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**Female Friendship and *Fraternité*  
In the Prostitute Memoir Novels of Eighteenth-Century France<sup>1</sup>**

*This essay explores a long-neglected novel, La Cauchoise, ou Mémoires d'une courtisane célèbre (César Ribié, 1783) and its depiction of female homosocial relations. As the prostitute heroine and narrator tells of her successful and colorful career and her many relationships along the way, we discover that her relationships (sexual, professional, and amicable) with other women prove to be the most satisfying and beneficial to her. These relationships can be read as a female version of the Revolutionary principle of fraternité.*

key words: friendship, fraternité, prostitutes, France

« La famille est donc si l'on veut le premier modèle des sociétés politiques: le chef est l'image du père, le peuple est l'image des enfans, et tous, étant nés égaux et libres, n'aliènent leur liberté que pour leur utilité. »  
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social*<sup>2</sup>

During the eighteenth century, the social networks of France underwent a significant change from the family model Rousseau described to one in which the free and equal “children” came together out of friendship and utility. In the *ancien régime*, power and prestige were transmitted via family connections attainable through birth or marriage within a patriarchal society with the father/king at its apex. According to Lynn Hunt’s interpretation, during the Revolution of 1789 the French attempted to replace that model of social networks with one based on equality and *fraternité*, that is, the mutual benefits from friendships and political alliances among men. Hunt calls this replacement of the patriarchal family as the

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this paper appeared in the *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 33 (2005).

<sup>2</sup> Bertrand de JOUVENAL (ed.), *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Du contrat social*, Geneva 1947 [1762], Livre 1, pp. 175-176.

source of political power the “Family Romance”, and the male friendships that were to build the new Republic of Virtue are the “Band of Brothers”.<sup>3</sup>

Hunt also traces how the literature and art of pre-revolutionary France paved the way for this transfer of power by discrediting paternal authority through depictions of family dramas. She examines several canonical texts, especially novels like *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Manon Lescaut*, to reveal unjust or powerless fathers confronted with the passions and needs of their children. These depictions helped prepare readers for a new model of social relations based on true affection and mutual admiration that promised greater personal satisfaction. The Republic of Virtue that these texts also promoted, however, required strict divisions between the genders, with women confined to the domestic sphere and forced to follow the narrow bourgeois path of chastity, then marriage, then motherhood. In contrast to the relative isolation women faced first in their father’s home then in their husband’s, men were allowed and expected to engage with each other in the public sphere. In the new social order that the Revolution of 1789 ushered in, the friendships and political alliances that were to make up the new power structures were specifically and emphatically reserved for men.<sup>4</sup> There was to be no Band of Sisters to complement the brothers.

But there did exist literary models for a female version of the Band of Brothers. In a sub-genre of the novel, what I call the prostitute memoir novel, readers encountered fictional women who chose to reject marriage and monogamy in favor of personal independence and participation in a network of female friends, coworkers and lovers. The heroines of these novels critiqued and discredited the family and patriarchal social hierarchy and at the same time endorsed a new kind of relationship that valued personal merit, creativity and mutual benefits. In this fascinating literary phenomenon during the fifty years preceding the French Revolution, over fourteen different novels (with a total number of reprints of over 125) appeared in which the narrator claimed to be a prostitute or former prostitute writing her memoirs. The heroine of one of these novels, *La Cauchoise, ou Mémoires d’une courtisane célèbre*<sup>5</sup>, and her relationships with the women in her life form the heart of this analysis of pre-Revolutionary female *fraternité*.

Although these pseudo-memoirs of prostitutes have been largely ignored by scholars and critics, the impressive number of reprints seems to indicate that they were in fact quite popular from the late 1730s up through the Revolution. In

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<sup>3</sup> Lynn HUNT, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, Berkeley 1992.

<sup>4</sup> See also Joan LANDES, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, Ithaca 1988.

<sup>5</sup> The edition cited here is from 1784, reprinted in *Œuvres anonymes du XVIIIe siècle 1: L’Enfer de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, Librairie Arthème Fayard 1985, 3: pp. 385-471. In the preface, Jean-Pierre Dubost points out that the British Museum has a nineteenth-century edition, called *La belle Cauchoise*, which is supposedly a reprint of an edition from 1783. However, no copies of the 1783 edition have been found.

these novels, a male author<sup>6</sup> adopts the voice and pen of a prostitute who recounts her rise from obscurity to fame and fortune as well as the titillating details of her erotic adventures. The first novel in which a self-proclaimed prostitute recounts her life story through a first-person memoir is the *Histoire de Mademoiselle Clairon, dite Frétilton*, first published in 1739, and the marquis de Sade's *Histoire de Juliette* provides the over-the-top swan-song of the genre in 1797. Until recently, most of these novels have remained hidden in the shadows of the Bibliothèque Nationale's *Enfer* catalog, presumably the better to protect unsuspecting (or debauched) readers from their immoral and erotic content. However, a few scholars have begun to bring some of these texts out into the light of publication, allowing modern readers easy access to these heretofore neglected texts.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to note that these "memoirs" are strictly works of fiction. As yet, no one has found any evidence that the authors of these texts were "real" prostitutes. Although all the novels – being erotic, libertine and hence illegal – were published anonymously, several have been attributed to certain lesser-known male authors, including Fougere de Monbron<sup>8</sup>, Meusnier de Querlon<sup>9</sup> and Antoine Bret<sup>10</sup>. Interestingly, in each case where an author has been identified, it is a man. These male authors use the voice of a prostitute to express their dissatisfaction with the *ancien régime* social structures that have denied them literary success, wealth and fame. For example, the heroines usually begin their stories with evidence of how the traditional family has failed them. Most of the narrator-heroines come from humble origins with absent or corrupting parents. The women escape their dysfunctional families to establish a successful career on their own and then consistently refuse to embrace the bourgeois feminine virtues of monogamy, marriage and motherhood. They never dream of a prince charming who will come along to marry them and to live happily ever after. Furthermore, they demonstrate amazing skill at avoiding pregnancy. The few women who do become pregnant quickly pass off the children to others in order to resume their profession and adventures.

