Marriage Calculations in the Eighteenth Century: Deconstructing the Love vs. Duty Binary

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The virtuous young woman torn by the conflict between nature and culture, duty and desire, was a typical heroine of the eighteenth-century novel. In the most successful of these novels, Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, the reader followed the heroine's struggle between love and filial duty in letters that seemingly flowed directly from her heart to the printed page. When forced to choose between eloping with her lover and marrying the man chosen for her by her father, Julie agonized in a letter written to her cousin and best friend Claire:

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Obedience and faith dictate opposite duties to me. Shall I follow my heart's penchant? Whom is to be preferred of a lover or a father? Alas, by harkening to love or nature, I cannot avoid casting one or the other into despair; by sacrificing myself to duty I cannot avoid committing a crime, and whatever choice I make, I must die both unhappy and guilty.

Realizing that happiness was out of the question and predicting her own fictional fate, Julie decided to obey the will of her parents (her father, really) because, she said, "it will be less cruel to lament in my misfortune than to have caused theirs."

For a modern reader, Julie's recourse to an argument for filial duty to the father who beats her hard enough to cause a miscarriage may not be a convincing alternative to the argument from the heart and nature. We root for love to win out and happiness to be thereby achieved. Perhaps this is why the novelist's binary opposition between duty and desire has come to shape the perspective of historians, who tend to frame their discussion of marriage in the Old Regime in terms of the relative importance of duty – the rational social, economic, and lineage interests of the family – and the desire of the loving, feeling individual.

François Lebrun has written that before the French Revolution, "in every milieu marriage was considered as being first an affair of interest, in the largest sense, and, very secondarily, an affair of sentiment." According to Lebrun, marriage was "too serious an affair to be the result of a personal choice. It was generally the parents who

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Maurice Daumas has disputed this bleak picture, suggesting "certain historians have too quickly evacuated love from the traditional marriage. To believe them, it was based only on the *convenance* of families, the forced submission of women, the respect for religious precepts, and the strict framing of sexual practices." Lebrun and Daumas agree, however, that interest was calculated by the family, represented by its male head, and love was the pure expression of the individual (woman's) heart.

The crusade for companionate marriage, or marriage based on the love and free choice of the partners, was one of the Enlightenment's central campaigns against tradition and patriarchal authority. The triumph of the nuclear family based on the freely joined companionate couple over the lineage family with its strategies and interests remains one of the pillars of our understanding of social progress as the rise of the individual. Yet, as an ideal of freedom,

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companionship marriage did not have the same meaning for women as for men. First, as men of letters opened up for themselves the expanse of opportunity for success and fulfillment they could achieve by their own "merit," they limited the achievement of happiness for women exclusively within companionship marriage and motherhood – the twin pillars of male desire. Second, those who argued for companionship marriage did not consider a woman's freedom not to marry, nor did they consider that true freedom of choice would require fundamental changes in laws and attitudes toward property, work, and professional ambition. These are the foundations upon which autonomy is built and which no amount of love can overcome. Finally, when women's freedom was limited to the choice between two men, patriarchy itself was merely established on firmer ground. Rousseau's thematization of the problem of forced marriage as Julie's struggle between duty to her father and love of her tutor shows that what looks like a woman's choice is just a reworking of the old story of the combat between two men for the woman upon whom they both make claims.  


5 Despite the fact that Rousseau makes Julie the tragic heroine of his novel, the example he gives in a footnote of the unjustness of patriarchal authority over marriage is of a young man whose powerful father disinherited his son for having married an actress. (Rousseau, 134n; in the translation, 158-9n, and editors' note, 669 n.6.) Similarly, in Diderot's play, Le Père de famille (1758), the drama turns around a young man who overcomes the opposition of his father and his uncle to his marriage to a poor girl. On Diderot's play and the importance of the new type of drama he invented for promoting companionship marriage and the sentimental family, see Sara Maza, The Myth of the French
Outside of novels, women's struggles concerning marriage did not map neatly onto the frame of duty versus desire or interest versus emotion. The decisions they had to make were rarely between male competitors. Nor were women unconcerned about or oblivious to the matters of "interest" that novelists and historians have traditionally associated with families and fathers. Indeed, to assume that they were is to limit women to the realm of feeling and deny the importance and utility of their reason in what was certainly the most important decision of their lives. If we assume that women could and did reason, then we should not be surprised to find them reasoning about marriage. Indeed, where better to look for the exercise of female reason than in the difficult and complex decision-making process around marriage?

