

Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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29. Julienne Joséphine Gauvin [Juliette Drouet] 10 April 1806–11 May 1883



Fig. 29. Julienne Joséphine Gauvin [Juliette Drouet], by C.-É.-C. de Champmartin. Photo by Vassil (2013). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/96/Maison_de_Victor_Hugo_Juliette_Drouet_Champmartin_27122012.jpg, CC BY 4.0.

Lettres à Victor Hugo. Correspondance 1833–1882

Dimanche.
4 h. du soir [1833].

Je rentre bien triste et bien découragée de tout. Je souffre, je pleure, je me plains tout haut, tout bas, à Dieu, à toi, et je voudrais mourir une bonne fois pour en finir avec toutes les misères, toutes les déceptions, toutes les douleurs. On dirait vraiment que mon bonheur s'est envolé avec les beaux jours, et compter les voir revenir lui et eux serait presque de la folie

car en regardant autour de moi et au-dedans de moi je trouve la saison bien avancée pour les beaux jours, et pour les jours heureux. Pauvre fou qui t'étonnes de me voir regretter si amèrement une journée de bonheur, on voit bien que tu n'as pas attendu le bonheur d'aimer et d'être aimé jusqu'à vingt-six ans. Pauvre poète qui avez fait *Les Feuilles d'automne* avec de l'amour, des rires d'enfants, des yeux noirs, et bleus, des cheveux bruns, et blonds, du bonheur en quantité vous n'avez pas observé combien une journée triste et pluvieuse comme celle d'aujourd'hui fait jaunir et tomber les feuilles les plus vertes et les mieux attachées. Donc vous ne savez pas ce qu'une journée sans bonheur comme celle-ci, peut ôter de confiance et de force pour l'avenir. Vous ne le savez pas, car vous vous étonnez quand je pleure, vous vous fâchez presque contre ma douleur. Tu vois donc bien que tu ne sais pas ce que c'est que mon amour, tu vois bien que j'ai raison de regretter de t'aimer autant puisque cet amour t'est inutile et importun. Oh ! je t'aime c'est bien vrai ! Je t'aime malgré toi, malgré moi malgré tout le monde entier, malgré Dieu, malgré le Diable qui s'en mêle aussi. Je t'aime, je t'aime, je t'aime. Heureuse ou malheureuse gaie ou triste je t'aime. Fais de moi ce que tu voudras, je t'aime.¹

Julienne Joséphine Gauvain [Juliette Drouet] was born in Fougères and died in Paris, Victor Hugo's companion for over fifty years. Her mother, Marie Marchandet, was a seamstress; her father, Julien Gauvain, was a

1 Juliette Drouet, *Lettres à Victor Hugo. Correspondance 1833–1882*, ed. Evelyn Blewer (Paris: Fayard, 2001), p. 20.

Translation: Sunday. 4 p.m. [1833]

I return quite sad and quite discouraged with everything. I suffer, I weep, I complain aloud, quietly, to God, to you, and I would wish to die once and for all to have an end of all the miseries, all the disappointments, all the pains. One would say truly that my happiness flew off with the fine days, and to count on seeing them return, it and they, would be almost madness because in looking around me I find the season well advanced for fine days and for happy ones. Poor madman who is astonished to see me regret so bitterly a day of happiness, one sees well that you did not wait for the happiness of loving and being loved until twenty-six. Poor poet who wrote the *Feuilles d'automne* with love, with children's laughter, with black eyes, and blue ones, with brown hair, and blonde, with happiness in quantity you have not observed how much a day sad and rainy like today will make the greenest and best attached leaves grow yellow and fall. And so you do not know what a day without happiness like this one can remove in the way of confidence and force for the future. You do not know it, because you grow astonished when I weep, you almost grow angry at my pain. You see well then that you do not know what my love is, you see well that I am right to regret loving you so much because this love is useless to you and importunate. Oh! I love you, that is very true! I love you despite yourself, despite me, despite the whole world, despite God, despite the Devil who has his part in this. I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you. Happy or unhappy gay or sad I love you. Do with me what you wish, I love you.

