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(In)Authenticité: De Brûler à la Manière de la Glace

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(In)Authenticité: De Brûler à la Manière de la Glace

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Introduction

The sixteen-year-old courtier reaches for her rouge and gives each of her cheeks a healthy dose of blush. Her natural color now obscured, she looks like the older women at court who use exaggerated hues of red and pink to create the illusion of youth. She has misread her own beauty, mimicking those who are trying to recreate her own youthful allure for themselves. Yet in many ways, her application of blush might not be a mistake, but rather a preparation for battle: with rouge on, she not only appears like the other women at court, thus giving off signs of experience she does not have, but she also protects herself from those who might be watching to see when she blushes. The naturally blushing cheek covered with rouge serves as a map for the problem of authenticity in French literature.

“La sincérité est une ouverture de cœur. On la trouve en fort peu de gens; et celle que l'on voit d'ordinaire n'est qu'une fine dissimulation pour attirer la confiance des autres” (La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes*, no. 62).¹ La Rochefoucauld's maxim explains the economy of authenticity in his society—more often than not, it is a “dissimulation.” True sincerity is openness of heart, and is rare, found only in “fort peu des gens.” Published in 1665, this maxim reflects the symptoms of cynicism's infectious spread across the French upper classes. La Rochefoucauld's choice of the word “sincérité” rather than “authenticité” reflects contemporary usage. During the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, “sincérité” described the concept of being oneself, genuineness, while “authenticité” had a more legal meaning. While the word “authenticity” better describes these ideas today for English speakers, “sincérité” was the term *du jour* in France.

¹ Translation, mine: “Sincerity is opening the heart. It is found in very few people; and what we usually see is nothing but a careful concealment to attract the confidence of others.”

One of the first French dictionaries, *Thresors de la langue francoyse tant ancienne que moderne*,² dates from 1606 and offers only the word “sincère.” The first edition of *Le Dictionnaire de L’Académie Française* was published in 1696, and it defines “sincere” as “Veritable, franc, qui est sans artifice, sans deguisement.”³ This definition, with minor changes to accents and a switch from “veritable” to “vrai,” remains the same for the word “sincère” through the fourth, fifth, and sixth editions of the *Dictionnaire de L’Académie Française*, dating respectively from 1762, 1798, and 1835. In more historical terms, this definition survived Le Roi Soleil, Louis XV, the revolution, and the July Monarchy of 1830. Apart from its almost one hundred and fifty year long career, this understanding of “sincère” proves to be important because it explains the word both positively and negatively. Just as much as it means truthful and frank, “sincère” also means the *absence of* artifice and disguise. This definition-by-negation suggests the overwhelming presence of manipulation and cynicism in French high society over this period: authenticity had to be distinguished against the prevailing landscape of *fausseté*.

“Authentic” in English borrows from both French and Latin, which in turn find their roots in Greek. The Oxford English Dictionary cites three such words: “*ἀθροτικός*,” defined as “warranted, original, authoritative,” “*ἀθροτία*,” translated as “authority,” and the older “*ἀθροτήτης*,” meaning “perpetrator” (“authentic, adj. and n.”). It’s not surprising, considering the meanings of these Greek terms, that “authenticity” and “author” are linguistically linked (“authentic, adj. and n.”). Together, these translations carry a sense of an actor, someone who *does* (in the sense of “perpetrator”) and also a sense of the truth of that action, that there is an “authority” there that is “warranted.” From these ancient and Hellenistic Greek roots, the

² All of the dictionaries referenced in this paragraph are a part of University of Chicago’s ARTFL Dictionnaires d’Autrefois online database, the citation for which can be found in the works cited.

³ Translation, mine: “Veritable, frank, what is without artifice, without disguise.”

essential idea of truth lives on in modern day definitions of “authenticity.”

Authenticity, for the scope of this project, means a correspondence between what one feels and thinks, and how one acts. This takes many forms—the (seemingly impossible) authentic person, the authentic moment, the authentic encounter—but the general principle of acting upon one’s feelings remains the same throughout all of the many manifestations of the authentic.

The extreme control exerted on the French aristocracy left no room for *sincérité*. Yet, in many of the novels from the *ancien régime* and beyond, the most powerful and shocking moments occur when the characters show lapses in control. The novels do the necessary work of imitating the heavily structured society that they are situated in, but against this backdrop, there are flashes of authenticity. These glimpses of *sincérité* suggest a kind of critique, the presence of rule-breaking behavior to question the rules themselves. This aligns with Wolfgang Iser’s theory that literature encourages readers to question social strictures. Inge Crossman Wimmers summarizes his ideal: “The central function of literary texts is to make the reader aware of norms and conventions by questioning and negating those norms in order to encourage the reader to imagine something new” (Wimmers 54). This is not to say that such narratives are pleading the case for sincerity in society—rather than taking a firm stance, they ask a question of their readers.

The four iconic novels targeting authenticity are *La Princesse de Clèves*, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, and *Le Rouge et le Noir*. Written across a span of one and a half centuries, these works stand out in the tradition of the French novel for putting the question of *sincérité* at the forefront of their work. A first kiss in an orchard, a deathbed confession, a guillotine—the authentic manifests itself differently in each novel, but the concern with this

question, and the possibility of believing in authenticity, permeate each text. There are aristocratic women who engage in a conscious struggle to maintain their virtue, young tutors who are unaware of their glaring naïveté, and then seductive manipulators who want corrupt the innocence of others. Libertines, married innocents, upstarts, ingenues, and puppet-masters all grace these novels and suggest the destructive and redemptive power of authenticity.

With a battle for virtue at its heart, *La Princesse de Clèves* of 1667 provides a merciless beginning to the question of sincerity in the French novel. Early in the text, the heroine's mother gives her a warning: "Elle lui faisait voir aussi combien il était difficile de conserver cette vertu, que par une extrême défiance de soi-même, et par un grand soin de s'attacher à ce qui seul peut faire le bonheur d'une femme, qui est d'aimer son mari et d'en être aimée" (La Fayette, 248).⁴ Emblematic of Madame de La Fayette's novel itself, this lesson suggests the treacherous social landscape of the French royal court, a place where "de conserver cette vertu" would be difficult.

"Vertu" proves to be an idea inextricably linked to authenticity in all four of these novels, but this association is perhaps strongest in *La Princesse de Clèves*. The Princesse is identified by the court as the most beautiful when she arrives at the age of sixteen. Many pitfalls, ruins, and temptations await her in the form of potential liaisons. Even when she finally meets a man who does ignite her desire (once she is a married woman), she does not allow herself the pleasure of giving in. Her will to "conserver cette vertu...par une extrême défiance de soi-même" proves to be her ultimate moral code, and she obeys it to the point of self-negation. Yet, it's possible that through forcing herself to suffer in the name of her virtue, the Princesse remains authentic to her moral code—this is to say, through self-denial, she constructs an identity.

⁴ "She also taught her how difficult it is to preserve virtue except by an extreme mistrust of one's own powers and by holding fast to the only thing that can ensure a woman's happiness: to love one's husband and to be loved by him" (Cave 10).

If Madame de La Fayette showed us the bleak future of a moralist at court, Jean-Jacques Rousseau asks a somewhat more light-hearted question: what if there were a utopia, away from Paris, where two young, earnest people could fall in love? This is the question and the hope of 1761's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Like *La Princesse de Clèves*, Rousseau's text also centers around a forbidden love, one between an aristocratic heiress, Julie d'Étange, and her tutor, Saint-Preux. Early on, he writes to her:

Si jeunes encore, rien n'altère en nous les penchants de la nature, et toutes nos inclinations semblent se rapporter. Avant que d'avoir pris les uniformes préjugés du monde, nous avons des manières uniformes de sentir et de voir; et pourquoi n'oserais-je pas imaginer dans nos cœurs ce même concert que j'aperçois dans nos jugements? (Rousseau 32)⁵

In Saint-Preux's language, Rousseau's hopes can be heard. The tutor's phrases, "si jeunes encore," and "pourquoi n'oserais-je pas imaginer," in particular suggest the utopianism of Rousseau's project. This is precisely what *Héloïse* is—an idea, a proposal, a question, as to the possibility of an authentic love. Saint-Preux, with his belief that he and Julie are yet to be prejudiced, yet to be altered by society, reveals a radical naïveté that would be decimated in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* or the *salons* in Paris. But this is Rousseau's universe, and here, being "si jeunes encore" means that Saint-Preux can still believe that "rien n'altère en nous les penchants de la nature." Julie herself is already overly educated in societal strictures, as any young noblewoman would be. Even so, the ingenuity of his letters charm her, and she falls in love with his unpracticed nature.

In 1782, Rousseau's hope for authentic love was put to the test in *Les Liaisons*

⁵ "Being still so young, we are impaired by nothing in our natural tendencies, and all our inclinations seem to agree. Before having acquired the standard prejudices of the world, we have some similar ways of feeling and seeing, and why should I not dare to imagine in our hearts the same agreement that I perceive in our judgments?" (McDowell 26)

dangereuses. Pierre Choderlos de Laclos seems to take his predecessor's novel as a kind of dare. Laclos asks whether a love in the style of Julie and Saint-Preux could exist in the vicious *salons* of Paris, and his answer is *Liaisons*. The novel's primadonna, the Marquise de Merteuil, lives and breathes the deceit and *calcul* infecting the *noblesse*. She throws out this maxim in one of her early letters: "L'amour, qu'on nous vante comme la cause de nos plaisirs, n'en est au plus que le prétexte" (Laclos 177).⁶ Here lies Laclos' memento mori: we are leaving the charming groves of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, and are firmly in his novel, one where the prevailing view is that love is merely an excuse for pleasure. Uninterested in the utopian, Laclos puts authenticity to the test, asking: can *sincérité* and virtue survive in the lion's den of Parisian society?

The alpha predator of the novel, the Marquise de Merteuil dares the Vicomte de Valmont to seduce the incorruptible and virtuous Présidente de Tourvel. Where the Duc de Nemours failed in winning over the Princesse de Clèves, Valmont swears to succeed. His plan isn't perfect, however—the Présidente has a way of bringing about love in the libertine. He writes to Merteuil: "Il faut tout avouer, je pensais ce que je disais" (Laclos 300).⁷ The correspondence between thought and speech, while it may seem simple, proves to be destructive to the very fabric of the novel. While Laclos seems to refute the proto-utopian vision Rousseau proposed, he takes a realistic approach and instead asks if there can be moments, not entire romances, that are authentic. Such moments, however, are not the brief gasps of heavenly *sincérité*. They are the unexpected, accidental, uncontrollable expressions that appear in the encounter, and they are devastating.

The only fitting end to this question is Stendhal's 1830 novel, *Le Rouge et le Noir*. It has

⁶ "Love, which people pretend is the cause of our pleasures, it at most only an excuse for them" (Constantine, 183).

⁷ "To be absolutely truthful, I believed what I was saying" (Constantine, 313).

the psychological focus of *La Princesse de Clèves*, flashes of Rousseau's utopia, and Laclos' willingness to be honest about the most cruel and calculating parts of human nature. Yet as the only novel written after the revolution, *Le Rouge* reveals radical changes in social structures, although not in a predictable way. Julien Sorel is a lower class tutor like Saint-Preux, but Julien rises through the ranks. Stendhal's message is not necessarily that social mobility is a worthwhile exploit, or even truly possible. As one climbs, the fall becomes more and more treacherous.

Julien Sorel serves as a microcosm of the novel itself. The major way that Stendhal shifts from Laclos' conclusion about the rarity of the sincere moment is in his ability to reveal how closely the authentic and the inauthentic intersect. Here, his protagonist finds himself in crisis:

Mais, dans les moments les plus doux, victime d'un orgueil bizarre, il prétendit encore jouer le rôle d'un homme accoutumé à subjuguier des femmes : il fit des efforts d'attention incroyables pour gêner ce qu'il avait d'aimable... En un mot, ce qui faisait de Julien un être supérieur fut précisément ce qui l'empêcha de goûter le bonheur qui se plaçait sous ses pas. (Stendhal 91)⁸

This “orgueil bizarre” stems from Julien's desire (inspired by Napoleon) to conquer the upper classes. For this reason, to “subjuguier des femmes” of better social rank than himself would be a victory, proof that the carpenter's son can master the heiress. What makes Julien and *Le Rouge et le Noir* so complicated are the multiple layers of his psychology—he wants to be a seducer, and yet he struggles to play that role. At the same time that he is “aimable,” he destroys this quality in himself without knowing it. In this moment, he has climbed a ladder into the bedroom of a woman whom he loves *and* wants to conquer. He should be able to enjoy the “bonheur” of being with her—such a simple thing would surely have been possible for Saint-Preux. But this is

⁸ But, victim to a bizarre pride, he still aspired, even in the tenderest of moments, to play the role of a man used to subduing women, he made tremendous efforts to spoil what was most lovable in himself... In short, it was precisely that which made Julien a superior being that stopped him enjoying the happiness that lay at his feet (Gard 96).

