

Olivier, Armance, and the Unspeakable

by Lauren Pinzka

As anyone knows who peruses the literature surrounding Mme de Duras' *Olivier* and Stendhal's *Armance*, the main interest of both works to the modern reader is that Stendhal's more famous work is based on Duras' epistolary tale and that they both revolve around a secret that cannot be told. They are detective novels without the cathartic moment of resolution. Françoise Gaillard writes that *Armance* transgresses the requirement for closure of the classical text, its laws of readability (124). The same could be said for *Olivier*. Although I shall address the secret as a central theme of the works, my main question will be, following up on Margaret Waller's excellent chapter on the two novels in *The Male Malady: Fictions of Impotence in the French Romantic Novel*, does a male writer take a different tack than a female author in the treatment of a literary subject? In particular, I will treat the differences in communication or lack thereof in the two works, and most importantly, the different ways in which Duras and Stendhal situate their hero's secret in the context of incest. They choose in one case the mother-son bond and in the other the brother-sister relation with different consequences. One situates the problem in the individual and the other in the relationship.

The question of intentionally comparing a male- and female-authored version of a story is fraught with difficulty for indeed any two authors would treat a literary subject differently. It would be absurd to proclaim causality based on the sex of the author just as it would be absurd to deny the differences between nineteenth-century men's and women's education, their position in society, and the freedom they enjoyed. Those differences have led to what Naomi Schor refers to as "the gendering of aesthetic categories" (3), by which she means that men and women often gravitated (less today as their roles have become less circumscribed) toward different forms of literary expression

because of precedent, prejudice, and environment. The complicated story leading from the first novel entitled *Olivier* to the second edition of *Armance* tells the story of many women's attempt to write, for it is one of male appropriation and humiliation. In fact, the female-authored *Olivier* has remained in our literary canon only through the inclusion of the male-authored *Armance*. Schor points out in her recent work on George Sand that the once illustrious and then forgotten writer similarly remained in the canon only indirectly through Flaubert's *Un cœur simple*, written for her (186).

In the case of Duras and Stendhal, no such devotion was at play. Instead, we have a story of imitation and embarrassment. There are, in fact, three novels based on a similar story, since an intermediate text also named *Olivier* exists as well, but has sparked little literary interest. Duras wrote the last of her five novels between 1821 and 1822. Although it was only published posthumously, the duchess did read it out loud in her Restoration salon. Many critics feel that the events following the reading of her book led her to abandon writing altogether (Waller, 119). An unscrupulous writer named Henri de Latouche had heard about Duras' novel and decided to profit from its scandalous reputation; he published his own version of *Olivier* and attributed it to Mme de Duras by copying publication details from Duras' earlier novels and by suggesting as much in the *Mercure du XIX^e siècle* for which he was a collaborator (Lebègue, xxvi). Although Duras had read it out loud to her friends, it was embarrassing for a duchess to publish such a novel because of the nature of the secret: male impotence. Latouche continued to deny his authorship and finally admitted that the duchess was also not the author; he then published a second edition, creating still another secret, the author's identity. Stendhal, an acquaintance of Latouche, did a very favorable review of the book for the *New Monthly Magazine* in February, 1826, and swore that Duras was the author. In fact, the controversy about the true authorship of the second *Olivier* was not cleared up until the mid-twentieth

century when her manuscript was found at the Château de Chastellux by the Duc de Duras along with another handwritten version, slightly amended (Crichfield, 22). Meanwhile, Stendhal, famous to us for his many acts of appropriation and outright plagiarism, decided to write his own version of the story and produced *Armance* in the same year, 1826 (Lebègue, xxiv-xi), too late to profit from the earlier versions' notoriety. His novel was generally disliked because of its enigmatic nature. He then revealed that *Olivier* (II) was not the work of Mme de Duras, who died shortly after following a mysterious illness. He decided to publish a second edition in 1828, hoping to benefit from the publicity surrounding her death. This time, he wrote an article in the *New Monthly Magazine* admitting to be the author of the earlier, flawed, *Armance*, and now willing to put his name on this book despite its risky subject. Although claiming to have improved his novel, he merely suppressed the date in the title (1827) and made a few cosmetic changes. The second edition fared no better than the first. By the time of his death, *Armance* was as forgotten as *Olivier* (Lebègue, lx-lxii). The problem of genesis is thus complicated by the fact that *Armance* is an unofficial rewrite of *Olivier*, of which there were two editions, which in turn is a rewrite of an earlier *Olivier*, which also exists in two different versions. Furthermore, Stendhal was not really named Stendhal, but Henri Beyle.¹

