

The Education of Marianne

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ABSTRACT

Marivaux's *La vie de Marianne* forms an interesting contrast to the prevalent authoritarian and reactionary view of women in eighteenth century France. It can be read as a fledgling feminist vision of what womens' education could or should be.

RÉSUMÉ

L'éducation de l'héroïne de *La vie de Marianne* s'inscrit dans une vision féministe du potentiel de la femme esquissée en France par quelques écrivains et écrivaines du début du dix-huitième siècle, et qui forme un contraste intéressant avec l'attitude autoritaire et réactionnaire prévalent à l'époque, illustrée notamment, plus tard, par Rousseau.

The behaviour of women in the eighteenth century French novel is portrayed as deplorable. Women are presented as dangerous to social order and to the honest man: emotional, immoderate and sexually predatory, they are inclined by nature to libertinage. If they are beautiful, they are temptresses without morals, if virtuous, they are prone to seduction by libertine men, if intelligent, they are seen as wilful, disobedient and careless of the social good. Their "charms" and their insatiable desire to please are seen as destructive either of their own virtue or of men's "reason," making the good citizen forgetful of what is due to his rank. As social order and reason dictate that a good marriage be founded on equality of rank and fortune, an alliance of families not of individuals, the rebel the heroine who refuses to obey her family—and the adventurer—the beautiful girl without rank or family—are its natural enemies. Whereas the adventurer hero of the novel, though without rank or fortune, can accede to these by experiences which give him a suitable "education," the adventuress remains "déclassée," dangerous in her charms because any man choosing to marry her, whatever her merit, becomes "déclassé" also, an exile from his own world, untrue to himself. In brief, from Prévot's *Manon*¹ through the vicious world of Sade² and Laclos,³ from *La Nouvelle Heloise*⁴ to *Paul et Virginie*,⁵ there is a notable lack of suitable wives for the "honnête homme" and this the novelists concur in ascribing to the faulty education of women.

In non-fiction also one finds a similar criticism of womens' education. Essayists throughout the century discuss the training necessary to correct the same faults. They concur with the novelists that the prevailing education (or lack of it) results in women who are vain coquettes, essentially amoral and hypocritical, dependent on their prey,

the male, and trading on their charms. They concur, too, in the basic aims of a more suitable education. Women should be trained to be good wives, capable of directing their households and finding their happiness in doing so virtuously. For this, they need a solid education in behaviour and values.

There are, however, two different schools of thought about how to achieve these aims. The dominant one, which the novelists on the whole endorse (though with nuances in the case of the "philosophes") and that the nineteenth century would perpetuate after Rousseau had crowned it in *Emile*,⁶ affirms that women are not capable of determining their own behaviours and values. They must be made to conform to the prevailing values of society, subordinating their nature (their sexual proclivities and desire to please, their frivolous pursuit of happiness) to an imposed cult of domestic virtue. Being "unreasonably emotional" by nature, they must learn obedience and submission to men's more "rational" judgement. This authoritarian view can be summarized as prescribing just enough instruction to guard their reputation and just enough religion to reconcile them to domination and direction by men—their father, their husband and the faceless male hierarchy of authority of church and state.

On the other hand, there is a quite different set of attitudes discernible in the early years of the century, prescribing an education in self-respect, presenting women as capable of defining their own happiness, and of being virtuous from choice. This thesis is developed chiefly by essayists, the most often quoted of whom is Fénelon⁷. Its elaboration, however, is largely the work of women. Mme de Maintenon⁸ before him and Mme de Lambert,⁹ Mme d'Épinay¹⁰ and at the end of the century, Mme de Genlis,¹¹

writing from personal experience, develop and add nuances to Fénelon's precepts. Mme de Lambert is particularly interesting, affirming the ability of women to think rationally and to make self-respect and loving kindness the basis of their behaviour and values.

