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Righteous Letters: Vindications of Two Refugees in *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* and Its Unauthorized Sequel, *Lettres taïtiennes*

Abstract
Some of the most heated discussions in the eighteenth century revolved around the issue of human rights and the fundamentals of international law. Throughout this period, jurists and philosophers applied themselves to the study of the law of nations and the rules of diplomacy. Repeatedly they pointed to the value of establishing an active international community, debating the extent of the political role of this community, as well as the laws that should ideally regulate international relations. They mainly attempted to theorize what Castel de Saint-Pierre, in 1712, called a "system of peace," that is, a political system capable of ensuring peace and happiness throughout Europe. Only on occasion did someone bring up the idea that the international community might have duties towards individuals who lost their homes as the result of civil or foreign wars. In 1758, for example, Emmerich de Vattel argued that granting refuge meant more than simply granting a person entry within a country's borders: "le Souverain ne peut accorder l'entrée de ses États pour faire tomber les étrangers dans un piège. Dès qu'il les reçoit, il s'engage à les protéger comme ses propres sujets, à les faire jouir, autant qu'il dépend de lui, d'une entière sûreté." As he described the humanitarian objectives of national and international laws, Vattel took care to underline the ongoing nature of a country's responsibilities towards the people it agreed to host. This was a groundbreaking concept, both because of the ideals it represented, and because, at the time, European governments had not yet developed national or international policies with which to address the situation of refugees. Until the end of the eighteenth century, nations tended to respond to the arrival of foreign exiles—such as French Huguenots, Spanish Jews, English Jacobites, and Dutch Patriots—on the basis of self-serving and ad hoc political or economic calculations.

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Righteous Letters: Vindications of Two Refugees in *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* and Its Unauthorized Sequel, *Lettres taïtiennes*

Giulia Pacini

Some of the most heated discussions in the eighteenth century revolved around the issue of human rights and the fundamentals of international law.[1] Throughout this period, jurists and philosophers applied themselves to the study of the law of nations and the rules of diplomacy. Repeatedly they pointed to the value of establishing an active international community, debating the extent of the political role of this community, as well as the laws that should ideally regulate international relations. They mainly attempted to theorize what Castel de Saint-Pierre, in 1712, called a "system of peace," that is, a political system capable of ensuring peace and happiness throughout Europe. Only on occasion did someone bring up the idea that the international community might have duties towards individuals who lost their homes as the result of civil or foreign wars.[2] In 1758, for example, Emmerich

1 Compare *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. and trans. Lynn Hunt (Boston and New York: Bedford and St Martin's Press, 1996), 4–12; Francis S. Ruddy, *International Law in the Enlightenment: The Background to Emmerich de Vattel's "Le Droit des gens"* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1975). This article was written with the support of a College of William and Mary summer research grant.

2 Until the end of the eighteenth century, the only "refugees" recognized as such were the Huguenots, who left France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. The socio-political category of the "refugee," moreover, was not theorized until the nineteenth century: see Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (New

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de Vattel argued that granting refuge meant more than simply granting a person entry within a country's borders: "le Souverain ne peut accorder l'entrée de ses États pour faire tomber les étrangers dans un piège. Dès qu'il les reçoit, il s'engage à les protéger comme ses propres sujets, à les faire jouir, autant qu'il dépend de lui, d'une entière sûreté."[3] As he described the humanitarian objectives of national and international laws, Vattel took care to underline the ongoing nature of a country's responsibilities towards the people it agreed to host. This was a groundbreaking concept, both because of the ideals it represented, and because, at the time, European governments had not yet developed national or international policies with which to address the situation of refugees. Until the end of the eighteenth century, nations tended to respond to the arrival of foreign exiles—such as French Huguenots, Spanish Jews, English Jacobites, and Dutch Patriots—on the basis of self-serving and ad hoc political or economic calculations.[4]

Given the rarity of any discussion in the eighteenth century about the situation of refugees, it is striking to note that this exact problem figures at the centre of a novel by a woman writer from Lorraine. In *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, an immensely successful epistolary novel first published in 1747 and then re-edited in 1752, Françoise de Graffigny displayed a distinctive interest in addressing the psychological, socio-political, economic, and legal ramifications of war, imprisonment, and exile.[5] Like Vattel, she emphasized how prisoners of war and refugees have long-term needs that their hosting community must address. By setting her novel in an explicitly colonial context, moreover, Graffigny sharpened the focus of discussion to highlight the unbalanced power

York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 8; and Laura Barnett, "Global Governance and the Evolution of the International Refugee Regime," *International Journal of Refugee Law* 14, nos. 2–3 (2002): 238–41.

3 Emmerich de Vattel, *Le Droit des gens, ou principes de la loi naturelle appliqués à la conduite et aux affaires des Nations et des Souverains*, intro. Albert de Lapradelle, 3 vols. (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1983), 1:331.

