

# Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

John Claiborne Isbell





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# Introduction

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This modest anthology collects thirty women writers in French for the period 1750–1850, a period for which no such anthology yet exists. While there are excellent monographs focused on either side of the 1800 century divide, and while some individual authors are much-studied—Germaine de Staël or George Sand in particular—for many others that are presented, secondary literature is sparse; France’s national library lists none for the memoirist Claire de Rémusat, nor have I identified any elsewhere. All however form the rich loam on which some in this period came to lasting fame, and all have their place in this narrative. Some major Enlightenment names are absent from this collection: Marguerite de Staal-Delaunay, Claudine de Tencin, and Émilie du Châtelet had all died by 1750; Marie Thérèse Geoffrin it seems wrote little. Françoise de Graffigny’s correspondence fills fourteen large volumes in the critical edition, but her epochal *Lettres d’une Péruvienne* appeared in 1747, and she died in 1758. We open instead with du Deffand, the great prose stylist and *salonnière* who lost her sight in later years, and we end with Colet, born in 1810. Juliette Adam, born in 1836, made her name after 1850 and under the Second Empire, as did Louise Ackermann, born in 1813. Non-French writers are included: thus, Charrière and Krüdener, who wrote in French but lived outside France, feature in these pages.

The intention is to provide a brief outline for interested students of women’s writing in French over the eventful century from 1750 to 1850, a time of three linked French revolutions and of Romantic art across the West, a time when French armies marched on Moscow bringing revolution with them. An extract of each author’s writing is given. This is often an extract from the author’s best-known work, as seems appropriate in an introductory survey. More specifically, extracts are chosen in the hope of being characteristic and interesting: for du Deffand, it is the last long letter in her correspondence; for Staël, the

opening of her short fiction *Zulma* (1794); for Drouet, her first long letter to Hugo. For fictions, rather than cite random passages from within the plot, the opening is given, since openings to fictions are interesting things. Many of these authors worked in several genres, including poetry, prose, and drama, as laid out in the biographies and bibliographies, but this anthology in the end contains less verse than it does prose—fiction, feuilleton, memoir, diary, declaration, treatise, correspondence—and drama does not appear. It proved difficult to extract a short, characteristic passage from a play. Gay, a prolific dramatist, is however represented by the dialogue that opens her fiction *Anatole* (1815). I have freely translated each extract in its accompanying footnote.

The anthology's one-paragraph biographies, which follow each extract and precede each section's commentary and bibliography, contain no revelations to scholarship, their function is simply to give readers a brief consensus overview of the major life events of each author listed. This volume is called *Destins de femmes*, and certainly that is reflected in the biographies cited here. An author is referred to by their pen name—d'Épinay, Cottin, Desbordes-Valmore, Tristan—only as and when it is adopted within the chronology of their biography, a method both true to their lives and feminist in reflecting their lived experience. Prior to this, first names or maiden names are used. Author pseudonyms—George Sand, Daniel Stern—are first given in square brackets; “Mme de” on the other hand is eschewed. Sources include notably the unfinished *Dictionnaire de biographie française*, the *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, the *Dictionnaire universel des créatrices*, the *Grand dictionnaire universel Larousse du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. A final point: full author names in each section heading follow the format they receive in the seven-volume *Index biographique français*.

Commentary in this anthology focuses on each author extract, with some contextualization, the whole intended to briefly situate that author's art within the history of French literature and European civilization. The latter clearly embraces both public and private spheres, and the commentaries reflect that truism. New thoughts regarding our featured writers will tend to appear here.

For the closing bibliographies—divided into ‘works’, citing writers’ first or critical editions, and such modern ‘sources’ as we could identify—our method was to review each author entry in the catalogue of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (repository of all that is published

in France) and cite each monograph or conference proceeding listed. This was possible for every author except Staël and Sand, who have too many entries to make that feasible; in their case, a selection of material is offered. Those writers who published extensively, such as Gay, Genlis, and Sand, are similarly represented by a selection of their works.

Does any single event define the period 1750–1850? Almost exactly halfway through this period, in 1789, the French Revolution began, marking a turning point both in the history of women in France and in world history. It was followed by further French revolutions in 1830 and 1848. Asked in 1972 what he thought of the French Revolution, Chou En-Lai responded, “It’s too early to tell.” Revolution and Empire dominate our middle section, and there does seem to be a gulf between the prose of du Deffand in 1780 and that of Drouet in 1833. A revolution in French women’s writing may indeed have occurred, a watershed of sorts. Let us look then at the event itself more closely for a moment.

People do not write in a vacuum, and patriarchy has its role here as elsewhere. “Il suffit que je sois bien malheureuse,” says the paper held in Marat’s cold hand, “pour avoir droit à votre bienveillance.” This blood-stained letter from Charlotte Corday has engineered his death. The scene is David’s *The Death of Marat*, which hung in the Convention from its completion in 1793 until the fall of Robespierre: the days of the *Grande Terreur*, but also of a radical curtailing of Frenchwomen’s newfound rights. The word *citoyenne* was banned, as was women’s ability to wear the Revolutionary *cocarde* or trousers—a law in effect in France for another two hundred years. Hercules replaced Marianne in government documents. Charlotte Corday, Olympe de Gouges, Manon Roland, Marie Antoinette all went to the guillotine.

