Joan Hinde Stewart

The Novelists and Their Fictions

The eighteenth century was as much inclined as our own to deliberate upon women’s roles, their merits and shortcomings, and the traits distinguishing them (for better or for worse) from men. Specifically, the issue of women’s writing was much debated. Curious and pertinent assessments of woman’s literary talents can be culled from scores of eighteenth-century tracts on morality and society as well as literature. Mme de Lambert takes as point of departure for her Réflexions nouvelles sur les femmes (1727) the observation that some fine “novels by ladies,” which had recently begun appearing, were ridiculed for no better reason than their female authorship; literary pretensions, she claims, are considered admissible in men but unpardonable in women. ¹ Two decades later, in an anti-feminist broadside entitled L’Année merveilleuse ou les hommes-femmes, the abbé Coyer—demonstrating both misogyny and misology—pronounced women all flummery and trumpery, all idle talk and gratuitous wit, and hinted in passing that they were no better fit for serious writing than for serious reading.² And in 1771, Antoine Thomas, a noted panegyrist of women, nevertheless remarked on the dearth of good contemporary female writers, attributing it in part to women’s timidity and to a certain intellectual flightiness; as far as Thomas was concerned, women were characterized by sensitivity and insight but not creative power. He footnotes his observations: “This is not to say that in this century there are not women who have written and who still write with distinction; they are known: but their number diminishes every day, and there are infinitely fewer than there were during the renaissance of letters or even under Louis XIV.”³ Thomas’s perceptions notwithstanding, the number of successful women writers had increased markedly as the century advanced. While their inclinations and capacities were endlessly weighed, women continued to write, and they especially wrote novels.⁴

Never separate from the cultural and aesthetic domain, the socio-economic significance of women’s work is nonetheless an especially vital factor in the writing of the eighteenth century. This was, of course, a period when very few professions were open to women. They could become seamstresses, like countless numbers of their
impoverished and desperate heroines, or ladies' companions, like Mlle de Lespinasse for a time; but seamstress and companion forfeited both autonomy and a certain amount of dignity. Some won distinction on the stage, like Mme Riccoboni as a young wife, but neither Church nor society considered acting respectable. On the other hand, the financial attraction of the literary profession and the independence it allowed must have been significant inducements, especially when a certain number of commentators were encouraging women precisely to think that their talents peculiarly suited them to novel writing. Female writers of the era constitute one of the earliest significant groups of women to earn an independent living by the exercise of their personal faculties in a domain that led to wide recognition. Mme de Gomez, Mme de Graffigny, Mme Riccoboni, Mme Le Prince de Beaumont, Mme de Montolieu, and numerous others were not women of leisure, writing to while away idle hours; they were independent, middle-aged (and often middle-class) women who wrote to sell.

It was not always easy. Correspondences testify to the obstacles they encountered in bucking the literary establishment and tight-fisted publishers. Mme de Graffigny has documented not only the years of hard labor that went into writing her best-selling novel but also the need of a male agent to represent her interests in the publishing world. Mme Riccoboni continually had difficulties in squeezing payment out of her English publisher, and her career was plagued with the appearance of pirated editions of her works. The Swiss writer Mme de Montolieu, who published her first novel in 1786 and continued writing through the first three decades of the nineteenth century, had chronic trouble getting compensation for tales she placed in the Mercure de France and never learned to demand her due with self-assurance and unfeminine assertiveness. "The profession of writer, of translator," she commented, "does not suit a woman far from Paris and who has no one there to look after her interests!" Similar complaints are, of course, voiced by men; but because of woman's status as a social and economic inferior, her professional problems were apparently more acute.

