Authors have always been fascinated by the theme of death. More than any other aesthetic, the romantic aesthetic has taken death as one of its paradigms. Two representations of death have attained the status of prototypes in the romantic novel: Richardson's *Clarissa* has become the classical example of female death, Goethe's *Werther* of male death. Whereas Clarissa induced many authors to "execute" their heroines, Werther inspired more imitations in actual life than in literature. Even after the appearance of *Werther*, death seems to strike the female character more readily than the male character.

Such narrative preference can only be accounted for by hypothesis. It may well be that the preference follows from social convention or circumstance; women may be particularly likely symbols of sensibility, suffering, and death. Pierre Fauchery writes ironically: "C'est dans la mort que la femme se 'réalise' pleinement."¹ Novelists may also have believed what present-day psychologists tend to assert, that women more than men have erotic associations with death. The preference for the death of the female character may also be dictated by the rhetorical convention according to which writing is a male enterprise. The code to which male and female authors adhere is one in which the speaker and seer are male, whereas the person spoken to or seen is female. Death would more naturally be inflicted upon the other (female) than upon the self (male). It is interesting to note in this perspective that Werther chooses a prompt and solitary death witnessed by nobody, whereas female death scenes in romantic novels are usually observed and described at length.

Such interpretations remain conjectural; only an analysis of numerous treatments of death can validate the hypotheses. It is therefore necessary to single out the narrative function of death, not as a reductive procedure, but as a way of tracing a pattern that may persist in an author's work, in a given historical period, or in an aesthetic mode. As an initial step toward a more general study, I shall investigate four cases of female deaths that occur in novels written between 1800 and 1807, some thirty years after *Werther*. They are Chateaubriand's *Atala* (1801) and *René* (1802), and Mme de Staël's *Delphine* (1802) and *Corinne* (1807).² The choice of these four texts is
prompted by the belief that culturally close texts yield a well-defined selection in a comparative study of this nature. The four texts are composed by authors socially and intellectually alike, are separated by a very short time span, and offer the interesting symmetry of one male and one female author, each contriving two female deaths.

Each of the four novels is structured around the same narrative nucleus: love, prevented by obstacles, leads to the death of the heroine. The love/death paradigm is undoubtedly one of the most common romantic clichés, a rhetorical convention so widespread and potent that it seems unsuitable as an element of differentiation between authors. Yet, while having recourse to this cliche, each author may create a context for the cliche in which a specific imaginary vision of self and world is expressed. The cliche imposed upon the text then becomes the pretext for the metaphorical expression of the author’s fictive self.

Two kinds of narrative variants will be singled out in the four texts. The first kind of variant is common to both authors and can be considered an aesthetic variation of romantic rhetoric; the second represents the distinctive features of an individual author’s narrative universe. Even for a corpus limited to four novels, such an assumption may be made without danger as long as any conclusion based on it is considered hypothetical. Examination of further culturally close texts might indeed narrow down the category of distinctive features.

Let us first look at the variants that occur in the work of both authors; these variants link the heroines in crossed pairs. The central couples whose love forms the essence of the narratives are Atala-Chactas (Atala) and Amélie-René (René) for Chateaubriand, Delphine-Léonce (Delphine) and Corinne-Oswald (Corinne) for de Staël. Love is a fatal condition for all four couples, a kind of illness for which there is no cure. Love, a passion as absolute as its prohibition, becomes the obstacle to happiness. Self-destruction is then preferable to an existence tormented by the prohibition of what is both necessary and impossible. In order to escape such a destiny, two of the heroines, Amélie and Delphine, enter convents. This step is a symbolic death for Amélie but does not have such absolute power for the latter. Delphine later commits suicide by poisoning herself, as does Chateaubriand’s Atala. The identities of Amélie and Delphine are known at the outset of the novels but are renounced by their religious vows. Although they are both orphans, their parentage is not surrounded by enigma; the identities of Atala and Corinne, however, are shrouded in mystery and are not revealed until later in the novels.

Both Atala and Corinne have a stepparent, and both combine two cultures. Atala is the daughter of a white father and an Indian mother; Corinne has an English father and an Italian mother. The same two heroines are further distinguished from Amélie and Delphine by their long death scenes. In both Atala and Corinne, the deaths of the heroines are a focus on the narrative; the
lovers are conscious of the imminent death, and the death scene is recorded at length. The deaths of the other two heroines, Amélie and Delphine, are rendered in an off-stage manner without the lovers' full consciousness of the approaching death.

