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Kathleen Kete, *Making Way for Genius: The Aspiring Self in France from the Old Regime to the New*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012. x + 256 pp. Notes and index. \$38.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-300-17482-3.

Review by Mary Orr, University of Southampton.

Good titles that locate their subject and invite reader curiosity are an art, and Kathleen Kete's choice of title immediately makes this book stand out. Its focus on Germaine de Staël, Stendhal (Henri Beyle) and Georges Cuvier further intrigues by its range: this study covers the woman of genius exiled by Napoleon; the writer who ends *La Chartreuse de Parme* with a dedication "To The Happy Few;" and the acme of the professional "scientist" before the word was coined in 1833. Kete's plotting of these distinctive paths of genius is centrally tied to the notion of "ambition," a term that she conceals from her title to develop in the introduction. Its trajectory from a term of opprobrium in the *ancien régime* to a more positive, post-Revolutionary attribute, "the passion to succeed" (p. 15), then raises questions about attainment of such a "self" while avoiding its shadow: self-serving self-aggrandisement. For Kete, this stress point of ambition has three variant solutions as masks of the modern self: romantic genius or heightened awareness as exemplified by Staël's *Corinne*; secular vocation in forms played out by Julien Sorel in Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*; and the callings of greater destiny as represented in the *Éloges* of Georges Cuvier. The shadow figure connecting all three is the naked ambition of Napoléon I.

Corinne's extraordinariness is the subject of the first main chapter on romantic genius. Kete inquires if Staël's heroine is born or made a genius (bowdlerising Beauvoir), by focusing on her creator's own upbringing by an aspiring and assertive mother. Corinne's discovered originality (she is Italy) resolves the dilemmas of locating genius in nature or nurture, or in the *égoïsme* of Napoleonic France. Corinne's suicide is then a result of failed love rather than a failed genius, which remained intact for Staël in the sociability with like-minded and different others, such as the circle at Coppet.

A similar parrying with *égoïsme* as success at all costs is examined in Julien Sorel's solution in Stendhal's novel *Le Rouge et le Noir*. The obsessive quality of personal vocation allows Julien to put on and take off negative models in his search for his own aspirational self. Kete reads this set of replacement "cures" for Julien's *monomania* against the psychiatric work of Philippe Pinel (closely following the critics Victor Del Litto and Jan Goldstein). Julien's shooting of Madame de Rênal is then the "shock therapy" transforming ambition into love. The wildest calls of Julien's imagination are thus rechanneled into his vocation at the end of the novel as representative of everything which the *métiers* available to his generation are not. For Kete, this also reconnects Stendhal, the Italian consul, with Stendhal, the writer. She omits to add "writer of the *Chronique du XIX^e siècle*," the all-important subtitle of *Le Rouge et le Noir*.

The final main chapter--on unalloyed ambition concealed as response to greater destiny--reads Cuvier's own life trajectories through the marked absence of history and politics in his various *Éloges* as a set of folktale motifs: problematic birth and upbringing, rewards for hard work, obstacles as advancements in disguise. Opportunism is then carefully stage-managed as discovery by eminent others, so that further advancement appears as a given, not something grasped. Cuvier's careerism is then set firmly and negatively against his friend cum archrival Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, whose need for approval while in Egypt (in correspondence with Cuvier) only announces his greater heroism in the face of Napoleon's withdrawal from Egypt (and Cuvier's support at the Jardin des Plantes).

Cuvier, but chiefly Napoleon in one neat sweep, is the new *ambitieux* of quasi-mythic proportions. For Kete these figures all give pause for thought. For the modern self, the principle of individuality always radically questions the principle of self-in-community.

But a further layer of this dilemma is Kete's own, how to make her own mark as an aspiring scholar on this diverse subject matter. Her solution is exemplified in the copious notes to this book (nearly fifty pages). These however largely boil down to a very circumscribed body of previous criticism mostly in English, on which Kete then over-relies--frequent quotations from them, too often work from the pre-selected citations already used by these authorities--rather than from direct engagements with her primary texts, and a large body of relevant criticism in French (and English) on her subject. For example, use of chapter thirty of *Le Rouge et le Noir*--entitled "un ambitieux"--could have further expanded her chapter to include a core question for all the authors of the study and their shadow, Napoléon I, the question of being a "provincial." Similarly and to the great detriment of the chapter on Cuvier, Kete also seems unaware of a recent revival of interest in France in the form of a raft of new biographies and critical studies. Philippe Taquet's *Georges Cuvier: naissance d'un génie* immediately stands out, not only for its title but also because it treats Cuvier's childhood and includes various appendices of immediate relevance and challenge to Kete's arguments.[1] One cannot also embark on a study of Cuvier's *Éloges* without a firm grounding in the history of the genre of *éloges* (and *éloges funèbres*), or the French (auto)biographical traditions that Stendhal's *Vie de Henry Brulard* also shares. One cannot ignore either the question of the gender of "genius" or the "aspirational self" as instigated by Staël, but more recently investigated in studies of Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, and Colette by Julia Kristeva.[2]

Nineteenth-century French literature specialists and historians of French natural science may therefore come away from this study more interested in its subtexts than its main studies, for the book's importance and fascination remain its engagement with the question of "the aspirational self" in France. Its deft turn to the iceberg of ambition lying below the tip of aspiration offers not only a window on France from 1750 until Cuvier's death in 1832, but also a cultural history of this "modern self" translated into American academe. French historians then need to take note of Kete's challenge for further work on this period, that fictional writing and scientific *éloges* are important documents revealing the spirit of the age as a crucial way to (re)interpret its histories.

NOTES

[1] Philippe Taquet, *Georges Cuvier: naissance d'un génie* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006).

[2] Julia Kristeva, *Le Génie féminine* (Paris: Fayard, 1999).

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