Perilous Pedagogies: Female Education Questioned in the Epistolary Novels of Rousseau, Laclos, Sade, and Charrière

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ABSTRACT

Perilous Pedagogies: Female Education Questioned in the Epistolary Novels of Rousseau, Laclos, Sade, and Charrière

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This dissertation looks at the thematic and narrative tensions that emerge when certain prominent late eighteenth-century French epistolary novels deal with the issue of women’s education and the possibility of its reform. The debate of the latter half of the century is firmly centered on Rousseau, who wrote both a best-selling epistolary novel dealing with the position of women in society (Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse) and a controversial pedagogical treatise that suggests sweeping changes to male education but decisively anchors women within a limited domestic sphere (Émile). More specifically, I have examined how Rousseau’s contradictory and problematic discussion of female pedagogy enacts narrative structures of tension and hesitation within both the treatise and the epistolary novel. Both texts, as well as the unfinished epistolary sequel Émile et Sophie, ou Les solitaires are destabilized by the fraught question of how to educate women.

The contradictions engendered by attempts to maintain strict gender difference also plague Laclos’ pedagogical treatises and his epistolary novel Les Liaisons dangereuses, which simultaneously offer revolution, reform, and a total impasse concerning female education. The Marquis de Sade subsequently approaches this topic with humor, choosing to imitate the excesses of Enlightenment discourse on female pedagogy, in turn creating a potentially instructive parody of his own. Finally, Isabelle de Charrière ponders the topic of women’s education in a variety of non-fiction and
literary works, which all reveal her cautious strategies of disguise and ambivalence when addressing such a hotly debated issue, especially from the point of view of a woman writer. Examining both the theoretical and fictional works of Rousseau, Laclos, Sade, and Charrière, I show that the convergence of epistolarity and female pedagogy was far from accidental, and that the tensions inherent in Enlightenment thought on gender are in fact reflected in the narrative permutations and problematics of the epistolary novel.
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INTRODUCTION

“Il faut donc oser le dire : il n’est aucun moyen de perfectionner l’éducation des femmes.”¹ With this lapidary statement, Choderlos de Laclos refuses the very question posed by the Académie of Chalons-sur-Marne in 1783, “Quels seraient les meilleurs moyens de perfectionner l’éducation des femmes?” Laclos’ radical claim appears to contradict the traditional understanding of the Enlightenment as an era of progress and optimism, especially with regard to education and the dissemination of knowledge. As Marie-Claire Grassi confidently pronounces like so many other critics, “le XVIIIᵉ siècle est le siècle de l’éducation et du ‘rattrapage’ pour les femmes.”² Laclos’ justification for his pessimistic declaration points to a less radiant facet of the Enlightenment, which did not illuminate all citizens equally: “...l’éducation prétendue, donnée au femmes jusqu’à ce jour, ne mérite pas en effet le nom d’éducation...nos lois et nos mœurs s’opposent également à ce qu’on puisse leur en donner une meilleure.”³ The apparent aporia of female education highlighted by Laclos is more than a witty remark designed to garner a literary prize; it speaks to the untenable contradictions enacted when the Enlightenment pedagogical project is applied to women, who are not regarded as independent beings but something more akin to slaves — “O! femmes....venez apprendre comment, nées compagnes de l’homme, vous êtes devenues son esclave.”⁴ The condition of women in eighteenth-century France negates the possibility of education, and “si, malgré ces

³ Ibid., 403.
⁴ Ibid., 404.
obstacles, quelques femmes parvenaient à se la procurer [une éducation], ce serait un malheur de plus pour elles et pour nous.”

Contrary some to received ideas about the Enlightenment, Laclos is far from being an anomaly in his pessimistic evaluation of women’s education: the myriad texts published in the eighteenth century which deal with female pedagogy demonstrate a veritable obsession with the problem and, simultaneously, a seeming inability to achieve social reform via philosophical analysis. Fascinatingly enough, this apparent impossibility of perfecting women’s education is foreshadowed and reduplicated in eighteenth-century pedagogical writings themselves, which are often characterized by contradiction, repetition, inconclusiveness, and formal or generic confusion. Treatises that deal with the problem of women’s education are often marked by multiple or aborted writing attempts, their authors struggling to come to a conclusion. Furthermore, these tracts are regularly coupled with fictional works that seek to address the same issues, as if the non-fictional texts were insufficient or ill-suited for the task. The double title of Rousseau’s Émile, ou de l’éducation, the philosophical starting point for the pedagogical writings of Laclos, Sade, and Charrière, is indicative of this problematic duality. Presenting itself as both novel and treatise, Émile can in turn also be read alongside the epistolary novel Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse, which is likewise intimately concerned with the question of women’s education. And Émile also engenders another supplementary text, Émile et Sophie, ou les Solitaires, which subverts the teachings of its predecessor, illustrating the downfall of both young people, betrayed by their flawed educations.

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5 Ibid., 403-404.
When Laclos suggests that only a total revolution could engender better women’s education — “apprenez qu’on ne sort de l’esclavage que par une grande révolution” — he is stating explicitly what Rousseau illustrates implicitly with the failure of his two heroines, Sophie and Julie. Neither the archetypal everywoman nor the romanticized ideal ultimately succeeds as a pedagogical model, and their respective narratives are marked with ambiguity and inconclusiveness. Laclos’ three abortive essays on female education, collectively titled *De l’éducation des femmes*, are likewise rife with contradictions, multiple writing attempts, and endings that simply fritter away. When read in juxtaposition with these theoretical texts, Laclos’ epistolary novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses* can be understood in a new light, not simply as a masterful parody, but also as a meditation on the double-edged sword of education, especially for women. Laclos’ motive remains somewhat ambiguous, however: his correspondence reveals that the *Liaisons* were intended to be complemented by the novel which would prove “cette vérité qu’il n’existe de bonheur que dans la famille.”

The dark parodies of the Marquis de Sade differ only in degree from Laclos’ libertine tale and gloomy predictions. Sade’s debauched personal life and pornographic writings would not at first glance appear to be vehicles for a serious discussion on education; in reality, however, a number of the Marquis’ texts seek to debunk the philosophical basis of Enlightenment pedagogy by exposing its contradictions and pushing its repressive tendencies to their logical extremes. In examining the problem of women’s education, Sade experiments provocatively with literary genres and tests the

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6 This collective title was given to the three separate essays by Édouard Champion to the 12846 manuscript in the Bibliothèque nationale. Laclos, *O.C.* ed. Allem, 839.

7 Laclos, *O.C.* ed. Versini, 1064 (original emphasis). This was a project Laclos had been contemplating for years; the letter containing this mention is from 1801.
limits of narrative expression. Moreover, as Sade will investigate the consequences of
atheist materialism on gender and sexuality, ultimately negating reproduction altogether,
he will subvert the conventional expectations of the novel and its relationship with the
reader, suggesting a new reading praxis of destruction. Divorcing sexuality from
reproduction, Sade simultaneously denies his reader satisfying conclusions, literary
verisimilitude, and the traditional trappings of marriage, children, and morality.

Witnessing the Revolution from afar, but intimately preoccupied with the position
of women in eighteenth-century society, Isabelle de Charrière tackles the question of
female pedagogy with a slightly more conciliatory, if restrained, approach. In both her
critical and fictional writings, Charrière suggests piecemeal solutions and tenuous
compromises for women, while donning numerous fictional disguises and experimenting
with writing as a forum for public debate. Inspired, though not entirely convinced, by her
predecessors such as Rousseau, Charrière likewise experiments with narrative form,
repeatedly eschewing conclusions for her novels. As she writes in a letter to a friend,
Jean-Pierre de Chambrier d’Oleyres, she suffers from a certain inability — or
unwillingness — to finish her novels: “D’ailleurs, j’aurais peut-être encore moins de
talent pour les dénouements que pour le reste. Les tristes sont tristes, et les heureux sont
fort sujets à être plats.”8 Charrière’s persistent “unfinishedness” is in part due to the
epistolary genre’s resistance to closure as Elizabeth MacArthur’s *Extravagant Narratives*
suggests,9 but also to a distrust of universal pedagogical systems and a constant effort to
understand and illustrate multiple points of view at the same time.

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In my dissertation, I have chosen to investigate the question of women’s education in relation to the epistolary genre. The long and fruitful collaboration between epistolarity and pedagogy can be said to begin with the letter manual, a classical tradition whose popularity dominated the seventeenth century. Titles such as Puget de la Serre’s *Le Secrétaire de la Cour* (1646) and Jacques Du Bosc’s *Nouveau recueil des lettres de dames de ce temps* (1635) were contemporary best-sellers that served as pedagogical tools via the letter form. In fact, Puget de la Serre would subsequently be incorporated into the “Bibliothèque bleue” in the eighteenth century, thus disseminated even to the lower classes. Well into the twentieth century in France, epistolary manuals continued to be published and enjoy popularity.\(^{10}\) Collections of witty and rhetorically embellished letters such as those by Guez de Balzac and Voiture were regularly prized. More specifically, however, as Dena Goodman points out in *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters*, the posthumous publication of M\(^{me}\) de Sévigné’s lively and natural letters to her daughter in 1725 inaugurated an important shift in the intended audience of such collections: with Sévigné’s correspondence, “the child returns as a possible reader and beneficiary of published correspondences.”\(^{11}\)

Inheriting the classical pedagogical notion of *exempla*, the letter manual was thus designed to educate by imitation, young writers copying and then modifying letter prototypes for every occasion. Even if women were not at first the primary intended audience of the various “secrétaires,” increased literacy eventually prompted the demand

\(^{10}\) See the Musée de la Poste’s list of letter manuals post-seventeenth century: http://www.ladressemuseedelaposte.com/ Chercheurs/documents/WEBMANUELEPISTOLAIREECRITURE.pdf

for a specifically female-oriented Secrétaires des dames, published in 1758. As Brigitte Diaz insists, in the eighteenth century the letter was the primary tool of women’s education: “outil d’apprentissage;” “exercice pratique;” “l’horizon d’un savoir mondain minimum – mais aussi maximum....” As the defining feature of female literacy, the letter form was thus irrevocably tied to the question of women’s education, both in terms of absorption and transmission of knowledge.

However, women writers were clearly drawn to the epistolary genre beyond the rote imitation suggested by the letter manuals; the eighteenth century witnessed a veritable explosion of epistolary novels published by women. The letter novel came to be seen as the crowning jewel of women’s artistic talents; as Mme de Scudéry, herself a novelist and avid letter writer, declared “une dame peut faire de médiocres vers sans honte, mais non pas une méchante lettre en prose.” In fact, the preeminence of women as letter-writers quickly became a quintessential trope, disseminated by male and female authors alike. As Cécile Dauphin explains, the superiority of women in epistolarity was justified simultaneously by historical documentation and an understanding of feminine “nature.”

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Madeleine, a letter manual author, for his “psychological” explanation of women’s epistolary genius:

[la lettre est] cet abandon délicieux…où l’âme parle à l’âme, et où le cœur ne cherche jamais à emprunter le masque de l’esprit. Le négligé d’une jolie femme a bien sa recherche et sa coquetterie ; mais l’art n’y emploie son adresse qu’à ne se pas montrer…Les femmes trouvent bien mieux que nous ces tours aîsés, badins et négligés qui rendent si bien le sentiment et la plaisanterie : cela vient en partie de la flexibilité de leur organisation, et de cette mollesse où elles sont élevées, qui les rend plus propres à sentir qu’à penser.17

The stereotype of the épistolière would ultimately come to be canonized with the universal success of Mme de Sévigné. But the pseudo-psychological justification for the female epistolary penchant was further corroborated by the definition of women’s social role; as Dauphin explains, “puisque les femmes, par incapacité naturelle et par respect pour les mœurs ne peuvent avoir accès à la littérature et la science, ou sinon à titre exceptionnel, puisqu’elles doivent éviter de briller dans ces domaines, il ne leur reste que la correspondance pour exercer leurs talents.”18 From being simply an area in which a small number of prominent women excelled (proved by a chronological list of épistolières), letter writing became a necessary component of female education as well as the only refuge for their intellectual ambitions, in accordance with what many eighteenth-century writers deemed their delicate sensibilities.

The long association of epistolarity with women was later strengthened by the socio-political climate of the eighteenth-century in France. According to Frédéric Limare, the eighteenth-century letter “a représenté pour la femme un outil d’expression de soi et de détermination de soi au regard autant du social, pour ce qui est de la relation à

17 Philipon de la Madeleine, Manuel épistolaire à l’usage de la jeunesse, cited in Dauphine, “Questions à l’histoire culturelle des femmes,” 114.
l’autre, que du psychologique, pour ce qui est de la transparence à soi-même.”

In *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters*, Dena Goodman moreover locates letters as a primary place of “gendered subjectivity” and a source of power and autonomy for women. In this light, however, the gendered subjectivity of women’s letter writing becomes a double bind: by claiming for themselves a mode of expression more flexible and perhaps more adapted to their experiences than other male-dominated forms of writing, women simultaneously trapped themselves within sex-specific expectations. And although epistolarity functions as a means for women to enter into the public sphere and social commerce, as well as one of the few viable means for female education, it nevertheless offers freedom only within the confines of the cabinet or boudoir. At the end of the century in particular, Dorinda Outram suggests that the difficulty of women in finding their own voices was intimately tied to the fact that female virtue and public (political) speech become incompatible during the French Revolution. Unable to safely participate in the political sphere, many women increasingly privileged epistolary commerce, which offered a measure of independence to female writers.

Goodman likewise makes the important observation that while many women striving for more knowledge were chastised for their intellectual ambitions, and nevertheless at the same time many learned women wrote letters and letter-novels, the epistolary genre somehow escaped the pedantic label. It became the middle road, the only feasible path for pedagogical writings on and for women — even if this middle road

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21 Ibid., 272.
was a thorny one, where “every writer on female education laid out a path between the Scylla of ignorance and the Charybdis of pedantry.”

Since the epistolary novel became the safest genre for women to adopt, and pedagogy one of their foremost concerns, a logical bridge can be established between form and content.

It is important to note that the generic innovation of the epistolary novel was not, of course, limited to women writers. On the one hand, it is easy to overlook the fact that, as François Jost suggests, the rampant success of the epistolary novel in the eighteenth century must have been linked to the role played by the letter in daily life. The rise of a more sophisticated postal system, as well as increased literacy, the popularity of salon culture, and a more stable political climate centered on royal authority would all explain at least in part the contemporary enthusiasm for the letter in all its forms. Nevertheless, the letter’s popularity appeared to stem from a deeper source. As Dorothea von Mücke explains in her *Virtue and the Veil of Illusion*, new literary forms such as the bourgeois tragedy, the *bildungsroman*, and the epistolary novel emerged in the eighteenth century as “new instruments for the fashioning of subjectivity,” both male and female. A marked dissatisfaction with older modes of representation, she argues, prompted the renewed desire for transparency evident in these forms. In approaching the epistolary novel not just as an emerging literary genre, but also as a discursive model, von Mücke

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23 Ibid., 67.
26 Of course, the letter form has been around in literature for a very long time; some critics even pinpoint Ovid’s *Heroides* as the birth of the epistolary novel. However, the widespread appreciation and cultivation of the epistolary novel during the eighteenth century certainly highlighted a change in the public’s perception of the genre.
claims it organizes “new types of subjectivity.” This new subjectivity, seemingly available to both men and women, in fact engendered a dramatic split in the representation of women by male epistolary novelists. Although the epistolary novel — and in fact, novels in general — were routinely deemed “feminine,” “the anti-theatrical literary genres of the age of transparency are conceived primarily as instruments for disciplining the male bourgeois subject. The woman remains a supplementary fiction.” That is to say: despite the alleged femininity of the letter novel, the genre’s representation of women was in fact highly problematic and often divorced from social reality.

The split between real and imaginary women is clearly played out in Émile and La Nouvelle Héloïse, where Sophie and Julie represent different ends of the pedagogical spectrum. The ideal woman and the real woman were incompatible subjectivities: while “the actual woman should be strictly subjected to the authority of public opinion,” “the ideal/imaginary woman should regulate the male subject’s desire and thus make him independent of public opinion.” Julie was formed to inspire and gently lead the small community around her; Sophie was taught blind obedience and conjugal devotion. The relationship of women to representation in the eighteenth century, investigated in The Veil of Illusion, yields especially fruitful observations when applied to question of pedagogy illustrated in the problematic heroines of Rousseau, Laclos, Sade, and Charrière. For literary characters just as for women writers, epistolarity raised questions about the distance between the literary and the societal woman. The newly popular form of expression allowed women certain literary freedoms while simultaneously defining the limits of their role in society. While “epistolary writing allowed for an easing of tensions

27 Ibid., 11.
28 Ibid., 15.
29 Ibid., 53.
between philosophical, epistemological, and emotional discourses,” as Julia K. De Pree

demonstrates in her study of lyricism in the eighteenth century, women were nevertheless
still trapped within a narrow range of possibilities.\textsuperscript{30}

The link between women, epistolarity and pedagogy becomes abundantly clear
when examining the problematic manner in which female education was represented in
epistolary novels authored by men and women alike during the eighteenth century. The
education of women was constantly deferred to secondary or ambiguous narratives by
many eighteenth-century writers. Women often appeared to be the “face d’ombre,” so to

speak, of the Enlightenment discourse on rationality and pedagogy. In fact, the question
of women’s education reveals a fault line already inherent in a major strand of
Enlightenment thinking, as was synthesized and defined by Kant in 1784, and which
stressed that autonomy and independence, both mental and material, were necessary
prerequisites for the exercise of one’s Reason.\textsuperscript{31} As Dorinda Outram observes, women
were thus at odds with a major tenet of Enlightenment thought, since they were, by and
large, neither considered autonomous or functionally independent.\textsuperscript{32} Unable to partake
directly in the Enlightenment project, how then were women to be educated?

Therefore, the question of gender in relation to Enlightenment thought on the
whole is a structuring issue in my dissertation; I have sought to examine how “the way
the Enlightenment thought about gender contradicted, undermined, and challenged its

\textsuperscript{30} Julia K. De Pree, \textit{The Ravishment of Persephone: Epistolary Lyric in the “Siècle des Lumières”} (Chapel

Hill: University of North Carolina Department of Romance Languages, 1998), 34.

\textsuperscript{31} See Immanuel Kant’s \textit{Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals} and \textit{What is Enlightenment?}, trans.


\textsuperscript{32} Dorinda Outram, \textit{The Enlightenment} (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 24. Gender is of course only

one of the categories that was excluded from such a project of rationality; writers like Wollstonecraft would

naturally compare the subjugation of women to slavery.
claims to legitimacy as a universally applicable project.”\textsuperscript{33} In \textit{Twilight of the Goddesses}, Madelyn Gutwirth in particular has highlighted the gender tensions leading up to the French Revolution that make the ultimate defeat of feminism at the hands of the revolutionaries much less surprising. The war of the sexes was informed by an unverbalized struggle over style, she argues, illustrated by the extreme poles of rococo and republicanism; women alternatively tried to adopt both forms of speech but ultimately failed at appropriating either for themselves as female citizens.\textsuperscript{34} In fact, no one form of speech or expression, even the “feminine” epistolary novel, would be able to satisfactorily illustrate the innate contradictions of the female condition during this tumultuous time.

Due to this idealized view of rationality promoted by the Enlightenment, the role of gender in society, and by extension, sexed education is not a peripheral one in the eighteenth century; as gender becomes ever more strongly, albeit ambiguously, traced back to Nature, the definition of the “fair sex” becomes central to Enlightenment thought. As Dorinda Outram points out, although eighteenth-century philosophy usually equated “natural” with “good,” this did not happen for women, whose “naturalness” made them dangerous and in many cases, inferior.\textsuperscript{35} The attempt to define femininity thus destabilized central Enlightenment concepts like “nature” and “reason.” Consequently, starting in the early nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century, the critical tendency was largely to speak of the Enlightenment as a homogenous entity, glossing over the problematic exclusion of women from the sphere of rationality by many philosophers and writers of the time. Certainly, Rousseau’s treatment of Sophie in book

\textsuperscript{33} Outram, \textit{The Enlightenment}, 83.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 218.
\textsuperscript{35} Outram, \textit{The Enlightenment}, 84.
five of Émile raised a few protests in its day, but was nevertheless admired by a large number of contemporaries, both men and women — and subsequently excused or all but ignored by many critical enthusiasts of the author. Kant, in his aforementioned attempt to define the Enlightenment, declares that the entirety of “the fair sex” is maintained like “dumb cattle” by the guardians of society and thus practically excluded from true enlightenment. The proto-feminist voices of a Poulain de la Barre are few and far between, and even the great champion of equality Condorcet would later retract his statements arguing for equal education regardless of gender. A strong misogynist streak, meanwhile, flourished during the Revolutionary period, evidenced by political measures limiting women’s engagement in social discourse as well as by the virulent works of literary authors such as Restif de la Bretonne.

However, some contemporary thinkers were already aware of the drastic gender inequalities of the eighteenth century and the ease with which the majority accepted them. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) vehemently declared that if women did not currently appear equal to men, it was only due to their inferior education. Olympe de Gouges likewise published a *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (1791), in which she argued for the legal and judicial equality of women to men. As Outram observes, such radical thinkers saw that the moral code and rational standard of the Enlightenment could not be gendered, as it would thus negate

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37 Though in 1790 he published *Sur l’admission des femmes au droit de cité*, where he argued for equal political rights for women, Condorcet nevertheless maintained that “excepté une classe peu nombreuse d’homme très-éclairés, l’égalité est entière entre les femmes et le reste des hommes,” cited in Gutwirth, *Twilight of the Goddesses*, 203. Moreover, as Gutwirth remarks in the same work, Condorcet would adopt a much less egalitarian stance in his pedagogical proposals of 1791–2.


the possibility of “emancipation through universal value systems based on reason and virtue.” For these progressive idealists, the condition of women was often likened to slavery, as Karen Offen has outlined. And unlike the exotic, colonial or indigenous other, women were highly visible in eighteenth-century France, as the prominence of salon culture illustrates.

Much like the oft-repeated association between women and letter writing, the important role played by the female-directed salons engendered a persistent vein of criticism, which accentuated the role of women in society. It is necessary, I believe, to revisit and nuance the work of critics who routinely termed the French Enlightenment “un siècle féminin.” Starting in the nineteenth century, some critics would espouse a glorified vision of women in the Enlightenment, illustrated in revealingly titled works like Vera Lee’s *The Reign of Women in Eighteenth-Century France*, Jean Larnac’s *Histoire de la littérature féminine en France*, and the Goncourts’ *La femme au dix-huitième siècle*. At the same time, others like Paul Hoffman (*La femme dans la pensée des Lumières*) replicated the Enlightenment discourse on women, confusing the feminine

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42. Already in 1774, the German philosopher and critic J.G. Herder began to sense the problems inherent in the Enlightenment’s quest for unified harmony concerning exotic difference. Though he would come to be remembered as a father of dangerous nationalism, Herder in fact warns his contemporaries about the perils of enforced universalism. Speaking primarily of colonial issues, Herder find that the Enlightenment’s crucial failure lies in its treatment of difference: “the garment of generalities which characterizes our philosophy and philanthropy can conceal oppressions, infringements on the true personal freedom of men and countries, of citizens and peoples.” “Yet Another Philosophy of History,” in Herder on Social and Political Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969), 220.
ideal projected by male writers with the subjugated reality of the female experience.\textsuperscript{44} Such criticism reveals, I believe, the double-speak at the heart of the female condition that is posited by von Mücke in correlation to the epistolary genre. In addition, critics of Sade and libertine literature in general have sometimes stated that the Enlightenment saw a sexual liberation that fed into the emancipation of women and the rise of feminism.\textsuperscript{45} By separating women from their maternal function, which was otherwise so heavily emphasized at the time, largely in part due to the influence of Émile, libertine writers offered the possibility of another (non-reproductive) female model, such critics argue. Sade could be seen as the absolute counterpoint to Rousseau’s economics of reproduction and family legacy. As G.S. Rousseau and Roy Porter’s \textit{Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment} asserts, however, this new sexual freedom was for men and men only, in practice becoming just another tactic for the oppression of women.\textsuperscript{46}

The dichotomy between the ideal woman as represented in literature and the pedestrian female reality discussed above is a crucial issue, both with regard to the divide

\textsuperscript{44} In particular, Hoffmann mimetically reads Diderot’s \textit{Sur les femmes}, like him insisting that one cannot write objectively about women, that they are ineffable and compromising. \textit{La femme dans la pensée des Lumières} (Paris: Ophrys, 1977), 18.

\textsuperscript{45} Most prominently, Angela Carter’s \textit{The Sadeian Woman} takes a feminist approach to Sade, especially in his treatment of Justine and Juliette. “If Justine is a pawn because she is a woman, Juliette transforms herself from pawn to queen in a single move.” \textit{The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History} (London: Virago Press, 1982), 79. In “Féminité et marginalisation de l’utopie,” Marie-Françoise Bosquet analyses the nomadic Bohemian tribe of \textit{Aline et Valcour} as representing an utopian possibility for women: narrated by Léonore, a strong female character, the episode also illustrates female homosexuality, freedom within and without marriage, and in general, the nomadic women as existing outside of the desiring gaze of the men. In \textit{Sade en toutes lettres : autour d’Aline et Valcour}, ed. Michel Delon et Catriona Seth, 113-121 (Paris: Éditions Desjonquères, 2004). Likewise Jane Gallop, in “The Liberated Woman” states that “Sade’s \textit{Philosophie [dans le boudoir]} in fact depicts the construction of the liberated woman” and the ideal of “bursting all the bonds,” especially of wedlock. “The Liberated Woman.” \textit{Narrative} 13:2 (May 2005): 90.

\textsuperscript{46} “Insofar as the sexual enlightenment liberated the libido — to use an anachronistic concept that the eighteenth century would have well understood — stressed the health-giving qualities of the spermatic principle, and urged a permissiveness and diversification in sexual partners; didn’t this all essentially create an image of sexuality utterly modelled on the norms, the fantasies even, of male sexuality; wasn’t it — like the ‘all you need is love’ permissiveness of the pill generation of the ‘60s — basically a charter for the emancipation of the male from traditional sexual restraints? Wasn’t liberation for men a new way of controlling women?” G.S. Rousseau and Roy Porter, eds., \textit{Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment} (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 4.
between pedagogical theory and praxis as well as its ramifications on the epistolary genre and narrative form in general. In her book *The Moral Sex*, Lieselotte Steinbrügge negates this traditionally accepted idea that the eighteenth century is “feminine.” Although new ideals of equality were *theorized* by the more radical thinkers, she maintains that the economic realities of the bourgeois household largely maintained women at home.\(^4\) In addition, the sexual differentiation of women and the unique maternal role stressed by natural philosophers, doctors, and writers alike served to anchor woman firmly as the domestic “other.” In terms of education, Steinbrügge maintains that on the whole, this dichotomy did not create “separate but equal” pedagogies — if such a thing were even possible — but rather established a constant lose-lose situation for women of the following generations. By claiming that women were different from men in any way, the floodgates to gender-specific education — and practically speaking, discrimination — were burst open. Paradoxically, then, the vast influx of female pedagogical writings during this period, though their intent was often to redress inequality by seeking more knowledge for women (albeit a small elite of women), in fact reinforced this dichotomy.\(^5\) I would add that the fact that so many of these works were epistolary only served to further pigeonhole women, both as writers and readers, into a narrow relationship between education and epistolarity.

In addition to these works of literary theory and criticism, it is important not to lose track of the concrete reality of education in eighteenth-century France. Although many of the texts dealing with female pedagogy in the eighteenth century had lofty ideals and fanciful solutions that could hardly be implemented on a larger scale, the situation of

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schools for girls was not quite so progressive. Working from archival sources, Martine Sonnet’s *L’éducation des filles au temps des Lumières* attempts to trace a realistic portrait of the education of young girls in Paris, across social classes and types of pedagogical institutions. Although the eighteenth century did witness a dramatic rise in female literacy, Sonnet is quick to point out that women’s education was nevertheless still fairly scant: 35.1% of girls only studied at a school for one year, 58.6% for two years, 23.8% for four years, and only 2.2% of girls would achieve “une vraie scolarité,” which Sonnet considers to be ten years or more of instruction. And by age sixteen, almost all girls were finished with their school, as “à seize ans, il faut choisir entre le monde et le cloître.” Sonnet is keen to point out, however, that public school, attended however briefly, was not limited to the upper crust of society, and that the various institutions (the fee-based grammar schools linked to Notre Dame; the parochial charity schools; the female religious communities; and the fly-by-night “écoles buissonnières”) accepted girls from all but the most destitute of social classes. Generally imbued with an Augustinian dimension, female education was in practice primarily about forming Christian mothers and wives, rather than adopting the newest pedagogical innovations.

Additionally, Marcel Grandière’s *L’idéal pédagogique en France au dix-huitième siècle* delineates two important periods of education reform during the Enlightenment. Marked by the publication date of Condillac’s *Essai* (1746), whose use of analytical procedures, observation, and the experimental method to arrive at a science of man largely rejects the traditions of Christian humanism, the years between 1746 and 1762

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49 Martine Sonnet, *L’éducation des filles au temps des Lumières* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1987), 199. As Sonnet laments, private instruction conducted at home left little to no traces, unless fictionalized like Mme d’Épinay’s *Conversations d’Émilie*, and thus cannot be quantified with any accuracy.

50 Ibid., 197.
generate new schools influenced by the budding new philosophy of knowledge.\textsuperscript{51} During this time, thanks to Locke, Condillac, Montesquieu and the \textit{Encyclopédie}, “la connaissance de l’homme” becomes the main focus of education, rather than the creation Christian subjects of monarchy.\textsuperscript{52} Due to the new importance of the body and senses, derived from the application of the scientific method, education — or at least its theoretical ideal — becomes increasingly centered on man, rather than the divine. Education is now more than mere instruction — not just knowledge, but also the development of the appropriate social and moral qualities. There emerges a new conception of the child — no longer “enfant de Dieu” but a sentient being that needs to be \textit{moved} by education. Much like M\textsuperscript{me} de Sévigné’s letters, which altered the intended audience of epistolary literature, pedagogical shifts during the middle of the century serve to elaborate “a wholly new vision of the child as a being with its own intellectual integrity, stages of development, and a more or less infinite potential for learning.”\textsuperscript{53} From a “purely rhetorical universe,” where the child was feared and contained and learning was divorced from the real world, the century moved to a more optimistic conception of the child as a sum of possibilities, nevertheless strictly supervised.\textsuperscript{54} At the same time, there is now the danger that the child will be considered as little more than a

\textsuperscript{52} Grandière, \textit{L’idéal pédagogique}, 3.
\textsuperscript{54} Georges Snyders, \textit{La Pédagogie en France aux XVII\textsuperscript{e} et XVIII\textsuperscript{e} siècles} (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965), 350.
student, the sum of his pedagogical experiences - a risk we see illustrated in many of the highly restrictive, controlling and unfeasible treatises of the century.\footnote{One could look at the increasingly success of the pensions throughout the century, as well as the totalizing pedagogical plans of Mme de Genlis, as explored in Adèle et Théodore’s exigent demands on the pedagogue.}

The parliamentary revolution of 1762–3, which begets the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1762, sparks an even larger social debate on the function and method of education, a debate that will persist until the end of the century. Notably, this date is the same as the publication of Rousseau’s pedagogical treatise Émile, ou de l’éducation. With Rousseau leading the fore, education becomes an increasingly political question, rather than just an epistemological one. With the movement away from a god-based education, the primary objective of pedagogy becomes the formation of good citizens, full of courage and virtue. As Snyders remarks, the true pedagogical revolution of the century was the new impetus to learn by contact with the world, rather than classical books.\footnote{Snyders, La Pédagogie en France, 351.} Social utility takes the forefront, and education, following the earlier ideas of Montesquieu, strives to be at the heart of the state. The desire for unity under monarchy inspires increasingly nationalized education, renewed enthusiasm for science and the mechanical arts, and the attempt to correlate instruction to one’s social station. As education in France endeavors to establish social homogeneity, it becomes an ever more politically fraught matter.

Looking at the prescriptions of Émile in juxtaposition with socio-political reality, it becomes apparent that a vast gulf existed between the theoretical ideals of eighteenth-century writers and the daily experience of its pedagogues. Moreover, if the wealth of writings on education during this period is undeniable, women’s instruction specifically does not appear to progress very far. Sonnet’s assessment of the reality of female
education in the eighteenth century should make any literary scholar pause to observe the important gap between theory and praxis; her resigned conclusion is that “des femmes et des hommes éclairés discourent et écrivent sur les vices de l’instruction féminine, mais aucune école conforme à leurs désirs ne voit le jour et celles qui existent continuent à fonctionner comme si de rien n’était.”

By and large, young girls learned to love and serve God, to sew and embroider, to read, and perhaps, to write and do arithmetic, as they had done for years.

Although this dissonance between the ambitious writings on women’s education and the poor shape of their actual schooling certainly warrants further research by historians and sociologists as well as literary scholars, my focus has been to use this information as background to understand the difficulties writers had in discussing female pedagogy. That is to say: the separation between the ideal female pupil and the real one evinced by historical documentation finds its parallel in the ambiguous and contradictory fictions penned by would-be pedagogues such as Rousseau, Laclos, Sade, and Charrière. As mentioned above, many Enlightenment writers sought to educate women via the epistolary novel, often by fictionalizing female education in a supplementary text after philosophical treatises failed to resolve the issue. The choice to use epistolarity to explore the possibilities of women’s education is not, as I have shown, an arbitrary one dictated only by the genre’s popularity; there is in fact a “felicitous homology between the contradictory nature of the letter form and the predominance of paradoxical tendencies in Enlightenment thought.”

57 Sonnet, L’éducation des filles, 287.
58 Ibid., 257.
adapting to numerous new circumstances in the public sphere, the letter was perhaps best suited to deal with the similarly vexed attempts to reform women’s education. As Janet Altman elucidates in her *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, the letter form is inherently riddled with polarities and paradoxes (the letter as presence/absence; portrait/mask; bridge/barrier; writer/reader; closure/overture...). These polarities, along with Jan Herman’s paradox of the injunction of “mentir vrai” at the heart of the epistolary novel are crucial to understand the contradictions engendered by the various and often competing discourses contained within many letter-novels. Caught in a double bind between a relentless need to assert the validity of the critically condemned novel at the same time as the authenticity of the letters they contain, epistolary novels are thus based on an untenable promise to deliver both fiction and reality.

The contradiction at the heart of the epistolary novel was consequently perhaps the ideal vehicle to examine the vagaries of reforming women’s education in the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, although many critics such as Altman have written important works on the epistolary form, and many others have sought to delineate the contours of eighteenth-century female education, either in literature or in practice, none

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60 For more on new forms of social relations, see Jürgen Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1989). Habermas argues that the rise of bourgeois public sphere creates the new phenomenon of public opinion; the growth of a literary public; political liberalism, etc. This idea has subsequently been attacked for excluding women, minorities, the poor and uneducated, and so forth.


have explicitly combined these two issues, which seem so clearly interrelated to me. Specifically, I am struck by the convergences between pedagogy and epistolarity, which thematically reflect many of the same concerns: a growing strain between the public and private self, as well as between men and women; a new conception of the child and its role within the bourgeois interior; and an increasing tendency to see the novel, as well as education, operate in the public sphere as a forum for debate, influenced by the real world and resplendent with polyphony. Moreover, the tension between philosophy and fiction, represented by authors grappling with experimental literary forms while addressing the issue of education, finds a parallel in the struggle of emerging scientific methods to overtake traditional pedagogical means during the Enlightenment. In a sense, therefore, epistolarity can be seen as a dramatization of pedagogy — a fact immediately visible in Laclos’ *Liaisons dangereuses*.

These intertwined concerns of pedagogy and epistolary commerce, juxtaposed with the long-standing tradition of women as epistolary writers, created during the Enlightenment a privileged space for thinking about female education in a formally transformative — and transformable — medium. For women authors, epistolary novels dealing with pedagogy were a way to escape the socially determined confines of their existence, while escaping the labels of pedant or libertine. For male authors, the undefined contours of the genre allowed them to experiment both formally and theoretically with regard to the complex problem of female pedagogy.

In my dissertation, I have chosen what I consider to be some of the richest examples of this convergence between women’s education and the epistolary novel. My

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63 Although discussions of pedagogy in epistolary novels has occurred locally, it does not appear that anyone has sought to compare the two modes of discourse formally, to my knowledge.
attempt has not been to compile an exhaustive study, but to bring to light some of the most formally intriguing and ideologically ambivalent responses to the challenge of addressing women’s education in eighteenth-century France. I have naturally begun my investigation with a discussion of Rousseau, whose *Émile* and *Julie* represent crucial contributions to both contemporary pedagogy and epistolarity, respectively. Rousseau’s noted ambivalence towards women functions as a starting point for my comparison of the two texts. Although often Rousseau advocates for minimal women’s education, with the result that they should remain subordinate to men and public opinion (as in Book Five of *Émile*), he simultaneously grants women a central role in his writing, especially in the figure of Julie, who ultimately transforms from pupil to teacher and represents the emotional crux of the novel. Moreover, the pedagogical ideal embodied by *Émile*’s Sophie is starkly contrasted, if not contradicted by, the epistolary representation of Julie, the two characters receiving vastly different educations and occupying different roles relative to men. These tensions find a further parallel in Rousseau’s constant destabilizing of the relationship between the social treatise and the fictional (epistolary) narrative.

In this first chapter I attempt to go beyond the traditional reading of Sophie as the “practical” woman and Julie as the “ideal woman” to see how, in the end, both women are representative of the same pedagogical and narrative tensions, a fact which is revealed by their equally luckless outcomes. Both women are led astray by their educations, but the respective failures of Sophie and Julie in fact become essential to the narrative, marking the highest points of pathos and narrative instability in *Les Solitaires*, the epistolary and unfinished sequel to *Émile*, as well as *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. These
exemplary fates suggest that for Rousseau, at least in narrative, there is no viable solution to women’s education that does not involve (self) sacrifice.

In fact, the supposed reversal of Julie (from pupil to teacher) that has often been made to represent a proto-feminist side of Rousseau is in reality symptomatic of the Enlightenment’s gender dichotomy on the whole, as illustrated by Steinbrügge in The Moral Sex. The insistence by natural philosophy on the radical difference between the two sexes, increasingly confirmed by the rise of medical science, served to render woman as truly other in eighteenth-century France. Accordingly, thinkers like Rousseau logically reasoned that women must play a different role in society and thus receive different educations. I consequently argue that Émile, Les Solitaires, and La Nouvelle Héloïse demonstrate that this radical difference extends to narrative function as well. A pedagogical treatise, Émile is thus ostensibly the “male,” philosophical text, while La Nouvelle Héloïse is the “female,” epistolary novel. However, the treatise is inherently destabilized by the fictional sequel of Book Five, as is the novel by the inclusion of an ambiguous and contradictory double preface. In addition, the generic (in both senses of the word, gender and genre) identity of both of these texts is called into question by the existence of Les Solitaires and the triangular relationship between all three works. The epistolary character of the sequel, combined with its male narrator, unfinished status, and proliferation of possible endings fantasized by its contemporary readers, illustrates the

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64 See, for example, Ruth Graham, “Rousseau’s Sexism Revolutionized,” in Woman in the 18th Century and Other Essays, ed. Paul Fritz and Richard Morton, 127–39 (Toronto: Hakkert, 1976); Gita May, “Rousseau’s ‘Anti-Feminism’ Reconsidered,” in French Women and the Age of Enlightenment, ed. Samia L. Spencer, 309–17 (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984); and Marie-Laure Swiderski, “La dialectique de la condition féminine dans La Nouvelle Héloïse,” in Rousseau et la société du XVIIIe siècle, ed. Jean Terrasse, 109–26 (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982). In addition to the portrait of Julie, some of these scholars have also found Book 1 of Émile to contain feminist undercurrents.

65 This dichotomy is furthermore supported by Rousseau’s account of his mother’s novels and his grandfather’s philosophical books in Les Confessions, 6–7.
constant threat of the female other, embodied by the specter of romantic love, to the Rousseauian social model and pedagogical project. The question of women’s education in fact prompts a switch (or return: *Julie* is originally published in 1761) to the epistolary genre, marked by lack of closure and polyphony.

Consequently, the reader’s inability to pin down Rousseau’s perspective on female education throughout these texts is due to the implacable assertion of a philosophical, moral, and pedagogical model based on sexual difference. Rousseau’s narrative is accordingly pulled towards the monological, attempting to resume all voices into one. Rousseau is thus forced to always view woman as the different other that destabilizes systematic theory. This failure to integrate women is exposed by the differing, incompatible and/or unrealistic guidelines for female education in *Émile*, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, and *Les Solitaires*. It is likewise revealed by the narrative instability of *Les Solitaires*, the relegation of Sophie’s education to Book Five of *Émile*, and the problematic transition from pupil to pedagogue illustrated by Julie, whose deathbed scene, though explicitly preoccupied with pedagogy, is notably lacking in the description of her adopted daughter Henriette’s education.

Using Rousseau as a pedagogical and epistolary model for my other authors, in my second chapter I will look at the unlikely pedagogical figure of Choderlos de Laclos, most famous for his masterful epistolary novel, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782). In addition to this work, however, Laclos also penned a series of three incomplete essays on female education (collectively titled by the publisher *De l’éducation des femmes* and published posthumously in 1903, though the essays were written between 1783–1802).

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As with Rousseau, it appears that the epistolary novel and pedagogical treatises exist in a state of mutual supplementarity, addressing the issue of women’s education in alternatively complementary and contradictory ways. The three essays are themselves internally contradictory: the first creates an impasse, suggesting that only revolution could successfully bring about change for women’s education; the second reinforces the status quo, by espousing a Rousseauian vision of the “natural” role of women; and finally, the third essay fragment enumerates some practical suggestions for bettering women’s education based on the power of reading.

Laclos’ apparent reluctance to educate via the treatise form is likewise echoed in the dubious and ambivalent power of books to educate and seduce found in Les Liaisons dangereuses. The figures of Merteuil and Valmont, libertine pedagogues, illustrate in complex ways the fraught relationship between the written word and the real world as concerns education. In addition, Les Liaisons dangereuses also contains contradictory prefaces (“Avertissement de l’éditeur;” “Préface du rédacteur”), which function, as in La Nouvelle Héloïse, to destabilize the text by questioning the very possibility of women’s education, as well as the role of novels in such an education. As with Rousseau, it is perhaps impossible to resolve all of the contradictions posed by the juxtaposition of the pedagogical treatises with the epistolary novel. Laclos’ similar ambivalence towards, and yet evident obsession with, the question of how to educate women likewise problematizes both genres. Just as Laclos’ pedagogical treatises attempt to address the problematic issue of female education from several different perspectives, only to lose all coherence and trail off into self-refuted paradox, so Merteuil and Cécile are nevertheless both victims, illustrating the constantly perilous position of all women posited in the
“Préface,” despite being at opposite ends of the education spectrum. As in Rousseau, the issue of female pedagogy prompts in Laclos a shift between epistolary novel and treatise, as well a crisis of expression linked to changing cultural, political, and literary currents. Ultimately, it is up to the reader to determine the fine line between education and seduction.

In my third chapter, I approach the controversial figure of the Marquis de Sade, prolific and persecuted libertine writer. In his works, which span numerous genres, Sade often broaches the issue of pedagogy, albeit in a humorous or oblique manner. I have chosen four texts which illustrate Sade’s complex views on education and narrative form: his essay *Idée sur les romans*; the dialogue *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*; the libertine “encyclopedia” of *120 journées de Sodome*; and finally, his only epistolary novel, *Aline et Valcour*. In the essay, Sade discusses the moral objective of the novel, arguing that good need not necessarily be shown to triumph in order to educate; this aesthetic and moral conception of writing will inform all of the other texts which we will examine. With *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, we see Sade explicitly addressing the issue of female education, embodied in the initiation of young Eugénie by her libertine pedagogues. Portrayed on the surface as female liberation, Eugénie’s education is in fact undermined by a series of contradictions which cast doubt on its redemptive character. The use of the boudoir as a gendered space, as well as the problematic relationships described between parents and children and teachers and students, serve to illustrate the limitations of female emancipation through libertine pedagogy.

While the darkly humorous scenes of Eugénie’s education hint at a parody of materialistic philosophy, the sexual compendium of *120 journées de Sodome* clearly
mocks the century’s Linnaean penchant for taxonomy and systematization with its encyclopedic form, complete with tables and cross-references. In addition, the ostensible pedagogical goals of any literary work are put into question by the growing tensions illustrated between teacher and student, the particular and the general, the author and the reader. The traditional pedagogical model of example and imitation is here perverted by power instabilities, which threaten the very possibility of education.

*Aline et Valcour* likewise functions as a sort of “encyclopedia” of contemporary leitmotifs, parodying and debating all of the eighteenth-century’s philosophical preoccupations and narrative devices. Although its style at first appears conventional, the novel in fact flaunts the epistolary pact, with narrative interruptions, contradictory prefaces, and a total lack of realism, revealing Sade’s inherent mistrust of the letter. The epistolary novel as penned by Sade is no longer a pedagogical tool but an empty form whose excesses are parodied.

In these four otherwise very different texts, I thus show that Sade is performing an exegesis of Enlightenment pedagogical thought, bringing out its underlying tendencies and contradictions, while illustrating the undesired consequences that certain strains such as atheistic materialism might bring to society if rigorously applied. At the heart of Sade’s labyrinthine declarations about education — at the heart, perhaps, of Sade’s structuring narrative force — we find only contradiction; instead of offering guidelines for female education, Sade presents the reader with a warning against the tyranny of classification and rigid indoctrination. With humor, parody, and intertextuality, Sade gives his contemporaries — if they are willing to read him — a new manner of reading and engaging with a dominant societal problem. By illustrating a series of productive
dichotomies and irresolvable contradictions, Sade shows pedagogy to be a repressive force, as incapable of escaping the teacher/student power structure as the novel is of surpassing the author/reader one. The question of female education in particular appears to push the Sadean text to dark parody and philosophical inconsistency, the pessimistic underbelly of the Enlightenment.

Linking epistololarity and women’s education on a much more personal level, Isabelle de Charrière stands out among so many other successful women writers by her unique position as Dutch-born Swiss author directly observing the ravages of the Revolution and the plight of émigrés. Profoundly influenced by Rousseau in terms of both epistolarity and pedagogy, Charrière nevertheless attempts to carve out more freedom and possibility for women than allowed by the philosopher. As a woman writing in a tenuous political climate, however, Charrière must use a variety of oblique strategies and masks to address the current problems of female education. Her abundant use of experimental literary forms and perspective as a critic of Rousseau link her to my other authors. Charrière’s critical pieces on Rousseau show tentative gestures towards the emancipation of women, cloaked in anonymity or disguise. In her epistolary novel *Trois femmes*, she uses a series of pedagogical case studies to illustrate the various obstacles facing eighteenth-century women. The novel’s inconclusive ending and experimentation with form likewise serve to destabilize the monological discourse of authority, arguing for the text, here embodied by the polyphonic epistolary novel, to become a viable forum for public debate. The increasing misogyny of the post-Revolutionary period pushes Charrière to develop new and more oblique strategies for
advocating for women’s rights without being publicly crucified as a “femme pédante,” as illustrated in the apparent apologia for illiteracy, Sainte Anne.

The importance of Charrière’s protean ability to disguise herself or adapt cannot be overlooked; as Joan Hinde Stewart has pointed out, female novelists of the eighteenth century have largely been accused of only being able to write autobiographically, and they have often been catalogued but not analyzed.67 Charrière is no exception: writers such as her biographer Philippe Godet will frequently reduce literary innovations to anecdotal, biographical elements.68 Throughout all of these different texts, both critical and fictional, the salient features of Charrière’s pedagogical philosophy emerge time and time again: the use of experimental and open-ended forms support her conception of writing as entering into the public debate, and her adopting of other voices and indirect strategies of attack emerge as a means for women to question male authority and construct their own educations.

In order to connect these chapters, I have treated Laclos, Sade and Charrière as so many readers of Rousseau, who offer responses to his pedagogical ideas and epistolary style. I have likewise examined the various ways in which all four writers approached the question of women’s education and what effect that contemplation had on narrative form. For all of these authors, female pedagogy appears to undermine narrative unity, prompting experimental forms and the creation of endless literary echoes. The inherent fault lines of Enlightenment thought, intimated by the era’s reflections on gender, ultimately reassert themselves in the epistolary form to cause textual instability.

68 Godet, Madame de Charrière et ses amis.
CHAPTER 1: ROUSSEAU: UNHAPPY HEROINES AND NARRATIVE HESITATION

I. Introduction

It seems that already in the 19th century, critics were defending Rousseau’s *Émile* by arguing that the author had never intended to write a pedagogical treatise that would systematically outline an ideal education program. As Jules Steeg writes in his preface to an abridged version of the first three volumes of *Émile* (the chapter concerning Sophie is conspicuously absent),

> Il n’y a absolument rien de praticable dans son système qui consiste à insolier un enfant du monde, à créer exprès pour lui un précepteur phénix, à le priver de père et mère, de frères et sœurs, de compagnons d’études, à l’entourer d’un charlatanisme perpétuel sous prétexte de suivre la nature, et à ne lui montrer la société où il doit vivre qu’à travers le voile d’une atmosphère factice.69

And yet, Steeg is rapidly willing to admit that “et néanmoins à chaque pas c’est la saine raison qu’on rencontre; par un étonnant contraste, cette fantaisie est pleine de bon sens, ce rêve déborde de réalités, *ce roman invraisemblable et chimérique contient la substance et la moëlle d’un traité de pédagogie rationnelle et vraiment moderne.*”70 For critics such as Steeg, *Émile* contains many brilliant pedagogical experiments, couched in a novelistic veneer. In his 1966 introduction to *Émile*, a more recent critic such as Michel Launay likewise follows in such traditional footsteps, by arguing that “si l’on prend garde que l’ouvrage n’est pas un traité dogmatique, mais un livre symbolique et ‘exemplaire’, un recueil de suggestions et d’exemples visant essentiellement à ‘faire naître de bonnes

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70 *Ibid.*, my emphasis. Here, and henceforth throughout my dissertation, I have reproduced the spelling, punctuation, and typography of the original texts, unless otherwise noted.
idées à d’autres’… on ne tombe pas dans le contresens de vouloir mettre en pratique, strictement et mécaniquement, tout ce que préconise Rousseau.”71 He then goes on to emphatically declare that Rousseau “s’était efforcé de ne pas faire de son livre un ‘traité d’éducation’ ou un manuel de pédagogie.”72

According to such interpretations, Rousseau did not venture to write a pedagogical treatise. Why then, I wonder, give his work a dual title, Émile, ou De l’éducation,73 thus allowing for the confusion between novel and treatise? Moreover, in the third section Rousseau explicitly compares his endeavor to one of his fundamental intertexts, Robinson Crusoe, calling the latter “le plus heureux traité d’éducation naturelle”?74 The blurring of the lines between fictional and non-fictional discourse appears thus immediately inherent to Rousseau’s text. We must therefore ask ourselves what role the choice of discourse plays in the dissemination of pedagogical information — what is the purpose of presenting Émile as an ambiguous text which straddles the line between novel and treatise?

Nevertheless, critics have repeatedly insisted that trying to find a systematic pedagogical treatise in the Émile is to bark up the wrong tree. This has been a convenient way of glossing over the contradictions in Rousseau’s pedagogical opus, not least of all the stark contrast between Émile’s innovative schooling and Sophie’s bare bones instruction. This sort of interpretation likewise ignores the reception of the treatise by Rousseau’s contemporaries. A female reader like Madame d’Épinay, for instance, was certainly taking Rousseau’s pedagogical suggestions seriously when she devoted her time

72 Launay, preface, 22.
73 It is also true that sometimes the book is simply titled Émile, Traité d’éducation, and that the mention of a treatise appears in the earliest versions of the work.
and energy to writing *Les Conversations d’Émilie* (1774), illustrating the major shortcomings of *Émile* and attempting to resolve them.\textsuperscript{75} Dissatisfied with the limitations Rousseau had placed upon her gender, she tried in her own life not only to establish useful methods for female education, but indeed to put them in action with regards to her granddaughter.

And if Madame d’Épinay and so many others took Rousseau seriously, it was perhaps first and foremost because he himself advocated for the application of his theoretical ideas. Alluding to this, Rousseau makes an ambiguous but significant remark in the first few pages of his treatise. Seemingly deflated, he writes that “on croira moins lire un traité d’éducation, que les rêveries d’un visionnaire sur l’éducation. Qu’y faire ? Ce n’est pas sur les idées d’autrui que j’écris ; c’est sur les miennes.”\textsuperscript{76} In this statement, Rousseau seems at best resigned to the fact that his work will not be read as a genuine attempt at a practical pedagogy, but rather inapplicable utopian dream.\textsuperscript{77} When Rousseau likewise suggests that “la partie systématique” of his work is nothing other than “la marche de la nature,” he is not at all denying a logical, rational, and programmatic structure to *Émile*; the systematization of nature may not seem methodical at first glance, but is a cohesive order nevertheless, Rousseau maintains. Moreover, Rousseau explicitly refers to the *Émile* as a pedagogical treatise, in an aside justifying his refusal to deal with

\textsuperscript{75} Presented as a series of dialogues between mother and daughter, very heavily based on Épinay’s own relationship with her granddaughter, the *Conversations* are adamant about not being a pedagogical treatise (“Il ne s’agit donc ici ni de plan ni de système”), while simultaneously striving to “former l’esprit d’un enfant, et à lui inspirer des sentiments vertueux et honêtes.” Madame d’Épinay, *Les Conversations d’Émilie*, ed. Rosena Davison (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1996), 50. The confusion between intentions is emblematic of many pedagogical works written by women at the time, who often sought to avoid being labeled as pedants.

\textsuperscript{76} Rousseau, *Émile*, 32.

\textsuperscript{77} Note especially the use of the future tense as a marker of supposition or doubt.
the young child’s practice of writing by declaring “non, j’ai honte de m’amuser à ces niaiseries dans un traité d’éducation.”

Although Rousseau remarks that he began the project of Émile “pour complaire à une bonne mère qui sait penser,” this initial impetus is clearly surpassed by the scope of the final, published product. Going from such a specific and individual project, to one with universal aims, we begin to see tensions inherent within the treatise form and more specifically, its instructive aims for society. The problems of pedagogical applications become even more apparent when we come to Book Five of Émile, which details Sophie’s scant education. The inclusion of this supplementary chapter, which is much more novelistic in form than the preceding sections, serves to destabilize the philosophical treatise by introducing radical gender differences. The inconsistencies between Émile and Sophie’s educations are thus mirrored by a narrative shift, which will culminate in the creation of a sequel, the epistolary novel Émile et Sophie, ou les Solitaires. Prompted by the question of women’s education, this sequel will completely abandon the form of the pedagogical treatise to adopt that of the epistolary novel, focusing on romantic pathos and exotic adventures instead.

If Sophie’s education ultimately fails to protect her from worldly evils, Émile’s upbringing is likewise called into question in this unfinished text. The inability of Rousseau to provide a satisfactory ending to the story, as well as the proliferation of possibly conclusions imagined by his contemporaries, highlight the problematic application of learning already hinted at in Émile. Rousseau’s ambivalence towards

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78 Rousseau, Émile, 146.
79 Several instances scattered throughout the book refer back to this “bonne mère,” like for instance: “bonne mère, préserve-toi surtout des mensonges qu’on te prépare.” Ibid., 261–2.
80 Ibid., 31. Ironically enough, Rousseau gave up his own children for adoption rather than educate them via his innovative strategies, thus incurring relentless criticism.
women is in turn further complicated by a juxtaposition of the uneducated Sophie with the exemplary heroine of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Julie. Although in the “male” treatise form, he argued for minimal women’s education, in the “female” epistolary novel, Rousseau creates a remarkable female character whose education is completely at odds with his prescriptions in *Émile*.

I have chosen to see these three texts as functioning in a triangular relationship which problematizes the questions of gender and genre. The contrasts between Sophie and Julie are thus echoed in the formal opposition between the treatise and the novel. As such, I have chosen to go beyond the traditional reading of the two women as “practical” and “ideal” concisely expressed by Jean-Louis Lecercle: “*Sophie* est une création de philosophe; elle illustre le systèmes d’idées que Jean-Jacques a développé sur la nature féminine et sur la place de la femme dans la société. Elle est LA FEMME. *Julie* est une création de poète, née de l’imagination de Jean-Jacques. Elle est UNE femme idéale.”

In her work *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau*, Mary Trouille likewise maintains that *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is the “portrait” of an extraordinary woman, while Sophie represents the ordinary woman as one half of a domestic couple.

To her credit, Trouille goes on to affirm that the potential contradictions between the pedagogical models of Julie and Sophie can be attributed to three key factors, addressing social, formal, and literary elements. For one thing, Trouille notes, there is an important class difference between the two women, which will in turn affect the sort of education that they can be expected to receive. For another, the formal character of a

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treatise versus a novel must surely affect the development of the text and its characters, thus explaining the difference between Julie as a major and complex character versus the shadowy outline of Sophie. Finally, Trouille suggests that if Émile is written from a male perspective, Rousseau’s epistolary novel often attempts to speak with a woman’s voice in a female-centered environment. All of these reasons cited by Trouille have elements of validity, I believe, but she ultimately stops short of suggesting that the narrative form is not just the cause of the two women’s differences, but also the symptom. The problem with such interpretations, I believe, is the unjustified idealization of Julie. If Julie is supposed to represent the ideal, in literature and possibly in another, more perfect society, while Sophie is meant to propose a practical pedagogy for contemporary women, then what are we to make of the tragic demise of both of these female figures, in large part due precisely to the failings of their education? Consequently, I suggest that both women are representative of the same pedagogical and narrative tensions; their failures are indicative of Rousseau’s inability to imagine another alternative — a happier scenario — for women, within his sexual politics of rigid gender difference. As Schwartz shows in The Sexual Politics of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Rousseau is rather pessimistic concerning the possibility for terrestrial happiness, and his asexual narcissism of later years is not a viable option for women. Without foreseeing the technical and medical advances that would drastically decrease infant mortality and thus liberate women from the cycle of

83 Trouille’s final conclusion is that Rousseau’s perspective on women is simultaneously feminist and misogynic, traditionalist and progressive. But while this may be an apt outward description of the appearance of Rousseau’s thought, it ultimately does not allow us to probe the issue any deeper than simply saying that Rousseau had multiple facets to his writing.

perpetual childbirth, Rousseau thus could not envision successful female education outside of the domestic sphere.\textsuperscript{85}

I will first examine the individual pedagogies of Sophie and Julie as set up in their respective texts, and then investigate the fictionalization of the former as portrayed in Les Solitaires in order to gain a more complete understanding of the female student in Rousseau’s educational philosophy. By examining all three texts together, I hope to show how the radical gender difference embodied in sexed education in fact spreads to the form of the narrative as well, destabilizing the authoritative treatise with ambiguous supplementary texts.

II. Ignorance is bliss?: Sophie’s education in Émile

Rousseau’s sprawling pedagogical treatise, Émile, ou De l’éducation, contains meticulous instructions for weaning, raising, and educating a prototypical male to be a virtuous husband, upstanding citizen, and competent father. Although four entire sections are devoted to Émile’s upbringing, with each one addressing a specific period of his infancy, childhood, and youth, only one section is tacked on at the end to deal with the education of a female pupil, Sophie. The text’s transition into the fifth section clearly indicates that Sophie’s education (and place in the narrative) is subordinate to Émile’s: “Nous voici parvenus au dernier acte de la jeunesse, mais nous ne sommes pas encore au dénouement. Il n’est pas bon que l’homme soit seul, Émile est homme ; nous lui avons

\textsuperscript{85} Schwartz raises the notion that since at least 50\% of children died before being sexually reproductive, women would have had to give birth to at least four children, statistically, to keep the population level even. Such data suggests a much more pressing need for reproduction than nowadays, illuminating a certain aspect of the limits that Rousseau places on women. Sexual Politics, 144.
promis une compagne, il faut la lui donner. Cette compagne est Sophie."86 Sophie is “given” to Émile much like a prize for having completed his schooling, and her introduction into the text is thus marked with inferiority and lack of individuality. Even more than Émile, Sophie is described as a template for all women, rather than an individual with personal thoughts, desires, and fears: “Sophie doit être femme comme Émile est homme, c’est-à-dire avoir tout ce qui convient à la constitution de son espèce et de son sexe pour remplir sa place dans l’ordre physique et moral.”87

And indeed, Sophie as a specific and concrete woman completely disappears from the text for the following fifty or so pages, instead being replaced by variations on “la femme”, in reductive statements such as the following: “il s’ensuit que la femme est faite spécialement pour plaire à l’homme.”88 In fact, in this section delineating the proper program of studies for Sophie, from infancy to marrying age, Rousseau does not once mention so much as her name, let alone any personal traits and inclinations. Sophie finally reappears abruptly at the end of a discussion on Spartan women, when the author concludes that “voilà dans quel esprit Sophie a été élevée, avec plus de soin que de peine, et plutôt en suivant son goût qu’en le gênant.”89 All the generalizations that have been made thus far are to apply to Sophie, we are told, despite the fact, of course, that no one person can embody the middle way and the ideal path so completely. Sophie seems very much like a narrative and sexual placeholder — a spot destined to be filled by Émile’s desire and the reader’s imagination.

86 Rousseau, Émile, 465. A similar phenomenon occurs with Émile as well, but he is subsequently endowed with a much fuller personality. The move from the abstract to the general is an important feature of Rousseau’s argumentative strategy for both Émile and Sophie; the dearth of description of Sophie as an individual is a narrative difference between the two.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid., 466.
89 Ibid., 516.
As for the extent of Sophie’s education, it is limited by and large to the domestic sphere. Her father develops her modest singing abilities, while her mother teaches her to dance. Only for a few lessons does an outside instructor come to show her the rudiments of piano playing. The rest of her home-schooled education consists entirely of cooking, cleaning, sewing, embroidering, and perhaps her only mental endeavor, keeping the household accounts in order. Rousseau assures us that, although Sophie can read and write as is necessary to run a household, her mind “ne s’est point formé par la lecture, mais seulement par les conversations de son père et de sa mère, par ses propres réflexions, et par les observations qu’elle a faites dans le peu de monde qu’elle a vu.”

Although it is true that reading comes rather late for Émile as well, he is nevertheless ultimately allowed to access the greater written world, if not encouraged to do so. Despite being introduced to reading later than his contemporaries, Émile as a teenaged boy ventures into the realm of literature: “voici le temps de la lecture et des livres agréables ; voici le temps de lui apprendre à faire l’analyse du discours, de le rendre sensible à toutes les beautés de l’éloquence et de la diction.” If Rousseau does not prize literary training as highly as his contemporaries do, it nevertheless remains an integral part of Émile’s pedagogy. As we shall see shortly, for women, however, reading seems to be limited to the Bible and perhaps another work or two of moral instruction.

Reading is thus first and foremost seen as a means to a financial asset for women.

Comparing the educations of boys and girls, Rousseau states that

\[\text{si je ne veux pas qu’on presse un garçon d’apprendre à lire, à plus forte raison je ne veux pas qu’on y force de jeunes filles avant de leur faire bien sentir à quoi sert la lecture : et, dans la manière dont on leur montre ordinairement cette utilité, on suit bien plus sa propre idée que la leur. Après tout, où est la nécessité}\]

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90 Ibid., 519.
91 Ibid., 448.
The written word is seen as little more than a tool for women to become competent housewives; and by this token, arithmetic is clearly the more valuable skill for young girls to learn. In Rousseau’s program of studies for women, nowhere is reading (and by extension, writing) portrayed as a gateway to deeper understanding of the human condition or as a fruitful means of introspection.

In regards to the education of boys, however, Rousseau’s position is more ambiguous. Although at one point he declares emphatically “je hais les livres,” he does ultimately concede their importance. His primary objection to giving children books — and what critics often overlook — is simply a question of appropriate timing. If according to Rousseau “la lecture est le fléau de l’enfance,” it does not necessarily follow that reading is useless in adolescence and adulthood. Even before adolescence, the pedagogue grudgingly allows his pupil to read *Robinson Crusoe*, which functions as a pedagogical treatise in its own right. Émile later will have a classical bent in his readings, bespeaking the important place of the “Ancients” in Rousseau’s philosophy: “en général Émile prendra plus de goût pour les livres des anciens que pour les nôtres, par cela seul qu'étant les premiers les anciens sont les plus près de la nature et que leur génie est plus à eux.” At the very least, Émile is indirectly involved in the Ancients vs.

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92 Ibid., 480.
93 In the introduction to the *Confessions*, we see that Rousseau’s relationship to reading is fraught, regardless of gender; he calls his early penchant for novels a “dangereuse méthode” of acquiring knowledge. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Confessions* (Paris: H. Launette & C., 1789), 7.
94 Ibid., 238.
95 Rousseau argues that “en ôtant ainsi tous les devoirs des enfants, j'ôte les instruments de leur plus grande misère savoir les livres. La lecture est le fléau de l'enfance et presque la seule occupation qu'on lui sait donner. À peine à douze ans Émile saura-t-il ce que c'est qu'un livre. Mais il faut bien, au moins, dira-t-on, qu'il sache lire. J'en conviens; il faut qu'il sache lire quand la lecture lui est utile; jusqu'alors elle n'est bonne qu'à l'ennuyer.” Ibid., 145.
96 Ibid., 449.
Moderns debate – a field of inquiry that is completely denied to women in Rousseau’s pedagogical model.