Despite the above chain of events, Pierre Barbéris dismisses Duras as the source of *Armance*, claiming that the real source is *Le Misanthrope*, a text that does not try to please, has no happy ending, and is a fable of inaccomplishment (68). One wonders whether he read Duras' novel since it is all of the above but is inconveniently written by a "minor" woman author. He is not alone in belittling *Armance*'s "humble" origins. Despite pilfering her story, Stendhal speaks disparagingly of Duras, referring to "[l]es hommes vulgaires au pied d'Ourika."² Margaret Waller explains that he actually appreciated Duras' talents but resented "the success and social privilege that made her,

rather than himself, the heir apparent to La Fayette's literary mantle" (116). He attacked her stilted, aristocratic style and use of novelistic conventions,³ which might seem ironic considering his use of false letters and mishaps in *Armance*.

In an interesting twist, Stendhal chooses to hide behind the pretense of a male editor revising a female-authored work; he was perhaps inspired to do so since he had done just that: revised a woman's text. He justifies the device of the anonymous female writer by invoking the scandalous topic of his novel. By pretending to be a woman, Stendhal feels freer to gear his story towards the private sphere, more common in women's fiction than men's (Waller, 121). Much has been written about women writers hiding behind male pseudonyms and narrators and by other means appropriating male authority; *Armance* represents the less common counter-example of a man liberating himself behind a woman's authorship, albeit an anonymous one. Anonymous, of course, because there was nothing to gain by publishing as a woman. After all, the only name that appears on the final published work is a man's, although he, too, uses a pseudonym, albeit for different reasons than a George Sand. However, Stendhal was unusual for a male author in the nineteenth century in his sensibility, his strong female characters, and his identification with female predecessors, in particular Mme de La Fayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*, for him "le sommet,"⁴ and the novels of Mme de Tencin (Lebègue, xli). He wrote nonetheless that he was afraid above all of being read by chambermaids and the marquises who resemble them.⁵ Christine Renaudin argues that, in making this statement, Stendhal is attacking non-political romance literature for women which functioned to keep them silent and passive. She notes that the character of *Armance* is a strong woman who wants to know what is happening in the salons. Stendhal's decision to introduce politics into *Armance*, prefaced by his famous line that talking about politics in a novel is like a *coup de pistolet* in the middle of a concert, is really a refusal to talk down to his

female audience (62-63).

Certain superficial similarities and differences between the two works are obvious. Stendhal names his novel after his heroine and Duras after her hero. The character of Armance is far better developed and more interesting than is Duras' male creation, Olivier, both because of the differing lengths of the works and because of Stendhal's unusual skill in depicting female characters. Stendhal wrote elsewhere that he did not want to tip his hand with the name "Olivier" since "ce nom seul fait *exposition* et *exposition indécente*" (Lebègue, xxxii). Because of the notoriety of Duras' and Latouche's character, he chooses to obscure the link and to allow for the possibility that Octave's secret is not Olivier's.⁶

Stendhal's full title, *Armance ou quelques scènes d'un salon de Paris de 1827*, and Duras' *Olivier ou le secret*, reflect the fact that, in the words of Françoise Gaillard, the novel of the secret has become a novel of manners, the enigmatic novel has become a realist novel (119), a literary genre that Naomi Schor heavily identifies with male authors. Indeed, Duras relies on emotional drama alone in her exceedingly spare novel, containing nothing extraneous and no local color. Stendhal's novel is remarkably devoid of action and like Duras' is full primarily of talk (Bellemin-Noël, 22). However, Stendhal situates his novel in Restoration France as opposed to the two *Oliviers*, both situated in pre-Revolutionary France, a more ideal setting for the aristocracy. Stendhal's novel has generated much interest with its subtle depiction of the conflict between aristocratic values and the bourgeois greediness that overtakes them. Closer to a realist novel than *Olivier*, *Armance* deploys real referents. For example, Octave attends the Ecole Polytechnique whereas Olivier has only done military service; he is thus more anchored in the aristocracy whereas Octave is part of the new meritocracy. The addition of real referents in the text permits a different interpretation of the story as an allegory of a class deprived of its means of reproduction (Pierssens, 30), or as a portrait of an impotent

social class, the aristocracy, faced with its disappearance.

A perfect example of a commonly divergent tack of male and female novelists is the choice of literary form. Duras chooses the epistolary form, already out of fashion by 1821, where the reader is superior to the characters by virtue of his or her omniscient position. The epistolary novel allows for more intimacy and knowledge of the characters' psyches. Women were particularly adept at the epistolary form in the late eighteenth century; they felt comfortable with its constraints since it corresponded to their limited access to the public sphere. In it they focused on social relations (although Stendhal does so as well) and the condition of women (Stewart, 554). The epistolary form works superbly with the theme of the secret for it is plausible if frustrating that we never learn the secret, since no one but the possessor of the secret knows it either and he never reveals it. Furthermore, the role of the exchange of letters in the text as a source of conflict is echoed by the use of the epistolary form. Perhaps it is Stendhal's choice of the more popular third-person narration, more typical of male authors in the nineteenth century, that indirectly made readers so dislike his work. The literary form implies an omniscient narrator yet the reader is confronted with a narrator who does not seem to know or chooses not to reveal a most vital piece of information.

