

Introduction

An “Other Voice” of the Eighteenth Century

Immortalized by Diderot as “the beautiful and wicked canoness,”¹ the salonnière Claudine-Alexandrine Guérin de Tencin (1682–1749) was, remarkably, a forgotten voice of French literature until well into the twentieth century. The revival of interest in Tencin’s work can be credited to Jean Decottignies, whose 1969 edition of *Mémoires du comte de Comminge* drew attention to her novels. And in 1983, Éditions Desjonquères was launched with the publication of a dozen works, including Tencin’s *Le Siège de Calais*, edited by Jean-Pierre Rémy. Since then, her two other finished novels have been published by Desjonquères: a new presentation of *Mémoires du comte de Comminge*, edited by Michel Delon (1996), and *Les Malheurs de l’amour*, edited by Erik Leborgne (2001).

Tencin’s career as a writer of sentimental fiction might have seemed almost anticlimatic after a life of passion and intrigue in the last decades of the Ancien Régime, but her novels were well received by her contemporaries, and the revival of scholarship on her work in the late 1960s was both merited and timely in the era of feminism and political tumult. Until very recently, however, anglophones could read only two of Tencin’s novels in English: the *Mémoires* in Charlotte Lennox’s translation of 1756 (reissued in a critical edition of 2011), and the *Siège de Calais* in a translation of 1740 (reprinted in 1974). Only *Les Malheurs de l’amour* remained inaccessible to English readers—until now, with this first-ever translation, *The Misfortunes of Love*, accompanied by a new presentation of the *Memoirs*.

A rereading of the novels, as well as critical essays on Tencin and her work, has shown that hers is an “other voice” not only in terms of her preference for historical novels (*nouvelles historiques*) but in her understated, classical style, her worldview, and her feminism. There were, moreover, few novels written by women in the first half of the eighteenth century—certainly fewer than in the late seventeenth century, when the “nouvelle historique” became popular. It seemed appropriate, then, to introduce “la belle et scélérate” Tencin to the wider audience of the “Other Voice in Early Modern Europe” series.

1. Denis Diderot, “Entretien entre d’Alembert et Diderot,” in *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*, vol. 2 (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1875), 109: “la belle et scélérate chanoinesse Tencin.” Diderot’s reference to Tencin as a “canoness” is a sly allusion to her earlier conventual life. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

Coming to Writing

Although published anonymously in her lifetime, Tencin's novels drew critical praise, and their success warranted several editions (including translations into German and—by Giacomo Casanova, no less—into Italian). Later in the nineteenth century, interest in her novels waned, and she would be remembered mostly as a historical figure. But what a figure! A significant participant in the great controversies of her time, hostess of one of the most celebrated, long-lasting salons of the Enlightenment, she was as ambitious as any of her male contemporaries.

Although she devoted much of her energy to promoting the political and ecclesiastical career of her brother, Pierre (1680–1758), Tencin had many irons in the fire. She led campaigns to elect several authors to the Académie française, participated in the aesthetic debate over the Ancients versus the Moderns, and supported the adoption in France of Clement XI's papal bull *Unigenitus Dei Filius* (1713), which condemned Jansenist doctrine in the Catholic Church.² Her reputation suffered thereafter as she became the relentless target of libels and satire in Jansenist newspapers and pamphlets, which then found their way into popular song and rumor.

According to biographers Pierre-Maurice Masson and Jean Sareil,³ much of this reputation consisted of lies. Still, there was enough scandal to turn the mill. Born in Grenoble in 1682, Tencin had been placed in the nearby convent of Montfleury at the age of eight, but rebelled against monastic life and left Montfleury in 1708, ten years after having taken her vows. She was eventually released from her vows in 1712. Once out of the convent and living in Paris with her sister, Madame de Ferriol,⁴ she quickly gained a reputation as a sharp-witted, cultivated socialite who—although never marrying—had liaisons with a number of powerful men. Among the names confirmed by biographers were Philippe d'Orléans (before he served as Regent for Louis XV) and the artillery officer Louis-Camus Destouches, with whom Tencin had a son who would become famous as Jean le Rond d'Alembert. The future mathematician and *philosophe* began his life as an

2. The Jansenist view of Christianity—which took hold primarily in France—emphasized original sin and the innate depravity of a humanity redeemable only through the grace of God, as well as the concept of predestination. Jansenism took its name from the Dutch theologian Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638), whose posthumously-published manuscript explained his theories. Interestingly, the poet Louis Racine, a Jansenist like his playwright father Jean, was a guest at Tencin's salon.

3. See Pierre-Maurice Masson, *Madame de Tencin (1682–1749)* (Paris: Hachette, 1909; rpt. Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1970), and Jean Sareil, *Les Tencin: Histoire d'une famille au dix-huitième siècle, d'après de nombreux documents inédits* (Geneva: Droz, 1970).

4. Marie-Angélique de Ferriol (1674–1736), whose husband was the receiver-general for the Dauphin of France at the time of their wedding; Sareil, 18. Marie-Angélique took into her household the four-year-old child Charlotte Aissé, who would later become a celebrated beauty and letter-writer and whose surname resembles that of the young Eugénie in *The Misfortunes of Love*.

infant left on the steps of the Church of Saint-Jean-le-Rond (after which he was named), abandoned there by his mother and never acknowledged by her—although Destouches arranged to have him raised by a glazier's wife, and supported him financially throughout his life.

Among the other men linked to Tencin were Viscount Bolingbroke (who had escaped to France after the failure of the Jacobite cause in Britain), the poet Matthew Prior, the cardinal Guillaume Dubois—and a tall, handsome soldier named Charles La Fresnais, who committed suicide in her Paris home in 1726 while the house was bustling with guests, leaving behind a note accusing her of infidelity and of causing his financial ruin. The latter accusation, although likely a case of sour grapes due to his own financial ineptitude, led to a faulty, politically-charged investigation that landed Tencin in the Bastille (where Voltaire happened to be in residence) for almost two months before being formally acquitted.

Tencin and her brother had earlier been allied with John Law, the Scottish-born economist who created a private centralized bank in France—based on the sale of stock from investments in Mississippi—in order to save the country from bankruptcy. The Tencins profited greatly from this venture (Claudine-Alexandrine herself launched a short-lived investment brokerage of her own on rue Quincampoix in 1719) before its spectacular failure led to soaring food prices, riots in the streets, and the collapse of France's Banque Générale in 1720.

