Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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4. Julie Jeanne Éléonore de Lespinasse
9 November 1732–23 May 1776

Fig. 4. Julie Jeanne Éléonore de Lespinasse, by L.C. Carmontelle. Photo by Shonagon (2020). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4a/Mademoiselle_de_Lespinasse_-_Carmontelle.jpg, CC BY 4.0.

Lettres suivies de ses autres œuvres

Mlle de Lespinasse à Nicolas de Condorcet

Ce vendredi, 27 juillet 1770.

Venez à mon secours, Monsieur, j'implore tout à la fois votre amitié et votre vertu. Notre ami, M. d'Alembert est dans un état le plus alarmant ; il dépérit d'une manière effrayante ; il ne dort plus, et ne mange que par raison ; mais ce qui est pis que tout cela encore, c'est qu'il est tombé dans la plus profonde mélancolie ; son âme ne se nourrit que de tristesse et de douleur ; il n'a plus d'activité ni de volonté pour rien ; en un mot,

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il périt si on ne le tire par un effort de la vie qu'il mène. Ce pays-ci ne lui présente plus aucune dissipation ; mon amitié, celle de ses autres amis ne suffisent pas pour faire la diversion qui lui est nécessaire. Enfin, nous nous réunissons tous pour le conjurer de changer de lieu et de faire le voyage d'Italie ; il ne s'y refuse pas tout à fait ; mais jamais il ne se déterminera à faire ce voyage seul, et moi-même je ne le voudrais pas ; il a besoin des secours et des soins de l'amitié, et il faut qu'il trouve tout cela dans un ami tel que vous, Monsieur, vous êtes selon son goût et selon son cœur ; vous seul pouvez nous l'arracher à un état qui nous fait tout craindre. Voilà donc ce que je désirerais, et que je soumets bien plus à votre sentiment qu'à votre jugement ; c'est que vous lui écrivissiez qu'il serait assez dans vos arrangements de faire le voyage d'Italie cette année, parce qu'il vous est important de profiter du séjour qu'y doit faire M. le cardinal de Bernis. Vous partiriez de ce texte pour lui dire que vous désireriez qu'il voulût bien faire ce voyage avec vous, et que vous pensez que cette espèce de dissipation le remettrait en état de travailler, et par conséquent de jouir de la vie, ce qu'il ne fait point depuis qu'il est privé du plus grand intérêt qu'il y eût, qui est le travail, etc., etc. Vous sentez bien que cette tournure est nécessaire, parce que, quelque confiance qu'il ait en votre amitié, il craindrait d'en abuser en vous demandant de faire ce voyage dans ce moment-ci.[1]

1 Julie de Lespinasse, *Lettres suivies de ses autres œuvres* […], ed. Eugène Asse (Genève: Slatkine, 1971), pp. 317–318. Spelling modernized by John Claiborne Isbell.

Translation: This Friday, 27 July 1770.

Come to my aid, Sir, I implore at once your friendship and your virtue. Our friend, M. d'Alembert is in a most alarming state; he is fading away in frightening fashion; he no longer sleeps, and only eats because he should; but what is worse even than all that is that he has fallen into the most profound melancholy; his soul nourishes itself only on sadness and pain; he has no more activity nor desire for anything; in a word, he will perish if we cannot pull him by an effort from the life he is leading. This country no longer presents him any dissipation; my friendship, and that of his other friends are not enough to make the diversion that he needs. In short, we are all uniting to beg him to change his location and make a trip to Italy; he does not entirely refuse it; but he will never determine himself to make this journey alone, and I myself would not wish it; he needs the aid and care of friendship, and he needs to find all that in a friend such as you, Sir, you are to his taste and to his heart; you alone can pull him out for us from a state which makes us fear everything. Here then is what I would desire, and which I submit much more to your sentiment than your judgment; it is that you should write to him that it would be well in your arrangements to make a trip to Italy this year, because it is important to you to profit from the stay that M. the Cardinal de Bernis is to make there. You would move on from this text to tell him you would desire that he might wish to make this journey with you, and that you think this type of dissipation would put him back in condition to work, and consequently to enjoy life, a thing he does not do since being deprived of the greatest interest he had in it, which is work, etc., etc. You see

