Sexual Contract and *mariage blanc*:
Marie Jeanne Riccoboni

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**Abstract**
Reading Marie Jeanne Riccoboni's biography as exemplifying eighteenth-century marriage based on women's limited legal recourse within the marriage contract, I argue that the author offers women an empowering alternative to the sexual contract in her fiction, a *mariage blanc* based on friendship.

**Résumé**
En lisant la biographie de Marie-Jeanne Riccoloni qui exemplifie le mariage du dix-huitième siècle basé sur le recours légal limité des femmes à l'intérieur du contrat de mariage, je fais valoir que l'auteure offre aux femmes une alternative qui confère des pouvoirs à comparé à celui du contrat sexuel dans son ouvrage de fiction, un mariage blanc basé sur l'amitié.

The institution of marriage underwent some minor changes during the Age of the French Enlightenment. By and large, though, it continued to favor men's authority over women while severely curtailing women's privileges after the wedding. Women's rights related to both entering and terminating marriage improved slightly over the course of the eighteenth century. Thus, women wielded more power in choosing their husbands than their seventeenth-century counterparts - as exemplified by Marivaux's Silvia in *Le jeu de l'amour et du hasard* (1730) - and gained the right to divorce their husbands, but not until the final decade of the century, in 1792. Until then, though, the only legal avenues open to women wanting to rid themselves of their husbands were either a *séparation des biens* or a *séparation de corps*, an economic separation or a physical separation, respectively, both of which were extremely difficult to obtain (Rogers 1984, 37). Lacking such an official separation, wives were condemned to obey their husband in all respects. Equality between husband and wife did not exist, and wives continued to need their husband's consent in all contractual matters, including those regarding publication of their own text.1 Adrienne Rogers' assessment that once a woman got married, "she ceased to be an individual," instead becoming a "virtual slave" (35), therefore appears accurate.

While Rogers discusses these concepts specifically as they apply to eighteenth-century French wives, Carole Pateman has explored the connection between wives and individuals (and slaves) in the broader context of contract theory. In her book entitled *The Sexual Contract*
(1988), Pateman makes a compelling, relatively transhistorical argument about women's paradoxical position within contracts in general and within the marriage contract in particular. She traces the origin of modern patriarchy to the traditionally incomplete representation of the original social contract and labels the lacking dimension the "sexual contract." The (male) makers of the original social contract did not consider women "individuals" and therefore excluded them from their contract. Thus, Pateman argues, "the original pact is a sexual as well as a social contract: it is sexual in the sense of patriarchal - that is, the contract establishes men's political right over women - and also sexual in the sense of establishing orderly access by men to women's bodies" (2). Women's exclusion from the original contract was perpetuated as "the sexual contract [was] displaced onto the marriage contract" (4), allowing women to enter marriage without being "individuals" and possessing the associated rights, the most important one of which is the ownership of property in their person. Consequently, a wife can not legally refuse her husband access to her body, as she does not legally own it. Paradoxically though, what is required for a marriage contract to be complete is not merely the signing of a document or a mutual "I do" expressed in a ceremony, but a husband exercising his conjugal right (164). So, while Rogers argues that eighteenth-century women lost their individuality when they married, Pateman proves that the fact that women were not acknowledged as "individuals" at the time of the original social contract has negatively impacted their position in the marriage (contract) ever since.

In the remainder of this essay, I will examine how Marie Jeanne Riccoboni (1713-1792), a French actress who became a best-selling novelist, challenged contemporary marital economies both in her private life and in her oeuvre. Legally constrained to endure her real-life marital troubles, Riccoboni solved her problems partially through the solace of a female companion. In her fiction, however, she proposes a radical alternative to the sexual contract: in her 1772 epistolary novel, Lettres d'Élisabeth Sophie de Vallière à Louise Hortense de Canteleu, son amie (Letters from Elizabeth Sophie de Vallière to Louise Hortensia de Canteleu, her friend), she depicts a mariage blanc, an un consummated marriage. Unlike the author's own marital economy, the mariage blanc is shown to greatly benefit women in many areas, granting them individuality in the sense that Rogers attributes to that term; yet, it also underscores women's paradoxical legal position within marriage, resulting from them not having been considered "individuals" at the time of the original social contract, as Pateman has argued.