Marivaux's Marianne¹² is a heroine in this mode. She is an exception in almost every way to the eighteenth century novelists' view of their female characters. Marivaux knew and admired Mme de Lambert and observed with appreciation the characters of other notable hostesses of salons he frequented. He ascribed their qualities to the heroines of his plays and in *La Vie de Marianne* dramatised many of the maxims which Mme de Lambert outlined in her writing.

Marianne is of obscure origins, having been separated by an accident from her parents while a baby. She therefore, cannot hope for a conventionally good match. Unlike many girls in reality, or such fictional heroines as Diderot's Suzanne¹³ and Rousseau's Julie, neither is she disposed of without her consent by an ambitious family. The novel relates how she makes her own way in the world, seeking love and social success. She thus shares the basic status of the adventuress. Like Prévot's Manon, she has no natural preceptress to teach her the values and behaviours expected of her. They are both placed outside the social norm by their lack of birth. Where Manon is an adventuress in the stereotyped mode, amoral, dangerously lovable and charming, ultimately destructive, Marianne is presented as basically a virtuous conformist but capable of developing her own standards of behavior, her own system of values and of determining her own destiny. The novel, which is written in the first person, from Marianne's own point of view, can therefore be read as a detailed analysis of an alternative, "might-have-been" form of education in the eighteenth century, showing what it consists of, how it works and what the end product will be.

Marivaux achieves this perspective by the structure of the novel. There are two Mariannes in his heroine, the young girl whose story he is telling, inexperienced and naive, and the older woman who is the narrator of the novel and whose comments, the famous "reflexions," can be read as revealing the mature person she will become. We see, to use Marivaux's own word, a series of "leçons" or trials put in the way of the young girl which, anticipating the precepts of Rousseau and modern pedagogues, evolve in sophistication as she grows to adulthood.

Marianne's lessons are not academic debates about the abstractions of social justice and political freedom as are such philosophic novels about women as *La Religieuse* or *Lettres persanes*.¹⁴ Nor are they illustrations of a thesis about vice as are Sade's novels or analyses of amorality as is *Liaisons dangereuses*. Marianne is not a tragic personification of virtue like Rousseau's Julie, nor a cardboard adjunct to a hero as is his Sophie. Marianne is "une femme qui raconte sa vie" (p. 8) and her "leçons" are dramatisations of behaviour, adventures which develop self-awareness and self-knowledge, a critical knowledge of the world and its ways. They lead ultimately to a security and virtuous happiness that come from within. Marianne learns, in brief, a self reliance that Mme de Lambert, in a more pious vein, recommends to her daughter, saying "Apprenez que la plus grande science est de savoir être à soi"¹⁵ and "Croyez que le sage ne court pas après la félicité mais qu'il se la donne."¹⁶

Marianne learns, says Marivaux, in the first instance by intuition, having certain innate tastes and inclinations. (These are perhaps inherited. Marivaux always leaves open the option of providing Marianne with suitable parents once her character has triumphed in its own right.) Among these, defying the stereotype of the adventuress, is an instinctive sense of right and wrong. Marianne, unlike Manon, is naturally inclined to virtue and she recognizes and appreciates goodness in others. Yet she is also naturally vain, and being mortified by her dependent status, is ready to seize whatever advantage offers, however hazardous it may seem. Like other persecuted heroines whose virtue is put to the test, she encounters vice early in the form of a false "dévot" to whom she has fled for help, but who tries to seduce her. The test is severe, for her situation is one of great insecurity and she is tempted to keep his gifts of fine clothes that enhance her charms, lend her the outward appearance of higher status and so enable her to catch the eye of a young man, Valville. Virtue triumphs however and—as frequently occurs in this novel—the serious lesson is followed by a parody when her employer, a linen-draper, gives her cynical advice about how to profit from the advances of a libertine without actually losing her virtue. Her innate sensitivity, however, on which Marivaux often insists, enables her to recognize the element of unscrupulous self-interest in the shop-keeper's recommendations. Marianne realizes that her character is "trop vrai pour" se "conduire de cette manière-là" and says "Je haïssais la fourberie, de quelque espèce qu'elle fut, surtout celle-ci dont le motif était d'une bassesse qui me faisait horreur" (p. 48). Yet, like Rousseau's Sophie, she has, and develops, an innate talent for pragmatic "ruse." Her honesty, she discovers, is not a