Women's talents, tenacity, and commercial successes nonetheless help define the eighteenth-century French novel. Jean Larnac has remarked that during this period the novel was a "fief of women"; there may be no towering eighteenth-century figure comparable to Mme de Staël in the early years of the nineteenth, but a veritable "army of women novelists" was publishing fiction and achieving extensive renown. Mme de Graffigny's Lettres d'une Péruvienne (1747), for example, was phenomenally popular; and in a period of just three years, Mme Riccoboni's first three novels—Lettres de mistress Fanni Bullerd (1757), Histoire de M. le marquis de Cressy (1758) and Lettres de milady Juliette

Catesby (1759)—catapulted her from relative obscurity to fame. By the century’s end, Lettres de milady Juliette Catesby alone had appeared in Swedish, Danish, Russian and English, while History of Lady Julia Mandeville, by the English writer Mrs. Brooke, was signed “by the translator of Lady Catesby’s Letters.” A 1765 heroine of Mme Riccoboni, Ernestine, enjoyed such popularity that Marie-Antoinette had a young companion for her daughter rechristened Ernestine. The question of how many of the century’s numerous anonymous novels were also in fact written by women will never be resolved, but it is doubtless a considerable number.

Recognition of the sheer numbers of women writing during a period uniquely important to the novel’s establishment implies recognition, even if only tacit, of the large measure of female responsibility for making the novel the typical art form of the modern West. Yet the great majority of these novels have not been reissued in well over a century and are, therefore, to be found only in private collections and major research libraries. Partly as a result of this, there is exceedingly little available in the way of sustained critical analysis, except for isolated allusions and monographs on a few of the best known. Even in a vast and erudite tome on the eighteenth-century novel by Pierre Fauchery, we find numerous passing references to the novels of, for example, Mme Le Prince de Beaumont, who was a prolific feminist writer; but we are hard put to locate more than two successive sentences about her work. Like Mme Le Prince de Beaumont, women novelists have, on the whole, been catalogued but not studied. Their major role is seen as vulgarization. Fauchery, indeed, is persuaded that the case of women novelists is not “fundamentally heterogeneous,” that the determining myths were of masculine invention and adopted without alteration by women novelists. In his book on “female destiny,” only twenty pages out of nine hundred treat the woman writer specifically. For Fauchery, female novelists are not really distinguishable from their male counterparts, except that, on the whole, women are verbose, gauche, only conventionally liberated, most at ease in short fiction, consistently prone to betray the “born moralizer” lurking beneath the “occasional novelist,” and inevitably inclined to autobiography; the heroine imagined by the woman novelist is “forever and eternally herself.”

Women did without a doubt write within established frameworks and frequently uninteresting fictional conventions. Like male novelists, they wrote letter-novels, memoir-novels and third-person narratives and created both representational and metaphorical heroines, whom they portrayed for the greatest part in relation to men and often struggling with the conflicting demands of virtue and passion. As a group, they treat love, marriage, and abandonment with more or less
sensitivity, eloquence, and narrative mastery and tend to avoid the pornographic and the libertine novel, which were flourishing forms. An impressive number were translators as well as novelists and largely responsible for the diffusion in France of English and German fiction. During the second half of the century, they frequently set their novels in England (a country and culture then very much in vogue), although the inspiration for plot often came, undisguised, from their private experience. But this was true of men as well. Like virtually all the period's novelists, they made technical blunders, even as they helped to develop themes and approaches to character that were crucial to the novel and to solve some of the many problems relating to technique in a nascent genre.

Their heroines include, for example, Mme Benoist's Célianne, title character of an ironic 1766 novel, who comes tantalizingly close to making illicit love but is finally "saved" by her husband, as well as the pathetic Fanny in Mme Beccary's Mémoires de Fanny Spingler (1781), who is victimized by sexual calumnies and eventually succumbs to her misfortunes. In L'Aveugle par amour, a macabre and extravagantly sentimental novel published the same year by Fanny de Beaufharnais, protagonist Eugénie blinds herself as an expression of her love for a blind man. The heroine of Mme Daubenot's immensely popular, 900-page Zélie dans le désert, on the other hand, is chiefly notable for her prodigious resourcefulness; after her shipwreck on the island of Sumatra, Zélie raises goats and poultry and runs a mill. We do women writers no service to exaggerate either their insights or their skill; but with fantasies and heroines as diverse as these, they offer, at the least, multiple and intense novelistic representations of a classic subject: a temperament in society.