The ambitions of Pierre Tencin, to whom Claudine devoted herself and through whom she lived vicariously, led him to be named Archbishop of Embrun by Louis XV in 1724. He eventually rose to the rank of cardinal in 1739, but never—despite his sister's relentless efforts—to the political post he so coveted: that of the king's chief minister, a position already being capably fulfilled by Cardinal André-Hercule Fleury (who in fact succeeded in repairing the financial damage done by John Law). When James Stuart, the exiled "Old Pretender" to the thrones of England and Scotland, nominated Pierre to the College of Cardinals in 1728, Fleury vetoed the nomination in the interests of maintaining peace with Britain.⁵ Claudine's activities on behalf of her brother and the anti-Jansenist cause were also monitored closely by Fleury, who ordered her into exile from Paris in 1730 and forced her to stay out of political and religious matters.

Although Tencin would return to Paris some time later on conditions imposed by Fleury, her brief exile—coupled with La Fresnais's suicide—led her to pursue a more intellectual life, if not necessarily a subdued one. Having been a regular guest at the much-admired salon of the Marquise de Lambert,⁶ she went on to host her own salon after Lambert's death, inheriting most of the *philosophes*

5. See Edward Gregg, "Monarchs Without a Crown," in *Royal and Republican Sovereignty in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Memory of Ragnhild Hatton*, edited by Robert Oresko, G.C. Gibbs, and H.M. Scott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 404–6.

6. Anne-Thérèse de Marguenat de Courcelles (1647–1733), Marquise de Lambert.

on Lambert's guest list, including Fontenelle, Marivaux, Montesquieu, Piron, Duclos, Mirabaud, Mairan, Réaumur, and Astruc, among others.

Tencin turned to writing late in life, publishing the *Memoirs of the Count of Comminge* in 1735 at age fifty-three. *The Siege of Calais*, an historical novel loosely based on Edward III's fourteenth-century siege of that city, appeared four years later. After another hiatus, she published *The Misfortunes of Love* (1747) and began a fourth novel, *Anecdotes of the Court and Reign of Edward II of England*, left unfinished at her death in 1749 but later completed by Anne-Louise Elie de Beaumont and published in 1766.⁷ The first three were successes, and despite anonymous publication (common for authors of this period), only those in her inner circle knew that she had authored them.⁸ Critical reviews of Tencin's work focused mainly on her style, which Voltaire praised in a letter to Mademoiselle Quinault: "I am currently reading *Le Siège de Calais* ... [and] finding a pure and natural style for which I have been searching a long time."⁹ In *Le pour et contre*, despite his disappointment about the *Memoirs'* implausible ending, Abbé Prévost agrees with the "unanimous public opinion" that the novel was well written, praising Tencin's style as spirited, elegant, refined, and pure.¹⁰ According to Decottignies, Tencin's style lived up to the ideal described by Fontenelle in his *Réflexions sur la poétique*: "A single brush stroke brings to mind a vivid idea ... conversations ... gather in a minimum of words everything that is most apt to touch the heart."¹¹

Tencin chose to write in a genre known today as the feminine historical novel, which originated in 1678 with Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette's *La Princesse*

7. A fifth novel, *Histoire d'une religieuse écrite par elle-même* (*The Story of a Nun, Written by Herself*) which appeared in a 1786 volume of the *Bibliothèque universelle des romans* was mistakenly attributed to Tencin. Franco Piva attributes it to Jean-François de Bastide: "Sull'attribuzione dell'*Histoire d'une religieuse écrite par elle-même*," *Quaderni di lingue e letteratura straniere*, no. 22 (1997): 121–39.

8. Some have attributed authorship of the novels to Tencin's nephew, Antoine de Ferriol de Pont-de-Veyle, a name which appears on the eighteenth-century English translations; Masson, however, shows convincingly that Pont-de-Veyle could not have written them, based on his own very different style. Montesquieu, a regular in Tencin's salon and a close friend, confirmed after her death that she was indeed the author of the novels. See Masson, 131–33.

9. "Je lis actuellement *le Siège de Calais*; j'y trouve un style pur et naturel que je cherchais depuis longtemps." Letter to Mademoiselle Quinault, in Brussels, July 27, 1739, in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, Vol. 35 (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1880), 306.

10. Abbé Prévost, *Œuvres de Prévost*. Vol. 7 (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1978), 499.

11. "Un seul trait vous porte dans l'esprit une idée vive ... Les conversations ... rassemblent en fort peu d'espace tout ce qui étoit fait pour aller au cœur." Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, "Lettre sur *Eléonore d'Yvrée, ou les Malheurs de l'Amour*, petit Roman de Mademoiselle Bernard, imprimé pour la première fois en 1687," in *Œuvres*, vol. 11 (Paris: Saillant, 1766), 230, as quoted by Jean Decottignies in his introduction to *Mémoires du Comte de Comminge* (Lille: Librairie René Giard, 1969), 38–39.

de Clèves.¹² More precisely, it was the “historical novel of gallantry,” a story of the danger of passion among the nobility at a time of arranged marriages, when women without dowries often ended up in convents at a tender age—like Tencin herself.¹³ Given her sharp wit and impudence, for which her letters provide ample evidence, one would imagine her the author of satire or, as several critics have remarked, of picaresque stories like those of Voltaire, Lesage, Mouhy, or Crébillon fils.¹⁴ Given her colorful life too, one would expect some of her adventures to show up in her fiction; as Masson remarks: “[i]t seems almost impossible that the memories of such a gripping reality did not find their way into her imagination, and that for her the novel did not serve as an adaptation, more or less unconscious, of her past.” However, Masson warns us, “such are the needs of the romantic reader, accustomed to seeing literature as life traced on paper.”¹⁵ Instead, Tencin’s novels are highly sentimental stories about the misfortunes of love that take place in settings anticipating romanticism, even at times the gloom of the Gothic novel.

The novels of the feminine historical tradition, as Shirley Jones has shown, are characterized by the rigorous moral virtue of their heroines, although they sometimes eschew literary propriety, or *bienséance*, in their depiction of moral weakness and, occasionally, bourgeois or peasant characters.¹⁶ Others associated with this school were the Countess d’Aulnoy and Marie-Catherine de Villedieu, as well as Catherine Bernard, the niece of Thomas and Pierre Corneille and a cousin of Fontenelle.¹⁷ Better known for her tragedies, Bernard also wrote a novel whose title Tencin would borrow for her second novel: *Les Malheurs de l’amour*. Bernard’s *Malheurs* was one of two short works written in the vein of La Fayette’s *Princess de Clèves*, and indeed La Fayette remained the touchstone for the feminine historical novel. As one critic wrote in the *Spectateur français* in 1805, La Fayette “had the merit of having reformed the novel as a genre. She was the

12. *La Princesse de Clèves* was the third novel by Madame de La Fayette (1634–93), and the last to be published in her lifetime.

13. See Pierre-Jean Rémy’s discussion of the “nouvelle historique” and “nouvelle historique et galante” in his introduction to *Le Siège de Calais* (Paris: Desjonquères, 1983), xv.