Riccoboni's creation of this fictitious, ideal mariage blanc could be interpreted as a reaction to her personal experience with marriage. Any illusions about marriage she might have harbored as a young girl could easily have been shattered by her father's bigamy: her mother, Marie Marguerite Dujac, married her father, Christophe Nicolas de Heurles, in 1710, and Marie Jeanne was born in 1713. It was soon discovered that Christophe was already married, and based on what his daughter wrote, his marriage to Marie Dujac was finally annulled in 1719: "dès l'âge de six ans, la perte d'un procès m'enleva mon père et ma fortune" ("a lawsuit robbed me of my father and my happiness when I was six years old") (Nicholls 1976, 227). Her mother never remarried and did not enjoy raising Marie Jeanne, instead sending her off to a convent. Marie Jeanne was not cut out to become a nun, however, and returned to live with her mother at age fourteen. The two women did not get along and Marie Jeanne acknowledges that in 1734 she married the Italian actor Antoine

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François Riccoboni merely in order to escape her mother: "Je me mariai pour quitter ma mère" ("I married in order to leave my mother") (Nicholls 1976, 227). Her escape was not successful for multiple reasons: her mother soon lost the majority of her fortune and Marie Jeanne was forced to take her in (until her mother's death in 1769!) and, arguably more importantly, her marriage to Antoine François, a comedian, turned out to be a tragedy.

A man who appeared to live life according to his motto "la patience est la vertu des sots" ("Patience is a fool's virtue") (Nicholls 1976, 275), Antoine François was a troublemaker. He had a run-in with the law for attacking a stagehand at the Comédie Italiennes (Nicholls 1976, 11-12) and made his wife suffer until his death. As noted, divorce was not an option in France until 1792, the year in which the author died. Nevertheless, by the mid 1750s (and perhaps earlier) Marie Jeanne was living in an apartment in the Rue Poissonnière without her husband. She may have obtained an official séparation de corps, yet continued to support her husband and to pay for his vices and irresponsible behavior, so it appears unlikely that she ever obtained a séparation des biens. She wrote to Garrick as late as 1769: "il [mon mari] se conduit à soixante ans, comme un homme de vingt et c'est moi qui paye ses sottises" ("He [my husband] behaves at age sixty like a twenty-year-old and it is I who fund his foolishness") (Nicholls 1976, 151). Not surprisingly, she did not regret it when her husband died in 1772.

Riccoboni may have separated from her husband, but she did not live alone; she shared her apartment in the Rue de Poissonnière for more than thirty years with her friend and colleague in the theatre, Marie Thérèse Biancolelli. Modern critics have speculated that the women's relationship was homoerotic; Riccoboni herself always stressed the importance of their friendship. The two women led a relatively secluded life privileging intellectual activity: in addition to writing novels and short stories, Riccoboni, an active member of the Republic of Letters, exchanged letters with several foreign correspondents (in addition to Garrick, David Hume was among them), attended the baron d'Holbach's salon, and collaborated with Biancolelli on an English translation project. In 1766, she took up correspondence with a Scot named Robert Liston who was almost thirty years younger than she was. Numerous modern riccobonistes have argued that she was in love with Liston, but despite their letters, it cannot be determined whether she wanted to marry him. The author appeared happy with her widowed status; widows enjoyed a relative amount of freedom in the eighteenth century, no longer subjected to the authority of a father or a husband. She never remarried.

Despite her never remarrying and her own dismal experience with marriage, Riccoboni incorporates marriage and remarriage as an integral theme in her oeuvre. Her heroines usually marry men they love, even if conventions are being flouted in the process. Such is the case of Ernestine (Histoire d'Ernestine), for instance, who marries a marquis although she, a painter of miniatures, belongs to the working class. In Lettres d'Élisabeth Sophie de Vallière à Louise Hortence de Canteleu, son amie, a relatively unknown novel, Riccoboni recounts orphaned, seventeen-year-old Sophie's identity quest, and here, too, the heroine ends up marrying the man she loves (1772). Her marriage does not concern us here, though. Rather, we will examine the marriage of an old convent friend of Sophie's named Henriette d'Alby.