Among the most accomplished not only of women's novels but also of the century's fiction are the early works of Mme de Charrière. Born in Holland, she lived her last thirty-four years in Switzerland, where she published in French, one of her native languages: Lettres neuchâteloises (1784), Lettres de mistress Henley (1784), Lettres écrites de Lausanne (1785), and Caliste (1788). In their portrayal of generational relations, their simplicity of plot, their characteristic refusal to end in any recognizably conventional way, and in the compelling dailiness of their concerns (serving dinner, choosing clothes, avoiding frostbite, finding a husband, earning a living), they encode a fascinating commentary on the position of the "average" European woman in the late eighteenth century.

An early novel by Mme Durand de Bédacier, La Comtesse de Mortane, first appeared in 1699, and must have enjoyed considerable popularity, judging from numerous reeditions throughout the eighteenth century. It is a loose weave of standard adventures: a novel about passion,
maternal tyranny, disguise and calumny, with several interpolated fairy tales and flashbacks. The strong central alliance—between two women—articulates a peculiarly female kind of bonding, based on confidences and gossip. The reader's attention is further rewarded by a passage like the following, where Mme de Mortane describes her wedding to a hated husband. She notes her “violent” efforts “to avoid making a scene in public,” and then:

I suddenly paled at the end of the ceremony . . . I will not tell you about the horrible pain I felt when they undressed me to put me in the bed; you surely must understand it, provided you are at all capable of hatred and love. Yes, interrupted Madame de Marigue, let us draw the curtain on this adventure; please continue your story.\(^\text{11}\)

The paralepsis (“I will not tell you . . .”) is, in this case, required by the literally unspeakable significance of the omission. The passage neatly suggests sexual and conjugal coercion and the tensions inherent in their concealment, in the necessity of maintaining both a public and a private self. Stripping away of clothing is the stripping away of social lies. Such themes, which are frequently important in the period’s female novel and whose explicit expression is as frequently repressed, strain at the limits of conventionally permitted language, giving unexpected life to words like pain, love, and hatred, which are already in the grip of cliché. The strong sense these words acquire is an example of the way women’s use of a convention is simultaneously the convention’s renewal.

In spite of shortcomings of style and composition, such novels may be read (especially cumulatively) as compelling and obsessive fictions of the female self, as a kind of writing that maximizes gender differences. Heroines are alternately characterized by compliance with societal expectations or by a (usually moderate) form of defiance, but, in either case, a close reading often suggests that protagonists use and subvert social conventions just as the authors use and subvert literary conventions. These texts are generally bland in appearance. They seem initially not to speak for themselves, only echoing the epoch’s familiar language; but they make subliminal statements, sometimes best revealed by interlocking readings. Perhaps no body of work lends itself so little to formal taxonomies and so much demands close and sustained analysis, a willingness to look beneath the surface conventions. In this essay I shall enumerate some of the clues, or cues, to which such an analysis could respond.

A fact of primary significance is this: in a day when women were allowed neither to manage their property nor to dispose of their fortunes, or even of their hand, when they were sometimes sent to convents to preserve intact the inheritance of their brothers, they
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wrote for the most part not poetry, or drama, but fiction and produced a long line of works that, by modern criteria, must be considered best-sellers. Since the novel is precisely the form that became for Lukacs, Girard, and Goldmann, among others, the exemplary literary vehicle for social dissent, we may be at first disappointed to find in these women only scattered and timorous voices of manifest protest. Normally, they confine explicit complaint to the spheres of education and of relations between the sexes. Mme de Graffigny, Mme Riccoboni, and Mme Elie de Beaumont, for example, all speak out within their novels against the narrowness and contradictions of the convent education of girls.