Rousseau argues over and over again that “le monde est le livre des femmes.” Women’s form of reading takes place in observation of the people and things that surround them; women’s writing, therefore, could be seen as the polite manipulation and discreet attentions of the ideal hostess, described in Émile. Sophie is explicitly said to have read only two books: “Elle n'a jamais lu de livre que Barrême (a simple accounting book) et Télémaque qui lui tomba par hasard dans les mains.” Télémaque functions as Sophie’s reference guide, much in the way that Robinson Crusoe does for Émile. There are two notable differences between the two books, however. Firstly, in a peculiar anecdote where a “real” Sophie is merged with Rousseau’s creation, the unauthorized Télémaque (which randomly “fell into her lap”) leads to sadness and suffering. This Sophie not only falls in love with Télémaque, but becomes inconsolable and obsessed with a fictional character. Failing to find Télémaque in the real world, Sophie tosses the book onto the table and declares to her mother: “plaignez votre malheureuse fille, sa tristesse est sans remède, ses pleurs ne peuvent tarir.” The negative effect of reading on this anecdotal Sophie is profound, and Rousseau imagines a tragic outcome,

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97 Ibid., 508.
98 “J’entre dans des maisons ouvertes dont le maître et la maîtresse font conjointement les honneurs. Tous deux ont eu la même éducation, tous deux sont d’une égale politesse, tous deux également pourvus de goût et d’esprit, tous deux animés du même désir de bien recevoir leur monde, et de renvoyer chacun content d’eux. Le mari n’omet aucun soin pour être attentif à tout : il va, vient, fait la ronde et se donne mille peines ; il voudrait être tout attention. La femme reste à sa place ; un petit cercle se rassemble autour d’elle, et semble lui cacher le reste de l’assemblée ; cependant il ne s’y passe rien qu’elle n’aperçoive, il n’en sort personne à qui elle n’ait parlé....En sortant de table, chacun croit qu’elle n’a songé qu’à lui ; tous ne pensent pas qu’elle ait eu le temps de manger un seul morceau....” Ibid., 502-3.
99 Ibid., 538.
100 The reader can, of course, be a little wary of such a “random” occurrence, when everything is planned out in excruciating detail by the pedagogue; there are no implicit hints, however, that Télémaque was planted by Sophie’s parents.
101 Ibid., 530.
“...l’infortunée, encore plus attachée à sa chimère par la persécution qu’elle lui fait souffrir, marchant à pas lents vers la mort, et descendant dans la tombe au moment qu’on croit l’entraîner à l’autel.”102 In reality, this is not the destiny that awaits Sophie, but it is significant that Rousseau chooses to paint such a dire picture, resulting solely from the reading of one ill-advised book. But bizarrely enough, the author drops the anecdote and returns to the literary fiction. Consoling his readers, Rousseau explains the point of his exaggeration and “resuscitates” the young woman in order to continue his narrative. Nevertheless, it remains that the (female) reader has been – paradoxically – warned against reading by seeing the nefarious power of the written word upon an otherwise virtuous and kind soul. Télémaque will be practically Sophie’s only book,103 and it is only redeemed by narrative coincidence – she finds a husband, Émile, who embodies all the traits of her literary hero. Sophie is lucky; this is perhaps not the idyllic marital fate that will befall every woman dabbling in the dangers of literature. In such a corrupted society, even a virtuous book such as Télémaque can inadvertently bring ruin to an innocent girl by skewing her expectations.

There is a second important difference between Émile’s reliance on a tale of shipwreck ingenuity and Sophie’s love for a literary character; it is precisely the difference between a story of personal triumph over adversity versus a romantic daydream. As de Negroni states, “dans l’éducation de la femme, le livre n’offre jamais de véritable modèle ; il n’est qu’un intermédiaire.”104 De Negroni also suggests that the

102 Ibid., 531.
103 Aside from the aforementioned Barrême, there is a passing note of Sophie reading Le spectateur in exchange for Emile reading Télémaque.
desert island provides a natural experiment, while Télémaque’s adventures furnish a social one. Robinson is a clearly a role model for Émile, in that he shows the young boy how to deal, in a very practical sense, with natural limitations and physical obstacles. Sophie does not attempt to be her hero — Télémaque is an illusion that she falls in love with, but what does he truly teach her? Precious little; perhaps only a set of traits to recognize in Émile, thus fulfilling her natural destiny as wife and mother. Moreover, the “accidental” insertion of Télémaque as a literary intertext suggests already the interweaving of fictional discourse within the pedagogical treatise that will be furthered by *Les Solitaires* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. As we can already see, however, Sophie’s education prompts a different relationship to the fictional novel than does Émile’s.

Sophie’s education is thus almost entirely divorced from scholarly studies, and focuses instead on her upbringing as a moral and virtuous daughter, then wife and mother. Once again, the tenets that inform Émile’s education are applied to the female pupil with increased severity and restriction. From a young age, Émile is taught to endure the inexorable yoke of necessity and submission to more powerful forces. For Sophie, however, the constraints go even further:

> La première et la plus importante qualité d’une femme est la douceur : faite pour obéir à un être aussi imparfait que l’homme, souvent si plein de vices, et toujours si plein de défauts, elle doit apprendre de bonne heure à souffrir même l’injustice et à supporter les torts d’un mari sans se plaindre.\(^\text{105}\)

Due in large part to her physical inferiority to man, according to Rousseau, woman must submit to man, and use more indirect means (kindness, observation) to obtain a bare minimum of her needs.\(^\text{106}\) The female pupil instructed to bend cheerfully to any and all

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\(^{105}\) Rousseau, *Émile*, 482-3.

\(^{106}\) Examples of said inferiority abound in the text: “La femme a tout contre elle, nos défauts, sa timidité, sa foiblesse ; elle n’a pour elle que son art et sa beauté” (484); “La femme, qui est faible et qui ne voit rien au
male whims is not educated — she is repressed. Numerous critics, many of them curiously female, have attempted to find proto-feminist strains in Rousseau’s pedagogy, or at least to partially exonerate it from misogyny.\textsuperscript{107} Susan Meld Shell, for instance, believes not only that Rousseau’s treatment of female education “follows with rigorous consistency from his position...on human nature and its implications for the modern human condition,” but also that “the pedagogies that inform the education of Émile and Sophie appeal to the same standard and are guided by the same goal.”\textsuperscript{108} In Meld Shell’s view of the pedagogical treatise, the goal of education according to Rousseau is to “develop natural strengths and talents to the fullest, with a view to maximizing the pupil's happiness, both now and in the future, consistent with the happiness of others.”\textsuperscript{109} This path towards happiness would ostensibly be the goal for both sexes. But since Rousseau’s conception of sexes is one of radical difference, male education would thus be about self-fulfillment and independence, while female education would be concerned with social — and sexual — relations, serving to reinforce (physical, mental) differences.

For critics like Meld Shell, who find total consistency in Rousseau’s sexual politics, gender difference is thus rigorously applied to both sexes, and women are raised to be pleasing to men because that is in fact the best path towards sexual equality. Sophie’s much more succinct education is “due less to her subordinate standing in Rousseau's eyes than to woman's peculiar role in the "rewriting" of human history that he here plays with..."
in all seriousness.”

Although Rousseau might have argued that strict gender difference was the best way to obtain mutual interdependence, and thus a successful society, it appears to me that Émile in fact already possesses more independence than Sophie: he leaves her behind when he goes on a journey of self-discovery with his tutor, for instance. I am tempted to agree with Judith Still who observes that “the crucial distinction between man’s development and that of Sophie lies in his increasing independence and her increasing dependency.” And as Schwartz points out, the sequel of Les Solitaires will have us witness not only an increasingly autonomous Émile, but also his transcending of sexuality. Is there consequently there is no real possibility for female education to exist as anything other than an afterthought tacked onto the universalizing — and independent — male program? As we shall see in Les Solitaires, this relegation of female education to an addendum already inherent in Book Five will pose serious problems for Rousseau’s ideal couple — and the narrative form — in their fictional sequel.

But in fact a glimmer of the dangers of female education already appears in Émile, in an aborted narrative, the alternative scenario that brings Sophie to the grave. As mentioned above, Sophie falls in love with the literary character Télémaque; seeing no man around her that approaches her ideal, she despairs of ever being able to share her love. Reproaching her mother for this love of virtue perhaps too deeply instilled, Sophie laments, “Ô ma mère ! Pourquoi m'avez-vous rendu la vertu trop aimable ? Si je ne puis

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110 Ibid.
111 See Schwartz, Sexual Politics, 3.
112 Judith Still, “From the Philosophy of Man to the Fiction of Woman: Rousseau’s Émile,” Romance Studies 18 (summer 1991), 78.
113 Ibid., 7.
Here the author takes a short narrative detour, examining a different fate for his heroine:

Aménerai-je ce triste récit jusqu’à sa catastrophe ? Dirai-je les longs débats qui la précédèrent ? Réprésenterai-je une mère impatientée changeant en rigueurs ses premières caresses ? Montrerai-je un père irrité oubliant ses premiers engagements et traitant comme une folle la plus vertueuse des filles ? Peindrai-je enfin l’infortunée, encore plus attachée à sa chimère par la persecution qu’elle lui fait souffrir, marchant à pas lents vers la mort et descendant dans la tombe au moment qu’on croit l’entraîner à l’autel ?

Pressured by her parents, this other Sophie marries badly and goes to her grave full of despair — not entirely unlike what we will see happen in *Les Solitaires*. This Sophie, Schwartz argues, is doomed by too much imagination; much as in Rousseau’s personal life, soaring idealism brings nothing but disappointment and loneliness.

### III. Julie, or the pupil as pedagogue: *La Nouvelle Héloïse*

Another crucial female figure in Rousseau’s oeuvre meets with an untimely end: Julie, or the “new Heloise,” who will initially appear as a radical alternative to Sophie. Some critics have seen Julie as the incarnation of the ideal woman proposed by the figure of Sophie, while others have identified contradictions and inconsistencies between the two models of womanhood. Although I will touch upon differences between the two pedagogical programs, I believe that a more fruitful discussion lies in an investigation of the narrative form as relates to issues of education. Most centrally, *La Nouvelle Héloïse* juxtaposes one of the most important narrative moments of the text — the heroine’s death — with a crucial reflection on education, specifically female education. As we shall see

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114 Rousseau, *Émile*, 531.  
115 Ibid.  
in the following section, Julie is an intriguing female figure, not only as an exemplary pupil, but also as a pedagogue in her own right: a figure that causes the narrative shifts between love novel and socio-economic treatise and prompts contradictory paratexts.

M. de Wolmar’s final letter (Livre XI, Lettre XI) recounts Julie’s last days, languishing from illness after jumping into the water to rescue her drowning son. Anticipating her imminent death, Julie assembles her family around her to discuss unresolved issues, including quite prominently, her children’s education. It is notable enough that Julie’s dying words concern her sons’ instruction — it is even more significant for our purposes that she also finally addresses the question of educating Claire’s daughter, Henriette, whom she had, for all intents and purposes, adopted. As in virtually every other instance that Henriette is mentioned, however, she is here deferred, effaced, almost eliminated. Unlike the education of Julie’s sons, which is discussed elsewhere in the novel, and to which all general commentary on pedagogy can ostensibly be applied, Henriette’s education is simply designated as separate and different before being brushed aside. Although Julie raises her sons, and then entrusts them to Saint-Preux for their formal instruction, she had envisioned educating Henriette herself throughout the years. And in her dying words, “elle [Julie] nous exposa en abrégé, mais avec force et clarté, le plan d’éducation qu’elle avait fait pour elle [Henriette].”¹¹⁷ Notably, however, this education program is nowhere to be found in the text!¹¹⁸ Like Sophie who is relegated to a final chapter in Émile, Henriette is evoked in the text only to

¹¹⁸ Nathalie Buchet Rogers argues a similar point to mine, suggesting that the education of women in Rousseau, be it Sophie or Henriette, is always deferred, considered a supplement. Nathalie Buchet Rogers, “De l’Émile à Émile et Sophie : Les malheurs du récit,” French Forum 22:1 (Jan 1997), 41. This issue could also be linked to the recurrent motif of the lost mother figure in Rousseau; although Rousseau fervently argues that the mother is essential and cannot be replaced (for instance, in her children’s education), she all too often is substituted, as in Rousseau’s own life.
be dismissed. This places the reader in an uncomfortable situation, a certain portion of information that the characters have access to being eclipsed from him/her. Henriette comes to represent a blank space in the text that calls into question the very possibility of female education. If Henriette’s education is to exist at all, it needs to be created by the reader; it cannot be outlined and theorized like Émile’s. In addition to this suggestion of narrative instability, it is also noteworthy that despite still being Julie’s pupil at the time of her death, Henriette is somehow already qualified, according to her mother, to become the **gouvernante** of her two younger “brothers.” She is thus apparently an extension of Julie, taking on her responsibilities after the former’s death — itself fraught with the implication of pedagogical failure. Like Sophie then, Henriette is both unfinished pupil and ignorant pedagogue.

The letter in which this passage occurs (V: III) contains a detailed description of the boys’ educational program, and Julie’s conception of pedagogy on the whole. In broad lines, it is quite similar to the instruction prescribed for young Émile. The young boys are left to play and move about in freedom, although Julie’s all-knowing eye finds every occasion for a practical lesson to be taught by actions rather than words. The idea of a universal educational system is rejected, without, however, consciously breeding specialization and individuality in each pupil (what we might consider catering to his/her potential). The young child is constantly made aware of his weakness and dependency, the better to teach him to bend under the yoke of ineluctable dominance.

119 Julie says about Henriette that “j’en fais en quelque sorte leur première gouvernante, et avec d’autant plus de succès que ses leçons leur sont moins suspectes.” For Judith Still, this is no more than Henriette turning “education into a love story for Julie’s two sons,” perhaps echoing again the tragic undertones of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, I would argue. Still, “Philosophy of Man,” 79.

120 For instance, the servant Fanchon sees the older boy steal a toy drum from the younger one, causing him to cry. Fanchon then takes the drum from the older boy, demonstrating that she is now the stronger of the two, and proves her point by joyfully playing the drum.
Speaking like Émile’s tutor, Julie maintains that “les seules leçons qu’ils reçoivent sont des leçons de pratique prises dans la simplicité de la nature.”121 The older son’s ability to read comes from such a “fortuitous” lesson, Julie recounts to Saint-Preux. Inspiring herself from the Bible, Julie composes short stories to read to her son, that she inscribes in a beautiful, illustrated book. By parsimoniously administering tantalizing bits of stories to her son, Julie keeps him perpetually unsatisfied and then nonchalantly leaves the book lying around to tempt his illiterate eyes.

As for Henriette’s education, however, it receives only a passing remark, being relegated to later date: “Quant à elle, son éducation me regarde ; mais les principes en sont si différents qu’ils méritent un entretien à part.”122 And yet, once again, no such letter appears in the epistolary profusion of Julie’s correspondence. In fact, no mention of Henriette even occurs until the fourth section of the book, and then it appears solely in the context of female education differing from male education. Wolmar writes to Claire that “comme par mille autres raisons votre sexe n’est pas propre à ces mêmes soins, leur mère s’occupera toute entière à bien élever son Henriette,” in contrast to the care that the précepteur will take to instruct his two sons.123 After the aforementioned letter dealing with Henriette’s role as gouvernante to the two boys, the next significant mention of Julie’s daughter serves to illustrate her strange double status, as a child of both Claire and Julie:

Je dis, ses mères ; car à voir la manière dont elles vivent avec elle, il est difficile de distinguer la véritable, et des étrangers qui nous sont venus aujourd’hui sont ou paraissent là-dessus encore en doute. En effet, toutes deux l’appellent, Henriette, ou, ma fille, indifféremment... elle appelle, maman l’une, et l’autre petite maman ; la même tendresse règne de part et d’autre ; elle obéit également

121 Rousseau, Julie, 438.
122 Ibid., 443.
123 Ibid., 381.
à toutes deux. S'ils demandent aux dames à laquelle elle appartient, chacune répond, à moi. S'ils interrogent Henriette, il se trouve qu'elle a deux mères....

Julie’s status as “la prêcheuse” and the dominant figure of Clarens can partially explain her being the most suitable tutor for Claire’s daughter. Nevertheless, it remains that Henriette is essentially abandoned by her real mother, thus refuting Rousseau’s constant reiteration that a mother must raise her own children and repeating the lost mother motif mentioned earlier. As he insists in Émile, “Voulez-vous rendre chacun à ses premiers devoirs, commencez par les mères ; vous serez étonnés des changements que vous produirez.... Qu’une fois les femmes redeviennent mères, bientôt les hommes redeviendront pères et maris.”

This is just one among countless passages where Rousseau argues that the primary role of women is to be mothers and raise their children, starting with nursing: “Comme la véritable nourrice est la mère, le véritable précepteur est le père.” Beyond mere infancy, however, Rousseau also indicates that women should be in charge of their daughters’ education, as it is different (and, in reality, less complex) than that of their sons. Responding to mothers lamenting about female education, Rousseau argues that the sorry state of female education is entirely in the hands of the women themselves, who should educate their daughters rather than send them out to tutors or schoolmasters: “Et depuis quand sont-ce les hommes qui se mêlent de l'éducation des filles ? Qui est-ce qui empêche les mères de les élever comme il leur plaît ? Elles n'ont point de collèges : grand malheur ! Eh ! plût à Dieu qu'il n'y en eût point pour les garçons ! ils seraient plus sensément et plus honnêtement élevés !”

124 Ibid., 455.
125 Rousseau, Émile, 47–8.
126 Ibid., 51.
127 Ibid., 473.
Although Rousseau’s construction of gender separation suggests that women should be the educators, of both boys and girls, this is patently not the case, however, with Émile.128

Henriette thus puts into question Rousseau’s standard advice to women, suggesting that Claire is somehow an incompetent or unfit mother to raise her own daughter. Is it simply, as many critics will again state, that Julie is the ideal mother and thus surpasses her friend in pedagogical excellence? Is it Claire’s “folâtre” nature and reluctance to bend to society’s expectations of women? Is it, as she herself admits, that her exclusively loyal friendship to Julie overrides any attachment to a lover, and presumably, a child?129 And yet, Claire is described as by Saint-Preux as being an intelligent and competent woman.

Claire, toute folâtre qu’elle est, sait prendre, quand il lui plaît, un ton d'autorité qui en impose. Elle a d’ailleurs du sens, un discernement exquis, la pénétration de Wolmar, la bonté de Julie, et quoique extrêmement libérale, elle ne laisse pas d’avoir aussi beaucoup de prudence. En sorte que restée veuve si jeune, et chargée de la garde-noble de sa fille, les biens de l’une et de l’autre n’ont fait que prospérer dans ses mains ; ainsi l’on n’a pas lieu de craindre que sous ses ordres la maison soit moins bien gouvernée qu’auparavant.130

The fact remains that Henriette, at first blessed with two mother figures and a doting father, is now seemingly abandoned to the care of Julie alone, who will soon die, thus allowing for an echo of Émile’s orphan status and the precarious problem of complete reliance on a précepteur. By being doubly relegated (from Claire to Julie, but also out of the narrative’s focus), Henriette becomes not only symbolically parentless but pedagogically orphaned as well.

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129 In a letter to Monsieur d’Orbe before their marriage, Claire writes “je suis en femme une espèce de monstre, et je ne sais par quelle bizarrerie de la nature l’amitié l’emporte en moi sur l’amour.” Rousseau, *Julie*, 121.
130 Rousseau, *Julie*, 455.
As we briefly mentioned above, however, the figure of Julie as pedagogue permeates many aspects of the text, not just Henriette’s education. Known as “la prêcheuse,” Julie represents the true path of virtue and thus problematizes Rousseau’s gender roles as regards education.\footnote{This denomination of la prêcheuse is not one that Julie rejects; rather, she embraces it, explaining her hope for the possible good she might bring about: “je me doute bien qu’à l’exemple de l’inséparable tu m’appelleras aussi la prêcheuse, et il est vrai que je ne fais pas mieux ce que je dis que les gens du métier. Si mes sermons ne valent pas les leurs, au moins, je vois avec plaisir qu’ils ne sont pas comme eux jetés aux vent.” Rousseau, Julie, 79.} In fact, many of the novel’s characters appear to be educated by Julie, in one manner or another. Although Saint-Preux initially emerges as the traditional figure of the tutor (harkening back to the tragic story of Heloise and Abelard), he ultimately becomes Julie’s pupil as well. Even from early on in their relationship, Julie acts as a teacher figure when she lectures Saint-Preux on the evils of the duel tradition and commands him to forget about “l’honneur apparent” — as she pithily argues, “si vous aimez sincèrement la vertu, apprenez à la servir à sa mode et non à la mode des hommes.”\footnote{Ibid., 104.} Painting the picture of a truly virtuous man who holds his head high in public, Julie shows Saint-Preux that the duel that he wants to fight against Milord Edouard on behalf of her reputation is little more than “fausse honte et la crainte du blâme.”\footnote{Ibid., 103.} Departing radically from her customary role as a demure and obeisant woman, Julie logically but sternly rebukes her lover, and is ready to put an end to their relationship if he does not follow her orders. She writes “j’emploie dans cette lettre une autorité à laquelle jamais homme sage n’a résisté. Si vous refusez de vous y rendre, je n’ai plus rien à vous dire.”\footnote{Ibid., 107.}

This specific incident, whose ardor was most likely motivated at least in part by Julie’s fear of losing Saint-Preux in the duel, is nevertheless an indication of the tone that

\footnote{Ibid., 104.}

\footnote{Ibid., 103.}

\footnote{Ibid., 107.}
their relationship will adopt as it matures. After Saint-Preux’s departure at the beginning of the second part of the novel, Julie believes that her heart is closed off forever. Upon receiving a letter from her beloved, however, she realizes that this is not the case. Julie is struck with fear and worry concerning Saint-Preux’s lifestyle and mores abroad, which launches her into a lengthy series of prescriptions and admonitions. Advising Saint-Preux to leave behind “ces vains moralistes” and follow his virtuous soul, Julie declares that “voici le temps de pratiquer tes propres leçons et de montrer comment on exécute ce que tu sais dire.”135 Reminding Saint-Preux of all the lessons he has ever given her, Julie becomes a pedagogical figure in her own right as she seeks to protect her lover’s morality. The issue that she addresses specifically is that of putting a theoretical (and in this case, purely book-based) education into practice in the real world. Although Julie maintains that she is not afraid of Saint-Preux being corrupted by the pleasures of the flesh and other vain pursuits (ironically enough, as we shall see), she does fear, however, that “les maximes et les leçons du monde” might slowly insinuate vice into Saint-Preux’s heart.136 The figure of Julie as teacher here hits upon the exact same problem that plagues all of Rousseau’s attempts at reconciling the education of an individual with the practices of society at large. Although Saint-Preux is naturally virtuous, and has been well educated to be an honest man, this also means that he has been kept away from the dangers of urban vice. Consequently, Julie fears that the young man is naively vulnerable to the pitfalls of the big city. Although Saint-Preux will ultimately triumph over the evils

135 Ibid., 158.
136 Ibid. This is also a bit of manipulation on Julie’s part, as she goes on to threaten Saint-Preux if ever he were to commit adultery: “Mon bien-aimé, mon doux ami, ah ! si jamais tu m’oublies... Hélas, je ne ferai qu’en mourir ; mais toi tu vivras vil et malheureux, et je mourrai trop vengée.” Ibid., 159.
of Paris, the reverse scenario will occur in *Les Solitaires*, where educated Émile should have known better than to introduce his well-meaning but innocent wife to life in Paris.

And in fact, Saint-Preux’s success at navigating the dangers of Paris is precisely linked to Julie’s epistolary instructions. Having just arrived in Paris, Saint-Preux writes to his beloved that he is musing over her "sages leçons" and occupying his time by compiling a beautiful bound book of Julie’s letters. "Ce précieux recueil," he announces, "ne me quittera de mes jours ; il sera mon manuel dans le monde où je vais entrer : il sera pour moi le contre-poison des maximes qu’on y respire....il préviendra ou corrigera mes fautes ; il m’instruirait durant ma jeunesse ; il m’édifiera dans tous les temps, et ce seront, à mon avis, les premières lettres d’amour dont on aura tiré cet usage.” Alluding perhaps to the tragic denouement of their historical predecessors, Heloise and Abelard, Saint-Preux determines that Julie’s letters, far from being solely love missives, are in fact so many lessons to be learned. In this period of their relationship, while Saint-Preux is busy observing and reporting on the Parisian world, Julie continues to assume a didactic role. When the latter describes to her the absurdity of polite society in a stylish, well-developed letter, Julie responds by admonishing her lover for his change in tone. “Homme sensuel,” she exclaims, “ne sauras-tu jamais aimer ?” In this new writing style, Julie sees signs of the Parisian infection spreading. She asks:

Dis-moi, je te prie, mon cher ami, en quelle langue ou plutôt en quel jargon est la relation de ta dernière lettre ? Ne serait-ce point là par hasard du bel esprit ? Si tu as dessein de t’en servir souvent avec moi, tu devrais bien m’en envoyer le dictionnaire....Que veux-tu qu’une pauvre Suisse entende à ces sublimes figures ? Au lien de prendre comme les autres des âmes aux couleurs des maisons, ne voudrais-tu point déjà donner à ton esprit la teinte de celui du pays ? Prends garde, mon bon ami, j’ai peur qu’elle n’aïlle pas bien sur ce fond-là.  

137 Ibid., 161;162.
138 Ibid., 167.
139 Ibid., 168.
The forceful tone of Julie’s response plainly indicates that she is disappointed with her former tutor, and that she is outlining a course of further action in order to continue their correspondence; it is clear to us once again that only by respecting Julie’s literary taste and moral values will Saint-Preux be allowed to continue writing to her. But interestingly enough, in his next response, Saint-Preux chooses to identify Claire as the real author of the criticism and refutes her arguments by insisting that “ce ne sont point les Parisiens que j’étudie, mais les habitants d’une grande ville.”140 Unable to address Julie’s criticisms directly, as she is increasingly portrayed as his moral superior and guiding light, Saint-Preux must present his objections via the second-best option, Claire. And yet, he is aware that Julie is the ultimate arbiter of his moral fate: “Veuillez donc, ma charmante prêcheuse, distinguer ici l’observation philosophique de la satire nationale...Laisse-moi donc te peindre sans contrainte les objets auxquels je rougis de ressembler....”141

Julie will nevertheless prove to be a fairly merciful mistress of her pupil’s fate. Having slowly been corrupted by his Parisian friends, Saint-Preux commits the unthinkable sin of betraying Julie during one inebriated night. Recounting the sordid adventure to his beloved, Saint-Preux fears the worst. But virtuous Julie is compassionate even in her chagrin. She writes: “rassurez-vous sur la crainte de m’avoir irritée ; votre lettre m’a donné plus de douleur que de colère. Ce n’est pas moi, c’est vous que vous avez offensé par un désordre auquel le cœur n’eut point de part.”142 Here again

140 Ibid., 172.
141 Ibid. Although this is beyond the scope of our discussion, it is interesting to note that this intellectual tension between Saint-Preux and Julie allows Rousseau to participate in the satirical criticism of society, in the same vein as Montesquieu, Voltaire, etc., all the while rejecting the genre and maintaining his status as outsider.
142 Ibid., 214.
Julie will lecture Saint-Preux (“votre première erreur...”) from her moral high ground. From the very style and subject matter of his letters, Julie says that she has been able to deduce Saint-Preux’s moral faltering. Not only is she using her education — specifically her critical reading skills — to ascertain the truth behind her lover’s claims, but she even goes on to criticize Saint-Preux’s own education methods. Comparing Saint-Preux’s letters to “sarcasmes d’un petit-maître,” she argues that by focusing on details of social convention, he is ignoring all that is of real sociological interest in painting a picture of the Parisians. From his depiction of Parisian women, especially, Julie laments that she did not learn anything of value: “m’avez-vous rien dit qui m’instruise solidement de leurs goûts, de leurs maximes, de leur vrai caractère,” she asks.  

Most importantly for the context of our discussion, Julie specifically addresses the question of education and its absence from Saint-Preux’s epistles, musing that “n’est-il pas bien étrange qu’en parlant des femmes d’un pays un homme sage ait oublié ce qui regarde les soins domestiques et l’éducation des enfants?”  

Anecdotally speaking, it is perhaps not unjustified that Julie, who was initially corrupted by her education, and her mother’s well-meaning complacency, would be personally invested in learning about the pedagogical endeavors of Frenchwomen. But this is clearly a moment of narrative tension in the text for other reasons, as Rousseau feels the need to interject with a personal note, this time not even couched under the guise of an “editor.” Addressing the reader directly, he explains:

Et pourquoi ne l’aurait-il pas oublié ? Est-ce que ces soins les regardent ? Eh ! que deviendraient le monde et l’État, auteurs illustres, brillants académiciens, que deviendriez-vous tous, si les femmes allaient quitter le gouvernement de la littérature et des affaires, pour prendre celui de leur ménage ?

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143 Ibid., 215.
144 Ibid.
145 Ibid.
Rousseau’s frustration here does not appear to be directed at any desultory reader, but specifically his detractors among the *philosophes* and the *académiciens*. This remark is highly reminiscent of several aforementioned passages in *Émile* where Rousseau laments the integration of women in the public sphere, and advocates for their increased involvement in domestic matters, particularly breastfeeding and child rearing. Julie’s critique of Saint-Preux’s philosophy is thus entirely in line with Rousseau’s own views on the role of women in society and their pedagogical responsibilities.

Julie’s attempts to reform Saint-Preux’s investigations of Paris go deeper than just requesting information about the mores of city women, however; she urges him to follow his own criticisms of modern comic authors and study all classes of society, not just the rich and well-groomed: “Si vous voulez donc être homme en effet, apprenez à redescendre.”146 In this lengthy and detailed letter criticizing Saint-Preux’s “études” of Paris, Julie effectively appears as a teacher figure dispensing future assignments. This calm and didactic letter is immediately followed, however, by the catastrophic realization, on Julie’s part, that her love letters have been snatched away and that her parents are aware of the affair. The precariousness of Julie’s position as a pedagogue is revealed by this narrative break between parts two and three. But Rousseau’s ambivalence towards Julie will also augment after the end of part two — despite his heroine’s moral failure and diminished role as a letter writer, she will simultaneously exhibit growing influence over those around her, becoming an exemplary model of friendship, wifely obedience, and motherhood.

The beginning of part three, full of drama and tearful goodbyes ("forever,” despite the fact that the novel continues for another 400 pages or so!) quickly illustrates the fact that, despite Julie’s fall from grace, her charisma continues to conquer the hearts of those around her. Responding to Saint-Preux, Claire describes the evolution in their three-way relationship: “toute la différence est que je vous aimais comme mon frère, et qu’à présent je vous aime comme mon enfant.... En nous apprenant à penser, vous avez appris de nous à être sensible.”147 As Steinbrügge has noted, as Enlightenment morality moved from reason to sentiment, this shift was borne unequally by men and women, and “women became the ‘moral sex’.”148 The pedagogical division of women on the side of sensibility and men on the side of rationality was thus a commonplace by Rousseau’s time; it is all the more noteworthy, therefore, that we see here Saint-Preux becoming the “sensible” or emotional child/pupil, while Claire and Julie are portrayed as rational thinkers. As Claire remarks, “quoique nous soyons toutes deux plus jeunes que vous, et même vos disciples, je vous regarde un peu comme le nôtre.”149

Fusing herself and Julie together in Saint-Preux’s eyes (much as Julie will attempt to blend the two together later on in the novel),150 Claire extends her cousin’s dominion and explicitly articulates the education that “la prêcheuse” has given him. What I will term Julie’s “contagion,” or the almost magical expansion of her influence to all those that come in contact with her, becomes a recurring theme in sections three through six.

147 Ibid., 234.
149 Rousseau, *Julie*, 234.
150 Julie writes to her cousin, speaking of Claire and Saint-Preux’s possibility of marriage: “Ah ! cousine, quel charme pour moi de réunir à jamais deux cœurs si bien faits l’un pour l’autre, et qui se confondent depuis si longtemps dans le mien ! Qu’ils s’y confondent mieux encore s’il est possible ; ne soyez plus qu’un pour vous et pour moi.” Rousseau, *Julie*, 480.
In Book Five, Julie’s empire is even likened to kingship. Hints of this influence were already apparent at the outset, of course, such as when Saint-Preux remarks that “c’était Julie elle-même qui répandait son charme invincible sur tout ce qui l’environnait.” As Julie’s actions and her epistolary presence become increasingly curtailed by the authority of the men around her, however, her indirect and almost spiritual influence appears to grow exponentially. And as Jean Rousset observes in *Forme et Signification*, despite the fact that Julie writes fewer and fewer letters as the novel progresses, she becomes ever more the center of attention and the organizer of the world around her. As Julie is eclipsed by her own narrative, her personal correspondence yielding to lengthy epistles on commerce, agriculture, and domestic life, she nevertheless retains her focus as the center of the reader’s emotional reading experience.

As evidenced above, Julie’s contagion first spreads to her closest friend and cousin, Claire. When the former is wracked with guilt and doubt after receiving Milord’s offer to flee to England with Saint-Preux and start a new life there, she writes to Claire seeking both advice and sympathy. Ultimately, Julie places her fate in her cousin’s hands: “Je n’ai plus d’espoir qu’en toi seule. Ou choisis, ou laisse-moi mourir.” In her response, Claire consoles Julie and discusses the options available. More importantly, however, she also addresses Julie’s “ascendant invincible” which has already conquered many, including Milord. Exposed to Julie’s ineffable charm, the noble Englishman has offered much more than is reasonable in any other circumstance. But as Claire reasons,

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151 Speaking of her admiration for the loyal subjects of the French monarchy, Julie desires to be loved as they are; her husband replies by saying “n’enviez rien...il y a longtemps que nous sommes tous vos sujets.” Rousseau, *Julie*, 423.
152 Ibid., 73.
154 Rousseau, *Julie*, 141.
155 Ibid., 142.
“voilà ce qui doit arriver à toutes les âmes d’une certaine trempe ; elles transforment, pour ainsi dire, les autres en elles-mêmes ; elles ont une sphère d’activité dans laquelle rien ne leur résiste : on ne peut les connaître sans les vouloir imiter, et de leur sublime élévation elles attirent à elles tout ce qui les environne.”

Here we clearly see that Julie’s moral rectitude molds her companions, turning them into copies of herself. This reduplicating phenomenon is one that is constantly attributed to Julie’s powers — we see the exact same thing happening when Claire asks her cousin to educate her daughter Henriette.

Relinquishing her daughter to her beloved friend, Claire asks Julie shape Henriette with her virtues:

La voilà, cette aimable enfant ; reçois-la comme tienne ; je te la cède, je te la donne ; je résigne en tes mains le pouvoir maternel ; corrige mes fautes, charge-toi des soins dont je m’acquitte si mal à mon gré ; sois dès aujourd’hui la mère de celle qui doit être ta bru, et, pour me la rendre plus chère encore, fais-en, s’il se peut, une autre Julie.

Aside from the somewhat incestuous nature of this arrangement (one of Julie’s sons already being betrothed to Henriette, and the latter’s aforementioned dual mother status), Claire’s abandonment of her own daughter to Julie strikes us as an extreme example of the ever increasingly authority that the latter maintains over the Clarens community. Like a perfect pedagogue, Julie is creating copies of herself to perpetuate her educational ambitions even beyond the grave. More than Saint-Preux, then, it appears that the most successful figure of the educator in La Nouvelle Héloïse is Julie — needless to say, a problematic role model even within the confines of Clarens.

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156 Ibid. Elsewhere, Claire will elaborate on this explanation of Julie’s influence. The reason she gives for Julie’s “empire”: “ton cœur vivifie tous ceux qui l’environnent, et leur donne pour ainsi dire un nouvel être dont ils sont forcés de lui faire hommage, puisqu’ils ne l’auraient point eu sans lui.” Ibid., 306.

157 Claire herself is not immune to Julie’s powers, as we can imagine; she writes: “Ma Julie, tu es faite pour régner. Ton empire est le plus absolu que je connaisse : il s’étend jusque sur les volontés, et je l’éprouve plus que personne.” Ibid., 305.

158 Ibid., 328.
But what of Julie’s influence on her husband, Wolmar? Judging from the important sway she appears to hold over Claire and Saint-Preux, one would expect Wolmar to likewise be influenced and possibly coerced by his charismatic wife. And yet, despite a promising stretch of time where Julie seems to act as the ultimate arbiter of their governing pair, she never achieves her ultimate goal of converting Wolmar to Christianity. As we see on many accounts, Julie and Wolmar very much work in tandem when dealing with the daily circumstances of Clarens, especially as regards their employees. As Saint-Preux remarks, however, the final word always rests with Julie: “Quand M de Wolmar a dit, je vous chasse, on peut implore l’intercession de madame, l’obtenir quelquefois et rentrer en grâce à sa prière ; mais un congé qu’elle donne est irrévocable, et il n’y a plus de grâce à espérer.”

But this, I would argue, is merely an illusion of Julie’s power; or rather, it is power that she, as a symbol, holds over the common people she employs. It in no way extends over Wolmar — it is inconceivable that Julie would make a decision with which Wolmar would strongly disagree. Likewise, while Julie is a controlling figure who steps into the role of a pedagogue with regards to Henriette, let us not forget that it is Wolmar who dictates the rules of their sons’ education. Ironically enough, of course, he entrusts

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159 Ibid., 335. The one exception to this argument is perhaps Julie’s secret garden, the Elysée. She says to Saint-Preux, defending the artful negligence of the grove: “j’en suis la surintendante, et que mon mari m’en laisse l’entièr disposition...Il est vrai...que la nature a tout fait, mais sous ma direction, et il n’y a rien là que je n’aie ordonné.” Ibid. 353–4. Several articles have specifically been devoted to the Elysée as a privileged female space in Rousseau: See Manfred Kusch, “The Garden, the City and Language in Rousseau’s La Nouvelle Héloïse,” French Studies 40:1 (1986 Jan), 45–54; Jacques Berchtold, “L’impossible virginité du jardin verbal : Les Leçons de la nature selon la Lettre IV, 11 de La Nouvelle Héloïse,” in Rousseausismus: Natureevangelium und Literatur (Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang,1999); 53–83; Catherine Cusset, “Cythère et Elysée : Jardin et plaisir de Watteau à Rousseau,” Dalhousie French Studies 29 (winter 1994), 65–84; and Elizabeth MacArthur, “Textual Gardens: Rousseau’s Elysée and Girardin’s Ermenonville,” Romance Quarterly 38:3 (Aug 1991), 331–40.
this education to his wife’s former lover. If we investigate Julie’s actions, rather than the profuse declarations of those around her, we start to realize that her influence is moral and affective, perhaps, but does not truly succeed in educating anyone. From the very beginning, we have hints that Julie, miseducated herself — seduced by her tutor, betrayed by her parents, married without love, and ultimately the victim of self-delusion — cannot be a successful pedagogue to others. For example, Julie’s attempt to take another woman under her wing almost fails, and is at best dubiously resolved. In Lettre XXXIX, Julie describes the pitiful situation of Fanchon, a young female servant in her parents’ household. Although this is the first mention of Fanchon in the novel, Julie explains that she had promised to take care of the vulnerable young woman: “je la protégeais auprès de ma mère ; je la tenais en quelque manière sous ma garde.” But Julie’s overwhelming preoccupation with her own affairs — that is to say, her love affair with Saint-Preux — has led her to neglect the poor servant: “pour n’avoir su me garder moi-même, je l’abandonne sans me souvenir d’elle, et l’expose à des dangers pires que ceux où j’ai succombé.”

The following letter, attached to Julie’s, is written by Fanchon herself and describes the pitiful situation in detail. Fanchon’s mother having died, she returns home

160 Rousseau, Julie, 380.
161 Ibid., 75.
162 Ibid.
163 This small detail is rather revealing, considering the relative illiteracy of servants in the 18th century. Even if literacy increased throughout the 18th century (as the signatures of wives on marriage contracts would seem to indicate (cf. Furet François, Sachs Wladimir. “La croissance de l’alphabétisation en France (XVIIIᵉ-XIXᵉ siècle),” Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations 29:3 (1974) : 714-737)), it is exceptional, to say the least, that a female servant in a rural household would be able to write an entire letter. As Martine Sonnet explains in L’éducation des filles au temps des Lumières, even when many girls were taught to read, this did not necessarily entail an ability to write. Sonnet, Éducation des filles, 221. If Fanchon is completely literate then, it is either out of narrative necessity or another example of Rousseau’s pedagogical theory. Sophie is taught to read, it is true, but can she write? The only mention of female writing in Émile is of another, unnamed little girl who learns to write before she can read, but abandons this activity in disgust when she sees what she looks like while engaged in this activity. And in fact Rousseau
to take care of her ailing father. There, she meets Claude Anet, a skilled laborer who begins to take care of her family. The two plan to marry, but outstanding debts force the courageous man to enlist in order to stop Fanchon’s family from becoming destitute. Meanwhile, a mysterious gentleman has come to Fanchon offering to pay the debts in exchange for her favors. Being a virtuous woman, Fanchon resists the gentleman’s advances and writes to Julie, pleading for an extension of time to pay the debts so that Claude Anet does not have to be shipped off to the army. Julie takes it upon herself to fix this situation — “de réparer envers ceux-ci ma faute” — and, with the help of her mother, father, and Saint-Preux, orchestrates the return of Claude Anet and the marriage of the two servants. It is interesting to note that the same word, “faute” is used to describe Julie’s negligence towards Fanchon’s well being as it was for the former’s succumbing to temptation. Nevertheless, while Julie’s lack of attention seems to have been repaired, in the nick of time, by her selfless actions, the ultimate outcome of Fanchon and Claude’s marriage paints a more ambiguous picture.

Fanchon and her husband reappear, rather briefly, in Saint-Preux’s lengthy Lettre X to Milord Edouard in the fourth section of the novel. Surprised to see Fanchon back in the Clarens household, the former tutor learns that

Malgré l’augure de Julie, ses bienfaits, ceux de son père, et les vôtres, cette jeune femme si honnête et sage n’a pas été heureuse dans son établissement. Claude Anet, qui avait si bien supporté sa misère, n’a pu soutenir un état plus

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*asks “Après tout, où est la nécessité qu’une fille sache lire et écrire de si bonne heure ?” (480). If he does prescribe female literacy, then, it is primarily as a tool to run a household, and definitely not as a form of expression.

164 Claude Anet is an interesting character, as his name is identical to that of Mme de Warens’ valet, with whom Rousseau shared in a ménage à trois. He is described in the Confessions as follows: “Claude Anet était sans contredit un homme rare, et le seul même de son espèce que j’aie jamais vu. Lent, posé, réfléchi, circonspect dans sa conduite, froid dans ses manières, lacoïque et sentencieux dans ses propos, il était, dans ses passions, d’une impétuosité qu’il ne laissait jamais paraître, mais qui le dévorait en dedans, et qui ne lui a fait faire en sa vie qu’une sottise, mais terrible, c’est de s’être empoisonné.” *Confessions*, 261. This eponymous character is thus ambiguous praise.

These rather tragic circumstances — not at all anticipated when the happy couple first married\textsuperscript{167} — seem to be glossed over, simply to continue into a description of Fanchon’s new tasks at Clarens. Though the young woman has remained virtuous and followed the guidance of her mistress, her young existence has been reduced akin to that of a widow or spinster. It would seem that Julie’s actions, if not her intentions, were rash at best, and her desire to do good perhaps blinded her to potential problems. The narrative is once again calling into question her potential role as a pedagogue.\textsuperscript{168}

Ultimately, we are led to wonder if there is any redeeming value to Julie’s education, let alone any possibility for her to transmit information and become an educator in her own right. And yet Julie appears over and over again as a role model, largely due to her education. Since Julie’s education — that is to say, the dangerous guidance imparted by Saint-Preux — is the very cause of her falling prey to sexual temptation, it seems paradoxical that it is this very education that helps her to transcend her downfall. But what other education did Julie have to rely on? Certainly not the salacious stories recounted by La Chaillot, Julie and Claire’s childhood nanny. Although this woman loved them dearly, she is described as a rather ill advised parent figure for the girls:

\begin{align*}
\text{Mais conviens aussi que la bonne femme était peu prudente avec nous ; qu'elle nous faisait sans nécessité les confidences les plus indiscrètes ; qu'elle nous entretenait sans cesse des maximes de la galanterie, des aventures de sa}
\end{align*}

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 336.
\textsuperscript{167} Similarities could of course be drawn with the blissful portrait of Émile and Sophie’s marriage which concludes \textit{Émile}, only to be rewritten as tragedy in \textit{Les Solitaires}.
\textsuperscript{168} The “happy” ending to this thread of the narrative is dubious as well, even if out of the scope of our argument. Claude Anet remerges, destitute and dressed in rags, and is received by Fanchon with open arms. Ibid., 550. She is seemingly willing to forgive all of his past sins, and does not suspect that he has simply returned out of monetary need.
Despite all of its shortcomings, however, Julie’s education *does* seem to offer some support in crucial moments. The preponderance of the verb “se relever” constantly alludes to a heroic victory over sin operated by Julie. After the death of her mother, for instance, Claire writes that “si elle fait encore un pas vers le découragement, elle est perdue ; mais si cette âme excellente *se relève* un instant, elle sera plus grande, plus forte, plus vertueuse que jamais, et il ne sera plus question de rechute.”

This is precisely what happens: Julie surmounts her sorrow and becomes more virtuous than ever. It isn’t until her final letter to Saint-Preux, written on her deathbed, that the problem of Julie’s lingering love and hence, weakness, is addressed. Nevertheless, after declaring that her love has, in fact, never faded but simply hidden in her heart for so many years, Julie’s final words are, notably, regarding the education of her sons. In a sentence, she summarizes her pedagogical approach: “n’en faites point des savants, faites-en des hommes bienfaisants et justes.”

Julie served as an inspirational model to many enthusiastic women readers — and yet, as we have discussed, within the novel, her pedagogical views concerning Henriette are purposefully absent from the text, and her own education leads her astray.

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169 Ibid., 18.
170 Ibid., 238, my emphasis.
171 Ibid., 566.
172 *La Nouvelle Héloïse* was a notable best seller; in an era when the “grands ouvrages” are printed in 500 to 1,000 copies, Rousseau’s epistolary novel sells over 4,000 copies for its first edition alone. V.-L. Saulnier, *Que sais-je : La Littérature française du siècle philosophique* (Paris: PUF, 1961), 12. As Trouille illustrates in *Women Writers Read Rousseau*, Roland, Gouges, and Staël were all “fervent admirers and defenders of his character and writings.” Trouille, *Women Writers Read Rousseau*, 3. Additionally, women like d’Épinay would be influenced by Rousseau in their own compositions (*Conversations d’Émilie*, in this case) even if they did not wholeheartedly agree with his prescriptions for women. For more on the reception of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* specifically, see Claude Labrosse’s *Lire au XVIIIe siècle*. *La Nouvelle Héloïse et ses lecteurs* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon/Editions du CNRS, 1985).
It could be argued that by excising Henriette’s education from the novel, Rousseau was in fact following through his earlier claim to leave girls’ educations to their mothers; by leaving an empty hole in the narrative, the author could have been inviting his female readers to fill in the blank with their own pedagogical ambitions. On the other hand, the uneducated woman such as Sophie — the alleged ideal — would not be able to complete such a task.

Using the epistolary genre, which as we have seen, was intimately connected to female expression, Rousseau is therefore presented with a dilemma: in order to create a compelling female character and riveting narrative, he must subvert or at the very least, put into question the very limitations that he had placed on women in Émile. There could not be a novel of Sophie — her entire identity is subjugated to a male narrative. But the inherently divided nature of woman, illustrated by this tension between what a woman is supposed to be (Sophie) and what she is fantasized as (Julie) in turn engenders a narrative split within both texts. As William Ray notes, the split between books 1–4 and 5 of Émile mirrors in many way the two halves of La Nouvelle Héloïse, primarily because both divisions are emblematic of different forms of reading.\footnote{Ray writes: “in fact, the disparity of the fifth book with respect to the rest of Émile comes from the fact that it opens up the question of gender just when the cumulative narrative has made us forget it.”\cite{Ray1994}}

\footnote{William Ray, “Reading Women: Cultural Authority, Gender, and the Novel: The Case of Rousseau,” \textit{Eighteenth-Century Studies} 27:3 (spring 1994); 442.}
\footnote{Ibid., 444.}

He goes on to explain that Sophie is precisely the lesson we have been taught not to accept by the rest of the treatise; namely, accepting things at face value, as givens, like a passive reader. The “semiotic autonomy” of Émile’s story is thus highly contrasted with the “authoritarian inscription” of Sophie’s, and therefore to accept Sophie
unquestioningly is “to read like a Sophie.”\textsuperscript{175} When applied to Julie’s story, we likewise see a dramatic split between the love narrative of the first half of the novel and the increasingly philosophical treatise of Clarens in the second half. Once Julie’s education has failed her, by allowing her to be seduced by Saint-Preux, her struggles to maintain control increasingly alter the text. The perfectly ordered enclave of the Elysée is in some ways a self-delusion when we contrast it with Julie’s failure to impart knowledge to Fanchon or Henriette and her untimely death. As the apex of emotional tension in the novel, Julie’s death is also a blank space for the reader to inscribe Henriette’s education: “c’est tout l’ordre humain que la mort de Julie remet en cause.”\textsuperscript{176} It simultaneously casts doubt upon the viability of female education in general and its inscription within the epistolary genre.

The bookending of the novel between an initial “préface” and a final “avertissement” make explicit these narrative tensions and the problematic relationship that readers might have to Julie. In the preface, Rousseau defines himself both as editor and author of the novel, and laments the fact that it will not be widely read, suiting the tastes of very few readers. He is also evasive in regards to his reading public. On the one hand, he suggests that “ce recueil avec son gothique ton convient mieux aux femmes que les livres de philosophie” and could be useful for some women — “qui, dans une vie déréglée, ont conservé quelque amour pour l’honnêteté.”\textsuperscript{177} Simultaneously, he declares that “jamais fille chaste n’a lu de romans,” further problematizing his potential audience.\textsuperscript{178}
The much lengthier *avertissement* following the novel takes the form of a dialogue between the unidentified “N” and “R,” and was allegedly supposed to serve the role of preface. Once again, the question of authenticity, so frequently debated in epistolary novels, is broached. We also find a justification for the radical split between the two halves of the novel. While N thinks that “ce sont deux livres différents que les mêmes personnes ne doivent pas lire,” R insists that “pour rendre utile ce qu’on veut dire, il faut d’abord se faire écouter de ceux qui doivent en faire usage.” But moments later, R contradicts the preface (which he ostensibly also penned), concluding that “il n’y a point, selon moi, de lecture utile aux gens du monde.” It is difficult to ascertain exactly *who* the intended reader of the novel should be, according to R(ousseau). He agrees that men and women, mothers could benefit from reading it, but that it should stay out of the hands of young girls, much as he had argued in the preface. However, as Julie is clearly the emotional protagonist of the novel, and the character to whom so many readers emphatically responded, there is quite a bit of ambiguity in R’s proclamation. In fact, N picks up on this possible duplicity, exclaiming: “Quelle étrange maladresse que d’être indulgent pour des filles qui ne doivent point vous lire, et sévère pour les femmes qui vous jugeront!” Julie’s exemplarity is clearly problematic, for her story, according to R, would only serve to corrupt young girls; at the same time, her example would be useless to a married woman, who would already have navigated the treacherous waters of girlhood by that time.

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180 Ibid., 577.
181 Ibid., 581. R in fact finds it absurd that “on adresse toujours cette morale aux jeunes filles, sans songer que les jeunes filles n’ont point de part aux désordres dont on se plaint.” *Ibid.*
182 Ibid., 583.
R would like to see his novel read by a husband and wife, “lisant ce recueil ensemble, y puisant un nouveau courage pour supporter leurs travaux communs, et peut-être de nouvelles vues pour les rendre utiles.” But this view of an ideal couple à la Julie and Wolmar really only addresses the latter half of the novel: the overcoming of desire for former lovers, coupled with instructions on agriculture, husbandry, household management, etc. This type of reading does not account for Julie’s premature and unwarranted death. Once again, however, N argues for Julie’s exemplarity, suggesting that it is her very shortcomings that can educate the reader: “si votre Héloïse eût été toujours sage, elle instruirait beaucoup moins ; car à qui servirait-elle de modèle ?” N asks. As though the reader were not, by this point, thoroughly confused with regards to the author’s intention and the pedagogical example of Julie, the end of the avertissement holds a dramatic reversal in store. Discussing the publication of this very dialogue, N suggests that he and R swap roles in the final version: “Feignez que c’est moi qui vous presse de publier ce recueil, que vous vous en défendez ; donnez-vous les objections, et à moi les réponses. Cela sera plus modeste, et fera un meilleur effet.” The reader is now forced to mentally switch the opinions of N and R, putting R once again quite in contradiction with his pronouncements in the preface. But ultimately, the ambiguity grows even greater: the avertissement’s last lines, delivered by N, “undo” the reversal (or do they?): “Non, je vous tendais un piège. Laissez les choses comme elles sont.”

183 Ibid., 580.
184 Ibid., 583.
185 Ibid., 586.
186 Ibid.
The narrative instability created by these dueling paratexts thus affects not only the authenticity of the letters and R’s role in writing and/or publishing them, but also the issue of the exemplarity of Julie’s education. The preferred audience is repeatedly put at odds with the desired influence of the narrative. The incentive to educate women via the epistolary novel form has hence created a series of unresolvable contradictions and narrative hesitations.

As we shall see in the next section, although Julie’s education may be very different from Sophie’s, both women come to unlucky ends; both demises are exemplary of Rousseau’s inability to contain female education within “safe” boundaries. As both a sequel to *Émile* and a parallel to *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, *Les Solitaires* produces many of the same narrative tensions in attempting to discuss the issue of female education. Both Julie and Sophie, on opposite ends of the educational spectrum, are in fact sacrificed in the destabilization of narrative that the question of women’s education engenders in Rousseau.

**IV. Thwarted Pedagogies: Les Solitaires, ou Émile et Sophie**

In the *Journal de Neuchâtel’s* review in 1781, the epistolary novel *Les Solitaires*, a sequel to *Émile*, is judged a valuable undertaking, illustrating the advantages of Émile’s education even in the direst of situations: “C’est, nous en convenons, une idée sublime que celle de mettre Émile aux prises avec l’infortune, afin de faire voir que, par une suite naturelle de son éducation, il trouvait en soi des ressources toujours prêts pour tous les
The unfinished novel, consistently worked on between 1762 and 1778, is thus envisioned by contemporaries as an extension of the pedagogical treatise, Émile. On the other hand, its title implies that the vague female figure sketched out in section five of Émile will here become just as much an integral part of the narrative. If we follow the outcome of Sophie’s education in Les Solitaires, however, the laudatory words of the Journal de Neuchâtel seem ironic at best.

At the end of section five of Émile, we are left with the picture of perfect happiness, achieved through Émile and Sophie’s respectively perfect educations: “s’il y a du bonheur sur terre, c’est dans l’asile où nous vivons qu’il faut le chercher,” concludes Émile’s tutor. Likewise, the tutor expresses the desire to further his story, by depicting the couple’s conjugal perfection in a sort of novelistic sequel:

Que ne m'est-il permis de peindre le retour d'Émile auprès de Sophie et la fin de leurs amours, ou plutôt le commencement de l'amour conjugal qui les unit ! amour fondé sur l'estime qui dure autant que la vie, sur les vertus qui ne s'effacent point avec la beauté, sur les convenances des caractères qui rendent le commerce aimable, et prolongent dans la vieillesse le charme de la première union.

This illustration of a perfect marriage seems to be the narrator’s great personal project, as he exclaims that "pour honorer leurs vertus, pour peindre leur félicité, il faudrait faire l'histoire de leur vie.” It stands to reason then, at the end of Émile, that an education as rigorous and thorough as Émile’s, and one as perfectly matched (in Rousseau’s opinion) as Sophie’s could only produce a “happily ever after” narrative. And yet, Émile et Sophie, ou Les Solitaires is a narrative of conjugal disaster, betrayal, and abandonment.

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188 According to Eigeldinger, Émile et Sophie was a life’s labor; as late as February of 1778, Rousseau was reading the unfinished text to his friends and soliciting advice. Preface to Émile et Sophie, ou Les Solitaires, 28.
189 Rousseau, Émile, 628.
190 Rousseau, Émile, 621.
191 Ibid., 628.
The idyllic picture painted at the end of *Émile* quickly turns dark: losing her parents and daughter in short succession, Sophie is inconsolable. Contrary to all of his teacher’s instructions, Emile’s solution is to bring Sophie into the bright city lights. Abandoning his wife for the trivial pleasures and pursuits of the city, Émile does not notice Sophie’s increasing sorrow and alienation. She is ultimately seduced by two of their friends and becomes pregnant with another man’s child. After Sophie’s heartfelt confession, Émile immediately decides to abandon his wife and child (although he briefly contemplates stealing the child away from its mother) and goes on a series of adventures, all the while embodying the picture of a self-sufficient man.

But what of Sophie? She is abandoned by her husband, left to raise a child without any means of obtaining employment, essentially an orphan cast out of society. When the unfinished second letter of the novel comes to an abrupt stop mid-sentence, Sophie’s situation is perhaps even worse than that of the enslaved Émile, having been made prisoner by the King of Algiers. How did Sophie’s education fail her so completely, and what does it represent for Rousseau’s theories on female instruction? In *Émile*, the ideal female education is clearly embodied by the figure of Sophie, and the authoritative nature of the treatise of the text supports such an interpretation, even though, as we have noted, the supplementary aspect of Book Five raises some questions. Rousseau even anticipates the temptations of the city, and dismisses them as not being of any danger for Sophie. He asserts that “je ne veux pas que de la province une mère sensée amène sa fille à Paris pour lui montrer ces tableaux si pernicieux pour d'autres ; mais je dis que quand cela serait, ou cette fille est mal élevée, ou ces tableaux seront peu
Being as close to perfectly educated as possible, according to Rousseau, Sophie should therefore have no problems resisting urban evils even if she is unfortunately confronted with them at some point.

Nevertheless, both Émile and his wife are gradually, but unmistakably, influenced by the nefarious ways of the city. Distracted, if not entirely consoled by her social activities, Sophie “n’avoir plus ce goût décidé pour la vie privée et pour la retraite : elle avoit oublié ses pertes et presque ce qui lui étoit resté.” Her education has clearly not made her strong enough to withstand great suffering, followed by distracting temptations. But I also believe that Sophie’s downfall is intricately connected to the narrative shift from treatise to epistolary novel, from philosophical prescription to romantic pathos.

Mary Trouille, upon reading Mme de Staël’s Lettres sur Rousseau, applauds the latter’s perspicacity in realizing that “Sophie’s adultery had been dictated by Rousseau’s narrative strategy, that her moral weakness was above all a means of testing and illustrating Émile’s moral strength.” Although this argument is tempting, allowing us to solve, at least partially, the mystery of Sophie’s problematic failure with recourse to narrative logic, I would argue that it only sidesteps the issue at hand. Aside from the aforementioned fact that the very title of Émile et Sophie, ou les Solitaires, begs us to turn our attention almost as equally to Sophie’s fate as it does to Emile’s, it is also significant that Sophie is set up as an exemplary model, like Julie, even as she fails: “Ah ! si Sophie a souillé sa vertu, quelle femme osera compter sur la sienne ?” The moral of the story seems quite dismal: if Sophie, as the ideal wife and mother, is so easily led astray from

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192 Rousseau, Émile, 510.
194 Trouille, Women Writers Read Rousseau, 211.
her education, what hope is there for the average woman that Rousseau seeks to educate and warn?

In order to understand the exemplary Sophie’s downfall, I believe it is necessary to address the unfinished state of the novel and examine its possible endings, as recorded by various friends of Rousseau. Within the first letter, we already have a few hints regarding the outcome of the unhappy couple. Émile writes to his former gouverneur that he has “tout perdu, femme, enfans, amis, tout enfin, jusqu’au commerce de mes semblables.” 196 A sad and solitary fate is thus anticipated for Emile (and by extension the rest of his family). After a lengthy discussion of his education under the gouverneur’s watch, Emile alludes, however, to a potentially more redeeming outcome: “c’est de vos enfans régénérés que j’ai à vous parler. Tous leurs égaremens vous ont été connus : je n’en dirai que ce qui tient à leur retour à eux-mêmes...” 197 Of course, we as readers are never able to read this tale of redemption, but several contemporary readers of Rousseau, with whom he may have shared his ideas concerning the ending of the novel, sketch out various possibilities for us.

First of all, we have the editor Moultou’s interpretation of the unfinished work, which contains a justification for Sophie’s infidelity, at the behest of DuPeyrou, 198 who sensed that readers may have been shocked by the sinful action of such a saintly woman. 199 In a convoluted series of arguments, Moultou seeks to clear Sophie’s name while staying true to Rousseau’s pedagogical aims:

196 Ibid., 53. Another citation clearly shows that Sophie is not simply missing, but deceased: Emile asks his former teacher is he is already living with Sophie in “la patrie des âmes justes?” Ibid., 54.
197 Ibid., 61.
198 Pierre-Alexandre DuPeyrou, a close friend of Rousseau’s, was also the first to publish his complete works in 1788.
199 in Les Solitaires, 147.
It is interesting to note that in his attempts to reconcile Rousseau’s portrait of Sophie in *Émile* and her fate here, Moultou fabricates an entirely different scenario, which would exonerate her at least partially. We have no indication that Émile learned about a poisoned beverage in the fragments of the original text, as he storms off immediately after Sophie’s rather succinct confession. Unable, like many of Rousseau’s devoted readers, to fathom the idea of a perfidious Sophie, Moultou resorts to a fanciful narrative twists to save her honor and allow for possibility of a reconciliation in the after-text.\(^\text{201}\)

The other two alternative endings, provided by the novelist Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and the Swiss philosopher and physicist Pierre Prévost, are more thoroughly fleshed out and share some similarities. In Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s version, Émile is freed by the Bey of Algiers and heads to a mythical island that shelters a grotto sacred to the Virgin Mary. On the otherwise deserted island, Émile meets a shipwrecked Spaniard and his (beautiful, of course) young daughter. Convinced by the Spaniard that adultery annuls marriages, Émile now marries the daughter. Miraculously, Sophie arrives on the island shortly thereafter, to expiate her sin by serving the two until her dying day. Émile is now led to become a bigamist, “forcé par la nécessité.”\(^\text{202}\)

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\(^{200}\) In *Les Solitaires*, 148.  
\(^{201}\) Moultou’s commentary is also strange because although it starts out in the critic’s voice, it devolves into an imitation of Rousseau’s voice. Moultou ends his text lamenting his woes to Sophie: “Sophie, ma chère Sophie, que ne puis-je revivre tous les jours de ma vie dans chacun de ceux que je passe avec toi, je n’en aurais jamais assez pour goûter ma félicité.” *Ibid.*, 149.  
ending may be in store for Sophie in the married trio, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre assures us that Rousseau’s intention was otherwise: “Sophie meurt, toujours triste.”203 Despite the young woman’s constant expiation of her sins and her devotion to her now bigamist husband, she cannot ever be truly forgiven, according to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. It does not matter that Émile’s sins – abandoning his pregnant wife and small child without resources to survive – are easily just as condemnable.204 Sophie’s adultery has brought a foreign usurper into the family, forever destroying Émile’s trust — and simultaneously knocking the narrative off-center. This is absolutely in line with Rousseau’s discussion of the relative sins of female and male adultery in *Émile.205*

Rousseau’s harsh criticism of female adultery is thus consistent in the treatment of Sophie in *Les Solitaires*, both in the completed sections and in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s account of a possible ending. But this ending also contains another piece of information, another fictional intertext: a letter left behind by Sophie, which Émile reads upon her death. It clearly explains that another woman, jealous of Sophie’s virtue, organized a scenario which would prey upon the latter’s natural kindness and sense of empathy. If Sophie succumbs under this pressure, it is largely because of her pity for a mournful young man. This explanation for Sophie’s actions certainly attenuates the scope of her evildoing in the reader’s mind and would likewise have allowed Rousseau an opportunity to show the excessive and unfeeling nature of Émile’s reaction. Instead,

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203 Ibid.
204 It should not be assumed that Émile’s hasty and cruel dismissal of his wife is a direct reflection of Rousseau’s position on female chastity. In fact, as *Les Confessions* reveal to us, Rousseau was no prude, involved in a ménage à trois with Mme de Warens and otherwise intimate with women in non-monogamous relations. Likewise, Julie is idolized despite her seduction.
205 “Sans doute il n’est permis à personne de violer sa foi, et tout mari infidèle qui prive sa femme du seul prix des austères devoirs de son sexe est un homme injuste et barbare ; mais la femme infidèle fait plus, elle dissout la famille, et brise tous les liens de la nature ; en donnant à l’homme des enfants qui ne sont pas à lui elle trahit les uns et les autres, elle joint la perfidie à l’infidélité.” Rousseau, *Émile*, 470.
however, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre uses this example of a jealous and manipulative woman as an occasion to indict all women: “il ne suffit pas de préparer a la vertu, il faut se garantir du vice. Les femmes ont encore plus à se méfier des femmes que des hommes....”206 As Nathalie Rogers observes, the male participant in this scenario is completely absent from Saint-Pierre’s mind as a potential source of blame: “le complice de l’adultère, quant à lui, ne semble en rien concerné par le crime, tout cela est affaire de séduction féminine.207

Bernardin de Saint-Pierre ultimately refuses to write this ending for Rousseau (which is why it remains in note form), objecting that he cannot believe in an adulterous Sophie: “a quoi sert, dira-t-on, tant d’aprest, tant d’education” if even Sophie is polluted by the vices of the city?208 This is of course a point that has been echoed by many critics since then. Contemporary critics like the aforementioned Moulou even went so far as to embellish the text with extra information designed to exonerate Sophie even further; in Moulou’s case, “les aleines aphrodisiaques, les vins préparés” become the “breuvage empoisoné” that profoundly alters Sophie’s mental state.209 Clearly, it becomes even easier to pity Sophie and criticize Émile if the young woman was drugged and raped. Contemporary critics were thus already trying to put together the pieces of Rousseau’s argument and justify such an ending. This narrative tension was resolved in yet another way by Pierre Prévost, who assembled the only real happy ending for the couple, based allegedly on various memories of conversations with Rousseau.210 In his version, Émile

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208 in Rousseau, Les Solitaires, 153.
209 Ibid., 152; 148.
210 As Charles Wirz demonstrates, three manuscript notes in Rousseau’s hand seem to indicate that the Bernardin de Saint-Pierre version is much more faithful to Rousseau’s intentions than either Prevost’s or
likewise lands on a desert island containing a temple; here, however, Sophie is the priestess of the temple, unbeknownst to Émile. After revealing herself to Émile and explaining the “tissus de fraudes et de violences sous lequel elle a succombé,” Sophie also introduces her husband to her “rival,” another young and beautiful girl who is somehow (it remains quite mysterious in Prévost’s text) linked to the two former lovers.211 Émile weds the other woman, and Sophie swears to serve them eternally as a slave. But just a few days after the wedding, the secret is revealed: the other woman is actually already married, and Émile and Sophie can now be reunited. Émile seems to finally appreciate the true worth of his wife: “non-seulement [il] lui pardonne une faute involontaire, expiée par les plus cruelles peines, et réparée par le repentir, mais qui estime et honore en elle des vertus, dont il n’avait qu’une faible idée avant qu’elles eussent trouvé l’occasion de se développer dans toute leur étendue.”212

Like Émile, then, in Prévost’s ending Sophie is portrayed as fleshing out and refining her education through the unhappy developments of her life. However, as Charles Wirz has shown, Prévost’s ending, though containing some elements of truth, is more likely a readerly fantasy.213 Just as it is necessary for Émile to become an independent man, cut off from family and nation, in order to truly understand the scope of his pedagogy, so too, Prévost suggests, Sophie must sin and expiate her sin through difficult trials to fully realize the internal force of her education. In his introduction to Les Solitaires, Frédéric S. Eigeldinger writes forcefully on the importance of experience in education, and its significant lack in the precursor text, Émile: “Non, Émile et Sophie

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211 Ibid., 154.
212 Ibid.
213 Wirz, “Note,” 295.
n’est pas le roman de l’échec...Émile y reconnaît à chaque occasion les vertus de la pédagogie dont il a été l’instrument. Mais cette éducation ne demandait qu’à être mise en pratique et il avoue même que l’expérience peut lui enseigner davantage encore...”