4 Barnett, 240. Governments sometimes allocated funds to foreign exiles whose futures were considered linked to that of the hosting state: the French granted pensions to the exiled Jacobite court and to the Dutch Patriots, in 1746 and 1788 respectively, in the hope that a reversal of their fortunes might benefit the French crown. The Jacobites received a few thousand *livres*, while the usual allocation for the Dutch exiles was 14 *livres* each, upon their arrival in France. See Michael Rapport, *Nationality and Citizenship in Revolutionary France: The Treatment of Foreigners, 1789–1799* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 66, 69.

5 Graffigny's experience as a non-French woman may have made her sensitive to the difficulties that foreigners experienced (the Lorrains and the French were juridically assimilated in 1738, but the duchy's political incorporation did not take place until 1766).

structures that configured colonial relationships, ultimately bringing up the question of European responsibility towards the inhabitants of its overseas colonies. As she depicted the plight of a Peruvian woman victimized by European expansionist enterprise, Graffigny insisted that human beings maintain their fundamental rights even after they have fallen into captivity. Far from assuming that they should simply be grateful for their lives, she suggested that prisoners of war are entitled to exceptional forms of protection and social support. Last but not least, as she raised the crucial question of what happens when a refugee is forced to resettle on foreign soil, Graffigny intimated to her readership that the effects of European colonialism would soon become visible at home, in France, as well as overseas.

The novel relates the adventures of an Incan princess made prisoner during the conquest of Peru. Initially captured by the Spanish, Zilia changes hands when the French attack the Spanish boats: in accordance with the "droit de la guerre," the Peruvian woman is given to the victorious French commander, the chevalier de Déterville, who, in the name of the King of France, seems authorized to keep and then to free the prisoner he has taken.[6] Following orders by Déterville, Zilia thus embarks on a journey that inexplicably transports her, over time and across space, from sixteenth-century Peru to eighteenth-century Paris. As her generous master and protector, the chevalier does his best to ease Zilia's integration into French society. Nevertheless, Zilia's correspondence with Aza (her cousin, the Incan prince she was initially supposed to marry) reveals the difficulties that arise throughout this process. As she illustrated the Peruvian's progressive integration into French society, Graffigny investigated the economic, social, and psychological consequences of shifting levels in education, wealth, and rank. More important, she took pains to link her heroine's troubles to her status, first as a prisoner of war and then as a refugee.

Surprisingly, literary scholars have ignored this critical aspect of Graffigny's story: they have preferred to focus on the novel's

6 Françoise de Graffigny, *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, in *Lettres Portugaises, Lettres d'une Péruvienne et autres romans d'amour par lettres*, ed. Bernard Bray (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1983), 307. References are to this edition. In 1747, an anonymous seven-letter *Suite* to Graffigny's novel clarified that Déterville was the "maître de la destinée de cette belle Indienne par les Loix de la guerre." This *Suite* is included at the end of *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, ed. Gianni Nicoletti (Bari: Adriatica Éditrice, 1967), 333. Graffigny's decision to grant Déterville rights over his prisoner accords with early modern military philosophy and practices. See, for example, Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace, including the War of Nature and of Nations*, trans. A.C. Campbell, 3 vols. (Westport: Hyperion Reprint, 1993), 3:347.

philosophical critique of French society and on Zilia's ultimate preference for friendship over marriage. Although this work is fictional with an unrealistic time warp at its centre, it seems important to take the historical background of *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* seriously. After all, Graffigny chose to reinforce this aspect of her text by adding a historical introduction (possibly written by Antoine Bret) to the second edition of the novel. Furthermore, Zilia's actions and vindications make much more sense if read in the light of her particular political situation.[7] In the following pages, I will argue that the Peruvian's letters represent the concrete concerns of an exiled and suddenly declassed victim of European colonial ambitions. The novel points out that, during the early modern period, an initially destitute, non-Catholic, female refugee who lacked precise technical skills and whose foreign values and unusual behaviour could have been viewed as a challenge to French conventions would not have been able to integrate easily into French society.[8] Zilia's letters represent the bleakness of this situation, voicing the needs and rights of a person who has been separated violently from her family and native culture.

By creating a work of fiction with a double sentimental plot, Graffigny commented on the limitations of a relationship based on love: with two aborted romances (one between Zilia and Aza, the other between Zilia and the chevalier de Déterville), *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* intimates that romantic attachments are insufficient to guarantee a female refugee's security and happiness over the years. Given her double disadvantage as a woman and a refugee, Zilia realizes she must look for a more reliable and binding social contract. Her letters to Aza and Déterville focus increasingly on juridico-political issues: Graffigny adopted and exploited the emotional charge of a sentimental epistolary novel to bolster her heroine's discourse of rights.[9]

First, as critics have traditionally pointed out, by having Zilia compare memories of Cuzco with her first impressions of Paris, Graffigny

7 Standard romance-novel conventions, which include the need for an attractive heroine, seem to encourage readers to fixate on Zilia's original status as a rich princess; readers tend to forget that the Peruvian spends most of her life as a prisoner of war and a refugee.

8 Foreigners were only welcomed and protected by the French State if they were ideologically and politically aligned with the interests of the French crown, or if they possessed a valuable form of technical expertise (for example, artisanal or military). See Rapport, 31–82.

