REREADING FOR GENDER:

ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF GUILLERAGUES' LETTRES PORTUGAISES AND CHARRIÈRE'S LES LETTRES DE MISTRISS HENLEY PUBLIÉES PAR SON AMIE

DISSERTATION

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To My Parents and Judy
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INTRODUCTION

What follows is a study of how we read. As such, my intention is to offer a contribution to two important theoretical approaches to the study of literary texts. One approach concerns the act of reading, the theoretical framework of which is known as reader-response criticism. A necessary component of this framework is the study of the text and the reader and their respective roles in the production of literary meaning. This interaction between the text and the reader defines the text as Object and the reader as Subject, and most reader-response criticism concerns itself with the juxtapositioning of these two phenomena. Consequently, until recently, the reading act has been defined in terms of who or what has control in the creation of a text's meaning.

Perhaps it is an archetypical representation of an essentially human struggle between the Object and Subject that has dramatized a juxtaposition of reader and text in most reader-oriented critical theories, or perhaps it is but a mundane example of the human mind's tendency to binarism. In any case, theorists of reading have historically
constructed hierarchies of either reader over text or text over reader. Such theorists as Stanley Fish and Norman Holland, for example, have privileged the reader's control in the production of meaning. Other theorists, such as Georges Poulet and Wolfgang Iser, have, while acknowledging the reader's creative role, asserted the dominance of the literary text. In both cases, the hermeneutic exchange is determined by a system of control in which either the text or the reader is primary.

Recently, however, theories of reading have focused on the interaction of the creative roles of both the reader and the author of the text. The substantial influence of feminist criticism on literary studies has had a major impact on the formation of these new theories of reading. The early feminist rereadings of major works authored by men and the discoveries and subsequent feminist readings of many "forgotten" works authored by women have all enhanced underlying political aspects of both the writing and reading process. Feminist criticism has, for example, foregrounded the fact that neither the text nor the reader is a purveyor of determinacy. Rather, meaning is relative to the socio-political stance of both the writer and the reader. Considerations of gender, sexual orientation, social class and race have become crucial to discussions of all literature. Consequently, contemporary theorists of reading are especially concerned with exploring the influence of
these factors upon the interaction between the reader and the text.

In this study, I am particularly interested in the influence a reader's gender—real or assumed—might have on the interpretive act. Because writers, by their very nature, are also readers, the gender of the literary writer has, as well, a crucial role in the creation of meaning. My focus, therefore, recognizes a duality at another level. On the one hand, I explore the concept of perceived gender identities in the Other of the literary text. What kinds of gender identities do authors construct for protagonists of literary works? How do these perceptions of gender shape the reader's own gender identity? Do these literary portrayals influence the perception of gender-role expectations in the opposite sex? On the other hand, I am also interested in the assumption of a gender identity in the Self. What kinds of individual gender identities might readers (and writers) already bring to the literary work? Is there a perception of difference in gender between the individual reader and the constructed gender identity of the Other in the text? If so, how do these interact? At what level can textually constructed gender identities be construed as accurate portrayals of the author's own gender identity? Are readers' gender identities and perceptions transformed in any manner by the act of reading?
Among the assumptions of my critical approach is the conviction that readers and writers are influenced by their individual perceptions of gender and this influence manifests itself in the interpretive act of reading. However, these same readers and writers are also influenced by universal concepts of gender that appear to be chronologically invariable. All literary meaning, therefore, is formed in part by these individual and universal beliefs in difference between men and women. The impact of gender in the creation of meaning comes from a metaphysical interaction of perceptions of gender inside and outside of the text. That is, readers and writers bring to the text codes of gender identity and perception. The external reader of a literary work tends to assume codes that interact with and are potentially transformed by codes of gender identity transmitted through the literary text by the author. What this interaction entails and how it might be characterized is central to this study.

Nonetheless, the production of meaning cannot be ascribed to gender alone. Other factors, such as race and social class (and, in the particular cases of this study, national and cultural differences) are, perhaps, just as relevant to the hermeneutic process. While recognizing the importance of these influential factors, I do not specifically explore their potential effects on the interpretive act. This study, admittedly limited in its
scope, is an attempt to explore the particular interaction of gender and reading in two representative epistolary works written in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France.

Chapter I begins with an introductory explanation of the birth of reader-response criticism. My primary focus, however, is to summarize and review those theories of reading that have had a formative impact on contemporary reader-oriented criticism. Of particular interest is the work of four critics, Georges Poulet, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Norman Holland. Each of these scholars represents a specific theoretical concern and has therefore contributed to the debate over the reader’s critical role vis-à-vis the literary text.

Poulet, for example, underscores the temporal, individual, and elusive nature of interpretation with his view of reading as a metaphysical experience or phenomenological event. The reader beholds and is even invaded by the work of art, a process that collapses the subject/object (interior/exterior) dichotomy. Interpretation, if it is to take place, occurs in a metaphysical space where reader and text converge. For Iser, the text is a structured act and the reader’s perception of this structure results in an interpretation, itself the product of an act of structuring. That is, the reader’s primary activity is to organize, syntagmatically and paradigmatically, the inherent structures of a work of
art. Significantly, although Poulet and Iser both advocate a rather passive role for the reader, they also emphasize, in different ways, the communicative process at the core of all interpretive acts.

In this manner, their work has much in common with the theories of Stanley Fish and Norman Holland. However, both Fish and Holland strive to characterize what the reader gives to the act of interpretation, thereby endowing him or her with an active, participatory role. Fish, for example, argues that the interpretive act is produced by a group of literary components (the text, author, and reader) which are all dependent upon each other for their meaning. He characterizes this structure of interdependence in his theory of "interpretive communities." Holland also advocates a kind of interpretive community, yet his is formed by a set of common fantasies, desires, and identities that both readers and writers enact (and reenact) in the communicative process.

The work of these four theorists represents the theoretical foundation of most reader-response criticism. Their underlying premise presupposes a certain kind of reading, one that strives to be aware of its own processes of comprehension, organization and interpretation. Furthermore, these theorists advocate a specific kind of reader; Poulet's is almost obsessively receptive to the text, Iser defines an "implied" reader, and the reader for
Fish and Holland is but one member of a larger institution of reading groups or strategies. However, in their efforts to specify the individuality of interpretation, none of these theorists addresses the individuality of the reader. In particular, the question of gender and the difference the reader's gender might have on the interpretive act has been, until recently, unexplored.

This clarifies, in part, the perceived inadequacy of reader-response criticism in its early formation. Contemporary critics, who espouse the view that interpretive activities, like writing and reading, are political manifestations of larger social concerns, explore the potential ramifications of who the reader is. Consequently, the latter part of this chapter reviews some of the recent developments in reader-criticism that have attempted to incorporate the specific role of gender into the consideration of the reader's interpretive strategies.

Chapter II offers an exemplary history of the readership of one epistolary work, the *Lettres portugaises*, written in 1669. These letters, originally believed to be the discovered correspondence of an anonymous Portuguese nun, were attributed, nearly two hundred years later, to a male author, Gabriel de Laveyron, vicomte de Guilleragues. My intention is not to prove that Guilleragues did not author this correspondence, but to reveal how readers read gender into a literary work and how their perceptions of
gender are substantiated by perceptions of gender in the text.

The *Lettres portugaises* offers a particularly intriguing example because the history of its readership is marked by conflicting perceptions of male and female gender identities. My analysis shows that these perceptions are further enabled by the kind of critical stance each reader adopts while reading the letters. I trace a lineage of male readers who, by attempting to define Mariane, the épistolière, through a system of universal beliefs about Woman, question the accepted female authorship of the correspondence. Mariane, for these readers, could not be the author of this correspondence because her actions and feelings conflict with these widely held beliefs about Woman. The final attribution of a male author to these letters is a result of these critical male readings of women and not necessarily of scientific findings that would prove Guilleragues' signature.

This is, I believe, a primary factor behind the reader's malaise regarding the true authorship of the *Lettres portugaises*. Despite a long history of partisan claims about who the true male author of the letters was, the attribution of Guilleragues' name to the text has not ended debate about the letters' origin. Instead, the attribution of Guilleragues' name has reformulated, redirected and resituated debates about gender in literary
works. The Lettres continues to inspire discussions about authorship and to divide readers according to their gender or gender biases. Twentieth-century analyses of the work provide evidence that perceptions of gender and gender identity remain crucial to interpretations of this work. Most important, perhaps, is the reader's awareness that meaning ascribed to this work is incomplete unless the question of gender identity is in some manner addressed.

In Chapter III, my focus turns to another epistolary work, Les Lettres de Mistriss Henley publiées par son amie, written in 1784. The authorship of this fictional collection of letters is established by Isabelle de Charrière/Belle Van Zuylen, a prolific eighteenth-century novelist, dramatist, and correspondent. In many ways, Charrière's work can be viewed as an intertextual response to questions of gender identity manifest in the Lettres portugaises. This response is most evident in the epistolary nature of the work. Consequently, this chapter focuses first on Charrière's attempt to define her readership.

Charrière strives to segregate her readers sexually in order to define a particular reading activity that will correspond with her narrative code of gender and gender-typing practices. In this manner, one level of interpretation is established in the text. The reader, who is textually defined as a representative of his or her en-
gendered worlds, is called upon to subscribe to the values, beliefs, and desires particular to their sex. Consequently, Charrière constructs a system of en-gendered horizons of meaning in which the reader's gender identity corresponds with Mistriss Henley's gender code as outlined in her letters. The reader's complicity with Charrière's strategy produces en-gendered readings of Mistriss Henley's narrative that rely on universal concepts about the underlying values of men and women's social roles. The moral confirmed by this complicity recognizes and affirms Mistriss Henley's deviation (her errors) from her gender role and, simultaneously, justifies her husband's social power in the structure of an eighteenth-century marriage.

Charrière complicates this level of interpretation, however, by assigning each reader a specific task, best described, as an underlying moral they must disengage from her narrative. Significantly, the kind of moral each reader might unravel is dependent upon the level of their reading activity. That is, the critical reader will unveil a different moral than the reader who complies with Charrière's structural epistolary readership. Furthermore, unlike the complicitous reader, the moral disengaged by the critical reader relies upon an individual perception of gender in the Self and in the opposite sex. The critical reader, then, must resist the universal portrayals of men and women in the text and maintain an interpretive autonomy
that will allow him or her to read transsexually.

To read this narrative critically, however, is to read again. In this manner, Charrière's subversive moral is revealed. For example, the critical reader will read beyond the literal meaning of Mistriss Henley's multiple instances of self-ecastigation (taking the form of J'ai tort) and the concurrent attribution of raison to her husband in order to perceive the social assumptions symbolized by these two terms. This, in turn, reveals other subtexts in Charrière's narrative. These are developed from a series of intertextual references to Rousseau's Emile and Samuel de Constant's Le Mari sentimental. It is within this thematic mise en abyme that Charrière's critical response to the masculine code of gender and gender-typing practices that define women is found.

The critical reader's discovery of this subversive subtext underscores Charrière's critique of universal gender identities that define women and, simultaneously, silence them. Her own work is indicative of women's struggle to delineate a discursive space of their own. While Charrière complicates, dramatizes, and ultimately seeks to correct the way readers assume gender codes and practice gender-typing interpretive strategies, she ultimately must rely on that social structure in order to define an alternative (female) gender code.
In conclusion, I return to my initial discussion of contemporary developments in reader-response criticism. I discuss, in particular, the need for an alternative (feminist) theory of reading that underscores the political aspects of the interpretive agenda. My own study of the Lettres portugaises and Les Lettres de Mistriss Henley reveals at least two components of the politics of reading. One includes the reader's psychological awareness of his or her interpretive strategies. In other words, the interpretive act relies on the degree to which the individual reader perceives himself or herself as reading critically or uncritically. The second component involves the question of gender and the degree to which the critical reader perceives himself or herself as gender-typed by the prevailing codes of his or her society. The importance of these two components on the interpretive agenda has far-reaching effects—not the least of which is the formation of the literary canon.

The Lettres portugaises, originally believed to be the work of a woman, has merited historically a critical, extensive re-examination by male readers. This rereading has been instrumental in the eradication of a female identity that did not conform to masculine codes of gender defining women. Rather, the possibility of a female Self (Mariane) is subsumed by the posited presence of a male author. This rereading has produced, in effect, a male
impostor of Mariane, one who, for nearly two hundred years, duped readers of both sexes into believing "she" truly existed. The role of the critical male reader is to revise and, in effect, correct this initial reading of Mariane as woman; my function is to "correct" this corrective.

Most importantly, however, the traditional interpretation of the *Lettres portugaises* was facilitated by a close examination of Mariane's actions and reactions to her situation and then compared with the fictional portrayals of women in similar situations who reacted differently. For this male readership, such texts as the correspondence between Héloïse and Abélard and the tragedies of Corneille and Racine provided examples of a universal female identity. The attribution of this text to a male author, Guilleragues, reaffirmed this universal female identity, suggesting that all women must conform to these universal codes in order to exist at all.

Strangely, Charrière's text has not yet merited from male readers the same kind of critical examination and reassessment as the *Lettres portugaises*. Contemporary readers of literature, and especially those interested in questions of gender, its codes and practices, and the canonical status of women's literature, should not only speculate why such a rereading has not taken place, but also attempt that critical reading themselves. Such a rereading might reveal that Charrière's work is indicative of a female
literary tradition in which the heritage of masculine codes of gender and gender-typing practices is subversively reformulated and transmitted to readers of both sexes. For the female reader, Charrière's text might function as a kind of Bildungsroman in which they may shape their own identities as individual women and assume their own gender codes and practices. For the male reader, the letters might serve as a literary affirmation of a female identity that is as unique, particular, and evolving as his own. But until male readers reevaluate works like Charrière's and, through rereadings, canonize them within the larger (male) literary tradition, the act of reading itself will remain politically segregated, separated by the gender identities and assumptions of the two sexes.
CHAPTER I

THEORIES OF READING

AND THE ROLE OF GENDER

If the experience of literature depends upon the qualities of a reading self, one can ask what difference it would make to the experience of literature and thus to the meaning of literature if this self were, for example, female rather than male.

"Some revolutions occur quietly...," begins Susan R. Suleiman in her introductory remarks on the conception of audience-oriented criticism. Such is the beginning of a domain of literary inquiry called reader-response criticism. Most contemporary scholars who attempt to trace the development of audience-oriented criticism begin their studies with similar comments about the "revolutionary," "evolutionary," and "responsive" aspects that characterize

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early formations of this literary approach. These theorists are acknowledging the influential impact of New Criticism on the birth and development of audience-oriented theories. Elizabeth Freund, Jane P. Tompkins, and Susan R. Suleiman, for example, situate the birth of the movement that privileges the reader's status in the production of meaning in the early 1920's, and, in particular, with the pioneering theories of emotional response developed by I.A. Richards.

Ironically, however, theorists of New Criticism assumed their critical positions by opposing those very premises upon which reader-response criticism is founded. Instigated by a rejection of historical, relativist, and biographical approaches to literature that characterized much of late nineteenth-century literary criticism, partisans of the New Criticism posited a system of reading in which the text, in and of itself, stands as the purveyor of meaning, thereby giving birth to the concept of the "self-sufficient text." The New Critic, a purportedly disengaged reader, adopts a

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2 I.A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1924) and his subsequent Practical Criticism (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1929) are often cited as the seminal theorizations of reader-oriented criticism.
formalist approach to the text that resists paraphrase, and self-consciously attempts to separate form and content. Thus, the technique of a "close reading" was developed: ". . . a mode of exegesis that pays scrupulous attention to the rich complexity of textual meaning rendered through the rhetorical devices of irony, ambiguity and paradox" (Freund 40, 41). The concept of an individual (idiosyncratic, subjective, psychological) reader-reaction to a literary text is subsumed by the "objective" stance of a reader who translates the rhetorical mechanisms of a text conveying its determinacy.

One of the most obvious pedagogical consequences of New Criticism that clearly dominated the reading and teaching of literature for more than twenty years (roughly between 1930 and the late 1950's) was the theory's implication that readers can be, in some manner, segregated. The "informed" reader (the critic/professor) deciphered literature for the "uninformed" reader (the common reader/student) who assumed a passive role vis-à-vis the text. How and, in particular, by what objective method this informed reader disengaged the meaning of a literary work (for obvious reasons, New Critics assiduously avoided viewing their roles as "interpretive") was, curiously, neither a source of theoretical speculation nor anxiety for the initial proponents of this movement.
It was in response to the New Critic's avoidance of his/her own problematic stance as a reader in the hermeneutic process that a reader-oriented approach to literature developed. As Freund notes:

. . . . (N)otwithstanding theoretical manifestos to the contrary, an overwhelming but suppressed or rarely acknowledged concern with the reader was at the heart of the New Critical project. Despite its ostensible endeavours to hypostatize the objectivity or autonomy of the literary work, the ghostly presence of 'readers' enacts a continuing resistance to its own dicta from within the project itself. (The Return of the Reader 41, 42)

Consequently, such terms as irony, ambiguity, and paradox, so valorized by New Critic readers for explaining the variability of meaning and indeterminacy of language they accurately perceived in literary texts ultimately were at the root of the collapse of their positivist thought. Ambiguity, as William Empson argued, "can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings." 5 For Freund, Empson's work is exemplary of a New Critic's uneasy, if not implicit, acknowledgment of the reader's

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creative function. To decipher ambiguity, she argues, the interpretive act of the individual reader must be and is necessarily taken into account. Otherwise, the concept of ambiguity in a literary work remains a perception of ambiguity that, in itself, is void of meaning.

The "quiet revolution" or "return" to the reader's cognitive role in the creation of meaning underscores the circularity, and therefore connection, between New Criticism and reader-response criticism. The reader, always on the theoretical margin of New Critical scholarship, in many ways needed to become the focus of critical analyses in the early 1950's. Otherwise, as a literary doctrine, New Criticism eventually "totters [and] seems it can fall only into the gulf of bewilderment . . ." where doctrine becomes "intolerable dogma."

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6 It should be noted that Louise M. Rosenblatt proposed a theory of reader-oriented criticism as early as 1937 in her book, Literature as Exploration (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts; New York: Noble, 1968, 1976). Primarily a pedagogical treatise challenging the objectivist assumptions advocated by New Critics, Rosenblatt's work was the first to introduce the concept of a "transactional" relationship between text and the reader, one that would inspire a broad range of humanistic understanding in students of literature. Much later, Norman Holland would develop this concept of reader "transaction" in his theory of reading. Rosenblatt's influence is also apparent in David Bleich's concept of "subjective" readings of literature.

The subsequent array of reader-oriented theories generated by the limitations of New Criticism's methodology is diverse and complex. It is, as Susan R. Suleiman notes:

... (N)ot one field but many, not a single widely trodden path but a multiplicity of crisscrossing, often divergent tracks that cover a vast area of the critical landscape in a pattern whose complexity dismays the brave and confounds the faint of heart. (The Reader in the Text 6)

Suleiman, in her survey, distinguishes six varieties of audience-oriented criticism: rhetorical; semiotic and structuralist; phenomenological; subjective and psychoanalytic; sociological and historical; and hermeneutic. Elizabeth Freund identifies the reader-response theorists of her collection as representatives of a distinctly Anglo-American institutional phenomenon. Nonetheless, she explores how these theorists were shaped by such European influences as French structuralism; the German school of Rezeptionsästhetik, and Freudian psychoanalysis.

Jane P. Tompkins gathers together a series of previously published essays representing a variety of theoretical orientations: New Criticism, structuralism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis and deconstruction. Her objective is to demonstrate how an emphasis on the reader "tends first to erode and then to destroy the objective text [and] forces a change in the kinds of moral claims critics can make for what they do." The "eventual exchange of world views" is,
for Tompkins, a major characteristic of all reader-oriented theories (Reader-Response Criticism x).

Like these three anthologies, the survey of reader-oriented criticism in this chapter is neither exhaustive, monolithic nor exclusive. My objective is to present overviews of those theories of reading that have informed the more recent reader-response theories which have incorporated the influential role of gender in the interpretive act. My focus reflects two general currents in reader-response criticism. The first is distinguished by its emphasis on the influential impact of the text on the reader. Georges Poulet's concept of the text as an existential phenomenon to be experienced by the reader and Wolfgang Iser's reception theories of aesthetic response are both models of reading that, while not repudiating the reader's role, privilege the text in the hermeneutic process. In the second current of reader-oriented theory, the hierarchy of text over reader is reversed. Theorists such as Stanley Fish and his theory of affective reading, and Norman Holland, whose psychoanalytical concept of reading privileges desire and the fulfillment of readers' fantasies, all situate the hermeneutic process somewhere within the reader.

Nonetheless, each of these theorists has contributed in unique and significant ways to the critical endeavor that
strives to integrate both reader and text in discussions of the interpretive act. Consequently, they form an integral part of recent developments in the field that focus on the potential impact gender might have on the creative reading process.

The final portion of this chapter reviews the work of contemporary reader-response theorists whose agenda is precisely the interaction between gender and reading. In particular, a recent collection of essays put together by Elizabeth Flynn and Patrocinio Schweickart offers especially informative insights into what this relationship might entail. Furthermore, because reading cannot be divorced entirely from the act of writing (an implicit act of reading in itself), feminist theorists who examine the politics of writing and sexual difference also help inform theories about gender and its role in the act of reading.

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In short, the extraordinary fact in the case of a book is the falling away of the barriers between you and it. You are inside it; it is inside you; there is no longer either outside or inside.‡

This semi-mystical experience characterizes for Georges Poulet, the leading figure of the Geneva School of phenomenology, the transcendental qualities of the reading act. Poulet's theory of reading is perhaps most interesting for its concerted, creative attempt to deconstruct the "barriers between you and it [the text]." His theoretical preoccupation, like that of the New Critic, focuses on the problematic irreconcilability of Object (text) with Subject (reader). However, whereas the New Critic's agenda isolates the text from the reader (thereby affirming the Object/Subject dichotomy), Poulet's theory of reading strives to transcend that very concept of duality. Consequently, the interpretive act entails, for Poulet, a convergence of reader and text in a kind of metaphysical, hermeneutic space.

Furthermore, as for the New Critic, Poulet's theory of reading is built upon an underlying supposition that there is a correct way to read. However, his theoretical departure from New Criticism's doctrinal objective of a disengaged reader manifests itself not so much as an active

counterpart, but as a reader whose consciousness receives, in a passive manner, the contents of a narrative.

When I read as I ought—without mental reservation, without any desire to preserve my independence of judgment, and with the total commitment required of any reader. . . I say farewell to what is, in order to feign belief in what is not. . . I become the prey of language. There is no escaping this takeover. (Poulet 43, 45)

Curiously, a further examination of Poulet's theory shows that he subsequently endows his ideal reader with an active component. Necessary for the phenomenological act of reading, this component is the continued awareness on the part of the reader of his or her own subjectivity.

For Poulet, the experience of reading consists of a perceptual series of "schizoid" (his terminology) distinctions in the reader's consciousness. The reader, who perceives his or her subjectivity (the sense of "I-ness") prior to reading a narrative, is initially confronted with the objective nature of the book. The book is an object, for example, like a vase or a statue. Like these objects, however, the book invites further speculation. Just as a statue provokes the spectator to circle and examine its entirety, a book's form invites the reader to explore its interior. Therefore, Poulet explains, we open books. By so doing, our consciousness conflates, in part, the antithetical concepts of exteriority and interiority. This
recognition of a book's interior is comparable to our subjective self-awareness.

This conflation develops further as we read. The words of a page are only objects until the moment we understand their content. "... (W)ords, images and ideas [that] in order to exist, need the shelter which I provide... [and] are dependent on my consciousness" (Poulet 43). Consequently, as we read, words become "subjectified" objects since we absorb their existence as objects into our own subjective consciousness. The reading experience interiorizes the objectivity of words which, in turn, subjectifies their form because they exist as part of our consciousness. A word's meaning, therefore, can only be the result of our subjective understanding of it.

However, this same act of reading that conlates, on the one hand, the antithetical notions of exteriority/objectivity and interiority/subjectivity produces other schizoid distinctions in the reader's consciousness. As we absorb words, images, and ideas—all of which become subjects of our consciousness—we become, in turn, at least partially "objectified." This occurs because the reader's consciousness functions, in Poulet's theory, as a host receptacle for the objects of the book.

Whenever I read, I mentally pronounce an I, and yet the I which I pronounce is not myself. ... (A)s soon as something is presented as thought, there has to be a
thinking subject with whom, at least for the time being, I identify, forgetting myself, alienated from myself. (Poulet 45)

This process of self-alienation occurs only as long as the reader reads. However, the loss of the reader's identity suggests a fundamental inactivity on the part of the reader. While it can be said that the reader remains aware of his or her subjectivity (therefore implying a certain "activity"), this sense is subsumed by a narrative subjectivity, which, paradoxically, is generated by the reader's own consciousness.

This paradox can perhaps be reconciled by Poulet's analysis of authorial presence in the reading process. The "I" that takes over the reader's consciousness and who "thinks like me" is the "I of the one who writes the book" (Poulet 46). The consciousness of the author, then, is an integral part of the reading process since it is this basic component of the text that determines how the reader will respond to a work. It would seem, therefore, that the reader is less the "prey of language" than a subjective space in which the author reformulates his or her thoughts. Furthermore, Poulet offers a hierarchical structure of reading in which the reader's passivity is a fundamental component of his theory:

The consciousness inherent in the work is active and potent; it occupies the foreground; it is clearly related to its own world, to objects which are its objects. In
opposition, I myself, although conscious of whatever it may be conscious of, play a much more humble role content to record passively all that is going on in me. (Poulet 47)

Poulet's theory of reading, of which the principal motivation is to incorporate equally the reader and the text in the production of meaning, is undermined by this authorial presence. The very potency of this presence prefigures an intentionality inherent in the text that, in turn, suggests a textual determinacy.

Nonetheless, Poulet's phenomenological approach to the interplay between reader and text provides an important forum for subsequent developments in reader-oriented theories. In particular, Poulet's concept of a textual subjectivity to be "experienced" by the reader was instrumental to the theoretical formulation of the "wandering" reader, proposed by the German critic, Wolfgang Iser. Emerging as the leading literary critic of the Konstanz school of reception theory, Iser can also be credited with reformulating Poulet's theory since he strives to balance the distribution of power in the hermeneutic act by endowing the reader with an active, creative role.

Iser's theory of reading as an "aesthetic response" owes, as well, its origin to the Polish phenomenologist, Roman Ingarden, a disciple of Edmund Husserl. For Ingarden, the structure of a literary text can be defined as having
two poles, one aesthetic, the other artistic. The artistic refers to the text created by the author. The aesthetic, on the other hand, refers to that process by which the reader realizes (konkretisiert) the text. Iser adopts Ingarden's position and subsequently bases his theory of reading on an essential interaction between the text and the reader in which the "virtual" production of meaning "must lie halfway between the two."

The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identical either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader."

Iser's phenomenological concept of a metaphysical space where text and reader converge to create meaning resembles that of Poulet. Furthermore, his agenda, like Poulet's, is not to define that space, but to characterize that aesthetic and artistic process (the "dynamic happening") leading to its existence.

To begin, Iser must resolve two problematic aspects of his theory, namely, his assumptions of a "reality of the text" and an "individual disposition of the reader." Both entail a certain danger for the viability of his theory.

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The former suggests that the literary text has complete control in creating meaning; the latter hints at an arbitrary production of multiple readings. Since both of these assumptions potentially undermine Iser's entire notion of an equal interaction between text and reader, he posits a theoretical framework, essentially adopted from Ingarden, in which the work of art exists primarily as a structured act. The reader's perception of this structure consequently limits his or her interpretations of it. The process of reading is to be primarily an act of structuring. By assembling the structures of a work of art, the reader's interpretation will necessarily be constructed by the work, thus regulating the variety of arbitrary meanings a reader could derive. I will discuss later on in this study how Iser incorporates an essential, creative aspect of reading into this act of structuring.

First, however, Iser's assertion that the work of art is a structured act warrants further investigation.\(^\text{10}\) Underlying this notion is the persistent Subject/Object dichotomy that plagues all reader-oriented theories of

\(^{10}\) Significantly, it is precisely this aspect of Iser's theory that was at the base of Stanley Fish's unfavorable review of Iser's *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* in the early eighties. Fish's review, "Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser," appeared in *Diacritics* 11 (1981): 2-13, as did Iser's response, "Talk Like Whales," pp. 82-87.
reading. Ingarden's theory of literature viewed the text as an inherently artistic object, possessing, in itself, no subjective qualities. This concept of the artistic object gave birth to Iser's notion of the text as a structured act. For this reason, a brief overview of Ingarden's order of objects helps clarify the important distinctions Iser makes in his theory between the objective and subjective qualities of literature.

Ingarden's phenomenological concept of defining objects is threefold. First, there are real objects which are universally determinate, are to be comprehended and, indeed, are completely comprehended. Second, there are ideal objects which are autonomous, are to be constituted, and are capable of being completely constituted. The third and final type of object is the work of art. Neither completely determinate nor autonomous, the work of art is distinguished by its intentionality. Composed of "guiding" sentences, literature lacks total determinacy. For Ingarden, these sentences are "schematic" structures that make up the "represented objectivity" of the work.

. . . (T)he represented object that is "real" according to its content is not in the strict sense of the term a universally, quite unequivocally determined individual that constitutes a primary unity; rather, it is only a schematic formation with spots of indeterminacy of various kinds and with an infinite number of determinations positively assigned to it, even though formally it is projected as a fully determinate individual
and is called upon to simulate such an individual.  

The "schematic formation" of a work of art consists of several determinate layers. The first is that of phonetic formations or sound configurations; the next layer, derived from the first, consists of syntactic and semantic units; out of these arise a layer of schematized objects (such as characters and setting); and, finally, there is a layer of represented objects (the author's world) which is the product and culmination of all the other layers. This constitutes, for Ingarden, a "polyphonic harmony" that is, nonetheless, incomplete without the beholder's realization of its "spots of indeterminacy."

Consequently, in Ingarden's theory, the work of art does not fully exist without the operations of a subject-object relationship. Iser adopts this same ontological position to formulate his theory of reading. His model of reading reflects Ingarden's in that he presupposes the existence of 1): a fictional text, which has inherent determinate structures and gaps of indeterminacy, and 2); that there exists an active processing by the reader of

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these determinate and indeterminate structures resulting in a synthesizing realization of the text. Iser adds, however, a third component to his model, that there are conditions that govern this text-reader interaction.

For Iser, textual structures (Ingarden's "schematic formations") have essentially two functions: they are verbal and affective. "The verbal aspect guides the reaction and prevents it from being arbitrary; the affective aspect is the fulfillment of that which has been prestructured by the language of the text."\(^{12}\) This "fulfillment" is the task of the reader. As each reader encounters the syntagmatic (determinate) structures of a literary work, he or she must fill in the indeterminate "gaps" or "blanks" that exist between these structures. For Iser, this creates a reader whose viewpoint "wanders" from one structure to another in order to establish paradigmatic relationships.

