The Edifying Examples

According to current dictionaries, to edify means to inspire virtue through an instructive example. Until Rousseau, eighteenth-century French fiction might appear more intent on amusing, exciting, or shocking readers than impressing and teaching them. Yet it contains examples enough of male and female characters throughout the century ostensibly intended to be admired for their goodness and, conceivably, imitated.

Who were the edifying females? In what way were they inspiring? What common denominators did they share? Some answers to these questions can add to our understanding of the fictional and nonfictional female of the French Enlightenment.

Most commonly, to qualify as edifying, female characters fit into two main categories: virtue rewarded and virtue regained (through repentance, reform, or rehabilitation). Since virtue is a prerequisite in both cases, it would be well to identify the virtuous woman of eighteenth-century French fiction.

To begin with, she would usually exhibit traits that corresponded to the moral views shared by “enlightened” bourgeois philosophes and the fashionable society they knew. Virtue, as those intellectuals understood it, had become a vague, elastic, and undemanding quality. For both sexes, it called for indulgence, occasional beneficence, and, above all, an oft-expressed adoration of the ideal of goodness.

Rare is the female character in Voltaire’s plays who does not pay tribute to the ideal of virtue. Jocaste in Oedipe, Lise in L’Enfant prodigue, Artémire, or Marianne are goodness incarnate without necessarily having to perform laudable actions, for they are solidly in favor of the ideal. Rousseau’s Julie speaks incessantly of virtue and honor in spite of the clandestine trysts she arranges in her parents’ absence. Rosalie of the Chevalier Yon’s Femmes de mérite has loose morals but a talent for praising and admiring virtue. In the latter part of the century, especially “good” female characters like Rousseau’s Julie or Bernardin’s Virginie add to their unfailing admiration of virtue concrete demonstrations of beneficence toward deprived or unhappy fellow creatures.

But for females, such vague proofs of goodness do not suffice. Their sex must fulfill first and foremost two stringent prerequisites:

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obedience and chastity. Voltaire’s compliant Nanine refers to her *devoir* almost as frequently as she does to her *vertu*. An inevitable submission to authority prompts Virginie to utter the words “All you . . . who control my fate,” and almost any admirable daughter or wife in novels and plays will offer proofs of dutiful acquiescence.

More important than obedience, and more directly relevant to the notion of feminine virtue, is the rule of strict abstinence from sexual intercourse except with one’s own husband. Even in the permissive Age of Enlightenment, virtue, for females, specifically meant chastity and fidelity. When it came to the stylish upper classes, chastity in young girls seemed far more plausible than fidelity in mature married women, who were expected to take lovers. It stands to reason then that a large number of fictional females are adolescent ingénues whose goodness—more precisely, innocence—rests largely on a technical virginity. But whether young and virginal like Jeannette of Mouhy’s *Paysanne parvenue* and Angélique of Challe’s *Illustrés Françaises* or mature and faithful like Mme Paragon of Restif’s *Paysan perverti* and Laclos’s Mme de Tourvel, they interest readers less through their chastity or fidelity than through their potential fall. Recognizing the boring nature of continued goodness, an author surrounds his heroine with threatening and inviting pitfalls, tantalizing readers with the implicit question “Will she or won’t she?”

Quite naturally, the criteria of obedience and chastity encourage the creation of female characters who mainly project weakness and vulnerability. Although such passive and negative characteristics would not, at first, seem likely qualities for constructing fine moral examples, they can be positive assets when applied to one of the two patterns of edification.

**VIRTUE REWARDED**

Obedience, chastity, and fidelity will nearly always reap a profit in sentimental comedies. *Nanine, L’Ecossaise, Le Préjugé à la mode, Le Père de famille*, and the myriad *drames* of the late century demonstrate to what extent such moral investments can ultimately pay off. True, in tragedies and novels, the chances of reward for such constraints are far less sure. Nevertheless, in the realm of the novel a resolute virgin has excellent prospects for success. Mouhy’s Jeannette, and Angélique of “Angélique et Contamine” in Challe’s *Illustrés Françaises* are cases in point. To paraphrase Pascal, by betting on virginity, their risks are finite and their potential gains infinite. If they give in to men, they stand to lose everything; if they manage to hold out, they may eventually make a fine match, that is, win the social jackpot. And so
they do. Marivaux’s Marianne learned the advantages of a hold-out strategy from her dying foster mother; and, clearly, Mme Riccoboni’s, or, for that matter, any finished version of Marivaux’s novel must have the heroine enter a brilliant marriage with her virginity intact.4

