This thesis compares two fictional accounts by Denis Diderot, examining how outsiders behave in foreign societies. The moral of the first story, *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*—it is best to abide by the rules of the society in which you live, even if you disagree—is first established, then applied to the second, more lengthy novel *La Religieuse*, where the title character ignores this idea of conformity with disastrous results. The possible motivations behind her ambivalent behavior are examined in an attempt to understand and explain her self-destructive stubbornness.
MORALITY, SEXUALITY AND CONFORMITY: DIDEROT’S OUTSIDERS PENETRATE FOREIGN SOCIETIES

A Thesis

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INTRODUCTION

CULTURE SHOCK

When visiting a foreign country, is it better to arrive with an open mind, interested in understanding the customs and practices of the natives, ready to absorb what the culture has to offer; or should the world traveler set out with a slew of preconceived notions and stereotypes about the country and its inhabitants, smug in his or her own feelings of cultural superiority, planning to behave on foreign soil exactly how he would in his own country? The obvious answer is, as the old saying goes, when in Rome, do as the Romans. This proverb is not only about foreign travel; it can be applied to other situations as well, even something as simple and everyday as visiting another person's home. Common sense and common courtesy tell us that you can't just go anywhere and behave in any way you want; there are different rules for different situations, and most people find it relatively easy to adapt to the slight variations in different environments. From the time we are small children, we learn that we can't act the same way we would at home out in public or at school, where the pressures of societal norms are more intense and the standards of acceptable behavior are different and more strictly defined. We carry this with us into adulthood, where many of us still behave very differently around colleagues at work than we do at home with family or out with friends.

In two of his fictional works, *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* and *La Religieuse*, Denis Diderot examines this idea of cultural conformity by imagining what life would be like two very different alternatives to eighteenth century France: the island paradise and the Catholic convent, respectively. At first these two communities seem to be on completely opposite ends of the spectrum; one is a society with a complete lack of sexual shame, where natives and visitors alike are invited to indulge their most primal desires; while the other community places the strictest restrictions on human sexuality, eliminating it altogether. But in Diderot’s imagined universes, things are not at all what one would first expect. As he infiltrates these two societies, he demonstrates that they are both governed by their own systems of laws and their own ways of living, different from what they at first seem. Though it may be difficult for an outsider to understand or accept these rules, once inside the community, it is better and easier to try to conform to its laws than to try to apply the familiar rules of one’s native society, which simply would not work.

In these two texts, we observe as outsiders penetrate these foreign societies: the aumônier, French visitor to Tahiti, and Suzanne Simonin, prisoner in the convent. The aumônier’s difference is his nationality; he is a foreigner on the island, and nothing he can do will ever change that. Suzanne’s difference is more in her own mind, she decides for herself that she is not like the rest of the community and stubbornly clings to this idea of superiority. The aumônier understands the importance of accepting cultural traditions,
and is able to enjoy his stay among the savages. On the other hand, Suzanne does the opposite. She enters the convent with her mind already made up that she does not want to be there; she prefers the rule of patriarchal society to the society of women, and resists the latter with all of her might. The results are disastrous; through her rebellions, she makes herself and those around her, including the people she cares about most, miserable.
CHAPTER 1
ABIDING BY THE STRICT RULES OF “FREE LOVE”: THE DARK SIDE OF TAHITIAN SEXUAL LIBERATION

The image of Tahiti that Diderot presents to us in his Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville seems at first to be that of a utopian civilization where sexual shame and taboos are nonexistent. Young couples make love in public while their families and friends look on with admiration and respect. Selfishness and jealousy are foreign concepts for the Tahitians, brought to their island by the Europeans; along with syphilis, the physical representation of everything that is corrupt about western morals and sexuality.¹ In Tahiti, the inhabitants follow the pure instincts of nature, and as a result seem to live happy carefree lives. As the bitter vieillard states, « Ils mangent pour vivre et pour croître ; ils croissent pour multiplier, et ils n’y trouvent ni vice, ni honte. »² For the Tahitians, the desire for physical love is merely another one of man’s appetites, and satisfying it, engaging in sexual activity is just as causal and as social of an event as eating dinner with the family. But we will soon see that there is no civilization without rules; as the discourse between Orou, the spokesman for the Tahitians³, and the aumônier, representative of French society, unfolds, we begin to suspect that maybe Tahitian “free love” isn’t so free after all.

The Joy of Sex

The first night in his host’s home, the aumônier is faced with a difficult decision: a man should not sleep alone; he is offered his choice of the three daughters or the wife. The difficulty lies not in his inability to choose but instead in the aumônier’s hesitation to break his solemn religious vows and dishonor his nation by giving in to this most irresistible temptation. His only excuse is « mais ma religion ! mais mon état ! » (SVB

¹ Walter E. Rex, in his “Contrariety in the Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville.” Diderot Studies 27 (1998): 149-168, makes the following observation: “Syphilis is of course paradigmatic, a potent dramatic device that demonstrates with the cruelest clarity how the irreversible malady of civilization invades, seizes hold of, infects and destroys the state of nature.” (p. 155). See also Colin Davis, “Backward, Forward, Homeward: Encounters in Ithaca with Kant and Diderot.” Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation 40, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 219-233., who sees syphilis as a “contagious disease of Otherness.” (p. 227)
² Denis Diderot, Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville, ed. Michel Bideaux (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2002), p. 53. All subsequent citations will come from this edition, abbreviated SVB.
³ On the idea of Orou as the articulate and intelligent spokesman for his society, see Claudia Moscovi, “An ethics of cultural exchange: Diderot’s Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville.” CLIO 30, no. 3 (Spring 2001): 289-309, who notes that the savage Orou provides “the most astute cultural wisdom” of all of the characters in the Supplément (p. 300).
Even though Orou does not understand the word ‘religion’, he immediately and instinctively thinks poorly of any institution that so obviously goes against the laws of nature, against animal instinct. His logical response to the aumônier’s weak protests:

Je ne sais ce que c’est que la chose que tu appelles religion, mais je ne puis qu’en penser mal, puisqu’elle t’empêche de goûter un plaisir innocent auquel nature, la souveraine maîtresse, nous invite tous ; de donner l’existence à un de tes semblables. (78)

Nature is the only true dictator of human behavior, and she affords us all with the opportunity to partake in the innocent pleasures of sex. However, this pleasure is described not necessarily as a physical one, the immediate gratification of orgasm, but instead as the joy of reproduction, of creating life, of recreating oneself in another human being. Sexual pleasure, for the Tahitians, is not about the physical satisfaction resulting from the act itself; instead the excitement lies in the possibility that a child may be conceived during the union. Sexual desire is not simply the «appétit physique» that it first seems; rather it is the longing for and pleasure of bringing a child into the world. As the vieillard has already informed us, there is no vice or shame in indulging this desire, in reproducing. Children are a source of joy not only for the parents but also for everyone in the community, as Orou says, «la naissance d’un enfant est toujours un bonheur…Un enfant qui naît occasionne la joie domestique et publique. » (SVB 87)

Child Labor: The Reification of the Tahitian Savage

Along with the joy he or she brings to the Tahitian community, each child is also a valuable commodity, an important resource. As Orou says, «Plus la famille de l’Otaïtien est nombreuse, plus elle est riche. » (SVB 88) Taken out of context, this could signify a metaphorical richness, meaning more children bring more happiness to the family who becomes rich in love. This would be the ‘innocent pleasure’ of having children that Orou mentioned before. But it is very clear that Tahitians are concerned with the economic wealth a child brings to his parents and to his country, as Orou explains:

Un enfant est un bien précieux, parce qu’il doit devenir un homme…c’est un accroissement de fortune pour la cabane et de force pour la nation. Ce sont des bras et des mains de plus dans Otaïti : nous voyons en lui en agriculteur, un pêcheur, un chasseur, un soldat, un époux, un père. (87)

The so-called ‘innocent pleasure’ and natural desire to reproduce now seems to be motivated by a very different kind of need, where the rewards of raising children are more economic than spiritual or emotional. Overpopulation is not a concern with the Tahitians. Instead of being a drain on the economy, every child is a precious commodity because he will one day contribute to the labor force of Tahiti. Rather than considering a new child as just another mouth to feed and therefore an economic burden on the family and the nation, the Tahitian parents see their offspring as just another pair of hands that
will soon be put to work to produce, hunt or catch food to feed all the hungry mouths attached to those arms and hands. The child is just another penis that will one day be able to reproduce, to create more hands and more penises in a never-ending cycle.

La femme est l’avenir de l’homme (or the other way around?)

I think it is interesting to note the masculine vocabulary Orou uses in the above citation: a child is great because he will become a man, a husband, a father. The little boy is useful to society because he can grow up to be a hunter, soldier, impregnator, etc., but what about little girls? How will they be of use to the community? In the Supplément, we hear only briefly from three Tahitian women: Orou’s wife; his youngest daughter, Thia; and another Tahitian woman who speaks indirectly through an anecdote told by B. The majority of the text is dominated by male discourse, speeches given by patriarchs of this patriarchal society. If we look at what the women have to say, it provides us some insight as to their role in this civilization.

The first to speak is Orou’s wife, the night the family welcomes the aumônier into their cabane and invites him to spend the night with one of the women of the house. As Orou hints that his youngest daughter is most in need of companionship, not yet having any children of her own, the mother heaves a big sigh, saying « Hélas ! je n’ai pas à m’en plaindre ; la pauvre Thia ! ce n’est pas sa faute. » (SVB 77) Thia, the childless woman, the poor girl, is to be pitied. Her lack of children is a source of sadness for the whole family, a problem—which is not her fault—to be fixed, hopefully by an obliging houseguest. This problem of childlessness is also a cause for embarrassment, as Thia herself reveals when she begs the aumônier on bended knee,

Honore-moi dans la cabane et parmi les miens ; élève-moi au rang de mes sœurs qui se moquent de moi. Asto, l’aînée, a déjà trois enfants ; Palli, la seconde, en a deux, et Thia n’en a point. Étranger…rends-moi mère : fais-moi un enfant…Si tu m’accordes cette faveur, je ne t’oublierai plus ; je te bénirais toute ma vie… (SVB 79)

It seems that a woman’s only purpose in life is to bear children. The desperate Thia speaks of the honor and status that will come with being a mother, and the humiliation she feels and the ridicule she must endure from her sisters, as long as she is not one. Orou’s three daughters seem to be in competition with each other for who can have the most children, and Thia is way behind; she has a lot of catching up to do. She appeals to the aumônier’s sympathy, trying to evoke the pitiful nature of her situation. Impregnating a woman has become a favor in this society, a service rendered for which the woman is eternally grateful and will ask nothing in return.

The whole family is in fact appreciative of the aumônier’s noble sacrifice; the next morning when they find the couple in bed, Thia « invitait son père, sa mère et ses sœurs…à joindre leur reconnaissance à la sienne. » (SVB 80) Orou expresses his feelings of gratitude again later; alone with the aumônier, he repeats the words of his wife’s frequent sermons to their errant daughter:
Tu ne saurais croire l’importance du service que tu auras rendu à ma fille Thia, si tu lui as fait un enfant. Sa mère ne lui dira plus à chaque lune : Mais, Thia, à quoi penses-tu donc ? Tu ne deviens point grosse. Tu as dix-neuf ans ; tu devrais avoir déjà deux enfants, et tu n’en as point…Si tu perds ainsi tes jeunes ans, que feras-tu dans ta vieillesse ? Thia, il faut que tu aies quelques défauts qui éloignent de toi les hommes ; corrige-toi mon enfant. À ton âge, j’avais été trois fois mère. (SVB 89)

The impregnation of his daughter would be such a relief to the whole family, Orou cannot even find the words to make his guest understand the importance of the good deed he has performed. If she were to have the aumônier’s child, Thia would no longer have to suffer the mockeries of her smug sisters or hear the nagging words of her mother, who believes there must be something wrong with a nineteen year-old girl with no children. And just as she feels rivalry with her older sisters, Thia is also in competition with her mother, who, at the same age, had already produced three children for her family and country. Again, we get the feeling that a Tahitian woman’s only reason for living is to create more Tahitians (who will grow up to be the soldiers, fishermen and farmers Orou talks about), and that a young woman without any children is wasting not only her youth but possibly her whole life. Thia, at the tender age of nineteen, has already thrown away a few good childbearing years, and needs to change her ways.

