

Witch or Saint

Absolutes in the French 18th Century Novel

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In the "Encyclopédie" entry on Magic, Diderot congratulates humanity on having freed itself of superstition, that "fléau de l'humanité" with its "sciences ténébreuses".¹ Science and philosophy, he asserts, have liberated people of their fear and dread of the supernatural. Henceforth all is to be explained in terms of the natural, of Nature.

Imbued with a similar confidence, the eighteenth century novelists in France set about to define a new morality for the newly emancipated age. Their topics are the nature of virtue and natural order. These are viewed in the abstract and usually set in the context of the sexual manners of the upper classes. Their method is by opposition. The dangers of lust and libertinage are opposed to the ideals of the reasonable, moderate man practising continence and fidelity to social order. For this purpose, however, the novelists did not seek a new metaphor or myth, a new type of character, but adopted the ready-made opposition, the black and white imagery, of witchcraft and Christianity.

This inherited vehicle of expression had certain obvious literary advantages: as a system of interlocked symbols it is dramatic, its contrasts are clear-cut, it evokes powerful emotions and its morality needs no explanation. It has also, however, characteristics which were to prove constrict-

ive to the novel and ultimately to the view of humanity which the eighteenth century projects. It is an opposition of absolutes leaving little middle ground for reconciliation of extremes — in morality or behaviour. Its fundamental dynamic is a power struggle — between good and evil, the natural and the unnatural, order and disorder, male and female. The latter was to prove particularly disastrous, because its characters — the witch, devil, temptress, as opposed to the goddess, angel, saint, categorise humanity as fixed types, representative of abstracts, and because it affirms a notion that women are particularly apt to personify both what men aspire to and the dangerous forces that prevent them from attaining their ideals. This would affect all aspects of human relations presented in the novels.

The novelists inherited their attitudes to women from a firmly rooted literary, popular and theological tradition. As part of their cultural inheritance, it formed their imagination and coloured their view of the world. Mysogyny is a recurrent theme in art from the Greeks through to the eighteenth century, usually mild, a joke in folk culture, but it had reached obsessive proportions at the time of the witch trials. The Inquisition sharpened the popular consciousness, adding a dimension of fear and dread of the female by asking such questions as: why it is that



*SOLOMON AND SHEBA DANCING (from Who Is Sheba?)
by Sarah Jackson, 1985*

women are chiefly addicted to evil superstitions; whether witches can sway the minds of men to love or hatred; whether witches can deprive men of their virility; whether they copulate with the devil; and how they achieve these things. From the “confessions” of witches, they provide such answers as “All witchcraft comes from carnal lust which is in women insatiable,” that witches “distract the minds of men, driving them to madness, insane hatred and inordinate lusts,” that woman is “but a foe to friendship...a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature painted in fair colours” and that “as regards intellect... [women] seem to be of a different nature than men.”²

The hysteria of the Inquisition was over by the eighteenth century and the Encyclopedists were dedicated to the eradication of its last lingering echoes in thought. There are no witches or saints in the novels portrayed as such, yet there is, at a subconscious level, in the tales of seduction and disorder, a recurring pattern borrowed from allegories of power dating from a less “enlightened” age. The goddess, angel, saint become in the portrait of manners the “dévoté”, the innocent, persecuted heroine, prey of rakes and libertines, often representing the weak, the powerless in society, whereas the witch, siren, sorceress becomes the adventuress, the dangerously attractive woman representing passion or ambition that seduces the honest man from the roles society has ascribed to him. Their male accomplice or counterpart assumes equally polarised roles. Man and woman, corrupter and prey, manipulator and victim: the oppositions are personified and the lines are drawn in a battle of moral absolutes. It is a world where the sexes are forever divided by conflicting interests: hers to pervert, his to elude, or hers to submit, his to conquer and where virtue is forever besieged by the subversive influence of beauty, cleverness, sensuality and non-adherence to social norms.

In this power struggle, the key image is the duel — the skillful thrust and parry of one indi-

vidual against another, formalised, elegant, ruthless, final. But that image of the human condition is rarely clearly articulated. Instead we find the novels constructed around the polarised types whose genesis we have sketched. These, being largely unexamined, are ambiguous in their subjectivity, and it is not always easy to judge whether the novelists intend us to interpret their witch/saint opposition as a description of immutable human types or as criticisms of society in need of reform, for almost all write from within it, offering no outside perspective. In either case, however, it forms the dynamic of the moral debate and the structure of the novels, governing their plot, their characterisation and often their language.

