

Lesley H. Walker

THE POLITICS OF SEEING GHOSTS IN *LES CHEVALIERS DU CYGNE*
BY MADAME DE GENLIS

RELIEF 7 (1), 2013 – ISSN: 1873-5045. P 90-105

<http://www.revue-relief.org>

URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-114616

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Through an analysis of the 1795 and 1805 editions of *Les Chevaliers du Cygne ou la cour de Charlemagne* as well as its historical reception, this essay examines the shifting sands of the *entre-deux* moment—a time of contingency when the end was not yet in sight. With the novel, Madame de Genlis sought to intervene in the cultural politics of 1793-95 by looking backward to a glorious past in order to move forward, beyond the Terror. By 1805, however, the urgency had receded; and ghosts no longer demanded to be seen.

Scholars in Europe and the U.S. have taken a renewed interest in the life and works of Caroline-Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis, the prolific novelist, educator, musician, and celebrity (Bessire and Reid, Coüasnon, Dow, Robb, Walker). Born 1746, Genlis lived through the Revolution, Napoleon's Empire, and the Bourbon Restoration. A few months before her death in 1830, she saw her protégé, Louis-Philippe, crowned King of France. Although Genlis was a well-known figure during her lifetime, she was also a controversial one. Respected author and *gouverneur* to the Duke of Orleans' children, Genlis was, nevertheless, frequently at odds with the leaders of the late Enlightenment. For instance, in his *Correspondance littéraire*, Melchior Grimm referred sarcastically to her as *la mère de l'église*, while Horace Walpole, author of the *Castle of Otranto*, called her a scribbling trollop during her visit to England in 1791. When the encyclopedists party ensured that Mme d'Épinay's eight-year-old work, *Les Conversations d'Émilie*, won the Monthyon prize, instead of *Adèle et Théodore ou sur l'éducation* (1782), Genlis riposted with a satire of her own, *Les Deux réputa-*

tions, ridiculing “false philosophy” (Broglie, 117-121). Despite her reputation as a know-it-all scold, Genlis’ novels were popular and sold well throughout Europe. Indeed, in an article that attempts to determine the popularity of eighteenth-century French novels and *contes*, Angus Martin shows that Genlis ranked 21st in a list of 35 authors (1701-1820). Her books proved more popular than those of Marivaux, Diderot, and Graffigny. These numbers make it clear that Genlis enjoyed a not inconsiderable reputation as a writer of talent who could sell books. Undeterred by such characters as Diderot or Grimm, Genlis battled her literary foes with the confidence and feistiness of a woman of letters with friends, influence, and an ever-widening reading public.

In the 1795 preface to *Les Chevaliers du Cygne ou la cour de Charlemagne*, Genlis made a bold claim that the novel could offer a restorative antidote to the misery caused by the Terror. As with many enlightened aristocrats, Genlis had welcomed the outbreak of the French Revolution and encouraged her pupils, the sons of the Duke of Orleans, to participate. The adolescent Duke of Chartres proudly donned the uniform of the National Guard, attended the Jacobin Club, and applauded the abolition of the laws of primogenitor. However, after the suspension of the King in the fall of 1792, Genlis escorted Adélaïde of Orleans into exile. She was not allowed to return to France until 1800. Madame de Genlis wrote most of *Les Chevaliers du Cygne* in 1793, while residing in Hamburg; she finished the novel in October of 1794 and saw it published in 1795 (1795, I, x). During these months of the Terror, Genlis wrote to her contemporaries with a remedy to redress the chaos caused by the likes of Robespierre and Marat. She urged French readers to remember a better and more glorious past, the past of Charlemagne and his knights, in order to imagine a way forward. But this Orphic gesture, this backward gaze, I will suggest, also caused that which was beloved to be lost. Yet, as in all good ghost stories, the dead beloved returns to haunt the living, reminding them of past wrongs. Through a close analysis of *Les Chevaliers du Cygne*, its multiple editions, and reception, I argue that the novel stages the dizzying and often heart-breaking experience of those writers and intellectuals who lived through these tumultuous times. They not only bore witness to these events but also sought to intervene in the belief that literature, too, can matter.

