When Mme de Genlis (née Stéphanie-Félicité Ducrest de Saint-Aubin (1746–1830)), ex-lady-in-waiting to the Duchesse de Chartres, mistress (for a while) of the Duc and governess to their daughters, was appointed to the post of ‘gouverneur’ of their three sons in 1782, the news of such an unprecedented step caused something of a sensation in Paris. The outrage felt by many, including male contenders for the position, at the nomination of a woman to the powerful position of teacher of princes beyond the age at which they were normally removed from the tutelage of women, manifested itself in scabrous personal attacks (‘elle ne fit qu’un saut d’un sofa voluptueux au fauteuil pedantesque de gouverneur’) and other hostile remarks and verses which promoted the view of their subject as an anomaly: ‘C’est une femme à système qui quitte son grand habit pour les culottes d’un pédagogue’. Mme de Genlis’s alleged response was characteristically sharp and self-assured: ‘Qui empêcherait donc que les femmes ne fussent capables d’autant et de plus de succès en tout genre que les hommes?’

The reputation and popularity of this prolific and versatile writer was to become immense. Saint-Beuve described her in 1850 as in a class of her own, ‘plus encore qu’une femme-auteur, elle était une femme enseignante; elle était née avec le signe au front’ and highlighted the most salient aspect of her considerable literary output: ‘son originalité la plus réelle consistait en cette vocation et cette verve de pédagogie poussée jusqu’à la manie’. Most studies of Mme de Genlis detail her elaborate and ambitious educational plans for the royal children which she carried out between 1782 and 1790 in the secluded pavilion in the grounds of the convent of Belle-Chasse, outside Paris, where since 1777 she had acted as ‘gouvernante’ to the Duc de Chartres’s daughters. Under her absolute authority, the young princes and princesses, together with
her own two daughters, her niece, nephew and two adopted English girls were subjected to an extremely varied, spartan and rigorously structured régime in which every moment of the day was occupied to good effect and every activity, meal, outing and leisure pursuit was dedicated to the training of the mind, body and character. As well as subjects like natural history, mathematics, anatomy, physics, drawing, music, art, modern languages and the classics, they learned practical skills like gardening, husbandry, woodwork and basketry and participated in physical activities such as dancing, gymnastics, swimming, riding and games. For up to ten hours a day by 1786, Mme de Genlis oversaw their food, clothing and hygiene, mapped out courses of reading and accompanied them on educational visits. She appointed masters where indispensable but taught grammar, history, literature, modern languages, gymnastics and anatomy herself.

Among her several theoretical works on education, *Adèle et Théodore, ou Lettres sur l'éducation* (1782), a complex network of letters between a group of aristocrats discussing the education of their own and other people's children, most extensively sets out theories on the pedagogical merits of an experimental education, up to the age of twelve, carried out in a rural, domestic setting. The chief correspondent is the Baronne d'Almane, who, together with her husband, resolves to remove her family to an isolated country château in order to devote four years exclusively to the education of their children Adèle and Théodore. (Mme de Genlis firmly rejected criticisms of lack of modesty for praising herself in the person of the Baronne, although she admitted that her central character shared her ideas and principles as both mother and teacher.) The general ideas expressed here are derived from Locke, Mme de Maintenon, Fénélon and her near contemporary, Rousseau, although she took issue with the latter on a number of aspects. *Adèle et Théodore* endorses Rousseau’s opinions in *Émile ou de l'éducation* (1762) on the importance of the pastoral life, of making education suitable to the age and temperament of the child, of maintaining a close relationship between teacher and pupil and of the power of example, but differs over the duration and scope of the

---


6 *Adèle et Théodore*, xxx. The denial of ‘le ridicule dessein de me peindre’ appears also in the Préface to *Les veillées du château* and was later added to the original preface of *Adèle et Théodore*.

education a child should receive, the value of reading carefully selected books and the acquisition of knowledge, the importance of rigid discipline, the question of education for girls and the subsequent rôle of women.\textsuperscript{8} Indeed, several of the correspondents in \textit{Adèle et Théodore} are explicitly critical of some of Rousseau’s ideas, the Comte de Roseville, who is tutor to a prince, arguing that although much of Rousseau’s advice is wise, many of his methods (notably not having Emile taught to read or write) are as defective as those he seeks to attack, and the Baron d’Almane speaks disparagingly of Rousseau’s enforcement of excessively spartan conditions.\textsuperscript{9}

In this work, Mme de Genlis reveals her standpoint to be aristocratic, religious, conservative and monarchist. A self-confessed enemy of the ‘philosophes’, she felt herself to be an innovator both as an educator and as a writer for children. She was undoubtedly an important figure in a literary climate in which, stimulated by the broadening debate on education, a number of women embarked, from the latter half of the eighteenth century onwards and in France and England in particular, upon achieving professional status as writers of books especially for the young.

Her most popular work for juvenile readers and their parents (it sold 7,000 copies in eight days) was \textit{Les veilles du château, ou Cours de morale à l’usage des enfans} (1784) (translated by Thomas Holcroft in \textit{c.} 1785 as \textit{Tales of the castle}), a collection of ‘framed’ moral tales amounting to a course of moral instruction based on Mme de Genlis’s inimitable pedagogical principles.\textsuperscript{10} Her highly structured approach is clearly delineated in the preface:

\begin{quote}
Avant de songer au plan \textit{romanesque}, c’est-à-dire, aux événements, aux situations, j’avois préparé le \textit{plan des idées}, l’ordre dans lequel je devois les présenter pour éclairer graduellement l’esprit et élever l’âme (du moins autant que mon intelligence me le permettoit). Cette chaîne de raisonnements ainsi disposée, il ne me restoit plus qu’à faire une combinaison aussi facile qu’amusante; il s’agissoit de trouver les caractères, les petits incidens, et les situations qui pouvoient servir à démontrer, de la manière la plus frappante, les vérités que je voulois établir.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

Her control over her material, as over her pupils and readers, is firm and always directed to a predetermined end: ‘Au lieu de \textit{chercher} et d’\textit{ajuster un résultat moral} à un joli sujet, j’ai arrangé et composé chaque sujet d’après une vérité morale’ (vol. i, xiii). This approach

\textsuperscript{8} Mme de Genlis published a truncated version of \textit{Emile} in 1820.