A woman’s children, a source of pride and wealth, become a kind of currency, as they make up a woman’s dowry; and the more children she has, the more desirable she becomes to men, as Orou states, « Plus nos filles ont d’enfants, plus elles sont recherchées; plus nos garçons sont vigoureux et beaux, plus ils sont riches. » (SVB 89) The word rich here seems somewhat ambiguous⁴, but this statement demonstrates the values and gender roles in this society. A man’s worth is measured by his looks and stamina, while a woman’s is measured by her children, both in number and in their health, attractiveness, and intelligence. A and B contrast this idea of sex appeal with European standards of beauty, where a woman with big eyes, nice skin, etc. is the most attractive:

…la femme sur laquelles les regards s’attache et que le désir poursuit est celle qui promet beaucoup d’enfants..., et qui les promet actifs, intelligents, courageux, sains et robustes…Une Otaïtienne disait un jour avec mépris à une autre femme du pays : « Tu es belle, mais tu fais de laids enfants ; je suis laide, mais je fais de beaux enfants, et c’est moi que les hommes préfèrent. » (SVB 91)

The qualities of the woman herself don’t really even matter in Tahiti; she exists only to mother beautiful healthy children. Her only function is as a vessel body for carrying future soldiers and fathers. Again here we see competition between women: who has the most beautiful children and as a result, the admiration of Tahitian men?

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⁴ We’re reminded of the notion that the more numerous a family, the richer it is. This statement could mean that vigorous and handsome men are preferred by women, father a lot of children, and therefore are the richest men in Tahiti, if children are indeed a measure of wealth. Or it could be actual monetary wealth.
Sperm Gathering

When the vieillard speaks, he says good riddance to the French, who have, in his opinion, corrupted the innocent Tahitians, and are unforgivably ungrateful for the hospitality shown them by their hosts, who generously and happily share their food, homes, wives and daughters with their guests. But Orou describes the situation very differently, and as it turns out, the reason the Tahitians are so quick to offer up their wives and daughters to the French visitors is in the hopes of expanding and improving the quality of the Tahitian labor force through procreation. The French have something very valuable to offer the Tahitians: their semen. Orou tells his guest,

Nous avons de terres immenses en friche; nous manquons de bras; et nous t’en avons demandé. Nous avons des calamités épidémiques à réparer et nous t’avons employé à réparer le vide qu’elles laisseront, nous avons des ennemis voisins à combattre, un besoin de soldats, et nous t’avons prié de nous en faire : le nombre de nos femmes et de nos filles est trop grand pour celui des hommes; et nous t’avons associé à notre tâche. (SVB 103)

Although at first one might have thought that the Tahitians are a most hospitable people, encouraging visitors to their nation to sleep with their women, it turns out that the Tahitians are just using the French, putting them to work in their baby-making factory. Reproduction is a serious matter, a duty in this society, for both men and women, especially during these difficult times. The Tahitians have suffered a loss, they are anticipating competition, and need to increase production of human beings, and they are enlisting the help of their French visitors in this exhausting, ongoing task, because the Tahitian men can’t keep up, they are falling behind in their work. Orou continues, « Parmi ces femmes et ces filles, il y en a dont nous n’avons jamais pu obtenir d’enfants, et ce sont celles que nous avons exposées à vos premiers embrassements. » (SVB 103) Not only are they putting the Europeans to work, but they have assigned them the most difficult job of all: that of impregnating the women who have yet to bear children (not for lack of trying, of course).

Along with increasing the quantity of babies produced, they are actually trying to improve their product, to breed a superior human race. Orou comments,

Plus robustes, plus sains que nous, nous nous sommes aperçus au premier

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5 « Tu t’es promené toi et les tiens, dans nôtre île, tu as été respecté, tu as joui de tout, tu n’as trouvé sur ton chemin ni barrière ni refus. On t’invitait, tu t’asseyais, on étalait devant toi l’abondance du pays. » SVB p. 54.
6 For the idea of Tahiti as a baby factory, see Rex (who uses this phrase on page 159 to describe Tahiti), as well as Andrew Cowell, “Diderot’s Tahiti and Enlightenment sexual economics.” Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century 332 (1995): 349-364., and Andrzej Dziedzic, “Liberté, propriété et sexualité dans le Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville.” Chimères 25, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 45-55.
7 On sex as a duty, see Cowell, p. 351, as well as Dziedzic, p. 50-51
The Tahitians aren’t interested in just any semen—or perhaps they are, and the perceived exceptional quality of French semen is just an added bonus—but with the help of the Europeans, and the submissive cooperation of their most beautiful women, they are performing some kind of experiment to see what will result from the combination of their own good health and vitality with the intelligence of the French. They are calculating to create a child with the best qualities of each race. The role of women in this system is to receive the good genes of the men, to combine them with their own good genes (which I suppose is why they have chosen, as Orou says, the best-looking females of their species for this task, although this idea may be slightly inconsistent with the above passage about the ugly woman making beautiful children and being more desirable), and to bear the new-and-improved Tahitian. This supposed primitive society is not content to remain that way; they will not wait for evolution and the normal progression of civilization to better their people and nation. This culture, which claims to attach great importance to what is natural, is actually trying to improve upon what nature, their ‘souveraine maîtresse’ has provided them with thus far.

The Baby Factory: Restrictions on Sex

We find ourselves in the midst of a society where physical pleasure has been at the very least diminished, if not altogether eliminated\(^9\) and where sex has only one purpose: procreation. Where western morals restrict physical love to the confines of marriage, this society restricts it to the confines of reproduction. Engaging in sexual activities for any reason other than doing the work of making babies is unimaginable as well as unacceptable for the Tahitians. Because the main goal of their civilization is to expand and improve the population, because the men can barely keep up in the work of impregnating women, because there are women who have (strangely enough) not fulfilled their duty to society by bearing children, then why would those who cannot contribute to the population augmentation actually try and do any of the ‘work’, when there will be no results? Those who are unable to reproduce are not only prohibited from engaging in such behavior, they are marked so as to alert the rest of the community that they are out of circulation. The scarlet letter of Tahiti is the veil, black symbolizing old age and sterility, gray for menstruating women, white for adolescent girls. Just as there are those in France who violate the restrictions on sex outside of marriage, there are some Tahitians who will ignore their laws as well, as Orou tells us, « Celle qui quitte ce voile et se mêle avec les hommes est une libertine, celui qui relève ce voile et s’approche de la femme stérile est un libertin. » \(^{(SVB\ 97)}\) However, as far as the teenagers are concerned, « Ôter sa chaîne, relever son voile est une faute qui se commet rarement, parce que nous

\(^9\) Rex remarks, “...copulation has been taken out of the sphere of enjoyment...” p. 159.
When in Rome...

Tahiti, which at first glance seemed to be an island paradise of sexual freedom, in fact has turned human sexuality into a perfunctory activity aimed only at reproduction, and has imposed upon it its own set of strict rules. Women, instead of being free of sexual inhibitions and shame, have been objectified by their society as an essential cog in the infant producing machine that is Tahiti. The women know a different kind of shame, the humiliation of having ugly children, or even worse, no children at all. What appears to be sexual liberation to the repressed Europeans is rather simply another kind of sexual morality, just as strict but with very different rules. Their entire civilization revolves around reproduction; physical love becomes more of a duty or a chore than a pleasure; they even recruit foreign visitors to help them in their efforts.

Two conclusions can be drawn from all this, as A and B neatly wrap things up in the Suite du dialogue. The first is this: « Vices et vertus, tout est également dans la nature. » (SVB 123) Is there really such a thing as ‘natural law’? In a way, all laws are natural because they are created by men, who are natural beings, children of nature. B speaks of three main codes to which men are subject: « le code de la nature, le code civil, et le code religieux. » (SVB 101) These three systems of laws overlap one another, reinforce one another and contradict one another, to form the fabric of each culture’s system of values. All societies have rules, no matter how free and liberal, or primitive and natural the civilization may seem at first, just as they all have rule-breakers as well. Tahiti has its rules, and it also has its rebels. Though their standards for what is acceptable behavior may be very different from those of western cultures, these conventions do exist. Furthermore, there are differing opinions and perspectives among the Tahitians; the vieillard’s negative reaction to the arrival of the Europeans (who corrupt the happy savages with their concepts of greed and selfishness) is very different from Orou’s more positive and optimistic one (the French have a lot to offer and can help, rather than ruin, his society).

The second conclusion of the Supplément is anticipated by Orou early on, when the aumônier hesitates about the offer to sleep with one of the women of the house. Orou demonstrates his intuitive cultural understanding when he says, « Je ne te propose pas de porter dans ton pays les mœurs d’Orou, mais Orou, ton hôte et ton ami, te supplie de te prêter aux mœurs d’Otaïti. » (SVB 78), and later « Mais tu n’accuseras pas les mœurs d’Europe par celles d’Otaïti, ni par conséquent les mœurs d’Otaïti par celles de ton

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10 SVB p. 89. The ‘chaine’ is a kind of chastity belt worn by young men until they have proven their stamina and virility, until about the age of twenty-two.
11 « L’AUMÔNIER—Avez-vous des châtiments pour ce libertinage? OROU—Point d’autres que le blame. » SVB p. 98.
12 On the objectification of Tahitian women, see Dziedzic, p. 48.
13 See, for example, Dena Goodman, “The Structure of Political Argument in Diderot’s Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville.” Diderot Studies 21 (1983): 123-137., as well as Rex, p. 164-166.
pays. » (SVB 98) Though Orou at first knows nothing of the rules of western morality, and as he learns, finds them arbitrary and nonsensical, he is still able to see their importance to western society. They are so different from the rules of his culture, they can’t be compared or judged against each other to decide whose system is superior. B makes an important distinction between laws and morals: laws are the rules of a society and morality are the society’s acceptance and adherence to the laws, « si les lois, bonnes ou mauvaises, ne sont point observées, la pire condition d’une société, il n’y a point de mœurs. » (SVB 120) Morality, then, is the respect one has for a society’s laws. By this logic, there would be nothing wrong or immoral about changing one’s behavior depending on one’s surroundings; which is why the aumônier, who has taken a vow of celibacy, can enjoy each of the daughters and finally the wife, with very little persuasion, it seems, and also without guilt. This is the conclusion A and B decide upon:

B. – Nous parlerons contre les lois insensées jusqu’à ce qu’on les réforme; et, en attendant, nous nous y soumettrons. Celui qui, de son autorité privée, enfreint une loi mauvaise, autorise tout autre à enfreindre les bonnes. Il y a moins d’inconvénients à être fou avec des fous, qu’à être sage tout seul… Imitons le bon aumônier, moine en France, sauvage dans Otaïti.
A. – Prendre le froc du pays où l’on va, et garder celui du pays où l’on est. (SVB 131)

Rebellion and nonconformity will always lead to chaos and disorder; it is easiest, and therefore best, to simply abide by the laws of whichever society you happen to find yourself in; to be, like the aumônier, obliging and adaptable to the current situation. This is not to say that one should always blindly accept every law, that revolution is not a good thing, but that until it becomes possible to change the system, it is better to try and conform to it.
CHAPTER 2

TO CONFORM OR NOT TO CONFORM: SUZANNE SIMONIN IN THE SOCIETY OF WOMEN

We will now leave the Tahitians behind to travel to another world, that of Catholic nuns. We have established, by examining Tahitian society in comparison with western culture, that there may not necessarily be a right or wrong morality, and that the easiest way to live in a community is to conform to its rules. Now we study the community of the religious convent, apply this same theory of conformity, and see how important it actually is. The convent, like the island, is its own little world isolated away from the rest of society. And the convent, like Tahiti, is governed by its own set of rules. Although it is in fact subject to the exterior and largely absent authority of the Catholic Church, within the convent walls, the members of this community, along with the mother superior—herself a prisoner as well as a ruler—create their own culture with its own way of doing things. Each of the convents that imprison Suzanne Simonin, the title character of Diderot’s *La Religieuse*, forms a distinct mini-society. Forced into the religious life against her will at an early age, she is adamant in her refusal to belong to any of these communities; her memoirs recount her ambivalent resistance and her constant struggle to gain her freedom from this life, and describe all of the hardships she endures along the way. Ironically, though she likes to play the innocent victim, to blame all of her suffering on others—her cruel parents, her hypocritical fellow nuns, her perverted superiors—she in fact brings her woes upon herself, and creates her own melodramatic misery. Much of the extreme anguish Suzanne feels through most of her life could be avoided if she were simply to accept her fate and conform to the society that has been chosen for her. Instead, she deliberately makes an unwanted but bearable situation completely unbearable.