Two Editions: 1795 and 1805

In 1794, Pierre François Fauche was willing to bet that Genlis’ newest novel, *Les Chevaliers du Cygne*, would prove a valuable commodity when he paid her the handsome sum of 6,600 francs for the three-volume work. The evidence seems to indicate that Fauche’s gamble paid off. There were at least six differ-

ent editions of the novel—1795, 1797, 1799, 1805, 1811, and 1825. Each of the three volumes of the 1797 edition is embellished with an engraving that depicts a dramatic scene in the novel. An English translation, by a certain James Beresford, appeared in 1796. It was also translated into German. The novel was widely reviewed in France, Germany and England. Catherine the Great ensured its success in Russia and even had a bracelet made that was fashioned after one described in the novel. In her *Mémoires*, Genlis claimed that, due to the popularity of *Les Chevaliers*, she was the first female author to make her living as a writer. Besides monetary gain, what did she intend to accomplish by writing this book at that time?

In the first edition of *Les Chevaliers du Cygne*, Genlis asserted that she wanted to help France find a way out of the catastrophe caused by the Terror. She thus explicitly cast the novel as a form of cultural intervention into Revolutionary politics. She chose the court of Charlemagne in order to give her contemporaries an example of great deeds performed by men and women of the past:

Enfin, j'ai voulu rappeler, par de grands exemples, à ces vertus antiques et sublimes qui ont honoré des siècles que nous nommons *barbares*. Je n'ai point eu le projet de rétablir *la chevalerie*, mais j'ai cru que la générosité, l'humanité, la loyauté des anciens chevaliers affermiroient [sic] mieux une *république* que les principes de Marat et de Robespierre (1795, xvi).

For Genlis, the heroic French past should serve to illuminate the present; it should instruct by offering great examples of virtuous deeds performed by *les grands hommes* (Hartog). In this manner, her moral fiction was harnessed to the public good and provided her contemporaries with models as they strove to remake France. Included in this moral prescription were women; for Genlis, women too had a role to play in reforming the nation.

Skip forward ten years, however, and in her 1805 *l'Avertissement de l'Auteur*, Genlis declared that, thanks to the new Napoléonic regime, there was no longer any need to look to the past for political exemplars:

Aujourd'hui, de grands exemples offerts sous nos yeux, rendent inutiles les fictions morales ; le tableau de la vie guerrière de Charlemagne, les justes éloges donnés à son zèle pour la religion, à son infatigable activité, et son goût pour les sciences, pour les lettres et pour tous les arts, à ses sollicitudes paternelles pour l'éducation de la jeunesse, ne sont plus des leçons, et ne paroitraient [sic] maintenant que des allusions, si cet ouvrage étoit nouveau (1805, xxiv).

As Napoleon's victories accumulated and his regime legitimated itself through monuments and ceremonies, the heroic past no longer provided models of exemplary behavior to be imitated by the present. Instead, the past offered a kind of prophetic preview of the greatness to come—the legend of Charlemagne anticipated the advent of another equally enlightened Emperor.

In the ten years that separate the two editions, Genlis made two substantive changes on which I will linger in this essay: moral fiction is declared “inutile” and the ghost becomes a figure of the hero's overactive imagination. Whereas the first edition intended to intervene in the cultural politics of a radicalized revolution, the 1805 version sought to reframe the novel as merely entertaining fiction. As the actual Terror receded in time, Genlis exorcised the overt references to Revolutionary politics. For instance, she omitted a long note that justified her activities during the Revolution; she dropped the subtitle, mentioned above, from the 1805 edition; and she rewrote the ghost scenes. What a consideration of the novel, its reception, and eventual re-writing reveals is a fascinating transitional moment: it records the time between two epochs when contingency was acutely experienced; when the end was not yet in sight; and the need for intervention seemed urgent.

