

Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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7. Stéphanie Félicité, Marquise de Sillery, Comtesse de Genlis 25 January 1746–31 December 1830



Fig. 7. Stéphanie Félicité, marquise de Sillery, comtesse de Genlis, by P.-N. Violet. Photo by Ecummenic (2019). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/be/Violet_-_Comtesse_de_Genlis.png, CC BY 4.0.

Adèle et Théodore ou Lettres sur l'éducation [...]

Cet ouvrage est le fruit de quinze ans de réflexions, d'observations, et de l'étude la plus suivie des inclinations, des défauts et des ruses des enfants. Je propose une méthode dont l'expérience m'a démontré les avantages ; mais je n'ai pas l'orgueil insensé de croire que ce faible traité d'éducation renferme tout ce qu'on peut dire d'utile sur cet important sujet.

J'ai cité beaucoup d'ouvrages relatifs à l'éducation, dans l'intention surtout de les faire connaître, et d'engager les pères de famille à les lire tous.

Plus on a médité et réfléchi sur ce sujet, plus on est éloigné de croire qu'il soit épuisé. Puisse-t-on ne jamais se lasser d'écrire sur une

matière si intéressante ! Loin de regarder comme des rivaux les auteurs qui se distingueront dans cette carrière, personne ne s'intéressera plus sincèrement que moi à leurs succès, comme je crois déjà l'avoir prouvé par la manière dont j'ai parlé de tous les ouvrages modernes de ce genre.

Quelques partisans zélés de Rousseau, m'ont reproché de n'avoir pas assez loué Émile. Avant que ces lettres parussent, j'avais une opinion bien différente, je craignais qu'on ne m'accusât au contraire de n'avoir point assez critiqué un livre si répréhensible à tant d'égards ; et, en effet, je ne me sentais pas au fond du cœur entièrement exempt d'impartialité pour un homme, qui, malgré ses défauts, ses torts et ses égarements, possédait des talents si supérieurs et des qualités si attachantes. Rousseau aimait et connaissait parfaitement les enfants ; il méprisait sincèrement l'intrigue et la cabale ; il dédaignait les *prôneurs*, espèce de gens si facile à gagner quand on veut bien perdre beaucoup de temps, surmonter beaucoup d'ennui pour obtenir des succès qui n'ont qu'un seul avantage, celui de n'exciter l'envie de personne : Rousseau enfin, comme le grand Corneille, pouvait dire :

Je ne dois qu'à moi seul toute ma renommée.¹

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- 1 Stéphanie Félicité de Genlis, *Adèle et Théodore ou Lettres sur l'éducation contenant tous les principes relatifs aux trois différents plans d'éducation des Princes et des jeunes personnes de l'un et de l'autre sexe*, ed. Isabelle Brouard-Arends (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2006), pp. 49–50.

Translation: This work is the fruit of fifteen years of reflections, of observations, and of the most sustained study of the inclinations, the defects, and the tricks of children. I propose a method whose advantages experience has shown me; but I do not have the mad pride to believe that this paltry treatise on education contains all that one can usefully say on this important subject.

I have quoted many works relative to education, in the intention above all of making them known, and to engage fathers of families to read them all.

The more one has meditated and reflected on this subject, the more one is removed from believing that it is exhausted. May one never grow tired of writing on so interesting a matter! Far from seeing as rivals the authors who will distinguish themselves in this career, none is more sincerely interested than I in their successes, as I believe I have already shown by the manner in which I have spoken about all the modern works of this sort.

Some zealous partisans of Rousseau reproached me with not having praised Émile enough. Before these letters appeared, I had a very different opinion, I feared lest I be accused on the contrary of not having sufficiently criticized a book so reprehensible in so many ways; and in effect, I did not feel myself at heart's bottom entirely exempt of impartiality for a man who, despite his defects, his wrongs and his wanderings, possessed talents so superior and qualities so attaching. Rousseau loved and knew children perfectly; he sincerely despised intrigue and cabal; he disdained promoters, a species of people so easy to gain when one wants to lose a lot of time, overcome a lot of tedium to obtain successes which have just one advantage, that of exciting envy in nobody: Rousseau at the last, like the great Corneille, could say:

I owe all my fame to none but myself.

