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Mme de Graffigny's story

Robin Howells

The two works which made Mme de Graffigny famous in her own time are very different. The *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (1747, revised edn 1752) is a novel consisting of letters composed by a fictional Inca princess. *Cénie* (1750-1) is a theatrical 'comédie sérieuse' with a domestic setting. For us they are also very different in quality and interest: the *Péruvienne* has recently generated a huge amount of critical interpretation, whereas *Cénie* has not. My main argument is that they tell the same story. It is the story of a woman fallen from her high estate and separated from her betrothed. This occurs through no fault of her own; blame lies partially with some military event. After years of fidelity on her part, the betrothed, assisted by another admirer, comes to her again. Here the story splits: the couple are reunited, or she finds a retreat (though in fact both endings exist for each work). The betrothed is faithful in *Cénie*, which we might see as the exemplary, public version of the story. In the private letters of the *Péruvienne* he is not faithful. While the former is Graffigny's wish, the latter is her distressing experience. Shortly before she began planning the two works, she had finally accepted that the man to whom she had been passionately attached for one-and-a-half decades had left her. The later years of her long affair with Desmarest are chronicled in Graffigny's remarkable correspondence with her friend and confidant Devaux. Her private letters also tell a story, in the double sense that they offer a chronicle of events and feelings, and that they show us the meanings that she made of them — the beginning of the mythifying process which will find literary form. The story that she tells in her two major works, and others too, proceeds from her own.

The titles *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* and *Cénie* both announce a feminine principle. They also both imply a female protagonist. The protagonist of the novel is indeed the 'Peruvian' and letter-writer Zilia. We do not know Zilia's age, but at the start she is just old enough to leave the Temple of the Virgins for her marriage — presumably fifteen or sixteen. The titular *Cénie* is about the same age, as we are told that it is 'quinze ans' since her birth (I, 8).¹ But the play's central protagonist is arguably not *Cénie* but her governess, Orphise. Graffigny in her correspondence, over many years of composing and revising the play, refers to it as *La Gouvernante*. The title was changed — and the name 'Cénie' substituted for 'Lucile' — only months before the first performance. The name 'Orphise' on the other hand is one of only two to survive through all the changes. In 1747 Graffigny summarised the play's central situation in relation to the governess not the daughter: 'c'est une mère qui est gouvernante de sa fille, sans le savoir'.² One

¹References (by Act and Scene) are to the only modern edition of *Cénie*: in *Femmes dramaturges en France (1650-1750). Pièces choisies*, ed. Perry Gethner, (Paris-Seattle-Tübingen: Biblio 17, 1994). References (by Letter) for the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* will be to the critical edition by Jonathan Mallinson, (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002).

²My argument is based on information provided by Vera Grayson, 'The Genesis and reception of Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* and *Cénie*', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 336 (1996), pp.1-152, chs 3 and 4, 'Composing *Cénie*' and 'Staging *Cénie*'.

could also say that the two are joint protagonists, in female solidarity or — a key word in Graffigny's sentimental vocabulary — 'confiance'. I shall assign the function to both, though there is also an external reason for giving Orphise priority, as we shall see later.

Zilia clearly fits the paradigm that I have indicated. She is an Inca princess, sundered from her high estate and from her prince Aza on the morning of their wedding by the Spanish conquerors of Peru. Ignorant of the fate of her beloved, taken to France where she is the dependent of a noble family, she maintains her fidelity. What of Orphise? In the play's first Act we learn only that she is a governess devoted to her charge and 'd'un mérite supérieur'. We might find her name odd for a Frenchwoman; but 'Zilia' is also odd for a Peruvian. Both names smack of romance (as does 'Cénie' to a lesser extent).³ In Act II Orphise and Cénie appear for the first time, and together. On the issue of marriage, Orphise advises Cénie, and then interrogates her suitor. Somewhat severe, she also hints at her own past sorrows in this domain (II, 1 and 2). The essential revelation however comes at the end of this Act. The master of the house (who hailed her qualities in Act I) is misled into excluding her from Cénie's counsels. Left alone, Orphise soliloquises:

C'est donc pour mettre le comble à mon abaissement que Dorimond devient injuste? Hélas! j'étais réservée à des traitements injurieux! Digne fruit de l'état où le malheur m'a réduite... Pardonne, Dorsainville: pour conserver la vie d'une épouse qui t'est chère, il ne me restait que le choix des plus viles conditions. Tu n'en rougiras pas, j'ai sauvé de l'opprobre ton nom et le mien... Epoux infortuné, devais-tu m'abandonner?... Quel que soit le désert qui te sert d'asile, c'est celui de l'honneur. La honte, ce tyran des âmes nobles, n'habite qu'avec les hommes: fuyons-les... Mais plus on m'éloigne de Cénie, plus mes conseils lui sont nécessaires. Sans offenser Dorimond, rendons à sa fille ce qu'exigent de moi sa confiance et mon amitié. On n'est pas tout à fait malheureux, quand il reste du bien à faire. (II, 5)