Henriette, coerced by her father into taking her vows, agrees moments before she is to enter the convent to marry a sympathetic, elderly friend of her father's, the marquis de Monglas. The marquis tells her the following
about yet another Riccoboni marriage flouting contemporary conventions:

Depuis longtemps, je songe à vous afîanchir d'une contrainte pénible, à vous rendre au monde, à vous-même. Pourquoi des idées reçues, l'usage, les bienséances, me forcent-elles à vous présenter un lien, quand je voudrais seulement rompre les vôtres ? Je l'avoue, ce lien ne vous procurerait pas tous les plaisirs qu'à votre âge il est naturel de se promettre en changeant d'état ; mais il vous laisserait l'avantage de ne pas prononcer le vœu d'une éternelle retraite et l'espérance de recouvrer un jour la liberté dont on veut vous priver pour jamais.¹⁰

(For a long time now, I have considered liberating you from a distressing constraint, returning you to the world, and to yourself. Why do convention, custom and decency force me to offer you a tie, when I should merely wish to break yours? I admit, this tie would not secure you all the pleasures one naturally promises oneself at your age when changing stations, yet it would offer you the advantage of not taking a vow of eternal retreat, as well as the hope of recovering one day the freedom of which they wish to deprive you forever).

(Letter 29)

Importantly, the marquis insists on obtaining Henriette's consent to marry him before asking her father for her hand. Just as the premise of this marriage is unusual in its effort to support Henriette in avoiding monastic life, instead empowering her ("vous rendre au monde, à vous-même" - "returning you to the world, and to yourself") and requiring her consent, the marriage itself will turn out to be atypical. For it will remain unconsummated, a *mariage blanc*.

Indirectly, the concept of the un consummated marriage has been employed in feminist criticism as a space of alternative destinies for women not inscribed within and by patriarchal society. It is then frequently represented as a "blank page," a term borrowed from Isak Dinesen's story by that name published in 1957.¹¹ Dinesen's story is set in a monastery in Portugal, where the nuns make wedding sheets for *all* the princesses of the royal house. In the convent, there is a gallery where pieces of fabric are displayed, taken from the princesses' sheets after their wedding night and then returned to the convent for this purpose. All the pieces of fabric contain a stain supposedly proving the princesses' virginity and all are mounted, framed and identified. Among the frames, there is a single blank page,¹² a piece of fabric without name and without stain. The fact that this anonymous princess did not stain her sheet during her wedding night hints at various possible scenarios in which she refuted the sexual contract. It is thus the suggestion of women's chance for alternative self-fulfillment that characterizes the blank page.

Until recently, un consummated marriages were considered extremely rare in eighteenth-century French fiction, but Joan Hinde Stewart mentions several in her *Gynographs* (1993), including Henriette's. In the one novel with this theme published before Lettres d'Élisabeth Sophie de Vallière à Louise Hortence de Canteleu, son amie, Jeanne Marie le Prince de Beaumont's *La nouvelle Clarice* (1767), marriage consummation is postponed merely temporarily (136). Henriette, however, remains a virgin throughout the narrative. After a well-meaning relative has "enlightened" her with horror stories about what happens behind closed doors after the wedding, her husband

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decides during their wedding night to preserve her virginity out of sympathy with her fears:¹³
“Perdez vos craintes, j’oublie mes droits; votre bonheur, le mien, exigent que je les oublie. L’effort est violent sans doute; il m’est difficile de réprimer les mouvements qu’élèvent en ce moment vos attraits, un privilège acquis ; mais en me livrant à ces mouvements, je me préparerais de longs et d’amers chagrins” (*Allay your fears, for I forego my rights. Your happiness and mine require me to forego them. Doubtless my effort is fierce, for it is difficult for me to repress the emotions that your beauty and an acquired privilege stir in me at this moment. But if I gave myself over to those emotions, I would occasion long, bitter suffering to loom*) (Letter 29). Instead, he proposes they base their marriage on friendship: “voyez dans cet époux un tendre père, un indulgent ami” (*Consider your spouse a tender father, an obliging friend*) (Letter 29).

