

Article

Writing Shared Humanity in Post-Enlightenment Fiction: Isabelle de Charrière and Jane Austen

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Abstract

This article analyses Isabelle de Charrière and Jane Austen together in relation to the changing perception of humanity affecting European thinking at the end of the eighteenth century. Not only is Charrière's rather lesser-known work likely to benefit from the comparison, but Austen's novels also gain in philosophical depth when read alongside hers. Each one an outsider in her own world, Charrière and Austen wrote against the grain of inherited gender prejudices but also against the growing conservatism of binary orthodoxy around 1800. Adopting as writers a perspective freed from 'feminine' expectations, as opposed to the lady novelist embodied by the famous Isabelle de Montolieu, they endeavoured to invent characters and stories distinct from the pervasive definitions of the feminine and the masculine, giving readers the possibility of considering the shared humanity equally shaping men and women.

Keywords: Jane Austen; Isabelle de Charrière; Isabelle de Montolieu; gender; humanity; fiction

Introduction

Readers familiar with both Austen and Charrière are routinely reminded of one through the other. Given the canonical position of Austen and, on the other hand, the status of Charrière as a relative outsider in French literature¹, to describe the two in relation to each other has often appeared self-evidently sensible to English readers. Almost thirty years ago, Margaret Higonnet's review of C.P. Courtney's biography in the TLS was simply entitled: 'A French Jane Austen?' (Higonnet 1994, p. 13, about Courtney 1993) And, more recently, Caroline Warman opens her introduction to the Penguin collection of Charrière's writing by describing her as 'the French, Swiss, and Dutch Jane Austen all rolled into one' (Warman 2012, p. xi). The number of similarities is striking: their ubiquitous irony, their careful handling of sentiment, their focus on stoicism, their common interest in dramatizing ordinary life and, even, ordinary language (see Miss Bates in *Emma* or Julianne in *Letters from Neuchâtel*), the way they force us to question expected plots and—gender studies might say—available social scenarios. Their vibrant and singular female characters stand out by being systematically contrasted with what a proper lady should have been. In *Letters from Neuchâtel* (1784), Marianne de la Prise—the heroine—becomes concerned about a working-class girl made pregnant by the man she loves. Similarly, the sentimental plot in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) is rendered indecorous by the way Marianne Dashwood flaunts propriety for the sake of her feelings, only to realise Willoughby's crass indifference to Eliza and his own new-born child.

The question of a potential influence between Charrière and Austen, however, needs to be handled with care. Isabelle de Charrière died in Colombier near Neuchâtel in Switzerland in 1805, that is, long before she could have read a single line of *Sense and Sensibility*. And there is not the slightest textual evidence in Austen's available letters or any clearly recognizable allusion in her novels to Charrière, be it to the relatively well-known *Caliste* (1787) or to the first and faulty edition of *Three Women* published in London in 1796 (Courtney 1980, pp. 98–101) or, indeed, to *Letters from Neuchâtel*, which did circulate among

the Swiss community in England in 1784, as we know from a letter written by a young admirer from Neuchâtel then serving Queen Charlotte.² Yet, in spite of distance and time, Austen and Charrière experienced and resented similar forms of gender prejudices. In this matter, as we know, the history of change has happened at an exceptionally slow pace.

What the two novelists have in common during the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth century is a way of writing fiction that made it possible for readers to imagine 'humanity' by including in it male and female characters on similar terms. What Virginia Woolf has described as the invisible challenge offered by Mary Wollstonecraft's works perfectly applies to Charrière's and Austen's: 'their originality has become our commonplace' (Woolf 2003, p. 158).

By producing new characters, their novels resisted existing conventions about gender difference, which had been building in their lifetime to gain even greater momentum in the 1790s. If the dates of Charrière (1740–1805) and Austen (1775–1817) as well as their geographical distance from one another forbid a direct comparison, this article depends on the necessity of going beyond an observation of straightforward authorial influence. What the intellectual contributions of Charrière and Austen have in common relates to their invention of new characters likely to replace the literary casts of available novels and plays. When they write, the emotional, intellectual, and moral definition of characters is articulated within a universalist paradigm of humanity, common to all, regardless of sex difference. Their original assessment of humanity informed by a critique of stereotypes often disappears behind the blinding effects of the 'masculin universel' on which French language and criticism depend, hence, for Francophone readers, the interest of a cultural outsider like Charrière and the need of a comparison with Austen.