Stendhal's universe, where human psychology is so layered that one person can be happy *and* unable to experience that happiness at the same time. *Le Rouge* is a textbook for cognitive dissonance—Julien is almost always displaced, struggling with which persona to incarnate next—and he can never get it quite right.

These four novels all ask the question: can there be an authentic person, authentic love, or an authentic moment within society? For each author, “society” meant a different thing—a different king, a different era, different rules. They each have their own answers to this question, but they do share a common language of ideas: each establishes the body as a source of involuntarily given signals, and there is a distinct spatial division between city and country, house and garden, in all four novels. These two ideas sustained their importance to the question of authenticity from 1667 to 1830.

Beginning when the Princesse asked her husband to let her leave the court for his estate, the landscape of city and country proves to be a meaningful dimension of these novels. The city came to mean, the *salons*, Paris, the peak of high society, and the country by contrast, a calmer, more natural space. Having this distinction established by other literature, Laclos and Stendhal decide to toy with the *fausseté* of the *forêt* and the *sincérité* of the *château*. The most scheming characters will use the “innocence” of the countryside to their advantage, and the garden becomes Julien's battlefield. But the traditional paradigm of the pastoral as a purer space allows each of the authors to suggest the possibilities that the countryside offers to ingenues and libertines.

The Princesse, Julie, the Présidente, and Julien all blush. Over and over again, the authors use blushing as a way to reveal a character's true feelings. Julie blushes when Saint-Preux mentions their first kiss four years after it happened, the Princesse can't stop blushing in front of

the Duc de Nemours and never does so in front of her husband, and arguably, blushing could be one of the meanings of “rouge” in Stendhal’s title. But blushing is more than an indicator of embarrassment, as it plays into a larger pattern, because all four authors explore the many ways in which the body betrays us. Laclos pays special attention to this idea, because Valmont the libertine must learn that his battle for seduction can’t be won through letters, but in person, where the Présidente doesn’t have time to conceal her feelings and desires. While conversation and letters are places of control, the body is a natural space, beyond language, more difficult to manipulate, and therefore a place where *sincérité* can appear, even by accident.

Whether it appears under the guise of sentimentality, a confession of desire, a gunshot in a church, or a blushing cheek, authenticity manifests itself in these novels, often to disastrous effect. Why does *sincérité* prove to be such a battlefield in these works? Moments of authenticity are a response to the society surrounding the texts: both the Princesse de Clèves’ virtuous self denial and the Présidente de Tourvel’s surrender to passion speak to an authorial impulse to critique the culture. All of the novels are the product of a society regulated to avoid *sincérité*, yet all four authors, be it through a character, an instant, a confession to a married woman, a man awaiting execution, or one last letter, reveal their belief that *authenticité* is in some way possible. In a time when wit and *calcul* reign, virtue and sincerity continue to assert themselves, even after defeat.

A Neoclassical Existentialist

Mais elle lui faisait voir aussi combien il était difficile de conserver cette vertu, que par une extrême défiance de soi-même, et par un grand soin de s'attacher à ce qui seul peut faire le bonheur d'une femme, qui est d'aimer son mari et d'en être aimée.

—La Fayette, *La Princesse de Clèves*

How is it that a text from 1678 foreshadows existential authenticity? With *La Princesse de Clèves*, Madame de La Fayette does more than provide an early modern perspective on life in the French court—she discusses an authenticity entirely different from what appears in the novels of Rousseau, Laclos, and Stendhal. The Princesse herself serves as a veritable roadmap for a moral life. She acts with a type of authenticity that's distinct from the more Rousseauistic version, which collapses feeling and doing. To act upon your desires is an authentic action for Rousseau, but when the Princesse denies herself a romance with Nemours, she exhibits not an abandonment of responsibility, but loyalty to her own moral code. The Princesse relies upon constant self-denial to uphold her moral standards and to maintain her virtuous identity. But can this kind of elaborate self-construction ever be called an act of *sincérité*?

Early in the text, the heroine's mother tells her: "Si vous jugez sur les apparences en ce lieu-ci...vous serez souvent trompée: ce qui paraît n'est presque jamais la vérité" (La Fayette 265).⁹ This warning should serve as the motto for Madame de La Fayette's novel, which follows a young noblewoman's struggle and suffering in the court of Henri II¹⁰. Mademoiselle de Chartres arrives at court a sixteen-year-old, and is quickly established as the most beautiful woman there. Her mother supplied her with an education that stood in the face of court society and its many tempting liaisons: "Mais elle lui faisait voir aussi combien il était difficile de

⁹ "If you judge by appearances in this place...you will frequently be deceived: what you see is almost never the truth" (Cave 26).

¹⁰ Henri II (b. 1519- d. 1559) The novel is historical, written in 1678 during the reign of Louis XIV.

conserver cette vertu, que par une extrême défiance de soi-même, et par un grand soin de s'attacher à ce qui seul peut faire le bonheur d'une femme, qui est d'aimer son mari et d'en être aimée (La Fayette, 248).¹¹ Madame de Chartres marries her daughter to the Prince de Clèves, and while he is madly in love with her, she considers her marriage to be a kind of sacred duty—the Princesse de Clèves feels no passionate desire for her husband. Such an education leads to great turmoil when the Princesse meets the Duc de Nemours. As the most handsome man at court he is her clear match, but the Princesse is unwilling to have an affair with him despite their mutual attraction. Rather than beginning a liaison with Nemours, she confesses her desires to her husband—an extraordinary and unprecedented choice. Her husband perishes and she is free to marry Nemours, but the Princesse decides instead to leave the court and live half of her days in a convent. He pursues her for several years, but eventually his love fades.

The Princesse is the ancestor of a character type that appears again and again in the novels that follow: the virtuous woman faced with a romance that would force her to act outside of proper and prescribed behavior. Forbidden liaisons and authenticity go hand in hand in these novels, but beyond establishing these key conflicts, the Princesse is anything but typical. Rather than giving in to her desires and abandoning her virtue, she chooses first to confess to her husband and then to abstain from any relationship with Nemours. Although her choices are not representative of her desires, the Princesse acts authentically according to her own moral code of virtue.

The Princesse rests apart from those who surround her at court—La Fayette makes clear that her heroine seems to have literalized her mother's teachings. Faced with overt displays of

¹¹ “She also taught her how difficult it is to preserve virtue except by an extreme mistrust of one's own powers and by holding fast to the only thing that can ensure a woman's happiness: to love one's husband and to be loved by him” (Cave 10).

desire from the Chevalier de Guise and her future husband the Prince de Clèves, the Princesse is unmoved except by the embarrassment their attentions give her: “Elle contait à sa mère la peine que lui donnait l’affection de ce prince [le Chevalier de Guise]. Mme de Chartres admirait la sincérité de sa fille, et elle l’admirait avec raison, car jamais personne n’en a eu une si grande et si naturelle” (La Fayette 259).¹² Madame de Chartres sees in her daughter an authenticity which is particular: both “jamais” and “personne” emphasize the unique quality of the Princesse’s sincerity. As critic Inge Crossman Wimmers explains, “her extraordinary conduct is repeatedly emphasized and ‘naturalized’ within the text itself... Through such remarks, the narrator stresses from the start the Princesse’s paradoxical situation, subject to both a rigorous social code and the exacting demands of her own personality” (27). The Princesse’s behavior is singular, unusual—Wimmers finds that this suggests La Fayette knew the plausibility of her protagonist’s actions would be in question. By confessing to her husband her love for Nemours, she acts against and outside of social codes.¹³ To have kept her secret hidden or even to have begun an affair with Nemours would have been more in the norm for the contemporary reading public, but the Princesse is unusual in her actions because she is unusual in her virtue.

The Princesse is willing to be herself at all costs. The novel is full of references to the extraordinary nature of both her confession and her person, reinforcing both the importance of her authenticity (perhaps in its rarity) and also its seriousness. Nowhere does this question have

¹² “She told her mother how sorry she was that the Chevalier was so fond of her. Mme de Chartres marveled at her daughter’s great frankness, and with good reason, for it was unmatched in its spontaneity” (Cave 21).

¹³ “When *La Princesse de Cleves* was first published in March 1678, it gave rise to lively discussions. Of major interest in these first responses to the book was the behavior of its central character, the princess. A telling example is the poll organized by *Le Mercure Galant* that asked its readers whether Mme. de Cleves was right to tell her husband about her love for the due de Nemours. The majority thought not. Her conduct seemed implausible, since according to social custom (the well-established code of *biensiance*), such behavior was not sanctioned” (Wimmers 27).

more importance than in the confession scene. She reveals to her husband that she has a passion for another man, and when he presses her to identify the object of her desire, she tells him:

“L’aveu que je vous ai fait n’a pas été par faiblesse, et il faut plus de courage pour avouer cette vérité que pour entreprendre de la cacher...Il me semble, répondit-elle, que vous devez être content de ma sincérité...aucune de mes actions n’a fait paraître mes sentiments” (La Fayette 335).¹⁴ This last phrase suggests that for the Princesse, authenticity means fidelity to her husband and her moral code, but *not* the a correspondence between her thoughts and her actions. She identifies her own brand of *sincérité*: the courage to tell the truth and the strength to assure that one’s feelings aren’t represented in one’s actions.

What makes Madame de La Fayette understand “being oneself” in such a profoundly different way from Rousseau, Laclos, and Stendhal? Critics from the last century have the same problem that La Fayette’s contemporary readers did hundreds of years ago: why does the Princesse deny herself, particularly when no social punishment would come of her marriage to Nemours after her husband’s death? J.W. Scott found “The motive is, by any name, essentially self-centered” (Hyman 19).¹⁵ Claude Vigée derived that “Le refus final la confirme dans le choix passionné d'elle-même” (Hyman, 19).¹⁶ Serge Doubrovsky took an existential angle: “Elle veut échapper à l’inexorable dialectique de la possession...sa décision est d’un égoïsme total.” (Hyman 19).¹⁷ All three scholars have found different ways to explain that the Princesse’s final decision, one which goes against her desires completely, is in fact self-serving or self-affirming.

¹⁴ “It was not weakness that made me confess: it needs more courage to admit such a truth than to seek to hide it...It seems to me that my sincerity should be enough for you...Be content with this assurance, that none of my actions has revealed my feelings” (Cave 96-7).

¹⁵ Richard J. Hyman assembled these quotes in his article, “The Virtuous ‘Princesse De Clèves,’” mentioned in the Works Cited.

¹⁶ Translation, mine: “The final refusal confirms her in her passionate choice of herself.”

¹⁷ Translation, mine: “She wants to escape the inexorable dialectic of possession...her decision is the product of complete egoism.”

Their reading relies on the idea that the Princesse's choice to deny Nemours signifies her belief that possession is only a means to arrive at dispossession—that were she to be with him, ultimately he would leave her.

One of Madame de Chartres' major lessons was that men almost never stay. Before her death, she told her daughter about “Le peu de sincérité des hommes, leurs tromperies et leur infidélité, les malheurs domestiques où plongent les engagements” (La Fayette 248).¹⁸ Indeed, Nemours' passion eventually fades: “Enfin, des années entières s'étant passées, le temps et l'absence ralentirent sa douleur et éteignirent sa passion.” (La Fayette 394).¹⁹ If absence alone had extinguished Nemours' passion, perhaps Madame de Chartres would have been wrong, but La Fayette also mentions temporality. It seems that Nemours' affections would have faded whether he and the Princesse had given into their desires or not—and so mother is always right. The critics, however, have it somewhat wrong: despite appearances, their theories and the text itself don't fit perfectly with one another. Doubrovsky in particular argues that the Princesse's choice allows her to escape the “dialectic of possession” entirely, rather than allowing her to escape dispossession. Does her decision free her from being with him, or free her from the eventual *rupture*?

There are, of course, scholars who oppose the idea that the Princesse's final choice is not a “choix passionné d'elle-même.” Rather, she makes a choice *against* herself. On her deathbed, Madame de Chartres warns her daughter: “Vous êtes sur le bord du précipice: il faut de grands efforts et de grandes violences pour vous retenir” (La Fayette 277-8).²⁰ These “grandes

¹⁸ “She spoke to her of men's insincerity, of their deceptions and infidelity, of the disastrous effect of love affairs on conjugal life” (Cave 10).

¹⁹ “Finally, after years had gone by, time and absence diminished his pain and quenched his passion. (Cave 156).

²⁰ “You are on the edge of a precipice. You will have to make great efforts and do yourself great

violences” are indicative of the way that the Princesse defines and sustains her own authentic mode of being. As Marianne Hirsch explains: “Being worthy of herself means to deny and defy herself. She can ultimately assert herself only against her own desires and impulses. This typically female form of development through self-denial is also a form of extinction” (Hirsch 26). Hirsch is right to indicate the immense power the Princesse’s gender has over her fate, but while she calls her self-negation “typically female,” in many ways the Princesse’s choice to leave the court is unprecedented. In choosing to uphold her authentic identity, she is singular, even if the way she does so might be more commonplace. The Princesse denies the self constituted by her emotional and sexual desires in order to “be worthy” of her virtuous self, the being and identity that she constructs around her virtue. The authenticity of this self demands her constant fidelity, that she obey her identity as the most virtuous woman at court. In this way, her choice to join the convent and deny Nemours (and herself) was inevitable as the only way for her to remain authentic to her virtue.