14. Voltaire’s magnum opus *Candide* (1759) was written in the picaresque tradition of works such as Alain-René Lesage’s classic *Gil Blas* (1715); Charles de Fieux de Mouhy and Claude-Prospér Jolyot Crébillon the younger also wrote in this vein.

15. “Il nous semble même presque impossible que les souvenirs d’une réalité si prenante ne se soient pas imposés à son imagination, et que le roman n’ait pas été chez elle une transposition, plus ou moins inconsciente, de son passé. Ce sont là besoins de lecteur romantique, habitué à prendre la littérature comme un décalque de la vie.” Masson, 130.

16. Shirley Jones, “Madame de Tencin: An Eighteenth-Century Woman Novelist,” in *Woman and Society in Eighteenth-Century France: Essays in Honour of John Stevenson Spink*, ed. Eva Jacobs et al. (London: Athlone Press, 1979), 210.

17. Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville, Baroness d’Aulnoy (1650–1705), Marie-Catherine de Villedieu (1640–83), and Catherine Bernard (1662–1712).

first who, in her ingenious stories full of real sensibility, replaced adventures with sentiment and substituted chimeric beings with men such as they are.”¹⁸

Although Tencin takes up the tradition of the “misfortunes of virtue,” her novels differ from those of her predecessors in the degree to which they subvert social and religious norms. The immorality portrayed is not that of the heroines but the men or women who exploit them, whether for material or sexual reasons. The *Memoirs* were particularly subversive in terms of religion, considering Adélaïde’s quasi-blasphemous deathbed confession: “Far from feeling thankful that [Comminge] was on the path to salvation, I blasphemed the Lord for having taken him from me. . . . I watched as an angry God pressed him with the weight of his almighty hand. I believed that the love that I bore even to the foot of altars had drawn divine vengeance on the object of that love” (*Memoirs*, 60).¹⁹

Still, the question posed by Jones continues to puzzle readers today: “why did women novelists, including Mme de Tencin, writing in the 1730s, choose to cling to a musty historical décor when the novel was beginning to emancipate itself from the shackles of classical aesthetics and adopt a more immediate view of reality?”²⁰ Jones offers three possible explanations. First, *history* had become a literary subgenre which women could exploit without risk to their reputation; one must remember that in the 1730s the novel was still very much a maligned, unproven genre (compared to theater and verse), and women were less likely than their male counterparts to venture into a picaresque realism so removed from the aesthetic norms of *bienséance*. Second, the role of historical novelist gave women an instrument of revenge, as it were, for the limits placed on their sex; they now had the opportunity to rewrite history. Third, the frequent choice of settings of these novels, in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, brought with it the ethos of chivalry and chivalric love, which La Fayette and her followers “sought to extol.” And taking into account the belief, “current at that time, that the Middle Ages were also a period of gloom and violence, one readily understands its appeal for exponents of the sentimental novel.”²¹ This is arguably the most convincing of the reasons for Tencin’s choice of an outdated genre; the temporal setting lent itself well to a feminine sensibility, one which the quasi-realism of Lesage, Mouhy,

18. “Sur les Œuvres de Mmes de la Fayette et de Tencin,” *Spectateur français au dix-neuvième siècle*, vol. 2 (1805), 637: “Madame de la Fayette a le mérite d’avoir réformé le genre des romans. Elle est la première qui, dans ses fictions ingénieuses et pleines d’une sensibilité vraie, ait mis les sentimens à la place des aventures, et substitué à des êtres chimériques, les hommes tels qu’ils sont.”

19. *Mémoires*, 173 and 178: “loin de benir le Seigneur de l’avoir mis dans la voie sainte, je blasphemai contre lui de me l’avoir ôté. . . . je vis Dieu irrité appesantir sa main toute puissante sur lui; je crus que cet amour que je portais jusqu’aux pieds des autels, avait attiré la vengeance celeste sur celui qui en était l’objet.” All French quotations in the notes are taken from the first edition (1735) of the *Mémoires* (hereafter cited as “*Mémoires*”).

20. Jones, 211.

21. Jones, 212.

or Crébillon fils did not accommodate. Furthermore, historical distance, like the geographical or cultural distance in exotic literature, added a buffer to any commentary or social criticism that might have been controversial by making it indirectly.

Enlightened Sensibility

As Michel Delon suggests in his introduction to *Mémoires du Comte de Comminge*, Tencin's choice of historical settings (spanning from the late Middle Ages to the seventeenth century) may be explained by the fact that "sensitive souls, as in the great Baroque novel, create the extraordinary circumstances they need in order to fully realize their capacity to love and to suffer."²² In the words of the Count of Comminge: "when the heart is truly moved, it takes pleasure in all that confirms its unique sensibility" (*Memoirs*, 40)²³—in other words, an ideal framework in which to explore the emotions. Tencin takes what had become in the feminine historical novels a "cult of suffering" to darker places full of pathos. In this respect, her interest in representing complex emotions in tragic circumstances links her work to her British contemporary Samuel Richardson, and to Abbé Prévost, whose primary goal (as one of his fictional editors exclaims) was "[t]o penetrate the human heart, which we think of as impenetrable! Yes, if despite popular belief, certain unknown passages, formed by nature, gave access to those who could discover them."²⁴ As Pierre Masson observes, Tencin "never intended to disorient her (mostly female) readers by presenting them with strange characters in exotic landscapes. It seems on the contrary that she remained voluntarily faithful to all the outdated conventions of the traditional novel, to draw attention mainly to minute psychological details."²⁵

Freudians of their time, authors like Abbé Prévost, Tencin, and Pierre Marivaux shared a quasi-scientific interest in the emotions, influenced partly by Descartes' *Passions of the Soul*—although sentiment in early eighteenth-century literature took on a more positive meaning than passion for Descartes or Racine,

22. See the cover of Delon's edition of *Mémoires du Comte de Comminge*: "Les âmes sensibles, comme dans le grand roman baroque, créent les circonstances extraordinaires dont elles ont besoin pour connaître toute leur faculté d'aimer et de souffrir." Paris: Desjonquères, 1996.

23. *Mémoires*, 54: "quand le cœur est véritablement touché, il sent du plaisir à tout ce qui lui prouve à lui-même sa propre sensibilité."

24. Abbé Prévost, *Le monde moral*, in *Œuvres de Prévost*, vol. 6 (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1984), 289.

