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'La femme mal mariée': Madame d'Epinay's challenge to *Julie* and *Emile*[1]

Louise d'Epinay (1726-1783) is remembered today as the wealthy patroness of Rousseau who lent him the 'Ermitage', where he wrote his best-selling novel *Julie, ou La nouvelle Héloïse* (1761). Among her contemporaries, she was best known as a friend of the Encyclopedists, whose home attracted some of the most brilliant minds of her time. However, d'Epinay was a gifted and prolific writer as well. Author of a remarkable autobiographical novel, *Histoire de Madame de Montbrillant* (published posthumously), she also wrote the *Conversations d'Emilie* (published in 1773), to which the Académie Française awarded a prestigious prize for its contributions to the field of education. She was also an important, albeit anonymous, contributor to the influential *Correspondance littéraire,* directed by Frédéric Grimm, her long-time friend and lover.[2]

In studying Rousseau's reception among his female contemporaries, I have found d'Epinay's response to him to be particularly important and complex. For not only was she his close personal friend (and later his bitter enemy); but, during the last thirty years of her life, she was engaged with him in an intense intellectual and literary rivalry that challenged his narrow vision of women's role and capabilities. In this paper, I examine d'Epinay's response to *Julie* and *Emile* and the challenge to Rousseau's sexual politics underlying her works.

Histoire de Madame de Montbrillant as a literary response and challenge to *Julie*

It was in the summer of 1756, during his solitary walks in the forest surrounding the 'Ermitage', that Rousseau began composing *Julie*. The following spring, Rousseau gave d'Epinay the first two sections of his novel to read. She recalls her first impressions of *Julie* in her own novel *Histoire de Madame de Montbrillant,* where she refers to Rousseau as René:

> After lunch, we read René's notebooks together. I was rather disappointed. The manuscript is beautifully written, but seems overdone to me and rather artificial. The characters don't speak naturally; it's always the author who speaks for them.[3]

[1] An earlier version of this article appeared in *Eighteenth-century life* 20 (1996), p.42-66.
[2] See Weinreb 1988, and 1993, p.143-57.
[3] D'Epinay 1951, vol.III, p.100; this work will be referred to hereafter as *Montbrillant*. Translations are mine (M.T.).

Although disappointed by Rousseau's novel, d'Epinay seems to have found it sufficiently inspiring to try writing a novel of her own. In a letter to her lover Volx (Grimm's alter ego in *Montbrillant*), d'Epinay's heroine Emilie confides:

> I just began writing a piece, and I'm quite satisfied with the beginning. It was René's novel that gave me the idea. When I have a few notebooks finished, I'll send them to you to see if they are worth continuing.[4]

Grimm was away on military duty, and Georges Roth (editor of the 1951 edition) contends that d'Epinay wrote the novel to amuse herself and her lover during his absence. The desire to fill the emotional void caused by Grimm's absence may also have been a motivating factor, as Elisabeth Badinter (editor of the 1989 edition) has suggested.[5] However, both these explanations trivialize the ambitiousness of d'Epinay's project. In my view, it was above all the desire to measure her creative talents against Rousseau's that prompted her to write her novel.

That *Montbrillant* was conceived as a response to *Julie* is made clear in the novel itself: 'René's book gave me the urge to write a novel in letter form', Emilie explains. 'It seems to me that one needs only a natural style and good taste in order to write well in this genre'.[6] The claim that Rousseau's style lacked naturalness and taste – and that d'Epinay herself could do better – is made more explicit in a subsequent letter to Volx: 'All his letters are so flowery, so overdone, that the style strikes me as cold and tiresome'.[7] D'Epinay's literary rivalry with Rousseau is expressed most clearly in a letter from Volx to Emilie, in which he conveys his initial reaction to her novel. 'It's a masterpiece', he declares:

> If you take my advice, you won't show this work to anyone until it is finished; for your writing might become constrained, your style less natural if you worried about your readers. Look upon your work as a monument reserved for yourself alone, and you will produce a work worthy of a woman of genius [...] As for René, if you have shown him any of this work, I predict trouble ahead. His judgment is too keen for him not to sense the huge difference between your Sophie and his boring, pedantic heroine.[8]

Commenting on this passage, Roth writes: 'The author makes no show of false modesty. She ascribes to Grimm's pen the same enthusiastic praise for her writing later expressed by Sainte-Beuve and the Goncourts'.[9]

D'Epinay's criticisms of Rousseau's novel parallel those made by other literary critics – Voltaire and Fréron, director of the *Année littéraire* –, who found Julie's long letters redundant, didactic, and often boring. Casting Volx in the role of omniscient literary critic, d'Epinay echoes these criticisms of *Julie* and claims to have avoided these problems in her own novel. Volx is especially impressed by the

[4] Ibid., vol.III, p.131.
[5] See Roth in d'Epinay 1951, vol.III, p.131, n.4, and Badinter 1983, p.268-76.
[6] D'Epinay 1951, vol.III, p.118.
[7] Ibid.
[8] The Sophie referred to here is Sophie de Rambure, the heroine of the novel Emilie is writing and heroine of the novel that d'Epinay herself began writing before beginning *Montbrillant*.
[9] D'Epinay 1951, vol.III, p.171-72.

naturalness, realism, and spontaneity of her style. Contrary to Rousseau, who complained that writing was often a difficult process for him, requiring constant revisions, d'Epinay underlined the ease, rapidity, and pleasure with which she wrote. Finally, in contrast to Rousseau's 'cold and tiresome style', Volx praises Emilie's ability to hold her reader's interest. 'Once I started your book, I couldn't put it down. At two in the morning, I was still reading'.[10] Volx especially praises the vividness of her character portrayals and the liveliness of her dialogue: 'Your portrait of Beauval is a masterpiece. Nothing could be truer to life, nor more delicate and refined'.[11] And later: 'Your work is truly a masterpiece and deserves to be published'.[12]

What is most striking about d'Epinay's self-appraisals as a writer is the recurrence of the label *chef-d'œuvre,* which she applies to her work more frequently than the conventions of modesty would seem to permit, with such frequency in fact that the repetition has an almost incantatory effect – as if by repeating the claim she could make it come true. And indeed, the judgment of 19th-century critics such as Sainte-Beuve and the Goncourts seems to vindicate d'Epinay's unwavering faith in her literary talents.

Ignoring Volx's instructions, Emilie does show her novel to 'René' and to another friend, who express quite different reactions to her work:

> René gave me many compliments, but Monsieur de Beauval said the style was too familiar and the overall structure very weak. I felt that what I had written was better than he thought, yet that it didn't deserve all the praise René had given it. I was even tempted to interpret René's admiration simply as surprise that my work wasn't as bad as he expected.[13]

René's praise for Emilie's writing – praise which she suspects to be ambivalent and insincere – presents an ironic contrast to Rousseau's satiric and entirely negative judgment of d'Epinay's literary efforts in the *Confessions.*[14] On the other hand, Beauval's remark that Emilie's novel was structurally weak and her style too familiar recalls criticisms made not of d'Epinay's novel, but of Rousseau's. Emilie is perplexed by these contradictory appraisals of her work, but Volx quickly reassures her in his next letter: 'What you tell me about the various appraisals of your work is quite amusing. Have confidence in my good opinion of it and in your own, and I promise you that the public will agree with us in time'.[15] Given d'Epinay's observations in her novel concerning the strong prejudices against women writers – 'Few

