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Nadine Berenguier, *Conduct Books for Girls in Enlightenment France*. Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011. x + 283 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$104.95 (hb.). ISBN 978-0-7546-6875-6.

Review by Joan B. Landes, Pennsylvania State University.

Once again we seem to be fighting a mommy war and, as in the past, what's right and wrong with French mothering is drawing international attention, thanks especially to recent books by Élisabeth Badinter and Pamela Druckerman.<sup>[1]</sup> The eighteenth-century analogue to contemporary concern with mothers is well-known, and no figure has been more discussed in this context than Jean-Jacques Rousseau.<sup>[2]</sup> Nadine Bérenguier's absorbing study of eighteenth-century conduct books further deepens our understanding of past French contributions to what is turning out to be an enduring modern obsession with the mother's role in the intellectual and moral development of her daughters.

This is not exclusively a book about mothering but it is unavoidably about mothers' relationships to their female children. Like other *dix-huitièmistes*, Bérenguier credits Rousseau's influential appeal to eighteenth-century mothers. However, she demonstrates convincingly that not everything *c'est la faute à Rousseau!* Rather "the key role of mothers in their daughters' upbringing was a staple of the discourse on female education throughout the eighteenth century" (p. 65). Mothers were caught in a double bind, blamed for their ignorance and deemed inadequate to the task of educating their daughters, while simultaneously held to be the *sine qua non* of a successful female upbringing. Likewise for authors: insofar as reading was a means of empowerment and self-improvement, it raised the specter of how much enlightenment for young girls was potentially too much.

This study examines the contradiction between the Enlightenment goal of education, including the promotion of female reading, and deep-seated anxieties, even among progressive authors, about the moral and intellectual dangers of educating girls. Bérenguier situates conduct books within the broad shift from oral to print culture as it impacted the realm of female education. An instance of reformist literature, conduct books had the potential to challenge a good deal about mainstream practices, especially in the realm of marriage and family life. These books were not just about "about girls but for them," thus offering an intriguing opportunity to investigate the prescriptive and descriptive narrative strategies adopted by authors engaged in developing a new reading public (p. 3, author's emphasis).

Bérenguier does a terrific job of showing what a vexed instrument such books were for this young female readership, whose ignorance was associated with innocence and virtue. She clarifies the contrasting approaches employed by male and female authors of conduct books, and she makes an astute selection of authors, ranging from mothers to professional educators, journalists to social critics, Christians to republicans. Female authors could be (actual and textual) mothers, governesses and friends, while men often masked their identities as fictive females or portrayed themselves as surrogate fathers to an orphaned child. While authors like Marquise de Lambert or Louise d'Épinay drew authority on the topic of girl's education from their own direct experience as mothers, in general, conduct book authors devised ways to perform, through the mediation of print, the duties of which too many mothers were deemed to be failing. Lambert is an interesting case, as her status was linked to her

writings to her children, which circulated first as manuscripts among members of her *salon* and then were published in 1728, purportedly against her wishes.

Additional complications arose when the author was not a mother. Male writers had to be on particular guard about their responsibility for and motives in lifting an innocent girl's veil of ignorance. Moreover, according to the age's new physiological theories, girls were deemed to be weak, delicate, and disturbingly susceptible to the demands of an uncontrollable imagination. Further compounding the stakes of addressing such reading subjects was the decline of convents as the exclusive guardians of girl's education and the expansion (even supplanting) of orthodox religious instruction by secular teachings. Some books went through multiple printings and achieved measurable success, while the dissemination of others was short-term. In certain cases, an eighteenth-century book was reissued and only achieved best-selling status in the nineteenth century. Despite their diverse backgrounds, convictions, and fame, the authors of these works shared a concern with the values of virtue, modesty, respect of authority, and self-control. These topoi are explored throughout the book, with the aim of investigating "these educational texts not only for *what* they told their young readers but for *how* they approached an audience for whom reading was a problematic endeavor" (p. 3, author's emphasis).

Bérenquier has structured her work in three admirable sections, each cross-referencing the others but with a clear focus. The three sections approach the principal texts under analysis from literary and historical perspectives. The two chapters in part one "Textual Strategies" serve as an inviting introduction to the authors and books at the core of the study. Bérenquier here examines the narrative forms favored by conduct-book authors, alongside their anxieties about their role in relation to their target audience. In the latter instance, Bérenquier effectively applies Gérard Genette's approach to authorial and allographic prefaces, a critical approach she again utilizes in part three to address editor's prefaces to nineteenth-century editions of the enlightened works.

Part three is actually the lengthiest of the book's sections. Here Bérenquier tackles the always-challenging issue of determining a book's reception. In lieu of the readers themselves, she traces press reception of these conduct books, focusing on journalists' and periodicals' ideological orientations, and the impact of the author's gender on the book's critical reception. She follows this up by examining the place of these books in the bio-bibliographical compilations of the late eighteenth century, as a bridge to an assessment of the nineteenth-century literary fortunes of these works. The chapters on the reception of specific authors in part three are exceptionally thorough and will likely best reward those with a specific interest in the age's critical landscape or in specific authors. In contrast, the three chapters of part two—examining the topoi of motherhood, new social spaces, and marriage and its disillusionments—are a treat for anyone concerned with changing eighteenth-century gender relations and pedagogy.

Pedagogically, parts one and two of *Conduct Books* would be an especially wonderful addition to either history and literature courses, and not only of France. In fact, Bérenquier's insights on the paradoxes of a woman's existence in both the public and private realms often made me think of nothing less than a good Jane Austen novel and many of the issues raised here probe, with fresh insight and in a different domain, issues previously addressed in Mary Poovey's now classic work.<sup>[3]</sup> This study could be fruitfully paired with literary works in courses on the history of manners, the history of girlhood, the history of the press, the history of the family, or educational theory and practice, to name just a few specific topics. In short, this is a book with lots to offer to specialists as well as students. It is based on impressive research, which is presented in a lively and accessible manner. There is much here for those who would venture into the subject of how girls navigated the boundary line between knowledge and moral propriety.

## NOTES

[1] Elisabeth Badinter, *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women*, trans. Adriana Hunter (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2011 [orig. 2010]); Pamela Druckerman, *Bringing Up Bébé: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting* (New York: Penguin, 2012). See also Amy Chua's controversial comparison of traditional Chinese and contemporary Western parenting in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (New York: Penguin, 2011). Feminist critiques of normative ideals of mothering are too many to mention, but see the following examples: Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995); Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004).

[2] For two reevaluations of Rousseau's legacy in light of feminist ambivalence toward his domestic agenda, see: Jennifer J. Popiel, *Rousseau's Daughters: Domesticity, Education, and Autonomy in Modern France* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2008); Lesley H. Walker, *A Mother's Love: Crafting Feminine Virtue in Enlightenment France* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2008). Among additional accounts, see Mary Trouille, *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Lydia Lange, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988).

[3] Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

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