Trials and Tribulations: Readings and Misreadings of the Revolutionary Body in French Women Novelists, 1792-1799.

The Revolution! An unutterable word. Who can claim to understand clearly and precisely that set of events, alternatively glorious and deplorable, some of them the fruit of genius and daring, or again, of the most respectable integrity, and others born of the most perverse iniquity.

Jeanbon Saint-André, Committee of Public Safety

One would be hard pressed to find a more confusing period than that of the French Revolution, a time when the body politic tried to integrate and embody two equally powerful but ostensibly oppositional ideologies of the eighteenth century: sensibility and rationalism. The dramatic and tragic disjunction between the two, the one calling on passion, the other dispassion, resulted in a schizophrenic production of contradictory signs, symbols, discourse and actions during the revolutionary period, coming into sharp focus during the Terror, 1793-1794. For the Revolutionaries, it was not a question of one mode opposing the other, but rather they conceived the two modes along a continuum as one led to, and justified, the other. The philosophical, medical, and literary work on materialism and sensationism earlier in the century and in the years leading up to 1789 set the foundations for this connection. Following J. J. Rousseau, the revolutionary’s aim was to embody reason, virtue and sensibility. The violent acts resulting from the sensibility/rationalism dyad, however, showed up the contradictions inherent in connecting the two.

The internal conflict within revolutionary discourse, which proclaimed on the one hand love and compassion for one’s fellow man, and cold hard impartial justice on the other, was subject to heated discussion amongst the revolutionaries whose members tried to negotiate the disjunction; for some, such as St. Just, the sensible paradigm was a dangerous weakness to be suppressed in favor of reason embodied in the stoic persona; while for others, such as Vaugirard, sensibility united men in communal feeling and was in fact constitutive of community itself. In addition, sensibility, and the virtue with which it was connected, was seized upon by the people and given a mystical status, which symbolized the aspirations of the Revolutionary project itself. According to Pierre Trahard “ce mot prestigieux [vertu] couvre les excès et autorise les défaillances, puisqu’il s’associe au mot sensibilité.”¹ The public discussion on sensibility, reason, and virtue was bound up with confrontation between the historical necessity of nation building and the laws of morality. Not only was it carried out in the political arena in speeches by the delegates, but also in novels, pamphlets, and newspapers.

The generalized diffuse atmosphere of sensibility in the Revolution’s beginnings came increasingly into question as sensibility’s association with the feminine was seen as problematic and contradictory to the drastic measures needed to establish the republic. However, if on the one hand sensibility diluted the masculine force grounded in reason, on the other the justification for violent redress arose from a moral foundation based on sensibility and compassion. Sensibility was increasingly coming under attack in


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Revolutionary discourse in public political speeches by the constituents. Fabre d’Eglantine qualifies it as odious, affected, puérile, a “Tartufferie” and “un mal qui gagne la politique.” Barnave writes “La sensibilité est devenue aussi précieuse que l’était autrefois la vertu et les nerfs ont presque pris la place du cœur.” Nervous irritability now replaced the role of the emotional feelings arising from the spirituality of the compassionate heart. Barnave writes “Il importe de ne pas prendre des passions pour des principes ou les mouvements de son âme pour des mesures d’ordre général” while Fouché argues that “la pitié et la sensibilité sont des crimes de lèse-liberté.”

If Revolutionary discourse is increasingly critical of sensibility as a political mode, the fact that it depends upon a sensible discourse to unite the community through the organization of public ceremonies demonstrates the growing gap between the representatives and the larger public. In fact, the growing disjunction between the people and their representatives erupts intermittently into violence as evidenced by les journées. Although popular radical newspapers such as the Père Duchêne railed against sensibility and exhorted the public to moderate their sentiments, “soyons justes, incorruptibles, inaccessibles aux petites foutues passions qui dévorent l’âme et font tourner la tête et nous ferons le bien…,” the public for the most part still subscribed to the sentimental paradigm of transparency, compassion and pity which, when frustrated as Simon Schama has pointed out, erupted into violence. The people were not yet quite ready to free themselves from sensibility in order to conform to the revolutionary ideal of the independent autonomous and controlled individual that was developing into the model of the ideal citizen.

Women had a particular investment in the public discussion as they were bound to sensibility by virtue of their bodies. Women’s participation in politics and society literally depended on both the perceived value and real role of sensibility in the body politic. As the sensible paradigm lost ground to the rationalist stoic model, women found their voices silenced in both the political and social arenas. Furet argues that the struggle for power during the Revolution was carried out at the level of discourse as competing factions vied to represent the general will through the control of discourse, symbols and signs, the underpinnings of revolutionary power. The one-upmanship of Revolutionary discourse evolved into one of absolutes--vice/virtue, sincerity/hypocrisy,

2 Cited respectively in Trahard, 50, 64, 84.
3 Cited in Trahard, 53. Simon Schama speculates that the “politics of paranoia” that came to overtake the nation and erupt into outbreaks of popular fury stemmed from anxiety, fear, and incomprehension. When faced with confusing situations and contradictory events the response was often the unleashing of fury in face of perceived deceit which often, in fact, just a tragedy of errors. *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1989, p. 402, 439.
transparency/opacity, aristocracy/commoners, feminine/masculine— which excluded ambiguities, compromise, or any middle ground. The fate of the role of women in not only politics but in society itself was caught up in the race for power through the embodiment of the general will. Dorinda Outram argues that what the Revolution did was “to force the abandonment of the sensibilité which had united men with women in their reactions to novels, to drama, and to real life events in the late eighteenth century” and she adds that the discussion of virtue (chastity/virtue and republic/virtue) literally “bisected the apparently universalistic discourse of the general will into distinct political destinies, one male, the other female.” Sensibility, then, becomes a line of demarcation between not only women and men but also between the middle class with its tenuous hold on power and the people. “Sensibilité was, explains Outram, a part of an intra-class language, a rigid control was the only proper attitude in face of inter-class relations” as it was between the genders.