The elevated register and display of moral sentiment are in themselves proof of Orphise's superiority. But this is also a matter of elevated birth. 'Mon abaissement' is implicitly social as well. That she is fallen from a higher station becomes explicit in the reference to her present situation as 'l'état où le malheur m'a réduite'. As Cénie's admirer will later perceive, 'Orphise n'est point née pour l'état où elle est' (V, 2). What caused her fall? She herself supplies the answer in the form of her ambiguous rhetorical question: 'Epoux infortuné, devais-tu m'abandonner?'. It is clear that she is the passive victim. The fault seems to lie with the 'infortune' of her 'époux'. The 'devais' implies necessity, that of fate or destiny; but 'devais-tu' addresses the question to the husband, suggesting that he too might have some responsibility. Yet Orphise submits her conduct, and subjects herself, to him: 'Pardonne, Dorsainville'. She defines herself in relation to him, and she does not doubt his love, for she is 'une épouse qui t'est chère'. The whole speech is an affirmation, yet a kind of protest. It sets out my narrative paradigm. The key sentence — 'Epoux infortuné, devais-tu m'abandonner?' — could equally have been addressed, in any or all of her letters, by Zilia to Aza. In both cases, moreover, there is

³'Zilia', as critics have noted, fits entirely the eighteenth-century literary conventions of exotic naming: 'Zaire', 'Zadig', ('Aza'), and so forth. 'Orphise' is also non-French; its exotic quality resides most obviously in the seme of gold in the first syllable, and the 'ph' which is redolent of Greek romance. 'Cénie', again non-French, suggests romance in its initial soft 'c' and implicit 'œ' following. All three names have an element of sibillance, and conventional French endings indicating femininity.

no-one to answer. The literary forms are also parallel: Orphise's speech is a soliloquy, as is in effect Zilia's writing.

Aza had been separated from Zilia in the first place when each was taken captive during the Spanish conquest of Peru. The circumstances in which Dorsainville was separated from Orphise are more complicated. We learn of them in Act I, in part from Dorsainville himself who has (unknown to Orphise) re-appeared. His friend and benefactor Clerval assures him that justice is owed to 'un homme de votre naissance' whom 'une affaire d'honneur a réduit [...] au métier de simple soldat', in which capacity 'il a signalé sa valeur' (I, 8). Thus Dorsainville too has been deprived of the high station to which he was born. Aza went from Inca prince to captive, Dorsainville from marquis (we will learn) to ordinary soldier. The cause of the separation is different. 'Une affaire d'honneur' means a duel — though this too, as the euphemism implies, is a mark of nobility. Collective conflict is also involved, in both cases. War did not bring about the separation of Dorsainville and Orphise, but it has played a fundamental role. Of his spouse he knows only that 'elle a disparu presque en même temps que moi [...] et depuis quinze ans aucune de nos connaissances ne sait ce qu'elle est devenue'. The period in which Zilia and Aza were separated must have been much shorter; but her ignorance of his fate was no less absolute. A particular link with the *Péruvienne* is made when Dorsainville wonders why he has received no letters from her. The answer to his question — 'pourquoi ne m'avez pas écrit?' — is provided by Clerval: 'La guerre, vous le savez, avait interrompu le commerce'. A further and remarkable link is provided when we learn where this war took place. Dorsainville, as we were told earlier, is 'un homme qu'il a ramené des Indes' (I, 5). Zilia locates Peru 'aux Indes' (Letter 23).

Thus Zilia and Dorsainville make in effect the same journeys (following their similarly involuntary separation from the beloved), for almost the same reasons. Zilia goes from her native Peru to France as a captive; Dorsainville goes from his native France to 'the Indies' as a fugitive. Dorsainville then comes back to France in search of his spouse. Zilia in Letter 23 wants to return 'aux Indes' in search of her betrothed. Of course 'les Indes' in the eighteenth century is the broadest of designations, covering a vast area of the world.⁴ But this is also the point: 'les Indes' is that which is far from France, a distant 'ailleurs'. Zilia in France (where of course she remains) feels herself to be an alien. But so to a lesser extent does Dorsainville. He has been away for fifteen years, and he is actually outside the law until he can obtain a pardon. Both Zilia and Dorsainville are in distress socially and emotionally. Both have lost their rank, as well as their spouse. In almost all these respects they are at one with Orphise.

As Clerval brought Dorsainville back from the Indies, it is Déterville whom Zilia asks to arrange her return. The roles of Clerval and Déterville are similar more broadly. Both are brave officers in the service of France. But both are also remarkably submissive lovers. Déterville, having for so long 'porté la discrétion jusqu'au silence', at last declares himself to Zilia. If she cannot respond to 'un respect si tendre,' he says, 'je vous fuirai; mais je le sens, ma mort sera le prix du sacrifice' (L.23). Clerval is persuaded by Orphise not to pursue his love for Cénie, though this he says will 'm'imposer un silence dont ma mort sera le fruit' (II, 2). Each is indeed a paragon of generosity. Despite his

⁴The 'East Indies' covered what we would call South Asia, from Indonesia to India; the 'West Indies' embraced much of the Americas. (Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes* (1770 etc) will also include China in the first category, and Atlantic Canada in the second!) The prestigious opera-ballet *Les Indes galantes* (1735) included a section entitled 'Les Incas du Pérou', notes Jonathan Mallinson: *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, 'Introduction', pp.12-13.

