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In the Blood: Repressing Reproduction in the French Convent from Sanguinity to Sexuality

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IN THE BLOOD: REPRESSING REPRODUCTION
IN THE FRENCH CONVENT FROM SANGUINITY TO SEXUALITY

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
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in
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by
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Abstract

This project examines the French convent as a convergent point of evolving blood myths in the eighteenth century. According to Michel Foucault, as a society transitions from sovereign power to more liberal forms of government, the target of how power is enforced shifts as well: from the punishment of individuals who pose a threat to the crown to the regulation of perceived “deviants” who threaten the health and stability of the nation’s population. As the eighteenth century was a time of radical social change, the era encapsulates a prime moment for the study of continuities and discontinuities of these various forms of power. The longstanding tradition of patriarchal power from the highest political ranks down to the family unit remains steady and relatively uncontested. Yet while France is careening towards the Revolution in 1789, it is at the same time experiencing rampant colonialism: thus the idea of race is introduced into the regulation of deviance at the same time that the idea of social class is being violently challenged and reconstituted. However, the contrasting continuity of male dominance with the discontinuity of the social importance of class and race in the eighteenth century share one important commonality, and that is blood. In the corpus that I analyze in this project, the convent serves as an alternative fate for those deemed unfit for reproduction due to the threat that they pose to the purity of blood: familial, noble, and finally racial. I have chosen works by Claudine Guérin de Tencin, Denis Diderot, Boutet de Monvel, and Claire de Duras dating from 1735 to 1823 that trace this evolution of reproductive repression in both forms: sanguine (against the individual) and sexual (for the population).
Introduction

Proto-Eugenics in Eighteenth-Century France

When Michael Foucault writes about the societal transition from “sanguinity to sexuality,” he implies that sovereign regimes of power require bloodshed as payment for crimes against an autocratic ruler, whereas modern regimes that characterize more liberal forms of government exercise their power through the regulation of populations, or “biopower.” Optimal populations require that the optimal reproductive subjects express their sexuality, and express it in a way that serves a purpose for the state. In other words, in a democratic republic, for example, it is no longer enough to punish the guilty criminal who threatens the state, but the propagation of desirable citizens becomes a national concern as rule is essentially in the hands of the masses. ¹ So, who is granted the “right” to reproduce and who is not? And for those who are deliberately kept from reproducing, how is this repression enforced? There are several traditions and institutions that we can look at today that attempt to regulate reproductive freedom. ² Yet one such crucial institution that served this role for centuries in France seems to be rapidly disappearing, if not imminently invisible: the convent.

I argue that the “right” to reproduce in eighteenth-century France is inherently tied to the notion of “blood.” This is not, however, blood in the sense of the ancient concept of actual bloodshed as recompense for transgressions against the state (the “sanguinity” in the Foucauldian dichotomy of sanguinity and sexuality). It is, rather, “blood” as the iteration of

¹ This is perhaps most obviously exemplified by the National Socialist practices and policies that led to the Holocaust. While Foucault does have the Holocaust in mind while detailing much of his analysis regarding eugenics and the regulation of sexuality, he does also, as I will demonstrate, point to the eighteenth century as a pivotal moment in the transition “from sanguinity to sexuality.”

² I consider some of these contemporary modes of reproductive repression in the Conclusion.
blood myths that serve to regulate the blood as the transmission of desirable or undesirable characteristics within a given “population.” In this project, I will study concerns for the blood from family to social class and, finally, to race in four texts set in the eighteenth century: Claudine Guérin de Tencin's Mémoirs du comte de Comminge (1735), Denis Diderot's La Religieuse (1780), Boutet de Monvel's Les Victimes cloitrées (1791), and Claire de Duras' Ourika (1823). I will at points throughout this analysis refer to this notion of “blood myths,” and by this I am referring to the concept that the purity of certain types of blood (familial, noble, and racial) needs to be protected from potential “contamination” by unfit reproductive subjects. Using the word “myth” proposes that contemporary discourse has since (albeit not entirely) demystified such preoccupation with purity of the blood. Foucault speaks to this mythic nature of such concerns, especially regarding the racial blood, by asserting that such discourse is deliberately divisive and serves a political, rather than biological, agenda. In other words, the mere fact that humans can successfully reproduce with one another, regardless of differences such as social class and race, dispels the supposition of a biological basis for such concerns. These incompatibilities are merely the fabrications of men.

To begin with the familial blood, the blood myth is inherently tied to patriarchal authority. The patriarch in this corpus is concerned with how his property will be passed down, with his preference for rightful heirs. I will examine this concept through two branches of patrilineal succession. First, the familial patriarch will refuse a reproductive union of his offspring that benefits or otherwise intertwines his inheritance with that of a personal enemy, to appease his own grudge.
Second, the patriarch will reject any illegitimate heirs on the basis that these children are not the rightful heirs of his property. Such concerns veer into “mythic” because they are, by contemporary Western standards at least, seen as archaic and old-fashioned. “Love” marriages have replaced arranged or practical pairings as the dominant means of depicting marriage, and children nowadays have more agency regarding such life decisions compared to the past, when the word of the father was the definitive law of the land. Likewise, preferential treatment of “natural” or “lawful” children over adopted or even illegitimate children is now widely considered distasteful or cruel.

Second, the value of noble blood is something that was radically questioned and redefined over the course of the eighteenth century, with literature being one of its primary means of this propagation. Problems of wealth inequality related to social class came to a head at the onset of the French Revolution in 1789. Even though monarchical rule and noble privileges were temporarily restored to France in the early nineteenth century, noble status as a cultural currency was nonetheless dealt an irreparable blow by the Revolution and subsequent Terror. Where literature is concerned, authors’ portrayals of class concerns grew more and more radical (i.e. anti-aristocracy) as the century progressed: the fear of repercussions for publishing anti-nobility literature diminishes around the time of the Revolution. Thus, the timeline of eighteenth-century literature demonstrates a considerable evolution in its criticism of arbitrary class inequalities. While the conflict in many texts depends
upon a protagonist who falls for someone from the “wrong” class, the prejudices that influenced the literary topos of class-crossed lovers wane in relevance by the end of the era.\(^3\)

Finally, racial blood emerges as a societal concern as the result of extensive colonization, first emerging post-Revolution as immigrants are allowed legally in France for the first time. Racial tension presents a different kind of problem for the Republic, as skin color differs from class as a marker of “otherness” in that it cannot be masked by clothes or language. Yet categorization based solely on skin color is a complex issue with legal ramifications: France at the turn of the nineteenth century was still under the rule of the Code Noir, a series of articles that established the laws regarding race, slavery, and freedom in the French colonial empire. Purity of racial blood was a concern because miscegenation questioned the very nature of these laws. For instance, whenever white French colonizers had sex with the black women slaves, how were their mixed-race offspring to be governed? What were their rights? Race post-Revolution becomes an increasingly prominent issue in France, as colonial expansion increases not only contact but also the cohabitation of people from various parts of the world. Yet the fact that people of different "races" can reproduce with one another dispels the myth of racial blood and incompatibility. However, unlike the notion of noble blood, which has all but disappeared from Western society, racial stigmas persist to this day despite an increasing number of people who identify themselves as being from two or more races. The mere fact that

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\(^3\) Consider Pierre de Marivaux’s 1730 play, Le Jeu de l’amour et du hazard, in which class and arranged marriage are problematized by protagonists who use cross-class travestissement to test their “true” compatibility. In the end, this “true love” reigns, as a noble gentleman professes his love for a noble woman whom he believes to be a domestique. Yet, both true love and class hierarchy prevail in the play’s denouement, since everyone has ultimately “fallen” for someone from their own class. This stands in sharp contrast to blatantly anti-class literary depictions that characterize the théâtre monacale of the final decade of the eighteenth century, which violently upends class prejudices, as I examine in Chapter Three.
skin color has the biological power defy categorization speaks to the arbitrary and imprecise nature of attempts at legal categorization.

I therefore propose that by looking at familial, noble, and racial blood concerns in eighteenth-century France, we are looking at a “past, present, and future” model of mythic blood concerns and prejudice. Familial blood represents the past because of the indefinitely long history of patriarchal concerns for inheritance and blood succession that predate French literature. But by suggesting familial blood concern as a model of the “past” in the eighteenth century, I am not suggesting that patriarchal authority and concern for the legitimacy of heirs is dead, but merely that it is an ancient tradition that remains relatively uncontested. While the concept of the nobility in France might be a similarly ancient tradition, concern for the purity of the noble blood represents the “present” for the eighteenth century as the cause célèbre of the moment, with the Revolution being the defining event of the era. Lastly, the concern for the racial blood represents the “future” of blood prejudices. Because relatively very few black people lived in France prior to the early nineteenth century, very few black characters, let alone protagonists, exist in French literature prior to Claire de Duras’ Ourika. Though published in 1823, most of the novella takes place during the 1790s. Just as concern for the purity of the noble blood is violently rejected by the masses at the time of the Revolution, a new type of blood concern, racial purity, enters the dialogue. And, as we were to see over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, racial blood all but replaces noble blood as the main concern for blood purity in French society.

The attempted regulation of blood in eighteenth-century France, what one might consider “proto-eugenics,” since eugenics was not coined until the nineteenth century, acted
mostly negatively. It was initially not concerned with improving the biological quality of life of the population, but rather concerned with keeping certain blood out. In order to preserve the purity of the bloodline, it was necessary that reproduction (and, thus, sexuality) be monitored and controlled, for which the convent became particularly useful. The religious cloister in eighteenth-century France is a place where concerns for blood purity and the regulation of sexuality converge: as a primarily single-sex space, the cloister contains "threats" to the bloodline, regardless of the subject's willingness to devote his or her lives to religious service. This project traces the evolution of the convent as a means of providing alternative lives for undesirable reproductive subjects through the eighteenth century. Monastic life is a tried-and-true manner of housing children who threaten the blood and inheritance of the family, and it is also a predictable fate for a reproductive subject capable of compromising the purity of noble, and eventually racial, blood.

**Corpus, Methodology, and Chapter Summaries**

I have chosen works by Claudine Guérin de Tencin, Denis Diderot, Boutet de Monvel, and Claire de Duras dating from 1735 to 1823 that trace varying models of reproductive repression from "sanguinity to sexuality:" concern for blood purity expands from the immediate and individual (i.e., the familial) to encompass issues of class and race that also affect larger models of population than the family unit. The first two chapters, on Tencin's *Mémoirs du comte de Comminge* and Diderot's *La Religieuse* are focused on familial concerns for the blood. Both texts depict patriarchs who have personal reasons to prevent their children from reproducing, related to the notion of the bloodline and inheritance. While Tencin's protagonists choose to retire to a monastery because they cannot be together, Diderot's titular nun is forced
into a convent through various means, including coercion, emotional blackmail, and physical confinement. Yet both texts use cloistral detention to question contemporary standards of gender and agency: traditional dynamics of gender and power are reiterated and problematized in single-sex cloisters. I argue in the third chapter that Monvel’s *Les Victimes cloitrées* upends concern for the preservation of noble blood purity. The play’s aristocratic family conspires with a local abbot to imprison a pair of *mésallié* lovers, but their strength of character prevails over their arbitrarily ordained destiny regarding marriage. Finally, Duras’ *Ourika* introduces race into the dialogue about bloodline purity by telling the story of a young black woman rescued from slavery by an aristocratic French family. Ourika’s incompatibility with French society against the backdrop of the Revolution reflects a critical moment in history: while the Revolution dismantles traditional class power dynamics in France, race is foreshadowed as class’s successor as a main point of contention, and Ourika, as an outsider, is left with no other choice but to live her final days in a convent.

The through line of this project is Foucault’s various writings on power, blood, and sexuality. The Foucauldian model of blood prejudice transcends centuries because it proposes discrimination as a self-serving, although surmountable, demonstration of human nature. Foucault explains how we, as humans, create "others" in society to express dominance and assuage our survival instincts. In the first two chapters, I rely upon Foucault’s *Discipline & Punish* and *History of Sexuality Volume I* in my analysis of patriarchal power in the family unit and the problematizing of gender roles. In the third and fourth chapters, as I move from familial concerns of blood and inheritance to the societal concerns of noble and racial purity, I turn to

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4 The protagonists in question in Tencin’s novella, one male and one female, do both end up in a monastery, an anomaly that I explain in Chapter One.
Foucault’s lectures at the Collège de France, which have been appearing in published form only recently. Specifically, I draw upon Foucauldian theories presented in the lectures as opening the scope of the project to class and race allows for the inclusion of Foucault’s more in-depth work on biopower as a successor of sovereign power, such as that of Society Must Be Defended (1975-76) and Security, Territory, Population (1977-78). I also put the primary texts as well as Foucault’s work into dialogue with more recent scholarship that supports my study of the main themes in this project.

The first chapter analyzes Claudine Guérin de Tencin’s criticism of familial blood feud and the despotic patriarch in her novella Mémoirs du comte de Comminge (1735). The titular count falls in love with his cousin Adélaïde de Lussan, but their marriage is forbidden by their fathers: Comminge’s family is involved in a bitter dispute over inheritance dating back three generations, when a substitution granted the Lussan line the wealthier Comminge fortune. Comminge’s father is unable to overcome this grudge, even at the expense of his son’s happiness, going as far as to exile Comminge to the family’s property in the mountains and lock him away in a tower until a suitable marriage match has been made for him. The unyielding father even exerts his authority by charging at his son with a drawn sword upon learning of his defiance. Yet rather than marry his father’s choice of bride, Comminge circumvents the matter of marriage, first by infiltrating the now-married Adélaïde’s house disguised as a painter to spy on her, and second by entering a monastery. Coincidentally, following the death of her husband, Adélaïde, disguised as a man, commends herself to the same monastery, and she engages in spying on the count in return.
Though Tencin’s ill-fated lovers are not forced into a life of monastic devotion by their overbearing fathers, they nonetheless resort to monastic life because of the threat that their disobedience poses to the sanctity of the familial blood and its linear succession. Comminge’s father refuses to let the marriage between his son and Adélaïde de Lussan reconcile the rival branches of the family tree; rather, he sees Adélaïde as nothing but his enemy’s daughter, unfit for marriage to his son. Comminge exercises his agency by refusing his father’s prescribed life for him, signaling an ideological shift in the generation from father to son; this speaks to the increasing emphasis on personal liberty over the course of the eighteenth century. However, the novella’s ultimate denouement is Adélaïde’s ability to overcome Comminge’s subjugation of her. By remaining disguised in the monastery rather than reveal her identity to Comminge, she turns the tables on his voyeurism. Furthermore, in “willing” her own death, she believes herself to be making the ultimate sacrifice for Comminge, whereas in life Comminge had spoiled her attempt at self-sacrifice by breaking the terms of their arrangement.

The concern for blood in the second chapter remains within the familial sphere, but explores a mode of familial reproductive repression that is of a different nature than the dilemma in Tencin’s novella. Suzanne Simonin, the protagonist of Denis Diderot’s La Religieuse, is suddenly forced into a convent by her parents, a fate that she is unwilling to accept. To squelch her reluctance, Suzanne’s mother entrusts a priest to inform Suzanne of her family’s true intentions: they refuse to let her marry because she is not M. Simonin’s biological daughter, but rather the result of her mother’s infidelity. Suzanne must thus suffer the consequences of her own illegitimate birth and atone for her mother’s sin; confining Suzanne in the convent ensures that Suzanne’s older sisters remain Simonin’s ‘rightful,’ and sole, heirs.
Whereas Comminge and Adelaide resort to the monastery because their fathers’ rivalry prevents any possibility of their marriage to one another, Suzanne is confined to the convent as a preventative measure. Once she has reached the age of sexual maturity and, inevitably, marriage, the fact that men begin to “notice” her proves problematic for the disdainful patriarch. Diderot’s depiction of the convent is a scathing criticism of Church hypocrisy: Suzanne as an unwilling novice narrates an account of false devotion, graphic violence, and sexual indecency rampant within the walls of the cloister.

Diderot thus uses a female heroine as a porte-parole of crucial eighteenth-century ideals, most prominently the insistence on personal liberty at all cost (e.g., Suzanne asserts that she values her freedom over her own happiness) and the call for the disenfranchisement of the Catholic Church in French politics. Yet the novel otherwise credits very little to Suzanne and to female agency in general: the convent ultimately fails, at multiple instances, to successfully break free from patriarchal structures of power. Both homosexuality and homosociality ultimately prove inadequate models of social microcosms within the confines of the convent in that they mimic patriarchal power structures and eroticize the all-female living environment.\(^5\) While Suzanne’s rebellion against familial and Church authority in *La Religieuse* carries echoes of political progress coming to a head in the eighteenth century, her agency as a subject is all-but diminished. She ultimately attains the freedom that she so values by finally escaping the convent at the end of the novel, but she is fated to an equally undesirable existence: in the span of a few final pages, Suzanne is first injured, then raped, then trapped in a life of continued subservience. Diderot’s text is a forward-thinking diatribe against the injustice of

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\(^5\) The fact that the novel started out as a prank is particularly pertinent here, and something that I will analyze in the chapter.
cloistral confinement, but one that ultimately forestalls a proto-feminist agenda by hastily wrapping up Suzanne’s fate as a perpetual victim.

The oppressive hold of both the Catholic Church and the aristocracy on eighteenth-century French society is challenged in Boutet de Monvel’s 1791 play Les Victimes cloitrées, the subject of the third chapter. Prior to the events of the play, Dorante, a wealthy, merchant bourgeois, has fallen for Eugénie, the daughter of an aristocratic family. Eugénie’s mother’s concern for the purity of her family’s noble blood compels her to hide Eugénie away in a convent, under the watch of her abettor, a corrupt abbot in charge of the neighboring monastery, Père Laurent. Laurent imprisons Eugénie in a dungeon beneath the convent, tells her family that she has died in a fire, and attempts to force himself on her sexually. He also manipulates Dorante into vowing to become a monk; once inside, Dorante is confined to a dungeon as well. In the first two of the play’s three acts, the nefarious authorities of the Church exploit their positions of power for their own benefit: for Laurent, this is primarily procuring Dorante’s wealth as a dowry and fulfilling his own sexual desire vis-à-vis Eugénie. Yet Laurent accomplishes his crimes by preying upon a grave societal weakness: class prejudice. Eugénie’s mother would rather commit her daughter to a convent (where she believes her to have perished) than let her marry a commoner.

Yet this wrongdoing is chastised by other members of the household: in private by the servants, and openly by Eugénie’s uncle, M. de Francheville, who was in favor of a marriage between Eugénie and Dorval. Francheville in the play is the voice of reason and, I argue, an advocate for democracy: he eschews the privilege of his own noble heritage, preferring to be a voice for “the people,” and is elected mayor of the family’s small provincial village. It is
Francheville who uncovers the truth about the fates of Eugénie and Dorval in the play’s ultimate act. Yet, Eugénie and Dorval liberate themselves from incarceration in their respective convent and monastery in the moments preceding Francheville’s intervention. They break through the dungeons’ walls to reunite, thus ending the play with a triumph of reproductive freedom that defies the interference of Church and aristocratic agendas, reaffirming the play’s pro-Revolutionist leanings.

The final chapter looks at a newly-emerging concern for blood purity at the end of the eighteenth century: racial blood. Claire de Duras’ novella *Ourika* is a keystone text released at a cusp of shifting societal concerns for blood purity, a “discontinuity” as Foucault would call it. Though published in 1823, most of the narrative takes place during the Revolution. The protagonist is a young woman of Senegalese origin who is rescued from slavery by a French colonial general and adopted by his aristocratic, Parisian family who eventually survives the Terror. But being a black woman raised in a white world, Ourika is nonetheless a doomed character; marriage and children are an impossibility for her because the color of her skin is a mark of “otherness” that aristocratic French society cannot allow to taint their lineage. Though treated affectionately by her adopted family, Ourika absorbs and internalizes the racism prevalent in the family’s social sphere. Once she realizes that she can never have a family, she sees race as a pathology and her “otherness” as an inevitable form of social quarantine. She begins covering her skin with gloves and a veil and suffers from intense bouts of vague ailments (described as a *mélange* of fever and melancholia) that verge on the life-threatening. Her illness worsens when her adoptive brother Charles, with whom she is secretly in love, marries a fellow survivor of the Terror and becomes a father. Ourika, then, at the suggestion of a priest, decides
to become a nun and retire to a convent, which still bears the marks of destruction from the Revolution.

Ourika’s struggle to find her place in society, and her internalized racism, relate to a certain number of postcolonial texts that describe similar feelings and comparable experiences. The focus of this concluding chapter, however, is to posit Ourika as a spiritual successor of literary heroines like Adélaïde, Suzanne, and Éugenie, who find themselves in the convent because of the threat that they posed to the blood. Race, although an emerging social concern in almost exclusively-white eighteenth century France, is nonetheless regulated by society in the same way as familial and noble blood concerns, which Ourika demonstrates. Duras portrays Ourika’s situation as an impossible anomaly specific to her time, when there were neither black nor immigrant communities to empathize with her personal history of marginalization. Therefore, like many other representations of women labeled as undesirable reproductive subjects, Ourika, in a similar vein, resorts to the convent as her sole recourse.

I argue that literary depictions of the convent trace concerns for familial, noble, and racial blood purity over the course of the eighteenth century: both how these concerns evolve and how they stay the same. The literature of the eighteenth century depicts both the holdover of despotic sovereign power and the emerging model of power that Foucault theorizes: biopower. The corpus of this project shows how blood prejudices are argued and enforced under both systems to prevent the transmission of “undesirable” blood via the repression of reproduction.
Chapter One. "Feminist Writing": The Fallibility of the Sovereign and the Feminine Voice of Agency

In this political and cultural climate where the religious and gendered pillars of patriarchal authority had begun to crack perceptibly, the representations of nuns assumed power and urgency. Between 1730 and 1789, lawyers, religious pamphleteers, and men of letters used women religious and the convent to oppose political, religious, and social authority on a variety of fronts. (Choudhury Convents and Nuns 4)

Like many women of her era, Claudine Guérin de Tencin did not want to become a nun, but her family did not have the money to marry off their youngest daughter (Delon 7). Called "la scélérate chanoinesse" by Denis Diderot, Tencin did not devote her life to God (Delon 9). She renounced her vows and chose Parisian society life, becoming a salonnière and giving birth to the philosopher Jean le Rond d'Alembert out of wedlock. But her background as a religious certainly served as inspiration for her novella Mémoirs du comte de Comminge (1735), the story of a blood feud between two branches of the same family who produce ill-fated, would-be lovers Comminge and Adélaïde. Like many literary protagonists whose illicit desire threatens the familial bloodline, Comminge and Adélaïde turn to the cloister as a last resort, not to fulfill any religious duties, but to lament their unconsummated passion.

Michel Delon, who prefaced the novella’s 1996 edition, notes that Tencin's novella, like many works published anonymously but attributed to women, has at times faced a controversy of authorship: "Quelques critiques chipoteront sur l'attribution des Mémoirs du comte de Comminge à Mme de Tencin ... à la façon dont d'autres n'acceptent pas que Mme de Lafayette a composé La Princesse de Clèves ni aucune femme un chef-d'œuvre," (8). If authorship is a problem of gender, this too is an idea that is mirrored in the text itself. Comminge, the story's narrator, dominates the storytelling throughout the novel until its very end, when his dying
lover Adélaïde is given the chance to tell her story, and Comminge, who had previously ignored Adélaïde’s "voice," suspends his own. This creates a mise-en-abime of a woman (Tencin) writing a man (Comminge) writing a woman (Adélaïde). Tencin's denouement allows her to end the story from an empowered, female perspective that counters Comminge's egotistical perspective, in line with what Nancy K. Miller classifies as "feminist writing."

"[V]if et plein de sa haine": Entitlement, Jealousy, and the Problem of Inheritance

The novel’s narrator, Comminge, falls in love with his second cousin, Adélaïde, while procuring papers that will rectify a familial injustice and recover his father’s “stolen” birthright. Comminge’s great grandfather had two sons, but “donna au cadet des terres considérables au préjudice de l’aîné” (21), thus breaking the noble custom of primogeniture and denying the elder brother (Comminge’s grandfather) his just birthright. This is called a “substitution.” The brothers’ close bond, however, is unaffected by this redistribution of the family wealth, and they insist on having their sons (first cousins and the fathers of Comminge and Adélaïde) raised together. Yet almost from birth, Comminge’s father is instilled with a deep-seated “jalousie” of his cousin, the Marquis de Lussan, who surpasses him in every aspect of their childhood education (21). Well into adulthood, the men continue to quarrel over the matter of their inheritances, and Comminge's father remains "vif et plein de sa haine" (22). The resentment over the substitution eventually comes to blows for the respective patriarchs. Comminge's and Adélaïde's fathers are, quite simply, out for blood regarding the matter, and it is Comminge’s father who is humiliated:

[I]ls mirent l’épée à la main. La fortune se déclara pour monsieur de Lussan ; il désarma mon père et voulut l’obliger à demander la vie : Elle me serait odieuse,
si je te la devais, lui dit mon père. Tu me la devras malgré toi, répondit monsieur de Lussan, en lui jetant son épée et en s’éloignant. (22-23)

Comminge's father would rather die by the sword than grovel for his life before his cousin, Lussan, who spares him nonetheless. The scene, which portrays Comminge's father as a man who values his pride more than his life, sets him up as the inflexible patriarch in opposition to his son, who is driven by his emotions.

To exacerbate the animosity between the two houses, Comminge’s father’s steward gives him the idea to file suit to restitute the original hereditary properties (i.e. reverse the substitution). However, Comminge’s father needs evidence for his petition to be successful. He sends his son to locate the family’s papers in the archives of an abbey, and Comminge leaves with every intention of following his father's wishes: “Je n’avais nulle raison de m’opposer à ce que mon père désirait de moi, aussi, l’assurai-je de mon obéissance,” (24). To keep his identity unknown from any relatives, Comminge disguises himself as the "marquis de Longaunois" while on his journey, but he is nonetheless invited to a society dinner at a marquis’ house. There, he meets Adélaïde de Lussan, his second cousin and the daughter of his father’s adversary. It is truly le coup de foudre for the young couple as they fall in love while out for a walk without speaking a word to one another (25).

When Comminge learns of Adélaïde's identity, he must attempt to reconcile his filial duty with his newfound passion. He is instantly broken-hearted upon learning that the woman he has fallen in love with is the daughter of his family's sworn enemy:

Mais que devins-je quand on me nomma la fille du comte de Lussan? Tout ce que j’avais à redouter de la haine de nos pères se présenta à mon esprit; mais de
toutes les réflexions, la plus accablante fut la crainte que l’on n’eût inspiré à Adélaïde... de l’aversion pour tout ce qui portait le mien. (26)

Comminge recognizes right away that his love for Adélaïde will incur the wrath of his intractable father, but ultimately his love for her outweighs this fear. As a show of his devotion to Adélaïde, Comminge burns the evidence that might have reversed the substitution and restored his father’s birthright. “En fallait-il davantage pour convaincre un homme amoureux; je crus avoir droit de disposer de ces papiers, j’allai chercher la cassette qui les renfermait; je n’ai jamais passé de moment plus doux que celui où je les jetai au feu,” (30). Comminge, for the moment, feels a sense of satisfaction in his rebellion against his overbearing father, despite his initial conflict over the matter.

Moreover, Comminge does not tell Adélaïde what he has done, even after he reveals his identity. She reacts, as expected, in shock and desperation: “Vous êtes le fils du comte de Comminge? s’écria Adélaïde. Quoi, vous êtes notre ennemi! C’est vous, c’est votre père qui poursuivez la ruine du mien,” (32). Comminge keeps the secret of having burned the papers from Adélaïde even though by doing so he has saved her father from the threat of this dreaded “ruine” (the loss of their estate to Comminge’s father), even though they have several conversations regarding the matter (33). In exchange for keeping this secret, Comminge has the self-satisfaction of doing a good deed without recognition or reparation. He also has the purity of Adélaïde’s fidelity, which would be tarnished for him if he suspected that she felt like she “owed” him: “[j]e veux qu’Adélaïde m’aime et je ne veux pas qu’elle me soit obligée,” (31). By keeping her in the dark, Comminge ensures that she loves him for who he is and not because of his sacrifice for her: the favor of his father and the potential for greater wealth and
property. This is the first of many instances throughout the novella where either Comminge or Adélaïde makes a sacrifice that comes with a condition: the virtue of Comminge’s sacrifice would here be marred if he used it to gain favor with Adélaïde. It remains virtuous because he does not.

As predicted, when Comminge reveals the fate of the papers to his father, it infuriates him, and he launches an attack against his son. Delon writes that the act of denying his father’s entitlement characterizes Comminge as an “héros d’une époque nouvelle,” who challenges the aristocratic notion that “[u]n fils de famille doit illustrer son patronyme par quelques coups d’éclat sur la scène publique” (9). Tencin portrays the despotic rule by the familial patriarch as unreasonable: the count’s depiction of his own father as a cold and short-sighted is far from flattering, an anachronistic relic of noble rigidity. In the eyes of the protagonist and narrator himself, not only does the unyielding father refuse to consider the union between Comminge and Adélaïde as a possible reconciliation of feuding sides of the same family, but he even fails to learn from the wisdom of his own father (Comminge’s grandfather), who was denied the same birthright in question and yet was able nonetheless to accept the substitution and live amicably with his brother.

Furthermore, as Comminge notes, he and Adélaïde are their fathers’ only offspring: “Le marquis de Lussan n’eut qu’une fille de son mariage et mon père n’eut aussi que moi,” (22). It is thus even more important that they marry according to their fathers’ wishes because there are no other heirs in either family to bear the family name and title and reproduce, allowing the aristocratic family bloodline to continue. A marriage between Comminge and Adélaïde would therefore be an inevitable union of the two houses. This is an idea that might resolve the
problem of the initial substitution for the family if not for the determined, longstanding hatred between Comminge’s father and Lussan. Over the course of the story, Comminge’s father goes to great lengths to keep this marriage from happening, preferring to cling to his hatred for his cousin and pursue his legal suit, hoping to reclaim his proper birthright.

Paying with Blood: The Law of the Sword

There are two kinds of male characters in Memoires du Comte de Comminge that typify “old” and “new” models of thinking in the eighteenth century. Comminge is a sensitive, forward-thinking man whose excessive sentimentality and his endless shedding of tears serves physical proof of his interior turmoil. Comminge is not only not afraid to show his emotions, but he defines himself by them as if his life depended on them; he claims repeatedly to prefer death to the anguish of being without Adélaïde.\(^6\) While Comminge does draw his sword twice during the story, it is only in self-defense or in defense of Adélaïde. Dom Gabriel, the younger brother of Adélaïde’s eventual husband the marquis de Bénavidès, parallels this emphasis on sentimentality, and both members of the younger generation reject their respective patriarchs’ strict authoritarianism. Katharine Jensen calls this generational disparity “a ‘kinder, gentler’ masculinity in [the] two characters” (45). Consequently, both men suffer from the rule of the contrary archetype: the tyrannical patriarch, a sovereign reigning over his land and property (i.e., the “old” model of thinking). Twice in the story, Comminge is charged at with a drawn sword: first by his own father and later by Bénavidès, who catches Comminge alone with

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\(^6\) Thinking he has lost Adelle due to his deception at the Bénavidès household, Comminge tells Adelle, “j’irai loin de vous mourir de douleur des maux, que je vous ai causés et de la perte de votre cœur” (63) and subsequently shows a lack of concern for his own self-preservation, writing, “Je n’aimais pas assez la vie pour la défendre, mais j’haissais trop Bénavidès pour la lui abandonner” (64).
Adélaïde “à ses genoux” (64). These older men, quick to reach for their swords upon perceiving a threat to the patriarchal law, represent the longstanding tradition of French sovereign power to exact recompense for transgressions in blood, Foucault’s “sanguinity.” Comminge’s rejection of this autocratic form of authority represents a more forward-thinking way of ruling that foreshadows sovereign power’s eventual upending.

