Don Juan and His Fallen Angel:
Images of Women in the Literature of the 1830s

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The decade between 1830 and 1840 produced a series of novels remarkably similar in theme, structure, and characterization. All of the novels, which include some of the best of the nineteenth century, are variations on the structure of the *Bildungsroman*, and all owe some debt to that earlier (1816) novel of cruel and inconstant youth, Constant's *Adolphe*. The parallels between the bored, weak, and vacillating Adolphe, seeking emotional and sexual fulfillment always at the expense of others, and the literary heroes of that fecund decade are manifold. Julien Sorel in 1830, Balzac's Gaston de Nueil and Félix de Vandenesse in 1832 and 1836, Amaury in the 1834 publication of *Volupté*, and Musset's Octave in 1836 all suffer the dilemma of young men soon to embark upon careers made meaningless by the end of the Napoleonic Wars. These dispirited and effete young heroes seek solace in society and society women for the disappointments of their professional lives, and from this search comes a second and parallel structure, which draws upon the myth of the archetypal seducer Don Juan and the fallen angel who attempts to save his soul. The struggle between the young seducer and the virtuous woman who resists his advances (the traditional Don Juan–Donna Elvire story) permeates all of these novels and sheds light in particular on the role women play in romantic literature.

The preoccupation with Don Juan in the novels of the 1830s, strangely enough, tells us more about the women he would seduce than it does about the legendary character himself. For one thing, the Don Juan figure that fascinated the romantics is quite different from the mythic rebel-son archetype of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Indeed, the triumph of romanticism in the early decades of the nineteenth century brought with it a veritable metamorphosis of the Don Juan legend. Lost is the implacable seducer—the son who deliberately and blindly disobeys his father's wise counsel—and in his place is a far more complex character who merits at least a margin of our sympathy. There are certainly a variety of reasons for the change in the portrayal of Don Juan in romantic literature, but perhaps the most compelling of these is the weakening of the influence of the Catholic church after the French Revolution.
With the disappearance of sin as a powerful imaginative conception came an experimentation with the ingredients of the Don Juan legend as it had been conceived by earlier writers. Such experimentation had already deeply influenced the English romantics (I am of course thinking of Byron's *Don Juan* in particular), and the result was that by the 1830s in France the Don Juan figure was less dangerous quite simply because it was no longer surrounded by an atmosphere of sin and evil. The romantics added dimensions to the mythic Don Juan that, if only because there seem to be strata of his personality never before explored, render his characterization more intricate. He is still a seducer of women, obviously—restless seduction and Don Juanism are practically synonymous—but his motives are now more diverse. He is linked, for example, with the general malaise of romanticism; the romantic hero's disappointed dreams are not far different from Don Juan's repeated disappointments with women. The romanticized Don Juan's abandonment of women is merely an extension of his search for an ideal of womanhood that simply cannot be satisfied by any one person. If he yearns for the unattainable, it is because his dreams dazzle him and reality is too cruel a disappointment. If he is bored by too constant an association with a single woman, it is because all of romanticism's young heroes suffer from the terrible ennui that cursed their generation. Like Mérimée's Darcy of *La Double Méprise*, Julien Sorel, Gaston de Nueil, Amaury, and Octave all set out to seduce their victims because they simply have no better way to occupy their time. The initial conquest is later treated with equal dispassion: "N'ai-je manqué à rien de ce que je me dois à moi-même?" Julien asks himself. "Ai-je bien joué mon rôle?" Amaury too speaks only in terms of his own ego when he describes "L'orgueil d'émouvoir ainsi deux êtres à la fois, de faire dépendre peut-être deux bonheurs de mon seul caprice." Too, the women are attractive; as Adolphe says of Ellénore: "[elle] me parut une conquête digne de moi."

