

Chapter III - Isabelle de Charrière and the Eighteenth-Century Novel



The Novels of Isabelle de Charrière

by

Dennis Wood

Having surveyed the important friendships and experiences of Isabelle de Charrière's life and their relationship to her work, and having examined the more significant of her minor works, we are now to consider her fiction in a broader context. I propose in this chapter to ask where Isabelle de Charrière stands in relation to earlier and contemporary writers of fiction. However, before attempting to consider her work in the broader framework of literary history, it is important to note briefly what writers Isabelle de Charrière herself read and prized highly or returned to with most pleasure, and in this task we are fortunate enough to have the evidence of her correspondence, both published and unpublished, to aid us.

In a letter addressed to her protégée in Prussia, Henriette L'Hardy, Isabelle de Charrière makes this comment on those achievements in the novel which she admires most:

Werther est a mon gré un chef d'œuvre. Je ne dis pas qu'il n'y ait point d'imperfection mais c'est l'ouvrage du génie & d'une sensibilité exquise. La Pr. de Cleves, Manon L'Escaut, Werther, voilà a mon avis en fait de roman la gloire de la France & de l'Allemagne.¹

From her early years in Holland she knew Richardson's *Clarissa*,² Marivaux's *La Vie de Marianne*,³ Hamilton,⁴ and Voltaire,⁵ and we can be sure that she sampled many more. For Isabelle de Charrière's taste in her later years was catholic, as we see from her letters to Henriette L'Hardy,⁶ L F Huber,⁷ and from those written to Isabelle de Géliou which cover the years from 1790 to her death.⁸ In English literature it is well known that she admired Mrs Inchbald.⁹ But she also read and recommended Johnson's *Rasselas*¹⁰ and Mrs Charlotte Lennox's *Female Don Quixote* (1752),¹¹ and preferred Robert Bage's *Man as He is* (1792) to Fanny Burney's *Camilla* (1796).¹² Godwin's *Caleb Williams* prompted Isabelle de Charrière to write to its author in praise of his novel.¹³ In German literature hitherto unpublished letters to Henriette L'Hardy reveal a predilection for Wieland's *Geschichte des Agathon* (1766-67),¹⁴ and for a novel by Johann Karl Wezel, *Wilhelmina Arend* (1782).¹⁵ But though she dearly loved *Werther*, Madame de Charrière disliked later volumes of *Wilhelm Meister*.¹⁶ As to her reading of contemporary French novelists, we learn that she particularly approved of *Adèle de Sénange* (1794) by Madame de Souza,¹⁷ knew the work of Benjamin Constant's uncle, Samuel de Constant¹⁸ and probably of Madame de Montolieu,¹⁹ and, in the *genre troubadour*, read Madame de Genlis's *Les Chevaliers du cygne ou la cour de Charlemagne* (1795).²⁰ She also had access to Restif's *Les Contemporaines* in Monsieur de Charrière's library.²¹

When we have entered the necessary caveats regarding this evidence - books being on occasion specifically recommended for Henriette L'Hardy's education, for example - it is reasonably clear that Isabelle de Charrière had a general preference for novels of sentiment, novels that explore the complex workings of the human heart in a love-relationship.²² However, it would be unwise to rely solely on such fragmentary information, which in any

case applies for the most part to the period after 1790. We must turn now to considering the facts of literary history, and consider the work of Madame de Charrière in the light of these.

In a recent survey of eighteenth-century French fiction, Professor Henri Coulet has remarked:

De toute l'histoire du roman sous l'Ancien Régime, la période dont il est le plus difficile de donner une description satisfaisante est la fin du XVIIIe siècle.²³

While we await a thorough and systematic listing of French novels published in this period,²⁴ we have to help us a number of partial surveys of the fictional production of the second half of the eighteenth century. From the work of Etienne,²⁵ Mornet,²⁶ Martin,²⁷ Godenne,²⁸ and others²⁹ it is possible to gain a general picture of the state of French fiction during most of Isabelle de Charrière's life and then to isolate those strands which are most closely related to her work.