Henriette is shown to benefit greatly from this arrangement, as I will illustrate. However, without underestimating its advantages, we should not overestimate Henriette's role in bringing about this arrangement. The marquis de Monglas consults her about the marriage before requesting her father’s permission, but she agrees to it merely as a last resort in order to avoid monastic life, not so much choosing the marriage as rejecting the convent. Additionally, it is the marquis rather than Henriette who decides not to consummate the marriage, underscoring Pateman's point that the husband alone can refrain from exercising his conjugal right, the wife lacking the right to deny him access to her body. So although the *mariage blanc*, the blank page, could be considered a feminist alternative to marriage for women, its construction nevertheless accentuates women's subjection to men.

Throughout the *Lettres d’Élisabeth Sophie de Vallière à Louise Hortence de Canteleu, son amie*, Henriette is portrayed as blossoming socially and intellectually in her marriage. She learns to make music, studies foreign languages and literatures, and gracefully hosts social gatherings where a select group of family members and friends perform dramas and play games. Riccoboni describes Henriette's happiness as deriving directly from the nature of her marriage:

Les femmes, nées sensibles, mais élevées à modérer leurs désirs, ne sentiraient jamais une partie des peines de la vie, si la seule amitié les liait à ce sexe violent, emporté, qui s’efforce cruellement de faire passer dans notre sein les passions tumultueuses dont il est agité. Faibles, tendres, trop compatissantes, en voulant calmer ces passions, nous les partageons; elles détruisent notre repos [my emphasis], notre bonheur; le trouble, l'inquiétude, la douleur et le regret s’introduisent avec elles au fond de notre cœur.

(Women, who are born sensitive but raised to moderate their desires, would never experience some of life’s suffering, if mere friendship tied them to that violent, quick-tempered sex cruelly trying to impart to our heart the tumultuous passions that bother it. As we are weak, tender, excessively compassionate and wish to calm those passions, we share them; they destroy our peace and our happiness. With them, distress, agitation, sorrow, and regret find their way to the bottom of our hearts).

(Letter 29)

The author refers to *repos* (emphasized in the above quotation) twice in Letter 29, describing a woman's state of inner peace.
when men's passion is absent from it (see above) and depicting the marital expectations Henriette harbors before her wedding night: "un triste assujettissement, ses suites fâcheuses, de continues importunités, d'inévitables querelles, d'odieux soupirs, plus de repos [my emphasis], plus de tranquillité: quelle affreuse perspective!" ('a sad submission, its unpleasant consequences, continuous requests, inevitable quarrels, and vicious suspicions, no more peace, no more tranquility: how dreadful a prospect!'). Riccoboni thus inscribes her novel in the feminist tradition started by Madame de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), whose heroine, once widowed, chooses not to marry the man she loves, because marriage to him is not compatible with her repos. Henriette, however, manages to retain both her marriage and her repos due to her *mariage blanc*.

Henriette's marriage story appears to be merely a subplot in the novel since readers do not follow her entire life in detail; her main role is to facilitate Sophie's identity quest. It is indeed at Henriette's house that Sophie first meets Milord Lindsey, an old friend of the marquis de Monglas's. She discovers that Milord Lindsey knew both her parents - he was in love with her mother and accidentally killed her father - and can provide the missing links in her genealogy. Once these have been established, Milord Lindsey decides to adopt Sophie and assist the man she loves in marrying her. At the end of the novel, however, Riccoboni reveals the vital importance of Henriette's personal tale.

