

The Power of Care: Political Pedagogy in Postrevolutionary France

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To care is surely to be selfless, to put the interests and the welfare of others before your own. In the educational theory of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, caring also conferred power. The dynamics of this power of care are apparent in the works of Félicité de Genlis, Clary de Rémusat, and Pauline Guizot: Frenchwomen who worked within a feminized private sphere that was in the process of being demarcated but whose pedagogies always offered a way of thinking about politics. Their reflections upon the power of care reacted to a postrevolutionary politics that was making enormous demands of citizens. Political pedagogy enchanted care, which became the outward sign of an infinite love that could never be adequately reciprocated because it had cost the parent/educator too much but—precisely for this reason—had always to be reciprocated. Care empowered not despite, but because of, its selflessness.

For Genlis—author of more than a hundred books and governor to the royal children of the House of Orléans, including the future King Louis-Philippe—care implied a near-mythical act of self-sacrifice that summoned reciprocal sacrifices from its recipients. The initial sacrifice of the parent/educator, remembered and reiterated, called upon the child/pupil to honor it forever.¹ Genlis's superlative devotion rebuked previous princely education. A governor had always guided a prince through courtly procedures, speaking for him and preserving him from gaffes, while delegating quotidian instruction to a team of valets, preceptors, and masters. In contrast, Genlis emphasized her total devotion. By banishing the courtly apparatus of fluent flatterers and officious factotums, her charges did not have their attentions diffused throughout a sphere of courtly relationships but concentrated into a single point: her. Their devotion was prompted by her sacrifices. Her greatest sacrifice was *le monde* – the Parisian high society that often seemed like the world itself. She had the father of her pupils, the Duc de Chartres (better known to history as Philippe Égalité) build for her a pavilion at Bellechasse, within the grounds of an Augustinian convent on the Left Bank. There she lived in retirement with her pupils beginning in 1779.

When the Revolution began, Genlis thought to turn all of France into a morally exalted arena of sentimental pedagogy. In 1790, as the Festival of Federation marked the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, Genlis published a pamphlet announcing that “a free Nation has the right to monitor the education of the Prince who must govern it.”² Her plan for royal education came during the Constitutional Monarchy, a moment when the future seemed to hinge upon reconciling the monarchy with the revolution.³ Genlis offered instructions for producing such a reconciliation by transposing her pedagogy of devotion onto politics. She envisioned the creation of new solidarities founded by a giving of the self that deliberately exceeded what reason could justify.

¹ See her account in the third volume of Mme de Genlis, *Mémoires inédites de Madame la comtesse de Genlis, sur le dix-huitième siècle et la Révolution française, depuis 1756 jusqu'à nos jours*, 4 vols. (Paris: Ladvocat, 1825). For an admiring notice of her as an “ideal teacher,” see Arnold H. Rowbotham, “Madame de Genlis and Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (September 1942): 369. For a more skeptical take, see Évelyne Lever, *Philippe Égalité* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), 184-206.

² Mme de Brûlart, Ci-devant Mme de Sillery [Genlis], *Discours sur l'éducation de M. le Dauphin et sur l'adoption* (Paris: Onfroy, 1790)

³ Brissot, for instance, ventured that the Constitutional Monarchy required “a revolutionary king.” Quoted in Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 303.

The crucial figure in her plan was the governor of the dauphin, who would deliberately forsake his old life as a courtier in favor of completely devoting himself to the prince. The prince must return the governor's devotion without measure, in continual recognition of a sacred debt not in any final sense repayable. The prince learns from the governor how to love the nation, having experienced perfect devotion himself. The nation then returned this love to the prince, as he previously had done to the governor. The governor became the most important political actor because his foundational sacrificial act brought forth a renewed nation untroubled by the push and pull of individual interests.

After the Constitutional Monarchy ended in 1792, Genlis went into exile and began writing *Les Chevaliers du Cygne* (the "Knights of the Swan"). The final movement of this thousand-page chivalric romance diagnoses in Revolutionary politics that dynamic of mutual sacrifice that actuated her pedagogy. The story: Béatrix, the young, beautiful, and enlightened Duchess of Cleves, has rejected every proposal of marriage to devote herself to her subjects (as a Genlisian governor to pupils). But a horde of knightly suitors besieges her realm to press their claims. Although her plight draws a company of sentimentally responsive knights who pledge to defend her, Béatrix assembles her subjects to announce her abdication. To save them from war, she will withdraw to private life. Faced with her willingness to sacrifice for them, the people feel moved to sacrifice for her. They cry out, "*And us too, we will fight, we will take up arms.*" This universal enthusiasm passed into the hearts of all the Knights who witnessed this touching scene, they united their voices to those of the people and the soldiers; the sensitive Isambard [a good knight] could not hold back his tears." The enraptured throng carries her to the palace in triumph.⁴ Cleves will obviously be fine.

