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Isabelle de Charrière
and the Novel
in the 18th Century

English translation by Viorel-Dragos Moraru

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To the organizers of the conference

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La Princesse de Clèves, Manon Lescaut, Werther, voilà à mon avis en fait de roman la gloire de la France et de l’Allemagne. (4 avril 1795; V, 79)

The Belle van Zuylen chair was held ten years ago by Professor Cecil Courtney, a prominent specialist of Isabelle de Charrière’s life and works to whom I owe a lot. In his oratie titled “Belle van Zuylen and Philosophy” he gave a brilliant account of the way in which the works and thoughts of this remarkable 18th-century woman writer were rediscovered in the last decades of the 20th century. Having contributed to the critical edition of Belle de Zuylen/Isabelle de Charrière’s complete works and having published himself a splendid biography, he noted though that “no comprehensive study of Belle de Zuylen’s art as a novelist or letter-writer” existed to the date. This is the field in which I have been working for the past years. My question is thus: How did it happen that a woman born in the Dutch aristocracy could play a part in French literature such that her asserted “écriture féminine” enters today in a series deemed to illustrate French uniqueness? This question may bring up answers of a socio-historical, a biographical, or yet of a literary kind. My intention is to consider Isabelle de Charrière as a virtual salonnière, and to favor directly the literary approach without neglecting however the socio-historical and biographical circumstances that were accessory to the originality of a prose whose specific ability was to bring women’s voice to the fore. “[...] I have a soft spot for my sex: I may be but the advocate of my own cause” (VIII, 147), claims the épistolière of Lettres écrites de Lausanne. This kind of tempered commitment pervades throughout the fictions of this 18th-century intellectual whose writing never leaves us indifferent. But why did Belle de Zuylen develop her writing projects in French, while her mother tongue was actually Dutch? How did she stand out through her writing work so as to become Madame de Charrière and take a place in literary history among real French salonnières and women novelists?

During the Ancien Régime, the culture of the elites was carried by the prestige of the most brilliant royal courts so that,
beginning with the prominent reign of Louis XIV, French letters spread all through the European courts, where French was fluently spoken all along the 18th century. This mark of distinction adopted in Holland as well as in Germany did not necessarily clash with the nobles’ attachment to their lands and to their country. On the contrary, the mastery of several languages was required of all those who prided themselves on moving in high circles and being a cosmopolitan mind. The example comes to mind of philosophers welcomed at the Prussian court by Frederic II and at the Russian court by Catherine II. Now, it is quite often that, on their way eastward, the French stopped at The Hague, where the princes of Orange held court. For generations, Belle de Zuylen’s family had been very close to the court of Orange and shared its francophilia. Thereby, Baron Diederick Jacob van Tuyll van Serooskerken (1707-1776) did not hesitate to hire a Genevan governess to teach French to his elder daughter Isabella (Belle) Agneta Elisabeth as soon as she was eight. In 1750, Belle traveled to Switzerland and France with her governess. This incidence, undoubtedly brought about by the important works done that year to the castle of Zuylen, confirmed the little girl’s love for the language of Molière. From then on, she never ceased to improve, by her own will, the quality of her French. By choosing later to write and publish in French, she did not leave the circles she attended, and gained a larger audience than if she had chosen to write in Dutch. Later, when she married Charles Emmanuel de Charrière and went to settle with him in Colombier, near Neuchâtel, her everyday language met the language of her writing. She then became a great lady of the principality of Neuchâtel and, by extension, of French-speaking Switzerland. But from a political perspective, the principality of Neuchâtel belonged to Prussia and was only yielded to Napoleon in 1806, little after Isabelle de Charrière’s death. Thus, the baroness of Charrière was in contact with the court in Berlin where her young friend Henriette L’Hardy was a companion to the countess of Dönhoff, the morganatic wife of Frederic-William II.

The activity that allowed Belle de Zuylen – then Isabelle de Charrière – to emancipate from the narrow circles of family and friends in Zuylen, then in Colombier, was of course reading as much as writing. She was a great reader. From her youth to the end of her
life, she took an interest in a large number of texts, but especially in the humanities that nurtured her conversation, her letters, and her literary works. Critics consider this distinctive feature to a great extent. For that matter, the way Isabelle de Charrière prized books is illustrated in *Sir Walter Finch et son fils William*, her last novella, by the image of a tower made to protect these works of the mind from the savageries of history. Besides, it is by the evocation of this monument inviting the assiduous readers to peruse restlessly, that Nathalie Ferrand concludes a vast study devoted to books and the reading in 18th-century French novels. Therefore, it seems advisable to me to examine the readings of Isabelle de Charrière before approaching her writing.

At the time of the first conference on Isabelle de Charrière held in 1974 at Slot Zuylen, Simone Dubois advanced a reflection on the “Scattering of the literary heritage of Isabelle de Charrière”. Indeed, no list of her papers or of her books was preserved after her death. She had bequeathed the former to her friend, Henriette L’Hardy, who died soon after having received this heritage, while the library of the couple was divided after the death of M. de Charrière in 1808 among Louis-Eusèbe-Henri Gaullieur, the widower of Henriette L’Hardy, and three friends of the Chartrières, that is to say the pastor from Neuchâtel Frederic Berthoud, the mayor of Colombier, César d’Ivernois, and Georges de Chaillot-de Mézerac, a dear neighbor of the Charrières, owner of the domain of La Prise in Colombier. In addition, he and Ivernois had been charged with the enforcement of the testamentary provisions of the couple. In spite of the absence of an inventory of the books given out, the critics are relatively well informed on the readings of Isabelle de Charrière, thanks to the abundance of her letters.