But what of this worthy conquest? In the legend of Don Juan, after countless seductions, after the murder of the father of one of his victims, God sends to earth an angel in the form of a woman to convert the infamous seducer. The angel falls in love with Don Juan, but his love for her does not save him. Instead, the angel loses her divine inspiration and is finally abandoned by God. As George Sand describes the tragic conclusion of the Don Juan legend in *Lélia*, "il y eut au ciel un ange de moins, et dans l'enfer un démon de plus."

Just as many of romanticism's young heroes are characterized in terms of an archetypal Don Juan, so too does the romantic heroine resemble in many respects Don Juan's fallen angel. Mme de Rénal in *Le Rouge et le noir*, Henriette de Mortsauf in *Le Lys dans la vallée*, Claire de Beauséant in *La Femme abandonnée*, Mme de Couaën in *Volupté*, and Musset's Brigitte of *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle* are all attracted to their restless seducers in part at least because they feel that their lovers must be saved from their own
destructiveness. The penchant of "good" women for attractive men with reputations is a commonplace, and certainly the fallen angels of romantic literature suffer from that conceit. But the Don Juan aspects of the romantic hero also challenge the heroine's urge to possession. The fallen angel wishes to be the successful rival of her sisters, to be the one woman to possess the eternal seducer, to incorporate him in herself, and to satisfy his passion as no other woman can.

The parallels between these representative heroines of the novels of the 1830s are as numerous as the similarities between the weak and ambitious Don Juan figures who populate romantic literature. Like the fallen angel of the myth, these young heroines all suffer at the hands of the young men who would seduce them. They suffer in part at least because they are not free. They are either married or, like Musset's Brigitte, determined to remain free of romantic involvement. Obviously they do not submit easily to seduction despite the fact that they are married to men who are much older than they and either cruel or mad (and sometimes both, as is the case with M. de Morsauf in *Le Lys dans la vallée*). Like Constant's Ellénore, Brigitte, Claire de Beauséant, and Henriette de Morsauf all acknowledge a growing passion in their would-be seducers, and all manifest a desire to remain free of romantic entanglement. Scruples crumble, nevertheless, despite enormous guilt, and, predictably, all of the heroines fall in love with their young lovers. Structurally, then, the novels follow a similar line of action: an unattainable older woman is repeatedly besieged by a young and passionate lover, she is eventually seduced, he in turn becomes interested in other women, she regrets her submission and is eventually destroyed by it.

But the parallels between these fallen angels go far beyond their situation vis-à-vis the men they love and indeed tell us a great deal about the romantics' feminine ideal, for if not all of these women share every characteristic of their sisters, they are in so many respects similar that they provide patterns by which we may understand them all. Without exception they are women who are older than their lovers; they are "femmes de trente ans" who have experienced life and its vicissitudes if not love and passion. As a matter of fact, they are all utterly inexperienced in matters of physical love and, as a result, are as naïve as children. Félix de Vandenesse insists that he has never known anyone "de plus jeune fille qu'[Henriette]," and Mme de Rénal is described in the same terms in *Le Rouge et le noir*. Her laughter reflects the gaiety of a young girl, and Julien insists several times that she is a woman of no more than twenty in demeanor and behavior.

Despite their youthful appearance and naïveté, these devoted women exhibit a strong maternal instinct; and most are, in fact (with Brigitte offering the only exception), conscientious mothers passionately fond of their children. Most are introduced to the reader surrounded, in somewhat clichéd fashion, by either
children or animals, and maternal passion indeed plays a dominant role in these novels of love and seduction. Both Henriette de Mortsauf and Mme de Couaën, for example, believe that their children will suffer for their inconstancy. They are, in fact, punished through their children, for Henriette’s son nearly dies and Mme de Couaën loses her child by what she believes to be divine retribution. Mme de Rénéal swears that she will give up Julien if her ill child is spared, and she is indeed freed from further torment by Julien’s departure for Paris. Brigitte does not have children of her own, but she is a mother figure for the capricious Octave; she insists that God “m’a chargé de veiller sur toi comme une mère.”