Stendhal transforms Duras' lovers into characters similar to his other literary creations. The female-created Louise offers herself sexually to her lover in a misguided effort to save him. Every bit the conventional woman of her time, she terms it a "sacrifice." She also concludes when her husband dies that she ought to have bent more to his tastes and needs as a woman should (143). She, unlike Armance, freely admits her love to Olivier. Unusual though for a Stendhalian heroine and more similar to his heroes, Armance contrasts with Louise in her fear of sex and of disillusionment if she marries Octave: "Je pourrais l'aimer en secret, se disait-elle...je serais aussi heureuse et peut-être bien plus que si j'étais sa compagne. Ne dit-on pas que le

mariage est le tombeau de l'amour, qu'il peut y avoir des mariages agréables, mais qu'il n'en est aucun de délicieux? Je tremblerais d'épouser mon cousin" (128). She is a prouder, more cautious literary creation. She initially scorns Octave because he has become wealthy and she does not wish to appear a fortune-hunter and continues to avoid any admission of her love, believing that he is not in love with her. She pretends to be betrothed to another. Like Mathilde de la Mole, Armance is slightly masculine, wearing short hair with big curls, which was seen as boyish at the time (Renaudin, 57); furthermore, most critics have noted that she is repeatedly referred to as "*un ami*" (see 47 for three examples). Octave feels that Armance is "le maître de [sa] destinée" (297). She resembles Stendhal's heroes more than she resembles Louise in her pride, elusiveness, fear of commitment, and inability to express herself. She also functions in the text as Octave's mirror image, which Louise does not for Olivier.

Octave is an elusive figure compared to Stendhal's other heroes, largely because we never learn the reason for his vow never to love and we do not see the letter he finally writes to Armance disclosing his secret (Felman, 173). Just as *Olivier* functions as part of a trilogy of novels about "defective" individuals excluded from society (Bertrand-Jennings 40-41), Octave, in Stendhal's hands, resembles many of his great novelistic creations: self-conscious, proud, unable to communicate his feelings, and always looking for the mother-substitute. Shoshana Felman gives as a prime example of Octave's Stendhalian self-consciousness the moment when Octave is about to tell Armance his feelings and suddenly he sees her "non plus comme un amant, mais de façon à voir ce qu'elle allait penser" (276). He explains, "Mon orgueil élève un mur de diamant entre moi et les autres hommes" (150). Emile Talbot emphasizes Octave's links to Corneillian heroism, arguing that in Stendhal it is a failed heroism (156-57). Waller makes an astute comment about Octave's bondage to the home and mother while the text emphasizes his masculinity and his power over others (122).

He is a dark figure, compared to the Messiah and to Lucifer (A 8) and characterized both as superhuman and as inspiring terror (A 18). In the course of the novel his misdeeds include provoking a duel and throwing a lackey out the window. Despite the title *Armance*, Octave is more developed than the woman he loves and is clearly the main character. The book starts and ends with him, unlike *Olivier* which is framed by the character of Louise.

Duras emphasizes her female characters and their relations more than Stendhal, and both authors represent men more negatively, as already seen in my description of the character of Octave. Louise's letters are considerably longer and more frequent than Olivier's. Olivier writes a few short letters in which he mostly bores the reader with overblown *mal du siècle* "angst." By so emphasizing the women in her novel at the expense of the character of Olivier, Duras suggests that the man a woman loves is not in himself so important or interesting: it is the obsession itself. Louise's sister, Adèle, also has a central role as Louise's and Olivier's confidant. Female relationships are stressed in this way as well as the critical nature of such relations. Louise asks her sister repeatedly not to judge her for her actions. Olivier, too, expresses fear of her judgment and of losing her respect: "Vous, Adèle, ne me jugez pas!" (156); Louise also fears Adèle's opinion: "Que penses-tu de moi? Quel mépris mes lettres doivent élever en toi! Hélas, Adèle, c'est pour l'état où je suis qu'il est dit: *ne jugez pas*" (185). When she decides to "give herself" to Olivier, she writes, "je suis indigne de toi" (193). The mother-figure of Adèle is both a confidant and an *entremetteuse* as will be Octave's mother, Mme de Malivert, but in the woman-authored novel, she is also a critical judge of her "children's" behavior. In both novels, however, the "mother" tries to help the female character obtain the man's love. The role of men sharply contrasts with that of women in both novels. In Stendhal, it is men who seek to thwart Octave and Armance's love, while in *Olivier*, men publicly ridicule Olivier, presumably for his impotence, and perhaps contributing to his suicide.