Sophie enacts her education not simply in her virtuous actions, but also in her one great shortcoming: she is not sufficiently prepared to deal with the dangers of the city. Eigeldinger succinctly asserts that “rien ne remplace l’expérience dans la formation d’un être, voilà la vraie leçon de ce roman.”

I cite these various interpretations and projections of the ending of Les Solitaires not, in fact, to try and ascertain what Rousseau’s vision was (since that is something we will never fully be able to determine) but more importantly, to suggest that so many attempts to justify the necessity of Sophie’s betrayal and identify a redemptive narrative telos are in fact indicative of the inherent tensions within the text. In a sense, these critics and friends of Rousseau are, perhaps unwittingly, leading a cover-up mission, glossing over if not entirely ignoring the difficulties regarding Sophie’s education and fate and their relationship to the narrative form.

In La Transparence et l’obstacle, Starobinski likewise hypothesizes a tender and happy ending for Émile’s sequel:

Émile retrouvera Sophie ; il apprendra que sa faute était involontaire : une rencontre inattendue et une reconnaissance auront lieu dans le climat paradisiaque d’une île déserte. Le roman est inachevé, mais dès son début il nous annonce l’ivresse du retour...Nous sommes rassurés d’emblée : la longue épreuve, elle aussi, aura une conclusion attendrissante.

215 Eigeldinger, preface, 42.
217 Jean Starobinski, La Transparence et l’obstacle, 155–6.
Part of a larger argument on the role of the “return” trope in Rousseau’s oeuvre, Starobinski’s argument here is centered on the short citation he identifies as promising future happiness: “mais de quelle trempe unique dut être une âme qui peut revenir de si loin à tout ce qu’elle fut auparavant?” Based on the three manuscript notes left by Rousseau and analyzed by Charles Wirz, only three elements of the story’s ending can be confirmed: Émile’s arrival on a beautiful desert island; his meeting with an old man; the presence of a beautiful young woman who is not Sophie. It nevertheless seems to me that this is not entirely convincing evidence to support the case for a happy ending, especially as concerns Sophie. I believe that Starobinski is in fact reflecting the same engaged and fantasizing form of reading as the aforementioned critics and contemporaries of Rousseau: the desire to make a smooth transition from Émile to Les Solitaires, to salvage the heroine while being faithful to the hero’s principles. When we place the two texts side-by-side, however, the portrait of female education reveals blatant tensions. For Émile, the trials and tribulations of Les Solitaires free him, allowing him to become an independent and self-sufficient man, not owing anything to anyone and exercising the full force of his education in action. For Sophie, however, her chance to enact her education in the world only leads to disgrace, abandonment, and death. And while the male bildungsroman narrative of Émile is neatly contained within the first four

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218 Rousseau, Les Solitaires, 61. Starobinski cites the quotation ambiguously, leaving out the question mark, and introducing his own exclamation point after the quotes, which lends the phrase a decidedly different flavor.
219 Wirz, “Note,” 300–3.
220 Starobinski writes that here, as in many points in Rousseau, “la rupture n’aura donc eu lieu que dans l’espoir d’un retour plus émouvant.” La transparence, 153–4. Though I do not deny that this may be a statement that is highly applicable to Rousseau’s oeuvre in general, Wirz’s study of the manuscript of Les Solitaires seems to suggest that for Sophie, there is no happy ending. “L’ivresse du retour” may well be felt by Émile once he realizes that Sophie was tricked into being unfaithful – but she will already be dead.
221 Émile says this himself in so many words: “je n’ai jamais mieux senti la force de l’éducation que dans cette cruelle circonstance.” Rousseau, Les Solitaires, 80.
chapters, stylistically and philosophically consistent, the question of Sophie’s education prompts a new form of uncritical reading (as Ray argues) as well as an ambiguous sequel, marked by numerous narrative hesitations and changes in style and tone. The happy ending for Sophie may be imagined as philosophically consistent with Rousseau’s philosophy, but it remains a projection on the part of the reader.

Not every critic, however, has chosen to downplay (or ignore) the inherent issues regarding pedagogy in Émile and its continuation. In her article “Les Solitaires as a Test for Émile and Sophie,” for instance, Nancy Senior not only argues that Sophie’s education fails, but that Émile’s does as well.222 This failure, Senior stresses, is due to the fact that Émile follows the “letter” of his education but not the spirit. One important demonstration of this is that he doesn’t educate his own children, despite being vehemently urged to do so by his gouverneur; another is Émile’s renunciation of his homeland, marking his failure as a citizen as well.223 On the other hand, Senior submits that Sophie shows a lot of courage, even in the direst of circumstances. Despite lacking in formal education, skills transferable to the workplace, a support system, and monetary funds, Sophie shows remarkable courage and readiness for the prospect of raising her child alone — something for which she is in no way qualified!224 Senior’s conclusion goes so far as to suggest that there are perhaps two Sophies, for her “frankness and courage” are in stark contrast to what she is supposed to be in Book 5 of Émile.225

Sophie — or the idea of Sophie — as illustrated in Rousseau’s pedagogical treatise

222 Nancy Senior, “Les Solitaires as a Test for Emile and Sophie,” The French Review XLIX: 4 (March 1976), 528–35. If, as Schwartz argues, man is to be dependent on woman as the citizen is to society, then Émile has failed on both counts. Sexual Politics, 73.
224 Ibid., 534.
225 Ibid.
represents the ideal woman for Émile, an obedient and kind-hearted woman whose only goal in life is to become a diligent wife and mother. Nowhere is it suggested that Sophie will ever, or should ever, attain any degree of autonomy outside of her marriage. Therefore, Senior is correct in identifying two very different facets of Sophie, portrayed in the two different texts: the Sophie of Les Solitaires may retain her virtue and sentimental nature, but she is, at the very least, capable of supporting herself once abandoned.226

If, as Lori Marso argues, Les Solitaires marks a “deep ambivalence” on Rousseau’s part about the solutions he laid out in Émile,227 then perhaps the latter is really a complement to earlier propositions, rather than an attempt at seamless continuation. Several critics have already commented on the generic difference between the treatise and the epistolary novel embodied by the two texts, and some, like Judith Still or Nathalie Rogers, have argued that this shift is problematic for our perception of Sophie; Rogers remarks that the “supplement” of Les Solitaires in fact destabilizes its preceding text. According to Rogers, “la question de la femme semble faire systématiquement basculer un texte de type ‘traité philosophique’ du côté de la fiction et du romanesque...le texte supplémentaire d’Émile et Sophie ne peut que déconstruire et destabiliser la plénitude affirmée par l’Émile.”228 The treatment of the subject of female education is thus transformative, altering not only the content and tone of Émile in Book Five, but the treatise’s possibility for conclusion as embodied in the fragmentary sequel.

As we have seen, different critics have argued that Sophie’s education does not

226 For instance, the possible endings of the text all have Sophie arriving on the same desert island as Émile, clearly indicating that she somehow obtains the money and resources to travel alone.
fail; or that her education fails but so does Émile’s; or that Émile’s education fails precisely because of his wife’s shortcomings; or they have chosen to ignore the question of Sophie’s fate. Perhaps, however, we should look at the question from a different angle. What if, as Émile himself surmises at one point, Sophie’s downfall is directly caused by Émile’s failed education, rather than the other way around? In *Les Solitaires*, we find the following admission: “...c’est avec raison qu’on impute à un mari le désordre de sa femme, soit pour l’avoir mal choisie, soit pour la mal gouverner ; que j’étois moi-même un exemple de la justice de cette imputation, et que si Émile eut été toujours sage Sophie n’eut jamais failli.”229 If we accept that Émile’s education does not succeed, in that it produces neither an exemplary father, husband, nor citizen, James Hamilton’s political conclusion seems apt: Émile is “the fallen hero, [who] embodies the moral and political failures of both his pedagogical experiment and the philosophic ideal of enlightened despotism.”230 Erected to be a figure of support, once Émile falls himself, he cannot sustain his wife’s education. Consequently, Sophie *cannot* succeed, as she has been inherently designed to be dependent — first on her parents, and then on her husband — for monetary support *and* pedagogical guidance — just as Book Five and *Les Solitaires* must be dependent on the authoritative totality that is Émile.

**V. Triangular relations**

Therefore, what can be the meaning, narratively or ideologically speaking, behind

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Sophie’s failure, if it comes as an inevitable result of Émile’s flawed pedagogy? And is it not ultimately echoed by Julie’s demise at the end of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, as well as the short tragic life of the “other” Sophie alluded to in *Émile*? I believe it is fruitful to draw connections between these three texts, in order to illuminate the fate of Rousseau’s heroines. Susan Okin has argued that the shortcoming of Rousseau’s pedagogy lies in its exclusion of women as citizens. Not civically instructed, women are relegated to the domestic sphere. Therefore, Okin declares, women are not trained to put the public good before their own interests. Over and over again, romantic love, virtuous marriage, and ideal motherhood are stressed as the goals of a female education. This female vision of the world is thus entirely at odds with Rousseau’s utopian ideal, argues Okin, not least of all because according to sociologist Lewis A. Coser, utopian visions have often eschewed traditional marriage for either celibacy or promiscuity. Just as women were relegated to the domestic sphere and considered radically other, so Sophie and Julie cannot exist in conformity with traditional narrative forms. If, as Schwartz argues, all gender oppositions find root in bodily differences, then cannot we not hypothesize that narrative form is likewise subject to such divisions?

The idea of romantic love threatening the Rousseauian ideal is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Julie’s adulterous relations with Saint-Preux. Driven by love and personal desires, Julie overthrows all of the social obstacles that are supposed to prevent her from acting as an independent woman — she chooses Saint-Preux despite his social

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231 Immediately after the publication of *Les Solitaires*, readers were criticizing the narrative sacrifice of Sophie in favor of Émile — see Staël’s *Lettres sur le Caractère et les écrits de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* and Burghelin’s “L’éducation de Sophie” on this.


233 Cited in Okin, “Rousseau’s Heroines,” 104. For Coser’s in-depth discussion of this subject, see the chapter entitled “The Sexual Requisites of Utopia,” in *Greedy Institutions; Patterns of Undivided Commitment*, 136–149 (New York: Free Press, 1974).
class, despite the master-student relation, despite her father’s disapproval, and despite society’s taboo against premarital sex. Julie’s “faute” is not just a matter of personal failing; it is a moral trespassing that has implications for the structure of society as a whole. After this brief foray into independence, however, Julie must be reined in by the narrative to reestablish order and the patriarchal structure of society. As Okin asserts, Julie is in fact sacrificed to save the Wolmar family, the pinnacle achievement of the Rousseauian ideal. She is forced to give up her lover, and embark in what ostensibly amounts to an arranged marriage. In order to preserve the image of virtue for which Wolmar married her, Julie is likewise obliged to struggle internally with her secret for years. And once Wolmar does discover his wife’s past relations with her tutor, he forces the two of them to live together, in a strictly platonic and agonizing relationship always under the scrutiny of his watchful eye. Living her entire life in shame and repressed emotions, Julie ultimately reveals, on her deathbed, that all of her efforts, though at the time salutary, are now rendered useless:

Je me suis longtemps fait illusion. Cette illusion me fut salutaire ; elle se détruit au moment que j’en ai plus besoin. Vous m’avez cru guérie, et j’ai cru l’être. Rendons grâces à celui qui fit durer cette erreur autant qu’elle était utile : qui sait si, me voyant si près de l’abîme, la tête ne m’eût point tourné ? Oui, j’eus beau vouloir éteindre le premier sentiment qui m’a fait vivre, il s’est concentré dans mon cœur.

It is thus only in death that Julie can find any peace, after having sacrificed all of her personal wishes and desires to the “greater good” of the community at Clarens. This female selflessness, so evident in La Nouvelle Héloïse, is likewise apparent in chapter five of Émile. As we mentioned above, Sophie is described less as an individual with

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234 Okin, “Rousseau’s Heroines,” 96. Judith Shklar goes so far as to suggest that Julie is a Christ-figure in her Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau’s Social Theory (London: Cambridge, 1969). Although I am not investigating Rousseau’s religious leanings in this text, the idea of sacrifice is clearly present already in Shklar’s analysis.

235 Rousseau, Julie, 564.
free will than as a predetermined signifier fleshed out by an obedient body. When Émile meets Sophie for the very first time, he in fact already knows her, as a verbal signifier that the gouverneur has been subtly introducing into his mind: “Sophie, ô Sophie ! est-ce vous que mon cœur cherche ? est-ce que vous que mon cœur aime ?”236 As Émile’s tutor had already suggested to the reader, “dès longtemps Sophie est trouvée ; peut-être Émile l’a-t-il déjà vue ; mais il ne la reconnaîtra que quand il en sera temps.”237 And during this first, fortuitously “accidental” meeting, Émile recognizes his wife-to-be with ease, having been suitably prepped by his teacher: “Au premier son de cette voix, Émile est rendu ; c’est Sophie, il n’en doute plus. Ce ne la serait pas, qu’il serait trop tard pour s’en dédire.”238

Sophie is a placeholder: a submissive blank slate with which Emile will forge his destiny and enact the tenets of his education. It is not surprising, therefore, to discover parallels with Julie’s selfless fate in Sophie’s downfall as depicted by Les Solitaires. In fact, as soon as Sophie becomes a narrative center of interest, she must be abandoned by Émile in order to reestablish the storyline as a primarily male-dominated expression of educational values. Sophie is devastated by the death of her father, mother, and daughter, and for a short moment, her grief takes center stage: “à ce dernier coup [la mort de sa fille] sa constance ébranlée acheva de l’abandonner. Jusqu’à ce tems, contente et paisible dans sa solitude elle avoit ignoré les amertumes de la vie, elle n’avait point armé contre les coups du sort cette ame sensible et facile à s’affecter. Elle sentit ces pertes comme on

236 Rousseau, Émile, 544.
237 Ibid., 533–4.
238 Ibid., 544.
sent ses premiers malheurs : aussi ne furent-elles que les commencemens des nôtres.”

For then a brief instant, Émile writes, with sympathy, of his wife’s chagrins:

Rien ne pouvait tarir ses pleurs ; la mort de sa fille lui fit sentir plus vivement celle de mère : elle appelloit sans cesse l’une ou l’autre en gémissant ; elle faisait retentir leurs noms et de ses regrets tous les lieux où jadis elle avoit receu leurs innocentes caresses : tous les objets qui les lui rappelloient aigrissoient ses douleurs.  

This high point of pathos recalls Julie’s deathbed confession, which is likewise mitigated by its male reporter: but almost immediately, however, Émile draws the attention back to himself: “je résolus de l’éloigner de ces triste lieux. J’avois dans la capitale ce qu’on appelle des affaires....” Despite, as we have mentioned several times already, being warned by his pedagogue that the city is a source of ruin for even the most virtuous of men, Émile selfishly drags his wife along, claiming that it is an attempt to cheer her up, but in fact simply pursuing his own business affairs. Émile chooses to disregard his knowledge about Sophie’s temperament, ill suited to city life, and follow his own destiny instead.

Sophie is hence already sacrificed once by her husband, and tossed inside the lion’s den of pleasures and frivolity. But another, more subtle act of sacrifice occurs, this time at the hands of the novel’s very narrative structure. Ostensibly billed as the story of a couple — Émile et Sophie — the text quickly disintegrates into two divergent narratives — Les Solitaires. The story of Sophie must in fact be pushed aside, discarded, in order for Émile to reach his full development and ultimate redemption as a man — though not, of course, as a father or citizen. Upon discovering Sophie’s infidelity, Émile simply

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239 Rousseau, Les Solitaires, 57.
240 Ibid., 57–8.
241 Ibid.
242 The work’s subtitle “seems to suggest that the book was to have told the story of Emile and Sophie achieving independence of one another; that Emile and Sophie were to have been portrayed as solitary beings, akin to Rousseau the solitary walker, and no longer united as one moral being.” Schwartz, Sexual Politics, 96.
abandons her, and the narrative largely does as well. We leave the story of conjugal strife to follow Émile in his peregrinations around the world, beginning as an apprentice to a master artisan and putting himself “tou à fait dans l’état d’un homme qui commence à vivre.” Not only is Émile starting over, but one gets the impression that this is to be a truer expression of his individual worth than the domestic interlude we have just read. From this point on, the narrative will deal almost exclusively with Émile’s adventures; the second letter of the novel devolves into purely fanciful escapades involving swashbuckling pirates, double crosses, and desert islands with magical shrines. It appears as though Émile needed to be rid of his wife in order to return to a state of nature, ostensibly symbolized by the “happy” ending on the island that echoes Robinson Crusoe. There is no room for Sophie in this narrative of redemption, at least not until she travels the world over and prostrates herself at Émile’s feet, vowing to serve him forever and die still miserable. Not only does this fate seem overly harsh, but it is also completely missing from the sketched out storyline — Sophie’s trials and tribulations once abandoned by her husband, and her presumably grueling quest to find him are entirely absent. Just as Julie was sacrificed to save the Wolmar family, and to create a compelling tearjerker of a novel, Sophie is relegated to the after-text when it is time to showcase Émile’s pedagogical progress in the wider world.

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243 Ibid., 90–1.
244 Again, although Wirz’s research suggests that Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s account of the ending is the closest to what Rousseau may have written, it is still rather negative for Sophie and additionally, possibly not entirely faithful to Rousseau’s intentions.
VI. Conclusion

Critics have struggled for generations to contextualize the sorry fortunes of such different women as Sophie and Julie within Rousseau’s larger pedagogical philosophy, often straining to justify the harsh treatment and narrative dismissal of these female figures. Rousseau’s problematic position within the Enlightenment canon clearly rejects an ideology of progress, elsewhere so important in the eighteenth century. Consequently, scholars’ dogmatic conceptions of Enlightenment thought have at times created forced interpretations, occasionally attributing an anachronistic feminism to Rousseau that he would likely have denied. Rousseau is sometimes depicted as supporting progressive female education, though this is at best a tenuous argument. Mary Trouille remarks for instance that unlike Rousseau, truly progressive pedagogues sought equality in the instruction of both sexes:

Although Rousseau’s description of Sophie’s education at home was occasionally invoked to argue against public education for girls, there was a movement among progressive educators of the period to apply the principles of Emile’s education to the upbringing of both sexes, thus contributing to Rousseau’s reputation (largely undeserved) as a champion of progressive female education.245

Rousseau’s revaluation of the domestic sphere, and the near autonomous reign of women over it, certainly appealed to certain aristocratic ladies seeking a role within their marriage and household.246 This popularization of the domestic model, however, was an ambiguous goal based more on reverie than reality. Moreover, as we have seen in our analysis of Sophie’s prototypical education, this delineation of women’s duties remains a

245 Trouille, Women Writers Read Rousseau, 69.
246 Certain female critics have argued that Rousseau’s ideas need to be considered relative to his time, in an attempt to justify what was criticized as misogyny. See, for example, Mary Louise Butler, Rousseau’s Vision of Woman (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Connecticut, 1980); Ruth Graham, “Rousseau’s Sexism Revolutionized,” in Woman in the 18th Century and Other Essays, ed. Paul Fritz and Richard Morton, 127–39 (Toronto: Hakkert, 1976); and Gita May’s “Rousseau’s ‘Anti-Feminism’ Reconsidered,” in French Women and the Age of Enlightenment, ed. Samia I. Spencer, 309–17 (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984).
far cry from a vindication of women’s rights. Critical readers of Rousseau such as Germaine de Staël and Mary Wollstonecraft would pen passionate responses to his treatment of female education, disagreeing with the philosopher on many important points. And yet other Enlightenment women like Olympe de Gouges and Mère de Genlis would themselves elaborate ambitious pedagogical programs for women to be educated right alongside men. While many women read Rousseau, praising certain elements of his thought, they at the same time sought to supplement his pedagogical program with writings of their own, perhaps intuitively filling the narrative blank created by the absence of young Henriette’s education.

Rousseau’s inaccurate portrayal as a proto-feminist writer is perhaps supported by a contradiction that Lori Marso observes: “though Rousseau claims that women aren’t worth listening to, he gives them a lot to say, and he frames what women say in a way that makes their statements quite compelling as an alternative to his own arguments.”

Just as Rousseau writes a sentimental novel while decrying the seductive evils of literature, he also focuses his attention on a strong female character who dominates the text in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Such contradictions are precisely what have driven critics to analyze themselves into knots attempting to determine Rousseau’s position on women. But perhaps the reader’s inability to pin down Rousseau’s perspective on female education is due to the impossibility of the integration of women within the male-centric model. Rousseau in fact never strays from his sexual politics of radical gender difference, and is thus forced to always view woman as that which destabilizes his systematic theory. This failure to abolish sexual difference is illustrated by the differing, incompatible and/or unrealistic guidelines for female education in *Émile, La Nouvelle*

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Héloïse, and Les Solitaires, as well as the problematic transition from pupil to pedagogue illustrated by Julie. Formally, it is likewise revealed by the narrative instability of Les Solitaires, the relegation of Sophie’s education to Book Five of Émile, the dual prefaces of Julie and the latter’s shift from love story to socio-economic treatise.
CHAPTER 2: AMBIVALENCE AND DISGUISE: LACLOS AND THE QUESTION OF WOMEN’S EDUCATION

I. Revolution or Reform?: Laclos’ treatises on education

Pierre Choderlos de Laclos represents a mysterious figure in the annals of literary history, a moderately successful army general who invented the modern artillery shell — and penned exactly one great epistolary novel, Les Liaisons dangereuses. His scant oeuvre otherwise contains military writings, a few juvenile poems, and strikingly enough, a series of three pedagogical essays dealing with the contemporary problem of the education of women. Like Rousseau and many others in the Enlightenment, Laclos appeared preoccupied with this issue; prompted, in 1783, by the Académie de Châlons-sur-Marne’s question, “Quels seraient les meilleurs moyens de perfectionner l’éducation des femmes?,” Laclos publicly entered into the debate.\footnote{Choderlos de Laclos, “De l’éducation des femmes” in Œuvres Complètes, ed. Maurice Allem (Paris: Gallimard, 1951).} He was thus particularly focused on the problem of female education, to which Rousseau had dedicated only a relatively small segment of his ponderous Émile (though of course, as we have seen, also exploring the issue in Julie). What are generally referred to as the three “essays” on female education written by Laclos are better described, however, as the disjointed juxtaposition of a self-refuting speech given to the Académie, a failed Rousseauian social contract, and an unfinished attempt at defining the proper reading selections for young women.
What arises from the co-reading of these pedagogical essays and Laclos’ epistolary masterpiece is a complex and fraught relationship between fictional writing on education contained within the epistolary novel and pedagogical writing per se. The objective of women’s education is vague at best, for like Rousseau, Laclos offers us no truly successful female models in either genre, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* giving us the pitiful downfalls of both the naïve Cécile and cunning Merteuil. Laclos also questions the role of the novel — especially the epistolary novel, which was widely written and read by women and largely escaped the label of pedantic — in female education. The dual possibilities of novelistic education and seduction are illustrated in the epistolary novel designed for a largely female public. Moreover, the polyphony which Laclos exploits in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, marked both by stylistic variation and contradictory prefaces, is reflective of the problematic configurations of female education in late eighteenth-century French society. The issue of how and why to educate women prompts in Laclos’ texts, as in many other authors, a crisis of expression linked to changing cultural, political, and literary currents, just as it effects a shift between the non-fictional treatise form and the libertine novel. In contrast to the masterful control exhibited in *Liaisons dangereuses*, the free-falling, inconclusive, and self-defeating treatises suggest latent ambivalences in Laclos’ view of female education. Although it is perhaps impossible to resolve all of the contradictions presented by Laclos across these two complementary genres, I put forth that his ambivalence towards, and yet evident obsession with, the question of female pedagogy are themselves illuminating, opening up new lines of enquiry for his literary successors.

Laclos begins his first essay, simply titled “Discours,” by boldly asserting that “le premier devoir qu’il m’impose est de remplacer par une vérité sévère une erreur
séduisante. Il faut donc oser le dire : il n’est aucun moyen de perfectionner l’éducation des femmes.”

The paradox is thus firmly established: female education can supposedly not be rectified, but Laclos nevertheless continues expounding on the subject. He recognizes this contradiction and argues that “souvent le paradoxe est le commencement d’une vérité.”

We may notice that Laclos is here, perhaps inadvertently, reproducing Rousseau’s gesture in the opening of the Premier Discours by likewise seeking something other than literary glory in proposing an answer. In the preface to the Discours sur les sciences et les arts, Rousseau argues that he is oblivious to the criticisms that his contemporaries may throw his way:

> Je prévois qu’on me pardonnera difficilement le parti que j’ai osé prendre. Heurtant de front tout ce qui fait aujourd’hui l’admiration des hommes, je ne puis m’attendre qu’à un blâme univernal ; et ce n’est pas pour avoir été honoré de l’approbation de quelques sages que je dois compter sur celle du public : aussi mon parti est-il pris ; je ne me soucie de plaie ni aux beaux esprits, ni aux gens à la mode.

Similarly undeterred by the fear of rejection or academic disapproval, Laclos will advance his theory without hope of winning the prize: “La foule d’orageurs s’avance. Chacun d’eux vient présenter à ses juges le fruit de son travail et tous espèrent en obtenir le prix. D’autres motifs m’amènent.” These reasons, ostensibly, are a concern for the state of female education and a desire to improve it. If, as we read through Laclos’ speech, this harkens back again to Rousseau’s aims in writing the first Discours, we are nevertheless puzzled by what Barbara Guetti terms the “self-defeating logic” of its presentation.

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249 Laclos, Éducation des femmes, 389.
250 Ibid.
252 Laclos, Éducation des femmes, 389.
253 “…c’est qu’après avoir soutenu, selon ma lumière naturelle, le parti de la vérité, quel que soit mon succès, il est un prix qui ne peut me manquer : je le trouverai dans le fond de mon cœur.” Rousseau, Discours, 30.
Laclos begins by defining the concept of education as the “développement des facultés de l’individu qu’on élève et de la direction de ces facultés vers l’utilité sociale.” Education is thus not a strictly personal matter, but one that is entrenched in the foundations of society – so firmly entrenched, we shall see, that its questioning will force writers to attempt new literary strategies to address it. Laclos then ponders whether the current state of female education is beneficial to society or if rather, “nos lois ne s’opposent pas à ce développement et nos mœurs à cette direction, enfin si dans l’état actuel de la société une femme telle qu’on peut la concevoir formée par une bonne éducation ne serait pas très malheureuse en se tenant à sa place et très dangereuse si elle tentait d’en sortir.” In order to address this question, Laclos poses the syllogism of the woman as slave and declares that no education is truly possible in an enslaved state. To support his bold statement, earlier cited, that women’s education could not be ameliorated, Laclos simply declares that “partout où il y a esclavage, il ne peut y avoir éducation ; dans toute société, les femmes sont esclaves ; donc la femme sociale n’est pas susceptible d’éducation.” Nevertheless, it is significant that the self-defeating introduction, denying the validity of the Académie’s question, and the above-cited passage attributing the impossibility of women’s education to their effective enslavement, bookend a direct address to women readers and a revolutionary call to arms. This passage is worth quoting nearly in full, as it represents one of the only glimmers of hope for women within Laclos’ pedagogical – and, as we shall see, fictional universe. Rather than addressing the Académie, as he purports to do in the rest of the speech, Laclos here directly addresses his potential women readers:

254 Laclos, Éducation des femmes, 390.
255 Ibid.
256 Ibid., 391.
Ô femmes ! approchez et venez m’entendre. Que votre curiosité, dirigée une fois sur des objets utiles, contemple les avantages que vous aviez donnés la nature et que la société vous a ravis. Venez apprendre comment, nées compagnes de l’homme, vous êtes devenues son esclave ; comment, tombées dans cet état abject, vous êtes parvenues à vous y plaire, à le regarder comme votre état naturel ; comment enfin, dégradées de plus en plus par une longue habitude de l’esclavage, vous en avez préféré les vices avilissants mais commodes aux vertus plus pénibles d’un être libre et respectable....

Laclos’ text is not merely a lamentation on the current condition of women, however; he also implores women for their participation in potential reform – or revolution:

Mais si au récit de vos malheurs et de vos pertes, vous rougissez de honte et de colère, si des larmes d’indignation s’échappent de vos yeux, si vous brûlez du noble désir de ressaisir vos avantages, de rentrer dans la plénitude de votre être, ne vous laissez plus abuser par de trompeuses promesses, n’attendez point les secours des hommes auteurs de vos maux : ils n’ont ni la volonté, ni la puissance de les finir, et comment pourraient-ils vouloir former des femmes devant lesquelles ils seraient forcés de rougir ? Apprenez qu’on ne sort de l’esclavage que par une grande révolution. Cette révolution est-elle possible ? C’est à vous seules à le dire puisqu’elle dépend de votre courage. Est-elle vraisemblable ? Je me tais sur cette question ; mais jusqu’à ce qu’elle soit arrivée, et tant que les hommes régleront votre sort, je serai autorisé à dire, et il me sera facile de prouver qu’il n’est aucun moyen de perfectionner l’éducation des femmes (ibid.).

Sandwiched between two pessimistic declarations of the impossibility of female education — and perhaps even, for the moment, female emancipation — we find this stunning flash of revolutionary zeal. As with many of Laclos’ pedagogical messages, however, it appears that its intended receiver is difficult to identify. Although elsewhere in the text Laclos maintains that any woman who is able to procure education within the current system is ultimately damaging herself or society, he is here clearly addressing an educated, rational thinking woman who would be concerned with the issue of pedagogical reform. In a sense, his destinataire does not — should not — exist in his

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257 Ibid.
258 “...si, malgré ces obstacles, quelques femmes parvenaient à se la procurer [l’éducation], ce serait un malheur de plus ou pour elles ou pour nous.” Éducation des femmes, 390. As we shall see later on, this is an issue clearly illustrated by the personal case of Mme de Merteuil.
current society. As we shall investigate further in our analysis of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, this is a recurring problem throughout Laclos’ oeuvre, which at times appears to address an impossible or contradictory reader.

While defending his syllogism of slavery and the oppression of women, Laclos comes to an abrupt stop. The final sentence, followed by an ellipsis, is as follows: “On ne peut sortir de ce principe général que sans liberté point de moralité et sans moralité point de d’éducation. [...]” Laclos was clearly unable to finish a paradoxical text, and, as Barbara Guetti suggests, “the ellipses mark the faltering of a discourse that knows itself doomed to repeat further useless subdivisions of its own initial first premises.”

There is apparently nowhere to go from this “gesture of self-refutation” and denial of the possibility of change; and yet Laclos will attempt to answer the question of women’s education two more times.

The analogy between the condition of women (as wives or daughters) and that of slaves is not invented by Laclos; in her article “How (and Why) the Analogy of Marriage with Slavery Provided the Springboard for Women’s Rights Demands in France, 1640–1848,” Karen Offen traces the comparison back to the novels of the Précieuses, which,

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259 This is not only a rhetorical absence; we can also doubt the opportunity of women to have read this essay, even had it been published during Laclos’ life, especially as there were no female académiciennes at the time. For the composition of the Académie de Châlons-sur-Marne, see Daniel Roche, “La diffusion des Lumières. Un exemple : l’académie de Châlons-sur-Marne,” *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 19:5 (1964), 887–922; and H. Menu, “La Société littéraire et l’Académie des Sciences; Arts et Belles-Lettres de Châlons-sur-Marne,” in *Mémoire de la Société d’agriculture du Département de la Marne*, 1868.

260 And indeed Laclos’ goal in writing *Les liaisons dangereuses* was future-oriented, for he confided to his friend the Comte de Tilly that he wished to “faire un ouvrage qui sortit de la route ordinaire, qui fit du bruit, et qui retentit encore sur la terre quand j’y aurais passé” (original emphasis, *Mémoires du duc de Lauzun et du Comte de Tilly* ed. M.Fs. Barrière (Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot Frères, 1862): 317.

261 Laclos, *Éducation des femmes*, 392.

like Mme de Scudéry’s *Clèlie*, denounced the subjection of women in marriage.\textsuperscript{263} Offen likewise observes that the metaphor of slavery was not, at first, inspired by the African slave trade of the French West India Company, as public consciousness of these issues only surfaced around 1750.\textsuperscript{264} The abstract notion of slavery was thus used first, and then recuperated by feminist movements in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by linking it to contemporary reality. Simply by using this analogy, Laclos was entering into a highly politicized debate. On one hand, Rousseau had used the slavery analogy entirely in the favor of men in the *Social Contract*, declaring that “l’homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers;” on the other, the bold Olympe de Gouges would compare the slave trade to the Ancien régime’s “traffic in wives.”\textsuperscript{265} Oscillating between these two extremes, Laclos expresses his dissatisfaction with the current (pedagogical) situation of women, all the while suggesting that only a complete revolution could truly change the enslaved condition of women.

Despite the radical undercurrents of the first essay, the second text, “Des femmes et de leur éducation” does not continue in such a revolutionary vein. In this significantly longer though likewise unfinished essay, Laclos appears to return to Rousseauian lines of thought in establishing a state of nature where man and woman would have been yet uncorrupted by culture and society. This utopian passage does not account for the actual conditions of real eighteenth-century women. For example, free female sexuality is celebrated in this state of nature, despite being perceived as an evident danger within


\textsuperscript{264} Ibid., 66.

\textsuperscript{265} Ibid., 67.
Laclos’ society as represented in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. In tracing the evolution of woman from this state of nature to her current status in society, Laclos poses the question of whether women have gained or lost advantages with the advent of modern social institutions. As Rousset notes in his work *Forme et Signification*, “le traité de l’Éducation des femmes s’inscrit en marge de Julie, du Livre V de l’Émile, dans le prolongement des réflexions de Rousseau sur la femme naturelle et sa perversion dans la civilisation parisienne de son temps.”

Like Rousseau, Laclos maintains that the state of nature was one of happiness and plenitude for man as well as woman: “La femme naturelle est, ainsi que l’homme, un être libre et puissant.... Un tel être est-il heureux? Oui sans doute....” Much like Rousseau again, Laclos’ ideal infant is raised by a doting mother in the state of nature who endures a quick birth, only to bathe and breastfeed her child just hours later:

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\text{Couchée tranquillement, elle attend sans crainte comme sans prévoyance un événement qu’elle ne conna\textat pas. Cependant une douleur salutaire vient lui rendre du ressort, la sollicite au mouvement nécessaire pour faciliter cette opération, l’engage même, par quelque soulagement, à prendre la situation la plus favorable à la sortie de l’enfant. Il naît enfin, et la cessation de la douleur (état si semblable au plaisir) est le premier sentiment qui attache la mère à l’enfant....peu d’heures après l’enfantement, elle se lève ; elle va baigner son enfant dans un ruisseau voisin... elle le sèche à son tour....}^{268}
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Laclos’ young child is thus in every way a student of nature, his early life being more or less limited by the actions of eating, sleeping, and playing. At the moment of puberty, however, Laclos’ discussion forks off from Rousseau’s and begins to address the specific problem of female development and education. Laclos’ description of a girl undergoing the first pangs of puberty is similar to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s representation of the unknown trouble suddenly sweeping over the hitherto innocent body.

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267 Laclos, *Éducation des femmes*, 393.
268 Ibid., 394.
of Virginie; Laclos writes that “déjà elle cherche la solitude ; là elle se replie en quelque sorte sur elle-même ; pour la première fois elle va s’occuper de ses pensées ; le morne ennui, la vague inquiétude la tourmentent tour à tour.” With puberty, hence, arrives the possibility of introspective and perhaps rational thought. For Laclos, this appears to be the logical starting point for education. Although he previously discusses the fundamental activities of the prepubescent child, these are primarily limited to questions of basic human needs for survival. The child that has not yet experienced sexual desire is little more than an animal. “On voit donc que manger et boire occupe[n]t une grande partie du temps de notre élève. À quoi d’autre emploiera-t-il le reste ? À dormir.” In fact, the only real education mentioned in the prepubescent sections of Laclos’ essay is the ability to learn how to jump over a bush or climb a tree, “natural” lessons suggested by his/her environment. Laclos is still quite removed from the bourgeois conception of a child as a different psychological entity, rather than just a pre-rational adult.

The gift of reflection given to the young woman does not, however, prompt Laclos to engage in a discussion of the proper educational program for women. Still focused on the state of nature, he stifles this budding self-knowledge under the natural imperative of reproduction. In what Guetti terms the “primal scene of surprised rapture,” Laclos’ sexually awakened woman is immediately drawn to an anonymous man whom she selects apparently at random. “C’est alors qu’à quelque distance, elle aperçoit un homme ; un instinct puissant, un mouvement involontaire, la fait courir vers lui ; plus près, elle devient timide, elle s’arrête mais, emporté de nouveau, elle le joint et le serre

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260 Laclos, Éducation des femmes, 400.
270 Ibid., 397.
entre ses bras.” Wordlessly and almost blindly, the young woman gives herself over to sexual — and thus ultimately, maternal — desire. It is significant to note that no reference to any pedagogical experience has yet been mentioned. Laclos’ discussion of female adulthood is likewise limited to the role of the prototypical wife and mother, culminating in a tranquil and fearless acceptance of death somewhat akin to Julie’s in La Nouvelle Héloïse.

Des femmes et de leur éducation then takes a brief detour, discussing the relative happiness of a queen, outwardly bathed in riches and idolaters, and that of the aforementioned natural woman. This short dissertation on the pitfalls of greatness and the superior merits of the rural and secluded life still, we realize, avoids the specific question of education. The ninth and following section of the treatise likewise skirts pedagogical concerns, focusing instead on certain differences between Buffon and Voltaire concerning the state of nature theory. As Joan de Jean illustrates in her book Literary Fortifications, we are beginning to notice that Laclos’ technique for dealing with female education is indirect and faltering at best. Drawing comparisons to the wavering lines of Vaubanian fortifications in contemporary military strategy, de Jean finds that Laclos takes “oblique” and essentially defensive action to address the issue of female education, which he has indeed already deemed impossible.

In fact, many sections of the treatise read as an explanation for the current oppression of women. The tenth section, entitled “Des premiers effets de la société,” attempts in a very Rousseauian

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271 Ibid., 401. This scene was likely influenced by Buffon’s description of the first man awakening to sensation and sexuality in Histoire naturelle de l’homme (1778).

272 Raaphorst sees another important link with Rousseau in this refutation of Buffon and Voltaire and more specifically in the notion that Buffon has confused la femme naturelle and la femme sauvage. Madeleine Raaphorst, “Choderlos de Laclos et l’éducation des femmes au XVIIIe siècle,” Rice University Studies 53:4 (fall 1967): 37.

fashion to explain the origins of inequality between the sexes and to conduct a very succinct anthropology of female oppression. Here, the metaphor of female slavery is not used to incite any radical activism, but rather to reinforce the status quo: “Parcourez l'univers connu, vous trouverez l'homme fort et tyran, la femme faible et esclave ; que si quelquefois elle a l'adresse de lier les mains à son maître et de commander à son tour, ce cas est extrêmement rare.”

The two final sections of this second essay are perhaps the most clearly illustrative of Laclos’ failed attempt at defining and improving women’s education. Dealing with beauty and the various accouterments of women, these two chapters dodge any veritable pedagogical preoccupations. In the first of these passages, Laclos seeks to define a universal beauty based on the merits of youthfulness, size and strength, and bemoans the estrangement from such natural tenants that modern taste has undergone. The final section of this essay in no way functions as a conclusion of an attempt to speak about women and their education. Entitled “De la parure,” the twelfth chapter defines this all-encompassing female preoccupation as “non seulement l’art de tirer parti des dons de la nature, mais encore celui de leur prêter les charmes de l’imagination.” Laclos does in fact offer several suggestions to his women readers, but these can hardly pass as pedagogical in a strict sense: he suggests that women maintain a “régime doux et salutaire,” and that they avoid all sorts of harmful influences such as alcohol, excessive sunlight, and mood swings. The imitation of nature being at the base of the few concessions to artificial beauty that Laclos allows, he urges women to follow “le chemin

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274 Laclos, Éducation des femmes, 433.  
275 Ibid., 429.  
276 Ibid., 431–2.
que la nature vous a tracé” in order to maximize their unique and individual beauty.\footnote{Ibid., 433.} In the concluding passage of this essay, Laclos laments the imitation of nature that has crept into theatre and likewise into daily interactions between men and women.

In this entire second text, there is only one fleeting mention of an intellectual education for either men or women. In speaking about appearances, Laclos recommends that women enliven their countenance by cultivating their minds: “Cultivez votre esprit, augmentez le nombre de vos idées ; en vain la nature vous aura accordé de beaux yeux : si votre âme est froide, si votre esprit est vide, votre regard sera nul et muet.”\footnote{Ibid., 433–434.} This concessive nod to the influence of intelligence in a woman’s charms is completely at odds with the rest of the essay, which has sought to illustrate the ideal woman as one entirely enveloped in a state of natural ignorance. It is as though, in his final stages of writing, Laclos realized the shortcomings of his theory when applied to the very real problems of female education in his society. Nevertheless, this is too little too late — only a dash of knowledge and a sprinkle of intelligence are required to achieve the more important goal of being charming and appealing to the male of the species. As Morten Nøjgaard concludes in reading the second essay, Laclos’ advice to woman is that she should simply “maintenir constante la séduction de son regard, c’est-à-dire de tirer profit de sa condition d’esclave !”\footnote{Morten Nøjgaard, “L’éducation de la Marquise : Un contre-exemple? À propos des Liaisons dangereuses,” \textit{Orbis Litterarum} 57:6 (2002): 407.} Once again, this reading alludes to the double paradox of slavery and seduction which structures women’s power. Although women should be natural and innocent, they should also cleverly manipulate their charms to seduce men (towards a final goal of bettering society’s mores). It is as though Laclos, like many
other male writers of the time, is suggesting that women must draw power from their very subjugation as slaves. The model of the harem, especially as portrayed in Montesquieu’s *Lettres persanes* is here quite appropriate, for within its confines, Roxane is both powerless and all-powerful, enslaved but holding Uzbek’s heart in thrall.

In his third attempt at delineating a proper female education, Laclos deals specifically with the issue of reading. In sharp contrast to the previous two texts, which were theoretical and idealizing, this third essay is eminently practical in its scope. Laclos begins by narrowing his intended audience: the pedagogical program he is about to elucidate is limited to “une jeune personne qui a de l'esprit et de la figure, et que son rang et sa fortune mettent dans le cas de vivre dans la compagnie la plus distinguée, et même d'y avoir de l'influence.”

This well-born woman’s education is thus fundamentally directed towards a greater social utility, in agreement with Laclos’ statements in his first essay. As Nøjgaard aptly summarizes, in his Académie-directed speech Laclos envisions “la femme idéale, telle qu’on peut l’imaginer après une révolution réussie,” whereas in the third essay he “se contente d’analyser le perfectionnement de l’esprit accessible à une femme vivant dans une société très concrètement réelle et de proposer un programme de lecture dans le cadre de l’éducation privée d’une fille bien née.” And since the education proposed here is conducted at home, there is, significantly enough, no direct criticism of the problems engendered by the traditional convent model of female instruction, unlike what we shall see in our investigation of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*.

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280 Laclos, *Éducation des femmes*, 474–5. An investigation of Laclos’ letters to his daughter done by Laurent Versini reveals that many of the ideas and practical suggestions made by the author in the treatise are echoed in his personal advice. He wants his daughter to begin mathematical studies early on; insists on the importance of natural history; and prefers the practicality of English to the seductiveness of Italian (respectively, Lettre du 26 fructidor an VII; Lettre du 24 brumaire an IX; Lettre du 30 vendémiaire an IX, cited in Laurent Versini, *Laclos et la tradition* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1968), 576).

Rather than truly an education in and of itself, reading is, as Laclos insists, a means of procuring instruction; the process is perhaps often more important than the content. The importance of reading is that

La lecture est réellement une seconde éducation qui supplée à l'insuffisance de la première. Celle-ci a plus pour but de nous mettre en état de nous former que de nous former en effet. Elle nous fournit en quelque sorte, les matériaux et les instruments; rarement s'occupe-t-elle de nous en indiquer l'usage, et plus rarement encore de nous guider dans le travail qu'elle nous laisse à faire.  

To fulfill this aim, Laclos suggests a three-step process of reading, beginning with the moralists, passing through historical texts, and culminating in literature. The main purpose of this progression is to acquire a conception of ideals before that of reality: “C'est après avoir ainsi fixé ses idées sur ce qui doit être, qu'il devient utile et qu'il ne peut être dangereux de connaître ce qui est. Cette connaissance s'acquiert dans l'histoire.”

History and the evolution of ideas will also consequently convince the young reader of the importance of style and eloquence: “On sentira que ce n'est pas assez qu'une idée soit bonne, mais qu'il faut encore qu'elle soit exprimée avec clarté pour être facilement comprise et avec charme pour être généralement adoptée.” This is obviously the crucial instruction that literature and the belles-lettres can furnish to Laclos’ student.

The educational program proposed by Laclos is fairly varied in its scope and moderately ambitious with regard to the contemporary expectations for women. Aside from the three main fields mentioned above, Laclos also recommends the reading of basic scientific texts, since it seems to him “...nécessaire d'avoir quelque connaissance en

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282 Laclos, Éducation des femmes, 434.
283 Ibid., 435–6.
284 Ibid., 436.
astronomie, en physique, en chimie, en histoire naturelle et en botanique." The writer of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* does not simply envision education as a personal matter, a way of cultivating one’s private ideas – knowledge is first and foremost a *language* that two individuals can use to communicate with each other. As such, knowledge is clearly not detrimental to a woman, but in fact necessary for a happy relationship with the opposite sex. He writes that

> Ce qui éloigne beaucoup de gens de mérite de la société des femmes, et même des femmes aimables, c'est l'impossibilité de causer avec elles, ou même devant elles, des objets auxquels ils s'intéressent. On ne voit que trop souvent ces deux êtres si bien faits pour être réunis, l'homme de mérite et la femme aimable, se séparer avec regret, mais sans retour, faute d'avoir une langue commune.

Nevertheless, despite his insistence on the social utility of education, Laclos’ reliance on ancient Greek and Roman historians and orators remains rather traditional. Barely deviating from the medieval conception of education, Laclos recommends the readings of ancient epistolary works as *exempla* for contemporary writing: “...on s'occupera de connaître les lettres grecques et romaines: il est inutile de dire qu'en ce genre nos travaux sont bornés à les imiter, et notre gloire à les égaler quelquefois. Il en est de même de leurs beaux-arts dont les monuments sont parvenus jusqu'à nous.”

Laclos establishes two ways of gaining knowledge: through direct experience, and through reflecting on the recorded experiences of others. If we were limited to our own personal and immediate experiences, Laclos argues, we would be gravely hindered, like savages, in our quest for knowledge of the good and the just. But with books,

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285 Ibid., 442.
286 Ibid., 436–7.
287 Ibid., 438.
288 “Il n'y a que deux moyens pour connaître : observer et méditer. Il est facile de juger combien nos connaissances seraient bornées si nous étions réduits à nos observations et à nos méditations personnelles, et à celles de ceux qui nous entourent. Tel est l'état des peuplades que nous nommons sauvages.” Ibid., 434–5.
however, we can live vicariously through others and put into practice — imitate, so to speak — the teachings of their experiences, rather than have to take every step ourselves:

Mais les livres nous font jouir des observations et des méditations des hommes de tous les temps et de tous les lieux.... L'effet de cette lecture sur un sujet bien né doit être un amour de la vertu porté jusqu'à l'enthousiasme et qui ne lui laisse trouver de plaisir que dans le beau, le juste et l'honnête ; une extrême horreur du vice ; le courage et la sévérité pour soi, la pitié et l'indulgence pour les autres ; enfin les connaissances générales sur l'homme et ses devoirs.  

Moreover, it is not only positive instruction that can be gleaned from the experiences of others, but furthermore, when these books are novels, disastrous consequences, “car selon que les ouvrages de ce genre [les romans] manquent de talent, de raisons, ou de morale, il n'en est pas de plus propres à gâter le goût, l'esprit ou le cœur.” The power of books and the vicarious knowledge gleaned from them is a crucial idea for Laclos, and partially serves to explain his oscillation in the three essays, as we shall see, between revolutionary fervor, philosophical speculation, and practical realism.

Introducing the topic of novels and what role they should play in a young woman’s education, Laclos significantly uses the example of Richardson’s *Clarissa, or the Story of a Young Lady*, a wildly popular epistolary novel published in 1748. Susan Dunn finds the choice of this novel of seduction significant, as it suggests that “the young woman’s capacity for independent judgment and not her acceptance of authority should be both the means and the end of education.” Rather than whole-heartedly rejecting the pedagogical potential of a novel with a salacious plot, Laclos allows for the possibility that the young woman’s discernment — or, in some cases, that of her mentor — will be keen enough to separate the wheat from the chaff. He declares: “Presque tout

289 Ibid., 435.
290 Ibid., 440.
dépend donc, en ce genre, ou de l'adresse du guide, ou du bon esprit de la personne qui lit.”

It is significant for our purposes that Laclos employs the example of an epistolary novel to illustrate the potential application and subversion of pedagogy within a literary form. This text being the only novelistic example suggested by Laclos, he is — perhaps inadvertently — stressing once again the potent but problematic link between pedagogy and epistololarity, between learning how to read and learning how to act.

After a short passage extolling the virtues of travel writing and the eighteenth-century penchant for exoticism, Laclos engages in some methodological concerns highly reminiscent of Montaigne’s reading philosophy. Using the metaphor of reading and education as “nourriture” for the student, Laclos suggests that the pedagogical diet should vary from individual to individual; most importantly, moreover, pleasure should be instrumental in the process for the highest rate of absorption:

Nous avons dit en commençant cet écrit, qu’au moral comme au physique la nourriture devait être choisie suivant les tempéraments ; et aussi que les aliments pris sans plaisir ne profitaient point. En suivant cette idée, nous ajoutерons que ce n’est pas ce qu’on mange qui nourrit, mais seulement ce qu’on digère. Il ne suffit donc pas de lire beaucoup, ni même de lire avec méthode, il faut encore lire avec fruit ; de manière à retenir et à s’approprier en quelque sorte ce qu’on a lu.

In order to reach this aim, Laclos offers two suggestions, either that of intelligent discussion with someone who has read the same materials, or that of writing down, after each text, a critical summary — a technique not so different, we might note, from the current and widespread academic practice of a “fiche de lecture!”

Laclos’ final remarks come full circle in emphasizing the greater goals of education. It is not simply a love of knowledge that motivates such a pedagogical program: it is in fact a humanist desire for greater personal happiness and social utility.

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292 Laclos, Éducation des femmes, 440.
293 Laclos, Éducation des femmes, 442.
Laclos argues that if a young woman were to follow his prescriptions, “nous croyons pouvoir l’assurer qu’elle sera non seulement plus instruite mais aussi plus heureuse que la plupart des autres femmes.” This happiness, our writer is quick to point out, should not come from literary glory or intellectual renown. A woman’s education should remain, in fact secret, cleverly disguised as simplicity: she should “ne jamais montrer ses connaissance qu’à ses amis les plus intimes et pour ainsi dire comme confidence.”

Laclos’ warning seems to extend much further than a classical taste for restraint and good breeding; it appears as if women can only benefit from their education if they hide it from prying male eyes.

Having examined the three essays in succession, we are now tempted to connect them together, to locate an underlying proposition. The differences, and at times contradictions, are striking, however. Whereas the first essay launches a forceful revolutionary cry à la Olympe de Gouges, only to self-destruct almost immediately, the second essay espouses traditional Rousseauian notions about women, using them to sidestep the question of education altogether, while the third and final essay attempts to redeem education in constructing a highly practical — and thoroughly unrevolutionary reading list. It is for this reason that Nøjgaard sees the moralist’s evolution illustrated throughout the three essays, rather than a unifying worldview. Laclos “débute par des fanfaronnades libertaires, pour finir dans une prudence bien-pensante,” he argues.

Suellen Diaconoff likewise views Laclos as “slipping into complicity” with the status quo.

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294 Ibid., 443.
295 Ibid., my emphasis.
by the time he pens the third essay. The third essay is in fact, according to Nøjgaard, a clear refutation of the first, as it takes “le contre-pied de la doctrine radicale et négative du discours,” and renders education possible.

There are, of course, two different perspectives with which to approach this apparent about-face. On the one hand, Laclos’ reversion to pragmatism, though certainly less groundbreaking than his incendiary speech, allows for the possibly of real change to occur, for some modifications to be made in female education. One might argue that revolutionary rhetoric is all well and good, but that it led Laclos down a dead-end, whereas practical reflection on a narrower topic at least yielded some positive results. Moreover, as we saw before, Laclos believes in the power of literature to permit us to experience things vicariously — this third education is thus perhaps not so limited as it might appear. On the other hand, critics like Diaconoff see the third essay as evidence that Laclos is not truly convinced that education is really the central problem for the female condition. She deduces that ultimately, “Laclos does not seem to believe that education can change much at all, either for the individual woman (who must hide her knowledge so as to preserve her modesty) or for society as a whole.”

In drawing a parallel with Les Liaisons dangereuses, Diaconoff makes the valid point that Cécile is not corrupted because of the books she did — or did not — read, but rather by the clever manipulations of the libertines — it is even possible, I would suggest, that reading novels could have protected her against their machinations.

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298 “Un contre exemple,” 416.
Written significantly later than its two predecessors, the third essay seems a return to tradition, a desire for normalcy for which contemporary history can surely furnish some explanations. Rather than pitting this essay against the other two, in an attempt to justify Laclos’ feminism or admonish his conservatism, I propose that it is perhaps more fruitful to consider the failed, unfinished, and polyphonic nature of all three of the pedagogical texts. In his edition of Laclos’ Œuvres complètes, Versini suggests that perhaps the author of Les Liaisons dangereuses did not finish his treatises on education not only because his first position blocked all avenues for productive discussion, but also “faute de dons pour poursuivre une réflexion abstraite, quand ses guides habituels lui font défaut.” In addition to this methodological concern, we can moreover see the common failure of all three essays as perhaps stemming from Laclos’ reluctance to educate via the treatise form. The ostensible pedagogical goals of Laclos’ epistolary novel, outlined in the “préface du rédacteur” and illustrated throughout, are at odds with the prescriptive outline the Académie’s question seeks. The novel’s desire to “plaire et instruire” is reflected in its double aims for imitation: on the one hand, the “variété des styles” which mimetically reproduces the speech and thought of numerous characters (heteroglossia); on the other, the “preuve et exemple” of two educational warnings (“l’une, que toute femme qui consent à recevoir dans sa société un homme sans mœurs, finit par en devenir la victime ; l’autre que toute mère est au moins imprudente, qui souffre qu’un autre qu’elle ait la confiance de sa fille”). The pedagogical treatise, however, endeavors to delineate an education program using mainly abstract thought and

300 Versini locates the writing of the third essay as occurring sometime between 1795 and 1802, whereas the first two were mostly likely written in 1783.
generalizations within an ostensibly authoritative framework. Rather than addressing the plight of his female contemporaries, Laclos retreats to Rousseauian theory and describes “la femme naturelle” with wistful idealization and cobbled-together anthropology. As we shall see, the strongest moments of educational import in Les Liaisons dangereuses are not revolutionary call to arms like those implied in the first essay — they are concrete and exemplary warnings designed to help women navigate the treacherous waters of society.

There have been a variety of critical analyses drawn from Laclos’ three pedagogical essays. One tendency has been to locate passages in the essays that would support the theory of Laclos as a proto-feminist. Most often used in this perspective is the evocation of revolution in the first essay. When placed in correlation to the strong female character of M<sup>me</sup> de Merteuil, many earlier critics of Laclos such as Giraudoux, Malraux, and Vailland<sup>303</sup> found the essays to be rife with feminist implications. Nøjgaard draws interesting parallels with Olympe de Gouges’s pamphlet, Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne, published in 1791. In a similar fashion to Laclos, though ultimately much more forcefully, Olympe de Gouges also proclaims that only women can hoist themselves out of the slavery imposed by the patriarchal system, and that they should expect nothing from their male compatriots.<sup>304</sup>

In her preface to a translated edition of Laclos’ De l’éducation des femmes, Chantal Thomas locates a subversive feminism stemming from the reintroduction of


sensuality in womanhood. Sensuality, in a way, would replace the rehabilitation of female education: “But — and here is the simultaneously revolutionary and timeless dimension of the work — she [woman] will discover a new body; she will invent for herself a new sensuality. Woman is beyond rehabilitation? Perfect! Let us do away with the convents and go swimming.”305 The flippant tone of Thomas’ declaration echoes her interpretation of Laclos’ proposals as a “surrealistic theory of total revolution.”306 For Thomas and many others, Laclos’ essays on education function as a sort of utopia, an attempt at reform that fails because of its overriding idealism. Critics such as Thomas strike me as rather naïve in equating materialism with feminism, especially as the term is used in the modern day. As we shall see in our discussion of Sade’s pedagogically-minded works, the reintroduction of female sexuality is clearly not enough to warrant a “feminist” reading; that is to say, one which would argue for equal rights and similar roles in society. Dispensing with idealism and any conception of “spirit” – which is not even what Laclos seems to be suggesting here – will not liberate women, as the eighteenth century will attest.

The question of female sexuality, especially within this notion of utopia and the state of nature is clearly linked to Rousseau’s ideas as exposed in the Social Contract, Émile, and La Nouvelle Héloïse. But according to some critics such as Madeleine Raaphorst, the heavy undertones of Rousseauian inspiration in the second essay are not enough to swing Laclos back into conventionality. Despite the paradox at which Laclos arrives concerning female education in the first essay, also rather akin to his predecessor’s theories, Raaphorst nevertheless finds that “même dans cet état

306 Ibid., 123.
Raaphorst’s assumption that such a “clan” existed smacks of anachronism, and is illustrative of this overwhelming desire on the part of some critics to ascribe progressive and modern feminist positions to Laclos (or Rousseau, for that matter) without taking historical context into account.

In fact, this feminization of Laclos may seem to us modern readers as quite problematic. Many of today’s critics find that Laclos’ position on female equality is much more nuanced and difficult to pin down. Suellen Diaconoff, for example, argues that Laclos is writing as a “femino-centric” author but is actually focusing on female vulnerability, and does not actually break with most conventions concerning women in his society. Let us not forget that the revolutionary verve of the first essay is largely mitigated by both the overall negation of the question and the contradictory ideas of the following essays. Laclos’ masterful biographer, Versini, poses the question quite explicitly:

"Est-ce là un authentique féminisme ? On peut en douter, non pour les intentions, Laclos s’insérant dans la tradition des éloges des femmes et se montrant partisan convaincu de l’égalité des sexes, mais pour les résultats, même en ne considérant que les Essais. Lorsqu’on envisage l’ensemble de l’œuvre, le problème est encore plus complexe....Les Liaisons sont les prolégomènes des traités sur un plan négatif, les deux parties de l’œuvre apparaissent comme complémentaires."

It is ultimately perhaps pointless to argue about the merits of Laclos’ so-called feminism. On the one hand, the term, if not the issue, is clearly anachronistic. Whatever leanings towards equality of the sexes Laclos may have espoused, his wildest concepts and musings would never be enacted, barring perhaps a brief revolutionary window. But

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309 Versini, Laclos et la tradition, 578.
more significantly yet, we must take into account Laclos’ *role* in the “feminist debate.” The general Laclos was first and foremost a novel writer and intellectually somewhat on the sidelines of great philosophical debates. As Versini aptly writes, Laclos thankfully “...nous a épargné un roman à thèse en faisant un roman d’analyse, qui ne ménage au demeurant pas plus les hommes que les femmes.”310 However, even if there are feminist ideas in his educational treatises, Versini argues, Laclos knew that his project was doomed from the start: “Dans ce siècle qui parle tant de pédagogie, l’éducation des femmes est tout le contraire d’une éducation ; et si Laclos ne propose pas à son tour sa pédagogie, ce n’est pas seulement parce que ses deux premiers essais sont inachevés, c’est que la solution n’est pas du ressort de réformes pédagogiques.”311

Having discovered and published *De l’éducation des femmes* at the turn of the twentieth century, earlier critics of Laclos often sought to illuminate the swerving and problematic *Liaisons dangereuses* with the aid of these theoretical texts. Although such a *critique des sources* tradition sought to use the essays to elucidate the novel, modern criticism, however, has more frequently attempted the reverse, using the novel to understand the treatises. As de Jean argues, Laclos’ pedagogical work is “marginal,” since it needs to rely on previous intertexts in order to be understood. Unlike the highly complex and fine-tuned epistolary novel, the education treatise cannot stand alone. More precisely, de Jean suggests that it reflects an attempt to continue Rousseau’s project for Sophie.312 In his imitation and extension of Rousseau, Laclos nonetheless eludes many obvious and direct references to his predecessor. As de Jean deduces, by conveniently forgetting to mention Rousseau’s name and influence directly, Laclos is copying an

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312 De Jean, *Literary Fortifications*, 204.
inhertentl Rousseauian strategy. Laclos “attempts to engulf his precursor and his threatening power, just as the master teacher engulfs Émile, and Julie overshadows Saint-Preux. All these instances of aggressiveness are self-protective; these ‘unions’ are forged in an attempt to silence a threatening voice.”

In this psychoanalytical reading, de Jean examines Laclos’ struggle against classical authority, as embodied specifically in the powerful figure of Rousseau, in regard to both pedagogy and epistolarity. We need only take one step further to link this resistance to the latent struggle between the Enlightenment desire for universalizing systematization (De l’éducation des femmes) and the rise of dialogic heteroglossia (Les liaisons dangereuses) that it seeks to silence. In the following section, we will examine the pedagogical stakes of Laclos’ epistolary novel and their interaction with the educational treatises, attempting to illustrate the various power plays between these two epistemological poles.

II. Teacher, Student, Victim: Les Liaisons dangereuses

At the pinnacle of eighteenth-century literary epistolarity, most critics place Les Liaisons dangereuses. Laclos’ virtuosity for manipulating the letter form to create an astounding representation of late eighteenth-century libertine society is arguably still unparalleled. As Jean-Louis Cornille eloquently writes, “Les Liaisons retraceraient ainsi, à la fin d’un siècle sur le point de s’achever prématurément, que la poursuite du désir a essoufflé, le tableau clinique complet des possibles épistolaires : moins roman de lettres

\[^{313}\text{Ibid., 206.}\]
qu’archives des Postes.”314 But this novel is also a masterpiece of pedagogical subversion and intellectual seduction. Nowhere else, perhaps, are the common roots of *educo*315 and *seduco*316 so apparent. Pedagogical projects abound in the plot of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and figures of students and teachers multiply. Merteuil and Valmont loom over the frail form of Cécile, simultaneously educating and corrupting her. The educators are indeed nurturing a young plant, but bending it in nefarious ways. The double meaning of *seduco* — both to lead into safety, and to lead astray by use of artifice — is clearly exploited in Laclos’ epistolary novel, not only, as we shall see later, in the devious strategic uses of the letter but most prominently in the pedagogical models that emerge from the libertine wreckage of the text. De Jean argues that Laclos inherently remains a classical writer due to this very reliance on education and seduction as means of control. She writes: “The great French novelists of the Enlightenment are less concerned with teaching us more about the realm of human sensibility than with putting into operation an infallible system created to predict and control the shape of human behaviour.”317 In examining the highly controlled pedagogical experiments contained in Laclos’ novel, we will also see contradictions arise between the two prefatory texts, as well as the ostensible goals and possibilities of education.