The wandering viewpoint of Iser's reader is the initial process by which the virtual determination of meaning is attained. The reader's memory and their attentiveness, logically, plays a crucial role. In order to assemble the various textual structures, each syntagmatic encounter (be it word, sentence, paragraph, character, etc.) becomes,

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temporarily at least, the focus of the reader's mental activity. Iser calls this activity *ideation* since the term incorporates the important components of each reader's individuality and variable responses. Significantly, this concept of ideation is the single most original, reader-initiated act in Iser's theory. Although stimulated by the determinate structures of the text, the existence of each reader's ideational activity is ultimately indeterminate in nature. It is only a process; the content of which is undefinable as it exists in the consciousness of the reader's mind.

However (and herein lies one of Iser's conditions concerning the text/reader interaction): "The actual content of these mental images will be colored by the reader's existing stock of experience, which acts as a referential background against which the unfamiliar can be conceived and processed" (Iser 38). The reader, therefore, accepts or rejects certain schematic structures in the constitutive process of reading. The basis for accepting or rejecting these structures depends, in part, on the reader's individual repertoire of experience. Unfortunately, Iser does not pursue the implications of this conditional aspect of reading, as does M.M. Bakhtin, for example, in his theoretical formulations. While asserting the infinite indeterminate status of this condition, Iser further states
that it is only one aspect of the structuring act that limits the number of potential interpretations of a given text. His real interest appears to be those other limitations imposed by the presence of the Implied Reader.

Iser's unique concept of the Implied Reader is apparently a theoretical counterpart to Wayne Booth's Implied Author.¹³ Unlike Michael Riffaterre's "Super Reader," or Fish's concept of the "Informed Reader,"¹⁴ Iser's reader is not an imagined construct outside the text. The Implied Reader is actually one of the structured components of the text:

He embodies all those predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. Consequently, the implied reader as a concept has his roots firmly planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader. [. . .] The concept of the implied reader is therefore a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him: this concept prestructures the role to be assumed by each recipient and [. . .] designates a network of response-inviting


structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text. (Iser 34)

For some critics, the identity of Iser's reader (real or implied) remains a "slippery point" as he manages to "straddle two sides of a fence, one text-centered and hypothetical, the other reader-centered and empirical" (Freund 143). Robert C. Holub notes that Iser "comes dangerously close to defining his 'construct' in purely literary terms" and that "defining the term in this fashion allows him to move to and fro from text to reader without ever clarifying the composition and contribution of either half of his partnership."\(^{15}\)

Consequently, the conditional aspects of Iser's theory of reading appear the most problematic. In the final analysis, it is difficult to conceive the participatory role of the real reader. What seems most clear is that this reader "reads" a series of perceptions. These perceptions have, paradoxically, determinate and indeterminate qualities. On the one hand, they are indeterminate reflections of the reader's personal experience of reality. On the other hand, they appear as structures of the text, which, it must be remembered, are determinate structures for Iser. Yet, as Fish's response to Iser's work reminds us,

the status of the text cannot be taken for granted. The objective textual structures of Iser's text remain, ultimately, the results of our perceptual strategies or reading acts. "The determinacies or textual segments, the indeterminacies or gaps, and the adventures of the reader's 'wandering viewpoint' will be the products of an interpretive strategy that demands them."\textsuperscript{16}

Iser's theory, while encompassing the plurality of the complex system of reading, eventually seems to lead nowhere. As Freund argues,

\begin{quote}
Iser's critical text becomes the itinerary for a wandering viewpoint which fails to reach a destination in a metacritical landscape whose co-ordinates (object/subject, text/reader, artistic/aesthetic) disorient the stability of the discursive map. (The Return of the Reader 147)
\end{quote}

Yet the strength of his theory is in its concerted attempt to converge these dichotomies. Iser was one of the first to establish theoretically the vital existence of a text-reader relationship. He also managed to do so by deliberately avoiding the question of authority, even if that authority surfaces in his system as textual in nature.

The so-called phenomenological theories of reading (represented in this study by Poulet and Iser) attempt to incorporate the reader's creative act in the reading

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process, but inevitably privileged the status of the literary text. It is perhaps because of this theoretical insufficiency that other scholars, such as Stanley Fish and Norman Holland, formulated dialectical theories of reading by focusing specifically on the kind(s) of creative acts a reader performs in order to bring the text into existence. Yet this second group of theorists must struggle with the same dualities of subject/object and reader/text. Furthermore, they, too, must contend with the elusive qualities of the artistic versus the aesthetic and the determinate versus the indeterminate.

Stanley Fish's seminal work on the affective aspects of reading first appeared on the Anglo-American scene of literary studies in 1967 with the publication of Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost. This early work centered on the dual role of the reader in Milton's work, which, as Fish viewed it, was a text meant to educate the reader by making him aware of his fate as fallen man, and to provoke in this reader a sense of "the distance which separates him from the innocence once his." By recreating the drama of the fall from Paradise, Fish argued, the reader experiences the same struggle between faith and reason as Adam. This experience, characterized by alternating moments

of self-doubt, self-justification, and self-analysis is motivated by the rhetorical strategies of Milton's narrative. Rather than maintaining a sequentially ordered progression of narrative events and thoughts for the reader, Milton's rhetoric reverses and disrupts the reader's desire to organize the various elements in the text.

In this early work, Fish prepared the groundwork for his subsequent theoretical essay, namely his article in 1970, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics." In this essay, he rejects the notion that fictional narratives are fixed structures leading the reader down a logical path of determinacy. Sentences don't mean in themselves, he argues, but they do do things to the reader. "It [the word, sentence, etc.] is no longer an object, a thing-in-itself, but an event, something that happens to, and with the participation of, the reader" (Fish 25).

Static narratives, therefore, cannot exist. Rather, as Fish suggests, fictional "meaning" is constantly shifting and its

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18 This essay first appeared in *New Literary History* 2 (1970): 123-62. It is also reprinted as an Appendix in Fish's *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972); and in *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980) 21-67. Jane P. Tompkins also includes the essay in her edition, *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1980) 70-100. All references to Fish's essay in this study are from *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. 
effect on the reader (the reader's experience) is of a temporal nature. Therefore, his concept of analysing the reading of narratives involves

... an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time. The category of response includes any and all of the activities provoked by a string of words: the projection of syntactical and/or lexical probabilities; their subsequent occurrence or non-occurrence; attitudes toward persons, or things, or ideas referred to; the reversal or questioning of those attitudes; and much more. (Fish 27, emphasis added)

Despite the numerous remarkable illustrations in his essay of how this analysis might work, Fish undermines his theory by ignoring some rather obvious ramifications of his own reading experience. For him to interpret his examples, he must experience the text first, after which comes the written or oral explanation of that experience. This "gap" or "lag" between the reader's experience and the reader's interpretation of that experience proves the two can never fully coincide, for the reading experience "if it is to be itself, must remain private, mute, inexpressible" (Freund 95). As Jonathan Culler would later note:

The conclusion seems inescapable: what Fish reports is not Stanley Fish reading but Stanley Fish imagining reading as a Fishian reader. Or perhaps we ought to say [...] that his accounts of the reading experience are reports of Fish reading as a Fishian
reader reading as a Fishian reader.\textsuperscript{19}

Fish's initial theory of reading results, ultimately, in an
instinctual feeling that something happens to the reader
while reading, but what that was must remain forever
elusive. Fish himself seemed aware of this condition in the
concluding remarks to his essay: "The meaning of an
utterance, I repeat, is its experience--all of it--and that
experience is immediately compromised the moment you say
anything about it" (Fish 65).

Such an ontological position, however, does little more
than pronounce a death sentence for the practice of literary
criticism.\textsuperscript{20} Predictably, in his later essays, Fish
investigated the underlying assumptions of his initial
theoretical formulations. He recognized that theories of
reading, including his own, were constrained by an
ideological acceptance of the dialectical Object/Subject
relationship. His own work, as he later viewed it, was
impaired by its deliberate attempt to displace the New
Critic's autonomous text by replacing it with an autonomous

\textsuperscript{19} Jonathan Culler, On Deconstruction: Theory as

\textsuperscript{20} Fish's recourse from this kind of negative theory
was his recognition of the inevitable curiosity of the human
mind which "seems unable to resist the impulse to
investigate its own processes" (Fish 66). See Steven Knapp
and Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory," Critical Inquiry
8 (1982): 723-742, for their provocative commentary on
Fish's work.
reader. Consequently, Fish's later work questioned the following critical assumptions: 1) that the literary text was an objective entity independent of authorial intention and 2) that a complete subjectivity of the individual reader did exist. What he discovered was the need for a mode of enquiry that decentralized the subject-object dichotomy in epistemological debates. His concept of "interpretive communities" in which ideal or "implied" readers functioned as purveyors of interpretive strategies in the reading act was intended to provide the necessary framework for the elimination of this irksome dichotomy.

Fish's first move was to develop a theoretical system in which a reader's interpretation of a given text could not be viewed as the result of a syntagmatic or paradigmatic reading process. The objective elements of a text, Fish argued, could have no more influence on the production of meaning than a reader's reaction to those elements. Fish believed that neither the author (his or her intentions), the text, nor the reader has complete autonomy because they are all dependent upon each other. The text and the reader coexist in contemporary contexts which shape the meaning of the work.

This, then, is my thesis: that the form of the reader's experience, formal units, and the structure of intention are one, that they come into view simultaneously, and that therefore questions of priority and independence do not arise. What does arise
is another question: what produces them? That is, if intention, form, and the shape of the reader's experience are simply different ways of referring to (different perspectives on) the same interpretive act, what is that act an interpretation of? I cannot answer that question, but neither, I would claim, can anyone else....

Fish's assertion, then, is that interpretations are products of the reading act, but they are not produced by autonomous elements discovered in the text. Nor are they produced by the reader's reaction to those elements. By analyzing the underlying assumptions of his own studies in how we read, Fish concluded that interpretations (or, precisely, strategies of interpretation) exist prior to the actual moment of reading. The reading process itself is an act which affirms and reinforces those interpretive strategies.

... (M)eanings are the property neither of fixed and stable texts nor of free and independent readers but of interpretive communities that are responsible both for the shape of the reader's activities and for the texts those activities produce.

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This move enables Fish to collapse the theoretical categories of author, text, and reader in order to view their hermeneutic relationship at a level that seemingly transcends the hierarchies established by the formalist position. A closer look at Fish's notion of "interpretive communities," however, reveals an inherent hierarchy, precisely the kind he hoped to eliminate, in which authorial intention has ultimate control in the production of meaning.

By "interpretive communities," Fish means a set of strategies or norms of interpretation that readers hold in common and which regulate the way in which they think and perceive. These norms predate the act or experience of reading and are, in fact, created by the ideological context in which authors produce works.

Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties. In other words these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around. (Fish 14)

The activity of writing produces interpretive communities and the reader's interpretation of a text is an extension of that activity of writing. The "texts" that the reading activity produces are reflections of the author's interpretive strategies which have already created the conventions of the community constituting both the reader
and his or her interpretation. "The reader," Freund notes, "who is at once interpreter and interpretation, is always situated inside a system of language, inside a context of discursive practices in which are inscribed values, interests, attitudes, beliefs" (The Return of the Reader 109). Therefore, reading, as Fish suggests, is an act of compliance to these inscribed values, interests, attitudes, and beliefs of the author, who is both instigator and ruler of the interpretive community.

It follows that Fish's conception of the reader's role in the interpretive act does not take into account his or her individual, and therefore potentially arbitrary, response to a literary work. The ideal or "implied" reader for Fish is one who subscribes to the semiological components of the text as defined for him or her by the author. This reader, however, who produces meaning by subscribing to these components, also enacts meaning according to the norms of this interpretive community. His or her way of reading is individual only in that it is contemporary and exclusive to the interpretive community of which he or she is a part. Since Fish's readership must ultimately be and reflect the experience of an implied group of readers who accept and subscribe to the conventional norms of their interpretive community, these communities can be neither completely subjective nor objective.
An interpretive community is not objective because as a bundle of interests, of particular purposes and goals, its perspective is interested rather than neutral; but by the very same reasoning, the meanings and texts produced by an interpretive community are not subjective because they do not proceed from an isolated individual but from a public and conventional point of view. (Fish 14)

At this juncture, it becomes difficult to view Fish as a reader-response critic since he appears to advocate that no single act of reading can ever be truly unique. His readers are denied the ability to resist, reinvent, and revise their understanding of literary works because they are bound to the political (and empirical) demands of authorial intention. His concept of interpretive communities emerges, in effect, as a disguised formalism. Instead of the independent, determinate textual structures the New Critic proclaimed to convey meaning to the reader, Fish offers the textually inscribed, ideological perceptions of the author.

Even so, authors perform acts of reading by the very activity of writing. It can be argued that Fish remains partial to the critical operations of a kind of reader, but that reader is defined exclusively by his or her active and creative performance that takes its shape in the act of writing. Fish's authors are endowed with both the creative construction and operation of their communities. The
reader remains both an inert component and passive representative of that act of writing. Yet Fish's initial, and admittedly unanswerable, question continues to haunt his theoretical speculations. From what interpretive community does this author/reader operate? What are they interpretations of?

His, and our, inability to provide an answer opens new areas of investigation, particularly into the activity of writing itself. If, as is likely, all readers do not become authors, what is the underlying force that enables certain readers to write? Are Fish's authors readers who have rejected an interpretive community in order to create their own? Are we to assume that each author, throughout history, has created a unique interpretive community for his or her work? Or do these communities exist as fixed entities (resembling myths) that circulate around a common core of epistemological awareness and surface periodically as new modes of interpretation? Finally, Fish's assertion that we, as readers, are both the text and extensions of it presents some problems as well. Precisely, how can readers both be and represent contexts which are, for example, historically, culturally, or linguistically foreign to them? And, especially pertinent to this study, do interpretive communities provide specific contexts for female or male readers to both be and represent communities created by
authors of the opposite sex?

More than any other theorist discussed thus far, Fish foregrounds a spiraling configuration of possible author-reader hierarchies. His notion of interpretive communities, although offering useful and relevant ways for describing how readers do derive meaning from literary works, emphasizes an inherent circularity at the center of discussions involving the relationship between writing and reading. This notion of circularity is also apparent in the critical apparatus of Norman Holland, the leading figure of psychoanalytically oriented theories of reading. Indeed, Holland situates the epistemological core within the deepest realm of the human mind where the search for referentiality is a search for itself as an objective entity.

Holland's initial theory assumes a position in which the reader is shaped by the subjective experience of reading and the objective formal elements of the text. This perception of reading at once aligns Holland within the New Critic's doctrine of viewing determinate meaning in objective textual components and, as well, within reader-oriented doctrines that prioritize the aesthetic, emotional, or experiential response(s) of the reader. Upon further examination, however, Holland deviates from the New Critic's path of determinacy by implying that the same psychic processes that constitute the reader's experience also
constitute the underlying forces of the author's ego. His perception of the literary work, the form of which "shapes" its readers' responses, ultimately manifests itself as the drive of authorial intention that is, paradoxically, unconscious.

Holland's first theoretical work on the subject, The Dynamics of Literary Response, published in 1968, set out to explore the intimate relationship between psychology and literature. His underlying assumption that a classical reading (understanding) of Freud's principles of the ego (its formation and development) would inform the literary critic's endeavors was at the base of his conception of reading as a dynamic transaction. This transaction, as Holland viewed it, is a combination of the reader's perception of the formal properties of the text and his or her subjective experience of that text. "Literature is an objective text, but also a subjective experience. Form, too, is both objective and subjective; we can see it in the text, but form only comes alive as it shapes our response."23 His critical apparatus depends, therefore, on an inherent separation between the literary work's form and content. Borrowing from Simon O. Lesser's definition, Holland defines form as "the whole group of devices used to

structure and communicate expressive content" (The Dynamics of Literary Response 106). His conception of content refers to the underlying portrayal of socially unacceptable fantasies or desires that we have in common and that we therefore perceive in literary works.

Significantly, it is the operations of the ego that, according to Holland, produce a series of conflicting desires shared by all readers and reproduced in literary texts. Indeed, these desires characterize the reader's interaction with the text. In particular, the reader and, as well, the alter ego of the text struggle between various competing psychological desires of impulse and inhibition. Holland describes these desires as reading strategies that, on the one hand, provide a set of literary defenses in the text and in the reader and, on the other hand, stimulate the reader's desire for assimilation into the text. Reading, therefore, is characterized by the transformation of the text's unconscious fantasies into the reader's psyche whereby he or she experiences these textual fantasies as his or her own. This process converts the socially and morally unacceptable fantasy or desire into intellectual terms, thus enabling the reader to derive deep textual meaning and, accordingly, experience gratification from the act of reading.

. . . (A) literary work means by reworking those rather unsavory wishful or fearful
fantasies at its heart into social, moral, or intellectual themes which are consciously satisfying to the ego and unconsciously satisfying to the deep wishes being acted out by the literary work. (The Dynamics of Literary Response 104)

These unconscious fantasies are played out both in the text and in the reader's psyche. This substantiates, to some degree, Holland's assertion that the reader-text interaction is both an objective and subjective experience. The reader perceives the literary work as the objective reflection of an alter ego, whose (textual) fantasies invite the reader's psychic compliance. Because these textual fantasies are common to the psyche of all readers (Holland devotes an entire chapter in his work to a "dictionary" of fantasies), the reader shares, as well, similar anxieties, instigated by the ego, about the realization of these fantasies. The reader, therefore, incorporates the content of the textual fantasy in a subjective manner. However, literature itself has, according to Holland, a unique strategy that represses the actualization of forbidden desire, and this strategy manifests itself in the objective elements of its form.

This, then, foregrounds the essential components of the transactive nature of reading. The reader identifies, unconsciously, with the fantasy portrayed, unconsciously, in the literary work. Accordingly, the reader, rather than
resisting the text psychologically, perceives the content of a literary work as the unconscious expression of his or her own fantasy. The formal rhetorical devices are then viewed not only as the text's own structure of psychic defenses but of the reader's ego as well, whose psychological function is to censure the realization of unconscious (the id's) desires. Consequently, the reader, who has introjected the text through his/her "willing suspension of belief," experiences the alter ego (the textual fantasy) as his or her own ego thus fulfilling a primitive desire for oral gratification in a socially and morally acceptable manner.

The result is, at the deepest level of response, a kind of fusion or introjection based on oral wishes to incorporate, so that what goes on at a fairly primitive level in the literary work feels as though it is going on within us or, more exactly, not outside us. (The Dynamics of Literary Response 104)

Holland's theory of reading consistently transforms the reader's psychic anxiety into a pleasurable experience of fulfilling unconscious desire. This positivist approach, while useful in explaining the pleasurable aspects of reading, has nonetheless provoked a number of critical commentaries. In particular, critics have often pointed to Holland's unquestioning assumption that we share common fantasies or desires. To be sure, the question of whose fantasies he speaks (in his dictionary, for example) remains suspended. By positing the presence of an autonomous ego,
Holland subsumes the text's specificity and undermines our understanding of the figurative power of language. As one critic notes:

Instead of being illuminated by psychoanalytic terms, the text's specificity is simply sacrificed to the interpretive scheme, and literary meaning is confined to a meagre repertoire of predictable infantile fantasies. . . . (Freund 122)

Furthermore, Holland's conception of the literary text is also problematic. The literary form, defined in his theory as an objective set of reading defenses, evokes the presence of a textual determinism of which the reader is a passive recipient. Moreover, although Holland asserts that the content of a literary work represents an unconscious, subjective ego (itself an intriguing hypothesis), he does not pursue the potential threat that this textual presence might impose on the reader's own ego. His assumption that the reader's assimilation of the textual ego implicates as well a willing submission of the reader's own ego suggests a voyeuristic reader whose role consists of little more than reshuffling the contents of Holland's "dictionary of fantasies." Consequently, the understood reconciliation of psychic forces does not allow for the kind of subjective reader response Holland wants to advocate in which, for example, the reader's defensive strategies might impel him or her to resist, rather than assimilate, the text's
Holland, in his subsequent theoretical work, abandons the hypothesis that texts have fantasies, claiming instead that only people do. This move eliminates another problematic feature of his initial theory, that is, how does a literary work acquire an ego of its own? This elimination of the text's inherent subjectivity appears to be an attempt to substantiate the underlying presence and role of an authorial ego in the reader-text interaction. However, Holland does not develop this line of inquiry. Rather, his thesis, as outlined in his article "UNITY IDENTITY SELF TEXT," is that the reader uses the text to enact a basic compulsion to recreate his or her own identity.

Holland's informing premise is that readers search, above all else, for a central theme in literary works which then functions to unify the various components of the text. The process by which readers arrive at this unity is not

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24 Interestingly, Holland does recognize the potentiality for an unsuccessful transaction between the reader and the text. However, such a reader does not develop a creative counter-fantasy his or her "resistance" to the text might imply. Rather, the presence (and reader's recognition) of this psychic resistance only adds to the pleasure of reading. See The Dynamics of Literary Response, pp. 132-33.

unlike our conception of an individual's identity. For Holland, the "self" is defined as that entity which comprises the numerous various activities of an individual's life. Identities are formed, according to Holland, through a series of "choices" we make about the variations and transformations we perceive in the activities of the self. Moreover, these choices are dictated by our perception of structural relationships between these activities which allow us to abstract the self's invariable patterns and themes.26 This, in turn, enables us to arrive at a "centering identity theme:")

In this way, identity is like a musical theme on which variations are played: not the notes themselves but their structural relationship to one another remains constant through a lifetime of transformations. ("UNITY IDENTITY TEXT SELF" 121)

Identities, then, are conceived through a process of interpretation. Holland further argues that this process involves the same kind of interpretive maneuvers a reader

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26 This corresponds to Heinz Lichtenstein's definition of a "primary identity," which is at the base of Holland's theory of identity acquisition. As Holland explains: "Out of the newborn child's inheritance of potentialities, its mother-person actuates a specific way of being, namely, being the child that fits this particular mother. The mother thus imprints on the infant, not a specific identity or even a sense of its own identity, but a "primary identity," itself irreversible but capable of infinite variation. This primary identity stands as an invariant which provides all the later transformations of the individual, as he develops, with an unchanging inner form or core of continuity" ("UNITY IDENTITY TEXT SELF" 120-21).
performs vis-à-vis the literary text. Precisely, there is a
direct parallel between our perceptions of the self and its
identity and our perceptions of the text and its unity.
This relationship, formulated as "Unity is to identity as
text is to self," or "Identity is the unity I find in a self
if I look at it as though it were a text" ("UNITY IDENTITY
TEXT SELF" 121), provides the essential framework from
which readers approach literary texts and in which they re-
construct their own identities. Each individual approaches
the text armed with his or her individual "style" of coping
with experience. This style is defined by that individual's
characteristic configuration of defenses, expectations,
fantasies, and transformations (Holland provides the acronym
DEFT) through which each new experience is filtered in an
ongoing process of adaption and assimilation.

This model of reading has provided Holland's critics
the opportunity for numerous critical, and often severe,
commentaries. A frequent charge, for example, involves
Holland's assumption that individuals possess an unchanging
essence, a core identity that is invariable throughout the
individual's life. Although Holland recognized that such a
notion could only be substantiated by the perceptions of an
individual ("Naturally, one pursues this inquiry through
one's own identity"\textsuperscript{27}, he failed, as Susan R. Suleiman notes, to be fully aware of the implications of his remark:

\begin{quote}
... (I)f identity replicates itself in interpretation, and if identity itself can only be arrived at through interpretation, then the enterprise whereby the analyst seeks to demonstrate the validity of the first statement is hopelessly circular--it can never fail but it can never be proven either, for proof would require that the identity of the reader be definable independently of the interpreting identity of the analyst.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

In a similar manner, Holland's assertion that such personal and unique identities do exist and that they are capable of being defined (by projective personality tests as is the case, for example, in \textit{5 Readers Reading}\textsuperscript{29}) has been faulted for its implied "objectivist" point of view. David Bleich, for example, writes: "Holland speaks as if defenses, expectations, fantasies, and transformations are discrete

\textsuperscript{27} Norman N. Holland, "The New Paradigm: Subjective or Transactive?" \textit{New Literary History} 7 (1976): 343.


\textsuperscript{29} Norman N. Holland, \textit{5 Readers Reading} (New Haven: Yale UP, 1975). A sizeable portion of this work is devoted to an analysis of the recorded comments and thoughts of Sandra, Sam, Shep, Saul, and Sebastien, who are analyzed for their "identity themes" via Holland's gestalt of personality configurations.
items perceivable by anyone studying a response...". 30 Jonathan Culler argues that the determined "identities themes" (derived through a series of "free associations") of Holland's five readers are mere reflections of "the clichés of the various subcultures and cultural discourses that work to constitute the consciousness of American college students." 31 Significantly, Culler's comment underscores the limitations, not only of Holland's theory, but of the notion of identity posited by all proponents of American ego psychology. Precisely, these critics have ignored the other reading of Freud (i.e., Jacques Lacan's) in which the self is viewed as an indeterminate sign or verbal representation, a concept which is the product of linguistic practices and not its cause.

The foregoing survey of four reader-response theorists should provide a critical framework in which subsequent theorists have generated varying, but essentially similar, approaches. A major component of this critical framework involves the discrepancy between theory and practice. To be


sure, the theoretical assumptions underlying Poulet's transcendental hermeneutic space where reader and text converge, Iser's receptive yet "wandering" reader, Fish's interpretive communities, and Holland's literary transactions of desire and identity implicitly reflect the problematic aspects of putting theory into practice. These reader-response critics consistently remind us that the reader is, and must be, an active participant in the creation of literary meaning. Yet each theorist has implicated as well a kind of reader, who strives, in theory, and often claims, in practice, to assert a dominant or authoritative stance vis-à-vis the text. Indeed, it could be argued that these constructed readers resemble in some ways the New Critic's perception of the work of art--a determinate, constructed entity whose aesthetic operations remain frustratingly elusive.

It is perhaps because of the problematical aspects of defining, characterizing or impersonating the reader that contemporary theorists of reading have avoided the subject-object dichotomy. Indeed, a dominant characteristic of this "new" generation of theorists is that the antithetical concepts of objectivity and subjectivity or determinacy and indeterminacy can no longer occupy the forefront of critical endeavors. Rather, the underlying premise is that distinctions are always being made by readers. Jonathan
Culler, for example, notes: "We employ such distinctions all the time because our stories require them, but they are variable and ungrounded concepts." In other words, we, as readers, authors, critics, or, whatever the distinction we wish to impose upon ourselves, are always in a context of interpretation in which we create those very concepts of difference. In this manner, our various communicative activities resemble "stories" (Culler) or "allegories" (De Man) in that they are consistently the products of interpretive practices.

A recent collection of essays entitled Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts demonstrates and exemplifies this return to the critic's stated awareness of the political aspects of reading and writing. Each essay, for example, attempts to substantiate the hypothesis that gender plays a significant role in the interaction between text and reader. Moreover, each critic adopts a critical (essentially feminist) viewpoint which, in turn, informs the various reader-oriented discussions of the interpretive act. The combination of feminist criticism and


reader-response criticism promises, as the editors note, significant contributions to the understanding of the reading process in that each induces "a heightened awareness of the way perspective conditions comprehension and interpretation. Perspective here signifies the capacity for certain insights as well as the limitations of vision" (Flynn and Schweickart xxii).

Significantly, these reader-response theorists, whose specific interest lies in the interaction between the text and the reader's gender, have generated their theoretical frameworks by first observing and documenting what and how actual readers read. As a consequence, their work has naturally been interdisciplinary in nature: linguistics, cognitive psychology, social anthropology and communication theory, for example, have contributed to each contributor's understanding of language acquisition and development. For the feminist scholar in particular, these disciplines have provided useful insights into gender-role acquisition and the social, political, and cultural structures that function as ideological components of gender identity.

In the domain of linguistics, for example, researchers are exploring the impact gender has on the organization of information in memory and its effects on comprehension. Mary Crawford and Roger Chaffin, in their review of current investigations into the influence gender has on linguistic
practices, agree with linguists that there is a connection, but its precise nature has not yet been established. This rapport appears to be between an individual's gender, the degree to which the individual's identity is gender-typed (sex-typed), and the manner in which the individual processes and understands a communicative act. This connection is substantiated, in part, by the results of psychological and linguistic protocols.

These theorists argue that gender differences in language are derived, at least in part, by the degree to which an individual is psychologically aware. This awareness is manifest in the psychological distinction an individual makes between the perception of gender (one's

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36 "By gender, we do not mean chromosomal sex [which] is merely one influence on gender, [...] best defined as one's psychological sense of one's self as female or male.

(continued...)
gender identity) and the degree to which this individual behaves and evaluates himself or herself in terms of proscribed and prescribed social norms and expectations (their gender-typing). The latter is based on a "heterogeneous network of associations representing general knowledge rather than specific incidents, and it is used by the individual as an aid in assimilating new information" (Crawford and Chaffin 17). According to Bem's research, this process represents the "gender schema" and is responsible for the development of individual gender-typing.

In particular, (gender schema) theory proposes that sex-typing results, in part, from the fact that the self-concept itself gets assimilated into the gender schema. As children learn the contents of the society's gender schema, they learn which attributes are to be linked with their own sex and, hence, with themselves. This does not simply entail learning where each sex is supposed to stand on each dimension or attribute. . . . but involves the deeper lesson that the dimensions themselves are differentially applicable to the two sexes.  

36 (...continued)
At least two other forces help determine gender. These are the hormonal climate of the body and the gender label given the individual. (...) It is the gender label that begins the process of elaboration and mythification of the biological. Gender is thus socially defined and constructed, becoming 'the means through which we attempt to apprehend sex'" (Crawford and Chaffin 13).

To substantiate this theory, Bem proposed a test in which male and female students, first classified as gender-typed and non-gender-typed, were obliged to choose between "masculine" and "feminine" alternatives. Throughout her research, Bem discovered that such words as "butterfly," "gorilla," and "ant," for example, were respectively and consistently classified by gender-typed students as "feminine," "masculine," and "neutral." In another experiment, Bem measured the speed with which gender-typed and non-gender-typed students were able to decide whether gender-stereotyped traits applied to themselves (a "me/not me" judgment). Again, her results consistently provided evidence that gender-typed individuals made judgments more quickly because, she argued, "in deciding whether a sex-stereotyped trait is "me" or "not me," they do not introspect deeply but simply rely on the readily available gender schema" (Crawford and Chaffin 18).

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38 In her earlier work, Bem proposed a sex role inventory to measure this phenomenon. See her article, "The Measurement of Psychological Androgyny."

Bem's research, and that of her colleagues, has provided reliable, yet relatively minor, evidence of linguistic variation between the sexes. Crawford and Chaffin point out, for example, that, given that gender schema is learned in the early years of childhood, is extremely rich in associations, and is intimately connected with the sense of self, studies such as Bem's should not need to rely on personality tests that determine the degree to which one is gender-typed. "We should find large and reliable differences in reading when we simply compare the understanding of women and men" (Crawford and Chaffin 20-21). The "missing link," they argue, may be explained by pre-existing dominant social structures that obscure differences in viewpoint.

