

“The Other Rise of the Novel: Imagining Alternative Economies in the Eighteenth-Century French Novel”

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What would the field of eighteenth-century studies look like today had Ian Watt set aside his copies of *Moll Flanders* and *Pamela* and devoted his attention instead to Prévost’s *Manon Lescaut* or Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*? The rise of the novel paradigm—and the underlying homology between the rise of a bourgeois middle class and the coming of age of a new literary genre—continues to influence the way we analyze economic discourse in the eighteenth-century French novel. Characters are still often seen as portraying burgeoning bourgeois values, even when historiographical evidence points to the virtual absence or the “myth” of a self-conscious and coherent bourgeoisie in France in the early modern period. Likewise, the fact that the nobility was a dynamic and diverse group whose members had learned to think in individualistic and meritocratic terms as a result of courtly politics is often ignored.

In this first part of my paper, I will argue that the eighteenth-century French novel does not reflect material culture mimetically and that character action is best analyzed by focusing on the social and discursive exchanges staged by the text, rather than by trying to create parallels between specific behavior and actual historical changes. The novel produces its own reality by transforming characters and their stories into alternative social models, different articulations of how individuals should define their economic relations to others. I will suggest that the representation of interpersonal relations often highlights idiosyncratic and personal conceptions of private interest that cannot be easily reconciled with the traditional narrative of a transition towards economic modernity.

In the second part of the paper, I will discuss how these alternative conceptions of private interest are depicted in three important eighteenth-century novels whose main characters have often been analyzed as proto-bourgeois announcing the rise of rational individualism. In *Manon Lescaut*, Des Grieux’s rebellious behavior points to the widening gap between the fantasized aristocratic ethos that he seeks to reclaim and the practical choices with which nobles are confronted on a regular basis. The novel stages a heterogeneous elite based on both old privileges and new wealth and points to new forms of behavior in which the social obligations imposed by the system in place and an ethic of friendship and disinterestedness could co-exist. In *Lettres d’une Péruvienne*, the heroine Zilia struggles to disentangle herself from seemingly generous acts that establish power relations and expectations of counter gifts. In her last letter, she outlines a new “economy of one” that excludes all others as the only means of preserving the self from the bonds and binds of interested exchange. In *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, the resistance to open exchanges takes the form of an “escrow economy” based on a desire to hold off on a transaction and to entrust a friend with one’s immaterial possessions to prevent them from circulating in the outside world. This deposit is a means of self-preservation rather than a transaction, and it is the unrealized dimension of the exchange that defines and guarantees a true relationship of trust.

