

## Chapter VII - Trois femmes and Suite des Trois femmes



The Novels of Isabelle de Charrière

by

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*Plato's Dialogues are queer little novels. It seems to me it was the greatest pity in the world, when philosophy and fiction got split. They used to be one, right from the days of myth. Then they went and parted, like a nagging married couple, with Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas and that beastly Kant. So the novel went sloppy, and philosophy went abstract-dry. The two should come together again - in the novel.*

(D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix*)

*Trois femmes*, which first appeared in a German translation by Ludwig Ferdinand Huber in 1795,<sup>1</sup> was published in the original French for the first time in London in 1796 in a somewhat bowdlerized form,<sup>2</sup> having been censored and in parts rewritten by a French émigré Count, M. de Lally, against Isabelle de Charrière's wishes.<sup>3</sup> It appeared in its complete form in an edition published at Lausanne in 1797, but unfortunately one which was full of printing errors.<sup>4</sup> Modern editions of the novel - those of Lonchamp (1942) and of Professor Charly Guyot (1971)<sup>5</sup> - follow the text of 1798, printed by Orell Füssli in Zurich and published in Leipzig 'chez Pierre-Philippe Wolf'.<sup>6</sup> I shall base my study on the most recent and readily available of the two modern editions, which also happens to have the fewest misprints.

*Trois femmes* is not a particularly easy work to grasp immediately, but it is one that richly repays careful reading. Like for example *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, the central problem which it poses for the reader is whether it requires to be read in terms of conflicts between certain abstract moral and philosophical positions or whether it is concerned with the real problems of everyday living. I intend to deal with this question before moving on to any other, in the hope that it will lead us nearer to what Isabelle de Charrière is doing - and doing with considerable success - in *Trois femmes*.

The novelist has left us a few important clues that may help in solving the problem. She described the novel on one occasion as:

un petit traité du devoir, mis en action [...] On n'a pas prétendu donner des modèles à suivre, mais montrer des vices et des faiblesses à excuser comme non incompatibles avec une idée ou un sentiment de devoir et une moralité dans la personne coupable ou accusable.<sup>7</sup>

In a letter to Constant written closer to its period of composition Isabelle de Charrière also said:

Par idée de devoir j'entends l'idée que quelque chose est dû, n'importe quoi, et indépendamment de tout calcul. Le roman ne prétend point prouver l'existence de cette idée, que Kant dit exister.<sup>8</sup>

The first quotation is a clear echo of the well-known preface by the Abbé Prévost to his *Manon Lescaut*:

L'ouvrage entier est un traité de morale réduit agréablement en exercice.<sup>9</sup>

This obviously suggests that Isabelle de Charrière is anxious to avoid any kind of direct preaching, but also that every incident in her story will be significant and will illustrate some moral concept. The second quotation clearly sets out to question a new vogue in ethical thinking which has recently been preoccupying her.

On the actual extent of Isabelle de Charrière's acquaintance with Kant a considerable amount of work has been done by Munteano, whose long article<sup>10</sup> places the influence of Kant in Switzerland in its context. The facts briefly are these. Benjamin Constant, who was in correspondence with Isabelle de Charrière from 1787 to the end of her life, spent the period from 1788 to 1794 largely at the court of the Duke of Brunswick. He could read German, and in December 1794, while staying in Lausanne, seems to have been particularly excited by his reading of Kant's philosophy and to have shared his discoveries with Isabelle de Charrière. It is clear that through conversations and letters she became acquainted with the broad lines of Kant's ethical thinking as expressed up till then. This knowledge would soon be supplemented by her friend and translator Ludwig Ferdinand Huber who was engaged in translating Kant's *Theorie und Praxis* (1793) over the period November 1794 - January 1795, a translation of which Isabelle de Charrière probably corrected the proofs. (Huber's translation was sent in manuscript to Paris and was in the hands of Grégoire by the end of January 1795, but nothing is known of its fate after that date). Isabelle de Charrière was not exaggerating when she wrote to Henriette L'Hardy on 16 December 1794:

Dans cet instant il est fort question ici de Kant. On le traduit, on l'analyse, on s'efforce de le comprendre.<sup>11</sup>

But probably her clearest statement concerning her understanding of Kant at that moment comes in her letter to L. F. Huber of 25 December 1794:

J'ai reçu hier une lettre de M. Constant. Il y a un mot ou deux que je n'ai pu déchiffrer. Comme il ne s'agit que de métaphysique, cela est peu important. M. Constant est ainsi que moi de l'avis de Kant qu'on ne saurait mêler à l'idée de devoir l'idée d'aucun avantage attaché à remplir un devoir qu'on ne détruise son essence. Pour le reste il ne m'a pas entendue et je ne l'entends pas. Peut-être croira-t-il que c'est parce que je ne l'entends pas que je crois qu'il ne m'a pas entendue. Mais ce n'est pas cela. Avec le temps nous pourrions mieux nous expliquer, si le sujet nous intéresse encore.<sup>12</sup>

She is obviously concerned with the field of disinterested actions as against actions directed towards achieving some utilitarian end, and this is the focus of concern in part of *Trois femmes*. But what is most noteworthy is her shunning of abstractions, a feature which brings life to a novel where abstractions and ratiocination might have proved artistically disastrous.

We ought now perhaps to examine exactly what elements of Kantian ethics Isabelle de Charrière is trying to question in *Trois femmes*. Principally it is the *deontological* conception of the value attaching to actions, which Kant adopts as the *sole* criterion of goodness in behaviour. In Kant's view a person could only be called good whose will was determined by an *a priori* law of reason. *Willed action alone* counted towards goodness. Action which

originated in the inclinations or desires did not fall within the purview of reason, and though it could be evaluated in other terms, it could not according to Kant have any *moral* value. The only strictly *moral* motivation is compliance with the *a priori* command of reason as expressed in Kant's moral law. Such an *a priori* command or categorical imperative is *apodeictic*, or immediate in its authority, whereas all prudential, that is end-directed - or in Kant's term 'hypothetical' - injunctions are non-rational, and therefore not immediately binding on the individual. Kant's position in the perennial debate between deontological and teleological moral systems is an extreme one. His anti-empirical standpoint is in total opposition to the varieties of systematized utilitarianism favoured by Helvétius and other French Enlightenment thinkers influenced by Locke. Actions have value not because of the feelings that go into them, nor because of the favourable results they produce. They have value because of the *principles* on which they are undertaken. At the close of the eighteenth century Kant sent unexpectedly massive reinforcements to beleaguered absolutist thinkers marooned by the high tide of empirical utilitarian thought. And for a while at least Isabelle de Charrière, Germaine de Staël and Benjamin Constant were all interested in his so-called 'Copernican revolution' in philosophy and ethics.