In *Manon Lescaut*, the characters converse in a “mélange profane d’expressions amoureuses et théologiques”³. This idiom, common to the seventeenth century dramatists at their greatest, to the modern novelette at its most trite, to folk tales of magic and to accounts of religious experience, is the common vehicle for the expression of emotion and character development throughout the eighteenth century novel. “Charms” and “enchantment” are freely attributed to both men and women. People are “transformed” and “transported”. When Des Grieux first sees Manon, he says “elle me parût si charmante que moi...dont tout le monde admirait la sagesse et la retenue, je me trouvai enflammé tout d’un coup jusqu’au transport”⁴, and later, when she appears at the critical moment just as he is defending his theological thesis at the Sorbonne, she is an “apparition surprenante” and he exclaims, “j’en étais épouvanté: je frémissais, comme il arrive lorsqu’on se trouve, la nuit, dans une campagne écartée; on se croit transporté dans un nouvel ordre de choses.”⁵ Rousseau’s *Des Preux* is similarly “transformé”, whisked into a new order in an “instant d’illusion, de délire et d’enchantement”; when Julie kisses him, he says “Je ne suis plus le même.”⁶

If the sentimental novelists borrow their vocabulary of emotion and decisive encounters from tales of the supernatural, the satirists tend to introduce magic tokens into their works both for fun and as clues to their serious intent. Voltaire's génie in *Zadig*⁷, Diderot's rings in *Les Bijoux indiscrets*⁸, Crébillon's skimmer in *L'Écumoire*⁹ are all comical, disguised symbols of power, pointing the real magic gifts of the eighteenth century — birth, rank and fortune — those without which not even the talented 'roturier' novelists and thinkers could acquire prestige, affluence or influence.

Plays on words or clichés, 'jeux d'esprit' or simply a fashion, these borrowed vehicles of expression with their overtones of superstition or Old Testament morality, parallel an equally simplistic, subjective and ambiguous treatment of characterisation. Few portraits are complex, nuanced. All too often, in the case of the female characters, if the woman has one of the "dangerous" qualities — beauty, sensuality or intelligence, or if she lacks one of the virtuous ones of modesty, submissiveness, devotion, she is presented as "unvirtuous", absolutely. Such treatment adversely affects the male characters also who must interact with such abstract creations and who are, in any case, also subordinated to the demands of the plot or thesis. The tendency to reduce characters to a "mere concept, an abstract construction...to prove a thesis about the consequences of virtue"¹⁰ and to use a stereotyped language to do so is observable even among the philosophers in their serious works. In his "Essay on Women", Diderot says of them: "C'est surtout dans la passion de l'amour, les accès de la jalousie, les transports de la tendresse maternelle, les instants de la superstition, la manière dont elles partagent les émotions épidémiques et populaires, que les femmes étonnent, belles comme les séraphins de Klopstock, terribles comme les diables de Milton...si vous les aimez, elles vous perdront, elles perdront elles-mêmes."¹¹ This is no doubt a literary expression of a love-hate relationship from an imagination

nourished on theology and the classics, and Diderot is at times far from unsympathetic to women's condition, but, taken in the context of his certainty of his intellectual freedom, it suggests that although the eighteenth century mind was open, the vision was not. In an age and milieu where women were said to have "reigned", when there was no shortage of complex, multi-faceted women, — libertine or virtuous — the writers were content with generalisations about female behaviour, borrowed from literature or folk "wisdom". Diderot was less far than he believed from the *Malleus Maleficarum* in his distrust of women's emotional notions, their dangerous fascination. Montesquieu too expresses fear of the effects of women's reasoning on social order and their tendency to exercise influence in sabbath-like groups: "Ces femmes ont toutes des relations les unes avec les autres," he makes his Turk say of the Parisiennes, "et forment une espèce de république dont les membres toujours actifs, se secourent et se servent mutuellement...C'est un nouvel Etat dans l'Etat."¹² Elsewhere in *Lettres Persanes*, he also poses the question of whether "il est plus avantageux d'ôter aux femmes la liberté que de la leur laisser"¹³ and offers a fairly ambiguous answer. Then Rousseau, at the end of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, after a major attempt to create a new type of heroine, one the nineteenth century would adopt and develop, says of women:

Femmes! femmes! objets chers et funestes, que la nature orna pour notre supplice, qui punissez quand on vous brave, qui poursuivez quand on vous craint, dont la haine et l'amour sont également nuisibles, et qu'on ne peut rechercher ni fuir impunément!. Beauté, charme, attrait, sympathie, être ou chimère inconcevable, animé de douleurs et de voluptés! beauté plus terrible aux mortels que l'élément où l'on t'a vu naître! malheureux qui se livre à ton calme trompeur. C'est toi qui produis les tempêtes qui tourmentent le genre humain.¹⁴