The heroines of these novels also manipulate and humiliate the wealthy and powerful men at the top of the hierarchical society they disdain. Their aristocratic clients are usually portrayed as impotent, the higher members of the clergy

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<sup>6</sup> The authors of only four of the fourteen prostitute memoir novels that I have found remain unknown. Each of the other ten novels was written by a man.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Raymond Trousson's anthology Raymond TROUSSON, *Romans libertins du XVIIIe siècle*, 5th ed., Paris 1995; the Pléiade edition of *Romanciers libertins du XVIIIe siècle*, Patrick Wald Lasowski, Alain Clerval, Jean-Pierre Dubost, Marcel Hénaff, Pierre Saint-Amand and Roman Wald-Lasowski (eds.), Editions Gallimard 2000; and *Œuvres anonymes du XVIIIe siècle: L'Enfer de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, Librairie Arthème Fayard 1985.

<sup>8</sup> [Louis-Charles] FOUGERET de MONBRON, *Margot la ravaudeuse*, in: R. Trousson, o. c. in note 7 [1750].

<sup>9</sup> Anne-Gabriel MEUSNIER de QUERLON, *Psaphion ou la courtisane de Smyrne suivi de Les Soupers de Daphné*, pref. Michel Delon, Nantes 2001 [1747] and *La Tourière des carmélites servant de pendant au "P. des C."*, in: *Romanciers libertins du XVIIIe siècle*, o. c. in note 7, [1743].

<sup>10</sup> Antoine BRET, *La Belle Allemande ou les galanteries de Thérèse, Deux parties*, Paris 1755.

(who are also of the nobility) are exposed as hypocrites and often profess particularly twisted desires, and wealthy bourgeois bankers and financiers appear simple-minded and considerably more avaricious than the prostitutes themselves. In contrast with these older, more powerful representatives of paternal authority are the young pages, lackeys and theology students the women prefer and often support financially. As the prostitutes cheat on their high paying customers (who invariably demand fidelity) with these young men, they literally transfer money and symbolically transfer the power of their affections from the established sources of power, wealth and prestige to a younger generation, in which birth and class do not matter – at least not to the prostitute. In sum, these novels reject the family-based social models and the patriarchal society associated with them.

Instead of the *ancien régime* social networks based on birth and family, female friendships offer the most admirable and successful models of human relationships in the prostitute memoir novels. As prostitutes who constantly dissimulate and profess affection they do not possess, their relationships with men are inherently suspect. However, many of the heroines form strong and sincere friendships with other women. These relationships are sometimes with an older, mentor figure, sometimes with fellow prostitutes, and sometimes with loyal servants, who are treated as equal partners in their mistress's business. While sometimes including sexual relations, these friendships are always selfless and mutually beneficial for the two women involved.<sup>11</sup> No one is taking advantage of the other. These same-sex friendships reflect the desire for *fraternité* that would appear in the rhetoric of the Revolution, but without the confining and limited roles for women that the Republic of Virtue would dictate.

These forgotten texts of the underground presses are particularly revealing cultural artifacts. These authors were not the Rousseaus, Diderots and Voltaires aiming to revolutionize literature, philosophy and government. They used and re-used established tropes in hopes of selling more novels. Judging from their relative obscurity and lack-luster careers one can safely call them average writers at best. The words they wrote, then, as well as the images they created and the ideas they supported, can safely be viewed as “average”. Either the authors were unconsciously reproducing the thoughts and words of a typical Frenchman, or they were purposefully articulating what their readers thought in hopes of increasing sales. In either case, these texts are valuable pieces of evidence that I intend to use to pro-

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<sup>11</sup> These relationships exhibit many characteristics of Adrienne RICH's idea of a “lesbian continuum” in her essay, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, in: *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*, New York 1994, as well as the homo-social bonds that Eve KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK has identified in early modern English literature in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York 1985. In the criticism of eighteenth-century literature, Susan LANSER has identified an anxiety about “*sapphic societies*”, in which “*relationships between women are deeply erotic but also tenderly mutual.*” See ‘*Au sein de vos pareilles*’: *Sapphic Separatism in Late Eighteenth-Century France*, in: *Journal of Homosexuality* 41, 3-4, 2001, p. 108.

vide further insight into the atmosphere of discontent preceding the French Revolution.

In 1784 an anonymous novella, called *La Cauchoise, ou Mémoires d'une courtisane célèbre* appeared. The narrator never gives her first name, and all we have are the pseudonyms she goes by for protection, including La Dumonci.<sup>12</sup> The most recent publication of *La Cauchoise* can be found in volume 1 of the *Oeuvres anonymes du XVIIIe siècle* series, where it contains (as it did in the 1784 edition) a preface which uncharacteristically destroys the illusion of verisimilitude that most prostitute memoir novels and most eighteenth-century novels sought so hard to maintain. The author states: “*C'est l'ouvrage d'un seul et même auteur*” (387) and recognizes himself to be the same author of *Les Héros américains*, and one of the contributors to the *Almanach des spectacles*. While this is evidently César Ribié, unfortunately nothing else is known about this man.

The story of *La Cauchoise* is typical of the erotic genre already popular by the 1780s. The narrator describes her childhood spent in a small village in Normandy until age fifteen when she is quickly seduced into becoming the mistress of a young bourgeois playboy who rents her a room in le Havre. When he catches her being unfaithful to him, he arranges for her to be raped by a group of men and then has her arrested. As part of her punishment, she is sent to a convent, where she develops the only truly selfless and satisfying relationship of the book, an intimate friendship with a nun, Sister Prudence. After teaching La Dumonci about masturbation, dildos and anal sex, Sister Prudence, knowing her young lover's taste for *le monde*, arranges for her to be released and sends her to Paris.

