Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis.

Signature:

_____ _____

Sarah Ellen Lackert 04/18/12

Seductive Suffering: Constrained Freedom in Diderot's *La Religieuse*

By

Sarah Lackert

Adviser- Geoffrey Bennington

Department of French Studies

_____

Geoffrey Bennington

Adviser

_____

Lilia Coropceanu

Committee Member

_____

Gary Laderman

Committee Member

_____

4/18/12

Seductive Suffering: Constrained Freedom in Diderot's *La Religieuse*

By

Sarah Lackert

Adviser- Geoffrey Bennington

An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors
Department of French Studies

2012

Abstract

Seductive Suffering: Constrained Freedom in Diderot's *La Religieuse*

By Sarah Lackert

During a shift of philosophical ideals from the Age of Faith to the Age of Reason, Diderot's *La Religieuse* emerged as a shocking and powerful novel revealing the corruption of religious institutions. The main character and narrator, Suzanne Simonin, is committed against her will to a convent in order to expiate her mother's sins. Suzanne's tragic memoire recounting her relentless attempt to proclaim her innocence and fight for her freedom reveals the fanatical and hypocritical aspects of religious life. Through Suzanne's intimate descriptions of treatment in the convent, the reader bears witness to both the sacrifice of her freedom and also her resilience.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my committee for your support and inspiration

Table Of Contents

Introduction

Denis Diderot, a prominent French philosopher of the 18th century, was a leader in the transition of European culture from the Age of Faith to the Age of Reason. His master project, *L'Encyclopédie (The Encyclopedia)*, made knowledge of scientific and other advances accessible to the literate public. By expounding upon the use of reason in human behavior, as opposed to using religion and philosophy, Diderot's works would have far reaching effects from the French and American Revolutions to the growth of science. Diderot also wrote a large number of other works, often difficult to classify, from philosophical dialogues such as: *Pensées philosophiques*, to experimental works of theatre and fiction like *Jacques le fataliste et son maître.*

His largely hopeful attitude toward human condition, more like Voltaire and Rousseau and less like Hobbes, would serve The Enlightenment well, where leading thinkers focused on a bright future for humankind based on principles of Reason and Freedom. The Enlightenment, a movement in 17th and 18th century Europe, fostered a new way of thinking driven by reason. In contrast to the Age of Faith, the new worldview created new understandings of God and man through logic and the scientific method. The application of logic to faith proposed a still provocative view on religion and the Church. In turn, faith in a time of reason instigated an increase in Atheist beliefs and control over one's own condition.

Along with the newfound sense of control over one's own destiny, the rational man's goals were primarily to obtain happiness, freedom, and knowledge or

as the American constitution states: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”. In creating and editing *L’Encyclopédie* alongside the philosopher and mathematician Jean-Baptiste le Rond d’Alembert, Diderot allowed for scientific knowledge to be available to every man, which created a sense of individual agency and freedom. This work contains a mass of information and can be viewed as an anthology of human knowledge at the time. The revolutionary movement towards spreading information to educate the public undermined established authority and empowered citizens. Diderot’s masterpiece allowed for more faith in the individual through the freedom of knowledge.

Born under the reign of Louis XIV in 1713, Diderot spent his childhood in Langres with seven siblings. His rigid education in Latin, ancient history, and Roman literature coupled with his Catholic upbringing sparked his permanent curiosity about religion and morality. After abandoning the prospect of joining the clergy and his studies in law, Diderot decided to become a writer and was subsequently disowned by his father. Despite his upbringing in a wealthy family, Diderot moved to Paris in1732 to study at L’Université de Paris and weathered difficult living conditions. While in Paris, Diderot began to publish translations of books such as *Le Dictionnaire universel des Arts et des Sciences* in order to survive.[1]

In 1749, Diderot wrote *La Lettre sur les aveugles, à l’usage de ceux qui voient*, which revealed his belief in materialism. However, he was soon after arrested and imprisoned in a dungeon at Vincennes due to the publication of this piece. During

[1] Floch, Jacques. *Denis Diderot, le bonheur en plus*. Paris: Les Editions Ouvrières, 1991. 1-32. Print.

Diderot' imprisonment, Rousseau often visited him, and Diderot was inspired by his love for reason. After his three-month sentence, Diderot was released and was forced to promise that he would never write anything prejudicial about religion again. However, the act of imprisoning a man for his love of freedom and reason continued well into the French Revolution.[2]

L'Encyclopédie brought to life a variety of new ideas, Diderot continued to introduce themes and concepts that challenged social norms. In one of his provocative novels, *La Religieuse,* Diderot focuses on the life of a French nun, who was forced against her will, to enter a convent, and has written a memoire explaining her plight. In this novel, Diderot's position on societal norms, religion, freedom, and Reason are unequivocally stated at a time of shifting philosophical ideals. Writing a novel on a women's sentence to the convent was not uncommon during 18th century France however, Diderot's vivid portrayal of a rebellious nun provides for a provocative subject still to this day as Jacques Rivette's film of *La Religieuse* was also banned for two years in the 1960's.

The main character of the novel, Suzanne Simonin, finds herself imprisoned in her own purgatory. Trapped in the convent from the outside world, all she desires is freedom from the walls confining her. However, the walls she seeks to climb are not only physical but are metaphorically constructed by social norms, which are compounded by a woman's lack of access to financial resources and low social rank. Her tragic memoire, written as a plea to a Marquis, forces the reader to bear witness

---

[2] Floch, Jacques. *Denis Diderot, le bonheur en plus*. Paris: Les Editions Ouvrières, 1991. 1-32. Print.

to the cruelty and corruption hidden in the religious community. Suzanne's narrative also embodies several additional functions: a memoire, a *cri de coeur*, a confession, and a judicial plea. This wide range of utility permits the text to permeate the barriers to her freedom and convey her plight to readers to this very day. At the beginning of the text, Suzanne pleads to the Marquis to burn the letters she has written after he is done reading them. However, since her memoire was not burned and was intended by Suzanne only to be read by the Marquis, the text engages the reader at a more intimate level by placing the reader in a perverse viewpoint.

In the following chapters, I seek to investigate Suzanne's Simonin's *cri de coeur* from the convent. By exploring the text through its different functions, I hope to discover how a young nun fits into an age of reason and how her freedom is the key to her own personal happiness. While examining the relationship between the corruption of religious institution, gender issues, madness, and feminine sexuality Suzanne's letters reveal the negative implications inflicted by the religious community.

Chapter I. The Fanatical and Hypocritical Constructs of the Convent

Although Diderot's text is arguably not a direct attack on religion, his story written as a memoire from a female nun's perspective fortifies the negative claims made about injustice in 18th century French convents. Suzanne's words still disturb as well as enlighten modern readers, about the horrors that occurred behind the enclosed walls of cloistral life. Diderot's novel had far-reaching and scandalizing affects, which ultimately caused it to be banned for several years.

La Religieuse was not banned from the public simply because of Diderot's depiction of the events that occurred within the convent, but more so because of the overwhelming success of the novel. Suzanne's plea sparked intense curiosity in the public about the events that occur behind the walls of the convent. In addition to inspiring curiosity, Diderot's text also unveils the complexity of the inner workings of the convent, which drive its social purpose in society. As, Georges May explains,

> Fait de main d'ouvrier, le roman était dangereux en raison de son excellence. Non seulement il se permettait d'interroger, - de manière purement oratoire, comme on l'a vu -l 'état sur l'utilité sociale des couvents ; non seulement M. Manouri consacrait trois pages à affirmer que les religieuse cloîtrées ont bien des raisons de souffrir ; mais, d'un bout à l'autre du livre, l'hostilité à l'égard de l'institution monastique transparait, sans s'affirmer, et se justifie aux yeux du lecteur non averti, non plus par des raisonnements et des interrogations oratoires, mais par la plus merveilleuse vertu persuasive d'un récit simple et naïf en apparence, mais en réalité complexe et pénétrant.[3]

May illustrates the captivating nature of the text in unveiling the hostile and corrupt environment of cloistral life. By incorporating a lawyer, M. Manouri, Diderot intertwines reason and faith. He also highlights the power of the text to provoke

[3] May, Georges. *Diderot et "La Religieuse"*. Paris: Presses Universitaires De France, 1954. Print.

intense curiosity in the reader, which attributes greatly to Diderot's success. The text not only inspires a voyeuristic curiosity in the reader, but also allows him or her to witness the unbearable conditions in the convent hidden behind the mask of religion. Therefore, Diderot does not directly criticize religion, but instead condemns the social implications of religion and its institutions.

