

Continuations to Grafigny's *Les lettres d'une Péruvienne* (1747)

by Sylvie Blais

Contrary to the “suite,” considered to be a sequel to the original text under the same authorship, the continuation is the product of an alterior author whose objective is to merge with and imitate its model in the hopes of participating in literary notoriety. Such are the definitions of Gérard Genette in *Palimpsestes*. There are several continuations offering closure to the open-ended novel by Mme de Grafigny: the texts by French authors Ignace Hugary de Lamarche-Courmont (1749), and Mme Morel de Vindé (1797); an English continuation of 1774 by R. Roberts;¹ a theatrical adaptation by Goldoni (1754); a Spanish continuation by Maria Romero Masegosa y Cancelada (1792). Genette explains that a continuation necessarily denatures the body of texts it imitates: “on ne peut achever l'inachevé sans trahir, au moins, ce qui lui est parfois essentiel—l'inachèvement bien sûr” (*Palimpsestes* 197). The French, English and Italian continuations to *Les lettres d'une Péruvienne* affect Zilia's matrimonial status. However, the anonymous continuation (1747, possibly by Grafigny) and Cancelada's version leave Zilia celibate. Zilia's refusal to marry becomes central to the story.

Grafigny's message

Nancy K. Miller finds *Les lettres* to be representative of a “move beyond female plot as a repositioning of feminine desire through authorship” (*Subject* 126). She assesses its closure as somewhat eccentric to eighteenth-century standards. The original plot revolves around Zilia, the female protagonist who is independent and intellectually acute. Grafigny provides her character with the type of autonomy she personally desired. Zilia's characterization as writer lends her a position of authority rarely attained by female characters. An immigrant from the province of Lorraine, Grafigny herself insisted on being a writer. Despite great financial instability, she refused any other means of support

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available to women (Showalter, 16). On the contrary, Grafigny's French, English and Italian followers emphasize Zilia's dependence on male characters and marry her off to either Déterville or Aza. Grafigny's continuators were apparently responding to the readers' "frenzy of disappointment" over Zilia's final choice (DeJean, "Introduction" xiv).

The Peruvian princess refuses to marry her savior and protector, the faithful Déterville, after her betrothed, the sacred King of Peru, is converted to Catholicism and subsequently marries a Spanish lady. Zilia adamantly criticizes French marriage customs in a letter she sends to Aza:

S'il est donc vrai, mon cher Aza, que le désir dominant de nos cœurs soit celui d'être honoré en général et chéri de quelqu'un en particulier, conçois-tu par quelle inconséquence les Français peuvent espérer qu'une jeune femme accablée de l'indifférence offensante de son mari ne cherche pas à se soustraire à l'espèce d'anéantissement qu'on lui présente sous toutes sortes de formes? (*Lettres* 346)

In establishing a Platonic scholarly relationship with Déterville, Zilia maintains a status of equality with her French suitor. Admirative of French aesthetics and philosophy, she retains Peruvian mores and values and establishes her identity as Franco-Peruvian. Her books and her *quipos* may be indicative of Zilia's idealism, of her disengagement from contingencies. Déterville also confers Zilia with "une vie indépendante" when he restitutes the Peruvian loot to her (*Lettres* 340). Decorated with ornaments from the temple of the sun where she spent her youth, surrounded by an infinite number of French books, Zilia's villa preserves a Peruvian charm while it satisfies an innovative thirst for the Enlightenment. Basking in her autonomy, complete with servants and farmers, Zilia takes advantage of her solitude to enhance her existential pleasure

of being: “Le plaisir d’être; ce plaisir oublié, ignoré même de tant d’aveugles humains; cette pensée douce, ce bonheur si pur, je suis, je vis, j’existe, pourrait seul rendre heureux, si l’on s’en souvenait, si l’on en jouissait, si l’on en connaissait le prix” (*Lettres* 362). This passage could be gleaned out of Rousseau when he turned his back to science and abandoned all his books, if it were not that Zilia has maintained her sense of self through textual existence ever since she was abducted by the Spaniards. *Les lettres d’une Péruvienne* consist in the mail she writes daily to Aza, by tying her *quipos*. When she runs out of thread, she must learn French in order to continue her letters-journal accounting for her experience in France.