From the moment when girls begin to be able to receive instruction, they are shut up in a convent, to teach them how to behave in society... and we entrust the responsibility for enlightening their minds to people in whom it might be considered a crime to possess a mind, and who are incapable of molding their hearts, for they do not know the heart.12

Mme de Graffigny and Mme Riccoboni also condemn the double standard, and Mme Riccoboni more than once excoriates men for their limited sensibility, excessive sensuality, and the dissimulation they practice on women.

Look here, you men! What are you? From what source do you derive the right to scant toward women the regard that you impose on yourselves among one another? What law in nature, what convention in any state ever authorized this impudent distinction? What? Your merely given word commits you toward the lowest of your kind, and reiterated vows do not bind you to the woman friend you have chosen?13

Mme Riccoboni suggests here that her contemporaries accepted a significant gender difference in verbal performance: giving one's word to a man imposed radically different obligations from giving it to a woman. My argument is a corollary of that assertion: as the same word is different when given to a man or to a woman, so the same word may have different senses when coming from a man or from a woman.

Women writers also occasionally ride that eighteenth-century warhorse, the forced vocation; one of the subplots in Mme de Tencin's Le Siège de Calais (1739) deals with the issue. Mme de Tencin had an exceptionally intimate acquaintance with the problem, having been herself forced to take religious vows. But denunciation of this particular abuse was by no means confined to women, Diderot's La Religieuse (1796) being perhaps the most eloquent example. Indeed, the most "liberated" of female protagonists by twentieth-century standards are probably found in novels written by men, Duclos' Mme de Rêtel in
Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire des moeurs du dix-huitième siècle (1751) and Laclos’s Mme de Merteuil in Les Liaisons dangereuses (1782), for example. Mme Riccoboni, on the other hand, strenuously objected to the character and comportment of Mme de Merteuil and, in a series of letters to Laclos, labeled her an insult to France and womanhood.

But protest in the novel is by definition masked and mediated and, hence, in need of interpretation. If, at first glance, the voices of eighteenth-century French women novelists seem less distinctive than, for example, those of the nineteenth century, we must examine the tensions underlying the earlier era’s restricted vocabulary and stylized expression. We should be aware, too, of the extent to which the period was one of linguistic transition. Raymond Williams argues that the eighteenth century saw the beginning of a major new emphasis on language as activity, in close relation to the demystified understanding of society as a set of structures and inventions “made” by human beings. “Language” and “reality” were no longer systematically perceived, as they had been in all previously dominant traditions, as decisively separated. Within a world of mystically withdrawn “things” and (Platonic) ideas, patriarchy could flourish and priests could manipulate the commandments. But with the merging of words and things in the neutral daylight of the eighteenth century, the questions of feminism become possible; the patriarchal repression of words is transparently at issue in the new inquiry into what and how words “mean,” what and how they control. Scrutiny of the works of female novelists suggests evidence of just such a move toward language as operative, and certain publications that are marginal to the genre romanesque—Mme Le Prince de Beaumont’s Lettre en réponse à L’Année merveilleuse (1748), for example—challenge male discourse and hierarchies. One discerns in a number of women writers an inchoate realization of the opacity of the signer and the degree to which everyday speech may sustain patriarchal arrangements—social, political and sexual. Under the pen especially of women writers of the late century, crucial words such as virtue, reason, and happiness slip from their accustomed places, becoming newly functional and acquiring original nuances that embody specifically female vision and desire.