The authentic inspiration from a real nun, Marguerite Delamarre, who was committed against her will into the convent at Longchamp and shared similar experiences to those of Suzanne, contributes to another alluring aspect of the text. Marguerite Delamarre was born in 1717 and at the age of 3 was first admitted to Longchamp by her parents in 1720, but only remained there for only nine months. Subsequently, Marguerite spent 3 years at a convent in Chartres and soon thereafter was moved to a convent called Saint-Marie. Similar to Suzanne, her lack of dowry and husband caused her continued confinement to cloistral life. In addition, Marguerite also experienced the damaging affects of maternal rejection. Parallel to Suzanne's story, Marguerite's family disinherited and maltreated her. Georges May explains, "Ce fut même en raison de sa naissance irrégulière qu'elle dût d'être déshéritée, maltraitée et finalement condamnée à une clôture perpétuelle".[4] Their similar unjust admittances to the convent as well as their disinheritance makes a compelling tragedy rooted in history and literature about the nature of societal values and forced vows.

---

[4] May, Georges. *Diderot et "La Religieuse"*. Paris: Presses Universitaires De France, 1954. Print.

Furthermore, Suzanne's admittance to the same institutions as Marguerite helps produce a sense of truth in her memoire. The authenticity behind Suzanne's story makes the corruption in cloistral life even more shocking. May explains, "On en parlait à cette époque comme d'une maison entièrement dissolue. D'une part, Diderot n'a pas eu à hésiter: il suivait une histoire authentique et conduisait son héroïne à Longchamp comme il l'avait conduite à Sainte-Marie, tout simplement parce que c'était dans ces établissements qu'avait vécu Marguerite Delamarre". [5] Therefore as Suzanne's story unfolds in each convent, the history of Marguerite's struggle intertwines with Suzanne's. Diderot's narrative unveils itself as a more natural and organic story through the reconstruction of Marguerite's recorded experiences in the convents of Longchamp and Sainte-Marie. The shared elements between their two stories suggests the validity in Diderot's depiction of corruption and control implemented by religious institutions. By implementing fear of damnation in the religious community, the convent uses religion as a way to control and subdue women. Suzanne describes her view "leur couvent est une prison; et le couvent en est une pour moi mille fois plus affreuse que celles qui renferment les malfaiteurs. Il faut que j'en sorte ou que j'y périsse" (288).[6] Suzanne's constant battle to escape and renounce her vows illustrates the extent to which she feels the convent threatening her happiness and individual freedom. She compares the

---

[5] May, Georges. *Diderot et "La Religieuse"*. Paris: Presses Universitaires De France, 1954. Print.

[6] Denis Diderot, *Œuvres romanesques*, ed. Henri Bénac. Paris: Garnier Frères, 1962. 235-393. Print. All subsequent references will be to this edition of *La Religieuse,* and will be incorporated into the text.

convent to a prison, outlining its confinement and the appalling treatment that she receives there.

By analyzing the *Préface-Annexe*, one sees that the story reaches a conclusion determined by truth and mystification. This preface, consisting of commentary and correspondence, in contrast to the severe hostility in the novel serves as a practical joke on Diderot's close friend, the Marquis de Croismare. In order to coax him to come back to Paris, Diderot capitalized on Croismare's reported desire and love for Marguerite. Therefore, Diderot along with his friends, Melchior Grimm and Madame d'Epinay drafted a fake letter from a nun who was forced to live in a convent by her parents, but now had escaped and needed Croismare's help. Ironically, Croismare's response was to offer her aid with his friend Diderot and refuge at his estate in Caen. Croismare made formal arrangements to house the hoax nun however he never returned to Paris. Although Diderot's preface served as a practical joke between him and his friends, in light of Suzanne's memoire it generates various issues.[7]

At first glance the preface calls into question the sincerity and reason behind Suzanne's narrative. Since the hoax correspondence serve as an imprisoned nun's plea for help, Diderot's practical joke appears to discredit the emotional impact of Suzanne's tragic story. Her heartbreaking memoire appears as a useful ploy to get male attention and affection. However in contrast to the shallow function of the hoax correspondence, Diderot's personal life reveals that his intentions behind creating *La Religieuse* are more complicated. Diderot's sister, often cited as another

[7] Lloyd, Heather. *Diderot: La Religieuse*. London: Duckworth Publishers, 2000. Print.

inspiration for *La Religieuse*, was forced into a convent against her own will. At an Ursuline convent, his sister went insane and soon died at the age of 28 in 1748. Diderot's daughter Angelique wrote about her father's life and stated that his sister was a motivation for writing his novel. Diderot's family history illustrates his own personal proximity to the text and Suzanne's plea. Despite the comical aspect of the preface, Diderot presents Suzanne's story as a telling and personal memoire in honor of his sister's death through his reaction to his work.[8] Despite the pretext to the Préface-Annexe, the corruption of religious institutions deeply afflicted Diderot,

> Les lettres de la Religieuse avaient été composées au milieu des éclats de rire. Mais Diderot en robe de chambre, les pieds sur une chaufferette, un verre de Malaga a portée de la main, pleure en *lisant* la page qu'il vient d'écrire. Ses contemporains s'étonnent. La portée réelle de la mystification leur échappe. Diderot l'élevé au-dessus de la plaisanterie ou de la vengeance. Il y voit l'origine de l'œuvre, l'irrécusable témoignage d'une présence.[9]

Diderot's deeply rooted connection to the truth emulated in Suzanne's narrative reinforces the intimacy of the memoire and its powerful portrayal of the suffering inflicted by religious life.

In addition to homage to his deceased sister, Suzanne's narrative allows the reader to discover the mistreatment and corruption behind the fortifications of religious life that his sister and Marguerite experienced. Often described as an atheist, Diderot criticizes religion for its lack of reason, use of blind faith, and tactics of fear. By consistently utilizing the fear of damnation the religious community

---

[8] May, Georges. "Le Modèle inconnu de "La Religieuse" de Diderot: Marguerite Delamarre." *Revue d'Histoire litteraire de la France*. (1951): 273-287. Web. 27 Mar. 2012. <www.jstor.org/stable/40520901>.
[9] Kempf, Roger. *Diderot et le roman*. Paris: SEUIL, 1984. Print.

manipulates and controls its believers. Therefore Diderot's evocative tale of the horrors of the convent serves as a testimony to the corruption in the religious community.

By unveiling the realities of life in the religious community, Diderot often portrays Suzanne as both a prisoner and a Christ-like figure. When she refuses to take her vows at Longchamp, the nuns relentlessly punish her. Initially, they confine Suzanne to social seclusion from the others in the convent. Suzanne remains in her cell until nighttime when she is allowed to use the bathroom. In addition, the superiors removed mattress, chairs, and bed covers from her cell. Suzanne is forced to drink water that she fetches from a well and is only provided with scarce amounts of bread for meals. She describes her struggle: "On en vint jusqu'à me voler, me dépouiller, m'ôter mes chaises, mes couvertures et mes matelas; on ne me donnait plus de linge blanc. Mes vêtements se déchiraient. J'étais presque sans bas et sans souliers. J'avais peine à obtenir de l'eau" (293). The horrifying conditions that Suzanne endures demonstrate the sadistic nature of the convent. The few social interactions that Suzanne has with the other nuns were centered on tormenting her and trying to mentally break her spirits. Moreover, Suzanne is physically and emotionally disheveled, barely able to maintain her own dignity and sanity from the lack of food and humane treatment.

Furthermore, the hypocritical nature of religious life, which supposedly encourages kindness and compassion, presents a radically different image within the convent. The others within the convent illustrate no compassion for Suzanne

despite her severe and pitiful condition. Suzanne continues, “J’étais couchée à terre, la tête et le dos appuyés contre un des murs, les bras croisés sur la poitrine, et le reste de mon corps entendu fermait le passage; lorsque l’office finit et que les religieuses se présentèrent pour sortir” (293). The image of Suzanne crouched on the floor as the other nuns pass by without sympathy illustrates the utmost cruelty and dehumanizing treatment. The superior herself regards Suzanne as a cadaver, not worth of any recognition. The superior commands the other nuns to trample on Suzanne’s frail body, “Marchez sur elle, ce n’est qu’un cadavre” (294). The treatment Suzanne receives eventually comes to the point of being both menacing and dehumanizing. She is reduced to a dead body unworthy of recognition or social interaction. The nuns try to bully her into taking her vows and fail to make her believe in the proclaimed sacred cause of cloistral life. Their focus on the vows themselves and ignoring the cause of becoming a wife of Christ reveals the corrupt incentives behind religion as a method of control and lack of sincere faith and devotion to God.

The blind obedience on the part of the other nuns also helps illustrate the manipulative power of religion. When the superior orders the others to step on Suzanne because she is nothing more than a corpse many obey without any remorse. Suzanne narrates, “Quelques-unes obéirent et me foulèrent aux pieds. D’autres furent moins inhumaines ; mais aucune n’osa me tendre la main pour me relever”(294). Even the nuns who do not obey the superior, witnessed the horror of the others trampling Suzanne and do not try help her to her feet. The apathy towards Suzanne’s well-being and ignoring the crimes of hatred towards her further

exemplify the victimization in the religious community. The hostility from the other nuns forces Suzanne to face social exile even as she remains on the verge of death.