The 1795 Edition

As the title indicates, the novel is set during the reign of Charlemagne in the ninth century. The heroes Oliver and Isambard represent *la générosité, l'humanité, and l'amitié*. Reminiscent of the opening scene of *La Princesse de Clèves*, the court of Charlemagne is peopled by many young and beautiful men and women. In addition to a long description of the heroes, the sublime Célanire (daughter of Vitikund, chief of the Saxons who is eventually vanquished by Charlemagne) is introduced, as well as her nemesis, the scheming coquette Armoflède. Olivier quickly falls in love with Célanire and has reason to hope that he may marry her. Unfortunately, she has already been promised to Albion, an old and faithful friend of Vitikund. Despite this parental interdiction, the couple decides to marry in secret. The reader is then treated to a full-blown gothic wedding: a storm, multiple faintings, underground passage-ways, candles blown out, and of course an evil priest. Due to the machination of Armoflède, the ever-credulous Olivier comes to believe that Célanire is having an illicit affair. He surprises Célanire in the midst of what he believes to be an amorous assignation: he takes out his sword; his supposed rival flees; and “à bras forcené” he kills Célanire before running himself through with his own sword. The frontispice of the 1797 edition reads: “On la trouva baignée dans son sang.” In this dramatic fashion, Célanire dies, but it turns out that

Olivier is only hurt. He will eventually recover physically from this wound, but he will never recover from the horror of his deed. The reader only discovers what really happened to Célanire about half way through—some 600 pages—into the novel, thanks to Isambard’s detective work. In the meantime, the knights encounter a series of other characters (Giafar, the English King Egbert, the Caliph Aaron, and Ogier le Danois) who relate their stories and delay the discovery of Olivier’s crime. Although we see the ghost within the first 50 pages of the novel, its true origin and *raison d’être* are not revealed until hundreds of pages later.

What interests me about this apparition is that, at least in the first three editions, the ghost is real; that is, it is not mere a figment of Olivier overly active imagination. Isambard, as witness, not only sees and hears it, but he also mops up its blood. The ninth chapter, entitled *Affreuse découverte*, opens with these words: “Mais qui pourrait exprimer le saisissement et l’horreur qu’il éprouva, à l’aspect terrible du tableau surprenant qui frappa ses regards ! Il vit un affreux squelette ensanglanté, qui s’éloignait avec lenteur en gémissant sourdement” (1795, I, 62). For Isambard what at first appears as a scene of libertinage, the clicking of little heels, turns quickly into a nightmare when he realizes that the person in bed with Olivier is the ghost of Célanire.

If the first half of the novel is about Oliver’s secret, the second half concerns the transformation of his unhappy passion into something productive and useful. As wandering knights errant, Olivier and Isambard decide to assist a princess who finds herself and her lands besieged by a band of confederated princes who insist that she cannot rule alone but must marry one of them. If she refuses to do their bidding, they will take her and her lands by force. Such conduct convinces the Princess Béatrix that any one of these princes would be a despot to her and her people. In order to defend their freedom, she makes a general appeal for help to all brave knights, to which Olivier and Isambard respond—as well as a host of others. With two armies amassed on either side of the city’s walls, Olivier is introduced to Béatrix and promptly faints because she is an exact double of Célanire.

In an extraordinary plot twist, Béatrix turns out to so closely resemble Célanire that they could be identical twins. Olivier promptly falls in love with her. This section of the novel is replete with conventional attributes of sentimental fiction such as secret gifts (the bracelet of which Catherine the Great would have an imitation made), stolen portraits, tear-filled nights, and ingenuous disguises. But the love affair between Oliver and Béatrix is, of course, doomed. After vanquishing the army of the confederate princes, Olivier is mortally wounded by Theudon who mistakes him for Isambard. On his death-

bed, Olivier insists that Béatrix marry his *frère d'armes*, Isambard. The two are married and Olivier dies.

It is with the young and enlightened Princess Béatrix that the novel takes an explicitly political turn. As a wise and generous ruler, Béatrix is also a female double of Charlemagne. Confronted with a difficult choice, Béatrix consults her people to decide whether she should abdicate and place her lands under the protection of Charlemagne or launch a war and risk the lives of many good men. Her people elect to fight under the banner of their enlightened princess instead of submitting to the laws of a foreign king. Béatrix is thus represented as a leader worthy of the highest respect and patriotic love of her people. Indeed, as with Charlemagne, Béatrix is also represented as one of the novel's exemplary monarchs who respects the will of the people, is reasonable and just, and is highly cultivated. (Under Charlemagne, France of the ninth century had legislative assemblies and royal academies of the arts and letters).

