

The epistolary novel in French literature

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Abstract: The eighteenth century is considered as the golden age of epistolary art. If we analyse the historical and social value of letters, we notice that epistolary exchange soon becomes one of the principal ways of communication and of providing information. One of the most important qualities of the epistolary novel is its ability to effectively convey emotion. The epistolary novel removes the temporal distance between personal history and its written form. The most famous writers of the time (such as Montesquieu) and other writers (Laclos and Sade in particular) employed the epistolary novel in different ways. So eighteenth-century literature is characterised by the successful epistolary novel. Since the Modern Age letter has held great historical and social importance due to the power of letter to act as a vehicle for information. This emerges as one of the main reasons for the rise in popularity of the epistolary novel.

Keywords: novel, letter, modern Age, Eighteenth-century, France.

1. *The epistolary novel in the eighteenth century*

Epistolary novel is certainly one of the most important genres in French pre-revolutionary literature. Several writers choose it to achieve different purposes such as political and social criticism (Montesquieu); description of noble love (Madame de Graffigny, Rousseau); expression of desire (Crébillon, Meusnier de Querlon, Laclos and Sade); war bulletin (Laclos); sense of margination (Sénac de Meilhan).

Thanks to progress in learning and in postal organization, the letter becomes an important medium for communicating information and can be viewed as a precursor to the modern gazette. At the beginning the evolution of the epistolary form facilitates news circulation concerning politics, literature, family and society: it's the main way used by aristocracy and bourgeoisie to find news¹. Consequently, the readers are impatient to receive a letter to enliven an ordinary

¹ M.-C. Grassi, *L'art épistolaire français, XVIII^e et XIX^e siècle* in *Pour une histoire des traités de savoir-vivre en Europe*, Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Science Humaines de Clermont-Ferrand, Clermont-Ferrand 1994, p. 302.

life. The value of a letter lies in several aspects considering that the “art” of letter writing under the *Ancien Régime* in France clearly has an ethic as well as an aesthetic importance, a politic as well as a poetic component. Letters published as “art” under Classicism are always transformed into illustrations of the “art” of writing letters where the writing subject is positioned as a loyal (male) servant of an aristocratic order revolving around an absolute king such as in the novel *Lettres persanes*². The final letter written by Roxane shows how much women, especially wives, are submitted to tyrannical power. In particular, the lexical field of freedom (“affliger”, “servitude”, “libre”, “indépendance”) confirms that the stake of the letter is to assert female independence and female freedom.

However, epistolary novel gives rise in the second half of the eighteenth century. The beginning of the Eighteenth is dominated by memoirs in which the protagonists offer their experience of life and love. The principal quality, attributed to a letter, is its capacity to transmit feelings immediately: in fact, a letter avoids temporal distance between lived experience and its written expression. In this way, the absence of a narrator guarantees the authenticity of narration because nobody can talk or think in place of characters³.

2. *Origins of the epistolary novel and the principal French epistolary works*

The epistolary novel is a specific literary genre that is particularly loved by European authors during the Eighteenth century. The genre first appears in England and France and, later, in Germany. In fact, the epistolary novel is a millennium old if we consider that one of the first examples is *Heroines* by Ovid who reproduces fictional correspondence between two lovers: except for three letters produced by men, all the women write to absent husbands and lovers, who apparently have other things to do⁴. During the Middle-Ages and the Modern Age

² «This writer serves the monarch through public speech acts that constitute a predictable and universally imitable model of courtesy. The counter current to this dominant Classical model, which coexists with it from the outset, is epistolary “art” interpreted as inimitable but inspiring emulation, because it is understood to emanate from differing, private literary spaces that articulate the particularities of historical contingency. The latter concept of epistolary art generates discourses of cultural difference, which will assume a renewed ascendancy in the eighteenth century». J. G. Altman, *The Letter Book as a Literary Institution 1539-1789: Toward a Cultural History of Published Correspondences in France*, in «Yale Studies», Special Issue *Men/Women of Letters*, Vol. 71 (1986), p. 62.