Gender and "Humanity" at the End of the Eighteenth Century

As observed by the historian Lynn Hunt about the significance of fiction within the Enlightenment, the process of 'psychological identification that leads to empathy took place across gender lines' (Hunt 2007, p. 48). I argue that Charrière and Austen capitalized on precisely this 'human' potential of the genre when inventing unprecedented literary characters. Getting rid of existing stereotypes, they allow readers to go even further than crossing conventional gender lines. As authors they are keen on actually blurring such lines by creating a different kind of character altogether, encouraging readers in their turn to imagine men and women differently. And, while the generation gap between Charrière and Austen certainly must not be overlooked, it is also important to remember how the 1790s were equally significant for both. The revolutionary decade corresponds to decisive years of production in their careers: Charrière published, among other things, the *Collection of the Abbé de la Tour* in 1798–1799, which is her intellectual and optimistic legacy produced at a threateningly reactionary moment on the continent. As for Austen, she drafted 'Elinor and Marianne' (between 1795 and 1797), 'First Impressions' (1796–1797), and 'Susan' (1798–1799). That is, she articulated three particularly significant novels precisely when Charrière tried to make sense of the time through her own fiction. They have in common what Claudia Johnson has called a 'commitment to uncovering the ideological underpinning of cultural myths', femininity and masculinity being seen by them as myths hindering the promise of an enlightened definition of humanity (Johnson 1988, p. 27). A woman 'won't have chosen [her duty], but most men don't choose theirs either', explains the narrator of *Letters Written from Lausanne* to her daughter Cécile (de Charrière 2012b, p. 136). In their novels, assignments depending on gender appear as a form of prejudice at odds with the needs of universal moral principles.

There is no place in this article to unfold the rich intellectual history of each writer or to identify in detail the numerous overlaps between them. Suffice it to say that the philosophical panorama developed by Peter Knox-Shaw in the first chapter of his work on the intellectual sources of Austen's worldview finds many echoes in the six volumes of Charrière's correspondence as well as in her novels.³ However untypically Dutch she may have been, she should be regarded as a true European cosmopolite rather than a Francophile. As Janet Whatley writes in the introduction to her correspondence with David-Louis Constant d'Herminches: 'In a sense, it is her very 'Dutchness'—that Dutch humanist heritage—that makes of her a cosmopolite; it is part of the context of her love for the language and literature of England, and for her readings of the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment.' (Whatley 2000, p. xi). Charrière and Austen did read the same books.

Hunt has made us aware of how 'historical change must in the end account for the alteration of individual minds'. Her work explains how the process of declaring human rights hinges on personal empathy and a leap of the imagination for these to become effectively 'self-evident' (Hunt 2007, p. 34). While equality between them was anything but a fact of life, writers such as Charrière and Austen could see how equal men and women needed to be imagined. 'The rights of women clearly ranked lower on the 'conceivability' scale than those of other groups', observes Hunt after reviewing revolutionary debates about religious minorities, slaves, and race (Hunt 2007, p. 168). In Charrière's unpublished historical novel about the Revolution written in 1792, *Henriette and Richard*, she has her mouthpiece character—the Abbé des Rois—deplore the fact that 'man invents woman'.⁴ The phrase