This ambivalence about women, a sense of their having an unnatural charm, witch-like or angelic or both, a tendency to unorthodox behaviour and judgements — all perilous to men and order — runs right through the eighteenth century and is all the more insidious in that it appears to be the judgement of the enlightened mind, of philosophic and intellectual certainty. It runs like a dark shadow through the novels, obscuring their thesis, even when the writers themselves satirise it or criticise it, being particularly evident in the treatment of plot. The latter is usually rudimentary: boy meets girl, father won't allow the unequal match. The protagonist is often a talented charming upstart/adventuress and the young man of quality or the pure young girl, *jeune fille à marier* and her would-be seducer. Their story is one of vicissitudes and intrigues ending in the triumph, not of happiness, but of virtue. On the surface, it is a love story or an adventure story, but at some unconscious, metaphorical level, there are echoes of the medieval struggle between the Church and the forces of heresy and magic, while at a more conscious level, the plot is often an allegory of social order. Yet the thesis rarely becomes overtly political. The power struggle is not openly presented as one of class, the novelists choosing to ascribe the failure of their characters to achieve happiness or success, not to the social structure with its entrenched elite, but to the lack of virtue of the characters themselves. The underprivileged and the "déclassés" do not triumph, unless satisfactorily transformed into eligible members of the privileged class with acceptable notions of social order. There is no bourgeois idyll, nor are its claims asserted overtly. Perhaps the punishment meted out to too-radical writers kept the novelists faithful to their black and white plot, perhaps they were asserting the claims of a new order, but often we feel that they shared the belief that order must prevail because it is the very essence of what they call virtue, and that beauty, sensuality, passion and/or independence of mind, especially in women, must be punished because they are dis-

ruptive, an insidious attack on the status quo — that they are like witchcraft to the Inquisition — heretical.

The attitudes of the writers themselves to their common themes and common types, form another dimension to the duel conducted in the novels, for there are two opposite schools of thought in the eighteenth century about the nature of virtue and order. The approach of the novelists varies according to their thesis, but the absolute vision and the fixed personifications lead to common conclusions about the human condition. This can, perhaps, best be illustrated by some detailed attention to selected novels and their treatment of the heroine and the plot.

Rousseau's Julie in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* personifies his idea that "le bon n'était que le beau mis en action..et qu'ils avaient tous deux une source commune dans la nature bien ordonnée."¹⁵ Julie is in love both with an unsuitable man and with virtue itself, and she must conquer herself — one aspect of her emotions — if she is to achieve a satisfactory ending: "la froide raison n'a jamais rien fait d'illustre, et l'on ne triomphe des passions qu'en les opposant l'une à l'autre" (p.476). Julie, with her internal conflict, is potentially a Cornelian or modern heroine, in her personification of the sublime, she is a Romantic, but Rousseau is less interested in Julie than in what she represents and he sacrifices her to his thesis. For his plot he accepts an artificial, conventional starting point and although the whole thrust of the novel (in modern terms) is towards uniting Julie and her lover in a rural, unworldly idyll, asserting a new value system and a new concept of self, Rousseau rules this out from the start by the premise that virtue consists not merely in wedlock, but more importantly, in obedience to a father's authority, and that it is the father's duty to prevent an unequal match. In accepting this convention, Rousseau begins a great novel about the impossibility of reconciling absolutes, but turns his back on creating a truly original heroine. Instead of pres-