Both novels have as a central theme the breakdown of communication, of which of course the secret is a main part. Communication is handled very differently in the two novels according to the different literary forms. In *Olivier*, Adèle, the heroine's sister, serves as intermediary between the lovers who write to each other less often. Adèle communicates confidences to each party although she, like her sister, does not know Olivier's secret, that he cannot marry Louise, his childhood sweetheart, because he is impotent. She encourages and discourages their love according to Louise's marital status (the latter becomes widowed part way through the novel). At first, she tries to prevent Louise from committing adultery and later urges her to pursue Olivier and uncover his secret. She also encourages Olivier not to take Louise's reticence after her husband's death as a personal affront. Most communication between the lovers is thus indirect, filtered through the confidant.

In her excellent analysis of *Olivier*, Ivanna Rosi notes that Duras adeptly uses the epistolary form to show the limits of the notion of the confidant. Instead of functioning as a forum for expressing one's soul, the letters in Duras reveal the negative aspects of letter writing. Olivier is always defending himself from the pressing demands of Adèle and Louise and never confides his secret (although he does offer to). Geographic distance means that letters always arrive late in relation to events, sometimes with unfortunate results (Rosi, 145). For example, Adèle tells Olivier to leave Louise alone immediately after the death of her husband, which is misinterpreted by Louise as a lack of love (*O* 157). Adèle provokes in Louise a feeling of being judged as evidenced by the latter's frequent requests *not* to judge her; she also misjudges Olivier and believes he wants to marry Louise. As Olivier describes in more and more detail the symptoms of his unhappiness, Adèle questions him to find out his secret. It is Adèle's urging of Louise to find out the source of Olivier's chagrin that prompts Louise to ask him his secret, which he offers painfully to do. She then renounces her need

to know and in a misguided effort to help him offers, by letter to become his mistress. Horrified, he tries to write her letter after letter, burning them all, and takes his life the next day. As Pierssens writes, Duras' characters "se disent" but Stendhal's spend their time *not* talking (24). Although it is true that they are more communicative than in Stendhal's version, perhaps reflecting the fact that *Olivier* was written by a woman, it should be pointed out that Duras also emphasizes the problems of communication and its breakdown. After all, her hero cannot even write, much less speak, his secret. Letters are no less destructive in *Armance*. Octave confides his secret in a letter, showing that Stendhal considers the secret less impossible to divulge, but is tricked by a false letter into believing that Armance is insincere in her love. (Language is always deceptive in Stendhal's fiction.) Octave then decides to marry her and commit suicide, writing his secret in a letter which we never read. In both novels, letters ultimately lead to death.

All four protagonists believe that putting sentiments into words makes bad things worse; bearing the soul is never seen as salutary. Olivier believes that confiding his secret will make it a bigger obstacle and that the act of confiding will serve to persuade him of its truth. He can pretend that it is not true if he has not put it into words (148). Louise holds the same belief, writing that the terrible language of revealing secrets is only learned at the expense of repose. She claims that, although one pays too dearly *not* to have the right to speak, it is not truly a relief to confess a secret. She tells her sister that in describing her torments, she only increases them (185). In *Armance*, Octave is acutely sensitive to words, tones, and accents: "[L]es mots dispoient de sa vie" (68). He is only able to reveal his love to Armance when she faints, at which time he whispers, "jamais je ne t'ai tant aimée" (173). Fortunately, she wakes up to hear his words. Only on threat of death can he say Armance's name, and it is the process of speech that brings him finally to life (Felman, 177): "[n]ommer Armance fit une révolution dans la situation d'Octave. Il osait donc prononcer

ce nom, chose qu'il s'était tant défendu" (200; qtd. in Felman, 177). But Octave later denies his love for her until he thinks that he is about to die after a duel. Then he writes to Armance with his own blood, "[V]ous serez séparée de qui vous aimait mieux qu'un père n'aime sa fille" (202), a projection of the Œdipal attachment he has for her. Towards the end of the novel he does write a letter confessing his secret, putting his shame into words, but, revealing his ambivalence, instead of mailing it puts it in an orange crate where he and Armance often leave letters for each other. It is there that he finds the false letter supposedly from Armance, at which point he takes back his letter only to send it to her just before committing suicide. Again death is a requirement for communication to take place. In contrast, death brings only an absolute and unknowable secret in *Olivier* (Rosi, 147). For the reader, however, the secret is unknowable in both novels. Felman writes that Octave's secret, written down but never told, becomes a vessel, a signifier, an empty sign without meaning (187). All the tension of the novel leads up to the anticlimactic "[I]l écrivit une lettre de dix lignes." The content has been made irrelevant. Felman writes, "*Armance* est le roman de la parole impossible" (174), concluding that Octave's real impotence is linguistic.