There are more positive takes on the Princesse’s choice to desert Nemours. Michael Danahy uses space to look at the Princesse’s decision: “The heroine...is striving toward a form of freedom refused to her by the male-dominated culture, namely the right to her own inviolate space. More than Jansenistic self-abnegation, stoic inwardness, or courtly sublimation, Madame de Lafayette's heroine is seeking the physical space in which to exercise and enjoy concretely the right to be herself” (213). Danahy’s move to sweep away the ideas of self-abnegation seems right, as the Princesse self-affirms through self denial—but he’s not completely correct. The Princesse might be seeking a form of freedom denied to her, but if she does so, it is not in a conscious, twenty-first century sense. He attributes too much of a modern self-consciousness to

violence to hold yourself back” (Cave, 40).

her choices, as did Claude Vigée with the idea that she makes a “choix passionnée d’elle-même.” Danahy’s idea that her tendency toward “self-abnegation” is a means to an end feels right—but what might that end be?

The Princesse follows a system of ethics where she must follow her virtue at all costs. If this imperative requires violence to herself, she will perform it, but it also seems that through this self-denial, the Princesse can reach self-affirmation, or at the very least, self solitude. Danahy and Doubrovsky both suggest that either the “égoïsme totale” or the “right to be herself” are direct products of her actions, and further, that these were her goals. The former asserts that she “is seeking” this right, and the latter states that “elle veut échapper” possession in lieu of her own egoism. While it’s tempting to twist the narrative and believe that the Princesse makes a self righteous decision here, in reality, the end product of her decision to deny the Duc de Nemours and to live alone were not necessarily her intentions. Rather, the Princesse is always concerned with her virtue and her ability to act authentically according to her moral code. This is to say that for her, actions carry more value as evidence of her existence *as virtuous* than the results they lead to. For the Princesse, the decisions to confess to her husband and to leave her desires unfulfilled are infinitely more important and edifying to how she constructs her self-identity than any result such a choice might have—even if those results are edifying, freeing, or positive in themselves, such as living “chez elle.”

The Princesse believes so strongly in her duty to be authentic that she sacrifices the happiness she could find in a potential romance and makes an extraordinary confession. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) provides two definitions for authenticity that are relevant to her unique *sincérité*: “The quality of truthful correspondence between inner feelings and their outward expression; unaffectedness, sincerity” and “A mode of existence arising from self-

awareness, critical reflection on one's goals and values, and responsibility for one's own actions; the condition of being true to oneself" ("authenticity, n."). The former understanding of the word aligns with what Rousseau, Laclos, and Stendhal explore. The latter definition comes from Heidegger's *Being and Time* and was used by Sartre in *Être et néant*. The Princesse inhabits something like this second form of authenticity, concealing her feelings so that she can engage in "critical reflection on one's goals and values." The terms "self awareness" and "responsibility for one's own actions" align with the moral imperatives she gives herself, particularly in a court where such morality is unnecessary, laughed at, and even extraordinary. La Fayette did not predict Heideggerian philosophy, but Heidegger's model provides an answer as to the reason why she flies in the face of happiness and self-fulfillment at the novel's end.

The Princesse's authenticity is not passionate, warm, or sentimental—rather, it's her duty, her imperative, a kind of condition of her being. Heidegger wrote *Being and Time* almost two hundred and fifty years after La Fayette wrote her novel, but her protagonist certainly exhibits "the condition of being true to oneself" ("authenticity, n."). The critic Philippe Cabestan explains how Heidegger understood man's responsibilities:

Le *Dasein*²¹ n'est pas une substance, un être en-soi, mais un être dont l'essence réside dans l'existence, un être dont les qualités ou propriétés (*Eigenschaften*) sont...des manières possibles d'être (*mögliche Weisen zu sein*). De ce point de vue, le *Dasein* n'est pas un être qui est ce qu'il est, mais un être qui a à être...Aussi Heidegger souligne-t-il ce qu'il dénomme la *Jemeinigkeit*, la mienneté, l'être-à-chaque-fois-à-moi de l'être que j'ai à être. (Cabestan)²²

²¹ Definition from OED: "In existentialism, esp. that of Heidegger and Jaspers: human existence, the being of man-in-the-world" ("Dasein, n.").

²² Translation, mine: "The Dasein is not a substance, a being in itself, but a being whose essence resides in its existence, a being whose qualities or properties are...possible ways of being. From this point of view, the Dasein is not a being that is what it is, but a being who has *to be*...Also, Heidegger underlines what he calls the *Jemeinigkeit*, the mine-ness, the being-every-time-to-

Again, the idea of an imperative to action appears, particularly in the idea that a human being is the being which must be, “qui a à être.” Faced with the possibilities of being, authenticity is not a given—you can act as you choose, even if your actions don’t align with your beliefs or values.

Heidegger’s and Rousseau’s senses of “authenticity” are directly opposed to each other: how can the Princesse act as her feelings would have her do while she also maintains her virtue? Doesn’t the passionate moment, the long-awaited fall into the lover’s arms, require abandoning one’s goals, values, and “responsibility for one’s actions?” Even when her husband dies, the Princesse obeys her moral imperative. If she were to engage in authenticity à la Rousseau, she would not confess her love for Nemours to her husband, but to Nemours himself. The proof is in her actions—and the fact that they suggest not her feelings, but rather the virtue and values she subjects herself to. What La Fayette depicts in *La Princesse de Clèves* is a different type of authenticity, one based a morality of duty—here, a duty to husband and to virtue, no matter the suffering this entails.

Upon first examination, the Princesse could be diagnosed with a “typically feminine” case of self-denial, a feminist choice of space, or an escape from the “dialectic of possession.” All of these elements are in some way accurate, and are valid interpretations—but they are all symptoms of the Princesse’s personal moral imperative. If she did not act in accordance with her identity as virtuous, not only would she be inauthentic, she would not *be*. Heidegger explains the human way of being thus: “The advent of beings lies in the destiny of being. But for humans it is ever a question of finding what is fitting in their essence that corresponds to such destiny; for in

myself the being that I have to be.”

Cabestan’s explanation goes into further detail: “Plus précisément, Heidegger introduit le concept d’authenticité au cours du chapitre IX de *Sein und Zeit* à partir de l’affirmation décisive que le *Dasein* n’est pas une substance, un être en-soi, mais un être dont l’essence réside dans l’existence... En outre, cet être que j’ai à être en tant que *Dasein*, c’est aussi et toujours *mon* être, au sens où cette main est *ma* main, alors que cette autre main n’est pas la mienne” (Cabestan).

accord with this destiny the human being as ek-sisting has to guard the truth of being (Heidegger 252). The Princesse denies herself the satisfaction of desires in order to answer this question, to match virtuous actions with her virtuous essence. But such virtue, such control over the self, and such mastery over desire don't necessarily seem *sincère*.

While the Princesse does obey her own moral code flawlessly, calling her authentic is still not without its caveats. Heidegger's understanding of authenticity has at its heart a process of construction, specifically the construction of the self. Consider his claim that "For humans it is ever a question of finding what is fitting in their essence" in this sense—is he not talking about a level of self awareness that goes too far beyond simply *being* to be called authentic? The Princesse's form of authenticity requires an almost unbelievable amount of self consciousness and self control, and as Rousseau will point out, perhaps authenticity requires a certain ignorance. This is to say, if you know what authenticity is, you've most certainly lost it.

Creating the Natural

La vertu qui nous sépara sur la terre nous unira dans le séjour éternel.
— Jean Jacques Rousseau, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*

Rousseau's body is interred at the Panthéon, but his epistolary novel, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, has not enjoyed the posterity of *Les Confessions* or *Les Rêveries*. Yet the ideas of the work echo through other narratives with names recognizable to modern day readers. *The* foundational text for thinking about authenticity in eighteenth century France and beyond, *La Nouvelle Héloïse* proposes a theory of authentic love to be tested by Laclos and Stendhal. What makes the novel so extraordinary is its apparent approval of an inter-class romance and Rousseau's trademark connection between nature and truth. The narrative is an epistolary romance between a country aristocrat, Julie, and her low born tutor, Saint-Preux, but like its medieval ancestor, *Héloïse et Abélard*, it has a philosophical bend. Imbued in each letter are Rousseau's beliefs that aristocratic society was destructive to a person's integrity because it stood in the way of an authentic and natural life. A work of early romanticism, the novel is not traditionally moralistic or austere—rather, Rousseau introduces his own morality, where genuine affection is prized, and sensuality is rendered pure by nature and passion.

The novel begins at the country estate of Clarens, where Julie and Saint-Preux are joined by her parents and cousin, Claire. The pair slowly become closer, their letters becoming more and more romantic. When Julie sleeps with Saint-Preux, her mother finds their letters and dies of grief, believing her daughter's virtue to be ruined. The Baron d'Étange, her father, arranges Julie's marriage with his friend, Wolmar, and sends Saint-Preux away. Four years later, Saint-Preux returns from voyages at sea. Julie is a mother and shares what seems to be a perfect, rational marriage with her husband, who invites Saint-Preux to stay with them at Clarens. Julie

and her old tutor both remain convinced that the other has forgotten the feelings of years past, when in reality, they are both tortured that they cannot be together. Just before Julie dies from leaping into dangerous waters to save her child, she confesses to Saint-Preux that her passion for him never dissipated.

La Nouvelle Héloïse became a best seller of 1761, but its author enjoyed a particularly troubled version of celebrity: the paranoia and egotism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau made him a contentious figure in his day. Feeling alienated by the aristocratic elite who were his patrons and champions of his work, Rousseau rejected *salon* culture. The critic Antoine Lilti explains how Rousseau identified himself in opposition to the upper classes: “Throughout the 1750s and 1760s, Rousseau constructed a figure of himself as a writer who had broken with elite norms of behavior” (61). Rousseau’s initial antagonism led to a more significant rift: when he refused a royal pension offered him by David Hume, the *salon* society of Paris sought to ruin Rousseau’s reputation (Lilti 61-2). Yet through setting himself in opposition to the norms of patronage and elitism, Rousseau produced his own moral philosophy—and the utopian vision of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* demonstrates what he created from negativity.

Rousseau forged the conceptual link between the countryside and authenticity, one which Laclos would later toy with in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and Stendhal would re-imagine in *Le Rouge et le Noir*. *La Nouvelle Héloïse* sets into motion a particular topography: if the *maison* houses society, class structure, and the rational, arranged marriage, then the countryside provides a space for the passionate romance that defies moral and class strictures—and nature seems to sanctify this questionable liaison.

It’s no coincidence that the most emotional and sensual scenes of the novel take place deep in nature, far away from the estate and its manicured gardens. Consider that Saint-Preux

and Julie had their first kiss in the groves near the estate. He details what took place: “On parcourt le jardin...le soleil commence à baisser, nous fuyons tous trois dans le bois le reste de ses rayons, et ma paisible simplicité n’imagineoit pas même un état plus doux que le mien” (Rousseau 64).²³ Here, the movement from the garden into the woods and the setting of the sun call to mind the arrival of Rousseau’s “state of nature.” Paired with the term “peaceful simplicity,” the novel-long association between the outdoors and authentic experience and emotion begins here. Yet there’s more to come: “En approchant du bosquet j’apperçus, non sans une émotion secrète, vos signes d’intelligence” (Rousseau 64).²⁴ The movement into a wilder natural landscape continues as the trio walks into the arbor. Saint-Preux, previously blind to the paradoxical signs given off by Julie, now understands that something significant is at hand. Although Julie herself is a master of restraint, it seems that such control is lost once the characters are within nature. In fact, the signs themselves are plainly read because they are so physical and unmasked: Saint-Preux extols to Julie “Vos sourires mutuels,” continuing, “Et le coloris de tes joues prendre un nouvel éclat” (Rousseau 64).²⁵ Once the lovers are in nature itself, their language is no longer letters or conversation—instead, they convey meaning through the body. The inability of the blushing cheek to reduce its pink color is exactly what represents authenticity for Julie, Saint-Preux, and Rousseau, and the fact that such flushes appear in the arbor is no coincidence.

To write about authenticity in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is to write about its heroine, Julie d’Étange. Julie governs the economy of what is sincere and insincere in the novel. Too much of

²³ “We walked through the garden...the sun began to set, all three of us eluded the last of its rays in the woods, and my peaceful simplicity did not even imagine a sweeter state” (McDowell 53).

²⁴ “Approaching the arbor, I perceived, not without a secret emotion, your significant signs” (McDowell 53).

