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Martyred Mothers Never Die

The Legacy of Rousseau's Julie

In his autobiography, *The Life of Henri Brulard* (1973), the French novelist Stendhal tells a story that exemplifies the impact of Rousseau's (1967) preromantic novel, *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, on the reading public of his time. Stendhal's grandfather recalls that, in 1760, the year of the novel's publication, a close friend of his, the Baron des Adrets, did not come down to dinner one evening. His wife sent a servant to look for him, whereupon the normally cold and formal gentleman appeared with tears streaming down his face. His wife, rather alarmed, asked: "What's wrong, my friend?"¹ and he replied simply, "Ah, Madame, Julie is dead!"² (1973: 184).

Perhaps no other novel in the history of literature has so affected the attitudes, values, and sensibilities of its generation, not to mention those of generations to come. From its romantic beginnings to its tragic dénouement, *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* serves as a practical manual for women, telling them how to act, how to think, and even, perhaps most importantly, how to die. Readers took the implicit masochistic values of female self-sacrifice as source of fulfillment or salvation as a model for a mythology of the ideal mother that perpetuates female abnegation. As we will see, it was Julie's death even more than her life that fired the imaginations of eighteenth-century readers and subsequently affected the lives of countless generations of women who would become mothers in the Western world.

In her essay entitled "Stabat Mater," French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva speaks of "the self-sacrifice involved in becoming anonymous in order to pass on the social norm" (1986: 183). Kristeva calls such self-effacement a "père-version," a form of officially sanctioned masochism for which women are offered the reward of sainthood in exchange for total powerlessness in the symbolic world of patriarchy. As Kristeva writes:

Feminine perversion ... is ... legalized ... through the agency of masochism... . Feminine perversion [*père-version*] is coiled up in the desire for law as desire for reproduction and continuity, it promotes feminine masochism to the rank of structure stabilizer...; by assuring the mother that she may thus enter into an order that is above that of human will it give her her reward of pleasure. Such coded perversion, such close combat between maternal masochism and the law have been utilized by totalitarian powers of all times to bring women to their side (1986: 183).

Maternal self-sacrifice, then, can be seen as a device used by totalitarian systems such as patriarchy to rob women of power in the law of the symbolic world by codifying the ways in which they may express their desire for continuity. The continuous cycle of maternal altruism as passed along from mother to dutiful daughter becomes the framework for female reproduction; as long as mothers continue to find it necessary to raise their children to conform to this norm, their daughters will believe in the inherent worth of selflessness as a means of masochistic pleasure. While, as Kristeva argues, such a mythology of motherhood loses much of its appeal in a society no longer dominated by Christian ideals of sacrifice and ultimate reward, I would argue that this ideology, originating in the martyred maternal image of Julie, remains with us today, pervading our popular culture with representations of self-sacrificing maternal masochism.

In the case of Julie, the cycle of maternal martyrdom begins with the death of Julie's own mother, Madame d'Etange. A virtual nonentity in the plot until the circumstances leading to her demise, Madame d'Etange represents the older generation of mothers who, completely submissive to their husbands, can only pray that their husbands will spare their children the excesses of paternal authority. The Baron d'Etange, upon the discovery of Julie's liaison with her tutor Saint-Preux, commits her first and only act of conjugal defiance by hiding her discovery from her husband in order to protect her daughter. In spite of this proof of maternal tenderness, Julie and her mother seem distant until the moment when the mother actively assumes her role as the daughter's confidante and protector. Unfortunately, taking her child's side against her husband seems to consume all of Madame d'Etange's limited strength; too weak to help her daughter any further, she can only wish for the key to the couple's happiness. She is quite powerless, however, to deliver such a key, telling Julie in a moment of mental rebellion: "If it were only up to me...!"³ (Rousseau, 1967: 230) Exhausted by even this minimal effort to resist her husband's domination, she dies, giving birth through her death to a new Julie who will follow the maternal example and submit to the law of the Father—the Baron d'Etange—in order to become a mother herself. The cycle of maternal sacrifice repeats itself, with a change of emphasis, however, that illustrates the Rousseauistic ideal of the mother. Whereas Madame d'Etange represents the older generation, submis-

sive and self-effacing before the father, Julie creates her own path of virtue and duty: at once submissive and dominant, respectful of her husband and devoted to her children, she redefines conjugal and maternal duties with emphasis on the latter. While for Madame d'Etange the husband's will takes precedence over the welfare of her child, Julie will allow nothing to interfere with her maternal role; in contrast to Madame d'Etange who lost her life by placing herself between her husband and daughter, Julie will sacrifice herself to save her child, not from the fury of the father, but from the dangers of nature: Julie meets her death through her attempts to save her son from drowning.