tailor. Julienne lost her mother some months after her birth, her father the following year, and was placed like her siblings with a wet-nurse, then later in a convent, before being raised by an uncle, Drouet, who moved to Paris and whose name she took. Around 1825, she became the mistress of the sculptor James Pradier, who may have modeled the Strasbourg statue after her on the Place de la Concorde.² The couple had a child, Claire, whom he recognized two years later. Pradier encouraged her to act, and she began in 1828, taking her uncle's name. Not a natural actress, Drouet was booed in *Marie Tudor* (1833). She was however extremely beautiful, and Victor Hugo, seeing her that year, began to fall in love. Auditioning for the queen in *Ruy Blas* (1838), she was passed over perhaps in part due to a frank letter from Madame Hugo, contrasting her place in Hugo's affections with her talent as an actress. She abandoned acting and instead devoted herself to Hugo—he required of her a cloistered life, going out only in his company. Their liaison was public knowledge, Hugo even leading her daughter Claire's funeral cortège with Pradier. In 1852, having organized Hugo's flight from the Second Empire, Drouet accompanied her lover to exile in Jersey, then Guernsey, but without sharing his roof. He rented a little house for her within eyesight, but was not faithful, cheating on her for instance in 1873 with Blanche, her chambermaid. She wrote him over 22,000 letters during the fifty years of their liaison.

Looking for Drouet's letters, you will find them at the Bibliothèque nationale de France not under D for Drouet, but under H for Hugo. Our title is *Destins de femmes*, and Drouet's destiny was to be subsumed by the man she loved to the point of disappearance. In the fifty years of their affair—for it was an affair, he remained for a half-century with his wife and children—she was not to leave her home except in his company. In Guernsey, a smallish island, Drouet even had her little house within eyesight of the Hugo property, where Madame Hugo could see it. Reading the thirty biographies here given, one is struck more than once by how badly men at least were prepared to behave when they thought they could get away with it. Flaubert, in our closing chapter, trashed Louise Colet as an artist after their breakup and her reputation has not recovered almost two centuries later. "All power corrupts," wrote Lord

2 Jean-Pierre Barbier, *Juliette Drouet. Sa vie—son œuvre* (Paris: Grasset, 1913), p. 21.

Acton, “and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” How did Drouet feel about this? Let us look at her letter, almost the first she wrote to the great man. It is 1833.

The first thing that strikes the eye is her prose. It is very good. In its openness to passion, it is not without analogy to the extract from Lespinasse near the start of this book. Drouet is evidently overwhelmed with passion in this text, and yet she exerts mastery over the prose she uses to express it. “A spontaneous outpouring of powerful emotion [...] recollected in tranquility,” wrote Wordsworth, seeking to define poetry in 1798, but there is no evidence here of multiple drafts: Drouet is not Flaubert. Instead, one has the impression that this is simply how she writes, almost without lifting the pen from the paper. “Je souffre, je pleure, je me plains tout haut, tout bas, à Dieu, à toi, et je voudrais mourir une bonne fois pour en finir avec toutes les misères, toutes les déceptions, toutes les douleurs,” she writes; “Je t’aime, je t’aime, je t’aime,” she adds, switching between *tu* and *vous* at the drop of a hat. Victor Hugo was clearly a vain man, but he was also a gifted writer, and one imagines that the relationship would not have lasted for the 20,000 letters it generated from Drouet had she had no gift for prose. One might take a moment to suggest that Drouet suffered from depression—again, quite understandably—but it seems fitting to end here by stating that prose combining this amount of passion with this musicality of expression is not a given. One finds it in Juliette Drouet, the lady who spent fifty years sitting at home waiting for Hugo to come and visit.

Works

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