25. "Aussi bien n'était-ce pas son intention de dépayser ses lectrices, en leur montrant des figures inconnues dans des paysages exotiques. Il semblerait même qu'elle soit restée volontairement fidèle à tous ces procédés surannés du roman traditionnel, pour ramener plus sûrement l'attention sur les menus détails psychologiques." Masson, 154.

becoming, as Philip Stewart has shown, a more subtle and varied concept.²⁶ The quest to delve further into psychology also grew out of the feminine-led salons, from those of the Marquise de Rambouillet²⁷ in the mid-seventeenth century to those of the Marquise de Lambert and Tencin in the eighteenth, in which emotions of the heart were a source of great curiosity and intellectual pleasure—“jouissance,” in Masson’s words.²⁸ An ever-present figure in the salons of Lambert and Tencin, and one who would outlive them all, was Fontenelle, an enthusiastic proponent of this kind of inquiry, which he called “the singularity or the delicate bizarreness of the effects of passion.”²⁹ This is what critics of the time called the “metaphysics of sentiment,” or in Lambert’s case, “the metaphysics of love.”³⁰

Tencin’s novels in fact drew upon a mix of genres: the baroque novel of adventures, the fictional “histories” of which *La Princesse de Clèves* was the model, and the fictionalized memoirs and epistolary novels made popular by Prévost, Marivaux, and Montesquieu. As Jean Decottignies argues in the preface to *Memoirs of the Count of Comminge*, there is really very little truly original in the novel in terms of invention and topoi. Like La Fayette, d’Aulnoy, and Bernard, Tencin found in the *roman d’aventures*—still a very popular genre in her day and somewhat of a guilty pleasure for writers like Voltaire—a likely backdrop for the portrayal of intense emotions, especially those stemming from the suffering associated with passion, incompatible as it was, even in the eighteenth century, with the social structure. In Tencin’s work, the “cult of suffering,” with roots in troubadour lyrics and Petrarch’s poetry, allows for a deeper psychological inquiry and memory.³¹ The opening lines of the *Memoirs*, her first work, state what would become a recurring theme in her fiction: “In writing my memoirs, I hope for nothing other than to recall every last detail of my misfortunes, and to engrave them deeper still, if possible, into my memory” (*Memoirs*, 31).³²

26. See Philip Stewart, *L’invention du sentiment: Roman et économie affective au XVIIIe siècle* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010), 2.

27. Catherine de Vivonne, Marquise de Rambouillet (1588–1665), whose salon guests included Madame de La Fayette.

28. See Masson, 201–3.

29. “La singularité ou la bizarrerie délicate des effets d’une passion.” Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, *Réflexions sur la Poétique*, in *Ceuvres*, vol. 4 (Paris: Salmon, 1825), 320, as quoted by Decottignies, introduction to *Mémoires*, 37.

30. See Jean Sgard, *Prévost romancier* (Librairie José Corti, 1989), 170.

31. See, for example, poem 61 of the *Canzoniere*: “And blessed be that first sweet breathlessness / That caught at me as I was bound to Love, / The bow, the darts that pierced me, be they blest / And wounds so deep they struck me to the heart.” “Affano” is translated literally as breathlessness here. Figuratively it signifies “grief, anxiety, stress.” See James Wyatt Cook, trans., *Petrarch’s Songbook: Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1996), 101.

32. *Mémoires*, 1: “Je n’ai d’autre dessein en écrivant les Mémoires de ma vie, que de rappeler les plus petites circonstances de mes malheurs, et de les graver, s’il est possible, plus profondément dans mon

Tencin was not the only author of her time to exploit the historical memoir and elements of the old but still popular *roman d'aventures*. In 1735, she would certainly have read the first five volumes of Prévost's *Cleveland*, a lengthy novel full of transatlantic crossings, duels, shipwrecks, tragic quid pro quos, and reflections of the narrator (a bastard son of Oliver Cromwell), who claims to be the most unfortunate man on earth. In this novel, Prévost grafted a new narrative device onto an old genre—a study of the narrator's emotions and those of secondary, embedded narrators, and a type of contract with the reader, which Prévost's narrators make explicit. They challenge the reader's sensibility, soliciting his or her capacity to empathize. "One must have felt the pains of another," Cleveland tells us, "or have at least felt that one can experience them, to take in interest in them through compassion."³³

Unlike Prévost's narrators, who occasionally address the reader, Tencin never makes such asides. Nonetheless, two elements of her fiction challenge the reader's sensibility: on the one hand, the modeling of empathetic listening within the narrative, to which there are references throughout the *Memoirs* and *The Misfortunes of Love*; on the other hand, the numerous maxims which punctuate the narrative, engaging the reader with more universal thoughts which take us out of the narrative, like the essayistic thoughts of the "philosophe anglais," Cleveland.

In the *Memoirs*, the narrator's father despises his cousin and rival, the Marquis de Lussan, father of Adélaïde. The narrator, under a false identity, encounters Adélaïde by chance, falls helplessly in love, and wins her love. He fights over her in a duel, and saves her at the scene of a carriage accident upon which he happens (an implausible coincidence typical of the *roman d'aventures*). But his father vehemently opposes their marriage, locking his son up in a chateau to prevent it. To free him, Adélaïde sacrifices herself by marrying the unlikeable, unattractive Marquis de Bénavidès. After several months, the free but despairing Comminge enters the Bénavidès chateau masquerading as a painter. Caught kneeling at Adélaïde's feet by her husband in what he intends as a final adieu, he defends himself against Bénavidès, whom he wounds badly. Later, believing Adélaïde to have died from an illness as her husband had announced publicly, he retreats to a Cistercian abbey. Years later, the deathbed confession of a fellow monk turns out to be that of Adélaïde. Freed by the death of her husband, who had had her secretly locked up for two years, she is on her way to the convent where she intends to spend the rest of her days when she is mysteriously drawn to the Cistercian abbey and recognizes Comminge's voice singing among those of the monks. She disguises herself as a monk in order to be near him. Determined to respect his repose there, she does not speak to him or reveal her identity, observing him in

souvenir."

33. "Il faut avoir éprouvé les douleurs qu'un autre sent," Cleveland tells us, "ou sentir du moins qu'on peut les éprouver, pour être capable de s'y intéresser par la compassion . . ." *Œuvres de Prévost*, II, 378.

silence as he mourns her and performs acts of humility required of Cistercians, like digging his own grave—a reminder that the cloister is comparable to death, “to bury[ing] yourself alive,” as Eugénie tells Pauline in *The Misfortunes of Love*.³⁴

In the *Mémoires* we see several traits that Suzanne Keen identifies in her research on novels most apt to solicit readers’ empathy—namely, first-person memoirs which, like epistolary novels, establish an intimate link with the reader, and the example of empathetic listening/reading within the narrative.³⁵ Keen notes, based on empirical studies of reader reactions, that empathy is more likely to be elicited by imaginary, unrealistic narratives (as opposed to those representing reality as experienced by readers). Tencin’s choice of distant historical settings and borrowings from the fanciful *roman d’aventure* serve as good examples of this, even from an eighteenth-century reader’s perspective. As well, by challenging the reader’s sensibility, Tencin’s narrators allow us to be among the “in-group” (in Keen’s phrase) of sensitive souls capable of understanding the code of sensibility.