This stability, this predictability (and one might well wish for even one moment’s capriciousness in these devoted women) is accompanied by a certain wise intuition but no formal education. These angelic characters never compete intellectually with their lovers, and indeed their ignorance is stressed in order to enhance their femininity. Like Ellénore, who is described as possessing “un esprit ordinaire,” Madame de Rénéal has forgotten everything she learned as a child in a convent and has replaced that void with nothing (“et elle finit par ne rien savoir,” as Stendhal reminds us). Mme de Couaën has had no formal training, and the inherent intelligence of Henriette de Mortsauf and Brigitte is dismissed in favor of their simple and kind goodness. All of these ladies are wise by intuition, but none possesses the native ability or education to survive outside of the sphere of family and home.

Nevertheless, these romantic heroines must compete (and compete outside of their own spheres) for their seducer’s love and attention. Like the restless Adolphe, whose boredom with Ellénore anticipates romanticism’s ennui a decade later, Félix de Vandenesse, Julien Sorel, Octave, Gaston de Nueil, and Sainte-Beuve’s Amaury are all tempted, as young Don Juans, by women radically different from their chaste mistresses. These tempting rivals are women as capricious as the romantic heroines are faithful, as sexually provocative as the angels are chaste, as independent and masculine as their counterparts are passive and feminine. They are represented by Lady Dudley in Le Lys dans la vallée, by Mathilde de la Mole in Le Rouge et le noir, and by Octave’s first mistress and the redoubtable courtesan Marco in La Confession d’un enfant du siècle. Even the mysterious Mme R in Volupté incorporates the characteristics of these capricious rivals and represents in the novel an alternative to Mme de Couaën’s angelic goodness.

The portrayal of these femmes-démons of romantic literature is nearly as consistent as the depiction of the fallen angels with whom they compete. Perhaps no novelist captures the cold cruelty of these provocative courtesans more effectively than does Musset with his portrait of the dreadful Marco in La Confession. In an initial episode of the novel, after an evening of dissipation, Marco seduces Octave only to explain later that her mother has just died that morning. Even if Lady Dudley hardly matches Marco in cold insensibility, she
is described in surprisingly similar terms. Unlike the open, utterly transparent Henriette, Arabelle Dudley is said to possess “un masque impénétrable qu'elle met et qu'elle ôte flegmatiquement.”¹⁰ She is a woman of steel; her strength is such that she fears no man in combat, and her heart is unbreakable. At one point, near the conclusion of the novel, Félix insults her by recounting an incident that should strike her like a knife thrust to the heart, except that, as he explains, the weapon would shatter upon contact with so hard an object.

In contrast to Mme de Couaën’s utter innocence and kind heart, Mme R is capricious, jealous, impenetrable, “un malicieux sphinx de bronze,” as Amaury describes her.¹¹ Mathilde de la Mole functions in similar fashion as the antithesis of Mme de Rénéal in Le Rouge et le noir. Not only is she utterly capricious and cold-hearted, she is also decidedly masculine. Unlike Mme de Rénéal, whose voice is angelic, Mathilde’s voice “n’a rien de féminin.”¹² She shuns “la délicatesse féminine”; her vast intelligence should have been at the disposal of the opposite sex. She should have been a man, as Julien himself observes.¹³

Ironically, these cold-hearted women succeed in seducing the young men who have been guided to manhood by their faithful mistresses. The sacrifice of reputation, of health, of children, indeed, of life itself for the young Don Juans of romantic literature is fruitless. At the dénouement of each one of these fine novels, each angel has indeed fallen.