enting her as partly good and partly bad, endowed with complex, simultaneous emotions, he manipulates her, like a sorcerer himself, transforming her from one absolute role to another. He must deny the sensual, loving side of Julie for this is unvirtuous, dangerous, and have her affirm only the values of social order and Christianity and nature. At first she is an angel to whom her lover writes “Céleste Julie...Il me semble que des passions humaines soient au dessous d’une âme sublime: et comme vous avez la beauté des anges, vous en avez la pureté.” (p.26). Her dangerous beauty is thus explained as a moral one, whereas her lover is at first a sorcerer, seducing her mind and heart from the path of duty and order. She writes to Des Preux: “Dès le premier jour que j’eus le malheur de te voir, je sentis le poison qui corrompt mes sens et ma raison: je le sentis du premier instant et tes yeux, tes sentiments, tes discours, ta plume criminelle le rendent chaque jour plus mortel.” (p.13). Rousseau’s fundamental adherence to attitudes which cause him grave difficulties in developing Julie’s character, are complicated by his being himself torn between the absolutes of intellect which require him to be orderly and reasonable in his thesis and his projection into her of his own emotions which threaten to overwhelm it. Thus, although Julie succumbs to her passion, she acquires moral ascendancy over her lover through her approaching maternity, while torn with guilty feelings of her own. A guilty angel and innocent libertine living an immoral idyll amidst virtue-giving Nature are, however, paradoxes too weighty for the flimsy plot even when presented as the result of destructive passion. Rousseau’s thesis reaches an impasse which he resolves by transforming Julie into the wife of another man and ascribing to her a mystic conversion. The description of the wedding ceremony reads like an exorcism. She arrives at the church still in the grip of her passion for Des Preux, “menée au temple comme une victime impure qui souille le sacrifice où l’on va l’immoler” but then feels, she says, “une émotion que je n’avais jamais éprouvée...une terreur vint

saisir” son “âme..tout rempli de la majesté de celui qu’on y sert.” (p.332). The words of the mass, their security and their order, act on her like a magic incantation. “La pureté, la dignité, la sainteté du mariage, si vivement exposées...ses chastes et sublimes devoirs, si important au bonheur, à l’order, à la paix, à la durée...tout ceci me fit une telle impression que je crus sentir intérieurement une révolution subite.” (p.333). The revolution purifies her: “une puissance inconnue sembla corriger tout à coup le désordre de mes affections et les rétablir selon la loi du devoir et de la nature.” (p.333). The spell of passion is broken and Julie is free to think of her lover without guilt...“je connus dès ce moment que j’étais réellement changée.” (p.334).

By this device, Rousseau attempts to show that amidst all other passions, “quand celle de la vertu vient à s’élever, elle domine seule et tient tout en équilibre.” (p.476). He gives to his novel a socially acceptable ending, passion proving destructive, but neither he nor his heroine is able to reconcile the absolutes and although Julie dies as a way of extricating the novelist, her character in all its unresolved paradoxes — guilty saint, innocent witch — lingers on in literature and society, to be modified and developed by the Romantics and the Victorians, its neurotic dimensions to be analysed by Freud and modern psychologists.

At the opposite extreme to Rousseau among eighteenth century novelists are two who reject the thesis that virtue alone is natural. Sade, in *Juliette*¹⁶ asserts that libertinage, vice and crime are also natural, virtue a mere convention. Human nature is governed by self interest, pleasure is its motivation, and human relations are a power struggle where the powerful abuse and degrade the weak, the latter being to a greater or lesser degree accomplices in their degradation. *Les Liaisons dangereuses*¹⁷ expresses a view of the human condition similar to Sade’s, but whereas Sade describes the extreme forms that abuse of power takes, with particular attention

to the relations between the sexes, Laclos examines the power struggle in terms of drawing-room behaviour. He focuses on the mechanism, the technique and the psychology of power: its strategies, its ploys, its pleasures. In *Liaisons* not merely is innocence corrupted, virtue outraged and vice exposed, but Laclos shows why it is so and how. He suggests that immorality is learned from amoral education and example. No other novel in the eighteenth century more clearly shows the human condition as a duel. The language of the relationships is invariably that of conflict, though the characters talk about love. The latter is presented as a battle trophy, the prize in a military campaign.

Laclos' world is divided into aggressors and prey, the powerful and their victims, both male and female; all human activity is based on a pattern of conquest or defence. Seduction, corruption, manipulation, are both a game and an art form. This is apparent in the very first letter from the Viconte de Valmay to his devilish soul-mate, the Marquise de Merteuil, where he informs her of his latest plan for amusement: "le plus grand projet que j'aie jamais formé" (p. 31). This is no mere undertaking to seduce "une jeune fille qui n'a rien vu, ne connaît rien, qui pour ainsi dire me serait livrée sans défense, qu'un premier hommage ne manquera pas d'enivrer et que la curiosité mènera peut-être plus vite que l'amour" (p. 31). His chosen prey, La Présidente de Tourvel with her "devotion, son amour conjugal, ses principes austères" (p. 31), is an opponent worthy of his skills; he aims to corrupt virtue personified: "Voilà ce que j'attaque, voilà l'ennemi digne de moi." (p. 31). The prospect of a siege excites him: "une passion forte" consumes him; he writes "je désire vivement...je dévore les obstacles...Je n'ai plus qu'une idée. J'ai bien besoin d'avoir cette femme pour me sauver du ridicule d'en être amoureux." (p. 32).