If women’s bodies furnished revolutionary abstract imagery with signs, the male figure came to embody the Revolution in its concreteness: a rational non-reactive, impermeable, emotionally and physically controlled body as opposed to the reactive compassionate, emotional, transparent woman’s body. Increasingly excluded from public political participation and circumscribed in their rights, some women turned to a traditional and powerful area of public discourse, the novel, in which they could partake of the socio-political discussion. The novel was particularly suited to this enterprise as the novel was a discursive space in which reason and sensibility, action and emotion could be explored. In this essay, I examine how four women novelists exploited popular forms of narrative to address sensitive political issues as they contrast Revolutionary goals and ideals with the reality of them. They project traditional courtship and social initiation narratives onto a national context and take national issues into private lives. Past and contemporary events are not simply the background against which the traditional tale unfolds, but rather they are integral to the narrative itself. Transparency of the soul perceived through the body, a key element in the sentimental paradigm, is thus conflated with transparency of motivation or intention in the political domain, a key issue in these novels. Four women authors studied in this essay writing very different types of novels, Marie Françoise Kéralio, Pauline de Meulan, madame Grandmaison Vanesbecque and Elisabeth Guénard, testify to the breakdown of sensibility as a literary and popular as well as political phenomenon in which the transparency of the body as a foundational

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7 Patrice Higonnet discusses Jacobin ideology, explaining the basic instability at root of Jacobin project—the Jacobins “manifested a doubled and reconcilable but also unstable inspiration, at once individualistic and communitarian. It is important, she writes, to keep this division—and instability—in mind because it sets up the framework of the two basic dimensions of Jacobinism’s history”. *Goodness beyond Virtue: Jacobins during the French Revolution*, Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 2. Jeanbon Saint-André’s citation used as exergue in this article is found in Higonnet, p. 10.

8 Outram, respectively pp. 87, 126, 122. David Denby writes “the Revolution represents a turning point: the Terror represents a limit to the sentimental vision, and more than any one event signals a partial split between sentimental vision and the historical optimism of the Enlightenment.” *Sentimental Narrative and the Social Order in France*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 3.
The precept of sensibility gives way to an unreadable, isolated body, no longer available as a window into the soul. The novels center on discussions of transparency, sincerity, sensibility, and heroism and carry out in the feminized private domain of the novel those carried out in the political forum. The novels, in very different ways, aim to educate their readers not only on how to interpret contemporary events and what they signify, but also teach them how to read the unreadable.

The transparent body, which had mediated a spiritual as well as physical union and which had fostered community, becomes an indecipherable and divisive object, a blank space, open and vulnerable to narrative projections, and deceptions. Philosophical, medical, and literary discourse throughout the eighteenth century discussed, promulgated and proposed a world vision in which equality was based on the quality of feeling, on the formation of community by shared sentiment, and even an individual’s relation to the world was to be found in the sensible fibers of his being. A culture immersed in the ideology of equality espoused by sensible ideology found the lack of transparency in practice an immense source of frustration. These authors in very different ways demonstrate the consequences of the breakdown of sensibility when the legible body becomes illegible, and the comprehensible incomprehensible. The resulting confusion and disappointment lead to violence and paranoia, fueling the creation of explanatory and dangerous narratives projected onto the now opaque surface of the body. The novel affords a space in which to explore the breakdown of a sentimental transparency, the uneasy alliance between reason and sensibility, between middle and lower classes, between the genders and reenacts, on the personal level, civil strife, the consequences of sensibility’s connection with the feminine and perceived betrayal of the community.

The most popular forms of narrative (by both men and women) from 1789 to 1800 were written in pastoral, oriental, sensible, gothic and satiric modes, all forms that could be adapted the troubled times of the 1790s. Malcolm Cook in his study of the political content of Revolutionary fiction states that there were very few texts after 1789, that did not make some sort of allusion to the revolutionary events. This may well be true but in texts by women, outside of the works of better-known women authors of this period such as Genlis, de Gouge, de Staël, and Charrière, references to the Revolution are often embedded obliquely in the text, almost incidental. During this period, two modes of narration seem to fall neatly along the gender divide. For men, satire seems to have been a popular intellectual mode most suited to deal with the social upheaval of the time while women turned to the novel of sentiment, the gothic or a combination of the two to deal with issues in the emotional register, channeling free floating anxiety without directly addressing the underlying social upheaval generating it. However, Marie Françoise