*A Black Sheep*

Even in her own home, Suzanne has always been an outsider; she does not even

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14 Walter E. Rex notes that Suzanne demonstrates, especially under the reign of the tyrannical Sainte-Christine, a “need to destroy herself with punishment,” adding, “Suzanne was getting exactly what she had been asking for.” “Secrets from Suzanne: the tangled motives of *La Religieuse*,” in *The attraction of the contrary: Essays on the literature of the French Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 130-131. See also Manuela Mourao, “The compromise of enlightened rationalism in Diderot’s *La Religieuse*,” *Romance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (October 2001): 223-238, who comments on Suzanne’s efforts to make herself hated.

belong to the little community of the family. She comments on her parents’ preference for her two sisters, « S’il arrivait qu’on dit à ma mère: ‘Vous avez des enfants charmants…’ jamais cela ne s’entendait de moi. » 16 She later discovers—or rather is forced to acknowledge—what the reader has already been able to guess: she is the unwanted result of her mother’s indiscretion, a painful reminder of the mistake that will become Suzanne’s burden. Far from being a minor detail, just another hardship Suzanne must endure, her illegitimacy is in fact the very source of her woes: it denies her any future as well as any place in the world,17 two things she regrets most about life in the convent. She will repeatedly remind us that she does not wish to be shut away in the convent; she has a vague dream of freedom, of living in the outside world, as the solution to all her problems. As we will soon see through her actions, she will not be content to wear the habit and blend in with the rest of the nuns; instead she constantly calls (mostly negative) attention to herself, as if she needs confirmation of her existence. Her fate will be to atone her mother’s sin; she cannot have a life of her own. Paradoxically, she will have to devote her entire existence to excusing the fact that she actually exists. Because she has been denied membership in society, she is exiled to the convent, a fate that for her is the equivalent of a death sentence, expressed by her lament, « Hélas! je n’ai ni père ni mère ; je suis une malheureuse qu’on déteste et qu’on veut enterrer ici toute vive. » (LR 49) She will not accept this as her destiny, she will struggle to make a place for herself in a world that has none for her18, that has tried to do away with her. This stubbornness will be the beginning of all her troubles and the basis for her memoirs.

Shattered Dreams

Before she realizes that the convent is to become her lifelong prison, Suzanne is cooperative about staying there. She says of going to her first convent, « J’étais si mal à la maison, que cet événement ne m’affligea point; et j’allai à Sainte-Marie, c’est mon premier couvent, avec beaucoup de gaieté. » (LR 47) At first the convent provides an

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18 On the subject of Suzanne as a character with no past, no future and no place in the world, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Privilege of Unknowing: Diderot’s The Nun,” in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); and especially Anne Coudreuse, “Pour un nouveau lecteur: La Religieuse de Diderot et ses destinaires,” *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l’Encyclopédie* 27 (octobre 1999): 43-57. Coudreuse makes the fascinating observation that Suzanne is nameless until she enters the convent. Her name appears for the first time six pages into the novel; after she has taken the habit, the superior flatters her: « sœur Suzanne est une très belle religieuse. » (LR p. 51) Suzanne has no place in the world outside of the convent, no real existence, no name until the mother superior names her. Suzanne’s own mother doesn’t even call her by name until she writes from her deathbed « Adieu, Suzanne » (p. 89). And, at the end of the novel, after she has escaped the convent and is living a miserable existence outside the convent walls, her maîtresse calls her ‘Marie’ (p. 266). Suzanne has changed her name, her identity, in order to create a place for herself in a world she has never belonged to as Suzanne Simonin.
escape, a safe haven away from the family that doesn’t love her and doesn’t want her. It is only later, when she must face the fact that she may never leave, that she becomes miserable and stubborn, and begins to hate the religious life. Her disdain begins when she discovers that living in the convent is not a vacation to be spent dreaming of a future in the world, but a life sentence. She prefaces the moment of realization: « …ma tête s’était remplie de projets séduisants, lorsqu’on me fit demander au parloir. » (LR 48) The odd structure of this statement shows how Suzanne’s hopes and dreams are about to be crushed in a single instant, when she will be told that she is expected to become a nun.

The mother superior of Ste-Marie tries to console her, to reason with her, to persuade her. Suzanne describes the scene: « Elle joignit à ces propos insidieux tant de caresses, tant de protestations d’amitié, tant de faussetés douces; je savais où j’étais, je ne savais où l’on me mènerait, et je me laissai persuader. » (LR 50) There are several interesting aspects to note in this sentence. First and foremost, it shows us for the first time the power of the caress and its effect on Suzanne.19 It also, for both Suzanne and the reader, establishes the affectionate caress of a mother superior as a common practice in the convent, an act that will be taken to extreme measures later by Mme *** in the convent of Arpajon. Second, the use of the phrase ‘faussetés douces’ seems significant, especially considering the fact that Suzanne lets herself be persuaded. She recognizes the hypocrisy of the superior, she knows she is being lied to, manipulated by kind words and caresses, but still she can be convinced. Finally, the sense of confusion or insecurity she seems to feel about what the future holds for her seems out of character. As we will see later, she doesn’t seem to give much thought to the consequences of her actions and where they will lead her. Or when she does consider them, she is nonetheless adamant in her resistance and reckless in her conduct.

At any rate, she has conformed for the first time to the rules of the convent, but it won’t last long. As the time to take her vows approaches, she has second thoughts and she receives but resists encouragement from all sides, her parents, the mother superior, and the nuns of the community. When they grow tired of her unwillingness to cooperate, they shut her away in her cell, where she hatches a plan of public protest, which, as even she can see, will only end in disaster. When she announces her (false) intention to accept her fate, « Voilà la joie répandue dans toute la maison, les caresses revenues avec toutes les flatteries et toute la séduction. » (LR 58) As soon as she conforms, or pretends to do so, the whole community is happy, and the affection that had been withheld as a form of punishment is restored. Her period of rebellion behind her, « …il n’y avait plus que des roses pour moi. »20 This could be true, if it weren’t for Suzanne’s stubborn defiance.

The Pursuit of Misery

19 It has been suggested that because of her estranged relationship with her parents that Suzanne is in some way hungry for love and affection, which she finds in the convent (under some superiors more than others). See, for example, Rita Goldberg, “La Religieuse and Clarissa: Convent and Bordello,” in Sex and Enlightenment: Women in Richardson and Diderot (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); as well as Vivienne Mylne, “What Suzanne knew: lesbianism and La Religieuse,” Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century 208 (1982): 167-173.

20 As the mère des novices promises, LR p. 58.
In the *Supplément*, the aumônier tells Orou that « [les moines femelles] sèchent de douleur, périssent d’ennui », a statement to which the response is, « Ô le vilain pays!…vous êtes plus barbares que nous. » (*SVB* 105) Orou sees right away, as Suzanne observes throughout her stay in the convent environment, just how unnatural and inhumane it is to isolate a group of women away from society. The convent seems to him, as it does to Suzanne, some sort of cruel and unusual punishment. Suzanne will complain of both *douleur* and *ennui*, as well as others, throughout the course of the novel. She decides early on that she hates the very idea of living in the convent, and will not let anything change her mind, not even the actual experience of living in the convent itself, even though at times, it’s not all that bad. She boldly states, « J’étais, je suis, et je serai toute ma vie mécontente de mon état. » (*LR* 118) As we will see, there will in be brief moments of happiness, lapses in her insubordination, namely her relationships with Mme de Moni and with Mme ***, during which she will forget to complain that she is miserable living a life someone else has chosen for her. But in the end she will always remember that she is destined to be miserable, and won’t allow anything to get in the way of that. She is asked several times throughout the course of the novel by different characters why she feels such contempt for the religious life, and she expresses a rather vague longing to do something else—anything else, to live anywhere but the convent. She tells the evil Sainte-Christine, « C’est la maison, c’est mon état, c’est la religion; je ne veux être enfermée ni ici ni ailleurs. » (*LR* 120) Later she will tell her lawyer, « Je hais la vie solitaire, je sens là que je la hais, je sens que je la haïrai toujours. » (*LR* 161) Again with this definitive statement, Suzanne leaves little room for the possibility of change. Everything is in black and white, she does not wish to be in the convent, and nothing will ever change the way she feels, period. To M. Manouri’s suggestion that she move to a different convent, she replies, « Et puis, que trouverai-je dans un autre couvent ? Mon cœur inflexible, des supérieures impitoyables, des religieuses qui ne seront pas meilleures qu’ici, les mêmes devoirs, les mêmes peines. » (*LR* 160) At this point in the narrative, she has experienced two completely different environments in one convent under the reigns of two very different superiors, but strangely she insists that they are all the same. She admits that regardless of the convent, first of all, her heart will remain inflexible.21 The troubles with the rest of the community are listed after her own stubbornness; it seems that she knows and admits these problems to be a result of her inflexibility.

*My Mad Nun, My Fate, Myself*

Something significant happens in the convent of Sainte-Marie, which serves to reinforce and strengthen Suzanne’s determination to reject the religious life: she witnesses the escape of a crazed nun from her holding cell. As Suzanne watches the wild-eyed, disheveled sister run around screaming and pulling her own hair, she realizes she is getting a glimpse of her own future as a nun. This idea terrifies her, and she once again becomes determined to resist entering the convent. « Je vis mon sort dans celui de cette infortunée, et sur-le-champ il fut décidé, dans mon cœur, que je mourrais mille fois

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21 Suzanne’s mother foreshadows this, in a way, when she tells her daughter, « Mais vous ne sentez rien ; vous avez l’âme inflexible de votre père… » *LR* p. 73.
plutôt que de m’y exposer. » (LR 54) Suzanne has misread the warning; instead of recognizing what will happen to her if she doesn’t conform to the rules of her community, she believes this wild nun to be the image of herself if she is forced to remain in the convent. This image haunts her; it acts as a constant reminder that she must gain her freedom at all costs. « A tout moment ma religieuse folle me revenait à l’esprit, et je me renouvelais le serment de ne faire aucun vœu. » (LR 54) She identifies with this poor woman—in this mad nun she sees herself. Suzanne claims ownership of her with the possessive pronoun ma, and at the same time, takes ownership of her own fate. As we will see, she will become this nun through her own doing. Although she decides she’d rather die than expose herself to this physical and mental torture, ironically, she will bring this very torture upon herself in trying to avoid it through her resistance to accept the convent as her home.

The Art of Seduction

Although she had sworn she would never let herself be forced into the convent or be turned into the hideous crazy nun, after her shameful exile from Sainte-Marie and several months spent in the home where she has never been welcome, Suzanne eventually and reluctantly agrees to enter the convent of Longchamp. I will come back to the reason behind this change of heart later. For now, we will see that her world does not immediately crumble around her, as she expected, when she joins this tranquil community. Instead, she finds herself under the benign rule of a woman who will become very dear to her and with whom, it has been suggested, she will have a nonsexual romance. Suzanne’s first two years at Longchamp are glossed over in a single sentence, sandwiched between two long and loving descriptions of Mme de Moni’s goodness: « Je fis mon noviciat sans dégoût; je passe rapidement sur ces deux années, parce qu’elles n’eurent rien de triste pour moi que le sentiment secret que j’avais de ne pas vers l’entrée d’un état pour lequel je n’étais point faite. » (LR 79-80) Suzanne has resigned herself to living in the convent, she causes no problems for others or for herself; her only complaint is the dread she feels over taking the vows that will forever confine her to her prison. The time passes quickly and uneventfully, and Suzanne is more or less happy.

The rule of Mme de Moni is one of sensual pleasure. This mother superior does not believe in corporal punishment; instead she uses the persuasive power of seduction. As Suzanne tells us, « Son dessein n’était pas de séduire; mais certainement c’était ce qu’elle faisait. » (LR 80) She brings her nuns closer to God through spiritual ecstasy. While she prays aloud, « d’abord on l’écoutait; peu à peu on était entrainé, on s’unissait à elle, l’âme tressaillait, et l’on partageait ses transports. » (LR 80) After these tremors

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22 On the romantic nature of Suzanne’s relationship with Mme de Moni, see Rex, as well as chapter six of Rita Goldberg. It has even been suggested that the heights of ecstasy reached in this relationship set Suzanne up for her more physically expressive romance with Mme *** at Ste-Eutrope.