love for Zilia, Déterville will find Aza for her and arrange Aza's journey. Despite his love for Cénie, Clerval will undertake to find a retreat for her and Orphise, and arrange for their journey (IV, 5). In each case the man in social power (Déterville, Clerval) is dominated morally by the dependent. In fact Déterville is repeatedly reproved by Zilia (for his declaration and his silence, for staying and for leaving, for implying Aza's infidelity and for not revealing it). Clerval is terribly bullied by Orphise, who accuses him of almost everything ('porter le désordre dans votre famille, pour satisfaire à un goût que la première occasion fera changer d'objet': II, 2; 'vos soins [...] injurieux', 'transforme[r vos] désirs en vertus': IV, 5). One suspects that the women are taking out on Déterville and Clerval the resentment which they cannot and dare not voice to their own betrothed. In a word, Déterville is the gentle confidant who is always there for Zilia, while Aza is the strong and absent lover. Similarly, Clerval is the helper and confidant of Dorsainville the missing duellist and spouse. The difference is that in the *Péruvienne* both men are involved with the same woman, Zilia, whereas in *Cénie* the two love different women. But in the latter case as well as the former one of the men aids and consoles — the role of Clerval as well as Déterville.

On the female side all three women are in the paradigmatic situation: the loss of high estate and beloved. This is obviously true of Zilia, and we have seen that it applies to Orphise. Cénie undergoes the experience, at a more domestic level, in the course of the play. At the start she is the cherished daughter of Dorimond, who has both 'richesses' and 'naissance' (I, 3). In Act III she learns that she is not in fact his child. Though what she calls 'mon horrible destinée' is in no way her own fault ('je ne suis point coupable'), it apparently requires her to renounce Clerval too (III, 4). The significance of 'cet affreux moment' (loss of estate and beloved) is thematised by Orphise. 'Vous avez vu le bonheur: il a disparu' (IV, 4). Zilia recounts her own fall from plenitude in similar if more elaborated terms. Carried off from the Temple on the day of her marriage, 'du suprême bonheur, je suis tombée dans l'horreur du désespoir, sans qu'aucun intervalle m'ait préparée à cet affreux passage' (Letter 1). This pivotal moment is marked in all three heroines by a loss of consciousness followed by reluctant return to life. In the case of Cénie the event is summary. Her disinheritance revealed: 'CENIE: (tombe évanouie). — Je me meurs' (III, 3).⁵ Taken from the Temple and Aza, Zilia writes 'je mourais [...] lorsque mon amour m'a rendu la vie' (L.3). For of course she continues to believe that Aza is hers, through all her letters, until near the end when his infidelity is revealed. This time she falls into a fever, but is nursed by Déterville's sister. Writing of 'l'état dont les cruels soins de Céline viennent de me tirer', she exclaims 'Ah, Dieux! pourquoi en me rappelant à la vie, m'a t'on rappelée à ce funeste souvenir!' (L.39). Orphise evokes her own moment of loss, fifteen years before, in no less dramatic language. 'La mort n'avait qu'un pas à faire pour venir jusqu'à moi: le Ciel en courroux me rendit à la vie' (V, 3).

Close to fleeing life itself, all the women wish to withdraw from society. I shall first trace Zilia's retreat and its successive motivations, then look at the pattern in *Cénie*. Zilia has never felt at ease in the high society of France, because it does not treat her with respect, as well as being generally frivolous. To its 'bonté méprisante' towards her (L.14), to 'le monde et le bruit' (L.31), she much prefers 'ma solitude' (L.28). Then Déterville and his sister endow her with the country house, admirably furnished and appointed, and for its upkeep 'une cassette remplie de pièces d'or' (L.35). Awaiting

⁵An editorial footnote observes 'Cénie reprend conscience assez vite, puisqu'elle entend manifestement la réplique suivante' (*ed. cit.*, p.354)! Weakness in motivation ('invraisemblance') serves as a pointer to mythical signification.

Aza's arrival, she expects that they will live there once they are 'unis ensemble' (L.36). Then Aza at last re-appears, only to reject her. To Déterville she makes what she calls 'l'aveu de ma honte et de mon désespoir' (L.38). Recovering from that crisis, she tells Déterville that she could not remain in 'la maison de votre sœur [... où] les objets me retraçaient sans cesse la perfidie d'Aza'. She will withdraw to the retreat that he generously provided for her — 'me retirer dans la solitude que je dois à votre prévoyante bonté'. (L.40). Her last letter shows that she has done so.

Cénie offers some close parallels. Orphise at the end of Act II, we may recall, already envisaged flight from social humiliation: 'la honte [...] n'habite qu'avec des hommes: fuyons-les'. Cénie then undergoes her own fall and shame, which prompts her to repeat the proposition. 'Est-il un courage à l'épreuve [...] de la pitié insultante des gens du monde? [...] Fuyons, Madame' (IV, 1). They agree to withdraw from the social world — like Zilia — and to 'chercher un asile' (IV, 4). Even Zilia's reference to the intolerable associations of the present abode recurs. Cénie too cannot be expected to remain 'dans une maison où tout lui rappellerait son infortune' (V, 2). Clerval undertakes — like Déterville — to arrange for a place of retreat. Dorimond announces — most oddly, unless one thinks back to the excellence of Zilia's country house — that this place will be both generously-equipped and gracious. 'Je prétends aussi que Cénie trouve dans sa retraite non seulement le nécessaire en abondance, mais les choses de pur agrément.' Even the casket of gold recurs, in a more bourgeois form: 'Tu donneras ce portefeuille à Orphise' (V, 2)!