In the course of my research on women's letter-writing practice in the eighteenth century I have looked closely at the letters of two women who reasoned deeply in order to sort through the complexities of proposed marriages. The


Katherine Ann Jensen has written similarly of the association of women's writing with love letters: "the ideology that informed the feminine love letter, defining women's writing as emotional and unselfconscious, denied woman the self-conscious distance necessary to write anything except love letters." Writing Love: Letters, Women, and the Novel in France, 1605-1776 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), xvi.

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pressure under which these women were being asked to make such an important decision was particularly intense because neither assumed that any marriage was better than no marriage. The following cases of women reasoning over proposed marriages show how much more complicated the marriage calculations of eighteenth-century women could be than a simple weighing of love versus duty.

Catherine de Saint-Pierre lived her life in port towns in Normandy: Le Havre, Dieppe, Honfleur. Her father, who claimed descent (erroneously) from the leader of the famous Burghers of Calais, was the director of the Le Havre office of the royal messenger service. Her mother's family were upstanding citizens of Dieppe, where they were merchants and ship captains and served the town as churchwardens, militia officers, aldermen, and commercial court judges. We know her from the letters she wrote to her brother, the writer Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, between 1766, shortly after the death of their father, and her death in 1804.

7 The Burghers of Calais, led by Eustache de Saint-Pierre, became Normandy's greatest heroes for having offered to sacrifice themselves in order to secure the freedom of their city from the besieging English in 1347. They were most famously memorialized in Le Siège de Calais, the 1739 novel by Mme de Tencin; the 1765 play, "Le Siège de Calais" by Pierre Laurent Buycette de Belloy; and the 1895 sculpture by Auguste Rodin. On the significance of their story in the eighteenth century, see David A. Bell, The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

8 For biographical information, see Lieve Spaas, Lettres de Catherine de Saint-Pierre à son frère Bernardin (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996), 29-63; and Maurice Souriau, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre d'après
For Catherine, there was no courtship or other means to get to know her suitor personally, no parents at hand to look out for her interests, and inadequate financial means to take an economic risk on a marriage without strong foundations. She was always under pressure from suitors, as well as well-meaning friends and relatives, and had to decide within a time frame that was absurdly short. For example, on 15 January 1773 she wrote to Bernardin about an offer she had received from a gentleman glassmaker on New Year's Day. "I have requested a month," she wrote, "which I was barely able to obtain." Whether it had taken her two weeks to gather the necessary information or that long to decide to consult her brother, she had only two weeks left to make her decision. She thus wrote urgently at the end of her letter: "Little brother, do not refuse to act quickly for me. The young man will know my response the last days of the month or the first two of February."  

For Catherine, the heart does not seem to have been at issue at all. After laying out everything she knew about the gentleman glassmaker, she apologized for her "scrambled letter" but explained that she was just trying to get everything down "so that you can know for yourself what there is to know about the affairs of this man." After noting that her friends were concerned about his lack of fortune,

*ces manuscrits* (Paris: Société Française d’Imprimerie et de Librairie, 1905), 2-8, 83. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's major works are *Voyage à l’Île de France, à l’Île Bourbon, et au cap de Bonne-Espérance* (1773); *Études de la nature* (1784); *Paul et Virginie* (1789); and *La Chaumière indienne* (1790).


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she admitted that she worried about "his youth." She really must have been concerned both about his youth and the age difference between them, since she brought up the issue again at the end of the letter. "Pay attention to his age of twenty-one or twenty-two and to mine, twenty-nine or thirty. His head is still to be formed, mine already is," she reminded Bernardin.

Beyond giving her brother all the information she could gather about the young man's finances, character, health, family, and prospects, Catherine also asked him to imagine what her life would be like if she accepted this proposal. That is, she asked him to follow her own thoughts as they extended into the future such a marriage opened up. "Imagine me at the head of a small rural household far from the church," she wrote.

Winter and summer, taking the roads, such as they are. Not a person to see. The place is a desert. The garden to take the place of vegetables and fish. A husband whom one sees on Sundays. Being a league from the place where he works, they can only come home on Sundays. A house that is nearly unfurnished, or at least having only the bare necessities of an unfurnished house.

