Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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5. Suzanne Necker
2 June 1737–6 May 1794

Fig. 5. Suzanne Necker, by J.-S. Duplessis. Photo by Bonarov (2019). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7b/Duplessis_-_Suzanne_Curchod%2C_Madame_Necker.jpg, CC BY 4.0.

Réflexions sur le divorce

L'on vient donc de la publier cette loi dangereuse qui autorise et favorise le divorce ; ce n'était pas assez des divisions attachées à l'esprit de parti, il fallait encore disjoindre les époux, isoler les enfants, et combattre toutes les affections naturelles ; c'est cependant leur réunion qui forme la Patrie et qui la protège, ce sont les rameaux d'un arbre sacré, qu'on ne peut en séparer successivement sans laisser sa tige chauve et déshonorée.

Qu'il me soit permis de plaider la cause de l'indissolubilité du mariage, je sais quelle défaveur est attachée à cette opinion, je sais que le langage du sentiment s'affaiblit et plie en présence des passions, mais malgré ces obstacles, je m'abandonne à l'impulsion d'une âme tendre, inaccessible jusqu'à présent à nos secousses morales, et qui voudrait

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faire désirer et goûter le genre de bonheur dont elle jouit ; pour en jouir davantage encore.

Toute loi nouvelle suppose quelques nouvelles observations propres à perfectionner l'ordre public ou particulier ; il est donc à présumer, qu'en permettant le divorce, l'on a cru améliorer l'institution du mariage par tous les genres d'influences qu'elle peut avoir sur le bonheur des époux, pris individuellement, dans leur jeunesse et dans leur vieillesse ; sur celui de leurs enfants, et enfin sur le maintien des mœurs. Ces divers points de vue formeront la division naturelle des objections que j'entreprends de présenter contre le divorce; je livre ce projet sans rougir à toute la dérision de nos philosophes; car l'on sait qu'ils voudraient nous faire abandonner cinq mille ans de douces habitudes, pour introduire dans l'espèce humaine, dans sa nature intime, morale et sensible, des nouveautés bizarres ou funestes, et ils rappellent ce médecin impromptu de Molière, qui disait, en dénigrement des anatomistes, nous autres modernes, nous avons changé tout l'ordre du corps humain, qui n'était bon que pour nos ancêtres, nous ne plaçons plus le cœur du même côté qu'eux.[1]

Suzanne Necker, *née* Curchod, daughter of a pastor in the Pays de Vaud near Lausanne, was born poor but received a good education. She was

1 9 Suzanne Necker, *Réflexions sur le divorce* (Lausanne: Durand Ravanel, 1794), pp. 5–7. Spelling modernized by John Claiborne Isbell.

Translation: So, this dangerous law has just been published, that favors and authorizes divorce; it was not enough to have the divisions attached to party spirit, but spouses needed to be disunited, children isolated, all natural affections combated; it is nevertheless their union which makes the Fatherland and protects it, they are the branches of a sacred tree, which one cannot separate from it successively without leaving the stem bald and dishonored.

May it be allowed me to plead the cause of the indissolubility of marriage, I know what disfavor is attached to this opinion, I know that the language of sentiment weakens and bends in the presence of the passions, but despite these obstacles, I abandon myself to the impulse of a tender soul, inaccessible until now to our moral shocks, and which would wish to make others desire and enjoy the happiness that it enjoys; to enjoy it all the more.