La Dumonci arrives in Paris knowing no one. She quickly meets a man who promises he can find high-paying clients for her sexual favors. After “restoring her virginity”, he introduces her to a financier who provides her with a beautiful, lavish apartment. This relationship proves to be financially, if not sexually satisfying to La Dumonci. She finds a handsome count who fulfills her sexual needs while the financier continues to support her. All goes well until she and the count humiliate an admiring abbot who then informs the financier of his mistress's infidelity. Forced to sever ties with her beloved count, the practical La Dumonci takes solace in the security of her financier's money, until she makes a terrible gaffe at the theatre – insulting a woman who is actually a princess – and her financier cuts her off completely.

It is then that La Dumonci becomes serious about her profession, deciding to have sex with anyone and everyone who will pay. Among her many customers is a colonel in the infantry, who takes her to his garrison in Rouen, where she contracts her first case of syphilis. Contracting and transmitting venereal disease is

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<sup>12</sup> The reader never learns her first name, and the names she uses to refer to herself are inconsistent. When describing her fame, she mentions that she is known as “*la Dumoncy, fouteuse par excellence*.” Later she explains that she adopted this last name, this time spelling it “*la Dumonci*” because she felt the name she had been using, “*Morancourt*”, needed renewing. *La Cauchoise*, p. 396 and 454, hereafter cited in text.

a recurring theme of the rest of her story, which she ends in the Latin Quarter admitting that she is once again infected and deciding to use this break from work to write her memoirs. She recognizes that the little beauty she had has faded and it will soon be time to become a procuress herself, but she regrets nothing.

The narrator of *La Cauchoise* begins her story the way many of the French prostitute heroines do: by denying any kind of illustrious family heritage and asserting that the status of her ancestors and family is not at all important. Even though many of her fellow prostitutes claim to be related to noble and influential people, La Dumonci disdains such airs, as she explains: "*Ma naissance n'a rien de fort illustre: cet aveu naïf n'est cependant point ordinaire dans les femmes de mon état. Je connais beaucoup de mes chères et vénérables consœurs qui se donnent une belle origine, sans en être plus nobles pour cela. [...] Quelle folie qu'une pareille généalogie! Une véritable putain ne doit absolument connaître que le plaisir. Elle doit mépriser sa naissance et ses parents, et n'avoir d'autre ambition que celle d'assouvir sa passion et de se ménager des connaissances aussi utiles qu'agréables.*" (389)

These "*useful and agreeable acquaintances*" will include not only the wealthy men who purchase her charms, but also the female friends and lovers who will occupy an important place in her life. Before describing her first lover, La Dumonci demonstrates more specifically how her own parents and family have had nothing to do with her success. She explains how her parents have been completely disinterested in the education and prospects of their daughter, hoping only to draw some profit from her labors. When they realize that her natural penchant for laziness will not serve them at home they decide to send her to the city with eggs and butter to sell. La Dumonci pauses for one more moment to discuss the parents she is leaving behind: "*Mon lecteur, en me voyant ainsi séparée de mes parents, s'attend sans doute que je vais lui peindre leur douleur de m'avoir perdue, et les soins qu'ils ont pris pour me recouvrer. Je me crois totalement dispensée d'entrer dans un tel détail. A parler clair, du moment que je fus chez la couturière, mes parents ne me furent plus rien et je n'entendis plus parler d'eux.*" (396) Our narrator not only seems to care very little about the pain of her parents, we cannot even know whether they were saddened by her disappearance or even tried to find her. This is her last comment on her blood relatives, until her father reappears in her story.

Another way in which traditional, patriarchal society and its compulsory heterosexuality are undermined in this novel is the unpleasant and dissatisfying depiction of our heroine's relationships with men. Her first lover is a wealthy young dandy who seduces her with his incessant demands. But this is no example of sweet, first love. She finds this boy, who takes her virginity, quite unattractive: "*Au reste, ce jeune homme n'était rien moins que beau: des yeux bleus enfoncés dans un front relevé en bosse, un nez extrêmement court, un teint livide et, par-dessus le tout, force marques de petite vérole.*" (390)

The first time they have sex, he has difficulty taking her virginity because of the odd shape of his penis which is “*plus gros par le haut que par le bas*”, and she jokes that this size would have been more appropriate for some rich old dowager. Before being able to enter her, he ejaculates a few time on her legs from the effort, and all this time she is feeling not even “*la plus légère émotion*”. (395) Although she eventually enjoys sex with him, she assures the reader that it is not long before her lover was no longer sufficient to satisfy all her desires (396).

The character of this young fellow proves to be just as ugly as his face. When he discovers that she has been unfaithful to him (by submitting to the aggressive advances of an officer while alone in the seamstress’s shop) he plans a cruel revenge. The jealous lover hides his anger with coolness while he arranges a gang rape. In an uncharacteristically violent and unpleasant scene, La Dumonci recalls how she was taken to a deserted building by the young man who was supposed to be her “protector”. When her first attacker throws her down she calls out for help, but, as she states: “*Je criais en vain au secours, mon amant était sourd à ma voix.*” Then she describes her assault: “[I]l me saisit les deux mains de la main gauche et me les joint sur la tête. D’un coup de genou il me sépare les cuisses, et me plante de la main droite le vit dans le con. Il s’agite, après cela, en vrai grenadier, me foutant en plein trois fois de suite sans déconner. Puis il dit aux autres, d’un air triomphant et moqueur : --A vous, Messieurs, faites-en autant si vous le pouvez. J’eus beau pleurer et vouloir faire la réservée, ces champions m’exploitèrent chacun, l’un après l’autre, trois fois.” (400-401)

The frightening and graphic tone of this scene poses a sharp contrast to the pleasurable and light-hearted descriptions of group sex elsewhere in this novel and in other prostitute memoir novels. For example, later in her career, La Dumonci will entertain six young men at the same time, but the tone of that scene is light-hearted with an amused emphasis on her ingenuity. In Fougéret de Monbron’s *Margot la ravaudeuse*, the narrator complains of having to service an entire regiment in one day and even decides to leave her brothel after this incident. But in her case the complaint is that too much pleasure is too much. In this scene, there is no mention of La Dumonci’s pleasure in any way. In fact, from this moment on, she refers to the man who betrayed her as “*mon perfide amant*” (402), “*mon parjure amant*” (403), “*ce coquin*”, and “*mon scélérat amant*”. (404) Thus we see the sum total of La Dumonci’s heterosexual experiences before meeting Sister Prudence: a vengeful, pock-marked youth, a well-endowed captain who abandons her as soon as they are caught and eight rapists.

