

Subjects of Civilization

Narratives of Passion in French Epistolary Fiction, 1721-1761

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with literary representations of the passions in a selection of eighteenth-century French epistolary fiction. In close readings of Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu's 1721 *Persian Letters*, Francoise de Graffigny's 1747 *Letters of a Peruvian Woman* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1761 *Julie, or the New Heloise*, I consider how the passions serve, in the context of narrative, to ground claims about human nature and sexual difference, and to speculate on the social and political apologetics at work within each text. The importance of sensibility in the culture and literature of the eighteenth century has to some extent eclipsed the role of the passions in literary representations of human nature and sexual difference. However central sensibility became to eighteenth-century imaginations, it did not eclipse but rather complemented developing moral and natural philosophical conceptions of the passions. As each of novels explored here attest, the passions remained central to literary and philosophical claims about human nature and sexual difference in the eighteenth century, providing a common vocabulary for making claims about the state of the social and political order. Entrenched, polysemous, and changing, discourses of the passions in Early Modern Europe served multiple and divergent ends. The goal of this thesis is to contextualize their representations in the narratives of three eighteenth-century novels as interventions in moral philosophy, shaped not only by epistemological philosophy but also the imperatives of a French literary tradition of gallantry.

DEDICATION

For Christopher

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: PASSION, REASON, AND HUMAN NATURE

This paper represents an attempt to more deeply historicize literary history, contextualizing claims made in literary narratives as interventions into moral-philosophical discourses of the passions. I approach the eighteenth-century epistolary novel by way of seventeenth-century intellectual history, largely guided by the insights of Richard Tuck's work on the skeptical humanist tradition in the formation of the modern natural law.¹ As Tuck emphasizes, the dismantling of sixteenth-century constitutionalism with the ideological tools of skeptical humanism entailed the development of new models of the individual that was to be governed by the morally dubious political entities of the modern state. Following the insights of Pierre Force and Robin Douglass, I stress the influence of seventeenth-century neo-Augustinian interpretations of the fall in shaping skeptical moral theory in France.² The seventeenth-century authors discussed here confronted the passions as both the substance of and answer to skeptical moral and political philosophy. In the process, they developed an epistemology that centered the sensing and perceiving subject over and above the metaphysical or moral truth claims imposed by doctrine or tradition. Eighteenth-century philosophers extrapolated this epistemology into full-blown sensationalism, but the passions came to play a very different role, one which both precipitated and was shaped by the development of sensibility.

While seventeenth-century philosophers and theologians reimagined the nature and role of the passions in scholarly discourse, practitioners of the "modern" literary style – epitomized by Madeleine de Scudéry – complicated the human affective landscape with the creation of new emotional vocabulary of *la tendre*. In her foundational scholarship, Joan DeJean argued that Scudéry's new emotional language emphasized relationality and reciprocity in contrast to the

¹ Richard Tuck, *Philosophy and Government, 1572-1651* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); *The Rights of War and Peace: Political Thought and the International Order from Grotius to Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

² Robin Douglass, *Rousseau and Hobbes: Nature, Freewill, and the Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Pierre Force, *Self-Interest Before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003).

alienating and isolating experience of passion.³ DeJean argued that the new model of human affectivity represented by Scudéry's *carte de tendre* came to replace the passions in the vocabulary of affection, setting the stage for eighteenth-century sensibility. In DeJean's analysis, passion is supplanted in the language of emotions first by Scudéry's *tendre* and eventually by *sensibilité*, which allowed the reimagined landscape of human affectivity to be grafted onto an emerging field of medical discourse.⁴ But the language of sentiment and the language of passion developed conterminously, within and between a variety of discourses and to disparate ends. Passion certainly underwent changes in meaning and inflection, as DeJean indicates, but this does not support the claim that they diminished in importance. As all three of the novels discussed here attest, the language of the passions remained central to the representation of human nature on the levels of individual and collective life.

Many historical and literary scholars have mapped the dense semantic field constituting eighteenth-century discourses of human nature, and this paper relies on their work to explicate passion's relationship to virtue, *la tendre*, and reason in various texts.⁵ But it seeks to highlight how the narrative context of these representations impinges on interpretation. Abstracted from their narrative contexts, representations of passion (or virtue, or sentiment) are too easily and too often flattened into the service of arguments over influence or intention. Nowhere is this inattention to narrative context more conspicuous than in scholarly discussions of Usbek's famous tale of the Troglodytes in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*. The story, told over a series of four letters, has been closely scrutinized and compared to Montesquieu's contemporary sources, and Ursula Gonthier has argued that the story, as well as the novel itself, represents Montesquieu's application of Shaftesbury and Addison's vision of open communication free from the impingements of doctrine and political power.⁶ But whatever the moral or political implications of the tale might be, it does not stand alone, but must be interpreted in light of the novel's

³ Joan DeJean, *Tender Geographies: Women and the Origins of the Novel in France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

⁴ DeJean, *Tender Geographies*, 82-8.

⁵ Particularly, Anthony La Vopa, *The Labor of the Mind: Intellect and Gender in Enlightenment Cultures* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Ann Thomson, *Bodies of Thought: Science Religion and the Soul in the Early Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

⁶ Gonthier, *Montesquieu and England: Enlightened Exchanges, 1689-1755* (London: Routledge, 2010).

narrative and the character development of its fictional creator, neither of which recommends a straightforward reading.

If Graffigny's narrative structure is more readily scrutable than Montesquieu's it nonetheless serves a central ideological purpose, thrusting its protagonist into confrontation and accommodation with the structures of modern commercial society. The novel's famous open ending, which refuses the traditional resolutions of marriage or death for its heroine, has generally been interpreted as form of radical critique against French social and political life.⁷ While Zilia articulates harsh criticisms of worldly customs, however, her independence and freedom are made possible by the unique political and economic structures of modern France, whose laws can be made to accommodate unmarried women and the exchange of currency for property. Zilia's critique of corrupt customs of worldliness – especially the neglect of and scorn for girls and women – should not be confused with a radical critique of the French state. Instead, Graffigny invokes a poetics of republicanism, imagining peace within that state facilitated by the virtuous attentions of a land-holding class, remarkable for its flexibility and potential diversity. This poetics is not at all inconsistent with loyalty to the French monarchy, which nowhere figures as an adversary or obstacle in Zilia's journey.

Zilia's famously harsh condemnations of French polite society, then, is attenuated when considered against the novel's ending, which finds its heroine generously accommodated by France's modern financial and social practices. Rousseau's tragic narrative, by contrast, emphasizes the futility and emptiness of worldly pursuits in the context of corruption. The novel's two parts, which chronicle the couple's descent into and subsequent "cure" of passion, is commonly explained by scholars as a tactic meant to trick the reader – the titillating first half serving as a "gilded pill" to facilitate the curative consumption of the edifying second half.⁸ But Julie's final letter, revealing her unending devotion to her forbidden lover, essentially undermines the carefully constructed narrative of domestic bliss that initially appears to have successfully

⁷ The foundational essay is Gurkin Altman, "Graffigny's Epistemology and the Emergence of Third-World Ideology," in Goldsmith, *Writing the Female Voice*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), 175-6. Graffigny's epistemology has since been carefully scrutinized, but their political implications skirted.

⁸ Anne Vila, for example, accepts this division even while she recharacterizes the two parts as defined by dysregulated and regulated sensibilities in *Enlightenment and Pathology*, 199.

resolved passion's threat to the individual and social body. The novel leaves room for the continued neutralization of that threat with the potential marriage of Julie's cousin and former lover, but the signs that the protagonists might follow this path are not encouraging.

Rousseau was reacting against an intellectual sea change, solidified in the decade following the original 1747 publication of Graffigny's novel, that redeemed the human passions as essential and edifying (if still unstable) elements of human nature and political life.⁹ The change was well underway by the time Graffigny wrote, already evident in Montesquieu. This paper hopes to trace some of the contours of that development and to elucidate some of the stakes of the authors' narrative choices. While the bulk of this paper is concerned with the narrative representation of passions in literary fiction, the reliance on narration to explicate a role for the passions in the individual and social body was not unique to fiction. Seventeenth-century modern law provided just such a narration for the sake of justifying the power of the modern, absolutist state – laying down speculative accounts of humanity's taming and directing of unruly passions into more or less stable social arrangements. The eighteenth-century practice of conjectural history has its roots in these narratives of the natural law, and the nature and shape of those narratives underlie claims about the nature of human reason and its relation to passion.

Scholars have explored the implications of Montesquieu and Rousseau's engagement with the tradition of natural law, although more concerned with their works of political philosophy than their fiction.¹⁰ Graffigny's narrative application of epistemological philosophy has received substantial attention from scholars over the past thirty years, but the novel's preoccupation with the themes and poetics of the natural law has not, as far as I know, evinced any notice, but they are central to the unfolding drama of the letters: The naïve heroine Zilia, violently torn from her home and social identity, has her fate decided by the outcome of a battle between vessels of different, competing states and the subsequent litigation that will provide her the means to establish a new social identity. If the letters center Zilia's thoughts, feelings, and the development

⁹ Discussed in Johnson Kent Wright, *A Classical Republican in Eighteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 83.

¹⁰ C.P. Courtney, "Montesquieu and the Natural Law" in David Carrithers, Michael Mosher, eds., *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on 'The Spirit of the Laws'* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); Douglass, *Rousseau and Hobbes*.

of her “subjectivity,” the plot is structured directly around the practical questions that shaped seventeenth-century natural law.

Historiography and Methodology

DeJean’s work was part of a veritable re-writing of literary history and theory under the critical gaze of feminist scholarship and the methodological tools of deconstruction. Until the second wave women’s movement brought forth a generation of professional feminist scholars, the literary discipline had routinely derided the “sentimental” literary productions of women as trivial precursors to the development of the novel in its proper, realist form. Dismissed as trivial in substance and regressive in style, eighteenth-century women’s fiction – and the entire poetics identified as “sentimentalism” – was confined to a literary “pre-history.”¹¹ DeJean and others have long since established the sociopolitical relevance of women’s sentimental literature and the logic of sentimental poetics. This scholarship has emphasized the role of sentimental literature in negotiating the gendered boundaries of privateness and publicness in emerging liberalism. Women’s literary productions were widely read and understood as social and political commentary and made claims about women’s centrality in the creation and maintenance of public order. As April Alliston argued in *Virtue’s Faults: Correspondences in Eighteenth-Century British and French Women’s Fiction*, critical attention to the boundaries of gender and genre negotiated in the pages of the novel provide a vantage point for witnessing the construction of and challenge to the gendered subjectivities naturalized by liberalism’s self-justifying discourses.¹²

As helpful as these studies are for exposing the ideological work at play within and between texts, without due attention to the historical dynamics that shape a text’s potential meanings, literary analysis remains impeded by presentism. As Anthony La Vopa argues, DeJean’s argument that the seventeenth-century literary public served as the cradle for a liberatory, rational “public sphere” obscures the historical reality of the literary public, which was anything but democratic, but rather constituted by and for an elite social class “jealous of its

¹¹ April Alliston, *Virtue’s Faults: Correspondences in Eighteenth-Century British and French Women’s Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 1-5; Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*, 1999)

¹² Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989); Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: University of Stanford Press, 1988).

singular honor.” Because DeJean wants to identify “the moment of origin for the modern feminist agenda” in the seventeenth-century literary archives, she must necessarily account for the democratizing project central to modern feminism. La Vopa’s contextualist approach highlights the gender and status norms at play in seventeenth and eighteenth-century literary productions that better accounts for the apparent contradictions of what he calls “unmodern modernity.”¹³ Seeking to understand how these authors made use of the language of the passions, rather than searching for the seeds of impending liberalism or imposing an entirely foreign interpretive framework such as “subjectivities” onto their work, allows for the recovery of meanings and intellectual fault lines that otherwise remain obscured.

In the case of eighteenth-century epistolary fiction, such an approach also provides a compelling framework for understanding the era’s preoccupation with this literary form, which all but disappeared in the nineteenth century. Within literary studies, an inherited disciplinary narrative framed the epistolary novel as a vanishing mediator, a genre destined to give way to the objectively superior realist novels of the nineteenth century. A proto-form, the epistolary novel had significance only in as much as it contributed to the development of the properly modern, authorial voice that characterized the realist novel. Janet Gurkin Altman challenged this framework in her 1982 study *Epistolarity, Approaches to a Form*, reconceptualizing epistolary fiction as a distinct literary genre to be evaluated on its own terms.¹⁴ In *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters*, Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook argued that the epistolary genre only coheres as such in the eighteenth-century, where it served to mediate modern subjectivities based on emerging conceptions of publicness and privateness.¹⁵ As I hope to suggest, the eighteenth-century preference for the epistolary form came from its particular usefulness to exploring contemporary epistemological and moral philosophies that privileged the perceiving subject.

In intellectual history, discourses and rhetorical uses of the passions have been identified as central to the creation of “modern” social identities, anchored by states and markets. In his

¹³ La Vopa, *Labor*, 13.

¹⁴ Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity, Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982)

¹⁵ Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook, *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

1977 *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before its Triumph*, A.O. Hirschman argued that modern concepts of self-interest that frame modern economic science had roots in reason of State theory and Augustinian theories of the passions. Reason of State theorists had argued that the pursuit of rational interest could serve as a check on rulers otherwise driven by passions. Meanwhile, Augustinian theorists put forth a theory of “countervailing passions,” in which potentially destructive passions are tempered by the presence of competing, calmer passions. Hirschman sees these two schools of thought coming together in what he labels the “Montesquieu-Steuart doctrine,” which elevated commerce as civilizing force capable of integrating interests into a common fabric while serving to check the ambition of princes, summed up in Book XXI of *L’esprit des lois*: “And it is fortunate for men to be in a situation which, though their passions may prompt them to be wicked (*méchants*), they have nevertheless an interest in not being so.”¹⁶ In Hirschman’s analysis, this novel political argument for capitalism, was rejected by Adam Smith, who erased the distinction between passions and interests that undergirded it.¹⁷

In *Self-Interest Before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science*, Pierre Force elaborates on and significantly nuances Hirschman’s analysis. Force demonstrates that ambiguity about the nature of interest and passion long pre-dates Smith. As early as Montaigne, philosophers associated the “private” interests of individuals with the passions, which jeopardized the common interest that justified reason of State.¹⁸ In the seventeenth century, the Augustinian principles that shaped the works of La Rochefoucauld, Nicole, and Pascal undermined the possibility that interest might be rationally calculated at all, driven as it was by the dictates of self-love. Seventeenth-century moral philosophy absorbed the language of interest from Reason of State, but according to the Augustinian premises of counter-vailing passions: “interests are successfully pitted against the passions because the interests are an expression of the passions themselves.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Montesquieu, *Esprit des lois*, XXI, 20, as cited in Hirschman, 73.

¹⁷ Hirschman, *Passions*, 110-11.

¹⁸ Force, *Self-Interest*, 140.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 140

Hirschman and Force are primarily concerned with the development of economic science as an independent branch of knowledge. Force is interested in the development of the concept of self-interest that continues to ground modern economic science. His close analysis of the rhetorical choices of La Rochefoucauld, Bayle, and Mandeville demonstrates how disinterestedness emerged as a moral category in the seventeenth century. In his exploration of Hume, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, Force demonstrates how disinterestedness came to implicate the role of reason in moral action, and how it was reconciled by Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*. It is precisely passion's relationship to reason that was at issue in late seventeenth-century moral philosophy, most famously, if controversially, articulated by Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. While crude caricatures of the "Enlightenment" as a philosophical endorsement of cool rationality over the phantasms of imagination continue to frame discussions of the period in most popular and academic corners, historians and other scholars of the Enlightenment have long stressed the complex relationship imagined by eighteenth-century writers between the aesthetic and the objective, the imaginative and the real, passions and reason.²⁰

My choice to contextualize the cultural productions of the eighteenth-century in the terms of a shared discursive field shaped by the legacies of the seventeenth reflects trends in Enlightenment historiography. If at one time the Enlightenment was considered coterminous with the eighteenth-century, since the 1970s scholars have stressed *the longue durée* of cultural and intellectual change that attended the creation of European modernity. The prolific scholarship of John Pocock, in particular, emphasized not only the historical depth but the geographical and intellectual diversity that might be included in the historian's Enlightenment.²¹ With the rise of cultural history at the close of the twentieth century, scholars largely abandoned the project to define – let alone defend – a singular historical event or process evoked by "Enlightenment."²²

²⁰ Anthony La Vopa, "History, Philosophy, and the Imagination in Enlightenment Studies" *Modern Intellectual History*, 17, no. 1 (2018): 279-302.

²¹ John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4-5.

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

Seemingly solidified in the 1990s, by the turn of the millennium the cultural turn gave way to a renewed interest in the Enlightenment as an intellectual and philosophical phenomenon. John Robertson and (far more polemically) Jonathan Israel have passionately identified Enlightenment with a cohesiveness of purpose and vision that, they accuse, a cultural history of social practices diminished or ignored.²³ Casting Scotland and Naples as models (both “kingdoms ruled as provinces”), Robertson identifies the creation of political economy as the defining legacy of the Enlightenment.²⁴ While for Israel, the true Enlightenment is a “radical” one dedicated to the truths of single substance materialism and the supposedly self-evident principles of liberation that attend it. Robertson and Israel each attempt, in very different ways, to articulate a singular historical “Enlightenment,” which both frame as being “threatened” by the cultural historian’s rejection of a cohesive, unified narrative of the period. Neither France nor the eighteenth century are centered in their updated narratives of the Enlightenment, reflecting a consolidation of the historiography they are responding (or reacting) to. If for Robertson the defining development of the Enlightenment – the formal creation of political economy ushered in by Jean-Francois Mélon – was an accomplishment of the eighteenth century, its roots went deep into the seventeenth, where it was “midwived” into existence by epicurean philosophy.²⁵ For Israel, the major intellectual work of the Enlightenment was accomplished by the 1740s, and the great eighteenth-century iconoclasts such as Voltaire and Montesquieu are cast as enemies of the true, “radical” Enlightenment, weaponizing moderation against its liberating impulses.

Anthony La Vopa has taken a more nuanced approach to the Enlightenment as historical process and the practice of intellectual history.²⁶ The writing of philosophy is no less a social practice than less overtly intellectual acts, and like other social practices, it takes on meaning within a “culture of symbolic power” not immediately evident to the twenty-first century reader.²⁷

But to appreciate how intellectual practices were shaped by such cultural forces also requires the

²³ Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*.

²⁴ Robertson., ix.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, ix.

²⁶ La Vopa, “A New Intellectual History? Jonathan Israel’s Enlightenment” *The Historical Journal*, 52, no. 3 (2009): 717-738; “History, Philosophy, and the Imagination in Enlightenment Studies” *Modern Intellectual History*, 17, no. 1 (2018): 279-302.

²⁷ La Vopa, “History, Philosophy, Imagination,” 281.

practice of intellectual history. Close readings of texts, situated within a broad range of relevant social and discursive frameworks, allows for a recuperation of potential meanings that are swept up in the view of Enlightenment as social practice.²⁸ To understand the social context that shapes a text requires an understanding of the circumstances of its production and the inter- and intrapersonal dynamics shaping how the author engages his or her rhetorical repertoire. Their choices as authors should be understood as constructions of “rhetorical personae”, which serves a “mediating function” between context and audience. Because the “performance of a rhetorical persona is *situated* in various directions,” understanding the terms of its performance entails an exploration of the “logic of a value system, or more precisely, the logic of intermingling value systems.”²⁹ This rhetorical approach contextualizes language within the “webs of social relations” implicated in a text by its rhetorical properties.³⁰

In *The Labor of the Mind: Intellect and Gender in Enlightenment Cultures*, La Vopa offers cogent readings of a wide range of seventeenth and eighteenth-century texts to explore the variety of ways that men and women constructed and contested the gendered meanings assigned to the performance of intellect. In close readings of a variety of texts familiar and unfamiliar to traditional intellectual histories of the era, La Vopa considers how the value imperatives of both status and gender impinged on performances of intelligence as acts of labor. The new value assigned to women’s conversation by the standards of seventeenth-century *mondanité* can only be understood according to the value system of *honnêteté*, at the heart of which lay a disdain for any form of labor and a celebration of its opposite, *aisance*.³¹ Women’s “natural” conversation, free from the torturous disciplines of Latin and rhetoric, became the normative standard for men who hoped to distinguish themselves in *le grand monde*, which tolerated no trace of pedantry. While this gave women new cultural prominence and might legitimate limited participation in literary pursuits, it also placed strict limits on their performance of intelligence. If scholarly men could be ridiculed for pedantry, a woman perceived to be engaging in any sort of scholarly work or conversation could be shunned for freakishness – failing to

²⁸ Ibid., 282

²⁹ Ibid., 285.

³⁰ La Vopa, *Labor*, 18.

³¹ La Vopa, *Labor*, 5.

embody the circumscribed intelligence unique to her naturally “delicate” constitution. The capacity to endure the labor of prolonged abstract thought was declared beyond women’s capacities almost universally, and was in any case not the standard of intelligence valued in the world.

I rely on La Vopa’s study throughout this thesis, particularly his insights into the gender and status norms infused in *honnête* culture and its ambiguous tradition of gallant literature. La Vopa’s methodology, reading texts as performances of rhetorical personae, could be fruitfully pursued in the case of all three novelists examined here, each of whom left behind letters and journals and whose biographical details have already been the subject of inquiry among scholars. Limits of time, scope, and skill restrict the current study to a more modest methodological approach. I am interested in exploring the rhetorical dimensions of philosophical claims about the passions, aware, following La Vopa, that “philosophical argument is not as self-contained as some philosophers would like it to be; that it is permeable to stylistic practices, and particularly to uses of figurative language, from other rhetorics in the culture at large.”³² The point is not that novels must be read with attention to stylistic practices and rhetorical choices in a way that differentiates them from philosophical texts, but that philosophical texts must also be recognized as representations of rhetorical choices, scripted in alternative poetics, with alternative, although “intermingling” value systems.

As novelists, Montesquieu, Graffigny, and Rousseau occupied a literary space dominated by the codes of *honnêteté* and the rules of gallantry. If Montesquieu and Graffigny’s novels provided at times biting criticism of *honnête* moeurs, they nonetheless served a noble apologetics and shared *honnête* assumptions about gender complementarity and the benefits of gender mixing. Rousseau’s adaptation of gallant codes, unsurprisingly, rejected the noble conceit that birthed and nurtured them, while extending the implications of gender complementarity to reject the limited grounds for autonomy claimed by *honnêtes femmes*. Whereas Montesquieu and Graffigny had affirmed the potentially edifying effects of mixed gender commerce, a unique feature of French *mondanité*, Rousseau rejected its civilizing premise.

³² La Vopa, “New Intellectual History,” 731.

The Problem of the Passions in Early Modern Europe: Absolutism, *Honnêteté*, and the Natural Law

As Europe descended into the religious and imperial warfare of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, political and moral philosophers sought to articulate models of human nature and knowledge conducive to the creation of civil order. The passions were a familiar conceptual category – established since antiquity to denote emotional responses to irrational or prerational desires – but their centrality to the new moral and political philosophy practiced by early modern philosophers reflects the prolonged political, religious, and epistemological crises of the era.³³ At once physiological and moral, passions in the seventeenth century referred not only to feelings and impulses but the material limits of human perception. The effects of the “animal spirits” created in the body in the process of perception, the passions were framed as a result of the Fall and circumscribed the reliability of truth-claims.³⁴ In both humanist philosophy and neo-Augustinian theology, the passions grounded a skeptical critique of moral and political virtue that converged with the imperatives of *raison d'état* and the politics of absolutism. Among humanist scholars seeking to interpret the continuing devastation of civil and religious warfare, a turn away from Cicero to the historical works of Tacitus – what Richard Tuck has called the “new humanism” – reduced claims of political virtue to deceptive weapons of political ambition, while the epistemological certainty of Aristotelian political science was widely abandoned.³⁵

In light of the power widely ascribed to them, knowledge of the passions came to occupy a central position in seventeenth-century moral and political philosophy. In the late seventeenth century, humanist authors like Lipsius and Montaigne found in the passions a valuable vocabulary for making sense of the destruction wrought by religious and civil warfare, and they promoted their discernment and management as the central task of sages and princes alike.³⁶ In the absence of reliable reason or virtue, the management of passion became the primary if not

³³ Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 2.

³⁴ J. Barnouw, “Passion as ‘Confused’ Perception or Thought in Descartes, Malebranche, and Hutcheson.” *Journal of the history of ideas* 53, no. 3 (1992): 397–424.

³⁵ Tuck, *Philosophy and Government*, 30.

³⁶ Nannerl Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France: The Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 151-8; Tuck on Lipsius, *Philosophy*, 54

the exclusive mechanism of civil and self government alike. While the disordered souls of ordinary subjects required the active management of the sovereign and his institutions, a philosophical skepticism – exemplified by Montaigne’s *Essays* – counseled wise men to master their passions in private retreat from the world.³⁷ Tuck has emphasized the reliance on the stoic tradition in this practice of philosophical retreat, but as the case of Montaigne illustrates, neo-stoicism existed in practice alongside neo-epicureanism.³⁸ Stoic and epicurean themes remained relevant and intertwined in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries – the result, perhaps, of the inadequacy of either to successfully meet the epistemological and moral skepticism they faced.³⁹

In the seventeenth century, the divorce of moral from political philosophy justified the creation of a mercantilist political economy, which scandalously advanced the argument that the state stands to benefit even from passions traditionally counted as sinful. When properly ordered by the will of the monarch and skillfully managed by his ministers, the reliable human passions of avarice and vanity might produce wealth and power for the state.⁴⁰ The king might be relied upon to provide such prudent management, these writers argued, out of due regard for his own interest. Interest was able to provide a wedge against passion where reason could not because it required no claim to abstract knowledge or virtue, instead relying on a supposedly universal feature of human motivation that might, if properly harnessed, temper the equally unavoidable passions.

Although seventeenth-century writers enthusiastically embraced the idea that interest might be counted on as a reliable guide or check on the king, theories of interest were always vulnerable to skeptical neutralization. Individual self-interest was itself established as a passion, its presence enough to hijack reason in service of self-love.⁴¹ What preserved the interest of the sovereign from these attacks was the identity of his interest with that of the public. Like any other man, the king will be motivated according to his interest. Unlike any other man, his personal

³⁷ Tuck, *Philosophy*, 62.

³⁸ Keohane, *Philosophy*, 101.

³⁹ Kavanagh, *Enlightened Pleasures: Eighteenth-Century France and the New Epicureanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Keohane, *Philosophy*, 101.

⁴⁰ Keohane, *Philosophy*, 151-168.

⁴¹ Pierre Force discusses self-interest as a passion in Montaigne in *Self-Interest Before Adam Smith*, 140-141.

interest is precisely identical to that of his kingdom. Because the public interest is in some sense “objective” – in so far as actions might be judged according to the benefits they accrue for the state and its subjects – the special case of the king aligns even the most passionate self-interest with the dictates of right reason.⁴²

Developments in moral theology and natural philosophy, however, cast profound doubts as to whether such reasoning was possible. As Richard Tuck has emphasized, sixteenth-century philosophical skepticism did not share the epistemological concerns that came to characterize seventeenth-century philosophy.⁴³ For sixteenth-century humanists, the skeptical denial of political and intellectual virtue counseled philosophical retreat in the name of self-preservation: The wise man will seek knowledge and virtue within himself in the process of discerning and overcoming his passions. Charron’s sharpening and systematizing of skeptical philosophical critique in his widely read *De la sagesse* in 1601 set the tone for the upcoming century, reducing moral reasoning to a reflection on interests.⁴⁴ But the neo-Augustinian anthropology of Port Royal undermined the pursuit of self-knowledge at the heart of philosophical skepticism. Montaigne and Charron had accepted Augustine’s prognosis on the inescapability of passion, but they followed his insight into the usefulness of counter-balancing passions to affirm a reliable moral epistemology. While the passions of ordinary souls required outside management to prevent civil disorder, the “few souls so orderly, so strong and wellborn that they can be trusted with their own guidance” can through their own efforts gain insight into the “sickly qualities” by which our “being is cemented” to discern their true interests.⁴⁵

Pascal would draw very different conclusions about the possibility of reasoning about our interests, which must for him always follow the concupiscent logic of self-love. To Pascal and his theological sympathizers, the human person is dominated by only one passion: the corrupting, all-encompassing, and inescapable passion of self-love. The product of the Fall, self-love enslaves the human will to the impulses of pleasure and hijacks the intellect to its purposes. Condemned to obey pleasure over the reason that had once commanded it, the fallen human will is incapable of

⁴² Force, *Self-Interest*, 94.

⁴³ Tuck, *Philosophy*, 2.

⁴⁴ Tuck, *Philosophy*, 85-6.

