

# Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

John Claiborne Isbell





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# 1. Marie de Vichy-Chamrond, Marquise du Deffand 25 September 1696–23 August 1780

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Fig. 1. Marie de Vichy-Chamrond, marquise du Deffand, by J. Encina. Photo by Pyb (2018). Wikimedia, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/archive/c/c3/20181021101003%21Mme\\_du\\_Deffant\\_CIPA0635.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/archive/c/c3/20181021101003%21Mme_du_Deffant_CIPA0635.jpg), CC BY 4.0.

## *Correspondance complète de la marquise du Deffand*

De Madame du Deffand à la Duchesse de Choiseul

Ce 18 août 1780

J'aime madame de Grammont à la folie. Ah ! je n'en suis point surprise, direz-vous ; mais ce n'est point pour ceci, pour cela, qui sont les raisons de tout le monde, c'est pour une toute particulière. Elle vint passer la soirée hier chez moi ; elle se fit un plaisir de m'apprendre que vous viendriez l'hiver prochain à Paris, comme à l'ordinaire. Si vous aviez vu ma joie, vous connaîtriez à quel point je suis sensible. Si vous n'étiez pas l'objet de cette sensibilité, j'en serais honteuse. N'est-elle pas déplacée et

ridicule à un tel âge que le mien ? Aussi ne s'étend-elle pas plus loin que pour vous. Vous êtes une personne si singulière, si rare, que tout ce que vous inspirez doit être du même genre.

Je ne suis pas si bien avec l'abbé, et j'ai peut-être tort ; il me débite souvent des lieux communs. J'exige qu'ils soient bannis dans l'amitié. Il faut bien les tolérer dans l'usage du monde ; mais avec son amie, il faut se taire ou parler à cœur ouvert.

Que vous a-t-il donc dit ? me demandez-vous. Je lui ai parlé de l'Académie : il y a deux places vacantes, il y en aura bientôt quatre ... « Ah ! je n'en suis pas digne, je ne le désire point, et pourquoi moi ? Qu'ai-je fait ? ... » Cela n'est-il pas insupportable ? Voilà notre querelle. Je lui trouvai l'air de se bien porter.

Vous ne voulez donc jamais me parler de votre santé ; en vérité, cela n'est pas bien ; y a-t-il quelque chose au monde qui m'intéresse autant ? Et cette règle de ne point parler de soi est encore un lieu commun bien désagréable dans l'amitié.

M. de Beauvau va tant soit peu mieux ; il est entouré de tout ce qu'il aime ; femme, fille, sœurs ; par-ci, par-là, quelques académiciens.

Nous verrons, je crois la semaine prochaine, la nouvelle opération de M. Necker, c'est-à-dire sur la bouche. Vous savez les nouveaux établissements sur les prisons. Ceux-ci, vraisemblablement, seront durables. Il serait à souhaiter que les autres le fussent aussi ; mais tout est sujet au changement dans ce monde, excepté les vertus de la grand'maman [sic] et les sentiments de la petite-fille.

C'est par effort que je ne parle pas du grand-papa.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Marie de Vichy-Chamrond, *Correspondance complète de la marquise du Deffand* [...], ed. M. de Lescure, 3 vols (Genève: Slatkine, 1971), III pp. 371–372.

Translation: This 18<sup>th</sup> of August 1780

I love Madame de Grammont madly. Ah! I am not at all surprised, you will say; but it is not for this thing, for that thing, which are everybody's reasons, it is for a quite particular one. Yesterday she came to spend the evening with me; she gave herself pleasure in informing me that you would come next winter to Paris, as usual. If you had seen my joy, you would know to what degree I am sensitive. If you were not the object of this sensibility, I would be ashamed of it. Is it not misplaced and ridiculous at such an age as mine? Thus, it extends no further than for you. You are so singular a person, so rare, that all you inspire must be of the same type.

I am not so well with the abbé, and perhaps I am at fault; he often pronounces commonplaces to me. I demand that they be banished from friendship. One really must tolerate them in the ways of the world; but with one's friend, one must either be silent or speak with open heart.

