

Rewriting the Family Romance: Prostitution and Revolution in Restif de la Bretonne's *Le Palais Royal*.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Rewriting the Family Romance:
Prostitution and Revolution in Restif de la Bretonne's *Le Palais Royal***

Rori Bloom (bio)

In *Le Pornographe*, published in 1769, Restif addresses the problem of prostitution in an essay within a series of essays entitled *Les Idées singulières*.¹ This particular project proposes a general systemic reform in which prostitutes would be controlled by the state, housed apart, and sheltered from abuse so that in turn society would be shielded from the ills associated and sheltered with unregulated debauchery. In his article “Restif de la Bretonne and the Reform of Prostitution,” David Coward assesses *Le Pornographe* as progressive, explaining that Restif does not condemn prostitutes for their vice but views them as victims of poverty who merit sympathy and social protection.² When Restif revisits the subject of prostitution in his 1789 work *Le Palais Royal*³ at the very moment when fundamental social change was occurring all around him, one would imagine that he would return to his position of social activism with a renewed call for laws to regulate the practice of prostitution. However, as Peter Wagstaff has observed, Restif’s writing during the Revolution presents a retreat from his previous projects for social reform into a personal world of sexual fantasies,⁴ and *Le Palais Royal* is exemplary of this movement from general to particular solutions, from hope for a different future to a retreat into the familiar and familial past. In his interviews with the prostitutes he meets in the *allée des soupirs*, Restif is not interested in discovering and documenting their everyday experience but in delving into their origins, asking them to recount **[End Page 153]** their early life from the circumstances of their birth to their entry into the sex trade. Significantly, the majority of the women he features are from families with means, and their entry into prostitution is often less a result of economic need than of the perversion of a parental figure; accordingly, in this text, Restif situates the causes of prostitution not in general socio-economic factors but in psycho-sexual problems particular to each family. Moreover, at the end of many of the stories, if Restif proposes a solution for prostitution, it is not a general proposition for institutional reform but a personalized rescue of the individual prostitute in a return to virtue through a reunion with her family. In *Le*

Palais Royal, Restif facilitates the *affabulation* of a family romance for the girls he meets, one that sometimes features the elevating claim of noble parents but just as often the degraded image of sexually perverted ones. At the same time, the exploration of family relations in the prostitutes' stories allows Restif to oscillate between his dual views of the family as both the site of moral salvation and the nexus of sexual corruption. In his constant return to family origins, Restif shows not only an inability to abandon his own strange family values but also an incapacity to truly believe in the power of the Revolution to offer new solutions for society.

Family Romances

In *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, Lynn Hunt defines the Freudian paradigm in this way:

By 'family romance,' Freud means the neurotic's fantasy of 'getting free from the parents of whom he now has a low opinion and of replacing them by others who, as a rule, are of higher social standing.'⁵

While the historian Hunt applies the Freudian concept to the collective unconscious, literary critics have used it to study the story an individual tells about his or her own family: Marthe Robert has established that the *roman des origines* is at the origin of the nineteenth-century French novel,⁶ and Jan Herman has recently adapted Robert's ideas by reading the eighteenth-century French novel as a *récit généalogique*.⁷ In examining Restif's own autobiography, *Monsieur Nicolas*, Peter Wagstaff has identified the presence of a Freudian family romance in Restif's ambivalence toward his father and his superiority to his surroundings.⁸ As well, the obviously invented genealogy in *Monsieur Nicolas* which traces the author's ancestors back to emperors of ancient Rome exemplifies the...

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