[10] D'Epinay 1951, vol.III, p.171.
[11] Ibid., p.124.
[12] Ibid., p.163.
[13] Ibid., p.174.
[14] In the *Confessions,* Rousseau quips: 'She decided to try her hand at literature and dabbled at writing novels, letters, comedies, short stories, and other such rubbish. But what amused her most was not so much to write them as to read them; and if she managed to scribble out two or three pages at a time, she insisted on finding at least two or three indulgent listeners with whom to share this huge production.' (Rousseau 1961, vol.I, p.411). This passage reflects a deliberate attempt to ridicule d'Epinay as an author and to trivialize her work. On a deeper level, Rousseau's satiric portrait of d'Epinay in the *Confessions* reflects the anxiety and rage generated by his financial dependence on her and by the threat she posed to him both as a woman and as a writer.
[15] D'Epinay 1951, vol.III, p.196.

people are willing to acknowledge their talent, and many are apt to accuse them of literary pretensions'[16] – this unabashed expression of self-confidence constitutes a bold challenge to the literary and social conventions of the period.

Histoire de Madame de Montbrillant as an ideological challenge to *Julie*

Let us now turn to the more complex issue of how d'Epinay's novel responds to Rousseau's on an ideological level. For not only is *Montbrillant* an eloquent response to the repression of female desire underlying Rousseau's novel. It also reflects the strivings of a woman writer to create within the confines of male-dominated novelistic genres – the aristocratic, worldly novel (best represented by Duclos's works)[17] and the bourgeois novel epitomized by Rousseau's *Julie* – a *roman de femme* in which the experiences and dilemmas of women might be presented in a more authentic manner, in which their grievances and longings could be expressed from within, rather than viewed from the outside through the refractive lens of male desire and self-interest.

Through its detailed description of d'Epinay's unhappy marriage, *Montbrillant* illustrates the painful dilemma of *la femme mal mariée* in 18th-century French society. Because of her upbringing, and especially her mother's influence, Louise d'Epinay fervently believed in the Christian ideal of conjugal fidelity and the newly evolving bourgeois ideal of domesticity that together were to find their most powerful expression in Rousseau's *Julie*. Her husband, on the other hand, belonged to the generation of financiers of the *haute bourgeoisie* who attempted to rival the lifestyle of the French court. Along with other aristocratic values, he had adopted the conception of marriage prevalent among the court nobility, who accepted and even expected infidelity on the part of both spouses. The incompatibility of the young couple's views on marriage and family life soon became evident through her husband's flagrant love affairs, his virtual abandonment of his family, his financial irresponsibility, and his thwarting of Louise's desire to breastfeed their children and to educate them at home. All these obstacles to domestic happiness, painstakingly described in her novel, challenge the idealized view of marriage presented in *Julie*.

In an effort to fill the emotional void created by the failure of her marriage, d'Epinay explored the various outlets available to married women of her age and class, with illuminating and sometimes painful results. In *Montbrillant,* she records her experiences at length, providing an inside view of the everyday lives of upper-class women of her period and valuable insight into the problems and frustrations they faced. Nearly all the options explored by d'Epinay in her life and later in her

[16] Ibid., p.141.

[17] See in particular Duclos's *Confessions du comte de* *** (1742) and his *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des mœurs* (1751), which d'Epinay read and greatly admired. Both works are culminations of the *roman aristocratique et mondain,* which were to exert considerable influence on the composition of d'Epinay's own novel. For further discussion of Duclos's literary influence on d'Epinay, see Roth's introduction to d'Epinay 1951, vol.I, p.xvi.

novel are also presented in *Julie,* either as acceptable or unacceptable outlets for female energies. However, the options Rousseau considers most appropriate for respectable married women – dedication to children and husband, close friendships with women, and religious devotion – are precisely the ones toward which d'Epinay expresses the most ambivalence. On the other hand, the options criticized most strongly by Rousseau – extra-marital affairs and participation in literary and intellectual activities – are the very ones d'Epinay comes to view as the most fulfilling. In this way, *Montbrillant* challenges the feminine ideals of self-effacement and self-sacrifice advocated in *Julie*. By refusing to deny her ambitions and desires in her self-portrayal, d'Epinay provides a far more realistic view of the problems and tensions experienced by her female contemporaries and, in so doing, points to the distortions and blind spots in Rousseau's male-centred view of women. In many ways, *Montbrillant* can be read as a survival manual for 18th-century women in their struggle to find happiness and self-fulfilment despite woefully inadequate educations, repressive social conventions, unhappy, indissoluble marriages, and all the traps and contradictions of the double standard.

