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“The Sensible body of the female reader”

by Anoosheh Ghaderi

The image of the female reader in pre-revolutionary France has been subject to various gender bias depictions. Women were framed as the *sensible* creature devoid of reason and therefore associated with *libidinous sensibility* (Meeker). The nature of the relation that a woman reader holds with the book, the event of reading and the reading space as it's depicted in paintings of the first half of the century manifests a negative image of women (Swain). Nevertheless, they became the source of so much heated debate and generalized anxiety throughout the century.

However, these negative images that surrounded women have been contested by female writers of the time such as Riccoboni and Grafigny. Looking at *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (1752) and *Histoire d'Ernestine* (1762), this article aims to analyze how these novels reject the negative libidinous sensibility associated with the female reader and claim a rational representation of “*lectrice intellectuelle*” that eventually becomes an active intellectual collaborator to the reading space (“*femme écrivain*”).

The anxiety with the female reader: the masculine image

The complex phenomenon of *sensibility* has spread its shadow over the 18th century understanding of *human nature*. The age of French Enlightenment, ultimately obsessed with this

polysemous concept, has come up with various positive and negative associations. In the moral and social vocabulary of the 18th century France, *sensibilité* belonged to the same family of words as *sens*, *sensation*, *sentiment*, *sentimental*, and *sensiblerie*, and was associated with notions like sympathy, virtue, pity, benevolence, tender feeling. However, at a larger scale and in European physiological terminology, the term was also used to “describe the innate capacity to react to stimuli” (Vila 2). Such descriptions enter a dialogue with what is called the *physical sensibility*. Unlike men, women were believed not to be endowed with Reason or rational capability. Therefore, the event of reading was framed as a dangerous experience for a sensitive (*sensible*) body.

Arguably, one of the objects that is put under the category of stimuli is *reading*. In the age of the French Enlightenment when the process of secularization emerged, books played a crucial role in philosophical and ideological debates of the century. Many of the key figures of the time such as Rousseau dedicated part of their thoughts to examine both the effect (as well as the affect) of books on society and the examination of society in the books. What is worth remarking upon is that their observations were largely projected on the relation of the female reader with the book.

Principally, one of the spaces where the anxiety takes an explicit embodiment is the female body. Women have always unwillingly hosted the discourses concerning ethical issues of the society. Looking at paintings of the 18th century, we can see that the image of woman has been constantly overcharged by ideological discourses of the time. Female reader (*lectrice*) reflects the reader’s experience in general and opens up debate on the subject of ethical values and the position of the book in particular.

The social associations of femininity in the 18th century can be summarized in “sentimentality,” “passivity,” and above all “productivity.” Sentimentality when it is applied to

the female sex oscillates between the two poles of vice and virtue and becomes the bone of contention among moralists and philosophers and therefore subject to libidinous drives.

In visual arts and more specifically in painting, the trope of the woman reader becomes the site of a collective thinking through of the problems not only of how to regulate reading matter (what should be read), but also of how to measure the material and social effects of reading as a generative activity; an event in which subjects are constituted and reconstituted as bodies engage with narrative. Meeker argues that the reader is consistently singled out not only as a particular case to explore the potential productive effects of reading but also to build the implicit link between “eighteenth-century theories of reading as a form of “perfection of the human spirit,” in Mercier’s terms (Meeker 41).

The famous painting “*Reading*” by Pierre Antoine Baudouin (c. 1765) and “*A Lady Reading the Letters of Heloise and Abelard*” by Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1758-59) are explicitly preoccupied by the relation that young ladies have to the book and, more specifically, to novels. The novel also conveys the anxiety over the problematic phenomenon called “reading addiction, reading rage, reading fever, reading mania or reading lust”. The latter describes the state of becoming unaware of one’s temporal and local condition that makes her vulnerable to the effects of the written word. The novel slipping from the female reader’s fingers indicates how the novel is a distraction to her. This oeuvre alludes to the danger of explicit reading. She is constantly the prey, the victim, the unthinking consumer. The reader’s pleasure depicted in paintings gives an embodied subjectivity to the words of the writer or the book characters and places herself in the subject-hood of the social narrative to which she belongs to. She is shown as a purely “biological species” incapable of mastering the reading space. This is not surprising why the female reader is consequently sent off to the site of numerous exclusions.

