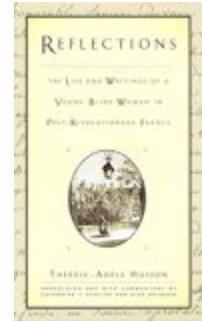




**Therese-Adele Husson.** *Reflections: The Life and Writings of a Young Blind Woman in Post-Revolutionary France.* Translated, with Commentary by Catherine J Kudlick and Zina Weygand. New York: New York University Press, 2001. xv + 155 pp. \$20.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-4746-9.

Reviewed by Gay L. Gullickson (Department of History, University of Maryland)  
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## A Search for an Independent Life

### A Search for an Independent Life

I have recently read an array of memoirs and autobiographies by, and histories of, disabled Americans in preparation for teaching a history course in the field of disability studies. So, when I was asked to review Catherine Kudlick's and Zina Weygand's publication of Therese-Adele Husson's *Reflections*, I said "yes." The book combines modern scholarship on disability with an early nineteenth-century text by a young blind woman. The scene is far removed from twentieth-century America, as is the formula for the primary text. Even so, both Husson's autobiographical writing and Kudlick's and Weygand's short social history of the plight of the blind in nineteenth-century France will interest anyone whose work or intellectual interests lie in the field of modern disability studies.

The book contains five discrete parts: a foreword by French and women's historian Bonnie G. Smith; an introduction by Weygand and Kudlick; two pieces by Husson: her "Reflections on the Physical and Moral Condition of the Blind" and an autobiographical "Note" in one of her published novels; and the results of Weygand's and Kudlick's research on Husson's life.

Therese-Adele Husson was born in the French town of Nancy in 1803. She lost her sight as a young child as a result of smallpox, an unfortunately common occurrence. She spent the first part of her childhood with her family where she appears to have been well cared for, but unchallenged and uneducated. When she was

around twelve or thirteen, a succession of fortuitous encounters with members of the social and political elite in Nancy provided Husson with a far better education than was normally available for boys or girls of her socio-economic class, not to mention for blind children. In her early twenties, Husson announced her intention to move to Paris. This was a bold move for a young woman, and an even bolder (and unfortunately disastrous) one for a young blind woman with no clear means of earning a living.

Husson's goal, apparently, was to earn a living as a novelist. We know of ten published novels written by her, one published posthumously, and she refers to several early novels that were taken by publishers but never printed. The amount Husson was paid for her writing was far from adequate for her support, even in the most impoverished lifestyle. To tide her over at least temporarily, Husson applied to the Royal Hospice of the *Quinze-Vingts* in Paris for lodging and financial assistance. This hospice was the major source of financial support for the blind in Paris. Its name, "the *Quinze-Vingts*" translates literally into the fifteen-twenty, or three hundred, a reference to the fact that in its inception it provided support for 300 individuals. (By 1801, 300 blind adults and 120 blind children were receiving support from the *Quinze-Vingts*.) The *Quinze-Vingts* housed blind adults and their families on its grounds, providing them with a food ration and stipend, and awarded stipends to a number of adults who did not live on the grounds. The behavior of the *Quinze-Vingts* residents was closely observed and

tightly regulated, but it provided the best means of support available for the blind. The institution encouraged the recipients of its aid to supplement their support by working and those who were able to find work did so.

As part of her application for support, Husson wrote a long essay entitled “Reflections on the Physical and Moral Condition of The Blind.” The essay was never published, but remained in the *Quinze-Vingts* archives where it was discovered by Catherine Kudlick and Zina Weygand. In her essay, Husson gives a brief account of her life in Nancy, and then muses on several aspects of blindness. She perceives the blind as dependent upon the aid and support of the sighted and urges her fellow “sufferers” to be deferential to those who help them. She advises the blind never to marry another blind person (for who would help them and keep them safe from dangers like fire?) and advises blind women not to aspire to marry at all. The single, celibate, religious (if only in the lay sense) life was, from her perspective, a more secure path for blind women who might easily be seduced and misled by men when they could judge them only by their voices.

Husson’s judgment about the dependence of the blind on the sighted for help was certainly accurate. In addition to the fact that very few blind adults had learned marketable skills, Louis Braille had not yet invented the tactile method of reading and writing, although he was working on it during Husson’s lifetime at another Parisian institution for the blind, the Royal Institution for Blind Youth. People like Husson who wished to write could only dictate their work to a sighted writer.