The most complete study of the readings of Isabelle de Charrière was offered in 1998 by Raymond Trousson. After having published her biography in French and studied closely her response to Voltaire and especially to Rousseau, he finally raised the question of the true content of her knowledge. “She seems sometimes to have skimmed through rather than read, without quoting her sources. Though a pedagogue, [...] she happens to recommend works
of which she has obviously only a superficial or an indirect knowledge.” Rather suspicious, the critic is compelled “to draw up an inventory of her curiosities.” Since the publication in 1981 of the general index of the Œuvres (X, 691-725), then in 1984 of the general index of the letters (VI, 971-1093), one and the other prepared under the supervision of Jeroom Vercruysse, it is easy to find the passages mentioning authors. One still had to analyze them in order to establish what Vercruysse called the “dictionary of the intellectual and social universe of Isabelle de Charrière” (VI, 969). This was revealed by Raymond Trousson, who joined a vast knowledge of the literature of the time with the analysis of the relevant passages.

The suggested itinerary approached first the Greek and Latin classics, concluding that Mme de Charrière’s knowledge was incomplete but out of the ordinary for a self-educated person, considering that she had not learned the ancient languages in her youth. One can suppose that she instructed herself in many authors with the help of the Lycée ou Cours de littérature ancienne et moderne of Jean-François de La Harpe. Spain is only represented by the often quoted Cervantes. Next are the literatures that Isabelle de Charrière could read in the original. Now, she quoted rather rarely Italian authors. Her connection with the literary circles of her country was about nonexistent, but she drew from the Dutch novel Sara Burgerhart all the inspiration that she needed in order to write her first novella of manners. Her preference went, however, clearly towards the English and German letters. Quantitatively, it appears that she favored contemporary novelists. In his inventory, Trousson limited himself to offering a report, without contextualizing the quotations that he had used and thus without evaluating the intellectual and literary project of the writer. But the importance of the references to contemporary English and French novelists shows that Isabelle de Charrière’s novel writing was in connection with the course of her time.

This remark was usefully supplemented by a study of Guillemette Samson, who, while confining herself to the French field, tried to identify Isabelle de Charrière’s literary judgments of her contemporaries. It appears that she was much interested in other women writers. Thus, classifying the men and women of her time according to the number of occurrences in her letters, Samson pro-
poses the following order: Mme de Staël, Mme de Genlis (often opposed to each other), Mme de Souza, Duclos, Crébillon fils, Rétif, and finally Mme d’Arblay (Frances Burney). The study shows that Isabelle de Charrière judged everyone very severely first with regard to taste, then with regard to style and composition. She only praised Duclos for the simplicity of his style and the rhythm of his narration that “gives the illusion of a stroll”. Her judgments are more amiable when it comes to evaluating the usefulness of the works and, as for Mme de Staël, when it comes to her elegant, fluent and clear-cut eloquence. When noticing that Mme de Charrière’s literary judgments slip easily towards the evaluation of the person, Guillemette Samson concluded that she “relates literature to the criteria of graciousness and of conversation”. This remark seems judicious to me because, as a matter of fact, Isabelle de Charrière did not restrict herself to judging her contemporaries in her private correspondence; she also publicly exposed them by confronting her fictions with recent publications.

In the 1780s, as Claire Jacquier has shown, her writing began to disturb the sentimental fervor in French-speaking Switzerland, a fervor initiated of course by the huge success of Rousseau’s La nouvelle Héloïse, the fictional universe of which illustrates precisely this region. The case of the Lettres de Mistriss Henley (1784) constitutes a particularly striking example. This novella explicitly takes the opposite course to the Mari sentimental, a novel published the previous year by Samuel de Constant. As Suzan van Dijk has showed, this novella provided an interpretation of Constant’s text which has continually conditioned the reader’s response to it and even caused the rewriting of the end of the novel for the 1785 edition. In fact, “Madame de Charrière gave [...] a lesson of novel writing to Monsieur de Constant.” To impose herself like that in the literary circles of a host society, Isabelle de Charrière needed a self-assuredness that she undoubtedly drew from her vast knowledge of the field, but also from family culture. Thanks to the letters from her governess that have been preserved, we know that during the 1750s, at the castle of Zuylen, the baroness van Tuyl read and discussed with her daughter the long epistolary novels of Richardson as soon as they were first
published. Mlle Prévost wanted for example to know, before undertaking the reading of *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, if Belle’s mother attached as much importance to it “as she did to *Pamela*” (I, 91). As we can see, it is quite obvious that, by her social status, her education, her passion for books and reading, her critical mind and her projects of committed writing, this Enlightenment woman carved out a place for herself in the literary world. But was it really a novelist’s place?