The friendship Zilia proposes to Déterville is supposed to ward off destructive passion and establish a blissful constructive dialogue that maintains intact each interlocutor’s integrity, and thus the “pleasure of being.” Zilia’s passion for Aza is no longer an option. However, she may keep him as a respectable model of virtue. Even though he breaks his engagement to Zilia, he retains some degree of honor by respecting the principles of his new religion: “Il prend une autre épouse, il m’abandonne, l’honneur l’y condamne” (Grafigny, 358). Grafigny confessed to an old friend, “Panpan,” François-Antoine Devaux, that Zilia’s letters were reminiscent of her own life (Showalter, 18). She reassures him: “Non tranquiline-toi, Zilia ne sera jamais mariée, je ne suis pas assés bête pour cela” (Showalter, 23).

Zilia’s undying proclamation of love and fidelity to Aza and her emphasis on Inca honesty allow Courmont to successfully justify the king’s actions and reunite the two lovers. The lack of response on Déterville’s behalf to Zilia’s offer of erudite friendship gives Roberts and Vindé the opportunity to explore the ambiguity in order to create a plausible love story. Rachel Blau DuPlessis finds that continuations produce “a narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive patterns of feeling that are culturally mandated, internally policed, hegemonically poised” (*Beyond the*

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Ending 5). The desire to “right the wrong” insinuates that the previous writer produced a dissatisfying piece.

“Lettres d’Aza,” by Ignace Hugary de Lamarche-Courmont (1749)

Courmont constructs his text parallel to the original, aiming to document Aza’s distress throughout the revolutionary ordeal. The narration is restored to a male character. Aza replaces Zilia in the presentation of thoughts on religion, society, and the unfair condition of Spanish women. The first two letters are addressed to Zilia. He describes his recollections of the Spanish invasion and his desires for vengeance. Aza is quickly separated from his Peruvian friend, Kanhuiscap, who henceforth becomes his correspondent. The love theme reappears in the thirty-fourth letter addressed to Zilia for the first time since the initial letters. The final letter is sent to Kanhuiscap, thus concluding with a male voice and confidant.

Courmont justifies Aza, so that he is once again worthy of Zilia. Their marriage provides a closure which is emotionally satisfying, yet nonetheless illegal in Christian kindoms where it is incestuous. The scandalous couple returns to the Peruvian homeland, their forbidden union possibly invalidating any of their criticisms on French and Spanish decadence. Zulmire, Aza’s hopeful Spanish *fiancée* enters “dans une maison de Vierges” (390), thus providing a conventional closure.

Grafigny disapproved of Courmont’s continuation: “Je le trouve assez bien pour le sentiment, fort sot pour les critiques des mœurs, et très faible imitateur.”² Aza’s critique of Spanish society resembles Rica’s light observations on social customs, rather than Usbeck’s insight or Zilia’s reflections on governmental faults. Courmont criticizes lack of virtue at the Court, and the fact that money is the deciding factor in matters of justice (Courmont, 362). Grafigny’s critique of social inequities is much more radical in that she suggests an overhaul of the entire hierarchical structure in favor of a more socialist organization of society. She

questions the existing social structure which allows the peasants to be robbed of their products, reduced to beggary, while a small minority basks in opulence (Grafigny, 304).

Courmont replaces Grafigny's feminist perspective with the ridicule of men who cater to the women in their lives. Alonzo mocks "cet homme qui d'un seul coup d'œil se fait obéir par un millier d'autres, il est esclave dans sa propre maison, & soumis aux moindres volontés de sa femme" (356), only to find himself "dans le cas du guerrier dont il venoit de blâmer la foiblesse" (356) in his relation to Zulmire, his daughter. His criticism of women's vanity, infidelity, and lack of virtue may have inspired Grafigny to add letter thirty-four to her second edition (1752), where men are deemed responsible for such faults: "ils contribuent en toute manière à les rendre méprisables, soit en manquant de considération pour les leurs, soit en séduisant celles des autres" (Grafigny, 344). Consequently, Grafigny's Zilia refuses to marry because she realizes that happiness is impossible for French women who are overwhelmed by male contempt.

Grafigny's Zilia never lets herself be ruled by passion. Her love for Aza is based on duty and obedience. She turns to arts and sciences, to the pleasure nature offers. On the contrary, in the *Lettres d'Aza*, the male protagonist is governed by unrestrained emotions. He chooses Zilia over the Catholic faith he sincerely embraced. Aza avoids Zilia (Courmont, 387) until the thought of Déterville consumes him with jealousy: "Zilia à mes pieds, ses sanglots, les miens prêts à s'y confondre, Déterville, quel souvenir! Furieux j'ai fui de ses bras" (Courmont, 387). On the topic of sentiments, if Grafigny approves of Courmont's insights, both authors position themselves on antipodes. Grafigny has Zilia reject passion: "Renoncez aux sentiments tumultueux, destructeurs imperceptibles de notre être" (Grafigny, 361). Courmont objects: "Les Sciences et l'étude peuvent distraire; mais elles ne font jamais oublier les passions" (Courmont, 366). Presenting a sensible man and a philosopher

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coexisting in a schizophrenic Aza (Rustin, 134), Courmont implies that Grafigny's desire to integrate philosophical observations into a sentimental narrative is impossible.

