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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.

Response by Katharine Jensen, Louisiana State University.

In reading Whitney Walton's review of *Uneasy Possessions*, I was gratified by the even-handed and accurate description of my argument in the first half of the review. Thus, I was surprised by Walton's shift in the second part of her review toward either overstating my claims or trivializing my analysis. It was all the more distressing to read Walton's cursory dismissal of my arguments because she failed to provide counter-evidence of any kind.

When she was not trivializing my arguments, Walton misrepresented them. For instance, in the concluding sentence to her description of my chapter on Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*, Walton asserts: "Jensen interprets Lafayette's novel as representing the impossibility of women realizing their individuality because the social ideal of feminine virtue was so limiting." I make no such claim. On the contrary, I argue that in the world Lafayette depicts, virtue is the crucial term through which the heroine and her mother seek to distinguish themselves as individuals from the norm of women's adultery. Further, the princess distinguishes herself from her mother's rigid understanding of virtue as the complete absence of erotic desire and affirms instead her individuality through a paradoxical assertion of female virtue and erotic desire. As I demonstrate, the problem for women in this brilliant novel is not individuality per se or the "limits" of feminine virtue, but rather the problem of a woman being recognized for her individuality. The princess in my account does, in fact, achieve individuality; however, she cannot ultimately sustain her achievement either at court or in seclusion because no one recognizes her as an individual. My argument is not that women cannot achieve individuality in relation to virtue, but that they cannot, paradoxically, achieve individuality alone. They require, as men do, social and personal recognition for their individuality, and it is this recognition that women--throughout the five centuries of my study--often have been either denied or only granted on punitive terms.

In the second half of her review, Walton has significantly overstated the claims I make for my study. I explicitly do *not* assert that my five texts "are representative of mother-daughter relationships in France from the seventeenth to the twentieth century." Instead, as I make clear in my introduction, "I do not mean to suggest that the pattern of psychological possession and filial resistance I analyze was the only relational model available to women in life or in fiction--certainly other models existed and were practiced. [I provide an endnote with citations of critical work on some of these other models.] Yet I am interested in a particular relational pattern that we have not yet seen [recognized], but is clearly discernable in women's writing in France from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries and whose persistence I seek to explain both historically and psychologically" (p. 21).

Obviously then, I do not contend, as Walton purports, that "*all* aristocratic mothers and daughters, and later *all* bourgeois mothers and daughters" were subject to the "psychological

suffering" I illustrate in my examples (emphasis added). I have no way of knowing—nor would I presume to know—the inner psychological workings of the private relationships of thousands of women who left no historical record. However, I stand by my argument that it is highly significant for five extraordinary women—unusual among their peers in their access to literary and/or artistic professions—all to have conducted mother-daughter relations according to a similar pattern of psychological domination and resistance in their efforts to attain individuality.

Walton is disturbed that my authors "appear...selected precisely because they fit the reflectivity model." I have two answers to this concern. First, for simply practical reasons, I wanted to work on writers who have high name recognition among feminist critics outside of French studies in order to make my book appealing to a reasonably broad readership and to make it marketable at a university press in these days of retrenched publishing. Second, and more importantly, my corpus emerged organically. I was struck by how many prominent French women, during the periods of my study, wrote in their letters, memoirs, or autobiographies about their relationship with their mother or daughter or both.

Significantly, I could have chosen some other prominent French women writers whose work offers further support for my thesis. For example, I might have chosen Graffigny's relationship with her adopted daughter; Anne Catherine de Ligniville or Staël's relationship with her mother, Suzanne Curchod Necker; or Sand's relationship with her daughter Solange. I have, in fact, elsewhere written both on Graffigny's relationship to Ligniville and on Sand's relationship to Solange, and my research confirms that these women, too, engaged in the pattern of psychological domination and submission or resistance that I analyze in my book. Likewise, Suzanne Necker is famous for rejecting the daughter whose ambitious wishes caused her to deviate from her mother's domestic model, refusing to reflect maternal wishes. I wonder which other, presumably positive, portrayals of mother-daughter relations in women's life writings from the periods of my study Walton would have preferred to see in this book.