Like the staunch virgin, the eternally faithful wife can find happiness and glory at the denouement. Constance in Le Préjugé à la mode, the loving spouse in Loisel de Tréogate’s Dolbreuse, and other patient, though abused, wives may have the smug satisfaction one day of seeing their errant husbands sink before them on repentant knees.

Since mature wives and mothers of Enlightenment fiction, like the young, nubile female characters, operate out of weakness and vulnerability, their means of achieving their just rewards are limited indeed. According to Nivelle’s character Damon, “to defend her rights, a woman has only her fidelity, her weakness, and her tears.”5 So like virgins such as Marianne or Angélique, older women often bend their efforts to manipulating those around them. Marmontel’s heroines in La Femme comme il y en a peu and La Bonne Mère owe their successes entirely to subtle and effective manipulation. In La Nouvelle Héloïse, Julie continually (and successfully) maneuvers her lover as though he were a child. Often the rewards of virtue go, not to those with the finest characters, but to those most adept at playing the virtue game.

VIRTUE REGAINED

In defending his love story, Rousseau maintained that a novel that depicts a woman’s downfall and subsequent reform is more believable—and, therefore, more morally effective—than one that merely describes her continuing virtue.6 Although readers may disagree about its effectiveness, Rousseau’s own technique was, indeed, to chronicle his heroine’s sexual capitulation and, later, her repentance and reform.

Like Julie’s redemption, the about-face of many fallen female characters might seem superfluous or contradictory when we consider that sexual surrender could be seen as a virtuous act in itself. Mme de Graffigny, Mme Riccoboni, Baculard d’Arnaud, and other writers of the time constantly impress on their readers that goodness is inextricably tied to sentiment. A virtuous woman can only be one who feels, who sympathizes, who behaves with indulgence and generosity. In novels especially, good, kind hearts can provide justification for scores of right-minded ladies who fall into sin. Says Julie, apropos of her seduction, “love itself would have spared me . . . it was pity that ruined me.”7 Pity breaks the resistance of enamored females in novels of Mouhy or Crébillon. It leads even the most chaste of girls, Virginie,
to the edge of the precipice, when she tells Paul: "Do as you will with me. Unvirtuous girl: I could stand your caresses but not your pain." Always the most effective masculine ploy is Valmont's piece of psychological blackmail in his seduction of Mme de Tourvel: "Eh bien! la mort!"

But no matter how powerful the argument that a good woman is a sympathetic, giving one, the traditional moral code still serves as the gauge of proper female behavior, in fiction as in society; thus, the popularity, especially in post-Rousseauist literature, of plots that trace a woman's dramatic fall followed by her repentance and reform. Such reversal of unacceptable conduct appears in a variety of ways. Beaumarchais's *La Mère coupable* concerns a married countess (formerly Rosine of *Le Barbier de Séville*) who, after one single infidelity, spends years anguishing in guilt. Marmontel's *La Mauvaise Mère* describes a mother's rejection of one of her sons and her eleventh-hour change of heart. Such women are joined by an impressive list of repentant prostitutes, including the heroine of the anonymous *Confessions d'une courtisane*, the chevalier Yon's Rosalie, Rousseau's Lauretta Pisana, Diderot's Mme des Arcis and others. For remorseful wayward females of Enlightenment fiction, the prognosis can be excellent. Some ex-prostitutes, such as Lauretta, may not make the fine marriage granted to others, such as Mme des Arcis; but they, like lesser sinners, can don brand new haloes in the last pages of their story. And they often have the last word—albeit from their deathbeds (as, for example, in Elie de Beaumont's *Lettres du marquis de Roselle*).

Virtue regained can appear a facile means of erasing past sin with present probity. In many cases, characters can indulge themselves and not have to mend their ways until the final paragraphs of their story. This eating-one's-cake-and-having-it system may not convert a female public to an exemplary life, but it neatly solves the famous literary *dilemme* by titillating readers and theoretically edifying them in the same work.