Retrospectively then, Julie's relationship with her mother becomes meaningful only in the sense that Madame d'Etanges ultimately places her daughter's welfare above her own. This pattern of maternal sacrifice, set by Madame d'Etange and followed by Julie, reinforces the symbolic order by demonstrating the precedence of the child's survival over that of the mother. Madame d'Etange's attempt to remain faithful to the symbolic order of the father failed when the revelation of her daughter's danger awakened her maternal protectiveness. Her betrayal of the law of the father marks a break in the familial order and a return, for mother and daughter, to a symbiotic intimacy for which the daughter has longed since the beginning of the novel, but which, since Madame d'Etange gives her life for it, comes too late.

Fittingly, Madame d'Etange is punished for her temporary betrayal of the symbolic order: ironically, her death marks her daughter's return to the very laws that killed her mother. As Julie writes after her mother's death: "worthy wife, incomparable mother, now you live in the place of glory and bliss..."⁴ (Rousseau, 1967: 231). In order to experience the same "glory and bliss" of a heavenly reward, Julie must conform to the patriarchal code of maternal abnegation that killed her mother. In order to live by her dead mother's value system, Julie must put aside Saint-Preux, her lover and male/maternal substitute, and re-enter the patriarchal order so that she may in turn become a "worthy wife, incomparable mother" like Madame d'Etange. Interestingly, Julie will have only sons; Rousseau thereby deprives her of the very mother-daughter bond that was so instrumental in Julie's submission to marriage. In her self-sacrifice for her male children, even—or especially—unto death, Julie earns the approval and admiration of all who know her; her sons will be strengthened by the memory of their mother who abandoned all thoughts of herself in order to assure their happiness, indeed their salvation.

As Julie reminisces on her deathbed, she tells Claire that her mother's death served a vital function by effectively ending her brief attempt at selfhood in her affair with Saint-Preux. Had her mother lived, Julie speculates, Julie might have been tempted to continue her liaison with Saint-Preux, a liaison that, according to her, could only have ended in disaster. Her voluntary return to "reason," to the sacrificial economy of Rousseauistic maternity, is a direct consequence of her mother's death, serving as a model for Julie's own sacrificial death for the sake of her son. Both of these mothers, then, gave their lives to

save their children, one from mortal sin, the other from drowning. In this way the cycle of maternal sacrifice continues and is sanctified by the idea of a higher purpose. Julie's guilt at having caused her mother's death, possibly an echo of Rousseau's own guilt about his own mother's death at his birth⁵, is assuaged by this revolutionary concept of quasi-mythical dimensions: that of the self-sacrificing mother. The incident itself, the actual act of sacrifice, becomes unimportant: Julie's husband Wolmar even trivializes it in his letter to Saint-Preux, saying, "It is not of her illness, but of her that I wish to speak to you. Other mothers can throw themselves in after their children"⁶ (Rousseau, 1967: 536). For Rousseau, as for Wolmar, the reflexive risking of one's life for one's offspring is a given, something any mother would do, according to the idea of natural maternal instinct advanced by Rousseau and accepted as truth by many of his readers, both male and female.