Literary Continuity and Moral Fiction

In her bid to write fiction that mattered, Genlis' first strategic move was to lay claim to continuity: literary, historical and personal. From its earliest inception, the novel combined a chivalric plot with elements of the *roman noir*. In *Charlemagne and France*, Robert Morrissey explains that the emperor, as both historical figure and myth, grew in prestige throughout the eighteenth century. Morrissey points out that, despite Voltaire's acerbic critique of Charlemagne, writers such as Montesquieu in the *Esprit des lois* looked favorably on Charlemagne as a potentially viable political alternative to either monarchism or republicanism. Later in the century, Gabriel Henri de Gaillard penned his *Histoire de Charlemagne* (1782) that imagined the Carolingian king as an enlightened monarch who instituted the rule of law (his capitularies), governed by consensus, and even founded an academy of letters. At the same time that the legend of Charlemagne was becoming increasingly popular, a more generalized interest in troubadour literature was also on the rise as evidenced by the publication of the *Bibliothèque universelle des romans* in 1775. This voluminous and ambitious series offered a capacious understanding of the term novel. It published translated versions of ancient Greek tales and stories from the English periodical the *Rambler*; it also popularized medieval genres such as the *chansons de geste* and romances, rendered in modern French. According to Morrissey, this vogue for medieval tales encouraged a crafting of a different national history; one that was not solely based on Greek and Roman antiquity, but one that was indebted to specifically French stories from history.

In order to write her ghost story, Genlis did not need to look across the Channel to Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764). As Jean Fabre's articles made clear in the mid 1960s, novelists such as Madame de Tencin and the Abbé Prévost culled earlier Baroque themes from the *nouvelles historiques* of the 1690s to tell their haunted tales. More recent scholarship on the French gothic, such as Catriona Seth's *Imaginaires gothiques: aux sources de roman noir français*, confirms Fabre's insights: the staples of the gothic imaginary like torches, underground prisons, wicked priests and nuns, infanticide and other unnatural acts form the stock inventory of the genre. Already by 1782, Genlis had penned a recognizably gothic tale that she inserted in her pedagogical novel, *Adèle et Théodore*, entitled "La Duchesse de C***." It is no surprise to learn that Genlis wrote the first nine chapters of *Les Chevaliers du Cygne* before the Revolution. In the *Épître Dédicatoire*, Genlis explained that the inspiration for the plot came from another ghost story, *Voyage de la caverne de R**** whose author, according to Gabriel de Broglie, was Nicolas de Romanzoff. It was at his urging that she wrote a short tale entitled *Les Petits Talons*.

This fact that a portion of the novel was penned before the Revolution allowed Genlis to stake a claim to continuity—a claim she made repeatedly. Despite having suffered exile, dispossession, and tremendous personal loss—both her husband and Philippe Egalité were guillotined in 1793, and her daughter Pulchérie was imprisoned during the Terror—she declared in the opening sentence of the preface to *Les Chevaliers* that her principles remained unaltered by public events:

[C]ar mes principes n'ayant jamais varié, les événemens publics n'ont eu aucune influence sur mes opinions et sur mes sentimens. [...] [O]n trouvera dans tous la même horreur du despotisme et de l'intolérance; le même respect pour la religion et les mœurs, les mêmes sentimens d'humanité, de générosité et d'intérêt pour le peuple; le même mépris du préjugé de la naissance, et le même amour de l'ordre, de la justice, et de la vertu (1795, I, vii).

Genlis maintained that her "principles" never changed over the course of the Revolution; and, by implication, it would be these prerevolutionary ideals that would enable France to recover from its traumatic experiment with Republicanism. Her fictionalized Charlemagne shared her principles: he was a wise and just legislator, who governed by consensus and as such was an exemplary ruler and a historical model to be imitated. In her hands, he became a figure to which a traumatized France could look back as the country sought to move forward, beyond the Terror. Although Genlis has long been tarred with a politically conservative reputation, her depiction of Charlemagne as a thoroughly

enlightened ruler picked up on what can only be described as a kind of liberalism often associated with Montesquieu and his later acolytes. Indeed, in the lengthy notes at the end of each volume, she cites more than once Montesquieu's favorable opinion of Charlemagne. Her espousal of these liberal political ideas is very much in keeping with her better-known progressive theories on education.