The theory of muted groups is particularly useful in explaining why gender differences are not manifest, in more obvious ways, in linguistic practice. Borrowed from socio-anthropologists, this theory describes situations in which groups of people, such as blacks and whites or colonizers and the colonized, exist in asymmetrical power relationships. The theory, feminist scholars have noted, is applicable to women as well since they occupy a socially subordinate position. Consequently, as members of the muted group, they

... are disadvantaged in articulating their experience, since the language they must use
is derived largely from the perceptions of the dominant group. In order to be heard, muted group members must learn the dominant idiom and attempt to articulate within it, even though this attempt will inevitably lead to some loss of meaning. The experiences "lost in translation" to the dominant idiom remain unvoiced, and perhaps unthought, even within the muted group. (Crawford and Chaffin 21)

The evidence presented, for example, by women's writing collectives of the 1960's and early 1970's and women writers who speak of the difficulties in "trying to speak about their own experiences, through or around the literary language and form accepted by men," reinforces the validity of the muted group theory and helps to explain why linguistic variations and perceptions between the sexes are both subtle and complex.

Crawford and Chaffin's article serves as an informative background for the critical essays in Gender and Reading that investigate the impact gender has on the reading process and, specifically, on representative literary works. These articles adopt the position that the interpretive act produces, to evoke again Culler's term, "stories of reading." As each of these scholars notes, foremost among the themes that recur in these stories is the "immasculination" of the woman reader (Flynn and Schweickart

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xv). Following the position advocated by Judith Fetterley, women and men alike are initially taught to read like a man, that is, to adopt the androcentric perspective that pervades the most authoritative texts of our culture. The feminist reader is compelled to "resist" this manner of reading in order to evoke the presence of her own voice. Consequently, these studies substantiate the status of women as a muted group, whose perception of self is subsumed by dominant male discursive practices.

Furthermore, Crawford and Chaffin's work clarifies and distinguishes the particular, problematical aspects of theorizing about the relationship between gender and reading. As the foregoing survey of the theoretical endeavors of Poulet, Iser, Fish, and Holland have demonstrated, the history of reader-response criticism can be characterized as a struggle for the reader's control over the text or the text's control over the reader. Neither of these models appears consonant with the feminist reader-response critic's concerns. As Schweickart points out, text-dominant models leave women readers at the mercy of androcentric texts, and reader-dominant models obscure the

oppressive actions of such texts. What is needed, according to Schweickart's theory, is a

... feminist story (that) will have at least two chapters: one concerned with feminist readings of male texts, and another with feminist readings of female texts. In addition, in this story, gender will have a prominent role as the locus of political struggle. The story will speak of the difference between men and women, of the way the experience and perspective of women have been systematically and fallaciously assimilated into the generic masculine, and of the need to correct this error. Finally, it will identify literature -- the activities of reading and writing -- as an important arena of political struggle, a crucial component of the project of interpreting the world in order to change it (Schweickart 39).

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At this juncture, I want to suspend momentarily this "story" in order to interpolate two other (feminist) stories. The following chapter offers a history, in the chronological sense of the term, of the actual readership of one representative literary work, the seventeenth-century collection of letters entitled Lettres portugaises. Initially claimed to be the authentic writings of a woman, this epistolary work enjoys the contemporary status of a classical masterpiece written by a previously

undistinguished male author, Gabriel de Guilleragues. Thus, the history I reveal demonstrates as well a critical, and collective, "fiction" (a his-story?) in which readers have constructed the presence of male discursive practices that have eliminated the possibility of an original female signature.

Chapter III is an attempt to read, as a woman, Isabelle de Charrière's *Les Lettres de Mistriss Henley, publiées par son amie*. My objective is to foreground the manner in which gender, and especially Charrière's reading of gender-typing practices in late eighteenth-century France, are portrayed in the text. At the same time, I analyze Charrière's prescriptive efforts to "en-gender" the letters' intended readers. However, a successful reading of her work, I argue, entails, and even requires, the reader's androgynous perception of gender. To read in this manner is to recognize Charrière's work as representative of a revolutionary female voice that offers, on the one hand, a didactic treatise for both sexes and, on the other hand, demonstrates how the woman writer has employed the epistolary form to develop a voice of her own.
CHAPTER II
THREE HUNDRED YEARS OF STORIES:
THE INTERPLAY OF VRAISEMBLANCE AND GENDER
IN THE LETTRES PORTUGAISES

"The Lettres portugaises were written by a man, I'm told. It can't be true! These letters are written by a woman, otherwise, they fulfill the mold of feminine literature. . . ."

This defiant cry, taken from a reader's journal in the first literature seminar I ever taught, provides the initial incentive for investigating the relationship between gender and reading in this small collection of letters. The reader, who confused the "fictional Mariane who writes" with the "non-fictional Guilleragues who invents," was duped by her own gender ideologies and seduced into believing only one of two possible alternatives. The first option requires that Mariane had to exist and physically write the letters herself. The gender of the author, in this case, is instrumental to this reader's understanding of the text's meaning. Through a complex system of gender-related responses, this student, a female, has identified a female narrative and responded to that narrative apparently because
of its complementarity to her own gender values. This student wants to believe and is led to expect that the author is female. The second alternative, vehemently denied by the reader, involves accepting that Guilleragues, a male, created Mariane. The student's refusal to accept this possibility, however, suggests that Guillerague's epistolary fiction is nothing more for her than a "rewritten" story. This story, familiar to the student, is a stereotype, an archetypical image of an abandoned woman in love. The student's outrage, then, appears to originate from the idea that a male might have mimicked a natural female condition, thereby fulfilling, as an impostor, "the mold of feminine literature."

Over three hundred years have passed since the initial anonymous publication of the Lettres portugaises and yet, despite numerous scholarly efforts to untangle, once and for all, the riddle of the unnamed "author," this student's protest provokes a modern reenactment of the original debate about the letters' fictionality. When the Lettres portugaises first appeared in Parisian literary salons of the late seventeenth century, most readers read the letters by focusing, like the student, on one of two alternatives. One alternative consisted of reading the letters as though they were the tragic, authentic (non-fictional) testimonies of a "real-life" Portuguese nun whose victimization by her lover incited largely prurient conjectures about the
identity of the addressee. The second alternative, clearly that of more "critical" readers not so easily seduced by the voyeuristic pleasure of reading the text, consisted of classifying the letters as poorly written expressions of a woman's passion. In both cases, however, the gender of the author was not explicitly put into question. And yet, the current debate on the letters' authorship finds its roots in these initial responses to the Lettres portugaises and is, in itself, a curious rendition of those very readings. It is a debate whose participants would ultimately consider the letters as a quintessential masterpiece of "classical" fiction. Once established, this literary judgment would consequently lead some readers to denounce the plausibility of a female signature; other readers would focus on and question the methodology involved in this purportedly logical conclusion; still others would ignore the gender-based authorial questions and, like the student, remain convinced that the letters originate from a woman.

In this chapter, I will first outline the history of readers' responses to the letters, highlighting precisely those moments in which readers' considerations of the literary value of the text sparked as well an inquiry into the true "authorship" of the letters, an inquiry that would cast substantial doubt on the plausibility of a female author. I will then review and expand upon the research conducted by those scholars who have questioned and
attempted to explicate the ideological assumptions and procedures through which the letters' author was discovered. Finally, I will adumbrate a theory that should prove useful in explaining how the text's implicit gender codes elicit engendered responses from a reader. These responses, I hope to show, are embedded in an existential concept of the *vraisemblance* of gender, a concept that appears to be both universal and chronologically invariable.

I want to begin by exploring some of the particular implications surrounding the term *vraisemblance*. Due primarily to the work of Gérard Genette, the concept of *vraisemblance* in literature is considered, in general terms, as a reflection of coinciding values conferred upon a work of art by both its creator and its beholder (reader, spectator, audience). Any derivation of meaning is largely the result of these coinciding values; that is, the beholder (reader) is implicitly asked to exist within the same world of probability and generality as the creator of the work of art. The result is the existence and maintenance of a "code of *vraisemblance*"; a tacit contract between the reader, the creator, and the text in which instances of the reader's perception of any given phenomenon correspond with the artistic portrayal of that same phenomenon. Because the artistic work precedes the act of beholding, this correspondence is one that relies on and responds to the reader's life experience and his or her exposure to other
texts and contexts as well. It is in this way that a realm of generalities and probabilities exists. In order to maintain the correspondence between the reader, the creator and the text, Genette suggests that pre-existing codes of meaning, taking the form of maxims and model characters, superimpose the literary interaction. As he notes

"... ce qui subsiste, et qui définit le vraisemblable, c'est le principe formel de respect de la norme, c'est-à-dire l'existence d'un rapport d'implication entre la conduite particulière attribuée à tel personnage, et telle maxime générale implicite et reçue. Ce rapport d'implication fonctionne aussi comme un principe d'explication: le générale détermine et donc explique le particulier, comprendre la conduite d'un personnage (...), c'est pouvoir la référer à une maxime admise, et cette référence est reçue comme une remontée de l'effet à la cause...."

Here Genette is referring, of course, specifically to the manner in which seventeenth-century readers read two literary texts, which, he believes, are exemplary of the "deux grands procès de vraisemblance" (Genette 71): Corneille's Le Cid (1637) and Mme de Lafayette's La Princesse de Clèves (1678), both of which were considered "defective" in accordance with the standards of vraisemblance. Yet, because the Lettres portugaises originate from the same era (1669) and because their authenticity was eventually determined in part by readers' applications of the code of vraisemblance to the text,

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Genette's study also helps guide an understanding of how the public reading of this work was influenced by these two processes of *vraisemblance* as well.

What, then, are these two processes? Genette has defined the classical conception of *vraisemblance* as relative to a corpus of maxims or generalities. He further points out, however, that this conception was tempered by some confusion about the nature of *truth* (*vérité*). The scandal provoked, for example, by Chimène's marriage to Rodrigue, her father's murderer, is precisely because of the conflict of values arising from what actually happens in the play and what should happen according to the dictates of the code of *vraisemblance*. Scudéry remarked that "il est vrai que Chimène épousa le Cid, mais il n'est point vraisemblable qu'une fille d'honneur épouse le meurtrier de son père" (Genette 71). The truth (reality?) of her actions does not coincide with the "maximes reçues" that make up the realm of probability. Nor does Chimène's character reflect the moral construct of "un tel personnage" in the same situation. The concept of *vérité*, then, was the apparent opposite of *vraisemblance* and was considered, by these seventeenth-century readers, much like an "accident" in the realm of generality. Genette cites, for example, le Père Rapin, a seventeenth-century scholar, who attempted to clarify the distinction between *vérité* and *vraisemblance* as

*la vérité ne fait les choses que comme elles sont, et la vraisemblance les fait comme*
Rapin's distinction defines truth as a *variable* and often a *particular* instance in which one is surprised out of the realm of probability. The term *vraisemblance*, therefore, has, for these seventeenth-century readers, little or nothing to do with the truth per se. Instead, the concept of *vraisemblance* connotes a system of dual beliefs; one founded on the historical probability or likelihood of any given event; the other subsequently relying on the first in that the likelihood of an event must also fall within a code of social norms (ideologies) arbitrarily governing the probability of that historical event. Genette writes:

> En fait, vraisemblance et bienséance se rejoignent sous un même critère, à savoir, "tout ce qui est conforme à l'opinion du public". Cette "opinion," réelle ou supposée, c'est assez précisément ce que l'on nommerait aujourd'hui une idéologie, c'est-à-dire un corps de maximes et de préjugés qui constitue tout à la fois une vision du monde et un système de valeurs. (Genette 73)

The distinction between *vérité* and *vraisemblance* becomes clear. The term *vraisemblance*, although etymologically related to *vérité*, refers to a prefabricated structure of ideologies, posing as a truth and understood by
its readers as a kind of absolute. Vraisemblance, with all its social rules, looms over the reading process and functions as a link between the reader, the text and the writer from which encoded meanings are given and received. Vérité, on the other hand, remains an elusive variable, characterized as unpredictable, accidental, inexplicable, and freakish in nature. Genette cites Bussy's expressive summation of truth as "l'extravagance [qui] est un privilège du réel" (Genette 74); a summation that flavors that understanding of truth perhaps best expressed, in Bussy's "pre-modernist" terms, as reality.

Understood in Genette's description of the intimate link between vraisemblance and the system of social norms that governs its existence is the variable nature of those norms. As he later remarks, the meaning of every era of human history, every genre of art will be affected by the changing content of the social code of norms; that which truly maintains the system is a respect for the norm itself.² A logical consequence of this respect of the norm is that the code of vraisemblance holds both the creator, the text, and the reader as prisoners in the creation of meaning. Each must constantly refer itself to that general corpus of maxims and personae capable of explaining, or at least predicting, the outcome of anything within the realm

² Genette 74.
of plausibility.

Etymologically, *vraisemblance* would seem to describe best that state in which events, actions, and *personae seem* to be *true*; however, it is also a problematic term. Not only does it define a limited field in which only certain meanings may be exchanged, its code also maintains a closed world of "absolutes" whose contents are, at best, only recognized. All things can only *appear to imitate* that which, we are told, is true. A fundamental question, then, involves the nature of this world of preconceived truth to which readers are constantly referred. Can its nature be determined? More pertinent for this study, can the codes that govern *gender* and manifestations of gender be determined? If, as Genette asserts, readers of the seventeenth century referred to a code of *vraisemblance* to derive meaning from works of literature, could those same readers also have read encoded manifestations of gender in the *Lettres portugaises*, codes that confirmed the authenticity of the letters? If so, is it also possible that, on a more fundamental level, this text has been read for over two centuries according to the same code of *vraisemblance* of gender that dominated its original readership? Or, if the social norms making up the code of

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This is precisely my reason for not substituting the English equivalent of the term in this study. "Likelihood" and "probability" allow only one nuance of this dual-coded term, neglecting the aspect of "truth" crucial to my argument.
vraisemblance do change across generic boundaries and historical moments, as Genette says, has the code of gender (i.e., what it is to be a man or a woman) also changed, thus explaining the search for and affirmation of a male author for these letters?

Finally, there is one other aspect of *vraisemblance* that needs some examination. Since the code of *vraisemblance* involves a system of preconceived notions (ideologies) about how things should be, it seems only logical to question the origin(s) of those notions. The question of origin is particularly significant in the case of the *Lettres portugaises* since the debate about the text's genesis concerns the letters' authenticity. Does the code of *vraisemblance* that governs the letters' authenticity also implicitly govern the presence of a female signature? Likewise, does the code governing the letters' literary status also point the way to a male imitation of a feminine code? Even if the codes are determined and their contents analyzed, does this explain the origin(s) of the codes? Most important for our study, do these same gender-relevant codes still exist today and shape the manner in which we interpret literary texts?

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Among the first readers of the *Lettres portugaises* were
the partisans of authenticity. These readers believed that Mariane, a cloistered Portuguese nun, spontaneously wrote the five letters to a French officer to detail her own passion, to implore and eventually insist that he do the same by returning her letters with his own affirmation of love, undying loyalty and honorable intentions. The underlying motivation for writing the letters, then, was to keep the fire of their love burning until the officer's professional duties in France were fulfilled whereupon he could return to Portugal and rescue her from the convent. For these readers, Mariane ceases her correspondence only after she realizes her love is not mutual, that she, in fact, has been betrayed and abandoned. Furthermore, those who regarded the letters as authentic (non-fictional) argued as well for the incontestable validity of the editor's remarks in the preface to the letters; namely, that these were "found letters," translated from the original Portuguese, and more importantly, the identity of either the addressee or the translator was unknown to the editor.

J'ai trouvé les moyens, avec beaucoup de soin et de peine de recouvrer une copie correcte de la traduction de cinq Lettres portugaises. . . . Je ne sais point le nom de celui auquel on les a écrites, ni de celui qui en a

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4 For the sake of consistency, I will retain the French spelling of Mariane in this study. Those who regarded the text as a collection of authentic letters often changed the spelling of the nun's name to respect Portuguese orthography. Thus, "Marianna" and "Mariana" are both variations found in discussions of the work.
fait la traduction. . . .

It is important to note that this authorial claim of anonymity of the author, the addressee, the translator, and the conditions under which the letters were made available to the reading public, is not uncommon to many epistolary fictions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France. The appeal of reading letters, fictional or otherwise, was enhanced if the participants' names were unrevealed (or fictionalized) and the editors (or authors) prefaced the collections with statements testifying to the authenticity of what followed. Editors of letters such as these were wise to the marketability of creating and promoting such mysteries. For the general reading public, however, the mystery and speculation surrounding the "true" identity of the author was often the focus for discussion in the literary salons where most "literary criticism" (especially of certain specific genres of literature such as epistolary fictions and novels) existed. In the case of the Lettres portugaises, the question of naming (precisely giving the addressee's full name and, somewhat later, Mariane's full name) was synonymous with the letters' authenticity and, consequently, any discussion of the text's literary value

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5 Gabriel de Lavergne, vicomte de Guilleragues, Chansons et Bons Mots, Valentins, Lettres portugaises, ed. F. Deloffre and J. Rougeot. (Geneva: Droz, Paris: Minard, 1972) 145. All other references to this text will be from this edition unless otherwise noted.
seemed far removed from the readers' agenda.

The public reception to the text is perhaps best outlined by Frédéric Deloffre and Jacques Rougeot, the editors of the "definitive" edition of the *Lettres portugaises* published in 1972. They include in the preface of this edition a schematic, yet thorough history of general responses to the letters since their appearance in 1669. Almost immediately after the *Lettres* publication, for example, three anonymous editions of published responses to the letters appeared. All three sets of responses were in letter form; the first edition, published by Barbin (also the publisher of the original edition), contained seven letters all of which imitated the style and content of Mariane's originals. These letters, however, did differ from the other published responses in two noteworthy ways. First, this edition was not a response to Mariane by the addressee. Instead, the seven letters were an addendum to the original letters, responding, then, to Mariane's plight, but as another Mariane. Rather than assuming the form of a male response to her pleas, this unknown author assumed Mariane's stance as a betrayed lover. The second important change appeared in Mariane's situation. Although the writer of these letters continued to name herself "Mariane," he or she did change her social situation. No longer "une religieuse portugaise," this Mariane defined herself as "une femme du monde." The emergence of a second Mariane and the
ensuing change in her occupation and social status invite speculation about the causes and effects of a code of vraisemblance that might have governed the initial reading of the text.

One of the principal arguments among current readers of the Lettres is that Mariane's social status as a cloistered nun casts substantial doubt on the plausibility of her story. Her story "seems" sacrilegious; Mariane, unlike the earlier Héloïse, for example, never mentions the conflict she "should" feel between a transcendant love for God and her carnal love for the soldier. Readers familiar with the story of Héloïse and Abélard no doubt immediately notice the situational similarities between the two nuns. The story of Héloïse is also that of a wayward nun almost seduced again by earthly delights of the flesh, yet saved in the end by her recognition that the rewards of loving God are far more satisfying. Héloïse, in this case, functions as a literary maxim, a morally correct persona, tempted, of course, by the immediate desires of the flesh, ravaged by the effects of what she has done, yet able, in the end, to transcend those desires. The story of Héloïse precedes the story of Mariane whose epistolary persona evolves into a kind of revitalized

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6 I find it necessary to use quotation marks here (and in the next two paragraphs) in order to avoid confusion that I, as a reader also susceptible to codes of vraisemblance, am in agreement with or giving preference to a particular group of readers to the Lettres.
Héloïse for readers who already know this story. According to these readers, this maxim (represented by Héloïse) should have governed Mariane's reactions and, consequently, would have produced the conflict that would have made her story more plausible. However, Mariane's apparent lack of psychological and moral anguish represents a deviation from the code of vraisemblance in which the "Héloïse maxim" would stand for the responses of all women in the same situation.

On another, non-literary level, however, the example of "Héloïse-as-a-maxim" does not need to function as a maxim for Mariane's actions. It would be vraisemblable for any nun to feel some anguish in Mariane's situation. Nuns, after all, vow their eternal devotion to God and, in many ways, resemble in their duties the role of a wife to God. Mariane, then, "should have" felt some guilt for having betrayed her most fundamental vows of chastity to God. Yet the vérité of Mariane's actions remains independent and seemingly indifferent to this kind of guilt or conflict. Any reader, caught in the code of meaning that determines, in a general sense, the actions of all nuns, is shocked out of a world of vraisemblance and forced to accept the reality of Mariane's actions or transform them into the plausible actions of any nun according to the code dominating the reading of the text.

A pragmatic reader would conclude that Mariane's status as a cloistered nun "should have" created some physical
difficulty in arranging meetings with her lover. Yet Mariane remembers the many times her lover came to her private room: "...je sors le moins qu'il m'est possible de ma chambre, où vous êtes venu tant de fois..." (Lettres 154). She even had a three-hour chat alone (presumably) with yet another French officer after his departure: "Un officier français a eu la charité de me parler ce matin plus de trois heures de vous..." (Lettres 154). Furthermore, other nuns in the same convent knew about her lover and were sympathetic to her situation: "...quelques religieuses, qui savent l'état déplorable où vous m'avez plongée, me parlent de vous fort souvent..." and "Les religieuses les plus sévères ont pitié de l'état où je suis, il leur donne même quelque considération et quelque ménagement pour moi..." (Lettres 154, 163-4). Even certain members of her family were aware of the liaison—her brother, for example, aided her in delivering the letters to her lover: "J'avoue cependant que l'occasion que mon frère m'a donnée de vous écrire a surpris en moi quelques mouvements de joie..." (Lettres 149).

The change, then, that this unknown author of the first set of published responses (taking the form of an addendum) made in Mariane's character suggests that readers of the seventeenth century were responding to the same code of vraisemblance that would eventually guide a prevalent twentieth-century reading of the text. This reader, by
changing Mariane's status in the world, seems to be responding to a preordained code of meaning in which Mariane's persona must necessarily reflect her moral construct. Because her behavior does not reflect the moral construct of a cloistered nun, according to the codes of vraisemblance, she must be modified in order to reflect a specific persona (here, "une femme du monde"), most likely to conduct herself in the manner she does. In this way, Mariane's status as a worldly woman can explain and justify her conduct toward her lover. The story becomes more plausible because it respects and adheres to a code of vraisemblance in which worldly women know how to write love letters, especially those of such great passion and depth as Mariane's. The change in her status, then, ultimately functions as a mechanism designed to maintain the reader's belief that these are, in fact, authentic letters. The reader/anonymous writer, in this case, rewrites Mariane's social character thus conforming her behavior to the confines of that specific milieu.

This early response to the letters also reflects, on a deeper level, a "suspicious reader" who must have "suspected" the letters' authenticity and by so doing hesitated between bestowing a certain literary value on them (as fictional constructs) or rewriting the story in such a way as to confirm its authentic quality. In a time when the prevailing reading of the Lettres centered on identifying
the addressee, this author's choice could have been dictated by that public desire "to know the truth," but only if the "truth" adhered to the code of vraisemblance that explained and predicted a character's moral make-up.

At least two other sets of réponses appeared soon after Barbin's second edition. One, published in Paris, contained five letters and assumed the stance of the unknown (and previously silent) lover. These letters, however, did not purport to clarify the mystery surrounding the identity of the two lovers. Rather, they seemed to be an exercise in the style of the original letters, for they are often classified as pure imitations of their form and content. As one reader would later remark, these responses were

"... un pur et simple démarquage du texte [de Guilleragues]: l'auteur s'est le plus souvent contenté de répéter à la première personne ce que Mariane avait dit à la seconde, et inversement; frauduleux travail, qui plus pourtant au point d'avoir souvent été joint à l'original sous une même couverture. (emphasis added)"

Unlike the first addendum to the Lettres, this second reader of Mariane's tale seems to have been unconcerned about the credibility of Mariane's moral make-up as it might relate to her social status. Nor does this reader/respondent seem concerned about proving the authenticity of her letters.

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Rather, if we are to judge by later reader-reactions to this edition, the author appears more enchanted by the style of the Lettres and imagines a male response that would mimic the original (understood as "feminine") style of writing passionate love letters.

There are, of course, some commentaries to make on this second set of responses. One involves the seventeenth-century preoccupation with the aesthetic qualities of a literary text. The literary works of this time, in keeping with the long tradition of literary goals set forth by Horace's Ars poetica, purported to accomplish at least two goals: (1) to instruct, and (2) to please the audience or the reader. The author of this second set of responses apparently "read" Mariane's letters with the second goal specifically in mind. Mariane's letters are interpreted by this reader as a pleasurable experience; a pleasure so consuming that he/she is inspired to imitate them as purely as possible in the responses. In so doing, however, the plausibility of Mariane's persona and situation is accepted without question. Accordingly, the letters' authenticity is assumed. This reader appears blind to either a female or male signature to the text and responds in an equally gender-blind fashion.

The pleasure of reading the letters seems to have transcended the gender-specific codes of vraisemblance, at least those codes that guided the reading of the first
edition in which the reader is notably more preoccupied with the moral/instructional aspects of the letters. Might this then suggest that the problematics of authenticity and of gender in the Lettres are directly related to their moral, and not to their stylistic aspects? This possibility may appear insignificant; however, it also has a number of implications for determining how women's writings are read. If the amount of pleasure that a reader derives from a text is implicitly understood as existing within the code of vraisemblance governing women's writing, this could suggest that pleasure is one component that makes up the code of vraisemblance governing the gender of the author for the reader. Furthermore, if the amount of moral instruction a reader derives from a text is directly linked to the plausibility of the character's persona and situation (its vraisemblance), this could also suggest that the character and her actions must first be in accordance with an understood code of the vraisemblance of her gender. Since Mariane's failure within the code, according to our first reader, is specifically linked to the plausibility of her persona in this particular situation, the authenticity of her letters is problematic. In other words, the implication

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8 I use this term with some reservations. "Stylistic" here refers to the manner in which the content of the letters is expressed. Specifically, in the Lettres portugaises, this is the way in which love and the betrayal of love is related to the one who is loved.
drawn from the first reader's reaction is that Mariane cannot exist as a woman writing these letters because of her deviation from a pre-existing norm that governs her actions as a woman-nun. However, if the reader considers only the pleasure of reading a woman's passion (as does the second reader), the implication is that Mariane can exist as a woman despite her status as a nun, a detail appearing as an "aside" to the gender of the writer in this second reader's opinion. Two schematic equations appear to be developing; 1) Mariane, nun-woman = letters are fictional constructs and can, therefore, be modified; 2) Mariane, woman-nun = letters are authentic. One combination remains: a reader who recognizes Mariane as a nun-woman and still considers the letters authentic. The third set of responses to the Lettres portugaises provides precisely this point of view.

This edition, entitled the Nouvelles Réponses aux Lettres portugaises, appeared in Grenoble also in 1669. The unknown author wrote that, although unable to enlighten the reader about the identity of the writer or the addressee, he did observe that

. . . l'ingénuité et la passion toute pure, qui paraissaient dans ces cinq Lettres portugaises, permettent à peu de gens de douter qu'elles n'aient été véritablement écrites...On m'a dit qu'une passion violente avait inspiré ces cinq premières lettres, et qu'un homme qui ne serait pas touché d'une pareille passion ne réussirait jamais heureusement à y faire des réponses; que c'était une fille qui avait fait les premières, et que, dans l'âme des personnes de ce sexe, les passions étaient plus fortes
et plus ardentes que celles d'un homme, où elles sont toujours plus tranquilles; que c'était, outre cela, une religieuse, plus capable d'un grand attachement et d'un transport amoureux qu'une personne du monde; et que moi, n'étant ni fille, ni religieuse, ni peut-être amoureuse, je ne pourrais pas seconder dans mes lettres, ces sentiments qu'on admire avec sujet dans les premières.  

It is immediately clear, that in these Réponses de Grenoble, the author, although anonymous, identifies his gender as male. He places himself, solely on the basis of his gender, in juxtaposition with a set of pre-existing vraisemblables attitudes about women and their specific emotional capacities. By so doing, he seems to be preparing his reader for his own potentially feeble imitation of Mariane's style and content but justifies this potential failure by relying on some (understood) emotional inadequacies vraisemblables to the male gender! His letters will be poor imitations precisely because he is not a woman (fille), not a nun, and probably not in love.

These letters, significantly, are the first to address the underlying questions about the text's authenticity and, consequently, the vraisemblance of their author's gender. By addressing these two problematic features of the text, this reader has also managed to combine the previous preoccupations of the vraisemblance of Mariane's status as a

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nun in the first set of responses with that of the pleasure
of reading her style in the second set. For this reader, to
accept the authenticity of Mariane's letters is to accept
equally her status as a nun and her status as a woman. In
fact, for this reader, Mariane's occupation only enhances
her (inherent) capacities as a woman to express pure passion
which, in turn, reinforces the authenticity of their
conception.

The reader, as well, seems to have derived substantial
pleasure from reading Mariane's letters. The proof is his
own desire to respond despite his self-conscious awareness
that his gender will, supposedly, impose certain limitations
upon how well he does so. His eventual response to
Mariane's situation is shadowed by a pre-existing condition
or maxim (taking the form of a generic "on m'a dit..."'); a
condition that will govern his own concept of "a male in
love" and, as well, the concept of a "woman in love" both of
whom have already been defined by this gender-specific world
of vraisemblance. This condition has been applied by the
reader to a specific gender-directed reading (or perhaps re-
reading?) of the Lettres and to a specific gender-directed
writing of his response. Yet, his desire to respond is not
necessarily dictated by this condition; in fact, it is
entirely possible that his desire to respond to Mariane
resulted from reading alone and existed before the discovery
of the maxim that "told" him what was specific about and
inherent in a woman writing her passion.

Because it is virtually impossible to establish the nature of this reader's desire to respond, one can only speculate about the cause(s) inspiring that desire. Among these causes is, of course, the situation of this particular woman in love. Mariane, because she is cloistered in a convent, exists in a kind of emotional and sexual vacuum, a state void of physical matter, in which her passion and her desire for the other (the soldier) echoes, almost pathetically, around her and eventually threatens to consume, not her lover who is physically absent, but herself. Furthermore, her void is reinforced by the monologic form of her letters; her lover's epistolary absence frustrates her only escape from the physical vacuum of her situation and intensifies her anguish. The reader becomes ensnared in Mariane's solitary world, seduced by the intensity of a passion that has nowhere to go. The power of the pathos itself molds the reader as a "substitute lover," compelled into existence by responding in an epistolary fashion.\footnote{The explosion of various editions, translations, forgeries, and imitations of the original edition attests to the enormous popularity of public responses to the letters. P. and J. Larat ("Les 'Lettres d'une religieuse portugaise' et la sensibilité française," Revue de littérature comparée [1928]: 623-626) give a list of principal editions, translations and imitations of the Lettres. These all indicate, I believe, responses to the letters despite their classifications within differing generic boundaries.} The name "Mariane" by and in itself might indeed
be the spark that ignites a gender-oriented reading of Passion thus ensuring a gender-based response. The respondent, then, is compelled to respond, either directly or indirectly, but **always**, in this particular case, as a **gender-typed male reader**.

