

# Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

John Claiborne Isbell





<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2023 John Claiborne Isbell



This work is licensed under an Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).

Attribution should include the following information:

John Claiborne Isbell, *Destins de femmes: French Women Writers, 1750–1850*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0346>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions and in the list of illustrations. Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

Further details about CC BY-NC licenses are available at  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Any digital material and resources associated with this volume will be available at  
<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0346#resources>

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

Cover image: Nanine Vallain, *Freedom* (1794), [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nanine\\_Vallain\\_-\\_Libert%C3%A9.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nanine_Vallain_-_Libert%C3%A9.jpg)

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

16. Henriette Lucie Dillon,  
Marquise de La Tour-du-Pin  
Gouvernet  
25 February 1770–2 April 1853

---



Fig. 16. Auguste Danse, portrait of Henriette Lucy Dillon, Marquise de la Tour du Pin Gouvernet. Etching, 103 mm x 77 mm, ca. 1900–1925. © National Portrait Gallery, London (image ID: D15778), <https://npgimages.com/search/?searchQuery=+marquise+de+La+Tour+du+Pin+Gouvernet>.

*Mémoires de la marquise de La Tour du Pin.*  
*Journal d'une femme de cinquante ans*

Quelques jours après les événements que je viens de raconter, mon mari reçut un courrier lui annonçant la nomination de son père au ministère de la guerre. Nous repartîmes aussitôt pour Versailles. Alors commença ma vie publique. Mon beau-père m'installa au département de la Guerre et me mit à la tête de sa maison pour en faire les honneurs, de concert avec ma belle-sœur, également logée au ministère, mais qui, au bout de deux mois, devait nous quitter. J'occupai le bel appartement du premier avec mon mari. J'avais été si accoutumée, à Montpellier et à Paris, aux

grands dîners, que ma nouvelle situation ne m'embarrassait aucunement. D'ailleurs, je ne me mêlais de rien que de faire les honneurs. Il y avait par semaine deux dîners de vingt-quatre couverts, auxquels l'on priait tous les membres de l'Assemblée constituante, à tour de rôle. Les femmes n'étaient jamais invitées. Mme de Lameth et moi étions assises vis-à-vis l'une de l'autre, et nous prenions à côté de nous les quatre personnages les plus considérables de la société, en observant de les choisir toujours dans tous les partis. Tant qu'on a été à Versailles, les hommes assistaient sans exception à ces dîners en habit habillé, et j'ai souvenir de M. de Robespierre en habit vert pomme et supérieurement coiffé avec une forêt de cheveux blancs. Mirabeau seul ne vint pas chez nous et ne fut jamais invité. J'allais souvent souper dehors, soit chez mes collègues, soit chez les personnes établies à Versailles pendant le temps de l'Assemblée nationale, comme on la nommait.<sup>1</sup>

Henriette Lucie Dillon, Marquise de La Tour-du-Pin Gouvernet was born in Paris in 1770 and died in Pisa in 1853. Her father was the Irish Jacobite colonel Arthur Dillon, her mother the lady-in-waiting Thérèse Lucy de Rothe. After her mother's death in 1782 and her father's posting abroad, Lucie lived in her maternal grandmother's house. She married Frédéric Séraphin, Comte de Gouvernet, later Marquis de La Tour-du-Pin, in 1787. He was the son of a French Minister of War. Gouvernet became lady-in-waiting to Marie-Antoinette and filled that role from 1787 to

---

1 Henriette Lucie Dillon, *Mémoires de la marquise de La Tour du Pin. Journal d'une femme de cinquante ans*, ed. le comte Christian de Liedekerke Beaufort (Paris: Mercure de France, 1989), pp. 124–125.

Translation: Some days after the events I have been describing, my husband received a letter announcing to him his father's appointment at the Ministry of War. We left at once for Versailles. Then began my public life. My father-in-law placed me in the Department of War and put me at the head of his household to receive visitors, in concert with my sister-in-law, also lodged in the ministry, but who would need to leave us two months later. I occupied the fine apartment on the first floor with my husband. I had been so accustomed, in Montpellier and in Paris, to grand dinners, that my new situation was no encumbrance to me. Besides, I took no part in anything but the social visits. Weekly there were two dinners of 24 places, to which were invited all the members of the Assemblée constituante, in turn. Wives were never invited. Mme de Lameth and I were seated facing each other, and we sat beside us the four most considerable members of the society, observing to choose them always from among all parties. As long as we were at Versailles, the men attended these dinners without exception in dress attire, and I recall M. de Robespierre in an apple green suit and superiorly coiffed with a forest of white hair. Mirabeau alone never came to call and was never invited. I often dined out, either with my colleagues, or with the persons established at Versailles during the time of the Assemblée nationale, as it was called.