It will be evident from earlier discussion of Isabelle de Charrière's fiction that she was associated with a particular line of development, that of the *roman sentimental*,³⁰ a line which we can trace back to the seventeenth century, to Madame de Lafayette, to *Le Grand Cyrus*, and to *L'Astrée*. In her own century it was *La Nouvelle Héloïse* which of course gave additional popularity to the *roman sentimental*, but there were many other practitioners, notably Marivaux (*La Vie de Marianne*, 1731-41), Prévost (*Mémoires d'un homme de qualité*, 1728-31), and Richardson, certain of whose novels were taken into the French tradition in Prévost's adapted translations. However, it is among the lesser practitioners of the form that we must look for parallels to Isabelle de Charrière's own kind of fiction, to Madame de Tencin, Madame de Grafigny, and above all, perhaps, Madame Riccoboni. We might also look to Duclos (*Histoire de Madame de Luz*, 1741), to Crébillon fils (*Lettres de la Marquise de M*** au Comte de R****, 1732) and particular works of Baculard d'Arnaud, for example *Les Epoux malheureux...* (1745) and *Clary* (1767). I shall be returning to such novelists presently. After 1761 the tradition of the *roman sentimental* was joined by imitators and disciples of Rousseau, such as Dorat (*Les Sacrifices de l'amour*, 1771, and *Les Malheurs de l'inconstance*, 1772) and Loaisel de Tréogate (*Ainsi finissent les grandes passions*, 1778, and *Dolbreuse...*, 1783), and later Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, as well as other *minores*.³¹ By the period when Isabelle de Charrière was writing, translations and imitations of Goethe's *Werther* had added further new elements to the tradition³² The years 1780-1800 represent largely a continuation of earlier forms of the novel rather than its renewal. Madame Riccoboni's fiction was still appearing (*Histoire de Christine, reine de Suabe* and *Histoire d'Enguerrand*, 1783), Restif continued to publish his *Contemporaines* (and also *La Paysanne pervertie* (1784)) and Baculard d'Arnaud his stories. Two of the more significant works of the period were, of course, Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) and Rousseau's *Les Amours de Milord Edouard Bomston* (1780), to the latter of which *Caliste* bears some resemblance.³³ But more directly important as regards Isabelle de Charrière's work was Samuel de Constant's *Le Mari sentimental...* (1783), to which *Mistriss Henley* was a kind of pendant. Other species of the novel in this period 1780-1800, the gothic, erotic (Nerciat and Louvet, for example), sombre, oriental and historical need not detain us, but it is of interest that Madame de Charrière did utilize the common Emigration situation as a background in *Trois femmes*, a situation found in several other novels of the period.

Looking back on the preceding brief survey, we can observe that Isabelle de Charrière belongs to a tradition of the *roman sentimental* which was still alive in her creative years, and would be continued by Madame de Genlis, Madame Cottin (*Claire d'Albe*, 1799), Madame de

Krüdener (*Valérie*, 1803), and, of course, by Madame de Staël (*Corinne*, 1807). There is, however, in the restrained, sober tone of Madame de Charrière something that is remote from the Romantic effusiveness of Germaine de Staël, and which looks back to earlier writers.

A further important element in placing Isabelle de Charrière in the general context of the eighteenth-century novel is her preoccupation with 'la condition féminine', with the social and emotional lives of women. The view of human relationships that Isabelle de Charrière offers is, however, too comprehensive for propaganda. Nevertheless, if we add together this evidence - sobriety of manner and a concern with the affective lives of women - there can be little doubt of her further affiliation with that particular form of the *roman sentimental* known as the *roman féminin*.³⁴

Professor Jacques Vier noted recently:

Ce que l'ancienne poétique appelait "les grands intérêts" n'intervient guère dans le roman féminin; quant aux "grandes passions" elles y sont rares. En revanche, le prisme sentimental s'y enrichit de mille nuances.³⁵

