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Educating Women: Schooling and Identity in England and France, 1800-1867 (Book Review)

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Ideals, Stereotypes, and Realities in French and English Bourgeois Women's Education

Christina de Bellaigue's *Educating Women: Schooling and Identity in England and France, 1800-1867* explores stereotypes about women's boarding schools on both sides of the English-French Channel. In the process de Bellaigue identifies the basis in reality which many of the most widespread stereotypes had, including: the socially grasping schoolmistress; the schoolmistress as a gentlewoman fallen on hard times; the short-lived nature of many schools; the stress laid on the teaching of "accomplishments"; and the idea that preparing women for their domestic role was the ultimate goal of an education. However, she also simultaneously undermines these stereotypes by supplying nuance and context through a careful study of life writings, prescriptive literature, fiction, letters, and bureaucratic records. Finally, she demonstrates the significant overlap but also critical differences in women's and girls' daily lives in boarding schools on both sides of the channel.

Though the valorization of feminine domesticity exerted an enormous influence on education in both France and England, religious, political, and legal differences gave the ideal a different inflection in each country. English schools tended to be smaller, presented themselves as more familial, and allowed their pupils more freedom than their French counterparts. De Bellaigue attributes these differences to the Roman Catholicism of France, its tradition of republican motherhood, and a sense of schools as institutions rather than homes, including a requirement that all boarding schools identify themselves with a sign. England's Protestantism, laws restricting married women's rights (and their enforcement), and comparatively conservative political-cultural heritage in turn influenced the development of girls'

boarding schools there.

One of the primary mechanisms by which each nation's political-cultural heritage exerted an influence on girls' boarding schools was through prescriptive literature. This study's sophisticated treatment of prescriptive literature demonstrates the way in which historians of education can move to recover this now often neglected source base. First taken as indicative of a middle-class reality, then as a protest against a transgressive reality, and now often treated as if they hardly mattered to historical actors, de Bellaigue demonstrates the complex, often ambivalent ways in which teachers, pupils, and pupils' parents internalized, rhetorically mobilized, and rejected prescriptive ideals.

In letters to parents, advertisements, and their life writings teachers in England emphasized their maternal and domestic nature even as they became schoolmistresses precisely because they could not or would not marry and start a family. But this rhetorical appropriation of the prescriptive emphasis on maternity and domesticity was not always and purely hollow pragmatism; rather, in many cases, it signified the desire to achieve these ideals in a nontraditional manner. English schoolmistresses were thus contradictory figures who both drew on and transgressed the very ideals they were tasked with inculcating in their pupils. Not as tightly bound by an idea of private domesticity as their English counterparts, French schoolmistresses commonly and openly balanced marriage with teaching and the management of schools.

Though schools were represented as private, domes-

tic spaces, they were also businesses. De Bellaigue reminds us that “as their contemporaries recognized, private schoolmistresses were as much entrepreneurs as teachers” (p. 74). One needs to be careful about writing off short-lived schools as failures since, as with other small businesses in this period, the relocation, sale, and even closure of schools could reflect success rather than failure. In France, in particular, the sale of schools was common, and proprietors were keenly aware of the market value of their schools. By the end of the period in this study, though, the rise of large-scale enterprise and laws favoring it put increased pressure on teachers to adopt a professional rather than an entrepreneurial persona.

In both countries teachers also drew on and, crucially, helped to create the rhetoric of professionalism. They did so by “adopting a maternal metaphor or referring to a sense of mission [which] was a way for teachers to express their professionalism, without directly challenging prevailing ideas about women’s nature and role” (p. 135). De Bellaigue thus offers a powerful reinterpretation of the stereotype of women teachers as amateurs by reading their invocation of the ideal of feminine domesticity as a socially acceptable expression of a strong underlying sense of vocation and commitment to pedagogical expertise. This move forces the reader to reconsider the standard chronology of educational professionalization, which has tended to locate the movement in the late nineteenth century.

This study confirms that accomplishments such as drawing, music, and dance figured centrally in the curriculum at girls’ boarding schools on both sides of the channel but also demonstrates that serious subjects like history, botany, mathematics, geography, astronomy, and modern languages were common offerings. Schoolmistresses were more likely to teach these subjects in England while in France male professors were commonly brought in to do so. In France learning was also more structured, with a fairly rigid system of classes through which girls advanced based on their performance in the frequently administered examinations.

De Bellaigue points to the French system of examinations as one of the chief English pedagogical borrowings in her last chapter, which examines cross-channel influences. French schoolmistresses going to England, and English pupils going to France were far more common than vice-versa but even these limited exchanges made some commentators and parents nervous. French educational culture was associated with frivolity and its English counterpart with shop-keeping and overly open manners. “Genuine exchange,” de Bellaigue concludes, “was limited” (p. 228). For English women the mastery of French signaled the attainment of feminine civility but to associate oneself with French culture much beyond that was potentially socially dangerous and, for schoolmistresses and young ladies on the marriage market alike, bad business.

While on the whole richly textured and analytically sophisticated, this study does have some limitations. In particular, the statistical comparisons it offers of the social origins of teachers and pupils, subjects offered at schools, and whether a teacher crossed the channel at some point rely on such different source bases as to necessitate an even more cautious handling of some seemingly significant differences than this study offers. While English statistics are drawn largely from life writings, French statistics come from the *declarations d’ouverture* which French schoolmistresses were required to submit when applying to open a school. Discussions of the lives of both pupils and especially schoolmistresses also seem suited to a more sustained exploration of sexual identity and same-sex friendships. But these are fairly minor points in a very fine work.

This careful and innovative study identifies stereotypes about nineteenth-century French and English girls’ secondary education as the products of attempts to rhetorically reconcile often straightforward prescription with a more complex reality. Girls’ secondary education in this period was profoundly conservative even as it was profoundly transgressive; it was not simply a case of one masking the other, but of each enabling the other.

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