A quick glance through her complete works would be enough to notice the diversity of genres that Isabelle de Charrière cultivated. Her work as a playwright occupies volume VII, where Vercruysse counted “twenty-six comedies, operas and lyrical tragedies, the writing of which stretched out over about thirty years” (VII, 9). Her work as a novelist and short story writer makes up the 8th and the 9th volumes, while the 10th volume contains her essays and satirical tracts, her poems and her music. To complete the range of her creative works, one should also state her interest in painting and more particularly in the art of the portrait that she practiced in her youth, simultaneously with her exercising the art of the literary portrait. All the fine arts that used to ornament and embellish the life of the elites during the Ancien Régime contributed to the enrichment of her literary career. The interaction between her work of novel writing and visual arts, dramatic art and music is also perceivable, but it has been less studied than the dialogue between her thought and the philosophical and revolutionary trends of her time. The iconicity and the musical quality of her works are not perceptible at once as their ideological content may be, but they illustrate the sensitivity that sided then the advent of individualism. It is beyond doubt that Isabelle de Charrière devoted quite a lot of time and money to study the art of the portrait by having her portrait painted at various stages of her life. In the same way, she offered herself music tutors and spent more than a year in Paris with the intention of deepening her command of the piano and of learning musical composition so as to be able to write operas. Thanks to the archaeological work of Jacqueline Letzter and Robert Adelson, this enthusiasm for music, which left very few traces, holds today its right place in the context of women’s contribution to the writing of operas in revolutionary France.”
Being especially interested in the iconicity of her writing and in the existing connections between Isabelle de Charrière’s painted portraits and her art of the literary portrait, I realized that this study was similar to a parlor game that was very fashionable in France during the late 1650s, and that could be considered a first victory of women’s writing. Already in the early 20th century, Philippe Godet stated that Belle de Zuylen had depicted herself in *Portrait de Zélide* “with the biting grace Mlle de Montpensier’s guests must have tasted.” He did not say though that the fashion of separated portraits had been imported by the French court from Holland, more precisely from The Hague, a city and court well-known to Belle. In his dedication and foreword to the *Divers Portraits* of Anne Marie Louis d’Orléans, duchess of Montpensier, known as the Grande Mademoiselle (1627-1693), Jean Regnault de Segrais (1624-1701) explained how the example of the portraits of the princesses of Tarente and of La Trémouille, made by themselves in 1656 in The Hague following the models seen in Holland, had determined her to make her own “in a quarter of an hour” while she was at Champigny in November 1657. These portraits open her collection published in 1659. They offer non complacent physical and moral descriptions, submitted to the judgment of readers. Here, as an example, are the last words of the first portrait: “I would scruple about concealing anything whatsoever of which I feel guilty, & consequently I submit myself to your criticism.”

It has escaped the notice of those who drew up the index of the Œuvres complètes (X, 720) that in the first story she published in 1764, Belle de Zuylen hinted at Jean Regnaud de Segrais. One should thereby infer that his work interested Belle de Zuylen well before it offered Isabelle de Charrière the lyrics for a composition of her own (X, 361) and before he was put down next to the marquis de Racan (1589-1670) as a poet to be presented in a handbook of modern literature (VI, 102). The question is of course which of his works may have been familiar to her. His work is in any case closely related to that of Mlle de Montpensier. Although, in the introduction to the *Divers portraits*, he credited himself with the composition and the publication of the collection, the work was due to the initiative of the Grande Mademoiselle, who herself had painted in all the gen-
res and had made of the collection a kind of poetic art of the literary portrait. In fact, Segrais had already praised her literary talent in *Les Nouvelles françaises ou les divertissements de la princesse Aurélie* (1656), because this collection introduced her under the name of Aurélie and showed the pleasure she found in telling stories and commenting on them with her friends. According to Segrais, editor and author of the collection, this princess animated, in the company that surrounded her, the creation of literary portraits and stories, the brevity, diversity, and truthfulness of which were opposed to the long baroque novels. With her first works, two literary portraits and a moral tale, Belle de Zuylen joined to some extent the genres practiced by Mlle de Montpensier and her friends such as described by Segrais.

It is not possible to know exactly which texts by Segrais gave Belle de Zuylen the idea for her first short story. *Les nouvelles françaises* was reprinted at least three times during the 18th century, while a selection of his works was republished in Paris in 1755. Beside a life of the author, this anthology included eclogues, odes, various poems, sonnets, madrigals, songs, many anecdotes and fragments of memoirs, the *Relation de l’Isle Imaginaire*, the *Histoire de la Princesse de Paphlagonie*, of which he would be only the editor, and finally an opera. His “Portrait de Mademoiselle”, which closes the *Divers portraits*, is also a part of this selection. Without undertaking here a thorough study of convergences between the works of Segrais and those of Isabelle de Charrière, one should nevertheless notice women’s names like Caliste and Honorine, which are conspicuous in titles on both sides. One could also turn one’s attention to such scenes as that of the lover with the cut finger, to topoï like that of the love between a brother and a sister who do not know their real parents or to the sceneries of the castle with its towers where women must withdraw. But what is striking above all is the heterogeneous body of minor works related to the forms of high life entertainment and likely to emphasize the talents of women in society. Isabelle de Charrière highly appreciated the writings of Mlle de Montpensier and of Mme de Lafayette. She recommended the *Memoirs* of the former to her young friend Henriette L’Hardy (March 13, 1793; III, 551 and 553), finding that Mlle de Montpensier “is as easy to read as it is to swallow blancmange” (June 11, 1793; IV, 95), and she wanted
young Caroline de Chambrier to study thoroughly The Princess of Clèves: “the description of the court of Henri 2, the portrait of M. de Nemours, the larceny of the portrait, the consent, must be read again” (May 17, 1790; III, 209). In fact, the larceny of the portrait of the beautiful woman recurs in Belle’s moral tale, Le Noble. In short, Segrais and his well-read women friends practiced a form of writing that, used as a model, could encourage the literary ambitions of a young aristocrat, captive in a confined society. Did the writing of portraits not make it possible for women of the nobility to leave their reserve in order to make themselves known by means of small descriptive texts which tried to seize the truth in spite of the pitfalls of flattery on the one hand and of modesty of the other? Feminist studies rightly underline that, for a time, the fashion of the society portrait gave women an autonomous voice and an interesting expertise.