If the system of virtue regained does not provide us with profoundly inspirational or edifying examples, virtue rewarded seems hardly more convincing a device. The deserving wives of *Le Préjugé à la mode* or Dolbreuse, the sweet and innocent ingénues of *L'Ecossaise* or *Le Père de famille* offer us their histories of long and patient suffering, and their rewards seem less a positive source of joy than a quick end to slow pain. On the other hand, a tale of safeguarded virginity recompensed, customarily also chock full of anguish and danger, impresses us less with the heroine's virtue than with her shrewdness in saving her trump card and winning the game. For a Marianne, strategy and compromise replace the notion of goodness. She prefers the admiration...
of others to their esteem, and, in order to survive and succeed, she will never carry truth or self-sacrifice to an extreme. "Edifying" and "rewards" in such cases relate merely to the mundane goal of socioeconomic arrival.

All considered, in the search for impressive models of feminine virtue, clearly, it is less the category, less the conventional pattern of edification, that matters than the author's intent and, especially, talent. The two most obvious cases of writers with both the aim and the ability to create memorable edifying female characters are Rousseau and his disciple, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre.

Julie

Julie stands apart from Virginie and from most of the edifying females of her century, in that she has a personality and, indeed, a strong one. The virtuous young ingenues of Voltaire’s plays, all frail reeds, are, practically speaking, interchangeable. In novel and theatre, the patient wife and mother, no matter how mature, usually plays a passive, even infantile role, complying with the wishes of her husband, the traditional paterfamilias and a sort of surrogate father to her.10 This is true of characters such as the countess in La Mère coupable or Julie’s own mother in La Nouvelle Héloïse. Yet Julie herself, despite her authoritarian father and the paternal figure who replaces him as her husband, breaks the mold. It is she who, as a young girl, takes all the initiative in her relationship with her tutor-lover. It is she who protests, resists, and revolts against her father, even to the point of planning to use her pregnancy to maneuver the inflexible baron into a shotgun wedding. Later, rather than regret her disobedience, she laments that it did not work. True, Julie does capitulate. She submits to Saint-Preux out of some combination of sensuality, love, sympathy, inexperience, and a lot of free time. She gives in to her father because of pity and guilt. Yet, in each case, she chooses her course of action—indeed, she uses the word choix (p. 323) in referring to her sexual surrender—instead of blaming her own blindness, the tyranny of others, or destiny. If Julie agrees to marry the man of her father’s choice, she first sets the terms; she will do so only with Saint-Preux’s consent. Later, on the subject of her vow of fidelity, she resolutely declares, “I shall keep it until death” (p. 334).

Julie’s will and her lucidity represent two sides of the same coin. She rarely deludes herself, but if she does, she eventually sets herself straight. Intent on examining her own motives, she is in constant communication with her super-ego. She may tell herself for years that she no longer loves Saint-Preux. In her final “posthumous” letter to
him, however, she explains her self-imposed illusion as a very "practical" and "useful" means of keeping herself out of danger. She had simply manufactured and put on an effective psychological chastity belt. Earlier—and younger—when love was too attractive and compelling for Julie to deal with through her lucidity and will, she "solved" the problem by handing it over to Saint-Preux, that is, by asking him to protect her virginity. Yet, despite Julie's sensuality, her lapses, her self-imposed periods of blindness, or her deliberate renunciation of will, most of her letters throughout the novel impress the reader with her strength and her sober, rational insights. Mature since her hour of birth, Julie is always right—even when she is wrong.

In what way can this strong-minded character serve as an edifying example?