9 Regarding the relationship between sentimental narratives and the emergence of a discourse of human rights in late eighteeenth-century Europe, see Hunt, "The Paradoxical Origins of Human Rights," in *Human Rights and Revolutions*, ed. Jeffrey Wasserstrom, Lynn Hunt, and Marilyn Young (Lanham and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 14.

used her heroine's descriptions of Peru to signify a remote and bygone ideal world, an exemplary Utopia to which the many flaws of contemporary France could be juxtaposed. As with Montesquieu's Persian ambassadors in *Lettres persanes* and so many other exotic correspondents of the French epistolary tradition, the conceit of a foreign voice allowed Graffigny to describe life in Paris from a purportedly objective, external point of view. Yet, contrary to *Lettres persanes*, which voices the opinions of free and privileged male heroes, *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* represents the original perspective of a vulnerable female refugee. The Peruvian's voice serves to condemn the gendering of French society, as well as the generally contradictory and "depraved" nature of the Parisians (330).[10] Zilia takes issue with French women not receiving a proper education and their following oppression by the chains of marriage (341–47). Women do not even find protection before the law: they suffer from a lack of rights, though they sometimes find consolation in the privileges of rank and money. Zilia explains to Aza:

> celles [les femmes] du peuple, accablées de travail, n'en sont soulagées ni par les lois, ni par leurs maris; celles d'un rang plus élevé, jouets de la séduction ou de la méchanceté des hommes, n'ont pour se dédommager de leurs perfidies, que les dehors d'un respect purement imaginaire, toujours suivi de la plus mordante satire. (340)

Zilia laments her sex's gendered status and ultimately justifies whatever strategies Parisian women may adopt as a form of personal resistance:

> Comment ne seraient-elles pas révoltées contre l'injustice des lois qui tolèrent l'impunité des hommes, poussée au même excès que leur autorité? ... Par quelle inconséquence les Français peuvent espérer qu'une jeune femme accablée de l'indifférence de son mari ne cherche pas à se soustraire à l'espèce d'anéantissement qu'on lui présente sous toutes sortes de formes? (345–46)

Locked into this critical analysis of eighteenth-century women's lives is a parallel meditation on the psychological, social, political, legal, and cultural situation of Europe's subaltern Others. With this fiction

10 Zilia writes: "il me semble que les femmes naissent ici bien plus communément que chez nous, avec toutes les dispositions nécessaires pour égaler les hommes en mérite et en vertus. Mais comme s'ils en convenaient au fond de leur cœur, et que leur orgueil ne pût supporter cette égalité, ils contribuent en toute manière à les rendre méprisables ... . Quand tu sauras qu'ici l'autorité est entièrement du côté des hommes, tu ne douteras pas, mon cher Aza, qu'ils ne soient responsables de tous les désordres de la société" (344–45).

of a young woman captured during the Spanish conquest of Peru, Graffigny denounced the cruelty with which the Incan civilization was destroyed. Echoing passages by Las Casas, Montaigne, and Voltaire, her novel opens with a grim description of the horrors that accompanied this historical event.[11] Zilia remembers:

> Les pavés du temple ensanglantés, l'image du Soleil foulée aux pieds, des soldats furieux poursuivant nos Vierges éperdues et massacrant tout ce qui s'opposait à leur passage; nos *Mamas* expirantes sous leurs coups, et dont les habits brûlaient encore du feu de leur tonnerre; les gémissements et l'épouvante, les cris de la fureur répandant de toutes parts l'horreur et l'effroi, m'ôtèrent jusqu'au sentiment. (259)

In addition to denouncing these irreversible past actions, the novel raises questions about the ongoing consequences, in the eighteenth century, of the European colonial project. Doubling the text's first representation of Peru as a Utopian ideal, Zilia's exotic place of origin is used once more to signify a contemporary international reality.[12] Graffigny's heroine obviously believes that the "droits de l'humanité" or the "lois de l'humanité" should have protected the Incas against the Spaniards' violence, but given this history, she now intimates that the Europeans' interference in her life has given them particular responsibilities (252; 306). They must compensate for uprooting her from her country and forcing her to rebuild a life in a confusing, foreign environment. In particular, since "le droit de la guerre" placed her in their hands, Zilia believes that the French, in the form of Déterville, should equip her with some kind of ongoing support (307).

This argument is most clearly articulated at the novel's end, when Zilia refuses to marry her French master. For many readers, this decision comes (and came) as a particularly surprising ending, not only because Zilia has just discovered that her Peruvian lover is unfaithful, but also because she has always admired Déterville. Still, she cannot renounce her feelings for Aza, and, she suggests, a French man would never really understand her. Their reciprocal affection could not

11 Compare Las Casas, *Tyrannie et cruauté des espagnols commises ès Indes occidentales* (first trans. into French in 1582), Montaigne's essay "Des Coches," and Voltaire's *Alzire* (mentioned in Graffigny's "Avertissement" at the beginning of the novel).