rigorous absolute. She determines to tell her protector that she cannot love him, but that if he persists in giving her presents, she will take them "sans scrupule" (p. 49). Having thus made a "petit arrangement" with her conscience without wholly abandoning the hope of keeping the clothes she prizes, Marianne is almost immediately rewarded by meeting a true protectress who turns out to be the mother of Valville. This first encounter with danger and vice thus ends in material security and love but also—and more importantly—in the discovery within herself of certain nuanced values and a certain resourcefulness and courage which strengthen her self-respect. As these are reinforced by the esteem of Mme de Miran and the love of Valville, Marianne's self-image begins to change also. She sees herself as possessing a potentially noble character and aspires to develop it to offset her obscure origins.

Having no parents to be "reasonable" for her, or to impose their control over her "feminine" tendency to be emotional, Marianne must learn (and Marivaux is free to determine) her own way of controlling herself. Her first reactions to joy or despair are unrestrained. She weeps with great freedom and frequency, she gives reign to her temper when provoked, she is gleeful at her successes and passionately grateful for affection and support. Marivaux is doubtless responding to popular taste when he makes her faint and lacrymose, but this is never his whole purpose. Once Marianne has sobbed out her despair, her brain clears and she is able to think. After a scene of misunderstanding between herself and Valville, Marianne analyzes the advantages of tears:

Je pleurais donc, et il n'y avait peut-être pas de meilleur expédient pour me tirer d'affaire. Vous croyez que mon découragement est mal entendu...et c'est le contraire. Il va rémédier à tout; car premièrement il me soulagea, il me mit à mon aise, il affaiblit ma vanité, il me défit de cet orgueilleux effroi que j'avais...Voilà déjà bien du repos pour moi (p. 80).

She then explains how her tears ennobled her in the eyes of her lover, disarmed his anger, put the onus on him to extricate them both from their misunderstanding and brought about "une réparation des injures que" lui "faisaient le sort" (p. 83). Her frank expression of her emotions frees her of them and of the necessity to manipulate those of others as she regains control of her destiny. Thus does Marivaux establish a distinction between true self-control and the imposed repression of feeling that leads to neurotic behaviors so common to women's education elsewhere in fiction and reality.

Marianne thinks, but like Rousseau's Sophie, is unconcerned with "reason":

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, pour moi, qu'il n'y a que le sentiment qui nous puisse donner des nouvelles un peu sûres de nous, et qu'il ne faut pas trop se fier à celles que notre esprit veut faire à sa guise, car je le crois un grand visionnaire (p.22).

Her thought processes are inseparable from her "sentiments." Gradually she learns to value above all those feelings that come from the heart. Like her model, Mme de Miran, "c'était son coeur, et non pas son esprit qui philosophait" (p. 171). Not that Marivaux considers women incapable of intellectual thought. He echoes Mme de Lambert in his high opinion of women's intelligence. His highest praise is reserved for women who are both intellectual and kind. Of his friend Mme de Tencin, the original of Mme Dorsin in the novel, he wrote: "Cette dame était un prodige de perfection. Elle avait le coeur excellent et le caractère admirable; et pour l'esprit, toute la force de celui de l'homme, mêlé avec toute la délicatesse de celui des femmes..." (p. 210).

Learning to control her feelings and to be motivated by kind, honest and respectful ones is, however, for Marianne a long process with many set-backs. Though Marivaux's vocabulary lacks such useful modern words as "sentimental, intuitif, mental, amical, fortuit, fictif, psychologique,"¹⁷ he presents his heroine as learning how psychological nuances affect decisions and actions. Marianne becomes particularly sensitive to mixed motivation, recognizing the small cheats and self-deceptions that people allow themselves, when "quelquefois on est glorieux avec soi-même, on fait des l'âchetés qu'on ne veut pas avoir, et qu'on se déguise sous d'autres noms" (p. 132). She must also learn disarming techniques for saving face when confronted with a "situation équivoque" and the embarrassment and mortification people endure as their social masks lead them into further delusion, or are stripped away.