⁴⁵ Montaigne, *Essays* II, 12, quoted in Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France*, 103.

procuring true good for itself. In Pascal's analysis, humanity's unreasonable self-love, when confronted with its undeniable wretchedness, gives birth to an "embarrassment" that in turn "produces in him the most unrighteous and criminal passions that can be imagined."⁴⁶ Instead of contemplating and accepting his wretchedness in pursuit of salvation, most of humanity seeks to satisfy the tyrannical needs of self-love with *divertissement*, whether in worldly affairs or stoic contemplation and epicurean pleasures.

While Montaigne skewered the values of worldliness as a distraction from the knowledge of self, Pascal denied that any such knowledge was possible without the grace of God accessible only within a community of the saved. As Augustine had outlined in *The City of God*, the pursuit of virtue recommended by human wisdom inevitably fails to procure human happiness. Just as Roman virtues had failed to create a durable political community, individuals who pursue virtue will not find true good but will find their wills circumvented by pleasure.⁴⁷ Even God's grace submits to this primary rule of Augustinian moral anthropology, acting as it does by overriding concupiscent desires with its irresistible, efficacious force.⁴⁸ There is no fundamental difference between the disorder that plagues the souls of ordinary humans and that of the "sage," whose perspective on his own interests remains just as mired in the disordered passion of self-love as any other child of Adam, who should not expect any true benefit from attempts to clarify and pursue them.

Pascal and his theological sympathizers echoed Saint Augustine in marveling at the ability of sublimated and re-directed self-love to order and strengthen states, even while condemning the broader social and political order as base concupiscence. But this other-worldly Augustinianism articulated by Pascal proved amply conducive to an analysis of human behavior – individual and collective – without reference to transcendence. Pierre Nicole's *Moral Essays* pursued this intellectual path vigorously, elaborating a veritable social mechanics of concupiscence, which, despite his allegiance to the virtues of Port Royal, became at times outright celebratory of the worldly ethic he purported to deplore. Complex networks of commerce

⁴⁶ Pensée 100, quoted in Keohane, *Philosophy*, 275.

⁴⁷ Force, *Self-Interest*, 57-8

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

driven by human greed, governed by an absolutist prince, provide “all the needs of life...without the intervention of charity” allowing men motivated only by greed to live “with as much peace, surety, and commodity as if one were in a republic of saints.”⁴⁹ While the theology of Port Royal acceded readily to absolutist authority, their heterodoxy resided in their denial that God’s grace could be effectively pursued alongside the “worldly” affairs of statecraft and social control. Inasmuch as human behavior remains within the context of ordinary life – that is, among a community of fallen humans driven by appetites and interests – it remains outside the activity of God’s grace, which resides uniquely in the abnegation of selfhood and the extinguishing of self-love.

The usefulness of self-love to the procurement of the social order observed by Pascal converged with the apologetic needs of the entirely antithetical ethos of *honnêteté*. Coming to prominence with the defeat of the Fronde and the entrenchment of Quatorzian absolutism, *honnêteté* provided a legitimizing discourse to a nobility in crisis.⁵⁰ Characterized by his eagerness to please and *aisance* in *le grande monde*, the *honnête homme* provided a model by which the French aristocracy sought to distinguish itself in lieu of the martial valor or judicial service now compromised as *frondeur*. Apologists of *honnêteté* readily embraced the Neo-Augustinian assumption that human behavior was motivated by self-love, but they denied the moral rigorism of their Jansenist critics. As Jean de Silhon had explained in his moral tract *De la certitude des connaissances humaine*: “amour-propre...is not such a destructive and venomous drive [*plante*] as we commonly figure.” It is the inborn, “blind instinct” which “inclines us to love and to cherish that which helps to give us being.” Like interest, its “faithful companion and inseparable associate,” *amour propre* has been unfairly maligned, blamed for its excesses and not credited for its fruits.⁵¹

The confident assurance that self-love might be regulated and *éclairé* into just and equitable pursuit of interest provided an alternative to the Augustinian insistence that self-love pursued its own will, independently and usually in spite of the supposed will of the human agent.

⁴⁹ Nicole, *Essais Morales*, quoted in Keohane, *Philosophy*, 296.

⁵⁰ Keohane, *Philosophy*, 283.

⁵¹ Silhon, *De la certitude des connaissances humaine*, (Amsterdam : Chez Antoine Michiels, 1662), 76.

But apologists of *honnêteté* and their Jansenist critics shared a fundamental agreement about the nature of the human person and the passion that dominated it. As Silhon readily conceded, *amour-propre* feeds our appetite for vengeance more readily than it inclines us towards gratitude. Left to itself, *amour-propre* leads only to disorder, but when properly governed within a system of laws, by a prince who lives and rules as an *honnête homme*, self-love and interest provide the foundation of all the social virtues necessary to civil society. Recognizing the universality of self-love and the primacy of particular interests in motivating individual behavior allowed for their coordinated pursuit by men and women socialized into the rituals of *mondanité*.

This ideological construction did not represent a rejection of sixteenth-century skepticism as much as its creative redeployment: the *honnête* made no claims to moral or intellectual virtue, which could only be assumed to veil self-interest, posing a potential threat to the harmony of transparent interests consciously cultivated by the *honnête* code. In practice, moreover, there was a substantial convergence between the axiomatic assumptions that fueled the practices of *honnêteté* and the ideological universe of Port Royal. Nicole's *Moral Essays* are remarkable for betraying precisely this ideological convergence, in spite of its professed disdain for the "goods" associated with worldliness. On the other side of the worldly divide, the practicing *honnête* La Rochefoucauld deliberately applied Jansenist moral criticism to the practices of polite sociability not simply to excoriate *honnêteté*, but to refine it, through careful management of the dynamics of self-love through which polite society – *le monde* – operated. If this fell short of the requirements of virtue, it nonetheless provided the foundation for a peaceful and productive civil life.⁵²

The overlapping anthropological assumptions of Jansenist and *honnête*, moreover, grounded a shared commitment to the goods of absolutism. The passionate human person, driven by appetites and an unreasonable love of self, required the strict policing of absolute monarchy. Beneath the shared conceptual language of Port Royal and the worldly apologists of *honnêteté* lay the influence of Hobbes, whose political philosophy had pressed neo-Augustinian and humanist skeptical assumptions into the service of a new moral science.⁵³ Hobbes'

⁵² Keohane, *Philosophy*, 289.

⁵³ Keohane, *Philosophy*, 11; Tuck, *Philosophy*, 284-5.

absolutism was a necessary correlate to the violently passionate natural man of his natural philosophy, who bore striking resemblance to the postlapsarian man of neo-Augustinian moral theology.⁵⁴ Passionate and irrational, he is also unable to procure the end he seeks for himself – that is, self-preservation. Whereas earlier political writers had relied on the right to self-preservation as a conceptual mechanism against the encroachments of absolutism, Hobbes was able to establish self-preservation as the political good enabled by the institution of sovereignty, rendering that sovereignty inviolable.⁵⁵

Unlike the fallen human natures of Neo-Augustinian imagination, however, Hobbesian man bore no imprint of a prelapsarian reason. For Hobbes, reason is a byproduct of sensory experience processed by the imagination. Human understanding is distinguished from that of non-human animals first by humans' relentless curiosity to explore effects in addition to causes, and then by the ability to generalize by means of language, so that he may "by words reduce the consequences he finds to general Rules, called *Theorems* or *Aphorisms*."⁵⁶ Left to their own devices, men inevitably speak and reason according to the dictates of their passions, which each inevitably accords the status of "right reason." But right reason does not exist for Hobbes outside of civil society, which is instituted among men precisely in order to fill this void. Rather than an abstract metaphysical entity, right reason is the "common measure" instituted among men through covenant, and "the civil laws are to all subjects the measures of their actions."⁵⁷ Men might be made to conform to these judgments by the commands of the passion of fear, which can only be ordered by the institution of an absolute sovereign authority.⁵⁸

The force of Hobbes' post-skeptical political philosophy lay, as Tuck emphasizes, in his willingness to embrace the full moral, political, and epistemological implications of modern skepticism.⁵⁹ As a member of the intellectual circle centered around Marin Mersenne that was dedicated to the "use and transcendence of modern skepticism," Hobbes pursued the same

⁵⁴ Gianni Paganini, "Hobbes and the French Skeptics" in Larsen, Paganini, eds. *Skepticism and Political Thought in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, 55-82; Douglass, *Hobbes and Rousseau*, 54.

⁵⁵ Tuck, *Philosophy*, 306-7

⁵⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Continuum, 2005), 328.

⁵⁷ Hobbes, *Elements*, 188, quoted in Tuck, *Philosophy*, 109-10.

⁵⁸ Douglass, *Rousseau and Hobbes*,

⁵⁹ The following discussion follows Tuck, *Philosophy*, 279-345.

intellectual path explored by his fellows Gassendi and Descartes. The essential insight pursued by these writers, inspired by a shared admiration of Galilean science, was that while our sense perceptions might not be relied upon to impart knowledge of the material world, they might be called upon to ground a reliable epistemology. Hobbes, responding to Descartes' attempt to answer the challenge of hyperbolic doubt with recourse to proof of God's existence, turned to a materialist metaphysics to justify the reliability of an epistemology of perception. Gassendi had argued that the certainty of our existence as perceiving subjects might ground a science of "signs" capable of making inferences about the nature of external reality. Hobbes insisted that our sense perceptions themselves constitute a material facet of reality, a certainty based on our experience of them as *moving* and *changing*. While our senses cannot provide insight into the true nature of a reality outside of ourselves, conceiving of perception as in itself material meant that the existence of *some* kind of external material reality capable of activating the movements of sense perception could be reliably inferred.

This radically subjective epistemology grounded Hobbes' intervention into natural law, where Grotius' already parsimonious moral system was rigorously reduced to the starkest conclusions of skeptical logic. Grotius, widely regarded in eighteenth century as the progenitor of a distinctively modern natural law tradition, had forged the path towards a post-Aristotelian moral science by modeling his anthropology on the insights of the skeptics. As Tuck argues, Grotius' innovation was seeing "that the ideas of the skeptics and *raison d'état* theorists could be put into a juridical or ethical form simply by construing self-preservation as a universal right."⁶⁰ To the skeptical claim that human moral knowledge exists only as historical product reflecting human interests and can therefore have no foundation in natural or divine law, modern jurists answered that the needs of human nature in fact constitute the foundation of moral science, as Grotius explained: "The mother of natural law is human nature itself."⁶¹

As Tuck has shown, Grotius' intention to justify aggressive imperial warfare meant his commitment to accounting for human sociability was weak, but in order to ground his claim to

⁶⁰ Tuck, *Philosophy*, 6

⁶¹ Quoted in Tuck, *Philosophy*, 196

have discovered the principles of a new moral science, he had to show how self-interested individuals could be brought into social and political community if not by the cunning mechanisms of power and interest cited by skeptical theorists.⁶² In order to account for this society and accommodate a theory of justice, Grotius complemented his primary natural law of self-preservation with the additional principles of *inoffensiveness* and *abstinence*, which prohibited “wanton injury.” Justified by the claim that these principles of human nature would be agreed upon by all men everywhere, Grotius defended a version of the natural law in which human sociability “extended only as far as was necessary to justify the private right of punishment.”⁶³ Any obligation a person found themselves under that exceeded these minimal standards cannot be attributed to the natural law but to “a deliberate decision by men to enter in a civil society.”⁶⁴ Ethics may then be rationally judged not only by the minimalist standards of the natural law, but by the standards articulated in separately constructed moral systems, even if these systems defy any obvious rational design.

While Hobbes’ reduction of natural law professed to offer a truly post skeptical science, to many of his readers he had simply acceded to the feared implications of a radical skepticism.⁶⁵ In the second half of the seventeenth century, Pufendorf offered an alternative interpretation of Grotian principles of natural law that stressed human sociability, which, although it eschewed the Epicureanism shared by Hobbes and *honnête* culture alike, mirrored the latter’s apologetic discourse. In order to answer Hobbes, Pufendorf had to dispense with Grotius’ appeal to the laws of abstinence and inoffensiveness, as Grotius’ appeal to their universal acceptance as evidence of their truth no longer satisfied the requirements of a rigorous epistemological skepticism.⁶⁶ In much the same way that the self-love of *honnêtes* was said to be rendered sociable and useful in the process of accommodating the self-love of others, Pufendorf represented sociability as the byproduct of interaction among self-interested individuals. Naturally self-interested and self-absorbed, humans find themselves placed in relations of interdependence that require the

⁶² Tuck, *Rights*, 85.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 88

⁶⁴ Tuck, *Philosophy*, 174

⁶⁵ Paganini, “Hobbes and the French Skeptics,” 57.

⁶⁶ I follow Tuck’s interpretation of Pufendorf in *Rights of War and Peace*, 140-165.

accommodation of others to achieve the end of self-preservation.⁶⁷ Although Pufendorf stressed the consistency of sociability with the imperative for self-preservation, he rejected an anthropology posited on a singular, overriding human passion, insisting that sociable passions implanted by God (such as pity, love, and shame) are necessary to human society. Passions must not be uniformly suppressed or extinguished, but rather discerned and cultivated according to their value.⁶⁸

In addition to these socially inclined affections, Pufendorf's natural man is distinguished from Hobbes' by the nature of his reason. Whereas Hobbes asserted we can have knowledge *only* of our own sense perceptions, Pufendorf insisted that "the Understanding of Man is naturally right and certain, and upon sufficient Enquiry and Meditation, does always apprehend things clearly, and as they are in their own Nature and Constitution."⁶⁹ For Hobbes, any version of right reason remains elusive in a state of nature because there is no standard by which to judge actions or language. Pufendorf's natural humans, on the other hand, negotiate reliable understanding because they share an understanding of God who judges men's actions and has created them to behave rationally. Pufendorf's humans are in their most "natural" state when they follow the "Dictates and Informations of sound Reason" available to all who have not been degraded by the "Prevalency of Corrupt Manners."⁷⁰ For Hobbes, the passions not only motivate but determine behavior: as the byproducts of sensory perception, passion provides the only measure by which individuals can make judgments about their self-preservation. Only the external mechanisms of an absolutist state can order these passions by arbitrating the terms of self-preservation. For Pufendorf, the passions were impulses or drives that motivated, without determining, human action. But while he emphasized the importance of properly social passions and affections, he framed them as forces impinging on a natural reason that required the constraints of law.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Istavan Hont, "The Language of Sociability and Commerce", Pagden, ed. *The Languages of Political Theory in Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 268.

⁶⁸ Heikki Haara, "Pufendorf on Passions and Sociability," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 77, no. 3 (2016), 423-444.

⁶⁹ Pufendorf, Samuel, Freiherr von, 1632-1694, William Percivale, Jean Barbeyrac, and Basil Kennett. *Of the Law of Nature And Nations*: The 2d ed. (Oxford: Printed by L. Lichfield, for A. and J. Churchill [etc.], 1710).

⁷⁰ Pufendorf, *Law*, 92.

⁷¹ Heikki Haara, "Pufendorf on Passions and Sociability," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 77, no. 3 (2016): 423-444.

If Pufendorf's sociable version of human nature underlies his intention to delegitimize Grotian and Hobbesian arguments for imperial aggression, it remains a nature in need of the control of absolutist institutions. Within states, subjects are to remain at the mercy of their sovereigns in the portioning out of punishments.⁷² The extent of that control, however, was sharply tested in the case of religious institutions and practices. As Tuck stresses, Pufendorf's eagerness to limit claims made by Grotius and Hobbes about the natural right of punishment reflected his experience of the Thirty Years War, fueled by foreign intervention in the name of religious vengeance.⁷³ Pufendorf thus carefully distinguished between punishment, which could only be applied as part of a preexisting relationship between a superior and a subordinate, and retaliation, the right granted to all by nature to redress personal injury. But absolutism soon proved incapable of delivering the peace it promised, instead turning the use of its force towards the pursuits of universal catholic monarchy.⁷⁴ By the close of the seventeenth century, the consolidation of French power at the height of Louis XIV's reign and the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 made Pufendorf reassess the possibility of interfering with the internal politics of a state whose violence and internal instability threatened a larger community of nations.⁷⁵ But challenging the legitimacy of absolutist political power would require an alternative model of human nature capable of challenging the prevailing model of a humanity riddled with irrational and unruly passions.

Are passions the problem? Conceptualizing Passions in the Eighteenth Century

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, a counter-discourse began to cohere that challenged the negative assessment of human nature in skeptical discourse as well as the political and religious practices said to contain or channel its passions.⁷⁶ Rather than the inevitable source of disorder, the passions became subject to a radical revisioning – whether they were conceived of as morally neutral or, as became increasingly common as the century

⁷² Tuck, *Rights*, 151.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁷⁶ Force, *Self-Interest*, 42; Roger Mercier, *La Réhabilitation de la nature humaine, 1700-1750*, (Villemonble : Editions la Balance, 1960)

progressed, celebrated as the source of genius – while the charge of pathology was placed on the religious and political practices blamed for perverting them. Shaftesbury articulated the charge in *On Enthusiasm*, comparing the aggressive policing of absolutist religious and political institutions to the overly-enthusiastic interventions of misguided physicians: “The human mind and body are both of them naturally subject to commotions,” he explained, which, while harmless in themselves, might become the cause of serious ailment should an overzealous physician seek to allay all of the humors and “ferments” that cause them. Similarly, “as ill-physicians in the body politic,” who under the “specious pretense of...saving souls from the contagion of enthusiasm,” attempt to suppress even the most innocent and trivial public “mental eruptions” and end up “[setting] all nature in an uproar.”⁷⁷

Shaftesbury's vision of political discourse among citizens free from the arbitrary policing of church and state reflected an anthropology diametrically opposed to the selfish and passion-riddled person characteristic of most seventeenth-century moral and political theory. Rather than a sorry specimen bearing epistemic and affective scars from the Fall, Shaftesbury's potential citizens were in innate possession of all the qualities necessary to sustain flourishing social and political life. Whereas Hobbes had famously described man in his “natural state” as motivated exclusively by the imperative of self-preservation and dominated by the passion of fear, Shaftesbury insisted that “It is impossible to suppose a mere sensible creature originally so ill-constituted and unnatural as that, from the moment he comes to be tried by sensible objects, he should have no one good passion towards his kind, no foundation either of pity, love, kindness or social affection.”⁷⁸ Even the passion of self-love could not be considered innately antisocial or vicious, but rather, interpreted in a stoic register as a moderate and sensible regard for one's own life and well-being, properly regulated self-love provides an essential impetus towards social peace. Reminiscent of Pufendorf's stoic interpretation of self-love and affirmation of the naturally sociable passions, Shaftesbury was uninterested in speculating about what he considered to be unprovable first principles of an obscurantist metaphysics unimportant to the substance of moral

⁷⁷ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1999), 12.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

life.⁷⁹ But his rejection of the Fall and relatively untroubled reliance on the guidance of human reason ground a radically different application of sociability. For Pufendorf, as for the *honnêtes*, it is the process of relational exchange within a community of interest that explains the fact of sociability. For Shaftesbury, conversation and polite exchange leads naturally sociable men towards greater understanding.

Shaftesbury's work provides (at last) an entrée to Montesquieu, whose 1721 *Persian Letters* has been described by Ursula Gonthier as a response to “Shaftesbury and Addison’s call for a new form of open, rational communication between equals in a social sphere free from courtly influence.”⁸⁰ The correspondence between Usbek and his circle of friends, according to Gonthier, exemplifies the atmosphere of free discussion among gentlemen advocated by Shaftesbury in *Sensus Communis*. It was precisely this free and open discourse – which allowed ideas to be subjected to a polite *raillerie* according to standards of critical judgment – that Shaftesbury offered as the milder, more appropriate, and more effective remedy against “enthusiasm” than repression and censorship. Anthony La Vopa has emphasized how Shaftesbury’s vision of a modern, critically informed public took shape in part as a reaction against the vogue for the French literature of *honnêteté*, which, as the product of an absolutist political culture, Shaftesbury saw as a threat to English liberties won in 1689. Unlike the battlefield or the law court, the social milieu of the *honnête homme* was distinguished by the company of women, whose natural talent at the art of conversation served to refine – ‘*polir*’ – men’s behavior, rendering them properly social. To Shaftesbury’s republican sensibilities, the eagerness to please that characterized the *honnête homme* – particularly his eagerness to please women – degraded conversation into a series of performances that achieved nothing but affirming the irrational rule of ‘opinion.’ According to La Vopa, in *Sensus Communis* Shaftesbury is crafting an “authorial persona” calculated to bring serious philosophical reflection to the world of polite sociability, infected – from his perspective – with a feminine preoccupation for pleasure and *complaisance*.⁸¹

⁷⁹ La Vopa, *Labor*, 128.

⁸⁰ Gonthier, *England*, 8.

⁸¹ La Vopa, *Labor*, 141.

Sexual politics are at the heart of the *Persian Letters*, and Montesquieu chose a conspicuously feminine form – a collection of letters that reads “like a kind of novel” – for inserting critical philosophical reflection into polite discourse.⁸² Placing the correspondence between male friends back into the narrative structure of the novel renders Montesquieu’s application of Shaftesbury’s vision ambiguous. Rica, Rhedi, and Usbek may achieve free and open discourse, but it bears limited fruit. Usbek’s recalcitrant embrace of patriarchal absolutism calls into question the ability of men to “polish one another and rub off our corners and rough sides” in isolated philosophical pursuit. I consider how Montesquieu might be fruitfully read alongside Shaftesbury by looking closely at the operation of passions in his 1721 novel. To do that, however, requires an overview of the developments that framed Shaftesbury’s neat identification of passion and sociability, via the epistemology of Locke, as well as the alternative conceptualizations of passions available to Montesquieu when he wrote the *Persian Letters*. The Hobbesian Neo-Augustinian ideology of seventeenth-century *honnêteté* remained influential, seen in the literary popularity of La Rochefoucauld as well as the ideological influence of Bayle. But while the heterodox theologians of Port Royal found themselves silenced by the religious policies of the Bourbon monarchy, a more powerful criticism of worldly appropriation of Augustine became available in the 1690s in the work of Nicolas Malebranche.

Locke: Thinking Passions

It was Locke who would reconfigure Pufendorf’s narrative of civil society to anti-absolutist ends: The state has no claim to authority over private religious beliefs and devotions, which pre-date the existence of the civil contract and are not dependent on it.⁸³ Locke’s epistemology was more flexible, as Voltaire’s enthusiasm for it attests, but the model of the passions he delineated in book two of his 1690 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (translated into French in 1700 by Pierre Coste), could serve to defang appeals to disorderly passions as justification for absolutist force. Recasting passions as the product of intellectual imagination, Locke made them

⁸² Montesquieu, “Some Reflections on the *Persian Letters*” in Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, ix.

⁸³ John William Tate, “Locke, Toleration, and Natural Law: A Reassessment,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 16, no. 1 (2017), 115.

not only essential to the moral life but theoretically scrutable to interrogation by reason. In chapter 22 of book two, Locke describes the passions as “complex ideas” (or “modes”) about pleasure and pain. Pleasure and pain are in themselves “simple ideas”, that is, ideas that “cannot be described, nor their names defined; the way of knowing them is...only by experience.”⁸⁴ These simple ideas about pleasure and pain are then associated with the ideas of “good” and “evil”, and the “complex idea” of passion is born: “Pleasure and pain and that which causes them,— good and evil, are the hinges on which our passions turn.”⁸⁵ Passion is not simply the byproduct of an animal economy being passively acted upon by animal spirits (the role of which Locke famously refused to speculate on), but the result of an active process of sensation and reflection about things that “appear to be the causes of pleasure and pain, or to have pleasure or pain some way annexed to them.”⁸⁶

Passions produce disorder only when they arise from a “wrong connexion of ideas” that misleads the faculty of reason meant to guide them. These erroneous connections may be made “by chance or custom”, but it is custom that “settles habits of thinking in the understanding,” making it all but impossible to separate ideas once the connection is established.⁸⁷ Gonthier argues that Usbek’s apparent blindness to the disconnect between his principles of justice and his cruelty as a harem master “illustrates the perpetual struggle between rational knowledge and unfounded prejudice” explored by Locke in book two of his *Essay*. Usbek’s state by the novel’s end – mired in depression and consumed by jealous anxiety – represents what Locke had described as a state of “madness” that caused even “men of fair minds” to become impervious “to the evidence of reason, though laid before him as clear as daylight.”⁸⁸ If Usbek is “mad”, however, he is not anomalous, as Locke explains that there is “something unreasonable in most men.” The “wrong connection of ideas”, created and reinforced by custom, not only disturbs our judgments of truth and falsehood, but “is of so great force to set us awry in our actions, as well moral as

⁸⁴ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (Ontario: Batoche Books, 2000), 180.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 180

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 183

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 319-21.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 319.

natural, passions, reasonings, and notions themselves.” It is these particular, arbitrary “connexion of ideas” that shape the “sympathies and antipathies of most men.”⁸⁹

It is precisely the vulnerability to error found in custom that motivated Shaftesbury’s criticism of Locke’s fideist acceptance of the doctrine of the afterlife.⁹⁰ His *Essay Concerning Virtue or Merit* had delineated at length the threat posed to the social order by irrational doctrinal positions. In the *Persian Letters*, the harem provided a stark representation of what Shaftesbury called the “horrid or unnatural...unexemplary” effects of upholding religious principles that counter the “right application of the affections.”⁹¹ Usbek’s passions, reasonings, notions, and – most tragically – his actions, have been shaped by the demands of corrupt customs, the source of which the novel locates in the reign of unilateral religious and secular authority. It is in his relationship with women that custom has most degraded Usbek’s judgement, by rendering him insensible to their appeals to *la tendre*.

Unlike Shaftesbury, who imagined the human person in possession of an innate sociability (a stance shared by Hutcheson), *honnête* ideology as well as Pufendorf’s elaboration of Grotian natural law framed sociability as an achievement of history in which women played an essential role. Pufendorf was no *honnête*, seeing women’s most important role not in the civilizing realm of the court but in the family as wives and mothers, privileging marriage as the foundational civilizing institution.⁹² Drawing on the literary and discursive traditions of *honnêteté*, Montesquieu complicates the nature of Shaftesbury’s innately social man, but in content and spirit Shaftesbury is less a target than a model, as Gonthier compellingly argues. After all, Shaftesbury’s insistence on an exclusively male public discourse might be excused as a necessary component of his republican political project: The gendered opposition between feminized monarchy and *virile*, manly republicanism was established long before Montesquieu delineated his own version of this phenomenon in *The Spirit of the Laws*.⁹³ Montesquieu took the role of women in the monarchy

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 321-2.

⁹⁰ La Vopa, *Labor*, 121.

⁹¹ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 175.

⁹² Pufendorf, *Law*, 575.

⁹³ Michael A Mosher, “The Judgmental Gaze of European Women: Gender, Sexuality, and the Critique of republican Rule,” *Political Theory* 22, no. 1 (1994): 25-44; Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, Part 1, book VII, “Consequences of the

seriously, but the more salient target of Montesquieu's critique was the Augustinian-Cartesian epistemology of Malebranche. Before turning to Malebranche, however, it is important to consider the literary context in which *honnête* ideas about the passions were delineated in the variety of literary forms associated with *honnêteté*, and which provided the foil for Malebranche's gendered attack on worldliness.

Alternatives to Passion: *La tendre* and *honnête* self-criticism

As the *Maximes* of La Rochefoucauld attest, the critique of *honnête* mœurs was a tradition within *honnêteté* itself; an apologetic counterpart to the *honnête* claim to be involved in a process of refinement as much as a concession to the conditions of a seventeenth-century modernity. La Rochefoucauld's contemporary, Madeleine de Scudéry, launched a very different critical enterprise dedicated not to unmasking but de-centering passion within the alternative emotional framework of *la tendre*. DeJean argued that Scudéry's map of the human heart sought to redefine emotional experiences relationally in order to provide an alternative to the alienating experience associated with passion. In "Journey Through Mlle de Scudéry's Carte de Tendre," Gloria Feman Orenstein reminds us that Scudéry's *carte de tendre* took the form of a society game, modeled on existing gallant maps of the "domain of love."⁹⁴ Unlike the *jouissance* of sexual pleasure celebrated in gallant narratives of triumph, Scudéry's map had for its goal the goods of tender friendship, bereft of the sensual pleasure faulted with degraded feeling. The *carte de tendre* was above all a map of Scudéry's own emotional territory, delineating emotional and physical boundaries that not only allowed her to preserve her autonomy, but also provided a model for ordering the social landscape of her salon.⁹⁵ The goods of tender friendship were never solely relational, but outlined the terms of Scudéry's moral autonomy.