²⁵ “Your mutual smiles,” “And the increasing glow on your cheeks” (McDowell 53).

the scholarship on *Héloïse* tends to focus on Julie as merely an object for Saint-Preux to interact with, a way to read the philosophy of Rousseau through the his letters. Taking a closer look at Julie's psychology can offer a more challenging understanding of how she struggled to be authentic and natural while also being a daughter, lover, wife, and mother. In examining her letters and her utopian garden, the Elysium, Julie's losses—of her mother, of her great love, and of her virtue both moral and physical—have pushed her into a pattern of desperate preservation, a tragic effort the often comes too late to save something true and authentic.

Julie perfects her English garden in a way that she earlier policed Saint-Preux's writing and behavior. The control she exerts over his letters suggests the innocence she sees in him—his epistolary faux-pas are charming signifiers of his authentic naïveté. Julie is Saint-Preux's student, but it is she who educates him in how to write and how to love her. Yet the "authentic" cannot be taught—often, learning about society and its manipulations destroys this quality. After their *rupture* and her marriage to Wolmar, Julie will create her garden, name it the Elysium, and make constant efforts to give the space the look of complete wildness. Julie's English garden serves as a perfect allegory for her desperate attempts to preserve the authentic and the natural in the face of regulated and unforgiving aristocratic society. Ultimately, authenticity is merely a utopia—what must be understood is why we want that particular paradise so badly.

The Elysium is not only symbolic of Julie's marriage—it has broader implications on her psychology. From the novel's beginning, Julie is in some ways "gardening" Saint-Preux as she does her Elysium. She prunes, clips, and trains him to become a better writer and lover while trying to preserve his untrained innocence and manners. Her corrections are sprinkled through her writing. In the first few letters, Saint-Preux confesses his love to her, Julie responds with *froidueur*, and he threatens to leave—but she reproaches him thus: "Un homme tel que vous avez

feint d'être ne part point; il fait plus" (Rousseau 38).²⁶ When Julie sees him acting outside of what she considers to be his identity, or the one he has taken on, she corrects him. In fact, her words are a clever manipulation of Saint-Preux' pride, a dare of sorts.

When Saint-Preux goes off to Paris, his letters to Julie belie a certain shift in style and tone. His first letter from the city begins this way:

J'entre avec une secrète horreur dans ce vaste désert du monde. Ce cahos ne m'offre qu'une solitude affreuse, où regne un morne silence. Mon ame à la presse cherche à s'y répandre, et se trouve partout resserrée. Je ne suis jamais moins seul que quand je suis seul, disait un ancien : moi, je ne suis seul que dans la foule, où je ne puis être ni à toi ni aux autres. Mon cœur voudrait parler, il sent qu'il n'est point écouté ; il voudrait répondre, on ne lui dit rien qui puisse aller jusqu'à lui. Je n'entends point la langue du pays, et personne ici n'entend la mienne. (Rousseau 231)²⁷

Rousseau certainly had a sense of humor—while Saint-Preux himself wouldn't understand what makes his own dramatics so funny, his observations about Paris read as the attempts of a young man to imitate what he thinks he *should* be saying. In his desire to establish himself in opposition to the *foule*, he in fact aligns himself with it. From the philosophical reference to some unnamed *ancien* to his overdone metaphor of the "vaste désert du monde," the entire effort falls flat.

Rather than proving that he is alone, the one authentic person in the city of lies, Saint-Preux reveals his obvious admiration for the poeticity and drama of Parisian society and language.

²⁶ "A man such as you have pretended to be does not leave; he does more" (McDowell, 31).

²⁷ With a secret horror I am entering this vast wasteland of a world. This chaos offers me only a frightful solitude, in which a dismal silence reigns. My oppressed soul seeks to burst forth but finds itself everywhere restrained more closely. I am never less alone than when I am by myself, an ancient writer said; as for me, I am only alone in the crowd, where I can be neither with you or with others. My heart would speak, but it senses that it is not heard. It would answer, but nothing is said which can reach it. I do not understand the language of the country, and no one here understands mine. (McDowell 196)

She doesn't let him get away with this pastiche of urbane elitism, though: immediately, she polices his writing style, finding any sudden shift toward grace or pretension to signify falseness in his writing, his being, and his love toward her. She reprimands him thus:

Il y a de la recherche et du jeu dans plusieurs de tes lettres. Je ne parle point de ce tour vif et de ces expressions animées qu'inspire la force du sentiment; je parle de cette gentillesse de style qui, n'étant point naturelle, ne vient d'elle-même à personne, et marque la prétention de celui qui s'en sert. Eh Dieu ! des prétentions avec ce qu'on aime? (Rousseau 238)²⁸

What Julie calls the “jeu” in her lover's letters is more than just a game—rather, she's referring to the larger game at hand in Parisian society, one she knows can influence her humble tutor to begin waxing poetic. What troubles her most is that his style is no longer natural, and nothing holds higher value in *Héloïse* than the natural. Because the tone he inflects doesn't come by chance to anyone, and is rather the indication of a forced grace, Julie understands his writing to be full of pretension. While Saint-Preux might think that a loftier style would please the one who outranks him, the case is exactly the opposite. She is undeniably an aristocrat, but Julie is atypical in the sense that she is practically allergic to the elitism of her class. It's clear to see what first drew her to Saint-Preux: his untrained authenticity was for her more charming than anyone with real wit and charm. The Paris letters show that Julie's corrections are among her efforts to preserve—as if from the moment he arrives at Clarens, she knows that her lover will eventually be lost to her.

Julie does indeed lose Saint-Preux—her mother finds their letters and dies of grief, and

²⁸ Translation, mine: “Many of your letters contain curiosity and games. I'm not talking about this sudden change and these animated expressions that inspire strong feelings; I'm talking about this genteel style, one that isn't at all natural and doesn't come to anyone by itself, and marks those who use it as pretentious. Oh god! Pretension with the one you love?”

Julie sends him away out of guilt.²⁹ The melancholy of loss that Julie experiences after she loses both her mother and her lover transforms into her garden, the Elysium. Given that the grove at Clarens was a haven from the class structure that controlled Saint-Preux and Julie, one would think that this garden would be a similar refuge. Yet Wolmar tells Saint-Preux when they are with Julie in the garden: “Julie a commencé ceci longtemps avant son mariage et presque d’abord après la mort de sa mère” (Rousseau 472).³⁰ As her husband indicates, this garden is not an Eden, but a representation of Julie’s struggle with her own nature and the pressures upon her. Simply put, the garden is a result of her losing both her mother and her lover. Julie made the Elysium in a desperate effort to preserve something—be it her romance with Saint-Preux, the memory of her mother, her virtue, or all three. It’s clear that the garden is a monstrosity created by Julie’s false consciousness: in a manicured wildness, nature is dominated by woman in order to have it perform its own “freedom.”

Saint-Preux returns to Clarens after four years away, and Wolmar invites him to stay at the estate. Julie and her husband take him to the Elysium for a tour, and the first thing he notices about the garden is its enclosed nature—hidden away and kept under lock and key, the Elysium is not public. He describes the garden to his friend Lord Bomston: “Ce lieu, quoique tout proche de la maison est tellement caché par l’allée couverte qui l’en sépare qu’on ne l’aperçoit de nulle part. L’épais feuillage qui l’environne ne permet point à l’œil d’y pénétrer, et il est toujours soigneusement fermé à clé” (Rousseau 471).³¹ It’s important to note that the “maison” makes an

²⁹ See Partie III, Lettre V: “Je vous conjure de me fuir à jamais, de ne plus m’écrire” (Rousseau 316). Translation: “I implore you to fly from me forever, to write me no more” (McDowell, 236).

³⁰ “Julie had begun this long before her marriage, almost immediately after her mother’s death” (McDowell, 306).

³¹ “This place, although quite close to the house, is so hidden by a shady walk which separates them that it is visible from no part of the house. The dense foliage which surrounds it makes it impervious to the eye, and it is always carefully locked” (McDowell, 304).

appearance even in a description of an escape to nature. This is to say, the Elysium exists not apart from, but in relation to the house, growing in its shadow. Stendhal will repeat this side-by-side relationship of the house and the garden, and while nature provides Julien Sorel and Madame de Rênal with a place to fall in love, the Elysium is the graveyard of Saint-Preux and Julie's romance. The space is only open to those with a key, and many of these "secret" or "private" elements also speak to an effort to protect the garden. Much like Julie's reprimands after reading Saint-Preux' Parisian letters, the Elysium is a desperate effort to preserve something that is either disappearing or already gone.

Memories of the first kiss return at the novel's close during the garden tour. Saint-Preux asks why Julie didn't use the grove as the site for her Elysium: "À quoi bon vous faire une nouvelle promenade, ayant de l'autre côté de la maison des bosquets si charmans et si négligés? Il est vrai, dit elle un peu embarrassée, mais j'aime mieux ceci" (Rousseau 485).³² The embarrassment that Julie shows indicates that she feels the pain of both her husband and her past lover knowing exactly what happened years earlier in the grove she now avoids. Not only does her reaction suggest her lingering affection for Saint-Preux, but it also sets up an important distinction between Julie as the young lover in the "bosquets si charmans et si négligés" and the woman she has become. In fact, it is the very negligence of the other grove that made it so authentic. Julie tried to preserve this same untrained charm in Saint-Preux when he went to Paris, but even then, it was already too late. Four years later, she has moved from the grove to the garden, and it seems Julie has accepted that she cannot save the natural and authentic—now, she imitates it. If the wild arbor growing chaotically is the place of Saint-Preux's love with Julie, her

³² "For what good did you make a new place to walk, having on the other side of the house some groves, so charming and so neglected?" "It is true," she said, a little embarrassed, "but I prefer this one" (McDowell, 312).

marriage with Wolmar is the Elysium: a perfect model, trained to have naturalness and harmony.

Julie did to Saint-Preux what she later does to the thickets in the Elysium: “on avait fait recourber les branches, pendre en terre, et prendre racine, par un art semblable à ce que font naturellement les mangles” (Rousseau, 473).³³ The message couldn’t be any clearer: through “art,” Julie creates the “naturel.” Her desperate efforts to bend Saint-Preux into the perfect lover and to hide any trace of the human hand in her garden are telling of her own situation. Having already been educated in how to be a noblewoman, Julie is already “fallen” in some ways, but she still seeks out and tries to preserve the natural and authentic when she can.

On her deathbed, Julie writes her last letter to Saint-Preux. With nothing left to lose except her life, she pens her confession:

J’en dis trop peut-être en ce moment où le cœur ne déguise plus rien... Eh! pourquoi craindrais-je d’exprimer tout ce que je sens ? Ce n’est plus moi qui te parle ; je suis déjà dans les bras de la mort. Quand tu verras cette lettre, les vers rongeront le visage de ton amante, et son cœur, où tu ne seras plus. Mais mon âme existerait-elle sans toi ? sans toi quelle félicité goûterais-je ? Non, je ne te quitte pas, je vais t’attendre. La vertu qui nous sépara sur la terre nous unira dans le séjour éternel. Je meurs dans cette douce attente : trop heureuse d’acheter au prix de ma vie le droit de t’aimer toujours sans crime, et de te le dire encore une fois. (Rousseau 743)³⁴

³³ “The branches of which had been made to bend round, hang down to the ground, and take roots, by a process similar to that which mangrove trees follow naturally” (McDowell, 306).

³⁴ I have said too much, perhaps, in this moment when the heart no longer hides anything...Ah, why should I be afraid of expressing all that I feel? It is no longer I who speak to you; I am already in the arms of death. When you see this letter, the worms will be preying upon your lover’s features and upon her heart, where your image will exist no more. But could my soul exist without you? Without you, what happiness could I enjoy? No, I do not leave you; I go to wait for you. The virtue which separated us on earth will unite us in the eternal dwelling. I am dying in this sweet hope, only too happy to purchase at the price of my life the right of loving you forever without crime and of telling you so one more time. (McDowell 407)

Julie's confession is only possible because she is so close to death, and therefore without the fear of punishment—this is why she mentions both “ce moment où le cœur ne déguise plus rien” and “le droit de t'aimer toujours sans crime.” Yet even in her last moments, it takes Julie several sentences to get to the truth: “La vertu qui nous sépara sur la terre nous unira dans le séjour éternel.” This is, of course, the ultimate hope and promise of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Although Clarens is as close to utopia as is possible on Earth, only in “true paradise” can Julie and Saint-Preux be together. Julie's confession comes late, she captures it in writing and she believes that their eventual togetherness will be eternal—in these ways, the authentic is preserved in more than just a moment. The text suggests that while society kept it from flourishing, the love between Julie and Saint-Preux was in fact authentic and did exist.