Such public effusions, Genlis apostrophizes, unleash "a sort of contagion from which it is almost impossible to preserve oneself."⁵ Reaching backward from her exilic present, Genlis seizes on a moment in her recent past when she had watched transfixed as the Revolution unfolded. During the Storming of the Bastille she thought she had glimpsed a revelation of the social sublime.⁶ She felt the birth of the popular sovereign - a collective subject to which citizens were asked to ecstatically render up themselves by their sacrifice to the revolution, sacrifices honoring the sacrifices of those who died taking the fortress. Yet she feared the collision of this popular sovereign with the irreconcilable source of legitimacy in the monarchy that had built the Bastille - a legitimacy that uneasily coexisted alongside the popular sovereign for decades to come. The scene of Béatrix's acclamation recoups what spoke to Genlis in 1789, but without disturbing the location of sovereignty. Now the emotional solidarity of the assembled people saves Béatrix's throne. The people of Cleves reject regime change even when invited to make it. They tearfully renew their allegiance. The crowd's response is dictated by the exemplary sentimental performance Béatrix enacts before them. She will sacrifice for them, so they must do so for her, a dynamic that brings forth sentimental unity.

Genlis's concern with how devotion and sacrifice could enchant new postrevolutionary relationships was also that of the political regimes that attempted to establish themselves following 1789. From the time of the Republic's *levée en masse* ("mass draft," summer 1793), the French Revolutionary Wars disclosed "the bleak and startling message that citizenship entailed poten-

⁴ Mme. de Genlis, *Les Chevaliers du Cygne, ou la Cour de Charlemagne. Conte historique et morale pour servir de suite aux Veillées du château, et dont tous les traits qui peuvent faire allusion à la Révolution Française, sont tirés de l'Histoire*, 3 vols. (Hamburg: Pierre François Fauche, 1795), 3: 78, 74.

⁵ Genlis, *Chevaliers du Cygne*, 3: 79 (emphasis in original).

⁶ Genlis, *Mémoires*, 3: 260-2.

tially unlimited obligations” to citizens united by “the equality of sacrifice.”⁷ The Revolution culturally processed political violence to be transcendently meaningful: one’s death realized the presence of the popular sovereign because one had knowingly set aside prudential considerations for its sake.⁸ Postrevolutionary liberals, then as now, felt unease at the call to sacrifice the self’s finite interests for the transcendent values of the popular sovereign. It was the republicans and the Bonapartists who clamored for war and denounced gun-shy mainstream liberals for their egoism in choosing peace, as if their refusal to forsake their interests for love of the nation – even to the point of risking death – trapped them within the smallness of themselves.⁹ When this dimension of the history of political experience is accentuated, Genlis’s work seems timely in its exploration of how a founding act of sacrifice could create a new context defined by mutual sentimental access and limitless devotion, morally affirmative because deliberately beyond the boundaries of reason.

The absolute character of Genlis’s pedagogy was rejected by liberals who lived through the same events, but they too relied on an underlying pedagogy of care. Clary de Rémusat, a guest at Genlis’s semiofficial salon at the Arsenal when a lady-in-waiting to the Empress Josephine, faulted Genlis for having devised an education with an elective affinity to “absolute government in the hands of a single man.”¹⁰ Rémusat was a liberal at a time when that meant calling for a temperate, peaceable, and reasonable postrevolutionary social settlement. She equally mistrusted the *Ancien Régime*, Revolution, and Empire for claiming an unrealistically absolute and undivided sovereignty. As she rejected absolute sovereignty, she likewise rejected Genlis’s educational theory for the absolute character of the mutual devotion it posited between parent/educator and child/pupil. A child raised as Genlis recommended would have a conscience that was only “docility” and a faculty of reason that would only be “memory.” Incapable of independent thought, the child raised under the overpowering authority of another would be helpless in adulthood or merely await the opportunity to rebel. Yet Rémusat certainly did not mean to deny the authority of parents, and quickly stipulated that “undoubtedly a mother is in a position of command.” So what is the source of this authority and why will it not reduce the child to helpless (or resentful) dependence? The answer, in an unacknowledged similarity to Genlis, lies with the power of care. A mother’s care for her daughter founds a relationship of mutual sentiment which gives the parent authority over the child. This sympathetic direction forms the mind itself, which can then operate autonomously without – as in Genlis’s case – constant new intervention from the governor.¹¹ In Rémusat’s liberal pedagogy, care morally legitimizes claims of authority that would otherwise be unjustifiable.