La carte de tendre was one of Scudéry's many interventions into the *honnête* practice of gallantry. Whereas traditional gallant discourse framed male-female relationships as inherently

Different Principles of the Three Governments with Respect to Sumptuary Laws, Luxury, and the Condition of Women," 96-111.

⁹⁴ Gloria Feman Orenstein, "Journey through Mlle de Scudéry's Carte de Tendre : A Seventeenth-Century Salon Woman's Dream/Country of Tenderness," *Femspec* 3, no. 2, 2002

⁹⁵ Orenstein, "Journey", 3-5.

sexually charged, which the gallant code was meant to direct and diffuse, Scudéry proposed the possibility of a “gallantry without love,” in which men and women are lifted above the coarseness of sensual passion.⁹⁶ The imperative of avoiding passion also found expression in Lafayette’s 1678 *Princesse de Clèves*, in which the heroine achieves autonomy as a moral agent in her regulated expression of the passion of pity. In *Compassion’s Edge: Fellow-Feeling and Its Limits in Early Modern France*, Katherine Ibbett argued that Lafayette’s generic innovations in *La Princesse de Clèves* took “particular aim at the courtly culture of pity...according to which the married woman is asked to take pity on the supplications of her lover.”⁹⁷ The novel’s most famous scene, in which the princess confesses her love of another man to her husband while pleading for pity on her knees, was shocking to its readers because it inverted the depiction of the gallant supplication. Rather than a “pitiless woman spurning her kneeling admirer,” the princess places herself in the role of supplicant, relying on her husband’s masculine exercise of regulated compassion to aid her in her struggle against passion.⁹⁸ When Monsieur de Clèves proves unequal to the task, driven to his death in the grip of bitter jealousy, the princess once again finds herself subverting the norms of courtly pity when she eschews the advances of her admirer the Duc de Nemours in favor of retirement in a convent. Rather than an undiscerning pity prey to the manipulation of gallant professions, the princess exercises a reasoned compassion that feels for the suffering of others yet remains undisturbed by it, practicing a level of moral autonomy most moralists proclaimed to be beyond women’s capacity.⁹⁹

The eschewal of passion prescribed by Scudéry and practiced by the Princess represented a literary intervention into a gallant literature that depicted women in positions of power over men on the basis of men’s apparent helplessness over their sexual desires. As Anthony La Vopa argues, Scudéry’s spiritual gallantry was meant to “play down erotic idealization, which in fact serves men’s contempt for women, and to insist on the need to engage

⁹⁶ Scudéry, *L’air galant*, quoted in La Vopa, *Labor*, 100.

⁹⁷ Katherine Ibbett, *Compassion’s Edge: Fellow Feeling and its Limits in Early Modern France*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 148-9.

⁹⁸ Ibbett, *Compassion*, 149.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

women's reasonable agency."¹⁰⁰ This appeal to women's reason was not, as La Vopa stresses, an appeal for intellectual equality. While gallant literature provided "unprecedented common ground for intellectual exchange" between men and women, women's intellectual performance remained strictly circumscribed by gender and status imperatives that proscribed any form of labor.¹⁰¹ Women were to exercise their reason in matters of taste and judgement, not intellectual achievements. As Scudéry explained, women committed to truly spiritual gallant friendships must learn to "manage all of their advantages well," not succumbing to gallant gestures but rather valuing men according to their actual merit. Under women's moral leadership, "it would be possible to introduce into the world a gallantry so spiritual, so agreeable, and so innocent all together, that it would shock neither propriety nor virtue."¹⁰²

While critical of worldly social commerce, Scudéry could claim the roles of interpreter of the human heart and arbiter of taste thanks to the codes of *honnête* discourse. As La Vopa stresses, the *honnête* imperatives of leisure and *aisance* assigned new value to the qualities ascribed to feminine intelligence that were traditionally derided.¹⁰³ Women's lack of formal training in logic, grammar, and rhetoric lent their speech and writing the "pleasing" qualities valued in *honnête* conversation and literature. In addition to aligning with status imperatives that proscribed labor, women's conversation avoided engagement with abstract knowledge that the skeptical epicureanism of *honnêteté* eschewed. As La Vopa notes, Montaigne had extolled the virtues of conversation for precisely the same reasons as the seventeenth-century *honnêtes* – the avoidance of pedantry, the exercise of refining thought, and the pure epicurean pursuit of pleasure – but understood them in the context of cultivating male friendships.¹⁰⁴ The "delicacy" widely attributed to the peculiar constitution of noble women, however, gave them a singular advantage in an epistemological framework that privileged the act of perception in the procurement of knowledge. If the typical worldly gallant professes helplessness in the face of

¹⁰⁰ La Vopa, *Labor*, 99

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 13

¹⁰² « "il seroit possible d'introduire dans le monde une galanterie si spirituelle, si agréable, & si innocente tout ensemble, qu'elle ne choqueroit ny la bien-seance ny la vertu. » Madeleine de Scudery, *Conversations nouvelles sur divers sujets*, (Paris : C. Barbin, 1684), 380.

¹⁰³ La Vopa, *Labor*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, *Labor*

women's indisputable physical charms, the *vraie galant* imagined by Scudéry willingly accedes to women's superior judgments of taste. The truly *honnête homme* must be willing to accede his will to the requirements of taste as dictated by the object of his affection.

Despite her deference for propriety, Scudéry and her literary disciples met with vitriolic ridicule, providing the subject of one of Molière's most popular comedies, *Les Femmes Savantes*, which remained a potent weapon against learned women throughout the eighteenth century.¹⁰⁵ Despite this pushback, however, the cultural predominance of *honnêteté* continued to lend legitimacy to women's participation in literary and cultural production. The cultural predominance of *honnête* discourse of aristocratic virtue in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries emerged from a confluence of political and cultural developments. In addition to filling the ideological vacuum left by the delegitimization of discourses that identified noble virtue with military or judicial service, the rituals of *honnêteté* served to allay the status anxiety created by the expansion of the venality of offices.¹⁰⁶ In the years surrounding the death of Louis XIV and the early, tumultuous years of the Regency, however, criticism of *honnête* pretensions grew, as the French aristocracy entrenched itself in the ideological and "socioprofessional" disputes that would continue up to the Revolution.¹⁰⁷ By the 1720s, when Anne-Thérèse de Lambert offered a new vision of gallant relationship among the exceptional souls of the worldly, she had to contend not only with the increasing apprehension of a reading public, but with the critical voice of Malebranche.

Malebranche versus The World

For the Neo-Augustinians of Port Royal, the passions represented variations of the self-love that infected the will and was the legacy of the Fall. In *De la recherche de la vérité*, Nicolas Malebranche offered an alternative interpretation of Augustine that framed passion not as a condition of the affections but of reason.¹⁰⁸ In Malebranche's Augustinian Cartesianism, the major

¹⁰⁵ Dufour-Maître, *Les précieuses*, 12.

¹⁰⁶ Linton, *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France*, (London : Palgrave, 2001); La Vopa, *Labor*, 28.

¹⁰⁷ Harold Ellis, *Boulevardiers and the French Monarchy: Aristocratic Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century France*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 8.

¹⁰⁸ The following discussion follows La Vopa, *Labor*, 63-96.

effect of the Fall on human nature was to invert the relative power of immaterial mind and corporeal body in the process of reasoning. The perfect union of immaterial mind and material body that characterized God's original creation reflected his intention that humanity should live in unity with his divine intellect. Endowed with sense perceptions for the purpose of bodily self-preservation, these sensory faculties were subject to the control of reason exercised by the immaterial substance. To exercise reason in this prelapsarian context was to actually participate fully in the intellection of God, understanding reality as it is in its essence and not in narrow relation to our own perceptions and needs. The punishment for original sin was to invert this formula, and to enslave the immaterial substance to sensory perceptions that occlude reason and distort reality. This inversion, which enslaved human reason to sense perception, constituted Malebranche's definition of passion.

This mistrust of sensory perception is an Augustinian twist on Descartes, whose epistemology had affirmed the relative reliability of perception based on presumptions about God's nature.¹⁰⁹ But for Malebranche no reliable knowledge can come from sense perceptions, which a distorted self-love transforms through its hold on the imagination. Whereas our prelapsarian parents had been in possession of sensory faculties that participated directly with the intellect of God that resides in immaterial substance, the unbounded self-love of their postlapsarian ancestors allows the imagination to process perceptions only in relation to itself. Instead of sensing and understanding the "essences of things", we see only a partial – and delusional – reality. Lacking the strength to resist the sensory information overloading our disordered animal and spiritual economy, fallen humans allow themselves to be deceived by delusions of self-love. Passion – understood as the processing of sensory perception in the imagination – diverts the person away from the love of God that resides in immaterial substance and towards the false goods of worldly approbation. Malebranche ascribes the corrupting power of passion to the physiological mechanism of the "animal spirits", which physically alter the constitution of the physical substance that hosts the mind, inscribing "grooves" and leaving ineradicable "traces" that capture the imagination into a feedback loop of deluded self-love.

¹⁰⁹ Tuck, *Philosophy*, 287.

Like his Jansenist counterparts, then, Malebranche rejected accommodation with worldly values in the pursuit of spiritual truth, and his assessment of worldly knowledge sounded at times decidedly Jansenist: In collusion with the self-love of others, we fashion an alternative reality in the form of social and political orders that allow us to pursue our endless need for validation and reprobation – to confirm the delusion of our self-love. Reminiscent of Pascal, Malebranche counseled that the results of solitary meditation for the Christian should include the total renunciation of the self, but self-love for Malebranche is not the same as the Jansenist variety that cannot co-exist with the love of God. For Malebranche, disordered self-love is the result of the Fall, but by its nature self-love is a tool of self-preservation implanted by God to enable survival. The Fall diminishes the love of God, allowing self-love to apportion the resources of the will and guide the sensory faculties.¹¹⁰ The labor of prolonged meditation might silence, for a time, the unnecessary and distracting persistence of fallen self-love, but self-love, like all our corporeal instincts, coexists with the love of God enabled by grace that is the fruit of the immaterial substance. If for the Jansenists the world is a dangerous landscape of misplaced affections infected with self-love, Malebranche emphasized the dangers of worldly sumptuousness in distracting the intellect towards false goods. The problem of the passions for Malebranche is not the quality of love that animates the will but the acceptance of falsehoods by the will on the basis of the testimony of the senses.

Malebranche's dismissal of the intelligence ascribed to the *honnête femme* was not motivated by misogyny (though it was certainly fueled by it), but rather philosophical polemic.¹¹¹ While women's bodies tended towards the delicacy that renders the imagination susceptible to the errors of sense perceptions, some women are said by Malebranche to possess the appropriate firmness of constitution to engage in the "labor of attention" required to train the mind to operate independently of the senses. More pertinent to his point, the spread of Epicurean atomism and its attendant epistemology of perception demonstrated to Malebranche that men, too, fall prey all too easily to the phantasms of bodily sensations; he saved his harshest

¹¹⁰ La Vopa, *Labor*, 90.

¹¹¹ For Malebranche's attacks on Hobbes' atomism see Douglass, *Rousseau and Hobbes*, 33-7.

condemnation for the “effeminate” *bel esprit*. As La Vopa argues, Malebranche’s charges of “effeminacy” served as a “moral diagnosis” central to his philosophical and theological system. Worldly effeminacy was not simply a lamentable miscalculation of value but the observable product of an active process of corruption. Effeminacy was not about a set of “inclinations to be observed in certain men” but rather “the form that human corruption was taking in what he saw as the social condition of seventeenth-century modernity.”¹¹² Nothing contributed to the process of corruption more than the stultifying effects of worldly conversation. Whereas *honnêtes hommes* and *femmes* understood the art of conversation to enhance understanding by way of the natural spontaneity of its reasoning, Malebranche saw conversation as yet another interference of sensory perception with the operation of our true intellect.

Of course, *honnêteté* never entailed the search after truth that animated Malebranche, settling for the practice of a practical reason focused on the procurement of pleasure seen as an expression of interest. Malebranche sought not only to demonstrate that the abstract knowledge derided by Epicurean skepticism was possible, but that it was the *honnête* valuation of sensual, imaginative intelligence – epitomized by the delicacy of the *honnête femme*– that acted to obscure it. Overconfidence in the reliability of our sense impressions comes from the workings of imagination, which transformed sensations into mental images that left physical “traces” in the brain by way of the animal spirits.¹¹³ The exquisitely delicate brain fibers common to women meant they were peculiarly susceptible to the alterations caused by the spirits and therefore more easily fooled by imagination. When worldly women make use of their judgement, “the style and not the reality suffices to occupy their minds to capacity.”¹¹⁴ Malebranche fully agreed that women possessed heightened capacities for receiving and transforming sense impression, and as such rightly exercise their role as arbiters of worldly taste, but to Malebranche taste is inimical to truth.

¹¹² La Vopa, *Labor*, 63.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 79-85.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in La Vopa, *Labor*, 66.

Passions in Epistolary Fiction

Persian Letters

Céline Spector has argued that Montesquieu saw the epistolary novel as a means to bring together “philosophy, politics, morality, and the novel” in a new form capable of making the passions “felt,” while also exploring their physical and moral causes and effects.¹¹⁵ The *Lettres*, according to Spector, allowed Montesquieu to bring together disparate discourses in order to represent the passions while “avoiding the double pitfall of medical and moral discourses,” which gave too much explanatory force, respectively, to the body and to the soul.¹¹⁶ In Spector’s analysis, the seraglio serves as a “laboratory” that allows Montesquieu to examine the nature of the passions as both physiological and moral phenomena and the extent to which they can be controlled by the imposition of laws and customs.¹¹⁷ The failure of the seraglio to successfully neutralize passion, either through the interference of its physiological mechanism (in the case of the eunuchs) or the elaborate moral interventions of the harem economy grounds Montesquieu’s attack on dogmatic philosophy and reductive moral theories, as expressed in his personal *pensée* “We are never more grossly mistaken that when we want to reduce human sentiments into system.”¹¹⁸ As Spector’s analysis demonstrates, the passions in the *Persian Letters* work according to the imperatives of their own logic, defying strategies of containment, and determining the limits of despotic power: The more Usbek attempts to control the passions of his wives through punishments, “the less he masters and the less he dominates.”¹¹⁹

If the passions defy attempts to be classified or governed by the imposition of “reason,” Montesquieu’s novel suggests the extent to which the passions may be rendered comprehensible through narrative. Passion – particularly sexual passion – propels the narrative of the novel while it also determines its tragic outcome, but passion itself is not identified as the source of tragedy. Instead, the essential (if unstable) passion of sexual energy is continually thwarted by the

¹¹⁵ Céline Spector, « Le despotisme des passions dans les *Lettres persanes* » in Laurent Gerbier, ed., *De Rabelais à Sade : l'analyse des passions dans le roman de l'âge classique*, (Saint-Étienne : Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2003).

¹¹⁶ Spector, *despotisme*, 40

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 41

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

practices and institutions designed by positive law to govern it. This paper makes extensive use of the work of both Mary McAlpin and Janet Gurkin Altman, each of whom have presented compelling readings of the novel based on a close attention to the narrative that, although not easily scrutable in the terms of his cryptic dating system, Montesquieu constructed very carefully.¹²⁰ Focusing on each character's position as both receiver and sender of letters, Gurkin Altman's careful narrative reconstruction of the characters' correspondences highlights the role of the harem sub-plot as it unfolds in the first part of the novel, which, while subsumed by the energetic intellectual exchanges between the male protagonists, shapes their epistolary intercourse. Mary McAlpin's more recent work reads further into the narrative gaps of the harem sub-plot to highlight how Montesquieu used the character of Roxanne to put forth a vision of virtue based on principles of nature in contrast to what she argues is Usbek's congenital tendency to embrace entropy.

The following chapter builds on these insights, contextualizing Montesquieu's representation of passion in relation to the rhetorical traditions that shape it, highlighting the role of post-skeptical moral theory shaped by both a literature of *honnêteté* and seventeenth-century natural law. In his fatalistic fascination with the corruption he sees endemic in the human condition as well as his total rejection of the role of the senses in the pursuit of the goods that frames his tale of the Troglodytes, Usbek provides a literary caricature of the epistemology of Malebranche, which is widely rejected by the novel's tragic narrative as well as the many evident shortcomings of its interlocutor. But a rejection of Malebranchian epistemology (as well as his *esprit de système*) did not constitute approval of worldly practices, as the catastrophic collapse that closes the novel's first part (and the lived reality of many of his readers) attests. While critical of worldly *moeurs*, Montesquieu's novel embraces worldly conceptions of gender complementarity to forge an apologetic for noble judicial virtue.

¹²⁰ Robert Shackleton's work deciphering the hybrid dating system used by Montesquieu was published in 1954: "The Moslem chronology of the *Lettres persanes*", *French Studies*, no. 8, 1954, p. 17-27 ; reprinted in R. Shackleton, *Essays on Montesquieu and on the Enlightenment* (Oxford : Voltaire Foundation, 1988), p. 73-83. Janet Gurkin Altman, "Strategic Timing: Women's Questions, Domestic Servitude, and the Dating Game in Montesquieu," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 13, (no.2-3, 2001): 325-348; Mary McAlpin, "The Rape of Roxane and the End of the World in Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*," *Romanic Review* 107, (no. 1-4, 2016): 57-76.

Letters of a Peruvian Woman

Like Montesquieu's 1721 epistolary collection, Graffigny's *Letters* is concerned with the nature of passions and the conditions and limits of right reasoning. Despite sharing common objects of intellectual concern, the two novels differ considerably. Whereas Montesquieu layers polyphony throughout his novel and within its individual letters, Graffigny's novel includes the letters of a single writer, whose correspondence remains unsent for most of the novel. Montesquieu's novel ends with stunning finality, while Graffigny's famously open ending invites the reader to imagine possibilities for a continuing narrative. Montesquieu foregrounded sexual passions in the harem letters as a means to represent a universal model of human passions variously acted upon by historical forces. Graffigny, in strict accordance with the rules of propriety, deftly sublimated sexual passion into a narrative propelled by the heroine's epistemological crises. And in total contrast to Montesquieu's unaware pedant Usbek or ironic observer, Rica, Graffigny's Peruvian heroine Zilia earnestly narrates her own process of discerning passions and pursuing reason as she reconstructs a sense of self in a world turned upside down.

In a foundational essay elucidating the novel's central epistemological concerns, Janet Gurkin Altman argued that Graffigny's sympathetic representations of Zilia reflect the novel's larger critical purpose of challenging "a patriarchal European's ethnocentric perspective on world history." In casting Zilia as a sensitive, inquisitive, and rational protagonist, according to Gurkin Altman, Graffigny distinguished her from the caricature of the "savage" (whether noble or barbarous) who lives "outside of history".¹²¹ Locating Zilia in time is a central theme of the novel, which is however less concerned with criticizing colonialism than with delineating terms of assimilation into the conditions of European modernity. Fréron, apparently taking Graffigny's truth claims literally, chided in a review that no French vessels had been anywhere near Peru at the time of Spanish conquest.¹²² Even if the case had been otherwise, Zilia would still have had to travel through time as well as space, ending up as she does in the France of Louis XV. In the

¹²¹ Gurkin Altman, "Graffigny's Epistemology," 175-6.

¹²² *Élie Catherine Fréron, Lettres sur quelques écrits de ce temps*, (Londres: Chez Duchesne, 1752).

course of her journey, Zilia is forced to accept truths that destroy her previous understanding of the world on the most basic level. Like the descendants of the European conquerors, Zilia will gain a new cosmology when she learns that the sun “shines on the whole world” and not exclusively on the Inca. Forced into an exchange economy that structures social and linguistic as much as material relations, Zilia must learn how to navigate within it while preserving the “pleasure of being” inspired by nature that provides a source for the construction of a rational subjectivity. And in mastering French, Zilia will learn to speak the language of *la tendre*, moving beyond the language of passion that dominates her early letters translated from *quipos*.

I open the section of Graffigny’s novel with a discussion of Anne-Thérèse, marquise de Lambert, whose – somewhat contradictory – writing about passion in her works represents the changing inflections that the concept was accruing. Like Scudéry and Lafayette, Lambert underscored the importance of eschewing sensual pleasures in the pursuit of autonomy and virtue. But while she proffered the traditional wisdom about the importance of avoiding passion in her advice to her daughter, she elsewhere imagined the possibility that the experience of passion might be “purified” of sensory corruption.¹²³ Like her literary predecessors, Lambert seized on the opportunity provided by *honnête* celebration of women’s perceptive capacities but orients this capacity away from the senses and towards sentiment. But her willingness to consider the possibility that passion itself might be purified of sensory baseness also reflects changing conceptions about the nature of the passions as both moral and physical entities. It also underlay her attempt to imagine a version of gallant friendship that Graffigny would pursue in her 1747 novel.

Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse

Published in 1761, 14 years after the first edition of Graffigny’s *Letters*, Rousseau’s six-volume bourgeois epistolary epic reflects the confluence of intellectual and creative energies that had characterized the literary world of the 1750s. Rousseau’s own contributions to this intellectual

¹²³ Anne-Thérèse de Lambert, *Avis d’une mère à son fils et à sa fille*, (Paris : Chez Etienne Ganeau, 1728) ; *Réflexions nouvelles sur les femmes, par une dame de la Cour*, (Paris : chez François le Breton, 1727).

ferment was of course considerable, and I open my discussion of *La nouvelle Héloïse* with a brief consideration of his representations of the passions in his *Second Discourse* (1755). In *Rousseau and Hobbes*, Robin Douglass stresses the importance of Rousseau's engagement, rebuttal, and adaptation of the natural law tradition in the crafting of his *Second Discourse*. Rousseau delineates an account of man in his "natural state" as both peaceful and unsociable – rejecting Hobbes and Pufendorf simultaneously. This narrative is essential to his recasting of the passions as agents independent of an Original Sin that he rejected. But if he rejected Original Sin he did not entirely repudiate the Fall, instead secularizing it into a conjectural historical narrative of humanity's transition from its "natural" state to into the entanglements of modern political, economic, and social relations that have corrupted it. As Douglass emphasizes, Rousseau's secularization of the Fall into a contingency of history presented the possibility that the City of God might obtain on earth – a project that Rousseau would begin to outline in *du contract social*.¹²⁴ For the unhappy souls already compromised by an encroaching modernity, however, Rousseau offered an alternative prescription, which came with a much more sober prognosis.

As he acknowledges in his extended second *preface* – "Conversation about Novels between the Editor and a Man of Letters" – Rousseau's decision to publish a novel contradicted his well-established opposition to the quintessentially modern and "effeminate" literary form. In his *Lettre à D'Alembert sur les spectacles*, published only three years before *Julie*, Rousseau had reiterated his disdain for novels as part of his attack on worldly aesthetics that he blamed for the corruption their apologists claimed they inhibited.¹²⁵ Nicholas Paige has argued that *Julie* represents "the unfinished business of the *Lettre à d'Alembert*, a prolonged exercise in thinking about the inadequacies of previous accounts of aesthetic response."¹²⁶ Arguing against the common reading of the novel's first half as a "gilded pill" meant to entice the reader into the edifying second half, Paige interprets Julie's failure of resistance to Saint Preux as a representation of the troubling forms of aesthetic response Rousseau had denounced in his *Lettre à d'Alembert*.

¹²⁴ Douglass, *Rousseau and Hobbes*, 74.

¹²⁵ Nicholas Paige, "Rousseau's Readers Revisited: The Aesthetics of La Nouvelle Héloïse," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42, no. 1, 2008: 131-154.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

In the novel's first half, Julie's responses to her lover's sufferings represent a "bad kind of pity", which, like the feminine pity denounced by seventeenth-century philosophers, fails to distinguish the boundaries between the observer and the observed. The book's second half, detailing the "cure" of Julie and Saint Preux's passion, offers an alternative aesthetics of *attendrissement*, an "emotion of spectatorship" that maintains indissoluble boundaries between subjects and that is made possible by the renunciation of passion. The uniquely exquisite experience of *attendrissement*, Paige argues, grounds the aesthetic of the novel's second half. Far from an "unaesthetic" moralism, the novel's second half "proposes models of aesthetic engagement that will substitute for the type of emotional contagion that caused Julie's downfall" and which was implicated in the *Lettre à d'Alembert*.¹²⁷

The pleasures of renunciation are not exclusive to the novel's chaste second half, however, although they are decidedly less successful at warding off passion in the novel's first three parts. The renunciation of the satisfaction of passion for the goods of *la tendre* was, of course, a well-established theme of women's literary fiction, and it is precisely this gallant renunciation of passion's sensuality that Julie and Saint Preux attempt to enact in the novel's first part. When this attempt at gallant friendship leads – as Lambert had warned it would – to the intensification of passion, the exquisitely sensitive souls of the two lovers cannot help but succumb to its dictates. The failure of the gallant relationship to withstand the weight of passion is followed by the (temporarily) successful management of passion's effects within a domestic economy that structures sensibility and sentiment according to the rational insights of manly intellect.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 146.

CHAPTER 2

NARRATIVES OF PASSION: HUMAN NATURE AND SEXUAL DIFFERENCE IN FRENCH EPISTOLARY FICTION, 1721-1761

Interpreting the Persian Letters

The publication of the *Persian Letters* in 1721 launched Montesquieu's literary career, securing him entrée into the Parisian *grand monde* necessary for pursuing his scholarly and literary ambitions. The correspondence between Montesquieu's elaborate cast of Persian characters – their perceptions of the *mœurs* of Regency France, their philosophical and political “digressions”, and the initially sparse but persistent voices of the eunuchs and the wives imprisoned in the seraglio – provided rich ground for interpretive speculation then and since. As Philip Stewart noted in a 1999 article, at the center of most of these interpretive efforts lay Montesquieu's enigmatic harem despot, Usbek.¹²⁸ Stewart aimed his article at several commonly accepted misinterpretations of Usbek's character that do not hold up under textual scrutiny: Usbek is neither blind to the internal strife in the seraglio nor inflexible in his rule. He is, in Stewart's assessment, a fatalist who, seeing clearly the inevitable destruction of the seraglio initiated by his departure, inures himself from its fall-out by remaining securely in France. Building on Stewart's insights, Mary McAlpin argued in a 2016 article that while Usbek is clearly lucid about the state of his seraglio and the general faithlessness of his wives, he does have, pace Stewart, “a fatal blind spot.” His depressive temperament and his “embrace of a universal vision of destruction” render him blind to Roxane's infidelity because, according to McAlpin, he cannot “imagine that passionate, sustained love could exist in the world.”¹²⁹

In McAlpin's reading, Usbek's deficiency – as a husband and a philosopher – is fully manifest in the only unprompted letter that Usbek writes to any of his wives, Letter 24 to Roxane, in which he recites – and so relives – a detailed account of the act of rape by which he consummated their marriage.¹³⁰ Roxane is the only wife that Usbek professes to love, but it is not romantic passionate attachment to an individual, but what McAlpin refers to as “irritation-based

¹²⁸ Philip Stewart, “Toujours Usbek,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 11, no. 2, 1999: 141-150.

¹²⁹ McAlpin, “Roxane,” 59.

¹³⁰ In McAlpin's edition it is Letter 26

amour”: a reduction of sexual passion to the biological functioning of organic bodies. Usbek “loves” Roxane because her continued resistance stokes his otherwise overindulged sexual appetites, but this “love” bears no actual relationship to its object. McAlpin contrasts the passionate love between Roxane and her paramour to the “flaccid passion” of Usbek the “unnatural” husband to argue that Usbek’s deficiency is innate. Usbek’s fatalism – the despair that drives him to “project his anomie onto the world” into a vision of inevitable and totalizing entropy – should be interpreted as the result of the character’s “idiosyncratic tendency to overthink.” His meditations on the effects of the harem sexual economy or the disorientation of geographical displacement that he blames for his perpetual unease and weak will are little more than rationalizations, meager excuses for the shortcomings of his temperament. Roxane, by contrast, is marked as “exceptional” based on the quality of her passion for her “virile paramour.”¹³¹

Usbek may well be found guilty of rationalizing his bad behavior when he blames the structure of the seraglio for his chronic distemper, but there is little doubt that Montesquieu took the effects of social and political arrangements on human nature seriously. His three-fold classification of states delineated in the *Spirit of the Laws* codified the co-constitutive nature of people and states according to the nature of the passion that inspires and sustains them.¹³² Republics inspired by virtue and monarchies animated by honor cultivated particular passions, shaping the nature of their subjects and their values in different but potentially equally moral ways. Despotism, by contrast, by debilitating reason with pervasive fear “causes appalling ills to human nature” providing a negative moral limit, circumscribing the extent of Montesquieu’s relativism.¹³³

Usbek, of course, hails from the notoriously despotic empire of Safavid Persia, rendered by Jean Chardin as the pinnacle of despotism in his popular travel accounts of the late seventeenth century: “There is certainly nowhere in the world a sovereign as absolute as the king of Persia, as his commandments are always exactly executed, without regard for their substance

¹³¹McAlpin, “Roxane”, 61,71, 58.