These early responses to the *Lettres portugaises* are essential to an understanding of the various readings of the text that followed in the next two hundred years. Each reflects a specific reader preoccupation: 1) doubt regarding the *vraisemblance* of action, character and situation leading to an unstated suspicion of the text's authenticity; 2) suspension of doubt about the *vraisemblance* of the text and its authenticity, focusing instead on the pleasure of reading a specific content (passion) written in such a style; and, 3) suspension of doubt about the *vraisemblance* of the text, focusing on the pleasure of reading a text because it is written by a woman (reflecting a woman's **natural** style), thereby affirming the text's authenticity.

What is particularly fascinating about these early reader-responses is that they reflect how most subsequent readers have read the letters, even though some readers will

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11 We should note that Mariane is named only two times in the text. The first mention occurs in the *Première Lettre* ("...cesse, cesse, Mariane infortunée, de te consumer vainement..." [148]); the second mention appears at the end of the *Seconde Lettre* ("Je suis au désespoir, votre pauvre Mariane n'en peut plus, elle s'évanouit en finissant cette lettre" [154]).
attempt, as will be seen, to combine one way of reading with another. Even more significant, however, is an evolution of readers' responses that, while based on these earliest readings, results in a new reading of the letters, either proclaiming the text's literary worth as a classical masterpiece of fiction or condemning the text's literary value as a poor imitation of a certain "taste of the time."

This evolution, however, is marked by a change in the status of the Lettres' reader. The popular reader, whose principal response to the letters can be identified as a desire to substantiate the identity of the addressee and the addressor, accepted the authenticity of the text and, in so doing, did not question the stylistic mechanics that produced the pleasure of reading them. The critical reader, however, would question this pleasure, directly or indirectly, and, eventually through this process, would put into question the text's authenticity, its vraisemblance and its female signature. For both these types of readers, the Lettres become a candidate for inclusion in the canon. To attain this stature, however, their literary value must be compared with other literary texts. A new maxim, a new code of vraisemblance is thus brought into play. Yet, one question remains: at what level does this new code also produce readings that are gender-oriented?

The very first "critical" readers of the Lettres failed to appreciate—even dismissed—the text's potential
"literariness." Gabriel Guéret, a minor author of the late seventeenth century, alluded to the Lettres in his Promenade de Saint Cloud in which two of the characters compare this work with Furetière's Roman bourgeois:

"Voudriez-vous juger de la bonté des livres par le débit? Il me semble qu'il y en a d'excellens qui pourissent dans les boutiques pendant que d'autres qui ne valent rien se débient avec chaleur. Il ne faut pas aller plus loin que les Lettres portugaises. N'est-il pas surprenant combien il s'en est vendu et je n'en vois pas d'autre raison si ce n'est le charme de la nouveauté et qu'on a pris plaisir de lire les lettres d'amour d'une religieuse, de quelque manière qu'elles fussent faites sans considérer que ce titre est le jeu d'un libraire artificieux qui ne cherche qu'à surprendre le public... Il y a, sans doute, quelque tendresse dans ces lettres, si vous la faites consister dans les mots passionnés comme les hélas, etc. Mais, si vous la mettez dans les sentiments, à peine en trouverez-vous deux qui soient remarquables. Et en vérité n'est-ce pas une grande misère quand il faut lire un livre pour si peu de choses? D'ailleurs il n'y a pas même de stile; la plupart des périodes y sont sans mesure, et ce que j'y trouve de plus ennuyeux, ce sont de continuelles répétitions, qui rebattent ce qui méritoit à peine d'être dit une seule fois." (emphasis added)[12]

Dorat, the eighteenth-century editor of a new edition of the Lettres, wrote what appears to be a response to Guéret's summation of the work in his preface:

...(T)out y est vrai, naturel, de cette simplicité attachante, premier charme des écrits auxquels on revient et dont on ne se lasse jamais... Entendez parler nos jolis juges, ces juristes glacés qui poussent

jusqu'à la pédanterie l'amour du beau style, personnages élégamment froids et correctement ennuyeux, ils vous diront que les Portugaises sont du dernier médiocre, que cela ne se laisse point lire et qu'il est incroyable qu'un pareil livre ait encore des partisans (. . .) Pour peu qu'on ait de la sensibilité, on relit six fois les Portugaises avant de s'apercevoir qu'elles sont mal écrites.\textsuperscript{13}

And even Sainte-Beuve, as late as 1832, read the letters as non-literary, when he grouped the Lettres portugaises in the tradition of non-fictional love letters such as those of Mlle de Lespinasse and Mlle Aïssé:

\textit{Ce sont des livres qui ne ressemblent pas à des livres, et qui quelquefois même n'en sont pas (. . .) Aussi les lettres écrites au moment de la passion...sont-elles inappréciables et d'un charme particulier dans leur désordre? On connaît celles d'une Portugaise, bien courtes malheureusement et tronquées. . . .} \textsuperscript{14}

These critics, then, represent a new approach to reading the letters and constitute a third group of readers: those who do not directly dispute the authenticity of the letters nor their \textit{vraisemblance} of action or character. However, this group of readers makes clear their evaluation of the letters as the "natural, charming, simple" expressions of female passion in all its "boring, repetitive disorder." The

\textsuperscript{13} C.J. Dorat's new edition was entitled \textit{Lettres d'une chanoinesse de Lisbonne à Melcour} published at La Haye in 1770. This citation is quoted from P. and J. Larat, "Les 'Lettres d'une religieuse portugaise' et la sensibilité française," \textit{Revue de littérature comparée} (1928): 633.

letters are, quite simply, without "style" and consequently undeserving of any literary status, for they are "poorly written."

More importantly, these readers, with the possible exception of Dorat who does not explicitly name the reason for his own unfavorable judgment, establish model texts to which the Lettres are compared. Guéret, in comparing the work with Furetière's Roman bourgeois, bases his commentary on the amount of pleasure derived from reading the Lettres, substantiating, then, the existence of a dominant response to the public reception of the text. In this case, the pleasure the reader experiences is intensified because of what he believes to be the "charme de [leur] nouveauté."

Guéret further explains what this newness is: it is precisely the pleasure of reading the love letters of a nun. In this instance, it would seem that Guéret is referring to a group of "uninformed readers" who did not recognize Héloïse as a model for the text's conception; a model that would have negated the newness of Mariane's own letters. (Of course, there is also the possibility that Guéret himself was unaware of this literary precedent!) More importantly, however, is that Guéret focuses on the "nouveauté" of the text's content, yet consequently condemns its literary worth for reasons other than its contextual adherence to a code of vraisemblance. Rather, it is the
title of the letters,\textsuperscript{15} reflecting a deliberate attempt on the part of certain librairies to sell the book, that explains, for Guéret, the popularity of the text. For him, the "innocent reader" is lured into reading the letters because they are shocked (out of a world of vraisemblance?) by its title alone. On the other hand, Guéret, a "critical reader" who has perceived this "jeu," has resisted the pleasure promised by the text and has seen, instead, their literary (stylistic) imperfections. Guéret's vicious condemnation of manipulating editors and easily duped readers extends as well to the "boring, repetitive" style of the Lettres themselves; a style that, interestingly, would later be considered as one of the principal reasons for classifying the work as a classical masterpiece.

Dorat, like Guéret, also establishes himself as a "critical reader"; a stance through which he views the letters as full of "simplicité" and "charme" yet "mal écrites." However, his judgment is not based explicitly on the comparison of the letters to another literary model.

\textsuperscript{15} Like the spelling of Mariane's name, the title of her letters has changed throughout its various editions. Guéret's \textit{La Promenade de Saint-Cloud} was composed in 1669: the same year of the first two publications of the Lettres. Barbin's original edition was entitled \textit{Les Lettres portugaises traduites en français}. Du Marteau, however, published a few months later another edition of the same work, yet it was entitled \textit{Lettres d'amour d'une religieuse écrites au Chevalier de C. officier français en Portugal}. Guéret must have read Du Marteau's edition in order for him to comment on the title in this manner.
Instead, the act of rereading reveals, for him, their poor literary quality. Like Guéret, Dorat also recognizes and substantiates the presence of pleasure derived from reading the text; unlike Guéret, however, he admits that he has also succumbed to this pleasure (at least six times!) before perceiving how badly they were written.

Dorat's judgment suggests an important evolution in the reader's response to the text. Like the earlier reader who composed the second set of published responses to Mariane's letters, Dorat's initial pleasure in reading the letters appears to have overwhelmed his critical eye; Dorat, in short, fell for the "jeu" so disdained by Guéret. Yet, because he re-read the text (after all, he was putting together another edition), one can only conclude that Dorat's pleasure and his concurrent suspension of criticism waned as his re-readings progressed. Unfortunately, Dorat does not clarify exactly why he found these letters poorly written, yet it is evident that the change in his own perceived reader status (from "popular" reader to "critical" reader?) transformed as well the manner in which he judged the text's literary worth. Even more important for this study, however, is that his final judgment does not involve any question of the text's authenticity or of the gender of the author. Furthermore, Dorat makes no attempt to justify the text's deviation from a code of vraisemblance, that, according to later scholars, including Genette, influenced
significantly the reading of literature during this time. It is curious that Dorat, in becoming a "critical" reader, did not address this issue in his consideration of the text. Perhaps, in the end, that was his reason for stating that the letters were poorly written. Why, then, would he have avoided the issue of the *Lettres*' authenticity and the gender of their writer? Is it possible that Dorat, like the second respondent to the letters, was so enchanted by the pleasure of reading what he *always wanted* to believe (despite his self-imposed change of reading status vis-à-vis the text) was an authentic *female* confession of passion that he willingly overlooked, even as a "critical" reader, the text's obvious deviations from a code of *vraisemblance*? If so, this would substantiate further the theory that the amount of *pleasure* a reader derives from a text is linked to a unique conception of *vraisemblance* that is specific to the gender of the author, and heretofore little taken into account by literary historians and critics.

Sainte-Beuve, like Guéret, establishes a literary model for his own reading of the *Lettres*. Unlike Guéret, however, Sainte-Beuve places the letters within a tradition of other love letters that are all authentic and explicitly attributed to a female authorship. Sainte-Beuve, by placing the *Lettres* within a tradition of female texts, underscores his own conception of the letters as an authentic portrayal of a woman's passion. However, his remarks suggest that,
like the correspondence of Lespinaise or Aïssé, books such as these are not really books despite their generic similarities to "real" books. One can only wonder what Saint-Beuve might have meant by that. Do "livres," for him, connote some kind of understood literary status? He further remarks that because these kinds of "livres" are spontaneously conceived, they are, therefore, "d'un charme particulier dans leur désordre," a commentary that hardly places the works within a tradition of literary masterpieces! What is most revealing about Sainte-Beuve's comments, however, is that his final judgment on the Lettres focuses on their form "bien courtes malheureusement et tronquées," yet another aspect of the letters reinforcing later conceptions of the letters as master examples of a classical form.

It is important to note that, in the case of the Lettres portugaises, nearly two centuries of readers did not dispute the female (or Mariane's) authorship of the letters. Nor during this time was the non-fictionality of the text placed into question. In fact, if one were to point to a single significant evolution in how these letters were read, it would involve first and foremost a consideration of the reader's status vis-à-vis the text. "Popular" readers seemed more concerned with establishing the real-life identities of the receiver, translator and writer of the letters; justifying the actions, character and situation of
the épistolière according to a code of vraisemblance; or imitating their passionate content and style primarily for the pleasure alone. On the other hand, the concern of "critical" readers focused on evaluating the Lettres' literary status, that is, their style as opposed to another style and/or their literary lineage. Most significantly, nearly all of these "critical" readers, while not questioning the female authorship or the non-fictional nature of the text, did not consider the text as "real" literature.

There were a few noteworthy exceptions. One in particular led to the formation of yet another group of readers, a group whose reading still determines how the letters are read today. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his Lettre à D'Alembert sur les spectacles, is the first known reader to directly challenge the female authorship of the letters in his commentary on women's artistic and aesthetic capacities in general:

Les femmes, en général, n'aient aucun art, ne se connoissent à aucun, et n'ont aucun génie. Elles peuvent réussir aux petits ouvrages qui ne demandent que de la légèreté d'esprit, du goût, de la grâce, quelquefois même de la philosophie et du raisonnement. Elles peuvent acquérir de la science, de l'érudition, des talens, et tout ce qui s'acquiert à force de travail. Mais ce feu céleste qui échauffe et embrasse l'âme, ce génie qui consume et dévore, cette brulante éloquence, ces transports sublimes qui portent leurs ravissements jusqu'au fond des coeurs, manqueront toujours aux écrits des femmes: ils sont tous froids et jolis comme elles; ils auront tant d'esprit que vous
voudrez, jamais d'âme; ils seroient cent fois plus sensés que passionnés. Elles ne savent ni décire ni sentir l'amour même. La seule Sapho, que je sache, et une autre, méritèrent d'être exceptées. Je parierois tout au monde que les Lettres portugaises ont été écrites par un homme.\(^\text{16}\)

Rousseau's "bet" on the true gender of the Lettres' author is derived, in a seemingly logical manner, from a litany of global maxims about women in general, including the one that excludes women from "true" emotional depth for they "have no soul." Nor are they capable of expressing or feeling love, as women are emotionally mere reflections of their "cold and pretty" exteriors. Consequently, in literary endeavors, women can only succeed in those petits ouvrages where no greatness of esprit is required, only grace and a certain goût.

In most aspects, Rousseau's judgment on women, cast into the form of universal maxims, reflects an adherence to a long-established literary lineage in which women's inherent intellectual and esthetic capacities are determined largely by their external characteristics. Malebranche, for example, had perceived women's intellect as biologically determined. Concerning matters of the imagination, Malebranche wrote that a "délicatesse des fibres se rencontre ordinairement dans les femmes. Elles ont plus de

science, d'habilité et de finesse que les hommes. . ." in matters of taste and fashion, but, he later clarifies, they are "pour l'ordinaire incapables de pénétrer des vérités un peu difficiles à découvrir. Tout ce qui est abstrait leur est incompréhensible à cause des fibres délicates de leur cerveau."\(^7\) The idea that women are born intellectually inferior and, therefore, should not concern themselves with the science of discovering and expressing the "truths" of human existence is also found in Montaigne's writing about women:

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Que leur faut-il [aux femmes] que vivre aymées et honorées? Elles n'ont et ne sçavent que trop pour cela. Si toutesfois il leur fache de nous ceder en quoy que ce soit, et veulent par curiosité avoir part aux livres, la poésie est un amusement propre à leur besoin: c'est un art follastre et subtil, desguisé, parler, tout en plaisir, tout en monstre comme elles.
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Rousseau's comments on women, then, not only propagate the existence of maxims about women but also clarify their objectified status. Their physical traits, ostentatious in

\(^7\) Nicolas de Malebranche, Recherche de la vérité, ed. Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, 20 vols. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1962) 1: 266-67. This estimation of the female brain is curiously similar to Julien Offray de la Mettrie's explanation of "la folie." Whereas La Mettrie could not visually establish the precise area of the brain affected, he, nonetheless, was convinced that something was weak or missing ("un rien, une petite fibre, quelque chose que la plus subtile Anatomie ne peut découvrir eût fait [des] sots..."). L'Homme-machine (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1960) 159.

nature, have been read and defined, in this particular
lineage of thought, as instruments conveying pleasure (to
men). These physical traits of women are believed likewise
to govern and define the presence of their internal
qualities or capacities, specifically those involving great
intellect. Furthermore, even if these qualities are at all
present, they are, nonetheless, of questionable value. As
La Bruyère remarks in *Les Caractères*, "On regarde une femme
savante comme on fait une belle arme: elle est ciselée
artistement, d'une polissure admirable et d'un travail fort
recherché; c'est une pièce de cabinet, que l'on montre aux
curieux, qui n'est pas d'usage, qui ne sert ni à la guerre
ni à la chasse, non plus qu'un cheval de manège, quoique le
mieux instruit du monde."  

And, as Montaigne notes as well
in his *Essais*, if women's curiosity about the affairs of men
should extend to history and philosophy, they should extract
only that which can be of use to them in their daily lives,
i.e., use the *morales* they might find in their readings to
amuse and please others.  

In short, Woman as intellectual
thinker is not *vraisemblable* to her sex and therefore is an
oddity, a curiosity, a "chiseled," artificial object.

Of significance, however, is that these examples of how

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19 La Bruyère, "Des Femmes," *Les Caractères ou les Moeurs

20 Montaigne 83-4.
women are read extend as well to an examination of how certain forms of literature are perceived. Despite the time that separated Montaigne's remarks about women from Rousseau's own condemnation of their nature and function in society, the thrust of their perceptions on the subject of women remains the same. However, the idea of the kinds of literature women should read appears to have evolved sometime between the two writers. As previously noted, Montaigne believed poetry to be the appropriate genre for women of the sixteenth century to read because its frivolous, chatty quality apparently corresponded to women's inherent nature. Rousseau, however, links a different genre, the letter, to his remarks about women. Although it is possible to argue that Rousseau's connection between the Lettres portugaises and women's nature is inconsequential and extraneous, it is, nonetheless, equally possible to untangle a subtle system of values in Rousseau's thought that reflects the evolving status of the letter as a literary form. As such, the letter form itself, coupled with Rousseau's belief that a woman could not have possibly written such a work because it is not vraisemblable to her nature, reveals another maxim concerning both what women should be reading and what they should be writing.

As Roger Duchêne has noted in his work on the history of readership within the epistolary form, the public perception of the letter's literary status did indeed evolve
during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Duchêne situates the cause of this evolution to the initial publications of letters in French, first by Étienne du Tronchet and soon thereafter by Étienne Pasquier. Of course, the voluminous editions of Mme de Sévigné’s correspondence with her daughter, Mme de Grignan, had a formative impact on the evolution of epistolary correspondence. With the appearance of letters written in French and by women (Sévigné’s influence is enormous in this respect), a new public of readers, women and people of the court (both, traditionally, less versed in the Latin language and in the rhetorical features so admired by former épistoliers) entered into the literary enterprise of interpretation. These readers brought with them a new literary esthetic: one which centered on the thematics of daily life, contemporary portrayals of society and, of course, affairs of the heart. Because women did not normally receive rigorous instruction in the fine art of rhetoric and had little or no knowledge of the literary heritage of the letter in Latin and Greek literature, the changing status of the demands readers brought to letters influenced the authorial demands of epistolary writers. The letter, as a literary genre, became, for the first time, an accessible and popular mode through which women writers

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could publish and assure themselves of an audience.

This pragmatic nature of the letter's literary evolution, however, seems to have had far-reaching effects. The maxim about women's inherent capacities, described earlier, situates the female gender as the one most likely to write these kinds of epistolary works in this particular (i.e., historical) instance of evolving reader taste. Accordingly, the emergence of an unsigned text, like the Lettres portugaises, can be understood in terms of a readership obsessed with discovering the identity of the addressee, but not concerned with questioning the authorial presence of a female writer. The readership of seventeenth-century letters would accept as vraisemblable Mariane's authorship because these same readers had already accepted the maxim about what women know best—affairs of the heart.

However, with Rousseau's example, the Lettres' literary worth is connected explicitly to the gender of the author, as though the two were somehow intimately and inherently related. For Rousseau, they are, but this relationship has more to do with a dominant literary preference of his own time. Rousseau, the reader of the Lettres portugaises and himself the author of La Nouvelle Héloïse, is substantiating the presence of a new (i.e., eighteenth-century) readership whose primary desire in reading letters is to be profoundly moved by the pathos (sensibilité) of the text. Rousseau's wager that the Lettres portugaises were written by a man is
dependent upon his acceptance of both a generalizing and prejudicial maxim that attributes to women certain emotional capacities and his personal belief, defined by the demands of this new readership, that men alone have the ability to speak about passion with the grace and sensibilité witnessed in the text. These beliefs influence his reading of the text and prompt him to suggest that the Lettres portugaises have been "improperly" read. For if we had not been blind to the sentimental genius (for Rousseau, a characteristic not vraisemblable to the female gender: "[elles] n'ont. aucun génie")\textsuperscript{22} in the work, we would know the letters were not of a woman's hand and thus fictional constructs.\textsuperscript{23}

In this context, Rousseau's comments foreshadow and perhaps can even help to clarify Sainte-Beuve's ambiguous commentary in 1832 that would establish the Lettres within a (female) tradition of books that are not really books.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} It is perhaps relevant to note that the only exceptions to this rule, in Rousseau's opinion, are an unnamed woman and the Greek poet, Sappho, whose lesbian love poetry Rousseau must have read. One can only speculate if Rousseau might have excluded Sappho from his maxim about women because he believed her writing as non-gender-specific, or because he read her works as reflections of his own preconceived notions (another maxim) about what "masculine" writing is.

\textsuperscript{23} Given that Guéret's earlier remarks (p. 95 of this study) included a harsh criticism of the monotony of sentimental expression he perceived in the Lettres, it is unfortunate (at least for this study) that Rousseau did not explicitly outline the kinds of sentiment that he found both so compelling and so characteristic of the "masculine" capacity for emotion.

\textsuperscript{24} See pages 96 and 100-1 of this study.
Sainte-Beuve's comment appears to betray a certain reader confusion. In his own perceived status as a literary critic, he recognizes the ingenuity of the letters. However, since he also assumes the posture of a seventeenth-century reader who accepts, without suspicion, the presence of a female author, he cannot proclaim the Lettres as real literature. To do so, he would have to refute Mariane's authorship, thereby placing the text within a tradition of literary masterpieces, all authored by men (like Rousseau). Indeed, Sainte-Beuve might have wanted to issue a "bet" in much the same way as Rousseau had it not been for Boissonade's "discovery" in 1810 of the "true" author of the Lettres, a certain nun named Mariane Alcaforada.

Finally, it is worth mentioning another challenge, issued by the devoutly Catholic Barbey d'Aurevilly, on the subject of the Lettres' female authorship, based exclusively on moral grounds:

On parle de passion sincère! Mais la passion d'une religieuse pour un homme, si elle est possible, doit être quelque chose de terrible, d'inouï, de tragique à faire pâlir Phèdre... Pensez-y donc! une religieuse! une épouse de Jésus-Christ!... Non! Tout cela n'est pas vrai. Quelqu'un a menti! Nous ne savons pas le nom du menteur, mais qu'importe!... Nous [the readers] avons nié la religieuse; un autre que nous a nié la femme, un autre qui se connaissait aux passions et à leur langage....

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Barbey d'Aurevilly's denunciation of the moral *vraisemblance* of the letters (based on what would seem "likely" for any nun in this situation) leads him to suspect and suggest the authorial presence of a male impostor who has somehow duped the unsuspecting reader. He later aligns himself directly with Rousseau's suspicions about the plausibility of a male author and argues that works such as the *Lettres* are not really books thus placing himself as well alongside his contemporary reader, Sainte-Beuve.

Most important, however, is that Rousseau, Sainte-Beuve, and Barbey d'Aurevilly were crucial to the formation of the new (i.e., "critical") readership of the *Lettres portugaises*. By focusing on the letters' thematic content (and its adherence to a code of *vraisemblance*) and style, these readers reappraised the text's literary value, and, as a result, put into question and eventually denied the presence of a female author. In fact, both Barbey d'Aurevilly's and Rousseau's comments foreshadowed the ground-breaking studies performed in the twentieth century by F.C. Green and Leo Spitzer, two scholars dedicated to proving the true (male) authorship of the letters and whose research established how we view today the authorship (and, consequently, the reading) of the letters.
The research conducted by these scholars differed in crucial ways. Green's study\(^\text{26}\) relied primarily on some "external" documentation he had discovered about the life of a certain Marianna da Costa Alcaforada, the alleged writer of the letters. Specifically, Green's research led him to discover certain discrepancies between this Marianna's life and the few chronological and geographical references mentioned in the *Lettres*. In what evolved to be a fascinating search for the "true author," Green outlines the history of authorship attribution; certain details of which I will only note here.

Green first discovered a parallel edition of the *Lettres*, published in 1669, which may or may not have sparked the initial identification of both the translator and the addressee. This edition, entitled *Lettres d'amour d'une religieuse escrites au Chevalier de C. officier francois en Portugal*. A Cologne. Chez Pierre du Marteau, differed only from Barbin's original edition of 1669 by the addition in the preface of the following: "Le nom de celuy auquel on les a écrites, est Monsieur Le Chevalier De Chamilly, et le nom de celuy qui en a fait la traduction est Cuilleraque [sic]." Barbin, however, would later publish another edition of the letters in which he cited the translator to be Guilleragues. Yet another edition,

published by Cailleau in 1778, would name Subligny as the translator of the letters. Interestingly, the earliest proofs of the text's authenticity did not focus on the originator of the letters, but on the addressee and the translator, both of whom were presumed to be male. It was not until 1810, Green notes, that a bibliographer, Boissonade, wrote in the Journal de l'Empire that he had discovered the real name of the Portuguese nun.

Tout le monde sait aujourd'hui que ces lettres remplies de naturel et de passion furent écrites à M. de Chamilly par une religieuse portugaise et que la traduction est de Guilleragues ou de Subligny. Mais les bibliographes n'ont pas encore découvert le nom de la religieuse. Je puis le leur apprendre. Sur mon exemplaire de l'édition de 1669, il y a cette note d'une écriture qui m'est inconnue: "La religieuse qui a écrit ces lettres se nommait Mariane Alcaforada, religieuse à Béja entre l'Estramadure et l'Andalousie. Le cavalier à qui ces lettres furent écrites était le comte de Chamilly dit alors le comte de Saint-Leger."

Green is quick to point out (and rightly so) that this unknown annotator, hazy in geography, places the Portuguese nun somewhere in Spain and certainly far away from the convent at Beja in Portugal; thus, the "proof" this note gives us about the identity of Mariane is unreliable as the annotator might have simply "by dint of repetition" copied a conjecture that had "acquired the authority of a legend" (Green 164). Green's hypothesis is all the more credible because of his discovery of at least one other copy of the Lettres which, like Boissonade's, had marginal annotations
naming the mysterious nun as someone other than Mariane Alcaforada.

Green also cites some textual discrepancies as counterevidence to the letters' authenticity. For example, Mariane's reference to her mother in Letter IV as one person noticing the change in her since her lover's departure does not coincide with the life history of the Alcaforada nun, whose mother had died when she was a small child. To make matters worse, Green's research on the Alcaforada family revealed two sisters of the same name at the convent in Beja; Marianna and D. Peregrina Maria. Who, then, was the real Mariane of the Lettres? Furthermore, it was discovered that three convents, not one, existed at Beja at the time the letters were written! Which one, then, was the home of the Mariane who wrote the letters? The only geographical clue in the text is Mariane's reference in Letter IV to standing on a balcony "d'où l'on voit Mertola" (Lettres 164); yet this reference causes even more confusion as Mertola is situated about 50 kilometers southeast of Beja! Green's greatest contribution to resolving the question of the Lettres' authorship was his discovery in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris of a copy of the original publisher's permit (in the Registre des Privilèges accordés aux auteurs et libraires) from 1668 for the text of the letters. The permit was issued to the name of Guilleraqués (presumed to be Guilleragues for most scholars) for several
works to be published together, one of which was simply referred to as *Lettres portugaises*. There is no mention of a translator. Green, however, denies any possible conclusion (based on this fact alone) that Guilleragues is indeed the author. Nor does Green assume that the author is or is not Mariane. He, in fact, avoids any conclusion at all about the sex and identity of the author and concentrates instead on demonstrating precisely those moments in the text that do not correspond to the "code of vraisemblance" to which he, as a reader, adheres.

It is at this moment that Green's research closely foreshadows Leo Spitzer's own work on the text in 1954. In this study, Spitzer responds to Green's study by insisting that while Green's "external" (i.e., historical) documentation was important to determining the true authorship of the letters, the real determining factor, according to Spitzer, would be an intensive examination of the *classical style* of the letters themselves. By determining the style of the letters, and, in particular, their classical unity of time, place and, here, psychological action and their stylistic similarity to the language of the *précieux*, Spitzer hoped ultimately to establish correctly the *meaning* of the letters which would then

... allow us [i.e., the readers] to infer the causative force which gave rise to the work. As long as the work itself remains ill-defined, its causative force (the
author's personality) must be forever obscure. I am quite certain that no one would have espoused the view that these letters were "authentic" epistles written in Portuguese and somehow rescued—in translation—from the archives of history, if critics had recognised from the start the artistic value of the text. If we can demonstrate the unity of conception and execution of the five letters in their French form, then we will have ruled out all possibility of a "naturalist" or "evolutionary" theory of the concretion of Portuguese originals. 27

Spitzer begins his "proof" of male authorship by examining the order of the five letters, an order some critics had previously cited as one flaw that might indicate the spontaneity of the letters and consequently their authenticity. This order, according to Spitzer, can be justified since the conception and internal psychological development of love in the letters resemble closely the "classical" evolution of love in, for example, Racine's or Corneille's tragedies which he defines as:

The remembrance of the happiness of the onset of amorous feelings or of the erotic pleasures that followed, the disillusionment caused by the lover's departure, the torments of absence; the bitter judgments of the lover's character, the imagining of more fortunate rivals, relations with relatives and the other nuns in the convent, and the fact of writing itself—all these elements recur in almost every letter, and are connected either by the principle of parallelism or by contrast, in such a way that the psychological development of the

heroine can be glimpsed through the particular mix of the same motifs at each of the five stages represented by the five letters... The "epistolary drama" of the Lettres portugaises thus ends on a note of exhaustion. (Spitzer 265)

In fact, Spitzer suggests that the only real difference between a classical play and the Lettres is the absence of the heroine's death, although Mariane does indeed seem to threaten suicide at several moments in her writing ("je vis, infidèle que je suis, et je fais autant de choses pour conserver ma vie que pour la perdre" (Lettres 157). The absence of Mariane's death, signaling for Spitzer the author's departure from pure classical form, only seems to heighten his growing admiration for the male author's stylistic technique comparable only to Mme de Lafayette's La Princesse de Clèves:

The French author of the Lettres portugaises thus eliminated the entire spiritual and didactic superstructure [. . .] and restricted himself to the confessions of the forsaken woman, of which the psychological truth was beyond doubt. He was able to show the decay of passion coming from within the passion itself, not commanded from on high, that is to say the "pure" drama of passionate love in its underlying unity. . . . The ending of the Portugaises, like that of La Princesse de Clèves, coincides with an internal "end" as clear and firm as the action which it brings to a conclusion, as "finished" as a mathematical demonstration. (Spitzer 269, 282)

Spitzer continues his analysis of the Lettres as representative of a classical form of writing (precisely,
that of a play despite his reference to *La Princesse de Clèves* by examining the various instances of précieux (Spitzer's terminology) language he finds in the text. These instances, he notes, are only found in Letter 1; Mariane's style shifts from this mode in Letter 2 and 3 and evolves into an undefined (by Spitzer) "realist" language in Letter 4 and especially 5. This evolution of style, so obvious to Spitzer, is founded on Mariane's remark of Letter 5: "j'espère vous faire connaître par la différence des termes, et de la manière de cette lettre, que vous m'aviez enfin persuadée que vous ne m'aimiez plus..." (*Lettres* 169)--a remark that allows him triumphantly to ask:

How have critics failed up to now to recognise in this remark attributed to the heroine the *masterful signature of an author conscious of his style*? (Spitzer 266, emphasis added)

Spitzer, then, defines the *Lettres portugaises* as an "epistolary drama" because of their thematic content and their linguistic style. His analysis of these textual elements, however, prompts him not only to deny flatly the possibility of Mariane's signature, but that of all other women as well. His final implication, in fact, is that the author is male. Precisely, Spitzer's conclusions suggest that the sexual mark of the "true" author will be revealed once the astute critic (i.e., reader) has determined how well the theme has been developed and the style manipulated to produce a text of extraordinary literariness.
Unlike Green's study of external documentation, Spitzer's study leads him eventually to argue that the meaning of the text, produced from an examination of its classical style, leads naturally to determining the author's gender. For Spitzer, that gender is without question male even despite his suggestion that only a lady of "French high society, schooled in rhetoric...a marchioness in her Parisian salon...accustomed to analysing complex human situations" (Spitzer 280) could have composed the elegant turns of phrase in the letters. Spitzer's presupposition of male authorship surely colors his reading of the letters and blocks alternative reading(s) in which the author's gender would have little or no influence on the text's meaning and literary value. His inability to consider a female author at all, even if that female author were other than the Alcoforada nun, one educated, for example, and versed in "classical" rhetoric, suggests that he subscribes to the same set of ideologies about female writing as Rousseau did in his letter to D'Alembert.