After her release from the convent, her next heterosexual encounter is less horrifying, but just as dissatisfying. When she finds a pimp in Paris, he insists on trying her out himself. Once again the narrator experiences an unsatisfying heterosexual experience with this pimp: “*Mon drôle s’en donna le plus qu’il put. J’avoue franchement que je ne trouvai aucun plaisir avec lui. En effet, qu’on juge s’il était possible que j’en prisse! A peine bandait-il. Il était comme tous les autres maquereaux, qui exploitent autant de femmes qu’ils peuvent en livrer. Il en avait*

*besogné quatre ce jour-là même. [...] Il goûta beaucoup de plaisir dans mes bras. Sans avoir mon pucelage, il y avait cependant de quoi s'escrimer en m'approchant.*" (416)

Her description of the pimp who can barely maintain an erection pales in comparison to the criticism she lavishes upon the man who supports her throughout most of the story, her financier *entreteneur*. The first thing she notices about him is "*l'ampleur de son embonpoint*" (418), a euphemistic way of saying that he is fat. She explains to the reader, "*[I]l était, dis-je, laid à faire peur, ce qui m'effraya un peu*". (418) Later, as the charm of his money begins to wear off and her lack of any attraction for him gives way to aversion, her criticisms become even harsher. She refers to him as "*le rond financier*" (420), "*mon brutal financier*", "*l'imbécile financier*" (427), "*mon gros amant*" (429), and "*un vilain homme que je ne pouvais pas souffrir*" (447). In a longer passage she reveals her true feelings as she asks the reader for forgiveness for not going into more detail about the financier: "*Ne me blâmera-t-on pas de ne point faire ici le journal exact de mes amours avec le financier? Mais à quoi bon? [...] D'ailleurs, à parler de bonne foi, je m'ennuierais à mort si je parlais toujours de ce bonhomme. [...] Pourrais-je trouver du plaisir à décrire le dégoût que j'ai senti si souvent dans ses bras? [...] J'aime bien mieux revenir à mon aimable comte. Le commerce que j'eus avec lui pendant six mois me dédommageait bien agréablement de mon aversion pour le financier.*" (425-426)

In another scene, she describes the night before her financier leaves for a trip to the country and the "*tendres adieux*" he gave her: "*[L]a dernière nuit que je couchai avec lui avant son départ pour ce voyage, il me baisa quatre fois en plein. C'est-à-dire que mon pauvre bijou suçà quatre fois dans cette même nuit un des plus vilains vits que j'aie vus et maniés dans toute ma vie.*" (431)

The next man who supports her is a colonel in the infantry who takes her to Rouen. She ridicules this man a little as well, making fun of what she calls "*la folie des hommes quand ils ne s'attachent qu'à des putains*" and comparing these men to "*singes [...] méprisables*" (450). Later when she contracts a venereal disease, we see the lack of trust or intimacy between these two: "*[S]'il n'était pas sûr de se fier à mon colonel étant en bonne santé, il était bien plus naturel à moi de le craindre infiniment après lui avoir donné une vérole semblable à celle que j'emportais.*" (451)

After her return from Rouen, La Dumonci has the misfortune to encounter a man she calls a "*croc*". He is a type of man prostitutes detest and try to avoid: "*un de ces détestables animaux... furets de bordels... sans eux une putain serait trop heureuse*". (456) After being initially charmed by his appearance, she is repulsed when he asks her to perform fellatio on him. When she refuses, he threatens to have her sent to prison. At the sound of the word "*hôpital*" she becomes compliant and has intercourse with him. Then after his climax he makes her take his member in her mouth to "*mange[r] les rogatons*". (457) Not only was this experience unpleasant for La Dumonci, the man speaks to her in the worst language, calling her "*garce*", "*foutue garce*", and "*bougresse*" (457). In a final insult, he



sends her in lieu of payment insulting poems informing her that he gave her “*la vérole*”. She refers to him as “*ce fichu croc*”, “*mon infâme croc*” (457), “*coquin*”, “*misérable*”, and “*l’infâme*” (459).

The last sexual encounter she describes in the memoirs is also unpleasant. In a near-rape scene recalling the treachery and violation she experienced at the hands of her first lover, La Dumonci fends off the violent advances of a Jacobin monk: “[I]l m’empoigna par la tête puis, me jetant sur mon lit, il me mordit comme un chien et se disposa à m’enfiler sans miséricorde de toute la longueur de son braquemart écumant de fureur, ce que je ne pus empêcher qu’en empoignant son bougre d’engin et le lui tordant très fortement. L’instrument en fut si fort affecté qu’il s’avisa d’en pleurer de dépit dans ma main, et avec tant d’onction qu’il m’inonda le con et les cuisses d’un torrent de foutre. J’achevai pour lors de désarçonner, par un vigoureux coup de poing, mon priape apostolique, et je renvoyai enfin le moine aussi peu satisfait que quand il était venu.” (469-470)

The one man who is attractive and does bring her genuine pleasure is the young count with whom she cheats on her financier. He is handsome, as she attests: “Il était fait à peindre, grand, bien bâti, des yeux noirs à fleur de tête, surmontés de deux sourcils de la même couleur bien fournis, des joues remplis, des lèvres vermeilles, une jambe faite au tour. Comment un homme de cette tournure pouvait-il manquer d’être aimé?” (423). And indeed she does fall in love, or at least lust with this young man. Unfortunately, he is not perfect, as she quickly qualifies, “Je souhaiterais avoir à faire l’éloge de son esprit, mais il n’en avait pas” (424). Furthermore, her relationship with him is in fact quite limited. She knows she can never go to him for financial assistance: “Le comte n’était pas d’humeur à m’entretenir. Il était, quoique assez riche, de ces hommes originaux qui aiment le plaisir, mais qui pourtant ne sauraient se résoudre à acheter, à payer un cul” (447). In fact, this initially blissful relationship ends up causing La Dumonci the greatest pain, and after this man breaks her heart she vows never to love again and to have sex only for money.

