

# Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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## 25. Delphine Gay de Girardin [Vicomte de Launay] 24 January 1804–29 June 1855

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Fig. 25. Delphine Gay de Girardin [Vicomte de Launay], by L. Hersent. Photo by PancoPinco (2015). Wikimedia, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fa/Louis\\_Hersent\\_-\\_Delphine\\_de\\_Girardin.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fa/Louis_Hersent_-_Delphine_de_Girardin.jpg), CC BY 4.0.

### *Lettres parisiennes du vicomte de Launay par Madame de Girardin*

#### Lettre première

28 septembre 1836.

Événement du jour. — Paris provincial. — L'Ennuyeux et l'Ennuyé. — Esméralda. — Thémistocle et Scipion l'Africain dénoncés au commandant de la garde nationale.

Il n'est rien arrivé de bien extraordinaire cette semaine : une révolution en Portugal, une apparition de république en Espagne, une

nomination de ministres à Paris, une baisse considérable à la Bourse, un ballet nouveau à l'Opéra, et deux capotes de satin blanc aux Tuileries.

La révolution de Portugal était prévue, la quasi-république était depuis longtemps prédite, le ministère d'avance était jugé, la baisse était exploitée, le ballet nouveau était affiché depuis trois semaines : il n'y a donc de vraiment remarquable que les capotes de satin blanc, parce qu'elles sont prématurées : le temps ne méritait pas cette injure. Qu'on fasse du feu au mois de septembre quand il fait froid, bien, cela est raisonnable : mais que l'on commence à porter du satin avant l'hiver, cela n'est pas dans la nature.

Le spectacle et les promenades, voilà ce qui occupe la capitale en ce moment. Dieu merci, les courses sont terminées ; la dernière n'était point brillante : toujours les mêmes femmes, toujours les mêmes chevaux ; et puis toujours ce même et ennuyeux incident, ce cheval forcé de courir tout seul ; et l'on vous condamne à regarder niaisement ce lutteur sans adversaire, ce triomphateur sans rival. Depuis longtemps le *solo équestre* nous a paru la plus ingénieuse des mystifications. Bref, tout cela était médiocre et faisait dire aux mauvais plaisants que cette pauvre *Société d'encouragement* était toute découragée.<sup>1</sup>

Delphine Gay de Girardin [Vicomte de Launay] was born in Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen) and died in Paris, daughter of Sophie Nichault de la Vallette, writer and *salonnière*, here featured, and of Jean Sigismond

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1 Delphine Gay de Girardin, *Lettres parisiennes du vicomte de Launay par Madame de Girardin*, ed. Anne Martin-Figuiet, 2 vols (Paris: Mercure de France, 1986), I pp. 9–10.

Translation: 28 September 1836.

Event of the day. — Provincial Paris. — The Boring and the Bored. — Esméralda. — Themistocles and Scipio Africanus denounced to the commander of the National Guard.

Nothing very extraordinary happened this week: a revolution in Portugal, the appearance of a republic in Spain, a nomination of ministers in Paris, a considerable drop in the stock exchange, a new ballet at the opera, and two white satin hoods at the Tuileries.

The revolution in Portugal was expected, the quasi-republic had for some time been predicted, the ministry was judged in advance, the drop was exploited, the new ballet posted for the past three weeks: the only remarkable thing, then, is the white satin hoods, because they are premature: the weather did not merit this insult. Let one make fires in the month of September when it is cold, good, that is reasonable: but let one begin to wear satin before winter, that is not in nature.

The spectacle and the promenades, that is what occupies the capital at this moment. Thank the Lord, the races are over; the last was not brilliant: always the same women, always the same horses; and then always that same dull incident, that horse forced to run alone; and you are condemned to watch like a fool this fighter with no adversary, this victor with no rival. For ages now the *equestrian solo* has seemed to us the most ingenious of mystifications. In brief, all that was mediocre and made the ill-willed say that this poor *Encouragement Society* was quite discouraged.