It is not at all surprising that Spitzer's study provoked a number of responses from feminist critics. Peggy Kamuf, in her article "Writing Like a Woman," directs her remarks specifically to Spitzer's study and, as well, to other contemporary scholars who have accepted without question his conclusions, including Frédéric Deloffre and Jacques Rougeot, the editors of the definitive edition of
the Lettres published in 1972. Kamuf prefaces her remarks with a short discussion on the current debate among feminist critics about the nature of women's writing in order to establish her own critical perspective. Placing herself in opposition to such feminist readers as Patricia Meyer Spacks,28 who imply that women's writing is determined inherently by their biology and that, consequently, a female signature produces a feminine identity, Kamuf states her own perspective as one that

. . . understands a way of reading texts that points to the masks of truth with which phallocentrism hides its fictions; [. . .] one place to begin such a reading is by looking behind the mask of the proper name, the sign that secures our patriarchal heritage: the father's name and the index of sexual identity.29

Kamuf's reading of the Lettres portugaises, then, will be one which is blind to the signature (i.e., the gender) of the author highlighting precisely those moments in Spitzer's study that led him and those who followed to read and interpret the text as though a male had written it. The purpose of her exercise, she states, is to "clear the way for a blind reading of a text written, perhaps, in a woman's hand" (Kamuf 288); a statement suggesting, in the final


analysis (as Nancy Miller would point out later), that a "blind" reading of a text cannot truly exist.

Nonetheless, for many theorists, Kamuf's study remains a model of a feminist (or alternative) reading, not so much of the *Lettres portugaises*, but of the manner in which literary history is formed and how the phallocentric assumptions upon which it is built are maintained. Her study traces the paternal lineage of the letters' origin; one that finds its roots in the Platonic distinction of perceptible forms from ideal forms, that "advance in civilization" as Freud would later characterize it in his discussion of the patriarchal function in *Moses and Monotheism* in which the "turning from the mother to the father points...to a victory of intellectuality over sensuality...since maternity is proved by the evidence of the senses while paternity is an hypothesis, based on an inference and a promise."\(^30\)

In the case of the *Lettres*, Kamuf points out, the question of authenticity mirrors this distinction. The letters lose their literary value if they are known to be the spontaneous writings of a female hand and therefore evidence of female passion; they gain value, however, if they are considered idealized, intellectual versions of perceived realities and read accordingly as imitations of

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female passion. To prove her point, Kamuf cites two instances in the study of the *Lettres* literary history that have proved instrumental in determining the text's genesis. Both are instances that served as focal points for Spitzer's analysis. The first is the seventeenth-century concept of *vraisemblance*. The second is Spitzer's "meddling in an issue which is beside the point of his article" (Kamuf 295), that is, his comparison of the *Lettres portugaises* to the medieval correspondence of Héloïse and Abélard.

Where Kamuf falters in her study is precisely at this point. Whereas she views Spitzer's remarks on the *vraisemblance* of the *Lettres* (as proof of their male authorship) as conflicting with his subsequent comparison of the correspondence of Héloïse and Abélard, my own study points to a very logical conclusion and comparison on Spitzer's behalf. The idea of *vraisemblance* and Abélard's text are very much connected if one understands the process through which this relationship is perceived. First, we must remember that Spitzer's opening remarks to his own study of the *Lettres* states that he wishes to find the causative force behind the letters, thus revealing the author's personality. In order to accomplish this task, Spitzer must first find "un tel personnage, et telle maxime générale implicite et reçue" (Genette) that will serve as a model for Mariane's behavior. This comparison will then test Mariane's authenticity. If she "measures up" to the
model, she will be confirmed as the author; should she fail, the search for the author must turn elsewhere.

The process of Spitzer's examination deserves a careful analysis. His particular choice of a personnage or maxime against which he will compare Mariane's behavior is Héloïse, the female correspondent in the letters to Abélard. Why this particular text? For Spitzer, the choice seems based on tenuous resemblances alone. One could conceivably argue that Spitzer chose this text based on an assumption that readers of the seventeenth century were already familiar with the story. Yet, Spitzer's primary argument is to prove to a twentieth-century audience that the Lettres portugaises were authored by a man. One might also argue that Spitzer's choice is based on some thematic similarities he perceived in Mariane's letters and the correspondence between Héloïse and Abélard. Héloïse, like Mariane, is cloistered in a convent, separated from her lover, and the letter is the only instrument through which she can communicate. Even within this similarity, however, there are crucial differences. For example, Héloïse has not been abandoned by her lover in the same way Mariane has. Héloïse's letters are not, consequently, structured on the same thematic principles of guilt, despair and betrayal. Furthermore, there is a didactic purpose behind the entire correspondence of these two lovers; Héloïse's love for Abélard is one that evolves into a transcendent love for God. This is not the
consuming love of Mariane in the Lettres, who, once betrayed, has no divine replacement for her passion; instead, her passion evolves into a love of writing passion—a narcissistic love that finds its object not in another male (or male figure), but in herself. These differences, however, are not ones that Spitzer finds particularly interesting, despite the fact that the primary focus in his study up to this point has been a close examination of the content of the letters and their classical structure. Instead, Spitzer takes up the issue of authenticity and authorship in the correspondence between Héloïse and Abélard.

It would seem that Spitzer, at this point, is also attempting to establish another maxim, this time of male authorship, through which the literary heritage of the Lettres can be examined. It is at least interesting and perhaps significant that considerable dispute about the author (specifically, the gender of the author) of the letters between Héloïse and Abélard has influenced the reading of that correspondence as well.31 By evoking and establishing a heritage in which other unsigned texts are read as "male" texts, Spitzer draws upon a pre-existing maxim which, in turn, solidifies his own reading of the

31 For further reading of Spitzer's discussion of the correspondence between Abélard and Héloïse and the ensuing debate about their true author, see Spitzer's "The 'Lettres portugaises',' p. 267-59.
Lettres portugaises and the gender of their author. And yet this reading has little or nothing to do with the vérité of the external documentation that Green, for example, offered as "proof" of the letters' authorship.

This, perhaps, explains Kamuf's accusatory remark that Spitzer is "meddling" in a subject that has nothing to do with his thesis. What Kamuf seems to have not recognized is that the "paternal lineage" that she discusses in terms of a psychological orientation has much more to do with individual, and yet paradoxically universal, notions of gender-typing practices passed along in distinct, yet strikingly familiar, forms. In this light, Spitzer's remarks are not truly confined to a discussion of only one epistolary work, i.e., the Lettres portugaises. Rather, his study (or his reading) exhibits a broader notion of (male) reading that aligns textual meaning (i.e., content, structure, and form) to certain corresponding notions of gender. On this level, Spitzer's reading, like that of Rousseau, is, in the final analysis, linked with beliefs derived from a universal and invariable concept of vraisemblance concerning women's existence. Woman is textually and existentially confined to this code of vraisemblance, and, as such, has no recourse to any vérité of action or belief. Mariane cannot be morally, psychologically, or emotionally different from Héloïse because the code of gender (as determined by the concept of
vraisemblance) does not allow for variation on this level for any women's existence. Therefore, the textual Mariane can have no corresponding non-textual existence and must be a fictional construct. Thus the search for the true (male) author of her character is initiated.

One could also add that Spitzer's view of the Lettres portugaises reflects and repeats Rousseau's comments in that he has duplicated his own gender schema about men (and their intellectual and emotional capacities) into a text that bears a purportedly female signature. The initial female signature is incongruous to this gender schema, thereby necessitating a rereading of the text, one that inspires the "critical," male reader to correct the inconsistency. In the case of the Lettres portugaises, the error is, in fact, that those "popular" readers of the text adopted and naively accepted a code of gender-typing practices that were contrary to the tenets of vraisemblance. This, in turn, has produced the misreading of the work's meaning that Spitzer intends to correct.

In his process of correcting the erroneous reader, however, Spitzer's analysis also affirms that the forms of literature and corresponding conceptions of male writing have their own status within the realm of vraisemblance. His emphasis on the "classical," dramatic style and form of the letters, and on their artistic similarity to the psychological evolution of passion found in "classical"
drama enables him to evoke the dramatic masters of the seventeenth century. Racine and Corneille become, in addition to Abélard, surrogate fathers of the *Lettres portugaises*. By attempting to prove such stylistic and rhetorical similarities, Spitzer can then place the *Lettres portugaises* within this literary tradition of great works, all authored by men. The problematic epistolary form defined (cf. Duchène) as the most likely form in which seventeenth-century women could write and publish, is molded by Spitzer to fit into the generic constraints of drama itself, thus explaining Spitzer's emphatic conclusion that the *Lettres portugaises* are, in fact, examples of a "classical 'epistolary' drama."

The history of readers' responses to the *Lettres portugaises* demonstrates the extent to which readers, over a period of more than three hundred years, have maintained an ideological system in which stories about gender difference define what it is to be a woman or a man. The means by which this process is accomplished involves an adherence to and a profoundly embedded belief in a code of *vraisemblance* of gender. This code influences the manner in which the writing and reading of gender-specific literature is organized and maintained and, therefore, can be identified as a system of gender-typing practices within the literary activities of reading and writing. The content of the system consists of a set of specific rules restricting a
writer's and a reader's (re)inventions of gender, particularly the gender of Women. In the case of Mariane in the Lettres portugaises, these rules have dictated her moral make-up, her actions, her talents, indeed, every aspect of her existence and the interpretations thereof.

In all probability, it would seem that someone named Gabriel de Guilleragues did compose these five, short, intriguing letters, but this probability should be derived primarily, I believe, from the kind of external documentation that Green discovered and cited in his research on the text. Even then, a "critical" reader might still be reluctant to stamp the signature of a male author to the Lettres. Another question remains: was the text originally composed in Portuguese or in French? If the presence of a translator could be documented, could this explain the discrepancies Green discovered between the life of the "real" Marianna da Costa Alcaforada and the "fictional" Mariane? It is not inconceivable that the translator made these mistakes. Green himself recognized this possibility and refused to conclude his study with the indisputable claim of Guilleragues' authorship:

It will be observed, in conclusion, that I have not assumed that Guilleragues, cited in the privilège as the author, is identical with Lavergne de Guilleragues... There is no reason, chronological or otherwise, why he should not have been the author. In the absence of more complete knowledge as to his writings, however, there is nothing but conjecture to justify the assumption that he was the Guilleragues who wrote the Lettres portugaises. (Green 167, emphasis
And yet, my study has revealed a history of "critical" readers, from Rousseau to Spitzer to Deloffre and Rouget, who have neglected to question and pursue the implications of Green's initial conjecture. Rather, they have paradoxically suspended their "critical eyes," to focus instead on values, but those they bring to the text, values about what women are and should be. Through these values, such readers have created interpretations about women and their capacities in a universal manner and have been hesitant to probe the underlying basis of their assumptions.

In this light, it is difficult to understand how these readings have convinced so many other readers of the "true" authorship of the Lettres. I find that these readings have affirmed the existence of a "road not taken." My suspicions about the true status of Guillerague's authorship do not result from any kind of inherent recognition of female writing per se. To make such a claim would be, I believe, to fall into a similar kind of ideological interpretation based on gender. Instead, my suspicions result from witnessing how readers like Rousseau and Spitzer, in their efforts to view the text as a "classical" piece of literature worthy of canonical status, have simultaneously refuted the presence of a female author. What is most questionable is the way in which the search for the "classic" in the Lettres portugaises has also implicated
the search for the "male." How can these two distinct features of a work (one based solely on a set of beliefs concerning some prescribed characteristics about what good writing is; the other, a biological variable external to the text, thus having no influence [logically] on the interpretations bestowed on a work) be linked inseparably, as though one results from the another?

If we are to accept without question the underlying assumptions these readers have made (all under the rubric of vraisemblance), perhaps all texts should be reexamined in order to reveal and identify, first and foremost, the code(s) of ideologies that surround signed and unsigned texts, or, in other words, the ideological significance of a female or male signature. For this study, the Lettres portugaises is the exemplary text from which one can argue the necessity of alternative readings. What if the letters had been read otherwise? Would the question of gender not have been such an issue if, for example, other scholars had not begun to question the authorship of the Héloïse/Abélard correspondence? Probably not. The question of a female or male author in both cases seems to be the result of prejudice against the female signature: a malaise produced by the conflict of a recognition and appreciation of a literary text and the female name. One must finally ask why a scholar of Spitzer's stature did not follow up on the content of D'Alembert's response to Rousseau's
characterization of women? Within D'Alembert's comments, after all, an entirely different story about the authorship of the letters could have been written or, perhaps, maintained. In either case, the story would not have perpetuated the misogynist attitudes so prevalent in Rousseau's writings and so eerily reflected in Spitzer's own work and, as well, in the definitive, modern edition of the Lettres:

Mais si par malheur vous aviez raison, quelle en seroit la triste cause? L'esclavage et l'espèce d'avilissement où nous avons mis les femmes; les entraves que nous donnons à leur esprit et à leur âme; le jargon futile et humiliant pour elles et pour nous auquel nous avons réduit notre commerce avec elles, comme si elles n'avoient pas une raison à cultiver, ou n'en étoient pas dignes; enfin l'éducation funeste, je dirois presque meurtrière, que nous leur prescrivons, sans leur permettre d'en avoir d'autre; éducation où elles apprennent presque uniquement à se contrefaire sans cesse, à n'avoir pas un sentiment qu'elles n'étouffent, une opinion qu'elles ne cachent, une pensée qu'elles ne déguisent. Nous traitons la nature en elles comme nous la traitons dans nos jardins, nous cherchons à l'ornier en l'étouffant. (. . .) Nous ne pouvons nous dissimuler que dans les ouvrages de goût et d'agrément elles réussiroient mieux que nous, surtout dans ceux dont le sentiment et la tendresse doivent être l'âme; car quand vous dites qu'elles ne savent ni décrire, ni sentir l'amour même, il faut que vous n'ayez jamais lu les lettres d'Héloïse. . . ."

In the following chapter, I will consider precisely this question: what if a literary text is read otherwise? My agenda will be to attempt a dual reading of another female-

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signed epistolary text. The first reading will be one that stays within the confines of the codes of *vraisemblance* as have been identified in this chapter and can be tentatively identified (historically speaking) as a male reading. The second reading will be produced by a close examination of what I believe to be a subversive text in this collection of letters, at odds with the gender-specific codes of *vraisemblance* and yet existing in a parallel manner to them. This reading is an alternative reading, articulated in terms of the other--the opposite of Man--the Woman. Perhaps, in this way, the reading of these letters might also qualify them as "classical masterpieces" (Spitzer's term), yet I want to reveal the "classic" of these letters *despite* the presence of a female signature--or perhaps, even *because* of it.
CHAPTER III

LETTERS IN (R)EVOLUTION:

CHARRIERE'S MISTRISS HENLEY

J'écrivais Mrs Henley, qui causa un schisme dans la société de Genève. Tous les maris étaient pour Monsieur Henley; beaucoup de femmes pour Madames; et les jeunes filles n'osaient dire ce qu'elles en pensaient.

As the history of the readership of the Lettres portugaises demonstrates, the difficult enterprise of proving a male authorship foregrounds, first and foremost, the importance of the reader's ideological stance vis-à-vis the literary text. As well, this history provides a general profile of the letters' readers. To this point, it is the "critical," male reader who has determined the authorship of the letters and the manner in which that authorship is established. His ideological horizon can be characterized by an awareness of reading in a certain manner, that is to say, "critically." Moreover, this reader is also characterized by a deeply embedded practice of gender-typing

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strategies. These two components are interdependent since the degree to which the male reader reads "critically" influences his interpretation of women according to stereotypical codes defining the female gender. The result illuminates a paradoxical reading of the letters—one in which the "critical" male reader, in his attempt to prove Mariane's fictionality, reads her as though she were non-fictional.

The striking absence of a formalized, "critical," female readership of the *Lettres portugaises* has been an especially significant factor in the novel's reception and critical history. For three hundred years, this absence confirmed the minimal literary contribution of women to the content and use of gender-typing codes governing the female sex. Indeed, it would appear that, until recently, these codes have been exclusively male-defined. A phenomenon of this proportion is difficult to ignore, especially in light of the growing recognition that reading and writing are inherently political arenas in which large social issues and ideologies are enacted. Our expectations of what constitutes a critical response (i.e., an essay, apology, etc.) might reflect in itself a particular reader ideology that excludes women from the traditional canon of critical writing. But less formalized and accessible versions of critical responses are to be located in women's *literary* texts and, specifically, in the epistolary novel. This
genre, to recall Duchène, became historically linked with women's publications in the seventeenth century and remained a popular genre for female writers in Enlightenment France as well.

In many aspects, the epistolary novel incorporates the most pervasive characteristics of the early history of women's literature. It has often been noted, for example, that a study of this literature reveals a certain authorial preference for those literary forms in which the subjective pronoun ("I") guides the narrative act. Accordingly, some critics, such as Pierre Fauchery, have suggested that all women writers are inevitably and eternally themselves in their fictions: "...la femme qu'elle [the author] croit imaginer, c'est encore et toujours elle-même." Fauchery's comment, although painfully deterministic in nature, nonetheless allows us to infer that the female writer, incapable of separating Self from Other, must also read her own life in order to narrate it via another name.

Fauchery also notes that certain genres or sub-genres, such as diaries, memoirs, and epistolary narratives (and even the novel), are as much associated with women's writings as scientific and philosophical treatises are not

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1 See pages 106-108 of this study.

(110-13). Furthermore, the nature of these subjective narratives seems to facilitate certain thematic structures. In general, women's fiction has avoided the stringent demands of philosophical discourse; it has not been particularly scientific in nature either (at least in the way in which scientific and philosophical writings are conventionally identified). Rather, the thematic content of women's writing has tended to focus on personal relationships—in particular, that of women with friends, family, lovers, prospective lovers, as well as, in a less interpersonal way, the demands of everyday life. Within this context, the "objective" stance of an authorial presence is undermined by the subjective form and content of the narrative act.

Fauchéry's attempt at defining the female writer's literary destiny as ultimately an expression of the Self enhances another characteristic latent in their writings and overlooked by Fauchéry in his study. The tendency to narrate subjectively on a structural level and to narrate domestically on a thematic level (both interior domains) implies that the act of writing itself is first and foremost a subversive act of reading. In addition, these structural and thematic confines of women's writing suggest that this pre-existing act of reading might have enabled women to respond critically to gender-typing codes and practices. It is thus within this literature that women's participation in
the creation, maintenance or even modification of gender-typing codes that have guided male readings of women might be found.

The literature, philosophy, and scientific inquiries of eighteenth-century France, often characterized by their reversal of established ideals, create a particularly healthy environment for the presence of these female, critical responses. As Ernst Cassirer notes, the entire nature of things "... to which aesthetic objectivism had been oriented, is no longer the guiding star; it has now been superseded by the nature of man." The seventeenth-century preoccupation with objective reason, as the primary path to all knowledge, becomes insufficient for Enlightenment philosophes who maintain that reason must be accompanied by man's subjectivity, a quality to be considered inherent in all epistemological inquiries. In the domain of literature, the devalorization of seventeenth-century modes of epistemology, characterized by the separation of Object from Subject, is realized by an increased male interest in those forms of literature heretofore associated with women's writings. In other words, the basic premises of the major philosophical and scientific endeavors of Enlightenment France are reflected

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in the abundance of "sentimental" novels authored by men. Diderot is perhaps the most striking example--both in fictional and theoretical terms--of an Enlightenment philosophe who exploits this new esthetics. The same man who is found "plongé dans la douleur et le visage inondé de larmes" while inventing the fictional tragedies of an abandoned, imprisoned young woman in La Religieuse also presents his philosophical reflections (as a génie du goût) in his Essais sur la peinture.

Si le goût est une chose de caprice, s'il n'y a aucune règle du beau, d'où viennent donc ces émotions délicieuses qui s'élèvent si subitement, si involontairement, si tumultueusement au fond de nos âmes, qui les dilatent ou qui les serrent, et qui forcent de nos yeux les pleurs de joie, de la douleur, de l'admiration...? Apage, Sophista! (Arrière, sophiste!) tu ne persuaderas jamais à mon coeur qu'il a tort de frémir; à mes entrailles, qu'elles ont tort de s'émuvoir.

The reconciliatory move in Enlightenment thought between reason and sentiment is structured upon a system of interdependence in which both elements are necessary to appreciate fully a work of art.

The general content and thematic structures of women's literature finds its reflection in this "new" eighteenth-

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century esthetics. One effect of this phenomenon involves the particular status of women's writings. As the parallel between the thematic content of scientific and philosophical discourse and the narrative discourse of male-authored fictions converges, a concurrent restructuring of the eighteenth-century canon must logically occur. That is, women's writings should enjoy a status equal to that of men's since the general esthetic values concerning art and literature in Enlightenment France had (unwittingly?) elevated her authorial status within the literary canon. For our purposes, this evolution of the status of women's publications demands a critical reading(s) of their works; readings that seek radical manifestations of Enlightenment thought and, specifically, changing perceptions of gender, gender-role practices and expectations.

This is why, in this chapter, I have chosen to study another epistolary work, the *Lettres de Mistriss Henley publiées par son amie*, published in 1784 by Isabelle de Charrière/Belle (de) Van Zuylen. The novel differs from the *Lettres portugaises* is some crucial aspects. This brief collection of letters, for example, makes no overt claim to authenticity nor does the author/editor\(^7\) preface the work

\(^7\) It should be noted that Charrière personally financed her publications and thus avoided the kinds of editorial mystifications (often found in prefaces) frequently used in order to sell a book. Jerroom Vercriusse offers a brief overview of the history of Charrière's publications in "The Publication of the *Oeuvres complètes*: Navigating the Risky Waters of the Unforeseeable," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 13
with an explanation of how the letters were found. The question of Mistriss Henley's real existence is irrelevant to the author's agenda. Furthermore, Charrière published her work as her own, thus eliminating the kind of subjective determination of authorial gender which defined the Lettres portugaises. By signing her work, Charrière obviates the need to project codes of vraisemblance on the actions and events of the heroine's life in order to determine or justify the author's gender. Consequently, it is difficult for the reader to doubt that these letters were not written by a woman. The gender of the narrator and/or the author is never in question, it is explicitly given. Nonetheless, Charrière complicates the reading of the letters by focusing precisely on her readers' preconceived notions of what gender is and means.

By organizing the entire correspondence between Mistriss Henley and her anonymous female friend around a set of structural and thematic oppositions, Charrière creates a text that necessarily involves the readers' consideration of gender, gender-role expectations and practices. Furthermore, she also creates a complex and intricate series of mises en abyme in which the reader and his or her gender are textually determined, but undefined, in a kind of fictional limbo, since each reader's interpretation of

gender necessarily takes into account an interpretation of the gender of the other sex.

Structurally, Charrière's novel strives to incorporate the non-fictional (external) reader(s) of the letters into the epistolary format of her work. In the first letter, for example, Mistriss Henley addresses not only her female friend, but also a broader audience of women who are either in similar situations as herself or who would or might understand what she plans to narrate. Furthermore, albeit more indirectly, Mistriss Henley also addresses her letters to her fictional husband and, at the same time, to a larger audience of men who are perceived to be like her husband. Among these male readers are Samuel de Constant, the author of *Le Mari sentimental*, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose work, *Emile*, influenced significantly child-rearing practices (according to the child's biological sex) of the eighteenth century.

In either case, however, these textually defined readers are assigned, by Mistriss Henley, certain gender-relevant characteristics that are intended to direct their reading(s) of her narrative. Mistriss Henley, for example, defines her female audience as one who understands and accepts the social codes dictating a woman's role in an eighteenth-century marriage. Thus, to be a female reader (both fictional and real) in Mistriss Henley's world means first to subscribe to these social conditions in which women
must act in accordance with their gender types, or, with the codes of *vraisemblance* that govern how women should act. She must be, among other things, unaggressive, unassertive, and passively accept that her primary function is to please others. In a similar manner, the male reader, fictional and real, is assigned certain gender traits specific to his sex and is thus gender-typed by Mistriss Henley as well. Master Henley is not just an eighteenth-century husband; he is also the prototype of a level-headed, rational, and unemotional male. It is in this manner that Charrière's epistolary readership is built around a system of universally understood gender types.

Thematically, however, Mistriss Henley's narrative undermines this structural composition of epistolary readership. Ostensibly, Charrière's narrative is composed of six letters that all narrate Mistriss Henley's account of her unhappy marriage. Significantly, the entire narrative is marked by Mistriss Henley's practice of self-castigation, a practice that reflects, sarcastically, her awareness of the en-gendered horizon of which she is a part. However, the letters are also written as a response to Constant's work and are intended to vindicate the portrayal of, as Mistriss Henley views it, the overly chastised wife of the novel, Mme Bompré.

Mistriss Henley's story begins with her childhood and the events leading to her eventual marriage. Orphaned early
in her life, Mistriss Henley marries, in her mid-twenties, a man she believed to have all the qualities necessary for a "good" husband. Having previously rejected a variety of suitors, she describes her final choice as "spirituel, élégant, décent, affectueux [...] un mari de roman [qui] sembloit quelquefois un peu trop parfait."\(^8\) Ten years older than the narrator, Master Henley also has a child, a girl, the product of a previous and happy marriage that ended with the death of his wife. After their marriage, Mistriss Henley goes to England to assume her duties as mother, wife, and mistress of Hollowpark. Here her misery begins. In the shadow of her husband's dead wife, she increasingly is made aware of her own inadequacies. Her attempts to educate the child, manage the domestic staff, decorate the manor, or interact with her in-laws are consistently frustrated by what she perceives to be her husband's disapproval. Throughout the narrative, Mistriss Henley readily, and in an exaggerated manner, accepts the blame and succumbs to her husband's reason thereby placing his desires before her own. Increasingly, her self-doubt and self-castigation intensify. Indeed, her despair becomes such that, in her final letter, she hints at her eventual suicide.

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The entire narrative consists of relating to her friend a series of incidents that have led to her unhappy state. Each episode is marked by a juxtaposition of who is right and who is wrong. Mistriss Henley consistently admits that she is wrong. Yet her underlying motivation for writing the correspondence, outlined in the first letter, complicates the interpretation of her guilt. Mistriss Henley, having just read Constant's novel, states that she wishes to correct the portrayal of women in that work. She is in the position to do this precisely because she sees herself reflected in Mme Bompré, the heroine of his novel. At the same time, however, she also wishes to warn other men that if they do not understand the Mmes Bomprés of the world (herself included), they, too, will encounter the same suicidal destiny as Constant's unhappy husband. Charrière's story, therefore, strives to be more than a confessional narrative of one woman's marital state, it is, as well, a didactic treatise that will respond critically to Constant's novel and, indirectly, to those codes of vraisemblance and gender-typing practices that shape the existence of both sexes.

However, the structural composition of epistolary readership, as outlined above, hinders this didactic reading of Charrière's text, for in order to perceive the corrective and interpret the warning, the reader must disengage himself and herself from that same readership precisely because it
is predicated on a complicity with the gender horizon (codes and practices) of Mistriss Henley's world. To understand, for example, why Mistriss Henley is not always wrong, it is first necessary to understand the social forces, based on gender, that enable Master Henley to assume that his will and his desires are superior. In a similar manner, to understand why Master Henley is right requires an understanding of the social codes that govern women's role according to their gender.

Mistriss Henley's underlying motivation for writing her letters, then, is to seek subversively to reverse the reader's complicity with Charrière's en-gendered epistolary readership. So although Mistriss Henley accepts, obsessively, the blame for each of her "faults," she also wants affirmation or denial of that blame from the reader. All internal and external readers of her letters, therefore, must either affirm her fault and, simultaneously, her husband's superiority or justify her by denouncing the psychological abuse of her husband. To do the former requires a reading that is characterized by a degree of gender-typing interpretive strategies. Yet, to do the latter requires a reading of the gender-typing codes and practices of both sexes.

In this manner, Charrière forces an alternative reading of her novel, one that critically reassesses what it is to be a man and a woman. It is this rereading that reveals the
complex interplay of structural and thematic oppositions in Charrière's narrative. The first structure is an attempt to define an epistolary readership. To do this, two criteria have to be met: 1) the public (external) reader must be transformed into the internal readership of the letters, and 2) this public reader must be defined by a thematic system of universal gender codes and practices already inscribed in the text. The underlying motivation for writing the letters, however, evokes a second epistolary readership. This consists of an autonomous reader capable of disengaging himself or herself from Charrière's defined readership. Furthermore, this reader must confront and respond to the thematic thrust of the narrative (i.e., is Mistriss Henley right or wrong?). To accomplish this, as an autonomous reader, requires a rejection of universal gender codes and practices about both sexes, resulting in an interpretive reading strategy that is transsexual and, in some ways, androgynous. My objective in this chapter is to analyze how Charrière accomplishes this in her work. What I propose is, of course, ultimately a reading of my own, but I believe my analysis of this complex interplay between the reader and the text demonstrates the necessity of a theory of alternative reading before a full appreciation of the revolutionary impact of Charrière's work can be had.

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As Emile Benveniste has noted in his well-known, comprehensive work on the linguistic nature of pronouns and subjectivity in language, all interpersonal communications are based on the premise of exchange.

Dans les deux premières personnes, il y a à la fois une personne impliquée et un discours sur cette personne. "Je" désigne celui qui parle et implique en même temps un énoncé sur le compte de "je": disant "je", je ne puis pas parler de moi. A la deuxième personne, "tu" est nécessairement désigné par "je"; et, en même temps, "je" énonce quelque chose comme prédicat de "tu."