Chateaubriand and Mme de Staël have made equal use of these narrative details. Each author has one suicide, one heroine who enters a convent, one with a mysterious identity, and one to whom a long death scene is devoted. These narrative characteristics—suicidal death, withdrawal from society, unknown identity, exoticism—taken from the cultural materials available to the authors, can be seen as stylistic variants of the romantic rhetoric. They are likely to recur in romantic texts independently of authorship; they are indicative of a period, not of an individual.

The distinctive narrative features, however, characterize a particular writing and are thus a means of differentiation between authors. Instead of linking authors of a given period, they link texts of an individual author. The distinctive features in this study reveal a fundamental difference between the visionary worlds of de Staël and Chateaubriand rather than showing a parallelism between them. Whereas the stylistic variants linked the fictive heroines of the four novels in crossed pairs, the distinctive narrative features link them in parallel pairs. For the analysis of these features, death is studied within three contexts: death and love, death and discourse, and death and eroticism.

Love in Chateaubriand's novels remains at an embryonic stage. In both Atala and René the lovers are separated at the outset of love, and death occurs when the lovers have not yet established a relationship. The obstacles preventing love and causing the separation— intrinsic to the love situation itself—are of an absolute nature and cannot be overcome. Atala’s love for Chactas is prevented by her mother’s oath that she remain a virgin; Atala commits suicide when she feels she might give in to her love. Amélie’s love for her brother is incestuous, hence forbidden in her eyes; her entering the convent is a symbolic death, which occurs before René himself has become conscious of the ambiguity of his feelings. Both women renounce love, or rather a promise of love, leaving their lovers to indulge in sensuous mourning.

In Mme de Staël's novels, death occurs when love is at its decline. In both Delphine and Corinne love has failed; the women go through years of separation and agony before they die, and in each case the lover has turned to another woman who is related to the abandoned heroine. The obstacles to love in de Staël are not of an absolute nature; there is not one barrier to love but a series of misunderstandings, difficulties, and moral conflicts that arise each time love seems possible. The main obstacle—social convention in Delphine, the wish of Oswald’s father for his son to marry someone else in Corinne—may be overcome, but in each case a choice to the contrary is made.

In Chateaubriand’s novels the women bring about the separation, but the
narrative focuses on the suffering of the male characters. The situation is reversed in de Staël: the male characters cause the break, and the reader follows closely the distress of the heroines. For both authors, the deaths of the women are directly linked to love, but the deaths of the male characters are not love-related and, if mentioned at all, are only briefly described. Chactas and René are murdered by Indians, Léonce is executed for political reasons, Oswald’s death is not mentioned, but he returns to his wife out of “duty and fondness [attachement].”

For both authors death frees the women, rather than the men, from a love that seems (Chateaubriand) or has proven (de Staël) impossible. For Chateaubriand the mourning of the male characters becomes an obstinate declaration of love, a denial of the illusory nature of love. The mourning in de Staël’s texts is brief: the male characters are made to feel guilty for having been unable to overcome external obstacles to love. The novels close with the knowledge that, even if life went on, love would remain impossible. Where Chateaubriand creates a discourse of illusions, Madame de Staël creates a discourse of disillusion.

Upon dying all four heroines have recourse to verbal language. Unlike Julie in La Nouvelle Héloïse or Ellénore in Adolphe, whose final messages are written and read after their deaths, Atala, Amélie, Corinne, and Delphine communicate with their lovers at the moment of death. For Chateaubriand’s heroines the final discourse is one of confession and separation. The male characters discover the passionate nature of the love of Atala and Amélie. The avowal of the heroines is not only a confession but also an imploring for love. “L’aveu,” writes Michel Foucault, “est devenu, en Occident, une des techniques les plus hautement valorisées pour produire le vrai.” The confessional discourse of Chateaubriand’s heroines is a love-creating device through which the heroines take vengeance for their own deaths. The pain caused by the discourse of love allows the women to contemplate the pain experienced by their lovers. They receive from them a last token of love that gives meaning to their deaths; the pain of dying is lessened by the narcissistic pleasure of the love injury inflicted upon the other. Atala and Amélie die after having instilled in their lovers by means of discourse the feelings that caused their own deaths.