The elected retreat in this case is a convent (but clearly Cénie and Orphise are going to occupy a suite of rooms there — as single women of privilege did — not to take religious vows).⁶ Deputed to accompany the two women to their retreat is Dorsainville. Giving the lost lover this role could be seen as a version of the plan for Aza to join Zilia in her country retreat. Its instrumental function here is to bring about the encounter of the long-separated couple. Dorsainville and Orphise meet. 'Est-ce une illusion?' cries Orphise. (Perhaps she is, like Zilia, unwilling to relinquish the ideal image.) But this husband is Aza rectified. Faithful, he speaks as Aza should have spoken. 'DORSAINVILLE. — Epouse infortunée, ouvrez les yeux: reconnaissez le plus heureux des hommes, et le mari le plus tendre.' Familial and amorous joy is multiplied. Cénie, having found her father, is given to Clerval. Dorimond wants everybody to be one for life: 'Allons, vivons tous ensemble, et que la mort seule nous sépare'. This speech almost closes the play, were it not for Orphise who has the last moralising word. Zilia in her country house expressed an odd and similar wish to Déterville and his sister: 'je désire que vous viviez l'un et l'autre autant que je vous aimerai, et vous ne mourrez pas les premiers' (L.35). Her final letter will invite the two to share her retreat, setting out how they are all to live.

Both works thus offer the double ending — retreat and reunion — though in slightly different combinations. In the *Péruvienne* we have first the endowing of the heroine with the place of retreat, and the idea of sharing it with the betrothed following their impending reunion. Then the lover appears, proves unfaithful, and the retreat is occupied alone — albeit to be shared with her two dear friends. In *Cénie* we have first the idea and the endowing of the heroines with the retreat because the betrothed and the lover are lost. Then the betrothed appears, proves faithful, and brings about the reinstatement of both women, to live a shared or group life.

⁶Note that Céline and Zilia were also domiciled for some time in a convent (*Péruvienne*, LL.19-25).

Before turning to Graffigny's perception of her own life, we can point to a more comprehensive pattern or repetition in her works. Her first two pieces of fiction published in Paris anticipate in their structure the two major works that we have just studied. Her *Nouvelle espagnole* (1745) features a young and beautiful noblewoman (Elvire), her less distinguished friend (Isabelle), her elder brother to whom she is devoted (Don Pèdre), and her suitor (Don Alvar). We have here the pattern of the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*: the heroine (Zilia), the less distinguished friend (Céline), the elder brother (Aza), and the suitor (Déterville). One could even say that the form of the title is repeated. In each the generic category ('Nouvelle', 'Lettres') is followed by a national marker ('espagnole', '[p]éruvienne'). Also in 1745 appears Graffigny's playful fairy-tale, *La Princesse Azerolle*. In it there are two female protagonists of almost equal importance. The elder one is the fairy Canadine, the younger is the titular Princess; both love a prince who is 15 years younger than Canadine. *Cénie*, as we have seen, also has two female protagonists: the mother Orphise and the titular Cénie whose age is 15. (In each case the title features the younger heroine.) But in *Cénie* each of the two women has her own man, and is happily (re)united to him at the end. There was also a happy end — at least implied — in the *Nouvelle*, when the two couples are freed from persecution. Here is a cross-over, for the conclusion of *Azerolle*, like that of the *Péruvienne*, is not so happy.

Canadine, like Zilia, finally misses out on mutual love. The fate of Canadine at the end of *Azerolle* anticipates essentially and even textually that of Zilia in the *Péruvienne*.⁷ Beyond the loss itself, there are three common topoi: 'guérir', love and friendship, and the retreat. At the end of *Azerolle*, it is hoped that the lovelorn Canadine will recover over time: '[on] comptoit que la fée y trouveroit la guérison de son cœur' (p.301). This follows another hope: 'La tendre fée [...] se flatta un moment de trouver assez de satisfaction dans l'amitié [...] pour la dédommager de l'amour' (p.295). Neither hope is realised. 'Canadine, après avoir vécu dans une retraite obscure [...], parvint enfin au seul bonheur auquel elle aspirait; elle eut la permission de mourir, et ne tarda pas à en profiter' (pp.301-2). The end of the *Péruvienne* is actually more pessimistic in its central element, for Aza proves false whereas Canadine's prince is constant to his princess. But in these other respects it is a little more positive. Zilia tells Déterville that he need not fear for her in her retreat. She envisages being cured of her love for Aza, though she also in a sense refuses to relinquish it. 'Je puis guérir de ma passion, mais je n'en aurais jamais que pour lui'. The final sentence of the whole work repeats the terms of Canadine's forlorn hope: 'vous trouverez dans [...] mon amitié, [...] tout ce qui peut vous dédommager de l'amour' (L.41). Zilia is undoubtedly instructing herself too.

Establishing a common pattern in Graffigny's two major works has a clear critical and even heuristic value. It can orient the general interpretation of each work, in terms of the other, and it draws attention to details and differences. Tracing this pattern back to Graffigny's life is perhaps a more doubtful enterprise. Biographical criticism seems naive as well as reductive. Where the author is a woman, the latter accusation currently carries particular peril for a male commentator, though an important line of feminist criticism has quite explicitly related women's fiction to their life-experience.⁸ 'Life-

⁷Reference will be to the text of *La Princesse Azerolle* in *Œuvres badines, complètes, du comte de Caylus*, 12 vols (Amsterdam: Chez Visse, [...] rue Serpente, 1787), vol 9. I am grateful to Jonathan Mallinson for providing me with a copy.

