Outlandish Fictions: The Eighteenth-Century French Novel and Marriage on Women's Terms

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Abstract

ABSTRACT

OUTLANDISH FICTIONS: THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH NOVEL AND MARRIAGE ON WOMEN’S TERMS

Ekaterina R. Alexandrova

Joan DeJean

Focusing on plots that depict life after marriage, this dissertation studies the novel as a medium for imagining a spousal relationship transformed to promote new positive social, political, and familial roles and possibilities for women. I re-establish these fictions’ thrust as primarily concerned with individual freedom and fulfillment, rather than with affection in marriage. I begin by exploring the relationship between the rising appeal of conjugal sentiment and the novel, situating the genre within the general context of social and political shift in eighteenth-century France. Viewing emergent subversive marriage plots in light of the founding seventeenth-century tradition tying the novel genre to women’s interests, I suggest that attempts to contain fictions deemed “outlandish” may have warped our present vision of the “heroine’s plot,” or the range of roles and experiences imagined for women by Enlightenment novelists.

Chapter 1 examines how specific changes in marital legislation wrought by the centralizing French state progressively limited women’s legal and social prerogatives, showing that the novel of marriage engaged with these concerns from the outset through a study of Lafayette’s La Princesse de Clèves (1678). Subsequent chapters consider novels that envision marriage as a platform for societal transformation. In Chapter 2, I compare fictional utopian communities created through the heroine’s conjugal union: the contained patriarchal autarky of Rousseau’s La Nouvelle Héloïse (1761) and the expanding matriarchy of Le Prince de Beaumont’s La Nouvelle Clarice (1767). Chapter 3 analyzes Riccoboni’s portrayal of the platonic marriage of M. and Mme de Monglas in Lettres de Valliés (1772), an explicitly aristocratic vision of the ideal matrimonial relationship that insists on the fundamental importance of women’s control of their body and their sexuality by privileging friendship and arranged marriage over the destructive forces of romantic passion. Finally, the mise-en-abîme of reading’s effect on the conjugal relationship of the heroines of Charriére’s Lettres de Mistriss Henley (1784) and Montolieu’s Caroline de Lichtfield (1786), interrogates the genre’s potential influence on marriage.

The dissertation draws attention to eighteenth-century novels that have to date been understudied, and proposes new readings of prominent Enlightenment fictions that foreground questions of authority, the evolution of family relations, and women’s roles in the private and public sphere.

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Ekaterina R. Alexandrova

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To Rudolf Alexandrovich Alexandrov
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ABSTRACT

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Focusing on plots that depict life after marriage, this dissertation studies the novel as a medium for imagining a spousal relationship transformed to promote new positive social, political, and familial roles and possibilities for women. I re-establish these fictions’ thrust as primarily concerned with individual freedom and fulfillment, rather than with affection in marriage. I begin by exploring the relationship between the rising appeal of conjugal sentiment and the novel, situating the genre within the general context of social and political shift in eighteenth-century France. Viewing emergent subversive marriage plots in light of the founding seventeenth-century tradition tying the novel genre to women’s interests, I suggest that attempts to contain fictions deemed “outlandish” may have warped our present vision of the “heroine’s plot,” or the range of roles and experiences imagined for women by Enlightenment novelists.

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**Introduction: Novel Marriage in Eighteenth-Century France**

La lecture est réellement une seconde éducation qui supplée à l'insuffisance de la première.

Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, *De l'Éducation des femmes* (1783)

S’ils vécurent bien ou mal ensemble, vous le pourrez voir quelque jour, si la mode vient d’écrire la vie des femmes mariées.

Antoine Furetière, *Le Roman bourgeois* (1666)

Furetière’s witty observation on the incompatibility of married women’s lives with novelistic representation, made in his satire of fashionable romances such as Madeleine de Scudéry’s, was overturned by the anonymously-published *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678) only a decade later. Often considered the first modern novel, the masterpiece of Marie-Madeleine Pioche de la Vergne, comtesse de Lafayette, revolutionized the genre by beginning, rather than ending, with the marriage of its heroine.¹ The narrative focus on the spouses’ struggle to define the terms of their union and jointly come to grips with the heroine’s feelings for a man other than her husband forever wedded the genre to marital concerns, making the novel synonymous with “marriage in crisis,” according to Joan DeJean (“Notorious Women” 68). Yet, though marriage remained a central topos of the genre, novels did not again explicitly portray married life for quite some time.

Toward the middle of the eighteenth century, however, several key texts took up

¹ Lafayette was of course not the first to write about marriage: there are important French medieval and Renaissance fictional texts in some way concerned with matrimony. For instance, Chrétien de Troyes’ *Érec et Énide* (1165) depicts the joint adventures of a knight errant and his wife; *Les Quinze joies de mariage* (late 14th-early 15th century) and Rabelais’ *Le Tiers Livre* (1546) investigate marriage from a masculine and satirical viewpoint; Marie de France’s *Lais* (1180?) and Marguerite de Navarre’s *L’Heptaméron* (1559) feature many depictions of married couples and conjugal life; Christine de Pizan’s *Le Livre de cent ballades* (1402) laments the loss of her late husband. My study thus makes the claim of originality for *La Princesse de Clèves* specifically within the genre of the novel: as such, it is focused more exclusively on the spouses’ interiority and relationship dynamics than these earlier texts.
Lafayette’s groundbreaking tradition of depicting life after marriage.² The English novelist Samuel Richardson was probably the first to chronicle the minutia of married life in his extremely popular *Pamela* (1740), rapidly translated into French by the Abbé Prévost. But whereas Richardson extolled the joys of conjugality based on mutual affection, representation of marriage in novels of the French tradition resembles Lafayette’s in that marriage is found wanting by the female protagonist and sentiment is problematized in a conscious rejection of romantic passion. Although Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s monumental *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) remains the best-known depiction of conjugal life, several important novelists Joan Stewart identifies as following in the tradition of *La Princesse de Clèves* continued in Lafayette’s footsteps and also focused extensively on marriage (*Gynographs* 46). In particular, Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni, Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont, as well as the Swiss novelists Isabelle de Montolieu and Isabelle de Charrière, all achieved critical and sometimes extensive popular success with their portrayals of women’s experience of wedded life.

In *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt suggests that Richardson’s representation of conjugality was purposely extremely detailed so as to provide an “earnest redefinition” of marriage. “The middle-class concept of marriage was not yet completely established, and Richardson must have felt that his aim of producing a new model of conduct for the relations between men and women involved paying attention to many matters…on which there was not yet complete public agreement” (149). Although Richardson’s treatment of marriage attributed an important place to affection, introducing this new element into the conjugal relationship did not hinder recognition of the critical reassessment of the

² French novels concerned with marriage—but not focused on married life—do exist earlier in the eighteenth century. See p. 21 of this chapter.
institution in the novel, as Watt’s reading makes clear. Unfortunately, the opposite appears to be true for the work of the French women novelists of my corpus. Despite challenging love (including conjugal love), women’s writing in particular has been read as primarily concerned with romance. Consequently, the plots I have in mind at best have not been read as the crucial revisions of marriage that they in fact represented, and at worst, not read at all.

In his massive opus *Destinée féminine dans le roman du dix-huitième siècle*, Pierre Fauchery dismissively notes that “d’une manière générale, c’est aux romancières surtout que le thème matrimonial est secourable” (354). The critic further opines that in novels written by women, “la contestation du mariage…se fondera donc secrètement sur la nostalgie de l’amour. Mais elle s’abritera sous d’autres revendications, plus ‘avouables’; quoique peut-être moins essentielles” (364). Fauchery’s assertion that female novelists who criticized marriage were actually campaigning for love is typical of a continued misperception that women always and inevitably write about romance. This imposed reading of love’s novelistic predominance has in turn led to a reduction of the clear concern with freedom and individual fulfillment in human relations expressed by women novelists, to a subterfuge hiding their “true” interest.

However, the narrative emphasis on issues such as women’s control of their sexuality and the importance of female creativity in the work of the French novelists who, like Lafayette, made married life itself the subject of their narratives indicates that they did attempt a crucial redefinition of the conjugal relationship. The kinds of extravagant possibilities these novels envisioned for women, though, may have been at the origin of readings that, consciously or not, essentially minimized the impact of these
fictional representations of marriage. By focusing primarily on their role in endorsing
sentiment in human relations, the challenge to traditional patriarchal authority in the
public and private sphere presented by these portrayals of marriage was effectively
attenuated. My argument thus attempts to reconstitute the story that, to borrow Marianne
Hirsch’s terms, “has been written even if it has not been read,” by drawing attention to
the neglected aspects of these fictions that represented conjugal relationships in which
heroines struggle, usually successfully, to assume positive social, political, and cultural
roles far beyond those accessible to women in traditional marriage (“Mothers and
Daughters” 214).

I aim to demonstrate how, through their innovative representation of seemingly
conventional fates thought of as the “heroine’s plot” in the eighteenth-century novel—
mariage, death, and the convent—these writers envisioned a subversive transformation
of women’s experience reaching far beyond matrimony. These novels’ elaborate staging
of heroines’ quests for spatial, sexual, and creative autonomy within marriage testifies to
a coherent focus on developing a new private conjugal relationship model, sometimes
translated to a larger public family and social model. That is, the treatment of marriage in
these novels served to conceptualize gender and social relations in a way that fit into the
writers’ developed scheme of socio-cultural and often political ideals.

While some of the writers this study focuses on have been rediscovered, thanks to
important critical work beginning in the 1970s and 80s, Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni has
nevertheless not benefited from the kind of extensive attention devoted to Isabelle de
Charrière, whose increasingly canonical status has been consolidated by Oorschot’s
publication of her complete works. Moreover, even the Charrière or the Riccoboni we do
know represent but a narrow aspect of the writers’ extensive contributions. And Le Prince de Beaumont, along with Montolieu, remains virtually unknown today, despite the wide-ranging success of both writers. My readings in this study thus aim to chart some of these women’s crucial contributions to the Enlightenment project.

In the introductory pages that follow, I’d like to set the context of my study by outlining some of the important changes in French society occurring in the eighteenth century, briefly summarizing the novel’s evolution during this time. This will in turn allow me to situate and present my corpus. But I would also like to develop the suggestion that I have already made above: that the marriage narratives of these novels continue to be misread. That is, as is often the case with women writers in particular, their work tends to be “understood in ways that conform to stereotypes rather than to what they actually wrote,” and thus consistently underestimated, as Heidi Bostic claims in her astute study *The Fiction of Enlightenment* (147).

Though focusing exclusively on the appropriation and use of reason by eighteenth-century French women authors, Bostic’s study makes the key suggestion that the refusal to recognize women’s decisive involvement with the serious and supposedly exclusively masculine notion of reason, constitutes part of the process by which women are continuously denied a role in the Enlightenment. Similarly, it could be said that the

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3 After Charrière, Riccoboni has benefited the most from modern editions. Droz, Indigo, the MLA, Desjonquières, and SVEC have put out annotated editions of her best-known works. SVEC has also published Riccoboni’s correspondence, edited by J.C. Nicholls. Le Prince de Beaumont is mainly known today for her fairy tales, which have appeared in several anthologies for children, including the *Contes du miroir* collection. “La Belle et la bête” (1757) is especially popular and consistently reprinted. Besides a few of Montolieu’s translations of other authors, including Jane Austen, her only work appearing in a modern edition is the short story “Le Serin de Jean-Jacques Rousseau” (1811).
enduring misrepresentation of the focus of novels of marriage, in reducing it to love, participates in the same process, amounting to a trivialization of women’s work and of their involvement in the Enlightenment. These fictions, I’d like to suggest, were not merely the escape vents from patriarchy for dissatisfied readers to which some evaluations have reduced them. Though these novels certainly did generate alternatives to patriarchal structures, the particular narrative spaces they constructed did not embody romantic daydreams, but rather dimensions of women’s dissatisfaction, and loci of social transformation.

Before I begin my overview, however, a brief methodological disclaimer is in order. The issues involved in fictional representations of marriage and women’s multifaceted experiences within matrimony, in a century when French society as a whole was experiencing tremendous changes, make for a rich and diverse subject, and establishing a useful paradigm has not been an easy task. I ultimately chose to read “in context,” by situating these novels in the literary and to a lesser extent historical circumstances of their time, as this seemed most appropriate for the period in question. The Enlightenment has often been viewed as a conversation, and my approach tends toward reconstituting part of the voices and fragments of the discussion we no longer hear today, through focusing on some of these women’s distinct contributions.4

4 The importance of multiplicity to Enlightenment thought is highlighted by Ernst Cassirer’s landmark study The Philosophy of the Enlightenment. According to Cassirer, one of the period’s major intellectual innovations was the new form of philosophical synthesis originating in Leibniz, which held that “only the totality of…unique points of view gives us the truth of reality” (32-3). Lawrence E. Klein’s “Enlightenment as a Conversation,” in the anthology What’s Left of Enlightenment? A Postmodern Question edited by Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hans Reill (148-66) also provides a key definition of the period as a conversation, similarly described by Dorinda Outram in The Enlightenment.
Lafayette’s novel, with its clear awareness of the political and social frameworks’ impact on marriage and women’s private experience, and its acknowledged influence on the eighteenth-century novelists of my corpus such as Riccoboni, provided an excellent starting point. Another major piece of the literary context was, of course, Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*; though widely known today, the engrossing depiction of passionate relationships, especially between Julie and Saint-Preux, has sometimes overshadowed the text’s focus on marriage.

My reading of Rousseau’s novel reconstructs precisely the narrative space of the conjugal utopia, and the roles it offered women; comparison with the prospects envisioned by other utopian narrative spaces fleshes out a full range of possibilities for women and their potential bearing on not only the private, but also the public sphere. This broad view seems especially appropriate because the texts in my corpus explicitly situate themselves as part of an ongoing debate by highlighting their intertextuality. That is, each novel codifies literary influence by inscribing the formative role of reading at both the narrative and the meta-textual level. Where Rousseau’s Julie is a *New Heloïsa*, Le Prince de Beaumont’s heroine is a New Clarissa; Riccoboni explicitly presents her married protagonist’s story as a fictional narrative, and Montolieu and Charrière’s heroines both derive a conjugal education from reading. Moreover, the *mise-en-abîme* of reading’s role in changing marriage and ideas about marriage, present to some degree in all of the texts in my corpus, suggests that these writers imagined their fictions’ potential impact on society and certainly did not see them as simply novels about love.

Understanding these novels in the context of the diverse shifts in traditional structures of family and authority taking place not just in France, but across the continent,
is also important and brings me to my final point. Though I do sketch out some of the essential changes affecting human relations in the eighteenth century, I am by no means a historian, and this is primarily a literary study. I do not explicitly analyze (though I do address) issues related to the material circulation of literary works: the intricacies of the publishing trade, censorship, the royal _privilège_, the economics involved, and novelists’ navigation of these diverse difficulties, including the often challenging decision to publish. Neither do I make extensive use of non-fictional materials like the _mémoires judiciaires_ and other legal and historical documents examined in some excellent interdisciplinary studies on early modern France that touch on marriage-related issues, such as Elizabeth C. Goldsmith and Dena Goodman’s anthology _Going Public: Women and Publishing in Early Modern France_, Mary Trouille’s _Wife-Abuse in Eighteenth-Century France_, or Sarah Maza’s _Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Pre-Revolutionary France_. Thus, my subject is the literary representation of marriage and the complex issues surrounding women’s experience, addressed by these narratives and the spaces of dissent they create.

_Marriage and Family: Enlightenment Evolutions_

Family structures under the _ancien régime_ are best described as “traditional,” according to family historian James Traer (15). Legally and economically, an unmarried woman was the responsibility of her father; in marriage, the doctrine of coverture subsumed her identity under that of her husband. That is, upon marrying, her person and assets were given over to the control of her spouse, who pronounced on all legal and
financial proceedings in her stead. An undisputed ruler, the male head of the family
presided over his household much like the sovereign ruled over his kingdom.
Unsurprisingly, political theorists of the time used the model of family relations to justify
the monarch’s authority: Robert Filmer, in his Patriarcha (1680), likened the king’s
relationship with his subjects to the father’s power over his household.5

Though some women entered the convent—usually to allow the family to
consolidate its wealth in the hands of a sole heir—the dominant majority of women did
marry, and those who died unmarried made up less than ten percent of the population
(Hufton, “Women, Work, and Family” 3: 26). Thus, marriage was a pivotal moment of a
woman’s destiny, and education manuals for girls, such as Fénelon’s famous Traité de
l’éducation des filles (1687), advocated that their upbringing be structured in terms of
preparation for matrimony (or the convent). The overwhelming significance of marriage
in a woman’s life unsurprisingly made it a crucial question in the fictional narrative.

By general consensus, historians locate the beginnings of a transformation in
family relations in the eighteenth century. Indeed, today we readily associate the
Enlightenment with the birth of the modern nuclear family, in which spouses are united
by mutual affection, and children are raised and educated within the domestic sphere by
involved parents. This is demonstrated by some of the best-known studies of the period,

5 An opponent of divine right, John Locke provided the best-known competing model of
family and authority relations. One of Locke’s points of contention with Filmer was that
as children grow, they escape parental tutelage, and thus subjects cannot indefinitely
remain minors politically. Nevertheless, Locke did not extend the implications of this
conception of limited authority to the family, and especially to the permanently
l’esprit des lois, first published anonymously in 1748, followed Locke’s ideas in some
respects, being mainly concerned with the importance of the separation of powers and
self-imposed limits to royal authority in monarchies.
though these mostly focus on England. Lawrence Stone’s monumental work *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*, for instance, portrays the family as largely bereft of sentiment before the eighteenth century. Randolph Trumbach, in *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family: Aristocratic Kinship and Domestic Relations in Eighteenth-Century England*, posits a similar transformation, tracing the evolution of the family from “patriarchal” to “egalitarian,” and claiming that by the end of the century, a stunning three-quarters of aristocratic unions in England were concluded based on love.

English family values, however, may have rapidly crossed the channel to France. For Francis Ronsin, for example, the love-in-marriage craze in the French aristocratic families was an English import. The historian shows how anglomania, among other factors, contributed to important changes in the eighteenth-century French conjugal unions in his painstaking analysis *Le Contrat sentimental: débats sur le mariage, l'amour, le divorce, de l'Ancien Régime à la Restauration* (165). In the narrower field of novelistic production, Josephine Grieder argues that the incredible popularity of the English novel and the French public’s general interest in the English led to the birth of a new novel that “enroll[ed] itself under the banner of morality” and stressed (at least) the moral equality between men and women, a parity that in principle extended to the spousal relationship (126). And it is the literature and criticism of the French Enlightenment in general that Traer’s thorough study *Marriage and the Family in Eighteenth-Century France* credits with triggering the massive change from the “traditional” marriage and family organization under the *ancien régime*, to the “modern” family that the legislators of the French Revolution sought to establish.

One important reason why questions of family reform found receptive ground in
France was the perceived lagging behind of French society. After the 1715 death of Louis XIV, the Sun King, France experienced a “startling sense of disorientation,” according to David Bell (52). Faced with crippling debt, the country’s transitioning from Louis XIV’s seventy-two year reign to the regency’s political instability was a shaky process. Whereas the Sun King’s policies had tended to consolidate all power in the hands of the monarch, the regent put France’s “formidable government machinery under the control of the high aristocracy.” The restoration of the parlements that Louis XIV had suppressed also opened the way to testing the limits of royal authority (Bell 52).

Though after his coronation in 1722, the Sun King’s successor Louis XV acquired the soubriquet of “bien-aimé,” disappointment with his rule quickly grew among the high nobility and the populace. The unpopular treaty after the War of Austrian Succession, in which France lost previously acquired territories, the period known as Pompadour’s regency (1745-1764), and Louis’ perceived feebleness and promiscuity contributed to the growth of dissatisfaction with the king. The major setbacks suffered by France following the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763) with England, on the other hand, strengthened the impression that the country was falling behind its neighbors. By mid-century, discontent from various sources had prepped the ground for reform debates concerning both political and family authority.

A key problem felt by most thinkers to be at the root of France’s backwardness was the supposed sharp decline in the country’s population. While most historians today note that the eighteenth-century perception of a demographic crisis was exaggerated, the French did have some cause for concern, compared to their neighbors. France’s population showed a relatively healthy growth of about six and a half million in the
eighteenth century, but because of a population explosion in surrounding European
countries, the percentage of Frenchmen in the total European population dropped, which
may have accounted for the persistence of the depopulation fear (Carpentier and Lebrun
219).

Indeed, the rhetoric of a demographic crisis, said to be exacerbated by a plunge in
the number of marriages, the animosity between spouses, and hence an ever-falling
birthrate, appears nearly omnipresent in the eighteenth century. “La chute de la
population,” as Dominique Dessertine tells us, “obsède…les esprits du 18ème” (39). The
summary of the seventeenth and eighteenth century demographic trends given by the
family historian François Lebrun in La vie conjugale sous l’Ancien Régime, points out
some of the most obvious sources of alarm: “Age tardif au mariage, forte mortalité,
surtout infantile” (6). What’s more, “le tendance au mariage tardif ne fait que
s’accentuer au cours du dix-huitième siècle” (31-2). According to Jean-Louis Flandrin in
Familles: parenté, maison, sexualité dans l’ancienne société, this tendency particularly
affected the upper echelons of society, as data cited by the historian shows that fecundity
really did go down very apparently in the families of ducs and pairs de France, from the
beginning of 18th century onwards (191).6

In any case, however serious the crisis may have been, one has only to look at the
writings of the Enlightenment’s key thinkers—Montesquieu, Diderot, Voltaire, or
d’Holbach—to see references to depopulation, and even more so to the deplorable state
of marital mores among the aristocracy, commonly cited as responsible. Those who

6 Jean Gaudemet’s findings partially confirm Flandrin’s: although many aristocratic
families were exceptionally numerous, families with only one or two children became
increasingly common after 1750 (366-9).
participated in the public debate via the printing of often anonymous tracts, so-called “observers” such as a certain M. Tr. D. V., a citizen of Bordeaux in *Les Usages* (1762), or “un nouvel Argus” in *Paris en miniature* (1784) mocked the meaninglessness of most high society marriages. “Le respect du mariage? Ce n’était pas dans la règle du jeu,” deftly summarizes Hazard in his landmark work on the Enlightenment, *La Pensée européenne au XVIIIème siècle* (251).

The clamor for improvement of marriage in the eighteenth century produced a vast (and not easily condensed) amount of debate addressing the validity of existing familial, social, legal and economic practices surrounding matrimony, but Traer provides an especially useful summary of the *philosophes*’ main arguments for marital reform. Breaking these down into three categories, the historian argues that the *philosophes*’ “critique of traditional religious and legal conceptions” was accomplished through “their emphasis on diversity, utility, and sentiment” (48). Diversity-based critiques acquainted the French public with the possibility of radically different conjugal configurations current in other societies, whereas utility and sentiment-based critiques focused on the home front, both addressing the fears of depopulation in a complimentary fashion.

These reform arguments adroitly linked together the prerogatives of sentiment and utility, presenting problems in marriage as stemming from the traditional upper-class French marital practices’ neglect of the individual’s personal desires and fulfillment. Matches motivated primarily by dynastic and economic concerns were bound to fail. Sentiment, it was thought, could fix the problem, and render marriage beneficial to society in the process. To begin with, if people chose their life partner based on personal preference, marriage could become a means to happiness, an increasingly important
concept in the Enlightenment. Subsequently, greater personal happiness in marriage would maximize the social utility of the institution: according to the line of reasoning of the time, eliminating the causes of spousal animosity and amending the overall negative perception of matrimony, would cause more people to get married (Dessertine 15-6). Those already married, would also reassess the importance of the conjugal relationship and attempt to exploit its potential for personal fulfillment. Occupying themselves more closely with family concerns, caring spouses would solidify the founding unit of French society and ultimately produce more children for their country. Enlightenment optimism envisioned individual happiness and overall social utility working in tandem with resulting mutual benefit.

Such images of the socially beneficial sentimental family were often propagated by drama, on which Traer draws in support of his argument of affectionate marriage’s partially fictional origins (the only novel he cites is the first half of La Nouvelle Héloïse). Diderot himself, despite praising Richardson’s morally edifying novels, envisioned drama and not the novel as a particularly powerful potential reform weapon, even employing drama-like techniques in his own short stories (Howells 10-11). But representations in support of affectionate marriage were most often found in a flourishing production of treatises, pamphlets, and pro-divorce arguments. Reform publications such

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7 See Robert Mauzi, L’Idée du bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée françaises au XVIIIe siècle.
8 The necessary concurrence of individual and societal interest was a conviction emerging in the Enlightenment, vital in economics with Adam Smith’s The Wealth of Nations (1776), in government, or in a more general sense as Hazard shows in his analysis of eighteenth-century moralists (see the chapters on “La morale” and “Le gouvernement” in La Pensée européenne au XVIIIe siècle, particularly 167-8 and 187-8).
9 Looking at La Nouvelle Héloïse as a whole, however, yields a much more conservative text that may even have advocated aristocratic values. Jean Biou argues that the novel was likely overwhelmingly embraced by the high aristocracy precisely for that reason.
as Abbé Pichon’s *Mémoire sur les abus dans les mariages* (1766), which argued that the dowry system ought to be radically transformed, so that “la sympathie des cœurs” could triumph over venal interests in marriage, attempted to engage public interest through a lachrymose language of sentiment (34). Similarly, a curious new breed of treatises on marriage with an evident didactic bent, often presented as fictional texts or collections of letters, proposed affectionate marriage as a way out of the predicaments facing the French, among them depopulation. These novel-like treatises on conjugality, like *Le Mariage par M. C*** (1769), attributed to Charles Compan, or Cerfvol’s evocatively named *Gamologie du mariage* (1772), preached moderation and wise parents’ careful education of offspring as key to successful matrimony.

Cerfvol, who made a name (or rather, a pseudonym) for himself with his publications in favor of divorce, saw a solution to the problems besieging French society in a conservative version of affectionate marriage. The *Gamologie* enjoined parents to understand that though children have their own preferences, considering those to some extent did not mean abrogating control over their progeny’s choice. Instead, Cerfvol promoted strategies such as allowing the daughter to make a final choice among several suitors pre-selected by the parents. Such instances of parental flexibility and benevolence, in turn, were shown to lead to happy and most importantly prolific marriages. The *Gamologie* and similar treatises, however, did not by any stretch of the imagination advocate greater rights for women as part of the conjugal reform they promoted—women were given only an instrumental role in the writers’ vision of the new affectionate family.

Finally, another source of images in support of affectionate conjugality was poetry. One particularly striking example is “L’Épître à l’Hymen” published in *L’Année*
littéraire in 1785. Addressed to “les hommes honnêtes et sensibles” in order to “graver dans leur mémoire/ Que le sentiment le plus doux/ Qu’on puisse avoir sur la terre,/ Est de joindre au titre d’époux/ La félicité d’être père,” the poem’s sanctimonious tone as well as the identity of its author (a certain M. Collet, censeur royal), give it a propaganda-like ring (XXXII: 37). An earlier poem, “Triomphe de l’amour conjugal,” published as a pamphlet a few months after Louis XVI’s coronation in 1774 and celebrating the domestic virtues toward which the King’s example would lead the French, suggests that by the end of the century, the exaltation of conjugal sentiment may have come to serve official interests:

Il faudra désormais que cette Nation,/ Des époux vertueux respecte l’union:/ Le Monarque Français, que l’univers contemple,/ Corrigea les mœurs, & veut donner l’exemple./ … Le Français aujourd’hui, revenant à lui-même,/ Du véritable amour connaîtra le bonheur:/ Qui sait aimer son Roi, & sa bonté suprême,/ Prouve que la vertu peut enflammer son cœur. (4)

Despite the optimism evident in this vast body of representations in favor of the affectionate family, ancien régime reality lagged behind the confident reform projects: while new feelings, desires, and ideas took off, outdated legal and social practices became, if anything, increasingly reactionary. Significantly, French society was far from unanimous in its reform stance. Division existed between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, and nowhere was the rift more obvious than in the question of marriage. Historians Albert Soboul, Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, and Jonathan Dewald all evoke an increasing rigidity in the higher nobility, who stubbornly stuck to their traditional ways in response to the perceived threat of the bourgeoisie’s financial clout. Elizabeth de Fontenay especially aptly summarizes how the split affected views on marriage reform:

Deux courants s’affrontent, dans la deuxième moitié du dix-huitième siècle: la montée des valeurs bourgeois et l’excitation des différences aristocratiques. On assiste d’une part à la naissance de nouvelles mœurs…et surtout valorisation du ‘mariage de convenance,’ la convenance des coeurs se substituant aux arrangements fait par les familles: l’affaiblissement du lignage et la
tendance à l’individuation autorisent désormais qu’on réclame le droit de se marier pour soi. D’autre part l’esprit de caste et l’exclusivisme nobiliaire se renforcent, et le courant idéologique par lequel l’aristocratie légitimait sa domination se maintient avec violence. La question du mariage marque très nettement la ligne de partage entre les deux états. (791)

Fontenay’s analysis suggests that interests of marriage reform were closely aligned with social position, and that the proposed affectionate family had perhaps more to do with the distribution of power in the sociopolitical sphere than with individual empowerment. Furthermore, the emerging family ideology seemingly considered only the male to be an individual entitled to fulfillment; affectionate marriage tended to marginalize women’s position within the family by making it dependent solely on the husband’s good will. ¹⁰ Whereas the traditional arranged marriage of the aristocracy presupposed a de facto equality or at least a symmetry between the prospective spouses, determined by their families to be of equivalent status, what Fontenay terms bourgeois “mariage de convenance” threw off the relationship balance in basing it on the uncertain criteria of sentiment (792).

Most importantly, similarly to the larger scope of the political arena where Frenchmen dreamed about distributing the father’s power to a band of brothers as Lynn Hunt has convincingly shown, the male-oriented structures of the family unit remained unchallenged. Filmer’s initially dominant conception of political power in terms of the father-king’s absolute control over his children-subjects encountered increasing opposition as the eighteenth century progressed. But even political thinkers espousing contractual theories of government and critiquing the unlimited power granted by the traditional doctrine of divine right to the monarchy, did not question the husband’s

¹⁰ Thus, as Ruth Perry argues in Novel Relations, “The invisible bonds of love came increasingly to be substituted for the social expectations of wives in earlier times: a husband’s love came to be a woman’s only protection and her only law” (195). See also James Thompson’s Models of Value, especially 153-175.
absolute authority in the private sphere (Traer 51, Maza 268). Following the Revolution, the sexual contract remained in place despite and perhaps even because of changes in the marriage institution, effectively shutting women out from the social contract and the public sphere as Carole Pateman persuasively demonstrates.

But until the Revolution, the vertical patriarchal power structures of ancien régime society remained unchanged, rumblings of discontent notwithstanding. Intensifying with the advent of absolutism, which began to replace older feudal structures under the reign of Louis XIII/Richelieu, the power of the monarch solidified under Louis XIV. And despite enjoying isolated periods of greater freedom, women in particular felt their bounds constrict as the French state became increasingly centralized, with the eighteenth century being no exception. As Natalie Zemon Davis asserts in her groundbreaking essay “Women on Top,” beginning in the sixteenth century “kings and political theorists saw the increasing subjection of wife to husband…as a guarantee of the obedience of both men and women to a slowly centralizing state” (149).

This subjection was concretized by an evolution in the legal system unfavorable to women. Davis, among others, notes that from the sixteenth century on, women were increasingly deprived of property rights, likewise losing whatever legal personality they may have had (149). Moreover, the state progressively impinged upon the church’s traditional jurisdiction over marriage. Hence, women lost even the limited protection of canon law, which did not allow the “discrimination sexuelle et sociale qu’enseign[aien] les juristes français” (Lottin “Vie et mort du couple” 77). Yet, despite “the tightening of legal restrictions on women (which continued to make it almost impossible for them to find legal solutions to the most disastrous marriages),” DeJean remarks the incongruous
“popular perception…that, aided by cooperative authorities, women were having their own way and making their own law” (“Notorious Women” 75). Perhaps this perception was what served to justify the often-brutal physical chastisement of women by spouses and other abusive practices, which remained an acceptable (and accepted) means of keeping supposedly wayward wives in check throughout the eighteenth century, as Trouille’s exhaustive study shows. Obviously, then, the transition into marriage for a young woman in eighteenth-century France was no rosy prospect, meaning above all “a continuation of her legal and financial powerlessness, to which were added the risk of death in childbirth and the virtual certainty of the loss of at least some of her children at young ages” (Sherman 46).

In sum, while reactive ancien régime structures increasingly constrained women despite Enlightenment promises of personal happiness, reformers’ projects of affectionate marriage included them only instrumentally to benefit society and male individual fulfillment. “Le grand projet du dix-huitième siècle, c’est que les femmes se sentent femmes, le tout devant se faire dans la douceur—conditionnement subtil, suggestion de chaque instant,” suggests Jocelyne Livi in Vapeurs de femmes: essai historique sur quelques fantasmes médicaux et philosophiques. Directing women into what Livi terms “l’espace feutré de la soumission volontaire,” a current of Enlightenment thought sought

11 Robert Niklaus’ article “Diderot and Women” contains an excellent summary of the condition féminine in eighteenth-century France.
12 By “reformers,” I refer specifically to the writers of treatises on marriage mentioned earlier on in the chapter, but the philosophes likewise maintained a conservative stance as far as women’s rights in marriage and elsewhere were concerned. Alleging his surprise that “more works were not written to vindicate the rights of women,” Niklaus argues that “the philosophes failed to mount a crusade urging the emancipation of women. … They put forward reforms, especially in regard to the education of women, but these were for the most part subordinated to the overall programme they were promoting” (71, 69).
to convince them that these changes were above all for their benefit (74). The alluring description of the affectionate family Ruth Perry denounces as “Stone’s male-centered fantasy” replicates the period’s “assum[ption] that educating women to be companions for men was the best thing that ever happened to them” (Novel Relations 195). In contrast, the novel of marriage, concerned with female individual and creative fulfillment, played an especially important role in representing alternative possibilities for women.

**Marriage, the Novel, and the Enlightenment Project**

In the seventeenth century, the romance model represented marriage as “both fiction’s goal and a utopian union, the culmination of both personal interest and official hostilities, and the solidification of a national state” (DeJean, “Notorious Women” 67). The long roman’s intrigue was commonly built on the initial separation of the lovers, as when an earthquake parts Clélie and Aronce just before their wedding in Scudéry’s famous Clélie, histoire romaine (1654-1660), which then charts their numerous adventures prior to finding each other again. Typically, “at the end of their travails, romance lovers discover that their seemingly individual desires have been serving their public obligations or vice versa,” in Kathleen Wine’s formulation, and their marriage can at last take place (Beasley and Jensen 151).

Lafayette’s La Princesse de Clèves, however, challenged this paradigm, and heralded the popularity of shorter historical narratives. Though longer romances remained extremely popular well into the eighteenth century, the diverse body of fiction
at the end of Louis XIV’s reign and the Regency often experimented with form, sometimes introducing realistic elements (Doody 258, 288). English Showalter, who studies the emergence of realism during this period, posits that the temporary freedom from political and critical constraints experienced by writers led to the production of new forms of fiction, such as shorter narratives featuring bourgeois characters. Some of the productions of this period that experimented with new narrative forms, like Robert Challe’s *Les Illustres Françaises* (1713) and Montesquieu’s *Lettres persanes* (1721), do feature marriage, but not as a main narrative element and certainly not as a plot culmination device as the seventeenth-century *roman de longue haleine* had done.

Beginning in the 1730s, as Georges May’s groundbreaking study *Le Dilemme du roman* argues, competing charges of immorality and lack of verisimilitude nearly shut down novelistic production, eventually forcing the genre to evolve significantly. The few novels of this period framed their representation of love marriage as the protagonist’s challenge of an oppressive authority, which was perhaps no coincidence considering the analogous struggle of the genre itself. Prévost’s *Manon Lescaut* (1731), Marivaux’s *Le Paysan parvenu* (1735) and Mouhy’s imitation *La Paysanne parvenue* (1735), but especially Marivaux’s multi-volume *La Vie de Marianne* (1731-1742), all pitted the individual against society, more or less explicitly envisioning the happy ending of love marriage for their protagonists.

With the exception of Prévost, these novels present love as leading to marriage, which is exogamous. What Watt refers to as “hypergamy” is also something of a phenomenon, since the peasant Jeannette (*La Paysanne parvenue*) and the orphan of dubious origins Marianne (*La Vie de Marianne*) attempt to marry into the aristocracy
Richardson’s *Pamela* also featured an upwardly mobile heroine—the male protagonist Squire B is so smitten by his servant Pamela’s beauty, virtue and intelligence that he winds up marrying her. Love in these novels often does appear democratic, even egalitarian, as when the young man and woman’s initially socially disparate positions are leveled by the struggle against an outside authority to which both are subject. Thus in Baculard d’Arnaud’s *Les Époux malheureux* (1745), based on a real *cause célèbre* in which a father convinced the courts to annul his son’s marriage to an actress, the two spouses suffer equally from the authority of the absent father. Both partners are childlike, as neither spouse is able to sustain the household economically, instead relying on an older male to ensure their survival: thus love marriage may above all be possible for protagonists equally dependent on a figure of authority.

Though the long roman’s coincidence of individual desire and official interest through the concluding conjugal union of the protagonists was certainly problematized by French fiction of the first half of the eighteenth century, marriage itself remained primarily a closing device. Thus in *De l’usage des romans* (1734), the literary critic Lenglet-Dufresnoy adamantly defends displacing marriage to an earlier moment in the narrative. “Il est défendu en bonne police romanesque de faire marier les Héros au

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13 The novel went through several editions over the course of the eighteenth century, with additional plot elements being added by Baculard d’Arnaud to later versions. Denby and Lecercle suggest that the novelist expanded *Les Époux malheureux* in 1783 to contain a happy ending in order to bring the novel in line with the reality of the case and its evolution between 1745 and 1759, but also possibly to diffuse the elements of social criticism in the plot, incompatible with Baculard d’Arnaud’s increasingly conservative, anti-philosophical stance (respectively 14, 297). Rousseau’s note to Letter II of Book II of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* conveys his outrage at the decision of the La Bédoyère affair, which he seems to have witnessed first hand. Robert Dawson’s study on Baculard d’Arnaud discusses how the La Bédoyère case and the novel it inspired influenced Rousseau (1: 74).
commencement ou au milieu du Roman. Comme le mariage en est le but, tout ce qui est au-delà devient inutile & superflu pour l’action principale; on sait bien ce que font les gens quand ils sont mariés” (189-90). Lenglet-Dufresnoy’s definition of the novel as a genre, in identifying marriage anywhere than at the end as a major transgression that invalidates the narrative’s very existence, suggests that opening with matrimony remained a considerable gamble for the eighteenth-century novelist, despite Lafayette’s revolutionary precedent.

The fifties and especially the sixties were a particularly propitious period for novelistic production. Laurent Versini, for example, notes the dearth of psychologically complex novels earlier on in the century: “Il est frappant de constater qu’entre Marianne et 1760 environ, les romans d’analyse digne de ce nom sont rares, Crébillon et Mme Riccoboni mis à part” (Laclos et la tradition 41). Indeed, Frautschi’s exhaustive Bibliographie du genre romanesque français 1751-1800, shows publication increasing dramatically with every decade in the second half of the century.14 This romanesque boom also gave rise to growing experimentation with the place of marriage in the narrative, though it would seem that readers still overwhelmingly expected the conclusion to unite the protagonists. Thus the ending of Françoise de Graffigny’s bestselling Lettres d’une Péruvienne (1747) so disappointed the readers that they wrote to the novelist, demanding she change it by uniting the Peruvian protagonist Zilia to the gallant Frenchman Déterville. While Graffigny insisted on her heroine’s rejection of marriage

14 Unfortunately, no comparable work exists for the first half of the eighteenth century, though Frautschi et al. have announced that this project is in the works. An outline of preliminary data for the first half of the eighteenth century can be found in Frautschi and Martin’s article “French Prose Fiction Published Between 1700 and 1751: A New Profile of Production.”
and retirement to her own land and library, even adding a critique of women’s abject position in matrimony in France to the 1752 edition, the first of the novel’s apocryphal sequels, Hugary de Lamarche-Courmont’s *Lettres d’Aza* (1749), reunited Zilia with her Peruvian fiancé Aza and sent the happy newlyweds back to their homeland.15

Riccoboni, another important writer of this period whose passionate *Lettres de Miss Fanni Butlerd* (1757) likely influenced Rousseau’s portrayal of Julie and Saint-Preux’s tumultuous relationship, also experimented with marriage in the narrative early on in her authorial career. One of her shorter productions, written exceptionally in sparse third-person prose and compared by René Godenne to Lafayette’s *La Princesse de Montpensier* (1662), even opened with marriage (199). However, the ending subsumed this extraordinary narrative departure: while *L’Histoire de M. le marquis de Cressy* (1758) was immediately recognized as a masterpiece, critics generally professed shock and disapproval at the culminating suicide of the heroine.16 Riccoboni’s heroines also remarkably opted for friendship and retirement over marriage, whereas her innovative narrative technique of flashbacks by widowed protagonists allowed the novelist to feature representations of life before, during, and after marriage in the span of one fictional text in her later work.

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15 Carol Lynn Sherman’s study *The Family Crucible in Eighteenth-Century Literature* analyzes *Lettres d’une Péruvienne*’s four major sequels, which marry the heroine off either to Déterville or to Aza, who betrays Zilia in Graffigny’s novel (161-3). Sherman argues that later editions in particular escaped Graffigny’s control. Almost all editions of the novel were pirated from the start, and after her death in 1758, *Lettres d’une Péruvienne* was commonly published together with *Lettres d’Aza*. Thus according to Sherman, between 1760 and 1797 (the publication date of yet another sequel), thirteen of the novel’s twenty-five editions included the apocryphal conclusion.

16 In *De l’influence des femmes sur la littérature française* (1811), Félicité de Genlis, though highly complimentary of the novelist’s work, laments that “Madame Riccoboni a eu la première la funeste idée de vouloir rendre le suicide intéressant” (280).
The first major representation of marriage as subject for the novel, however, was Rousseau’s monumental *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), a crucial marker for my study. Julie and Saint-Preux’s passion is famously atoned for by the reasonable domesticity of Julie’s arranged marriage with Wolmar. Rousseau the novelist consciously aligned the representation of marriage with moral improvement: the identification, rooted in an emerging vision of the novel’s didactic potential, likely initially served to defend the novel from detractors accusing the genre of immorality. But readers may indeed have looked to this literary form for relationship instruction, as Grieder’s argument that it is mainly the novel that conveyed English domestic values to the French public suggests. That contemporary observers considered the genre a most effective pedagogical tool (at least as far as the English were concerned), seems evident in La Coste’s remark in his *Voyage philosophique* (1787) that “C’est dans Clarisse Harlove [sic]…et non dans Humes [sic]…que j’étudie les usages, les mœurs, et le caractère des Anglais” (96).

La Coste likewise proclaimed his approval of the “romancier devenu moraliste,” echoing Diderot’s glowing endorsement of Richardson (177). Though *Éloge de Richardson* (1762) seemingly purposefully ignored Rousseau’s opus, Diderot’s essay nevertheless celebrated the appearance of a new genre that instructed its readers and moved them to virtue, replacing the “tissu d’événements chimériques & frivoles, dont la lecture était dangereuse pour le goût & pour les mœurs” formerly signified by the novel (387). Another ostensibly concurrent part of the genre’s transformation was placing marriage at the beginning, rather than at the end, a narrative structure reproduced by a number of influential novels in the 1760s, 70s, and 80s. Perhaps such a concern with domestic affairs, and specifically marriage, was one of the markers of this new, “serious”
novel: a complex possible relationship may have existed between growing fictional representation of married life and the novel’s increasingly articulated responsibility in readers’ moral improvement and instruction.

The French Enlightenment is commonly viewed as a literary phenomenon by modern criticism: Lionel Gossman, for instance, describes it as “a literary movement aimed at the conversion of readers” (Hollier 489). Literature exercised a crucial formative role during this period, as Janet Whatley argues. “The power of French Enlightenment literature is different. … It is a literature thoroughly and avowedly implicated in ideology, in change. Its authors meant to act on the world in explicit ways” (416). In the Enlightenment, it would seem, narrative was indeed “the most potent of the ideological forms” (Eagleton 71).

The novel of marriage may have been especially apt to carry an ideational charge. Narrative structures in which the protagonists’ adventures ultimately lead to marriage feature an intrigue driven by individual desire, hinged on the possibility of love’s final fulfillment; portraying married protagonists, on the other hand, made the narrative less conclusion-driven and enabled the novel to focus on social transformation rather than on bringing the protagonists together. By intrinsically taking the focus off love, typically important in the narrative as a “precedent” for marriage, these representations of an existing marriage could privilege establishing the actual dynamics of the spousal relationship. Indeed, the anonymous eighteenth-century author of Justification de M. Henley (1785), decrying the flawed education that led women to envisage marriage as “la félicité suprême,” critiqued the taste for improbable adventures ending with the protagonists’ nuptials, and evoked the lack of portrayals of conjugal life potentially
valuable to readers:

Ce n’est pas des histoires des ménages et de la vie domestique qui intéresseront; il faut des romans qui conduisent bien une intrigue, & qui, par des circonstances extraordinaires, amènent, avec beaucoup de peine, deux personnes jusqu’au grand événement du mariage. Cependant, ce n’est pas encore que là que commence la vie, et même la vie vraiment essentielle; mais on ne s’en soucie plus…il semble que l’histoire de l’humanité n’aille pas plus loin…un mari qui est tué par les chagrins domestiques de tous les moments, une femme qui périt par sa sensibilité, & sous les peines de famille, sont indignes de l’histoire, des romans, & des drames (324-5).

Yet, despite the suggested ideological potential of the Enlightenment novel, marriage narratives by French women writers, unlike Richardson or Rousseau’s fictions, have not received due attention, especially where their crucial reform aspects are concerned. This seems to exemplify a general tendency: even as women are increasingly being reinstated into the eighteenth-century literary canon, the reductive ways in which their vast and complex work is presented means that we still have a curtailed vision of their contributions to the Enlightenment.

“Bien absurde, bien d’une femme”: Women and the Novel

Votre mari trouve donc ma législation bien absurde, et il s’est donné la peine de faire une liste des inconvénients de mon projet. … Écoutez, mon cousin: la première fois qu’un Souverain me demandera l’explication de mon projet, dans l’intention d’en faire quelque chose, je l’expliquerai, et le détaillerai de mon mieux; et s’il se trouve à l’examen aussi mal imaginé et aussi impraticable que vous le croyez, je l’abandonnerai courageusement. ‘Il est bien d’une femme,’ dites-vous: à la bonne heure, je suis une femme, et j’ai une fille.

Charrière, Lettres écrites de Lausanne (1785)

In the past twenty years or so, studies have tended to investigate the French novel’s unique origins, often rectifying the blind spots of earlier generations of critics, produced by an unquestioned acceptance of the biases inherited from the genre’s initial detractors.17 This recent critical work importantly suggests that the French novel may

17 Many early studies of the increased prominence of the novel in the eighteenth century are based predominantly on the English context and do not necessarily take France into
have been especially apt to convey a feminocentric ideology, and outlines strategies used by the genre’s opponents to diffuse its charge, which had long-reaching consequences for the evaluation of eighteenth-century novelistic production. Thus, Thomas DiPiero and Margaret Doody highlight the essentially seditious nature of the French novel, which served to articulate dissenting political concerns from its very inception. Moreover, DeJean has shown that in the French context, women often had a crucial role in the birth of the genre (Tender Geographies 7-11). In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, increasing numbers of women, like Scudéry and Lafayette, entered the literary arena, producing some of the most widely read novels of the period (Doody 262). The subversive new fictions were consequently uniquely suited to articulate “a feminocentric perspective on issues of concern as immediate to women outside the novels, their readers, as to their heroines,” such as marriage (DeJean, Tender Geographies 11).

Because of these anti-establishment connections, the novel was unsurprisingly viewed as a menace to the existent social order by seventeenth and eighteenth-century literary critics. During periods of political unrest in the seventeenth century, the novel’s very multiplicity opposed it to the unity demanded by the centralizing absolutist state, and detractors like the conservative literary critic and poet Nicolas Boileau distinguished the genre as a dangerous “enemy of the civic” (Doody 267). Other seventeenth-century account. Thus, Watt’s groundbreaking study The Rise of the Novel argues that the rise of the novel accompanied that of the bourgeoisie and somehow championed its interests. Martin Green evokes the alliance between eighteenth-century English literature and what he terms the “merchant caste.” Michael McKeon, on the other hand, speaks of the “crisis of status inconsistency,” mediated by the English novel of the eighteenth century. For DiPiero, the novel has from its very beginnings played a political role by championing aristocratic concerns of hegemony, as the critic argues in Dangerous Truths & Criminal Passions: The Evolution of the French Novel, 1569-1791 (v).

