals and republican ideals. She agreed with his condemnation of women writers and vowed never to expose herself to ridicule. A voluminous correspondent, she never wrote for a public except through her memoirs, composed while in prison and published after her death. Through her husband, she acquired a political voice and a role, serving as his unofficial secretary and providing a meeting place for Brissot and the Girondins. Always sympathetic to reform, she welcomed the revolution in 1789 and hoped to influence its leaders. Unfortunately, as the revolution shifted left, her liberal views became suspect and marked her for arrest and death. Winegarten suggests that Madame Roland's self-censorship deprived the world of a great mind whose awareness of the power of public opinion made her a true modern.

Claire de Duras (1777-1828), the subject of chapter three, survived the turbulent revolutionary years despite her commitment to constitutional monarchy. She fled the Terror and traveled first to Philadelphia and then to Martinique where her Breton father had met and married her mother. Her encounter with the sugar plantations, the source of her family's wealth, fueled her critique of slavery. She treated this topic in her 1824 best-selling novel, *Ourika*, and welcomed prominent abolitionists in the salon she led during the Bourbon Restoration. She married the Duc de Duras in 1797, the scion of a Breton aristocratic family, and through his political duties found herself allied to the court of France. She admired Madame de Staël and remained a liberal monarchist throughout her life. She wrote all of her novels between 1820-24, although she never acknowledged herself as an author. According to Winegarten, her friendship with Chateaubriand, whom she met in 1808, proved the most meaningful relationship in her life. She devoted herself to promoting his career, lending him money and advice, only to be abandoned by the celebrated writer when he became a statesman and peer of the realm. A melancholy woman beset by inhibitions, Duras captures the plight of a gifted woman who never fully shook off the weight of convention to find happiness. Her novels, which explore topics such as race, desire, and impotence, confirm her progressive spirit.

In chapter four, Winegarten turns to Felicité de Genlis (1746-1830) whose literary career acquired renown in the last decade of the Old Regime. While she tested her pen in several genres, her work in educational theory drew the attention of the Duc d'Orleans, who appointed her tutor to his children including Louis-Philippe, the future king of France. Although she was a child of the Enlightenment, Genlis consistently found herself at odds with the "false philosophy" of her contemporaries (p. 125). Inspired by Fénélon and Madame de Maintenon, Genlis believed religion was the fount of morality and central to pedagogy. Yet, despite her critical views of mainstream Enlightenment thought, she hardly qualified as a reactionary. She instilled in her pupils a dislike of courtly pomp and privileges while nurturing their respect for constitutional principles. She welcomed the revolution in 1789 as the end of despotism and an opportunity for reform. Yet, her heart remained attached to the throne and she fled France in 1792, not returning until 1800. Napoleon offered her a pension in return for fortnightly reports on public opinion. While Genlis emerges in the last decades of her life as an opportunist, given her capacity to survive so many regime changes, Winegarten argues that fear guided her decisions and her pen. She continued to publish until her death in 1830, although her memoirs mystify more than they illuminate her beliefs and decisions.

Chapter five examines the life and career of Germaine de Staël (1766-1817) daughter of Louis XVI's famous treasurer, the Swiss Protestant banker, Jacques Necker. De Staël adored her father who nurtured her intellect from an early age and encouraged her ambitions. She inherited her father's anglomania and remained committed to liberty, progress, and constitutional government her entire life. She discovered the influence of public opinion from her father's own career, a lesson she never forgot. Married in 1786 to an impoverished Swedish diplomat, she quickly separated from her husband. Together with her younger lover, Benjamin Constant, she molded liberalism as a political theory and practice. Unlike her predecessors in Winegarten's book, de Staël embodied the role of a militant intellectual and paid the price in years of exile. She believed that literature had a moral obligation to denounce tyranny and pursued this conviction even when she risked arrest or death. Napoleon despised and feared her and had her policed even when in exile. Her commitment to speaking the truth rankled successive governments from Louis XVI through the Directory and Bonaparte. De Staël spent most of two decades wandering Europe until her death in 1817. Her sense of intellectual responsibility distinguishes her as a citizen and writer in a democratic age.

Winegarten concludes her book with the career of Georges Sand (1804-1876) who, like de Staël, had an active political agenda, although of a different ideological cast. Sand came of age during the 1830s and witnessed the

hardships imposed by early industrialization. Her disillusionment with the liberal policies of the July Monarchy pushed her to embrace socialist ideas. The daughter of an aristocratic father and a demimondaine mother, Sand experienced class tension within her family from an early age. Her sensitivity to inequality guided her work toward "a great reform" and her later participation in the short-lived second republic of 1848 (p. 205). Her popular novels treated themes of injustice and she devoted time and money to promoting working class culture. Her initial enthusiasm for the 1848 revolution gave way to disgust with the violence and corruption of politics and led her to retire from public life. Winegarten suggests that Sand envisioned a classless society without the struggle required to establish it.

It is frustrating that such careful descriptions failed to frame a sharper analysis. In her epilogue, Winegarten asserts that despite their exclusion from politics, each woman found access to power and exerted influence over those who exercised it (p. 234). This general statement seems more appropriate at the start rather than the end of a book. A couple of points merited closer attention. What did authorship mean to each of these writers and how did she manage her career, financially and intellectually? Winegarten refers to the popularity of Sand's novels across Europe in the 1830s, for example, but she neglects to account for how Sand achieved this success. The question of literary career leads directly into that of legacy. How do we explain the fact that some of these women have slipped into oblivion while others are part of the canon of French literature? Moreover, Winegarten's refusal to situate these women in a feminist history ultimately leaves their connections to one another and to politics elusive. Finally, Winegarten never explains why she refers to her women writers by their first name and their male contemporaries by their last name. Consistency would appear more neutral than Claire and Chateaubriand, Germaine and Constant.

NOTES

[1] Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001); Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1996).

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