Duras does allow her protagonists to openly reveal their love for each other, whereas Stendhal keeps his star-crossed lovers in a dance of non-communication throughout the novel. Olivier and Louise finally communicate directly about their love, although he, like Octave, cannot bring himself to tell her the secret. Upon asking her whom she would choose if she were to remarry, he interrupts her answer, covering her mouth and shouting, "Ne le nommez pas! Ne le nommez pas! Louise, je ne veux pas le savoir, laissez-moi vivre quelques jours encore" (170). His outburst demonstrates the power of speech on Olivier. When Louise asks that he trust her, that they communicate (something the male-created Armance never does), he cites "un obstacle, un motif, un devoir" and flees (171). When Octave actually tries at one point to tell Armance in person his secret, his features

contract (perhaps an allusion to impotence) and his lips convulse. He cannot even say as much as Olivier, who goes so far as to write to Louise that night in a reassuring manner. They see each other again and have an even more direct discussion of their love (176), something that never occurs in Stendhal. Stendhal thus develops further than Duras the theme of non-expressibility and secrecy. *Armance* also claims to have an eternal secret, that there is someone that she must marry, which is patently false. Although Louise's love for Olivier also constitutes a secret which is discovered by her suitor, de Rieux (*O* 179), she never pretends with Olivier that she, too, has an impediment to marriage once her husband has died.

These two works portray a common fate, oblivion, followed by a common revival of interest, and a familial relationship between lovers, a mother-son relation to be exact. They are both tales of impossible love, obstacles, and suicide. The male protagonist faces an unknown impediment to consummating his love for the heroine and, in the end, takes his life. The modern reader is caught in a peculiar dilemma in reading *Olivier* and *Armance*. Both novels would deny the reader's satisfaction, but just as Mme de Duras' salon public knew the secret of her short novel and could thus laugh inwardly at the *double-entendres* in her work, we too know the secret if we read the introduction of either book. Perhaps we finally have a definitive argument against reading introductions which, of course, bias our interpretation, not allowing the privilege of a first reading. Many critics have refused the "knowledge" transmitted by the introductions, arguing, most convincingly, that we do not know the secret and that we do not need to know the secret; it is irrelevant.

Shoshana Felman writes that *Armance* is organized around a "fermeture." We have an outside "key" to the secret, a letter that Stendhal wrote to Mérimée in which he revealed Octave's secret of impotency, but it is an integral part of the text that the secret not be revealed (170). The absence is essential, rather than the essential being absent (170). Gaillard writes that we never learn the secret because

lack can only be expressed by the lack of a statement of lack (124). We are left with the presence of letters but an absence of revelation. However, most readers find this state of affairs frustrating, for, indeed, one cannot easily guess the secret no matter how astute the reader. And once we have been told that the secret is male impotence, how do we exclude this all too tempting solution from our minds? We oscillate between denial and recognition in a fetishistic relation to the text; we know the secret, but should we believe it? What would our reading of the book be without that exterior knowledge? Could the secret be different and can we read the texts without answering the question? The answer is obvious if one reads the superb commentary that has appeared on *Armance* over the years; few have considered the same possibility for *Olivier*. Some have argued that the secret is not revealed because impotence was too embarrassing a subject at the time. It is worth noting that Sand depicted female impotence in *Lélia*, written at the same period. It is not surprising that frigidity should be less embarrassing to mention, if indeed male impotence was considered indelicate, given the prevailing attitudes towards female sexuality. Other critics, like Barbéris, have denied that impotence is even plausible. Bellemin-Nöel and Felman have focused more on mental illness, while the former also notes obvious hints that Octave may be homosexual (75).