In such scenes, Marianne learns that honesty and self-awareness are not enough to avoid humiliation. Indeed much of what she learns is inspired (as is much of the writing of women educationalists, notably Mme d'Épinay), by the experience of mortification and wounds to self-esteem. Because she has no parents to give her status, she is at the mercy of social prejudice which discounts her individuality. Marivaux provides her with some social ex-

ceptions who see beyond her lack of parentage to her individual worth and who accept her into their social circle. Significantly these people of unusual discernment and generosity are women. Yet as their male advisor points out to them, their courtesy is a gift, not a right: "Ce ne sera pas moi qui lui refuserai le titre de mademoiselle," he says to Mme de Miran, "...mais...C'est comme un présent que nous lui faisons et que les autres peuvent se dispenser de lui faire" (p. 331). Others do in fact dispense with the courtesy and Marianne is at times exposed to tactlessness, malice and cruelty. She must learn to defend herself. At first she is inclined to think in terms of vengeance, as do other women she meets, motivated by the jealousy and competitiveness inherent in the cult of pleasing. She tends to see relationships in terms of victim and persecutor, victor and vanquished, but from the example of Mme de Miran and Mme Dorsin, she learns, as Mme de Lambert tries to teach her daughter, to extricate herself from mortification without humiliating others.

Non-vindictiveness and respect are not seen as passive behaviour. Marianne also learns from Mme de Miran and Mme Dorsin that difficult situations can be resolved by a little thoughtful ingenuity and contrivance. She learns to distinguish between "fourberies"—power-plays which harm or exploit others—and "arrangements" made by people who respect themselves and others. In the other world of Mme de Miran and Mme Dorsin, common sense and the exercise of a little judicious manoeuvring can reconcile love with social order, sentiment with reason, happiness with goodness. Their value system and its behaviour patterns are flexible, nuanced with common sense and humour. They reconcile the opposed absolutes of the eighteenth century debate on womens' education and lead to potentially harmonious relations between men and women. It is a harmony where love, born of self-respect and intelligent concern for others, love in all its forms from physical passion to friendly affection, is not merely an end but also intrinsic to the means. Molière¹⁸ had already pleaded in the seventeenth century for the right of girls to marry for love and not just be disposed of as possessions against their will. Marivaux and Mme de Lambert go beyond this. They suggest that the ability to love is the vital key to all harmonious human relations and that it must be learned. Mme de Lambert suggested creating a school for love, teaching "une métaphysique de l'amour."¹⁹ Marivaux's works are one long analysis of love and its relationship to other forms of social behavior. Marianne, like Mme de Lambert's daughter, must learn how to like, esteem and love, first herself, then those around her and finally the man of her choice. She is, therefore, exposed to a wide range of nuanced affection

and attraction. Her first experience of sexual passion—lust masquerading as charity—is dramatically contrasted to her discovery of "la tendresse" when she first sees Valville. Here she experiences that fusion of physical attraction, affection and respect that is Marivaux's ideal. In Marianne this is a less intense emotion than her passionate loving gratitude to Valville's mother. This may seem somewhat disturbing to the modern reader, but it has an inner coherence, for Mme de Miran's concern is sensitive and never humiliating. It proves worthy of Marianne's love where Valville's does not. He will prove inconstant and leave Marianne to learn bitter lessons of romantic disillusionment and hurt pride. Mme de Miran is a model for Marianne of how to give without putting the beneficiary at a disadvantage. Marivaux elaborates this theme at length, reserving his highest praise for Mme Dorsin: "une âme qui ne vous demande rien pour les services qu'elle vous a rendus, sinon que vous en preniez droit d'en exiger d'autres, qui ne veut rien que le plaisir de vous voir abuser de la coutume qu'elle a de vous obliger" (p. 224) and whose giving and helping is enhanced by true insight:

tout ce que vous n'osiez lui dire, son esprit le pénétrait; il en instruisait son coeur, il l'échauffait de ses lumières, et lui donnait pour vous tous les degrés de bonté qui vous étaient nécessaires. Et ce nécessaire allait toujours plus loin que vous ne l'aviez imaginé vous-même (p. 223).