The epistolary narrator is aware, like no other prose narrator, of the importance of interpersonal exchange. He or she has chosen, in effect, this generic form in order to address (directly or indirectly) the inherent "you" of all communicative exchanges. The epistolary form, with its subjective, "I" narrator, evokes, by this same narrator's defined presence, an implicit "you," created in the act of writing letters. It is in this way that the epistolary act most closely resembles the act of verbal communication.\[^{10}\]

\[^{1}\] Emile Benveniste, "Structure des relations de personne dans le verbe," Problèmes de linguistique générale (Gallimard, 1966) 228.

\[^{10}\] There are other characteristics of the letter that closely resemble those of oral communication. These include the letter-writer's attempt to "write to the present" (Richardson), that is, to present the narrative as if it were spontaneously conceived. The use of the present tense as a pivotal point for discussing past and future events is yet another characteristic. For further discussion, see Janet Gurkin Altman, Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form (Columbus: OSU Press) 134-41.
However, the presence of the epistolary "I" is also one which complicates the hermeneutic exchange between the "I" and the "you." As one critic of the genre has noted, a certain "potential for paradox" soon becomes apparent in this exchange.

. . . (T)he constant use of the first person by necessity introduces corollary themes of self-analysis, self-justification, and self-awareness into the narrative; in other words, a rejection of the Other is implied.\[11\]

So while it can be said that all letters call for the presence of an internal "you," taking the form of an implicit reader and eventual respondent to the correspondence, the presence of the narrating "I" also implies yet another you, one born from the Subject and yet distinct from it since it, too, views (reads) itself as the Other. Based on this premise, the "epistolary pact," that Janet Gurkin Altman defines as "the call for response from a specific reader within the correspondent's world"\[12\] must necessarily imply at least two readers, one of whom is a creation and extension of the epistolary writer. The potential paradox would involve the supremacy that each inherent "you" of a letter has over the other, producing, in the end, a rejection of either the self-analyzing narrator

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\[12\] Janet Gurkin Altman, \textit{Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form} (Columbus, OSU Press, 1982) 89.
or the evoked Other, distinct from the originating Subject.  

Readers of epistolary narratives soon discover that there are, in fact, several layers of readers in a given work. The external reader, aware of his/her status as a seemingly, objective, uninvolved witness to the events of the narrative, holds the unique position of reading, as well, the responses of the internal reader(s). Functioning as a kind of "Super Reader," this external reader's role can perhaps best be described as an omniscient reader who will potentially determine a final meaning of the correspondence. There are, as well, many variations in the kinds and numbers of internal readers of letters, all of whom might influence the Super Reader's interpretation. It has already been established that at least two readers will exist in any epistolary exchange (the implied "you" evoked by the narrating "I" and the created "Other" of the narrating "I"). There can be, however, a multitude of

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13 Benveniste notes that it is at this moment that the implied "you" (the Other) becomes, in essence, a third-person: "À la deuxième personne, 'tu' est nécessairement désigné par 'je' et ne peut être pensé hors d'une situation posée à partir de 'je'; et, en même temps, 'je' énonce quelque chose comme prédicat de 'tu'. Mais de la troisième personne, un prédicat est bien énoncé, seulement hors du 'je-tu'; cette forme est ainsi exceptée de la relation par laquelle 'je' et 'tu' se spécifient" (Problèmes de linguistique générale 228).

14 I am borrowing Altman's description of her analysis of the kind of reader status Merteuil and Valmont have in Les Liaisons dangereuses (Epistolarity 94).
internal readers or just one, whose responses may or may not be included in the collection.

It is practically impossible to measure the extent to which those internal readers, whose responses are included in the correspondence, have "truthfully" stated what they indeed have wanted to say. All letters, in the end, are meaningful insofar as they are presented specifically to the addressee(s)—any underlying motivation or authorial intention can only be a source of speculation. It is possible, nonetheless, in those cases where the internal reader's responses are not included, to suggest that the role of the external reader becomes more active. That is, his or her response to the letters might resemble more that of the imagined internal reader. Moreover, it would then be possible to assert that, in monologic correspondences, there are indeed two levels of interpretation derived from the external reader. The first would be the imagined response, a response including, for example, the external reader's acquired knowledge of the historical and cultural conditions surrounding the letters' conception. The second possible level would be the "objective, Super Reader" interpretation derived from the external reader's awareness that his or she is, in fact, a voyeur of an ostensibly private correspondence.

It is important to note as well that the sex of the implicit "you" of an epistolary act is not always specified
in the correspondence. Whether the letters are monologic, dialogic, or polylogic in nature, their addressee's name can remain anonymous or be fictionalized and/or misrepresented. The textual identification of the internal reader's sex might indicate, however, an underlying motivation on the part of the letter-writer that would subsequently influence the Super Reader's final determination of meaning. If we, as external readers, do read perceptions of gender into texts, we will also then read in a certain way, relative not only to our degree of gender-typing practices but also to those of the addressee(s) and addressee(s). Likewise, it is also possible to suggest that, in monologic correspondences, an external reader would imagine an internal reader's response through a specific set of gender codes and practices, most likely those to which this external reader already subscribes.

This brief overview of the many kinds of epistolary readers possible in a correspondence and the intimate interplay between these readers and their perceptions of gender in the interpretive act brings me to the Lettres de Mistriss Henley. In this text, the internal and external readers are directly addressed by both their biological sex and a system of gender codes and practices relative to each sex. Charrière's epistolary narrator, Mistriss Henley, will attempt to assign a specific moral task to each reader, dependent upon that reader's compliance to the system of
gender identification she creates. In so doing, at least
two levels of reading, male and female, are identified.
Both rely on a fundamental acceptance of difference between
men and women and, as well, on the reader's compliance with
Charrière's interpretation of gender defining that
difference.

The first level of reading resides in the world of the
internal reader of the letters. Charrière's narrator,
Mistriss Henley, addresses directly her internal reader as
"ma chère amie,"
(Mistriss Henley 101) identifying her sex
at once. She thereby also establishes intimacy with her
addressee. The external reader knows, for example, that
this French confidante has been corresponding with Mistriss
Henley for some time: "Pourquoi ne m'en avez-vous rien dit,
ma chère amie, dans votre dernière lettre?" (Mistriss Henley
101). Plunged, so to speak, in medias res, the external
reader is immediately made aware of a history between the
two women. The intimation of intimacy suggests that the two
women know more about each other than do we, on a first
reading. Specifically, it is likely that the French
confidante is already aware of her friend's unhappy marital
status.

Yet this internal reader has an ambiguous status in the
correspondence since the content of the initial letter, and
of most of the subsequent correspondence, is not only a
summary of Mistriss Henley's life before her marriage, but
also a narrative of her marriage since its inception. The entire correspondence consists of six letters, yet it is not until the fifth letter that Mistriss Henley ends her autobiographical account and relates to her friend the current state of her life. Why, then, is the friend interested in reading Mistriss Henley's letters (and responding to them), if she knows already, in all probability, most of the story? Charrière's narrator must first justify the redundant nature of her letters and, as well, explain the addressee's role, if the story is to have formal vraisemblance.

Mistriss Henley's justification for the autobiographical content of her letters first takes the form of a rhetorical question. Immediately thereafter, she gives other reasons for re-writing her narrative.

_Voulez-vous, ma chère amie, que je vous fasse l'histoire de mon mariage, du temps qui l'a précédé, & que je vous peigne ma vie telle qu'elle est aujourd'hui? Je vous dirai des choses que vous savez déjà, pour que vous entendiez mieux, ou plutôt pour pouvoir plus facilement vous dire celles que vous ignorez._

(Mistriss Henley 102)

Her justification involves clarifying some previously narrated accounts of her marriage to her friend. She also wants to add certain details which she might have forgotten or declined to tell her friend in the course of their correspondence. Underlying all these reasons, however, is her decision to focus precisely—to categorize in order to
examine closely—this aspect of her life, even if it means re-narrating certain events. In the process, she offers herself and her friend an invitation to reread and re-evaluate her situation. The importance of reading again in order to derive meaning is immediately foregrounded as one of the primary tasks of the two implicit internal readers (Mistriss Henley and her friend) of the text.

This is, however, not the only reason Mistriss Henley wants to rewrite the events of her marriage. Her addressee is also the means through which she will transcend the limitations of a private correspondence and communicate with public readers. Her French friend is also invited to become the translator, editor, and publisher of her letters, thereby establishing her role not only as a reader of the correspondence, but also a transmitter.

Vous dirai-je la pensée qui me vient? Si ma lettre ou mes lettres ont quelque justesse & vous paroissent propres à exciter quelque intérêt, seulement assez pour se faire lire, traduisez-les en changeant les noms, en omettant ce qui vous paraîtra ennuyeux ou inutile. Je crois que beaucoup de femmes sont dans le même cas que moi. (Mistriss Henley 102)

The desire to be read by a public is a significant move from the private world of internal readers and suggests that, although Mistriss Henley's letters are formally monologic in nature and addressed to one female friend, she seeks to transcend those epistolary constraints in order to create or identify a public readership of women.
Mistriss Henley's narrative "I" evolves, therefore, into the plural "we" of a community of women. She wants to communicate with other women (via her female confidante) about the miseries of her particular situation and thereby hope to give voice to that misunderstood community. In so doing, Mistriss Henley at once asserts her authority as a representative of a gender-encoded world whose ideals will be shared with other members of her sex. The gap between the narrator's gender identity and the reader's indeterminable gender identity is bridged, in part, by this assumption of shared ideals. The female reader might expect to understand Mistriss Henley's situation whereas the male reader, at the very least, recognizes his exclusion from that world. However, even the external female reader must first subscribe to those aspects of Mistriss Henley's gender-encoded world that will enable her to understand the underlying message the narrator intends to convey to her.

This process of linguistic bonding based on gender alone extends as well to the French confidante. The immediate naming, by biological sex (ma chère amie), of the implicit "you" of the correspondence functions not only in defining the sex of this reader, but also in defining the way she identifies herself, gender-wise. The French friend can be entrusted to convey Mistriss Henley's narrative to the public without editing too much the content of the letters because Mistriss Henley has assumed her friend
shares the same gender horizon as herself. In this way, only the "boring" and "useless" parts of her story will be omitted. What Charrière has done, by evoking the sex of her internal reader, is to enable her épistolière to draw upon a mutually shared horizon of life experience of which one's gender identity shapes the meaning. The true role of Mistriss Henley's friend is not specifically linked to their intimate history together as friends, but is based on her existence as a silent, female accomplice. In other words, her friend is more a rhetorical construct than a specifically identifiable person.

Charrière thereby constructs, via this assumption of shared gender ideologies, an intertextual dialogue between all women readers who will understand, in a womanly way, Mistriss Henley's specific situation. This situation involves those problems underlying relationships between the sexes and especially, in this narrative, those conflicts produced within the social construct of the Henley marriage. It is by evoking this universal female readership that Charrière both collapses the distinction between private (internal) and public (external) readers and attempts to separate those readers by a system of gender-typing practices. The underlying message implies that all internal and external female readers will understand her narrative in a particular way (and especially those who share her marital situation); at least in a way that male readers (supposedly)
will not. The narrative cast of readers is progressively
dichotomized by Charrière's construction of an en-gendered
world.

Like the female reader, the male reader of the
correspondence is initially identified as both internal and
external to the work. However, he is addressed indirectly
via Mistriss Henley's female friend. His presence is marked,
immediately in the first letter, by two apparently distinct
personae. First, he is the fictional character of a
miserable husband in a book Mistriss Henley has just read,
Samuel de Constant's *Le Mari sentimental*.¹⁵ He is also,
however, Mistriss Henley's husband. Here begins the story's
most complex *mise en abyme* through which the male reader's
role is textually defined. Although both internal male
readers are fictional constructs, Master Henley's role
resembles that of an imagined (yet non-fictional) external
male reader. He is ultimately defined, however, as reacting
in the same manner to the events of Mistriss Henley's
narrative as the fictional husband of *Le Mari sentimental*.

Constant's novel, published one year before
Charrière's, recounts the tragedy of a simple, middle-aged
man of the country, M. Bompré, who believed, until he
attended the wedding of his friend, that he was content with

¹⁵ *Le Mari sentimental ou le mariage comme il y en a
quelques uns* (1783; rep. Milano: Cesalpino-Galiardica,
1975).
his single life. In his first letter, he reminds his friend of the sources of his contentment: his uncomplicated country life (i.e., close relationships with his neighbors, especially Nicolas, who visit, go hunting, etc); his magnificent horse; his faithful dog, Hector; and his two equally faithful, elderly servants, Nanon and Antoine. Nonetheless, the view of his friend's new bride whose "beaux yeux noirs [. . .] avaient tant de douceur lorsqu'ils se tournaien sur vous [his friend]" (Constant 53) left M. Bompré with an indelible impression that something was missing in his own life.

Of course, his friend knows precisely what is wrong—M. Bompré needs a companion, a wife, a woman ("une compagne, une femme" [Constant 61]). M. Bompré is unwilling to accept this for two reasons. The first concerns his physical appearance ("j'ai toujours été trop laid... de petits yeux, un nez épaté, de grosses lèvres, un front presque chauve, et une taille peu élancée..." [Constant 61]) and his age. The second, however, involves his previous experience with women. Mocked, ridiculed, and rejected by almost every woman in his past, he believed to have found happiness only once.

. . . (O)n m'écoutait, je me flattais de ne pas déplaire; je croyais que mes sentiments avaient fait pardonner ma triste figure; j'avais des espérances sans avoir ni vanité, ni amour-propre; mon coeur était de bonne foi; on paraissait sensible à ma délicatesse; il me semblait que l'on faisait cas de mon esprit et de mon caractère; on faisait valoir
However, the day he arrived at this woman's house for the long-awaited rendezvous, he found her with one of her "relatives" in a compromising position. His shocked and scandalized reaction resulted in a near-fatal wound. "Il fut convenu, entre mon coeur et moi, que nous renoncerions au beau sexe et à l'honneur de lui plaire [Constant 62]."

Nonetheless, in his next letter, he has married.

The sister of a close friend's wife in Geneva, Mlle de Cherbel

. . . fut très aimable, et elle me parut avoir infiniment d'esprit. Elle tirait parti de tout; elle faisait valoir sa soeur et son beau-frère; il semblait que nous avions tous de l'esprit comme elle. Le son de sa voix est touchant; elle a des grâces dans la bouche; de l'embonpoint et de la fraîcheur. Il y a dans ses grands yeux noirs plus de douceur que de feu, et dans toute sa manière d'être, quelque chose de doux et d'intéressant qui attache. (Constant 74)

Originating from a modest family of the country, this woman of thirty-five, seems the perfect wife for M. Bompré. Her "faults," as he relates them, consist only of "un peu de hauteur dans son caractère; [. . .] elle manque même de cette philosophie qui réduit le paraître à sa juste valeur;" for M. Bompré, however, this trait is natural to the female sex ("c'est une suite de l'empire que l'opinion doit avoir
sur les femmes" [Constant 76]). Her second "fault," in his opinion, is her tendency to dress in a manner inconsistent with his simple, country tastes.

Unfortunately, M. Bompré's contentment with his new wife is brief. Only four weeks after their marriage, Mme. Bompré's behavior changes; she withdraws frequently to the solitude of her room and does not eat breakfast with her husband because she sleeps too late. Furthermore, she wants to change the decor of the house, get rid of the two elderly servants, the dog Hector, the horse, and the portrait of her husband's father in the salon. She does not appreciate M. Bompré's friends nor his relatives. Indeed, all that is part of M. Bompré's world displeases and humiliates his wife. Bewildered, confused, and unhappy about this situation, M. Bompré tries to justify his spouse's behavior. She reads, he suggests, too many books--particularly novels.

... (J)'ai agité la question s'il était bon que les femmes aimassent la lecture, et lussent beaucoup. Dans [le pays] où les femmes font le sort de leur maison et de leur famille, où leur économie et leur raison décident de la fortune et du bonheur de leurs maris, il n'est pas très sûr que la lecture soit utile aux femmes, et qu'elle produise un grand bien. Les femmes lisent beaucoup de romans, et très peu d'autres livres. Il faut qu'un livre d'histoire, de science ou de morale soit bien court, bien gai, bien piquant, pour qu'elles en lisent quelques feuilles; c'est-à-dire que, pour l'ordinaire, elles occupent leur esprit de fiction, de fausses peintures de la nature, de sentiments exaltés, enfin de choses qui les mènent loin de la vérité; et si, par hasard, elles n'ont pas l'esprit juste, l'écart peut devenir immense. D'ailleurs, pour que la lecture
d'un livre quelconque soit vraiment utile, il faut un fond de logique et d'éléments de sciences, qui sont toujours négligés dans l'éducation des femmes. (Constant 101-2)

And yet even this explanation (one that evolves, significantly, into a treatise on women's education) does not alleviate his worry about his wife's state. Only his friend, whose own marital bliss continues, can advise him in these affairs of the heart, thereby insuring the continuation of his correspondence.

The narrative ends with M. Bompré's suicide, and his last letter outlines his reasons. He feels he inspires nothing more than disgust in his wife and his modest fortune has been depleted. Yet his marital problems are not the only source of his fatal despair; he has also lost his public reputation and his best friend Nicolas through a scandalous affair in which his wife played a minor—at most—role.16 Furthermore, because of this scandal, M.

16 Briefly, this affair involved the youngest daughter of his friend, Nicolas. Pauline was an extremely pretty young woman who was in love with and expected to marry a handsome employee (Jean Duport) of an English lord. Unfortunately for Pauline, Lord Lowell fancied Pauline as well. Nicolas, whose age and means prevented him from adequately protecting his daughter from Lowell's advances, sought help from M. Bompré. Both Bompré and Nicolas suspected Lowell of attempting to kidnap Pauline and, indeed, Lowell did have such plans. At least one entire night was spent thwarting the various ruses Lowell had concocted to make everyone leave Nicolas' house, except, of course, Pauline. Frustrated, Lord Lowell finally decided instead to destroy Pauline's reputation. He told Duport and, as well, various people of the community, that Bompré had seduced Pauline and intended to keep her as a mistress after her marriage. Furthermore, Lowell claimed he knew of Pauline's pregnancy. None of this, of course, was true, yet
Bompré has also lost the confidence of his correspondent—the final ally he had hoped to keep. Charrière's heroine, however, who has just read this story, interprets Bompré's suicide as the direct result of only his wife's behavior.

Mistriss Henley writes

Quel aimable & cruel petit livre (. . .) il m'avait tourmenté. (. . .) Ma chère amie, ce livre, si instructif en apparence, fera faire bien des injustices . . . . Cet homme-là eut grand tort, après tout, de se marier. Son bonheur, tout son sort, étoit trop établi; sa femme n'avoit rien à faire qu'à partager des sensations qui lui étoient nouvelles & étrangères (. . .) il n'y avoit pas là de quoi occuper une existence. Je lui pardonnerois ses livres, ses romans, son ennui, sans la dureté de coeur, l'esprit faux & la fin sinistre que tout cela occasionne. (Mistriss Henley 101)

Mistriss Henley, who identifies with Mme Bompré, consequently views Constant's work as a personal attack as well ("En vérité, ma chère amie, je croirois en la condamnant prononcer ma propre condamnation" [Mistriss Henley 101]). Her letters, then, will attempt to justify the behavior of Mme Bompré, all other women who might understand or be like Mme Bompré and, finally, herself.

As discussed above, in order to give voice to this community of misunderstood women, Mistriss Henley conflates the internal and external female readers of her correspondence in her attempt to define an epistolary

all the circumstances of Bompré's interaction with Pauline substantiated the plausibility of the rumor. Even Mme Bompré believed Lord Lowell.
readership. I have argued that this technique enables Mistriss Henley to direct the (female) reader's interpretation of her narrative in a gender-specific way. In a similar manner, Mistriss Henley attempts to create a male readership who will respond to her situation just as M. Bompré responded to his wife's behavior. That is, Mistriss Henley not only addresses her letters to Constant and his fictional M. Bompré, but also to her husband, Master Henley, and, eventually, to a broader audience of other male readers external to the correspondence. The external and internal male readers of the letters are thus defined according to widely-held opinions about what constitutes the male gender.

Significantly, the inclusion of Master Henley as a reader of Mistriss Henley's letters occurs the moment he textually interacts with Constant's fictional character. This happens immediately after Mistriss Henley's reads Le Mari sentimental in French and then decides to read the English translation to her husband. His reaction, as witnessed by his wife, mirrors that of M. Bompré.

Ces jours passés je l'ai lu en anglois à mon mari. (. . .) En lisant seule l'histoire du portrait, les meubles changés, le pauvre Hector, je me suis souvenue douloureusement d'un portrait, d'un meuble, d'un chien: mais le portrait n'étoit pas de mon beau-père, le chien est plein de vie & mon mari s'en soucie assez peu. . . . Quand j'ai lu tout cela à mon mari, au lieu de sentir encore mieux que moi ces différences, comme je m'en étois flattée en commençant la lecture, ou de ne point sentir du tout cette manière de ressemblance, je l'ai vu tantôt sourire, tantôt soupirer; il a dit quelques mots, il a
Mistriss Henley, then, has read her husband's response according to her interpretive reading of Constant's text. Based on her observations, she infers that all male readers would respond to the activities of Mme Bompré in the same manner. The narrative conflation of the fictional husband of Le Mari sentimental and the textually "real" husband will, then, logically extend as well to the non-fictional external male reader once the letters are published.

M. Bompré and Master Henley function also as further motivation for Mistriss Henley's re-narrating the events of her marriage. In her final and most explicit justification for the letters' publication, she affirms the important role the male reader will have in her correspondence.

Having perceived the unjust reactions of both M. Bompré and her husband, Mistriss Henley wants to respond to the portrayal of women she was witnessed in Constant's work. Moreover, she wants to justify herself to her husband. Yet the husband is only one of many men who would react in a similar manner to Mistriss Henley's situation. This
definition of a male readership underscores Charrière's attempt to prescribe the textual role of the male reader, fictional and non-fictional, in accordance with an identifiable code of *vraisemblance*. Any distinction between a fictional male reader and a non-fictional male reader is eliminated in much the same way that Guilleragues' Mariane, (the Portuguese nun), became, for male readers, all women. ¹⁷

Indeed, it would be possible to view this readership as a kind of "tongue-in-cheek," "critical" response to the reading of women seen in Guilleragues' text. The underlying moral quality of her justification, however, disrupts the stability of these defined epistolary readerships--both male and female.

All readers of *Les Lettres de Mistriss Henley* are textually assigned the task of disengaging a moral lesson from the work. This moral is specific to their individual perception of their own gender and as well as that of the opposite sex. The role of the internal and external female readers in the letters is basically one of collaboration. She exists primarily in order to substantiate a universal gender code defined by Mistriss Henley, but, though drawn

¹⁷ This is not the first time that Charrière's heroine brings together those qualities of a fictional male with those of a textually "non-fictional" male. Her choice of husband is based on this very premise; "Spirituel, élégant, décent, délicat, affectueux, M. Henley enchantait tout le monde; c'étoit un mari de roman. . . " (*Mistriss Henley* 104, emphasis added).
into Mistriss Henley's world of shared experience, she must also function as a reader who re-examines, re-reads, and re-evaluates what it means to be a woman as Mistriss Henley's narrative unfolds. In order to this, however, the female reader must maintain a degree of interpretive autonomy by disengaging herself from Mistriss Henley's code of gender and gender-typing practices, thereby creating her own interpretations and, ultimately, assigning her own values.

Consequently, Charrière's narrator/heroine constructs her epistolary narrative on the basis of two possible female readerships. One is a participating reader ("beaucoup de femmes sont dans le même cas que moi") who react to certain social situations (in this case a marriage) according to certain codes perceived as necessary in a woman's world. The other, united with a universal female readership who understands a female ideology apart from these codes, is a critical, questioning female reader who reassesses the underlying assumptions of those codes. These assumptions, however, are derived from beliefs about men and what they believe women to be! The "critical" female reader must, consequently, formulate a domain of masculine values in order to reassess her own value as a woman.

On the other hand, there is only one textually defined male reader. In the letters, his response will always be the same ("ils se croiront tous des Messieurs Bompré" [emphasis added]) and, more importantly, his response will
always be in conflict with Mistriss Henley and her world of female readers. His assigned role is constructed to resemble that of a Super Reader who holds the power to applaud or denounce the acts of women and assign value judgments based on gender. However, it is important to note that the male reader is only being seduced into believing that he is the sole instigator of gender codes and gender-typing practices. Although textually defined as responding in the same manner to the letters as Master Henley or M. Bompré, he is also invited to retain, like the female reader, a certain critical stance vis-à-vis the text.

Because part of Mistriss Henley's justification states that she wants to "correct" and "warn" other male readers, he is aware of this invitation. To interpret his moral, however, he must ultimately consider Mistriss Henley's situation. That is, he must read as a woman in order to understand why he needs to correct himself. Whether or not he accepts this invitation relies upon his willingness to divest himself of Mistriss Henley's male gender code. In both cases, in order to interpret the moral lesson of Charrière's work, the female and male readers' readings must first be filtered through an individual perception of gender in the self and the other sex.

Charrière's composition of an epistolary readership, defined by two levels, male and female, thus strives to take into account only one kind of reading activity. This
reading activity involves a naive complicity (a willing suspension of belief) on the reader's part. This complicity, moreover, creates a sexually segregated reader whose gender schema replicates that of Mistriss Henley. There exists, however, a second reading activity, one born from Charrière's intertextual response to Constant's work (her moral justification). Offered as an invitation to a critical, questioning reader, this interpretive reading activity involves the reader's disengagement from Mistriss Henley's gender schema. The resulting distance between this critical interpretation and the content of the narrative will facilitate a series of transsexual points of view from which this critical reader can contextualize both the gender codes and gender-typing practices of Charrière's heroine and his or her own individual gender schema.

Mistriss Henley's underlying moral is, however, only one element of Charrière's work that encourages a rereading of the correspondence. As noted previously, the correspondence is composed of a set of thematic oppositions, of which the most prominent is Mistriss Henley's obsessive recourse to self-effacement. This strategy elicits a superhuman, rational response from her husband each time the couple experiences one of their numerous marital conflicts. These various conflicts compose the narrative matter of the work. In nearly every case, Mistriss Henley accepts the blame, an act that produces multiple exclamations of *j'ai*
tort in her narrative while Master Henley always a raison. Yet the criterion for establishing who is right remains an elusive variable; its positive value exists only within the domain of the male-engendered world. Master Henley is usually right—it is not known why, but it does mean Mistriss Henley is not.

This narrative ploy of arbitrarily assigning positive and negative values to each character according to their biological sex might be enough to provoke in the reader a suspicion of the true meanings of tort and raison. The need to question their meanings becomes even more compelling, however, as the reader is repeatedly confronted with these words. Mistriss Henley attributes to her husband the word raison twelve times in the collection's six letters, and to herself the word tort a total of seventeen times!

The repeated use of these words increases every reader's participation in each situation and urges him or her to play, in effect, the role of a judge. The conflicts, however, are all ones whose origins spring from differing perceptions of how women should act as opposed to how women feel. Master Henley's perceptions of his wife are based on his belief in engendered social codes governing the way wives should dress, interact socially with in-laws, manage the domestic help, and decorate their homes (including what kinds of animals they should have and where they should sit!). His gender schema also dictates the subjects wives
should teach their children, the manner in which they should nurse them, and the role they have in their husband's external affairs. For Mistriss Henley, "Ce sont de petites choses qui m'affligent ou m'impatientent, & me font avoir tort" (Mistriss Henley 112), however, these "little things" are precisely the sources of her anguish for she responds to each of these situations based on how she feels, and not how she knows (or progressively learns) she should act according to her husband's gender schema for women.

One of the most striking incidents demonstrating the conflict of gender horizons between the couple occurs as they prepare to leave for a ball one evening at the neighboring Guilfords. This incident, precipitated by the kind of clothing Mistriss Henley chooses to wear, becomes the subject of the entire fourth letter.

Nous y allâmes; je portai les habits que je vouliais mettre, une robe que j'aviais mise à un bal à Londres il y a dix-huit mois; un chapeau, des plumes & des fleurs, que ma tante & Fanny avoient choisies exprès pour cette fête, & que j'avoys reçues deux jours auparavant. Je ne les avois vues qu'aup moment de les mettre, n'ayant pas ouvert la caisse. J'en fus très-contente; je me trouvais fort bien quand je fus habillée, & je mis du rouge comme presque toutes les femmes en mettent. (Mistriss Henley 112, emphasis added)

Mistriss Henley's choice of dress is dictated by her desire; her accessories, although chosen for her by her aunt and chambermaid, meet with her approval as well. And, even though her make-up reflects the current fashion, she
nonetheless finds it attractive on her. Mistriss Henley dresses for herself, not for her husband. Indeed, no mention is made here of any anticipated effect her appearance will have on either her spouse or the guests at the ball.

Master Henley, upon seeing his wife, offers what initially appears to be a compliment ("Vous êtes très bien, Madame, parce que vous ne sauriez être mal; . . ."). However, in his usual manner, he undermines its effect by adding:

(M)ais je vous trouve cent fois mieux dans vos habits le plus simples qu'avec toute cette grande parure. Il me semble d'ailleurs qu'une femme de vingt-six ans ne doit pas être habillée comme une fille de quinze, ni une femme comme il faut comme une comédienne. . . . (Mistriss Henley 112)

Mistriss Henley responds by dramatically bursting into tears and demanding that her husband tell her not to go with him to the ball. Her immediate acceptance of blame is indicative of her constant awareness that she is, once again, wrong to do what she wants to do. Her husband is "right" because he can allude to the social codes dictating how a woman of twenty-six should dress.

He alludes, in fact, to two distinct social codes; both of which are specific to the linguistic domain of "femme." The first code concerns a woman's age; the second, that of a wife's duty. Mistriss Henley, initially unaware of these two distinct codes, attempts to justify her choice of
costume by evoking the opinions of other women (in particular her aunt). "Lady Alesford en m'envoyant tout ceci n'a pas cru parer une fille de quinze ans, ni une comédienne; mais sa nièce votre femme dont elle sait l'âge. . ." (Mistriss Henley 112, emphasis added). For a time, her husband appears to accept this justification, yet he underscores the fact that she has not understood the social codes of a wife's duties to her husband. "Je souhaite que la raison & la décence vous gouvernent. . . [mais] puisque votre Tante a jugé cette parure convenable, il faut rester comme vous êtes. . . (Mistriss Henley 115, emphasis added). Momentarily appeased, yet still disturbed ("Je ne savois si j'avois bien ou mal fait. Je me déplaisois, j'étois mal à mon aise" [Mistriss Henley 115]), she successfully manages to wear to the ball her chosen apparel.

This incident eventually marks the critical reader's awareness of what it means to be a wife and a woman. Upon arriving at the ball, she sees her husband's sister dressed in a similar manner. Triumphanty, she declares to her spouse "Voyez!" to which he responds "Elle n'est pas ma femme" (Mistriss Henley 115). It is at this moment that the linguistic coupling of "wife" and "woman" contained in the word femme depicts for Mistriss Henley her final destiny. As Susan S. Lanser notes "... (O)ne must cease to be a woman as one becomes a wife. 'Femme' becomes a split
identity, representable only through a split subjectivity and hence a double voice."18 Mistriss Henley's anguish finds its source in a divided self; the wife Master Henley expects to have and the woman Mistriss Henley wants to be. Those "little things" that torment her symbolize manifestations of herself as woman in confrontation with her husband's view of her as wife/woman, an identity of which she has no knowledge. It is this former part of her self (herself as woman), that, as Lanser suggests, will need to die in order for Mistriss Henley to be happy. It is also this part of Mistriss Henley's self that triggers in the critical reader an awareness of a female gender-encoded world whose values and beliefs have no place in a dominant male system of values. A smiling Master Henley's final "Eh! qu'importe!" reverberates in a discursive space devoid of female identity while Mistriss Henley's emphatic "Il m'importe à moi!" (Mistriss Henley 115, emphasis added) searches desperately for a discursive space of female identity. This conflict, then, with its linguistic conflation of "wife" and "woman", serves as a pivotal point from which the critical reader can reread the couple's other confrontations. Moreover, this incident provides further incentive for re-examining the basis of Master Henley's

raison and Mistriss Henley's tort.