In her novel, d'Epinay attempts to justify her liaison with her first lover by evoking her husband's repeated infidelities, her earnest attempts to save their marriage, the impossibility of divorce, and above all the genuineness of her love. The belief that adultery is justified in a case like hers, that a woman has the right to search for love outside an unhappy marriage, gradually becomes the core of a personal morality distinct from both the worldly morality of her husband and the Christian morality of her mother. This credo sustains Emilie through the pain and humiliation caused by her lover's gradual abandonment of her for other women. She senses that happiness would still be possible for her if only she could find some worthier object for her affection.

Before Volx appears on the scene to console her for her first lover's betrayal, Emilie undergoes a long period of emotional desolation similar to what she experienced with her husband, but rendered more painful by her own sense of remorse and humiliation. Under her mother's guidance, Emilie seems to undergo a religious conversion (not unlike Julie's) and resolves to lead a pious, retired life. However, her confessor senses that Emilie's sudden wish to renounce the world is neither genuine nor healthy. When he learns that her resolution has been prompted by an unhappy love affair, he wisely observes: 'You are in the same situation as any unhappily married but respectable woman who still feels a need for love. God becomes the focus of a restless sensibility difficult to restrain. Are you prepared to lead a life of hypocrisy that can never satisfy your needs?'[18] The priest's criticism of false conversions and of religious hypocrisy can be read as a critique of Julie's conversion experience and of her efforts to sublimate her desire for Saint-Preux through religious pietism. Emilie's realization that it is not God she desires, but a lover, poses a direct challenge to the ideals of self-sacrifice and religious exaltation advocated in Rousseau's novel. Rejecting the masochistic martyrdom that Julie embraces, Emilie resolves to seek the fulfilment of her desires not in heaven, but on earth.

[18] D'Epinay 1951, vol.II, p.371-72.

D'Epinay's response to Rousseau's vision of the ideal mother

D'Epinay's strongest challenge to Rousseau in *Montbrillant* lies in her realistic portrayal of pregnancy, motherhood, and family life – a view that contrasts sharply with the idealized vision of domesticity presented in Rousseau's *Julie* and in Book I of *Emile ou de l'éducation* (1762). She expresses considerable ambivalence toward motherhood; yet she is highly critical of the social conventions and prejudices of her period that prevented the formation of strong family bonds.

When she becomes pregnant after three months of marriage, Emilie's first reaction is irritation that this will prevent her from accompanying her husband on his inspections as *fermier général*. She complains of nausea, depression, and general lassitude – banal symptoms from everyday life that never seem to enter Julie's ethereal realm of existence. After learning of her husband's infidelity, she is so despondent that she comes to resent the 'creature' within her that forces her to go on living. As the term of her pregnancy draws near, she is obsessed with the fear that she will die in childbirth or of childbed fever, as had a number of her friends.[19]

To calm her fears, a family friend encourages her to nurse her child, insisting that breastfeeding would help protect her from childbed fever and strengthen the baby's health as well. Emilie eagerly seizes upon this plan, but her mother opposes it, fearing both for her daughter's health and for her reputation. Her mother finally agrees to the plan, as does her father-in-law, providing that Emilie's doctor and husband consent to it. Encouraged by her doctor's support, Emile dutifully writes to her husband in the hope of gaining his approval. However, his callous reply shatters her hopes:

> You, nurse your child? I thought I'd die laughing [...] Do you think I'd ever consent to such a ridiculous idea? Whatever the advice of the midwives and doctors may be, this plan is completely out of the question [...] What satisfaction can one possibly get from breastfeeding a child?[20]