The Marquise calls this campaign a "ridicule caprice", but to the Viconte, it is a major chal-

lenge (p. 31). He aims at nothing less than replacing God in the Présidente's heart. The inevitable suffering of his prey has no importance, will indeed be the proof of his success: "Qu'elle croie à la vertu, mais qu'elle me la sacrifie; que ses fautes l'épouvantent sans pouvoir l'arrêter; et qu'agitée de mille terreurs, elle ne puisse les vaincre que dans mes bras...Qu'alors elle me dise 'je t'adore'...Je serai vraiment le Dieu qu'elle aura préféré." (p. 33).

The Marquise is, however, unappreciative of her confidant's initiative, for she had had other plans for him: an adventure "digne d'un Héros", combining "amour" and "vengeance" (p. 29). She proposes to take revenge for a past humiliation by having the Viconte seduce the bride of their old enemy: "si une fois vous formez cette petite fille, il y aura bien du malheur si le Gercourt ne devient pas..la fable de Paris" (p. 27). She describes their proposed victim as "vraiment jolie; cela n'a que 15 ans, c'est le bouton de rose": a satirical comment on the physical charms of the stereotyped persecuted heroine (p.29).

With this economical military vocabulary, Laclos quickly introduces a whole series of intertwined intrigues and duels set up by the corrupters: that between the Viconte and his prude, the one between the Viconte and God, that between the Viconte and the innocent heroine — one which will plunge her and her innocent admirer into intrigue with each other and with their families — that between the Marquise and her old enemy, and the one which proves deadliest of all, that between the Viconte and his ally the Marquise herself.

In the case of the latter, the language describing their relationship is often political. The Viconte writes to her when she has been peremptory: "vous feriez chérir le despotisme" (p. 30) and follows this veiled barb with: "Il n'est donc pas de femme qui n'abuse de l'empire qu'elle a su prendre" (p. 35). Later, his threats are even clearer: "chacun de nous ayant en main tout ce

qu'il faut pour perdre l'autre, nous avons un égal intérêt à nous ménager mutuellement" (p. 403). They and they alone occupy a middle ground in the battle of absolutes but it is defined by and based on a balance of power. This, warns the Viconte, can change; in case of need, he will resort to extremes: "je serai ou votre Amant ou votre ennemi" (p. 403). This language suggests perhaps that Laclos intends his power struggles to be interpreted in a wider context than the immediate one of men and women in an immoral society game.

The novel as a whole is a detailed analysis of the duels set in play in the first pages: Laclos exposes the strategies, the motivations, the thrust and parry as the characters act, react, and manoeuvre, according to their various weaknesses and strengths. Love, though the ostensible prize, is never seen as a matter of affection or intimacy or shared happiness, except in the mind of the Présidente de Tourvel. Her serenity is a state of being, but all the other main characters are motivated by having, possessing, conquering, winning, victory.

As in Sade, men have the upper hand, a natural advantage in this predatory world. The Viconte writes to the Marquise: "des moyens de déshonorer une femme, j'en ai trouvé cent, j'en ai trouvé mille: mais quand je me suis occupé de chercher comment elles pourraient s'en sauver, je n'en ai jamais vu la possibilité" (p. 182). Even she, the ruthless Marquise, he says, "dont la conduite est un chef-d'oeuvre, cent fois, j'ai cru vous voir plus de bonheur que de bien joué" (p. 182). To this accusation of weakness, of putting happiness before the elegance of the sport, she replies agreeing with him in general: "Pour vous autres hommes, les défaites ne sont que des succès de moins. Dans cette partie si inégale, votre fortune est de ne pas perdre, et votre malheur de ne pas gagner" (p. 203). But she is not to be confused with the generality of women, she adds indignantly: "Mais moi, qu'ai — je de commun avec ces femmes inconsidérées? quand

m'avez-vous vue m'écarter des règles que je me suis prescrites et manquer à mes principes? je dis mes principes et je le dis à dessein; car ils ne sont pas, comme ceux des autres femmes, donnés au hasard, reçus sans examen et suivis par habitude, ils sont le fruit de mes profondes réflexions; je les ai créés, et je puis dire que je suis mon ouvrage" (p. 203).