18 For DiPiero, the novel has from its very beginnings played a political role by championing aristocratic concerns of hegemony, as the critic argues in Dangerous Truths & Criminal Passions: The Evolution of the French Novel, 1569-1791 (v).

19 From 1677 on, Boileau was also a royal historiographer. His Dialogue sur les héros de
reactionaries labeled the novel as useless, extravagant, or outlandish. Jean Baptiste Henri du Trousset de Valincour’s *Lettres à Madame la marquise*** sur le sujet de la *Princesse de Clèves* (1678), ostensibly a review of the novel, became an occasion to denounce the genre. Valincour, who fittingly became a member of the all-male state-sponsored *Académie française* in 1699, dismissed *La Princesse de Clèves* as “inutile,” “pas vraisemblable,” “extraordinaire,” and full of “incidents qui choquent la vérité” (23, 100, 129, 272).

His most serious charge against the novel, however, was its supposed immorality. Though the extraordinary Mme de Clèves’ virtue never faltered, Valincour argued, the ordinary female reader to whom the heroine “aura inspiré la même faiblesse,” would certainly be more likely to succumb to the dangers of adultery, disturbing familial and social order (278-9).

The eighteenth-century cleric Armand-Pierre Jacquin, in his *Entretiens sur les romans* (1755), took up Boileau and Valincour’s accusations of the novel’s dangers. Similarly dismissing Lafayette’s fiction as “inutile” (because historically inaccurate), and Mme de Clèves as “sotte et imprudente,” Jacquin condemned novels’ general reversal of the social order (163). Portraying a woman commanding man as a “tyran” rather than a

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20 I give only a brief example of Valincour’s critique here: he uses the term “inutile” on at least nine occasions in his text, refers to numerous episodes as “bizarre,” and generally fustigates the novel for being not at all “vraisemblable” and full of “des aventures peu vrais” and “si extraordinaires” that they “sentent trop l’histoire à dix volumes” (i.e. are reminiscent of the *grands romans* made famous by Scudéry). The *Publication du Groupe d’étude du XVIIe siècle de l’Université François-Rabelais*’ 1972 reprint of the original 1678 edition of the *Lettres* includes a helpful index of critical terms used by Valincour.

21 Some other virulent critics of the genre’s depravity, not mentioned here, include the Jansenist Pierre Nicole in the seventeenth century, and Pères Bougeant and Porée in the eighteenth (see May).
“compagne,” and teaching children to be insubordinate to parents, the greatest peril of the novel genre presumably lay in its possible incitement of female readers to similar unruliness and rejection of their inferior status (333-4, 341). Jacquin’s denunciation, however, astutely recognized novels’ real potential to change societal practices. By no means seeing fiction as merely a source of leisure activity, the critic’s charges of immorality had a great deal to do with the novel’s challenge to patriarchal arrangements limiting women’s freedom. Indeed, novels were judged so harshly precisely in their quality as narratives of female noncompliance and deviation from traditional structures.

In the late eighteenth century especially, the rising anxiety about the consequences of female freedom, evident in trial briefs’ construction of narratives of wifely insubordination “laden…with connotations of political chaos and change,” as Maza argues in *Private Lives and Public Affairs*, may have made it especially important to negate the feared fictional threat to the social order (264). An important way to counteract the potential menace of the novel became explicitly associating it with women and their concerns, in turn identified as not only immoral, but frivolous, as Jacquin and to an extent Boileau effectively began to do. By the end of the eighteenth century, this critical mechanism was well in place, as the ready identification between women and the novel in Jean-François de La Harpe’s famous *Lycée, ou Cours de littérature ancienne et moderne* (1798-1804) suggests. The critic presents the genre as particularly suited to the gender because it treats exclusively trivial subjects like love, defined as women’s natural domain and specialty. Moreover, the genre’s inconsequentiality means that even women, presumed to be unable to think analytically, could embrace a craft not requiring the reflection and hard work inherent in the more “serious” and prestigious genres like drama
and poetry. Conceding that some of the best eighteenth-century novelists were women,
La Harpe simultaneously trivializes their accomplishments:

Il y a, dans la passion, une foule de nuances délicates et imperceptibles, qu’en général elles saisissent mieux que nous, soit parce que l’amour a plus d’importance pour elles, soit parce que, plus intéressées à en tirer parti, elles observent mieux les caractères et les effets. … La sensibilité ne suffit pas pour exceller dans les ouvrages de poésie et de théâtre [lesquels] demandent une force de conception réfléchie et de travail suivi, qui semble au-dessus de ce sexe, dont l’imagination n’est si vive qu’aux dépens de la réflexion. (251-2)

For Doody, associating the novel with women was understandably a favored strategy of the establishment, since “to pretend that the novel is primarily directed towards females (including those of both middle and upper classes) is reassuring, for women (unlike youthful male aristocrats) are theoretically disabled from bringing concepts into social currency” (278). Michael Danahy similarly argues that the “gendered paradigm” became a way for criticism to diffuse the threat of the flourishing genre (22, 93). That is, because its prominence could not be ignored, women’s contribution to the novel was acknowledged, but the genre was simultaneously relegated to the realm of supposedly insignificant and restricted feminine concerns like love. By distorting the perception of feminocentric plots, this strain of criticism simultaneously sought to undercut the potential political and social impact of the novel, and to create an insular definition of the genre that did not admit treatment of more “serious” content.

One important consequence of the limiting parameters effectively established by the genre’s opponents, was the continued ironing out of any subversive particularities of fictional plots. For instance, Suzan van Dijk speaks of “refus refusés,” a critical tendency to “passer à côté, sinon fausser carrément la diegèse originale” in reading the refusal of marriage in Lafayette, Riccoboni, and Le Prince de Beaumont (296). Charrière’s *Lettres de Mistriss Henley* (1784) suffered a similar fate, for eighteenth-century criticism conflated the heroine’s death in childbirth, occurring in an anonymous sequel entitled
Justification de M. Henley, with the Lettres’ subversively open-ended plot. The reviews of the novel in both L’Année littéraire and Le Mercure de France ridiculed the heroine’s insufficiently motivated and bathetic death as a trite novelistic device: “Elle meurt en couches. C’est sans doute prendre la chose bien au tragique; & c’est un reproche à faire à l’auteur, qui n’a pas assez motivé cette mort, & qui paraît n’avoir pas tué son héroïne que parce qu’il était pressé d’en finir” (Mercure de France [22 April 1786] 191).

In The Family Crucible, Carol Lynn Sherman notes a comparable suppression of Graffigny’s ending to Lettres d’une Péruvienne in the three sequels to the novel, as well as in Goldoni’s play, that all insisted on marrying off Zilia: “It seems that no one can accept the freedom that Graffigny accords her heroine and herself. The picture of the female self’s evolution in financial independence and in the security of loving friendships is repeatedly denied, subverted, overturned by closures of the sort offered by the standard life-narratives and by literature” (161). Indeed, Sherman’s suggestion “that novels granting freedom to women…are rewritten immediately, whether in memory or in print, or forgotten, or both” seems well substantiated not only in the case of narratives inscribing the heroine’s refusal of marriage, but especially in fictions charting a greater

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22 Arbitrarily choosing to read the novel’s closure as death in childbirth, and then mocking the author’s supposed ineptitude at killing off her heroine, would seem to demonstrate a revelatory degree of hostility toward Charrière’s plot. It was perhaps easier to ridicule the actual physical death of the heroine than to recognize that marriage could mean psychological death for a woman through her effacement as an individual. That the inconvenient truth of Charrière’s marriage narrative rendered critics quite uncomfortable is suggested by the fact that even as recently as 1981, Béatrice Didier once again misread the heroine’s death as occurring in Lettres de Mistriss Henley, even citing the lengthy deathbed discourse the protagonist pronounces in the Justification as part of Charrière’s novel (98). Though Didier’s article “Belle de Charrière ou la constance d’écrire,” is surprisingly inaccurate overall, misquoting a key passage of Lettres de Mistriss Henley, attributing Constant de Rebeque’s Le mari sentimental (1783) to Charrière, and even confusing the servant characters of Charrière’s novel with Constant’s, the continued critical desire to kill off the heroine is nevertheless striking (L’Écriture-femme 93-110).
freedom for women through their portrayal of a reformed conjugal relationship (153).

Condensed to a purely *romanesque* pipe dream of love, the import of these representations of marriage has been by and large ignored.

Recent criticism has remarkably altered the face of eighteenth-century studies by highlighting the neglect of French women’s tremendously rich fictional output, as well as by challenging the biases of earlier generations of critics, that had mostly categorized these female novelists’ productions as second-rate.\(^2\) Though Miller and more recently Bostic have denounced the persistent hierarchy of classification reducing “women’s writing” to thinly disguised autobiography or love letters, and critics like Dijk and Sherman have drawn our attention to the misreading suffered by feminocentric fictional plots, it would seem that the strategies devised to achieve the genre’s concerted containment continue to have profound effects on our perception of eighteenth-century French novels by women.

That is, though novels like those of my corpus, forgotten in spite of a wide readership in the eighteenth century, are being increasingly rehabilitated by modern criticism, they are all too often read in restrictive ways. No longer seen as portraying trivial concerns, their mode of social criticism is nevertheless usually reduced to the

\(^2\) Besides the studies mentioned here, I am thinking of April Alliston’s *Virtue’s Faults*, Julia Douthwaite’s *Exotic Women*, Claire Jaquier’s *L’Erreur des désirs*, and Elizabeth MacArthur’s *Extravagant Narratives*. The stance of earlier critics regarding eighteenth-century French women’s writing is well represented by Fauchery’s assertion: “la femme qu’elle croit imaginer, c’est encore et toujours elle-même.” Fauchery further critiques the female novelist’s “débilité provocante,” an inability to process lived experience into generalized maxims that consigns her to exorcism of her private disappointments through the narrative (94). La Harpe’s openly expressed conviction, and some earlier modern criticism’s underlying assumption, was that women’s writing, unable to translate the personal into a universally significant political, forever remains irrelevant.
representation of female victimization in romantic relationships. In 1996 appeared the long-overdue *Romans de femmes du XVIIIe siècle*, featuring among others works by Tencin, Graffigny, Riccoboni, and Charrière. Yet Raymond Trousson’s introduction to this anthology supposedly celebrating the work of female novelists concludes that the heroines created by their better-known male contemporaries are generally far more active and resourceful. Trousson’s assessment suggests that to some extent, eighteenth-century novels by women tend to be read in terms of passive female suffering: “La passion amoureuse menant à la solitude et au désespoir…peut-être débouche-t-on ainsi davantage sur le pathétique que sur la révolte” (xxix).

Similarly, the fictional representation of marriage by female novelists has been seen primarily as a covert denunciation of women’s distress in a system of institutionalized enslavement. In *Gynographs*, her study of late eighteenth-century female novelists, Stewart notes that “the focal point of the majority of novels was…marriage,” and that “novelists frequently portrayed that enslavement [of women in marriage] in their fiction” (11). Despite the apparently conventional nature of these narratives, their “subtle play between conformism and contestation” was in fact a critique of women’s inferior social status, according to the critic (7). Stewart’s reading of fictional representations of marriage appears to support Miller’s larger hypothesis that the writing of female novelists of the period took a not-so-enjoyable view of human relations, which explains its neglect nowadays: “retained for posterity among the eighteenth-century novels devoted to the social relations between the sexes, is…libertine and not feminist writing” (“Men’s Reading, Women’s Writing” 41).

While both analyses make valid points, they once again place women’s writing
within the schema of women’s victimization in romantic attachments. It would seem that even feminist critics see the work of eighteenth-century French female novelists as tedious, formulaic and timid:

La destinée féminine incarnée dans l’idée de l’inégalité et d’asservissement de la femme par l’homme dans la société restrictive du dix-huitième siècle, est le sujet de prédilection de la littérature féminine de l’époque. Dans cet univers romanesque de la femme, le lecteur est confronté à d’innombrables lamentations sur le sort des héroïnes, condamnées soit à un mariage malchanceux, soit à la retraite au couvent, également malheureuse. Ce qui est significatif quant à la vérité de cette dévalorisation de la vie féminine est que la solution au sort malheureux de la femme ne se trouve pas dans l’activité de la création littéraire. Ce destin n’est pas une possibilité conscience entrevue par l’héroïne à l’intérieur du roman. (Cragg, Cressy 9)

Reading these plots seems to necessitate justification on the part of the critic, conceivably implied even by Miller’s reconstructive literary project of “reading in pairs,” in which women’s texts must be read against and in relation to their canonical male-authored counterparts (“Men’s Reading, Women’s Writing” 45). The connotation of reading against a central tradition, likewise suggested by Miller’s definition of feminist writing as contesting “the available plots of female development or Bildung” and embodying “dissent from the dominant tradition” may in itself marginalize the women writers in question (Subject to Change 8). Despite women writers’ eventual exclusion from the literary canon, they overwhelmingly formed the French novelistic tradition as DeJean has shown in Tender Geographies. Thus, was “dominant tradition” always necessarily patriarchal or male-defined, as Anne Duggan pertinently asks in Salonnières, Furies, and Fairies (17-9)?

I would argue that the perception of the genre born of attempts to limit the novel’s ideological charge has so far largely predetermined our reading of lesser-known eighteenth-century plots. In the case of fictions depicting conjugal life, the more

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24 My observations in no way imply criticism of Miller’s groundbreaking contributions to French studies: rather, I want to sketch out some of the potential drawbacks in critical approaches that I hope to avoid in my reading of the texts of my corpus.
acceptable concerns with love in marriage, pasted over seditious female individualism, have obscured these novels’ progressive image of marriage and their continued relevance. Despite Olga B. Cragg’s claim that fictional visions of “la destinée féminine” usually show heroines condemned to an unhappy marriage, depriving them of “la solution au sort malheureux de la femme…dans l’activité de la création littéraire,” the novels I study in the following chapters not only represent resourceful heroines who successfully implement reforms in their conjugal relationship, but also openly suggest the importance of female creativity, often expressed through writing. To name just a few examples, Le Prince de Beaumont’s *La Nouvelle Clarice* (1767) explicitly envisions publication and a literary career for its heroines; Riccoboni’s *Lettres de Vallière* (1772) depicts a heroine who saves herself from a disastrous marriage by becoming a professional writer, and a female protagonist who chooses work over marriage; the heroine of Montolieu’s *Caroline de Lichtfield* (1786) imposes a separation on her husband, using her freedom to construct a pavilion devoted entirely to the practice of artistic pursuits.

Inattention to or non-recognition of the subversive aspects of the marriage narratives with which I am concerned, suggests that novels tend to remain in previously assigned, reassuring categories and reading continues to be informed by outdated parameters. Subsequently, the active critical function performed by these texts is underestimated. The sustained marginalization of the majority of the novels of my corpus despite their frequent status as bestsellers and the acclaim received by these works and their authors, may in turn contribute to yielding the inaccurate image of “dominant tradition” suggested by Duggan. Yet the tradition of women’s social criticism and political dissent originating in the seventeenth century may have been kept alive after all,
as my chosen texts’ bold depictions endorsing women’s claims to creative fulfillment suggest.

In the following chapters, I re-read both Lafayette and Rousseau, examining what are arguably the two best-known fictional representations of marriage and marital life in the early modern French novel. I also focus on the work of important eighteenth-century French women writers, only some of whom have been gaining a deserved degree of literary prominence, and on the marriage models they proposed: Le Prince de Beaumont, Riccoboni, Montolieu, and Charrière. I pay particular attention to the feminocentric ideology of these texts, and to the kind of dynamic criticism performed by their narrative experiments with marriage. Thus, for example, I stress how narratives representing female retreat in the tradition of La Princesse de Clèves, sometimes read in negative terms of renunciation and sacrifice, become an occasion to model the concrete social transformation achieved by women’s efficient management of their own space. In analyzing plots concerned with female chastity, in which critics have often seen a fear of sexuality and its dangerous consequences to women, I demonstrate on the contrary how these fictions call for women’s entire control over their body, stipulated as a requisite condition of matrimony; and so forth.

In Les Voleuses de langue, Claudine Herrmann notes that though women may perpetually dream about love precisely because it remains eternally out of reach, Lafayette’s most famous heroine is consistently aware that her vision of love is not viable in the society she inhabits:

Si les femmes ne ressentaient pas généralement l’amour qu’elles désirent comme une impossibilité répétée, elles en rêveraient moins. Elles rêveraient d’autres choses, peut-être plus intéressantes. Cependant, écrite dans un langage de rêve, rêvée par Mme de La Fayette, la princesse de Clèves ne rêve jamais…car elle sait que l’amour tel qu’elle le connaît n’est pas réalisable. Ce qui est réalisable, c’est une contre-façon dont elle ne veut pas. (77-8)
With a similar awareness, these narratives’ representation of marital experience goes beyond dreams of romance or a simple rejection of the available modes of heterosexual interaction. Permitting a novel conceptualization of women’s existence and of gender and family relations, these fictions constitute an essential component of Enlightenment thought, as the following readings will seek to demonstrate.
Chapter 1
Imitating the Inimitable: the Example of La Princesse de Clèves

L’Historien a choisi la Cour de France…parce qu’il a voulu faire une histoire française.
Jean-Antoine de Charnes, Conversations sur la Critique de la princesse de Clèves (1679)

Writing in defense of Lafayette’s controversial novel La Princesse de Clèves (1678), the seventeenth-century literary critic Charnes suggested the intentional specificity or “Frenchness” of the novel’s setting. In spite of immediate critical scrutiny that questioned the judiciousness of situating the novel’s action at the sixteenth-century court of Henri II, Lafayette’s choice was likely motivated by precise considerations, which modern readings have often attempted to pinpoint. It is probable that the writer of the first novel of and about marriage purposely chose to set her story in the crucial historical moment when changes in its definition would be marked for centuries to come: the reign of Henri II was precisely the epoch in which the monarchy undertook major marital reform with the goal of controlling aristocratic unions through enforcing a public, secular conception of the institution.

Lafayette’s major innovation was to focus on the dynamics of the spousal bond, and the choice of setting supported the novel’s preoccupations. The depiction of the Prince and Princesse de Clèves’ struggle to maintain a private definition of their relationship in spite of official pressures, and of the heroine’s attempts to establish personal autonomy (exemplified by her rejection of remarriage) in unfavorable social circumstances, charted the territory explored in representations of conjugality in a number of eighteenth-century novels. Specifically, La Princesse de Clèves suggested the conflict between the crystallizing definition of the institution and the type of union most favorable to the (female) individual, and set the stage for the eighteenth-century heroines’
quest for spatial, sexual, and creative autonomy over romance in marriage. The reading of Lafayette’s novel that follows will first show how the novelist’s choice of historical moment allowed her to trace the destructive effects of the intensification of official control of marriage on the individual. Then, it will explore the narrative’s endorsement of the heroine’s desires of control over her destiny, and suggest the ways Lafayette’s representation of marriage influenced subsequent eighteenth-century tradition.

La Princesse de Clèves: Marital Reform in Sixteenth-Century France and Beyond

By the eighteenth century, marriage in France had undergone significant reform, as the monarchy successfully expanded its authority over marriage and family law. Though most Frenchmen viewed marriage primarily as a sacrament, the monarchy insisted on defining it as a contract in order to assert control over this previously private act (Traer 22). Whereas in the Middle Ages in France “the basis of marriage remained the free consent of husband and wife” as it had been in Roman law, later reforms sought to move away from a definition of marriage endorsing a private agreement between two individuals (Traer 28).\(^\text{25}\) Considering the parties’ free consent as the main prerequisite to marriage, as well as the union’s subsequent sacramental indissolubility—which the Catholic Church continued to affirm in every reform regarding marriage, especially in the seminal Council of Trent in the sixteenth century—gave individuals far too much power to conclude marriages conflicting with family or state interest.\(^\text{26}\) Outlining how the

\(^{25}\) Even if, as Traer reminds us, “in practice, parents or feudal lords usually arranged marriages for their children and vassals” (28).

\(^{26}\) Though Traer explains that nullity could be declared under some conditions, such as
process of centralization, which expanded secular jurisdiction over marriage, helped tip the balance in the struggle in favor of the state, Sarah Hanley identifies what she terms “the alliance of patriarchs and politicians for the express purpose of controlling the formation of marriage in France…[that] closed ranks against women, children and church between 1556 and 1789” (54-5).

The French monarchy’s consistent efforts to curb individual marital autonomy through a series of edicts beginning in the sixteenth century show just how crucial the issue was perceived to be by the head of an increasingly absolutist political system.27 “The intense impulse of the absolute monarchy to regulate all manner of human affairs” made securing control over marriage a top priority, transforming the conjugal relationship into a locus of political and social anxiety under the ancien régime. Perceiving the family as the microcosm and founding unit of society, “the crown was eager to support the authority of the heads of families, analogous to that of the monarch himself against rebellious subjects” (Traer 32). For marriage to elude the restraints of royal dominance would threaten an unacceptable victory of individualism over the authority of the patriarchal family whose structure directly mirrored the workings of absolute royal power.

The seventeenth-century literary critic Valincour ridiculed Lafayette’s choice of setting, on one occasion saying there is absolutely no “fondement” for such a tale in non-consummation of marriage due to impotence, or the discovery of impediments ranging from prohibited degrees of kinship to the prior taking of holy vows by one of the parties, these cases were the exceptions that confirmed the rule of indissolubility for the overwhelming majority of matches.

27 Hanley provides a particularly useful outline of the major sixteenth and seventeenth-century royal legislation regarding marriage, and of ways it enhanced the power of male heads of families over women and children.
Henri II’s court. Supposedly resembling *Amadis* more than any concrete courtly setting, the narrator’s depiction would have worked better in the remote context of the first Franc or Merovingian kings, where its presumably ridiculous “suppositions” could be covered up by “l’obscurité.” There are few instances in the critic’s *Lettres à Madame la marquise*** sur le sujet de la Princesse de Clèves* (1678) where the attack on the novel is so virulent:

> Je conseillerais à l’auteur…s’il avait une si grande envie d’en faire une histoire de France…de la mettre du temps de Pharamond ou de Clodion le Chevelu, afin que ses suppositions se pussent plus aisément cacher dans l’obscurité. (100)

The barrage of mockery is so insistent on proving that the setting has absolutely no relevance to the intrigue, or that the events of the plot misrepresent history, that one begins to suspect the contrary. Indeed, Lafayette’s was likely a loaded choice, for the sixteenth century witnessed several important power conflicts, seminal among them the dispute over marriage that had been brewing since Carolingian times.

The long-standing conflict between the warrior nobility and the church regarding the nature of “le bon mariage,” resulted in a tenuous accord described by the historian Georges Duby in *Le Chevalier, la femme et le prêtre*. However, the Council of Trent’s sessions on marriage reopened the battle.  

28 Henri II was notably unable to influence the Council’s decisions to privilege his agenda. As Dessertine summarizes in *Divorcer à Lyon*, “Le roi n’avait pu imposer sa conception autoritaire et hiérarchisée de la famille; sa tentative du renforcement du pouvoir paternel avait échoué” (19). But the king’s successive legislation dealt a serious blow to the doctrine of consensualism upheld by the

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28 One of the most important in church history, the council convened in twenty-five sessions between 1545 and 1563. The decrees on matrimony were finalized during the twenty-fourth session, in November of 1563. See *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent*, ed. and trans. J. Waterworth.
Consequently, the importance of individual prerogative in marriage was also discounted, for consensualism had been problematic for the monarchy precisely because the doctrine’s “respect de la volonté individuelle avait conduit à ne pas tenir compte juridiquement de l’attitude des parents, ce qui allait à l’encontre des mœurs de l’époque” according to the historian Jean Gaudemet (286).

Lafayette significantly chooses to situate the Clèves marriage in this historical moment characterized by the intensification of paternal power over marriage, which undermined its consensual basis in order to allow the family and state greater control over the matches of noble children. The narrative marks the beginnings of the conditions that would later yield the absolutism the author herself lived in under Louis XIV. The ideology of that subsequent period is perfectly encapsulated in the “Traité du mariage,” composed around 1670 on the instructions of Louis XIV’s finance minister Colbert. The document claims that the king ought to remain the supreme authority over marriage, for the good of the state as a whole. As “le bon ordre de l’état” results from “le bon ordre des familles,” the king, as “gardien de la société publique,” must have “une autorité souveraine sur les mariages” (cited in Lottin, “Vie et mort du couple” 60). Gaudemet cites a similar document from the end of Louis XIV’s reign, an official letter dated

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29 Proclaimed in 1563, the Tametsi decree was a ruling of the Council of Trent against clandestine marriages. While it placed restrictions on marriage, requiring the presence of a priest and two witnesses as well as the publication of banns, the decree nevertheless maintained the Church’s position that the bond of matrimony was contracted by the free will of the spouses, and did not require parental consent.

30 The “Traité du mariage” was contained in the “Recueil de traités sur le droit public et ecclésiastique de France” composed for Colbert by lawyers Abraham and Gomont.
September 3, 1712, in which the chancelier Pontchartrain expostulates on the sovereign’s rights over marriage to the president of the Parlement of Besançon. “Pouvoir direct sur le contrat, parce que le prince seul peut en régler la nature et les conditions; indirect sur l’administration du sacrement, parce que le contrat étant la matière du sacrement, si le contrat est nul, le sacrement n’a plus de matière à laquelle on puisse l’appliquer” (365).

Significantly, the letter-writer interprets the monarch’s “pouvoir direct” over marriage in its juridical definition as logically allowing the king to direct the sacramental component, as well. By the early eighteenth century, an increasingly absolute monarchy, aided by legal theorists, sought greater control over all aspects of the no longer private matter of marriage.

This control continued to be affirmed. Around the third quarter of the eighteenth century, the jurist Pothier’s “Traité du contrat du mariage” (1772), which Gaudemet aptly terms “l’aboutissement de la réflexion doctrinale de l’Ancien Régime sur ce sujet” unhesitatingly maintained the marriage-contract equation, as well as the monarch’s power over the contract, considered null and void without royal consent (332). Strikingly conservative and especially unfavorable to women, Pothier’s treatise is also notable because it later served as a model for the notoriously misogynist Civil Code (Mainardi 9, Ourliac and Malafosse 3: 16-17). But the proliferation of such contract theories, of which Pothier’s document is a prime example, was significant not only because of their counteraction of individual will. Another important result of the jurists’ triumph was that the ecclesiastic tribunals, which had traditionally settled marital disputes, progressively lost their jurisdiction over matrimony. Spouses in conflict now appeared in front of lay judges, but the change was by no means a move toward a modern, egalitarian form of

The absolute monarchy’s intensification of a system unfavorable to women on all fronts, and the efforts of the (female) individual to counter the effects of political and social prerogatives on private life and relationships are brilliantly captured in La Princesse de Clèves. Perhaps the long roman that had been dominant earlier in the seventeenth century traditionally made the love marriage of the protagonists simultaneously serve official interests precisely because individual prerogatives were not likely to triumph with impunity over those of the state. The utopian nature of fiction permitted individual and state prerogatives to coincide and thus be reconciled in the metaphoric space of the marriage union, as Wine proposes. But in Lafayette’s groundbreaking novel these goals are suggested to be forever at odds, illustrating the struggle between the state and the individual to appropriate a definition of marriage concurrent with their respective aims.

Significantly, the key incident that occasioned one of the main royal edicts against conjugal individualism is directly addressed in La Princesse de Clèves. It is specifically Henry II’s Edict of 1556, against clandestine marriage, as well as Henry III’s later Edict of Blois in 1580 that “formed the basis of two centuries of effort…to extend the power of

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31 Christian Biet similarly accords importance to the marriage reforms that take place during the sixteenth century in his reading of Lafayette’s novel. My own reading, though at times approaching Biet’s, is part of a larger overall argument about marriage, rather than being an illustration of the significant links between the law and ancien régime literary production through the example of a particular novel.
the king over marriage” (Traer 34). Both sought to limit the possibility of strictly individual choice, the Edict of 1556 by effectively undermining the validity of marriages concluded in secret to get around familial control. The Edict of Blois, which promulgated the Tridentine reforms in France, albeit with some modifications, most importantly sought to prevent minors from getting married without parental consent, and thus had similar goals to the earlier regulations of 1556. By placing additional restraints upon marriage, sixteenth-century legislation effectively undermined the importance of spousal consent, rendering political and social obligations squarely dominant. “Le XVIème siècle voit s’effondrer la doctrine classique des canonistes selon laquelle c’est la volonté des époux qui crée le mariage. … La puissance paternelle et le consentement du lignage au mariage deviennent prédominants” (Biet 178).

That Lafayette was very aware of the evolving conception of marriage in the sixteenth-century French society in which she chose to set her novel, is clear from the explicit reference in La Princesse de Clèves to the incident that occasioned the Edict of 1556. That year, Henri II wanted to marry his illegitimate daughter to the oldest son of the Connétable de Montmorency. The father, of course, was overjoyed, but discovered that his son was not only firmly set against the marriage, but what’s more, had already secretly married one of the ladies-in-waiting to Catherine de’ Medici. After failing in his attempt to get a dispensation for the projected marriage from Pope Paul IV, the furious Henri II struck back with the edict in question, which heavily punished clandestine

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32 Incidentally, Rabelais and Marguerite de Navarre shared a strong opposition to clandestine marriage, and this concern is manifest in both the Tiers Livre and L’Heptaméron. See Cathleen M. Bauschatz, “Rabelais and Marguerite de Navarre on Sixteenth-Century Views of Clandestine Marriage,” as well as M. A. Screech, The Rabelaisian Marriage.
marriages. The edict made parental consent indispensable before the age of thirty for
men, and twenty-five for women. If such a match was found to already exist, as in the
Montmorency case, it could be dissolved on grounds of non-consummation. The absence
of sexual intercourse, required to complete the act of marriage, was one of the few cases
in which the Catholic Church allowed the generally indissoluble union to be broken.
Hence, non-consummation became the pretext used by Henri II and the connétable to
effectively get rid of the defiant bridegroom’s existing wife.

It is no coincidence that the connétable and his sons are characters in *La Princesse
de Clèves*. The Montmorency family, as we have seen, was directly responsible for the
appearance of the Edict of 1556 and “Madame de Lafayette le sait fort bien” (Biet 181).
Indeed, Lafayette explicitly evokes the secret marriage of the youth and its dissolution in
the novel:

[Le connétable] ne se contentait pas d’avoir marié son fils ainé avec Madame Diane, fille du roi et
d’une dame de Piémont, qui se fit religieuse aussitôt qu’elle fut accouchée. Ce mariage avait eu
beaucoup d’obstacles, par les promesses que Monsieur de Montmorency avait faites à
Mademoiselle de Piennes, une des filles d’honneur de la reine; et, bien que le roi les eût surmontés
avec une patience et une bonté extrêmes, ce connétable ne se trouvait pas encore assez appuyé.
(50)

The treatment of the clandestine marriage in this passage initially seems puzzling.
Lafayette, as Christian Biet maintains, was well acquainted with the specifics of the case,
which is certainly suggested by her citing the repudiated first wife by name. Meriting
designation by name likewise seems to point to the important role played by this
character. Yet the narrative refers to the marriage between François de Montmorency and
Jeanne de Piennes as “promesses,” merely a private engagement. Moreover,
characterizing the king’s involvement in the matter as limited to the exercise of infinite
patience and goodness does not refer to any legal action being taken by the monarch to
separate the couple.
The passage, however, may be read as an effective *mise-en-scène* of the impact of the centralizing state’s increasing control of marriage on the (female) individual in its evocation of a private union effaced so thoroughly as if it had never existed. That only the second, official engagement is afforded the status of marriage by the narrative, throws in sharp relief the insignificance of individual will, and especially of women’s fates in the grand schemes of the state, in the society it represents. Jeanne de Piennes’ private story is a gaping ellipsis in the history of the official exigencies governing individual lives. Ironically, a power negating the validity of a free agreement between two individuals becomes all goodness and generosity from the patriarchal point of view of the connétable seeking to ensure the political clout of the entire Montmorency clan through his son’s marriage to Diane de France.

From the introductory pages of the novel, we see a representation of court society in which the definition of marriage as primarily a means used by families to advance their political goals is constantly reinforced. Individual desire is successfully subdued and subjected to official authority, with the explicit reference to the Edict of 1556 suggesting ever-tightening control. “Ainsi, Madame de Lafayette présente la dynamique du mariage nobiliaire tel qu’elle apparaît entre 1558 et 1678. Son constat est fort net: entre ces deux dates, la noblesse de cour, pour assurer la puissance paternelle, se défait de l’emprise de l’Eglise pour séculariser voire ‘laïciser’ le mariage” (Biet 186).

The secular definition of marriage as a contract of political importance effaces the religious and private Montmorency-Piennes union. The primacy of the public definition of matrimony is likewise reinforced by the spaciotemporal markers of the three royal marriages that structure and propel the *récit*, as well as by several of the interpolated
narratives. These royal marriages are significant because the king’s matrimonial union captured the very meaning of marriage, as Georges Snyders clarifies in *La Pédagogie en France au XVIIème et XVIIIème siècles*: “Le modèle même…le mariage du roi, qui se règle par traité et qui résulte des intérêts et des désirs de toute une nation, ou plutôt de l’ensemble des nations; c’est lui qui dévoilerait la véritable signification du mariage” (232). The heroine first meets Nemours at a ball given to celebrate the engagement of Claude de France, the younger daughter of Henri II and Catherine de’ Medici, to the Duke of Lorraine. The marriages of Henri II’s sister to the Duke of Savoy, and that of Madame Elisabeth, the oldest daughter of the sovereign, are likewise central events around which several key episodes are constructed. Elisabeth’s marriage is supposed to crown the peace negotiations between France and Spain, so its predominantly political importance is clear from the outset.

But the fatal non-coincidence of individual wishes and political prerogative is made even more obvious when Philip II of Spain imposes an important modification during the negotiations of the marriage—“le roi d’Espagne n’a voulu passer aucun article qu’à condition d’épouser cette princesse, au lieu de Don Carlos, son fils” (109). Instead of marrying a man of the same age (both were born in 1545) “pour qui elle a de l’inclination sans l’avoir vu,” the “inconsolable” Elisabeth must marry a much older man whose dour temperament will certainly make her life miserable, as Marie Stuart, another character in the novel, points out to Mme de Clèves (109). “Ce n’est pas une chose qui puisse plaire, d’épouser un homme de l’âge et de l’humeur du roi d’Espagne, surtout à elle, qui a toute la joie que donne la première jeunesse” (109). Political interest unfailingly wins over considerations of individual satisfaction, and “Madame Elisabeth,
après beaucoup de répugnance, s’était résolue d’obéir au roi son père” (124). What Lafayette only hints at, but her readers certainly knew, is that the marriage had truly tragic consequences for the young woman.\textsuperscript{33}

This instance of individual obedience to state interest in marriage returns again and again in the narrative, for the match is crucial to the development of the intrigue in the novel: the celebrations occasioned by the Spain and Savoy marriages dictate the heroine’s appearances at court. And it is during the joust organized to celebrate the two weddings that Henri II is killed in single combat with the Count of Montgomery. Even more importantly, the organization of the voyage to Spain to deliver Elisabeth to her new husband permits Clèves to discover the identity of the man loved by his wife. Provisionally chosen to escort the royal bride, the prince observes the reaction of his wife to names of the other men who might also be chosen for the Spanish voyage. When the princesse remains calm upon hearing of several potential candidates, Clèves pretends that it is Nemours who has also been chosen. His wife’s obvious discomposure apprises Clèves that Nemours is indeed the man she has been endeavoring to avoid. A voyage to conclude a marriage from which all possibility of personal sentiment has been shut out, fittingly sets the scene for a discovery that in naming the heroine’s love object, once again underscores the non-coincidence of marriage and romantic love, at least for the female characters.

A narrative recounted by Marie Stuart to the princesse, provides another evident example of the triumph of the public, politically motivated definition of marriage. The interpolated narratives that “fill in” the heroine about the past of important court

\textsuperscript{33} The tragic love story of Carlos and Elisabeth, both killed on Philip II’s orders, was popularized by Saint-Réal’s “nouvelle historique” Dom Carlos (1672).
characters, such as Henri II’s mistress, Diane de Valentinois, are commonly seen as completing the heroine’s education. Marie Stuart’s telling of her mother’s history, albeit shorter, also helps Mme de Clèves understand court dynamics in showing her why the dauphine is virulently hated by both the queen and the king’s mistress. Yet the tale contains another important lesson, about the nature of marriage. Marie Stuart evokes the passion of young Henri II, then heir apparent, for her mother. Though already married to Catherine de’ Medici, “dans les premières années de son mariage, qu’il n’avait point encore d’enfants…il parut quasi résolu de se démarier pour épouser la reine ma mère” (64). Apprised of this politically dangerous projected marriage, that would reinforce the position of the already too-powerful Guise family (to which Marie de Lorraine, Marie Stuart’s mother, belonged), Henry’s father, François I, effectively put an end to this supposed project. “Pour lui ôter absolument la pensée d’épouser la reine ma mère,” François I precipitately married off Marie de Lorraine to the King of Scotland, with whom the young woman led an unhappy existence (64).

Marie Stuart’s tale highlights the consistent victory of official interest over individual considerations. The episode confirms the impossibility of love marriage in a society ruled by dynastic ideology, even for a figure as powerful as the king—or especially for the king, as Biet points out: “Le roi n’a pas le droit de fonder le mariage sur la passion, au même titre que la plupart de ses sujets, mais encore plus clairement qu’eux” (180). The political meaning of marriage threatened by Henri II’s failed attempts to marry for love is re-established with their failure; the “very model” of marriage is once again solidly set in favor of the state and not the individual. The narrative brings into focus the king who not only reaffirms the acceptable model of marriage in his own
exemplary union, but further strengthens it by dissolving the Montmorency marriage through the Edict of 1556.

Indeed, the story of Henri II and Marie de Lorraine suggests that with the triumph of the public definition of marriage, fulfillment of individual prerogatives was increasingly relegated to extra-conjugal liaisons. The king can love a mistress, but not a wife, and his example extends to the other courtiers. Mme de Chartres herself, in the pedagogical “peintures de l’amour” that she presents to her daughter, shows an awareness of court reality through examples depicting romantic love as predominantly extra-conjugal. Meant to protect the young woman from the seductions of “galanterie,” Mme de Chartres’ scenarios focus especially on the calamitous effect on women of the relationship modes facilitated by court values. Brought to venture outside of the conjugal relationship to find love, women inevitably encounter instead “le peu de sincérité des hommes, leurs tromperies et leur infidélité, les malheurs domestiques où plongent les engagements” (54).

The verdict of the interpolated tales seeking to educate the princesse is conclusive: in the world of the court the importance of marriage as a politically and socially motivated contract trumps the consensual definition of the union based on individual agreement, and relegates love to extra-conjugal involvement disastrous for women. Whereas Henri II is unable to break off an already existent match to marry the woman he loves, François de Montmorency and Jeanne de Piennes, already married, have to submit to a cassation of their private union, suggesting that official restraints on marriage continued to escalate. With a strictly official, public definition of marriage set by the proliferation of such examples of its growing force in the novel, it is no wonder
that Clèves’ attempt at a love match fails spectacularly.

“Le bon mariage” and the Clèves Couple

Brought up far from the “agitation sans désordre” of the bustling court of the Valois, the heroine receives a thorough education from her widowed mother, Mme de Chartres (60). A woman of “la vertu et le mérite...extraordinaires,” Mme de Chartres bestows an equally extraordinary education upon her daughter: “Elle avait donné ses soins...à l’éducation de sa fille; mais elle ne travailla pas seulement à cultiver son esprit et sa beauté, elle songea aussi à lui donner de la vertu et à la lui rendre aimable” (54). A happy marriage is shown by Mme de Chartres to be an indispensable component of the good life for a virtuous woman. Yet, critics have often underlined the apparent discrepancy between Mme de Chartres’ teaching of the importance of conjugal affection—“ce qui seul peut faire le bonheur d’une femme...est d’aimer son mari et d’en être aimée”—and her subsequent choice of M. de Clèves, a man for whom Mlle de Chartres readily admits “aucune inclination particulière,” as husband for her daughter (54).

A number of critical readings have obliquely addressed this ostensible contradiction by suggesting that the values taught by Mme de Chartres to her daughter, seemingly out of step with the practices of the Valois court, reflect vestiges of the feudal aristocratic moral code. Thus Marie-Odile Sweetser claims that “Mme de Chartres felt it was her duty to instill in her daughter the social and moral values of the aristocratic code,” according to which the prospective marriage partners were perfect for each other
(“In Search of Selfhood” 210). The conjugal tensions arose not from Mme de Chartres’ injudicious choice of husband, but rather from what Ralph Albanese terms the heroine’s threatened “anachronistic values” (101). For Philippe Desan, the heroine’s problematic situation in the novel suggests a struggle to preserve the “nobiliary values of purity of emotions, courtly love, moral honesty” endangered by a new ideology based on “profit, utility, and necessity” (105). Serge Doubrovsky similarly sees Mme de Clèves undertaking “l’ultime combat de la génération de la Fronde,” preserving the values of the once-independent nobility fighting against subjugation to an absolute monarch (101). The failure of these values signaled by the heroine’s retirement from the court, has in turn been seen as a “flight from reality” offering “an oblique commentary on the political disenfranchisement” of her class (Albanese 98, 101).

Though these critical readings for the most part do not expressly address an evolution in conjugal values, readings of the heroine’s difficulties as partially arising from an ideological shift would seem to confirm the existence of a possible tension created by a transition from a private, consensualist view of marriage, to a contractual obligation controlled by the monarchy. The conflict between the spouses might indicate that Mme de Chartres’ conception of marriage, embraced by Mme de Clèves, simply could not function as well in a society that increasingly negated individual desire in its definition of the conjugal union. More likely, it is the undesired element of passion that profoundly disturbs the equilibrium of a union in which the partners’ fulfillment was expected to stem rather from mutual respect and esteem, in accordance with the older noble ethos of “le bon mariage” probably at the source of Mme de Chartres’ views of conjugal affection.
Critics like Marianne Hirsch, Peggy Kamuf, and Arnold Weinstein have viewed Mlle de Chartres as a victim of her mother’s education, married off to a man she did not love and seemingly condemned to follow an unrealistic moral code of virtue and fidelity in a society that lived and breathed the amorous intrigues of *galanterie*. Nevertheless, I would argue that the heroine was equipped by Mme de Chartres to face the unfavorable social conditions for women through assuming strategies allowing for maximum autonomy, which the mother herself had enjoyed. Thus I do partially agree with Hirsch in that the lessons of the heroine’s mother respond to a world of limited possibility for women by teaching independence from passion and men, but the mother’s lesson is not a “death warrant,” nor is the trouble the supposed dependence on the maternal in which this pedagogy places Mme de Clèves (“A Mother’s Discourse” 81, 85). Rather, passionate love is what wreaks havoc on the heroine’s life, but the focus on Nemours’ passion has distracted attention from the real problem, the nature of M. de Clèves’ sentiments.

The mother’s endorsement of M. de Clèves, despite Mlle de Chartres’ apparent indifference, was not an incongruous choice condemning her daughter to a life of emotional struggle. In Mme de Chartres’ view of the good marriage, all the ingredients necessary for the couple’s conjugal happiness were present, and romantic love was not one of them. Her warnings to her daughter about the risks of *galanterie* suggest that Mme de Chartres associates certain kinds of love exclusively with amorous intrigue that places the woman in a vulnerable position. Though Mme de Chartres’ lessons primarily intend to teach the princesse to avoid extra-conjugal involvements that destroy the domestic

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34 Claude Vigée goes farther, arguing that Lafayette reproaches Mme de Chartres for marrying her daughter to a man for whom she had no feelings (728). In his biography of Lafayette, Stirling Haig contends that the episode condemns the way the author herself had been married off by her mother (130).
happiness of the conjugal union, linking romantic love with hazardous “engagements” implies that passion is too dangerous in marriage. The necessary criteria for conjugal affection are instead indicated by the conversation between mother and daughter about M. de Clèves.

After the heroine recounts to her mother M. de Clèves’ proposal, made “avec tout le respect imaginable,” Mme de Chartres agrees that “tant de grandeur et de bonnes qualités,” as well as “tant de sagesse pour son âge,” would make him an excellent husband (66). Coupled with the insistence that it is the heroine’s modesty that initially attracts M. de Clèves, inviting not merely love but also an extremely high regard for her person—“une passion et une estime extraordinaires,” the narrative seems to imply that their marriage will be based on these qualities (56). “Respect,” “estime,” “sagesse” are suggested to be the indispensable ingredients for marriage and conjugal entente in Mme de Chartres’ conception. Thus the famous double negative of “elle ne craignit point de donner à sa fille un mari qu’elle ne pût aimer en lui donnant le prince de Clèves,” as Sweetser indicates in “La Princesse de Clèves et son unité,” should be read in light of these views (66). “Il faut entendre que Mme de Chartres, connaissant le cœur noble de sa fille, la droiture de son caractère et de son jugement, compte qu’elle saura apprécier les qualités morales de son mari et ne pourra manquer d’éprouver pour lui estime, respect, et affection, sentiments qui sont, pour elle, la base même de l’amour conjugal” (484).

Indeed, conjugal love as understood by Mme de Chartres is far from being a passionate sentiment. It is rather a noble woman’s most effective strategy for preserving her defining quality of virtue, since the attachment to a husband is also defined as protection from the dangers of galanterie. Showing her daughter the perils of romantic
love, Mme de Chartres opposes the tranquil happiness of marriage as the alternative for which the young woman ought to strive:

Elle lui faisait voir, d’un autre côté, quelle tranquillité suivait la vie d’une honnête femme, et combien la vertu donnait d’éclat et d’élévation à une personne qui avait de la beauté et de la naissance. Mais elle lui faisait voir aussi combien il était difficile de conserver cette vertu, que par une extrême défiance de soi-même et par un grand soin de s’attacher à ce qui seul peut faire le bonheur d’une femme, qui est d’aimer son mari et d’en être aimée. (54)

As a guarantee of virtue, which elevates and thus in a sense empowers a well-born woman, conjugal love necessitates two essential components, both the contrary of romantic sentiment. The first is “une extrême défiance de soi-même,” implying an analytical self-awareness that is the opposite of passionate abandon, and indeed meant precisely to guarantee the heroine from such feelings, which could ruin the very attachment that she must take care to cultivate. The second component of happy conjugality, on the other hand, is a “grand soin,” a constant effort to maintain feelings of affection for a husband, and his reciprocal love for her. In a sense, the husband, as an “allowed” object of affection, provides an additional rampart against more dangerous sentiment and protects the exemplary woman’s “éclat” and “élévation.”

And it should be pointed out that it is the heroine herself, not her mother, who chooses M. de Clèves: Mme de Chartres tells her that “si elle sentait son inclination portée à l’épouser, elle y consentirait avec joie,” approving the candidate but clearly leaving the final decision up to her daughter (66). The heroine, “touchée de reconnaissance du procédé de prince de Clèves,” and admitting that “elle lui remarquait les memes bonnes qualités” as her mother, agrees to wed him “avec moins de répugnance qu’un autre” (65-6). In his commentary on the passage, Valincour claims that he doesn’t understand this contradictory statement: if she would be willing to marry M. de Clèves “avec moins de répugnance qu’un autre,” how could she claim to have “aucune
inclination particulière pour sa personne”? (66). Although the critic mainly intends to mock what he perceives to be the heroine’s exaggerated simplicity (and perhaps the narrative style), his reading of the passage suggests that for Lafayette’s contemporaries, the feelings the princess shows for her future husband appeared more than sufficient.

Il fallait donc que Mademoiselle de Chartres eût une furieuse répugnance pour tous les hommes en général, puisqu’elle en trouvait à épouser un homme de grand mérite & de grande qualité, à qui elle avait obligation, qui était passionnément amoureux d’elle; & que tout ce qu’elle peut faire en sa faveur, c’est de l’épouser avec moins de répugnance qu’un autre. D’ailleurs je ne sais comment Madame de Chartres ne remontra point à sa fille, qu’il n’y a guère de différence entre avoir une inclination particulière pour un homme, & avoir moins de répugnance pour lui que pour tous les autres. (132-3)

For Valincour, incredulous regarding Mademoiselle de Chartres’ supposed indifference to M. de Clèves, the inexperienced heroine’s “moins de répugnance” needed only maternal guidance to be recognized as the “inclination particulière” that she already feels. In any case, the heroine undoubtedly does develop the kind of solid affection required to constitute a good marriage in the ideology she shares with her mother, as the scene of the aveu and other passages in the novel suggest. As the narrator tells us, following the wedding “elle vécût parfaitement bien avec [M. de Clèves]” (69). The problem is suggested to lie elsewhere: it is not the heroine’s lack of sentiments, but the excess of her husband’s, which creates tension in the couple. Nemours may appear as the catalyst of the conflict, but it is there from the outset because of M. de Clèves, as Sweetser and René Pommier suggest in their readings of the novel.