The first education to discuss is perhaps the most evident one: the attempted initiation of Cécile by Madame de Merteuil into the ways of libertinage. The project is originally conceived out of jealousy and Madame de Merteuil’s desire to enact vengeance

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315 *educo, educere*: “to lead or bring out (persons, etc.); esp. (in mil. context) to lead forth (troops, etc.)” but likewise the weak root *educo, educare*: “to tend and support the growth of (offspring), bring up, nurture, rear.” *Oxford Latin Dictionary* s.v. “educo.”
316 *seduco, seducere*: “to draw (a person) aside b. to lead out of harm’s way. c. to lead astray, entice.” *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “seduco.”
on the Comte de Gercourt, an unfaithful former lover. As the Comte is about to marry Madame de Volanges’ daughter Cécile and places an inordinate amount of importance on her purity and convent-educated ways, the Marquise sees a golden opportunity to get back at the Comte by corrupting the young girl. She instructs Valmont that “l’Héroïne de ce nouveau Roman mérite tous vos soins” and that “si une fois vous formez cette petite fille, il y aura bien du malheur si Gercourt ne devient pas, comme un autre, la fable de Paris.”\textsuperscript{318} The original project of seduction (in the sense that Merteuil seeks to lead Cécile away from her betrothed) is rife with tempting educational possibilities. Writing again to Valmont, Madame de Merteuil muses that “quant à la petite, je suis souvent tentée d’en faire mon élève ; c’est un service que j’ai envie de rendre à Gercourt....nous lui donnerons une femme toute formée, au lieu de son innocent Pensionnaire.”\textsuperscript{319} Despite Madame de Merteuil’s frequent remarks concerning Cécile’s education, Valmont largely ignores the project until his return to Paris in the second section of the book. It is important to note that although Merteuil’s pedagogical fervor significantly outweighs Valmont’s, he is absolutely necessary to the physical enactment of the plan. As Merteuil herself writes concerning Cécile, and juxtaposing the ever-present notions of education and seduction, “elle me prie de l’instruire, avec une bonne foi réellement séduisante. En vérité, je suis presque jalouse de celui à qui ce plaisir est réservé.”\textsuperscript{320} In a caricature of the contemporary debate on the duties of motherhood, Merteuil finds herself unable, as a woman, to “educate” another woman; even in the most libertine of circumstances, a man is still required for female education to take place.

\textsuperscript{318} Laclos, Les Liaisons dangereuses (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 32. The importance of these literary metaphors will become more evident when we will analyze Merteuil’s role in Cécile’s epistolary education. \textsuperscript{319} Ibid., 72. \textsuperscript{320} Ibid., 113.
Merteuil’s education of Cécile functions on two levels: on the one hand, it molds Cécile’s actions and her emotional reactions through a series of covert manipulations; on the other, it is an explicit lesson in reading and writing letters that could also be extended to the extratextual reader. When the Marquise reveals the existence of Danceny and Cécile’s correspondence to Madame de Volanges, she is not just attempting to acquire the latter’s confidence and trust, but simultaneously “putting obstacles” in the way of this otherwise unobstructed romance. “Il est bon, d’ailleurs, d’accoutumer aux grands événements quelqu’un qu’on destine aux grandes aventures. Après tout, ne peut-elle pas payer de quelques larmes le plaisir d’avoir son Danceny?”

By weaving a tale of romantic intrigue where previously only a childish crush existed, Madame de Merteuil is selecting which emotions to trigger in Cécile and giving her a penchant for torrid love stories. De Jean argues that scandal — in the etymological sense of *skandalon*, a trap or obstacle — is a pedagogical tool exploited by the libertines to ostensibly educate while leading astray. “Scandal, as Laclos’ master seducers comprehend perfectly, can be manipulated to serve as a form of fortification that protects the libertine and his/her path while causing the victim to change course — and generally to adopt the course chosen for him by his debaucher.”

By setting an obstacle in the way of the budding lovers, Merteuil is actually forcing them to imitate her own swerving manipulations and initiating Cécile into the art of libertinage, much as she will later coax the young girl into mimicking her writing style.

The Marquise’s covert operations also attempt to undermine the religious teachings that Cécile has received during her convent education. In order to further

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321 Ibid., 167.
restrict the young girl’s possibilities for communication outside of the libertine triangle, Merteuil sabotages the latter’s relationship with her confessor: “...je n’ai pas manqué d’élever quelques doutes dans l’esprit de la petite fille, sur la discrétion des Confesseurs; et je vous assure qu’elle paie à présent la peur qu’elle m’a faite, par celle qu’elle a que le sien n’aille tout dire à sa mère.”

By leading Cécile away from the Church (and her mother), the Marquise has once again managed to cause the young girl’s path to deviate. For Tristan Florenne, the Liaisons dangereuses “announce” the education treatises precisely because they illustrate this total absence of relations between mother and daughter and of the role of the convent in female education. Madame de Volanges is practically absent from Cécile’s life, and thus the Marquise is able to imitate the role of the mother in the young girl’s education. As Cécile herself remarks, “d’ailleurs elle [Merteuil] m’est bien utile ; car le peu que je sais, c’est elle qui me l’a appris.”

The traditional convent education is entirely negative and hence rapidly thwarted by such libertine machinations. At the same time, Madame de Volanges fails her daughter by keeping her completely in the dark regarding not only the world at large, but even her immediate future: Cécile writes to the Marquise that “elle me traite toujours comme un enfant, Maman; et elle ne me dit rien du tout. Je croyais, quand elle m’a fait sortir du Couvent, que c’était pour me marier; mais à présent il me semble que non....”

The subtle education given by Madame de Merteuil also affects Cécile’s physical appearance and gestures; it is, as well as a mental training, a physiological one.

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323 Laclos, LD, 147.
325 Laclos, LD, 115.
326 Ibid., 90.
327 I obviously do not mean to suggest that Cécile achieves anywhere near the success that Merteuil has (cf. Letter 81) but it is, at the base, the beginning of a similar procedure that is implied.
Merteuil’s mere presence — but when, in fact, is she simply “present”? — is enough to raise a newfound awareness of physicality for Cécile. Getting ready to go to the Opera with Madame de Merteuil, Cécile writes to her confidante Sophie that “je n’ai jamais eu tant d’envie d’être jolie que depuis quelques jours, et je trouve que je ne le suis pas autant que je le croyais ; et puis, auprès des femmes qui ont du rouge, on perd beaucoup. Mme de Merteuil, par exemple, je vois bien que tous les hommes la trouvent plus jolie que moi....”\(^{328}\) Cécile’s first sexual attraction is thus doubled by her realization of competition among female beauties, and of the artifice (the “rouge”) that is often employed. This sexual awakening, so to speak, is shrewdly structured by the Marquise, who will use it to blur the lines of friendship that Cécile had previously established. The Marquise writes to Valmont that her pupil is “naturellement très caressante, et je m’en amuse quelquefois : sa petite tête se monte avec un facilité incroyable.”\(^{329}\) The homosexual undertones of Merteuil’s friendship with Cécile\(^{330}\) allow the libertine to further extend her control over the young girl. The Marquise effectively replaces Sophie Carnay as her student’s interlocutor; Cécile writes to her convent friend that

> Je crois même que quand une fois on a de l’amour, cela se répand sur l’amitié. Celle que j’ai pour toi n’a pourtant pas changé ; c’est toujours comme au Couvent : mais ce que je te dis, je l’éprouve avec Mme de Merteuil. Il me semble que je l’aime plus comme Danceny que comme toi, et quelque fois je voudrais qu’elle fût lui.\(^{331}\)

Is friendship imitating love, or love imitating friendship? Caught in the pedagogue’s invisible snares, Cécile sees her own desires echoed in Merteuil’s actions and can no longer distinguish which feelings are her own. “Elle partage tous mes

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\(^{328}\) Ibid., 61–2.

\(^{329}\) Ibid., 112–113.

\(^{330}\) Certain interpretations of Laclos’ novel, such as the film adaptation Cruel Intentions, have chosen to exploit the homosexual tensions that can be found throughout the book.

\(^{331}\) Ibid., 153.
chagrins comme moi-même,” writes Cécile, never doubting that those sorrows are in fact created by her friend and mentor and thus much more than “shared.”332 This bond of closeness is actively encouraged by the Marquise, who is once again taking over Cécile’s education – and affection - from her absent mother. Aware of Merteuil’s involvement in her literary education, Cécile writes:

Mme de Merteuil m’a dit aussi qu’elle me prêterait des Livres qui parlaient de tout cela, et qui m’apprendraient bien à me conduire, et aussi à mieux écrire que je ne fais : car, vois-tu, elle me dit tous mes défauts, ce qui est une preuve qu’elle m’aime bien ; elle m’a recommandé seulement de ne rien dire à Maman de ces Livres-là, parce que ça aurait l’air de trouver qu’elle a trop négligé mon éducation, et ça pourrait la fâcher.333

In this excerpt we see again that Merteuil is essentially taking on the role of a mother to her pupil, whose education has been largely neglected by her actual family. The only written instruction, albeit very restricted, that Cécile receives comes not through a traditional educational model but rather through libertine transmission.

Despite her crucial influence in educating and corrupting Cécile, Madame de Merteuil only writes two letters to her pupil (that can be seen by the reader). This can be partly explained, of course, by the close proximity in which the two reside and their almost quotidian visits. Nevertheless, the scarcity of Merteuil’s letters to her protégé underlines the critical necessity of these bursts of correspondence. The first of the two (L13) appears to be a simple response to Cécile’s explanation that her mother is ill and thus that she cannot go to the Opera with Madame de Merteuil; we know, however, that no epistle of Merteuil’s is entirely innocent. This brief message is an opportunity for the Marquise to gain Cécile’s confidence, as she agrees to pass on the message to the Chevalier Danceny on her pupil’s behalf. It is moreover a convenient occasion to flatter

332 Ibid., 115.
333 Ibid., 93.
Cécile both on her beauty and her charms. Madame de Merteuil refers twice to her destinataire as “ma belle” and indirectly praises her singing. Most importantly, perhaps, the older woman expresses what is meant to appear as sincere regret at the loss of Cécile’s company. Madame de Merteuil places Cécile’s inability to attend and her mother’s illness on the same level in the letter, thus allowing the young girl to feel self-important.

Merteuil’s response can also be seen to function as an indirect lesson in style for Cécile. The poise and restraint of the letter is in stark contrast to Cécile’s effusive conversational tone. The young girl exclaims “je vous assure que je regrette bien plus de ne pas être avec vous que le Spectacle. Je vous prie d’en être persuadée. Je vous aime tant!”334 In this candid passage, Cécile clearly reveals her feelings and motivations, something that Madame de Merteuil would never do. Compared with the Marquise’s following poised response, Cécile’s enthusiasm now seems overeager and awkward: “Je suis très fâchée, ma belle, et d’être privée du plaisir de vous voir, et de la cause de cette privation.”335 However, the most striking différence between the Cécile’s letter and Merteuil’s response is perhaps not this correction in tone conveyed by the Marquise, but her taking hold of the reins, so to speak. Cécile begins her letter constrained by motherly authority and having no agency of her own: “Maman est incommodée, Madame ; elle ne sortira point, et il faut que je lui tienne compagnie : ainsi je n’aurai pas l’honneur de vous accompagner à l’Opéra.”336 The young girl’s lack of control over her own life is echoed in the sentence structure given above. The first person does not appear as a subject until the third clause of the sentence, and even then it is only to be negated – Cécile does not

334 Ibid., 60.
335 Ibid.
336 Ibid., 59.
any free agency outside of her mother. This negation of self is in stark contrast to Merteuil’s answer, which adamantly proclaims the Marquise’s power, importance, and will by making her the subject of almost every sentence. In addition, the Marquise uses almost exclusively future tense verbs to illustrate her upcoming actions without a shadow of a doubt; even the occasional conditional clause seems to be submerged under the authoritative power of the future tense.\(^{337}\)

With her highly polished response to her pupil, Madame de Merteuil is in a sense giving Cécile an example of a controlled and appropriate *lettre mondaine* of the sort that any society woman would be expected to write. This education, we can surmise, is possibly genuine and well-meaning: shortly thereafter, Merteuil writes to Valmont explaining that “elle [Cécile] aura au moins une bonne amie, car je m’attache sincèrement à elle. Je lui ai promis de la former et je crois que je lui tiendrai parole. Je me suis souvent aperçue du besoin d’avoir une femme dans ma confidence, et j’aimerais mieux celle-là qu’une autre.”\(^{338}\) This desire to turn Cécile into a sidekick of sorts will ultimately fade, as Merteuil realizes the limitations of her pupil, finding her to be little more than “une machine à plaisir.”\(^{339}\)

Merteuil’s second letter to Cécile makes the educational lesson in writing style explicit, functioning as a series of guidelines for the young girl to learn and imitate. In her letter 105, Merteuil is writing to her pupil to both chide and comfort her after Valmont’s sexual initiation. The letter begins as a set of practical explanations and instructions, a sort of sexual primer. Merteuil reassures her pupil that “la honte que cause

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\(^{337}\) For example, Merteuil writes “Si elle veut me recevoir demain, j’irai lui tenir compagnie.” Nestled in such a forceful message, however, we get the impression that Merteuil’s intention is to visit no matter what, and that the si-clause is a pure formality.

\(^{338}\) Ibid., 151.

\(^{339}\) Ibid., 308.
l’amour est comme sa douleur : on ne l’éprouve qu’une fois. On peut encore la feindre après ; mais on ne la sent plus.” In ostensibly consoling Cécile, the Marquise is also opening the door for sexual ruses and manipulations; a time may come, we sense, when Merteuil will want Cécile to feign the “honte” of her first time. The Marquise then goes on to illustrate how this arrangement with Valmont will actually protect Cécile from her mother’s suspicions and garner her Danceny’s respect, all the while allowing her to indulge in carnal pleasures. “Ce parti que je vous propose,” asks Madame de Merteuil, “ne vous paraît-il pas le plus raisonnable, comme le plus doux ?” The main purpose of this letter seems thus to allay Cécile’s fear and shame and allow her relationship with Valmont to continue budding under the watchful eye of Madame de Merteuil.

However, in a concise postscript to her letter, Merteuil reveals the crucial lesson Cécile needs to learn in order to succeed as a libertine. As this passage is one of the most explicitly pedagogical moments in the text, I will quote it in full:

P.S. A propos, j’oubliais... un mot encore. Voyez donc à soigner davantage votre style. Vous écrivez toujours comme un enfant. Je vois bien d’où cela vient ; c’est que vous dites tout ce que vous pensez, et rien de ce que vous ne pensez pas. Cela peut passer ainsi de vous à moi, qui devons n’avoir rien de caché l’une pour l’autre : mais avec tout le monde ! avec votre Amant surtout! vous auriez toujours l’air d’une petite sotte. Vous voyez bien que, quand vous écrivez à quelqu’un, c’est pour lui et non pas pour vous : vous devez donc moins chercher à lui dire ce que vous pense, que ce qui lui plait davantage.

This passage illustrates what is termed by Peter Conroy as Merteuil’s “theory of reception.” The Marquise outlines two basic rules for letter writing; firstly, full disclosure and brutal honesty are neither obligatory nor even helpful when dealing with love relationships; secondly, that one’s intended audience should dictate form and

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340 Ibid., 303.
341 Ibid., 304.
342 Ibid., 305-6.
content. As Conroy concisely states, “writing is dominated, according to the Marquise de Merteuil, not by external considerations like truth, reality, or the ‘facts’ of a situation, but rather by internal factors and most especially by its intended audience.” This statement can of course be applied to the great majority of the Marquise’s letters, which are shrewdly calculating while sometimes even juggling the reactions of multiple readers. In urging Cécile to imitate her writing philosophy, Madame de Merteuil is presenting her with one of the libertines’ greatest tools: the manipulation of reality and its reflection in epistolary commerce. As de Jean has pointed out, the libertines use (re)creation as a form of control, attesting to their instinct that “teaching is first of all a form of fiction-making.”

This tenet of letter-writing stands in sharp opposition to Danceny’s belief in the letter’s authenticity, described in his letter 150. In this amorous message to the Marquise de Merteuil, Danceny explains the pleasure that he takes in writing her: “En attendant le bonheur de te voir je me livre, ma tendre amie, au plaisir de t’écrire; et c’est en m’occupant de toi, que je charme le regret d’en être éloigné. Te tracer mes sentiments, me rappeler les tiens, est pour mon cœur une vraie jouissance; et c’est par elle que le temps même des privations m’offre encore mille biens précieux à mon

344 Ibid.
346 The debate over the authentic and natural virtues of the letter and by extension the epistolary novel was a constant one throughout the 18th century. Although the problematic of the letter portraying the true emotions of its writer is outside the scope of our current argument, we refer our readers to the comprehensive studies of the letter form written by Charles E. Kany, Frédéric Calas, John Howland, Jean-Luc Seylaz, and Jan Herman, among others. As Laurent Versini writes in explaining the immense popularity of the epistolary novel in the eighteenth-century, “le lecteur de romans, au dix-huitième siècle, défiant à l’égard de la fantaisie et de l’ininvraisemblance, trouve dans le roman en lettres un garantie de vérité et un aliment pour sa sensibilité.” Laclos et la tradition, 252.
Like many a Classical lover, Danceny finds solace in the epistle because it represents a conversation with an absent friend or lover. His traditional perception of the letter and its uses extends further, however, when he compares it to another favorite eighteenth-century mode of representation: the portrait. The portrait-fetish (one only has to refer back to the Princesse de Clèves to see the extreme importance it can obtain) is one of Danceny’s few consolations; the letter, nonetheless, is another: “Ton portrait, ai-je dit ? Mais une Lettre est le portrait de l’âme. Elle n’a pas, comme une froide image, cette stagnance si éloignée de l’amour ; elle se prête à tous nos mouvements : tour à tour elle s’anime, elle jouit, elle se repose....” Compared with the static portrait, the letter is a dynamic and rapidly changing copy of the soul. For Danceny, the epistolary mirror is not just a source of pleasure (“...une lettre est si précieuse ! si on ne la lit pas, du moins on la regarde...”) but more significantly, a repository of truth.

As Tristan Florenne highlights in his analysis of the various rhetorical styles contained in the Liaisons dangereuses, Danceny’s conception of letter-writing as “un miroir de l’âme” is contrasted with the libertine perception of rhetoric as an act of communication. Therefore, whereas Danceny — with the full strength of tradition behind him — trusts in the letter as a direct and genuine mode of communication

347 Laclos, LD, 423.
348 This tradition of the letter as conversation dates back to the Ancient philosophers. In response to Lucilius’ reproach that his letters are devoid of high style, Seneca answered “qualis sermo meus esset, si una desideremus aut aumbularemus, inlaboratus et facilis, tales esse epistulas meas volo, quae nihil habent accersitum nec fictum.” Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Epistulae morales ad Lucilium (Los Altos, CA: Packard Humanities Institute, 1991), LXXV. This same idea will develop further in the Renaissance, where we find Erasmus espousing more or less the same idea: “...the wording of a letter should resemble a conversation between friends. For a letter, as the comic poet Turpilius skillfully put it, is a mutual conversation between absent friends, which should be neither unpolished, rough, or artificial, nor confined to a single topic, nor tediously long.” Erasmus, De conscribendis epistolis (Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1989), 20.
349 Letters are “une des expression favorites de l’honnêteté, avec les portraits et les maximes.” Versini, Laclos et la tradition, 231.
350 Laclos, LD, 424–5.
351 Florenne, Rhétorique de l’amour, 19.
incapable of betraying its author’s true intentions, the writing lesson that Madame de Merteuil gives Cécile is quite a different one; namely, what Florenne terms “une technique maîtrisée” to seduce and persuade while respecting the bienséances. John W. Howland quips that Merteuil’s writing is thus “not the place for self-expression.” He elaborates upon this idea, classifying Merteuil’s ars epistolica as a creation of reality rather than a representation of it. The letter becomes thus “a strategic weapon for outright deception and the ultimate domination of the adversary or prey.”

The epistolary lesson which Merteuil imparts to Cécile is clearly at odds with the romantic Chevalier’s perspective on letter-writing as a substitute for amorous discourse. With its emphasis on the manipulation of the recipient’s hopes and desires and its strategic rhetoric of deception, the Merteuilian letter is an exercise in duplicity and fabricating facades. The Marquise’s writing lesson is not, however, the only libertine education that Cécile undergoes: she simultaneously receives a “sentimental” (sexual) education from Valmont. Although the Vicomte rather begrudgingly agrees to debauch the young Volanges, being all consumed with his conquest of Tourvel, he ultimately obeys the Marquise and provides Cécile with her first sexual experiences. Valmont first supplies Cécile with writing materials once Mme de Volanges has discovered her correspondence with Danceny. He then introduces the young girl to means of deception in order that she might continue receiving letters from her lover. Step by step, the Vicomte provides his pupil with the tricks and tools necessary to obtain a copy of the bedroom key. He concludes his precise instructions by declaring that “ce sont ces petits

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352 Ibid., 20.
354 Ibid., 155.
détails qui donnent la vraisemblance, et la vraisemblance rend les mensonges sans conséquence, en ôtant le désir de les vérifier.\textsuperscript{355} In the same way that the Marquise urged Cécile to write not what she thought or felt, but what her correspondent wanted to read, Valmont teaches her to anticipate her interlocutors’ reactions and questions in conversation. This rhetoric of deception is thus an instruction for writing as well as an instruction for acting, another way for Cécile to obliquely navigate as a woman in a male-dominated society. It likewise raises questions about the external reader’s relationship to the letters presented in the novel.

Valmont continues his pedagogical experiment by introducing Cécile to the pleasures of the flesh. Using the key to the bedroom that he had ostensibly obtained for the purpose facilitating interactions between Danceny and Cécile, the Vicomte sneaks into his pupil’s room in the middle of the night. He immediately realizes the state of total sexual ignorance of the latter:

\begin{quote}
Après avoir calmé ses premières craintes, comme je n’étais pas venu là pour causer, j’ai risqué quelques libertés. Sans doute on ne lui a pas bien appris dans son Couvent, à combien de périls divers est exposée la timide innocence, et tout ce qu’elle a à garder pour n’être pas surprise : car, portant toute son attention, toutes ses forces, à se défendre d’un baiser qui n’était qu’une fausse attaque, tout le reste était laissé sans défense ; le moyen de n’en pas profiter !\textsuperscript{356}
\end{quote}

Once again, we see the obvious failures of the traditional convent education, which seeks to educate young women about a world from which they are excluded and isolated. Knowing only about the dangers of an embrace, Cécile is totally ignorant of the rest of her body. Valmont initially proceeds in his pupil’s sexual instruction by non-verbal means, essentially using Cécile’s body as a puppet devoid of will. Unsatisfied with his first kiss, the Vicomte surreptitiously places his pupil in the appropriate posture: “Alors

\textsuperscript{355} Laclos, \textit{LD}, 237.
\textsuperscript{356} Ibid., 270.
ayant guidé les brais timides autour de mon corps, et la pressant de l’un des miens plus amoureusement, le doux baiser a été reçu en effet ; mais bien, mais parfaitement reçu.”

In this first “lesson”, the student seems strangely absent, a mere place-holder for Valmont’s sexual escapades. Scared into submission by the libertine’s convoluted reasoning, Cécile is unable to respond at all to the sexual attack; Valmont finds her “dénuee de tout secours étranger.”

The young Volanges’ account of the same night reveals simultaneously her total ignorance towards sexuality and her lack of epistolary eloquence. She writes to the Marquise that “j’ai peur de ne pas m’être défendue autant que je le pouvais.... il y avait des moments où j’étais comme si je l’aimais...Vous jugez bien que ça ne m’empêchait pas de lui dire toujours que non : mais je sentais bien que je ne faisais pas comme je disais.”

We could envision this moment as Cécile’s first realization of duplicity, of the split between what one says or does and what one truly thinks or feels. Much like what Merteuil was suggesting in her epistolary advice, Cécile’s behavior here is, inadvertently, that of a perfect coquette who seeks to appear virtuous while succumbing to sexual advances. It would appear that Cécile has internalized Merteuil’s advice in her behavior, but has failed with regard to writing. In fact, Cécile seems unable to articulate her feelings to the Marquise, even trailing off in an ambiguous and less than eloquent way: “il a voulu m’embrasser ; et pendant que je me défendais, comme c’est naturel, il a si

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357 Ibid., 271.
358 Ibid.
359 Ibid., 274.
bien fait, que je n’aurais pas voulu pour toute chose au monde....”

Unsure of her words, Cécile even refuses to sign her own letter.

In the same letter as she criticizes Cécile’s writing style, Merteuil also reacts to her account of the night spent with Valmont. In an ironic tone perhaps beyond her pupil’s comprehension, the Marquise seeks to convince Cécile that this is a crucial pedagogical moment in her education. “Il vous apprend ce que vous mouriez d’envie de savoir!” she exclaims. Likewise, the Marquise uses this opportunity to pick apart the young woman’s letter in order to demonstrate its inconsistencies and flaws. Reading between the lines, Merteuil highlights the duplicity of phrases used by Cécile such as “si difficile de se défendre” and “comme fâchée” and accuses her young protégé of lying to her. But in fact Cécile is, albeit clumsily, only doing what the Marquise will advise her to do in her postscript; namely, covering her immodesty with the veil of words designed for a specific addressee, and attempting to master the art of polyphony.

Although Merteuil and Valmont initially appear to be working in cooperation to turn Cécile into a libertine, their educational programs take two very different paths. Whereas, as we have seen, the Marquise influences Cécile in order to teach her about the powers and pitfalls of manipulation, Valmont appears to work in a much more straightforward manner. Valmont writes to the Marquise about their pupil’s progress, indicating that “l’écolière est devenue presque aussi savante que le maître.” Evidently, unlike Merteuil’s epistolary advice, which seems to be too finely tuned for Cécile’s less-

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360 Ibid., 273–4. One manuscript variant completes the sentence as follows: “au monde qu’il restât comme ça.” The fact that this much more straightforward sentence was revised by Laclos indicates the importance of Cécile’s ambiguity, running parallel to her sexual confusion.
361 This is, as mentioned above, one of only two letters written by the Marquise to Cécile.
362 Ibid., 302.
363 Ibid., 322.
than-agile writing abilities, Valmont’s sexual education is met with some immediate success. Is the unambiguous nature of the Vicomte’s teaching perhaps responsible for this discrepancy in results? Of his pedagogical program, Valmont writes that he spends his time

\[ \text{à composer une espèce de catéchisme de débauche, à l’usage de mon écolière.} \]
\[ \text{Je m’amuse à n’y rien nommer que par le mot technique ; et je ris d’avance de l’intéressante conversation que cela doit fournir entre elle et Gercourt la première nuit de leur mariage.} \]
\[ \text{Rien n’est plus plaisant que l’ingénuité avec laquelle elle se sert déjà du peu qu’elle sait de cette langue! elle n’imagine pas qu’on puisse parler autrement.} \]

Cécile’s sexual education is thus precise and anatomically correct, the radical opposite of what little she might have learned in the convent. Rather than using rhetorical flourishes or manipulative psychology as a teaching tool (and, at the same time, as techniques to imitate in order to be a libertine), Valmont calls a spade a spade, using bald technical terms. The catalogue of debaucheries that Valmont prepares for his pupil — which, as we shall see, is incidentally not without anticipating the calculated debauchery of a Sade — seeks nothing but the vulgar truth.\(^{365}\) Much like the *Encyclopédie*, the empiricist Valmont illustrates his lessons with technical terms and visual aides — by showing and doing, rather than by theorizing.

In her thesis *Le libertinage féminin comme réforme pédagogique chez Laclos, Sade et Restif*, Jennifer Howell suggests that Cécile’s education fails completely because Merteuil and Valmont are operating in contradictory directions.\(^{366}\) Whereas the Marquise is (at least initially) looking to shape her pupil by using artifice and deception, Valmont


\(^{365}\) As Florenne notes in his analysis of Cécile’s epistolary style, the young woman does not master “le discours figuré” and instead calls things by their proper name (*op. cit.* 59).

uses brutal actions and raw words to convey the reality of sexuality.\textsuperscript{367} Moreover, as Howell also argues, the certain sexual progress that Cécile makes under Valmont’s tutelage is countered by her total lack of improvement in the epistolary department.\textsuperscript{368} Both Howell and Florenne maintain that “Cécile est le seul personnage qui traverse tout le livre sans changer de manière de parler.”\textsuperscript{369} These two contrasting directions suggested by Howell are in fact related to our initial problematic of imitation and pedagogical exempla. Valmont’s teachings have some measure of success with Cécile because he has her blindly repeat words and actions; imitation here is no more than ignorant mimicry based on the most primitive of natural sensations. Merteuil, on the other hand, fails at educating Cécile because her conception of pedagogical imitation is essentially a rhetorical — and psychological — one, where education is not a tool for simply recreating reality but rather for deception and the manipulation of appearances. In the end, Merteuil does not instruct Cécile so much as she exploits her. Contrasting Cécile with Sade’s Eugénie (\textit{La Philosophie dans le boudoir}), Chantal Thomas concludes that the former, “her youthful illusions dashed forever, has gained no new knowledge: destroyed by a string of affairs, each disastrous in its own way, she has learned nothing.”\textsuperscript{370} Despite receiving a modicum of instruction from Valmont, Cécile’s education from Merteuil is aptly described by this statement.

\textsuperscript{367}This is just another illustration of the opposing strategies used by the two libertines. Writing to the Marquise, Valmont stresses the gendered differences in their strategies: “Déjà vous cherchez par quel moyen j’ai supplanté si tôt l’amant chéri ; quelle séduction convient à cet âge, à cette inexpérience. Épargnez-vous tant de peine, je n’en ai employé aucune. Tandis que maniant avec adresse les armes de votre sexe, vous triomphez par la finesse ; moi, rendant à l’homme ses droits imprescriptibles, je subjuguais par l’autorité.” Laclos, \textit{LD}, 269.

\textsuperscript{368}Howell, “Le libertinage féminin,” 26.

\textsuperscript{369}Florenne, \textit{Rhétorique de l’amour}, 62. Florenne does pinpoint one letter (from Cécile to Danceny, 49) where the young woman attempts to use rhetorical figures such as inversions and parallelisms, but ultimately slips back into her infantile style.

\textsuperscript{370}Thomas, preface in Feher, 117.
Despite Cécile’s predominant role as the young pupil figure throughout the
*Liaisons dangereuses*, she is not, in fact, the only character to receive an education,
epistolary or otherwise. As the ultimate figure of the pedagogue, Merteuil also dispenses
educational wisdom to her partner in crime, Valmont. The first instance of such a
pedagogical dynamic between the libertines can be found in Merteuil’s letter 33, a
response to Valmont’s previous epistle to the Présidente de Tourvel. Ironically enough,
Merteuil’s first criticism of Valmont’s endeavor is his use of the epistolary mode: “Mais
la véritable école est de vous être laissé aller à écrire.” The Marquise then engages
on a discussion of the limited power of letters since, no matter how beautiful their words
may be, the two parties are irremediably absent and thus unable to benefit from the
“ivresse de l’amour” produced in the epistolary form. Merteuil moreover advises
Valmont in much the same way that she will later correct Cécile’s infantile writing style:

> De plus, une remarque que je m’étonne que vous n’ayez pas faite, c’est qu’il n’y
a rien de si difficile en amour, que d’écrire ce qu’on ne sent pas. Je dis écrire
d’une façon vraisemblable : ce n’est pas qu’on ne se serve des mêmes mots ;
mais on ne les arrange pas de même, ou plutôt on les arrange, et cela suffit.
Relisez votre Lettre ; il y règne un ordre qui vous décèle à chaque phrase.

Much like Cécile, who can only say what she is truly feeling or thinking, the
Vicomte is criticized here by his fellow libertine for his shortcomings at the art of
duplicity. His rhetoric, according to Merteuil, is too measured, too technically artificial,
and does not betray the amorous confusion below the surface that a true lover would feel.
The Marquise extrapolates this idea to a criticism of literature in general, lamenting that
“c’est le défaut des Romans ; l’Auteur se bat les flancs pour s’échauffer, et le Lecteur

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371 As the Pléiade edition established by Laurent Versini notes, this common metaphor is “empruntée au jeu
de trictrac,” but “Laclos remonte en tout cas à la valeur étymologique de l’expression, dont l’origine est
373 Ibid., 100.
374 Ibid.
This sentiment of Merteuil’s clearly harkens back to the entire eighteenth-century debate on authenticity in literature. As many critics have examined, the epistolary form was one manner in which the Enlightenment sought to achieve a high degree of authenticity in literature. The only novel that Merteuil graciously exempts from this overall criticism is La Nouvelle Héloïse; nevertheless, she surmises that “malgré le talent de l’Auteur, cette observation m’a toujours fait croire que le fonds en était vrai.” What a mise-en-abîme we have here! Within an epistolary novel, whose contrasting prefaces both assert and deny its authenticity, we have one character criticizing the epistolary style of another for reeking of artifice, in passing making a reference to a real epistolary novel whose basis in historical reality (or at least biography) was hotly debated during the eighteenth-century.

Manifestly doubting in the letter’s utility as an instrument of seduction, the Marquise sketches out instead an argument in support of conversation and direct, verbal contact. Using a varied palette of tones of speech and facial expressions, Merteuil explains, a libertine is more able to conflate desire and sentiment in conversation than in the epistolary form. Natural, unstructured speech, the Marquise argues, is more apt to bring about “cet air de trouble et de désordre, qui est la véritable éloquence de l’amour.” Likewise, facial expressions and easy tears succeed much more at

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375 Ibid.
377 Laclos, LD, 100.
378 Ibid., 101.
deceptively creating an appearance of lovelorn anguish than rhetorical figures and flourishes.

Versini sees Madame de Merteuil as “l’héritière du classicisme,” largely because of her refusal to admit the letter’s “pouvoir de toucher” and by remaining “l’adepte de la parole soutenue par l’action.” For Merteuil, the letter is not privileged as an instrument of seduction, but rather as strategy for defense. As Joan de Jean investigates, Laclos’ characters — as well as Rousseau and Sade’s — demonstrate “a recurrent association between self-protectionism and (classical) pedagogy.” The letter is a bulwark, a fortress behind which Madame de Merteuil attempts to hide if she is forced to write. Likewise, the Présidente de Tourvel seeks to defend herself with the strategic tools of classical rhetoric; perhaps only a reader as adept as the Marquise could notice that “sa défense est bonne ; et sans la longueur de sa Lettre, et le prétexte qu’elle vous donne pour rentrer en matière dans sa phrase de reconnaissance, elle ne se serait pas du tout trahie.”

Having distributed so much pedagogical advice, it is only fitting that the Marquise then provides us with an account of her own, highly unorthodox, educational formation. In the crucial letter 81, Merteuil recounts her early adulthood and how she subverted the constraints placed upon her by a male-dominated society. “Entrée dans le monde

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379 Laclos, O.C., ed. Versini, 1217.
380 De Jean, Literary Fortifications, 7.
381 Laclos, LD, 101. As Janet Altman suggests, Valmont is perhaps the central writer of the Liaisons dangereuses, but Madame de Merteuil is clearly the central reader. Janet G. Altman, Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982): 97.
382 Nøjgaard makes an interesting remark, noting that letter 81 is the only prolonged instance of a flashback in an otherwise future-directed narrative. Nøjgaard, “Un contre exemple,” 419. Though I would object that the story of the “inséparables” might fall under the term of a flashback as well, it is clearly less removed in the past than Merteuil’s youth. Although a further investigation of this incursion into the past would be outside the scope of this dissertation, Nøjgaard’s observation serves to highlight the importance — and oddity — of this letter within Merteuil’s system.
The basis of Madame de Merteuil’s autodidactic system is thus observation and imitation. By examining the facial expressions and bodily gestures of the men and women of society around her, the neglected young Marquise learns the importance of appearances in social commerce. Realizing the effect that such appearances can produce, Merteuil then perfects the art of false representation, imitating the expressions she has observed in the book of society while maintaining her true intentions and desires a secret. By reading the countenances around her, the Marquise has learned to recreate the emotions and actions of others — it is fittingly ironic, then, that Merteuil is proposed as an inimitable figure.

Merteuil continues her education through observation right into her wedding bed. She treats her first foray into sexuality as nothing more than an occasion to learn: “cette première nuit, dont on se fait pour l’ordinaire une idée si cruelle ou si douce, ne me...”

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384 Ibid., 222–3.
385 As Amy J. Allen writes in her thesis *La vertu féminine et l’éducation des femmes dans La Nouvelle Héloïse et Les Liaisons dangereuses*, for Merteuil, “tout rapport social ou intime est devenu une étude.” “La vertu féminine et l’éducation des femmes dans *La Nouvelle Héloïse et Les liaisons dangereuses*” (B.A. Thesis, Smith College, 1990): 72. Could Merteuil’s aptitude in social (and sexual) relations be seen as a site of genuine study? If so, then Merteuil could be said to have devised her own program of studies, and excelled at it, in a sexual imitation of men’s education.
386 Mme de Volanges, while respecting the strength of Madame de Merteuil, will write to the Présidente that “il est juste de la [Merteuil] louer, il serait imprudent de la suivre.” Laclos, *LD*, 98.
présentait qu'une occasion d'expérience : douleur et plaisir, j’observai tout exactement, et ne voyais dans ces diverses sensations, que des faits à recueillir et à méditer.”

Once again, the Marquise’s breed of pedagogy is at the antipodes of a conventual education. It does not derive its foundations in tomes of philosophy or morality but rather in the concrete physical world. The scientific detachment with which Merteuil approaches her nascent sexuality is thus perfectly fitting with her own pedagogical upbringing.

Following her husband’s death, however, the newly widowed Merteuil uses the socially imposed period of grieving to further her education, this time having recourse to the more traditional tools of philosophy and literature. Having deciphered the actions and reactions of people around her, Merteuil now consults works of literature, philosophy, and morality, in order to ascertain “ce qu’on pouvait faire...ce qu’on devait penser...ce qu’il fallait paraître.”

It is important to note that, in mentioning these three branches of learning, Merteuil is in fact echoing the same tripartite division made by Laclos in his pedagogical treatises. Additionally, by first relying on direct experience and then using the recorded experiences of others, the Marquise is likewise following the two-pronged pedagogical model suggested by Laclos in the third essay. This distribution of appropriate reading materials is repeated when the Marquise is preparing for her intimate night with the Chevalier de Belleroche. She writes to Valmont that her reading lists consists of “un chapitre du _Sopha_, une Lettre d’_Héloïse_ et deux Contes de _La Fontaine_, pour recoder les différents tons....” These three works — a popular libertine novel by Crébillon fils, the most famous epistolary novel of the century written by one of its

387 Laclos, _LD_, 224.
388 Ibid., 225.
389 Cf the third essay, 435–437.
390 Laclos, _LD_, 55.
premier philosophers, and a classic of the moralists — embody the same three facets of education proposed by Laclos in his treatise and are likewise employed by Madame de Merteuil for her deceptive purposes.

The most innovative aspect of Merteuil’s self-education, however, is engendered when she realizes the differences between life as represented in literary works and as experienced in the real world, an issue touched upon in Laclos’ essays. Specifically on the issue of love, the Marquise discovers that the transcendental emotion extolled by the poets is not quite so pure and untainted in its eighteenth-century societal incarnation. Passionate love, the Marquise has been instructed by literature, cannot be feigned: “en vain m’avait-on dit, et avais-je lu qu’on ne pouvait feindre ce sentiment.”

Nevertheless, with her clever use of imitation and representation, Merteuil unlocks the secret to the appearance of love. “Je voyais pourtant que, pour y parvenir, il suffisait de joindre à l’esprit d’un Auteur, le talent d’un Comédien.” This statement is only perhaps the most explicit of many addressing the crucial issue of Merteuil’s vision of acting in the world as a sort of theatrical representation. Education — both epistolary and practical — is representation for the Marquise. As we discussed above when examining the advice dispensed to Cécile and Valmont on the subject of letter writing, libertine epistololarity is essentially a theatrical (re)presentation of a protean self, constantly being adapted to the desires and expectations of the reader. Likewise, the use of reading in education appears to be preparation for the donning of various roles in society. To feign

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391 Ibid., 225.
392 Ibid., 225–6.
love, in conclusion, the Marquise needs only to have mastered the words of the novelist and the gestures of the actor.\textsuperscript{393}

In his dialogue, \textit{Le Paradoxe du comédien}, Diderot examines this protean nature of the actor, the first interlocutor arguing that the ideal actor is “un spectateur froid et tranquille” who possesses “de la pénétration et nulle sensibilité, l’art de tout imiter, ou, ce qui revient au même, une égale aptitude à toutes sortes de caractères et de rôles.”\textsuperscript{394} Above all, the actor is constantly engaged in observation in an attempt to reproduce reality: ”tout son talent consiste non pas à sentir, comme vous le supposez, mais a rendre si scrupuleusement les signes extérieurs du sentiment.”\textsuperscript{395} The discomfort encountered in Diderot’s text concerning the essential nature of the actor lies in his ability to be everything and yet nothing at once. The malleability of the actor is thus that “peut-être est-ce parce qu’il n’est rien qu’il est tout par excellence.”\textsuperscript{396} This problem of individuality, at the core of theatrical representation, appears to engender anxiety a hundred-fold when it is a woman assuming various roles. As Merteuil is characterized by her use of theatrical representation, her imitation of other identities (a sort of behavioral heteroglossia) becomes one of her most effective manipulations. Why is the Marquise’s ability to shape-shift so dangerous and disconcerting to her male counterparts? In a

\textsuperscript{393} Chantal Thomas writes about the importance of “face-reading” as early as the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, and the plethora of manuals written on comportment and demeanor: “The treatises which claim to offer objective knowledge in service of virtue, imply an important theatrical dimension of behaviour, and along with it innumerable possibilities for duplicity, lies, and deceit.” Thomas, preface in \textit{Libertine Reader}, 19.

\textsuperscript{394} Denis Diderot, “Le Paradoxe sur le Comédien,” in \textit{Œuvres esthétiques} (Paris: P. Vernière, Garnier, 1959): 306. This aptitude for incarnating a myriad of roles is a theme also found in Diderot’s \textit{Le Neveu de Rameau}, and especially highlighted in the following passage: “Avec des joues renflées et bouffies, et un son rauque et sombre, il rendait les cors et les bassons ; il prenait un son éclatant et nasillard pour les hautbois ; précipitant sa voix avec une rapidité incroyable pour les instruments à corde dont il cherchait les sons les plus approchés ; il sifflait les petites flûtes, il recoulait les traversières, criant, chantant, se démenant comme un forcené ; faisant lui seul, les danseurs, les danseuses, les chanteurs, les chanteuses, tout un orchestre, tout un théâtre lyrique et se divisant en vingt rôles divers...” \textit{Neveu de Rameau}, 112.

\textsuperscript{395} Diderot, \textit{Paradoxe sur le comédien}, 312.

\textsuperscript{396} Ibid., 341.
word: because she, like the ideal actor, can assume any disguise and her male rivals are never able to determine her true identity. This is the same confusion that Merteuil discovers and exploits at the core of the amorous relationship; unlike the majority of women, the Marquise is able to distinguish between love and the lover, whereas others “confondent sans cesse l’amour et l’Amant...croient que celui-là seul avec qui elles ont cherché le plaisir en est l’unique dépositaire ; et, vraies superstitieuses, ont pour le Prêtre, le respect et la foi qui n’est dû qu’à la Divinité.”

In both her educational program and her attitudes to representation in society, Madame de Merteuil is clearly a solitary figure. Whether it is considered a success or a failure, the Marquise’s educational path stands in stark contrast to that of the other women in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* — and, for that matter, the vast majority of eighteenth-century women on the whole. Morten Nøjgaard sees the Marquise’s self-instruction as a “counter-education,” as an attempt by Laclos the pedagogical theoretician to illustrate an education that is not exemplary, but rather exceptional. Furthermore, Nøjgaard believes that this education ultimately fails, most specifically because of its autodidactic nature and its total exclusion of sentiment. Merteuil’s attempt can be applauded for its boldness, but it cannot be considered successful. Nøjgaard writes that

Ainsi l’éducation de la marquise est une tentation héroïque, cornélienne, pour frayer la voie à une nouvelle conception de la femme, mais comme elle ne peut réussir qu’à condition de nier l’autonomie de la vie affective (réduite à un reflet des réactions des sens) et la valeur morale de l’utilité sociale, cette éducation n’a aucune chance pour être adoptée comme le modèle pédagogique qui va former la future épouse du mariage bourgeois.

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397 Laclos, *LD*, 221.
398 Nøjgaard, “Un contre exemple,” 419.
399 Ibid., 425. An analogy could be made here between Merteuil’s individual actions as a woman in a male-dominated society and what Lynda Lange terms “liberal individualist feminism.” Lynda Lange, “Rousseau and Modern Feminism,” in *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory*, ed. Carole Pateman and Mary Lyndon Shanley (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1991), 109. Although Merteuil breaches the boundaries of womanhood in her society, she nevertheless fails at effecting structural change which would
By and large, critics have seen the Marquise’s triple punishment at the end of the novel — her social rejection, physical deformation by illness, and loss of wealth — as an indicator of the failure of her pedagogical experiment. Jennifer Howell, on the other hand, suggests that the question is perhaps to be further probed: “...l’échec, proprement dit, de son éducation [Merteuil] vient uniquement d’une lecture superficielle des Liaisons dangereuses.” Unlike her counterpart Valmont and her pupil/victim Cécile, the Marquise does not die and is still independent at the end of the novel, albeit disgraced and forced to flee. Although I do not entirely agree with Howell’s conclusion that this proves the success of Merteuil’s education, I do believe that this is a question not so readily given an answer by Laclos’ novel as critics may have argued. The issue of Madame de Merteuil’s fate, and the role that her education may have played in it, is clearly an uncomfortable one for the author to resolve. By viewing Merteuil’s pedagogical formation in juxtaposition to Laclos’ essays on female education, however, we can perhaps shed some light on the question. Laclos argues in the treatise that education must always be socially useful; this is obviously in stark opposition to the Marquise’s self-directed attempt at intellectual freedom. Merteuil is the embodiment of the woman mentioned in the first essay who would be dangerous to society, if she managed to procure some sort of education for herself.

Likewise, Merteuil’s overtones of feminism in her letter 81 harken back to our reading of the first pedagogical essay; she boasts to Valmont that she is “née pour venger endure in her wake. Likewise, Sade’s villainous heroine Juliette succeeds, but only by transcending her femininity; she does not seem to have a sense of belonging to a class of women.

400 Howell, “Libertinage féminin,” 34.
401 “...si dans l'état actuel de la société une femme telle qu'on peut la concevoir formée par une bonne éducation ne serait pas très malheureuse en se tenant à sa place et très dangereuse si elle tentait d'en sortir.” Laclos, Éducation des femmes, 428.
mon sexe et maîtriser le vôtre.” Much as the first essay dissolves into the impossibility of revolution, however, so does Madame de Merteuil’s feigned allegiance to her gender — she in fact shares very little with “femmes à sentiments” above whom she has raised herself. As Giulia Pacini argues, the Marquise seeks to appropriate the same rights as men but never questions the inevitability of the system, playing within the male power structure. Social conventions serve to isolate women in the Liaisons dangereuses — in contrast to the importance of male friendships in the novel, such as Valmont and Danceny or Prévan’s ultimate redemption — and Merteuil thus “manipulates an extant system, rather than considering the possibility of reform or revolution.” For all her personal accomplishments, she is complicit within the authoritarian and monologic male system and ultimately, Merteuil’s lack of solidarity with her gender — like that of Sade’s Juliette — means that the gains procured by her self-education are not transferable.

If we are still unsure about the outcome of Madame de Merteuil’s education, we need only consider the fate of her pupils. Cécile, as we have mentioned, is completely depraved and destroyed by the two libertines, who use her to write an “anti-Émile,” a negative education of ignorance and defenselessness. Disgraced and retreating into the convent for life, the young Volanges has evidently been failed by her education. Unable to obtain a true education in the convent and completely destroyed by her dangerous libertine instruction, Cécile could easily be considered, as Florenne believes,

402 Laclos, LD, 221. As Seylaz suggests in La création romanesque chez Laclos, Merteuil’s vengeance is perhaps even more personal than her actions seem to suggest — the entire impetus behind her projects in the Liaisons dangereuses being an attempt at vengeance against Gercourt. Jean-Luc Seylaz, Les Liaisons Dangereuses et la création romanesque chez Laclos (Genève: Droz, 1965): 90.
405 De Jean, Literary Fortifications, 246.
“l’incarnation de la réflexion théorique de Laclos sur l’éducation des femmes.”

Although Florenne is rather obscure in this statement, I have interpreted it as suggesting an analogy between the essays’ obliqueness and the female protagonists’ wayward destinies in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. That is to say: just as Laclos’ pedagogical treatises attempt to address the thorny issue of female education from several different perspectives, only to lose all coherence and trail off into self-refuted paradox, so the proud and self-educated Merteuil tries to obliquely navigate the perils of her society, only to be thwarted by her own talents, while the unfortunate Cécile, never mastering such survival tactics, becomes akin to a boat tossed around this way and that on the open sea. Despite being at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of education, both women are ultimately brought down by their inability to control their own movements within male-dominated society.

Let us examine now the case of Valmont, who, as mentioned above, is sometimes also treated as a student by the Marquise. If in letter 33, the Marquise chastises Valmont for his lack of rhetorical ability and emotional deceptiveness, letter 141 is the ultimate proof of both her control (and superiority) over Valmont and, simultaneously, the flaws of her pedagogical system. In this letter, a manipulative masterpiece, Mme de Merteuil criticizes Valmont for being weak and falling in love with Mme de Tourvel. Unconvinced by his staged infidelity with Émilie, the Marquise maintains that Valmont is subjugated by the Présidente: “Mais ce que j’ai dit, ce que j’ai pensé, ce que je pense encore, c’est que vous n’en avez pas moins de l’amour pour votre Présidente ; non pas, à la vérité, de l’amour bien pur ni bien tendre, mais de celui que vous pouvez avoir....”

Using her

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keen observational skills, Mme de Merteuil has detected that “la différence entre vos [Valmont] discours et vos actions.”408 She thus begins her attack by using mimicry, repeating several of Valmont’s phrases from previous letters — the most important phrase becoming the object of her own vengeance. In Letter 138, Valmont wrote to his “belle amie” announcing that “je persiste... non je ne suis point amoureux ; et ce n’est pas ma faute si les circonstances me forcent d’en jouer le rôle.”409 In the context of Merteuil’s response, this phrase acquires its full strength by forcing the Vicomte to definitively break things off with the Présidente, and, indirectly, to admit Merteuil’s superiority. According to Michel Delon, the use of italics in Les Liaisons dangereuses is very often a sign of “mots de passe et les jeux de la rhétorique libertine,” shattering the letter and revealing “ce qu’il y a d’illusion dans cette apparence de jaillissement spontanée d’une intimité” in intimate correspondence.410

Merteuil’s use of the italic thus marks her imitation of Valmont’s rhetoric and, by locating flaws in its logic, demonstrates the superiority of her observations. Ensnaring Valmont in his own words, the Marquise recounts a story of a “homme de sa connaissance” who was powerless to leave a woman who he loved, and the advice given to him by his friend. Much like Valmont, we discover, this man “passait ainsi sa vie, ne cessant de faire des sottises, et ne cessant de dire après : ce n’est pas ma faute.”411 As a remedy, a female friend of his sent him a little story built around this refrain. We can perhaps spot the irony, therefore, in the fact that the narrated story offers a complete escape from personal responsibility, whereas the action that Merteuil demands will push

408 Ibid., 402.
409 Ibid., 396, original emphasis.
411 Laclos, LD, 404.
Valmont to undergo the consequences of a decision he did not even want to make. The story hence highlights the Marquise’s attitude, as she has educated herself since childhood: there is no room for “ce n’est pas ma faute” in Merteuil’s system, and her first principle is that of self-determination.

Functioning as a clever and cruel exemplum, Merteuil’s story seeks to educate the Vicomte by revealing to him his own weaknesses. Using what Calas terms “une réécriture violente,” citing and imitating Valmont with the worst of intentions, Merteuil also displays her rhetorical superiority by playing with the various levels of enunciation and readers of her letter. There is first the level of correspondence between Valmont and Merteuil; this is mirrored by Merteuil’s citations of Valmont, drawing the reader’s eye to the reflexive nature of the text; Merteuil then includes a story which is both simultaneous and previous to the letter. For if the characters of this strange story are vaguely named “un homme de ma connaissance” and “une amie,” and if we can find correlations with Valmont and Merteuil, Merteuil nevertheless does not identify as the author of this text, but simply as its copiste. As Jean Rousset remarks in his article “Les lecteurs indiscrets,” this letter 141 is thus a “monstre épistolaire,” “une pseudo-lettre” and above all a “citation réelle d’une citation fictive.”

This is also, interestingly enough, the only letter of correspondence, albeit indirectly, between Merteuil and Tourvel. As Conroy remarks, this is also a narrative victory for Merteuil because Valmont’s “status as a writer or narrator of this climactic letter is so diminished that a separate copy of it does not even appear in the novel.”

Merteuil’s superiority is also revealed in contrast to Valmont’s apparent incomprehension.

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414 Conroy, Intimate, Intrusive, Triumphant, 114.
of the letter model; his response seems to us rather disingenuous: “Ma foi, ma belle amie, je ne sais si j’ai mal lu ou mal entendu, et votre Lettre, et l’histoire que vous y faites, et le petit modèle épistolaire qu’y était compris.”\textsuperscript{415} Whether his incomprehension is real or willful, we are surprised by the lack of mastery Valmont reveals in this situation. The power to construct and decipher epistolary ruses is essential to the libertine’s role; “Merteuil and Valmont’s power depends entirely on their singular ability to read society as a text to be decoded and rewritten according to their own personal ambitions and desires.”\textsuperscript{416} In response to Merteuil’s letter 141, Valmont can only blindly recopy the model, without understanding the lesson: “ce que je puis vous dire, c’est que ce dernier [le modèle] m’a paru original et propre à faire de l’effet : aussi je l’ai copié tout simplement, et tout simplement encore, je l’ai envoyé à la céleste Présidente.”\textsuperscript{417} Offering the letter and the epistolary model without a guide for interpretation, M\textsuperscript{me} de Merteuil demonstrates her superiority vis-à-vis Valmont: “Valmont, qui dictait des lettres à ses victimes, se voit obligé de recopier la lettre de rupture dont Merteuil lui donne le modèle.”\textsuperscript{418}

Vanpée suggests that the language contained in the “lettre de rupture” indirectly written by Merteuil comes in fact from a male discourse such as Valmont’s; offering a mirror in which the seducer could look at himself, the epistolary model becomes “a parodic echo of his particular language. The letter would seem to have an author — Valmont.”\textsuperscript{419} Merteuil is thus able to master the various glossai of society, even posing

\textsuperscript{415} Laclos, LD, 405.
\textsuperscript{417} Laclos, LD, 405–6.
\textsuperscript{418} Delon, “Discours italique,” 146.
\textsuperscript{419} Vanpée, “Reading Differences,” 98.
as a man. And despite the alleged male discourse, Valmont does not understand the letter and attempts to reduce its complexities. His solution, according to Vanpée, “is to ignore the Marquise’s letter, which frames and places the story and the enclosed letter in a *mise en abîme*, and to concentrate instead on the ‘petit modèle épistolaire,’ whose series of conventionally coded clichés make it more easily decodable.”420 Where Vanpée mainly sees a distinction in the female and male modalities of reading,421 I, however, chiefly see two different conceptions of the power of language and, more specifically, of the manipulation of discourse as pedagogical advantage. After having sent the epistolary model, Valmont is rather surprised that he has not yet received a response: “J’espérais pouvoir vous envoyer ce matin la réponse de ma bien-aimée : mais il est près de midi, et je n’ai encore rien reçu. J’attendrai jusqu’à cinq heures ; et si alors je n’ai pas eu de nouvelles, j’irai en chercher moi-même.”422 Evidently, Valmont still believes that he and Tourvel will be able to patch things up, much like after his letter 138 and the episode with Émilie; he clearly does not see the amplitude of his message. The Marquise must open his eyes to the truth: “Quoi ! vous aviez l’idée de renouer, et vous avez pu écrire ma Lettre ! Vous m’avez donc crue bien gauche à mon tour ! Ah ! croyez-moi, Vicomte, quand une femme frappe dans le cœur d’une autre, elle manque rarement de trouver l’endroit sensible, et la blessure est incurable.”423

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420 Ibid., 99–100.
421 According to her, Letter 141 “produces radically differing interpretations that will separate the Marquise and Valmont irrevocably...” and Valmont’s failure is not being able to read as a woman, whereas the Marquise “can read both as a man and a woman” and therefore can understand Tourvel’s reaction. “Reading Differences,” 94; 104. And lastly: “Faced with the reading test that the Marquise invents for him in Letter 141, he cannot but fail, for he cannot read in any other way but mimetically and narcissistically, by projecting himself onto what he reads.” Ibid., 109.
423 Ibid., 412.
Merteuil’s Letter 141 thus functions as the ultimate lesson for Valmont, both theoretical and practical.\textsuperscript{424} On the one hand, she is engaging him in a lesson on the power of rhetoric and his limited ability to manipulate language. Simultaneously, the Marquise deals the final blow to Tourvel, illustrating to the Vicomte his mistaken understanding of female psychology. Perhaps most importantly, however, is Valmont’s complete effacement from this letter, as briefly mentioned above. The reader never sees his copied version, and his action is limited to blindly repeating a message he does not understand. In the words of Barbara Guetti, the message of the letter is meaning “perpetually bestowed and endlessly retracted,” a message in constant circulation but admitting neither author nor origin.\textsuperscript{425} Letter 141, therefore, is a clear example of Madame de Merteuil’s superior mastery of discourse — both epistolary and seductive — over her libertine rival.

\section*{III. Conclusion}

We could, as some critics have, conclude our analysis with this portrait of Merteuil, successful autodidact and captivating protagonist. What happens, however, when we try to assess the educational outcomes of \textit{Les Liaisons dangereuses}, particularly in light of Laclos’ pedagogical essays? As we briefly mentioned above, the oft-debated ending of Laclos’ novel centers on Merteuil’s triple punishment and its relation to the rest of the text. Many critics would agree with Vivienne Mylne, arguing that Merteuil’s fate

\textsuperscript{424} Versini makes a similar comment about letter 10, concerning Merteuil’s amorous interlude with Belleroca. \textit{Laclos et la tradition}, 335.

is “an error of judgment,” a last-minute return to morality that convinces no one and causes the text, as a whole, to suffer stylistically. Rather than try and examine the novel’s ending within the framework of morality, let us have recourse to the pedagogical problematic. Already, Barbara Guetti sees a clear connection between education and Valmont’s fate contained in the aforementioned Letter 141, which encloses “a message which appears to summarize what is actually being said in this [Laclos’] abortive treatise on women’s education: *ce n’est pas ma faute.*” She argues that no responsibility is taken, either for the current deplorable state of affairs in women’s education, or for the repercussions of the deadly letter. If we accept this perspective, then we find that much as Laclos the moralist was not able to finish a cohesive and unified treatise on female education, perhaps Laclos the novelist was likewise left with irresolvable contradictions. Pierre Bayard takes a similar approach in his *Paradoxe du menteur*, where he argues that Merteuil’s education, as illustrated in Letter 81 in particular, is “l’un des textes les plus cyniques du roman de Laclos” and simultaneously “une grande page de la philosophie des Lumières.” He finds that Merteuil’s ultimate fate, and how we are supposed to interpret it, is likewise ambiguous. Perhaps, after all, Merteuil’s punishment is not so harsh, he suggests, pointing to an uncertainty in the novel’s ending: “le texte ne dit pas que Mme de Merteuil a perdu un œil, mais que Mme de Volanges en a entendu parler, ce qui, dans le cadre des Liaisons, n’est absolument pas la même chose.”

At the end of the day, Laclos is not a professional pedagogue. Like many socially conscious members of his century, he ruminated on the pedagogical question, in both

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427 Guetti, “The Old Régime,” 146.
429 Ibid., 22.
fictional and non-fictional modes of writing. But does he ever provide a unified answer for the reformation of female education? I believe not. Let us also remember that Laclos’ project for “happy family novel,” so to speak, mentioned in his correspondence, was never carried out.\textsuperscript{430} It would perhaps have been the counter-poison to the \textit{Liaisons dangereuses}, but Laclos, the virtuoso of the epistolary novel, was never able to write it. Ultimately, \textit{Les Liaisons dangereuses} throws the pedagogical question back at the reader, who must decide if the novel is an exercise in education, seduction, or both. The contradictory prefaces (as we saw, also an important aspect of Rousseau’s \textit{La Nouvelle Héloïse}) initiate the reader into this productive mode of reading from the very beginning of the text. Addressing the anticipated criticisms of readers concerning the utility of the work, the “rédacteur” admits that

\begin{quote}
\ldots tous ces reproches peuvent être fondés : je crois aussi qu’il me serait possible d’y répondre, et même sans excéder la longueur d’une Préface. Mais on doit sentir que, pour qu’il fût nécessaire de répondre à tout, il faudrait que l’Ouvrage ne pût répondre à rien ; et si j’en avais jugé ainsi, j’aurais supprimé à la fois la Préface et le Livre.\textsuperscript{\textit{431}}
\end{quote}

The reader is warned that no preface or moralizing gloss will be provided to elucidate the meaning of the text; s/he will have to derive it from the marrow of the novel.

The novel is doubly prefaced, by an “avertissement de l’éditeur” and a “précéd de l’éditeur.” The first of these paratexts reenacts the authenticity debate prompted by many epistolary collections and creates ambiguous distinctions between the narrator, the author, the editor, and the copywriter (“rédacteur” being itself an ambivalent term). A satirical tone permeates the short \textit{avertissement}, insisting on the fact that such debauched tales could not be true “dans ce siècle de philosophie, où les lumières, répandues de

\textsuperscript{430} Cf. René Pomeau, \textit{Laclos ou le paradoxe}, 116.
\textsuperscript{431} Laclos, \textit{LD}, 31.
toutes parts, ont rendu, comme chacun sait, tous les hommes si honnêtes et toutes les femmes si modeste et si réservées.”

The author/copywriter’s preface, on the other hand, begins by explaining the editing choices made concerning letter selection, style, and typography, and then addresses the possible merits of such a work. The reader might derive pleasure from the letters’ variety of styles and perspicacious observations, but the collection’s real usefulness lies in its revealing depiction of libertine seduction. Such a truthful portrait of vice would ostensibly serve to educate, and thus warn, innocent young men and women. And yet the writer of the preface insists that “loin de conseiller cette lecture à la jeunesse, il me paraît très important d’éloigner d’elle toutes celles de ce genre.” Who is thus the intended audience of this cautionary tale? The preface author says he would agree with a mother who would give this book to her daughter on her wedding day — but in fact, this is much too late, if we are to believe the story of Cécile’s corruption!

The essential polarity that Janet Altman attributes to the letter novel in Epistolarity is here exemplified by the ambiguous and at times contradictory interpretations that the reader of Les Liaisons dangereuses can extrapolate, especially with regard to the education of women. If Cécile’s convent education obviously fails her, and her libertine initiation leads her to ruin and despair, Madame de Merteuil’s fate nevertheless cannot be so easily resumed. She is perhaps simultaneously the misguided and dangerous self-educated woman of the treatise and the sole survivor of the libertine carnage; the victim of a misogynist society and the victor of an intellectual fight for supremacy. Like the Vaubanian fortresses criticized by Laclos, perhaps Merteuil is a

432 Ibid., 25.
433 Ibid., 30. The epigraph to the novel, taken from Rousseau’s Julie, is likewise admonitory: “J’ai vu les mœurs de mon temps, et j’ai publié ces lettres.” Ibid., 23.
self-contained entity which can survive indefinitely only because it is cut off from the outside world, a constant exercise in defense.\textsuperscript{434} As Laclos’ pedagogical treatise warns, no woman can break out of the system and hope to obtain a socially beneficial education — she, like Madame de Merteuil, can only maneuver defensively within the male constraints and attacks.

The variety of styles for which the \textit{Liaisons dangereuses} is praised can, in this light, be seen as another navigational tactic, another strategy for self-expression without the danger of being exposed so directly. The heteroglossia exhibited in the novel allows ambiguity to cloak the questions of how, what and why to teach women; just like the unreadable Merteuil, Laclos’ pedagogical suggestions remain evasive and at times, apparently contradictory. The three essays on female education accomplish the same goal: a genuine exploration of the problems inherent in teaching women in eighteenth-century France, protected by a series of veering strategies designed to try and negotiate a unique space for women.

\textsuperscript{434} De Jean, \textit{Literary Fortifications}, 43.
I. Introduction

Easy stereotypes have developed about the Marquis de Sade, often conflating his personal life and his literary works. He has even lent his name to the sexual practice of “sadism,” albeit unwittingly, as the term was created by the Austro-Hungarian psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing in 1886. But there is more to Sade than sexuality; and more to Sade’s sexuality than reveling in the pain, suffering, and humiliation of others. Never one to back down from controversial arguments, Sade will enter into the contemporary debate on female education with aplomb. In his novels, dialogues, short stories, and essays, the Marquis is constantly preoccupied with the question of education and, by extension, issues of power between the sexes and the appropriate role for women. Unlike Rousseau, Laclos, and his other predecessors, however, Sade is willing to take his arguments to their farthest reaches without any respect for bienséances. In reiterating educational structures and solutions proposed by Enlightenment thinkers in his works — for instance, the totalizing categorization of knowledge exemplified by the Encyclopédie — Sade parodies them and reveals just how far they might lead, once applied to the sexual realm. Sade’s strategy of parody, a form of imitation, has several consequences. First of all, it allows him to engage with other texts in precisely the same pedagogical manner that he seeks to parody. Parody is in fact a mode of reading, a form of analysis that draws out the latent ideas of a text and extrapolates them to their exaggerated consequences. Secondly, the genre of parody reveals an oft-neglected aspect of Sade: his
humor. In literally interpreting his predecessors and mining their contradictions, Sade takes their arguments one step further, arriving at conclusions that are often absurdly comical. In a sense, Sade is performing an exegesis of Enlightenment pedagogical thought, bringing out its underlying tendencies and contradictions, while illustrating the undesired consequences that it might bring to society if rigorously applied. Consequently, Sade’s “answers” do not provide a particular course of studies for women and, like Laclos, do not propose a systematic model for female education. What Sade does offer, however, is a warning against the tyranny of classification and rigidindoctrination. With humor, parody, and intertextuality, Sade gives his contemporaries — if they are willing to read him — a new manner of reading and engaging with an important social issue.