This ideal has a sharp contrast in the condescending, despotic intervention of Valville's powerful relatives, determined to stop his marriage to Marianne. They kidnap her and provide her with another bride-groom and a single crude alternative—banishment or the convent. The young man himself offers a contrast to Valville also. Where the latter, inspired by his first sight of Marianne, is, in the early stages of his love at least, all heart and forgetfulness of self, the alternative bride-groom has never met her and wants to marry her solely for the protection and privileges that obedience to his patron would bring him. Marianne's third suitor is also uninterested in her individuality. He is the man of reason who has heard of her merits and cares nothing for her parentage:

Je suis homme de bon sens. C'est ma raison qui vous a donné mon coeur...Que m'importe à moi votre famille? Quand on la connaîtrait, fut-elle royale, ajouterait-ell quelque chose au mérite personnel que vous avez? (p. 423).

For Marianne, however, only a marriage for love and which permits her to keep her self-esteem will do. None of

her suitors offers this, not even Valville whom she loves, because she accepts the judgement of society of her ineligibility.

This attitude could lead Marianne into an impasse and indeed at the beginning of the scene where she is a captive of Valville's powerful relations, it seems that she is trapped, physically and psychologically. Marivaux then gives us clues—"leçons" to Marianne (and to women in the restricted world of the eighteenth century norm)—on the means of disarming oppressors. In a skillful fusion of her previous experience, she surprises her persecutors who expect her to affirm values alien to their own, whereas in fact she defends theirs, taking their argument as her own renouncing her love and leaving them with no case. Admitting her superiority to his prejudice, her judge and kidnapper, the most politically and socially powerful man in the novel, is so impressed with her personal values that he gives his consent to the match, explaining, "la noblesse de vos parents est incertaine, mais celle de votre coeur est incontestable, et je la préférerais s'il fallait opter" (p. 337). This echoes the maxims of Mme de Lambert whose son indeed made such an "unequal" marriage, doubtless encouraged by Marivaux himself. It also offers an interesting contrast to other fictional victims of autocratic decisions about their lives, Prévot's Manon who dies, Diderot's rebellious nun and Montesquier's harem wives, who achieve their freedom through a single-minded pursuit of an absolute, intellectually conceived—a "révolution dans la tête,"²⁰ but only at the expense of themselves, their persecutors and the institution that imprisons them. They are never vindicated as in Marianne, in their desire to be free.

Renunciation is a dangerous ploy, however, and when Valville proves unfaithful, Marianne learns from her friend, the nun Tervire, to beware of making self-denial a habit or an absolute that may trick her into the loss of her freedom. Tervire warns Marianne, who is considering entering a convent or marrying the man of reason, to avoid hyperbole and mental dramatization: "Vous croyez, ma chère Marianne," she says, "être née la personne du monde la plus malheureuse, et je voudrais bien vous ôter cette pensée qui est encore un autre malheur qu'on se fait à soi-même" (p. 430). The nun's story teaches Marianne to remain true to herself when faced with disillusionment and despair. The technique Tervire offers anticipates modern "positive thinking." Marianne must try to change her situation by changing her description of it. When comparing herself to girls of good family, Marianne should say "les autres ont un avantage qui me manque" and "j'ai une affliction plus qu'eux" (p. 430). Instead of dwelling on her lack of parents, she should ponder the re-

sources and consolations that she has: "un caractère excellent, un esprit raisonnable et une âme vertueuse qui valent bien des parents" (p. 430). This is an important lesson for Marianne because although she accepts the social order and neither seeks to change it nor rails against it, she does tend to see herself as a victim of it. Up to this point, she has not made any major decision concerning her destiny, but has merely reacted to events precipitated by others. From Tervire who perhaps made the wrong decisions, Marianne learns to further modify her self-image and so achieve emancipation from the role of the persecuted heroine. Marivaux leaves Marianne, the young girl, ready to take her destiny into her own hands, to achieve a new level of maturity.