¹³² For a discussion of Montesquieu’s three principles of virtue, honor, and fear as passions see Sharon Krause, “Laws, Passion, and the attractions of Right Action in Montesquieu” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32, (no. 2, 2006), 211-230.

¹³³ Sharon Krause, “History and the Human Soul in Montesquieu” *History of Political Thought*, 24 (no. 2, 2003), 259.

or the circumstances of things.”¹³⁴ As Joan-Pau Rubiés has argued, Chardin’s analysis emphasized the historical peculiarity of Safavid despotism, which was not a product of the peoples’ natures: they were neither the “natural slaves” of an eastern caricature nor the denatured barbarians of a brutal dictator. The extreme nature of Safavid despotism, in Chardin’s analysis, lay in the peculiar historical conjunction of the imposition of a military government with the Shi’ite doctrine that grounded the dynasty’s legitimacy in their claim to descend directly from the Prophet Muhammed, granting them full political *and* religious authority. The Ottomans, while considered more “barbarous” in their despotism than the Persians, had rulers liable to consult a clerical judicial order, tempering the individual wills of rulers.¹³⁵

Chardin had remained circumspectly focused on the details of political and social life in Persia, but his description of the political and religious union that constituted Persia’s unique form of despotism resonated with French readers in the wake of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 (which forced the Protestant Chardin into exile in England upon his return to Europe). That the Persians were said to live peacefully according to civil laws and to excel in culture and *politesse* further eroded the civilizational divide that traditionally protected the French monarchy from charges of despotism.¹³⁶ By 1721, the religious claims of the Bourbon monarchy had only increased, as the crown not only hounded the remnants of French Protestantism but also the proto Calvinist heretical sect labeled Jansenist. Fears of despotism were confirmed with the 1713 promulgation of the bull *Unigenitus*, which, in affirming the primacy of papal authority over regular and secular clergy, threatened the independence of the Gallican church and even the monarchy itself. The condemnation of lay scripture reading extended this violation to the faith lives of ordinary French laity.¹³⁷

Montesquieu had no interest in religious apologetics, instead highlighting the absurdity of religious “reasoning” altogether. If he agreed with the Molinist assessment of human nature’s general fitness for social life and potential for virtue, he excoriated the implications drawn by the

¹³⁴ Quoted in Joan-Pau Rubiés, “Oriental Despotism and European Orientalism: Botero to Montesquieu,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 9, (no. 1, 2005), 155.

¹³⁵ Rubiés, “Oriental Despotism,” 162.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹³⁷ Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 73.

Jesuits, who “defend a good cause...through quite a bad means.”¹³⁸ Usbek’s own sincere grappling with his received understanding of his faith (provoked, it would seem, by a confrontation with hyperbolic doubt) is met with admonitions from the devout counselors he consults, who answer his rational inquiries with absurd and grotesque tales presented as historically factual.¹³⁹ But if the pretensions of religious zealots to possess unique access to truth and reason could be amusing in their absurdity, they were dangerous in their applications. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu would depict the seraglio as a climactic necessity, due to the supposedly precocious age of puberty experienced by girls in hot climates.¹⁴⁰ In the *Persian Letters*, by contrast, in which the Persian institution provides the opportunity for commentary on France and the French, the harem is represented as the historical product of an insalubrious union of temporal and spiritual power.

Usbek’s temperamental shortcomings are part of his nature, but they are nonetheless acquired, and he himself is keenly aware of the role that scripturally ordained polygamy has played in the transformation of his own amorous passion into exhausted jealousy.¹⁴¹ While he laments the effects of the harem sexual economy on his own sexual passion in one of the novel’s opening letters, his encounters with the shocking *mœurs* of Regency Paris lead him to a more positive assessment of the seraglio’s ability to control and dominate women.¹⁴² Reducing not only sexual passion but women themselves to instruments of sensory satisfaction, Usbek elaborates that like gambling or alcohol, women induce reason-debilitating passions that are the targets of regulation by religious law. Unable to banish sexual passion, Islamic law has tempered it so that “love brings with it neither agitation nor frenzy.” The flaccidity of his passion, then, is by the design of religious law, which is “principally concerned to take from us everything which can disturb our reason.” The many wives of upright Muslim husbands, Usbek insists, “tempers the violence of our desires” and in so doing shields men from women’s only presumed source of

¹³⁸ Charles-Louis de Secondat baron de Montesquieu, *My Thoughts*, Tr. by Henry C. Clark (Indiana: Liberty Fund, 2012), *pensée* 730, 220.

¹³⁹ *Persian Letters*, 22-5 (Letters 15-7); Arguing that “It seems to me that nothing is either pure or impure in and of itself. I cannot imagine any quality inherent in a thing that would render it such.” Given that our sense perceptions only provide us with information about our own experiences and not an objective reality, how can they be relied upon to judge the purity of substance that provokes different reactions in different people?

¹⁴⁰ *Spirit of the Laws*, 264-5

¹⁴¹ *Persian Letters*, 8-9 (Letter 6)

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 73-4 (Letter 54)

power.¹⁴³ As the tragic unraveling of his seraglio demonstrates, it also renders Usbek incapable of engaging with women as anything but objects, unworthy of the fraternal sentiment he lavishes upon his male friends.

The distorted passions of a jealous husband and a disfigured eunuch are two of many abominations committed against nature in the name of controlling the passions according to “reason” as dictated by religious law. Letter 7 from Usbek’s wife Fatmé introduces the reader to the lengths taken to ensure that the harem’s intricate safety net for virtue works according to its “rational” design: “When I married you, my eyes had not yet seen the face of a man...my imagination is unable to conceive of anything more beautiful than the alluring charms of your person.”¹⁴⁴ While the reader cannot know the true extent of the passion that Fatmé professes (letter 7 is her only appearance in the novel), the attempt to circumscribe the horizons of feminine imagination through extreme interventions is undercut in proceeding letters. It is dramatically denied altogether in the novel’s tragic dénouement when Roxane, in the letter announcing her betrayal and suicide, asks Usbek a question destined to remain rhetorical: “How could you suppose me so credulous as to believe that the sole purpose of my existence was to adore your caprices?”¹⁴⁵ Roxane, who as McAlpin emphasizes is marked as a “foreigner” to the seraglio context throughout Montesquieu’s text, has not had her imagination tailored to the needs of her husband, but has allowed it to nurture her illicit, though “natural,” passion.¹⁴⁶

Positioning the Passions in the *Persian Letters*

Usbek may lack the necessary imagination to understand the passion that motivates Roxane, but Montesquieu’s readers would have recognized his famously sober protagonist as a man motivated by his passions. His opening declaration that he and his travelling companion, Rica, are “perhaps the first Persians whom the appetite for learning has prompted to leave the land of their birth, and forsake the charms of a peaceful life in favour of the arduous quest for wisdom,” suggests that Usbek’s self-love is intimately bound to the love of wisdom he

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 213

¹⁴⁶ McAlpin, *Roxanne*, 67.

professes.¹⁴⁷ For readers familiar with the *Maximes* of La Rochefoucauld, Usbek's stress on the hardships of his quest, and his request that his friend relay to him the rumors that his departure have provoked, nicely illustrate the maxim that "those who believe themselves to have merit, make it a point of honor to be unhappy, to persuade others, and themselves, that they are worth being the target of fortune." Likewise, his claim to be fleeing persecution in the name of virtue in letter eight seems only to confirm the famous epigraph printed on the 1688 edition of the *Maximes*: "our virtues are usually nothing more than vices in disguise."¹⁴⁸

While Usbek's opening correspondence with his friends may betray his vanity, it is sexual passion that dominates the opening sequence of nine letters. Three letters from abandoned and sexually frustrated wives, Usbek's letter detailing the enervating effects of the harem sexual economy, and a letter from the head eunuch detailing the effects of castration on his passion constitute five of the opening nine letters. The ninth letter brings sexual passion together with the moral language of the passions in the testimony of the head eunuch. Detailing the torments of his castrated passion, the head eunuch explains that as a young man he had expected "to be freed of the pangs of love by the inability to satisfy them." Castration, however, merely extinguished the "the effect of passion" but not "the emotion that sparked it." Surrounded by "objects that constantly excited" passion, he passed his youth with a "heart full of rage" and a "soul full of terrible despair." Only age has calmed his frustrated sexual passion, so that now he can satisfy his ambition – the "sole passion remaining to me" – by imposing his rule over the women he has learned to hate. 149

Rehearsing a familiar skeptical discourse, letter nine dismantles the possibility of interest calculation providing an effective counterweight to passion. Explaining that when his master had him castrated, he had consoled himself in thinking he "was sacrificing my passions to my repose and to my fortune," the head eunuch discovered too late the futility of attempting to banish passion through interest calculation. Instead, he weaponizes appeals to interest as a tool against

¹⁴⁷ *Persian Letters*, 4.

¹⁴⁸ La Rochefoucauld, *Réflexions, ou sentences et maximes morales*, 4^e édition, (Toulouse, 1688).
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k993268j/f39.item.r=la%20rochefoucauld%20maximes>

¹⁴⁹ *Persian Letters*, 12

the women under his supervision: After having “driven them to despair” through constant verbal chastisement, he affects disgust in the act of punishing them, “seeming to imply that my sole motivation is their own interest.” In reality, he explains, he “welcome[s] the hatred of all those women” as affirmation of his domination.¹⁵⁰ The head eunuch, it would seem, by embracing his ambition, has learnt not to distinguish between interest and passion. This familiar skeptical reduction of passion and interest is importantly modified, however, as the self-love of neo-Augustinian motivation is replaced by sexual passion as the central human motivation. Much like the self-love lamented by neo-Augustinians, the frustrated sexual passion of the head eunuch adapts its expression according to its context the better to serve its needs. Like Augustinian self-love, sexual passion is frustrated in its attempts to procure the ends that it seeks, but the obstacles it faces are not internal but imposed by human law and enforced by human power.

The head eunuch's illustrative lamentation is immediately followed by a letter from Usbek's friend Mirza, which prompts Usbek's famous tale of the Troglodytes. Told in a series of four letters (11-14), the tale of Troglodytes swiftly undermines the skeptical claims evoked in the opening letters while dismissing the role of sensory experience – sexual or otherwise – in answering moral questions. Mirza's letter had recounted a philosophical dispute among friends as to “whether man's happiness depends on pleasure and the satisfaction of the senses, or on the practice of virtue.”¹⁵¹ Usbek writes his tale of the Troglodytes in response to Mirza's request that he explain his oft-repeated axiom that “man was born to be virtuous, and that justice is a quality as natural to him as existence itself.”¹⁵² While the opening letters suggest that passions are the product of a complex interaction of physical and moral causes, the passions in the tale of the Troglodytes are divorced from the senses and represented as disembodied products of reflection. The barbarous Troglodytes, upon throwing off the yoke of governance, cease to act without first reflecting on their direct interest: “Why bother wearing myself out working for other people who are no concern of mine?” Their “unusual” cousins, meanwhile, likewise acted on the basis of passion born of reflection, but one based on entirely different *sentiments*: It is because the two

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 13.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 15. These are of course the respective philosophical positions of epicureans and stoics

¹⁵² Ibid., 15.

remarkable Troglodyte men “understood what justice was...and loved virtue” that the passion of pity was aroused in them by the sad state of their wicked brethren.¹⁵³

Often read as a rejection of Hobbes’ state of nature, Robin Douglass has argued that the tale of the Troglodytes in fact demonstrates little obvious concern for Hobbes’ state of nature theory, being more concerned to establish that justice and virtue do not rely on the existence of the civil laws.¹⁵⁴ But of course the contention that justice and virtue cannot exist without the institution of civil law is the conceptual counterpoint to Hobbes’ state of nature, in which each individual judges only and inevitably according to the logic of his own self-interest, dictated by his passion. The affirmation that justice and virtue might be perceived and advanced without the formal institution of civil contract is a clear refutation of Hobbes’ political anthropology and epistemology, even if the story is simultaneously concerned with theories of interest associated with Mandeville as Douglass argues. In portraying sociability among the “unusual” virtuous Troglodytes as an innate capacity, Usbek’s tale does indeed provide compelling proof of support for Shaftesbury’s anthropology, suited to his vision of aristocratic republicanism. If the tale is an affirmation of Shaftesbury’s vision of innate sociability, however, any moral claim that can be derived from it does not stand alone but must be placed in the context of the novel’s tragic narrative.

Instead of Hobbes or Shaftesbury, the tale of the Troglodytes might be more fruitfully read alongside the narrative of civil society found in Pufendorf’s *De iure naturae et gentium*. In its rehearsal of key narratives of natural jurisprudence about the origins of society and the development of social institutions its debt to Pufendorf is sometimes quite explicit, and its divergence quite instructive. Central to Pufendorf’s answer to Hobbes was a reconfiguration of the “state of nature” that undergirded Hobbes’ conception of *civitas*: “We are ready to acknowledge it for a most certain Truth, that all Mankind did never exist together in a mere Natural State”, that is, “outside society.”¹⁵⁵ Men do not emerge fully formed “like toadstools”,

¹⁵³ Ibid., 18.

¹⁵⁴ Douglass, *Rousseau and Hobbes*, 46-8

¹⁵⁵ Pufendorf, *Law of Nature and Nations*, 87; For Pufendorf’s adaptation of the State of Nature, see Tuck, *Rights of War*, 150-1.

independent of one another and caught in inevitable opposition in a war of all against all.¹⁵⁶ To the contrary, people are found everywhere in society, tied not only by the necessity of survival but by natural feelings of common humanity reflective of their common ancestry. In his delineation of the social passions, Pufendorf makes clear that self-interest alone cannot account for the establishment of social and political institutions, nor provide the mechanism for its own domestication.¹⁵⁷ The presence of the sociable passions does not impinge on the primacy of the passion of self-love that dictates our self-preservation, but rather allows it to engage sympathetically and cooperatively with other self-interested agents. The backwards ways of “barbarous” societies, he argued, did not reflect man in a “state of nature” but rather a condition of corruption. Even in countries whose manners were so corrupted, he had argued, there would certainly have existed men who remained “sensible enough to comprehend the Law of Nature.”¹⁵⁸

The barbarous behavior of the Troglodytes that led to their eventual destruction resulted from their professed commitment to obey only the dictates of self-interest, but they do not occupy a “state of nature” in any obvious sense. The Troglodytes live under a series of political arrangements that they continually undermine and overthrow before settling on the principle of self-interest to guide them in the place of law. Their violent descent into a war of all against all had been initiated by the *annulment* of a political contract that had proven inadequate to the task of governing unsociable men. Society is not the product of a rational pursuit of needs by self-interested agents, but rather the result of a union of feeling between the “two most unusual men” among the Troglodytes, who felt “only pity” for the violence surrounding them. While their pedagogy affirms the union of the collective interest with the rational self-interest of the individual, rationality and interest remain secondary to the identity of sentiment that created the initial bond and continues to enforce the perception of interest: Using the tragic history of the barbarous Troglodytes as moral allegory, they “made [their children] feel that the interest of the individual is

¹⁵⁶ Pufendorf, *Law of Nature and Nations*, 90.

¹⁵⁷ Pufendorf, *Law of Nature*, 89-90; Haara, “Pufendorf on the Passions and Sociability”, 425; Istavan Hont has argued the opposite, that Pufendorf intended to ground moral theory on the principle of self-interest alone, in “The Language of Sociability and Commerce: Samuel Pufendorf and the Theoretical Foundations of the ‘Four-Stages Theory’”, 256, in Pagden, *The Languages of Political Theory in Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). As I suggest in my discussion of Tuck’s work in the introduction, Pufendorf’s concern for the primacy of self-preservation reflects a preoccupation with answering Hobbes’ skeptical reduction of Grotius.

¹⁵⁸ Pufendorf, *Law of Nature*, 93.

always identical with the common interest, and that to attempt to separate oneself from it is fatal".¹⁵⁹

Pufendorf had carefully distinguished between the creation of relationships that constitute human *society* from the contractual agreements that undergird political power.¹⁶⁰ Similar to the cooperative men imagined by Pufendorf, Usbek's virtuous Troglodytes establish family and community ties in an organic process of cultivation that requires the establishment of political relationships to accommodate the needs of a growing and increasingly complex society. But whereas Pufendorf understood the civil contract to secure the goods identified and cultivated in society, Usbek laments the moment of civil contract as a betrayal of virtue and institutionalization of corruption, and the Troglodytes remain tied to the revolutionary time of pre-modern republicanism.

Pufendorf, moreover, had grounded his argument for humanity's sociability on the scriptural account of creation: God created Eve from Adam's flesh so that they be united by ties of "deepest *Love and Affection*." He privileged marriage as the foundational institution of civil society, ordered according to the hierarchy that was in fact reflective of humanity's natural condition, serving to soften and socialize as yet uncivilized humans.¹⁶¹ In Montesquieu's later account of the origin of society in *The Spirit of the Laws*, strongly socially inclined individuals are drawn into society through an organic process of family and social formation, and the dynamics of heterosexual attraction and relationships constitute a central feature of human sociability and the natural law itself. The absence of sexual politics among states interacting in the international arena is one of the reasons that the laws of human sociability can be consistent, for Montesquieu, with aggressive, even pre-emptive warfare.¹⁶² Usbek's account of the origins of Troglodyte societies, in contrast, is almost completely devoid of women: The unusual Troglodytes loved their wives, but it was the shared understanding of justice among men that Usbek identified with the foundation of society. Without the need of social or sexual commerce to refine their innately

¹⁵⁹ Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, 18

¹⁶⁰ István Hont, "Language of Sociability and Commerce" in Pagden, ed. *Languages*.

¹⁶¹ Pufendorf, *Law of Nature*, Book VI, Chapter 1, "Of Matrimony", 439-477.

¹⁶² Tuck, *Rights of War and Peace*, 186.

sociable sentiments, Usbek's virtuous Troglodytes are drawn only reluctantly into a defensive war against unscrupulous neighbors.

Montesquieu's readers would not have to have been familiar with narratives of natural law to notice the absence of women from Usbek's account of Troglodyte society. The type of pity experienced by the "unusual" Troglodytes – that is, pity that is moved irrespective the worth of its object – was identified as a particularly *feminine* attribute.¹⁶³ Their "sweet and tender friendship", moreover, suggests a *délicatesse* that *honnête* literature portrayed as the distinctive trait of cultivated feminine constitutions. It is precisely this absence of women that Rica redresses in his tale of *Anaïs*, the final fictional tale recounted in the *Lettres* that appears towards the conclusion of the novel's first part. Introduced as a "travestied" version of an apparently familiar Persian folk tale, the tale of *Anaïs* is nothing less than a "travestied" version of Usbek's original *conte* intended as a rebuke and warning against Usbek's male insensitivity.

As I hope to show with my reading of the tale of *Anaïs* in the context of the novel's narrative, Rica's story addresses the same question that had prompted Usbek's tale of the Troglodytes about the relative importance of sensory satisfaction and virtue for a happy life. Unlike Usbek's tale, Rica's account of the ostensibly "travestied" folk tale abounds with sensory experiences. *Anaïs*'s heavenly experiences with sensual and social delights, goods which had been denied to her on earth, prompt the remarkable heroine to reflect on the goods of intellection, the sole pleasure that had been available during her unhappy earthly existence. If Rica's tale seeks to answer, in a far more obfuscated way, the questions posed by Mirza about the relationship of sensory pleasure and virtue to the pursuit of goods, the moral he expounds is far from clear. But Rica's story is not intended to provide a clear-cut moral but rather to function as a sympathetic narrative meant to provoke Usbek's pity.

In reading Rica's travestied tale as written *primarily* (and perhaps exclusively) for Usbek, I am pursuing a slightly different interpretative tack than McAlpin in her 2000 article, "Between Men for All Eternity: Feminocentrism in Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*." While McAlpin contrasts Usbek's exclusively masculine tale of the Troglodytes with the feminocentric *conte* created by

¹⁶³ Ibbett, *Compassion's Edge*, 30.

Rica, she presumes Rica's alterations to the unknown textual original to have been made to suit the taste of its unnamed French recipient identified as a *dame de la Cour*.¹⁶⁴ As McAlpin notes, when the letter is read "with Usbek understood as the primary recipient of both the letter and the tale," it becomes a "cautionary tale aimed at his companion's obdurately Persian misogyny."¹⁶⁵ McAlpin does not pursue this possibility, instead speculating on the changes that have been made to the unknown original tale to emphasize Rica's adoption of polite standards of taste: Rica cannot share an unaltered Persian tale with the French woman, because its details would violate the primary rule of worldly discourse by displeasing her.

Similar to McAlpin, my reading of letter 135 emphasizes Rica's awareness of the limits inherent to rendering difficult truths pleasing. But it is not the wild religious speculation that betrays these limits as much as the tale's context within the novel's narrative. That is, McAlpin sees Rica's tale of a devout, learned Muslim woman imagining a version of paradise for women replete with male *houris*, a detail so impossibly absurd that it renders the entire tale absurd, reducing any discernable moral to a wink and a nod among smug gentlemen. But questions about women's status and capacities addressed by Rica's letter bring with them questions about the proper relationship between religion and the social order. Is the scriptural command claimed by Zulema in the opening of Rica's tale evidence of religious and sexual disorder – as Usbek is likely to interpret it – or is the attempt to control religious imagination in the service of civil order both inherently despotic and doomed to failure? Such questions were of course of particular relevance for Montesquieu's readers, only eight years into the turmoil provoked by the bull *Unigenitus* that would plague the monarchy throughout the century. In his first letter written from Paris, Rica had linked controversies over *Unigenitus* to questions about women's status: "It was the women who were fomenters of this revolt", he explains, reacting against the bull's condemnation of women's scripture reading. "Indignant at this insult to their sex" French women have successfully rallied men to their cause, "who in this case don't want to be privileged."¹⁶⁶ In the tale of Anaïs, the questions remain linked, but Rica, having spent eight years enjoying the

¹⁶⁴ McAlpin, "Between Men for All Eternity: Feminocentrism in Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 24, (no. 2, 2000): 45-61.

¹⁶⁵ McAlpin, "Between Men", 95.

¹⁶⁶ *Persian Letters*, 32.

pleasures of Parisian *mixité*, no longer seems inclined to agree with his younger self that women's prohibition from scripture seems justified since they "are a creation inferior to ours, and...they will not enter paradise."¹⁶⁷

Although Rica had professed astonishment over the presumption that the pope and king might dictate the contents of individuals' personal beliefs in his early letter on *Unigenitus*, the Persia of the Safavid dynasty he left behind, and that serves as the setting for the telling of his *conte*, was based on a similar imposition of religious uniformity. Some consequences of this theocratic empire building were on display in letter 65, which includes the tale of the Zoroastrian sibling-spouses Apheridon and Astarte. In contrast to the denaturing and sterile practices ascribed to Safavid-enforced Islam, the passionate Zoroastrians manage to establish a peaceful, happy, and productive life thanks largely to their practice of a religion that "may well be among the most ancient in the world."¹⁶⁸ The tale effectively claims gender *mixité* as a "natural" feature of society, while identifying the imposition of strict religious law upon the human passions as a uniquely destructive form of despotism. The culpability of theocratic law in the "denaturing" of the passions is reinforced by the novel's tragic ending wrought by Usbek's lack of sensitivity to the appeal of *la tendre* with women, represented as the constitutional effects of life as a harem master.

Usbek *insensible*

Usbek's paeans to sociability in his letters to his friends stand in stark contrast to his brutal treatment of his wives. In his limited correspondence with his wives, Usbek abandons affective language of sociability altogether, instead adopting what Gonthier calls the "ritualized rhetoric of absolutism."¹⁶⁹ His coldness to his wives, however, is not inconsistent with his appeals to sociability, which reference only bonds between men. The identification of sociability with masculinity extends beyond the story of the Troglodytes: Even his location of the origin of society within the family, in the first of his letters to Rehdi on the subject of public law, refers exclusively

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁶⁹ Gonthier, *Montesquieu and England*, 34.

to male relationships: “a son is born close to his father, and remains with him: there we have a society, and also its origin.”¹⁷⁰ In his own life, Usbek demonstrates himself to be sensitive to appeals to sentiment, but only when they come from men. The effusive warmth of his early correspondence with friends and the reprieve from castration he grants to the slave, Pharan despite the wishes of the head eunuch testify to Usbek’s responsiveness to the appeals of reciprocal relationship, but he remains impervious to the appeal of *la tendre* in relationship with women.¹⁷¹ He writes his infrequent letters to the seraglio almost exclusively when prompted by passion – usually his cruel jealousy. He ignores the repeated pleas of several wives that punctuate the opening sequence of the novel, breaking a ninth-month silence only to threaten Zachi who, having been abandoned and ignored by her husband, has been found in bed with a white eunuch.¹⁷²

Impervious to his wives’ pleas of passion, Usbek is equally indifferent to the appeals of *la tendre* from his first wife and mother of his only child, Zelis. After two and a half years of silence, Zelis writes Usbek with questions concerning a proposed marriage between a slave girl and a eunuch, attempting to engage him in a discourse over the philosophical questions raised by such a union. Having had no response from Usbek, Zelis writes again six months later, this time to inform him that she has decided to enclose their seven-year-old daughter in the seraglio under the watch of eunuchs. In a letter dripping with irony, Zelis explains that although custom does not confine girls to the seraglio until the age of ten, “one cannot too soon deprive a young person of the freedom of childhood” in order to train them in the ways of submission required by harem life. To accustom a girl to any degree of liberty is to “condemn them rather than consecrate them to the seraglio.” Her bitterness is undisguised when she condemns Usbek for the “suspicions...jealousy, and...unhappiness” that motivate his behavior toward his wives.¹⁷³

Usbek again ignores Zelis. He does, however, respond promptly to the letter of the head eunuch, dated only seven days after Zelis’ second, which claims that the seraglio is in “an

¹⁷⁰ *Persian Letters*, 125.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 81-2.

appalling state of chaos and confusion.”¹⁷⁴ Addressing his wives as a group, Usbek admonishes them for their conduct and threatens them with the specter of violent methods suggested by the head eunuch, while claiming to act with the affection proper to a husband. While Gurkin Altman and Stewart see this as evidence of Usbek’s moderation, McAlpin points out that the eunuch’s report contradicts those that Usbek has received from Zachi and Zelis detailing reconciliation and depicting thoughtful harem governance; these reports have not only been ignored, but are now cast as willful deception.¹⁷⁵ When Usbek finally does reply to Zelis, it is in response to a letter she had written two months after announcing her daughter’s enclosure, upon receiving distressing news about the daughter of Usbek’s friend, Soliman.¹⁷⁶ Zelis had explained that Soliman had arranged his (unnamed) daughter’s marriage to a “young fool named Suphis” who, after having agreed to the marriage contract, insisted the dowry be increased. Having obtained an increase in the dowry, the wedding was performed and the daughter “taken forcibly to the bed” only to be swiftly repudiated and violently mutilated by her new husband, who insists her virginity was not intact. This is the only letter Zelis writes that she does not justify with a matter concerning harem or family governance. She is clearly distressed relaying news of Soliman’s daughter to Usbek, and the source of her anxiety is evident with the closing of her letter: “if my daughter were treated like that, I think the pain of it would kill me.”¹⁷⁷

Usbek writes his response to Zelis only after issuing his threat to his collective of wives, and its brevity and content only underscore the extent of his unfeeling. He makes no attempt to comfort or reassure his wife, instead declaring that, however barbaric and unsupported by scientific evidence the practice may be, “there is nothing to be done” since Soliman’s son-in-law has “simply taken advantage of the freedom the law grants him.” While he expresses regret, the damage he bemoans is not to the well-being of the daughter, but to the “honor of a family.” He then uses the opportunity to praise Zelis’ decision to enclose their own daughter, trusting to prayer that her future husband “find her as beautiful and as pure as Fatima.”¹⁷⁸ Usbek’s complete

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁷⁵ Gurkin Altman, *Strategic Timing*, 345; McAlpin, *Roxanne*, 72.

¹⁷⁶ And so received, presumably, two months after sending his missive to the harem.