12 Graffigny's decision to maintain the plot time warp—despite contemporary critics, who raised questions about this anachronism—testifies that she intended "Peru" to signify doubly in this novel, representing both a sixteenth-century history *and* an eighteenth-century colonial reality. For eighteenth-century comments on the novel's anachronisms, see Elie-Catherine Fréron, *Lettres sur quelques écrits de ce temps* (Genève, 1749), 1:91–92; and Abbé Joseph de La Porte, *Observations sur la Littérature Moderne* (London, 1752), 47–48.

compensate for the cultural differences that divide them: "vous n'êtes point de ma nation," she explains (312). To console her rejected suitor, Zilia can only express "le regret de n'être point née en France" (361).

This unromantic conclusion takes an even more striking turn when the Peruvian insists that the chevalier and his sister continue to befriend her nonetheless. Graffigny marked this demand as one of the most singular events in the novel as she allowed Zilia to interrupt, for this sole purpose, her long and exclusive monologue with the silent Aza. The extraordinary character of this letter—the first epistle in the novel to address someone other than Aza, and possibly the first to receive a response—is further intensified by Zilia's adoption of a discourse of rights. The Peruvian expresses feelings of guilt for having caused the separation of brother and sister, but she proceeds more positively to argue that, although she may have rejected Déterville as a suitor, she remains entitled to his friendship and support. She refuses to let the chevalier forsake his natural and social ties: "vous entendrez prononcer mon nom, vous recevrez mes lettres, vous écouterez mes prières," she insists; "le sang et l'amitié reprendront leurs droits sur votre cœur" (354).

Besides noting his "blood" or family obligations—Déterville must return from Malta and not abandon his sister Céline—Zilia reminds the chevalier that their friendship is complicated by the uncertainty of her position. When she goes on to argue that he must fulfil "les devoirs de l'amitié" to help assuage her "peines" or "maux," she is most probably referring to more than her sentimental troubles (355). It seems highly reductive to read her pain in exclusively psychological terms, only as the pathetic outburst of an abandoned heroine. Much more likely, Zilia's words refer as well to previously stated feelings of cultural ignorance, solitude, and social awkwardness—all of which persist even after she has mastered the French language and recovered her Peruvian wealth.[13] She complains at Céline's marriage:

> je ne suis guère moins embarrassée que je ne l'étais en arrivant en France ... . Je reste dans une espèce de stupidité qui fournirait sans doute beaucoup à [la plaisanterie des Français], s'ils avaient le loisir de s'en apercevoir; mais ils sont

13 This broader interpretation of Zilia's understanding of her troubles matches the notice she takes of the legal, social, and educational difficulties faced, for example, by women in patriarchal France. Since Zilia usually includes elements of cultural criticism when she describes the French and their feelings (see the case of Céline), it seems strange not to assume that she is doing the same as she talks about her own.

> si occupés d'eux-mêmes, que mon étonnement leur échappe. Il n'est que trop fondé, mon cher Aza, je vois ici des prodiges dont les ressorts sont impénétrables à mon imagination. (326–27)

Far from being a free and easy friendship founded on the shared enjoyment of each other's company, Zilia and Déterville's relationship is skewed by the problem of her social and cultural dependency. In the Peruvian's mind, the chevalier is not just a friend (or just another friend) who can walk off when he pleases. His intervention in her life has given him unique and irreversible duties.

Indeed, Zilia views—and has always viewed—her relationship to the chevalier in political terms: at first she saw him as an Incan subject whose gifts were due tributes to her royal status. Later, when she realizes that in France she is nothing but a refugee, she links this condition to Déterville's intervention in her life. Throughout the novel, she continues to view the chevalier as the officer of the king of France. Only as such can she accept his financial support, for she believes that in France her honour will depend on refusing gifts that do not come directly from the monarch (304, 322). Although Zilia eventually develops personal feelings of friendship for the private individual Déterville, this attachment remains secondary to the conditions and logic of her primary relationship to the king's man.

In addition to invoking the importance of their friendship, Zilia insists on the chevalier's obligations towards her, reminding him that in France she has no other form of support (psychological, social, and cultural): "que les devoirs de l'amitié vous ramènent," she writes, "Si vous m'abandonnez, où trouverai-je des cœurs sensibles à mes peines?" (355). Abandonment, isolation, and disorientation have been the Peruvian's worst fears since the terrible moment she was forced out of the Incan Temple of the Sun, and therefore "retenue dans une étroite captivité, privée de toute communication avec nos citoyens, ignorant la langue de ces hommes féroces" (257). The experiences of captivity and exile confused her psychologically, culturally, spatially, and ontologically: in the darkness of prison, she could no longer make sense of "la place que j'occupe dans l'univers" (260; compare 266). From that moment, Zilia associates her unhappiness with the uncertainty of her socio-cultural and geo-spatial situation: she constantly laments the undesirable nature of the positions that she is forced to occupy in France. On board Déterville's ship, she complains that the French "me refusent ... jusqu'à la liberté de choisir

la place où je veux être" (271); she detests the "affreuse contrainte où ils me retiennent," and continues to be torn between different systems and spaces even after her arrival on the Continent (273). Déterville's mother has her conducted "presque malgré moi dans une chambre au plus haut de la maison" (289). When she finds herself alone in what are obviously servants' quarters, Zilia complains about the brutality of the maid "qui m'avait arrachée d'un lieu où j'avais intérêt de rester" (290); she miserably notes: "je me croyais abandonée de tout le monde" (290). To make matters worse, Déterville's mother eventually banishes Zilia and Céline from the house, condemning them to the solitude of convent life (301). In general, Zilia is disturbed by the difference between her clearly defined status and situation in Peru and her current and all too unstable existence as a homeless refugee. As she tries to understand the hierarchical organization of French society, she has trouble defining her own, as yet terribly unstable, position within the latter's ranks: "Oh ciel!" she asks, "dans quelle classe dois-je me ranger?" (304).