Les Chevaliers's title page is heavily freighted with literary-historical parallels. The epigraph was borrowed from the popular novel, *Sethos: Histoire ou Vie tirée des Monumens anecdotes de l'Ancienne Egypte* (1732), by Jean Terrasson. Sethos, an Egyptian pharaoh, was another enlightened ruler who possessed the same virtues of courage, great learning, and immense concern for the well being of his people as Charlemagne. Sethos likewise embodies antique generosity and a staunch commitment to the values of friendships. The epigraph reads:

Si les adversités, qui ne regardent que les biens de la fortune, dont un ami se voit dépouille, sont une raison de s'attacher à lui avec plus de zèle, et de faire pour lui de plus grands efforts, la perte de l'innocence, quand elle ne vient pas d'une dépravation sans ressource, est un motif bien plus pressant de voler au secours d'un homme qui tâche lui-même de se relever de sa chute (1795, title page).

The act of true friendship is defined as helping a friend in need who, in addition to losing material wealth, has lost his innocence. Genlis draws a multi-layered analogy, here, in which France might be seen as the "fallen friend." In the figure of Sethos/Charlemagne, the friend/France discovers a loyal comrade who can help restore his innocence. The heroic narratives of Sethos and Charlemagne provide a sort of compass that allows the friend to return to and thus to recover his lost innocence.

Through the publication of the novel, Genlis also extended a metaphorical hand to assist in her country's recovery. Her historical and moral fiction sought to offer a form of succor to an imaginary, fallen French reader. The subtitle of the novel's first three editions makes this clear: "Conte historique et moral [...] dont tous les traits qui peuvent faire allusion à la révolution française, sont tirés de l'Histoire." In imaginatively re-living past French greatness, the post-revolutionary reader discovers a model on which to base efforts to remake the nation. Genlis explains:

Un des grands avantages des romans historiques, (si l'on sait tirer parti des faits que présente l'histoire) est de donner à la morale l'autorité si puissante de l'expérience et de l'exemple. Il est impossible qu'un personnage imaginaire produise autant d'impression qu'un héros dont la gloire a consacré le nom (1795, I, xvi).

To understand the complexity of Genlis' claim and to gauge later critical response, it would be useful to rehearse briefly the theoretical status of the novel in eighteenth-century France.

How was it imagined that a novel might intervene in the real life of its readers? Following in the wake of François de la Mothe-Fénelon's *Télémaque* (1699), novelists of the mid-eighteenth century sought to lay claim to moral seriousness and, thereby, distinguish their labors from the mere pleasurable entertainment that was often associated with the novel. To charges of frivolity and immorality, novelists such as Mesdames de Graffigny and Leprince de Beaumont responded by crafting models of virtuous behavior and utopian communities for an ever-increasing reading public. A key strategy in this effort was to disavow the genre itself. The example *par excellence* of this tactic is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) whose preface stages a complex play of disavowal in which Rousseau claims that the book is not a novel at all, but it is instead a set of found letters. A novel's moral seriousness and utility comes, then, to reside in its claim to pseudo realness as opposed to avowed make believe.

During the second half of the century, however, this gesture of disavowal became utterly conventional. In "Crise et triomphe du roman au XVIIIe siècle: un bilan," Jan Herman, Mladen Kozel and Nathalie Kremer, describe this generic oddity, using Diderot's pithy formulation: "ceci n'est pas un roman" that, at the same time, also means "ceci est un roman." In a departure from earlier scholars' accounting of this phenomenon of disavowal, Herman et al. argue that readers and critics were, at once, aware but willing to forget the fictional status of a novel because it was believed that fiction could be truer than mere fact. The concept of verisimilitude comes into play here. Accordingly, fiction can produce truths more compelling than simple reality, provided that it be anchored to credible (but maybe not true) facts. And for Herman et al., everyone—the eighteenth-century writer, reader, and critic—was in on this complex illusionist game: there were no dupes, only good and bad players.