It remains to be seen whether this expertise does not extend to the writing of the short story such as defined by Segrais through the voice of Aurélie, who represents Mlle de Montpensier in the frame story of the Nouvelles françaises.

The critics rightly stressed that Le Noble, conte moral is related to a fashion much more recent than that of the literary portrait, since the first collection of moral tales was published by Marmontel in 1761, while Candide, the style of which seems to have inspired Belle, dates back to 1759. But, perhaps Voltaire and Marmontel are really not the only models of Belle of Zuylen. A relation going back to the innovative prose of Segrais the short story writer undoubtedly marks as much her arrival to writing. Apart from the names and motifs already mentioned, Aurélie and Julie, the heroine of Le Noble, share the same contempt for the “lineages”.

Aurélie prefers to draw lots for the right to speak of her friends rather than yield to the order of precedence. As for Julie, she is scolded for having preferred a “Middle-class woman from the neighborhood to a Young lady [...]. By thoughtlessness she would have passed before a Princess; by indifference, & civility she would have let everyone pass before her.” (VIII, 22) Conceived like Boccaccio’s Decameron and Marguerite de Navarre’s Heptameron, Segrais’ collection includes a frame story that stages the women narrators and allows a discussion of the stories and of their characters. The rejection of precedence thereby founds leve-
ling relationships between the confabulators who can thus freely judge the quality of the stories and the behavior of the characters. Although less noticeable, Belle’s story also involves a critical voice which distances itself from the heroine and her father: “I do not know what she was still feeling and thinking” (VIII, 23), or: “That was the end, I think, for the Baron” (VIII, 33). Later, in the short story collection *L’Abbé de la Tour*, Isabelle de Charrière also developed a frame story that gave this critical persona as much presence as the women narrators and confabulators of Segrais.

If I insist on this division of the narrative authority between a voice that narrates and a voice that judges, it is because this division opens the way for the questions of ethics and poetics that underlie any literary undertaking. The one proposed by *Les Nouvelles françaises* as well as by *Divers portraits* situates the work, whether it is a narration or a description, a story or a portrait, as a form of entertainment allowing to appreciate what is true, or “genuine”, to adopt the expression of Aurélie. The problem is not that of the “plausible”, which animates the debates on aesthetics, as all those who studied Segrais have noticed. Thus, the definition of the short story, of which Aurélie is the spokeswoman, does not refer so much to the art of the narration as to the object of the story itself. This is what Aurélie answers to the friends who have just criticized the unlikelihood of certain details of her account:

I am most delighted [...] to hear you speak like this, for I would rather be reprehended than lauded. I would have only to answer you both that we undertook to tell the things as they are and not as they should be; furthermore, it seems to me that it is precisely the difference between the novel and the short story to say that the novel writes these things as the propriety commands and in the manner of the poet, whereas the short story must take more after history and give the picture of things as we usually see them happen rather than as our imagination envisages them. Therefore, I have received this story as I learned it, and I guarantee nothing else.\(^{16}\)
The images to be rendered in the short story are consequently not the ones depicted by imagination, or those imposed by the designs of a particular ideal, but simply whatever the senses of the narrator enable him to see and hear. Her friends are free to imagine whatever they like: a death at war rather than a long repentance, a gallant Italian rather than a German one... They do not deprive themselves of doing so. All the entertainment is there. Each one of them sides with a hero of another nation, but the narrator bewares of revealing the outcome of this debate. “I do not know what she felt” (VIII, 23), says the narrator of Le Noble. “I do not know what was decided about it”’, acknowledges the narrator of the Nouvelles françaises. Neither Segrais, nor Belle of Zuylen makes use of an omniscient and directing narrator. Many questions remain open, thereby inviting the reader to take part in the exchange of opinions.