In *Trois femmes* part of the essence of Kant's position reappears. Characters with strong moral scruples find themselves suddenly confronted by a human situation that cries out for some action which their principles will not allow. Isabelle de Charrière is far too subtle to oversimplify the issues: there are discriminations both for and against to be made by the attentive reader. What she does admirably well is to lay before us objectively her explorations of these issues. Of course the whole novel is set against a background of revolutionary violence and inhumanity, the result on occasion of either too many principles or of no principles at all. Isabelle de Charrière's ethical sense was clearly disturbed by the prevailing absence of any profound notion of moral responsibility on the part of those in authority in France:

Savez vous ce qui me consterne surtout dans le jugement rendu & exécuté ce n'est pas la sceleratesse ni la dureté de ceux qui ont provoqué le décret mais la lâcheté de ceux qui l'ont voté contre leur vœu intime & l'apathie de ceux qui ont assisté en silence à un supplice qu'ils ne désiroient pas ou se sont cachés dans leurs maisons. Il est affreux de voir que les gens soi-disans honnêtes ne soyent que des machines sans âmes ou de vils trembleurs.<sup>13</sup>

Shortly after writing this passage at the height of the Terror in a letter to her young friend Henriette L'Hardy, *Trois femmes* was already in existence, at least in rough draft - that is by April 1793. Indeed it was probably already in the form in which we know it, except for topical commentaries that may have been written later:

M. Berthoud & M. de Charriere ont eu la bonté de copier les 3 femmes & je les donnai hier à M. Huber qui les traduira. Elles vous amuseront plus qu'une autre à cause de la France dont vous tenez & de l'Allemagne que vous connoissez. Je continue à écrire les lettres qui feront suite au roman ou plutôt je corrige & copie les dernières, les premières sont déjà au nez.<sup>14</sup>

It seems that the additions on Marat, Rousseau and Voltaire were made later, and certainly around December 1794 the novel was reshaped to accommodate Isabelle de Charrière's thoughts on Kantian problems. Another letter to Henriette L'Hardy illustrates Isabelle de Charrière's attitude to the troubled times that form the backcloth to *Trois femmes*:

Mon scepticisme va toujours croissant & je pourrais en venir à n'être pas très démocrate, même au sein d'une monarchie tyrannique ni très aristocrate au milieu du republicanisme le plus désordonné. Rien n'est si mauvais que son contraire ne puisse paraître encore pire. Je pense à ces grandes insolubles questions le moins que je puis, & me borne à de petites indignations & pitiés individuelles, partielles, privées.<sup>15</sup>

This also demonstrates the concern for individuals that is so apparent in her novel. She is, for all intents and purposes, agnostic in religion and political matters, being concerned primarily with individual dilemmas rather than with broader issues:

Entre l'ignorance qui croit & l'ignorance qui rejette, je choisirois la première excepté chez un souverain dont la superstition peut devenir persécutante. Encore ne sais-je! Neron en fait de cruauté valoit bien Philippe II. Robespierre valoit bien le Duc d'Albe. Les Jacobins valent bien les Jésuites. Carybde & Scylla ne sont-ils pas d'aussi épouvantables écueils l'un que l'autre?<sup>16</sup>

This is confirmed by an undated fragment intended for publication and found in a journal which is also contained in the dossier of letters addressed to Henriette L'Hardy:

Aujourd'hui que le bouleversement d'une grande nation ébranle toutes les autres & que l'autorité des lois nous est devenu précaire & foible de fait mais dans beaucoup d'endroits douteuse de droit, la société me semble ne reposer plus que sur la vertu individuelle. Qu'elle redouble donc de force d'activité de pureté, qu'elle soit excessive s'il le faut chez ceux chez qui elle règne et qu'elle supplée ainsi à toutes les autres lois. Il en étoient qui m'auroient contrainte il y a quelque temps & que je ne reconnois plus auxquelles je n'obéis plus. Je les remplace par d'autres que je m'impose à moi-même et auxquelles je veux obéir strictement. Où en seroit-on dans certains pays & Dieu sait combien de pays sont à la veille de ressembler à celui là si l'on y faisoit tout ce que l'on croiroit pouvoir faire impunément. Il est vrai que les factions y punissent tour à tour les crimes des factions, mais elles punissent aussi les vertus qui s'opposent à elle[s]. Le seul tribunal toujours responsable est celui de notre propre cœur.<sup>17</sup>

We see, then, Isabelle de Charrière's approach to the problem raised by Kant and by the events of the Terror. She wishes to examine, like Rousseau in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, how far it is permissible to place one's own principles and integrity before the interests of others. *Trois femmes* in fact asks whether it is necessary on occasion to sacrifice one's own integrity in order to save others from suffering, and whether one has the right to punish others, as it were, for one's own principles. This is also linked to an inquiry undertaken in the second part of the novel about ill-considered benevolence at the expense of others. At certain moments the focus of concern in *Trois femmes* is very similar to that of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, a play which indeed Isabelle de Charrière may have read. One recalls the central scene between Claudio and Isabella where the choice open to the condemned man's sister is either to give herself physically to Angelo and save Claudio's life, or to preserve her integrity and see her brother die. The scene begins idealistically - Isabella will refuse and Claudio will die - but then moves towards a tragic conclusion as Claudio comes round to begging Isabella to save him. Isabella refuses, holding to the resolution expressed at the close of Act II, Sc. iv:

Then, Isabel, live chaste, and, brother, die:

More than our brother is our chastity.

Emilie is placed in a situation that also demands compassion and a relaxation of principle, and like Isabella, whatever she does may possibly be wrong in the long run. It is perhaps on account of her initially unbending character that she, like Théobald, is in the overall story a slighter figure than Constance or Joséphine, both of whom hold our interest and concern throughout as fully human individuals. But this is not to say that what Constance and Joséphine do is always morally right.

The introductory dialogue before the beginning of *Trois femmes*<sup>18</sup> presents several different points of view concerning morality. In it the Abbé de la Tour's voice is one among many. His own view, as a result of the experiences of the three women whose story he is to relate, is quite clear:

Je me suis convaincu auprès d'elles qu'il suffit, pour n'être pas une personne dépravée, immorale, et totalement méprisable ou odieuse, d'avoir une idée quelconque du devoir et quelque soin de remplir ce qu'on appelle son devoir. N'importe, que cette idée soit confuse ou débrouillée, qu'elle naisse d'une source ou d'une autre, qu'elle se porte sur tel ou tel objet, qu'on s'y soumette plus ou moins imparfaitement, j'oserai vivre avec tout homme ou toute femme qui aura une idée quelconque du devoir.<sup>19</sup>

A Kantian, believing in the strength and autonomy of the will when carrying out the maxims formulated by pure practical reason, maintains the universality of moral obligation *in everyone*. A theologian and a Quietist uphold the heteronomous origin of obligation: that is, it lies in conformity with God's will, and it may be reinforced by God's rewards and punishments. Another defends enlightened self-interest, and yet another questions the derivation of 'ought' from such profit-and-loss calculations. The longest interpretation is cogently and powerfully argued by 'l'homme de la société', and, very significantly, comes last and just before the story itself, as if it represents the strongest challenge to all other moral systems. The 'homme de la société' traces the growth of ethical awareness in the child through reward and punishment. By self-observation, somewhat in the manner described by Adam Smith (see my earlier comments on *Lettres neuchâtelaises*), our moral consciousness is shaped:

nous sommes dans le monde tout à la fois spectacle et spectateurs, jugés et juges.<sup>20</sup>

By the time we reach maturity we have been fully moulded by our upbringing, and our notion of a rewarding and punishing God is an extension of this. This of course is the orthodox 'sociological' and empirical view expounded by, for example, Helvétius, and one which foreshadows much later empirical psychology. Isabelle de Charrière appears to have subscribed to this kind of attitude at least up to the composition of *Lettres neuchâtelaises*. But although it is satisfactory as far as it goes in explaining some aspects of obligation, it is not alone in winning her sympathy. She also admires the kind of individual, autonomous ethical response described by Rousseau. Further, although the Abbé purports to be producing a non-political story, it is clear on close reading that its implications are highly relevant to political actions in France. These, then, are the different possible ethical positions Isabelle de Charrière wishes to lay before an audience well aware of the courage which new situations have demanded of people since 1789. Of course the presence of humour in the prologue alerts us to the huge proliferation of systems and dogmas, and prepares us to see reproduced in the novel something closer to the real experience of men. (And of course the Abbé is no more Isabelle de Charrière than, say, Diderot is *simply* his Narrator, Reader, Jacques or Master in *Jacques le Fataliste*.)