In addition to the Church's methods of control, Diderot harshly condemns the implementation of enforced vows. Both Suzanne and Marguerite's families due to financial motives confine them to cloistral life. Furthermore because of their illegitimate births, Suzanne and Marguerite cause disruption in the social order and are therefore condemned to spend the rest of their lives within the convent to reinstitute order. Suzanne's mother also manipulates Suzanne into believing that she has the moral duty to pay for her mother's infidelity by becoming a nun. Her mother uses "moral blackmail" [10] to force her to take her vows at Sainte-Marie and Longchamp. Janet Whatley describes the tragedy behind Suzanne's mother's selfishness,

> But the mother of Suzanne Simonin is on an entirely different level of intensity: a haunted and terrified figure, she hopes through Suzanne's vocation not to appease her vanity, but to escape damnation. Mme Simonin's desperate hopes are pinned to a degraded version of the belief that one person can and must expiate through suffering, the sins of another. Mme Simonin mistakes her daughter for Christ: and tacitly, through the cruel terror that impels her, Diderot attacks the very idea of vicarious propitiation even in its orthodox form.[11]

Diderot clearly critiques the ideology behind forcing vows upon someone to expiate another's sins. The veil of religion does not hide the immorality and lack of reasoning behind such a concept. Therefore, Diderot uses his provocative narrative

---

[10] Whatley, Janet. "Nuns' Stories: Marivaux and Diderot." *Diderot Studies*. 20. (1981): 299-319. Web. 27 Mar. 2012. <www.jstor.org/stable/40372540>.
[11] Janet, "Nuns' Stories", 306.

in order to unveil the corruption in the religious community. Suzanne's ceremony serves more as a spectacle of horror and tragedy.

Forcing someone to take vows implies that the wrongdoer does not have to pay for their own sins because someone else can be coerced to do so. In Suzanne's case, she recognizes the injustice done to her in forcing her to pay for a crime against God that she did not commit. She constantly proclaims her innocence, and highlights the injustice of the Church by renouncing her liberty. Suzanne asserts, "Je connais du moins le prix de la liberté et le poids d'un état auquel on n'est point appelée" (250). She acknowledges that in order to pay for her mother's sins, her own personal liberty serves as the currency. Suzanne also feels the burden of her mother's infidelity weighing on her own moral conscience, fearing damnation for herself as well as her mother.

Despite her mother's fanatical obsession that religious life can expiate her sins, Suzanne openly criticizes religious life as a mask of obedience. Through Suzanne's discourse, Diderot expresses his strong distaste of the enforcement of vows. Diderot proclaims, "Faire vœu d'obéissance, c'est renoncer à la prérogative inaliénable de l'homme, la liberté. Si l'on observe ces vœux, on est criminel ; si on ne les observe pas on est parjure. La vie claustrale est d'une fanatique ou d'un hypocrite"(310). Diderot harshly criticizes the vows of religious life as confining, hypocritical, and dehumanizing. In order to adhere to the laws of the Church and convent one must renounce his or her own freedom, which is fundamental human right.

Diderot exposes those who have taken their religious vows as either obedient fanatics or fearful hypocrites. Despite the nuns' relentless attempts to convince Suzanne that she is guilty and must beg God for forgiveness, Suzanne still pleads her innocence. She fearlessly proclaims that she would only be guilty if she adhered to vows that she did not voluntarily chose, " Ma faute est de n'être point appelée à l'état religieux, et de revenir contre des vœux que je n'ai pas faits librement"(306). Suzanne continues her defense against the claims made by the nuns refuting her innocence. However, Suzanne proclaims her virtue since the religious life was forced upon her without consent.

Later in her defense, Suzanne asks a series of rhetorical questions that disarm the purpose of religious institutions and forced vows. Her judicial language also reinforces the attack on the importance or lack of need for convents in society. She asks, "Les couvents sont-ils donc si essentiels à la constitution d'un État? Jésus-Christ a-t-il institué des moines et des religieuses ? L'Eglise ne peut-elle absolument s'en passer ? Quel besoin à l'époux de tant de vierges folles, et l'espèce humaine de tant de victimes ? " (310). In the narrative Suzanne's questions remain unanswered by the discourse of the other characters, insinuating that there is no real justification or reasoning behind the severity of such institutions and their fanatical principles of religion. Furthermore, her persistent proclamation of her innocence exemplifies both her innocence and the restraints on her freedom by the religious community, which become compounded by her illegitimate birth.

Chapter II. The Involuntary Sacrifice of Femininity

> " La vie m'est à charge. Je suis une femme. J'ai l'esprit faible comme celles de mon sexe. Dieu peut m'abandonner "(308).

As *La Religieuse* was written in France during the 18th Century, the novel inherently presents gender as a constraint on freedom. During this time period, women did not share any legal or social rights and female independence was discouraged and often punished. Although *La Religieuse* is not a feminist piece, Diderot's novel reveals the complex power relationship over individual agency between the male and female gender.

During the period of the Enlightenment, the influx of new ideas concerning reason and freedom did not immediately reflect in views towards women. Under the Ancien Régime, women were considered the subordinate sex and were often sent off to convents or confined to an arranged marriage. Moreover, they were considered subordinate and inferior to the male gender even in scientific terms. In *L'Encyclopédie*, Diderot states that women are governed by their own sexual organs, which creates them to be weaker and more sensitive.[12] Women were indeed often described as victims of their own sexual organs and therefore very sexual creatures. At the same time, however according to men and science, women were more driven by spirituality than sexuality, which leads to high emotions. James McMillan describes, "In opposition to the discourse which, down the centuries had made

---

[12] McMillan, James F. *France and women, 1789-1914: gender, society and politics*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2002. 1-33. Print.

women out to be the dangerous sex, the Enlightenment proclaimed them to be more spiritual than sexual, and not so much a sexual threat as in need of protection against male sexual aggression". [13] The Enlightenment suggests the capability of women to be discussed was limited in terms of both sexuality and spirituality, however Diderot's text illustrates that "spirituality" can itself become sexualized. Although women were seen as more emotional and spiritual compared to men, their rank in society as secondary to men remained undisputed.

Tragically restricted to a life of obedience and societal expectations, women were confined to an identity and a purpose ascribed to them by men. Despite new ideas brought to light by philosophers and revolutionaries of the time a woman's place in society remained the same. Roger Kempf explains, "Si cruellement traitée par la nature, la femme ne trouve dans la Société aucun dédommagement à ses maux…Refusée comme conscience, la femme s'illustre à peu de frais; elle est essentiellement ce qu'il nous plait qu'elle soit".[14] Kempf clearly defines the constraints inflicted on women due to male expectations and the disadvantage of being female. However, his explanation also further suggests that men dominate the essence of femininity because only men have told women's narratives.

With limited mobility for women, much of France's Age of Reason for women was concentrated in salons where they were able to take part in meetings. These meetings helped mobilize the Enlightenment movement and allowed a small

---

[13] Whatley, Janet. "Nuns' Stories: Marivaux and Diderot." *Diderot Studies*. 20. (1981): 299-319. Web. 27 Mar. 2012. <www.jstor.org/stable/40372540>.
[14] Kempf, Roger. *Diderot et le roman*. Paris: SEUIL, 1984. Print.

number of women to participate in the discussions with men. However, even in an Age of Reason, women were still considered irrational and unpredictable. Sexual freedom did not coincide in the sphere of femininity and the natural order of French society, but the salonnière, or women who partook in salon discussions, exhibited exaggerated sexual freedom.[15] As women were expected to exhibit passive and docile demeanor, such provocative behavior commands considerable attention. The severe societal constraints and expectations of women help illustrate the breadth of issues that arise from gender roles in relation to the plight of Suzanne in *La Religieuse*.

Suzanne's unchangeable identity as an illegitimate child ostracizes her from society. Without legitimate parents she does not hold a social rank or birthright. Therefore, her freedom and rights depend directly on those in control of her life. As her two other sisters were married off and given considerable dowries, Suzanne expects the same to happen to her. However, Suzanne is surprised to find that she is being sent to a convent instead. Upon an initial reaction of shock and sadness, Suzanne soon becomes absent in the control of her own life and actions. She writes, "Quoique les religieuses s'empressassent autour de moi pour me soutenir, vingt fois je sentis mes genoux se dérober, et je me vis prête à tomber sur les marches de l'autel. Je n'entendais rien. Je ne voyais rien. J'étais stupide. On me menait, et j'allais. On m'interrogeait, et l'on répondait pour moi"(239). Diderot illustrates how her lack of social rank also leads to her lack of agency to control her own destiny. She suddenly becomes incapacitated and lifeless in order to assume a new identity of a

[15] Kempf, Roger. *Diderot et le roman*. Paris: Seuil, 1984. Print.