Each new law supposes some new observations suited to perfecting the public or private order; it is then to be presumed that in permitting divorce, one thought to improve the institution of marriage by all the types of influences it can have on the happiness of the spouses, taken individually, in their youth and their old age; on that of their children; and finally on the maintenance of morals. These diverse points of view will form the natural division of the objections I undertake to present against divorce; I deliver this project without blushing to all the derision of our philosophers; for one knows that they would like to make us abandon five thousand years of sweet habits, to introduce into the human species, in its intimate, moral, and sensitive nature, bizarre or fatal novelties, and they recall that impromptu doctor of Molière's, who said, denigrating anatomists, we moderns have changed the whole order of the human body, which was good only for our ancestors, we no longer place the heart on the same side as them.

courted by Edward Gibbon—"I sighed as a lover; I obeyed as a son," he wrote on abandoning her—but in 1764 married the Genevan Jacques Necker, already a successful banker and future finance minister of Louis XVI. Their daughter became famous under her married name: Germaine de Staël. As Jacques Necker became a minister, Suzanne Necker founded their salon, soon among the most famous in Paris—it was arguably the last great salon of the Old Regime, where both literature and politics were discussed, welcoming Jean-François Marmontel, Jean-François de La Harpe, Georges-Louis de Buffon, Friedrich Melchior von Grimm, Guillaume Raynal, Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre; also Denis Diderot, Jean le Rond d'Alembert, Thérèse Geoffrin, Marie Anne du Deffand, and the Swiss visitors the Neckers both valued. A passionate writer, Necker barely published during her life, perhaps at her husband's urging, but at her death, he brought out her notes and reflections in five solid volumes. She is known primarily for her *Mémoire sur l'établissement des hospices* (1786) and for her *Réflexions sur le divorce* (1794), written during her daughter's somewhat high-profile affair with the Comte de Narbonne. Necker had worked to give her daughter an education far superior to what was typical of the age and the milieu; she is also remembered for having founded the *Hôpital Necker-enfants malades* in Paris. After the fall of her husband's ministry in September 1790, Necker retired to their château in Coppet outside Geneva. Having written instructions as to the erection of her tomb and the treatment of her remains—in 1790, she published her work *Des inhumations précipitées*—she died in 1794 in Lausanne, in the château of Beaulieu. Her body is interred with those of her husband and daughter in the grounds of Coppet.

Suzanne Necker, then, is a Swiss author, like Rousseau, like Isabelle de Charrière who follows here: born in the Pays de Vaud, Necker married a Genevan citizen and retired from Paris to Geneva; Charrière, born three years later in the Netherlands, settled in the Pays de Vaud and remained there. This is a reminder that France's cultural hegemony in Europe lasted well into the nineteenth century: Frederick the Great of Prussia wrote in French, not German, and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869), like Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1900), features dialogue in French. Given French censorship under the Old Regime, it was also typical for major French works to appear first abroad—in Amsterdam, or in Geneva. For

the Neckers in 1794, a Lausanne publication was convenient—they were living near Geneva—and perhaps necessary since Paris was under the Reign of Terror. It may seem an odd time to focus on divorce, among all that the new French republic was up to, but Necker had the extra incentive of her daughter Staël's recent affair with Narbonne, Minister for War from 1791–1792. Necker died this same year, and her daughter was not admitted to her deathbed.

What of the text? Two things seem worth noting at once: first, that the author was Protestant, a branch of Christianity open to divorce since at least Henry VIII of England; and second, that she got her wish: divorce—made legal in 1792—was restricted in 1804, made illegal in 1816, and not reestablished until 1884. Tens of millions of Frenchwomen, Flora Tristan for one, faced the consequences of that decision. One might then suggest that the text represents a certain failure of imagination on the part of Necker, a woman who spent her married years happy. Her husband was not drunk or abusive, a gambler or a cheat. He was not violent. Did Necker indeed have no suspicion that such husbands existed? That seems unlikely. Perhaps it is fairer to treat her text as a dream of married happiness—her daughter Staël, after all, has a rather more generous chapter in *De l'Allemagne* (1810/1813) called "De l'amour dans le mariage," and who frankly has not similarly felt that love in marriage is to be celebrated, or said their vows with that belief in mind? Perhaps Necker, caught up in disappointment at her daughter's actions, simply allowed herself thus to imagine lasting marital concord and to look to publish that appeal to happiness on paper. Perhaps, caught up in argument as one sometimes can be, she laid out her personal principles with a certain amount of vigor while missing the real-world consequences of the arguments she was both proposing and providing.

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