At the outset *Trois femmes* seems to lie somewhere in the line of the *conte philosophique* because of a note of detached amusement in the narrator's voice. Gradually, however, this slips away as the characters grow in stature, and, one assumes, also grew in Isabelle de Charrière's sympathy. She succeeds in building up wholly credible characters, not least in Emilie and Joséphine. The early part of the *Première Partie* places us in the ironic realm of the Voltairean superlative:

[...] la plus jolie maison du plus joli village de la Westphalie.<sup>21</sup>

We have our critical faculties alerted by the lightness of treatment given to a potentially tragic situation. This is the absurd death of Emilie's parents, who are the victims of the pretentious poses they strike, each claiming to die on account of the misfortunes suffered by the other. The welfare of their daughter is therefore sacrificed for their principles, such as they are, namely not to live on in dishonour when their property has been confiscated by the revolutionaries. Into Altendorf comes Emilie, at first glance a figure in the mould of *Candide*, whose education is to be acquired not through the school of experience alone but also through the tensions between the demands of urgent human situations and her received conceptions of right conduct. The lives of Emilie and her servant, the faithful and generous Joséphine, are bound together by adversity. The first crisis in their quiet pastoral existence brings to light the deep gulf between their respective ethical positions: Emilie is thoughtful, hesitant, endowed with principles acquired from her parents and her convent education; Joséphine is relatively uneducated and acts on instinct. This contrast is expressed succinctly in Emilie's 'comment se peut-il:?', alive to causes and consequences, and Joséphine's opportunistic "Jouez, jouez".<sup>22</sup> Joséphine presents Emilie's choice of whether to accept the harp or not as the result of a chain of events at the end of which she places Emilie. Some unknown person has been generous to Emilie and Joséphine; with Emilie's best interests (in her view) at heart, she insists that it would be churlish to refuse the gift. Her second line of attack is to hint that the gift may be for herself. This should appear a more flimsy suggestion to Emilie's rational mind, but when supported by Joséphine's cunning rhetoric, it proves convincing:

pitié pour une jeune fille éloignée de tous ses parents, et obligée par son attachement pour ses maîtres à vivre dans une terre étrangère [...]<sup>23</sup>

In her possibly short-sighted wish to secure at least the short-term advantage of her mistress, Joséphine finally triumphs, and the harp is taken into the house. This first confrontation between them reveals the strengths and weaknesses of each character. Emilie is cautious and perhaps a little too anxious not to compromise her integrity. Joséphine is loving but rather foolhardy. The central point is that neither can foresee the consequences of either course of action, and each must bring her wisdom, experience and humanity to bear on the problem in the hope that the decision taken will be the right one. Emilie has given in largely out of pity for Joséphine, and has ceased for a moment to act in accordance with her ideal rule against "accepter le don d'un inconnu", "une harpe qui ne m'appartient pas"<sup>24</sup> and concerning which she has no information. A tightly knit series of consequences flows from Emilie's first acquiescence in a transaction that goes against her received code of conduct. Emilie, lying awake at night and thinking of the harp - a retrospective clue to her not altogether unselfish motives the previous day<sup>25</sup> - hears Henri enter Joséphine's room. In failing to prevent Joséphine and Henri from pursuing their liaison - out of "la crainte de me compromettre" we later learn - Emilie reveals a little more of the complexity beneath her high moral tone. For she is in fact something of well-meaning prig whose principles are clearly untested by any experience of life. When she persists in her pursuit of absolutes at the expense of others she

becomes pharisaical. The most important of this first series of exchanges shows this most clearly. Joséphine excuses her liaison with Henri on the grounds that his help with the cultivation of their land has been keeping them alive. It must somehow be paid for. Again she places Emilie at the end of a chain of consequences and urges her to accept the situation and to forget moral codes that do not further their material well-being. Up to now Emilie has acquiesced in Joséphine's increasingly utilitarian manoeuvres and has been the beneficiary of their profitable consequences. Now she is forced either to make a stand or to make a really major one which goes against the principles she has been brought up in.<sup>26</sup> She knows of her maidservant's willingness to commit fornication, and may sense that Joséphine's consequentialist morality could be damaging to them both. At this early point in the novel the situation is already extremely complex. Emilie's selfish side sees the advantages of the situation, but also the appalling risks even from a utilitarian viewpoint. That part of her which adheres to principles which she has never put to the test is already weak and uncertain. Emilie gives in because of this combination of feelings, and practises that compassion that Joséphine has been demanding. Joséphine has not been entirely honest, for she clearly enjoys her relationship with Henri<sup>27</sup>, and so in part she is responsible for her own corruption. She is quick to lay the burden of responsibility rather unfairly on Emilie's shoulders. Emilie, inexperienced and as yet incapable of making her own moral judgements, allows her very reasonable and principled position to be undermined by a misplaced sense of responsibility. She allows her brief moral stand to be demolished. Emilie allows pity and guilt to triumph in her in a situation in which the reader feels that they may not be altogether appropriate, especially considering the risks Joséphine is taking. She tells her servant:

Je n'ai plus rien à répondre à un docteur tel que toi.<sup>28</sup>

Is Emilie relieved that there is someone to relieve her of all material worries, and who does not harbour moral scruples? With such thoughts in our minds we move on to the next stage of the story, also remembering the narrator's curiously suggestive words on Emilie's tears and Joséphine's possible incomprehension:

Au moment où elle vit revenir Joséphine, elle essuya des larmes dont il eût été difficile et pénible de lui expliquer les différentes causes.<sup>29</sup>

It is not that all dogma, superstitious rule-worship or legalism has been proved wrong - Isabelle de Charrière is far too subtle to be saying that. It is rather that certain people, rather like Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, knowingly or unknowingly use principles to the detriment of others, and even as a cloak for their own failings. Nor are blind utilitarianism and self-interest given a plus-value; Joséphine's subsequent fate eloquently shows this. Rather Isabelle de Charrière is exploring certain moral options and it is our task to respond to her explorations as fully and as sympathetically as possible.

Teased, provoked and persuaded by Joséphine's exuberant wit and vivacity, Emilie has conceded much ground. She sends a note of thanks to the château enclosing a *fichu* for the Baroness. The observant reader now recalls that Joséphine quite knowingly planted an additional selfish reason in Emilie's mind for accepting the harp, the interest of the squire's son in Emilie:

vous êtes la moitié mieux coiffée que lorsque le Junker vous rencontra dans le chemin, et s'éprit si bien de vous qu'il dit que c'est pour la vie.<sup>30</sup>

When Joséphine had said this, Emilie made no reply, but we must add her servant's words to the sum total of motives prompting Emilie to write to the château. (Why did Joséphine say this? To give Emilie a chance of happiness with Théobald and to ensure that she would rise in the world? Because Henri wanted to see his master's love requited? Once again the suggestiveness of one remark is in fact profound.)

Emilie with her education and principles should have been able to maintain a commanding position vis-à-vis Joséphine, but Joséphine has been perceptive and has played on Emilie's weaknesses. Emilie has occasionally jettisoned her scruples, and now this process is partly helped by the first signs of interest in Emilie for Théobald, signs which later grow into love. Her letter to the Baroness flatters both its recipients and herself, and plays no small part in crystallizing Théobald's admiration for Emilie. Joséphine can rightly feel "glorieuse" when she delivers it, for she has successfully browbeaten her mistress, and cajoled her into submission. The style up to this first 'palier' has gradually developed away from the *conte philosophique*; the tone has ceased to be ironic, and the story is now more overtly serious in its concerns.