In both novels, the authors avoid what Waller terms “the culture’s comedic script for an impotent male which would make him the subject of derision or a character out of farce” (132). However, in a significant gender difference, Duras allows for constant humor through the use of double meaning, whereas Stendhal’s text avoids such mockery of an indelicate male condition. The examples given in *Olivier* are numerous. There is, for example, a constant repetition of the verb *manquer* in relation to Olivier (136, 155, 155). Louise writes that she does not understand why Olivier does not experience happiness. “Je sais qu’on peut le posséder sans en jouir” (145). Olivier laments, “il y a des désespoirs *chroniques*;...ils rongent, ils dévorent, ils tuent, mais il

n'alitent pas" (147). Perhaps the most amusing is Olivier's comment to Adèle: "[p]lus misérable que le roseau, je me plie et ne me relève pas" (155). In contrast to *Olivier*, impotence is not generally something to be laughed at in *Armance*, with the possible exception of the narrator's assertion that "Octave manquait de pénétration mais pas de caractère" (90). Instead, we can only guess, if indeed we can, through a cultural reference to Héloïse and Abélard and a citation from Marlowe which Stendhal reinforces by translating it later into French: "Melancholy mark'd for her own, whose ambitious heart overrates the happiness he cannot enjoy" (23); "[u]ne imagination passionnée le portait à s'exagérer les bonheurs dont il ne pouvait jouir" (41). There are also revealing scenes where Octave flees the depiction of sexual intercourse. Bellemin-Noël disputes the reference to the doomed medieval lovers by rightly arguing that castration and impotence are not synonymous (26). He insists on the problem instead of castration and the Œdipus complex which is, in fact, far more explicit in the text.

Bellemin-Noël's comment brings up one of the most interesting points of comparison between the two novels, that is the choice of both authors to situate the secret within the context of psychologically incestuous relations. Stendhal more directly implies the mother-son bond, which according to Waller, is an innovation in *mal du siècle* literature where the mother was significantly absent (199 n. 23). Duras imitates more consciously *René* by insisting on a brother-sister relation. Stendhal also creates a slightly incestuous link between his lovers in that they are cousins and both call Octave's mother "maman." But it is with shocking directness that Stendhal describes Octave's attachment to his mother. The father is negatively portrayed and practically non-existent, a pattern throughout Stendhal's novelistic production. The first line of the novel announces the scenario: "tel était le désir constant d'un père qu'il respectait et de sa mère qu'il aimait avec une sorte de passion" (7). The Malivert residence is stifling and immobile, "surchargée," devoid of light, and his room too low-ceilinged (12). He

tells his mother: “je jouis du bonheur d’être seul avec toi, mon unique plaisir consiste à vivre isolé” (15). He refuses to go to the theater, preferring to stay at home with his mother: “je reste où je suis le plus heureux” (17). He explains, “Hélas! chère maman, la vue de tous les hommes m’attriste également; je n’aime que toi au monde” (18). The sudden disappearance of the mother from the plot suggests that he is trying to repress his love for her as he transfers his affections to Armance, who is very much like him. Octave’s decision during adolescence never to love might be seen as stemming from his inability to break away from his mother. Diamond reads it as obedience to a feudal code, a form of the law of the Father (45). Octave loses his “amour filial” and breaks his vow once he falls in love with Armance (165). Bonnivet and Soubirane succeed in destroying that love, as the law of the father surfaces at last. Soubirane, his uncle, a surrogate father since his own is so weak, maliciously compromises Armance only to be horrified that they decide to marry; he then tries to block the marriage, but the women, Armance and Octave’s mother, triumph. Undaunted, he and Octave’s rival, sarcastically named Bonnivet, scheme to thwart the lovers’ letters. Octave and Armance marry, but because he believes the false letter, Octave then commits suicide. The two men thus keep Octave from union with his mother-substitute, imposing the symbolic order (Bellemin-Noël, 70).

The mother, according to Bellemin-Noël, is everywhere, waiting to engulf Octave. She is lurking most obviously in Armance. Her initials, AZ, encompass the alphabet while the O of Octave is exactly in between. Armance is like a daughter to Mme de Malivert who seduces her into marrying her son. Bellemin-Noël notes several references to Armance in a maternal context, for example a repeated reference to the diamond necklace that Armance’s own mother had given her (172, 230; Bellemin-Noël, 82). The mother is also to be found in nature when the two retreat to Andilly and most especially in Greece. There he dies in the “*Mer Méditerranée*,” curled up next to ropes on the third

of March, the dates doubly reinforcing the Œdipal number three; he has killed himself with opium and digitalis, also called “doigt de Notre Dame.” Armance and Octave’s mothers are eternally united at the end of the novel as they both retreat to the womanly refuge of the convent (303; Bellemin-Noël, 71, 91). His suicide can be read in many ways: as a rejection of his identification with Armance/mother; as a submission to the Law of the Father by depriving himself of his mother substitute (Diamond, 54 n. 18; 43); as a return to the symbolic mother as he dies in the “mer;” as a killing of Armance by killing himself since he has already introjected the mother into himself (Bellemin-Noël, 84). Waller interprets Octave’s suicide as an over-privileging of the phallus such that, despite the fact that Armance is happy without it (after their marriage she appears to be sexually satisfied), Octave must see it as all-important and martyr himself to his lack (129). Unlike in *Olivier*, Octave’s death is politicized. He goes to Greece to fight for freedom in an epic gesture but does not even land and dies before ever fighting. Diamond notes that Stendhal contrasts Octave’s fate to Napoleon’s, whom he recalls as he passes by Corsica (301). His status as failed hero is transposed to the failure of the Revolution and to that of his social class. Sexual and social impotency are intersubstituted and the motif of his impotence becomes ideological (Gaillard, 117-18).