1789. From Versailles, she witnessed the Estates General, the Women's March on Versailles, and the *Grande Peur*. From 1791–1792, her husband served as ambassador to the Dutch Republic in the Hague, where she joined him. During the Reign of Terror, she fled to the Gironde region. With the help of Madame Tallien, she secured a passport for herself and her husband, leaving for exile on a dairy farm near Albany, New York in 1794. She described this time as the happiest of her life. She was close to Talleyrand during his exile in the United States, returning to France with her husband in 1796 after the establishment of the Directoire. Bonaparte's Brumaire coup in November 1799 allowed her husband to resume his diplomatic career, and she continued to accompany him to his various appointments after the Bourbon Restoration. Their son was involved in the Duchesse de Berry's anti-Orléanist plot of 1831, and the couple again went into effective exile. Following her husband's death in 1837, Gouvernet moved to Italy, where she died. Her memoir was written to her only surviving child at the age of fifty and was not published until 1906.

Here is a lady-in-waiting to Marie-Antoinette discussing the onset of the Revolution: and in this extract, she idly recalls Robespierre in his apple-green costume and powdered wig as a guest in her salon. It is all rather unexpected. What then is going on?

Let us recall that the French aristocracy was by no means monolithic in their political opinions in 1789. This book's most extreme aristocrat, thus far, is Vigée Le Brun, whose parents were bourgeois. Not for nothing on 4 August 1789 did the nobles in the Assemblée surrender their feudal rights; the work of the *philosophes* over the preceding century had gone far to inculcate a vision of progress for France in which various institutions were seen as antiquated at best. And moreover, La Tour-du-Pin was daughter-in-law to the Minister for War. She had social obligations in support of his executive work. As she notes, these were dinners "auxquels l'on priaît tous les membres de l'Assemblée constituante, à tour de rôle": Robespierre, member of the Assemblée for the Third Estate (he was a provincial lawyer), had every reason to expect an invitation. Besides, he had yet to order anyone's death. The only deputy not invited, La Tour-du-Pin notes acidly, was Mirabeau, on whom a lot of blame for the early Revolution had already fallen; he was also venal, the story went. There is in this extract a certain amount perhaps of world-weariness, a certain

amount of executive knowledge that to get things done, there is no use whining, there is no use dreaming: decisions may be hard, but leaving them unmade is worse, as is surrendering to faction, resentment, and spite. La Tour-du-Pin had a job to do, and she did it. If that meant hosting the radical Robespierre, so be it, and she is not writing these memoirs at fifty to second-guess herself. Much of the beauty of her memoirs lies in that steady tone.

Let us note then the one detail this former lady-in-waiting permits herself, at the close of the paragraph in question. She talks of the Assemblée nationale with which the whole revolutionary circus started, and she adds four words: “comme on la nommait.” That is very dry indeed.

## Works

[La-Tour-du-Pin Gouvernet, Lucie de], *Mémoires de la marquise de La Tour du Pin. Journal d'une femme de cinquante ans*, ed. le comte Christian de Liederkerke Beaufort (Paris: Mercure de France, 1989)

*Une dame et deux rois de cœur: correspondance inédite, 1833–1842*, ed. Bertrand de Viviés (Nîmes: C. Lacour, 1996)

## Sources

Lassère, Madeleine, *Lucie de La Tour du Pin, 1770–1853: marquise-courage* ([Bordeaux]: «SudOuest», 2014)

Moorehead, Caroline, *Dancing to the Precipice: The Life of Lucie de La Tour du Pin, Eyewitness to an Era* (London: HarperCollins, 2009)

Rohan Chabot, Alix de, *Madame de La Tour du Pin: le talent du bonheur* ([Paris]: Perrin, 1997)

Rossi, Henri, *Mémoires aristocratiques féminins 1789–1848* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000)