23 A lot has been written on Mme de Moni’s blending of religion and sensuality. See, for example, Nadine Monier, “Diderot/Foucault: La Religieuse, Jacques le fataliste et La Volonté de savoir,” Constructions (1985): 17-37; Christopher Rivers, “Intelligibles pour une femme honnête: Sexuality, Textuality and Knowledge in Diderot’s La Religieuse and Gautier’s Mademoiselle de Maupin” The Romanic Review 86, no. 1 (): 1-29; David Marshall, “La Religieuse: Sympathy and Seduction.” in The Surprising Effects of Sympathy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); as well as Conroy, Lloyd, and Rex.
of the soul, these heights of ecstasy, the nuns weep tears of joy. They become addicted to this exhilaration, to the excitement of religion as Mme de Moni represents it to them. They inevitably want to relive this ecstasy, as Suzanne reports, « Quelques-unes m’ont dit qu’elles sentaient naître en elles le besoin d’être consolées comme celui d’un très grand plaisir; et je crois qu’il ne m’a manqué qu’un peu plus d’habitude pour en venir là. » (LR 80) Mme de Moni gets the nuns hooked on the elation of religious devotion, and keeps them coming back for more. Unfortunately this is not the case with Suzanne; in a community ruled by the seductive talents of the mother superior, she refuses to be seduced, tricked into accepting and enjoying the religious life. She shares the ecstasy of Mme de Moni, but she does not seem to feel the urgency of religious fervor. As the time of her profession approaches, she falls into a deep depression, putting Mme de Moni’s powers to the test and eventually draining her of these powers and of all life. Suzanne cannot conform to the way of life in this community, and so she inadvertently destroys it. She resists the seductive abilities of Mme de Moni, causing her superior to question, doubt and then lose her talent as a direct liaison between the heavens and earth.

This mother superior makes a lasting impression on Suzanne, who will wear Mme de Moni’s portrait over her heart for the rest of her life. However, she will later downplay this relationship when she tells Mme ***, « J’étais malheureuse, et elle adoucissait mes peines. » (LR 208) In her memoirs, the description of her time spent at Longchamp with this cherished friend fills barely ten pages, and about half of these relate Suzanne’s feelings of melancholy and hesitation brought on by her upcoming vows. This last burst of resistance aside, it seems that Suzanne is actually happy in the convent with Mme de Moni. On the morning of the day when Suzanne is to take her vows, when Mme de Moni comes to check on her, they exchange these words:

——…Je voudrais bien que vous fussiez heureuse.
——Si vous m’aimez toujours, je le serai. (LR 83)

Suzanne has just admitted that, even though she will be forced to live out the rest of her days as something she does not want to be, she will be happy as long as she has the love of Mme de Moni. But this cannot be; as we have already noted, she has always been and swears to be forever miserable about having been forced into the religious life. This is someone who would rather die than be a nun. She has found a true friend in the convent, with whom she spends a lot of time; this is not the solitary life she claims to hate. Suzanne cannot be content with life in the convent, and so she must resist and destroy her chances of happiness within the convent walls. 24 Otherwise, she has no reason to make herself suffer, no reason to long for her freedom and plan her escape. She is happy in this situation, but if the story of her misfortunes is to go on, then her happiness cannot continue. The life she has not chosen for herself and does not want must be insufferable. She remains immune to Mme de Moni, destroying the rule of the convent as well as its ruler.

24 Walter E. Rex asserts that when she finds herself happy (or at least less miserable) at the convent of Arpajon, Suzanne must destroy her relationship with Mme *** as well as destroying the mother superior herself, in order to revert to her miserable state and then gain her freedom. I think that the same logic can be applied here to her romance with Mme de Moni.
The next mother superior, Sainte Christine, rules the convent through tyranny. Where the sweet and gentle Mme de Moni relied on pleasure rather than pain to guide her flock, Sainte Christine is a firm believer in the use of corporal punishment. Although at first she does not pay much attention to Suzanne, « Je fus indifférente...à la supérieure actuelle...mais je ne tardai pas à empier mon sort par des actions que vous appellerez ou imprudence, ou fermeté... » (LR 91) Suzanne will not be ignored, she does her best to make herself noticed, so that everyone will be sure to know that she is the one member of the community who doesn’t want to be there. If there is to be no sympathetic consolation, as Mme de Moni had offered, for her bitter resentment of the religious life, Suzanne will ask for and accept cruel punishment. She refuses to be intimidated by Sainte-Christine’s reign of terror and will not conform, no matter how severe of a beating she must take. She deliberately does everything she can think of to make a bad situation (in her own eyes) so much worse, even though she realizes that her actions are foolish and irresponsible. To justify her hatred of the convent, she turns it into the horrifying prison she believes it to be and wants to expose to the rest of the world. If she can make herself hated, she will prove to everyone that she does not belong in this society. Just as she plotted to create a public scandal at the ceremony at Ste-Marie, resulting in her banishment from the community, she is now scheming to wreak havoc in the convent of Longchamp, once again to make herself the center of negative attention. In her own words, « Je n’omis rien de ce qui pouvait me faire craindre, haïr, me perdre, et j’en vins à bout. » Suzanne enumerates her acts of rebellion, which are later echoed in the words of Sainte-Christine as she lists Suzanne’s offenses against the house:

Vous avez affecté de louer celle qui m’avait précédée, pour me rabaisser ; de mépriser les usages qu’elle avait proscrits, les lois qu’elles avait abolies et que j’ai cru devoir rétablir ; de soulever toute la communauté ; d’enfreindre les règles, de diviser les esprits ; de manquer à tous vos devoirs ; de me forcer à vous punir et à punir celles que vous avez séduites. (LR 101)

I think it is interesting and possibly significant, although I’m not sure why, that this superior is called Sister Sainte-Christine while the other two are called Madame... Maybe the fact that she calls her by her first name, along with the fact that she is referred to as a ‘sœur’ rather than a ‘mère’ is indicative of Suzanne’s lack of respect for her, it could be ironic that the most evil of the three superiors is called a saint, or it could be another way to set her apart from the other two ‘good’ superiors.

Sedgwick implies Suzanne is some sort of drama queen, constantly calling attention to herself, “She keeps each of the convent regimes...whipped up to a high lather, whether in celebration, envy or punishment of her (p. 36). See also Marshall, for his analysis of Suzanne as a self-proclaimed spectacle.

LR p. 93. In an earlier version of the manuscript, Diderot wrote « j’y réussis » where Suzanne now says « j’en vins à bout » (See p. 340 of the appendix “Choix de Variantes” in LR p. 327-374). The ideas behind these two phrases are not exactly the same, but they compliment each other. The claim of success supports the idea that she is asking for precisely the treatment she receives, and vice versa; whereas « j’en vins à bout » shows her desperation for the community’s hatred; Suzanne is willing to pull out all the stops.

See LR pages 91-92, where Suzanne specifically outlines her five-step plan to turn the whole community against her.
The similarities between Suzanne’s plan to make herself hated and the accusations of the mother superior indicate that Suzanne has done what she has set out to do, and that she gets exactly what she deserves. Though she might be suffering severe mistreatment, she has actually planned and committed the crimes for which she is being punished. It may be inhumane treatment, but it is not altogether unfair. The punishments might be extreme, but she has not been singled out and persecuted for no apparent reason. Her careful calculations and the deliberate actions she takes to make herself a victim show that she fully understands the rules of the house, and chooses not to conform to them.

Suzanne’s Sob Story

Once the desired result is achieved, as soon Suzanne is hated by the entire community and endures persecution and punishment, she has the necessary excuse and motivation to engage a lawyer to free her from the convent. She needed a pathetically dramatic story to attract the sympathy of the public, so she created one for herself, she deliberately made it happen. Her descriptions of the horrible mistreatment that she must suffer within the convent walls provide her best chance for a life outside of them. No one would have taken her seriously had she tried the same thing earlier, while living among peaceful and spiritually satisfied nuns under the reign of Mme de Moni. At the very end of the novel, after she has escaped the convent and is working with a laundress, Suzanne’s mistress remarks on the story of the escaped nun, « Elle n’avait qu’à boire, manger, prier Dieu et dormir; elle était bien où elle était; que ne s’y tenait-elle? » (LR 266) A dissatisfied nun obviously invokes little sympathy from those who work long hard hours just to survive in the world, while in the convent, the nuns have everything they need. But the trials of a tortured nun will appeal to the compassion of human nature. Suzanne understands this concept even better than her lawyer, who publishes « un premier mémoire qui fit peu de sensation; il y avait trop d’esprit, pas assez de pathétique, presque point de raisons. » (LR 151) She needs a pretty compelling reason to justify her leaving the convent. She has consciously created a reason to be hated and persecuted within the community, and this hatred and torment provides a reason to be loved and pitied by the outside world. Unfortunately, M. Manouri’s memorandum does not effectively convey the true horrors of her situation, which provide the only justification she has in asking for her freedom, and her case does not go well.29

29 This idea of effectively conveying the horrors of the situation to evoke sympathy is reflected in the anecdote recounted in the Préface-Annexe, where one of Diderot’s friends finds him crying while writing Suzanne’s tragic story; followed by this statement, « Il est certain que s’il eût achevé cette histoire, elle serait devenue un des romans les plus vrais, les plus intéressants et les plus pathétiques que nous ayons. On n’en pouvait pas lire une page sans verser des pleurs… » (LR 273-274). In trying to lure his friend the marquis de Croismare back to Paris, Diderot tells a heart-wrenching story sure to create sympathy and spark a desire to help this poor nun ; and he does this so effectively that he himself gets caught up in the story and feels sorry for his own fictional character as well. The Préface-Annexe ends with the following question on the letters exchanged between the fictional nun and Croismare, a question that can be applied to the novel as a whole as well as to the meta-narratives within the text itself as Suzanne tells her story over and over : « Quelles sont les bonnes ? Sont-ce qui auraient peut-être obtenu l’admiration ? Ou celles qui devaient certainement produire l’illusion ? » (LR 306).
Suzanne creates a new rule for the community of Longchamp: the hatred and rejection of this rebellious nun. When she launches her campaign to make herself hated, «…bientôt je me trouvai seule. J’avais des amies en petit nombre…elles me visiteraient la nuit ou à des heures défendues…» (LR 93) She has made herself into an enemy with whom the others are afraid to be caught fraternizing. No one will dare speak to her in broad daylight, they must sneak around at night so that no one finds out. Far from being indifferent to her, some of the other nuns, specifically the superior’s pets, spend their free time stealing her things, throwing glass on the floor for her to walk on, making noise at night to keep her awake, rolling her food in dirt, etc. Those who don’t participate in her torture cannot or will not do anything to help her. One day when the community finds Suzanne slumped down in the hallway outside the chapel, Sainte-Christine orders the other nuns to step on her lifeless body. «Quelques-unes obéirent, et me foulèrent aux pieds ; d’autres furent moins inhumaines ; mais aucune n’osa me tendre la main pour me relever.» (LR 129) The hatred and mistreatment of Suzanne is now a rule to which the rest of the community conforms.

At the end of the Supplément, A and B have decided «Il y a moins d’inconvénients à être fou avec des fous qu’à être sage tout seul.» (SVB 131) Even if the laws don’t make any sense, it is better to conform and fit in with the rest of the society, rather than to be self-righteous by oneself. This logic can certainly be applied to Suzanne’s situation in the convent. She has decided to be sage, and she ends up toute seule. She does not want to be folle with the rest of the women who are actually crazy or hypocritical enough to choose the convent. Although she doesn’t really ever try, she truly believes she can’t conform to or fit into this society. «J’ai envié, j’ai demandé à Dieu l’heureuse imbécillité d’esprit de mes compagnes ; je ne l’ai point obtenue, il ne me l’accordera pas.» (LR 162) The convent cannot be her destiny because she doesn’t possess the stupidity required to be a nun; she envies this quality in the rest of the women, she has asked God for the same, but he hasn’t and will not respond to her plea. The difference between herself and the rest of the nuns is apparently the will of God. This proves she does not belong in the convent, and she has God himself on her side.

Suzanne actually has one friend in the convent, la sœur Sainte-Ursule, who risks everything to help her, and in the end sacrifices her own life after she becomes infected with Suzanne’s contagious disease of nonconformity.30 It seems to be more than a simple coincidence that the one sister that will help Suzanne, who abets the black sheep of the convent in the stunt which will bring dishonor and shame to the community, the nun who sits by Suzanne’s (supposed) deathbed, is the one who dies while everyone else (Suzanne included) is having lunch. The response of Sainte-Christine to the death of this member of her society is described as cold.31 Though Suzanne expresses feelings of love for her

30 David Marshall attributes Ursule’s death to a contagious disease of sympathy, which will later be reflected in Mme ***’s contagious illness (the ‘symptoms’ appear for the first time when Suzanne relates the story of her trials at Longchamp). I believe, however, that Ursule falls prey to the disastrous consequences of nonconformity. Everyone else in this community hates Suzanne; and when Ursule decides to take a stand, to openly show her love for the black sheep of the convent, she falls deathly ill and dies.