In contrast to the steady disappointment and dissatisfaction she finds with men, the narrator’s experiences with other women give her both sexual pleasure and material gain. Even though both her parents are inadequate in preparing her for the world, and she cuts all ties with them early in the novel, her depiction of her mother is slightly better than that of her father. While still living with her parents, she first informs them that she does not want to return to the city. Her mother, whom she calls “*cette bonne femme*” (391), expresses concern, as if out of some feminine solidarity against the wolfish advances of the men she encounters there. In contrast, her father seems to care nothing for her feelings and fears and sends her off once again. Later her father alone reenters the story to send her to the convent as an unjust punishment, and when Sister Prudence tries to get her parents to let her out of the convent, it is the father who refuses. Although her relationship with neither parent is very good, her father appears as the sole source of injustice.

The next woman La Dumonci meets is the seamstress in Le Havre. When La Dumonci's lover has her imprisoned, he assumes that her innocent roommate was an accomplice and has her arrested as well. During the day La Dumonci spends awaiting their impending arrest under the watchful gaze of her lover, she is tortured by the fact that she cannot warn her friend. She is certain that the seamstress would be able to solve their dilemma with her "*génie fertile en expédients [...] par un long usage du monde*" and with "*l'assistance de ses bons amis et au moyen d'une retraite aussi prudente que nécessaire dans ce moment critique*" (402-403). Even though we never see any direct communication between these two women until much later in the novel, they are obviously close. In addition to wanting to communicate the pain of her rape to her friend, she also knows that this friend has the necessary ingenuity and network of friends herself to get them out of their predicament. A true friend has both "*le genie fertile*" and "*[d]es bons amis*".

After her release from the convent, La Dumonci's first thought is again of that seamstress, who has unfortunately not been freed. Years later, at the height of her good fortune, La Dumonci goes to mass at the Blancs-Manteaux convent, looking to run into one of her clients. She is instead surprised to find her old seamstress friend sick and badly abused at the hands of two cruel soldiers, and exclaims: "*Quels furent mon étonnement et ma surprise! Je crus reconnaître cette chère couturière dont le malheur m'avait causé le plus cuisant chagrin*" (454). Three days later this unfortunate woman shows up at her door, and La Dumonci describes their conversation in an unusually touching passage. The depth of her feelings towards her friend is obvious. Even taking into consideration a certain amount of hyperbole and *sensibilité*, we find an intense emotion in this passage that cannot be found elsewhere in her memoirs. She refers to her as "*ma pauvre couturière*", "*cette malheureuse fille*", "*cette pauvre bonne*" and "*une des plus déplorables victimes*". The state she finds her in is "*affreux*", with "*un air triste et honteux*". When the seamstress begins telling her about the horrors she has endured, La Dumonci calls this "*une peinture si touchante*" and "*le récit odieux des cruautés inouïs*". Her reaction to the "*choses terribles*" that she hears is almost visceral. Even now, years later, in telling this story she trembles in horror and admits that the memory of this good woman "*[s]'arrache des larmes*" (454-456). In fact, she is so moved that she urges her friend to live with her, and is proud to have given this poor woman a few months of rest and leisure before her premature death.

Her reaction to the seamstress contrasts starkly with her attitude towards her parents. Early in the novel, when La Dumonci leaves her parents, she claims to feel a certain responsibility towards them, but only out of guilt: "*S'ils m'occupèrent quelquefois l'esprit, c'était uniquement pour plaindre leur sort dans l'espoir de l'améliorer un jour et de satisfaire par là aux devoirs de la nature, et mériter de leur part une indulgence plus que papale pour mon escapade*" (396). Any desires she has to help her parents financially or otherwise rise solely out of a sense of duty and a hope for a pardon. Furthermore, this concern is most likely short-lived, since even when she becomes wealthy and well-known, she makes no mention of send-

ing money home to “improve their condition”. Unlike the guilt she feels towards her parents, which she apparently does nothing to atone for, she is thrilled to be able to help her friend enjoy her last remaining days.

In addition, it seems that her relationship with the seamstress is the one that replaces her family when she moves to Le Havre. Interestingly, she does not refer to this moment as “*when I began sleeping with my lover*” or in any other way referencing her boyfriend. Instead, she states, “[D]u moment que je fus chez la couturière, mes parents ne me furent plus rien et je n’entendis plus parler d’eux” (396). It is her female roommate who represents this period of her life and the break with her family. Finally, it is interesting to note that the seamstress was twenty-eight when she died, the exact age that La Dumonci claims to be as she is writing her memoirs. Clearly, she identifies with this woman on a strong level.