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Kéralio’s *Les visites par mademoiselle D***K*** (1792), Pauline de Meulan’s *Contradictions ou ce qui peut en arriver* (1799), Madame Grandmaison Vanesbecque’s *Adolphe ou la famille malheureuse* (1797) and Madame Guénard’s *Irma, ou les malheurs d’une jeune orpheline, histoire indienne* (1799-1800) do stand out from the rest and integrate the Revolution into their narratives both directly and indirectly.10

Marie Françoise Kéralio (née Abeille), chose a narrative form for *Les Visites*, which falls somewhere between a journal and a social column recounting the social conditions and events of the time as seen through the aristocratic salon society which when read post 1793 reminds one a bit of the story of Nero fiddling while Rome burned. The author states that the work was written in 1791 and published in 1792. She orchestrates these *visites* in a loose monophonic epistolary structure, which would, at first, seem to present an unbiased view of events in Paris as both the *épistolière*, Amélie d’Orvillars, and the person to whom she is writing are from the provinces, and should have the distance to judge events impartially. However, her anti-revolutionary bias is fore-grounded in the first letter, « Depuis cinq jours je suis dans cette ville, jadis si brillante, maintenant le séjour de l’injustice et du crime » (2). Nostalgia is one of the markers of anti-revolutionary rhetoric and sets not the tone of the text, for that is ironic, witty, acerbic, and by turn sentimental, but rather signals the narrator’s political orientation to the reader who knows from the outset what sort of text is to come.

Kéralio gives the reader the aristocratic take on Revolutionary politics, imbedding her commentary, her criticism, in a sentimental narrative of friendship and social education which will turn out to be, in fact, a political one. Keralio plays with duplicity on many levels. She renders legible the invisible subtext of revolutionary rhetoric through her demonstration of the opacity of seemingly transparent signs of loyalty in words and in deeds as well as in discourse. In other words, legible signs of authenticity are called into question. The integrity of the sign is corrupted as the relation between signifier and signified, between symbol and meaning, no longer coincide. Dissimulation is the order of the day. Kéralio takes on the specular aspects of Revolutionary culture, comparing it to the artifice of the theater. In an opposite movement to that of the Revolutionary culture which aims for a false transparency, Kéralio, on the other hand, dissimulates her criticism in a thinly disguised roman à clé. Her identity, as well as that of her characters, is hidden under easily decipherable semi-anonymous initials, Mademoiselle D*** K***. Her hidden truth, like that of the Revolutionaries, is easily decipherable if one knows how to interpret it; both are secrets de Polichinelle.

The story tells of Amélie d’Orvillars, a provinciale visiting Paris, and her introduction into society. Her education, both social and political, is undertaken by a friend, madame de Verseuil, who represents the best of Ancien régime society: étourdie but intelligent, witty but sensitive without being showy about it, a pragmatist but generous and selfless. Amélie begins to understand the complexity and art of society

10 Marie Françoise Kéralio, *Les visites par mademoiselle D***K***, Paris: Gattey, 1792; madame Grandmaison Vanesbecque, *Adolphe ou la famille malheureuse*, Paris: Lepetit, an V; Elisabeth Guénard’s *Irma, ou les malheurs d’une jeune orpheline, histoire indienne*, Delhy & Paris: chez l’auteur et les Marchands de Nouveautés, an VIII; and Pauline de Meulan, *Contradictions ou ce qui peut en arriver*, Paris: Maradan, an VII. All further references to these texts will be made parenthetically in the body of the text.
through her visits to her “institutrice’s” apartments, while the artifice of Revolutionary society is revealed. Literature, art, poetry, religion, and politics are seamlessly integrated into Amélie’s social initiation in this rarefied atmosphere of salon society. Amélie takes care to separate her private sentimental discourse to be communicated in “lettres particulières” (not available to the reader) to another female friend remaining at home from her more public take on Révolutionary politics in its social context. Her intention is to amuse her friend who stayed at home and declares that “la vérité seule conduira ma plume.” The reader’s place is doubled as he or she reads as the destinataire or “I” of the narrator whose mission is to be truthful and stands in the place of the destinataire whose duty is not only to be amused, but also to read the truth.

The young women’s first salon evening is a model for all the others to follow and Kéralio’s first volley is to draw attention to the specular aspect of the political by a condemnation of the politicization of theater, “Depuis que nos auteurs ont pris la sotte manie de vouloir politiquer sur le théâtre, d’égayer le peuple par leurs fausses idées de philosophie, ils n’ont rien fait qui ait le sens commun” (14). After setting up the political/theatrical connection it is a short leap to the condemnation of the theatricalization of the political which follows. When asked if she has been to the Assemblée nationale, Amélie’s interlocutor feigns astonishment “Quoi! Même pas à l’Assemblée nationale? Vraiment qu’ils sont excellens acteurs; leurs talens seront bientôt impayables. Rien n’est plus étonnant que leur facilité à jouer tous les rôles; ils sont alternativement bons patriotes, vils agens, législateurs, mauvais sujet; il n’y [a] que celui d’honnête homme qu’ils n’ont pu jusqu’alors imiter au naturel” (17). Fictional characters take the stage, in this novel, with real people who are either singled out for praise (such as the abbé de Mouhy in a passage where Amélie actually does visit the Assemblée nationale) or whose sex lives are open season for the salon culture. Witty vicious commentaries on contemporaries such as Mme de Staël among others are sown throughout the text and give truth to the statement that if the Revolutionary politics created the image of public man, participation in the same arena made women into filles publiques (Outram127).

