

# Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

John Claiborne Isbell





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## 20. Claire Élisabeth Jeanne, Comtesse de Rémusat 5 January 1780–16 December 1821

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Fig. 20. Claire Élisabeth Jeanne, comtesse de Rémusat, by G. Descamps. Photo by Benj73 (2020). Wikimedia, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c0/Comtesse\\_de\\_R%C3%A9musat\\_.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c0/Comtesse_de_R%C3%A9musat_.jpg), CC BY 4.0.

### *Mémoires de Madame de Rémusat [...]*

Le mardi matin, Mme Bonaparte me dit : « Tout est inutile ; le duc d'Enghien arrive ce soir. Il sera conduit à Vincennes, et jugé cette nuit. Murat se charge de tout. Il est odieux dans cette affaire. C'est lui qui pousse Bonaparte ; il répète qu'on prendrait sa clémence pour de la faiblesse, et que les jacobins seraient furieux. Il y a un parti qui trouve mauvais qu'on n'ait pas eu égard à l'ancienne gloire de Moreau, et qui demanderait pourquoi on ménagerait davantage un Bourbon ; enfin Bonaparte m'a défendu de lui en parler davantage. Il m'a parlé de vous, ajouta-t-elle ensuite ; je lui ai avoué que je vous avais tout dit ; il avait été frappé de votre tristesse. Tâchez de vous contraindre. »

Ma tête était montée alors : « Ah ! qu'il pense de moi ce qu'il voudra ! Il m'importe peu, madame, je vous assure, et, s'il me demande pourquoi je pleure, je lui répondrai que je pleure sur lui. »

Enfin, à l'heure du dîner, il fallut descendre et composer son visage. Le mien était bouleversé. Bonaparte jouait encore aux échecs, il avait pris

fantaisie à ce jeu. Dès qu'il me vit, il m'appela près de lui, me disant de le conseiller ; je n'étais pas en état de prononcer quatre mots. Il me parla avec un ton de douceur et d'intérêt qui acheva de me troubler. Lorsque le dîner fut servi, il me fit mettre près de lui, et me questionna sur une foule de choses toutes personnelles à ma famille. Il semblait qu'il prît à tâche de m'étourdir, et de m'empêcher de penser.

On annonça le général Hullin; le Premier consul repoussa la table fortement, se leva, et, entrant dans la galerie voisine du salon, il demeura tout le reste de la soirée avec Murat, Hullin et Savary. Il ne reparut plus, et cependant moi, je rentrai chez moi plus tranquille. Je ne pouvais me persuader que Bonaparte ne fût pas ému de la pensée d'avoir dans les mains une telle victime. Je souhaitais que le prince demandât à le voir ; et c'est ce qu'il fit en effet, en répétant ces paroles : « Si le Premier consul consentait à me voir, il me rendrait justice, et comprendrait que j'ai fait mon devoir. » Peut-être, me disais-je, il ira lui-même à Vincennes, il accordera un éclatant pardon.<sup>1</sup>

Claire Élisabeth Jeanne, Comtesse de Rémusat was the daughter of Charles Gravier de Vergennes, councillor at the Parlement of Burgundy

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1 [Claire Élisabeth Jeanne de Rémusat], *Mémoires de Madame de Rémusat* [...] (Paris: Les Amis de l'Histoire, 1968), pp. 97–98.

Translation: Tuesday morning, Mrs. Bonaparte said to me: "All is useless; the Duke d'Enghien arrives this evening. He will be taken to Vincennes and judged tonight. Murat takes charge of everything. He is odious in this affair. It is he who pushes Bonaparte; he repeats that one would take his clemency for weakness, and that the Jacobins would be furious. There is a party that finds it bad that Moreau's former glory was not respected, and which would ask why one should sooner make allowances for a Bourbon; frankly, Bonaparte forbade me from speaking more with him about it. He spoke to me of you, she then added; I avowed to him that I had told you everything; he was struck by your sadness. Try to constrain yourself."

My blood was up then: "Ah! Let him think of me what he likes! Madam, I assure you, I am little concerned, and if he asks me why I weep, I shall say I weep for him."

Finally, at the hour of dinner, one had to go down and compose one's face. Mine was overwhelmed. Bonaparte was still playing chess, he had taken a fancy to this game. As soon as he saw me, he called me to him, telling me to counsel him; I was not in a state to pronounce four words. He spoke to me with a tone of sweetness and interest which completed my trouble. When dinner was served, he put me next to him, and questioned me on a host of topics all personal to my family. It seemed that he took it upon himself to confuse me and to stop me thinking.