While living as the financier’s mistress, La Dumonci takes solace with the count, her lover, but also with a woman she repeatedly calls “*ma chère amie*”, another man’s mistress named La Duttey. This woman is a good friend to La Dumonci, as she states: “*Je pouvais me fier entièrement à elle*” (424). There is also an ambiguously sexual element to their friendship, as La Duttey and the count appear to be almost interchangeable. La Duttey serves as the liaison between La Dumonci and her lover, and each time our narrator must break off with the count, she is also forbidden to see her friend. After the first suspicions of the financier are allayed and he allows her to see them again, she describes her surprise visit to La Duttey’s house to announce the good news. Inexplicably, yet not at all surprisingly to La Dumonci, the count is there at her friend’s house. First La Dumonci asks the count to kiss her, then she states: “*Le comte me répondit fort bien, ainsi que ma bonne amie, mais ils ne pouvaient revenir de leur surprise. [...] Tous deux, également charmés de me voir, ils cherchaient la cause de ce bonheur*” (my emphasis 429). While the narrator could very well be describing a different kind of joy in each person, that is simply equal in its intensity, the placement of these two friends in parallel positions concerning her return does raise questions about the nature of this female friendship, and also places it at the same level of importance as her feelings for the count, the only man she ever loves.

A female friendship that is not at all ambiguous, however, is her relationship with Sister Prudence. The narrator attributes all her professional progress and success as a prostitute to this nun who takes her under her wing. Even though this is the only undeniably homosexual relationship she has in the novel, the affection and devotion between these two women is very significant. Her initial meeting with Sister Prudence begins with a kiss, as the nun greets her warmly in a scene with blatantly sexual undertones. Even with the flirtatious tone of this passage, it is clear that theirs will be a mutually beneficial relationship. Sister Prudence will get the pleasure of a young and beautiful lover, and La Dumonci will earn her freedom. Unlike the similar transactions she would later have with men, this deal also brings her pleasure as well as benefits. The two women develop a satisfying sexual relationship despite the older nun’s sagging and faded body.

Over the course of their next several meetings Sister Prudence tells her the story of her life and adventures. Like a good pupil, La Dumonci asks for explanations of anything she does not understand and in this way becomes “*savant en peu de temps*” (408-409). This education is quite effective, since the narrator enters the convent “*une simple fouteuse*” but leaves it with all the talents of “*une vraie putain*” (407). Although this language of education and training is of course meant to be amusing, and the entire depiction of her lascivious nun-lover plays rather unimaginatively into the common anti-Church rhetoric of much literature of the time, this information is nonetheless useful for La Dumonci. The “training” she receives from Sister Prudence (no matter how sarcastically the term may be read) allows her to excel in her profession and become wealthy, famous and successful. Having received barely any training from her parents – who taught her nothing more than how to read and write – La Dumonci relishes and benefits from the lessons of this friend.

Not only does she gain knowledge and skills, La Dumonci is also able to leave the convent thanks to Sister Prudence’s intervention. As the two women spend their time enjoying sexual pleasures, Sister Prudence is keeping up her end of the bargain by trying to obtain the freedom of her young pupil: “*Nos plaisirs n’étaient point pour elle quelque chose de si sérieux qu’elle ne pensât à ma liberté. Elle fit parler sous main à mon père qui ne fut jamais d’avis de me laisser sortir. La sœur, ne pouvant rien faire de ce côté-là, représenta à ses supérieurs que j’étais bien changée. [...] Cette bonne fille fit si bien que je sortis de la correction quatorze mois après y être entrée. Nous nous dûmes un tendre adieu. On s’imagine de quelle façon.*” (413-414) This aging and fading libertine selflessly helps her friend escape the convent. No man in La Dumonci’s life ever acts so selflessly. The narrator recognizes Sister Prudence’s rare qualities, and in addition to the vivid depictions of their sexual activities and the enormous pleasure La Dumonci receives from them are signs of true devotion. While La Dumonci is never faithful to any of her male lovers, including her beloved count, in the convent she sees only Sister Prudence.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond these specific relationships, La Dumonci has a symbolic relationship with all other prostitutes. She sees herself as a member of a group, a professional collective with similar tastes, goals and fears. She makes several references throughout the text to “*mes chères et vénérables consœurs*”, “*les femmes de mon état*” (389), “*mes chères consœurs les putains*” (423), and “[*les femmes*] *de mon éminente profession*” (453). Of course there is a certain sense of irony and sarcasm on the part of the author and the narrator in these instances, but the quality of her relationships with La Duttey, the seamstress, and above all Sister Prudence do indi-

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<sup>13</sup> This fidelity is not the result of a lack of any other willing partners. An earlier description of religious houses as sites of debauchery and the devotion of their inhabitants to lascivious behavior allows for suspicion that Sister Prudence was not the only lubricious nun that our narrator could have encountered in her convent.

cate a genuine sense of community. Often in the novel she speaks not as an individual, but as a member of this group, which even has its principles. Throughout the novel the narrator repeatedly pronounces specific rules or generalizations (fourteen in all) about prostitutes, as if to educate the reader. For example, she states: “[G]énéralement parlant, une putain a toujours le cœur excellent” (404), “C’est [à Paris] qu’une putain a véritablement ses coudées franches” (414), “[U]ne véritable et bonne putain n’aime que le plaisir, Vénus et la volupté” (424), “On sait de reste qu’une putain, sauf les plaisirs du canapé, n’aime rien tant qu’à voyager” (450) and “[U]ne putain ne craint rien tant que cet hôtel de misère [l’hôpital]” (457).

La Dumonci sees herself as a part of a community of prostitutes, but she is also a successful member of a network of female friends. Whether as mentors, confidantes, lovers or rescuers, the women of this novel come together to create a new kind of social body. In contrast with the men in her life, La Dumonci sees the women within her network as a source of aid, as companions who will understand each other’s worries, and even sometimes as fellow victims. The variety of roles these women occupy for each other goes beyond the categories of “female friendship”, “lesbian lovers”, or even the intentionally vague labels of “romantic friendship” or “intimate relationships” that other critics have identified in eighteenth-century literature. This same-sex bond among the “consoeurs” of her life is much stronger than anything La Dumonci feels for her kin or for her male sexual partners.