A propos, ma belle, avez-vous examiné la ridicule baronne de St---l qui est vis à vis de nous? Avouez que sa figure ressemble extrêmement à un rosier chargé de boutons.---Peut-être la comparaison des épines ne seroit-elle pas hasardée, reprit la marquise, en riant: véritablement je suis indignée pour l’honneur de Louis de N----e qu’il lui ait adressé ses voeux. Quant à Mathieu de Mo---i, il a cru réparer sa réputation de médiocrité, en s’avouant l’amant d’une femme a qui on est convenu d’accorder de l’amabilité, il y aurait de l’injustice…à vouloir lui refuser celle de la facilité. On ne peut disconvenir que madame de S---l ne soit pas une propriété nationale confisquée au profit des citoyens de bonne volonté” (16). The salacious comments turn around the notion of equality both social and political transferred to a sexual register for women whose favors are shared liberally and democratically, and are gender and color blind,”Quand [sic] à la princesse de Bro---e, me dit la marquise, son grand cœur, enchanté de la déclaration du droit de l’homme, met son plaisir à le faire valoir dans toute sa force ; elle s’occupe avec zèle de faire le bonheur d’une partie de la nation. Sans égard pour la différence du sexe ni des individus, tous participent également à ses faveurs” (99). Another woman’s behavior is topic for discussion: “Il paroit que vous la connoissez parfaitement; avouez qu’elle a parfois des
momens d’amabilité.—Oui, et de facilité aussi. Son imagination troublée lui a souvent fait confondre le noir avec le blanc; ce qui obligea le comte de Chois.... de la renvoyer de Saint-Domingue” (105) Men, on the other hand were taken to task for their stupidity, or cupidity.

Specific actions of the Revolutionary government are targeted such as the decree of June 19 1790, the abolishment of hereditary nobility, which is something flouted in this text where all the characters openly carry their titles and whose servants sport livery. Certain nobles who have subscribed at least on the surface to the renunciation of titles, the soberness of the revolutionary dress, or to the sporting of revolutionary colors are sharply criticized and shown to be hypocritical, “C’est le prince Charles de Roch....t, un de ses princes qui n’ont fait les [sic] sacrifice apparent de leur titres, que dans l’espoir de le mieux conserver; et qui, en admettant l’égalité avec le peuple, n’ont eu que l’orgueuilleuse [sic] vanité de vouloir s’égaler aux rois » (38). Amélie finds out that sporting tricolor clothes doesn’t necessarily mean one is a revolutionary beyond the surface and that some nobles are “Democrate par calcul,” if not by stupidity, and “rien de ce qu’il paraît être” (128). On the other hand, the danger of appearing exactly what one is is apparent in an incident when a group of the salonniers decide to go for a promenade in the Bois de Boulogne. In a chilling scene, Amélie describes their splendid turnout and liveried footmen who “nous conduisit à grand train au travers de la gente démocratique, qui toute étonnée de notre magnificence, s’en vengeoit, en criant à l’aristocratie” (114).

Dorinda Outram points out that the act of seeing was a powerful act and one associated increasingly with the sensible during the redefinition of gender roles during this period (42). Women’s emotional capacity allowed them to see into things more deeply than men who were concentrated on a “remorseless control over body and emotion” (84). It should not be lost on the reader that this reading of Revolutionary culture takes place in an epistolary exchange among women, in a female hosted space, the salon. This reading, or seeing, then, is coded a feminine and sensible one which reveals the stupidity, cupidity, and hypocrisy of Revolutionary politics. The accusation that politics in the were determined by private interests is shown to be just as true for the new government as for the old when the two women upon leaving the Assemblée nationale overhear two men speaking about a new law forbidding dueling as “un outrage fait à la nature, un acte d’inhumanité” (31). The older woman laughs at hearing this, and tells the young woman of this particular representative’s reputation for cowardice. The effect of this extra-political commentary is to show how private interests/desires still regulates public policy. The work of interpretation, of perception has an effect on the sensible body as well, as Amélie informs her friend that “Un mal de tête affreux, effet ordinaire de l’horrible tapage qui se fait au sénat, où président nos modernes Lycurgues, Solons, etc.” (31).

The physical aspect of the revolutionaries reflect their baseness and sets them apart from other well meaning citizens.

J’imaginois que j’allois voir un sénat respectable, s’empressant de traiter avec zèle les intérêts de la nation; calculant le bonheur du peuple en établissant des lois sages. Quel fut mon étonnement, lorsqu’au lieu d’apercevoir sur chaque physionomie l’empreinte du bien et de la vertu, je n’y vis que l’expression de l’animosité et de l’injustice....un mélange de bassesse et d’insolence, de dévouement et d’égoïsme” (27).
Amélie points out the gap between the revolutionaries and the people of France when to her shock and dismay she sees the Assemblée in action, “si les provinces étoient temoins des atrocités que commettent ici ceux qu’elles ont choisis pour leurs représentants…la division qui règne entre eux…[ils] rougiroient d’avoir confié leur pouvoir entre les mains mercenaries” (29). The pervasiveness of the revolutionary fervor and rhetoric is underlined by multiple settings, both public and private. The Lycée, that continuing education for the wealthy for example, is not what it used to be, “Ils sont d’une demagogie insoutenable: éloge de la Revolution, projets constitutionnels, vers pour Robertspierre, odes à Mirabeau, etc. Voilà ce qui maintenant remplit toutes les séances” (106). In opposition to Revolutionary meaningless rhetoric and the image of the Revolutionary orator the reader is presented with a model of sensibility. In answer to a question Amélie writes, “un oui, suivi d’un regard expressif, fut toute ma réponse; le véritable sentiment n’en exige pas d’autres; il se peint dans un silence eloquent” (22).