The shift of focus from cottage to château is matched by the increasing presence of the Abbé-Narrator who is eye-witness and judge of behaviour in polite society. We are presented with a range of ethical attitudes running from the ogre-father, a ludicrous monster of honour and self-interest in the lineage of Baron Thunder-ten-tronckh or the father in Isabelle de Charrière's own *conte*, *Le Noble*, through the more discreet self-interest of Baroness d'Altendorf and the Countess Sophie, to Théobald's adherence to a principle of universal altruism. Théobald - and Isabelle de Charrière said of him, perhaps tongue-in-cheek:

C'est le plus beau caractère du roman <sup>31</sup>

takes this duty of doing good to others with absolute seriousness, come what may. His mother controls her husband who, in his comic automatism, resembles a clockwork Mr. Punch. However on this particular occasion, when the jealous Sophie tries to use him to nip Théobald's infatuation with Emilie in the bud, the Baroness, for all her reluctance to see her son marry a person not of her choosing, shows herself a mother. She ensures that Sophie's comment on the harp rebounds on her. Already, in a very few words the Baroness has taken on a more three-dimensional character. Sophie shows understandable pique at Théobald's new attachment, and this resentment smoulders on until the end of the story; and it must be said that he is partly responsible for everything he receives at her hands. The real point of this introductory tableau is to cast another sidelight on the central concern of the novel. The Baron, like the father in *Le Noble*, places his honour and integrity before everything else, so that it excludes any kind of imaginative sympathy or compassion for others, even for his own son.

There now follows a period of acquaintance and of growing affection between Théobald and Emilie. Although rather superficially portrayed, their friendship adds a further dimension to the main theme of the novel, for it concentrates on national differences. Emilie is stereotypically French, Théobald typically German: each has what are considered 'national qualities'. It becomes apparent as the novel develops that Emilie has a tendency towards arrogance and pride, and an ability to ridicule others quite hurtfully.<sup>32</sup> Théobald lacks such quick-wittedness, but has a fundamental if rather plodding honesty. Both learn as individuals to control what they had previously prided themselves in. They learn that such habits of mind may bring with them a lack of sympathy for the feelings of others. In their own relationship



each tests the resilience of the other's characteristic attitudes. Emilie's coquetry plunges Théobald into turmoil, for he is exasperated by her desire to live in Paris, a place he considers a centre of barbarism and cruelty on account of the atrocities of the Revolution. Théobald declares his intention of staying in Altendorf and caring for his villagers.

At this crucial moment a new figure comes onto the stage, Constance de Vaucourt, an émigré widow from Paris. We have noted the tightness of the development of the moral dilemmas facing Emilie; no lull has been allowed. Now there is a new challenger - more powerful than Joséphine because more intelligent – to Emilie's fund of moral certainties. Constance is an engaging and perceptive woman of considerable intellectual power, but represents a further pressure on Emilie to reconsider her inherited golden rule of "réfléchis, conserve tes bonnes habitudes". Constance is shrewd and near in outlook to the balance of personal and general interest advocated by "l'homme de la société" in the *Avant-Propos*. Her first concern, as a solitary widow in exile, is to win Emilie's friendship. This task presents no difficulty, for Constance soon imposes her strong personality on her. She moves in next door to Emilie, whose mixture of excitement and uneasiness is laconically hinted at:

Au bout d'une quinzaine de jours, sa demeure fut prête à la recevoir. Emilie trouva qu'on s'était trop pressé.<sup>33</sup>

Capitalizing on her greater experience of life and greater perceptiveness, Constance acts with a convincing blend of rather brutal rhetoric, genuine warmth and self-interest in her treatment of Emilie. In order to insinuate herself into Emilie's confidence - her ultimate long-term aim - she gives an account of her background of misfortune, coloured by an apparent sense of wronged innocence. In this account the very real guilt of her husband and of her father (brought out in the *Suite* to the novel) is considerably underplayed. In a superb piece of casuistry she gradually whittles away before Emilie's eyes all the reasons why she should repay her family's creditors, alleging that:

- (a) Many other people embezzle and escape punishment;
- (b) her creditors are spread too widely across the world; and
- (c) one should not restore money to such corporate bodies as countries or governments because they are all as bad as each other.

Then, with a mixture of pique and confidence born of perceptiveness, Constance changes from a slightly hesitant and cautiously self-justifying tone to one of well-directed personal slight. She clearly senses that Emilie's principles are really only verbal:

Votre éducation vous a donné des idées spéculatives extrêmement délicates sur quantité d'objets, que vous envisageriez un peu différemment si vous aviez plus vu le monde.<sup>34</sup>

Finally she demands Emilie's *discretion* and *esteem*. A stammering Emilie offers the former and before she can continue Constance seizes the latter:

Votre estime m'est due, et je l'aurai<sup>35</sup>

She continues to construct her edifice of deception (and possibly of self-deception), precariously balancing a new layer of propositions upon the last, and reaches a point where

she can maintain that *l'intérêt* is not her kind of moral ideal. She catches Emilie unawares in a complacent moment and self-righteously cuts her to the quick for having bent her principles when it suited her on the subject of Théobald. Mote and beam have been cunningly exchanged:

Ne voyez-vous pas qu'au château vous séduisez Théobald, inquiétez sa mère et désolez sa cousine? <sup>36</sup>

Emilie at once retreats into an automatic guilt-response:

comment pouvez-vous me montrer quelque estime et vous confier à moi, si vous croyez... <sup>37</sup>

This is the kind of half-admission Constance has been seeking, an admission that for all Emilie's principles (clearly a deep source of annoyance to Constance for more than one reason) Emilie can put her own interests before those of Sophie. She can now relax the pressure on Emilie, and concedes to her what she has just taken away, that her love is basically innocent and even praiseworthy. She can even allow herself the additional triumph of quite superfluously *encouraging* Emilie in her love. Emilie is overwrought and breaks down in tears, her self-esteem shot to ribbons. The encounter has the flavour of real life, with the underlying irony that for all Constance's accusations of selfishness against Emilie, her behaviour is itself partly motivated by self-interest. And yet Constance is to show that she is a generous-hearted woman and a true friend to Emilie when Emilie really needs a friend; it is also these second and third levels of significance that win our assent to the novelist's fictional world.