In a sense, Clèves’ tragedy is precisely going against the very trend charted by the novel: the intensification of official restraints upon marriage, due to the promulgation of royal legislation such as the Edict of 1556, that significantly reduced the place of individual consent in the definition of the nuptial union. As most readings of the novel point out, Clèves is only able to conclude this match motivated by personal sentiment
because of the sudden death of his father, who publicly “blâma ce dessein” (61). The power vacuum left by the death of the patriarch atypically permits this younger son to follow his own desires. Mme de Chartres, on the other hand, is unable to conclude a brilliant match for her daughter due to court intrigues, and indeed despairs of finding any husband at all, for “personne n’osait plus penser à Mademoiselle de Chartres par la crainte de déplaire au roi” (65). Clèves, “quasi rassuré qu’on ne la lui refuserait pas,” is thus able to marry according to his personal choice when the likelihood of this match on both sides had initially been nearly non-existent; it is a fluke in their world (65). His marriage is a twofold offense: “sa transgression est double dans la mesure où il ne respecte ni le code de son rang—le choix paternel...ni les règles du mariage—on ne se marie pas par l’amour” (Biet 187). Clèves appears to doubly flout the dynastic ideology that increasingly sought to subordinate the individual.

By seeking to satisfy romantic passion through marriage, Clèves attempts to bring into the conjugal relationship an element forced outside of it in just about all other unions mentioned by the main narrative and the interpolated tales; but in a sense, so does the princess in channeling the rich inner life catalyzed by her contact with Nemours into the relationship with her husband. “Elle lui témoignait plus d’amitié et plus de tendresse

35 Though Biet correctly points out that Clèves still had an older brother, who strangely enough is absent to prevent this marriage that goes against the family interest, unlike the older brothers of another suitor of Mlle de Chartres, the Chevalier de Guise, who forbid their younger sibling to think of the marriage. The novel itself evokes the rarity of younger sons’ marrying when it clarifies the Guises’ motivations for opposing the match: “ses frères n’approuveraient pas qu’il se mariât, par la crainte de l’abaissement que les mariages des cadets apportent d’ordinaire dans les grandes maisons” (60). In a study of the demographics of feudal French noble families, Duby shows that out of the thirty-four “maisons aristocratiques” in existence around 1100, only three were formed by marriages of younger sons, which shows that the policy had traditionally been ruthlessly enforced (114). Such data suggests just how exceptional Clèves’ marriage was in this respect alone.
qu’elle n’avait encore fait; elle ne voulait point qu’il la quittât, et il lui semblait qu’à force de s’attacher à lui, il la défendrait contre monsieur de Nemours” (93). The passage evokes both the depth of the heroine’s attachment to her husband, and her adhesion to the mother’s pedagogy, shown most concretely by the controversial episode of the _aveu_. Such instances in the narrative recall the feudal values of the good marriage, endangered by the public nature of court life.

In the famous _aveu_ scene, the princesse shows that she has taken her mother’s lessons to heart, assuring Clèves that “pour faire ce que je fais, il faut avoir plus d’amitié et plus d’estime pour un mari que l’on n’en a jamais eu” (162, italics mine). Not only has the heroine cultivated greater sentiments for a husband—though qualifying these sentiments as more tranquil ones of friendship and esteem rather than love—than those of any other woman; the radical act of the _aveu_ itself is the “grand soin” necessary to maintain the emotional closeness of the couple, that the princesse undertakes in spite of the potential negative consequences, even danger, to herself. The heroine’s characterization of the conjugal sentiment in terms of _amitié_, also suggests continued adherence to her mother’s values and their possible feudal origins referred to by modern critics. Feudal aristocratic values envisioned _amitié_ as the cement linking together married partners, but also, in its implication of fidelity (the significant subtext of _amicitia_’s original Latin meaning), as characterizing the proper relationship of vassals to

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36 The novel’s first readers—who responded to the _question galante_ famously launched in the _Mercure galant_ by Donneau de Visé, on whether a virtuous woman should ever declare her passion for another man to her husband, even if she deems it necessary to preserve her virtue—often stressed the risk taken by a wife who makes “une confidence si dangereuse à une Personne dont elle devait toujours dépendre” (cited in Laugaa 33). This particular example is drawn from a response signed “L’Insensible de Beauvais,” but there are several such letters. See Laugaa, especially 27-33.

37 For a broader definition of _amitié_, see Chapter 3 (15-16).
their liege lord (Duby 36). The amitié of the couple, then, was potentially significant because in mirroring a liegeman’s fealty to a sovereign, it underpinned the existing power structures.\(^\text{38}\)

Since the full meaning of amitié implies a public and socially important component, much like the contractual definition of marriage impinging on the sacramental in the 16\(^{th}\) century, characterizing her conjugal relationship in these terms may suggest an attempt on the princesse’s part to preserve her marriage by adapting her mother’s values to a rapidly evolving social context. She attempts to appropriate this value by giving the amitié she feels for her spouse heretofore-unseen intensity, and at the same time to furnish her husband with an “official” proof of fealty in swearing to amitié. By characterizing their relationship as a contractual one of liege-vassal through the use of the aveu—for as DeJean demonstrates, the term’s earliest legal meaning referred precisely to the conclusion of this crucial agreement that founded the feudal order—the heroine endeavors to moderate M. de Clèves’ private sentiments, perhaps so as to stabilize their marriage in unfavorable circumstances (“Lafayette’s Ellipses” 897).\(^\text{39}\)

Significantly, Clèves had earlier told the heroine, in the context of relating his friend Sancerre’s involvement with the hypocritical Mme de Tournon, that were his own mistress or even wife to communicate her feelings for another man, he would step out of the role of lover or husband to counsel and support her: “La sincérité me touche d’une

\(^{38}\) Thus, for instance, in the history of Henry VIII narrated by the dauphine to Mme de Clèves, the accusation leveled at Anne Boleyn of an “amitié criminelle” for her brother, the Vicomte de Rochefort, is not simply that of incest. Rather, and perhaps more importantly, Anne’s crime is that of privileging her personal interests over those of the king, by diverting “amitié/fidélité” from its legitimate target of husband/sovereign towards a private relationship.

\(^{39}\) I cite DeJean’s reading of this scene in greater detail on p. 29 of this chapter.
telle sorte que je crois que si ma maîtresse, et même ma femme, m’avouait que quelqu’un lui plût, j’en serais affligé sans en être aigri. Je quitterais le personnage d’amant ou de mari, pour la conseiller et pour la plaindre” (99). However, because the narrative tells us that Clèves’ passion for the heroine remains unfulfilled even after their marriage (the essential quality of romantic love in Denis de Rougement’s famous definition), he remains a lover despite becoming a husband.40 “Pour être son mari, il ne laissa pas d’être son amant, parce qu’il avait toujours quelque chose à souhaiter au-delà de sa possession” (69). Clèves unites lover and husband in one person, and his wife’s extraordinary sincerity may be meant precisely to force him to step out of this character of not “amant ou mari,” but “amant et mari,” a lover-husband. In insinuating an important official component to their relationship, in conformity with the emerging view of marriage, she seeks to cool his private passion and make him share a conjugal affection based on mutual respect, esteem, and merit, initially promised by his demeanor of “tant de sagesse pour son âge” that attracted both Mme de Chartres and her daughter.

But amitié is radically at odds with Clèves’ desires in marriage. From the beginning of their engagement, “il voyait avec beaucoup de peine que les sentiments de mademoiselle de Chartres ne passaient ceux de l’estime et de la reconnaissance,” and his wife’s aveu confirms that her feelings remain in these limits, initially set by her mother’s moral education (66). Despite the heroine’s extraordinary step, she ultimately fails to achieve the aim of excluding passion from the conjugal relationship, as her husband’s deathbed reproach makes clear: “Vous avez donc oublié que je vous aimais éperdument

40 Tracing the development of the amour courtois tradition of the Middle Ages, Rougemont’s L’Amour et l’Occident takes Tristan and Iseult’s doomed passion as the defining myth of romantic love in the West.
et que j’étais votre mari? L’un des deux peut porter aux extrémités: que ne peuvent point les deux ensemble?” (199). Clèves loses control in pushing the “extrémités,” the traditional boundaries of marriage, by combining the expectations of lover and husband. The doubled hazards of being a head-over-heels in love spouse carry Clèves to the “extrémités” of death, the term evoking also the emblematic edge of the precipice with which Mme de Chartres had terrified her daughter when warning the young woman not to give in to her growing attraction to Nemours. But it is the heroine’s husband who plummets into the dangers of passion.

Valincour, who evokes the narrative episode in which Clèves sends a manservant to spy on his wife and Nemours, taking the laconic response of the returning messenger for a confirmation of the heroine’s infidelity, links the protagonist’s death to excessive sentiments, inappropriate for a husband: “Un mari qui se mettait dans la tête des chagrins aussi bizarres & aussi violents que Monsieur de Clèves, en était quitte à trop bon marché, quand il était quitte pour mourir” (75-6). Though Valincour’s assessment of the novel is often biased, his frustration with the death he critiques as insufficiently motivated suggests a response possibly encoded in the narrative itself. The event appears so incongruous, almost absurd precisely because it was not meant to be inevitable.41

Though Nemours’ rash actions, as the heroine justly points out, did directly cause her husband’s death, the demise of the marriage was not preordained in the narrative. Sweetser argues that despite critical readings highlighting the novel’s tragic nature, the outcome of the marriage or Mme de Clèves’ subsequent comportment could have taken a number of routes: “Il y a toujours…une alternative et un choix possible.” After a period

41 Though some critical readings argue the contrary, like Genette’s analysis of the novel’s narrative logic in *Figures II*. 
of grief following her husband’s death, the heroine “pourrait aussi tenter de réaliser l’union fondée sur le devoir et l’amour conjugal recommandée par sa mère, avec un homme qui n’aurait ni l’égoïsme de Nemours, ni la faiblesse devant les passions de M. de Clèves” (“La Princesse de Clèves et son unité” 490). That is, marriage as envisioned by Mme de Chartres and the heroine is feasible, without the egoism or passionate excess of romantic love; but rather, with the kind of profound attachment suggested by the depth of Mme de Clèves’ grief after her husband’s death.

The heroine’s union with M. de Clèves could have successfully lasted with a cooler-headed husband who shared Mme de Clèves’ existential values, the repos and tranquility she cites to be her goals at numerous instances in the narrative, most notably in her refusal of Nemours. Domna Stanton’s informative article on the ideal of repos in seventeenth-century French literature explains how certain prominent members of the nobility, such as Mlle de Montpensier, Mme de Motteville, and Saint-Evremond delineated a value system exalting “aristocratic versions of the simple life” (94). Mme de Clèves, as Stanton contends, has the astuteness to embrace the lifestyle of repos at an uncharacteristically young age due to a “precocious identity with the elderly’s reasonable outlook” (101). In characterizing M. de Clèves with wisdom beyond his years, the narrative seems to imply that he could have shared the pleasures of the “simple life” with the heroine, had passion not gotten in the way.

“C’est assez que d’être”: the Heritage of Exemplary Retreat

Madame de Clèves vécut d’une sorte qui ne laissa pas d’apparence qu’elle pût jamais revenir; elle passait une partie de l’année dans cette maison religieuse et l’autre chez elle, mais dans une retraite et dans des occupations plus saintes que celles des couvents les plus austères; et sa vie, qui fut assez courte, laissa des exemples de vertu inimitable.

Lafayette, La Princesse de Clèves
Though among the seventeenth-century public, it is the episode of the *aveu* that attracted the most attention and controversy (with readers taking sides on Donneau de Visé’s generalized question, published in the *Mercure galant*, of whether a virtuous woman should ever declare her penchant for another man to her husband), modern readings of *La Princesse de Clèves* have been fascinated by the heroine’s second major choice, refusal to wed Nemours followed by a retreat from public life. This choice has been met with considerable critical hostility. For Claude Vigée, the refusal of Nemours’ suit supposedly reveals “sous ses dehors nobles…une personnalité sans étoffe ni bonté réelle, une âme avare, calculatrice et timorée, repliée sur sa peur de vivre et sa répugnance mesquine à se commettre avec autrui” (746). The critic denounces her “indifférence royale” and her “égomanie sans égale” (741). The opinion is seconded by Serge Doubrovsky, who sees in the heroine’s decision proof of an “égoïsme total…nulle chaleur, ni élan; pas un seul instant elle ne pense à Nemours ni à son bonheur à lui” (111). Still others, like J. W. Scott, see Mme de Clèves’ conduct as dominated by fear, which for M. S. Greene is a neurotic terror of sexual feelings causing the heroine to retreat from men and reality (226). Weinstein, too, cites her fear and crippled sexuality, especially obvious in her solitude at the country house at Coulommiers (82).

The retreat itself has been read in equally negative terms: the heroine’s departure to her own land has been termed a preparation for death by Doubrovsky, and “another death” by Kamuf (respectively 112, 96). Hirsch also finds the heroine’s choice of a “passive vicarious existence” akin to death (82). Stirling Haig is even more categorical in his denunciation of the heroine’s quest for *repos*: “It is retrenchment, a truncation and a semi-suicidal mutilation of the self that results in that traumatism that goes by the name
of repos” (133). For Weinstein, “the Princess is obliged to wither away, leaving no progeny other than ‘inimitable examples of virtue’” (83).

It would seem from these readings that the refusal to conform to a traditional script for female behavior, signaled by the rejection of marriage and thus officially sanctioned reproduction-oriented sexuality, could only stem from the heroine’s utter mental derangement, which causes her self-destruction through retreat. “Not her husband, her lover, or most literary critics allow a woman to reject her preconceived role with impunity”—aptly deduces Michael Danahy’s analysis (118). Critical hostility is unfortunately a predictable reaction to the heroine’s daring.

The princesse does not refuse but rather the embraces a lifestyle in conformity to her values and desires, permitting her spatial, sexual, and creative autonomy and even fulfillment. Throughout the novel, she suffers from intrusions on her privacy, seeking refuge in her cabinet and at Coulommiers, a property whose design and construction she supervises. Her husband opposes this absence from court, whereas Nemours notoriously intrudes on her privacy in her quarters, at Coulommiers, and even during her periods of mourning for her mother and spouse, his propensity to voyeurism causing Michael G. Paulson to characterize him as a “mental rapist” (21).

In her widowhood, the heroine is finally free to escape male intrusion and regulation of her space, by dividing her time between “de grandes terres qu’elle avait vers les Pyrénées” and a religious establishment (236). The vast expanse of the heroine’s remote property suggests that at last, far away from the court, she is free to live the private life she desires; the “maison religieuse,” on the other hand, provides female companionship in a society constituted by and centered around women. Thus for Danahy,
“the aveu and the refus are necessary steps that the Princess takes to free herself from the abusive aspects of the monosexual spatial patterning underlying the novel” (121). DeJean argues that aveu’s original meaning of a vassal’s written declaration of fidelity to his lord in exchange for land, suggests that “using the proper legal code,” the heroine is asking for “a male prerogative: to rule as lord over an estate” (“Lafayette’s Ellipses” 897). The same desire to direct her own life story in a “chez elle” removed from manipulation, is evident in her final retreat (898, 900).

The departure could also be a movement into sexuality, presaged by the famous scene of reverie in the princesse’s garden pavilion at Coulommiers, as Miller argues in “Men’s Reading, Women’s Writing.” In her land, however, her intimacy is no longer violently invaded, whereas in the pavilion she is not safe from Nemours’ omnipresent gaze. Spying on the heroine, Nemours observes her alone on a summer night, winding ribbons in his colors around a cane that had belonged to him, and studying his likeness in a painting of the siege of Metz. Attempting to surprise her, Nemours catches his scarf on a window. The noise frightens the heroine out of her reverie, and she seeks refuge in the main building. Although the symbolism of this scene may be obvious to critics like Michel Butor, Roland Racevskis argues that its undeniably erotic nature tends to obscure another important dimension to the heroine’s solitary occupations. In “Solitary Pleasures: Creative Avoidance of Court and Convent in La Princesse de Clèves,” the critic claims that the heroine’s activity in the pavilion is a “signifying act of creative combination” suggesting her future activities in retreat (27). In spending time at her residence in the Pyrenees, she benefits fully from her widowed status, and the “practice of creativity motivated by dissatisfaction with social reality” helps her to “establish an intensely
personal way of life" characterized by private aesthetic pleasure (32).

The triple prerogative of spatial, sexual, and creative authority secured by the heroine’s radical choice of retreat, significantly set the playing field for heroines in the eighteenth-century novel. Similarly to Lafayette, the writers of my corpus centered their narratives around the female protagonists’ struggle to enjoy their land, their sexuality, and their creative activity on their own terms, in opposition to the increasing regimentation of marriage and the female self. *La Princesse de Clèves* opens with a relationship based in large part on the “estime extraordinair[e]” Mlle de Chartres inspires the prince following their first encounter (56). Comprehended within these parameters by the heroine and her mother, the narrative of the conjugal union is disturbed by passion—both the princesse’s and Clèves’—and then returns to equilibrium. In her widowhood, the heroine is at last able to achieve spatial, sexual, and creative integrity. A number of French eighteenth-century novels by women that begin with marriage follow Lafayette’s example, barring one key exception: the female protagonists often attain the right to manage their land, body, and activities in marriage. To do so they, like Lafayette’s heroine, must reject romantic love.

Thus, the heroine of Le Prince de Beaumont’s *La Nouvelle Clarice* defines her relationship with her husband as one of “estime” and “reconnaissance” (I: 207). Her marriage serves primarily as the foundation for a utopian community, similarly to the arranged marriage of Julie and Wolmar in Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. However, unlike Rousseau’s static feudal patriarchy Clarens, Le Prince de Beaumont’s ever-growing matriarchal community provides a textual mise-en-abîme of women coming into their own as social reformers and writers. Whereas Le Prince de Beaumont’s Clarice puts
off the consummation of her marriage until she can be sure of her mother-in-law’s approval, Riccoboni’s heroine Mme de Monglas decides, together with her spouse, to exclude sexuality from their relationship altogether in Lettres de Vallière. Freed from reproductive and managerial constraints in her conjugal relationship, Mme de Monglas enjoys a version of the lifestyle of the elite aristocracy reminiscent of the seventeenth-century cult of repos, devoting her time to education, self-improvement, and simple country pleasures.

Education and self-improvement, as well as the creative pursuits to which they give rise, are primordially important in Isabelle de Montolieu’s Caroline de Lichtfield. Though subjected to an arranged marriage by her father, the heroine refuses to consummate the union and gets her love struck husband to agree to separate residences. In her feminocentric universe far away from the Prussian court, the heroine builds a private pavilion especially for the practice of her artistic pursuits: drawing, music, and poetry. Montolieu’s novel thus suggests that it is creative freedom, and not spousal affection, that is the indispensable ingredient to women’s happiness. Isabelle de Charrière’s Lettres de Mistriss Henley, through a somber representation of the misery of an educated and sensitive young woman trying to channel her energies into domestic concerns like Rousseau’s Julie, ultimately makes a similar suggestion.

Though these novels all place a degree of stress on all three important aspects of heroines’ integrity—spatial, sexual, and creative—I chose to organize my reading by highlighting one dominant element of each novel in my subsequent chapters. Thus, my reading of Le Prince de Beaumont’s La Nouvelle Clarice focuses predominantly on the spatial freedom exercised by the heroine in a utopian community governed, managed, and
planned down to the minutest details by women. Sexual and creative freedom are also weighty elements in the text, however, since it is Clarice who decides on the when and where of the couple’s intimacy, and on the urgings of her correspondent Hariote [sic] considers publishing their letters as a novel. In *Lettres de Vallière*, I focus on the freedom represented by the platonic marriage of the heroine, though her study space and the creative autonomy implied by self-cultivation are likewise crucial elements. Finally, my reading of Montolieu and Charrière highlights the formative aspects of freely exercising creativity (or not) over the other, no less present components of female control of marital sexuality and private space.

Why do these heroines accomplish within the script of marriage what the princesse accomplishes beyond it? One might posit that the kind of freedom Lafayette could envision for women after a female regency and female aristocrats’ crucial role in the *Fronde*, no longer seemed possible after Louis XIV’s reign firmly set France on the route of patriarchal absolutism. Graffigny, however, did famously maintain her heroine’s right to “le plaisir d’être,” though as an outsider in French society, perhaps Zilia had greater freedom to choose land and library over marriage (168). But other eighteenth-century novelists, too, like La Guesnerie, Riccoboni, or Charrière, often show heroines who actively decline marriage or simply never get an opportunity to marry. Thus, though it may well be that portraying heroines who must carve out their due within marriage reflected some loss of freedom or possibility for themselves and their creations experienced by the novelists, the hypothesis does not account for the variety of fictional scenarios in the eighteenth century. I’d like to suggest a different, and in my eyes more productive, hypothesis.
In Lafayette’s novel, the right to control one’s boundaries becomes an inscription of female textual authority: the heroine “exchanges her husband’s estate for the female literary estate, a territory beyond male control” (DeJean, “Lafayette’s Ellipses” 899). However, by moving into the territory outside available female plots, the princesse’s tale also becomes “unnarratable”: “She expresses a desire to be outside of story, to be unnarratable. This she will achieve by rejecting Nemours and life in society” (897). Essentially, as DeJean and Richard Moye suggest, to maintain control over her story she must suppress it. Eighteenth-century writers attempted to resolve what Moye calls “Lafayette’s ironic paradox” by winning maximum freedom for their female protagonists within what might be called the narratable script of marriage and existence in society (847). Unlike the princesse’s “inimitable examples,” these novelists (to varying degrees) inscribed imitation into their texts.

Susan Gubar’s essay “She in Herland: Feminism as Fantasy,” asked a pertinent question: “If woman is dispossessed, a nobody, in the somewhere of patriarchy, is it possible that she might be somebody only in the nowhere of utopia?” (140). These writers attempted the arduous task of plotting out a utopia for women enjoying spatial, sexual, and creative control within the “somewhere” of marriage. They depicted heroines as squarely in the world, inscribing positive social and cultural roles for women in their narratives, and possibly simultaneously countering the charges of frivolity and fantasy traditionally leveled at women’s writing. In the chapters that follow, we will see whether—and how—these heiresses of Lafayette succeeded in their undertaking.
Chapter 2
Conjugal Utopia: Marriage and Social Transformation in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *La Nouvelle Clarice*

Si [Rousseau] eût peint deux amants que la destinée aurait réunis, dont toute la vie serait composée de jours dont l’attente d’un seul eût autrefois suffi pour embellir un long espace de l’année ; qui, faisant ensemble la route de la vie, seraient indifférents sur les pays qu’ils parcourraient ; qui adoreraient dans leur enfant une image chérie, un être dans lequel leurs âmes se sont réunies, leurs vies se sont confondues ; qui accompliraient tous leurs devoirs comme s’ils cédaient à tous leurs mouvements ; pour qui le charme de la vertu se serait joint à l’attrait de l’amour, la volupté de cœur aux charmes de l’innocence ; la piété attacherait encore ces deux époux l’un à l’autre… Ah ! si pour nous faire adorer ce lien respectable, Rousseau nous eût peint une telle union, sa tâche aurait été facile ; mais est-ce la vertu qu’il eût prêchée ? est-ce une leçon qu’il eût donnée ? aurait-il été utile aux hommes, en excitant l’envie des malheureux, en n’apprenant aux heureux que ce qu’ils savent ? Non, c’est un plan plus moral qu’il a suivi.

Germaine de Staël, *Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau* (1788)

In a major seventeenth-century theoretical text on the modern novel, the *Traité sur l’origine des romans* (1670), Pierre-Daniel Huet proclaimed that the main objective of fiction should be “l’instruction des lecteurs,” particularly in regard to “la correction des mœurs.” Novels were especially proper to accomplish this lofty task, because they could captivate the reader’s attention through “l’appât du plaisir” and educate while entertaining. The second preface of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Enlightenment bestseller *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), enunciates similar goals for the novel. This preface in the form of a dialogue (hence its alternate title, “Entretien sur les romans”) has the character “R.,” the *porte-parole* of Rousseau, defend the novel’s seemingly

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43 This preface did not appear in the original edition of the novel, by Rousseau’s Dutch publisher Rey. Prepared for Duchesne’s projected French edition of the novel, the new preface was first published as a separate pamphlet in February of 1761 with the subtitle *Entretien sur les romans, dialogue entre l’éditeur et un homme de lettres* (see Raymond Birn’s informative article “Rousseau et ses éditeurs”). Most modern editions of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, such as the one from which I cite throughout this chapter, include the second preface as an appendix.
incongruent storyline. The passionate tearjerker of the beginning, in which defiant aristocrat Julie loses her virginity to a commoner and intends to use her subsequent pregnancy as leverage to convince her parents to allow the socially disparate union, is unexpectedly transformed into a moralizing representation of the repentant heroine’s exemplary conjugal comportment in an arranged match imposed by her father.

The plot twist seemingly creates two separate books unsuited to the same reader, “on dirait que ce sont deux livres différents que les mêmes personnes ne doivent pas lire” (576). R., however, explains that any readers put off by such a scandalous beginning clearly do not need the lessons of the end, whereas those to whom the end would be the most salutary will certainly be drawn in by the portrayal of illicit passion in the epistolary novel’s opening letters. The novel’s didactic strategy, according to R., is best exemplified by the metaphor of a cup containing a bitter medicine, whose edges have been covered in some sweet liquor to trick a sick child into drinking it.44 The love story between Julie and her impecunious tutor Saint-Preux is thus simply the charm seducing a potential reader to get involved with the narrative, much as the heroine herself is seduced by reading her preceptor’s passionate letters. Following her fall, it is the dedicated adherence to her obligations as a wife and mother that empowers Julie’s return to virtue, shown to be possible even (and perhaps especially) in a marriage not based on romantic love. The covered-up harsh lesson revealed after the first sweet sip seems to be that marriage is too important an institution to represent merely a chance for individual fulfillment. Forming

44 Rousseau’s image is interesting in that it seems to indirectly address the comparison of the novel to a poison that corrupts its readers, made by the genre’s detractors such as Nicole and especially Jacquin, who likened fiction to a gilded cup concealing toxic contents. The novel’s indirect assimilation to a cup containing (poisonous) medicine also appears in Riccoboni. See Chapter 3 (14).
the foundation of society, marriage is a serious partnership in which a woman in particular has onerous duties to fulfill.

The “Entretien,” like Huet’s treatise, also stresses the importance of vraisemblance—fiction must especially strive to be true-to-life if its aim is moral instruction. R. thus decries the novels in fashion, that portray exclusively “les gens du bel air, les femmes à la mode, les grands, les militaires,” though the majority of readers are not high society Parisians, but rather rustic country folk who take their reading much more to heart than dissipated city dwellers (578). Instead of consoling and instructing the simple “campagnard,” such fictions render his quotidian unbearable by comparison with the glamorous existence they uniformly depict: “Loin de leur rien offrir de convenable à leur situation, vos romans ne servent qu’à la leur rendre plus amère. Ils changent leur retraite en un désert affreux; et, pour quelques heures de distraction qu’ils leur donnent, ils leur préparent des mois de malaise et de vains regrets” (580). The kind of novel the dialogue defines in opposition to “vos romans” of high society, should by contrast offer its readers “que des tableaux qui les environnent, que des devoirs qu’ils peuvent remplir, que des plaisirs de leur condition” (579). To be “bien fait” or “au moins...utile” in guiding the reader toward moral perfection in his or her actual circumstances, fiction ought to maintain a close rapport to its reading public’s situation (580).

Through R.’s argument, the second preface gives Rousseau’s daydream of the optimum effect a truly well crafted novel like La Nouvelle Héloïse could have on the reader:

J’aime à me figurer deux époux lisant ce recueil ensemble, y puisant un nouveau courage pour supporter leurs travaux communs, et peut-être de nouvelles vues pour les rendre utiles. Comment pourraient-ils y contempler le tableau d’un ménage heureux, sans vouloir imiter un si doux modèle? Comment s’attendrissent-ils sur le charme de l’union conjugale, même privée de celui de l’amour, sans que la leur se resserre et s’affermississe? (580)
Novels that truly merit the name, in Rousseau’s redefinition of the genre, must present imitable lessons in engaging form, speaking to their readers’ day-to-day struggles. Significantly, the second preface’s enthusiastic imaginings of novelistic pedagogy in practice narrowly link it with matrimony. Marriage and the novel as Rousseau envisions it form a natural pair—indeed, the dialogue seems to imply that the true matter of fiction is or ought to be matrimony.\textsuperscript{45} Wedded life appears to be the area most sorely in need of reform, and the novel’s most valuable instruction must be aimed at teaching its readers to perform ideal conjugality in imitation of its representation in fiction. The illustration of marriage in \textit{La Nouvelle Héloïse} not as the blissful culmination of Julie’s love affair with Saint-Preux, but rather as an arranged match serving as a foundation for a reformed and seemingly invigorated society at Clarens, with the wedded pair at the heart of the transformation, would seem to be a crucial and loaded pedagogical choice.

Perhaps, in keeping with his theory of the importance of \textit{vraisemblance} to effective novelistic pedagogy, Rousseau felt that readers were unlikely to accept a match between Julie and Saint-Preux, or that such a marriage would hardly correspond to the reality of their lives and thus have little instructional value. Indeed, as Staël somewhat nostalgically points out in her \textit{Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau}, portraying a married pair blissfully in love was unlikely to be heartening to those going through the motions of an arranged match and needing daily encouragement to face their duties (22).\textsuperscript{46} In any case, choosing to portray marriage as the indispensable base of social

\textsuperscript{45} One could argue, of course, that Lafayette had already made that crucial identification in \textit{La Princesse de Clèves}.

\textsuperscript{46} Not quite twenty years old at the time of the letters’ composition in the spring of 1786
reform, with dutiful women being particularly important to its success, attributes a new role to matrimony and imbues all elements of this novelistic portrayal with significance, pedagogical and otherwise.

The reading that follows proposes to analyze La Nouvelle Héloïse’s lesson on marriage in focusing on the novel’s portrayal of nuclear family structures, as well as their bearing on the arranged marriage and the relationship of spouses within it, and perhaps most importantly, on the kind of reformed society Julie and Wolmar’s union brings about at Clarens. At the time of the novel’s publication, comparisons with Richardson’s transatlantic hit Clarissa (1748) were a critical commonplace, and modern analyses still compare elements of the two novels in their reading.47 However, there exists another eighteenth-century novel that has far more significant parallels with La Nouvelle Héloïse, sharing in particular the bipartite structure of a beautiful and virtuous heroine’s romantic

and married in January of that same year to a man almost twice her age, Staël’s depiction of the joys of a love match ingenuously seems to assume that couples who marry for love have no need of guidance.

47 Clarissa was made known to the French public by the Abbé Prévost’s famous translation in 1751. For an especially notable eighteenth-century comparison of Rousseau to Richardson, see Grimm’s review in the Correspondence littéraire of January 15th and again February 1st of 1761. Both are reprinted in R.A. Leigh, Correspondance complète de Rousseau (volume 8). La Harpe’s Lycée also attributes many traits borrowed from Clarissa to La Nouvelle Héloïse. Joseph Texte’s Jean-Jacques Rousseau et les origines du cosmopolitisme littéraire argues that Rousseau was inspired by Clarissa in the composition of La Nouvelle Héloïse, and discusses eighteenth-century comparisons of these novels. Taking the opposite stance, F.C. Green claims that Rousseau owes nothing to Richardson in his study Minuet, a Critical Survey of French and English Literary Ideas in the Eighteenth Century. More recently, the 2002 special edition of the Annales de la société Jean-Jacques Rousseau dedicated to “L’Amour dans La Nouvelle Héloïse” included several comparative critical readings of Richardson and Rousseau. Particularly useful are Byron R. Wells’ “Julie, ou la nouvelle Clarisse. L’amour, la vertu, et la question du moi” (257-269) and Valérie Cossy’s “Des ‘moral difficulties’ chez Madame Sinclair à la morale du sentiment ‘au pied des Alpes’: Sentiment et vertu chez Richardson, Prévost, et Rousseau” (271-315).
adventure replaced by minute representation of marriage as a base for social reform.

Though Jeanne Le Prince de Beaumont’s fourth and last major novel, La Nouvelle Clarice, appears to be a rewriting of Richardson’s Clarissa, any resemblance between the two, as between Richardson’s and Rousseau’s novels, is largely superficial. If Le Prince de Beaumont’s fiction could be termed a “new” model of any novel, it might more logically be called La Nouvelle Julie, though Le Prince de Beaumont herself would have most likely vigorously opposed any rapprochement between her heroine and Rousseau’s, for reasons I shall elaborate later on in my analysis.

As with many popular women writers of the eighteenth century, Le Prince de Beaumont, a bestselling author in her day, remains largely ignored by contemporary critics despite her prolific publication. Yet according to Robert Darnton, it would seem that Enlightenment fans of Rousseau also appreciated Le Prince de Beaumont. In The Sentimental Education of the Novel, Margaret Cohen makes the notable assertion that “too often, noncanonical texts are fragments of lost solutions or answers to questions we no longer hear” (25). La Nouvelle Clarice seems to me to be just such an essentially complementary response to the diverse questions of parental authority, the place of affection and the role of women in matrimony, and the social impact of marriage, more famously debated and hypothetically worked out by Rousseau’s La Nouvelle Héloïse.

48 In the lone modern biography of this exceptional figure, Madame Le Prince de Beaumont: Vie et oeuvre d’une éducatrice, Marie-Antoinette Reynaud points out that Le Prince de Beaumont’s total lifetime publication of 70 octavos makes up “une bibliothèque entière” (9). Reynaud further notes that Le Prince de Beaumont was translated almost immediately into most major European languages, including Russian, Polish, English, Spanish, Italian, Greek, and Dutch. Her pedagogical works were used for the education of Louis XVI, Louis XVIII, and Charles X.

49 In The Great Cat Massacre, Darnton discusses the reading habits of one avid follower of Rousseau, Jean Ranson. Darnton’s complete list of Ranson’s beloved book collection includes several works by Le Prince de Beaumont (205-206).
Claiming to embody a new genre, both novels redefine conjugality through imagining its vital place in a reinvigorated society, resulting in structurally similar, yet ideologically distinct representations. In contrasting ways, the novels’ representations of marriage as the founding unit of social transformation question the possibility of love in matrimony. Ultimately, both textual experiments of utopia provide crucial responses to the dilemmas facing the family and society in the second half of the eighteenth century.

I believe that a complimentary analysis of the two novels is indispensable, and not simply because Rousseau’s vision of marriage and woman’s place in matrimony as depicted by *La Nouvelle Héloïse* can be grasped and understood in a new way against other, structurally similar visions of his day that imagine totally different possibilities for women as spouses-*cum*-social reformers. The complexity and multiplicity that characterize the Enlightenment are reestablished by tuning in to its many voices and in this case, being conscious of other existing theoretical constructions of matrimony in eighteenth-century French fiction than the canonical ones retained today. The contributions of Le Prince de Beaumont, a writer and educator who devoted her career to helping women lead their lives with dignity and who published the first magazine devoted specifically to women’s concerns, seem particularly important to reconstruct as counterpoint, an alternate vision for women to Rousseau’s canonical Clarens.  

The full title of Le Prince de Beaumont’s novel is *La Nouvelle Clarice, histoire*

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50 In her article “A French Writer and Educator in England,” Patricia Clancy makes the important point that Le Prince de Beaumont was “the first woman to found a magazine and then to turn the periodical essay to the propagation of feminist ideas, all of which probably makes her the mother of women’s magazines” (199). According to Clancy, Le Prince de Beaumont denounced women’s confinement to a narrow sphere and their restrictive education, and claimed that women were largely capable of governing (199-201).
véritable. One of the characters in the epistolary novel remarks, however, that although all events mentioned in the letters are strictly true (vrai), they are not vraisemblable. Thus, if ever she used the letters as basis for a novel, it would make “un livre qui ne contiendra que du vrai, & qui ne sera pas vraisemblable” (II: 195). Imagining the critiques of an “impertinent petit-maître,” she laughingly supposes that such readers would find the work excruciatingly tame. “Quel pitoyable ouvrage! Il n’y a aucun sel, & il n’eût tenu qu’à l’auteur d’y en mettre.” Clarice is too virtuous, and men who surround her, too respectful and “ne ressemblent en rien à ceux de nos jours.” Much as in Rousseau’s “Entretien,” the imagined critiques of the text are preempted and subsequently disarmed, and in both cases the metatextual commentary points to the genesis of an influential new genre. However, Le Prince de Beaumont’s “livre nouveau,” a new kind of novel defined by the text, insists on the importance and the reality of the heroine’s spotless virtue over the maintenance of vraisemblance.\footnote{The tug-of-war between the maintenance of vraisemblance and morality is, of course, at the heart of the “dilemme du roman” in the eighteenth century, as identified by May’s study. However, Le Prince de Beaumont’s explicit parti pris to depict heroanism at the expense of vraisemblance is also interesting in that it seeks to protect the writer from one of the common criticisms historically leveled at the founding tradition of seventeenth-century women’s fiction.}

Marriage in La Nouvelle Clarice, though primarily depicted as a base for reform as in La Nouvelle Héloïse, is not characterized as atonement for an initial fault, at least not the heroine’s. And that is a crucial choice, for like Rousseau, Le Prince de Beaumont seeks to redefine the novelistic genre and its purpose in aligning it with marriage. La Nouvelle Clarice also proposes a lesson in conjugality to be imitated by its readers, and the representation of the heroine is significant to the moral charge and reach of the didactic message. The following comparative analysis of these “new” novels of marriage
is structured as an in-tandem reading of their respective representations of the interplay of existent family structures, transformative nuptials and the subsequent creation of utopian societies. While pointing out these fictional utopias’ overwhelming structural similarities, my reading will particularly highlight the impact of the contrasting initial choice of a flawed versus morally impeccable heroine on the conceptions of conjugality advanced by these texts. The concluding remarks will in turn hypothesize about the fundamental differences in possibilities for the novel of conjugality as the authors of _La Nouvelle Héloïse_ and _La Nouvelle Clarice_ seek to define it.

**Family Structures and Marriage**

Les deux amants sont à plaindre; la mère seule est inexcusable.  
Rousseau, _La Nouvelle Héloïse_

Julie, sixteen years old at the beginning of _La Nouvelle Héloïse_, is one of the few heroines in eighteenth-century French fiction to have two living and present parents.\(^{52}\) Besides Julie’s mother and father, the military man Baron d’Etange, there is also her eighteen-year-old cousin Claire, Claire’s father, and mention of Claire’s brothers. The girls shared Claire’s governess, Chaillot, who has recently died. The reader finds out that Julie’s brother has also died some time ago, and thus the Etange family significantly

\(^{52}\) Isolated or orphaned heroines are a recurrent character type in eighteenth-century plots. For instance, Marivaux’s Marianne is an orphan, as are most of Riccoboni’s heroines (see the Introduction). Cécile of Laclas’ _Les Liaisons dangereuses_ (1782) is brought up at a convent away from her mother; “S.” of Charrière’s _Lettres de Mistriss Henley_ is in the care of her aunt until her marriage. Another Cécile, of the _Lettres écrites de Lausanne_, has only a mother living. Caroline de Lichtfield of Isabelle de Montolieu’s popular novel is mostly brought up by an aunt, though her father is alive. Poulain’s Mademoiselle de Plounai of _Lettres de Rivière_ (1776) is also brought up by an aunt, who is an abbess; only her grandparents are still living. Zilia of _Lettres d’une Péruvienne_ loses any and all family ties when she is transported to France.
lacks a male heir. Though Ernst Cassirer calls Rousseau “l’avocat disert” of the family, and *La Nouvelle Héloïse*’s second half an “apologie de la famille,” the depiction of domestic ties in the beginning of the novel is sooner suggestive of the traditional family’s shortcomings, for the main characters attest to feelings of isolation and decry the lack of parental protection and guidance (*Le problème Jean-Jacques Rousseau* 89).

Julie, unsure of how to respond to the love letters of her tutor (later baptized Saint-Preux by the cousins), finally decides to answer his impassioned missives when he obliquely threatens suicide. Her reply in Letter IV of Book I of the novel is especially striking in that the heroine confides to her very aggressor her sentiment that she has no one to protect her in her troubles:

> Dans l’impuissance de résister, j’ai voulu me garantir d’être attaquée; tes poursuites ont trompé ma vaine prudence. Cent fois j’ai voulu me jeter aux pieds des auteurs de mes jours, cent fois j’ai voulu leur ouvrir mon cœur coupable; ils ne peuvent connaître ce qui s’y passe. Ils voudront appliquer des remèdes ordinaires à un mal désespéré: ma mère et faible et sans autorité; je connais l’inflexible sévérité de mon père, et je ne ferai que perdre et déshonorer moi, ma famille, et toi-même. Mon amie est absente, mon frère n’est plus; je ne trouve aucun protecteur au monde contre l’ennemi qui me poursuit; j’implore en vain le ciel, le ciel est sourd aux prières de faibles. (15)

Julie condemns Saint-Preux as a “vil séducteur” who profited from her admiration to betray her—“je t’estimais, et tu me déshonores!” What’s more, her complaint makes it clear that had her family dynamics been different, the illicit involvement with Saint-Preux may have been avoided. Unlike the perspicacious Mme de Chartres of Lafayette’s *La Princesse de Clèves*, who is aware of the potential dangers to her daughter and urges the young woman to “lui faire confidence de toutes les galanteries qu’on lui dirait,” promising to “lui aider à se conduire dans les choses où l’on était souvent embarrassée quand on était jeune,” Mme d’Etange naively trusts a stranger with her offspring without considering the dangers of such an education (23–4). Mme de Chartres gains her

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53 On pedagogy in Rousseau’s novel, see DeJean, *“La Nouvelle Héloïse*, or the Case for
daughter’s confidence “pas comme sa mère, mais comme son amie” (23). Rousseau’s mother, on the other hand, prefers her social circle, leaving her daughter in the care of a servant: “Ses sociétés lui prennent encore bien des moments qu’elle ne veut pas dérober à mes petites études, et Babi remplit alors sa place assez négligemment” (I, vi, 19). The text presupposes no close relationship between the two, and Julie’s overall lack of supervision is striking.

But even if Julie had been accustomed to confide in her mother, the lopsided distribution of power between the Etange spouses effectively robs the older woman of any ability to protect her daughter. Mme d’Etange is “faible” and “sans autorité,” while the patriarchal power of her father that directs all decision-making in the family is repressive and “inflexible.” A representative of patriarchal rule more lenient to Julie’s predicament is eliminated with her brother’s premature death. Even heaven itself is deaf to her prayers. The inadequacy of Julie’s family, in its inability to protect her, leads to the heroine’s paradoxical strategy of asking her seducer himself to watch over her, in essence fulfilling the role her family should have occupied.54

Saint-Preux certainly interprets her request as such when he assures her that “je frémirais de porter la main sur tes chastes attraits plus que du plus vil inceste, et tu n’es pas dans une sûreté plus inviolable avec ton père qu’avec ton amant” (I, v, 17). Faulty family dynamics oblige Julie to look for a protector in her seducer, but though Saint-Preux readily assumes the role, his claim that Julie will be as safe with him as with her

54 See Book I, Letter IV, where Julie writes to Saint-Preux: “Puis-je te croire assez vil pour abuser de l’aveu fatal que mon délire m’arrache? Non, je te connais bien; tu soutiendras ma faiblesse, tu deviendras ma sauvegarde, tu protégeras ma personne contre mon propre coeur…mon honneur s’ose confier au tien” (16).
own father is doubly ironic. Of course, Saint-Preux fails to keep his promise upon his return to Julie’s side after a separation that has left her dangerously ill and barely convalescent. But the pledge was null to begin with, for as the reader well knows, her father’s savage beating that causes Julie to lose the child she is carrying, shows that he may well be the most dangerous man in her life. In the end, neither father nor lover keeps the heroine safe, and both violate her body and her trust.

Julie, however, is not the only character to feel alone in the midst of family. Her closest confidante Claire, expressing her grief over the passing of her governess Chaillot, expresses a sense of isolation that recalls her cousin’s:

La perte que je pleure en elle, c’est son bon cœur, son parfait attachement, qui lui donnait à la fois pour moi la tendresse d’une mère et la confiance d’une sœur. Elle me tenait lieu de toute ma famille. À peine ai-je connu ma mère! mon père m’aime autant qu’il peut aimer; nous avons perdu ton aimable frère, je ne vois presque jamais les miens: me voilà comme une orpheline délaissée. Mon enfant, tu me restes seule. (I, vii, 21)

Claire’s letter explains the violence of her mourning—she has lost a mother, not a governess, in Chaillot. Claire’s father, if less severe than Julie’s, is equally distant, for as Claire reiterates throughout her letters, his indulgence is the result of the utter boredom his offspring’s upbringing inspires him. Finally, Claire hardly ever sees her siblings: the accumulation of affective lack betrays a feeling of desolation well summed up by the startling term “orphan” with which the young woman describes herself. Essentially consigned to the care of a servant, the two young women are left more than ever on their own with their governess’ passing.

Julie, however, considers Chaillot’s death a blessing in disguise, for as she writes Claire, “la bonne femme était peu prudente avec nous.” Chaillot had thoroughly acquainted the young women in her charge with “des maximes de la galanterie,” warning them “du manège des amants,” and her lessons “commençaient à devenir dangereuses.”
On the brink of involvement with Saint-Preux, Julie reassesses the value of Chaillot’s instruction: “Pour nous garantir des pièges des hommes, si elle ne nous apprenait pas à leur en tendre, elle nous instruisait au moins de mille choses que des jeunes filles se passeraient bien de savoir” (I, vi, 18). The governess’ cautionary tales of “galanterie” and male perfidy recall the pedagogical strategy of Mme de Chartres, but Julie clearly fears that the lessons have had the opposite effect. To preserve the young women from love’s pitfalls, their governess had given them too much knowledge of the dangerous passion, ultimately causing corruption rather than edification. Chaillot is more than an unsuccessful Mme de Chartres, however—to an extent, she presages the pedagogical failure of the text itself. Her seductive lessons replicate the metaphor of the sweet-edged cup full of a bitter drug, but the supposed remedy turns out to be the same “poison” Julie discerns in Saint-Preux’s pedagogical presence, an inoculation leading to contagion rather than immunization.

That Chaillot’s lessons and the negligence of Julie’s mother fail to protect the young woman from a premature loss of virginity, however, also discredits women’s education and authority in the text, and sets the stage for the patriarchal utopia of Clarens in the novel’s second half. The correlation is emphasized by the death of Chaillot, who had inspired unflattering (and supposedly false) ideas of marriage to the cousins, but even more so by the necessary death of Julie’s mother, favorable to her daughter’s union with Saint-Preux. At the end of her life, Julie herself makes this assertion, describing her

55 Of course, Rousseau’s first preface famously threatened that any girl who dared to turn the page would be “une fille perdue,” but the deterrent power of such a prohibition is dubious to say the least (4). The importance of the first preface and of the intended audience it designates for the novel will be discussed later on in the chapter.
56 In Book IV, Letter II, Claire writes Julie: “L’expérience me donna du mariage une idée
mother’s passing as a necessary evil indispensable to the accomplishment of the arranged marriage to Wolmar: “Si le ciel la [sa mère] lui eût conservé, bientôt il fût survenu du désordre dans la famille. L’appui de sa mère, quelque faible qu’il fût, eût suffi pour la rendre plus courageuse à résister à son père; et de là seraient sortis la discorde et les scandales” (VI, xi, 552). The maternal pole, aligned with “désordre,” represents a dangerous pull that would have encouraged the young woman to oppose her father. Its removal thus becomes fundamental if the new family order symbolized by Clarens is to be successfully established.

