

ABSTRACT

Title: Le « roman de Némée » dans les *Lettres athéniennes* de Claude Crébillon

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Author: Natacha Borzee

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To many critics, Claude Crébillon's last work, published in 1771, appears confused and enigmatic. It would seem that chaos and excess as well as lack of meaning are what characterise this text. Very few literary scholars have studied *Lettres athéniennes* in any detail; to this day, there exists no monograph on the subject. The aim of the present study is to show that there is a predetermined narrative structure in the novel, a sense of order that the author establishes through the female characters. In order to highlight the meaning of the novel, one has to consider the character of Némée. A comparison of her story with the stories and characteristics of the novel's other twenty-seven female characters is vital to an understanding of *Lettres athéniennes* (Chap.1).

The study argues for a division of the narrative structure in two parts: the "novel of Aspasic" and the "novel of Némée." In dividing the novel in this manner, it is possible to disclose an ideological structure, in which the evolution of virtue plays a major role (Chap. 2).

In the first part of the novel, the female characters are dedicated to fidelity, chastity and modesty according to the classic ideal of monogamous virtue. This leads to an unresolved conflict between duty and passion. The individual self is passive, complying with social imperatives. The decisions taken by the women are always fatal to their own personal development: already deprived of their freedom of action, they are also always denied the emotional pleasure they hope for.

The second dimension of the novel points to the possibility that an acquired wisdom can serve to control or accommodate the emotions. The self mostly abandons the idea of love; the characters in the second part of the novel are all embodiments of a disillusioned female consciousness. The imperatives they follow are no longer dictated by duty, marital fidelity, a social ideal, or even by social conventions. They emanate instead spontaneously from characters who are freer and endowed with more self-respect, much more in tune with nature. It is through Némée that the author portrays a paragon of feminine qualities, creating a new ideal. Her mind is true to itself, dignified and enlightened. Némée makes decisions that are totally reconciled with her self – mature, integrated, desired and assumed – and thus significant while not tragic.

Female licentiousness does not appear as the only form of liberating experience; whether transcended or not, it rather indicates a character's adoption of a liberating way of thinking. The libertine attitude of the female characters in the novel reflects the positive values of a new code of ethics that goes beyond the "morale naturelle"; the morality that stems from it appears more based on principles.

This study, which presents an analysis of all the female characters in the novel (Chap. 3), underscores the importance of all these female characters to both the structure and meaning of the novel. An entire chapter is devoted to Némée (Chap. 4): the exploration of the personality of this courtesan who expresses moral ideas constitutes one of the fundamental aims of the whole narrative. According to this reading, Crébillon's text is characterised by the search for a new ideal of feminine virtue, the outcome of which is revealed at the end of the novel, when Némée appears as the embodiment of this reconstructed ideal.

In conclusion, it is argued that the different female characters represent alternative perspectives that do not compete but rather complement each other. The *Lettres athéniennes* thus emerge as a readable and finished text with a profound moral intention.

Keywords: Claude Crébillon, *Lettres athéniennes*, Eighteenth century, female character, feminine typology, women, libertine philosophy, libertine attitudes, love, moralism, ethics, virtue, ideal, epistolary novel, narratology, narrative structure, semiotics, meaning.