

“I felt such a need to be loved ... in a letter:”

Reading the Correspondence of Léonie Léon and Léon Gambetta

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The relationship between Léon Gambetta, a leading political figure in the early Third Republic, and his lover, Léonie Léon, spanned the years 1872 to 1882. It produced one of the great romantic correspondences of the nineteenth century, originally comprising some 6,000 letters.¹ While only 1,187 letters have survived, this nevertheless represents a significant corpus at a time when, by Roger Chartier's estimate, French people wrote on average nineteen letters per year.² Gambetta's letters to Léonie Léon remained in private hands for many years, and were purchased by the Assemblée nationale in 1976 and 1984. Léonie's letters were purchased by the Chambre des députés in 1937, only to be commandeered by German forces in 1941. A typed copy made by the librarian in 1938 has survived.³ The letters are remarkable for

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¹ This figure is given in Jacques Suffel, “Gambetta et Léonie Léon (correspondance inédite),” *Bulletin du bibliophile* (Paris, 1987), 456, cited in Camille Servan-Schreiber, “Léonie Léon et Léon Gambetta. Les relations personnelles et politiques d'un couple au XIXe siècle,” *Maîtrise d'histoire contemporaine*, Université de Paris X—Nanterre, 1995, 19. This thesis is the only study of the correspondence to date.

² Roger Chartier, ed., *La Correspondance. Les usages de la lettre au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1991), 39. For the correspondence between Léon Gambetta and Léonie Léon, see Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée nationale, MS 1777 and MS1777bis. This comprises 495 letters from Léonie to Gambetta and 580 letters from Gambetta to Léonie. A further 112 letters from Gambetta to Léonie were published in Daniel Halévy and Émile Pillias, eds., *Lettres de Gambetta, 1868-1882* (Paris, 1938). Charles Sowerwine and I are currently undertaking a detailed study of this correspondence. For further information on the history of the letters, see the unpublished paper by Charles Sowerwine, “Women Counsellors and Family Networks: Shaping the Third Republic, 1871-1890,” Society for French Historical Studies, 50th Annual Meeting, Paris, 17-20 June 2004. Given the similarities between the names of the correspondents, I will refer to them as “Gambetta” and “Léonie” to avoid confusion.

³ For a fuller discussion of the history of the letters, see Servan-Schreiber, 19-23. The reason for the German interest in Léonie's letters is not clear.

their passion as well as for the political discussions they contain. They provide an outstanding resource, illuminating the political cut-and-thrust, the involvement and intervention of women in political matters, and the cultural and social dynamics of the period.

Intimate letters such as these reveal a unique relationship between specific individuals. Nevertheless, the literature on life-writing (discussed below) reminds us that the modes of expression through which a relationship is articulated are shaped by the epistolary conventions of the day. It therefore warns against assuming that even intimate letters represent a transparent source of information about individual lives. This essay explores the epistolary relationship between Léon Gambetta and Léonie Léon. It focuses particularly on Léonie’s side of the correspondence, and locates the letters within the history of letter-writing in the nineteenth century. When viewed through their letters, Léon Gambetta and Léonie Léon emerge as a pair of lovers deeply embedded in the cultural practices of their day, practices that were strongly marked by both gender and literary conventions.

I

Léon Gambetta played a crucial role in the republican movement in the 1870s, particularly in mobilizing support around a “realizable” (as opposed to an ideal) Republic. As a number of historians have argued, if Thiers brought the Orléanist elites to this Republic, Gambetta persuaded the people and the Republican elites to support it.⁴ Gambetta’s oratory was legend. Léonie Léon was “captivated” by the Republican leader in 1868, on hearing his celebrated plea as defense lawyer in the Delescluze trial.⁵ She finally succeeded in meeting Gambetta four years later, and he was captivated in turn.⁶ But Léonie’s background meant that she was unlikely to enhance the Republicans’ search for respectability. The illegitimate daughter of an army officer, former mistress of the Inspector General of Police for the *Résidences impériales* and unwed mother of his son, she was a dubious consort for an emerging Republican leader.⁷ Public knowledge of a liaison between Gambetta and Léonie would have been grist to the mill of Gambetta’s political opponents, which may explain why the relationship remained a closely-guarded secret for ten years. It may also explain why the earliest study of Léonie Léon focused on her political

⁴ Cf. Sanford Elwitt, *The Making of the Third Republic: Class and Politics in France 1868-1884* (Baton Rouge, 1975); Philip Nord, *The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995). On Gambetta’s role, see also J. P. T. Bury, *Gambetta and the Making of the Third Republic* (London, 1973). The best biography of Gambetta is Jacques Chastenet, *Gambetta* ([Paris], 1968). Charles Sowerwine discussed this formative period at greater length in “Women Counsellors and Family Networks,” cited above.