While Julie's obsessive efforts to preserve and create the natural were ultimately doomed—in Rousseau's universe, the authentic cannot be forced and must come about unexpectedly—her experience of being in love with Saint-Preux was never lost and was never false. Both Saint-Preux' letters in the Parisian style and Julie's Elysium are Rousseau's demonstrations of how a conscious effort to be authentic will always result in the destruction of any sincerity. Yet from Saint-Preux' first letter to Julie and her last letter to him, their feelings remained. In the world of *Héloïse*, authentic love is possible, and can be sustained over time. The novel's ending is tragic, but it promises the presence and possibility of authentic love in spite of a society constituted of rules and control. Rousseau's promise invited the darker *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and *Le Rouge et le Noir*, novels that wouldn't have been possible had he not dared to imagine the possibility of being authentic.

Vice Loves Virtue

“L’amour, qu’on nous vante comme la cause de nos plaisirs, n’en est au plus que le prétexte”
- Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*

If *La Nouvelle Héloïse* burns, *Liaisons* freezes, even in its most emotional moments. This is the icy passion that Charles Baudelaire used to distinguish Laclos’ great work: “Ce livre, s’il brûle, ne peut brûler qu’à la manière de la glace” (*Œuvres*, 639).³⁵ Laclos had a great esteem for Rousseau: he called *Héloïse* “le plus beau des ouvrages produits sous le titre de roman,” and with his novel, he pushed Rousseau’s philosophy to its limit. (*Œuvres*, 545).³⁶ In Laclos’ universe, the earnest drive to virtue and empathy yields to a cold and calculating landscape. The *salons* devour sentimentality, naïveté serves an amusement for the cynics, being innocent is foolish—and dangerous.

The Marquise de Merteuil, one of the novel’s masterminds, sets *Les Liaisons dangereuses* into motion, throwing down the gauntlet with her challenge to the Vicomte de Valmont: “Aussitôt que vous aurez eu votre belle dévote, que vous pourrez m’en fournir une preuve, venez, et je suis à vous” (Laclos, Lettre 20, 42).³⁷ *Liaisons* wagers that virtue is a novelistic construct, an amusing pretense to pass the time. This is not to say that the novel does not focus on the power of the authentic moment. Virtue and vice conquer each other briefly in Laclos’ narrative: the *innocente* and the libertine share an instant of *sincérité*. Such moments aren’t evidence of Laclos’ belief that authentic love exists—rather, the authentic moment is destructive, resulting in the novel’s tragic ending.

Instead of one love story between two characters, Laclos has a much larger cast, and one

³⁵ “This book, if it burns, cannot burn except as ice does.” Translation, mine.

³⁶ “The most beautiful of all works under the title of “novel.” Translation, mine.

³⁷ As soon as you have had your fair devotee, and can send me proof of that, come to me and I shall be yours” (Constantine, 45).

entangled in a web of intrigues and attractions, jealousies and hatreds. The Marquise de Merteuil is the alpha predator of *Liaisons*, and in her, the corruptive influences of aristocratic society find their incarnation. She inverts the virtuous woman “type” embodied by the Princesse de Clèves and Julie d’Étange. Laclos makes use of several such “types” of both men and women. The libertine Vicomte de Valmont is Merteuil’s natural match, but he has eyes for the virtuous Présidente de Tourvel. Her buttoned-up dresses and stiff morality are what first attracts him, and his reputation (for ruining reputations) is what draws her to Valmont. A pair of ingénues are among the main group of letter-writers: Cécile de Volanges and Danceny, her music tutor. They are a sort of parody of (and undoubtedly a reference to) Julie and her tutor, Saint Preux—but Rousseau’s hopes for authentic love and the purity of passion are dashed in Laclos’ universe, which leads the naïve couple to far more sinister ends. Lastly, there are two “maternal figures,” Madame de Volanges, Cécile’s own mother, and Madame de Rosemonde, Valmont’s eighty-four year old aunt who hosts him and the Présidente at her countryside estate.

Before the Marquise even sets her challenge to Valmont, he meets the Présidente when paying his elderly aunt a visit. In an early letter, the Présidente writes to her friend, Madame de Volanges: “Je compte rester à la campagne tout le temps de l’absence de M. de Tourvel” (Laclos, Lettre 8, 21).³⁸ While she doesn’t explain her reasons for staying with Madame de Rosemonde, she has suspiciously sequestered herself just when her husband is away. Her decision to abstain from the *salons* of Paris during this time not only suggests that she knows what dangers await her there, but also that she doesn’t trust herself in the face of such temptations. The Présidente’s daily life is a kind of performance of the “good” or “honest” woman. Consider Valmont’s description of her days in the country: “Une messe chaque jour, quelques visites aux pauvres du

³⁸ “I intend to stay in the country for the whole period of Monsieur de Tourvel’s absence” (Constantine, 25).

canton, des prières du matin et du soir, des promenades solitaires, de pieux entretiens avec ma vieille tante, et quelquefois un triste wisk” (Laclos 13).³⁹ While Valmont and Merteuil use this tapestry of holy boredom to mock the Présidente, there’s a deeper implication at hand. The landscape of ennui that Valmont lists out suggests that not even the Présidente could find excitement or happiness in her situation: she must be forcing herself into a kind of asceticism. What they both read as her authentic self may in fact be her safeguard against becoming like the Marquise or a performance of virtue to validate her own identity as an “honest” woman.

Down to her clothing, the Présidente’s modesty is flawless. Scandalized by how unfashionable her rival is, Merteuil writes: “Toujours mise à faire rire! avec ses paquets de fichus sur la gorge, et son corps qui remonte au menton!” (Laclos, Lettre 5, 15).⁴⁰ The Marquise should look beyond those kerchiefs and consider what they might mean—the prudish choice of high-buttoned collars reinforces the Présidente’s identity as virtuous. Her devotion to both religion and her husband, her strict way of dress, her constant charity, and her isolation with Madame de Rosemonde in the country all suggest both an “honest” woman and a woman who knows to stay away from liaisons, pleasure, society, Paris. While her prudishness could be read as the outer manifestation of an inner naiveté, it also signifies the efforts of someone resisting certain temptation. It is her performance of incorruptibility, in fact, which most attracts Valmont. He writes to Merteuil: “Vous connaissez le présidente Tourvel, sa devotion, son amour conjugal, ses principes austères. Voilà ce que j’attaque; voilà l’ennemi digne de moi” (Laclos Lettre 4, 13).⁴¹

³⁹ “Mass each day, a few visits to the poor in the canton, prayers morning and evening, solitary walks, pious conversations with my old aunt, and the occasional dreary game of whist” (Constantine 17).

⁴⁰ “Always dressed up in that silly fashion! With all those kerchiefs tied around her bosom and her bodice buttoned right up to her chin!” (Constantine, 19).

⁴¹ “You know the Présidente de Tourvel: her devotion, her love for her husband, her strict principles? She is the object of my attack. She is the enemy worthy of me” (Constantine, 17).

Even Valmont in all his duplicity can't read her "principes austères" as anything other than an uncomplicated expression of her virtue. If the Présidente was truly as incorruptible as the first portion of the novel seems to suggest, why would she isolate herself in a lonesome country house? Would a truly virtuous woman have anything to fear in the *salons* of Paris?

The Vicomte sets himself the Herculean task of seducing the Présidente, but she sees him as her own challenge as well. The critic E. Scully Hudon believes that she has her own brand of holy narcissism: "Virtue is seldom without its share of vanity, and like many another woman strong in her virtue, Madame de Tourvel sees first in Valmont the challenge of the sinner whom no one else has been strong enough to save" (28). If she could turn the scoundrel into a gentleman, his transformation would be a proof of her virtue, and to see the effects she had on him would in turn satisfy her vanity. Her good intentions appear in early letters to her friend, Madame de Volanges, where she writes: "Je ne le connaissais que de réputation, et elle me faisait peu désirer de le connaître davantage; mais il me semble qu'il vaut mieux qu'elle. Ici, où le tourbillon du monde ne le gêne pas, il parle raison avec une facilité étonnante" (Laclos, Lettre 8, 22).⁴² The Présidente makes several important points here. She would, as a virtuous woman, naturally avoid a libertine like Valmont—hence the remark that she would "peu désirer" making his acquaintance. Then, she manages to reveal her own intentions for being exiled in the country, because it is the space which is outside of the "tourbillon du monde." Her phrase "parle raison" seems to imply that there is also frivolous speech, perhaps also a part of the country-city binary: she makes clear that the only conversations she enjoys are those without games and lies, in her mind, "authentic" speech.

⁴² "I only knew him by reputation, and that gave me very little desire to get to know him better; but he seems to me to be worthier than people think. Here, where he is not affected adversely by the social whirl, he shows a surprising capacity for serious conversation" (Constantine, 25).

Against a backdrop of vice and deceit, virtue shines as one of the novel's greatest commodities. The Présidente embodies the ultra-female, ultra-competitive struggle to be the most virtuous, possessing a talent not unlike that of Julie d'Étange. Both are schooled in virtue and skilled in writing, are sequestered or sequester themselves in the country away from the city or *salon* context, and they both use letters to temper the emotions and desires of the men who write to them. While the Présidente is married and Julie is not, their choices to be with Valmont and Saint-Preux are both transgressive. Much like Julie used her letters to control Saint-Preux, the Présidente uses hers to stave off Valmont's professions of love. Unlike Julie, the Présidente doesn't have any teaching to give Valmont—if anything, he is overly educated in the realities of society. But while she might not be able to engage in Julie's constant control over her lover and his letters, she does engage Valmont in a kind of battle.

Reproached by Madame de Volanges for even giving Valmont the pleasure of her conversation, the Présidente redoubles her efforts to plead his case. Already, vice in Valmont and virtue in the Présidente are constantly watching over each other, pulled together by a magnetic attraction. She writes, “Ce redoutable M. de Valmont, qui doit être la terreur de toutes les femmes, paraît avoir déposé ses armes meurtrières, avant d’entrer dans ce château...C’est apparemment l’air de la campagne qui a produit ce miracle” (Laclos, Lettre 11, 29).⁴³ Her use of “miracle” suggests her religious devotion, and the fact that this comes as a result of “l’air de la campagne” sounds like Rousseau. But the Marquise could have easily told the Présidente that at the precise moments when these “armes meurtrières” disappear, she has the most to fear. As in her previous letter to Madame de Volanges, the countryside itself plays a part in her reasoning,

⁴³ “The redoubtable Monsieur Valmont, that terror of our sex, seems to have laid down his deadly weapons before coming to the chateau...Apparently it is the country air which has worked this miracle” (Constantine, 32).

with the “country air” being the source of his placation rather than she herself. For the Présidente, because the *campagne* is a place exterior to and separate from Paris, it is therefore a space free from the wit and wile of Parisian society. It seems she has read *La Nouvelle Héloïse* without an eye for irony, and were she Rousseau’s character, she might have succeeded in taming Valmont. In Laclos’ universe, however, the main task is to unmask society and its players, and this means that even nature provides a stage for manipulation and deviancy.

The countryside, Rousseau’s locus amoenus, is *especially* the place for an illicit courtship. After all, Julie and Saint Preux first kiss in the orchard, and Stendhal continues the idea with hands intertwined beneath a linden tree. The natural is in some ways the pure, but only in the sense that the country is free from the games of the city—this purity is not chastity. Valmont understands the sexuality that comes with the more natural setting, unlike the object of his attention, who sees the country air as a cure for *libertinage*. He writes to the Marquise:

J’ai dirigé sa promenade de manière qu’il s’est trouvé un fossé à franchir...Il a fallu se confier à moi. J’ai tenu dans mes bras cette femme modeste...dès que je me fus emparé d’elle, par une adroite gaucherie, nos bras s’enlacèrent naturellement. Je pressai son sein contre le mien; et, dans ce court intervalle, je sentis son cœur battre plus vite. L’aimable rougeur vint colorer son visage, et son modeste embarras m’apprit assez que son cœur avait palpité d’amour et non de crainte. (Laclos 18).⁴⁴

The “adroite gaucherie,” that Helen Constantine translates as “deliberate awkwardness,” could be the motto of the *Liaisons* universe. Cynicism infects every word, action, and glance: even the

⁴⁴ “I contrived a walk so that we would need to cross a large ditch...She had to entrust herself to me. I held this modest woman in my arms...The moment I grasped her, with a deliberate awkwardness, our arms entwined around each other. I pressed her bosom against mine, and in that brief interval I felt her heart beating ever more rapidly. A lovely blush came over her face and her embarrassed modesty hold me straight away that her heart had palpitated with love and not with fear.” (Constantine, 22)

“gaucherie” can become a place for manipulation and deception. This is the cold fire that Baudelaire described—the Présidente blushes, in the grasp of both Valmont and a “modeste embarras,” but her involuntary response was only brought about by a contrived episode. Where there should be the warmth of a blush on Valmont’s cheek, a product of genuine embarrassment, there is only the calculation of his next offensive in the battle to corrupt the incorruptible. Such cynicism allows Valmont to “read” the Présidente, however, because her “aimable rougeur” and “modeste embarras” are signs of her attraction to him. Carrying the Présidente over the ditch, he is not rewarded with a moment of shared awkwardness with her, but rather with the confirmation of her attraction. For his manipulation, he is rewarded with her irrevocable and involuntary admission of love.