During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the art of the novelist aimed to produce persuasive truth effects that guaranteed a novel's seriousness and utility. A useful novel was by definition a moral one; that is to say, it depicts exemplary behavior and virtuous communities. According to the theory, novels make positive contributions to the social good. However, in *Les Chevaliers du Cygne*, Genlis sought to up the ante with its raw quotient of historical information; she contended that her *roman historique* was unlike any other because of that. Although she recognized that *roman historique* has a long lineage in French letters; that Madame de Lafayette's, *La Princesse de Clèves*

(1678) represented an excellent example of the genre; and that these novels were often written by women. She found the tradition lacking because it was not concerned with painting a true picture of the period's social norms (mœurs). "Nous avons dans notre langue plusieurs romans historiques fort agréables, presque tous faits par des femmes ; mais aucun ne présente la peinture des mœurs et des usages du temps qu'ils rappellent, tous sont dépourvus de recherches historiques" (1795, vol. 1, x). Because these earlier works are not interested in historical accuracy in the same way that she is, they cannot make the same moral claims on the reader. They lack the requisite realness, at least according to Genlis.

In a departure from the practices of her predecessors, she conducted pains-taking research on Charlemagne and his court. She relied, for instance, on the four-volume *Histoire de Charlemagne* (1782) by Gabriel Henri Gaillard, Abbé de Mably's *Les Observations sur l'histoire de France* (1765), Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois* (1748) and Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1702). In her copious notes at the end of each volume of *Les Chevaliers*, she explained exactly where she invented or changed the historical record. For example, in the first note at the end of volume one, Genlis tells the reader that, despite what the old chronicles say, she decided that Olivier would survive the battle of Roncevaux. Unlike his unfortunate friend Roland, he lives on to have other adventures. Each of the three volumes contains lengthy appendices wherein Genlis detailed her sources, quoted extensively from them, and frequently offered further commentary. Moreover, throughout her life, she maintained that she was the first author to make such extensive use of historical sources. In her *Mémoires*, she claimed to have invented the modern historical novel: "Cette utile innovation a été employée pour la première fois dans les *Chevaliers du Cygne*, et elle a été depuis généralement adoptée" (vol. 8, 239). While it is beyond the scope of the present essay to discuss developments in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historiography, the extraordinary European-wide success of Walter Scott's novels clearly points to an epochal shift in both the writing of novels and history. In this light, Genlis' claim that she contributed to this transition appears plausible, even if literary historians still neglect to acknowledge her contribution. The elaborate paratextual apparatus may strike the modern-reader as rather clumsy; yet the novel itself is relatively unencumbered by lengthy and dull historical disquisitions. Due to the suspense, pacing, and love story, the book remains a relatively good read.

Critical Reaction

The publication of *Les Chevaliers* in 1795 generated a good deal of critical response in France, England, and the German States. A positive review seemed to depend on the critics' sympathy for the novel's female characters. Were they sufficiently moral? Indeed, the litmus test was whether one would give the book to one's unmarried daughter or niece. In a lengthy brochure entitled, *Examen Critique et Impartial du Dernier Roman de Madame de Genlis Les Chevaliers du Cygne*, Berlin (1795), the unnamed author addresses two letters from "Charles de *** à Matilde," his niece. In reading with the grain, the critic admires the tortured and complicated relationship between Célanire and Olivier; he praises the unconventional and innovative nature of Genlis' depiction of her heroine:

Un des grands mérites de cette histoire consiste en une idée bien neuve, Célanire est angélique, mais c'est elle qui séduit Olivier, parce qu'elle ne sait qu'aimer ; c'est elle qui aime la première [. . .]: C'est elle qui fait la première déclaration, et c'est elle enfin qui le décide à s'unir à elle. Un homme auroit pu parvenir à inspirer de l'indulgence pour une telle héroïne, mais une femme, et une femme de génie a conçu cette idée et tracé ce caractère, et elle a sù [sic] rendre Célanire respectable par sa foiblesse même ; elle a une telle idée de ses devoirs, elle voit si clairement qu'elle sera malheureuse, elle se fait si bien tous les reproches qu'on pourroit lui faire, qu'on pense plutôt à la consoler et à la plaindre.¹