Pauline (de Meulan) Guizot, a friend of Rémusat and especially of her son Charles, also developed a liberal pedagogy of care. In Guizot’s domestic education, care opens up mutual sentimental access between children and parents without subjecting the weaker to the unfettered au-

⁷ Alan Forrest, “La patrie en danger: The French Revolution and the First *Levée en masse*,” in *The People in Arms: Military Myth and National Mobilization since the French Revolution*, ed. Daniel Moran and Arthur Waldron (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 24.

⁸ See the suggestive remarks of Paul W. Kahn in “Imagining Warfare,” *The European Journal of International Law* 24, no. 1 (Feb. 2013): 199–226 and “Politics and the Necessity of Narrative,” *Soundings* 97, no. 3 (2014): 349–56.

⁹ See, for instance, Louis Blanc, *Révolution française. Histoire de dix ans, 1830–1840*, 7 vols. (Brussels: Wouters, 1843)

¹⁰ Claire-Élisabeth-Jeanne Gravier de Vergennes, comtesse de Rémusat, *Essai sur l’éducation des femmes*, 3rd ed., ed. Charles de Rémusat (Paris: Ladvocat, 1825), 247.

¹¹ Rémusat. *Essai*, 234, 248, 249, 151.

thority of the stronger. Claims of absolute authority disrupt the sentimental communion by pushing children to become wayward, secretive, and self-enclosed in order to defend themselves from the threatened loss of individuality. The process involved is like the liberal political theory of Guizot's husband François, for whom authoritarian regimes undercut their own foundations by making their rule so intolerable that they must be evaded or overthrown by their subjects. Pauline Guizot proposed to use care to enlist children in the process of reshaping their raw potential for subjectivity and creating a well-functioning, bourgeois self. It is still the devotion and selflessness of the caring parent/educator that prompts the psychic awakening of the child/pupil, but now care becomes the origin of the liberal individual.¹²

It is striking, however, that Rémusat and Guizot, while personally engaged with postrevolutionary liberalism, knowingly renounced actual participation in public life. This renunciation was the founding gesture of Rémusat's posthumously published *Essai sur l'éducation des femmes*, less a practical handbook than a long rumination on what "the education of women" might mean. In it, Rémusat attempted to make a historical transition from the Old Regime (near the end of which she had been born, in 1780) to the new, postrevolutionary monarchy in which she found herself. She was struck by the reorganization of gender, now that (to use Sarah Maza's terms) an "all-male contractual universe" of citizens was supposed to have displaced "the male-female world of familial and sexual bonds" that was the prerevolutionary *monde*, with its royal courts, salons and marital alliances.¹³ She was born a noble of the robe and, along with her husband, rallied to Napoleon in 1802 and joined the Napoleonic court. Now she found herself as the mistress of what was, effectively, an ordinary bourgeois household and without a public role. This new situation seemed to her just what the present required of her (and all other women too), in order to stave off what her generation feared so much: the seductive corruption of *le monde*. Her thoughts on the education of girls were not the fruit of experience – her son Charles was her only child – but a historical intervention to leave behind that bygone era of "refinement and softness" when women, "usurping a power offered by idleness and fashion, mixed up ranks . . . We have seen their influence enervate character and compromise virtue."¹⁴

Rémusat thought of herself as making a splendid renunciation of the political influence she had once informally held as a courtier and which had – as she now saw it – morally deformed all the women of the eighteenth century. While composing her *Essai*, she wrote to her son Charles

There are times when I am close to believing that I . . . am writing a political work; and nevertheless I should be very upset if it appeared that way. Not that I forbid women from thinking about what happens in their country: that would be to make them indifferent to the happiness and to the functions of their husband and of their sons. But their own happiness, and their functions, mustn't depend on that. I want them to make for themselves an inward space [*un intérieur*] of elevated ideas, serious affections, of sacred beliefs, that isolate them, that protect them,

¹² See Mme Guizot, *Les Enfants, contes à l'usage de la jeunesse*, 2 vols. (Brussels: Société Belge de Librairie, 1837 [1823])

¹³ Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 172.