Greuze uses the novel's narrative¹ to expose the hypothetical reader to the story of an affair with multiple erotic scenes and provoking love letters. She is depicted three-quarter length seated in a white dress (symbolizing her innocence) surrounded by red manteaux that stands for her sexual desires that have symbolically overshadowed or dominated her purity. She is leaned against a puffy cushion. The red color that dominates the space alludes to the libidinal desires of the young reader that surrounds her. Her eyes look abstractly into space, her body leans backward, acknowledging her sexual arousal and suggesting masturbation soon to come. The darkness of the reading space is in stark contrast with the reader's flesh and highlights her corporal existence in relation to the void. It seems that the void represents a private spot for the reader where she will not be interrupted from her pleasures. This particular space for practicing the secretive pleasure of reading was understood during the *ancien régime* under the term *boudoir* which meant "a particular morally compromised space that disturbs the female reader" (Diaconoff 23). They suggested that this space is capable of capturing and seizing the feminine body through arousal.

Baudouin's "*Reading*" suggests a similar image of the female reader. However, the space is given more specificity and emphasis. The female dreamer is depicted in her bedroom. The moving curtain that are drawn towards her give the impression that a sensational wind has blown into the room and adds a metaphoric charge to the reading space. The book is open wide and the

¹ In this tragic medieval love story (popular throughout the eighteenth century) presented in this painting, there exists a rousseauist prediction of the danger that a woman can cause by being exposed to education. The protagonists, Heloise and Abelard, are both intellectuals of their time. Young Heloise is being educated in philosophy under Abelard's supervision who is her senior and eventually they fell in love and began an affair. Heloise ends up having a child out of this affair which is soon discovered. As a result, Abelard becomes subject to castration and Heloise is sent off to convent. As we can read from the morality of the story, the young women are discouraged from reading novels. The tragic ending manifests the destructive consequences of women being equally educated because they are not capable of recognizing the pedagogical relationship from a romantic one. Moreover, the woman's presence is ultimately dangerous and destructive to men (which is Abelard in this case).

reader's hand is still keeping it open. However, she is sunken into her thoughts of a potential lover who she is probably waiting on. Her other hand is secretly placed under her skirt and towards her vagina. It seems like the invisible hand of the author of the book has haunted her body and is now causing a rupture or an arousal. The messiness of the room indicates the reader's state of mind ultimately disturbed by the event of reading. Arguably, in this painting, the concept of *boudoir* is present. However, it is depicted more as a mental or psychological state of the reader rather than a spatial existence. She is considered incapable of handling reading and resisting being objectified by the book. The image-making of the female reader as the "biological species" who is constantly the prey, the victim, the unthinking consumer suggested that reading space and the event of reading are both considered as "the luxury her sex could not afford" (Ibid. 24). This image was subject to intellectual women and writers' pushbacks. Grafigny and Riccoboni provided a self-portrait of the intellectual reader which will be analyzed in the next section.

The reasonable and sensible reader of Grafigny and Riccoboni:

Sensibility finds a different manifestation in *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* and *Histoire d'Ernestine*. Throughout both novels, the heroines are challenged with the real life issues of a young girl in the French society. Zilia and Ernestine are both outsiders, strangers, the *others*. Sensitivity is a natural virtue that they carry within themselves. However, the society that surrounds them abuses this virtue to restrict them and turn them into the male desired product.

Grafigny exposes the goddess of Virtue to the French society. Having Zilia travel from the 17th century, shows that she embodies the heritage of virtue which is then forcibly moved to

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18th century France. Using Peruvian eyes, she gives visibility to the ways in which French society afflicts women from learning the real virtues and pushes her to the borders of chastity.

The society pushes young girls to alienation and confusion.

To survive the alienation and the violent transition, Zilia keeps writing to her Peruvian lover Aza. Writing is her *survival kit* (Ahmed). Her act of writing is initiated by using “*quipos*,” which used to function for Peruvian women as a note to keep hold of the household but then eventually was transformed into a diary. In a series of letters to Aza, Zilia documents her observations of the way the society treats her and women in general. This way Grafigny applies a *resistant gaze* of a stranger as well as the objective *diagnostic gaze* of a pro-feminist writer at the social structure.