⁵ Charles Delescluze was on trial for trying to have built a monument to Baudin, a deputy killed on the barricades during the resistance to Louis-Napoleon’s coup in 1851. See Daniel Amson, *Gambetta ou le rêve brisé* (Paris, 1994), chap. 12.

⁶ On the beginning of their relationship, see Émile Pillias, *Léonie Léon. Amie de Gambetta*, préface de Marcellin Pellet, 3d ed. (Paris, 1935), 51-58.

⁷ The most reliable source on Léonie Léon’s background is Pillias, *Léonie Léon*. Pillias had personal ties with a number of Gambetta’s Republican colleagues, particularly Marcellin Pellet, who was married to the daughter of Auguste Scheurer-Kestner (see the *avant-propos*, 15-17).

“influence” on Gambetta.⁸ No sooner had the couple decided to throw caution to the winds and marry than Gambetta died accidentally in 1882.

The lovers wrote almost daily during their ten-year romance. Intimate letters like these, intended to be read by no-one but themselves, were rare in the nineteenth century when even letters between spouses were often destined for broader circulation in the family.⁹ Such letters offer an important insight into the relationship of which they were a part, but the literature on life-writing alerts us to the inadequacies of a literal reading. Specialists on correspondence—like Cécile Dauphin, Marie-Claire Grassi, Mireille Bossis and Martyn Lyons—argue that letters represent a particular form of social encounter that utilizes particular codes. The task in reading correspondence is to interpret those codes, which are embedded in the time and place, and the social situations, of the writers. As the editors of *Ces bonnes lettres* put it, we have to attend to “the rules of social grammar” when utilizing correspondence.¹⁰

Letters are by definition intended for another reader, and the relationship between sender and recipient is at stake in the exchange. Mireille Bossis describes letter-writing as a process of “creating fictions of oneself for the other.”¹¹ Those “fictions” are shaped by gender conventions as well as literary conventions. In a similar vein, Cécile Dauphin and her colleagues utilize the concept of the “epistolary pact,” adapted from Philippe Lejeune’s “autobiographical pact,” to argue that the exchange of correspondence serves primarily to construct the bonds between people. The writing doubles for the self, so that “the letter seals the engagement of the self in the relationship with the other.”¹² In love letters, the relationship is at stake in a particularly powerful and intense way. This explains the intensity of a correspondence like that between Léonie Léon and Léon Gambetta. Not being married, they lived apart and letters were vital to the expression and development of their love.

Letters are “long distance conversations,” in Marie-Claire Grassi’s phrase.¹³ They are written to another who is absent but who is made “present” again by the writing or the reading of a letter.¹⁴ In this sense, letters temporarily overcome time and distance and compensate for absence.¹⁵ The concept of the letter as a “female” literary genre has a long history, but in the nineteenth century that assumption had a basis in fact, for it was frequently women who waited for men. Léonie Léon shared the experience of other women whose husbands’ careers took them away from home, and who therefore sought solace in the letter.¹⁶ She referred on many occasions to the “consolation” of receiving Gambetta’s letters. An unexpected letter was a “delicious

⁸ Emile Pillias, *Léonie Léon. Amie de Gambetta*

⁹ Cécile Dauphin, Pierrette Lebrun-Pézerat and Daniel Poublan, eds., *Ces bonnes lettres. Une correspondance familiale au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1995), introduction, 165-77.

¹⁰ Dauphin *et al.*, *Ces bonnes lettres*, introduction, 22-3. See also Marie-Claire Grassi, “Des lettres qui parlent d’amour,” *Romantisme* 68 (1990): 23-32; Martyn Lyons, “Love Letters and Writing Practices: *Ecritures intimes* in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Family History* 24.2 (April 1999): 232-39.

¹¹ Mireille Bossis, “Methodological Journeys Through Correspondences,” in Charles A. Porter, ed., “Men/Women of Letters,” special issue of *Yale French Studies* 71 (1986): 63-75.

¹² Dauphin *et al.*, *Ces bonnes lettres*, introduction, 131.

¹³ Marie-Claire Grassi, “Friends and Lovers (or The Codification of Intimacy),” *Yale French Studies* 71 (1986), 78.

¹⁴ Cf. Roland Barthes: “tu es parti (de quoi je me plains), tu es là, puisque je m’adresse à toi,” *Fragment du discours amoureux* (Paris, 1977), 21, quoted in Dauphin *et al.*, *Ces bonnes lettres*, introduction, 131.

¹⁵ Grassi, “Des Lettres qui parlent d’amour,” 23-4.