The arguments presented against maternal nursing by Emilie's husband and mother provide a realistic picture of the often insurmountable prejudices and obstacles faced by middle- and upper-class women who wished to breastfeed their children. Her experience demonstrates what little voice women had even in the most important – and most personal – decisions affecting their lives. The arguments made in *Montbrillant* in favour of maternal breastfeeding and against the tyranny of social conventions are far more eloquent than those made in *Emile,* precisely because d'Epinay describes in realistic detail her own painful experiences. The rather glib advice Rousseau offers in *Emile* seems highly unrealistic and impractical in light of the attitudes described so vividly in *Montbrillant.*

Contrary to Emilie's expectations, her delivery and recovery go well. Yet her joy is clouded by her mother's choice of a wet-nurse who lives thirty miles away. Not

[19] In her *Souvenirs,* Madame d'Allard (d'Epinay's granddaughter) notes that in d'Epinay's circle of friends, twelve died of childbed fever before the age of 25. Cited in d'Epinay 1951, vol.I, p.286, n.1.
[20] D'Epinay 1951, vol.I, p.295.

only is Emilie prevented from nursing her son, but even from seeing him more than once or twice a week, which hardly makes for healthy family relations.

Later in her novel, d'Epinay recalls how her husband constantly thwarted her plans and desires concerning the upbringing and education of their son and daughter. He ignores her objections to the mediocre tutor he chooses for their son, mocks the ambitiousness of the studies she proposes, and objects to the low priority she gives to *les arts d'agrément* (music, drawing, dance, etc.). His irresponsibility as a parent and his refusal to adopt his wife's progressive plan for their children's education contrast sharply with the Wolmars' affectionate cooperation in such matters in Rousseau's *Julie*. By illustrating the difficulties faced by women married to men whose views they do not share or respect, d'Epinay's novel challenges the idyllic view of marriage and parenthood presented in *Julie*.

In *Montbrillant,* d'Epinay not only describes her frustrations and tribulations as a mother, but is surprisingly candid in expressing the ambivalence she feels toward her children. Despite her efforts to devote herself to her young children following her mother's advice, she openly admits that they cannot console her for the loss of her husband's affections. Emilie's candid recognition of her ambivalence toward motherhood contrasts with the suppression of maternal ambivalence in *Julie*. Whereas Julie pretends to fill the emotional void within her by playing the perfect mother, refusing to admit until her death that Saint-Preux had always been the first object of her affections, Emilie openly expresses her conviction that children cannot fully satisfy a woman's need for love and companionship.

In a clever subversion of the Rousseauian ideal of domesticity, Emilie uses her children's education as a pretext to invite her lover to take up residence at her country estate. Later, he shares these tutorial duties with Volx (her second lover) in an amusing *ménage à trois,* from which Emilie's husband is significantly absent. The parallels are of course striking with Julie's plan to keep Saint-Preux at Clarens as her son's tutor. Through her heroine, d'Epinay both mimics and mocks Julie's exemplary motherhood.

In *Montbrillant,* d'Epinay repeatedly expresses guilt and frustration for not having lived up to the ideals of motherhood and domesticity she herself espoused. These guilt feelings are especially apparent in a conversation between Emilie and her mother, who chides her for neglecting her maternal duties:

> Now is the time to sow the seeds of a good upbringing. You must study your children's inclinations and character, and be with them all the time [...] It is not by playing music, acting in comedies, and engaging in other frivolous activities that you will prepare yourself for your new responsibilities or inspire your children with love for their own duties. Destined to serve as an example, a mother must be very scrupulous in all aspects of her behaviour.[21]

This idealized view of the mother's crucial role as educator and moral exemplar for her children closely parallels the view presented by Rousseau in *Julie* and *Emile*. What distinguishes d'Epinay's novel from both these works is her effort to articulate

[21] Ibid., vol.I. p.547-48.

the complexities of such issues as mother-child relations, maternal breastfeeding, the choice between home-schooling and boarding-school education, and women's participation in the broader cultural sphere beyond the home. By presenting opposing viewpoints on these issues and insights drawn from her own experience, d'Epinay offers a much richer and more nuanced view of the obstacles encountered by mothers who sought to follow Rousseau's teachings yet, at the same time, to fulfil their own needs and desires as women.