¹⁷⁷ *Persian Letters*, 98-99

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

lack of sympathetic communication and his recalcitrant embrace of patriarchal privilege brings his correspondence with his wives to an end and ushers in an era of what Janet Gurkin Altman refers to as “harem self-government.”¹⁷⁹

The only other communication Usbek initiates with them comes after a five-year mutual silence, when he announces his intent to keep them under the control of the eunuch Solim, “not to guard, but to punish you.”¹⁸⁰ By the time Usbek sends this announcement, he has passed three years attempting to impose his will on his harem, which has been governed in the interim by an alliance of disaffected wives and slaves (though the reader must infer this collaboration).¹⁸¹ His initial granting of full authority to the original head eunuch, who had counseled Usbek to allow him to isolate and manipulate his wives, had been thwarted by the former’s sudden death. The apparent stupidity of Narsit, the oldest slave who claims the role of interim head eunuch, continued to thwart Usbek’s tyrannical intentions. Finally in 1719, Usbek succeeds in appointing Solim as head eunuch – who has assured his master that he is “full of avenging fury.”¹⁸² At this point in the narrative, he has also all but abandoned correspondence with his friends, presumably preoccupied by the disintegration of his Seraglio and mired in a depression he had earlier confessed in a letter to his friend, Nessir. Rhedi in Venice ceases to write Usbek altogether – presumably put off by the vision of universal entropy that had animated Usbek’s long series of letters on the causes of population decline. Rica continues to write faithfully, but as Janet Gurkin Altman has argued, his letters effectively buttress the pursuit of harem reform pursued by the wives in Usbek’s absence.¹⁸³

Rica is not alone in his efforts to moderate the effects of Usbek’s reflexive jealousy on his rule of the seraglio, but appears to be joining Ibben, Rhedi’s uncle and a mutual friend and correspondent. Ibben, located in Smyrna, is not only a regular correspondent but in charge of sending Usbek’s letters and packages to Persia.¹⁸⁴ The reader cannot know how much Ibben knows about the nature of the correspondence Usbek sends through him, but it is clear that their

¹⁷⁹ Gurkin Altman, *Strategic Timing*, 327.

¹⁸⁰ *Persian Letters*, 209.

¹⁸¹ Gurkin Altman, *Strategic Timing*, 327.

¹⁸² *Persian Letters*, 208.

¹⁸³ Gurkin Altman, *Strategic Timing*, 346.

¹⁸⁴ *Persian Letters*, 87

own exchange is extensive and intimate. Although Rica and Usbek's letters to Ibben constitute a large portion of the novel, only one of Ibben's responses was included in the first edition.¹⁸⁵ This is Letter 65, which appears early into Usbek's struggle to impose his will on his distant seraglio, and which contains the tale of the Zoroastrian sibling-spouses *Apheridon and Astarte*. Comparing the barbaric practices of isolation and intimidation practiced in the Safavid *seraglio* to the "natural religion" of Zoroastrianism practiced by its sibling protagonists, the story weaves together still more tightly the identification of women's moral and social status with the question of religion and religious authority, while it serves up an indictment of the Safavid seraglio for its corruption of passions intended by nature to enable reproduction and sociability.

Ibben opens his letter with a plea of concern, complaining of Usbek's lack of communication (the last letter from Usbek to Ibben that appears in the novel is dated four months prior). After praising friendship in general and Usbek in particular, Ibben introduces Apheridon, the Zoroastrian, as "probity personified" and a man whom he holds, after Usbek, "dearest in [his] heart."¹⁸⁶ Apheridon, who has been persuaded by Ibben to write down his "principle adventures" to be shared with Usbek, proudly proclaims that he "was born among...a religion which may well be the most ancient in the world." Unlike the up-start "Muhammadanism," which was established "not through persuasion, but by conquest," his Zoroastrian religion has "always prospered in Persia" and "has no other origin than this empire, whose beginnings are lost in time." Unfortunately for Apheridon and his sister, Astarte, who passionately desire to enter into a marriage according to "the ancient customs of the Zoroastrians," their family lives "in fear of the Muslims" who rule. Seeking to subvert their union, the parents send Apheridon away to live with a distant relative and Astarte into the service of a sultana in a harem, requiring her conversion to Islam. When the bereft brother learns of his beloved sister's fate – which would require her to "not now look upon me with anything other than horror" – he returns home and bitterly reproaches his father. Apheridon spends the next two years "gazing at the wall of the harem" that encloses his

¹⁸⁵ Two letters appear in the 1754 edition. In addition to letter 65, Ibben's response to Usbek's defense of the right of suicide appears as letter 77.

¹⁸⁶ *Persian Letters*, 88.

sister, at the risk of meeting death at the hands of “the eunuchs who guarded that fearsome place.”¹⁸⁷

Their father eventually dies and the sister – whose increasing beauty had provoked the jealousy of the sultana – is married to a freed eunuch “who loved her passionately,” and leaves the seraglio with him. After three months of negotiating with her jealous husband, Apheridon manages to enter the harem and visit his heavily veiled sister through a screen. Although closely monitored, the brother and sister manage to communicate freely in their mother tongue (“ancient Persian”), unknown by the jealous husband or his slaves. The couple manages to escape and, after weathering the trials of fortune, eventually settle to live a peaceful and productive life in Smyrna.

If the incestuous marriage of the Zoroastrians suggested backwardness to Montesquieu’s readers, their acceptance of relationships said to be “naïve reflections of the union already established by nature” is decidedly benign next to the brutal practices ascribed to their Muslim compatriots.¹⁸⁸ Pufendorf had declared such marriages to be consonant with the natural law, despite the natural sense of shame that led most societies to proscribe them. For Pufendorf, the fact that God had restricted his initial creation to two humans clearly indicated that “we cannot positively confirm” that they are “in themselves, repugnant to the Law of Nature.”¹⁸⁹ In the *Lettres*, they are at least more conducive to civil peace and utility than the unnatural and sterile unions brought into being by the seraglio system. The relevant difference, for Montesquieu’s readers, between the “natural” religion of the Zoroastrians and the denaturing practices ascribed to Safavid Islam is not the practice of incest per se, but the relative status of women as wives and the consequences for the social order.

The next letter from Usbek to Ibben is dated eight months later, and contains no mention of the Zoroastrians (although he does include a defense of paternal power in a letter he writes to Rhedi around the same time).¹⁹⁰ Instead, an obviously melancholic Usbek spends the length of

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 88-9.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 88

¹⁸⁹ Pufendorf, *Law of Nature*, 472

¹⁹⁰ Letter 74, from Usbek to Ibben, is dated the 15th Moon of Saphar 1715, *PL*, 103-104; Letter 76, from Usbek to Rhedi, is dated the 18th Moon of Saphar, *Persian Letters*, 107-9.

the letter expounding a philosophical justification for suicide, and his mood only continues to darken as he meets continued resistance to his rule over the seraglio. After a series of long letters lamenting the moral causes of a population decline that he takes to be a physical inevitability, Usbek begins to ignore his friends entirely as he obsessively struggles to impose his will over his wives and slaves.¹⁹¹

It is during this prolonged silence that Rica makes his most compelling case for the reform of Usbek's governance in letter 135, containing a "travestied" version of an apparently familiar *Conte Persane* (although unknown to either Rica or Usbek, by the time it is sent Roxane has already immolated herself to passion). Rica foreshadows the unpleasant truths he will be revealing to his friend in the letter immediately preceding his *conte*, ostensibly about the recently exiled Paris *parlement*, in which he muses to Usbek that "these bodies are inevitably hated [because] they never approach the throne unless it is to impart hurtful truths." His championing of the honesty of the *parlements* over the sycophantic groveling of courtiers grounds his concluding meditation on the nature of truth-telling: "Truth, my dear Usbek, is a heavy burden when it must be conveyed to the knowledge of princes" – or, we might assume, harem masters – who "should consider carefully that those bearing this burden are obliged to do so, and that they would never bring themselves to take steps so unfortunate and distressing to themselves, were they not forced to do so by their duty, their respect, and even by their love."¹⁹² Written five days later, letter 135 includes layered references to women's special capacity for imagination and feeling in what can be read as an admonition – however tender or veiled – against Usbek's own diminished capacity for affect.

Rica introduces his tale to Usbek as a response to request by a *dame de la Cour*, who had summoned him to inquire about "the customs of Persian men and the way of life of Persian women." Despite Usbek's professed admiration for the "rationality" of the seraglio system, Rica reports that the lady of the court finds it "distasteful the thought of one mand being shared between ten or twelve women." This "lover of poetry and novels" could not, Rica explains, "see

¹⁹¹ Gurkin Altman, "Strategic Timing," 338.

¹⁹² *Persian Letters*, 187.

the happiness of the one without envy, or the situation of the others without pity.”¹⁹³ McAlpin interprets Rica’s description of the *dame de la Cour*’s envious and piteous reactions to the seraglio as signaling to Usbek her presumed sexual licentiousness, allowing the two men to “snicker at the wanton ways of Parisian women.”¹⁹⁴ While I agree with McAlpin’s assessment of the coherency of the sexual politics represented in the *Persian Letters* according to a patriarchal logic of complementarity, it is not at all clear that Rica’s description of the *dame de la Cour* is meant to belittle her. Rica’s appeal to the *dame de la Cour*’s affective response to the harem system reflects contemporary portraits of the unique perceptive and affective capacities of *L’honnêtes femmes*, the product of their uniquely “delicate” constitutions.¹⁹⁵ While this portrait was easily weaponized into familiar charges of women’s overly sensuous and sexually incontinent nature, even opponents of *honnêteté* admitted women’s superiority in both sentiment and language that gave them a special insight into *le goût*.¹⁹⁶ Following her “taste” rather than her reason, the *dame de la cour*’s rejection of the harem system appears far more “rational” by the standards of most of Montesquieu’s readers than Usbek’s reasoned support for it.

If it is uncertain how we are to feel about the virtue of the *dame de la Cour*, Rica’s “travestied” version of an apparently familiar tale embeds the perspective of two clearly remarkable women. The first, a Persian woman named Zulema who lived “[i]n the days of sheik Ali-Khan,” and “knew the entire holy Qur’an by heart,” united to her “vast learning...so playful a turn of mind, that it was almost impossible to guess whether she intended to entertain or to instruct those to whom she spoke.” When one of her companions – presumably another wife – asks Zulema for her “thoughts on the next life, and whether she believed in that ancient tradition...that Paradise is only for men”, Zulema answers that such “pernicious opinions” are based only on the “pride of men,” a pride that leads some so far as to suggest that women possess no soul.¹⁹⁷ Elaborating, Zulema introduces the perspective of yet another remarkable woman in her interpretation of the (supposedly) Arabic tale of Anaïs. Unlike Zulema, who clearly

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 187-8.

¹⁹⁴ McAlpin, “Between Men”, 53

¹⁹⁵ La Vopa, *Labor*, 39-41

¹⁹⁶ Notably Malebranche, discussed in La Vopa, *Labor*, 78.

¹⁹⁷ *Persian Letters*, 188

possesses a degree of status within the milieu of the seraglio, the Arabic heroine Anaïs remained isolated from her co-wives under the barbaric rule of a cruelly jealous husband. Unlike her co-wives, however, Anaïs possessed a mind that was “truly philosophical,” allowing her to profit from the isolation imposed on her through sustained meditation, giving her the “strength of mind” necessary to “disdain death.” When the wives are assembled by their master, Anaïs – “bolder than the rest” – uses the opportunity to chastise him for his congenital cruelty. When he quite predictably drives a dagger into her chest, she uses her dying breath to announce to her co-wives that “if Heaven takes pity on my virtue, you will be avenged.”¹⁹⁸

Heaven indeed takes pity on the long-suffering wife, and Anaïs finds herself in a celestial paradise brimming with earthly delights. Entering into eternity by way of a series of breathtaking landscapes – a “sunlit meadow”, a “charming woodland” and then through “splendid gardens” – she is welcomed into a celestial palace by “sublime men intended for her pleasure.” These “immortal captives” proceed to envelope Anaïs in sensory delights: perfumed baths, sumptuous garments, and “exquisite dishes,” that seemed “designed to fill her senses with rapture” but were, in fact, calculated to “lead her gradually to greater pleasures.”¹⁹⁹ Only after being carried off by her “entrancingly handsome men” does she attain “true ecstasy.” When the arrival of daylight interrupts this ecstasy, Anaïs is introduced to more of the afterlife’s abundant pleasures when she is greeted by an “adoring court.” Thenceforth she divides her time between sensory delight and admiring affirmation: “That is how the immortal Anaïs spent her life, now in splendid public festivities, now in solitary pleasures; admired by a brilliant gathering, or worshipped by an infatuated lover.”²⁰⁰ Anaïs, however, knows enjoyment that is distinct from the sensory and affective affirmation offered by her celestial abode, born of her strength of mind and capacity for reflection. After a week of “[enjoying] her happiness without knowing it,” Anaïs observes to herself that “the blessed know such intense pleasures that they can rarely enjoy this freedom of spirit” born in the “silence of the passions” that allows the mind to reflect beyond the present moment. Thus Anaïs begins to move, “little by little...beyond the delirium of pleasure” to enjoy the fruits of

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 189

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 189-90

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 191

solitary reflection, and, dwelling “on her past existence and on her present happiness...she could not help pitying in her companions in their misfortunes.”²⁰¹

Our remarkable heroine, however, does not settle for “being compassionate; full of tenderness for those unfortunate women,” but also acts upon her sentiment. Summoning one of her divine attendants, she commands him to impersonate her husband, Ibrahim, in order to “assert his rights as [the seraglio’s] master, evict the husband, and remain there in his place” awaiting future orders.²⁰² The false Ibrahim has no trouble at all taking over the seraglio of the jealous husband, whose wives and eunuchs are only too eager to accept the pleasures of being ruled by their master’s divine imposter, and “the jealous husband is rejected and shamefully cast out of the seraglio.” When the wives, who are thoroughly enjoying the celestial attentions of their new master, fret over the potential return of the “tyrant” Ibrahim who “knew nothing of our virtue” but solely of “his own weakness,” the divine Ibrahim assures them that “the place I occupy is not one that can be held by subterfuge.”²⁰³

When the jealous husband does eventually make his way back to the seraglio “to trouble them,” he finds it “full of joy,” and wives and eunuchs who are deaf to his claims. Making good on his word to his wives, the divine interloper follows the cruel Ibrahim as he stomps off in a fury, captures him and whisks him through the air to deposit him in “a place four hundred leagues away”. When the divine Ibrahim returns to the seraglio, he finds the household once again weeping in misery under the rule of the eunuchs who had “returned to their natural severity.” Celestial Ibrahim responds by liberalizing the seraglio to the point that it looked suspiciously like the mixed gender milieu familiar to Parisian high society: Dismissing the eunuchs and opening “his house to everyone,” he “did not even want his wives to veil their faces” and allowed the free intermingling of the sexes. The neighbors of course took notice of the uncharacteristic liberality of a man they knew to be jealous and cruel, and the “strange sight” of his wives “mingling with the male guests and enjoying the same freedom as they did” proved decidedly out of step with common practice. We must infer that the celestial Ibrahim, having decided that “the customs of

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 191-2.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 192.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 193.

the country were not made for citizens like himself,” has left his post when the jealous Ibrahim reappears from his exile, to find “only his wives, and thirty-six children.”²⁰⁴

While McAlpin sees the character of Zulema as transgressive and threatening, reigning over a feminized space that has been emptied of male oversight, the letter provides no evidence of sedition afoot. Zuléma, who clearly has access to the pleasures of sociability and learning, reigns over a coterie of women who appreciate her cultivation. She shows no interest in questioning the harem system itself, imagining a version of heaven that includes “men who have lived virtuously, and have not abused the power they have over us here on earth.”²⁰⁵ As McAlpin notes, her power is limited by the exclusively feminine nature of her setting.²⁰⁶ Any harm Zulema might do seems limited in the context of what we can infer are relatively pleasant terms of confinement. Anaïs, on the other hand, represents a danger that even the most scrupulous of harem masters cannot not guard against. It is not that she is a particularly “disobedient harem wife”²⁰⁷ – the story provides no indication that she shirked any of her duties, but rather endured them to her profit. All Anaïs does is to tell the truth – the same exculpatory claim made by Usbek in the novel’s opening letters.

Usbek may well chuckle knowingly to himself in recognition of the heightened affect attributed to women throughout Rica’s letter and interpret Zulema’s learning and cultivated charms as impertinence, as McAlpin suggests (although earlier letters from Zelis indicate he at one time valued such feminine cultivation). But the letter, as an appeal for Usbek’s pity, is meant to test the limits of Usbek’s capacity for feeling, and his response to Rica’s opening description of the French noblewoman might be interpreted as the first such test. Rica freely mocks worldly French women throughout his letters, but his introduction of the *dame de la Cour* is one of very few French subjects *not* overtly mocked in the *Letters*; any penchant for licentiousness that Usbek might infer will be one he attributes to all noble women, to whom such *délicatesse* was commonly attributed.²⁰⁸ Is Usbek able to suspend his judgment about a woman he knows almost

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 194

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 188

²⁰⁶ McAlpin, “Between Men,” 51.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁰⁸ La Vopa, *Labor*, 38-41.

nothing of? Or will he – like the jealous Ibrahim – respond to women as undifferentiated threats to male power? We do not know how Usbek will react when he reaches the end of the story, just as we do not know what happens to Ibrahim’s unprotected wives once their jealous master returns. If the prospects for the latter seem dim, the narrative thrust of Rica’s travestied tale provides some hope for sympathetic identification on Usbek’s part. As McAlpin notes, by the time the reader reaches the (non)conclusion of the story, which abruptly ends the letter itself, Rica’s opening editorializing has been “all but forgotten,” his “male voice has been taken over by Zuléma.”²⁰⁹ Ibrahim cannot realistically be expected to abandon the objects of his jealous passions, but Usbek as a sympathetic reader, with no immediate interest in the imaginary scenario, might conceivably be capable of reflecting on the wives’ situation, and comparing it to their former condition. He might, conceivably, feel pity.

As Rica had presciently observed while recounting the pitying reflections of the immortal Anaïs, however, “people are deeply affected by suffering in which they themselves have shared.”²¹⁰ By the time Rica sends his letter, Usbek has more in common with jealous Ibrahim than with the apparently absent husband of Zulema, having finally overcome three years of the combined resistance of geography, time, and an alliance of wives and eunuchs to impose a brutal regime on his wives. Judging by the letter by which he breaks his prolonged silence with his fellow expatriates, his famous diatribe against corrupt ministers, Usbek was not moved by the plight of the isolated harem wives. The letter, sent not to the attentive Rica but the long-silent Rhedi, is written in the wake of the “twin catastrophes” of the collapse of Law’s system in France and the news of murder, suicide, and deceit at the seraglio.²¹¹ As McAlpin notes, Usbek’s naïve assignation of blame onto a single individual (Law) for the corruption of an entire nation is an uncharacteristically puerile interpretation for an otherwise aloof and careful observer of French society. Usbek’s response is shaped more by the disintegration of his seraglio than by the details of France’s economic collapse: He is placing the blame squarely on Roxane, who has been marked as a foreigner to the context of the seraglio from the beginning, “as much in her character

²⁰⁹ McAlpin, “Between Men,” 59.

²¹⁰ *Persian Letters*, 192

²¹¹ McAlpin, “Roxane,” 66.

traits as in her origins”, and by whom Usbek, for all his cynical suspicion, had remained blinded. Usbek takes a sudden turn to the magical thinking he has elsewhere carefully avoided – apparent in his description of an entire nation of virtuous people being corrupted “in an instant” by the bad example of a single, foreign minister – in order to exculpate himself in a disaster of his own making.²¹²

Reassessing Virtue

While Usbek manages to successfully insulate himself from any immediate consequences of his harem’s collapse, he is not, as McAlpin notes, accorded the last word in the novel. The closing sequence of letters, following Usbek’s letter on corrupt ministers, abruptly returns the reader to 1717, and narrates the fate of the wives and eunuchs at the seraglio, culminating in Roxane’s defiant suicide note. Like the novel itself, the tragic ending has invited various interpretations as to the moral it is meant to impart. C.P. Courtney has suggested that Roxane’s suicide, like Usbek’s failure to follow the principles of justice he espouses, demonstrates that his novel reflects “traditional skeptical assumptions” about the impossibility of moral knowledge: Usbek’s rational reflections and Roxane’s principled rebellion are equally futile for the individuals as well as society.²¹³ But Montesquieu’s embrace of passion as a reliable measure of human motivation did not represent a straightforward adoption of skeptical premises that “all values are relative,” but was closer to the strategy found in modern natural law, which framed human nature and its passions as the proper and natural measure of moral and political action. Like the skeptical philosophers, the novel portrays human beings controlled by passions, but human nature and its passions do not threaten the foundation of the moral order but in fact constitute it. These are shaky foundations, as the social chaos that reigns throughout the novel attests, but they are not inherently oppositional to virtue and as such to be considered “vices”, such as Mandeville glibly categorized them.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 73

²¹³ C.P. Courtney, “Montesquieu and the Problem of ‘la diversité,’” in David Carrithers, ed., *Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu* (London: Routledge, 2009), 123

McAlpin argues that Roxane's defiant claim to virtue, based on the strength of her passion for her young lover (a partner sanctioned by "nature") offers a template for rethinking the nature of "virtue on a literal, physical level, one that appeals to nature's laws."²¹⁴ Whether or not Roxane merits the title of virtue that she claims for herself is not clear. Like Usbek, Roxane is moved to her supposed acts of virtue by the imperatives of her passion. As McAlpin demonstrates, the details of the narrative clearly mark her as an exceptional woman, along with her "coconspirator" Zelis, distinguished by their "natural," heterosexual, monogamous passions.²¹⁵ The two women are distinguished by the quality of their passions and their use of practical reasoning in their pursuit, but whether this pursuit of passion can be understood as virtue remains an open question.

Ultimately, the novel's ambiguous moral prevails upon readers to exercise judgment about the characters and their actions, not according to abstract ideas about moral excellence, but by a standard of justice based on the relationship between the civil and natural laws. Roxane's marriage to Usbek constituted a violation of both natural right (which requires marriage to be based on consent)²¹⁶ and positive law (she is Usbek's fifth wife, expressly proscribed by Islamic law).²¹⁷ She appears to have no recourse to civil law, however, which places her under the control of her husband. The failure of Usbek's reason to overcome the disordered passions that guide him does not mean that the novel presents no hope that reason might prevail in human judgment. It is precisely because human beings are inevitably motivated by passions and constricted by their interests that judgment must be rendered collectively. The problem presented in the *Persian Letters* is the neutralization of such collective wisdom through the cultivation of pathological "sympathies and antipathies"²¹⁸ (in the words of Locke) or "sensibilities" (in emerging medical discourses) through corrupt socio-political institutions.

²¹⁴ McAlpin, "Roxane", 66

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

²¹⁶ That is, according to Pufendorf, *Law of Nature*, 448.

²¹⁷ McAlpin, *Roxane*, 61.

²¹⁸ Locke, *Human Understanding*, Book II, 319.

Gallant Civilization: Reasoning Through Time in Graffigny's *Letters of a Peruvian Woman*

From the perspective of the twenty-first century, Roxane's defiance of Usbek's narrow ethic seems to embody a moral and sexual autonomy central to modern feminist projects. But Montesquieu's heroine defied the conventions of feminine virtue prescribed by writers like Scudéry and Lafayette, who imagined moral autonomy for aristocratic women based on the same reasoned management of passion associated with manly aristocratic virtue. As McAlpin notes, Montesquieu's vision of gender complementarity did not include any version of political or social equality for women – theirs was a fate to be decided “between men.” Like most of his readers – male and female – Montesquieu assumed women's subordination to and dependence on men to be an indisputable fact of nature.²¹⁹ At the same time, however, Montesquieu's anthropology served to limit the autonomy of *all* moral actors, placing them in webs of relational and physical interdependence that restricted the will's arena of action.²²⁰ It was precisely women's practiced ability to submit willingly and gracefully that polite men of the world were to emulate for the sake of social tranquility. It was, moreover, the defining trait of the gallant to willingly remit a will that he had, by nature, the strength to enforce.²²¹

The other side of women's submission, however, is feminine resistance, credited, by its champions with upholding virtue among men. For seventeenth-century *femmes de lettres*, resistance to passion became the defining trait of feminine virtue and the only path to moral autonomy.²²² As discussed in the introduction, women's literary interventions were legitimated by the cultural codes and practices of *honnêteté* which had become, by 1721, increasingly subject to challenge. The sexual politics of *honnêteté* were a prime target for opponents of *honnête* nobility, who blamed women's incontinence for promoting the decadence and corruption that had characterized the Regency.²²³ In her *Réflexions nouvelles sur les femmes*, published (without her permission) in 1727, Anne-Thérèse de Marguenat de Courcelles, marquise de Lambert framed the direction of ridicule towards learned women as the cause of moral decay, blaming Molière's

²¹⁹ McAlpin, “Between Men,” 55.

²²⁰ Tuck, *Rights of War*, 186-7

²²¹ La Vopa, 99-100

²²² Alliston, 147.

²²³ La Vopa, *Labor*, 76.

famous satire of the *précieuses* for having precipitated the moral corruption of the Regency. Just as *Don Quixote* had precipitated Spain's downfall by ridiculing the valor that had fueled its rise to power, Molière's comedy had belittled a source of the French monarchy's greatness: the refined intellectual sentiments of the noble women credited with civilizing men. According to Lambert, since Molière's play, the French "have attached almost as much shame to the knowledge of women as to the vices that are the most forbidden them." Seeing such "innocent amusements" being met with such vitriol, French women have instead committed to the corrupting pursuit of sensory pleasure.²²⁴

Like Scudéry, Lambert imagined a version of gallant friendship that eschewed the pursuit of sensory pleasure. But whereas Scudéry lauded the innocence of pleasurable sentiments over the disorder of passion, Lambert saw the spiritual pursuit of intellectual friendship in terms of a "metaphysics of love" that allowed its participants to experience a pure form of de-erotized passion divorced from sensual pleasures. The pursuit of such spiritual friendship (which could only exist between a woman and man), however, entailed moral danger, as the continual deferment of pleasure ensures the intensification of passion. The danger of slipping into gross sensual passion could be resisted only by certain "well-born souls." Because "love acts, according to the dispositions that it finds..." the union of two souls that are "sensible" to glory and to pleasure serves to elevate them both, and "saves them from the abasements of *volupté*."²²⁵

While Scudéry had envisioned the possibility of a gallantry based on a sincere respect for women's virtues, her idealized life of literary retirement entailed primarily the company of other women equally committed to the refinement of taste and sentiment.²²⁶ In contrast, Lambert insisted on the singularly edifying effects of mixed-gender friendships pursued in the spirit of a true gallantry – that is, one detached from sensory, erotic pleasure. Women are united by need and not sentiments, and men by themselves know only how to love "in a vulgar manner."²²⁷ The refinement achieved in mixed gender commerce was the result of "the desires and designs of men, and the modesty and restraint of women...which polishes the mind and purifies the heart."

²²⁴ Lambert, *Réflexions*, 5-6.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 62-7.

²²⁶ La Vopa, *Labor*, 98-9.

²²⁷ Lambert, *Réflexions*, 58-60

The profligate morals often blamed on women's freedoms and the liberal intermixing of the sexes was in fact the result of women's decreasing freedoms and a decline in opportunities for such mixing.²²⁸

Lambert's reflections on the cultivation of a chaste passion in the form of sentimental friendship differed markedly from the counsel she gave her daughter in her 1728 as *Avis d'une mère à sa fille*, in which she counsels her against the pursuit of any passion, particularly love. While some passions might be warded off with reason or the strength of an alternative passion, no such simple remedy exists against love, which insinuates itself into the heart without its knowledge or consent, so that up until "love has made itself master, it is almost always ignored." Should her daughter be unfortunate enough to experience this most dangerous of passions, she counsels "[a]s soon as it makes itself felt, flee," warning, "love is not extracted from the soul with ordinary efforts." Lambert, of course, was concerned with the dangers of adulterous entanglements and the sexual impropriety associated with the *grand monde*, where "passions acquire authority." In order to escape worldly influence, Lambert advises her daughter to "assure yourself a retreat" where she might "enfeeble the impression made on us by *objets sensibles*" and learn "the greatest science...to know to be *en soi*."²²⁹ She must learn to close [the heart] to the passions" through the purification of her sentiments, "that they be reasonable and filled with honor."²³⁰

Lambert's prescription of a solitary retreat for the cure of passion would be followed by Zilia, the protagonist – and sole letter writer – of Françoise de Graffigny's 1747 *Lettres d'une péruvienne*. This retreat – which the heroine dreams will provide the *mise en scène* for a virtuous friendship free from the "tempestuous feelings" of the passions – is available to her thanks to the gallant protection of her benefactor and spurned lover, Déterville.²³¹ The passions at work in Graffigny's depiction of French gallantry, however, are of a fundamentally different nature than the passions of Scudéry. Closer in time and nature to the passions explored by Lambert, Graffigny's novel nonetheless attenuates Lambert's model of gallant friendship based on purified

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 40-1

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 156-9

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.

²³¹ Graffigny, *Peruvian Woman*, 118.

passion. While Zilia will reject passion altogether in favor of sentimental friendship, her passion is not represented as pathological or corrupting, instead serving, in its original context, to further the social and political order and, in another, as the sole source of her will to survive.