¹⁴ Rémusat, *Essai sur l'éducation des femmes*, 106, 27.

and from which their soul draws its life, even when their body shall be elsewhere.¹⁵

She refers to an “intérieur.” This word can mean, *inter alia*, the physical space of the rooms in the home, the domestic life of the household, or the notionally spatial spiritual dimension of the human soul. I suggest that Rémusat deliberately wants all of these meanings to apply at once. The effect is as though the social sphere of women is a projection of the self that she wants her education to produce. This *intérieur* is her version of Genlis’s Bellechasse or the renewed France created by her *alter ego* the dauphin’s governor, to represent the sphere of activity that she created in her work as an educator. In both cases, the founding condition is a magnificent renunciation of an outer world she abandons for the greater good.

This renunciation, this sacrifice, compels recognition. Her letter to her son was quoted by him in his preface to the posthumous publication of her book, a publication he undertook out of filial love. Explaining why she deserved admiration and esteem, he said that, “The more she knew society, the more she pulled back within herself; it seemed that over the years she disengaged herself more every day from any connection to vulgar interests and ideas, as though to confine herself to that which is most unchangeable and immortal in human nature.”¹⁶ Notice that his own views – unlike those of the mother he lauds – are couched in trans-historical and essentialist terms. Indeed, based on his understanding of his mother’s work he considered women to reside outside history. The lesson he derived was that, “Despite all reformist pretensions, marriage and the family are hardly threatened by revolutions.” Consequently, “The essence of the condition of women will always stay the same. What can change are the sentiments and ideas that they carry into an invariable situation.”¹⁷ History bypassed the private sphere, whose denizens – women – always lived the same life. Their education was a matter of internal adjustment to this inalterable fact.

Charles de Rémusat used the same language to praise Pauline Guizot after her death in 1827. After his mother died, he had gravitated to her “*intérieur*.” Her care for him exemplified how motherhood defined womanhood:

The life of a woman, and especially of a happy woman, is always brief in the telling. Society, in accord with nature, has in no way separated the happiness of women from their retirement, and their destiny is almost always appointed to be in the shadow of domestic duties, affections, and interests. . . . [E]ven when imperious circumstances or a no less powerful vocation have forced [women] to extend the circle of their activity and their influence . . . the ties and the sentiments of family, the cares and tasks of the interior life, still absorb the greatest portion of their time and energies, and compose the better part of their happiness.¹⁸

¹⁵ Quoted in Charles de Rémusat, préface de la deuxième édition in Mme de Rémusat, *Essai sur l'éducation des femmes, précédé d'une étude par Oct. Gréard, de l'Académie française*, ed. Octave Gréard (Paris: Hachette, 1903), 196.

¹⁶ Charles de Rémusat, préface de l'éditeur in Rémusat, *Essai sur l'éducation des femmes*, 17.

¹⁷ C. de Rémusat, préface de la deuxième édition, 192.

¹⁸ Charles de Rémusat, “Notice sur la vie et les ouvrages de Mme Guizot,” in Mme Guizot, *Conseils de Morale, ou Essais sur l'homme, les mœurs, les caractères, le monde, les femmes, l'éducation, etc.*, 2 vols. (Paris: Pichon et Didier, 1828), 1: i.

Everything she wrote communicated her motherly role and womanly being. Yet this relationship is more complicated than he allows. Pauline de Meulan had been a writer long before marrying, but she was a sophisticated litterateur attuned to *le monde*. Her noble parents, indeed, had maintained an impressive salon in the years following her birth in 1773. In her mid-thirties, Meulan was virtually running the journal *Le Publiciste*.¹⁹ She was, however, also virtually anonymous, signing her work “M.” or not at all. Her shift toward a new persona began in 1810, after she met François Guizot but before marrying him or having children. Soon she had become “Madame Guizot,” a new self who wrote about education and lived in “retirement.” It is that self whom Charles met.

He responded to care as he was meant to, honoring the devotion of his mother and of Pauline Guizot. Yet he did not quite understand the sacrifices made for him. These were historical choices which he mistook as natural. He, born in 1797, remember nothing from before the Revolution. The political pedagogy of his mother’s generation of women seemed like a statement of what had always been and could never change, not a wrenching choice to forsake one self and assume another in the face of a new society. The political pedagogy of care annihilated its own context to found a new order wherein historically contingent behavior seemed the natural course of things.

¹⁹ Charles-H. Pouthas, *La Jeunesse de Guizot (1787-1814)* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936), 271.