¹⁶ See Dauphin *et al.*, *Ces bonnes lettres*, introduction, 132.

surprise”¹⁷ but when the expected letter failed to arrive Léonie became absolutely miserable:

Were you mocking the speed with which my poor soul began to suffer? I surrender, you far surpass me in moderation; but I was so unwell, so annoyed, I felt such a need to be loved ... in a letter, I wanted so much to read some expressions of tenderness, since I couldn’t give any, that this silence for three mail deliveries as the only response to my insatiable passion exasperated me!¹⁸

In providing a tangible reminder of the absent one,¹⁹ letters brought comfort, reassurance and pleasure to the reader. Porter suggests that a letter could become a fetish, and this was certainly true of these particular letters.²⁰ The letter was held and fondled, its perfume savored: “Thanks to this continuity of exquisite sensations,” wrote Léonie, “this sweet letter ... perfumed with wild thyme, is a most fitting sequence to a day of ecstasy and enchantment.”²¹ Each word was a gift and her eyes savored the “adorable lines,” perusing the words on the page as the hand might caress the person in the flesh.²² The letter became an object of affection replacing the absent lover. Gambetta’s letters received from Léonie “all the caresses I intend for you.”²³ “I am laughing,” she wrote, “now that I am holding and pressing to my heart and to my lips this wonderful letter that arrived in the evening mail.”²⁴

Just as Léonie kissed the lock of hair she cut from Gambetta’s head before his departure on a trip late in 1872,²⁵ therefore, she kissed his letters, and thus imaginatively their sender: “I kneel and kiss the pretty hand that wrote such an adorable letter;”²⁶ “I kiss the adored hand that wrote me such delightful lines.”²⁷ Likewise, the reply to a letter carried the embraces destined for its recipient: “I confide to my letter all my wishes, all my love, and the most tender kisses of all.”²⁸ The letter could also transport material signs of love, like Léonie’s gift of “a tiny rose

¹⁷ MS1777bis, Letter 126, 30 Dec. 1873: “la délicieuse surprise a-t-elle été accueillie avec une émotion des plus vives.”

¹⁸ Letter 157, 31 Mar. 1876: ‘Vous êtes-vous moqué de la promptitude avec laquelle ma pauvre âme se fait souffrir? Je vous rends les armes, vous me surpassez beaucoup en modération; mais j’étais si souffrante, si agacée, j’avais tant besoin d’être aimée ... (sic) par correspondance, j’étais si avide de lire des tendresses, faute d’en pouvoir prodiguer, que ce silence à trois courriers pour toute réponse à mon insatiabilité passionnée m’a exaspérée!’

¹⁹ Dauphin *et al.*, *Ces bonnes lettres*, introduction, 131-4.

²⁰ Porter, “Foreword,” *Yale French Studies*, 5.

²¹ Letter 175, 28 May 1876: “Grâce à cette continuité de sensations exquis, la mignonne lettre ... parfumée de serpolet, se trouve très appropriée à un lendemain d’extases et d’enchantements.”

²² Letter 26, 17 Sept. 1872: “[C]es adorables lignes que mes yeux ne cessent de parcourir tant elles répandent de bonheur dans tout mon être.”

²³ Letter 17, undated: “[C]es incomparables petites lettres, qui reçoivent ... toutes les caresses que je vous destine.”

²⁴ Letter 173, 24 May 1876: “[J]’en ris maintenant que je tiens et presse sur mon coeur et sur mes lèvres cette merveilleuse lettre, arrivée par le courrier du soir.”

²⁵ Letter 27, 19 Sept. 1872; letter 32, undated.

²⁶ Letter 8, undated: “J’embrasse à genoux la jolie main qui a écrit une si adorable lettre.”

²⁷ Letter 37, undated: “J’embrasse la main adorée qui m’écrit de si ravissantes lignes.”

²⁸ Letter 39, undated [1873]: “Je confie à ma lettre tous mes vœux, tout mon amour, et le plus tendre de tous les baisers.”

filled with as many kisses as it has leaves,”²⁹ or Gambetta’s gift of a photo of himself. On receiving this gift in 1873, Léonie responded:

I ardently desired this beloved image, and if I didn’t ask for it yesterday, it’s because I preferred to see it come of its own accord; so when, as I awoke, my trembling hand felt through the envelope this beautiful head, engraved in all my thoughts, I could not hold back my tears, but sweet tears of happiness, and since then I have been absorbed in exquisite contemplation.³⁰

This image became an object of devotion, as she “contemplat[ed] [her] dear divinity in his pretty gold tabernacle” many times a day.³¹

