ADÈLE VERSUS SOPHIE: 
THE WELL-EDUCATED WOMAN OF MME DE GENLIS

by Madeleine R. Raaphorst

In 1782, Countess Caroline-Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis, governess and tutor of the royal Orléans children, published Adèle et Théodore ou lettres sur l'éducation. After 1750 a number of books appeared whose subject was the upbringing and schooling of women, which were generally considered to be inadequate. None of these, however, had as large a readership as that enjoyed by Mme de Genlis. In 1782, two successive editions were published in Paris and a new edition appeared yearly thereafter until 1788. After a lapse during the Revolution, there were frequent re-editions dating from 1794 up to the middle of the nineteenth century. The work's fame crossed France's borders: beginning in 1782/83 there were translations in London, Dublin, the Hague, and Germany.

The 1782 success was undoubtedly due to Mme de Genlis' social position as a woman, which was exceptional. She was the first woman to be entrusted as tutor to the males of the royal family. Critics attacked her as being a “blue-stocking.” Upon entering the theater where Les Femmes savantes was being performed, she was booed, and as the play continued, each reference to a pedantic woman drew jeers and peals of laughter. According to Mme de Genlis, the first edition of Adèle et Théodore was bought up in less than eight days, and the work in “receiving the approbation of the public,” brought down on the countess the “irreconcilable hatred” of the “philosophes,” because it is founded on revealed religion and traditional moral values. She also offended some members of the court who saw themselves depicted in the novel as reprehensible characters.¹

This could hardly account for her post-revolutionary success. Was the recommended method so new and so revolutionary that it merited so prolonged an interest? The pedagogical vocation of Mme de Genlis continued to

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manifest itself in her written works for the entire length of her much-troubled life, which spanned the role of a lady of the court, the vicissitudes of exile, and a return to favor under the Empire and the Restoration. The principles disseminated through the amorous intrigues and courtly adventures in *Adèle et Théodore* remained constant throughout the pedagogical writings of Mme de Genlis, despite the broadening of her views concerning the social hierarchy, incurred by historical events. Although the book treated the education of both a boy and a girl (and, less importantly, royalty), the great majority of the letters deal with young Adèle, whose name appears first in the title, as if to counteract *Emile*, in which Sophie was only secondary and practically ignorant.

Preferring an exchange of letters in novel form to a strict theoretical treatise, Mme de Genlis used her mouthpiece, the Baroness d'Almane, to heap advice on her friends, the Viscountess de Limours and the Viscountess de Valmont, as well as on the Countess d'Ostalis, her niece. The baroness furnishes them with the minutest details of the ideal education that she is lavishing on her daughter Adèle in order to make her a perfect lady in the society in which she is to circulate. She does not concern herself with the education of all classes of society, but rather only of members of the nobility who preferred education in the home. To assess the type of reform Mme d'Almane proposes for Adèle, it may be interesting to see first how Mme de Genlis herself was raised.

If we are to judge by what she wrote in her *Mémoires*, her family-based education seems strange, unstructured, and to say the least, neglected. Her father, a former student of the Jesuits, was well educated, but his only educational efforts concerning the young Caroline-Stéphanie were directed towards making her a "strong woman," accustoming her to touching spiders and toads, which repelled her, and making her raise a mouse solely because she was afraid of it (M. 1.25). Her mother, "preoccupied with her own pursuits and the continuous visits of her neighbors" (M. 1.22), washed her hands of the problem by employing a young girl of sixteen, Mlle de Mars, to raise her daughter, a choice based simply on the fact that Mademoiselle played the harpsichord well.

Caroline-Stéphanie spent her childhood in the country, at Champaéri and Cosne on the Loire; then, from the age of five to eleven, she resided in the ancient and dilapidated chateau of Saint-Aubin in Burgundy, which she claims bears a resemblance to the chateaux described by Mme Radcliffe (M.1.8). The village schoolmistress taught her to read, but the majority of her time was dedicated to playing with her youngest brother. This brother was sent to Paris at the age of six to attend a famous boarding school, while the young girl stayed at the chateau in the hands of Mlle de Mars, who "lacked secular instruction, though she had natural spirit, a gentle and serious character, a noble, sensitive soul, and the most sincere piety" (M.1.22).
At the age of eleven, Caroline-Stéphanie could read, she had learned music and singing, and she had spent much time playing in a wide variety of comedies and tragedies such as Zaïre, Iphigénie, Le Joueur, Le Distrait, George Dandin, and Cénie. Writing skills had been either forgotten or judged useless, so in order to send a letter to her father on New Year's Day, she taught herself to write by copying the words she read. Mme de Genlis tells us that she also learned to spell by reading.