This observation could equally well be applied to some of Madame de Charrière's finest writing as to Madame Riccoboni and other practitioners of the *roman féminin* who preceded her, Madame de Fontaines (*La Comtesse de Savoie*, 1722), Madame de Tencin (*Mémoires du Comte de Comminge*, 1735, and *Le Siège de Calais*, 1739), and, in some measure, Madame de Grafigny (*Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, 1747). But the parallels are perhaps strongest with Madame Riccoboni's work, which is not concerned with dramatic moments in the historic past and has few exotic affinities, but rather records fine shades of feeling in women who suffer through love, often through the faithlessness of the object of their passion, and who frequently reveal great generosity of character. The scale of some of Madame Riccoboni's brief stories, such as the *Histoire du Marquis de Cressy* (1758) or the *Histoire d'Ernestine* (1765), her sense of the often unjust burden of responsibility laid on women and of the quiet strength required of them, and the generally domestic setting of her novels, all these characteristics bring us close to the concerns of Isabelle de Charrière. The similarities are such that I believe they require some brief consideration here. The discussion will further serve to distinguish Isabelle de Charrière's work from more distantly-related novelists whom limitations of space preclude my discussing other than cursorily.

In *Lettres de Milady Juliette Catesby* (1759), Lady Catesby loves Milord d'Ossery. Her letters to her friend record the monotonous rhythm of her lonely days at a country house, the dullness of those around her, and the aching memory of Milord d'Ossery's perfidy. Madame Riccoboni's heroine is intelligent, sensitive and affectionate and draws us into growing sympathy with her plight. She finds herself in a perpetual state of nervous expectation, wanting news of d'Ossery but also wishing to forget him now he has married Jenny Monford. There is humour of a kind, too, in the contradictory positions the heroine adopts from moment to moment, and this helps to make Lady Catesby's character plausible. Later in the story comes a moment of pathos in the briefly reported scene between Milord d'Ossery and his dying wife, since he is unable to love Jenny even though he feels great pity for her. Lady Catesby, like the heroines of *Le Noble*, *Mistriss Henley* and *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*, is at a permanent disadvantage. She is obliged to conform to *l'usage du monde*, the social pattern of respectability, and at the same time is constantly vulnerable to the wiles of men.³⁶ In Madame Riccoboni's *Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd...* (1757), there is a more girlish heroine whose tone matures through grief and suffering until she finally approaches the

situation of Madame de Tourvel in Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Again the reader's involvement is built up by the genuineness of Fanni's love and the cruelty of her betrayal, as well as by our following in detail her day-to-day feelings. As Fanni says:

Mon style est toujours assujetti aux impressions que mon ame reçoit.³⁷

and further,

mon style est tendre quelquefois; il est tantôt badin, tantôt grave, triste même, souvent ennuyeux, toujours vrai.³⁸

It is the kind of confessional style of letter-novel that we find in these two novels by Madame Riccoboni that Madame de Charrière later used in *Lettres écrites de Lausanne and Mistriss Henley*. We also find, for example in Madame Riccoboni's Fanni Butlerd, the kind of woman whose high principles must make up for her social inferiority:

La rigidité des principes auquel[s] je tiens le plus, n'est peut-être estimable que dans ma sphère; elle est peut-être le partage de ceux qui, négligés de la fortune, peu connus par leurs dehors, ont continuellement besoin de descendre en eux-mêmes, pour ne pas rougir de leur position. Le témoignage de leur cœur leur donne en partie, ou du moins leur tient lieu de ce que le sort leur a refusé.³⁹

In a somewhat different form we shall find a comparable disjunction between character and status in *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*. Indeed there is to some extent a parallel to Caliste in Fanni's description of herself addressed to her faithless lover:

trop délicate pour vous partager, trop fière pour remplir vos momens perdus, & trop équitable pour vouloir garder un bien sur lequel un autre acquiert de justes droits [...]⁴⁰

Similarities of tone and interest are, then, discernible between Madame Riccoboni's work and that of Isabelle de Charrière. But there are also considerable differences. The fact is that Madame Riccoboni's feminism is overt and leads to passages of preaching:

Les hommes nous regardent comme des êtres placés dans l'Univers pour l'amusement de leur esprit, pour servir de jouet à cette espece d'enfance où les assujettit la fougue de leurs passions, l'impétuosité de leurs desirs, & l'impudente liberté qu'ils se sont réservée de les montrer avec hardiesse & de les satisfaire sans honte. L'art difficile de résister, de vaincre ses penchans, de maîtriser la nature même, fut laissé par eux au sexe qu'ils traitent de foible, qu'ils osent mépriser comme foible.⁴¹

However much Isabelle de Charrière might sympathize with such sentiments, her novels generally eschew propaganda and simple, unqualified didacticism. Only the utopian dreaming of the heroine's mother in *Histoire de Cécile* comes anywhere near feminist apologetics. Madame de Charrière disliked tugging at the reader's sleeve.⁴²

A further difference between Madame Riccoboni and Madame de Charrière which distinguishes the latter's individual position within her tradition is the use of local references. Madame Riccoboni's settings tend to be colourless by comparison with those of Isabelle de Charrière. Now I do not mean to imply by this that there is massive use of concrete detail in Madame de Charrière's Swiss settings. There is not. But there are a considerable number of

references to places and streets, and discreet allusions to the social hierarchy of Lausanne, to the freedom of association between young men and women in Protestant Lausanne and Neuchâtel, the total effect of which, I believe, is to lend *Lettres neuchâtelaises* and *Histoire de Cécile* a convincingly localized flavour.

In the use which they make of the letter form, the two novelists are perhaps closer. Their epistolary novels, like Madame de Grafigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, exploit the one-sided correspondence form, a literary device better suited to self-analysis and self-revelation rather than to imparting a sense of movement or action to a narrative. However, in *Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd...* and *Lettres de Milady Juliette Catesby...* the form suffers from rather creaky machinery. Parts of the latter novel rival the worst passages of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*:

quelle surprise! sous une enveloppe dont la main m'est inconnue, une lettre de Milord d'Ossery... oui, de lui, en vérité... voilà son caractère... elle est de lui... Mon Dieu, elle est bien de lui!... D'où vient-elle?... qui l'a apportée?... comment?... pourquoi?... Il m'écrit encore!... à moi!... que me veut-il?... Ma main tremble... ma plume s'échappe de mes doigts... Il faut que je prenne l'air.⁴³

There is nothing in Isabelle de Charrière as absurd as this.⁴⁴ There is, rather, a general level of competence, and indeed in *Lettres neuchâtelaises* each speaker has a convincingly personalized voice and tone, and the order of letters is often telling.

The final all-important distinction between Isabelle de Charrière and her predecessor in the *roman féminin* is that, though their tone may be similar at times, Madame de Charrière has an incisiveness of which Madame Riccoboni was perhaps incapable. Her manner is far more 'natural', as is her handling of dialogue. She does not adopt the flaccid prose of the 'style noble'. On the contrary, her writing at its best displays a distinctive pertness, a tone of Voltairean understatement, and a wit which fully engages the reader's intelligence. For all her insights into human nature, Madame Riccoboni's central characters are frequently two-dimensional and conventional. Isabelle de Charrière's are most often the very opposite.

If we look a little further afield in the tradition of the *roman sentimental*, we might perhaps see the sufferings of Caliste as in some measure anticipated in those of the Marquise de M*** in *Lettres de la Marquise de M*** au Comte de R**** of Crébillon fils or in the misfortunes of Baculard d'Arnaud's *Clary*. Indeed the scale of such a *récit court* by Baculard d'Arnaud is not unlike that of some of Isabelle de Charrière's work. The morbid and sentimental tone, on the other hand, particularly in longer works like *Les Epoux malheureux...*, is utterly alien to Madame de Charrière. The same can be said of another near-contemporary, Dorat. Once more it is Isabelle de Charrière's restraint, sobriety of tone, and conciseness that distinguishes her from the author of *Les Sacrifices de l'amour...* (1771) and *Les Malheurs de l'inconstance ...* (1772), as well as from the high-flown sentimentality of followers of Rousseau, imitators of *Werther*, or members of the *école sensible* writing in the last third of the century.