“religieuse”. Moreover, her identity and naïveté is reflected through the actions of others. The other nuns respond for her and command her physical movements. In her lack o f social awareness, the reader gets a glimpse of her innocent and childish nature.

Unfortunately, even her own mother takes advantage of Suzanne in forcing her daughter to pay for her own sins. Since Suzanne’s mother conceived Suzanne as an illegitimate child she has sinned in the eyes of God. In order to expiate her own sins, Suzanne’s mother forces Suzanne to go into a convent to repent for her infidelity. Although Suzanne has not sinned herself, her mother sacrifices her daughter’s freedom to alleviate her own guilt and suffering. This act presents a problematic understanding of sins and religion. In sending off her daughter to pay for her own infidelity, Suzanne’s mother suggests that sins are transferable and one’s own children are accountable for their parents’ mistakes. Through her selfishness her mother does not pay for her own sins, but instead allows her innocent daughter to suffer for her. Not only does her mother condemn her, but Suzanne is also condemned by her sex. Suzanne stands at a severe disadvantage in society, by being a female and also being charged with her mothers crimes stemming from her own youth.

Additionally, Suzanne’s freedom is revoked in order to maintain social order and alleviate guilt. Her status in society as an illegitimate child disrupts conventional conceptions of family and social status. Since she threatens 18th century France’s societal norms of children born from one marriage, Suzanne is

punished and is used as a financial exchange for her family. William F. Edmiston defines sacrifice in terms of *La Religieuse*, "Sacrifice is viewed as a means of re-establishing order, on the social or cosmic level, through the expiation of guilt. The innocent victim becomes a scapegoat for the maintenance of that order".[16] He clearly outlines Suzanne's transition in identity from a child to a victim of the need to maintain a certain societal machinery. Society holds no place for a woman who is free from the convent and unmarried, therefore in order to maintain order and coincide with societal ideals Suzanne becomes a victim to fulfill her predetermined role in society.

As Suzanne begins to assume her identity that she occupies for the rest of the novel, as a scapegoat, she is further punished with 6 months of solitude when Father Séraphin discovers her illegitimate birth. When Suzanne's mother visits her in the convent, Suzanne suddenly falls to her feet in obedience and begins to incessantly bleed and cry. At the sound of her mother's voice Suzanne falls to her feet to express her unhappiness in the convent. While also demonstrating her extreme suffering through her body language, her clothes become stained with blood and tears. Suzanne's dirtying of her religious garments by her soiled lineage "displeases" her mother. In addition, Suzanne's mother's immediate reaction is to demand Suzanne to get up off her knees in cold demeanor, which destroys any doubt Suzanne had about her illegitimacy. Suzanne writes,

---

[16] Edmiston, William F. "Sacrifice and Innocence in "La Religieuse"." *Diderot Studies*. 19. (1978): 67-84. Web. 27 Mar. 2012. <www.jstor.org/stable/40372493>.

> Tant d'inhumanité, tant d'opiniâtreté de la part de mes parents, ont achevé de me confirmer ce que je soupçonnais de ma naissance. Je n'ai jamais pu trouver d'autres moyens de les excuser. Ma mère craignait apparemment que je ne revinsse un jour sur le partage des biens ; que je ne redemandasse ma légitime ; et que je n'associasse un enfant naturel à des enfants légitimes. Mais ce qui n'était qu'une conjecture va se tourner en certitude (248).

Suzanne's doubts about her lineage as well as her maternal love are both destroyed upon her mothers visit. Suzanne tries to grapple with the inhumane decision of her parents to put in her in a convent to pay for her illegitimacy's disturbance in society.

Father Séraphin reiterates her place in society as he simply explains the difference between Suzanne and her sisters. The dialogue in this scene highlights the contrasting views of faith and order against reason. Suzanne asks Father Séraphin in relation to her legitimacy as a child after her mothers visit seeking any chance of contradiction, "Et qu'est-ce qui peut l'y contraindre! Ne m'a-t-elle pas mise au monde? Et quelle différence y a-t-il entre mes sœurs et moi?". Father Séraphin simply responds, "beaucoup". Suzanne then answers, "Beaucoup? Je n'entends rien à votre réponse" (248). The conversation between Father Séraphin and Suzanne exposes the upholding of faith and societal norms in a time where reason defaces the validity of such previously accepted notions. However, after their conversation Suzanne describes her renunciation of doubt, "Ce *beaucoup*, qu'il m'avait répondu, fut un trait de lumière pour moi. Je ne doutai plus de la vérité de ce que j'avais pensé sur ma naissance"(249). Although Suzanne is disillusioned by her own origins, she describes the truth as a way to lead her out from the darkness and confines of religion.

Suzanne continues to use reason and logic to make her case as a daughter to her mother despite her illegitimate status. Suzanne hears that Monsieur Simonin is not her father and devastation strikes again when her mother visits the convent to explain her condition. In this scene, Diderot again intertwines the conversation between faith and reason into the dialogue between Suzanne and her mother. Suzanne's mother describes her as a punishment for the wrong that she, her mother, has done. Despite her mother's insensitive and hateful rhetoric, Suzanne still addresses her mother as "maman" and pleads her case that she is her daughter. She outlines the indisputable fact that they share the same lineage and that she was born from her mother's womb. Suzanne states, " Mais je suis toujours votre enfant, vous m'avez portée dans votre sein, et j'espère que vous ne l'oublierez pas" (252). She outlines the indisputable biological lineage between them that leaves her mother the moral obligation to acknowledge her as her daughter. However, her mother continues to see Suzanne in terms of a punishment for her infidelity. Suzanne's mother illustrates, "Le monstre! Il n'a pas dépendu de lui qu'il ne vous ait étouffée dans mon sein, par toutes les peines qu'il ma causées. Mais Dieu nous a conservées l'une et l'autre, pour que la mère expiât sa faute par l'enfant…Ma fille, vous n'avez rien, et vous n'aurez jamais rien " (253). Her mother provocatively suggests her wish that Suzanne was aborted in the womb so that she, herself, would not be tortured by her mistakes with "le monstre", Suzanne's father. In addition, she claims that God has conserved the pain from her infidelity so that she could expiate her own faults through Suzanne. In such case, Suzanne has nothing in this world and she will be left with nothing. This sense of "rien" echoes just as deeply as Father

Séraphin's "beaucoup" in that she is forced to be sacrificed for sins she did not commit.

Suzanne's role as a sacrifice to the religious community becomes even clearer when she is forced to move to another convent, Longchamp. Under a newly appointed superior, Suzanne is often punished and made an example of to the other nuns. She cleverly employs reason on her side to defend herself, which displeases the superiors. As Suzanne describes it:

> Je me défendais. Je défendais mes compagnes, et il n'est pas arrivé une seule fois qu'on m'ait condamnée, tant j'avais d'attention à mettre la raison de mon côté…j'en fus châtiée de la manière la plus inhumaine : on me condamna des semaines entières é passer l'office é genoux, séparée du reste, au milieu du chœur, à vivre de pain et d'eau ; à demeurer enfermée dans ma cellule ; à satisfaire aux fonctions les plus viles de la maison (268).

The nuns persecute Suzanne for defending herself and subject her to the torture of isolation, humiliation, and scarce nourishment. They treat her as a prisoner with no consideration of an alternative or more humane punishment. Her treatment in the second convent demonstrates the relentless sacrifices that Suzanne must make in order to survive.

In addition to Suzanne's recognition of the unjust treatment in the convent itself, she identifies the injustice in her own involuntary sacrifice and admittance. Suzanne's lack of will in her own future makes her memoire compellingly tragic. Janet Whately explains the horror of involuntary sacrifice,

> …the act of sacrifice is rarely voluntary in any real sense: the novice, too young to understand what she is doing, is caught in a network of seduction and coercion that will obscure her choices for her. The moment of sacrifice itself is a spectacle in which the collectivity gets a vicarious semi-erotic thrill

> at a cost in human freedom that the charmed spectator does not have to pay.[17]

Whately's provocative explanation of this scene illustrates the complexity of the sacrifice of Suzanne, pulling together the sexual and problematic aspects. By highlighting the erotic thrill that arises from Suzanne's loss of freedom, Whately illustrates the voyeuristic aspect of Suzanne's tragic sacrifice. Through her outbursts and physical illnesses, her dramatic rebellion against authority conveys her suffering as a form of victimization.

Sacrifice is often taken to portray heroic qualities; however since Suzanne's sacrifice is involuntary her plight conveys her more as a victim than a heroine. The element of involuntary or unintentional sacrifice is essential to understanding why reading Suzanne's memoire is both tragic and voyeuristic. An act of voluntary sacrifice serves the purpose of a spectacle, a moment of heroic fearlessness. In contrast, involuntary sacrifice serves as the victimization and exploitation of a human being. When this event is made into a spectacle, suffering becomes a form of entertainment. The reader becomes a perverse witness to the sadistic punishments to which Suzanne is subject.