As Valmont’s success on the *promenade* suggested, the love affair between him and the Présidente must be won in person. The epistolary novel and epistolary love have a core problem: any emotion detailed in a letter has always already happened, and can be objectified in writing and used to persuade the lover. The description of feeling in a letter might bear witness to the emotion that inspired the writer to put pen to paper, but the writing about that feeling is always mimetic, forever a representation, and therefore never authentic. In this way, a romance based solely on letters will not lead to Valmont’s success with the Présidente. While Valmont believes that he can seduce her in letters, Merteuil understands that writing actually allows the Présidente to maintain her virtue.

Perhaps herself the best reader and writer among the characters of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Merteuil explains to Valmont why a written seduction can never work. She tells him in letter thirty-three: “Songez donc au temps qu’il faut pour écrire une lettre, à celui qui se passe avant qu’on la remette, et voyez si, surtout une femme à principes comme votre Dévote,

peut vouloir si longtemps ce qu'elle tâche de ne vouloir jamais...Malgré l'avantage que vous aviez pris sur elle dans votre conversation, elle vous bat dans sa lettre" (Laclos, 67).⁴⁵ Merteuil emphasizes the way in which, given time, a "femme à principes" can reason with herself and avoid the reality of her desires. The conversation must be Valmont's battlefield because there, the Présidente has no time to conceal her blushes or to repress her feelings as she experiences them. Her own actions confirm Merteuil's theory: by first feigning illness and then begging him to leave the estate, the Présidente makes constant efforts to hold Valmont at arms length. Much in the same way that she knows to avoid the *salon* and stay in the country, here too, the Présidente knows more than she lets on. It seems she herself knows that the letter is a means of dragging out the *attente* before the inevitable affair. The letters themselves are a way for the Présidente to preserve her virtue, and each written refusal of Valmont's affections affirms her own morality once more.

The letters continue until Valmont visits the Présidente at her husband's house, having practically chased her from the country estate. As the portrait of the President hangs stoic on the wall, his wife at last gives in to Valmont's seduction.⁴⁶ At the end of the battle, neither the Présidente nor Valmont wins. Valmont loses, because he falls in love. He confesses to Merteuil: "Je ne sortis de ses bras que pour tomber à ses genoux, pour lui jurer un amour éternel; et, il faut tout avouer, je pensais ce que je disais" (Laclos, Lettre 125, 300).⁴⁷ While in his letter, he tries to

⁴⁵ "Remember how long it takes to write a letter, and the time it takes before you send it. And tell me whether a woman, especially a principled woman like your devotee, can sustain for all that time a desire she is struggling never to entertain? ...In spite of what you gained in conversation with her, she defeats you in her letter" (Constantine, 70).

⁴⁶ Valmont truly has succeeded where the Duc de Nemours couldn't. The presence of the husband through his portrait makes this a consummation of the Princesse's desires for Nemours just as it is one of the Présidente's for Valmont.

⁴⁷ "I left her arms only in order to fall at her feet, and swear eternal love. And, to be absolutely truthful, I believed what I was saying" (Constantine, 313).

deride his own emotions, it's clear from his obvious efforts at obscuring them that Valmont has failed at his own game. No longer does he deny any feeling, rather, he puts his emotions in the imperfect: "je pensais ce que je disais." Here again is Baudelaire's icy fire: in some ways, "je pense ce que je dis" would be an expression of authenticity, but here Valmont speaks of something in the past. For a moment, he spoke his mind, but this is a faraway memory, a flame already frozen.

The Présidente loses, too: both her virtue and her identity as virtuous are shattered, and ultimately, she loses her life out of grief when Valmont betrays her. Her ruin, however, is infinitely less surprising than his—the reader is primed for success of the seduction from Valmont's first declaration of infatuation. In her abandonment of her virtuous identity and his abandonment of his own role as a cold seducer, the two exit for a moment the game of performance and actually encounter each other. He writes of this moment to the Marquise: "Ce fut avec cette candeur naïve ou sublime qu'elle me livra sa personne et ses charmes et qu'elle augmenta mon bonheur en le partageant. L'ivresse fut complète et réciproque; et, pour la première fois, la mienne survécut au plaisir" (Laclos, Lettre 125, 299-300).⁴⁸ Not only does Laclos emphasize the total abandon that the pair give in to, with phrases "elle me livra sa personne" and "l'ivresse fut complète," but he also emphasizes that Valmont has experienced something new, something he can't quite articulate in language. In the completion of this encounter, they are both equally present: not only is the pleasure complete, it is also "réciproque." The "bonheur" is *partagé* in a way it never has been before.

This moment in the Tourvel château crystallizes as the one authentic encounter in the

⁴⁸ "It was with such naive or sublime candour that she gave herself and her charms to me, and increased my happiness by sharing in it. The delight was complete and reciprocal; and for the first time my happiness lasted longer than the pleasure" (Constantine 312-3).

novel. Certainly, Valmont uses his usual tricks to lead up to this scene, pretending to leave and feigning hurt feelings. But the fact remains that in the midst of all this falseness, the Présidente seduces the seducer, conquers the conqueror. How can we make sense of this shocking moment?

The critic Mary McAlpin suggests that Laclos' moment in history has a heavy impact:

This addition of love as a positive element in the emotional repertoire of natural man and woman reflects a profound cultural transformation at work, for while often acknowledged to be the last and best of the many eighteenth-century epistolary masterpieces, the *Liaisons dangereuses* looks forward to the ideals of Romanticism as much as it looks back, with evident appreciation, to the savage wit and decadence of the glory days of the ancien régime. (2)

Laclos' characters are all in some ways "types" that find their root in the ancien régime and beyond, but as McAlpin suggests, there is something about such brief gasps of optimism, the "addition of love as a positive element," that makes these people exceptionally modern. Of course, McAlpin's use of the phrase "natural man and woman" and the new idea that love could be positive, emotional, authentic, has its roots in Rousseau. But it is Laclos who thrusts Julie D'Étange's doppelgänger into a world that wants to swallow her whole, only to find that she, as the Présidente, could for an all-too-brief moment master the sadistic and calculating Valmont, the living incarnation of the ancien régime.

Laclos points toward the fall of cynicism (although at the heavy price of sacrificing innocence) with the ultimate fate befalling the Marquise de Merteuil. The Marquise could only be Laclos' character: Rousseau prefers to stay away from her, as she represents the Paris society that rejected him and corrupts the likes of Saint Preux. She is in many ways the "outsider" of Laclos' narrative. While Valmont nearly matches her in manipulation and wit, he ultimately fails, committing the only sin in their shared religion: falling in love. While it's clear from her

attentions and affections for him that she is herself perhaps in love with Valmont, she never admits to this.

Merteuil is essentially alone at the top—the apex predator of her society. In a letter about her youth, she reveals that she never had a best friend and that, after many early affairs, she realized that “L’amour, qu’on nous vante comme la cause de nos plaisirs, n’en est au plus que le prétexte” (Laclos 177).⁴⁹ This kind of maxim-esque phrase suggests that the Marquise represents what McAlpin called the “savage wit” of past “glory days.” In message and in style, she sounds like an echo of La Rochefoucauld, who wrote: “Quelque soin que l’on prenne de couvrir ses passions par des apparences de piété et d’honneur, elles paraissent toujours au travers de ces voiles” (Maxim 12).⁵⁰ Despite Laclos’ evident delight in such treacherous people, the end of *Liaisons* finds Merteuil banished from Paris, her secrets revealed and her face marked with smallpox. In many ways, the ending of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* offers up poetic justice to Merteuil: she is exiled, finally living out the outsider status she has experienced since her debut, and the only man who might have matched her proves her theory wrong, falling in love while seeking out pleasure.

Despite the fact that she masters the *salons* of Paris and engineers the entire plot of the novel, Merteuil loses along with the Présidente and Valmont at its close. McAlpin understands that Merteuil’s failure points to Laclos’ ultimate argument in favor of authentic love— even if that one moment of “ivresse réciproque” leads to multiple deaths. She writes:

The outdated materialist libertine philosophy of the marquise, so reductionist in mechanicity, dismisses love as a curable disease brought on by the hypocrisy

⁴⁹ “Love, which people pretend is the cause of our pleasures, is at most only an excuse for them” (Constantine, 183).

⁵⁰ “However much one tries to conceal one’s passion with appearances of piety and honor, it will always appear through these veils.” Translation, mine.

inherent in the civilized lifestyle. But while, for Laclos, hypocrisy is indeed an inevitable byproduct of civilization, love carries a natural imprimatur that excludes it from any such outright dismissal. Just as the marquise is incapable of understanding that Cécile's love for Danceny is not a sign of intellectual incapacity, she underestimates the possible consequences of Valmont's love for Tourvel, and of her feelings for Valmont. Love triumphant, if only in its destructive power, will be the cause of the marquise's downfall at the novel's end, when this previously infallible manipulator of others is caught in a trap of her own making. (McAlpin 2)

McAlpin's understanding of Merteuil's fall from grace perfectly suggests why she can't succeed in Laclos' novel—she is a “reductionist” in a narrative that seeks to complicate. According to McAlpin, Laclos wanted to bring out the tensions in a society that loved *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and yearned for the days of Le Roi Soleil. The key part of her argument here, however, does not concern itself solely with the Marquise: “Love triumphant, if only in its destructive power” succinctly describes what authenticity means in *Liaisons*. Of course, these triumphant moments last for mere seconds in a landscape of duplicity, but when the “bonheur partagé” of the Présidente and Valmont occurs, that brief moment sends the ordered schemes of the Marquise *and* the virtue of the Présidente into utter chaos and ruin. Everything—virtue, vice, *calcul*, *sincérité*, falls in the wake of the disruptive power of an authentic encounter in Laclos' universe.

If Rousseau wrote the hypothesis, then Laclos followed as the experimenter. They both ask: can there be an authentic person, authentic love, an authentic moment in this society? Laclos' answer seems to be affirmative, but such instances of sincerity are fleeting and rare, and we never seem to know that we are in them. Nevertheless, the authentic encounter is possible and devastating to a social structure predicated on the eradication of sincerity, the mark of the naive. Laclos shows that even the most duplicitous among us can experience the union between feeling

and action, the thing felt and the thing said—but of course, such lapses are quickly denied. They can have disastrous consequences, however, and the tragic ending of Laclos' novel seems to show that an icy flame will eventually melt.

The Fall and Rise of Julien Sorel

“*Mon roman est fini, et à moi seul tout le mérite*”
— Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le Noir*

At the height of his climb to greatness, Julien Sorel makes a declaration suggesting how he frames his life—that his sacrifices to ambition all add up to one great “*roman*.” *Le Rouge et le Noir* is not Julien’s novel, however: it belongs to Stendhal. The narrative follows Julien’s battle between his desire to realize his destiny and his lapses in control, which are almost always brought about by the women he loves. Two romances structure the text: his first with Madame de Rênal, and the latter with Mathilde de La Mole. *La Nouvelle Héloïse* could be considered the inspiration for Julien’s earlier affair. Innocence and *sentiments involontaires* prevail in the courtship, although these are mediated by his ambitious desire to see their affair as a victory over his master: her husband, the mayor. In his second romance, Julien’s ambition spurs him on to chase after Mathilde, and while she herself may have a more sentimental experience of their relationship, his actions always have a touch of *calcul*. Awaiting execution at the novel’s end, Julien’s love for Madame de Rênal resurfaces—with his future cut off, he has nothing to lose, and his authentic feelings take over his ambitious affair.

The pages that detail Julien’s journey from his father’s sawmill to the guillotine are not an account of his struggle to be authentic in a society that seeks to repress sincerity—rather, his own ambitions suffocate his true feelings until they burst free from their constraints. Stendhal significantly restructures the way previous authors depicted authenticity by having his protagonist internalize societal control. This works because of Julien’s constantly precarious position in an upward climb. Born the son of a carpenter in the village of Verrières, Julien Sorel gets a religious education from the abbé Chélan, the local curate who noticed the boy’s unusual

intelligence. At the age of nineteen, Julien gets hired as a tutor for the Mayor's children. There he meets the lovely Madame de Rênal, an ingenue ten years his senior who falls in the vein of Julie d'Étange and the Présidente de Tourvel— although with a much less developed sense of what is forbidden. The two begin a courtship, holding hands secretly in the garden and spending nights together in her room. When it's possible their affair might be discovered, Julien leaves for a seminary at Besançon, and then quickly accepts another post at the prestigious Hôtel de La Mole in Paris.

