

WOMEN WRITERS IN THE ROMANTIC AGE



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Cover image: the Brontë sisters (Anne, Emily and Charlotte) by Patrick Branwell Brontë, oil on canvas, ca. 1834. ©National Portrait Gallery, London

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13. Writers from the Swiss Confederation

Swiss independence from Austria, and with it the Swiss national tradition, begins early, in 1291. The French Revolution brought restructuring and regime change, and the tiny republic of Geneva joined the confederation at Napoleon's fall in 1814; but the Swiss story is one of continuity, not fragmentation. I have identified four Swiss women writers for the period 1776–1848, writing in French and German.

Switzerland (4 writers)

Marianne Ehrmann, née **Marianne Brentano-Corti** [or **Marianne Ehrmann-Brentano** or **Madame Sternheim**] (25 November 1755–14 August 1795), born in Rapperswil, lost her mother in 1770, her father in 1775, finding work as a governess. Around 1777, Ehrmann married, divorcing in 1779. She became insane and was confined for months. Around 1782, she went to Vienna, touring Europe for some years as an actress. In 1784, she published the tract *Philosophie eines Weibes* [Philosophy of a Woman]. She married Theophil Friedrich Ehrmann in 1785; in 1786, she published a play, *Leichtsinn und gutes Herz* [Frivolity and a Good Heart]. In Stuttgart after 1788, Ehrmann co-edited her husband's journal *Der Beobachter* and published the epistolary novel *Amalie*. She also wrote for the *Frauen-Zeitung* after 1787, and from 1790–1792 published *Amaliens Erholungsstunden*, then *Die Einsiedlerin aus den Alpen* from 1792–1795.¹

1 Annette Zunzer, *Marianne Ehrmann: Die Einsiedlerin aus den Alpen* (Bern: Paul Haupt Verlag, 2002).

Valérie de Gasparin, née Catherine-Valérie Boissier (13 September 1813–16 June 1894), born in Geneva, traveled for two years in France and Italy before her first publication: *Nouvelles*, 1833. More than thirty other publications followed: poetry, novels, memoirs, essays. After her mother's death in 1836, Gasparin embraced the Protestant Réveil, and religion remained very important to her. She married Count Agénor de Gasparin in 1837, moving to Paris where he represented Bastia, Corsica from 1842. In 1847–1848, the couple traveled via Greece to Egypt and Jerusalem, as Gasparin recorded. Gasparin published *Des corporations monastiques au sein du protestantisme* in 1855, condemning the institution of deaconesses. In 1859, she founded the first lay school for caregivers, the *École de La Source*. She continued publishing after her husband's death in 1871, including translations from the English.²

Isabelle de Montolieu (7 May 1751–29 December 1832) published her first novel, *Caroline de Lichtfield*, in 1790; it was reprinted until the mid-nineteenth century. She published over 100 volumes of translations, including the first (unauthorized) French versions of two Jane Austen novels, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion*. Montolieu also produced the still-standard *Le Robinson suisse* [The Swiss Family Robinson] from Johann David Wyss's German original.³

Suzanne Necker, née Curchod (2 June 1737–6 May 1794), daughter of a pastor in the Pays de Vaud, married Jacques Necker in 1764, future finance minister of Louis XVI. Their daughter was Germaine de Staël. As Jacques became a minister, Necker founded their salon, arguably the last great salon of the Old Regime, welcoming Marmontel, La Harpe, Buffon, Grimm, Raynal, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre; also, Diderot, d'Alembert, Geoffrin, and du Deffand. Necker barely published during her life, perhaps at her husband's urging, but at her death, he brought out her notes and reflections in five volumes. She is known primarily for her *Mémoire sur l'établissement des hospices*, 1786, and for her *Réflexions sur le divorce*, 1794, written during her daughter's somewhat high-profile affair with Narbonne.⁴

2 Denise Francillon, ed. *Valérie de Gasparin, une conservatrice révolutionnaire. Cinq regards sur une vie* (Le Mont-sur-Lausanne: Éditions Ouvertures, 1994).

3 Béatrice Didier et al., eds. *Dictionnaire universel des créatrices* (2013).

4 Sonja Boon. *The Life of Madame Necker: Sin, Redemption and the Parisian Salon* (London: Routledge, 2011).