\textsuperscript{9} \textit{Adèle et Théodore}, vol. i, 202; vol. ii, 53, ‘Je ne vois point d’enfant plus tourmenté et plus malheureux que ce pauvre Emile’.

\textsuperscript{10} This structure is reminiscent of Sarah Fielding’s \textit{The governess, or, Little female academy} (1749) and Mme Leprince de Beaumont’s \textit{Magasin des enfants} (1757).

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Les veilles du château, ou Cours de morale à l’usage des enfans}, 4 vols (Paris: Le Cointe et Durey, 1826), vol. i, xii–xiii. Future page references to this edition will be given in the text.
may suggest a rather cold and uninteresting didacticism, but Mme de Genlis is fully aware of the necessity of capturing the imagination:

Vouloir persuader, entraîner, exiger les sacrifices pénibles, douloureux, sans tâcher de plaire et d'intéresser, sans chercher et saisir tous les moyens qui peuvent fixer l'attention de ceux qu'on désire gagner et convaincre, voilà sans doute d'étranges inconsciences! Lorsqu'on parle au coeur, on est sûr d'être écouté. Pourquoi donc proscrire des ouvrages de morale, le sentiment et l'imagination? Ce ne sont point de froids raisonnements qui rendront les hommes meilleurs; ce sont des exemples frappants, des tableaux faits pour toucher et s'imprimer fortement dans l'imagination: c'est enfin la moral mise en action (vol. i, xiv–xv).

The world of Les veillées du château is that of the Ancien Régime and the fictional children to whom the tales are told belong to an aristocratic family. The Marquise de Clémire, like her literary predecessor in Adèle et Théodore, takes her three children, César (9½), Caroline (8½) and Pulchérie (7) (named after Mme de Genlis's own daughters and nephew) to their château at Champcery in rural Burgundy, together with their grandmother, the Baronne d'Elby, while their father is away in the army. In order to amuse and instruct the children, the Marquise implements a routine of telling moral tales before bedtime between 8.30 and 9.30 p.m. The removal of the father from the scene effectively foregrounds the influence of the mother as teacher and moral guide, supported by the grandmother, despite the presence of the Abbé Frémont, César's tutor, who is indeed occasionally subjected to mild ridicule for his pretentiousness and complaining nature. Even when the Marquis returns from the war, he remains in the background in this absolute matriarchy where his wife rules with benign severity. The isolated setting of the house in the country, far away from the distractions of the city, facilitates the total dedication of the mother to her children's education. Her supervision and companionship are unflagging and the children's lives carefully controlled at every moment, with no ideas or activities unshared or unsanctioned, thus, in effect, denying them the freedom to experience life in their own way.

The framing narrative is in many ways as important as the tales themselves, for the latter not only serve to illustrate moral precepts but are used by the Marquise to reward or punish her children for their behaviour. The telling of a tale is withheld or a child excluded for lapses from virtue which in turn may serve as stimuli for a further anecdote or lesson. The three children also mirror the rôle of the reading child, who is intended to identify with them as they react to, and learn from, the tales. If, as Mme de Genlis appears to

12 In Adèle et Théodore, the father plays a more important rôle in teaching Théodore.
envisage, the book is read by or with a parent, the voices of the speaking mother (the Marquise) and the reading mother thus merge together. Mme de Genlis's acceptance of the absolute and ever-present authority of the parent figure is amply illustrated in this respect, for although the children are encouraged to discuss the tales with their mother, the questions they ask representing the questions the author imagines a child might reasonably be expected to wish to ask, she is angry when they are overheard criticizing her arguments on one occasion when she is not there to reply: 'Vous devez croire que votre opinion ne vaut rien quand elle diffère de la mienne; et lorsque vous n'êtes pas frappés de la vérité des principes que je cherche à vous donner, c'est à moi qu'il faut exposer vos doutes' (vol. i, 181). This is, in fact, one of the rare occasions when the children are seen and heard conversing on their own. The retaining of the privilege of participating in the 'veillées' thus becomes synonymous with the children's desire to please their mother and earn her love.

The framing narrative also allows for vivid glimpses of the daily lives of the children, the details of which are nicely observed. Their early reservations about the old, chilly, dilapidated château, surrounded by marshes, with its heavy, lumbering furniture, are soon dispelled by a new-found delight in the countryside in winter. (Indeed, when, at the end of the text, they are back in Paris, they find the balls and parties no compensation for the outdoor fun.) They are seen to be energetic and spontaneous as they throw snowballs, slide each other on chairs round a frozen pond and run and tumble. Although they are for the most part the passive recipients of their mother's instruction, at such moments they are quite unlike the sedate, sedentary creatures of many early moral tales. In summer, they discover the pleasures of walks, carriage-rides and gardening, an activity frequently recommended by the rational moralists and which allows their mother to instruct them, echoing Rousseau and Voltaire, in the simple delights afforded by nature: 'Les goûts innocents et simples sont les seuls durables. On se lasse d'un palais et même d'un trône: on ne se lasse point d'un jardin que l'on cultive' (vol. ii, 125). When news of their father's safety reaches them on May Day, the festivities include dancing round a maypole and their eager participation in a peasant wedding and the local grape harvest is colourfully detailed. It was precisely Mme de Genlis's talent for the use of detail evocative of the period that appealed to the young Aurore Dupin (George Sand) as she

13 The authoritarian voice here reflects not so much the defence mechanism that Julia Briggs claims for many English women writers of the period, but Mme de Genlis's natural pedagogical manner. See J. Briggs, 'Women writers and writing for children: from Sarah Fielding to E. Nesbit' in Gillian Avery and Julia Briggs (eds), Children and their books: a celebration of the work of Iona and Peter Opie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 221-50, 230-1.
recounts in her *Histoire de ma vie*: 'son imagination est restée fraîche sous les glaces de l'âge, et dans les détails, elle est véritablement artiste et poète. . .'.

