

# Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

John Claiborne Isbell





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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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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

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Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

# 11. Adélaïde Marie Émilie de Souza-Botelho

14 May 1761–19 April 1836

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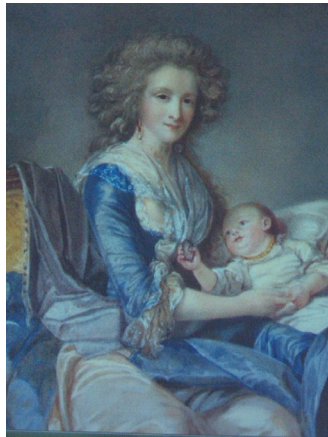


Fig. 11. Adélaïde Marie Émilie de Souza-Botelho. Photo by Pbrks (2022).  
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## *Adèle de Sénange, ou Lettres de Lord Sydenham*

Avant-Propos.

Cet ouvrage n'a point pour objet de peindre des caractères qui sortent des routes communes : mon ambition ne s'est pas élevée jusqu'à prétendre étonner par des situations nouvelles ; j'ai voulu seulement montrer, dans la vie, ce qu'on n'y regarde pas, et décrire ces mouvements ordinaires du cœur qui composent l'histoire de chaque jour. Si je réussis à faire arrêter un instant mes lecteurs sur eux-mêmes, et si, après avoir lu cet

ouvrage, ils se disent : *Il n'y a rien là de nouveau* ; ils ne sauraient me flatter davantage.

J'ai pensé que l'on pouvait se rapprocher assez de la nature, et inspirer encore de l'intérêt, en se bornant à tracer ces détails fugitifs qui occupent l'espace entre les événements de la vie. Des jours, des années, dont le souvenir est effacé, ont été remplis d'émotions, de sentiments, de petits intérêts, de nuances fines et délicates. Chaque moment a son occupation, et chaque occupation a son ressort moral. Il est même bon de rapprocher sans cesse la vertu de ces circonstances obscures et inaperçues, parce que c'est la suite de ces sentiments journaliers qui forme essentiellement le fond de la vie. Ce sont ces ressorts que j'ai tâché de démêler.

Cet essai a été commencé dans un temps qui semblait imposer à une femme, à une mère, le besoin de s'éloigner de tout ce qui était réel, de ne guère réfléchir, et même d'écarter la prévoyance ; et il a été achevé dans les intervalles d'une longue maladie : mais, tel qu'il est, je le présente à l'indulgence de mes amis.

... A faint shadow of uncertain light,  
Such as a lamp whose light doth fade away,  
Doth lend to her who walks in fear and sad affright.

Seule dans une terre étrangère, avec un enfant qui a atteint l'âge où il n'est plus permis de retarder l'éducation, j'ai éprouvé une sorte de douceur à penser que ses premières études seraient le fruit de mon travail.

Mon cher enfant ! Si je succombe à la maladie qui me poursuit, qu'au moins mes amis excitent votre application, en vous rappelant qu'elle eût fait mon bonheur ! et ils peuvent vous l'attester, eux qui savent avec quelle tendresse je vous ai aimé ; eux qui si souvent ont détourné mes douleurs en me parlant de vous. Avec quelle ingénieuse bonté ils me faisaient raconter les petites joies de votre enfance, vos petits bons-mots, les premiers mouvements de votre bon cœur ! Combien je leur répétais la même histoire, et avec quelle patience ils se prêtaient à m'écouter ! Souvent à la fin d'un de mes contes, je m'apercevais que je l'avais dit bien des fois : alors, ils se moquaient doucement de moi, de ma crédule confiance, de ma tendre affection, et me parlaient encore de vous ! ... Je les remercie ... Je leur ai dû le plus grand plaisir qu'une mère puisse avoir.

A. de F .....  
Londres, 1793.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Adélaïde Marie Émilie de Souza-Botelho, *Adèle de Sénange* (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1995), pp. 1-3. Spelling modernized by John Claiborne Isbell.

Adélaïde Marie Émilie de Souza-Botelho was born and died in Paris. Legend says that her mother was the mistress of Louis XV, then of a farmer general, Étienne Michel Bouret, one of whom was her father. At sixteen, Adélaïde's sister Julie married the brother of Madame de Pompadour; their mother died in 1767 and Julie took charge of her. Adélaïde was educated at a convent, leaving it in 1779 aged eighteen to marry Charles François, Comte de Flahaut de la Billarderie at the decision of her sister. He was thirty-six years older than her and both marshal and intendant of the King's gardens: according to her, the marriage was never consummated. They lived at the Louvre where Flahaut, as she then was, decided to write *Adèle de Sénange*, the story of a young girl married off to a much older man, living a passion resembling

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Translation: Preface.