Julie also sees her early death as a means of escape from an uncertain future: as a woman who lives solely for her sons, their eventual separation from her and entry into the symbolic world would have been painful for her. As she so wisely notes, "Maternal tenderness grows continually, filial tenderness shrinks, as children live further from their mother. . . . They would have lived in the world; they might have neglected me"⁷ (Rousseau, 1967: 553). By dying at the height of her role as a mother, she avoids the disappointments and sacrifices that would await her as her sons grew older. This eventual separation from her children is not the only thing Julie is trying to escape, however. In her final letter to Saint-Preux, she confesses that her love for him is far from dead: "One more day perhaps, and I would have been guilty! By taking away my life, Heaven . . . is protecting my honor"⁸ (565). The sacrifice of Julie's life not only saves her son, it also expiates her original sin of loving Saint-Preux, the sin which caused her own mother's death. Her maternal rescue of her son drowning in the lake is a baptism, through which Julie not only preserves his life, but also assures the salvation of her soul and that of Saint-Preux. Her death therefore serves a double purpose, giving Julie the right to sainthood two times over, once for her maternal altruism and then again for her dedication to virtue. It is worth pointing out, once again, the deeply imbedded fault lines along which Julie's sacrifice runs: her sense of guilt at having been the cause of her mother's death has created a wish to expiate that guilt by giving up first her selfhood and then her life in defense of the patriarchal system as symbolized by her father and, later, her son. Her unquestioning acceptance of maternal masochism as a means of social stability and a holy way of life leads to her saintly death and the resulting cult of the maternal in France and throughout the Western world.

Far from being a mere heroine in an obscure novel, Julie became an overnight sensation, a powerful symbol of the new maternity described by Rousseau in his essay on education, *Emile* (1964). Julie's ultimate immolation on the altar of maternal love served as a catalyst for social reform whose effects can be observed throughout the two centuries that separate us from the original publication of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Beginning with Rousseau's contemporaries,

both male and female, the novelist was praised as the first man to truly understand women. To illustrate the novel's devastating impact on readers of the time, I would like to quote at length from a letter sent to Madame de Verdelin by Madame de Polignac in 1760. Madame de Polignac wrote:

The first five volumes drew tears from my eyes, but the sixth!⁹ Oh my dear, I dare not describe to you the effect it had upon me; no, I was beyond tears, an acute feeling of sadness took possession of me and wrung my heart. Julie on her death-bed was no longer like some unknown being: I felt I was her sister, her friend, her Claire¹⁰: my emotion rose to such a pitch that had I not put down the book I would have felt as faint as those who surrounded this virtuous woman during the last moments of her life... You know that as long as I thought of the *citizen*¹¹ as merely a philosopher and a learned man, it never occurred to me to cultivate his acquaintance; but Julie's lover, the man who loved her as she deserved to be loved, oh! that is quite another matter; my first impulse was to order a carriage, ... to see him at all costs, to tell him how his tender emotion seemed to me to put him far above other men, to ask him to let me see Julie's portrait, to let me kiss it and kneel before the image of this divine woman, who, even as she ceased to be virtuous, was ever a model of all the virtues....¹² (Guéhenno, 1952: 69)

Struck by the heroic and virtuous nature of Julie's death, Madame de Polignac was far from an isolated case; we have hundreds of examples of such testimony to the influence of Julie on eighteenth-century readers. Even Madame de Staël, whose career as an author depended to some extent on her liberation from maternal duties, claimed that maternal love was revived by Rousseau: "... he made known to mothers this duty and this pleasure; he inspired in them the desire to allow no one to rob them of the first caresses of their children...."¹³ By inspiring in mothers the desire to raise their children themselves, Rousseau introduced the concept of redemption through maternal altruism; or, as Madame de Staël puts it, "all is not yet lost for the unfortunate mother whose errors or whose fate have ruined her life!"¹⁴ (1979: 56)

While, in the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, Rousseau bestowed a new status on mothers by elevating the function of motherhood to sacred heights, he also created a new social arrangement by which mothers turn out little men who will go on to be all-powerful fathers, and little women who will perpetuate the masochistic cycle of maternal selflessness. These ideas were immediately taken up by various moralists wishing to restrain women in their role as mother, not the least of whom was Napoleon, who based parts of his Civil Code dealing with women on the teachings of Rousseau. In the nineteenth century, according to Elisabeth Badinter's study entitled *Mother Love, Myth and Reality* (1980), Jules Michelet, among others, considered it perfectly natural for a woman to sacrifice herself

for her child. As Badinter writes, “Faced with a choice between the mother and the child, the [nineteenth] century chose to save the child and immolate the mother. In this sacrifice of self, woman found her reason for being and her pleasure. The woman was indeed a masochist” (1980: 235). Horrible invectives were thrown at “bad” mothers throughout the nineteenth century, and exemplary “bad” mothers found a prominent place in literature, with such tales as Balzac’s *La Femme de trente ans* and Constant’s *Adolphe*, two stories of selfish and inadequate mothers and the suffering brought upon them by their neglect of supposedly “instinctive” maternal duties.¹⁵