⁸For example the now-classic study of nineteenth-century fiction by women, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan

perception' or the current 'life-writing' might be a better term, insofar as our evidence is not only the facts of a life but, crucially, the account of it that the experiencing subject sets down. The private letters of women in particular we have learned to associate with self-revelation, though this is not necessarily the case with authentic letters in the mid-eighteenth century.⁹ The copious surviving correspondence of Mme de Graffigny however is exceptionally personal by any standards. Giving shape and meaning to the 'facts', the letters already offer their versions of Mme de Graffigny's story.

Graffigny's surviving letters result from her own fall from high estate.¹⁰ Born into the minor provincial nobility, and having survived a disastrous early marriage, from the later 1720s she had found a pleasant way of life at the ducal court of Lorraine with a group of lively young people. This happy situation abruptly ended when the duchy of Lorraine was transferred in 1736 by the Treaty of Vienna. The court dispersed, and Graffigny loses her place and her status. She makes her way laboriously to Paris, living for several years as a house-guest or companion to privileged ladies, in penury and repeated humiliation.¹¹ The situation that she will assign to the heroines of her two major works is essentially similar: dispossession and dependence. Well may she affirm that 'Orphise n'est point née pour l'état où elle est' (*Cénie*, V, 2). It has been suggested that the end of the Lunéville court represented for Graffigny an 'overthrow of secure order', analogous to that experienced by Zilia at the start of the *Péruvienne*.¹² Graffigny's regular correspondence begins with her departure from 'home' in 1738. Her letters recount her distress; but they also provide her with a refuge, and an identity through writing.¹³

Graffigny's group at Lunéville included the cavalry officer Léopold Desmarest. Thirteen years her junior, Desmarest was her lover from about 1730 until 1743. He was not faithful, and they were often apart, but her love for him dominated her emotional life. Critics have readily perceived a fictional reflection of this relationship in Zilia's devotion and Aza's infidelity in the *Péruvienne*. Graffigny's correspondence shows that she herself was conscious of it.¹⁴ We have seen that the parallel is also present, despite the different ending, in *Cénie*. It is to be found in other works as well. Zilia's fruitless love is anticipated, we noted, by that of Canadine in *La Princesse Azerolle*. But Canadine is

Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979).

⁹See Marie-Claire Grassi, 'Epistolières au xviiiè siècle', in *La Lettre au xviiiè siècle et ses avatars*, ed. Georges Bérubé and Marie-France Silver (Toronto: Editions du Gref, 1996), 91-105.

¹⁰The critical edition, *Correspondance de Mme de Graffigny*, ed. J. A. Dainard et al (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1985-), is in course of publication (eight volumes so far, of a projected fifteen). Extracts from the whole of the correspondence, with modernised spelling and brief notes, are available in *Mme de Graffigny: Choix de lettres*, ed. English Showalter (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002). I will refer to both, but for preference to the latter because it is more readily accessible.

¹¹See Showalter, *Choix de lettres*, 'La Vie de Mme de Graffigny', notably for the period 1738-42, and especially Letters 3 (Mme de Stainville), 9 (Cirey), 15, 17, 27 (the Richelieus, and Mme du Châtelet), 36 (the princesse de Ligne), 44 (her own prospects), 47-8, 55 (convents and Mme de Lévis). See too Robin Howells, 'Humiliation in Mme de Graffigny', in *The Enterprise of Enlightenment: A Tribute to David Williams from his Friends*, ed. Terry Pratt and David McCallam, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 65-80.

¹²Thomas M. Kavanagh, 'Reading the moment and the moment of reading in Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*', *Modern Language Quarterly* 55 (1994), pp.125-47 (p.130).

¹³See Georges Bérubé, 'Mme de Graffigny à Cirey: écrire pour exister "par procuration"', *Femmes en toutes lettres: Les épistolières du xviiiè siècle*, ed. Marie-France Silver and Marie-Laure Girou Swiderski (SVEC 2000.04), pp.23-32.

¹⁴'Si je fais Aza infidèle, c'est peindre [...] les amants tels que je les connais': *Choix de lettres*, p.118 (11-9-1745).

fifteen years older than the man whom she loves — unlike Zilia but very like Graffigny. And here the external evidence is explicit. Graffigny in her correspondence makes it clear that in the tender *Canadine* she has depicted herself.¹⁵