In another respect Isabelle de Charrière appears more indebted to her predecessors and contemporaries. The distinctly *regional* flavour of *Lettres neuchâtelaises* and of *Histoire de Cécile* probably owes something to *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, but also perhaps to Restif de la Bretonne's portrayals of provincial life. Samuel de Constant is also close to Madame de Charrière in offering an authentically *Swiss* setting in his fiction. Although it must be emphasized that Isabelle de Charrière does not share Samuel de Constant's rather facile Rousseauistic dislike of town life, his domestic psychological study, *Le Mari sentimental...*

(1783), to which *Mistriss Henley* (1784) is Madame de Charrière's companion-piece, and *Laure, ou Lettres de quelques femmes de Suisse* (1786) both have a localized setting and a certain similarity of tone.

We are now in a position to see Isabelle de Charrière's relationship to the tradition of the novel in her century. Her work combines some features of the *roman sentimental*, in particular of the so-called *roman féminin*, with, on occasion, a particular regional setting, probably suggested both by her own experience of life in Switzerland and by the example of writers such as Samuel de Constant. Further, it is my belief that although her novels can undoubtedly be read from quite different points of view, Madame de Charrière's principal preoccupations are psychological and moral ones. My purpose in subsequent chapters will be to offer an analysis of her works that will reveal how the exploration of a moral theme is supported by the structure of a given novel or story. As Professor Jean Starobinski has said, in any critical approach to Madame de Charrière "il faut écouter de légers bruissements",⁴⁵ those minute shifts and transitions in the emotional lives of men and women in her novels. In tracing out her patterns of cause and consequence, Isabelle de Charrière is able to suggest some of the contradictoriness and complexity of human experience. This she does with what is perhaps best described as a naturalness of style which avoids the grosser pitfalls of her age - didacticism, propaganda, sentimentality - and, for a minor artist, succeeds in maintaining a considerable degree of interest and involvement in her reader.

¹ B.V.N. Ms 1303, no.105, 4 April 1795.

² *Lettres à d'Hermenches*, 133.

³ Godet I, 29.

⁴ Godet, I, 64.

⁵ *Lettres à d'Hermenches*, 321.

⁶ B.V.N. Ms 1302-1304, 161 letters covering the years 1791-1803.

⁷ In the private collection of Madame Paul Chaponnière of Geneva, copies communicated to me by Professor Charly Guyot.

⁸ Dorette Berthoud, *Madame de Charrière et Isabelle de Gélieu*. Extrait des *Actes de la Société jurassienne d'Emulation*, Année 1971 (Imprimerie Roger Pfeuti, La Neuveville [1971]).

⁹ With Isabelle de Gélieu she published a translation of her *Nature and Art* in 1797.

¹⁰ B.V.N. Ms 1302, no. 5, 27 Sept. 1791, to H L'Hardy.

¹¹ B.V.N. Ms 1304, no. 141, 9-13 Dec. 1794, to H. L'Hardy.

¹² Letter to L F Huber, 20 July 1798.

¹³ Godet II, 350.