Julien meets Mathilde, the daughter of his employer the Marquis de La Mole and a wealthy, educated heiress. They too have a liaison, but all of their gestures and conversations seem to be imitations of medieval histories or romance novels. When Mathilde becomes pregnant, her father the Marquis de La Mole offers Julien a title in a desperate attempt to legitimize their future child. Julien's dream of becoming noble, despite his contempt for the upper classes and his love of Napoleon, is actualized. His plans are cut short, however, when Madame de Rênal's confessor forces her to send a letter revealing him as a seducer and ruiner of aristocratic women. He returns to Verrières and shoots her as she prays in church. Surviving the attack, Madame de Rênal visits Julien in prison, where a jury of bourgeois have sentenced him to death. There, the two affirm their love for each other. Julien dies on the guillotine, and she in her childrens' arms. His upward climb is emblematic, defining the trans-class experience and struggle. As such, the stakes couldn't be higher for Julien Sorel: acting authentically costs him his life.

Before the guillotine at the novel's end, there was a garden gate. When they first meet, it's clear that Julien and Madame de Rênal are kindred spirits in their beauty and in their naïveté. Stendhal has them meeting while they are both in a vulnerable position: she is nervously

awaiting a tutor, and he is terrified by the lavish house awaiting him. Their encounter is a series of readings and misreadings, and Madame de Rênal's mistake brings them physically closer than they should be. Upon seeing him,

L'esprit romanesque de Mme de Rênal eut d'abord l'idée que ce pouvait être une jeune fille déguisée, qui venait demander quelque grâce à M. le maire. Elle eut pitié de cette pauvre créature, arrêtée à la porte d'entrée, et qui évidemment n'osait pas lever la main jusqu'à la sonnette. Mme de Rênal s'approcha, distraite un instant de l'amer chagrin que lui donnait l'arrivée du précepteur. Julien, tourné vers la porte, ne la voyait pas s'avancer. Il tressaillit quand une voix douce dit tout près de son oreille : Que voulez-vous ici, mon enfant ? (26)⁵¹

Rather than seeing a cruel *précepteur*, Madame de Rênal thinks that Julien might be a young woman, due to what the narrator deems as her “esprit romanesque.” After being mistaken as a “jeune fille déguisée,” Julien is described as a “pauvre créature.” Because she doesn't see a masculinity in Julien's beauty, but rather a vulnerability, she allows herself to approach him closely, as the verbs “s'approcha” and “s'avancer” suggest. In the moments before they speak, Madame de Rênal perceives her future lover as anything but what he is: a young man.

Madame de Rênal mistakes Julien for a girl, but aspects of her first impression remain accurate throughout the novel. Her calling him “mon enfant” is almost prophetic as to the nature of their relationship: during their romance, “Il y avait des jours où elle avait l'illusion de l'aimer comme son enfant”⁵² (97). The critic James A. W. Heffernan sees this connection: “Deprived of

⁵¹“Mme de Rênal's slightly romantic temperament made her think at first that it could be a young girl in disguise, come to ask some favor from the Mayor. She pitied the poor creature halted at the main entrance and evidently not daring to raise its arm to the bell. Mme de Rênal stepped nearer, distracted for a moment from the bitter upset the tutor's arrival was causing her. Julien, facing towards the door, did not see her. He started when a soft voice said just next to his ear: What do you want here, my child?” (Gard, 35)

⁵² “There were times when she was under the illusion that she loved him like one of her children” (Gard, 107).

a mother, routinely beaten by his brothers, and despised by his sawmill-owning father, he badly needs a mother's love. So it is hardly surprising that this dreamy, bookish, teenage peasant should be aroused by a lovely bourgeoisie who, we soon learn, is also an heiress" (195). Julien was essentially primed for his affair with Madame de Rênal, just as her motherhood lends her a tenderness that she first uses with him here. While she can't seem to identify who the person at the gate might be, she can perceive the sadness and anxiety Julien has lost himself in, afraid to knock at the door of the largest house in Verrières. She understands his hesitation, that he "n'osait pas lever la main jusqu'à la sonnette." He is further unmasked, because he thinks he is alone: "Julien, tourné vers la porte, ne la voyait pas s'avancer." This is likely why he felt that he could take a pause at the door—with no one watching, he could gather himself and wipe away his tears. Already, this secret display of feeling suggests how Julien struggles between *sincérité* and the person he wants to be: the confident *précepteur* entering the *château* without an ounce of fear. The first meeting between these two suggests their future romance full of secret kisses in the garden, ladders at windows, and tearful embraces. This moment is authentic, because rather than performing according to social rules as they should, they are utterly absorbed in each other.

Another crucial misreading casts its shadow on their encounter: imagining a cruel and aging Latinist with a gargoyle face and a cane in hand, Julien appears like a vision before Madame de Rênal. She does eventually come to her senses, having been under some kind of spell: "À sa grande joie, elle trouvait l'air timide d'une jeune fille à ce fatal précepteur, dont elle avait tant redouté pour ses enfants la dureté et l'air rébarbatif... Enfin elle revint de sa surprise. Elle fut étonnée de se trouver ainsi à la porte de sa maison avec ce jeune homme presque en chemise et si près de lui" (Stendhal 37).⁵³ The innocence of these characters is what allows for

⁵³ "She found in this fatal tutor, whose harshness and forbidding air she had so much dreaded for

the strange closeness of their encounter, ultimately leading to the charged atmosphere of their mutual attraction. Julien is “presque en chemise,” another metaphor for his vulnerability—he’s not in his usual battle armor, the black habit. Once again, Madame de Rênal finds a certain youthful femininity in Julien, seeing in him “l’air timide d’une jeune fille,” allowing her to get just close enough to realize she’s inches from an attractive young man. Julien will later use his beauty as social capital and a weapon in his conquest of the aristocracy, but this early in the novel, he has yet to understand its power.

Julien also fails to read Madame de Rênal’s appearance. Stendhal makes a subtle allusion to his experience with women, but here it fails him: “Tel est l’effet de la grâce parfaite, quand elle est naturelle au caractère, et que surtout la personne qu’elle décore ne songe pas à avoir de la grâce, Julien, qui se connaissait fort bien en beauté féminine, eût juré dans cet instant qu’elle n’avait que vingt ans” (Stendhal 29).⁵⁴ Madame de Rênal’s beauty is made all the more charming and valuable because she isn’t aware of it—could this be called “authentic” grace? In any case, it makes her appear ten years younger. The first meeting these two share is possible because their beauty, grace, naïveté, and charm transcend their class, age, and gender, and so their encounter is based in their sameness. Additionally, they are both vulnerable in this moment—he’s terrified to knock at the door, and she’s afraid of a cruel tutor for her children. They are both exposed, open, and this unites them rather than pushing them apart. For the rest of *Le Rouge*, it is Madame de Rênal who most brings out Julien’s confessions of vulnerability and fear.

her children’s sake, the manner of a shy young girl...At last she recovered from her surprise. She was disconcerted to find herself standing in this way at the door of her house with a young man in his shirtsleeves, and so close to her” (Gard, 36)

⁵⁴ “Such is the effect of perfect gracefulness when it is natural to the character, and above all when the person it adorns is unaware of having such grace, that Julien, who was quite prepared to appraise feminine beauty, could have sworn at that moment that she was no more than twenty” (Gard, 38).

Given Stendhal's conscious use of space, it is no coincidence that Julien first meets Madame de Rênal in the garden, outside of the house. Stendhal has a particular sense of space, with an almost theatrical categorization between outside and inside, above and below.⁵⁵ To begin, in both his romances, Julien often makes his romantic advances away from the house, in the garden or the countryside. Stendhal uses nature and the color green in particular to indicate moments of transition, according to Nicholas Kostis:

The fact is that Stendhal consciously uses the color green as metaphor and nature as metaphor. Associating them with passionate love, energy, and simplicity, he opposes them to the elaborate vicinations of external society. By resorting to green, he develops a complex structure of tensions which he sustains throughout his fiction. Generally speaking, his works are generated from the antagonism between nature and civilization, sexuality and society, impotence and self-assertion. Shifts of energy between these opposite poles are modulated and communicated by allusions to green and associated references to natural phenomena such as trees, gardens, and forests. Green is a constant governor of shifting tensions. (12-13)

The “antagonism between nature and civilization, sexuality and society” proves to be a core tension in *Le Rouge et le Noir*. But while Kostis considers green to be a marker of “shifts of energy between...opposite poles,” Julien's moments in nature and greenery are in fact indicators of his romantic, authentic “mode.” Instead of being a marker of shifts in larger forces, green, and therefore the garden, is more linked to nature and sexuality than to the idea of transition. Recall the importance of the first encounter between Julien and Madame de Rênal, which occurred just outside the estate. As he follows Madame de Rênal inside, Julien's demeanor changes: “Entrons, Monsieur, lui dit-elle d'un air assez embarrassé...Mais, est-il vrai, Monsieur...vous savez le latin? Ces mots choquèrent l'orgueil de Julien et dissipèrent le charme dans lequel il vivait depuis un

⁵⁵ Stendhal wrote *Racine et Shakespeare* in 1823-5, *Le Rouge et le Noir* was published in 1830.

quart d'heure" (Stendhal 38).⁵⁶ The move from outside to inside changes how the characters behave, and while greenery is present in the garden they leave behind, it's the "going in" that marks their transition. It seems that upon going inside, Madame de Rênal switched from speaking to him as the "pauvre créature" to remembering that she should be treating Julien as a tutor and employee. The movement between garden and house brought about this shift from an encounter beyond the reach of societal rules to one governed by social norms.

The garden at Verrières serves as one of Julien's prime battlefields, the place where he wages war on the heart of Madame de Rênal. Stendhal makes the association between their romance and the garden clear—hidden underneath a gigantic linden tree, Julien makes his first advances. The first time, it's an accident: "L'obscurité y [sous l'arbre] était profonde. Un soir, Julien parlait avec action...en gesticulant, il toucha la main de Mme de Rênal...Cette main se retira bien vite; mais Julien pensa qu'il était son devoir d'obtenir que l'on ne retirât pas cette main quand il la touchait" (Stendhal 60).⁵⁷ Julien didn't plan this moment, but the sudden brush of one hand against another leads the pair down a path to their eventual romance. While her sudden movement is her attempt to show that she rejects his touch, this reaction in fact suggests her attraction. Why should she react so strongly to a simple accident like this? Through her telling reaction (which he misreads as her desire *not* to have her hand touched by his), Julien arrives at a romantic plan, which he transforms into "duty." These few seconds in the garden exemplify Julien's tendency to ruin his own happiness. Rather than noticing that her withdrawal

⁵⁶ "'Let us go in, monsieur,' she said to him in a rather embarrassed manner... 'But is it true, monsieur...that you know Latin?' These words offended Julien's pride and dispelled the charm in which he had been living for the last quarter of an hour" (Gard 37).

⁵⁷ "Beneath it [the tree] the darkness was profound. One evening Julien was speaking energetically...in gesticulating, he touched Mme de Rênal's hand... The hand was very quickly withdrawn; but Julien conceived that it was his duty to ensure that this hand be not withdrawn when he touched it" (Gard 60).

suggests her feelings for him, he turns her hand into an object to be won and transforms love into duty. Hyper-aware of his own life as a narrative, Julien is in a constant battle to author his *roman* by living it, and this prevents him from actually *being*. It's clear that even scenes in the garden expose his cognitive dissonance.

Julien transforms his romance into a war of metaphors. On the first night after having brushed his hand on that of Madame de Rênal, they find themselves in the garden once more. He is anxious when faced with his emerging plan—the ambition to hold her hand: “‘Serait-je aussi tremblant, et malheureux au premier duel qui me viendra ?’...Bientôt la voix de Mme de Rênal devint tremblante aussi” (62).⁵⁸ Their mutual trembling recalls an idea about love and authenticity that La Fayette, Rousseau, and Laclos all made use of: the body betrays our emotions to the loved one when we most wish them to be concealed. Despite his wishes to be an icy-hearted Napoleonic seducer, Julien trembles. Not only could this alert Madame de Rênal of his nervousness, but the involuntary shaking reveals his fear to that part of himself which calculates: the “Julien Sorel” he wishes to be.

The darkness of the garden allows Madame de Rênal and Julien to share a secret courtship in front of Monsieur de Rênal. The first night after touching his hand to hers, Julien “observa, avec une joie...qu’elle [la nuit] serait fort obscure” (61).⁵⁹ The next night, the sky is dark once more, and Julien plans his advance: “En entrant ce soir-là au jardin...L’obscurité devint bientôt profonde. Il voulut prendre une main blanche que depuis longtemps il voyait près de lui” (71).⁶⁰ When Julien makes his first proposal to come to her room, he takes a risk by

⁵⁸ “‘Shall I be trembling like this, and so ill at ease when the first duel comes my way?’...Mme de Rênal’s voice began to tremble as well” (Gard 62).

⁵⁹ “He saw—with a joyful feeling...that it [the night] was extremely dark” (Gard 61).