31 See LR p. 172 for Ursule’s death scene. Suzanne’s description of finding her only friend dead in her bed, although she claims inexpressible douleur, is, in a way, fairly cold and distant as well: «Elle [Sainte-Christine] y monta, accompagnée de quelques autres ; je les suivis ; elles entrèrent dans sa cellule ; la
only friend, and sorrow over her death, it is hard to ignore the way in which she has used her. She involves her in the scandal she is about to bring to Longchamp without asking her, without any regard for what may happen to her. It seems Suzanne barely even knows Ursule when she puts her at risk by thrusting her memoirs upon her. « J’étais assise à côté d’une jeune religieuse qui m’aimait…elle ne me parlait point, mais certainement elle souffrait. » (LR 99) Suzanne selfishly draws an unknowing Ursule into her schemes because she suspects the sympathetic nun likes her enough to help; she takes advantage of Ursule’s compassion, as well as her connections with the outside world. Suzanne knows no one outside of the convent that can help her, so Ursule proves herself to be a very useful accomplice in Suzanne’s plot.

Live to Tell: Rage against the Dying of the Light

Back when she saw the crazed nun at the convention of Ste-Marie, Suzanne swore to herself and us that she would rather die than expose herself to this horrible fate. 32 Now we see that not only has she welcomed this fate with open arms, it hasn’t killed her. No amount of physical torment can extinguish the fire in her heart; not even a seemingly fatal illness can destroy Suzanne Simonin. She claims she does not wish to live, but she suspects that the others wish her to die, and this feeds her desire to survive. She lives on to tell the story of all the injustices that have been done her in life. 33 Suzanne wants to claim a place in the world. She is not content to accept her fate and blend in with the rest of the nuns, she constantly finds away to stand out, to get others to notice her. Just as she does not want to be trapped in the convent, isolated from the rest of the world, I would venture to say that, despite her desperate musings, she doesn’t really wish to die either. Death would only be another way for the world to reject her, and she refuses to be done away with.

She adds to the drama of her story by suggesting that she is so miserable she is sometimes tempted to put an end her suffering, but every time she resolves to do so, something—possibly the hand of God—stops her. Her life is hell on earth, everyone hates her; she is even told by one nun, « Vous n’êtes pas digne de vivre! » (LR 127) She believes the rest of the community wants her dead, and so living becomes another way for her to rebel against the convent. « On me dégoûta de presque tous les moyens de m’ôter la vie, parce qu’il me sembla que, loin de s’y opposer, on me les présentait…En vérité, je ne vivais que parce qu’elles souhaitaient ma mort. » (LR 96) She won’t give the other nuns the satisfaction and peace her death would bring to the house. She is able to defy the community simply by living and breathing.

Though the evil nuns may hope to dispose of her in any way possible, whether through constant physical abuse or emotional harassment leading to her own suicide,

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32 See My Mad Nun, My Fate, Myself, above.
Suzanne remains an innocent with a pure heart, and wishes no harm to her persecutors. She even seems to pity them a little, and no matter how horrifically she has been tortured, she would never change places with them. No matter how much she is bullied, she refuses to snap back at her tormentors. She prefers to stay on the receiving end; she seems to enjoy being the victim. She is almost smug in the fact that she is somehow superior to the rest of the community—not only is she far less idiotic and hypocritical, as she commented earlier, but she is also so much sweeter and kinder and holier than her fellow sisters.

J’ai souffert, j’ai beaucoup souffert ; mais le sort de mes persécutrices me paraît et m’a toujours paru plus à plaindre que le mien. J’aimerais mieux, j’aurais mieux aimé mourir que de quitter mon rôle, à la condition de prendre le leur... La mémoire, la honte et le remords du crime leur resteront jusqu’à l’heure dernière. Elles s’accusent déjà ; n’en doutez pas ; elles s’accuseront toute leur vie ; et la terreur descendra sous la tombe avec elles. (*LR* 149)

Suzanne’s conception of a fate worse than death has changed a bit from the image of the crazy disheveled nun to that of the heartless sisters that have tormented her. Suzanne has survived the worst of her troubles, at this point in the novel, and hopes for better times ahead. But the nuns who have committed the horrible crimes against her have a lifetime of guilt and shame ahead of them, not to mention whatever will happen afterwards. Suzanne decides that this is in fact the worst possible destiny. The good news is that she can sleep at night, with a clear conscience, while those who have tortured her will now torture themselves for the rest of their lives. What Suzanne doesn’t know is that soon she will take the role of the tormentor when she (unintentionally of course) drives her spurned lesbian lover to madness. Mme *** of Arpajon will in turn become the mad nun that Suzanne first saw at Ste-Marie, then turned into at Longchamp.

For now Suzanne finds comfort in the fact that she is not as cruel as the rest of the convent. She would never dream of harming anyone, no matter how much they have hurt her. She reasserts her complete innocence to the Marquis de Croismare:

Une question, monsieur, que j’aurais à vous faire, c’est pourquoi, à travers toutes les idées funestes qui passent par la tête d’une religieuse désespérée, celle de mettre le feu à la maison ne lui vient point. Je ne l’ai point eue, ni d’autres non plus, quoique ce soit la chose la plus facile à exécuter : il ne s’agit, un jour de grand vent, que de porter un flambleau dans un grenier, dans un bûcher, dans un corridor. (*LR* 97)

She considers taking her own life, but the possibility of setting fire to the convent, of destroying her prison, never even occurs to her, even though it does seem the most simple and effective solution. She must have given it some consideration since the idea came to her, because she now has the details all worked out: a windy day, a flame, and all her

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34 Or at least, this is what she would have the reader believe, that she is innocent in every possible way. Josephs remarks that Suzanne claims to never experience the “demeaning sentiments of hatred and vindictiveness” p. 748.
problems are finished. She even suggests that there would be other, similar ways of
dealing with her problem, but unfortunately, those don’t occur to an innocent nun either.
Another obvious solution that doesn’t seem to cross her mind is the possibility of
conforming to the rules of the house. This idea is as inconceivable as the thought of
burning down the convent.

**Bordel and the Boudoir**

At the convent of Ste-Eutrope at Arpajon, ruled by chaos and disorder, religion is
mentioned only by accident, and life revolves around the boudoir. The image of this
convent is very different from those we have already seen; it seems like an ongoing social
event with the occasional interruptions of mass and confession. Mme ***, affectionately
referred to by Suzanne as a ‘folle créature’, is pictured as distracted, restless, and
indecisive, and her direction of the community as inconsistent:

> Voulez-vous que je vous donne, dans une petite chose, un exemple général
de son administration ? Deux fois l’année, elle courait de cellule en

cellule, et faisait jeter par les fenêtres toutes les bouteilles de liqueur
qu’elle y trouvait, et quatre jours après, elle-même en renvoyait à la
plupart de ses religieuses. Voilà celle à qui j’avais fait le vœu solennel
d’obéissance. (LR 180-181)

This is the first time Suzanne mentions her solemn vow of obedience; what’s even more
interesting is how she attaches it to the mother superior instead of to the Catholic Church.
At Longchamp, she showed no indication of any such feeling of obligation towards
Sainte-Christine, whom she actually defied, claiming to have agreed to certain duties and
nothing more, and she had the rulebook to back up her refusal. She felt more of an
obligation to the abstract authority of a book that to the actual flesh-and-blood ruler of
her community. She blatantly refused some of her orders in her last convent; now she
acknowledges a responsibility to obey. Suzanne could be trying to preface her ensuing
inappropriate relationship with Mme *** by reminding us that the other woman is in a
position of authority over her, that she owes this mother superior respect and obedience.

Suzanne discovers soon after she arrives at Ste-Eutrope that religion actually
plays a very minor role in the activities of the community. The nuns scamper joyfully
from room to room, chatting and having coffee, or gather in Mme ***’s boudoir to giggle
and gossip. When Suzanne plays and sings psalms on the mother superior’s spinet for the
other nuns, she is interrupted by Mme ***: « nous avons de la sainteté à l’église tant qu’il
nous plaît. Nous sommes seules ; celles-ci sont mes amies et elles seront aussi les
tiennes ; chante-nous quelque chose de plus gai. » (LR 187) The nuns of Ste-Eutrope get
their fill of Christianity in the chapel, and once that is out of the way, the convent
resumes its perpetual pajama party, complete with Mme ***’s own version of truth or
dare.

Life in this convent is not so bad; it is actually enjoyable. Suzanne describes an
intimate social gathering in the mother superior’s room as a beautiful painting. Mme

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35 See Rita Goldberg, p. 191.
***, exhausted from a long night spent trying to work things out with Thérèse, decides to have her dinner served in bed, and invites the youngest and prettiest nuns to gather around her with their sewing and crocheting as she relaxes. Only Suzanne is not working, as she tells us twice, just in case we missed it the first time. This could be symbolic of the fact that she has nothing to offer the community; it shows how she refuses to participate even in social events. She just takes up space in the convent and in Mme ***’s heart. But it also shows that she has to do absolutely nothing to gain the mother superior’s attention and affections; for once, she doesn’t have to make any effort to stand out. Though she’s busy inspecting the work of the other nuns, distributing compliments and caresses, Mme *** immediately notices when Suzanne gets up to answer Thérèse’s timid knock at the door. Suzanne is still an outsider in the convent, despite the fact, or maybe because of it, that she has become the center of the mother superior’s world. She observes the other nuns talking amongst themselves as she sits there, doing nothing. But she won’t deny that she enjoyed herself. She says of this little gathering, « Cette soirée fut délicieuse. » (LR 225)

The community of Sainte-Eutrope is very affectionate and hands-on. When Mme *** comes the first night to undress Suzanne, the young nun finds the caresses and compliments her superior heaps on her slightly embarrassing, and even a little odd. Upon reflection, she concludes that of course they were completely innocent displays of affection from a good and sensitive woman. At this point, she really has no real reason to suspect anything untoward; Suzanne has already seen and experienced, in other convents, the practice of caressing. Mme *** is simply getting carried away in this natural and normal way to express affection. Just as she created a new rule for the convent of Longchamp—Suzanne Simonin is to be hated and harassed—here the new rule is the opposite: Suzanne, as the mother superior’s new favorite, is to be loved and feared. When she sings for the others, they follow Mme ***’s lead and heap praises and caresses on her: « Je chantai donc une chansonnette assez délicate, et toutes battirent des mains, me louèrent, m’embrassèrent, m’embrassèrent, m’en demandèrent une seconde: petites minauderies fausses, dictées par la réponse de la supérieure. » (LR 187) Their caresses and compliments might not be sincere, but the other nuns are mimicking the mother superior and conforming to the rules of Ste-Eutrope. We saw the same kind of imitative behavior at Longchamp, where the favorites of Sainte-Christine hated and tormented Suzanne.

The other nuns will learn to use Suzanne and her influence over Mme ***. Kisses and caresses from Suzanne will become a kind of currency with which the good graces of the mother superior can be bought. It all begins when Thérèse has irritated Mme ***; and Suzanne graciously and innocently steps in to ask for forgiveness:

—Que je lui pardonne ? Je le veux bien, mais que me donnerez-vous ?
—Ah ! chère mère, serais-je assez heureuse pour avoir quelque chose qui vous plût et qui vous apaisât ?
Elle baisa les yeux, rougit et soupira ; en vérité, c’était comme un amant. (LR 194)

36 « Toutes travaillaient, excepté moi, comme je vous aï dit. » LR p. 222. On Suzanne’s repeating of details to ensure we are following her story, see Diaconoff.
37 See Vivienne Mylne.
Whether it is intentional or not, Suzanne is teasing the mother superior with her coquettish response to Mme ***’s somewhat suggestive question; she replies with her own suggestive question.\(^{38}\) The mother superior seems uncharacteristically embarrassed by Suzanne’s provocative words. In this exchange, the roles the two women will take on later are reversed—Suzanne is encouraging Mme *** to say more, to put her desires into words, while Mme *** acts timid and uncomfortable. Suzanne can see, even at this early point in their relationship, that the mother superior’s interest in her is more than friendly—she compares her to a lover!\(^{39}\) Mme *** wants to kiss Suzanne to pardon Thérèse’s offense. “Depuis ce temps, sitôt qu’une religieuse avait fait quelque faute, j’intercédaïs pour elle, et j’étais sûre d’obtenir sa grâce par quelque faveur innocente.” (\textit{LR} 194-195) Any little problem or mistake can now be fixed or made up for with sexual favors, and Suzanne jumps at every chance that presents itself to ask for the superior’s forgiveness. Both women are using this little system as an excuse for more physical contact; Suzanne seems to enjoy and crave it just as much as we imagine the mother superior does. Suzanne goes on to list all the possible body parts that might receive these innocent little kisses. The first kiss of pardon, exchanged on Thérèse’s behalf, lands on the forehead, but as this practice continues, Mme *** goes for the neck and throat, the eyes, the cheeks, but most often the mouth.