Now, hard on the heels of Constance's verbal assaults, a new problem comes to trouble Emilie. Joséphine is perhaps right in saying of Emilie:

Votre âme s'ouvre [...] aux intérêts, aux fautes, aux faiblesses des autres: oh! combien vous en devenez plus aimable. <sup>38</sup>

(But we must also remember how faulty Joséphine's judgement can be on occasion, if not necessarily on *this* occasion.) The sudden discovery that Joséphine is pregnant precipitates the climax of the novel, precisely at a moment when Emilie is at her most insecure. Joséphine indeed presents a pitiful picture carrying Henri's child, but she does not fail to touch up that picture at points where she might be considered blameworthy, making light of her friendship with Lacroix, and uttering threats of suicide if she cannot be married to someone to spare her shame. Constance offers to bribe Henri to marry Joséphine, but Joséphine rejects this as both impractical and beneath her dignity. She would rather Emilie exercise some form of moral blackmail on Henri. Emilie's sense of reason and logic cries out in the face of Joséphine's known promiscuity and deceptiveness:

Mais après tout ce que tu m'as dit, comment nier...? <sup>39</sup>

and when forced to admit her liaison with Lacroix, Joséphine reluctantly does so. Yet she insists that it is vital that Henri should be deceived on this point and imposes this as an obligation on Emilie. So Emilie is to blackmail and deceive Henri for the sake of a woman who may not suit him and who might one day be unfaithful to him. Again Emilie is outraged and tempted to put principles before people:

Mais, ma chère Joséphine, trahirai-je la vérité, moi qui n'ai jamais affirmé que ce dont j'étais ou me croyais assurée? Abandonnerai-je en un instant des principes et des habitudes sur lesquelles je fonde tout ce que je puis avoir d'estime pour moi-même...? <sup>40</sup>

(As so often with Emilie's pronouncements, it is difficult to separate her principles from a certain egotistical *pride in having principles*.) She is at once set upon by Joséphine who with the utmost virulence attacks her "estime pour moi-même" as basically selfishness. She puts Emilie's fine words to the test by walking to the door and hinting that she will kill herself:

C'est fort bien, Mademoiselle, abandonnez et trahissez Joséphine plutôt que des mots, de grands mots, la vérité, vos principes, vos habitudes, et quand je serai morte, estimez-vous encore si vous pouvez...<sup>41</sup>

If Emilie held firmly to her principles, she would probably remain impassive. But they prove to be merely theoretical. She gives in to Joséphine, and promises to speak to Henri. (We as readers know the kind of action we expect from Emilie, action based on concern and fellow-feeling. But Isabelle de Charrière is objective enough not to leave room for any complacency, for, as we presently see, Emilie's break with hard-and-fast principles is to lead to the near catastrophic climax of the book.) While they are waiting for Henri's arrival, there is a subtly delineated exchange between Emilie and Joséphine on the subject of Joséphine's threatened suicide, in which Emilie rather ponderously rehearses the traditional argument:

Sans oser condamner le malheureux qui s'ôte la vie [...] j'estime plus celui qui le supporte; il montre plus de respect et de soumission pour son Créateur.<sup>42</sup>

Joséphine deliberately adopts a more light-hearted approach to the subject altogether:

Oh! bien, [...] je ne me tuerai pas: je ne voudrais pas contrarier vos idées. Rendez-moi un peu de bonheur et je ne me tuerai pas.<sup>43</sup>

She clearly has no time for such "idées" and admits:

j'étais au désespoir quand je vous voyais tout occupée de vous et d'un certain mérite que vous voulez avoir, et avec lequel vous laisseriez tranquillement souffrir tout le monde.<sup>44</sup>

But in her eagerness to prick the bubble of Emilie's rectitude Joséphine has left the reader in no doubt as to her own capacity to deceive on the matter of suicide. Can we *really* believe that, speaking this way now, she would have killed herself? And Emilie herself is anxious about Joséphine's ability to deceive Henri, and perhaps to be unfaithful to him. Nonetheless Emilie does give in, and she regains the reader's sympathy (in the light of Joséphine's unreliability) by stating with dignity:

Etre sage, être vraie, ne posséder que ce qui est bien à soi, voilà ce qu'on m'avait recommandé depuis que je suis au monde. Est-il bien étonnant que j'aie quelque peine à prendre sur tous les objets des idées plus relâchées?

Cependant, je cède, Joséphine; mes répugnances cèdent les unes après les autres à l'amitié, à la reconnaissance.<sup>45</sup>

With characteristic realism, however, Isabelle de Charrière allows Emilie to carry her apologia further than is necessary, thus leaving an aftertaste of priggishness. (It is the kind of technique Jane Austen uses in *Emma* to allow the reader to measure how far her heroine has yet to develop.):

Cette condescendance m'ôtera, peut-être, peu à peu, toute l'estime que j'avais pour moi: n'importe!<sup>46</sup>

In the meantime Constance has been out on a mysterious errand, which we later learn was to bribe Lacroix to marry another village girl. Emilie's next move is to speak to Henri's father and then to Henri. Henri, however, offers stout resistance from the outset and proves largely impervious to Emilie's emotional rhetoric. He throws back at Emilie her use of the verb "aimer", and is as cutting in his language as Constance. He is indeed a powerful adversary and the more so because Emilie knows he has right on his side in some measure:

Heureux, Mademoiselle! Et si je suis jaloux, serai-je heureux? Et Si M. Lacroix... Comment dirai-je cela honnêtement...? Serai-je heureux?<sup>47</sup>

He does not want to be tied to a woman for whom he has no love. But there is another side to the situation. Is this simply a convenient pretext for Henri to neglect Joséphine? This is something we have to bear in mind later when his marriage proves a failure: it does not necessarily mean that a man is right because we can see how he has been wronged. Henri has definite responsibilities towards a woman he has slept with and who is now going to give birth to a child. But it is debatable whether he should be *made* to marry her. At this point Constance announces that Lacroix is to marry a village girl, but of course reveals nothing of her own part in the arrangements. Henri remains adamant in his refusal, and even Joséphine is beginning to wonder whether it is worthwhile pursuing the matter:

Mais, Monsieur Henri, c'est assez vous presser; vous êtes le maître. Grand Dieu!<sup>48</sup>

Emilie now jettisons all her scruples in one last desperate effort to ensure that Joséphine has a husband. She declares that she will leave Altendorf with Joséphine and not return. This strikes at Henri's Achilles' heel, his love for his master Théobald, whom he knows to be in love with Emilie. He capitulates immediately. To a large extent Emilie thus assumes responsibility for the marriage. This is a concrete example of Isabelle de Charrière's awareness of the complexity and interdependence of moral situations, for here the characters are shown to be affecting third parties by their actions.

We have a brief glimpse of the consequences of such conduct as Emilie's emotional blackmail of Henri in an ensuing dialogue between Constance and Lacroix. In both characters enlightened self-interest has replaced moral principles. Lacroix chooses his wife Mathilde in a casual and random fashion, heedless of any broader or more long-term considerations regarding her happiness or his own. Once again the question of 'national qualities' comes to the surface, since for Lacroix and Constance "l'esprit" is the only value of real use in society, and implies that ability to manipulate others so familiar from the novels of Crébillon fils and Laclos. Constance ensures that all her *ficelles* function correctly, even seeing to it that another temptation for Joséphine is kept out of her way, a certain Hans. By now the reader certainly begins to feel some unease at witnessing such rough-and-ready trading in human destinies, especially when Lacroix remarks:

Madame Constance est bien bonne; si j'osais, je dirais que c'est elle qui a bien de l'esprit; elle connaît ses gens; c'est tout autre chose que ces dames allemandes; elles n'auraient pas imaginé en vingt ans ce que Madame a arrangé en un quart d'heure. <sup>49</sup>

All this must give us pause when considering Emilie's abandonment of principles, something which will have consequences beyond any she could have foreseen. Indeed the first fruits of Emilie's deception are not long in showing themselves. For Théobald becomes greatly anxious whether Emilie really cares so little for him that she could have left Altendorf there and then. And Emilie, weakened by her interview with Henri, cannot prevent Théobald from stumbling into the trammels of her deceit. Théobald would by no means agree with Constance's opinion of Emilie:

L'esprit d'Emilie se forme, se perfectionne extrêmement. <sup>50</sup>

He would not consider attachment to principle as being merely a childish aberration, the result of too little experience of life.