As her children grow older, Emilie begins to find great pleasure in their company.[22] Yet her joy as a mother is clouded by the financial uncertainty of their situation and by her son's increasingly marked resemblance to his father. D'Epinay's foreboding concerning her son turned out to be only too well justified, for by the age of twenty-three, he had accumulated so many gambling debts that his parents had him imprisoned for six months. Her friend Galiani tried to console her by pointing to the inexorable influence of heredity: 'Were you ever crazy enough to take Rousseau and his Emile seriously? Did you ever really believe that education [...] can change the way people act and think? If so, then take a wolf and turn it into a dog if you can'.[23]

A year later, in a letter to Diderot, d'Epinay again evoked Rousseau's theories of education as she bitterly reflected on her feelings of failure as a mother:

> The claim that education can somehow be perfected reminds me of a conversation I had fifteen years ago with Jean-Jacques [...] He maintained that, by nature, parents are ill-suited to raise their children. I lacked experience in those days and was filled with illusions. I found his opinion revolting. But my illusions are shattered and I admit now that he was right.[24]

Rather than find fault with Rousseau's theories for the failure of her son's education, d'Epinay blamed her own naïveté in believing she could overcome her son's heredity and the negative influence of her husband's example. In her discouragement, she even began to agree with Rousseau's claim that parents are ill-equipped to raise children and would do better to send them away to state boarding schools. Yet this claim – which Rousseau made no doubt to defend the abandonment of his own children and which he later developed in his *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne* – is in complete contradiction with the pedagogical theories and the ideal of enlightened motherhood he presents in *Julie* and *Emile*.[25] At first, d'Epinay failed to recognize this contradiction and found herself trapped within it. However, in her *Conversations d'Emilie,* as we shall see, she explores the contradictions in Rousseau's views on education, as well as the ambivalence they shared toward parenthood.

[22] 'I sent all my guests away tonight and am going with my children to dine with my mother,' Emilie writes to Volx. 'You can't imagine the children's joy or the pleasure it brings me. I wouldn't give up this evening for many others that might seem more appealing. Children bring a continual source of happiness that can never be enjoyed enough' (D'Epinay 1951, vol.III, p.93).
[23] Letter from Galiani to Madame d'Epinay, 19 Jan. 1771, in Galiani/d'Epinay 1993, p.36.
[24] Letter from Madame d'Epinay to Diderot, Jan. 1772, in Diderot 1970, vol.XII, p.29-30.
[25] The anti-family undercurrents in Rousseau's thought are particularly apparent in his *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne,* (1772) as well as in his *Discours sur l'économie politique* (1775).

Emilie vs. Emile: d'Epinay's views on women's education

Both d'Epinay's autobiographical writings and her pedagogical works can be read as a response to Rousseau's views on female education – particularly to the narrow views set forth in Book v of *Emile*. In her autobiographical writings, d'Epinay carefully retraces and criticizes the upbringing she received as a child, which was not unlike the education outlined by Rousseau for Emile's future wife Sophie. 'I'm very ignorant', she confides. 'My entire education was limited to cultivating female accomplishments and to becoming adept in the art of sophistry.'[26]

In the early years of her marriage, d'Epinay claims to have been primarily motivated in her studies by the desire to be better prepared to raise and educate her children. Soon, however, she came to view study as an end in itself – as a way of becoming more self-sufficient, a source of consolation and pleasure, and a resource against dissipation and boredom. Her view of women scholars was not without ambivalence, however. In a letter to Galiani, she stressed the risks and obstacles that women scholars faced: the danger of neglecting their primary duties as wives and mothers, of being ridiculed for displaying pretensions to learning, and of trying to pursue studies too complex or otherwise inappropriate for their sex – or that they were unable to apply in any useful manner.[27] Yet she also made it clear that the gender hierarchy she was describing stemmed not from natural differences between the sexes, but from differences in social conditioning and inequalities in education. By underlining the complex network of social and educational constraints that prevented women from developing their full potential, d'Epinay implicitly challenged the naturalist-traditionalist view of women epitomized in Rousseau's *Emile*.