³ C. Burel, *Le texte en perspective*, in P.-A.-Fr. Choderlos de Laclos, *Les liaisons dangereuses*, Gallimard, Paris 2012, p. 506. P. V. Conroy analyses the principal elements concerning the French epistolary genre (epistolary choice, public and authenticity) in this way: «By adopting the epistolary format, the novel took upon itself that particular way of rendering the outside world that the letter had already conditioned the reading public to accept as normal. To the extent that fictitious novel followed the same conventions and satisfied the same expectations as did real letters, they qualified as authentic and enjoyed the same “real” status as the true letters they resembled in format and content». P. V. Conroy, *Real Fictions: Authenticity in the French Epistolary Novel*, in «Romanic Review», Vol. 72, n. 4 (1981), p. 413.

⁴ It is said Ovid’s *Heroides* is an Ovid’s exercise when Latin author is studying for a law degree

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several real epistolary exchanges (Saint Catherine from Siena, Erasmus, Cromwell and Madame de Sévigné) are published and read by a large audience⁵. But it's especially the rediscovery of Ovid's work during the Renaissance that sees an increase in the number of readers of those letters where their authenticity is questioned.

French epistolary novel becomes very popular only in the second half of the seventeenth century after the publication of *Lettres portugaises* (1669) by Guilleragues (1669)⁶. The novel is focused on Marianne's suffering: the girl, who is abandoned by a young and charming French officer, writes a series of letters in which she expresses her grief after her lover's escape. The technique is not innovative because it is inspired by Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. However, Marianne describes her interior struggle as being characterised by flux and reflux between reminiscences and dreams, judgements and emotions, questions and answers, decision and irresolution, regret and desperation⁷. And yet, *Lettres portugaises* represents an epistolary novel with one voice centred on feelings and it inaugurates a long tradition according to the Portuguese model. Among different writers using the epistolary technique, Laclos aims to personalise the epistolary novel transforming it into a war bulletin in which characters confess to each other their battle plans and strategic lies.

The Eighteenth century manifests the triumph of the epistolary genre linked to the increasing presence of females: women become writers and readers⁸. The

because legal rhetorical training in Rome includes the art of writing of imaginary speeches and epistle. Actually, no other classical work gives women characters such different and precise voices. T. O. Beebee, *Epistolary Fiction in Europe, 1500-1850*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, p. 106.

⁵ The letter is considered as the most prominent and often-used literary form which is reserved to female voice and experience. In other words, epistolary novel is a sub-literary genre to which women are condemned by the hierarchy of genre: «The epistolary novel became an important cultural vehicle for living women a voice, both as characters and as authors. Arguably, Western literature had never produced an array of female characters at once realistic and eloquent as it did starting with Mariana (the Portuguese nun) and continuing through Richardson's Pamela and Clarissa, Graffigny's Peruvian princess, Rousseau's Julie, and Laclos's Madame de Merteuil», Ivi, p. 105.

⁶ Considering the publication of *Lettres portugaises*, it is easy to recognize a significant change. In the Renaissance women can abashedly publish their own letter books and broach the same range of topics as men. In seventeenth-century women's letters are rarely turned into letter books: they write anonymously and against their wills. In fact, authorship in the seventeenth century becomes a male-dominated institution, deeply connected, moreover, to political hierarchies. J. G. Altman, *The Letter Book as a Literary Institution 1539-1789: Toward a Cultural History of Published Correspondences in France*, cit., p. 45.

⁷ F. Jost, *Le Roman épistolaire et la technique narrative au XVIII^e siècle*, in «Comparative Literature Studies», Vol. III, n. 4 (1996), p. 412. Also, in this case authenticity is questioned. However, Beebee argues *Lettres portugaises* can be considered as genuine because no man could disorder his prose so beautifully. T. O. Beebee, *Epistolary Fiction in Europe*, cit, p. 117.

