

# Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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## 18. Marie Françoise Sophie Gay

1 July 1776–2 March 1852

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Fig. 18. Marie Françoise Sophie Gay, by J.-B. Isabey. Photo by M0tty (2021).  
Wikimedia, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/38/Marie\\_Fran%C3%A7oise\\_Sophie\\_Nichault\\_de\\_la\\_Valette-02.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/38/Marie_Fran%C3%A7oise_Sophie_Nichault_de_la_Valette-02.jpg), CC BY 4.0.

### *Anatole*

- Eh bien, disait Richard, en brossant son habit de livrée, c'est donc après-demain que cette belle provinciale arrive ?
- Vraiment oui, répondit mademoiselle Julie, madame vient de m'ordonner d'aller visiter l'appartement qu'elle lui destine, pour savoir s'il n'y manque rien de ce qui peut être commode à sa belle-sœur ; je crois qu'on aurait bien pu se dispenser de faire meubler à neuf tout ce corps de logis ; madame de Saverny, accoutumée aux grands fauteuils de son vieux château, ne s'apercevra peut-être pas de tous les frais que madame a faits pour décorer son appartement à la dernière mode.
- C'est donc une vieille femme ?

- Point du tout, elle a tout au plus vingt-deux ans ; M. le comte est son aîné de plus de dix années, et madame la comtesse a bien au moins sept ou huit ans de plus que sa belle-sœur, puisqu'elle en avoue quatre.
- Et cette parente a-t-elle un mari, des enfants, une gouvernante ? Faudra-t-il servir tout ce monde-là ?
- Grâce au ciel, elle est veuve ; et je pense qu'elle est riche, car son mari était, je crois, aussi vieux que son château ; et l'on n'épouse guère un vieillard que pour sa fortune.
- Qui nous amène-t-elle ici ?
- Tout ce qu'il faut pour s'y établir, des gens, des chevaux ; enfin, jusqu'à sa nourrice.
- Ah ! C'est un peu trop fort. Je sais ce que c'est que ces grosses campagnardes, qui se croient le droit de commander à toute la maison, parce qu'elles ont nourri leur maîtresse ; ce sont de vieilles rapporteuses qui, sous prétexte de prendre les intérêts de leur cher nourrisson, vont leur raconter tout ce qui se fait ou se dit dans leurs antichambres ; Lapierre est bien libre de se mettre au service de celle-là ; quant à moi, je ne compte pas lui donner un verre d'eau.
- Ah ! tout cet embarras ne sera pas éternel, madame s'en lassera bientôt, surtout s'il est vrai que madame de Saverny soit aussi belle qu'on l'assure ; ne savez-vous pas, Richard, que deux jolies femmes n'ont jamais demeuré bien longtemps ensemble ?

Les remarques philosophiques de mademoiselle Julie furent interrompues par le retour du carrosse de madame de Nangis.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Marie Françoise Sophie Gay, *Anatole* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1863), pp. 3-4.

Translation: -- Well then, said Richard, brushing his livery costume, it's tomorrow this beautiful provincial lady is arriving?

Yes, indeed, replied Miss Julie, Madame has just ordered me to go visit the apartment she plans for her, to see if anything is missing that could be convenient for her sister-in-law; I believe that we could well have done without furnishing this whole main building like new; Madame de Saverny, accustomed to the big armchairs of her old chateau, will perhaps not notice all the expenses that Madame has made to decorate her apartment in the latest fashion.

It's an old lady then?

Not at all, she is at most twenty-two years old; the count is her senior by more than ten years, and the countess is at least seven or eight years younger than her sister-in-law, since she admits to four.

And does this relative have a husband, children, a governess? Will we have to serve all that crowd?

Marie Françoise Sophie Gay, *née* Nichault de la Valette was born and died in Paris, daughter of the Italian Francesca Peretti and of Auguste Antoine Nichault de La Vallette, a financier. She was raised in a boarding establishment by Jeanne Marie Leprince de Beaumont, author of *la Belle et la Bête* (1756), alongside Claire de Duras, the future author of *Ourika* (1823), with a focus on music. Her father presented her aged two to Voltaire, who kissed her on the forehead; she also met the Vicomte de Ségur, Vergennes, the chevalier de Boufflers, and Alexandre de Lameth. In 1793, aged seventeen, she married the courtier Gaspard Liottier, divorcing in 1799 to marry Jean Sigismond Gay, Baron de Lupigny, soon after. In Aix-la Chapelle—a spa town—she met, among others, Pauline Bonaparte, who became a friend. Her salon drew many writers, artists, musicians, actors, and painters, among them Benjamin Constant, the Duc de Broglie, Chateaubriand, the Duc de Choiseul, Népomucène Lemercier, Jouy, Dupaty, and Talma, along with Juliette Récamier and the Marquise de Custine. In 1802, she published her first novel anonymously: *Laure d'Estell*. In 1803, she published a letter defending Staël's *Delphine*, after whom she named her daughter. She wrote songs and verse romances, both words and music—she had studied with Méhul. She also played the harp. Ten years after her first novel, in 1813, she published *Léonie de Montbreuse*, with the two initials of her name: Sainte-Beuve considered it her best work, but *Anatole* (1815), the story of a deaf-mute's loves, deserves attention.<sup>2</sup> Gay continued publishing

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Heaven be thanked, she is a widow; and I think that she is rich, because her husband was, I believe, as old as his chateau; and one does not marry an old man except for his fortune.