Quickly preparations are made for the wedding. Joséphine tries to console Emilie, assuring her that she is determined to hold to her promise of fidelity to Henri for Emilie's sake:

Chacun a sa vertu à sa manière: la mienne est de tout faire pour vous. Je me suis vouée à vous. <sup>51</sup>

Indeed her words are moving, and she expresses the central concern of the book when she says:

Aller tout droit son chemin dans ses actions et dans ses paroles sans s'embarrasser de ce qui en peut arriver, a je ne sais quoi que je respecte, et je crois que c'est la vertu des gens de qualité. Toutefois ils ne doivent pas la pousser trop loin. <sup>52</sup>

(We the readers understand, of course, that such a morality is not necessarily linked to any particular social class, nor is its abuse.) However she also reveals a disturbing readiness to be too exclusive in her concern with Emilie:

Je ferais un faux serment pour vous épargner le moindre mal [...] <sup>53</sup>

Joséphine's wedding ceremony takes place, marked symbolically by a brief and magnificent firework display which lasts no more than a quarter of an hour. In the case of Joséphine it clearly suggests a shortlived triumph which is soon to be followed by the hard reality of everyday living.

We briefly now return to another of the novel's concerns in the next scene. For we are not allowed to forget that Altendorf is a haven of peace in a world full of barbarism, and that this peace is fragile. The Abbé-Narrator's disgust with a France existing in the shadow of the guillotine is a sombre warning to his compatriots, Emilie and Constance, as to the consequences of an excess of zeal at the expense of others. It is also an excuse to poke fun at those who believe a nation can be *wholly* anything, whether good or evil, much as *Trois femmes* itself aims at being objective about human complexity. The Abbé says of Germany:

Croyez, Madame,[...] que ce n'est pas chez vous qu'on peut penser que l'esprit, le goût, la générosité, que rien, enfin, de ce qui est agréable et beau, manque aux Allemands ni à l'Allemagne.

Chacun me remercia par un coup d'œil ou un sourire.'<sup>54</sup>

The story has demonstrated so far that society is composed neither of villains nor plaster saints.

After Joséphine's wedding Théobald, deeply in love with Emilie, now broods on her deception of Henri and dislikes what he has discovered. This is the first unforeseen result of Emilie's successful blackmailing of Henri, and it is to have long and serious repercussions. Théobald muses:

N'avait-elle point trop pressé Henri, sachant quelle fille était Joséphine?<sup>55</sup>

and he registers instinctive distrust of Emilie's "fleur de rhétorique", as Constance had called it.<sup>56</sup> (Rhetoric is a weapon Emilie has borrowed from the hitherto alien armoury of Constance and Joséphine.) Very characteristically Isabelle de Charrière is presenting the same situation as viewed through different eyes, and hence suggesting the protean character of moral problems.

Now we see the beginning of a period of serious misunderstandings and misinterpreted gestures that leads on to the climax of the *Première Partie*. Emilie, concerned at Théobald's appearance, is unable to guess its cause, and it is only the intervention of the Abbé to allay Théobald's fears about Emilie that cuts short this period of estrangement between them. Now indeed the focus is on Théobald and on how far removed he is from the attitudes of Constance. Constance continues meanwhile to represent the forces of self-interest in her conversations with Emilie:

Supposé que Théobald fût capable de se laisser donner pour femme cette petite envieuse [Sophie], il faudrait vous remontrer tous les jours à eux, jusqu'à ce que la tête eût tourné à l'un de regret et à l'autre de jalousie; mais j'attends tout autre chose de sa part.<sup>57</sup>

Théobald for his part theoretically holds to:

une vertu plus sévère, plus inflexible.<sup>58</sup>

But, like Emilie's ideas at the beginning of the story, Théobald's are untested and unshaped by experience. Constance, having schooled Emilie, now turns her attention to Théobald, questions his attachment to "la règle", and looks for lapses from this rule of conduct. Théobald, however, is a quite different personality from Emilie. He can foresee that lapses may occur on his part, especially as a result of the working of his emotions, but maintains that they are only lapses. His rule does not change with every circumstance, nor is it invalidated by his failure to obey it. (The nuances are important here: Emilie has her 'principles' tested by an urgent human problem, and shows compassion in resolving it, however unwise her solution. Théobald really *believes in* and practises his ideal of disinterested *bienfaisance*, and although he fails badly, his kind of idealism retains a large measure of our approval. In a way it could be said that both characters attain the kind of virtue that befits their background and character.) A determined Constance makes Théobald feel embarrassed at his admission of

occasional failure, and in so doing increases our sympathy for Théobald's position.<sup>59</sup> By now, too, there is a further stimulus to the reader's faculty of moral judgement in the Abbé-Narrator's unconcealed infatuation with Constance and with all her views, a factor which renders him less clear-sighted as to her failings. The occasion of Théobald's momentary embarrassment at the hands of Constance also forces Emilie to admit to Théobald that she truly would have left Altendorf when she had said she intended to. She plunges him into despair, then unmistakably reassures him of her affection. By doing this she further increases Théobald's passion, as his excited words to the Abbé confirm.<sup>60</sup> Another circumstance, directly attributable to Constance's influence on Emilie, precipitates a sudden and dangerous crisis. Emilie reads *Adèle de Sénange* by Madame de Flahaut, and Théobald is so inflamed by its story of a coquette who teases a patient lover that he contrives to be left alone with Emilie while the Countess Sophie is called elsewhere in the château. Although this is not stated, Théobald's uncertainties are, we presume, exacerbated by the memory of Emilie's deception of Henri, and also by the unresolved statement that she would have left Altendorf because she 'had talked herself into doing so'.<sup>61</sup> He impetuously declares his love to Emilie and proposes marriage, unaware that Sophie, whom he has tried to deceive, is listening at the door. The scene of the love-declaration is thoroughly conventional, and clearly Isabelle de Charrière's main concern is with the development of the moral interest of the story. We are not to be disappointed on this second point, for the pieces are fitting inexorably into place. A noise is heard in the adjoining room and the lovers are at once fearful that they have been spied on. With this ominous cloud hanging over them, Emilie and Théobald separate for the night. The following day Théobald, delirious with happiness, is already beginning to forget the necessities of everyday life. He sleeps till eleven in the morning and omits to see Sophie off on her mysterious errand to Osnabruck. His actions are shortly to rebound on him: an irate Sophie returns with her mother, and Théobald in his blindness is incautious enough to greet them lightheartedly. Baron d'Altendorf when informed of Théobald's infatuation insists that an undertaking once entered into must be honoured. Now it is implied throughout the story that Théobald's parents and Sophie's mother have an understanding about their respective children eventually marrying. Théobald is now wilfully shirking his responsibility even though he was not a party to the undertaking, he who has maintained the sacrosanct nature of all obligations. To a certain extent, of course, his actions are understandable: first, he loves Emilie, and in the second place he is simply reacting to the widening shock-waves generated by Emilie's deception of Henri. But now he is clearly seen to be holding one very real and important duty, however repellent or unjust, in contempt.<sup>62</sup>

Depuis quelques moments, Théobald n'écoutait plus et, nonchalamment assis, caressait son chien dans un coin de la chambre.<sup>63</sup>

He makes a deceptive statement to his mother implying that he will leave Altendorf as she wishes but secretly meaning that he will elope with Emilie. Emilie later that evening receives a mysterious invitation to join "un malheureux" who she can little doubt is Théobald. We are reminded at this crucial moment of Emilie's moral blackmailing of Henri, for it is he who has the task of persuading Emilie to leave with the unknown gentleman. He pleads as the servant

qui me suis marié pour que vous ne vous séparassiez pas de mon maître<sup>64</sup>

And his rough words and harsh treatment of Joséphine further underline the results of Emilie's earlier manipulation of Henri. As so often, however, the picture is not touched up: Henri's boorishness might suggest that a woman like Joséphine is really neither better nor worse than he deserves:

Ne dis mot et ne remue pas [...], ou tu t'en repentiras le reste de tes jours.<sup>65</sup>

Henri is no martyr. Emilie herself, partly of her own volition and partly out of force of circumstance, now joins Théobald and Henri in their flouting of conventional morality and of family honour.