Mme Morel de Vindé (1797)

The consequences of a French wedding are also illustrated in Vindé's continuation:

Alors il fut ouvrir la porte d'un cabinet qu'il ne reconnut pas d'abord, c'étoit celui où il avoit placé jadis tous les ornements du Soleil, et qui étoit maintenant attaché à son appartement: tout y étoit changé. Vous vous rappelez sans doute que Déterville y avoit fait peindre l'histoire des cérémonies de la ville du Soleil; c'est à présent l'histoire de Déterville et de Zilia qui est représentée sur les murs. (435-36)

Zilia's villa no longer preserves her cultural identity nor her link to her king. Replacing memories of her homeland with a history of her relationship with her new husband, Zilia forsakes her Peruvian origin. In Courmont's version, Zilia's marriage to Aza demanded that she abandon her library. Grafigny's Zilia was attached to her French books which offered her "toutes les lumières, tous les secours dont j'ai besoin" (Grafigny, 305). Essentially neither continuator maintain Zilia's Franco-Peruvian identity. However, Vindé allows her to remain an author: Zilia continues her autobiography in the letters she sends to Céline and Déterville.

Courmont and Vindé propose a husband who is her source of enlightenment even more forcefully than Grafigny. After all, Aza was responsible for Zilia's instruction, as Déterville was supposed to enlighten her with his discussion of the books he had supplied her with: "Vous me donnerez quelque connaissance de vos sciences et de vos arts; vous goûterez le plaisir de la supériorité; je la reprendrai en développant dans votre cœur des vertus que vous n'y

connaissez pas” (Grafigny, 362). Zilia’s conversion to Christianity is justified on the same basis of superior masculine knowledge in Vindé’s continuation: “Comme je me sais bon gré d’en avoir applani les difficultés en écoutant les *sages avis* de Déterville! il m’avoit fait sentir que la rare philosophie respecte l’opinion, redoute d’afficher une entière indépendance, et je ne m’étois soumise depuis quelque temps à la religion du pays que j’avois adopté.” (Vindé, 433). The same idea is expressed by Roberts: “Aza, whose understanding is far superior to mine, who, as a son of the divine luminary, must have more penetration than I can have, has found defects in ours, which I am not as yet sensible of” (Roberts, 8). The Rousseauistic conception of sexual complementarity issuing from Grafigny’s *Lettres* allowed her continuators to pursue the theme.

Vindé’s Zilia lets Déterville know that he has created her: “Je veux à votre retour, vous faire faire connoissance avec une autre Zilia, avec une Zilia heureuse, et voir si vous serez content de votre ouvrage” (418). She looks at Déterville as some infallible protective force: “Appuyée sur le bras de ton frère, il me sembloit que j’étois protégée par un ange: je le regardois avec attendrissement, avec respect; je me trouvois indigne d’un être si parfait, je me demandois comment j’avois pu acquérir des droits si constants à ses soins, à son intérêt” (415). The vocabulary of “angel,” “perfection,” and “brother” indicates a Romantic inspiration.

Vindé’s text reconciles Zilia’s virtuous faithfulness to Aza with her subsequent marriage to Déterville: Zilia learns of a vile conspiracy of greed between the former King of Peru and his Spanish conquerors. Zilia admits: “C’est perdre Aza une seconde fois” (411). Zilia becomes despondent and machine-like, practicing a self-evaluation with a surprising detachment, reflecting on her life “tout aussi froidement que j’aurois examiné celle d’un autre” (412). Thus Vindé also reconciles Grafigny’s Zilia who is firmly determined to control her life, with the metamorphosed heroine who breaks with her past: “Qu’il respire ou non; il n’existe plus pour

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Zilia, et ne doit pas même vivre dans son souvenir” (410). She suffers from having misjudged her former King: “Comment aurois-je pu prévoir un tel degré d’avilissement et de bassesse dans celui qui étoit le modèle de toutes les vertus?” (411). Vindé manages to downplay the scandalous repudiation of King Aza by his subject and parent, in order to concentrate on the love theme. Zilia’s changes require explanation: “en vous peignant la Zilia du jour de ma lettre, ce n’auroit pas été la Zilia de la veille, ni peut-être celle du lendemain” (412). Vindé seems to be aware that to transform the Peruvian Princess into a French spouse, some important shift has to occur in Zilia’s character—practically a type of death “je voulais m’en tenir à une existence purement machinale” (413). Vindé’s continuation implies a deconstruction of the main character.