Who is she bringing us here?

Everything she needs to establish herself, her people, her horses; frankly, down to her wet-nurse.

Ah! That's a bit rich. I know these fat country women who believe they have the right to order the whole house around because they nourished their mistress; they are old gossips who, under pretext of taking the interests of their dear nursling, go tell them everything done or said in their antechambers; Lapierre is quite free to put himself at the service of that one; as for me, I don't plan to fetch her a glass of water.

Ah! all this affair will not be eternal, Madame will soon grow tired of it, especially if it is true that Madame de Saverny is as beautiful as they say; don't you know, Richard, that two pretty women never lived long together?

Miss Julie's philosophical remarks were interrupted by the return of Madame de Nangis's carriage.

- 2 Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Nouvelle galerie de femmes célèbres: tirée des Causeries du lundi, des Portraits littéraires, etc.* (Paris: Garnier, 1865), p. 551.

extensively after the Restoration, not only novels but also theatre, staging her one-act comedy the *Marquis de Pomenars* in 1819 at the Comédie-Française. Five-act comedies and dramas followed, staged at the Odéon and the Hôtel de Castellane. She also wrote several opera librettos, which met with some success. In 1826–1827, she traveled in Switzerland and Italy with her daughter. At her salon, one might see Hugo, Soumet, Lamartine, Vigny, Soulié, Sue, Balzac, Janin, or Dumas. Painters also came: Gérard, Girodet-Trioson, Isabey, Horace Vernet. After the July 1830 revolution, she brought out a series of historical novels which sold fairly well, enabling her to live off the proceeds: the *Duchesse de Châteauroux* (1834–1839), *Marie de Mancini* (1840), *Marie-Louise d'Orléans* (1842), *Ellénore* (1844–1846), the *Comte de Guiche* (1845). She also wrote the *Courrier de Versailles*, a sort of complement to the *Courrier de Paris* (1836–1848) by the Vicomte Charles de Launay (*i.e.*, her daughter).

In this passage from Gay, two servants are discussing the household doings: Richard and Julie. Richard is not a particularly common French name, making one wonder why Gay employs it. In Gay's youth, it was notorious in France because of the *Almanach du Bonhomme Richard* (1778), the French title for Ben Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* (1732–1758), at just the time the name Julie was omnipresent as the heroine of Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761). Even allowing for Grétry's royalist anthem of 1785, "Ô Richard, ô mon roi," it seems hard to avoid the homespun bourgeois tone these two names carried, even as late as 1815. The maxims the servants offer have a similar patina of age to them: the countess is at most seven or eight years older than her sister-in-law, we read, since she admits to four; one only marries an old man for his fortune; two pretty women never lived together long. These well-worn channels of thought and wit have a slightly antiquated appeal, as does the fact that the lady being discussed is a widow, which was about the only way a woman of the Old Regime could escape tutelage. What then is new here? A couple of things. First, to open on the people, the *demos*, reviewing the doings of the great: this is routine in Shakespeare, from *Julius Caesar* (1599) to *Hamlet* (1603), and reminds us that Gay was a successful playwright after 1819. Second, for Richard to say "Faudra-t-il servir tout ce monde-là?" in a world after Mozart immediately recalls Leporello's opening refrain, *Non voglio più servir*, in Mozart's 1787 *Don Giovanni*. These two novelties are perhaps common enough by 1815. But

third, *Anatole* is the story of the loves of someone who is deaf and mute. That now is a very Romantic storyline: the Romantic era turns again and again to protagonists facing adversity and stigma, from Hugo's Quasimodo to Duras's impotent Olivier, finding in these unknown souls our common humanity after all. One is reminded of André Chénier's *boutade*, which again had become omnipresent by the 1820s: "Sur des penses nouveaux faisons des vers antiques." 1815 was a transitional year if ever there was one—it opened on Louis XVIII, transitioned back to Napoleon for the Hundred Days, then back to Louis XVIII again after Waterloo—and it is only fitting to find such a mix of old and new in Gay's new novel. Her daughter, as noted, was the writer Delphine Gay de Girardin, her niece was the writer Hortense Allart; Voltaire kissed her on the forehead; Hugo visited her salon. She is, in a sense, a liminal figure, or a pivotal figure if one prefers. She is obviously competent. One might expect to find more written about her than seems to be the case.

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