Indeed, Mistriss Henley's imploring questions, "Ai-je eu tort? (. . .) aurais-je eu encore tort, toujours tort, tort en tout?" (Mistriss Henley, 106, lll), continue to echo in the discursive space between all readers and the text and demand an answer. The answer that Charrière's reader will provide, however, relies on two factors: (1) the level of reading activity, heretofore discussed as either naive or critical, and (2) the degree to which that reading activity can be characterized by its gender-typing interpretive strategies. Charrière's epistolary readership, as we have seen, is defined by the reader's complicity with Mistriss Henley's world of gender codes as they are presented in her narrative. Yet this same readership is invited, once the moral justification of her letters is presented, to retain a degree of interpretive autonomy. The episode described above has thus far taken into account only the critical reader's interpretation. However, Mistriss Henley, too, is a member of her own epistolary readership and, consequently, must struggle between the opposing worlds of gender codes in her narrative and eventually provide an answer to her own questions.

Significantly, this same evening at the ball provides this answer; Mistriss Henley succumbs entirely to the social code of gender-related conduct for women by inscribing irreversibly her tort. Having witnessed her husband's
attention to Miss Clairville, a young woman, who, in Mistriss Henley's opinion, was "[. . .] très-fraîche, très-gaie, modeste cependant & point jolie" (Mistriss Henley 116), she decides, in turn, to court the attention of another man, M. Mead. While returning to Hollowpark the next day with her husband and step-daughter, she comments on the beauty of M. Mead's sister, an elegant, refined urbanite whose resemblance to Mistriss Henley had often been noted by Lady B.'s spouse. Master Henley, however, is not impressed by Lady B.; his reaction sparks his wife's anger and jealousy, and yet another dispute. Of course, Mistriss Henley replies, since beauty for her husband is symbolized by Miss Clairville--with her "air de pâissanne," everyone else, namely herself, must surely pale in comparison. Spitefully, she adds that the only person to rival Lady B.'s beauty is, in her opinion, her brother, M. Mead, who reminds her of her first lover, Mylord Alesford.

-Heureusement je ne suis pas jaloux, a dit en souriant à demi M. Henley. -Heureusement pour vous, ai-je repris, ce n'est pas heureusement pour moi; car, si vous étiez jaloux, je vous verrois au moins sentir quelque chose; je serois flattée; je croirois vous être précieuse; je croirois que vous craignez de me perdre, que je vous plais encore; que, du moins, vous pensez que je puis encore plaire. Oui! [. . .] les injustices d'un jaloux, les emportemens d'un brutal, seroient moins fâcheux que le flegme & l'aridité d'un sage. -Vous me feriez croire, a dit M. Henley, au goût des femmes
Russes qui veulent être battues.\textsuperscript{19} Mais, ma chère, suspendez votre vivacité en faveur de cet enfant, & ne lui donnons pas l'exemple... Vous avez raison, me suis-je écrié. Pardon, Monsieur! pardon, cher enfant!... . (Mistriess Henley 116)

Immediately thereafter, Mistriess Henley writes a letter to her husband (inserted in Letter 4 of the correspondence to her friend) in which she recognizes, finally, the sources of her tort. She has not been the ideal wife/woman for M. Henley.

Vous avez pourtant eu un tort;\textsuperscript{20} vous m'avez fait trop d'honneur en m'épousant. Vous avez cru, & qui ne l'auroit cru! que, trouvant dans son mari tout ce qui peut rendre un homme aimable et estimable (., .), une femme raisonnable ne pouvoit manquer d'être heureuse: mais je ne suis pas une femme raisonnable. Je ne réunis pas les qualités qui nous auroient rendu heureux avec celles qui vous ont paru agréables. -Vous auriez pu trouver les unes & les autres chez milles autres femmes. . . . Je n'ai parlé aigrement de Miss Clairville, que parce que je sentois avec chagrin combien une fille comme elle vous auroit mieux convenu que moi. Mais... (p)arlon de l'avenir; parlons sur-tout de votre fille. Tachons d'arranger ma conduite de manière à réparer le plus grand de mes torts. En vous opposant dans les commencemens à ce que je voulois faire... vous n'avez rien fait que de juste & de raisonnable. . . ." (Mistriess Henley 117, emphasis added)

\textsuperscript{19} Charrière's character, M. Henley, appears to allude to Margum's "lettre d'une Moscovite" inserted in Letter 51 of Montesquieu's Lettres persanes.

\textsuperscript{20} This is the only instance in the correspondence in which Mistriess Henley attributes the word tort to her husband.
Mistriss Henley's realization of her tort comes about only after the narrative juxtaposition of the two women. Miss Clairville, the wife/woman her husband desires, functions therefore as a model for Charrière's narrator. Offering herself as clay to be molded by the master sculptor, Mistriss Henley inscribes a self-imposed death sentence. Predictably, her husband's response to this letter is greeted with enthusiasm: "... M. Henley étoit plus prévenant, & me regardoit plus souvent qu'à l'ordinaire; c'étoit la meilleure manière de me répondre" (Mistriss Henley 118). By admitting her most grievous fault (i.e., doing what she wants to do), she no longer has any reason to narrate her unhappy marriage to anyone. Indeed, her next and final letter of substance begins by stating that "je n'en veux plus écrire du même genre [...]. Pour la dernière fois vous verrez mon coeur; après cela je m'interdis la plainte... " (Mistriss Henley 119).

Mistriss Henley's decision to terminate the correspondence is also due, in part, to the response of her female addressee in the previous letter. Although this internal female reader's letters are not provided in the text, her response to Mistriss Henley's plight is evident in Letter 3 of the collection. Mistriss Henley begins

Vous avez raison, ma chère amie, ce n'étoit pas à moi à me plaindre des injustices que peut occasionner le Mari sentimentale. (Mistriss Henley 108)
Although Mistriss Henley does not immediately complement this attribution of *raison* with her own *tort*, it is nonetheless evident that she is admitting fault. Curiously, her friend's response to Mistriss Henley's reaction to Constant's text evokes an acceptance of blame characteristic of the manner in which Mistriss Henley reacts to her husband. More importantly, however, this internal female reader's response prepares Charrière's heroine for the understanding of her *tort* in the following letter (i.e., Letter 4, discussed above). That is, Mistriss Henley's friend conveys, in her response, both a kind of reading activity and a degree of gender-typing interpretive practices. Although sympathetic to Mistriss Henley's cause, she nonetheless finds fault with Mistriss Henley's reactions. This internal female reader perceives Mistriss Henley's situation as would the male reader of Charrière's defined epistolary readership (Constant, M. Bompré, M. Henley). Mistriss Henley's friend, then, reads non-critically (naively) and demonstrates her belief in (or recognition and acceptance of) an en-gendered social code or codes governing female conduct.

The defined epistolary readership, then, views Mistriss Henley's self-castigation and subsequent self-effacement as an act of good faith. The responses of M. Bompré, M. Henley, and Mistriss Henley's friend affirm her propensity to blame herself. For these readers, her acceptance of
fault indicates that she is fulfilling her role as wife by striving to become what her husband wants her to be. Her duties include conforming to his desires although it also means losing her own self in the process. Mistriss Henley is an ideal woman, a wife who reacts in a manner vraisemblable to the codes defining her as a woman. Conceived from an en-gendered code that defines the female first and foremost as unselfish in nature, Mistriss Henley is not only being wifely, but womanly. Consequently, the function of this defined epistolary readership is didactic; these readers' responses serve as guidelines within which Mistriss Henley progressively learns to shape her behavior not only as a wife, but as a woman.

On the other hand, the critical reader--male and female--will respond differently to Mistriss Henley's questions ("Ai-je tort?...") because they are instructed, and aware of, the underlying moral to be disengaged from the narrative. Yet, in order to offer this different response, the critical reader must first filter through those specific codes of gender outlined by the defined epistolary readership. Because Charrière has so astutely described the idealization of women in this closed social world, their response to Mistriss Henley's questions must rely on both an awareness of (re)reading critically and on the assumption that that rereading will be transsexual in nature. In this manner, Mistriss Henley's obsession with taking the blame in
all her domestic disputes with her husband has little to do with her knowledge of having committed a moral transgression. Rather, it is her way of acknowledging a husband’s dominant role in an eighteenth-century marriage. It is also a narrative mechanism that underlines the existence of opposing horizons of gender values. Master Henley is always right, and, because Charrière's text is structured on a series of thematical oppositions between the sexes, it is necessary that Mistress Henley be wrong.

This response reads Mistress Henley’s practice of self-castigation and self-effacement as a narrative function necessary to sustain the idealized woman vis-à-vis the raisonné21 man. According to this reading, she is not wrong to act thus, rather, she is reacting as an individual and not a representative of all women defined by the gender codes of the epistolary readership. She has evolved an effective strategy. She is not opposing her husband, the individual. She is, instead, in confrontation with a female engendered horizon defined for her but to which she feels no affiliation. What she feels, what she wants, believes or

21 Master Henley is simultaneously he who is right and he who is raisonné. From the critical reader's point of view, however, to be raisonné is more likely a linguistic extension of avoir raison (i.e., an adjectival form of the noun raison) than it is a gender-relevant term connoting intellectual superiority. Thus, Mistress Henley's "Je ne suis pas une femme raisonné" merely reflects the linguistic opposition already constructed by her use of raison and tort.
does is in opposition to her husband's wishes because her gender schema as an individual has no content within the text's (her husband's) gender code. To be a woman in that world is nothing more than to occupy a space representing what man, who is always right, does not desire. Mistriss Henley's myriad cries of tort evoke the anguish of that defined space from which she sees herself unable to speak or to write.

From this vantage point, the subversive, revolutionary aspects of Charrière's work become evident; these aspects concern an underlying analysis of women's education and, in particular, the role a mother plays in the formation of her child's gender identification. Significantly, Mistriss Henley's detailing of her marital conflicts begins and ends with such incidents: first, her present interaction with Master Henley's daughter and later, her eventual interaction with her own child. Upon arriving at Hollowpark, Mistriss Henley, eager to please her new daughter and fully intending to be a mother to her, brings several gifts from London, namely, some pretty shoes, artificial flowers for a hat, and a necklace. Her husband's disapproval is immediate; the shoes will prevent his daughter from running and the flowers are out of place in the country. Besides, he explains,
"c'est un goût que je ne voudrois pas lui inspirer..."  
(Mistriss Henley 104). Mistriss Henley immediately admits her tort.

Her next attempt at interacting with her step-daughter involves her education. Precisely, she wants to teach this child, who can read both French and English, some of La Fontaine's fables.

Elle récita un jour à son père Le Chêne et le Roseau avec une grace charmante. Je disois tout bas les mots avant elle; le coeur me battoit, j'étois rouge de plaisir. Elle récite à mervelle, dit M. Henley; mais comprend-elle ce qu'elle dit? il vaudroit mieux peut-être mettre dans sa tête des vérités avant d'y mettre des fictions: l'histoire, la géographie...... Vous avez raison, Monsieur, lui dis-je, mais sa Bonne pourra lui apprendre, tout aussi bien que moi, que Paris est sur la Seine, & Lisbonne sur le Tage. Pourquoi cette impatience? reprit doucement M. Henley, apprenez-lui les fables de La Fontaine, si cela vous amuse; au fond il n'y aura pas grand mal."  
(Mistriss Henley 105, emphasis added)

22 Throughout my discussion on Mistriss Henley's maternal role and duties, I will be footnoting instances in which Master Henley's ideas reflect those of Rousseau in Emile ou de l'éducation, Oeuvres complètes, vol. IV. (Paris: Gallimard, 1969). Here, the influence of Rousseau's work is evident in Master Henley's ideas on how girls should dress. "Tout ce qui gêne et contraint la nature est de mauvais goût; cela est vrai des parures du corps, comme des ornemens de l'esprit" (Emile 706).

23 Rousseau writes "Non seulement je n'ai jamais vu d'enfans faire aucune application solide des fables qu'ils apprenoient, mais je n'ai jamais vu que personne se souciât de leur faire faire cette application" (Emile 542). The editors of Charrière's text note Rousseau's comment: "On fait apprendre les fables de Lafontaine à tous les enfants, et il n'y en a pas un seul qui les entende" (Oeuvres complètes 613).
Despite this concession, Mistriss Henley leaves the room crying and admitting, again, that she is wrong. Later, she offers the child a lesson on history and geography, but they both become bored. Music is not an option because Master Henley believes his daughter too young and "... mettoit en doute si cette espèce de talent ne donnoit pas plus de prétentions que de jouissances" (Mistriss Henley 105). Consequently, Mistriss Henley looses all interest in the child, who has nothing to do but to follow her new mother's movements, "d'un air tantôt stupide, tantôt curieux" (Mistriss Henley 105).

The importance of this incident is threefold: first, it responds directly to a long heritage of masculine ideas--most obviously, M. Bompré's--on what women should read\(^2\); second, the choice of the fable, "Le Chêne et le Roseau," is symbolic of the opposition of en-gendered worlds in Charrière's work and also serves, like her own text, a didactic purpose, especially for women; and thirdly, this episode prepares Charrière's ultimate response to Rousseau's treatment of women in *Emile*. It is thus in this thematic *mise en abyme* that the critical reader discovers Charrière's most revolutionary response to masculine codes of *vraisemblance* that have defined the female sex through a

\(^2\) See pages 103-106 of chapter II for my discussion of this masculine heritage and pages 160-1 of this chapter for M. Bompré's remarks.
series of gender-typing practices.

Significantly, a similar debate about vérité and vraisemblance, as was witnessed in the Lettres portugaises, is also at the core of these masculine ideas about what women should be reading. Malebranche, it is worth recalling, believed women's brains were incapable of penetrating the vérité; Montaigne thought women should only read to amuse themselves and please others; La Bruyère suggested that women avoid being educated because it transformed them into a "une belle arme,"--pretty, but essentially useless. The remarks of Constant's M. Bompré ("...elles occupent leur esprit de fiction [. . .] enfin de choses qui les mènent loin de la vérité") function as one more variation on this theme. For Rousseau, education destroys women's natural talents "[. . .] depuis qu'elles se sont mises à juger les livres et à en faire à toute force, elles ne se connoissent plus à rien" (Emile 673). It is thus natural that Master Henley, who is defined in Charrière's readership as reacting like all other men, would prefer that vérité be taught to his daughter and that she avoid the reading of fiction.

Yet La Fontaine's fables, while intending to please, ultimately seek to instruct the reader. "Le Chêne et le Roseau"\textsuperscript{25} tells the story of the oak's arrogant pride in its

\textsuperscript{25} La Fontaine, Fables I (Paris: Bordas, 1964) 85-86.
strength and height. In its opinion, nature has generously enabled the oak to confront the forces of nature. Its size allows it not only to stop the sun's rays but also the damaging effects of a storm. The oak pitied the reed its feeble physique and the unjust treatment it receives from nature. Nature decrees, after all, that the reed be born where the effects of nature's forces are the most destructive. If only, the oak offered, you were born under me, you would not have to suffer so much. The reed, however, although appreciate of the oak's compassion, sees the situation differently. I'm not as weak as you think, it responds, for I can bend under the worst wind and never break. You, on the other hand, will break. The fable ends with the arrival of the most terrible north wind; indeed, the reed survives by bending but the oak is uprooted and dies.

The educational value of a fable whose moral privileges the physically smaller is particularly significant for women in an eighteenth-century context where Lamarckian concepts of evolution were already influencing the understanding of social hierarchies of power. More importantly, however,

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La Fontaine's fable presents a real danger to the stability of Master Henley's code of gender which is defined by the domination of the male sex. For Mistriss Henley to teach this fable to her new daughter is to expose her to an alternative social structure. From this fable, the child will learn, for example, that adaptation—rather than resistance—allows the reed to survive natural hardships. Through the child's identification with the reed, she will also understand that a lack of physical strength does not necessitate the need to search for protection in those who do have such power. Finally, the moral of this fable also teaches that the presence of physical strength does not dictate intellectual superiority. Consequently, all these didactic features of La Fontaine's fable threaten to expose the myths surrounding not only Master Henley's code of gender but also the heritage of that code. If the child understands these lessons, La Fontaine's fable would symbolize a radical departure from the society of which she is a part. The very premises upon which that society is founded would be placed into question.

However, Mistriss Henley abandons her efforts to instruct the child and so the danger of teaching such lessons disappears—at least, temporarily. Mistriss Henley's interest in her step-daughter does return in her fifth letter, but it is not because she seeks to resume her pedagogical efforts. Rather, it is because Mistriss Henley
has just learned of her pregnancy. The idea of giving birth to and raising her own child—not that of another woman—renews Mistriss Henley's maternal enthusiasm because it represents her final, desperate struggle for control of her own destiny.

Initially overjoyed at the thought of having a child, Mistriss Henley, in her final letter to her friend, considers the pragmatics of nursing the infant herself. Her concerns may be characterized as typical for her in the sense that she initially views her dilemma as an individual:

D'un côté j'étais effrayée par la fatigue, les soins continus, les privations qu'il fallait s'imposer.
- Le dirai-je? je l'étais aussi du tort que fait à la figure d'une femme la fonction de nourrice. (Mistriss Henley 119)

However, she also recognizes (a recognition that has developed in the course of her narrative) the importance of adhering to the social codes defining her duty as a wife, mother, and woman.

D'un autre côté, je craignois comme une grande humiliation d'être regardée comme incapable & indigne de remplir ce devoir. Mais, me direz-vous, n'avez-vous donc pas que de l'amour-propre? N'imaginez-vous pas un extrême plaisir à être tout pour votre enfant, à vous l'attacher, à vous attacher à lui par tous les liens possibles? (Mistriss Henley 119)

Significantly, this moment is the first in which Mistriss Henley imagines her friend's response to her situation. This response, characteristic of her husband, is indicative
of the reaction of all women who subscribe to the same
social codes concerning their duties as wife, mother, and
woman. Such imagined responses on the part of the female
internal reader are no doubt the result of Mistriss Henley's
awareness that her friend is a non-critical female reader
who will, in all probability, view her situation through the
same gender-typing practices as her husband.

Mistriss Henley's recognition of her maternal duties
also permits her to imagine her husband's eventual response
to her hesitation. Even though she knows that he will
consider his wife's nursing of their child as a necessary
duty ("... qui alloit sans dire. ..."). [Mistriss Henley
120]) and that he will reject her own hesitation as absurd,
she, nonetheless, resolves to speak to him about it.

Indeed, one must ask why? Why would Mistriss Henley,
assuming she is not masochistic by nature, deliberately
create another scenario in which she will be forced to
subsume her individuality and admit, once again, that she is
wrong? After all, Master Henley does respond as she had
predicted. However, to her chagrin, he also has some
hesitations about the idea. Born from his fear that his
wife will, by nursing their child, pass along her
undesirable character traits, Master Henley reveals to his
wife (and to the critical reader) the rights\textsuperscript{27} he has over her body.

À son avis, rien au monde ne pouvoit dispenser une mère du premier & du plus sacré de ses devoirs, que le danger de nuire à son enfant par un vice de tempérament ou des défauts de caractère, & il me dit que son intention étoit de consulter le Docteur M. son ami, pour savoir si mon extrême vivacité & mes fréquentes impatiences devoient faire préférer une étrangère.\textsuperscript{28} (Mistriss Henley 120)

Master Henley's intention to consult a doctor about his wife's temperament and the possibility that it might be inherited by their child demonstrates his awareness that his spouse, despite his claims otherwise, is not the ideal wife. However, his intention is also symbolic of his rejection of Mistriss Henley's individuality. As she notes,

De moi, de ma santé, de mon plaisir, pas un mot: il n'étoit question que de cet enfant qui n'existoit pas encore. [. . .] Quoi! me

\textsuperscript{27} It is interesting to suggest that a linguistic coupling exists in the English equivalent of raison as well. Charrière's heroine, transplanted to England by her marriage, reads, writes, and speaks French. Her husband, however, appears monolingual—at the very least, he does not read French since Mistriss Henley had to read the English translation of Constant's work to him. In any case, her epistolary transcriptions of their conversations together are no doubt translated into French. Might this then suggest that a linguistic coupling exists in the original English "right," a coupling that is lost in its French translation? In this way, Master Henley would be right because he has the right to dictate how his wife should dress, speak, interact with children, decorate the house and, ultimately, feel.

\textsuperscript{28} Rousseau writes: "il vaut mieux que l'enfant sucre le lait d'une nourrice en santé que d'une mère gâtée" (Emile, Livre IV), quoted by the editors of Charrière's Oeuvres complètes 614.
d'ois-je, aucune de mes impressions ne sera dévinée! aucun de mes sentiments ne sera partagé! aucune peine ne me sera épargné!
Tout ce que je sens est donc absurde, ou bien M. Henley est insensible & dur. (Mistriss
Henley 120)

Her subjectivity, her individuality is denied its existence. Reduced to a mere machine whose performance will be analyzed in order to manufacture the best results, Mistriss Henley's final conclusion involves more than her realization that all she feels is absurd. Rather, all she is is absurd and, accordingly, she has no right (raison) to desire otherwise.

Subsequent to this scene, Mistriss Henley loses all joy over the thought of having a child. Her depression becomes so severe that her husband, fearing the worst for his offspring, sends for his wife's aunt, presently in London. Her arrival at Hollowpark assuages somewhat Mistriss Henley's emotional state—not because her aunt serves as a confidante—but because she brings from the city all the current gossip, news, and intrigues of life at the Court. For Mistriss Henley, the real interest in this news concerns the future of her own child. Her maternal fantasies include, for example, that her child, male or female, be "des prodiges de beauté, dont les brillans talens, cultivés par la plus étonnante éducation, exciteroient l'admiration de tout le pays ou même de l'Europe entière" (Mistriss
Henley 120). Rejuvenated, she tells her husband about these fantasies. Significantly, she begins by attempting to
create an ambiance in which her fantasies will not be misunderstood.

Je riais pourtant de ma folie; car je n'étais pas tout-à-fait folle. Un jour, moitié plaisantant, moitié raisonnant ou croyant raisonner, je déployais mes chimères...

However, Master Henley's response immediately (and typically) rejects her fantasies. Furthermore, his response formulates both his intentions as a father and her duties as a mother.

. . . (J)e désiré que mes filles soient élevées simplement; qu'elles attirent peu les regards, & songent peu à les attirer; qu'elles soient modestes, douces, raisonables, femmes complaisantes & mères vigilantes; qu'elles sachent jouir de l'opulence, mais surtout qu'elles sachent s'en passer; que leur position soit plus propre à leur assurer des vertus qu'à leur donner du relief: [. . .] Quant à mon fils, un corps robuste, une ame saine; c'est-à-dire, exempt de vices & de foiblesses, la plus stricte probité qui suppose une extrême modération; voilà ce que je demande à Dieu pour lui. (Mistress Henley 121)

This, then, summarizes the content of Master Henley's codes of gender for women and, to a lesser extent, for men. Even his wife's fantasies, representing here the last vestiges of her attempt to control her own destiny, are denied existence. Significantly, Master Henley implicates the same destiny for his daughter whereas his son's fate depends on the will of God.

In the course of this analysis of Mistress Henley's maternal role, I have noted various instances where Master
Henley's ideas have reflected those of Rousseau in his educational treatise, *Emile*. It is here, however, that M. Bompré's gender code most clearly reflects that of Rousseau. For both Bompré and Rousseau, the female's biological sex inherently determines her gender identity. Consequently, women's education must include nothing more than learning a series of gender-typing practices.

In Livre V of his treatise on education, Rousseau outlines the perfect woman for his pupil, Emile. Sophie is constructed on the basis of her two most prominent female characteristics. These are, for Rousseau, her physical characteristics and her moral constitution.

.La seule chose que nous savons avec certitude est que tout ce qu'ils [les hommes et les femmes] ont de commun est de l'espèce, et que tout ce qu'ils ont de différent est du sexe [. . . ]. Ces rapports et ces différences doivent influer sur le moral; [. . . ] Dans l'union des sexes chacun concourt également à l'objet commun, mais non pas de la même manière. De cette diversité nait la première différence assignable entre les rapports moraux de l'un et de l'autre. L'un doit être actif et fort, l'autre passif et foible. . . . Ce principe établi, il s'ensuit que la femme est faite spécialement pour plaire à l'homme. . . . Si la femme est faite pour plaire et pour être subjuguée, elle doit se rendre agréable à l'homme au lieu de le provoquer. . . . (*Emile* 693-4, emphasis added)

Rousseau's logic is infallible(!). One's biological sex has a direct influence on one's moral make-up. The moral constitution of men and women is different. One is strong and one is weak. Women are weak. Therefore, women are made
to please the strong. Thus, everything woman does and
learns must be directed to please men. Later, he clarifies:

Ainsi toute l'éducation des femmes doit être
relative aux hommes. Leur plaire, leur être
utiles, se faire aimer et honorer d'eux, les
elever jeunes, les soigner grands, les
consulter, les consoiter, leur rendre la vie
agréable et douce, voila les devoirs des
femmes dans tous les temps, et ce qu'on doit
leur apprendre dès leur enfance. (Emile 703)

Rousseau's analysis illuminates two pervasive
components of a masculine code of gender defining women.
The first component is based on the fundamental biological
differences between the sexes. In keeping with the
essentialist notions of his time, Rousseau concludes that
these physical differences have a direct formative impact on
the moral character. The second component of his code has
an even more tenuous theoretical base. The moral
constitution of women is defined only by their sexual
interactions with men. These interactions require that
women play the passive, weaker role. Otherwise, Rousseau
explains, the future of the male sex is in danger.

Qui est-ce qui peut penser... que le premier
à former des desirs doive être aussi le
premier à les témoigner? Quelle étrange
dépravation de jugement!
(., . ) Avec la facilité qu'ont les femmes
d'émouvoir les sens des hommes et d'aller
réveiller au fond de leurs coeurs les restes
d'un temperament presque éteint, s'il etoit
quelque malheureux climat sur la terre où la
philosophie eut introduit cet usage, surtout
dans les pays chauds où il naît plus de
femmes que d'hommes, tirannisés par elles ils
seroient enfin leur victimes, et se verroient
tous trainer à la mort sans qu'ils pussent
jamais s'en deffendre. (Emile 694)

It appears, then, that a latent and pervasive fear of female sexuality is at the base of Rousseau's ideas. This, in turn, allows him to proceed, logically, to his thesis of a social structure in which women are made to please men. His outline of prescriptive gender-typing "lessons," which must limit women's education, evolves from this need to harness the power of this sexuality.

In her final letter to her friend, Mistriss Henley relates how her husband, without discussing with her or even intending to tell her, is forced to admit that he declined a position in the English parliament. Although he knows that such a position would have fulfilled his wife's dreams, who has always wanted to return to the city where her friends and family live, he offers no reason for excluding her opinion in his decision not to take the job. Instead, he alludes to his fear of political change and a hypothetical situation in which he might experience "...un amour-propre blessé, une ambition frustrée, des passions qui [. . .] me sont étrangères" (Mistriss Henley 121). Mistriss Henley, who has recognized and admitted to her husband (via her letter) that to oppose him is the greatest of all faults, can, because of her newly acquired gender identification as a representative of all women, say nothing.

J'ai voulu dire quelque chose; mais (. . .) j'étois tellement combattue entre l'estime que m'arrachoit tant de modération, de raison, de droiture dans mon mari, &
l'horreur de me voir si étrangère à ses sentiments, si fort exclue de ses pensées, si inutile, si isolée, que je n'ai pu parler. (Mistriss Henley 292)

This final episode exposes clearly what it means to be a man and to be a woman in Charrière's narrative. Moreover, this episode demonstrates the devastating impact a gender code, like Rousseau's, has on women. Mistriss Henley's desire to say something cannot be ignored for it represents the final vestiges of her self (i.e., her individuality). The discursive horizon of her universal gender identification as Woman, however, prevents her from speaking. Charrière's critical response to codes of gender defining women and maintained by the gender-typing practices of male authors like Rousseau is clear. There is no discursive female space within that code. Therefore, her strategy of presenting a female voice, Mistriss Henley, defined by that masculine code, leads to the result that nothing more than silence and isolation are available to her narrator, a state comparable to death.

In this sense, Master Henley is, always has been, and always will be right because he, as a representative of all men responding to the Mistriss Henleys of the world in the same manner, enforces those codes defining a woman's existence. Master Henley is, like Rousseau, but one purveyor of those codes prescribed for a universal female identity. But any attribution of fault in Charrière's
narrative must be understood as that which results, naturally, from a situation in which conflicting concepts of gender identity are unresolved. Mistriss Henley opposes those codes indirectly because she is one woman, not all women. She is "wrong" only in the sense that she has never recognized that her identity is predetermined, that she is, in fact, not an individual. Her "fault" is derived from her persistence in seeing herself as an individual whose actions are unpredictable, variable, true. To "correct" herself, she must become one representative of all women and thereby react "naturally" to situations according to social codes of conduct concerning women. On the surface, Mistriss Henley's recourse to self-castigation is an attempt to define herself within this code of the en-gendered female. The reader who chooses to remain defined by Charrière's epistolary readership (i.e., the reader who reads according to gender-typing codes and practices) will thus understand and accept Mistriss Henley's fault in her marriage and not feel compelled to read the narrative again to derive another, different interpretation.

Yet, the trivial, exaggerated nature of these marital conflicts and the insertion of an underlying moral that strives to render justice, correct, and warn men all indicate another level of discourse in which Mistriss Henley retains her individual voice. To read at this level, however, requires a critically aware interpretive strategy
that takes into account the gender codes and practices of both Mistriss and Master Henley's en-gendered worlds. If we interpret Charrière's narrative solely from the point of view of Master Henley, we are sure to misread Mistriss Henley in the same way as M. Bompré misread Mme Bompré in Le Mari sentimental. However, to interpret the work solely from Mistriss Henley's viewpoint would be not to understand completely (as she herself did not) the dominant, oppressive social codes dictating a woman's existence and enforced, correctly, by Master Henley. Suspended between the en-gendered worlds of both Henleys, the critical reader must read again in order to discover the true sources of Mistriss Henley's anguish while understanding the basis of Master Henley's expectations.