* Mémoirs du comte de Comminge*, published in 1735, takes place in the earlier years of the eighteenth century, and certain characters therefore tend to embody the specific dichotomy of outdated or progressive ideals, a source of conflict. Comminge’s father, as well as Bénavidès, as I intend to demonstrate vis-à-vis their drawing of swords, rule by bloodshed, the tradition of sovereign power. Foucault posits in the first pages of *Discipline & Punish* that one indicator of the beginning of the end of this form of power was the horrendously botched execution of Robert-François Damiens. Damiens blamed the monarchy for allowing the Catholic Church to discriminate against Jansenists and sought to kill the king, Louis XV on January 5, 1757, earning him the title “Damiens the Regicide.” Though Damiens inflicted a mere flesh wound on the king, such an attack nonetheless necessitated that the convicted make the *amende honorable*, which Damiens did before the public on March 2 of the same year. He was subjected to a series of tortures involving pincers, molten lead, boiling oil, and burning resin, wax, and sulfur, after which Damiens was finally drawn and quartered (Foucault *Discipline 3*).

Foucault amasses a series of accounts that depict the *amende honorable* in a bad light: for example, the executioners are, at every turn, portrayed as incompetent, and additional horses need to be added to the original four to complete Damiens’ dismemberment (4-5). These

7 See William Doyle’s *Jansenism: Catholic Resistance to Authority from the Reformation to the French Revolution* (2000).
testimonies suggest, as does Foucault, that sovereign power and reign by bloodshed has become unnecessarily brutal, or even clumsy. Considering the growing political dissatisfaction of the era, it is therefore not surprising that Damiens was the last person executed in France by being drawn and quartered. Foucault’s timeline of the decline of sovereign power therefore coincides with the timing of Tencin’s text: the older generation reaches for their swords to enforce the law by demanding bloodshed, while Comminge reaches for his sword only in righteousness, rendering the rule of the patriarch anachronistic and barbaric.

Once Comminge burns the evidence his father needs in his suit against Lussan, he attempts to prepare his father for the news by appealing to his emotions, explaining the need to end the feud for the sake of his romantic feelings for Adélaïde. When he finally confesses, his father wastes no time in charging at him: “A peine eus-je le temps de prononcer ce peu de paroles, mon père furieux vint sur moi l’épée à la main; il m’en aurait percé sans doute, car je ne faisais pas le plus petit effort pour l’éviter, si ma mère ne fut entrée dans le moment. Elle se jeta entre nous,” (35-36). In Comminge’s family and, as I will mention later, in Lussan’s, the mother is forced to play the role of mediator in the family, caught between the father’s desire for control and the child’s desire for agency. In this scene, Comminge’s mother is successful, in preventing her husband from wounding, perhaps even fatally, their son, and she separates the men long enough to calm her furious husband. She tells Comminge, “Hélas! Si votre bonheur ne dépendait que de moi, je sacrifierais tout pour vous rendre heureux. Mais vous avez un père qui veut être obéi; il est prêt à prendre les résolutions les plus violentes contre vous,” (36). As Delon writes, "Le rituel aristocratique apparaît comme despotique et destructeur," (10).

Comminge’s father is still embracing the old-fashioned, infallible rule of the sovereign patriarch;
it is most important that he be uncontested and obeyed, and the life of the disobedient child is thus deserving of the most severe punishment.

While Comminge burns the proof that his father needs for his lawsuit as an act of devotion to Adélaïde, his father, concerned only with his “rightful” material dues, does not concern himself with his son’s reasoning. Comminge’s father does not see his son as his own person, but merely a potential extension of his own agency. Sara Ahmed’s writings on “willfulness” examines this parent-child dynamic, where the will of the parent supersedes the child’s right to subjectivity. She writes, “If becoming an object is to receive the will of a subject, then an object that does not allow a subject to carry a will would be described as ‘willful’” (Willful 42). In the context of Comminge’s story, this quotation points out the arbitrary nature of parental authority, especially once a child has reached adulthood. One’s power in this dynamic is granted by being the progenitor, not based on any measure of wisdom or rational thinking. Ahmed writes that the parental will must be obeyed, not only at the expense of the child’s livelihood, but of their very life: “The punishment for willfulness is a passive willing of death, an allowing of death,” (Willful 1). Comminge’s father nearly goes a step further: he threatens his son with his sword, thus an active willing of death, in retaliation for having disobeyed him. While Comminge's mother intervenes to protect her son she must nonetheless defer to the patriarch. She is caught between two contradictory roles: she is at once a subservient partner to her husband and bound by her maternal empathy for her suffering child. Ultimately, Comminge’s mother takes the side of her husband by acquiescing to his rule. The will of the father is right, while the “willfulness” of the son is wrong.
As dramatic physical action, the altercation that takes place when Comminge’s father learns that his son has burned the papers is the climax of their dispute, but it is far from the end. Comminge is unable to escape the will of his father, who following the attack has his wife send his son to “la campagne,” which turns out to be a chateau in the Pyrenees (37). The father intends to arrange a marriage with someone other than Adélaïde de Lussan for his son and, in the meantime, wants to ensure that his son make no attempts to see her. Coincidentally, Comminge is very briefly reunited with his lover when he encounters Adélaïde and her mother after they suffer from a carriage accident while on the way to his sojourn at the chateau (which he refers to as “mon exil”). After helping Adélaïde and Mme de Lussan to safety, Comminge and Adélaïde must again say their adieux, lamenting the age-old, familial blood feud that inhibits their relationship. She says, “Je ne sais quelle sera votre destinée, mes parents décideront de la mienne,” to which he replies, “Et pourquoi nous assujettir… à la tyrannie de nos pères; laissez-les se haïr puisqu’ils le veulent, et allons dans quelque coin du monde jouir de notre tendresse et nous en faire un devoir ?” (41-42). This exchange subtly highlights the prevailing disparity of contemporary gender norms: while Adélaïde reluctantly accepts submission to the will of her father as her inevitable lot in life, she leaves Comminge’s destiny more open. Ahmed’s work recognizes this incongruence along gender lines; in her analysis, she writes, “To become a woman is to submit to a weakening of the will” (Willful 87). As a female child, Adélaïde must behave more dutifully regarding her father’s will. Comminge has more agency in willfully disobeying his father simply because he is a man.

Comminge is denied a right to his own subjectivity by his father, threatened with the rule of the sword at his choice of wife, and exiled to prevent the exercise of his own will.
Comminge’s instinct is to rebel against the tyrannical rule of the patriarch, an occasion that permits him to reassert his own agency (and masculinity) and to distinguish himself from the reluctant (“feminine”) reaction of Adélaïde. She, in response, would rather her desire for Comminge make her an unfulfilled “malheureuse” than a “criminelle” (42). Yet as a result, Comminge’s desire for rebellion is irrelevant: he says, “Je ne suis capable, lui dis-je enfin, que de vous aimer et de mourir de douleur” (42). If Adélaïde will not defy her father to be with him, then there is no point in Comminge disobeying his own father, since a life without his true love isn’t a life worth fighting for.

Comminge’s mother’s behavior during his exile sheds further light on the familial dynamics of power in the novella. While Comminge’s mother was earlier successful in protecting her son from his vengeful father, she is less successful in negotiating a happy relationship between father and son. She initially reassures her son that “tous nos parents travaillaient à raccommoder notre famille, et qu’ils y réussiraient,” but then, six weeks later, she delivers the unfortunate news that Comminge’s father will be soon coming to marry him off immediately to “une fille de la Maison de Foix” (43-44). Comminge’s mother, in her role as the familial peacekeeper, seems to have been lying to him about a potential familial reconciliation that would allow Comminge to marry Adélaïde; his father is simply uncompromising. Her lie attempts to appease her son in the immediate present, disregarding the fact that he must eventually learn the inevitable truth. Hiding the truth from Comminge, she merely wishes to see her son less miserable. This scene mirrors a previous one where Adélaïde’s mother, Mme de Lussan, similarly reassures Comminge falsely to save face: “elle me promit de faire tous ses efforts pour réconcilier nos familles,” (41). The mother makes these false promises without any
indication that the inflexible father might budge on his absolute opposition to a union between Comminge and Adélaïde. Mothering in the novella is therefore depicted as keeping the familial peace by any means, even in anticipation of a fierce altercation. Whereas the men are eager to draw their swords, the women try to evade, or at least forestall, any violent confrontation. Comminge’s mother, for instance, must delicately balance the obstinacy of her husband, whom she is obliged to obey, with the well-being of their own son. She offers Comminge false hope, which is problematic for Comminge but also symptomatic of her maternal role, in which she must defer to the patriarch.

In response to the paternal decree that he must marry Mlle de Foix, Comminge simply refuses, saying, "je suis trop honnête homme pour épouser une personne que je ne puis aimer," thus inciting the wrath of his father, who promises that his punishment will be swift and brutal (45). He tells Comminge, "Tu ne verras pas même le jour; je vais t'enfermer dans un cachot destiné pour ceux qui te ressemblent" (45) He addresses Comminge as “tu,” not as a show of familiarity or warmth, but as a lack of respect and an statement of domination. Imprisonment serves as a metaphoric emasculation of Comminge for a few reasons. First, it denies his sexual agency by keeping him separated from Adélaïde. Furthermore, it is evident that "ceux qui te ressemblent" refers to people who resemble Comminge through their willful behavior: that he defies the law of the land. Like a criminal, he is to be locked up "dans le fond d'une tour; le lieu où il me mit ne recevait qu'une faible lumière d'une petite fenêtre grillée" (46). Being locked in a tower is a topos dating back to the earliest days of French literature, and one usually exacted
by jealous husbands on their wives, or perhaps even by fathers on their daughters. The tower, like the sword, represents the phallus, or the power of the father, and thus alludes to Comminge's symbolic castration; familial imprisonment as a form of punishment feminizes the prisoner, as exile is a more common sentence for disobedient or nonconformist men who fail to fall in line with social norms (like Comminge earlier in the novella). Tencin seems to acknowledge this reversal, having Comminge imprisoned in the base, rather than the usual height, of the tower. Comminge is engaged in a battle of wills with his father. As Ahmed writes, “Power involves the capacity to carry out an action despite the will of others.” (Wilfull 54).

Though Comminge has thwarted his father by destroying the evidence needed for his suit, it has not brought him any closer to being with Adélaïde. His father, instead, seeks to punish his willful son by preventing his union with Adélaïde de Lussan at all costs.

The guard of Comminge's cell eventually delivers a letter to him from Adélaïde that brings bad news: since Comminge's father cannot force him to marry to prevent his union with Adélaïde, the father insists upon her marriage instead. She complies, giving her freedom in exchange for Comminge's. Since Comminge is his only son and his only chance at producing an heir worthy of the inheritance, Comminge’s father cannot simply forsake his son to exile and/or imprisonment forever, but must force his will upon him; yet Comminge still does not relent. Devastated by the news, Comminge uses his heightened emotional state to convince the guard to let him out. However, it proves to be too late, as Comminge encounters his mother on the

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8 The “fenêtre grillée” foreshadows that Comminge will end up in a monastery, as this is often used as a symbol of the very limited contact with the outside world that the monastery or the convent allows.

9 For example, Marie de France’s Lais at times deploys this dichotomy of exile as a masculine form of punishment (e.g. “Milun,” “Chevrefoil,” and “Eliduc”) and confinement as feminine form of punishment (e.g. “Guigemar” and “Yonec”). Also, Adélaïde herself is later imprisoned in a tower by her jealous husband the marquis de Bénavidès after he catches her alone with Comminge.
road on her way to free him, confirming that Adélaïde has married Bénavidès. Comminge subsequently falls ill and suffers a terrible fever. He is governed by his emotions, this time with physical consequences, which yet again juxtaposes Comminge’s sensibility with the shrewdness of his father. Comminge’s mother’s empathy in response to her son’s illness makes her equally susceptible, finding herself "dans une affliction inconcevable" (51). Due to the pain of seeing her son’s illness, Comminge's mother eventually admits that it was her idea, and not his father’s, to have Adélaïde marry in exchange for Comminge's freedom; she simply did not think that her son "y fussiez si sensible" (52). Just as when she lied about the impending family reconciliation, Comminge’s mother acts in the interest of her son’s contentment in the present and does not admit that Comminge’s intransigent father has the final say on the matter. When Comminge hears the news of Adélaïde’s marriage, he declares that he would rather be imprisoned in the tower and faithful to Adélaïde than free in a world where she is not reciprocally faithful to him, despite his freedom: "la seule chose qui me donnait de la consolation était l'idée d'être aimé" (51, my emphasis).

This declaration, that having someone love (and be faithful to) him supersedes being together to love, rings of truth, as Comminge tends to attach his desire to objects, particularly Adélaïde's portrait and her letter, on which he continually sheds tears. This miniature of Adélaïde is stolen (Comminge forged a duplicate and kept the original), so Comminge is alone in the knowledge that he possesses the authentic likeness of Adélaïde. The disingenuous manner through which he procured the portrait only adds to its role as a fetishized object: Jensen writes that "exchanging the copy for the original, thereby oblig[es] Adélaïde to accord him her 'favors' without her knowledge (or consent)," (49). Her portrait is an adequate substitute possession
but only if Adélaïde is faithful to Comminge in body and spirit. Comminge's mother, however, in procuring her son's freedom, has tarnished Adélaïde's faithfulness, which for Comminge held a higher value than physical togetherness. It is only once she is married to the elderly and unappealing Bénavidès that Comminge insists on seeing Adélaïde in person.

In the letter, Adélaïde declares her love for Comminge and her disgust for Bénavidès, but she also requests that Comminge avoid her so as not to increase her torments: "vous les augmenterez encore si vous n'évitez avec soin les occasions de me voir et de me parler" (48). Yet not long after his mother leaves the chateau, Comminge decides to flout these pleas and visit the Bénavidès household, sending his friend Saint-Laurent in advance to survey and report. Saint-Laurent finds Adélaïde's husband suspicious and possessive, "son mari ne la quittait presque jamais," (55). Yet instead of deterring Comminge, this news compels him even more to see Adélaïde, given her "triste situation" (55). Moreover, Comminge plans on wearing a disguise, reasoning that the best way to see Adélaïde without upsetting her is to "tenter de la voir sans être vu" (54). Yet, as Jensen argues, by sneaking into Adélaïde's home to spy on her, Comminge is re-committing the same violation as stealing her portrait, the stolen erotic gaze: "In keeping with the secrecy of his portrait exchange, he wants again to claim pleasure from Adélaïde without her knowledge or consent," (50). The two episodes mirror each other further by the recurring motif of the "painter." Comminge infiltrates the Bénavidès household disguised as a house painter, thus playing upon the dual sense of the work of the peintre: Comminge uses dubious means to gaze upon Adélaïde, first as artist and now as artisan. Once in the house, Comminge occupies himself by spying unabashedly on Adélaïde, for instance, in the chateau's chapel several days after beginning his work: "Je me plaçai de façon que je pusse regarder
pendant tout le temps qu'elle y fut, sans être remarqué" (58). Being overly cautious in the chateau of a jealous master only partially explains why Comminge spends several days in Adélaïde's home, watching her intensely when he is able, without making any attempt to reveal his identity or to speak to her; he simply enjoys voyeurism.

Nonetheless, Adélaïde does discover Comminge's identity, due to the machinations of Bénavidès' younger brother Dom Gabriel. Dom Gabriel, himself in love with Adélaïde, uses his good rapport with Comminge to interrogate him, and pointedly assumes “Vous êtes amoureux” (58). But the context of this assertion is a more specific, though unspoken, confirmation: that both men now know that the other is also in love with Adélaïde. Dom Gabriel, despite his good nature, sees Comminge as a potential rival for her love. The novella's next scene has Dom Gabriel bring Adélaïde to Comminge, presumably to gauge their reactions in one another's presence. When Adélaïde recognizes Comminge, she reacts in anger, refusing even to look him in the eye (60). Yet, despite anticipating this response, Comminge jumps to the conclusion that it must be because she is in love with someone else, namely Dom Gabriel: “Il est vrai que je suis venu ici contre ses ordres. Mais si elle m’aimait encore, elle me pardonnerait un crime qui lui prouve l’excès de ma passion. Je conclus ensuite que puisque Adélaïde ne m’aimait plus, il fallait qu’elle aimât ailleurs” (60). This is clearly simple jealousy, as Comminge has already confirmed that Dom Gabriel is also in love with Adélaïde despite being her brother-in-law. Though Comminge's instincts about Dom Gabriel's penchant for Adélaïde ultimately prove to be correct, they do not explain Adélaïde's anger when she recognizes him, since she does not reciprocate Dom Gabriel's love. She loves Comminge, and his presence violates the terms of the sacrifice that she has agreed to make in exchange for his freedom, as she has explained in her
Furthermore, Comminge uses Adélaïde’s indignation as an attempt to validate his voyeurism, claiming, “Hélas! que j’avais tort de me plaindre de ma fortune avant ce cruel moment” (60-61). I interpret this lament to mean that Comminge would now have preferred to remain disguised and continue to spy on Adélaïde unbeknownst to her rather than to reveal his identity and risk her ire, which compromises his “image” of her: he is able to watch her alone and fantasize that she is faithful to him, simply ignoring what may be going on between Adélaïde and Bénavidès behind closed doors.

When Comminge finally manages to meet Adélaïde alone, he pleads for her forgiveness by kneeling before her, at which point her husband intrudes upon them. Caught by Bénavidès in the compromising position of being “aux genoux de sa femme” in a closed room, Comminge realizes that he has rather indiscreetly displayed his romantic intentions towards Adélaïde (64). This situation was, however, foreshadowed by Adélaïde, who, as Comminge acknowledges, “m’eut dit plusieurs fois de me lever” (64). Once again, Comminge ignores Adélaïde’s pleas and disobeys her, leading this time to catastrophe. Bénavidès, in his rage, does not hesitate to attack. It is not Comminge, however, but his own wife whom Bénavidès intends to strike down for her betrayal: “venant à elle l’épée à la main : Tu mourras, perfide, s’écrit-t-il. Il l’aurait tuée infailliblement si je ne me fusse jeté au-devant d’elle,” (64). Much like Comminge’s father, Bénavidès acts immediately upon appearances. He assumes his possession has transgressed and reaches for his sword, the symbol of his patriarchal reign over his property. But in the ensuing tussle, Bénavidès strikes Comminge, who is wounded in the shoulder. Rather defend his own life, Comminge acts only to protect Adélaïde. He draws his sword and deals (what he perceives to be) a fatal blow to Bénavidès. Comminge is immediately restrained by Bénavidès’
servants and imprisoned without recourse: he has gone against the master and is inherently guilty of the crime whatever the circumstances.

As the novella shows, Comminge is an ineffectual foil to the archetype of the brooding, uncompromising patriarch exemplified by Comminge’s father and by Bénavidès. Dom Gabriel possesses a sensitivity similar to Comminge's. This sensibility is what their elders lack in executing their authority, what Comminge describes as his father’s “froideur.” Whereas Comminge’s father and Bénavidès draw their swords to punish disobedience, Comminge draws his sword to save Adélaïde’s life:

> Je n’aimais pas assez la vie pour la défendre, mais je haïssais trop Bénavidès pour la lui abandonner. D’ailleurs ce qu’il venait d’entreprendre contre celle de sa femme ne me laissait plus l’usage de la raison ; j’allai sur lui, je lui portai un coup qui le fit tomber sans sentiment. (64)

Despite not having the time to raisonner his decision, Comminge, in acting to save Adélaïde’s life, does make the noble choice in the eyes of the reader, showing an instinct for “right” rather than “wrong” (e.g. his father or Bénavidès). Comminge, a man of sensibility, stands up to the rule by blood of the sovereign, demonstrating a more progressive model of masculinity emerging in the eighteenth century.

Comminge is interned and later visited by Dom Gabriel, who tells him that Bénavidès has survived and ordered his wife to be locked up as well. Comminge’s wound from the altercation with Bénavidès heals neither quickly nor easily. It persists as a figurative thorn in his

10 M. de Lussan, though a very minor character, could also be categorized as such in the text, as he also rules by the sword. Comminge recounts the story of his father’s altercation with Lussan over the substitution: “La fortune se déclara pour monsieur de Lussan; il désarma mon père et voulut l’obliger à demander la vie : Elle me serait odieuse, si je te la devais, lui dit mon père. Tu me la devras malgré toi, répondit monsieur de Lussan, en lui jetant son épée et en s’éloignant,” (22-23).
side, becoming infected and even reopening and bleeding anew. The wound haunts Comminge as a reminder of his offence against Bénavidès’ conjugal property, even bleeding through his clothes for others to see, serving as a scarlet letter-like mark of transgression (68). The fact that others can “see” Bénavidès’s retribution against Comminge again refers to ancient sovereign power before it wanes over the course of the eighteenth century: crimes against the patriarch need to be punished publicly and with bloodshed. Foucault writes:

> It was the task of the guilty man to bear openly his condemnation and the truth of the crime that he had committed. His body, displayed, exhibited in procession, tortured, served as the public support of a procedure that had hitherto remained in the shade, in him, on him, the sentence had to be legible for all. (Discipline 43)

The public nature of sovereign punishment is beneficial both as a show of strength and to deter others from similar disobedience.

Comminge falters as a hero because too many of his actions concerning Adélaïde are specious at best and because he fails to truly listen to her: in visiting her and in refusing to get up off of his knees. Jensen writes:

> Comminge’s sensitivity, then, his ostensible difference from his father and from “virile” conquering heroes, seems to carry its own liability and one which links him to traditional masculine privilege. However promising Comminge’s unusual emotional vulnerability may be initially, its devolution into self-absorption marks a limit in Tencin’s revision of masculinity and illustrates the compelling force of patrimony be defining it in terms of men’s power to objectify woman. (47)

Comminge is a sensitive man guided by his emotions, but he uses his emotions, such as love, to justify some truly questionable acts that, as Jensen claims, objectify the woman that he claims to love. Though he foregrounds his own emotional vulnerability in his narrative, to distinguish himself from his tyrannical father, Comminge does draw his own sword twice: against le
chevalier de S. Odon, offensively, and against Bénavidès defensively.\textsuperscript{11} His behavior still demonstrates the quality of wanting to control or possess his lover, even if symbolically, in a likeness of her, such as with the portrait. This signals a Foucauldian-like discontinuity in how patriarchal power is expressed as society moves from sanguinity to sexuality. Comminge’s father expresses his power through heavy-handed, despotic rule. Though Comminge wields his power in subtler ways, he is nonetheless privileged by his masculinity. Despite his sensibility, he expresses no guilt over repeatedly deceiving Adélaïde. In the final episode of the novella, however, Adélaïde claims her subjectivity and not only turns the tables on Comminge’s voyeurism, but she also silences him, delivering a final soliloquy in the novella uninterrupted and thus getting in the “final word.”

“Mon dernier sacrifice”: The Rectification of Cloistral Improprieties by a Female Heroine

The final pages of Comminge’s and Adélaïde’s story take place in an abbey. However, neither enters truly devoted to the function of the cloister, serving God. Rather, the abbey serves another purpose for the would-be lovers: to devote themselves to their unconsummated but still-simmering passion and indulge themselves in their loyalty to their lost love, with their fathers’ feud to blame. This situation was all-to-common, historically, for children in the eighteenth century who resorted to the cloister out of practical necessity: “Their vows were founded not on any personal inclination for religious life but on ‘caprice and paternal despotism,’” (Choudhury 1). Comminge and Adélaïde echo this sentiment, being forced to give up their happiness at the expense of their fathers’ rule. But while neither character enters the cloister for religious redemption, Adélaïde eventually sees the necessity of God’s salvation to

\textsuperscript{11} Odon is the knight who steals Adélaïde’s portrait when it falls from her bracelet.
rectify their “passion criminelle” (92). She is finally able to provide the sacrifice for Comminge that, up until this point, he has refused her.

Dom Gabriel frees Comminge from his confinement in Bénavidès’s home and instructs him to take a letter to “un couvent de religieux, qui n’était qu’à un quart de lieue du château” (67). The priest who receives the letter, Dom Jérôme, tends to him and sends for a surgeon to look at Comminge’s wound, though he remains more preoccupied with his worry for Adélaïde than for his own health (68-69). Dom Gabriel, meanwhile, conducts a fake manhunt for Comminge, having told Bénavidès that the count has somehow escaped. After two months in the convent, Dom Gabriel and Saint-Laurent deliver the news that Adélaïde has died. Dom Jérôme learns the news first, and displays considerable empathy for his friend. In delivering the news, to Comminge, the priest shares in the pain of his loss: “Dom Jérôme était triste et rêveur. Il détournait les yeux, il n’osait me regarder, il répondait avec peine à mes questions” (71). As a minor character, yet one that serves the reader as the representative of the convent, Dom Jérôme is morally upright and well-intentioned, willing to care for an unfamiliar lay person who shows up at his door; Tencin renders the institution, or at least its people, in a relatively positive light. Yet it is nonetheless an institution that welcomes disowned or errant children without judgement.

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12 “Convent” generally, though not exclusively, refers to religious houses for nuns; it can technically house either sex. I use it here for the “religieux” (masculine) simply because Tencin uses “couvent” in French as opposed to “abbaye” where Comminge ultimately ends up, so the precise role of this “couvent” isn’t specified.

13 This is opposed to much of the literature portraying convents that comes later in the century: Sade, Gouges, and, in this project, Diderot and Monvel.
If anyone is in the convent for the wrong reasons in the *Mémoirs*, it is surely the protagonists themselves. After writing a letter to his mother explaining his disappearance, Comminge decides to commit himself to an abbey. He states, taking his leave of Saint-Laurent:

Je lui donnai, quand il partit, tout ce que j’avais d’argent; je ne gardai que ce qui m’était nécessaire pour faire mon voyage. La lettre de madame de Bénavidès et son portrait que j’avais toujours sur mon cœur étaient le seul bien que je m’étais réservé… Je vins sans presque m’arrêter à l’abbaye de la T… (87)

In a sign of good faith, Comminge gives away his money in preparation for entering the abbey. Yet he also brings the miniature portrait of Adélaïde that he stole from her (via Odon) as well as her letter, objects that he fetishizes. The juxtaposition of giving away his money but bringing the portrait immediately recalls the first two of the three monastic vows: poverty and chastity. Comminge signals his intent to comply fully with the former while not so much with the latter, as least not completely in the Christian sense.

The abbey in *Mémoirs* serves practical purposes for protagonists who are ultimately *non-pratiquants*. Comminge uses the cloister to devote his mind to his unconsummated love of Adélaïde. He is so preoccupied with mourning her death that when he is asked how he is adapting to life in the abbey, he claims, “Ma douleur m’occupait si entièrement que je ne m’étais pas même aperçu du changement de nourriture et de ces austérités dont on me parlait” (87). The asceticism that defines conventual dedication and sacrifice does not even register for Comminge, because he is there for personal, rather than religious, reasons. His indifference is ironically mistaken for true focus and dedication, “une marque de zèle,” by the others in the abbey (87). He describes the cloister as the ideal environment for him in his suffering: “je passerais ma vie entière dans cet exercice… L’affreuse solitude, le silence qui
régnait toujours dans cette maison, la tristesse de ceux qui m’environnaient me laissaient tout entier à cette douleur qui m’était devenu si chère, qui me tenait presque lieu de ce que j’avais perdu,” (87). Comminge has become enslaved by his sadness in wake of Adélaïde’s supposed death, and speaks of it as if he has nothing else to live for. But he does: right after, he mentions stealing away to weep over Adélaïde’s portrait and letter: “J’allais tous les jours dans quelque endroit écarté des bois; là je relisais cette lettre, je regardais le portrait de ma chère Adélaïde, je baignais de mes larmes l’un et l’autre et je revenais le cœur encore plus plein de tristesse” (88). Comminge deliberately repeats an action that augments his sadness because he is addicted to it. He wants to be able to feel his sadness fully, undistracted by it as he did at the couvent near Bénavidès’ chateau, hence his choice to retire to the abbey.

In the narrative’s denouement, Comminge jumps forward three years’ time, as one day he is called to attend the last rights and sacrament of a dying religieux.14 When the religious asks the abbot for permission to address the crowd, there is a sudden and dramatic change in gender and “he” is revealed to be female: “Je suis indigne de ce nom de frère dont ces saints religieux m’ont honoré. Vous voyez en moi une malheureuse pècheresse qu’un amour profane a conduit dans ces saints lieux,” (88, my emphasis). The gender transition from “honoré” to, a few words later, “malheureuse pècheresse,” unveils the travesti of the speaker to the reader, but also to the listeners in the abbey as well, as the gender differentiation is obvious in the pronunciation of “malheureuse pècheresse.” The dying religious is Adélaïde de Lussan. After

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14 As with “couvent,” I will rely upon a direct translation of Tencin’s “religieux,” a general term, or use the English equivalent “religious” rather than attempt to specify. Since it is an abbey, and Comminge has taken vows, it is easy to assume that he is a monk (which Michel Delon does in the Préface), but since Tencin does not specify “moine” in her text, I will not use it nor its English equivalent, “monk.” Nor will I use the word “priest,” as, assuming that Comminge is a monk, he cannot say mass or administer sacraments as a priest can.
being confined to a tower for two years by Bénavidès, who fabricated the news that she was
dead as given to Comminge, Adélaïde was finally freed upon her husband’s death. Her initial
plan was to seek refuge in the convent where she spent her youth. Yet along the way, she
overhears Comminge singing from the abbey and thus finds herself drawn to it; having already
disguised herself as a man to free her husband’s estate, she simply continues the ruse upon
arriving at l’abbaye de la T... the final pages of the story take a dramatic turn: Adélaïde reveals
that she has infiltrated the same abbey, where she has been watching Comminge.

This ending reverses Comminge’s objectification of Adélaïde in his story by giving her
her own narrative agency. Throughout his story, Comminge obsesses over fetishized objects,
Adélaïde’s portrait and her letter, and explains away his repeated deception of Adélaïde
through emotion and sentimentality. But Adélaïde’s re-emergence at the end of the story
allows her to upend this objectification, thus questioning the rationale of Comminge’s
infatuation by giving Adélaïde the voice to dissent; this allows for her own narrative to conclude
the story of the two lovers. Nancy K. Miller labels Tencin’s oeuvre as an example of “feminist
writing”:

These fictions of dissent call into question the fulfillment of the virile
subjectivities that typically structure libertine texts, by which I mean here the
recollections of a man’s life as organized by and narrated through his sexual
experience—whether a list of encounters or the obsession of a single passion, like
Manon Lescaut. I am prepared to argue that this particular plot of heterosexual
engagement provides the basic psychosocial design of the memoir novel, one of
the two dominant novelistic forms in the eighteenth century. Feminist fictions
take another, harsher, and less jubilant view of the sexual and social stage of
human relations; and in these novels female subjectivity is the figure, not merely

15 As the Présidente de Tourvel will in Laclos’ Les Liaisons dangereuses nearly fifty years later, after her reputation
is tarnished by a scandalous affair with the Marquis de Valmont.
the ground of representation against which the tropes of masculine performance display themselves. (44)

In the space of the final pages of the novella, Mémoirs du comte de Comminge fulfills Miller’s requirements for what constitutes “feminist writing” in the eighteenth century. As a dying Adélaïde recounts her story for the religious in the abbey, there are notable revelations in her soliloquy that turn the tables on Comminge and deny his “rightful” place as the hero at the end of the story. This turns the story towards a “female subjectivity” that transcends the “ground of representation against which the tropes of masculine performance display themselves” as Miller proposes. Foucault writes that the notion of being an ‘author’ constitutes the privileged moment of individualization” (“Author” 101, original emphasis). Adélaïde seizes the narrative from Comminge, and this “individualization” of authorship counters Comminge’s objectification of her person and fetishization of her portrait and letter.