Gay, receiver-general of the revolutionary department of the Roer. Delphine was raised in Aix-la-Chapelle and Paris in her mother's salon, named Delphine in honor of Staël's heroine and belonging like her mother to Nodier's romantic circle. By sixteen, she had met Vigny, Latouche, Soumet, and Émile Deschamps, publishing her first poems in *La Muse française*, followed by *Essais poétiques* (1824) and *Nouveaux Essais poétiques* (1825). Her marriage to Émile Delamothé, known as Émile de Girardin, in 1831, opened new literary horizons to her—notably her dazzling chronicles in the newspaper *La Presse*, published from 1836–1848 under the name of Charles de Launay, which had great success. Her best-known works of fiction include the novel *Le Marquis de Pontanges* (1835); a group of tales, *Contes d'une vieille fille à ses neveux* (1832); *La Canne de Monsieur de Balzac* (1836), and *Il ne faut pas jouer avec la douleur* (1853). Her prose and verse dramas include *L'École des journalistes* (1840); *Judith* (1843); *Cléopâtre* (1847); *Lady Tartuffe* (1853); and the one-act comedies *C'est la faute du mari* (1851), *La joie fait peur* (1854), *Le Chapeau d'un horloger* (1854), and *Une femme qui déteste son mari* (1856), which appeared posthumously. Girardin wielded a considerable influence on contemporary literary society, not least in her salon frequented by Gautier, Balzac, Musset, Hugo, Laure Junot d'Abrantès, Desbordes-Valmore, Lamartine, Janin, Sandeau, Liszt, Dumas père, and George Sand among others. She wrote under several pseudonyms.

Girardin, crowned like Staël's Corinne at the Capitol in Rome in 1827,<sup>2</sup> had by 1830 given up poetry for prose and the theatre, and this was likely a good thing. She was, as it happens, an unusually witty person, as seen both in her novels—*La Canne de Monsieur de Balzac* (1836)—and in her chronicles for *La Presse*. The loss of that wit would have diminished and impoverished the July Monarchy.

Our extract is her opening entry in *La Presse*, 28 September 1836. Girardin's method here is litotes or ironic understatement: nothing extraordinary has happened, she writes, just the usual revolution in Portugal, republic in Spain, new ministers in Paris, drop in the Stock Exchange, new ballet at the Opera, and two white satin hoods at the Tuileries (the royal palace). Girardin promptly explains how all but the satin hoods are routine, if not banal occurrences; the hoods, on the contrary, deserve attention. The very syntax puts major political

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2 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th edition, "Girardin, Delphine de."

events on a par with fashion, then undercutting them by Girardin's insistence that the fashion *faux pas* is more significant. Here is a world, like Balzac's, in which economic and political realities are not invisible; they are simply thrown in the pot with fashion and reduced. This, one might say, is a voice which has seen a revolution or two and decided they are not worth the effort, the time and expense. Instead, in an almost Parnassian retreat, the voice will speak passionately and knowledgeably about white satin hoods in September. To which one might rejoin: is this mere frivolity, mere whipped cream? And the answer might be: on the contrary. Because the fashion *faux pas* is not on the streets of Paris, it is at the Tuileries: the speaker maintains a diplomatic discretion, but the conceit is that the entire July Monarchy belongs not to the earth-shaking world of revolutions and republics, but to the world of the fashion *faux pas*, of white satin hoods in September. It is a small place, and what it engages in are small things. It is no coincidence that the chronicles also feature fulsome praise of Louis Napoléon Bonaparte, the future Napoléon III; Louis Philippe, in a perhaps mistaken bid to outflank the legitimists, promoted the first Napoleon somewhat unrelentingly—the Arc de Triomphe, the Invalides in Paris—and the public was more than happy to find in the unremarkable nephew, who had never won a battle, a fitting heir to his uncle, that remarkable man. This is, in short, a world immediately familiar to readers of Balzac; but it also prepares the Second Empire, in all its puffery and disappointment. That, after all, is true of the July Monarchy itself.

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