Romantic love, associated with these dangerous women and their botched pedagogy, is thus also rendered suspect in the text. In a sense, passion is doubly discredited, for it is moreover shown to be insufficient—what the characters seek above all is affectionate consanguineal ties. Julie seeks a father in Saint-Preux, Claire consoles herself for the loss of Chaillot by lavishing care on her “enfant” Julie, and even Saint-Preux, in his willingness to assume the role of Julie’s father, betrays his desire to belong to a family unit. Like the cousins, Saint-Preux also reveals an obsessive sense of loneliness when he imagines Julie “environnée des gens que vous chérissez et qui vous adorent: les soins d’une tendre mère, d’un père dont vous êtes l’unique espoir; l’amitié d’une cousin qui ne semble respirer que par vous” (I, xxi, 41). His borderline-envious

\begin{footnotes}
57 Julie’s reminiscences are in the third person because they are presented in the form of discours rapporté by Wolmar, who sends an account of her last moments to Saint-Preux.  
58 After Julie’s marriage to Wolmar, Saint-Preux will be designated as the couple’s “child,” or sometimes as the “child” of Julie and Claire.
\end{footnotes}
idealization of Julie’s situation contrasts with the isolation Saint-Preux feels—“errant, sans famille, et presque sans patrie, je n’ai que vous sur la terre, et l’amour me tient lieu du tout.” Existent family structures are inadequate to the protagonists’ affective needs, and passion is but a faulty palliative.

*La Nouvelle Clarice* likewise questions the efficacy of traditional family arrangement, but with different results. Clarice’s mother, forced to marry the wealthy aristocrat Darby by her tyrannical father (who is not without similarity to the Baron d’Etange), soon discovers that her husband has a mistress and acknowledged offspring. The new Mrs. Darby becomes a quasi-servant in the household, subject to the whims of her dissolute husband and his illegitimate second family. Before the family’s departure to Darby’s Irish estate, Mrs. Darby decides to confide her baby daughter to her husband’s pious and independently wealthy widowed sister. Like Mme d’Etange, Clarice’s biological mother is unable to properly educate her offspring. As in Rousseau’s novel, patriarchal power that assigns all control of the family to the husband renders the mother incapable of protecting her daughter.

However, *La Nouvelle Clarice*’s representation of the patriarchal family makes it abundantly clear that women’s educative incapacity is not inherent, but a product of that very family dynamic. Mrs. Darby cannot properly instruct her daughter not because she is supposedly negligent like Mme d’Etange, or a busybody like Chaillot; her powerlessness to regulate her husband’s behavior leaves little Clarice open to contagion by the loose morals of her father and the mistress and illegitimate children Mrs. Darby is forced to tolerate in her home. This is why Mrs. Darby decides to undertake the radical step of giving her daughter away to be raised by a relative. The novel thus drives home the point
that even a perfectly virtuous and dedicated mother is unable to provide a solid education to her children in a skewed patriarchal family system that paradoxically robs the woman of the power to perform the very tasks she is expected to fulfill. The hyperbolic representation of the consistently villainous Darby, unlike the more nuanced portrayal of the Baron d’Etange, reiterates this same criticism by making it even more obvious that the danger from which these heroines need to be protected is the father and consequently the actual patriarchal order he represents.

Rousseau’s and Le Prince de Beaumont’s novels both suggest inadequacies in the traditional patriarchal family, linked to the unequal distribution of power between the spouses and the incapacity of the domestic bonds fostered by such families to fulfill the affective needs of the protagonists. Yet, by consigning the heroine to the care of a woman made independent through widowhood and stressing the success of the excellent education Clarice’s aunt gives her, Le Prince de Beaumont’s text validates women’s pedagogical capacity and implies that it needs only to be freed of the shortcomings of traditional patriarchal relations to develop fully. Consequently, Clarice’s education by her devout and resolute aunt not only prepares her to independently handle the vicissitudes of fate, but also foreshadows the advent of a regenerating matriarchal order in the second half of the novel, much as the educative failure of women in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* spells the setting in place of the new society at Clarens.

Like Julie, Clarice is exposed to the pressure of an arranged marriage prepared by her father with the death of her main female caretaker, which forces her to return to her biological family. However, Clarice’s biological mother is still alive, and the heroine significantly finally meets and develops a bond with this figure. The novel stresses this
attachment by showing its profound impact on the heroine, whose correspondence trivializes her upcoming nuptials in favor of describing the long-anticipated meeting with her mother. Similarly, in the second half of the novel, the instrumental relationship will be with the mother of the man Clarice marries, and not with her new husband. That Clarice’s mother is alive subtracts the heroine from her father’s marital exigencies to an extent, but his authority is further invalidated by another important detail. Unwilling to give up the infant Clarice to the care of the sister he detested, Darby was induced to do so by a signed agreement through which he gave up paternal rights to his daughter in exchange for financial compensation.

Thus, as Clarice would astutely remark to her confidante Hariote after fleeing the marriage her father attempts to impose, the agreement concluded in her childhood effectively means that she no longer has a father to dispose of her hand, and thus must acquire a husband on her own: “Je ne suis pas d’un âge de disposer de ma main sans l’aveu de mon père. Mais hélas! puis-je me flatter d’en avoir un ? N’a-t-il pas vendu depuis bien des années, le droit que la nature lui avait donné sur moi?” (I: 211). Clarice’s father sells her to an aunt, Julie’s father, as she indignantly points out in a rare (and short-lived) moment of rebellion, sells her to Wolmar: “Enfin mon père m’a donc vendue! il fait de sa fille une marchandise, une esclave!” (I, xxviii, 57). Both of these fictional fathers use their offspring as currency, but luckily for Clarice, the trade ultimately ensures her independence.

Though following her brief outburst, the contrite Julie immediately backtracks and proclaims her father “le meilleur des pères,” the head of the Etange household is by
no means an exemplary family man.\footnote{Julie’s rant against her father ends by excusing him, while the blame is characteristically displaced on the mother—“elle m’a trop aimée, elle m’a perdue” (I, xxviii, 58).} As the reader finds out from Claire, it is her husband’s numerous infidelities and harsh treatment that weaken Mme d’Etange and contribute to her premature death.\footnote{“S’il faut attribuer sa perte au chagrin…c’est à son époux seul qu’il faut s’en prendre. Longtemps inconstant et volage, il prodigua les feux de sa jeunesse à mille objets moins dignes de plaire que sa vertueuse compagne; et, quand l’âge le lui eut ramené, il conserva près d’elle cette rudesse inflexible dont les maris infidèles ont accoutumé d’aggraver leurs torts” (III, vii, 237).} The baron, however, blames his wife’s death on Julie, just as he holds Saint-Preux accountable for the beating Julie receives at his hands.\footnote{Her father tells Julie, on bed rest after her beating, that “Quoique je me sois toujours senti peu d’inclination pour lui [Saint-Preux], je le hais, surtout à présent, pour les excès qu’il m’a fait commettre, et ne lui pardonnerai jamais ma brutalité” (I, lxiii, 120).} Julie’s culpability in turn becomes a weapon in the baron’s arsenal, for it is not through brute force, but through emotional manipulation that he is able to get his daughter to agree to the projected marriage with Wolmar. The distinction is significant, for the baron’s portrayal marks the fictional advent of a new, “affectionate” father who enforces his rule through love. The portrait’s unsavory underside insinuates, however, that the emerging Enlightenment discourse extolling affectionate family bonds, exemplified by Rousseau’s novel, may ultimately have served to cover up the patriarchal family’s tightening exigencies toward women.\footnote{Lynn Hunt sees Julie’s father as marking the halfway point between the older vision of an authoritarian patriarch, and the new image of benevolent paternity in her study The Family Romance of the French Revolution. Hunt’s analysis in particular highlights the immensely influential role of the novel as “source for new attitudes about fathers and children” (21).}

Darby likewise relies on emotional manipulation to control Clarice, though unlike the Baron d’Etange, who presses marriage with Wolmar out of loyalty to his old friend, his motivations are exclusively venal. When Clarice is named her aunt’s “héritière
universelle,” Darby considers himself cheated out of his sister’s wealth. He thus schemes to get his hands on the money by having his daughter marry someone under his control, proposing the son of his childhood friend, the Duc de Montalve. Even Clarice’s correspondent Hariote and her husband, who know of Montalve’s wealth and ancient nobility, applaud the proposed match. Though Clarice has no sentiments whatsoever for her suitor, and her mother even experiences an inexplicable aversion to the young man, the women dutifully go along with Darby’s choice. However, the young man turns out to be illegitimate, and because Darby had also been involved with the Duc de Montalve’s mistress, possibly related to Clarice.

Such outrageous revelations may well put off the modern reader, generally intolerant of what Joan Stewart terms the “excesses of plot and language characteristic of many eighteenth-century sentimental novels” in her brief overview of La Nouvelle Clarice (Gynographs 37). But I believe that this exaggeration is part of a deliberate strategy on Le Prince de Beaumont’s part. On the one hand, Darby’s unmitigated villainy is intended to shock the reader, who may have been tempted to excuse a father like the Baron d’Etange, into a reflection on the limits of paternal power, potentially bringing about a recognition that any unbalanced authority is inherently abusive, even if some fathers and husbands do not fully impose their prerogatives on their children and wives.

On the other hand, Le Prince de Beaumont’s portrayal adroitly takes the meaning of aristocratic marriage à la lettre. The incestuous union put forth by Darby uses Clarissa as a pawn to advance his financial goals. But the essence of any aristocratic match consisted in consolidating wealth and influence within the family, as does the proposed brother-sister union, and daughters were simply a means to that end, as Clarissa is shown
Kamuf, in her brilliant analysis of Rousseau’s novel in *Fictions of Feminine Desire* suggests similar motivations guiding the Baron d’Etange’s choice of his daughter’s spouse. Not only is Wolmar her father’s textual double, the death of Julie’s brother, the sole male heir of the Etange family, necessitates a replacement “son-in-law who is of the same blood, and even better, of the same name” (112). Etange thus chooses Wolmar: Kamuf’s reading stresses the etymological similarity between the names Etange/étang, and Wolmar/mare, both of which essentially refer to stagnant bodies of water. In a sense, Montalve is a Wolmar laid bare.63

Le Prince de Beaumont’s representation of traditional patriarchal family dynamics shows their inherently flawed nature as well as heralds the advent of a reformed society in the second half of the novel. The paradox that becomes apparent in a comparison between Rousseau and Le Prince de Beaumont’s depiction of the heroines’ initial family situation and its impact on their subsequent marriages, is that the novel that adopts the most conservative discourse on marriage allows its heroine the most freedom in choice of spouse. *La Nouvelle Clarice*, though outwardly championing strict obedience to parents regardless of how bad their choice of spouse may be, frames the heroine’s particular case in such a way that she must flee and disobey her father.64 Not only that, Clarice’s

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63 Le Prince de Beaumont’s outrageous plot twists also seem to be deliberate because the novel is exceptionally self-conscious, using pointed humor to diffuse the impact of dramatic situations. Thus, for instance, Hariote and Clarice’s discussions of the latter’s adventures mock the traditional novelistic convention of the delicate heroine’s victimization at the hands of villainous males. Clarice challenges both Montalve’s suit and novelistic partiality to love at first sight from the outset, writing to Hariote that “le coup de roman n’est pas parfait, car on dit que dans ces sortes d’ouvrage, l’amour est presque toujours une surprise. Le Marquis venait ici pour y être amoureux” (I: 123).

64 Le Prince de Beaumont’s novel ingeniously uses the heroines’ reading of Richardson’s *Clarissa* as a framing device that puts Clarice’s flight in context, and preemptively excuses her apparent disobedience and marriage. Hariote is appalled that Clarissa would
circumstances subsequently oblige her to not only choose her own husband, but even to propose to him. Le Prince de Beaumont’s representation of a heroine compelled by particular conditions to a course of action in opposition with the text’s overtly espoused values appears to be a conscious reversal of Rousseau’s novelistic paradigm.

_La Nouvelle Héloïse_, though polyphonically expressing some rather radical opinions on marriage and parental authority—one has only to cite Saint-Preux’s friend Edouard Bomston’s tirades against the nobility’s antiquated marital practices, Claire’s definition of marriage as slavery, or even Rousseau the editor’s indignant note on the La Bédoyère affair—ultimately has Julie decline the possibility of flight and happiness with Saint-Preux on Bomston’s Yorkshire estate, because in the heroine’s particular case, the emotional stakes of freedom are simply set too high. Julie is already ravaged with guilt over her initial misstep, which she believes has caused her mother’s death. If she consequently accepts the marriage imposed by her father, it is not because she finds his reasons compelling, or even because she acknowledges his authority—it is simply because she knows that the additional culpability of disobedience and its impact on her father will prove too much for her to bear. Nevertheless, Rousseau’s novel bends the

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refuse to marry Lovelace despite the risk to her reputation, claiming that if she were ever forced to flee her father’s house, even with a servant, he would be her husband within twenty-four hours. Clarice responds to Hariote’s critiques of Clarissa’s behavior by claiming that the author sought to teach the importance of filial obedience. As for marrying one’s ravisher, “il faudrait ne s’y point exposer, & j’aurai toujours une mauvaise opinion d’une fille qui quitte la maison de son père, à moins qu’elle ne pût échapper a un crime certain, & où ces circonstances se rencontrent-elles?” (I: 139). This, of course, is exactly what later happens to Clarice—she escapes a “crime certain” and is obliged to marry her rescuer to preserve her reputation.

65 On Milord Edouard’s view that it is the prospective spouses’ free choice that matters most, see Book I, Letter LXII, and Letters II and III of Book II. For Claire’s views on marriage and particularly its equation with “esclavage,” see Book IV, Letter II, especially p. 304. On Rousseau and the La Bédoyère affair, see the Introduction (22).
heroine into compliance with marriage and the patriarchal order, and it is the initial
breach of her virginity that significantly opens a breach to emotional manipulation by her
father.

Fault and Redemption

Je crois que l’intention de l’Auteur, qui était très-bonne, vous a échappé. C’est comme s’il eût dit:
Une fille aussi parfaite & aussi vertueuse que mon Héroïne, a perdu pour une désobéissance à ses
parents, son bonheur, sa réputation, son honneur même. Apprenez, jeunes personnes, par son
exemple, qu’une première faute contre l’obéissance que vous devez à vos parents, peut vous
conduire de précipices en précipices; qu’il est de démarches qui ne laissent plus que le choix entre
deux malheurs.

Le Prince de Beaumont, La Nouvelle Clarice

Un mari, comme un gouvernement, ne doit jamais avouer de faute.
Honoré de Balzac, Physiologie du Mariage (1830)

In Julie’s first letter to Saint-Preux as Mme de Wolmar, she confesses her failed
strategy to force her parents’ hand and get them to agree to the lovers’ marriage by a
declaration of pregnancy made to her pastor. Her miscarriage puts a stop to this idea,
being interpreted by Julie as punishment from above for her temerity: “Le ciel rejeta des
projets conçus dans le crime; je ne méritais pas l’honneur d’être mère; mon attente resta
toujours vaine; et il me fut refusé d’expier ma faute aux dépens de ma réputation” (III,
xviii, 253-4). Julie wants to expiate her errors through marriage to Saint-Preux, but it is
that very fault that in her eyes precludes both divine and clerical aid for her project. The
novel aligns heavenly order with the patriarchal, and Julie’s famous altar-side conversion
in which she surrenders her interior dissent to the “œil éternel qui voit tout,” presages her
loss of individuality at Clarens where she will be continuously scrutinized by the “œil
vivant” Wolmar (III, xviii, 260).

The heroine’s fault both leaves her helpless and securely subjugates her by
requiring perpetual redemption. When a despairing Julie first confesses the loss of her virginity to Claire, the latter’s answer is decisive: “Chère cousine, il faut gémir, nous aimer, nous taire: et, s’il se peut, effacer, à force de vertus, une faute qu’on ne répare point avec des larmes!” (I, xxx, 61). The role Julie assumes at Clarens following her marriage symbolizes the very erasure of her lapse from virtue foretold by Claire. Indeed, Wolmar himself knowingly stakes the success of his marriage to Julie on her need to return to a state of virtue. Though Julie’s father forbids her to mention her involvement with Saint-Preux to Wolmar, it turns out that her omniscient husband has known of her past all along. Hesitant to marry Julie knowing that she is passionately in love with another man, the observant Wolmar finally decides that he can count on virtue to ensure Julie’s complaisance and sexual fidelity: “Cette conduite était inexcusable. … J’offensais la délicatesse; je péchais contre la prudence; j’exposais votre honneur et le mien. … Mais, Julie, je vous connaissais…j’osai croire à la vertu, et vous épousai” (IV, xii, 370-1). The text’s definition of marriage as atonement for an original fault effectively forces Julie’s individuality into the mold of normative feminine virtue constantly policed by the all-seeing eye in the Foucauldian Panopticon of Clarens. Mme de Wolmar’s active repentance in the role of the perfect wife and mother is made possible only through the continual erasure of Julie’s own self, her interiority and her desire.

“Sublimes auteurs, rabaissez un peu vos modèles, si vous voulez qu’on cherche à les imiter” self-righteously advises Rousseau in the second preface. Yet the choice to represent Julie’s repentance is clearly more than a strategy to make the novel’s lesson more imitable and thus more effective (583). Staël, elsewhere La Nouvelle Héloïse’s champion, argues that the novel would have been even more effective had Rousseau
portrayed Julie as only passionate instead of unchaste: “Je voudrais que Rousseau n’eût peint Julie coupable que par la passion de son cœur. … Combien on fait rougir d’une grande faute, en peignant les remords et les malheurs que de plus légères doivent causer?” (49). But had Julie been “coupable que par la passion de son cœur,” she may not have accepted the marriage to Wolmar followed by enclosure in the reformed patriarchy of Clarens. As Nadine Bérenguier aptly points out in her discussion of Julie’s marriage: “Eût-elle été mariée à monsieur de Wolmar dans sa pureté virginale, Julie n’eût peut-être pas éprouvé le besoin de se consacrer si passionnément à sa vie de couple. … Si la conjugalité est placée chez Rousseau au sommet des valeurs, elle n’y est pas moins fondée sur une faute, c’est-à-dire étymologiquement, un manque” (L’Infortune des alliances 105). Indeed, the woman’s fault is nothing less than essential to the novel’s vision of conjugality and the lesson it ostensibly aims to impart, but as such, the vision is by definition faulty from the start.

Staël critiques Rousseau for representing Julie’s sexual misstep, but the prolific eighteenth-century writer Marmontel formulates the opposite criticism of Lafayette in his theoretical text Essai sur les romans (1799).66 The critic makes the startling assertion that representing the heroine’s guilt would have had greater moral utility: “La princesse de Clèves, après bien des combats et une longue résistance devenue coupable et malheureuse par la seule témérité de sa confiance en elle-même et en ses propres résolutions, eût été d’un exemple…moins intéressant, mais certainement plus moral” (312). Marmontel’s critique of a heroine known not only for her aveu but also for a

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66 Marmontel’s Essai sur les romans, considérés du côté moral posits moral utility as the most important aim of novels, but its reactionary and authoritarian tone sharply differentiates it from Huet’s treatise.
remarkable refusal of marriage and a withdrawal from society, seems to show striking proclivities with Rousseau’s novelistic strategy in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*.

Why would the princesse have been a more moral example had she committed adultery? Marmontel assumes that few women could have resisted such temptation, and the princesse’s fall would presumably have shown female readers their weakness and need for guidance. But I think the hushed over point of contention with Lafayette is that her heroine’s spotless virtue is ultimately too liberating. The princesse’s adherence to her core values enables her to chart her own course and bypass the constraints of patriarchal society *in her own land*. Such independence was not likely to be the destiny envisioned for female readers learning from novelistic examples by either Marmontel or Rousseau, who sensed that “guilty” women were easier to manage. Julie’s striking inability to leave the territorial confines of her father’s domain, which intensifies after her marriage, would seem to confirm such a supposition, particularly when considered within the literary context of monumental heroines such as Lafayette’s.

By contrast, the representation of Le Prince de Beaumont’s Clarice seems to be more closely aligned with the literary heritage of self-sufficient heroines like the princesse (Stewart, *Gynographs* 46). By positing itself as a monument to its heroine’s exemplary virtue, *La Nouvelle Clarice* both establishes woman’s moral superiority, and makes it her greatest defense against a prejudiced society. Indeed, for Stewart the Christian morality of Le Prince de Beaumont’s heroines is a “specifically female strategy,” and “the inviolate chastity of dutiful heroines sets them apart from a phallocentric culture” (*Gynographs* 48, 35). Significantly, Clarice’s spotless virtue and piety guarantee her the aid of the church in escaping the marriage arranged by her father,
denied Julie. Despite Darby’s defaming claims, the Catholic priest Baker takes Clarice’s side. Protecting her from Darby’s pursuit, Baker helps her to marry the candidate she has chosen and flee to France, the ecclesiastic’s approval effectively replacing the paternal benediction.

But the truly singular plot element of the novel is not just Clarice’s virtue. Instead of the heroine, it is her future husband who must atone for a past fault. Refusing to marry Montalve, Clarice flees her father’s house and meets a chivalrous (and Catholic) Frenchman enjoying a walk in the countryside. Seemingly expressly sent by Providence for the heroine’s protection, the Baron d’Astie is in fact the scion of one of France’s oldest though impoverished noble families, in England due to complicated personal circumstances. Astie helps Clarice to find her way undetected, and arranges a meeting with her confessor Baker. Acquainted with the Frenchman’s true identity, the ecclesiastic counsels Clarice to preserve her reputation and acquire legal emancipation by marrying her protector. Astie is a minor and cannot marry without his mother’s permission, but the widowed Baronne d’Astie had already asked Baker to find her son a virtuous Catholic wife. Clarice proves to be the perfect match, and Baker happily conducts a clandestine ceremony and arranges the couple’s flight.

The virtuous heroine is able to marry against her father’s wishes because she follows a higher morality that sets her above the laws that subjugate women in a patriarchal society. Instead, Clarice follows the guidance of Providence, that has

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67 The novel consistently posits the Church as a virtuous woman’s safeguard against societal abuses. This may reflect the Church’s traditional defense of the importance of spousal consent to marriage, opposed by royal legislation, as well as the more favorable treatment of women’s grievances by ecclesiastical courts, as I explain in the Introduction and Chapter 1.
undoubtedly sent her Astie as the correspondence with Hariote makes clear, and Heaven’s earthly representation in the person of Baker helps her to conclude the match. Though the newlyweds both profess love at first sight, Clarice immediately takes care to define this sentiment as the opposite of passion. Rather, her affection springs from esteem and gratitude for her rescuer’s kindness: “Pourquoi nommer passion un sentiment qui fut sitôt étayé par l’estime et par la reconnaissance? Aurais-je pu payer autrement un libérateur si généreux?” (I: 207). The heroine’s escape from an arranged marriage by no means valorizes romantic passion as the basis for conjugality, proposing instead a union in which the superior virtue of the heroine will find a concrete outlet through social reform.

For Astie, who confesses to being unworthy of his spouse because of committing a grave fault, the marriage is most of all a means to redress his wrongs toward his mother. Enraptured with Clarice’s moral qualities, Astie exclaims: “Quel présent plus précieux puis-je lui faire, qu’une fille telle que vous? Que je vais réparer avec usure tous les tourments dont j’ai déchiré son cœur! Vous ne connaissez pas, madame, combien celui que vous élevez jusqu’à vous s’est rendu coupable, & combien il mérite peu un tel sort” (I: 227). Astie’s fault is undoubtedly of a sexual nature, meaning that Le Prince de Beaumont’s novel also insists on the consequence of chastity for its male characters. Even more importantly, however, the reader does not find out the specifics of Astie’s misstep until the very end of the text. Astie’s recognition of his guilt ultimately means that Clarice’s superiority is admitted from the outset by her husband, and her marriage is redefined as a kinship bond between the heroine and her mother-in-law, two virtuous women who will form the matriarchal utopia of the novel’s second half.
Life After Marriage: Two Visions of Utopia

These, Penshurst, are thy praise, and yet not all.
Thy lady’s noble, fruitful, chaste withal.
His children thy great lord may call his own;
A fortune, in this age, but rarely known.

Ben Jonson, To Penshurst (1616)

Liée au sort d’un époux, ou plutôt aux volontés d’un père, par une chaîne indissoluble, j’entre dans une nouvelle carrière qui ne doit finir qu’à la mort.

Rousseau, La Nouvelle Héloïse

In both La Nouvelle Héloïse and La Nouvelle Clarice, marriage is redefined as an institution whose significance surpasses strictly personal satisfaction. Rather, the heroines are expected to find individual fulfillment through their particular functions in the reformed societies constructed by their marriage. However, Julie’s first letter of Book IV (the portion of the novel that elaborates on the new society established by the Wolmar spouses), reveals the lack of satisfaction she feels in all areas of her personal life, as she ardently enjoins Claire to return to Clarens. So many of her loved ones are gone, a loss akin to slow death: “On perd tous les jours ce qui nous fut cher, et l’on ne le remplace plus. On meurt ainsi par degrés” (IV, i, 297). The impersonal “on” masks that the loss of life “par degrés” is Julie’s, that she has been dying since her marriage. The heroine admits only to a terrible sentiment of emptiness, “tous ces vides” left by the loss of mother, lover, and Claire’s husband M. d’Orbe, a good friend. She has become a mother, but her children are too young to fulfill Julie’s affective needs: “Si mes fils étaient plus grands, l’amour maternel remplirait tous ces vides; mais cet amour, ainsi que tous les

68 The novel operates a curious switch of the longed-for absent object here: the last letter of Book III is by Saint-Preux, who notifies Claire of his impending departure for a world tour, “je pars, charmante cousine” (293). Julie’s very next letter opens with “Que tu tardes longtemps à revenir,” but the object of desire thus addressed is not the absent Saint-Preux as the previous letter may have led to expect, but Claire.
autres, a besoin de communication, et quel retour peut attendre une mère d’un enfant de quatre ou cinq ans?”

Wolmar’s affection is likewise insufficient to fill the emptiness felt by Julie, as she confesses in the same letter. Though he appreciates the expressions of Julie’s fondness for their children, the affective communication she seeks is impossible, because he cannot reply in kind. “On a si grand besoin de dire combien on les [nos enfants] aime à quelqu’un qui nous entende! Mon mari m’entend, mais il ne me répond pas assez à ma fantaisie; la tête ne lui en tourne pas comme à moi; sa tendresse est trop raisonnable.”

Later, Julie confesses to Saint-Preux that her husband is an atheist, which also places a gulf between the spouses, and deeply distresses the devout heroine. These differences seem to compromise emotional intimacy between the spouses from the start, while the separate spheres for men and women established at Clarens minimize physical proximity during the day (though husband and wife do share a bedroom). Julie’s clearly restrained grievances effectively undermine the supposed satisfactions of marriage and motherhood from the outset.

Indeed, what primarily sustains Julie in her “état présent” is not affective satisfaction, but the contemplation of her new role of wife and mother: “J’aime à nourrir mon cœur des sentiments d’honneur. … Le rang d’épouse et de mère m’élève l’âme et me soutient” (IV, i, 299). Paradoxically, a novel that ostensibly seeks to show its readers the contentment of redemptive wife- and motherhood suggests the opposite with its dissonant portrayal of Julie, whose profound dissatisfaction is masked only by clinging to an idea of herself as a wife and mother. Spouse and mother are revealed to be a “rang,” an artificial construct to which Julie actively tries to conform her individual identity, but
the resulting Mme de Wolmar is a hollow shell of "tous ces vides," which is already crumbling.

Claire’s return is hastened by Julie to prevent this eminent collapse: “Tu ne m’es pas seulement nécessaire quand je suis avec mes enfants ou avec mon mari, mais surtout quand je suis avec ta pauvre Julie.” (IV, i, 301). The heroine cannot bear to be alone, and Claire, the “ange tutélaire,” is projected as her only salvation: “tou...
convincingly argues in *Domesticating Passions, La Nouvelle Héloïse* is “an eminently political work whose literary form is deliberately chosen to convince a corrupted, but not yet corrupt, public of the necessity of reform” (6). For Fermon, Rousseau’s novel thus stages the “conflict between passions and the requirements of the social order” (7). However, though the microcosm of Clarens is constructed on the general suppression of desire, the sacrifice truly indispensable to its functioning is a woman’s to make.\(^7^0\)

But what exactly is this new society built on a woman’s sacrifice, and how does it operate? Clarens has been variously viewed as a kind of utopia, or at the very least a transformed society. For Penny Weiss, Clarens is one representation of Rousseau’s rejection of both aristocratic and bourgeois families “founded on their inability to accomplish politically what the sex-roled, affectionate family can accomplish” (56). Kamuf also evokes a transformation of the family and consequently society, which she describes as “the transition from the Baron’s vain patriarchy of artifice and prejudice to the more natural order of Wolmar’s enlightened management” (113). The Swiss estate is the incarnation of the community that can be created on the basis of a new kind of family unit, one that follows neither traditional aristocratic nor bourgeois models of kinship structures, but relies on affectionate bonds and gender differentiation for its smooth functioning.\(^7^1\)

The admiring Saint-Preux, recently returned from his travels, elaborates the

\(^7^0\) In *Gendered Community: Rousseau, Sex and Politics*, Penny Weiss points out that in Rousseau’s socio-political thought and particularly in his conception of what the critic terms the sex-roled family, “men do less to sustain community, even as they receive more benefits from it.” On the other hand, “woman in Rousseau’s system as in too many others helps create a community of which she herself is not fully a part and from which she does not receive due benefits” (112).

\(^7^1\) Tanner describes Clarens as “mainly a high-bourgeois dream” but “partly a lower aristocracy dream as well.” (150).
changes made by the Wolmar couple to the Clarens estate in a letter to Milord Edouard.

The transformation, according to Saint-Preux, has been guided by one dominant
principle: “Partout on a substitué l’utile à l’agréable, et l’agréable y a presque toujours
gagné” (IV, x, 337). The new economy of Clarens privileges the useful over the
agreeable, a change symbolized by the diversion of water from the Baron d’Etange’s
ostentatious and costly fountain to irrigate formerly arid grounds, fostering abundant and
lush growth. Destructive and sterile romantic passion has been replaced by the
“tendresse raisonnable” of the married couple, an affective economy that likewise favors
the useful over the agreeable. Pragmatic tenderness crucially holds together a family that
must be closely united in order to face the demands of a burgeoning agrarian community.
Instead of exclusively renting their land out to farmers, the Wolmar couple has
undertaken a major agricultural development project, carefully cultivating and planting
vineyards.

The community has become largely self-sufficient, and Saint-Preux’s letter details
the meticulous system that has been put in place for recruiting, training, supervising, and
disciplining the large number of workers and servants demanded by such an enterprise.
Wolmar, who appreciatively evokes the Roman “qui voulait que sa maison fût construite
de manière qu’on vît tout ce qui s’y faisait,” indulges his taste for observation and
similarly structures Clarens as a Panopticon, where nothing can be hidden and the
minutest actions are policed and reported (IV, vi, 317). Diligence reaps monetary

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72 Kamuf structures her excellent analysis of Rousseau’s novel around the crucial
symbolism of the transformation of the estate’s water supply. Tanner evokes it as well.
73 In Literary Fortifications, DeJean compares the orderly microcosm of Clarens, with
Wolmar at the impenetrable center, to Vauban’s elaborate military fortifications that
ensured the omnipotence of the Sun King: “He alone remains invisible, unknowable to
reward, missteps economic penalties or dismissal, and a rigid balance in which each member remains in an assigned place and performs a specific role, maintains general order. Thus, for example, Julie discourages any changes in socio-economic status among the inhabitants, and the servants, who perform gender-differentiated tasks, are purposely kept separated “pour prévenir entre eux des liaisons suspectes” (IV, x, 337).  

Though boosting agricultural development, favoring local production, and shunning luxury items are all important elements of reform leading to general economic prosperity at Clarens, the main thrust of the reorganization remains centered on the landowners’ profit. The workers may earn better wages and can rely on a steady source of labor demand, but “the real benefits of their labors are reaped by their employers,” as Theodore Braun perceptively points out (43). Saint-Preux praises Julie’s generosity and compassionate “bonté naturelle” towards those in the couple’s dependence, but depictions of any actual aid are very vague. Supposedly, the typical villager “a plus besoin de ses avis que de ses dons,” though widows and orphans do receive Julie’s “bienfaits” (V, ii, 402). Reform of the country folk’s quotidien is likewise mentioned in laudatory, but strikingly imprecise terms. “Toutes les maisons où elle [Julie] entre, offrent bientôt un tableau de la sienne; l’aisance et le bien-être y sont une de ses moindres influences, la concorde et les moeurs la suivent de ménage en ménage” (V, ii, 403). Indeed, detailed descriptions are seemingly limited to the laborers’ training and

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anyone but himself. Wolmar’s self-portrait as living eye reveals that he has mastered the essence of Louis XIV’s fortifications of secrecy. He is constantly vigilant, never exposed, always master of his own hollow (absent) presence” (182, see also 173-183).

74 In Book V, Letter II Saint-Preux writes Milord Edouard that “La grande maxime de Madame de Wolmar est donc de ne point favoriser les changements de condition” (405).
occupations.\textsuperscript{75}

Despite seemingly progressive reform, the rigid sex and social roles and the driving dominance of the ruling caste’s interest in the autarky of Clarens underpin a structure of relationships that have been described by critics as typically feudal.\textsuperscript{76} Thus, in his celebrated reading \textit{La Transparence et l’obstacle}, Jean Starobinski evokes “la structure encore féodale de la communauté à Clarens,” that divinizes the “père de famille” (123, 138). Nicole Fermon classifies the novel’s representation a “reconstruction of a feudal household” (157). And in \textit{Rousseau’s Republican Romance} Elisabeth Rose Wingrove likewise convincingly argues that “the relationships that sustain Clarens resemble nothing so much as a demesne, where the absolutism of political rule is undergirded by the social and moral obligations of customary right” (107).

The policy of pervasive supervision and control of the workers’ sex lives, on the other hand, has produced a reading of Clarens as a “bankrupt” utopia of “totalitarianism,” in James F. Jones’ study of the novel (70). Raymond Trousson even goes so far as to call Wolmar “un Big Brother en perruque poudrée” (Jean-Jacques Rousseau 2: 26). For Trousson, “Clarens est une véritable utopie paternaliste reposant sur l’aliénation totale de l’individu à la personne morale de l’ensemble et la fabrication d’un eudémonisme collectif.” But calling Clarens a “paternalist utopia” is pleonastic, for following in the footsteps of Thomas More, traditional eighteenth-century utopias tended to reproduce the

\textsuperscript{75} Bérenguier’s article “From Clarens to \textit{Hollow Park}: Isabelle de Charrière’s Quiet Revolution,” compares \textit{La Nouvelle Héloïse} and \textit{Lettres de Mistriss Henley}, highlighting Charrière’s subtle criticism of Rousseau’s vagueness through her portrayal of the Henleys’ failure at implementing the ambiguous lessons of the Clarens domestic utopia.

\textsuperscript{76} Interestingly, Vigée identifies a thread of “spiritual autarky” in Rousseau’s oeuvre reminiscent of Mme de Clèves’ choice of retirement: “Le repos que désire la princesse trouve bien des échos dans la nostalgie secrète de Rousseau…une exigence secrète de l’autarcie spirituelle” (751).
“static picture” and rigid organization of “strict patriarchal hierarchy with severe subordination of women and children,” as Alessa Johns convincingly demonstrates in her excellent article “Remembering the Future: Eighteenth-Century Women’s Utopian Writing” (38). Clarens is thus a typical utopia in every sense, that encloses the heroine within a patriarchal space and a narrowly defined role which is ultimately unfulfilling.77

Like the limited joys of motherhood, Julie’s confined social sphere and its duties hint at the heroine’s frustration. Trapped in what Tanner calls “the kind of unemployment that was to beset many later bourgeois mothers,” Julie is restricted to the conservative occupations of house, garden, and children by the novel (160). Her only personal space, where Julie can escape her roles of spouse and mother and the accompanying constant observation, is the Elysée garden that she carefully plants and nurtures.78 But the Elysée, a miniature walled-off paradise within Wolmar’s domain, is in itself representative of Julie’s enclosure within patriarchy. The garden, as critical analyses often point out, is intimately associated with Julie herself, and represents the entity of the heroine.79 For Christophe Martin, the “consubstantialité de Julie et du jardin de Clarens,” an example of the eighteenth-century’s preoccupation with metaphors of the female body as “territoire, enclos, propriété,” is a manifestation of the mutation of the family into its modern

77 DeJean points out that since etymologically, “paradise” means “walled-in park,” Clarens, “like all utopias...is sealed off from the outside world” (Literary Fortifications 173). Critical readings of La Nouvelle Héloïse that focus exclusively on its utopian aspects include Guillaume Ansart’s Réflexion utopique et pratique romanesque au Siècle des Lumières: Prévost, Rousseau, Sade and Nicolas Wagner’s “Utopie de La Nouvelle Héloïse,” in Roman et Lumières au XVIIIe siècle.

78 A space that clearly irks Wolmar, who cuts off Saint-Preux’s laudatory exclamations on the garden’s beauty with a curt “louez modestement des jeux d’enfant, et songez qu’ils n’ont jamais rien pris sur les soins de la mère de famille” (IV, xi, 359).

79 For a fascinating reading of the Elysée garden and its relationship to the Clarens domain, see Louis Marin’s article “L’effet Sharawadj ou le jardin de Julie: notes sur un jardin et un texte (Lettre XI, 4e partie, La Nouvelle Héloïse).”
conjugal form, characterized by woman’s confinement in the private domestic sphere (195, 206-7).

For Julie, death becomes the sole way out from the suffocating hold of normative domesticity. “Je ne vois partout que de sujets de contentement, et je ne suis pas contente; une langueur secrète s’insinue au fond de mon coeur; je le sens vide et gonflé, comme vous disiez autrefois du vôtre; l’attachement pour tout ce qui m’est cher ne suffit pour l’occuper; il lui reste une force inutile dont il ne sait que faire,” confides the heroine to Saint-Preux in a letter written shortly before her fatal drowning accident (VI, viii, 528). “Gonflé[e],” bloated with dissatisfaction, the heroine is smothered within the rigidly organized utopia of Clarens, unable to employ her pent-up energies. Tellingly, it is the same prescriptive motherhood, responsible for both the figurative and physical states of being “gonflé,” that also causes Julie’s death. Jumping after her toddler Marcellin who accidentally falls into the water, Julie is literally “gonflé[e],” saturated with water to the point of asphyxiation. “Vous mourez martyr de l’amour maternel,” enthusiastically cries out the minister present in her last hours of life (VI, xi, 546). As Jones remarks in his analysis of the utopia at Clarens, the continuation of the estate depends on a strictly structured equilibrium maintained by Julie’s negation of her individuality, a kind of necessary “stasis.” The resulting “human stagnation…serves as the ultimate basis for her death-wish,” as Jones convincingly argues (82). In other words, the heroine’s only escape from the patriarchal paradise of Clarens is succumbing to suffocation, and her death heralds the approaching destruction of the balance carefully crafted by Wolmar.

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80 Stasis being, once again, a defining characteristic of traditional utopia.
81 Jones associates the states of stasis, stagnation, and suffocation in his reading of the heroine’s death, and argues moreover that certain textual clues indicate that the Clarens
As it does in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Clarice’s marriage brings a radical change in narrative preoccupations: the social is privileged over the individual in a detailed portrayal of the functioning of a new, transformed society. Both visions of post-marital utopias, situated in a relatively concrete geographical location, focus on descriptions of thorough reform of every aspect of the family and surrounding society, through household management to the training of domestic labor and the implementation of new agricultural techniques. However, unlike the patriarchal utopia of Clarens, underpinned by Julie’s marriage to the father-substitute Wolmar, *La Nouvelle Clarice* presents a utopian vision characterized by dominant female bonds. Thus, though the two utopias are alike in their reform preoccupations, Le Prince de Beaumont’s (re)vision ultimately outlines a more ambitious and active role for women.

In the second half of the novel, newly married Clarice travels to France with her husband to join the community Astie’s mother has founded about eighty kilometers from Bordeaux. Her first meeting with the Baronne d’Astie is remarkably characterized as a kind of “love at first sight” in the letter that Clarice writes to her mother:

> Elle avait en main les armes de la femme forte, c’était pour moi, dit-elle, qu’elle travaillait. J’avais voyagé en héroïne de roman, plus de diamants que de chemises. Ce mot de diamants me rappelait le dessein où j’étais de lui offrir ma montre. … J’en veux recevoir un plus précieux de ma chère fille, me dit-elle, c’est son cœur, son amitié, sa confiance. En vérité, Madame, lui répondis-je, je n’ai plus rien à donner de ce côté-là: tout est fait, et je n’en dois avoir aucun mérite, car toutes ces choses me sont échappées sans mon aveu, à l’instant où j’ai eu le bonheur de me voir a vos pieds & entre vos bras…cette demi-heure ressemblait si fort à celle où j’eus le bonheur de vous voir pour la première fois, que leur souvenir confondu me fit croire qu’il n’y avait point de vrai Bonheur sur la terre. (II: 16-17)

As in the first half of the novel, where Clarice’s meeting with her birth mother (also evoked by the above excerpt) takes precedence over the projected marriage, the heroine’s newlywed status is glossed over to privilege the nascent bond with her mother-utopia (which has in fact been short-lived compared to the time span of characters’ experiences in the novel), will shortly disintegrate altogether.
in-law. The narrative consistently emphasizes that the most important relationship of the heroine is with a mother figure, not a spouse. Her mother-in-law, a Scriptural femme forte, forms the affectionate union with Clarice that was presaged by the Baron d’Astie’s description of his marriage in Book I of the novel. “Le Ciel en me la donnant a comblé tous mes vœux,” writes the baronne to Clarice’s mother (II: 5). Her term “vœux,” reminiscent of (wedding) vows, once again stresses the female union crucial to the utopian vision of the novel. Hariote, on the other hand, receives Clarice’s mother in Paris and is thrilled to be adopted by the older woman, becoming her “seconde fille” (I: 334). As Stewart points out, “the mother-daughter relation is constantly privileged in Le Prince de Beaumont’s novels, usurping the customary position of relations between women and men” (Gynographs 47). Both young women are in due course represented at the center of a female community founded on the mother-daughter relationship, with the initially worldly Parisian universe emulating the reforms of the baronne and her exemplary daughter-in-law.

The mothers also begin corresponding, and the baronne significantly compares the newlyweds’ virtue in one of her letters to Mrs. Darby. “En vérité, il [le Baron d’Astie] ne méritait point votre trésor…cette vertu, que j’avais tâché à cultiver en lui, a souffert une terrible éclipse, & celle de son épouse est sans nuage” (II: 5). Clarice’s virtue is explicitly placed above her husband’s by her mother-in-law, which is a crucial distinction

82 Whereas for Julie, it is her relationship with her father that supercedes the spousal bond: “Liée au sort d’un époux, ou plutôt aux volontés d’un père” (III, xviii, 249).
83 Clarice’s mother indulgently teases her daughter about her independent choice of husband, writing “vous avez bien pris la liberté de me donner un fils, pourquoi me refuserais-je celle de me donner une seconde fille.” Hariote, previously an orphan, enthusiastically recounts her love at first sight for Mrs. Darby. “J’ai enfin le bonheur d’avoir une mere,” she writes to Clarice. Thus Hariote gets a mother, seemingly the true wish of every heroine, and the female community is shown to be constantly growing.
with Rousseau’s novel. Unlike Clarens, this community is built on women’s moral superiority, made clear from the very beginning by the insistence on Astie’s fault. That it is the male character who, through his marriage, must erase an initial misstep by participating in a reformed community, seems to hint at a conscious inversion of the Clarens paradigm. Though the baronne is careful not to impose her ways on the spouses, they are impassioned by her reforms, and continue to create widespread innovation in their community under Clarice’s leadership.

The changes initially instituted are reminiscent of Wolmar’s suppression of the superfluous. Astie, who tends a garden like Julie, decides to get rid of his beloved flowers in favor of a vegetable plot for the poor. But the principle behind the transformation is not the same. Rather than organizing the land according to a strict principle of enforcing the “utile” over the “agréable,” Le Prince de Beaumont’s characters are actively practicing Christian virtue. Because their means are initially far more limited than those of the Wolmar spouses, they can help others only by judiciously limiting their own consumption of minor luxuries. Hence the regretted garden, eliminated because it is the only way to free up a patch of land for the uses of the poor, is transformed from a space that provides visual pleasure into a source of survival for the poorest peasants. By showing the vital impact of this seemingly insignificant economy, the text in turn seeks to

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84 The text also underlines the legal dependence of Clarice’s husband on his mother, by periodically mentioning his status as a minor, requiring authorization from the Baroness. Thus, at one point Clarice writes, “Madame ma belle-mère avait eu la bonté de nous envoyer un pouvoir de conclure & notre mariage, & nos conditions matrimoniales, puisque mon époux n’est point majeur” (II: 11). When discussing the possibility of the couple’s visit to Paris, Hariote also mentions Astie’s dependent status, “s’il ne pourra point obtenir de Madame sa mère la permission de venir nous rendre une visite à Paris le temps de mes couches” (I: 262).

85 Here a parallel may be drawn with Julie’s garden, except that the garden is associated with the male character and is ultimately eliminated as an unnecessary luxury.
show that one can practice such acts of Christian charity in any situation.

The baronne possesses only a simple country house, some surrounding land, and a few cows, and her agricultural endeavors are not aimed at personal prosperity. This is clearly reminiscent of the agricultural reform at Clarens, where the Wolmars “ont pour maxime de tirer de la culture tout ce qu’elle peut donner, non pour faire un plus grand gain, mais pour nourrir plus d’hommes” (IV, x, 331). Clarice is ambivalent about recuperating some of the inheritance that had been seized by Darby, despite arguments that she ought to enrich her potential progeny, just as the Wolmar spouses “n’ont pas eu assez mauvaise opinion de leurs enfants pour craindre que le patrimoine qu’ils ont à leur laisser ne leur pût suffire” (V, ii, 399). Nevertheless, though the agricultural innovations of both utopias focus on maximizing land value over amassing wealth, the Wolmars’ efforts to “l’améliorer plutôt que l’éteindre” are limited to their personal property. The baronne and later Clarice, on the other hand, specifically attempt to remedy the dire situation of the surrounding peasants, as their own land holdings are minimal.

Thus the description of their reforms is less concerned with the immediate domestic sphere than Saint-Preux’s detailed accounts of the Wolmars’ day-to-day household life and innovations. Even the references to schooling domestic help, while mirroring the training country folk receive to be servants at Clarens, immediately move beyond the confines of the household, because the baronne’s intention is to teach these peasants a skill they will be able to apply at other, larger estates. The preoccupation with helping the peasants also leads to the implementation of other specific reforms. The baronne improves nursing practices, teaching women obligated to work as wet-nurses how to feed their own children, taken from the breast too early, with the cow’s milk and
“eau d’orge” that she provides. The resulting amelioration in their health and hygiene causes widespread demand for their reputed services, and even rich merchants from Bordeaux send their infants to these robust women. The detailed references to the improved earnings and economic status of the peasant women, show that the impact of the transformation is wider than simple preservation of children from malnutrition, and that the baroness is not merely concerned with these women in their capacity as mothers. Instead, the reforms in this community are characteristically aimed at fostering economic independence and self-sufficiency for men and women both.

Other wide-ranging reforms, orchestrated by the baronne with the help of the newlyweds as well as two dedicated priests, concern areas such as agriculture and communal property. They are far too numerous to list here, but some examples include all available lands being put to cultivation, and the adoption of orphans who eventually augment the community’s work force. Peasant families are motivated to work by assurances that they will keep their profits, new hygienic housing is built, and religious education is given. Though the Baroness’ reforms ostensibly aim to help the peasantry, the text suggests the interdependence of the peasants and the nobility, by the ways that change in one sector is shown to concern the other as well. The narrative points out, for instance, that nobles are necessarily affected by the hygiene and health of peasant households, since they send their children to these places for the crucial first years of their life, and better conditions for peasants indirectly mean the survival of more of these

86 See II: 44. Stewart mentions this particular improvement in Gynographs, but she mistakenly asserts that it is Clarice who reforms peasants and “feeds abandoned babies with a concoction of milk and barley water,” which somewhat misses the point, because the baronne’s reforms are meant to transform society and have long-reaching benefits, which can only be made possible by enabling self-sufficiency (37).
The novel’s exposition of the complex mechanisms that link all elements of society echoes the portrayal of the interdependent Clarens community, organized on the Wolmars’ belief in the importance of maintaining local economy. The baronne’s reforms, however, are described far more precisely and extensively, suggesting a certain potential to expand that characterizes Le Prince de Beaumont’s model community. Marriage, at the center of the reforms represented in La Nouvelle Clarice, is a good example of the difference in the novels’ respective presentation of innovations. Both Julie and the baronne are concerned with augmenting the number of local marriages. Thus Julie organizes country balls and other ways for young people to meet and interact with each other in a safe public setting. The baronne, who also stresses the importance of public gatherings for young people, moreover lays in place far more specific and detailed arrangements facilitating peasant marriages. Thus, the 16th of September is established as an annual wedding celebration date. The unions have the support of the whole village, whose inhabitants build a house for each newlywed couple, and a dowry system is also ensured.