First, remaining disguised gives Adélaïde greater power in her relationship with Comminge. Not only does keeping them apart make her alone in the knowledge of their actual proximity, but it gives her control over both of their fates. Adélaïde compromises her own morals by entering the abbey under false pretenses and by remaining, calling herself a “mauvaise pècheresse” and later saying about her “fellow” religieux in the abbey, “je leur demande pardon du scandale que je leur ai donné, et je me reconnais indigne de partager leur sépulture,” (93). However, she is only willing to compromise her morals because she mistakenly believes that Comminge has become genuinely devout:

Mon égarement n’alla pourtant pas jusqu’à me faire connaître. Mais quel fut le motif qui m’arrêta? la crainte de troubler le repos de celui qui m’avait fait perdre
le mien; sans cette crainte, j’aurais peut-être tout tenté pour arracher à Dieu une âme que je croyais qui était toute à lui. (91)

Adélaïde thinks that by inhibiting their reunion she is ensuring Comminge’s salvation at the expense of her own, another form of sacrifice, yet still not her last, as it recurs in the novella.

Remaining disguised allows Adélaïde moreover to watch Comminge without him watching her (the way that he did to her while disguised as the house painter at the Bénavidès estate). As Jensen states, “Only by making herself absent and invisible to Comminge’s objectifying gaze can she savor (‘goûter’) the pleasures of his presence,” (52). But as the reader surmises, and as Adélaïde eventually uncovers, Comminge is a faux-dévot. During her time watching Comminge, she follows him (“je m’attachais à tous ses pas”), watches him dig his own grave (a scene to which I will return shortly), and, finally, watches him watching “her” in the woods (90). She says, “je le vis dans un endroit écarté, occupé à regarder quelque chose qu’il avait tiré de son sein. Sa rêverie était si profonde que j’allai à lui et que j’eus le temps de considérer ce qu’il tenait sans qu’il m’aperçut : quel fut mon étonnement quand je reconnus mon portrait!” (91-92). Adélaïde makes no mention of Comminge crying while looking at her portrait, but rather uses the word “rêverie.” Though in his entry for rêve in the Encyclopédie, Denis Diderot calls rêverie “toute idée vague” he goes on to add, “Rêver est aussi synonyme à distrair... Il marque en d’autres occasions un examen profond,” (14: 228, my emphasis). While Comminge claims to be weeping while looking at the portrait, Adélaïde describes a calmer, concentrated focus that suggests that Comminge is fantasizing about her. And her reaction suggests the same: what Comminge is engaged in is somehow sinful, since she immediately begins praying to God for his conversion from “une passion criminelle” to devotion to God (92).
Comminge himself uses the word “exercice” to describe the act of looking at the portrait, and Adélaïde also says, referring to Comminge after the incident, “Si le compagnon de mes égarements gémit encore sous le poids du péché...” (92, my emphasis). This language is sexually suggestive, perhaps hinting that Adélaïde has caught Comminge in the act of masturbating, his constant shedding of tears thus his metaphoric gloss for ejaculation.

After witnessing Comminge with the portrait, Adélaïde realizes that he has spoiled yet another one of her sacrifices. First, she gave herself as a wife to Bénavidès (her happiness in exchange for Comminge’s freedom) and pled that Comminge not visit her, and when he visits her at her husband’s estate regardless, both men end up gravely wounded, and Adélaïde is incarcerated by her furious husband. And second, by keeping her identity from Comminge in the abbey, she believed that she was keeping him pious and pure, an idea he dispels by taking her portrait and letter into the woods. As a result, Adélaïde spends her days praying for God’s mercy, for Comminge, rather than for herself: “Oui, mon Dieu, c’était pour lui que je vous priaïs, c’était pour lui que je versais des larmes, c’était son intérêt qui m’aménait à vous,” (92). This is Adélaïde’s final sacrifice for Comminge: her life in exchange for his salvation. It is therefore imperative again that she keep her identity concealed from the abbey and not let Comminge know her presence. Adélaïde has, after all, always purported to value her duty over her happiness: “c’est une cruelle chose... quand il faut mettre toujours le devoir à la place de l’inclination” (75); “je ne puis être heureuse avec monsieur de Bénavidès, mais j’aurai du moins la consolation d’être où mon devoir veut que je sois” (84). Her prayer ultimately “works”; addressing God, she says, “Vous voulûtes encore me purifier par des souffrances, je tombai malade peu de jours après.” (92). She sees her suffering as a sign from God, that he has
accepted her sacrifice for Comminge, and she dies believing that she has earned him God’s mercy through her illness and death. As Christ dies for the sins of the world in the Bible, Adélaïde sees her death for the expiation of Comminge’s sins as her own “dernier sacrifice” (93).

The final notable revelation in Adélaïde’s soliloquy is the fact that Comminge remains silent throughout despite recognizing her voice “dès le premier mot qu’elle avait prononcé” (93). Her entire speech is uninterrupted both for the listeners in the abbey and for the readers of the memoirs. Given Comminge’s failure to truly listen to Adélaïde at crucial intervals in the story (e.g. when she told him not to visit her or when she told him to get up from his knees), in this final, lengthy monologue, she assumes the agency that Comminge has repeatedly denied her, emerging as the heroine of the final act. Speaking is an act in and of itself, one that defies “the male church hierarchy [that] had restricted the power and autonomy of convent women” (Woshinski 7). Adélaïde decides to enter the abbey because she hears Comminge singing and is seduced by his voice, but in the end, it is her voice that commands power over Comminge: he explains, “Tant qu’elle avait parlé, la crainte de perdre une de ses paroles avait retenu mes cris; mais quand je compris qu’elle avait expiré, j’en fis de si douloureux que les religieux vinrent à moi et me relevèrent,” (93). He doesn’t interrupt her because he finally recognizes the value of her speech, and only reacts once she has finished (and died), thus inevitably granting her the last word. As Miller claims regarding Tencin’s “feminist writing,” “the conventional sex/gender arrangements that underwrite masculinist stories (the complacent fantasies of the ‘roman-
By taking control of her own destiny and of Comminge’s, Adélaïde (all the while disguised as a man), usurps the traditional gender roles found in contemporary novels by rewriting her own ending in Comminge’s narrative.

Though the time that the protagonists spend in the abbey is relatively brief, there remain nonetheless important motifs of contemporary cloistered protagonists that are introduced in Mémoirs du comte de Comminge. After Adélaïde’s death, Comminge needs only to negotiate a deal with the abbot: he promises to live out his days as a hermit rather than commit suicide if the abbot agrees that when he does die “le même tombeau nous unira” (94). As I explain in subsequent chapters, eighteenth-century authors often compare the cloister, be it abbey or convent, to the tomb; this metaphor not only foretells the eventual death of the convent’s inhabitants, but it also symbolizes their sterility. Not long after her arrival at l’abbaye de la T..., Adélaïde participates in an unusual ritual:

Il y a deux mois que pour obéir à la règle du saint fondateur qui a voulu par l’idée continuelle de la mort sanctifier la vie de ses religieux, il leur fut ordonné à tous de se creuser chacun leur tombeau. Je suivais comme à l’ordinaire celui à qui j’étais liée par des chaînes si honteuses ; la vue de ce tombeau, l’ardeur avec laquelle il creusait me pénétrèrent d’une affliction si vive qu’il fallut m’éloigner pour laisser couler des larmes qui pouvaient me trahir... (91)

Even though at this point Adélaïde is unaware that Comminge only pretends to be converted, it is likely that what she is witnessing is Comminge digging his own grave in earnest, hoping to end the pain of his loss through death, much as he does more explicitly at the end after he witnesses Adélaïde’s actual death.

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16 By “roman-liste” Miller is referring to memoir-style novels composed of a catalogue of the hero’s romantic or sexual conquests.
The “cloistral tomb” hinges upon several associations in early modern France. The stereotype of the cloister as cold and silent make it lexically synonymous with the tomb. Since nuns who enter the cloister rarely leave, when they take vows, they are going to their inevitable death, even if it is decades in the future. The nun’s habit evokes notions of mourning, even widowhood, while monks’ attire is similarly austere. They are people who will not “live on” through their children and the generations to follow. As sterility is often equated with death, the cloistral tomb is also perpetuated by the idea that its inhabitants, as non-reproductive subjects, are plagued with the end of the bloodline. (Ironically, because Comminge’s father and M. de Lussan refuse the marriage of their only children to one another, there is no direct heir to either as both die unmarried and childless by their own volition). Thus, conversely, the cloister can be used to confine undesirable reproductive subjects who pose a threat to the bloodline. This project examines two types of literary protagonists who represent this phenomenon: those who are forced into the convent to prevent them from corrupting the bloodline, and those who resort to voluntary cloistral sequestration to lament their failure as reproductive subjects.

Though they took indirect paths to the cloister, voluntary cloistral sequestration is fundamentally the problem of Comminge and Adélaïde. In recounting her story to the religieux in the abbey, a dying Adélaïde identifies the root of their doomed relationship, “La haine de nos pères mit obstacle à notre mariage,” (88). Comminge and Adélaïde cannot be together because of the blood feud between their fathers over inheritance. Just as fathers can force their children into a marriage as a means of uniting or reconciling two quarrelling families, obstinate fathers can deny heirs who love against their will from being together. Comminge’s father is embroiled in a suit against his cousin M. de Lussan to reverse the substitution and restore what is rightfully
his; if his son were to marry Lussan’s daughter Adélaïde this would make his pursuit ineffectual, as the Lussan offspring (as well as future generations, i.e., blood) would still be partaking in the rightful Comminge wealth. This notion of intertwining the Comminge and Lussan inheritances simply does not serve Comminge’s father’s grudge against his cousin. Yet ironically, since his prohibition of the marriage has all but ensured that Comminge will die childless, as Adélaïde has, Comminge’s father’s lineage has come to an end. The preservation of his birthright is a questionable point, as there are no heirs to pass it down to.
Chapter Two. "Strange Pleasures" and the Sterility of Forced Vocation; Liberty as Means of Resistance

L’homme est né pour la société. Séparez-le, isolez-le, ses idées se désuniront, son caractère se tournera, mille affections ridicules s’élèveront dans son cœur, des pensées extravagantes germeront dans son esprit comme les ronces dans une terre sauvage. Placez un homme dans une forêt, il y deviendra féroce ; dans un cloître où l’idée de nécessité se joint à celle de servitude, c’est pis encore : on sort d’une forêt, on est esclave dans le cloître. (Diderot La Religieuse 137)

Strange pleasures, [science] warned, would eventually result in nothing short of death: that of individuals, generations, the species itself. (Foucault Sexuality 54)

Regulating reproduction and preserving the purity of bloodlines is an idea older than French literature itself. Foundational literary texts implicate the societal preoccupation with paternity and legitimacy, whether it be the insinuation that Roland is Charlemagne’s actual son, and not his nephew, in La Chanson de Roland, or any number of jealous male characters who locked up their wives in a tower or a dungeon in medieval literature, such as in Marie de France’s various Lais. Blood myths originate, perhaps, out of concern for the most basic unit of blood succession. Western traditions hold that all that can constitute a family line descends paternally, be it wealth, property, or social status within a community: “Power is both a primal word and a primal relationship under patriarchy. Through control of the mother, the man assures himself of possession of his children; through control of his children he insures the disposition of his patrimony and the safe passage of his soul after death” (Rich 64). The cultural practice of male-to-male heir succession was committed to law with the decree of the Loi salique by the Frankish King Clovis I in the early Sixth Century, and the law remained in place through Early Modern France.
Daughters, however, were not entitled to such succession of wealth or property and bestowed instead the dowry, the sum of money given to a gentleman’s family that symbolized the “transfer” of responsibility for said daughter from father to husband. And yet another type of dowry existed, the conventual: “To maintain the house financially, new postulants, as ‘brides of Christ’ were asked to pay a dowry” (Woshinski *Imagining* 3). This exchange is therefore, at once, practical and symbolic: it helps to maintain the “bride’s” residence, and substitutes the Church or Jesus for the husband, thus ending the woman’s availability for marriage. In exchange for her lifelong service to God (i.e. the Church), she would receive lodging, and the family was relieved of caring for her. It would seem as if few women ever enthusiastically embraced this fate; for centuries, the trope of the father threatening his disobedient or uncooperative daughter with the convent recurred throughout literature (Woshinski *Imagining* 1). Mita Choudhury writes, “The *vocation forcée* story is the tragic tale of a young woman whose family forces her into the convent. Throughout her girlhood she finds herself marginalized within her family, often because a parent or both parents devote their energies to another child” (98). Choudhury continues, “Readers may assume that this story is another summary of Denis Diderot’s *La Religieuse*;” (99).

As Choudhury aptly notes, Suzanne Simonin, Diderot’s titular heroine, sets a literary standard for this “vocation forcée.” Yet as this project examines the convent narrative at the intersection of power dynamics, blood myths, and the repression of reproductive rights, *La Religieuse* is an apt successor to the problems of blood and inheritance that beleaguered Tencin’s Comminge and Adélaïde. The denial of Suzanne Simonin’s reproductive freedom is at

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17 Here, Woshinski cites Molière as the foremost example.
its roots a family affair, the social unit that is the earliest and most basic power dynamic we experience. Suzanne is forced by her family into the convent because of her illegitimate paternity, a significant concern for a male patriarch with rights and property and a secret that Suzanne herself learns when her mother sees no other way of suppressing her daughter’s rebellion against the religious life. That the offspring of one man receive the hereditary benefits (e.g. dowry, a concept revisited at several intervals in the novel) of another man was a grave concern for citizens of eighteenth-century France, especially prior to the Revolution, when they were dealing with the disparate matters of wealth and noble lineage. Suzanne is both the titular protagonist and the narrator of the novel, a fictional nun based on a historical figure, Marguerite Delamarre, writing letters to another historical figure, the Marquis de Croismare, Diderot’s friend and the object of a practical joke that ended up being published as an epistolary novel. Though Woshinski insists on the ahistoricism of the text (Imagining 5), the liberties taken with a work of fiction allow Diderot to invoke the emphasis on individual liberty in the face of despotism. Claiming that she did not take her vows of her own free will, Suzanne implores the marquis for help to escape and start a life outside the convent. A biased narrator with a clear objective (to win the sympathy of her reader), she benefits from the perspective of hindsight and controls her reader’s knowledge of the events she is describing, allowing her to slant her narrative in her favor. Her account amplifies both the austerity and the peril of the convent’s conditions, thus making her situation all the more critical as Suzanne is forced to navigate the world of the cloister unprepared and unwilling.
A Family Affair: False Paternity and the Condemnation of the Unlawful Daughter

Though Suzanne Simonin is initially resolute in her insistence that she will not become a nun, her family makes it clear that they will go to whatever means necessary to procure Suzanne’s submission. The story of this submission itself comprises the first quarter or so of Diderot’s *La Religieuse*: before the target of criticism turns to the convent as an institution and to the myriad abuses of power that Diderot fictionalizes happening within its walls, the novel begins by criticizing the gender bias and patrilineal succession that arbitrarily disadvantage illegitimate children. Like Suzanne, such children have no control over the circumstances of their own birth yet bear nonetheless the consequences. Suzanne’s is quite clearly the case of a daughter who is forced to live out the consequences of the “sin” of her mother’s infidelity in a society that is governed by patriarchal domination and patrilineal succession.

Patrilineal descent, however, is but a mere part of the larger concept of patriarchy, which Adrienne Rich defines as “a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play” (57). In the convent, Suzanne is forced to live a life that she wants no part of through many of these methods that Rich mentions: the force of physical confinement; the pressure of authority figures (stepfather, mother, priest, superior); the law that binds one to the religious life through the profession of the vows: poverty, chastity, and obedience; etc. Diderot’s convent is a system that is in its nature worked to enforce the patriarchal decree and retain young women who would otherwise threaten to disrupt the father’s bloodline succession. According to Suzanne’s story, she is suspicious of the way she is seen by her family from an early age. She notices, for
example, that she doesn’t necessarily “fit in” with her sisters: “je valais mieux que mes sœurs par les agréments de l’esprit et de la figure, le caractère et les talents, et il semblait que mes parents en fussent affligés” (12). She also admits that, “Peut-être mon père avait-il quelque incertitude sur ma naissance” (13). Not only does Suzanne see herself as different from her sisters, she sees herself as better than her sisters in several ways. While Suzanne makes no mention of how this tension affected her childhood, the question of Suzanne’s legitimacy can no longer be ignored once she is of marrying (reproductive) age. As a solution she is abruptly brought to her first convent Sainte-Marie. She recalls:

Ma sœur ainée fut recherchée par un jeune homme charmant. Je m’aperçus qu’il me distinguait et qu’elle ne serait incessamment que le prétexte de ses assiduités ; je pressentis tout ce que ses attentions pourraient m’attirer de chagrins, et j’en avertis ma mère. C’est peut-être la seule chose que j’ai faite en ma vie qui lui a été agréable, et voici comment j’en fus récompensée. Quatre jours après, ou du moins à peu de jours, on me dit qu’on avait arrêté ma place dans un couvent, et dès le lendemain j’y fus conduite. (13)

The situation with the eldest daughter’s suitor is therefore doubly insulting to M. Simonin: it highlights the superiority of Suzanne’s qualities over her sisters’, and therefore the superiority of his wife’s lover’s genes to his own, and this superiority takes a suitor (i.e. husband and father) away from his legitimate daughter, who is more entitled to M. Simonin’s family legacy than Suzanne is or ever will be. “[T]he individual family unit … originated with the idea of property and the desire to see one’s property transmitted to one’s biological descendants (Rich 60; my emphasis). Having reached sexual maturity, Suzanne, now sixteen, is a threat to her half-sisters’ rights to M. Simonin’s family endowments (a dowry and the privilege of continuing the family bloodline). The mention of Mme Simonin’s contempt for Suzanne, her youngest
daughter, in the passage also sets the tone for Suzanne’s terse relationship with her mother and her ensuing struggle for agency in her own life.

Suzanne is initially untroubled upon arriving at the convent; she believes that once her two sisters are married, she will be able to return to the family home and embark upon her own “projets séduisants,” which would naturally for her include marriage and a family of her own (14). It is not until Suzanne’s mother’s directeur arrives to try and convince Suzanne to become a nun that Suzanne learns the truth: “vos parents se sont dépouillés pour vos sœurs, et je ne vois plus ce qu’ils pourraient pour vous dans la situation étroite où ils se sont réduits” (14). Suzanne’s refusal to accept this fate is immediate, and her objection quite simple: “je ne me sentais aucun goût pour l’état religieux” (14). As Suzanne’s parents retaliate for her refusal to take her vows, Suzanne’s mother reveals during one such admonishment that their financial situation is exacerbated by the fact that Suzanne’s sisters have both given birth several times as time has passed, and that her parents are still helping them financially (21). This destiny of fecundity for both of Suzanne’s sisters serves to highlight exactly what is being stripped away from Suzanne by keeping her incarcerated in the convent: her reproductive entitlement.

And yet Suzanne still has not been given the whole truth behind her cloistral incarceration (the truth of her paternity), as she must push her mother to the brink before her mother finally confesses. Suzanne is confined to her cell for refusing to profess her vows and is traumatized by witnessing the rampage of an escaped nun. She then concocts a plan to go along with the profession and use the ceremony as an opportunity to “protester publiquement contre la violence qu’on méditait” (23). This plan is thwarted, however, when Suzanne, first, learns that hers will be a closed ceremony, with only church officials and close family allowed,
and, second, a group of nuns surrounds her and carries her back to her cell as soon as she begins her speech (all she can say is, “Messieurs, et vous surtout mon père et ma mère, je vous prends à témoin” [26]). Not only does Suzanne’s family plot to confine her unjustly, but the convent itself blatantly “conspires” with this action by abusing its authority to silence Suzanne’s protest (Fowler 77). Infuriated by her actions and determined to break her, Suzanne’s parents finally have her brought home and locked in a room, a “nouvelle prison” (28). Suzanne is meanwhile getting closer to the truth about her father. She laments to her mother’s directeur that she should be treated the same as her sisters, asking, “quelle différence y a-t-il entre mes sœurs et moi?” to which the priest replies “Beaucoup,” (29). Suzanne writes, “Ce beaucoup qu’il m’avait répondu fut un trait de lumière pour moi, je ne doutai plus de la vérité de ce que j’avais pensé de ma naissance,” (29; original emphasis). At this point, it is clear to everyone involved that Suzanne knows the truth about her illegitimate birth and suspects that it is the true reason why she has been confined to a convent rather than allowed to be married, despite whatever financial difficulties the family is going through. It is, after all, common practice to provide a convent with a dowry (albeit a less substantial one) just as one would a husband, and the dowry that Suzanne’s mother will eventually pay to the Longchamp convent is the subject of a lawsuit at the end of the novel.

Thus, the matter of Suzanne’s illegitimate birth does not long remain a skeleton in the familial closet. It is, rather, used against Suzanne to convince her that she belongs in the convent to make reparations for the circumstances of her birth, first by le père Séraphin, a monk living at the Feuillants monastery who is entrusted by Mme Simonin, and finally by her mother herself. The former initially delivers the news on behalf of the latter: “Elle a cru pouvoir
sans cette ressource vous amener à ses desseins ; elle s’est trompée, elle en est fâchée, elle revient aujourd’hui à mon conseil, et c’est elle qui m’a chargé de vous annoncer que vous n’étiez pas la fille de M. Simonin,” (30). At this point, Suzanne’s resilience has earned her the admission of maternal guilt that she (according to her narrative at least) has long been anticipating. Her mother was unfaithful to her husband and Suzanne is the product of her mother’s infidelity. Suzanne has many questions for the priest, including, if the truth to Suzanne’s paternity must remain a secret, how then could her sisters be content to see Suzanne, whom they believe to be their full sister in blood, be confined to a nunnery, to which Séraphin replies, “Chacun songe à soi dans ce monde,” (31). This is a particularly ironic explanation of Suzanne’s family’s motivations, considering that they are demanding of Suzanne the exact opposite: to think not of herself, but to do what is best in the interests of her family in order to expiate her mother’s infidelity.

Suzanne is then allowed to see her mother, now with the ammunition to confront her regarding the circumstances of her birth (during M. Simonin’s absence of course). The setting of the scene is ominous: “C’était dans l’hiver. Elle était assise dans un fauteuil devant le feu ; elle avait le visage sévère, le regard fixe et les traits immobiles” (32). Not only does fire suggest Mme Simonin’s contemplation of her own mortality (as she later imagines herself “sur le point de paraître devant le grand juge”), but she is also about to condemn her daughter to a life of torture and anguish at the hands of the Longchamp nunnery (i.e. by throwing her into the metaphoric fire of sacrifice) (35). Even though Suzanne has now been given the evidence of her mother’s infidelity, her mother asserts her position of power, and Suzanne is terrified, rather than empowered, by her mother’s confirmation of her true paternity, as if she is at fault for the
circumstances of her own birth, a birth that “generates hatred in her legal father and a mixture of displaced loathing and religious guilt on the part of her mother” (Fowler 75). Mme Simonin says, “Ma fille, car vous l’êtes malgré moi, vos sœurs ont obtenu des lois un nom que vous tenez du crime,” thus highlighting the essential conflict of the first part of the novel: blood, law, and the social regulations of inheritance (35). Suzanne’s mother makes it clear that Suzanne will live to serve the patriarchal decree and has no choice regarding her own fate (Suzanne’s biological father is the monstre at the beginning of the quotation):

Le monstre ! il n’a pas dépendu de lui qu’il ne vous ait étouffée dans mon sein par toutes les peines qu’il m’a causées ; mais Dieu nous a conservées l’une et l’autre pour que la mère expiât sa faute par l’enfant... Ma fille, vous n’avez rien, vous n’auriez jamais rien ... voilà les suites d’une faiblesse. (34)

Mme Simonin admits everything, yet delicately deflects the blame for her transgression, demanding her daughter’s life as reparation for her own crime (e.g., using passive voice, speaking about herself in the third person as “la mère,” and avoiding use of possessives, such as saying “une faiblesse” rather than “ma faiblesses”). Suzanne’s mother fails to see her own daughter as an individual person worthy of agency; she merely regards Suzanne as a reminder of her own weakness and, therefore, as the embodiment of her own failures. Thus, she insists that Suzanne give her life to religious devotion to atone for her own sinful conception to two wronged patriarchs: M. Simonin and God. Likewise, “the authority figures in the novel—Suzanne’s confessors, her attorney, the archdeacons and vicars who visit her convents, and, of course, the interlocutor... are male” (Woshinski Imagining 235). This is yet another example of how the structure of power in the convent mimics (even “exploits”) that of the family unit, with a patriarch at the head (Fowler 76).
Mme Simonin’s punishment of Suzanne is an extension of her husband’s will and ultimate authority. “Patriarchy depends on the mother to act as a conservative influence, imprinted future adults with patriarchal values” (Rich 61). The mother is therefore programmed to be complicit with the father’s rule. As Mme Simonin reveals to Suzanne, she has kept the matter of the dowry paid to the convent a secret from her husband for fear of having to verbalize the secret that they both silently acknowledge (that Suzanne is not his biological daughter). She tells Suzanne, “Si vous entrez en religion comme c’est ma volonté et celle de M. Simonin, votre dot sera le fruit de ce que je prends sur moi tous les jours” (34; my emphasis). Mme Simonin’s first responsibility is not to her child, but to do right by her husband, even if it deprives Suzanne of her life. Yet, Suzanne’s mother alludes only to her own sacrifice, to the fact that she has saved for the secret dowry by abstaining from all that she finds pleasurable in life, such as gambling, the theater, and hosting guests (34). All she has “sacrificed,” however, she has done to be able to rid the Simonin family of Suzanne with no questions asked by her husband.

As subsequent issues regarding the dowry that Mme Simonin pays to the Longchamp convent prove, the concern for blood succession, and not their finances, is what drives the Simonin family to force Suzanne into professing her vows. Money is merely a front used to misdirect Suzanne and to silence the open secret that is the illegitimacy of her birth. In addition to atoning for her mother’s sin, Suzanne’s family must also prevent her from reproducing to keep her from carrying her illegitimacy into a second generation. Only when the family’s efforts to force Suzanne's profession fail upon multiple occasions does her mother admit the truth about her birth and demand that her daughter give her life in service of righting her mother's
moral wrong; Suzanne thus acquiesces. This is, however, only the beginning of Suzanne's cloistral confinement. As the rest of the novel shows, once M. and Mme Simonin are both deceased, Suzanne again begins clamoring to reverse her vows, which she claims to have delivered only under manipulation and coercion, and fighting to regain her freedom.

“Quel orgueil !”: Weaponizing Masculinity in a Flawed, Catholic Feminotopia

The first part of the novel establishes that Suzanne’s destiny of monastic servitude is intrinsically tied to her tainted blood. However, does the novel represent the suppression of Suzanne’s reproductive potential in the convent? First there is the matter of gender itself. As a place that houses women alone, men’s absence creates for curious representations of female-female relationships. Most of Suzanne’s narrative tells of her exchanges with other women, mostly her mother superiors, with men relegated to very minor characters (though with the foremost authority). Power is structured so that mother superiors control the other nuns, invested with the patriarchal authority of the clergy. Yet Suzanne is resistant to their way of life, preferring to rebel and take punishment. Her rebellion goes against the long-held tradition and sexist trope assumption that nuns be docile and orderly, positing her as a masculine force. As an illegitimate child, Suzanne’s gender has determined her fate, but Suzanne’s resistance to her cloistral confinement problematizes eighteenth-century notions of appropriate gender roles.

Suzanne’s embrace of a “masculine approach” is perhaps best proven deliberate in Diderot’s text by Suzanne’s use of references to the biblical Jesus to describe her persecution in the convent at the hands of her second mother superior, sœur Sainte-Christine. Suzanne begins secretly preparing a statement of case that she hopes will lead to a legal judgment revoking her
vows, and eventually finds a lawyer, M. Manouri, who is willing to plead her case in court.

Christine, however, becomes suspicious by how much paper Suzanne has been asking for and demands to know the location of her hidden document. When Suzanne refuses, Christine unleashes a fury of torments upon Suzanne: she is stripped of her clothes, placed barefoot in a “sac” and made to march through the cloister until “j’avais les pieds ensanglantés et les jambes meurtries” (62). Suzanne is then thrown into an underground dungeon, where she panics upon seeing “sur un bloc de pierre une tête de mort avec un crucifix de bois,” and begins screaming and beating her head against the wall (62). Suzanne is kept in the dungeon and given only scraps of bread and droplets of water for sustenance for a period of three days. While the crucifix, as well as the bloodied feet and the barefoot march, seem obvious referents for Jesus, the period of three days is equally significant as the amount of time that Jesus spent in the tomb before resurrecting.¹⁸ At the end of her three-day purgatory, Suzanne is sent to Christine, who says that God is ready to forgive her: “mettez-vous à genoux et demandez-lui pardon” to which Suzanne replies, “Mon Dieu, je vous demande pardon des fautes que j’ai faites, comme vous le demandâtes sur la croix pour moi” (62-63). The other nuns in Suzanne's presence (i.e. the mother superior's minions) immediately recognize the allusion, exclaiming, “Quel orgueil ! ... elle se compare à Jésus-Christ et elle nous compare aux Juifs qui l’ont crucifié” (63). Suzanne thus equates herself in times of suffering to Jesus not only in the words of her own narrative, but also in her documented disapproval of her own behavior by her fellow nuns. When Christine begins yet another round of tortures, once word of Suzanne’s legal proceedings

¹⁸ In the Bible the referent three is constant: three is also the number of times that Jesus’ apostle Peter denied knowing him, the number crucified at Golgotha (Jesus and the two thieves), the apostle Judas betrayed Jesus to the Romans for 30 pieces of silver, etc.
spreads throughout Longchamp, Suzanne is symbolically “murdered” on the third day of this ordeal: “que l’on m’ordonna de me placer debout au milieu du chœur, et que l’on récita les prières pour les agonisants, les litanies des saints avec le refrain, Ora pro ea” (78). She is then symbolically “buried” on the following day: “on me fit coucher dans une bière ... chaque religieuse en sortant me jeta de l’eau bénite en disant, Requiescat in pace” (79). From the initial mention of her bloodied feet to the tribulation of symbolic death and resurrection that she is forced to endure, Suzanne thus substantiates the claim to her perceived “masculinity” in the text, at least symbolically. Suzanne, as a nun after all, might have used any number of biblical figures, both Old Testament and New, to symbolize her struggle against the status quo, her suffering at the hands of her persecutors, or her courage vis-à-vis their attempt to “break” her.