⁶⁰ “The darkness soon became profound. He had an impulse to take the white hand that for a long time he had seen lying next to him” (Gard 73-4)

asking her before the sun is set: “À peine fut-on assis au jardin, que, sans attendre une obscurité suffisante, Julien approcha sa bouche de l’oreille de Mme de Rênal ” (89).⁶¹ Over and over, “obscurité” is paired with the garden and the nightly advances Julien makes on Madame de Rênal. *Obscurité* can conceal expressions of love *or* the calculations of ambition. The calculating Julien wouldn’t want her to see his lapses into *sincérité*—he wants to be in control, to come out as the winner of the *duel*. In much the same way, the duplicity of ambition can be concealed by darkness, and so Madame de Rênal could think Julien to be earnest when he is at his most calculating.

The *obscurité* the garden offers handicaps Madame de Rênal’s ability to interpret Julien’s actions as either authentic *or* insincere. His attempts under the linden tree meet with success: she lets him hold her hand, and ultimately lets him into her bedroom. The garden offers something to the pair that the house never could: in its darkness, they can hide the various stages of their courtship from Monsieur de Rênal. In its very separation from the estate, the garden offers a space for their romance, one that does not fit within the social framework of the house.

Between the garden and the estate, Julien moves laterally, but his vertical movements have received even more scholarly attention. These movements have a relationship to Julien’s two major motivations of passion and heroism, according to Ramón Saldívar: “The erotic implications of the enchanted pleasure garden identify Julien as a candidate for Romantic passion and Weltschmerz no less than his posture on the emblematic, sun-lit heights signals his desire to be seen as a Napoleonic hero and ‘bird of prey.’” (79) Essentially, the many climbs Julien makes speak to his ambitions. Julien considers his courtship with Madame de Rênal in the

⁶¹ “Hardly had they seated themselves in the garden when, without waiting for it to get dark enough, Julien put his lips to Mme de Rênal’s ear” (Gard 94).

“enchanted pleasure garden” to be a battle and names himself her conqueror, but when he climbs to Madame de Rênal’s bedroom, and expects to win his victory, the battle disappears for a moment. Just as there is some *calcul* in the garden, there is some authenticity in the climb.

Ladders are Julien Sorel’s metaphor of choice, he climbs them to his lovers’ windows several times in *Le Rouge et le Noir*. After he leaves the mayor’s estate for the seminary, Julien comes back to Verrières one last time to visit Madame de Rênal: “La nuit était fort noire. Vers une heure du matin, Julien, chargé de son échelle, entra dans Verrières. Il descendit le plus tôt qu’il put dans le lit du torrent, qui traverse les magnifiques jardins de M. de Rênal à une profondeur de dix pieds” (215).⁶² The late hour, the ten feet deep stream, and the dark night all play into a general sense of risk and peril—this is to say, the threat of the fall is present, and Julien’s situation is precarious. These suggestions of physical danger are also suggestive of the very present threat of Monsieur de Rênal (it’s no coincidence that Stendhal reminds us that they are *his* gardens) finding the young man in his wife’s room.

Once Julien enters through the window, the ladder’s symbolic meaning of ambition comes into question. She provokes him: “J’ai pitié de vous, lui dit-elle, cherchant à blesser son orgueil qu’elle connaissait si irritable” (217).⁶³ Julien asks the fatal question, “Quoi! Est-il possible que vous ne m’aimiez plus,” and is met with her silence (217).⁶⁴ Sufficiently wounded, his ambitions and heroism melt away: “Tout son courage l’avait quitté dès qu’il n’avait plus eu à craindre le danger de rencontrer un homme; tout avait disparu de son cœur, hors l’amour” (217).⁶⁵

⁶² “The night was very dark. Around one in the morning, Julien entered Verrières carrying his ladder. As soon as he could, he got down into the bed of the stream which crosses M. de Rênal’s magnificent gardens at a depth of about ten feet” (Gard 228).

⁶³ “I pity you, she added, trying to wound the pride she knew to be so sensitive” (Gard 231).

⁶⁴ “What! Can it really be possible you no longer love me” (Gard 231).

⁶⁵ “From the moment he no longer had to fear the danger of meeting a man all his boldness had deserted him; everything had departed from his heart, save love” (Gard 231).

The ladder of ambition leads Julien to the woman he thinks he will conquer, who then manipulates him into realizing his love for her. While Madame de Rênal intended to wound Julien's pride, her silence in the face of his question has a larger effect, pushing every feeling out of his heart other than love. Perhaps the most blameless and authentic character in all four novels, Madame de Rênal succeeds here in manipulating Julien, forcing him into an experience of *sincérité*. The oscillation between truth and lies in the space of these few lines suggests that what the ladder offers is not higher social standing, but rather a necessary bridge allowing these two characters to admit their authentic emotions.

The ladder scene bears the echo of Valmont and the Présidente's "bonheur complète," yet Stendhal's moment is somewhat more lasting. Laclos' pair ended their long battle of virtue and deceit in one brief instant of authenticity, but here Madame de Rênal short-circuits Julien's ambition to conquer her by refusing to be the beloved. She forces him to ask if he loves her, transforming Julien into her beloved, and making her the lover. The love Julien has for Madame de Rênal and that she has for him remains dormant until the novel's end, when they can fully experience it together. Like the authentic moment Valmont and the Présidente share in *Liaisons*, the love between Julien and Madame de Rênal brings about the tragic downfall of the novel's characters. Yet Julien and Madame de Rênal share several moments of *sincérité*, not just a few earth-shattering seconds, and so Stendhal reveals a stronger belief in love's durability, one more akin to Rousseau than Laclos.

Julien climbs another ladder to the window of Mathilde de La Mole, and then climbs the scaffold after he shoots Madame de Rênal for ruining his chances at a title. But Julien's end is not tragic—it's somewhat exultant. When Madame de Rênal first comes to see him in prison, Julien confesses: "Sache que je t'ai toujours aimée, que je n'ai aimé que toi." 'Est-il bien

possible!’ s’écia Madame de Rênal à son tour. Elle s’appuya sur Julien, qui était à ses genoux, et longtemps ils pleurèrent en silence” (Stendhal 491).⁶⁶ Weeping together, Julien’s confession allows them both to accept that he will die, to realize that she will be disgraced, and to admit to their love. Julien, so often the calculating and cold one of the pair, was the one to confess, and the two fall silent. After the long-awaited phrase “je t’ai toujours aimée” is spoken, nothing else remains but but pure emotion.

With his future cut off, Julien is finally free from his ambitions. In fact, the critics E. B. O. Borgerhoff and Jacques Rancière both use “happiness” to describe the novel’s ending.⁶⁷ Rancière explains: “This happiness presumes that the conqueror should shed any 'deftness', and the loved 'object' no longer be object to anything—it too must shed all social determination, and be subtracted from the logic of means and ends” (Rancière 44). Rancière finds that the frame of “conqueror” and “object” fades away only at the novel’s end, that only when Julien nears death is he able to abandon his ambitions. But this theory doesn’t accurately describe the relationship between Madame de Rênal and Julien. As the ladder scene makes evident, Julien might wish to be a conqueror, but he often is not. He can’t stay in character throughout the novel—while he tends to play his part, Julien does have significant lapses in control. These moments of authenticity become fully realized as authentic love when he’s sentenced to death. The awaiting guillotine puts an end to Julien’s constant performance, and his cognitive dissonance dissipates.

⁶⁶ “‘You must know that I have always loved you, that I have never loved anyone but you.’ ‘Can that be so!’ cried Mme de Rênal, ecstatic in her turn. She leant over Julien, who was on his knees before her, and for a long time they wept together in silence” (Gard 514).

⁶⁷ “Surrendering completely to his love for Mme de Renal—that is, in no longer trying to keep his head—he finds his happiness” (Borgerhoff 523).
 “Such happiness can be summarized in a simple formula: to enjoy the quality of sensible experience that one reaches when one stops calculating, wanting and waiting, as soon as one resolves to do nothing” (Rancière 45).

When Julien Sorel ceases to be “Julien Sorel,” when he ceases to live his *roman*, he arrives at moments of authenticity. Like Valmont, he cannot articulate these moments: they are totalizing. Language disappears with the arrival of the authentic moment—pure emotion takes over, the body feels, the internal author disappears. At the very bottom, in a basement prison cell, Julien Sorel reaches the peak of his experience. Having fallen, he rises. With tears on his face and Madame de Rênal in his arms, “A aucune époque de sa vie, Julien n’avait trouvé un moment pareil” (Stendhal 491).⁶⁸

⁶⁸ “Never in his whole life had Julien had a moment to compare with this” (Gard 514).

Conclusion

Hidden away in a prison cell, secluded in a wild grove, or under the gaze of a husband's portrait, authenticity is manifest. The authentic is always unexpected, always accidental, always totalizing. Despite themselves, these texts reveal the possibility for us to *be*, however briefly. The best way to understand the authentic is to know what it isn't: the sincere is not stable, spoken, practiced, or virtuous.

Authenticity doesn't lead to a consistent personality—it is by nature disruptive, bringing about cognitive dissonance in those who experience it. The authentic proves to be the brief moments when one's reason is lost, when language is no longer relevant, a truth manifesting itself when least expected. “Nous n'avons pas assez de force pour suivre toute notre raison,” writes La Rochefoucauld, and as devastating as his cynicism can be, even he admits the limits of our ability to be rational (412).⁶⁹ There is one character who proves La Rochefoucauld wrong: a sixteen year old courtier proves to be the most inauthentic of all characters across the four novels. The Princesse de Clèves forces herself to obey a strict moral code and never gives into her desires—as such, she is loyal to her own identity as virtuous, but she never experiences the unexpected and overwhelming authentic encounter. Like the Princesse, the Marquise de Merteuil remained consistent in her deceit and cynicism—but can sincerity ever be the act of constructing and protecting a self? It is the characters who don't engineer any kind of construction, like Madame de Rênal and Saint-Preux, or characters who are unstable, like Julien Sorel and the Vicomte de Valmont, who experience the authentic.

Vice loves virtue—this is one of the paradoxes about *sincérité*: only the inauthentic knows the value of authenticity. Struggling to be authentic, Julie d'Étange worked constantly to

⁶⁹ Translation, mine: “We do not have enough strength to follow all our reason.”

preserve *sincérité* around her. Saint-Preux and his anomalous innocence prove to be less important to understanding Rousseau's grasp of authenticity than Julie's desire to surround herself with "the natural." Yet, Rousseau's careful study of the difference between the wild forests at Clarens and Julie's garden seems to put forth the idea that not all nature is natural. The glaring artificiality of her Elysium speaks to an authorial awareness of the impossibility of utopia. Even so, Rousseau couldn't help but try with *Héloïse*. This pursuit of the authentic by the inauthentic is why Julie loves Saint-Preux, why Valmont chooses the Présidente, why Julien found Madame de Rênal so beautiful.

Sincérité manifests itself in its completion for only a moment, and often these moments are beyond language. When the Présidente's virtue and Valmont's vice reconcile and give in to one another, Valmont can't even articulate his feeling—when he approaches the "authentic," he is unable to understand exactly *what* causes the "bonheur réciproque" he feels. Laclos' message is clear: the "authentic" can't be a personality trait. A challenge to the utopian project of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* throws the earnest hopes of Saint-Preux and Julie into the perilous world of Parisian society. Laclos has much less faith in nature's redemptive powers: Valmont the Parisian libertine spreads the infectious *insincérité* of the city wherever he goes. By having Valmont use nature as a ruse for corrupting virtue, and having him experience authentic emotion in an elegant mansion in the city, Laclos seems to be demonstrating the power of both *calcul* and authenticity to invade every space. After all, Julien Sorel falls silent not in the garden, but in his prison cell. The pure and totalizing emotion Julien and Madame de Rênal feel in that moment silences all else, their bodies grieving together.

Authenticity is not chaste, religious, or practiced: the clear link between the body, desire, and the authentic in all four of these texts points to the un-virtuous nature of the sincere. Julien

had much to lose, but unlike Madame de Rênal, his virtue was never a crucial part of his identity. While inextricably linked to authenticity, virtue is not the same idea. Often the most virtuous characters in these texts are also the least authentic: the Princesse, Julie, and the Présidente all embody this paradox, and it is no consequence that the characters who struggle with virtue are all women. *Vertu* was social capital, a way to be judged, a value system. However, these virtuous women only have authentic experiences when they are *not* being virtuous: the Présidente and Valmont share their brief moment of truth when they sleep together. Madame de Rênal and Julien, constrained even in the garden, embrace only in her bedroom. When the virtuous transgress their own moral codes, they often arrive at a moment of even greater *sincérité*.

This is the nature of the authentic: it's unpracticed, unexpected, almost involuntary. Deeper emotions and desires briefly conquer the layers of rules, propriety, and religion in these characters' lives. These moments aren't necessarily positive or suggestive of an authorial position in favor of a more honest society—but they are undeniably powerful, and stand in fierce opposition to the masks we wear every day. We cannot aspire to *be authentic*—as soon as sincerity becomes aspirational, it's already calculating, double. Rather, the authentic moment often lurks around the corner, waiting for the moment when it will take over our own *roman*.

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