The significance of the intimate letter lay in its message, which was not about news or information but about love. The proof that love and desire were enduring, despite separation, was what the recipient sought and what the writer sought to provide. There are numerous examples in the Léonie/Gambetta correspondence to illustrate this point. I will quote just one of the most remarkable:

This supreme hour will be eternally present in my thoughts! This pale ray of the setting sun will envelop my whole life with its gentle light! We have contemplated the infinite face to face, we have felt and understood it. You have initiated this soul born of your breath to such divine mysteries, and what adoration does it not owe you in exchange for the ineffable delights with which you fill it? Such a letter, I throw myself at your feet bathed in love and gratitude, [I leave] to tomorrow the affairs of this world.³²

Language was the vehicle by which such depth of feeling had to be conveyed in a letter and it often seemed inadequate to the task. This put the lovers in search of new ways to express their sentiments. Léonie wrote: “I search in vain in our cold language for expressions fiery enough to depict the divine emotions that stir my heart in reading these incomparable little letters.”³³ By contrast, Gambetta succeeded in overwhelming her with the strength of his literary passion, as he seems to have done in real life! She responded to one such missive:

²⁹ Letter 9, undated: “Je vous envoie une toute petite rose chargée d’autant de baisers qu’elle a de feuilles.”

³⁰ Letter 32, undated [1873]: “Je la désirais ardemment cette image chérie et si je ne l’ai pas demandée hier, c’est que je préférerais la voir venir d’elle-même; aussi lorsqu’à mon réveil ma main tremblante a pressenti sous l’enveloppe cette belle tête, gravée dans toutes mes pensées, je n’ai pu retenir mes larmes, mais de douces larmes de bonheur, et depuis je suis absorbée par une délicieuse contemplation.”

³¹ Letter 49, undated [early 1873]: “Devinez combien de fois par jour je vais contempler ma chère divinité dans son joli petit tabernacle d’or?”

³² Letter 114, 29 Nov. 1873: “Elle sera éternellement présente à ma pensée cette heure suprême! Ce pâle rayon de soleil couchant enveloppera toute ma vie de sa douce lumière! Nous avons contemplé l’infini face à face, nous l’avons ressenti et compris. A quels divins mystères vous l’avez initié cette âme née de votre souffle, et quelles adorations ne vous doit-elle pas en échange des ineffables délices dont vous la comblez? Quelle lettre, je me jette à vos pieds baignée d’amour et de reconnaissance, à demain les choses de ce monde.”

³³ Letter 17, undated: “[J]e cherche en vain dans notre froide langue les expressions assez brûlantes pour dépeindre les divines émotions qui agitent mon coeur à la lecture de ces incomparables petites lettres.”

Let us invent the words, a language that we alone understand [,] to describe the intoxications that we alone can feel, since your divine nature, so superior to all the others inspires, feels, and expresses feelings that are unique to it and that cannot be produced by any other! Those who have written on love were indeed poorly favored by destiny, because none of them has managed to convey a sense that nearly accurately conveys the extremely varied and infinite nuances of this feeling, the extent of which it is indeed impossible even to suspect when the soul has not been brought into contact with a soul endowed, like yours, with every greatness and every seduction! Balzac himself, my ex-divinity, sprinkles his amorous accounts with theories which reveal a profound ignorance of the delicious emotions that fill my memory at this moment.³⁴

Like Balzac, Prosper Mérimée failed to produce romantic prose to match the marvels of Gambetta! In a letter addressed to her “beautiful Sun king,” Léonie dismissed Mérimée as an “egotistical and pretentious *poseur*” whose letters conveyed only “the fallacious pretext of love.”³⁵

Clearly, then, this couple were very aware that they were writing love letters. This serves as a reminder that such correspondence is by its very nature carefully constructed rather than spontaneous. It is constructed to meet the writers’ views of what constitutes a “love letter” in a particular historical context. Letter-writing was an art with its own conventions and social rules in the nineteenth century. By 1860, manuals like *Le secrétaire universel* (*The Universal Writing Guide*) provided models of style for the aspiring letter-writer. The 1880s witnessed the publication of manuals for writing love letters, such as *Le petit secrétaire des amants* (1886), although compendia of “the most beautiful love letters” long predated them.³⁶ The development of personal correspondence has been linked to what Charles Porter calls “the outburst of emotional expression” that stemmed from Romanticism.³⁷

The letters between Gambetta and Léonie Léon illustrate the increasingly effusive expression of emotion in the nineteenth century remarked upon by Marie-Claire Grassi. She associates this with the more pronounced articulation of the self and therefore, we might add, of desire.³⁸ Cécile Dauphin likewise emphasizes that ways of expressing affection were shaped by the epistolary codes of the day, rather than by the individual imagination. Forms of salutation and closure, for instance, reflected the “rules of social grammar,” although these did not completely eliminate spontaneity.³⁹ The letters of Léonie and Gambetta are remarkably creative in this