The paradox is that texts that may revise dominant eighteenth-century categories are nonetheless couched in the language of the poli and the agréable. Important aspects of their nature and significance may thus be elusive. Mme de Montolieu’s Caroline de Lichtfield (1786), although normally read as a novel of sensibility—André Chénier praises it for “a thousand details full of truth, naïveté, grace and delicacy”—is a startling and funny narrative about female self-concern and sexual anxieties, a retelling of the story of Beauty and the
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Beast. Mme de Tencin’s *Le Siège de Calais* begins when the hero accidentally finds himself in bed with the heroine, who understandably takes him for her husband. A highly conventional plot element in eighteenth-century fiction involves the notion that, for men, sexual fulfillment signals the end of love; as though reflecting this theme, novels characteristically end where Mme de Tencin’s begins, with the lovers’ union. But in *Le Siège de Calais*, M. de Canaple is indifferent to Mme de Granson until sex engenders passionate love; he spends the remaining 170 pages trying to win not just her pardon but also her affections. While the novel glorifies sensibility and fidelity and extols the strictest virtue, it also subversively rewrites a standard and essentially male plot; love is not crowned with sex, but sex with love. It seems clear, furthermore, that the use of the historical genre—at which women writers like Mme de Tencin, Mlle de Lussan and Mme Durand de Bédacier excelled—was often a way of displacing discussion of the forbidden, although the “morality” of Mme de Tencin’s novels was long the object of critical adulation. Jean Decottignies has demonstrated that while for two hundred years Mme de Tencin’s *Mémoires du comte de Comminge* (1735) never shocked the proprieties there lies beneath its familiar figures (parents, lovers, spouse) and episodes (forced marriage, sequestration, convent sojourn) an original work of poetic ambiguity whose “secret meaning” is neither so simple nor nearly so reassuring as La Harpe and other critics preferred to think.¹⁶

Still another case in point is Mme de Souza’s *Adèle de Sénange* (1794), which reminds us of the author’s own teen-age marriage to the middle-aged comte de Flahaut: a genial sixteen-year-old is saved from the convent by an apparently grotesque union with a seventy-year-old man, who, at bottom, is as generous as he is gouty and decrepit. Lord Sydenham, a young Englishman, promptly joins them and falls in love with the bride, all the while astounded and somewhat annoyed that she does not quite correspond to his idea of the perfect woman; she is carefree, capricious, and frivolous as well as kind and tender. Sydenham’s instincts are so fine that he almost prefers to Adèle’s company that of the respectable septuagenarian; but he occasionally wonders, not disinterestedly, how long the old man can survive. M. de Sénange feels some uneasiness about the situation, but he morally adopts both young people and dies leaving them his fortune.

In *Adèle de Sénange*, I read a subtle revision of the idea of the sentimental heroine, accommodating both frivolity and flirtatiousness, as well as an allegory about the ambiguity of virtue, female enclosure and liberation, incest and adultery. This is a text where esthetic concerns (gardens, dress, dance) are translated into psychological and female force. Sainte-Beuve, on the other hand, nostalgically reads only the language of sensibility. He likens Mme de Souza’s work to “pure
water which can restore our overheated palates." Sainte-Beuve's first-person plural is gender-specific: "our" palates are as masculine as the water is feminine. Mme de Souza, moreover, epitomizes for this critic the very traits he finds lacking in the novels of his own day, the mid-nineteenth century: "that quality of freshness and delicacy, that limpidity of emotion, that sobriety of word, those soft and restful nuances." In 1929, Jean Larnac echoed Sainte-Beuve: the turn-of-the-century novels of Mme de Souza had a "charming finesse;" their style, "correct and moderately embellished, recalled the florid conversations of the old regime." Such comments illustrate the tenacity with which male critics have maintained a cage around the consciousness of eighteenth-century women, benevolently repainting the bars of the cage with the language of decorum and purity.

