

Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

John Claiborne Isbell





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6. Isabelle Agnès Élisabeth de Charrière

20 October 1740–27 December 1805



Fig. 6. Isabelle Agnès Élisabeth de Charrière, attr. G. de Spinny. Photo by Jan Arkesteijn (2017). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/59/Belle_van_Zuylen%2C_attributed_to_Guillaume_de_Spinny.jpg, CC BY 4.0.

Lettres écrites de Lausanne

Première Lettre

Le 30 Novembre 1784

Combien vous avez tort de vous plaindre ! Un gendre d'un mérite médiocre, mais que votre fille a épousé sans répugnance : un établissement que vous-même regardez comme avantageux, mais sur lequel vous avez été à peine consultée ! Qu'est-ce que cela fait ? que vous importe ? Votre mari, ses parents & des convenances de fortune ont tout fait. Tant mieux. Si votre fille est heureuse, en serez-vous moins sensible à son bonheur ?

Si elle est malheureuse, ne sera-ce un chagrin de moins que de n'avoir pas fait son sort ? Que vous êtes romanesque ! Votre gendre est médiocre ; mais votre fille est-elle d'un caractère ou d'un esprit si distingué ? On la sépare de vous ; aviez-vous tant de plaisir à l'avoir auprès de vous ? Elle vivra à Paris ; est-elle fâchée d'y vivre ? Malgré vos déclamations sur les dangers, sur les séductions, les illusions, le prestige, le délire, &c. seriez-vous fâchée d'y vivre vous-même ? Vous êtes encore belle, vous serez toujours aimable ; je suis bien trompée, ou vous iriez de grand cœur vous charger *des chaînes de la Cour*, si elles vous étaient offertes. Je crois qu'elles vous seront offertes.¹

Isabelle Agnès Élisabeth de Charrière, *née* van Tuyll van Serooskerken [Belle de Zuylen] was born in the château of Zuylen, near Utrecht, and died in the canton of Neuchâtel, which then belonged to Prussia. Belle van Zuylen spoke English, German, Italian, and Latin, and studied mathematics and physics, but it was in French, language of the European nobility in the eighteenth century, that she was to write, starting at twenty-two with *Le Noble* (1762), an anonymous satirical sketch. At thirty, she married the Swiss M. de Charrière, and from 1782, she began a career as a writer of letters, pamphlets, tales, and novels including the *Lettres neuchâteloises* (1784), *Lettres de Mistriss Henley publiées par son amie* (1784), *Lettres écrites de Lausanne* (1785), *Caliste* (1787), and *Trois femmes* (1796), along with plays, political tracts, and operas. Her production post-1789, a period when she hosted émigrés in Neuchâtel, is particularly rich. Her extensive list of correspondents includes James

1 Isabelle de Charrière, "Lettres écrites de Lausanne", in *Œuvres complètes*, 10 vols (Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 1980), VIII, p. 137. Spelling modernized by John Claiborne Isbell.

Translation: This 30 November 1784

How wrong you are to complain! A son-in-law of average merit, but whom your daughter married without repugnance: an establishment you yourself view as advantageous but about which you were barely consulted! What of it? what difference does it make to you? Your husband, his relatives and suitabilities of fortune did everything. So much the better. If your daughter is happy, will you be the less sensitive to her happiness? If she is unhappy, will it not be a grief the less to you not to have made her fate? How romantic you are! Your son-in-law is average; but is your daughter of so distinguished a character or wit? You are separated from her; did you have so much pleasure in having her near you? She will live in Paris; is she angry to be living there? Despite your declamations on the dangers, on the seductions, the illusions, the prestige, the whirlwind, &c. would you be angry to live there yourself? You are still quite beautiful, you will always be charming; I am sadly mistaken, or you would gladly go charge yourself with the *chains of the Court*, if they were offered to you. I believe they will be offered to you.

Boswell and Benjamin Constant, who was a great love of her life. She also composed music for piano, harpsichord, and string instruments. The asteroid (9604) Bellevanzuylen, discovered in 1991, bears her name.²

Isabelle de Charrière, a Dutch aristocrat living in what is now Switzerland, wrote this elegant text in French, like most of the ten volumes of her complete works. We are thus reminded that the national boundaries to which Europe has devoted such attention since about 1814, had much less weight just thirty years earlier. Thus, in Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* of 1767, he wanders happily through France for a good fraction of the book before noticing a) that France and his native England are at war and b) that he has no passport. Here then are a series of letters written from the Swiss Pays de Vaud which open with a review of Paris and the court—Versailles—and how our protagonists are to get admitted to it. Thus far did the impact of Louis XIV extend, in an age before nations as we know them existed. The Pays de Vaud, as it happened, owed suzerainty to German-speaking Bern, but it was to Paris that its aristocracy looked for guidance and meaning.

This is, as we have noted, an elegant text. It is *mondain*, not naïve, and at ease with the world's complexity. Thus, it admits at once that a disappointing son-in-law is just that, a disappointment—he is a man “d'un mérite médiocre,” and the mother was not consulted—but it couches this *datum* in a broader review of the field: if things turn out badly, the mother will not feel responsible, while if they turn out well, she will not resent her lack of input. The argument provided has an almost metaphysical wit to it, pointedly avoiding cliché and the commonplace, and it is also Socratic, couched in a series of questions designed to elicit reasoned assent from the addressee. This is, in short, the play of reason at work for which the Enlightenment came into being. It is, moreover, an aristocratic text, starting with the focus on court; in this, too, it is typical of a century then already passing. It is not bourgeois. Lastly, these are letters, they are an example of the epistolary fictions so in vogue throughout the eighteenth century, and scarce in the nineteenth century. As such, the text offers a tight focus on speaker and listener, mouth and ear; as in Laclos, any epistolary novel quickly becomes a hall of mirrors, in which each short text echoes back to us a reflection both

2 “JPL Small-Body Database Browser”, ssd.jpl.nasa.gov.

of its author's agenda and of its designated reader's reaction to it. Each letter we read has a sender and recipient, acting and reacting precisely as Newton had defined the process in his Third Law of Motion of 1686: "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." Reason, in Charrière's world, is a universal thing. It is a world that fundamentally makes sense.

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