

# *Lady J (Mademoiselle de Joncquières): A scorned woman takes revenge, or attempts to*

By David Walsh  
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*Written and directed by Emmanuel Mouret; based on a story by Denis Diderot*

*Lady J* is the somewhat confusing English-language title of French filmmaker Emmanuel Mouret's *Mademoiselle de Joncquières*. It is currently available on Netflix.

The film is based on an episode from *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*, a picaresque novel written by Denis Diderot (1713–1784), the great Enlightenment figure, in the years 1765 to 1780, but not published until after the French Revolution—and his death. The novel first became widely known because of its discovery in Germany by Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The latter translated it partially into German in 1785.

*Jacques the Fatalist* follows a valet and his employer as they travel about, somewhat aimlessly. The servant entertains his master by recounting, with endless interruptions, the stories of his loves. Other characters the pair encounter also tell various tales, including the one that forms the basis of *Lady J* (in this case, the landlady of an inn where Jacques and his master are spending the night.)

Emmanuel Mouret expands on Diderot's story, adding characters and sequences. The story itself, set in the 1770s, is simple enough.

Madame de La Pommeraye (Cécile de France), in Diderot's words, "a widow of high moral character, high birth, good breeding, wealth, and haughtiness," lives more or less retired in the countryside. The Marquis des Arcis (Edouard Baer) relentlessly pursues her over the course of some months while a guest at her estate.

At first, the lady laughingly puts him off. She is well aware of his reputation and even (à la Leporello in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*) reels off a "catalogue" of his previous female conquests. She has no intention of becoming his latest.

However, the Marquis acts in the most charming and persuasive manner, assuring her over and over again that he has never truly loved a woman before, that she has opened his eyes to what love could be and so forth. He never attempts the slightest physical contact. This is purely a spiritual and emotional seduction.

The landlady in Diderot's work explains that the Marquis' tireless efforts "backed up by his personal qualities, his youth, good looks, what seemed to be the truest of passions, her solitude, her longing for affection, in a word everything that makes us women yield to the wishes of men ... had its effect, and Mme de La Pommeraye, after having resisted both the Marquis and herself for

several months and having exacted from him the most solemn of vows, as is customary, finally made him the happiest of men."

Unfortunately, after a few years, the Marquis begins to find rural life with the lady somewhat boring and grows restless.

One day, to test his affections, Madame de La Pommeraye informs him that *she* has become somewhat bored, that she no longer finds his company as exciting, that she, in fact, no longer loves him.

The Marquis is ecstatic! She has expressed, he explains, his exact sentiments: "Ah, how vastly superior you are to me at this moment. How noble I find you and how mean I perceive myself. You have spoken first and yet it is I who was guilty first. ... I admit that what you have said of your feelings applies word for word to mine. Every word that you have said to yourself I have said to myself, but I have kept quiet and suffered in silence."

It's a heart-breaking sequence. The Marquis feels a great burden lifted, while the lady now suffers atrociously in silence. After his departure, she begins to plan her revenge. (Diderot's landlady observes, "When her first furies had calmed and her mood turned to cold indignation her thoughts turned to avenging herself, and to avenging herself in a cruel way, in a way which would frighten all those who in future would be tempted to seduce and deceive honest women.")

Madame de La Pommeraye's revenge involves making use of a mother and daughter, once long ago acquaintances of hers, who fell on hard economic times and have essentially been prostituting themselves for the previous decade.

The lady takes Madame (Natalia Dontcheva) and Mademoiselle de Joncquières (Alice Isaaz)—as they now call themselves—out of their misery and depravity, sets them up in a respectable dwelling, has them dress simply, modestly and generally turns them into—or has them perform—as reserved and pious women. The pair are all too happy to change their circumstances, although the entirety of the lady's plot is not clear to them.

While strolling with the Marquis, now merely a good "friend," Madame de La Pommeraye "accidentally" encounters the woman and her daughter. The latter, needless to say, is very beautiful. The Marquis becomes infatuated ("She has the face of a Raphael!") with the girl. "I must have her." However, both mother and daughter, under Madame de La Pommeraye's strict instructions, rebuff his slightest advance. The Marquis becomes more and more frantic. He finds irresistible those who resist him.

Madame de La Pommeraye pretends to be shocked by his

interest in the religious-minded girl. A marvelous hypocrite, the lady exclaims (in Diderot), “Ah! Marquis, we people of the world are a long way from understanding the delicate scruples of such timid souls.”

