

**Jeanne Marie Le Prince de Beaumont (1711-1780): Biographical Essay for
Chawton House Library and Women Writers**

By Peggy Schaller

Jeanne Marie Le Prince de Beaumont created works of fiction and non-fiction, authored essays and epistolary novels,¹ and published what many now consider the first educational journals for children. A French author who resided in England from 1748 to 1763, Beaumont² is primarily recognized today for the children's tales she popularized in those journals written during her fifteen years as governess, pedagogue, and author in London. Her version of "Beauty and the Beast," part of her famous *Magasin des Enfants* (*Young Misses Magazine* 1756), is described by Joan Hinde Stewart as "without doubt the best-known work of fiction published by any woman in the eighteenth century" (*Gynographs* 26). Her influence on such British educators as Lady Charlotte Finch, royal governess to the children of George III, and Sarah Trimmer, the turn-of-the-century author, publisher, and educator, has been well documented by Enlightenment scholars and modern day historians alike. In addition, the *Young Misses Magazine* bears a resemblance to Sarah Fielding's *The Governess* (1749) for its dialogue format between young girls and their governess. Unfortunately, attention to the magazines also often obscures her other work and so improperly pigeonholes her in the category of pedagogue, even though much of her writing broached a broad expanse of contemporary socio-political issues. In fact, Beaumont surpassed even her contemporary French women authors Emilie du Châtelet and Françoise de Graffigny in public influence, although modern day critics have made their names more recognizable to contemporary readers. Beaumont's pedagogical journals and epistolary novels were routinely shelved in private eighteenth-century libraries alongside the works of Voltaire and Rousseau,³ and she

played an influential role in European thought and behavior well into the nineteenth century, as the re-editions and translations of many of her works attest. Publication of the English translations of many of her works occurred almost simultaneously with the French publications, and re-editions continued well into the nineteenth century, both in Britain and in the Americas. Several of these are available in the Chawton House Library.

Her life

Although her works were numerous and widely circulated in all of Europe, the details of her personal life remain the subject of much contradiction and theorizing. Born to a middle-class family in Rouen, France, Beaumont was the eldest child of Jean Baptiste Nicolas Le Prince, a sculptor and painter, and his second wife Barbe Plantart. Having lost her mother during adolescence, young Marie Barbe and her sister Catherine Aimée were enrolled in the convent school at Ermenet when they were 14 and 12 respectively. Here she also began her professional life teaching young girls, following seven or eight years of her own schooling, since the girls were expected to take their vows and live out their days as nuns. Yet in 1735, after ten years of residence, she abruptly left the school, relocating to Metz in the east of France where her remarried father had made his residence. Almost immediately, Jeanne Marie was engaged as governess in the nearby court in Lunéville, residence of Duke Leopold, nephew of Louis XIV by marriage. Her duties were primarily with Elisabeth-Therese, oldest of the daughters, who was married to Charles-Emmanuel III, King of Sardinia, two years later. In fact, the entire family of the then defunct Duke Leopold left Lunéville in 1737, leaving Stanislas Leszynski, former King of Poland and father-in-law of Louis XV, in command and Jeanne Marie without employment. Her years in the court at Lunéville brought her

into contact with the reputations and writings, if not the actual persons of such philosophers as Voltaire and Coyer. Coyer inspired her first published work, a quarto⁴ entitled '*Réponse à 'L'Année Merveilleuse'*' (1748). Voltaire was to become a frequent contributor to Beaumont's *Nouveau Magasin Français* (1750-2), providing essays, letters, poems, and his short story *Babouc, ou le monde comme il va*, serialized in that journal over several months in 1750. It is interesting to note that the relationship between Beaumont and Voltaire appears to have soured in the 1760s and 1770s over serious ideological disagreements on their respective positions toward religion. During the period at Lunéville, Beaumont also became acquainted with Emilie du Châtelet and Françoise de Graffigny, women who spent time at that court and whose works appeared in print in the years immediately preceding Beaumont's first publications. In fact, excerpts from Graffigny's play *Cénie* (1750) also appeared in the *Nouveau Magasin Français*, in the February 1751 volume. The texts of such predecessors as medieval author Christine de Pizan and the more contemporary Mesdames de La Fayette and de Tencin must also have been part of Beaumont's library, encouraging her in the promotion of her own works. Yet the absence of a significant population of women authors could not have escaped her, and the obvious misogyny of many mid-century texts attracted her attention. As the beneficiary of an extended education, Beaumont must have recognized her unusual situation as an educated woman in eighteenth-century France.