Again, as in *Cleveland* and *Memoirs of a Man of Quality*, the narrator enjoys exclusive communication with others who share his heightened sensibility, notably Adélaïde: “Hearts as sensitive as ours understand each other instantly: they know all forms of expression” (*Memoirs*, 34).³⁶ Like the narrator of *Misfortunes*, communication with the beloved requires only a glance, and at times emotional pain takes the place of words: “the pain I felt expressed my feelings better than words” (*Memoirs*, 39), a subtle language to which the reader is privy.³⁷

Prévost’s narrators often challenge the reader’s sensibility by implying that only those who have felt the emotions described by the narrator can fully understand his or her account. Des Grieux enjoins the reader to be as sensitive to Manon Lescaut’s contrition by implying that to do otherwise would be barbarous: “What barbarian could have remained unmoved in the face of such sincere, such tender, remorse?”³⁸ He later suggests that there exists a nobility of character not

34. *Malheurs (Première partie)*, 245: “vous enterrer toute vive.” All French quotations in the notes are taken from the first edition (1747) of *Les Malheurs de l’amour* (hereafter cited as “*Malheurs*” and specifying Part One [*Première partie*] or Part Two [*Seconde partie*], the latter consisting largely of Eugénie’s story).

35. Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 96–97.

36. *Mémoires*, 22: “Les cœurs aussi sensibles que les nôtres s’entendent bien vite: tout est expressif pour eux.” The last volume of the lengthy *Memoirs of a Man of Quality* (1728–31), Prévost’s first novel, contains *The History of Manon Lescaut and the Chevalier des Grieux*; the story became so popular that it was published in a tome by itself and remains the Abbé’s best known work, especially with the nineteenth-century operatic settings of the novel by Puccini and Massenet.

37. *Mémoires*, 51: “ma douleur lui parla pour moi, bien mieux que je n’eusse pu faire.”

38. George D. Gribble, trans., *The History of Manon Lescaut and the Chevalier Des Grieux*, by Abbé Prévost (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1925), 95. Frédéric Deloffre and Raymond Picard, eds., *Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* by Abbé Prévost (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1965), 47: “Où trouver un barbare qu’un repentir si vif et si tendre neût pas touché?”

found in the average person: “people of a finer mould can be moved in a thousand ways; it is as though they possessed more than five senses and were receptive of ideas and sensations which lie outside the ordinary faculties of human nature.”³⁹ Tencin’s narrators appeal to the reader’s sensibilities less directly, mainly through the interactions of the protagonists and those who understand them, but occasionally in the form of maxims referring to sensitive souls as a privileged group, as, for example the communication between Comminge and Adélaïde, whose sensitive hearts “understand each other instantly.” The references to an “in-group” serve as reminders to the reader of her or his access to this *un-happy few*.

In *Misfortunes*, Tencin continues to exploit the pathos of “destructive eros,” mining the sentimental drama it creates in an early sixteenth-century setting.⁴⁰ It is in fact the story of three women: Pauline, the principal narrator, mentored by the nun Eugénie, whose story serves as a caution to her protégée, and finally Hippolyte, a woman who falls in love with and bears a child by Barbasan, only to realize that he had loved Pauline all along. Briefly, when the wealthy bourgeois heiress (Pauline) first comes out of the convent, she falls in love with Barbasan, a noble whose status fails to impress her ambitious mother, determined to marry her to someone connected to the court. Accused of murder after a fatal duel and imprisoned, Barbasan manages to flee to Frankfurt with the help of the jailer’s daughter (Hippolyte). Learning of his exile there, Pauline follows him, only to see him in church with Hippolyte. She assumes that Barbasan has betrayed her, while in fact the duel that imprisoned him was part of a scheme by her greedy new stepfather to prevent her from marrying and bearing heirs. Taking Eugénie’s advice, she marries a dotting, much older Monsieur de Hacqueville, mainly to avenge what she considered Barbasan’s betrayal.

Eugénie tells a similar story of betrayal, lost love, and a marriage that is meant to avenge herself but turns out to be yet another betrayal. She gives birth to a child fathered by the Count of Blanchefort, who soon regrets his attachment and marriage proposal because of Eugénie’s low social status, and abandons them. When the child later dies, she returns to the convent in despair, only to learn that she is of noble descent and heiress to a great fortune. La Valette, her beloved, returns to explain that despite an engagement he broke off and a byzantine series of misunderstandings, he had loved her all along. Eugénie, still dutiful though an abandoned wife, determined to live out her life in retreat, begs him to leave her, but he cannot. In the end, the two share “the charm of a friendship both tender and lasting,” to which La Valette would “devote himself entirely” (*Misfortunes*,

39. Gribble, 128. Deloffre and Picard, 47 and 81: “les personnes d’un caractère plus noble peuvent être remuées de mille façons différentes”; “il semble qu’elles aient plus de cinq sens, et qu’elles puissent recevoir des idées et des sensations qui passent les bornes ordinaires de la nature.”

40. See Erik Leborgne, introduction to *Les Malheurs de l’amour* (Paris: Desjonquères, 2001), 11.

121).⁴¹ This unexpected ending, of love transformed into platonic friendship and renunciation of passion, recalls that of Françoise de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (also from 1747), an historical novel of letters resembling a memoir, in which a Peruvian princess exiled in France (to escape the Conquistadors' invasion) resists a suitor's efforts to marry her.⁴² They too forego passion to conserve their energy ("économiser nos ressources") in close friendship, Zilia retreating to a country home not unlike a convent.

The Misfortunes of Love ends with Hippolyte's deathbed confession and Pauline's belated forgiveness of Barbasan, whose child she adopts. Pauline and Eugénie, like Adélaïde of the *Memoirs*, remain committed to marital duty despite their suffering, and, like Madame de La Fayette's *princesse*, retreat to the convent in search of peace ("repos").⁴³

The "Cult of Suffering"

The suffering that Tencin depicts in all her novels creates a poignant sense of tragedy which aims to provoke, if not catharsis, then the emotions of the protagonists in the reader. The aging narrator of the *Memoirs* so values the memory of the misfortunes themselves, he suggests, that he must (rather masochistically) "engrave them" in his memory to relive both his love for Adélaïde and the pain it caused. As in *Cleveland*, suffering is often accompanied by a certain joy, even elation, forming a leitmotif throughout the *Memoirs* and *Misfortunes*: for the Count of Comminge, the idea of confronting his father with his determination to marry Adélaïde, and the pain of having to wait for his return home, fills his heart "with a feeling close to joy" (*Memoirs*, 41).⁴⁴ Examples abound of pain or suffering mixed with the pleasure of indulging in those thoughts: cut off from Adélaïde forever after badly wounding her husband, Comminge plans to escape to a place where he would let himself "fall altogether prey to my suffering. The idea of making myself even more miserable than I was seemed almost pleasurable" (*Memoirs*, 52).⁴⁵ He is not the only character who seems to relish misfortune; in love with him, but

41. *Malheurs (Seconde partie)*, 179–80: "les charmes de la plus tendre et de la plus solide amitié ... [pour laquelle] il voulait se garder tout entier."