But the chaste and pure women of these tragic love stories share a final ironic triumph, for their young Don Juans realize, too late, the consequences of their brutal treatment and the value of what they have lost. Unlike their male counterparts and their female rivals, the fallen angels are never treated with irony. Stendhal is of course repeatedly ironic about Julien; he mockingly complains at one point that “Julien s’obstinent à jouer le rôle d’un don Juan,” despite his lack of experience with women, for example.¹⁴ But the angelic women of romantic literature are never subjected to ironic comment by their creators; rather, they are presented as ideals. They are open, transparent characters who know themselves and who function, as John Mitchell says of Mme de Rénéal, as the “principal repository of the author’s values.”¹⁵ They come as close to representing a vision of idealized womanhood as can be found in romantic literature.

But what are we to say of this romantic ideal that seeks to create a dichotomy between sensitivity and intelligence, between the pure and the sexual, the masculine and the feminine? The virtues ascribed to the feminine ideal are uniform and consistent in these representative romantic novels, for in all of them the women are valued only because of their sensitivity, their resignation, their very martyrdom. Even the heroines of the great adventure novels of the decade, women like Esmeralda of Hugo’s Notre Dame de Paris and Pauline in Dumas’s 1838 historical novel of the same name, exhibit similar tendencies
toward resignation and passivity. Félix de Vandenesse himself comments on the problem when he complains that he is the victim of two irreconcilable passions. “J'aimais un ange et un démon,” he says, “deux femmes également belles, parées l’une de toutes les vertus que nous meurtrissons en haine de nos imperfections, l’autre de tous les vices que nous défions par égoïsme.” It would seem that the split between the femme-ange/femme-démon is everywhere in this literature of the 1830s; and the whole woman, independent and educated, sensitive and creative, strong and tender, is but too rarely to be found.

There is of course one major novelist of the decade who stands utterly opposed to the depiction of feminine protagonists as fallen angels. George Sand’s Lélia addresses the question directly in one of the most bitter monologues concerning male-female relations ever written—certainly there is nothing in the decade of the 1830s to rival its black despair and blanket condemnation of romanticism’s Don Juans. Sand’s criticism is in fact further intensified by the parallels between her novel of love’s inconstancies and the psychological novels of the decade. Like romanticism’s fallen angels, Lélia is ten years older than the young poet Sténio who would seduce her; like the inconstant heroes of the decade, Sténio is tempted and seduced by Lélia’s sister and antithesis, Pulchérie, who incarnates sensual love and carnal enjoyment. But the parallels stop there, for Lélia is as different from the martyred romantic heroines of her generation as Sand could portray her. Lélia’s austere and tormented asceticism has nothing in common with the affectionate sensibility of her sisters, and yet she understands, with the wisdom of an outsider, the forces that bind them to their faithless lovers. Society demands that a woman’s existence be absorbed by the man she loves. Lélia’s response is simply that she wants her own existence: “moi, je voulais exister.” To do so she feels that she must expose the endless cycle of seduction that characterizes male-female relations, for her time and for all time. She sees clearly that Don Juan has become a symbol, a divinity, in fact, and that “les hommes plaisent aux femmes en ressemblant à Don Juan.” How many women, she wonders, have been destroyed by their mindless admiration for this personification of vice, this hideous phantom adorned with poetry and grandeur? For women, she complains, imagine themselves to be the angels sent from heaven to save Don Juan. Tragically, like the fallen angel of the legend, they fail to convert the seducer and are lost with him. Lélia’s ironic command, “faites-vous victimes, faites-vous esclaves, faites-vous femmes,” illustrates the depth of her bitterness toward the fallen angels of romantic literature.

The alternatives to the martyr’s role that Sand proposes in Lélia relate principally to feminine awareness and education. She counsels against endless patience and resignation, for example, just as she warns against timidity and irresolution: “Oubliez don Juan, prouvez-lui que vous êtes aussi forte, aussi légère que lui.” Lélia’s role as teacher and prophet at the conclusion of the
novel provides Sand an opportunity to expose her views on female education but unhappily does little to enhance the value of the novel as literature.