\textit{Love Affair}

Mme *** continues to woo Suzanne, lavishing her with gifts, compliments, caresses, tender sentiments, and the two women spend every waking moment together. Suzanne is well aware of the effect she has on her superior:

…elle ressentait une joie qui ne se peut exprimer; elle m’embrassait, me caressait, me prenait sur ses genoux, m’entretenait des choses les plus secrètes de la maison, et se promettait, si je l’aimais, une vie mille fois plus heureuse que celle qu’elle aurait passée dans le monde. (\textit{LR} 199)

Suzanne is once again trying to justify the physicality of her relationship with the mother superior. So great is Mme ***’s love and happiness that she has trouble communicating it, so it doesn’t seem too surprising that she would express it through some innocent kissing and heavy petting. The promise she makes is not to ensure that Suzanne—who has lived through so much anguish, who never wanted to be a nun in the first place—is happy in the convent; she instead promises herself a life of happiness as long as she is loved by Suzanne. We’re reminded of the morning of Suzanne’s vows ceremony at Longchamp, when she said she would be happy if Mme de Moni always loved her. Here, Suzanne expresses no such sentiment, makes no such promise in response to Mme ***.

\(^{38}\) On Suzanne as a tease, see Diaconoff.

\(^{39}\) It has been brought to my attention, as a very valid and interesting point, that the innocent and virginal Suzanne wouldn’t know anything of a lover’s behavior anyway, making this comparison even more surprising.
As happy as Suzanne has made her superior by loving her, she will make her just as miserable by later giving her the cold shoulder.

This passage is followed by the infamous orgasm scene, where Suzanne innocently proves her love for the good superior. Interestingly enough, the setting up of this scene is narrated in the imparfait:

…elle baissait les yeux, la main dont elle me tenait embrassée me serrait plus fortement, celle qu’elle avait appuyée sur mon genou pressait davantage…elle m’attirait sur elle…elle soupirait…elle me disait : « Ah ! sœur Suzanne, vous ne m’aimez pas ! —Je ne vous aime pas, chère mère ? —Non. —Et dites-moi ce qu’il faut que je fasse pour vous le prouver. —Il faudrait que vous le devinassiez. —Je cherche, je ne devine rien. »

…elle se taisait, je me taisais aussi…Elle m’invitait à lui baiser le front, les joues, les yeux et la bouche, et je lui obéissais…elle m’exhortait…à redoubler mes caresses : je les redoublais. (LR 199-200)

Suzanne resumes narration in the passé simple to describe Mme ***’s orgasm and her reaction to it, but this exchange of ambiguous words and kisses and caresses must have occurred several times to warrant narration in the imparfait. Suzanne is once again playing the coquette, the innocent who can’t imagine what she possesses that could possibly interest the mother superior. If this dialogue, sandwiched between two paragraphs narrated in the imparfait, presumably happened more than once, why would Suzanne pretend not to know what Mme *** wants? If she already knows that when the superior is upset or irritated with one of the other sisters, an innocent kiss will appease her, why can Suzanne not guess now how to prove her love? She already knows the extreme value of the caress in this society, she already knows Mme *** to be overly sensitive and affectionate. It seems pretty obvious, at least to the reader it does, but Suzanne refuses to see or acknowledge what is right in front of her. She still asserts her complete innocence; she is just the naïve nun, obediently following her superior’s orders.

**Happy Days and Restless Nights**

Suzanne is not exactly conforming to this society; she is still somewhat of an outsider with the other nuns—she doesn’t mention any friends other than Mme *** (and Thérèse, who is really more of a rival). She understands the politics at play in this convent, as well as any other, and she is fitting in in the most important way: by befriending the one in charge. She is granted all sorts of privileges and enjoys special treatment from the woman who makes the rules. As Mme *** tells her as she tries to climb into bed with her at night, « C’est moi qui récompense ou qui punis…c’est moi qui le défends aux autres, et qui vous le permets et vous le demande. » (LR 217) Not only does Suzanne have every reason to be content at long last in this convent, and seems to
be⁴⁰; but as a result of Suzanne’s cooperation, and of her obedience to the mother superior, the whole community is also calm and happy. The atmosphere of the convent seemed pretty lighthearted to begin with, but Suzanne’s arrival makes things even better, if only for a while: « Jamais la communauté n’avait été plus heureuse que depuis que j’y étais entrée. La supérieure paraissait avoir perdu l’inégalité de son caractère ; on disait que je l’avais fixée…Mais ce temps heureux devait passer pour les autres et pour moi. » (LR 213) Suzanne is happy, she admits it; the others are happy (according to Suzanne), and Mme *** has already sworn that with Suzanne’s love, she is happier than ever.

These happy times must unfortunately come to an end when Suzanne decides to change her relationship with Mme ***, for reasons which will be discussed in the next chapter. Suzanne’s rejection sends the spurned superior over the edge. « Je vous aime à la folie »⁴¹, she told Suzanne the day they met, and it turns out she does. She will go mad, she will become Suzanne’s ‘religieuse folle’ from the convent of Sainte-Marie, roaming the hallways half-naked and screaming like an animal. She begs Suzanne on bended knee not to ignore her: « Sœur cruelle, demande-moi ma vie, et je te la donnerai, mais ne m’évitez pas, je ne saurais plus vivre sans toi… » (LR 242) Again she is right, she will die not long after Suzanne puts an end to their relationship. She warns her once more, « Vous ne savez pas ce qui peut arriver, non, vous ne le savez pas ; vous me ferez mourir… » (LR 243) These words seem to have a strange effect on Suzanne, instead of appealing to her sense of compassion, they seem to scare her, and she pulls away and flees from the mother superior. It is perhaps the way in which she rephrases what has already been said that bothers Suzanne. When Mme *** says ‘I’m crazy about you’ or ‘I don’t know how to live without you,’ she in a way accepts the responsibility for what will go wrong as a result of their separation; but now she accuses Suzanne, puts the blame on her, by saying ‘You will be the death of me.’⁴² Suzanne maintains that she is just an innocent victim, as she has been all of her life, and doesn’t want to entertain the possibility that she may have played any other role in her relationship with Mme ***.

The rest of the convent blames Suzanne as well, for the ensuing dark cloud that descends upon the community. Suzanne’s rejection affects not only the superior’s demeanor and mental health, but also alters the overall atmosphere of the house as a result of the superior’s misery:

...elle devint mélancolique et sérieuse ; la gaieté qui depuis mon arrivée dans la maison n’avait pas cessé, disparut tout à coup ; tout rentra dans

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⁴⁰ As Mourao has remarked, Suzanne forgets to complain about the convent life while involved in this relationship with Mme ***.
⁴² The translations of these three sentiments expressed by Mme *** are my own, with my emphasis added to the subject pronouns. In Leonard Tancock’s translation, The Nun, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972), these phrases are translated as “I simply dote on you” (p. 123); “I couldn’t go on living without you” (p. 169); and “It will kill me” (p. 169); respectively. It is Tracy Adams, who in her article “Suzanne’s Fall: Innocence and Seduction in La Religieuse,” Diderot Studies 27 (1998): 13-28., notes that Suzanne does not wish to hear anything unflattering about herself, she wants to remain an innocent victim of an evil plan of seduction in which she shares none of the blame. Adams suggests that what is really so shocking about the superior’s famous confession, which begins with « mon père, je suis damnée », is actually something negative said about Suzanne, i.e. she is not completely without blame in the affair, that she seduced the mother superior instead of the other way around.
l’ordre le plus austère ; les offices se firent avec la dignité convenable ;...défense aux religieuses de fréquenter les unes chez les autres...les fautes les plus légères furent sévèrement punies ; on s’adressait encore à moi quelquefois pour obtenir grâce, mais je refusais absolument de la demander. La cause de cette révolution ne fut ignorée de personne. Les anciennes n’en étaient pas fâchées ; les jeunes s’en désespéraient, elles me regardaient de mauvais œil. (LR 244)

Finally everything is as it should be in a community that is based upon religion; Ste-Eutrope now resembles more closely the other convents we have seen, complete with strict discipline, solemnity, and religious piety, drastic changes that Suzanne refer to as a revolution. The other nuns, accustomed to the practice of Suzanne taking a kiss to forgive their mistakes, are still asking her to follow this rule that she herself established, but now she adamantly refuses. Everyone knows what brought about all these sudden changes, but only the younger nuns resent Suzanne’s behavior, the more experienced ones are able to accept it. Maybe this change in the superior’s demeanor has happened before, perhaps not in this magnitude, but it could be a common occurrence. We know that Mme *** has had affairs with at least two of the other sisters,⁴³ and difficulties in those relationships may have caused problems for the community as well. The older nuns could be more accustomed to these ups and downs.

Everyone also knows that with one simple gesture, Suzanne could undo all the damage she has done by rejecting the superior.

Quelques religieuses s’adressèrent à moi, et tâchèrent de me faire entendre qu’avec un peu plus de complaisance et d’égards pour la supérieure, tout reviendrait à l’ordre (elles auraient dû dire au désordre) accoutumé ; je leur répondais tristement : « Je vous plains, mais dites-moi clairement ce qu’il faut que je fasse. » Les unes s’en retournaient en baissant la tête et sans me répondre ; d’autres me donnaient des conseils qu’il m’était impossible d’arranger avec ceux de notre directeur. (LR 245)

Suzanne is the only one that can turn things around again, to eliminate all of this strict religious business, and restore the convent to its original slumber party state. But she is not concerned with the rest of the community or how her actions affect it, she never has been in any of the convents; she only worries about herself. After all her time in the religious life, she still does not really belong, she is still an outsider. She tries to pin down the nuns that approach her in vain, asking them to tell her specifically what she needs to do. This recalls the scene when she can’t guess (or pretends to have no idea) how to prove her love for Mme ****, and asks her for specific instructions. This defensive strategy of hers serves to embarrass some of the nuns, who don’t dare respond. It also suggests that Suzanne does indeed understand exactly what they would like for her to do to return things to normal. Things have certainly changed from her early days at Ste-Eutrope, when she actively offered up her body in order to reconcile Mme **** and

⁴³ It is generally assumed, I believe, by Thérèse’s behavior and some of her dialogue that she is one of Mme ***(name)’s former lovers. There is also mention of a sœur Agathe, Thérèse’s predecessor as the superior’s favorite. There could well have been others before these two.
any nun that had fallen from her good graces. Back then, sexual favors were freely exchanged in the aim of keeping peace in the community; and now, Suzanne, who used to run eagerly to the superior at any and every opportunity to pardon an errant sister, will not even entertain the thought of such behavior.

As Mme *** descends into madness, Suzanne nonchalantly stands by and watches. Walter E. Rex, on the final page of his article “Secrets from Suzanne”, offers this explanation for Suzanne’s callous treatment of the woman she loves:

Suzanne’s unspoken love for this Mother Superior…means love of the society of women, in fact it represents love of the cloister, and before Suzanne can get free and out of this walls, she will have to put behind her, and even kill off, her own secret desires…I think this was why Diderot dreamed up Suzanne’s unpardonable cruelty toward a woman (…)whose only crime was in loving (…) his heroine too much.

Suzanne is happy in this community, and truly loves the mother superior. But, as she decided early on, she could never truly be happy in the religious life because it was not her choice. So, when the opportunity to settle in to the convent and be happy arises, when Suzanne starts to get comfortable, something must happen to prevent her from accepting her fate. Mme *** admitted earlier to being much happier within the convent, because her precious Suzanne was there. If Suzanne feels the same way, if she loves her mother superior, then that means she loves the convent; and she is happier there than she would be outside of it, away from the woman she loves. But Suzanne hates the convent, always has, and always will. So the one thing that might be able to keep her there must be destroyed, so she can be freed.

44 On Suzanne as a cool, almost scientific observer, see Rita Goldberg.
CHAPTER 3

A RETURN TO INNOCENCE: THE REBELLIOUS NUN BOWS TO PATRIARCHAL AUTHORITY

What Suzanne Simonin really rejects is not necessarily imprisonment, as she claims, but rather isolation in a community of women. She expresses a vague desire to be married, which at the time would have been just another kind of confinement. When she returns to her parents’ home for six months after the scandal at the convent of Sainte-Marie and before joining the community of Longchamp, she refers to her bedroom as her “nouvelle prison,” yet she pleads with her mother to let her stay. As she comments several times, Suzanne finds the convent environment unnatural and damaging. As we have seen, and as Mme de Moni warned, it can turn sweet and innocent women into ferocious beasts, as was the case with Sainte-Christine at Longchamp, or it can pervert sexual desire, which was the only problem with the good Mme *** and the happy community of Ste-Eutrope. It has been argued that the entire novel can be read as Diderot’s morbid fascination with lesbianism as a rejection of the society of men and his desire to reassert patriarchal control, a point that, although extreme, does in fact provide interesting insight on some issues of debate—the paradox of Suzanne’s feigned innocence/ignorance, for one—when we take a look at how Suzanne interacts with the men she encounters during her story.