It is the period following the termination of her association with the Princess Elisabeth-Therese that discrepancies in accounts of Beaumont's life begin, swirling around the number and nature of her relationships with men. For many early biographers such as Jean Marie Robain and Marie-Antoinette Reynaud, Beaumont supported herself

with work outside the court or royal grants until her marriage in 1743 to Antoine Grimard de Beaumont, followed almost immediately by the birth of their daughter Elizabeth and their divorce or separation in 1745. Recent historians, in particular Geneviève Artigas-Menant, have maintained that such eighteenth-century enemies of Beaumont as Pastor Deschamps were correct to describe an adventurous youth and several romantic liaisons. In fact, Artigas-Menant cites a 1737 marriage record between Marie Le Prince, court dancer, and Claude-Antoine Malter, also a dancer, and the subsequent birth of their daughter, Elizabeth. A letter written by Beaumont to Thomas Pichon (aka Tyrell) outlining reasons for the annulment of her marriage are associated by Robain to the end of her marriage to Beaumont (28), but in the chronology of Artigas-Menant they apply rather to her unfortunate union with Malter (297). And where Robain has Jeanne Marie relocating to London to flee Beaumont, Artigas-Menant notes that A. Beaumont witnessed her 1752 publishing contract with the British editor John Nourse (297) for the *Education complète* (1753).

All sources agree that in 1748 she left France for London, where she became instructor to the aristocratic young ladies of several prominent families, apparently through introductions by Sir James and Lady Oglethorpe, to whom she dedicated the *Lettres diverses et critiques* (1750). Her affiliation with Lady Pomfret also provided her with numerous introductions and subsequent posts. Beaumont was, in fact, governess to Lady Pomfret's granddaughter Sophie Carteret for six years, and this young girl would retain a special place in Beaumont's heart and her written works, where Beaumont featured her as one of the students and even dedicated the *Magasin des adolescentes* (*Young Ladies Magazine* 1760) to her. Lady Pomfret's own daughter, the future Lady

Charlotte, Royal Governess to the fifteen children of George III of England, was also influenced by her contacts with Beaumont, whose pedagogical methodology is apparent in Lady Charlotte's use of interactive teaching tools employed this royal appointee.

During her almost fifteen years in England, Beaumont met many influential people with whom she remained in contact throughout the rest of her life. Lady Frances Mayne was perhaps the person closest to her, and there are many references to Beaumont in Lady Mayne's correspondence, including letters exchanged with Beaumont after her departure to France. Lady Shelburn, the former Sophie Carteret, also remained a lifelong correspondent of Beaumont's. It was also in London that Beaumont met Thomas Tyrell (1780-1781), a French exile whose work with British intelligence caused him to change his name from Pichon to Tyrell and take up residence in England. It is also clear that they lived together as husband and wife until her return to France with her daughter in 1763, although no record of their marriage has been found to date.

Beaumont returned to France in 1763, and much of her life during these final years is recounted in her letters to Tyrell, which span a twelve-year period (1763-75) and are archived in the municipal library of Vire, France. In them, she speaks of her many supporters and correspondents who eagerly purchase subscriptions to her works, offer fine gifts, and entice her with lucrative posts in Burgundy, Paris, Spain and Poland. Even the Empress of Russia subscribes, and sends financial gifts of admiration. Yet her letters also recount her interest in the land, where she finds physical, moral, and spiritual renewal. Ultimately Beaumont relocates one final time to Avallon in Burgundy, where she makes her permanent residence for ten years until her death in 1780. This did not preclude occasional trips to Paris and even a one-year stay in Spain according to Roubain

(140), but the majority of these final years were spent in the company of her daughter Elizabeth, son-in-law Nicolas Moreau, and her six grandchildren, the fourth of whom would give birth to Prosper Mérimée in 1803.