In contrast to revolutionary ideology and hypocrisy (and even fashion) are accounts of the generosity and sensibility of the noblesse, who succor the needy to which the Revolutionaries are insensible. When military pensions for disabled war veterans are cut by the Assemblée nationale and results in real suffering, private aristocratic intervention come to the rescue. Revolutionary rhetoric of sensibility, equality, merit, family, and service to the nation, is shown to be empty of meaning, when used by the Revolutionaries, but true when speaking of the noblesse. Each party shows their true colors as “tous ces amis de la constitution sont si peu [sensible] de l’humanité souffrante (25). Even the most important Revolutionary figures are shown to be duplicitous and working towards their own ends as evidenced in the last overheard conversation between Brissot and one of the deputes where they are discussing the state of the revolution, “apprenez de nous, a séduire le peuple a le conduire graduellement d’injustices, en injustices, jusqu’au sommet du crime” (151) and “où en serions-nous, si la vérité alloit tout-à-coup arracher le bandeau de l’erreur, et découvrir aux yeux des Français abusés, nos intrigues secrètes? Les motifs intéressés qui nous faisoient agir, etc.” (147).

Of course we, standing in for the intended reader, are at once getting the same political and social education as Amélie, and flattered to be let in on all the latest gossip, to be included in this select circle. The educative factor extends to not only telling the reader what is considered good form (Rousseau, Voltaire, Racine), what is amusing (Faublas), and what is considered bad form (Laclos and anyone attached to Philippe d’Orléans), but also what to read to keep up to date after the book is done, the journal de la Cour et de la Ville, which has “choses charmantes, pleines de finesse et de gaieté” and is considered the “tribunal du bon gout” (102). The Visites has taught the reader how to see beyond the surface of revolutionary rhétorique, has exposed falsehoods in the same, has seduced him and her with the salon culture where “la conversation en étoit gaie…les réflexions courtes et piquantes, les phrases brillantes, les sarcasmes légers; on y passoit successivement du sérieux à l’enjouement, de la philosophie à la galanterie, des modes à la politique, du cabinet des ministres au foyer de l’Opéra, des décret de l’auguste sénat à une pièce des bouffons et de la littérature à la chronique du jour” (43). We have learned, in other words, to read past the visible surface oppositions in this description created by rhetoric and syntax to understand the deeper connections hidden in the meaning. Kéralio has rendered transparent the new political system and all its signs, symbols, and rhetoric.
Political education along with history occupy both Madame Guénard and Madame Grandmaison Vanesbecque who turn to Orientalism and allegory in their novels in which to frame their take on revolutionary events. Oriental and allegorical tales were popular during this decade, as they were pre 1789. Malcolm Cook points out that allegory in 18th century was little more than a veil easily seen through and that this veil, instead of hiding the truth, served to magnify it, “allegory appears as a medium of transmission rather than an obstacle”. Almost all of the Oriental and allegorical tales surveyed by Cook are in a comic mode, however, Guénard and Grandmaison-Vanesbecque, wrote novels of sentiment, rather than comic tales.

Grandmaison Vanesbecque in *Adolphe, ou la famille maleuseuse* recounts the eventual restoration of the French monarchy, thinly disguised as a tale of the persecution of the king of Lombardie and his family by the king of Bulgarie. She represents the royal family’s last moments as well as the events leading up to the restoration of a constitutional monarchy. These events frame the incredible adventures of the surviving members of the family. This novel weaves a fiction around Marie-Thérèse-Charlotte, Louis XVI’s eldest daughter and her marriage to her cousin, Charles-Philippe, duc d’Angoulême, son of the comte d’Artois. Grandmaison Vanesbeque draws upon Revolutionary discourse, signs and iconography familiar to the contemporary reader only to resituate them in a counterrevolutionary fiction. Or rather, she culls certain ideas that were current early in the Revolution, such as gender equality and the union of sensibility and reason, but which had fallen out of favor and integrates them into a new and renewed political context. The course of the novel traces the sentimental and political education of their fictional child as he develops into the man, Adolphe, who will fight to assume his rightful position as heir, and help his father defeat the usurper to the throne.

The old régime ends with the death of the king but continues in its incarnation through his male heir. The new royal line, however, is made stronger through the mediation by the sensible realm of the feminine as well as by contact with the common people. The text enacts the merging of the sensible and the rational, the masculine with the feminine through *travestissements*. Because Grandmaison Vanesbecque renders the legible signs of gender unstable and illegible, the prescribed behavior those signs entail breaks down. Through the free play of those signs and attributes falling on either side of the gender divide, an individual’s common humanity is brought to the fore. Men’s bodies hide behind womanly exteriors and exhibit compassionate and sensitive behavior, while women not only dress as men, they are also as courageous as they. Even the essentialism of maternity and paternity as stable and fix points on a fluid gender continuum are envisioned as inclusive, the social aspects of mother/fatherhood is of equal importance in this text as the biological one. Grandmaison Vanesbecque creates fictional families in the old meaning of the term, through blood relations, but also plays with truly “fictional” families bound together by sentiment. The key body in this text and the one around which all the others turn is the body of a young child. This child will be revealed as male and royal. However in this text the masculine royal body hides behind a feminized exterior, uniting gender traits of both. This bi-gendered experience combining both masculine and feminine virtues will result in a just, honest, and decisive leader, the future of the nation.