Yet the biblical Jesus symbolizes Suzanne’s journey due to the fact that she is using a rebellious act (comparing herself to Jesus) to corroborate an equally rebellious act (refusing her subservience to family and Church in order to assert her individuality and subjectivity).\footnote{19} This not only problematizes traditional gender roles in both arenas (a female Jesus and an illegitimate female child’s claim to liberty), but it also exacerbates Suzanne’s perceived orgeuil through blasphemy. In comparing herself to Jesus, Suzanne demonstrates a lack of reverence that is certainly not lost on her fellow nuns. While her rebellion against life as a nun might model Jesus’ principles (she will not give into the will of her antagonists despite their brutal means of suppression), her motivations are entirely contrary to his. Jesus willingly endures his tortures and succumbs to his fate to fulfill the destiny set before him by his father. Suzanne follows his example in tactic alone, while blatantly eschewing his intention to appease God. She

\footnote{19} I will return to the discussion of the concept of a female Jesus in my discussion on Monvel’s Les victimes cloîtrées in Chapter 3.
endures her tribulations to live to discredit the decree of her own patriarchal figure, rather than fulfill it. This incongruity underscores the Jesus references. Critical of religion from some of his earliest works, Diderot is quite possibly using Suzanne’s ordeal and her motivation to mock not only the perils of monastic incarceration, but also the fundamentals of the Christian religion themselves.20

La Religieuse is not a text that seeks to emulate Christian philosophy; it is one that expresses certain ideals that lead to the French Revolution, above all, Suzanne's personal liberty (in the face of an oppressive Church). After all, the concept of one’s “rights” emerged as a political response to power (Foucault, Sexuality 145).21 Suzanne reflects, "J'ai envié, j'ai demandé à Dieu l heureuse imbécilité d'esprit de mes compagnes, je ne l'ai point obtenue" (108). If Suzanne is anything like Jesus, it is therefore by ascribing to herself a higher level of knowledge than the people who surround her, reminiscent of Jesus’ line from the Bible “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23: 34). Comparing herself to Jesus is orgueil in the sense that Suzanne believes herself to be “enlightened” and others ignorant, even those in positions of power over her. She believes that she has arrived at a level of reason that puts her above the arbitrary regulations and confines of the convent: the recognition of individual liberty. Suzanne is persecuted because her assertion of individual liberty is a threat to the institution of systematic monastic incarceration as a whole, lest others follow Suzanne's lead and revolt: "les contestations de la nature de la mienne sont toujours regardées d'un œil

20 See La Promenade du sceptique (1747).

21 Kelly Oliver writes that Foucault “seems to allow only for an oscillation of power between domination and resistance or trespass” and that “resistance/trespass is always a reaction to domination,” (66). This is one example of Foucault’s writing that supports Oliver’s argument.
défavorable par l'homme politique qui craint que sur le succès d'une religieuse réclamante contre ses vœux, une infinie d'autres ne soient engagées dans la même démarche" (100).

Religious officials fear that, like Jesus, Suzanne's rebellion will lead to a larger movement of reform that will endanger the convent's stranglehold of power.

Critics tend to question whether Suzanne would be better off if she was relieved of her monastic duties. Woshinski, for example, asks: “if all convent doors were unlocked overnight, as Diderot urges, would Suzanne’s situation be improved?” (Imagining 277). This question speaks to women’s lack of opportunity in life outside of marriage and children. If Suzanne is not a nun, is she a house servant? A prostitute? Diderot himself seems not to be concerned with this question as he answers it rather hastily: when Suzanne first escapes the convent, she resorts to accepting a room in a brothel, and when she escapes at the end of the story, she is working as a laundress, still living in misery and pleading to the Marquis de Croismare for help. J.E. Fowler takes a slightly different approach in considering whether Suzanne is better off in the convent, proposing that Suzanne’s “happiness” is dependent upon “being inside or outside the favor of the parent (-substitute)–father, mother, Mother Superior, confessor, or Marquis (80). Yet Suzanne makes it clear at every turn that her main concern is her freedom, not happiness. As she plainly tells her fellow nun sœur Ursule, “Je demande à être libre, parce que le sacrifice de ma liberté n’a pas été volontaire” (67). Suzanne later says to Christine, who has accused her of being possessed by demons, “faites chercher dans le village les haillons de la paysanne la plus pauvre, et que la clôture me soit” (76). Suzanne’s repeated insistence upon her freedom above all else is an embodiment of liberalism, as Diderot was amongst the most prominent voices of

22 The Marquis de Croismare, Suzanne’s interlocutor.
the eighteenth century that accelerated the weakening of the already-beleaguered Church in the court of public opinion (Choudhury 3).

The Sterile Erotic: Fatality in Homosocial Communities and Homosexual Relationships

Suzanne's first mother superior at her second convent, Longchamp, is Mme de Moni, a sympathetic woman who treats Suzanne with humanity.23 "Elle m’entretint de mon aventure à Sainte-Marie ... je lui dis tout ce que je viens de vous écrire ; et ce qui regardait ma naissance et ce qui tenait à mes peines, rien ne fut oublié. Elle me plaignit, me consola, me fit espérer un avenir plus doux" (41). Suzanne confides in Mme de Moni, and the two develop a strong bond. Though she is fundamentally in a position of power as mother superior, Mme de Moni, as Suzanne describes her, is a natural leader and someone whom the other nuns are drawn to. Suzanne writes, "Son dessein n’était pas de séduire, mais certainement c’est ce qu’elle faisait" (41-42). However, Mme de Moni is so deeply affected by Suzanne's utter disdain for the profession of her vows that when Suzanne falls into a deep melancholia, the illness "mit ma supérieure à de terribles épreuves" (42). Perhaps seeing someone whom she perceives to be as "good" holding the religious life in such contempt causes an existential crisis in Mme de Moni.

Parker writes:

In the case of Mme de Moni, sexual energy is transformed into mysticism. The spiritual conquest of Suzanne is no less a seduction than is the attempt to possess her physically. Diderot sets up a causal relationship between the girl’s instinctive resistance to the superior’s spiritualization of the body, which threatened Suzanne with permanent internment, and the fact that Mme de

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23 Suzanne lives in three convents over the course of the novel. She is thrown out of Sainte-Marie for refusing to take her vows. She files suit against her second convent, Longchamp, and her lawyer is able to negotiate a transfer under the circumstances. She next moves to Saint-Eutrope d’Arpajan, from which she escapes at the end of the novel.
Moni, forced to reexamine the conventual system in terms of elementary human justice, loses her ability to pray, to in/spire [sic], and finally dies. (98)

This seduction that Suzanne refers to is spiritual, and she has, by rejecting religious life, caused Mme de Moni to "fail" causing her to lose first her sense of purpose and then her will to live. Within a short period of time, she falls aphasic when attempting to pray, telling Suzanne, "Ah! chère enfant... quel effet cruel vous avez opéré sur moi ! Voilà qui est fait, l'Esprit s'est retiré, je le sens," (43). She recognizes that her association with the rebellious Suzanne is the reason behind her loss of communication with God and spends her final days writing and meditating and dies (as Suzanne notes) near the same time as both M. and Mme Simonin.

The second nun who dies because of her attachment to Suzanne is sœur Ursule, the only nun at Longchamp willing to help Suzanne when she is systematically tortured by the mother superior sœur Sainte-Christine, torture that serves as punishment for the court case that Suzanne initiates to win her freedom from the convent. Ursule first helps Suzanne by hiding Suzanne’s papers (the statement of case for her lawsuit) when Christine becomes determined to find them, a dangerous undertaking with dire consequences in the event that Ursule is caught. Ursule must watch as Suzanne is punished daily by Christine for what the latter perceives as slandering the convent, and she takes care of Suzanne when she falls ill.

Suzanne writes:

Il était dit que je souffrais dans cette maison toutes les peines qu’il est possible d’éprouver. Il y avait eu de la malignité dans ma maladie. La sœur Ursule ne m’avait presque point quittée. Lorsque je commençais à prendre des forces, les siennes se perdirent; ses digestions se dérangèrent; elle était attaquée l’après-midi de défaillances qui duraient quelquefois un quart d’heure. Dans cet état, elle était comme morte... (114)
Ursule’s loyalty to Suzanne comes at the cost of her own sickness and death, for seemingly no other reason than the symbiotic nature of relationships between the nuns at Longchamp. Ursule is the source of Suzanne’s returning strength, and therefore she is weakened in the process; as Suzanne mentions at one point “Je lui dois la vie” (111). Suzanne describes her fellow sister’s deteriorating health shortly before her death: Ursule is “d’une maigreur à effrayer ; elle avait sur son visage la pâleur de la mort” (110). And yet after Ursule’s death, the mother superior Sainte-Christine remarks (facetiously, if we are to subscribe to Suzanne’s account of her failing health), “qui l’aurait crue si proche de sa fin ?” (116-17). Suzanne is thus suggesting that Sainte-Christine, who epitomizes the sadistic nun and exists in the text only to torture Suzanne, did nothing to care for a discernably ailing sister under her charge and then gloats about Suzanne’s hand in her own ally’s demise.

Though Suzanne’s relationships with both Mme de Moni and with Ursule were close enough that they die because of her, they remain, according to Suzanne, platonic. Many different terms might apply to these partnerships (symbiotic, codependent, etc.) but lesbian is not one. There is a radical shift in the final third of the novel when, thanks to her lawyer in her failed suit against the Longchamp convent, M. Manouri, Suzanne earns a transfer to the Saint-Eutrope convent in Arpajon, just south of Paris: “Je ne recouvrais pas ma liberté, mais je changeais de prison et c’est quelque chose” (120). This foremost proves to be true, as the environment at Sainte-Eutrope is worlds away from Longchamp. Mme ***, Suzanne’s fourth and final mother superior in the text, is the opposite of sœur Sainte-Christine and goes out of her way to make Suzanne feel welcome, comfortable, and cared for. Suzanne’s daily torments eventually resume, but only as the emotional turmoil of the new convent replaces Sainte-
Christine’s reign of cords, hairshirts, and promenades across broken glass. Suzanne must now navigate the dangers of *too much* affection between two nuns in the convent, as the main subject of Diderot’s text turns from the abuse of power in cloister to the problem of lesbianism therein.

When Suzanne first sees Mme ***, she interrupts a nun’s self-flagellation:

[L]a supérieure, devenue compatissante, lui arrache l’instrument de pénitence, se met à pleurer ; qu’elle est bien malheureuse d’avoir à punir ! ... qu’elle a la peau blanche et douce ! le bel embonpoint ! le beau cou ! le beau chignon ! Sœur Sainte-Augustine, mais tu es folle d’être honteuse, laisse tomber ce linge, je suis femme et ta supérieure... Oh la belle gorge ! (123)

A few important points can be made about the character of Mme *** from this introduction that will define her relationship with Suzanne. Firstly, Mme *** empathizes with her fellow nuns. Just as Mme *** encourages the nun to stop macerating herself, she demands that Suzanne tell her of her troubles from Longchamp, so that they can lament them together and bond through their tears. As it was with Mme de Moni and with Ursule, the initial bond between Suzanne and Mme *** is the superior’s *empathy* for Suzanne's suffering. But as Sara Ahmed claims, empathy is not entirely selfless. She writes, "empathy sustains the very difference that it may seek to overcome: empathy remains a 'wish feeling', in which subjects 'feel' something other than what another feels in the very moment of imagining they could feel what another feels" (*Politics* 30). Mme *** wants to cry with Suzanne to bond with her, but their tears are not shared because Suzanne has lived through the experience causing the emotional response, while Mme *** is living through her own fantasy of what Suzanne might be feeling. Where Ahmed reads empathy as a “wish feeling,” the genuineness of Mme ***'s
character is questioned in the novel, and she is quite possibly exaggerating empathy to gain favor with Suzanne. Secondly, Mme *** is constantly admiring female bodies, giving out not only seemingly endless compliments, but also kisses and caresses, which Suzanne initially considers innocent: “Le premier soir, j’eus la visite de la supérieure ... Ce fut elle qui m’ôta mon voile et ma guimpe et qui me coiffa de nuit, ce fut elle qui me déshabilla. Elle me tint cent propos doux et me fit mille caresses qui m’embarrassèrent un peu, je ne sais pourquoi, car je n’y entendais rien,” (127). Thirdly, Mme *** is not afraid to delicately apply pressure to her more reluctant nuns. Her line “je suis femme et ta supérieure” aptly summarizes the problem of gender in Diderot’s text through its contradictory modes of persuasion. Mme *** orders Augustine not to be embarrassed and to undress because Mme *** is a woman (i.e. women are alike and should not be ashamed to undress in front of each other) and her mother superior (i.e. women are not alike because I have authority over you, and you must do as I say). Mme *** successfully invokes at once her femininity and her masculine privilege as an authority figure in the convent, a female interpreter and enforcer of the divine (patriarchal) law.

Female homosexuality and its metonymic partner homosociality24 are deadly liaisons that deplete the female body of its vitality. To highlight periods of harmony in the absence of men is simply to ignore this fact. The negative portrayl of lesbianism in the text is twofold: it reiterates Diderot’s views on the futility of female sexual pleasure, but it also eschews situational lesbianism in the convent as a denial of agency to potential reproductive subjects, such as Suzanne. The most telling evidence of this is the scene in which Suzanne, innocent

24 Though here I use “homosociality” as a general term and referring to women, it was initially used by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to talk about male same-sex platonic relationships. (See: Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire [1985].)
about the reason for her ailing mother superior’s trouble, equates the female orgasm with death twice. Suzanne writes:

La main qu’elle avait posée sur mon genou se promenait sur tous mes vêtements depuis l’extrémité de mes pieds jusqu’à ma ceinture, me pressant tantôt dans un endroit, tantôt en un autre ; elle m’exhortait en bégayant et d’une voix altérée et basse à redoubler mes caresses, je les redoublais ; enfin il vint un moment, je ne sais si ce fut de plaisir ou de peine, où elle devint pâle comme la mort, ses lèvres se fermèrent d’abord, elles étaient humectées comme d’une mousse légère, puis sa bouche s’entrouvrit et elle me parut mourir en poussant un grand soupir. (139; my emphasis)

Though Diderot is surely playing on the expression “la petite mort,” which refers to an orgasm, the insistence upon metaphors of death for what is clearly a female orgasm is also a criticism of lesbian pleasure as outside of the procreative function of sex. The literary fatality of lesbianism in La Religieuse highlights the lack of reproductive potential in such homosexual relationships or homosocial communities. According to Barbara Woshinski:

[T]he main argument against the enclosure of nuns—the “unnaturalness” of locking up women with other women and preventing them from performing their basic functions as wives and mothers – had its antecedents: seventeenth-century critics argued that through celibacy, monks and nuns were depriving the state of much-needed citizens at a time of population decline through war and famine. (Imagining 213)

This concern for population replenishment continued throughout the eighteenth century in France, and there was sustained social pressure to reproduce, if not for the urgency of the population as a whole, then for the legacy of such social groups as the noble class or, in the case of Suzanne, even in bourgeois families.25 Diderot, through Suzanne, echoes this criticism

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25 While this chapter focuses on familial blood and inheritance, I focus on preservation of the purity of noble blood Chapter Three. Diderot, like Suzanne Simonin, was the child of bourgeois family. However, this is not to discount blood prejudices and the concern over transmission of one’s property to legitimate heirs: bourgeois families often
forced profession denying of an individual of her reproductive rights in order to preserve hegemonic traditions such as the privileges of bloodline heredity. Though Suzanne herself does not explicitly express a desire to marry or have children, I propose first, that this is deliberate, and, second, two possible motivations for Diderot excluding it. Concerning the narrative itself, it is necessary to consider the destinataire of Suzanne’s letters, the Marquis de Croismare. Suzanne likely did not want to give the impression that she intended her plea for help to lead to an arranged marriage, either with Croismare or with one of his associates. Moreover, as I have proposed, Diderot represents Suzanne as a mouthpiece of emergent philosophies of liberty and individual rights; therefore, it was necessary to keep her motivation for renouncing her vows consistent and focused. Angela Parker says of Diderot, “His materialistic system left ample room for modification of behavior by environmental factors... While he viewed Christianity as basically repressive, he gave nature a beneficent role that favored pro/creation, thus liberating sexual energies” (91). Philosophically, Diderot’s embrace of materialism means that he likely saw a higher value in natural functions like reproduction than in spiritual asceticism. Therefore, the negative (i.e. deadly) portrayal of lesbianism is first a critique of the convent as a sterile, unproductive environment and second a reflection of Diderot’s personal views on the sexual inferiority of females as he argues in his 1772 essay “Sur les femmes.” Simply put, homosexuality “goes against the pro/creative function of nature” (Parker 97).

Mme ***’s seduction of Suzanne comprises a significant portion of the text. While Suzanne’s position of prominence as Mme ***’s favorite affords her privilege, such as staying in bed and resting rather than attend certain functions, the seduction itself is underscored by two

had substantial financial wealth. As I will show in Chapter Three, wealth and pedigree were not synonymous in the eighteenth century, though they might be thought of that way today.
main events, one encounter during which the superior climaxes, and another (their last) during which they are caught nude underneath the covers in Suzanne’s bed by Sainte-Thérèse, the jealous, former favorite of Mme ***. I will describe both events in more detail shortly.

According to Suzanne’s narrative, she simply misreads sexual arousal on the part of Mme *** as harmless affection, sickness (in the case of the orgasm), or a need for rest and warmth during their final physical encounter in bed. The rupture between the two women occurs when the père Le Moine, the priest overseeing Sainte-Eutrope, interrogates Suzanne during her confession, wherein he chides Suzanne for the sinful nature of her encounters with Mme ***, and encourages Suzanne to avoid her mother superior at all costs for the sake of her own salvation: “si Satan en personne se présentait à vous et vous poursuivait ; oui, mon enfant, Satan, c’est sous cet aspect que je suis contraint de vous montrer votre supérieure” (165). The “caresses” that Suzanne once believed to be innocent are henceforth tainted by the knowledge that they are sinful; Foucault writes, “On the list of grave sins, and separated only by their relative importance, there appeared debauchery (extramarital relations), adultery, rape, spiritual or carnal incest, but also sodomy, or the mutual ‘caress’” (Sexuality 38). Suzanne has been conditioned to heteronormativity. Convinced by the words of the male authority figure that Mme *** is “indigne, libertine, mauvaise religieuse, femme pernicieuse, âme corrompue…” Suzanne follows his recommendation in order to fulfill her “penance” (164).

When Mme *** tracks Suzanne down only to find her spending the night in the chapel rather than her cell, Suzanne declares her allegiance to Le Moine’s authority despite protestations from Mme ***, evoking Le Moine’s words to order an astonished mother superior, “Loin de moi, Satan !” (168). This officially ends any form of relationship between the two women and
consequently sends Mme *** into a downward spiral of madness and religious guilt that will lead to her fatal illness. Diderot sees a futility in lesbian sex not only as non-reproductive, but also because women, as inferior sexual beings, cannot take pleasure in sex as men can. In “Sur les femmes,” Diderot writes (about women versus men): “Moins maîtresses de leurs sens que nous, la récompense en est moins prompte et moins sûre pour elles... Organisées tout au contraire de nous, le mobile qui sollicite en elles la volupté est si délicat, et la source si éloignée, qu’il n’est pas extraordinaire qu’elle ne vienne point ou qu’elle s’égare,” (425). In other words, because of the way that male and females are biologically different, Diderot claims that sex is meant to be between a man and a woman and for the enjoyment of the man.

Peter Conroy asserts that lesbianism emerges in the convent as a mode of resistance against male abuse of hegemony: he argues that while Diderot does not condone homosexual activity, “Once we go beyond the moral and sinful act of lesbianism, we see that in this polemical context of a diatribe against the church, Diderot also and even paradoxically envisions it as a positive force, a source of sharing and cooperation, and a possibility for congeniality over hostility” (56). What Conroy describes places Suzanne in a short-lived feminutopia26 free from the oppression of men. Yet this model neither hinges upon nor necessitates a metonymic lesbian component (Conroy himself cites examples that show that Suzanne is hardly interested in sex with her fellow nuns), it rather promotes a homosociality (social bonds between members of the same sex that are not necessarily sexual) untainted by the “hostility” that men cause in their positions of power. The true threat to male dominance

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26 According to Woshinski, a feminotopia, play on the word “heterotopia” is a “community wholly or largely composed of and/or governed by women, while a feminotopia is “a utopic female space” (Imagining 3). A feminotopia is, therefore an idyllic and fully imagined rendering of a feminotopia (Imagining 124).
that this model of the convent poses is not that women are able to replace the affections of a husband with lesbian liaisons, it’s that nuns who eschew obedience and submission to assert their will, unlike other nuns, express a male model of social behavior:

Suzanne’s scandal is that she has usurped for herself a man’s prerogatives... Like a man, she wants to choose freely what she will do with her life. Together with her innocent yet threatening acceptance of sex in the form of lesbianism, Suzanne’s masculine approach to life makes her a terrible danger to male privilege. (Conroy 61)

The women are free to work together to lead independent lives, some of whom enjoy physical intimacy with one another more than others. The sexual is merely a component that serves the greater good of the convent as a microcosm of society, one that Suzanne seems to endure rather than embrace. To call Suzanne’s approach to life “masculine” is to equate the pursuit of liberty that Suzanne continually demands for herself with exclusively male subjects. Women are expected to be docile and fall in line, taking their orders from a church official in the absence of a father or husband, which was simply the norm.

For Conroy, the ruin of the homosocial conventual utopia is the menace of confession (60). While it is true that the demise of this relationship (Suzanne and Mme *** ) is precipitated by the arrival of Le Moine, and Suzanne’s strict adherence to his authoritative decree, I disagree that Sainte-Eutrope is a feminutopia outside of male interference. Simply based on the patterns that emerge over the text during Suzanne’s stay at the convent under Mme ***’s rule, there are only two feasible trajectories for Suzanne in her relationship with Mme *** . The first is that, given the escalation of their sexual relationship prior to Le Moine’s intervention, Mme *** would push Suzanne too far with regard to their physical contact. During the last encounter
between the two nuns that takes place before Le Moine’s intervention, Mme *** visits Suzanne in the middle of the night and contrives her way into Suzanne’s bed. The superior arrives under the premise having had a premonition that Suzanne was in danger and then tells her that she herself feels ill and cold. This is enough to convince Suzanne that they both should lay under the covers (“écartez seulement un peu la couverture, que je m’approche de vous, que je me réchauffe et que je guérisse”) and then, ultimately, undress, as the skin-on-skin contact could help her to warm up enough to be able to return to her own room: “la chère mère me disait : Ah, chère amie, voyez comme mes pieds se sont promptement réchauffés, parce qu’il n’y a rien qui les sépare des vôtres. – Mais, lui dis-je, qui empêche que vous ne vous réchauffiez partout de la même manière ?” (151-52). Suzanne’s lack of protest demonstrated in this final question shows her extreme hesitancy to displease her mother superior, but the encounter ultimately causes Suzanne anxiety when the pair is “caught in the act.” Suzanne writes, “elle avait écarté son linge ; et j’allais écarter le mien, lorsque tout à coup on frappe deux coups violents à la porte. Effrayée, je me jette sur-le-champ hors du lit d’un côté, et la supérieure de l’autre,” (152). Suzanne’s fright contradicts her perception of the “innocent” nature of Mme ***’s physical affection. Whether Suzanne is willing to admit it or not, she recognizes, at the very least in a vague sense, the dangers of such late-night rendez-vous in the convent as they are inevitably discovered.

Yet even if Suzanne does return Mme ***’s affections and is willing to enter a fully sexual relationship with her, this seems just as likely ill-fated. The second potential trajectory of Suzanne’s relationship with Mme *** without Le Moine’s intervention evokes a different pattern: Mme *** loses all interest in Suzanne and begins to shun her as soon as she sets her
sights on the next young novice to come to Saint-Eutrope. Before Suzanne, there was Thérèse; before Thérèse, Agathe (Mme ***’s former conquests who have since fallen from her graces). In fact, from the very first time that the mother superior climaxes from her caresses with Suzanne, there are already indications that she might lose interest in her once she gets what she wants: Suzanne remarks, "Les autres fois quand je sortais elle m’accompagnait jusqu’à sa porte, elle me suivait des yeux tout le long du corridor jusqu’à la mienne, elle me jetait un baiser avec les mains, elle ne rentrait chez elle que quand j’étais rentrée chez moi : cette fois-ci, à peine se leva-t-elle..." (141). In other words, she seems far less interested in pursuing Suzanne when she is in a state where her desires are satiated. Mme *** is essentially “a human time bomb capable of igniting the suppressed sexual energy of the countless nubile girls and women in her charge” (Parker 99). Suzanne needs only look at the misery of Thérèse to see her own future at Saint-Eutrope: even if Suzanne may not miss Mme ***’s affections to the extent that Thérèse does, no doubt she would lament the loss of her position of favor with the superior and, thus, the rewards of favoritism.

Mme *** recognizes that père Le Moine uses confession as a tool to identify and destroy homosocial and homosexual unions that might threaten the hegemonic status quo of the convent, and she is able to get Le Moine replaced by a new directeur, Dom Morel; and yet she still suffers from madness and fatal illness because of the blow dealt by Suzanne’s rejection and subsequent downward spiral. Mme *** thus returns to the pattern set by Mme de Moni and Ursule: she dies because of her bond with Suzanne, telling her simply, “vous me ferez mourir” (173). Though Mme ***’s unusual behavior (isolating herself, wandering the corridors of the cloister barefoot, and randomly begging other nuns to pray for her) initially seems to be
caused by Suzanne’s rejection, the cause proves to be something far more fundamental: the recognition of her own “diabolical” nature (to invoke the “Satan” reference) and the religious guilt that ensues, which drives her mad. She exclaims:

Délacez-moi... je sens là quelque chose qui m’oppresse... La tête me brule ; ôtez-moi mes coiffes... Je veux me laver... Apportez-moi de l’eau. Versez, versez encore... Elles sont blanches, mais la souillure de l’âme est restée... Je voudrais être morte, je voudrais n’être point née ; je ne l’aurais point vue. 186.

The “souillure de l’âme” that Mme *** speaks of is the sin of her homosexual desire, and she is tortured by her yearning for purification, going as far as to stage a symbolic but ultimately futile “cleansing” act that resembles a baptism. Mme *** is tortured by the guilt of being impure and female: according to Geneviève Reynes, “la chasteté n’a pas la même valeur selon qu’elle est masculine et féminine. Chez l’homme, la vertu est un combat dans lequel les défaites peuvent être suivies des victoires. Chez la femme... elle est un état d’innocence que la moindre altération viendrait souiller irrémédiablement” (125). The unspecified object of the last sentence in the quotation “la” (feminine in gender because of the agreement with “vue,”) is doubtlessly Suzanne (i.e. “I wish I had never laid eyes on her”). According to Foucault, in prisons and asylums (institutions which Diderot’s depiction of the convent often resembles), fear is an “essential presence” (Madness 144). He states, “A source of strong emotions and terrifying images which it arouses through fears of the Beyond, Catholicism frequently provokes madness; it generates delirious beliefs, entertains hallucinations, leads men to despair and to melancholia,” (Madness 146). This is a particularly fitting description of Mme ***, who hallucinates about women being tortured and rants about eternal damnation: “elle se croyait
conduit à la mort, elle disait aux bourreaux : J’ai mérité mon sort ; je l’ai mérité. Encore, si ce tourment était le dernier ; mais une éternité ! une éternité de feux !” (188).

Death in literary depictions of the convent is not only constant, but it is often a place where literary heroines go to die. Moreover, death in the convent does not reflect any microcosm of society because there is no birth to replace the deaths taking place. New novices, in fact, represent quite the contrary: as potential reproductive subjects entering into vows, including chastity, they are removing a source of life replenishment from society. The convent as an institution is, thus, a source of depletion of the state’s population. Various relations of female intimacy and codependency in the convent in La Religieuse lead inevitably to death. Both female homosexuality and homosociality develop unnaturally strong bonds that result in ultimate death for women partners, as is shown with both Mme de Moni and sœur Ursule. Both women fall sick and die because of their symbiotic relationships with Suzanne Simonin. In a similar vein, Suzanne’s final mother superior Mme ***, who is most attached to her, becomes mad and fatally ill. Unlike the other two, this final relationship becomes sexual (despite protestations of innocence from Suzanne as both character and narrator), and the fatality of female-female relationships is only amplified by the sexual component in the final part of the novel.

Diderot’s text ends quite abruptly, with the final ten pages or so dealing, in varying degrees of detail, with a number of events. Suzanne is blamed for Mme **’s continued descent into madness, thus making her a pariah at Sainte-Eutrope, and she falls into the same

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27 The text itself calls attention to this abruptness: “Ici les mémoires de la sœur Suzanne sont interrompus ; ce qui suit ne sont plus que les réclames de ce qu’elle se promettait apparemment d’employer dans le reste de son récit” (184).
traps that led to her ostracism and torments at Longchamp. Due to Suzanne’s hasty ending to her memoirs and her vaguely-explained departure from Saint-Eutrope, the reader does not witness Mme ***’s impending death, and must assume its inevitability. Nevertheless, Diderot’s novel is nothing if not predictable and formulaic in its procession of female companions for Suzanne: any other female who takes a vested interest in soeur Suzanne (be it emotionally or sexually) suffers death as the consequence. The surface-level objection to homosexuality is primarily religious, delivered through Le Moine and then through his replacement, Dom Morel, who has less theatrical but equally critical views of Mme *** and her behavior: “Quand on s’oppose au penchant général de la nature, cette contrainte la détourne à des affections déréglées qui sont d’autant plus violentes qu’elles sont moins fondées ; c’est une espèce de folie” (180, my emphasis). Sexual deviance was a form of madness, and so, unsurprisingly, the character goes mad. Yet the systematic equivalence in the text of both female homosociality and homosexuality with death is means for a greater analysis than the priests’ sermons against sinful practices.

According to Foucault, deviant sexuality is as much a biopolitical concern as procreative sexuality: “debauched, perverted sexuality has effects at the level of the population, as anyone who has been sexually debauched is assumed to have a heredity” (Society 252). While this might seem an odd question regarding homosexuality (since these practices in their nature are non-reproductive, they would not likely be passed along), it is nonetheless pertinent with regard to lesbianism in the convent in eighteenth-century France. The homosexual as a figure was not yet a part of the social lexicon, only sodomy as a behavior; Foucault, writing on this development between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, claims, “The sodomite had
been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (Sexuality 43). In the eighteenth-century social conscience, someone with tendencies towards homosexual acts was therefore still as likely to end up in a procreative, heterosexual relationship as those who practiced any other “deviant” sexual acts (masturbation being the most practical example). “Reproduction is the binary opposite of sodomy (the statute under which lesbianism was persecuted in France) because sodomy encompasses the full range of non-reproductive sex acts,” (Kahan 347). Legally speaking, any acts that constituted non-reproductive sexual practices could be condemned under “sodomy.” Therefore, the problem of lesbianism in the convent in La Religieuse is a matter of futility versus utility.

Suzanne discusses marriage with Mme *** not long after her arrival and Sainte-Eutrope (Mme *** speaks first): “Mon amie, parlez-moi à cœur ouvert ; voudriez-vous être mariée ? – Je l’aimerais mieux que d’être ce que je suis, cela est certain. – Pourquoi cette préférence ? – Je l’ignore. – Vous l’ignorez ?” (146). Mme *** is clearly trying to gage Suzanne’s sexual inclinations. The debate about whether sexuality is biologically determined or socially constructed is further complicated by single-sex environments such as prisons, boarding schools, or, in this case, convents. The question is: do otherwise reproductively able women end up in convents because they feel homosexual desire and are reluctant to marry men (as this would certainly seem a possibility), or do women in convents resort to homosocial and situational homosexual practices only once thus confined? Diderot’s text suggests that the eighteenth-century convent indeed contained a mixture of both ends of this nature versus nurture spectrum. There is certainly textual evidence that Mme ***, for example, takes advantage of her time in the convent to have sexual liaisons with other women: in the novel
Suzanne describes the “jalousie” of two of Mme ***’s previous favorites, sœur Thérèse and sœur Agathe, suggesting that Mme *** displays a pattern of bribing young novices into trysts, with the perks of Mme ***’s favoritism as the mother superior. Yet Suzanne herself expresses no overt sexual desire towards either men or women in her narrative, and maintains her naïveté when participating in homosexual acts with Mme ***. Angela Parker proposes that in La Religieuse, “Sexual behavior... is both instinctual and learned, but it can only be read in a specific cultural space” (98). If any character in the novel represents this “instinctual” sexual behavior is it certainly the rapacious Mme***, while Suzanne, as a young novice learns this behavior within the space of the convent. Anne C. Vila writes:

Hence Mme. ***, whom Suzanne calls a prime example of 'the strangeness of the female mind' and of 'the effect of retiring from the world.' And hence the urgency of liberating a delicate creature like Suzanne (as well as her potential offspring, according to the populationist bent of the argument) from a setting that fosters, not the spiritual values of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but rather, ‘discomfort, nausea, ... passions nurtured in silence.’ (168)

Therefore, in Diderot’s text, the “unnaturalness” of the convent is that it “teaches” non-procreative sexual practices to women who, free from its confines, could otherwise be engaged in marital, heterosexual, procreative sex and thus contribute to the population, were it not for the intervention of fathers like Suzanne’s. M. Simonin is more concerned with devoting his inheritance to his rightful, legitimate heirs, thus disinheriting Suzanne as the wrongful heir to his fortune. Despite the fact that male opposition squelches the chance for the convent as a viable feminutopia, the problem at the heart of the convent in La Religieuse is that it denies unwilling nuns the chance to marry and reproduce.