That such ambiguous yet vital relationships exist is clear. But why would authors like Ribié explore such possibilities? The depiction of the narrator’s relationship with Sister Prudence clearly lacks the modern voyeuristic appeal to heterosexual men sneaking a peek at two beautiful women pleasuring each other. Sister Prudence is considerably older than La Dumonci and somewhat worn out: her breasts have “une peau livide et tannée” (409), and La Dumonci describes her body as “fanée, vilaine et maussade” (411). Rather than showing off for voyeuristic men, her depictions of their couplings prove to her readers the possibility of achieving pleasure at the total exclusion of men.

Another common explanation for female sexual relations in eighteenth-century literature is that it serves to reinforce the primacy and “naturalness” of heterosexuality. This argument seems to apply more to British literature of the period. For example, much of the criticism that reveals female sexual relationships as reinforcing heterosexuality focus on John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill, or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. Most scholars see the lesbian scenes in *Fanny Hill* as insignificant or at best a means of reinforcing the exclusive legitimacy of heterosexuality.<sup>14</sup> The scene in which Phoebe seduces the still-virginal Fanny demonstrates how

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<sup>14</sup> See Lillian FADERMAN, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, New York 1981; Emma DONOGHUE, *Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801*, New York 1993; and Elizabeth Susan

dissatisfying Fanny finds sex with a woman, and she only has her appetite whetted for the ultimate pleasure involving a penis.<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Wahl explains that such depictions were meant to excite the male reader and also “reinforce that reader’s sense of sexual sufficiency by demonstrating that even a woman of lesbian inclinations must inevitably turn to men for sexual satisfaction.”<sup>16</sup>

At first glance this argument seems to describe La Dumonci’s relationships as well. Sister Prudence makes certain that the special dildo she has built resembles as closely as possible a “real” penis: “*La sœur revêtit ce fer-blanc d’un velours cramoisi, sur le milieu duquel elle attacha le plus de poils qu’elle put. On voit, par cette attention, avec quel soin sœur Prudence étudiait et suivait la nature*” (411). And when she first uses it with La Dumonci she claims, “*Enfin, nous allons avoir le même plaisir que si nous étions homme et femme*” (411), implying that sex between a man and a woman is the best kind of pleasure possible. However, the fact that, in order to simulate the ejaculation of semen, Sister Prudence fills the dildo they will share with milk, an inherently “female” liquid – and the word “*lait*” here is in stark contrast with the usual term in early modern pornography for any kind of genital fluid, “*liqueur*”<sup>17</sup> – indicates a kind of pleasure completely exclusive of any

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WAHL, *Invisible Relations: Representations of Female Intimacy in the Age of Enlightenment*, Stanford, CA 1999. Katherine BINHAMMER also sees female same-sex desire in English literature as point on a continuum that also contains heterosexuality, but it is the extremity that points towards the center. See her article, *The ‘Singular Propensity’ of Sensibility’s Extremities: Female Same-Sex Desire and the Eroticization of Pain in Late Eighteenth-Century British Culture*, in: GLQ 9, 4, pp. 471-498.

<sup>15</sup> A persuasive alternative approach can be found in John C. BUNYAN’s interpretation of the female same-sex desire in *Fanny Hill*. He plays upon Eve Sedgwick’s notion of the love triangle as a means of homosocial bonding among men to show how Fanny and her fellow prostitutes use their male clients as a means of erotically bonding. Looking specifically at the scene of Fanny’s “initiation” into Mrs. Cole’s brothel and its emphasis on the female gaze and caresses of her fellow prostitutes, as well as the scene in which Fanny submits to a violent client, Bunyan argues that the homoeroticism serves not to please the men in question but the other women. See his chapter ‘*Traffic in More Precious Commodities: Sapphic Erotics and Economics in Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, in: Patsy S. Fowler and Alan Jackson (eds.), *Launching Fanny Hill: Essays on the Novel and Its Influences*, New York 2003.

<sup>16</sup> E. S. WAHL, o. c. in note 14, p. 236. Chris ROULSTON sees a similar emphasis on heterosexual relationships, particularly marriage, in the “ménages à trois” in many eighteenth-century novels, involving a husband, his wife and her best friend. Often these friendships are tinged with sexuality, but all the while maintaining the heterosexual, bourgeois marriage. *Having It Both Ways? The Eighteenth-Century Ménage à Trois*, in: Chris Mounsey and Caroline Gonda (eds.), *Queer People: Negotiations and Expressions of Homosexuality, 1700-1800*, Lewisburg, PA 2007.

<sup>17</sup> In the preface to the *Oeuvres érotiques* edition of *La Cauchoise*, Jean-Pierre Dubost points out the feminine quality of this liquid. See the work of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray on the female body as silent, absent and unrepresentable within phallogocentric Western discourse, but also as the site of a possible means of feminine expression beyond that phallogocentric Western discourse – a means in which the vaginal lips represent the oral mouth (IRIGARAY’s *Quand nos lèvres se parlent*, in: *Ce Sexe qui n’en est pas un*, Paris 1977) or in which the mother’s milk and menstrual blood represent the author’s ink (CIXOUS’ *The Laugh of the Medusa*, in: Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds.), *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, Amherst 1980).

real male presence. Furthermore, the vivid depictions of her dissatisfaction with men and thus with penises both before and after her “education” with Sister Prudence undermine any arguments that her lesbian relationship was simply to remind her of the validity and satisfaction inherent in heterosexuality. She repeatedly describes the pleasure she felt with Sister Prudence, but it is not until she finds her count that she has any kind of satisfying sex with a man.

Nevertheless, it is clear that representations of female relationships in eighteenth-century literature were a key element in determining, establishing and enforcing gender norms.<sup>18</sup> Susan Lanser has expanded on this idea to demonstrate how canonical authors in France and Britain were also able to articulate class differences by insisting upon a sharp divide between “innocent” friendship (among the gentle classes) and “sapphism” (among the lower classes and later a few debauched aristocrats).<sup>19</sup> While Lanser reveals the fragility and ultimate futility of such divides, many critics of female relations in eighteenth-century literature still discuss either those characters engaging in sexual activities with other women or those whose friendships are ostensibly and presumably asexual. So then how do complicated texts like *La Cauchoise* – which cater to heterosexual male fantasies but also firmly reject marriage and patriarchy, which depict heroines who seek social ascension but also critique *ancien régime* society, and which contain both sexual and sexless friendships – fall within these paradigms? A new category beyond “innocent friendship” and “sapphism” is required.

