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Marc André Bernier and Marie-Laure Girou Swiderski eds. *Madame d'Arconville, moraliste et chimiste au siècle des Lumières: Etudes et texts inédit*. Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment, Voltaire Foundation, January 2016, xviii + 266 pp. Notes, 2 ills, £60/€90/\$95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-7294-1172-1.

Review by Mi Gyung Kim, North Carolina State University.

A new collection of essays on Marie-Geneviève-Charlotte Thiroux d'Arconville (1720-1805), published not long after the first one edited by Patrice Bret and Brigitte van Tiggelen, indicates her rare status as a female writer who left a significant body of work. [1] Although she published most of her wide-ranging translations and treatises anonymously, she was determined to leave a full record of her life in pursuit of useful knowledge, as evidenced in the twelve volume, 5,000 page manuscript, *Pensées, réflexions et anecdotes*, composed during the last five years of her life.

Between the two collections, a profile of madame d'Arconville emerges as a precocious girl (née Darlus) who lost her mother at age four and taught herself vicariously, unable to acquire a systematic education despite her father's wealth and a series of governesses. Marriage to Louis Lazare Thiroux d'Arconville, an *avocat* and *conseiller* at the Paris *parlement*, became an escape from the boredom that imparted indissoluble melancholy. Three sons later and aged twenty, she finally acquired the leisure to pursue her education in earnest by utilizing personal networks and public lectures. Her status as a wealthy, respectable *présidente* helped shape her professional life, albeit hidden, as an erudite savant. Her conservative moral outlook and serious dedication to useful knowledge for the public good straddled the cultures of erudites, *philosophes*, and *savants*.

Bernier and Swiderski's lucid introduction in this collection provides a comprehensive overview of madame d'Arconville's "intellectual and moral itinerary" (p. 8). Although she was a traditional moralist of Augustinian sensibility, she took advantage of the Parisian Enlightenment culture—free public lectures in botany, anatomy, and chemistry at the *Jardin du roi* and the concomitant need for invisible translators (especially from English)—to fashion herself as a female erudite well-versed in all subjects of learned conversation. She began with literature, *la morale*, and languages, but turned her attention toward the sciences around 1742. If the range of her interests seems extraordinary to us, it is because our historiographical emphasis on the "radical" Enlightenment has created an historical amnesia about the conservative Enlightenment that included most of the elite public. Her ability to straddle between the erudites and the *philosophes* was the norm, rather than the exception, among the educated judicial elite of her generation. [2]

In the first part of the book, two selections from the *Pensées, réflexions et anecdotes* pertaining to her childhood and self-cultivation ("Sur moi") feed three essays that characterize madame d'Arconville as a liminal figure who carried traditional moral concerns into the enlightened age. Why she felt such a "vital necessity" to write the *Pensées* despite her deteriorating health and eyesight is the question Swiderski probes to capture the moment when the mask of anonymity came off. If she wrote in the confessional mode as she had done in her childhood, her reflections stayed within the bounds of Christian (possibly

Jansenist) conscience to characterize her incessant quest for self-cultivation as a morally disciplined pursuit of useful knowledge. Such effort at self-fashioning required a serious reflection on *l'amour-propre*, the topic of the first essay in the *Pensées* and what d'Arconville characterized as the "primordial and unique cause of all passions" that leads the human race astray. Bernier focuses on her thoughts on *l'amour-propre* to characterize her as a moralistic, yet imaginative and analytic writer. As an enlightened individual, she had to struggle incessantly to mold this primordial passion in service of the public good. Julie Hayes places her views on marriage in the long-running *querelles des femmes* to explore the tensions and contradictions she developed as a traditional moralist in the emergent culture of sensibility. If madame d'Arconville noticed the asymmetry of power and the bleak prospect of happiness in marriage, as other female moralists did, her writings sought to reconcile the desire for autonomy with the reality of dependence, always condemning infidelity and libertinage.

This section of the book provides precious insights on the inner life of a *présidente*, which poses the question of whether the judicial culture had something to do with her utilitarian pursuit of the public good. Although there exists a significant body of scholarship on this venerated institution's political opposition to the crown, the intellectual and social contribution of its members to the Enlightenment has been neglected to enshrine the *philosophes* and their "radical" project of Enlightenment.[3] The two leading chemists of the following generation, Antoine Laurent Lavoisier (1743-1794) and Louis-Bernard Guyton de Morveau (1737-1816), were both trained in law. While Lavoisier financed his laboratory as a Tax Farmer, Guyton was a vocal member of the Burgundy *parlement* and helped make the Dijon Academy a premier institution of European chemistry.[4]