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28 As Suzanne recounts, during Mme***’s dying days, she cries out, at various points, for all three sisters in her delirium: Suzanne, Agathe, and Thérèse (186-87).
Though Suzanne does not explicitly bemoan her denial of reproductive agency as does, say, Claire de Duras’ Ourika, Suzanne does, in the early pages of the novel, when the notion of the bloodline is most prevalent, express her preference for marriage over the convent. Suzanne sees a value in herself as an individual that transcends the notion of her own illegitimacy and the lack of a dowry that this illegitimacy presupposes for her: “Peut-être que... il se serait trouvé quelqu’un à qui mon caractère, mon esprit, ma figure et mes talents paru une dot suffisante” (32). Suzanne’s question of “What if someone wants to marry me for me?” is one that still finds resonance with today’s reader, but at the same time one that is easily dismissed as a mere impossibility due to M. Simonin’s rigidity in his insistence that a dowry not be paid for Suzanne. Though he initially justifies this prejudice by explaining that Suzanne’s sisters have had so many children so soon after being married, Suzanne eventually learns the truth: that she is not his daughter. However, considering the fertility of her sisters, Suzanne doubtlessly, in her fantasies of being married, anticipates motherhood as a subsequent result.

The novel ends with Suzanne escaping Saint-Eutrope. Yet, upon obtaining her freedom, she injures her feet going over the convent wall, she is raped by a coachman, and she is lodged in a house where she works as a laundress. She initially wishes she could return to the convent, since she is “mal nourrie, mal logée, mal couchée,” but insists that she is “en revanche traitée avec humanité,” (191). Suzanne concludes that, despite her insomnia, “Je serais assez contente de mon sort, si je pouvais espérer d’en jouir paisiblement” (191). By claiming that if she could live without the torture of sleeplessness (caused by a combination of her squalid surroundings and being traumatized by convent life) she would not mind living as a laundrywoman, Suzanne remains true to her word that her liberty is her first and only concern.
Thus, Suzanne’s insistence on the value of her liberty is a rhetorical device that Diderot uses to condemn the Church and support the ideal of personal liberty, without giving any actual agency to Suzanne as a woman. Though Suzanne claims to value her freedom above all else, she is obviously miserable after leaving the convent despite expressing her gratitude for having escaped. She bears not only the physical agony of having to work long hours as a laundress after having injured her feet while scaling the wall of the Saint-Eutrope convent during her escape, but also the psychic trauma of having been raped; this only exacerbates the meager conditions of her living situation post-cloister. “Freedom” for Suzanne proves to be yet another form of confinement and physical and mental tortures that replicate, yet again, her experiences at three different convents. The novel, therefore, concedes to Suzanne’s inevitable failure as a “liberated” nun who is still an unmarriageable woman seeking out her own life in eighteenth-century French society, and Diderot neglects to address how Suzanne might overcome this inevitable failure. Despite the fact that the text recounts Suzanne’s experience in three convents in great detail, her fate post-escape from Saint-Eutrope is wrapped up hastily, in the space of just a few pages, concluding with a paragraph-long post script that ends with the sentence, “Je suis une femme, peut-être un peu coquette, que sais-je ? mais c’est naturellement et sans artifice” (195). Suzanne is, in her final words, relegated to the role of a mere “coquette.” Considering her tumultuous journey toward her freedom, this conclusion seems abrupt. While Diderot began working on the novel in 1760, it did not appear in any published form until 1780, at which point he had stopped working on it, still four years prior to his death. The seemingly unfinished circumstances of the resolution of Suzanne Simonin’s story is, therefore, not the result of a lack of time on Diderot’s part. Rather it reflects that Diderot
accomplished what he intended to accomplish through the text, and left Suzanne to her curt end as a laundress, still imploring the Marquis de Croismare for his intervention.

At a certain point among Suzanne's protests at Longchamp, she sits in a hallway with her legs and feet across the threshold of a passageway leaving the chapel. When mass lets out (a mass she was prohibited from attending), her presence in the hallway stops the nuns in their tracks; Christine merely orders her charges, "Marchez sur elle, ce n'est qu'un cadavre," (82). This insistence on death evokes a tendency to view cloistral confinement, particularly for contemplative orders, as a symbolic death, not only because of the isolation, but because sterile, single-sex environments were perceived as robbing humanity of its natural function: proliferation. Though Suzanne Simonin does not wax poetic about marriage and motherhood, her rebellion against the convent exemplifies the paradigm of individual liberty (in her case of the female child from the despotism of the parental law).

In the scheme of blood myths and reproductive repression, lesbianism in the convent reinforces the identity of its inhabitants as undesirable reproductive subjects. Diderot's criticism is not a moral indictment of homosexuality as a practice, but rather of the lack of reproductive potential in strictly homosocial communities and homosexual acts. Yet the lascivious detail in which Diderot describes "strange pleasures" eroticizes female homosocial living. This, according to Erica Rand, "locates the text doubly in the traditions of social criticism and pornography" (506). In "Sur les femmes" he describes the female orgasm as an "épilepsie passagère," a reference which parallels his description of Mme ***'s climax (425). The essay, which further proves Diderot's secular (as Vila would argue, "medicalized") interest in female sexuality, reinforces misogynistic stereotypes about women, particularly regarding sex and emotions.
Diderot does, however, concede, "Femmes, que je vous plains ! Il n'y avait qu'un dédommagement à vos maux ; et si j'avais été législateur, peut-être l'eussiez-vous obtenu" (436; my emphasis). In line with his depiction of Suzanne's rebellion in *La Religieuse*, Diderot believed that the women of his time were disadvantaged by law, patriarchal and despotic; yet this is problematic as he nonetheless writes about them in the essay as biologically inferior to men. As Diderot's spokesperson against the Church, Suzanne's fate at the end of the novel is rather unenviable: wounded, violated, and destitute despite having reclaimed her "liberty."
Chapter Three. Engendering a Republic: The Triumph of the Reproductive Subject over the Conventual Tomb

What does this new technology of power, this biopolitics, this biopower that is beginning to establish itself, involve? I told you very briefly a moment ago; a set of processes such as the ratio of births to deaths, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of a population, and so on. It is these processes—the birth rate, the mortality rate, longevity, and so on—together with a whole series of related economic and political problems ... which, in the second half of the eighteenth century, become biopolitics' first objects of knowledge and the targets it seeks to control. (Foucault, Society 243)

Despite the considerable success of its initial 1791 run at the Comédie-Française, Jacques-Marie Boutet de Monvel's *Les victimes cloîtrées* elicits the following question from historian Michel Biard: “n'est-il pas dangereux et inutile de s'attaquer violemment au sentiment chrétien comme le font quelques œuvres qui stigmatisent les rigueurs des cloîtres, après que les premières fractures religieuses soient apparues dans le sillage de la constitution civile du clergé ?” (534). During the Revolutionary period, the Church maintained little of the power that it had held over France for centuries. Many churches were ransacked and desecrated in the spirit of revolt, and several legal actions placed unprecedented limits on the Church’s authority over individuals. Perhaps most notable was the 1790 *consitution civile du clergé* that Biard evokes: under its decree, the Assemblé Nationale confiscated all Church-held property and abolished contemplative religious orders for both sexes (Sullivan 167). All things considered, what could be further accomplished through an anachronistic diatribe against “les rigueurs des cloîtres” that were fundamentally defunct? Quite simply, was Monvel's theatre making a moot point?
Yet Monvel was not primarily motivated by abasing the Church at one of its lowest points. The final words of the play are a call to prayer in the spirit of community togetherness and giving thanks. Corrupt Church officials, not God nor even religion, are the play’s actual villains. Instead, Monvel sought to disseminate ideas among his spectators, thus educating them as Sophie Marchand, who compiled the play’s most recent critical edition, proposes: “La pièce... incarne à merveille les ambitions que la Révolution nourrit pour un théâtre conçu comme école du peuple,” (19). Whereas Marchand traces how Monvel’s subsequent revisions make the pro-Revolutionary agenda of the play more obvious to the public, Monvel’s suggested mode of resistance to despotic power in France is nonetheless still conveyed in the original text: he proposes a freedom to reproduce unrestricted by ancien-régime constraints of birth and class, in order to propagate a body of worthy citizens. In this chapter, I will analyze the political implications of the play, specifically as they pertain to the question of liberty that seems to concern Monvel. These are issues that he addresses in his depiction of a pair of young lovers who are coerced into, and who subsequently liberate themselves from, monastic entrapments.

**Revolutionary Theatre as “école du peuple:” Context, Response, and History**

The temporal relevance of *Les victimes cloitrées* can certainly be called into question based on its history, owing its initial success in the 1790s to the Revolutionary backdrop. Jean Duvignaud describes a personal, emotional response that the play elicited in its spectators at the time of its initial performances that taps into a sense of connection and patriotism: he recalls “l’effusion sentimentale et l’émotion collective provoquées par le spectacle de l’innocence persécutée” (291). Yet, despite the outpouring of emotion that the play elicited in
1791, the triumph of the young lovers at the end of the play over the tyranny of the corrupt church officials simply evokes the prevailing politics of contemporary theatre: “Prolongeant la série des drames monacaux antérieurs à 1789, l’attaque anticléricale portée par Les Victimes cloîtrées ne présente rien de radicalement neuf dans ses thèmes et ses motifs” (Marchand 14). By the time of Monvel’s play, the criticism of Church as an institution had already become the norm for progressive (and transgressive) playwrights.

The play itself was revised four times from 1792 to 1793, seemingly to keep it current in the throes of a chaotic society, as Marchand explains: “Les transformations apportées aux Victimes cloîtrées... trahissent la volonté de Monvel de radicaliser le propos idéologique du drame pour adapter celui-ci à l’évolution de la Révolution,” (24). In other terms, Monvel was not subtle in his ambitions to keep the play socially relevant throughout the 1790s. But the revisions themselves proved only a temporary solution to the permanent problem of a rapidly evolving cultural context, leading the play into a period of irrelevance, what Marchand refers to as a historical “purgatoire” (32). This lasted until from the reunification of the Comédie-Française in 1799 until a renaissance of anticlerical theatre that the July Revolution of 1830 inaugurated (36).

Monvel’s support of the Revolutionary spirit is echoed in the play itself, mostly through the character of M. de Francheville, the play’s foremost progressivist sympathizer. In trying to

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29 As I discuss in this chapter, the play’s position on the Comédie-Française’s split is staunchly pro-Rouge (progressive) and anti-Noir (royalist). Thus, the reunification made this aspect of the play less “current.” Other plays included in the anticlerical renaissance were Pigault-Lebrun’s Les Dragons et les Bénédictines (1791) and Chenier’s Fénelon (1793), as well as new works such as Ducange and Pixérécourt’s L’Incendiaire ou la Cure et l’Archevêché (1831) (Marchand 36).
convince the young Dorval not to profess his monastic vows, Francheville makes the following appeal:

Profitons au moins du moment. Insensé! Que vas-tu faire? Quel est ton dessein? Pourquoi t’ensevelir vivant dans les tombeaux habités par les passions les plus basses, ou par les regrets et le désespoir? Pourquoi le sacrifice de ta liberté? Quelle raison te fait renoncer à la société à qui tes talents un jour peuvent te rendre utile, où tes richesses te permettent de faire des heureux? À qui va passer ta fortune? Quels hommes te donneront des lois? Et comment justifier aux yeux de la raison cette abnégation de toi-même, cet oubli de la dignité de ton être, cette obéissance aveugle et servile que tu vas promettre, que tu vas jurer au despote le plus tyrannique, le plus bas, le plus insolent? Qu’as-tu à m’opposer? Tu n’es faible ni crédule; les préjugés vulgaires, le fanatisme et la superstition jamais n’ont asservi ton âme... Rappelle tes idées, réponds-moi, que fais-tu dans ces lieux?... Que t’y proposes-tu?... Motive ta conduite. (137-38)

This diatribe accuses the Church of perpetuating blind obedience and tyrannical despotism. Francheville expresses his disdain for these practices and attempts to talk Dorval out of a life of such blind subservience, attempting to appeal to Dorval’s sense of obligation to the community (fitting, as Francheville is the recently-elected mayor of their provincial town). Entering the monastery will not only rob Dorval of his own livelihood, but it will rob society of a talented citizen and potential reproductive subject, a term which I will use to mean someone with the freedom and potential to reproduce without any obstacle in the way of this freedom to negate their agency. As Karen Sullivan notes, although regarding nuns rather than monks, the notion of “utility” was often a “veiled reference to reproduction” (170); Francheville’s plea for Dorval to make himself “utile” can be seen as a call for Dorval to forego monastic life and fight for his freedom to reproduce with a partner of his choice, a freedom that serves the best interests of both Dorval and of society.
Le Rouge et le Noir: Setting the Stage for a New Kind of Ruler

*Les Victimes cloîtrées* was the last production performed at the Comédie-Française before the troupe was divided into two rival political factions, the progressive *Rouges* and the royalist *Noirs* (Marchand 9). Monvel’s play addresses head-on this imminent fracture that itself represents the landscape of France’s political turmoil in 1791, situated between the *Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen* of 1789 and the *Terreur* that began in 1793. In the play’s first act, Monvel outlines the positions of both factions, takes a clear side in the conflict, and allows the battle to play out on stage in front of the public, proposing for society his own vision of ideal political leadership for the evolving nation that rejected the traditions of the monarchy and the aristocracy.

The rejection of this conception of “birth” is an important concept in the play from its beginning. The first scene opens with Picard, the oldest and wisest of a noble family’s domestics, praising his universally loved master, M. de Francheville. For Picard, it is a point of pride that he witnessed the births of both of the family’s children, Francheville and his sister Mme de St. Alban (now both adults), and Picard is, due to his seniority, the *de facto* head of the servants. Though Picard is referring to *naissance* as Francheville’s physical birth, his reminiscence of the event highlights an altogether different notion of *naissance* as an inherited entitlement based on the ascribed social class of one’s family. Despite his affection for his master, their relationship as master and servant was determined at the precise moment that Picard recalls: Francheville’s *naissance*. Picard insists nonetheless that from the moment Francheville was born, he was destined to do great things not because of his noble birth, but because of his strength of character: “ce garçon-là aura de l’esprit, un excellent cœur, il fera
parler de lui dans le monde” (94). From the beginning of the play, it seems as if Francheville has fulfilled Picard’s prediction, having been elected to the position of mayor of the town in which the family home is situated. Unlike, for instance, a born monarch, Francheville has earned his place as the leader of the community based on his reputation among the citizens. The birth that Picard witnessed was one of noble entitlement, but also the birth of an individual with the potential to become a good citizen, one capable of leading the community based on the merits of good qualities, character, and judgment.

It may, at first glance, seem that Francheville’s inherent “goodness” is synonymous with his noble birth (i.e. that the nobility are the nobility because they are inherently better by some means). This idea is refuted by Francheville’s sister Mme de St. Alban. Unlike Francheville, she seems to have adopted the worst qualities of someone privileged by birth. The household is unanimous in their esteem of Francheville, and his sister is instantly set up as a foil prior to their arrival at home, for which the servants are preparing. Picard tries half-heartedly to dissuade the other servants from any slander of their mistress, and the case against Mme de St. Alban is made mostly by la femme de charge, who despite proclaiming that she loves her mistress with all her heart (98) is quick to identify her faults, not the least of which is that she is “naturellement fière et entichée de sa noblesse” (97). Before either of them has set foot on stage, the tension between Mme de St. Alban and M. de Francheville has been clearly delineated: she clings to the old notion of “birth” as entitlement whereas he has proven himself in spite of his birth and earned the respect of the common class.

La femme de charge is especially resentful because of Mme de St. Alban’s decision to place her daughter Eugénie, another character universally beloved by the house servants, into a
convent, an unforgivable offense in her eyes: “Non, voyez-vous, je vivrais des siècles que je ne pardonnerais jamais à Mme de St. Alban” (96). She soon, however, turns her contempt towards Mme de St. Alban’s confessor, Père Laurent, who is also the head of the monastery that adjoins the convent. Through the household’s conversations, it is soon revealed that Eugénie has died in a fire that spread throughout an entire wing of the convent/monastery edifice, which explains the house staff’s reactions of fervor and emotion at the mention of her cloistral confinement. When Eugénie appears alive, much to the surprise of both the characters on stage and the play’s audience in Act IV, for the moment, at least, everyone believes her to be dead.

Unlike Mme de St. Alban, Père Laurent is held in blatant contempt in the household and he is denounced as a hypocrite and a phony (96), with even Picard unable to forgive his role in Eugénie’s death: “Sans lui elle vivrait encore” (99). As further dialogue discloses, Mme de St. Alban conspired with Père Laurent to send Eugénie to the convent because Eugénie was planning on marrying Dorval, a local merchant below her social class. Mme de St. Alban would rather give her daughter to the church than see her marry a commoner: being “fière et entichée de sa noblesse” has essentially cost Mme de St. Alban her own daughter. Père Laurent is more harshly chastised, as the household is sure that he persuaded Mme de St. Alban to send Eugénie away: la femme de charge imagines the language he would have used to manipulate Mme de St. Alban: “Une femme de votre naissance, une dame de votre rang, et ce petit Dorval, un roturier, un négociant... un homme de rien” (97). La femme de charge expects that the best way to influence her mistress is to appeal to her snobbery, forcing her to imagine the embarrassment that it would bring the family were Eugénie to marry a bourgeois. Moreover, the house staff seem to suspect, and the play ultimately reveals to be true, that Père Laurent
manipulated Mme de St. Alban into sending her daughter to the convent so that, as the head of the neighboring monastery, Eugénie will in effect be under his charge: his interest in her is ultimately sexual.

M. de Francheville arrives on scene to great fanfare on the part of Picard and the other domestics. The conversation continues, and Francheville is, as his namesake indicates, frank about his sister’s character flaws that led to the tragedy of Eugénie’s sequestration and subsequent death: “Fièr de sa noblesse, l’esprit de Dorval, ses mœurs, la considération dont il jouissait, sa fortune immense, ne paraissaient point à ma sœur un équivalent à la naissance qu’elle se croyait en droit d’exiger de son gendre. Dorval adorait sa fille, Dorval en était aimé…” (110). For Mme de St. Alban, there is no getting around the notion of naissance, despite one’s qualities or even personal wealth. Dorval is, in fact, quite rich and capable of providing a life of comfort for his would-be wife, except that his prospective mother-in-law clings to the rapidly dissolving notions of social class in late-eighteenth century France that hinder such marriages from taking place.

The fondness that Francheville expresses both for Dorval as his niece’s would-be husband and for the servants of the house, including the loyal Picard, is not a love shared by his sister. Francheville’s arrival midway through Act I is characterized by warm and familiar intimacy: he embraces them all and uses the familiar “tu” when addressing them (though he does not interject when they address him more formally as “vous”) and he uses the affectionate term “ami” in several instances. Upon Mme de St. Alban’s arrival at the beginning of Act II, however, she is not comfortable with labels such as “amis” regarding the house staff, lest they blur the lines of social order and etiquette. Mme de St. Alban also casts suspicion upon
the warm welcome that her brother so forthrightly embraced: when a laquais suggests that “amitié” is behind the jovial atmosphere of the family reunion, Mme de St. Alban replies, “depuis quand sommes-nous si bons amis?” (112). She attempts to dispel the possibility of such closeness and familiarity between people of different classes, affirming that she has not wavered in the very prejudices that led her to send her daughter off to her eventual death. The fact that Eugénie would consent to the convent rather than give in to her mother's wishes and forget about Dorval undermines her mother's perceived superiority. Just to avoid any misunderstanding about how she wishes to interact with the house’s servants, Mme de St. Alban clarifies, “ce plaisir-là peut se marquer d’une manière un peu plus respectueuse... Je vous sais gré de ce que vous appelez votre amitié... Mais je ne suis pas faite encore à l’espèce d’intimité que vous voulez établir entre nous...” (113). She receives the servants’ joy with a coldness that deliberately slights Francheville’s warm embrace of the domestics: though he may think himself “fait à l’espèce d’intimité” that would erase their social standings for such interactions, she certainly is not.

These initial conversations between masters and servants accentuate the fact that M. de Francheville and Mme de St. Alban oppose one another on the decision to have Eugénie become a nun rather than marry Dorval. The siblings embody different ideologies with regards to shifting contemporary social norms. When M. de Francheville tells his sister, regarding the servants, “Ce sont de bons citoyens, des hommes,” she chastizes his republican politics, “Ah! voilà le grand argument de la philosophie! Des hommes! Vos égaux, n’est-ce pas? vos semblables,” (117). Mme de St. Alban simply mocks the notion that anyone from the lower class could ever equal her family. Likewise, Francheville approves of the mésalliance of Eugénie
and Dorval because they love each other, even if it is not the sensible social arrangement that preserves the family’s noble lineage.

This tension between brother and sister raises the issue of what constitutes the individual's rights to self-empowerment. M. de Francheville, not coincidentally someone who has just recently been elected to political office, possesses a quality of judgment that resonates with the common people of the house and with Eugénie’s own wishes, while Mme de St. Alban is preoccupied with preserving her naissance and the authority that it grants her: Marchand describes her as “une victime d’un reste de préjugés obsolètes” (13). Part of this preservation is to adhere therefore to traditional ancien-régime social mores despite the backdrop of the Revolution. She considers the notion that her brother holds an elected office trivial compared to their noble birth, saying, “Le marquis de Francheville honoré longtemps des faveurs de la Cour; élevé par son roi à de plusieurs postes éminents, dont la maison peut se flatter d’être une des premières du royaume, M. de Francheville regarde la mairie d’une petite ville comme une place de distinction,” (116). Mme de St. Alban considers the position of an elected official to be common and pitiable and she embraces more prestigious, traditional ways of thinking and governing whereas M. de Francheville represents the forward-thinking sector of society. With this discord, Monvel evokes the imminent fracture of the Comédie-Française itself that nearly coincided with the play’s opening: Francheville is a progressive Rouge, the side of “dissidents favorables aux idées nouvelles” (Marchand 9), while Mme de St. Alban is a Noire, a royalist sympathizer, clinging to the notion of naissance as the mechanism of power that governs society.
As the events of *Les Victimes cloîtrées* ultimately play out in Francheville’s favor, Monvel, himself a *sociétaire* of the Comédie-Française since 1772, unsurprisingly joined with the Rouges, who took on the name “Théâtre de la République” at the Palais-Royal after the schism (Marchand 9). Whereas these ideological differences between Francheville and Mme de St. Alban in Act I of the play serve as a microcosm of the political fracture within the state theatre, the theatre is a microcosm of the political upheaval in the state itself at the time of the Revolution: the arbitrary social hierarchy that had for so long structured life in France was crumbling. The play’s portrayal of the shifting societal power dynamics and its setting upon the cusp of such cultural discontinuity lead me to Foucault’s writings about biopolitics.

In its simplest terms, biopower is the modern notion of the “power to ‘make’ live and ‘let’ die” (*Society* 141). In this definition, Foucault intends to contrast biopower with sovereign power, its predecessor, although both phenomena overlap and neither is mutually exclusive. Whereas the sovereign could expend life in order to preserve his own, through commanding his people to go to war or executing an attempted regicide\(^{30}\) (*Sexuality* 135), biopower “is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population” (*Sexuality* 137). Biopolitics are the practices through which this power is monitored and to some extent enforced, concerned with things such as “propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause them to vary” (*Sexuality* 139). As both this power and the practices through which it manifests in society can be considered agents, they are in many instances interchangeable. I adhere to biopower as

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\(^{30}\) Here I am referring to Robert-François Damiens, the attempted assassin of Louis XV whose botched execution in 1757 Foucault analyzes in *Discipline and Punish*.
the more general term and biopolitics to refer specifically to the regulation of policies and practices.

Though Foucault introduces the “make live and let die” definition of biopower in an analysis of state racism (National Socialism and the Holocaust), the regulation of the population regarding desirability versus undesirability of citizens can be traced back to normalizing practices with centuries of tradition (although “eugenics” was not coined until the nineteenth century). Whereas sovereign power was all about blood (as in, transgressions are paid in corporal punishment), biopower came to be about the regulation of sex to influence populations, what Foucault calls the “transition from ‘sanguinity’ to ‘sexuality’” (Sexuality 148). Mme de St. Alban does not want her bloodline tainted by someone not of her class, Dorval, whereas the other characters, such as Francheville, praise Dorval for his enlightened moral fiber rather than preoccupy themselves with his birth. The negative portrayal of Mme de St. Alban in Les victimes cloitrées condemns the antiquated notion of class and pedigree that attempt to thwart “true” love: the idea that Dorval’s blood is not worthy of mixing with Eugénie’s is an outmoded myth. Likewise, the idea of social progress that Monvel puts forward in his work is one that negates the blood myth in favor of democratically elected leaders and equal citizenship unrestricted by lineage or class. The society that is emerging in the play is one where the antidote for despotism is reasonable, elected rulers and where people are valued for their character over their birth: M. de Francheville, having been elected mayor, (even of a small town of little note for a born aristocrat) is a model of this system. As Picard states, “Le voilà élu maire de notre ville, place honorable assurément, et qui prouve dans quelle estime il est parmi ses Concitoyens” (94). One’s place is therefore determined by the esteem of the community, and
the prevailing opinion is decided not by an autocrat, but by a collection of individuals empowered by citizenship.

Though sovereign power and biopower are fundamentally different, and that sovereign power pre-dates biopower, Foucault makes no claims that there is a moment where the former ends and the latter begins; rather they overlap over extensive periods of time. The Revolutionary period in France is, however, the site of one of the major discontinuities in modern history. Thomas Lemke argues that the “birth” of biopolitics coincides with the appearance of the world’s liberal forms of government: he writes that biopolitics are "an explicit rupture with the attempt to trace political processes and structures back to biological determinants," in other words, one of the indicators of biopower emerging in a nation is the end of the hereditary monarchy, which is based solely on a biological determinant: birth (33). But before these new forms of government can take hold, the old forms must first be debunked and unseated. Though Les Victimes cloîtrées depicts an unflattering portrait of hereditary nobility in the prejudiced and short-sighted Mme de St. Alban, Monvel gives a much more sinister depiction of the abuses of despotic power: the true antagonist of the play is Père Laurent, her confidant. Père Laurent uses his position within the church to imprison both Dorval and Eugénie to his own ends. As the play’s central conflict transitions from M. de Francheville and Mme de Saint Alban to Dorval’s struggle to free himself from Père Laurent, Père Laurent is set up to be the face of the self-serving autocrat, while coerced monasticism is his preferred arm of power in suppressing individual liberty.
“Sois homme et rends à ta patrie un citoyen vertueux:”
Sexual Repression in Cloistral Imprisonment

As I have demonstrated in earlier chapters, for centuries, convents and monasteries were filled reluctant monks and nuns who were there because of practical arrangements who outnumbered those who were there for their own spiritual inclinations. A majority of young women in particular who did not make the transition from their father’s authority to their husband’s found themselves taking religious vows. The reasons for the “unmarriageability” of these women are varied, but monastic life was generally considered the fate of the unfit or the unproductive: according to Geneviève Reynes, “La société considérait depuis trop longtemps les carrières ecclésiastiques comme le refuge de ses membres inutiles; les cloîtres et les séminaires étaient remplis de gens sans vocation, insatisfaits de leur sort” (37-38). Most commonly, nuns were women whose parents could not afford a dowry to marry them off, often because it had been spent on their elder daughters (Reynes 39). It is therefore not surprising that depictions of nuns dissatisfied with life in the cloister tend to dominate the literature of the period. Moreover, despite the convent being an all-female living arrangement, literary nuns were still subjected to some form of patriarchal authority, which appears in the form of stock characters such as lecherous priests, corrupt monsignors, or benefactors expecting *quid pro quo*. In *Les victimes cloîtrées*, traditional sex and gender roles are given a much greater flexibility. The combined convent/monastery edifice blurs the lines of who has access to go where, turning the convent into a space that men regularly visit. Likewise, the play depicts a man who, much like a young novice would, is victimized by the patriarchally structured power dynamics of the Church.
Monvel’s play is considered part of the théâtre monacal, a sub-genre popular in 1790s France whose thematic is “la claustration conventuelle” and whose ambition is to “remédier aux disconvenances sociales en éclairant l’opinion sur les dérives et les méfaits des pratiques ecclésiastiques” (Marchand 10). These plays brought into light the plight of women coerced into taking vows for circumstances beyond their control and then victimized by church officials. Though most works of the théâtre monacal focus on depictions of convent life, Les victimes cloîtrées approaches the pitfall of monasticism and its subsequent woes through the perspectives of both sexes. This is aided by the dual convent/monastery setting of the play as well as the cooperation between the heads of both establishments, Père Laurent and an unnamed mother superior; though Père Laurent is the primary antagonist and the mother superior never appears in the play, her collusion with Père Laurent is nonetheless essential to the plot.

Père Laurent plots to have Dorval, his sexual rival for Eugénie, coerced into the monastery, drained of his riches, and then left to die in an underground cell. Dorval first enters on stage in the play’s second act a distraught man, believing the woman that he loves to have perished in a fire, and much of Acts II and III are comprised of several characters debating Dorval’s fate. Mme de St. Alban, whose wishes align with her confessor’s, whole-heartedly supports Père Laurent’s recommendation that the monastery is the best environment for Dorval, while M. de Francheville and M. de St. Alban, who defers to his wife in most instances, cite Eugénie’s reported demise in the convent to denounce the monastic life as a solution to Dorval’s agitated state. Whereas Barbara Woshinski argues that the prison/refuge dichotomy that dominates depictions of the convent is insufficient (Imagining 1), the notion of the convent
as the tomb certainly prevails in works such as Monvel’s that define the théâtre monacal. The social conditions that culminated in the revolt against the Church in Revolutionary France very much included these criticisms of the cloister, not only as a form of captivity and social death, but also as a sterile, unproductive space. By representing the prison/tomb thematic, Monvel underscores the opposition that death is the antithesis to both life and birth.

As Dorval enters the play already determined to retreat from society and pronounce his monastic vows, Père Laurent’s prior counseling of Dorval up to this point is not depicted on stage, but rather assumed by the portrayal of Père Laurent’s true character and discussed retrospectively in the play, when, for example, Dorval tells him:

*Je vous ai promis, mon père, de renoncer au monde, de m’ensevelir à jamais dans le cloître que vous m’avez ouvert... il sera mon tombeau... c’est demain que j’y descends pour n’en jamais sortir ; ... mais je ne vous ai point promis d’oublier que j’eus un cœur, que ce cœur a tout perdu, qu’il brûle encore et qu’il brûlera jusques dans la tombe d’un feu... (126)*

Dorval quite simply seems to prefer a solitary death in the monastery to a public life without Eugénie, and yet the “je vous ai promis” insinuates that Dorval has arrived at this conclusion after much persuasion from Père Laurent, who, as proven at every instance, is a self-serving figurehead of the Church. Père Laurent has extracted this promise from Dorval that he will commit himself to the monastery under Père Laurent’s supervision. His hold over Dorval in his despair is so strong that Dorval has even forgiven Père Laurent for his role in Eugénie’s “death,” albeit without having all the facts: “c’est par ses conseils qu’Eugénie... Mais il s’excuse... Il la regrette, il la pleure avec moi... il me console... Je n’ai trouvé que lui de qui le cœur s’ouvrir à mes chagrins” (139). Père Laurent has convinced Dorval that he is as equally grief-stricken over
the loss of Eugénie, and uses it as a means of bonding in the face of tragedy. Dorval’s fate, at least for the duplicitous priest, seems sealed.