However, if, as Rousseau claimed, maternal instinct was a product of nature, then why did one moralist after another find it necessary to endlessly expound upon the self-denial required of the “good” mother, right up through the mid-twentieth century?¹⁶ Dr. Benjamin Spock, the mothering guru of my parents’ generation, seems to believe that by becoming a mother, a woman finds in herself a maternal ‘instinct,’ a product of her female nature, that will tell her how to care for her infant; but where does that leave women who fail to find in themselves this well of natural selflessness that, according to our popular culture, all “good” mothers automatically possess? Badinter argues that maternal instinct is a result, not of instinct, but of culture (1980: 4). Taking that argument one step further into the realm of psychoanalytic theory, I would add that the willingness to give one’s life for one’s offspring is learned by the little girl from her identification with her mother, who was raised by her own mother to believe in the mythology of maternal masochism as a path to righteousness. This mythology is therefore self-perpetuating as well as subtle; learned by example rather than by teaching, it can only be interrupted by a radical change in the behavior of mothers themselves.

Such change does not come easily, however. Adrienne Rich tells of her fears of being “a monster of selfishness and intolerance” toward her demanding children, based on the “unexamined assumption ... that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless ...” (1986: 21-22). Rich was obviously not listening when Julie’s minister, choked with emotion, said to his languishing parishioner: “Madame, you are dying as a martyr to maternal love ... may we all live and die like you! We will be assured of the happiness of the other life”¹⁷ (Rousseau, 1967: 546). The reward for maternal sacrifice, then, seems to be eternal life in heaven; but if maternal instinct is merely a product of nature, why is there a need for any reward, either here or hereafter? The language of sacrifice and reward in Rousseau, later borrowed by his admirers, disproves Rousseau’s own thesis of a natural maternal instinct and shows how the cult of motherhood, with Julie as its chief Martyred Saint, served as a tool in the hands of the powerful to deny social power, the power of the law, to women who attempt to follow in the footsteps of their mothers.

Even now, we are surrounded by evidence of the influence of Julie’s death on popular culture. In the classic film *Gone With the Wind*, Melanie Wilkes portrays the epitome of the self-sacrificing mother; when she becomes preg-

nant against the doctor's advice, she tells Rhett Butler, with a saintly smile, "Children are life renewing itself, Cap'n Butler, and when life does that, danger seems very unimportant." The selfless mother image also explains the popularity of a 1987 novel by Betty Mahmoody entitled *Not Without my Daughter*, and the subsequent movie, starring Sally Field as the stereotypical hysterical mother who risks her life to save her daughter from her cruel and tyrannical husband. I could cite countless other instances of idealized maternal martyrdom in Hollywood, that Mecca of popular culture; from old classics like *Pocketful of Miracles* and *Stella Dallas* to more recent dramas such as *Steel Magnolias*, the purveyors of cultural ideology continue to make a profit from portrayals of noble, altruistic mothers. Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, recently revived as a popular musical, first in France and then in Britain, tells a tale of the selfless devotion of a saintly mother, Fantine, who sacrifices her beautiful hair, her health, her virtue, and eventually her life in order to ensure the survival of her beloved daughter. In the original French score, Fantine sings: "You have to feel you'll survive / in a child you've brought to life / and in her spring of innocence / you drown your despair / so as not to bring an end / to this life without hope."¹⁸ (*Les Misérables*). This sentiment is reminiscent of Mme de Staël's praise of Rousseau for allowing mothers to live vicariously through their children.

Julie's continued importance is reflected in the most unlikely sources, from Broadway musicals to TV sitcoms; the controversy about Murphy Brown's single motherhood in the 1990s, for example, evolved from Rousseau's ideology of the nuclear family, as did the maternal conflicts in most of our cultural productions to this day. In many ways a Christ-like figure, Julie died to save others and was resurrected in the minds of thousands of readers as the embodiment of a philosophy of femininity called Motherhood.

In her final hours, Julie said to her loved ones:

No, my friends, no, my children, I am not leaving you, I will stay with you; by leaving you all united, my spirit and my heart will remain with you. You will see me constantly among you; you will feel yourselves constantly surrounded by me ...¹⁹ (Rousseau, 1967: 553).