Grafigny criticizes the inefficacy of girls’ education to prepare them for real life: “Ils (les français) attendant de leurs femmes la pratique des vertus qu’ils ne leur font pas connaître, ils ne leur donnent pas même une idée juste des termes qui les désignent” (Op cit) and keeps them in constant alienation with their true identity. She recognizes education as the main reason behind the supposed libidinous *sensibility*: “Du moment que les filles commencent à être capables de recevoir des instructions, on les enferme dans une maison religieuse pour leur apprendre à vivre dans le monde” (Lettre 32). The latter treatment is similar to domesticating and restricting rather than educating. Even parents are only concerned with their daughters’ marriageability and so prepare them uniquely for their responsibilities as a wife or a mother “Régler les mouvements du corps, arranger ceux du visage, composer l’extérieur, sont les points essentiels de l’éducation” (Ibid.). The description that Zilia provides of the values for a girl seems to turn her into a marketable product for the male society that is only concentrated on the appearance and the

surface and finally “C’est dans cette ignorance que l’on marie les filles, à peine sorties de l’enfance” and expect them to guarantee “bonheur” of the family.

The diagnostic pro-feminist gaze recognizes a point that in two centuries forms the main argument of the first feminist movement one of the main figures being Simone de Beauvoir: “En général, il me semble que les femmes naissent ici, bien plus communément que chez nous, avec toutes les dispositions nécessaires pour égaler les hommes en mérites et en vertus.” Women are “born” just as capable as men, yet it is society that turns them into “*women*.” The patriarchal society that cannot stand equality between the two sexes “contribuent en toute manière à les rendre méprisables, soit en manquant de considération pour les leurs, soit en séduisant celles des autres.” Male arrogance aims at mastering women to maintain power in the society.

The force of the society is also pictured in the betrayal of the male lover. Aza who is also exiled like Zilia in Spain ends up marrying a Spanish princess. Grafigny in fact argues for an ill-fated education of children who are treated with “mépris :”

“Dans le premier âge, les enfants ne paraissent destinés qu’au divertissement des parents et de ceux qui les gouvernent. Il semble que l’on veuille tirer un honteux avantage de leur incapacité à découvrir la vérité [...] on leur donne des idées fausses de ce qui se présente à leur sens, et l’on rit inhumainement de leurs erreurs” (Lettre 32).

The education that children receive according to the Peruvian viewpoint is hypocritical and inhuman. It leaves children in confusion and afflicts them with a “puérile compassion” about their life events. Children’s education produces an ill sensibility while suspending rational sensibility.

Surprised by the unbelievable decision of her virtuous lover, Aza, who has eventually given in to the social arrangements, she decides to stay single and invest her heritage in establishing her own “palace” where she tends to spend her life writing and translating her story. By this innovative ending of the abandoned woman who becomes a writer, Grafigny offers a new model of the “female writer” who holds an active relation with the event of reading as being educated and eventually becoming an autonomous writer.

Grafigny portrays her version of the female reader in a similar space painted by Greuze and Baudouin. However, instead of a dark boudoir or a bedroom, she locates Zilia in the convent’s library and draws the following image:

Le seul endroit où je m’arrêtai fut dans une assez grande chambre entourée d’un grillage d’or, légèrement travaillé, qui renfermait une infinité de livres de toutes couleurs, de toutes formes, et d’une propreté admirable ; j’étais dans un tel enchantement, que je croyais ne pouvoir les quitter sans les avoir tous lus. (Lettre 35)

Astonished by the space, Zilia conveys wonder through the words “grande,” “grillage d’or,” “infinite,” and “admirable.” Zilia endows this library with enormous enthusiasm (*enchantement*). She is eager to read all the books and spend an eternity there. Comparing this image to Greuze’s painting, we can draw an analysis between Zilia and the reader since in the painting she has other books ready to devour. However, the facial expression of the reader and her posture pictured for the male viewer fosters masculine fantasies concerning female readers. But Zilia on the contrary is filled with joy and excitement for reading which is quite distinct from sexual arousal.