When Dorval does indeed keep his word to Père Laurent and leaves for the monastery, his imprisonment is a symbolic emasculation, as his cell is next door to the nuns in the convent, making him one of the eponymous *victimes* of the play. He is feminized by a description where a “nun” (actually Eugénie) hearing Dorval stirring in the cell next to hers, imagines who might be inhabiting the space: “C’est peut-être, disais-je, une captive comme moi... C’est à la liberté qu’elle aspire, sa pitié m’aidera sans doute à recouvrer la mienne...” (157). It has not occurred to this nun that her fantasy co-captive could be very real and *male*. This reflects popularly held ideas at the time that men in religious houses generally enjoyed more freedom of mobility than females and were less likely to be confined, especially against their will. According to Woshinski, men had the option of joining the Dominicans or the Franciscans, mendicant orders whose lifestyle emphasized poverty, but also travel, ministry, and charitable work in urban communities, while equivalent options for women were exceptionally rare (*Imagining* 18). Therefore, a man relegated to monastic life was not necessarily confined to a monastery the way that a nun was limited to life in a convent (even one engaged in community or otherwise charitable work), and the forced imprisonment of a male character upsets this perceived duality.

The monastery depicted in *Les victimes cloitrées* is indeed Dominican, but for Père Laurent’s purposes of confining Dorval, it is not portrayed as a mendicant order. Père Laurent, 

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its superior, uses cloistral imprisonment to entrap Dorval and to quench his own desires, money from Dorval and sex from Eugénie. Père Laurent also infiltrates the convent in a way that was quite uncommon for the time, as Woshinski writes, “most male regular orders wanted nothing to do with supervising women” as a general attitude of misogyny in the monastic orders prevented such situations from arising (Imagining 18). To the contrary, Père Laurent is very interested in supervising women to fulfill his own sexual desires. As Eugénie recounts after she is revealed to be alive in the opening scene of Act IV, “J’ai résisté à d’infâmes séductions; j’ai vu avec horreur l’amour et les projets d’un homme abominable; mon courage a rendu vains les criminels efforts de sa vile complice...” (156). She has evidently been able to withstand the sexual advances of Père Laurent, and it is unclear to what extent Père Laurent’s fellow priests and accomplices Anastase, André, and Ambroise took part, but it is clear by Eugénie’s use of the feminine “sa vile complice” that the accomplice she condemns is none other than the mother superior of her own convent.

Père Laurent reveals his true intentions in persuading Dorval to take monastic vows during a private conversation with Père Ambroise, one of his cohorts: “il est à nous; sa raison égarée nous l’assure à jamais. Que demain il s’enchaîne aux pieds de nos autels, que sa fortune immense devienne notre bien...” (136). In addition to suggesting a parasitic aspect of the Church’s hold on society, Père Laurent demonstrates the potential for abuse with such a despotic power structure vis-à-vis his own greed. He even uses the metaphor of human sacrifice, which he cryptically suggests through the imagery of chaining Dorval to the altar. He wishes to have Dorval sign over his wealth to the church and use the "news" of Dorval’s death as leverage to seduce Eugénie, as up to this point she has successfully fended off his advances
through various means including threats (*menaces*) for which she later prays forgiveness (156).

Since a monk is, as Woshinski argues, not normally confined by his superiors in a way that a nun is, and since Père Laurent is using every arm of his power to prevent a sexual union between Dorval and Eugénie, his process of thwarting Dorval is a way of emasculating the young man.

True to his nature, Père Laurent expresses his personal disdain for Dorval behind closed doors, calling him "*ce Dorval que je déteste*" (136), while publicly he treats the young man as a cherished friend, masking his desire to confine him and drain him of his fortune with a pretense of affection. He waxes poetic to feign affection. For instance, when Francheville later in Act III arrives at the monastery to take Dorval home with him, Père Laurent feigns sadness at the thought: “Ah! que demandez-vous, mon frère? On veut m’enlever mon ami, le tendre ami qu’a choisi mon cœur. Celui qui sera après Dieu ma consolation dans les peines de la vie...” (140).

Here Père Laurent uses a rhetoric that would suggest a romantic or sexual relationship between the two men. Despite Père Laurent's prurient interest in Eugenie, for him to have lured Dorval into the monastery and subsequently confined him is an indirect form seduction and sexual conquest. However, as the battle to restore Dorval to the side of reason (i.e. M. de Francheville) ensues, the two-sided nature of Père Laurent’s behavior is made clear, and Francheville replies, “Je suis aussi son ami, Monsieur, et un sincère ami, qui lui conseille de ne point renoncer à la société pour laquelle il est fait, à laquelle il doit aussi ses talents et l’exemple de ses vertus; un ami qui l’exhorte à ne point s’ensevelir dans un cloître...” (141). Francheville not only sees through Père Laurent's feigned emotions but also insinuates Père Laurent's insincerity.

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32 This includes the servants of the St. Alban household, who share Francheville's opinion of Père Laurent and refer to him as both "hypocrite" and "douceureux," (96), while their mistress, Mme de St. Alban has her own agenda that aligns with Père Laurent’s. This idea of the servant as the character who is able to “sniff out” the pretensions of an imposter is also in the tradition of Molière’s *Tartuffe* in the character of Dorine.
by insisting on his own sincerity (as his name *de franche ville* suggests). Père Laurent is an unjustly anointed ruler who abuses his power and is despised by the public, serving as a foil to Francheville, who is fair, wise, and appreciated by the disenfranchised.

Though the final act turns the play over to Dorval as its main protagonist, and Eugénie’s unexpected appearance allows her to accede to an equally heroic role, M. de Francheville remains Monvel’s *porte-parole* throughout the middle of the play. Francheville anoints Dorval as his spiritual successor as the voice of reason, discouraging the idea that Dorval should become a monk by saying of the young man, “M. Dorval... tant d’amabilité, de lumières, d’esprit, une fortune si considérable, ensevelir tout cela dans un cloître !” Though he is a rich bourgeois, Dorval is also, like Francheville, widely admired because of his reason, his good judgment, and his ability to connect with other people, or his *fraternité*. Likewise, in a last-minute attempt to dissuade Dorval from joining the monastery in Act III, M. de Francheville begs, “du courage, mon ami... Sois homme et rends à ta patrie un citoyen vertueux,” (142). Francheville’s command to “be a man” reinforces the notion of emasculation: Père Laurent’s true intentions are to suppress Dorval’s desire to marry Eugénie and thus suppress their reproductive potential. The word “citoyen” lends itself to a dual reading in this regard: either Dorval himself or a potential future offspring that Dorval should be willing to give.

Through the endorsement of a republic and of this free reproduction across classes, Monvel’s rebuke of despotic power is not pointed singularly at the Church, but also at the crown. On the decline of sovereign power and the emergence of biopower, Foucault writes that, "One might say that the ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death," (*Sexuality* 138, original emphasis). Père Laurent
represents this "ancient" right, that of the premodern sovereign, to take life for his own benefit with impunity, while the emphasis on the young couple's reproductive potential represents the other side of the spectrum. This shift in power in the play signals the transfer to the management of populations rather than individuals taking place in France in the late 1700s that defines biopower. Père Laurent as a corrupt figurehead is, in the end, upended by the couple's right to reproductive freedom in the burgeoning republic.

Christ Cometh: Proliferation of Citizens as the Future of a Nation

Early in Act I of *Les victimes cloitrées*, M. de Francheville contemplates a portrait of his niece Eugénie, when we learn for the first time that her family and loved ones believe her to be dead. It is not until the final act’s opening scene that Eugénie is revealed to be alive, albeit “pâle, mourante” (155), the prisoner of Père Laurent. To preserve the secrecy of her fate, Eugénie’s name does not appear in the list of *personnages* preceding the text: she is instead credited as “Une religieuse, enfermée dans un des cachots monastiques que l’on nomme *Vade in pace* d’un couvent des religieuses, séparé par un mur mitoyen de celui des Dominicains.” As Marchand notes, “L’absence de prénom (conforme au manuscrit) préserve à la lecture, comme à la représentation, la surprise de la reconnaissance du 4e acte,” (93). Monvel intended not only for the spectator, but for any reader of the play’s manuscript to experience this same “resurrection” from the dead. The notion of a *reconnaissance* after this resurrection has a Biblical undertone that is but one way that Eugénie can be read as a Christ-like figure.\(^{33}\) Though Dorval remains the protagonist, the true triumph of the play is that of the citizen as reproductive subject over despotic power. In this sense, the true heroes are both Dorval, as the

\(^{33}\) For the recognition scene, see, for example, Luke 24:31.
victor over the Church as institution that conspired to keep the two would-be lovers apart, and Eugénie, whose womb provides the metaphoric proliferation of potential citizens: in other words, while Dorval is the play’s hero, Eugénie is its “savior.”

In the Bible, strips of linen or strips of cloth are found in Jesus’s empty tomb, hinting the condition of his clothes during and after the crucifixion (John 20:5). Eugénie first appears in the play “vêtue d’une robe blanche déchirée et qui tombe en lambeaux,” (155), evoking many visual representations of Jesus amid stages of his persecution and death. Jesus also remains dead in the tomb for three days after his crucifixion before his resurrection. Père Louis, a priest who turns against the monastery and unveils Père Laurent's treachery, reveals that Eugénie’s “death” occurred three days after the letter from Père Laurent to the mother superior of the convent suggested that something had to be done to silence the young woman (150). Eugénie is also believed to be dead for precisely three full acts of the play itself before her sudden re-emergence, giving the number three two distinct ties to the biblical reference regarding her “resurrection.”

Moreover, the underground cells in which Eugénie and Dorval are confined (his is revealed to be right next to hers, coincidentally separated by only a single wall) are described as “deux tombes en pierre noire, avec un anneau à chacune pour lever la grande pierre qui la couvre” (155), and the first sign of Jesus’s resurrection is that the large stone entombing him has mysteriously been removed (John 20:1). Finally, while everyone outside of the monastery/convent believes Eugénie to be dead, there remains nonetheless a sort-of spiritual connection in Act I between the Francheville-St. Alban household (particularly the servants) and the portrait of Eugénie that haunts the opening scene. La femme de charge, for example,
confesses while in front of the portrait: “toutes les fois que je viens ici: il faut que je lève les yeux sur ce cher portrait qui nous représente si bien notre adorable Eugénie, et chaque fois que la regarde, il faut que j’en parle, c’est plus fort que moi,” (96). Her need to mention a dead Eugénie in spite of herself is a coping mechanism for her sense of loss, but it also shows Eugénie’s spiritual power à la Christ, thus foreshadowing Eugénie’s eventual resurrection from her death in cloistral tomb. Furthermore, the meditation on this icon of the dead woman and its seeming magnetism, both in the servant’s avowal and in its prominence on stage, gives Eugénie a savior-like quality that prefigures her re-emergence “from the dead” that is to come. While Dorval fulfills the role of the typical protagonist, Eugénie, as these comparisons to Christ would seem to support, is at least an equally heroic figure and one who is, as I will argue, the savior that Monvel intends for his work.

On the brink of death, Eugénie compares her waning life force to the diminishing flicker of a lamp in her cell. This connection between Eugénie and light not only reinforces the comparison to Christ, it likens her cell to a tomb, recalling the synonymy of monasticism and death that characterized Francheville’s words regarding Dorval entering the monastery previously in the play. In her monologue that begins Act IV, Eugénie depicts the convent for her as dark and desolate: “Cher Dorval ! Eugénie n’existe plus pour toi ! ma jeunesse, mes plus douces espérances, la nature, le bonheur, et l’amour, tout, tout est enseveli avec moi dans une nuit éternelle” (156). Again, the verb ensevelir is used not only to indicate the fact that hidden, underground dungeons exist in the convent building, but also that the taking of monastic vows is a symbolic funeral, or burial, for the death of Eugénie’s social identity and potential as a wife and mother; the convent is devoid of any potential for new life, symbolized by night, and she is
instead condemned to the “nuit éternelle.” In this moment, she also believes that her actual
d physical death is certain, having been left to die as punishment for refusing Père Laurent’s
sexual advances: “Hélas ! l’ordre de la nature n’existe plus pour moi ! les jours, ainsi que mes
douleurs je ne puis plus les compter ! tout se confond dans l’effrayante obscurité, dans le
silence absolu qui règne autour de moi” (156). The unending darkness is psychological torture
for Eugénie: unable to tell night from day, there is no way to tell time nor quantify the duration
of her torment, making it her own eternal hell.

Eugénie’s last remaining hope in her struggle to stay alive is represented by the waning
lamplight, the only source of comfort in her cell. The lamp letting out only a few mere flickers of
light reinforces her exhausted state:

(Elle tourne les yeux vers sa lampe qui ne jette plus que de faibles lueurs, et
s’élance de ce côté avec autant de vivacité que ses forces peuvent le lui
permettre, elle se traîne vers la pierre, où sont déposés la cruche d’eau et le pain
noir.) Quoi ! rien... rien... (157-58)

The weakened glimmer of the lamp reminds Eugénie that she is starving, and that much like the
lamp if it is not refueled, she will soon die if she is not given any nourishment. She therefore
jumps up to see if she has been fed only to find nothing, understanding that when the light
goes out, the cell will quite literally become her tomb. The next time she notices the dying
flame of the lamp, Eugénie likens it to God, calling him the light: “Dieu!... Oh! ne m’abandonne
pas, toi, mon unique consolation, flamme active, bienfaisante clarté” (161). Though she is
imprisoned at Père Laurent’s whim, Eugénie still believes in the existence of a benevolent god
and counts on him to help her survive her imprisonment. Like Francheville in claiming that "le
culte est toujours le culte," Eugénie blames individuals, rather than the Church’s dogma or the
god that it represents, namely Père Laurent and his corrupt accomplices (156) and her parents (158). Yet as Eugénie is calling God her “bienfaisante clarté,” Dorval, who has been just on the other side of the wall from Eugénie this entire time, delivers a harsh diatribe against “Dieu... qui m’a plongé dans l’abîme où je suis,” (161). Whereas Eugénie’s faith is not shaken by her ordeal, Dorval has a moment of doubt like that of the crucified Jesus when he says, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 26:47). Likewise, at this point in Act IV, Dorval becomes the main actor in the play’s climax, as he undertakes destroying the wall that separates himself from Eugénie.

This common wall becomes a symbol of the abuse of power that has kept the young lovers apart: Père Laurent's ability to manipulate and dominate individuals, going as far as to put them to death without any danger of repercussions clearly shows sovereign power in a negative light. But the scene also shows how power can serve to prevent new life: the physical separation between Dorval and Eugénie imposed by Père Laurent impedes any chance for procreation. The wall is a material representation of the political barriers criticized in the play, not the least of which is Mme de St. Alban’s fear that her daughter would choose to marry Dorval, someone below her class. The characters conquer the threat of death twice: the threat of actual death, which the corporeal remains found in Dorval’s cell make quite real and imminent for the protagonists unless they stage some form of revolt, and the threat of social death of being confined in the cloister. But through the destruction of the wall, Eugénie and Dorval are both revived: even before understanding what is happening, Eugénie, stirred by the trembling of the cell’s wall, says, “Mon cœur s’est ranimé... il palpite... un pouvoir inconnu, un sentiment que je ne puis définir, une force surnaturelle semblent me rappeler à la vie” (78).
Dorval then recants his previous diatribe against God and reaffirms his faith in saying, “Dieu que j’ai blasphémé, Dieu ! dont je doutais, que j’ai maudit... pardonne, pardonne-moi, grand Dieu ! que ta clémence égale mon ingratitude ! Dieu de bonté ! signale ta puissance ! achève, achève ton ouvrage” (163, my emphasis). The mission that he undertakes in destroying the wall is not only a personal trial, he is accomplishing the will of God: that he be in a union with the love of his life and that they be free to marry and “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 9:7) in triumph over inevitable death.

Les Victimes cloîtrées culminates in this reunion between Eugénie and Dorval and is on the surface the victory of one bourgeois man over the nefarious Church. But it represents different issues preoccupying France during the late eighteenth century, such as the triumph of the individual over despotism, the triumph of reason over blind religious faith, and the triumph of true love over forced submission. More specifically, the play affords the character of Eugénie the chance for a romantic relationship with a chosen partner rather than a life of servitude to an arbitrarily imposed debt, “earning” her livelihood in the convent under Père Laurent, who, in the microcosm of society presented in the play, represents the sovereign clinging to his power to condemn "those who attack his will, his law, or his person" (Foucault, Sexuality 137-38).

In a broader context, however, the denouement of Les Victimes cloîtrées evokes a triumph over the lingering, antiquated fear of the mésalliance that the “reason” of the eighteenth century ultimately debunked, the very fear that sets into motion the action of the play and allows officials of the Church to interfere in the lives of its parishioners. Mme de St. Alban appeals to Père Laurent because she fears breaching a traditional social norm that upholds not only her own place in society, but also the entire hierarchical structure on which it
rests, all the way up to the hereditary monarch ruling over France. She sides with her confessor because, first, she blindly accepts that he is in a position of authority, and second, believes that his interests align with her own. As the French Revolution proved, the Church has only as much authority in the day-to-day lives of the “people” as they are willing to grant it.

Though the play’s warning to beware of the wolf in sheep’s clothing, or the villain behind the robe certainly registers to the reader, Les Victimes cloîtrées intrinsically attached to the politics of its time. Nor are Dorval and Eugenie mere victims of family pride and circumstantial rivalry; their roles are more specific than that. True love and romance are not as fundamentally pertinent to Monvel’s text as are the political arguments symbolized by the final act’s denouement, such as the notion of the free and unstigmatized reproductive union. There are no scenes of the two lovers together prior to their confinement to “prove” their love to the audience; rather, the play’s intended focus is the how and the why of these characters’ incarceration and the suggested resolution of this injustice: defiance of traditional power structures in favor of rebellious acts.

As such a rebellious act, when Dorval breaks through the wall separating his and Eugénie’s cells, he is reclaiming the virility lost to Père Laurent’s manipulations earlier in the play. Dorval decides to attack the wall after finding an engraving from the cell’s previous occupant that reads, “Cherchez, espérez,” (162). The message for the future within the play is, likewise, one of hope. When they are reunited through the wall, Dorval tells Eugénie, “Ô moitié de ma vie! Chère épouse!... Reprends tes forces... Renais à l’espérance; aide ton ami qui va briser et ses fers et les tiens... La liberté, la vie et le bonheur, voilà le prix de nos efforts.” (165-66). The notion that his lover is a “moitié” of his life suggests that male and female are
complementary and incomplete halves of a missing whole, thus reinforcing the emphasis on
normative heterosexual unions, including "la vie" born of reproduction, and the propagation of
the “new” post-Revolutionary citizen, whose rights are liberty and happiness.

Reunited, and about to be rescued, the couple fears an imminent attack by the corrupt
monks. Dorval takes hold of an iron bar and Eugénie finds two stones from the dungeon’s
rubble to defend themselves. The symbolism of these defensive arms is the key to
understanding the message of reproductive freedom and citizenship that punctuates my
analysis of the play’s subtext. The iron bar is a phallic symbol that represents the restoration of
Dorval’s reproductive potential, having overcome Père Laurent’s plot and rescued Eugénie, his
would-be partner, from her cell; likewise, the two stones symbolize can be read as ovaries and
therefore Eugénie’s own re-found viability that her mother’s class interests, along with Père
Laurent’s sexual interests, intended to suppress. The penetration of the wall is rendered a
symbolic reproductive act: in vanquishing the corrupt officials of the Church, the protagonists
have cleared the path for their future as citizens and as latent reproductive subjects. If the play
sits at a moment in time when the shift from sovereign power to biopower marks a shift from
sanguinity to sexuality, as Foucault suggests, this nascent emphasis on the sexual is embodied
in Monvel’s text, where Dorval and Eugénie are symbolically and temporarily reduced to their
sexual organs and their most basic function: reproduction. Though no character explicitly
announces in the final act of the play that the couple’s plans are to get married and have
children, the message of their escape is the triumph of cross-class love unions (for which, of
course, marriage was the model in the eighteenth century) over class prejudices approaching
the obsolete. The reproductive potential of this union, though only suggested through symbolism, is in line with the play’s politics.

The play’s climax reunites Dorval and Eugénie with Eugénie’s entire household, including Francheville, M. and Mme de St. Alban, and the house staff, as well as Père Louis and other residents of the town, in the dungeon. When Eugénie’s mother discovers that her daughter is alive, she drops down to her knees to beg her forgiveness. Whereas Mme de St. Alban is cold and inflexible in the play, Eugénie shows her mother compassion, merely saying, “Pressez-moi contre votre cœur,” (168). The typical role of mother and child are reversed, as the mother asks her daughter’s pardon. And Eugénie grants it, showing not only Christlike mercy, but than of an exemplary maternal figure. Adrienne Rich writes that one archetype of maternity is, “the Mother, source of angelic love and forgiveness in a world increasingly ruthless and impersonal,” (52). By forgiving the mother who had her imprisoned for the sake of her own egotism, Eugénie treats Mme de St. Alban with a grace that Eugénie, as the child, did not receive.

If the triumph of the play is that Eugénie and Dorval are free from the sterile confines of religious houses to begin a potentially reproductive union, how does this serve a political purpose larger than the individual? Here we return to the crucial socio-historic intersection that forms the backdrop of this play that I described at the beginning of this chapter: the Revolution and the constitution civile du clergé that abolished monastic orders, thus increasing the potential pool of reproductive subjects in French society. How does the potential for the creation of life at an individual level, as we see in Monvel’s play, benefit society? Quite simply, just as Dorval is overpowered upon discovering the truth about Père Laurent’s crimes by Père
Laurent’s armée of Anasatase, André, and Ambroise, proliferation of French citizenry is the best defense against a tyrant and his claim to power. Led by M. de Francheville, the people of the city storm the monastery, overtake Père Laurent and his co-conspirators, and free Dorval and Eugénie from their dungeon. In a state with as long and bloody history as France’s, it is in the best interest of the people to have their own armée. This idea that power in an emerging republic lies in numbers exemplifies Lemke’s assertion that the birth of biopower coincides with the emergence of more liberal forms of government.

In addition to the need for manpower, the quality of the reproductive subject is an equally important social obligation as their numbers if the goal is a strong republic. Foucault writes that biopower emerges after the systems that regulate man moved from individualizing or “man-as-body” to massifying or “man-as-species” modes:

I would say that discipline tries to rule a multiplicity of men … dissolved into individual bodies that can be kept under surveillance, trained, used, and, if need be, punished. And that the new technology that is being established is addressed to a multiplicity of men… to the extent that they form, on the contrary, a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on. (Society 242-43)

Firstly, advances in technology (medical or agricultural, for example) that led to lower mortality rates and increased population also allowed for the development of new demographic indicators of the overall health of the population: the statistics on the number of people with a contagious disease, for example, is not affected if they are an aristocrat or a bourgeois.

Secondly, the play’s message of reproductive hope is one that evokes Foucault’s theory of this shift in action from individualizing to massifying: society needs a proliferation of citizens free from the relegation of social strata to engender a republic. Class prejudices inhibit the
population because they lead to the incarceration of young women in convents, women who might otherwise marry and have children. If “the people” are to be thought of as one body, with each person as a unit, the best citizens must reproduce. In Monvel good citizens possess good character, not simply noble birth. It is in this vein that M. de Francheville implies that being a “citoyen vertueux” (142, my emphasis), Dorval owes himself (and/or his offspring) to society.

Finally, in this new state, a chosen leader is not granted the same entitlement to self-serving acts that an autocrat would be. Gaining and maintaining power is no longer a matter of birth, but the ability to satisfy a majority of the population rather than just its sovereign. It is therefore imperative that the leader serve his people rather than only himself. In the first act, when M. de Francheville talks jovially with Picard about the servant’s tendency to “gronder” his younger master, Picard clarifies: “Mais ce n’est pas assez que vous ayez toujours raison, il faut que vous empêchiez vos amis d’avoir tort; vous ne devez pas vous contenter de faire toujours bien, il faut que vous sauviez les autres du danger de mal faire,” (108). Picard’s insight is a key point for the play’s political message of the emerging “man-as-species” mode of regulation. His insistence on a communal, rather than individual responsibility, speaks not only to Francheville’s recent appointment as the city’s mayor and its implications of democracy, but also to the equality in a system where everyone holds collective responsibility for social conditions (thus echoing the call of liberté, égalité, fraternité in Maximilien Robespierre’s speech of 1790).

Monvel’s text proposes therefore a notion of dissemination as a potential solution to the problems hindering French society in 1791, whether in terms of the biological (i.e.
reproduction of the freethinking individual to inflate numbers and discourage any attempt at a restoration of despotic power), or the symbolic, in terms of dissemination of Revolutionary ideas, furthering man’s “Enlightening” and waking him up from what Kant referred to as man’s period of darkness, triumphing over despotic sovereign power. Though Monvel’s play attributes this arbitrary power to the blind deference of people such as Mme de St. Alban to the Church, the notions of church and state power, in their essential despotism, cannot be separated in terms of the play’s central political message. Any arm of power that extends over the population to maintain an unaccountable hierarchy with an omnipotent sovereign as its head is dangerous for society.

Foucault in no way advocates that biopower is progressive or somehow more humane than sovereign power. In fact, he asserts that the types of oppression that have emerged under liberal forms of government are far worse than anything seen under sovereign power. He writes, “This death that was based on the right of the sovereign is now manifested as simply the reverse of the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life. Yet wars were never as bloody as they have been since the nineteenth century,” (Sexuality 136-37). Biopower operates on two poles, the preservation of a population on one hand, and the defense of that population at all costs on the other hand, a philosophy that has led to events such as the use of the atomic bomb by the United Stated in World War II (137). Although the social implications of Les victimes cloîtrées do not offer a complete solution to the problem of class (there is no suggestion that the lines of master and servant will be erased), the play ends nonetheless on an

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34 This was perhaps a better idea in theory than in practice, as Napoleon was elected as the First Consul of the French Republic in 1799 only to transform his role to that of Emperor of the French by 1804, essentially establishing a dictatorship.
optimistic note. There is hope that rulers and citizens can coexist peacefully and with mutual esteem under the right type of leadership: Francheville has *earned* his right to lead the town through his strength of character, his good judgment, and his reputation among the citizens who elected him. As Monvel sided with the progressive Rouges after the split of the Comédie-Française, he was after all a republican and not a royalist. Therefore, even though Foucault was pessimistic that biopower could be measured in terms of improvement over sovereign power, he did nonetheless outline potentially successful modes of resistance to power in general that align with Monvel’s positive view of the abolition of hereditary monarchy:

> The “right” to life, to one’s body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfaction of needs, and beyond all the oppressions or “alienations,” the “right” to rediscover what one is and all that one can be, this “right”- which the classical juridical system was utterly incapable of comprehending- was the political response to all these new procedures of power which did not derive, either, from the traditional right of sovereignty. (*Sexuality* 145)

Foucault uses the word right (*droit*) in quotes because it adopts the language of the juridical system that has been used to rule society since at least the advent of sovereign power, yet the idea is nonetheless hopeful in terms of its consequences for individuals. Eugénie, after all, impedes Père Laurent’s sexual advances, and she and Dorval assert their individual rights in the face of despotic power.

Seeing as the common threads of my project are depictions of the convent and repression of the reproductive subject, the role of gender in Monvel's play is an important point to return to at this juncture. Does the work of the *théâtre monacal* such as Monvel’s text attempt to liberate the woman’s body from the cloister? Furthermore, does it succeed? Or, on a more basic level, do sex and gender play any role whatsoever in Monvel’s political message?
The notion of male activity versus female passivity that is essential to the reproductive message of the scene (Dorval destroys the wall and enters Eugénie’s cell) reinforces notions of stereotypical gender roles and restores heteronormative order. Dorval and Eugénie, in liberating themselves from the confines of their respective dungeons, expose the corruption of the Church officials and usurp aristocratic blood prejudice. Yet a potential long-term problem with the play’s progressivist optimism is that while the establishment of Dorval and Eugénie as “desirable” reproductive subjects is a successful condemnation of ancien-régime notions of class, it sets the stage for a myriad of other forms of prejudice and oppression with regard to reproductive rights of the individual: race, age, disability, sexual orientation, etc. As the oppression of marginalized peoples form a basis for a large part of Foucauldian discourse, Les victimes cloîtrées can be examined to understand just how biopower could be designated as neither worse nor better but merely different, with regard to sovereign power.

35 For race in this context, see Chapter Four.
Chapter Four. Peau noire, voile noir: Miscegenation as the Emergent Successor of Class Anxieties in the Fledgling Republic

“[L]a philosophie nous place au-dessus des maux de la fortune, mais elle ne peut rien contre les maux qui viennent d’avoir brisé l’ordre de la nature. Ourika n’a pas rempli sa destinée: elle s’est placée dans la société sans sa permission; la société se vengera.” (Duras Ourika 13)

“Starting from the eighteenth century, modern western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species.” (Foucault Security 16)

The political turmoil of the French Revolution is such a dominant reference point for France at the end of the eighteenth century, that the Republic’s ongoing conflicts abroad, including its ambitious colonial enterprises, seem secondary by nature. Yet the latter had an equally long-lasting impact on the future of the former French Empire: the distinct clash of race, language, and culture that colonialism incited, then in its infancy, became the dominant subject of critical discourse in the twentieth century amidst numerous wars of decolonization. Claire de Duras marries these disparate yet quintessential French historical narratives in her novella Ourika (1823). This story of a Senegalse woman adopted by an aristocratic French family links the Revolution with colonialism to show how the construction of racial alterity served France's conquests both at home and abroad. The majority of Duras’ novella takes place only a few years after Monvel’s Les Victimes cloitrées, but the span of these few years is crucial; Ourika captures France’s violent, “kill-or-be-killed,” panic of the 1790s amidst the Reign of Terror. This violence reflects what Foucault describes as an intrinsic “need” for othered-ness to maintain the upper hand in a modern power regime, where here the other is an (aristocratic) royalist or royalist sympathizer. Ourika herself, however, represents a remarkably early case of a different “other” in French society: the racial other. In this chapter, I use Foucault’s analysis to consider
how state-instituted racism relates to emerging biopower in Revolutionary France. As I have analyzed in previous chapters, many eighteenth-century texts depict the convent as a tool used to preserve the bloodline of both the patriarchal family and the French nobility by confining women whose reproductive potential threatened to taint it by introducing "undesirable" blood. Ourika is indeed a spiritual successor to these undesirable reproductive subjects, unfit for French society and given no recourse other than exile in a convent due to the threat that she poses to the racial bloodline. Her experience as a black immigrant conceives an entirely new type of conventual heroine: “une nouvelle victime des cloîtres” (Duras 3).

Like the characters in her novella, Claire de Duras survived some of the most violent events of the French Revolution. Duras’ father Armand de Kersaint himself fell victim to the Terror. A Girondin, the comte de Kersaint opposed the monarchy, yet was a suspected royalist sympathizer because of his vote in favor of pardon for Louis XVI and because of his vocal objection to the September Massacres of 1792. Kersaint was guillotined on December 4, 1793, amidst a series of Girondin executions, after which Duras’ family fled to her mother’s native Martinique. They went on to Philadelphia and London before finally returning to France following the Restoration; Claire was married into another aristocratic family of the Ancien Régime and subsequently enjoyed a prosperous court life, hosting a salon at the Palais des Tuileries.