It is essential that Mistriss Henley's final narrative act anticipates an inner fusion of her Self (her individuality) and the Other (a universal womanhood) since this will be symbolic of her feminine destiny. "Dans un an, dans deux ans, vous apprendrez, je l'espère, que je suis raisonnable & heureuse, ou que je ne suis plus" (Mistriss Henley 122). Each reader must struggle to determine what Mistriss Henley did not say by choosing how to read her ambiguous conclusion. If to be raisonnable is to be what Master Henley, M. Bompré, and Rousseau desire, then to be heureuse is a state comparable to death. On the other hand, if to be raisonnable is to have a right to be, her happiness
consequently becomes a reflection of her affirmation of Self and a rejection of the Other.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION:

GENDER, READING STRATEGIES,

AND THE POLITICS OF INTERPRETATION

Les femmes de leur côté ne cessent de crier que nous les élevons pour être vaines et coquètes, que nous les amusons sans cesse à des puerilités pour rester plus facilement les maîtres; elles s'en prennent à nous des défauts que nous leur reprochons. Quelle folie! Et depuis quand sont-ce les hommes qui se mêlent de l'éducation des filles?

Here, this story of reading will end in a discursive space where readers of two exemplary texts, the Lettres portugaises and Les Lettres de Mistriss Henley, have been juxtaposed, analyzed, and compared. The confrontation of each text's readership against itself and against other texts has represented, symbolically, the difficulties of discussing the role of gender in the interpretive act. For reading, as we have seen, does not happen alone. Reading is interpretation. Reading is an interaction with something or someone else. This interaction involves a communicative

exchange, one that has an existence of its own and is interwoven with concepts of time, place, action, and people. The act of reading has a mythical quality that transcends and, consequently, seeks to undermine the private, individual aspects of its happening. And yet, paradoxically, the entire process must be born from that singular moment when one person chooses to open the cover of one book.

In this concluding chapter, I want to return to theoretical discussions about reading and interpretation. I began this study with an overview of four prominent reader-response theorists: Georges Poulet, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Norman Holland. The outline I provided of each of these critics' work demonstrates the extent to which they have informed how we might characterize that private, individual, yet public and universal "happening" of interpretation. For the feminist reader, however, these discussions have not been enough. There remains a "gap," they argue, at the very base of their critical formulations. That is, none of these theories considers the implications of one of the most fundamental aspects of reading and interpretation—the difference of the reader. Indeed, my own discussions of two epistolary novels have demonstrated the importance of one of these differences within the reader, his or her sex and/or gender orientation.
The very concept of difference, however, presents its own special problems. As individuals of a larger society, we cling to our need to define ourselves by our differences. Thus, to speak of the difference a woman reader makes in the interpretive act is to dramatize the multitude of other silent readers. Who will speak for the proletarian reader, the Black reader, the lesbian reader, the Jewish reader?--the list is virtually endless. Too often, literary critics are tempted to abandon the task of this enterprise even before beginning. What difference, they might argue, does difference make? What is the purpose of literary interpretation if not to generate a consensus of meaning? On another level, what is literary interpretation if no one can decide either what it means or how to talk about it? For Poulet, Iser, Fish, and Holland, these underlying questions have been central to the formulation of a theory of reading.

Generally speaking, the limitation of these theories concerns, for the feminist critic, a question of space. A major preoccupation of the male critic, for example, has involved his hesitation in the face of the vast plurality the difference of the reader allows. What to do with so many readings? For sure, a fear of arbitrary interpretations and reading practices is reflected in the variety of "ideal" readers found in many male reader-response theories. The need to control the reading
experience and to categorize correct meaning(s) is pervasive. It is enacted, in a vicious circle, in Iser's "structured" text which "structures" the reader who "structures" interpretation. It is, as well, the founding principle behind Fish's "interpretive communities." Even the most self-proclaimed "open" theories, such as Poulet's, ultimately privilege a "taking over" of the reader's consciousness or, as Norman Holland would have it, a "recreation" of the reader's identity. Umberto Eco, one reader notes, demonstrates perfectly this conflict between the reader theorist's desire to free interpretation while, at the same time, constraining it. In his discussion of what he calls "open texts" (those with unrealized constructions that invite creativity), Eco writes: "An open text outlines a 'closed' project of its Model Reader as a component of its structural strategy."

Jonathan Culler explains that the male critic's efforts are to "conceal" the "double or divided structure of [the reading] 'experience'" in which "experience is posited as a given yet deferred as something to be achieved--by asserting that readers simply do in fact have a certain

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experience." Yet, this effort to conceal the divided nature of experience is indicative of the essential struggle between theory and practice. Theory strives to generalize but practice thrives on distinction. The problem then arises that male theories of reading have been compelled to disguise their fundamental subjectivity by appealing to a certain practice that involves an identifiable, objective entity (called a reader) whose performance can be analyzed in a similarly objective manner. For the feminist (Marxist, third-world, etc.) critic, this entity speaks only of its dominant male subjectivity. Its claim of generality, unfortunately, only emphasizes the oppressive nature of its structure.

The notion, however, of speaking about reading and its interpretive strategies through a constructed idealized reader and/or critical activity is a useful metaphor that does not need to implicate an unattainable, omniscient force. What is, after all, the theoretical concept of an "ideal," "implied," "wandering" (etc.) reader if not one more manifestation of the individual (differing) critic who creates it? In a very real sense, all literary endeavors have at their core an "idealized" reader in that the interpreting subject, at the heart of its practice, is fantastically privileged. My own reading of Charrièrè's _Les

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Lettres de Mistriss Henley, for example, privileges me. The same is true for Leo Spitzer's study of the Lettres portugaises. Both our readings take into account a heritage of other texts, voices, and experiences that have shaped the unique and individual manner in which we read a literary work.

Consequently, all of our stories of reading are, as Patrocinio Schweickart defines it, utopian. Our stories idealize the source(s) of their conceptions by assuming an omniscient posture whose raison d'être is to determine meaning. Likewise, when Elaine Showalter speaks of the "hypothesis of a female reader," she underscores the fact that we must all inevitably play a role of some kind in order to begin reading. Subjective experience is and must be acknowledged as divided for there is never a conscious moment that synchronizes completely with the moment of experience. The reader's awareness of the role he or she is enacting, the limitations, privileges, and exclusions that role entails, constitutes one of the two primary differences of feminist reader-response criticism. The reader is not

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innocent; he or she will always represent a unique blend of differing, often political, viewpoints.6

Once the plurality of the reader's experience is admitted, the next move is for the feminist reader-response critic to acknowledge the myriad readings and interpretive strategies that will be produced. For the feminist, this endeavor strives to resist divisive categories among readerships. Rather, differences in viewpoint are brought together in a celebratory gesture. Difference is redefined, as Mary Jacobus argues, to avoid dialectical oppositions—it is a "multiplicity, joyousness and heterogeneity which is that of textuality itself."7 Our plurality of vision is embraced rather than disguised since it brings us closer to each other. Through our differing points of view, we learn to communicate, to interact with the Other on a variety of levels, and, thus, bring ourselves closer to an understanding of the Self. Elizabeth Flynn defines this as

6 The terms "political," and the "politics of interpretation" have become highly charged in recent years as is witnessed by the bewildering variety of definitions outlined in a special issue of Critical Inquiry 9 (1982). Peter J. Rabinowitz offers one of the best (and succinct) descriptions. Politics, he writes, "refers to the systems of power relations among groups (genders, races, nationalities, social classes, among others) in any social situation—systems that may be in part formalized [. . .], but that are always in part invisible." Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987) 5.

a third alternative to models of reader- or text-dominated theories:

(S)elf and other, reader and text, interact in such a way that the reader learns from the experience without losing critical distance; reader and text interact with a degree of mutuality. Foreignness is reduced, though not eliminated. Self and other remain distinct and so create a kind of dialogue.  

Our plurality, then, does not necessarily implicate the arbitrary, but it does necessitate a dialogue. This, then, is the second difference that feminist reader-response criticism offers in its model of reading.

This said, the feminist critic must still address the problematic qualities of the text itself. To speak of the reader/writer as both necessarily subjective and political emphasizes, more than ever, that the text is a representation of a dual subjectivity. But it is also something else. The text is different (and thus distanced) from both the reader and writer's subjectivity in two ways. First, the text, by its very form, is closed—in and of itself; it is an entity. Poulet's metaphor of the statue comes to mind. A book exists apart from us, we can hold it, study the quality of paper, its print, etc.; in short, we perceive it as a thing. It is objective in the most fundamental sense we have of the term. Yet, to open this

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thing involves more than putting into motion its inherent
dual subjectivity. It is to awaken its textuality from its
own slumber. Reading, therefore, represents a space, where
three forces (the reader, author and text) must interact.
And, because the text is the only purely representable
objective component of this trio, its limitations also must
be taken into account.

Thus, feminist reader-response theorists speak as well
of conditions imposed on the communicative interaction
between the dual subjectivities of author and reader. Flynn
makes this point above—the reader does not lose "critical
distance, ...self and other remain distinct." Schweickart
stresses "the need to keep it [the reading interaction] from
being totally subjective" (Schweickart 53). Culler begins
his discussions of the woman reader by evoking an "informed"
female reader (Culler 43). The utopian dream of converging
pluralities encompassing all differences strives, in theory,
for union. But, in practice, this theory is at odds with
itself. On the one hand, feminist theories of reading want
to incorporate plurality and difference. In practice, then,
the individual reader and his or her own unique experience
should be taken into account. Yet, the goal of feminist
criticism is to transform this unique experience into a
community readership of dialogue and exchange. Feminist
criticism, moreover, has its own agenda. It intends to
 teach a different structure of interpretation; one that puts
into question the theoretical premises of traditional (male) scholarship.

This illuminates a second meaning of utopian, one that is at the core of all reader-response criticism. There is always a vision behind these theories. The feminist reader is no different. While the feminist vision allows, theoretically, a plurality of readers and interpretations, it, nonetheless, seeks to speak for a particular interest—that of women—in practice. Consequently, the feminist vision strives to encompass multiple readerships, but it can only "anticipate what might be possible, what 'critical understanding' might mean for everyone, if only we could overcome the pervasive injustices of our time" (Schweickart 35, emphasis added). In practice, any feminist theory of reading will exclude someone, who is, no doubt, going to be less than "joyous." Our immediate concern, as Schweickart points out, is to remember that feminist criticism is also a "mode of praxis. The point is not merely to interpret literature in various ways; the point is to change the world" (Schweickart 39). Whose world we change and what we might bring to it is always relative to the members of that
To summarize, feminist reader-response criticism is identified by at least three components. First, there must be a recognition of the duality of subjects. This, in turn, foregrounds the communicative (dialogic) nature of reading. Second, this duality is threatened by the absence of the author and the presence of the text's objectivity. The reader's awareness of this absence/presence ushers in the third moment. The locus of the dialogic exchange is in the reader who must "mediate [...] between the context of writings and the context of readings" (Schweickart 54). Culler, in his chapter on reading as a woman, identifies these three levels within a broader spectrum of feminist criticism. The first is based on an appeal to the personal and collective experience of the female reader; the second level focuses on the problematic aspects of this experience, namely, the fact that female readers do not always read as women. Finally, the third moment is, in Culler's terms, "to investigate whether the procedures, assumptions, and goals of current criticism are in complicity with the preservation of male authority, and to explore alternatives" (Culler 61).

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All of these components or levels underscore the most pervasive characteristic of feminist reader-response criticism. It attempts to speak of dialectical, and not dualistic, interactions between the reader, text, and writer. This ambitious goal intends to escape both the monism of theory and the monism of the reader (i.e., of the Object vs. Subject or Text vs. Reader dichotomy) by placing into question our obsessive practice of perceiving the world in terms of opposing and therefore conflicting structures. The task for feminist critics is enormous and, accordingly, no complete feminist theory of reading as yet exists. Yet, the "dream" of such a theory has already opened new forums of discussion and research which begin to outline what such a theory might entail. In the remaining pages, I would like to explore some of those aspects of current feminist criticism that have influenced significantly my analysis of the history of readership in the Lettres portugaises and the alternative readings I propose of Les Lettres de Mistriss Henley. During the process, I hope to outline a particular sequence of theoretical concerns that have guided my understanding of the complex interplay between differences in the reader's sex, gender affiliation, and gender biases and the practice of reading and interpretation.

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The claim of a unique female experience, in theory and in practice, has been the fundamental motivation underlying the feminist critical endeavor from its earliest phases. Indeed, feminist criticism was initially defined by that claim; consequently, its critics have often focused upon the search and affirmation of the female Self. For literary studies in particular, feminist criticism has tried to liberate the female voice from a variety of patriarchal systems of thought. The emergence of this female voice would offer the reader a different point of view that relied upon the privileged authority of a female experience. Thus, these early feminist readings often focused on the images and portrayals of women in male literature, particularly in those "great masterpieces" of the literary canon. As a result, a series of male-defined myths about women thematized much feminist research. The image of Woman as Mother, Woman as Whore, and Woman as Madonna was revealed time and again as an obsessive male characterization of the female's socially, morally, economically, and physically inferior role. Moreover, the heritage of these female myths found its reflection in the contemporary status of women's existential condition. This literature of "masterpieces," it was discovered, offered more than a portrayal of "universal" human dilemmas and struggles. For feminists, it also offered, and still does, much in the way of pedagogical "consciousness-raising" for both men and women.
This initial work of feminists provided the groundwork for other discoveries. If male characterizations of women perpetuated the condition of women, feminist critics could reveal this as a source of androcentric oppression but had no means to provide an alternative female model for women. Consequently, feminist critics were quick to search archives and libraries to find the material necessary to create a history of their own. They unearthed a wealth of "forgotten" literature written by women. Indeed, the canonical status of this literature both symbolized and confirmed the female condition. It, too, had been marginalized, silenced by the oppressive forces surrounding its conception. Among these forces, the most obvious concerned the manner in which dominant critical practices defined "good" literature. Therefore, feminists also questioned the ideology of the canon, its formation, and the influential impact the tradition of the canon might have on future generations.

Yet the process of reinvestigating historical claims about women's role in social thought and development revealed other stories about women. Her exclusion has not been confined to literature or its criticism. In what quickly became, as Adrienne Rich has stated, an "act of
survival [rather than] a chapter in cultural history,"¹⁰ feminist critics began their attempt to construct a new female paradigm of women's history, literature, and culture. The claim of a female experience thus gained theoretical ground for many feminist scholars because it could evoke the authorial presence of a common history of female experience. The belief in that experience has produced multiple alternative readings of both male and female fiction that have transcended historical and generic boundaries. More importantly, the theory of a historical female experience offers to a twentieth-century feminist scholar the means with which to bridge, in part, the gap between her own individual experience of Self and that of the Other Woman. It strives to create, in effect, a universal female identity.

The reception of feminist criticism, and especially that criticism based on the authority of the female experience, has often not been embraced in the wider academic audience. It has been viewed in a hostile or suspicious manner since its function has been to reveal and correct injustices, exclusions, and biases against women by men and their ingrained systems of gender-typing codes and practices. Moreover, feminism is often considered

exclusionary in its own right. As Annette Kolodny points out:

If we are scholars dedicated to rediscovering a lost body of writings by women, then our finds are questioned on aesthetic grounds. And if we are critics determined to practice revisionist readings, it is claimed that our focus is too narrow and our results are only distortions, or, worse still, polemical misreadings. 11

Most significantly, however, it has become obvious that while the personal and/or collective experience of women as an oppressed group may seem a convincing argument in and of itself, it does not guarantee that all female readers will read in a manner consonant with feminist ideology. Thus, the political struggle of feminist practice has been obliged, to borrow Kolodny's metaphor, to "dance through its own minefields." The feminist goal of exteriorizing or making public the practice of reading women and having women read has instead been redirected in order to tend to the problematic features of its constituency.

Consequently, a large portion of current, Anglo-Saxon feminist reader-response criticism focuses on the narrative conventions brought to the reading act before it even takes place. The goal of these theories is to explain why all

women do not always have the same (feminist) reading experience. Judith Fetterley's call for a "resisting" female reader\textsuperscript{11} was among the first to offer the metaphor of an uninformed woman reader who practices misogynist reading strategies by allowing herself to be, as Fetterley puts it, "immasculated" by the text. Women do not always read as women because the heritage of their oppression has deeply ingrained a strategy of interpretation that urges them to read against the text and, thus, against themselves. The female reader, according to Fetterley's account, suffers (. . .) not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one's experience articulated, clarified, and legitimized in art, but more significantly, the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male--to be universal--. . . is to be not female. (The Resisting Reader xiii) 

Fetterley's theory maintains that a woman reads differently from a man but the experience is not always one that spells salvation. American fiction, she notes, "insists on its universality at the same time that it defines that universality in specifically male terms" (The Resisting Reader xii). This is responsible for the female reader's split identity in which the act of reading is comparable to schizophrenia: "Imagining myself male, I attempted to create

myself male. Although I knew the case was otherwise, it seemed I could do nothing to make this other critically real. The problem, as these feminists view it, is that androcentric literature rehearses the subject/object dilemma inherent in male critical approaches to interpretation. The crucial question of control remains: What does the text, as a representative of androcentric values, do to the female reader? For her, it transforms the literary transaction into an expression of self-denial and even self-hatred. Furthermore, as long as women continue to read and write according to androcentric models of interpretation, they will also perpetuate their schizophrenic experience as a female reader.

Female (feminist) readers need to learn, above all else, an interpretive strategy that will avoid self-fragmentation and center on self-unification in the reading experience. To do this, she needs to take control of her own destiny by recognizing that she can do things to the text. "Reading is a learned activity," Kolodny reminds us, "which, like many other learned interpretive strategies in our society, is inevitably sex-coded and gender-inflected." To correct her destiny as a misogynist

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female reader, then, the woman-reader must learn to distance herself (partially) from the androcentric models of interpretation that urge her to read as a man. She cannot, however, forget that these models exist so she must complement that interpretive activity by choosing to read as a woman. The female reader must not forget

( . . . ) the androcentricity of the text or its power to structure her experience. ( . . . ) Taking control of the reading experience means reading the text as it was not meant to be read, in fact, reading it against itself. Specifically, one must identify the nature of the choices proffered by the text and, equally important, what the text precludes--namely, the possibility of reading as a woman without putting one's self in the position of the other, of reading so as to affirm womanhood as another, equally valid, paradigm of human existence. (Schweickart 49, 50)

Yet for the "uninformed" female reader, this control is conferred to the alert feminist critic who teaches the "existence of a significant body of writing by women" and encourages "to learn how to read it within its own unique and informing contexts of meaning and symbol." 15

Therefore, the feminist endeavor to create and maintain a conceptual female experience common to all women is crucial to feminist reader-response theories. Without such an experience, it is difficult to distinguish the female

reading experience from mainstream (androcentric) interpretive strategies. The female experience, feminist critics argue, has a redeeming quality in that it affirms women's existence by giving them a voice despite the pervasive, political systems underlying dominant interpretive practices. Yet, women's identity (their experience) has been and still is shaped in part by their muted status within those systems. The consequences of articulating that identity through the same discursive structures that oppress it inevitably results in, to recall Crawford and Chaffin's article, some loss of meaning.\textsuperscript{16} The recuperation of that meaning is the work of these feminist critics who want to structure the female reading experience in a way that creates, through desire and belief, the presence of a female identity.

In my study of the critical readership of the Lettres portugaises, I attempted to put into practice this feminist ideology. Indeed, my point of departure was to valorize the response of one (relatively "uninformed, non-feminist") female reader, angered by my announcement one day in class that the originally anonymous text was really written by a man. Significantly, her subsequent anger suggested to me that she had identified with the female protagonist, Mariane, at some point during her reading of the letters.

\textsuperscript{16} See Chapter I, p. 68.
This identification, however partial, was connected to the manner in which she experienced herself as a woman. Her concept of self (her female identity) was, in some way, already united with Mariane's. The effect of my announcement was to divide that identity into two distinct parts. On the one hand, she was forced to silence her own voice--her own identity--in order to read Mariane as the Other, a constructed object of male desire. The process of reading (rereading) for her involved the immasculation of her primary identity and a rejection of herself as woman. Her "new" identity emerged from her divided self. By the end of the term, she "came to believe" Mariane was a construct largely because I presented to her a history of critical male readers who had "proved" Mariane's fictionality. Without question and without investigation on my own part, I, a feminist critic, passed along a tradition of female self-denial and self-effacement common to academic institutions of higher learning.

In some ways, my analysis of that male readership restores my student's initial response and, therefore, the value of her original identity with Mariane. The investigation I did (eventually) undertake revealed the tenuous nature of critical claims to male authorship of the *Lettres portugaises*. It did not, however, reconstruct that primary unity of female identity between the student and Mariane. Neither the spontaneity nor "purity" (for its
nature is unknown) of that female reading experience can be restored, at least not without imposing the political agenda of another Subjectivity. That voice is muted as is the multiple voices of other women who have no doubt responded to the letters since their publication in 1669. The silence I and the history of male readership imposed on her underscores, more than anything, a long tradition of value accorded to a text by how we read it. If we choose to read "critically," we are, at present,—even as feminist critics—necessarily obliged to practice some misogynist attitudes in our interpretive strategies. There is no other history of female readership—at least, of the Lettres portugaises—to which we can refer as evidence of female reading or male misreading. Our practice of imposing androcentric critical interpretations on texts eliminates, more often than not, that unique female voice before it can be articulated. However, it is only through the presence of that voice that feminist critics can even begin to understand what a female identity might entail.

At least part of the feminist agenda seeks to reconstruct a literary female identity that would be based on the responses of such contemporary female readers as my student and that would exist despite the authority of a long tradition of androcentric readings, offered, for example, by works like the Lettres portugaises. This, however, would be a theoretically dishonest position to adopt since any
reconstructed female identity would be derived from an empirical ideology that claims to name what is, in fact, unnameable. To validate my student's initial identification with Mariane based on their shared biological traits necessarily involves myself first assuming and then ascribing to the text a feminine gender code whose values and practices have remained unchanged for nearly three hundred years. My act of validation would need to include the responses of more than myself and one student because I would also be claiming the existence of a universal female experience to be shared, hopefully, by all women. As a critic, feminist or otherwise, such a claim seems as tenuous as those of the male readings I studied. Not only is it presently impossible to provide the necessary supporting evidence, it betrays, as well, the fundamental difference and plurality of viewpoint to which feminist criticism aspires. If female identity is a universal given and inherently familiar to other women, then we should be able to articulate its content in more concrete terms than simple belief or desire.

Mary Jacobus, in her critique of the Anglo-Saxon feminist effort to base theories on the empirical authority of female experience, illuminates the dangers involved.

In America, the flight toward empiricism takes the form of an insistence on "women's experience" as the ground of difference in writing. "Women's writing," "the woman reader," "female culture" occupy an almost unchallenged position of authority, akin to
the fetishization of "history" in some Marxist contexts. The assumption is of an unbroken continuity between "life" and "text"--a mimetic relation whereby women's writing, reading, or culture, instead of being produced, reflect a knowable reality. Just as one can identify a woman biologically (the unstated argument would run), so one can with a little extra labor identify a woman's text, a woman reader, the essence of female culture.¹⁷

Jacobs seems to suggest that if only a female readership could be formulated or produced, and not silenced by androcentric critical models of interpretation or reduced to a transcendental, mythical female experience, perhaps then we could attempt to outline a theory of feminist reading strategies that escapes the negative and reductive hermeneutic practices offered by current Anglo-Saxon scholarship.

On the other hand, Elaine Showalter describes an evolution within Anglo-American feminist studies that recognizes the limitations and determinate nature of theoretical claims about female experience. To describe this evolution, she divides the work of feminist critics into two areas: woman as reader and woman as writer.¹⁸ For Showalter, the feminist study of "woman as reader" is, more

¹⁷ Mary Jacobus, "Is There a Woman in this Text?" Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 108.

or less, a dead-end enterprise. Not only does it hint of essentialism, it is also based, she believes, on the "angry or loving fixation on male literature" (Showalter 131). She calls for a new agenda within feminist studies, one that minimizes the claim of a common female experience and focuses instead on the (current) production of female literature and culture. The emphasis on "woman as writer" (Showalter coins the term "gynocritics") offers scholars the opportunity to study what a female literature and culture might involve. Gynocritics is

(. . .) woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres, and structures of literature by women. Its subjects include the psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the problem of a female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career; literary history; and, of course, studies of particular writers and works. (. . .) Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture. ("Towards a Feminist Poetics" 128, 131)

Yet, Showalter's attempt to divide feminist criticism into two parts seems to betray her own belief in "fitting" women between the "lines of the male tradition." My study on the Lettres portugaises has revealed to me that feminist (re)readings of male texts, literary or non-literary, signed or unsigned, can itself produce a female literary activity. My analysis of the text does not rely on a common female
experience nor does it reveal a universal female identity. Neither does it particularly illuminate a "newly visible world of [seventeenth-century, French] female culture." It does, however, contribute to the creation of a contemporary female culture in which I, as well as critics like Elaine Showalter, are attempting to unravel, to make visible, whatever it is that might constitute that world of female culture. Part of that enterprise must concern the feminist reader who is aware of the political nature of interpretation and sets about to re-read the history of critical interpretive exercises in order to search for examples of how gender, its practices and codes, have affected how and what we have read or, in some cases, not read.

Showalter's appeal to a gynocritical study of women's literature is a valuable and much needed boost to contemporary reader-response criticism. Rather than dividing the work of feminist critics into those who study reading and those who study writing, I would argue instead that a feminist reading of literary works, like my analysis of the Lettres portugaises, is itself an attempt to put gynocritics into practice. Feminist readings must first recognize themselves as a form of female literary production. Reading at this level cannot be divorced from the activity of writing. That activity must be conscious of itself; that is, it must take into account several
complementary components of reading and writing. It needs to be aware of the power of political agendas before, during, and after the process of reading and writing. Gender ideologies, ingrained at an early age, are shared concepts that are defined by their historical, linguistic, and cultural relationship to another. For one person to read one book is to awaken and put into motion an entire system of interconnecting horizons. Feminist critics need to view the process of reading itself as a form of writing. Whether we are restructuring the literary canon, engaging in reconstructive or corrective readings of male texts, or formulating new writing styles and analytical methods, we all share this common writing activity. We are participating in the creation of a new history that will be the heritage of future generations.

My reading of Charrière’s Les Lettres de Mistriss Henley provides, perhaps, a more concrete example of Showalter’s appeal to gynocritics because the focus of my reading takes into account that “psychodynamics of female creativity” which includes, in part, the study of linguistics and the problem of a female language. In many ways, my study of Charrière’s work is itself an experiment in putting "gynocritics" into practice. My goal was to read (or reread) for the mark of gender. I found the mark of gender between Mistriss Henley's letters, between the lines of her letters, and between the words of each line. Yet, in
order to speak about gender in this work, I needed to re-
write it, to force to the surface the ambiguity, the irony,
and the refusal of closure that characterizes the
 correspondence. There, Mistriss Henley surfaced for me but
not as a universal female experience that I could identify
as such. Rather, she appeared as a specter of conflicts,
oppositions, desires and representations. This is the
"female identity" I discovered. A fragmented representation
of both objectivity and subjectivity, Mistriss Henley
resembles a text that wants to be read, analyzed, questioned
and perhaps even categorized.

Charrière's attempt to construct an epistolary
readership while appealing to another more critical and
sympathetic reader is symbolic of Mistriss Henley's quest
for an identity. That reader could, perhaps, salvage her
unique concept of self if only such an omnipotent reader
existed in her narrative horizon. But whether or not her
search for identity is also a search for her Womanhood seems
almost to miss the point. Mistriss Henley represents first
a universal human (and genderless) desire to be. Her
struggle to be is complicated by the incidental conditions
of her biological sex. To speak of an identity in this text
is to view Mistriss Henley as, more than anything else, a
representation of genderless, frustrated desire. That
desire to produce a voice, a language, within the confines
of a discursive system, is also a universal human struggle.
Mistress Henley's anguish is undoubtedly intensified by her socially inferior status; her voice is muffled under the stifling, en-gendered female condition in which she finds herself. However, her gender, its codes and practices, are products of Mistress Henley's biological sex and it is only by examining the political status of that sex that the reader can begin to understand what it means to read and write like a woman.

To offer a hypothesis about the existence of a female language is to extend to a character like Mistress Henley the means through which she can save herself from silence (i.e., the end of her correspondence) or death. Indeed, my emphasis on the existence of a subtextual critical response to Constant's Le Mari sentimental and Rousseau's Emile allows a space within which a female language can emerge from the work. As well, my analysis of the linguistic exaggerations and interplays between right and wrong broadens the horizon of that space where, to recall one of Showalter's criteria for gynocritical studies, "woman as the producer of textual meaning" may appear. What is most striking about this female discursive space is its tendency (perhaps even its necessity) to be interwoven with the dominant androcentric discursive structures. What is said reveals what is not said, and it is within these gaps that a subtext of differing desire is found by the reader. Yet, this desire is only en-gendered because it is produced from
a genderless libido whose shape and definition is determined by the external political forces surrounding its existence.

For feminist theorists like Mary Jacobus, this is the difference that European (French) feminism offers to studies of woman as reader and woman as writer.

(T)he French insistence on écriture féminine--on woman as a writing-effect instead of an origin--asserts not the sexuality of the text but the textuality of sex. Gender difference, produced, not innate, becomes a matter of the structuring of genderless libido in and through patriarchal discourse. Language itself would at once repress multiplicity and heterogeneity--true difference--by the tyranny of hierarchical oppositions (man/woman) and simultaneously work to overthrow that tyranny by interrogating the limits of meaning. The "feminine," in this scheme, is to be located in the gaps, the absences, the unsayable or unrepresentable of discourse and representation. ("Is There a Woman in This Text?" 109)

To contextualize this approach to the study of women's literature as a uniquely French endeavor minimizes the contribution the concept of écriture féminine offers to the Anglo-American feminist reader-response critic. Both enterprises center upon that elusive interplay of Showalter's "psychodynamic forces," in which language and discourse, politics and gender, woman and man, and objectivity and subjectivity find their locus in the feminist reader. These forces are ones that can be revealed by politically aware reading strategies that are not particular to women and their experience, but that have
been, and still are, defined under the rubric of "feminist" criticism. To read differently is to adopt an interested critical approach that reads specifically for something. To read as a woman is to re-read for the mark of gender in not only literature, but the world. It is to attempt to write as a women by outlining the content, filling in the gaps, that that "newly visible world of female culture" offers. However utopian, this must be the aspiration of feminist criticism.

If this conclusion seems conciliatory, it is intended. For my "experience" in working with concepts of gender, language, and women's reading has consistently led me to discuss my two epistolary works in terms of integration and cooperation. Woman (woman-reader, woman-writer, etc.), as a universal identity, can neither exist apart from nor totally within the production of androcentric discourse. She needs to recognize, as Nancy Miller argues, a "fraternal alliance" in which "a more promising model of future relations between women and institutional authorities" is found "for it at least poses a ground of parity and reversibility."\(^{19}\) This alliance acknowledges the impossible relation between woman to Woman, between reader and Text, and between subject and Object. Yet it does allow for the necessary difference of

the reader where meaning is located. Even if this difference entails an endless discursive and critical practice of fragmentation, circularity, opposition, and ambiguity, it is, nonetheless, one which we can, as feminist readers, (to borrow what Jonathan Culler would call Nancy Miller's "happy ending") "work with and through" ("Subject to Change" 117).


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