The Marquis offers jewels, which Madame de La Pommeraye insists that Madame and Mademoiselle de Joncquières refuse and return, much to the mother’s dismay. Then, he offers half his estate. Again, Madame de La Pommeraye is resolute. She tells the other women, “Do you imagine that I am doing what I do for you? Who are you? What do I owe you? Why should I not send the two of you back to your brothel? If what is being offered is too much for you—it is not enough for me.”

Eventually, the Marquis proposes marriage. He weds Mademoiselle de Joncquières. The trap is sprung. To his overwhelming humiliation, Madame de La Pommeraye now reveals the sort of degraded woman he has married: “Marquis,” she said to him, “learn to know me. If other women valued themselves enough to show the resentment I feel, men like you would be less common. You acquired an honest woman whom you could not keep. That woman was me. She has avenged herself on you by making you marry someone who is worthy of you.”

However, that is not the end of the story, and the conclusion is the most important and moving moment of all.

Mouret’s version is very effective, and well worth seeing. The actors are convincing and the dramatic tension sustained throughout. This is a serious and intriguing work.

French filmmaker Robert Bresson directed a beautiful modern adaptation, co-written by Bresson and Jean Cocteau, of the same story in 1945, *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (*The Ladies of the Bois de Boulogne*).

*Jacques the Fatalist*, although its form is relaxed and apparently casual (influenced by Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* among other novels), is an immensely complex work, concerned with many political, social and cultural problems.

Various contemporary critics have inevitably attempted to reduce *Lady J* to a “profoundly feminist” film. One interviewer suggested to Mouret, “There’s also a bit of, to put it in 21st century terms, toxic masculinity?”

Undoubtedly, both the novel and the film contain a criticism of the Marquis’ reckless philandering and the general condition of women in French society, but much more than that is going on. After all, one feels sympathy for Madame de La Pommeraye to begin with, but, as translator David Coward notes, that sentiment “turns into horror when she shows her claws, and we are increasingly drawn to the Marquis des Arcis, the cruel seducer who becomes a victim.” Mouret, to his credit, did not take the line of least resistance and transform his film, in accordance with present-day pressures, into a brief for gender politics.

Diderot understood that the very position of women forced them to carry out acts of emotional terrorism, but he does not condone the latter.

Moreover, the events take place within the aristocracy. Madame de La Pommeraye’s cruelty is also the cruelty of a highly privileged person, who makes use of poorer women as her instruments and disposes of them without a thought. Speaking of the lady’s conduct toward the Marquis, one observer noted that if

this is how the aristocrats treated each other, imagine how they must have acted toward the lower orders!

In *Jacques the Fatalist*, the telling of Madame de La Pommeraye’s tale is extended over a period of hours, as the landlady has to attend to her duties. She, Jacques and his master drink, delay, squabble. This story of altered circumstances and reversed sympathies itself takes place as change occurs, as the relations between the human beings speaking and listening deepen. The structure of the book reflects Diderot’s view that the idea we form of people “and their conduct,” as Coward suggests, “is therefore dependent on our own shifting viewpoint.”

The theme of psychological and social mutability and change is ever-present. (The subversiveness of having “Jacques” take precedence over “His Master,” the reversal of the usual social order implied in the title and the work itself, is only one of the many factors that no doubt discouraged Diderot from publishing the work during his lifetime.) Madame de La Pommeraye’s great mistake is not simply her belief that the Marquis’ affections (which are entirely sincere) will endure forever, but that somehow emotions can be fixed and made permanent.

Critic Martin Hall writes that among the “great writers of the Enlightenment Diderot is distinctive by the importance which time and transformation play in his vision of the world, a world whose working can only be understood in terms of its perpetual change.” Sexual inconstancy and infidelity have to be seen in this context, as regrettable and personally painful, but perhaps inevitable.

Indeed, immediately following the landlady’s recitation of her story, *Jacques the Fatalist* includes the following observation:

“The first oath taken by two creatures of flesh and blood was at the foot of a rock that was turning into dust. They called upon the heavens (which are never the same from one instant to the next) to witness their fidelity. Despite that everything inside them and outside of them was changing, they believed their hearts to be immune to change. Oh children! You are still children ...”

*Lady J* is a valuable interpretation of a portion of a brilliant work.

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