In a plot similar to the one precipitating the love affair between Valmont and Mme de Touvel, Détéville’s moral superiority is demonstrated in his acts of generosity towards a disadvantaged family (415). Zilia reciprocates the good deed when she rescues her suitor from financial ruin by marrying him. In Vindé’s text, Zilia’s narrative is produced by passive emotions motivated by reactions to situations, and by chivalresque ideals. Like the other continuator, Vindé does not appear to believe that a solitary retreat can satisfy Zilia. Once she is fixed into French patriarchy (by means of marriage), Zilia’s philosophical critique becomes intolerable as it can no longer be dismissed by foreign ignorance. She is quickly converted and her social criticism comes to an abrupt stop with the exception of a hasty remark concerning charity, the principle which drew her to her husband, the virtue which prompted her to donate her Peruvian treasure and gold to him. Like Grafigny, Zilia has been expropriated from her own narrative: “Où allez-vous donc, mon ami? lui dis-je, Zilia n’est pas chez elle aujourd’hui, vous la trouverez chez son mari” (435).

Conclusion

What sets Vindé’s continuation off from the others is

her realistic depiction of Zilia's coercive limitations. Where "impuissance," "ignorance," and "crainte" composed the dominant vocabulary of isolated despair in Grafigny's text, Vindé mentions "malheur," "peur," "insécurité," and "contrainte" which point to interactive involvement (398, 399, 400). Having lost her king, Zilia has to secure a new protector in her host country. In Vindé's version, since Aza can no longer fulfill the role of addressee, Déterville's sister has become her new confidante, and there are now limits to Zilia's expression: "Je vous afflige trop souvent, ma tendre amie, par le style ordinaire de mes lettres" (Vindé, 401). She is now addressing a character partial to her persistent suitor. Zilia seems coerced into showing her gratitude to the man who has saved her. In Grafigny's continuation, while Déterville's charity towards Zilia could be motivated by self-interest, his generous act towards a poor family authorizes the princess to assess his noble character and surrender honorably.

Some of the authors demonstrated by which reasonings Zilia would be saved from herself and choose a married, ordered, productive life. Vindé shows how Zilia will have to give in emotionally to the social pressures of her host country. Zilia will have to conform internally (of her own free will) to a French model of femininity in order to survive. We propose that Vindé's closure be considered realistic, yet sympathetic to the heroine of a utopian narrative, while the continuation by the male author was influenced by masculine interests, as they were apparently challenged by Grafigny's Zilia. At any rate, Courmont implies that a feminine genre (the sentimental novel) cannot merge with a masculine genre (the philosophical tale).

Notes

1. Written by Laura Isotti, this endnote is the result of her

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involvement with the Eighteenth-Century French World Center, and her participation to the SSHRCC grant, entitled “The Other Side of the Story.” She reviews the special case of a continuation by R. Roberts (1774) whose gender we cannot determine accurately at this time, although a contemporary woman translator shares the same initials. The author of these *Peruvian Letters* claims to be unwilling to offend or “hurt the young female mind” (iv). There are other letter-writers, Celina and Mlle St. Clare, a new character. Roberts chooses to shift the focus of authorship from Zilia to Déterville who is writing to a misogynist friend, the Chevalier Dubois at Malta. Déterville reveals that Dubois forms his judgment “only from women in general” (54). It seems that Dubois is not convinced of Zilia’s exceptional nature. He estimates that Déterville should simply “change the object” of his passion in view of her resistance, perhaps turning his affections towards Mlle St. Clare. Women become interchangeable under the influence of an addressee for whom “love has been a sport, and women only the amusement of [his] lighter hours” (46).