During the course of La Nouvelle Héloïse, we find Julie torn between two species of virtue: virtue as sentiment, the passion of sacred love, a secular, preromantic religion, and virtue as honor, the Christian code of purity, monitored by the ever-watchful eyes of God. Her love for Saint-Preux is, at one and the same time, sacred passion and sheer dishonor. Yet, as she says, "love and innocence were equally necessary to me" (p. 323). Faced with marriage to Wolmar, she finds the Corneillean contradiction unacceptable, and so she sacrifices love. But Julie, a product of the emotional Rousseau and an increasingly sentimental climate, cannot offer readers an unflinchingly Spartan reform. Instead, she must find a way to reconcile the two kinds of virtue, and she finally does. After having had the pleasure of passion and the justification of moral and religious reform, she not only demonstrates her susceptibility to Saint-Preux after she marries, but also, on her deathbed, she openly avows her passion for him. Although still technically Mme de Wolmar, her confession causes her no guilt, since she is leaving this world for another one that will undoubtedly reunite her with her lover (and not her husband). Julie satisfies both definitions of virtue and, in a sense, has the best of both worlds. As she puts it, "my virtue remains spotless and my love without remorse" (p. 729).

According to Rousseau, Julie's example would prove useful (particularly to a mature, female reading public and married couples) because of her moral rehabilitation, her pattern of virtue lost and found once again. But if his heroine came to serve as a model for her time, it was less in the story of her fall and redemption than in her image as a new and admirable species of female. This was the model that served as an inspiration for the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century woman, real and fictional: Rousseau's lady of Clarens, admired for her devotion as wife and mother, for her simplicity, sincerity, generosity and sentiment, her love of nature, her modesty and feminine grace.
Virginie

Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s character, like Rousseau’s, is “feeling and virtuous” and similarly demonstrates a certain strength in protesting an arranged marriage; but beyond that, she bears no resemblance at all to Saint-Preux’s mistress. Virginie’s creator, devoting all his efforts to rendering external rather than internal realities, does not endow his heroine with the personality or psychological complexities of a Julie.

If the two-dimensional Virginie is edifying, it is largely because of two things: her beatific morality and her fate in the last pages of her story. As a pre-teen-ager, Virginie obviously deserves high marks for conduct and attitude. It is perhaps unnecessary to recall her sweet, if naïve, befriending of a Negro slave woman, her presents of home-cooked wheat cakes to poor whites, or, in general, her mania for doing good. And it would no doubt be kinder to pass in silence over some of her more unmemorable homilies, such as “one must not do a thing, not even a good deed, without consulting one’s parents” (p. 95) or “bread that comes from a wicked person fills your mouth with gravel” (p. 89). Her behavior and moral stance seem so predictably admirable that readers may be surprised to find her feeling less than saintly under the stress of puberty and a hot climate.

More significant than such examples, however, is Virginie’s final destiny, that is, her plight at sea and her solution to it, for there is the episode with the deepest moral implications and the greatest dramatic impact on the reader. There Virginie is presented with her most important existential choice: to undress or not to undress. It must certainly have impressed readers throughout the years that Virginie was so chaste she preferred keeping her clothes on to saving her life, and many must have pondered over what conclusions to draw. Did it mean that if society had not dragged Virginie off to corrupt Paris, but let her stay in a state of nature, she would not have killed herself because of an acquired social etiquette that demanded modesty? It is true that as a child, in her island paradise, she was quick to pull her skirt up like an umbrella to shield Paul and herself from the rain. But later, even on that same island, she proved to be a modest adolescent indeed. Whatever Bernardin’s intention, it is certain that he did not mean to chastise Virginie for her reluctance to disrobe. Yet Sade could have used the situation to greater advantage.

Julie convinces readers mainly because of her essence; Virginie largely because of her fate. In death, both women, almost saintly figures, edify through their incarnation of virtue sublime.13 Julie’s death, however, offers her a complacent happiness and peace, while Virginie’s, on the contrary, provides shock and sheer tragedy. Fitting neither the
category of virtue rewarded nor virtue regained, in the tradition of Clarissa rather than Pamela, Virginie's goodness for the sake of goodness is sublime because it is tragically doomed.