If love does not seem to have entered into her reasoning, a lot of other things, including "interest" did: what kind of financial shape the family would be in; her own happiness or loneliness; distance from family, friends, church, and the urban life of the seaport to which she was accustomed; and compatibility with a man eight years her junior.

Duty, moreover, was equally irrelevant. With her parents dead and her other brothers busy with their own lives, Catherine was grateful to her eldest brother for taking some of the responsibility thrust upon him now as head of their family; indeed, she urged him to take more. "I think of
you as my father and I await from your zeal a response that will settle the thing, which ought not to leak out," she wrote. She begged Bernardin, who was living in Paris, to sort things out, make a decision for her, or, better yet, to come back to Normandy and take charge of the situation:

Little brother, take care to clarify all this, to see what is defective in his situation and mine. Decide as the head of the family. May God inspire this response; by His grace, may it not be equivocal. Decide, or rather come, if possible, to confer about all this with the interested parties. They could only praise me for the deference that I would show you. . . . Little brother, do not refuse to act quickly for me.

Far from struggling with a sense of duty to obey the head of her family, Catherine actively encouraged her eldest brother to step up and take responsibility.

Catherine de Saint-Pierre did not marry the gentleman glassmaker. Nor did she marry the other serious suitor who appeared thirteen years later: a widower just returned from Guadeloupe who wanted to settle down with a new wife on a modest property he had inherited in the countryside outside Honfleur. The two letters Catherine wrote to her brother concerning this suitor are marked with the same meticulous research, conscientious reporting, and desperate plea to Bernardin to make a decision for her.

Put me within reach of responding immediately, because the days are numbered. I want to have a mass said and to take communion during the interval of your response. Let it be decisive, do not send it back to me, because I am incapable. It is you who are my support, who will make me overcome my weakness.

10 Catherine de Saint Pierre to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, 1 May [1786], ms 142 (B3-5), Bernsp 00708. The first letter in which she...
If anyone's duty was invoked here, it was that of an elder brother to his sister.

My second case is Manon Phlipon, the future Madame Roland. Manon was also the daughter of respectable urban parents. She grew up in Paris, where her father was a master engraver and her maternal grandfather a merchant in the luxury trade (*marchand mercier*). Madame Roland, of course, has left us the memoirs she wrote in prison during the Terror. But we also have her half of her correspondence with Sophie Cannet, whom Manon met during a year she spent as a boarder at the Parisian convent of the Dames de la Congrégation. The correspondence began in 1767, after Sophie had returned home to Amiens, and continued until Manon's marriage to Roland in 1780. Unlike her memoirs, and like the letters of Catherine de Saint-Pierre to her brother, Manon Phlipon's letters to her friend were written while the decision-making process was happening and constituted part of that process. As such, they too provide a sense of how one woman reasoned under the pressure of family, financial worries, and deadlines.

Manon Phlipon received her first marriage proposal at the age of seventeen from a twice-widowed merchant jeweler in her neighborhood who was twice her age and the
father of a one-year-old daughter. In letters to her friend Sophie written as the negotiations progressed, she shared these details as well as everything else she was able to learn about the gentleman, whom she met twice, by arrangement, at the home of a relative. To Sophie, Manon expressed her desire to do her duty – but to whom? And what was it exactly?

My dear parents are proposing a match that they consider appropriate; should I persuade myself that God reveals his will to me in theirs? They do not demand anything of me; wishing to make me happy, they leave me free to accept or not what, however, they have made clear to me they see as an appropriate match, if I wish to agree to it.¹²

Rather than being torn between her own will and that of her parents, Manon wrestled with the metaphysical question of whether the will of her parents was a manifestation of God's will. Her parents had assured her that the decision was hers, but they asked her to make that decision based on a meeting whose purpose was to find out simply if she found the gentleman "repugnant." Presumably, God would confirm or contest the parents' choice in this visceral response.¹³