⁸ Successful epistolary novel corresponds to the spread of manual letters which give a model for different kinds of letters. There are letters for those who have not taken leave of their parents before a trip, a letter from a father writing to his son who is in Paris, a letter to another son to make renounce to a duel and a letter from a mother to a daughter staying in a convent. J. G. Altman, *Epistolary Conduct: The Evolution of the Letter Manual in France in the Eighteenth Century*, in

history of letter books during and after the eighteenth century is marked by an awareness of the relational differences between oral conversation, handwriting, and print as modes of interpersonal communication, as representations of temporally specific experience, and as conveyors of social values⁹. At the beginning of the eighteenth-century *Lettres persanes* (1721) by Montesquieu is published. Montesquieu shows a certain internal coherence because the letters come from the same character which maintains a kind of psychological unit. In fact, the main characters (Rica and Usbek) send a lot of letters to their other friends who, however, do not answer. In this case the epistolary technique, associated with exotic taste, is useful for hiding the writer's political, social and philosophical convictions: two travellers harshly criticise Parisian institutions and habits. Inspired by *Lettres persanes* and its disoriented voyager, Voltaire composes *Lettres philosophiques ou anglaises* (1734) where his choice to write in the epistolary form is only functional, used to develop topics loved by Enlightenment such as religion, politics, economics, philosophy, etc. The goal is to propose England as a model of an enlighten monarchy which is opposed to French absolutism. Other writers make use of the epistolary novel to give voice to emotional torments which exhaust their protagonists. In fact, Madame de Graffigny creates *Lettres d'une péruvienne* (1747) adopting the model proposed by *Lettres portugaises*. The young Zilia writes to her lover, who has become unfaithful, and refuses the approaches of a French admirer. Zilia can be likened to an Usbek, a female Rica, because she arrives in France where she talks about French society in the Eighteenth century¹⁰. However, her letters show her great feeling (unrewarded love and quivering sensibility). Moreover, the same sentimental climate is visible in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), one of the most famous epistolary novels of the eighteenth century¹¹. According to Rousseau, the epistolary novel is the most proper form able to manifest his sensitive soul, his dreams and, finally, his need to love and to be loved: Rousseau is successful to unit Madame de Graffigny's morality

«Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century», vol. 304 (1992), p. 869. Writing-letters manuals do not end in the eighteenth century. Between about 1830 and the turn of century 195 titles are published in 616 different editions by 143 different publishers. R. Chartier, *Introduction: An Ordinary Kind of Writing: Model Letter and Letter-Writing in Ancien Regime France*, in R. Chartier, A. Boureau, C. Dauphin (ed.), *Correspondence. Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, UK Polity, Cambridge 1997, p. 3.

⁹ After French Revolution autograph letters are used in order to authenticate some original manuscripts: «Autograph letters become the object of a veritable cult, significantly intensified and commercialized after the Revolution by the dispersion of manuscript collections and by the technology of facsimile printing, which enabled collectors to identify authentic originals more readily». J. G. Altman, *The Letter Book as a Literary Institution 1539-1789: Toward a Cultural History of Published Correspondences in France*, cit. p. 60.

¹⁰ F. Jost, *Le Roman épistolaire et la technique narrative au XVIII^e siècle*, cit., p. 413.

¹¹ According to Altman, Rousseau and Richardson share same vision concerning letter: «in *Pamela*, *Clarissa*, and *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Richardson and Rousseau will project a similar, albeit secularized, vision of the value of the letter book as the documentary record of an exemplary life, to be reread and imitated by a community inspired by the saintly model». J. G. Altman, *The Letter Book as a Literary Institution 1539-1789: Toward a Cultural History of Published Correspondences in France*, cit., p. 47.

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and Crébillon's exotics¹². Madame de Staël, admiring Rousseau's novel, says that: «Rousseau n'a rien inventé, mais il a tout enflammé» (Rousseau has invented nothing, but he has exaggerated everything).

3. *Epistolary novel in libertine literature*

Certain writers (such as Crébillon, Meusnier de Querlon, Laclos and Sade) employ the epistolary genre neither to express characters' desires nor to show the effects produced by letters on characters. Then some epistolary novels such as *Letters de la marquise de M*** au comte de R**** and *La Tourière des carmélites* concern the point of view a protagonist who writes to a single receiver. For example, in *Lettres de la marquise de M*** au comte de R**** Crébillon transfers struggle from the convent to the sitting room, focusing attention on one Madame's sentimental trouble. This noble woman writes to his lover whose reactions are reproduced through allusions made by the woman. So the main conflict involves a desperate woman struggling between respect for her moral system (but which is inadequate) and her sexual desires. Her destiny reflects aristocracy's decline: courteous love has now disappeared and been replaced by lustful passions having no value. In *La Tourière des carmélites* Meusnier de Querlon chooses the epistolary novel in order to express feeling of Agnès, best known as Sainte Nitouche, who composes her memoirs through several letters addressed to a nun.