If the confession of love is direct in the final discourse of Chateaubriand’s heroines, it is displaced in the final discourse of de Staël’s heroines. Delphine, having poisoned herself, accompanies Léonce to his execution and talks incessantly about the religious duty of the dying person. Corinne has a young girl read her last poetic composition, in which she takes leave of Rome, her beloved city. Corinne’s procedure creates at the same time a distance and a mediation between the two lovers and allows her to observe Oswald in the audience while remaining unseen herself. Her love for Oswald is transferred to the city of Rome, for which she expresses a vivid passion. This displacement allows the hyperbolic tone of Corinne’s poetic discourse.
In *Delphine* the discourse is not transferred to another person, but Delphine herself assumes the discourse of someone else, taking the role of the priest who would accompany the condemned Léonce to his place of execution. Here also a double displacement occurs, the first in the transfer of roles, the second in the fact that Delphine’s feelings are displaced onto the religious level. In the final discourse of both novels, the object of love thus undergoes a substitution that reflects the one that occurred in the love relationship itself, where Delphine and Corinne were supplanted by cousin or stepsister. If Madame de Staël’s female characters distanciate themselves from the lovers in the final discourse, they repeat verbally the actions of their lovers.

The final discourses of the heroines fulfill the function of a funeral rite for both authors; discourse exorcises death by adding a specular dimension to the act of dying. All four heroines contemplate at the moment of their death the suffering of their lovers and seek their approbation; Chateaubriand’s heroines seek confirmation of sentiment, de Staël’s heroines admiration of character. Atala’s and Amélie’s confessions seek reciprocation of love, Delphine’s and Corinne’s discourses admiration for the intellectual and moral qualities by which they have transcended love.

The final discourses of the heroines also reflect a fundamental difference between the two authors. Highly erotic in Chateaubriand, unerotic in de Staël, the discourses of the dying heroines sustain the specific quality of the love relationship in each author. The heroines of Chateaubriand experience love as a sexual longing, whereas the passion of the Staëlian woman has no sexual overtones.

The erotic desires that accompany the feelings of love in Chateaubriand’s heroines awaken the sense of guilt that leads to their deaths. The obstacle to love is a sexual taboo for both heroines—oath of virginity for Atala, incest taboo for Amélie. Atala curses the virginity, which she says devours her life, and Amélie speaks of her “burning chastity”: the malediction of virginity weighs upon both heroines. Because of the powerful erotic imagery in *Atala*, I shall give particular attention to this novel in this part of the study.

The imposed virginity is the price paid for Atala’s life, which was endangered at birth, and for the sexual transgression of her mother—the premarital intercourse with Atala’s father. Atala’s passion for Chactas is as absolute as the mother’s oath, since only death can preserve her virginity. Virginity also becomes a recurrent motif in Chactas’s story of his love for Atala and her love for him. Chactas’s vision of virginity is given to him by his mother, according to whom virgins are “des fleurs mystérieuses qu’on trouve dans les lieux solitaires” (p. 80). When he perceives Atala for the first time, he believes she is the virgin sent to prisoners of war to comfort them in their last moments. An ironic reversal occurs here: instead of being the virgin who comforts Chactas in his death, she dies a virgin, and her virginity will be carried as a burden by Chactas throughout his life. Chactas’s final blindness suggests an emascula-
tion, a forced virginity that prolongs the one imposed upon Atala. A symbolic and sensuous form of blinding occurred earlier at Atala’s funeral when her long hair veiled Chactas’s eyes.

Although suffering because of Atala’s virginity, Chactas savors virginal eroticism. Having spent a chaste evening with Atala, he describes himself as “plus heureux que la nouvelle épouse qui sent pour la première fois son fruit tressaillir dans son sein” (p. 101). Virginity is linked to both maternity and death in Chactas’s narrative. His image of virgins is given by a mother and passed on to mothers. He also relates how virgins of the Indian tribe pass the tomb of a dead child in the hope of becoming pregnant.

Chactas’s blending of death, virginity, and motherhood is expressed in the imagery of female breasts. Breasts, or rather the “sein” referring to both breast and womb, are especially powerful in Chactas’s erotic vision. He twice gives the picture of a mother burying her son and wetting the tomb with maternal milk. To the mothers of the Indian tribe he describes the situation of man: “L’homme sort de votre sein pour se suspendre à votre mamelle et à votre bouche” (p. 80). Breasts haunt Chactas’s sensuous discourse. In a ritual game he notices and reports how the nipples of the breasts of two young girls come in contact. Upon meeting Atala he is struck by the small golden cross “sur son sein,” and the final image of the dead Atala is also that of her breasts: “son sein surmonta quelque temps le sol noirci, comme un lis blanc s’élève du milieu d’une sombre argile” (p. 134).