Her works

The year that marked Beaumont's departure from France was also that of her first publications. When the young philosopher Abbé Gabriel François Coyer published his essay *L'Année merveilleuse* (1748), a social satire written to bring attention to the foppish attire and behavior of mid-century men, Beaumont was among those to respond. Her *Réponse à "L'Année merveilleuse"* (1748), ostensibly written by a woman to a woman, comments on the tragedy that it would be for women to lose their superior traits in exchange for the less desirable ones of men if the exchange predicted by Coyer were to occur. The following year she publishes the *Arrest Solomnel de la nature*, a sequel essay in which the author obtains a one-year delay in the role-reversal process, thus allowing women a year in which to correct their frivolous behavior, reinhabit the fullness of their God-given characteristics, and return to their rightful place in society, thereby depriving men of the reversal – and the acquisition of women's superior qualities – they so desire.

These two essays demonstrate Beaumont's ideal of parity for women, coupled with her particular *esprit* or wit, characteristics that will be found in nearly all of her texts over the next three decades and that articulate the spirit of feminist vigor that dominates her early works in particular. They include her novels *Le Triomphe de la vérité* (*The Triumph of Truth* 1748), *Civan, roi de Bungo* (1754), her two-volume *Lettres diverses et critiques* (1750), and her periodical publication *Le Nouveau magasin français* (1750-52),

a compilation of fiction, critical and scholarly essays (it was also referred to as the *Magasin des Dames*). Each of these works demonstrates, in the female protagonists they feature, a sense of intellectual capacity to confront, debate, collaborate, and resolve significant social and moral issues. Whether in the seamless transition of mentors in *Civan*, where the lady Dulica assumes the complex educational development of young Prince Civan upon her husband's untimely death, in the rebuttal of misogynistic directives given by a father to his daughter's tutor in the *Lettres diverses*, or in the confident voice of Beaumont herself regarding her own ability to compile, edit, and publish the monthly volumes of the *Nouveau magasin français*, the reader of these early works hears clearly the voice of women and for women that Beaumont strenuously emphasizes.

Beaumont's relocation from the provincial French court at Lunéville to the aristocratic circles of London in 1748 reordered dominant themes in her writings. Shocked at what she saw as the misguided priorities of English parents, the lack of training for instructors, and the obsolete methodology of pedagogy in general, Beaumont attacked such education with energy. During the almost fifteen years of her British residency, she wrote no fewer than twenty-one volumes, predominantly on the subject of how to educate young women and girls. The first socially diagnostic work appeared in 1750 as part of the *Lettres diverses et critiques*, whose first volume is comprised of letters addressing – among other subjects – inequalities in young women's education, and then devotes half of the second volume to Beaumont's detailed "Traité sur l'éducation."

In 1756 the *Magasin des enfans*, the first of her series of pedagogical journals, promptly attracted international attention, and it remains her most famous creation.

Beaumont is in fact considered today by such noted critics as Patricia Clancy and Jill Shefrin as the creator of the children's educational magazine. Using a dialogue format to animate pedagogical lessons of history, morality, religion, and other schoolroom topics, she followed the *Magasin des enfans* (1756, four volumes) with the *Magasin des adolescentes* (1760, four volumes), *Anecdotes du quatorzième siècle* (1760, two volumes), *Principes de l'histoire sainte* (1761, three volumes), and *Instructions pour les jeunes dames qui entrent dans le monde* (1764, four volumes). These pedagogical texts, designed to engage children, adolescents, and their adult mentors in the process of active learning, are meant to supplement, or more precisely to enhance the materials used in her hands-on experiences with her students, experiences that included student-teacher conversations, games of interactive role-play, and – her own innovation – dissected maps.⁵ Inspired by the works of François Fénelon and John Locke, Beaumont's methods of instruction, more practical in approach and application techniques, preceded those of another French writer, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*Emile*, 1762).

Although one might also consider her work as modeled after Sarah Fielding's *The Governess* (1749) for its dialogues between young girls and its use of fables and tales, it is unlikely that Beaumont would have chosen to imitate too closely an author whose topics she found objectionable for children. In the *Magasin des enfans*, when speaking of La Fontaine's *Fables* (1748) she notes “ces contes . . . sont toujours pernicious pour les enfans, auxquels ils ne sont propres qu'à inspirer des idées dangereuses & fausses” (these tales are always harmful for children, in whom they only stimulate dangerous and false ideas; I: iv). Such a clear position would not make imitation of Fielding's subjects

or methods desirable, although Beaumont may have used the contrast of form and content as a foil to her own methods.