We have no such avowal in respect of the character of Servilie in her later play *Les Saturnales* (1752-5). But within the text the parallel with the story of her relation to Desmarest can be startlingly close.¹⁶ Servilie still loves the dashing Cesar, whom she calls ‘le plus aimable des Romains’ (I, 6; p.133). She had an affair with him ten years ago (the play was composed about ten years after the break with Desmarest). Convinced that he still loves her, she foolishly ignores all the evidence. She is (again) much older than him: ‘elle a précédé Cesar dans le monde de dix ou douze ans’ (II, 4; p.152).¹⁷ He has had many affairs, and she is firmly told that ‘il ne pense plus à vous’. But she continues to believe: ‘Il revient, Bachis, il revient. Cesar est infidèle sans être inconstant’. The servant drily replies ‘Je n’entends pas cette subtilité’ (I, 6; pp.133-5). In fact Cesar is using her as a cover for his pursuit of young Cornélie, domiciled in the same house, whom he wants to marry.¹⁸ Of the three fictional versions of her own love story, this is the truest to that revealed and told by her letters. The correspondence shows Graffigny more aware of the folly of her own enduring passion for Desmarest. Sometimes she is in despair, but occasionally she expresses incredulous joy. ‘Il n’est pas possible qu’il ait feint avec moi’, ‘mais aussi, comment se croire aimée de quelqu’un de si aimable?’. Clear-eyed yet perhaps still deluded, she was willing to put up with almost anything to keep him. ‘Je vois qu’au fond il m’est attaché. C’est tout ce que je demande. Qu’il fasse tout ce qu’il voudra’.¹⁹

But the *Péruvienne* also reflects the other essential element of Graffigny’s emotional life. Almost as important to her as Desmarest was her relationship with another member of the Lunéville group, François-Antoine Devaux. Timid, and devoted to her, ‘Panpan’ Devaux was not only the confidant of her passion. He provided the antidote to her insouciant lover. In her earliest extant letters she already addresses him as ‘l’ami de mon cœur’. Pursued sexually by another man and fearful of Desmarest’s reaction, she appeals to Devaux: ‘Mon Dieu, Panpan, pourquoi tous les hommes n’aiment-ils pas comme toi?’²⁰ Ten years later, having finally broken with Desmarest, she tells Devaux:

¹⁵Having evoked ‘la jalousie, la generosité et l’amour de ce personnage’, Graffigny tells her correspondent ‘si tu n’as reconnu personne à son portrait, tu es bien bouché’. Devaux perceives that ‘la sensible et genereuse Canadine a bien l’air d’être mon Abelle [Graffigny]’. See *Correspondance de Mme de Graffigny* 6, pp.215, 225; Letter 813 and note 17 to Letter 814 (25-2-1745 and 28-2-1745).

¹⁶Reference is to the only edition of *Les Saturnales* (drawn from manuscripts), in English Showalter, *Madame de Graffigny and Rousseau: between the Two ‘Discours’* (Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century 175 (1988)). The evidence for an ‘autobiographical’ reading of this work has been persuasively presented by Charlotte Simonin, ‘Mme de Graffigny et les amertumes de la passion, ou un cruel autoportrait dans *Les Saturnales*’, *SVEC* 2001.12, pp.467-76.

¹⁷Thus the two fictional versions of the age gap — ‘quinze ans’ for *Canadine* and ‘dix ou douze ans’ for Servilie — are exactly balanced around the real difference in age of thirteen years between her and Desmarest.

¹⁸Graffigny believed that Desmarest had been pursuing his own marriage project with her friend and former landlady Mme Masson (no Cornélie but a twice-married widow!) behind her back. See *Choix de lettres*, pp.83-5.

¹⁹*Choix de lettres*, pp.38-9, 30 (1739). It is of course absurd to try to summarise in two sentences the complexities of a fifteen-year passion, or the evidence offered by hundreds of Graffigny’s letters. In the absence of a systematic study, Charlotte Simonin’s article is valuable in this respect too.

²⁰*Correspondance* 1, pp.8, 13; Letters 8 and 14 (c.1735).

le besoin de mon cœur [...] n'est pas tout à fait celui d'aimer d'amour. Il me semble que je m'en passerais si je goûtais le plaisir de l'amitié. [...] Je ne désire point, je craindrais même, une liaison plus forte que l'amitié [...]. Je fuirais avec une véritable horreur un homme qui me ferait sentir cet ascendant supérieur que j'ai éprouvé.²¹

In a word, Desmarest and Devaux met complementary needs in Graffigny's emotional life. These are reflected in the *Péruvienne* in the roles of Aza and Déterville.

Aza and Déterville represent for Zilia love and friendship. At the end of the work, as we saw, this means 'l'amitié [qui doit] dédommager de l'amour'. But the double principle is established much earlier, when Zilia first tells Déterville that her friendship is for him and her love is for Aza (L.23). The balance is carefully maintained in the text thereafter: 'concilier les devoirs de l'amour avec ceux de l'amitié' (L.25); 'la voix de l'amour éteignait celle de l'amitié' (L.26); 'l'amitié a des yeux aussi bien que l'amour' (L.31), and so on. The theme is traditional, and the treatment here somewhat 'précieux'. But its dimensions for Graffigny are considerable. I suggested that in the *Péruvienne* Aza is the strong lover and Déterville the gentle confidant. Graffigny's own letters confirm this reading. They show her submissive to Desmarest, dependent on him and fearful of erotic domination. Devaux is the unthreatening male friend who listens and consoles, and offers her calm. Devaux was in fact submissive to her, and for twenty years she bullied him. 'Vous seriez grondez de la belle manière sur toute les extravagante louange [que vous avez faites de moi]', we read in the first sentence of her first extant letter to him.²² The pattern will never change. It is reproduced in Zilia's relation with the devoted Déterville, whom she not only uses as the confidant of her passion for Aza but dominates throughout.