Husson received an external pension from the *Quinze-Vingts* and continued to write novels. She also met and married Pierre-Francois-Victor Foucault, a blind musician, in 1826. Unlike contemporary autobiographical writings, Husson tells us nothing directly about her decision to marry Foucault, their personal relationship, their possible joys and frustrations, and historians like Weygand and Kudlick have no way of filling in the gaps. Husson does, however, credit Foucault with rescuing her, most likely when she had reached the end of her meager resources.

Husson’s decision to violate her own advice that the blind should not marry the blind may have saved her in the short run, but it was an ultimately disastrous decision. The couple remained pitifully poor. She tried again to obtain support for herself and Foucault from the *Quinze-Vingts*, but to no avail. The institution was utterly opposed to the blind marrying the blind (although they housed both men and women, they kept them as far

apart as possible in order to prevent relationships from developing), and by this time, someone at *Quinze-Vingts* considered Husson to be a disreputable woman. The reasons for this are unknown, but Kudlick and Weygand suggest that it may have had to do with her writing novels under her own name—a very forward act for a woman, even when the novels were deeply informed by Catholic piety, as Husson’s were.

Husson bore two children whose fate is completely unknown, and died in 1831 at the age of twenty-eight, from severe burns. One is left with the terrible impression that the dangers of trying to keep house without the assistance of a sighted person (which Husson warned people about in her “Reflections”) came true in her own life, although we will never know what caused the fire and how Husson got caught in it. We also will never know what happened to her children who drop out of the historical records. Her husband married a sighted woman, was readmitted to residency at the *Quinze-Vingts* along with his new wife, continued to work as a musician and became an inventor.

Husson and Foucault were remarkable people. Unlike the vast majority of blind people of their era, they had the strength of will, intelligence, talent, and good luck to overcome the usual confined life of the blind, to become educated and to pursue careers. Weygand and Kudlick have done an admirable job of detective work in reconstructing their lives and the overwhelming odds against which they succeeded. One only wants their story to have had a different ending, and Therese-Adele Husson to have lived a longer, happier and more prosperous life as a wife, mother, and writer.

The book can easily be assigned to undergraduate students in European history, women’s history, and disability history courses. The combination of primary sources (Husson’s “Reflections” and autobiographical “Note”), and social history will provide students with a good example of the historian’s craft and the caution with which one must draw conclusions from literary texts.

Kudlick and Weygand allow Husson’s reflections on blindness to stand largely uninterpreted. This is understandable given their interest in social history, but there is more to be pursued in the primary texts. As a women’s historian, I am interested in Husson’s advice to blind women and men, and its relationship to nineteenth-century conceptualizations of gender. In a remarkable passage, Husson advised blind men who married sighted women to lead a “gentle, happy, and calm life” and to “beware of showing the slightest dissatisfaction or dis-

pleasure, even if certain actions of his wife should warrant it" (p. 53). This advice is virtually word for word the kind of advice found in bourgeois advice manuals for young women. In the relationship imagined by Husson, the blind man was to play the female role of subservience and devotion to the head of the family. In contrast, wanting to free the blind woman of the danger of having to be subservient to an unscrupulous husband, she urged her blind sisters to cultivate sweetness and social virtues and praised the life of the single woman surrounded by female friends and relatives. In Catholic France, as Kudlick and Weygand point out, female celibacy and a life of piety and service were accepted (but not entirely equal) alternatives to marriage and motherhood. Husson herself considered the renunciation of marriage and motherhood by blind women to be a sacrifice that would be

largely, but not entirely, compensated for by other relationships. Whether the life of gratitude and piety that Husson urged on both blind men and women would have served her better than the independence she sought is unknowable, but her inability to follow her own advice reveals once again the inadequacy of advice and social policies that are based on stereotyping and romanticization. Among Husson's contemporaries were her musician and inventor husband, Louis Braille, the mathematician Jean-Baptiste Penjon, and other talented men and women who strove to create lives and communities in the face of policies and attitudes that reduced the blind to the position of dependent children. Like children they were to be educated, but they also were deemed unable to make their own decisions. These are attitudes with which people with disabilities are unfortunately still familiar.

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