Zilia's insecurities about her social, economic, cultural, and geographic place in the world are aggravated every time Céline or Déterville—her new points of reference—seems to disappear.[14] The first time Déterville goes off to war, she worries in a letter to Aza: "À qui pourrais-je avoir recours, s'il m'arrivait de nouveaux malheurs? Je n'étais entendue de personne" (301). As already noted, Zilia reiterates these anxieties during Céline's wedding, a disheartening moment when she sees her friend embark on a new life and no one else has the "complaisance" to notice or answer her questions: the Parisians are apparently too distracted by their own feelings of self-importance (326). Even though she has mastered the French language by this point, Zilia continues to suffer from loneliness and cultural confusion. With its emphasis on location, her question to Déterville suggests that these worries will never leave her: "si vous m'abandonnez, *où* trouverai-je des cœurs sensibles à mes peines?" (355, emphasis added). The refugee repeatedly struggles to understand where she stands socially, economically, culturally, and existentially. This sense of vulnerability causes her to search for a central point of reference capable of giving her a sense of direction.

14 Zilia's isolation must have been important to Graffigny, who chose to intensify this condition in her 1751 revision of the novel. See Vera L. Grayson, "The Genesis and Reception of Mme de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* and *Cénie*," *SVEC* 336 (1996): 34–35.

In her last letters, however, instead of reiterating the exact nature of these difficulties, Zilia focuses on Déterville's responsibilities towards her. She emphasizes her right to his support, immediately linking this fact to her displacement and isolation. She understands that her departure from Peru has diminished the likelihood of her ever being perfectly autonomous and happy. Exile—being brought to France—has made her vulnerable to the norms regulating French gender constructions (in Peru, women were allegedly treated better), just as it has also separated her from a country and social system in which she occupied a secure and clearly defined position. Even when she is freed from financial worry, she remains a foreigner who will need help interpreting the Parisians' contradictory social codes.

When these anxieties seize Zilia, she reminds herself that Déterville, as the officer who brought her to France, is accountable for the quality of her life: since he contributed to her uprooting and consequent disorientation, he owes her his assistance. A compensatory and contractual understanding of their relationship supports the woman's claim, giving her the confidence and energy necessary to address Déterville and to voice her demands. Zilia picks up pen and paper not only to write of their friendship, but also to defend her right, as a disoriented refugee and a victim of Europe's colonial enterprise, to the chevalier's psychological, social, and cultural support. Her happiness in the present and her hopes for the future are contained in these feelings of entitlement. Having discovered the problematic gendering of French society and knowing that, despite her newly established financial independence, she occupies the weak position of a solitary and culturally naive refugee, Graffigny's heroine wields pen and paper to fight for a relationship that alone can grant her the happiness and stability necessary to enjoy the beauty of life ("le plaisir d'être") (362).

Lettres d'une Péruvienne presents speech and writing as two empowering activities. Mastering the French language helps Zilia develop a sense of self, for she examines her emotions and ideas in her letters to Aza.[15] The acquisition of new linguistic skills increases the Peruvian's control over her life, allowing her to redefine the terms of her relationships with others. At the beginning of the novel, as Zilia lies ill on board the ship carrying her to France, Déterville forces an

15 Since Zilia has run out of *quipos* (Peruvian ropes that were knotted to express meaning), the only way she can communicate with Aza—and therefore analyse her own feelings and ideas—is through writing in French.

untenable agreement upon her: he makes her repeat the sounds "oui, je vous aime" and "je vous promets d'être à vous" before the Peruvian understands their meaning (278). Months later, when Zilia is more linguistically savvy, she corrects the terms of this contract, glossing Déterville's "love" as a form of friendship that allows her to be faithful to her feelings for Aza (311).[16] In similar fashion, at the end of the novel, Zilia initiates a correspondence with Déterville to remind him of the protection he owes her, in accordance with the terms of their original master-prisoner or protector-protege relationship.