Elizabeth Wahl has developed a particularly apt phrase: “female intimacy”, which she defines as “a nexus of relations not limited to sexual practice but also including social and economic ties that can operate within or cross the boundaries of heterosexual institutions such as marriage and prostitution.”<sup>20</sup> “Female intimacy” seems to convey the complexity of La Dumonci’s varied but significant relations with the women in her life. But because this novel appeared so close to the Revolution of 1789, a more political term like “female *fraternité*” better captures the subversive elements of the novel and La Dumonci’s female relationships. Like the revolutionaries who came together in rejection of the hierarchical society of the *ancien régime*, the women in La Dumonci’s life support each other in opposition to patriarchal society. Just as the Band of Brothers sought *fraternité* as an alternative to a political system that had proven dissatisfying, the Band of *Consoeurs* in La

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<sup>18</sup> See as but one interesting articulation of this idea, Christine ROULSTON’s article on the connection between female “inseparable” friendships and the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere: *Separating the Inseparables: Female Friendship and Its Discontents in Eighteenth-Century France*, in: *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32, 2, 1998-99, pp. 215-231.

<sup>19</sup> Susan S. LANSER, *Befriending the Body: Female Intimacies as Class Acts*, in: *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32, 2, 1998-99, pp. 179-198. While for clarity I deliberately use the anachronistic terms “lesbian” and “homosexual” to describe La Dumonci’s relationship with Sister Prudence, it bears mentioning that such terminology was not in existence in the eighteenth century. Words like “sapphism,” “sapphist” and “tribade” were commonly used to describe – often in a derogatory or suspicious way – female same-sex relations and partners.

<sup>20</sup> E. S. WAHL, o. c. in note 14, p. 9.

Cauchoise provide each other with financial support and sexual pleasure when the men and the heterosexual relationships in their lives fail to satisfy them. “Female *fraternité*” hints at the revolutionary rumblings and the social subversions at play in the text.

Historians have begun to explore how female same-sex desire in eighteenth-century literature represented a serious threat to society. Jeffrey Merrick briefly describes the depiction of eighteenth-century French “tribades” in the *Mémoires secrets* and the *Correspondance secrète* as bisexual, mercenary, betraying their natural inclination and duty to reproduce, but also as not really sexual since sex without a man (penis) was considered impossible. But these women were still seen as disruptive and threatening, as he states: “‘Unnatural’ relationships between women, in the last analysis, disrupted the patriarchal and familial order of French society by diverting or extricating women from marriage, which institutionalized their ‘natural’ subordination to men and their ‘natural’ procreative functions.”<sup>21</sup> Female homosexuality was generally seen as dangerous in that it could remove women from the heterosexual economy of marriage and allow them to form sapphic societies such as the “Secte anandryne” described in the *Confessions de Mademoiselle Sapho*. Susan Lanser and Elizabeth Wahl agree that such “separatist” societies – whether truly in existence or not – could represent for eighteenth-century readers the threat of promoting women’s intellectual interests and preventing them from participating in the reproductive economy necessary to patriarchal capitalism.<sup>22</sup>

Certainly, prostitutes like La Dumonci were a threat to traditional bourgeois marriage and that particular kind of patriarchy. But unlike their English counterparts, French prostitute memoir novels were not tales of caution. These stories offer a sense of excitement, titillation, amusement and incitement. Yes, these women are subversive. La Dumonci and her sisters – her *consoeurs* to whom she refers in her own memoir and those who were the heroines of their own – refuse to marry and have babies. But rather than regret this choice, rather than present a tone of self-condemnation for their lifestyle, they celebrate it. Ultimately in refusing to make new subjects for their king, they are refusing to reproduce *ancien régime* society with its hierarchy based on marriage and family connections. Instead they advocate a universal sisterhood of *fraternité*, in which one’s talent and imagination – as embodied in Sister Prudence – are more important than how one was born, be it as a woman or as a lower-class bourgeois. The female friendships and lesbian love in these novels represent a social structure that is much more appealing to most eighteenth-century French readers than the one they were experiencing.

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<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey MERRICK, *Sexual Politics and Public Order in Late Eighteenth-Century France: The Mémoires secrets and the Correspondance secrète*, in: *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1, 1, 1990, p. 73.

<sup>22</sup> E. S. WAHL, o. c. in note 14, pp. 14 and 177, and S. LANSER, o. c. in note 11, p. 113.



*Female Friendship and Fraternité  
In the Prostitute Memoir Novels of Eighteenth-Century France*

If we view the political upheaval of eighteenth-century France in sexual terms, heterosexuality represents the traditional *ancien régime* society, and homosexuality represents the upcoming democratic fraternity of the revolution. In this way, the prostitute memoir novels served to “queer” eighteenth-century social networks. The tender emotional bond La Dumonci feels towards her female friends, as well as the physical gratification and *jouissance* she experiences with Sister Prudence reflect a category of human relations that rejects patriarchal society, but also rejects gender divisions. These pornographic novels, so long dismissed as pulp fiction useful only for sexual stimulation, capture and convey a desire for a new social structure as well as a deep dissatisfaction with the limitations of *ancien régime* society. Furthermore, these critiques contained potential models for social relations that, unlike the models of bourgeois domestic “virtue” advocated by the real revolutionaries, did not require gender divisions. As it appeared in the prostitute memoir novels, the female *fraternité* forming a Band of Sisters (or of *Consoeurs*) was not at all separatist, but a successful and above all pleasurable alternative to the patriarchal family.