Isabelle de Charrière never departed from this dialogical principle. Segrais sought the “genuine” as a short story writer, in order to counter the excesses of imagination of the baroque novel, whereas Isabelle de Charrière was always wary of the novel and particularly of what she called “the biographical excess” of the incipient Romanticism. In a fragment found after the publication of her Œuvres complètes, she asserted that the authors of the tormented time that followed the Revolution were not historians any more, but biographers “who give us to read their own life & their own heart to study. God knows if these painters of themselves are faithful & if their portraits are lifelike!” One can see that the historical vein of writing that Segrais had proposed in order to counter the too idealized novelistic universe was again welcomed so as to dam up the ever more subjective turn of writing on the threshold of the 19th century. Madame de Charrière found this movement egoistic and, for her part, she never gave up the quest of truth under the eyes of the other. In her writing, the interaction takes precedence over the action, the dialogue gets the better of the monologue and sensitivity does not exclude critical judgment. Herein, her novelistic production is attached to that type of feminine narration which illustrated, under the reign of Louis XIV, the writing of short stories and from which came out the glorious Princesse de Clèves. Segrais was also close to this glory, since he lent his name to the first works of Mme de Lafayette after
having been the secretary of Mlle de Montpensier.

When in 1795 Isabelle de Charrière wrote to Henriette L’Hardy: “La Princesse de Clèves, Manon Lescaut, Werther, here is in my opinion the glory of France and Germany as regards the novel” (April 4, 1795; V, 79), she was giving her news of her laboratory of literary production then turned towards Germany. Ludwig Ferdinand Huber was to undertake the German translation of Trois femmes of which M. de Charrière and Pastor Berthoud had just made a copy. She wanted to read a new novel by Goethe that had just been published, undoubtedly Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, and said that to her mind Werther was a “masterpiece (...) of exquisite sensitivity” (V, 79). She also promised her friend plenty of pleasure in the reading of Trois femmes, since she had a French education and knew Germany. The list of best novels drawn up in this context underlines the heroicization of French women and the respect for the German genius to be found in the plot of Trois femmes. But Isabelle de Charrière’s heroine that will clash like Werther against an impossible love is Honorine d’Userche, created in one go at the end of the same year. From a historical point of view, the action of Honorine d’Userche went back to the first phase of the Revolution, already treated in Henriette et Richard, but the interest is not anecdotic any more, but really dramatic, entirely tended towards the inexorable break out of a society that has lost its reference marks and is centered upon a discovery that ruins all youth’s hopes. This is, in my opinion, an exemplary story. I will not betray Isabelle de Charrière by associating her through this generic term with Cervantes. We know that in the fall of 1793 she had obtained “Cervantes’ Stories” (IV, 200) through Benjamin Constant, to whom she wrote: “(...) happily do I take the works of Cervantes at the cost that you say. One must have his friend & colleague as complete as possible” (September 23, 1793; IV, 178). As Isabelle de Charrière did not write long adventure novels, Cervantes can be her “colleague” only by the writing of the Exemplary Stories.

After having been initially published in Germany in the translation of Ludwig Ferdinand Huber, Honorine d’Userche appeared in French in the second volume of L’Abbé de la Tour ou recueil de nouvelles & autres écrits divers in 1798. This story followed that of the three women and had to justify the opinion that the abbot defended in the
debates on the freedom of the press “regarding God and Nature, the Gospel and Reason” (IX, 178), which animated the society of the baroness of Berghen. The story entails, however, a new critical debate. Everyone states their opinion, like the confabulators in the frame story of Segrais’ *Nouvelles françaises*, but the company assembled in the baroness of Berghen’s parlor is not at all feminine. There are only men there, and the baroness says: “I see in my coterie the theologian alarmed about religion, Kant’s sectarian about the idea of duty, the friend of social order about social ethic”. So the abbot had to explain himself. His intention had been to do a service to those who would read the story of Mlle d’Userche because, in his view, it showed how “the unbeliever (...) is pitiful and the apostle of unbelief (...) is frightening” (IX, 233). This story is therefore an *exemplum* suggesting that he who believes neither in God nor in the existence of the soul is likely “to become very unhappy and to trouble society” (IX, 233). But as the abbot himself thinks and doubts, *Honorine d’Userche* is, indeed, the last story of which he explicitly assumes the writing in the frame story. *De l’esprit des rois*, three dialogues that supplement the second volume of the collection, were only received by the abbot who contents himself with making some corrections to the manuscript. In the third volume of abbé de la Tour’s collection of short stories, there is no longer a frame story. Everything happens as if the exemplarity of the stories could now go without the commentary.

On January 11, 1799, in a letter to Benjamin Constant, Isabelle de Charrière offered a kind of foreword to her collection of short stories. She would even have liked it to be “a pretty dedicatory epistle” (V, 518) flattering her friend and pleasing him, for she said everything to him and seemed to make a point of reconciling with him.

You had distressed me a little. I wanted to find consolation & amusement, I also desired to oppose to the heroic Zulma some people as one can actually meet, & the simplest style; I was pondering thus on the three women when a letter of Mme de Montrond expressing her needs rather painfully made me write them. The three women brought along Honorine, without my having thought of you any more,
and you had no share in the dialogues, in Ste Anne, or in the ruins of Yedburg, where the same idea governs as in the first dialogue. Rousseau is to some extent the father or rather the godfather of these. His name might be able to bring some attention to my thought. Farewell, I said it all. (V, 517-518)