By dying a saintly death, "a martyr to maternal love," Julie remains with us even today. In the words of her loving cousin Claire: "May her spirit move through us, may her heart join all of ours; let us live always in her sight"²⁰ (Rousseau, 1967: 567). Amen.

¹⁸"Qu'avez-vous donc, mon ami?" (Note: original French quotes will appear in the endnotes. All translations are my own.)

²⁰"Ah, Madame, Julie est morte !"

³⁰"S'il ne dépendait que de moi !"

⁴⁰"Digne épouse, mère incomparable, tu vis maintenant au séjour de la gloire et

de la félicité....”

⁵See the opening pages of Rousseau’s autobiography, *Les Confessions*: “Ten months later, I was born, infirm and sickly, I cost my mother her life....” (1959: 35).

⁶“Ce n’est point de sa maladie, c’est d’elle que je veux vous parler. D’autres mères peuvent se jeter après leur enfant.”

⁷“L’affection maternelle augmente sans cesse, la tendresse filiale diminue, à mesure que les enfants vivent plus loin de leur mère.... Ils auraient vécu dans le monde; ils m’auraient pu négliger.”

⁸“Un jour de plus peut-être, et j’étais coupable!... En me l’ôtant [la vie], le ciel ... met mon honneur à couvert.”

⁹The sixth volume recounts Julie’s death.

¹⁰This is a reference to Julie’s cousin and closest confidante, Claire.

¹¹The reference is to Rousseau himself.

¹²“Les premiers volumes m’ont arraché des pleurs, mais le sixième, ô ma belle! Je n’ose vous dire l’effet qu’il m’a fait: non, ce n’est plus le temps des larmes, c’est une douleur vive qui s’est emparée de moi, mon coeur s’est serré. Cette Julie mourante n’a plus été pour moi un être inconnu: je me suis crue sa soeur, son amie, sa Claire; mon saisissement s’est démonté au point que, si je n’eusse quitté le livre, je me serais trouvée aussi mal que tous ceux qui entouraient cette vertueuse femme dans ses derniers moments.... Vous savez que tant que le *citoyen* ne m’a paru qu’un philosophe et un homme d’esprit, il ne m’est pas venu en pensée de chercher à le connaître; mais l’amant de Julie, qui l’a aimée comme elle méritait de l’être, oh! ce n’est plus la même chose; et, dans mon premier mouvement, j’ai été au moment de faire mettre des chevaux ... de le voir à quelque prix que ce fût, lui dire combien il me paraissait par sa tendresse au-dessus des autres hommes, obtenir de lui de voir le portrait de Julie, le baiser, me mettre à genoux devant l’image de cette femme divine, qui, en cessant même d’être vertueuse, a toujours été un modèle de toutes les vertus....”

¹³“... Il fit connaître aux mères ce devoir et ce bonheur; il leur inspira le désir de ne céder à personne les premières caresses de leurs enfans....”

¹⁴“Tout n’est pas encore perdu pour la mère malheureuse dont les fautes ou la destinée ont empoisonné la vie!”

¹⁵Ironically, the “bad” mother of Constant’s *Adolphe*—the domineering Elénore who abandons her children for the sake of her love—is modeled upon the same Madame de Staël whom we heard earlier praising Rousseau’s concept of self-sacrificing motherhood.

¹⁶See Selma Fraiberg, *Every Child’s Birthright: In Defense of Mothering* (1977), or Dr. Spock’s *Baby and Child Care* (1992).

¹⁷“Madame, vous mourez martyre de l’amour maternel ... puissions-nous tous tant que nous sommes vivre et mourir comme vous! Nous serons bien sûrs du bonheur de l’autre vie.”

¹⁸“Il faut qu’on se sente survivre / dans un enfant qu’on a fait vivre / et qu’en sa source d’innocence / on noie notre désespérance / pour ne pas mettre fin / à cette

vie sans lendemain.”

¹⁹“Non, mes amis, non, mes enfants, je ne vous quitte pas pour ainsi dire, je reste avec vous; en vous laissant tous unis, mon esprit, mon coeur, vous demeurent. Vous me verrez sans cesse entre vous; vous vous sentirez sans cesse environnés de moi”

²⁰“Que son esprit nous anime, que son coeur joigne tous les nôtres; vivons toujours sous ses yeux.”

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