Corday stabbed to death in the bath Marat—a man whose own writing had caused the deaths of countless victims. But was he really found in his tub with Corday’s letter in his hand? Or is this a fiction even more convenient for its play with old tropes about female authorship and what we might call public women? In France in 1793, writing was a gendered activity, and various ‘private’ genres, such as correspondence, translation, and memoir, were less problematic for women authors. David has done something remarkable in making Corday’s villainy depend on her taking pen in hand to write a letter. She is, in a sense, the Terror’s most famous *épistolière*.

It seems reasonable to ask, then, what this revolution meant for women's writing. Is the elegance of a du Deffand in 1780, a Charrière in 1784, possible in France by 1833? Or have the rules of art forever changed? Has there, for instance, been some sort of Romantic break with an enlightened or neoclassical past? The question is vast. One might look a moment at Girardin, elegant like du Deffand, in the text from 1835 presented in this volume. The text appears under a pseudonym, the Vicomte de Launay: in itself, this is interesting, as male pen names abound after 1800 and are rare in this anthology prior to that date. Girardin is witty, again like du Deffand; but she also talks of revolutions as if they are two a penny. Hers is very much a post-revolutionary text.

Out of these thirty extracts, the beginnings of a history may in short emerge, though complicated by the play between public and private that shapes them all: some extracts featured were intended for mass consumption, others for a single reader or even for the author alone, like perhaps Colet's memento. To an extent, this distinction is gendered; and it also shifted as the Old Regime gave way to Revolution, Empire, and a troubled Restoration. We are not here to define 'Romantic' art, but it seems fair to say that du Deffand's tone is courtly, like say d'Épinay's or Charrière's, in a way that Staël's, or Tristan's, or Drouet's, or Sand's is not. Beyond that, these various extracts may speak for themselves, in a sort of polyphony.

What, to conclude, is the shape of the field here? Where does women's writing stand in France during the period 1750–1850? Our thirty short bibliographies, drawn from the catalogue of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, suggest that it may be uneven, with a few authors earning more commentary than most—some indeed maintaining societies and journals—and a number of detailed studies presenting corpuses somewhat different than this one. The period 1750–1850, which might be called the Revolutionary or Romantic watershed, has, I believe, yet to be treated thus as a unit, though various studies group women authors within it; for instance, Michelle Perrot, *Des femmes rebelles—Olympe de Gouges, Flora Tristan, George Sand* (2014); Cécile Berly, *Trois femmes: Madame du Deffand, Madame Roland, Madame Vigée Le Brun* (2020); Whitney Walton, *Eve's Proud Descendants: Four Women Writers and Republican Politics in Nineteenth-century France* (2000); or Joyce Johnston, *Women Dramatists, Humor, and the French Stage: 1802–1855* (2014).

Several major overviews touching on the period confine themselves to particular centuries—notably, for the eighteenth century, Samia Spencer, ed. *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment* (1984); Laurence Vanoflen, ed., *Femmes et philosophie des Lumières: de l’imaginaire à la vie des idées* (2020); Ángeles Sirvent Ramos, María Isabel Corbi Sáez, and María Ángeles Llorca Tonda, eds, *Femmes auteurs du dix-huitième siècle: nouvelles approches critiques* (2016); Heidi Bostic, *The Fiction of Enlightenment: Women of Reason in the French Eighteenth Century* (2010); Annie K. Smart, *Citoyennes: Women and the Ideal of Citizenship in Eighteenth-century France* (2011); Anthony J. La Vopa, *The Labor of the Mind: Intellect and Gender in Enlightenment Cultures* (2017), and for the nineteenth century, Jeanne Pouget-Brunereau, *Presse féminine et critique littéraire: leurs rapports avec l’histoire des femmes de 1800 à 1830* (1994); Adrianna M. Paliyenko, *Genius Envy: Women Shaping French Poetic History, 1801–1900* (2016); Kathleen Hart, *Revolution and Women’s Autobiography in Nineteenth-century France* (2004); and Alison Finch, *Women’s Writing in Nineteenth-century France* (2006). Others focus on the Revolutionary decade: Jean and Marie-José Tulard, *Les égéries de la Révolution* (2019); Jacqueline Letzter and Robert G. Adelson, *Women Writing Opera: Creativity and Controversy in the Age of the French Revolution* (2001); and Huguette Krief, ed., *Vivre libre et écrire: anthologie des romancières de la période révolutionnaire (1789–1800)* (2005). Lastly, a smaller group of overviews cross the 1800 break to review works in both centuries: Henri Rossi, *Mémoires aristocratiques féminins 1789–1848* (2000); Anne Louis Anton Mooij, *Caractères principaux et tendances des romans psychologiques chez quelques femmes-auteurs, de Mme Riccoboni à Mme de Souza, 1757–1826* (1949); Steven Kale, *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848* (2004); Stephanie M. Hilger, *Women Write Back: Strategies of Response and the Dynamics of European Literary Culture, 1790–1805* (2009); and Julia Effertz, *Songbirds on the Literary Stage: The Woman Singer and Her Song in French and German Prose Fiction, from Goethe to Berlioz* (2015). All of these works, be they monographs or anthologies, appear in this volume’s bibliographies and may usefully be consulted in understanding the field; however, they do not entirely replace this current global overview of the Romantic and Revolutionary period 1750–1850.

This chosen period is indeed marked both by revolution—the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, in particular—and by the