On the other hand, some epistolary novels such as *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and *Aline et Valcour* suggest a richness of voice offering to readers a privileged position because they are the only ones to read all of the letters written by different people. For example, the same event is related from different points of view and then interpreted by the character who is narrating. In *Les Liaisons dangereuses* the same event at the Opera, where Valmont is accompanied by courtesan Émilie, is recounted in three different letters. The readers are unaware if Valmont is indeed sincere when he writes to marquise de Merteuil and to Madame de Tourvel. This polyphonic epistolary novel reveals truth as a problematic question because it does not exist outside different points of view¹³. In particular, a certain number of letters link the marquise de Merteuil with four people like Valmont and Madame of Volanges; Madame de Tourvel maintains relationships with three confidantes like Cécile; Danceny communicates with five addressees. We can also observe a precise distribution of letters among different couples: in particular, the most significant epistolary exchanges are between Valmont and marquise of Merteuil; Valmont and Madame de Tourvel; Cécile and chevalier de Danceny. However, the two libertine characters determine and, at the same time, dominate other epistolary exchanges. Besides, libertine characters need a public because their success is intimately associated with their social reputation. Both of

¹² O. Fellows, *Le roman épistolaire français*, cit., p. 35.

¹³ C. Burel, *Le texte en perspective*, cit., p. 509.

them sometimes feign tragedy because they are not able to express the sincerest feelings. One of the most important letters is certainly letter eighty-one in which the marquise de Merteuil gives expression to her real feelings explaining when and how she is become a hypocrite cynic¹⁴.

Finally, in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* the letter is not simply a means of conveying information, but it becomes either a weapon of seduction, used by Valmont in order to spite Madame de Tourvel, or a battle weapon between Valmont and the marquise de Merteuil. In fact, letters written by Valmont and the marquise de Merteuil symbolise a social representation, which they required in order to maintain their leadership¹⁵. If we analyse *Les Liaisons dangereuses*'s function in the epistolary novel as a whole, critics point out that Laclos's novel represents, on the one hand, epistolary novel's triumph and, on the other hand, its death. Certain researchers notice that, even if Laclos's novel remains the epistolary novel's masterpiece, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* shows the influence of other epistolary novels in the eighteenth century (such as *Clarissa* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse*). It is not surprising to see the widespread diffusion of Richardson's novel and Rousseau's novel, if we consider the number of new editions that have been published¹⁶. For instance, *Clarisse* (1751) amounts to ten new editions whereas *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) has more than thirty-five new editions¹⁷. B. Didier analysed Laclos's sources: Crébillon's *Les égarements du cœur et de l'esprit* where Versac can be considered as Valmont's precursor; Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* et Molière's *Tartuffe* de Molière¹⁸. It is, however, worth pointing out a relevant difference between Rousseau and Laclos. Firstly, Rousseau's letters express common language characterising the most beautiful souls, which is the same as that revealed by Rousseau in other works.

¹⁴ «Entrée dans le monde dans le temps où, fille encore, j'étais vouée par état au silence et à l'inaction, j'ai su en profiter pour observer et réfléchir [...] Ressentais-je quelque chagrin, je m'étudiais à prendre l'air de la sérénité, même celui de la joie ; j'ai porté le zèle jusqu'à me causer des douleurs volontaires, pour chercher pendant ce temps l'expression du plaisir [...]. J'étudiai nos mœurs dans les romans ; nos opinions dans les philosophes ; je cherchai même dans les moralistes les plus sévères ce qu'ils exigeaient de nous, et je m'assurai ainsi de ce qu'on pouvait faire, de ce qu'on devait penser, et de ce qu'il fallait paraître». P.-A.-Fr. Chodelos de Laclos, *Les liaisons dangereuses*, Gallimard, Paris 2012, pp. 214-217.