What advice on instruction, especially female instruction, can we expect to gain from the works of a writer famous for his depiction of sexual cruelty and amoral licentiousness? Reading closely, we find that Sade is obsessed with the issue of education and in particular with relations between teacher and student. Like Laclos, Sade chooses to elaborate his pedagogical ideas in a variety of genres, including the essay *Idée sur les romans*, the novels *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* and *Les 120 journées de Sodome* and, last but not least, in his often neglected (and sole) epistolary novel, *Aline et Valcour, ou le roman philosophique*. The variety of literary genres — and especially the dichotomy between the epistolary novel and the academic treatise — suggests for Sade, as it did for Laclos before him, that the pedagogical question is not an easy one to answer. It is precisely this confusion surrounding attempts to establish a proper (female) pedagogy that Sade exploits. The apparent realism of Sade’s novels — the graphic
violence and pornography, the straightforward narration — is in fact only a house of mirrors reflecting back upon itself. Fully manipulated by Sade, the issue of pedagogy is revealed to be fundamentally contradictory with the novel’s purpose, and realism just another of its fallacies. At the heart of Sade’s labyrinthine declarations about education — at the heart, perhaps, of Sade’s structuring narrative force — we find contradiction.

II. Vice Vindicated: Idée sur les romans

Although Sade does not write a strictly pedagogical treatise in the spirit of Laclos’ three essays on female education, he does provide us with his musings on a related topic in Idée sur les romans. A preliminary draft of this text, labeled as Lettre sur les romans and written in the vein of Marivaux and Lafayette was elaborated as early as 1788. The revised Idée was published as the preface to Sade’s short story collection Les Crimes de l’amour in Year VIII. Idée sur les romans offers reflections on the novel and its potential social utility as a teaching tool. As we already saw in our previous chapter, female education as understood by Laclos was largely a matter of teaching young women how to read and write; not in a basic functional capacity, but as a means to protect themselves in a male-dominated society rife with libertine seduction. The novel, wildly popular in the eighteenth-century and yet regarded with critical suspicion, was a source of many potential dangers, as Rousseau’s pithy formula “jamais fille chaste n’a lu de romans” conveys. In Idée sur les romans, Sade chooses to defend the novel and its utility against the common criticism that it was a dangerous genre to be kept away from upstanding moral readers. In fact, however, Sade is doing more here than just being the novel’s
apologist. As we will see shortly, his ambiguous and self-defeating mention of *Justine* at the end of this essay lays the groundwork for Sade’s parodying of Enlightenment thought regarding education. Essentially, Sade establishes the principle of contradiction at the heart of his narrative. Both in regard to the often-contradictory relationship between author and character (or narrator) and that between author and reader, Sade problematizes the Enlightenment belief in instructional literature by parodying its extremes and illustrating its inherent contradictions.

The Marquis begins his investigation into the purpose of the novel by offering up the following three questions, which he will attempt to answer in his brief opuscule:

On appelle roman, l’ouvrage fabuleux composé d’après les plus singulières aventures de la vie des hommes. Mais pourquoi ce genre d’ouvrage porte-t-il le nom de roman ? Chez quel peuple devons-nous en chercher la source, quels sont les plus célèbres ? Et quelles sont, enfin, les règles qu’il faut suivre pour arriver à la perfection de l’art d’écrire ?

Sade at first appears to approach these questions in a frank and straightforward manner: in a rapid and somewhat fanciful etymological foray, he links the term *roman* to the “langue romane” spoken in the Middle Ages. This terminological issue out of the way, he moves on to the second question, seeking to identify the cultural and geographical origins of the novel form. Sade explains that contemporary thought would have it that the novel began in ancient Greece, was passed on to the Moors, then picked up by the Spaniards and finally transmitted to the French troubadours, who would go on to influence the courtly romances of medieval times. However, Sade notes the vast temporal gaps in such a filiation, suggesting that perhaps a psychological approach could more successfully pinpoint the origins of the novel. He establishes a link between religion and the novel, which may at first seem somewhat surprising to us. “N’en

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doutons point : ce fut dans les contrées qui, les premières, reconnurent des dieux, que les roman prirent leur source...à peine les hommes eurent-ils soupçonné des êtres immortels, qu’ils les firent agir et parler ; dès lors, voilà des métamorphoses, des fables, des paraboles, des romans.”

436 Man, Sade argues, is ruled by two weaknesses: the need to pray and the need to love. From these two desires springs forth the fledgling novel.

“Voilà la base de tous les romans ; il [l’homme] en a fait pour peindre les êtres qu’il implorait, il en a fait pour célébrer ceux qu’il aimait.”

437 This brief argument once again brings us back to the notion of imitation, for it is not so much to exalt their gods that the first novel writers would have penned their works, but to (re)produce them, to give credence to the traditions and superstitions emanating from the priests. The novel is created with a desire to emulate the deity or loved one, almost to take its place, by creating idols which may exceed their original models: “on chante les enfants de Mars comme on avait célébré ceux du ciel...las de s’entretenir d’eux, on crée des personnages qui leur ressemblent...qui les surpassent.”

438 Bored — or jealous? — of his original models, man seeks to surpass them by means of the novel. With imitation so anchored at the basis of the novel, Sade already implies the possibility for parody — which is, after all, imitation and humor combined.

Consequently, Sade proposes that it is futile to seek a single origin for the novel, since it would have come about under every sky where man, always the same, had the desire to pray and to love. “Il ne faut donc pas s’attacher à trouver la source de ce genre d’écrire, chez telle ou telle nation de préférence ; on doit se persuader par ce qui vient d’être dit, que toutes l’ont plus ou moins employé, en raison du plus ou moins de

436 Sade, Idée, 35.
437 Ibid., 37.
438 Ibid., 35.
penchant qu’elles ont éprouvé, soit à l’amour, soit à la superstition.”

Although certain national tastes and styles may be distinguished, the novel as a form of expression is universal, according to Sade. This argument, perhaps not terribly exciting to us, given our modern predilection for novels over many other literary forms, was a rather bold statement in a century that still cherished the ancient forms of poetry and tragedy. Sade’s position essentially provides the novel with the illustrious heritage often denied it by contemporary critics. And at the foundation of this newfound honor is the notion of imitation, the novel’s potential for reproduction and embellishment of history.

During his international review of some of the major high points of the novel’s development throughout the ages, Sade devotes an important paragraph to praising Rousseau, and more specifically, his *Nouvelle Héloïse*. The Marquis’ rapport with Rousseau, which we will have the opportunity to discuss later on, is always a complicated and problematic one. In this essay, however, we initially only see Sade’s clear and unambiguous praise for his predecessor:

> Que de vigueur que d’énergie dans l’*Héloïse* ! ...L’Amour traçait de son flambeau toutes les pages brûlantes de *Julie*, et l’on peut dire avec raison que ce livre sublime n’aura jamais d’imitateurs. Puissé cette vérité faire tomber la plume des mains, à cette foule d’écrivains éphémères qui, depuis trente ans, ne cessent de nous donner de mauvaises copies de cet immortel original ; qu’ils sentent donc que, pour l’atteindre, il faut une âme de feu comme celle de Rousseau, un esprit philosophique comme le sien, deux choses que la nature ne réunit pas deux fois dans le même siècle.

However, as many critics point out, the “inimitable” *Nouvelle Héloïse* ironically provides much inspiration for Sade’s own epistolary novel, *Aline et Valcour*. Is the crucial point here that Sade’s attempt at a similar project is only possible because he also unifies the contradictions of the “âme de feu” and “esprit philosophique”? Or is *Aline et Valcour* in

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439 Ibid., 37–8.
440 Ibid., 47.
fact a parody of Rousseau’s pedagogico-epistolary blockbuster? In addition to Rousseau, the Marquise likewise praises the English epistolary novelists Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, arguing that their brand of realism, focusing on human passions such as love, is more apt to represent “l’étude profonde du cœur de l’homme” than the work of their fastidious French counterparts.\textsuperscript{441}

Here Sade introduces the single most important argument of his treatise on novel writing: that a positive social effect on the reader can be achieved independently of the apparent triumph or failure of morality within the novel. From Richardson and Fielding, Sade writes, we have learned that “ce n’est pas toujours en faisant triompher la vertu qu’on intéresse.”\textsuperscript{442} It is the full range of human emotions, passions, and actions that must be represented by the novel, the “miroir fidèle de ce cœur.”\textsuperscript{443} Writing as reflection of innermost feelings was a very common idea in Sade’s time, similarly espoused, for instance, by Danceny in his letter 150 where the missive is described as the “miroir de l’âme.” However, Sade strips this idea of its rose-colored connotations when depicting vice implacably. Nevertheless, it is not only due to an aesthetic preoccupation with \textit{vraisemblance} and the faithful portraiture of the soul that Sade argues in favor of total representation. It is in fact first a quest for literary recognition and readerly pleasure that causes him to take up the banner of vice and infamy. Virtue is only one of the colors available on the novelist’s palette, and very often not, Sade believes, the most effective one in affecting the reader:

\textit{Car, lorsque la vertu triomphe, les choses étant ce qu’elles doivent être, nos larmes sont taries avant que de couler ; mais si, après les plus rudes épreuves, nous voyons enfin la vertu terrassée par le vice, indispensablement nos âmes se déchirent, et l’ouvrage nous ayant excessivement émus, ayant, comme disait...}

\textsuperscript{441} Ibid., 48.
\textsuperscript{442} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{443} \textit{Ibid.}
The “happy ending,” as it were, does not provide the novel with enough emotional investment on the part of the reader. It is only by thwarting the reader’s sentimental expectations that the novelist can hope to keep his attention and interest. Although the above passage only speaks explicitly of “intérêt” and the praise that such a novel could garner, in answering his third aforementioned question Sade is using the language of morality.

Moreover, I believe that Sade is purposefully blurring the distinction between aesthetic and moral objectives for the novel, thus establishing contradictions within his own arguments to highlight those often found in his contemporaries. If a moral objective does not at first seem entirely plausible in the passage cited above, we have only to refer to an entirely more straightforward example that the Marquis gives in a letter to his wife: “Qu’il est nullement nécessaire qu’au dénouement le vice soit puni et la vertu récompensée.... Mais quoique impunie, qui est-ce qui voudrait lui ressembler? Or, voilà l’art: il consiste non pas à punir le vice dans la comédie, mais à le peindre de telle sorte que personne ne veuille lui ressembler.”445 Which Sade are we to believe? The one asserting the novel’s amorality or the one arguing that his aesthetic choices are actually more moral than those of his contemporaries?446 It seems that Sade is purposefully blurring this distinction, taking on either role as it best suits his argument or defense against critics.

444 Ibid.
446 The latter is certainly the position Sade adopts in his response to Villeterque, as we shall see.
“A quoi servent les romans ?” Sade’s blunt answer directly addresses his readers, whom, anticipating Baudelaire, he terms “hommes hypocrites et pervers” — “ils servent à vous peindre tels que vous êtes.”447 Once again evoking the notion of the novel-as-mirror, Sade suggests that the novel is the “tableau des mœurs séculaires,” hence playing an important moral role in societal self-examination. We find an even clearer illustration of Sade’s position on the role of virtue and vice in his response to Villeterque, a littérature who savagely attacked Sade’s Les crimes de l’amour in an article published in year IX. In this vitriolic response, Sade justifies his theory of “le vice terrassant la vertu” by having recourse to the Aristotelian model of terror and pity, the two emotions that theater must arouse in its spectators. “Or d’où peut naitre la terreur, si ce n’est des tableaux du crime triomphant, et d’où naît la pitié, si ce n’est de ceux de la vertu malheureuse ?”448 By rousing his readers with pitiful portraits of defeated virtue, Sade is again blurring the line between an aesthetic and a moral objective for the novel. It is implied, of course, that if he did not cherish purity, the sight of its immolation would not be a cause for sorrow. Moreover, the Aristotelian terms of terror and pity cannot be used without implicating the notion of catharsis, very frequently interpreted as a moral concept from the Renaissance on. As Brunius argues in the Dictionary of the History of Ideas, “Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics does give...support to a specific ethical interpretation of catharsis.... Corneille, Racine, and Lessing formulated different solutions, but they agreed that the catharsis made the experience of tragedy a moral one, and made the public morally wiser.”449

447 Sade, Idée, 53.
448 Sade, Idée, 94.
In his response to Villeterque, Sade also evokes one of his most important literary tenets: the narrative separation between author and character (or narrator), which may engender apparent contradictions. Though literary criticism has weathered the storms of modernism and post-modernism, many critics still attempt to directly correlate the Marquis de Sade’s personal beliefs with his characters’ perverse dissertations. As Philippe Roger lucidly points out, there are two main theoretical and critical tendencies used in approaching Sade’s work. On one side are “les figuratifs,” who seek to sketch out Sade’s portrait, to diagnose him; on the other, “les moralistes,” who attempt to expose an obfuscated moral philosophy buried within his oeuvre. And yet, Sade in his time already denounced these very hermeneutic traps. He writes to Villeterque:

Je suis en contradiction avec moi-même, ajoute le pédagogue Villeterque, quand je fais parler un de mes héros d’une manière opposée à celle dont j’ai parlé dans ma préface. Mais, détestable ignorant, apprends donc que chaque acteur d’un ouvrage dramatique doit y parler le langage établi par le caractère qu’il porte ; qu’alors c’est le personnage qui parle, et non l’auteur, et qu’il est on ne saurait plus simple, dans ce cas, que ce personnage, absolument inspiré par son rôle, dise des choses totalement contraires à ce que dit l’auteur quand c’est lui-même qui parle. Certes, quel homme eût été Crébillon s’il eût toujours parlé comme Atrée ; quel individu que Racine, s’il eût pensé comme Néron.

In Sade’s perspective, the novel is not a straightforward exhibition of its author’s morality, but rather an independent narrative, capable of contradictions without necessarily disintegrating into absurdity. Sade’s ironic tone in this passage likewise serves to illustrate the ridiculous extension of his critic’s ideas.
Returning to *Idée sur les romans*, we find that in this text Sade also lays out a series of prescriptions for his conception of an ideal and socially useful novel. Again straddling the line between aesthetic and moral intérêt, Sade chastises the “hommes hypocrites et pervers” who are afraid of the unflattering portraits created by novelists. Sade identifies the foundation for an art of the novel: “la connaissance la plus essentielle qu’il [le roman] exige est bien certainement celle du cœur de l’homme.”\(^{453}\) We thus encounter once again this literary topos of writing-as-truth-telling-mirror. Moreover, Sade parodies the rigid education prescribed by the “froids censeurs” and their rejection of the novel, comparing them to “ce cul-de-jatte qui disait aussi, *et pourquoi fait-on des portraits* ?”\(^{454}\) The interest of Sade’s argument, however, lies in the prescribed path for obtaining such knowledge: “que par des *malheurs* et par des *voyages* ; il faut avoir vu des hommes de toutes les nations pour les bien connaître, et il faut avoir été leur victime pour savoir les apprécier.”\(^{455}\) The education prescribed by Sade is thus both worldly and sentimental, primarily based on obtaining the proper distance for reflection (an idea not unfamiliar to several strains of classical philosophy). The figure of the budding novelist is a largely silent observer of nature; misfortune, “en exaltant le caractère de celui qu’elle écrase, le met à la juste distance où il faut qu’il soit pour étudier les hommes.”\(^{456}\)

The unique association of travel and misfortunes prescribed for the novelist is followed by a rather traditional argument which would have been quite familiar in seventeenth-century France. The novelist is above all “l’homme de la nature, elle l’a crée

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\(^{453}\) Ibid., 54.
\(^{454}\) Ibid.
\(^{455}\) Ibid. We will see in the second half of this chapter that this is precisely the narrative structure of *Aline et Valcour*, whose characters are constantly traveling the world over, and moving from one misfortune to the next.
\(^{456}\) Ibid.
pour être son peintre;” his sole inspiration should be the faithful reproduction of (human) nature.457 But Sade’s adherence to such a classical doctrine is somewhat mitigated by the tone he uses, which veers on the parodic. “Ô toi qui veux parcourir cette épineuse carrière!” he exclaims to the would-be writer. This pedantic tone is one the Marquis often uses when addressing the critics who he believes to be woefully ignorant. As such, here we are alerted to the potentially duplicitous nature of Sade’s arguments.

Like many of his theoretical predecessors, Sade parses the notion of *vraisemblance* within this argument. The painter of nature is not a simple copyist, he has license to adorn the truths of Nature: “maîtrisé par son imagination...qu’il embellisse ce qu’il voit.”458 But quickly Sade defines this freedom more precisely and warns that “en te conseillant d’embellir, je te défends de t’écarter de la vraisemblance.”459 If Sade’s range of acceptable literary scenes is wider than that codified by a Boileau, he nevertheless remains faithful to the close link between *vraisemblance* and public opinion formulated by P. Rapin: “ce n’est que par la bienséance que la vraisemblance a son effet : tout devient vraisemblable dès que la bienséance garde son caractère dans toutes les circonstances.”460 Sade clearly refers to the notion of readerly expectations when he states that “le lecteur a le droit de se fâcher quand il s’aperçoit que l’on veut trop exiger de lui.”461 Moreover, he addresses the novelist, instructing him to never replace “le vrai par l’impossible, et que ce que tu inventes soit bien dit ; on ne te pardonne de mettre ton imagination à la place de la vérité que sous la clause expresse d’órner et d’éblouir.”462

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457 Ibid., 55.
458 Ibid.
459 Ibid.
462 Ibid., 56.
This is traditional theoretical reasoning, which is precisely why Sade’s subsequent argument, encouraging spur-of-the-moment inspiration, is quite jarring and contradictory. Starting with the classical preoccupation for structure and order, Sade then incites his novelist to surpass his own plans and expectations, relying instead on uninhibited inspiration. “Ce sont des élans que nous voulons de toi, et non pas des règles ; dépasse tes plans, varie-les, augmente-les ; ce n’est qu’en travaillant que les idées viennent. Pourquoi ne veux-tu pas que celle qui te presse quand tu composes soit aussi bonne que celle dictée par ton esquisse ?”

We can glimpse in this passage Sade’s enchantment with the lyrical élan of many sections of Rousseau’s La Nouvelle Héloïse. The freedom permitted to the novelist seems to be a sort of voyage of self-discovery with only a few guiding principles — respecting vraisemblance, avoiding repetition or boredom, knowing when to use digressions or not.

This literary liberty granted, however, the novelist still needs to respect Sade’s most controversial rule, that of the novel’s amorality. Contradicting the statement made in the letter we cited above, Sade here once again rejects the necessity of a strictly moral aim for the novel. Dissenting with the vast majority of his contemporaries, the Marquis encourages the novelist to “évite[r] l’afféterie de la morale ; ce n’est pas dans le roman qu’on la cherche.... ce n’est jamais l’auteur qui doit moraliser, c’est le personnage, et encore ne le lui permet-on que quand il y est forcé par les circonstances.” Once again Sade delineates the all-important difference between the author’s voice and that of the literary character. If the novel is to be as Sade terms it, a “tableau des mœurs séculaires,” and if this portrait entails not just the virtuous but also the nefarious elements of society,

\footnote{463} \textit{Ibid.}  
\footnote{464} \textit{Ibid.}, 57.
it follows logically for the Marquis that such a representation need not be circumscribed by morality. In fact, the Sadean novel appears to prompt a readerly independence that departs from the main tendencies of eighteenth-century literary theory. If Sade presumes that his reader will be able to deduce the inner morality from the “spectacle du vice terrassant la vertu,” many of his contemporaries would keep a rather tighter hold on their audience.

After a brief digression explaining the authenticity and originality of two of Sade’s short stories, which he had been accused of plagiarizing, *Idée sur les romans* concludes with a defense of the Marquis’ epistolary novel, *Aline et Valcour*. Like many of his other works, *Aline et Valcour* was accused of painting vice too salaciously, with “des traits trop odieux.” Sade’s justification for this depiction refers back to his argument in favor of “le vice triomphant.” Unlike some of his contemporaries, such as Crébillon and Dorat, the Marquis does not espouse “le dangereux projet de faire adorer aux femmes les personnages qui les trompent,” but instead portrays unredeemable villains who cannot inspire an ounce of pity or love. By not embellishing the evil truth, Sade maintains that he is actually more respectful of morality than those who betray nature and surround vice with roses. Once again Sade insists on the role of morality in regard to the novel. So far, the argument is fairly convincing; what then do we make of the curious concluding — and yet inconclusive — paragraph of this treatise?

In the final words of the treatise, Sade seeks to put to rest the accusations that he wrote the novel *Justine*, an extremely licentious novel banned by Napoleon. As we now know, the Marquis did write this work, and his denial of authorship was most likely a

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465 Ibid., 62.
466 Ibid.
move for personal protection. The eruption of this issue at the end of a treatise ostensibly dealing with the general rules prescribed for novel writing, however, seems ill-advised, if not self-defeating. Or is the Marquis’ aim something other than simply escaping the wrath of the censor? He declares:

Qu’on ne m’attribue donc plus, d’après ces systèmes, le roman de J..., jamais je n’ai fait de tels ouvrages, et je n’en ferai sûrement jamais ; il n’y a que des imbéciles ou des méchants qui, malgré l’authenticité de mes dénégations, puissent me soupçonner ou m’accuser encore d’en être l’auteur.

Clearly, Sade’s feigned shock is an act, and he is responsible for *Justine*’s publication; even the majority of his contemporaries were not be fooled by his denial. Why then evoke this issue in this text, especially as it might remind the reader of these negative associations with Sade that his theoretical reflections might have otherwise superseded? Perhaps Sade was cleverly conscious of what he was doing — perhaps he fully intended to not only draw further notoriety to his work, but also to illustrate the very contradictions in morality that he had been defending in the preceding sections, most specifically, the notion that portrayal of vice could be an aesthetic and moral choice. *Justine* could evidently be considered as an example of vice painted “que sous les couleurs de l’enfer,” as Sade argues he has done elsewhere. In denying authorship of arguably his most scandalous published work, despite simultaneously maintaining an aesthetic of representation that challenges contemporary morality, the Marquis is inscribing yet another layer of contradiction to be elucidated by the reader.

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467 Ibid., 63.
This, in turn, leads us to suspect Sade of some greater agenda: is contradiction itself perhaps the only point being made? Is Sade in fact genuine when he addresses the issue of morality in the novel, or is his ideal conception of the novel one which thwarts readerly expectations by turning the idea of morality on its head?\(^\text{470}\) The novel’s ostensible social utility would reject the pedagogical notion of exemplarity. Rather than depicting virtue to create virtue by a process of pedagogical imitation, Sade portrays vice, seeking to inspire virtue through repugnance and contradiction. Within the text of *Idée sur les romans*, the novel is thus an illustration of the dialectical relationship between vice and virtue, a relationship that is primarily exploited to produce a new form of aesthetic representation. I say primarily aesthetic because, all moral justifications aside, Sade is not first and foremost a moralist, but a novelist. Sade’s most important contributions to instruction and pedagogy actually occur in his (often contradictory) reflections on how to read and write novels rather than in a strict concern for moral education. By using the tools of humor and imitation, as in hinted as in this text and contained more boldly in pieces like *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, Sade creates parodies of contemporary thought to expose its contradictions. What could appear to us as Sade’s plea for realism is in fact a manner for him to depict the absurd conclusions of Enlightenment educational thought; hence the irrelevance with which we can treat the physical impossibility of many Sadean scenes. As Klossowski argues in *Sade mon prochain*, the “philosophie scélérate” of the Marquis’ works poses a sinister question about “le parti de penser et d’écrire, et particulièrement de penser et de décrire un acte, au

\(^{470}\) As Sade declares regarding the dénouement of novels, “je n’exige pas de toi, comme les auteurs de l’Encyclopédie, qu’il soit *conforme au désir du lecteur* ; quel plaisir lui reste-t-il quand il a tout deviné ?.” *Idée*, 57–8.
lieu de le commettre.” More so than for his personal indiscretions, Sade was vilified for his descriptions of immoral acts and his imitation, often brutally parodic, of Enlightenment thought.

In *Idée sur les romans*, an apparently transparent opuscule delineating the history and ideal practice of the novel, Sade thus lays the seed for one of the structuring principles of his oeuvre: the dialectical and contradictory structure of narrative which will serve as the main pedagogical tool illustrated in his novels. Before we address the specific connection between epistolarity and this educational method in *Aline et Valcour*, let us examine two other novels by Sade, which although not epistolary, cannot be overlooked due to their explicit preoccupation with pedagogy.

III. The Dungeon at the Heart of the Bedroom: *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*

The double subtitle of Sade’s dialogic novel, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir, ou les instituteurs immoraux, ou Dialogues destinés à l’éducation des jeunes demoiselles* (1795) immediately alerts us to its pedagogical intentions. The cover page is moreover inscribed with the single phrase “la mère en prescrira la lecture à sa fille,” a message which clearly reminds us of Laclos’ preface to *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Like *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and Sade’s *Idée sur les romans*, moreover, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* brings up a number of problems regarding female education. Specifically, the model of young Eugénie’s education becomes entangled in a web of contradictions. How can her education be exemplary if its innermost crucial teachings remain opaque, either

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through contradictions or because they are hidden from the very women they are supposed to instruct? As we will see when addressing the residual gender issues in the dialogue, Eugénie’s freedom and her role as a woman are likewise at odds, just as on the more general level, Sadean personal desires are always in a double bind regarding subjugation to the other’s desires.

And indeed, the preface in this text, entitled “Aux libertins,” already signals to us the potential contradictions concerning the rejection of pedagogical exemplarity found in our previous section’s observations. On the surface, the preface certainly appears to seek to incite libertinage on the part of its readers: “Femmes lubriques, que la voluptueuse Saint-Ange soit votre modèle…. Jeunes filles trop longtemps contenues dans les liens absurdes et dangereux d’une vertu fantastique et d’une religion dégoûtante, imitez l’ardente Eugénie… Et vous, aimables débauchés…que le cynique Dolmancé vous serve d’exemple…. “473 Likewise, the novel’s narrative is essentially the “education” of a young girl, Eugénie, by a pair of libertines, Mme de Saint-Ange and Dolmancé. In the first dialogue, Mme de Saint-Ange outlines this pedagogical project:

Dolmancé et moi nous placerons dans cette jolie petite tête tous les principes du libertinage le plus effréné, nous l’embraserons de nos feux, nous l’alimenterons de notre philosophie, nous lui inspirerons nos désirs, et comme je veux joindre un peu de pratique à la théorie, comme je veux qu’on démontre à mesure qu’on disserterà, je t’ai destiné, mon frère, à la moisson des myrtes de Cythère, Dolmancé à celle des roses de Sodome.474

As promised by Mme de Saint-Ange, Eugénie’s sexual education will also comprise a systematic dismantling of all her preconceived notions on subjects such as religion, morality, and social relations. In order to discover the contradictory elements of

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474 Ibid., 45.
education and philosophical notions, which Sade parodies by taking them to the extreme, let us examine practically how this instruction gets enacted in the novel.

Eugénie arrives fresh out of the convent (this is in fact where M\[^\text{me}\]\ de Saint-Ange had first met her); in this perspective she can be obviously be seen as a parody of the young ingénue embodied of Laclos’ Cécile. In many ways, Eugénie will become the libertine foil to the victimized Cecile. Like M\[^\text{lle}\]\ de Volanges, Eugénie shows a natural and easily perverted malleability. While still in the convent, M\[^\text{me}\]\ de Saint-Ange explains, “nous ne pûmes rien, nous n’osâmes rien, trop d’yeux étaient fixés sur nous, mais nous nous promîmes de nous réunir dès que cela serait possible.” Eugénie’s “aimable innocence” appears to be little more than a blank canvas on which the libertines will paint their fantasies, and on which Sade will depict the contradictions inherent in female education.

Although discussed in the first dialogue, Eugénie only appears in the second, where she meets up with M\[^\text{me}\]\ de Saint-Ange and they proceed to the boudoir. Jane Gallop identifies the following transition, between the very short second dialogue and the much lengthier third one, as a source of gendered tension in the text. In her article “The Liberated Woman,” Gallop stresses the fact that the “boudoir” specifically genders the work, as it is predominately a female space of privacy. The boudoir is then fittingly the space where Eugénie and M\[^\text{me}\]\ de Saint-Ange are about to retire to together: “Passons donc dans mon boudoir, nous y serons plus à l’aise ; j’ai déjà prévenu mes gens ;

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475 Ibid.
476 Jane Gallop, “The Liberated Woman,” Narrative 13:2 (May 2005): 92. Likewise — but this is perhaps more immediately apparent — the boudoir clearly places the text within the context of a specific, aristocratic class.
assurée qu’on ne s’avisera pas de nous interrompre.” But as Gallop remarks, the two women are prevented from being alone by, precisely, the “interruption” of Dolmancé into their private space, the boudoir. The male teacher Dolmancé, suggests Gallop, is in fact the figure of the “philosophe” in the boudoir. But here is the problem — philosophy then becomes a gendered concept as well, as Dolmancé arrives too early, surprises the women, and in his behavior embodies the male homosexual ideal.

Gallop continues by examining the other moment in the text where Eugénie, and by extension, all women are excluded from male-dominated space. At the end of the fifth dialogue, Dolmancé and the servant Augustin are entering into a small “cabinet” in order to perform an unmentionable act. This is in fact the only moment in the text that remains opaque to the reader, who otherwise observes the proceedings with full pornographic access. Dolmancé laments that “mais, en vérité, cela ne peut pas se dire.” Me de Saint-Ange and Eugénie, both curious and incapable of conceiving of an action that would be repugnant to them, pressure the Chevalier for an answer. But Eugénie is shocked and revolted: “Vous avez raison, cela est horrible.” The reader is purposefully left in the dark as to the nature of this abominable sexual act. This omission poses a problem at the center of a text which purports to recount an education. How is the reader supposed to profit from Eugénie’s exemplary education if its most shocking element is hidden? Nevertheless, the most problematic aspect of this scene, Gallop maintains, is the existence of a secret and exclusive male space that cannot be penetrated by women. Eugénie offers to accompany Dolmancé and Augustin, in a gesture of pure servitude: “Voulez-vous que j’aille avec vous ? Je vous branlerai, pendant que vous vous amuserez

477 Sade, Boudoir, 50.
478 Ibid., 264.
And yet, she is refused, her entry into the male space denied; Dolmancé replies that “ceci est une affaire d’honneur et qui doit se passer entre hommes; une femme nous dérangerait.” Like the reader, Gallop argues, Eugénie and all women are ultimately excluded from the ultimate private male space, *despite men being able to invade their private space*, the boudoir.

What Gallop doesn’t address, however, is the fact that this hidden space at the center of the text is far from being the only instance of female exclusion or confusion. Eugénie is in reality progressively constrained by a series of contradictions, which parody the consequences, brought about when certain Enlightenment ideas, especially materialist ones, are extended to their logical conclusions. Eugénie’s education is allegedly a form of sexual liberation; her libertine instructors will attempt to combat all the traditional constraints of religion, virtue, and social bonds to allow the young girl to freely experience pleasure. These traditional constraints are in fact more often than not replaced with untenable instructions that are at odds with each other. As we have already briefly seen, moreover, this destruction of the accepted value system quickly loses its initial veneer of true gender equality. As in the two moments analyzed above, many other points of the text are problematic as regards the status of women within the libertine social economy. In her cultural study *The Sadeian Woman*, Angela Carter locates one of these practical contradictions in the relationship between daughters and mothers. This is another example of what I have termed above as the dialectical nature of narrative; through the pedagogical lessons concerning the mother-daughter relationship, meaning arises from the contradictions themselves rather than from the impossible and

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irresolvable positions adopted. Despite the sexual, religious and moral freedom that the libertine philosophy appears to grant Eugénie, we must be careful not to equate this with any sort of specifically *female* liberation. As Angela Carter writes speaking of Juliette and Sade’s other extraordinary women characters, they have “no sense of women as a class.”

She writes that Juliette

> has no sense of women as a class; it is difficult to ascertain whether Sade does so himself. Sade regularly subsumes women to the general class of the weak and therefore the exploited, and so he seems femininity as a mode of experience that transcends gender. Juliette is an exception; by the force of her will, she will become a Nietzschean superwoman, which is to say, a woman who has transcended her gender but not the contradictions inherent in it.

Although Carter addresses issues from a strictly feminist perspective, she has struck upon the issue of contradictory teachings that stands at the heart of my argument. Eugénie’s education regarding the traditionally female role of motherhood clearly illustrates this point. Dolmancé and Saint-Ange commence their course of destruction by describing the reproductive process. In accordance with one of the prevalent contemporary theories, Mme de Saint-Ange argues that the fetus is almost entirely a product of the male sperm: “élançé seul, sans mélange avec celui de la femme, il ne réussirait cependant pas ; mais celui que nous fournissons ne fait qu’élaborder ; il ne crée point, il aide à la création, sans en être la cause.”

This biological condition in turn predisposes the child to favor his or her father over the mother, being only of the same blood as the former. Eugénie agrees with this statement and Dolmancé goes one step further by declaring that “uniquement formés du

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482 Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago Press, 1979), 98. Carter’s use of the word “class” to refer to women, independently of any socio-economic connotations, can appear a bit confusing. I have adopted her use of the term here with reference to classification and categorization.


484 Sade, *Boudoir*, 64.
sang de nos pères, nous ne devons absolument rien à nos mères.  

Likewise, the young girl is instructed in all the various manners of avoiding pregnancy; reproduction is stripped from the female condition.  

As the resident “philosophe,” Dolmancé’s preference for sodomy thus becomes even more justified, as it allows for a sexual experience void of any reproductive possibility.

But Eugénie’s instructors go further than simply just liberating her from her parents — they will seek the young girl’s hatred, and eventual destruction, of her mother. When asked if she has ever wished death upon somebody, Eugénie replies that “j’ai sous mes yeux chaque jour une abominable créature que je voudrais voir depuis longtemps au tombeau;” she thus pinpoints her mother, despite some residual shame.  

Even though Mme de Saint-Ange acts as a sort of mother figure throughout the text, it is clear that the total annihilation of Eugénie’s mother is the ultimate goal. When we examine the final — and easily most shocking — scene of the novel, we see the metaphorical death of the mother being carried out in an all too literal way. Mme de Mistival, arriving to wrest her daughter away from these dangerous libertines, is met with opposition on all sides and a lecture on her total lack of rights as a mother.

However, it is important to note that Eugénie does not begin tormenting her mother on her own. It is first Dolmancé and Mme de Saint-Ange who antagonize and disrobe Mme de Mistival. If Eugénie responds to her mother’s pleas with her bare behind

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485 Ibid.  
486 “Eugénie, sois l’ennemie jurée de cette fastidieuse propagation, et détourne sans cesse, même en mariage, cette perfide liqueur dont la végétation ne sert qu’à gâter nos tailles, qu’à émousser dans nous les sensations voluptueuses, nos flétrir, nous vieillir et déranger notre santé....” Ibid., 122.  
487 Ibid., 109.  
488 Jane Gallop points out, for instance, that in her embarrassment Eugénie asks to “cacher ma rougeur dans ton sein,” the singular sein clearly belonging to the maternal semantic field. It is important to note with Gallop as well that this tenderness is denied Eugénie when Mme de Saint-Ange replies with a scathing “j’ai détesté ma mère tout autant que tu hais la tienne, et je n’ai pas balancé.” Gallop, “Liberated Woman,” 110.
(an offensive but not physically painful gesture of torture), her justification is not one sprouting from personal desire, but rather obedience to her teachers: as she obeys her instructor, she says “souviens-toi, Dolmancé, que je me montrerai toujours digne d’être ton élève.”

The two libertines likewise evoke the mention of Mme de Mistival’s impending doom before her daughter espouses the idea. When Eugénie finally becomes an active partner in the torments inflicted upon her mother, it is notably at the bidding of the same Dolmancé: “Allons, belle Eugénie, foutez votre mère ; enconnez-là d’abord.”

The final and most terrible of Mme de Mistival’s punishments is similarly enacted by Eugénie, but devised by one of her instructors. Although Eugénie suggests that her mother’s execution be brought about by flaming “mèches de soufre,” Dolmancé assumes control of the situation and announces the final punishment instead. This right is granted to him “en ma qualité de votre instituteur,” he tells Eugénie. When Dolmancé introduces his valet Lapierre, who suffers from an advanced case of syphilis, he is once again creating an intrusion into the protected, feminine space. Once Mme de Mistival has been infected with the disease, it is Saint-Ange who adds the final excruciating detail, the sewing up of Mme de Mistival’s orifices in order to trap in the infection. Again, although Eugénie accepts this idea with exuberance, it did not come from her own imagination.

Many readers might initially overlook, as I did, a certain reluctance on the part of the Chevalier to engage in these horrible acts (he is also notably the only one to react negatively to the pamphlet by still clinging to a notion of universal pity and brotherly love). Although it is slightly out of the scope of the present argument, I find it interesting that the Chevalier pronounces some of the objections that we might have expected

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489 Sade, Boudoir, 273.
490 Sade, Boudoir, 278.
Eugénie to emit. For example, he first opposes M\textsuperscript{me} de Mistival’s treatment by timidly saying that “ce que vous [Dolmancé] nous faites faire est horrible ; c’est outrager à la fois la nature, le ciel, et les plus saintes lois de l’humanité.”\textsuperscript{491} We might also be initially tempted to regard this as another pleasure obtained in the delight of transgression, but the Chevalier speaks again a little later: “Obéissons, puisqu’il n’est aucun moyen de persuader ce scélérat que tout ce qu’il nous fait faire est affreux.”\textsuperscript{492} During the final scene of sewing, the Chevalier seems, rather than an enthusiastic participant, to be carried along by the others’ desires. He ambiguously declares that Eugénie “va la [M\textsuperscript{me} de Mistival] mettre en sang,” without us being able to discern if he is pleased or disgusted by this vision. The Chevalier’s final words are preceded by a telling stage direction: “obéissant.” And last but not least, the Chevalier is excluded from the final feast and sleeping place of the libertines; he is instructed to walk M\textsuperscript{me} de Mistival home instead.\textsuperscript{493}

Like Eugénie herself, the Chevalier then appears as little more than a blindly obedient pupil. Despite proclamations of raw individualism touted by the libertines, neither one of these figures seems to retain any truly autonomous power. Thus, condemning her mother to death, Eugénie still gives us the impression that she is not, paradoxically, in a position to determine the use of her own power. Has M\textsuperscript{me} de Mistival’s sentence not already been proclaimed by a letter which precedes her and is sent by her husband? As Dolmancé exclaims, showing her the letter, “apprends que nous étions autorisés par ton époux même à tout ce que nous venons de faire.”\textsuperscript{494} If, as a

\textsuperscript{491} Ibid., 279.
\textsuperscript{492} Ibid., 281.
\textsuperscript{493} This region of ambiguity in the text, represented by the Chevalier’s mitigated position, leads me wonder if it is not the displacement of Eugénie’s horror, and a way for the reader to internally attenuate his disgust. There is perhaps a way out of boudoir that does not necessarily lead to death, as it does for M\textsuperscript{me} de Mistival.
\textsuperscript{494} Ibid., 286.
woman, Eugénie was excluded from the private male space beforehand, here she is clearly taught that the only woman allowed in the libertine’s company is an infertile whore stripped of any solidarity with her gender. As Angela Carter observes concerning Eugénie’s “liberation,” it appears that “the daughter may achieve autonomy only through destroying the mother, who represents her own reproductive function, also, who is both her own mother and the potential mother within herself.”

Just as we identified an area of uncertainty in the Chevalier’s ambivalent behavior, Carter finds a potential faltering point in the libertine education in the relationship between mother and daughter. Observing her mother subjugated by the avalanche of torments being inflicted upon her, Eugénie exclaims “je crois que tu décharges, ma douce mère ? Dolmancé, vois ses yeux ! n’est-il pas certain qu’elle décharge ?...Ah, garce ! je vais t’apprendre à être libertine !” Nevertheless, allowing Mme de Mistival to orgasm would be breaking the ultimate taboo, Carter argues, for it would allow a place for the mother within the Sadean landscape. Sade conveniently leaves the reader in the dark, choosing instead to have Mme de Mistival faint. Carter bemoans that Sade “is on the point of becoming a revolutionary pornography [sic]: but he, finally, lacks the courage.”

For Angela Carter, therefore, Eugénie’s education is only superficially revolutionary, for it does nothing to improve the status of the mother and only allows women freedom in so far as they distance themselves from their gender as a whole and obey the rules of male-dominated space. The refusal to allow sexual pleasure to the mother is the most evident moment of this, as “Eugénie’s transgression initially disrupts

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495 Carter, Sadeian Woman, 144.
496 Sade, Boudoir, 278.
497 Carter, Sadeian Woman, 154.
but finally restores the status quo. Mother has not been eroticised." As I have suggested above, Eugénie’s education is perhaps not best understood as a practical guide for her actions, since many of instructions given to her are contradictory, self-defeating, or serve to strip her of her freedom to make independent choices. Elaborating on Carter’s portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship, I also find another such contradiction in the respective and conflicting rights of parents and their children. Two different and often-warring viewpoints are voiced throughout the text. On the one hand Eugénie is encouraged to free herself from the shackles of the traditional parental structure, since as Mme de Saint-Ange explains,

> ce n’est pas dans un siècle où l’étendue et les droits de l’homme viennent d’être approfondis avec tant de soin, que des jeunes filles doivent continuer à se croire les esclaves de leurs familles, quand il est constant que les pouvoirs de ces familles sur elles sont absolument chimériques.\(^\text{499}\)

By comparing human childhood with that portrayed in the animal world, Saint-Ange concludes that children owe nothing to their parents once they have been weaned and raised. Fully “educated” by the age of fifteen (as few pedagogical opportunities were available for women beyond that age), any young girl would then be able to emancipate herself from her parents. Contained in a lengthy description of the rights of young women, Saint-Ange advises Eugénie that “ton corps est à toi, à toi seule ; il n’y a que toi seule au monde qui aies le droit d’en jouir et d’en faire jouir qui bon te semble.”\(^\text{500}\) This freedom of the child turns out to be rather illusory, however, when Mme de Saint-Ange later defends the (apparently liberating) practices of abortion and infanticide. In

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\(^{498}\) Ibid., 152. Referencing Astrid Henry’s work \textit{Not My Mother’s Sister}, Jane Gallop points out that this difficulty in sexualizing the mother is by no means surmounted in modern culture. Astrid Henry, \textit{Not My Mother’s Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

\(^{499}\) Sade, \textit{Boudoir}, 80–1.

\(^{500}\) Ibid., 84.
complete contradiction to her previous statement, the libertine instructor tells Eugénie that “il n’y a sur la terre aucun droit plus certain que celui des mères sur leurs enfants.”

Although Eugénie’s personal freedom may not seem to have decreased — since, according to Saint-Ange’s reasoning, she becomes both free from her parents and at liberty to dispose of any unwanted children — it is clear that parents and children cannot simultaneously maintain these two convictions without being in conflict. Dolmancé, whose hatred of mothers is otherwise rampant, will here go even further than his fellow teacher; from a general defense of murder, he proceeds to a specific justification for infanticide: “en vous développant, Eugénie, la très médiocre importance dont l’action du meurtre était sur terre, vous avez dû voir de quelle petite conséquence doit être également tout ce qui tient à l’infanticide, commis sur une créature déjà même en âge de raison.”

If it is evident that a mother and her daughter could not simultaneously espouse these two opposing viewpoints, deducing an educational lesson from Sade’s reasoning becomes yet more problematic when we address the question of female liberty vis-à-vis her male counterparts. A similarly deceptive freedom can be found in a discussion of this issue as well. In controversial opposition to contemporary mores, Sade’s libertine instructors reject the traditional matrimonial structure. Mme de Saint-Ange apparently defends the independence of women when she explains that

c’est visiblement outrager la destination que la nature impose aux femmes, que de les enchaîner par le lien absurde d’un hymen solitaire. Espérons qu’on ouvrira les yeux, et qu’en assurant la liberté de tous les individus, on n’oubliera pas le sort des malheureuses filles.”

501 Ibid., 122.
502 Ibid., 124.
503 Ibid., 82.
But just what is this “destination” that nature, the only rule that the libertinest follow, has imposed on women? “La destinée de la femme est d’être comme la chienne, comme la louve : elle doit appartenir à tous ceux qui veulent d’elle.” Woman is free from marriage, parents, and children, but she is at the mercy of every man. A similar contradiction evoked by the issue of individual freedom is found in the revolutionary pamphlet included in the fifth dialogue, *Français, encore un effort si vous voulez être républicains*. The bonds of marriage are initially decried as a means of oppression: “Jamais un acte de possession ne peut être exercé sur un être libre ; il est aussi injuste de posséder exclusivement une femme qu’il l’est de posséder des esclaves ; tous les hommes sont nés libres, tous sont égaux en droit.” The subtle adverb “exclusivement” raises our doubts yet again, however. What begins as an argument for equality — neither sex can possess the other with exclusive rights — culminates in another justification for female promiscuity: “...aucun homme ne peut être exclu de la possession d’une femme, du moment qu’il est clair qu’elle appartient décidément à tous les hommes.” A tenuous argument is elaborated in the pamphlet, distinguishing momentary “droit de jouissance,” so to speak, from long-term appropriation and possession. The author of the pamphlet, presumably a revolutionary writer distributing his tracts on the steps of the Palais de l’égalité, clearly realized the inherent contradiction within his argument, as he resorts to a footnote in an attempt to resolve its inconsistencies. As any given man, he has “aucun droit réel à la propriété de telle ou telle femme, mais j’en ai d’incontestables à

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sa jouissance ; j’en ai de la contraindre à cette jouissance si elle me la refuse par tel motif que ce puisse être."  

This distinction made between rights to *jouissance* and *propriété* is in fact simply privileges sexual over legal possession of women. The libertine philosophy delineated in the pamphlet seems to grant women financial, social, and moral freedom, but at the cost of relinquishing sexual control. As Eugénie wonders out loud, blushing, “d’après les maximes qui me sont inculquées ici, puis-je donc refuser quelque chose ?” And yet, as though we were trapped in a series of endlessly reflecting mirrors, this contradictory notion of lack of sexual control is *itself* canceled out in other sections of the text by the libertines’ assertions that personal desires and preferences shall be the only dictating forces in an individual’s life. First of all, the natural source of all desires and preferences, no matter how shocking, is a constant assumption throughout Sadean literature. As Dolmancé explains, “rien n’est affreux en libertinage, parce que tout ce que le libertinage inspire l’est également par la nature.” The revolutionary pamphlet likewise justifies all sexual perversions: there is no “caprice...qui ne soit dans la nature, aucun qui ne soit avoué par elle.” After a lengthy exposition illustrating the ideal state of women, subjugated sexually to all men regardless of their age or desires, the pamphlet writer reverses his argument in an attempt to compensate the fairer sex. If all women “doivent être soumises à nos désirs,” he reasons, then “assurément nous pouvons leur permettre de même de satisfaire amplement tous les leurs.” This sort of reciprocal prostitution would logically seem to engender some conflicting desires, as mentioned above.

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507 Ibid., 222.
508 Ibid., 94.
509 Ibid., 157.
510 Ibid., 223.
511 Ibid., 224.
Liberated from moral dogmas, however, women are urged by the pamphlet’s author to revel in their individual desires:

Sexe charmant, vous serez libre ; vous jouirez comme les hommes de tous les plaisirs dont la nature vous fait un devoir ; vous ne vous contraindrez sur aucun. La plus divine partie de l’humanité doit-elle donc recevoir des fers de l’autre ? Ah ! brisez-les, la nature le veut ; n’ayez plus d’autre frein que celui de vos penchants d’autres lois que vos seuls désirs, d’autre moral que celle de la nature.  

Dolmancé embodies the figure of the libertine who is completely guided by his specific perverse tastes. A sodomite by principle, Dolmancé absolutely refuses to have vaginal sex with any woman. He goes even further in advocating sodomy as the superior passion (despite the previously alleged equality of all preferences under the sun): “Ah ! loin d’outrager la nature, persuadons-nous bien, au contraire, que le sodomite et la tribade la servent, en se refusant opiniâtrement à une conjonction dont il ne résulte qu’une progéniture fastidieuse pour elle.”  

Dolmancé justifies his sexual preferences by relying upon the frequent Sadean argument that Nature is governed by destruction, rather than creation. In his perspective, therefore, we can infer that not all sexual penchants are created equal. In fact, when we see desires conflicting in the boudoir, we realize just how ephemeral this sexual equality is, with respect to both gender and orientation. Turned down by Dolmancé, who will not vaginally penetrate Eugénie, the latter is at first offended by this refusal, but ultimately accepts it, as she must “respecter des principes qui conduisent à des égarements.”  

It becomes increasingly clear throughout the dialogues that although Eugénie is liberated enough to break the traditional bonds of family and marriage and piety, she is still at the mercy of the superior male libertine. That is to say,

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512 Ibid., 227, my emphasis.
513 Ibid., 160.
514 Ibid., 185.
the total freedom of *jouissance* granted her is only valid as long as she desires exactly what the man desires.

In this tangled-up web of contradictions, what has become apparent is that no unifying answer can be obtained regarding female rights and duties. However, the contradictions stacked high suggest that Sade, a meticulous writer — one has only to think of his elaborate compendium *Les 120 journées de Sodome* — has not simply succumbed to oversight and inconsistency. Perhaps all of the contradictions, absurdities, and abuses contained in Eugénie’s education are there precisely to highlight Sade’s ulterior motive: through imitating his contemporaries, often with a humorous touch, Sade parodies and extrapolates their ideas to illustrate the latent contradictions therein. As Adorno and Horkheimer write concerning the Marquis’ work, it is “an intransigent critique of practical reason” which “pushes the scientific principle to annihilating extremes.”\(^5\) The scientific, or rational principle that they locate at the foundation of Sade’s thought is pushed to its absurd and contradictory limits.

**IV. Impossible Instruction: Les 120 journées de Sodome**

The illustration of Enlightenment excess is nowhere more striking than in Sade’s anthology of sexual perversions, *Les 120 journées de Sodome*.\(^6\) In a century fascinated with the attempt to totalize and categorize knowledge, *Les 120 journées de Sodome* can be perceived as a sort of anti-*Encyclopédie*, a repertoire of all libertine scenarios. The scientific principle at the heart of the *Encyclopédie* — and the cross references, tables,

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and keywords used to this end — is here perverted by Sade and applied with the full force of rationality to what Sade’s contemporaries would have considered completely irrational behaviors. But more than just the form of the Encyclopédie, Sade is also parodying its educational goal. The 120 journées de Sodome is, as Joan de Jean entitles it, an “immense pedagogical treatise, his version of a ‘traité d’éducation naturelle’.”

And although certain elements of the narrative could certainly be construed as pedagogical accounts — such as the historienne Duclos’ childhood and adolescence in a brothel — the novel’s central educational preoccupation lies in its relationship to the reader. The 120 does not explicitly present itself as an instruction manual for young girls, like La Philosophie dans le boudoir; it does, however, engage the reader directly on numerous occasions. The pedagogical method of example and imitation is repeated ceaselessly, and we realize that Sade is not only mocking a prevalent pedagogical tool, but also putting form in contradiction with content. By applying the intellectual method of the Encyclopédie to libertine excesses, Sade is already hinting at the inherent problems in such a rational endeavor at systematization.

One such latent tension will be depicted in the novel’s introduction, where the dueling powers of readerly freedom and narratorial dictatorship will be established. Strikingly, the novel’s introduction stands in stark contrast to the rest of the text: it is, frankly speaking, static and tedious. Sade uses this space to introduce and describe each and every character and to delineate the highly codified proceedings of the days inside Silling, the libertines’ remote fortress. Preceding the author’s description of the four primary libertines, we find a passage reminiscent of Sade’s theory in Idée sur les romans. Sade will not sugarcoat the portraits of these wicked men, will not paint them “en beau,

non de manière à séduire ou à captiver, mais avec les pinceaux mêmes de la nature, qui malgré tout son désordre est souvent bien sublime, même alors qu’elle se déprave le plus.”

This predilection for the portraiture of evil is clearly illustrated in the introduction; compared to the detailed and captivating scenes and diatribes of the libertines, the descriptions of the victims are bland and conventional.

Putting the tropes of narrative exposition aside, the introduction’s key singularity lies in its announced relationship to the reader. After warning the reader that he is about to read the most impure of texts ever written, the narrator prescribes him a reading strategy:

Sans doute, beaucoup de tous les écarts que tu vas voir peints te déplairont, on le sait, mais il s’en trouvera quelques-uns qui t’échaufferont au point de te coûter du foutre, et voilà tout ce qu’il nous faut. Si nous n’avions pas tout dit, tout analysé, comment voudrais-tu que nous eussions pu deviner ce qui te convient ? C’est à toi de prendre et à laisser le reste : un autre en fera autant ; et petit à petit tout aura trouvé sa place. C’est ici l’histoire d’un magnifique repas où six cents plats divers s’offrent à ton appétit. Les manges-tu tous ? Non, sans doute, mais ce nombre prodigieux étend les bornes de ton choix, et, ravi de cette augmentation de facultés, tu ne t’aviseras pas de gronder l’amphitryon qui te régale. Fais de même ici : choisis et laisse le reste....

The reader at first appears to be the main organizational force within the novel, being invited to take whatever segments of the work he desires, and to leave the others behind. Following the libertine code of ethics, the reader’s personal desires are the sole motivation for his ingestion of the novel. The host, or narrator, is simply laying out a great banquet of stories for the guest’s pleasure. In this section, at least, the narrator appears as a benevolent provider with no ulterior motives. The 120 journées de Sodome hence “corresponds perfectly to Rousseau’s conception of the pedagogical work: it is a

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518 Sade, Idée, 25.
519 This is an observation also made by Barthes who argues that, for Sade, “la laideur se décrit, la beauté se dit; ces portraits rhétoriques [des belles victimes] sont donc vides, dans la mesure même où ce sont des portraits d’être....” Roland Barthes, Sade, Fourier, Loyola (Paris: Seuil, 1971), 28.
520 Sade, 120, 99–100.
generous, totally selfless creative act.” Sade is putting himself at the disposition of his readers, offering them a lavish banquet of perversions. The encyclopedic nature of the novel nevertheless poses a contradiction to this reader-defined enterprise. As Philippe Roger establishes in Sade: La Philosophie dans le pressoir, there is a paradox between the particular and the general contained in the introduction. On the one hand, Sade is addressing the reader specifically, inciting and titillating him; this is the pornographic element of the 120. On the other, he is generalizing, creating a compendium with encyclopedic value. This paradox is thus played out structurally and stylistically in the opposition between the stylistic “froideur scientifique” and “le désir ad hominem d’échauffer le lecteur.”

Elaborating upon the tension between the particular and the general, Le Brun argues that Sade’s insistence on so many individual perversions is in fact demonstrating his vision that “le général n’est envisageable que comme la somme des particularités.” Believing the general to unstable and best and tyrannical at worst, Sade would then be a proponent of the particular, of the individual, of the specific (which is, as Le Brun notes, an inherently aristocratic penchant). Clearly, however, this reliance on the particular is at odds with the attempt to totalize and systematize that is found in the 120. What exemplarity — what pedagogy — can ensue when faith in the general is eradicated? As we shall continue to see, the contradictions arising from the opposition between the particular and the general will be just one example of Sade’s parodic and perverted application of Enlightenment education models.

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521 De Jean, Literary Fortifications, 269.
522 Roger, Philosophie dans le pressoir, 79.
A similar problem of belief occurs with the question of narrative knowledge posed in the introduction. That is to say, who is speaking, and how has he gained access to such highly secretive proceedings? The narrator’s knowledge at first appears to be total: he is familiar with the smallest details of each and every day. It is thus surprising, at the very least, when we come across the following passage: “je ne sais ce qui s’y passera, mais ce que je puis dire à présent sans blesser l’intérêt du récit, c’est que, quand on en fit la description au duc, il en déchargea trois fois de suite.”\textsuperscript{524} We might at first be tempted to regard this as a simple narrative tool for creating suspense, a trace of good-natured deception on the part of the author. Remarks of the same sort are indeed scattered throughout the text: e.g., “le lecteur, qui voit comme nous sommes gênés dans ces commencement-ci pour mettre de l’ordre dans nos matières, nous pardonnera de lui laisser encore bien des petits détails sous le voile.”\textsuperscript{525} As this last example illustrates, however — and it is representative of all these narrative interruptions — neither suspense nor a genuine lack of knowledge seem to be the forces producing such direct addresses to the reader.

In fact, the forces of transparency and obscurity reveal what is at stake here: namely, Sade’s highly detailed, almost mathematical architecture for his novel. The strictly codified organization at Silling is likewise reflected in Sade’s progressive outline, the last three volumes of 120 journées de Sodome existing only in this state. This is not an unbridled orgy, no matter how scandalous or out of control some scenes may appear to be: every “passion” is anticipated from the beginning and placed in its appropriate slot.

\textsuperscript{524} Sade, \textit{120}, 82.
\textsuperscript{525} Ibid., 114.
In one of his numerous allusions to a master plan, the narrator concludes the seventh day by lamenting that

nous sommes désespéré de ce que l’ordre de notre plan nous empêche de peindre ici ces lubriques corrections, mais que nos lecteurs ne nous en veulent pas. Ils sentent comme nous l’impossibilité où nous sommes de les satisfaire pour ce moment-ci ; ils peuvent être sûrs qu’ils n’y perdront rien.  

These constant narrative interruptions serve not to actually highlight narrative doubt but to remind the reader that he is not just reading a pornographic escapade, but the fruit of libertine research and organization. Moreover, it is a frequent assertion of the narrator’s (author’s) structural power, since the glimpses of doubt actually draw attention to the knowledge detained. In her article “Les 120 journées de Sodome: Disciplining the Body of Narrative,” Joan de Jean argues that the novel is almost dictatorial, “...a text without the failles Barthes considered essential to readerly jouissance.” As exemplified in the material constraints of the 120’s production — Sade, being imprisoned, composed it in tiny cramped handwriting on rolled up parchment, in constant fear of it being discovered — the text does not allow for any interruption, for any intrusion on the part of the reader. It is, as de Jean concludes, a totalizing fortress.

I also see this as another facet of what Marcel Hénaff termed the Sadean aporia of telling all. In its double register as dictionary (listing all the passions) and narrative (illustrating and enacting these passions), the 120 journées de Sodome represent for Hénaff an encyclopedia of excess: “ ‘Tout dire’ selon Sade sera donc vouloir en même temps la totalité et l’excès....” The tout and the trop are thus two edges of the same sword. In attempting to tabulate and account for every passion, Sade has effectively

526 Ibid., 226.
pushed out the reader, for, as the introduction clearly announces, everything has been said, everything has been analyzed. Perhaps, therefore, we can agree with de Jean when she reasons that “the outline form in which we have three-fourths of the 120 is truer to the nature of the Sadian [sic] literary enterprise than the first one-fourth of the text in which we have, in Barthes’ words, ‘crime’ fleshed out by ‘performance’.”

The narrator of the 120 is in reality more of an authoritarian schoolmaster than he is a gracious host; “under the guise of making life easier for his reader, the 120 journées de Sodome’s authorial dictator moves to take over the reader’s space.”

Having examined the contradiction created by the proposed readerly freedom and the dictatorial voice of the narrator that constrains the reader, let us now briefly investigate pedagogical endeavors depicted within the novel’s narration. Much like the warring relationship between the reader and the narrator, the interaction between the student and the teacher also proposes a pedagogy fraught with obstacles and contradictions. Most obviously, unlike Eugénie’s initiation in La Philosophie dans le boudoir, the 120 does not concern itself with the fashioning of young libertines, strictly speaking. In fact, the non-libertine members of the orgy are either paid professionals or little more than sacrificial victims, more suggestive perhaps of a master-slave relationship. Although the subtitle of the novel is “l’école du libertinage,” we must wonder who exactly are the students of this school. Once again, we are alerted to a contradiction at the heart of the Sadean pedagogical novel. If, as Barthes suggests, “il s’agit essentiellement d’une société éducative, ou plus exactement, d’une société-école

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529 De Jean, “Disciplining the Body of Narrative,” 38. Le Brun likewise argues that the 120 should be considered a finished project, since Sade would have had plenty of time (between 1785 and 1789) to flesh out the remaining three sections if he had wanted to. Le Brun, Bloc d’abîme, 43.

530 De Jean, Literary Fortifications, 323.
(et même d’une société-internat),” then what is the goal of this pedagogical experiment? If the victims are educated, it is purely for technical skill; we can put in this category the masturbation lessons offered to the young boys and girls every morning. In order to motivate the young girls, to whom this education is personally useless, the libertines decide that “on établirait des punitions réglées pour celle qui, au bout de la première quinzaine, ne réussirait point parfaitement dans cet art sans avoir plus besoin de leçons.” Good students are not recompensed, but poor students are punished; there is effectively no “promotion sociale” as Barthes termed it: “de toute manière, l’éducation ne permet jamais de passer d’une classe à l’autre.” The libertines and their victims are two totally impermeable groups.

What Barthes neglects to mention, however, is the notable exception of Julie, who takes a liking to the libertine practices and is the only wife to survive the final days at Silling. Julie’s unique status in the novel blurs the distinction between libertine and victim (and her name might raise some eyebrows for readers of Rousseau!). Her introductory portrait, far from remaining insipidly sweet like those of the other wives, describes her lack of personal hygiene in great detail: “...les dents les plus infectes, et d’une saleté d’habitude sur tout le reste de son corps, et principalement aux deux temples de la lubricité, que nul autre assurément, malgré tous ses traits, ne se fût arrangé de Julie.” This passage also suggests that although Julie can be the object of their jouissance, she resembles the libertines too much to remain entirely a victim: “il arrive souvent qu’une femme qui a nos défauts nous plaît bien moins dans nos plaisirs qu’une

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531 Barthes, S.F.L., 29.
532 Sade, 120, 138.
533 Barthes, S.F.L., 30.
534 Sade, 120, 51.
quir n’a que des vertus.” Her punishments are therefore mitigated; caught with Hercule, Julie responds in a libertine manner and after a whipping, “comme elle est aimée, ainsi qu’Hercule qui s’est toujours bien conduit, on leur pardonne et on s’en amuse.” Nevertheless, Julie still remains an object; her growing penchant for debauchery “la faisait passer pour une créature fort aimable et qui méritait d’être mise au rang des objets pour lesquels on avait des égards.” While she is ultimately spared at the end, taken nominally under her husband’s protection, she has still endured great torture and permanent bodily harm. In the end, no real justification of Julie’s salvation occurs – she simply seems to have been assimilated into a middle class, like the historiennes, perhaps victim, but neither casualty nor executioner. This ambiguous space, clouding an otherwise strict dichotomy between student and teacher (or master and slave) is not so much an example of a successful conversion due to libertine teachings as an illustration of the inherent limitations of such an education. For Julie is painted from the beginning as a budding libertine: the process at Silling only serves to bring out her natural tendencies, all the while suggesting that, as a woman, her education in debauchery can only elevate her so far.

Clearly, this rigid and unforgiving dichotomy, especially concerning to women, Julie notwithstanding, needs to be contrasted with Eugénie’s libertine education, which seeks to impart a philosophical system that would affect all aspects of her lifestyle. But as we have suggested above, Eugénie’s freedom is problematic at best and illusory at worst; were she not enthusiastically compliant, she would quickly become a victim. Therefore we can perhaps see the unyielding structure of Silling as a logical extension of

535 Ibid.
536 Ibid., vol. 2, 221.
537 Ibid., vol. 2, 89.
the contradictions already sketched out in the boudoir. If this anachronistic reading seems troublesome, let us simply examine it from the other angle: *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795) throws prudent veils over the same images laid bare in the *120 journées de Sodome* (1785) – let us not forget that the years in between have seen Sade narrowly escape the guillotine, and though almost continuously imprisoned, lose the painstakingly elaborated manuscript of the latter.

If the victims only receive a limited, technical education, then what of the libertines? Do they educate each other? Are they instructed by the narratives of the old women *historiennes* hired to regale them with lascivious tales? If we examine the interplay between the framing novel and the anecdotes it contains, we see that a curious relationship of example and imitation is enacted. Initially, and as we might suspect, the stories recounted by Duclos, the first of the *historiennes*, prompt the libertines to mimic the passions described. Following one of the stories of the seventh day, the narrator takes over and exclaims: “Ô terrible effet de l’exemple!” as the libertines repeat the scene they have just heard.538 But as the first part of the novel advances, the libertines’ freedom to imitate the stories becomes increasingly limited, as they may not infringe on any of their self-imposed restrictions concerning the progression of the passions. Trying to reign in Curval — the most transgressive of the libertines — the Duc de Blangis reminds them all that “nous sommes ici pour entendre et non pas pour agir.”539 The bishop pithily retorts that “c’est donc à dire que tu ne fais rien,” but Blangis manages to guide the conversation.