*Adèle de Sénange* is written in the form of letters, Lord Sydenham's to his confidant; there are no responses. In fact, during the century's middle and late years, a major fictional form was the epistolary novel, and it was largely popularized by women authors. Late-century letter-novels contemporary with *Adèle de Sénange* were often polyphonic, with an exchange of letters by several correspondents. Laclos's *Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) probably represents the epitome of this form, where a great many letters from different sources are impressively orchestrated. Mme Elie de Beaumont was one of his predecessors; her *Lettres du marquis de Roselle* (1764), with letters by half a dozen principal writers, is a sober and engaging novel about a young man who learns to value the best in woman (intelligence and wit) rather than the worst (dissimulation and dissipation). The majority of the earlier novels written in letter form, however, involve only a single letter writer, usually the heroine. This particular variant of the genre seems historically to be remarkably well suited to the emergence of authentic female voices into an open language. Additionally, the letter form favors a domestic emotional center. When woman's access to the public domain is problematic, the letter form conceals and compensates for her exclusion from history and valorizes her space in life and her private experience of time.

The theme of women writing, of course, is an important one from Molière to Sade and Laclos. Arnolphe's mistake in the *Ecole des femmes* is allowing Agnès to learn to write; Restif de La Bretonne's *Les Gynographes* (1777)—a work whose subtitle enunciates its project to "put women in their place"—specifies that upper-class girls should be taught to read, but even they should not learn to write. Male control depends symbolically on control of words, especially the written word. While eighteenth-century women novelists were using the Word to achieve economic independence, they were also exploiting its symbolism with works in which the epistolary act suggests a way of escape from...
alienation and fragmentation and allows the heroine to triumph over love and victimization—experiences that tend to be coextensive in the novel.

Among the most widely imitated of such works are the monophonic epistolary novel of Mme de Graffigny and the first of those by Mme Riccoboni, autobiographical and vibrant mid-century portrayals of an otherwise and an elsewhere, narrations of female time and female truth. Zilia, the Inca princess in Lettres d’une Péruvienne, is captured by the Spaniards, then falls into the hands of the French. She is brought to Paris where she comments extensively on French manners and morals from the perspective of the naïve foreigner, while she remains faithful to Aza, the brother-lover from whom she was separated. Eventually, he is discovered to be living at the Spanish court, and she is briefly reunited with him, only to learn that he has embraced Christianity with its prohibition of incestuous unions and that he intends to marry a Spanish woman. Still, Zilia refuses the hand of her French rescuer and admirer, the long-suffering Déterville, preferring celibacy, friendship, and the pleasures of nature to those of passion. This final gesture, the rejection of a deserving lover and the decision to live alone in society (Zilia does not withdraw to a convent), is original and courageous; as Déterville’s sister explains to her, society looks askance at unmarried and unprotected young women residing alone. English Showalter notes that it is also surprising in terms of conventional fictional endings, for readers’ expectations were strongly for marriage either with Aza or with Déterville or, failing that, for Zilia’s demise. Socially and psychologically, according to rules both within the fiction and without, Zilia would seem to need a husband in order to survive, but Mme de Graffigny was moving away from obvious linguistic and literary plans.20

Mme Riccoboni’s first novel, Lettres de mistress Fanni Butlerd, appeared ten years later. Published pseudonymously, it pretended to be a translation from the English, but it was probably a fictionalization of the author’s own love affair with the comte de Mallebois. It was one of the very first of a wave of “English” novels in France and was soon recognized as one of the era’s most direct and most psychologically satisfying fictions. Lord Alfred, a British peer, swears undying fidelity to Fanni Butlerd, a commoner. They begin an affair; but, predictably, it is almost immediately interrupted when he departs to do his military service, and for a period of close to two months, she writes him impassioned letters. Shortly after Alfred’s return, Fanni discovers that he is about to marry someone else, a woman of greater wealth and status. In a final letter—exceptionally eloquent if conventional—Fanni lambasts Alfred in particular and men in general and declares that she will have nothing more to do with them.
Like Zilia, Fanni is victimized by a society complicitous with men and indulgent toward their desires for social status and conquest, on both the battlefield and the bed. Like Zilia, too, Fanni is the novel’s sole letter writer, and hers is the only voice the reader hears in this passionate soliloquy. The interest resides, on the one hand, in Fanni’s energetic recognition and arrangement of her own sexuality (she does not slip into an affair; she consciously decides to have one) and, on the other, in her lucid effort to anatomize in writing the subtleties, genesis, and growth of female passion. When Zilia and Fanni finally disclaim passion and claim autonomy, they express a forceful symbolic negation of male dominance and conventional sexual and marital categories.