At this point in the text, Zilia no longer defines herself in terms of a romantic relationship with another man: she rewrites her earlier lamentation to Aza—"Tu ignoreras toujours où je suis, si je t'aime, si j'existe" (272)—removing his love from the picture and turning her sentence into an unequivocal expression of joy: "ce bonheur si pur, je suis, je vis, j'existe" (362). As she erases the earlier reference to her geographic displacement, she gives the impression of having come to terms somewhat with the decentred nature of her life. Yet, at the same time, Zilia also recognizes the conditions that ensure this newly constructed happiness. She explains to Déterville: "cette pensée si douce, ce bonheur si pur, *je suis, je vis, j'existe*, pourrait seul rendre heureux, si l'on s'en souvenait, si l'on en jouissait, si l'on en connaissait le prix" (362). In order to appreciate the beauty of her present situation, Zilia must remind herself of the latter's fragility. She must appreciate how fortunate she was to be rescued by the chevalier and to enjoy his ongoing support. She has also seen how indispensable it is, in France, to own property and to be financially independent. She has realized how difficult it is for a French woman to control her reputation and destiny. As a lone foreigner and refugee, she cannot forget how different her situation would be (or would have been) without the presence of friends and cultural mediators such as Déterville and Céline.

As Zilia realizes that she owes her happiness to the chevalier and his sister, she acknowledges that her "plaisir d'être" is far from absolute: it is founded on a contractual form of sociability that provides something more than good company and intellectual gratification. In addition to these pleasures (which Déterville and Céline will undoubtedly enjoy as well), this arrangement offers Zilia a guarantee of

16 Zilia therefore maintains her bicultural—French Peruvian—identity: see Janet G. Altman, "Lettres et le néant: l'invention de l'écriture postcoloniale chez Graffigny," in *Sur la plume des vents: Mélanges de littérature épistolaire offerts à Bernard Bray*, ed. Ulrike Michalowsky (Paris: Klincksieck, 1996), 171.

support—that ever-so-desirable possibility of assistance ("recours" [301]) of which she has always dreamed for eventual moments of crisis. Far from simply representing the autarchic dream of a self-sufficient woman, the novel's conclusion describes a sociability of interdependency that alone can ensure the happiness of the displaced colonial subject.

This ending begs the reader to rethink notions of friendship and of "les devoirs de l'amitié" (355). As she integrates into French society, Zilia learns about the ways in which social interactions can be affected by existing power-structures and economic constraints (the principle of primogeniture, for example, predestines Céline to the solitude of a convent and Déterville to the Order of Malta). This knowledge incites the Peruvian to structure the most important actions and relationships in her life according to carefully regulated economies of exchange or compensation. Contrary to what she would have done in Peru, in France Zilia the refugee only accepts gifts and help that come her way honourably through Déterville, the emissary of the king of France. She refuses the presents that Céline and her brother offer her on a personal level. She only accepts the house her friends give her when she realizes that she has unwittingly signed the title to this property, and when she discovers that, in any case, the house was bought with her own Peruvian gold (349). A similar interest in regulating every exchange—whether financial or social—appears when Zilia feels the need to clarify the terms of her friendship with Déterville. If in her last letter she suggests that they trade moral lessons for intellectual knowledge, the novel has by then intimated that this agreement is secondary to the conditions of their first (master-prisoner/protector-protege) interaction.[17] Rather than simply representing a free form of sociability inspired by the "pure" pleasure of having company, friendship in this novel is, to a great extent, configured as a socio-political and economic relationship well defined in terms of mutual obligations and individual rights. The basic terms of this relationship, moreover, are affected by the particular conditions that gave rise to the characters' first encounter.

Zilia's discourse of rights causes us to reconsider and therefore want to nuance traditional readings of the conclusion of *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*. Literary critics generally note the extent of Zilia's

17 Zilia tells her friend: "Vous me donnerez quelque connaissance de vos sciences et de vos arts; vous goûterez le plaisir de la supériorité; je la reprendrai en développant dans votre cœur des vertus que vous n'y connaissez pas" (362).

troubles—they rightly stress that she suffers from "la perte de [sa] liberté, de [son] rang, de [sa] patrie," as well as from the loss of Aza's love (356)—but they then concentrate their attention on the Peruvian's impressive process of psychological and cultural reconstruction. Studies of the novel tend to conclude either with a celebration of Zilia's new-found independence, or with sceptical comments about the idealistic and self-deceptive nature of her final choices. Few people would deny the radical nature of Zilia's character and decisions. Her interest in the arts and sciences, the pleasure that she finds in writing, her criticism of French society and of marriage, and her general contentment with a retiring lifestyle were extraordinary in 1747. Of course, Zilia also stands out for the ways in which she defends the importance of a non-European culture.[18] I would also argue that her specific history and ultimate discourse of rights signal her identity as a refugee with ongoing needs.[19] Just as she recognizes the importance, in France, of possessing money and property, so she realistically perceives the precariousness of her position. Rich as she may be in the end, the Peruvian has few illusions about a female refugee's autonomy in patriarchal French society. To a great extent, the modernity of Graffigny's character should be attributed to her awareness of her needs and her understanding of her rights. Zilia's lucid assessment of her situation and her overarching political consciousness set her apart from other equally strong and original French literary heroines—such as LaFayette's princesse de Clèves—who in the second half of the seventeenth century chose the peace of a solitary retreat over marriage and a social life. As a vulnerable refugee Zilia knows that, for her, complete autonomy is not an option.