The ending of this epistolary novel is controversial. Zilia is the first heroine of epistolary novels that does not end up in convent, suicide or eternal sufferance (Jensen). She invests her heritage to make a palace of her own which is described in a hyperbolic tone:

C'était un cabinet tout brillant de glaces et de peintures: les lambris, ornés des figures extrêmement bien dessinées, imitant des jeux et des cérémonies de la ville du soleil. On y voyait nos Vierges représentées en mille endroits avec le même habillement que je portais en arrivant en France; on disait même qu'elles me ressemblaient. (Lettres 33)

“Clé d’or,” “chaise d’or,” “grillages d’or,” “infinité de livres de toutes les couleurs” gives a utopic allure to the eventfulness of establishing *a room of her own*; although this decision calls for a remarkable shift in the heroine’s reaction to social hardship, it bears a magical aspect to the operation of such a space. Grafigny suggest an idealistic space to replace *boudoir* which is “le merveilleux cabinet.” Zilia states that this cabinet carries significant similarities to “le temple du Soleil.” “Soleil” is the metaphor of the Peruvian Virtue and Zilia as previously mentioned embodies the virtuous and holly princess of this temple. Eventually, Grafigny’s female reader becomes a writer and turns the female reading/writing space is depicted at the end to be a house of virtue and intellectual sensibility.

Riccoboni, too, joins Grafigny’s pro-feminist trope to contest the male image-making of the female reader. In *Histoire d’Ernestine*, Riccoboni focuses on the sexual enlightenment and social prejudice affecting women, namely, seduction, marriageability and importance of money in marital events. She places an innocent German orphan, Ernestine, in the center of the novel. Her German origin is a metaphor of her *otherness* and the state of being the outsider to the

dominant culture of the society. Innocently unaware of the rules of the game, her actions are led by her heart and senses.

Escaping two unfortunate losses --that of her biological mother (Christine) and Madame Dufresnoi the “*sensible voisine*” who’s moved by seeing Ernestine mourning over her mother’s dead body-- she is constantly challenged with the threat of a third potential loss : loss of Henriette, her miniature mentor’s sister, or that of the love of her life, marquis de Clémangis. She oscillates constantly between the two and the social prejudices that disable her from being freely united with them. These two people embody the conflictual social discourses on “chastity” and “seduction” respectively.

Ernestine is the naïve product of the convent where girls do not receive an intellectual education. Failing to be prepared for the real life, she embodies an ideal victim for the male desire. In love with marquis de Clémangis, she is ultimately troubled by his words. Even at some point throughout the story, she claims to be ready to reward him with her virginity as a proof for her gratefulness for his help “mais avant d’accepter un si grand sacrifice, promettez-moi de remettre dans vos mains tous les dons que vous m’avez faits” (63). However, this decision is not entirely based in her weakness and sensibility; she considers it proof of her honesty and gratitude.

The sensational libidinous image is rejected explicitly in the scene of the initial encounter between Ernestine and marquis de Clémangis: she is unafflicted by the application to her work of miniature. Not only this, but she holds a non-sensational rapport with the miniature and the presence of marquis in her atelier but also she directs a meticulous exanimating gaze at both him and his picture (to check the accuracy of her art work). Therefore, she exhibits a rational presence in the working space.

Falling in love with one another, they both have to dance around the discourses that surround them as well as the social values that hinders a union based on mutual love and sensations. Marquis is not a libertine lover with a seductive project for Ernestine. Amazed by her virtuous performance, he wills to support her financially and tries to avoid any advances that might cause her social ostracization. He manifests sensitivity to fragility of women's honor "Qui, moi, je t'avilirais? J'abuserais de ton amour, de ta noble confiance" (63) and therefore breaks with the negative picture of other male figures of the novel such as Ernestine's father "un mari méchant". However, by acting upon the conventional social definition of the woman as the weaker sex: "Périsse l'homme injuste et cruel, qui ose fonder son bonheur sur la condescendance d'une douce, d'une sensible créature, capable pour s'oublier d'elle-même pour le rendre heureux" (63), we can trace in effect of the passable social narrative of women as "douce," "sensitive," "vulnerable," "devoted," etc. on him. Like Grafigny, men do not have a toxic and dark image in Riccoboni's work. He is also been constantly challenged by the society's prejudgments.