Returning to France in 1763 did not slow the rhythm of Beaumont's writing, but it did once again reorient the emphasis of her subjects and genres. The early years in the Savoyard countryside saw the publication of three epistolary novels in a three-year period: *Lettres d'Émerance à Lucie* (1765), *Mémoires de Madame de Batteville, ou la veuve parfaite* (1766), and *La Nouvelle Clarice, histoire véritable* (*The New Clarissa, A True Story* 1767). Although Beaumont had previously published one epistolary novel, *Lettres de Madame du Montier à la Marquise de ***, sa fille*, first as a series in her periodical *Nouveau magasin français* (1750) and then as a separate two-volume text (1756), she appears in the 1760s to have embraced this epistolary mode that was enjoying widespread popularity among all types and levels of readers, particularly women. This change of genre represents a significant shift in conception and technique, allowing Beaumont to reach an audience quite different from the young adults and children of the rather elite families targeted by her pedagogical magazines. In these three epistolary texts the letter format allows her both to introduce characters, themes, and social situations and to allow for debates among the characters, producing thought-provoking arguments on topics of civic concern to readers. Each of these novels traces the lives of virtuous young women seeking advice from an older and wiser woman to give guidance through the difficult travails of marriage, courtly intrigues, and often compromising social situations. The heroines cross national borders, interface with all classes of the population, and take on traditionally male tasks when husbands or other male characters do not respond. Complex plots that explore subjects of historical actuality ranging from contemporary

education to foreign policy strategies, from arranged marriages to land-use reform, from containing the plague to crowning the king, demonstrating Beaumont's command of important contemporary issues.

From the beginning, all of her work emphasizes the Christian faith as a crucial source for personal, social, and intellectual development. Indeed, in her last texts the intense focus on the Catholic faith is so sharp, and her voice so strident that other subjects are all but eclipsed. *Magasin des pauvres, artisans, domestiques, et gens de la campagne* (1768), *Les Américaines, ou la preuve de la religion chrétienne par les lumières naturelles* (1770), *Contes moraux* (1774), *Nouveaux contes moraux* (1776), and her final text *La Dévotion éclairée* (1781), all reflect a profound sense of commitment to Christian teachings and their application in daily life. The first two texts and the last one recur to the dialogue format of which Beaumont was once so fond, to conversations between young people and adults that retrace scriptural stories, sectarian beliefs, and modes of applying Christian principles in the daily lives of the faithful. Here a deep familiarity with the Bible is evident, and Beaumont's characters enact broad if sometimes inaccurate representations of various Christian denominations as well as several of the non-Christian faiths prominent in eighteenth-century Europe. This all-inclusive approach is particularly characteristic of the six-volume collection *Les Américaines*, in which the narrator's young students pretend to be uneducated but clearly not unintelligent North American women in France, trying to comprehend world religions. The role-play allows the students to ask the most naïve questions they can imagine, challenging preconceived notions and dogma. Although Catholicism always wins the argument in Beaumont's texts as the true representative of Christ's church founded by Saint Peter, the deliberations

along the way dramatize her insistence on global communication and tolerance as essential parts of religious training. In this impressive work, followed by the *Contes Moraux* (1774), *Nouveaux contes moraux* (1776), and her final publication *La Dévotion Eclairée* (1779), though she defends Catholicism and the faith it entails, Beaumont rejects many practices of the institutionalized eighteenth-century Church as arrogant and wasteful. She writes repeatedly about the need to recruit priests and nuns through vocation only, and not as a means of maintaining patrimonies or disposing of daughters without dowries. She advocates the necessity of religious training as part of any instructional process, an advocacy that is biblically based and avoids the often-fatuous rhetoric of the Catholic *dévots* of her age. Beaumont thus completes the whole of her philosophical position by outlining not only the actions that should be part of a moral lifestyle, but also those that should most certainly be avoided.

Her Legacy

Beaumont offers an alternative to women and men alike by appealing to an audience desirous of taking an active role in improving the conditions of their own lives, as well as those of the communities in which they reside. The numerous editions of her French works and their English translations speak to her influence in her countries of direct influence. In addition, a multitude of foreign-language publications began during her lifetime, continuing well into the nineteenth century as illustrated by later editions of the *Magasin des enfans* in Greek (1803), English (1818) and Spanish (1846).