The force of this discourse of rights and Graffigny's general sensitivity to the problems of displacement and exile were striking enough to be noticed by Marie-Josèphe de L'Escun, Mme de Montbart, who, in 1784, furthered these considerations in her *Lettres taïtiennes*, an

18 As Altman has pointed out, Graffigny's heroine can be seen as "one of the first politically conscious heroines from the colonized third world"; she "constantly negotiate[s] room for 'Peru' in a society that attempts to eliminate or expropriate her culture." Altman, "Making Room for *Peru*: Graffigny's Novel Reconsidered," in *Dilemmes du roman*, ed. Catherine Lafarge (Saratoga: Anma Libri, 1989), 46.

19 At least L. Etienne seems to have grasped a part of Graffigny's argument as he took issue, in 1871, with the latter's defence of (what he calls) "parasitism," that is, people feeling they have a "natural right" to some form of social, State-mandated support. See Etienne, "Un roman socialiste d'autrefois," in *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, ed. Nicoletti, 489. This article first appeared in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (15 July 1871).

unauthorized epistolary fiction presented as a *Suite* to *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*. Contrary to the authors of other, better-known sequels to this novel, Montbart was not interested in wrapping up Graffigny's original plot by marrying off Zilia to Aza or Déterville.[20] Instead of focusing her energies on bringing the romance plot of *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* to a close, Monbart chose to develop the thrust of her predecessor's philosophical argument, continuing to dramatize the ramifications of European actions overseas. Similar to Graffigny, she too pointed to the socio-political and legal problems that, in the eighteenth century, were beginning to cloud Europe's international horizons. Like *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, Montbart's *Suite* stages the troubles experienced by a female refugee forced to live in France. *Lettres taïtiennes* also raises the question of how to deal with the problems experienced by a foreigner obliged to function within the French cultural, social, and legal system. Montbart's novel points to the importance of respecting an individual's fundamental rights—in peace as in war—as he or she travels across national boundaries.[21]

The novel describes the arrival of British and French explorers in Tahiti, illustrating the ruinous violence that resulted from these encounters. Montbart represents both the gradual corruption of an individual Tahitian named Zeïr and the larger destruction of this man's native culture. Drawing on the history of Aotourou, the

20 Hugary de Lamarche-Courmont has Zilia marry Aza in his *Lettres d'Aza ou d'un Péruvien, Conclusion des Lettres d'une Péruvienne (*1749), while Morel de Vindé makes Zilia marry Déterville in her *Suite* (1797). These sequels are included in Nicoletti's critical edition of *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*.

21 Montbart maintained the narrative and epistemological gaps that characterize the structure of Graffigny's original novel, thereby doing justice to the open-ended nature of *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*. Besides adopting a similarly fragmented epistolary format, Montbart positioned her sequel's plot in a disjointed but nonetheless parallel relationship to Graffigny's initial intrigue: she added another time and another place to the already convoluted settings of *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, effectively reproducing, with this late eighteenth-century Tahitian sequel, a time warp similar to the one that, in Graffigny's text, first connected sixteenth-century Peru to mid-eighteenth-century France. Instead of pretending to continue the original plot in an (impossibly) seamless manner, Montbart constructed a conceptual bridge between *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* and her own peculiar sequel. She therefore seems to have sensed an argument crucial to the structure of the former novel: like Graffigny, Montbart may have realized that, as Europe encountered more and more cultures overseas, the articulation of an exhaustive global History was becoming increasingly difficult, if not actually impossible. Instead of attempting to account for the distance that separates sixteenth-century Peru from eighteenth-century France, Graffigny boldly affirmed the limits of her novel's overarching narrative through an extravagant time warp. Following this move, Montbart similarly proclaimed her novel's inevitable difference from *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* and conceded an analogous inability to represent the complex dynamics of contemporary international relations.

Tahitian who returned to France with Bougainville in 1769, the novel opens upon Zeïr's decision to join a group of French explorers when they start their journey home. As he writes Zulica, his lover, and his French friend St Val, the Tahitian expresses excitement about his life in France—until he discovers the Parisians' hypocritical, contradictory, and frivolous character, as well as their generally dissolute lifestyle. *Lettres taïtiennes* thus reiterates some of the most scathing points of cultural criticism in *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*. More important, Montbart continues to echo Graffigny's words as she invokes "les lois sacrés de l'humanité" and denounces the European explorers' behaviour overseas.[22] From Tahiti, Zulica describes the violence with which the French and British have treated her people. Her letters to Zeïr depict the divisions that these explorers have created within her own community. As a result of their arrival, she loses lover, family, friends, and country, as well as all understanding of her psychological, social, or cultural identity: "Je n'ai plus d'amis, plus de parents, plus de patrie; en un mot, je ne m'appartiens plus" (1:126; compare 2:18).