To help women provide a sounder education for themselves and their daughters, d'Epinay composed and published her *Conversations d'Emilie,* a series of dialogues between a mother and child patterned after conversations with her granddaughter, who lived with her from 1769 until d'Epinay's death in 1782. Spanning a period of five years beginning when the child was five, the conversations provide detailed practical advice concerning the methods and materials to be used in the upbringing and instruction of girls at home by their mothers. According to Badinter, d'Epinay wrote the *Conversations* to reconcile her aspirations and guilt feelings as a mother with her ambitions as a writer. However, in my view, she composed this work above all as a response and challenge to *Emile*.

In the *Conversations d'Emilie,* d'Epinay points to four major shortcomings in *Emile,* which she strove to overcome in her own work. In her preface, she questions the practical value of abstract theoretical formulations and pedagogical systems in works such as Rousseau's. 'In the field of education, as in most other fields, general precepts are of little use', she asserts. 'By nature, they are too vague to indicate any precise course of action; in fact it's not unusual to see people who preach the same maxims following entirely opposite paths'.[28]

[26] 'Mon Portrait', in d'Epinay 1869, vol.II, p.5.
[27] Letter from Madame d'Epinay to Galiani, 20 Jan. 1771, in Galiani, *Correspondance,* ed. Perey and Maugras, vol.I, p.349. Subsequent quotations from this letter are from this same edition, vol.I, p.347-49.
[28] D'Epinay 1783, vol.I, p.VII.

Second, d'Epinay underlines the fact that her own approach to education was drawn from her daily experience as the mother and educator of real children, which enabled her to join theory with practice and to gear her methods and goals to the real world. D'Epinay's own experience as a mother and grandmother made her wary of pedagogical treatises written by men like Rousseau who never raised children of their own. Her pupil's active involvement in determining what methods and materials were most effective presents a sharp contrast to *Emile,* where pupils are mere puppets in the hands of an omniscient tutor.

A third shortcoming of *Emile* that d'Epinay strove to avoid was Rousseau's preachy tone, 'that imperative, didactic tone which people in a position of authority tend to adopt'.[29] Instead of an abstract pedagogical treatise thinly disguised as a novel, she offered her readers lively conversations drawn from real life, in which theory and practice, style and content, were perfectly fused. Her insistence on the need for confidence and mutual respect between educator and child contrasts with the tyrannical control exercised over Emile by his tutor.

It was above all the stultifying education traditionally given to women – and epitomized in the education prescribed for Sophie in *Emile* – that d'Epinay challenged in the *Conversations.* 'I would not venture to set limits for what our sex can or cannot learn', she declared. 'When I was a child, girls usually were not taught much of anything. People never took our minds seriously and carefully avoided any kind of real instruction'.[30] While Rousseau's perspective was undeniably male-centred in the education he proposed for Sophie, the view of female education presented in the *Conversations d'Emilie* is strikingly feminocentric. D'Epinay was not interested in raising a Sophie, whose main purpose in life was to please her husband and to submit to his whims, but rather an intelligent, autonomous woman capable of finding happiness and fulfilment in herself.

Unlike Rousseau's Sophie, Emilie was taught to read and write before the age of five and, by the age of ten, had been introduced to a broad range of subjects following a plan of studies quite ambitious for the period. However, the true originality of the *Conversations d'Emilie* lies less in the plan or method of studies it proposed (which in fact resembled the more enlightened educations given to boys of the period) than in the self-confidence and self-sufficiency it aimed to foster in women.