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11 Cook, op. cit., p. 275.
The novel opens with an unknown woman and child attacked by bandits and saved by a passing soldier. The woman seeks refuge with kind woodcutters in the Black Forest into whose care she leaves her child, Eugénie, at her death. On her deathbed she reveals that the three-year-old Eugénie is in fact a boy (Adolphe), not her daughter, and that his/her identity must be kept secret as it is a matter of life and death. She dies before revealing the reason behind the *travesti*. The first volume of this three-volume novel is made up of the child’s youth, as well as the embedded recitation of the last days of the old King in prison. The juxtaposition of Adolphe/Eugénie’s story with that of the King’s end both underlines the continuity of the old and the new as well as how the two differ. The King awaiting his fate in prison warns his daughter to tell the heir that “la faiblesse est le vice le plus dangereux pour un souverain; que ce n’est qu’avec une sage fermeté qu’il peut soutenir son empire” (I, 105). It is only imprisoned that the king could show his virtues: “il nous développa ses vertus sublimes” (I, 103). The imprisoned king is a compassionate one, a stronger one who sacrifices his life to avoid his subjects’ bloodshed. In prison, the king learns to unite courage with compassion.

The king’s grandchild, on the other hand, learns from an early age to balance them. He is raised in the country by the “virtuous” peasant couple who took him/her in and who were assigned the task of inspiring the child with “les sentimens d’honneur et de probité dont vous êtes rempli” (I, 30). There ensues a curious confusion of sexes, names, and events, which conflates the sexual with the political, and unites reason and the *sensible*. The child, Adolphe, a Janus-like figure, bears at once the name of his father and the name his mother takes in hiding, Eugénie. Adolphe’s mother, then, in hiding her identity still encodes her maternity by the adoption of the name Eugénie. The reader is confronted with two of each: two Adolphes, young and old, two Eugénies, male and female. The young Adolphe, disguised as Eugénie, is obliged to defend her/himself from the unwelcome advances of village suitors, in addition to being kidnapped by a stranger who is attracted by Adolphe/Eugénie’s innocent charms. Adolphe/Eugénie escapes and, in coming upon a dying soldier, succors him. Adolphe/Eugénie dons the clothes of a dead soldier in his/her attempt to escape and is falsely accused of the murder of the soldier whose uniform he is wearing. Adolphe/Eugénie is cleared of the charge by virtue of that fact that he/she confesses to being a woman and therefore would be hard pressed to have the strength to kill the soldier with his own sabre. In addition, his/her virtue is testified to by the testimony of the surrogate father, the woodsman. The episode serves to show how this man/woman displays both masculin virtue in his strength (his first escape) and womanly compassion. In a curious meditation Adolphe/Eugénie ruefully muses “On m’impose la loi de déguiser mon sexe: il y va, dit-on, de ma vie; et sous les habit d’une femme, je suis exposé à être enlevé tous les jours et à coucher, malgré moi, avec un Colas ou Werder” (I, 72). Political persecution and sexual oppression merge here just as the feminine merges with the masculine.

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12 Paternity and maternity are multiplied in the text as well. The child Adolphe/Eugénie has a biological royal father, a surrogate military, and a peasant one as well. The maternal roles are divided among his biological royal mother, her lady-in-waiting, and the wife of the woodsman. The child, then, can be said to have parents representative of the community as a whole.
This *travestissement* is doubled when the true daughter of the peasant couple disguises herself as a soldier in order to volunteer to fight along side Adolphe in the restoration of his father to the throne (I. 173-174). Women in this text are portrayed as capable of physical heroism while men posses a fine sensibility and both sexes demonstrate courage. Mothers and soldier/women exemplify male *virtus*, encouraging, demanding even, action from men: “les femmes indignées courent se ranger auprès du jeune héros; elles s’élançant avec furie sur les soldats, les renversent, arrachent leurs armes, et se jetent dans les rangs…” (III, 82). An apostrophe, “O femmes, femmes sublimes que les hommes ont osé s’assujettir, sexe asservi, et digne de les gouverner, c’est dans ce moment terrible que déploïâtes cette force énergique, ce miracle de l’amour et de la tendresse maternelle, supérieurs à la crainte; bravant de tous cotés les dangers et la mort, on vit vos foibles bras garantir l’enfant chéri attaché à votre sein, et repousser et frapper l’ennemi…” (III, 83), draws on revolutionary iconography to figure the woman as a heroic mother grounding the nation-state, here put to counterrevolutionary ends. The royal family and those with whom they associate embody both reason and sentiment, inspiring those around them. These episodes lead up to a culmination when Adolphe (the father) makes clear, at the sentimental outpouring of the people who claim him as their liberator and king, that he will not reign without the deliberate and reasoned support of the people. Rather than be king of “les sujets [ressemblant] à des enfants livrés aux fureurs d’une capricieuse marâtre” he will abide by a free exercise of their will, “prononcez librement votre voeux” (III, 131), and lays out his conditions, which the people accept.