In *Olivier*, the incestuous bond is between brother and sister and is not as explicitly Œdipal; however, on closer examination, we will see that this is not so different as it appears. Louise and Olivier have a narcissistic childhood bond as cousins. When Olivier was sick at the age of seventeen, Louise became sicker still (140), like Mme de Malivert who develops a chest problem along with her son. Olivier considers himself a brother to Louise, something which is announced as early as the first letter (127) and is constantly repeated throughout the text. In the revised manuscript, Olivier turns out *to be* her brother, but Crichfield finds this version unconvincing. It is specifically

stated that they are cousins and unlikely that their parents would have attempted to arrange a youthful marriage between them (to which Olivier decided to object) because someone would know the truth (25). It is striking that Olivier's fear of Louise is compulsively expressed as his fear of falling over a precipice into an abyss, suggesting fear of female engulfment, fear of the mother. In fact, both books narrate the tragic consequences of an imperfectly resolved Œdipus complex. Whereas we see the obvious mother-son attachment in *Armance* and must surmise that Armance represents a displacement from Octave's mother and is hence taboo, in *Olivier* we see the obvious brother-sister attachment between Louise and Olivier and must guess that it is linked to an Œdipal conflict.

We have many clues that Olivier associates Louise with his mother. He compares their childhood love to suckling at his mother's breast. In the very first line of the text Olivier speaks of duty and division, of patriarchal authority and maternal bonding, the hallmarks of the Œdipus complex: "je vous obéis, ma chère cousine....: vous voulez que nous terminions nos tristes partages" (127). He then adds, "ou plutôt c'est monsieur de Nangis qui le veut" (127). It is the law of the father, her husband in this case, who determines that their "partages" must cease. He continues: "[j]'aimais, je l'avoue, cette communauté d'intérêts, elle était un reste de l'affection qui a uni nos deux mères" (127). We see the link to the mothers, the "father's" separating tactics, and the necessity to submit. He suffers from a feeling of impurity: "[u]n profond dégoût s'attache pour moi à tout ce que je possède" (147). He is filled with unsatisfied longing: "j'envie tout ce que je n'ai pas" (146), the basic mechanism of desire. "Le monde est rempli de ces secrètes douleurs" (146), he writes, recognizing the universality of the situation. In another letter, he writes that duty is born from constraints and that on one occasion in his life (referring to his decision not to marry Louise), Olivier claims that he followed his duty, adding, "qu'il m'en a coûté! Je devrais, Adèle, suivre sa voix sévère" (156). The

severe voice suggests the parental superego. Ostensibly the duty is that of not marrying under false pretenses as he would be unable to father a child. In another letter he writes, “[l]e bonheur que je dois fuir ne cesse d’obséder toutes mes pensées, et mon imagination en multiplie les charmes pour augmenter mon supplice” (148). Again love is forbidden and punished. In both *Armance* and *Olivier*, it is odd to what extent the male protagonists are full of guilt and self-loathing for their secret. Octave considers himself a monster and thoroughly despicable. The intensity of both men’s reaction to their condition implies that there is more at stake than impotency. Taken at face value, it also suggests that impotency is the worst fate that could befall a man.

Louise senses something illicit in her love for Olivier as well: “Est-il possible que je jouisse de ce bonheur dans l’innocence, que rien ne me défende de le sentir et que ma vie doive se passer ainsi? Je sais bien que cela est impossible, que la condition de l’humanité s’y oppose” (163). She is breaking the rules of society by loving her “brother” and he his “mother-sister.” Her statement also proclaims that we are all repressed in society by rules. She later compares the two of them to Siamese twins, destined to spend their lives together, explaining, “nous n’avons qu’une âme entre nous....le même sang coule dans nos veines et nous avons reçu l’amour de nos mères avec leur lait” (171-72). When Olivier answers by saying, “notre état naturel, c’est d’être réunis,” and “nos deux vies, nos deux âmes ne sont-elles pas unies par une chaîne indissoluble” (173), it becomes obvious that the Siamese twin metaphor suggests a regression to the womb as well. The emphasis on the mother’s milk and a physical condition where two bodies and two blood supplies are joined, linked by a cord, invokes pregnancy as well. He emphasizes that he is her “*premier ami*” (173), italicizing “premier,” and thus evoking a parent-child relation as well as that of siblings. In the same letter, he writes, “ton souvenir quelquefois me tourmente bien plus que ta présence” (173); it is their past, not the present that is the problem. In fact it would be just the opposite if