Julie Jeanne Éléonore de Lespinasse was born in Lyon, the natural child of the Comtesse d'Albon and possibly the Comte de Vichy-Chamron, and she died young in Paris in 1776. Her alleged father later married the comtesse's daughter, and Julie was raised by her mother (until her mother's death) as governess to her nephews and nieces, who may also have been her half-siblings. Her natural aunt, du Deffand, then appointed her as reader in her salon when her sight began to fail: a great opportunity for Lespinasse, who shone. She inspired lifelong passion in d'Alembert. The arrangement with her aunt lasted from 1754 to 1763, until du Deffand discovered that Lespinasse was receiving salon guests early, as her aunt was still getting up. Du Deffand felt betrayed and never forgave Lespinasse, even after the latter's death. Lespinasse opened her own salon in 1764, receiving her aunt's regular guests alongside Étienne de Condillac, Nicolas de Condorcet, Denis Diderot, Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, and others: the *Encyclopédie* took shape here. Lespinasse fell in love with the Marquis de Mora, son of the Spanish ambassador, but his family worked hard to prevent a marriage and succeeded; she later fell in love with Guibert, despite his apparent indifference. She and Guibert became lovers as Mora returned to France, dying in Bordeaux in 1774; wracked by guilt at this news, Lespinasse considered suicide, and she did not long survive Guibert's marriage, dying in her turn at forty-three.

From the closed world of court and salon, as seen in the texts of du Deffand or d'Épinay, we seem to enter a new universe with this late letter of the young Lespinasse. Her prose lacks du Deffand's perfection; but its charm is different. This is the world of Franklin and Jefferson, those plain-spoken Americans in Paris, and of the early Roman paintings of David; it is the world of republican virtue, as the rococo period comes to an end. Lespinasse is writing about friendship—somewhat ironically, one might think, given how her time with her aunt ended. She is not a mocker, she is all enthusiasm as she writes to one brilliant mathematician, Condorcet, about another, d'Alembert, a man who corresponded with Euler. D'Alembert, then, is sick—"il ne mange que par raison"—and Lespinasse will do something about it. She will not travel to Italy with him; she will instead put people with people, because she is a facilitator.

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clearly that this turn of phrase is necessary, because, whatever trust he has in your friendship, he would fear abusing it in asking you to make this journey at this time.

Her letter opens with an odd appeal to Condorcet's *amitié* and his *vertu* in equal measure. She describes d'Alembert's alarming condition, zeroing in on his melancholy, his state of mind: "son âme ne se nourrit que de tristesse et de douleur," she writes, rather beautifully. Lespinasse knows this territory, and she sees the solution—what she calls *dissipation*—in a trip with Condorcet to Italy, a project shared, she writes, by "nous tous". You are, she tells Condorcet, "selon son goût et selon son cœur." There is a certain authenticity to this language which is absent in our earlier texts: it is a willed authenticity, as when Lespinasse says she submits her project "bien plus à votre sentiment qu'à votre jugement." This again is a major break, a Rousseauist rejection of reason in favor of the heart. It is not a position that Voltaire would find welcome or even necessarily comprehensible, but it will soon be the bread and butter of Europe's Romantics.

Lespinasse ends with concern for d'Alembert's sensibility; to accommodate that, the trip must be proposed as born of pure self-interest, a position neatly inverting the seeming concern that disguises self-interest in d'Épinay's marquise. Interest and compassion have evidently flipped. Finally, Italy was of course a key stop on any Grand Tour, and those continued into the nineteenth century. But it is also the land to which Keats traveled in a failed bid for recovery; it is that land of sun and laughter "wo die Zitronen blühen," where the lemon trees bloom, as Goethe's Mignon sings.

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