³⁴ Letter 71, 1 August [yr?]: “Inventons des mots, une langue que nous seuls comprendrons pour définir des ivresses que nous seuls pouvons éprouver, puisque votre divine nature, si supérieure à toutes les autres natures inspire, ressent et témoigne des sensations qui lui sont propres et qui ne peuvent émaner d’aucune autre! Ils étaient véritablement peu favorisés par la destinée ceux qui ont écrit sur l’amour, car aucun n’est arrivé à donner une idée à peu près exacte des nuances si variées et si infinies de ce sentiment, dont il est impossible en effet de soupçonner l’étendue lorsque l’âme n’a pas été appelée à se trouver en contact avec une âme douée, comme la vôtre, de toutes les grandeurs et de toutes les séductions! Balzac lui-même, mon ex-divinité, sème ses récits amoureux des théories qui révèlent une profonde ignorance des émotions délicieuses qui emplissent en ce moment mon souvenir.”

³⁵ Letter 119, 16 Dec. 1873: “Quel poseur égoïste et prétentieux et comme on sent qu’elles étaient destinées à la postérité ces longues épîtres ... où sous le fallacieux prétexte d’amour il morigénait, puisqu’il n’admirait, cette pédante et fantasque Miss.” Ellipses added.

³⁶ Grassi, “Friends and Lovers,” 77-92.

³⁷ Porter, “Foreword,” *Yale French Studies*, 11.

³⁸ Grassi, “Des lettres qui parlent d’amour,” 23.

³⁹ See Dauphin *et al.*, *Ces bonnes lettres*, 106, 112.

respect. Gambetta found an array of amorous expressions to address Léonie, who was variously his “dearly beloved,” his “gracious and tender nini,” his “sweet sovereign,” or his “dear adored little one.”⁴⁰ His letters nevertheless confirm Dauphin’s observation that men were often more succinct than women due, perhaps, to the greater haste in which their letters were often written.⁴¹ Léonie constantly invented new salutations for Gambetta. If he was often simply her “beloved” or her “adored one,” he was also her “Sun king,” her “divinity,” her “divine beloved,” her “dear great orator,” her “illustrious love.”⁴² Significantly, however, Léonie always used the *vous* form in writing to Gambetta, whereas he used *tu* to her. This was a small but clear indication of the element of hierarchy that persisted in Léonie’s relationship with a leading political figure.

During the nineteenth century, the body of the absent one was increasingly invoked imaginatively in correspondence to express the feelings that focused on that body. The arms, the heart, the embrace of the beloved were recalled affectionately: a pattern we also see in the Léonie/Gambetta correspondence.⁴³ Desire is expressed there through references to the physical contact that is treasured but missing: Léonie’s desire “to hear from [Gambetta’s] lips” that he believed in her love;⁴⁴ to “cover [his] adorable hands with kisses.”⁴⁵ Léonie also kissed his “beautiful eyes,”⁴⁶ his “pretty[,] fiery lips,”⁴⁷ his “sweet little ears,”⁴⁸ his “adorable face,”⁴⁹ his “pretty head,”⁵⁰ or simply Gambetta *tout court*: “I adore you more tenderly than ever and I cover you with kisses.”⁵¹ As Dauphin points out, however, the “*lettre-caresse*” was important because it caressed the heart, not just the body.⁵²

Since affection was expressed increasingly with reference to the body, the health and wellbeing of that body became an increasing subject for comment. Mireille Bossis refers to “the language of the suffering body” to describe this phenomenon in nineteenth century correspondence.⁵³ Even minor illnesses were potentially more serious in the nineteenth century than today, so such references are understandable in the correspondence between lovers. But re-envisaging the language of illness as part of the language of love gives added meaning to the frequent references to their respective maladies in the exchanges between Léonie and Gambetta. The letters express a constant interest in and concern about the other’s health. They each rejoice

⁴⁰ Bibliothèque de l’assemblée nationale, MS 1777. See, for instance, 72.7bis/18; 72.8/18; 72.13/18; 74.17/55

⁴¹ Dauphin *et al.*, *Ces bonnes lettres*, 115.

⁴² See, for instance, letters 76, 86, 135, 174, 147.

⁴³ Grassi, “Friends and Lovers,” 86, 90.

⁴⁴ Letter 18, undated [1872]: “Il me tarde d’entendre sortir de vous lèvres de persuasion la certitude que ce n’est pas sérieusement que vous avez pu douter de l’adoration éternelle de votre petite esclave pour son adorable maître.”

