

Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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22. Marceline Félicité Josèphe Desbordes-Valmore 20 June 1786–23 July 1859



Fig. 22. Marceline Félicité Josèphe Desbordes-Valmore, by Nadar. Photo by Paola Severi Michelangeli (2011). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1b/Marceline_Desbordes-Valmore_1.jpg, CC BY 4.0.

Poésies inédites

« Les Roses de Saadi »

J'ai voulu ce matin te rapporter des roses ;
Mais j'en avais tant pris dans mes ceintures closes
Que les nœuds trop serrés n'ont pu les contenir.

Les nœuds ont éclaté. Les roses envolées
Dans le vent, à la mer s'en sont toutes allées.
Elles ont suivi l'eau pour ne plus revenir ;

La vague en a paru rouge et comme enflammée.
 Ce soir, ma robe encore en est tout embaumée ...
 Respires-en sur moi l'odorant souvenir.¹

Marceline Félicité Josèphe Desbordes-Valmore was born in Douai in 1786 and died in Paris in 1859. Daughter of Catherine Lucas and Félix Desbordes, a painter and cabaret owner ruined by the Revolution, Desbordes left France at fifteen with her mother in 1801, seeking financial support from a wealthy cousin in Guadeloupe. Yellow fever took her mother in 1803; revolt agitated the island, and the cousin's finances were ruined in their turn. Desbordes returned to her father in Douai, becoming an actress at the age of sixteen, first touring in the provinces, then performing in Paris at the Odéon and the Opéra-Comique, thanks to Grétry, then in Brussels in 1815, where she played Rosine in Beaumarchais's *Le Barbier de Séville* (1775). She often played *ingénues*, meeting Talma, Marie Dorval, and Mademoiselle Mars who remained her lifelong friend. From 1808–1812, Desbordes stopped acting while engaged to Eugène Debonne, a member of Rouen society, by whom she had a son; but the family refused any marriage to a former actress. Desbordes therefore left her fiancé and resumed acting. Their son died in 1816. In 1817, she married an actor, Prosper Lanchantin, known as Valmore, whom she met in Brussels. She had four more children, of whom one, Hippolyte, survived his mother; one may have been the child of the playwright Henri de Latouche, the great love of her life. In 1819 Desbordes-Valmore published her first volume of poetry, *Élégies et Romances*, which opened the pages of *La Muse française* to her. *Poésies de M^{me} Desbordes-Valmore* followed in 1820. After 1823, she definitively abandoned theater for poetry, publishing *Élégies et poésies nouvelles* (1824), *Pleurs* (1833), *Pauvres fleurs* (1839), and *Bouquets et Prières*

1 Marceline Félicité Josèphe Desbordes-Valmore, *Poésies inédites* in *Les Œuvres poétiques de Marceline Desbordes-Valmore*, ed. M. Bertrand, 2 vols (Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 1973), II p. 509, pp. 735–736.

Translation: "Saadi's Roses"

I wanted this morning to bring you back some roses; / But I had taken so many in my closed belts / That the knots, over-tight, could not hold them.

The knots burst. The roses flown / in the wind, all went to the sea. / They followed the water not to return;

The wave seemed from it red and as if aflame. / This evening, my dress is still completely embalmed from it ... / Breathe its scented memory on me.

(1843). Her works earned her a royal pension under Louis Philippe and several academic distinctions. She also wrote prose, including tales for children in prose and verse. In 1833, she published an autobiographical novel, *L'Atelier d'un peintre*. She died in 1859, having survived almost all of her children. Desbordes-Valmore was known as "Notre-Dame-des-Pleurs" in reference to the dramas which marked her life. In 1859, the Académie française gave her a posthumous prix Lambert; her admirers include Sainte-Beuve, who writes at length about her, Balzac, Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Aragon. Clearly among the most gifted French poetesses since Louise Labé, she brought the eleven-syllable line to French and contributed to the idea of *Romances sans paroles*. She also published in Picard.

And so, we come to "Les Roses de Saadi." First, one may ask, is what it describes possible? There have been critics who doubted it. At this point, it is worth recalling that Desbordes-Valmore is imitating a passage in the thirteenth-century Persian poet Saadi's *Gulistan*: she is the maker of the music of her poem, not its content. But it is also quite possible to overstuff a garment with roses and have the knots come undone. Why ever not? The objection gives some insight into why the Romantics were unfond of critics. The story, then, goes thus: the speaker gathered roses for her addressee this morning. The knots came undone, and the roses flew off in the wind into the sea. The water was red and as if on fire. The speaker's dress still smells of it; she invites the addressee to smell that memory. This conceit is fresh and resonant. Roses have a long history in poetry: Desbordes-Valmore, echoing her source Saadi, says she has not one rose to offer, but instead a memory of roses. She also has a tale to tell, of roses gathered and then lost to the ocean, with the ocean's strange sea-change into red flame beneath that weight. There is a magical quality to the whole thing, and Desbordes-Valmore works to make her poem as like a spell as possible. First, it is nine lines long. Short poems are hard: Desbordes-Valmore has told every necessary detail of this somewhat complex story, and not a syllable more. There is no filler. She has done so with an elegant play between end-stopped and enjambed lines: the excess roses enjamb to their dispersal, then the flying roses enjamb into the wind. The other seven lines are all end-stopped and a complete thought—a level of simplicity that is not so easy to achieve, as any practicing poet will know. Finally, her rhyme

scheme is new: *aab ccb ddb*, three tercets which alternate masculine and feminine alexandrines as French tradition required, with a refrain on *-ir* to hold the whole together. It is, in short, a cameo fully the equal of, say, those of Théophile Gautier's 1852 *Émaux et camées*. It is chiseled. But it doesn't look chiseled, it looks effortless. And that is hard indeed. Just as Alphonse de Lamartine's rather longer "Le Lac" (1820) has more structure than is sometimes thought, so Desbordes-Valmore, another canonical Romantic, has built her music into something new and strange, despite its seeming simplicity and flow. She has cast a spell on us. Saadi, that Persian Sufi poet from the tradition which produced Rumi, Hafiz, and Omar Khayyam, might have been content to see his work thus rendered into French.

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