The victimized and suffering heroine is a commonplace of eighteenth-century fiction from Richardson to Rousseau to Laclos. What seems new, however, is Célanire's active role in pursuing love. And what Genlis did persuasively for this reader was to walk the fine line between this agency and immorality with which less sympathetic reviewers taxed the novel. However, unlike Julie in Rousseau's bestseller, Célanire's punishment for disobeying her father is prompt and unforgiving; she dies at the hand of her beloved early in the narrative. What made the novel moral and exemplary for the Berlin critic were its competing but ultimately reconciled demands. Pure love and generosity of spirit unite the ill-fated lovers. But the authority of fathers—Charlemagne and Vitikund—cannot and should not be transgressed. The clash of these two imperatives causes the death of the lovers, while their unfortunate fate provokes a sympathetic response in the ideal reader. Yet lest the reader be too saddened by Olivier's death, the novelist quickly offered another sympathetic couple to redeem and reconcile the past (Olivier) and future (Isambard). Through his sacrificial death, Olivier clears the path for a better future: a future to be inhabited by the innocent couple, Isambard and Béatrix, and her people. The sympa-

thetic response of the reader was what guaranteed the novel's usefulness: and hence its claim to moral authority.

But those whom she dubbed in 1805 "les littérateurs français" did not agree that *Les Chevaliers* accomplished its stated goals. *Les Nouvelles politiques* criticized the depiction of the courtesan Armoflède and implied that such a character impugned the moral integrity of its author (Broglie, 272-3). In another pamphlet from Berlin published in November of 1796, the author, who had clearly read the *Examen impartial*, adopted a more neutral tone: neither derisive nor laudatory. After praising the novel for being "intéressant" and "très bien écrit," he wrote that it might not be to everyone's liking. What some found distasteful, opined the critic, were the parallels drawn between current events and Charlemagne's court and the ghostly appearance of Célanire. He discussed at length why and how Genlis should have made the bloody skeleton a figment of Olivier's over-active imagination. He reasoned that the kind-hearted Célanire would have forgiven Olivier for his crime and certainly would never have haunted him. And most damning for the author of *Adèle et Théodore*, he could not recommend it as reading suitable for a daughter: "Ces tableaux suffiroient pour nous faire interdire à nos filles la lecture des *Chevaliers du Cygne*." Such a statement is code to say that this is not a work of moral fiction.

The critic from the *Journal de Paris* decried the author's bad taste in her choice to make a bloody apparition visible, night after night, to not only the novel's beleaguered hero but also his brother-in-arms:

Ce spectre est dégoûtant par ses traces de sang. Qu'Olivier seroit frappé, c'est bien ; mais qu'Isambard l'entende, le voie distinctement, qu'il le voie & l'entende à plusieurs reprise, qu'il aide son ami à effacer les traces de sang laissées dans la chambre & à plus forte raison dans le lit ; que cela se reproduise constamment chaque nuit, cela n'est pas vraisemblable (Wednesday 27 January 1796).

Genlis knew that this vivid ghost story might fall foul of critical expectations. In a long footnote to the first edition, she defended it by arguing that she was writing about a different world, the Middle Ages, that possessed different beliefs, which included the supernatural. She pointed out that classical and Renaissance literature was replete with ghosts and magical beings. Indeed, many of the novel's chapters begin with an epigraph from Shakespeare. As a kind of ethnographer *avant la lettre*, she insisted that the novel is "historically" accurate and should not be judged by eighteenth-century standards of verisimilitude: "Je place une apparition dans un siècle où la croyance universelle consacrait ce

grand moyen de terreur" (1795, I, 64). But this footnote did not convince many of the critics.

Capitulation

In 1796, Genlis wrote a spirited pamphlet defending the novel's morality and critiquing her critics.² She defended adamantly her choice to tell a ghost story not only on ethnological grounds but also on esthetic ones. That is, what was innovative about the novel was to have killed off the heroine in the first pages, while still maintaining readerly interest in her throughout the three volumes. Accordingly, the 1795 conception of the novel was structured by two sets of doubles: Olivier/Célanire and Isambard/Beatrix. The tragic pairing of Olivier and Célanire is superseded by a virtuous and blameless couple who can capably manage the political interests of the duchy of Clèves. As the historian Morrissey suggested this denouement can certainly be understood as a political allegory, but it is not yet about the advent of another "Great King." If Genlis wrote an allegory, that allegory is as much about the centrality of feminine moral agency as it is about constitutional monarchy. It is the ghostly presence of Célanire throughout the novel that drives Olivier to accomplish the necessary sacrifices that will save the Duchy of Clèves (France?) from her enemies and unite Isambard and Béatrix in marriage (national reconciliation?). The bloody skeleton of Célanire is the terrifying agent that literally propels the plot. The haunted Olivier finally dies for the sake of friendship and the greater good. In so doing, he releases the Célanire/Beatrix character to marry and rule over a peaceful and prosperous homeland. The first editions thus end on a powerful note of feminine agency.