¹⁵ If Laclos proposes a female liberation, Rétif demonstrates a conservative point of view. In *La femme infidèle* he points out female sexual liberation causes emasculation and death of the male. The anti-heroine of *La femme infidèle* is compared to Sappho, an Ovid's character. T. O. Beebee, *Epistolary Fiction in Europe*, cit., p. 123.

¹⁶ Richardson's letters show a connection between genuineness and fictionality representing reading attitude in the second half of the eighteenth century. On the one hand, publication implies doubt rather than feeling of facticity because handwriting cannot be used to testify authenticity. On the other hand, readers seem to apply "Historical Faith" to any sort of published letters. T. O. Beebee, *Publicity, Privacy, and the Power of Fiction in the Gunning Letters*, in «Eighteenth Century Fiction», Vol. 20, n. 1 (2007), p. 65.

¹⁷ M. Angus, *Romans et romanciers à succès de 1751 à la Révolution d'après les rééditions*, in «Revue des Sciences Humaines», n. 35 (1970), pp. 387-388.

¹⁸ B. Didier, *Choderlos de Laclos: Les Liaisons dangereuses*, cit., p. 13.

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Despite Rousseau, Laclos shows how way of writing can manifest a different style¹⁹. For example, in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* young Cécile writes in a very clear and innocent way while the marquise de Merteuil displays a more sophisticated style expressing her false proposals²⁰. Another example concerns the chevalier de Danceny whose style is a pastiche coming from lyric language used by Saint-Preux in Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. This pastiche is remarkable through either the use of apostrophes and lyric questions or a vocabulary full of sensibility. It is normal for Valmont and the marquise de Merteuil to criticise Danceny's writing style compared to a traditional novel's beautiful hero²¹. Secondly, *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is a novel concerning positive sentimental education in order to create a sensitive individual and ideal society, while in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* the couple formed by Cécile and chevalier de Danceny receives a negative sentimental education determining, on the one hand, the end of ideal love and the separation, on the other hand. The dispersion of two lovers (Cécile goes to a convent and Danceny renounces life amongst the rest of society) is opposed to Clarens's community, described by Rousseau, where the Saint-Preux lives next to Julie until her tragical death. However, Laclos's theory is inspired by Rousseau's conception: in fact, Rousseau affirms that the novel is dangerous to young ladies who are not supervised by their mothers. So Laclos thinks girls should read travel writing and translations, learn foreign languages (such as Italian and English) and scientific disciplines such as physics, chemistry, natural history and botany²².

If we analyse the importance attributed to the letter, we can affirm that Laclos' novel is inspired by *Clarissa*, considered as an epistolary masterpiece by the same Laclos. In fact, Richardson makes use of the letter as instrument for seduction. If Madame de Tourvel (*Les Liaisons dangereuses*) is completely aware when she gives Valmont's plan away, *Clarissa* is stunned by Lovelace who seduces her before dying in a duel.

¹⁹ C. Burel, *Le texte en perspective*, p. 516.

²⁰ Versini highlights that the war of arms involves the war of the alcoves since the two pleasures are closely related: «On fait le siège d'une vertu comme on investit une place forte, et ces métaphores, d'abord inspirées par l'habitude de compléter la gloire des armes par la gloire des alcôves, puis par le besoin de compenser l'effacement de l'une par l'ivresse de l'autre, reçoivent une nouvelle justification de la guerre des sexes, où ce sera à qui capturera l'autre». L. Versini, *Laclos et la tradition*, Klincksieck, Paris 1968, p. 120.

²¹ C. Burel, *Le texte en perspective*, cit., p. 519.

²² B. Didier, *Choderlos de Laclos: Les Liaisons dangereuses. Pastiches et ironies*, Éditions du temps, Paris 1998, p. 27. «Laclos, en imitant en cela Rousseau, émaille son texte de quelques notes également auctoriales dénégatives, jouant ainsi de la contradiction rhétorique entre le caractère prétendument authentique de la correspondance et son appartenance à la fiction. [...] Cette forme d'ironie est plus structurale et compositionnelle que tonale». F. Calas, *Commentaire stylistique de la lettre CLXXV des Liaisons dangereuses de Choderlos de Laclos*, in «L'information grammaticale», n. 81 (1999), p. 32.