What distinguishes Ernestine as a *sensible* protagonist is that she does not censure her desires for Clémangis in her letters addressed to him. She even avows her feelings: "Je vous aime: oui, Monsieur, je vous aime, je le dis, je le répète avec plaisir; je ne rougis pas de vous aimer" (62) instead of making them understood by actions. She is aware of her desire while she resists seduction, and she even takes on the responsibility of submitting to him "Ce n'est pas vous, monsieur, c'est moi-même que je crains." Still, she resists slipping blindly into the traditional narratives based in prejudgments. "Que je hais le monde, ses usages, ses préjugés, ses malignes observations. Faudrait-il immoler mon bonheur a ses fausses opinions?" (41). She has her own story to tell.

When she learns that Henriette is distancing herself from her due to social mischiefs, she decides to debate the issues with her and tell her own version of the story that exonerates Clémangis and herself from all suspicions. However, she is open to rational deduction and justifications. Ernestine's abilities to respond conventionally to Clémangis's sentimental discourse is admirable. We can trace both the presence of virtuous and innocent *sensibility* accompanied by rationality. Taking a factual mode, she firstly informs him of her decisions of leaving Madame Dumenil "On vient de m'apprendre que je ne dois à madame Dumenil ni égards, ni reconnaissance. Ne me cherchez plus chez cette femme; je la quitte pour jamais." Then, she asks him to provide logical justification and a rational narrative to Henriette's accusations: "Vous qui depuis un an jouissez de mon amitié, de mon estime, de ma plus tendre affection, êtes-vous un homme perfide? Si vous pouvez justifier vos intentions aux yeux d'une fille respectable, venez chez Mademoiselle Dumenil." She portrays herself waiting for him using the term "avec crainte," which alludes to her rational concerns as well as "avec impatience" that exhibits her *sensibility*. Finally, she aligns her feelings with her rationality by stating: "Je désire, j'espère, je crois que vous êtes digne de mes sentiments" (43).

The constant dispute between Henriette and Ernestine provides a dialectic space. Capturing a vision of the good and the proper, Ernestine manifests respect for her sexuality. After Henriette's sermon over marquis's probable seductive motifs, she is enlightened with awareness and self-protection: "Pour la première fois, éprouvant à l'approche du marquis une émotion où le plaisir ne se mêlait pas, elle craignit sa présence et sentit le désir de lui cacher les mouvements de son cœur. Mes yeux sont ouverts" (44). This resistance to marquis's presence shows the burgeoning of a purposeful rejection of being "le sexe faible" that Henriette had framed in her anti-male argument: (Ils) se prétendent formés pour guider, soutenir, protéger un

sexe timide et faible. Cependant eux seuls l'attaquent entretiennent sa timidité, et profitent de sa faiblesse" (41). Ernestine decides to stop such an ill relationality to the male lover.

Ernestine displays a talent for forming in Clémangis's requests. In a scene where he must leave to fulfil a mission he writes "Dans vos moments de loisir, daignez vous occuper à regarder ce portrait, à le copier; multipliez l'image d'un ami dont le cœur vous est tendrement attaché. Conservez son souvenir et souhaitez parfois le revoir" (18). This narcissistic demand that he proposes to Ernestine becomes a project for her to analyze her previous works and try to enhance and create "une image plus exacte." Comparing this rhetoric to that of Ernestine in a scene in which she is troubled by Henriette's suspicions of Clémangis's intentions, although she is ultimately emotional "d'une main tremblante elle traça ces mots," her sentences testify rationality in their concise informative and logical mode. She clearly asks for a discussion over the issues in person which as a family problem solving appears quite modern.