She took the greatest pleasure in her dramatic roles. At the age of eight, she had played Voltaire's character, Zaïre, but her real success was in the role of Cupid, whose winged costume suited her so well that she made it her uniform for two years. When she later learned to fence with a dancing teacher who doubled as a fencer, she was dressed as a boy. The boy's clothes, which she wore until she left for Paris at age eleven, were more suited to country life than the more customary whalebone corsets.

The new life in the capital did nothing to improve the structure of the young girl's education. Music consumed an average of four hours per day and included harpsichord, harp (on which she excelled), and guitar. One hour was devoted to poetry recitals, especially to the Odes of Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, given to her as a present. She also frequently attended performances at the Opera and the Comédie française with her mother.

The period from her arrival in Paris until her marriage at age seventeen was highly eventful. Her father, ruined, left for Santo Domingo. Her mother, whose income had been reduced to nothing, was forced to live in tiny lodgings or to accept the hospitality of friends, such as M. de la Popelinière, a rich farmer-general. Caroline-Stéphanie shared the adults' rather frivolous daily activities: music, dancing, and games, and it was only after her marriage to M. de Genlis that the young countess began to read seriously in order to complete her education.

What was the place of religious education in all of this? At the age of six, she was made canoness of the noble chapter of Alix, but she never took vows, leaving her in complete freedom to remain outside of the chapterhouse while retaining the advantage of the title of Lady or Countess (M.1.17-19). She owed her religious instruction to her young schoolmistress, who taught her catechism and the normal prayers. Her family does not seem to have been particularly pious, but religion played its standard role in this society, the extent of its demands consisting in belief in God and regular attendance at services.

Mme de Genlis never criticizes the way she was brought up, neither in her Mémoires nor in other works. She did think it extraordinary enough to merit description, however. It is with pleasure that she evokes a "childhood so sweetly and cheerfully passed" and during which time she enjoyed a great freedom and was never scolded nor punished. The Countess proudly asserts that she was a brilliant child whose own superiority compensated for the lack
of schooling and for what she terms an eccentric upbringing, but she was well aware that children, girls as well as boys, needed a structured education.

Before 1782, the methods of child rearing advocated for Emile by Rousseau seem to have monopolized all the public's attention. Sophie, Emile's wife to be, has practically no place in the pedagogical literature written for girls.

In spite of a growing ideological hostility, which in the middle of the century provoked incessant attacks of increasing virulence, convents remained prosperous up to the time of the Revolution. Whereas general education was more and more recommended for boys, the almost universal opinion was that girls should be raised under the auspices of the family, specifically under the active supervision of the mother. The idea can be traced back to Fénelon, but (except for rare exceptions, one of which was Mme de Genlis) the eighteenth century had forgotten this affiliation. When Mme d'Almane, Adèle's mother, dedicates all her time to her daughter, she is putting the theoretical doctrines of her period into practice as if it were only natural, as a "good mother" whose sole concern is her daughter's future. There is no discussion of choice; nothing is said about convents, and Mme de Limours, with whom she corresponds, acts likewise, although Mme d'Almane reproaches Mme de Limours for not having raised her elder daughter, Flore, according to sound principles. This daughter consequently turns out badly because of her lack of education.

It was only later, in 1791, that Mme de Genlis voiced her opposition to convent education in her *Discours sur la suppression des couvents de religieuses et l'éducation publique des femmes* (*Discourse on the elimination of religious convents and the public education of women*).

Mme de Genlis was familiar with all the current literature on education. She had a thorough knowledge of Rousseau's *Emile* and quoted him, sometimes approvingly but more often to criticize the "philosophe." She believed that all the truly "useful" ideas in *Emile* were derived from Seneca, Montaigne, Locke, Fénelon, Moncrief, etc.

Initially she disagrees with Rousseau's fundamental principle that man is innately good and that society is responsible for his corruption. Instead, she holds that man is born with some virtues but also with some faults, and that a good education can correct his vices.