Although, as in the majority of late eighteenth-century moral tales, the portrayal of the children is restricted to the author's external, adult viewpoint and there is no attempt to portray their inner life, they are individualized enough not to be the one-dimensional, facile stereotypes of some contemporary texts. Their characteristics are, nevertheless, chosen to serve Mme de Genlis's pedagogical purposes. César, 'le plus raisonnable', has already acquired self-control and is 'sensible, docile, sincère, courageux', Caroline is loyal and good-hearted and Pulchérie, though a little more scatter-brained than her sister, is loved for her 'extrême franchise et la sensibilité de son coeur' (vol. i, 4). The process of learning is clearly foregrounded, but other aspects of the children's nature do emerge, like their enthusiasm, affection and sense of fun, and all three set an example to the reader in regarding education as a source of pleasure: they are thrilled by the Marquise's description of a telescope, inspired by the many ways of enjoying and profiting from nature and attracted by the prospect of doing good deeds.

Their responses to the tales, though on the whole intended to illustrate their grasping of the moral and complete acceptance of the adult viewpoint and hence invariably thoughtful and serious, are expressed in language which is not inconsistent with their ages and are varied and occasionally amusing in their naive earnestness. Thus, on hearing about the curing of a blind peasant, César exclaims: 'Si nous pouvions en trouver une aveugle, quelle joie!' and, having been instructed in the importance of never vilifying one's enemies, he yearns: 'Ah, je voudrois être grand pour avoir un ennemi, afin de le louer et de le défendre' (vol. iii, 221). Although Mme de Genlis claims that 'ces recits sont souvent interrompus par les questions des enfans, qui ne laissent jamais passer un mot au-dessus de l'intelligence de cinq ans, sans en demander Implication', the language used in the narration of the tales (and in some respects the subject matter too) seems, to the modern reader, to make few concessions to the ages of the children. They are, indeed, allowed to question their mother about aspects of the tales and even pick up the occasional apparent inconsistency or contradiction, which she answers patiently. They are quick to notice, for example, that she

---

15 See for example 'Little Steady' and 'Miss Wilful' in Lady Eleanor Fenn's *Cobwebs to catch flies, or Dialogues in short sentences, adapted to children from the age of three to eight years* (c. 1783) or Mme Leprince de Beaumont's child characters who have names like Spirituelle, Sensée, Tempête.
16 *Adele et Théodore*, vol. i, 104.
enjoys talking to the peasant families in the neighbourhood despite her ban on their conversing with the servants, an observation which she turns to good account by praising the simple, hardworking purity of the peasants in contrast to servants who have often become corrupted by idleness and affectation and are seen here, as in other contemporary works, as potentially a bad influence on children. 17

Although basically good and obedient, César, Caroline and Pulchérie do occasionally misbehave. They were perhaps more believable to the contemporary child reader than the preternaturally good or incorrigibly bad children so frequently 'paired' in early moral tales, but they are still far from the naughty children of later nineteenth-century texts, whose childish high-spirits and curiosity lead them constantly into scrapes which are realistic and often not unattractive. Their misdeeds are seen as due to lack of reflection or experience rather than to character defects and reap an immediate and effective lesson: thus, Pulchérie is deprived of a week's stories after mocking the Abbé Frémont's defeat at chess for not only vexing a man who is her superior in age and experience, but for maliciously enjoying his discomfort. After recognizing her fault and sincerely repenting, she is forgiven by her mother for her fundamentally 'good heart' although the punishment remains. Caroline is taken to task for trying to excuse her sister and subjected to a lecture on the dangers of telling a lie which, as in many English Evangelical texts for juvenile readers, is seen as the worst of faults, since it represents not only disobedience to the parent but disobedience to God. 18 When César is made to see the error of being sullen with the Abbé after a punishment, he voluntarily imposes a fortnight's deprivation of nightly stories on himself. The relationship between the children and the Abbé is, in fact, repeatedly a source of conflict. The scene in which Pulchérie is accused of distracting her brother while he is studying by faking sneezes, grimacing and stitching his coat to the chair is an amusing one, although her actions are made known only by report rather than portrayed at first hand. In each of these cases, the children demonstrate their good nature, sibling affection and total acceptance of correction by all renouncing their entertainment if one is punished. The narrative also stresses the importance of the confession of faults, which usually leads to forgiveness, for the worst fault is seeking to deny or hide them from their mother.

---

17 See, for example, Maria Edgeworth's Harrington (1817) and Mary Wollstonecraft's Thoughts on the education of daughters (1787).
18 See especially Mary Martha Sherwood's The history of the Fairchild family (1818) in which the parent is seen to represent God on earth.
The graver offences and character flaws are reserved for the children and young adults who feature in the tales themselves. Although the plights of these characters are often extreme and coincidences and reversals of fortune abound, Mme de Genlis prides herself on the fact that they are all based on truth, the settings and dilemmas reflecting the world the listening children see about them. The protagonists are generally either aristocrats, like themselves, or poor peasants. Varied though the tales are (indeed some might seem more suitable for adults, dealing with love and marriage), they share the same aim, that of teaching the recipients to practise, recognize and reward virtue and do good deeds. The Marquise tells her children: 'Je tâcherai, mes enfans, de vous faire connoitre ce qui est mal et ce qui est bien; et, quand vous aurez cette précieuse connaissance, j'en suis sûre, vous aimerez la vertu, parce que rien n’est aimable comme elle, et vous détesterez le vice' (vol. ii, 104). The rôle of the parent/teacher is clear: 'l’objet principal qui doit l’occuper, c’est de réprimer les défauts de son élève et de perfectionner son caractère... s’il le rend bon, vertueux, sociable, il a dignement rempli son noble emploi' (vol. ii, 144.) More specifically, the mother’s rôle as teacher is seen as one to which any reasonably educated woman might aspire, even at a modest level, without male collaboration: 'une mère tendre, dans le fond d’une province, sans fortune et sans les secours d’aucun maître, peut, avec de la raison et de la vigilance, donner à sa fille une excellente éducation. Il ne faut pas pour cela que de l’affection, de la patience, et une petite bibliothèque bien choisie’ (vol. ii, 145).