- ¹⁴ B.V.N. Ms 1304, no. 137 [Nov. 1794]. (See also Godet II, 274.)
- ¹⁵ B.V.N. Ms 1302, no.10, 2 February 1792.
- ¹⁶ Letter to L F Huber, 29 December 1800
- ¹⁷ Godet II, 350
- ¹⁸ *Camille* (see Godet II, 178) as well as *Le Mari Sentimental*
- ¹⁹ See Godet I, 305
- ²⁰ Letter to L F Huber, 16 December 1795
- ²¹ Godet I, 360.
- ²² This interest in motive and feeling perhaps explains her lifelong attachment to Classical historians like Tacitus and Plutarch.
- ²³ Henri Coulet, *Le Roman jusqu'à la Révolution* (Paris, 1967), t.1, 418.
- ²⁴ In preparation, A Martin, V G Mylne, R L Frautschi, *Bibliographie du genre romanesque français, 1751-1800* (London and Chicago), continuing the work of Silas P. Jones, *A List of French Prose Fiction from 1700 to 1750* (New York, 1939).
- ²⁵ S Etienne, *Le Genre romanesque en France depuis l'apparition de la Nouvelle Héloïse jusqu'aux approches de la Révolution* (Brussels, 1922).
- ²⁶ J-J Rousseau, *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, ed. D Mornet (Paris, 1925), t.1.
- ²⁷ A Martin, 'A First Listing of New French Prose Fiction 1780-1783', *A.J.F.S.*, III (1966), 356-369; 'A First Listing of New French Prose Fiction 1784-1788', *A.J.F.S.*, IV (1967), 109-131; 'A First Listing of New French Prose Fiction 1780-1788: Addenda and Corrigenda', *A.J.F.S.*, VI (1969), 131-137; 'Le Roman en France sous la Révolution: Thèmes et Tendances: 1789-1799', *Studi francesi*, XVI (1972), 281-294.
- ²⁸ *Histoire de la nouvelle française aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Geneva, 1970).
- ²⁹ Laurent Versini, *Laclos et la Tradition* (Paris, 1968), esp. 654-664, and Anna Mary Attridge, *The Reception of Rousseau's La Nouvelle Héloïse in France and its influence on the French novel from 1761 to 1786*, unpublished Cambridge PhD thesis, 1972.
- ³⁰ On this genre in the eighteenth century, see Henri Coulet, op. cit., t.1, esp. 378-386.
- ³¹ See Rousseau, *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, ed. D Mornet (Paris, 1925), t.1, 367-369, and Anna Mary Attridge, *The Reception of Rousseau's La Nouvelle Héloïse in France and its influence on the French novel from 1761 to 1786*, unpublished Cambridge PhD thesis, 1972.
- ³² See Louis Morel, 'Les principales traductions de *Werther* et les jugements de la critique (1776-1872)', *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 119 (1907),

139-159, and Henry Stavan, 'Les premiers romans werthériens français: imitations ou parodies?', *Neophilologus*, LII (1968), 362-365.

³³ Madame de Souza's *Adèle de Sénange* (1794) may have given Isabelle de Charrière the idea for Constance's coach accident in *Trois femmes*. It was doubtless fresh in her mind at the time of writing *Trois femmes*, as we learn from Godet II, 216.

³⁴ See Jacques Vier, *Histoire de la littérature française: XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1970), t.II, 580-605, and Pierre Fauchery's monumental study, *La Destinée féminine dans le roman européen du XVIIIe siècle. Essai de gynécomythie romanesque* (Paris, 1972), 2 vols.

³⁵ Jacques Vier, op. cit., 599-600.

³⁶ Such pressures also govern the behaviour and limit the freedom of action of Ernestine in her love for the Marquis de Clémengis in the *Histoire d'Ernestine*.

³⁷ [Madame Riccoboni], *Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd, à Milord Charles Alfred de Caitombridge...* (Paris, 1759), 93.

³⁸ [Madame Riccoboni], op. cit., 120.

³⁹ [Madame Riccoboni], op. cit., 172.

⁴⁰ [Madame Riccoboni], op. cit., 173

⁴¹ [Madame Riccoboni], *Lettres de Milady Juliette Catesby à Milady Henriette Campley, son amie* (Amsterdam, 1759).

⁴² This was the principal reason for her dislike of the work of Madame de Genlis. Of one of her works Isabelle de Charrière wrote to a friend that it was "si moral, si endoctrinant, d'un style si sec!" (Godet II, 257 n.1.).

⁴³ [Madame Riccoboni], *Lettres de Milady Juliette Catesby à Milady Henriette Campley, son ami* (Amsterdam, 1759), 124.

⁴⁴ It may readily be conceded, however, that there is sometimes too much giving of information which the correspondent might reasonably be expected to know already. I am thinking particularly of the beginning of *Mistriss Henley* and of *Histoire de Cécile*.

⁴⁵ *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse, Lettres écrites de Lausanne*. Présentation de Jean Starobinski (Lausanne, 1970), 45.