Rousseau very eloquently stated that man is born essentially good, and that left entirely to himself, he would always be good, etc. . . . I believe his idea to be false; man, if left to himself, would be necessarily vengeful and would consequently be lacking in spiritual nobility and generosity. . . . Man is born with faults and vices, but he is born a sensitive being. . . . Finally, a consoling reflection for teachers: all the bad qualities that children exhibit need have no future consequences, because a sound upbringing can rectify them while on the contrary, and for the same reason, we must take advantage of all their virtues. (AT. I.108-109)

She thought Rousseau's most judicious opinion, one worth following, was his refusal to prod children excessively into learning things beyond their
comprehension, and instead to teach them while entertaining them.

The main fault with all teachers is that, as Rousseau observes, they concern themselves less with the students themselves than with making them shine; to this end, they instill them with knowledge unsuitable to their age; and finally they overburden their memories, not with concrete things, but with words that generally have no meaning for them. (AT.1.59)

The instruction of young Adèle is to be, foremost, a moral education designed to mold her into a woman capable of conducting herself reasonably and virtuously. Her intellectual training is to be related to the formation of her personality in such a way as to prepare Adèle for marriage and to prepare her to assume her place in family and society.

Basing her opinion on the principle that sensual impressions dominate in children's minds, Mme de Genlis feels that the earliest education should be oriented toward the senses and be raised step by step to the levels of thought and judgment.

Her spokesman, Mme d'Almane, emphasizes one point in particular: the education of girls must differ from that of boys because they are "born for a monotonous and dependent life." How close is this to Rousseau? It is surprising to see that a woman who occupied as lofty a position as Mme de Genlis could persist in her view that woman was destined only for marriage and subjugation to a master, just seven years before the outbreak of the Revolution.

Genius is, for them (women), a useless and dangerous gift; it causes them to stray from their position and can only serve to make them aware of the unpleasantness of their social status. Love leads them astray, ambition leads them only to intrigue. A taste for knowledge sets them apart from others and tears them from the simplicity of their domestic duties, and from that society which they adorn. Made for running a household, for raising children, for depending upon a master who will demand both counsel and submission, it is therefore necessary that they possess a sense of order, patience, prudence, a fair and sound mind, that they not be strangers to any kind of knowledge so that they can agreeably add to any kind of conversation, that they be capable of reflecting without expounding, and that they know how to love passionately. (AT.1.36)

This idea of the dependency of woman in marriage, which for that matter corresponded with the legal status of woman in eighteenth-century French society, was firmly anchored in Mme de Genlis' mind. For whereas the Viscountess de Limours writes to Mme d'Almane that she has read Lord Chesterfield's Letters to His Son and is offended by the way that he treated women in it (which she emphatically labels impertinent, unjust, false, and contemptuous), Mme d'Almane ignores the matter and emphasizes, on the contrary, what she finds praiseworthy in this work that she thinks is valuable, mature, erudite, and refined, "and like an interesting monument of paternal tenderness" (AT.1.189-190).

Although some people viewed Mme de Genlis as Rousseau's adversary, several of her ideas coincide with those of the author of Emile. Mme d'Almane
makes it a point of honor to maintain her daughter in a state of complete submission, without letting her know it. This art of manipulating the mind of a child is reminiscent of the tutoring of *Emile*.

Nothing is easier than imposing upon a child: but when you can force a naturally imperious mind into submission, you can no longer leave it to itself for a single instant. For, if you let the child you have mastered stray out of your sight, you can be sure that at the earliest opportunity, he will try to compensate for the restraints that you impose upon him: the more complete his subjugation to you, the more unmanageable he will be with others. Thus, rather than removing one of his flaws, you will create new ones in him; the gentleness that he shows to you is actually only an artful flexibility capable of becoming duplicity and hypocrisy. Therefore, leave him only with those whom you trust as you do yourself; always keep an eye on him until time, reason, and custom have completely changed his character. (AT.1.182)

When Adèle is six years old and Théodore seven, the d'Almanes decide to leave the “splendor and magnificence” of Paris, in order to deter the children from worldly temptations and to allow them to taste the simple pleasures of the Languedoc countryside. They want no interference with the self-imposed goal of complete dedication to their children.

But instead of providing a natural education, they convert the chateau into an artificial milieu designed for the children. The dining room frescoes depict episodes of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The large living room has tapestries portraying the history of Rome in chronological sequence: the medallions of the seven Roman kings, the great men of the Republic, the emperors, and the most illustrious Roman women. The gallery depicts the most significant events of Greek history together with its greatest men. Adèle’s bedroom is decorated with watercolors of French history, while her mother’s has Biblical scenes. The stairways and hallways are covered with geographical maps, and painted screens showing the history of England, Spain, Germany, Malta, and the Turks are kept in storage. Besides a library, the house contains a veritable museum of minerals, coral collections, and shells. Three small artificial mountains are added to the garden so the children can get exercise by climbing on them. Exotic species of trees are brought to the chateau while the more usual plants are grouped together to serve as an introduction to botany. Everything is directed toward education, including the panes of the magic lantern, Adèle’s doll, and Théodore’s houses of cards.