42. Françoise de Graffigny (1695–1758) was also a salonnière, as well as a playwright. Her *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* resembles a memoir because the reader sees only the heroine's letters, and thus only her perspective.

43. Early in the story, Pauline declares that she would rather enter a convent than marry the marquis selected for her. Eugénie then asks her: "Do you fancy yourself the heroine of a novel, who locks herself in a cloister because she does not get the suitor of her choice?" (*Misfortunes*, 76).

44. *Mémoires*, 60: "un sentiment qui approchait presque de la joie."

45. *Mémoires*, 129: "où je pusse être en proie à toute ma douleur. J'imaginai presque un plaisir à me rendre encore plus misérable que je ne l'étais."

anticipating the obstacles they face, Adélaïde admits: “I foresee only misfortune, and yet I feel such pleasure in my feelings for you” (*Memoirs*, 36).⁴⁶

In *Misfortunes*, the characters’ emotional suffering appears to increase exponentially as the story unfolds: as Hippolyte asks, “How could I imagine that misfortune a thousand times worse awaited me?” (*Misfortunes*, 130).⁴⁷ The tragedy again stems from an ironic misunderstanding and circumstances beyond the heroine’s control, which make passion destructive and painful; when Eugénie fears that Barbasan will hang for the fatal duel he survives, she feels as though she were on the scaffold, and cannot conceive that those who were actually about to die could be in a state more deplorable than hers. Suffering takes a physical toll in *Misfortunes*, often associated with suffocation: “the pain suffocated me” / “choked by tears” / “choked by tears and sobbing” (*Misfortunes*, 120).⁴⁸ But as in *Cleveland* and the *Memoirs*, suffering, especially for love, is delectable. A new misfortune, Pauline explains, is nourishment for an already suffering heart—“as though more suffering brought with it a sort of relief.”⁴⁹

These seemingly masochistic descriptions of consolation in suffering are contingent on the heroine’s virtue; as Pauline remarks: “Some suffering brings with it a pleasant sort of feeling, but that only occurs if we cry over someone we love, not over our own errors” (*Misfortunes*, 134).⁵⁰ Likewise, Hippolyte, the jailer’s daughter who relentlessly pursues Barbasan despite signs that he is in love with someone else, reflects: “[m]y suffering does not warrant telling. It is merely the result of my waywardness” (*Misfortunes*, 125).⁵¹ The pain that Tencin’s protagonists savor is that of the misfortunes of virtue or of heroic love, which they sublimate. But the pleasure so often referred to in the context of suffering from love lost may not be masochistic so much as confessional, linked to the act of narration, both within the story with empathetic interlocutors and outside the text with the reader.

The embedded stories within the main narrative of *Misfortunes* create a polyphony that solicits readers’ empathy all the more as Pauline hears Eugénie’s tale,

46. *Mémoires*, 30–31: “Je n’envisage que des malheurs, et cependant je trouve du plaisir à sentir ce que je sens pour vous.”

47. *Malheurs (Seconde partie)*, 249: “Comment m’imaginer que des malheurs mille fois plus grands m’attendaient encore?”

48. *Malheurs (Première partie)*: “la douleur me suffoquait” (132) / “nos larmes nous suffoquaient” (189); *Malheurs (Seconde partie)*: “suffoqué par ses larmes et par ses sanglots” (168).

49. *Malheurs (Première partie)*, 207: “il semble qu’on trouve une espèce de soulagement à voir croître ses peines.”

50. *Malheurs (Seconde partie)*, 285–86: “Il y a des douleurs qui portent avec elles une sorte de douceur; mais il faut ... n’avoir à pleurer que ce qu’on aime, et n’avoir pas à pleurer ses propres fautes.”

51. *Malheurs (Seconde partie)*, 211: “mes peines ne méritent pas d’être contées; elles ne sont que trop dûes à mes folies.”

so like her own, Eugénie herself having been portrayed as empathetic to Pauline's story: "She suffered along with me, and, in doing so, gave me the only consolation that could make a difference" (*Misfortunes*, 88).⁵² And there are minor characters within embedded stories that model similar listening—for example, Eugénie's own mentor in the convent, Madame du Paraclet, whose pity "brought her even closer to the unfortunate young woman" (*Misfortunes*, 110).⁵³

In addition, while the *Memoirs* are framed by the conventional device of a fictional editor finding an authentic manuscript, *Misfortunes* and *The Siege of Calais* are dedicated to individuals with whom the author appears on intimate terms: "I write for you alone. The only success I hope for is to pay you homage. You are the world to me" (*Misfortunes*, 64).⁵⁴ Although we will never know to whom these epistles were dedicated, some scholars suggest that they were fictional persons—in which case one could say that the modeling of empathetic reading extends to a second person implied reader, "vous," over whose shoulder, so to speak, the reader is allowed to look on in turn (recalling the notion of an "in-group" of readers). Likewise, within the story, Pauline remembers devouring novels in the convent, and how her natural sensibility made this so pleasurable: "I took a keen interest in my heroes; their happiness and misfortunes were my own" (*Misfortunes*, 69).⁵⁵

Although the most prevalent theme of *Misfortunes*, as in the *Memoirs*, is emotional suffering ("douleur"), Tencin focuses not just on suffering, but on the complexity and simultaneity of emotions, often indescribable, and left to the imagination of the listener. "How can I do justice to what I felt in my heart?" Hippolyte asks, echoing other characters' frustrations (*Misfortunes*, 126).⁵⁶ There are also attempts to depict the dynamics of emotions, usually expressed in the form of maxims. "How quickly passion carries us away as soon as we concede to it in the least!" Pauline says, early in the novel, of her love for Barbasan (*Misfortunes*, 79). Much later, writing of Monsieur d'Hacqueville, she reflects: "Respect, friendship, gratitude formed together a sort of illusory emotion, and by dint of wanting to love him, I convinced myself that I did love him, hoping to escape from the constraint that trapped us" (*Misfortunes*, 123).⁵⁷ These nuances of emotion, the

52. *Malheurs (Première partie)*, 177: "elle s'affligeait avec moi, et me donnait par là la seule consolation dont j'étais susceptible."

53. *Malheurs (Seconde partie)*, 90: "[Sa] pitié ... l'attachait encore plus fortement à cette malheureuse fille."