Zilia the Non-idolatrous Idolator: Nature and Civilization in *Letters of a Peruvian Woman*

Like the *Lettres Persanes*, Graffigny's novel makes use of the foreign observer in order to examine and critique French social and political customs. Unlike Montesquieu's sophisticated Persian protagonist, represented as a relic of a decaying social and political order, Zilia comes from a blossoming civilization still informed by the principles of "nature." Like Montesquieu's Zoroastrians, Zilia's character was molded by an eighteenth-century rhetoric of idolatry concerned with defining and criticizing European modernity. John Pau Rubiés has argued that these early modern theological, ethnological, and historical debates about idolatry's nature undermined idolatry as a meaningful theological concept, instead coming to serve in polemic against Christian orthodoxies.²³² Rather than a grave theological error confounding the Creator with the created or the falling prey to the machinations of the devil, idolatry in the eighteenth century was equated with superstition, comparable to the excesses ascribed to Christian piety stoked by "priestcraft."

According to Rubiés, it was Voltaire who rang the death knell for idolatry's usefulness as a category of theological analysis when he claimed in his *Philosophical Dictionary* that no people have worshipped images or sacred objects, but only the deity or deities they are said to represent.²³³ The charge of "idolatry" leveled against others was pure polemic, as easily attributable to the Christian accusers as to the people they sought to dominate. Montesquieu's Zoroastrian interlocutor levels this same criticism against his sister's early objections to their marriage. When Apheridon appeals to the ancient lineage of their native religion in an attempt to convince his sister to abandon Islam, Astarté objects that while her religion "is more modern...it is

²³² Rubiés, Joan Pau. "Theology, Ethnography, and the Historicization of Idolatry." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 4 (2006): 571-596.

²³³ Rubiés, "Idolatry", 571-2.

at least more pure, for it worships God alone, whereas you also worship the sun, the stars, fire, and even the elements.” Apheridon objects that “by living among Muslims you’ve learnt to slander our holy religion.” Zoroastrians “do not worship the stars or the elements” but have only ever “venerated them as holy, but lesser, works and testimony of the Divine.”²³⁴ But idolatry in this instance is positively charged, distinguished from the manufactured, manipulative piety of a highly developed state religion. Graffigny’s use of the trope is closer to Montesquieu’s than to Voltaire’s, as Zilia is carefully constructed as both a (non-idolatrous) idolator and a sympathetic heroine. Unlike Montesquieu’s unassuming Zoroastrians, however, Zilia is an Inca princess raised in a “house of virgins” in the Temple of the Sun, destined, before the Spanish conquest, to serve as Queen alongside her relative and the object of her passion, Aza. If the simplicity of her conduct and language identifies Zilia as closer to “nature” than her French counterparts, her status and her upbringing mark the significant distance between a “natural state” and the Inca civilization that shaped her.

The novel’s opening letters carefully construct Zilia in the mold of a non-idolatrous idolator. While her opening letter invokes both the “name of thunder” and the sun as prescient deity, her second letter invokes the name of *Pachacamac*, whom Graffigny explains in a footnote is “God the Creator, more powerful than the Sun.”²³⁵ When Zilia finds herself on board a French ship, having been rescued from the “barbarian” Spaniards, she wonders if the *French* might be idolators. Confused by the strange behavior of the Frenchman who kneels in contemplation at her bedside, kisses her hand with veneration, and speaks “a great many words” gently and earnestly, Zilia wonders if she has found herself among a nation of idolators who worship women: “Before the great Manco-Capac brought down to earth the will of the Sun,” she clarifies, “our ancestors made gods of anything which struck fear in them or brought them pleasure: perhaps these savages feel those two emotions just for women.”²³⁶ Zilia quickly dismisses the thought, but not because she witnesses signs of true devotion (that is, to the Sun) but because their service to her is limited and limiting. The point has been made, however, that the manners and customs of the

²³⁴ Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, 91-2.

²³⁵ Graffigny, *Peruvian Woman*, 16.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 28

French are just as liable to be interpreted as idolatry by a foreign observer as any Incan ritual. To reinforce this point, letter five also contains a clarifying footnote, comparing the Incan custom of kissing the Diadem of Manco-Capac with the Catholic practice of kissing the relics of saints.²³⁷

The historical preface that Graffigny added in 1752, based on the early seventeenth-century work of Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, more explicitly positions the novel within a mid-century rhetoric of idolatry. The Peruvians, who at the time of the Spanish invasion had only the most “limited knowledge of their origins and antiquity” Graffigny explains, found themselves peculiarly vulnerable to conquest.²³⁸ Their major disadvantage was not their inferior weaponry, but rather their customs, which had conditioned them to accept prophecies of conquest and to attribute supernatural intention to natural phenomena. Despite their developed knowledge of astronomy, Graffigny explains, “they were terrified by extraordinary natural events,” causing them to interpret the appearance of comets and moon rings as ominous portents. The appearance of the Spanish conquerors and their horses, moreover, seemed to the Inca to conform to the description of a bearded specter with an “unknown animal” who was said to have appeared to “the eldest son of the seventh Inca” claiming to be “a son of the Sun, brother of *Mancocapac*.” Believing the Spanish to be the celestial descendants of the fabled specter, the Peruvians hailed their arrival only to find that “their wrath could not be calmed by even the most extravagant gifts or the most humiliating worship.”²³⁹

Whether or not natural phenomena might reasonably be interpreted as miraculous occurrences or signals from God had been the subject of Pierre Bayle’s 1682 attack against superstition, *Pensées diverses sur la comète*. Bayle’s arguments remained in wide circulation during the eighteenth century’s crusade against superstition, but Graffigny also evoked a more contemporary context for her readers with her description of the widespread belief in prophecy. The “figurist” practice of reading contemporary political events as episodes in a living Biblical narrative had been central to the war against *Unigenitus* waged from the *parlements* from 1730-

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 28

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 5-6

32.²⁴⁰ The popular resistance to *Unigenitus*, meanwhile, was fought over the grave of the deacon François de Pâris by convulsing mystics – precisely the type that Graffigny’s readers might recognize as falling for the “ridiculous fables” of celestial apparitions.²⁴¹ Lest her French readers miss these striking similarities, thinking themselves to be above the “gullibility of the Peruvian people,” Graffigny is sure to inform them that “people are the same everywhere.”²⁴² If the comparison made readers uncomfortable, however, they could be assured that although the Inca worshiped the Sun they were “honest and humane,” and followed the precepts of their religion in order to live as “men of reason.”²⁴³ As their impressive achievements in material culture and their knowledge of astronomy aptly demonstrated, they commanded full use of reason and skill.

Not all eighteenth-century writers agreed that Amerindians possessed a capacity for reasoning equal to more “civilized” European peoples, and as Graffigny’s use of Garcilaso attests, debates followed in the conceptual path forged by seventeenth-century thinkers. Garcilaso had written his 1609 *Royal Commentaries on the Incas* largely to defend the rational capacity of the Inca people against the depictions in José de Acosta’s popular ethnology, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*.²⁴⁴ While Acosta had acceded in theory that Amerindians possessed natural reason – enough to be aware of God the Creator – his systemic analysis of the various forms of idolatry he saw being practiced by the Incas categorized the ways that demonic influence captured and distorted their reason. Like children, they remained only potentially rational. Garcilaso had countered that Acosta had failed to distinguish the relatively rational and civilized Inca religion from the base idolatry of the people they conquered. The Inca cult of the sun, while inevitably containing elements of idolatry because lacking Christian revelation, reflected a natural, rational monotheism that prefigured knowledge of the true God. Without denying that the Inca necessarily fell prey to the machinations of the devil, manifesting as

²⁴⁰ Van Kley, *Religious Origins of the French Revolution*, 92-3.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 97-100.

²⁴² Graffigny, *Peruvian Woman*, 5-6; This is also a clear reference to Malebranche, who wrote of the universal tendency to make judgments about worth based on false judgments about signs, as do Graffigny’s Inca, in *Recherche de la vérité*,

²⁴³ *Peruvian Woman*, 7-9.

²⁴⁴ Rubiés, “Idolatry”, 591-2.

idolatrous practice, Garcilaso claims for the Inca a uniquely cultivated and “civilized” idolatry informed by reason such as the Jesuit missionaries had identified in China.²⁴⁵

In the eighteenth century, questions about the rationality of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas no longer revolved around the parameters of demonic influence, but rather the perceived material, historical, and physiological constraints of “primitive” peoples.²⁴⁶ Zilia’s epistemological crises drive the novel’s narrative, as Gurkin Altman demonstrated, but her ability to navigate through them is not ascribed to a unique Peruvian identity, and still less to any supposedly universal human trait, but rather to the institutions of a civilized society. Zilia is *not* a mere “primitive” but an elite member of a “civilized” people, in possession of the tools for written language as well as an education consistent with her duties: The Peruvians, Graffigny explained in her preface, had understood the importance of an education that “halted the growth of incipient passions, or turned them to the benefit of society.”²⁴⁷ While Zilia is clearly in possession of a “thinking soul”, her relatively sophisticated reason fails to guide her through traumatic and abruptly changing circumstances. For most of the novel, Zilia must rely on the resources of her imagination, finding strength in passion that was absent in reason.

Substance is Immaterial: Passion and Reason in Graffigny’s *Letters*

Gurkin Altman’s essay elucidated the novel’s philosophical preoccupations for its modern readers, arguing that it should be read as an “epistemological fiction” that explores the nature and limits of human understanding in a narrative application of sensationist philosophy.²⁴⁸ In “The Subject of Writing: Language, Epistemology, and Identity in the *Lettres d’une Péruvienne*” (1997), Madeleine Dobie argued that while the novel is “indeed marked by philosophical sensualism,” it is at least equally concerned with the “representation of language as the medium of experience.”

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 592.

²⁴⁶ DiPiero, “Missing Links : Whiteness and the Color of Reason in the Eighteenth Century”; Specifically British perceptions of the rational capacity of “exotic” peoples is discussed in P.J. Marshall, Glyn Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind: Perceptions of New Worlds in the Age of Enlightenment*.

²⁴⁷ *Peruvian Woman*, 9

²⁴⁸ Gurkin Altman, “Graffigny’s Epistemology,” 179.

Rather than elucidate a process by which “ideas are traced back to their origin in the senses,” the *Lettres* explore the extent to which experience is rendered meaningful through language.²⁴⁹

Dobie’s insights mirror a broader consensus about the novel’s preoccupation with a philosophy of language, but they do not successfully ground her claim that Graffigny’s epistemology of language precludes an underlying materialism or empiricism.²⁵⁰ In his 1674 *Recherche de la vérité*, Malebranche had identified language with the work of the imagination upon sensory experiences, responsible for stoking passion with the endless noise of worldly conversation.²⁵¹ Knowledge could not be produced through the medium of language, but only in the silence of prolonged, solitary meditation, which allowed the immaterial substance to emerge through the veil of sense perceptions. While the printed word offered the possibility that the dangers of language might be neutralized, it was undermined by the practices of literary style, which rendered it a useless reflection of opinion, irrelevant to the search for truth. Zilia’s letters, of course, are not written according to the dictates of “style”, but as reflections about her sense perceptions, they remain, from a Malebranchian perspective, moored in Augustinian concupiscence.

Graffigny, moreover, followed Locke quite closely in his depiction of the passions in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in which the passions took shape as an extension of language. Locke insisted that all words relate to ideas received from sense perception, which are then applied to sensations produced by reflection, enabling the communication of abstract ideas. These abstractions – whether of mixed modes, relations, or substances – are “made by the understanding” and are “independent any pattern in nature,” creating reality independently of it:

Who can doubt but the ideas of sacrilege or adultery might be framed in the minds of men, and have names given them, and so these species of mixed modes be constituted, before either of them was ever committed; and might be as well discoursed of and reasoned about, and as certain truths discovered of them, whilst yet they had no being but in the understanding, as well as now, that they have but too frequently a real existence?”²⁵²

²⁴⁹ Dobie, “The Subject of Writing,” 100.

²⁵⁰ François Rosset, « Les Nœuds de langage dans les *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* », *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 6 (1996), 1106-1127; Calder, Martin. *Encounters with the Other: A Journey to the Limits of Language through Works by Rousseau, Defoe, Prévost and Graffigny*

²⁵¹ My discussion of language in Malebranche follows La Vopa, *Labor*, 63-96.

²⁵² Locke, *Understanding*, 350; Coste, 344-5

The creative force of language notwithstanding, Locke's *Essay* provided plenty of grounds for speculation that his empiricism was in fact materialism.²⁵³ His notorious suggestion that God might, in theory, endow matter with the ability to think, only affirmed this equivalence for many of Locke's readers.

In *Bodies of Thought: Science, Religion, and the Soul in the Early Enlightenment*, Ann Thomson contextualizes the controversy that Locke's claims about the possibility of thinking matter provoked, by elucidating contemporary debates about the nature of the soul.²⁵⁴ Christian mortalists – or “soul sleepers” – had long dissented from established orthodoxy about the soul's immaterialist and (natural) immortality. They denied that the soul's immateriality had any foundation in scripture or reason, arguing instead that the soul is a material reality coextensive with the body. As material substance, it too is bound for the grave – only the supernatural imposition of God's grace through Christ ensures that souls will be awakened on the day of judgment to ascend into heaven and enjoy eternal life. As Thomson demonstrates, these heterodox interpretations of the soul found powerful support with developments in physiological science – particularly Harvey's discovery of the mechanism of blood circulation and Willis' breakthrough work on the brain and nervous fibers – which were synthesized into a fully materialist interpretation of the soul. A flurry of orthodox apology followed closely on its heels, promoted by the Boyle lectures, which emphasized the acceptance of substance dualism as a requisite for the faith. Locke's speculation about the theoretical possibility of thinking matter (which he professed to reject on the basis of reason and revelation) was in response to orthodox apologetics that protected substance dualism by imposing limits on God's power.²⁵⁵ With the end of the licensing act in 1695, debates about the nature of the soul became broadly public for the first time, capturing not only the attention of the British reading public but an international audience, kept informed by the epistolary and literary commerce of the Republic of Letters.

In France, an expanding clandestine press reported on these English debates, often presenting them in such a way as to highlight the potentially irreligious implications that had

²⁵³ Locke, *Understanding*, 447; Coste, 440-1

²⁵⁴ Ann Thomson, *Bodies of Thought: Science, Religion, and the Soul in the Early Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

²⁵⁵ Thomson, *Bodies*, 62.

exercised orthodox British Churchmen.²⁵⁶ The educated French reading public was already familiar with these heretical English speculations about substance when La Mettrie published his *L'Histoire naturelle de l'âme*, synthesizing disparate components of philosophy and medical theory (citing, among others, Locke) to put forth a thoroughly materialistic vision of the mind as brain.²⁵⁷ Although he insisted that he accepted the orthodox position on the immateriality of the thinking substance, La Mettrie's work describes the physiological processes that produce thought with no mention of immaterial substance. As La Mettrie explains, the object of his study is the "motive principle" of organized bodies. What we conceive of as the rational soul can be more accurately understood as the result of a particular organization of matter; the soul as such is "an ideal being, disproved by all our knowledge."²⁵⁸ La Mettrie's brazen and deliberate provocations soon had him fleeing Paris for Holland, which would exile him in its turn following the 1747 publication of *L'Homme machine*.

When Graffigny's published her philosophical novel, then, she was dealing with potentially dangerous intellectual topics that were central to ongoing doctrinal strife. It is not unexpected that her novel demonstrates an obvious, even exaggerated concern for the status of the soul in its earliest pages. Readers encounter the immaterial soul two times even before reaching Zilia's opening letter. The *Avertissement* appeals to readers to interrogate their assumptions about Peruvians based on prevailing wisdom, which is "scarcely willing to credit these wretched people with a thinking soul."²⁵⁹ Discussing the customs of the Inca in her historical preface, Graffigny is sure to clarify that the "belief in the immortality of the soul was well established among the Peruvians." They, "like most Indians," assumed their soul would be eternally rewarded or punished according to their deeds on earth.²⁶⁰ Zilia's third letter, in which she recounts losing consciousness upon seeing a "company of raging men" storm her Spanish captor's "suspended house" (what she will later learn to be a boat), establishes that the Inca understood this soul as immaterial: Describing her astonishment at waking up to find herself in a

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 135-174.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 180-9.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 182-3

²⁵⁹ *Peruvian Woman*, 3

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

bed “surrounded by several Savages who were different from those cruel Spaniards,” she explains she was initially unsure whether she “was still in this world, or if my soul had taken leave of my body and passed into the unknown regions.”²⁶¹ Having established that she is, in fact, still alive, and having decided to eschew the lure of death in favor of her passion for Aza, Zilia concludes her letter as if to reiterate the immateriality of her reflections, reassuring herself that despite the distance that separates them, “the weightless cloud of my thoughts will never cease to hover above you.”²⁶² By the conclusion of letter three, then, the soul has been described as rational, reflective, immortal, and immaterial.

Whether Graffigny’s confirmation of the rational soul’s immateriality was due to conviction or prudence, however, is not evident from the text, whose heroine is not concerned with questions of substance but rather engaged in a this-worldly pursuit of knowledge. Central to this pursuit is the relationship between passion and reason that will frame Zilia’s struggle and which she will seek to resolve in proposing a gallant and “tender” friendship with Déterville. For most of the novel, Zilia remains relentlessly focused on finding her way back to Aza, but her reason quickly proves unable to orient or motivate her, and she must rely on the strength of her passion to keep herself alive. While she is clearly marked as intelligent and perceptive, as Gurkin Altman emphasizes, passion dominates her opening letters. Her first letter recounts the Spanish invasion and foregrounds the fear and grief caused by the violent invasion of the Temple and her abduction, while condemning the Spanish as “barbarians” for their lack of pity: “What people can be so brutal that they are not affected at all by signs of suffering?” But it is Zilia’s passion for Aza that subsumes all others, as she candidly admits that although her devastated homeland “ought to be the reason for my tears...my grief, my fears, and my despair are for you alone.”²⁶³ For most of the novel, this passion sustains Zilia in body and mind, and challenges to it literally threaten her existence. Zilia must ultimately face and endeavor to survive the betrayal of this passion and face the reality of life without Aza, which provokes her final “crisis” – in the fully medicalized sense – allowing her to live within the context of her present, previously unimaginable social context.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 13

Imagining Reality: Language and Passion in Zilia's Letters

Zilia's nostalgic description of her budding passion for Aza and its development throughout their courtship, which accounts for most of her second letter, serves to delineate a model of the passions that reflects Locke's description in his *Essay*. Describing Aza's first visit to the interior of the Temple, Zilia recalls the feelings of "uneasiness, yet also pleasure" that the sight of him provoked in her. Zilia, however, "too ignorant of love's effects not to be deceived," initially believed herself to be experiencing "divine rapture." Having never seen a man except the *Capa-Ica*, Aza's father, and with a "mind...full of the sublime theology of our *Cucipatas*, Zilia can only imagine that her budding passion is a message that the Sun "was selecting me for his preferred wife." But this reflection, she explains to Aza, caused her to "sigh," and once he had left she "looked inside [her] heart and found nothing there but the image of you." Upon learning that she, as his closest female relative, was to become Aza's wife once she came of age, Zilia feels "happiness in the thought," but it is not until her meetings with Aza – "too rare and too brief to satisfy our hearts" – that she experiences full-blown passion: "It is you, my dearest Aza...who later filled my soul with rapture when you told me that the noble rank of your wife would bind me to your heart, to your throne, to your glory, to your virtues."²⁶⁴

Zilia's "uneasiness" and "pleasure" was reminiscent of Locke's description of the feelings associated with passion. What we call "hatred or love" is in fact "often the uneasiness or delight which we find in ourselves, arising from a consideration of their very being or happiness." When we lack the object of our passion, we experience "uneasiness" that we label "desire" which is considered "greater or less, as that uneasiness is more or less vehement."²⁶⁵ These passions and desires were what Locke called "modes of pleasure and pain" – modes being "complex ideas" about dependent entities, as opposed to substances.²⁶⁶ Our passions are moved, according to Locke, by "things, only as they appear to be the causes of pleasure and pain, or to have pleasure or pain some way or other annexed to them." 182 The uneasiness mingled with

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 19-20

²⁶⁵ Locke, *Understanding*, 181; Coste 179

²⁶⁶ Locke, *Understanding*, 125; Coste, 120

confused pleasure that Zilia experiences upon seeing Aza is nurtured into a passion first through Zilia's private reflections, which remain confused by her narrow religious reference points, and subsequently by Aza himself, who provides Zilia with an alternative framework for her desires not only in his person but also in the rank of Queen as well as the instruction he provides in philosophy. The strength of Zilia's passion for Aza does not come directly from "nature" but is the product of intentional cultivation. By teaching Zilia "how to think," Aza has given Zilia the tools of passion.²⁶⁷

Zilia's third letter opens with a description of harrowing experiences that had brought her close to death and her declaration that she continues to live only because "my love returned me to life." Zilia's distress at the increasing distance between herself and Aza is compounded by her inability to understand her circumstances: "[H]ow shall I be able to tell you of the remarkable events which have befallen me? How can I recall thoughts which were already confused when they first came to me, and which have become even less intelligible with the passage of time?"²⁶⁸ After a long and brutal journey travelling through the desert at night, the first major challenge to Zilia's ability to rationally account for her perceptions comes when she boards a boat. Having never seen a boat and having boarded the vessel in darkness and so unaware of the water that surrounds them, Zilia cannot account for the "state of perpetual rocking" that is making her sick. When her hard won sleep is interrupted by loud noises and violent shaking, Zilia, unable to locate the source of the commotion, believes "that the whole of nature was being destroyed." Losing consciousness upon the sight of the "company of raging men" storming into her room, Zilia cannot account for finding herself in a bed surrounded by a different breed of "Savage."²⁶⁹

Describing to Aza the terrors she has experienced and her increasing despair, Zilia confesses that in her state of dejection she began refusing sustenance and found herself welcoming death as a "moment of repose." In her despair, Zilia comes close to succumbing to death, but finds herself recalled to life by a "hallucination" within her soul, responding to the "natural instinct" that resist death and demands to know "how we shall live on in the object of our

²⁶⁷ *Peruvian Woman*, 117

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 21

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 22

love” Transported by her hallucination to Aza’s palace to witness his reception of the news of her death, Zilia sees him “pale, disfigured, bereft of feeling, like a lily weathered by the burning rays of the midday sun.” Zilia’s emotionally turbulent response in this hallucinatory experience – in which she “rejoices” at Aza’s grief and comforts herself with his “horrible misery” – rouses her back to consciousness and, “awoken as if from a deep sleep, ravaged by your own suffering, trembling for your life, I called out for help, I beheld the light again.” 270

Having been rescued from death by her passion, Zilia explains in her fourth letter that she has resolved to live only for the sake of Aza: “every breath I take is a sacrifice made for you.” Unable to account for where or with whom she is, Zilia is tormented by her inability to understand her circumstances. While the passage of time brings her “relief from the violent anguish which consumes” her, it “doubles the suffering in my mind.” Surrounded by an unknown language, people, customs, and objects, she explains, “everything arouses my curiosity, and nothing can satisfy it.” Her inability to communicate causes its own suffering, “an agony in my very body which is no less unbearable than pains which might seem more real.” Zilia’s only consolation is in her *quipos*, which allow her “make [her] thoughts more real” and to create “an illusion which brings relief to my suffering.”²⁷¹ Understanding that the relief she experiences while knotting her *quipos* is based on an “illusion,” Zilia holds fast to her passion, nurturing it with the reflective tools of language, creating “this sweet delusion” which is her “sole possession and...life.” Zilia remains rational and inquisitive, but while she finds herself “plunged into the darkest abyss” she has only her love of Aza, the “Sun of her days,” to orient her existence.²⁷²

Zilia’s fifth letter recounts how even this imaginary consolation was briefly taken from her, when her “interfering persecutors” observed that the *quipos* “increased my dejection.” But while her imaginary communication was a “pitiful consolation,” it was nonetheless consolation, and her only source of it: “could I lose that and not despair?”²⁷³ After “many a tear” her captors return her *quipos*, allowing Zilia to express the torment caused by circumstances that impinge communication on all levels and constrain her understanding. Cut off from language, she is

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 23

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 25-6.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 26.

unable to share in the “jubilation” of the Savages and suffers under the “attentive looks” of the “importunate creatures” who surround her, causing her to “restrict the movements of my body, and inhibit my very thoughts.”²⁷⁴ Miscommunication dominates the letter, which includes Zilia’s speculations that her captors may be idolators who “worship women.” While the reader recognizes the budding of amorous passion that motivates the behavior of the as yet unnamed Frenchman, this possibility does not occur to Zilia as she attempts to explain her circumstances in her imaginary correspondence with Aza.

Zilia knots her next letter in a state of despair, which she will claim in the following letter to have “ravaged” her reason and induced a “fit of madness” that led her to seek to end her life.²⁷⁵ Having finally been permitted to leave her sickbed, she dragged herself to a window that had long excited her curiosity. When she saw “nothing but that dreadful element,” Zilia realized “only too well what caused that uncomfortable motion of our dwelling.” Finally understanding that she is on “one of those floating houses which the Spaniards used,” she loses hope of being reunited with Aza.²⁷⁶ Locke had explained in his *Essay* that the desire that fuels our passions requires that we believe its object to be attainable, whereas “[d]esire is...stopped or abated by the opinion of the impossibility or unattainableness of the good proposed.”²⁷⁷ Having resolved to stay alive for the sake of her passion, Zilia can find no reason to live once the hope it requires vanishes: “I no longer live in the same element; you will never know where I am, whether I love you, if I exist...I shall see you no more, I no longer wish to live.” While the same “natural impulse” that had strengthened her resolve with a “hallucination” in her soul again makes itself known, this time Zilia rejects the “illusion” as “leading [her] astray.” It is not Aza who intercedes on behalf of Zilia’s life but rather her “timid nature.” Neither her reason nor her passion can overcome her despair.²⁷⁸

Zilia’s intention to allow the sea to “engulf in its depths forever my wretched love, my life, and my despair” does not come to pass, but only because of the “vigilance of those who watched

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 30

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 28-9.

²⁷⁷ Locke, *Understanding*, 181; Coste, 179.

²⁷⁸ *Peruvian Woman*, 29.

over” her.²⁷⁹ While the “well-meaning Savages,” Zilia explains, attempt to “make [her] share in the joy that delights them,” her shame at her “loss of control” prevents her feeling “worthy of joining their celebrations” even if she could ascertain the cause of it. Unlike the other savages, Zilia’s attentive Frenchman, identified by Zilia as “the *Cacique*” (defined in a footnote as “a type of provincial governor”) responds to Zilia’s “offence” with more subtlety, and “far from taking part in the general excitement, he shares only in my sorrow. His eagerness is more respectful, his concern more solicitous, his attentions more keen.”²⁸⁰ Because of this attention he is able to recognize the distress caused to Zilia by the “continual presence of the savages in his troupe,” and has her “delivered...from their importunate looks.”²⁸¹ Although she must still tolerate his gaze, she admits to Aza there are times at which she finds *douceur* in these “silent interviews,” when “the fire in his eyes recalls the image of the one I have seen in yours” and the similarities “seduce [her] heart.”²⁸² Unlike the illusion she consciously nurtures with her incessant knotting, the illusion she finds in the Frenchman’s eyes is fleeting, reminding her only of what she has lost.

By her next letter (8), new circumstances strengthen the hold of Zilia’s passion for Aza by giving her cause for hope. With the help of their developing language of signs and the *Cacique*’s telescope – a “wonderful machine” that works by “some miracle I cannot comprehend” – Zilia has been made to understand they will soon be on land again, which had been the cause of the general jubilation that had troubled her. Zilia explains that she “immediately realized the benefits of this discovery; hope, like a ray of light, has shone brightly to the very depths of my heart.” For the length of this brief letter, Zilia is convinced that her reunion with Aza is inevitable because “[m]y love, my reason, my desires, everything assures me that it is so.” But while her newfound hope allows her to “recover [her] peace of mind” and to again “taste the delight of the recovering the freedom to think,” such freedom brings with it renewed anxiety.²⁸³ Having learned that the “name of the *Cacique* is *Déterville*, that of our floating house is a vessel, and that of the land where we are going is *France*,” Zilia explains that she initially worried, having never heard of such

²⁷⁹ Peruvian Woman, 29.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 30

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 30-1

²⁸² Graffigny, *Lettres d’une péruvienne* (1747), 67; Mallinson translates *douceur* as *pleasure*, 31.

