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0521025729 - Sentimental Narrative and the Social Order in France, 1760-1820

David J. Denby

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Much of Europe wept over narratives of misfortune in the eighteenth century. Why? This book places sentimentalism at the heart of the Enlightenment project. Working in the first instance on sub-literature of the late eighteenth century (Baculard d'Arnaud, Gorjy, Vernes) it moves on to consider texts by Rousseau, the *Idéologues* and Germaine de Staël, as well as a variety of social pamphlets, and texts and debates of the French Revolution. It proposes a formal definition of sentimentalism as a popular narrative structure dealing in happiness and misfortune, but at the same time representing the reaction of an observing subject. In this sense, sentimentalism figures Enlightenment theories of morality and language; it is the site for the working out of notions of equality and democracy, with all the ambiguities bound up with these notions in this period.

Spanning a crucial period of transition in the emergence of modernity, this book seeks to break down artificial divisions, between both periods and movements (the Enlightenment and Romanticism; reason and sentiment) *and* between disciplines. Denby reveals that sentimental writing is rooted in a set of social attitudes, and traces the evolution of a formal structure across types of discourse, changing historical circumstances and different social and political interests. This discerning study is interdisciplinary in approach, addressing problems in literary and social history, and in the history of ideas, mentalities and ideologies.

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*For John, Alex and Marian,  
and in memory of Sydney*

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Les hommes ne sont naturellement ni Rois, ni Grands, ni Courtisans, ni riches. Tous sont nés nus et pauvres, tous sujets aux misères de la vie, aux chagrins, aux maux, aux besoins, aux douleurs de toute espèce; enfin tous sont condamnés à mort. Voilà ce qui est vraiment de l'homme; voilà de quoi nul mortel n'est exempt.

Rousseau, *Emile*, Book 4

Venez, nous pleurerons ensemble sur les personnages malheureux de ses fictions . . .

Diderot, *Eloge de Richardson*

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## *Note on spelling*

Some quoted material is taken directly from eighteenth-century editions, while in other cases a later edition or a secondary source has been used, where spelling had already been modernised. I have therefore modernised the spelling of all quoted materials, with one or two exceptions where the boundary between spelling and syntax suggested that the original should be kept.

Ellipses marked thus ‘...’ are an important feature of sentimental writing. In contrast, to show where I myself have made cuts in quoted material, I enclose the ellipses in brackets thus ‘[...]’.