Although her sacrifice is involuntary, Suzanne is extremely aware of her condition in the convent and demands for her freedom. When she is asked to write her confession for her sins in her cell, she instead uses the paper to write her own memoire. She writes, "Je demande à être libre, parce que le sacrifice de ma liberté

---

[17] Whatley, Janet. "Nuns' Stories: Marivaux and Diderot." *Diderot Studies*. 20. (1981): 299-319. Web. 27 Mar. 2012. <www.jstor.org/stable/40372540>.

n'a pas été volontaire. Avez-vous lu mon mémoire ? " (281). She recognizes the injustice of her loss of freedom upon entering the convent, as well as the incriminating action of reading her memoire. Although her question, "Avez-vous lu mon mémoire? " is posed to a fellow sister it may also be interpreted as a rhetorical question to her audience. By reading her memoire and bearing witness to her story, the reader is morally obligated to react to the injustice of her situation. In addition to incriminating the reader as a witness, her story serves as damning proof of the malpractices in the convent. As her punishments continue and worsen, the nuns begin to question her sanity in order to justify their inhumane treatment. Therefore as Suzanne's memoire progresses, her defense for her individual liberty also serves to prove her sanity.

Chapter III. Sexualized Madness

The text's underlying sexual tension and constrictions on individual freedom start to unravel in the scenes where Suzanne begins to lose jurisdiction over her own sanity. During her punishment and mistreatment at Longchamp, Diderot incorporates madness into the psychology of cloistral life. Suzanne's rebellion against her forced vows leads the superiors and other nuns to believe that Suzanne has demonic intentions. During her time of suffering, the other nuns begin to fear Suzanne, which further ostracizes her from social interaction. Suzanne explains, "On y était prévenu que j'étais folle, ou peut-être quelque chose de pis. Il se retourna du côté des juges. Il insista sur l'exécution de l'ordre signifié à la supérieure de me représenter morte ou vive, quand elle en serait sommée" (297). Once Suzanne is labeled as crazy, her perceived sanity and stability are compromised. The others begin to interpret every one of her actions as a result of her insanity and Suzanne loses the capability to prove that she is sane.

Similar to the fate of Diderot's sister, Suzanne illustrates the ability of the convent to compromise both individual liberty and sanity. In reaction to her cruel treatment, Suzanne does indeed begin to go a little crazy and falls ill. The other nuns accuse her of being mentally unstable, which further ostracizes her from the group and is used to justify her mistreatment. Since she is "crazy", it becomes easy to instill fear in the other nuns and convince them to follow orders to mistreat her. Suzanne describers herself a, "forcée de sortir la nuit pour satisfaire aux besoins de la nature

et accusée le matin de troubler le repos de la maison, d'errer et de devenir folle" (294). The nuns accuse Suzanne of causing disorder in the religious community, but also she is charged with insanity. Consequently, Suzanne loses control over how others see her inside the convent. Fear begins to take hold of the other nuns and Suzanne becomes a spectacle. Those who believe blindly that Suzanne had suddenly become insane do not dare interact with her,

> Il y a dans les communautés des têtes faibles, c'est même le grand nombre. Celles-là croyaient ce qu'on leur disait, n'osaient passer devant ma porte, me voyaient dans leur imagination troublée avec une figure hideuse, faisaient le signe de la croix à ma rencontre et s'enfuyaient en criant : "Satan éloignez-vous de moi ! Mon Dieu, venez à mon secours ! " (294).

The other nuns, governed by fear, exacerbate Suzanne's isolation by labeling her not only as crazy, but suggesting that Suzanne is possessed by the devil. A fellow nun humiliates her by making a scene and putting a cross up to Suzanne as if she embodies the Devil. Suzanne's insightful comment about the "weak minds" in society illustrate that the majority obediently follow what limited information is presented to them. Consequently, this scene illustrates the social repercussion of religious institutions, but also the brutality of individuals.

Although the other nuns' reaction to Suzanne appears exaggerated and fanatical, the belief that Suzanne is possessed spreads quickly within the community. Despite her sound argument for her sanity, the accusations against her begin to multiply and she finds herself again with little or no control over her own liberty. She writes, "S'il était de mon intérêt de paraître devant mon juge innocent et sage, il n'importait pas moins à ma supérieure qu'on me vît, méchante, obsédée du

démon, et folle. Aussi, tandis que je redoublais de ferveur et des prières, on redoubla de méchancetés. On ne me donna d'aliments que ce qu'il en fallait pour m'empêcher de mourir de faim" (298). In defense of her own sanity, Suzanne's judicial discourse fails her. She is already condemned due to the opinion of the superior. The superior gains jurisdiction over the definition of both justice and Suzanne's sanity.

The accusation concerning Suzanne's spiritual well-being continues to be exacerbated, as her "possession" develops into a spectacle in the convent. Although Suzanne is ostracized from the others, she becomes an object that induces fear and curiosity. She tells of the other nuns' interest and terror,

> Voici le moment le plus terrible de ma vie ; car songez bien monsieur, que j'ignorais absolument sous quelles couleurs on m'avait peinte aux yeux de cet ecclésiastique, et qu'il venait avec la curiosité de voir une fille possédée ou qui le contrefaisait. On crut qu'il n'y avait qu'une forte terreur qui put me montrer dans cet état, et voici comment on s'y prit pour me la donner (298).

She describes the worst moment of her life as when the other nuns in her hall viewed her as a spectacle. The curiosity coupled by fear demonstrates the dehumanization and malice on both the individual and institutional levels. Suzanne is presented as an object of intrigue or a freak show offering a form of entertainment. She explains, "Les religieuses m'examinaient de loin. Elles ne voulaient rien perdre du spectacle de ma douleur et de mon humiliation"(314). The nuns make sure to distance themselves physically, but their piercing gaze remains fixed on Suzanne during her struggle. Their sadistic obsession with humiliating Suzanne unveils the aggressive and drastic forms of voyeurism in the convent.

After the others gawk at and shun Suzanne due to her supposed possession, the superior and three other sisters soon greet Suzanne in her cell. They demand her to beg forgiveness for her sins. In a moment of panic and terror, Suzanne begins to enter a trance-like state. She describes the situation, "Dans ces moments de transe, où la force abandonne insensiblement…Je perdis la connaissance et le sentiment. J'entendais seulement bourdonner autour de moi des voix confuses"(299). The text ambiguously describes her moments of hallucination and falling in and out of consciousness. Her fainting and hallucinations most likely are due to her malnourishment and fear of the superior nuns, however the nuns attribute it to alleged possession by the devil. Her superior claims explicitly, "Mon enfant, vous êtes possédée du démon; c'est lui qui vous agite, qui vous fait parler, qui vous transporte; rien n'est plus vrai: voyez dans quel état vous êtes!"(287) .In response Suzanne looks at herself and notices the disorder that her clothes and veil are in. Although she is disturbed by her disheveled appearance, she soon reaffirms her sanity. She describes, "Cependant je tachais de rajuster mon voile; mes mains tremblaient; et plus je m'efforçais à l'arranger, plus je le dérangeais; impatientée, je le saisis avec violence, je l'arrachai, je le jetai par terre, et je restai devant ma supérieure"(287). Therefore, despite the superior's best efforts to convince Suzanne that she is possessed by the devil and must pay for her sins, Suzanne once again defends her innocence. However, despite her best efforts Suzanne remains guilty in the eyes of the superior.

Consequently, in order to rid Suzanne of her "demons" they drag her to the altar and perform an exorcism. The superior convinces the others of Suzanne's

wickedness and the other nuns harass her in her cell yelling, "'Vous appelez Dieu en vain. Il n'y a plus de Dieu pour vous. Mourez désespérée, et soyez damnée…'"(296). The commotion stirred around Suzanne's cell reinforces the superior's belief that Suzanne is possessed by the devil and must be exorcised. Suzanne describes,

> C'est que quoique je ne fisse rien qui marquât un esprit dérangé, à plus forte raison un esprit obsédé de l'esprit infernal, elles délibèrent entre elles, s'il ne fallait pas m'exorciser et il fut conclu à la pluralité des voix que j'avais renoncé à mon chrême et à mon baptême, que le démon résidait en moi, et qu'il m'éloignait des offices divins. Une autre ajouta qu' à certaines prières je grinçais des dents et que je frémissais dans l'église; qu' à l'élévation du Saint-Sacrement je me tordais les bras; une autre, que je foulais le Christ aux pieds…(296).

Suzanne overhears the murmurings of the leading nuns reaffirming to themselves her supposed possession. The other nun's gossip about Suzanne's behavior in church reinforces the suspicions shared by the head nuns. However, in Suzanne's account of their discussion the claims made about her demeanor become increasingly radical and ridiculous. Despite the outrageous claims made against her, Suzanne is still proven guilty by suspicion.