General Hullin was announced; the First Consul pushed back the table vehemently, got up and entering the gallery next to the salon, he spent the rest of the evening with Murat, Hullin and Savary. He did not reappear, and yet I, I returned to my chambers more tranquil. I could not persuade myself that Bonaparte would not be moved at the thought of having such a victim in his hands. I wished that the prince would ask to see him; and that is what he did in fact, in repeating these words: "If the First Consul consented to see me, he would do me justice, and would understand that I have done my duty." Perhaps, I said to myself, he will go to Vincennes himself, he will grant a splendid pardon.

and Paris director of taxes, 1784–1789—guillotined with her grandfather on 24 July 1794—and of Adélaïde de Bastard, daughter of a councillor at the Parlement of Toulouse. Rémusat left an important correspondence, notably with her husband and her son Charles. Sainte-Beuve called her “à peu près la seule femme avec qui [Napoléon] causât.”<sup>2</sup> At her father’s death in 1794, Madame de Vergennes took refuge with her two daughters in Saint-Gratien near Montmorency. In 1796, the sixteen-year-old Claire married Auguste Laurent de Rémusat, aged thirty-four, a family friend and widower. They had two sons. In 1802, aged twenty-two, she was chosen by Madame Bonaparte, wife of the First Consul, as lady of honor at the Tuileries. Her husband was named a prefect of the palace. Both rose at court over the years, and the couple hosted a successful salon. Talleyrand penned her portrait in 1811, as did her son Charles in 1857.<sup>3</sup> She died aged forty-one and is buried in Père-Lachaise Cemetery.

Besides her unpublished novels, Rémusat kept memoirs which she burned in 1815 during Napoleon’s Hundred Days. Then, reading Staël’s *Considérations sur la révolution française* in 1818, as an exchange of letters with her son reveals, she was struck with the urge to relate what she knew, notably of “ce malheureux homme,” her name for Bonaparte. Her early death ended the memoirs with just three of five planned sections complete. Here, then, is her memory of the year 1804 and the seizure of the Duc d’Enghien, a *prince du sang* and only heir of the Condé line, at his home across the Rhine in the Holy Roman Empire. Bonaparte had received news that Enghien was involved with Cadoudal’s royalist conspiracy earlier that year: this was false, though Enghien had earlier borne arms against Robespierre’s republic in the émigré *armée de Condé*. Enghien was taken to Vincennes, where Savary prevented any interview between him and the First Consul. Hulin executed him in the castle moat at dawn: a pillar marks the spot. There is no evidence of Murat’s involvement in the affair, despite Joséphine’s long speech. Savary was a man of blood; Murat was an ardent republican, but also a soldier, future marshal of the Empire and King of Naples. The claim looks like slander. The execution shocked Europe, though Napoleon continued to defend his action even in his will on Saint Helena. Fouché, a chief of police

2 *Mémoires de Madame de Rémusat, 1802–1808*, ed. Paul de Rémusat, 3 volumes (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1880), I, p.32.

3 *Mémoires de Madame de Rémusat* (1880), I, pp. 23–24.

less pliable than Savary, said of it: *C'est pire qu'un crime, c'est une faute*. Bonaparte made himself emperor that December.

What is Rémusat's reaction? Disbelief, to begin with. The passage ends with her still believing Bonaparte would pardon Enghien if only they met; in reality, the arrest seems either Savary's or Napoleon's idea, and Napoleon later devoted some effort to saying he would do it again. On the other hand, after reporting Joséphine's long speech about Murat, Rémusat does nothing to confirm or contradict it. Both women seem open to the age-old trope that separates a benevolent but misled ruler from their nasty counsellors—one might wish for clearer eyes, but perhaps they are there in Rémusat's name for the man: "ce malheureux homme." She was lady-in-waiting to Napoleon's wife and rose like her husband in his service, but as her memoirs reveal, a good mind maintains its independence. In all, this is an interesting, even revealing passage, and the writer's son played a significant, though still-occluded role in the Paris of the 1820s. It is a little startling, then, to find not one monograph devoted to Rémusat in the catalogue of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, nor anywhere else for that matter.

## Works

[Rémusat, Claire de], *Essai sur l'éducation des femmes*, published by her son Charles de Rémusat (Paris: Ladvocat, 1825)

«Je vous dirai, cher ami»: *lettres de madame de Rémusat à son mari, 1804–1813*, ed. Hannelore Demmer ([Paris]: Mercure de France, 2016)

*Lettres de Madame de Rémusat, 1804–1814*, published by her grandson Paul de Rémusat, 2 vols (Paris: C. Lévy, 1881)

*Mémoires de Madame de Rémusat* [...], ed. Pierre-André Weber (Paris: Les Amis de l'Histoire, 1968).

## Sources

The Bibliothèque nationale de France lists no study of Rémusat in their holdings, and I have identified none elsewhere. There is however a more general survey:

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