¹³ Ibid., [Oct.] 1771, 1:56 and 8 Nov. 1771, 1:61-2: "I do not accept the principle that certain people have advanced that there are three things in life, of which getting married is one, that one must do without reflection, and I understand that if one gave in to all those things that one would do judiciously in a similar case, there would be very few people who wished to do so; accepting, of course, that one would count as nothing resignation to the orders of the Supreme Being, which one could believe to be revealed to us in the wishes of our parents, as long as we do not feel in ourselves an absolute estrangement and decisive reasons that prevent us from consenting to them."
If Catherine de Saint-Pierre sought to prepare herself for her brother's decision by taking communion and having a mass said, Manon Phlipon found it harder to read God's will in that of her parents. For Manon, moreover, the question was not simply whether or not she found the proposed match acceptable – that is, not repugnant. The prior issue was whether marriage was even the right path for her. "Concerned solely with the desire to accomplish the will of divine Providence in all things," she wrote,

and particularly in this important situation, on which I am completely convinced that my eternal happiness or unhappiness depends, I find myself completely indifferent regarding every sort of status, equally ready to marry, to enter into religion, or to remain as I am, having no other will than to do what is most pleasing to God in taking the path that He has decided for all eternity that I should take to him.

But if Manon was perplexed about what her destiny in life was, she refused simply to wait passively to be told. Nor did she accept the proposition, as she put it, that "there are three things in life, of which getting married is one, that one must do without reflection." On reflection, she concluded that

marriage is ordinarily the most bizarre thing in the world: we are united to one another by the most sacred ties, we swear a tender, sincere, unshakeable love, to whom? To a man whom we often know only superficially, and who one is often pained to find little worthy of the sentiments that duty obliges us to feel towards him.

Most people, she concluded, would never marry if they really thought about it.¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid., 1:62.
Which, of course, was all Manon did. As she wrote to Sophie shortly before her twentieth birthday:

In contemplating man in the state of nature, Rousseau says that the man who reflects is a depraved animal; in that case, of all the animals of my species, I am the one who has arrived at the highest degree of depravity, since reflection has become necessary for me to the point that I cannot do without it.

This was a letter in which she admitted that she was not "blind to the extreme difficulty of finding a man whom I could love with that vivacity, that force, that constancy, of which my heart seems capable." It would be hard enough to find that rare person who suited her but even harder for him to suit her parents as well; she was looking for someone who was "personally" compatible, while they were more concerned with finding someone whose "station" was compatible with hers. The real problem was not her parents, however (she had learned early on that she could manage them, and she did), but the disparity between her financial situation and her aspirations. She could not marry a poor man for love because, as she explained, "I am...

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15 Ibid. [Feb. 1774], 1:183-4.
16 "If I had younger sisters, for whom it was necessary to provide, or unpleasant circumstances that compelled me to want to get married, I would close my eyes; a victim of duty, I would go to the altar to consummate my sacrifice, to immolate myself and my freedom; I would not expect the husband to whom I united myself to bring me happiness, I would base it entirely on that which I would claim to bring him through my gentleness and my attentions. But I am under the gaze of parents who cherish me, with whom I live happily and satisfied, and who would never impose their will upon me absolutely." Ibid., 20 Feb. 1773, 1:130. Later, when she felt pressured to accept another match, her favorite uncle assured her: "Don't upset yourself, don't do anything against your inclination, don't rush, and be calm." Ibid., 11 Sept. 1777, 2:129.
not poor enough to accept a man who has nothing, nor rich enough to make his fortune." More troubling, she realized that the kind of man she was looking for – one who shared her Roussseauean family values – was unlikely to emerge from the social and economic milieu from which her suitors came: "the modesty of my property does not allow me to extend my aspirations far, which leaves them trapped within a class where, apparently, they will not find anyone who can fulfill them." \(^{17}\)

As each new suitor presented himself, her frustration grew. The one who caused her the most agony, perhaps, was a man she described as "capable of making a woman happy, by the goodness of his heart and the evenness of his character, if, however, a certain compatibility of mind and way of seeing things were not just as necessary for the happiness of a union whose fruits require caring for them together." The fellow was rich but apparently not too bright, and Manon had no intention of playing both mother and father to her children. \(^{18}\) As she had observed a few years earlier, interviewing suitors was similar to interviewing prospective tutors for one's son when one knew one could not take charge of his education oneself. \(^{19}\)

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 1:184.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 22 Aug. 1777, 2:118. She developed these thoughts further in her next letter to Sophie, 27 August 1777, 2:120: "M. C. is very well described by the expression that you use in regards to him: he's good husband material (c'est une bonne pâte à mari); one could expect peaceful days with him. But it must be admitted that when it comes to his mind, his knowledge, and his capacity to raise children, he does not differ at all from the common class [of men]. However, the goodness of his heart will allow a gentle and reasonable wife to exercise considerable authority over him."