⁴⁵ Letter 26, 17 Sept. 1872: “Je suis à vos genoux et je couvre de baisers vos mains adorées.”

⁴⁶ Letter 28, 21 Sept. [yr?]: “Je supplie les beaux yeux que j’embrasse de ne regarder aucune femme trop activement.”

⁴⁷ Letter 42, undated: “Je couvre de baisers ardents tes jolies lèvres fiévreuses.”

⁴⁸ Letter 107, 16 Nov. 1873: “[J]e couvre de baisers (à distance) ces mignonnes oreilles base de mes dissentiments.”

⁴⁹ Letter 43, undated: “Ce sera si bon ... de couvrir de baisers l’adorable visage que mes yeux contemplant incessamment.” (Ellipses added).

⁵⁰ Letter 94, 19 Oct. 1873: “[Je] couvre de baisers votre jolie tête.”

⁵¹ Letter 78, undated: “Je vous adore plus tendrement que jamais et je vous couvre de baisers.”

⁵² Dauphin *et al.*, *Ces bonnes lettres*, introduction, 142.

⁵³ Mireille Bossis, “Methodological Journeys through Correspondences,” 74.

to hear that the other is well, and repeat warnings about catching cold.⁵⁴ Sometimes their concerns take the form of advice, as when Léonie recommends ether, laudanum or chloroform for Gambetta’s neuralgia or warns him against over-using emetics,⁵⁵ or when he insists that she visit the doctor.⁵⁶ More significantly, perhaps, Léonie often describes herself as *souffrante*, a condition that seems to blend physical ailments like stomach aches and an unclear problem with her (physical) heart, with a melancholy that is partly due, at least, to Gambetta’s absence.

II

The letters between Gambetta and Léonie Léon tell us much about the loving bond that united them, even though, read against the literature on correspondence, they are not as “unique” in their expressive repertoire as might initially be assumed. But what do they tell us about the political relationship between this couple? This essay concludes with a brief discussion of that question, focusing not on the political content of the letters, but on the way politics was itself a form of amorous exchange between the lovers.

From the very beginning, Léonie represented her relationship with Gambetta as a political union as well as a union of hearts. She constantly affirmed her identity as his political ally as well as his lover. In reply to an early letter from Gambetta, she wrote:

Why didn’t you mention politics, knowing the immense attraction exercised on my spirit by this fascinating preoccupation, this element in which I would like to have lived exclusively? Wasn’t it that noble passion that drew my thoughts to your personality, my admiration to your actions, my gaze to your person and my heart to your great and innumerable perfections?⁵⁷

Political matters were discussed frequently in their correspondence as events, ideas, suggestions and reactions were exchanged. Sharing the details of daily life was a way of making the absent one present,⁵⁸ and the “daily life” of this couple included not only family matters but politics too.

The Republic took pride of place in their relationship. For Léonie, expressing dedication to the project of building the Republic both articulated her own political sentiments and signaled her commitment to Gambetta. But the Republic’s pride of place meant that it sometimes came between them, exerting its demands over the demands of intimacy. This affected the two differently, because political life in the service of the Republic brought Gambetta renown, power and wide public engagement, whereas it brought Léonie a sense of her own exclusion and political marginality. Léonie’s acceptance of the primacy of the Republican cause was

⁵⁴ Letters 26, 17 Sept. 1872; 28, 21 Sept. [1872?]; 35, undated; 41, undated.

⁵⁵ Letters 20 and 43 (both undated).

⁵⁶ For instance, letter 35, undated (1873).

⁵⁷ Letter 9 [1872]: “Pourquoi ne me dites vous pas un mot de politique, sachant l’immense attraction qu’a pour mon esprit cette fascinante préoccupation, cet élément dans lequel j’aurais voulu vivre exclusivement? N’est-ce pas cette noble passion qui a attaché ma pensée à votre personnalité, mon admiration à vos actes, mes regards à votre personne et mon coeur à vos grandes et innombrables perfections?”