The virtues and vices depicted in the tales can be seen to apply to adults too and are not just directed at childish naughtiness. It is a pattern for life and in this respect the mother’s rôle is seen as crucial as educator of the next generation and preserver of traditional moral values. It should be noted that the teaching of virtue is related to fulfilling as well as possible the demands and responsibilities of one’s station in life rather than for the sake of the immortal soul as in English Evangelical texts like Mrs Sherwood’s History of the Fairchild family (1818), for example. Although Mme de Genlis claimed that ‘j’ai fait de la religion l’unique base de toute ma morale’ and has the Marquise speak of God to her children, she is, in Les veillées du château, more overtly concerned with socialization than the hereafter. The virtues taught are largely ungendered in that fortitude, honesty, self-sufficiency (Caroline is accused of debasing a servant by requiring her to buckle her shoes), endurance, obedience and benevolence are encouraged in all the children, although the Marquise does discuss heroism with César specifically.

19 Letter of 7 October 1786 to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre cited in Broglie, Madame de Genlis, 122.
Mme de Genlis was perplexingly ambivalent in her attitude towards the education of young females, arguing in *Adèle et Théodore* that overstimulation of the intellect and imagination was dangerous and urging the inculcation of patience, prudence and moderation in all their interests but also asserting that they should not be strangers to any area of knowledge and, in her later *Projet d'une école rurale pour l'éducation des filles* (1801) she advocates knowledge of law, industrial pursuits and estate management, foreseeing the need for women to be capable of taking their place more independently in the world.

The tales themselves in *Les veillées du château*, which, like the framing narrative, intersperse description with dialogue to sustain interest, include examples to avoid as well as to emulate. Many are patterned on traditional character types found in the works of Sarah Fielding, Mary Wollstonecraft and Maria Edgeworth as well as Berquin, Mme Leprince de Beaumont and Mme d'Epinay. The first tale, ‘Delphine ou l'Heureuse Guérison’, for example, draws on the device of opposing moral characteristics in introducing a spoilt rich girl, aged ten, plagued by physical and mental ailments (she is capricious, nervous, permanently ill-humoured and suffers with her lungs) which are seen as due to gluttony, indolence and vanity. Her only chance of a cure is to spend several months under the supervision of the doctor’s family, in a cowshed in the country. Delphine’s reaction to her new life in which she encounters spartan conditions and discipline for the first time, is a characteristically violent one, her frustration and rage at being deprived of her cossetted, idle existence manifesting themselves in spiteful, contemptuous and aggressive behaviour. Her growing friendship with Henriette, the doctor’s daughter, aged twelve, slowly transforms her as she is forced to think, for the first time, about personal conduct and begins to enjoy learning to appreciate nature with Henriette, who collects fossils, as her teacher. (The enticing prospect of a butterfly hunt reinforces the listening children’s awareness that learning can be fun). The country-bred child, moreover, teaches the child brought up in the salons of Paris to read and write. Thus Delphine comes to love ‘la raison et la vérité’ and discovers the disinterested pleasure that can come from helping others. Once a useless, self-obsessed and self-indulgent creature, she finds physical and mental well-being in a simple, full and active life. An interesting aspect of this tale is the criticism of Delphine’s mother who lacks the strength of mind to educate her daughter properly. The Marquise’s children quickly grasp that true motherly love does not run the risk of ruining health and character by

---

20 A similar cure is described in Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna’s *Personal recollections* (1843).
pampering and indulging a child and appreciate the good and caring parent who enforces discipline and education. The moral of the tale, the endorsing of reason and selflessness, is seen to have an immediate impact on them, for they decide to use the money with which they planned to purchase a butterfly tank for good deeds instead, thus furnishing for the reader a concrete example of a desirable response to the story.

A similar theme appears in ‘Eglantine ou l’Indolente Corrigée’ in which a rich couple’s daughter is so idle that she grows up careless, ignorant, stupid and thoughtless (a passing reference to Pulchérie’s carelessness in losing her possessions drives the point home here). Once again, her well-meaning but ineffective mother is criticized for not adopting harsher methods, demonstrating Mme de Genlis’s awareness that responsibility was a concomitant of power. At sixteen, Eglantine loses a suitor because she is silly and unsocialized. Although a degree of repentance and resolution is initiated by the financial ruin and death of her father, she has to undergo a further decisive trial: the smallpox she contracts ruins her beauty but enables her to concentrate on developing her charm and wit which eventually win back her suitor. This fairly common device (a very similar situation is depicted in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Original stories* (1788)) illustrating that physical beauty only elicits superficial responses, leads, as in Delphine’s story, to a reassuring and encouraging ending. The same condemnation of coquetry is used by the Marquise to promote the desirability of benevolence in a tale about a young married woman who gives away to a poor old man the money her father-in-law has provided for a new ball-gown. This gracious action bestows happiness on all concerned, for Eugénie is distinguished at the ball for the elegant simplicity of her dress, thus demonstrating that true pleasure and success reside in natural beauty and virtue. Here, Eugénie’s mother has devoted herself to her daughter’s upbringing and perfect harmony reigns between them. The emphasis is on the importance of pleasing a deserving mother by virtuous behaviour (a further strategy of maternal power) and, as in the framing narrative, of heeding a good mother’s advice: ‘Quels conseils peuvent jamais être inspirés par plus d’intérêt, donnés avec plus de réflexion que ceux d’une bonne mère’ (vol. ii, 73).