538 Ibid., 220. Saint-Amand finds that the Sadean orgy “is based on the principle of *imitation*: its *modus operandi* is to copy, to imagine the other’s desire, to outdo the other libertine’s imagination.” Pierre Saint-Amand, *The Libertine’s Progress: Seduction in the Eighteenth-Century French Novel*, trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage (Hanover and London: Brown University Press, 1994), 116. This is, in fact, how many of the orgies and anecdotes are intertwined in the *120*.
539 Sade, *120*, 261.
back to the storytelling: “Continue, Duclos, il sera plus sage à nous d’écouter des sottises que d’en faire, il faut se réserver.” The libertines are thus primarily listeners and not actors in this human drama; why else, of course, would such an emphasis be placed on the dictionary of the passions rather than on the frame narrative, which eventually disintegrates? In a sense, we can see the libertines as readers of the *historiennes’* speeches, just as we are readers of the complete text. Our readerly freedom is curtailed, as described above, just like the libertine’s power vis-à-vis the stories they hear.

Stepping outside of the novel itself and examining the matter of reception, the question of pedagogy becomes even less clear. Is the *120 journées de Sodome* a pedagogical text for its intended audience? If so, what could its pedagogical relationship to the reader be? Is the desired reader a libertine or a victim? Relative to the introduction, briefly discussed above, the reader appears to be a friend and master, thus placing him in the camp of the libertines. Nevertheless, as we also analyzed above, the reader’s freedom, immense at first glance, is in fact largely curtailed by the controlling narrative voice, just as Eugénie’s freedom was curbed by the contradictions implicit in the libertine philosophy. The kind of student that the reader is asked to become is essentially a passive role. As Philippe Roger proposes in *La Philosophie dans le pressoir*, “le texte sadien n’incite donc que parodiquement à l’action.... Sade ne pousse...”

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540 Ibid.
541 Aside from the obvious fact that the last three volumes only exist in outline form, and thus contain the bare minimum of the frame narrative, it is also notable that the narrative within the first part turns increasingly to outline form. As de Jean points out, if the first day merits 19 pages, the eighteenth only receives four, and the twenty-second a mere two. “Disciplining the Body of Narrative,” 37.
542 There was, of course, a lengthy delay between the writing of the *120* and its actual publication date in 1905. Clearly, these two audiences are not the same. I am here referring to the hypothetical eighteenth-century audience which would have responded to Sade’s text had it been published.
543 Among other significant clues: “ami lecteur;” “c’est à toi à la prendre et à laisser le reste.” *120*, 99.
pas au crime, ni au stupre; il pousse au texte."\textsuperscript{544} That is to say, Sade pushes his reader to become a passive receptor of his ideas. There is no real practical project in pedagogy here, simply a depicting of the parody engendered by Enlightenment contradictions.

Through the philosophical contradictions in \textit{La Philosophie dans le boudoir} and the ambiguous pedagogical relationships of the \textit{120 journées de Sodome}, it becomes apparent that Roger’s words can be applied to any instructional value ostensibly contained within these texts. If perverse exemplarity there is, it attacks the codified structure of narrative and taxonomy, not the education of young women. This is why Hénaff is absolutely correct in saying that “l’éducation d’Eugénie c’est l’initiation à la jouissance de son corps comme pratique du langage.”\textsuperscript{545} What appears disguised as pedagogy (sexual, moral, political...) in these texts is actually an example of what Barthes termed the \textit{sémiosis} of the Sadean oeuvre. Explaining why so many readers have condemned Sade’s style, attacking him as monotonous, Barthes argues that “Sade choisit toujours le discours contre le référent : il se place toujours du côté de la sémiosis, non de la mimesis....”\textsuperscript{546} By attempting to find reality and expressions of reality (the referent) in Sadean texts, the reader has missed the point. In refusing representation and all the picturesque it entails, Sade is in fact refuting the very idea of pedagogy by example.

If we wish to gain a deeper understanding of representation as a refusal of exemplary pedagogy in the Sadean oeuvre, we discover almost immediately that much critical ink has been spilled on the scarcity of such traditional description in the Marquis’ novels. Philippe Roger analyses at length Sade’s mistrust of the traditional portrait. For

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[544] Roger, \textit{Philosophie dans le pressoir}, 84.
\item[546] Barthes, \textit{S.F.L}, 41.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
him, Sade breaks with the age of representation and attacks “la littérature peinturlante.”

The portrait is motionless and mute, thus closed off to the viewer; as such, it represents classical morality: “le tableau est cet espace clos, où s’exhibe, exemplaire, l’illustration élue par le peintre ; espace dont le spectateur est exclu, où s’affichent des postures qu’il ne peut déranger ; espace privilégié de la moralité.” In other words, the static nature of representation embodied by the portrait mimics the fixedness of moral conventions. Although Sade does not completely avoid portraits — the introduction of the 120 journées being a prime example — he often reduces them to caricatures or elects to use the dynamic representation of the scene instead.

Examining the portrait of the Duc de Blangis at the opening of the 120, we find that despite an apparent profusion of description, physicality is reduced to a few swift paint strokes. The Duc has “cinq pieds onze pouces, des membres d’une force et d’une énergie, des articulations d’une vigueur, des nerfs d’une élasticité....” Aside from the specific measurements, this description tells us precisely nothing about the Duc’s appearance, instead trailing off into an ellipsis. The comparisons that were about to be made are left incomplete. Furthermore, the Duc is then vaguely illustrated by a series of superlatives which only serve to prove the extremity of his size and character: “...les hanches belles, les fesses superbes, la plus belle jambe du monde....” The blandness of such a description is striking — but nothing compared to the utter conventionality of the victims’ portraits. As mentioned before, Barthes notes a total inability (or unwillingness) to describe beauty in the Sadean text. A certain degree of realism found in the libertine

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547 Roger, *Philosophie dans le pressoir*, 112.
548 Ibid., 119.
549 Sade, *120*, 31.
550 Ibid.
portrait (although, as we noted above, these are also rife with superlatives and indistinct traits) is replaced by pure rhetoric in the victim’s portrait. Even a cursory glance at the portrait of Adélaïde, Durcet’s wife, reveals this conventionality:

Elle était âgée de vingt ans, petite, mince, extrêmement fluette et délicate, faite à peindre, les plus beaux cheveux blonds qu’on puisse voir. Un air d’intérêt et de sensibilité, répandu sur toute sa personne et principalement dans ses traits, lui donnait l’air d’une héroïne de roman.\footnote{Ibid., 46–7, my emphasis.}

Sade is constantly aware of these references to classical painting and representation, peppering his description with phrases like the “temple où Vénus semblait exiger son hommage,” and “l’Amour même avait pris soin de la former.”\footnote{Ibid., 47; 44.}

Ultimately, the portrait is not Sade’s chosen medium for description. If much has been made concerning the theatricality of Sade’s backgrounds,\footnote{Barthes, Sade Fourier Loyola (p. 33 and passim); Rocca, Sade: Le Problème du Mal dans Aline et Valcour (p.77 and passim); Finkenstaedt, Framing Sade’s Aline and Valcour (p.39 and passim); Hénaff, Sade, l’invention du corps libertin (p. 136 and passim).} it is in part because he privileges the \textit{scène} over the \textit{tableau}, according to Roger. The theatrical scene, by its very nature dynamic and flexible, allows Sade to depict his characters’ inner motivations more clearly and effectively than the static portrait. Compared to the tableau, the \textit{scène} is “non plus attitude fixée par le dessin moral, mais nature bien vivante, dont la contemplation engendre un discours qui incite à la réactivation du plaisir.”\footnote{Roger, \textit{Philosophie dans le pressoir}, 119.} The principle of dynamic movement — one of the main tenets of Sade’s materialist philosophy\footnote{For a discussion of the principle of movement in Sade’s philosophy and its relation to other materialist philosophers such as La Mettrie and Hélvetius, see Pierre Klossowski, \textit{Sade mon prochain}; Philippe Roger, \textit{Sade : la philosophie dans le pressoir}; Marthe Tirelli Rocca, \textit{Sade : Le Problème du Mal dans Aline et Valcour} (PhD diss., UCLA, 1980); Jean-Pierre Han and Jean-Pierre Valla, “Le système philosophique de Sade,” \textit{Europe} 522 (Oct 1972): 105–123; Maurice Blanchot, \textit{Lautréamont et Sade} (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1963); and Alice Laborde, \textit{Sade romancier} (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1974).} — confers the scene with new possibilities for reader interaction. The
theatrical scene allows the reader to enter into the text as a participant and no longer a mute spectator.

If we extrapolate this notion of interactive reading – that is, the scene preferred over the portrait, and semiosis replacing mimesis – to the question of pedagogy, we discover that here as well the traditional framework falls apart. At first glance, the passions depicted in the 120 journées de Sodome could easily be qualified as so many exempla to be imitated. In fact, this is precisely where certain critics, shocked or bored by the contents of the novel, have halted their analysis. Just as we discovered when examining the apparent transparency of the introduction and its instructions to the reader, however, a further probing of the “exemplary” role of the passions illustrated reveals problematic issues. Sade’s preference for the interactive scene suggests that the crucial part of the text would be the frame narrative, which contains the mises-en-scène elaborated by the libertines. On the contrary, however, the frame narrative acquires, as mentioned above, an increasingly more restricted role in the 120, ultimately vanishing in the last three outlined volumes. The argument that Sade did not have time to finish the last three volumes is inconsequential: his drafts clearly contain the crucial structuring elements of the text, which are revealed not to be the libertine scenes. Combined with the physical improbability, if not impossibility, of many of the acts described, this contradiction clearly points to a problem with the issue of education by example.

Ultimately, I believe this is what Roger is hinting at when he writes that the 120 journées de Sodome is “un livre à faire et non pas à imiter.” It is not imitative action that is sought, but a new praxis of creative reading and decoding certain aspects of Enlightenment thought. It’s not a traité de savoir-vivre, but rather one of savoir-lire. The education as depicted within the novel does not truly seek a practical application in the outside world. Sadean pedagogy would in fact be the attempt to instruct a new form of narrative representation, paradoxical and semiotic. At the center of the 120 — in the cachot, so to speak — there is still only a self-referential concern, the use of parody of Enlightenment education ideas as a means to reveal its inherent flaws. Contradiction is the tool used to highlight the shortcomings of Enlightenment pedagogy. These contradictions that we keep encountering — between the roles of the reader and narrator, students and teachers, the particular and the general — are not, therefore, flaws in Sade’s philosophical or educational arguments; they are signposts leading us to the real issue at stake: how to read Sade. Contradiction is hence a liberation from traditional representation and morality, a new approach to reading and writing.

For Sade, writing is consubstantial to the libertine act. As Klossowski suggests, Sade shocks his contemporaries and violates classical style “non parce que l’aberration y est décrite, mais parce que l’acte aberrant y est reproduit.” Ultimately, it is not just Sade’s subject matter that breaches the classical thresholds of decency and bienséances (pornography, as we know, has existed in every period including Sade’s); it is also his

557 Roger, Philosophie dans le pressoir, 79.
558 The argument could thus be made that when Sade does engage in concrete description (almost always regarding sexual acts), he is in fact applying rhetorical tools to a licentious subject in order to parody the Enlightenment’s obsession with bienséances.
559 Klossowski, Sade mon prochain, 52.
560 As Carter argues, pornography only becomes rejected by society when it criticizes the power structures inherent in that society: “when pornography serves — as with very rare exceptions it always does — to
stylistic and formal choices, rooted in contradiction and a non-linear narrative progression, which invade what de Jean terms the classical “fortress,” the logical and highly codified pretension of utility expected from even the most licentious of novels. Barthes speaks of this when he finds that the structuring logic of Sade’s novels is not “romanesque,” but rather “rhapsodique” – serial, but without progression.\textsuperscript{561} Teleology is refused; endlessly modulating repetition replaces it. Introducing all three of his subjects — Sade, Fourier, and Loyola — Barthes stresses that none of these writers are truly preoccupied with content: “s’ils voulaient dire quelque chose, la langue linguistique, la langue de la communication et de la philosophie suffirait ; on pourrait les résumer, ce qui n’est le cas pour aucun d’eux.”\textsuperscript{562} Likewise, addressing the Sadean novel specifically, he writes that “le roman rhapsodique (sadien) n’a pas de sens, rien ne l’oblige à progresser, mûrir, se terminer.”\textsuperscript{563} A novel such as the 120 journées de Sodome is a perfect example of this anti-linear narration. Even if a certain intensification of the passions can be delineated, the narrative structure of the novel remains the same throughout the four sections. More than a work of literature, the 120 appears to become a catalogue, the numerical recapitulation at the end of the fourth section being the most evident illustration of this.

And how can we speak of the 120’s flat, largely ateleological narrative without immediately grasping its sexual implications? The repetitive, rather than cumulative structure of the stories denies the reader any final pleasure and resolution. If the same argument might be applied to a number of pornographic story lines, Sade’s perplexing

\textsuperscript{561} Barthes, \textit{S,F,L}, 162.
\textsuperscript{562} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{563} Ibid., 144.
originality clearly lies in the combination of this repetitive drone of sexuality and Silling’s ostensibly educational structure. By using an inherently rational and systematic mode of inquiry — in this case, the encyclopedic method — and using it to illustrate both educational and sexual excesses, Sade is ultimately using the tools of the Enlightenment against itself. This appropriation of contemporary cultural trends and tactics is precisely what is striking if we turn our attention to Sade’s only epistolary novel, *Aline et Valcour*. In the next section, I will examine this much more outwardly conventional novel to see if its treatment of narrative likewise thwarts any possibility for female pedagogy.

V. Defying the Epistolary Pact: *Aline et Valcour*

With the sprawling *Aline et Valcour, ou le roman philosophique*, Sade gives the impression of adopting contemporary literary trends and traditions.\(^{564}\) The Marquis began work on the novel in 1786, but it was not published until 1795, allowing him to revise certain elements of the text in order to support his spurious subtitle, “écrit à la Bastille un an avant la Révolution de France” and thus appear as a revolutionary prophet. The novel’s encyclopedic cornucopia of styles, themes, and narrative devices can obviously be linked to Sade’s aforementioned obsession with calculation, compilation, and tabulation. Likewise, Sade’s generic choice is not a neutral one, as *Aline et Valcour* is not just another epistolary novel: it functions as Sade’s repository of all eighteenth-century tricks and trends. Sade was not content with writing a stereotypical epistolary novel, ostensibly dealing with pedagogy in general and female education in specific; he

sought to write a master text, a parodic exercise in totalization. But in compiling and analyzing all of his century’s philosophical questions and quandaries, while couching them in one of the era’s favorite vehicles for instruction — the epistolary novel — was Sade in reality attempting to create something more than a parody — perhaps his own pedagogical system? In the following discussion, we will examine the primary moments of pedagogical import in *Aline et Valcour* and try to determine if any coherent model of female education emerges.

Like all self-respecting eighteenth-century epistolary novels, *Aline et Valcour* begins with a sententious epigraph and two admonitory prefaces which contradict each other, a trope which poses the problem of pedagogical intent from the very beginning. The epigraph from Lucretius immediately suggests the educational nature of the text to follow:

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\text{nam veluti pueris absinthia tetra medentes, / cum dare conantur prius oras pocula circum / contingunt mellis dulci favoque liquore, / ut puerum aetas improvida ludicifetur / labrorum tenus ; interea perpotet amarum / absinthiae laticem deceptaque non capiatur, / sed potius tali tacta recreata valescat (De rerum natura book IV, v. 1-17).}
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Just as the cup of salutary but bitter absinthe is ringed with sweet honey, so the harsh but necessary educational truths that Sade wishes to impart to his readers are sugar-coated, so to speak, in the pleasant guise of an epistolary novel. This was a banal and widely-used narrative trope; only with great difficulty, therefore, can we read this epigraph in a novel of Sade’s at face value. Like many other *topoi* in *Aline et Valcour*, the pedagogical epigraph will be placed in humorous opposition and sometimes direct contradiction to the philosophical systems expressed and enacted throughout the novel.

The first preface is marked as an *Avis de l’éditeur* and is striking by its reiteration of many of the concepts proposed in Sade’s *Idée sur les romans*. Lauding the diversity of
styles and characters — we are reminded of a similar merit being awarded to Laclos’ *Liaisons dangereuses* in its preface — the éditeur justifies the many vivid descriptions of evil contained in the novel. The almost excessive force with which virtuous and nefarious characters are opposed is to demonstrate “avec quel ascendant, et en même temps avec quelle facilité le langage de la vertu pulvérise toujours les sophismes du libertinage et de l’impiété.”565 The author could have softened the traits of evil, the editor reasons, but only at the risk of becoming another Crébillon fils, drifting in rose-colored vice and entirely missing “le but moral que tout honnête homme doit se proposer en écrivant.”566 The elaborate descriptions of Butua’s despotic regime in a remote corner of Africa, for example, are thus necessary to Sade’s alleged moral objective contained within this novel.

Sade’s justification for an accurate portrayal of vice, though perhaps more adamant, is not so different from the préface du rédacteur contained in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. In the latter, we likewise found a defensive argument for the corrupted mores depicted in the novel and several instructions for reading (among others, of course, the prescription that a mother should give the novel to her daughter on her wedding day). Illustrating vice in all its salacious glory is thus, at least ostensibly, a pedagogical tool for both authors, even if Sade trumpets it quite a bit louder. What remains to be seen, of course, is what exactly such a pedagogical tool strives to accomplish and if such an objective ever rises above mere parody.

In the avis de l’éditeur, Sade likewise pays lip service to another favorite trope of eighteenth-century epistolary novels: namely, the assertion of authenticity. Whereas

565 Sade, *Aline*, 44.
epistolary novels in the earlier portion of the century often resorted to claims of veracity in order to garner some respectability for themselves — the otherwise popular novel being frowned upon by critics — we have seen that later authors such as Rousseau and Laclos often played upon the ambiguity that their prefaces distilled throughout their novels, choosing to focus on the interplay between fiction and truth. Here, the éditeur appears to contradict himself within the very same preface. This text, he maintains, could only be the result of “des aventures inouïes,” which are so extraordinary “qu’aucune anecdote réelle...qu’aucun mémoire, qu’aucun roman, n’en contient de plus singulières.”

This highly ambiguous sentence not only trails off after the questionable expression “anecdote réelle” (aren’t anecdotes, by their very nature, true stories?), but then juxtaposes it with vastly different literary genres. It appears that the genres (anecdote, mémoires, roman) are listed in decreasing order of veracity. The text of Aline et Valcour is thus so astonishing that it surpasses even the most creative inventions of authors. If we read this sentence closely, however, we notice that no claim to authenticity is in fact made. The following paragraph complicates matters further. Here the éditeur explains: “Personne n’est encore parvenu au royaume de Butua, situé au centre de l’Afrique ; notre auteur seul a pénétré dans ces climats barbares ; ici ce n’est plus un roman, ce sont les notes d’un voyageur exact, instruit, et qui ne raconte que ce qu’il a vu.”

This sudden shift to a quasi-anthropological case study is striking: let us not

\[567\] Ibid., 43.
\[568\] Oxford English Dictionary s.v. “anecdote;” and pl. “secret, private, or hitherto unpublished narratives or details of history. (At first, and now again occas. used in L. form anecdota).”
\[569\] Ibid.
forget that our first introduction to the text is via its title, *Aline et Valcour, ou le roman philosophique*. Sade’s work is thus already emerging as a text with dual aims.\(^{570}\)

The *éditeur* then retracts claims of authenticity, however. In the following sentence he admits that Butua’s utopian counterpart, Tamoé, is pure fiction: “Si par des fictions plus agréables il [l’auteur] veut à Tamoé consoler ses lecteurs des cruelles vérités qu’il a été obligé de peindre à Butua, doit-on lui en savoir mauvais gré ?”\(^{571}\) The fiction is here the sugarcoating, the honeyed rim meant to sweeten the bitter absinthe of Butua’s truth. Although this is clearly a way for Sade to shield himself from reproach — he is the author of virtue and only the reporter of vice — it also has a rather ambiguous pedagogical extension. If, as the *éditeur* laments, the only problem with this literary mixture is “que tout ce qu’il y a de plus affreux soit dans la nature, et que ce ne soit que dans le pays des chimères que se trouve seulement le juste et le bon,” then is there any instruction really taking place? If *Aline et Valcour* is simply illustrating the horrible truth and contrasting it with virtuous flights of fancy, what is the reader’s lesson to be learned?

As we shall see depicted in numerous passages of the text, the lesson is precisely demonstrated by and contained within this contrast. “Quoi qu’il en soit, le contraste de ces deux gouvernements plaira sans doute, et nous sommes bien parfaitement convaincus de l’intérêt qu’il doit produire.”\(^{572}\) Just as contradiction served as a teaching tool in *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, and the *120 journées de Sodome* exposed a parodic desire for totalization undermined by oppositional structures, so *Aline et Valcour*’s educational

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\(^{570}\) Anthropology, especially contained in more-or-less authentic travel writing, was a budding interest in the eighteenth century. The blending of fact and fiction in many travelogues of the period is notoriously prevalent, complicated furthermore by the mixture of genres in works such as Diderot’s *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (which reinstates many factual elements from the naval officer’s travel writing within a fictional narrative serving to criticize Western mores).

\(^{571}\) Sade, *Aline*, 43.

\(^{572}\) Ibid., 44.
import will reside in its use of contradiction and contrast to illustrate the fallacies of the philosophical and pedagogical systems favored by Enlightenment thinkers. The generic opposition between travel narrative and novel that is stated in the preface\(^{573}\) will thus serve as a structural framework for the numerous other productive dichotomies contained in the text.

Having already been introduced to several structural dualities, it is fitting that the reader now encounters a second, doubled preface: the *Essentiel à lire*. Written in the third person ("l’auteur croit devoir prévenir..."), this short text distances itself from the general “nous” of the éditeur’s voice; we have the impression that this is actually a mitigated first-person text couched in safer language. The *Essentiel à lire* is, as its title suggests, a series of prescriptions for proper reading. The author exhorts his readers to keep the temporal conditions of his production in mind; if the novel is not completely up to date, it is due to a seven-year delay in publication that the author could not control. Additionally, the author begs his readers to judge the book “qu’après l’avoir bien exactement lu d’un bout à l’autre” and without attempting to reduce it to partial truths: “ce n’est ni sur la physionomie de tel ou tel personnage, ni sur tel ou tel système isolé, qu’on peut asseoir son opinion sur un livre de ce genre ; l’homme impartial et juste ne prononcera jamais que sur l’ensemble.”\(^{574}\) Here Sade once again appears to be striving for totalization, for a complete system that could reduce the contradictions inherent between the virtuous Valcour and the nefarious Blamont, between idyllic Tamoé and despotic Butua. But just as every system which strives to be comprehensive in fact

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\(^{573}\) In fact, the generic hybridization is further broken down in the preface: “la réunion dans le même ouvrage de trois genres : comique, sentimental et érotique.” Ibid., 44.

\(^{574}\) Ibid., 46.
creates more and more exceptions, so the desire to eliminate contradictions will in turn produce more dichotomies.\textsuperscript{575}

Although we are more interested in systematic and structural dichotomies here than specific philosophical arguments, one obvious contradictory diptych must be mentioned: namely, the opposing utopian (or dystopian) societies of Butua and Tamoé. These two experiments are clearly contradictory philosophical systems, not least in matter of pedagogy. In the African kingdom of Butua, women are completely enslaved by the male race, which is in turn subjugated by the all-powerful king Ben Maâcoro. As the Portuguese Sarmiento, having lived in Butua for many years, remarks regarding the condition of women, “le sort des bêtes féroces est sans doute préférable au leur.”\textsuperscript{576} But this comment is made without any pity or criticism of Butua’s government; in fact, much like the despot Ben Maâcoro, Sarmiento is appalled by the respect that women obtain in Europe. The king castigates the virtuous husband Sainville, exclaiming that “vous êtes fous....vous autres Européens, d’idolâtrer ce sexe ; une femme est faite pour qu’on en jouisse, et non pas pour qu’on l’adore.”\textsuperscript{577} The women in Ben Maâcoro’s harem — or should we say stable? — are divided into classes much like livestock, and serve to complete all of the work within the palace. Interestingly enough, women also function as the guards of the palace. One might not expect such an oppressed class to be chosen as

\textsuperscript{575} In relating Laclos’ work to Vauban’s fortifications, Joan de Jean arrives at a similar conclusion: “This systematization gone haywire makes Vauban in the true spirit of the eighteenth century, when every attempt at perfecting codification leads, like the Encyclopédie, to a nonstop accounting machine.” Literary Fortifications, 58. The Derridean term “supplement” is perhaps appropriate to de Jean’s argument, where the supplement is both an addition and a replacement. The Rousseauian “dangerous supplement” Derrida addresses is that which supplements and supplants, i.e., education in relation to nature. Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 141. In the case of Sade, the idea of a supplement would tie in well with the obsessive counting machine of Silling, which seeks to totalize, but always creates a remainder or an exception.

\textsuperscript{576} Sade, Aline, 246.

\textsuperscript{577} Ibid., 220.
protectors of the State; however, this serves to highlight the problems inherent in any master-slave dichotomy. If the men are all powerful and the women considered useless, then the latter should not be entrusted with anything of import or value. And yet, to have men accomplish such tasks would create a breach in the stark opposition between master and slave. The woman’s marginal power is then structurally created by untenable oppositions.

Nevertheless, female education is rather limited. For both sexes, though separately, instruction is doled out by the priests, who are little more than superstitious policemen. For women specifically, however,

la vertu principale, et presque l’unique, qu’ils inspirent aux femmes, est la plus entière résignation, la soumission la plus profonde aux volontés des hommes ; ils leur persuadent qu’elles sont uniquement créées pour en dépendre, et, à l’exemple de Mahomet, les damnent impitoyablement à leur mort.  

Perhaps in a satirical echo of the education of the ancient Greece, the priests also serve as sexual initiators for the young girls, virginity being despised by the monarch. On the whole, Sarmiento notes, libertinage is the rule in the pedagogical establishments. The final comment made about female education in this rather brief description is that it is compulsory and national: if any parents attempted to subtract their children from the educational system, the priests are authorized to kidnap them and enroll them by force.

Female education is clearly non-existent in the kingdom of Butua. Woefully ignorant, Butua’s women are reduced to sexual playthings. But, one might argue, they are still essential for the propagation of the race, and must thus receive a modicum of respect as mothers. Nothing could be further from the truth: strange and severe reproductive restrictions ensure minimal conception and expectant mothers are treated

578 Ibid., 250.
with scorn and disgust. In fact, Butua’s regime ensures a gradual decimation of the female population and, consequently, of the population on the whole. Butua’s educational system, which derives from its national ideology, is nothing other than a contradiction in terms: a totalizing endeavor — national and compulsory — whose aim is self-destruction. Butua’s citizens reveal a nihilism completely at odds with civic duty.

In many regards, Zamé’s utopian island of Tamoé appears as the complete opposite to Butua’s cruel and tyrannical regime. Depicted as a benevolent ruler seeking only the good of his people, Zamé approaches the eighteenth-century notion of the enlightened despot; his emphasis on rationality, tolerance, and the social contract is not unlike the principles of a ruler like Joseph II. However, some troubling similarities with Butua’s authoritarian regime appear when we investigate the educational system of Tamoé. As in the African kingdom, education is mandatory and nationalized. From the ages of 2 to 15, children are separated from their parents and established in single-sex boarding schools; what is at first little more than a kindergarten becomes, around age 6, agricultural training. From ages 12 to 15, the students are inculcated with their civic duties, the love of God, and their marital duties towards their future wives. Military training, essential for the defense of the island, is also part of male education. In a very traditional perspective, physical education is subtracted from female education, to be replaced instead with needlework, cooking, and sewing.

Next comes rudimentary instruction in astronomy, practical medicine, and architecture. Although allusions are elsewhere made to a few local poets, literature does not seem to be part of the curriculum. In fact, although Zamé provides for the literacy of all of his citizens and establishes public libraries, he says that the fifty thousand volumes
of French writing contained therein are “bien plus pour leur amusement que pour leur instruction.” Neither theology nor law, two of the major elements of European education, is deemed worthy of attention on Tamoé. Likewise, art is relegated to a leisure-time hobby without much use for society; although Zamé himself paints in his free time, no artistic education is ever proposed in his discourse. Musical education is similarly scant, as Zamé fears “que la musique ne soit plus faite pour amollir et corrompre l’âme, que pour l’élever.”

In a novel embracing so many eighteenth-century preoccupations, Sade clearly could not neglect the debate concerning the social utility of theater. Although many forms of art are otherwise conspicuously absent from Butua, Tamoé’s predilection for theater provides Sade with an opportunity to enter the debate. In every town, a public space is devoted to theatrical performances, which Zamé terms a “honnête et instructif délassement.” The piece represented for Sainville embodies Zamé’s conception of exemplary theater. Depicting an adulterous woman brought back into the fold by the shame and misfortunes heaped upon her, an adulterous woman in the audience is so moved by that pathos of the play that she herself reforms her conduct. The simplicity and earnestness of Tamoé’s theatrical productions serve to impact its spectators in an exemplary fashion, producing real moral results akin to those, Zamé reasons, sought by French penal law. But rather than the jaded indifference of the French public or the cruel

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579 Ibid., 358.
580 Ibid., 351.
581 The polemic concerning whether or not theater could have a moral effect on society is most notably linked to Rousseau and Diderot. On the one hand, Rousseau’s Lettre à d’Alembert sur les spectacles vilifies contemporary theater and, by suggesting the abolition of drama, marks his decisive break with Voltaire. On the other hand, although Diderot advocated reform for the theater in order to bring it closer to home, he argued that the “drame bourgeois” should be used as an educational medium.
582 Ibid., 359.
punishments of other regimes, Zamé declares that “voilà les seules punitions nécessaires à un peuple sensible.”

The more closely we observe Tamoé’s educational system, going beyond a cursory examination of the curriculum — which, incidentally, is not radically different from many other eighteenth-century propositions — the more we begin to discover its troubling contradictions. The supposedly charming introduction of Zilia, the wife of Zamé’s eldest son, is one such disconcerting note in the utopian program. She has only been taught three words of French by her husband, and she performs them for Sainville in all earnestness: “et la tendre et délicieuse Zilia, posant la main sur son cœur et regardant son mari avec autant de grâce que de modestie, lui dit en rougissant : Voilà votre bien.”

Needless to say, what is ostensibly intended as a touching portrait of domestic fidelity begins to ring false once the concept of ownership is introduced.

What is most troubling about Tamoé’s pedagogical empire, nevertheless, is not so much the remaining vestiges of inequality between the sexes — Sade is still, however radical, a man of his century — but rather the uncompromising rigidity of its comprehensive structure.

In what at first appears to be a proto-communist perspective, Zamé explains that young students choose their life’s work purely according to their natural penchant;

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583 Ibid., 360.
584 For example, the program offered by Laclos in his third essay. Historically speaking, Martine Sonnet’s Éducation des filles au temps des Lumières (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1987) reveals similar curricula in aristocratic circles.
585 Sade, Aline, 316.
586 Sade was evidently aware of Mme de Graffigny’s Lettres d’une Péruvienne, which he described as a “modèle de tendresse et de sentiment.” Idée sur les romans, 45. We note here the — ironic? — contrast with the similarly named protagonist of Mme de Graffigny’s Lettres d’une Péruvienne. Moreover, Zilia is depicted as being incredibly similar to the frame story’s Aline, thus adding another layer of resonance to the implications for her character’s pedagogy. Additionally, Sade also has a character named Déterville in the novel, who likewise fulfills a virtuous function.
587 For example, the conversation about prostitution begun by Zamé and continued by the editor, which appears to condemn the practice out of respect for its female victims, but immediately thereafter suggests that most women were driven into it because they were “primitivement séduites par l’avarice ou l’intempérance.” Sade, Aline, 320.
namely, that “les dispositions seules de nos jeunes gens établissent la différence de leurs occupations pendant leur vie.”

In reality, however, very little true choice is allotted to Tamoé’s pupils. Zamé’s system is entirely totalizing: it seeks to account for everyone within the national grid. Even the “célibataires” are accounted for, but it is always assumed that personal choice is in accordance with the will of the State. Deviances which could weaken the system, such as homosexuality or physical deformity, are rapidly dismissed.

For example, in allusion to homosexual men, Zamé discounts the possibility of a personal and irreversible natural character: Zamé converts “leurs défauts mêmes au profit de la société” inspiring in them “malgré eux, le goût des choses honnêtes, quelles que puissent être leurs dispositions....”

Zamé assures Sainville that within Tamoé’s system, everything is accounted for and everyone is happy: “l’État est tout ici ; c’est l’État qui nourrit le citoyen, qui élève ses enfants, qui le soigne, qui le juge, qui le condamne, et je ne suis, de cet État, que le premier citoyen.”

But in fact, the State becomes a crushing and automatic machine, impelled by itself and with no visible source (since Zamé is no dictator), but nevertheless maintaining an all-knowing eye upon its citizens. Intimacy and solitude are virtually impossible, “afin que l’œil vigilant du commandant de la ville pût [sic] s’étendre avec moins de peine sur tous les sujets de la contrée.”

The domestic idyll originally proposed in portraits such as that of Zamé’s family is quickly replaced by the impersonal authority of the national education system. Taken away from their parents at the young

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588 Sade, *Aline*, 324.
589 Likewise, the possibility that a man or woman would want to get married, but would be rejected by all their choices, is not addressed. Personal preference is little more than a government mandate.
590 Ibid., 371, my emphasis.
591 Ibid., 366.
592 Ibid., 368.
age of two, children essentially become wards of the State. Zamé justifies this procedure as follows:

On n’imagine pas combien la loi, qui débarrasse les pères et les mères de leurs enfants, évite dans les familles de divisions et de mésintelligences : les époux n’ont ainsi que les roses de l’hymen, ils n’en sentent jamais les épines.  

In order to foster patriotism, Zamé essentially explodes the notion of the family as heritage and lineage, which is evidently in contradiction with his initial presentation of the all-important domestic structure. But most significantly, the arguments supporting Zamé’s exemplary systems are completely undermined by his often trite and rapid conclusions. On a number of occasions, we have the impression that the author, speaking through Zamé, must resort to a “happily ever after” narrative in order to avoid addressing the inherent weaknesses of the latter’s pedagogical systems. For example, when discussing the marriage pact, Zamé concludes by stating that “ces formalités remplies, on met les jeunes gens en possession d’une maison, ainsi que je l’ai dit, sous l’inspection, pendant deux ans, ou de leurs parents, ou de leurs voisins ; et ils sont heureux.”

Likewise, we also note the same trope just a few pages earlier:

Avec ces objets et de l’eau excellente, ce peuple vit bien ; sa santé est robuste, les jeunes gens y sont vigoureux et féconds, les vieillards sains et frais ; leur vie se prolonge beaucoup au-delà du terme ordinaire, et ils sont heureux.

Female education, and pedagogical structures on the whole, though intrinsically problematic in Tamoé, are brushed aside with narrative ellipses. Though the necessity for education is not completely negated, in principle, as in the kingdom of Butua, Tamoé’s instructional program is likewise undermined by essential contradictions. All

593 Ibid., 319. The allusion to Supplément au voyage de Bougainville seems inevitable here, once again drawing attention to the travelogue aspect of Aline et Valcour.
594 Sade, Aline, 362, my emphasis.
595 Ibid., 357, my emphasis.
difference or deviance is evacuated from the system, resulting in a standardization, which, all residual female inequality aside, attempts to reduce education to a bare minimum required to keep the State structure functioning. Creativity and individuality are at best relegated to frivolous leisure pursuits. Tamoé’s pedagogy is ultimately not a system for enriching individual lives, but for the reproduction of its current social and political structures. Much like Silling’s monstrous accounting machine, Tamoé’s government is terrified of the excess, of the residual, and seeks to contain it by force and oppression.

Many critics have analyzed the philosophical contradictions illustrated in the utopian diptych of Butua and Tamoé, and such a dialectical technique is certainly not unique to Sade. Its pertinence to our discussion lies in the broader undermining of any pedagogical project that occurs when Sade parodies issues central to Enlightenment debate. After addressing the ambiguity of travel literature, it is only natural to examine Sade’s handling of another great eighteenth-century favorite, epistolarity. In adopting the form of the epistolary novel, Sade was in many ways courting easy popularity and recognition. It quickly becomes evident, however, that this choice is at odds with Sade’s intrinsic mistrust of the letter novel. Much like the static portrait, the fictional letter is for Sade a stilted, conventional genre that is perhaps not best suited for pedagogical aims. No doubt a connection may be drawn here with his personal life, since Sade experienced firsthand the tyrannical power of letters and their potential for abuse when he suffered at the hands of his mother-in-law.

In his introduction to *Sade en toutes lettres : autour d’Aline et Valcour*, Michel Delon writes that “dans ce roman par lettres, Sade met en évidence la fausseté du pacte
épistolaire.” For Sade, the epistolary genre is irremediably false, I would add, because its inherent contradiction resides in its quest for authenticity, which is in fact little more than literary trompe-l’œil. Delon locates three key structural elements of the novel that serve to undermine the epistolary pact: the exaggerated length of the two travel narratives inserted at the center of the novel; the “lien distendu” between the letter and its recipient; the editorial and authorial notes interrupting the narrative. All three of these techniques serve to contradict the epistolary pact that Sade appears to respect in the Avis de l’éditeur by undermining the reader’s ability to believe in any sort of reasonable mimesis.

The first of these structural elements to violate the epistolary pact — the Histoire de Sainville et Léonore, contained in the letters XXXV and XXXVIII — is evident to even the most inattentive of readers. Representing almost sixty percent of the novel’s length, these two enclosed letters clearly go beyond feasible epistolarity. The two letters unbalance the genre, and as Anne Brousteau terms it, create a perverse hybrid text. Our attention is furthermore drawn to the absurdity of these lengthy letters by the fact that the laborious Déterville is said to transcribe the two stories, word by word, in the space of two nights. Moreover, when the transcription of Sainville’s story begins, the author intervenes in the text, drawing even more attention to the lack of conviction in the epistolary pact. Anticipating the reader’s criticism, the footnote reads: “Le lecteur qui prendra ceci pour un de ces épisodes placés sans motif, et qu’on peut lire ou passer à

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597 Delon, Sade en toutes lettres, 10.  
598 Ibid., 37.
volonté, commettrait une faute bien lourde.” Thus recognizing the artifice of the novel — the episode is not random, but strategically placed — the author/editor highlights again the games he is playing with the epistolary genre.

Throughout the novel, this third structural element pinpointed by Delon — the intervention of editorial notes — jolts the reader out of the text and forces him/her to recognize the artificial nature of the text he is reading. Some of these notes, clearly posterior to the novel’s completion, are used to reinforce the “prophetic” nature of this allegedly pre-Revolutionary text. For example, when Zamé exclaims that “vous [les français]...finirez par secouer le joug du despotisme, et par devenir républicains à votre tour, parce que ce gouvernement est le seul qui convienne à une nation aussi franche, aussi remplie d’énergie et de fierté que la vôtre,” he is accompanied by an editorial note prodding the reader into admiration: “Conviens, lecteur, qu’il fallait les grâces d’état d’un homme embastillé pour faire en mil sept cent quatre-vingt-huit une telle prédiction.” If the nature and purpose of these types of notes are evident, the same cannot be said for many others, however. In a number of instances, the notes seem to house Sade’s philosophical surplus, evidence and arguments that would have bogged down the flow of the narrative. It is not insignificant, therefore, that some of Sade’s most audacious arguments are contained in the notes; relegated, as it were, to the domain of the highly committed reader. For example, Sarmiento’s defense of cannibalism, though shocking, is ostensibly limited to his marginal philosophy (the character is clearly a villain). When

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599 Sade, Aline, 187. The use of the word “faute” clearly has the potential for moral implications, as it did in Julie’s case in La Nouvelle Héloïse. This is another hint of the Sade who is not perhaps so devoid of moral intent in his writings, regardless of the manner in which he seeks to achieve this objective.

600 Like many, but not all, of the other notes in this novel, this footnote is not attributed. We might assume that it is a “note de l’auteur,” however, since the first attributed note, in letter XXXV, is marked in opposition as “note de l’éditeur.”

the author intervenes with a lengthy note stating that “l’anthropophagie n’est certainement pas un crime ; elle peut en occasionner, sans doute, mais elle est indifférente par elle-même,” we are unnerved by the complicity between Sarmiento and our supposedly trustworthy narrator.602

This complicity is short-lived, however. The author’s notes will in fact consistently serve to point out contradictions and, in doing so, to obfuscate the author’s position. If, as Haisoo Chung remarks, Aline et Valcour’s footnotes sometimes serve to “montrer les sophismes fallacieux des philosophies des personnages,” this is certainly not their only function.603 Whereas we may see the gypsy Brigandos reprimanded for fallacious arguments,604 we also see the narrator/author corrected by, ostensibly (the note is again unattributed) the editor on a number of occasions. One notable example occurs when Zamé makes an allusion to Apelle as the inspiration for his painting, saying that “la Grèce m’a donné l’idée et la France m’a fourni le sujet.”605 The editor, comments that “on ne peut présumer de qui l’auteur veut parler ici ; mais il ne faut chercher que dans les annales du commencement de ce siècle.”606 The fictional editor — who is of course none other than the author, both fictional and real — thus highlights the incomprehensibility of his own example, alluding to what is in essence an empty reference. It is quite significant, then, that this note must itself be footnoted by the current edition’s editor (Jean M. Goulemot) in an attempt to salvage meaning from empty contradictions. Goulemot writes, in note 378, “en effet, on ne voit guère à qui pense Sade

602 Ibid., 227.
604 Lettre XXXVIII, for example, when Brigandos justifies the end by the means and the author retorts that “voilà où Brigandos est dans l’erreur. Un meilleur logicien l’a dit, dans ce même ouvrage, et avec bien plus de raison : il n’est jamais permis de faire le mal pour arriver au bien.” Sade, Aline, 514.
605 Sade, Aline, 329.
606 Ibid.
où même ce qu’il veut très exactement dire.”\textsuperscript{607} Goulemot’s note treats this almost as a textual anomaly, a mistake or absent-minded omission on Sade’s part. But in fact the problematic reference and inability to determine exactly what Sade is trying to say is already present in the text and reinforced by the intradiegetic note. As we discussed in the previous section, Sade’s meaning is not something to be teased out by reconciling contradictions and problematic instances in the text: it is the contradiction itself that alerts us to Sade’s parodic intent.

Delon suggests briefly in his introduction that perhaps the most troubling aspect of Sade’s epistolary novel is its structurally arbitrary nature. Unlike Laclos’ \textit{Liaisons dangereuses} or, to a certain extent, Rousseau’s \textit{La Nouvelle Héloïse}, Sade’s epistolary novel does not seem to be generically motivated; what is here contained in the form of letters could easily be transferred to a genre such as the \textit{roman-mémoires}. Sade makes little use of the structural possibilities of correspondence or of the letter’s material presence within the narrative.\textsuperscript{608} As Anne Brousteau remarks, “Sade met en évidence l’artifice de la rhétorique épistolaire et contredit en quelque sorte les principes de l’esthétique laclosienne.”\textsuperscript{609} And in fact, as she pithily concludes, “la lettre ne tue plus — mais le poison si.”\textsuperscript{610} If the connection between the epistolary form and the narrative content of Sade’s novel seems arbitrary, this also brings us to Delon’s second structural element contained in \textit{Aline et Valcour} and which undermines the epistolary pact originally proposed by Sade: i.e., the “lien distendu entre lettre et destinataire.” Such

\textsuperscript{607} Note by Goulemot in Sade, \textit{Aline}, 833.
\textsuperscript{608} Or as J. Goulemot terms it, the “simplicité surprenante des schémas épistolaires d’Aline et Valcour.” In \textit{Sade en toutes lettres}, 23.
\textsuperscript{610} \textit{Ibid.}
arbitrariness is true to an even greater extent when dealing with the individuation of the letters; that is, the specificity of the writer and reader of each letter. Where is the personal address of a monstrously oversized letter such as the *Histoire de Sainville et Léonore*? But more troubling still is what Delon calls “le tremblement de l’identité” in an eponymous article, which discusses the many confusions and parallel structures surrounding character development in *Aline et Valcour*. How can we rely on the specificity of a character’s nature as letter writer if we cannot even pinpoint his/her identity? Unlike in Laclos’ novel, where each character can be clearly identified by his/her letter-writing style, the voices contained in *Aline et Valcour* are often interchangeable. This is in large part due to the constant destabilisation of identity that Delon discusses in the aforementioned article. The identities of Léonore and Aline, for example, are constantly being questioned by the foils and doubles proposed by the figures of Clémentine and Eugénie. Likewise, the striking resemblances between Aline, Sophie, and Léonore become problematic as the kinship lines between them are continually being redrawn. This “jeu de miroirs,” as Delon terms it, is moreover complicated by the fact that the characters of *Aline and Valcour* are constantly in disguise: Dolbourg as Mirville, Léonore as a young boy, Sainville as an African, etc. In fact, after three encounters with Léonore where Sainville does not identify her, it is only when she is on stage as an actress — disguised as an other — that he manages to recognize her.

Thus, as Delon convincingly argues, identity is not a stable concept in Sade’s philosophical novel, but is rather defined by tensions and contradictions. He concludes: “le caractère n’est plus tant une catégorie fixe, la case d’une grille ou d’une typologie
qu’une contradiction et une dynamique.\textsuperscript{611} Incessantly switching masks and disguises, the characters of \textit{Aline et Valcour} thus naturally cannot exemplify stable voices in their letters. Their educational arguments and philosophical viewpoints are dispersed, scattered pieces of a jigsaw that never quite comes together. This is why, as several critics have thrown their hands up in the air and concluded, it is perhaps futile to try and find a coherent philosophy — the resolution of all contradictions — in \textit{Aline et Valcour}. Once again, we begin to suspect that contradiction \textit{is itself} the teaching mechanism being exploited in the Sadean text.

Many critics have sought to isolate the character of Léonore, the principled if hard-hearted woman as the novel’s saving grace, the way out of the contradictory libertine/sentimental impasse. It is undeniable that her fate as a wealthy heiress reunited with her husband is by far the happiest and that she survives a plethora of adventures by utilising rational and pragmatic solutions. But upon closer inspection, we discover that Léonore, rather than proposing a coherent philosophy, is herself fraught with contradictions and oppositions. For example, her possible status as an exemplary character is undermined by the fact that she only writes one letter (excluding the verbal account of her travels transcribed by Déterville). Léonore’s voice is thus largely absent from the epistolary structure; her single letter to M\textsuperscript{me} de Blamont sheds an appropriately ambiguous light on her constitution. In it, Léonore is cast in a cold and almost cruel light, alternating with flashes of goodness, in a manner that prevents the reader from truly determining her character. Speaking of the reversals in fortune occasioned by the discovery of her authentic identity, Léonore muses that “rien ne m’amuse autant que le bouleversement de ces petites fortunes dissipées par ma présence.... vous m’avouerez

\textsuperscript{611} Delon, \textit{Sade en toutes lettres}, 65.
pourtant qu’il y a des occasions où le mal qui arrive aux autres est quelquefois bien doux.”

In the same letter, however, Léonore also proposes to take care of the orphaned Sophie, either by setting her up as an actress or giving her a domestic position in her household. This act of generosity is clearly at odds with the blatant disregard for the dispossessed mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, a trace of ruthlessness reappears in this offer to take care of Sophie as well: insisting on the value of work, Léonore decrees that “si cette petite fille ne veut rien faire, en vérité, je l’abandonnerais sans scrupule.”

The crowning inconsistency, however, appears in the editor’s postscript to the correspondence. The editor explains that Léonore, greatly saddened by the fate of her vicious libertine father, as well as the death of her blameless mother and sister, decides to seek out her father: “l’ayant découvert à Stockholm, elle lui a fait dire qu’il eût à prendre un lieu de résidence fixe ; que là elle le ferait jouir d’un bien qu’elle n’avait accepté que pour le soigner, l’améliorer et goûter le plaisir délicat pour son cœur de lui en faire annuellement passer les revenus...ce qu’elle fait avec la plus grande exactitude.”

This misplaced tenderness of Léonore’s — her father being responsible for the tragic death of her mother and sister — strikes us as incompatible with her admirable love for Sainville and her many virtuous, if rationally driven, actions throughout the novel. If a critic like Rocca suggests that Léonore surmounts Sade’s Manichean dichotomies, I would argue that Léonore no more resolves Aline et Valcour’s contradictions than Merteuil provides a solution to Laclos’ educational quandaries. Both women are proponents of logic and reason in the course of human interactions, but unlike Merteuil, Léonore escapes from the

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612 Sade, *Aline*, 682.
613 Ibid., 683.
614 Ibid., 800.
novel’s wreckage relatively unscathed and independent.\textsuperscript{615} But just as Merteuil’s autodidactic program fails because it is unique, in contradiction to the contemporary social structures constructed to confine women to the domestic sphere, so Léonore’s personal path cannot represent a solution for female education, as she is ultimately contradictory and flawed. In fact, we again arrive at the conclusion that neither novel provides a coherent system of female pedagogy, despite its obvious struggles dealing with the topic.

VI. Conclusion

Although it appears that Laclos was sincere in addressing the problem of female education — the essays clearly illustrating an attempt to resolve serious inner contradictions on the subject — is it possible to say the same about Sade? Or do the works that we have discussed only portray a parody of pedagogical concerns? Certainly, Laborde’s triple reading of the three versions of Justine — Les infortunes de la vertu (1787); Justine ou les Malheurs de la vertu (1791); La Nouvelle Justine ou les Malheurs de la vertu (1797) — supports the point that I am trying to make in regard to Sade’s pedagogical philosophy, as illustrated in La Philosophie dans le boudoir, les 120 journées de Sodome, and Aline et Valcour.\textsuperscript{616} Laborde finds that in every subsequent version, the contradictions and errors in judgment already inherent in the primary text are

\textsuperscript{615} Although it bears mentioning that Merteuil still retains her freedom, and a certain amount of wealth. She is possibly not, as some critics have argued, the most punished at the end of the Liaisons dangereuses.

\textsuperscript{616} Alice Laborde, \textit{Sade romancier} (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1974).
not corrected but rather amplified, reinforced, extended, engendering what she terms “un renforcement du système des contradictions.”

Consequently, the reason for the choice of the epistolary genre in Sade’s *Aline et Valcour* becomes apparent. The letter form is not chosen to facilitate the pedagogical program but rather to thwart it. In a parodic gesture of eighteenth-century pedagogical treatises, *Aline et Valcour* mimics the zigzagging reflections of thinkers like Rousseau and Laclos on the question of women’s education. Moving back and forth between scientific ideas, moral philosophies, and political systems, *Aline et Valcour* condenses the major issues that concerned the Enlightenment, via Sade’s parodic wit. Ultimately, *Aline et Valcour* fails as an epistolary novel because of Sade’s deep-seated refusal of the letter as a pedagogical tool. As mentioned above, Sade’s mistrust of the letter stems perhaps from its capacity for abuse, but it also certainly arises from its intrinsic distance from the reader.

As we discussed earlier in this chapter, Sade prefers the scene to the portrait because its dynamic immediacy, its egalitarian opportunities for the reader. The choice of the scene over the portrait within the letter form is thus an inherently contradictory one, for as Goulemot explains, “la scène sadienne implique un rapport immédiat, de proximité, traversé par la violence dans laquelle le discours est toujours second. La lettre comme rapport distancié, médiatisé, est au fond étrangère à la pratique sadienne, même s’il a été lui-même un fantastique épistolier dans sa vie réelle.” Sade is thus using a genre contrary to his habitual desire for immediacy. And since *Aline et Valcour* is Sade’s only epistolary work, whereas he has a significant output in other dialogical or theatrical

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genres, we are immediately alerted to the fact that the Marquis is trying to do something unprecedented in his oeuvre. From the very generic choice of the novel, then, down to the most minute details of Butua and Tamoé’s philosophical systems, and to the labyrinthine character relationships, *Aline et Valcour* is a text at odds with its purported pedagogical aims. The educational model of *plaire et instruire*, which had been used for decades as the principal justification for the epistolary novel, is here shown to fall apart, undermined by irreconcilable contradiction. With this choice and the many others described throughout this chapter, Sade clearly shows his readers that although “tous Sade...est pédagogie, en affecte la démarche, en parodie les intentions,” no coherent program for female education is established...or even envisioned. The dialogical nature of *Aline et Valcour*, alternatively conservative and subversive in form and content, would lead us to believe that a pre-Hegelian dialectic is being established. But after so many *thèses* and *antithèses*, no *synthèse* can be found. As Roger writes, linking Sade’s use of the notions of contradiction and motion, “par-delà le bien et le mal, il y a le mouvant.”

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620 Ibid., 33.
CHAPTER 4: ISABELLE DE CHARRIÈRE: OTHER VOICES, OTHER TEXTS

I. Introduction

Isabelle de Charrière, native of Holland, inhabitant of Switzerland, and admirer of French culture, left behind a sizable body of work, represented by the ten volumes of the Œuvres Complètes published by G.A. van Oorschot. Charrière is likewise notable for her status as an outlier, both in her own time and, until recently, in the eyes of French literature critics. Her position as a woman writer entering into a male-dominated conversation cannot be overlooked, of course; however, she was doubly alienated from mainstream society by her status as an immigrant and a non-native — if absolutely fluent — speaker of French. Having left her native Netherlands to settle in Switzerland with her husband, Charles-Emmanuel de Charrière de Penthaz, Madame de Charrière would later witness the arrival of many French nobles fleeing the violence of the Revolution. Her criticism of these émigrés would emerge in many writings, suggesting that perhaps little had been learned from the excesses of the Revolution. Consequently, Charrière’s position is unique within the context of this study because unlike Rousseau, Laclos and Sade, she deals explicitly with the ravages of the neighboring violence and their impact on quotidian matters such as education. More significantly, however, this distance from the court and its intellectual quarrels would allow Charrière the ability to develop her own, independent ideas on female pedagogy. Like many of her contemporaries, Charrière was profoundly influenced by Rousseau, both in terms of education and epistolarity. Hence, her unique position as a foreign female author writing after the

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621 Of course, Sade’s La Philosophie dans le boudoir was likewise written after the Revolution (1795). However, it can hardly be considered as a sincere reflection on the impact of the political changes upon education.
Revolution will allow us to investigate the issue of female pedagogy from a new standpoint, shedding further light on the reception of Rousseau by women readers and the continuing difficulty of creating an educational program for women after the Revolution.

In her critical pieces on Rousseau, Charrière uses a variety of styles and voices to address the problems inherent in the philosophe’s ideology, attacking the dominant male discourse obliquely or behind a rhetorical mask. The Lettre à Willem-René and Réflexions sur l’éducation give us another facet of Charrière’s pedagogical philosophy, this time from a more personal and perhaps less mediated angle. In her epistolary novel Trois femmes, she uses a series of pedagogical case studies to illustrate the various obstacles facing eighteenth-century women. The novel’s inconclusive ending and experimentation with form likewise serve to destabilize the monologic discourse of authority, arguing for the text to become a viable forum for public debate. Finally, we will look at Sainte Anne, a novel whose apparent apologia for illiteracy appears to contradict all of Charrière’s progressive ideas on female education. Upon closer inspection, however, the text reveals positive female characters behind a protective façade of political correctness; the increasing misogyny of the post-Revolutionary period pushes Charrière to develop new and more oblique strategies for advocating for women’s rights without being publicly crucified as a “femme pédante.” Throughout all of these different texts, both critical and fictional, the salient features of Charrière’s pedagogical philosophy emerge time and time again: the use of experimental and open-ended forms express her conception of writing as a vehicle for public debate, and her adopting of other voices and indirect strategies of attack emerge as a means for women to question male authority and construct their own educations.
II. Mitigated praise: Non-fictional writings on Rousseau

As we saw in Chapter 1, Rousseau had many contemporary women readers; Madame d’Épinay was far from being the only one to take her criticisms to pen and paper. Numerous other female writers such as Madame de Genlis, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Madame de Roland were conflicted about the ideals they saw illustrated in *Émile* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, often praising the revalorization of domestic tasks while struggling with Rousseau’s views on female pedagogy. While these women — and many others — played an important role in the ongoing debate on the education of women, Isabelle de Charrière stands out as truly unique in her treatment of Rousseau’s ideas. Unlike Laclos and the Marquis de Sade, Isabelle de Charrière did not confine her reaction to Rousseau to her fictional writings. The presence of Rousseau and most significantly, his *Émile* can be felt strongly in Charrière’s novels, such as *Trois Femmes*; however, she also chose to address her ambiguous and complex relationship with the philosopher in several short critical pieces. The texts responding to Rousseau and his philosophy are clearly linked to Charrière’s epistolary novels, as they display many of the same ambitions and strategies at play in her fictional works. As a reader of Rousseau, and writing both on pedagogy and often in the epistolary genre, Charrière derives much inspiration from her predecessor, almost seeming to overlook more contemporary authors such as Laclos and Sade. Thematically, the critical pieces reacting to Rousseau are linked to her epistolary novels by the issue of pedagogy, a constant rewriting of the same themes and questions in different settings, as if the text were in fact a classroom. It is formally, however, that I believe the strongest connection can be made between these fictional and critical texts. First of all, Charrière’s use of experimental and unfinished forms is a constant across
both genres that reveals her challenging of classical structures. Secondly, her conception of writing as a public forum for debate, rather than prescription, is something that emerges in both her fictional and non-fictional texts, while standing in stark opposition to her personal correspondence. And thirdly, Charrière’s ambiguous relationship to her model Rousseau is a notable symptom of her unremitting questioning of authority; often using oblique tactics, including adopting the voice of another, she enters into the male-dominated debate and disputes its validity as an outsider.

Although Charrière’s first critical piece dealing with the *philosophe, De Rousseau*, was written between 1788 and 1789, I have chosen to largely exclude it from our discussion, as it is unfinished and of little critical interest, blandly praising Rousseau and his musical talents.622 Published in August of 1789, the *Courte réplique à l’auteur d’une longue réponse* is Charrière’s second critical exploration of Rousseau’s work; here, however, the budding pedagogue will deal with the all-important question of education that shapes her own oeuvre. Responding to a text which is itself a response to *Mme de Staël*’s *Lettre sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau* (1788),623 Charrière adopts the voice of *Mme de Staël* in order to outline her criticism in three sections — first illustrating her opponent’s poor rhetorical skills, then admitting the flaws in the original work (i.e., Staël’s text), and finally defending her most important ideas. In the first section, Staël’s critic, the journalist marquis de Champcenetz, is rebuked for using a convoluted style, full of affectation and rhetorical contradictions. The misogyny of the marquis is everywhere apparent, as he speaks “des femmes foibles avec un persiflage

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méprisant” and accuses them of overstepping “les bornes morales” of their gender. For the purpose of our study, however, Charrière’s most significant criticism is pointed at her male rival’s justification of Les Solitaires. She cites Champcenetz as follows: “Rousseau devoir donc AVILIR Sophie pour mettre Emile AU COMBLE DE L’INFORTUNE, livrer son cœur AUX COUPS DU DESESPOIR...Rousseau ne pouvait-il supposer le DESHONNEUR d’une femme.” Although the first part of this statement — that Sophie had to be sacrificed for the sake of Emile’s narrative journey — has been addressed as a common reading in our first chapter, the latter half of Champcenetz’s statement, as cited by Charrière, is ambiguous. The inversion of the sentence suggests a question, but no such punctuation is included. In fact, Charrière seems to have purposefully created ambiguity by abridging the whole citation: “Pour nous offrir un tableau si touchant, Rousseau ne pouvait il pas supposer le déshonneur d’une femme, sans paroître un visionnaire aux yeux même de ce sexe ?” In fact, this phrase is not easily understood even in its entirety. Champcenetz appears to be arguing that Rousseau’s portrait of Sophie’s downfall must necessarily make him seem like a visionary to his female readers. This strikes us modern readers as rather backwards, but a multitude of eighteenth-century female readers swooning over Rousseau’s Julie could confirm the apparently contradictory appeal of his misogynistic portraits of women.

Highlighting one of her rival’s many contradictions, however, Charrière points out that earlier in his essay he had written “la vraie Philosophie ne fait plus dépendre l’HONNEUR des femmes d’une surprise des sens...et un amant ne DESHONORE pas

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624 Charrière, O.C. X, 167; 166.
625 Ibid., original typeface. I have faithfully reproduced Charrière’s sometimes fanciful orthography here and henceforth.
626 Ibid., 562.
plus une femme de mérite qu'un mauvais ouvrage ne corrige une femme Auteur.” Here again Champcenetz’s meaning is not immediately evident; what may at first appear to be a criticism of Rousseau’s intransigent views on female chastity is attacked by Charrière for being both an incoherent contradiction and a disguised critique of women. The vilification of women writers, incapable of being educated by the most basic of texts, is clearly directed at Mme de Staël, whose persona Charrière dons in her response. “Encore une fois, Monsieur, vous vous trompez, le vôtre [ouvrage] m’aura corrigée,” she retorts ironically.628

In this first section, Charrière appears as an admirer of Rousseau, defending his Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard and noting Champcenetz’s inconsistencies in dealing with Rousseau’s philosophy. After a brief second section where she “admits her faults” — that is to say, Germaine de Staël’s — Charrière proceeds to the heart of the argument: the education of women. Here, Rousseau no longer appears as an infallible source of wisdom; his pedagogical proposals, despite seeming innovative for boys, are criticized as being shortsighted for girls.629 Charrière would like to see “une éducation qui donneroit de la force d’esprit aux femmes,” hence helping both them and society at large.630 Drawing on Rousseau’s characters in Émile, the main problem, Charrière argues, is that Sophie and Émile have different educations. In his female pedagogical experiment, “Rousseau n’a pas assez songé aux dangers, aux ennuis, aux chagrins qui

627 Ibid.
628 Ibid.
629 Charrière and Rousseau agree, at least in theory, as to the necessity of female education: like Charrière, Rousseau “saw the improvement of women’s education as the key to his program of moral reform” and both authors rejected the traditional convent education. Mary Seidman Trouille, Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 30.
630 Charrière, O.C. X, 168.
peuvent attendre une femme dans sa carrière de mère, d’ami, d’épouse,” she explains. Writers as different as Mme de Genlis and Laclos both highlighted this particular problem: if women were to be able to resist potential seducers and domestic pitfalls, then they must be well trained to recognize and prevent such dangers. This idea is therefore not unique to Charrière; however, she elaborates upon her criticism by arguing for the equal treatment of children, both girls and boys, by their parents. Rousseau argues for the unrestrained freedom of the young boy, especially from the “yoke of society,” but simultaneously believes that girls should be subjugated to this necessity as soon as possible. For Charrière, this is an untenable contradiction:

Or, les parents ont ce droit [de subjuguer l’enfant], ou ils ne l’ont pas. S’il leur est permis d’agir selon les convenances, telles qu’ils les conçoivent, ils le peuvent à l’égard du jeune homme comme de la jeune femme, dont les forces et les facultés, ou plutôt la faiblesse et les besoins, sont si semblables, à leur entrée dans la vie, qu’il n’est pas possible de croire qu’ils y apportent des privilèges différents.

Boys and girls, coming into the world with the same human weaknesses, should be treated the same, Charrière argues.

But at this point in the text a strange phenomenon occurs: Charrière begins to address Rousseau directly in the second person. The charm of Rousseau’s style is not enough (“les charmes de votre style ne me donnent pas le change”), Charrière alleges, to blind her to the unequal fates of Émile and Sophie, and the logical contradiction posed therein. Admitting that Jean-Jacques has a strong grip (ascendant) upon her ideas, Charrière nonetheless states that “je laisserai mon fils et ma fille libres comme Emile,

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631 Ibid.
633 Charrière, O.C. X, 169.
d’après les principes sur lesquels vous établissez sa liberté, ou.... je les accoutumerai tous deux, comme on y accoutumoit Sophie, avec adresse et douceur, aux entraves que l’un ni l’autre ne pourra toujours éviter.”

Succinctly attacking the problematic difference between Émile and Sophie, Charrière argues above all for equal treatment in education. Despite the evident admiration for the author of Émile in this passage, Rousseau nevertheless does not emerge as an unchallenged idol for Charrière in terms of pedagogy.

This short text, often overlooked by critics of Charrière’s novels and essays, therefore holds one of the keys to the Swiss-born, Dutch writer’s position on educational reform, especially as concerned women. In addition to the glaring contradiction found between Émile and Sophie’s upbringings, the author of the Courte réplique judges Rousseau lacking in practical application. It is all well and good to envision pedagogical utopias; on the eve of the Revolution, however, Charrière is starting to demand some more tangible results for her fellow women.

As we shall see in several other short non-fiction texts, Charrière’s relationship to Rousseau is at times difficult to decipher, mingling adoration, disappointment, and justification; additionally, her use of a mask to attack or defend Rousseau makes it even thornier to extricate her ideas.

The critical triangle formed by Germaine de Staël, Isabelle de Charrière, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau reappears in another text penned by Charrière in 1789, the Plainte et défense de Thérèse Levasseur. Rousseau’s low-born wife had already become the...

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634 Ibid. This is not the only use of the second person plural to address Rousseau in this passage; notably, Charrière also writes “je vous admire toujours ; mais je vous trouve en contradiction dans ces deux parties également attachantes de votre admirable ouvrage.”

635 Charrière’s search for concrete solutions to the question of pedagogy and other societal issues can clearly be situated within a broader shift in the later part of the century towards more pragmatic politics. As the philosophes came closer to real political power, the utopian allegories of the earlier part of the century gradually yielded to more detailed-oriented social treatises that aimed to correct contemporary ills. That Charrière participates in this shift, despite being largely a political outsider, is revealing of the general population’s frustration with the status quo.
scapegoat for Rousseau’s many shortcomings, and she was often blamed for being a nefarious influence on the great man — despite being in reality, the more disadvantaged of the pair.\textsuperscript{636} But although many writers, among them Voltaire and Grimm, would jump on the bandwagon and later attack Thérèse Levasseur, M\textsuperscript{me} de Staël can be said to have been the instigator of this largely unfounded movement of vitriol, with the publication of her \textit{Lettre sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau} the preceding year. In her response to these accusations against Rousseau’s “chambermaid,” Charrière once again speaks with another’s voice, this time pretending to be Levasseur herself in a direct retort to all her detractors. This requires a little bit of narrative ingenuity, as the uneducated Levasseur is illiterate, and thus must dictate her defense to one of her friends, “bonne \& simple femme comme moi.”\textsuperscript{637} In this short but animated speech, Charrière-as-Levasseur attempts to defend herself by having recourse to Rousseau’s own ideas, which she argues most readers have not properly understood.