The nuns bombard Suzanne with demands that she renounce her allegiance to Satan. Although Suzanne is not possessed, nor loyal to the works of Satan, she renounces her demonic allegiance anyway in order to appease the sisters and avoid more torture. Suzanne writes: "L'archidiacre me remit le bas de son étole sur la tête; les religieuses allaient se rapprocher, mais il leur fit signe de s'éloigner, et il me redemanda si je renonçais à Satan et à ses œuvres; et je lui répondis fermement: 'J'y renonce. J'y renonce'"(303). In this scene Suzanne becomes completely helpless and renounces her innocence in order to placate the nuns. They have not only convinced

themselves of her allegiance to Satan, but have used tactics of fear and dehumanization in order to force her to admit to it. However, as the scene progresses the reader sees that Suzanne continues her defense of her innocence and simply goes through the religious motions, because she is told to. She explains, "'Faites un acte de foi…' et je le fis. 'Faites un acte d'amour…' 'Faites un acte d'espérance…' et je le fis"(304). During Suzanne's trance phases where she is physically and emotionally forced to fulfill the duties of a nun, she also relentlessly defends her innocence by continuing to refuse confession for sins she did not commit. However, her consistent plea of her innocence enrages and shocks the nuns and they continue to punish and try to subdue Suzanne.

During the middle of the ceremony Suzanne exacerbates the severity of the ceremony by continuing to assert her innocence. Due to Suzanne's stubborn display of her innocence, the nuns are increasingly cruel in trying to coax the "demons" out from Suzanne. She writes, " Le reste de cette cérémonie où la majesté de Dieu venait d'être insultée, les choses les plus saintes profanes, et le ministre de l'église bafoue, s'acheva; et les religieuse se retirèrent, excepté la supérieure, moi et les jeunes ecclésiastiques"(304). In contrast to the rest of her revealing memoire, Suzanne does not even dare name the details of the ceremony, which allows the readers imagination to wander. She describes the profanity and disgrace of the ceremony and the continued injustice she receives. Edmiston also outlines her mistreatment, "The ensuing punishment is disguised as a religious purification: Suzanne is again persecuted as a demonic outcast, subjected to the ritual of exorcism, and dragged

forcibly to the foot of the alter". [18] It appears as though the more Suzanne attempts to prove her innocence the guiltier and crazier she appears to the religious community. Regardless of the validity of her defense, the nuns use the ritual of exorcism to punish Suzanne's rebellious nature in order to make an example of her to the other nuns in the convent.

Before being released back into the religious community, Suzanne is forced to endure five days of public humiliation and prolonged strange religious ceremonies. Her description of one of the ceremonies at night makes it appear cult-like,

> Le soir, lorsque je fus retirée dans ma cellule, j'entendis qu'on s'en approchait en chantant les litanies; c'était toute la maison rangée sur deux lignes…On me passa une corde au cou. On me mit dans la main une torche allumée et une discipline dans l'autre…Quand je fus arrivée à ce petit oratoire, qui était éclairé de deux lumières, on m'ordonna de demander pardon à Dieu et à la communauté du scandale que j'avais donné (318).

Suzanne's description of the ceremony outlines the force that the nuns use to institute religious beliefs and principles on her. Their motives prove to be self-serving as Suzanne's health begins to repeatedly fail after every ceremony and the nuns again shun her. Like her hallucinatory episodes, Suzanne's reaction to her prolonged torture causes concern and commotion among the other nuns. As her health declines, however her basic needs remain unaddressed.

---

[18] Edmiston, William F. "Sacrifice and Innocence in "La Religieuse"." *Diderot Studies*. (1978): 67-84. Web. 27 Mar. 2012. <www.jstor.org/stable/40372493>.

In addition to tormenting Suzanne by making her supposed possession a spectacle, she is further tortured by a lack of medical attention. The nuns' unconcerned attitude toward Suzanne's severe medical condition illustrates another level of cruelty towards the young nun. In the article, *Diderot's La Religieuse: Libertinism and the Dark Cave of the Soul,* Josephs elaborates; "The violence unleashed has almost fatal consequences for Suzanne and the nuns conceal only poorly their dismay over her recovery from the illness inflicted through a prolonged torture".[19] He highlights the nuns' poor attempt to conceal their negative incentives about Suzanne's well-being. Their aggressively negative feelings also appear in their denial of the severity of Suzanne's illness and her continued torment.

The aggressive and relentless torture inflicted on Suzanne also highlights the underlying sexual tension. Suzanne is transformed into an object of spectacle and desire during her period of alleged possession. As Josephs describes,

> She is transformed into some fearsome creation of collective fantasy who must be and is symbolically cast out of the communal life by the ritual of the convent, ignored, trampled upon, defiled, and readmitted to the common order only after the further ritual mechanisms of the religious temper-exorcism, prayers for the dead, rigorous public penance-have purified her of the hidden demons harbored by all but confined to the more secret recesses of the mind.[20]

---

[19] Josephs, Herbert. "Diderot's La Religieuse: Libertinism and the Dark Cave of the Soul." *Johns Hopkins University Press*. 91.4 (1976): 734-755. Web. 31 Mar. 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2907067>.

[20] Herbert. "Diderot's La Religieuse: Libertinism and the Dark Cave of the Soul.", 743.

His description shows how the continued isolation and defilement of Suzanne increases her desirability to the other nuns. Suzanne's rage against the religious community augments the sexual tension between her and the other nuns, because she appears animated and rebellious. Her torment serves as both entertainment and arousal for the nuns. During the ceremonies, the nuns take on the role of superiority and Suzanne is forced to comply with their use of physical force. She explains, "Après cela, on m'ôta la corde; on me déshabilla jusqu'a la ceinture; on me prit mes cheveux qui étaient épars sur mes épaules; on les rejeta sur un des côtés de mon cou"(318). The nuns appear to be unnecessarily aggressive in forcing Suzanne's movements and taking off her clothes for the ceremony. Furthermore, since Suzanne remains in a trance-like and hallucinatory state during all the ceremonies, the nuns capitalize on Suzanne's lack of awareness in being so aggressive.

During Suzanne's periods of sickness and rebellion, she becomes more desirable to the other nuns. One nun, Ursule, shows a surprising interest in helping Suzanne recover. Suzanne writes, "Il était impossible que ma santé résistât à de si longues et de si dures épreuves. Je tombai malade. Ce fut dans cette circonstance que la sœur Ursule montra bien toute l'amitié qu'elle avait pour moi"(319). Therefore, Suzanne illustrates how her sickness fosters her relationship with Ursule. During Suzanne's periods of sickness, Ursule is the only nun concerned with her condition. Ursule barely leaves Suzanne's side, extremely distraught over her condition and repeatedly prays for her health. Suzanne asks Ursule what is wrong and she responds, "' Ce que j'ai, me répondît-elle; je vous aime, et vous me le demandez! Il était temps que votre supplice finît. J'en serais morte''(319). Ursule

proclaims her love and compassion for Suzanne. Ursule's distraught condition illustrates how she suffers alongside Suzanne. Urusle portrays one of the few religious figures in the text, along with Madame de Moni that Suzanne describes in a positive light. However, sexual tension underlines her concern for Suzanne.

Only under the pretense that Suzanne was possibly insane and falling in and out of consciousness, does Ursule came to her side. Therefore, the illustration of Ursule as a compassionate caretaker begins to unravel the complexity of relationships within the convent that intertwine social confinement and sexual tension. Diderot forces madness into his narrative augment the torment that the religious community inflicts, to unveil the power relationships between nuns and the superior as well as the impact of labeling someone as "crazy". However, Diderot more broadly employs madness into his narrative to also to shed light on the impact of social confinement and maltreatment forced on the individual by the religious community.

Chapter IV. Exploring Homosexuality in the Religious Community

The erotic and sexual undertones in Suzanne's madness and possession also manifest themselves in the expression of homosexuality. As one of the first novels exposing provocative forms of female sexuality, *La Religieuse* makes a significant contribution to the history of sexuality by circumventing the barriers of male censure. Furthermore, the suggestive scenes in the novel illustrate the social confinement of the convent, while also fulfilling a male fantasy of lesbianism.

According to society and religion, homosexuality and especially lesbianism were morally wrong. It was considered sinful to entertain such sexual fantasies and desires. Therefore the few literary works that mention lesbianism, such as Henri Estienne and Montaigne's literary passages, were written in order to condemn and judge those who engaged in homosexual desires and activities. In contrast, Diderot was one of the first authors to present lesbianism in a different light.[21] His novel does not aim to expose female sin to provide a moral example to the public. Instead, Diderot takes a neutral approach, which illustrates lesbianism as a natural exercise of human freedom as well as liberation from societal norms and traditional morals.