⁵⁸ See Dauphin *et al.*, *Ces bonnes lettres*, introduction, 102.

represented as a patriotic act, therefore, as she subordinated romantic desire to the political union between them. She wrote to Gambetta in April 1872:

I want you to consecrate yourself completely to the republic that is your goddess, and whose supremacy in your heart I accept because it is a great and noble passion, a lofty and sublime goal, and because it also gives me a goal to strive for, that of one day equaling her in your sentiments by means of love and abnegation.⁵⁹

The relationship could not have survived had Léonie not accepted the requirements of Gambetta's political career. Nevertheless, the language of self-sacrifice was a "feminine" one, consistent with the social expectation that women subordinate their own lives and interests to those of men. That reading is reinforced in other exchanges where Léonie subordinates her own ideas and opinions to those of Gambetta. One letter begins, for instance: "I must ask your pardon once again because you are always right; and you accompany your reasons with such touching gestures that I am embarrassed and humiliated by the insignificant and second-rate ideas that I expressed freely the day before."⁶⁰

Léonie's self-sacrificial stance was a gesture of commitment to Léon Gambetta; an offer of the self made in the "feminine" language of self-surrender. The emotional exchange between the lovers was nevertheless more complex and even-handed than such quotations taken in isolation might suggest. Gambetta's letters also expressed an overwhelming devotion to Léonie and were likewise filled with gestures of surrender, although those gestures assumed different rhetorical forms from hers. A letter from May 1872 is a good example. Ecstatic that she had announced her love for him he wrote:

You will scold me, support me, defend me against myself. I find you ... so delicate and so just that I dream of nothing other than becoming your pupil and your child. You will perhaps charge me with being puerile, but I would love to be guided and even restrained by your pretty hand.

I feel your feminine superiority, and perhaps I only love you so much because my heart tells me that I have found in my Léonie, a mistress who will let me snuggle up on her knees and almost become a young but wise tutor.⁶¹

For Gambetta, the language of surrender was the language of pupil to mistress, child to mother, justified by reference to feminine moral superiority but with a sexual

⁵⁹ Letter 2 [1872]: "Je veux que vous vous consacriez tout entier à cette république qui est votre déesse, et dont j'accepte la suprématie dans votre coeur parceque c'est une grande et noble passion, un but élevé et sublime, et qu'elle me fournit aussi un but à atteindre, celui de l'égaliser un jour dans vos sentiments à force d'amour et d'abnégation."

⁶⁰ Letter 34, undated [1873]: "Il faut encore vous demander pardon puisque vous avez toujours raison; et vous accompagnez vos raisons de si touchantes attentions que je suis confuse et humiliée des petites et méchantes idées auxquelles j'ai donné hier un libre cours."

⁶¹ Letter 72.3/18 (postmarked 9 May 1873), ellipses in the original: "Tu me gronderas, tu me soutiendras, tu me défendras contre moi-même. Je te trouves (sic) ... si délicat et si juste que je ne songe à rien autre qu'à devenir ton élève et ton enfant. Tu vas peut-être me taxer de puérilité, mais j'aimerais à me sentir guider et même réfréner par ta jolie main.

J'ai le sentiment de ta supériorité féminine, et je ne t'aime peut-être tant que parce que mon coeur me dit que j'ai rencontré dans ma Léonie, une maîtresse qui me laissera me blottir sur ses genoux et saura devenir presque une jeune mais prudente tutrice."

undercurrent. This formulation expressed the reciprocity of their intellectual, emotional and sexual encounter.

As their mutual passion, politics also provided the language and motifs in which their passion for each other could be expressed. Early in 1872, Léonie wrote to Gambetta: “My heart is overflowing with politics and tenderness, get yours ready to receive this double flood.”⁶² This initially surprising concept illustrates the inextricability of their passion for politics and their passion for each other. Similar sentiments pervade the entire correspondence. If Gambetta failed to discuss politics Léonie chided him, because it was an important aspect of their relationship. As the practices of political life became increasingly “masculine” in the nineteenth century, politics increasingly took men away from women into a world of male camaraderie. In this sense, not only was the Republic a rival with Léonie for Gambetta’s affections, but politics in general rivaled women’s place in men’s life. Léonie expressed this idea in early 1876:

[I]n the midst of the most charming memories, a sort of anxiety is floating in my spirit, troubling its serenity, a vapor which would become a cloud if your letter of tomorrow doesn’t come and dissipate it, with its style as ardent as your gaze, as gracious as your smile, as intoxicating as your kisses! But let’s call a truce on subtle expressions of love and return to politics; this attractive, invincible and ever triumphant rival, which alone can make the most sensitive chords of your being vibrate. *Quid novi?*⁶³

The simultaneous appeal to sex and politics was a strategy for binding Gambetta to her. But it was also his politics, his identity as a political being, that she found sexually enticing.

If Gambetta’s kisses could be “intoxicating,” then, so too could his political triumphs; if his touch was thrilling, his politics were also *palpitante*.⁶⁴ Both their love and their political relationship were sites of passion, or rather, the two came together in one erotic encounter. When Gambetta thought he had given too long a political report in one letter, for instance, Léonie corrected him: “Don’t apologize for anything I beg you[,] I am passionate about your politics and it’s a joy for me to follow you wherever it requires your exclusive attention.”⁶⁵ The prospect of their next rendezvous was anticipated in the letters, both for its intimate pleasures and for the prospect of talking politics: “Tomorrow at four o’clock I’ll be beside you,” wrote Léonie in 1873, “not so we can thumb our noses at politics, but on the contrary so we can talk of nothing else.”⁶⁶ “If the desire I feel to see you again, to find myself gently leaning on

⁶² Letter 4, 1872: “Mon coeur déborde de politique et de tendresse, disposez le vôtre à recevoir ce double flot.”