Joan DeJean and Margaret Waller, who co-authored the Introduction to the 1994 edition of the text, note Ourika’s popularity in Paris and beyond, and how surprising this acclaim was for the time. Although she eventually retreated from the court of Louis XVIII to write in 1822 (Waller XIII), Duras was still a reputable member of the emigrés in Paris post-
Restoration. Meanwhile, however, the Code Noir (1685), which regulated slavery in France’s colonies, was revised in 1802 and 1805, and Revolutionary abolitionist sympathies were silenced by the violence in Saint-Domingue in 1791 and would not see a resurgence until the decade following Ourika’s publication (X). In other words, the sympathetically tragic story of a Senegalese woman being brought to France amidst political turmoil did not spark any recognition of a racial agenda at the time of its publication, yet it saw unexpected popularity nonetheless.

Yet there is irony in Ourika, a sympathetic portrayal of a would-be slave turned immigrant, finding success in the 1820s, a time when slavery was no cause célèbre. The book's readers appreciated the story without necessarily changing their anti-abolitionist political leanings, perhaps because the novella depicts an alternative to slavery that ultimately fails against the backdrop of Revolutionary France: Ourika's fundamental incompatibility with French society. Like the convent-dwelling literary heroines that preceded her, Ourika is beleaguered by the problem of preserving “pure blood" and how it hinders reproduction for disenfranchised individuals within the population. Her experience of social disjunction results in her melancholia and eventual death. Ourika is a unique and valuable cultural testimony to the fact that one pitfall of a post-ancien régime France is that race is destined to succeed (though not subsume) class as a primary target of reproductive regulation. I do not purport that classism predates racism, or vice versa; the two concepts are intrinsically intertwined throughout history. Prior to the Revolution, mésalliance across classes serves as the main scapegoat of reproductive suppression, with the convent as a harbor for the repressed. Ourika puts forth the possibility of miscegenation as a new artery of concern for the health of the reproductive
population, as convents are reopened under Napoleon and black foreigners are legally allowed to enter France under the Restoration.

“Que deviendra-t-elle ?”: The Health of the Population and the Pathologization of Race

Foucault’s writings on biopower and racism, as well as many of his lectures from the Collège de France that cover the same subjects, explain the origins and functions of racism within a society. In the biopolitical age, racism serves to create an “other” out of a member of the same species to establish a relationship of dominance and compliance. As former methods of societal segregation were created to deal with disease, there is therefore a tendency to pathologize racial difference to the same ends, as if it were, itself, a disease. In Ourika, the titular heroine’s world is turned upside down when she first recognizes her racial difference and the stigma that the world she inhabits attaches to it.

Ourika is an orphaned Senegalese woman, who at the age of two is spared a life of slavery by the chevalier de B., a French colonial governor. He places Ourika in the care of his aunt, Mme de B., and Ourika is raised in this woman’s elite, aristocratic social circle. By all accounts Ourika’s early childhood is a happy one: spending her youth in Mme de B.’s salon, Ourika is “aimée d’elle, caressée, gâtée par tous ses amis, accablée de présents, vantée, exaltée comme l’enfant le plus spirituel et le plus aimable” (7). Even from her retrospective deathbed narration, Ourika seems to miscalculate her position as a child in Mme de B.’s household. She describes a positive experience of feeling “aimée,” and yet her descriptions show that this attention was more likely the product of being treated as a curiosity by Mme de B. and her aristocratic circle than being loved as an actual member of the family. “Caresser” might today
be an action associated with maternal affection, but considering a typical eighteenth-century, aristocratic family, to “caresser” would more likely concern a cherished family pet. For example, Ourika describes a typical day as follows: “Vêtue à l’orientale, assise aux pieds de Mme de B., j’écouteis, sans comprendre encore, la conversation” (8). While Ourika speaks fondly of Mme de B., there is nonetheless textual evidence that her treatment of Ourika, who as a child sat at the woman’s feet, tends towards (perhaps unconscious) exoticism and even dehumanization. Thérèse De Raedt proposes rather a mistress/slave dynamic in this citation: “prisée pour son exotisme, Ourika est habillée « à l’orientale » et se trouve « aux pieds de Mme de B. » comme les petits esclaves domestiques. Elle ne se trouve pas, par exemple, sur ses genoux, ce qui aurait pu trahir l’existence d’un lien maternel et de chaleur humaine,” (28). This is, however, an anachronistic interpretation of maternal affection: French literature of the period normally depicts aristocratic mothers as distant and very formal; thus, by being more affectionate towards Ourika, Mme de B. is treating her less like a daughter and more like a “pet,” whether this is deliberate or not. David O’Connell writes that “Ourika is a portrait ... of a black person who is crushed not only by the intentional cruelty of a society that has no place for her, but also by the well-intentioned, but perhaps equally cruel, condescension of her would-be benefactors” (53). Throughout her story, Ourika has only kind things to say about her bienfaitrice, portraying her as affectionate, loving, protective, and generous because she interprets the attention she receives because of her exoticism as a genuine form of affection.

36 The use of the plural “benefactors” here likely refers to Mme de B. as well as her unnamed friend the “marquise” appears twice forthcoming in the novella and on both occasions attempts to “help” Ourika, with contradictory results.
Yet, if there is one event for which Mme de B. could be faulted for her “condescension,” it is surely the pivotal scene where she has Ourika perform an African dance for her society friends. Perhaps unintentionally, Mme de B. exploits Ourika’s racial heritage for the delight of her guests, showing her off as an exotic treasure, an objectification of a young woman she does seem to care for very much, and to dire consequences. Mme de B. instructs Ourika, now 15 years old, to perform this “Comba, danse nationale de mon pays” as part of a “quadrille des quatre parties du monde où je devais représenter l’Afrique” (10). Ourika describes the dance in detail and notes that it was “piquante” (10). In his entry of the word for the Encyclopédie, Denis Diderot writes that, “Au figuré, une femme est piquante, lorsqu’elle attire une attention vive de la part de ceux qui la regardent, par sa fraîcheur, sa légèreté, l’éclat de son teint, la vivacité de ses yeux, sa jeunesse” (Page 12: 648). The dance is itself the beginning of the end of Ourika’s innocence: people are noticing her at this point, and Mme de B. must eventually deal with Ourika’s transition into adulthood (i.e., her burgeoning sexuality). This haunts Ourika’s story as an obvious problem that no one wants to mention, at least not to her, because the uniqueness of the situation makes it seem without any hopeful end. Since “having” an immigrant from the colonies as a member of a French household was at this point in history not only extremely uncommon, but, as DeJean and Waller note, technically “illegal,” there is no precedent for Mme de B. regarding how to usher the young Ourika into adulthood post-dance, yet she must nonetheless confront this reality.

Only a few days after the performance, a friend of Mme de B. whose name is not revealed (“la marquise”) forces Mme de B. into this difficult conversation, euphemizing Ourika’s approaching sexual maturity: “elle devient charmante... elle est piquante, naturelle; mais que
deviendra-t-elle? et enfin qu’en ferez-vous?” (12). Unbeknownst to both women, Ourika overhears the entire conversation, concealed behind a lacquer screen. Since Ourika is recounting her life story retrospectively, it seems obvious that she has borrowed the marquise’s word “piquante,” an adjective that Diderot notes is, in the figurative sense, reserved for women. When she uses the same word to describe her performance of the Comba, this confirms that it is the dance that marks the end of Ourika’s innocence, both in the sense of childhood innocence and in the sense of her not previously understanding her race or “otherness.” At the age that Ourika becomes a reproductive subject, the problem of the blood myth becomes thus a problem for her family, as she is of the right age to become a sexual being, and therefore one capable of spreading her blood through reproduction.

If Ourika were a white woman, it would be time to think about marriage, but as a black woman she can neither marry nor have children in French aristocratic society. Mme de B. admits, “Pauvre Ourika! je la vois seule, pour toujours seule dans la vie!” and Ourika describes her reaction to this revelation: “je vis tout; je me vis négresse, dépendante, méprisée, sans fortune, sans appui, sans un être de mon espèce à qui unir mon sort,” (12). Duras portrays Ourika’s traumatic encounter of her otherness at a time when the black experience was practically unheard of in French literature. The novella has in recent years been the subject of numerous critical works, and scholars ascribe to the text many firsts, such as the first black heroine in a novel set in Europe and the first black female narrator in French literature, according to Joan DeJean (XI).

Yet Margaret Waller reminds us that the story’s first "narrator" is the doctor, "that modern representative of secular authority," whose encounter with Ourika frames her
narrative (XV). The doctor’s status as an "authority" also serves to validate her story: this “recours au narrateur digne de foi pour accréditer une fiction est bien rôdé, voire éculé...” (Bertrand-Jennings 44). In the preceding century, this validating narrative frame was often done by someone of a higher social rank.\(^{37}\) This is but one example of many that highlight Ourika’s ushering in of race as a competitor for social class as the central concern for governing powers in France post-Revolution: the cosignataire of her story is, “un homme blanc respectable... [qui] exerce la profession prestigieuse de médecin,” in other words, someone in positions of power that Ourika lacks (male, white, and educated in medecine) (Bertrand-Jennings 44). The doctor’s narrative frame thus immediately introduces the limitations of agency that Ourika endures throughout her life. Ourika is indeed an exceptionally early representation of internalized racism experienced by the immigrant in hexagonal France, as well as the complex culture clash that occurs between the French and citizens from its (now former) colonies. The Revolution as the backdrop for Ourika’s story, however, provides an apt context for considering how racism is related to biopower in a liberalizing state, and how this connection manifests itself in the literature of the period. Foucault’s writings on racism analyze its very origins in society: the need for superiority (and thus, survival) over an other.

To begin, Foucault says that biopower in its simplest terms is the “power to ‘make’ live and ‘let’ die” that a state wields in order optimize a population (Society 241). As more liberal forms of government replace sovereign regimes, a state’s show of power does not change: superiority is expressed through population (and, of course, territory). This is an idea consistent across both forms of government. Colonialism, which serves to decimate populations (and

\(^{37}\) Consider, for example, Abbé Prévost’s Manon Lescaut (1731), in which the young hero’s narrative is similarly “vouched for” by an “homme de qualité,” named Renancourt.
conquer territories), was certainly no less violent under liberalism. However, with the sovereign deposed as the ultimate authority, as the king was during the French Revolution, the systems of maintaining a state’s population changes. Instead of a monarch making personal decisions to eliminate threats to the state, the Republic looks at the population as a single, thinking organism and must decide which members need to be eliminated to benefit the whole. Due to advances in medicine and technology, those to be eliminated became less and less clear in the modern era. For centuries, the “unhealthy” members of society were easily identified. Foucault compares, for example, segregation during epidemics of leprosy, the plague, and smallpox (Security Territory Population). But “at the end of the eighteenth century, it was not epidemics that were the issue, but something else—what might broadly be called endemics, or in other words, the form, nature, extension, duration, and intensity of the illnesses prevalent in a population,” (Society 243). The obvious, widespread illness associated with the notion of the epidemic of days past, gave way to the more general notion of the endemic, which permitted modern society to monitor threats to the population based on emerging tools of demographics: not which individuals, but rather which groups of people, and from where, posed a threat to the overall health of the state. Forms of difference, especially racial and sexual, thus began to be more heavily scrutinized as the imminent threat of morbidity dissipated in a modernizing France.

It is at this point that racism becomes systematic of biopower. Not only is the problem of class no longer as relevant, thus clearing the way for a new concern for “blood” purity, but the “sick” within society were becoming harder to pinpoint, and colonization was on the rise. To elaborate, according to Foucault, racism is ultimately an implement of biopower:
How can a power such as this kill, if it is true that its basic function is to improve life, to prolong its duration, to improve its chances, to avoid accidents, and to compensate for failings? How, under these conditions, is it possible for a political power to kill, to call for deaths, to demand deaths, to give the order to kill, and to expose not only its enemies but its own citizens to the risk of death? Given that this power's objective is essentially to make live, how can it let die? How can the power of death, the function of death, be exercised in a political system centered upon biopower? It is, I think, at this point that racism intervenes. (Society 254)

Our right to live is then validated by our ability to outlive another, but for this to happen an “other” must die. According to Foucault, racism becomes the mechanism for ascribing this “mythical adversary” of the population in the absence of major threats to the health of the state: “the death ... of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer,” (Society 255, 258). When Foucault notes that in the eighteenth century, the West had to accept the scientific fact that human beings are a “species” (Security 16) his object of criticism is racism itself. As one species, race is a series of circumstantial, rather than biological, factors, and fear of miscegenation denies those discriminated against their very right to their humanity, as is the case with Ourika. As mentioned in the introduction, she considers herself “sans un être de mon espèce à qui unir mon sort,” and “étrangère à la race humaine toute entière!” (12, 15). Because of her internalized racism, she considers herself an outsider not only to white French society, but to humanity. Even if subconsciously, Mme de B. is subtly mimicking the dehumanization tactics used in colonialism: "In order to render the oppressed inhuman, the oppressors represent them as animals at the mercy of their bodily instincts with no access to an interior mental life," (Oliver 24). The psychic trauma of racism thus causes Ourika to equate "white" with "human" and "black" with "inhuman" or an entirely different espèce.
It is not surprising that race is often pathologized in *Ourika*. Upon first encountering Ourika in the convent, the doctor and Ourika have an interaction that, despite showing mutual respect and curiosity, nonetheless results in a confounding of race with sickness. The doctor describes his first moment with the patient: “Elle se tourna vers moi, et je fus étrangement surpris en apercevant une négresse! Mon étonnement s’accrut encore par la politesse de son accueil et le choix des expressions dont elle se servait. ‘Vous venez voir une personne bien malade’ me dit-elle,” (4). The doctor/narrator certainly concedes his own prejudices, being admittedly surprised by the black woman’s manners and her seeming mastery of a refined language later in their initial encounter. Yet Ourika’s response to the doctor’s poorly hidden surprise upon encountering this well-spoken and culturally homogenized black woman is to substitute sickness for blackness. This foreshadows the manifestation of race as pathological, to the point of it being responsible for her physical deterioration. It also speaks to Ourika’s decorum and cultural sensitivity: she attempts to curtail the doctor’s embarrassment at being caught gawking at a black woman by equating herself, “négresse,” with “malade” and thus easing the discomfort of a well-intentioned medical expert.

This pathology continues throughout Ourika’s narrative. When speaking about the matter of Ourika’s race with the marquise, Mme de B. says, “lorsque je réfléchis à sa position, je la trouve sans remède” (12, my emphasis). *Remède* becomes another often-used code word that assumes medical terminology to discuss the unsayable: if there is no “cure” for blackness, what will become of Ourika? Once Ourika realizes what her blackness represents to society, her body begins to manifest her psychic turmoil. She first feels the need to run away, and does not acknowledge overhearing the conversation between Mme de B. and the marquise. However,
once she returns, “tout le monde fut frappé de mon changement; on me questionna: je dis que j’étais malade; on le crut. Mme de B. envoya chercher Barthez, qui m’examina avec soin, me tâta le pouls, et dit brusquement que je n’avais rien” (14). Ourika’s diagnosis is nonetheless abundantly clear; she sees her race as a pathological condition that separates her from a white society that she does not reflect. She is the “tainted” other that must not be allowed to compromise the health of the population; her body therefore reacts as if it requires physical quarantine. While she lives a joyously ignorant childhood, her sexual maturity as evoked in the dance disrupts this paradise, and Ourika must now, on her own, confront her incongruity and inevitable exile.

Even though she is diagnosed with “rien,” Ourika lives in constant self-contempt once she understands the problem that her race poses. She overhears the marquise ask the question, “Qui voudra jamais épouser une négresse?” (13), and the mere notion of being a social pariah haunts Ourika’s daily life. She says of the weeks following the incident, “ma figure me faisait horreur, je n’osais plus me regarder dans une glace; lorsque mes yeux se portaient sur mes mains noires, je croyais voir celles d’un singe; je m’exagérais ma laideur, et cette couleur me paraissait comme le signe de ma réprobation” (15). Ourika is seeing the racist attitudes of French society inscribed on her own body, a novel, complex idea at the time of the book’s publication, and it is often noted that Duras portrays Ourika with a "psychological depth" that was unprecedented for a black character in French literature (DeJean XI, Bertrand-Jennings 43). Over a century later, in Peau noire, masques blancs (1952), Frantz Fanon explains this notion of self-contempt that Ourika experiences, as it is certainly not unique to her:
Dans le monde blanc, l’homme de couleur rencontre des difficultés dans l’élaboration de son schéma corporel. La connaissance du corps est une activité uniquement négatrice. C’est une connaissance en troisième personne. Tout autour du corps règne une atmosphère d’incertitude certaine. (89)

Ourika’s negative reaction to her own appearance is an effect of being a black woman living in an entirely white society. She finds herself adopting the prevailing social attitudes of the world she lives in, even at the expense of her own self-worth. For Ourika, mind/body distress becomes the ordinary; it reaches point where everyone is merely “accoutumé à me voir souffrante” (27). Many vague terms are used throughout the novel to describe her various ailments (maux, chagrin, souffrance, fièvre), yet they are all manifestations of this sickness that she sees in herself as a member of the black race, a product of internalized racism.

News of the slave uprising in Saint-Domingue (modern-day Haiti) of 1791 only worsens Ourika’s self-perception. The violence of the insurrection in the French colony casts a negative light on the rebelling slaves, despite their motivations for rebellion and the ferocity of the French colonists' retaliation. Being completely immersed in French aristocratic society, and therefore being fed a biased narrative of the events, Ourika has no choice but to sympathize with the colonizers, admitting that the massacres “me causèrent une douleur nouvelle et déchirante: jusqu’ici je m’étais affligée d’une race proscrite; maintenant j’avais honte d’appartenir à une race de barbares et d’assassins” (20). Ourika senses an elevated scrutiny towards her race in a society with a newfound pretext for racial prejudices, intensifying her internalized racism. According to Foucault:

Racism first develops with colonization, or in other words, with colonizing genocide. If you are functioning in the biopower mode, how can you justify the
need to kill people, to kill populations, and to kill civilizations? By using the themes of evolutionism, by appealing to a racism. (Society 257)

Racism is used to justify colonial empires, but the relationship between racism and colonization is also cyclical: colonization can be a means to validate racism. French reaction to the slave uprising in Saint-Domingue is a prime example of this: the rebellion of a population of people unjustly enslaved is used by the colonizer to “prove” their savage nature and “justify” the brutality of their regime. All of this affected French opinion and, ultimately, French policy. Though abolitionist sympathies existed in France, especially as liberalism began to take hold in the early days of the Revolution, the incident in Saint-Domingue all but put an end to any talk of “la liberté des nègres” for decades, a question that Ourika notes would be impossible for her not to feel touched by (20).

David O’Connell examines Ourika through the lens of the “psychological effect of white racism on a black person” as written about in Fanon’s Peau noire, masques blancs (52). Specifically, O’Connell traces Ourika’s series of realizations about her place in society through many steps of the black experience as outlined by Fanon’s text; these include insecurity, solitude, and self-hatred (i.e. internalized racism) (54). Yet Ourika’s own experience is even more alienating than what Fanon describes over more than a century later. His masques are metaphoric: aspects of the colonizing culture such as language that the colonized borrow in an effort to conform to the dominant society in the power relation, striving for mutual respect and social acceptance. These masks attempt to disguise cultural differences and the subject’s native identity. For Ourika, there is no native culture to cover up: all she knows is France, and her

38 Some 15,000 blacks were killed in retaliation for the 4,000 whites killed in the insurrection.
mask is very much literal. She veils not only her face, but later begins attempting to cover every possible square inch of her body with clothing until her black skin is literally disguised by fabric: “je portais toujours des gants; mes vêtements cachaient mon cou et mes bras, et j’avais adopté, pour sortir, un grand chapeau avec un voile, que souvent même je gardais dans la maison” (27).

Ourika as a colonized subject is not part of any marginalized group as described in the work of Fanon, Césaire, Memmi, et. al. While Ourika exhibits internalized racism that closely echoes what Fanon would come to describe in _Peau noire, masques blancs_, her situation is otherwise not comparable to the postcolonial condition. What makes her unique as a heroine is that unlike later narrative voices of colonial immigrants in France, Ourika is utterly and completely alone.

Kelly Oliver claims in her book _Witnessing: Beyond Recognition_ (2001) that the concept of recognition is intrinsically rooted in a rigid, Hegelian subject-object power dialectic, and is therefore an insufficient mode of resistance to marginalization. Moreover, she writes that Fanon claims as much in _Peau noire, masques blancs_: "Fanon problematizes the connection between recognition and identity. In fact, by extending Fanon's analysis, it is possible to interpret the recognition model of identity as the particular pathology of colonial or oppressive cultures," (23). Oliver proposes "witnessing" as an alternative that goes a step beyond recognition by seeing and valuing difference. This failure of recognition is especially pertinent to Ourika, who, as I have mentioned, is not part of a marginalized group, but wholly "seule" (12), an outsider to the human race itself. Oliver writes, "It is only after oppressed people are dehumanized that they seek acknowledgement or recognition of their humanity. More perverse is that they seek recognition of their humanity from the very group that has denied
them of it in the first place," (26). Ourika’s aloneness in her blackness makes the chance of recognition, let alone any potential for the mutual respect that accompanies witnessing, all but an impossibility; she is trapped in the psyche of the colonizer, with no other references of what it could possibly mean to be black, and thus sees herself as incompatible with the rest of the (white) human race. A true example of what Oliver describes as witnessing would have been finding a suitable partner for Ourika to have children with, embracing difference and celebrating the métisse children as the product of such a union. But both Mme de B. and the society that she represents fear such a threat that miscegenation poses to the blood.

**The Blood Myth Revisited: “Seule dans la mort comme dans la vie”**

Ourika feels sharply the loneliness of not having any biological relatives in her life. Though she expresses fondness and appreciation for her adoptive family, Mme de B. and her grandson Charles, she sees shortcomings nonetheless in their relationships, noting a longing to be able to call Mme de B. “Ma mère!” that remains unfulfilled (17). Ourika says, “Les liens de famille surtout me faisait faire des retours bien douloureux sur moi-même, moi qui jamais ne devais être la sœur, la femme, la mère de personne!” (17). Yet is it by far the impossibility of becoming a mother that is the focus of the most of Ourika’s lamentations as well as her deepest unfulfilled desire. Her problems of societal incompatibility culminate in a denial of her maternal right.

Ourika’s situation recalls that of Monvel’s Eugénie in *Les Victimes Cloitrées* in that both heroines’ reproductive viability needs to be contained as they both pose a threat to the health (blood) of the population. For Eugénie, this is a matter of class; her mother fears a
contamination of their noble blood because Eugénie fell in love with Dorval, a wealthy bourgeois merchant who is nonetheless of a lower class. For Ourika, denying her the chance to reproduce stems from a fear of miscegenation in French society: she overhears herself being declared unfit for marriage by the marquise, a sentiment confirmed by Mme de B., her aristocratic guardian. Just as a marriage with a commoner under the Ancien Régime would have tainted noble blood, Ourika’s marriage to a white Frenchman would compromise the racial purity of his French blood. In her analysis of Fanon, Oliver writes, "Racism objectifies by turning skin and blood into objects and then reducing one's very being to that black object," (25) as Fanon himself writes about a specificity of blood based on race: "désorienté, incapable d’être dehors avec l’autre, le Blanc, qui, impitoyablement m’emprisonnait, je me portai loin de mon être-là, très loin, me constituant objet. Qu'était-ce pour moi... une hémorragie qui caillait du sang noir sur tout mon corps ?" (91, my emphasis). Fanon, like Ourika, describes an experience of blackness dependent upon difference-based oppression. By envisioning "black blood" he pathologizes race and reiterates the colonial narrative of racial difference instilled in him by "le Blanc." On racism, Foucault says:

It is a way of separating out the groups that exist within a population. It is, in short, a way of establishing a biological type caesura within a population that appears to be a biological domain. This will allow power to treat that population as a mixture of races, or to be more accurate, to treat the species, to subdivide the species it controls, into the subspecies known, precisely, as races. That is the first function of racism: to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower. (Society 255)

A “caesura” can refer to a complete pause in music or verse, or, more generally, to a deliberate interruption or break. By asserting that racism is a “biological type caesura,” Foucault is here suggesting that the drawing of racial lines has no biological basis in the human species. It is
rather a fabrication of regimes of power: *faux*-biology to divide populations for political gain. Miscegenation is inherently undesirable in a society that hinges on racism to justify the pursuit of its colonial endeavors for the benefit of the State (in this case, “*l’Hexagone*”). If the first function of racism is to invent “biological type caesuras” in society, how then, does one categorize children of mixed marriages? The social boundaries delineated by racism would then become less and less clear, creating a potential problem for the powers that depend on it to further their endeavors and the well-being of the State. Ourika must then suffer the social environment created by these caesuras: a black woman living in France, while France is expanding its Empire under the pretext of “civilizing” its colonies.

Meanwhile, in the French colonies, miscegenation is not prohibited under the 1685 *Code noir*. Rather, rudimentary regulations are put in place to categorize (at least the first generation of) the offspring of mixed marriages: social inheritance runs matrilineally, thus reinforcing the power of the patriarch and “blaming” the mother for the fate of her child. The *Code noir* dictates the children of slave women and free men as slaves and the children of free women and slave men as free (5). As it is the woman who gives birth to the child, the determining factor of a biracial child’s classification of race is quite literally “in the blood.” This acceptance of interracial unions and simplified solution for the “categorization” of the resulting offspring does not work in hexagonal French society, where the blood myth persisted for many centuries under the Ancien Régime; rather than dying out as the Revolution demolished the old

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39 It would seem, at least in Western cultures, that in miscegenation it is always the “white” blood that is foremost tainted or corrupted. This explains why it is a common (mis)conception in that a white woman can give birth to a “black” baby, but a black woman would never give birth to a “white” baby. See Werner Sollers’ *Neither Black nor White yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (1997).
system, the blood myth merely branched outward, with race increasingly becoming its dominant discourse. *Ourika* depicts a very early incident of this phenomenon.

The tragedy of the fear of miscegenation in *Ourika* is that as the only black person in her social sphere, especially an aristocratic sphere with a long tradition of the blood myth, her race leaves her without any potential romantic or marriage partners whatsoever. Moreover, her love interest in the novella is Charles, Mme de B.’s orphaned grandson and Ourika’s childhood companion and confidant. He is never given the opportunity to reject Ourika for a few reasons. French society has presupposed the impossibility of a romantic relationship between them because of Ourika’s race, and they were also raised as adopted brother and sister.40 There is certainly no indication in the story that Charles has ever thought of Ourika in a romantic way. It seems, therefore, socially engrained twofold in Charles that Ourika not be a potential spouse, both as black and as a sister figure. According to Foucault:

> But because it also has procreative effects, sexuality is also inscribed, takes effect, in broad biological processes that concern not the bodies of individuals but the element, the multiple unity of the population. Sexuality exists at the point where body and population meet. And so it is a matter for discipline, but also a matter for regularization. (*Society* 251-52)

It is quite possible that Charles never consciously considers Ourika as a potential partner because society has imposed an impossibility of reproductive union as a standard of population maintenance: just as the aristocratic elite fears contamination of the noble blood, they immediately see Ourika’s difference as an immediate threat. This is not to say that Ourika is not a sexual being; as the incident of the *Comba* performance demonstrates, she very much is. But

40 Although depictions of such taboo desire certainly exist: Duras was a close friend of François-René de Chateaubriand, whose 1802 novella *René* features a protagonist whose sister Amélie’s incestuous desires drive her to take refuge in a convent.
this sexuality is only compatible with her own “population,” (something that the incident of the dance performance manages to conclude as well).

There is also a grave disconnection in the relationship between Ourika and Charles, as even though Charles is an open book around Ourika with regard to his feelings, the notion of confidences between the two is unreciprocated. Ourika notes on several occasions that she cannot bring herself to disclose the feelings that most consume her (her contempt for her racial difference, which would explain her bouts of uncanny physical ailments). Ourika resents that Charles accepts her “illness” without understanding it: “je me dis qu’il était donc bien facile de tromper ceux dont l’intérêt était ailleurs” (34). Ourika understands that she must care more for Charles than he cares for her; otherwise, he would notice that some intrinsic truth in the explanation for her suffering was missing, especially as someone who has, as she notes, two central passions: “la justice et la vérité,” (25).

Furthermore, Ourika doesn’t comprehend that her feelings for Charles are indeed romantic until the very end of the story, at which point he is married to someone else. Therefore, because of the intense platonic intimacy of their relationship, she must suffer through every detail of Charles’ courtship of the other woman, much to her own chagrin.

Charles, who has been abroad for two years, is suddenly summoned back home by Mme de B. In September and October of 1792, decrees are issued threatening any nobility who have fled France with the confiscation of their properties if they do not return (21). Charles arrives home in February of the following year to avoid losing the family’s holdings, after which they all flee to Saint-Germain, near Troyes. Soon, however, Charles is introduced by a friend of Mme de B. to Anaïs de Thémines, the sole survivor of the execution of her entire family and subsequently a
rich heiress; Charles “devint passionnément amoureux” (29). When Ourika meets Anaïs, she finds Charles’ fiancée gracious and assures her that Charles will make her a wonderful husband. Yet, secretly, Charles’ happiness (he proclaims, “Qu’ai-je fait, ô Dieu! pour mériter tant de bonheur!”) is Ourika’s misfortune (she reacts internally, “Hélas! J’adressais en ce moment au ciel une question toute contraire!”) (32).

As Ourika languishes in her pain of being unmarriageable in French society, she nonetheless attempts to support Charles as he revels in the joys of being in love for the first time. When he pays Ourika a visit in Saint-Germain and they have a pleasant and deep conversation, Ourika, nostalgic for the past, tells him that this conversation is “comme autrefois” (31). Charles’ response reveals his lack of appreciation for the time he has spent with Ourika before his engagement: “quelle différence! avais-je donc quelque chose à dire dans ce temps-là? Il me semble que je n’ai commencé à vivre que depuis deux mois” (31). The importance that Charles places on his relationship with Anaïs undermines his and Ourika’s bond as significant. The relationship between Ourika and Charles at this point achieves a form of antibiosis: as Ourika describes it, “je le voyais nageant dans cette mer de délices qu’il m’avait dépeinte, tandis que je mourais abandonnée, seule dans la mort comme dans la vie” (35).

Oliver writes, "When the child or young adult begins to experience the racism of her culture, she is put into a position of the Other, longing for a sense of self as belonging and loved that is missing within the dominant culture," (37). Each of Charles’ new joys is a reminder to Ourika that she is missing a sense of belonging and love in her life because of her race, a bitter pill for her to swallow as she must confront her destiny of solitude anew. While Ourika describes in detail Charles’ courtship of Anaïs, there is a brief break in her narrative (the only one in the
novella) where the doctor, noticing that she has begun to weep, interjects and offers to let her rest. Yet she persists, saying, “Jusqu’à l’époque dont je viens de vous parler, j’avais supporté mes peines” (33). In other words, Charles’ falling in love and getting married escalates her descent into melancholia and the inevitability of her death. Ourika’s malady henceforth continually worsens. After Charles’ final visit to Saint-Germain before his marriage in Paris, Ourika’s fever returns, and Mme de B. is forced to make the trip to the wedding ceremony without Ourika, leaving her in the care of doctors (34). Any joy that Charles experiences during his spell of good fortune inflicts suffering on Ourika threefold: she is reminded at each important chapter of Charles’ new life that she is losing the company of her lifelong companion, that she is losing him to a destiny that will never be her own (marriage), and that she feels guilty for not being able to be genuinely happy for someone for whom she cares so deeply: “j’étais mécontente de moi-même, en voyant que je préférais mon bonheur à celui de Charles; ce n’est pas ainsi que j’étais accoutumée à aimer,” (30).