54. *Malheurs (Première partie)*, Épître dédicatoire à M...: "Je n'écris que pour vous. Je ne désire des succès que pour vous en faire hommage. Vous êtes l'Univers pour moi."

55. *Malheurs (Première partie)*, 36: "Je m'intéressais à mes héros, leur malheur et leur bonheur étaient les miens."

56. *Malheurs (Seconde partie)*, 221: "Comment vous peindre ce qui se passait dans mon cœur!"

57. *Malheurs (Première partie)*, 111: "Avec quelle rapidité les passions nous emportent dès que nous leur avons cédé le moins du monde!" *Malheurs (Seconde partie)*, 198: "L'estime, l'amitié, la reconnaissance

“inner workings of the heart” that fascinated authors like Fontenelle, Marivaux, and Prévost, represented in their eyes a hidden dimension of human existence not unlike, to use Prévost’s metaphor, another continent (what we would call the unconscious) to which the discovery of some “unknown passage” might grant access.

Cloisters, Prisons, Solitude

Another topos common to the feminine historical novels following in the wake of *La Princesse de Clèves* are the prisons, both real and metaphorical, of which the cloister is often a figure in Tencin’s fiction. She makes heavy use of somber settings: convents, monasteries, family and royal prisons, and the dark forests of the Gévaudan (Lozère), for which Comminge expresses a pre-Rousseauian, pre-Romantic predilection: “I found this wilderness pleasant simply because it increased my melancholy. I spent entire days in the forest, and upon my return wrote letters expressing all of my feelings” (*Memoirs*, 40).⁵⁸ In fact, the novel anticipates the dungeons and forests of the Gothic novel.⁵⁹ In his first days at the Abbey, after hearing the false news of Adélaïde’s death, Comminge recalls: “The awful solitude, the eternal silence of this place, the sadness of everyone around me, allowed me to fully embrace the pain which had become so precious to me, and which almost substituted for what I had lost” (*Memoirs*, 59).⁶⁰ One of the more extreme examples of isolation is Cleveland’s Rumney Hole, where Cromwell’s former mistress raises and educates her bastard son to protect him against his tyrannical father. The cave, from which Cleveland emerges as a young man—just as Tencin’s Pauline and Eugénie emerge from the convent—evokes the alternative space to the social “world,” one devoted to self-exploration, writing, reading, and philosophy. It too

me composaient une sorte de sentiment, qui me fit illusion, et à force de vouloir l’aimer, je me persuadais que je l’aimais.”

58. *Mémoires*, 55: “Cette demeure si sauvage me plaisait, par cela même qu’elle ajoutait encore à ma mélancholie; je passais les journées entières dans les bois; j’écrivais quand j’étais revenu, des lettres, où j’exprimais tous mes sentiments.”

59. See Maurice Lévy’s study of Tencin’s influence on Ann Radcliffe’s fiction, most notably on *A Sicilian Romance* (1790): “Une nouvelle source d’Anne Radcliffe: *Les Mémoires du Comte de Comminge*.” *Caliban* 1 (1964): 149–156. In addition to somber atmospheric and architectural references, the Marquis de Mazzini of *A Sicilian Romance* sequesters his wife in a dark prison of his chateau just as Bénavidés does in the *Mémoires*. Lévy also notes the importance of Tencin’s influence on Thomas Baculard d’Arnaud, one of the early proponents of the gothic novel, whose work Radcliffe would have known. It was d’Arnaud who adapted the *Mémoires* to the stage with *Les Amans malheureux, ou le Comte de Comminge, drame en trois actes et en vers*.

60. *Mémoires*, 166–67: “L’affreuse solitude, le silence qui regnait toujours dans cette maison, la tristesse de tous ceux qui m’environnaient me laissaient tout entier à cette douleur qui m’était devenue si chère, qui me tenait presque lieu de ce que j’avais perdu.”

evokes “the unconscious workings of the text,” in which the reader is invited to participate, as Leborgne has shown.⁶¹

Despite the injustice of the convent or monastery, which became de facto asylums for women without dowries and men without inheritances, and despite the rigors of prison, Tencin’s characters take consolation there. When Comminge is locked up for having betrayed his father, he describes his first days there as relatively tranquil, even pleasant (*Memoirs*, 41).⁶² After being discovered in Adélaïde’s home and gravely wounding her husband, he seeks refuge in a monastery, where eventually, disguised as a man, she does the same. The convent in *Misfortunes* is both a beginning and an end for Pauline and Eugénie, serving as a place of compulsory education and a refuge from cruelty, from passion, and from the exploitation of her family. But unlike the equivocal retreat of the Princesse de Clèves, who chooses repose in the convent over the passion she feels for Nemours, the convent in Tencin’s later fiction takes on a more positive meaning, one of self-preservation and independence; Eugénie, Pauline’s counterpart in *Misfortunes*, ultimately returns there, preferring repose to the proposals of her Nemours, La Valette. Determined to limit their initially passionate relationship to friendship, she—like Graffigny’s *Péruvienne*—subverts the economy of passion so costly to women: “The relationship that they established thereafter allowed them to savor the charm of a friendship both tender and lasting” (*Misfortunes*, 121).⁶³

Other forms of isolation for which the cloisters and prisons of the novels act as metaphors take place on the intersubjective level, often the effect of misunderstandings or miscommunication and the narrative irony they create. Adélaïde finds Comminge years after he learns of her death, when she is looking for a convent to which she might retreat in her own despair. Torn between her sense of duty and her need to be near him, she disguises herself as a monk and, in effect,

61. “Le lecteur sensible ... est appelé à s’identifier affectivement au héros malheureux, mais aussi à participer à sa manière au travail inconscient du text.” Erik Leborgne, *Figures de l’imaginaire dans le Cleveland de Prévost* (Paris: Desjonquères, 2006), 29.

62. *Mémoires*, 63: “avec assez de tranquillité, et même avec une sorte de plaisir.”