Significantly, the last letter in *Lettres d'Élisabeth Sophie de Vallière à Louise Hortence de Cantelev, son amie*, Letter 44, is followed by a note from Henriette to Hortensia, Sophie's friend and the addressee of most letters. In this note, Henriette speaks for Sophie, the latter having been overcome by the emotions stirred by her impending adoption and (traditional) marriage. Henriette, having preserved her repos through her *mariage blanc*, thus receives the final word in the novel. Riccoboni indicates that Henriette's marriage may be the most desirable destiny for women, reconfirming in the very last sentence of her novel (before the editorial postscript) the advantages of friendship over love in Henriette's words: "je m'assure avec bien du plaisir, que la douce paix de mon âme est préférable à un sentiment dont les délices si vantés peuvent produire le même effet que la douleur" ("I see with considerable pleasure that the sweet tranquility in my soul is preferable to an impulse whose much praised delights may produce the same result as pain") (Note from Madame de Monglas to Mademoiselle de Cantelev, following Letter 44). Here "la douce paix de mon âme" ("the sweet tranquility in my soul") reiterates the notion of repos. Three protagonists in the novel, including Sophie and Hortensia, enter into traditional marriage contracts in the editorial postscript following Henriette's note. Thus, the final words from Henriette could be interpreted as a warning to them that a marriage based on love can lead to pain, whereas a marriage based on friendship offers women a "blank page," a form of alternative self-fulfillment not dictated by the sexual contract.

In conclusion, Riccoboni's biography can be read as exemplifying the eighteenth-century institution of marriage in its negative impact on women. Alleviating the hardships of marriage in her private life through female companionship, the author proposes a different type of "blank page" in her *Lettres d'Élisabeth Sophie de Vallière à Louise Hortence de Cantelev, son amie*, namely a *mariage blanc* based on friendship. She depicts the *mariage blanc* as empowering for women, allowing them to be individuals in the sense Rogers attributes to that term, and therefore, as rewriting female destiny. However, the *mariage blanc* requires that a husband refrain from exercising his conjugal right and as such, it underscores women's subjection to men and
their paradoxical position within the marriage contract as analyzed by Pateman.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the three anonymous *Atlantis* reviewers for their careful reading. Parts of this essay appear in my unpublished doctoral dissertation "Marie Jeanne Riccoboni's *Letters from Elizabeth Sophie de Vallière to Louise Hortensia de Canteleu, her friend*" (Diss. U of New Mexico, 2002) and I gratefully acknowledge Pamela Cheek for her initial comments on them.

Endnotes


2. "Only masculine beings are endowed with the attributes and capacities necessary to enter into contracts, the most important of which is ownership of property in the person; only men, that is to say, are 'individuals'" (5-6).

3. Riccoboni, a reserved woman who did not enjoy talking about herself, confessed this autobiographical detail in a 1772 letter to David Garrick, the famous British actor and playwright, who was her close friend and assisted her with the English translation of one of her novels. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.


5. In a letter dated May 8, 1772, 6 days before her husband died, she wrote about Biancolelli: "J'ai des amis, dit-on? Eh mon Dieu, qu'on donne facilement ce nom! J'ai une amie, une véritable amie et je ne sais si personne au

monde en eut jamais une pareille. Dans toute la France je ne compte que sur elle" ("So people say that I have friends? My God, that name is given so easily! I have one friend, one true friend, and I don't know if anyone has ever had a friend like her. In all of France, I count only on her") (Nicholls 1976, 245-46). I have modernized the spelling.

6. They translated five plays into French: Edward Moore's *The Foundling* (1747), Arthur Murphy's *The Way to Keep Him* (1760), Hugh Kelly's *The False Delicacy* (1768), and George Colman's *The Jealous Wife* (1761) and *The Deuce Is in Him* (1763).

7. See, for example, the articles by Stewart (1980) and Charrier (1997).

8. *Lettres d’Élisabeth Sophie de Vallière à Louise Hortence de Canteleu, son amie* contains the story of a happy widow, Madame d'Auterive, who pertinently refuses to remarry.

9. For an analysis see, for instance, Chapter 4 of Stewart's *Gynographs* entitled "Remarrying: Marie Jeanne Riccoboni" (1993).

10. I have modernized the French in all quotations from the 1772 first edition.

11. See, for instance, the articles by Gubar (1985) and Skredsvig (1999).

12. In French, "blank page" translates as "page vierge" [virginal page]!

13. For representations of the wedding night in eighteenth-century French fiction by women, see Stewart (1992, 762), where she cites Henriette's case without however identifying it.

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