The fundamental link between the correspondence and the *Péruvienne* is of course the epistolary medium itself. Graffigny records her passions and her life through intimate letters, as does Zilia. Zilia writes to her lover, it may be objected, whereas Graffigny writes to her confidant. But Zilia's last letters are to her confidant; and we know that Graffigny wrote hundreds of letters to her lover, which she managed to reclaim after Desmarest's death in 1747, and then destroyed.²³ More exactly and importantly, Zilia addresses her lover, but she writes essentially for herself. (She has no idea of Aza's whereabouts or even whether he is still alive, until L.23; she switches to French which he would not understand anyway, from L.18.) She needs to write. Graffigny's correspondence with Devaux is very much two-way. But neither she nor he waited for a letter to reply to. Each wrote, two or three times a week, to tell the other of their activities and feelings. Graffigny's correspondence with Devaux was vital to her, as a link with 'home',²⁴ as consolation, and most of all as the expression and the monument of their unique 'amitié de cœur'.²⁵ Finally, we know, as Graffigny knew, that Devaux faithfully preserved all Graffigny's letters, numbering and even annotating them. He was also supposed to edit her unpublished works after her death. The 'Avertissement' at the start of the *Péruvienne* admires the 'esprit vif et naturel' of the letters of Zilia. It explains

²¹ *Choix de lettres*, p.128 (18-4-1746); see too p.194 (26-11-1750).

²² *Correspondance 1*, p.5; Letter 7 (1733).

²³ Graffigny first reread her love-letters. Seeing them now as the record of faith and trust abused, she refers in a marvellously rueful phrase to 'ma lourde duperie, tant de zilianisme perdu' (*Choix de lettres*, p.162 (1-11-1748)). Here she projects a retrospective shape upon her letters and her fiction alike.

²⁴ Zilia, addressing her letters to Aza, assumes that she is writing 'home' to Peru: L.23.

²⁵ See English Showalter, 'Authorial consciousness in the familiar letter: the case of Mme de Graffigny', *Yale French Studies* 70/71 (1986), pp.113-28.

furthermore that ‘la complaisance qu’elle a eu[e] de les communiquer au chevalier Déterville, et la permission qu’il obtint enfin de les garder, les a fait passer jusqu’à nous’. The confidant is also the means by which the epistolary legacy, Graffigny’s or Zilia’s, has reached us.

If there was one other intense interpersonal relationship in Graffigny’s life, it was with her ‘niece’ (strictly, the daughter of a cousin), Catherine de Ligniville. This brings us back to *Cénie*. In the Lorraine years Graffigny had been partly responsible for the education of ‘Minette’ de Ligniville. In 1744 she wrote her will making the young woman her heir. In 1746 Minette came to live with Graffigny, who spent much effort in the next five years trying to arrange her marriage. Reading Minette’s letters, says Graffigny in her own correspondence, ‘je sentais en moi cette faiblesse de grand-mère’. Later she will describe herself in relation to the young woman as ‘plus que mère’.²⁶ Governess, marriage-counsellor and mother is just what Orphise will be for Cénie. ‘Cénie’ is an anagramme of ‘nièce’. That seems to make the identification fairly clear, while providing external support for the view that the principal protagonist of this play is Orphise. Thus *Cénie* combines a version of Graffigny’s story of herself and Minette with one of herself and a rectified Desmarest, assigning to a more distinguished Devaux the chief supporting role as ever.

Having argued that Graffigny’s main works have a metaphoric relation to the chief emotional relationships in her life, I will observe finally that they also have a metonymic one. That is, their composition follows closely upon crises involving all three relationships. The most important crisis is the conclusion of the fifteen-year-affair with Desmarest. In March 1743 Desmarest comes to her in Paris. At first he makes her ecstatically happy; within weeks she feels a kind of resignation to the end of it all.²⁷ He left in August, but we do not know exactly when, because for that summer we have few letters from Graffigny to Devaux. Accusing Panpan of siding with other members of the Lunéville group against her, she bitterly denounces him. In January 1744 she writes what is in effect a formal letter of rupture with Desmarest. It is perhaps unsurprising that in the summer of 1744 she decides to make her will — assigning her few worldly goods, as we just noted, to her ‘niece’.²⁸ To this pattern we can add the other. The inception of almost all of the works which she will eventually publish — those four in which I identified a broadly similar narrative and structure — occurs within a year of these crises.

The composition of the two tales published in 1745 might be seen as merely *post hoc* rather than *propter hoc*. They emerged from tasks handed out to Graffigny and other members of the ‘société du Bout-du-banc’ by the master of ceremonies Caylus. From her correspondence we know that an outline for what became the *Nouvelle espagnole* was assigned to her on 25 August 1744 (and she grumbles mightily). *La Princesse Azerolle* began its literary incarnation on 15 December 1744.²⁹ It seems certain too that this activity, and the good reception of the tales, encouraged Graffigny to develop what will

²⁶*Choix de lettres*, pp.115, 178 (letters of 13-7-1745 and 14-3-1750).

²⁷‘Je crois que c’est un rêve depuis qu’il est arrivé, premierement de voir lui-même en personne, après avoir tant craint de le perdre, et puis de voir qu’il m’aime comme la première année.’ A month later, ‘Il n’oublie rien de tout ce qu’il faut faire pour me détacher, et sans effort j’y veux parvenir’: *Correspondance* 4, pp.204, 250; Letters 538 and 553 (22-3-1743 and 24-4-1743).