Grandmaison-Vanesbecque interweaves history and fiction (emphasis on the adventures) in her speculative tale of the sentimental and political education of the heir to the throne and the monarchy’s restoration, to show the reader that sentiment, compassion, and pity are the only unchanging values in an inconstant world. She draws upon the reader’s political education in revolutionary discourse and familiarity with revolutionary iconography as a lens through which the images are read as they are refashioned into a counterrevolutionary novel of sentiment which incorporates the best of both political ideologies.

Madame Guénard in *Irma* also weaves history with fiction in the Oriental mode. The novel is a *roman à cle* with the characters barely masked (Siblouis for Louis/Selabius for Elizabeth). She also stays closer to historical events than does Grandmaison-Vanesbecque in her tale of Irma, a masque for Marie-Thérèse-Charlotte, Madame Royale and surviving daughter of Louis XVI. Both novelists take this central, yet marginalized historical figure and transform her into a “player”-through her role of wife and mother. If you lifted the thin veil of Orientalism, changing the names and situating the events back in France, you would call it a historical novel. In this cross between a *mémoire* and letter novel, Irma writes of events to her intended husband, her first cousin. She recounts the events leading up to the Royal family’s imprisonment and includes letters from the King,

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her father, to family members when he is separated from them right before his trial. Guénard creates a real family out of a symbolic one, thus appealing not to politics so much as to the reader’s sentiment. The historical sequence is respected, giving the reader both sides of events, the private side as well as the public. Guénard shows the private face of history as Irma’s narrative traces the march on Versailles, their incarceration, the physical conditions of that incarceration, and the reaction of her father and mother on the one hand, and the reaction of the “outside” to the King and Queen on the other. The narrative is split into contemporaneous events told by Irma and the historical perspective leading up to those events explained by her aunt, Selabius.

One can look at this text as Irma’s political education, à la Télémaque. It is made clear in the text that Irma has received her sentimental education from her father, but it is her aunt that teaches her the historical causes of the Revolution. Her discourse is an explanatory one, giving justifications for certain decisions, which, in hindsight, were poor ones. Guénard literally traces the path from Louis XIV to Louis XVI, pointing out the good that had been done as well as showing how things went wrong, how poor decisions had been made and how the father/King, a good sentimental man, is taking responsibility for his forebears mistakes as well as his own. Irma presents the king in his role as her father and rarely refers to him by his title, “son âme sensible avoit reçu toutes les vertus d’un dign de chef de famille: heureux pour lui s’il n’eut été que satrape!” (I, 5). He is presented as the incarnation of a roi-philosophe,

C’étoit lui qui avoit effacé jusqu’à la trace de l’esclavage. Par lui, on avoit renoncé cette coutume barbare, d’arracher, par les tourmens. Les aveux aux prévenus de crimes souvent imaginaires; la tolérance étoit dans son coeur, et il cherchoit les moyens de rappeler, dans le sein de l’Inde, les sectaires que le fanatisme des prêtres en avoit bannis […] il avoit la douceur de Zoroastre et croyoit que les homes sont frères. Il méprisait les grands dont les moeurs étoient corrompus; il aimoit le peuple. (I, 8)

But one unsuited to public life, “On entoura mon père de pièges que sa franchise ne lui permettoit pas même d’imaginer” (I,11). Misinterpretation of words and deeds is a leitmotif recurring constantly in the king’s sister (Irma’s aunt) Sebaluis’ historical political account. If “les actions les plus simples de la cour étoient mal interprétées” in the present, it was the same in the past (I, 15). The lack of transparency in the king’s intentions has brought the royal family and the nation to a crisis point. The mis/reading of signs has always been important in the political arena and this king finds himself at the end point of a long series of missteps that reach back to le grand Sibloüis (Louis XIV), “le coup est porté, et c’est de la magnifique profusion du prédécesseur de notre ayeul, que sont sortis tous les maux de sa race” (I, 121). Irma receives an education in interpretation, in reading and deciphering ostensible and hidden meanings in a political and private context as her aunt takes her step-by-step through one hundred years of government. The past adds to the present lesson that her father, a victim of his own misplaced trust, deems so important and requests that his children learn: they should count on nothing, “pas même sur les vertus apparentes de ses semblables” (I, 88). Irma shows how the King has been and is still poorly served by his advisors, who wanted only a “simulacre du roi” (I,23) to front for their ambitions. The narrative alternates from contemporaneous events to the historical synthesis and back again. This political education (of Irma and the
reader) is interrupted by the “hache homicide,” to which she loses her family, one by one (I, 97).

Irma, like her real life model the Madame Royale, is eventually sent to her maternal relatives (the King of Persia in the text) in exchange for Revolutionary hostages. In the Persian court she continues her “lessons” in practical politics--international relations and local party politics as palace intrigue etc.-- and then again on a more abstract level when a sage takes up where her aunt left off. An integral part of this education is the short inset narratives of people Irma comes across. Everyone tells their story and they all have one from the highest nobles, to the servants that served them, to peasants in the field. From monarchists, to revolutionary partisans, to the politically neutral, (women especially) all tell horrendous stories of betrayal, separation, anxiety, and loss.