The reader serves as a witness to the implications of Suzanne's deprived social interactions and lack of freedom in the convent. Through various suggestive scenes, Diderot illustrates ways that Suzanne innocently explores her sexuality in order to express herself and exercise some form and arguably the only form of

---

[21] May, Georges. *Diderot et "La Religieuse"*. Paris: Presses Universitaires De France, 1954. Print.

freedom that she can. At Longchamp, Suzanne develops an innocent affection and deep admiration for Madame de Moni. Suzanne describes, “Son dessein n’était pas de séduire, mais certainement c’est ce qu’elle faisait. On sortait de chez elle avec un cœur ardent ; la joie et l’extase était peintes sur le visage, on versait des larmes si douces !”(259). Suzanne continues, “ Elle me l’avoua elle-même”. ‘Je ne sais, me dit-elle, ce qui se passe en moi. Il me semble quand vous venez que Dieu se retire et que son esprit se taise. C’est inutilement que je m’excite, que je cherche des idées, que je veux exalter mon âme, je me trouve une femme ordinaire et bornée’(259). Although the lesbianism is not explicit, the tension and desire underline Suzanne’s dialogue through the sexual and suggestive language. Diderot uses the words “extase,” “séduire,” “je m’excite,” “exalter” to arouse suggestions of female homosexuality. Furthermore, such language serves to tease the reader by sparking perverse curiosity.

The curiosity aroused in the reader continues to build as Diderot draws a parallel between prayer and sexual arousal. In Suzanne’s description of the happiness she derives from praying and signing with Madame de Moni and it remains ambiguous as to whether her pleasure comes from prayer or sexual arousal. Peter V. Conroy Jr. explains the mixture of the two emotions, “the physical symptoms are the same for sexual arousal and religious devotion, for being moved by music or by prayer…The two powerful emotions, religious fervor and sensuality, seem to blur as they mix freely in Suzanne.”[22] Although not interchangeable, both

[22] Conroy Jr., Peter V. "Gender Issues in Diderot's La Religieuse." *Diderot Studies*. 24. (1991): 47-66. Web. 27 Mar. 2012. <www.jstor.org/stable/40372909>.

emotions instigate the same bodily reaction. Suzanne is moved to the point of tears by the joy she experiences when she is with Madame de Moni. Suzanne's reaction to music and prayer resembles the statue, The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa, Lorenzo Bernini's masterpiece, created in 1646, captures the ecstasy of heaven and earth through prayer. Although, his sculpture offers various interpretations such a nun experiencing an actual physical orgasm, his work also symbolizes the rapture of a divine encounter.[23]

The pleasure derived from her relationship with Madame de Moni is harmless; however, the lesbian undertones begin to push the boundaries of what is considered natural desire as the novel progresses. Although lesbianism remains a sinful act, Diderot makes a spectacle of Suzanne's superior's aggressive desire. The superior's forward advances toward Suzanne expose her irrational yearning for the young and innocent religieuse. Suzanne writes,

> …sa main était placée sur mon épaule nue, et l'extrémité de ses doigts posée sur ma gorge. Elle soupirait elle paraissait oppressée, son haleine s'embarrassait ; la main qu'elle tenait sur mon épaule d'abord la pressait fortement, puis elle ne la pressait plus du tout, comme si elle eut été sans force et sanas vie, et sa tête tombait sur la mienne (340).

This scene, where Suzanne is playing the piano for her superior illustrates another instance where feminine sexuality is mixed with another form of expression to subtly describe the liberating pleasure of self expression. The superior's touching

---

[23] Salinger, Margaretta. "Representations of Saint Teresa." *Metropolitan Museum of Art*. 8.3 (1949): 97-108. Web. 3 Apr. 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3258079>.

of Suzanne's shoulders and neck during her performance explicitly shows her desire for Suzanne in her premeditated and subtle advances.

Although Suzanne does entertain the liberty of her sexual freedom in the convent, she only does so because it is the only way that she receives praise and recognition. Since Suzanne's mother was cold and dismissive, Suzanne has often faced hostility and rejection for the majority of her life. Therefore, through her interactions with the superior, Suzanne mistakes sexual desire for approval, for which she constantly searches in order to gain a feeling of self worth. She writes,

> Je me penchai, et elle me baisa le front. Depuis ce temps, sitôt qu'une religieuse avait fait quelque faute, j'intercédais pour elle et j'étais sure d'obtenir sa grâce par quelque faveur innocente. C'était toujours un baiser ou sur le front, ou sur le cou, ou sur les yeux, ou sur les joues, ou sur la bouche, ou sur les mains, ou sur la gorge, ou sur les bras, mais plus souvent sur la bouche…si c'était mon front, il était blanc, uni et d'une forme charmante ; si c'étaient mes yeux, ils étaient brillants ; si c'étaient mes joues, elles étaient vermeilles et douces ; si c'étaient mes mains, elles étaient petites et potelées ; si c'était ma gorge, elle d'une fermeté de pierre et d'une forme admirable ; si c'étaient mes bras, il était impossible de les avoir mieux tournés et plus ronds ; si c'étaient mon cou, aucune des sœurs ne l'avait mieux fait et d'une beauté plus exquise et plus rare (340).

Suzanne first explains that she often receives the grace and affection of the superior by doing "quelque faveur innocente." The ambiguity of her "faveur" begins to unveil itself as she explains the "grace" she receives from the superior (340). Suzanne describes the praise she receives as a kiss from the superior on the forehead. However as she continues to elaborate on where else the superior kisses her, it becomes progressively more inappropriate from that of a socially acceptable relationship between a superior and another nun. Suzanne's description of the kisses seductively leads the readers wandering eyes up and down Suzanne's body.

Her unaffected tone teases the reader into believing that their relationship is completely innocent and normal. Suzanne also describes the nature of each kiss depending on where it is placed on her body. In describing the more innocent parts of her body such as her hands, she depicts the superior's kisses as small. In contrast, when talking about a sexual part of her body such as her neck, she describes the kiss as rare and delightful. Therefore, by mapping not only the different areas of where she is kissed but also the different kind of affection she is given, Suzanne directly illustrates the intention and desire behind the superior's actions. However since Suzanne is desperate for approval and affection, she mistakes the superior's advances as an affirmation of her homosexual behavior.

Suzanne also depicts the lesbian contact between her and the superior as innocent and often describes it in a nonchalant tone in order to normalize their interactions and make them seem both socially and morally acceptable. She does not think much of being kissed on the lips or neck, which is blatantly inappropriate to the reader. Suzanne describes, " …elle paraissait goûter le plus grand plaisir. Elle m'invita lui baiser le front, les joues, les yeux et la bouche, et je lui obéissais : je ne crois pas qu'il y eut du mal à cela"(343). In an institution that condemns lesbianism with severe hostility, Diderot presents lesbian sexual advances as complex manifestations of social confinement and rejection. Suzanne's descriptions of her interactions are given without fear of judgment or hesitation. Her unknowing attitude towards lesbianism illustrates her innocence, but more so her view as female homosexuality as free of sin.

In allowing Suzanne's innocent view of homosexuality to be expressed, Diderot entertains the possibility that lesbianism inspires female camaraderie. In addition to reinforcing self worth and self-esteem, female homosexuality appears to create feminine solidarity within the convent. Suzanne encourages sharing the superior's affections with other nuns, in particular Sainte-Thérèse. As the relationship progresses between Suzanne and the superior, she clearly states to Sainte-Thérèse that they can share the superior. Suzanne describes, "Je ne suis point fâchée que vous la voyiez sans cesse, moi. Vous ne devez pas être plus fâchée que j'en fasse autant ; ne suffit-il pas que je vous proteste que je ne vous nuirai auprès d'elle, ni à vous, ni à personne ? "(338). Suzanne reiterates that she is not angry that they both share a relationship with the superior, and that it is possible to live in harmony and share her. Furthermore, Suzanne declares her innocence again by explaining that she has done no harm by engaging in this type of relationship.

By affirming her innocence, Suzanne helps shed light on the natural and positive aspects of lesbian interactions in the convent while also making it the more titillating for the presumptive male reader. Without the overarching moral context that emphasizes the sinfulness in feminine homosexuality, Suzanne is free to experiment and express her sexuality. Peter V. Conroy explains Suzanne's attitude toward lesbianism,

> She does not regard lesbianism as a sin simply because a man tells her it is. From her perspective, it is an act of solidarity which permits women to find value in themselves and in each other, free from the restrictions of male judgments. Once we go beyond the moral and sinful aspect of lesbianism, we see that in this polemical context of a diatribe against the Church Diderot also

> and even paradoxically envisions it as a positive force, a source of sharing and cooperation, and a possibility for congeniality over hostility. [24]

Conroy's analysis of Diderot's motives behind creating Suzanne's attitude towards lesbianism illustrates the complexity and moral delicacy involved in presenting one of the first illustrations of feminine homosexuality. Although Diderot's feelings towards women's sexuality often address the woman as governed by her sexual organs, he develops the lesbian relationships more deeply and not only sexually in order to demonstrate the natural desire to seek affection. Suzanne often describes her interactions as harmless or innocent, which underline the natural intentions behind such relations.