impotency were the only obstacle to their love. Olivier cries in jealousy at his potent rival de Rieux, and he speaks in the short sentences of a child: "Il vous aime, il prétend à vous, cette pensée m'est insupportable! Je suis jaloux, je suis injuste, je le sens" (178). His manhood threatened, he becomes violent and tries to kill his rival in a secret duel. There is a hint in this entire section of the jealous son trying to kill the omnipotent father. Like Octave who furnishes his new bedroom with three large mirrors, Olivier loves finding in Louise the image and the reflection of everything that he feels: "[u]nion délicieuse, sécurité touchante! Quoi! c'est à ce bonheur qu'il faut renoncer?" (186). One hears quite clearly the cry of the child. Finally, Olivier writes that twice he has given up "celle que je n'ai jamais cessé d'adorer" (189). He, of course, is referring to his present refusal to marry Louise and to his earlier refusal as an adolescent, but the idea of renouncing twice the love object also recalls the subject's earliest love object, the mother, whom he has also had to renounce. He has given up the woman he loves twice in that he has given up his mother and his mother-substitute, Louise.

Both novels situate their characters' problems in incestuous conflicts. Stendhal, who openly acknowledged his own attachment to his mother and hatred of his father, went much further in depicting an overtly unresolved Oedipus complex. Duras instead emphasizes brother-sister incest, providing a problem that appears more intrinsic to the Louise-Olivier relationship. Olivier has always felt a taboo preventing him from loving Louise. In *Armance*, if indeed impotence is the problem, it is a practical one to a certain extent; Octave sees prostitutes, actually marries Armance, and Armance appears completely satisfied, fainting in his arms, all suggesting that desire exists beyond the phallus;⁷ Stendhal writes crudely to Mérimée that there are solutions to the problem of impotence and proceeds to name them. Furthermore, as Waller astutely observes, Stendhal shifts the male lack to a female one, writing, "je suis sûr que beaucoup de jeunes filles ne savent pas précisément en quoi consiste le

mariage physique" (Lebègue, xxxiii). He goes on to say that many young women would prefer celibacy for three or four years so as to avoid ruining their figures (xxxiii). Duras depicts instead an insurmountable taboo between two lovers, situating it in incestuous childhood links, whereas in Stendhal Octave's problem predates his relationship with Armance and is hence more fundamental to his nature. Having amply demonstrated Octave's overattachment to his mother, Stendhal suggests that Octave's inability to love anyone stems from that mother-son bond. Furthermore, Octave finally reveals his secret to Armance, whereas Louise never finds out, unless Olivier whispered it to her before killing himself, a scene to which we are not privy. It is significant that the female author situates her lovers' problem *within* the relationship, whereas the male author depicts the solitary man whose problem is within *himself* and probably stems from his relationship to his mother.

In *Olivier*, we do not know exactly what transpires just before Olivier's suicide, but our imagination fills in the gaps. Echoing Duras' own fate of literary oblivion (Jennings, 40), we are left with the image of Louise repeating a pilgrimage to the oak tree where her lover met his end. Stendhal spells out every detail of his hero's demise but deprives the reader of Armance's reaction, except by cryptically recounting that she and Octave's mother enter a convent. Duras' ending is far more poignant for her female character, suggesting that woman is doomed both to oblivion and to compulsive repetition, seeking the phallus, the oak tree, but finding nothing there.

Notes

1. Michel Pierssens finds a link between the fascinating origins of *Armance* and its theme of the inability to reproduce (22), alluding, of course, to the hero's secret which Pierssens takes to be his impotence.
2. Appears at the beginning of the original manuscript of *Armance*, vol. 2, "Idée de février 1826" (*Arm*, li. n. 2).
3. Stendhal, *Courrier anglais*, 1 Dec. 1825 2: 333; cited in Waller 117.
4. Written on an interfolio of the original manuscript of *Armance* (Lebègue, li. n. 2).
5. On interfolio of *Armance* (Lebègue, li. n. 1).
6. Margaret Waller notes that he also maintains continuity both with the two *Oliviers* but also with many *mal de siècle* heroes' names by choosing a name starting with an *O*, as in Senancour's *Obermann*, Staël's *Oswald*, and Duras' *Ourika*. The letter *O* by its shape denotes lack (131).
7. Katherine Jensen, "Sex and Sensibility in *Armance*," unpublished essay, qtd. in Waller, 129.

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