

RETROSPECT (1998)

Over the years I have frequently been asked by *charriéristes* why I never published my 1975 Cambridge doctoral thesis, the original title of which was *The Novels of Madame de Charrière (1740-1805)*. My honest reply has always been ‘because I’ve been too busy’. While I was still writing the thesis, I was invited to join the international team planning the *Œuvres complètes de Belle de Zuylen/ Isabelle de Charrière*¹, and my time was entirely taken up with that project between 1975 and 1982. Then, in 1983, I was invited to join another team preparing the *Œuvres* and *Correspondance générale* of Isabelle de Charrière’s friend Benjamin Constant, a project to which I am fully committed for the foreseeable future². It has long been clear to me that I am unlikely to have the leisure needed to update my thesis this side of retirement!

It may be an opportune moment to recall the circumstances in which the dissertation was written. I began work in autumn 1969 at the suggestion of the great Rousseau scholar Dr (later Professor) R. A. Leigh of Trinity College, Cambridge, whose enthusiasm for Isabelle de Charrière’s novels had ensured that a plaque was put up on the wall of her house, Le Pontet at Colombier, near Neuchâtel in Switzerland commemorating her life there. Ralph Leigh’s incomparable wit and erudition sustained me during my years of research. In Neuchâtel Professor Charly Guyot generously made available to me his transcriptions of hitherto unpublished letters by Isabelle de Charrière which I refer to in the text. The thesis was examined by two more formidable scholars, Vivienne Mylne and

Alison Fairlie, and awarded a doctorate in 1975. It is particularly poignant that not one of these colleagues and friends is alive today.

The thesis reflected reasonably accurately, I think, the state of scholarship and opinion in the mid-1970s. Already a fair amount of valuable new work had been done on Isabelle de Charrière during the preceding decade – I am thinking in particular of the research of Simone and Pierre Dubois and of a remarkable essay by Jean Starobinski. But what was still lacking was a reliable edition of all her work. Thanks to the unstinting support of Geert van Oorschot, a distinguished academic publisher in Amsterdam, and to the generosity of the Dutch and Swiss governments, our team of editors was able to produce ten scholarly volumes between 1979 and 1983, fortunately in time for Geert van Oorschot to see the project completed before his death. I recall several agreeable summers during the 1970s spent in the Bibliothèque publique de la Ville de Neuchâtel (since 1983 the Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Neuchâtel) working on Isabelle de Charrière's manuscripts and early editions of her works (aided by the erudite *dix-huitiémiste* librarian Jacques Rychner and his colleagues), and staying at Miremont, a château near Bevaix belonging to the late Thérèse de Chambrier, a descendent of Isabelle de Charrière's friend Chambrier d'Oleyres.

Since the completion of the *Œuvres complètes* there has been an enormous increase in the amount of research into Isabelle de Charrière's life and work, as will be immediately apparent from a glance at René Rancœur's or Otto Klapp's annual cumulative bibliographies. Not only is there a lively annual bulletin, the *Lettre de Zuylen et du Pontet*

(1976-), there are also associations devoted to the study of *la Dame du Pontet* in France, Switzerland and Holland, and a major international conference on her work took place at the University of Neuchâtel in 1993, the Proceedings of which appeared in 1994.³ She has recently had biographies devoted to her in three languages, by Simone and Pierre H. Dubois in Dutch (1993), by Raymond Trousson in French (1993) and by my fellow Constant editor Cecil Courtney in English (1994).⁴ Cecil Courtney has also produced two essential bibliographies of primary and secondary Charrière material.⁵ American feminist critics have worked on her fiction in recent years, notably Kathleen M. Jaeger and Jenene J. Allison,⁶ and Isabelle de Charrière has that most modern of accolades, a Website⁷ devoted exclusively to her at <http://www.etcl.nl/charriere/>

Opmerking [GPU1]:

Looking back over nearly a quarter of a century, what would I now change in my thesis? Most obviously, all references would henceforward be to our edition of the *Œuvres complètes*, the text of which is reliable⁸. (Nevertheless Philippe Godet's and Charly Guyot's editions of the novels still contain useful things in their introductions.) I would now lay emphasis on Isabelle de Charrière's literary collaboration with the young Benjamin Constant, a fact which emerged I was editing Volumes VIII and IX of the edition, the *Romans, contes et nouvelles*. Not only is it clear to me that the two writers worked together on the *Lettres de d'Arsillé fils*, but also on a *Suite* to the *Lettres trouvées dans des porte-feuilles d'émigrés*⁹. Although I do not see Isabelle de Charrière as anything like a feminist writer in the modern connotation of the word, especially as understood in Britain or America, I would acknowledge the value of insights contained in

the several books and articles to have been published recently on her from a feminist viewpoint.¹⁰

This said - and of course making due allowance for what others and I myself have published subsequently in the field¹¹ - I remain broadly in agreement with what I wrote twenty-three years ago, though I would undoubtedly express myself differently today. I am publishing the dissertation now electronically, and in a revised form, as a book in the hope that it may be of use to present-day scholars and critics. The revisions I have made are stylistic and (very occasionally) factual: I have not attempted a fundamental updating of the 1975 text, and I would urge those wishing to explore particular areas further to consult the more recent books and articles listed in my endnotes here. My thesis has already been referred in the recent past to by Charrière commentators, some of whom have been able to consult a photocopy which I allowed the BPU in Neuchâtel to make years ago. It seems only fair therefore that those who are unable to visit Cambridge University Library or the Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Neuchâtel should henceforth be able to consult it as a book on the Internet. All I ask is that acknowledgement be made of anything in the book that is used in future publications. The copyright rests with me.