²⁸³ *Peruvian Woman*, 31-2

a place. Reassuring herself by thinking of “the countless lands in your empire whose names I cannot recall,” and unable to rely on her meagre French, Zilia turns to her received cosmology. Because she knows that the “Divine star shines only on its children,” she can have “unshakable confidence” that she remains in Aza’s realm as long as she is within “the sight of the Sun.”²⁸⁴

Although she acknowledges that to doubt the truth of her received Incan cosmology would be “criminal,” Zilia cannot help but have her confidence shaken by the extraordinary differences she observes between the Frenchman and the Peruvians. Despite her proclamations of faith, “[a]nxious thoughts sometimes cast a shadow over my fondest hopes.” While her cosmology allows her to maintain some hope, it cannot answer her pressing questions, and though she “seek[s] enlightenment with an urgency that quite consumes [her]” she finds none from her senses, which cause her to “Drift from one error to the next.” When they arrive in France, Zilia gains more reasons to worry. Seeing “no signs of the happiness I had expected,” she is not able to judge what she does observe. She is not only unable to make sense of what she perceives, but now questions even the reliability of those perceptions, as she explains to Aza, “I almost doubt what I see.”²⁸⁵

Zilia’s self-doubt in letter ten has been provoked by her introduction to the mirror, or the “machine which reproduces objects.”²⁸⁶ Although the *Cacique* demonstrates to Zilia that she is seeing her own reflection and not, as she had initially assumed, another Virgin of the Sun, Zilia finds little comfort in his explanations: “what does that tell me? Does it make the marvel any less great? Am I less mortified to find nothing but error and ignorance in my mind?” Realizing that the French possesses more powerful knowledge than the Inca, she is unsure how to judge them: “Are they to be feared, are they to be loved?” Zilia declares her intention to withhold her judgment, unsure as she is, with a “mind...drifting in a sea of uncertainties,” she can rely only on her heart, “the one fixed point” that “awaits a single joy, without which there can only be sorrow.”²⁸⁷ Her confrontation with the mirror foreshadows a series of unsettling and exhilarating experiences with people, nature, and objects that keep Zilia in a state of uncertainty regarding her

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 33

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

knowledge and perceptions. Still ignorant of the language, despite her endeavors to learn, she continues to rely on her invented language with Déterville and eventually also his sister Céline, who also speaks the “universal language of beneficent hearts.”²⁸⁸

Narrating her experiences for Aza with the knots of her *Quipos*, Zilia attempts to make sense of increasingly baffling and upsetting behaviors as she arrives in Paris and is subjected to the objectifying scrutiny of high society. Her experiences in Parisian high society lead her to form much harsher judgments against the French than she had earlier entertained. Forced by Déterville’s cruel mother to change back into her Virgin’s robes to be exhibited as social currency while enduring the harassment of small-minded socialites, Zilia tells Aza that “[t]hroughout the different regions I have crossed, I have not seen savages quite as proud and insolent in their manners as these.” So appalled by the behavior she witnesses among the company of Déterville’s mother – *madame* – Zilia cannot believe that her protector and his sister are products of the same nation: “they alone known and respect virtue.”²⁸⁹ So different is their humane treatment from the belittling spectacle of Parisian society that Zilia feels “quite certain that the *Cacique* is one of those who pay tribute to you.”²⁹⁰ His gifts and “marks of respect” convince her that he knows she is meant to marry Aza and reign as queen, and “[t]his certainty reassures me and calms some of my anxieties.”²⁹¹ In order to understand “what obliges [the *Cacique*] to detain me in his home” and to learn how to reach Aza, however, Zilia realizes she must learn French.

As soon as she had arrived in France Zilia had recognized that she would have to learn the language in order to obtain the knowledge she needed to return to Aza. But her mastery of French only comes after she has exhausted the supply of *Quipos* with which she had recorded her experiences and narrated her passion. Not being able to turn to her *Quipos* to “give a manner of existence to [her] thoughts” limits Zilia’s ability to render concrete the passion for Aza that has kept her alive: “Illusion deserts me, and dreadful truth takes its place; my aimless thoughts, lost in the immense void of absence, will henceforth be extinguished just as quickly as time itself.”

²⁸⁸ Graffigny, *Lettres d'une péruvienne* (1747), 115; Mallinson translates the phrase as “the universal language of sympathetic hearts”, 44.

²⁸⁹ *Peruvian Woman*, 46-7

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 48-9.

Profiting from the tutor provided by Déterville and the isolation she has gained in retreat with Céline in a “house of virgins,” Zilia’s first letter written in French appears after a period of six months – time, she says, that has been “wiped from [her] life.”²⁹² Without the “imaginary happiness” of communicating with Aza, Zilia had only the future on which to project passion, and “the present no longer seemed to merit being counted.” Although she is barely able to “form these shapes” she writes, the ability to express her passion – to “give a manner of existence” to it – leaves Zilia feeling “restored to myself.”²⁹³

Mastering written French, by allowing Zilia to express her passion for Aza, brings her “back to life,” but her knowledge comes at a price: “Alas! how I have suffered for knowing the language I now use, how deceitful has been the hope which inspired me to learn it!” Now understanding the true geography of the world and the modest place of the Inca within it, Zilia declares that “Even the Sun has deceived me.” Far from a Divine being in covenantal relationship with the Inca, the Sun “shines on the whole world, of which your empire is but a part.” She is not being deceived by an alternative mythic narrative, she explains, “do not think, my dearest Aza, that they have tried to trick me with these incredible facts: they have proven to me only too clearly that they are true.” But if Zilia has been deceived by her “mind, [her] heart, [her] eyes,” she remains steadfast in her devotion to her passion for Aza.²⁹⁴ Her mastery of the language, however, initially brings her no closer to obtaining the information she needs to be reunited with him. Unable to call upon Déterville, who had left for the battlefield before Zilia could speak the language, surrounded by “Virgins who live” in “profound ignorance,” and seemingly obstructed by Céline, her language provides her no access to the knowledge that she seeks.²⁹⁵

Zilia’s inability to clarify her circumstances while at the convent is no longer a problem of language but the result of passion, although not solely her own. The same letters that have allowed Zilia to nurture the passion that keeps her alive have unwittingly narrated Déterville’s growing passion for Zilia. The reader, of course, has been aware of Déterville’s infatuation since letter five, when Zilia confuses his gallant performances for acts of worship. Shortly after their

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 54

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55

arrival in France, Zilia, satisfied he is not an idolator, reasons that his strange behavior was not religious worship but rather a “form of play widely practiced in his country.” As Zilia elaborates, it becomes clear that Déterville has pursued his passion beyond his earlier performative devotions, having instructed Zilia to “pronounce distinctly some words in his language...yes, *I love you*, or *I promise to be yours*.”²⁹⁶ When Zilia later repeats these phrases attempting to cheer him, still completely unaware of their meaning, Déterville must restrain from indulging the passion he has forged. Overcome by Zilia’s naïve gesture, “his eyes lit up, he came towards me with an agitated look...Then stopping suddenly, he took my hand and shook it firmly, saying...*No...respect...her virtue...*”²⁹⁷ Despite his imaginative indulgence of passion, Déterville remains a committed Gallant.

Déterville’s passion is clear not only to the reader of Zilia’s letters, but also to Déterville’s family and friends who constitute Zilia’s de facto social world, and who discourage her from discussing Aza, whose existence she has only recently been able to make known. Céline, who has evaded requests for information in what Zilia identifies as “a rather clumsy attempt to deceive,” also denies her sympathetic friendship. While Zilia considers herself “the permanent confidante of her troubles” and willingly listens to Céline’s bitter complaints about being separated from her beloved and pressured to take religious vows, Céline refuses Zilia any similar comfort. When Zilia seeks comfort for her own anguished love, seeking “relief from the burden of my heart merely by speaking [Aza’s] name,” Céline scornfully “disputes [his] understanding, [his] virtues, and even [his] love.”²⁹⁸ And while Zilia gains a bit more insight into the circumstances surrounding the events that had “put [her] in the hands of Déterville,” from the *Man of Religion* who comes to teach her, he refuses to discuss details that might help Zilia contact or return to Aza. Instead, he encourages her to wait for the return of Déterville – promised to be imminent – emphasizing the debt of gratitude that Zilia owes him and insisting that she “could not honorably decide [her] own fate without his consent.”²⁹⁹ While Zilia readily accedes to the logic of gratitude articulated by the Man of Religion, and is in full agreement over the extent of “the exceptional

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 33-4

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 39

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 57

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 61

qualities which distinguish Déterville from others of his rank," she cannot comprehend the anger and impatience provoked by her love of Aza. Even her otherwise obedient and affectionate servant, she explains to Aza, "has the audacity to tell me I must think of you no more."³⁰⁰

Zilia and Déterville each remain unaware of the passion of the other until his return, detailed in letter 23, when they are tortuously articulated with the unrefined tools of language. Déterville, having been forewarned by his sister that Zilia has already sworn her heart to Aza, has been reduced to a state of despair when Zilia finds him. Eager to demonstrate her gratitude and esteem, Zilia notices as she speaks to him that "the sadness I had observed on [his] face when I entered was fading and giving way to joy." Still unaware of his passion, her enthusiastic and sincere displays of affection provide Déterville with a source of hope needed to sustain it. Although she does not yet understand why, Zilia experiences a "vague unease" when she considers asking his advice about how to reunite with Aza. Déterville, presumably responding to his own uneasiness, falls to his knees and "in a voice filled with emotion" implores Zilia to clarify the feelings that have inspired hope in him: "Am I the happiest of men at the very moment my sister has led me to believe I am the most worthy of compassion?"³⁰¹ This clarification is tortuously wrought, as Zilia's innocent declarations of "love" for Déterville only bring into sharp relief the ambiguity the word. As Zilia continues to insist on her love, offended that he could possibly "blacken [her] name" with the idea she did not love him, Déterville objects: "No...I still dare not believe it, you do not speak French well enough to dispel my well-founded fears." When Zilia clarifies that her love of Déterville implies that "you are dear to me, that your future is of concern to me, that friendship and gratitude attach me to you," she demonstrates that mastery of the language is not the source of their miscommunication.³⁰² Rather, the ambiguity of the language itself – heightened in the case of the French usage of *aimer* – allows for myriad interpretive possibilities susceptible to the inclinations of the passions. It is ultimately only when Déterville insists that Zilia clarify his status in her heart vis à vis Aza that the nature of their passions become clear to one another.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 57

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 64

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 65

Zilia initially responds to Déterville's declaration of love with incredulity. With vastly different origins, united only by chance, and only just able to "express our thoughts freely to each other" how could he possibly claim to love her? "What reason then could you have to entertain the feelings you describe?"³⁰³ Déterville, who insists that his love is well-founded on the basis of Zilia's "charms and my nature," explains that he "lived without passion until the moment he saw" her. "Born sensitive, indolent, opposed to deceit," he explains, he never had the will to endeavor to "engage a woman's heart" and feared "not finding the sincerity I sought." Zilia's beauty, although "striking," he explains, might easily have made just as slight an impression "as that of many others" but for the "sweetness and artlessness of your character" that made her seem "the very being my imagination had so often fashioned." Stricken with a passion that he has subsequently nurtured, Déterville cannot accept Zilia's love of Aza without despair, and, although he promises to help her communicate with him, declares death the only conceivable outcome of his deprivation.³⁰⁴

The confrontation of their mutually exclusive passions brings turmoil to Zilia and her ability to communicate, despite her mastery of French. She is soon struck by "an illness they call a fever" that she is sure was caused by the "distressing passions" she experienced during her exchange with Déterville.³⁰⁵ Her illness was extended, she explains, by her "sad thoughts" and the loss of Céline's friendship, who, although she dutifully nursed Zilia back to health, did so with "coldness" and with "little consideration [*ménagement*] for my soul." Angry on behalf of her brother's heartache, Céline's kindness is "feigned", and "all sweetness and accord have been banished from our commerce."³⁰⁶ Déterville, meanwhile, while still making good on his promise to help her communicate with Aza, takes pains to avoid Zilia. When they do interact, their passions do not allow them to speak to one another freely about their thoughts and sentiments.

Zilia's letters to Aza – now written on paper in French – remain just as essential to her survival as her *Quipos* had been. In letter five, before she had acquired any familiarity with

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 65

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 66

³⁰⁵ Graffigny, 68

³⁰⁶ *Lettres d'une péruvienne*, (1747), 209; Mallinson's translation: "all sympathy and pleasure have been banished from our dealing with each other." 68

French, Zilia had lamented that she had “been robbed even of that comfort which those in misfortune find in speaking of their troubles.”³⁰⁷ Now that Zilia is able to articulate those troubles, she is denied the opportunity to voice them, and must again rely on her letters as “the only docile witness to the sentiments of my heart.”³⁰⁸ When Céline’s wedding (made possible by the sudden death of the “vain and unnatural mother” and a court settlement in her favor) removes her from the seclusion of the convent, she cannot find conversation able to satisfy her curiosity about the steady stream of new objects and experiences she encounters.³⁰⁹ When Céline’s marital obligations force Zilia out of the seclusion of the convent into the taxing social requirements of *mondanité*, Zilia writes her most stringent criticisms of French manners, customs, and laws as she attempts to reconcile the skill and sociality of the French with the disdain for virtue she sees manifest in high society. And Zilia’s new knowledge of Déterville’s passion has added an additional burden to her heart and mind, ruining the “meagre satisfaction of living at peace with myself” that she had previously been able to sustain. Finding herself to be the cause of unhappiness to “two people to whom I owe my life”, Zilia now feels “only a kind of scorn for myself.”³¹⁰

Her love for Aza, however, is “stronger than [her] remorse,” and it is soon rendered even stronger by the sudden injection of hope, when Déterville uses his connections to locate Aza at the Spanish court and arranges for him to meet Zilia in Paris. Although Déterville has planted seeds of doubt in Zilia’s mind regarding Aza’s faithfulness – doubts which his continued silence amplifies – she occupies herself by imagining their shared life in France. This life is conceivable thanks to the new social identity Zilia acquires when Déterville returns to her a portion of the treasure looted from the Temple of the Sun that had come into his hands after his battle with the Spanish, and this social identity is given concrete form when she acquires property in the form of a country estate. While Zilia still occupies the role of outsider, her proficiency in the language, her experiences in society, and her study of literature demonstrate how assimilated she has become

³⁰⁷ *Peruvian Woman*, 26.

³⁰⁸ Graffigny, *Lettres d’une péruvienne*, 1747, 166; Mallinson, “the only sympathetic witness to the feelings in my heart.” 57.

³⁰⁹ *Peruvian Woman*, 56.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 69

over the course of her time in France. Her practice of criticism is itself the product of her avid consumption of literature in moral criticism, which comes to inform not only her observations of French social life but also her own actions.³¹¹

Zilia will find a place in French society, but it will not be with Aza, who has settled into life at the Spanish court, converted to Catholicism, and made plans to marry a Spanish woman. When Aza's betrayal destroys her illusion, Zilia begins to address letters to Déterville, who has sought to escape the object of his passion through military service in Malta. The collapse of the illusion that had sustained Zilia throughout the novel unfolds over three letters. Although Aza does not initially disclose the real purpose of his visit on their first, brief meeting, Zilia can see clearly that "Aza...is no longer the same Aza."³¹² When Aza confirms his intention to return to Spain and marry, Zilia writes again to Déterville and articulates her devastation and rage over Aza's unfaithfulness, insisting it "serves no purpose to tell me I am free, my heart is his, and it will be his unto death."³¹³ The third letter, written in response to Déterville's complaints to Céline over Zilia's silence, paints a vivid portrait of despair, as Zilia protests that she could not have written, because she had not "been capable of thought." The return of thought has been no great gift, either, she explains, as it returns to her the "fearful memory" of Aza's betrayal and the reality of her situation. Overwhelmed by grief, Zilia instructs Déterville to remain in Malta, far from her – "a wretched woman who can no longer feel the kindness shown to her, for whom it is a torture, who wants only to die."³¹⁴

The penultimate letter, still to Déterville, describes Zilia's early recovery from the dissolution of her passion, which had endangered her life. Once again nursed through the throes of passion by the devoted attentions of Céline (again on friendly terms), Zilia manages to recover a portion of her reason, and Aza's marriage – "the certainty that my misfortune is past hope" – finalizes the cure of her devastated passion. Her "grief has not been extinguished," she explains, but "its cause is no longer worthy of my regret." Thanks to Déterville's "far-sighted kindness", Zilia has her own private *retraite* in the form of a country estate where she may go to recover from her

³¹¹ Ibid., 104.

³¹² Ibid., 111.

³¹³ Ibid., 112.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 113-4.

ill-fated passion and be “at one with [her]self.”³¹⁵ Cautioned by Céline about rules of propriety that frown on an unmarried woman living alone in a country estate, Zilia protests that “It is not to the image of virtue that I pay homage, it is to virtue itself. I shall always take that as the judge and guide of my actions.”³¹⁶

Zilia’s final letter reveals that Déterville has not managed to cure himself of the “passion which grieves [her].”³¹⁷ Presumably given a cause for hope by Zilia’s cure from her passion for Aza, he returns to Paris once again declaring his love. Accusing him of being “deluded by false expectations” and of “taking advantage of the state of my soul,” Zilia rejects his overtures: “I may be cured of my passion, but I shall only ever have passion for [Aza].” She is not interested in persuading her “heart to take on chains” but rather seeks to relish “all the feelings inspired by friendship.”³¹⁸ But it is not for the sake of seeking truth Zilia proposes that Déterville eschew passion in favor of the “innocent charms of simple friendship,” but rather in order to enjoy the pleasures of society. In her final letter, Zilia imagines that a virtuous friendship that includes both Déterville and Céline will “make time pass quickly” no less effectively than would love. The respective gifts of its members – Déterville’s knowledge of ‘science and arts’; Zilia’s knowledge of the “resources of the soul”; Céline’s devotion and “cheerfulness” – are not offered in service to an ideal such as truth but to pleasures, though “innocent and lasting” ones. Rather than the *vif plaisirs of le grand monde*, which degrade feeling, the micro-society that Zilia imagines in her final letter pursues the simple “pleasure of being...that have been forgotten by so many people.”³¹⁹

Zilia’s eventual eschewal of passion and preference for her *retraite* do not constitute a rejection of worldly society but an accommodation, made in and by its terms. The country estate that ensures Zilia’s independence and facilitates her preference for virtue over passion is hers only thanks to the worldly realities of commerce and empire, as well as the committed gallantry of her worldly patron. And while she has pledged her life to virtue, Zilia’s virtue is clearly not of the ascetic variety, as she freely enjoys the feeling of owning her estate and the many “delightful

³¹⁵ Ibid., 114-5.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 116.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 116.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 116-7

³¹⁹ Ibid., 117-8

objects” within it.³²⁰ These goods of society – private property, the “enchanted objects” produced in an economy of luxury, and especially books – allow Zilia to find refuge from “the terrible truth hidden in the depths of [her] heart” and to devote her time to sentimental friendship.³²¹

Graffigny’s open ending displeased critics and inspired a torrent of publications offering a more traditional ending for Zilia, whether in death or marriage. Graffigny’s evasion of the marriage plot reflects not only the author’s preference for independence but the also the novel’s epistemological thrust: it is a novel about Zilia’s evolving understanding of herself and her world as well as her own “coming to authorship” and not a romantic narrative.³²² It is also reflective of the unique relationships made possible by French law and customs, products of modern society without precedent. Zilia’s invitation to Déterville to forge the bonds of sentimental friendship is also an invitation to Graffigny’s readers to imagine the kind of relationships that might be possible between modern men and women.

Re-Scripting Gallantry: Sensibility, Passions, and Pathology in Rousseau’s *Julie*

However harsh Zilia’s criticism of the customs of the French *grand monde*, Graffigny’s narrative ultimately served as an apology for the goods enabled by modern social, political, and economic relations, or what would soon come to be called “civilization.”³²³ This strategy of worldly accommodation came under frontal attack by Rousseau in his 1761 Epistolary novel *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, which dismantled the tropes of gallantry creatively deployed by Graffigny and her literary predecessors. Karen Green has argued that Rousseau did not reject but rather transformed “the theme of the gallant lover inspired to virtue.” Unconcerned with the supposed virtues of a worldly noble class he considered beyond redemption, Rousseau’s explosively successful book rewrote the novel’s sentimental script, allowing “any tender bourgeois mother and competent housekeeper” to “aspire to govern her husband for the greater social good.”³²⁴ But Rousseau’s novel does not simply domesticate gallantry, which is implicated from the novel’s

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 115-6

³²¹ *Peruvian Woman*, 115.

³²² Dobie, “Subject of Writing”, 100.

³²³ Zilia’s harshest condemnation of luxury, as well as her lengthy exposition on women’s education, appeared after Rousseau’s first discourse, in the 1752 edition. Read without these additions, the novel loses considerable critical thrust.

³²⁴ Karen Green, *A History of Women’s Political Thought in Europe, 1700-1800*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 169.

earliest letters as a source of the corruption that dooms its sensitive protagonists. The novel's first part depicts the failure of gallantry to protect against the passions it heightens, which are subsequently managed by the sage redirection of a manly reason in the novel's second half. The novel's tragic and shocking ending, however, brings into sharp relief the limits of human wisdom in conditions of corruption.

Rousseau had, of course, launched his career as a man of letters with an extended lament on the corrupting forces of worldliness, understood in the broadest sense as encompassing not only the insincerity of its practices but the entire edifice of science, art, and culture which it arbitrated. Rousseau's attack on worldliness in his *Second Discourse* took aim at the apologetics of *doux commerce*, which had seized on the natural philosophical practice of conjectural history to tell a story about the unruly human passions being tamed by the social imperatives of commerce.³²⁵ Rousseau's famous version of humanity's deep evolutionary history – *avant la lettre* – reimagined the nature and source of the passions that apologists of luxury confidently claimed could be managed and contained with the force of self-interest. The works of Locke and Malebranche had each contributed to a moral philosophical trend emphasizing the imaginative and ratiocinative dimension of passion, but passion for both was born where perception meets imagination by way of the body's sensory mechanisms. In his *Second Discourse*, Rousseau carefully distinguishes between what he identifies as “principles” that exist “prior to reason” and passion, which exists only when these principles are modified by reflection.³²⁶ Self-love properly so called – that is, *amour de soi même* – was neither a passion nor its source. A necessary ingredient, self-love is distinguished from passion by the work of reason.

By the time Rousseau wrote *Julie*, he had recourse to a poetics of organic sensibility, allowing him to graft his two fundamental “principles” of *amour de soi même* and *pitié* onto a newly theorized model of the reactive body.³²⁷ In *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France*, Anne Vila argues that *Julie* provided Rousseau an opportunity to define and delineate mechanisms of control over the property of

³²⁵ Douglass, 178.

³²⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, in Victor Gourevitch, *Rousseau : The Discourses and other early political writings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 153.

³²⁷ Vila, *Enlightenment*, 172.

organic sensibility. Vila's study of the "medical and imaginative literature" of eighteenth-century France delineates the construction of sensibility as a "structuring concept" in Enlightenment philosophical discourses. Sensibility had been established as a literary and moral category since at least the seventeenth century, and was central to the "social, moral, and linguistic codes" of the aristocracy.³²⁸ By the mid eighteenth century, a rising class of professional physicians, trained in the vitalist physiology of the Montpellier school of medicine, popularized the concept of "organic sensibility." Organic sensibility had more universalizing implications: Understood as the fundamental principle of living matter, responsible for mediating sensory input and response, sensibility was not only shared by all humans but provided a "link between the human body and the psychological, intellectual, and ethical faculties of humankind."³²⁹

Vila argues that *Julie* provided Rousseau an opportunity to define and delineate mechanisms of control over the property of organic sensibility. In Vila's reading, the novel's two-part structure "allowed Rousseau to represent and contrast two radically distinct modes of sensibility – one involuntary and untamed, the other voluntary and carefully contained." The novel's second half, which details the "cure" of the lovers' sensibilities through the "hygienic" management of sensory impressions, allowed Rousseau, according to Vila, to "carry out his vision of a fully executed *morale sensitive*."³³⁰ Rousseau's concept of *morale sensitive*, discussed in his *Confessions* was concerned to delineate a method of moral instruction based on sensory interventions.³³¹ As Vila demonstrates, the domestic milieu of Clarens described by an admiring Saint Preux closely follows the austere prescriptions of the Swiss physician Samuel Auguste Tissot (whom Rousseau exempted from his general disdain for physicians).³³² The carefully orchestrated domestic economy, "designed both to foster sensibility and keep it in its place", prescribes habits of sleeping, eating, working, socializing, and recreating meant to "force the animal economy to favor the moral order it so often troubles."³³³

³²⁸ Ibid., 9

³²⁹ Ibid., 2.

³³⁰ Ibid., 199, 186.

³³¹ Ibid., 182

³³² Ibid., 187-198.

³³³ Rousseau, *Confessions*, quoted in Vila, *Enlightenment*, 183.

The maintenance of this domestic economy requires the participation of both sexes, but Clarens is no celebration of gender *mixité*. In a letter to Edward describing the prudent practices used by the Wolmars to keep male and female servants in segregated spheres of activity, Saint Preux explains “Too intimate relations between the sexes never lead to anything but trouble.” Such segregation is not unique to the domestics but is universally practiced, as Julie asserts, according to Saint Preux, “neither love nor conjugal union imply continual contact between the sexes.”³³⁴ Enforced by custom and not statute, gender segregation was not absolute, its parameters framed by the dictates of “nature” and not the imposition of a transcendent moral purity.³³⁵ The gender segregation that prevails in daily life reflects a rational design based on the incommensurability of the two sexes.³³⁶ The book’s first half represents this incommensurability in terms of constitutionally different reactions to passions. Although both lovers surrender to passion, they are not equally affected by love’s transports, and their experiences of its effects quite distinct. Both Julie and her lover possess similarly exquisite sensibilities and they both surrender to passion, but they are not equally affected by its transports. While each indulgence of their passion vitiates Julie’s tender sensibility, it invigorates and emboldens the usually insecure and anxious Saint Preux. Despite a persistent femininity that follows Saint Preux throughout the novel, when agitated, Saint Preux’s passion is “ardent and impetuous...and in its frenzy...liable to destroy”, as Rousseau had described love in his *Second Discourse*. Julie’s passion, however, causes her to shield herself from what she calls St. Preux’s “attacks” in an act of appropriately feminine resistance.³³⁷ And while Julie loves St. Preux, it is pity, not love, that proves to be her downfall.

Vila argues that Julie and Saint Preux’s different reactions to the ordeals of the novel’s first half do *not* reflect constitutional differences – the two lovers being cast from “one mold” – but rather their different social contexts.³³⁸ It is of course Julie’s social context that creates the double

³³⁴ *Julie*, 369-70

³³⁵ As Saint Preux explains, the “indiscreet and perpetual mingling” of the sexes, far from improving them, is “likely to confound and disfigure in them nature’s wisest distinctions.” *Julie*, 370

³³⁶ Saint Preux, again quoting Julie, writes “the inclinations nature imparts to them are as various as the functions she assigns them” *Julie*, 370.

³³⁷ *Julie*, 53.

³³⁸ Vila, *Enlightenment*, 187.

bind that drives the novel's narrative and provides the circumstances for the development of Julie's resolution and courage. But far from being strengthened by the recurring crises provoked by passion, Julie's moral character is continuously degraded by the passion she pursues. By the time she survives her final passionate encounter with Saint Preux, she is willing to commit herself to an adulterous liaison. Only the tender ministrations of Claire, the sudden death of her mother, and the sacred rite of marriage prove powerful enough to interrupt the process of moral decay wrought by passion. St. Preux's moral health has also degraded, but his reluctant concession to the possibility of adultery is identified with the corruption of his reason by the libertine philosophizing of Paris, where he has been exiled awaiting orders from Edward.³³⁹

In addition to formalizing organic sensibility as the discursive model for the perceptive and reactive body, mid-century vitalism provided a reconceptualization of the passions by reviving the model of the "non-naturals". Cast alongside air, food, sleep, rest, and motion as elements necessary for the body's operation but external to it, the vitalist model of the passions converged with the conceptualizing trend in moral philosophy. Vila stresses the role of organic sensibility in eclipsing the need to refer to the soul as an independent, immaterial, "moral" force, but organic sensibility only reinforced the moral philosophical trend of conceptualizing the soul as the perceptive faculty problematically contained by and expressed in the body. Malebranche's postlapsarian metaphysical dualism and theory of occasional causes, in particular, provided strong justification for an atomist or sensualist epistemology by affirming the impossibility of extricating material and spiritual substances.³⁴⁰ Organic sensibility provided a physiological map of the reactive body – the intermediary for the perceiving subject centered in moral philosophy. For Rousseau, the vitalist re-ordering of the passions appears to have provided an opportunity to speculate about the nature of sexual difference according to the imperative of complementarity. In *Julie*, Rousseau draws on the paradigm of vital sensibility and the reordering the passions it appears to have facilitated in order to undermine the gallant narrative of sentimental friendship and consign feminine sensibility to male control.