In contrast to Suzanne, Sainte-Thérèse reacts with hostility and roiling feelings of guilt for her relation with their superior. She often appears tormented and disheveled. She rages with jealousy about the relationship between Suzanne and the superior because she feels threatened despite Suzanne's suggestions to share the superior. Suzanne describes Sainte-Thérèse's turmoil, "Je l'observai plusieurs jours de suite et lorsque je me crus suffisamment assurée de mon soupçon, par ses petites colères, ses puériles alarmes, sa persévérance à me suivre...plus encore à sa pâleur, à sa douleur, à ses pleurs, au dérangement de sa santé, et même de son esprit "(337). Suzanne describes her fellow nun's troubled

---

[24] Conroy Jr., Peter V. "Gender Issues in Diderot's La Religieuse." *Diderot Studies*. (1991): 47-66. Web. 27 Mar. 2012. <www.jstor.org/stable/40372909>.

state, because of the withdrawal of affection from the superior. She confesses to Suzanne that before she arrived, she had received the same kind of affection and attention, but now no longer shares as strong bond with the superior. Therefore the reader comprehends how a lack of affection and attention in the convent can lead to such severe distress and negative feelings.

Furthermore, Sainte-Thérèse's negative emotions stem from her deep sense of guilt for her lesbian relations with the superior. However, male dominant societal values create her sense that lesbianism is morally wrong. Her confession to a male, Père Lemoine, reinforces her doubts about the innocent nature of her homosexual relationship. The superior also shares the feelings of guilt as Suzanne hears her the superior confessing to herself that she is damned. Therefore, Diderot illustrates such sensual scenes between the characters to show the natural human instinct to seek affection, but also how this lesbian interaction does not come without judgment or fear of punishment. The anxiety and guilt experienced by the women for their sexual relations unveils another intimate element of cloistral life. However, Suzanne appears as the only character free of guilt from engaging in homosexual advances. She persistently proclaims her harmless intentions and remains naïve about the nature of the close female relations developing in the convent.

In addition to displaying the natural instincts of confined women, the intimacy of the text itself reveals the voyeuristic curiosity of the reader. The lesbian scenes in the novel do not repulse or disgust the reader, but instead entice him or her. The detailed, yet subtly intimate moments described in the text allow the

reader to feel enough distance in order to explore his or her own curiosity, but enough proximity to make them feel guilty or embarrassed for their invasive interest. In a way, the reader becomes a voyeur sharing the close sensual moments between the nuns in the convent. The novel seduces the reader through allowing them to see such taboo scenes in which they are invading the privacy of those involved.

The seductive descriptions in the text appeal to a male fantasy of lesbianism. Suzanne's elaborate and innocent depictions of her homosexual relations with the other nuns in the convent appeal to one of the functions of her memoire to plea to the Marquis for her freedom. By seducing and inviting the reader to witness the taboo homosexual interactions, Suzanne capitalizes on voyeuristic desires to capture the reader and the Marquis' attention. Therefore, the underlying homosexual content in the text both appeals to and displays natural human desires in reaction to prolonged social isolation.

Conclusion

Suzanne's haunting recollection of her prolonged torture in the convent unmasks the realities of religious life. By analyzing the manner in which various functions of the text interact, her memoire serves as a lasting provocative depiction of life in the convent. Suzanne's tale, rooted in both history and Diderot's personal life, invites or condemns the reader to bear witness to her mistreatment and the horrors of the religious community behind closed walls.

Firstly, the problematic enforcement of vows in the religious community begins to unravel the corruption in religious institutions. Suzanne's mother's belief that her daughter can expiate her sins implies the capability to transfer responsibility. Her mother gains the ability to alleviate the burden of redemption through suffering and displaces it onto Suzanne. Her mother also blames Suzanne for her own infidelity and resents her because she serves as a reminder of her sins. In addition, the Church reinforces her mother's corrupt ideology and concept of redemption by punishing Suzanne for her mother's mistakes. Suzanne embodies the path of Christ as she is forced to expiate the sins of another. Diderot directly attacks the Church's reinforcement of corrupt ideology and Suzanne's memoire serves as an incriminating testimony against the religious community for unjustly forcing her to take her vows to pay for another's sins. Her mother's poisoned bloodline condemns Suzanne to find her mother's redemption and avoid eternal damnation. Her gender and issues surrounding her legitimacy compound the burden of her mother's damnation.

Suzanne's memoire also brings to light the gender issues surrounding a woman's sphere in 18th Century France as well as the problem of illegitimate birth. In addition to forced vows, through Suzanne's narrative Diderot critiques the Church's endorsement of involuntary sacrifice. In order to expiate her mother's sins, Suzanne is morally forced to surrender her personal liberty. Although Suzanne continuously pleads her innocence in response to the unjust treatment and restrictions placed upon her personal freedom, the nuns' unrelenting efforts to subdue her spirits forge on. Due to Suzanne's illegitimate birth, society views her as "less than", which helps justify the sacrifice of her individual freedom. However, as Suzanne endures increasingly harsh and sadistic treatment the nuns begin to call her sanity into question, which furthers Suzanne's lack of personal agency over her freedom.

As Diderot begins to incorporate the theme of madness into Suzanne's narrative, he demonstrates the toll that religious institutions have on an individual's mental and overall well-being. Since Suzanne refuses to take her vows, the nuns begin to insinuate that she must be possessed. Rumors of her contorting and levitating circulate the convent and only further the suspicion that she is driven by demons. In reaction to the rumors, Suzanne transforms into an object of fear and desire. The other nuns' response to Suzanne's frail body lying on the convent floors dehumanizes and humiliates Suzanne. In addition to social isolation, Suzanne endures an exorcism enforced by the superior. During the various ceremonies to rid Suzanne of her demons, the elements of religious corruption and underlying sexual desire climax.

During the climax of fanatical displays of faith and religion, the underlying sexual tension and homosexuality begin to emerge. Writers at the time did not usually explore female homosexuality; Diderot's text proves equally provocative and shocking since he does not portray lesbianism from a moralist's perspective. Although the other nuns in the convent feel guilt and shame for their homosexual relationships, Suzanne retains her innocence. Her relationship with Madame de Moni reveals how her desperate search for affection and approval represents a natural reaction to the enclosing walls of the convent. Furthermore, Suzanne's intimate and suggestive descriptions of the lesbianism occurring in the convent seduce the reader as well as the Marquis into witnessing her story.

Diderot's *La Religieuse* explores commonly discussed issues of 18th Century French Society, such as religion. Despite the themes' banality, Diderot unmasks the corruption of religious institutions in an innovative and powerful way. Suzanne's personal memoire of her suffering and experience behind the towering walls of the convent still shocks readers today. Her resilient belief in her own innocence and rebellion against the constrictions forced on her personal freedom represent Suzanne as both a victim and a warrior. Although Suzanne leaves the convent at the end of her memoire, she remains preoccupied about being readmitted. Thus Suzanne's lasting narrative illustrates freedom as not an absence of physical confinement, but more so the audacity to believe that one's fate is changeable and limitless, "Un sentiment secret me soutenait, c'est que j'étais libre, et que mon sort, quelque dur qu'il fut, pouvait changer" (248).

Works Cited:

Conroy Jr., Peter V. "Gender Issues in Diderot's La Religieuse." *Diderot Studies*. (1991): 47-66. Web. 27 Mar. 2012. <www.jstor.org/stable/40372909>.

Diderot, Denis. *La Religieuse*, in *Œuvres romanesques,* ed. Henri Bénac. Paris: Garnier Frères, 1962. 235-393. Print.

Edmiston, William F. "Sacrifice and Innocence in "La Religieuse"." *Diderot Studies*. (1978): 67-84. Web. 27 Mar. 2012. <www.jstor.org/stable/40372493>.

Floch, Jacques. *Denis Diderot, le bonheur en plus*. Paris: Les Editions Ouvrieres, 1991. 1-32. Print.

Josephs, Herbert. "Diderot's La Religieuse: Libertinism and the Dark Cave of the Soul." *Johns Hopkins University Press*. 91.4 (1976): 734-755. Web. 31 Mar. 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2907067>.

Kempf, Roger. *Diderot et le roman*. Paris: Seuil, 1984. Print.

Lloyd, Heather. *Diderot La Religieuse*. London: Duckworth Publishers, 2000. Print.

May, Georges. *Diderot et "La Religieuse"*. Paris: Presses Universitaires De France, 1954. Print.

May, Georges. "Le Modele inconnu de "La Religieuse" de Diderot: Marguerite Delamarre." *Revue d'Histoire litteraire de la France*. (1951): 273-287. Web. 27 Mar. 2012. <www.jstor.org/stable/40520901>.

McMillan, James F. *France and women, 1789-1914: gender, society and politics*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2002. 1-33. Print.

Salinger, Margaretta. "Representations of Saint Teresa." *Metropolitan Museum of Art*. 8.3 (1949): 97-108. Web. 3 Apr. 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3258079>.