¹ Isabelle de Charrière/Belle de Zuylen, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Jean-Daniel Candaux, C.P. Courtney, Pierre H. Dubois, Simone Dubois-De Bruyn, Patrice Thompson, Jeroom Vercruyssen et Dennis Wood, Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 1979-1984, 10 volumes. There are still plans for a final *Supplément*. Jean-Daniel Candaux has published a convenient one-volume edition of the Isabelle de Charrière-Benjamin Constant correspondence in modernized spelling, *Correspondance (1787-1805)*, Paris: Desjonquères (coll. 'XVIIIe siècle'), 1996. There are now several studies of the correspondence corpus, most recently Paul Pelckmans, *Isabelle de Charrière: une correspondance au seuil du monde moderne*, Amsterdam: Rodopi (coll. 'Faux Titre', 95), 1995.

² At the initiative of the late Pierre Cordey an Editorial Board was set up in 1980, and under the chairmanship of Professor Paul Delbouille that Board signed a contract with Max Niemeyer Verlag of Tübingen in 1988. By March 1998 six volumes had appeared, four of the *Œuvres* series and two of the *Correspondance*. The *Correspondance* volumes complement and in some areas supercede the edition of the Isabelle de Charrière-Benjamin Constant letters in the Van Oorschot Charrière *Œuvres* (see note 1 above). These are Benjamin Constant, *Correspondance générale I (1774-1792)* ed. C.P. Courtney and Dennis Wood (with the collaboration of Peter Rickard for the linguistic notes), 1993 and *Correspondance générale II (1793-1794)*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1997.

³ *Une Européenne: Isabelle de Charrière en son siècle*, ed. Doris Jakubec and Jean-Daniel Candaux, Neuchâtel: Attinger, 1994. Isabelle de Charrière's place in the history of the French novel now seems reasonably secure. Her work is discussed, for example, in Michel Delon and Pierre Malandain's *Littérature française du XVIIIe siècle*, Paris: PUF (coll. 'Premier cycle'), 1996, and by Raymond Trousson in his important anthology *Romans de femmes du XVIIIe siècle*, Paris: Laffont, 1996, which includes the complete texts of *Lettres neuchâteloises*, *Lettres de Mistriss Henley* and *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*.

⁴ P.H. and S. Dubois, *Zonder vaandel. Belle de Zuylen. Een biografie*, Amsterdam, Van Oorschot, 1993; Raymond Trousson, *Isabelle de Charrière. Un destin de femme au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris: Hachette, 1994; C.P. Courtney, *Isabelle de Charrière (Belle de Zuylen). A Biography*, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1993. Among studies of Isabelle de Charrière's contemporaries there is now Sabine Dorothea Jordan, *Ludwig Ferdinand Huber (1764-1804): his life and works*, Stuttgart: Akademische Verlag H.-D. Heinz (Stuttgarter Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 57), 1978.

⁵ C.P. Courtney, *A Preliminary Bibliography of Isabelle de Charrière (Belle de Zuylen)*, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, (*Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century*, 186), 1980; *Isabelle de Charrière (Belle de Zuylen): A Secondary Bibliography*, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation; Paris: Jean Touzot, 1982.

⁶ Kathleen M. Jaeger, *Male and Female Roles in the Eighteenth Century: the Challenge to Replacement and Displacement in the Novels of Isabelle de Charrière*, New York: Peter Lang, 1994, and Jenene J. Allison, *Revealing Difference. The Fiction of Isabelle de Charrière*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995.

⁷ A useful list of books and articles relating to Isabelle de Charrière can be found at this site.

⁸ See note 1 above.

⁹ See Dennis Wood, 'Isabelle de Charrière et Benjamin Constant: à propos d'une découverte récente', *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation), Vol. 215, 1982, pp. 273-279; 'Isabelle de Charrière et Benjamin Constant: problématique d'une collaboration', *Annales Benjamin Constant* 4, 1984, pp. 17-30; and *Benjamin Constant. A Biography*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993. My edition of *Ma vie (Le Cahier rouge)* in Benjamin Constant, *Œuvres III. Ecrits littéraires (1800-1813)*, ed. Paul Delbouille and Martine de Rougemont, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1995, contains a good deal of information about the early period of Constant's friendship with Isabelle de Charrière. C.P. Courtney's edition of the same Constant text (Cambridge: Dæmon, 1991) looks again at the question of Isabelle de Charrière's alleged affair with a M. de Saussure and concludes that the most likely candidate as

lover is in fact one Charles Dapples (1758-1842). He also discusses the matter in his biography (see above, note 4, pp. 484-486), and is agreement with the Dubois' conclusion on the matter in their Dutch biography (p. 806, n. 33).

¹⁰ I am thinking in particular of Béatrice Didier's chapter on Isabelle de Charrière in *L'écriture-femme*, Paris: PUF (coll. 'Écriture'), 1981, pp. 93-110, and of Mona Ozouf's perceptive essay in *Les Mots des femmes. Essai sur la singularité française*, Paris: Fayard (coll. 'L'Esprit de la cité'), 1995, pp. 53-83.

¹¹ Particularly worthy of note are Alix Deguise's *Trois femmes. Le monde de Madame de Charrière*, Paris and Geneva: Slatkine, 1981, and Sigyn Minier's *Madame de Charrière. Les premiers romans*, Paris and Geneva: Slatkine, 1987. *Isabelle de Charrière (Belle de Zuylen): De la correspondance au roman épistolaire*. Etudes réunies par Yvette Went-Daoust (*CRIN*, 29), Amsterdam-Atlanta, Ga: Rodopi, 1995 maintains a high standard standard of critical comment and erudition. Two recent articles of my own, 'Isabelle de Charrière, ou la difficulté de conclure' and 'La Ville dans l'œuvre d'Isabelle de Charrière' will be published by the Université de Franche-Comté, Besançon during 1999.