EDIFICATION IN REVERSE, OR VIRTUE PUNISHED

Nothing seems more "interesting," in the French sense of touching, than oppressed virtue in female characters. To investigate the subject thoroughly would take us outside the bounds of this study and into the realm of victimization. Yet mention should be made of the numerous writers whose ambition was to edify the public with tales of unhappy, though virtuous, women. The aim was ostensibly to elicit sympathy for such characters, thereby encouraging readers to want to help virtue in distress. Diderot's nun Suzanne, Duclos's Mme de Luz, and Laclos's Mme de Tourvel are only a few examples of the system of oppressed virtue. Yet quite naturally, rather than inspire readers with moral attitudes, such tales can logically suggest the conclusion that virtue does not pay. No eighteenth-century writer has demonstrated this moral reversal so clearly, pithily, and wittily as Voltaire in his short story Cosi-Sancta. To summarize it briefly, a young woman, Cosi-Sancta, undergoes misery after misery as long as she remains chaste or faithful. The disgusting old man she is forced to marry suspects her unjustly of a clandestine affair, and her attempts to discourage an assiduous admirer only inflame the young man's passion for her. The husband murders the suitor and is himself condemned to hanging for his crime. In order to save that villain, Cosi-Sancta must give herself to the judge. Then, to save her brother's life, she has to submit to his would-be assassin. And thirdly, to save her dying son's life, she is obliged to sleep with the doctor. Because of her three very helpful sacrifices, Cosi-Sancta is eventually canonized.

Voltaire's moral? As long as Cosi-Sancta persisted in following the rule of chastity, she brought pain and tragedy to those around her. When she consented to share her "sacred treasure" in a trinity of adulteries she could work wonders, inspiring great admiration.

Particularly in the novel, virtue frequently undergoes its "edifying" trial by fire and punishment. Cosi-Sancta and Virginie have much in common with Sade's Justine. They and other heroines may remind us, too, of the medieval Sainte Eulalie, put to the stake for her fidelity to Christianity. "Buona pulcella fut Eulalie..." A good girl and a good virgin, but killed nonetheless.

The idea that feminine virtue does not pay underlies balanced, almost Alexandrine statements made by two heroines at diametrically opposite moral poles: Rousseau's virtuous Julie and Sade's evil Juliette.
Julie says, “Le passé m’avilite, le présent m’afflige, l’avenir m’épouvante” (The past demeans me, the present pains me, the future frightens me, p. 189); Juliette says, “Le passé m’encourage, le présent m’électrise, je crains peu l’avenir” (The past encourages me, the present electrifies me, I fear not the future).  

It would be false to come to the conclusion that the Age of Enlightenment judged traditionally edifying heroines to be laughably wrong. Certainly, during the latter part of the century, figures such as Julie and Virginie, exemplary in life and saintly in death, inspired great admiration in sentimental readers. We can conclude, however, that such sublime examples were exceptional and that, before Rousseau, eighteenth-century fiction—for all its patient, long-suffering, silent, and weak females—offered few women who could qualify as truly inspirational. This is undoubtedly because the Enlightenment’s concept of virtue was singularly lacking in grandeur and because transmundane ideals had gone quite out of fashion during the myth-exploding age of philosophes. Poems about female saints in the Middle Ages could impress the public with examples of sacrifices made to a familiar religious ideal. Stories about Joan of Arc could illuminate through an exalted, transcendental heroism. Corneille’s Chimène, with all her human quality, was still admirable in her commitment to noblesse oblige.

But the morality of the Enlightenment, an increasingly bourgeois artifact, no longer understood concepts of gloire, sacrifice, heroism, or mysticism. A moral philosophy that replaced self-sacrifice with self-fulfillment, gloire and heroism with moderation and compromise, could hardly provide fertile ground for female characters to serve as examples of purity or grandeur. For that, French literature would have to await Chateaubriand’s Atala or, later, heroines of Péguy, Claudel, and modern drama’s revival of ancient Greek myths.

NOTES

2. The term “edifying female” has a more restrictively affirmative thrust than “edifying story.” Therefore, a category such as “vice punished” will not be treated in this study.
4. Here were edifying examples enough for nubile girls of good family, but how many respectable adolescent females were encouraged to read stories about threatened virginity?


8. Saint-Pierre, p. 148. Subsequent quotations from this work will be cited in text.


10. The passive role corresponds to the Arab concept of *settachia* (child-woman).

11. See “Préface de Julie” in Appendix of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, p. 743ff.


13. Sublime too (although I lack space to treat them here) are the tender, loving friends of late-century fiction or the sweet, self-sacrificing mothers, whose immaterial but ample reward consists simply in their continuing goodness, the satisfaction it grants them, and the admiration it inspires in those around them.