tells us much about how she understood the political impact of imaginary characters. She could see the role of representation and the constitution of the individual's sense of their identity in terms akin to ours today. For her as for Austen the arguable was clearly related to the imaginable. Far from advocating a mere inversion of the proposal—'woman invents man'—it is the very labelling of humans through gender stereotypical qualities which both found problematic. Undermining the feminine and the masculine as fundamental categories splitting humanity into two unequal parts is what fiction can and must achieve according to them. When Marianne provokes her sister by supposing that she entertains conventional ideas—'I thought our judgments were given us merely to be subservient to those of our neighbours.'—Elinor typically vindicates herself by appealing to universalism: 'No, Marianne, never. My doctrine has never aimed at the subjection of the understanding (Austen 2006d, p. 108).' The use of the understanding means the same for all, as it also does in Charrière, whose fairy Suggestina articulates her moral advice to Eaglonette—an avatar of Marie-Antoinette—in the universalist moral terms of the Enlightenment: 'consult only experience [. . .], and when you have done that, listen only to your own judgment' (de Charrière 2012b, p. 178). Fiction is the place of discourse where the authors could create characters compatible with the most recent understanding of 'humanity', overlooking the gendered limitations increasingly being forced on women. The consequences for writers in the second half of the eighteenth century and through the aftermath of the Revolution were the development of a middle-class readership shaped along gender lines by the book trade, involving the reproduction of characters determined by stereotypes. As Michelle Perrot and Geneviève Fraisse warn about the re-organization of the public sphere at the dawn of the nineteenth century: 'the democratic era is not in itself favourable to women. It involves among its principles that women must be excluded from the public sphere and contained in domesticity.'⁵ As far as the French-speaking world is concerned, Jean-Clément Martin observes that while one must certainly get rid of the dark legend of women knitting in front of the guillotine, women having been evicted from the public space by 1793, there was a twist: the more absent women actually were, the more present they became through representation conditioned by the male gaze such as the embodiment of the Republic through Marianne with her Phrygian bonnet as early as September 1792 (Martin 2008). And Éliane Viennot underlines the gender ambiguity of the double movement then taking place, with a groundbreaking equality being articulated for the first time between all men in front of the law while, simultaneously, 'women are excluded from citizenship and, even, from humanity', explicitly and implicitly (Viennot 2016, p. 142, my translation).

A Need for Different Men and Women in Fiction

The old customs and prejudices separating the female sex from humanity were thus perpetuated through the new era, reinforced when explicitly mentioned through an appeal to reason and, even, to modern science. This is typically how, for instance, at the beginning of Book V of *Émile* (1762)—the influential 'Sophie or Woman'—Rousseau had established a kind of part-time humanity for women by relying on a sense of difference justified by 'compared anatomy'. The text begins by asserting that 'as far as things unrelated to sex are concerned woman is like man', before establishing a woman's separateness from humanity more categorically: 'man is male only on certain occasions, whereas woman is female all her life.'⁶ According to Rousseau, the female sex left very little or, indeed, no respite for women to be human beings. The significance of *Émile* had been reinvigorated in 1791 when Talleyrand published a report about national education in France, in which much was owed to Rousseau's articulation of sexual difference and inequality. In turn, this report famously triggered Mary Wollstonecraft to write *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in which, in her opening address, she asks Talleyrand to 'reconsider' his view on 'the rights of woman and education' (Wollstonecraft 2008, p. 65). Although a lifelong admirer of Rousseau herself, she takes the risk of giving ammunition to his usually reactionary critics by attacking him squarely in chapter V, alongside James Fordyce and John Gregory, expressing serious 'doubt whether woman were created for man' (Wollstonecraft 2008, p. 151). On the continent, Charrière knew about the *Vindication* via her reading of Robert Bage's *Hermesprong* (1796) and through the *Bibliothèque britannique*, which, in 1798, published a translation of Godwin's *Memoirs of Wollstonecraft*, whose feminism, inspired by the claims of 'humanity', corresponded to her own approach (however severely criticized by the editors of the periodical) (Godwin 1798, pp. 320–44). But, as a progressive sympathizer of the revolutionary movement, Charrière had abstained from voicing criticism of any kind against Rousseau in the ideological context of the early 1790s. Yet, we know what she thought of his female model through a humorous poem she wrote in her twenties, in which she imagines the author of *Émile* complaining about herself: 'No, this is not my Sophie!⁷'. As for Austen, she certainly developed intellectually far

away from London and the Jacobins. Yet, Lydia Bennet's rather endearing outburst of impatience against Fordyce's Sermons suggests how, as far as gender criticism was concerned, the author of *Pride and Prejudice* belonged to the same intellectual constellation as Wollstonecraft and Charrière, shaped by an enlightened understanding of 'humanity' and the need to expose conventional assignments as old-fashioned prejudices denying women their own share in it.