After deciding to take distance from the marquis and going to convent, Riccoboni provides a picture of what a desent education should look like for girls in convent: "On lui avait préparé un appartement commode et agréable; elle y découvrit partout les soins de son amant: une petite bibliothèque compose de livres choisis par le marquis lui offrait un amusement utile et la félicité d'acquérir des connaissances. ," (53). In fact, she suggests that an effective education should firstly be designed based on a goal for girls to achieve by someone who truly cares for their progress and upbringing. The education should originate from love and therefore be *sensible*. Considering that Ernestine is a young lady at the age of romantic adventure, an education derived from and in line with true love is what can make a *sensible intellectual reader* : "Le plaisir qu'il lui donnait de multiplier l'image de marquis de Clémangis. Des traits si chéris se trouvaient retracés dans tous les sujets qui se présentaient à son imagination, et son

cabinet se remplissait des portraits de son amant.” (54). Love is the only derive that can flourish a young lady and guide her in her intellectual path.

Finally, like Aza, Clémangis ends up submitting to the social structure and leaves Ernestine to marry a wealthy woman. His decision causes Ernestine and himself great pain and such suffering that allows Riccoboni to meticulously criticize the judgmental and dogmatic social narratives of gendered performances. But the magic happens through Clémangis’s failure in the court and he is sent to exile. The failure in society gives lieu to personal prosperity. Their union as well as their happiness can come true only if they inhabit an isolated space together. Such a contradictory happy ending is a subtle way of critiquing the social values and trends of that time.

Wrapping up the story, Riccoboni leaves her signature and creates a self-portrait of a woman writer. She claims a mediated subjectivity for herself. She signs the novel as the omniscient observer, the narrator, the storyteller:

Henriette partagea la félicité de son amie. Madame de Ranci retourna dans sa retraite, où les soins attentifs de Madame de Clémangis prévinrent ses désirs : et moi, qui n’ai plus rien à dire de cette douce et sensible Ernestine, je vais peut-être m’occuper des inquiétudes et des embarras d’une autre (81).

Riccoboni is the narrator of *her* stories. Her job is crucial in giving visibility to concerns, issues and obstacles that young women of her society deal with, particularly in a society of the ancient regime where women’s rights were not the subject of legal concerns. Swain argues for the effective role of women writers in making women’s needs known. In the pre-revolutionary French society those women who spoke the “male” language of rights have been pushed back

and even superseded by gendered discourses of the time, namely, motherly discourse that Henriette implies throughout the novel. Therefore, in order to claim rights, women needed to be well versed in the language of rights to be able to be heard. *Storytelling* is definitely one of the principal forms of female pro-feminist contestations in the history of feminist movements.

Conclusion:

“Letter novels” as Jensen argues, provided female writers with the opportunity to retell or explain the story of women. Novels written by female writers such as Grafigny and Riccoboni offered a dialectic space to examine the discursive, political or social spaces in an effort to say what happened to women and women’s works under the *ancien régime*. They suggested “*L’espace du livre*” as a discursive space where women were given voice to duel over the image-making of the female reader.

The image-making of 18th century philosophers such as Rousseau and male painters like Baudouin and Greuze, which presented the female reader with libidinous sensibility, fostered ideological viewpoints and discourses on women that not only silenced them but hid them from view as well. The performativity that such ideological and iconographical statements exercised over the female identity, as illuminated in this essay, has been subject to pushbacks from female writers. The quarrel over the female reader’s true relation to the reading space has claimed legitimacy for women when it comes to being considered intellectual readers and contributors to the social discursive space. Not only the image but the real intellectual space “cabinet” was claimed by Grafigny and Riccoboni. Although it took women a century to inhabit the cabinet as

“a sex neutral space” (Madame de Genlis), the fantasy of the existence of a libidinous space called *boudoir* (the space of sexual intrigue and moral laxity) was questioned (Diaconoff 22).

There are multiple layers in which heroine of Grafigny and Riccoboni prove to be sensible. Twisting the definition of virtue and building off the social values concerning women, these writers argued for a *rational sensibility* in their female protagonists that was entirely absent in masculine art and novels. Nonetheless, they tried to revise the reductionist masculine viewpoint of female inhabited spaces.

Finally, the image of the female reader which become tied up with that of the female writer suggested a new model of “femme intellectuelle” which was in total contrast with the male gendered images of women. This way, Grafigny and Riccoboni initiated a female discourse that could survive the male social and ideological discourses of the time.

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Annex:



Fig. 1: “Reading” by Pierre Antoine Baudouin (c. 1765)



Fig. 2: “A Lady Reading the Letters of Heloise and Abelard” by Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1758-59)