

Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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John Claiborne Isbell, *Destins de femmes: French Women Writers, 1750–1850*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0346>

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<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0346#resources>

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-032-3

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-033-0

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-034-7

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-035-4

ISBN XML: 978-1-80511-037-8

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-038-5

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0346

Cover image: Nanine Vallain, *Freedom* (1794), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nanine_Vallain_-_Libert%C3%A9.jpg

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

2. Marie Jeanne Riccoboni

25 October 1713–7 December 1792



Fig. 2. Marie Jeanne Riccoboni, by F.L. Couché. Photo by LeDeuxiemeTexte (2019). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8c/Marie-Jeanne_Riccoboni.png, CC BY 4.0.

Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd

Mss. Fanni, à un seul lecteur.

Si le naturel & la vérité, qui font tout le mérite de ces lettres, leur attirent l'approbation du public ; si le hasard vous les fait lire ; si vous reconnaissez les expressions d'un cœur qui fut à vous ; si quelque trait rappelle à votre mémoire un sentiment que vous avez payé de la plus basse ingratitude ; que la vanité d'avoir été l'objet d'un amour si tendre, si délicat, ne vous fasse jamais nommer celle qui prit en vous tant de confiance. Montrez-lui du moins, en gardant son secret, que vous n'êtes pas indigne à tous égards du sincère attachement qu'elle eut pour vous. Le désir de faire admirer son esprit ne l'engage point à publier ces lettres ; mais celui d'immortaliser, s'il est possible, une passion qui fit son bonheur, dont les premières douceurs sont encore présentes à son idée, et dont le souvenir lui sera toujours cher. Non, ce n'est point cette passion qui fit couler ses pleurs, qui porta la douleur & l'amertume dans son âme. Elle n'accuse

que vous des maux qu'elle a soufferts ; elle ne connaît que vous pour l'auteur de ses peines. Son amour était en elle la source de tous les biens ; vous l'empoisonnâtes cruellement ! Elle ne hait point l'amour, elle ne hait que vous.¹

Marie Jeanne Riccoboni was born in the parish of Saint Eustache in Paris, where she was later married and eventually buried. Her father, condemned in 1719 for bigamy, abandoned mother and daughter, who were thenceforth declared illegitimate. Housed in a convent and destined to stay there, Marie-Jeanne persuaded her mother to take her back at fourteen. In 1734, she married Antoine François Riccoboni, son of the director of the Comédie italienne. Her destitute mother lived with the couple until her death; the unhappy marriage continued until her husband's death in 1772, though they separated in 1761. Riccoboni seems to have loved other men without acting on it, including the Comte de Maillebois and the young Robert Liston. She first performed in the Comédie italienne in 1734, continuing until 1760, though Diderot calls her "l'une des plus mauvaises actrices de son temps."² He preferred her writing. For a time, Riccoboni frequented the salon of d'Holbach and possibly of Helvétius, befriending Marivaux, Adam Smith and David Hume, but she later withdrew from salon life and what she saw as its sectarianism and intolerance. After 1757, Riccoboni wrote ten novels, contributing to the fashion for the Richardsonian epistolary genre. The

1 Marie Jeanne Riccoboni, *Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd*, ed. Joan Hinde Stewart (Genève: Droz, 1979), pp. 3–4. Spelling modernized.

Translation: Mistriss Fanny, to a single reader.

If the naturalness and truth, which make up all the merit of these letters, earn them the approval of the public; if chance makes you read them; if you recognize the expressions of a heart which was yours; if some trait recalls to your memory a sentiment you repaid with the basest ingratitude; may the vanity of having been the object of a love so tender, so delicate, never make you name she who put so much trust in you. Show her at least, in keeping her secret, that you are not unworthy in every point of the sincere attachment she had for you. The desire to make her wit admired does not engage her to publish these letters; but rather that of immortalizing, if it is possible, a passion which made up her happiness, whose first sweetnesss are still present to her idea, and whose memory will always be dear to her. No, it is not this passion which made her tears flow, which brought pain and bitterness into her soul. She accuses only you of the pains she has suffered; she knows you alone as the author of her sorrows. Her love was the source of every good in her; you cruelly poisoned it! She does not hate love, she hates only you.

2 Denis Diderot, *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, *Œuvres complètes*, 25 vols (Paris: Hermann, 1975–1986), XX, p. 114.

Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd of 1757, her first success, is often thought to relate her unhappy passion for the Comte de Maillebois. In 1761, she imitated Marivaux well enough in her *Suite de la vie de Marianne* that disclaimers were needed, and she freely adapted Fielding's *Amelia* in 1762. She translated five English plays and wrote one herself, along with some lyric pieces. She died in poverty in 1792, after the Revolution suppressed the royal pension on which she had depended.

Va, je ne te hais point, says Chimène to Rodrigue in Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid* (1636). It is a moment famous enough for Riccoboni to nod to it in ending this prefatory letter to her first novel. This reminds us both that Riccoboni was an actress and that the eighteenth century valued the common coin of shared cultural referents over passion or authenticity in discourse. Contrast Juliette Drouet, another actress writing a century later, to Victor Hugo: "Je t'aime, je t'aime, je t'aime." In 1757, Rousseau's vogue was just beginning; the fashion remained for Richardsonian bourgeois suffering at the hands of the aristocracy, a European fashion extending to the contemporary German *bürgerliches Trauerspiel*—Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, for instance—and opening a window on authenticity contrasting with the elegance of, say, a Valmont in Choderlos de Laclos's 1782 *Liaisons dangereuses*.

The sincerity is evident in Fanni's opening words on "le naturel et la vérité." Indeed, the whole extract shows a seismic shift taking place in French, if not European thought, as Fanni struggles between "a spontaneous outpouring of powerful emotion," to use William Wordsworth's words from 1798, and a focus on the gap between *l'être* and *le paraître* which would not have been alien to Corneille himself. Fanni may be hurt, but her aim now is "l'approbation du public." Rather oddly, Fanni asks her "seul lecteur" not to name her, though she is doing just that on her title page; the furniture of lived emotion is present—*coeur, vanité, ingratitude*—but this is a far cry from Juliette Drouet. It seems fair to say that mid-eighteenth-century French society found the spontaneity of a Drouet a challenge, much though its participants began to desire it. "Le désir de faire admirer son esprit," writes Fanni in a construction quite alien to a Romantic mind, "ne l'engage point à publier ces lettres."

Let us remember that this novel was a great success in 1757. In the salon world that Riccoboni had abandoned, and in the interstices of that world's elegance, tact, grace and charm—the world of du

Deffand—something new and alien was rearing its head, resembling both authenticity and passion. That salon world was making room for Rousseau.

Nor should we dismiss Samuel Richardson too easily: his novels may seem slow going to a modern reader, but they were devoured in the decades before Rousseau's triumph. Much has been said of the role of the bourgeoisie in Europe between Enlightenment and Revolution, and the subject is in some ways inexhaustible. One might simply note that the bourgeoisie was a locus of authenticity for Riccoboni, as it would be for Staël a generation later. What could be more authentic than bourgeois letters? And from England, at that. There is a frisson to reading other people's mail, even if the writer says that was her intention; mail belongs to the private sphere, and in the very public world of eighteenth-century France, that private sphere was sometimes not easy to access.

Works

[Riccoboni, Marie Jeanne] *Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd*, ed. Joan Hinde Stewart (Genève: Droz, 1979)

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Lettres d'Élisabeth-Sophie de Vallière à Louise Hortense de Canteleu, son amie, par Madame Riccoboni (Paris: A. Desrez, 1835)

Lettres de Milord Rivers à Sir Charles Cardigan (Paris: A. Desrez, 1835)

Lettres d'Adélaïde de Dammartin, Cesse de Sancerre, à M. le Cte de Nancé son ami (Paris: Belin, 1786)

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3. Louise Florence Pétronille Tardieu d'Esclavelles d'Épinay 11 March 1726–17 April 1783



Fig. 3. Louise Florence Pétronille Tardieu d'Esclavelles d'Épinay, by J.-É. Liotard. Photo by Adamvs (2023). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e6/Liotard_-_Portrait_de_Madame_Denis-Joseph_La_Live_d%27Epinay%2C_n%C3%A9e_Louise-Florence-P%C3%A9tronille_de_Tardieu_d%27Esclavelles%2C_dite_Madame_d%27Epinay%2C_vers_1759%2C_1826-0007.jpeg, CC BY 4.0.

Histoire de Madame de Montbrillant

Madame la Marquise de Beaufort à M. le Marquis de Lisieux

Décembre 1735

Ce que j'ai toujours craint est arrivé, Monsieur. Le nom de Gondrecourt va s'éteindre ; mon neveu touche à sa fin. Il est sans espérance et ne laisse point d'enfant mâle. J'ai souvent dit à la marquise de Gondrecourt que l'amour qu'elle portait à sa fille lui faisait oublier ce qu'elle devait à