The early heroines such as Julie in Charrière's *The Nobleman* (1763) or Austen's characters in the *Juvenilia* had made fun of the gendered destinies automatically expected from girls. In their later works, by contrast, the authors dramatize the fact that not only has the prejudice of gender difference not been open to scrutiny but that it has been strengthened, to such an extent that the humanity of women is by now impossible to decipher in public life: Fanny Price is famously misunderstood by Sir Thomas and by Henry Crawford and so is Mademoiselle d'Estival in *Saint Anne* (1799) by her conventional lady cousins (Cossy 2014, pp. 185–97). Charrière and Austen were similarly concerned to invent fiction likely to include men and women together in the concept of humanity such as it had been articulated by people such as Locke or, indeed, Rousseau himself in the first four books of *Émile*: humanity as a matter of human sensations, emotions, judgment, individual liberty, or agency, and, ultimately, sense of right and wrong.⁸ The authors of *Three Women* (1798) or *Emma* (1816) invented fictions at a time when women were in the process of being excluded from an increasingly male-centred definition of humanity. Their heroines expose the absurdity of assigning women to a different and subaltern kind of humanity devoid of agency. And, more generally, it is the very possibility of attributing intellectual or emotional traits according to gender difference, be it to men or women, which Charrière and Austen undermine by inventing characters defined by their shared human nature.

Their novels focus in part on the existing social assignments which articulated gender difference in social life, what Judith Butler would call the performativity of gender. Their fictional characters certainly know how to behave as men and women in their own environment, doing so with various degrees of self-consciousness and willingness. Mrs Elton and Emma do not share the same enthusiasm for—nor the same critical appreciation of—what a lady's accomplishments and duties are supposed to be. Or, considering *Letters from Neuchâtel*, Marianne de la Prise is laughed at for her poor singing voice, while the more conventional young ladies of the place are happy, as Mr Bennet would say, to exhibit. But Charrière's heroine is paradoxically pleased with her poor performance: '[My father] wants me to sing at the concert. If I do, it won't hurt anyone one way or the other, for no one will hear me' (de Charrière 2012b, pp. 43–44). Yet, Charrière and Austen are not only concerned with social scenarios and the need to escape from them: they are also questioning, philosophically, what constitutes humanity and morality through the dramatization of characters. Their readers realise that what makes them human beings has nothing to do with gender difference. The characters' claim to the human intellect, whether man or woman, is the same, and their emotional reactions are also perfectly comparable, anything but gender specific. The men and women invented by them similarly laugh and cry, blush and start. They are equally capable of holding a rational conversation and, even, of arguing. Their sensibility in relation to brain and feeling (or lack of them) are not determined by gender. Their novels routinely redress existing prejudices by showing rational women of feeling and clever emotional men.

Only a man as 'stupid' as Mr Collins can believe that there is such a thing as 'an elegant female' for whom 'no' would mean 'yes'⁹. For Elizabeth Bennet, 'no' means 'no'. Her famous repartee, while taking place in a vivacious argument likely to make readers smile, borrows from the universalist terminology of philosophy and echoes Wollstonecraft: 'Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart' (Austen 2006c, p. 122). Charrière likewise inserts her philosophical point about gender within plots likely to render equality 'natural', self-evident, and even pleasing to readers. One can think of Mademoiselle d'Estival's ability to talk rationally about marriage and feeling when *Saint Anne* makes his proposal during a late evening promenade back from a graveyard. While hero and readers are ready for a purely sentimental moment, the heroine surprises all by talking rationally about her feelings: 'There is something about marriage [. . .] that I do not understand at all,' she answers (de Charrière 2012b, p. 329). Not only is she keen, at this stage, on demystifying marriage as a climax in a woman's life, she proves also capable of making a point about the sincere feelings of lovers being threatened by an unjust and unequal legal arrangement. Arrived on her doorstep, Mademoiselle d'Estival tells *Saint Anne* good-bye according to the comradeship and perfect equality which, as she has just explained, are incompatible with love and marriage conventionally understood: 'Mademoiselle d'Estival took her key out of her pocket, opened the front door, held out her hand to St. Anne, and shook