Clarice, on the other hand, occupies herself with making marriage possible for the offspring of the impoverished nobility of the environs. Slowly dying off because they cannot afford the prohibitive costs of marrying off their numerous progeny to candidates from their own milieu, these provincial nobles cling to their heritage and refuse to consider potential unions with the prosperous farmers’ children they deem to be below them. Clarice finally succeeds at convincing her noble neighbors of the real advantages of

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87 For a detailed description of these reforms, see II: 45-6.
contracting such marriages, and matches up several couples who had already shown some mutual interest. The heroine thus effectively changes at least the provincial aristocracy’s views of matrimony and marital practices. Together with her mother-in-law, Clarice convinces these noble families to accept and actively implement a new definition of *mésalliance*, which would only consider a marriage unacceptable in case of a disparity in the prospective spouses’ morals, rather than in their rank. Though Julie also shares these views, as is evident from her encouragement of a marriage between Saint-Preux and Claire, Rousseau’s novel does not give any specific examples of the heroine’s success in changing local customs.

Unlike the vague references to Julie’s beneficence, the transformation of the community instituted by the mother-daughter team is detailed and concrete. Rather than creating a static and rigidly organized autarky to foster the prosperity of one family of landowners and indirectly of their dependents, these reforms are ambitiously aimed at continuous innovation in an ever-growing community. Thus, Clarice comes up with a

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88 Clarice takes under her wing the family of two haughty cousins, noblemen who are starving to death with their twenty-six children, eighteen of whom are girls. They intend to place their oldest daughters in a convent, having successfully petitioned for a state-sponsored place. The two oldest sons will enroll in an *École militaire*, likewise on state sponsorship. The rest of children cannot ever marry due to extreme poverty. Yet these noble families refuse to cultivate their lands properly, or engage in any profitable activity such as commerce. They also refuse to consider marriages between their daughters and rich farmers’ sons. Clarice slowly convinces their parents that in England nobles are not stigmatized for earning a living, and that cultivating the earth had been the pastime of the earliest nobles and even kings. Swayed by the heroine’s eloquent examples and ready proofs of concrete financial advantage, the noble families finally come around and accept the matches proposed by Clarice. All in all, the heroine marries off nine of these twenty-six young people, and prepares them for marriage with an appropriate education. Thus it is not only marriages, but also educated new families that are created by Clarice’s efforts (II: 234-247).

89 *Mésalliance* traditionally meant marriage to a social inferior. The text proposes a new definition: “se mésallier, c’est épouser une fille sans mœurs, ou qui sort d’une famille déshonorée par le vice” (II: 243).
project for an ideal society called *L’Union Chrétienne* that would go back to the original communitarian ways of the first Christians. Together with the expanding village community, these successful new societies are modeled as exemplary by the text.

Imitation of these reforms, already embedded in the narrative with the example of Hariote who changes her leisurely ways after being inspired by Clarice’s letters, is boldly intended to restore the prosperity of France overall. The women and their correspondents in Paris calculate the concrete numbers of new families and children that such reforms would bring, and express their hopes of seeing France become “le grenier de l’Europe” (II: 206). Clarice even banteringly suggests that Hariote recruit men and women of leisure for hard work, by promising them it will cure their ennui. If all dissipated nobles left to cultivate the countryside, the new hardy populace would certainly assure France the status of “la première nation de l’Univers”! (II: 180-1).

In her article “Reproducing Utopia: Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont’s *The New Clarissa,*” Johns posits that the novel’s reformative vision was influenced by the author’s concern over restoring France’s status after setbacks suffered during the Seven Years’ War, hence the focus on marriage as a means of increasing the country’s population (208-9). Though such a preoccupation certainly could have prompted the novel’s representation of concrete reforms implemented by an ever-expanding community, the truly striking aspect of the text’s vision of transformation is in its implied

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90 Indeed, the calculations provided by the narrative are extremely precise. A detailed chart breaks down all the new families the state would gain by taking charge of *enfants-trouvés*, confiscating children of beggars to raise them, not allowing young people to join monasteries without true vocation, and marrying all of this youth. In thirteen years, the state would supposedly gain 128,000 new families. With four children per family, these new households in turn “mettront en vingt ans cinq cents douze mille habitants en état de contacter de nouveaux mariages” (II: 206).
universality. What’s more, the change is brought about not by an omniscient legislator or sovereign, but by a group of determined women. Indeed, Le Prince de Beaumont’s text is a forceful articulation of women’s instrumental social role and their power to transform their communities, remarkably expressed by one of Mrs. Darby’s letters. Considering potential censure of their ambitions, Mrs. Darby anticipates a response to jeers about impertinent women’s pretensions:

Si quelqu’un s’avisait de lire nos lettres, il se moquerait de nos prétentions. C’est bien à de pauvres petites femmelettes qu’il appartient de s’ériger en réformatrices dans un royaume gouverné par des hommes si sages, & dont la police fait l’admiration des étrangers. C’est surtout une impertinence à deux femmes qui sont a peine agrégées parmi les citoyens. … Déjà je me sens Francaise, sans oublier pourtant mon ancienne Patrie. Ah! je le sens aux mouvements de mon cœur, je suis citoyenne de l’Univers, & tous les hommes, quels qu’ils soient, sont mes frères. (II: 195)

Any questioning of the legitimacy of women’s role as reformers is preemptively undermined by the irrefutable retort that echoes Socrates’ famous declaration—“je suis citoyenne de l’Univers.” Women have a place and hence an important social role anywhere they choose to claim it, and Le Prince de Beaumont’s textual construction of just such a space is one attempt to show the concrete reality of these ambitions. Clarice’s personal fulfillment in a social role that makes the most of her abilities for the greater good of the community stands in sharp contrast to Julie’s suffocation under the yoke of prescriptive domesticity. Le Prince de Beaumont’s novel suggests an alternative vision to traditional male utopia, and its expansive dynamism and definition of a larger space and role for women all set it apart from fantasies such as Rousseau’s domestic dystopia.91

91 In “Remembering the Future,” Johns argues that the important differences between women’s utopias and the traditional male utopian genre suggest that gender position “exercises a decisive influence on the utopian imagination of the eighteenth century.” That is, “rather than refer to feudal and absolutist models to express their ideal societies, as do many authors of traditional utopias, women writers draw on emerging capitalism and point to the contractual nature of marital, familial, and community relationships; to the significance of demographic changes for economic development; and to the
**Conjugal Utopias: Some Concluding Remarks on Readers and Writers**

The type of heroine put forth as an example by each respective novel perhaps best conveys the key difference between the two fictions. Le Prince de Beaumont’s text presents a protagonist who actively changes people’s marital practices as part of her reform effort, while Rousseau’s novel counsels redemptive conjugality through the example of a resigned heroine who finds solace in conforming to prescriptive visions of marriage and family in a circumscribed feudal community. Though Julie’s ostensible lesson of virtuous resignation seems to be directed primarily at married women, Staël makes a brief and somewhat hesitant suggestion that “peut-être…il [Rousseau] a voulu attaquer, par l’exemple des malheurs de Julie et de l’inflexible orgueil de son père, les préjugés et les institutions sociales” (53). Numerous passages in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, as well as the critique of the lack of reformative instruction to parents in Rousseau’s second preface, which decries the “inique despotisme de pères” who push their unfortunate children into “des nœuds forcés,” would seem to substantiate Staël’s supposition (581).

But despite any potential effects of the novel’s heartbreaking portrayal of Julie on societal prejudice, Rousseau’s static patriarchal utopia is guilty of the very fault he criticizes in “vos lâches auteurs qui ne prêchent jamais que ceux qu’on opprime” (582). Despite realigning the genre with the driving purpose of moral utility originally outlined by Huet, Rousseau paradoxically reduces the instructional potential of the new novel.

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importance of horizontal vs. vertical power structures for the amelioration of traditional ills” (38). Other critical texts on women-authored utopias in the eighteenth-century include Rebecca D’Monté and Nicole Pohl’s anthology *Female Communities 1600-1800: Literary Visions and Cultural Realities*; Pohl’s *Women, Space and Utopia, 1600-1800*; and Pohl and Brenda Tooley’s coedited publication *Gender and Utopia in the Eighteenth Century: Essays in English and French Utopian Writing*. 
promised the reader in the “Entretien” by representing the heroine’s marriage as redemptive. If the novel’s scandalous portrayal of illicit passion would form a deterrent to virtuous older readers, as the second preface supposes, and be too dangerous for younger readers (for the curious girl who would dare to read a page of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is famously castigated as “une fille perdue” by the first preface), who would be left to profit from the lessons in its second half? (4). The novel’s intended audience seems to be reduced to women who are already married and can only be taught to cope with existing unfavorable conditions, a classic case of the same preaching to the oppressed Rousseau hypocritically denounces.

In contrast, Le Prince de Beaumont’s novel, through the “livre nouveau” announced by Hariote, outlines a genre which imperatively maintains moral purity, even at the risk of no longer appearing *vraisemblable*. Hariote is impatient to hear the tale of d’Astie’s errors, and asks him for a written account of his past. She then envisions the possibility of publishing their complete correspondence, and the reception the book would likely receive in Paris. The novel, consistently following the same strategy of preemptive refutation of possible critiques exemplified by Mrs. Darby’s vindication of the women’s reform efforts, consequently projects Hariote’s defense of the publication, which effectively articulates a new prescriptive definition of the novelistic genre. The extract is worth being cited in full, despite its length:

Point de délai; il nous faut votre histoire bien détaillée, pour joindre à celle de votre épouse. Qui sait si cela ne me donnera pas la tentation de devenir auteur? Cela ne me sera pas difficile; il n’y aura qu’à chercher les dates, ou les suppléer; car Clarice & moi avons l’habitude de n’en marquer aucune. Ce manquement réparé, voilà un livre tout fait, un livre nouveau, un livre qui ne contiendra que du vrai, & qui ne sera pas vraisemblable. Cela n’empêchera pas qu’il ne soit bien vendu; on veut lire à Paris, n’importe quoi, c’est un air, une manie. Quel plaisir pour moi d’entendre les raisonnements qui se feront sur l’auteur & sur l’ouvrage! car je veux garder l’incognito…un impertinent petit maître me dira: quel pitoyable ouvrage! Il n’y a aucun sel, & il n’eût tenu qu’a l’auteur d’y en mettre, il n’y avait qu’à feindre le Baron un peu moins respectueux, ou si l’on voulait conserver le caractère de cet Amadis, Montalve était tout propre à figurer auprès...
Hariote makes a significant assertion in her apology of the “nouveau livre.”

Because it is young people who predominantly read novels, any author who claims a moral intention, must avoid “dangerous details,” which do not contribute to moral edification. Moreover, Hariote’s “tentation de devenir auteur” implicitly seems to encourage women to cede to the temptation of writing, inviting them to participate in the creation of a new edifying genre, whose impact will ripple out like the model community instituted by the heroine.

*La Nouvelle Clarice* chooses to represent a faultless heroine’s exemplary conjugality because the novel’s lessons are explicitly addressed to young people, and purified to make them truly salutary. Thus, the tale of Astie’s fault is left for the very end of the narrative, once its lessons have presumably taken effect. Moreover, depiction of the young man’s misstep is filtered to stress the role that reading unsuitable novels had in his moral corruption. If young men, too, can be impacted by reading novels, the “nouveau livre” inspiring moral change and new conjugality may be addressed to them, as well.

Readers of both sexes who are not yet married are invited to imitate the reforms outlined by *La Nouvelle Clarice* in their adult life. Significantly, Hariote’s example also encourages readers to take up the pen and actively contribute to an innovative genre that will enable true change by defining a place and role for women in society.

I do not mean to suggest that *La Nouvelle Clarice* is a radical text in every respect: even if Clarice is a reformer, she is also a wife and a mother, and the narrative
seems to imply that marriage is an inevitable condition outside of which women are powerless to effect transformation. Though the novel does show that certain supposedly innate traits are the result of nurture and not nature, its portrayal of gender and social positions is oftentimes conservative. The stress on virtue, though necessary to render effective the new pedagogical genre Le Prince de Beaumont is seeking to create, produces heroines whose heroism could be termed a strategy of “hyperconformisme,” evoked by Starobinski’s critique of Charrière’s *Lettres de Lausanne*.92

Nevertheless, I think that the utopian vision of conjugality proffered by Le Prince de Beaumont’s novel is a crucial addition to complete and potentially offset portrayals such as Rousseau’s. Following the course charted by Lafayette, Le Prince de Beaumont maps a geography of female empowerment through her representation of the married heroine’s thorough command of a vast territory. Ultimately, the different destinies of Julie and Clarice, through the death of one heroine and the happiness of another only in a transformed matriarch-created community, both suggest that unless the underlying conditions that contribute to marital dynamics in a patriarchal society are altered, marriage will remain irrelevant to personal fulfillment, regardless of whether or not a form of conjugal affection is introduced into the mix.

92 “L’héroïsme n’est pas dirigé dans le sens de la révolte, mais dans celui de l’hyperconformisme” (“Lettres écrites de Lausanne” 138-9).
Chapter 3
“Le titre d’époux, nécessaire à sanctifier aux yeux des autres mon amitié pour vous”: Marriage as Friendship in *Lettres de Vallière*

Vous ne vous apercevez seulement pas, qu’approuver le sacrifice de ma tendresse, c’est positivement convenir que j’eusse été folle de m’y livrer. Il est apparent que je l’ai pensé avant vous. Cependant, mon sage ami, répondez à ma question. Dans une pareille situation, auriez-vous résisté, auriez-vous immolé vos désirs? non, certainement. D’où vient? C’est qu’il a plu à d’impertinents législateurs de consulter leur intérêt, de négliger le nôtre; de se ménager des plaisirs, de nous réserver des privations. Ces vilains hommes, comme ils ont étendu leurs prérogatives! comme ils ont borné nos droits! que de contrainte ils nous imposent! que de travers ils créèrent pour nous!

Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni, *Lettres de Mylord Rivers à Sir Charles Cardigan* (1776)

Critical studies of the bestselling eighteenth-century author Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni often point to the pessimism that dominates her representations of heterosexual relationships. These critical readings, sometimes influenced by the notoriously negative role played by certain male figures in Riccoboni’s private life, tend to reduce the author’s depiction of interaction between the sexes to permanently immature and selfish male protagonists’ victimization of morally superior heroines.93 Such a view is not totally unjustified, considering that the self-centered comportment of male characters in Riccoboni’s novels does often have disastrous consequences for the women who love them.94 However, despite their shortcomings, these male protagonists

93 See for example Emily Crosby (76-77). For Colette Cazenobe, in Riccoboni’s fiction “les femmes ne sont pas victimes de l’amour, elles sont celles des hommes” (70, 154). Stewart likewise argues that Riccoboni’s representation of fulfillment-driven behavior in male characters, which contrasts with the non-self-centered comportment of the heroines, points to an inherent pessimism about the long term success of relationships between spouses in her novels (Novels of Mme Riccoboni, 111, 118-119, 137, 142).

94 Some of the novelist’s more negative male characters are Milord Alfred of *Lettres de Fanni Butlerd*, Marquis de Cressy of the eponymous *Histoire*, and Lord Danby of *Histoire de Miss Jenny* (1764). Other male protagonists, like Lord Anglesey of the same novel, Mylord Ossery of *Lettres de Mylady Juliette Catesby* (1761), Clémeingis of *Histoire d’Ernestine* (1762) and Germeuil of *Lettres de Vallière*, are generally positive characters who nevertheless are capable of committing negative actions and at times show proof of emotional manipulation and immaturity. Yet all of these characters, even
are not inherently and rarely overwhelmingly villainous. More importantly, heroines are by no means confined to the role of passive saint by the novelist, as has often been suggested.

Rather, Riccoboni’s nuanced fictions astutely expose the destructive impact of society’s unjust treatment of women on intimate relationships. Her novels’ more or less overt denunciation of romantic attachments stems less from injured sensibility than from a philosophical conviction that the glaring legal and social inequalities between the sexes, evoked by Mylady Orrery in *Lettres de Milord Rivers*, stack the deck against any heterosexual relationship that attempts to construct itself on these inherently shaky foundations. Indeed, Riccoboni’s novels often seem to point to the conclusion that, considering the inequality between men and women, women’s best bet is to avoid romantic relationships, and especially love marriage, where men’s dominance of women is consecrated and backed by custom as well as law. The acute hesitation of Riccoboni’s heroines to marry for love suggests that doubling the yoke of marriage with that of romance appeared a particularly perilous enterprise.

In one novel in particular, however, Riccoboni proposes a solution to this stalemate. Through her representation of the exemplary married couple in *Lettres d’Elisabeth Sophie de Vallière à Louise Hortense de Canteleu, son amie* (1772), the novelist suggests that, though marriage is practically inevitable for women, they can nevertheless achieve the greatest degree of liberty and personal fulfillment by reducing it to friendship and building a reasonable, platonic attachment. The preference for friendship is not unique to this novel, since this type of bond, in all its forms, is often the most negative, fall far short of, say, Valmont of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, to take the most famous example of a fictional villain.
most rewarding relationship in her fiction. However, Lettres de Vallière is distinctive in its representation of friendship undergirding marriage, and also in its depiction of a married couple’s relationship. Elsewhere Riccoboni mainly adheres to the traditional pattern of matrimony as closure, at times resorting to the innovative technique of widowed heroines’ flashbacks to their wedding and married life to include their experience of the periods before, during, and after marriage. Indeed, the sole other instance where Riccoboni portrays the unfolding of a conjugal relationship, could be said to form an implicit contrast to the winning formula of marriage as friendship, for the heroine of L’Histoire de M. le marquis de Cressy (1758), who makes the mistake of marrying for love, ultimately commits suicide.

In the following reading, I will predominantly focus on Riccoboni’s Lettres de Vallière to show how friendship, as opposed to romantic love, provides a viable conjugal relationship model in the novelist’s representation of marriage. I will first show how Riccoboni’s overall textual logic presents love precisely as a reason not to marry. The prevalent fictional failure of love marriage, however, may have a larger role than that of implicit critique through representation of passive female suffering. I suggest that Riccoboni formulates an active therapeutic function for her writing relatively early on in her literary career, and the educative potential she attributes to her fictional scenarios becomes especially evident in Lettres de Vallière.

This novel contains two complementary intrigues that illustrate the dynamics of marriage as friendship. The marriage of M. and Mme de Monglas is an interpolated tale that serves as a succinct example of the success of such a model, with which the title heroine Sophie gets acquainted while sheltered in the happy couple’s home.
Significantly, the story of the Monglas couple is communicated in written form, since a female friend of the couple composes an embellished account of their marriage, which consequently becomes extremely popular reading in their extended circle. By framing its presentation of the model union of friendship as a widely circulated text read by all the protagonists, the novel advances a *mise-en-abîme* view of fiction’s conjugal lessons in action. Suggesting an active role for Riccoboni’s representation of marriage as friendship, I will attempt to show the unique aspects of this conjugal model developed by the novelist.

Seemingly conservative in their hostility towards love marriage, Riccoboni’s representations of the conjugal union are in fact deeply concerned with women’s rights and individual fulfillment. Though critics have at best viewed Riccoboni’s fictional remonstrations against the *destinée féminine* as cautious, referring to her “self-conscious and ironic use of the conventions of society” that steered the middle road between conformism and contention, the marital model she puts forth in *Lettres de Vallière* is in some respects quite radical, especially when read against another fictional marriage it clearly resembles (*Gynographs* 7). The antecedent of Rousseau’s Clarens is certainly evoked by Riccoboni’s fictional ménage. However, Riccoboni’s conjugal model probes and stretches traditional family configurations to an extreme extent in order to give her heroine maximum liberty and personal fulfillment in spite of deficient *ancien régime* legal and social institutions, which are likewise brought under examination in this fictional reworking of the marital unit.
Raison et Sentiments: Love in Riccoboni’s Fictional Universe

Despite recent scholarship’s rediscovery of Marie-Jeanne de Heurles de Laboras, whose Italian surname came from her spouse, this wildly successful author of the eighteenth century remains largely overlooked today, even by specialists of French literature. Unlike the majority of women at the time, barred from experiencing professional fulfillment, Riccoboni exceptionally succeeded in two careers. An actress at the Théâtre-Italien (her husband was the son of the theater’s famous director), Riccoboni first flexed her literary muscle when she agreed to write a continuation to Marivaux’s unfinished *La Vie de Marianne* (1731-1742) on a dare sometime in 1751. Riccoboni’s addition was so successful that Grimm himself, though disapproving of the original novel’s style, pointed out that “sa manière d’écrire, même en se réglant sur un mauvais modèle, est très-supérieure à celle de Marivaux” (Riccoboni, *OC* xxv).

In 1757, she published her first novel, the popular *Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd*, which appeared anonymously. The abandoned heroine’s letters to her lover were thought to contain autobiographical elements, as such passion was deemed impossible to feign. Some of her subsequent novels also attained both popular and critical acclaim, becoming immediate bestsellers rapidly translated into major European languages. Diderot considered her novels “plein de génie, d’honnêteté, de délicatesse et de grâce”

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95 I give the most common version of Riccoboni’s full maiden name, though she also occasionally used the surname de Mézières, as well as the pseudonym Adélaïde de Varançai. The only full-length biographical study on Riccoboni remains Crosby’s *Une romancière oubliée* (1924). Besides Stewart and Cazenobe, Olga B. Cragg and Marjin S. Kaplan have published literary studies of varied lengths on Riccoboni.
96 Published anonymously in *Le Monde* in 1760.
97 See Crosby’s Appendix for a list of translations of Riccoboni’s novels.
(Paradoxe sur le comédien [manuscrit Saint-Pétersbourg] 163). And La Porte, in his history of women writers, identifies Riccoboni as one of the period’s best novelists. Claiming that “celle qui, dans ce siècle, partage avec Mme de Tencin la gloire de disputer la palme à nos meilleurs romanciers, est sans contredit madame Riccoboni,” La Porte singles out Cressy and Katesby [sic] as her “chef d’œuvres” (251, 252). Indeed, Lettres de Mylady Juliette Catesby (1761), her most popular production, went through a re-edition the very same year of its publication and through about twenty more before the close of the century. Her later work, including her penultimate novel Lettres de Vallière, also achieved success. In all, Riccoboni published eight novels plus some shorter pieces, including several troubadour tales.

The disasters of Riccoboni’s private life, about which she was notoriously discreet, have sometimes colored the reading of her fictional scenarios. Her suffering with her alcoholic and violent husband was widely known to her contemporaries, who at times assumed that Riccoboni had taken up the pen to distract herself from her sentimental chagrins. Modern critics, on the other hand, have focused on the bigamous marriage of the novelist’s father and its discovery when Riccoboni was a young child. Echoes of the traumatic event, that deprived Riccoboni of both name and fortune, have occasionally been seen in the representations of the villainous comportment of male protagonists and the disastrous outcome of sentimental intrigues for Riccoboni’s heroines.99

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98 See the Bibliographie du genre romanesque français.
99 Not known to Riccoboni’s contemporaries, her father’s bigamy was revealed through her correspondence with a close friend, the famous Shakespearean actor David Garrick. The plot of Histoire de Miss Jenny in particular has been read as influenced by Riccoboni’s personal history. One of her darker novels, Miss Jenny represents the
However, love is set up to fail on precisely delineated grounds in Riccoboni’s fictional logic: women are obliged to be reasonable in their affections by societal structures, which invariably chastise deviation from this rule. Her novels reflect the dramatic intensification of patriarchal power in France, whose escalating control of the institution of marriage from the sixteenth century onwards “fashioned a world for women wherein human passion, illicitly indulged in terms of these social mores, spelled social, economic, and emotional ruin” (Hanley 63). Thus Mylady Orrery, a protagonist of what some call Riccoboni’s most philosophical novel, evokes the unjust laws and usages that forbid and ridicule the very same behaviors in women in which men indulge with societal approval.

In the epigraph to this chapter, Orrery points out to her phlegmatic correspondent Rivers that while he and his fellow men are free to indulge their romantic desires, she is expected to suppress her own in the androcentric system put in place by “impertinents législateurs” (57). This absurd logic allows a man like the “imbécile lord Carnégui, âgé de cinquante-six ans, laid, goûteux, voûté, ridé,” to marry a girl whose “traits enfantins” provide a shocking contrast to his “mine flétrie” (61). Yet the young and beautiful widow Orrery can only imagine society’s reaction were she to marry a penniless young man ten years her junior, with whom she is passionately in love: “Mille voix se seraient élevées contre ma démarche, auraient interprétées mes intentions. À trente-six ans, épouser un jeune homme? quelle carrière ouverte à la malignité! Eh pourquoi cette différence? Parce que je suis femme, obligée par état d’être raisonnable, et qu’un homme peut se dispenser de l’être autant que moi” (61).

struggles of the heroine, illegitimate because of her father’s irresponsible comportment, to free herself from a secret marriage that turns out to be a sham.
Through Orrery’s shrewd deconstruction of the notion of “raisonnable” as an additional constraint placed on women’s affective choices, Riccoboni aptly highlights the double standard inherent in societal expectations that assigned responsibility to be reasonable in matters of the heart to women, despite denying them reason in any other domain. The split of reason along gender lines in the French Enlightenment, built on the complementarity of “feminine sensibility and masculine reason” supported the conception of women’s inferiority as Dena Goodman argues in her historical study. That is, the celebration of women’s supposedly innate sensibility effectively relegated reason to an exclusively masculine sphere (9). Yet Orrery recognizes that not only is she not allowed to display sensibility in her choice of spouse in the eyes of the world, her self-preservation depends on the suppression of sentiment.

Marrying for love is an improbable option, all the more so because the heroine would then forfeit her relatively independent status as a widow. Orrery realizes with a sinking heart that once her husband’s affection fades, as it well may after she reaches the “fatal” age of forty, she would be left with a “possesseur de [s]a personne et de [s]a fortune” who could “prodiguer l’une [sa fortune], négliger l’autre [sa personne]” with impunity (57). The bitterness of potential heartbreak, thus, would be magnified by the realization that she voluntarily sacrificed her personal and financial freedom.

Orrery’s rejection of love marriage clearly illustrates the perils with which the

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100 Two other excellent studies of the gender split in Enlightenment notions on reason are Geneviève Fraisse’s *Muse de la raison: la démocratie exclusive et la différence des sexes* and Bostic’s *The Fiction of Enlightenment.*

101 Bostic notes that “raisonnable,” when applied to women, was often relegated to the moral domain, as in the *Encyclopédie* article “Raisonnable,” which defines a reasonable woman as one who avoids “galanterie” (9-10). Riccoboni, however, subverts this limited definition of women’s reason by her representation of heroines who question the meaning of “raisonnable.”
union was fraught for women, even and especially one entered into for sentimental reasons. As the heroine’s logic convincingly demonstrates, the inequality between men and women essentially reduced a married woman to a position of inferiority and dependence, and were she to love her husband, she would have even more to lose if he asserted his privileges. Indeed, love for her potential spouse becomes the deciding factor in Orrery’s rejection of the proposed union, a conclusion formulated more or less explicitly by many a Riccoboni heroine. Thus, for example, Mme de Martigues of *Lettres de Sancerre* (1767), who runs away before her wedding ceremony, assures her correspondent that love is the reason why she will not marry: “Je préfère le comte de Piennes à tous les hommes du monde; je l’aime, oui, en vérité, mais l’espèce de sentiment qu’il m’inspire ne me donne pas la moindre envie d’être à lui, n’affaiblit point du tout la répugnance qui m’éloigne d’un lien assujettissant” (121). Whereas Orrery’s rejection of matrimony hinges on the possibility of losing her husband’s love, the clarification of Mme de Martigues makes it even more obvious that regardless of the merits of the husband or the duration of sentiment, the flaws of the institution itself could not be patched over with romance.

“*Ce remède salutaire*”: the Novel as an Antidote to Love Marriage

The reluctance expressed by Riccoboni’s heroines where marriage is concerned seems well justified considering the outcome of the love match represented by *L’Histoire de M. le marquis de Cressy*. Riccoboni’s second novel, and the only one that depicts life after marriage besides *Lettres de Vallière*, *Cressy* succinctly details the gradual
disillusionment and final suicide of a heroine who marries for love. At the opening of the narrative, Mme de Raisel is suggested to be an extraordinary woman:

Mme la comtesse de Raisel…semblait s’être destinée à vivre libre; elle entrait dans sa vingt-sixième année; sa taille était haute, majestueuse; ses yeux plains d’esprit et de feu; une physionomie ouverte annonçait la noblesse et la candeur de son âme; la bonté, la douceur et la générosité, formaient le fond de son caractère. … Une naissance illustre, une fortune immense, étaient les moindres avantages qu’une femme telle que Mme de Raisel pût offrir à l’heureux époux qu’elle daignera choisir. (23)

Beautiful, virtuous, immensely wealthy and of the highest nobility, Mme de Raisel seems to have a radiant future in front of her. But the spouse she chooses, M. de Cressy, reduces all these apparent advantages to nothing, as the narrator makes explicit: “Cette femme si aimable, si désirée…dont le sort était si brillant avant qu’elle connût M. de Cressy” (112). Although Cressy does come to love and admire his wife, the dominant motive of his conduct is ambition, which pushes him to marry Mme de Raisel over a penniless young woman, Adélaïde de Bugei. Despite having no serious intention to marry Adélaïde, Cressy leads her to believe the contrary, inciting passionate sentiment in the inexperienced sixteen-year-old. When Adélaïde realizes the true nature of Cressy’s aims following a seduction attempt that borders on rape, she retires to a convent. Mme de Raisel, a friend of Adélaïde, is unaware of her true motives for taking the veil, for Cressy manages to spin the whole story to his advantage and in the process, convince the widow that he is passionately in love with her. They marry but eventually, of course, Cressy’s wife learns Adélaïde’s side of the story. The discovery that Cressy manipulated her and lied about his sentiments is compounded by another, that her husband is having an affair in their own home, with Mme de Cressy’s orphaned protégée Hortense de Berneuil.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Though Cressy appears irredeemably villainous in my summary, I have left out some details for the sake of brevity. Riccoboni’s characterization is much more nuanced: Cressy is torn between ambition and sentiment in his involvement with Adélaïde, and he does develop strong feelings for his wife. Almost inadvertently drawn into the affair with
Though the reader has been led to pity Adélaïde’s untimely retreat from the world, the narrative’s contrast between her fate and Mme de Cressy’s represents the convent as preferable to marriage. Indeed, Adélaïde realizes that even her secluded life is preferable to the love match she envied her friend:

Le sort de la marquise lui parut plus fâcheux que le sien…la charmante recluse se consola de n’avoir point joui d’un bonheur qu’un instant pouvait changer en amertume; elle plaignit celle dont elle enviait peut-être auparavant la félicité; et pour toujours à l’abri des cruelles peines qui déchiraient le cœur de la marquise, elle s’applaudit du choix qu’elle avait fait. (98-9)

Mme de Cressy, too, is struck by the contrast between the happiness she had expected from her marriage, and its disastrous outcome. The last straw for the proud woman is finding out that her servants had all along known of Cressy’s liaison with Hortense and pitied their mistress: “Juste ciel! S’écria-t-elle, voilà donc tout le fruit de cette union tant désirée, qui semblait m’élever au comble de la félicité! Rejetée d’un ingrat, trahie par celle que j’ai tendrement recueillie, malheureuse dans ma propre maison, j’y suis l’objet de la pitié de mes valets” (111-2). After a period of reflection, Mme de Cressy “prit le seul parti qui lui parût capable d’abréger toutes ses peines” (113). Incapable of continuing to live with her husband, suffering from weakened health and a “noire mélancolie,” “elle ne voulut pas attendre d’un long dépérissement la fin d’une vie si languissante; elle se détermina à en abréger le cours” (113).

Carefully setting the scene for her suicide, Mme de Cressy has both Hortense and her husband assist at the spectacle of her death, with each playing a key role. Preparing herself a cup of poisoned tea, she tells Hortense that the powder she has added is a “calmant [qui] me procurera du repos” (114). When Cressy joins them, she insists that Hortense remain in the room, and asks her husband to serve her the cup of tea. The

Hortense, he tries to break off it off on several occasions and avoids his wife mainly because he feels unworthy of her affection.
poison, however, is qualified a remedy by Mme de Cressy. “Je suis charmée, monsieur, de tenir de vous-même ce remède salutaire,” she tells her puzzled spouse (115). Once he grasps the meaning of his wife’s utterance, Cressy attempts every means in his power to save her, but the effects of the “spécifique sûr contre d’insupportables douleurs” cannot be stopped (117).

Riccoboni’s contemporaries admired Cressy’s excellent style and tight plot, but were shocked when the virtuous heroine took her own life. Both the *Mercure de France* and *L’Année littéraire*, and later Mme de Genlis, condemned the suicide. Although women’s victimization and death was a routine affair in eighteenth-century plots, as Fauchery’s study *La Destinée féminine* and its review “Exquisite Cadavers” by Miller both suggest, Mme de Cressy’s taking control of the time and circumstances of her death affronted contemporary sensibilities. Bostic contends that Mme de Cressy’s suicide was so shocking, despite the Enlightenment’s evolving views on the subject, because it was performed by a woman, who thus robbed patriarchal society of the body and life it considered a man’s property. That this ritualized suicide was performed with the pen and not the body, made it all the more offensive (126).

Analyzing Mme de Cressy’s qualification of suicide by poison as a “remède,”

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103 Mme de Cressy’s death was especially problematic because even the word “suicide” was only just beginning to appear at the time. The 4th edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* (1762) has only a short entry on suicide: “Action de celui qui se tue lui-même.” It is not until 1787-8 that Féraud’s *Dictionnaire critique de la langue française* considered the word as both a verb and a noun, adding the possibility of female suicide: “Il se dit de celui, de celle, qui se tûe soi-même et de l'action par laquelle on se tûe soi-même.” The *philosophes* wrote about suicide, most notably Voltaire who consecrated the entry on Cato to suicide in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764). So did Diderot and Helvétius, but Riccoboni’s evocation of suicide is a comparatively early one. Almost twenty years later, Goethe’s depiction of the lovelorn hero’s taking his own life in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) would have a huge cultural impact throughout Europe, popularizing suicide.
Bostic argues that the heroine and through her Riccoboni, is a “Socratic figure” who proposes reason as a remedy against life’s ills (131). I agree that the representation of Mme de Cressy’s suicide has a symbolic value (with the important caveat, that, like Bostic, I don’t read the heroine’s death itself as being a positive or empowering act). However, I think that Riccoboni’s didactic thrust may be focused more on writing or the possibilities of fictional representation itself, rather than reason. Perhaps the novelist’s contemporaries found the suicide so scandalous because of the narrative’s radical implication that self-determination, not love, is the ultimate value sought by its heroines. Adélaïde counters victimization by retiring to a convent, and insists on her action as a choice that determined her own destiny. Mme de Cressy takes the only means of regaining her freedom that she has at her disposal; the narrative questions society and not the heroine’s morals in suggesting suicide as the only possibility of self-determination it leaves women.

By vividly illustrating for its readers the potential negative effects of marrying for love, and implying that self-determination, not passion, is key to a happy life, Riccoboni’s fictional scenario assumes a more active role than simply sympathizing with female victimization. Indeed, the “remède salutaire,” an antidote to an unbearable situation, may be writing itself. Riccoboni’s equation of poison and remedy is reminiscent of the ambiguous double meaning of the Greek word *pharmakon*, most notably invoked by Plato in the *Phaedrus*. According to J. Nicholls’ reading of certain references in Riccoboni’s correspondence, the novelist was likely very familiar with the philosopher’s work (328). Inseparably poison and cure, the ambiguous nature of the...

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104 Bostic also points out that Riccoboni’s intellectual coterie, which included the Baron
*pharmakon* is also associated with writing in the *Phaedrus*, as Derrida’s reading of Plato explains. Riccoboni’s “remède salutaire” is reminiscent of the multiple meanings of the *pharmakon*, for Mme de Cressy’s poisonous love marriage becomes the antidote against the institution’s false promises to women through the novelist’s attempted remedy of writing.

In addition, beginning in the seventeenth century, the novel genre’s detractors had customarily associated it with poison. In *Les Visionnaires* (1666), Pierre Nicole had famously condemned the “faiseur de romans” as an “empoisonneur public…coupable d’une infinité d’homicides spirituels” (51). In the eighteenth century, Boileau’s spiritual heir Jacquin lambasted the dangerous “poison” of novels numerous times in his *Entretiens sur les romans*, published just three years before *Cressy*. Even the motif of the cup disguising its venomous contents under an attractive facade also appears in Jacquin: “De tous les poisons, celui qu’on présente dans une coupe dorée & sous les dehors pleins de charme, est souvent le plus dangereux” (289). In its suggestion that marriage for love is the truly toxic deception, Riccoboni’s remedial fiction, while poison to conservatives seeking to maintain the patriarchal order, could be a remedy to the women suffering under its yoke.

The curative effect of witnessing Mme de Cressy’s end is explicitly posited by the narrative. In distributing some of her affairs as gifts in preparation for her death, Mme de Cressy gives her rival a beautiful box, telling Hortense that the present is intended to serve as reminder of an event capable of transforming the young woman’s mindset and conduct: “Gardez soigneusement le présent que je vous prie d’accepter; il vous rappellera d’Holbach, would have been likely to discuss Plato.

105 See the essay “Plato’s Pharmacy” in *Dissemination*. 
un événement capable de vous conduire à d’utiles réflexions, de ranimer dans votre cœur des sentiments qui peuvent y renaître, si un triste égarement ne les a pas entièrement détruits” (114). Witnessing the scene of the suicide does lead to lifelong reflection on the characters’ part, just as the reading experience itself is intended to do. Riccoboni’s correspondence mentions that reaching the greatest numbers of readers by depicting commonplace situations that impacted everyone was indeed her goal—a program in some respects reminiscent of the objective posited by the second preface of La Nouvelle Héloïse. Considering the active role attributed to writing by Riccoboni, it is important that in Lettres de Vallière, the Monglas episode—or the sole fictional space that presents a working marriage—is framed as a circulating text. Marriage based on friendship thus gains the status of proposed solution, as I will attempt to show in my analysis of the novel.

**The Advantages of Friendship**

Sûres de trouver des amis, nous dédaignerions l’art d’attirer des amants.
Riccoboni, L’Abeille (1761)

The Western view of friendship as a bond where the other is loved solely “for his own sake” is commonly traced to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, though this notion of higher friendship traditionally applied uniquely to men (hence my choice of “his”).

The most widely known expression of such sentiment in French literature is probably Montaigne’s famous “parce que c’était lui, parce que c’était moi” describing his

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106 See Ullrich Langer’s informative study *Perfect Friendship: Studies in Literature and Moral Philosophy from Boccaccio to Corneille*.
friendship with Etienne de La Boétie. Though Montaigne also defines such higher friendship as male, he does nevertheless advocate giving the conjugal relationship the characteristics of amitié, even if equality of the partners is doubtless not one of them.

In the eighteenth century, however, the concept of friendship itself was evolving, and women were at the center of the transformation. Goodman’s study of Enlightenment salons convincingly demonstrates the concept’s significant modification at the hands of women. The salonnières of the Republic of Letters, according to Goodman, created a space for themselves “in a world of friendship which had traditionally been thought of as the preserve of men,” and found “a sort of relationship with both men and women which was both an alternative to the romantic love and patriarchy of the dominant social and political orders and a challenge to traditional assumptions about women” (Republic of Letters 83-4). Riccoboni’s fictional depiction of amity and her particular interpretation of heterosexual relationships, especially marriage, reaching their optimal capacity through friendship, similarly flouts stereotypical notions about women and attempts to establish a safe space for her heroines in the oppressive world they inhabit.

Lettres de Vallière contains several references to love matches that all end in tragedy, which strengthens its ultimate lesson of marriage as friendship being the only viable option for women. The heroine, Sophie, turns out to be an orphan who knows nothing of her past. The quest to reestablish her identity permits the novelist to introduce

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108 Thus, as Montaigne writes in “Sur des vers de Virgile”: “Je ne vois point de mariages qui faillent plus tôt et se troublent que ceux qui s’acheminent par la beauté et désirs amoureux. Il y faut des fondements plus solides et plus constants, et y marcher d’aguet; cette bouillante allégresse n’y vaut rien… Un bon mariage, s’il en est, refuse la compagnie et conditions de l’amour. Il tâche à représenter celles de l’amitié. C’est une douce société de vie, pleine de constance, de fiancé, et d’un nombre infini d’utiles et solides offices et obligations mutuelles” (Les Essais III, V).
several back stories that all highlight the disastrous consequences of marrying for love for female protagonists. The epistolary novel’s first letter appraises the heroine’s correspondent of the death of the woman who raised Sophie in its opening lines. The journal and letters found by the family when searching for Madame d’AUTERIVE’s testament reveal that Sophie was a foundling whom the older woman decided to raise as her niece.

From Mme d’AUTERIVE’s journal, we learn the circumstances behind Sophie’s adoption. A rich widow, she took pity upon her niece, who had married a Protestant against her family’s wishes and was forced to flee to Holland with her husband. But the match turned out to have tragic consequences for the young woman:

Déséritée, abandonnée de tous ses parents, pour comble de disgrâce, elle perdit son mari, dont la tendresse et les égards la consolaient de tant de sacrifices faits à l’amour. Monsieur de Saint-Aulay mourut la seconde année de son mariage, laissant ma nièce prête à devenir mère, accablée de douleur et dans une situation extrêmement fâcheuse. (27)

The narrative’s representation of marriage for love associates it with catastrophe for female characters: the isolation of the couple from the family due to the choice of love, here exacerbated by the factors of religious difference and geographical displacement, leaves a woman completely dependent on her husband. Thus, even if her partner’s post-marital comportment is irreproachable, like M. de Saint-Aulay’s unwavering “tendresse” and “égards,” her position is extremely marginal. With the loss of her sole source of stability, the pregnant Mme de Saint-Aulay is desperate for help, but Mme d’AUTERIVE is the sole family member moved by “tendre compassion” for the black sheep. Even so, the reader gets the sense that the older woman is finally able to help her niece only because she herself has recently been widowed and has acquired complete independence. Nevertheless, Mme d’AUTERIVE still feels that she must disguise the
motives of her journey to the rest of her family.

When she reaches Amsterdam, however, she learns that her niece has died in giving birth to a sickly baby girl. Arriving at an inn with her servants and the baby in tow, Mme d’Auterive is forced to witness yet another tragedy, also the result of a love match. Hearing loud cries and lamentations, the widow runs out of her room, only to see a crowd gathered around a mortally wounded young man and his violently grieving pregnant wife attempting to recall him to life. Despite the ministrations of a doctor summoned by Mme d’Auterive, both spouses die. The doctor then proposes to save the pregnant woman’s baby by surgically removing it from the mother’s body. Mme d’Auterive assents, but cannot stand the idea of seeing the operation, which is unfortunately not the case for the rest of the crowd. The dead woman is publicly exposed and cut open, her child delivered as a curiosity in front of a throng of strangers, writes Mme d’Auterive: “J’eus peine à percer la foule qui remplissait ce triste lieu. Toute la maison et beaucoup de gens du dehors s’y étaient rassemblées. Le dessein du chirurgien, l’opération qu’il allait faire, fixait autour de lui l’hôtesse, les servantes, tous ceux qui pouvaient en approcher” (28). A greater indignity, a more entire dispossession than those embodied by the posthumous public delivery suffered by the young woman can scarcely be imagined.

Though the reader learns the circumstances behind the couple’s tragic demise only at the dénouement of the narrative, the young woman’s death is clearly caused by that of the man she loves, with marriage for love once again bringing nothing but misfortune to female characters. When the feeble infant of Mme de Saint-Aulay dies, Mme d’Auterive, who experiences an immediate and forceful emotional bond to the unknown child (“Jamais un objet ne pénètre mon cœur d’un sentiment de compassion si
vif et si tendre”), substitutes the child of one unfortunate love match for another (28).  

The grown Sophie, unlike her mother, rejects marriage for love and consequently avoids her miserable fate.

Sophie’s projected union with her presumed cousin the Marquis de Germeuil is initially a marriage arranged by Mme d’Auterive and Germeuil’s mother, who wish to consolidate family property but also take into account character similarity between the young people. Similarly to Mme de Chartres’ upbringing of her daughter in La Princesse de Clèves, Mme d’Auterive warns Sophie about the negative aspects of love, and the orphaned heroine scrupulously avoids the sentiment following her adoptive mother’s death. With marriage to Germeuil no longer sanctioned by the family due to the revelation of Sophie’s identity, she avoids the marquis and denies any ambiguity in her feelings to her correspondent Hortense. Indeed, the heroine insists on defining her sentiment as friendship throughout the narrative. “Je connais peu l’effet d’un sentiment qu’on m’apprit à redouter,” she writes her friend, simultaneously denying her familiarity with love and asserting the negative view of such sentiment acquired through her education (56). Instead, Sophie assimilates her affection for Germeuil to the “naturelle” and “paisible” attachment felt by family members and friends. Twice in the same letter, the outraged heroine refuses Hortense’s terms of love for those of friendship. “Avez-vous pu, ma chère Hortense? … Quel nom vous donnez au marquis de Germeuil, mon amant, lui! je regretterai mon amant? Ah! c’est bien assez de regretter un tendre, un fidèle ami”

109 The theme of women’s generosity to each other is common in Riccoboni’s novels—the orphan Ernestine of the eponymous short story is also adopted by a benevolent widow, and heroines are often taken in by independently wealthy female friends—which directly contradicts Fauchery’s biased assertion that orphan girls in eighteenth-century French literature represent “des innombrables avatars du mythe de Cendrillon,” menaced by maleficent female figures (126).
(56). Sophie does not want a lover—a friend is enough.

When the love-struck Germeuil presses marriage despite Sophie’s changed circumstances, the orphan continues to speak the language of friendship and refuses the marquis’ suit precisely because of the selfless nature of her feelings as a friend. The heroine consistently speaks a revealing language of friendship, reason, duty and obligation to justify her refusal. Though she wants to assure Germeuil of a returned affection in the strictly non-romantic terms of “amitié,” “estime,” and “vénération,” she does not give an answer until she has had the time to reflect on her duty. “Je sais bien ce que je voudrais, mais je ne sais pas ce que je dois vouloir,” the perplexed Sophie writes to Hortense when asking for her friend’s advice in the matter (61). Because her feelings for Germeuil are based on reason, Sophie cannot commit the unreasonable step of accepting his hand and ruining his future. “La noblesse de son cœur m’est connue, son naturel sensible, sa bonté, sa candeur me portèrent à le chérir dès que ma raison m’apprit à distinguer ses qualités aimables…mais l’amitié, mais la reconnaissance, mais le devoir, mais l’honneur me permettent-ils de recevoir sa main?” (63).

Duty and honor are as primordially important to Sophie as to the Princesse de Clèves, a heroine with whom Riccoboni, as a self-proclaimed disciple of Lafayette, was doubtless well acquainted.110 The potentially disastrous consequences for Germeuil—“contenter ses désirs, combler ses vœux, ce serait le livrer à l’éternel regret d’en avoir formé de si contraires à son bonheur”—lead Sophie to consider refusal as a “devoir indispensable” (63, 64). The heroine checks Germeuil’s impetuous male desire and

110 In a letter published in the Mercure de France of March 1768, Riccoboni wrote: “Madame de Lafayette fut toujours ma maîtresse et mon guide; l’honneur d’approcher d’elle, de la suivre, même à distance, est la louange que je voudrais mériter, & serait un prix bien flatteur de mes faibles essais” (52-3).
redefines their relationship as reasonable friendship for the marquis’ own sake. Indeed, until the proposed marriage becomes an arranged marriage once again, as at the beginning of the narrative, Sophie continues to refuse her consent.111

Germeuil’s reaction to her choice confirms her doubts about male behavior and brings an important revelation about love. Instead of recognizing that “le soin de son bonheur [l’a seule intéressée],” Germeuil’s accusatory response not only shows no “reconnaissance” for Sophie’s generous refusal, but hurts and disappoints the orphan. Sophie comes to regret even her limited contact with the marquis, since it seems to entitle him to direct her decisions. “Je voudrais n’avoir jamais revu Monsieur de Germeuil, n’avoir jamais admis ses visites, ne lui avoir jamais écrit. Eh! Pourquoi ne suis-je pas libre au moins, dans ma pénible situation?”—exclaims the heroine. “Qui soumet ma conduite à Monsieur de Germeuil? Quel droit a-t-il de la blâmer?” (71). Examination of Germeuil’s comportment, and the clear contrast Sophie sees with her own behavior, prove to the heroine that she has not been mistaking love for friendship in her own heart, as Hortense had supposed. Germeuil’s insensitive and undeserved reproaches to a woman who has unselfishly sacrificed her own best interest to his, highlight the negative effects of love to Sophie.