Marianne is thus the antithesis of the dangerous, predatory adventuress of the fictional stereotype. She starts out as a young girl with many of the weaknesses pin-pointed by the eighteenth century critics—vanity, a craving to please, and shallowness of mind—but she learns to correct these without succumbing to vice. With experience, affectionately guided by women of intelligence, she learns to develop the qualities Fénelon and Mme de Lambert prize and those which we find endearing in Marivaux himself: urbane kindness, tolerant generosity, humour and worldly wisdom.

She is able to achieve this character development because she is not determined by the prevailing rigid definition of her role or prescription of her behaviour. Marivaux affirms the value of an education specifically for women, based on and geared to a cast of mind and standard of behaviour different from those of the norm, where virtue and happiness are not merely reconcilable but are reconcilable both in womens' terms and those of society. Where most unconventional heroines of later novels, though sometimes lovable and attractive to their own creators, come to a bad end, either dying or being otherwise punished, because they are creations of, and judged by, conventional morality and cannot be allowed to succeed in their unconventional behaviour, Marianne lives on, resilient and free, and rewarded by her creator.

Marivaux's suggestion that goodness of heart and nobility of character, generosity of mind and a strong virtuous soul are worthy of the highest dignities is part of the whole eighteenth century thrust of the talented middle-class novelists who sought to penetrate the world of privilege and its right to respect. His social thesis can thus be seen to be part of the movement of ideas that form the political and social mainstream of eighteenth century thought. Where he differs markedly from most other male

novelists of his day and the later part of the century, however, is in his affirmation that women, too, are entitled to respect for their individual qualities and that they are capable of earning that respect. He shows that their virtue, when based on a strong sense of self-worth, is intrinsic to their happiness, and that they do not need to be controlled and restrained by a pattern of behaviour conceived and imposed by men.

Marianne's freedom to be in a sense her own creation makes of her a twentieth century heroine astray in an eighteenth century world. She speaks to us directly across the gulf of 250 years of disbelief in womens' potential, for she is the creation of a fledgling feminist vision of what social relationships could be, were women free of an authoritarian and stereotyped vision of their limited nature. She is the creation of a man who knew from observation and from his friendship with such "grandes dames" as Mme de Lambert and Mme Tencin, that women living without the domination and control of authority need not be feared as recklessly amoral or destructive of the social order. Marivaux presents them, on the contrary, as a civilizing influence upon that order, adding to the basic requirements for social living—honesty, reason and moderation—a loving concern and insight that is peculiarly their own.

NOTES

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5. Saint-Pierre, Bernardin de, *Paul et Virginie*, Nelson Editeurs, Paris.
6. Rousseau, *Emile*, Garnier, Paris.
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9. Mme de Lambert, "Avis d'une mère à sa fille" et "Sur les femmes" dans *Oeuvres morales de la Marquise de Lambert*. Librairie des Bibliophiles.
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11. Mme de Genlis, *Discours sur la suppression des couvents et l'éducation publique des femmes*, 1790.
12. Marivaux, *La vie de Marianne*. Ed. Frédéric Deloffre, Garnier, Paris, 1963. All quotations from this novel are identified by page number in the text.
13. Diderot, *La religieuse dans Le Neveu de Rameau suivi de La Religieuse*. Union Générale d'Éditions, Paris.
14. Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes*. Nelson, Paris, 1951.
15. Mme de Lambert, op. cit. pp. 73-74.
16. Ibid, p. 77.
17. Deloffre, Frédéric, Introduction à *La vie de Marianne*, p. LXI.
18. Molière: *Théâtre*, e.g. *L'Ecole des femmes*, Classiques Larousse, Paris.
19. Mme de Lambert, op. cit. p. 176.
20. Diderot, op. cit.

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