Indiana suffers from something of the same problem, but it is far less a philosophical treatise than is Lélia, though it espouses the same radical view of women as whole and independent creatures. Musset’s insistence that the novel is not a treatise against marriage but is rather a profound analysis of seduction, “de l’inconstant,” is confirmed by Sand’s letter to the poet in which she complains that her Raymon is only a miserable travesty of the great Don Juan figure Musset creates so effortlessly. Raymon de Ramière is indeed a ruthlessly inconstant young man who finds a close brother in Merimée’s Darcy of La Double Méprise; and Indiana, as his intended victim, seems initially to resemble the martyred Henriette de Morsauff, Mme de Renal, and Mme de Couaën. But she does indeed turn out to be a singularly different kind of woman. As Sand’s Edmée de Mauprat would do in 1837, Indiana, at the dawn of the decade, insists on her autonomy to her tyrannical husband. “I know that I am the slave and you the master,” she says. “Vous pouvez lier mon corps, garrotter mes mains, gouverner mes actions. Vous avez le droit du plus fort, et la société vous le confirme; mais sur ma volonté, monsieur, vous ne pouvez rien, Dieu seul peut la courber et la réduire.” Imagine such words from Henriette, who was incapable of addressing the mildest reproach to her despotic husband! Indiana in turn censures Raymon for his belief that men are the masters of the world: “je crois que vous n’en êtes que les tyrans.” And her ideas on the reciprocity of love are revolutionary for the decade. Raymon must be ready to sacrifice all—fortune, reputation, duty, career, principles, and family. “Tout” she says firmly, “parce que je mettrai le même dévouement dans la balance et que je le veux égale.” When Indiana finds in Sir Ralph the man who can both understand her and support her, she agrees to live with him as his wife, although the two of them never have children. It may be that Sand denied Indiana maternity in order to underscore her repudiation of the values embodied in the romantic heroines of the decade.

Sand indeed spoke while others remained silent. But her female characters are too few, her novels too uneven, her ideas too untested to have exercised much influence on that prolific decade’s depiction of women in literature. Sand’s condemnation of the Don Juan archetype and the fallen angel who abortively attempts his salvation fell on barren ground.

The limitations of the romantic view of women, with Sand as the exception, are illustrated by the narrow oppositions forced upon female characters in these novels of the 1830s. When we contrast the femme-ange and the femme-démon, we see that any “masculine” strength or aggressiveness, any inclination toward behavior independent of the domestic environs, makes women little more than prostitutes. Women must be either naïve or worldly, either tender or callous, either wife or whore, either maternal or manipulative, either angel or demon.
The repeated appearance of the Don Juan motif in romantic literature verifies this dualistic view of women, for the choice of the young hero of the decade of the 1830s was, with few exceptions, the prostitute who corrupted him or the angel who failed to save him.

9. Stendhal, p. 36.
13. Ibid., p. 488.
16. Théophile Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* appeared during the decade of the 1830s, in 1835 to be exact (Paris: Garnier, 1966); and the heroine of that amusing novel of mistaken identity and transvesticism does present an alternative of sorts to the romantic heroine of the nineteenth century. The explicit condemnation of feminine timidity and resignation echoes George Sand, but essentially the novel has little in common with the psychological novels of the decade, which are structured upon the legend of Don Juan and his fallen angel. The novel’s apology for sensual enjoyment sets it apart from those novels in which sensual and elicit love cause only torment and pain, and in any case the bisexuality of Mlle de Maupin creates a character utterly different from the romantic heroine who suffers only as a result of her passion for one inconstant man. “En vérité,” says Mlle de Maupin, “ni l’un ni l’autre de ces deux sexes n’est le mien; je n’ai ni la soumission imbécile, ni la timidité, ni les petiteuses de la femme; je n’ai pas les vices des hommes, leur dégoûtante crapule et leurs penchants brutaux: je suis d’un troisième sexe à part qui n’a pas encore de nom” (p. 352).
20. Ibid., p. 104.
21. Ibid., p. 106.
23. Ibid., p. 86.
24. Ibid., p. 225.
PART TWO : TEXT