his, wishing him a good night'(de Charrière 2012b, p. 331). What a character in a work published in 1799! Charrière's male and female heroes do, like those of Austen, combine sense with sensibility. Furthermore, the male characters are themselves dramatized as emotional, disenfranchising feeling or 'passion' from an experience traditionally attached to female characters: Darcy's face and body are shown to respond emotionally and wordlessly to his rejection by Elizabeth; Mr. Knightley appears fidgeting with the buttons 'of his thick leather gaiters' and blushing when taunted by Emma to speak of his feelings (Austen 2005a, p. 310; cf. Austen 2006a, p. 212). In *Letters Written from Lausanne*: Cécile, the heroine's mother is struck by the emotional attitude of the young English lord, observing him as he falls in love with her daughter: 'A second later, not hearing them speak, I looked at them. Cécile's hand lay unmoving on the chessboard. She was leaning forward, her head lowered. The young man, also leaning down toward her, seemed to devour her with his eyes. Everything else was forgotten; it was ecstasy, abandon' (de Charrière 2012b, p. 133). The last two words make one think of how, in *Sense and Sensibility*, Edward Ferrars is shown, at a moment of intense emotional suspense, mindlessly destroying a pair of scissors and their sheath 'by cutting the latter to pieces as he spoke' before falling 'into a reverie' and failing to answer Mrs Dashwood's questions (Austen 2006d, pp. 407–8). In *Saint Anne*, the emotional focus lies on the male character likely 'to forget himself even further' (de Charrière 2012b, p. 328) rather than on Mademoiselle d'Estival, whose hard life has taught her to keep her feelings under control. Charrière and Austen are keen on showing men emotionally absorbed. Gender stereotypes of the time are even mocked, be it through Mademoiselle d'Estival's 'unladylike' behaviour when assessed by her cousins, or through Mrs Bennet's regular and comic appeals to her nerves, or Mr Collins' claims to moral responsibility. The novels by Charrière and Austen enable readers to re-imagine gender within the paradigm of humanity thanks to characters who think and feel in the same way and should be judged according to the same standard.

“Humanity” versus Conventional Gender Categories

The way the two novelists mobilize the words 'queer' in English and 'bizarre' in French reveals how arbitrary and irrelevant they deemed contemporary definitions of the feminine and the masculine. Not being men and unwilling to identify with what was supposed to be 'feminine' at the time, they articulated their writing according to what it meant to be different from the norm. Relying on the vocabulary available at the time, words such as 'queer' or 'bizarre' define their attitude in relation to gender expectations. While culturally validated notions of femininity excluded women from humanity, from human understanding, and from universal moral duty, those whose perspective depended on such 'enlightened' and universal categories had become 'unfeminine' and impossible to decipher. The words 'queer', 'bizarre', and 'amphibie'¹⁰ are used by or about them in reference to unreadable gender performances. By relying on—or being described through such words, Austen and Charrière illustrate characters failing to correspond to conventional categories of femininity or masculinity and, simultaneously, the power of social exclusion or even punishment attached to them.

Thus, Fanny Price lies beyond Henry Crawford's power of understanding. Confronted with a woman who does not behave according to current expectations of femininity, the Don Juan in him cannot but call her 'queer': 'I do not quite know what to make of Miss Fanny. I do not understand her. I could not tell what she could be at yesterday. What is her character?—Is she solemn?—Is she queer?—Is she prudish?' (Austen 2005b, p. 268). As a character who has developed her critical mind and moral judgment through her own experience and personal reading, Fanny Price, a true daughter of the Enlightenment, has become impossible to understand in the eye of the yet exceedingly clever Henry Crawford. He can easily flirt with her Bertram cousins who, like Mademoiselle d'Estival's own cousins, have been properly groomed into becoming ladies. But, as he confesses, he cannot make sense of Fanny.