The criticism is two-fold: on the one hand, Levasseur claims that it is due to the fanciful idealization of Rousseau that she has been demonized, for failing to live up to impossible standards:

\begin{quote}
Quoi, parce que M. Rousseau a fait à une pauvre fille qui ne savoit ni lire, ni écrire, ni voir l’heure qu’il étoit sur un cadran, l’honneur de lui donner son linge à blanchir \& son potage à cuire ; parce qu’il lui fait partager par fois son lit, \& longtemps après son nom ; il faudroit que cette pauvre fille devint une héroïne, un grand esprit, une belle ame, à la maniere de celles qu’on fabrique dans les livres, \& que feu M. Rousseau disoit n’avoir trouvées nulle art dans le monde !\textsuperscript{638}
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{637} Charrière, \textit{O. C. X}, 173.

\textsuperscript{638} \textit{Ibid.}
As a poor laundress, Levasseur never asked to be brought under the scrutiny of the public eye, and she certainly never had the education or opportunity to become a woman of letters. Mme de Staël, like all the other slanderers of Levasseur, were mistaken in wanting her to be “une plus admirable personne qu'[elle n'avait] de vocation à l’être.”

The second major criticism, which Levasseur principally directs again at Mme de Staël, is that of an erroneous understanding of class distinctions, especially in light of Rousseau’s own writings on the subject. First and foremost, Staël is deemed to be lacking in “bonté,” as she speaks ill of a lower-class woman who has never done any harm to her, and is by all accounts in more precarious living circumstances. Levasseur explains her “circonstances moins brillantes” by saying “mon célèbre ami est mort ; votre célèbre & respectable pere est, Dieu merci, plein de vie ; vous êtes riche, vous êtes baronne & ambassadrice, & bel esprit ; & moi, que suis-je ?” This lack of class empathy is furthermore coupled with total incomprehension of what the lower classes might consider a source of pride or honour. Levasseur alludes to the public pressure that forced Rousseau to eventually give her his last name, which she never wanted. “Ce fut votre réputation, non la mienne, qui vous détermina,” she argues, explaining that it is because of this name that now she is expected to resemble Rousseau, “ou plutôt...vos femmes & maîtresses imaginaires.” The patronymic of Rousseau was alleged an honour for his wife to receive, in the eyes of the grand monde — they could not understand that such a gift could actually complicate and damage her daily life. And finally, the issue of class is raised once again when Levasseur addresses the specific accusation of adultery flung at her by Mme de Staël. Levasseur’s alleged penchant for

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639 Ibid., 174.
640 Ibid.
641 Ibid., 173.
another man, “de la plus basse classe,” is rumoured to have been the cause of Rousseau’s death — now ruled by the public a lovesick suicide. Levasseur dismisses the accusation as unfounded — “les maris se tuent pour ces sortes de choses?” — but also elaborates upon the misreading of Rousseau’s political philosophy that is at the basis of the shock and disgust concerning this supposed act of lower-class adultery. 642 M’me de Staël has clearly fashioned this argument without knowledge of Rousseau’s true nature, Levasseur posits:

Selon vous, il se seroit donc mieux consolé si j’eusse aimé un prince. Lui! Jean-Jacques! Allez, madame, vous ne l’avez pas lu, si vous ignorez combien non-seulement les classes lui étoient indifférentes, mais combien sur-tout il honora davantage Mad. de Warens que Mad. de Pompadour. 643

Charrière’s frustrated voice breaks through the Levasseur façade at the very end of La plainte et défense de Thérèse Levasseur, when she lyrically admonishes Rousseau’s disciples to take a closer look at themselves, for they are nothing but “enthousiastes stupides ou hypocrites.” 644 “N’appelez plus Rousseau votre maitre, votre modele, votre dieu,” she advises, “ou suivez mieux ses leçons & son exemple.” 645 This emotive ending is clearly one of the justifications for the canonical reading of the Plaïnte in defense of Rousseau himself, in the voice of his spouse. What is perhaps more interesting, however, is examining Charrière’s appropriation of another’s voice, not only to defend Rousseau at certain times, but also to speak to him directly. By assuming Levasseur’s voice, Charrière steps into the shoes not only of a lower-class woman, but of one ostracized by society. In a dialogic effect somewhat reminiscent of a hall of mirrors, Charrière now addresses M’me de Staël through the voice of an outsider, criticizing the same woman she

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642 Ibid., 174.
643 Ibid., 174–5.
644 Ibid., 176.
645 Ibid.
had impersonated and thus defended (with minor stylistic suggestions) in her *Courte réplique*. As we shall see throughout this chapter, shifting viewpoints and identities is a crucial part of Charrière’s literary oeuvre, and adaptability, a dominant factor in her pedagogical philosophy as well.

One of the salient features of this particular text, however, is Charrière’s use of the Levasseur pretense to address Rousseau. The second person plural appears in the above-cited discussion regarding Levasseur’s adoption of Rousseau’s last name. “Ah, mon bon ami!” she exclaims, “vous qui ne vouliez pas recevoir des bienfaits, parce qu’avec eux on reçoit des chaînes, vous qui redoutiez les chaînes plus que la mort, vous m’en faites porter de bien pesantes!”

The tables are turned here; instead of blaming Levasseur for demeaning the great author, as numerous contemporaries had, Charrière accuses him of having misplaced his generosity and unduly subjected the poor woman to impossible expectations. We can already sense in this passage that Charrière is not a blind follower of Rousseau; she distances herself even more by suggesting that a vain worry for his reputation was what motivated Rousseau to give his then common-law wife his name: “n’importe : vous étiez bon, vous auriez laissé dire Voltaire votre ennemi, & j’aurais gardé mon nom, dont j’étois contente, si vous eussiez su, qu’en le perdant, je perdrois toute liberté, & que le prétendu honneur que je recevois seroit une source d’infortune, un prétexte de persécution.” It was not, therefore, for Levasseur’s sake that Rousseau bestowed this gift, but for his own. As a result, now the deceased man is

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646 Ibid., 173.
647 Even the mild-mannered DuPeyrou attacked Levasseur in his private correspondence, deeming her to be the cause of Rousseau’s falling out with many friends. See Charly Guyot’s *Un ami et défenseur de Rousseau. Pierre-Alexandre DuPeyrou* (Neuchâtel: Ides et Calendes, 1958) for an in-depth analysis of DuPeyrou’s relationship with Rousseau and his opinions on the Levasseur matter.
idolized, Levasseur bemoans, while she is calumniated. At the end of this diatribe, Charrière’s voice pierces through once again, criticizing not only Mme de Staël and the Comte de Barruel, but all the false readers of Rousseau, who bastardize his ideas for their personal malicious aims: “Ceux qui prétendent vous apprécier le mieux, vous ont en effet mal connu; & vos livres, qui sûrement enseignent la bonté, sont perdus pour eux, quoiqu’ils s’extasient à chaque page, à chaque mot.”

These two short texts begin to elucidate Charrière’s attitudes towards Rousseau and her rhetorical techniques for dealing with difficult questions. While the Courte réplique sows the seeds of doubt in the reader’s mind as to Charrière’s admiration of Rousseauian pedagogy, by vividly criticizing the inconsistencies of Sophie and Émile’s educations, La plainte et défense de Thérèse Levasseur, on the other hand, includes a very marked attack on Rousseau’s personal actions towards his wife, drawing a crucial distinction between the man and his ideas. When juxtaposed, the texts convey the increasing degree of affective distance between Isabelle de Charrière and her erstwhile literary model. This intellectual separation is paralleled by Charrière’s increasingly complex game of voices, as though she needs a mask in order to express herself convincingly. In the unfinished De Rousseau, likely never intended for publication, Charrière appears to speak directly, without a mask or appropriated voice. In the Courte réplique, however, she impersonates Mme de Staël, attacking Champcenetz, and giving a nuanced criticism of Rousseau’s gendered pedagogy. In this text Charrière adopts the disguise of her own rival, and in the process defends Staël against their common enemy of misogyny. This complexity is increased further when Charrière speaks as Levasseur in

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the \textit{Plainte}, now condemning Staël and criticizing Rousseau, while simultaneously shifting a portion of the blame onto the author’s readers, who have misunderstood him.

Raymond Trousson has often pinpointed personal grievances as rationale for Charrière’s writing, finding here that in the \textit{Plainte}, “l’ironie y a plus de part que la compassion, et Belle écrit moins pour Thérèse que contre Germaine.”\footnote{Raymond Trousson, \textit{Défenseurs et Adversaires de J.-J. Rousseau. D’Isabelle de Charrière à Charles Maurras} (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1995), 43.} Although the antipathy towards Staël was very real,\footnote{Although no specific incident appears to have turned Charrière against Staël, Trousson muses that “M\textsuperscript{me} de Charrière n’aimera jamais M\textsuperscript{me} de Staël et, dans la suite, elle opposera aigreur et défiance aux avances de sa jeune rivale qu’elle ne rencontrera qu’en 1793. Le fait est surprenant, puisque M. de Charrière connaissait les Necker et que, en 1786-7, lui et sa femme voyaient les Suard, chez qui fréquentait aussi M\textsuperscript{me} de Staël… Certaines antipathies naissent à première vue. La femme mûre, désenchantée, déçue par le mariage, retirée dans la monotonie de Colombier, ne devait-elle pas éviter la jeune Germaine évoluant dans une société brillante, déjà fêtée et admirée, personnalité remuante et tapageuse dont les précoces succès lui représentaient ce qu’elle aurait pu être elle- même, vingt-cinq ans plus tôt ? Le désir de défendre Thérèse a pu se combiner avec celui d’être désagréable à M\textsuperscript{me} de Staël, de faire rire à ses dépens, de troubler une première victoire littéraire insolemment ajoutée à la réussite mondaine.” Raymond Trousson, “Isabelle de Charrière et Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” \textit{Bulletin de l’Académie Royale de Langue et de Littérature Françaises} 43:1 (1985): 21.} such biographical musings mask the more important narrative technique of impersonation. Many critics likewise find \textit{Lettres de Mistriss Henley} to be a thinly veiled account of Charrière’s loveless marriage.\footnote{See, for instance, Susan K. Jackson’s article “Publishing without Perishing: Isabelle de Charrière, a.k.a. \textit{la mouche du coche},” where she asserts that \textit{Lettres de Mistriss Henley} “unquestionably derive from the frustrations of Charrière’s own married life.” In \textit{Going Public: Women and Publishing in Early Modern France} (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1995), 195.} Although, once again, biography cannot be entirely divorced from literary production, I find these assumptions of clear derivation to be needlessly reductive. The underlying implication seems to be that as a woman, Charrière’s depiction of other women characters must necessarily coincide with her personal experience, and that she is, at the end of the day, incapable of imaginative fictional writing. In reality, I believe that it is precisely Charrière’s experimental writing techniques, such as her identification with
Oppressed women, which unnerve critics seeking to find a univocal and prescriptive writer of the Enlightenment.

In January of 1790, Charrière once again picked up her pen to address the subject of Rousseau, and it is likewise interlaced with other voices and implicit polemics. Pierre-Alexandre DuPeyrou, a close friend of both Rousseau and Charrière, was shocked and dismayed by the projected publication of the “Seconde partie” of the Confessions by Barde and Manget, whom he considered inept publishers likely to mangle Rousseau’s original text.653 Charrière became implicated in this war of editions, both as a friend of DuPeyrou and an enthusiastic, albeit critical, reader of Rousseau. In what Vercruysse terms a “circumstantial” text, Éclaircissements relatifs à la publication des Confessions de Rousseau, Isabelle de Charrière attempts to defend DuPeyrou’s behavior in this publication melee, especially considering that the second part of the Confessions was never meant to be published so soon after Rousseau’s death.654

Once again, however, Charrière takes a step back from her literary model in order to assess the most appropriate of responses. Although Rousseau’s wishes clearly stipulated that the latter half of Confessions only be published posthumously, Charrière will argue that both his pointed, eloquent criticisms of contemporary figures and his public readings of the work contradict this intention. “Rousseau pouvoit-il desirer bien vivement que ceux qu’il accusoit d’avoir fait le malheur de sa vie, n’en apprissent rien,

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654 This was a point that Charrière had already made at the end of the Plainte: “Il vouloit que les fautes de ses ennemis de fussent publiées que LONG-TEMPS après sa mort.” O.C. X, 176. Likewise, in the Éclaircissements, Charrière explains that the manuscript was given to Condillac with explicit instructions not to be published before the end of the century. Rousseau’s text read as follows, Charrière insists: “Si j’étois le maître de ma destinée & de celle de cet écrit, il ne paroitroit que long-temps après ma mort & la leur [celles de ses ennemis].” Ibid., 186.
n’en souffrissent en rien?” Charrière asks the reader. The immaculate style and refined portraits found in the *Confessions* were clearly effects seeking a receptive audience. Moreover, the second half of the autobiography had allegedly been read in public, by Rousseau himself, to a group of captive listeners, including Malesherbes and the Count and Countess d’Egmont. By using Rousseau’s own actions to betray his written instructions, Isabelle de Charrière again proves her independence from the influential author. Unlike in the previous texts discussed, however, here she at first appears to be speaking as herself, directly addressing the eventual reader of DuPeyrou’s projected edition. However, it is important to note that the text is nowhere signed, and Charrière only designates herself as the “mouche du coche” in an epigraph found on one of the fragmentary manuscripts. This allusion to the well-known fable by La Fontaine not only serves to hide Charrière’s identity behind a literary trope but also perhaps to minimize the risk of appearing a “femme pédante” to her readers; the “mouche du coche” is, after all, someone who looks very busy but does not actually accomplish anything useful!

By downplaying the seriousness of her text and speaking anonymously, but with the support of her friend DuPeyrou, Charrière is thus able to speak while protected. After the protracted story recounting DuPeyrou’s honest fears about a new edition and the close-kept secret of the “Seconde partie,” she launches into a lengthy refrain of “o tempora o mores,” decrying post-revolutionary violence and mayhem. The publishing

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655 Charrière, *O. C.* X, 186.
656 “Dame Mouche s’en va chanter à leurs oreilles / Et fait cent sottises pareilles. *Voyez, dans la Fontaine, la Mouche du Coche*” is found on manuscripts A and B: Neuchâtel, BV, ms. 1369, ff.1–2.
657 “Il me semble que nous allons vivre sous un régime moral moins lénifiant & moins amphigourique que par le passé,” Charrière muses. *O. C.* X, 189. With a skeptical eye, she adds: “mille préjugés ont été détruits, quoiqu’on n’en voulût qu’à quelques-uns, & peut-être qu’il a été détruit plus que des préjugés. Ce qu’il y a de bien sûr, c’est que les temps, soit qu’on les trouve meilleurs ou pires, sont autres....” Ibid., 190.
fiasco now completely forgotten, Charrière analyzes the literary changes brought about by the Revolution and the overthrow of the *Ancien Régime*. Perhaps all this fuss about Rousseau is unnecessary, Charrière seems to be saying, for who knows what we shall be reading in just a few years’ time? “Qui sait si dans dix ans on se mettra encore fort en peine de ce que fut Rousseau, de ce que furent ses amis & ses ennemis?” In what Trousson terms a “plaidoyer peu conformiste,” Charrière thus pushes aside the question of Rousseau’s untimely publication in order to address the more pressing issue of revolutionary change. In this passage, her scepticism becomes apparent; although Rousseau may have inspired the philosophy behind the Revolution, he is no more responsible for its excesses than he is capable of regulating them. Several years later, in a letter to Benjamin Constant, Charrière will succinctly express this same frustration with the popular bastardization of Rousseau’s ideas: “Il ne faut plus rien dire à ces gens qui n’ont plus de théâtre intéressant que l’échafaud…. Voltaire et Rousse eux-mêmes ne se feraient plus entendre au milieu du bruit qu’ils ont excité.” The revolutionary noise that started with these two philosophers has by now exceeded them.

Charrière is once again separating the man and his philosophy, the reality and the ideal. Although in the *Éclaircissements* she does not hide behind any one voice in particular, Charrière is still cloaked in anonymity and thus able to analyse Rousseau without ascribing herself to any one particular political camp. As in the previous texts we have discussed, however, the defense or criticism of Rousseau is largely oblique, appearing tangentially in a text meant to support a friend or attack a rival. Charrière will

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659 Trousson, *Défenseurs et adversaires*, 52.
once again enter the contemporary debate when she decides to sing the praises of Rousseau, ostensibly to win a prize, in the Éloge de Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Originally written to compete in the Académie’s concours d’éloges, Charrière’s contribution was ultimately published in September of 1790, thereby prohibiting it from garnering a prize. One generally accepted explanation for this withdrawal from competition is the text’s relative lack of political engagement, in an era when both and praise and criticism of Rousseau would have been expected to be extravagant and in the service of a patriotic agenda.\textsuperscript{661} Instead, Charrière pens an “assez inoffensif” encomium.\textsuperscript{662} By virtue of this temperate and reasoned exercise in praise, we in fact learn more about Charrière herself than the philosophical ideas of her predecessor. The affinity that the Dutch-born French-language writer feels with Rousseau stems from his capacity to transcend reality, to offer an unattainable ideal in guise of hope for humanity. From the outset, Rousseau is portrayed as an outsider, just like Charrière: “vous rendez hommage à un homme qu’une terre étrangère vit naître, et qui professa une autre croyance, une autre philosophie que la vôtre.”\textsuperscript{663} Misunderstood and alienated, Rousseau almost becomes a kindred spirit for Charrière, who address him directly, almost as if invoking a Muse: “O Rousseau ! que n’êtes-vous le témoin de votre triomphe ! Que ne puis-je être inspiré par elle [votre âme sublime] ; que ne pouvez-vous, ô Rousseau, me donner votre stile enchanteur.”\textsuperscript{664}

\textsuperscript{663} Charrière, O.C. X, 199.
\textsuperscript{664} Ibid.
Charrière thus wishes to speak as Rousseau, finding fault with her own voice and style. (Incidentally, this is exactly the tone and subject matter of the “avis de l’éditeur” which precedes the piece. This avis de l’éditeur is none other than Isabelle de Charrière, hiding again behind a narrative mask, playing the roles of both author and editor. In this introduction, she both addresses the lack of political bent in her work and a number of grammatical mistakes that slipped through to publication). We might wonder at Charrière’s identification with a male, albeit eccentric, author — after all, as Dena Goodman observed in *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters*, women writers were strongly urged to rely on female models to hone their literary craft. And in fact, the avis de l’éditeur is written entirely in the third person and thus avoids any sort of gendered speech. Using the title of “l’auteur,” Charrière is thus able — or forced — to speak of herself as “il,” a masculine subject. The core of the text is likewise devoid of any signs of female gender. In addition to the fact that the éloge largely avoids first person constructions, a sentence on the first page clearly marks the author as male-identifying: “Ah ! votre [Rousseau] ame sublime survivant au corps qu’elle animoit, ne seroit-elle point errante au milieu de vos admirateurs ? Que ne puis-je être inspiré par elle.” Further on in the text, Charrière again pretends to be part of the old boys’ club when, in refuting cynical realism, she exclaims “mais supposé que je veuille d’une maîtresse capable d’infidélité, d’un ami à demi-sûr...serai-je sûr qu’il n’y ait rien de plus à craindre ?”

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665 No doubt can remain about the provenance of the “avis de l’éditeur,” as Charrière’s correspondence reveals her self-satisfaction at crafting the Shakespeare-influenced epigraph “His words were Musick / his thoughts celestial dreams” (See O.C. III, 210–211).
667 Charrière, *O.C.* X, 199, my emphasis.
668 Ibid., 206.
Charrière’s grammatical and stylistic appropriation of a male identity, even when the piece would be published under her name, speaks once again to her preference for disguises and varied points of view. Perhaps she felt confined within her limited worldview as an aristocratic lady; more likely, however, as an outsider, Charrière felt that she had to conform in order to compete in the concours de l’Académie. Ironically enough, in trying to adopt the dominant (male) voice, she was once more highlighting her outsider status and her protean ability to adapt to changing situations.

Once we realize that Charrière is thus praising Rousseau in what she believes to be a normative discourse, the somewhat bland tone of the text becomes logical. Her tripartite plan, of illustrating who Rousseau was, what she most admires in him, and what perhaps needs to be excused in his conduct, is designed to fit neatly into the recent canonization of Rousseau and to silence all of his detractors. She begins as an apologist for Rousseau, who may have hurt a few individuals along the way but has blessed entire nations with his sagacious dreams. But Charrière, as in other works, quickly surprises the reader, her unique voice inevitably challenging the male monologic discourse.

What might appear at first as a sentimental justification for Rousseau’s faults is in fact a realistic and largely impartial look at Rousseau, separating him from his idealized visions in fiction. She describes him as “un père tendre mais négligent, un camarade doux mais foible, un instituteur long-temps judicieux et indulgent mais qui cessa de l’être....” A misunderstood man, Rousseau was idolized and then denigrated for not meeting his own unrealistic standards, as portrayed in his works. But was this much different, Charrière argues, from an older Cicero reflecting upon the idealized writings of his youth and striving to embody the portrait of himself he had painted? “Voilà aussi ce

669 Ibid., 200.
que chanta Rousseau; et plein des objets qu’il venoit de créer ou d’embellir, tantôt il fut naturellement, tantôt il voulut être l’homme de ses ouvrages.”

When Charrière writes that “Rousseau étoit écrivain, ce qu’il étoit homme,” she appears at first to be speaking primarily of his “sensibilité” and the importance of harmony in his works. However, could we not interpret this statement as a way to excuse Rousseau for his inconsistencies and contradictions — and to justify the impossibility of the integration of the man or his ideas into a flawed society?

Fittingly enough then, the Rousseau whom Charrière most admires is the author Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire, first published in 1782. This text, written for no one other than himself is Rousseau’s most solitary and detached opus. In this work, Jean-Jacques represents the voice of the eccentric, the outsider, the quintessential Other; as such, he is the only one capable of dreaming up utopian ideals. And although it may appear contradictory at first, Charrière strongly believes in the practical utility of dream-world utopias, even if they cannot be realized. She writes: “Pour faire aux hommes le petit bien qu’ils sont capables de recevoir, pour se faire écouter d’eux, il faut chanter de belles chimères, et les chanter avec une voix de sirène.”

Charrière deems Rousseau’s rêveries useful, despite their impossible application, as they can be used to rejuvenate jaded hearts and minds. The myth of natural goodness is, in a certain way, a convenient fiction, Charrière reasons, for it allows society to

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670 Ibid., 203.
671 Ibid., 202.
672 “Qu’admirai-je le plus dans Rousseau? ce sont ses Rêves.” Ibid., 204. Beyond this, it is hard to ascertain exactly how Charrière felt about individual works — she often praised his style in isolated comments rather than discussing his ideas methodically.
674 Charrière, O.C. X, 204.
construct an ideal from which to work out laws and structures. Charrière is not, therefore, rejecting her previous desire for concrete solutions to societal problems, as the literary utopia is, among other things, a platform for government-building: “il seroit aussi difficile d’imaginer des loix défectueuses, mais au moyen desquelles un étant pût néanmoins subsister, que d’imaginer des loix parfaites.” Only by shooting for the stars, so to speak, can man hope to realize anything worthwhile. Charrière insists on the illusory nature of the social outsider’s viewpoint, explaining that “quelquefois Rousseau voit bien que ses loix et ses conseils ne conviennent à aucune société existante.” Nevertheless, the allegory of a golden age is a salutary one, which helps men keep hope in an otherwise imperfect world. “L’âge d’or, l’homme de l’âge d’or ne sont pas matériellement vrais, mais ils sont vrais dans une hypothèse nécessaire, et que nous ne pouvons point ne pas faire, et à laquelle nous rapportons tout, sans même nous en appercevoir.” Even if the grandiose ideas cannot be implemented in reality, however, at least they will leave “quelque mouvement dans l’ame.”

This separation between utopian ideal and republican praxis is specifically addressed in regard to education and Rousseau’s seminal Émile:

On n’a pas cru sans doute pouvoir élever un enfant précisément comme Rousseau élève son Émile; mais cependant les mères ont plus souvent offert leur propre lait au fruit de leurs entrailles, et n’ont plus permit qu’on serrât si fort ses maillots; les précepteurs sont devenus moins pédans; l’expérience a été plus souvent jointe à la doctrine; les enfants, moins gênés de toute manière, ont eu un peu plus de chances de devenir des hommes.

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675 Ibid., 206.
676 In a similar vein, Trousson calls Rousseau the “magicien du Rêve,” the one providing much-needed utopian ideals in all-too-real post-Revolutionary turmoil. Défenseurs et adversaires, 47.
677 Charrière, O.C. X, 205.
678 Ibid., 206.
679 Ibid., 207.
680 Ibid., 208.
This point highlights precisely the problems inherent in such an idyllic pedagogical treatise. As we saw in our first chapter, the question of Émile’s application is a tricky one. Did Rousseau’s readers and critics not, in fact, try to enact his instruction manual? Even if they were not able to recreate all of the initial circumstances, did they not praise his wisdom and attempt to apply it in daily occurrences? In discussing the aftermath of the Terror, Jean Roussel insists on the cardinal role played by Rousseau in the reconstruction of the nation: “philosophes, politiques, moralistes et savants, les idéologues rencontrent Rousseau sur toutes les voies. C’est par rapport à lui que, dans une assez large mesure, vont se définir ces Instituteurs de la République.” The education of the new republican citizen was to be largely molded on the basis of Émile.

More practical than many of her contemporaries, Charrière realized that Rousseau’s prescriptions, whether they came from Émile ou Du contrat social, were not meant to be enacted verbatim. As Caroline Weber illustrates in her article “Rewriting Rousseau: Isabelle de Charrière’s Domestic Dystopia,” the Éloge accurately predicts that Rousseau’s ideas should remain in the imagination, and will fail in republican praxis. Nonetheless, Rousseau’s usefulness is preserved in his function as a utopian dreamer who elevates the common mind above daily drudgery. This originality aside, in concluding her Éloge, Charrière reverts to a rather conventional defense of Rousseau, insisting that the public had judged him too harshly because “sous le voile rayonnant dont le couvroit

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681 For Rousseau’s influence on schools and practical pedagogy, see Georges Snyders’ La Pédagogie en France au XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles (Paris: PUF, 1965).
683 And one only has to think of Charrière’s own Mister Henley to see the practical influence of Rousseau inscribed, this time within a fiction — Mr. Henley reprimands his wife for teaching his young daughter La Fontaine’s fables by heart, explaining that although the girl can parrot the words, she is far from understanding their meaning.
la gloire, ils avoient cru entrevoir un demi-dieu.”685 As the reader might remember, this is a similar argument to the one Charrière had made about Thérèse Levasseur in the *Plainte* — namely, that her shortcomings were only so blatant because of the ridiculous idealization foisted upon her by the public.

In this third and final section, as promised, Charrière discusses some of Rousseau’s flaws that require further explanation. At this point, Charrière must of course address the most egregious of Rousseau’s misdeeds: his abandoned children. Like many of her contemporaries and allies, however, she touches upon this matter only to brush it aside almost immediately.686 The author of *Émile* “lost” his children; but “étoit-ce les perdre, les abandonner, les livrer à un sort malheureux, que de les confier à la religion et à la patrie?” Charrière asks.687 This argument strikes me as weak, especially in light of Charrière’s earlier and vigorous defense of Thérèse Levasseur. Her suggestion that his lifelong guilt and despair are justification enough fall flat in this otherwise well-reasoned text. This “indulgence,” as Trousson terms it, is not much of an explanation – and readers of the *Éloge* like Trousson, perhaps uncomfortable with its incongruity, have tended to mimetically gloss over this portion of the text. Immediately following this brief and inconsequential mention of Rousseau’s abandoned children, Charrière switches to the second person plural and addresses her “judges”:

O vous que je vois parmi mes juges, vous dont le langage, aussi clair, aussi pur, aussi noble que celui de Rousseau, s’est fait entendre dans la cause de l’humanité pauvre et infirme; voici une autre cause non moins touchante que vous devrez plaidaient et gagner un jour. Puissiez-vous, avec assez de puissance pour faire le bien, avoir bientôt plus de tranquillité et de loisir qu’aujourd’hui, et

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686 Germaine de Staël, otherwise Charrière’s main rival, has a similarly blithe explanation for Rousseau’s abandoned children: “Rousseau eût été capable de donner les plus grands exemples d’amour paternel...s’il n’eût pas été convaincu qu’il leur épargnait les plus grands crimes en leur laissant ignorer le nom de leur père ; s’il n’eût pas cru qu’on voulait en faire de nouveaux Séides.” Charrière, *O.C.* I, 19.
toujours autant de zèle et de bonté qu’autrefois ! C’est bien de vous qu’on est autorisé à tout attendre ! vos engagemens sont encore plus solennels que ceux de Rousseau. Il fit espérer, vous avez promis, et l’univers a entendu le serment.

It is evident that this second person address is not, this time, directed at Rousseau. Who are these judges, however? It seems that Charrière is simply speaking to the judges of the éloge competition, even though the hyperbolic praise of the passage would at first appear to discredit this reading. One need only reference the incipit of the Éloge to find a similar second person apostrophe: “C’est vous que vous avez honoré jusqu’ici, quand vous avez prescrit à l’éloquence de louer des talens ou des vertus, à qui dès long-temps tous les hommes rendoient hommage.”

In both of these apostrophizing passages, we hear Charrière’s impersonation of male normative discourse, rather than her unique point of view. When Trousson writes that “seule M’me de Charrière demeure étrangère à la campagne de déification ou d’exécration et son Rousseau n’appartient qu’à elle : visionnaire, restaurateur d’idéal, magicien ou dispensateur de consolantes chimères,” he is only partially correct. Although Charrière pens a largely moderate and respectfully eloquent text, she nevertheless succumbs to societal expectations when faced with two uncomfortable situations: introducing herself within a male-dominated discourse, and defending Rousseau’s heartless cruelty to his children.

This latter issue, clearly not resolved in the aforementioned brief reference, reappears in the text’s exultant yet disorganized ending. Charrière reads Rousseau as having anticipated the Revolution:

il a averti, et plût à Dieu qu’on eût été plus attentif à ses pronostics ! il a averti la société de son bouleversement prochain, quand il présage qu’Emile aura besoin

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688 Ibid.
689 Ibid., 199.
690 Trousson, Défenseurs et adversaires, 48.
Until the end, Charrière insists, Rousseau reached out to his fellow citizens and tried to warn them of the evil excesses of the society in which they lived. But no one listened to Jean-Jacques — he had “point d’amis, point d’enfans. Et pourquoi point d’enfans. Allez, ame trop tourmentée, allez vous reposer dans le sein du Dieu auquel vous avez cru.”

In this reiteration of Rousseau’s self-inflicted childlessness, the text literally appears to crumble apart, lacking punctuation and abruptly turning to the facile recourse of eulogic tropes. Unable to fully justify Rousseau’s parental behavior, Charrière chooses instead to stage a crumbling of text, feigning a struggle to regain control. The reader is left with a disconcerting impression of lack of closure. The last sentence of the Éloge is an overwrought attempt to find steady ground and please the judges; Charrière exclaims that Rousseau’s divine works transport her “comme dans un temple majestueux, où j’entends un chœur d’anges former une douce symphonie, et chanter Dieu, l’ordre et la paix.”

Many readers have struggled to comprehend the full extent of Charrière’s ambiguous relationship to Rousseau. These five short texts are her only explicit and non-fictional discussions of Rousseau and his writings, and they all appeared within a fairly limited span of years: from 1789–1791. Such a flurry of activity devoted to Rousseau has attracted the attention of critics, who, like Jean Roussel and Raymond Trousson, attribute it to little more than circumstances. Trousson writes that these “écrits reflètent moins la passion pour Rousseau que le sens de l’opportunisme littéraire,” and Roussel echoes the

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691 Charrière, O.C. X, 211.
692 Ibid.
693 Ibid.
694 The latter date is included because of Charrière’s À Monsieur Burke, an unfinished letter probably written in early 1791. I have elected not to discuss this letter in depth, as it is principally directed at Edmund Burke; it does, however defend Rousseau against the former’s counter-revolutionary accusations. See O.C. X, 213–6.
same sentiment when he says that “l’enthousiasme règne dans ces écrits, mais il exprime moins la passion pour Rousseau que le sens de l’opportunité littéraire.” In the Éloge de Rousseau specifically, Roussel argues that Charrière “paraît avoir cherché avant tout son illustration personnelle” and “ne se fait thuriféraire que dans une cérémonie officielle, et à l’appel de la société parisienne.”

Regardless of the societal pressures, both wanted and unwanted, which may have compelled Charrière to address Rousseau’s ideas in such a series of public writings, the most salient trait that emerges from the juxtaposition of these texts is, I believe, Charrière’s constant reexamination of her beliefs and adopting of other viewpoints in order to work through her problematic relationship with Jean-Jacques. As in other texts like Lettres d’un évêque français à la nation and Lettres trouvées dans la neige, Charrière is here expressing herself “en marge des partis et des doctrines,” using the voices of others to guide her analyses. She is using critical texts as a public forum, a series of different strategies to address topical issues. The vision of Rousseau that emerges from these five short texts is an ambivalent one, praising Rousseau’s harmonious style and delicate sensibility, while thoroughly critiquing his treatment of women, his pedagogical systems, and his mauvaise honte. The vision of Charrière that can be discerned from the same texts, however, is striking in its flexibility and temperance. In terms of pedagogy specifically, Trousson writes that “de ‘l’éducation impossible’ de Rousseau, elle accepte ce dont s’accommodent son pragmatisme raisonnable et son scepticisme.”

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695 Roussel, JIR après la Révolution, 491. Trousson’s quotation is posterior, and does not reference Roussel. The coincidence seems striking.
696 Ibid., 491–2.
698 Trousson, Défenseurs et adversaires, 75.
broader level, Charrière shows the remarkable ability to speak as another and incorporate various viewpoints within an always-revisable vision of the world. It is precisely because she can step outside of the canonical admiration (and its counterpart, the blanket denigration) of Rousseau that Charrière can offer us a more nuanced, and thoroughly unique examination of his pedagogical goals.

III. Between convention and challenge: *Lettre à Willem-René*

In addition to these critical writings on Rousseau, Charrière also left us with two non-fiction pieces that discuss education in more pointed ways. The first of these two pieces is her *Lettre 2088, à son neveu Willem-René van Tuyl van Serooskerken*, most likely written in early November 1799. The correspondence between aunt and nephew begins in 1793, when he is twelve years old, and continues until 1799, with a brief interruption between 1795-6. In total, there are 14 letters by Willem-René and 12 from Charrière in between the years 1793-99. During nine months in 1799, the young man stayed with his aunt, who attempted to put her pedagogical ideas into practice. Ironically enough, it was during this visit, and not during Willem-René’s absence, that Charrière would end up penning the instruction letter. Additionally, the letter would ultimately benefit from an ambiguous status: it was never sent, and although multiple drafts and revisions suggest a possible desire for publication, it was never printed in Charrière’s lifetime. Moreover, as Strien-Chardonneau observes, this letter is marked differently

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700 For biographical information concerning this correspondence, and Charrière’s interpersonal relationships more broadly, many critics rely on Pierre et Simone Dubois’ *Zonder vaandel/Belle van Zuylen een biografie* (Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 1993).
than the others in the author’s correspondence with her nephew—neither the name nor address of the recipient is marked, and its length resembles more an essay than a personal letter.\footnote{Madeleine Strien-Chardonneau, “Sur un lettre d’instruction de Mme de Charrière: pédagogie et rhétorique épistolaire,” in Penser par lettre : Actes du colloque d’Azay-Le-Freron, mai 1997, ed. Benoît Melançon (Québec: Editions Fides, 1998), 345.} This didactic letter is doubly exceptional in Charrière’s oeuvre, since, as Nadine Bérenguier perspicaciously notes, Charrière’s uniqueness in this period of educational reform is that she did not produce a pedagogical tract, like Mmes de Genlis, Leprince de Beaumont, Lambert, and their ilk.\footnote{Bérenguier, “Entre constat et prescription,” 85.} This letter, therefore, is the most explicit educational program contained in Charrière’s works of non-fiction.

In this text, Charrière struggles to iron out possible contradictions between what she says and does, relative to her nephew’s education; she likewise expresses a certain difficulty in agreeing with herself (“s’accorder avec moi-même”).\footnote{Charrière, O.C. V, 633.} Here, there is no foreign voice to adopt, no assumed identity to hide behind; Charrière speaks in close, familial terms. In fact, the family ties between Charrière and Willem-René highlight the Dutch nationality which Charrière often otherwise masks.\footnote{Strien-Chardonneau, “Un lettre d’instruction,” 352.} It is almost as though, by virtue of societal exclusion, Charrière is in turn brought closer to her nephew.\footnote{Among the moments that allude to the family’s Dutch, rather than French, origins are: the allusion to the Dutch Patriots Revolt twelve years prior; the references to the non-canonical (albeit Swiss) writers Haller and Guibert; and a fearful lamentation that “que ce soient les Russes qui nous subjuguent ou qu’il s’élève dans notre sein des chefs de bandes armées, des despotes, l’effet seroit le même.” Charrière, O.C. V, 636.} As we shall see, however, in this supposedly intimate and plainspoken missive to her young protégé, Charrière largely only succeeds in dispensing conventional platitudes and false choices.

As I mentioned above, Charrière’s ostensible aim in writing this letter is to explain away the contradictions that her nephew might have witnessed, in between her
sage advice and her often unpredictable, spur of the moment actions. For example, in the same breath, Charrière admits to having pushed the young man towards scientific learning *and* a reading of her novel *Saint Anne*, in praise of ignorance (more on this below). Likewise, the peasant laborer is praised as the pinnacle of occupations, but Willem-René is given the *Georgics* to read rather than actually work in the fields. These apparent contradictions, and many more, are due to the constantly changing position of nobility in this new society, and the radical overhaul of traditional political systems on the whole. A certain weariness is evident in Charrière’s explanation that “je suis vieille déjà & il y a douze ans tout au plus que l’on procède ouvertement à bouleverser les empires à confondre partout les rangs, à détruire nos institutions & les titres de nos propriétés.”

Her disgust of drastic transformations and a certain nostalgia for the nobility of days of yore imbue her words with a solemn tone, which Strien-Chardonneau describes in the following way: ”Mme de Charrière utilise les procédés rhétoriques du genre oratoire pour communiquer, voire imposer, sa vision personnelle de la société contemporaine à son neveu et pour lui assigner une place au sein de celle-ci...” Moreover, Charrière uses the letter to “conférer à cette instruction pédagogique la dimension d’un testament spirituel,” in which historical consciousness is very present.

Charrière thus distances herself from contemporary events, speaking almost as an oracle for the younger generations (this can perhaps be seen as yet another tactic to gain authority, especially when speaking to an — albeit young — man). Her perspective on history allows her to stress the importance of flexibility once more: “il faut changer de pensées quand les circonstances changent, il faut cesser de dire ce qui ne peut plus être

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dit sans folie ni écouté sans danger.” But as political and social stability has not yet returned, Charrière chooses to dispense conservative education for Willem-René, who is still “plus près de [son] ancienne situation que de toute autre.” The only path truly available to the young man is hence that of the educated noble — a well-trodden eighteenth-century path. Nevertheless, Charrière is careful to clarify that such a pedagogical course is not appropriate for most people. There are in fact two classes of men: the majority, who work and obey, and the exceptions, who think and lead. This is expressed a number of times in Charrière’s letter; she begins by musing “voyons...s’il y a tel conseil qu’il faille donner à la plupart des hommes, et tel autre qu’il convienne de donner à quelques hommes.” She confirms shortly thereafter that “il importe que ceux qui travaillent & obeissent deviennent très nombreux en comparaison de ceux qui meditent & qui peuvent pretendre à gouverner.” And finally, “je dirois avec confiance au grand nombre, travailléz & ne recherchez ni la science, ni les distinctions. La nature ne semble pas nous avoir faits pour la réflêxion abstraite & profonde.”

Willem-René, of course, is different — otherwise there would not be much to write, in terms of a pedagogical epistle. Unlike the majority of common men, he is destined for study and knowledge. Charrière urges him: “je vous dis recherchés la...
science recherchez tout ce qui attire d'honorables distinctions.” 715 Even if the prestige of nobility has suffered substantial blows in recent history, Willem-René must strive to meet the demands of a classical sort of *honnête homme*: “Où la noblesse est détruite, où l’égalité est proclamée, ce n’est qu’à force de lumières & de sagesse que vous pouvés reprendre la place qu’autrefois le sort sembloit vous assigner.” 716 Charrière paints a portrait of her nephew as the village savant, an aristocratic leader much like Théobald in *Trois femmes*, as we shall see later in this chapter. “C’est vous,” Charrière hopes, “que l’homme du peuple ira consulter & assrement il n’aura pas tort parce qu’accoutumé à peser le pour & le contre sans lassitude sans impatience sans l’intervention d’aucun argument étranger & parasite, il n’y a point d’affaire dont on ne se mettre bientôt au fait.” 717

In this idyllic vision of the enlightened aristocrat, we begin to sense the latent Rousseauian underpinnings of this text. Much like Julie and Wolmar, the hypothetical Willem-René would serenely rule over ignorant peasants. 718 Charrière concedes that there is no true equality among men, but puts forward that there are “compensations.” The idealism of the peasant class here can be felt, when Charrière suggests that she wouldn’t know how to choose, for a potential child, between “la force du corps ou...la finesse de l’esprit...un patrimoine assuré ou...la nécessité de travailler pour vivre.” 719 The benefit of the recent revolutions, Charrière suggests, has been a substantial redistribution of wealth, so that in general, inequalities are no longer injustices. 720 In fact, if Willem-

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715 Ibid.
716 Ibid., 634.
717 Ibid., 638.
719 Ibid., 634.
720 In an endnote, Charrière does admit her ignorance in such economic matters; she would not have been
René chooses to abdicate his given potential for being a public official or enlightened counselor, Charrière gives him another, more bucolic option: “choisir soit dans votre patrie, soit ailleurs une retraite, & l’obscurité avec une compagne assortie à ce choix & qui en sera contente.”

It is between the ages of 25 and 30 — nearing maturity — that the young man will need to make this choice, and “prendre un parti pour la vie entière.” The alternative option that is envisaged by Charrière is clearly inspired by Rousseau; in it, she paints a pastoral wonderland akin to Clarens, where Willem-René would play the role of dutiful and humble father, “écarter des jeunes filles la vanité qui perd leur sêxe, des jeunes hommes l’orgueil pointilleux & querelleur, de tous l’ambition de savoir & insatiable soif de posseder.”

Willem-René would thus appear to have choice in the matter, even if it is evident that his aunt would prefer him to become “éclairé utile solide” and “apprendre l’art d’apprendre.” As Paul Pelckmans rightly observes, however, the relationship between Charrière and Willem-René is “un échec pédagogique,” a project that failed primarily because Willem-René is presented with a false choice. That is to say, although he is ostensibly granted complete freedom to choose his path, it is implied that one particular choice is not possible: that of “indolence” and lack of ambition. In reality, Pelckmans concludes, Charrière ascribes to the ethics of an “individualisme éclairé, qui n’imagine la
liberté qu’ambitieuse.” She says clearly: “Il ne vous reste donc un seul parti à prendre, c’est de vous donner le mérite & le relief de l’application d’esprit & de l’étude assidue, ayés en la réalité & n’en négligés pas l’apparence.” Like so many other pedagogues, Charrière falls into the trap of trying to impose her own world vision on her pupil, inadvertently circumscribing his freedom within the few options that she can possibly understand.

Ultimately, the reader might be slightly disappointed by this supposedly candid glimpse into Charrière’s pedagogical ambitions: her fairly standard advice to Willem-René consists mainly of telling him to maintain his dignity in a topsy-turvy world and to give “à [son] esprit tout le developpement dont il est susceptible, à [ses] mœurs de la dignité, à [sa] probité non un eclat d’ostentation mais je ne sais quel lustre d’intacte pureté qui la rende notoire & indisputable.” The Rousseau-inflected tropes of bucolic life and enlightened nobility appear much more glibly conformist here than in the texts discussed above (we will likewise see a more innovative side of Charrière when we turn to her epistolary novels). The question arises naturally: why is Charrière so conservative in this pedagogical assay, reverting to the very Rousseauian platitudes that she denounced elsewhere? I will put forth the suggestion that Charrière’s reluctance to innovate in her letter to Willem-René is due to several factors: firstly, the private nature of the correspondence (as opposed to writings directed towards publication), and secondly, a calculated change in strategy adapted to a specific pupil under specific circumstances,

726 Ibid., 76.
727 Charrière, O.C. V, 638, my emphasis.
728 Pelckmans also notes that Belle sabotages her pedagogical authority by attempting to simultaneously maintain a professional and personal relationship with her ward, often seeking at the same to cajole and scold Willem-René. Her excessive worrying, jealousy, and protectiveness actually overshadow her otherwise sensible pedagogical suggestions. “Un échec pédagogique,” 80.
729 Charrière, O.C. V, 635.
rather than an abstract pedagogical treatise. Once again, Charrière is adopting disguises with ease — it is just that this one wears the mask of conventionality.

Nadine Bérenguier addresses this division between private letters and epistolary novels in her article “Entre constat et prescription: les hésitations pédagogiques d’Isabelle de Charrière.” She observes that Charrière utilizes different tactics for persuasion in these two different media. In her private correspondence, Charrière prescribes, speaking authoritatively, whereas in her public-oriented writings, she is careful not to impose any solutions, instead showing the complexity of the situation and the different sides of an argument.\footnote{Bérenguier, “Entre constat et prescription,” 85.} I agree with Bérenguier’s assessment that there is nothing terribly original in this private epistle: social obligations are upheld and epistolary conventions respected.\footnote{Ibid., 91.} But this trait of Charrière’s personal correspondence is related to another other issue that we examined in her public-directed texts. Using the public text as a forum for debate, Charrière is often capable of speaking as another, of donning various masks; however, her outsider status as a woman immigrant on the outskirts of the literary world seemingly makes her wary of such audacity when speaking as an individual rather than a literary character. Without the artifice of fiction, Charrière does not dare to innovate in the domain of education. Such an observation might lead us to Laurence Vanoflen’s conclusion that “l’originalité de Même de Charrière est toutefois moins dans les principes pédagogiques eux-mêmes que dans leur mise en scène.”\footnote{Laurence Vanoflen, “La Transmission de l’expérience : Art pédagogique et art du roman chez Isabelle de Charrière,” Lettre de Zuylen et du Pontet, bulletin de l’Association Belle de Zuylen/Isabelle de Charrière 24 (Aug 1999): 20.} And this is precisely what we see in this letter to Willem-René; stripped of the power of
narrative and imbued with personal sentiment, the letter reads as little more than a series of well-reasoned suggestions for a fairly conventional nobleman’s education.  

Nevertheless, I would maintain that one small clue is discernable in this letter, which foreshadows Charrière’s other, bolder views on pedagogy. She highlights a tight link between education and routine: “et c’est l’habitude qui forme ainsi les hommes c’est elle qui les rend si differens.” This observation in and of itself is not striking; Charrière’s use of it to defend the intellectual equality of women is, however. Rejecting the assumption of innate differences between men and women’s minds, Charrière insists that it is just lack of rigorous study which makes the former seem inferior in contemporary society. “On n’a point exigé d’elle des études suivies & régulières ; elle a effleuré & n’a point approfondi, d’où il arrive qu’elle plaisante agréablement, discute mal, & se décide pour l’opinion qu’elle pourra exprimer par une saillie.” This gender-specific aside (in a letter specifically addressed to a young male) marks one of its only true moments of fervor — and a glimpse into the pedagogical views Charrière will flesh out in her fictional writings.

IV. Tentative steps towards reform: Réflexions sur l’éducation

The verve displayed in such a revindication of women’s equal intellectual status is likewise present in Charrière’s unpublished “Réflexions sur l’éducation,” composed

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733 This return to convention is analogous to what we saw in Laclos’ third treatise on female education.
734 Charrière, O.C. V, 636.
735 Ibid.
736 Charrière expresses an similar sentiment, in regard to education, in her letter to Henriette L’Hardy on the 22nd of October, 1792: “Quand nous nous comparons à d’autres femmes nous sommes bien vite des aigles, mais combien un homme instruit en sait plus que nous & Quoique je maintienne que les facultés sont originairement les mêmes je ne puis disconvenir que la faculté raisonnante ne soit bien plus perfectionnée chez les hommes & cela par l’étude & rien que par l’étude.” Charrière, O.C. III, 428.
sometime during her nephew’s stay at the Pontet between 1799 and 1800. The manuscript, written in Willem-René’s hand, is “particulièrement énergique” according to the Œuvres Complètes editor, Jeroom Vercruysse, and possibly jotted down “dans un mouvement d’humeur.” The short text begins tempestuously, with Charrière declaring that “je suis d’autant plus dégoutée des sistèmes pédantesquement minutieux sur l’éducation que je vois dans le Journal Brittanique & ailleurs que je crois qu’a beaucoup d’égards la plus mauvaise manière denseigner est aussi bonne meilleure peut-être que la plus parfaite.” Geneva’s Bibliothèque brittanique was in fact, during these years, a haphazard accumulation of “textes pédagogiques les plus divers et quelquefois contradictoires.” Reacting to this educational fervor, Charrière’s brief manifesto begins with a bout of irony and self-deprecation. Here, Charrière writes intimately and in the first person, even admitting her literary and pedagogical ambitions, comparing herself to “d’autres pédans” (ibid.). But once again, it appears that Charrière’s most controversial ideas might be cleverly cloaked in wit and sarcasm.

According to Vercruysse, the irony of the opening statement sets the tone, and “...soutient parfaitement une belle démonstration par l’absurde.” Charrière’s main assertion appears to be that flawed pedagogical methods could in fact teach children something, as the bored or confused student will examine “la méthode en même temps que la science et se forme et se fortifie l’esprit d’autant.” Her tongue-in-cheek discussion of the alphabet system and its “revolting” tautology is just one example of her general disdain for pedagogical theories. She maintains that “toutes les théories nouvelles

737 Charrière, O.C. X, 291.
738 Ibid., 292.
739 Ibid.
740 Ibid., 291.
741 Ibid.
quelque parfaites qu’elles puissent être me paroitront toujours d’une grande inutilité.\textsuperscript{742} This outright rejection of universalizing systems is an important underpinning of Charrière’s reflections on education, and will be more fully developed in her epistolary novel \textit{Trois femmes}. In addition to this caustic but revealing sally, we can find another crucial element of Charrière’s pedagogical musings in this short text: the overturning of the “plaire et instruire” model that had been advocated for so many centuries.

For this enthusiastic, albeit amateur, pedagogue, learning is likened to a trial by fire, a difficult apprenticeship on the arduous path towards self-realization. The student must wade through information, accepting and rejecting and perhaps discussing with a master. In no way, however, should the path to knowledge be lined with roses: “Malheur aux méthodes faciles, malheur aux livres qui doivent amuser en instruisant, malheur aux gentils instituteurs qui sèment de fleurs la carrière des sciences et écartent des difficultés qu’il est si essentiel d’apprendre à surmonter!”\textsuperscript{743} This idea will be taken up again in \textit{Trois femmes}, where Charrière will elaborate upon her belief that education should not be easily available for everyone, and that only in overcoming difficulty will motivation and ultimately, success emerge. There is a hint of Rousseau here when Charrière suggests that society is better off without the current “satiété de demi lumières et de demis éclairés.”\textsuperscript{744} She likewise suggests delaying education, so that it can be more fully realized at a mature age, another echo of the \textit{Émile}.

The ironic tone of the text’s beginning and its Rousseauian suggestions scattered throughout are ultimately negated, however, by its resigned conclusion, where, astoundingly enough, Charrière essentially suggests continuing the status quo. She

\textsuperscript{742} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{743} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{744} Ibid., 293.
finally concedes: “Laissons donc l’Alphabet comme il est, le livret comme il est, beaucoup de plattes méthodes comme elles sont que les bons esprits s’instruisent au travers de mille difficultés que les esprits médiocres se rebutent et cherchent ailleurs que dans l’étude du plaisir et du relief.” With a few specific examples (mentioning family relations such as the gouverneur Salgas and Benjamin Constant’s uncle by marriage, Louis Théodore de Nassau-La Lecq), Charrière attempts to “prove” that a great man will rise above a mediocre, “common” education, but that a polished education will not make a “habile homme” out of a mediocre mind. Once again, the principle of instruction through amusement is refuted by Madame de Charrière, who insists on the necessity of the arduous climb towards knowledge. It is thus, she argues,

qu’un Chasseur qui au lieu de trouver perpétuellement des sentiers battus, des bois coupés, par des routes sablées ou tapissées d’un gazon uni deviendra moins fort moins adroit moins industriux que celui qui court les champs labourés, saute les fossés et les hâyes etre-connoit [sic] les traces du gibier sur le terrain le plus inégal & parmi les ronces et les épines.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to education, Charrière insists. The process of trial and error, and the consequently self-tailored education which results from it is nowhere more apparent than in Charrière’s Trois femmes (1798), a hybrid epistolary text illustrating many of her complex views on education intimated in the non-fiction essays discussed so far.

V. Epistolary innovation: Trois femmes

In a letter to her friend Caroline de Sandoz-Rollin in 1797, Charrière, perhaps inadvertently, summarizes her distrust of pedagogical tendencies towards universalizing.

745 Ibid.
746 Ibid., 292.
She maintains that “Il n’y a rien de général pour les individus & il faut toujours faire des applications particulières si l’on veut connoitre la vérité....”\(^{747}\) This revalorization of individuality was largely at odds with the instructional methods of the eighteenth century, which were derived from “une pédagogie qui se désintéresse des différences individuelles.”\(^ {748}\) In *Trois femmes* (1798), Charrière explores several pedagogical case studies, focusing primarily on the three female characters of Émilie, Joséphine, and Constance. These three women represent different points on the spectrum of education available to women in the eighteenth-century. At various points in the narrative, Charrière additionally illustrates several more innovative forms of education in regard to gender, age, and class. Enfolded within its nuanced discussion of pedagogy, *Trois femmes* also reveals many of the same thematic and formal concerns that were apparent in Charrière’s critical reactions to Rousseau. Many of her pedagogical strategies involve a questioning of (male) authority and hegemonic social discourse, formally by the use of open-ended and inconclusive narrative structures and conceptually by the staging of minority voices within the text. As in her complex and conflicting critical pieces on Rousseau, here in *Trois femmes* Charrière employs the literary text as a space for public debate and experimentation to practical and concrete ends, rather than for monologic prescription such as in *Émile*.

Framed as a response to the Kantian idea of a moral imperative, the story of the three women is recited by the figure of abbé de la Tour to the Baronne de Berghen.\(^ {749}\) The abbé is another instance of Charrière cloaking herself with someone else’s voice,

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\(^{747}\) Charrière, *O. C. V.*, 331.
\(^{748}\) Snyders, *Pédagogie en France*, 121.
\(^{749}\) In *Intellectual Tacking*, Jacqueline Letzter suggests that the three women could be counterparts to the three figures Kant used in his essay “On the Proverb.” *Intellectual Tacking: Questions of Education in the works of Isabelle de Charrière* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 126.
which Marie-Hélène Chabut fittingly terms the “detour” of the male narrator. The trustworthy figure of the priest allows Charrière to bravely forge into the debate on *devoir*. In the framing narrative that precedes the story of the three women, the small circle around the Baronne de Berghen offers differing viewpoints on Kant’s moral imperative: that it is an innate and universal idea; that is a manifestation of divine will; that it is a mere calculation for the greater good; that it is simple and unchangeable; that it is intricately complex and socially constructed. The central narrative of *Trois femmes* is thus explicitly presented as a response to these opposing viewpoints on the notion of obligation, very much in the style of a public debate. As Madeleine Dobie notes, Charrière’s purpose here is not to refute Kant, but to discuss, open-endedly, the problems associated with “anti-consequentialism.” This is not, therefore, a mere softening through fiction of Kant’s approach to duty, she argues.

In addition to engaging with the question of the moral imperative in a forum of discussion, however, *Trois femmes* more specifically appears to be the story of Émilie’s moral education by three other characters in the novel: Joséphine, Constance, and Théobald. The maid Joséphine will show Émilie the shortcomings of an entirely book-based education, forcing her to adapt to the messy reality of everyday life. The independent and wealthy widow Constance will help Émile understand the benefits of moral relativity and oblique strategies for women in a male-dominated world. And finally, the young baron Théobald, at first proposed as a viable pedagogue, will in fact

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751 According to a letter written to Chambrier d’Oleyres (13–4 octobre 1797), *Trois femmes* is “un petit traité de devoir mis en action ou plutôt illucidé par une action.” Charrière O.C. V, 354.
come to represent the problems embedded in many educational projects of the Enlightenment, especially as regards the relation of public and private spheres and the role of (male) authority. Through her manipulation of the narrative form and of polyphony, Charrière uses these three educations of Émilie to provide a number of commentaries on existing power structures and various strategies that woman can employ to navigate around them.

Émilie enters onto the stage as a hapless young woman of sixteen and a half, recently destitute and orphaned after having fled revolutionary France with her parents for tranquil Westphalia. While well-bred, aristocratic Émilie despairs at her new situation, her resourceful Alsatian maid, Joséphine, scrapes together enough money to set them up in a small village home. At first, Émilie is presented to us as a typical noble dainty flower; while Joséphine “cultivoit toutes sortes de légumes, nourroissoit une chèvre, filoit du chanvre et du lin,” providing for their basic needs, “Émilie arroisoit quelques rosiers, caressoit la chèvre, brodoit de la mousseline et du linon, dont Joséphine étoit parée le Dimanche et les jours de fête.” The pedagogical opposition between the two women is thus set up immediately: while Joséphine faces the difficulties of their new life head-on, Émilie remains in an aristocratic daydream. In fact, Émilie’s total ignorance — and lack of attention — concerning the buying and selling of commodities and the general management of the household will push her maid to seeking favors from Henri, the local aristocratic family’s servant.

Joséphine becomes the first of Émilie’s teachers, albeit by means of unconventional methods. When Émilie discovers that her maid has been sleeping with Henri, she is shocked and saddened, reproaching Joséphine for her immoral actions. But

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753 Charrière, O.C. IX, 44.
Joséphine laments, “Pensez-vous donc que je pusse tout faire, Mademoiselle?” She gently explains to Émilie that she was only striving to make ends meet: “Henri trait la chèvre dont nous avons le lait; il puise l’eau et scie le bois pendant que je cultive votre salade; et avec quoi acheterions-nous le café que vous prenez à votre déjeuner, si ce n’était avec le fil que je vends après l’avoir filé?” The young aristocrat is suddenly forced to see the hidden price behind her daily indulgences. Rather than appreciating the (bodily) sacrifices that Joséphine has made for her, however, Émilie is at first disgusted (“O Dieu! que me fais-tu envisager!”) and then obliviously ignorant of her responsibility in Joséphine’s seduction. Reproaching her mistress for not paying attention to Henri’s advances when she had nothing better to do than observe, Joséphine ultimately finds fault with Émilie’s scholarly education:

À quoi sont bonnes toutes vos lectures, si elles ne vous apprennent pas à prévoir les choses mieux que nous, qui n’y pensons que quand elles sont faites. J’oserai presque dire qu’une belle éducation est bien mauvaise, si elle ferme les yeux sur ce qui se passe tous les jours dans le monde. Mais ce ne devrait pas être cela. J’ai quelquefois ouvert vos livres; j’y ai vu des rois, des bergers, des bergères, des colonels, des marquis, des princesses. Cela revient toujours au même : les hommes s’introduisent au-près des femmes et par-ci par-là se battent pour elles, tandis qu’elles se haïssent pour eux: en prose, en vers, il n’est presque question que de cela.”

In this flight of Rousseauian rhetoric, Joséphine highlights the crucial disconnect between Émilie’s bookish learning and the vicissitudes of the real world. Émilie is forced to confront her principles directly when, some time later, Joséphine reveals her out of wedlock pregnancy by bursting out of her corset. Émilie is once again stunned but ignorant, to which her maid replies “Eh mon Dieu! ne le voyez-vous pas?...Est-ce à

754 Ibid., 45.
755 Ibid.
756 Ibid., 11.
force d’indifférence ou à force de décence que vous ne voyez rien? Émilie, having been reproached for her selective blindness, is nevertheless reticent to come to Joséphine's defense and convince Henri to marry her by vouching for her trustworthiness. She sidesteps the main issue, saying “mais, ma chère Joséphine, trahirai-je la vérité, moi qui n’ai jamais affirmé que ce dont je n’étois ou me croyois assurée ? abandonnerai-je en un instant des principes et des habitudes sur lesquelles je fonde tout ce que je puis avoir d’estime pour moi-même ?”

Joséphine has a vastly more practical view of her situation, and is dismayed by her mistress’ lack of sympathy. “C’est fort bien, Mademoiselle,” laments the maid, “abandonnez et trahissez Joséphine plutót que des mots, des grands mots, la vérité, vos principes, vos habitudes....” Once again the difference being highlighted is that between theory and practice, between lofty ideals and down-to-earth reality. Émilie explains that after being orphaned she was more than ever disposed to firmly adhere to her principles: “en perdant mes parens j’ai vu qu’il ne me restoit d’autre patrimoine que l’éducation qu’ils m’avoient donnée : elle étoit stricte et ne m’avoir pas permis de croire qu’on pût dévier en rien du devoir.” Ultimately, however, Émilie cedes to her affections for Joséphine, arguing that even if she must lose some self-respect, she must also protect the one person to whom she owes everything.

In several seemingly minor ways, Émilie’s friendship with Joséphine is in fact what softens her moral rigidity, adapting her principles to more concrete aims. When Émilie receives a harp from a mysterious benefactor (in fact Théobald), she is tempted to

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757 Ibid., 67.
758 Ibid., 68.
759 Ibid.
760 Ibid., 69.
Joséphine, thinking of the young man’s feelings, suggests that returning or purchasing the harp would be a tactless move only causing further chagrin. She advises instead to send over the beautiful shawl and apron Émilie has newly spun, to which her sanctimonious mistress replies “la valeur est si loin d’être égale.” Once again thinking of the interpersonal repercussions rather than the strict principles, Joséphine retorts “qu’importe la valeur? Cela est-il beau de compter si juste?” Émilie’s principles would lead her to narrow-mindedness, whereas Joséphine’s understanding of human nature allows her to be more flexible with values (in this case, monetary versus gift value).

Suellen Diaconoff, speaking of Charrière’s use of open-ended narrative forms, such as employed in Trois femmes, states that the author “excels in evoking those psychological movements towards change or slow metamorphosis that are not themselves change.” Joséphine’s brief lecture on gift economics would, in my opinion, be precisely one of these “psychological movements towards change” in regard to Émilie’s education. But Joséphine is far from being Émilie’s only “teacher” in Trois femmes: both Constance and Théobald will likewise shape the young woman’s new sense of morality. Just as Joséphine criticizes her mistress’s scholarly education, Constance likewise reproaches the squeamish and rigid morality Émilie has gained from her sheltered existence. Constance de Vaucourt arrives by complete coincidence in Altendorf, the victim of an overturned carriage. The attractive and enigmatic widow promptly befriends the local aristocracy with her well-bred demeanor. When she reveals to Émilie her

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761 Ibid., 49
762 Ibid.
mysterious past, which involves a vast fortune acquired by her late husband in dubious ways, Émilie is scandalized and suggests giving the money back to its rightful owners. In response, Constance argues that even if the money had been obtained by her husband through shady dealings, it legally belongs to her now, and that since restituting it is logically and politically impossible, she does the next best thing: help people monetarily whenever she can. Sensing Émilie’s reticence, even before such a well-reasoned argument, Mme de Vaucourt explains to her that “votre éducation vous a donné des idées spéculatives extrêmement délicates sur quantité d’objets, que vous envisageriez un peu différemment si vous aviez plus vu le monde.” Once again, Émilie’s book-based education in her reclusive tower is taken to task. Constance is very much projected as the “worldly woman” compared to the young and naive Émilie. Accordingly, she becomes the spokesperson for a new type of pedagogy, one that does not solely rely on the notion of virtue. Innocence can no longer be the basis of female education, Constance argues to Émilie, since “l’innocence est une fort belle chose...mais ce n’est pourtant qu’une valeur négative, elle n’offre aucune ressource pour les occasions difficiles, elle n’amuse ni console, elle ne donne ni conseil ni secours.”

This idea of the inherently flawed nature of female education, so long as it relies only on virginity of body and soul, could be seen as a commentary on the “negative” and sheltered educations of young women such as Cécile de Volanges and her sisters. If this is the case, then can Constance be read as a response to Merteuil? Could she be a middle way, a possibility for women to be educated and yet integrated into society without harmful consequences? In this perspective, Émilie could be perceived as a more

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764 Charrière, O.C. IX, 39.
765 Ibid., 72.
successful Cécile, who despite being orphaned and taken under the wing of an older and wiser woman, manages to find her place in high society. Unlike Madame de Merteuil, whose lessons are always self-serving, Madame de Vaucourt dispenses practical advice to help Émilie adapt to her new environs. Once such important discussion occurs on the topic of whether immigrants should maintain their own culture or seek to adapt to their new host culture. Homesick and exiled “du plus beau pays du monde,” Émilie wants to recreate France in Germany, to surround herself “de ses [la France] mœurs, des usages que le goût y avoir consacrés.” Constance argues that it is disrespectful to avoid adopting the customs of her new home: she says to Émilie, “gardons-nous de vouloir établir ici la France, et de traiter des gens qui nous souffrent, comme s’ils étoient étrangers chez eux, et que ce fut nous qui les tolérassions!” The practical advice that Constance dispenses suggests a certain flexibility of morals and mores, helping Émilie make the most of her new surroundings and get along with Théobald, who “mérite bien qu’on ne marchande pas avec lui, qu’on cesse d’être Françoise, puisqu’il est Allemand.”