At this moment Constance, the shrewd utilitarian and advocate of enlightened self-interest comes into her own. Weakness on Emilie's part and passion on the part of Théobald have almost brought about their undoing. Constance not only has an interest in Emilie's successful future but also very clearly has affection both for her and the man she loves. She is a real and complex individual in our eyes, and the *Suite* will confirm our sympathy for her. Her contribution is to extract, through the good offices of the Abbé her admirer, a conditional full pardon for the aberrant couple from Théobald's parents. This is obtained without difficulty by playing on their self-interest. Constance then pursues the fleeing lovers and overtakes them before Emilie's good name is lost forever. It is a piece of astute planning which comes off; the risk is worth taking, for by this stage nothing can be lost and everything can still be gained. Théobald and Emilie return to the fold, and even the Baron comes to life as a character by his amusement at Constance's wiles. The only mournful note amid the universal rejoicing is the disappointment of Henri at returning to the wife he does not love. Our feelings for him must be mixed, for hard though his situation now is, should we feel a great deal of sympathy for a man who refuses to marry the woman he slept with? Do we not also feel at times that in his case also 'moral principle' (in this matter of Joséphine's fidelity) is a cloak for egotism? Closing this section of the novel we are again reminded of the inseparability in real life of self-interest, altruism and love. Constance buys a ruby for Emilie, engraved with an intertwined 'C' and an 'E', a further hint that Constance intends to keep her advantageous friendship with Emilie in good repair after her marriage to the squire's son.

The marriage of Théobald and Emilie is not lingered over but dismissed in a single sentence. It is clearly only accessory to the novel's main theme. Instead we are returned to the outer narrative frame for a discussion of events between the Baroness de Berghen and the Abbé-Narrator. It is a more or less objective account of the findings of the novel so far, or rather of its *explorations*, since the dialogue ensures that no one view of the events is necessarily adequate to understand them. The Abbé defends his three women in much the same vein as his admired Constance, taking particular pains to emphasize the view that Emilie's change from "inflexible vertu" to "une moralité quelconque" is a great advance on her former position. He is challenged on the vagueness of this "moralité quelconque" by the Baroness de Berghen who also impugns the non-universalizable nature of the three women's conduct, saying that it is not of a type conducive to the maintenance of "le bon ordre". To this the Abbé rightly replies that Joséphine and Constance suffer. He does not pass on to more general moral considerations but confines himself to his chosen examples.

[Chapter VII continued]

<sup>1</sup> Godet II, 410.

<sup>2</sup> See Denise Hermann, 'La première édition des *Trois Femmes* de Mme de Charrière', *Etudes de Lettres*, 33 (1938), 76-89, and J.-D. Candaux, 'Note sur deux éditions mutilées de Madame de Charrière', *Revue des Sciences humaines*, 137 (janvier-mars, 1970), 87-92.

<sup>3</sup> Denise Hermann, art. cit.



<sup>4</sup> Godet II, 217.

<sup>5</sup> Respectively, *Trois Femmes* (Lausanne, 1942) and *Lettres neuchâteloises suivi de Trois Femmes*, postface de Charly Guyot (Lausanne, 1971). Although nowhere stated, the Guyot edition reproduces Lonchamp's text, with necessary corrections to printing errors.

<sup>6</sup> Godet II, 412.

<sup>7</sup> Godet II, 218-19.

<sup>8</sup> Godet II, 219.

<sup>9</sup> Abbé Prévost, *Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*, ed. Clifford King (London, 1963), 4.

<sup>10</sup> B. Munteano, 'Episodes kantiens en Suisse et en France sous le directoire', *Revue de littérature comparée*, 15 (1935), 387-454.

<sup>11</sup> Godet II, 219.

<sup>12</sup> Charly Guyot, 'Lettres inédites de Madame de Charrière', *Musée neuchâtelois* (1970), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Henriette L'Hardy, B.V.N. Ms 1303, No. 72, undated [Feb. 1793].

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Henriette L'Hardy, B.V.N. Ms 1303, No. 105, dated 4 April 1793.

<sup>15</sup> B.V.N. Ms 1304, No. 133, dated 26 September 1794.

<sup>16</sup> Letter to Henriette L'Hardy, B.V.N. Ms 1304, No. 139, dated 20 November 1794.

<sup>17</sup> B.V.N. Ms 1304, No. 159 in the dossier of letters to Henriette L'Hardy.

<sup>18</sup> The story is prefaced by a discussion between the ostensible author, the Abbé de la Tour, and the Baroness de Berghen and several other characters. The Abbé proposes to tell a story which will show that in order not to be immoral or depraved it is sufficient to have an idea of what one's duty is and to act upon it. The other characters dispute the origins of this sense of obligation - a Kantian, a Christian theologian, a Quietist, and an Enlightenment empiricist, 'l'homme de la société'. The question is thus thrown open, and the Abbé begins his story. Emilie, a French girl whose parents have lately died, comes to Altendorf in Westphalia with her maid Joséphine. She is offered a harp by a stranger, which after some hesitation she accepts. That evening her maid receives a man, Henri, the groom of Théobald, son of the local squire, into her bedroom. Emilie hears this but, through cowardice, does not interfere. In both cases Emilie's actions run counter to her inner convictions about right conduct. Joséphine's moral code, far less absolute than Emilie's and more pliable to circumstance, shocks Emilie, but at length she is persuaded of its occasional expediency. Emilie is loved by Théobald, son of the squire, Baron d'Altendorf, even though he is expected to marry his cousin Sophie. It is obvious to that Emilie loves Théobald. At this point, as a result of a coaching accident, Constance, a widow from Paris, comes to the village, becomes Emilie's friend and settles in Altendorf. Joséphine becomes the friend of Lacroix, Constance's manservant. After some time, Emilie discovers that Joséphine is expecting a child. Joséphine in distress threatens

suicide if Emilie does not help her. While Constance bribes Lacroix to marry another village girl, Emilie urges Henri to marry Joséphine. He is reluctant and has doubts about her fidelity, but Emilie uses moral blackmail. Théobald in despair declares his love to Emilie and is overheard by his cousin Sophie. She with her mother brings down Baron d'Altendorf's wrath on his son: the squire refuses to approve of his marriage to Emilie. Théobald impetuously leaves in the night for Bremen with Emilie, but Constance has the foresight to overtake their coach and to bring them back, having ensured a favourable reception from Théobald's parents. The Second Part of the novel, after the marriage of Théobald and Emilie, begins with a debate in the outer 'frame' of the novel between the Baroness de Berghen and the Abbé. The Abbé defends the behaviour of all the characters, but the Baroness is uneasy about such thoroughgoing relativism. This dialogue is followed by eleven letters from Constance and one from Emilie addressed to the Abbé, in which the pace of the narrative is slowed down and in which Constance describes Théobald's plans for the education of the villagers' children, his hostility to the behaviour of fashionable society, his hiring of an atheist geometry teacher, and Constance's own difficulties with the Countess de Horst and her husband whom she has taken under her roof. These details are interspersed with reflections on current political questions and remarks on Rousseau and Voltaire. The narrative climax of this section is the confusion of the baby sons of Joséphine and the Countess de Horst. The Countess abandons her own child to Joséphine who henceforth nurses both children. Both will be brought up as if they were of the same social class. Constance also plans to bring up a village boy and girl as if each were of the other sex, to find out whether upbringing or innate propensities make for the differences between the sexes. The section concludes with a *Dictionnaire politique, moral et rural* composed by Théobald, filled with observations on metaphysical, political and social questions raised by the revolutionary period in France. In Letter XII we learn of the approach of the English and émigré army, and of the flight of Emilie, Constance and the Baron to avoid a possible meeting with them, Théobald and Joséphine remaining at the château. Constance ends on a serious and thoughtful note, speaking of her regrets that her fortune was wrongfully amassed and of Henri's unhappiness at being married to Joséphine.