In Charrière, the equivalent word in French—'bizarre'—appears in her *Émigrés Letters* to qualify a thinking woman met by the hero Alphonse in Neuchâtel. This surprising person is described as holding a political and philosophical argument with her guests, Alphonse calling her 'bizarre and contradictory'. These adjectives refer to the female character's unconventionally active part in conversation but also to her use of philosophical and gender-neutral categories: 'Monsieur, it is not, or so it seems to me, because it is rational but because it is sentient that every living creature demands to be well treated' (de Charrière 2012b, p. 230).

Met in Neuchâtel, expressing views recalling the author's own argument about her reluctance to eat meat¹¹, the 'bizarre' woman of the novel is very similar to the author in real life. Benjamin Constant qualifies Charrière in his autobiography by relying on the noun derived from the adjective 'bizarre', designating her, paradoxically, as impossible to characterize: At this time [1787] I met with the first woman of a superior mind I've ever seen, and one of those whose mind was the greatest among

those I've known. Her name was Mme de Charrière. She was Dutch, belonging to one of the most significant families of the country, and who, when she was young, had caused some stir because of her mind and bizarre character.¹²

The words 'queer' and 'bizarre' (or 'bizarrerie') used in relation to Fanny Price or Charrière express the condition of women who do not correspond to the common expectations of womanhood. In both cases, be it a fictional character or a real woman, the words 'queer' and 'bizarre' are called for to refer to women who are not conventionally 'feminine' but whom Crawford in fiction or Benjamin Constant in real life will not call masculine either.

Gender in Translation: The Constraints of Language and Culture

Austen and Charrière are writers who can be described as expressing themselves from a position at odds with the straight performance of the woman novelist, such as was available around 1800. In this respect, it is a sad matter of irony that Austen should have been 'freely translated' into French by Isabelle de Montolieu, whose huge success depended, precisely, on her public persona as a lady novelist. From 1800, Montolieu was to become a significant professional translator and bestseller by relying on her former public success as the author of *Caroline de Lichtfield* (de Montolieu 1786). A widow in need of material support at the beginning of the 19th century, she knew how to adapt the skills acquired in the salon culture of her youth to the new context of the book trade by becoming a very prolific translator, entertainer, and celebrity. Her signature usually appeared on the front pages of her books in a font larger than the original author's name, as one can see from the second edition of *La Famille Elliot* (Austen 1828), on which the words 'Jane Austen' are half the size of 'Mme la baronne Isabelle de Montolieu'. Her 'free translations' of *Sense and Sensibility* in 1815 and *Persuasion* in 1821 are themselves revealing, paradoxically, of how unorthodox Austen was in her depiction of gender. While the author of *Sense and Sensibility* was still an anonymous 'lady', Montolieu capitalized on the word in her translator's preface. Enforcing femininity as a straitjacket imposed on the narrative which readers were about to discover, she claimed that the writer's gender although untold could be guessed: The English original does not indicate the author's name; but it can only be a woman; a man would not have been able to catch such nuances nor develop such feeling, getting with so much truth and detail into women's hearts. There are secrets unknown to men, however clever they may be, known only to women. As a reader of Richardson and Rousseau, the private Montolieu was probably more perceptive. But she owed her career in publishing to her public conformity with the feminine category of the 'romanière', relying on a form of popular fiction which spread and even reinforced the gender stereotypes which Austen and Charrière were concerned to overcome (Cossy 2012b, pp. 191–203). Knowing her personally, Charrière took a rather severe stance on her success as a commercial novelist, which reflected bleakly on her own difficulty to find a publisher for Sir Walter Finch. She wrote to Benjamin Constant:

The other day Madame de Montolieu would not believe me when I told her how I was treated by booksellers and printers. She knows nothing of such difficulties, she whose 'Tableaux de familles' are printed and sold and read with eagerness.— Well, everyone has their know-how—No, I have absolutely no know-how. It is true that Charrière's rather aristocratic habit of publishing impulsively at her own costs had become impracticable by 1800. While in the 1780s, she had managed to launch entirely by herself her completely original novels—*Letters from Neuchâtel*, *Letters from Mistress Henley Published by Her Friend*, or *Letters Written from Lausanne*—each time causing, as Constant would say, a stir in Swiss society, by the 1790s, the world of publishing and trade was gradually imposing its own formats on writers. As she complained, booksellers were no longer interested in novels the size of pamphlets like hers but demanded novels in several volumes. Critics of Austen can also wonder about the impact of publishing on her writer's voice when considering the discrepancy between the mad energy displayed in the *Juvenilia* and the irony under control typical of the published work. Tom Keymer describes this contrast as the outcome of a negotiation critics should keep in mind when analysing Austen's novels:

It's easy to forget how hard [Austen] found it to break into print following the rejection of 'First Impressions' (the original version of *Pride and Prejudice*) in 1797, and then, in 1803, her sale of 'Susan' (which became *Northanger Abbey*) to a publisher who simply shelved it. By the same token, it's easy to underestimate the adjustments, and no doubt the compromises, that Austen must have made in order to align her writing with the demands of a marketplace for fiction that was dominated by the commercial priorities of the circulating libraries, and by the tastes and desires of their fashionable subscribers. Austen would never have published at all, and we would never have heard of her, had she not at least met the market halfway. (Keymer 2020, pp. 6–7)

As established by Françoise Parent-Lardeur, Isabelle de Montolieu was a star with the circulating libraries in Paris, which gives an idea of the norm against which Austen and Charrière endeavoured to exist.¹⁸

Furthermore, while uniquely undoing binary gender expectations in her novels,

Charrière also expressed her pragmatic position in grammar as a user of the French language. She reveals how her philosophical position is best translated through 'masculin universel' by 1800, the feminine being now systematically synonymous with minor forms of art and expression. Writing to Ludwig Ferdinand Huber about his stepdaughters Therese Forster (living with her) and Claire, who wants to become a painter, she observes:

[Therese and I] have often talked about her sister Claire, and we dearly wish she should become a painter, simply a good painter, Mahler rather than Mahlerin [] I think that the originality of character or turn of mind can be perfectly

excused when it seems due to an extraordinary talent, but only then. One must be able to regard the original person less as a female friend, mother, or strange and bizarre housekeeper than as a painter, a sculptor, a poet, about whom the question is not whether one wants to live with her, but whom one admires very much and whose works, admired and much praised, are going to be paid at a very dear price. This is how, when we get excited, we imagine Claire's future. Her sister is ready to admire her, and we see in the corner of a very beautiful painting: Cl. Forster invenit. One can say that, according to Charrière, the good female artist cannot but trouble gender. Éliane Viennot has eloquently written about the domination of male scholars over the French language since the Renaissance and how they imposed 'masculin universel' as a gradually invisible and unquestionable norm (Viennot 2014). What Charrière is saying here, paradoxically, is that the only way for a woman to be considered an artist is by referring to herself in the masculine, a strategy which writers such as George Sand but also the Brontës or George Eliot in English were going to adopt in the 19th century.

