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Katharine Ann Jensen, *Uneasy Possessions: The Mother-Daughter Dilemma in French Women's Writings, 1671-1928*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011. 450 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-61149-038-1.

Review by Whitney Walton, Purdue University.

In this ambitious book, Katharine Ann Jensen analyzes mother-daughter relationships in selected texts by French women writers across four centuries. Her main frameworks are the ideology of reflectivity and the psychoanalytic theory of intersubjectivity. This analysis focuses primarily on the following works: Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette's novel, *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678); Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné's letters to her daughter written from 1671 to 1696; Elisabeth Vigée Lebrun's memoirs published in 1834, George Sand's autobiography of 1847-1855; and Colette's account of her mother, *La Naissance du jour (Break of Day)* (1928). The argument is complex, but overall Jensen contends that in the absence of opportunities for women to establish independent social identities as individuals, mothers and daughters were locked into relationships of psychological domination and submission that pained both parties equally and prevented them from recognizing one another as autonomous beings with separate desires. Jensen claims that her book "provides a new reading of women's history" (p. 20) and "a new understanding of female psychology" (p. 21).

Jensen clearly explains her theoretical frameworks, both in the introduction and several times throughout the book. She asserts that mother-daughter reflectivity was the only acceptable (and almost timeless) relationship for women; that is, mothers wanted to recreate themselves in their daughters. According to Jensen, mothers aspired for their daughters to be just like themselves, to be "masterpieces" created by the mother, and hence, the mothers' possessions. To support this contention, Jensen cites three different guidebooks on rearing daughters published in 1640, 1728, and 1786, along with two histories of mothers and girls by contemporary scholars. Such reflectivity, she maintains, clashed with the ever-rising ideology of individualism that posited the recognition of oneself and others as subjects with distinctive desires and characteristics. Since neither mothers nor daughters could enact both reflectivity and individualism because they were inherently contradictory, they engaged in psychological power struggles. Jensen invokes Jessica Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity as a potential means of escaping this dilemma, since it interprets psychological autonomy as deriving from self-assertion and others' recognition of the self.^[1] For Benjamin the paradox of intersubjectivity lies in the self's dependence upon others' recognition of the self as an individual, and the requirement that the self recognize as individuals those who contribute to *his* differentiation. Whereas Benjamin theorized intersubjectivity in heterosexual relationships--men depended upon women's recognition of them as subjects, but did not recognize women as subjects--Jensen sees a similar paradox in mother-daughter relations in France.

The study begins with Lafayette's novel (and the only work of fiction among the texts Jensen analyzes), *La Princesse de Clèves*. Jensen examines and even speculates upon the character of Madame de Chartres, the mother of the princess. According to Jensen the widowed Madame de Chartres withdrew from court society to preserve her reputation for virtue, and to raise her daughter to be the perfect embodiment of virtue, that is, having no passion. Returning to court to marry her daughter, Madame de Chartres was

pleased by the alliance with the Prince de Clèves, since it was socially prestigious, and since the princess' attachment to the prince was one of filial and wifely obligation rather than personal passion. However, when the princess fell in love with the Duc de Nemours, Madame de Chartres died because, according to Jensen, she could not bear the daughter's undermining of the perfection (impassivity) the mother had created in her daughter. The princess never acted upon her desire for Nemours in the sense of having an affair with him, but enjoyed only a solitary auto-erotic fantasy represented by the winding of a ribbon around Nemours's cane. After the prince died and the princess could have married Nemours without harming her reputation for virtue (if not impassivity), she chose instead to withdraw to the country where she performed charitable work until she, too, died. According to Jensen, the princess tried to assert her subjectivity in solitude, but was unable to do so in the absence of others' affirmation of her individuality. Jensen interprets Lafayette's novel as representing the impossibility of women realizing their individuality because the social ideal of feminine virtue was so limiting.