⁶³ Letter 145, 26 Jan. 1876: “[A]u milieu des plus charmants souvenirs, il flotte en mon esprit, ce qui en trouble la sérénité, une sorte d’inquiétude, une vapeur qui deviendrait un nuage si votre lettre de demain ne vient le dissiper, avec ce style ardent comme vos regards, gracieux comme votre sourire, éniyant comme vos baisers! Mais trêve de subtilités amoureuses et revenons à la politique; cette attractive, invincible et toujours triomphante rivale, qui seule peut faire vibrer les cordes les plus sensibles de votre être. *Quid novi?*”

⁶⁴ Letter 28, 21 Sept. [1872]: “Je ne trouverais pas digne de votre Minerve de vous détourner huit jours d’une politique si palpitante d’intérêt en ce moment.”

⁶⁵ Letter 44 (Spring 1873): “Ne regrettez rien je vous en prie votre politique me passionne et c’est une joie pour moi de vous accompagner partout où elle doit vous occuper exclusivement.”

⁶⁶ Letter 46 [early 1873]: “Ainsi demain vers quatre heures je serai près de vous; non pas pour y faire fi de la politique, mais au contraire pour en parler exclusivement.”

your beloved arm[,] could be increased in any way,” she wrote some months later, “it would certainly be by the impatience I feel to talk to you at length about the events which follow one another with dizzying rapidity.”⁶⁷

Just as politics had formed the initial bond between them, so the strengthening of their relationship, its evolution as the most important relationship in their lives, was expressed in terms of a strengthening of the political commitment they also shared. “I am more passionate than ever about this politics which, in attaching my mind to your deeds was the first link between us, the pretext for our first conversation,” Léonie noted.⁶⁸ For this reason, too, politics filled the void left by Gambetta’s absence during their numerous separations. Referring to the sadness that followed each new parting, Léonie wrote:

The days after [we are together] are so hard for me to endure, the present contrasts so cruelly with the memories, that all my complaints return to my pen and to avoid the pitfall I throw myself with all my soul into politics, our first bond, which alone can re-establish an equilibrium difficult to maintain in these constant shifts between passing happiness and irreparable sorrow!⁶⁹

If letters are primarily ways of indicating “I am thinking of you. I love you and want you to love me,” as epistolary scholars have argued, these letters are only incidentally “political.” This brief excursion into their correspondence might therefore suggest that Léonie’s place in Gambetta’s political life was marginal. This was not the case.⁷⁰ The literature on correspondence does suggest, however, that the interpretation of these letters is complex, and their meanings rich. Thinking about them as letters may not enable us to decide how much Léonie “influenced” Gambetta, as some scholarly interpretations have sought to do, but it does offer us insights into a remarkable relationship. Beyond that, it may suggest one way in which certain nineteenth-century women carved out spaces for themselves in men’s lives, inserting themselves into the political world of men as loved and desired, and therefore necessary, political partners.

⁶⁷ Letter 50, undated [1873]: “Si le désir que j’éprouve de vous revoir, de me retrouver doucement appuyée à votre bras aimé pouvait être augmenté par quelque chose, il le serait certainement par l’impatience que je ressens de vous entretenir longuement des événements qui se succèdent avec une rapidité vertigineuse.” The letter discusses Charles de Rémusat’s candidacy in the forthcoming by-elections, announced on 22 March, suggesting that it was written shortly after that date. See J. P. T. Bury, *Gambetta and the Making of the Third Republic*, 139-42.

⁶⁸ Letter 78, undated [1873]: “Je suis plus passionnée que jamais pour cette politique qui en attachant ma pensée à vos actes a été notre premier lien, le prétexte de notre première conversation.”

⁶⁹ Letter 74, undated: “Mes lendemains sont si dure à vivre, l’heure présente contraste si cruellement avec les souvenirs, que toute la série de mes plaintes revient à ma plume et pour éviter l’écueil je me jette à pleine âme dans la politique, notre premier lien, qui peut seule rétablir un équilibre difficile à garder dans ces constantes alternatives de bonheur éphémère et de douleur irréparable!”

⁷⁰ My current research focuses on the political discussions in the letters, and the ways in which these discussions are gendered.