Stéphanie Félicité, Marquise de Sillery, Comtesse de Genlis was the daughter of the Marquis de Saint-Aubin, from a Burgundian noble family. She spent some time in a convent as a child, as was then common. Even before her somewhat dissolute father's death, his wife and two children faced straitened circumstances. Félicité's mother, the marquise, gained access to the salons of financiers of the time, in particular the Farmer General La Popelinière: her daughter shone as a harpist. Through her father, imprisoned by the British while returning from the Antilles, the teenaged Félicité met Charles Alexis Brûlart, Marquis de Sillery, Comte de Genlis, then aged thirty, and they married in 1763. She was presented at court and joined the Orléans household as a companion to the Duchesse de Chartres, with whose husband, the duke—the future Philippe Égalité—she seems to have begun an affair almost at once. She also took charge of educating the Chartres children, including the future Louis Philippe, a little awkwardly because royal princes traditionally were raised by men after the age of seven. Louis Philippe's memoirs express his youthful attachment to her. Genlis met Rousseau and Voltaire and was the friend of Buffon, Marmontel, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Talleyrand, of Juliette Récamier. Her works extend to 140 volumes, making her ensuing neglect somewhat puzzling. From 1789 to 1791, she held a salon, visited by the Duc d'Orléans, Talleyrand, David, and the young deputies Lameth, Barère, and Barnave. During the Terror, she fled to England: her husband and her lover Philippe Égalité were both guillotined. Her time in emigration, where royalist circles made her unwelcome, also made writing her primary source of income. She returned to France in 1801, becoming a paid spy for Bonaparte. Her complex life grew more difficult in 1815 with the return of the Bourbons, and she was reduced to living off her royalties. Throughout this time, she adopted and raised several children of all conditions, living just long enough to see her pupil become *Roi des Français*. Both confided in Victor Hugo their impression of the other: Louis Philippe recalled her 'férocité' as governess—no candy, sleeping on planks, learning manual trades. She said of him: "Il était prince, j'en ai fait un homme; il était lourd, j'en ai fait un homme habile; il était ennuyeux, j'en ai fait un homme amusant; il était poltron, j'en ai fait un homme brave; il était ladre, je n'ai pu en faire un homme généreux."²

2 Victor Hugo, *Choses vues* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), pp. 439–440.

Genlis wrote several edifying works on raising children, starting in 1782 with *Adèle et Théodore*, an answer to Rousseau's *Émile* (1762). The work sold out in eight days, amid some controversy, including attacks from the *Encyclopédistes* and songs about her in Paris. Rousseau had made the topic very much in vogue, and Genlis was not alone in reacting against his treatment of the girl Sophie in particular: Necker for instance gave her daughter a highly formalized education and regretted only that it had not been more so, while Genlis's Spartan program for her royal charges is outlined above. One might feel that Genlis's moral authority on the topic of raising royal children could be compromised by her ongoing affair with the children's father, but Genlis seems unperturbed by such questions, much as Rousseau in *Émile* seems unperturbed by the fact that he gave his four natural children up to the foundling hospital. Genlis notes that Rousseau "aimait et connaissait parfaitement les enfants," and one is reminded that praise for Rousseau was common coin around 1780 as a token of authenticity and virtue. Genlis was perhaps not a natural Romantic—more than once, she remarked on Staël's gushing style—but she found herself already on a Romantic playing field in pre-Revolutionary France, where engagement with Rousseau involved mentioning certain Romantic topoi to establish one's bona fides. Genlis, whose discomfort with Rousseau's "défauts, ses torts et ses égarements" is explicit from the outset, does exactly that.

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