63. *Malheurs (Seconde partie)*, 179–80: “Le commerce qui s’établit dès lors entre eux leur a fait goûter à l’un et à l’autre les charmes de la plus tendre et de la plus solide amitié.” In Graffigny’s *Lettres d’une Péruvienne* (also from 1747), the heroine refuses the economy of passion for that of platonic friendship, repose, philosophy and “[l]e plaisir d’être; ce plaisir oublié, ignoré même de tant d’aveugles humains.” *Lettres portugaises, Lettres d’une Péruvienne, et d’autres romans d’amour par lettres* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), 362. Likewise, *Anecdotes of the Court and Reign of Edward II of England* ends with the retreat of the heroine and the choice of platonic friendship or marriage. Although *Anecdotes* was completed by Elie de Beaumont, the ending is consonant with Tencin’s earlier novels: Mademoiselle de Gloucester refuses the Count of Pembroke’s marriage offer, but attains the “only real form of happiness one can hope for in old age, ... the sweetness of an inalterable attachment”—a lasting but platonic friendship with him both in and out of the convent to which she retires, seeking peace (*repos*) from the world.

becomes a silent companion, working and suffering secretly alongside him for years. In *Misfortunes*, Tencin underscores the feeling of isolation through misunderstandings, lies, and narrative irony (the dramatic result of prolonged misunderstandings or non-communication among characters). Pauline and Barbasan are separated by distance when the latter is forced into exile in Frankfurt, but she weds Monsieur d'Hacqueville only based on a rumor that Barbasan had married and would never return. Her elder counterpart, Eugénie, believes La Valette unfaithful, and when he finally returns to offer a long explanation of his service to a friend, which prevented him from courting Eugénie, his story comes too late for her, already scarred from her abandonment by another and the tragic death of her illegitimate child. The false information that leads both Pauline and Eugénie to marry unhappily underscores the fact that love in Tencin's novels inevitably leads to suffering, but the tragedy brought on by miscommunication and rumor represents another degree of isolation; ultimately, the objects of desire of Tencin's heroes and heroines (like those of Prévost, Marivaux, and Richardson) resist transparency, remaining unattainable to some degree through their mystery—evoking the philosophical debate around the opacity of other minds.⁶⁴ Isolation is further compounded by lies and manipulation, for example, when Pauline's stepfather attempts to sabotage her relationship with Barbasan, and ultimately condemns her to the convent to assure the succession of her fortune to his son. The resulting portrait of both the aristocratic “petits maîtres” and a bourgeoisie desperate for legitimacy makes for dark satire, but the resulting physical and intersubjective isolation is as striking. Such isolation also underscores the value of a select group of empathetic interlocutors who share the hypersensibility of the narrators.

A Heroine's Text

Considering Tencin's novels in light of eighteenth-century narrative patterns, it is somewhat surprising that despite being of the few female authors of her time, her narratives reproduce the pattern of patriarchal ideology. In Nancy Miller's seminal study, *The Heroine's Text*, she demonstrates how many novels of the period follow an “ideology that codes femininity in paradigms of sexual vulnerability”—the tragic misstep of being seduced, of giving in to passion, having such devastating consequences. In fact, Tencin's endings, with the exception of *The Siege of Calais*, fall into the category of what Miller labels “dysphoric texts”—in which the heroine either dies or retreats to a convent, as in *La Princesse de Clèves*—as opposed to the “euphoric” texts which end with successful integration into society.⁶⁵ But as Miller

64. See John Wisdom, *Other Minds*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

65. Nancy K. Miller, *The Heroine's Text: Readings in the French and English Novel, 1722–1782* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), x–xi. *The Siege de Calais*, with its happy ending of a double

herself notes in an essay devoted to *Mémoires du Comte de Comminge*, the role of passion in Tencin's *œuvre* is not based on class identity (as in Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* or Marivaux's *La vie de Marianne*) so much as gender identity. Given this, Miller asks: "What difference does sexual difference make? If in feminist writing passion's ideal form is sublimation, then the difference within that difference is that women are superior to men; they love better."⁶⁶ Seen from this perspective, one can understand why Tencin was drawn to the feminine historical tradition begun in the seventeenth century, in which the cult of suffering, inextricably tied to sublimated love, only underscored the hopelessness for women in a patriarchal society. While it expressed indirectly the feminine condition veiled in historical contexts (just as exoticism allowed for social and political critique), it also created an idealized world to counter it: the sublimated love and suffering empathically shared by the eighteenth-century (mostly female) readership. This in itself could be seen as a consoling alternative to the patriarchal realities that sacrificed women to the convent or forced the most powerful of them, including Tencin, to live vicariously through another—in Tencin's case, through the career of her brother.

Tencin, Salonnière and Novelist

If Tencin's literary legacy appears to have little in common with the bold, Machiavellian woman whom Diderot called "beautiful and wicked," one should look to Tencin the salonnière to better understand the relationship between her life and works. As her biographers show, those who were not her enemies, particularly her salon guests, were treated royally; in the words of Friedrich Grimm, "she helped them with her counsel, her money and her credit."⁶⁷ The tone of the salons, which were far from a pretentious show of wit, as satirists claimed, tended to bring out the brilliance of her guests by virtue of polite encouragement, as memorialized by Marivaux in Marianne's descriptions of Madame Dorsin's salon.⁶⁸ Marmontel described a visit with Tencin in which she made him tell his story, beginning with childhood, and how she "dived into all my interests, showed sympathy for all of

marriage, does not fit into this schema; then again (according to Masson) Tencin composed the novel based on a dare, to write a novel that begins with the end and finishes with the beginning. Given that the story ends with marriage and begins with infidelity, one might even say that Miller's ideology of patriarchy may be found therein—but in reverse. See F. A. Delandine, "Observations sur les romans," in *Œuvres de Mme de Tencin* (Amsterdam and Paris: Hôtel Serpente, 1786), vol. 1, xxxvi, quoted in Masson, *Madame de Tencin*, 143.

66. Miller, "1735: The Gender of the Memoir-Novel," 442.

67. Friedrich Melchior Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, vol. 1 (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1877), 387, quoted in Jean Sareil, *Les Tencin*, 237.

68. In Marivaux's unfinished novel *La Vie de Marianne*, which appeared in installments between 1731 and 1745.

my troubles [and] ... appeared to think only about my worries.”⁶⁹ In other words, Tencin in real life could be as empathetic as her characters, which is perhaps what kept the philosophes she called “beasts” in her “ménagerie” coming back to the salon on Rue Saint-Honoré for so many years. Indeed, they were devoted to her—and she to them; in addition to the splendid suppers for which she was renowned, she gave each of her “*bêtes*” a New Year’s Day gift of two ells (about two and a half yards) of velvet to be made into breeches.⁷⁰

Her novels, though formulaic in many ways, stand out not only for their rendering of tumultuous emotions in a sober, rational style, but for the relationship they cultivate with the reader, and the psychological portraits which may be read as the literary extension of the salon. In an age that saw the rise of individualism, Tencin sought to break down barriers of isolation through a connection with her readers, at the same time revolting against the ethos of self-interest and social pretence of the post-Regency period, and showing the struggle women of her time faced trying to reconcile their sensibility with an unforgiving, patriarchal society.

69. Sareil, *Les Tencin*, 237: “entraît dans tous mes intérêts, s’affectait de tous mes chagrins, [et] ... semblait n’avoir dans la tête autre chose que mes soucis.”

70. “[L]e don que faisait chaque année madame de Tencin, aux auteurs qu’elle recevait, de deux aunes de velours, pour en faire des culottes.” Delandine, “Observations sur les romans,” xxxii.