Someday My Prince Will Come

At first one might think that an account written about her perils in the convent would have a mostly female cast, and it is interesting to note first of all that there are actually just as many, if not more, male characters, and that even though these men play smaller, more distant roles in Suzanne’s everyday life, she seems to accord them more

46 As she tells Sainte-Christine, « je ne veux être enfermée ni ici ni ailleurs », LR p. 120.
47 LR p. 64, 72.
48 For example, « Dieu qui a créé l’homme sociable, approuve-t-il qu’il se renferme? » LR p. 152-153.
49 LR p. 126, « Entre toutes ces créatures que vous voyez autour de moi si dociles, si innocentes, si douces, eh bien! mon enfant, il n’y en a presque pas une, non presque pas une, dont je ne pusse faire une bête féroce. »
50 Many scholars have noted suspicion of lesbianism in Diderot’s correspondance with Sophie Volland. See, for example, Anne Coudreuse p. 54-55, David Marshall p. 102-103, and Paul Allen Miller p. 171. On the issue of male domination and rejection of the society of women, see especially Manuela Mourao and Christopher Rivers; the issue is also touched upon in Ruth P. Thomas’s “The Woman as Prisoner.”
51 A subject that has been studied and written on extensively by many different scholars to produce several fascinating articles. See, among others, Rivers, Sedgwick, Mylne, Rex, Adams, Goldberg, and Fowler.
respect and more room in her memoirs than she does the minor female characters. Only a few of the nuns that make up the communities she lives in are named more than once and developed into actual characters, one is her aide and abettor, another her rival, and the rest her mothers superior. We don’t know the names of the very many of the women Suzanne sees on a daily basis, or even those of her older sisters, but we do get the name of the family confessor, as well as those of the directors that only rarely visit the convent. It has been observed that, aside from the callous M. Simonin, all of the men in *La Religieuse* play the role of the protector\(^{52}\), shielding Suzanne from the possible evils of the convent or trying to help her escape. These men also play the role of master and sage. Although her interactions with them are infrequent, they all offer Suzanne advice or give her orders that she ultimately follows, no questions asked, whereas she consistently ignores or resists most orders given her by women.

And of course, the marquis de Croismare, for whom the entire story is written, plays a large role as its principal reader. He is called on many times to pass judgment on the events of Suzanne’s life, or to excuse her actions. She pleads him not to think ill of her, she admires him, she flatters him, she humbles herself. She puts him on a pedestal, and he becomes her savior, a sort of god to her.\(^{53}\) On the very first page, she begins her account by gushing over the goodness of the marquis; the second sentence of her memoirs is an adoring description of a her “protecteur”, a man she doesn’t even know, but still seems to hold in higher esteem than almost anyone else that she does\(^ {54}\): « Avant que de lui écrire, j’ai voulu le connaître. C’est un homme du monde, il s’est illustré au service ; il est âgé, il a été marié…Il a de la naissance, des lumières, de l’esprit, de la gaieté, du goût pour les beaux-arts, et surtout de l’originalité. » \(^{LR\ 45}\) It’s as if Suzanne has a starry-eyed schoolgirl crush on a cute celebrity she dreams of one day meeting; she doesn’t actually know him, but she knows all about him, and he sounds completely dreamy. He will be her Prince Charming; he will come to save her from her hell.

Suzanne dreams of being rescued from her horrible fate in the religious life by a man from the beginning. The possiblity of finding a husband becomes « une ressource à tenter avant que de songer à un autre parti. » \(^{LR\ 69}\)

*The Kid Is Not My Son*

It is Suzanne’s mother who ruins her hopes of marriage, who tells her that finding a husband and living a normal life in the world is not a possibility for her, that nothing

\(^{52}\) See especially Mortimer, Rex, and also Conroy for a discussion of gender roles.

\(^{53}\) See Anne Coudreuse, who makes the following observation on Croismare’s larger-than-life status in Suzanne’s eyes and in the novel, “La divinisation du marquis de Croismare est plus explicite quand Suzanne cherche à lui prouver qu’à Longchamp elle a prononcé des vœux dans un état d’aliénation qui les rend nuls: « J’en appelle à votre jugement ; j’en appelle au jugement de Dieu. » [LR p. 86] La symétrie de la construction, renforcée par la paratexte et l’asyndète, suggère très fortement l’équivalence entre Dieu et le destinataire.” p. 47. Coudreuse also compares Suzanne’s torture at Longchamp to the passion of Jesus Christ, which is briefly hinted at in the novel (see exchange with Sainte-Christine and her cronies following Suzanne’s stay in the dungeon, p. 105.) The tortured nun becomes the suffering Jesus, calling out to God (Croismare) for help.

\(^{54}\) Mme de Moni is also described lovingly with respect and admiration, as an example of the ideal mother (superior); and even Mme *** is considered, if only for a while, a good woman in Suzanne’s innocent eyes.
can save her from the convent. It is the Simonin family confessor, the père Séraphin, who will tell Suzanne what the reader has already been able to guess based on the information she has given us: she is not her father’s daughter; and who will encourage her to go back to the convent. At this point she has been home for months, she knows what is expected of her, but still will not yield to her mother’s desire to see her become a nun, she still clings to the hope of getting married or rescued. The père Séraphin offers this sound advice: « Si vous m’en croyez, vous vous réconcilieriez avec vos parents; vous ferez ce que votre mère doit attendre de vous; vous entrerez en religion…vous passerez des jours, sinon heureux, du moins supportables. » (LR 68) Suzanne may never be happy, but as things are, she is making everyone around her as miserable as she is; she might as well resign herself to her fate. Although she will go on to prove the père Séraphein very wrong, Suzanne, who swore she would rather die before living the religious life, takes his advice. Immediately after this conversation, Suzanne makes one final attempt to reason with her mother, and then at long last agrees to go back to the convent.

When she writes a note of apology and concession to her mother, the servant comes back after having delivered it, saying « Mademoiselle, puisqu’il ne fallait qu’un mot pour faire le bonheur de votre père, de votre mère et le vôtre, pourquoi l’avoir différé si longtemps? » (LR 74) Why has she suddenly, to everyone’s great relief, decided to sign her life away to the convent? Her decision to obey could be due to the fact that she now knows for certain that she has no father and no hope for a future. However, as she has hinted all along at the differences between herself and her sisters, she seems to have some awareness of her illegitimacy even before she is informed of it. She even tells the père Séraphin, when he reveals this news to her, « je m’en étais doutée. » (LR 66) She already knows her parents want to see her settled in the convent, and she already knows that M. Simonin is not her father; nothing has really happened to cause Suzanne’s sudden change of heart, other than the fact that it is now a man telling her what to do. And she will willingly obey, after having resisted and ignored this same suggestion from others for so long.

Suzanne’s relationship with M. Simonin is interesting. We have already noted that he is the only male character that does not offer some sort of protection to Suzanne. Instead, he is the only character to inspire fear and command respect. Not even the evil Sainte-Christine scares Suzanne. When M. Simonin returns home to find his wife in tears and Suzanne in the same room, he orders her to leave, and she makes the following comment to the reader: « S’il eût été mon père, je ne lui aurais pas obéi, mais il ne l’était pas. » (LR 73) It seems that Suzanne has gotten something backward here; it would seem, especially at the time the novel was written, that a young girl would owe obedience first and foremost to her own father. But Suzanne decides to follow M. Simonin’s orders only because he is not her father. The logic Suzanne uses here is the exact opposite of that supporting the hackneyed cry of protest from the indignant stepchild: you can’t tell me what to do, you’re not my real dad! Suzanne in effect says the reverse: this man can tell me what to do because he isn’t my real father.

M. Hébert, Vicaire
The next male character to give Suzanne orders that she blindly follows without question is M. Hébert, the vicar that is called Longchamp for an exorcism but discovers the true problem and puts an end to the torment. When he later reveals to her that she will soon be transferred to Ste-Eutrope, thanks to M. Manouri, and suspecting something inappropriate between the nun and her lawyer, he asks all kinds of questions about their relationship and forbids her to have any further contact with him: « Je vous ordonne de ne le point voir au parloir; et s’il vous écrit, soit directement, soit indirectement, de m’envoyer sa lettre sans l’ouvrir; entendez-vous, sans l’ouvrir. » (LR 176) During Suzanne’s case, Sœur Sainte-Christine and the other nuns tried to prevent her from meeting with M. Manouri, making excuses when he came to see her. But Suzanne never refused to see him, not until now, not until M. Hébert orders her not to. She does not protest, she does not ask for a reason, she simply replies compliantly, « Oui monsieur; et je vous obéirai. »; even though she reflects in the following sentence, « Soit que la méfiance de M. Hébert me regardât, ou mon bienfaiteur, j’en fus blessée. » (LR 176) Suzanne is offended by the very suggestion that either she or her lawyer have done anything wrong, but instead of trying to argue with the vicar, as she probably would have with anyone else (read: a woman), she meekly accepts his advice, and when M. Manouri comes to see her that very evening, she refuses to talk to him. So he writes to her, and the obedient nun sends the letter, unopened, to M. Hébert, just as he commanded her. Even though she is dying to know more details about the promised transfer, she keeps her word to the vicar.

An Innocent among Perverts

At the convent of Ste-Eutrope, Suzanne enjoys an intensely affectionate relationship with the mother superior, a relationship that is, in her eyes, completely innocent for both women. She sees nothing wrong with expressing her love and affection for such a close friend and a good woman, as she wonders out loud, « Où est donc le mal de s’aimer, de se le dire, de se le témoigner? Cela est si doux! » (LR 252) But as it has been discussed in the numerous articles concerning the inconsistencies of Suzanne’s innocence, it seems that Suzanne does at least suspect that something is not exactly right in her relationship with Mme ***, because she muses constantly about what has happened and invents various excuses to reassert the innocent nature of their friendship.

But Suzanne must know something; she has already been accused of inappropriate behavior at Longchamp, when she frightened a young nun as she passed her in the hallway, and it was exaggerated into a scandalous situation. As she describes this incident to the marquis, she reassures him of her innocence—although she can’t even begin to comprehend the controversy—by accusing the rest of the community of impure thoughts and corruption:

En vérité, je ne suis pas un homme, et je ne sais ce qu’on peut imaginer d’une femme et d’une autre femme, et moins encore d’une femme seule; cependant comme mon lit était sans rideaux, et qu’on entrait dans ma chambre à toute heure, que vous dirai-je monsieur? Il faut qu’avec toute

55 See note 51, above.
leur retenue extérieure, la modestie de leurs regards, la chasteté de leur expression, ces femmes aient le cœur bien corrompu : elles savent du moins qu’on commet seule des actions déshonnêtes, et moi je ne le sais pas ; aussi n’ai-je jamais bien compris ce dont elles m’accusaient, et elles s’exprimaient en des termes si obscurs, que je n’ai jamais su ce qu’il y avait à leur répondre.56 (LR 131)

She claims not to understand the accusations against her, but she seems to grasp their sexual nature because she acknowledges that there would in fact be a problem or a reason for suspicion if she were a man. Otherwise, she can’t even imagine what could happen, but the fact that the other nuns can makes them perverse. If she knows that they know that sin can be committed by oneself, then how can she say that she doesn’t know what they know? Suzanne maintains her innocence; she refuses to acknowledge what the other (evil) sisters know, as another form of nonconformity. She doesn’t want to be one of them, and she refuses to think what they think, to imagine what they imagine.

Breaking up Is Hard to Do

She refuses to entertain any discussion of sexuality with the mother superior, claiming complete ignorance, but she apparently knows enough to realize that she doesn’t wish to learn any more information. Although she insists that she sees nothing sinful about the expression of love between two friends, she still decides to confess these innocent caresses to the père Lemoine, and even begs Mme *** to let her confess when the other woman tries to dissuade her. While she won’t talk with her own lover, a woman, about the true nature of their relationship, no matter how hard Mme *** tries to get her to verbalize her feelings and desires,57 she can’t possibly be stopped from discussing these same issues with the père Lemoine, a man and an outsider to the convent and to the friendship. The directeur obviously has a very different take on things, and even though he is not able to truly convince Suzanne that what is happening with the mother superior is wrong—he is too afraid of ruining her pure and innocent nature by providing her with too many details—he does manage to persuade her to reject Mme ***’s kisses and caresses. When she talks about her relationship with Mme ***, « ...il l’appela indigne, libertine, mauvaise religieuse, femme pernicieuse, âme corrompue, et m’enjoignit, sous peine de péché mortel, de ne me trouver jamais seule avec elle, et de ne souffrir aucune de ses caresses. » (LR 233) Suzanne does not understand what is most certainly an overreaction on the part of the directeur, and as she continues to reflect on the times she has shared with the mother superior, still she sees no harm in their displays of affection. But, as she concludes, « Quoi qu’il en soit, j’exécutai ponctuellement ce

56 LR p. 131. See J.E. Fowler for his analysis of this same passage. He notes the implication that impure thoughts are just as sinful as the acts themselves, which offers one reason why Suzanne is so intent upon maintaining her innocence: “the belief that nuns who know of sex are letting themselves in for damnation provides motive for wanting to resist such knowledge,” p. 86.