This excerpt “almost resembling a foreword” (V, 518), as the author puts it, shows very well that she was writing against Madame de Staël, the author of Zulma. If Benjamin Constant had a share in Trois femmes, that is due to the fact that Ludwig Ferdinand Huber and himself had initiated Isabelle de Charrière to the philosophical writings of Kant and more particularly to the idea of duty that he defended. But this “foreword” also shows that Benjamin Constant had no share in the second and the third volume of the collection. We may say that Honorine d’Userche “was brought about” by Trois femmes insofar as this short story continues to fuel the debate of political philosophy brought by Constant and Huber to Colombier, and staged in a caricatured way in the frame story of the collection. But this frame story disappears to make place for a dialogue bringing to the fore Rousseau’s thinking and especially his assertion that “a thinking man is a depraved animal” (V, 235). Consequently, Sainte-Anne and Les ruines de Yedburg put this idea to the test in socio-historical contexts subsequent to the ruin of a family and of a region. This Rousseauist perspective, often quoted, does not say anything, however, about the writing of these short stories. The intention to depict “people one can actually meet” and to adopt “the simplest style” very clearly attaches this writing project to the realism offered by Cervantes in the famous prologue of his Exemplary Stories, where he also gives a portrait of the old man that he was in 1613. Furthermore, this kind of realism is the one advocated by Segrais in his Nouvelles françaises in order to reform the art of storytelling. For this reason, it seems right to include the last short stories published by Isabelle de Charrière in a reformist lineage of novelistic writing that goes back to the Exemplary Stories of Cervantes.

There is at least one edition that gathers the three exemplary stories of Isabelle de Charrière in one volume. It was published in
French by Colburn in London, in 1808. To imitate the type of subtitles then in fashion, one could very well say *Honorine d’Userche, nouvelle française; Sainte-Anne, nouvelle bretonne; Les ruines de Yedburg, nouvelle écossaise.* These stories are different from the other novelistic works produced in the 1790s insofar as their composition departs from the daily report offered by the anecdotic form of *Henriette et Richard*, then by the epistolary form of the *Lettres trouvées dans des porte-feuilles d’Émigrés* and finally by the episodes of the *Trois femmes*. Bound to the events of the Revolution, these first three works remained unfinished. The first was preserved in manuscript form, while the two others had unpublished sequels. The exemplary stories, on the other hand, are completed, detached and autonomous. In addition to showing the kind of people one can meet in a very specific historical context and to illustrating the simple and sensitive writing aimed at by the author, each of them explores a question unambiguously asked from the very beginning: What happens to religion, education and wealth or, in other words, to the pillars of the traditional power of aristocracy, in the context of revolutionary upheavals? The issues broached in each fable are brought to their ultimate consequences.

A wealthy heiress, determined, inventive, educated but unbelieving, Honorine ends up facing nothingness, when she suddenly loses her love, her hopes, her brother and her country at the beginning of the Revolution of 1789. A Breton gentleman having returned from abroad on July 2, 1797, Sainte-Anne manages, on the contrary, to revive his war-devastated country by following his heart rather than the prejudices of his class. He marries Mlle d’Estival although she cannot read and is the daughter of a neighboring lord deceased during the Revolution and of his woman gardener. She is ready to accompany him to Auray, where he wants to restore the old manor of his ancestors. The adventures of Charles Stair start in June 1781, when he comes back, considerably richer thanks to his merits and to the support of an uncle he has found by miracle, to Old-Yedburg where his mother and his nephews live modestly close to the ruins of the castle of their ancestors. Incapable of taking a decision, he does not rebuild anything in order to spare an idyll, but what occurs is the disaster of the love life of the nephew who resembles him the most, the second Charles Stair. Emigrating appears then as a
Lettres trouvées dans des porte-feuilles d’émigrés, page de titre

(Bibliothèque publique de la Ville de Neuchâtel).
solution to the sorrows of the heart and as a melancholic flight from the places where conflicts are going on. There are elements of tragedy in Honorine, elements of comedy in Sainte-Anne, and of drama in Les ruines. The art of the playwright is combined with that of the storyteller in these stories.

The study of the literary genres practiced by Isabelle de Charrière shows that her pen was not afraid of diversity. The epistolary form however is very clearly preferred. That is precisely why her work is perceived as that of a novelist. The epistolary form espouses the fashion of the epistolary novel, which in the 18th century was at its pinnacle. The letter, just like the dialogue, makes room in the text for the voice of the character. Often, it reveals his most intimate secrets. Thus, it offers to all those who read it a privileged access to the interiority of the character and makes it possible to appreciate his sensitivity and to judge his good heart or his bad intentions. Hence, the reading of a letter can become decisive in orienting the development of a plot. These public readings cause commotions, and give rise to scenes, the significant details of which are often utterly examined by Isabelle de Charrière. Such is the case in her three exemplary stories. In fact, in each of these stories the reading of a letter brings about a turning point of the action that puts the characters in front of decisions fraught with consequences.