Through a complicated set of circumstances, Zulica is eventually sold to the British, brought to Europe, and finally, after many adventures, reunited with Zeïr. Before they can meet again, however, Montbart's heroine finds herself defending her legal right to his companionship. As was the case in *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, once again it is the formally most unusual—and therefore the most striking—letter of *Lettres taïtiennes* that conveys the heroine's most important claim.[23] This is the first and virtually the only time that Zulica ever addresses someone other than her lover, and she does so only when she needs to defend the cross-cultural validity of her Tahitian—that is, locally determined— rights.[24] In a "démarche qui ... paraîtra singulière," Zulica picks up pen and paper to address Mme de Germeuil, a Frenchwoman who manipulated Zeïr into swearing both orally and in writing that he will marry her (Germeuil) and abandon "cette

22 Marie-Josèphe de L'Escun, Mme de Montbart, *Lettres taïtiennes, Suite aux Lettres Péruviennes,* 2 vols. (Paris: Marchands de Nouveautés, n.d.), 1:12; compare also 1:126. I have modernized the spelling of Montbart's original text. References are to this edition.

23 As Julia Douthwaite notes: "The heroine's writing has the same symbolic value in the *Lettres taïtiennes* that it had in the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne,* signaling the woman's ascendancy to the status of writer, with the intellect and self-determination necessary to control her destiny." *Exotic Women: Literary Heroines and Cultural Strategies in Ancien Régime France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 165–66.

24 In addition to this letter to Mme de Germeuil, Zulica adds a few lines to St Val's letter to his sister at the end of the novel, when she wants to express her joy upon being reunited with Zeïr.

étrangère," Zulica (2:111, 77). The "imperious" Frenchwoman refuses to accept Zeïr's Tahitian values and his polygamous way of life: Mme de Germeuil forces him to renounce his previous love for Zulica and his larger cultural background (118).[25] Zulica, of course, refutes these exclusive claims, invoking the priority of her own status as a legitimate companion of Zeïr's. She tells Mme de Germeuil:

> Le bonheur d'un homme qui nous est également cher, Madame, m'engage à une démarche qui vous paraîtra singulière, si nous ne nous accordons pas dans la manière de penser, comme dans celle de sentir. Si j'étais née dans votre pays, Zeïr eût été mon époux, dans le mien il en eût les droits: ils ne furent point violés par moi, malgré les usages de Taïti, le don de mon cœur fut irrévocable. Cependant aujourd'hui je suis forcée à reclamer de votre générosité un droit, que dans vos principes vous devriez regarder comme sacré: un amour antérieur au vôtre. (2:111–12)

Zulica thus explains her non-exclusive, but inalienable right to be with Zeïr for as long as he continues to love her. As she speaks to the importance of guaranteeing fundamental civil rights across national borders, she spotlights the limits of local laws in a time of intercontinental exploration, colonial expansionism, and global travel.

This argument is grounded in Mme de Germeuil's and Zulica's shared feelings for Zeïr: Zulica points out that, despite their cultural differences, both women are sentient human beings capable of loving the same man. Zulica hopes in vain that recognizing this common nature will persuade the Frenchwoman of the merit of her claim. *Lettres taïtiennes* thus suggests that fundamental human rights should be guaranteed around the globe, regardless of the distance between people's values and social practices. In this light, perhaps, one might also want to read Graffigny's and Montbart's decisions to introduce exotic elements in their politico-sentimental plots: as they involved their lovely heroines in shocking stories of incest (Graffigny) or polygamy (Montbart), both authors stressed the notion that respect for an individual's rights should override contingent cultural differences. In *Lettres taïtiennes*, the urgency of this call is intensified as the novel progresses, for Zulica's claims are ignored and Zeïr is forced to abandon his first lover and marry Mme de Germeuil. Only upon the death of the latter can the two Tahitians finally be reunited. Montbart

25 Zeïr exclaims: "pourquoi faut-il que cette femme enchanteresse [Mme de Germeuil] ne soit pas née Taïtienne, j'eusse pu l'adorer sans abandonner Zulica, et mon âme partagée entre elles n'en eût pas été moins tendre pour chacune." (2:23–24; compare 2:68).

thus represented the impossibility of maintaining impermeable national borders in a time of colonial expansion. Refusing to write a story that would gloss over the cultural challenges posed by a foreigner's presence on French soil (something that frequently happens in French eighteenth-century literature via the description of a seemingly smooth marriage between a French man and an exotic foreign woman),[26] Montbart used a romance plot to stage a direct confrontation between two distinct cultural and legal systems.

Despite its many superficial differences, *Lettres taïtiennes* demonstrates a clear understanding of the political content of *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, just as it also draws out the larger implications of Graffigny's original argument. While the latter limited her discourse to a discussion of the rights of a refugee, Montbart used the fiction of two different protagonists—one a free male traveller, the other a vulnerable female refugee—to dramatize their common need of an international system of law. Both Graffigny and Montbart, moreover, showed a particular sensitivity to the possibility of European colonialism having repercussions on the demographics, the culture, and possibly even the legislation of European countries at home. Through their works of fiction, these women novelists intimated to their readers that European colonial powers would soon have to address the needs of newly arrived refugees, as well as the challenges that would arise for all involved as a result of these foreigners' inevitable cultural difference.

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26 In this regard, see Douthwaite.