Roberts capitalizes upon the disparaging portraits of French women rendered by Grafigny, who accuses French women of painting their faces with uniformity, of assuming similar manners, of repeating each other and themselves, all under the mask of affectation (Grafigny, *Lettres* 296). Her criticism condemns French women’s role in society, limited to platitudes, conformity, and vacuity. She possesses the virtues of any eighteenth-century heroine: “You must not judge Zilia by our countrywomen; such an invitation from a french woman would be an assurance of success, but Zilia, to all the sweetness, softness, and delicacy....which is rarely found in either; and a candour of soul, which makes her incapable of the least disguise” (40). Déterville’s praise for Zilia allows him to confirm the rule of feminine weakness, inconsequential behavior, and artificiality; her constancy and resolve are here glorified only inasmuch as they guarantee that she will possess the moral strength to keep her virginity intact for her spouse.

According to Roberts, Zilia's solitude must be far from satisfying, and increasingly apparent (6, 52-53). Déterville takes charge of Zilia's fate, as the facetious excerpt attests: "Zilia is, with all that ardour of affection which is consistent with unaffected modesty; formed with qualities capable of shining in the characters of wife, and mother, as well as that of friend; shall we suffer her, from a mistaken delicacy, to pine away in silent discontent, and never fulfill those social duties, for which Nature designed her?" (134). Autonomy is not a plausible remedy to heartache for Roberts, and Déterville's declaration "Zilia is mine" (166) provides a socially acceptable ending to the love story. Aza's conversion to Christianity made him an improper suitor to Zilia, while it paved the way to her conversion before her wedding.

The complementary story of Mlle St. Clare and St. Far's tragic love demonstrates the dangers of solitude and unregulated passion. Upon learning that St. Far is her brother, St. Clare opts for a conventual life where she can retire from the world. St. Far leaves for a monastery to become a monk and dedicate "the remainder of his life to religion" (112), and forget his passion. He dies of heartache.

Momentarily, Zilia and Déterville live the same experience. Zilia becomes a martyr because she chooses solitude in virtue of her exemplary constancy in love. Déterville seems to abide by Zilia's vow of celibacy, giving it a religious tonality: "Christ Jesus....was invested with passions incident to human nature; that he might shew, by practice of constant self-denial, that it was possible to control desires, which, under proper regulation, are beneficial to the world, but if let loose, must prove destructive" (62-63). Déterville stresses the satisfaction of "regulating, not destroying our passions" (65). Zilia's conversion and her marriage are all means of regulating the disruptive nature of *Les lettres d'une péruvienne* rendered productive.

An aesthetico-mystic subtext corrects Grafigny's plot, which connects it to Romantic themes. Zilia's initial

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rejection of conventual education derives from inconsistencies in the priest's pedagogical methods; "he so obscured and puzzled it by his manner, that I could by no means reconcile it to my understanding" (58). Déterville is able to admire Mlle Brutton's intellect: "the qualities of her mind are such as make her truly valuable to her friends: she has a superior understanding, joined with dissidence, which, I believe, no French woman ever possessed" (140). By means of moral aesthetics, Roberts offers solutions to detach women from the status of object into which they are confined by men who value their appearances rather than their inner beauty. Grafigny's authorial voice riddled with bitterness and scorn towards a society which renders any woman "trompée" (153), "dépourvue," "dépendante" (116) is replaced by Mlle St. Clare, who proposes: "If men searched only for the intellectual qualities of the soul, and looked on living beauties with the same degree of sensibility that they would feel upon examining a fine picture, without even a wish that the woman they married should be possessed of any, I should think that they designed to compliment us with having minds like their own, that looked down with contempt on outward graces, and only prized the inward gem" (78).

The same idea was proposed by Grafigny: Zilia loves Aza because he gave her an education equivalent to his own. Mlle St. Clare was also given an education by her father whose lessons were geared to compensate for his wife's disinterest in her. He also wanted to enrich his daughter's intellect. This education increases their mutual appreciation: "As my understanding improved, my father's pleasure in my company grew with it; that what I believed was at first the effect of compassion, became at last the result of judgement and approbation" (76). However, if Mlle St. Clare suggests a possibility of horizontal equality between the sexes, even symptomatically entertaining a love affair with her brother, it is clear that the rest of her life is devoted to the reestablishment of a vertical hierarchy which binds the nun to her God thus removing her from the carnal realm. Like

Zilia, she had to change the masculine “arbiter” of her destiny (71).

Roberts accounts for a misogynistic context, in which French women must evolve. This “continuation” seems more realistic, while Grafigny’s text is somewhat idealistic and more marginal since she requests equality as well as intellectual and economical independence.

2. Qtd. in Smith, 7; from the Grafigny papers, Yale University, xxxvi, 169, Dec. 13 1748.

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