Even Adèle’s doll is of use to me; Adèle is to repeat the lessons I give to her to her doll, and I always listen attentively to these dialogues; if Adèle unjustly scolds her, I enter the conversation, and I prove to her that she is wrong. This game also serves to sharpen her wits; if she needs an apron, a bonnet, a dress for her doll, Mademoiselle Victoire, one of my maids comes with scraps, and works with Adèle on the doll. (AT.1.63)

The educational method used for Adèle breaks completely with accepted theories. Banished is the written page from which the child learns to make his letters by constant repetition of several sentences. Mme d’Almane takes great
pains to have an excellent calligrapher copy on separate pages the equivalent of ten volumes of extracts from instructional and amusing authors to serve as models. Unfortunately, Mme d'Almane does not inform her correspondent as to the authors from whom she took these extracts. She does assert however, that Adèle is learning many different words, improving her reading, and rapidly learning to write.

With regard to reading, Mme d'Almane does not want to expose Adèle to the usual classics. Her reason is that Adèle could not possibly understand either the works or their art. Rather, her apprenticeship will begin, not too early, with secondary works.

Here are the results that she expects to have from Adèle by the age of twelve:

By the age of twelve, Adèle, far from being precocious, will perhaps seem to certain people infinitely less educated than many other children of her age; she will not even be familiar with one of the books that all young people know by heart; she will never have read the *Fables* of La Fontaine, *Télémaque*, the *Lettres* of Mme de Sévigné and the plays of Corneille, Racine, Crébillon, and Voltaire, etc. . . . Isn't it absurd to put all these masterpieces in the hands of a child incapable of understanding any of them, and thereby deprive him of the pleasure of reading them one day with full understanding for the first time? At twelve, Adèle will neither be able to do a summary, nor to write a good letter, nor help me to do the honors at my house. She will have few ideas, but there will not be a false one among them; she will sight read music well, will play several instruments and will draw surprisingly well for her age. . . . She will know only the history, mythology, geography that she has learned from our tapestries, through conversation and by other means. . . . and I think that in that respect she will be better educated than other children generally are.

Simply by having fun and living with us, she will acquire a much greater variety of knowledge than we could hope to impart through a more structured method. (AT. I.60)

Rousseau's advice is followed during walks in order to instill children with ideas of space, measure, and even agriculture; but she disagrees with the author of *Emile* in another matter that she considers indispensable by giving Adèle an excellent art tutor.

Unlike Rousseau, Mme de Genlis encouraged the cultivation of foreign languages. When Adèle is yet in her cradle, Mme d'Almane sends for an English woman, and Miss Bridget lives with the family until the completion of Adèle's education. A long visit to Italy is designed to familiarize the girl with the Italian language.

Unlike Sophie, Adèle follows from the age of seven a program of readings too numerous to be listed. Fairy tales are considered harmful for children, because they are not moral; their subject being passion, they can only channel the imagination toward the supernatural. Until the child is twelve, the reading list remains limited, and Mme d'Almane, to ensure a moral upbringing, herself writes the *Annales de la vertu*, an important work in Adèle's reading between the ages of eight and twelve. Since the theater is part of education, she also creates her own theater. The plays in which Adèle has a role feature only women characters—and their goal is a moral lesson.
Until the age of sixteen, Adèle will have read only such playwrights as Campistron, Lagrange-chancel, Crébillon, Lafosse, and Thomas Corneille; and as for comedy, Adèle, fourteen, will be restricted to the theater of Boissy and Marivaux (Mme de Genlis considered Marivaux a second-rate author). At sixteen, novels appear on the list and the first ones to be read are those of Richardson, which Mme de Genlis considered "sublime." When she is eighteen and a half years old, Adèle marries, but her regular program of reading is continued up to the age of twenty and a half, since she does no entertaining during the first two years of her marriage.

While Adèle has a much less extensive reading list than her brother Théodore, Mme d'Almane states in her Cours de lecture: "it is said that Adèle encountered few women in society having her education and her intellectual clarity; because she felt and understood everything that she read" (AT.3.421).