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 24 July 1774, 1:212: "In being presented with a husband, I am in a position to conduct the same research and the same tests that a man would who, recognizing the full value of an excellent tutor for his
Unlike Catherine, Manon did have the words "love" and "duty" in her vocabulary, but she asserted no simple opposition between them. If she found her duty unclear, she was equally unready simply to "follow her heart." Even when she tried to cast herself as a Rousseauean heroine by declaring her impossible love for an impoverished young man of letters, her good sense told her that she could not marry a man who was unable to support himself, let alone her. She declared herself willing to wait for him to establish himself in a career, but she did not even contemplate simply following her heart and worrying about her material interests later. Moreover, while enjoying the pleasure of loving and imagining herself loved, she was also able to endorse a "marriage of reason" for Sophie's sister Henriette. Manon's father, meanwhile, refused to

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20 "Sophie, Sophie, my friend! Without you I am lost; I am in the most violent crisis, in the most cruel battle with myself; I have only the strength to throw myself into the arms of friendship. . . . My soul burns to open, I think that it must do so for the life of the one love; and prejudice, opinion, my father . . . Oh, Gods! How I suffer!" Ibid., 5 Jan. 1776, 1:355.


22 Ibid., 12 Dec. 1776, 1:350: "This would be a marriage of reason, that reason will make happy, because it brings a certain happiness wherever it is found. This will be a marriage that will be cemented by the law of duty and by the satisfaction of necessity, a heart and an imagination that need to be secure. That's what I see. This is something to recommend and to do based on reason." Fortunately, Henriette could not bring herself to do it. Manon later compared her revulsion toward
play the role his daughter and Rousseau had assigned to him. Yes, he banned the poor poet from his house, humiliating and angering Manon, but after a while he shifted his focus to just trying to get his daughter to marry someone so that he, now a widower, could remarry too. Drawing his character from a different sort of novel, he lost interest in his work, let his business go down the drain, and proceeded to fritter away his fortune, his late wife's dowry, and his daughter's on debauchery and mistresses. Finally, as her father became increasingly irresponsible, Manon became more committed to what she considered her duty as a daughter and he considered her stubbornness. As she sacrificed herself to him, taking over the household duties, he stopped talking to her, stayed out later and later, and continued to spend money and resent her. He wanted her out of the house, but she refused to desert him. Fortunately for both of them, she, Roland, and her father finally managed to agree on a marriage that was foundering on the pride of all three.

Catherine de Saint-Pierre and Manon Phlipon were very different women who had at least one thing in common: they both worried, reflected, and struggled over the question of who, how, and if they should marry. Neither

another suitor with Henriette's response to this M de Clastre: "The most annoying part of the affair was the moment of departure, when my fat little good man came to ask permission to kiss me with an air so stupid and so inappropriate that, without fear of a scandal, I would have cried, like Henriette to M Clastre: 'Oh, not that!'" Ibid., 12 Dec. 1778, 2:344.
did so in a paradigmatic way that opposed her heart to her father's head, her desire to family interests. Reading their letters should make us reconsider that paradigm – where it came from and why it has survived to shape our understanding of the history of women, marriage, and family. I would suggest, by way of provocative conclusion, that the choice between love and duty, nature and social convention, was an invention of men of letters such as Rousseau, Diderot, and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, who had nothing to offer women but their hearts and their minds and who thus invested their entire concept of self-worth in the idea of merit – not just their value as writers, but as men. As they appealed to the public to validate them as writers, they appealed to women to validate them as men. With the power of their pens, they promoted the idea that marriage should be based on love and that love was by definition opposed to interest and thus to duty. They did this in novels, poems, plays, and essays aimed at a female readership they cultivated with all their hearts to advance their own gendered interests. While we have come to recognize that the glorification of motherhood was sold to women at considerable cost, we have not, I think, fully grasped that love, too, was sold to them by men who, really, had nothing else to offer.