The issue of emigration was a personally relevant one for Madame de Charrière, who left her native Netherlands for Switzerland after her marriage; it was moreover a topical issue in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Constance’s recommendations to Émilie are very similar, in fact, to the position adopted by Charrière in her own society.

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766 I say only “more” successfully because at the end of Trois femmes, Émilie is once again forced to flee due to impeding political turmoil, and because the Suite only further muddles matters, offering no real conclusion to the novel or Émile’s fate.
767 Ibid., 62.
768 Ibid.
769 Ibid., 65.
770 Charrière likewise wrote two other texts dealing specifically with the issue of emigration: the play L’Émigré (1794) and the epistolary novel Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d’émigrés (1793). For a longer discussion of the need for the émigrés to integrate into society, see Giulia Pacini’s “How to be
But lest we interpret it as a matter of misplaced national pride, Charrière is quick to point out that it is the adaptability that is key, not any one nation’s identity and customs. The Baronne d’Altendorf, discussing the recent trend of French affection among German youth, explains her position towards national posturing: “Quand je vois de jeunes Allemands se mouler sur la nation française, dédaigner leur propre langue, leurs propres usages, contrefaire un accent qu'ils ne saisiront jamais bien, et s'affliger tout de bon de cette impuissance, j'avoue que je rougis pour eux.” It is not a question of national superiority, but simply of adapting to local customs – for Charrière, when in Rome...

In addition to the sensible advice dispensed by Joséphine, Constance, and the Baronne d’Altendorf, Émilie also receives pedagogical instruction from her future fiancé, Théobald. In fact, one of their most heated discussions occurs around the subject of nationalism. Analyzing the recent political events, Émilie nevertheless maintains that Théobald will love living in Paris once the turmoil has calmed down. The young aristocrat rejects this idea, insisting on the shocking barbarity of the French people exhibited in the past few years. Feeling judged, Émilie claims that “malgré les défauts si choquants de ma nation, j'oserai penser que tout homme qui pourra vivre à Paris y vivra.” With a heavy heart, Théobald is forced to disagree: “je serai l'homme bizarre...qui fera exception à cette règle universelle, et je déclare que j'aimerais mieux ne sortir jamais d'Altendorf, y employer toute ma vie à servir de tuteur, d'arbitre, de consolateur à ses habitants, que de la passer sans utilité pour personne dans cette capitale


771 Charrière, *O.C.* IX, 55.
772 Ibid., 56.
fameuse, séjour brillant des grâces, du goût, et de tous les plaisirs.” Once again Émilie is made to confront her national prejudices and broaden her worldview.

Charrière uses this argument — one of the few genuinely tense moments of an otherwise fairly light-hearted text — to segue to an implicit criticism of Rousseau. Rushing out of the argument precipitously, Théobald leaves behind on a garden bench his copy of Émile (which he had symbolically been clutching throughout the altercation). Instead of encountering Théobald when she goes running after him, Émilie only finds the book, opened to the following phrase: “Sophie, vous êtes l’arbitre de mon sort, vous le savez bien. Vous pouvez me faire mourir de douleur, mais n’espérez pas me faire oublier les droits de l’humanité, ils me sont plus sacrés que les vôtres ; je n’y renoncerai jamais pour vous.” Théobald is here portrayed as the Rousseauian sympathizer, who would put the abstract, general good above his personal feelings and obligations towards Émilie. When Théobald later exclaims to the young woman “pourquoi...m’avoir mis dans la cruelle alternative de vous offenser, ou de désavouer mes principes et ma patrie ?,” he sounds very much like Émilie herself when she was presented with Joséphine’s pregnancy. But interestingly enough, Émilie and Théobald are driven in two different ways by the text: Émilie is forced to become more lenient and morally flexible out of compassion for Joséphine, Constance, and now Théobald, whereas Théobald will become increasingly dictatorial as the narrative unfolds. Émilie will adapt, as best she can, to German customs and establish her new life in Altendorf, submitting to her husband’s wishes. The young baron, on the other hand, will not only stay in his hometown and

773 Ibid., 56–7.
774 Ibid., 57.
775 Ibid., 58.
remain its presiding lord, but also establish a local school with rather authoritarian guidelines.

In the second half of *Trois femmes*, Charrière shifts from a third-person narrative to an epistolary relationship between Constance and the abbé de la Tour, the first half’s narrator. The subject matter of the second section also shifts subtly from a traditional love story to a philosophical reflection on pedagogy and society. In her fifth letter to the abbé, Constance explains at length Théobald’s program for his “pupils,” the residents of Altendorf. This program at first appears as a viable pedagogical model suggested by the author, but as we shall see becomes increasingly problematic once we consider issues of gender, age, and class. In his school, the young baron

> a décidé qu’il prendroit dans chaque famille le jeune homme que ses parens disoient avoir le plus d’intelligence, et qu’il lui feroit appreinde d’abord à lire, à écrire, l’arithmétique, la géographie, ensuite les principes de la langue Allemande, en même-tems que ceux de toute logique et rhétorique, et enfin un sommaire des loix du pays. Là où il n’y aura point de garçons, on prendra une fille, si les parens y consentent; de sorte qu’il y aura dans chaque famille quelqu’un qui en saura plus que les autres et que l’on pourra consulter... Théobald n’aura garde d’exiger qu’on n’envoye pas les autres enfants à l’école commune ; mais il n’encouragera pas leurs études, et il favorisera au contraire leurs travaux ruraux ou méchaniques.

Not only does Théobald control the number of people allowed access to education, and what age they may have (between 10 and 15 years old), but he likewise decides what subjects will be taught and what books will be available in the local library. Limiting the books to history, physics, medicine, and morality, Théobald even goes so far as to say that if he does not find the appropriate books, he will *make* them himself. In fact, he is in charge of every aspect of this pedagogical enterprise, from the selection of students, teachers, and curricula, to the material furnishings and location of the classes (which will

\[\text{\textsuperscript{776}} \text{Ibid., 101–2. Letzter remarks that the reforms undertaken in Altendorf were similar to those contemplated in France during the Thermidorian regime, in 1794–5, both inspired by Rousseau’s teachings.}\]
take place in his greenhouse and chapel). Although Constance finds this to be a suitably “modest” project, with high chances of succeeding, I find Théobald’s role to be evidently authoritarian if not in fact despotic. At the first sight of a problem, his rigidity — and shortsightedness — becomes apparent. A chagrined father comes to explain that his family, along with ten others, have no children between the appropriate ages, and are thus excluded from the local school project. They ask to have their youngest children included, but Théobald’s immediate reaction is telling: “je ne puis rien changer à mon plan,” he responds. Although Théobald will eventually set up a sort of remedial class for these excluded members of society, we see that he is reluctant to change his system, and that he “aura bien de la peine” in accommodating everyone. Ultimately, his desire to educate is, at best, paternalistic, and at worst, tyrannical.

Théobald is not the only character of Trois femmes with dubiously successful, if well-meaning, pedagogical aspirations. Several educational experiments happen in this second half of the text, in fact increasing in frequency as the novel draws to a close, as if the interlocutors of a public debate were attempting to address all the possible issues at hand. The first involves the new-born babies of Joséphine and the aristocratic Comtesse de Horst; the two sons are accidentally swapped and reswapped at birth, making it impossible to determine which is the aristocrat and which the plebian baby. Although there are no visible differences between the children of two very different classes, their mothers do exhibit rather contrasting reactions. Whereas the Comtesse de Horst finds fault with both babies and refuses to adopt either, Joséphine embraces both little boys. Despite assurances, from the local busybodies, that aristocratic blood will reveal itself,

777 Charrière, O.C. IX, 105.
778 Ibid.
Théobald seems determined to raise both children identically, even naming them the same, Théobald Alexandre Henri, followed by the names of all four parents.

This anecdotal foray into pedagogical equality is then immediately reduplicated in the narrative, when Constance describes the birth of fraternal twins whose mother died in childbirth. After finding suitable parents for the newborn twins, Constance pays them extra “à condition qu’on appelle Charlotte le garçon baptisé Charles, et vice versâ, les habillant précisément l’un comme l’autre.”779 The family residing almost alone in the countryside, Constance thinks that this experiment will reveal whether or not gender differences are innate or socially constructed: “Nous verrons si la vraie Charlotte tricottera, sera fine et gentille, coquette et caressante ; si le vrai Charles prendra le rabot et le hoyau, s’il sera franc, brave un peu brutal et fort batailleur.”780 Assuming that Charles and Charlotte can live out this charade until puberty, Constance argues that the boy will behave like a girl and the girl like a boy. In one of the more revolutionary moments of Trois femmes, Constance rejects an “oppositional model of sexual difference,” undermining “…the Rousseauian polarization of the male and female as principle and feeling, abstract and concrete, reason and sensation.”781 Constance declares

j’espère qu’on en dira beaucoup de pauvretés de moins sur les caractères essentiellement différens et les facultés distinctives des deux sexes. Adieu notre exclusive délicatesse d’imagination, nos lumineux apperçus et ces saillies si heureuses qu’elles atteignent aussi haut que les plus sublimes efforts de la raison : nous serons d’autant moins dispensées de raisonner que nous n’en serons plus jugées incapables. Je n’ai jamais eu foi à nos privilèges ni à nos désavantages naturels. 782

779 Ibid., 114.
780 Ibid.
782 Charrière, O.C. IX, 114–5.
A proto-feminist, Constance seems to argue for the radical equality of men and women, at least in terms of their natural variety of dispositions. Hiding behind multiple fictional layers, Charrière is here able to articulate a more radical position on the role of women. Within the novel, embedded in an epistolary framework and couched in a fanciful manner, due to the nature of the gender “experiment,” and moreover speaking as a liminal character hovering on the border of conventional society, Charrière allows yet another voice into the debate. As Jenene Allison remarks, Charrière shows how “the novel in the hands of a perspicacious author, might serve as a more effective vehicle for social change than might any type of explicit criticism.” In support of this idea, Allison points out that although Charrière abundantly addresses the status of women in her various novels, she almost entirely ignores this issue in her political works.

Two other experiments are performed on the townspeople of Altendorf by their well-meaning overlords. After the class-changing and gender-swapping experiments performed on the four babies, Émilie becomes inspired to try one out on a full-grown man. This native of Altendorf, already in his forties, has led a dissipated life, falling from the role of précepteur to a Prince to a begging drunkard; Émilie decides that he will learn to be a cobbler. Although we do not see the outcome of this experiment, it is clearly inspired by Rousseau’s ideas on trade and his depiction of an orderly, seamless society at Clarens. The baron takes Émilie’s experiment one step further, and this is where Rousseauian thinking begins to go haywire. Out of a desire to better the local tavern master’s life, the baron decides to teach him to read and write — by locking him inside a

784 Allison, *Revealing Difference*, 83. The one notable exception being Lettre d’un Anglois à un député de l’Assemblée nationale de France.
room for a year. Despite the baron’s reasoning that otherwise, the man would simply drink away his freedom, we are nevertheless shocked by the tyrannical cruelty of such a “pedagogical” method. These two examples, although inconclusive at the novel’s end, suggest that not all well-meaning pedagogical intentions may have happy outcomes, and continue to hint at the despotic nature of Altendorf, an imitation of Clarens.\textsuperscript{785}

It is not only the novel’s pedagogical experiments that are left uncertain; indeed, the ending of the text is itself perplexing. The progressive destabilization of the novel reveals an increasing discomfort with linear and authoritative structures, both of pedagogy and epistolarity. The text, dealing thematically with pedagogy, will itself turn into a pedagogical manual — Théobald’s “dictionnaire politique, moral et rural ; ou explication par ordre alphabétique des termes les plus usités.”\textsuperscript{786} Included by Théobald himself within Constance’s correspondence to the abbé de la Tour, the sixteen first entries in this dictionary range from the philosophical (“âme”) to the agricultural (“if”) and implicitly political (“dimanche”). After this jarring shift in genres, Constance de Vaucourt picks up her quill again, but the narrative now breaks down in distressed ellipses. Lettre XII begins thus:

Emilie craint l’approche de l’armée Angloise ; plusieurs de ses parens sont dans cette armée..............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................

et poussant la prévoyance encore plus loin..............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................

\textsuperscript{787}

\textsuperscript{785} Charrière appears to treat these experiments with a touch of irony, perhaps commenting on her century’s predilection for such ambitious, if ill-construed, attempts to reform human nature. On this issue, see Julia V. Douthwaite’s \textit{The Wild Girl, Natural Man and the Monster. Dangerous experiments in the Age of Enlightenment} (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2002).
\textsuperscript{786} Charrière, \textit{O. C. IX}, 117.
\textsuperscript{787} Ibid., 123.
This novel of exile ends with Émilie once again needing to flee, and suffering the brunt of (largely male-dominated) political consequences while her husband and the rest of the family stay in Altendorf. Continuing with Letzter’s metaphor, Émilie is literally made to tack, to change course and follow a new road to safety, while Théobald may stay at the helm of his manor. Constance, who is recounting these events in the final letter of the novel, will likewise precipitously change direction in her last paragraph, attaching a postscript discussing Théobald’s methodology. The abbé had apparently asked Constance if “l’extrême rectitude de Théobald” did not cause disagreements between the two of them.\textsuperscript{788} M\^eme de Vaucourt assures him that in reality, she is much more in agreement with Théobald than it might outwardly appear. Despite finding it “fâcheux, pénible, et souverainement inutile” to clamor for perfection out loud, Constance nevertheless admits to loving and desiring this perfection “au-dedans.”\textsuperscript{789} Linking, oddly enough, the use of her corrupt finances to Théobald’s rectitude, Constance closes the novel with the following enigmatic declaration:

\begin{quote}
Je n’aurai point de dispute avec Théobald. Je respecte tous les scrupules, les scrupules religieux, les scrupules de l’honneur, enfin tous, ceux mêmes qui n’auraient point de nom, et jusqu’à la soumission à des loix que rien ne sanctionneroit. Mon esprit, si ennemi de tous les autres galimathias, respectera toujours celui-ci. J’aimerai toujours à voir l’extrême délicatesse se soumettre à des règles qu’elle ne peut définir et dont elle ne sait pas d’où elles émanent.\textsuperscript{790}
\end{quote}

In this statement, Constance seems to single-handedly contradict the intellectual and moral principles she repeatedly illustrated throughout the entire narrative: logical reasoning, moral flexibility, and political skepticism, among others. After chastising Émilie for her ethical rigidity, here we seem to find Constance supporting blind devotion, moral dogmatism, and all varieties of intransigence. Although one possible reading of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{788} Ibid., 124.
\item \textsuperscript{789} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{790} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
this passage could hark back to the framing narrative’s discussion of the Kantian moral imperative, suggesting that it is an indefinable scruple, “que rien ne sanctionneroit,” I believe that it is more fruitful to investigate this citation as an extension of Charrière’s penchant for disguise.  

Constance, sharing some evident similarities with Charrière herself in terms of intellectual aspirations and societal standing, is perhaps the most prominent of her masks. Consequently, like Charrière, Constance “is reduced to infiltrating a field that is governed by others, which requires her to maneuver in piecemeal fashion, and to prove her conclusions over and over again in each individual case.” Much like Émilie, who is ultimately made to bow to her foreign husband’s mores, Constance-Charrière exhibits only a precarious freedom, one based on tacking, moral flexibility and relativism, and modest, gradual changes rather than radical ones. In fact, it is only by rejecting systematization and grand declarations that Constance is able to navigate the waters of a male-dominated society. Sometimes this adaptability even means contradicting oneself: “je le répète,” Constance writes, “tous les jours après avoir soutenu une opinion, j’en prends une autre, et je finis par n’en avoir aucune.” Constance is the ultimate navigator of Trois femmes, constantly reacting to fickle new circumstances and often harsh and unfavorable situations. Adopting Letzter’s tacking metaphor, Marie-Hélène Chabut finds the originality of Trois femmes in “son recours à toute une série de

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791 Ibid.
792 The main differences being that while Constance is widowed, Charrière remains unmarried until later in life, and the rather more extreme displacement of Constance to a tropical island as compared to Charrière’s own, relatively smaller, move from the Netherlands to Switzerland.
793 Letzter, Intellectual Tacking, 132.
794 Letzter’s metaphor of tacking (Intellectual Tacking) is taken from Constance herself, who writes: “n’essayez d’arriver au mieux possible que par degrés ; il faut se contenter de louvoyer, comme dit le sage Malesherbes en parlant de certain édit sur les protestants.” O.C. IX, 110.
louvoiements qui ont pour effet de subvertir des normes sans pourtant les attaquer de
front."\textsuperscript{796} Rather than attacking issues head-on, Constance “joue avec eux, les subvertit
en les intégrant en quelque sorte.”\textsuperscript{797}

This non-dogmatic dialogism may at first appear contradictory, but it is in fact a
means of protection for Charrière’s women characters, who simply do not have the
freedoms — politically, socially, or intellectually — that men do, especially in the post-
Revolutionary era. It is interesting, therefore, to observe how Charrière and her
characters in *Trois femmes* confront one of the century’s biggest authorities, Rousseau.
Although Charrière’s fictional works do not contain much outright criticism of Rousseau,
Letzter laments that her female characters are “often defeated; they can resist their
oppression only be being extremely circumspect and oblique, and by taking indirect
routes to their goals.”\textsuperscript{798} This pessimistic conclusion is very much what we see in
Émilie’s case, where external events seem to shape the young woman’s destiny and she
must constantly change and adapt in order to survive. When we see Charrière confront
Rousseau, however, is the outcome so dire?

In addition to the allusion to *Émile* discussed above, Charrière addresses
Rousseau, albeit obliquely, at various points in *Trois femmes*, with increasing frequency
in the second half of the novel. Several discussions of Rousseau and his pedagogical
ideas are scattered throughout six different letters. The first mention of Rousseau appears
in Lettre V, when the small Altendorf group is sitting in the parlor discussing which
famous author they might like to live with. Everyone immediately rejects Rousseau.
Constance elaborates upon this rejection, saying that she would rather “vivre avec un

\textsuperscript{796} Chabut, “Louvoyer pour innover,” 241.
\textsuperscript{797} Ibid., 249.
\textsuperscript{798} Letzter, *Intellectual Tacking*, 24.
auteur qui ne le seroit devenu que par nécessité ou par une impulsion irrésistible, qu’avec celui qui se seroit mis à l’être de son plein gré et par choix, c’est-à-dire par amour-propre.”
Continually thinking about his literary work, Rousseau never saw the reality of things, Constance argues, and consequently “ceux qu’il vouloit louer, ceux dont il voulait se plaindre, sont devenus à ses yeux ce qu’ils devoient être, pour que des portraits charmans ou hideux pussent porter leur nom.”

This criticism of Rousseau paints him as an imaginative but perhaps mendacious author — not exactly a trustworthy and practical pedagogue. And yet the following paragraph, turning “assez naturellement” to the subject of education, contains Théobald’s decision to establish his highly controlling — and quite Rousseauian — Altendorf school. As we have seen, from the reading list to the selection of students, Théobald’s pedagogical project embodies Rousseauian principles.

Constance’s ambiguous position on the matter — as observed, indirectly, by the abbé who fears a conflict between her and Théobald — nevertheless reveals that all may not be so blissful in Altendorf, and that perhaps she is not completely convinced by the young baron’s heavy-handed methods. She must ask the abbé for his opinion on the matter (“que ditez-vous, M. l’Abbé, de notre projet ? Ne sommes-nous pas modestes, du moins ?”) and justify the pedagogical enterprise by curtailing its effectiveness: “contens de fournir quelques alimens à la pensée et de la guider plus ou moins dans son premier essor, nous la laisserons ensuite se conduire elle-même, et elle pourra s’égarer, se retrouver ou se perdre à son gré.”

Rather less optimistic than Théobald, Constance claims that the Altendorf school will provide “some” instruction, “more or less” helping

800 Ibid.
801 Charrière, O.C. IX, 102.
the students along the path of knowledge, which they may nevertheless abandon or lose thereafter. Her faith in the Rousseau-inspired pedagogical project seems tepid at best.

In the following letter, after a brief description of the new school’s first days, Constance responds to the abbé’s political musings, to the effect that Marat will soon be “chassé du Panthéon français.” Rather unmoved by this prospect, Constance explains that she has little time for such pantheons: “Pourquoi un Panthéon ? pourquoi des Apothéoses ? Voltaire et Rousseau, à votre avis, ressemblent-ils à des Dieux ?” Rejecting the idea of literary gods, Charrière is quite critical of the popular fervor for Rousseau, saying that despite being “le plus bel esprit,” he is a poor replacement for Jesus Christ, “qui a fait peu de longs discours, et n’a dicté ni les Evangiles ni les Epîtres.” Charrière is here engaging in contemporary politics, albeit in a rather safe and oblique manner. In her next letter, Constance continues her discussion of Rousseau and Voltaire’s shortcomings, and it is clearly painted as a second half to the missive’s other preoccupation, the first signs of trouble at the Altendorf school. Did Rousseau accomplish any good for society, Charrière wonders. But ultimately she finds this question to difficult to answer, for does it concern “ce qu’ils ont voulu ou...ce qu’ils ont opéré”?

Rousseau’s objective was “vaine, diverse, ondoyante” and its consequences are still difficult to determine. Charrière rejects Rousseau’s contradictory statements, accusing him of now riling up his fellow citizens and then appeasing them. She writes:

*Cet oracle, que l’on consulte sans-cesse, après avoir vanté mille fois le prix inestimable de la liberté, dit qu’elle seroit trop achetée, si elle l’étoit par une goutte de sang. Oh, qu’il est naturel qu’on ait de l’autorité sur la multitude, quand tour-à-tour on flatte avec art des penchants opposés ! Ici la révolte est*

802 Ibid., 103.
803 Ibid., 104. This criticism of literary “religious” figures is echoed in her Lettre 189, where Charrière writes that “j’ai toujours cru que Voltaire et Rousseau étaient jaloux de Jésus-Christ.”
804 Ibid.
805 Ibid., 106.
sanctifiée, là c’est la soumission ; et l’inconséquence elle-même, si elle ne peut citer une éloquente page où elle soit érigée en vertu, trouvera du-moins à s’étayer d’un grand exemple.806

Once again we have the impression that although Charrière is receptive to Rousseau’s elegant writing style, she is quite a bit more reluctant to adopt all of his philosophical and political ideas.807 Unlike the “saints du calendrier,” who do neither harm nor good to society at large, Charrière is here suggesting that Rousseau’s influence has been a pernicious one, dominating the populace with fiery rhetoric. And yet, interestingly enough, this alternation of viewpoints and recommendations is quite similar to the ambivalent and ambiguous opinions often adopted by many of Charrière’s female characters. Whereas women have to make do with such a second-best strategy of defense, however, men with power should not abuse their powers of persuasion. The debate between Charrière and the abbé de la Tour continues into lettre IX (although we only ever see Constance’s letters). As paraphrased by Constance, the abbé’s position is that the people will always needs idols, and that they might as well honor Voltaire’s tolerance or Rousseau’s touching depiction of domestic virtues. But here, the otherwise opinionated Constance appears to waver and to become purposefully vague. The beginning of her explanation is marked by a strong conditionality: “si cela se pouvoit, j’y consentirois peut-être,” she says concerning this secular idolatry.808 She increasingly refuses to take a side, saying that “il est en toute chose du pour et du contre, et j’ai

806 Ibid.
807 Paul Pelckmans suggests likewise, that Rousseau’s main virtue, in Charrière’s eyes, was his writing style and not necessarily his philosophy: “Quand elle invoquait Jean-Jacques maître à écrire, Belle engageait à écrire aussi bien que lui ; s’agissant du maître à penser, elle se sera souvent dit qu’il y avait moyen de penser mieux.” “Usages de Jean-Jacques,” Restant XIX (1991); 684.
808 Ibid., 109.
d’autant moins le cœur à la dispute, que je vois tous les jours des raisons de douter de ce que j’avais cru indubitable.”

Rousseau and Voltaire are nonetheless not to be idolized, Constance argues: “prenez-en votre parti; tous les Saints de la légende seraient décanonisés, que ces nouveaux demi-dieux n’en réussiroient pas davantage. On peut dire du demi-dieu comme du grand homme, qu’il n’en est point pour son valet-de-chambre : or tous les lecteurs sont les valets-de-chambre de ces gens-ci.” Charrière’s distrust of the secular theologies that have arisen to replace the Church is strengthened as well by the insistence on great men within these ideologies, as if the women of the Revolution were entirely unimportant. Despite ostensibly overthrowing the Ancien Régime, the revolution has not changed the canon, as it were; the voices of minorities – including that minority which represents half the population, women – are still not included.

According Isabelle Brouard-Arends, “la prise de position intellectuelle, morale, et philosophique de Mme de Charrière à l’égard de Rousseau — qui est sa référence essentielle, explicite ou non — est analogue à celle qu’elle peut avoir sur le plan affectif à l’égard d’un mari, d’un amant, ou d’un père.” Although this interpretation may initially strike us as quite strange — these three men would clearly not evoke the same feelings for Charrière — it does bespeak both the importance of the male discourse and the general critical discomfort that emerges when examining the author’s relationship to

809 Ibid.
810 Ibid.
811 Isabelle Brouard-Arends, “De l’allégeance à la contestation : la représentation de l’intimité dans l’univers romanesque d’Isabelle de Charrière,” in Une Européenne : Isabelle de Charrière en son siècle. Actes du Colloque de Neuchâtel, 11–13 novembre 1993, Doris Jakubec and Jean-Daniel Candaux, eds. (Neuchâtel: Editions Gilles Attinger Haurrive, 1994): 154. This sort of comment, widespread among critics of Charrière, also seems to deny her any intellectual separation from her emotions — much like the theories that Lettres de Mistriss Henley “has” to be inspired by Charrière’s own, supposedly unhappy marriage.
Rousseau. In the aforementioned passage, Rousseau is simultaneously compared to a demigod and a valet, two seemingly antithetical terms. What is in fact highlighted in this double reference is the importance of perspective and relativism in all matters; although a man may appear to be an idol to some, to others — as his valet, witnessing his every mundane activity — he will remain no more than a mere human. This interpretation is clearly borne out by the rest of Lettre IX, which, while debating political matters, also contains the important discussion of tacking and the above-cited declaration, “tous les jours après avoir soutenu une opinion, j’en prens une autre, et je finis par n’en avoir aucune.”

Constance will ultimately even go so far in her wayward strategy as to negate the very validity of tacking itself, which she had proposed: “oui, c’est vrai, allois-je dire ; il ne faut pas se contenter de louvoyer, il faut, à force de voiles et de rames aller droit au but, fût-ce contre les vagues impétueuses de la grosse mer.”

This letter wavers and undulates much like a capsizing ship on the choppy sea, attacking, then retreating; asserting a viewpoint and then negating it; changing topics rapidly, from politics, to personal matters, to architecture; and finally, crumbling apart in a strikingly immediate portrait of decrepitude. The vivid scene with which we are left at the end of this letter delves in the underbrush:

Dans le tronc d’un vieux arbre, l’abeille trouve une ruche ; dans son feuillage, la fauvette fait son nid. L’ame, la vie industriuse et empressée se glisse partout. Regardez l’air, il vit ; la terre, elle respire. Remuez, retournez cette vieille pierre, vous la verrez couverte d’êtres vivans...Mais, ô Ciel ! que de guêpes, de rats, de serpens, sortent de leurs repaires ! Je les ai vus prêts à se jeter sur moi ; j’ai fui, dégoûté autant qu’effrayée.

From an impersonal, relatively placid criticism of modern architecture, Constance progresses to a moment of vivid description, whose symbolic meaning is perhaps not

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812 Charrière, O.C. IX, 109.
813 Ibid., 110.
814 Ibid.
immediately apparent. When read in the larger context of the letter’s portrayal of recent political strife, however, the swarming putrefaction just below the rock’s surface becomes an apt metaphor for the Revolution and all of its excesses. The noble intentions and patriotic speeches of many revolutionaries promised life, but brought only death and decay in their wake. Beneath the smooth exterior of rhetoric — be it Rousseau or Robespierre’s — lies only the same male violence.

I would argue that Lettre IX functions as a tipping point in the narrative of Trois femmes, marking the transition (already in the making) from a character-driven plot using case studies to illustrate a variety of different situations, to a theoretical discussion of politico-pedagogical concerns, in the process highlighting Charrière’s doubts about prescriptive morality and generic stability. It is important to note that it is after challenging the authority of the monological male discourse, embodied by Rousseau, that the narrative begins to unravel at the seams, revealing its very narrativity. In the following letter (X), we suddenly no longer see Constance but Émilie writing to the abbé de la Tour (for the first and only time). More importantly, however, than this simple change in voice, is the fact that Émilie’s pen is almost immediately usurped by Théobald, who barges in to speed up the recounting of the two babies accidentally swapped at birth. And then, instantly after Théobald has told the crux of the story, Émilie once again regains control of the letter, in order to describe the incident in full detail. But that control is again snatched out of her hands, when Théobald concludes the letter with a dry assessment of Joséphine and the Comtesse’s respective behaviors. This back and forth in the narrative voice serves to destabilize an already wavering text and progressively wrest

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815 Additionally, after the metaphor of decay examined above, the letter in fact contains a postscript, dealing with a completely different topic: the size of Paris’ population.
its control from female hands; although Constance begins the following letter (XI), describing her ingenuous experiment with Charles and Charlotte, Théobald interrupts her when it becomes a matter of the Altendorf school and its new master, an atheist Dutchman named Jan Praal. Théobald essentially hijacks the narrative, as he uses the remainder of the letter first to suggest that Constance’s gender swapping experiment will fail, and thus reinforce gender stereotypes, then to insert his “dictionnaire politique, moral et rural.”

After these multiple interruptions, and the movement away from a female narrator, the text becomes generically confused, as the dictionary overtakes the epistolary novel. It is not a garden-variety dictionary, however: Théobald’s entries range from the straightforwardly academic to the decidedly metaphysical to the wittily aphoristic. Under the entry labeled “Nature,” we find Charrière’s final reference to Rousseau in *Trois femmes*. Asserting that everything in society must needs be likewise present in nature, Charrière (or Théobald, the presumed dictionary author) writes: “Si cependant Rousseau et les autres appellans de la société à la nature, ont une idée distincte, si tout de bon ils voudroient en revenir à un état antérieur à nos institutions, je ne vois pas qu’autre chose qu’un déluge universel pût les satisfaire.” This final mention of Rousseau points to Théobald’s eminently practical nature, and a widespread contemporary misunderstanding of Rousseau’s ideas on the state of nature. Charrière illustrates here the young baron’s belief that Rousseau was advocating for a return to nature. In rejecting what he sees as

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816 In her article “Isabelle de Charrière, pédagogue,” Madeleine van Strien-Chardonneau finds the inspiration for the fictional Jan Praal in the mathematician Laurens Praalder. In *Éducation Création Réception*, 55.
817 Additionally, it is worth noting that this letter explains that the children of both Joséphine and the Comtesse are named Théobald, and that they will be raised at Altendorf castle, thus essentially bringing both children under his male control.
818 Charrière, *O.C.* IX, 121.
Rousseau’s utopian flights of fancy, however, Théobald is in fact simultaneously adopting Rousseauian pedagogical strategies at the Altendorf school (e.g., the use of experiments, the creation of books and tools specifically designed for the student, etc.).

Clearly, this irony is not lost on Charrière, who is constantly shifting positions and viewpoints, “assuming fictional identities, treating serious matters in a light tone, never expressing herself unilaterally on any subject, and undermining the claims of her various opponents by pitting them against each other.” In a sense, we have seen Rousseau pitted against himself, albeit obliquely, in *Trois femmes*. In a hostile world, Charrière is adopting various deflections strategies to express her viewpoint without becoming an easy target. Just as in many of the non-fictional texts we previously discussed, Charrière adopts a rhetorical mask in order to speak more directly, in *Trois femmes* she chooses to speak with the voices of many, at times contradicting herself in order to give a fuller and more accurate portrayal of the difficult position of women in late eighteenth-century society. It is only with tentative, wavering, and constantly adaptive maneuvers that women can hope to obtain a modicum of freedom, intellectually if not practically. The choice of the modified epistolary form in the second half of *Trois femmes* is a notable one, for it reveals Charrière’s simultaneous allegiance to eighteenth-century fashion (the epistolary novel being the genre of choice for women writers) and her outsider status: as Melançon suggests, “se jugeant marginalisée, elle arborera épistolairement sa marginalité.” Interrupted, supplemented, inconclusive and marked by ellipses, the ending of *Trois femmes* is far from stating an authoritative opinion; as we

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have seen, Constance’s final thoughts on scruples would tend to contradict much of the novel’s previous notions on moral obligation.

Unpublished until the edition of her Œuvres Complètes, Charrière’s Suite des Trois femmes does not answer any of the questions remaining at the end of the novel. Its narrative structure becomes increasingly complex, embedding stories within stories. What begins as the simple continuation of Émilie, Joséphine, and Constance’s stories turns into an exotic tale of murder and deception. Constance recounts the full story behind her husband’s illegal fortune in the islands, and within this digression includes the even longer tragic account of her uncle’s black slave, Bianca. The narrative increasingly moves away from its central heroines and devolves into novelistic intrigue. It certainly offers little in the way of resolution regarding Charrière’s position on the education of women; the previously virtuous slave Bianca becomes mad with jealousy and murders her master/lover, and Émilie is still separated from her husband, stuck in the limbo of political exile, neither one of their (very different) educations appearing to have done much good.821 A lengthy criticism of novels emerges as the only real pedagogical moment in the Suite; in this passage, it is described that Constance and Émilie avoid reading novels, for “quelque éloge qu’on puisse faire ils gatent l’esprit et surtout celui des femmes.”822 However, it is important to note that the novel has switched back to the abbé de la Tour and with him, a more conventional first-person narrative. The abbé’s discussion of the exemplarity of novels is just as confusing and ambivalent as Constance’s musings in Trois femmes, however. Initially criticizing novels for having an

821 Jenene Allison sees Bianca as the “chilling result” of extreme gender neutrality. Revealing Differences, 105. While I would maybe not go so far as to find Bianca gender-neutral, she does evidently break from the role that is expected of her from society, with disastrous consequences. As such, she can clearly be seen as another example of a minority voice.
822 Charrière, O.C. IX, 134.
“ideal” morality that cannot be applied to anything in real life, the abbé then is afraid that too many (women) readers “croit être le Heros ou l’Heroine et alors on fait des aveux comme la Princesse de Cleves, on se tue comme Werther.”823 Novels have both too much power and not enough — the abbé is shocked and possibly even disgusted that “au sortir de la lecture de Clarisse ou de Zaïde, de Werther ou du Comte de Cominge,” his acquaintances, allegedly deeply moved, are able to completely shift gears and “vivre en un mot la vie vulgaire et commune sans distraction, sans exaltations, sans vains scrupules.”824

Fittingly enough, Rousseau creeps into this discussion, once again in an ambiguous manner. The abbé laments that “vous vous etes trompé, Jean Jaques. Il y a des gens qui se croient obligés d’etre tout ce qu’ils admirent mais ils sont en petit nombre et trop souvent ils n’en valent pas mieux soit pour eux, soit pour les autres.”825 Speaking specifically of the stage, the abbé thus counters Rousseau’s assertion of theatre’s depravity from the Lettre à d’Alembert sur les spectacles, in fact arguing that fictional representations have little, if any, effect on their spectators. What conception of writing could Charrière have, if she ascribes to such a limited view of its potency? At this point in the text, we find a lengthy “note de l’éditeur,” in which Charrière, once again disguised, provides a sort of ars poetica for her readers. In this note, Charrière uses the well-known trope of the intervening editor to discuss the moral implications of the text. The main argument she furnishes is that moral lessons can only be “utiles” if they are above all realistic and credible. “Enfin pour que la leçon que vous voudrés donner soit peremptoire et qu’on ne puisse pas s’y soustraire il faut la pressante logique d’un

823 Ibid.
824 Ibid.
825 Ibid.
enchainement nécessaire de causes et d’effets.”\textsuperscript{826} This insistence on “vraisemblance” stems from a long and deep-rooted tradition in French literature. As such, it is nothing new and not very surprising. What is surprising, however, is its placement in the \textit{Suite}, vastly more convoluted and exotic than its predecessor \textit{Trois femmes}. It appears as though Charrière is again supporting two different viewpoints, fluidly altering her position when need be.

The ultimate sentiment of the editor’s note, however, appears to be one of resignation. What pedagogical effect can we expect from a fable, Charrière wonders, if history has taught us so little with its “severes et irrècusables leçons”?\textsuperscript{827} Charrière’s skepticism, observed by many critics, is here quite visible, as though she doubted her own narrative intentions. Additionally, this passage contains one of the few references to Laclos in Charrière’s oeuvre. Madame de Merteuil is not an effective pedagogical counter-example, as “une femme qui aura ses penchants pourra dire, donnés moi ses plaisirs, donnés moi le même empire sur tous ceux sur lesquels je voudrai regner, je saurai bien ne pas écrire de si imprudentes lettres et je ne prendrai pas la petite vèrole que j’ai déjà eue.”\textsuperscript{828} The rich irony contained within this quotation echoes the ambiguous tone of Laclos’ original ending, while suggesting that Merteuil’s downfall is not inevitable enough to function as a cautionary tale, according to the narrative laws set out by Charrière. Are \textit{Trois femmes} and its \textit{Suite}? This is the question posed by Charrière’s editorial digression.

Ultimately, however, the inconclusiveness of \textit{Trois femmes} combined with the literally unfinished (and posthumously published) \textit{Suite} provides no solid answers

\textsuperscript{826} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{827} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{828} Ibid.
concerning the fates of their three heroines. Chabut believes that the works are left “inachevées” in order to reflect the refusal of a closed system.\(^{829}\) The distrust of abstract systems and universalism is of course one component of Charrière’s unwillingness to provide methodical solutions for a female pedagogy in her works. As I have shown thorough this chapter, however, I believe that another factor is also at play here: Charrière’s constant obliqueness, a result of her identification with minority voices rather than the authoritative Parisian male discourse. In Valérie Cossy’s words, Charrière forces us to “revoir les Lumières,” especially regarding universalism and the role played by said minority voices, and the question of “national” literature.\(^{830}\)

Aside from the vagrancies of history, and the often casual disregard for preserving women’s writing that occurred in the past, it is no wonder that so many of Charrière’s texts were attributed to other writers;\(^ {831}\) she is constantly flirting with otherness. This technique has often been overlooked, or reductively analyzed, prompting banal statements like Henri Coulet’s observation that “les idées qu’on trouve dans ses écrits ne sont pas toujours les siennes [Charrière].”\(^ {832}\) Charrière’s heavy reliance on disguise is not a mere trope, or a result of confused or unfinished texts; it is an integral part of her approach to the world, and a subversive technique that she wishes to teach to women. Although, practically speaking, Charrière wants to see changes in women’s education, she is also skeptical of the possibilities, not simply because of she is wary of universal solutions, but also because


\(^{830}\) Valérie Cossy, introduction to Éducation Création Réception, 2.

\(^{831}\) For example, her Courte réplique discussed above was attributed for a long time to Germaine de Staël. O.C. VIII, 163.

\(^{832}\) Henri Coulet, “Isabelle de Charrière, femme des Lumières ?,” in Une Européenne, 11.
she rejects the authoritarianism at the heart of all pedagogy – as Bérenguier concisely puts it, “Isabelle de Charrière constate mais ne prescrit pas.”

VI. Charming Illiteracy: *Sainte Anne*

The greatest masquerade of all, perhaps, can be found in Charrière’s *Sainte Anne* (1799), a short novel which begins with these telling words: “Elle ne sait pas lire! Figurez-vous qu’elle ne sait pas lire!” This shocking revelation relates to Babet d’Estival, the novel’s unlikely heroine. Skilled in botany, animal husbandry, and other practical matters, the charming but rough-hewn Babet is a far cry from plucky Constance or aristocratic Émilie. For the critic, *Sainte Anne* may at first appear to be a troublesome text, contradicting all of Charrière’s previous efforts to enter into the pedagogical debate via the literary form. What appears as a justification for illiteracy, however, is in fact another one of Charrière’s oblique strategies for women to maneuver within the male power structure. By offering yet another choice, Charrière is continuing her criticism of universal, one-size-fits-all approaches to education. This case study takes place after the Revolution, amid darker times even those of the exiles at Altendorf. Charrière must thus resort to even greater subterfuge and disguise in order to express her feminist viewpoints.

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835 Her illiteracy is even more striking when we consider the novel’s title. As Letzter explains in her article “Isabelle de Charrière’s *Sainte Anne*, or a Woman’s Wayward Question for Knowledge,” *Sainte Anne*, very popular in Brittany, is widely regarded as the patron saint not only of matrimonial bliss, but also of female education – she is quite often depicted book in hand, teaching the Virgin Mary to read. “Isabelle de Charrière’s *Sainte Anne*, or a Woman’s Wayward Quest for Knowledge,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 26 (1998): 209–230.
The novel’s Sainte Anne, a nobleman in love with Babet, represents the voice of male discourse. From the beginning, he insists that he cares not one whit that Babet is illiterate: “j’ai déjà jeté les yeux sur tout ce qu’il y a ici de livres épars, et je pense qu’il eût autant valu ne les savoir pas lire,” he responds to his parents. Later on, in a heated discussion with his intellectually curious cousin Mlle de Kerber, he reveals that he doesn’t support universal education or even literacy. At first arguing that “il ne s’agit que d’être ce qu’on peut être de mieux pour soi et les autres. N’importe alors d’où cela nous est venu est si c’est de lire ou de réfléchir, de lire ou de voir et d’entendre,” Sainte Anne then goes on to denounce the progressive pedagogical changes of the century: “ma cousine, je ne suis point fâché de voir s’anéantir les anciennes écoles et les nouvelles ne s’établir point. Que la science soit de difficile accès ! Que le talent la viole pour ainsi dire !”

We already saw this same idea intimated in Trois femmes, when Constance mused to herself that “s’il est douteux que l’instruction convienne aux classes laborieuses de la société, il me paraît bien certain qu’elle est nécessaire à la classe oisive.” In this roundabout statement, we once again see Charrière uncomfortably skirting the question of education for all. Sainte Anne, however, appears to be the most vehemently anti-intellectual of all her novels – or is it? In the aforementioned article, Letzter suggests that the various novels in the “abbé de la Tour” series (Trois femmes, Honorine d’Userche, Sainte Anne, Les Ruines d’Yedburg) are so many “thought experiments” which evaluate “the appropriateness of Rousseau’s position” on the consequences of knowledge and education for different people. In this particular case, we need to take historical

836 Charrière, Sainte Anne, 27–8.
837 Ibid., 48; 49.
838 Charrière, O.C. IX, 105.
839 Letzter, “Woman’s Wayward Quest,” 211.
circumstances into question. The brief flourishing of equalizing rights for women, brought about by the Revolution, would in fact be almost completely overturned by 1804, the Napoleonic code rendering women unfit for legal autonomy and eliminating revolutionary rights such as divorce and the inheritance of property. There was simultaneously a sharp decline in novels published by women during the Revolution — during 1789–95, only 69 out of 861 novels were written by women. Compared to the democratic optimism and egalitarian zeal of her earlier works like Le Noble, the post-revolutionary Sainte Anne is thus appropriately disillusioned, especially about the value of education for women trapped in such a repressive society. As Yvette Went-Daoust concisely writes in her introduction to Sainte Anne, for Charrière, “l’héritage de la Révolution n’offre...rien de viable.”

Amid the smoldering ashes of the Revolution, Charrière hence attempts once again to find and portray a middle road for women, a delicate balance to strike between ignorance and knowledge. With the characters of the eponymous Sainte Anne and Babet, Charrière at first appears to propose a radically anti-feminist non-pedagogy; the two supporting characters of Mlles de Kerber and Rhedon, however, provide us with another perspective. Unlike Babet, who possesses “un mélange de science et de simplicité fort extraordinaire,” the two young aristocratic ladies present a more educated façade. The orphaned Mlle de Rhedon is charming, delicate and seeks to overcome her personal

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840 Ibid., 210.
841 Letzter, Intellectual Tacking, 56. Carla Hesse somewhat nuances this decline. Relying upon meticulous bibliography work, she finds that 96 novels by French women writers are published between 1789–1800 (this time period is, however, extended by five years from Letzter’s). Although she argues, contrary to popular belief, that women actually published more during Revolutionary years, this increase appears to be largely political pamphlets and other non-fictional texts. (She finds that for 78 French women in print during 1777–1788, there were 329 in the years 1789–1800). Carla Alison Hesse, The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), 39; 53.
842 Went-Daoust, introduction to Sainte Anne, 16.
tragedies by having recourse to books, and even Sainte Anne acknowledges that “votre enfance a été assaillie par l’infortune...malheur à qui désormais vous affligerait volontairement.” Likewise, Mlle de Kerber is candid and bright, and her cousin Sainte Anne admits that if she owes even the least of her qualities to books, “je me réconcilie avec eux et même je leur rends très humblement hommage.” Both women are rich, well brought up, and eligible for marriage, yet ultimately will have the decency to step aside and provide a happy ending for all involved, just as Sainte Anne’s friend Tonquedec, previously in love with Babet himself, will graciously switch his affections to Mlle de Rhedon. Although they are ostensibly supporting characters, these two young women nevertheless illustrate viable alternatives for women, as they are loved and respected, with bright futures ahead of them. Thus, Charrière once again presents multiple viewpoints on the same issue, allowing the reader to choose for him/herself. Letzter observes that unfortunately, Charrière’s contemporary readers were often “bitterly disappointed” and missed this point. She argues that Charrière was vacillating very carefully between the Babet and Kerber models of education, fighting against the dominant and fiercely misogynist “winds” of the post-Revolutionary era, at the risk of being silenced if she spoke too plainly.

And indeed, Charrière would have had good reason to worry: women’s speech was being prohibited more and more strictly in the post-Revolutionary period. Dorinda Outram argues that female virtue and public (political) speech were in fact incompatible

842 Charrière, Sainte Anne, 46.
844 Ibid., 48.
846 Letzter, “Woman’s Wayward Quest,” 212.
in late eighteenth-century France. Women who dared to speak out, such as Marie-Jeanne Roland and Olympe de Gouges, often met with unhappy ends. It appears, therefore, that Babet is a decoy heroine, a second-best option if all else fails. Went-Daoust suggests that Charrière’s ideas in Sainte Anne are ultimately borne out of resignation: “Au bout du compte c’est, sans doute, faute d’avoir pu ébranler les structures mêmes de l’institution matrimoniale, qu’elle prescrit aux femmes ces accommodements.” Accepting the standard marriage structure of her time, Charrière cannot imagine a happy outcome for an (overly) educated woman; Babet suggests that perhaps ignorance is bliss, in a situation where education can come to no good end for women. Uneducated, married off without her own consent by her mother, Babet is perhaps an endearing heroine, but by no means an independent woman, even if she obtains a conventionally happy ending.

However, her one act of rebellion is to ask to be taught how to read by Sainte Anne: “Voulez-vous l’hiver prochain m’enseigner à lire,” she asks. Her lessons will only take place in the winter, as “jusqu’à l’hiver je me passerai bien de lire ; j’aime mieux me promener pendant la belle saison et m’occuper en automne de la récolte des fruits, qui cette année sera abondante, à ce que j’espère.” At the end of the novel, the manipulative Môme de Sainte Anne, however, advises her son against such instruction, saying that “ignorante, elle vous aime et vous plaît, ne la rendez pas savante ; tout ce qui change ce qu’on aime le gâte.” Quoting Molière, Môme de Sainte Anne says that “le

848 Went-Daoust, introduction to Sainte Anne, 23.
849 Charrière, Sainte Anne, 34.
850 Ibid.
851 Ibid., 111.
mari doit dans les bonnes coutumes / écrire tout ce qui s’écrit chez lui.” The “haunting spectre” of Molière’s “femmes savantes” was indeed prevalent throughout the eighteenth-century, and Charrière’s character adopts a thoroughly conventional voice here. We are left wondering if, in fact, Babet will be granted her one “rebellious” demand.

Ultimately, Went-Daoust argues that Charrière’s thesis in this novel is that the acquisition of knowledge “doit obéir aux goûts et aux talens naturels de chacun.” She relies heavily on the notion of “convenance,” the agreement of one’s knowledge with one’s role in society; thus, for instance, Saint Anne is not educated in the same manner as Charrière’s nephew Willem-René, destined to be a political leader. Likewise, if Babet learns to read, it will be because she wants to, not because her education has been forced upon her. This sort of intellectual communism — to each according to his natural talents and position in society — is of course quite in line with the pedagogical reforms proposed by Théobald in Trois femmes. The two tenets of Charrière’s pedagogical philosophy that we can discern, even between texts as wildly different as Sainte Anne and Trois femmes, are thus the “appropriateness” of education for a given individual, and the salutary difficulty imposed on those who would become scholars. In a letter to her nephew Willem-René, Charrière clearly exposes this distrust of dilettantism. Commenting on the different educational paths available to women, she explains: “l’une

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852 Ibid., 112.
854 Went-Daoust, introduction to Sainte Anne, 18.
855 Ibid., 20.
856 Or as Letzter states: “[Charrière’s] ideal of education went counter to the modern ideal of democratizing education through pedagogical simplification.” Intellectual Tacking, 2.
VII. Conclusion

In *Trois femmes*, the devoted, albeit morally wayward Joséphine says to her mistress: “chacune a une vertu à sa manière : la mienne est de tout faire pour vous.” This is, perhaps inadvertently, an apt synthesis of Charrière’s various opinions on education and morality scattered throughout her essays dealing with Rousseau, her personal correspondence, and her pedagogically-centered novels. In her substantial volume *Trois femmes : Le monde de Madame de Charrière*, Alix Deguise suggests that Charrière’s ambivalence towards the possibility of better education for women is inherently borne out of the fact that, “pour elle, la femme devait en général s’incliner devant les règles de la société sous peine de profonde malheur.” And in fact, this attitude is one of resignation: “Mme de Charrière ne s’insurge pas contre cet état des choses, elle le constate.” I believe that this conclusion is rather hasty, and perhaps does not take into account Charrière’s innovative and often oblique narrative techniques. Although it may very often seem that Charrière lacks revolutionary fervor or radical solutions for female education and, more widely, the role of women in society, I nevertheless maintain that she is not simply asserting the status quo, resigned to the inferior and submissive role women in her world.

857 Charrière, O.C. V, 368.
858 Charrière, O.C. IX, 72.
In fact, Charrière’s solution to her dissatisfaction with the current position of women is one of combination, juxtaposition, contradiction, and *bricolage*. Drawing on her doubly eccentric status as an emigrant woman, Charrière then uses a diverse variety of narrative styles and genres to illustrate the multiplicity of viewpoints encountered in eighteenth-century society, using her writing as a forum for debate rather than prescriptive answers. Charrière presents the social, civilized dialogue that she might have welcomed in daily life — what Giulia Pacini has termed a “realistic cacophony.” Long before Bakhtin’s analysis of heteroglossia and the polyphonic novel, we see Charrière already experimenting with different voices and competing ideas to represent the diversity of minority perspectives. The eighteenth-century novel, at the time still widely seen by critics as a less noble and often feminine genre, was Charrière’s preferred vehicle for social, political, and pedagogical analysis precisely because it allowed her to mask her possibly provocative ideas under a polyphonic sheen. Perhaps unable — or unwilling — to express herself as directly as male writers, Charrière thus relied on more ambiguous modes of narration and expression.

The French Revolution would, as we have seen, curtail women’s rights in the public sphere even further. Simultaneously, however, the Revolution, albeit briefly, created the possibility for warring opinions and clashing voices, opening up the floodgates, albeit briefly, to dialogism. Delon argues that “la Révolution a définitivement fait entrer la France dans l’Histoire, c’est-à-dire dans une devenir incessant. De même,

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861 Pacini, “How to be Sociable,” 268.
863 Letzter also suggests that writing for a primarily German public was one of Charrière’s deflection strategies. Many of her works were in fact first written in German, to later be translated into French. As Charrière identified with the French language, however, this point would need to be further examined in order to support Letzter’s interesting claim.
l’Écriture sera désormais un processus indéfini, un ressassement qui sans prétendre atteindre la vérité, tente du moins de dire la multiplicité des points de vue.”

This statement could similarly have been written about Charrière, who takes on all the major issues of her century without adopting the systematic approach of many of her male contemporaries. By successively donning the disguise of others in her writings, Charrière in fact reveals to us the multiplicity of voices at the center of every novel and every individual. And this constant proliferation of speech, even if it sometimes appears contradictory, is perhaps the point in and of itself, as it maintains a female presence in contemporary dialogue. As Goldsmith and Goodman write, “through publication, Charrière suggested, women are able to get the last word, to capture the ground of discourse on which female reputation rests.”

In pushing the boundaries of the novel, both formally and thematically, Charrière ultimately transcends her century and provides a thoroughly modern analysis of the position of women to today’s readers.

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CONCLUSION: From polyphony to monologue and back

In this dissertation, I have shown how the attempts to discuss women’s education within the eighteenth-century French epistolary novel produced textual instability, exemplified in the form of open or unfinished works, narrative supplements, ambiguous paratexts, and contradictory positions on the role of women in society. The ambivalent dichotomy established by Rousseau’s *Émile* and *Julie* was echoed by the works of Laclos, Sade, and Charrière. The strategies used by all four authors ultimately showed the problematic nature of attempting to reform female education in a society that still so routinely relegated women to the domestic sphere. Responding as critical readers of Rousseau, rather than illustrating practical reforms for young women’s pedagogy Laclos and Sade sought instead to highlight the potential for parody and contradiction at the heart of Enlightenment ideas. Largely writing after 1789, Charrière, on the other hand, used narrative experimentation to advocate for greater female freedom while ostensibly respecting the rules of male authority.

In December of 1802, just a few short — but immensely tumultuous — years after Charrière’s *Trois Femmes*, Germaine de Staël’s *Delphine* is published. It elicits controversial reviews, and is ultimately banned in Paris the following year. Exiled by Napoléon for writing *Delphine*, Staël nevertheless insists in the preface that she had attempted to eliminate all political reflections from her epistolary novel. And in fact, to the modern reader *Delphine* seems a fairly innocuous, flowery novel, far from Sade’s revolutionary prose or Laclos’ biting social commentary. Perhaps its most notable feature is the absence of any representation of female happiness and success. The epigraph which introduces the novel, procured from the *Mélanges de Madame Necker,*
announces the radically different roles that men and women must play in society: “un homme doit savoir braver l’opinion, une femme s’y soumettre.” The capital importance of public opinion for women is illustrated throughout the novel. Ironically enough, it is Delphine’s relatively in-depth and progressive education which makes her rebellious, independent, and overly self-reliant. Confident in her chaste love for Léonce, she is unwilling to submit to the yoke of public opinion, and this is ultimately her downfall.

But Delphine is not the only woman to meet an unhappy end in the novel. Her close friend Thérèse is explicitly described as the victim of a failed education that relied on a precarious mixture of religion, superstitions, and novels. Thérèse, confined within a loveless marriage, eventually becomes an adulteress; the discovery of her infidelity prompts a series of catastrophic events, including her husband’s death, and her flight into a convent — leaving behind both her grief-stricken lover and young daughter. Likewise, Madame de Vernon, an older woman who will thwart Delphine’s amorous expectations by having her daughter Mathilde marry the former’s true love, Léonce, is the casualty of neglected and emotionless education. Her lengthy deathbed confession resembles Merteuil’s Lettre 81 in that it describes her cold and calculating education of her daughter: a project which leads both women to the grave alone and unloved.

The women of Delphine are represented not only as the victims of insufficient or defective schooling; they are simultaneously shown to be the perpetuators of such injustice, as they are (or believe themselves to be) incapable of educating their own children. Sophie de Vernon — perhaps an allusion to Rousseau’s ill-fated heroine? — feels incapable of giving Mathilde a fulfilling education, pushing her daughter instead towards pious ignorance as a bulwark against dangerous independent thought. Moreover,
the unfaithful Thérèse believes that her immoral behavior bars her from instructing her daughter Isore. The young girl is then in turn entrusted to Delphine, who likewise balks at the pedagogical responsibility: “puis-je accepter un tel dépôt ? quel exemple Isore aura-t-elle sous les yeux ? comment pourrai-je la convaincre de mon innocence, lorsque je dois sur-tout lui conseiller de ne pas imiter ma conduite ?”

Ultimately, Isore is abandoned, as her new guardian Delphine willingly embraces death at the close of the novel. Essentially an orphan, Isore will have only one pedagogical option: the convent.

It is clear from Staël’s novel that an independent, educated and happy woman is a near impossibility in her society, which seeks to contain women by means of public opinion. Despite the polemical arguments that resulted from the novel’s publication, Staël was quick to point out that her affection for Delphine did not translate into approval: Delphine is “un modèle à éviter et non un modèle à suivre.” Much like Merteuil and Julie, therefore, Delphine is more a lamentation on the current condition of women than a viable solution.

*Delphine* shares more than just a thematic connection with the novels of Rousseau, Laclos, Sade, and Charrière; in addition, its discussion of female education within an epistolary frame creates many familiar narrative effects. Like many of the texts I have analyzed in this dissertation, *Delphine* contains problematic paratexts, a critical reflection on the nature of the epistolary novel, and a fragmentary and inconclusive ending. The fifth section of part two, for instance, is composed of emotional fragments written during Delphine’s travels, and gives an impression of confusion and inconclusiveness. Similarly, reacting to the public’s frustration with the novel’s tragic ending, Staël, *Delphine*, 994.

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867 Staël, *Delphine*, 994.
ending — Léonce is executed for a crime he did not commit, and Delphine consequently commits suicide — Germaine de Staël decided to write a “deuxième dénouement” and a painstaking explanation of her choices in both endings. In the second ending, Delphine dies of a broken heart after realizing that she has condemned Léonce in the eyes of society, and he survives her only briefly in order to go get himself killed in the Vendée. This destabilizing double ending, followed by “quelques réflexions sur le but moral de Delphine,” are directly prompted by the novel’s readers who rejected Delphine’s suicide — and reveal Staël’s submission to public opinion where, on the contrary, her protagonist had rebelled. The comments on the novel’s morality likewise painstakingly walk the reader through the ambiguities and difficulties of Delphine, illustrating Staël’s wary attempts to justify herself in the eyes of public opinion.

In her preface, Staël is similarly direct, addressing the notion of authenticity and the moral role of the novel. Unlike many other epistolary novels that preceded it, Delphine never claims to be anything but a novel — in fact it stresses the idea that fiction can impart morality, perhaps even better than fleeting and personal life experiences. And yet the question of female destinies seems to problematize the novel, creating a double ending and an explanatory postface intended to clarify key points for the reader. It appears thus that Staël was nervous about the novel’s morality being entirely clear to its contemporary readers.

Mme de Staël’s epistolary Delphine therefore shares a number of formal features with the novels we have looked at so far. Her experience in exile moreover strengthens thematic connections with Charrière in particular: emigration, national prejudices, and the difficulties of women in post-Revolutionary society. Charrière was in fact a supporter of
the book, writing to her correspondent Chambrier d’Oleyres that the banning of the book was an “odious” and “unfounded” decision. But rather than offering tentative solutions like *Trois femmes* or *Sainte Anne*, Staël’s *Delphine* is an epigone of the epistolary genre, a pessimistic anti-model that illustrates the dangers facing women but yields no hope.

If the years between 1760 and 1780 represent the golden age of the epistolary novel in France, the publication of Laclos’ *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is often cited as its apogee, the crowning summit of epistolarity. Many critics argue that after this masterpiece, the genre as a whole suffers and declines, dying a relatively quick death in the first half of the nineteenth century. But what, in fact, happened to the immensely popular epistolary novel of the Enlightenment? Although a thorough answer to this question is beyond the scope of my dissertation, I believe that addressing the end of the fruitful collaboration between epistolarity and pedagogy is necessary. The aftermath of the French Revolution, with its return to patriarchal power structures and the imposition of repressive Napoleonic Code, might have served to disenfranchise women writers who had in the past privileged the letter novel. The growing consolidation of the power of the bourgeoisie, as well as the drive towards nation building in the nineteenth century in Europe might likewise have impacted epistolary commerce and its literary symbolism, especially after the heightened class awareness brought about by the Napoleonic wars. Urbanization and technology brought about great changes in the 1800s, in part breaking down the mechanisms of social rapport, of “correspondence” in a broader sense.

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Moreover, the rise of commercial printing to some extent encroached on the territory of private letter writing.

As Delphine illustrates, epistolary novels were still written in the years following the Revolution. By and large, however, the personal diary or journal increasingly replaces the letter exchange in nineteenth-century literature; if the epistolary form survives, it is most often an isolated device, included within a larger narrative. The tumultuous end of the Enlightenment saw a breakdown of the hierarchical literary forms of Classicism; with the Directory’s reassertion of power, however, Napoléon becomes the archetype of the great Romantic hero. From the vociferous polyphony of Les Liaisons dangereuses, we come to Chateaubriand’s René (1802), contemporary with Delphine but already leaving behind the multiple viewpoints offered by epistolarity, and Senancour’s Obermann (1804), which, like many later nineteenth-century letter novels, is epistolary only in a purely superficial sense.

The letter thus occupied a specific place in eighteenth-century society and literature, a site of ontological instability itself that allowed for the questioning of women’s education. As Elizabeth Cook writes, “eighteenth-century epistolary narratives do not merely depict or give readers access to individuals’ ‘private lives’; they are also part of the construction of a new kind of subjectivity, a new way of being a self that appears along with and as a product of the techniques and media of representation made available by print culture. Over time, this new subjectivity, introduced in large part by

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such proto- or quasi-novelistic forms of print culture as memoirs and letter-novels, became sufficiently familiar that it could be dissociated from these specific literary forms. The particular conjugation of epistolarity, education, and gender that flourished in Enlightenment France was never to be duplicated in quite the same way.

And what of women’s education? After the enthusiastic and egalitarian clamor of the Enlightenment, the nineteenth century’s return to Rousseauian conceptions of female domesticity appears as a great setback in regard to gender equality. The Napoleonic Code, as well as the alliance between the Catholic Church and the Restoration (1815–1830) quickly eroded the buoyant optimism women had glimpsed at during the Revolutionary period; for example, divorce was once again abolished in 1816. Both church and state sought to keep women in the domestic sphere, as vigilant mothers and submissive wives. Only in 1867, with the Duruy law, are any efforts explicitly focused on female educational reform (any village with more than 500 inhabitants was henceforward required to have a girls’ grammar school).

On the literary stage, the well-worn connection between suggestions for reforming female education and the epistolary form was increasingly passed over for other forms of communication and the dissemination of information. The feminists of the late nineteenth century did not write epistolary novels — they held conferences, wrote newspaper articles, formed associations. With these means of reaching the public, Maria Deraismes, founder of the Association pour le droit des femmes in 1870 demanded, among many other social and civil rights, women’s free access to high schools. In a way, the great achievements of twentieth-century feminists — the right to vote, in 1944, the constitutional equality of men and women in 1946, the legalization of birth control in

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1967 — could be traced back to the tentative demands for better female education, couched in epistolarity, in the great letter novels of the eighteenth century.

But the epistolary novel did not simply vanish with the advent of Romanticism and the third-person novel. Much like the movements of an accordion, this narrative contraction from polyphony to monologue would in turn expand with the breadth of realism, illustrated in the sprawling saga of La comédie humaine (1799–1850) and Les misérables (1862). And so on and so forth: as the social frescos of Martin du Gard and Anatole France fell out of favor mid-twentieth century, the first person narrative associated with the great novels of modernism became once again a prevalent form of expression. In the end, we come to realize that despite never regaining its eighteenth-century level of success, the epistolary novel has never truly disappeared. Throughout the twentieth century, the familiar form sporadically reappears, a thread weaving itself into the modern fabric — Malraux’s La tentation de l’Occident (1926), Montherlant’s Les jeunes filles (1936), Marc Gendron’s Rousseauian Louise, ou la nouvelle Julie (1970)872, Michel Butor’s Illustrations III (1973)...the list goes on. Even today, as the plausibility of an epistolary correspondence wanes, we see that another sub-genre has emerged, replacing the traditional missive with emails and texts messages; see, for instance, Luc Brunet’s 2008 Mailbox. The letter, which we analysed as a privileged space for the discussion of women’s education, has subsequently proven to be a versatile form for many debates. Constantly hinging on the division between public and private, the self and the other, epistolarity is an enduring and quintessential form of communication, perhaps because as Derrida writes in his own fragmentary letter novel

872 It is interesting to note that Louise, ou la nouvelle Julie adopts the same student-teacher structure as Héloïse and Abélard’s letters and Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse, but this time in a lesbian relationship.
Envois, “la lettre, l’épître... n’est pas un genre mais tous les genres, la littérature même.”\footnote{873} Moreover, this mediation of private and public means the epistolary form is particularly suited for moments of great change in cultural value. As Cook maintains in her *Epistolary Bodies*, “recent studies of post-Enlightenment letter-narratives have made it clear that at different historical moments of cultural transformation and political pressure, when existing categories of public and private are being redefined along with the bodies that inhabit these spaces, the letter-form returns to the foreground of the cultural imagination.”\footnote{874} If strict gender norms and pedagogical traditions were brutally reinstated and redefined on these body/subjects after the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon, perhaps this could explain, at least partially, the demise of the epistolary novel. Consequently, the epistolary novel is thus liable to reemerge every time the questions of gender and sex-specific roles in society and education are raised once again.

\footnote{874} Cook, *Epistolary Bodies*, 179.
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