Because Sophie knows herself to be incapable of forgetting reason and duty, she consequently concludes that it is friendship and not love that she feels for Germeuil. Her enhanced understanding of love through Germeuil’s behavior only strengthens her preference of friendship. The format of her response to Hortense, framed as a set of

111 At the end of the novel, since it is her newfound adopted father who arranges the union, Sophie’s consent is bypassed altogether.
conditional statements analogous to those used in mathematics and logic, implicitly validates the primacy of reason over the ardor of passion:

\[ J\text{`aime, vous en êtes sure, j\textquotesingle aime beaucoup, j\textquotesingle aime avec passion. Avec passion! Permettez-moi de ne pas le croire. J\textquotesingle aime sans doute Monsieur de Germeuil, je l\textquotesingle aime tendrement: sa personne me plaît, son esprit m\textquotesingle attache, ses qualités me touchent, son amitié me flatte. …Vous allez me répéter, votre amitié est de l\textquotesingle amour. Eh bien, ma chère, j\textquotesingle oserai combattre cette opinion, l\textquotesingle attaquer par les mêmes raisons dont vous vous servez pour l\textquotesingle appuyer. Si l\textquotesingle amour nous entraîne avec violence, s\textquotesingle il maîtrise notre âme…si la réflexion, les principes, le devoir n\textquotesingle élèvent devant lui qu\textquotesingle une faible barrière… je le dis avec assurance, je l\textquotesingle affirme avec vérité, mon amitié n\textquotesingle est pas de l\textquotesingle amour, ne ressemble point à l\textquotesingle amour. (75) \]

\[ If \text{ love commands behavior, if } \text{ it is overcomes sober considerations, principles, and duty, then } \text{ Sophie’s sentiments for Germeuil are not love, since her comportment has unalterably been guided by reason and obligation. The if-then statement thus also admits Sophie’s conclusion as a reasonable prognostic for the future: “mon amitié n\textquotesingle est pas de l\textquotesingle amour,” therefore “je ne renoncerai jamais aux lois que l\textquotesingle honneur et la reconnaissance m\textquotesingle imposent. … L\textquotesingle élève d\textquotesingle une femme respectable conservera du moins le précieux héritage qu\textquotesingle on ne peut lui ravir, un attachement inviolable à ses devoirs” (76). The heroine recognizes that her education, which importantly allows her to privilege reasonable sentiment over passionate love, is the true inheritance she has received from Mme d\textquotesingle Auterive. \]

The back-and-forth debate between Sophie and Germeuil suggests women as reasonable and desiring friendship and men as seducing them toward passion, a movement to which the heroine is inherently opposed. Sophie’s insistence on defining her conduct and sentiments through reason is particularly significant in its opposition to the traditional view of women as governed by their feelings, often exalted by contemporary fiction. Stewart argues that in depicting women’s emotionally dominated nature and their capacity of appreciating the finer nuances of sentiment, glorified as sensibilité in the eighteenth century, the fictions of novelists like Riccoboni “made
legible its symbiosis with oppression” (7). That is, these novels exposed women’s sensitivity as yet another means of control at the disposal of manipulative male characters occupying the dominant position in romantic relationships because of society’s biased nature. However, *Lettres de Vallière* goes a step further in suggesting that not only are women not inherently subjugated by their supposedly sentimental nature, but that they are aware of the repercussions of this oppressive stereotype. In depicting a heroine’s superior command of reason and implicitly contrasting her comportment with the passionate male protagonist’s, the novel subverts women’s exclusion from reason. Not only are women shown to be capable of reason, especially where intimate relationships are concerned, but Sophie’s choice also suggests that when given the means of self-determination, women may actually opt for reason over sentiment.

Indeed, Sophie is conscious of the tight corner into which women have been driven by the prescriptive views of their nature, contradicted by societal expectations of allowed female behavior. Much like Orrery, the heroine of *Lettres de Vallière* realizes that in fact, a woman has no choice but to be reasonable in her affections:

> On pardonne, dites-vous, toutes les fautes que l’amour fait commettre. Malgré mon peu d’expérience, j’oserai vous assurer de la fausseté de cette maxime, au moins à l’égard des femmes. Si l’extrême violence de cette passion est l’excuse d’un sexe porté par son éducation, par sa hardiesse naturelle, à ne pas contraindre ses désirs, à sacrifier beaucoup au plaisir de les satisfaire; la retenue et la modération, partage ordinaire du nôtre, ne lui donnent point le droit à la même indulgence: c’est un combat inégal, ma chère, où l’on impose au timide, au plus faible, la nécessité de remporter le victoire. (66)

Sophie’s remark points to the narrative’s lucid awareness of society’s unfair and rigid separation of appropriate male-female attitudes. Women may be morally superior, it is true, but it is also a role thrust upon them by society. They have no choice but to deny their desire; not only that, society expects them to also regulate male desire while robbing them of the practical means to do so by placing them into a powerless position. The
skewed societal perception of the behaviors allowed each sex leads to a fundamental inequality that either renders marriage for love impossible, or entails the sacrifice of the woman’s reputation and integrity.

There is, however, a possible way out of this predicament, suggested by the heroine’s startling assertion about an additional circumstance that leads her to reject Germeuil’s suit, his age. His youth would lead society to condemn the match as a product of “l’imprudence ordinaire de notre âge [la jeunesse]” (64). Germeuil would be considered “faible,” “séduit,” Sophie would be accused of “feinte,” “artifice,” “un vil intérêt” (64). Such a match, apparently motivated by lowly desire, would be “condamné sans examen” (64). Were Germeuil an older and experienced man, however, Sophie claims that she would have unhesitatingly agreed to marry him. Her deliberations are worth citing in full because they seem to precisely describe the husband and marriage of her friend Mlle d’Alby, of which the reader gets a detailed account in an interpolated narrative:

Si Monsieur de Germeuil était parvenu à ce temps de la vie où l’expérience, l’étude du monde, celle de soi-même, ont décidé la façon de penser; si maître de ses actions, ses principes affermis, connus, pouvaient conduire à regarder son choix comme réfléchi, comme une préférence accordée à ces qualités estimables, qui aux yeux d’un monde éclairé, l’emporteront toujours sur la naissance, sur des avantages de convention; je ne balancerais pas un instant; j’accepterais l’honneur qu’il daigne me faire; toute ma vie serait consacrée à lui prouver ma reconnaissance, à justifier sa bonté pour moi par ma conduite, par mes égards, par une continue attention à lui plaire, à l’obliger. (64)

Mlle d’Alby does indeed contract such a union with an older man, which is carefully represented by the narrative as a match motivated not by romantic love, but by the young woman’s superior characteristics and the wise and cultivated Marquis de Monglas’ unselfish desire to help her. Defined exclusively as a relationship of friendship, it is moreover the unique completely happy marriage in the narrative. The suggestion that a marriage of reasonable affection, based on an appreciation of the partner’s inner
characteristics, is only possible with an older man, is interesting in several respects. The Monglas marriage, as we shall see, excludes sexuality. So marriage with a younger man is perhaps not possible because he would not be able to make the sacrifice of sensuality, which in turn may not permit marriage to remain in the beneficial bounds of friendship. In any case, this requirement excludes the possibility of Sophie marrying Germeuil.

Instead, Sophie’s concern for her reputation and personal integrity leads her to accept work, not marriage, as a means of sustenance. Sophie enters the service of Mme de Moncenai, a newlywed seeking skilled needlewomen. Though her decision is motivated in large part by concern for her reputation and Germeuil’s welfare, the option of service, considered degrading by Marivaux’s orphaned heroine Marianne, also seems to point a way out of the traditional convent-marriage dyad. Riccoboni’s suggestion of the importance of work prefigures Charrière’s heroine Cécile, who shares her dreams of opening a boutique in *Lettres de Lausanne*. Sophie’s choice of work and independence also seems significant because it marks a crucial turning point in the narrative.

This is precisely the moment at which the narrative sends Mlle d’Alby, now become the Marquise de Monglas by her marriage, to rescue her friend and bring her to the idyllic country seat in which conjugal friendship reigns to the admiration of all. The initial and most difficult part of Sophie’s trials, then, ends with a renewed separation between friendship and love. As we have seen, Sophie has associated constructive sentiment with reason and destructive violent feelings with passionate love. Sophie’s affection is expressed in terms of reason rather than desire, and continually defining her relationship with Germeuil as “une amitié née avec notre raison” permits the heroine to maintain her personal integrity and independence (106). But what sets Riccoboni’s text
apart is that these liberating qualities of friendship make it the preferred basis for marriage, rather than romantic love, as shown by the example of M. and Mme de Monglas.

*Mme de Monglas, the New Julie?*

The representation of friendship as the basis for matrimony in *Lettres de Vallière*, particularly in the interpolated tale of the Monglas marriage, seems to suggest that by the last quarter of the eighteenth century spousal relationships were well on the way to acquiring a new, intimate dimension but that the nature of this emerging intimacy was still being defined. The text’s insistence on friendship rather than love as the ideal basis for marriage because of *amitié*’s advantages for the heroines, suggests an overwhelming concern with the potential impact of emerging definitions of conjugality on women. As we have seen, the fictional constructions of conjugality in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* likewise rejected passionate love as the optimal basis for matrimony, yet the marital model advanced by Rousseau differs in many significant ways from Riccoboni, particularly in its definition of women’s role in the intimate marriage and family. The exclusion of sexuality from the Monglas marriage is particularly important to Riccoboni’s definition of marriage as friendship and forms the basis of the divergence from the Rousseauist model of matrimony. However, the exemplarity of this marriage, dependent on its chaste nature, also suggests the difficulty inherent in defining marriage in such a manner.\(^{112}\)

\(^{112}\) Niklas Luhmann’s analysis of the evolution in the semantics of love during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, illustrates how the attempt to define marriage as friendship encountered the stumbling block of sexuality. Arguing that friendship and love
Though Sophie and Germeuil’s struggle to define their relationship suggests a competition between passionate love and friendship in the main narrative, the undisputed triumph of friendship in the interpolated tale plays an important role. Stewart makes a useful interpretation of the impact of micro-stories on the macro-narrative in her reading of the Jenny Montfort episode in Riccoboni’s Lettres de Juliette Catesby, showing that shorter tales can play an important corrective role to the overall narrative message (Gynographs 132). In Lettres de Vallière, the micro-narrative of the Monglas marriage casts doubt on the happiness of any conjugal configuration that does not have friendship as its base. Yet the exceptional nature of the sole successful conjugal union of the novel paradoxically makes evident the slim chances for success of conjugal relationships and the dubious odds of their benefit to women.

The Monglas episode has attracted some critical attention—Stewart finds the choice of such an affective relationship based exclusively on friendship “natural in a system where love is so fearful” (Novels of Mme Riccoboni 135). Colette Cazenobe compares M. and Mme de Monglas to La Nouvelle Héloïse’s Julie and Wolmar, calling the episode “La Nouvelle Julie selon Mme Riccoboni” (246-7). Eighteenth-century critics also singled out the interpolated tale—the laudatory assessment of Lettres de Vallière in the English periodical Monthly Review (1772) even cited the (translated) Monglas episode in its entirety as an example of the author’s consummate skill (47: 9-13). None, however, has pointed out the exceptional framing of this story, which appears crucial to

competed “as basic formulae for the codification of intimacy” in his study Love as Passion, Luhmann traces the effort to fine-tune the code for intimate relationships that “permeated the eighteenth century” (80). In the process of defining marriage as a close relationship, “for a time it appeared as if it were possible to fuse love and friendship,” but “the obstructive factor of sexuality [is what] made it necessary to distinguish between the two” (80-1).
understanding the role it plays in the overall narrative.

Sophie has not long been occupying her new position of needlewoman when several major disagreements determine her to leave. First, M. Ballin, the aging intendant, gets it into his head to marry Sophie and won’t take no for an answer, pestering her with bathetic declarations of his violent passion. Just as she finally manages to get rid of him, the bachelor brother of Mme de Moncenai decides that Sophie must without a doubt be smitten with his petit maître charms. Between the bumbling bourgeois’ proposal and the second-rate seduction attempts of the aristocratic cad, romance is rendered thoroughly ridiculous by the narrative. Luckily, the arrival of Mme de Monglas, cousin to Mme de Moncenai, saves the day just as the dispirited Sophie is ready to flee.

Accidentally crossing paths, the two young women immediately recognize each other. Mme de Monglas turns out to be the married name of Sophie’s friend from her convent days. Pressuring her to take the veil, Henriette d’Alby’s parents had intentionally treated her harshly and provided only the bare minimum for her upkeep. But Sophie, noticing that her friend longed for “toutes les bagatelles dont ses compagnes se parent,” had used her pin money to surprise Henriette with a luxurious sewing basket (38). The advantageously and happily married Mme de Monglas, who has never stopped thinking about her convent friend (“je conserve encore cette jolie corbeille brodée de votre main…votre idée ne s’est jamais effacée de ma mémoire”), is especially thrilled with the chance encounter because she has been looking for a “compagne de mon âge, dont le caractère et les principes puissent convenir à Monsieur de Monglas” (89). Sophie, of course, is found to be just such a companion, and she happily prepares to depart to the couple’s tranquil countryseat. Understandably curious about Henriette’s unexpected
marriage, Sophie questions Cécile, a mysterious young woman in the employ of Mme de Moncenai’s mother, who seems to know all the family stories and possess a strange power over the crabby matriarch.

In fact, Cécile owes her privileged position to her skill as a writer. Mme de Moncenai’s mother Mme de Terville is a bel esprit renowned throughout Europe, but it is Cécile who secretly pens the letters responsible for this reputation. Abandoned by her husband, the young woman chooses to make a living with her pen. Beautiful, sharp-witted, somewhat cynical about love and notoriously close-mouthed about her own story, the portrait of Cécile bears a striking resemblance to Riccoboni herself. Charged with putting the extraordinary story of Henriette’s marriage into writing, the young woman could well be the novelist’s narrative stand-in, at least in so far as they both compose tales of the tribulations of aristocratic heroines and their unlikely marriages, describing a world to which they do not belong for an elite reading audience. Both are moreover unable to reap the benefits ostensibly merited by the extreme popularity of their writing.

Like Sophie, the reader learns the story of M. and Mme de Monglas from the in-demand petit cahier Cécile has composed and its format thus differs substantially from the other parts of the narrative. Unlike letters or an intimate journal written for personal purposes by the characters and intended to be read only by a correspondent with whom a close relationship exists, Cécile’s book is a text penned by a professional writer meant for

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113 Riccoboni’s novels and Lettres de Vallière in particular, were likely especially in demand among an elite polite society readership. Although it’s usually difficult to determine readership or give any precise circulation statistics for this period, Crosby notes that according to the correspondence of Riccoboni’s friend Garrick, “Humblot [Riccoboni’s publisher] ne voulait jamais faire paraître ses ouvrages lorsque la cour était absente de Paris, ni lorsqu’elle avait d’autres distractions plus fortes que la lecture” (65n). The Notice to Riccoboni’s Œuvres complètes (1818) claims that Lettres de Vallière was especially popular among “les jeunes femmes et les gens du monde” (xl).
circulation among a wider, if still exclusive, audience of ladies of leisure. Suggesting a *mise-en-abîme* representation of the novel itself, the tale’s lessons about conjugality take on a wider dimension, impacting the interpretation of the macro-narrative message.

Cécile’s portrait of M. de Monglas is remarkably similar to the description given by Sophie of an older man whose suit she could have accepted. Germeuil would have been a satisfactory candidate had he reached “ce temps de la vie où l’expérience, l’étude du monde, celle de soi-même, ont décidé la façon de penser” (64). Monglas, a “guerrier dans sa jeunesse,” has fittingly become a “philosophe” later in life. “Le désir de voir, d’apprendre, de perfectionner son goût, d’éteindre ses connaissances, lui firent quitter la France, visiter les différentes cours de l’Europe, traverser les mers” (90). At sixty, the cosmopolitan and educated Monglas has accumulated the kind of life experience and understanding of himself and the world that Sophie judges necessary to make the right decision as far as choice of spouse is concerned.

Sophie had also pointed out the importance of marriage being perceived as motivated by rational considerations based on the positive qualities of the prospective spouse, rather than as the consequence of passion. She would have accepted Germeuil’s suit “si maître de ses actions, ses principes affermis, connus, pouvaient conduire à regarder son choix comme réfléchi, comme une préférence accordée à ces qualités estimables” (64). “Maître de lui-même,” Monglas values “l’étude et la réflexion,” and his proposal is presented in the narrative as the product of lengthy and careful deliberation (90). Spending the summer with Henriette’s family, the marquis gets to know the young woman whose parents intend her for the convent and who have exceptionally permitted her to pass some time at home as a last request before entering the novitiate. “Paisible et
désintéressé,” Monglas has no desire to marry, but his “cœur sensible et généreux” is moved by “tendre compassion,” which causes him to form “le désir de soustraire une jeune infortunée au triste sort que ses parents lui préparaient” (90-1). Though Henriette dearly loves her family, their cold treatment of the young woman brings to mind Edmond and Jules de Goncourt’s somewhat romanticized description of the unfortunate young women relegated to the convent by terrifying parents “sans entrailles” who wielded an unlimited authority over their timid daughters (54).114

“Négligée, presque étrangère à toute sa famille, les rares et courtes visites de sa mère, de ses parentes, se passaient en représentations sur la nécessité de céder aux désirs de son père” (91). “Douce, sensible, douée de mille agréments, de mille qualités aimables,” Henriette excites Monglas’ compassion and admiration (91). “Il découvrit en elle des qualités rares; chaque jour il la plaignit davantage” (92). His choice is most certainly presented by the narrative as the “préférence accordée aux qualités estimables” that the selection of spouse entails for Sophie (64). Indeed, the text destroys any possible ambiguity in the interpretation of Monglas’ sentiments for Henriette by specifying that the nature of the marquis’ interest in women has changed with age:

Un naturel sensible avait souvent livré son cœur aux charmes séduisants d’une passion dont son âge et beaucoup d’application à l’étude le rendaient alors peu susceptible; mais s’il ne cherchait plus les femmes avec cette ardeur que l’espoir d’être heureux par elles anime, entretient; il les chéritait toujours, préférait leur amitié à celle de son propre sexe et riait des vaines déclarations

114 The Goncourts generally characterize parent-child relationships in the eighteenth century as marked by severity on one side, and excessive fear rather than respect on the other (50). Their discussion of families who forced their daughters to take the veil points out that the predominant image of this phenomenon of the ancien régime comes from novels (54). One such novel, and arguably the most famous, is Diderot’s La Régissuse (1796), which recounts the struggle of the nun Suzanne Simonin to break the vows she has been forced to pronounce against her will. The heroine of Diderot’s novel doesn’t want to be in a convent, but also consistently maintains that she has never wanted to marry.
de ces philosophes maussades, qui ont osé les nommer l’écueil de la sagesse et de la tranquillité. (92)

The narrative’s description of Monglas’ view of women helps explain Sophie’s earlier suggestion that a marriage of friendship could only be possible with an older man. Though Monglas’ affection for women had always been the product of laudable sensibility much like Germeuil’s, “âge” and “beaucoup d’application à l’étude” guarantee him from the negative influence of passion in his later years. Thus, he no longer seeks out women with the selfish goal of “être heureux par elles.” Instead, he truly cherishes women and their friendship. The high value Monglas places on women’s friendship (preferring it to men’s), coupled with the narrative’s insistence on the mockery he makes of misogynistic views, are essential traits in a husband, who must be capable of recognizing women’s merit and enjoying an unselfish relationship of equals.

Still, marriage is not Monglas’ first choice. His primary goal is to “rendre [Henriette] indépendante et heureuse,” but after several months of reflection, any and all means he could think of offer “une sorte de difficulté dans leur exécution” (92). Monglas considers finding a suitable young man to marry Henriette, but “le marquis n’avait point de parent à proposer pour elle; absent depuis tant d’années, il ne connaissait personne dont il pût faciliter la recherche par des arrangements faciles à prendre quand on est riche et libéral” (92). As in Germeuil and Sophie’s case, Monglas realizes that existing societal structures do not permit him to help Henriette without defining their relationship. He must act through a proxy prospective husband, or marry her himself.

The exemplary marriage of the narrative is strikingly entered into as a last resort by both partners. For Henriette, it is a means to escape the convent, since a woman is shown to circulate in society only as man’s appendage. As for Monglas, matrimony is the
“seul projet que peu de temps auparavant il se croyait sûr de ne jamais former” (92). The narrative seems to imply that even the perfect marriage is still only a *pis-aller* through Monglas’s critique of the established social usages that do not allow him to give Henriette the independence she desires, without limiting her freedom in a different way.

Confessing his deep concern for her situation, Monglas admits his perplexity to Henriette: “Depuis longtemps, je songe à vous affranchir d’une contrainte pénible, à vous rendre au monde, à vous-même. Pourquoi les idées reçues, l’usage, les bienséances, me forcent-elles à vous présenter un lien, quand je voudrais seulement rompre les vôtres?” (92). Monglas’s selfless desire to use marriage to “restore her to herself,” rather than acquire a claim to Henriette’s person, is markedly different from the behavior of even a genuinely devoted lover like Germeuil, to whom just the simple proposal of marriage seems to already grant a right to direct Sophie’s conduct. Monglas’ proposal is consistent with his concern for Henriette’s free choice—knowing that the match would be extremely advantageous to the young woman’s family who may accordingly force her hand, he first breaches the subject to Henriette herself, giving her ample time to consider his offer. In this, their marriage is widely different from the one it is compared to by Cazenobe—Henriette is not forced to marry Monglas the way Julie is coerced and manipulated by her father into marrying Wolmar in Rousseau’s novel.

Moreover, Riccoboni’s heroine hesitates not between two potential spouses, like Julie, but between marriage and the convent. Thus the narrative goes beyond a debate of family duty versus individual sentiment, or the merits of choosing a partner based on love or reason. Rather, Riccoboni attacks marriage directly, denouncing the limited sphere of activity open to women. “Un destin rigoureux vous réduit au choix de deux états; l’un est
terrible et l’autre, peu satisfaisant,” assesses Monglas (93). In considering marriage as only the slightly less terrible alternative to the convent, Monglas’ pessimistic prognosis points out that for women, even in the most privileged echelons of eighteenth-century society, marriage was a default option and not a means for happiness or personal fulfillment. The narrative stress on Henriette’s choice as one between a rock and a hard place, pricks the bubble of the Clarens utopia, which had projected marriage and motherhood as women’s paradise.

Henriette, who simply wants to be allowed to live at home with her family, opts for wedlock because it is a closer fit to her desires than the convent, not because it is an appealing option in itself: “Si mon père m’accordait la faveur de vivre dans sa maison, les amusements qu’elle peut m’offrir suffiraient à mon bonheur; et si je changeais d’état, je n’en souhaiterais pas d’une espèce différente” (93). Like Sophie, who desires above all to be part of a family, and describes Germeuil in the non-sexual terms of “brother” and “friend,” Henriette marries to gain parental affection, which is further underscored by the chaste nature of her marriage to Monglas. Her new husband does not simply define himself as Henriette’s friend, but also as her father: “Voyez dans cet époux un tendre père, un indulgent ami” (95). Erotic desire is sacrificed to paternal sentiment—“je vous sacrifie mes désirs; dès ce moment je prends pour vous des sentiments vraiment paternels” (95). Thus Henriette’s hopes of parental affection and a tranquil life in the family circle, denied by her biological parents, are at last fulfilled through her marriage.\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{115} Henriette’s happiness at the news that she finally has an affectionate parent is reminiscent of the investment of Marivaux’s Marianne in the relationship with her adoptive mother Mme de Miran rather than with her flighty suitor Valville: “Vous, mon
The exclusion of sexuality and its direct consequences on the couple’s respective roles and lifestyle constitutes another important difference with the Wolmar marriage. On the day of her wedding, Henriette is given “des détails trop circonstanciés” by a disillusioned widowed relative who had suffered at the hands of a brutal elderly husband (94). Despite the injunctions of her mother and aunt, who implore the enlightened young woman to compose her terrified appearance lest she offend her new spouse, Henriette gets dressed and prepares to flee the nuptial chamber as soon as the older women leave her alone. Monglas arrives at that very moment and immediately understands her predicament, reassuring Henriette: “En m’unissant à vous, je n’ai pas cédé au désir de posséder une fille charmante, mais à celui de rendre heureuse une fille estimable. Perdez vos craintes, j’oublie mes droits” (95). Monglas explicitly disassociates his motivations for marriage from amorous desire; wedlock is motivated by the disinterested sentiment of friendship, which sees marriage as the only way to help Henriette. The union was entered into on terms of friendship and Monglas declares that these terms still apply after marriage. Like a true friend, he does not require any compensation for his generous action: “Vous n’achèterez point par des pénibles complaisances le sort que je viens de vous faire” (95).

Monglas’ restraint is not motivated uniquely by Henriette’s reluctance: he realizes that to be happy in marriage, it’s best for both of them if he forgoes his “droits; votre bonheur, le mien, exige que je les oublie” (95). Admitting sexuality into the union

père, vous, mon ami, vous, Monsieur! répétait-elle en se jetant dans les bras de Monsieur de Monglas, le serrant avec transport” (96). The thrilled Henriette promises Monglas the same “soins,” “attentive amitié,” “respect,” and “reconnaissance,” that Sophie earlier imagined bestowing upon a husband, were he an older man choosing her for her personal characteristics (96).
would bring passionate love with all its negative aspects: suspicion, jealousy, quarrels.

Thus, as Monglas explains to Henriette, “en me livrant à ces mouvements, je me préparerai de longs et d’amers chagrins” (95). The problems he foresees are exacerbated by the age difference between the spouses, but the marquis could be speaking of any marriage when he describes the Pandora’s box of emotional torment that passionate love in matrimony could open:

À mon âge, on aime avec inquiétude, avec douleur! L’assurance de ne pas pouvoir plaire porte un cruel sentiment au fond du cœur, la défiance l’accompagne et l’affreuse jalousie le suit. Bientôt tourmenté par des tristes soupçons, on afflige, on offense l’objet de son amour, de ses peines; on le rend aussi malheureux, plus à plaindre que soi-même! (95)

Though Monglas’ reasoning recalls stereotypical warnings against passion in his assimilation of “l’objet de son amour” to “l’objet de ses peines,” the import of the asexual nature of the union goes far beyond simple avoidance of the unpleasant sides of romance. That marriage is defined simply as a means to permit the couple to freely engage in their mutually beneficial relationship regardless of societal constraint—“le titre d’époux, nécessaire à sanctifier aux yeux des autres mon amitié pour vous, à vous faire partager ma fortune”—entirely changes its characteristics (95).

In its exclusion of sexuality, Riccoboni’s seemingly conservative formulation of marriage as friendship is radically different from traditional advice to maintain the temperate characteristics of friendly affection in marriage, articulated by Montaigne or the eighteenth-century pedagogical treatises on marriage that I discuss in my Introduction. Representation of the heroines’ control of their sexuality in marriage seems to go hand-in-hand with their empowerment in the novels in my corpus, despite Fauchery’s assertion that fictional eighteenth-century brides are unable to delay
consummation by more than a few hours. Thus, as we have seen in Chapter 2, Clarice requires her mother-in-law’s approval of the marriage before its consummation, and the new spouses live chastely together for some weeks as they travel to their new home. In Chapter 4, we will see how the heroine of Montolieu’s *Caroline de Lichtfield* (1786) refuses to consummate her marriage or live with her husband for over a year. *Lettres de Vallière*, however, is exceptional in its deliberate representation of marital chastity’s liberating impact on the heroine.

As Cazenobe argues, although Riccoboni was likely conscious “du caractère irréaliste de sa fable,” eliminating sexuality between the Monglas spouses allowed the novelist to get around the legal and social constraints condemning marriage to failure in *ancien régime* France in order to portray her own ideal vision of the union:

> L’intérêt pour Riccoboni et pour nous est l’expression, rendue possible par ce récit, d’une idée et d’un rêve présents dans chacune de ses œuvres. ... Pour que deux personnes soient heureuses ensemble, il faut qu’elles se soient éluées librement et qu’elles aient décidé d’un commun accord de leur plan de vie. C’est précisément ce qu’a imaginé Mme Riccoboni. (249)

The spouses, who freely choose each other, draw out a common “plan de vie,” discussing the details during their wedding night. This sort of private contract thus ostensibly takes the place of sexuality, and the lifestyle implemented by the Monglas couple differs sharply from that of the Wolmars. Their life of tranquil worldly pleasures—“des concerts,” “une table délicate, un jeu modéré, le spectacle, les devoirs qu’impose la société”—forms a contrast to the bourgeois work ethic of Clarens centered on increasing the productivity of the estate, where personal enjoyment is strictly controlled and moderated (96, 97).

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116 “Il est à peu près sans exemple qu’elle obtienne un sursis à sa consommation: cela heurterait à la fois le code matrimonial européen…et le parti d’élision euphémique affecté” (359n35).
Moreover, Henriette also takes up an extensive and orderly course of study: “La marquise prit des maîtres, se perfectionna dans l’art de marier les accents d’une voix flatteuse au son de la harpe et du clavecin. Une bibliothèque composée des meilleurs ouvrages de toutes les nations de l’Europe lui fit naître le désir d’apprendre plusieurs langues” (96-7). Unlike Julie, whose time is almost entirely devoted to taking care of her household and children (and whose husband expects the duties of a mère de famille to trump all other concerns), Henriette is freed of conjugal and maternal responsibilities, studying until noon and receiving family and friends later in the day. Riccoboni had already suggested her antipathy for the “ménagère” in Juliette Catesby, drawing a mocking portrait of a housewife that could be a satire of Julie’s domestic virtues:

Miss Bidulf qui, à votre refus, s’est accommodée du cœur, de la main, et de l’immense personne de Sir Georges notre hôte, est bien plus propre que vous à lui procurer l’espèce de bonheur qu’il est capable de goûter. … Elle conduit sa maison, gouverne ses fermiers, gronde ses valets, aime son mari, fait des enfants, de la tapisserie, ne lit point de peur d’affaiblir sa vue, consulte son chapelain, défend l’amour dans toute l’étendue de son domaine, aime son mari, fait des enfants, de la tapisserie, ne lit point de peur d’affaiblir sa vue, consulte son chaplain, défend l’amour dans toute l’étendue de son domaine, marie ses vassaux, traite sérieusement les moindres détails et se fait une grande affaire de la plus petite chose. … Si elle rit, ma chère, nous pourrions bien pleurer, nous qui lui ressemblons si peu. Il serait singulier que cette ménagère eût plus de mérite que nous: il est au moins bien sûr qu’elle a plus de bonheur. … Une longue étude de nous-mêmes, notre raison, nos connaissances, nous rendent-elles plus heureuses?

(14-5)

Mme de Monglas’ domestic arrangements seem to be the answer to the thinking woman’s dilemma expressed by Juliette: repulsed by the life of a devoted housewife, she despairs of finding happiness without abandoning the “étude,” “raison” and “connaissances” that appear incompatible with marriage. In Lettres de Vallière, Riccoboni represents the ideal conjugal union for such a heroine, a bond of friendship that permits a life of leisure devoted to personal development. Mme de Monglas’ country home and well-furnished library bring to mind not only the simple “plaisir d’être” of Graffigny’s Zilia, but also the seventeenth-century aristocratic ethic of repos embraced
by the Princesse de Clèves.

The marriage of the Monglas couple thus explicitly transforms the spousal relationship, and both are perfectly happy more than two years later (97). The tale’s conclusion—“Plus Madame de Terville examine sa nièce, plus elle la trouve charmée de son sort”—also seems to imply a certain optimism for the couple’s future, absent from the dénouement of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, in which Julie’s death threatens the continuation of the Clarens utopia (96). However, Riccoboni’s radical portrayal of marriage as friendship also exposes and indirectly denounces the structures of patriarchal society that put women at men’s mercy, effectively annihilating almost all possibility of meaningful relationships between the sexes. Henriette’s independence is symbolized by the marriage’s platonic nature, yet the fact that the heroine is unable to enjoy both her freedom and sexuality implies that they remain mutually exclusive options. Sophie also learns that her society does not permit women the luxury of experiencing, much less expressing, desire. In portraying the biological family as all-powerful, exploitative and devoid of affection, with matrimony the panacea and the only means of escape from an intolerable situation, the Monglas episode astutely considers the nearly insurmountable difficulties faced by marriage, prone to collapse under the enormous stress of a flawed legal and social system.

The explicit conflation of the husbandly and paternal roles in the narrative also seems to embody societal shortcomings. Monglas’ adoption of the paternal role seems natural, given that he is much older than Henriette. This is an obvious similarity to Wolmar, who is also much older than Julie and has often been read as her father’s double. In a sense, of course, this was also true for any *ancien régime* marriage, for the
patriarchal legal tradition that dated back to the Roman concept of the *pater familias* considered women as minors and made any husband a father, rather than an equal partner, to his spouse. Yet Monglas is also a means to escape from the biological father’s authority, and marriage is presented as trading a bad parent for the “good father.”

According to Paul Pelckmans, who traces the evolution in the fictional representations of the father figure, the parent absent in the beginning of the century gradually emerged by its midpoint and was transformed into a benevolent patriarch toward the century’s end, around 1775 (323). Hunt suggests that this portrayal mirrors the developments in the French political and social consciousness, with the perceived decrease of despotic authority in the male heads of the state and family. That the man who protects Henriette through marriage assumes a paternal role, may suggest that the “good father,” as he progressively lost his authority, was becoming less threatening to women’s self-determination than the despotic husband.117

But the general lesson of the story is simply and unequivocally given as a postscript in a letter Cécile encloses with the *petit cahier*, which she is sending to Hortense on Sophie’s request:

> Les femmes, nées sensibles, mais élevées à modérer leurs désirs, ne sentiraient jamais une partie des peines de la vie, si la seule amitié les liait à ce sexe violent, emporté, qui s’efforce cruellement de faire passer dans notre sein les passions tumultueuses dont il est agité. Faibles, tendres, trop compatissantes, en voulant calmer ces passions, nous détruisent notre repos, notre bonheur; le trouble, l’inquiétude, la douleur et le regret s’introduisent avec elles au fond de notre cœur. Puisse un heureux destin en garantir les deux charmantes amies dont je désire la paix et la tranquillité! (97)

The only relationship advisable with men is friendship; if one must marry, then friendship ought to form the basis of the conjugal rapport. The moral with which Cécile

117 In “Notorious Women,” DeJean argues that French women writing at the turn of the eighteenth century tended to problematize the power of abusive husbands, not fathers. Similarly, later on in the century women writers “identified the law with husbands, not fathers,” as Hunt claims (22).
endows the unusual tale she has penned, which is plainly meant to direct Sophie and Hortense’s reading of the Monglas marriage, seems to embody the overall message the novel directs at its readers. The interpolated tale’s lesson, exemplified by the fond wish made by Cécile for the heroines’ wellbeing and hence safety from romantic passion, provides a remedial antidote to the attractions of romance in the macro-narrative, highlighting the dangers of sentimental involvement culminating in marriage. And although the exceptional relationship of the Monglas spouses does not easily lend itself to replication, avoiding marriage for love might be a more imitable lesson.

What Then? Marriage and Conclusion

Je n’imaginais pas que la joie s’exprimât par des larmes, par des soupirs, par une sorte de tristesse. Ces amants m’étonnent en vérité. Je connais peu l’amour, mes idées sont très bornées sur les mouvements qu’il excite; mais si ces mouvements sont plus forts que ceux de l’amitié, ils le sont trop, ils doivent causer des sensations pénibles. En considérant ces deux amants, qu’on nomme ici des amants heureux, je m’assure avec bien du plaisir, que la douce paix de mon âme est préférable à un sentiment dont les délices si vantées peuvent produire les mêmes effets que la douleur.

Riccoboni, *Lettres de Vallière*

L’amour est une passion si incommode que j’ai de la joie que mes amis et moi en soyons exempts.

Lafayette, letter to Ménage, September 18, 1653

In the concluding portion of the novel, marriage is once again framed in terms of trading the bad father for a “good father,” which suggests a partial application of the micro-narrative lesson to Sophie’s projected marriage. However, Germeuil assumes the place of the “jeune parent” missing from the Monglas scenario, casting doubt over the probability of Sophie’s happiness. Just as the heroine begins to fear that despite her better instincts, she has developed romantic sentiments for Germeuil, the narrative puts forth a father figure, who can dispose of Sophie’s hand as he sees fit. Indeed, perhaps it is
romantic love itself that unlike liberating friendship brings the heroine back into the fold of patriarchal authority. The declaration of her love for Germeuil makes up the very last lines of a letter to Hortense; the very first lines of the heroine’s next letter apprise her correspondent of M. de Monglas’ surprising request to instruct his close friend, a melancholy Englishman residing nearby, of the exact particulars of Sophie’s birth.

In his forties and master of a large fortune, Milord Lindsey is clearly intended to have a decisive role in Sophie’s fate from the moment of his appearance in the narrative. Lindsey’s reaction the first time he lays eyes on Sophie is astonishingly strange: “ma vue lui a causé de la surprise, de l’émotion, et presque de la terreur…il semblait être affecté d’un sentiment pénible en me regardant” (101). After the initial shock, Lindsey pesters Monglas with questions about Sophie’s nationality, and seeks out the young woman’s company. The thrilled Mme de Monglas even begins to think of an advantageous marriage for her friend: “Ses attentions, sa complaisance pour moi, sont l’objet de tous nos entretiens et de mille suppositions inquiétantes. L’active amitié de Madame de Monglas remplit son imagination des plus riantes images: elle me parle sans cesse de rang, de fortune” (107). Mme de Monglas ostensibly wishes Sophie to reproduce the schema of her own marriage, a union with a significantly older man whose considerable material advantages and penchant for a quiet life in the country provide a safe haven in the midst of a few close friends.

She and Monglas increasingly pressure Sophie to be more favorable to Lindsey’s suit, but the revelation of Sophie’s origins and her relation to Lindsey show that the

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118 The Notice to Riccoboni’s Oeuvres Complètes smugly notes that “le premier Anglais qui paraîtra avec des millions et le spleen n’arrivera que pour réparer les torts de la fortune” (I: xl).
Englishman aspires to a different role—that of her father. Monglas passes along Mme d’Auterive’s journal and correspondence, which allow Lindsey to ascertain Sophie’s identity. Through Lindsey and his journals, the heroine finally learns the identity of her parents and the circumstances behind their tragic death. Lindsey’s story is so lengthy that it completely takes over the novel, making up most of its second half. Essentially, his journals document his strange relationship with Sophie’s father and the rivalry that results in their duel and the gruesome death of her mother.

The failure of the pair’s homosocial bond is at the core of the tragic destiny of Sophie’s mother, Emma. The inadvertent destructive collapse of their relationship, and the ways in which both men unwittingly contribute to the death of the woman they love, suggests how corrosive patriarchal systems lock men into positions in which they are “also misshapen by homosocial values,” as Beth Kowalewski argues in her introduction to Refiguring the Father: New Feminist Readings of Patriarchy (xi). Luckily for Sophie, whose refusal of Germeuil’s proposal is implicitly situated against her mother’s disastrous choice to marry for love, her suitor instantly forms a bond of friendship with Lindsey upon their meeting. “Devenu l’ami de marquis, je me suis prêté sans peine à tous ses désirs,” Lindsey informs Monglas (188). Taking the place of the biological father he killed in a duel, the Englishman is determined to adopt Sophie and marry her to his new friend Germeuil. “N’hésitez point à combler mes désirs, consentez à nommer votre père l’homme qui s’éloigne en ce moment de vous, pour prendre le soin le plus tendre

119 Indeed, most contemporary French reviews of the novel, including those by Fréron, La Harpe, and Grimm, though overall highly favorable, disliked the dark tone and the length of the protracted Lindsey digression, which cast a shadow over the main narrative. Grimm says, for instance: “Nos critiques ne tombent que sur les parents de mademoiselle de Vallière, qui n’ont que trop expié leur fautes” (Riccoboni, OC I: xl).
qu’exige ce titre, pour lier à jamais la charmante Sophie à l’amant le plus sensible et le plus aimable,”—Lindsey pleads with the heroine (186).

The text rewards the substitution of romantic passion for fatherly feeling: Lindsey’s love for the heroine’s mother indirectly brings about Emma’s death, whereas the adoption of Sophie allows for an ulterior atonement and enables Lindsey to unite Germeuil and his now-daughter. Claude Lévi-Strauss has famously posited that the exchange of women serves the primal function of structuring bonds between men. In the domain of fiction, Eve Sedgwick has shown how men bond over the bodies of women in English literary texts. Lindsey’s failed friendship with Sophie’s biological father, the crucial instantaneous bond with Germeuil, and the subsequent conflation of the paternity and the marriage suit in the narrative similarly hint at the determining influence of patriarchal structures and the male relationships they produce on marriage:

Because Lindsey’s letter is addressed to Monglas, Sophie does not know that she has been adopted, her name has been changed, and her hand given away, all without her consent. She has never given a positive answer to Germeuil, nor apprised him of her sentiments, yet “tous nos arrangements sont déjà pris.” Now that Sophie has regained a parent, the arranged marriage initially projected by Mme d’Auterive once again becomes possible. Its non-romantic nature is highlighted by the fact that Sophie’s consent is inconsequential to Lindsey and Mme de Germeuil’s agreement, and indeed is never given even after the heroine learns of the plans made behind her back. The heritage and name
Lindsey bestows upon her make her Germeuil’s social equal, if not superior, and she will no longer depend on him when they do marry, as she would have had she succumbed to his earlier pleas. But marriage comes accompanied with a heavy price—she must accept as her father her biological parent’s murderer. Her qualms are decisively silenced by her entourage, who demonstrate the necessity of exchanging the bad genitor for the “good father,” much like Mme de Monglas had exchanged the bad parent who wanted to confine her to a convent, for the “good father”/husband who allowed her the comforts of freedom, riches and social standing.

In each case, the woman’s position is so precarious that she must accept the protection of an older male; that he is not her actual father but rather a father figure suggests the patriarchal nature of the society that is reflected in such plots, in which it is impossible to escape want and danger without accepting male authority. Sophie repeatedly chooses the anonymity and independence of work rather than her cousin’s help. Yet marriage to Germeuil requires the sacrifice of her freedom and her sentiments to patriarchal society, accepting the authority of the “good father” who killed her actual parent and destroyed her original family. Miller points out in *The Heroine’s Text* that though “the trajectory of the orphan heroine operates a swerve from the paternal orbit,” such independence is only temporary (150). “As the heroines find their place in the world, they all do marry; and in that sense the challenge to the convention of the feminine condition, if challenge there is, is finally attenuated” (151). I’d like to suggest, however, that this challenge remains intact or at least is not entirely diluted in the marriage of friendship imagined by the novelist, for Riccoboni’s representation of the Monglas couple strikingly liberates Henriette from the majority of the conventional constraints of
the condition féminine. The narrative mise-en-abîme of her story and its lessons appears moreover to structure fictional representation of the importance of female self-determination as a possible antidote to the dangers of love.

Indeed, the novel’s conclusion shows that Mme de Monglas’s comparison of her friend’s approaching marriage with her own only strengthens her satisfaction. Dismissing the doubtful attractions of turbulent sentiment, Mme de Monglas reaffirms her continued contentment in her chosen lifestyle: “En considérant ces deux amants, qu’on nomme ici des amants heureux, je m’assure avec bien du plaisir, que la douce paix de mon âme est préférable à un sentiment dont les délices si vantées peuvent produire les mêmes effets que la douleur” (192). The last words of the last letter of the novel, penned by the only unambiguously happily married heroine, seem perfectly appropriate as the closing message of Lettres de Vallière.
Chapter 4
From Beast to “Mari de roman”: Reading Marriage in Lettres de Mistriss Henley and Caroline de Lichtfield

The widely debated *Le mari sentimental, ou le mariage comme il y en a quelqu’uns*, a Swiss novel that appeared anonymously in the fall of 1783, asked a salient question about the relationship between novels and marriage. Its author, Samuel de Constant (a member of the famed Constant family), painstakingly represents the unraveling of a marriage and the suffering of the bewildered protagonist Bompré as he tries to make sense of his conjugal fiasco.\footnote{Samuel de Constant de Rebecque was Benjamin Constant’s uncle and the brother of Charrière’s longtime correspondent Constant d’Hermenches.} In particular, Bompré cannot understand why his wife should want a room of her own, and why she prefers reading her favorite fictions to his company. Diverting his wife’s energies away from Bompré and their marriage, both spatial autonomy and novels are associated with feminine corruption.

Although he pretends to feel like a rustic for even making such a suggestion, Bompré writes to his best friend Saint-Thomin that perhaps reading is useful to the rare women who are themselves writers, but that regular housewives are more likely to merely get exalted ideas from books. “Dans le pays où les femmes font des livres,” explains Bompré, “même je passerai pour un homme sans goût,” by voicing doubt about whether it is good that women should love reading (93).\footnote{This and all subsequent references are to the 1785 edition, which published Constant’s novel side-by-side with Charrière’s *Lettres de Mistriss Henley*. I follow this edition because it is the one referenced by eighteenth-century reviewers.} But “dans celui-ci où les femmes font le sort de leur maison & de leur famille, où leur économie & leur raison décident de la fortune & du bonheur de leurs maris, il n’est pas très sûr que la lecture soit utile aux femmes & qu’elle produise un grand bien” (93). Women of Bompré’s *pays*, supposedly
occupied with husband and household, run a veritable danger in imbibing novels’ false representations of life, the protagonist opines. Particularly hazardous seems to be the confrontation between such misleading depictions and women readers’ quotidian of crucial obligations to their husband and family as prescribed by Bompré. The resulting “écart,” the discrepancy between the two, could presumably produce dissatisfaction with the homely realities of domesticity in weak minds. “Les femmes lisent beaucoup de romans…elles occupent leur esprit de fictions, de fausses peintures de la nature, de sentiments exaltés enfin de choses qui mènent loin de la vérité; & si, par hasard, elles n’ont pas l’esprit juste, l’écart peut devenir immense” (93).

Ironically, the model feminine domesticity Bompré observes in the pays de Vaud, where Constant’s novel is set, was already besieged by women of letters. Indeed, Bompré’s assertion about reading’s uselessness on the grounds that women in his region do not write stands in odd contrast to the remarkable activity of neighboring women novelists. On the north border, Charrière was already beginning her literary production at her residence Le Pontet in Colombiers, in the canton of Neuchâtel. In Lausanne, to the southwest, another writer would soon make herself known and inspire numerous other women by her success. Indeed, Montolieu’s brilliant reputation and her literary salon would earn Lausanne the appellation of “la ville des Romans” famously evoked by Bonaparte.¹²² Vaud would soon be surrounded by women writers from every side, with

¹²² See Eusèbe Gaullieur’s Histoire littéraire de la Suisse française (1856) for the (likely anecdotal) account of the First Consul’s admiration of Lausanne’s literary reputation. About Lausanne’s novelistic production, Gaullieur writes: “Il est certain que l’impulsion vint, comme le disait Bridel, de Mme de Montolieu et de Caroline de Lichtfield” (280). In the introduction to his edition of Le mari sentimental, Pierre Kohler also recognizes Montolieu’s decisive literary influence, though he argues that Charrière and Constant’s productions were likewise important contributions to Lausanne’s literary renown.
Charrière and Montolieu each publishing a novel whose representations of marriage and domesticity could potentially dangerously alter women’s ideas, as Bompré had feared.

Upon reading Constant’s somewhat misogynist novel, Charrière was quick to fire off a response, *Lettres de Mistriss Henley publiées par son amie* (1784). While the sentimental husband’s shrewish wife triggers his suicide, Charrière’s “explicitly literary provocation,” as Joan and Philip Stewart term it in their introduction to the MLA edition of *Lettres de Mistriss Henley*, takes the more subtle approach of having a seemingly perfect husband unwittingly drive his wife to despair with his imperturbable superiority (xi). The two novels were reprinted side by side the following year (with a clumsy *Justification de M. Henley* by an unknown author tacked on for good measure), and contemporary reviewers praised the innovative choice of subject. “Le fond de ce double Roman…a le mérite d’être absolument neuf,” noted the review that appeared on April 22, 1786 in the *Mercure de France*. Nevertheless, the pessimistic representation of married life was considered morally dangerous, for Swiss “pasteurs hommes de lettres s’alarmèrent de ces peintures propres à déconsidérer le mariage,” writes Pierre Kohler in

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59n55).