By the time she marries, Adèle is in all respects exactly as her mother had planned her, and the educational system proves such a success that Madame d'Almane presents her with the Lettres sur l'éducation as a wedding gift. Naturally her husband has been chosen by her parents, who also have seen to it that she has developed an inclination towards him, one which in no way resembles a dangerous passion, but which instead was based on reason, the principal idea being that the Chevalier de Valmont, her future husband, would never separate Adèle from her mother (AT.3.353).

Adèle cannot turn out like Sophie. Better educated than the latter, having had a moral upbringing which has made her perfect, she will be subordinated to her husband but will be capable of advising him. Another form of submission will continue: her subjugation to her mother. At dawn on her wedding day Adèle overwhelms Mme d'Almane with happiness by showing her that her efforts in her child's upbringing have been completely successful:

O mother, she cried, you are going to give me a new master, but in giving him the sacred rights that you have over your daughter, at least promise me that you will keep them as well, and that you will always exercise them to their fullest extent, and I will promise you that same submission, that same obedience that you have expected from me up until now. To use you as a model, to imitate you, if possible, to follow all your advice, to consecrate my life to you, these are the most cherished desires of my heart. I realize that your honor depends on my conduct.... Oh! you have been to me both a governess and teacher; you, my dear benefactress, my sweet mother, if the day ever comes when I cherish my duties any less, I will perform them nevertheless solely to make you happy. (AT.3.406)

In our day, Mme de Genlis' system may seem extremely far removed from the destiny of modern woman, but it must be judged in its historical context. Objections can be made to the omnipotence of the mother, which no doubt reflects the personality of the countess, and to a woman's dependency on her husband.

The positive aspect is that the education Adèle receives is much more extensive than that which was commonly the fate of girls of her social class.
Although she still spends much time studying music and art, reading occupies a larger portion of her time, and ultimately the girl is exposed to good authors and encouraged to continue reading. She has a good feeling for history, knows two foreign languages perfectly, and is capable of keeping the household accounts.

On the eve of 1789, equality and co-educational instruction remained a distant hope even though Condorcet pursued it fruitlessly in 1792. Not until the end of the nineteenth century and the advent of the third Republic would girls’ secondary schools be organized. In Adèle et Théodore, Mme de Genlis took a step forward in the education of woman. Finally at the end of the eighteenth century came a general acceptance that women can and should be educated, even if their emancipation was far from being realized.

NOTES

This paper was translated from the original French by Carol Mossman.

1. Mémoires inédits de Madame la comtesse de Genlis sur le dix-huitième siècle et la Révolution française (Brussels, 1825), 10 volumes. Hereafter cited in the text as M., with volume and page numbers.

2. In Adèle et Théodore, Mme de Genlis limited herself to the education and schooling of nobles, her own class. Later on, in 1791, after the break of the Revolution, she wrote a Discours sur l'éducation publique du peuple. She was always convinced that the masses should not receive the same schooling as nobles. The goals, and consequently the subject matters, were different, but the basic moral principles remained the same. What is more, she never questioned traditional religion.


4. Adèle et Théodore ou lettres sur l'éducation (Paris, 1782), 3 volumes, p. 68. Further references in the text are cited as AT., followed by volume and page numbers.


6. The titles given as works by Mme d'Almane are books by Mme de Genlis: Annales de la vertu ou Cours d'Histoire (Paris, 1782); Théâtre à l'usage des jeunes personnes (Paris, 1779-1780); Théâtre de société (Paris, 1781). The countess used these books for her own pupils. She identified herself as Mme d'Almane in her Mémoires (M.3.127).

7. Mme de Genlis states in Leçons d'une gouvernante (1791) and later in her Mémoires that her method was sound. She began applying her doctrines to her two daughters and to the Orléans children even before writing Adèle et Théodore. According to her idea that education was a continual process in specially designed surroundings, she asked to move from the Duke's residence, the worldly Palais-Royal, to Bellechasse, a secluded place with a large garden. Mme de Genlis lived at Bellechasse with the children, including her own, completely in charge of the household, choosing and supervising the various instructors. She brought two young girls from London and hired an Italian parlormaid and a German gardener to teach her pupils foreign languages.

As to the extent to which her theories were followed, it is difficult to tell. Napoleon recognized her pedagogical contribution by giving her the honorary title of Inspector of the schools in her Parisian borough in 1812.