

INTRODUCTION:

Madame de Genlis and Enlightenment Thought

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RELIEF 7 (1), 2013 – ISSN: 1873-5045. P 1-3

<http://www.revue-relief.org>

URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-114610

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Stéphanie Félicité du Crest de Saint-Aubin, comtesse de Genlis (1747-1830) was an enormously prolific and widely-read author in her own day. Known both for her pedagogical and religious oeuvre, her popularity – as evidenced by reprintings and translations, booksellers' stock and private library catalogues – equalled or even surpassed that of her contemporaries, the French *philosophes*, Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau and others, who are central to modern accounts of the French Enlightenment. Outside France, away from the debates that dominated Parisian circles, her work resonated with readers from England to Russia to the Americas. Thus for example, in *War and Peace*, when one of the protagonists was accused of becoming another Madame de Genlis, Tolstoy was making a reference that he assumed his Russian readers would easily recognize. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that when readers abroad thought about French culture and the French Enlightenment, the authors that immediately came to mind, besides the well-known *philosophes*, Voltaire, Rousseau and others, included also their supposed ideological opponent, Madame de Genlis.

Recognizing Madame de Genlis's eighteenth-century visibility, scholarship has recently started to reconsider some aspects of her oeuvre. Yet despite signs of a revival of interest, Genlis's works sit uneasily with most views of the French Enlightenment. This is due to their internal contradictions, that make it difficult to understand them using existing conceptual categories. Known primarily as an enemy of the *philosophes*, Genlis nonetheless embraced many of their rationalist, pedagogical ideals. A champion of women's literary traditions, she remained silent about some of her own most important female precursors. And while critics condemned her on ideological grounds,

criticizing her explicit religiosity, her novels were also dismissed – sometimes by the same critics – as no more than frivolous entertainments.

These contradictions in Genlis's oeuvre suggest that like another famous eighteenth-century author, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, she might usefully be considered not so much as a critic of Enlightenment or an author on the margins of the Enlightenment mainstream, but as a particular kind of "critic from within". This special issue on Madame de Genlis seeks to reconsider key aspects of Genlis's oeuvre, which appears ready for a thorough reappraisal, by repositioning it not outside the major Enlightenment debates, but within them. In a series of eight essays, it explores Genlis's engagement with the central debates of the Enlightenment, i.e. debates on virtue, pedagogy, and political power. In doing so, the essays collectively illustrate a double thesis. Firstly, that Genlis was not the insipid moralist her critics held her to be, but in fact participated in the major societal debates of her day, and should therefore be appreciated as the major intellectual she was. Genlis' intellectual positioning is the focus of the first group of essays in this issue, that successively explore her relation to the classical tradition, to Rousseau's political thought, the relationship between her pedagogical theory and practice, and the central notion of virtue in her oeuvre.

But secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, Genlis was virtually the only one of the major Enlightenment thinkers whose thought was actually put to the test in pedagogical and political practice. While the major *philosophes* – Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot – all died before the advent of the French revolution that claimed to realize their most radical ideas, Genlis outlived the revolutionary period, and was witness to the transformation of radical political thought into Terror and post-Napoleonic reconstruction. Alone of the Enlightenment intellectuals, she reflected on the earth-shifting changes her society had gone through, and integrated this reflection into her own literary oeuvre. This is an aspect of Genlis' intellectual biography that has not sufficiently been addressed by scholarship until present, and is central to the second group of essays in this special issue. Thus, starting out with a reconsideration of Madame de Genlis' sociopolitical thought, viewed against the background of the events of the French revolution, these essays successively consider changes in her work related to the ascent to power of Napoleon, Madame de Genlis' role in reconstituting aristocratic society around the *cercle de l'Arsenal*, and her reception in nineteenth-century Russia as an archetypically aristocratic author, a representative of an ideal, bygone era. This section ends with a transcription of three hitherto-unpublished letters of Genlis's, that themselves span the pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary

era, and illustrate both the changes and continuities in her pedagogical thinking.

Madame de Genlis was an extraordinarily prolific author, whose oeuvre by its sheer volume and generic variety challenges the capacities of any single reader. Subsequently, scholarship has until present done no more than scratch the surface of this oeuvre, and has tended to concentrate only on her two or three most well-known titles. By opening up the field of Genlis scholarship, both thematically and chronologically, these essays hope to demonstrate the richness of what has as yet remained a largely unstudied and little-understood oeuvre. Together, they seek to suggest a new interpretation of Madame de Genlis's oeuvre that, rather than positioning it against a monolithic "Enlightenment" discourse associated primarily with the *philosophes*, instead explores its engagement with that debate, proposing a revised or even an "alternative Enlightenment", i.e. one duly inflected by the confrontation of Enlightenment theory with revolutionary and post-revolutionary praxis.