The importance accorded to the bestowing of charity (a theme dearly loved by Victorian writers) indicates the envisaged audience for the text: the child of an aristocratic or well-to-do family, who, like the royal children in Mme de Genlis’s care, must learn how to use the privileges of their rank. As Ellen Moers remarks in her discussion of *Les veillées du château*, ‘benevolent princes and princesses begin life as good children, who listen to their mother’.21 In her immensely popular work, *Ministering children* (1854), Maria

---

Charlesworth argues that helping the poor, even in small ways, was an activity in which a child could find satisfaction and which created a habit for life. In many such texts, the poor seem to exist largely in order to provide opportunities for childish benevolence. Several of the tales in *Les veillées du château* demonstrate a paternalistic attitude: evidence of Delphine’s regeneration is that she begs her mother to provide a pension for a blind peasant’s family instead of buying her new toys. In ‘Les Solitaires de Normandie’, an angelic stranger who turns out to be a princess helps a poor couple by giving them a house in the forest, decent clothes, a meadow and assorted cows and hens, thus enabling them to make a better life for themselves in future. Subsequently, the benevolent lady’s child, aged only 5½, takes a little blind peasant child to Paris to have her sight restored and teaches her to read. A direct reflection of Mme de Genlis’s own experience appears in ‘Pamela ou l’Heureuse Adoption’ where an English orphan is adopted by a benevolent Frenchwoman and grows up, instructed by her mother in duty and virtue, to help, in her turn, an old paralysed woman, sowing blessings in her wake but also reaping happiness in finding a long-lost English uncle.

It is not, however, only the aristocratic characters who are seen to exercise charity and dutifulness: in ‘Le Chaudronnier, ou la Reconnaissance Réciproque’, an uneducated lackey works hard to support his impoverished mistress, giving her all his savings and living in poverty himself. The Marquise relates this story to illustrate that there are exceptions to her criticism of servants, reminding the children that ‘il n’est point de classe, point d’état où l’on ne puisse trouver les vertus héroïques’ (vol. i, 130). When the honest man falls sick, their plight is reported by the doctor to a high-placed, beautiful lady who appears, like a fairy godmother, at the moment of despair, with the promise of a pension and a new home for the old lady where she and her faithful servant can live happily ever after. (This situation echoes that in a number of Maria Edgeworth’s tales, notably *Simple Susan* and *Lazy Lawrence*, from *The parent’s assistant* (1800), in which an aristocratic patron is introduced to reward the honest and hardworking poor who help themselves.) This tale is juxtaposed with that of another servant, Marianne, who struggles to carry out her mistress’s dying wish to fund reading lessons for poor children. Here, too, generosity has its recompense and Marianne receives an inheritance and a pension from a prince. In her summing up of ‘Le Chaudronnier’, quoted above, the Marquise adds that ‘elle prouve encore que, si nous entendions bien nos intérêts, nous serions toujours constamment vertueux’ (vol. i, 130). Paradoxically and indeed problematically,

22 Holcroft’s translation has a note suggesting that this is the Duchesse de Chartres. Thomas Holcroft, *Tales of the castle*, 5 vols (London: Robinson, Phillips, 1806), vol. iv, 47.
disinterested benevolence is thus seen, as in the tales of Maria Edgeworth and many other writers of moral tales, to provide not only spiritual, but material reward for the bestowers too. In *Adèle et Théodore*, it is argued that such rewards should be noble ones (a portrait of the mother or a book). For the children in *Les veillées du château*, however, pleasure and excitement are the most usual rewards for their charitable acts.

The tales are juxtaposed with the experiences of César, Caroline and Pulchérie in their daily lives, in which both events and other characters serve to underline for both them and the reader the ‘example’ provided by the stories and to elicit further instruction from the indefatigable Marquise. Thus, the opportunity to help a poor woman in a neighbouring village who is about to give birth, affords Caroline and Pulchérie the satisfaction of making baby clothes and César a large chest-of-drawers as well as the fun of transporting their gifts by donkey and cart, an undertaking which assumes the proportions of a holiday excursion. The emphasis on the fun makes the event an attractive example for the reader of the ways in which even young children can participate in doing good. The children are also offered the living example of a neighbouring child, Sidonie, whose many talents including her botanical knowledge and skill in handicrafts, especially the sewing of clothes for the poor, are an inspiration to Caroline and Pulchérie. Her interest in plants and skill in making water colours from them teach that every walk in the countryside can be a source of useful and interesting knowledge. From the example of a peasant boy enduring a younger child’s blows, César learns the importance of respecting weakness, the Abbé, in this instance, reminding him of the responsibility of the rich and powerful towards those less fortunate. When he later encounters two near-frozen children (Augustin and his brother again) in the wood, he notes how Augustin instinctively demonstrates pity for the suffering of others as well as courage and endurance by giving his coat to the smaller boy. The outcome of this event is that Augustin is invited to come to the château to be educated with César, thus acknowledging his innate nobility. Conversely, the behaviour of an ignorant, over-familiar and patronizing guest at the château prompts a discussion on manners and breeding, although the Marquise severely reprimands the children for commenting maliciously on the man.

On the whole, she is pleased to witness the impression the tales have made upon them and, in a manner typical of the rational moralists, profits from their delight to contrast their endeavours with the results of indulging in idle passions: ‘les passions ne procurent qu’une agitation pénible, que des jouissances que l’inquiétude corrompt toujours, ou que le remords empoisonne. La vertu seule peut nous offrir une source inépuisable de plaisir et de félicité’ (vol. 3, 291) Even the instilling of enthusiasm has a caveat,
for an improper passion for anything (except virtue) can lead one astray. The children’s delight in gardening and in anticipating the progress of their flowers and lettuces earns them a rather over-zealous warning about the dangers of excessive partiality in the shape of an anecdote about huge sums of money being paid for a single flower bulb: ‘Il n’est rien dont l’homme ne puisse abuser quand il cesse d’écouter sa raison et de réprimer ses fantaisies’ (vol. ii, 125).