This work does not have the object of painting characters who leave the ordinary routes: my ambition has not climbed to wishing to astonish through new situations; I wanted only to show, in life, what one does not look at therein, and to describe those ordinary movements of the heart which compose the history of each day. If I succeed in making my readers pause a moment on themselves, and if, after having read this work, they say to themselves: *There's nothing new there*; they could not better flatter me.

I thought that one could approach nature enough, and still inspire interest, in limiting oneself to tracing those fugitive details which occupy the space between the events of life. Days, years, whose memory is erased, have been filled with emotions, with feelings, with little interests, with fine and delicate nuances. Each moment has its occupation, and each occupation has its moral spring. It is indeed good to bring to mind incessantly the virtue of these obscure and unnoticed circumstances, because it is the succession of these daily feelings which makes up in essence the basis of life. These are the springs I have tried to untangle.

This essay began in a time which seemed to impose on a woman, a mother, the need to distance oneself from all that was real, to reflect hardly at all, and even to push aside foresight; and it was finished in the intervals of a long illness; but such as it is, I present it to the indulgence of my friends.

[...] Alone in a foreign land, with a child who has reached the age where one may no longer delay his education, I felt a sort of sweetness in thinking that his first studies would be the fruit of my work.

My dear child! If I succumb to the illness which pursues me, let my friends at least excite your application, in reminding you that it would have caused me joy! and they can also bear witness to you, those who know with what tenderness I loved you; those who so often turned away my pains in speaking to me of you. With what ingenious goodness they made me tell of the little joys of your childhood, your little witticisms, the first movements of your good heart! How much I repeated to them the same story, and with what patience they lent themselves to listening to me! Often at the end of one of my tales, I realized that I had said it many times; then they gently teased me, my credulous trust, my tender affection, and spoke to me yet of you! ... I thank them ... I owed them the greatest pleasure a mother can have.

A. de F .....

London, 1793.

that of *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678). It appeared in 1794 as her first novel. Mistress of Talleyrand, she opened a salon where he presided between 1783 and 1792. They had a son in 1785. The salon also saw Gouverneur Morris, Lavoisier, Condorcet, d'Holbach, Suard, and Marmontel. Talleyrand drew close to Staël at the onset of the Revolution, causing a rift. At the start of the Terror, Flahaut settled in London, leaving her husband in France. He was guillotined the same year. She traveled then to Switzerland where she met the Duc de Chartres, and on to Hamburg where she met her future husband, Dom José Maria de Sousa Botelho Mourão e Vasconcelos, Ambassador of Portugal in Denmark. Talleyrand helped her to return to France in 1797 and to be removed from the list of émigrés. She published *Émilie et Alphonse* in 1799, and *Charles et Marie* in 1802, the year she remarried. Souza worked at her son's career—even encouraging his liaison with Hortense de Beauharnais, which produced a grandson—but lost her influence at the Empire's fall. She then retired from public life, raising her grandson whose career followed that of his half-brother, Napoléon III. She is buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery.

Here is a later émigrée than Vigée Le Brun: Souza left Paris for exile in 1793. Souza's husband was executed in 1794, as *Adèle de Sénange* appeared, and she had separated from Talleyrand—a trimmer in politics with a gift for remaining close to power as it changed hands, from 1789 to 1815 and beyond. The Terror was a dark time for her as for countless others, and that is perhaps reflected in her text. It opens by stating its goal of having no "situations nouvelles," no characters who leave the common paths: ambrosia, surely, to all those who saw in the Terror the price paid by France for a focus both on novelty and on extraordinary characters. Souza goes on to state that her focus will be on "la suite de ces sentiments journaliers," which make up the ground of life, evoking both the fashionable contrast of revolution with evolution, the equally vogueish focus on a gendered private sphere found in, say, David's 1784 *The Oath of the Horatii*, and finally, the contrast of everyday detail with the reign of abstraction that led to the guillotine—which was precisely Camus's argument in *L'Étranger* two centuries later. Souza does not name the Revolution in this preface, but one word—"encore", in paragraph two—depends on the Revolution for its weight of meaning.

The preface is rather oddly bisected by an edited quote from Spenser: the original reads,

But a faint shadow of uncertain light;  
 Such as a lamp whose light doth fade away;  
 Or as the moon clothed with cloudy night  
 Does shew to him that walks in fear and sad affright.

This is followed by an address to Souza's son (by Talleyrand) whose function is not entirely clear and where the word "vous" may surprise. Souza may have written this address as a *captatio benevolentiae*, an appeal to the reader's good will; or it may simply be her love and hope expressing themselves at a dark time for both, as we have seen. It is signed "A. de F ....." for Flahaut, her first married name.

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