She too, in her intellectual scorn and pride, challenges God and nature, asserting that she is her own creation. In a long explanation, she traces her career, explaining how she became what she is. First, "fille encore..vouée par état au silence et à l'inaction" — the starting point of almost all eighteenth century female characters — she had learned from her environment and education to dissimulate, to hide her feelings and thoughts: "Je n'avais à moi que ma pensée et je m'indignais qu'on put me la ravir ou me la surprendre contre ma volonté" (p.203). Building on this skill, "munie de ces armes", she looked forward to the object of all female education — her marriage — not in anticipation of happiness, but in the hope of acquiring important knowledge: "Je ne désirai pas de jouir, je voulais savoir" (pp.204-5). The opportunity came when she arrived "vierge dans les bras de Monsieur de Mertueil" (p. 205). During her wedding night, she studied carefully: "J'observai tout exactement" (p.205). Soon after, bored by the fashionable life of a married lady, she took advantage of her scientific knowledge and proceeded to widen her experience. This confirmed her notion that knowing and intrigue interested her more than love: "je m'assurai que l'amour que l'on nous vante comme la cause de nos plaisirs n'en est plus que le prétexte" (p. 205).

Having thus discovered her true vocation, not as a voluptuary but as a duellist in power games, and being threatened with the convent on the death of her husband, she again studied in self-defence. She read the philosophers and moralists to see what society expected her to do, to think and to be, and having mastered these and con-

cluded that in order to do just as she pleased, “il suffisait de joindre à l’esprit d’un Auteur le talent d’un Comédien”, she again went on the attack, playing the role of the virtuous society lady (p. 207). An apparently affectionate friend, wise counsellor and suitable confidante for young innocents, she perfected a facade behind which she became a fully-fledged, ruthless libertine. Only the Viconte could expose her because only he knew her true nature. Thus does Laclos explain the genesis of a she-devil, an “evil of nature painted in fair colours,”¹⁸ the clever scheming false woman feared by the philosophers. She is seen to be the natural product of an immoral and power-dominated environment.

As for the young innocent, she is seduced by the Viconte to please the Marquise and to while away his bored moments. She is, as he predicted, an easy conquest, being vain and having no principles to prevent her being attracted by vice. Her education, largely institutionalised silliness, hypocrisy and vanity, offers her no defences and has indeed trained her to become a willing accomplice in intrigue. She is raised and formed to be first a victim of seduction then a minor player in the games and trickery and manipulation of her world.

The Présidente, whose generous mind and spiritual strength keeps her at first apart from the power games of society, becomes by her very invincibility, a challenge to the libertines, a citadel to be stormed. She is not so much seduced as induced to succumb. Every gesture, every word in fashionable social life is related as a passage of arms, the language of love itself is imbued with strategic significance. It both attacks and disarms. The Présidente’s defences are undermined by the prospect of reforming a rake. Both she and the Viconte become victims of this ploy, falling in love against their will; but where he, being vain and shallow, recovers in the pride of his conquest, she, having loved with all her integrity and against her very nature, does not. She ends mad, destroyed by the knowledge that she has

been betrayed, by her guilt, her remorse and the uncontrollable longing for the lover who has caused all her ruin. In her obsessed state, her mind wanders between the absolutes which have destroyed her: she who was absolutely virtuous now feels absolutely guilty, deserving a just vengeance by both her husband and God. Not clear to whom she is writing, she alternates between her husband and her lover, between love and hate for the latter, she is both participant and victim. God has abandoned her and delivered her to a monster: “il m’a livrée à celui-lui même qui m’a perdue... Je veux le fuir; en vain, il me suit... Oh mon aimable ami, reçois-moi dans tes bras... tourne vers moi tes doux regards... Dieu, c’est ce monstre encore... laisse moi donc cruel... tu redoubles mon tourment, tu me forces de te haïr.”¹⁹ Having thus fulfilled the Viconte’s ambition, and having shown that there is no hope of reconciling absolutes in the eighteenth century novel world, she adds “N’attendez plus rien de moi” and dies.²⁰

Conventional morality has the last word, for everyone ends badly in this novel, though this is not Laclos’ primary concern. He is one of the keenest psychologists of the eighteenth century and in his work, the stereotypes become true characters and are imbued with considerable power and vraisemblance. His intention was perhaps, to criticise the system they personify, to undermine their influence by showing the disastrous results of forcing people into fixed roles, of defining values as rigorous absolutes with no middle ground. He was perhaps, appealing for change, portraying women and the weak as sighing, as Diderot would say, “sourdement après un libérateur.”²¹ Yet this appeal is not clear because he did not — except perhaps in the sketch of some minor characters — suggest any alternative. By his very skill as a psychologist, he contributed to fixing the polarisation of the two types: the fascinating wicked female and the defenceless, virtuous one, both destroyed in an eternal struggle which none can escape because it is inherent in social relations.