Yet this bloody ghost struck a nerve. If, in order for the novel to be considered moral, it needed to produce truth effects, then a real ghost was unquestionably a bad choice. For the first three editions, Genlis resisted giving into that judgment; yet by 1805, she rewrote the ghost scenes to please her critics. In so doing, she reframed the novel and introduced another couple, Charlemagne and Napoléon, who took the place of Isambard and Béatrix as the ultimate solution to the tragic events recounted in the novel. Genlis thus domesticated past terrors by turning them into mere ghost stories that served as light entertainment. In the 1805 preface, she capitulated: "Mais enfin ce spectre a déplu, et je l'ai retranché" (1805, I, xxiiij). Isambard would no longer scrub floor boards clean of the bloodstains left behind by a ghost that he had seen. Not only did she cut out the ghost, but she also rewrote the chronology of the text's composition. In a final note to the 1805 *Avertissement*, she claimed to have composed the novel *after* the fall of Robespierre and under the Directory,

thereby assuring the Napoléonic regime of her respect for government—even bad ones.

This act of rewriting not only erased the traces of the bloody skeleton, which had caused offense, but it also diminished the active role of the novel's heroines. In a recent article, Jérémie Grangé underscores the feminine agency in the novel by comparing and contrasting Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* to Genlis' *Les Chevaliers*. It was certainly true that after Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), the supernatural in fiction, despite deceptive appearances, demanded a rational explanation. (Of note, also, is the fact that Genlis penned her novel at the same time as Radcliffe wrote hers). Thus, as with Radcliffe's ghosts, women rulers were also relegated to a distant and superstitious past, turned into characters of someone else's overactive imagination. These fanciful stories would no longer make any claim on real-life events—the new Imperial regime would take care of the present and future.

But in the gap before Napoléon was crowned, we witness a struggle over how and what prose fiction could mean and, importantly, do. *Les Chevaliers du Cygne* provides a relatively extensive historical and esthetic record of significant literary continuities and shifts over the course of the Revolution. Genlis, an accomplished writer during the *ancien régime*, began the novel before the Revolution; its original nine chapters clearly link the 1770s and 80s to post-Revolutionary tastes and concerns. Charlemagne became an idealized and popular figure of enlightened monarchy during the last thirty years of the eighteenth century. In literary terms, we also note that the *roman noir* tradition of bloody skeletons and hauntings precedes the Revolution—despite the often-repeated comment by the Marquis de Sade to the contrary. The presence of strong female characters as active agents of social transformation likewise continues an Enlightenment tradition. In this light, the novel also allows us to understand Genlis' political views—at least those before 1805—and esthetic opinions as less reactionary and conservative than often claimed.

The 1805 edition portends a shift in the relation between fiction and history. In declaring *les fictions morales inutiles*, Genlis forecast a new and different role for the French novel. As the great novels of the nineteenth century became increasingly engaged with real life and the people from all walks of life, a certain moral clarity is sacrificed. While villains became sympathetic, heroes grew weak. The great realist novels painted a picture of the French as they were and not as they should be. Such representations may have instructed, entertained or horrified, but they did not seek to intervene in quite the same way as earlier, especially female-authored fiction, did. Yet in the year of 1795, the spectacle of a bloody skeleton chasing our good-hearted, brave, but guilty hero throughout

Europe strikes me as a fitting image: the bloodstains were still wet; guilt and innocence remained unclear; and ghosts demanded to be seen.

Notes

¹ *Examen critique et impartial du dernier roman de Mme de Genlis, Les Chevaliers du Cygnes* and *Journal littéraire de Berlin* (novembre, III, 2) are two pamphlets bound together, without page numbers, in *Pièces Diverses de Monpas de Dampmartin*, housed at the Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris. Broglie's attributions of authorship of the pamphlets seem unreliable.

² Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis, *Précis de la Conduite de Madame de Genlis Depuis la Révolution*, Hamburg, Cerioux, 1796.

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