Isabelle de Charrière wrote a *Suite to Trois femmes* which has not yet (1975) been published, B.V.N. Ms 1363, in the handwriting of Charles-Emmanuel de Charrière with corrections by Isabelle de Charrière. Although Godet dismisses it out of hand (Godet II, 228), it does belong to the same period of composition as the published novel and, as I intend to show, is well worth consideration as a valuable part of Isabelle de Charrière's total project. It develops the issues raised by the published novel, and is not simply a superfluous addition to an already self-sufficient edifice. (It is unfortunate that no modern edition has yet included it). The narrative frame is again that of the Abbé recounting the actions of his three women characters. Constance and Emilie on the coach leaving Altendorf discuss contemporary fiction at some length, and their comments and those of the Abbé clearly have some bearing on *Trois femmes*. They arrive at Celle in Hanover and settle there. The Abbé tells of Théobald's sheltering two of Emilie's émigré relatives, a gouty old marquis and his son, the Vicomte de Chamdray. He also tells of the Marquis' boorishness, his insistence that Emilie should marry his son, and his attempts to win Joséphine into his service. Joséphine, knowing of his licentiousness, refuses. Unaware of this development, a wounded Englishman, Sir James \*\*\* gives her money so that she can leave Henri, with whom he knows her to be unhappy, and cross to England to join his household. Henri discovers the money, and although Joséphine allays his suspicions, he remains sceptical about her character. Théobald suggests that the Vicomte should go and see Emilie, his relative. On arrival he recognizes Constance, and Constance begins the story of her background and of her early acquaintance with the Vicomte. She was brought up in Bordeaux by her Creole mother, her father having left France for the West Indies. All was

well until her mother's brother Victor returned from the West Indies with his daughter Biondina. His wife, a slave, had been exasperated by his infidelity and had tried to kill him. She had been executed for attempted murder. Now exceedingly melancholy, he encourages Constance's mother in her indolence and both die, leaving the two girls orphans. A representative comes from Constance's father to urge her to marry, saying her father will make the fortune of any future son-in-law if she and her husband join him in the Caribbean. A husband, M. Le Muret, is found, but soon it appears that he only wants Constance's money. Advised by relatives not to suffer such treatment without offering any resistance, she decides to flirt with a ship's officer, M. de Merival (the Vicomte) on the voyage, and arouses her husband's jealousy. At this point the Vicomte takes over the narration, telling how Le Muret challenged him to a duel while the other passengers were at prayer, and how in a final speech of bitter anger he poured forth a story of repeated disappointments in which his wife had been his last hope. Very reluctantly the Vicomte had fought and killed Le Muret. Although the Vicomte on his arrival in the West Indies had been acquitted of murder, the incident is still a source of anguished self-reproach to him. Constance reflects on the similar failing in French émigrés who should have stood up for their beliefs in France while they could still have been effective. Here the *Suite* ends, apart from a few interesting fragments which I shall mention in the commentary.

[\[Chapter VII continued\]](#)

<sup>19</sup> *T.F.*, 94.

<sup>20</sup> *T.F.*, 95.

<sup>21</sup> *T.F.*, 99. Cf. "le plus beau et le plus agréable des châteaux possibles" in *Candide*, ed. J.H. Brumfitt (London, 1968), 57. Of course, the château in question is also in Westphalia.

<sup>22</sup> *T.F.*, 99.

<sup>23</sup> *T.F.*, 101.

<sup>24</sup> *T.F.*, 100-101.

<sup>25</sup> Joséphine's emotional rhetoric may be powerful, but such is Isabelle de Charrière's realism that when we ponder on such details we have the convincing impression of the complexity of life itself: Joséphine could never have won her 'victory' if Emilie had not sensed that her rectitude hid a desire to know who had given her the harp and why. And to persist in her efforts at persuasion Joséphine must have felt intuitively that this was the case.

<sup>26</sup> We are told later that Emilie's unthinking and attitudinizing mother had said: "Je te laisse à la Providence ... prie Dieu, mon enfant; réfléchis, conserve tes bonnes habitudes; je n'ai point d'autre mentor à te donner que toi-même" (*T.F.*, 103).

<sup>27</sup> Note her laconic "Henri est fort joli" (*T.F.*, 103).

<sup>28</sup> *T.F.*, 108.

<sup>29</sup> *T.F.*, 109.

<sup>30</sup> *T.F.*, 108.

<sup>31</sup> Godet II, 217.

<sup>32</sup> We shall later look at the dinner scene after their marriage when this conflict comes to a head (*T.F.*, 183-188).

<sup>33</sup> *T.F.*, 128.

<sup>34</sup> *T.F.*, 131-2.

<sup>35</sup> *T.F.*, 131.

<sup>36</sup> *T.F.*, 132.

<sup>37</sup> *T.F.*, 132.

<sup>38</sup> *T.F.*, 134.

<sup>39</sup> *T.F.*, 138.

<sup>40</sup> *T.F.*, 138.

<sup>41</sup> *T.F.*, 138.

<sup>42</sup> *T.F.*, 140.

<sup>43</sup> *T.F.*, 140.

<sup>44</sup> *T.F.*, 140.

<sup>45</sup> *T.F.*, 140.

<sup>46</sup> *T.F.*, 140.

<sup>47</sup> *T.F.*, 142.

<sup>48</sup> *T.F.*, 143.

<sup>49</sup> *T.F.*, 146.

<sup>50</sup> *T.F.*, 147.

<sup>51</sup> *T.F.*, 147.

<sup>52</sup> *T.F.*, 148.

<sup>53</sup> *T.F.*, 147.

<sup>54</sup> *T.F.*, 151.

<sup>55</sup> *T.F.*, 151.

<sup>56</sup> *T.F.*, 147.

<sup>57</sup> *T.F.*, 152.

<sup>58</sup> *T.F.*, 153.

<sup>59</sup> *T.F.*, 154.

<sup>60</sup> *T.F.*, 155.

<sup>61</sup> We must remember that Emilie never denied that she would leave Altendorf: she merely said she would be sad if Théobald found her departure agreeable. Thus the link in the chain of cause and effect from the deception of Henri is carefully kept in place.

<sup>62</sup> This is not to say, of course, that his parents are not responsible for unwisely organizing their son's future life for him. They appear not to have consulted him on his choice of a wife, and throughout the story Théobald's father puts his own self-interest before that of his son.

<sup>63</sup> *T.F.*, 164.

<sup>64</sup> *T.F.*, 166.

<sup>65</sup> *T.F.*, 167.