The same tendency to inadvertently fix the absolutes while illustrating their inherently destructive nature is evident in other novels and their treatment of their heroines. Prévost, with his splendid psychological insights, made the amoral adventuress attractive and loving, but condemned her to death as a bad influence on a young man. In *Paul et Virginie*, Bernardin de Saint Pierre gave to the virtuous, passive nymph /angel one last polish and despatched her into the nineteenth century as a figure of pathos, most interesting on her death-bed or in her tomb.²² Diderot, on the other hand, made virtue intelligent.²³ In his portrait of a girl condemned by the absolutes and conventions of her world to the prison of a convent, he almost transcended the absolutes. His nun is not defined wholly by her virtue, but is a character in search of freedom. She asserts her individuality and her right to determine her own fate as firmly as do the adventuresses and libertines elsewhere and this duality perplexes the inhabitants of her world. In the course of her confrontation with authority she is both accused of witchcraft and addressed as Saint Suzanne. She is an astonishingly modern creation caught in an eighteenth century trap. The ultimate trap, however, is the novelist's thesis. Diderot does in fact allow her to escape the convent, but then loses interest in her and brings his story to an end. He does not free her character by exploring the new sort of woman she will become. Like his contemporaries, he was more preoccupied with definition than with reconciliation, so although he is the least ambiguous of all novelists in his sympathy for his heroine's condition, he shows us the madness and chaos that absolutes cause, then leaves us with them intact, uninterested in transcending them.

Few novelists indeed are interested in transcendence. Few attempt it, but there is one notable exception. Marivaux, of all eighteenth century novelists, is the one whose characters are the most alive and idiosyncratic. In *La Vie de Marianne*, the latent fear of women as a dangerous

force is wholly absent.²⁴ Marivaux has no apparent moral thesis, and no visibly predetermined ending. He allows his heroine to grow, to change, to elaborate the details of the story. He puts a little distance between himself and his creations, who thus inhabit that middle ground between value systems and emotion, between social mores and individual destiny, that is the domain of the great novelist — one to be perfected by the nineteenth century Russian novelists. Though his language is conventional, his vision is not. He says of Mme Dorsin, "elle était la meilleure de toutes les amies, et elle aurait été la plus agréable de toutes les maîtresses" (p. 210), and of Marianne's adopted mother, he says that she had "beaucoup d'amis et même d'amies" — almost unique remarks in a literature where outside Rousseau, it is axiomatic that women are too jealous to have friends (p.168). Of the latter character, he says "C'était son coeur et non son esprit qui philosophait" (p.168). Such affectionate and amusing comments come from a genuine spontaneous interest in human nature, an interest that enabled him to create a heroine who is neither witch nor angel, and whose adventures owe little to convention or contrivance, whose dramas are not always based on the duel.

Marianne, having lost her parents, is potentially a persecuted heroine or an independent-minded adventuress. In fact she is neither, or both. She says "je ne sais point philosopher, et je ne m'en soucie guère, car je crois que cela n'apprend rien qu'à discourir..Je pense..qu'il n'y a que le sentiment qui nous puisse donner des nouvelles un peu sûres de nous" (p. 22). This combination of the values of feeling and self reliance makes her an exception to her contemporaries in almost every way. Unlike Diderot's Suzanne and Rousseau's Julie, she eludes the tyranny of family and society trying to dispose of her, as she eludes all other absolutes. Marivaux transcends them simply by not writing them into his heroine's character. She is a light-hearted, free creation, complex, capable of con-

tradictory motives and behaviour. The novel purports to be her *Mémoires*, those of “une femme qui pense, qui a passé par différents états, qui a beaucoup vu..dont la vie..lui..a donné une certaine connaissance du coeur et du caractère des hommes” (p. 25). By this device, Marivaux frees himself to send forth his heroine/narratrice into the world where she changes mood, status, fortune and occupation, each new role marked by a new set of clothes and each revealing a new aspect of her personality. She is both virtuous and capable of using her virtue knowingly as a ruse, she is beautiful and chaste, ambitious but generous, she is aware of her power but does not abuse it. Her behaviour and that of the characters whom she encounters is so comparatively unpredictable that several endings to the novel seem possible. Convention demanded that she be reunited with suitable parents before being permitted to make a good match, but Marivaux seems to have considered other possibilities. At one point, Marianne almost marries into the aristocracy with no other merit than her personal qualities, and is supported in this by the parent of her admirer. It is true that the parent is a mother — and therefore presumably capable of strange reasonings, but that this is not the ending of the story seems to be less a matter of plot or thesis, than simply because Marivaux has more to say about her character and more characters for her to meet, ranging from the aristocracy in a variety of guises, through to quarrelsome concierges and carriage drivers, some virtuous, some not, some a mixture of the two, few defined wholly by their morality. We go from sentimental pathos to farce, and from castles to convents to garrets to the streets, for the sheer pleasure, it seems, of exploring the infinite variety of human nature. It is life and destiny that interest this novelist more than absolutes.