Finally, Charles experiences his greatest joy in that which Ourika will never know: “La naissance d’un fils mit le comble au bonheur de Charles; il accourut pour me le dire,” (37). As Charles reaches the peak of happiness, Ourika is approaching the depths of her despair. She herself places a great importance on the idea of being a mother, and for Anaïs to give birth to Charles’ son only exacerbates Ourika’s inexorable sterility. Ourika’s strong maternal drive is closely tied to the fact that she has no biological family left in her life, which she mentions on occasion; she also has no memories of her life in Senegal before being sent to Mme de B. In a society where it is all too painfully obvious that she doesn’t look like anyone else, she laments not having anyone in her life whom she can resemble (a child being the most obvious purveyor
of such resemblance, and a point to which I will return). More specifically, Ourika’s maternal
drive takes in form her desire to feel “needed.” She says of Charles and Mme de B., “Ourika
n’avait qu’eux dans la vie; mais eux n’avaient pas besoin d’Ourika: personne n’avait besoin
d’elle! Cet affreux sentiment de l’inutilité de l’existence, est celui qui déchire le plus
profondément le cœur” (35). Karen Sullivan notes, concerning women in convents, utility is
often a veiled euphemism for fertility (170). This makes the maternal reading of Ourika’s
lamentation here apt. What would possibly make a person feel needed more than a child?

Though Ourika realizes (and acknowledges) long before the birth of Charles’ son that
marriage and motherhood were all but an impossibility for her, seeing Charles experience
fatherhood makes the reality of what Ourika can never have excruciating for her. It is
immediately after the birth of Charles’ son that Ourika declares:

Qu’avais-je fait à ceux qui crurent me sauver en m’amenant sur cette terre
d’exil ? Pourquoi ne me laissait-on pas suivre mon sort ? Eh bien! je serais la
négresse esclave de quelque riche colon; brûlée par le soleil, je cultiverais la terre
d’un autre: mais j’aurais mon humble cabane pour me retirer le soir; j’aurais un
compagnon de ma vie, et des enfants de ma couleur, qui m’appelleraien: Ma
mère! ils appuieraient sans dégoût leur petite bouche sur mon front ; ils
reposeraient leur tête sur mon cou, et s’endormiraient dans mes bras! Qu’ai-je
fait pour être condamnée à n’éprouver jamais les affections pour lesquelles
seules mon cœur est créé! O mon Dieu! ôtez-moi de ce monde ; je sens que je ne
peux plus supporter la vie. (38)

For a moment, at least, Ourika resents being “saved” and brought to France, and she considers
her sterility a fate worse than slavery. As she sees it, her exile in France derails her maternal
destiny: “les affections pour lesquelles seules mon cœur est créé.” Unlike, for example, Eugénie,
Ourika talks of desperately wanting to be a mother, and she outlines every aspect of
motherhood that is denied her because of being brought to France: being able to look into a
face that resembles hers, hearing and experiencing herself addressed as "mère," and giving and receiving physical affection without feeling disgust ("sans dégoût"). A child in her likeness would seem the most obvious remedy for Ourika’s alienation from a society that excludes her because of her appearance. Finally, there is a dual reading of her final line where she asks to die because she feels she can no longer “supporter la vie,” meaning both that life is unbearable and that she can no longer possibly sustain it (i.e., procreate).

Waller's take on Duras' motivation for the slavery comparison questions potential "unconscious motivations" (XX) of Ourika’s declaration, asking, "Does setting up slavery as a desirable alternative to marginalization diminish its horror...?" (XIX). Though Waller does not answer this question definitively, she does conclude that Ourika as a character is socially conservative, even more conservative than most of the white society; she is her own harshest critic. Duras' portrayal of the young Senegalese woman is sensitive and nuanced, perhaps too much so for a reading of underlying anti-abolitionist sentiment to be possible. Rather, I would argue that any perceived justification for slavery in Duras’ text is not a defense of colonialism by a public representative of the court, but rather a stereotypical association of African-ness with nature as opposed to “civilization” (i.e. perhaps Ourika would be happier tilling the land).

Ourika's declared preference for slavery comes from someone who has not experienced its horror and is thus too naïve about its reality to justifiably make such a declaration. It is, consequently, not a genuine comparison loaded with political context, but simply rhetoric that attempts to convey Ourika's feelings of isolation and humiliation vis-à-vis Charles’ blissful family life. The notion of social quarantine being a fate worse than slavery is contentious, but encapsulates the extent of Ourika’s dismay with her life in France quite succinctly.
Ourika’s eventual revelation that she is in love with Charles directly echoes her first discovery that her race makes her an outsider: she first hears it from Mme de B.’s friend, the marquise. Long before Ourika recognizes that she is in love with Charles, her happiness is intrinsically tied to Charles’ presence and his attention. When Ourika’s illness worsens once Charles marries and becomes a father, the marquise visits her. The marquise first says that she’s always loved Ourika, and that it’s difficult for her to see her in such pain. She then proposes possible diversions that might help distract Ourika from her sickness, all of which Ourika abruptly dismisses, prompting the marquise to try and extract Ourika’s “secret” from her (41). Upon Ourika’s insistence that she has no such secret the marquise announces, “vous n’avez point de secret, eh bien! Ourika, je me chargerai de vous apprendre que vous en avez un... si, vous n’étiez pas folle d’amour pour Charles, vous prendriez fort bien votre parti d’être négresse” (41). Ourika is devastated (“anéantie”): “Quelle lumière affreuse avait-elle jetée sur l’abîme de mes douleurs!” (41). As with the earlier revelation, Ourika is instantly shaken and forced to question everything that she has thought true about herself and the world. The metaphor of shedding light into the abyss explains her understanding that her “illness” is still there, as grave as ever, but that she now has a clearer understanding of it. Her love for Charles was not that of a sister or a companion, but “une passion criminelle!” (41).

Was there truly no possible way for Ourika to reproduce as a black woman in French society in the 1790s? This is a crucial question and one that Adeline Koh addresses. Koh criticizes the tendency in recent scholarly work to “celebrate Duras for her insight into the black condition” (15). She cites two potential solutions to the marriage dilemma, one slighted and the other ignored, that demonstrate “the way Duras eradicates all possibility of her black
protagonist’s marriage in France [that] is indicative of a larger apprehension towards the black female subject” (16). Ourika “refuses to marry a lower-class white man … [and] does not consider the choice of marrying a free black man” (25). To start with the latter, “free” black men in France in the 1790s would have likely arrived there illegally, as this is pre-1815, and were therefore imaginably rare and seldom encountered. To address the former option, a closer reading of the quotation reveals Ourika’s reaction to this proposition as quite reasonable. She has overheard the marquise say to Mme de B., “si, à force d’argent, vous trouvez quelqu’un qui consente à avoir des enfants nègres, ce sera un homme d’une condition inférieure, et avec qui elle se trouvera malheureuse” (13). First, the marquise’s statement is a negative suggestion (i.e., “this is why said option will not work”). Second, even casting aside notions of inferiority and unhappiness, Ourika seems concerned with the beginning of the marquise’s statement, regarding money: “cet homme qui, à prix d’argent, consentirait peut-être que ses enfants fussent nègres!” (14, my emphasis). What Ourika expresses here is anger and indignity, not snobbery. Quite simply, she does not want to marry someone who would accept money as a concession for having métisse children. She does not refuse to marry a white man of a lower class; she rejects the notion of one being “bought” for her.

Ourika’s failure as a love match for Charles synthesizes different ways in which she is socially ostracized, from her racially-motivated designation as reproductively incompatible to the more general, unavoidable loneliness of not seeing herself reflected in the world. A child represents the intersection of these two ideas, and, therefore, Ourika’s ultimate undoing is being unable to experience maternity. If Duras sets Ourika up for failure through the futility of her situation, it is because Duras evokes the societal attitudes of her time and considers their
effects. The claustrophobic constraint of Ourika elicits sympathy for the ill-fated heroine, but also causes her plight to radiate with a demand for change.

“Une nouvelle victime des cloîtres”: A Spiritual Successor Takes Up the Habit

By the end of Ourika, the heroine is dying of a psychosomatic illness, relegated to the periphery of the social order, and condemned to a life of loneliness and sterility because of her race, a life she no longer wishes to face. She has moreover remained silent throughout her ordeal, never disclosing the reasons behind her "melancholia" to her adoptive family. Like many literary predecessors who have endured a traumatically failed romance such as Ourika’s, and like many whose blood has deemed them unmarriageable, she finds herself in a convent. However, Ourika enters the convent willingly, after experiencing a religious epiphany during a confession. Where her lack of wifely and maternal roles in society have left her with a profound sense of uselessness, her last recourse of solace is to put her fate in God’s hands. By agreeing to live out her final days in the convent, Ourika finally releases Mme de B. and Charles from the strain that her ailment places on them, thus allowing her to succumb to her illness peacefully unburdened.

Once Ourika has the shattering realization that the feelings she harbors for Charles are indeed romantic, a result of her conversation with the marquise, she falls into her most severe fever at this point. In addition to the feelings of isolation with which Ourika has long struggled because of race, she now also believes herself to have committed a crime against the very society that already spurns her. According to Foucault, “the person who violates the laws, breaks the social contract and thereby becomes a foreigner in his own land, consequently
falling under the jurisdiction of the penal laws that punish him, exile him, and in a way, kill him,” (Security 66). Ourika is already inherently an outlaw because of her race in a time when colonial immigrants were not legally allowed in France, and she becomes more so by having fallen in love with her surrogate brother: according to Woshinski, the incestuous “implication is clear” in the marquise’s accusation of “passion malheureuse,” thus breaking society’s rules of order (“Tombeau” 176).\footnote{Woshinski also argues that this two-sided impropriety of her love for Charles is contradictory: she is both too different and not different enough.} Tortured by what she perceives to be the delinquency of her love for Charles, Ourika throws herself into “un accablement qui ressemblait à la mort” that prompts the doctor to send for her confessor, who is himself announced dead (42). Mme de B. then sends for a parish priest to come and administer Ourika’s last rights. The imminence of death all around her, she manages nonetheless to regain consciousness after two weeks, finding that Mme de B. has not left her side and that Charles has come to see her as well. Yet Ourika turns for consolation instead from the priest, to whom she finally reveals her “fautes” (43). Having admitted her secret feelings for her adoptive brother, now married and a father, to the priest, Ourika is given a kind, but firm, response from the religious authority:

\begin{quote}
Votre cœur est pur, c’est à vous seule que vous avez fait du mal; mais vous n’en êtes pas moins coupable. Dieu vous demandera compte de votre propre bonheur qu’il vous avait confié, qu’en avez-vous fait? Ce bonheur était entre vos mains, car il réside dans l’accomplissement de nos devoirs… priez Dieu, Ourika: il est là, il vous tend les bras; il n’y a pour lui ni nègres ni blancs. (43)
\end{quote}

While the priest assures Ourika that she has not committed any sins in acknowledging her feelings, he does admonish her for allowing herself to languish in suffering rather than take her destiny into her own hands (i.e. give herself over to God). The priest argues for being able to
find one’s happiness through accomplishing good deeds, and these words provide Ourika a sort of peace that she has never known (43). She also unburdens herself of the weight of her secrets. Oliver writes, "Rendered an object, the victim of oppression and subordination is also rendered speechless," (95). Whereas Ourika was previously unable to speak about her experience to her family, telling her story to the priest and choosing the convent is as close as Ourika comes to transitioning from object to subject.

The near-death experience proves to be an epiphany that allows Ourika to come to terms with herself and with her fate: “Dieu, en me jetant sur cette terre étrangère, voulut peut-être me prédestiner à lui; il m’arracha à la barbarie, à l’ignorance; par un miracle de sa bonté, il me déroba aux vices de l’esclavage et me fit connaître sa loi” (44). Ourika no longer claims to prefer slavery to sterility, but sees her exile in France as a message from God. Instead of being alone and forsaken, she sees the potential to be alone and chosen by God, a kinder, though still unenviable, fate. Grateful for this newfound sense of calm, Ourika decides to answer “God’s call” and enter the convent to become a nun. In the final pages of Duras’ novella, religion quite suddenly emerges as the deus ex machina for Ourika’s seemingly impossible mode of suffering.

Ourika’s epiphany is not wholly religious, however. O’Connell is particularly skeptical of religion’s sudden importance in the novel’s final pages following Ourika’s epiphany: “the delusion of religious peace is nothing but a smokescreen, a deliberately contrived self-deception designed to mask her despair at being rejected by society” (55). While this peace might be a delusion, it is nonetheless, for Ourika, an attractive alternative to her unending pain. She says, reflecting upon the priest’s words, “Dieu a prescrit [ses devoirs] aux personnes isolées comme à celles qui tiennent au monde; s’il les a privées des liens du sang, il leur a donné
l’humanité tout entière pour famille” (44). Though the notion of monastic life as a microcosm of society that is indifferent to race seems perhaps overly optimistic, the fact remains that the convent is full of women who have been isolated from society for a common reason that Ourika nonetheless shares: suppression of their reproductive potential. This is not to say that the convent provides any sense of community for Ourika, since she is there depicted alone on her deathbed. She is, however, if nothing else, liberated from her most significant tormentors, life in Mme de B.’s household and interactions with Charles.

I am similarly skeptical of the true role of spirituality in Ourika’s decision to become a nun, but for different reasons from O’Connell’s. Where he sees “contrived self-deception,” I argue that Ourika sees the practical benefits of the convent. She attributes the improvement in her physical condition to her religious revelation, but uses this improved mobility to assert her subjectivity in a way that circumvents and even negates the religious context: she abandons Mme de B. and plans on using the isolation of religious life to fantasize about Charles. Religious life allows Ourika to assert her autonomy and find a means of independence outside of Mme de B.’s tutelage. Moreover, Mme de B., the only guardian that Ourika has ever known, is herself not particularly religious: Ourika remarks that Mme de B. “n’était point dévote” (15), and she even flees Paris with a faux-dévot: “un vieil abbé que, depuis dix ans, j’entendais tous les jours se moquer de la religion” (22). Embracing religion is, therefore, a way for Ourika to carve her own path in opposition to Mme de B.’s narrow social circle, which has defined Ourika’s existence up to this point. Upon hearing Ourika’s decision to become a nun, Mme de B. answers, “Je vous ai fait tant de mal en voulant vous faire du bien, que je ne me sens pas le droit de m’opposer à votre résolution,” (45). Mme de B. finally recognizes, albeit vaguely, the
ways that she has failed Ourika as a surrogate mother, and she consents to Ourika leaving for the convent, no longer the Ourika who isn’t “needed” (35) but now the Ourika who doesn’t “need” others (specifically Charles and Mme de B.). Moreover, Ourika receives Mme de B.’s admission of failed best intentions.

Like Ourika, Mme de Lafayette’s titular La Princesse de Clèves (1768), makes the decision to retire to the convent after a romantic infatuation fails to materialize. Yet unlike Ourika, the widowed princess had no fate obstacle (such as racial difference) separating her from being with her intended suitor the Duc de Nemours; her decision to split the remainder of her years between the convent (where she engages in charitable works) and her home upends the expected denouement and is a considerably modern act of rebellious agency. Conversely Ourika’s decision to join the convent is paradoxical in that, though it defies Mme de B., it also fits neatly into the agenda of societal oppression that will protect the purity of the bloodline (as is evidenced by the advice of Marquise). It is partially because of this oppression that Ourika sees her own interests aligned with her oppressors. I would argue, therefore, that choosing the convent does not itself constitute a significant act of agency, even though it is action as opposed to inaction. If there exists within Ourika’s choice any testament to her subjectivity, it is in her irreligious intentions to pass her time in the convent.

Ourika admits that she is escaping to the cloister to remember her relationship with her beloved Charles as it was before his marriage, without having to continually and painfully witness him as the doting father of his wife Anaïs’ children, a scenario that she would rather

42 For agency in La Fayette’s novel, see: Katharine Jensen, Uneasy Possessions: The Mother-Daughter Dilemma in French Women’s Writings, 1671-1928 (2011); Peggy Kamuf, Fictions of Feminine Desire: Disclosures of Heloise (1982); and Nancy K. Miller, Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing (1988).
envision for Charles and herself. Charles’s resistance to the news that Ourika intends to become a nun is “plus vif” than his grandmother’s, but Ourika tellingly ends the conversation and her story by imploring him, “Laissez-moi aller, Charles, dans le seul lieu où il me soit permis de penser sans cesse à vous,” (45). This final line spoken by Ourika to Charles is as close as the text comes to providing an admission of the true nature of her love for Charles. It also suggests her intention to use the privacy of the convent to fantasize about her illicit love for her adoptive brother; this is reminiscent of the Comte de Comminge, who, forbidden by his father from pursuing his true love, his cousin Adelaide, retires to the monastery, where he sneaks away to look at his stolen miniature portrait of her. 

Though Ourika’s admission demonstrates the newfound calm and acceptance of her situation that her “religious epiphany” has brought about, it does stand as a contradiction to Ourika’s earlier assertion that the convent will bring her closer to God. The convent is, if nothing else, a plausible end for Ourika, whether she goes there to be closer to God, to free herself from Mme de B., or fantasize about Charles. In the same vein as Monvel’s Les victimes cloîtrées, the cloister in Ourika is likened to a tomb and used to both ratify her sterility and facilitate her impending death. The doctor notes on his way to find her on her deathbed in the Parisian convent: “des tombes, car elles portaient toutes des inscriptions pour la plupart effacées par le temps. Quelques-unes de ces pierres avaient été brisées pendant la Révolution,” (3). Instead of describing walking past cells of nuns engaged in charitable works like teaching (this is, after all, an Ursuline convent) or their daily rituals, he simply walks past graves and ruins. The nun who receives the doctor remarks that they have not yet finished

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43 See Chapter 1.
reconstructing the building since its near demolition in the Revolution. These graves, however, are not of those killed in the violent events of the 1790s. These are much older tombs that serve as a reminder that the convent has always been a place closely tied to death.

Symbols of nature bookend the doctor’s narrative of his encounter with the dying nun. At the beginning of the novella, he first sees Ourika “à l’extrémité d’une longue allée de charmille” (3), while in the last line he explains her death rather simply: “elle tomba avec les dernières feuilles de l’automne” (45). In the first observation, death is imminent as Ourika appears at the end of a long alley in the garden, symbolizing the end of her journey through life, while in the latter the doctor equates her death with a natural process of returning to the earth. This is a metaphor that the doctor quotes from Ourika’s own narrative, as she recalls addressing God and speaking of herself in the third person, “laissez-la mourir comme la feuille tombe en automne. N’ai-je pas assez souffert!” (36). Before the idea of Ourika’s purported faith becomes so significant in the final pages of the novella, Ourika only appeals to God in such circumstances, asking to be released from the earth. As the doctor confirms, in using Ourika’s own words to announce her death, God grants Ourika’s wish once she commits herself to him.

However, the most resounding image in the doctor’s description of the dying Ourika in the convent is “son grand voile noir [qui] l’enveloppait presque tout entière” (3). This veil is symbolic of Ourika’s identity and of her struggle at various stages throughout the novel. It represents her overwhelming urge to disguise her skin by covering as much as needed to hide her race, her status as a widow figure after having said good-bye to Charles forever after a lifetime of companionship and love, her epiphany and subsequent decision to turn to God and become a nun (his “bride”), and finally her approaching death.
At the end of *Ourika*, there is no triumph of the reproductive subject, nor is there any miraculous resurrection from the dead à la Eugénie: racial politics are the new class politics, and *Ourika* prefigures the new archetype of social anathema in post-Revolutionary France. In order to fully understand the doctor’s implications in the “new victim” passage quoted in the introduction to this chapter, I consider it in full:

“Je m’approchai timidement, car mon cœur s’était serré en voyant ces tombes, et je me figurais que j’allais contempler une nouvelle victime des cloîtres; les préjugés de ma jeunesse venaient de se réveiller, et mon intérêt s’exalta pour celle que j’allais visiter, en proportion du genre de malheur que je lui supposais.” (3-4)

The priest does not yet know that he is about to visit a black woman, so the “préjugés” serve two narrative functions at once. First, they attest to the reputation of the convent as an “eerie” place of sterility and death that he can recall since his childhood; the description of his heart wrenching recalls the somber experience of a child encountering a place with such a macabre reputation (again, such as a graveyard or mausoleum, or perhaps even somewhere “haunted”). Second, the word *préjugés* ironically foreshadows the notion that the doctor is, in fact, about to meet a black nun, one whose story, which he himself is about to share, hinges on the very notions of *préjugés* and their own socially-sanctioned prejudices that have contributed to the sterility and death of the eponymous Ourika. Therefore, the “new victim” of the cloister is not merely another new victim; she is a new genre of victim of reproductive repression as endorsed by emerging biopolitics in the “liberalizing” French political landscape, a victim ahead of her time.
The convent provides Ourika with a home and a sense of autonomy in light of an otherwise hopeless situation, as it does for countless other heroines throughout French literature whose reproductive potential is repressed. For the convent, however, what Ourika provides is somewhat of an anomaly, a touchstone of a heroine. Her story depicts a type of racial encounter and conflict that would permeate French literature (and society) long after the Revolution, but that fascinated readers in Duras’ age as wholly unprecedented.

Ourika’s legacy as the successor of French literary conventual women is twofold, both of which pertain to problems of the blood. First, she chooses to go into the convent faced with an irreconcilable problem of prohibited romance, choosing to spend her last days unburdened from social scrutiny and stigma. This places her in the tradition of la Présidente de Tourvel in Choderlos de Laclos’ Les liaisons dangereuses (1782). Like Tourvel, who is haunted by the shame of her regretful extramarital affair with the Marquis de Valmont, Ourika retreats to the convent as a mechanism of running away from forbidden desire for Charles, brought into the light by the unnamed Marquise. Both heroines evade the potential social taboo of corrupting the blood: Tourvel through an extramarital liaison and Ourika through an (albeit adoptive) incestuous desire. Second, Ourika’s cloistral confinement is a seemingly inescapable fate based on her incompatibility as a reproductive subject that threatens to contaminate a specific bloodline. Unlike Monvel’s Eugénie, the perception of Ourika’s threat to said bloodline is racist rather than classist. She can marry neither Charles, whom she perceives to be her true love, nor anyone else from the aristocratic French society in which she was raised. She rejects the notion of being married off for money because she sees herself as deficient because of her internalized
racism and eschews any man who would deign marrying her and having “non-white” offspring in the interest of financial gain. According to Foucault:

The population is not, then, a collection of juridical subjects in an individual or collective relationship with a sovereign will. It is a set of elements in which we can note constants and regularities even in accidents, in which we can identify the universal of desire regularly producing the benefit of all, and with regard to which we can identify a number of modifiable variables on which it depends. (Security 106)

When monitoring the population, power relies on constancy and identification, thus causing codes to be established that limit the mobility of fluid identities such as class, race, gender, and sexual preference. I would not go as far as to say that race replaces class at a given point in history except as the dominant method of categorization in French society that determines suitable, individual reproductive populations; both race and class have existed and will likely persist, in some entangled form, indefinitely. I do, however, assert that the French Revolution is a moment of discontinuity in Western history where the de-emphasis of traditional class made room for race (amidst escalating colonialism) to overtake it as the predetermining factor of defining populations.

While there is much debate about Duras’ political messages about race and slavery, the shift towards religion as the final answer to Ourika’s dilemma causes me, in turn, to question the notion of the convent as a default “alternative” to maternity. One criticism of the convent denouement in Ourika is that it aligns directly with the machinations of the marquise, arguably the story’s antagonist despite her claims of a “tough love” approach in counseling Ourika. Does hegemony not ultimately reign? “Son choix délibéré … semble être une réponse à la marquise: elle se retire de la société pour rétablir l’ordre social. Ourika choisit de se réfugier dans le lieu
où « il n’y a ni nègres, ni blancs », mais dont l’institution avait fourni la justification pour l’esclavage,“ (De Raedt 30). De Raedt is referring to the fact that the Catholic Church was vague at best in its position on slavery and that its foundational text, the Bible, depicts the practice without criticism. In insisting on the ironic juxtaposition of the convent as a personal refuge and global menace, De Raedt makes an assumption similar to David O’Connell’s: that Ourika recognizes herself as part of a “people.” But she knows neither her home country, nor slavery, nor even anyone else who is black. Moreover, any inkling of compatriotism that Ourika might have for black men and women overseas is all but destroyed by the biased reports of the 1791 slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue:

On commençait à parler de la libération des nègres : il était impossible que cette question ne me touchât pas vivement ; c’était une illusion que j’aimais encore à me faire, qu’ailleurs, du moins, j’avais des semblables : comme ils étaient malheureux, je les croyais bons, et je m’intéressais à leur sort. Hélas ! je fus promptement dé trompée !” (20)

The talk of Saint-Domingue leaves a profound impression on Ourika and further exacerbates her internalized racism, and she inevitably sympathizes with the colonizers. Ourika is simply limited to act based her own unique experience in a white society that makes it clear that she will never have the same privileges as everyone else, including the freedom to reproduce. Waller says that the convent compromise is one that is "particularly palatable" to Duras’ reader: the moderate, Restoration-era aristocrat (XIX). It seems, however, perhaps more inevitable than palatable; Ourika’s entire story is governed by the hopelessness of her situation. It is exactly at such moments that one has no choice but to turn to religion (or, more specifically, religious institutions) as a means of comfort. While Ourika’s situation is unique, she most closely resembles other undesirable reproductive subjects of the eighteenth century who
have no choice but the habit. Though the convent affords Ourika a modicum of respite, this is a small victory in the grand scheme of oppression (of which the convent is a longstanding symbol) that subsumes her in the end.
Conclusion

From 1789 onward, Revolutionary forces targeted monastic orders for dissolution, and this was accomplished in stages up until 1792; afterwards, what remained of many of these buildings was left vacant for several years (Woshinski Imagining 287). Religious living spaces as symbolic tombs in the literature of the eighteenth century became a self-fulfilling prophecy, as men and women belonging to religious orders were driven from their cloistral homes, their vows declared null and void. During this brief period, prior to the reestablishment of religious houses initiated by Napoleon in 1807, these institutions of iron and stone were left to decay with no trace of life to walk amongst them (Woshinski Imagining 293). This is the condition of the convent as it is found post-Revolution by Ourika: its crumbling facades and the dying trees that fill its courtyard reflect Ourika’s own imminent death, but also her sterile body.

Being a black woman alone in a white world, the proscription of Ourika’s reproductive agency denies her only wish in life. Having children is her only chance at having someone look at her without first seeing the color of her skin, and therefore her only chance at true unconditional love. Ourika’s account of her internalized racism foretells the experiences of authors writing about similar feelings of marginalization around the time of decolonization in the twentieth century. Yet these later texts do not account for the uniqueness of her situation: there are no other black people around to acknowledge nor empathize with her experience of societal prejudices in an era with extremely limited immigration to France. Though Ourika’s contemporary literary heroines do not account for the singularity of her experience as the
racialized other either, we can trace a history of Ourika’s experience of taking refuge in a convent because she is denied her reproductive freedom.

In Chapter One, Tencin’s Comminge and Adélaïde, like Ourika, are denied their reproductive freedom because they pose a threat to the bloodline. In Tencin’s novella, the conservation of the bloodline is a familial issue, tied to the succession of wealth, property, and title. In Duras’ novella, the menace to the bloodline is of a much larger scope, the racial purity of the blood, yet it is nonetheless about the blood in both cases. Likewise, in Chapters Two and Three, Diderot’s Suzanne and Monvel’s Eugénie and Dorval are preemptively forced into the convent before they have the chance to reproduce and contaminate the bloodline. Suzanne’s family insists that she take vows to allow her older sisters alone to pass on the family inheritance, as Suzanne is the child of her mother’s extramarital affair. Eugénie and Dorval are class-crossed, mésallés lovers, and Eugénie’s mother refuses to allow Dorval’s commoner (albeit wealthy bourgeois) blood taint her lineage.

The racist views of aristocratic French society portrayed in Ourika are not a replacement for these class prejudices in the aftermath of the French Revolution. As the Restoration of 1814-1830 demonstrated, class was in no way permanently eradicated by the Revolution, but only radically changed. Duras’ story is instead a reflection of the fact that the violent upending of noble privileges occurred at a moment in history when race was primed for entering into the dialogue because of increased immigration to France. That Duras published her novella during the Restoration, and was herself a member of the reinstated, previously-exiled aristocracy, speaks to the fact that class privileges would persist post-Revolution in spite of emergent racial concerns. The unnamed marquise in Ourika tells Mme de B., “Si... vous trouvez quelqu’un qui
consente à avoir des enfants nègres, ce sera un homme à condition inférieure,” (13). The ensuing coexistence, even entanglement, of class and race as points of contention, prejudice, and discrimination in Western nations persists into the twentieth century, as do eugenic concerns.

Likewise, sex is a fundamental issue in the current debate over reproductive rights, with the circumstances that constitute legal abortion, including fathers' rights, periodically contested and reconsidered. While the dialogue around reproductive rights today doubtlessly centers on the argument over woman's rights and pro-choice legislation, reproductive repression is nonetheless an ongoing issue. Between 1995 and 1998 in France, five women with intellectual disabilities employed by the Centre d'Aide par le Travail (CAT) in Sens, France, were sterilized against their will (Hervieu np). In the United States, doctors sterilized nearly 150 women inmates, some coerced, in California prisons from 2006 to 2010 (Shwarz np). While in 2017, White County, Tennessee offered to reduce inmates' jail sentences by thirty days if they opted for elective birth control procedures: women were given a Nexplanon implant in their arm (which provides three years of birth control), while men were given vasectomies (Jackson np). These stories speak to the way that today's concerns over reproductive freedom relate to the texts analyzed in this project and the contemporary social issues that they portray.

Blood is less of a concern than it was in the eighteenth century. But as evidenced in the case of the five women from Sens, it has not completely dissipated. Authorities at the CAT wanted these women sterilized to keep their intellectual disabilities from being passed on to another generation. This is basic eugenics, for the perceived benefit of the population, meanwhile impinging upon the women's individual rights. Yet the stories of the American
inmates demonstrate that myths about blood and class differentiation have been all but debunked. By targeting prisons, it is clear that lifestyle, as opposed to blood, is thought to perpetuate undesirable elements in the population. Authorities in the California and Tennessee prison systems did not target the prisoners because they believe that criminality runs in the blood; they presume that one way to reduce the number of criminals in their state is to prevent criminals from reproducing. As with homosexuality in Diderot’s text, this is a nature versus nurture argument. Which forms of deviance are biologically determined and which forms are socially learned? And is there allowance for overlap? How does this rudimentary attempt at eugenics reflect our society?

Finally, where are the convents today? Did they survive the transition, as Foucault calls it, “from sanguinity to sexuality” as the deployment of power evolved during and since the eighteenth century? Convents and monasteries are less prevalent in the cultural, and therefore literary, psyche today than ever before in modern Western history. Due to technological advances, sterilization is much more accessible, as demonstrated by these recent stories. Medical procedures have assumed much of the function of repressing reproduction formerly done by sequestration, thus diminishing the importance of the single-sex religious space. Moreover, the Revolution has been followed by a series of social “rights” movements that have been taking place in the past two centuries that liberate individuals from unjust modes of oppression. While class and racial prejudices still exist, and some repression of reproduction might occur at a familial level, parents do not have as much control over their children as they did in previous eras. Children are now protected by an increasing number of laws and the agencies that enforce them. Thereby, in a reversal of the previous trend, the majority of
women who become nuns today choose to be nuns: this makes them both much fewer in number and less apt for cultural representations.
Bibliography


Vita

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