4. *The epistolary novel during the French Revolution*

The French novel during the Revolution does ever links with the traditional novel characterising the Eighteenth century because techniques are essentially the same that is to say the third person narrator and the epistolary novel in the first person. After *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, the epistolary novel declines quickly and before 1799 this genre has almost disappeared. This genre is later chosen by Senacour in *Oberman* (1804) inspired by Goethe's *Werther* (1774).

However, we find two examples regarding representative epistolary forms inspired by the libertine tradition such as Sade's *Aline et Valcour* (1796) et and Sénac de Meilhan's *L'émigré* (1797). The first one collects a series of letters written by two protagonists and certain secondary characters focussing the attention on Aline and Valcour's uncertain destiny: their love is forbidden by president de Biamont who wants to give her daughter to his old friend Dolbourg. Letters are divided between the development of a tragic love and the description of exotic settings. However, all critics affirm that Sade cannot achieve Laclos's perfection because Sade's style is more similar to that of Richardson²³. The second novel (*L'émigré*) is quite different because its author chooses the epistolary genre in order to focus on fragmentary form and subjective form which serve to narrate certain revolutionary events. Through the characters' point of view, readers are witness to some episodes pertinent to contemporary France, such as the beginning of the French Revolution in July 1789, royal weakness, the minister Necker, October's events causing the royal transfer from Versailles to Paris, the execution of the king symbolising the end of the monarchy²⁴.

5. *Conclusion*

It is worth concluding that the epistolary novel, although it was not born in the eighteenth century, has great importance during the century of Enlightenment and it disappeared only gradually. Even if the origins of epistolary art come from classical literature (Ovid) and French modern literature (such as the novel *Portuguese Letters*), epistolary novel becomes one of the most successful genres in modern literature. Different novelists choose the epistolary technique to achieve some precise intentions according to their coeval social-historical context.

²³ O. Fellows, *Le roman épistolaire français*, in «Dix-huitième siècle», n. 4 (1972), p. 36.

²⁴ At the beginning of the novel, Sénac de Meilhan explains his purpose: «Tout est vraisemblable, et tout est romanesque dans la révolution de la France; les hommes précipités du faite de la grandeur et de la richesse, dispersés sur le globe entier, présentent l'image de gens naufragés qui se sauvent à la nage dans des îles désertes, là chacun oubliant son ancien état est forcé de revenir à l'état de nature; il cherche en soi-même des ressources, et développe une industrie et une activité qui lui étaient souvent inconnues à lui-même. Les rencontres les plus extraordinaires, les plus étonnantes circonstances, les plus déplorables situations deviennent des événements communs, et surpassent ce que les auteurs de roman peuvent imaginer». G. Sénac de Meilhan, *L'émigré*, Gallimard, Paris 2004 [1797], p. 33.

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At the beginning of the eighteenth century the most famous French writers such as Montesquieu who makes use of epistolary novel to discuss several faults concerning absolutist France. Later, Crébillon's epistolary novel *Lettres de la marquise de M*** au comte de R**** (1732) describes the attitude of virtuous heroine annihilated by a cynic seductor.

Other novelists (such as Madame de Graffigny and Rousseau) use the epistolary technique to stress their characters' magnificence. Starting with the French masterpiece of the genre *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) by Rousseau, the middle of the eighteenth century offers a series of libertine epistolary novels like and *La Tourière des carmélites*: for instance, Meusnier of Querlon shows libertine career of a young girl who reveals herself through letters. Several writers (such as Laclos and Crébillon) adopt the epistolary form as a sharp instrument to criticise certain unacceptable social aspects such as aristocratic corruption: in 1782 Laclos writes *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, celebrated as the last example of the genre. Last epistolary novels in the eighteenth-century like *L'émigré* and *Aline et Valcour* appear during the revolutionary period with different purposes: in the case of Sénac de Meilhan the epistolary novel is used to denounce revolutionary excess.

Variety seen in the French epistolary novel shows the richness of the genre which is particularly loved by readers during the Enlightenment. In fact, readers have loved this kind of narration for its charm of authenticity and for the fact that it allows them follow a story which has the appearance of a real-life story.