

Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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15. Constance Marie Pipelet or Constance, Princesse de Salm 7 September 1767–13 April 1845

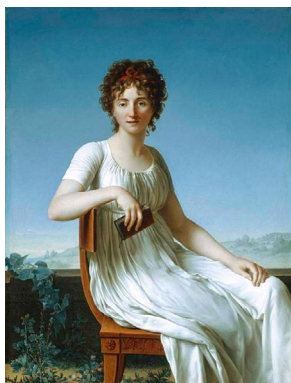


Fig. 15. Constance Marie Pipelet or Constance, princesse de Salm, by J.-B. F. Desoria. Photo by Cecil (2007). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d6/Jean-Baptiste_Fran%C3%A7ois_Desoria_-_Portrait_de_Constance_Pipelet.jpg, CC BY 4.0.

« Sur la mort du jeune tambour Barra,
âgé de quinze ans »

Jeune héros, espoir de ton pays,
Brave naissant dont la gloire s'honore,
C'en est donc fait, tes destins sont finis,
Et ton couchant a suivi ton aurore !

Quel furieux, altéré de trépas,
Leva sur toi son arme meurtrière ?
Cet assassin ne te voyait-il pas,
Couvert encor des baisers de ta mère ?

Hélas ! ses yeux sont fermés pour toujours ;
 Grâce, Plaisirs, Amours, versez des larmes.
 Il tombe à peine au printemps de ses jours ;
 Il n'a connu que la gloire et les armes.

Mais renfermons ces injustes regrets ;
 N'a-t-il pas dit : Je meurs pour ma patrie ?
 C'en est assez pour le cœur d'un Français,
 Et son trépas a compensé sa vie.¹

Constance Marie Pipelet or Constance, Princesse de Salm was born in Nantes in 1767 and died in Paris in 1845. Her father Marie Alexandre de Théis was a poet and playwright. During her childhood, he retired and the family moved to Picardy, where she received a good education. In 1789, she married Jean-Baptiste Pipelet de Leury, a surgeon, and settled in Paris, publishing in the *Almanach des Muses* and other periodicals. In 1794, her *Sapho, tragédie mêlée de chants*, in three acts and in verse with music by Jean Paul Égide Martini, was performed in Paris, with over a hundred shows.² In 1795, Pipelet was the first woman admitted to the Lycée des arts. Her father died in 1796. She participated in the *Querelle des femmes auteurs* launched by Écouchard-Le Brun in 1797, writing her own *Épître aux femmes* (1797) in answer to his. Pipelet divorced in 1799. She wrote more epistles and cantatas, on the marriage of Napoleon for example, some read by her at the Athénée and afterwards published. She also published several ballads, for which she composed the melodies and the piano accompaniments. She ceased writing for the stage in 1800 after a poor reception for her drama *Camille, ou Amitié et imprudence*. In 1803, Pipelet married Joseph, Count zu Salm-Reifferscheidt-Dyck, who

1 Constance Marie Pipelet, *Œuvres de Madame la Princesse Constance de Salm*, 4 vols (Paris: Didot, 1842), II pp. 273–274.

Translation: "On the Death of the Young Drummer Boy Barra, Aged Fifteen"

Young hero, hope of your country, / Developing warrior of whom glory honors itself,
 / It is then over, your destinies are done, / And your setting has followed your dawn!

What furious soul, drunk on death, / Raised over you his murderous weapon? / Did
 this assassin not see you, / Still covered by the kisses of your mother?

Alas! his eyes are closed forever; / Graces, Pleasures, Loves, shed tears. / He falls
 barely in the springtime of his days; / He knew only glory and arms.

But let us shut in these unjust regrets; / Did he not say: I die for my country? / It is
 enough for a Frenchman's heart, / And his death compensated for his life.

2 Jacqueline Letzter, Robert Adelson, *Women Writing Opera: Creativity and Controversy in the Age of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p.35.

took the title of prince in 1816; she published thereafter as the Princesse de Salm. The couple lived alternately in Germany and in Paris, where Salm held a salon featuring Dumas, Stendhal, and other leading authors.

This brief text, “Sur la mort du jeune tambour Barra, âgé de quinze ans,” consists of four decasyllabic quatrains, rhyming *abab*, with alternation of masculine and feminine rhymes as required by French tradition. Salm often writes longer pieces—epistles, for instance—but here, brevity is used to good effect. The story seems complete and there is little sense of pressure or constraint; on the contrary, Salm’s sixteen lines feel roomy and comfortable. Silent e’s are an important part of the music of French poetry and Salm uses them to advantage, tending to open lines with them for impact: “Jeune héros,” “Brave naissant,” “Grâces, Plaisirs.” Striking or indeed poignant images are coined—“ton couchant a suivi ton aurore,” “Couvert encore des baisers de ta mère”—and the latter may even have inspired Nerval’s famous line in “El Desdichado,” “Mon front est rouge encore du baiser de la Reine.” A certain level of abstraction, not without precedent in French neoclassicism, shapes the narrative throughout, both lexically and syntactically, from “espoir de ton pays” in line one to “son trépas a compensé sa vie” in line sixteen. Abstraction provides order and balance in opposition to the early death that is the poem’s topic, a feature of the elegiac tradition, though this elegy is unusually short. There is a sustained narrative: in stanza one, a young hero has died; in stanza two, we picture the killer; in stanza three, we call for tears from more abstractions that are as yet unknown to the young victim; in stanza four, we cease our tears in a wave of patriotism. The whole is highly skilled, indeed brilliant in its application of technique to the topic at hand, with just one awkward moment, that being the shift from second to third person in stanzas three and four, which the brief text does not seek to justify. Continuing with a revolutionary “tu” would pose almost no mechanical problems for the poet—just “Tu tombes à peine” with its extra syllable—which makes the decision even more curious.

Who is the Barra in the poem’s title? A drummer in the republican army, Joseph Bara was killed at age fourteen by Vendéens in 1793. After his commander requested a government pension for his mother, the deceased Bara became a revolutionary icon. He is, for instance, the subject of an unfinished painting by David from 1794, *La Mort du jeune Bara*, painted in series with *La Mort de Marat*. This may seem an

unexpected topic for a future princess, but it was in vogue under the Convention, with 1816 a long way off. Pipelet remained active in Paris throughout the Revolution, which may well reflect a certain bravery on her part, and republican patriotism is after all her subject.

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