The second part of the book consists of a newly edited extract from madame d'Arconville's *Essai pour servir à l'histoire de la putréfaction* (1766) and three essays that assess her scientific activities. Elisabeth Bardez adds context to the earlier sketch in the Bret-Van Tiggelen anthology of d'Arconville's path to chemistry and emphasizes her focus on utility while Margaret Carlyle seeks to discern her "intellectual program" (p. 185) through the translations that began with literature in 1747, moved onto the sciences in the 1750s, and then to histories from the 1770s. By focusing on the two major scientific translations published in 1759, Peter Shaw's *Leçons de chimie* and Alexander Monro's *Traité d'ostéologie*, Bardez configures her motive, authorial identity, construction of the self, and credibility through an analysis of rhetorical strategies. Sarah Benharrech offers a brief introduction to her interest in botany, a leisurely activity for solitary happiness *à la Rousseau*. Although madame d'Arconville recognized its utility as the basis of agriculture, she was painfully aware of her physical inability to become an expert as a field botanist. Her pleasure in learning the subject from Bernard de Jussieu at the Jardin du roi and in cultivating exotic plants at her domain could nevertheless tell us much about the domestic consumption and clientele of Enlightenment botany.

The formation of madame d'Arconville as a laboratory chemist makes a fascinating chapter in the rise of this lowly profession of "sooty empirics" to the rank of natural philosophy (*la physique*). It also underlines the importance of the *Jardin du roi* as a place of public instruction that mixed a broad range of audiences. Anatomy lectures by Jean-Baptiste de Sénac made her realize that the subject was still without order or method. Her translation of Monro's *Anatomy of the Human Bones* (1726) as *Traité d'ostéologie* (1759) in collaboration with Jean-Joseph Sue appeared with a volume of detailed illustrations to enhance its pedagogical value. Her move to chemistry was facilitated by Guillaume-François Rouelle's lectures at the *Jardin*, which became a hot spot for the *philosophes* including Rousseau, Malesherbes, Diderot, Condorcet, and Turgot.[5] Her work developed in close friendship with François Poulletier de La Salle and Pierre Joseph Macquer, presumably at her Crosne laboratory.

Madame d'Arconville's patronage of a private laboratory would require a more careful assessment than just following her research projects. As a wealthy aristocratic woman, she could offer a unique opportunity for the budding chemists of her generation in financing a laboratory not dedicated to commercial purposes such as pharmaceutical enterprise or royal industry. Her patronage would have placed her in a complicated

status relationship vis-à-vis the chemists who depended on her financial capacity to build their careers.[6] Her laboratory work began in 1750, after inheriting the family domain at Crosne, when the junior Academician Macquer was working on the *Elémens de chymie-pratique* (1751), the companion volume to the *Elémens de chymie-théorique* (1749) that launched his literary career in chemistry. In 1766, when his *Dictionnaire de chymie* catapulted his reputation and the mantle of royal porcelain and dye manufactories provided him with full size laboratories, madame d'Arconville sold Crosne to close the chapter of her chemical engagements. If Macquer were one of her chemists in the Crosne laboratory, it would fill a significant gap in understanding his formation as a stately chemist, arguably *the* representative French chemist before Lavoisier.

No less important was madame d'Arconville's ability to translate English treatises, as Gelbart, Carlyle, and Tiggelen documented in the previous collection, which Macquer utilized to access British industrial knowledge.[7] The centrality of translation in her intellectual formation and itinerary underlines her roots in the culture of erudition that cultivated the academic technologies that, ironically, fostered the Enlightenment culture of material knowledge and useful sciences. Translation was an important endeavor that helped rejuvenate French language and culture to "elevate the spirit of a whole nation." Voltaire thus argued in his acceptance speech to the Académie française in 1746 that "a translator is no longer a blind admirer of his author." He should exercise reason to treat the author impartially and to excavate true spirit and useful knowledge. Voltaire preached that "elegant and faithful translators" should be considered true philosophers and historians.[8] If madame d'Arconville as a translator offers an important precedent to madame Lavoisier and Claudine Picardet (Guyton's wife), she commanded a superior social position (and possibly moral sentiments) over her chemists.

Together, the essays in this volume track madame d'Arconville's strategies of self-fashioning that took advantage of the free public lectures at the *Jardin du roi*, her personal access to prominent scientists, and her wealth and status. Her prominence as a female erudite among male savants, coupled with her invisibility as an anonymous translator, set up the psychological dynamics that manifested in her *Pensées*. Most valuable to Enlightenment historians would be less her exceptional (albeit invisible) place as a scientist than her normality (albeit eccentric) as an aristocratic patron and consumer. How she acquired her taste for utility (in explicit contrast to frivolity for which she condemned most of her sex) and how her notion of utility intersected with other savants of erudite disposition, could help us write a much different story of the Enlightenment as a broad social movement that includes judicial culture. In other words, the historical excavation of madame d'Arconville, the daughter of a rich Tax Farmer who nevertheless shunned fashionable salons and idle conversations to uphold Christian morality and to experiment on untidy subjects such as putrefaction and chemistry, can help us recover a much broader social foundation of the French Enlightenment that enlisted conservative magistrates and progressive ecclesiastics. Chemistry and medicine would then acquire a more prominent place in the Enlightenment culture as useful knowledge than natural philosophy or electrical entertainments, which currently dominate the historiography of Enlightenment sciences.