Walton takes issue with my "unique focus on psychologically damaging effects of mother-daughter relationships" because this "means that the achievements and successes of the five authors get short shrift, and their satisfactions and pleasures are practically nonexistent." She seems to have wanted a more optimistic view of women's lives as a whole, and I sympathize with that wish—but that was not my focus. I chose to analyze mother-daughter relationships, not the notable and extensive literary or artistic productions of my authors. Even so, I explicitly demonstrate that some women during the periods of my study (for example, Sévigné's *salonnières* contemporaries) engaged in artistic production that did not necessarily devolve into narcissistic power struggles, and in my chapters on Vigée Lebrun, Sand, and Colette, I note their exceptional artistic output. Yet despite these women's public success and private satisfaction, their positive feelings did not transform their depictions of mother-daughter conflict, nor does Walton offer any evidence to the contrary.

Walton also takes me to task for not engaging 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." She is correct that I do not take up these changes, but that is because these writers' portrayals of mother-daughter relations do not seem to have been affected by them. My introduction accounts historically and ideologically for an ongoing conflict between mother-daughter reflectivity and individualism. There I argue that patriarchal social relations and their psychological effects, while certainly not monolithic, are powerful and tenacious. Therefore, social progress and success for women in certain areas did not magically provided total liberation. As a result, Sand and Colette—despite profiting in their professional lives from historical advances—represent their relationships to their mothers in

strikingly similar ways to the portrayals found in earlier centuries. In my book I provide extensive textual evidence for this argument, to which Walton, again, gives short shrift without providing counter-evidence of any kind.

In recapitulating my argument about the conflict between Vigée Lebrun and her daughter, Walton "wondered if Vigée Lebrun, like many parents, was simply disappointed in her daughter's choice of husband." This trivializes my analysis of the complex psychological issues at play here. Certainly, as I point out, Vigée Lebrun may very well have wished for her daughter to marry a man whom the mother thought would be a better provider than the man in question. But "regardless of Vigée Lebrun's motivations," I insist, "she treats her daughter's potential engagement as a power struggle" (p. 238). Perhaps, then, many parents, like Vigée Lebrun, have engaged in narcissistic domination of their children. I seek throughout *Uneasy Possessions* to identify and analyze the ways this domination can be concealed, from all concerned, by a parent's good intentions and sincere belief in her loving feelings for her child.

Walton similarly dismisses Sand's suffering--recounted as an adult when Sand was at the height of her literary power--by saying that "sometimes self-loathing and thoughts of suicide are simply part of adolescence." Sand documents extensively, in both her correspondence and emphatically in her autobiography, how her depression as an adolescent became a chronic, debilitating, and lifelong condition, accompanied by migraines, self-loathing, and suicidal wishes. Few therapists would agree that such a condition was "simply a part of her adolescence."

Finally, it is clear that Walton is troubled by my analysis of women's literary and psychological history in France. I appreciate that reading *Uneasy Possessions* "took [an emotional] toll on her." I think many feminist critics, myself included, often look to women writers of earlier centuries to celebrate their remarkable achievements, often realized under adverse conditions. From this perspective, it is painful to see that sometimes despite those remarkable accomplishments, women were also engaged in psychologically damaging patterns in their intimate relations. Reading my book may be particularly surprising and emotionally difficult because, as a long history of feminist work on mother-daughter relations has shown us, many women in many countries have written, in both fiction and life writings, about the empowering force of mother-daughter relations. Indeed, these relations have been, in literature and in life, a crucial resource for women--sometimes for mere survival, as well as for emotional fulfillment or intellectual or artistic support.

As a result, when I started to work on this book, I fully expected to find empowering stories of mother-daughter relations, and had I focused on fiction, I would have found such stories. Instead, my research took me in the direction of life writings, and what I discovered surprised, disturbed, and saddened me. Yet despite how emotionally challenging I found it to analyze the psychological pattern that emerged in example after example, I wanted to stick with life writing and the interpretations that emerged from it because I believe my authors tell us something true about women's lives and the psychological costs exacted by the conflict between reflectivity and individualism. By diagnosing this conflict as historical, I show that unhappy mother-daughter relations are neither natural nor mere personal pathology but instead indicative of long-standing structures. While these structures are resistant to change, when identified--as I intend my book to participate in doing--they can be changed to benefit us all.

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