Although, unlike Rousseau, Mme de Genlis is in favour of a wide but carefully selected range of reading for children (as long as the books are read with the mother), in common with many of her contemporaries, she is firmly against the reading of fairy tales. In *Adèle et Théodore* she writes that children will only remember the enchanted gardens and diamond palaces and forget the moral: ‘toutes ces imaginations fantastiques ne peuvent donner à des enfants que des idées fausses, retarder le progrès de leur raison, et leur inspirer de dégoût pour les lectures véritablement instructives’. When the little girls in *Les veillées du château* are found reading a fairy-tale lent to them by their governess and admit to their startled mother a fascination with such stories, she undertakes to write a story of her own to prove that ‘votre ignorance seule vous persuade que les prodiges et le merveilleux n’existent que dans les contes. La nature et les arts offrent des phénomènes tout aussi surprenants que les événements remarquables du prince Percinet’ (vol. ii, 121-2). The evening sessions are suspended for three weeks, partly so that she can research and write her story in which ‘tout le merveilleux sera vrai’ (vol. ii, 122) and partly as a punishment for reading an unsanctioned book. The resulting tale, ‘Alphonse et Dalinde, ou la Féerie de l’Art et de la Nature’, one of the longest in the text, has the format of a travelogue, in which the hero, Alphonse, visits many countries and sees many marvels, including phenomena akin to those in fairy stories: a palace of ice, a silver mine, coloured and magnetic rocks, and strange animals and machines. The writing is vivid and dramatic (it opens with a spectacular description of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755) and sustains the suspense and wonderment of the children. Alphonse, who is initially ignorant and vain, learns by his amazement and experience of suffering and eventually finds the young woman of his dreams. The Marquise reveals, by reading on the next evening the

---

23 See, for example, Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Edgeworth and Mme d’Epinay.
24 *Adèle et Théodore*, vol. i, 102-3.
25 The Marquise’s attitude may reflect a contemporary awareness of the paradox of teaching love of truth and virtue through the ‘untruths’ of fiction. ‘Le prince Percinet’ refers to Mme d’Aulnoy’s fairy-tale ‘Gracieuse et Percinet’ in her *Contes de fées* (1698).
26 This tale has been said to be the forerunner of the works of Jules Verne (Broglie, *Madame de Genlis*, 121).
scholarly notes which the real parent or child can peruse during the actual reading of the tale, that every 'magical' or monstrous element has a firm basis in fact. Backing this up with a practical demonstration, she further mystifies and enthralls the children by describing a hairy monster with eight legs, eight eyes and large pincers (merely a spider seen through a microscope) and gives them a telescope so that they can discover for themselves the 'miracle' of seeing things from afar.

This story initiates an intriguing discussion in which we find Mme de Genlis airing one of her most personal preoccupations. When the Abbé criticizes the Marquise for omitting any discussion of electricity in her 'fantastic' tale, saying condescendingly that he could have written it for her, her reply reveals the author's impatience at the prejudices and difficulties experienced by women writers: 'Une femme ne doit jamais souffrir qu'un homme ajoute un mot à ses ouvrages. L'homme qu'elle consulte passera toujours pour l'inventeur, et elle sera accusée de mettre son nom au travail d'un autre. . . Songez aux femmes qui ont écrit avec succès, vous verrez que presque toutes ont été soupçonnées de cette espèce de lâcheté' (vol. iii, 139). After citing examples of how, in her opinion, some famous male-authored works owe much to the work of women writers, she informs the discountenanced Abbé that 'Il me semble que ces exemples et tant d'autres devroient empêcher les femmes auteurs de consulter les hommes, et de former des liaisons intimes avec des gens de lettres' (vol. iii, 141).

Although modern readers inevitably find her style and approach too formal and didactic, both her contemporaries and later readers admired the often vivid and dramatic nature of her narrative technique. She had already produced the innovative Théâtre pour l'usage des jeunes personnes (1779), four volumes of playlets intended to be performed by children which demonstrate considerable skill in plot construction and the writing of vigorous dialogue. These short plays, like the tales in Les veillees du chateau, are 'morals in action', following the same narrative patterns of the correction of errors in both young members of the aristocracy and (an innovation of which Mme de Genlis was extremely proud) the children of tradesmen and artisans. In the light of her attitude towards fairy tales, the inclusion of fairy characters in some of the plays is surprising, but these are rational fairies whose 'magic' is largely psychological and serves a moralistic end.

The reputation and influence of Mme de Genlis in France and England were considerable. Maria Edgeworth, feeling that no contemporary English books for children approached such an intellectual standard, set out to translate Adèle et Théodore but did not persevere when a rival translation appeared. She and her father, Richard Edgeworth, another fervent educationalist, met Mme de
Genlis in Paris in 1803 but she appears not to have been very favourably impressed. Mary Wollstonecraft, although critical in her *Vindication of the rights of women* (1792) of Mme de Genlis’s ‘unreasonable’ endorsing of blind submission to parents and the opinion of the world, shared many of her educational views and her portrayal of the moral education of the two young pupils of the severely rational Mrs Mason in *Original stories* has many affinities with *Les veillées du château*. Hannah More, author of *Hints towards forming the character of a princess* (1805) and founder author of the Evangelical Cheap Repository Tracts, whose literary status and zeal for moral education perhaps most closely resembled that of Mme de Genlis, commented on ‘the surprising talent that woman has of making everything that passes through her hands interesting! The barrenest and most unpromising subjects she turns to favour and prettiness’ but expressed grave reservations about her character: ‘Can it be possible, my dear friend, that she who labours with so much ability and success in the great vineyard of education, should herself be so deficient in the important qualities which she so skilfully paints, and so powerfully recommends?’