57 As Suzanne tells us on p. 213, after her conversation on sexuality with Mme ***, « la scène que je viens de peindre fut suivie d’un grand nombre d’autres semblables que je néglige. » Apparently Mme *** keeps trying to broach the subject of Suzanne’s sexuality but the responses, the conversation is always the same, and Suzanne will give nothing away.
qu’il m’avait prescrit. » (LR 236) Suzanne doesn’t understand or necessarily agree with the père Lemoine’s suspicions, but nonetheless, she will carefully, immediately and willingly follow his instructions, without even knowing why he is giving such orders.

Mme *** finds Suzanne in the chapel late at night praying, and orders her to go to bed. These orders will be ignored by Suzanne, even though the mother superior assures her, « Le directeur n’a rien à ordonner contre la règle de la maison; et moi je vous ordonne de vous aller coucher. » (LR 237) Mme *** has the final say on what happens within the convent walls; Suzanne even mentioned her vow of obedience to this mother superior when she first arrived at Ste-Europe, but now her loyalties lie with the père Lemoine. A man has told her what to do and she intends to obey, no matter what the costs. The orders given by Mme *** no longer seem to carry any weight. She admits regret over having to change the relationship, but she really has no choice because she has been ordered to push the superior away. She tells her sorrowfully, « …je ne saurais m’empêcher de vous aimer, de sentir tout le prix de vos bontés, de vous prier de me les continuer, mais j’obéirai à mon directeur. » (LR 238-239) She announces her intentions to follow her orders, and nothing will change her mind, not even Mme ***’s goodness and Suzanne’s tender feelings for her. It won’t be easy, but what must be done must be done, and for Suzanne, the directeur’s orders must be followed. « Il m’en coûtera beaucoup, car je suis née caressante et j’aime à être caressée ; mais il le faudra, je l’ai promis à mon directeur…C’est un homme pieux, c’est un homme éclairé… » (LR 239) Again here, as with the marquis de Croismare, we see that Suzanne has immense respect for this wise and virtuous man, and she apparently feels some greater sense of obligation towards him, despite the fact that she truly does love her mother superior. So she will calmly and dutifully stand by and do nothing as she watches Mme *** go crazy and die of a broken heart, caused by Suzanne’s indifference.58

Suzanne’s Thirst for Ignorance

A young new directeur, dom Morel, soon replaces the père Lemoine. The latter has been accused, in a letter to the archdiocese that was most likely written by Mme ***59 of « une morale trop austère…qu’il semait la division dans la maison, et qu’il éloignait l’esprit des religieuses de leur supérieure. » (LR 250-251) These words confirm what Suzanne already thought about the former directeur, that he was reading too much into the manner in which Mme *** shows her love and goodness. It was in fact this directeur that encouraged Suzanne to distance herself from the superior, and in turn her rejection of Mme ***’s affections created mood swings in the superior that affected the overall atmosphere in the convent, much to the dismay of its inhabitants. It seems for a moment that maybe the mother superior was right, that the directeur was inventing things and trying to undermine her authority, that maybe Suzanne has gotten some bad advice.

58 On Suzanne’s cool, uninterrupted, unaffected, almost clinical or scientific gaze, see especially Rita Goldberg, and David Marshall.
59 This is pure speculation on my part, without any real evidence to back it up, other than the fact that it seems too coincidental that someone else would write to the archdiocese complaining of the very things for which Mme *** has to reproach him. Although it is true that he is trying to turn Suzanne against her superior and in consequence changing the way of life in the community, his cause for concern is in fact very real, and he is doing what he feels is necessary to protect her from perversion.
If this is true, then Suzanne can just forget the orders that she is making such a point to obey, patch things up with Mme ***, and everything can go back to normal at Ste-Eutrope, and everyone can be happy again.

When Suzanne agrees that there is some truth to the complaint that the père Lemoine is creating problems between superior and nun, dom Morel then confirms that this is, in the case of Mme ***, a good thing. When Suzanne once again asks why, pretending not to understand, dom Morel, instead of answering her question, gives her the following order: « Ma sœur, me répondit-il en prenant un air grave, tenez-vous-en à ses conseils, et tâchez d’en ignorer la raison d’autant que vous vivrez. » (LR 251) And this is exactly what Suzanne will do, she will purposefully remain ignorant of the true nature of her relationship with Mme *** for as long as she lives (after she persists with a few more questions for dom Morel, then later eavesdrops at the parlor door as he talks with the mother superior). The reason behind Suzanne’s paradoxical innocence can be explained by this simple order, given by a man and dutifully obeyed by a good and innocent nun. Although she writes her memoirs after she has left the convent, meaning after she has been accused of indecent acts at Longchamp; after numerous non-discussions with Mme *** on sexuality; after all these conversations with confessors through which she has gathered enough information to figure things out; after listening to Mme *** talk of eternal damnation with dom Morel; Suzanne still pretends, throughout the course of the novel, to know nothing of sexuality, she still asserts that whatever happened between herself and the superior was completely innocent. She pretends not to understand the accusations of the sisters of Longchamp, she creates flimsy excuses for the mother superior’s seemingly strange behavior and she adamantly refuses to verbalize any knowledge of sexuality as well as any desire to know; through all of this willed ignorance, she is simply doing what she has done from the beginning: yielding to patriarchal authority, and blindly following the orders of a man.61

60 It is generally assumed that Mme ***’s alarming phrase « Mon père je suis damnée… » (p. 256) is followed by a confession, shocking to Suzanne’s innocent ears, of her sins, namely her affairs with women. For two very interesting and different interpretations on what might actually have been said in the parlor with dom Morel, see Tracy Adams, who believes it must be something very unflattering about Suzanne herself in order to be so shocking to her. At this point, she has been amply warned and has reflected on the subject, and nothing about sexuality and Mme *** should really come as a complete surprise to her, catch her so off-guard, and upset her so much that she would call her dear friend an “abominable femme.” Unless of course, she has been trying so hard to follow dom Morel orders and remain ignorant about the whole situation, but now is finally forced to face the facts…See also Vivienne Mylne, who notes that it seems unlikely Mme *** would begin an open dialogue about her sexuality with the director in the casual parlor setting. She believes it must be something more general and vague, but still something Suzanne hadn’t thought of before, such as an abuse of her power or the like.

61 I am of course aware of the small problem of temporal discontinuity created by the extreme importance I have given this one sentence uttered by dom Morel as providing motivation for Suzanne’s actions throughout the entire novel. This order comes at the very end, after she had already resisted the conversations with Mme ***, so how can she be following advice given after the fact? I still believe that this command is the key to such an obvious paradox and controversial issue as Suzanne’s feigned ignorance, and wish to point out, as other scholars already have, that La Religieuse is full of inconsistencies and contradictions: Suzanne’s age fluctuates; she tells the marquis de Croismare that Ursule is still in the convent and needs help, but as it turns out, this other sister has already died by the time Suzanne begins writing after her escape from the convent; and her mother’s letter of adieu describes events that supposedly happen after she has sent it out; just to name a few of the most often mentioned ones. I would venture to say, as others have, that such discrepancies are not a big cause for concern, and in the spirit of conformity, I
Dom Morel soon talks Suzanne into escaping—something she had been thinking about for a long time but apparently needed a man’s help to do—then quickly changes from the protector from perversion to the perverse. She escapes him, and ends up destitute, badly injured, terrified, and most of all vulnerable in the real world. She desperately needs to be rescued and puts all of her faith in the good marquis de Croismare to do so. She appeals to the marquis’s sense of compassion, saying, « Monsieur, ayez pitié de moi, et ne vous préparez pas à vous-même de longs regrets. » (LR 268) The marquis is her only hope at this point, and she is desperate, but rather than innocently and humbly begging for his help, she threatens him. As she puts her life in his hands, she hints that she won’t be the only one to be sorry if something (else) bad were to happen to her. She has built her entire story around her own role as an innocent victim, and cast almost everyone around her, especially the women, as wicked enemies that now must forever live with the crippling regret of having wronged Suzanne Simonin, and now she hopes (for his sake) that the marquis won’t become one of the remorseful.
CONCLUSION

WHEN IN ROME…:  THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER ON THE OTHER SIDE

The lesson to be learned from Suzanne’s terrible story appears to be the same conclusion reached by A and B in the *Supplément*: conformity is the best policy. It is better to accept the laws of the society in which one lives, whether or not one agrees with them; and to abide by these laws, rather than go against the grain. The good aumônier was most obliging to his host and friend; he was curious about the morals of Tahiti, and decided to adopt them as his own while a visitor to the island. And in the end, nobody really thinks any less of him for it; his fellow Frenchmen A and B decide that he has set an example for them to follow, about how to behave in a foreign society. Suzanne, on the other hand, sets an example of what not to do; she shows us what disastrous things can happen when one refuses to adhere to the rules of a community.

Though her methods of nonconformity vary—from her resistance to seduction by Mme de Moni, to her blatant opposition to the tyrannical authority of Sainte-Christine, and finally her refusal to see what everyone else knows about her relationship with Mme ***—the motives behind her rebellions are always the same: the desire for freedom, the rejection of the society of women, and blind faith in patriarchal society. She chose to conform to the rules of one society while living in another, and it didn’t work. She does eventually get what she wants, but she is miserable every step of the way. Instead of imitating the aumônier (who laid aside his religious convictions in the spirit of conformity), of making the best of a potentially bad situation, of accepting the rules of the society she has been forced into, Suzanne deliberately makes things worse for herself by refusing to belong. Instead of pretending to conform while secretly plotting her revenge and escape, as she did at the convent of Ste-Marie, Suzanne takes a more obvious and stubborn approach with Sainte-Christine and the evil sisters of Longchamp, knowing that she will be punished. But this is all part of her strategy; the physical torments she brings upon herself provide the most compelling reason for her proposed release from the religious life.

Ironically, after dreaming for so long of being free, once she arrives in the outside world that has always held such irresistible appeal for her, she seems bitterly disappointed. As soon as she escapes the convent, dom Morel, whom she has trusted to help her, tries to grope her in the carriage, and she realizes that maybe she has gotten in over her head, « Alors je regrettais ma cellule, et je sentis toute l’horreur de ma situation. » *(LR 263)* When she then escapes him, she remarks, « Si j’eusse été voisine de mon couvent, j’y retournerais. » 62 How can Suzanne say, after her long struggle against

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62 *LR* p. 264. In Leonard Tancock’s translation, the statement shows more desperation: “If I had been near my convent I would certainly have gone back there.” p. 185. It’s not that she would be tempted to return to the convent prison, but she would definitely do so, without hesitation.
confinement, after demonstrating just how corrupt and perverse the community of nuns can be, how can she actually say that she would go back to this world she hated so much? She wants safety and security, which she has always believed would come from a man, but she didn’t really seem to think her plan through. In the ‘real world’, she finds herself alone, living in fear and in pain. This is not the life she has wanted all along, the freedom she has pretended to fight so hard for, and even the convent would be better than the life she has now. What she hated was the idea of living among women, but getting out of the convent was not enough. She has always wanted a man to rescue her, to keep her from going in to the convent in the first place, to fight for her release after all the torture she had to endure, to help her escape, and now she counts on the marquis to make all of her dreams come true.

It seems rather disappointing that Diderot, Enlightenment philosopher, would preach a message of conformity, and that he would bury this somewhat uninspiring lesson in seemingly exciting accounts of free love in an island paradise and of gothic torture and lesbian nuns. In these two works, he offers two very different alternatives to traditional French society, but it turns out that neither one is necessarily better or worse, just different, each with its own set of rules. In fact society seems to be what we make of it, and Diderot’s criticisms of his own and these other societies is very objective. In the end, he leaves it up to readers to draw their own conclusions, just as Suzanne allows readers to make their own judgment on the nature of her relationship with Mme ***, providing them with just enough detail, and all the while claiming complete innocence; just as A and B discuss the fictional supplement they have read and decide that the aumônier’s actions of conformity are the most logical. Diderot challenges his readers to think about their own culture, about alternative cultures, about conformity and rebellion, and about what it means to be a member of society.
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