123 All subsequent references to *Lettres de Mistriss Henley* are to this edition.

124 In 1785, the novels were united in one volume without the authors’ approval. Neither the publisher, nor the reviews in contemporary journals seemed concerned with the identity of the author(s). The reviewers further treated the heroine’s melodramatic death in childbirth, which occurs in the *Justification*, as part of the plot of *Mistriss Henley*. Charrière was understandably furious and wrote to the *Journal de Paris* to explain that the *Justification* was not her work and had been attached to *Lettres de Mistriss Henley* without her knowledge. In another letter probably written sometime in the 1790s (to an unidentified correspondent), Charrière complained about the unscrupulous booksellers who had published the works together, referring to the *Justification* as “une misérable suite de ma brochure” (Godet 271, 389).

125 The 1785 review in *L’Année littéraire* also made similar observations, citing the “marche différente” of these two novels, which “commencent là où les autres finissent” (169).
his introduction to *Le mari sentimental* (49). One of these pastors, the eminent Chaillet, judged *Lettres de Mistriss Henley* to be an “aimable cruel petit livre, excellent en littérature, mais selon moi dangereux en morale à divers égards” (Charrière, *Œuvres complètes* 2: 420).126 According to Charrière’s correspondence, the controversy seems to have fired up reader interest—in Geneva, for instance, the widespread enthusiasm for the novel divided society into camps rooting for one or the other of the fictional spouses.127

Shortly afterward appeared Isabelle de Montolieu’s *Caroline de Lichtfield* (1786), an instant bestseller. The circumstances of the novel’s composition were superficially similar to *Lettres de Mistriss Henley*. Like Charrière, who likely interrupted work on *Lettres de Lausanne* to write her own version of a series of conjugal disasters outwardly reminiscent of those of the sentimental husband’s, Montolieu was impulsively moved to write *Caroline de Lichtfield* after reading Anton Wall’s short story *Antonie* (1783). Drawing on the German tale’s portrayal of an heiress who initially rejects married life with her new husband because of his hideous appearance, only to be won over by his underlying gentle nature once she discovers it through the unusual mediation of a friend, Montolieu expanded the original to a two-volume novel, transforming it in several key ways.128 Ostensibly writing for the entertainment of an ailing elderly relative, Montolieu

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126 Chaillet borrows his “aimable et cruel petit livre” from Mistriss Henley’s first letter, where she uses this expression to describe *Le mari sentimental*, which she has just read (3).
127 In a January 1804 letter to Baron Taets von Amerongen, Charrière describes Genevese society’s animated reaction to the novel. “Tous les maris étaient pour Monsieur Henley; beaucoup de femmes pour Madame; et les jeunes filles n’osaient dire ce qu’elles en pensaient. … J’ai entendu des gens très polis se dire des injures à leur sujet” (*OC* 6: 559).
128 Montolieu’s avis to the second edition of 1789 cites her source as well as its two translated versions. “J’avais averti le Public, dans ma première édition, imprimée à Lausanne en octobre 1786, chez Luc Vincent, que le fond du Roman de Caroline était
did not intend to publish her manuscript, but her famous friends, particularly Gibbon, felt that the work had literary merit and ought to appear in print. Confirming their high opinion, the novel rapidly ran through several editions.

Sainte-Beuve noted the contrast of Charrière’s “ton parfaitement uni et réel avec le genre romanesque, d’ailleurs fort touchant, de Caroline de Lichtfield,” yet the novelists’ representations of life after marriage grapple with similar concerns (Charrière, *Lettres de Lausanne* 209, italics in original). Specifically, each novel’s subversive
tiré d'une petite anecdote Allemande, d'Antoine [sic] Wall, insérée dans un agréable journal ou recueil Allemand, intitule *les Bagatelles*, année 1783. … Ceux qui regretteront ce que j'aurais pris de l'original Allemand, pourront le retrouver dans *Albertine*, par M. de Bonneville, dans *Anthonie* [sic], ou recueil de traductions, à Lausanne, et dans ma première édition de *Caroline*” (iii–iv). The two translations to which I refer in this chapter, the French version of Anton Wall’s original *Antonie* (1787) and Nicolas de Bonneville’s looser imitation “Albertine” in *Choix de petits romans imités de l'allemand* (1786), are nearly identical.

Several interesting accounts of the novel’s publication exist. Addressing the public in the 1789 edition, Montolieu herself writes “Je n'eus point l'orgueilleuse pensée,/ Qu'au rang d'un auteur tout d'un coup élevée,/ J'occuperais les presses de Paris./ Qui m'aurait dit qu'un simple badinage,/ Sans mon aveu, me vaudrait cet honneur,/ Et du public obtiendrait le suffrage?” (i) In her correspondence, the British novelist Maria Edgeworth, who met Montolieu in 1820, mentions the circumstances surrounding novel’s publication. “[Gibbon] was the person who published Caroline de Lichtfield. She wrote it, without the least thought of publishing it, for the entertainment of an Aunt who was ill. It ran in a few months through several editions” (Letter of September 14, 1820 to Mrs. Ruxton [Reprinted in Colvin, *Maria Edgeworth in France and Switzerland* 239]). Gibbon himself writes, “a novel entitled Caroline de Lichtfield, of our home manufacture; I may say of ours, since Deyverdun and myself were the judges and patrons of the manuscript. The author who is since married a second time (Mme de Crousaz now Montolieu) is a charming woman: I was in some danger” (Letter of January 20, 1787 to Lord Sheffield [*Letters of Edward Gibbon*, 3: 62]). The biographical notice in “Un Conte inédit de Mme de Montolieu” also confirms this account. “Gibbon, un excellent critique, crut qu’il devait entraîner son amie sur la grande scène littéraire” (612). In her *Mémoires* (1825), Montolieu’s close friend Stéphanie de Genlis takes credit for both publication and editing.

Montolieu considered Caroline her chef d’oeuvre and scrupulously oversaw the amendments and corrections, in particular of the novel’s second edition of 1789, which I follow in my reading. Several editions dating from 1786, 1787, and 1789 are available in the *Bibliothèque nationale* collection. According to Montolieu’s correspondence, many unauthorized re-editions of the novel almost immediately appeared.
portrayal of conjugality posits creative freedom and the underlying necessity of controlling one’s body and private space as indispensable for female fulfillment.

Charrière’s disillusioned realism and Montolieu’s fairy-tale fantasy feature an analogous set of key motifs but with “différences” (to borrow Mistress Henley’s remark about her story read against that of the sentimental husband) (4). Though each novel has an explicit literary antecedent, Charrière’s and Montolieu’s marriage narratives unmistakably respond to the domestic ideology expressed by Rousseau in Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse. It is hardly necessary to trace the immense influence of La Nouvelle Héloïse on the reading public of the period, or on these writers in particular. Suffice it to say that the Swiss novelists both engage in important ways with Rousseau’s marriage narrative.

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131 For a detailed reading of the second preface, see Chapter 2.
132 Philippe Godet’s biography of Charrière as well as Raymond Trousson’s Défenseurs et adversaires de Jean-Jacques Rousseau are both good sources on Charrière’s intellectual involvement with Rousseau and on her measured admiration for his work. In particular, she published the Plaînt et défense de Thérèse Levasseur (1789), supporting Rousseau’s long-term companion, and an Éloge de Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1790), originally composed for a concours organized by the Académie française. She was also a friend of Du Peyrou, to whom Rousseau had entrusted the manuscript of the second part of the Confessions (1789), and assisted him in the controversy surrounding its posthumous publication. As for Montolieu, La Nouvelle Héloïse was her favorite novel as an adolescent, and she details her youthful infatuation for Rousseau in the autobiographical note given at the beginning of her short story “Le Serin de Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” published in 1811 in the Mercure. “Ma patrie est celle de Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Je fui longtemps enthousiaste de son génie et de ses ouvrages,” admits Montolieu, whose account of her early life at times curiously corresponds to Rousseau’s own description of his childhood (21).
133 Bérenguier’s article “From Clarens to Hollow Park, Isabelle de Charrière’s Quiet Revolution” reads Lettres de Mistriss Henley as expanding and challenging La Nouvelle Héloïse’s notions of domesticity, and attempts to explain why Rousseau’s novel was not seen as a precedent by contemporary critics of Charrière. Pelckmans similarly sees Charrière’s novel as “la plus efficace peut-être des transgressions de l’archétype wolmarien” (441n14). The parallels between Caroline de Lichtfield and Rousseau’s chef d’oeuvre have been noted by Jaquier, who condescendingly calls Montolieu’s plot “une
In the reading that follows, I will focus on the representation of marriage in these seemingly dissimilar texts, each of which takes the unusual approach of following a heroine’s post-wedding tribulations. First, I will show how the choice of the heroine’s circumstances and background before marriage helps set up the movement toward death and disillusionment in Charrière’s text, and female fulfillment and fantasy in Montolieu’s. In *The Heroine’s Text*, Miller has shown how many eighteenth-century plots tend to move heroines either on a euphoric trajectory culminating in matrimony, or a dysphoric one leading to death. The innovative representations of these two texts, however, destabilize the wedding-euphoria equation by placing marriage itself at the origin either of the female protagonist’s symbolic death as an individual, or of a fulfillment so extravagant that it seems to relegate functioning conjugality to the realm of fairy tales.

I will then read several corresponding key episodes in each novel, such as the heroine’s choice of husband, in order to show how these fictional representations of conjugal dilemmas treat the opposition between the heroines’ desires for fulfillment and their partners’ constructions of conjugal happiness. To varying degrees, the texts explore reading’s potential impact on relationships and question the benefits of Rousseau’s conjugal model for women in particular.

*Charrière and Montolieu: Adventures in Publishing*

Both of these writers were well-educated women of the aristocracy who lived and version édulcorée des conflits de Julie, dans *La Nouvelle Héloïse*” (“Le Roman au 18e siècle” 316).
worked in similar social and intellectual environments—Charrière and Montolieu each had close ties to the Constant family, shared a hedged admiration of Rousseau, and ran vibrant literary salons in the environs of Lausanne. They also unfortunately shared the disadvantages and trials that confronted eighteenth-century women writers who published their works. Yet while scholarly interest in Charrière’s work has undergone a renaissance today, thanks in large part to Oorschot’s publication of the critical edition of the writer’s Oeuvres complètes (Amsterdam, 1979-84), Montolieu’s many contributions remain largely unknown. In the late eighteenth century, however, Montolieu was if anything better known than Charrière. Although the publications of Agneta-Isabella-Elizabeth van Tuyll van Serooskerken (1740-1805), a Francophone Dutch aristocrat who relocated to Switzerland following her marriage in 1771 to her brothers’ former tutor Charles-Emmanuel de Charrière de Penthaz, were generally greeted with modest acclaim and even controversy, they did not meet with the widespread popular success of Montolieu’s bestsellers.

Born in Lausanne, Elisabeth-Jeanne-Pauline Polier de Bottens (1751-1832) was the daughter of the famous local pastor Antoine-Noë Polier, who was friends with Voltaire and a contributor to the Encyclopédie. Her first marriage to Benjamin de Crousaz de Mézery left her a widow at 24, and shortly before her second marriage, to the languedocian Baron de Montolieu, she wrote the novel that would establish her literary reputation and remain her biggest success, Caroline de Lichtfield. It is not until she became a widow for the second time in 1800, that Isabelle de Montolieu would undertake her full-time literary career (Berthoud 281). Altogether, Montolieu published 105 volumes during her prolific career, the majority of which were translations from German.
or English authors, most famous among them being Jane Austen.

However, in most cases Montolieu would skillfully elaborate and transform, keeping merely the kernel of the author’s original idea; the acute sense of the francophone literary market she seems to have shared with her friend Stéphanie de Genlis, would invariably turn out bestselling creations. “Dès qu’un auteur lui fournissait une anecdote, une légende, un fait divers, elle le développait et l’amplifiait parfaitement selon le goût du jour” adding “un charme que l’original n’avait pas,” writes Dorette Berthoud in *Le Général et la romancière* (321). Montolieu experienced a literary consecration of sorts when Le Breton, then director of the *Mercure de France*, invited her to become a regular contributor to the publication. Although her relationship with the subsequent director Duval, who replaced Le Breton in 1811, quickly soured, the biggest advantage of this collaboration was that it gained Montolieu access to the catalogs of *Mercure’s* publisher, Arthus Bertrand. To capitalize on her success, Bertrand proposed the publication of a *Collection des œuvres de Mme la baronne de Montolieu*, and eight volumes of short stories subsequently appeared (Berthoud 321-4).

Charrière’s correspondence suggests that she envied Montolieu’s easier access to publishers. Evoking the difficulties of finding a publisher for *Sir Walter Finch et son fils William* (published posthumously in 1806) in a letter to Benjamin Constant, Charrière refers to an aggravating recent conversation with Montolieu on the subject: “L’autre jour Mme de Montolieu ne voulait point m’en croire quand je lui disais comment j’étais traitée par les libraires & les imprimeurs. Elle ne connaît point ces difficultés-là elle dont

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134 Berthoud’s study focuses on post-Revolutionary French immigration to Switzerland through the unpublished voluminous correspondence between Montolieu and the famous émigré Montesquiou, the “general” of the title. It is thus not a biography, but remains one of the few sources of information on Montolieu.
on imprime & vend & lit avec empressément les tableaux de famille. Enfin chacun a son savoir-faire—non du savoir-faire je n’ai aucun” (Letter of June 1801 [OC 6: 353-4]).

At the same time, Charrière seems to have been at some pains to disassociate herself from the kind of popular sentimental fiction possibly exemplified for her by Montolieu’s work.

Ironically, the very real popularity of Montolieu’s prolific production ultimately seems to have worked against her. Construed as the result of skillful pandering to the market by exploiting clichéd plots, her phenomenal hit parade has paradoxically engendered continued critical neglect. Even the largely sympathetic Berthoud feels the need to excuse Montolieu’s commercial success:

La postérité lui a fait tort. On a beaucoup ri de cette écrivailleuse aux 105 romans. Or il ne s’agissait pas de romans, mais de volumes, car les romans de cette époque en comportaient toujours plusieurs. Ce qui n’était pas plus ridicule que nos romans-fleuves. On a oublié aussi que ce n’était pas là des créations, mais des adaptations... Enfin on a sans doute ignoré que la baronne de Montolieu n’écrivait pas, en grande dame, pour tromper son désœuvrement. Si ces succès ont fait fermenter, à Lausanne, beaucoup de têtes féminines et suscité trop de romancières d’occasion, elle n’en est pas responsable. C’est pour vivre qu’elle maniait la plume. Elle ne faisait pas de l’art, mais de la littérature commerciale. ... Son succès tient à ce que sa manière répondait au goût du jour. Au goût du pré-romantisme. (343)

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, Montolieu reigned

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135 The key difference between the two writers’ savoir-faire may have been Charrière’s extreme unwillingness to relinquish full control of her manuscripts to the publisher, unlike Montolieu, who in the later stages of her career often did not have time to read the publisher’s proofs herself, as Valerie Cossy suggests in Jane Austen (193). For mentions of Montolieu in Charrière’s correspondence, see letters 1581, 2330, 2332, 2333, and 2336 in the OC (volumes V and VI). Charrière seemed particularly annoyed at Staël’s side-by-side placement of Caliste and Caroline in her Essai sur les fictions (1795). But there is generally a striking number of ungracious remarks about Montolieu, critiquing her “malpropreté dégoûtante,” her “vulgarisme d’une marchande à la toilette,” and her shocking transformation into “un noir petit fagot, faisant des éclats de rire rauques et vulgaires” (6: 347, 349, 351).

136 Cossy reads a passage in Sir Walter Finch that satirizes successful lady novelists as a covert attack on Montolieu and an indication of Charrière’s discomfort with the clichés of “feminine” sentimental fiction (194).
as “celle qu'on lit dans toute l'Europe et qui endimanche si bien les Allemands qu'ils ne s'y reconnaissent plus,” as one enthusiastic reader wrote in his letter to the novelist (cited in Berthoud 334).137 A winning formula on the literary market of the time, Caroline stayed one of the most in-demand novels in Parisian cabinets de lecture well into the nineteenth century.138 Charrière’s undoubtedly more original work, on the other hand, remained forgotten for a long time after the writer’s death, despite an attempt at resuscitation by Saint-Beuve.139

**Before Marriage: The Heroine’s Universe**

Both writers create unique universes in their novels: Caroline is distinguished by its fairy-tale-like, palpably romanesque quality, Mistriss Henley is marked by the atmosphere of pervasive melancholy and emptiness of the aptly named Hollow Park, Henley’s estate. Each heroine’s fate seems to be in close connection to her surrounding universe, the tone of which is established before each young woman’s marriage. The

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137 The quote on Montolieu is from an unpublished letter to the novelist by Hector de Venoge; Berthoud explains that it is part of the private collection of correspondence belonging to Mme J.-J. de Luze, of which the individual letters are almost never dated (334n).

138 According to Françoise Parent-Lardeur’s study *Lire à Paris*, Montolieu remained the third most popular author in cabinets de lecture until at least the 1830s (the first and second being Genlis and Scott, respectively) (172). In his correspondence, Flaubert mentions reading *Caroline de Lichtfield* in preparation for writing Madame Bovary (*Correspondance 2*: 56, 58). One of the numerous manuscript versions of *Madame Bovary* (1857) assembled from Flaubert’s notes and edited by Gabrielle Leleu also contains a reference to Montolieu’s novel (156).

139 Saint-Beuve’s essay on Charrière, composed in 1839, is often included with modern editions of her works. Curiously enough, Sainte-Beuve himself notes that the particular copy of Charrière’s *Lettres neuchâteloises* from which he cites in his essay had belonged to Montolieu (Charrière, *Lettres de Lausanne* 209).
world of the nameless protagonist of Charrière’s novel (we know only her first initial, from the “S. Henley” scribbled at the bottom of a note to her husband) is rendered precarious from the outset by the death of her parents and then again of the man whom she had been intended to marry from her early childhood. Her subsequent need to find a spouse is a source of increasing anxiety, and she is under enormous pressure to make a choice, and quickly. She comes under open attack from her former friends for refusing to accept any of the several candidates who come forth, whom she herself considers unsuitable for a variety of reasons—“un homme riche sans naissance et sans éducation…un seigneur usé et endetté…un jeune homme en qui la suffisance se disputait à la stupidité” (7). Not only is she mocked for being “dédaigneuse,” her aunt more importantly sees her hesitation as financially unwise. “Ma tante…m’avertit plusieurs fois que les 3000 pièces qu’on lui payait par an finiraient avec elle, et qu’elle n’en avait pas trois mille de capital à me laisser” (7). It is in these conditions of social and financial precarity and mental strain that she meets Mr. Henley. Though she technically chooses her husband, marriage itself is not really a choice, but a matter of financial security and survival.

Caroline is also an orphan, but Montolieu’s modification of the German tale’s basic blueprint creates a protective, female-friendly alternate universe in the domain of the heroine’s adoptive mother, the Canoness of Rindaw. Though she was inspired by Wall’s Antonie (a French version of which appeared in 1787), and had also read Nicolas de Bonneville’s loose translation “Albertine” in Choix de petits romans imités de l’allemand (1786), Montolieu significantly changed the original to reflect a feminocentric perspective. Besides creating a far spunkier heroine with psychological depth and
focusing the narrative interest on Caroline rather than on the homosocial relations of the men competing for her love, Montolieu also created a crucial older female character to counterbalance patriarchal prerogative. Whereas in Wall’s original German short story the heroine is merely looked after by a relative on one of her father’s outlying estates, Montolieu’s canoness is in all respects a mother who educates Caroline, transmitting her nonconformist ideas of love and life. Once engaged to Caroline’s ambitious father, who jilted her for a wealthier heiress, the canoness refuses to sacrifice her love even though its object proves himself unworthy.

Much like the Princesse de Clèves, and even more like Lettres d’une Péruvienne’s heroine Zilia, the canoness never marries following her sentimental disappointment, even when the widowed Baron de Lichtfield attempts to win her back. Instead, she prefers independence on her own land, whose isolated nature in the middle of massive forests seems to geographically remove this protective space from the social constraints that govern women’s lives at court. There she is free to cultivate her mind through her extensive library, and read the seventeenth-century grands romans with which she is intimately acquainted, and which shape her vision of love. Like her favorite reading, the canoness’ refusal of her repentant lover’s entreaties to marry him harks back to the précieuses in its implicit admission of the incompatibility of marriage with the ideals of love.

The canoness is of course an important addition to the plot because this is the

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140 For more information on the two versions of the German short story available in French, see note 8 to page 4 of this chapter.
141 The canoness measures male behavior by the yardstick of her favorite heroes, Cyrus and Céladon, respective protagonists of Madeleine de Scudéry’s Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus (1649-1653) and Honoré d’Urfé’s L’Astrée (1607-1627).
woman who raises, educates, and protects Caroline, forming an important counterbalance to the Baron’s patriarchal power (especially since the heroine is her potential heiress). She is the essential female element that permits what Miller calls the orphaned heroine’s “swerve from the paternal orbit,” enabling Caroline to seek “the security of self-possession” over the matrimonial bond (*The Heroine’s Text* 150). But, her past also forms a precedent of female independence: the canoness is able to preserve the vibrancy of her sentiments despite her lover’s behavior, and by adopting Caroline, to have a child without undergoing pregnancy or marriage. The fairy-tale like domain of Rindaw, synonymous with women getting their way, becomes Caroline’s refuge, allowing her to keep the integrity of her body and her private space despite her marriage, and to undergo a sentimental education of sorts on her own terms, protected by her adoptive mother and closest confidante.

Marriage to Walstein disturbs this initial atmosphere propitious to the flowering of Caroline’s creativity, and the remainder of the narrative is a euphoric movement toward reestablishing this balance. *Mistress Henley*, on the other hand, is marked by a diametrically opposed trajectory of feminine frustration: marriage, which initially seems to be the solution to the heroine’s woes, eventually propels her towards dysphoria tinged with death. In both novels, the patterns of frustrated versus fulfilled desire suggested from the outset, mark the heroines’ experience of analogous events and concerns.

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142 In Charrière’s *Lettres de Lausanne*, a mother memorably answers her daughter’s question as to why women marry at all, given the unfavorable conditions they face in marriage: “Si les maris sont comme vous les avez peints, si le mariage sert à si peu de chose, serait-ce une grande perte? … Oui, Cécile: vous voyez combien il est doux d’être mère” (163-4). The canoness is exceptionally able to experience what Cécile’s mother sees as marriage’s sole advantage for women, motherhood, without actually marrying.
Great Expectations: Marriage and Happiness

Marriage is a determining moment for both heroines. Mistriss Henley’s apparently free choice is determined by overruling economic imperatives. But the explanations proffered by the heroine regarding her choice of Henley over another highly eligible suitor evoke changing values and expectations that were making marriage a morally loaded choice for women. Two men vie for her hand, the handsome widower Henley, father of a five-year-old girl who leads a quiet existence in the country, and a slightly older man, a striking urbane connoisseur of the arts who brings back a considerable (though possibly unsavory) fortune from the Indies. Though the conditions Henley offers his prospective bride are described as “les plus généreuses,” the Nabab’s proposal of “un douaire considérable, la propriété d’une belle maison qu’il venait d’acheter à Londres, et trois cents guinées par an pour mes épingles” is spectacular (8).

Yet the well-traveled and sophisticated young woman surprisingly chooses the more modest offer and opts for a husband and a lifestyle of rustic simplicity that seem unsuitable to her personality:

C’était, pour ainsi dire, la partie vile de mon cœur, qui préférait les richesses de l’Orient, Londres, une liberté plus entière, une opulence plus brillante; la partie noble dédaignait tout cela, et se pénétrait des douceurs d’une félicité toute raisonnable, toute sublime, et telle que les anges devaient y applaudir. Si un père tyrannique m’eût obligé à épouser le Nabab, je me serais fait peut-être un devoir d’obéir; et m’étourdissant sur l’origine de ma fortune par l’usage que je me serais promis d’en faire, “les bénédictions des indigents d’Europe détourneront,” me serais-je dit, “les malédictions de l’Inde.” En un mot, forcée de devenir heureuse d’une manière vulgaire, je le serais devenue sans honte et peut-être avec plaisir; mais me donner moi-même de mon choix, contre des diamants, des perles, des tapis, des parfums, des mousselines brodées d’or, des soupers, des fêtes, je ne pouvais m’y résoudre, et je promis ma main à M. Henley. (9)

“Vous pensez bien, ma chère amie, que je ne me permis presque pas d’hésiter,” writes Mistriss Henley, as if the man she categorizes as a “nabob” somehow represented a clearly unacceptable choice (9). Yet, as Stewart pointedly asks, “What man, faced with
a similar choice, would reject, as she does, the offer that would confer greater status, power, and freedom?” (*Gynographs* 103). Though marriage itself is economically dispensable for the heroine, her choice between two candidates is couched in moral terms, with the “vile” part of herself preferring Oriental opulence, and the “noble,” reasonable felicity with Mr. Henley. Deprived of a “tyrannical father” who would force her hand, the heroine nevertheless feels obligated to make the choice she sees as morally superior. Her refusal to consider the nabob’s proposal certainly points on the one hand to an “interiorization of paternal law,” as Stewart convincingly argues. “No psychological liberation complements her freedom of choice: she is like Rousseau’s Julie without her authoritarian father, but making the choice he and Rousseau would have her make” (103).

But besides suggesting internalized convention, Charrière’s representation of Mistriss Henley’s choice as a moral dilemma points to an evolving conception of conjugality and its damaging impact on women. In his study *Putting Asunder*, historian Roderick Phillips argues that the eighteenth century was characterized by “an increased propensity to justify or explain marriage in terms of affection or love,” despite economic and social considerations prevailing as the primary motive (359). The psychological pressure felt by Charrière’s heroine, torn between the socially imposed obligation to choose based on “noble” sentiments, and her underlying “vile” desire for the lifestyle offered by the nabob, seems a result of mediating the growing split in the definition of

143 Marie-Paule Laden also remarks the heroine’s interiorization of social convention in her reading of *Mistriss Henley*: “Her perception of her husband is shaped by a stereotype, a societal idea. So too are the heroine’s aspirations a product of prior conditioning, rather than a true reflection of her inner feeling” (297). MacArthur likewise points out Charrière’s impatience with culturally and fictionally propagated stereotypes of how women ought to face commonplace life experiences in her analysis of novelistic closure.
marriage described by Phillips.

Charrière’s astute representation of Mistriss Henley’s apparent freedom of choice as an added constraint suggests the illusory benefits for women of taking account of affection in the conjugal equation. In essence, these values, instead of liberating the heroine, merely force her to play dumb and pretend that marriage is not an interest-based transaction. Accepting a life of luxury would too blatantly reveal Mistriss Henley’s cognizance of the marriage market as driven primarily by commercial exchange, as the terms of her letter make clear. “Me donner moi-même de mon choix, contre des diamants, des perles, des tapis, des parfums,” is culturally predetermined to be out of the question, and she marries Henley.

Caroline, on the other hand, has exactly the kind of tyrannical father whose absence is deplored by Charrière’s protagonist. The Baron arranges a brilliant match for his daughter with the king’s favori, the Comte de Walstein. Caroline finds herself “forcée de devenir heureuse d’une manière vulgaire,” an option Mistriss Henley deems inadmissible (Charrière, Lettres de Mistriss Henley 9). The thoughts of Montolieu’s heroine upon first hearing of the projected union run along much the same lines as Mistriss Henley’s—she imagines all the potential pleasures of her new life as wife of the immensely wealthy ambassador to Russia: “Enfin le bonheur conjugal de Caroline, fondé sur la danse, les papillons et la parure, lui parut la chose du monde la plus assurée; elle se trouva d'avance la plus heureuse des femmes” (I: 30). However, her dreams of a “vulgar” happiness aren’t morally stigmatized, as in Charrière’s novel. Montolieu’s ironic representation of the naïve Caroline’s understanding of marital happiness suggests that it is due for a rude awakening, which first occurs when she meets her intended husband.
Upon glimpsing Walstein’s repulsive appearance, Caroline is so horrified that she emits a piercing shriek and runs away: “Elle n’avait vu que la cicatrice, que l’œil qui lui manquait, que son dos voûté, sa perruque et sa jambe traînante” (I: 33). She pleads with her father to save her from the marriage, but the ambitious courtier is determined to have his daughter marry the Count of Walstein and so comes up with an effective scheme to exhort filial obedience. Whereas in the original short story, Caroline’s father frightens her into acquiescence with threats and “un regard plein de colère,” Montolieu has him use emotional manipulation (Wall 17). “Il voulut d’abord essayer d’y parvenir par la douceur et le sentiment,” so he cleverly tells his daughter that the king was very angry over any suggestion of the marriage not taking place, and Caroline’s refusal will mean her father’s death. The courtier purposely speaks of his potential political disgrace in exaggerated terms, so the innocent Caroline thinks he really will be executed by the monarch and immediately capitulates (I: 38).

The authoritarian Baron de Lichtfield, who resorts to sentiment to have his way, is reminiscent of Julie’s father, who also emotionally manipulates his daughter into marriage with Wolmar. However, unlike Rousseau’s patriarch, who insists on Julie’s marriage because he really feels that his honor cannot survive reneging on his promise to his friend, Caroline’s father is entirely motivated by ambition, and openly criticized by Montolieu. Addressing the dejected heroine, who hopes that paternal affection will make her father change his mind, the narrator pities her naïveté. “Tu ne sais pas encore que l’âme d'un courtisan est fermée à tous les sentiments de la nature: tu crois avoir un père, un tendre père, et tu vas bientôt apprendre comment ce titre lui est moins cher, moins précieux que ceux de Ministre et de Grand Chambellan” (I: 37). The contrast between the
baron’s ambition, denounced by the narrative, and the affectionate discourse he uses to influence his daughter renders suspect paternal authority and explicitly shows family sentiment to be a tool of manipulation even more effective than threats. The text’s reprise of the figure of the new affectionate patriarch à la Rousseau thus discredits him by presenting his morally bankrupt side.

Caroline’s profound misery causes her to reflect on her situation for the first time. “Enfin, après avoir beaucoup pleuré, elle comprit que cela ne changerait rien à son sort, qu’il était décidé sans retour, qu’il fallait bien s’y soumettre, et tâcher d’en tirer le meilleur parti possible…rien ne forme une jeune fille comme le malheur” (I: 46). The maturing heroine realizes that her choices have been made for her, and that she has to operate within a framework of severely reduced possibilities. Essentially summarizing the condition féminine of the eighteenth century, Caroline’s assessment is also at the root of Mistriss Henley’s despair. While Montolieu’s heroine doesn’t succumb under the weight of her new understanding, but is determined “d’en tirer le meilleur parti possible,” each novel depicts a heroine’s response to fundamentally the same problem, brought to a head by matrimony.

Marriage itself comes to symbolize the absence of possibility in these texts, both of which problematize the heroine’s choice. Though Caroline and Mistriss Henley’s subsequent conjugal experience differs, its inauspicious beginning implicitly casts doubt on the possibility of individual fulfillment for a woman in matrimony. Both texts explore the absence of choice characteristic of the system of compulsory heterosexuality that

144 Thus for Martine Reid, in Charrière’s text marriage is merely a “motif écran,” while the real question is “la condition des femmes,” from which there is “pas de sortie pour Mistriss Henley” (171-2).
undergirds patriarchal society’s dominance of women in Adrienne Rich’s brilliant analysis: “The absence of choice remains the great unacknowledged reality, and in the absence of choice, women will remain dependent upon the luck of particular relationships” (659). As Rich points out, countering arranged marriage with love merely establishes a false dichotomy screening this lack of choice, which both novels play a significant role in exposing through their respective portrayals of marriage. Mistress Henley must marry, and the vituperative criticism she undergoes for being selective shows the very possibility of choice being put under societal scrutiny and ultimately used against the heroine. In the subsequent wavering between the nabob and Henley, Charrière brilliantly shows how cultural conditioning, perhaps partially through novelistic means, was effectively reducing women’s already slim alternatives by shaping their desires, expectations, and notions of the acceptable—marriage for merit is laudable, marriage for wealth is not, even though both matches are thinly disguised financial transactions. Caroline has no choice at all, and the novel reveals her reduction to an object exchanged to facilitate and reinforce homosocial political relations between the king and his subjects. But the subtle way in which Charrière’s novel represents emerging conjugal mores as obscuring this absence of choice makes its indictment of marriage even more powerful than Montolieu’s explicit critique.

The novelistic focus on the motivations behind each heroine’s choice of partner is also important in that it allows the texts to explore the expectations related to matrimony. What decides the heroine in favor of Henley is the image of married life as he presents it to his prospective bride. Henley’s construction of the charms of simple country life, where only a virtuous female companion and mother is wanting, invites the heroine to
assume a romanticized and evidently Rousseau-influenced role. By investing this version of matrimony with moral superiority, in contrast to the urbane life of luxury offered by the nabob, the novel puts to the test a Rousseaist ideology for women’s marital happiness, which assumes that feminine fulfillment is embodied by domestic country living. That Mistriss Henley’s distress is caused first by striving to conform to such an imposed image of female fulfillment through her choice of husband, and subsequently by her attempts to fit a predetermined vision of wifehood, undermines the validity and benefit of this marriage model for women.

If Henley’s presentation of conjugal life covertly caters to his prospective spouse’s predetermined expectations of marriage to influence her final decision in his favor, Walstein, like the sentimental husband Bompré, explicitly aims to regulate his future wife’s desires to fit his vision of female domesticity. Harking back to the omniscient planner Wolmar in La Nouvelle Héloïse, these men obsessively form systems to ensure their wives’ happiness. Wolmar, admitting to Julie that he was fully acquainted with the details of her liaison with Saint-Preux before their nuptials, justifies his decision to marry her despite knowing her to be passionately in love with another man by his superior understanding of what she really needed. “Mais, Julie, je vous connaissais…si quelqu’un était capable de vous rendre heureuse, c’était moi” (370). Julie’s subsequent fulfillment in her crucial role as wife and mother is presented as contributing to the rigorous productivity machine of Clarens. The scientific aspect of Wolmar’s enterprise is likewise recalled by Bompré’s assertion, “je veux absolument calculer & réduire en preuve mathématique le bonheur d’une femme” (Le mari sentimental 91).

Before his moral conversion, which allies him with Caroline’s interests against
the patriarchal values represented by the king and the heroine’s father, Walstein shares the superior attitude of these husbands.\footnote{Walstein’s alliance with Caroline against her father and even the king is all the more unusual in that in all social strata of eighteenth-century society, gender solidarities tended to trump family ties, as Trouille explains in her comprehensive study of spousal abuse \cite{Wife Abuse}.} Fearing that no woman could have a sincere affection for him because of his repulsive exterior, he comes up with a plan to find a naïve and inexperienced bride. Walstein reasons that unless he marries a woman who has never felt anything for another man, and he himself is almost the first of his kind she sees, he would not be able to win her over by his “bons procédés” \cite[I: 65]. “La difficulté [serait de] trouver une femme dont le cœur n'ait reçu aucune impression, car alors tout mon ouvrage est détruit d'avance: on ferait sans cesse la comparaison de moi à l'objet aimé et regretté, on me regarderait comme un monstre” \cite[I: 65-6].

Stewart identifies Walstein’s “pervasive male fantasy” as a kind of blank page topos in which it is the “young woman raised in ignorance of the world who makes the perfect wife” \cite[Gynographs 142].\footnote{The same fantasy often appears in fairy tales by women writers, such as Charlotte-Rose de Caumont La Force’s “Persinette” and “Vert et Bleu,” published in \textit{Les Contes des Contes} (1698); Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy’s “L’Ile de la Félicité,” which appeared in her novel \textit{Histoire d’Hypolite, comte de Duglas} (1690); and Aulnoy’s “La Princesse Printanière,” “L’Oranger et l’Abeille,” and “Fortunée,” in \textit{Contes des fées} (1697).} But Walstein’s discourse testifies rather to the same fantasy of ordaining and regulating female happiness in and through domesticity evoked by Rousseau and Constant’s fictional husbands:

\begin{quote}
Si je puis rencontrer une jeune personne, telle que je la désire et que je ne cesserai de chercher, dont l'amour et trés peu le monde; si je puis la trouver, elle sera à moi, je lui épouser: je saurai la rendre heureuse des femmes, et l'obliger à chérir ses liens... je n'ai pas d'autre moyen de jouir du seul bonheur que mon cœur désire, celui d'être époux et père, et de finir mes jours dans le sein de ma famille. \cite[I: 66]
\end{quote}

The orderly world of Clarens, Bompré’s mathematical formulas for female happiness, and Walstein’s desire to force his future wife to cherish her conjugal union...
and be happy in spite of herself, all conjure up a terrifying system of scientific-utilitarian
domesticity being superposed on women’s individuality like a kind of grid. But it is
Charrière’s text, in its portrayal of the heroine’s interiority, which is particularly effective
at suggesting the destructive effect of the internalization of these projections of
domesticity on women. Convinced of becoming “la meilleure femme, la plus tendre
belle-mère, la plus digne maîtresse de maison que l’on eût jamais vue,” the new Mistriss
Henley projects her new existence in a series of glowing images.

Quelquefois je me proposais pour modèle les matrones romaines les plus respectables, d’autres
fois les femmes de nos anciens barons sous le gouvernement féodal; d’autres fois je me voyais
errante dans la campagne, simple comme les bergères, douce comme leurs agneaux, et gaie
comme les oiseaux que j’entendrais chanter. (10)

Seemingly disparate, these endorsements of the austere values of antiquity and
innocent country life smack of Rousseau’s moral leitmotifs, which present themselves to
the heroine in her quest for a model for her new identity as a wife. The text likewise
insinuates the heroine’s need for identification with a positively perceived model when
she evokes her admiration for the reasonable Mr. Henley and her hope to “devenir
comme lui” by association (10). The letter-writer’s tangible unhappiness as she relates
the story of her marriage to her correspondent, however, suggests her growing awareness
of the tragic failure of this attempt.

Simply put, what happens after the marriage does not correspond to her
expectations. Mr. Henley’s courtship valorizes her future role as affectionate companion,
and his desire to give his little girl, “non une belle-mère, mais une mère” (8). Painting
the “plaisir qu’il y aurait à partager cette belle solitude avec une campagne aimable et
sensible, d’un esprit droit et remplie de talents,” he implies that this imagined virtuous,
talented and sensitive woman is, of course, his interlocutor (8). However, following their
marriage, he criticizes her every attempt at being a mother to the little girl, and negates her talents by criticizing the useless sophistication of city dwellers. Mistress Henley slowly comes to realize that her husband’s desire was not for her to be his wife because of her unique contributions, but for a stand-in to fill this vacant role. His assumption that she is meant to fill a preexisting place manifests itself through his surprise at her desire to change the slightest element of the order at Hollow Park, from the location of his first wife’s portrait, to the décor of her own room. “Ce séjour est comme son maître,” realizes the despairing Mistriss Henley, “tout y est trop bien; il n’y a rien à changer, rien qui demande mon activité ni mes soins” (37).

The heroine chooses her future husband with new expectations in mind and her affective investment in their relationship suggests that she expects it to be different from that of spouses in traditional matrimony. Mistriss Henley’s focus on interpersonal issues such as dissonant points of view and emotional reactions, taken as determining factors in the success of the union, distinguishes her expectations from traditional ones where “emotions simply had a lower profile in the making or unmaking of marriages,” according to Phillips (359). But her emotional responses perplex Henley, who appears to interpret her behavior in nearly pathological terms. When the heroine announces her pregnancy and asks her husband for advice about breastfeeding the child once it is born, his dampening reply is that “son intention était de consulter le docteur M. son ami,” to find out whether her “extrême vivacité” and “fréquentes impatiences” might require hiring a wet nurse to protect the child’s health (40).

Whereas Mistriss Henley struggles to adjust her expectations of emotional intimacy, her husband’s notions of appropriate conjugal behavior, often backed up by
citing ancestral authority, suggest that his outlook is more traditional. “Que dirait ma grand’mère, que dirait ma mère,” “ma première femme aimait cette ameublement,” or “autrefois on trouvais ceci fort beau,” Henley’s typical responses to his wife’s desire to change the outdated furniture and tapestries in her room, exemplify his attachment to traditional ways (14, 15).

Henley is willing to proffer an alluring discourse on marriage to appeal to his prospective bride, but Mistriss Henley’s unhappiness suggests that she suffers from a rupture between what the courtship has led her to expect and her subsequent experience.

This discrepancy between the reality of the marriage and the heroine’s expectations, reminiscent of the dissatisfaction-producing “écart” feared by Bompré as a consequence of female reading, is also indirectly evoked by the Mercure de France review in its disapproval of the heroine’s “écarts” (190). But these “écarts,” unspecified infractions of convention, stem from the “écart” between Mistriss Henley’s views of marriage and the societal structures changing far more slowly than she has been led to believe. Instead of being valued as an individual and gaining the personal valorization to which she had looked forward in her new role, Mistriss Henley is so to speak “tenue à l’écart,” both in her relationship with her husband, and in her inability to order any aspect of her life or personal space. In “The Failings of Rousseau’s Ideals of Domesticity,” Trouille argues that Rousseau’s ideals appealed to women because his “pseudo-feminist”

147 Kathleen Jaeger sees Henley’s marked preference for “ancienneté” as reflecting patriarchal attitudes (11-13). Jelka Samsom also notes Henley’s valorization of tradition, arguing that this is a typical trait of Charrière’s male characters. “What characterizes many of Isabelle de Charrière’s male characters is an often complete and unquestioned internalization of the social rules imposed on them. Unlike the female protagonists, the male characters are not aware of how little freedom they possess. … [They] represent various degrees of a lack of self” (136).
rhetoric appeared to offer them a new moral authority and added importance within the family, yet the female roles he envisioned were in fact limited and ultimately stifling. In portraying the distressing confrontation between her heroine’s hopes for her future and its reality, Charrière’s marriage narrative implicitly denounces these ideals’ unfulfilled promises to women. Through Henley’s specious construction of countryside conjugalit and his wife’s disenchantment with the aptly named Hollow Park, Charrière illustrates her heroine’s painful discovery of the superficial valorization of women fundamental to Rousseau-inspired exaltations of domesticity. The profound suffering of Mistriss Henley, unable to adjust her individual self and her experience to fit a preconceived ideal of matrimony, suggests that the greatest damage of such hollow promises was caused by their interiorization by women.

*What Women Want*

However, Charrière’s and Montolieu’s marriage narratives also importantly portray their heroines’ revolt: fictional husbands who try to implement their systems for domestication run up against a major obstacle when confronted by stubborn women. Their rebellion is often implicit, whether symbolized by Mistriss Henley’s fainting, or the solitary reading of Mme Bompré. Caroline, who repeatedly shows a preference for her own space and personal development over Walstein’s fantasies of domesticity, again brings to mind Graffigny’s Zilia, who chooses her land and her library over marriage. Female contentment/containment remains elusive despite attempts at systematization, a foil that highlights these husbands’ incapacity to make their wives happy. Mauzi, who
condescendingly compares Mistriss Henley’s self-willed unhappiness to the so-called real trials of male heroes like La Bédoyère, and characterizes the novel as a “récit de ses pseudo-malheurs,” is in a sense spot on (“Les Maladies de l’âme” 479, 479n). Charrière and Montolieu’s heroines do refuse happiness, but their resulting “pseudo-malheurs” represent an indirect rejection of a generic version of exteriorly imposed fulfillment.

Caroline’s first action following the wedding ceremony is to hand Walstein the note she has composed to negotiate her return to her adopted mother. She explains to her husband that she had unwillingly obeyed her father and the king in agreeing to the marriage, and asks him to let her live in Rindaw, “que j’attende là que ma raison ait fait assez de progrès pour me soumettre sans mourir aux liens que j’ai formés” (I: 51). If Walstein’s initial astonishment is replaced by compassion and a reevaluation of his own behavior, it is in part due to Caroline’s linguistic mastery, which she continues to develop in her post-marital retreat.

Walstein shows Caroline’s letter to the sovereign, pleading for a separation. After reading the letter, the King is won over by Caroline’s firm “style” and praises her character. “Au lieu de l'irriter, le style et la fermeté de cette jeune femme l'intéressèrent. Il y a de l'énergie dans ce caractère, dit-il en la finissant” (I: 55). The heroine’s skillful

148 La Bédoyère is the melodramatic and lamentation-prone male protagonist of Baculard d’Arnaud’s Les Époux malheureux, whose parents oppose his marriage to the virtuous actress Agathe Sticotti.
writing, explicitly acknowledged by her royal reader, is at once an exercise in and an assertion of female selfhood through its successful establishment of previously unsuspected “volonté.”

Caroline’s argument works so well with both of her readers—Walstein and the king—because she appeals to a conventional patriarchal view of women to justify her actions. Reason, traditionally a male quality in the Enlightenment, whose limited capacity in women was used to rationalize their subordinate status, is directly cited by Caroline to plead her present unfitness for marriage.149 Appearing to conform to stereotypes of female inferiority, the heroine’s writing ingeniously subverts them to serve her own ends. Walstein, who hopes for “une femme assez raisonnable pour m’aimer,” has no choice but to let his wife retire to the countryside to await the “progrès” of her “raison” (II: 37, my italics). The king decides to allow the informal separation seconded by Walstein, on the condition that the unconsummated marriage be kept secret.

Caroline returns to her adoptive mother and in a few months’ time the wedding fades to an unpleasant memory. For Fauchery, secret marriage is a hazardous “situation type” of the eighteenth-century novel, synonymous with “piège” for the female protagonist (354). In Montolieu’s novel, however, it is the heroine who benefits from keeping the marriage a secret, a total reversal of the standard plot type. Indeed, Stewart argues that Caroline’s originality lies precisely in such important reversals of typical fictional forms, reworked to suit her own ends by Montolieu (Gynographs 143, 149, 151). In this sense, Montolieu resembles her heroine, and manipulation through writing with a view toward female independence comes to characterize the text.

149 See Chapter 3 on the Enlightenment view of reason and the rejection of the limited definition of women’s reasoning capacities by writers like Riccoboni (8, 13, 21-24).
Through its seminal role in Caroline’s return to Rindaw, writing becomes synonymous with the demarcation of a private space for the heroine. Shortly after her homecoming, her elderly adoptive mother falls seriously ill, placing Caroline in charge. After the canoness’ recovery, the heroine decides to surprise her by building a pavilion commemorating the happy event. Initially, the small structure in a sort of bosquet is merely intended to house a bust of the canoness and some paintings telling the story of her illness and recovery. However, Caroline, who discovers how pleasant it is to draw and play the harp in this verdant corner, eventually moves most of her belongings up to the second floor, which in essence becomes her second home. Her increasing practice of creative pursuits fittingly takes place in a space whose construction and design Caroline has entirely overseen.

The heroine’s appropriation of this space is also accompanied by a growing sense of self. Caroline matures physically, mentally, and intellectually, and her letters to her spouse and father affirm her developed will. Whereas the younger Caroline had naively obeyed her father, his angry demands for her return to Berlin meet with a forceful rebuff. Caroline’s reply openly criticizes his handling of her marriage, and adroitly refers to her now-married status to deny her father’s authority:

[Vous aviez] une fille qui, si vous l’eussiez voulu, ne vous aurait jamais quitté, dont la vie aurait été consacrée à vous prouver sa tendresse; mais vous en avez ordonné autrement: permettez donc qu’à mon tour j’use de la liberté que mon époux et mon roi m’ont donnée; je puis demeurer à Rindaw autant que je le voudrai: tel est l’arrêt qu’ils ont prononcé, et que je n’ai point oublié.—Je déclare donc que je le voudrai aussi longtemps que mon unique amie existera. (I: 174)

The heroine manipulates the codes of patriarchal society even more skillfully: the very forced marriage that had seemingly endangered her liberty and that her father had declared ordained by the king is now cited by the heroine in support of her independence. It is the baron’s turn to submit to the law symbolized by the monarch. Caroline’s
similarly persuasive letter to Walstein assures her spouse of “l’impossibilité et de vous rendre heureux en vivant avec vous, et de l’être moi-même ailleurs que dans la retraite où je suis,” and obtains a response leaving her conduct entirely to her own discretion (I: 176). Her powerful written assertion of her desire triumphs over her husband’s preferences every time she and Walstein exchange letters.150

Unlike Montolieu’s heroine, Mistriss Henley is unsuccessful in her written attempt to negotiate her relationship with her husband. Her failure to assert her selfhood through writing unsurprisingly becomes assimilated to her inability to ordain her private space. “Une étrangère jusque dans [s]a chambre,” with its outdated tapestry and furniture, the heroine is disconcerted by the portrait of its initial inhabitant, Henley’s first wife (14). Although her husband finally orders fashionable wallpaper and furnishings sent from London, Henley’s refusal to understand his wife’s feelings of alienation stemming from an environment unsuitable to her tastes and personality widens the affective rift between the spouses. Her letters in turn reflect the increasing isolation experienced by the heroine.