Two of Mme de Genlis’s best-known successors in France, the Comtesse de Ségur and George Sand, followed in her footsteps in their recognition of the important rôle of imaginative fiction in the education of children and in their privileging of the rôle of the female in their own educational stories for the young.

With the hugely popular children’s books of the Comtesse de Ségur (Sophie Rostopchine (1799–1874)), whose moral aims and well-to-do social settings are similar to those of Mme de Genlis, considerable advances in narrative technique can be seen. In the domestic realism of texts like *Les malheurs de Sophie* (1864), *Les petites filles modèles* (1858), *Les vacances* (1859) and *Le bon petit diable* (1865), for example, the children are foregrounded more overtly and learn their lessons about behaviour and attitudes not from stories narrated to them but through their own first-hand experiences. Thus, Sophie, an example of a naughty child who has interesting adventures within a stable and privileged family environment, learns to confront her tendencies towards greed, sloth, disobedience and unthinking cruelty through bitter and frequently painful experience: she is almost burnt by builders’ quicklime which she has been forbidden to approach, is ill after gorging herself on

---


bread and cream, melts her favourite wax doll by warming it in the sun and causes the death of several animals through her 'bright ideas' and fascination with experimentation (salting live fish, drowning a tortoise, using holly to whip a donkey). Despite the unfortunate results of her actions for others and herself (she has to both suffer from the loss of her pets and receive punishment), Sophie must have been an attractive figure for young readers of the time, and has certainly remained the most memorable and popular of the Comtesse de Séguir's characters, for her faults are linked to qualities which also have their positive side – boundless energy, lively curiosity, inventiveness and determination. Her experiences are truly adventures in miniature, drawing on the intriguing and frequently hazardous potential of a familiar world, and are played out by children on their own without the presence of adults. Sophie's partner in crime is her cousin Paul, who is chivalrous, sensible and brave, but is easily led astray by the false reasoning, sulks and sheer dynamic force of character of his younger cousin. As in *Les veillées du château*, the father is absent from the scene (he comes from Paris only once when he rather unedifyingly causes the death of a cat through a careless act), so that Sophie's mother Mme de Réan and her aunt are in charge of the household. Mme de Réan is firm, but wise, patient and kind and Sophie, though repeatedly punished, is forgiven for her misdeeds if she is honest about them with her mother.

The text is divided into short chapters which repeat the pattern of one basic story type (bright idea or temptation – disaster – lesson) but with enough variation to sustain interest. Interestingly, although Sophie accepts her mother's admonishment or advice and resolves never to transgress again, she remains irrepressible to the end, despite the author's declaration in the dedicatory note that all her faults were corrected. The fascination of the book thus resides more in the amusement, suspense and excitement of the adventures (Sophie comes close to being eaten by wolves at one point) than in the portrait of a child growing placidly in goodness and virtue.

The Comtesse de Séguir dedicates the story to her granddaughter, suggesting a continuing link between Sophie ("une petite fille que grand'mère a beaucoup connue dans son enfance"), herself, the dedicatee and the readers ("elle était méchante, elle est devenue bonne. Grand'mère a tâché de faire de même. Faites comme elle, mes chers petits enfants; cela vous sera facile, à vous qui n'avez pas tous les défauts de Sophie"). The text gives the impression of a minutely documented social realism: the clothes, food, toys, pastimes, homes and gardens of the children are vividly detailed.

The extensive use of dialogue in the narrative, which frequently resembles the text of a play, creates a lively and dramatic immediacy. Her books are also noteworthy for providing some insights into the children's characters in scenes showing them talking together alone, without the inhibiting presence of adults. The everyday language employed makes the dialogue far more natural than in Mme de Genlis's work with, for example, several lively and realistic arguments between Sophie and her more reticent cousin, nevertheless, the tendency of these small children (Sophie is only four and Paul is five) to analyse their actions and motives and debate their faults proclaims their not-so-distant kinship with the children of Les veillées du château.\(^{31}\)

*Les petites filles modèles*, which draws on the familiar device of the opposition of types, portrays, as the title indicates, examples of children to be imitated. Again, the domestic context is an exclusively female one, with two widowed mothers living and bringing up their daughters together in a large country house. Camille and Madeleine, who are 'bonnes, gentilles, aimables' but not unbelievably perfect, are put in charge of the younger Marguerite under the direction of the two mothers, thus allowing them to prepare for their rôle in life as well as encouraging self-confidence, responsibility and the development of sound judgement.\(^{32}\) Like the children in *Les veillées du château*, they also learn the pleasures of benevolence to the poor who either tend to be represented in a rather idealized way or, occasionally, are cunning and unpleasant. It should be noted in passing that class distinctions appeared to dictate that, generally, poor children were not among the attractive madcaps of the period - it is those children privileged by birth who are privileged with naughtiness too.

The Comtesse de Ségur displayed a new awareness of the interests of her young readers by linking some of her novels by the reappearance of characters, here introducing disruption into the lives of the children by visits from Sophie, who is now living unhappily with a cruel step-mother after the deaths of her parents. Constantly subjected to mental and physical abuse and denied any loving teaching, she has not been able to acquire the good habits embodied in her friends. After many varied scrapes illustrating the usual defects of greed, temper and disobedience as well as fairly serious incidents of lying and stealing, she is invited to come to live with the others where, with proper correction, sometimes severe but always administered with love, she becomes 'non pas la Sophie d'avant-hier, colère, menteuse, gourmande et méchante; mais une

\(^{31}\) Ganna Ottevaere-van Praag claims that they speak like little 'philosophes' in *La littérature pour la jeunesse en Europe Occidentale (1750–1925)*, (Berne: Peter Lang, 1987), 245.