In Honorine d'Usérche, the fragments of correspondence offered to the reader show initially the evolution of a pure and sincere love between Honorine, a wealthy heiress, and Florentin, a charming young man placed by the care of the abbot de la Tour in a neighboring village. The abbot takes care of preaching wisdom to the very young lovers and includes two letters of Honorine in his account so as to show that she and Florentin are indeed “well-behaved” (IX, 203). The second letter is dated October 30, 1788 and announces they will spend the winter in Paris. The Parisian life of the young lovers does them credit, but the abbot decides to separate from them and leave his country “on the eve of a terrible jolt” (IX, 210). As Honorine is a very good match, she decides to flee her suitors and go back to the countryside at the very beginning of spring. An exchange of letters with Florentin follows, of which the reader can
only appreciate a few fragments. The intrigue to thwart this love is hatched by the Marquis de la Touche, a neighbor of Honorine and of her mother in the countryside. He emerges as a benefactor of Florentin, but he puts pressure on the abbot to push the young knight towards the orders, his own or “that of Malta” (IX, 201). This exchange of four short letters is included in the story and shows well the polite dissension which reigns between these two men. Later on, he has a message sent to Florentin’s best friend, so that he lets him know that the only career that is open for him is that of the holy orders. This letter is redirected to Honorine who conceives intense anger from it. The reading scene approaches.

In fact, the scene will be double, because the marquis de la Touche has also put in the hands of Florentin a wallet of old letters from which he learns that Honorine and he were born from the same father and the same mother: namely, the marquis de la Touche and Madame d’Userche. The scene of the pavilion is entirely theatrical and is supported by the dialogue of the passionate lovers. It takes place a first time in front of people in charge of spying on the lovers; and, the following morning, in the presence of the marquis, hidden in a bush so as to spy on his children. The dramatic turn of events includes a suicidal gesture of Honorine and the fainting fit of the father. Florentin who is already attached to this man feels sorry for him. This tragedy, which on scene would finish there, is doubled in the story by the tragedy lived by the French aristocracy. The abbot will find a desperate Honorine in Saxony, while Florentin and his father are supposed to have died, shot in Lyon or Toulon. As in this short story the epistolary framework that supports by itself alone the entire plot is not the only vehicle of the narration, this one tightens up amazingly well around an action that illustrates metaphorically the historical dead end in which an aristocracy of debased mores maneuvered itself.

The abbot responsible for the narrative has entirely disappeared in Sainte-Anne, but the use of letters included in the story is preserved, however, with the exception of any love correspondence, because the young heroine, Mlle d’Estival, cannot read. This circumstance causes a scandal at the castle of Missillac, where several women, all widows or orphans, seek comfort and distraction in rea-
ning. But Sainte-Anne falls in love as soon as he catches a glimpse of Mlle d’Estival on his return from exile and makes fun of the readings of the other ladies. He is totally seduced by the beauty, the naturalness and the good sense of his half-peasant cousin. Alas, the lady of the manor of Missillac wants to marry her son off to Mlle de Rhedon who is wealthy, and does certainly not want the granddaughter of her neighbor’s gardener to enter her family! Unable to confront his mother, Sainte-Anne runs away not without having written a letter both to Mlle de Kerber and to Mlle de Rhedon. He wishes that the former bends the maternal will by dint of wit and that the latter watches over Mlle d’Estival with generosity. Everything is set for a happy outcome provided, of course, that the letters of the young nobleman have the capacity to direct the actions of his cousins.

As a thinker, Sainte-Anne rejects the effect of literature on the conduct of readers and Mlle Kerber agrees with him in a letter which ridicules the inconsistency of novel readers moved to tears by the virtues of a weeping Artémise, then instantaneously recovered thanks to the arrival of a desirable man (IX, 275). But as a desperate lover, Sainte-Anne produces himself some touching letters with the hope of “amusing himself” (IX, 276) instead of seeing to his business. Is this not literature? Just like Werther, he intends to confide what he feels to his friend. Twice he really starts to write to Tonquedec, only to give up his letter or even tear it afterwards (IX, 276; IX, 289). Finding out finally that Tonquedec has gone to Missillac in view of asking for the hand of Mlle d’Estival, he is literally dismayed. His servant takes upon himself to write to Mlle d’Estival and warns her that if she marries somebody else, Saint-Anne is “a dead man” (IX, 304). This letter only appears in the story at the time when everyone is at the castle of Missillac. The indirect consent that it contains escapes the notice of the main party concerned, who cannot read. It is then Mlle de Rhedon the first person to discover Sainte-Anne’s secret and to take the responsibility to put this letter into the hands of Tonquedec. This scene, which locates the private reading in a minutely described society gathering, reveals all the stakes involved in a short story conceived as a sentimental comedy with a happy ending. The private letters, a mirror of the hero’s heart, are fully respected by his cousins, who are also readers of sentimental novels. Far from
opposing Sainte-Anne, they make his love known to the rival and his mother who immediately give up the idea of the marriage of convenience envisaged between Mlle d'Estival and Tonquedec. The heart revealed through letters will prevail on the self-interested intrigues, to the happiness of all.

