

~~~~ WiG Book Reviews ~~~~

**Sotiropoulos, Carol Strauss. *Early Feminists and the Education Debates: England, France, Germany 1760-1810*. Madison, Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007. 319 pp. ISBN 978-0838640876. \$52.50.**

To write about the history of women writers at any time previous to the twentieth century is to engage at once with the thorny question of formal education. Women who wrote in the eighteenth century, for example, not only struggled constantly with the limits of their intellectual training, but also knew that whatever they wrote would be judged as inferior: lacking cultural and literary knowledge, deficient in every possible way, including orthographically. Thus the need for pseudonyms; thus the sense that most of what they wrote was, indeed had to be, imitative.

I have carefully avoided the specific national identifications that I might have provided here, in part because the state of formal education for eighteenth-century European women – in Germany, but also in England, France, Russia, and Italy – was woeful. Obviously, class played a role, and some women benefited from their more privileged status. These women, however, represented a mere fraction, despite the stentorian tones of the Enlighteners imagining *Mündigkeit* for all.

In a welcome move, Carol Strauss Sotiropoulos has taken a comparative approach in her lively and informative investigation of German, French, and English women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the matter of their formal education – what was available to them but also what they fought for. Her combined pedagogical and literary approach is enhanced by a great variety of sources, from fiction to autobiographical texts, to treatises, to the petitions concerning the permission needed to open independent girls' schools. The result is a vivid account that provides insights into the complex and conflicted history of women's education in a time of political revolution and reaction. If there are *leitmotifs* that help to characterize the larger, European picture, they might have to do with the smothering presence of Tallyrand and Rousseau, with their highly influential prescriptive messages concerning girls' and women's education. It is useful to be able to think more broadly, see commonalities, generalize at least somewhat, but at the same time it is also helpful to see the differences. Although the primary emphasis remains on Germany, various chapters on French treatises both for and against women's education and on representatives of those working for women's education in England add significantly to a richly nuanced picture.

To write about non-English-speaking subjects brings forth dilemmas that all of us are familiar with, especially when we want to appeal to a larger audience. Sotiropoulos meets this challenge admirably. Translations are provided for all citations not initially in English. In addition, preceding each major chapter is what she calls a "window" on women's education in the specified country of focus, several pages of clarifying information that serve to give context to the subsequent chapter. Also welcome is her lucid and accessible style – precise, yet never jargon-laden, engaging and never stultifying.

The volume moves chronologically through the period between the 1760s and 1810. There is no attempt to cover all bases, but instead to provide by means of various examples a sense of the extraordinary difficulties facing the women of Germany, France, and England who were engaged in one way or another with the issue of improved educational opportunities for their sex. It is important, of course, to specify which women: given that literacy in this period was still mostly confined to those of the classes, they are for the most part the focus here as well.

An articulate first chapter provides a general introduction both to the historical period and to the particular situation in each country under investigation. A useful commentary on Rousseau and his powerful influence is included, and there are several explanatory rationalizations for Sotiropoulos's decision to focus on genre and voice. Significantly, the issue of advanced education, which flirts around the edges throughout the book, is brought up in its problematic clash with prescribed gender roles. In Germany, in particular, the word "gelehrt" took on a highly negative character not only for the expected foes of women's education, but also for many a woman herself who toed the line of what we might label today an "I am not a feminist but" position.

In that respect, it is appropriate that Sophie von La Roche is the first author to be discussed. Her own case is paradigmatic of the conflicts between gender roles as they were beginning to be trumpeted in the latter years of the eighteenth century and La Roche's own privileged education. What resulted in her case were tensions between what she understood as the proper education of young girls—very much according to the expected roles for them as women—and her own extensive intellectual training. She is thus characterized as an "accommodating" voice, one that did not acknowledge the paradox she was presenting but instead hewed to the guidelines for *Geschlechtscharaktere*.

A leap, then, to France, and a fascinating two-part chapter on the conflicting views of Talleyrand and Condorcet (the former essentially excluding girls and women from anything other than basic primary education, the latter taking a much more egalitarian approach in matters of both gender and class), followed by an investigation of the petitions produced by Revolutionary-era French women who tried to persuade the power structure to think of their rights as well as those of men. Almost simultaneous, and certainly stimulated as well by the Revolution, were the English writers Catharine Macauley and Mary Wollstonecraft, the latter well-known to any student of women's history, the former less so. Thus we can be grateful that Macauley is discussed and contextualized in detail here. The final two-pronged chapter focuses on Theodor von Hippel, specifically his *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber*, and the two educational reformers Amalia Holst and Betty Gleim, quite different in their philosophies of education but, in contrast to Sophie von La Roche, both exhibiting clear evidence of progress in the development of education for women.

Still, as the conclusion ruefully states, the reform of women's education "came about in glacial shifts." In fact, if I have any complaints, they concern Sotiropoulos's too optimistic use of the descriptor "feminist" throughout. The label itself did not yet exist and seems hyperbolic in the context of her book. Be that as it may, the care with which she presents this examination of a period in European history when women's and girls' education was scarcely a focal point of attention, but when much was nevertheless being debated in a variety of media, is greatly to be appreciated. And given the accessibility of her approach, this is a book to be recommended not only to academics in the fields of German, French, and English literature and culture but also to anyone interested in a comparative approach to European women's history.

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