Charlotte C. Prather

The View from Germany

FRIEDRICH MELCHIOR GRIMM reports an adventure, which he describes as "rather temerous and delicate to be attempted by a young and lovely woman." The heroine of the adventure, which Grimm transforms into a most amusing anecdote, is, in fact, Mme Deshoulières, whose poetry Grimm is pleased to see being published posthumously. He transcribes the episode from a biography of the poet that her editor has provided—a biography that he assures us is otherwise wholly tedious and poorly written:

Mme Deshoulières, having been told during a visit to friends in the country that one of the wings of their chateau was customarily haunted by night, conceives a great curiosity and determination to witness the said apparition personally. Having insisted upon sleeping in the haunted apartment, she hears her door open in the middle of the night. She addresses the ghost who, however, does not respond. It approaches treading heavily and sighing. A table is upset; the bed curtains part. The young woman, unconcerned, reaches for the visitor to discern whether it has any palpable form. She easily seizes the two ears of the ghost which she finds to be long and velvety, a discovery which causes her some serious thought. Afraid to release the said ears and thus render an escape possible, she persists until dawn in this uncomfortable position. At first light she recognizes her captive as a large dog of quite placid temperament who has developed a preference for sleeping there in comfort rather than out of doors. She is thus able to relieve the fears of her host who wonders at her courage.¹

This episode from the private life of a woman of some public stature may be seen as emblematic of the eighteenth-century German view of French women and of women in general. The relative weight of personal data, vis-à-vis public information, in this case a presentation or evaluation of the poetry of Mme Deshoulières, is not insignificant, nor is the ambiguous stance of the reporter in his interpretation of the adventure itself. The poetry, in fact, receives neither evaluation nor criticism. The only praise is offered to the editor, who has made, Grimm maintains, a wise choice in his selection rather than burdening the public with the entire corpus of the author’s work. The poetry seems not to deserve extensive attention; perhaps it was heartily