\(^{32}\) Mme de Genlis provided a young child for her own daughter Pulchérie to look after and advocates this measure in *Adèle et Théodore*. 
Sophie douce, sage, raisonnable'. The acquisition of adoptive sisters allows for a variety of emotions and family relationships to be explored and the Comtesse de Séguir was one of the first to portray the interaction between members of a group of children. Although considerable demands are still made on the children in terms of moral awareness and example, her books undoubtedly have a more natural and realistic feel than those of Mme de Genlis and also lack the heavy moral and religious tone of some of her Victorian contemporaries, like Charlotte Yonge. There is still no concerted attempt to portray the world through the child’s eyes, but her focus allows for a far greater possibility of identification between the child reader and the protagonists.

George Sand, who despite differing considerably from Mme de Genlis in her social and artistic beliefs, shared her view of the importance of education and her fascination with the natural sciences, presents her collection of educational tales, Contes d’une grand-mère (1873–76), as written versions of bedtime stories recounted by a loving grandmother in a secure domestic setting. Several of the tales carry a brief dedicatory note to either Aurore or Gabrielle Sand, the daughters of Sand’s son Maurice, which personalizes the context of the telling of the tale and perpetuates the ‘feel’ of the oral origins of the written text. Sand disagreed strongly with Rousseau and Mme de Genlis over the child’s need for the stimulation of the imagination by fantastic elements: ‘Retrancher le merveilleux de la vie de l’enfant, c’est procéder contre les lois de la nature’. The thirteen tales in the two series of the Contes all use the ‘merveilleux’ as a medium for instructing the child listeners/readers in the wonders of nature and human life. In her note to the first story, Le chateau de Pictordu, she writes: ‘La question est de savoir s’il y a des fées, ou s’il n’y en a pas. Tu es dans l’âge où l’on aime le merveilleux et je voudrais bien que le merveilleux fût dans la nature, que tu n’aimes pas moins’. All the ‘supernatural’ scenes in the Contes - journeys, visions, visitations, conversations with flowers and animals, and the ‘fairies’ themselves can be explained, frequently by the familiar device of the ‘fantastique’ tale, the manipulation of the disorientating period between sleep and waking.

The child protagonists, both female and male, learn not only to understand and construct the self in relation to the world about

35 Histoire de ma vie, 2e partie, ch. xi, 533.
36 Contes d’une grand-mère, vol. i, 32.
them, in the tradition of the fairy tale, but are introduced to the
secrets of the natural universe. Thus, in *La fée aux gros yeux*, a
young girl, Elsie, has the world of insects revealed to her by her
short-sighted, eccentric Irish governess Miss Barbara who, although
a ridiculous figure because of her clumsiness, refusal to wear glasses
and apparently irrational hatred of bats and birds, is uniquely
privileged in having eyes which can see as through a microscope.
Miss Barbara, nicknamed 'la fée aux gros yeux' because of her
appearance and her reputation as 'très savante et très mystérieuse',
indulges in the 'trésors de sa vision' at night in the pavilion in the
garden where she chooses to live alone.37 The invisible beings with
whom she is rumoured to converse after dark are the moths,
butterflies and other insects who swarm to the welcoming flame of
her lamp. Elsie, who begs to be taken into her confidence, is treated
with the help of a magnifying glass to the brilliance and splendour
of an insect ball as Miss Barbara explains their names and
distinguishing marks. The supernatural atmosphere is both
sustained and demystified by the governess's eccentricity, especially
her horror of the tutor, a black-clad, sinister, looming figure aptly
named M. Bat whom she identifies with the predators who destroy
her beloved creatures, but who, in fact, is polite and harmless.

Just as it is the governess in this tale who is both sensitive to the
beauty and romance of nature and has extensive scientific
knowledge at her fingertips, so in *Ce que disent les fleurs*, in which
the protagonist is the grandmother herself as a child, it is her
grandmother who endorses the child's belief in the discussion
between the flowers and the wind, praising it as a wholly desirable
'faculté de l'enfance', no longer available to adults, while the
'professeur de botanique', whose sense of smell, like his
imagination, is impaired and who denies flowers the power of
speech, opines only that she must be suffering from a stomach
disorder. In *La fée Poussière* the narrator (who uses the first person
and is therefore identified with the grandmother who tells the tale)
discovers, in what is clearly stated to be a dream, the wonders of
creation and evolution in process in a fantastic journey to the bowels
of the earth and through the centuries in the company of 'la fée
Poussière' who appears both as a little old woman in trailing, grey,
cobwebby clothes and a young beauty in gorgeous attire. The fairy
('ton aïeule, ta mère et ta nourrice') is seen as the source of life and
the agent of creation and she instructs the child narrator in the
broad outlines of chemistry, physics, botany, mineralogy and
zoology.38 The tale, like Mme de Genlis's 'Alphonse et Dalinde', is
both magical in its description of fantastic settings, plants and

37 Ibid., vol. ii, 179.
animals and packed full of scientific information. Like most of the *contes*, it also has a metaphysical level, for the fairy also uses her marvels to illustrate truths about life and death. In these tales, the emphasis is on what the child learns rather than on the depiction of the child herself, but Sand succeeds in evoking an exciting, colourful and educational experience for her young readers and, unlike Mme de Genlis, gains much from foregrounding a child in the experiencing rôle.

Sand takes the theme of the educating female to its most extreme, for in her novels for adults, like *Mauprat* (1837) and *La petite Fadette* (1848), the woman is seen as the moral and social educator not only of children, but of the male characters too. Such empowering of the female can be seen, however, to have its beginnings in children's literature where it was deemed acceptable because of the traditional view of women as carers and teachers of the young. The works and personal 'example' of Mme de Genlis can thus be seen to have been influential in both the history of children's literature in France and beyond, and in the history of feminism.