²⁸For a ferocious missive to Devaux, the letter breaking with her lover, and reflections upon making her will, see *Choix de lettres*, pp.77, 86-7, 94 (letters of 30-8-43, 6?-1-1744 and 18-7-44).

²⁹See *Correspondance* 5, Letter 736, and 6, Letter 783.

be her two major works.³⁰ The first allusion in her letters to the future *Péruvienne* appears on 25 February 1745, and to *Cénie* as well in June. But she claims to have them under way already.³¹ Even allowing for exaggeration (or her habit of provoking Panpan), this seems to take their origins back to the previous year. Vera Grayson's genetic study suggests mid-1744 for the inception of *Cénie*. For the *Péruvienne* Grayson proposes early 1745. But she also gives an account of the work which must have provided its germ: Garcilaso de la Vega's history of the Incas.³² Graffigny first read Garcilaso in May 1743.

In several letters of that month Graffigny mentions that she is reading a *Histoire des Incas*. At the first mention, she says that it engages her more than 'l'*Histoire de France*' (by Mézeray). The second mention, in the course of summarising her day, goes on from 'mes *Incas* m'amusoient [=m'occupaient]' to 'le soir j'eus le Voisin [a financier from Lunéville], et puis le D. [Desmarest], qui ne s'en va jamais qu'à deux heures'. The third mention playfully invokes the work to berate Devaux, whom she has accused of lacking frankness with her:

tu as tort de ne pas connoître *Les Incas*. Ils sont écrits par un Inca lui-même et traduit, je crois, par un talapoin [monk], mais les faits sont si intéressants qu'ils font passer par-dessus tout. Tu pourrais apprendre d'eux, comme il y a apparence que tu ne le sais pas, que l'amitié est un monstre quand elle admet des réserves, et que tout doit être égal, surtout la confiance.³³

Thus not only does she find the history of the Incas 'intéressant[e]' (interesting; extraordinary?; moving?). She identifies the Inca ethos with friendship, mutual sincerity and the essential value to which I pointed earlier — 'la confiance'. The identification is joky of course, confounding private with public sincerity, but it is also very serious. We have seen that her 'amitié de cœur' with Devaux was vital to her.

But her discovery of the Incas, associated metaphorically with friendship, is also associated metonymically with her lover. In May 1743, as we have just seen, Desmarest was with her. He had come to Paris on leave from service in the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-8).³⁴ He then returned to his regiment. We have seen that the heroine's

³⁰Graffigny's literary 'progress' as a reader, critic and writer at this point is set out in Judith Curtis, 'Anticipating Zilia: Madame de Graffigny in 1744', in *Femmes savantes et femmes d'esprit: Women Intellectuals of the French Eighteenth Century*, ed. Roland Bonnel and Catherine Rubinger (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), pp.129-54.

³¹'J'ai depuis longtemps un ouvrage sur le métier que je vais reprendre', 'Je t'envoyerais bientôt ce que j'ai fait, qui n'est pas l'autre chose'; in July 1745 she refers to 'deux ouvrages qui peuvent être jolis si je parviens à remplir mes plans déjà trop avancés': *Correspondance* 6, pp.215, 396, 490; Letters 813, 854 and 876.

³²See Grayson, 'Genesis', pp.8-11, 43-4. Graffigny first read Garcilaso in the old translation by Jean Baudouin (*Commentaire royal* (Paris, 1633)), republished by J.-F. Bernard as *Histoire des Incas* (Amsterdam, 1715) which she probably used in the edition of 1737. Subsequently she consulted the new condensed version by J.-F. Dalibart, also entitled *Histoire des Incas*, (Amsterdam, 1744) which she draws on directly in the *Péruvienne*. In his edition of the *Péruvienne*, Jonathan Mallinson like previous critics observes that Garcilaso offers a idealised picture of Inca civilisation (p.13). His notes to the text cite a number of passages, mainly from Dalibart's version.

³³*Correspondance* 4, pp.265, 274, 283; Letters 558, 560 and 562 (6-5-1743, 12-5-1743 and 17-5-1743). Her reading of the *Incas* is mentioned just once more, in Letter 563, where it is linked with her friend and mentor the abbé Pérau, with the financier, and with Desmarest whom she is about to see.

³⁴Her letter reporting his long-awaited arrival in Paris brings in the military reference (jokingly, once more) in the first sentence. 'Le D est arrivé d'hier enfin, et je ne parle plus que guerre et combat': *Correspondance* 4, p.201; Letter 537 (19-3-1743).

separation from her betrothed is linked in both the *Péruvienne* and *Cénie* with a military conflict. Desmarest had arrived via Lunéville from central Europe, where he had survived the siege of Prague. Not quite the Indies, one might object. But hostilities in the War of the Austrian Succession reached beyond Europe. They extended to the New World, including from later 1744 India itself (around Madras), where France vied with Britain. Graffigny began composing her two major works at precisely this time. Evoking the military service of Déterville (*Péruvienne*, L.19), and Clerval and Dorsainville (*Cénie*, I, 5 and 8), she was probably thinking of this war. And surely the service that she had in mind was that of Desmarest, which caused her an anxiety expressed in many of her letters of the earlier 1740s. What is certain is that when she discovered the kingdom of the Incas Desmarest was with her. They were separated by the war as well as his 'infidelity'. And when she came to compose the *Péruvienne* she knew it to be almost certain that they would never be together again.