Finally, *Les ruines de Yedburg* has a bad press in criticism. It is generally said that this is the weakest story of Isabelle de Charrière. But, don't the three last stories that she wrote without owing anything neither to Kant, nor to her young friends Benjamin Constant and Ludwig Ferdinand Huber, form a whole imagined according to the same structural model? As it happens, this Scottish story includes the reading scene, revealing of the crux of the plot, just as a certain number of letters quoted in the account so as to illustrate the interiority of the main characters. In addition, the topic of emigration, tragic in *Honorine*, then overcome in *Sainte-Anne*, appears here completely encompassing. For a long time, a branch of the Stair family, close to the house of Stuart, had to exile itself from its fatherland. Mylord D., the wealthy uncle who supports the return of Charles Stair (*alias* Woodbridge) to Old-Yedburg, lives in France, then will withdraw to Spain in order to escape the wars generated by the Revolution. As for the emigration of the nephew, it is justified by economic reasons. When he meets his uncle in Bordeaux, he is 35 years old and has already succeeded in life. His return to Scotland is that of a mature man ready to help his brother come out of poverty and recover the rights of his family, which has been wrongfully stripped of its titles and possessions. But in June 1781, when he arrives at his place, he finds only his old mother, his sister-in-law, and two young fatherless boys, apparently happy with their simple life.

His correspondence with Mylord D. is then used to discuss the scruples he has about changing the life of his family by richness and possibly corrupting the heart of his nephews by sending them to study in Edinburgh. But love finally prevails on the scruples nurtured by a Rousseauist philosophy. In love with Lady Brigit Merlo, Charles Stair is stopped in his first surge of affection by the paradox that he perceives: “What would have suddenly enlightened me about the interest of my nephews? Is it love? Love would therefore have provided lights to reason (…)!” (IX, 326). The story will show that he
was quite wrong not to offer his hand to Lady Brigit. On the other hand, he makes his family come out of obscurity to allow his nephew James to marry Lady Ann Merlo, Lady Brigit’s sister. This turning point, however, entails the misfortune of the youngest brother, another Charles Stair, because he, too, loves Lady Ann, and will in addition be the victim of a plot hatched by a malicious and unscrupulous cousin, who is after his wealth. The reading scene reveals cousin Merlo’s devilish plan to have Charles marry his mistress Jenny. Further letters show that Charles Stair is not able to escape this libertine scheme. One recognizes here the epistolary technique of Laclos’ *Dangerous Liaisons*. The generous uncle who also is Charles Stair’s confidant gets him out of this unfortunate step. Emigration will then be the solution for all the broken hearts in this story. The reader finds them in Spain, recollecting by singing together of the beautiful days lived among the ruins of Old-Yedburg. This story filled with nostalgia makes of emigration a constant state from which one can only wish for one’s native land to escape from the “explosion of the volcanoes” (IX, 345) of the Revolution. This exemplary story ends with a coda of letters Charles Stair never sent to his brother. Just like Werther, he has decided to keep his sentimental distress to himself. *Les ruines de Yedburg* does not only discuss the effect of wealth within society, they also yield a balanced example of the way in which letter-writing has provided the most successful novels of the 18th century.

Whether tragedy, comedy, or drama, Isabelle de Charrière’s exemplary stories question one last time the fortunes and misfortunes of the heart on the painful background of the Revolution. The epistolary form of writing is not the vehicle of the narration any more, but the letter which reveals the thought and the feelings of the characters is brought into play in a strategic way so as to support the ideological debates as well as the intrigues of love. It is finally offered to the appreciation and the judgment of all those who can read it. A great épistolière in a century when the epistolary novel knew its chief claims to fame, Isabelle de Charrière favors the short story, more condensed and more capable to enrich the parlor debates, by providing striking life samples. Virtual salonnière, she always starts up new debates that I look forward to pursuing here with my colleagues at the University of Utrecht.
Notes


3 This and the following translations are our own.


7 Simone Dubois, “Dispersion de l’héritage littéraire d’Isabelle de Charrière”, Documentatieblad. Werkgroep 18e Eeuw, 27-29, 1975, p. 40-41. The information concerning the library being shared comes from a letter addressed to Mme Morel de Gélieu, another of Mme de Charrière’s wards, by M. Gaullieur, on May 11, 1813. This letter is preserved by the Public Library of Neuchâtel.


13 ibid.

14 ibid., p. 505.

15 ibid., p. 511.
17 ibid., p. 24, b.
22 Anne Marie Louise d’Orléans, duchesse de Montpensier, Divers portraits, [s.l.], [s.n.], 1659, preface.
23 ibid., p. 1, 9 et 29. Two portraits also made in Touars in November 1657 precede the one of Mademoiselle.
24 ibid., p. 8.
27 These works are also due to the pen of Mlle de Montpensier. Cf. Wessie M. Tipping, Jean Regnaud de Segrais, l'homme et son œuvre, Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1978 [1933], p.75.
29 “Déclaration d’amour à Caliste”, ibid., p. 219; Caliste, ou continuation des lettres écrites de Lausanne (VIII, 183).
31 Segrais, Les Nouvelles françaises, op. cit., p. 54-56; and Lettres écrites de Lausanne (VIII, 167-168).
32 See “Mathilde” in Les Nouvelles françaises, and Honorine d’Userche, nouvelle de l’Abbé de la Tour.
33 The Château des Six Tours, which represents Saint-Fargeau, where Mlle de Montpensier had to withdraw in 1652 upon Louis XIV’s order, and the château d’Arnonville in Le Noble.
35 Segrais, Les Nouvelles françaises, op. cit., p. 94.
36 ibid., p. 98-99.
37 ibid., p. 100.
38 Isabelle de Charrière, Fragments [Deux frères] [Des Auteurs et des livres], BPU Neuchâtel, MS 1387/13/2.
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