Breasts are the focal point of various relationships: mother/child, woman/lover, and woman/woman; they also symbolize Chactas’s sexual desires imprisoned in the fertility/sterility contradiction. The narrative ends with the report of the death of René’s great grandchild, conceived, the mother tells the child, by a kiss of his father on her lips. This image of virginal eroticism contrasts with the macabre sterile union of Chactas and Atala. Chactas returns, after his wanderings, to Atala’s tomb, unearths what he believes to be her remains and those of the priest buried beside her, places them under his pillow, and dreams of love and virtue. A gruesome virginal triangle it is, in which each person exemplifies a different kind of virginity: male chastity (priest), female virginity (Atala), symbolic male castration (Chactas). Virginal fertility and erotic sterility are dreams that exemplify sexual fantasy in Chateaubriand’s novel. The Atala-René texts begin and close with two male relationships, those of foster father and foster son (Lopez/Chactas; Chactas/René), relationships that do not imply or require a sexual union and thus do not threaten virginity.

Virginity, an essential feature in Chateaubriand, is unimportant for the Staelian woman. Virginity is not referred to in the Staelian novels, where the passion of the heroines has no erotic overtones. Delphine is a widow, and the vows of chastity that she takes later are easily renounced; for Corinne, who has several male friends, virginity is not an issue. Highly eroticized in Chateau
briand, virginity, if at all present, is asexual in de Staël's novels. Neither Delphine nor Corinne suffers from sexual jealousy; both indulge in voyeuristic mourning by seeking to capture the moment when their lovers declare themselves to someone else. Love, then, is a specular system in which the rejected heroines become spectators of love and relate to the lovers in a displaced manner. In de Staël's novels, female desire is not expressed in erotic terms; the claims of the women upon the lovers are of an ethical and not a sexual nature. Although the rejection by the lovers arouses a longing for death in both women, death itself is not associated with Eros as it is by Chateaubriand.

Because the Staelian couples indulge very little in physical expressions of fondness, distance between the characters is maintained. The various countries in which the characters travel in de Staël's novels increase this distance, whereas traveling in Chateaubriand's works has a centripetal force that abolishes distance and brings the characters of the two novels together. The fictional world of Chateaubriand thus closes in upon itself. The grieving lovers of the two texts meet, the older one becoming the foster father of the younger one. This creates a relationship that transcends time and space and allows individual grief and memory to be shared.

Whether the differences between the authors that have come to light through intertextual parallelism reflect a male-female dichotomy is difficult to assess. For both Chateaubriand and de Staël, sexuality is avoided. The avoidance consists in the characters' abstinence in Chateaubriand, in the absence of references in de Staël. The censorship thus resides with the characters in Chateaubriand, with the author in de Staël. In each author there is a distinct emphasis on the mourning of one sex, female for de Staël, male for Chateaubriand. The gender concurrence of author and character is, I believe, incidental. In both cases the preference for female death prevails.

For Chateaubriand female death has been shown to be a self-protective mechanism through which the male character remains in the stage of autoerotic mourning. For Mme de Staël female death is a last attempt to keep intact the stature of the female self narcissistically constructed throughout the novel. By choosing female death Chateaubriand and de Staël have adhered to romantic aesthetics; the contexts elaborated for this conventional cliché, however, reveal opposing imaginary visions. In their representation of the Eros/Thanatos paradigm, the authors have stressed different elements. Mme de Staël emphasizes the love relationship while systematically desexualizing it; Chateaubriand indulges in the narrative of death to which he assigns strong erotic connotations. The authors, then, differ radically in their treatment of Eros and Thanatos: where de Staël desexualizes Eros, Chateaubriand sexualizes Thanatos.


3. Although Amélie dies later in life of a contagious disease, the vow-taking is considered here as her death scene. The ceremony is described as a death scene by the narrator: Amélie is stretched out as if on a death bed, covered by a funeral shroud, while funeral prayers are said. No such connotations characterize Delphine's vow-taking.