What then did he say to you? you ask me. I spoke to him of the Académie: there are two vacant places, there will soon be four ... "Ah! I am not worthy of it, I do not desire it,

Marie de Vichy-Chamrond, Marquise du Deffand was born in the family château in Burgundy and raised in a convent in Paris. At twenty-two, she married the older Marquis du Deffand: her wit and beauty earned her admirers in Regency Paris, where she frequented libertine circles and met Voltaire, who became a lifelong friend. In 1742 she began her voluminous correspondence with the great names of the age: Voltaire, Walpole, d'Alembert, Lescapade, the Duchesse de Luynes and others. At the death of her husband, she moved into Madame de Montespan's old apartments in Paris, rue Saint-Dominique, and she opened her salon in 1749. Her Mondays drew an intellectual elite, her fascination undiminished by the blindness which struck at the age of fifty-six. She then took her niece Julie de Lescapade as a reader, separating from her vehemently nine years later after discovering that Lescapade was meeting salon guests independently. In Sainte-Beuve's words, "M<sup>me</sup> du Deffand est avec Voltaire, dans la prose, le classique le plus pur de cette époque, sans même en excepter aucun des grands écrivains."<sup>2</sup> Friend of Voltaire, d'Alembert, Fontenelle, Marivaux, Helvétius, of painters, sculptors, and architects, du Deffand brought a world of grace and intelligence to her salon. She died in Paris in 1780. From her deathbed, hearing her secretary of twenty years weeping, she said her last words: "Vous m'aimez donc?"<sup>3</sup>

Du Deffand was over eighty when she wrote this letter—our oldest author—and had been blind for almost thirty years. What strikes one perhaps the most here is the letter's grace: each subject is made new by her angle of attack, from the opening line, where rather than say how

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and why me? What have I done? ..." Is that not unbearable? There is our quarrel. I found that he seemed in good health.

So, you never want to speak to me of your health; in truth, that is not good; is there anything in the world that interests me as much? And this rule of not speaking of oneself is another commonplace that is quite disagreeable in friendship.

M. de Beauvau is doing a little better; he is surrounded by all he loves; wife, daughter, sisters; here and there, some academicians.

We will see, I think next week, the new operation of M. Necker, that is to say on the mouth. You know the new establishments on prisons. These, apparently, will be lasting. One might wish that others were as well; but all is subject to change in this world, except the virtues of the grandmother and the feelings of the granddaughter.

It is by an effort that I do not speak of the grandfather.

2 Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du lundi*, 16 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1857–1862), I, p. 413.

3 Benedetta Craveri, *Madame du Deffand et son monde* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), p. 356.

glad she was to hear the news from Madame de Grammont, she flips her premise, saying she loves Grammont “à la folie” and leaving her correspondent to guess why. This is the simple made interesting—in Pope’s words, “What oft was thought, but ne’er so well expressed.” Wit, charm, and grace characterize this prose: M. de Beauvau thus has all he loves around him—wife, daughter, sisters, and “par-ci, par-là, quelques académiciens.” One might say this grace is quintessentially eighteenth-century in nature; a focus on wit, on avoiding tedium and the commonplace, does not distinguish Romantic thought, whereas it is fundamental to a Voltaire. It is elegant, and behind it lies a whole philosophy of lightness. It is the tone of refined conversation, in which the over-passionate, the monotonous, the false, risk being *insupportable*, if not ridiculous; in which whole regions of discourse are to be avoided for that reason—one’s health, for instance—and anything worth saying is worth saying wittily. It is a discourse which requires agility and imagination, built on shared premises and conclusions (much as Mozart’s glorious music is built on shared norms) in a way that will cease to be the case thirty years on. The discourse is, perhaps, epicurean: it regards pleasure as a central good, and therefore treats what is weighty lightly, rather than stir the depths that, say, prisons might evoke. “Tout est sujet au changement dans ce monde,” writes du Deffand then, much as jesting Pilate in Bacon’s famous essay said “What is truth?” and would not stay for an answer. Just so, the author pirouettes to family and closes with a *bon mot*. One guesses here at the skill with which du Deffand might have foregrounded any inelegance in du Châtelet, that brilliant mind, when Voltaire somewhat thoughtlessly brought her as a guest to his friend’s salon. Wit and charm do not exclude cruelty, and that is a fundamental Romantic *aperçu*.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that the Beauvau family here mentioned were the very family that gave a home to Ourika—the subject of Duras’s novel—when she was brought from enslavement in Senegal in 1786 by the chevalier de Boufflers. Around the elderly du Deffand, the world was changing. This is the last long letter in her correspondence, and she died the same year. Like Voltaire, she did not live to see 1789, which may after all have been a good thing.

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