His wealth of nuances leads him to create characters that outgrow the straitjacket of convention and absolutes, and they might have led him to defy the conventions of plot with all the political overtones that plot implies in the

French eighteenth century novel. Certain it is that in the unfinished form, order does not prevail. Marianne neither dies nor marries, nor is definitively punished or rewarded. Had Marivaux actually allowed his heroine to make an unequal match and thrive on it, he might have freed the novel to explore that dimension of the moral debate that is so conspicuously lacking until the eve of the Revolution when Bernardin de Saint Pierre articulated it at the end of *Paul et Virginie*: the relationship of individual morality to social equality and justice.²⁵

For despite the preoccupation with virtue and the consistent rewards and punishments, there are few characters revolting against the order implicit in this world, few characters crying rebelliously with Figaro and Suzanne “vous vous êtes donné la peine de naître, Monsieur le Comte”, few portraits of virtue outside the aristocratic class, little analysis of behaviour or morality outside the context of social and sexual mores.²⁶ All too often, the individual is subordinated to the short-hand oppositions of virtue and vice, the characters squeezed into one of these categories or the other. The novelists by limiting themselves to definition, evade the issues they raise, and despite the power of their thought and their style, and in some cases, their undoubted gift as storytellers and psychologists, they fail to see beyond the limitations of the inherited stereotypes in which they personify their ideas.

One could wish they had projected a more generous, more wide-ranging portrait of humanity, for in their intellectual enlightenment, they took humanity's dark fears of evil out of the realm of the supernatural and ascribed them clearly and irrevocably to human nature. Prisoners of their definitions, they perpetuated a misogynist and blinkered, at best ambiguous, vision of humanity as one where people are inevitably engaged in power struggles, defined absolutely by their differences of sex or of class, categorised absolutely as good or bad and this

would remain associated with their philosophic achievements and pass into the imagination of their successors, in literature and in social behaviour. It is possible that Western civilisation has not yet freed itself of this legacy and is still struggling to reconcile the oppositions they defined. Certainly the novel would have to wait for Stendhal for an artist capable of transcending the witch-saint opposition and of presenting characters of authentic verisimilitude and depth.

NOTES

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3. Prevost, *Manon Lescaut*, avec Préface de Pierre MacOrlan, Gallimard et Librairie Générale Française, 1959. p. 59.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
6. J.-J. Rousseau, *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Garnier, Paris, 1960. p. 39
7. Voltaire, "Zadig, Histoire orientale" in *Romans et Contes*. Garnier, Paris, 1960.
8. Diderot, "Les bijoux indiscrets" in *Oeuvres*, ed. by André Billy, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade Gallimard, Bruges, 1969.
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11. Diderot, "Sur les femmes" in *Oeuvres*, ed. by André Billy, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, Bruges, 1969.
12. Montesquieu, *Lettres Persanes*, Nelson Editeurs, Paris, 1951. p. 225.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 90
14. Rousseau, *op. cit.*, p. 664
15. *Ibid.*, p. 33. Further references to this work will be included in the text.
16. Sade, D.A.F. Marquis de, *Juliette ou les prospérités du vice*, Edit. Sambel, Paris, London, New York.
17. Laclos, Choderlos de, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, avec Préface d'André Malraux, Ed. Gallimard, 1952. Further references to this work will be included in the text.
18. *Malleus Maleficarum*, *op. cit.*
19. Laclos, *op. cit.*, p. 416.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 416
21. Diderot, *La religieuse*, dans *Diderot: Le Neveu de Rameau suivi de La Religieuse*, Union Général d'Éditions, Paris, p. 294.
22. Bernardin de Saint Pierre, *Paul et Virginie*, Nelson Editeurs, Paris.
23. Diderot, *op. cit.*
24. Marivaux, *La vie de Marianne*, ed. F. Deloffre, Garnier, Paris, 1963.
25. Bernardin de Saint Pierre, *op. cit.*
26. Beaumarchais, *Le Mariage de Figaro*, Classiques Larousse, Paris.