The theme of passionate renunciation that goes back to Mme de Lafayette’s La Princesse de Clèves was naturally echoed in countless other novels and modulated to express various nuances: not only the anger of a Fanni Butlerd but occasionally the joyful valorization of female alliances. In Mme Robert’s Nicole de Beauvais ou l’amour vaincu par la reconnaissanc(e) (1767), the title character decides that masculine jealousy and excesses are intolerable. As the subtitle suggests, she rejects the Baron, whom she loves and who loves her, in favor of a celibate, happy, and charitable life at the side of her benefactress.

There are, of course, more ways than one of saying no. The narration of the narrowest of female destinies may be symbolically emancipatory. A 1784 heroine of Mme de Charrièrè’s, while superficially complying with the demands of husband and society, subversively questions their rationality, their pertinence to a woman’s life. With Mme de Charrièrè, the letter-novel realizes its potential as the form best suited to express the control exercised by domestic concerns over female psychology. In the interior domestic spaces she depicts, the donning of an artificial flower or the removal of a portrait from a wall become crucial, determining events. Lettres de mistress Henley is the story of a young woman, orphaned and twenty-five years old, who must marry for financial security. She has two suitors. One is kind and decent, an eminently respectable and universally respected widower who loves the quiet country life. The second, a few years older, is fabulously wealthy, dynamic, a lover of good food and art; the only problem is that some slight suspicion hangs over the Oriental origins of his fortune. The heroine sighs at the prospect of such opulence and pleasure but chooses, as her (female) education has made her feel she must, the course of purity, nobility, sublime and “reasonable” happiness, the simple and decent life. But Mr. Henley turns out to be too perfect—a good man but a controlled and endlessly rational one whose very moderation collides with his young wife’s vitality, generous impulsiveness, and sensitivity. Realizing his moral and intellectual
superiority, she tries to imitate him, but she cannot. Hers is the story of a woman who is inevitably wrong: "Is it possible that he is right, my friend? Is it possible that I am wrong again, always wrong, wrong in everything?" Even the anticipated birth of their child—for Mrs. Henley an event of profound maternal significance, the culmination of hopes and ambitions—occasions only her husband's moralizing response; he thinks his wife perhaps too excitable to nurse the baby. It becomes finally apparent that death is the only alternative to living her husband's version of reason and virtue. Mrs. Henley compellingly figures woman in her status as a social, political, and economic minority. She is oppressed by a society rooted in patriarchy and tradition, where a woman—especially a poor one—cannot survive outside of marriage and a sensitive woman can hardly survive within it.

Contrasting starkly with the work of Mme de Charrière is that of Mme Le Prince de Beaumont, best remembered today for her classic, abridged version of the story of Beauty and the Beast that appeared in 1757 in her Magasin des enfants (translated as The Young Misses' Magazine). She was an educator and an extraordinarily productive writer, author of educational treatises, novels, fairy tales, and works of Christian inspiration. Her fiction is wordy and long, neither as stylishly written nor as technically successful as the best works of a Mme Riccoboni or a Mme de Charrière and rife with the most outlandish of fictional peripeties: duels, plague, sequestration, murder, razor-assisted birth, disguise, forged wills. Yet she stands as one of the century's most interesting feminist thinkers; on the one hand, asserting woman's moral and verbal strength and female fitness for literary and scientific study and, on the other, preaching submission to God's will and a morality more severe than what most of her contemporaries espoused in their fiction. In the lengthy Lettres de madame du Montier (1756) and Mémoires de la baronne de Butteville (1766), the young heroines make, at their parents' behest, marriages of convenience to rich and decent older men. There are indications (though hardly explicit) that their sex lives are wanting. Then, widowed at about the age of thirty, each is sought in marriage by a man to whom she was genuinely sexually attracted. Each refuses, not out of fidelity to the dead husband, but out of a barely articulated fidelity to self and desire for autonomy. They reject the marital and social economy that prescribes sex, procreation, female subservience, and toleration of the double standard. When Mme Le Prince de Beaumont calls this renunciation "virtue," she seems to suggest a new meaning for a much-used word, just as Mme de Charrière implies the bankruptcy of "reason" in the very heart of the Age of Reason.