Je puis y être heureuse par l’amour de mon bien-aimé, mais je le sens : au milieu des plus douces jouissances, l’image sanglante des auteurs de mes jours se présentera à moi, et je me trouverai bien mieux avec ceux, qui comme moi, ont des larmes a répandre, qu’avec les êtres qui ne peuvent avoir aucune idée de ce que je souffrirai sans cesse, n’ayant rien éprouvé de semblable. » 121

The common thread running through all of these “témoignages” is the pain of separation from both their country and loved ones. If the appearance of virtue is not to be trusted, easily counterfeited, and intentions illegible, the signs of pain are transparent. By the end of the novel, the reader like Irma has come to understand that her country is in reality not divided, but united and equal, with pain and loss as the great leveler. A united community has been forged, but it is not a political one. It is located rather in the sentimental register, coming out of pain and loss and built on shared trauma. It is in this domain that everyone proves equal and one in which her own experiences has taught her to read the suffering heart of her fellow Indians.

Rather surprisingly Pauline de Meulan’s first novel, Contradictions ou ce qui peut en arriver, is a comedy of manners. She avoids the feminine voice and assumes a masculine one through the loose restaging of Diderot’s Jacques le fataliste. Meulan explores the character and characteristics of post-revolutionary society and how one lives in it. Satire and irony, modes usually the domain of male authors, allowed Meulan the protection of humor’s critical distance in which to couch her criticisms. Writing in an anonymous male voice protects her from criticism and gives her a voice to explore social issues resulting from the social upheaval in a comic manner that belies the serious nature of topics such as enforced military service, social coercion, the rise of bureaucracy along with the struggle to deal with the radical changes in elemental areas governing the rhythm of daily life such as speech, marriages and the calendar.

Speech becomes more problematic for women after 1794 when the consequences of the vocal public role of women during the early stages of the revolution collapses. Joan Landes points out, “conservatives and revolutionaries alike recoiled from the unnatural spectacle of political women. A fierce contest was waged within the Revolution over how women would be represented and by whom. This in turn provoked powerful anxieties about women’s speech, action, and attire” (146). In Meulan’s novel, while humor affords a cathartic release of the encoded social and political anxiety, problems of speech and new social constraints structure the text. Les Contradictions is the story of a well to do young man and his valet. The novel, recounted in the first person, (Meulan gives an
authoritative voice to the gentleman “maître”) tells of his frustrated attempts to wed a young woman, Charlotte. The new post-revolutionary bureaucracy along with natural phenomena present a non-ending series of obstacles to a young man's desire to wed in this saucy ironic tale reviewed in the *Correspondance littéraire* as an amusing “bagatelle.”

Social-political obstacles are for the most part paired with those from the natural realm of experience. On the first day of the story, *le décadi*, the magistrate decides to take a day off because his wife just gave birth. The wedding is put off; the disappointed couple returns home planning to return the next day. It is the collapse of a neighboring house after a hard rain that closes the municipal building and prevents the marriage *le primidi*. Unfortunately the young couple can no longer afford to wait as they have consummated the marriage, the previous evening. Tempers flair at the new obstacle and the thwarted bridegroom incurs the enmity of the municipal officer, something that causes him problems later in the week. The ensuing days, *le tridi, le quartidi, le quintidi, le sextidi, le septidi, l' octidi,* and *le nonidi,* prove equally inauspicious for the marriage ceremony.

What is particularly interesting are the types of “*empêchements*” both natural and social that complicate a straight forward desire for marriage: we have (in addition to storms and floods) a birth, a miscarriage, a death, the threat of a army conscription, malicious gossip, a kidnapping and or elopement (it is never resolved as to which it might be), inheritance problems, in addition to an ever evolving bureaucracy with new laws, restrictions, applications, and rituals. Natural disasters, human tragedy and Revolutionary rules and regulations governing daily life are all treated equally. The young man’s refrain in the song and dance of post-revolutionary society is “les événements sont si incertains” which is counterbalanced by the valet Pierre’s optimistic determinism à la Pangloss, “si Dieu le veut”. Meulan’s light -hearted tale takes on the absurdity and arbitrariness of the time and acts out in a comic mode the anxiety of uncertainty. If she is not allowed to speak as a woman, she can participate in the larger social area by writing in a male voice. As a woman, it is acceptable to write novels. Her adoption of a male narrator, however, allows her the greater freedom to speak her mind and deal with less seemly and more controversial issues.

In sum, we have looked at two texts that have dealt with political issues in the social context ant at two others that have examined the construction of social values in politicized narratives. Two were sentimental and serious in tone while the two others embedded serious issues in a lighter and even comic mode. However, each of these authors, in one way or another, put a private face on public policy, exposing the disruptive and devastating effects of the revolutionary agenda in the domestic sphere as they try to work out or understand on the personal level, national issues, and to understand the historicity of the Revolution as well as its singularity. These authors participate in contemporary social and political discourse of their time in an accepted medium for women. They attempt through their fiction to make sense out of private and public trauma, to read the past in order to make sense out of the illegible, incomprehensible present and speculate on the creation of a community through shared values.