³³⁹ His reply includes justifications for adultery that he attributes to what Julie will later call "gallant" philosophers.

³⁴⁰ Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, 126.

Resistance is Futile: The Gallant Trap

The novel's opening letters from the (eventually named) Saint Preux reveal him to be already in the advanced stages of passion, hounding Julie with long, tortured descriptions of the suffering she causes him. Throwing himself metaphorically at her feet, the tortured lover claims to be paralyzed by the strength of his passion and begs Julie to decide his fate. His passion for her (agitated, he complains, by the "willful inconsistencies" of her behavior) has reached a point that he is no longer certain of his own will. Producing as it does "a fever or rather a delirium" that results in a state of "alienation" how can he be expected, he pleads, "to answer for myself"?³⁴¹ Despite the threat he poses to the serenity and even safety of the one he professes to love, the ardor of his passion renders him helpless to act against its dictates. Julie fails to answer his first letter, instead settling with modifying her behavior, per his request, in order to lessen his suffering. The impetuous lover's next letter complains of this change, however, charging her with coldness and a "wily severity" even more intolerable than her earlier comportment. When this letter causes Julie evident grief, a third letter seems to suggest her suffering has finally provided him with the resolve to act, and he announces his immanent departure.

This resolve – the first he has demonstrated thus far – finally prompts a written response from Julie in the form of a brief note granting him permission to stay. This does not satisfy him, however and, complaining of her "coldness" and "scorn", once again declares his intention to leave. When in a brief back and forth of notes the tutor declares his intention to follow through on suicide, Julie is at last compelled to confess her own "fatal passion" that has left her vulnerable to his "pursuits." Unable to resist her own passion or avoid his, it is Julie's turn to appeal for pity, that she might count on his virtue to be "the last refuge of my innocence."³⁴² Moved by her conflicting ardor for him and for the dictates of honor and virtue, the lover finds strength to contain

³⁴¹ *Julie*, 27.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 32-33.

the passion that had previously threatened to overwhelm him, and assures Julie she can “trust a faithful friend who is not one to deceive you.”³⁴³

The opening letters, then, not only serve to establish the mutual passion of the soon-to-be lovers but arranges them in the terms of a gallant relationship, wherein the satisfaction of passion is precluded by means of moral agreement. Gallantry is explicitly implicated in Julie’s first exchange of letters with her cousin, Claire, who is away mourning the death of her childhood governess and mother figure, Chaillot. Begging her cousin to return to her side, confessing the “dangers I have run by my imprudence,” Julie attempts (in a rather uncharacteristic instance of insensitivity) to mitigate her cousin’s grief by implicating Chaillot’s morals. Conceding that she had “never instilled in us anything but principles of propriety and honor”, Chaillot had nonetheless proven highly imprudent, sharing with the young girls “the most indiscreet secrets... forever repeating maxims of gallantry, the adventures of her youth, the wiles of lovers”. Under the pretense of protecting them from “the snares of men”, moreover, the governess had taught them, not exactly to “set snares for them” in turn but had “nonetheless instructed [them] about a thousand things which young maidens would do well not to know.”³⁴⁴

Drawn together by their naturally sensitive souls and mutual admiration for virtue, Julie and Saint Preux attempt to follow Lambert’s prescription for the purification of passion through the renunciation of its sensual satisfaction. As Saint Preux extols, the immediate effect of Julie’s virtue is to strengthen his own, “What good thing that I would not have done for its own sake, would I not now do to become worthy of you?” As Lambert had explicated, this renunciation leads to more exquisite sentiments, leading Saint Preux to reflect “True happiness, the glory of the loved one, the triumph of a love that honors itself, how superior art thou to all its pleasures!”³⁴⁵ Far from leading to idyllic tranquility, however, Saint Preux’s passion continually protrudes into the sentimental friendship, and he is soon complaining of Julie’s recovery of health and apparent gaiety, a state incompatible with her profession of “a violent passion reduced to warring with

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

itself".³⁴⁶ Julie's reprimand is swift and explicit. Not only has her professed gallant protector quickly exhausted his earlier generosity, but he has absurdly complained of the good health of the one he loves, reneging on his commitment as soon she has recovered her natural charms and "become bearable" again.³⁴⁷

Julie's reproach is targeted not at the substance of her lover's concern, however, but the "bantering style" of his letter, which betrays an uncharacteristic dissembling and lack of reasoning.³⁴⁸ Modeling the sincerity she expects of her lover, Julie puts the incongruity between her present gaiety and her "earlier declaration" into context. Explaining that she had been raised with "maxims so severe that the purest love appeared to me the height of dishonor," Julie had been struck with terror when she began to experience "the sentiment that binds me to you." Having been led to believe that "a maiden of any sensibility was undone at the first tender word that escaped her lips", Julie had been unable to imagine anything but her ruin, confusing "crime with the confession of a passion." ³⁴⁹ This overheated imagination, along with "excessive misgivings" about herself led her to appeal to Saint Preux's honor in defense of her own. Having taken the first step towards what she had been convinced was her ruin, Julie has found to her surprise that she feels only relief. She is now "perfectly calm" she explains, because "two months of experience has taught me that my too tender heart needs love, but that my senses have no need of a lover."³⁵⁰ Relieved of her terror, she moreover "savor[s] the delightful pleasure of loving in all purity", and admonishes Saint Preux to "calm the intoxication of vain desires that are always attended by regret" and to "peaceably enjoy our present situation."³⁵¹

Such peace proves elusive for Saint Preux, who, complaining of the "bitter choice" between Julie's heart or her "person", contends "why render incompatible what nature meant to join?" Julie's soul may be above the human passions, he admits, but as for him, "fire courses through my veins." And while his concern for Julie's honor and tranquility assures that he will not act on his passion, the very act of containing it "stir[s] it up", causing a "real torment to pursue

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 39.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 40.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 40

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 41

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 41.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 42.

me.”³⁵² Julie’s passion, however, is not stirred by his laments, and her next letter does not address his complaints at all, instead praising his constrained behavior, suggesting that he has learnt during this unspecified interval to better repress his torment. This respectful restraint has nurtured Julie’s attachment and fuels a growing passion: “I feel a thousand times more affected by your respect than by your transports, and I greatly fear that in making the more honest choice, you may ultimately have chosen the more dangerous one.”³⁵³ Admonishing herself, presciently, to be “more wary of pity than of love,” Julie reminds St. Preux that a sincere soul such as his could never hope to “be happy if I were dishonored” nor “with a satisfied eye witness me in infamy and tears.”³⁵⁴ Taking command over their common destinies, Julie claims a feminine prudence derived from the “dangerous trust” assigned to girls “from the tenderest age” to protect their chastity, which “awakens our judgment”, forcing them to think about risks and consequences.³⁵⁵

A delighted but grounded Saint Preux eagerly remits his will to Julie, but the bulk of his response is dedicated to outlining a course of study for his pupil, who is directed to meditate on examples of virtue. Julie finds her own passion stirred not only by her lover’s chaste enthusiasm but also by their separation and her relative isolation at the countryside estate of Clarens. A solitary walk in the woods emboldens her to plan “a little surprise for my friend”, lest it be said “that he must ever show deference and I never generosity.”³⁵⁶ The carefully orchestrated kiss in the bower, assisted and supervised by Claire, disturbs the precarious repression and redirection of passion that the couple had so painfully established between themselves. Lamenting the effects of “that fatal kiss” Saint Preux explains that in seeking to alleviate his sufferings she has “made them sharper”, exclaiming “your pity is the death of me.” He had begun to enjoy, he explains, his tranquil submission to Julie’s demands of virtue. Unable, in this “untroubled simplicity”, to “imagine a state more blissful”, his rapturous experience at the bower has “thrown me into a distraction which I can never get over.”³⁵⁷ Preparing for the return of her father, Julie asserts her privileges over Saint Preux and sends him away in this agitated state, where his

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

passion will be nurtured by distance and solitude: "I feel my sufferings ever more bitterly far from you" he laments, explaining that his extended exile is causing his anxiety to increase, not because he doubts Julie's constancy, but because his "peaceful solitude" has given his imagination free reign to "fashion new, uncertain" troubles.³⁵⁸

Julie's initial joy at being reunited with her father quickly turns to bitter grief, as his unfavorable reception of the news that he has been put in the debt of a commoner who refuses to accept a stipend quashes any hopes she may have nurtured for attaining his consent to their marriage. Now camping on a local mountain range where he observes Julie's town in isolation among an encroaching winter, Saint Preux's own despair begins to overwhelm him and he pleads with Julie to resolve her double bind by forsaking her family and running away with him, closing his letter with the threat of suicide. Julie's response to this letter is to fall violently ill, only to be cured by the return of her lover who has been summoned by Claire. Julie recovers her physical health, but she is forced to confront the onslaught of her passions alone when Claire is called away on family business. In a delirious letter to her cousin, Julie is frenetically pulled between the expression of conflicting sentiments and passions, accusing her "denatured" father of making "a slave of his daughter" for marrying her to his friend to then immediately reproving herself to insist he is in fact "the best of fathers." Begging her cousin to return, she nonetheless clearly recognizes that she is already facing "the moment of crisis" and the looming "shame and despair" of her inevitable defeat.³⁵⁹

Julie's next letter announces to Claire her "ruin", from which her lover is entirely exculpated. A brief expression of anger against "the cruel man who brings me to infamy" quickly gives way to self-recrimination as Julie laments "I have no reproach for anyone but myself."³⁶⁰ Julie's surrender, however, was not to the agitations of amorous passion but the result of her weakened resistance to pity. In Julie's eyes, Saint Preux's aggressive, sexually frustrated histrionics served as proof that he had learnt to "master himself." Julie's error, she explains to Claire, was to have "dared observe too long" the spectacle of his suffering love. "Love alone

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

might have spared me...it was pity that undid me.” Unable to accept either betraying her parents or losing her love, Julie accepts her “own demise” rather than choose between two equally unacceptable fates.³⁶¹

Their surrender to sensual passion has profoundly different effects on the two lovers, causing despair and weakness in Julie and confidence and vitality in Saint Preux. When he reproaches Julie for her grief, interpreting it as proof of the inadequacy of her love, Julie explains her regret is not “having given too much to love than having deprived it of its greatest charm.”³⁶² As long as they had remained committed to virtuous resistance they had enjoyed the “divine ardor that fed [love] while purifying it”, but they have abandoned that “charming state” to become “prey to the error of the senses.”³⁶³ When Julie conceives of a plan to become pregnant in order to make their marriage the *only* honorable option she is once again able to believe she might reconcile love with duty, but she is forced to dissemble her feelings and intentions, even lie to her parents, in order to conceal her past and continuing transgressions.

The lovers’ hopes, of course, do not come to pass, foiled by fate and a violent father. Although Julie remains unable to abandon her commitment to filial duty, she is equally committed to her passion, and this unbearable contradiction comes with a moral cost, leading Julie to plan an adulterous liaison in order to satisfy both passion and duty. She is moved to this state of corruption by St. Preux’s tender act of devotion in fleeing to her side when she was stricken by smallpox, receiving an “inoculation of love” in his turn. “I could not bear this last trial, and seeing such a tender love survive hope, mine which I had taken such care to contain had nothing more to restrain it.”³⁶⁴ Despite his initial repulsion at Julie’s proposition, Saint Preux cannot bring himself to refuse it, although he acknowledges that “[t]he hope you restore to me is a sad and somber one.” With his soul in this “frightful state”, he concludes the lovers will “be criminal, but...not be wicked...criminal, but...still love virtue.”³⁶⁵ Julie’s moral descent, however, is interrupted by the solemnity of her marriage ceremony, which affects a “sudden revolution” within

³⁶¹ Ibid., 79.

³⁶² Ibid., 83.

³⁶³ Ibid., 83-4.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 289.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 278.

her, repairing “all at once the disorder of my affections” and preparing her soul for the “cure” of her passion.³⁶⁶

The Myth of the “Cure”: Managing the Symptoms of Passion

The novel's second half opens with the two erstwhile lovers well on their way to repairing their moral characters, ready to reunite in order to affect a total “cure” of their passion under the sage direction of Monsieur de Wolmar himself. Female-led gallantry having failed to purify passion, the cool and penetrating reason of the *paterfamilias* will orchestrate a refuge where the former lovers may live in the “bosom of a tranquil friendship, safe from the storm of impetuous passions.”³⁶⁷ This situation is brought about by Julie's confession to her husband of her premarital passion in part four, which inverts another recognizably feminine literary device, most famously associated with Lafayette's *Princess de Clèves*.³⁶⁸ Unlike the unfortunate princess' husband, however, Monsieur de Wolmar is precisely the kind of person to maintain a critical distance to passion, having, as he explains, a naturally “tranquil soul and a cold heart.” The embodiment of masculine reason, he is even impervious to pity: “If I am pained when I see good people suffer, pity has nothing to do with it, for I feel none when I see the wicked suffer.” His sole experience with passion has been with Julie, who inspired in him “the first or rather only emotion” of his life. Without recourse to an alternative passion to counter it, for the first time in his life Wolmar found no help in his reason, and “sinning against prudence” he married Julie knowing of her passion, her premarital liaison, and her aversion to their union. He could, however, “sense” not only that his happiness depended on her but also that “if someone could make Julie happy it was I.”³⁶⁹ Providing Julie with the “innocence and peace” her heart requires in the blissful discharge of mutual duties, Wolmar has secured the health of Julie's sensibility, restoring it to virtue.

The total “cure” of passion, however, also requires that of St. Preux, which will allow him to take his proper place in the sentimental economy of Clarens as governor to the Wolmar's sons.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 292.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 363.

³⁶⁸ Ibbet, *Compassion*, 97.

³⁶⁹ *Julie*, 402-5.

If the role of wife and mother provided Julie with necessary and fulfilling outlets for her sentiments and her labor, the presence of St. Preux is necessary for staging passion's regulation and reinscription upon subjects fully purged of amorous inclinations. While Saint Preux remains overly attached and occasionally improperly familiar with Julie when he first arrives at Clarens, it is the "memory" of Julie that continues to transfix him, not the chaste *materfamilias* whose image Wolmar is intent on replacing it with. Memory's sensory triggers are carefully redirected by Wolmar, who stages new, edifying impressions meant to replace and neutralize passion's earlier "impressions" that continue to live in memory. St. Preux is not, Wolmar explains to Claire, in love with Julie de Wolmar but rather Julie d'Étang, who no longer exists. The memory of the latter, however, is continually evoked by the former, which Wolmar works to "tame" by forcing him to "see always the spouse of an honorable man and the mother of my children." With this simple "trick" of the imagination, Wolmar will "cover the past with the present."³⁷⁰

If this simple repetition serves to familiarize St. Preux with the image of Julie wife-and-mother, more dangerous artefacts of passion require more intensive methods, which Wolmar applies in a chaste re-staging of the kiss in the bower that had undone the young couple's efforts at resistance. When the power of the memory evoked by the bower is made evident by an imprudent remark by St. Preux, Wolmar uses it to stage a touching scene powerful enough to neutralize the earlier memory. Leading the unsuspecting former lovers to the bower, Wolmar announces his plans to fully cure St. Preux of his passion so that he will be fit to take charge of the education of the Wolmar children. Having discussed such edifying topics in detail, Wolmar then embraces them and encourages them to embrace one another. Reenacting the motions of their previous, passionate kiss in the bower with the innocence of friendship strips the location – and their passion – of a source of power. The kiss, Julie explains to Claire, proves to be "nothing like the one that had made me so dread the bower", announcing her change of heart to herself and, as Wolmar declares, the profanation of the erstwhile sanctuary of passion.³⁷¹

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 417-9

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 407.

The cure of St. Preux's passion begins in earnest during Wolmar's carefully timed exit directly following the tender restaging of the bower scene, when Julie and St. Preux revisit the site where he had nurtured his youthful passion in isolated encampment. Confronting objects invested with his memory of passion, he explains, "I experienced how powerfully the presence of objects can revive the violent sentiments with which one was formerly seized in their presence."³⁷² Julie, who has no memories associated with their location or the objects surrounding them, is seized by sentiment witnessing the sudden awakening of passion in St. Preux, and the couple quickly leaves. The boat ride home will be the setting of what Vila calls St. Preux's "definitive crisis of memory," when, seized by the despair of his frustrated passion, he has visions of hurling himself and Julie overboard.³⁷³ When this violent reaction exhausts itself, giving way to a state of gentle *attendrissement*, St. Preux's passion is effectively "purified", sublimated into tender affection for Julie de Wolmar and the domestic empire she animates and orders. Such reassociations and reinscriptions transform Saint Preux from an uncertain victim of passion into a dependable, "manly" friend to both Wolmar and Edward, whose kindnesses he is finally able to recompense.

The fraught scene on the boat ends part four, and the fifth part is dominated by a newly confident St. Preux. Julie falls silent for most of part five, sending only one letter to her cousin suggesting she consider marrying St. Preux – a project that will occupy her throughout the sixth and final part of the novel. When St. Preux travels to Italy to be of service to his friend and benefactor, Julie breaks a seven-year suspension of their epistolary correspondence in order to apprise him of her plans. As Julie rapturously declares, she is able to write to St. Preux for the first time "without fear and without shame" thanks only to the tender ministrations of her husband and his benefactor, Monsieur de Wolmar.³⁷⁴ Under his direction, passion has been purified, and love has been transformed into the bonds of friendship. "Would we have made such progress through our own strength?" Julie implores, immediately concluding "Never, my good friend, it

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 425.

³⁷³ Vila, *Enlightenment*, 113.

³⁷⁴ *Julie*, 545.

was rash even to attempt it.”³⁷⁵ The promise of gallant relationship – the purification of passion and the solid ties of spiritual friendship – are indeed attainable, but not with the sole resources of individual will and reason. But even if the ideal of sentimental friendship is attainable, Julie’s letters to St. Preux puts into doubt its ostensible goods. While she proclaims that the six months they have shared together in “fraternal intimacy and in the peace of innocence” to have been the “sweetest time of my life”, she confesses a restlessness and languor as a consequence being “deprived of the pleasure of desiring.”³⁷⁶ The very depth of her contentment, moreover, provokes anxiety “for anything that could trouble this pleasure,” motivating her project of uniting St. Preux with her cousin in a preemptive play against passion.³⁷⁷

While St. Preux takes offense at what he perceives as Julie’s lack of confidence in him, Julie’s final letter, written to St. Preux from her deathbed, affirms Julie’s fears by revealing her “cure” to have been a “salutary delusion.” If “everything within the power of [her] will” was dedicated to the dictates of duty, her heart remained dedicated to the “first sentiment that brought [her] alive” and the passion that had “crystalized” there.³⁷⁸ The “useful error” of her cure abandons her at the moment it is no longer required to sustain virtue in life. While Wolmar, Claire, and St. Preux had admonished Julie for creating phantasms of danger by reflecting too closely on the potential snares of an extinguished passion, her final letter redeems her anxious attempts to pre-empt the threat of passion by directing St. Preux’s sentiments towards Claire. “No doubt I felt for myself the perils I thought I was feeling for you.”³⁷⁹ Having failed to place St. Preux securely in the bonds of matrimony, facing his immanent return, providence (according to Julie) intervened to protect her innocence, and Julie declares her death to be “a blessing from heaven” preventing inevitable calamity.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 546.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 546, 570

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 566

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 608

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 609

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 608

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION: PASSIONS, VIRTUE, POLITICS

As I hope to have now adequately suggested, each of the novels explored here positioned the passions within narrative in order to make claims about human reason and its interdependence with other human subjects and institutions. Whatever specific political claims might be inferred from these narratives would require a separate study, but I conclude with a consideration of some of the potential implications of each authors' representations of human nature, within which necessarily cohere as fundamental political claims. Both Montesquieu and Graffigny were preoccupied with defining the nature and function of the aristocratic class within an absolute monarchy. Their practice of criticism served the broader purpose they imagined their own social class fulfilling within the context of an absolute monarchy that they accepted. Rousseau, of course, saw only corruption and degradation in the path of worldly distinction, making his name with the excoriation of the entire edifice of social distinctions upholding absolutism. Crucially for Rousseau, this included what he considered the "de-sexing" rhetoric of gallant friendship. Rousseau shared with both Graffigny and Montesquieu the gender ideology of complementarity at work in gallant narratives, but he drew very different implications from it based on his rejection of worldly cultivation.

Virtuous Nobility – and its absence – in the *Lettres persanes*

To the extent that the *Persian Letters* is concerned with standards of virtue, it is the virtue of the aristocratic class tasked with rendering judgment on the laws and not the particulars of individual moral perfection. Given the distinction between republican virtue and monarchical/aristocratic honor that he would cement with his model of governments in *Esprit des lois*, it seems counterintuitive to think of Montesquieu as concerned with a notion of aristocratic virtue. But the question of the *function* of the French aristocracy was highly relevant to Montesquieu and his contemporaries, for whom noble virtue served "as a means by which the

nobility staked its claim to being a superior order.”³⁸¹ Claims about the nature of aristocratic virtue varied widely, however, revealing the fault lines among a deeply fractured social class. Although we remember Montesquieu as one of the eighteenth century’s preeminent voices of civic humanism, in 1721 the prime spokesman for any version of classical political virtue was Boulainvilliers, whose *thèse nobiliaire* anchored political legitimacy in the singular Right of Conquest acquired by the Frankish subjugation of Gaul. In Boulainvilliers’ historical narrative, the virtue of the Frankish conquerors, institutionalized in feudal government, gradually succumbed to the corrupting forces of the absolutist state.² If his main political target was the absolute monarchy itself, Boulainvilliers disdained the cultivated politesse of courtly nobles as a symptom of the despotism under which the contemporary nobility languished. Montesquieu’s own use of civic humanist rhetoric was more measured, “domesticated” into a traditional model of “mixed government” consistent with France’s monarchical history and institutions.³⁸²

The blossoming of *honnêteté* under the early radiance of the Sun King had displaced martial and juridical discourses of aristocratic virtue. Claims to individual moral virtue among the *honnêtes* were generally met with skepticism, as tending to threaten the equality and interpersonal harmony that was supposed to prevail among the worldly. Virtue, like any other attribute, had to be rendered “pleasing” by the standards of worldly men and (especially) women. *Honnête* claims to virtue were linked to the mastery of social codes on the basis that their performance among social actors refined their very natures. The virtue of the *honnêtes* nobles, assembled under the protection of their King, was to enact a life imagined to be uniquely human, shaped by play and unrestrained by the coarse material concerns that occupied those outside its blessed sanctum.³⁸³

However formative the influence of civic humanism on shaping Montesquieu’s political understanding, as a committed “modern,” a skeptical posture towards claims of virtue remained central to his apologetics. If Montesquieu shared *honnête* suspicions towards claims of moral virtue as well as its submission to a monarchical constitution, his portrait of the frivolous and

³⁸¹ Linton, *Politics*, 32.

³⁸² J. Kent Wright, “The Idea of a Republican Constitution in the French *Ancien Régime*,” in Martin Van Gelderen, Quentin Skinner, eds., *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 289-306.

³⁸³ La Vopa, *Labor*, 30; Linton, *Politics*, 35.

ultimately disastrous moeurs of the Parisian *grande monde* in the *Persian Letters* is deeply critical of the abnegation of duty in the pursuit of play. In this sense, the *Letters* might be read as a plea for the juridical function of the nobility crafted in *honnête* style to appeal to a worldly audience. Montesquieu needed the approval of this worldly class – particularly the powerful women who facilitated access to it – in order to fulfill his own worldly ambitions, but such an appeal also resonates with the deference towards monarchy that characterizes his later noble apologetics in *L'Esprit des lois*.³⁸⁴ By adapting the epistemological presumptions and style demands of *honnêteté*, moreover, Montesquieu was able to introduce a case for the particular judicial virtues of the French aristocracy without invoking a combative and delegitimized rhetoric associated with judicial nobility.³⁸⁵

Graffigny the Radical? Aristocracy, Identity, and Property in *Lettres d'une péruvienne*

Thanks to the work of feminist scholars, Graffigny and her novel have been re-written into the literary and historical canon and done much to elucidate the author's contemporary cultural significance. As I have argued, however, the idea put forward by Gurkin Altman and others that Graffigny's novel represented a radical political critique obscures the extent to which the narrative shapes an apology for modern French commercial society. While the novel condemns the violent exploitation of colonialism, it displaces this criticism onto the Spanish. Like the novel's gallant hero, the French find themselves entangled in the dynamics of modern international commerce and exploration; like Déterville, the French might find a way to benefit from their international exploits while exculpating themselves from the worst of its abuses. Ultimately, the open-ended narrative renders all of Zilia's former pronouncements ambiguous, shaped as they were by a partially-informed worldview and the demands of a passion that she must abandon.

That Zilia's newly secured social identity is enabled by the mechanisms of modern commercial exchange does not preclude Graffigny's appeal to a civic humanist aesthetic. Her status as property owner is announced by a provincial notable, who presents her with keys and

³⁸⁴ Annelien de Dijn, "Montesquieu's Controversial Context: 'The Spirit of the Laws' as a Monarchist Tract," *history of Political Thought*, 34 (No. 1, 2013): 66-88; J. Kent Wright, "A Rhetoric of Aristocratic Reaction? Nobility in *De l'esprit des lois*," in Carrithers, ed. *Montesquieu*.

³⁸⁵ Linton, *Politics*, 3.

pays her “homage as sovereign lady.”³⁸⁶ Zilia’s rejection of the values of the *grand monde* position her as mistress and patron to the local population of villagers, who are assured of their lady’s continued generosity.³⁸⁷ Quite unlike Boulainvilliers’ stark vision of an aristocratic republicanism established by violence and enforced by heredity, Graffigny’s heroine claims her nobility on the basis of a refined sensibility, recognizable to others in possession of the same gift. But Zilia’s *retraite* and pursuit of sociable learning among an intimate circle is not a rejection of worldly commerce but an accommodation made along the lines of Graffigny’s literary predecessors. The goods that she will pursue within the safe confines of her estate – autonomy, the “pleasure of being” at ease with herself, and conviviality – are goods enabled by the political and economic structures involved in the violent displacement of her passion.

What Passion Wrought: Virtue and Corruption in La Nouvelle Héloïse

Unlike Graffigny and Montesquieu, Rousseau imagined no redemptive possibilities for the French nobility captured in the snares of absolutist corruption. Submission to absolutism entailed the willful surrender of what Rousseau considered to be “inalienable gifts of nature” – autonomy of reason and sentiment – and so was doomed to foster corruption.³⁸⁸ The threat of corruption, however, extended far beyond Paris and other urban centers of luxury, spreading like a contagion among unsuspecting and unprepared provincials. The suggestion that provincials possessed greater autonomy in their reasoning and sentiments, of course, was in direct contradiction to the narrative logic central to worldly apologetic discourse. As Douglass has stressed, however, Rousseau’s understanding of autonomy does not include the capacity for agency presumed by modern, post-Kantian usage. Rather, for Rousseau, autonomy entailed the reasoned ordering of the passions that allowed human beings to live in harmony with themselves and the social order.³⁸⁹

It is precisely this autonomy that is denied to Julie and Saint Preux, who find themselves abandoned to their passions and surrounded by contradictory influences. Thrust into a

³⁸⁶ Graffigny, *Letters*, 105.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

³⁸⁸ Douglass, 124.

³⁸⁹ Douglass, 190.

compromising position by a careless mother, the young innocents are further threatened by the corrupting forces of the knowledge they are encouraged to pursue. Although their naïve innocence and love of virtue protects them from its worst excesses, it simultaneously fuels the intensity of their passion and renders their surrender inevitable. The elaborate material and sentimental economy of Clarens is orchestrated to provide the conditions in which passions may be brought into alignment with reason, but Julie cannot enjoy its full fruits. Having experienced the fatal imprints of an illicit passion, the best Julie can hope for is the prudent management of its movements through the willful alignment of her imagination with reason. That this choice is revealed by her final letter as an abnegation of an essential element of herself is consistent with Rousseau's conception of virtue in a state of corruption, a necessarily precarious good.

Julie's eventual submission to the fatal effects of her passion, however, does not necessarily doom the collective goods being cultivated at Clarens. Julie's dying wish that Claire marry Saint Preux and take on the role of mistress of Clarens is of course rejected multiple times by both parties, but such declarations mean little in the context of the many vows made and broken throughout the novel. Such a choice, however, would entail the conscious election of reason over the movements of passions, which Saint Preux wishes to reserve exclusively for Julie and which compels Claire to cultivate an independence and autonomy suspiciously similar to that pursued and celebrated by French literary women.

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