Virginia Woolf (speaking implicitly of the English novel) reminds us that the eighteenth century was a turning point for female authorship.
Earlier, she is impressed by the "strange intermissions of silence and speech" in women's writing.\textsuperscript{22} By the late eighteenth century, fiction by women is continuous, deriving its significance partly from its critical mass, partly from the psychological continuities we discern in it, and partly from the transitional use of familiar rhetoric. Women wrote courageously in the face of criticism and ridicule. Restif de la Bretonne has a male protagonist in \textit{La Paysanne pervertie} (1784) put his female correspondent on stern notice: "a woman scientist, or merely a thinking woman, is always ugly—I warn you seriously—and especially a woman author. . . . A woman author transgresses the limits of modesty prescribed for her sex."\textsuperscript{23} But women were not deterred by attempts to portray their very female work as emanating from writers who must be by definition unfeminine: ugly and immodest. They went on proving that they \textit{could} write—and write with a difference. Novelists such as Mme de Graffigny, Mme Le Prince de Beaumont, and Mme de Souza reworked the standard marriage plot, imitating male novelists but subtly altering fictional arrangements and making possible new and formative female fictions and discourse. Within the literary systems they used, they were modifying the symbolic order of things. This enormously diverse corpus is reducible neither to a single ideology nor to a few generalizations about theme and form. It stratifies the complexities of convention and originality, vocation and provocation, autobiography and fiction. If we listen closely, we may hear distinctively female voices uttering, in the code of eighteenth-century conventions, things for which no explicit language yet existed.

NOTES

1. Mme de Lambert, \textit{Réflexions nouvelles sur les femmes, par une dame de la cour de France}, nouvelle édition corrigée (Londres: J. P. Coderc, 1730), p. 3. I am in debt to Robert Dawson for lending me a copy of this publication as well as of several other rare and pertinent eighteenth-century editions that he brought to my attention.


5. English Showalter discusses this aspect of the novel's genesis in "Les \textit{Lettres d'une Péruvienne}: Composition, Publication, Suites" (paper delivered at the 6th International Congress on Enlightenment, Brussels, July 1983).


9. Given the immensity of the corpus, my essay in no way pretends to deal with all of the important women writers of the eighteenth-century French novel. My selection represents an attempt to strike some balance and suggest avenues for future research, while it is also influenced by personal taste and the basic question of the accessibility of editions.

10. “…la femme qu’elle croit imaginer, c’est encore et toujours elle-même.” Pierre Fauchery, La Destinée féminine dans le roman européen du dix-huitième siècle (Paris: Armand Colin, 1972), pp. 94 and 111. English Showalter suggested to me that the history of Madame d’Epinay’s powerful Histoire de madame de Montbrillant is a striking demonstration of the lengths to which the prejudice that the heroine of the woman writer is “eternally herself” can lead readers and editors. Composed in the second half of the eighteenth century, it was published only in the nineteenth century as “memoirs,” then labeled “pseudo-memoirs” in the twentieth, and only recently recognized as fiction. The lack of invention, moreover, is a reproach only when directed at women. Has anyone contended that A la recherche du temps perdu is inferior because Proust and his narrator share so many experiences and sensations? Proust is just as much “eternally himself.”


20. Showalter.