Championing the Catholic faith without accepting its institutional baggage or rhetoric, and embracing the notions of scientific reason, toleration, and human rights for all

inhabitants of the nation, Beaumont offered her audience options for improvement that were more practical, more personal, and more achievable than the more abstract theories of the *philosophes* and other intellectuals of her day. Her methodology allowed for implementation at every level of society by any member willing to assume an active role in that society's well-being. The focus on royal behavior, while clearly essential as a tool for public acceptance of her proposals, was only aspect of her lessons, where the distinctive role of the individual was critical. Such a personalized approach to moral philosophy represents a more tempered, middle ground. In this way, Beaumont's works represent a significant facet of Enlightenment discourse, adding an alternative dimension to the intellectual debate of that period and into the discourse of the next century.

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Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont : Major Works Summary

Lettre en réponse à “ L’Année Merveilleuse ” (1748).

L’Arrest Solomnel (1748).

Le Triomphe de la vérité, ou les mémoires de Monsieur de la Villette (1748).

Lettres diverses et critiques (1750).

Le Nouveau magasin François ou Bibliothèque instructive et amusante (1750).

*Lettres de Madame de Montier et de la Marquise de *** sa fille, avec les réponses : où on trouve les leçons les plus épurées & les conseils les plus délicats d’une Mère, pour servir de règle à sa Fille dans l’état du Mariage ; même dans les circonstances les plus épineuses ; & pour se conduire avec religion & honneur dans le grand monde : L’on y voit aussi les plus beaux sentimens de reconnoissance, de docilité & de déférence d’une Fille envers sa Mère (1750 in series, 1756 as novel in 2 volumes)*

Letters of Madame du Montier, collected by Madame Le Prince Le [sic] Beaumont.

Translated from the French by Miss Newman. In three volumes. (London 1797).

Education complète, ou Abrégé de l’histoire universelle mêlée de géographie et de chronologie, à l’usage de la famille royale de S.A.R. la Princesse de Galles (1753).

Civan, roi de Bungo: histoire japonnoise ou tableau de l’éducation d’un prince (1754).

Civan, King of Bungo. Translated from the French. By a young lady of fashion, ... (London 1780)

Magasin des enfants, ou Dialogues d'une sage gouvernante avec ses élèves de la première distinction, dans lesquels on fait penser, parler, agir les jeunes gens suivant le génie, le tempérament et les inclinations de chacun (1756).

Magasin des adolescentes, ou Dialogues d'une sage gouvernante avec ses élèves de la première distinction, dans lesquels on fait penser, parler, agir les jeunes gens (1760).

The young ladies magazine; or, Dialogues between a discreet governess and several young ladies of the first rank under her education (London: 1760).

The young misses magazine: containing dialogues between a governess and several young ladies of quality, her scholars. : In which each lady is made to speak according to her particular genius, temper, and inclination (London: 1776).

Instructions pour les jeunes dames qui entrent dans le Monde, se Marient, Leurs devoirs dans cet État, envers leurs Enfants, pour faire suite au magasin des adolescentes (1764).

Lettres d'Émerance à Lucie (1765).

Mémoires de Madame la Baronne de Batteville, ou la veuve parfaite (1766).

La Nouvelle Clarice, histoire véritable (1767).

Magasin des pauvres, artisans, domestiques, et gens de la campagne (1768).

Les Américaines, ou la preuve de la religion chrétienne par les lumières naturelles (1770).

Contes moraux (1774).

Nouveaux contes moraux (1776).

La Dévotion éclairée (1779).

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Notes

¹ Very popular in the eighteenth century, the epistolary novel is written in the form of letters exchanged between two or more characters.

² She began referring to herself as Mme de Beaumont during her fifteen years in London (see Artigas-Menant, "Les Lumières" 293), and is most often represented as such by European scholars. Although she is generally catalogued as Le Prince (or Leprince) de Beaumont, I use the shorter Beaumont to refer to her in this study, following the European direction and her own. Her given name was, in fact, Barbe Marie Le Prince.

³ Robert Darnton lists several of her works in the library of Jean Ranson whose book orders and correspondence he traced. In fact, Darnton highlights "Ranson's favorite authors, notably Mme de Genlis and Mme Leprince de Beaumont" (*Great Cat Massacre* 219-20, 240). Jill Shefrin also refers to Beaumont's works as part of Queen Charlotte's library, sold in 1819 (*Such Constant Affectionate Care* 3).

⁴ A book written on large pages folded in half twice to produce eight pages, each about 9 by 12 inches.

⁵ These are puzzle-like geographic maps made from colored wooden pieces cut apart like jigsaw puzzles and shaped like the countries, regions, or continents being studied.