For Marie-Paule Laden, Mistriss Henley’s letters, a “guerilla maneuver” denouncing the very patriarchal system that won’t let her strike out directly, reflect the fragmentation of her identity in her struggle to conform to the passive role prescribed by society (297). Kathleen Jaeger and Susan Lanser also comment on the heroine’s losing battle against the confines of her narrow function, noting a movement from rebellion to self-effacement, marked by the total cessation of her voice announced by the last letter

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150 Walstein pencils his ascent to Caroline’s demand of separation on the inside of the sheet of paper enclosing her note, and they exchange several other letters not discussed in my reading.
“Après celle-ci je n’en veux plus écrire du même genre. Un billet vous apprendra de loin en loin que votre amie vit encore jusqu’à ce qu’elle ne vive plus” is reinforced a few lines down by “pour la dernière fois vous verrez mon coeur. Après cela je m’interdis la plainte: il faut qu’il change ou ne s’ouvre plus” (38-9). The “self-erasure in the name of marriage” Lanser sees represented in Charrière’s text, however, is particularly well symbolized by the heroine’s letter to her husband (53). The draft forwarded by Mistriss Henley to her correspondent has “presqu’autant de mots effacés que de mots laissés,” and the numerous “ratures” make it nearly impossible to decipher (34). “Vous ne lirez pas sans peine,” the heroine warns her friend, but the reference to the untidy state of the note well describes not only the physical but also the emotional difficulty, even pain, of reading the literal self-erasure or crossing out of the heroine’s individuality as she admits her failure in marriage and asks her husband to correct her “fantaisie” according to his “jugement” (34, 35).

Although in Montolieu’s novel writing allows the heroine to triumph over her circumstances, expressing empowerment rather than alienation, the final message is similar to that of Charrière’s text. Caroline’s existence at Rindaw is occupied by educational and aesthetic pursuits: she designs an intensive study program to perfect her skill in music and drawing, and learns English and Italian.152 This period is judged the

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151 Jaquier also makes a similar point: “C’est en effet dans l’exercice de sa parole que l’héroïne se fait peu à peu déposséder de son désir, et d’elle-même, par l’autorité raisonnable de son mari” (“Le Roman au 18e siècle,” 318).
152 Caroline’s aesthetic activities in Montolieu’s novel contrast markedly with the stereotypically feminine ones of the original, which focuses on the heroine’s flirtatious attention to her appearance. Her studies are reduced to her dress, “sa parure devint son étude,” and her main occupations are traditional domestic crafts, “surtout de petits ouvrages de femme où elle excellait” (Bonneville 29, 30). The Wall translation similarly evokes “les ouvrages de son sexe où elle excellait,” adding the pastoral pastimes of “les
happiest time of her life even after her reunion with her spouse precisely because of the opportunity for creative expression. Building the pavilion, “c’était en quelque sorte créer…jamais peut-être, Caroline ne fut plus heureuse que pendant cette douce occupation; elle l’a dit souvent depuis” (I: 91-2). By linking female happiness with the exercise of creativity, and stressing the related need for self-determination and control of a private space, both texts more or less explicitly disassociate marriage and female fulfillment.

*Readings of Conjugality*

In the second preface to *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Rousseau reveals his conception of the novel’s potential importance as a pedagogical tool to render the married state “plus supportable” (580). “J’aime à me figurer deux époux lisant ce recueil ensemble, y puisant un nouveau courage pour supporter leurs travaux communs, et peut-être de nouvelles vues pour les rendre utiles. Comment pourraient-ils y contempler le tableau d’un ménage heureux, sans vouloir imiter un si doux modèle?” (580). In other words, a couple actively rereading their relationship against a model fictional representation can redefine their bond in positive terms. But Bérenguier, who compares this imagined joint reading scene to Mistriss Henley’s reading of *Le mari sentimental* to her spouse, notes the negative effect of this reading on the couple in Charrière’s text. In its *mise-en-abîme* inscription of a couple’s joint reading of a fictional text primarily concerned with marriage, Charrière’s narrative seems to engage with *La Nouvelle Héloïse*’s theories of domesticity, and the fleurs,” “les oiseaux,” and “les promenades” (23).
failure of the Henleys’ reading presages the overall failure of Rousseau’s marital ideology when put to the test.

Mistriss Henley hopes that reading about a fictional marriage will strengthen her own relationship with her husband, but their differing interpretations of the sentimental husband’s dilemma drive them even further apart. The altercations of the Henleys bear a superficial resemblance to the predicaments of Le mari sentimental. Whereas Mistriss Henley wants to change the furnishings of her room and displaces the portrait of her predecessor to the dining room, Mme Bompré turns her husband’s rustic home upside down with her fashionable renovations, and moves her father-in-law’s portrait out of sight because she is embarrassed by its poor quality. In reading the novel to her husband, Mistriss Henley hopes that he will “sentir encore mieux que moi ces différences” or see no resemblance at all between his own wife and the fictional shrew (4). The hoped-for recognition of the positive difference between the real and the fictional marriage points to an oblique desire for appreciation on Mistriss Henley’s part, after a reevaluation of their past conflicts against those of the novel has taken place. However, her husband’s reaction is contrary to that anticipated by the heroine: “Il vivait et me jugeait, pour ainsi dire, au jour la journée, jusqu’à ce que Monsieur et Madame Bompré le soient venus rendre plus content de lui et plus mécontent de moi” (19). Reading Le Mari sentimental allows Henley to form an overarching interpretation of his own marriage, one that confirms his own superiority in contrast to his wife’s deficiency.

The Mercure de France review, which brings up the reading scene in its plot summary of Lettres de Mistriss Henley, asserts that husbands of the heroine’s acquaintance all criticize Bompré’s conduct. “Elle rend compte à son amie de l’effet qu’a
produit cette lecture sur les époux de sa connaissance, & notamment sur le sien. La faiblesse de Bompré est condamnée, & il paraît que M. Henley surtout veut bien se garder de l’imiter” (189). Although this is a somewhat fanciful interpretation of Charrière’s actual narrative, the review points out a crucial result of the reading process, the identification between Bompré and Henley.¹⁵³ Henley may not want to imitate Bompré’s weakness, but it is through this character’s plight that he evaluates his own marriage.

Bérenguier argues that Lettres de Mistriss Henley engages with Rousseau’s assertion of the positive effects of reading to show how fictional mediation can harm marriage by inducing anxiety among women readers unable to live up to the emerging ideology of domesticity partially popularized by La Nouvelle Héloïse.¹⁵⁴ This is certainly true, but such an effect is already present if not desirable in Rousseau’s original paradigm. La Nouvelle Héloïse suggests that even if it is an arranged union where the spouses don’t initially share a strong emotional bond, the indispensable element for the conjugal relationship to function is woman’s reform through the sacrifice of her individual desire. The implied lesson of Le mari sentimental replicates this pattern by

¹⁵³ The Justification likewise accentuates this identification, in its unintentionally comic rewriting of the reading scene in Mistriss Henley. “À mesure que ce sot Bompré devenait malheureux, je m’élevais sur mon trône, je m’affermissais dans mes droits; je ne disais pas: prenez l’exemple, mais mon air l’exprimait assez…je ne fus point fâché qu’il y eût des pistolets suspendus dans ma chambre; non pas que je voulusse m’en servir jamais, je pensai seulement, que lorsque ma femme résisteraît trop vivement à mes volontés, j’irais m’en enfermer, qu’elle aurait peur, & qu’alors elle n’oserait pas avoir trop de fermeté” (310-311).

¹⁵⁴ Bérenguier analyzes several key episodes of Lettres de Mistriss Henley, such as the heroine’s attempt at supervising her stepdaughter’s schooling and her hesitation over the decision to breastfeed, to show how Rousseau’s authoritarian yet vague models dictating how women ought to educate and take care of their children set up an unrealistic standard that adds to Mistriss Henley’s uncertainty over her own conduct.
associating the couple’s marital difficulties with Mme Bompré’s assertive embrace of her own tastes and interests over her husband’s.

The conclusion of the novel’s first edition was more neutral, placing some of the blame for the marital failure on incompatibility by apprising the reader of Mme Bompré’s happy second marriage following her husband’s suicide. Constant quickly realized his error, however, and revised the subsequent edition to more directly accuse Mme Bompré. Portraying the character’s unhappiness with her second husband, “qui la rend très malheureuse, & qui lui fait regretter, mais trop tard, le sensible Bompré,” Constant’s moralizing finale presented female readers with an indirect injunction to change their demanding attitude and realize, before it is too late, that their marriage already contains all that is necessary for happiness (232). Contemporary reviews picked up on this didactic aspect, praising the novel’s potential ability to “corriger les femmes” (L’Année littéraire 180). Chaillet likewise declared that Le mari sentimental “peut être utile à toute femme d’un esprit trop décédé” (Kohler 47). That Mistriss Henley’s reading makes her own relationship even more unbearable is a logical outcome with this misogynist model that places the burden for marital success on women’s rectification.

Now that the relationship has been read wrong, and Henley is if anything more dissatisfied with his wife than before, she despairs of ever arriving at the same reading of the relationship as her husband. Although she is not the kind of demanding wife to whom Le mari sentimental’s moral is supposed to be salutary, she still feels herself to be in the wrong, because a woman’s unhappiness in marriage becomes a transgression in the fictional models of domesticity such as Rousseau’s and Constant’s. The heroine’s statement—“ma situation est triste, ou bien je suis un être sans raison et sans vertus”—
initially appears to be a false dichotomy, but is in fact an accurate assessment of her situation (38). In such a reading, if marriage does not make her happy, it is because she is a being without virtue and reason.

The process of rereading the relationship epitomizes Mistriss Henley’s dilemma: the only element she can change in her conjugal dissatisfaction is her feeling itself and consequently her individuality. M. Henley is already a “mari de roman,” a perfect husband of a text such as *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, where the “living eye” Wolmar exemplifies the reign of wisdom and cool reason. Thus it is herself the heroine must reinterpret and the internalized pressure to bridge the gap between her role and her individual identity by conforming to an externally imposed standard (that Lanser reads as the split between woman/wife inherent in the French *femme*), results in the heroine’s death as an individual. As critical readings have pointed out, the heroine’s concluding lines to her friend—“vous apprendrez, je l’espère, que je suis raisonnable et heureuse, ou que je ne suis plus”—do not represent two alternatives, but different sides of the same coin (45). Like the fatal fall of Julie, stifled by her mandatory conjugal happiness, Mistress Henley’s balancing act of interpretation reveals the sacrifice of self women were asked to make to meet the demands of the ideology of domesticity.

Reading’s importance is also suggested by Montolieu’s novel, for it is a written text that makes the heroine consider her spouse in a new light. However, the conjugal relationship ultimately functions because Walstein, too, undergoes a corresponding turnaround. Not just physical but mental, Walstein’s transformation leads him to reject

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155 Bérenguier points out that a husband’s role was rarely attractive in French novels of the period, so this description would seem to refer rather to prospective husbands, with the sole exception of the textbook spouse Wolmar (229).

156 Among others, see Bérenguier, Laden, Lanser, and Samsom.
his preconceived notions about marriage and women, and recognize Caroline’s individuality as well as her need for autonomy. The summer following her marriage, Caroline meets a dashing young officer who shares her love of books and music. Lindorf turns out to be their new neighbor, and the canoness, won over by his looks, personality, and eligibility, throws the young people together as much as possible, intending to arrange their marriage. At first, the innocent Caroline does not realize her nascent love for Lindorf, but when he asks for her hand in marriage, she can no longer doubt the nature of her sentiments. Gathering her courage, she confesses to her suitor that she is already married, and tells him the sad tale of her forced union. Lindorf, on good terms with the king, vows to personally obtain her divorce. However, when he learns that her husband is the Comte de Walstein, the flabbergasted young man gives up the idea and begs Caroline for a last meeting the following morning. Lindorf stays up all night collecting letters and diary entries into a cahier, which he gives the heroine along with a mysterious portrait of a remarkably handsome officer, imploring her to read his manuscript and try to be happy with her husband.

The note accompanying the journal exhorts Caroline to forget their mutual sentiments, and Lindorf promises to earn the “titre d’ami de Caroline…en vous faisant connaître le seul mortel digne de vous,” his best friend and her husband Walstein (I: 196). Caroline’s reading informs her that Walstein lost his formerly handsome appearance by protecting a young peasant woman from seduction and kidnapping by Lindorf himself, who discharged his gun at Walstein in a moment of jealous fury. To protect his attacker, Walstein presented the injury as the result of a hunting accident, and magnanimously consoled the thoroughly repentant young man by maintaining that preserving their
friendship was worth the loss of an eye—“un cœur comme le tien, mérite bien d'être acheté par la perte d'un œil” (II: 37). The comte did not even mind the loss of his military career, because he had always wanted to be a diplomat. His sole concern became finding a wife who would cherish him in spite of his disfigurement. Still, as Walstein confided to Lindorf, “je ne désespère point de trouver une femme assez raisonnable pour m’aimer: c’est l’amour qui fut la cause de mon malheur; c’est à lui de le réparer” (II: 37).

Love both at the root of Walstein’s loss of beauty and as a future redeeming element makes this story strongly reminiscent of the fairy tale “La Belle et la Bête,” a well-known version of which had appeared in Le Prince de Beaumont’s *Le Magasin des enfants* in 1757. Bruno Bettelheim, who identifies the tale as a variant of the animal-groom cycle, explains that in European folklore, the transformation into a beast usually comes as a punishment for a man’s sexual misdeeds towards a vulnerable woman (283). Though it is Walstein who is punished for Lindorf’s urges, Montolieu’s version preserves the warning against the dangers of passion by highlighting its destructive side. This is, once again, an important departure from the German original, where the barely adolescent Lindorf accidentally discharges a gun with Walstein in the vicinity and hits his friend in the eye. The caution in Montolieu’s novel is doubly reinforced, since not only does Lindorf’s passionate love for the peasant Louise bring disastrous results, he commits the incident to writing as a pedagogical tool against passion. By engraving his “crime” “en traits inefťaçables,” he hopes to render himself and his future offspring immune to its nefarious effects (II: 28). “Cet écrit subsistera; je m’impose la loi de le relire une fois tous les ans: mes enfants le liront aussi; ils apprendront de [Walstein] à me pardonner: mais ils

157 The first known French variant of “La Belle et la Bête” was published by Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve in 1740.
verront à quels excès peuvent entraîner les passions non réprimées” (II: 28).

The reading’s revelation of Lindorf’s unsavory past acquaints Caroline with a darker aspect of male-female relations: the violence and mental coercion used by the male aristocrat against the defenseless peasant Louise in the name of love, suggest the particular danger of this sentiment for women. After studying the manuscript, Caroline is not only able to fully comprehend the nature of her sentiments for Lindorf, but also to question them. The reading and prolonged reflection gradually help her to arrive at a sense of closure and get over her involvement with Lindorf. Ultimately, the wiser heroine, like the Princesse de Clèves, comes to see the undesirability of passion, and its inability to establish her happiness in a permanent way.

These reflections, accompanied by a study of the handsome portrait, which of course turns out to be of Walstein before his calamity, take place in the private sanctuary of Caroline’s pavilion, the locus of her creative development and sentimental education. The dual nature of this site, as at once a savage bosquet bearing the intertwined chiffres of the canoness and her infidel, and a garden skillfully civilized by a diversion of water from the showy fountains in the courtyard, may symbolize Caroline’s complex multiple identity. The description of Caroline’s pavilion explicitly recalls both La Nouvelle Héloïse’s romantic bosquet and the Elysée garden tended by Julie after her marriage to Wolmar, but without the rigid separation of the setting of the lovers’ guilty passion from the micromanaged green space of the virtuous wife suggestive of the fracturing of Julie’s self.\textsuperscript{158} The conflation of the savage plot with the cultivated garden in Montolieu’s novel

\textsuperscript{158}“C'était un bosquet irrégulier et assez touffu, de hêtres, de coudriers, de lilas, d’acacias, coupé par des sentiers et des cabinets, et traversé par un petit ruisseau d’eau courante, qui venait des grands jets d’eau du parterre, et produisit la un effet bien plus
suggests a successful incorporation of Caroline’s individuality and preexisting feelings, in modified form, into her new life with Walstein.

The same rich multiplicity charactering Caroline’s self seems to apply to Montolieu’s writing. In the narrative, nature and culture, public ceremony and private experience, individual needs and the requirements of society interact in a complex counterpoint that ironically offsets the female voice with underlying darker notes. Thus the representation of female fantasy is given greater depth by the suggestion of its struggle against societal constraint. Caroline’s maturation, the attainment of a certain capacity for sentiment and greater self-awareness, is prompted by adversity and the limitations of her condition: first she must make the best of an imposed marriage, and then keep only the positive vestiges of her impossible relationship with Lindorf. “Son goû... n’avait fait que développer chez elle une sensibilité, une faculté aimante,” which Caroline’s reflections encourage her to apply to the relationship she subsequently develops with Walstein (II: 240). Sparing the heroine the potential hazards of firsthand experience, reading Lindorf’s manuscript enables her to realize that a handsome exterior may hide an ugly past, whereas what prevented her from appreciating Walstein’s generous and affectionate nature was in fact “la plus injuste antipathie” (II: 112-113). The involvement with Lindorf is born of chance and male persistence; her future relationship with Walstein is an informed choice of the heroine’s

agréable. La chanoiness... malheureuse: le chiffre du perfide chambellan était tracé de sa main sur l’écorce des jeunes arbres; toujours elle avait conservé de la prédilection pour cet endroit, témoign de sa tendresse. Caroline l’aimait aussi, parce que l’ombre et la fraîcheur y attiraient les oiseaux, et l’été précédent elle y avait passé de délicieux moments avec sa bonne amie” (I: 58).
matured understanding and perspective.

Though the implied necessity for a woman to adjust her feelings to comply with the exigencies of the social order might suggest an onerous psychological obligation reminiscent of the pressures internalized by Mistriss Henley, Montolieu’s representation of Walstein’s parallel transformation allows the triumph of female fantasy. Stewart points out that Walstein’s metamorphosis takes place at about the same time that Caroline’s reading leads her to view her husband in a new light (*Gynographs* 145). Although the reader learns that some ladies of the Russian court had already fallen for the ambassador purely on the basis of his natural amiability and wit alone, the change in his physical appearance completes his transformation into a thoroughly desirable man.\(^\text{159}\)

Walstein’s return to a handsome appearance most obviously recalls the climax of “*La Belle et la Bête,*” yet his metamorphosis is not merely physical. The crucial element of transformation in Montolieu’s narrative is rather Walstein’s moral change. Initially a conventional character (reminiscent of Rousseau’s Wolmar, even in name) espousing male prerogative to force an inexperienced girl into marriage and ordain her happiness according to his ideas, Walstein gradually becomes an enlightened subject who not only

\[\text{Ses cheveux que la fièvre avait fait tomber alors entièrement, étaient revenus en abondance, parfaitement bien plantés, et toujours arrangés avec soin; le temps et un peu d’embonpoint avaient presque effacé les traces de sa cicatrice, et lui donnaient un air de santé, de jeunesse, bien différent de ce teint jaune, de cette maigreur effrayante qu’il avait lors de son mariage. Un large ruban noir cachait encore l’œil qu’il avait perdu; mais l’autre était si beau, que ce ruban, qui n’était rien à la noblesse de sa figure, excitaît plutôt un tendre regret qu’un sentiment d’horreur. Un peu d’attention sur lui-même lui avait fait aussi redresser sa taille; elle n’était plus remarquable que par une attitude aisée et négligée, bien préférable à la roideur; il boitait encore, il est vrai, mais on ne marche pas toujours, et il marchait peu: on peu donc imaginer qu’avec de très belles dents, et beaucoup d’expression dans la physionomie, le comte de Walstein, alors âgé de 32 ans, n’était pas un objet bien effrayant. (II: 136-7)}\]

\[\text{“La Belle et la Bête,” yet his metamorphosis is not merely physical. The crucial element of transformation in Montolieu’s narrative is rather Walstein’s moral change. Initially a conventional character (reminiscent of Rousseau’s Wolmar, even in name) espousing male prerogative to force an inexperienced girl into marriage and ordain her happiness according to his ideas, Walstein gradually becomes an enlightened subject who not only}\]

\[\text{\(^\text{159}\) Here Walstein’s missing eye is covered with a black ribbon, but in the first edition, he has a glass eye, described as so skillfully fitted that only a slight difference could be perceived between the two.}\]
understands that a mature woman makes a better wife, but sets Caroline free and lets her decide for herself whether she wants to stay in the marriage or not. The process of this transformation, especially in Montolieu’s depiction of the count and Caroline’s mutual education, suggests a female fantasy of marriage and individual fulfillment that prevails over a La Nouvelle Héloïse-influenced vision of regimented domestic happiness.

Ostensibly on a journey to visit the canoness’ chapter, Caroline unexpectedly encounters Walstein and Lindorf, seeking consolation from their sentimental disasters in each other’s company. The emotion of seeing her husband makes the heroine dangerously ill. Lindorf’s reaction moreover betrays his love for Caroline to Walstein, informed of his friend’s heartbreak but previously unaware of the identity of the woman involved. Caroline’s slow convalescence takes place under Walstein’s roof. The despondent comte assumes that his wife’s illness is a result of her unhappiness compounded with the horror of being in his presence, but nevertheless cannot help spending hours at her bedside while the heroine is unconscious. In a moment of crisis, believing Caroline to be dying, Walstein makes a vow that should she recover, she will be free to live according to her own wishes. He decides to petition the king for divorce and arrange Caroline and Lindorf’s marriage. Walstein finally recognizes that his fantasy for his wife’s happiness was all wrong, and attempting to control Caroline’s desires only brought her to the brink of death. “Tu ne sauras donc jamais combien tu fus adorée de ce cruel époux qui t’a conduite au tombeau,” promises the repentant comte (II: 225). Even the best and most tender of husbands is insufficient to a woman’s wellbeing if she is not free, as Walstein comes to learn.

During Caroline’s gradual recovery, the lovesick Walstein notices her preference
for his company, but fears that the heroine’s diffident displays of affection are a product of his imagination. The pair’s chaste cohabitation gives occasion for their mutual education, coordinated by the heroine:

Elle réussissait particulièrement aux fleurs et aux paysages, c'était aussi le genre que le comte préférait. Elle s'offrit à lui donner des leçons, à le perfectionner, à diriger ses essais: en échange, elle le priait à son tour de diriger ses lectures, et les études qu'elle désirait de faire sur plusieurs objets, trop souvent négligés dans l'éducation des femmes. (III: 19)

Caroline teaches her husband to enjoy her aesthetic pursuits (and flowers, which she instructs Walstein in drawing, subtly evoke his initiation into female sexuality), while also benefiting from his greater knowledge of certain subjects. This description of their developing attachment, in which intimacy is established at the heroine’s pace and the spouses’ relationship is based on enjoyment of each other’s creative interests and skills, could be seen as revealing a feminocentric fantasy of marriage.

When Walstein at last obtains a decree of divorce and writes Caroline a letter expressing his love and remorse, and his hopes that she will be happy with the man she chooses, the heroine’s response is an unabashed declaration in her husband’s favor as she tears the decree into shreds. Only once Walstein abandons his expectations and sets her free does Caroline decide to share his life. The enchantment is over, and the spouses finally consummate their union, though the novel coyly elides the sexual climax of the plot. Walstein’s happiness, and his subsequent realization that marriage to a mature woman making an informed choice is preferable to the innocent ignorance he had once sought as the guarantee of a happy union, complete his moral metamorphosis. It is this

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160 “Le manuscrit ne dit point si la force de l’habitude fit qu’il se retira dans un autre appartement d’abord après le souper; on laisse au lecteur le soin de le deviner. Le lendemain matin, Caroline fit promettre au comte qu’ils reviendraient bientôt dans cette charmante terre, qu’elle aimerait toute sa vie, ajouta-t-elle, en baissant les yeux et la voix” (III: 78).
acquired consciousness, the real transformation of the novel, which successfully and
durably unites the spouses.  

Pour moi, je crois qu’il n’y a rien de plus doux, de plus flatteur que d’être le second objet
d’attachement d’une femme délicate et sensible; je compterais mille fois plus sur la durée de cet
attachement, que sur celle d’un cœur qui n’aurait jamais appris à se défier de soi-même. (III: 120)

Caroline de Lichtfield’s immediate and enduring popularity might have been due
to its optimistic portrayal of a heroine affirming her autonomy and managing to find
creative fulfillment in the most adverse of circumstances. Perhaps, too, the image of the
husband changing to adapt to his wife’s individual needs, a reversal of the Clarens
paradigm, proved particularly attractive. And at the same time, the conservative
beginning and ending frames of arranged marriage and happy domesticity kept the
feminine revolt within comforting parameters. Thus Caroline’s marriage narrative,
depicting the transformation of the initially frightening Walstein into the perfect husband,
may have played the reassuring role Bettelheim assigns fairy tales: “while the fantasy is
unreal, the good feelings it gives us about ourselves and our future are real” (126).

However, despite this containment of Caroline’s “swerve from the paternal orbit,”
Montolieu’s novel remains a crucial expression of protest (Miller, Heroine’s Text 150).
The heroine’s search for independence both indicates dissatisfaction with the patriarchal
plots directing women’s lives, and creates a vital alternative space of female fantasy, a
manifestation especially necessary in a historical moment of “struggle between women’s

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161 In a sense, Henley is also a second choice for Charrière’s heroine, though born of
necessity since her fiancé Milord Alesford dies. But Henley, unlike Walstein, doesn’t
acknowledge the heroine’s previous attachment. When Mistriss Henley mentions on the
spouses’ way back from a ball that one of her dance partners reminded her of Alesford,
his husband replies only, “heureusement, je ne suis pas jaloux” (32). To some extent this
lack of acknowledgement is a negation of Mistriss Henley’s history and thus of her
individuality, complexity, and the importance of her voluntary placement of affections on
her husband.
wishes and men’s attempt to shape them,” repeatedly theorized in late eighteenth-century fiction (Barker-Benfield 310). And Caroline’s ultimate acceptance of Walstein, while assigning her to a domestic sphere, does indicate a degree of empowerment, because the heroine takes on her new role on her own terms.

Some Concluding Remarks on Closure

According to Miller’s “Emphasis Added,” the extravagant female fulfillment inscribed in Montolieu’s novel marks it as a fantasy within another economy expressed in texts by women writers:

In this economy, egoistic desires would assert themselves paratactically alongside erotic ones. The repressed content, I think, would be, not erotic impulses, but an impulse to power: a fantasy of power that would revise the social grammar in which women are never defined as subjects; a fantasy of power that disdains a sexual exchange in which women can participate only as objects of circulation. (3)

If such optimism is possible in the fairy-tale atmosphere of Montolieu’s novel, the scrupulous realism of Mistriss Henley, by showing the negative consequences of internalized expectations of marriage and wifehood on the heroine, suggests that without concrete social change, the transformations of conjugality envisioned by Rousseau in La Nouvelle Héloïse, would only place an additional burden on women. The rigorous economy of Charrière’s plot “refuses to play with imagination or to embellish her story,” leaving the heroine increasingly frustrated in her conjugal quagmire (Bérenguier 20). Yet Montolieu and Charrière’s diametrically opposed textual economies, despite portraying very different female destinies, both suggest dissatisfaction with the available marriage narratives and question prescriptive visions for women’s personal fulfillment.

Montolieu’s text shows a preoccupation with closure through the addition of a
“Suite de *Caroline*” to the 1789 edition, a hundred pages or so addressed exclusively to “lecteurs sensibles” representing the unification of all characters and the full unraveling of each narrative thread (III: 84). But the need for a painstaking working out of every obstacle remaining between Walstein and Caroline before a definitive conclusion can be achieved suggests the extreme difficulty of establishing such a reformed marital relationship within unchanged patriarchal structures. Likewise, the striking lack of narrative closure in *Lettres de Mistriss Henley* expresses this very impossibility of satisfactorily resolving the conjugal standstill from within. Indeed, Charrière’s brusque cut-off may even have represented a refusal of existing limiting possibilities for women as Elizabeth J. MacArthur contends in “Devious Narratives” (13, 18).

I opened this chapter with the indirect accusation that Constant leveled at novels through his protagonist Bompré: in creating separate spaces for women both literally, in requiring isolation to be read, and figuratively, in providing an outlandish alternative to domestic concerns, fictions were dangerous to marriage. Montolieu and Charrière’s fictions of matrimony, by valorizing their heroines’ quests for creative fulfillment, were indeed the kind of dangerous challenge to patriarchal imperative that novels represented for Bompré. Practicing the dissident creative autonomy that they dared inscribe in their marriage narratives, Montolieu and Charrière were criticized for their writing career and especially for encouraging, in their respective salons, other women to take up literary production. “Voilà une femme qui est encore ragoûtante, qui pourrait briller…et la voilà…à se morfondre d’écrire des livres que l’on ne fait que critiquer,” observed a particularly vicious anonymous critic in the *Lettre écrite de la Cheneau de Bourg sur les*...

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162 In her analysis of Montolieu’s concern with closure, Jaquier argues that “rien n’est perdu ni sacrifié, tout est entièrement consommé” (*L’Erreur des désirs* 214).
Lettres de Lausanne et de Colombier (cited in Godet 315). Though Montolieu was rendered more acceptable by her stereotypical portrayal as a breastfeeding mother, a male acquaintance’s description of her right hand, subject to erratic movement following the writer’s partial paralysis, may be suggestive of the perception of female creative energy as an irrepressible menace.  

The image of the otherwise incapacitated female body that still manages to unpredictably strike out with its frightening right limb, termed the “main…folle” and “bras extravagant,” may symbolize the fear of the devious potential of female writing to break out of containment (“Un Conte inédit de Mme de Montolieu” 619). This potential is manifest in Charrière and Montolieu’s novels: the central function of female creative autonomy within the marriage narrative encodes a seditious attack on domesticity as the all-encompassing role for women.

163 Cossy argues that the insistence on Montolieu’s maternal tenderness and breastfeeding was a deliberate strategy of domestication of the professional writer (182n). A description of both Montolieu’s devoted mothering and devastating illness can be found in the anonymous biographical sketch at the beginning of “Un Conte inédit de Mme de Montolieu,” ostensibly written by someone who knew the author quite well and published in the Revue Suisse II (1839).
Marriage and the Novel: the Enlightenment and Beyond

As recently as 2004, the historian Maurice Daumas noted that the transformation of the family into its modern affectionate form, launched by the Enlightenment, has failed to fix the deep-rooted problems of traditional marriage arrangements by the introduction of love, and with due cause: “L’amour n’est donc pas la panacée pour les maux qui résulent de l’inégalité des sexes. L’une des fonctions de l’idéologie qu’il anime est même de les masquer” (10). Daumas, however, fails to point out that the neglected current of Enlightenment thought on marriage represented by the women novelists in my corpus already suggested as much in the eighteenth century. Their marriage narratives intimated that the needed revision of the institution lay in granting women spatial, sexual, and creative autonomy, not romance.

These fictions posited the spousal relationship as a key territory in and through which to redefine women’s familial and social roles. In my reading, I have shown how their heroines tried, by private agreement, to get around obedience to the inexorable family-state machine that sought to make marriage a public legal contract regularized by secular law. One such writer of fictions, however, realized that women need to “go public” with their revisions in a more radical way: during the French Revolution, Olympe de Gouges explicitly articulated the correlation between marriage, the social contract, and women’s place in society, stressing the interconnected nature of both men and women’s civil rights and marriage reform.

The notion of the private pact is present in all of the novels in my corpus, as the heroines invariably conclude a more or less explicit agreement with their spouse about
the marriage and what it should be in their individual case. Thus the Prince and Princesse de Clèves try to define their relationship in terms of sincerity and confidence, going against the court tendencies of duplicity. In *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Julie and Wolmar’s union functions on an equilibrium created by a strict distribution of roles and responsibilities inherent to the couple’s unique relationship dynamic. In *La Nouvelle Clarice*, physical intimacy in marriage is determined by the parameters set by the heroine, and the spouses notably delay consummation of the union until the conditions set by Clarice have been fulfilled. Riccoboni’s *Lettres de Vallière* overtly represents a private redefinition of marriage by describing M. and Mme de Monglas’ platonic arrangement, the elaboration of which replaces sex on the couple’s wedding night. The heroine of *Caroline de Lichtfield* likewise concludes an explicit—and written—pact with her new husband Walstein through an epistolary exchange, even as during their courtship Henley and his bride extensively discuss their vision of what marriage should be.

The most elaborate fictional description of such a private pact, however, is contained in Riccoboni’s last published work, *Lettre de madame la marquise d’Artigues à sa soeur* (1786) in which the writer cites the articles of an unusual *contrat de mariage* proposed by the heroine to her prospective spouse. The plot of the remarkable short story centers around Honorine de Verseil’s radical scheme to liberate herself from the societal constraints governing women by making marriage work to her own advantage. Daughter of a doting French father who accumulated an immense fortune through his involvement in the *Compagnie des Indes*, and of a Creole mother who died shortly after the heroine’s birth, Honorine is initially brought up in India. When she comes back to France with her father, she is at first enthusiastic about his scheme to marry her off, until she discovers
the harsh reality of the country’s customs as far as women are concerned: “En acquérant des lumières sur les coutumes établies, elle cessa de l’approuver [le projet de mariage]; et dès les premiers mois de son séjour à Paris, elle montra beaucoup de répugnance à former des liens qu’elle trouvait pénibles et assujettissants” (OC III: 445). What especially concerns Honorine, as a wealthy heiress, is married women’s powerlessness to control their assets under French law, which she denounces in terms similar to Graffigny’s Peruvian princess Zilia:

Blessée des conventions ordinaires, des usages reçus, il lui paraissait imprudent d’abandonner ses biens à la disposition d’un homme, autorisé par la loi à s’en réserver la jouissance, à régler la maison, borner la dépense de la femme qui l’enrichissait, à mettre au nombre de ses droits sur elle le pouvoir de lui imposer des privations, quand il osait prodiguer, souvent dissiper la fortune qu’il lui devait, pour contenter ses propres fantaisies. (III: 446)

Riccoboni’s late-life indictment of the unjust laws governing women’s lives—perhaps the most radical of those found in her fiction—exposes marriage as a kind of perpetual slavery, in which a woman can manage neither her own home, fortune, nor self. The representation of Honorine’s hesitations also ties the undesirability of marriage to women directly to the legal terms governing the institution. In proposing a different sort of contract, through which the heroine requires her future husband’s entire compliance with her financial and thus overall independence, Riccoboni’s text serves as a site of resistance to patriarchal power’s grip on women. Mistress of her fortune upon the death of her father, Honorine rents an apartment at a religious establishment, announcing “le dessein formé d’y attendre l’âge où la bienséance lui permettrait de vivre dans le monde, et d’y vivre sans engagement” (III: 446). The narrative stresses that Honorine leads a conservative lifestyle, goes out very little, and despite alienating her neighbors with her haughty nature, “la décence de ses mœurs et la régularité de sa conduite lui attirèrent l’estime de celles même qui ne l’aimaient pas” (III: 447). Insistence on the heroine’s
retired life and genuine probity seems to be intended to suggest that her strategy is not motivated by a desire to flaunt all societal mores by enjoying moral and sexual freedom à la Merteuil of Laclos’ *Liaisons dangereuses* (1782). Honorine wants merely to control her surroundings and financial and corporal assets.

The unforeseen hardship of a friend’s brother provides the heroine with an opportunity of living in the world sooner than she expected. Upon learning that M. de Cézane has lost his entire fortune in an inheritance lawsuit, and will be obliged to sell off all his possessions and retire to the country, Honorine calculates the total value of his debt, and proposes to her friend to marry her brother and save him from financial ruin. To acquire this economic independence, however, M. de Cézane must adhere strictly to stipulations she wants included in their marriage contract: Honorine elaborates and sends him a list of “Articles à rédiger, pour être insérés dans mon contrat de mariage,” to which her prospective husband must agree before the marriage can take place (III: 451).

Riccoboni’s text cites the entire proposed agreement in the original article-by-article form, in essence providing a model marriage contract for the reader. In a detailed outline of each spouse’s rights and responsibilities, the contract insists on the wife’s full financial and physical independence. Thus in Article IV of the contract, for instance, the heroine writes that:

> Il sera stipulé, énoncé dans les termes les plus clairs et les plus précis, constaté par toutes les formalités prescrites pour rendre un acte valide, inattaquable, que je conserverai l’entièr e jouissance de ma fortune, et la pleine liberté d’en disposer à mon gré; que, chargée seule de ma maison, des dépenses relatives à cet objet, je prendrai l’état que je jugerai convenable à mes revenus, et qu’ils me permettront de maintenir. (III: 452)

Furthermore, Article V entirely redefines the spousal roles, stipulating that Cézane will not assume a husband’s traditional prerogatives: “J’exige que M. le comte de Cézane consente à vivre chez moi, à s’y regarder, à s’y conduire, non comme un mari,
titre qui se change bientôt en celui de maître, mais comme un ami reçu avec distinction
dans une maison étrangère.” Riccoboni’s subversive fiction shows a woman re-imagining
the spousal relationship by means of a customized contract. Honorine’s alterations of the
terms of her union reflect the attempt to counter the diminished rights of women in her
society, made obvious by the imbalances of the married relationship.

The latent challenge of Riccoboni’s fictional marriage contract was made public
and universal by Olympe de Gouges’ similar reassessment of women’s rights in
matrimony. Gouges addressed a wide range of social issues in her fictional works, from
the difficulties faced by illegitimate children and their mothers, to the unjust treatment of
Africans. She became profoundly involved in the French Revolution, producing a vast
amount of polemical writing that testifies to her innovative and ingenious approach to
social problems. The best known of these political texts is the *Déclaration des droits de
la femme et de la citoyenne* (1791). Modeled on the *Déclaration des droits de l’homme et
du citoyen* (1789), Gouges’ text added an important preface and *postambule* to the
original seventeen articles. The paratext of Gouges’ *Déclaration*, including its opening
address to Marie-Antoinette, suggests the importance of women’s solidarity manifest in
her other writing. It also points out the interconnectedness of society, identifying the
original injustice towards women to be the root cause of all social imbalances:

“Considérant que l’ignorance, l’oubli ou le mépris des droits de la femme sont les seules
causes des malheurs publics et de la corruption des gouvernements,” women’s rights
must be restituted for the “bonheur de tous” (6). In its stress on interconnectedness,
Gouges’ vision is reminiscent of Riccoboni’s, whose novels suggest that biased social
structures do not allow the possibility of affective fulfillment to men and women both, as
well as of Le Prince de Beaumont’s, who demonstrated that the nobility directly suffers from the poverty of the peasantry.

The Déclaration is thus posited as universally relevant to women as well as men, especially through the marriage reform that is presented by Gouges as one of the crucial areas to be addressed in order to fix the deplorable state of affairs. Calling marriage “le tombeau de la confiance et de l’amour,” Gouges’ lengthy postambule unhesitatingly relates the restitution of women’s rights and marriage reform: “Si tenter de donner à mon sexe une consistance honorable et juste, est considéré en ce moment comme un paradoxe de ma part, et comme tenter l’impossible, je laisse aux hommes à venir la gloire de traiter cette matière; mais, en attendant, on peut la préparer par l’éducation nationale, par la restauration des mœurs et par les conventions conjugales” (17). Although Gouges also refers to the importance of “éducation” and “mœurs,” she does not elaborate on those elements; conjugal reform, on the other hand, is immediately tackled by the sample marriage contract she affixes to the postambule.

Entitled by Gouges a “Contrat social de l’homme et la femme,” the new agreement between man and woman is designed to result in an “heureux gouvernement” (18). Through the radical recognition of marriage as the social contract, Gouges effectively restitutes the formerly nonexistent legal and political status of women, a loss obscured by the sexual contract as Pateman has shown. That women are subjects who enter into contracts and not their objects, is further underlined by the description of a functional conjugal society of two individuals as a government. Besides identifying marriage as a contract entered into by individual and not family or state choice (“Nous N et N, unis par notre propre volonté”), the sample document provided by Gouges mainly
addresses the distribution and management of economic assets, assuring the financial
independence of both spouses and their children, whether or not they result from the
union or an outside relationship. Thus, as Scott argues, “De Gouges’ ‘social contract’
ended the subordination of women by denying husbands discretionary authority over
property and children” (44).

Like the fictional contract of Riccoboni’s Honorine de Verseil, the sample
contract provided by Gouges as an integral part of the Déclaration des droits de la femme
seeks to do away with the subordinate status of women and guarantee their right to
control their economic assets. Though critiquing Honorine’s selfishness, Riccoboni
implicitely suggests that by leaving private manipulation as a woman’s sole means to a
measure of the equality she ought to freely enjoy, the existent social structures fatally
compromise spousal relations. By going public with her marriage contract, Gouges
attempted to establish that equality, precluding all possibility of the agreement being
broken and guaranteeing women the independent status necessary to a functional spousal
union. And just as Gouges has been identified a “site of resistance” to patriarchal
practices by Joan Scott, so I would argue were some of the fictions of her contemporaries
(16).

Like other female revolutionaries, even the more conservative ones like
Théroigne de Méricourt or Manon Roland, Gouges paid dearly for her decision to go
public. The first woman to be guillotined in France after Marie-Antoinette, Gouges’ death
was presented by her male contemporaries as a cautionary tale to unruly women who
abandoned their natural abode of home and hearth to enter the public arena. La feuille du
salut public, reporting Gouges’ death, blamed her untimely end on the “imagination
exaltée” that made her forget the virtues of her sex. Likewise applauding Gouges’ fitting
punishment at the scaffold, the procureur Chaumette warned women not to follow in the
steps of the “virago, la femme-homme, l’impudente Olympe de Gouges qui la première
institua des sociétés de femmes, abandonna les soins de son ménage, voulut politiquer et
commit des crimes. …Tous ces êtres immoraux ont été anéantis sous le fer vengeur des
lois” (Lairtullier 2: 140). Unfortunately, the tragic end of female revolutionaries forecast
the subsequent fate of women’s rights in France, especially in the domain of marriage.

As I discussed in the Introduction, between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries
in France, paternal and husbandly power was significantly reinforced (Flandrin 124).
Specifically, as Hanley argues in “The Marriage Pact,” “the alliance of patriarchs and
politicians for the express purpose of controlling the formation of marriage in France
between 1556 and 1789” led to the expansion of secular jurisdiction over marriage and
the enhancement of men’s power over women and children through law (54). The
revolutionary period, as Hunt has suggested, attempted to do away with paternal power in
favor of a fraternal government, a horizontal as opposed to vertical power structure that
nevertheless remained male-centered. Thus while women did become the objects of
legislative concern that sought to improve family and spousal relations, they never
became deciding subjects with civil rights, as Scott aptly points out (20).

The most significant achievement of the revolutionaries in regards to marriage,
transformed into a purely civil contract with no religious component, was legislation
permitting divorce. Though divorce was pronounced in 1792, couples flocked to take
advantage of the new legislation as early as 1791. Importantly, the new law’s recognition
of two persons rather than two families at the root of marriage invented the very concept
of the couple, according to Ronsin (108). However, as the historian points out, “la réglementation de la vie privée des Français était essentiellement soumise à l’état des rivalités et des alliances politiques” (175). Thus, while divorce legislation and other innovations like the tribunaux de famille that oversaw family affairs, were quickly limited and eventually done away with by subsequent political regimes, it is the larger heritage of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution that remained unshaken for centuries to come. As James McMillan notes, the political liberalism and new vocabulary of the rights of man established in this period, also “enunciated the doctrine of the separate spheres, the ideological cornerstone of nineteenth-century antifeminism,” already evident in Gouges’ treatment at the hands of her male contemporaries (31).

Unsurprisingly, then, “the Revolution saw not only the triumph of the new bourgeois class in economic and political matters, it also saw the triumph of what came to be known as ‘bourgeois morality,’ a code that put particular stress on family life, male authority, female submission and chastity, and ‘good appearances,’” an ethos to some extent influenced by Rousseau’s theories about the family according to Barbara Corrado Pope (142). In the nineteenth century, Napoleon’s Code civil des Français of 1804 (renamed the Code Napoléon in 1807) “relegated all women, and particularly married women, to a position of inferiority and subordination in which they would remain for more than a century” (McMillan 36). According to Traer, the Civil Code demonstrated significant continuity with ancien régime legislation (92-97). Significantly, it is the work of the conservative ancien régime jurist Pothier, whose treatises I discuss in the Introduction, which served as a direct model for the Civil Code (Ourliac and Malafosse 3: 16-17).
Moreover, as Patricia Mainardi convincingly argues, “in some ways the Civil Code was even more harsh towards women than the Old Regime had been, for it not only re-established the power of husbands and fathers over them, but it also closed off whatever loopholes and compensations the former legal codes and systems had offered” (17). Besides considering women as perpetual minors, the Civil Code severely limited the right to divorce. While divorce was made especially difficult for women, even in the case of a husband’s established adultery, the new Penal Code excused a wife’s murder if taken in flagrante delicto. With the Restoration, divorce was abolished altogether in 1816, not to be reinstated until 1884, and nineteenth-century critiques presented its introduction by the Revolutionaries as disastrous for the family (Ronsin 108). The parenthesis of the Revolutionary period, when marriage reform benefiting women appeared on the horizon for the first time, was securely closed. And for a long time to come, the female Revolutionaries who had dared to demand rights for women remained written into history as “impudent” and “immoral” beings who had met with the end they deserved.

In the second chapter of his defense of the novel, De l’usage des romans, Lenglet-Dufresnoy noted that the imperfections of history ought to make us value novels. History’s biggest problem, according to the critic, is that “les femmes, quoique mobile essentiel des grandes affaires, paraissent à peine dans l’histoire” (53). On the other hand, “le Roman n’est pas en défaut sur ce chapitre; j’y vois briller des femmes, non pas à leur toilette, c’est où elles ne paraissent guère dans ces sortes d’ouvrages; mais en tout ce qu’il y a d’essentiel en matière d’intérêt public, & dans les plus grands mystères des affaires” (116). Lenglet-Dufresnoy’s suggestion, that it is the novel and not history that conveys a true image of society by privileging women and feminocentric concerns, identifies fiction
as an important site of resistance. The challenges to hegemony so easily erased by history, illustrated by the longtime neglect of contributions by women like Olympe de Gouges, survive in the novel’s subversive championing of women’s desires and concerns.

As I have tried to show, the novels of my corpus provide a particularly valuable alternative vision to the new conceptions of marriage and family introduced by the Enlightenment. Their subversive marriage narratives presented redefined familial and social structures by developing enhanced roles for women based on wives’ exercise of greater spatial, sexual, and creative autonomy, often shown to be beneficial for the family and society as a whole. As such, I would suggest that these fictions represented a serious strain of Enlightenment thought that rectifies and completes our image of the period and of its literary and cultural production. Kant has famously characterized the Enlightenment as an ongoing process of revision, a practice of the shedding of intellectual immaturity that occurs to the extent that people themselves decide to actively participate in it. Revising our image of the Enlightenment by recognizing the crucial contributions of these women writers thus fits the very definition of the phenomenon as a continuing movement.

Today, the family is undergoing a profound transformation that questions its very nature, and the changing spousal unit falters in continuing confrontation with “des mentalités inégalitaires héritées d’un mariage bourgeois archaïque,” argues sociologist Pascale Wattier. “Beaucoup plus conservatrice et immobiliste que la société elle-même, toute une culture veut encore enfermer les mariés dans leur caricature. Nouvelles libertés, vieux préjugés: le choc crée un malaise entre les conjoints en manque de repères. Plus légère qu’elle n’a jamais été, la bulle conjugale est encore captive du passé” (310).
However, the family and the marital unit are destabilized not just by their cultural enclosure in the past, but by a culture produced by an incomplete vision of that past. More than ever, it is of paramount importance to fully comprehend the period that gave birth to the modern definitions of marriage and the family, in part by acknowledging the fundamental contributions of women writers of the French Enlightenment.
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