Austen aimed to develop as a writer by occupying the same ground as famous male contemporaries such as Scott and Byron, which is suggested by her choice of John Murray as a publisher in 1815. But she also knew she could only do so by maintaining herself slightly apart from the tradition. Anne Elliot enjoys the same Romantic poems as Captain Benwick, but she also insists on reading something else. Her own self and her own experience of being crossed in love cannot be exactly dramatized by the lyrical 'I' of Byron and Scott, such as narcissistically enjoyed by Benwick. Anne cannot afford the same absorption into 'the impassioned descriptions of hopeless agony' nor is the same quick and easy transfer of actual feeling to another object possible for her (Austen 2006b, p. 108). As a reader, Anne is prevented from reacting in the same way as Benwick even though her emotions are equally strong. She manages to express how men and women do feel the same while being made by custom to behave differently through her famous tête-à-tête with Captain Harville (Austen 2006b, pp. 252–56). In Sanditon, Charlotte Heywood is likewise an attentive but critical reader of men's poetry. She enjoys their poems only to a point but without advocating specifically female writers either, observing about Burns: 'I am not poetic enough to separate a man's poetry entirely from his character, [. . .] He felt and he wrote and he forgot' (Austen 2008, p. 176, cf. n. 22, pp. 662–63). Her unwillingness to separate the poet's literary persona from the poet in real life raises the question of how identification actually works across gender lines. Austen draws our attention to how, in Romantic poems, a reader like Charlotte is expected to collude with the poetical voice while gender assignments provide men and women with unfortunately different experiences of love. If not entirely impossible, the identification of Charlotte Heywood and Anne Elliot with lyrical poems is shown to be difficult.

Conclusions

In her unpublished historical novel about the Revolution, *Henriette and Richard*, Charrière gives the Abbé des Rois the memorable reply already mentioned: 'The layman invents the nobleman as you imagine him. Man invents woman' (de Charrière 1979–1984, vol. VIII, p. 398, my translation). Imagination, indeed, not nature, is key to identity. And imagination is a matter of agency for all thinking and feeling individuals. Novelists are especially good at it: like Charrière's layman—'roturier'—they can take hold of speech and representation and change their readers' own imagination. While exiled in London and bored with the company of a French duchess and her son, the heroine of the *Émigré Letters* wishes her friend and servant Victoire had not been taken away from her, describing her typically in gender neutral terms as 'the only reasonable person there is for me to talk to' (de Charrière 2012b, pp. 184–85). In *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor 'sighed over the fancied necessity' of a duel between Brandon and Willoughby (Austen 2006d, p. 240); and, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth forces Darcy to confess he loves her for her unprecedented 'liveliness of

mind' because she knows she does not correspond to the imaginary patterns of female attractiveness (Austen 2006c). In *Mansfield Park*, readers are privy to Fanny's inner life, which is completely different from the scenario of self-forgetfulness fondly fantasized by Crawford 'as if it were a matter of course that she was not to have a moment at her own command' (Austen 2005b, p. 343); and while Emma needs to seriously reconsider the daftness of her own romantic imaginings before she can be happy, Mrs Croft in *Persuasion* simply begs her brother to give up binary representations of the past: 'But I hate to hear you talking so, like a fine gentleman, as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures' (Austen 2006b, p. 75). When the novel is vindicated as a great literary genre by the narrator of *Northanger Abbey*, it is praised for its 'most thorough knowledge of human nature' and not, as Montolieu would have it, for its knowledge of feminine secrets. The latter category is irrelevant for Charrière and Austen, however popular with readers at the time (Austen 2006a, p. 31).

Michelle Perrot writes that, through history, women have been imagined rather than described or 'racontées' as they were.²⁰ As novelists, Charrière and Austen did make the choice, in a time of change, to 'raconter' men and women differently by having fiction depend on a close observation of the ordinary. In the absence of women from public life, their novels substitute the arbitrary forms of gender representation shaped by prejudice with new scenarios and new characters. If History had turned out differently, Charrière would have published *Henriette and Richard, Mademoiselle d'Estival* would have been relished by more than some happy few, and Mrs and Admiral Croft, with 'their style of driving' so wonderful, might be more prominent characters in *Persuasion* (Austen 2006b, p. 99). Such novels invite readers to broaden their imagination and to desire the advent in real life of new men and women. 'Write to your comrades', was Charrière's key advice to the young Benjamin Constant in 1791.²¹ She and Austen privileged epicene words to focus the imagination on rational creatures. Writing as female outsiders, they were determined literature should create a consensus about the irrelevance of the prejudices increasingly hampering human lives in the name of sex difference.

Funding: This research received no extra funding. Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable. Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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