

Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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13. Beate Barbara Juliane Freifrau von Krüdener

22 November 1764–25 December 1824



Fig. 13. Beate Barbara Juliane Freifrau von Krüdener, by S.-G. Counis. Photo by Xviona (2021). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3c/Barbara_von_Kr%C3%BCdener.jpg, CC BY 4.0.

Valérie ou Lettres de Gustave de Linar à Ernest de G...

Préface

Je me trouvais, il y a quelques années, dans une des plus belles provinces du Danemarck : la nature, tour à tour sauvage et riante, souvent sublime, avait jeté dans le magnifique paysage que j'aimais à contempler, là de hautes forêts, ici des lacs tranquilles, tandis que dans l'éloignement la mer du Nord et la mer Baltique roulaient leurs vastes ondes au pied des montagnes de la Suède, et que la rêveuse mélancolie invitait à s'asseoir sur les tombeaux des anciens Scandinaves, placés, d'après l'antique usage de ce peuple, sur des collines et des tertres répandus dans la plaine.

« Rien n'est plus poétique, a dit un éloquent écrivain, qu'un cœur de seize années. » Sans être aussi jeune, je l'étais cependant ; j'aimais à sentir et à méditer, et souvent je créais autour de moi des tableaux aussi variés que les sites qui m'environnaient. Tantôt je voyais les scènes terribles qui avaient offert à Shakespeare les effrayantes beautés de Hamlet ; tantôt les images plus douces de la vertu et de l'amour se présentaient à moi, et je voyais les ombres touchantes de Virginie et de Paul : j'aimais à faire revivre ces êtres aimables et infortunés ; j'aimais à leur offrir des ombrages aussi doux que ceux des cocotiers, une nature aussi grande que celle des tropiques, des rivages solitaires et magnifiques comme ceux de la mer des Indes.¹

Beate Barbara Juliane Freifrau von Krüdener was born in Riga in 1764. Her father, Baron Otto Hermann von Vietinghoff, was a wealthy man and a leading freemason. Her mother, Countess Anna Ulrika von Münnich, was a strict Lutheran. Vietinghoff was educated in French, German, deportment, and sewing. In 1782, she married Baron Burkhardt Alexis Constantine Krüdener, sixteen years her senior. Well-traveled and cultured, the baron was reserved while the young Krüdener was more pleasure-loving and extravagant. In 1784, the couple had a son, named Paul after his godfather, the future tsar. Her husband became ambassador that year in Venice, then Munich in 1786, then Copenhagen in 1787. After the birth of a daughter, Krüdener traveled for her health. She was in Paris in 1789 when the Estates General met; there, she met Bernardin de

1 Beate Barbara Juliane Freifrau von Krüdener, *Valérie ou lettres de Gustave de Linar à Ernest de G ...*, ed. Michel Mercier (Paris: Klincksieck, 1974), p. 21.

Translation: Preface

I found myself, some years ago, in one of the most beautiful provinces of Denmark: nature, by turns wild and laughing, often sublime, had thrown into the magnificent landscape I loved to contemplate, here high forests, there tranquil lakes, while in the distance the North Sea and the Baltic rolled their vast waves at the foot of Sweden's mountains, and dreamy melancholy invited one to sit on the tombs of the old Scandinavians, placed, according to the ancient use of this people, on hills and mounds scattered in the plain.

"Nothing is more poetic, said an eloquent writer, than a sixteen-year-old heart." Without being so young, I nevertheless was; I loved to feel and to meditate, and often I created around me paintings as varied as the sites which surrounded me. Sometimes I saw the terrible scenes which offered to Shakespeare the terrifying beauties of Hamlet; sometimes the softer images of virtue and love presented themselves to me, and I saw the touching shades of Virginia and Paul: I loved to make these lovable and unfortunate beings live again; I loved to offer them shade as sweet as that of the coconut trees, a nature as great as that of the tropics, shores solitary and magnificent like those of the Indian Ocean.

Saint-Pierre, Rivarol, and the cavalry captain Charles Louis de Frégeville, with whom she fell in love. The couple went to Copenhagen, where the baron refused a divorce; Krüdener set out for Riga, Saint Petersburg, Leipzig, and Switzerland. In 1800, her husband became ambassador in Berlin, where she joined him briefly before departing after Tsar Paul's death. The baron died in 1802. In December 1803, Krüdener published her novel *Valérie*, then returned to Riga, where she fell under the influence of the Moravian Brethren. She met a peasant to whom God had supposedly revealed that Napoleon was the Antichrist, and the latter days were at hand.² Krüdener visited the Moravians at Herrnhut, the mystic Jung-Stilling, and the pastor Fontaines, who all influenced her thought. In 1809, she founded a colony of the elect in Württemberg, which was dispersed by the government. Krüdener resumed her travels, to Riga where her mother lay dying, then Karlsruhe, Strasbourg, Geneva, and Baden in 1814, where Tsarina Elizabeth hoped she might bring Tsar Alexander peace of mind. The two met on 4 June 1815. She followed him to Paris, where a private door connected her lodgings to the tsar's and he prayed with her every evening. Chateaubriand attended these meetings, as did Duras, Constant, and Madame Récamier. On 26 September, the sovereigns of Russia, Austria, and Prussia proclaimed the Holy Alliance under this influence: it was to herald a new age of peace and goodwill on Earth. Krüdener later claimed she suggested the idea and the tsar submitted the draft for her approval.³ In October, she left Paris, traveling in Switzerland before returning in 1818 to her estate in Livonia. Later, as the Greek War of Independence began, Krüdener announced the tsar's mission to take up arms for Greece; he wrote a polite letter telling her to leave Saint Petersburg. She died in the Crimea on 25 December 1824.

What might we say about this extract? Openings to fictions are revealing things. *Valérie* is an epistolary novel, and true to that tradition, Krüdener opens with a preface explaining how the letters we will read were obtained. Her framing narrator, we learn, met Gustave de Linar, and most of the letters are Gustave's. The two met in Denmark, site of Paul Henri Mallet's 1755 *Introduction à l'histoire du Dannemarc*, and Krüdener chooses to start by setting her scene. In the distance, the North Sea and

2 Francis Ley, *Madame de Krüdener et son temps 1764–1824* (Paris: Plon, 1961), pp. 268–270.

3 Ley, *Krüdener*, p. 513.

the Baltic meet: we are then near the Oresund Strait by Copenhagen—where Krüdener lived in 1787—with Sweden’s Malmö and Scania across the strait. However, the ‘Swedish mountains’ Krüdener describes peak in Scania at 696 feet; her goal seems less accurate travelogue than mood-setting. Staël’s *De l’Allemagne* (1810/1813) similarly says Germany’s mountains are in the North, though they are in the South; but northern mountains had been a European trope ever since Ossian first appeared in 1760. Krüdener’s six-paragraph preface is in fact packed with tropes, from the “sublime” of Burke’s 1757 *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* to the “rêveuse mélancolie” of Rousseau’s posthumous *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1782). Even the tombs Krüdener mentions echo Volney’s *Les Ruines* of 1792, and this is just the first paragraph; her second paragraph namechecks both Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1603) and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s 1788 *Paul et Virginie*, also quoting a line from Chateaubriand’s 1801 *René* to announce that we are at the cutting edge of European fashion. The text itself goes on to cite the poet Klopstock and the *Frühromantiker* Tieck (in Gustave’s diary and in Letter XXXV), who was then totally unknown in France and to whom an entire page is devoted. Krüdener is offering her readers a fresh Romantic universe, and her book sold out in Paris in 1803.

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