Madame d'Arconville's *Pensées, réflexions et anecdotes* promises an extraordinary panorama of the eighteenth-century French intellectual and scientific scene. If this versatile *présidente* provides strong proof of the Parisian High Enlightenment by illustrating its reach beyond the *philosophes* and their salons, her erudite approach and association with chemists complicates the conventional image of the rational Enlightenment based on mathematical reason. As an academic myth, the French Enlightenment is seen as an emancipatory project formulated by the *philosophes* and their antecedents. Their ideas and salons have always been at the center of Enlightenment stories to suppress its broad social foundation.[9] As a corollary, madame du Châtelet (1706-1749) as a mistress of Voltaire and the translator of Newton's *Principia*, occupies a central place in the Enlightenment historiography on women.[10] Madame d'Arconville's hidden career calls into question, however, such a conventional characterization of the rational (and potentially instrumental) Enlightenment that espoused reason (as exemplified in mathematics) and science as emancipatory strategies against the state and the church. Her situation

between the *érudits* and the *philosophes* invites a serious revision in the Enlightenment historiography that emphasizes its “radical” genealogy (patronized by salon aristocrats) at the expense of the best educated body of the time.[11] In order to appreciate her identity as a *présidente*, we need a more sophisticated framework for the French Enlightenment that includes the judicial and ecclesiastical elite and their audiences.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Marc André Bernier et Marie-Laure Girou Swiderski, “Présentation. Mme d’Arconville (1720-1805): récit de soi et discours sur la science au siècle des Lumières”

Madame d’Arconville, “Textes autobiographiques tirés des *Pensées, réflexions et anecdotes*”

Marie-Laure Girou Swiderski, “Les *Pensées, réflexions et anecdotes* de Mme d’Arconville: un projet autarcique?”

Marc André Bernier, “Le sourire de la raison: ironie, art de dire et connaissance de soi chez madame d’Arconville”

Julie Candler Hayes, “Réflexions sur le mariage: Mme d’Arconville et la tradition moraliste”

Madame d’Arconville, “Extraits de *l’Essai pour servir à l’histoire de la putréfaction*”

Elisabeth Bardez, “Mme d’Arconville a-t-elle sa place dans la chimie du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle?”

Margaret Carlyle, “Entre le *Traité d’ostéologie* et les *Leçons de chimie*: Mme d’Arconville, traductrice des Lumières”

Sarah Benharrech, “L’anti-Tournefort, ou la botanique d’une paresseuse”

Annexe: Table des matières des *Pensées, réflexions et anecdotes*.

#### NOTES

[1] Patrice Bret and Brigitte Van Tiggelen, eds. *Madame d’Arconville (1720-1805): Une femme de lettres et de sciences au siècle des Lumières* (Paris: Hermann, 2011).

[2] Mi Gyung Kim, “De l’érudition à la science: la mode des lumières à Dijon,” *Annales de Bourgogne* 85 (2013): 241-55.

[3] Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[4] Mi Gyung Kim, *Affinity, That Elusive Dream: A Genealogy of the Chemical Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 219-334.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 161-68 and 188-201; Christine Lecornu Lehman, “Gabriel-François Venel (1723-1775), sa place dans la chimie française du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle,” Thèse, Université Paris X-Nanterre, 2006.

[6] Mary Terrall, “Émilie du Chatelet and the Gendering of Science,” *History of Science* 33 (1995): 283-310.

[7] Nina R. Gelbart, "Splendeur et squelettes: la 'traduction' anatomique de Madame Thiroux d'Arconville," pp. 55-70 in Bret and Van Tiggelen, eds. *Madame d'Arconville (1720-1805)* (see note one above). Also in that same collection : Margaret Carlyle, "Femme de sciences, femme d'esprit: 'le Traducteur des *Leçons de Chymie*,'" pp. 71-91, and Brigitte Van Tiggelen, "Entre anonymat et traduction: la carrière d'une femme en sciences," pp. 93-107.

[8] Voltaire, Reception speech to the Académie française, May 9, 1746, in John Moreley ed. *The Works of Voltaire: A Contemporary Version*, 22 vols. (New York: St. Hubert Guild, 1901), v. 19, pp. 5-26.

[9] Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, N.Y.; Cornell University Press, 1994).

[10] Isaac Newton, *Principes mathématiques de la philosophie naturelle*, 2 vols. (Paris: Desaint & Saillant, 1759).

[11] William F. Church, "The Decline of the French Jurists as Political Theorists," *French Historical Studies* 5 (1967): 1-40.

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