Contrary to Rousseau's assertions in Book v of *Emile,* d'Epinay affirms the intellectual equality of women and their right to an equal education. She insists that the intellectual development of women is essential to their happiness and well-being. In contrast to the blind submission to authority instilled in Rousseau's Sophie, d'Epinay encourages her granddaughter to think for herself. Yet ever conscious of the outer constraints placed on women by the society of her period, d'Epinay seeks to give Emilie an education that balances this sense of inner freedom and critical judgment with respect for social roles and conventions.

In the final paragraphs of the *Conversations d'Emilie,* d'Epinay addresses the crucial question left unresolved by Rousseau concerning the relative merits of public

[29] Ibid., vol.I, p.vi.
[30] Ibid., vol.I, p.442-43.

education (or boarding-school educations) as opposed to the education of children by their parents at home. She alludes repeatedly to Rousseau as her 'censor', who favours certain pedagogical views and methods that young Emilie in turn criticizes and ridicules: 'It seems to me, Maman, that your censor approves or disapproves of many things'.[31] After poking fun at Rousseau's views concerning the dangers of *'une culture trop hâtive'* – education that he claims is botched by introducing subjects too early – d'Epinay returns to the choice between public education and home-schooling: 'My censor claims that a gardener who has only a single plant to take care of would run the risk of hampering its growth by too much attention; whereas if he were obliged to divide his time among a certain number of different plants, this danger would be avoided'. To which Emilie replies: 'Goodness, Maman, your censor is starting to annoy me with all his talk about gardeners'![32] She considers that she is an old chatterbox who will spoil our conversation if we let him go on preaching at us'.[33] Yet d'Epinay then surprises her granddaughter (and her readers) by offering a series of forceful arguments in favour of public education:

> One of the key advantages of a republican form of government is the possibility it provides of directly influencing the character of its people, of showing them their individual worth, which they might not have realized otherwise [...] Good public schools follow the republican model and offer the same advantages to their students. The instruction they provide is designed to enhance each student's abilities and talents [...] There, the students' individual efforts and talents [...] determine their success and rank.[34]

This glowing tribute to public education seems strangely out of place at the end of a work ostensibly devoted to promoting progressive home-schooling for girls. However, d'Epinay fully recognized the disadvantages of educating children at home – particularly the danger of spoiling them with too much attention, the lack of social interaction and of healthy competition with other students, and the risk of inferior methods and materials due to parental inexperience or ineptitude. It was only because the boarding schools and convent educations then available for girls presented even greater problems that d'Epinay chose to educate her granddaughter at home: 'After considerable uncertainty, I opted for the disadvantages of a private education at home, despite all its faults, to those of a public education which I could neither approve nor correct'.[35] Referring again to her censor, she maintains that 'as soon as he establishes a public school that follows his own principles, I will be relieved of a great burden, and Emilie will be the first to prove the innumerable advantages of so desirable an institution'.[36] In this open-ended conclusion, d'Epinay was responding to the national education plan proposed by Rousseau to the government of Poland. According to this plan, public education would be exclusively reserved for males, while girls would be relegated to the home to train them for their role as housewives

[31] Ibid., vol.II, p.457.
[32] Ibid., vol.II, p.462.
[33] Ibid., vol.II, p.458.
[34] Ibid., vol.II, p.460-61.
[35] Ibid., vol.II, p.464.
[36] Ibid., vol.II, p.458.

and mothers. In her conditional support for public education, d'Epinay points to the contradictions inherent in Rousseau's so-called republican plan, which served only to reinforce male-domination by continuing to exclude women from the public sphere.

With the passage of time, d'Epinay gradually changed from an enthusiastic admirer of Rousseau into a resisting reader and protesting writer. Drawing on her experiences as a wife and mother, daughter and lover, and responding to the powerful impulse of her talents and ambitions, she came to view his limited vision of female destiny with increasing ambivalence. By engaging in an overt literary rivalry with the author of *Julie* and *Emile,* who epitomized all the traditional prejudices against women authors, d'Epinay both proclaimed and concretized her challenge to the male-dominated literary establishment.

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