The chapter on Madame de Sévigné charts a similar pattern of maternal domination and daughterly submission in the seventeenth century through the letters of the mother, Sévigné, to her daughter, the comtesse de Grignan, who lived with her husband in Provence after 1671. Jensen asserts that Sévigné, who circulated in Parisian salon society, could have fulfilled her literary ambition through collaborative salon writing. But she chose instead to stake her individuality and her reputation as a writer on a correspondence that illuminated her perfection as a mother, and her daughter as a perfect re-creation of Sévigné, the mother. In order to achieve this, according to Jensen, Sévigné had to become narcissistically blind to Grignan's individuality and control her, for example, by urging her not to become pregnant. Jensen goes so far as to assert that Sévigné's quest to dominate Grignan included "murder," since her anxiety to control the correspondence required that Sévigné do most or even all of the writing. That is, Sévigné's authorial aspiration depended upon Grignan as a correspondent, but this created the dilemma of recognizing Grignan as an autonomous individual which challenged Sévigné's ambition as a mother and a writer. The way out of the dilemma was to eliminate Grignan as correspondent. Jensen presents both Sévigné and Grignan as miserable, psychically and physically, because of the contradictions imposed by reflectivity and individualism.

The unrelieved psychic suffering of mothers and daughters continues with Vigée Lebrun, Sand, and Colette in Jensen's rendering. Despite, or rather because of, Vigée Lebrun's success as a portrait artist in the late eighteenth century, Jensen claims that her method of refuting aspersions on her character and morality was to represent her perfections as a mother in the memoir she wrote at age seventy-nine. To prove this point Jensen analyzes at length Vigée Lebrun's account of her daughter's marriage to a man Vigée Lebrun thought unworthy. Jensen insists that due to mother-daughter reflectivity and "artistic self-absorption," Vigée Lebrun "apparently related to her daughter...as a fantasy object" (p. 233) and proceeded in her memoirs to assert her domination over the daughter by ascribing her bad behavior (marrying against her mother's wishes) to others' influence and professing her personal sorrow as proof of her own unblemished morality.

With Sand and Colette, the perspective shifts from the mother's to the daughter's. But the narcissistic blindness of mothers and debilitating disobedience (alternating with submission) of daughters persist in Jensen's interpretation. Clearly Sand suffered from the competition between her grandmother, Aurore de Saxe Dupin, and her mother, Sophie Delaborde Dupin, for control over Sand's upbringing after her father's death when Sand was four years old, which Jensen presents in extensive detail and which lasted from Sand's childhood through her marriage. And Jensen makes a plausible suggestion that Sand's chronic depression derived from the fact that she was never acknowledged as an autonomous being by the two women who had mothered her. But Jensen's reiteration of Sand's self-denial and submission is excessive, and her speculation about Sophie's syphilis and Sand's illegitimacy is unproductive. Sometimes self-loathing and thoughts of suicide are just part of adolescence. Oddly enough, Jensen did not analyze Sand's relationship with her own daughter, Solange, which is included in *Story of My Life*, though this would have extended an already long book.

The chapter on Colette maintains that she idealized her mother, Sidonie, in several different texts because she was haunted throughout her life by this possessive woman who never recognized her daughter as an independent being. For Jensen, the fictional autobiography, *Break of Day*, recounts a mother-daughter power struggle that Colette repeated in her many adult sexual relationships with men and women. Thus, for Jensen, the fact that Colette was never a subject in her mother's eyes doomed her to reproduce relationships of domination and submission in her adult life.

Jensen provides new insights into the mother-daughter relationships presented in the selected texts, though it appears that these texts were selected precisely because they fit the reflectivity model. She is scrupulous in acknowledging the work of other literary, mostly feminist, scholars, and distinguishing her own interpretation from theirs. Additionally, Jensen invokes excellent historical scholarship to contextualize her analysis of women authors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including works by Carolyn Lougee, Patrice Higonnet, Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, and Joan Scott, to name a few. But there is no comparable engagement with relevant historical scholarship for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and hence major historical changes that affected Sand and especially Colette (the expansion of literacy and publishing, mandatory education for girls, the New Woman) are barely acknowledged if at all.

Uneasy Possessions is a troubling book. The intense focus on the psychologically damaging effects of mother-daughter relationships means that the achievements and successes of the five authors get short shrift, and their satisfactions and pleasures are practically nonexistent. But the main problem is the implication that the five texts are representative of mother-daughter relationships in France from the seventeenth into the twentieth century. If we are to believe Jensen, from 1671 through 1928 all aristocratic mothers and daughters, and later all bourgeois mothers and daughters were subject to the psychological suffering that Jensen discerns in the works by Lafayette, Sévigné, Vigée Lebrun, Sand, and Colette. According to Jensen only in the second half of the twentieth century, since women "have gained social and political rights and recognition as individuals," have mother-daughter relations improved (p. 388). This is indeed "a new reading of women's history" (p.20).

NOTES

[1] Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

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