Portraits and Poses

van Deinsen, Lieke, Vanacker, Beatrijs

Published by Leuven University Press

van Deinsen, Lieke and Beatrijs Vanacker.
Portraits and Poses: Female Intellectual Authority, Agency and Authorship in Early Modern Europe.


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/100515
CHAPTER 3

Between Defence and Affirmation: The Discursive Self-Representation of Eighteenth-Century Women Authors in France and Italy

Rotraud von Kulessa
(translated by Kristen Gehrman)

In a letter dated August 15, 1751, Françoise de Graffigny wrote to her friend Antoine-François Devaux, known as Panpan: ‘[…] it is more honest for a woman to write in prose than in verse. Verse reveals the author, the scholar; prose only shows the witty woman of the world.’¹ The words of the author of one of the bestsellers of the eighteenth century, Les lettres d’une Péruvienne (‘Letters from a Peruvian Woman’) (1747/1752), seem in many ways emblematic of the self-representation of many women writers of the time. The denial of authority and the problem of the right to glory are recurrent issues in this discursive format, which is also part of the long-standing querelle des femmes.² Long considered a rhetorical game, the debate about the superiority of men, the inferiority of women, or even the equality of the sexes is omnipresent in the cultural history of Europe. As a rule, the texts belonging to the querelle des femmes are constructed on the model of attack–counterattack and can have a polemical dimension. The most recurrent thematic nodes of the querelle are the problem of marriage and thus of women’s virtue, access to knowledge, and glory. In this regard, Eliane Viennot has pointed out: ‘Finally, from the seventeenth century onwards, the dispute [querelle des femmes] would be focused on the question of education and women’s access to knowledge […]’³

The self-representation of women writers throughout this literary history can be situated in this context. The woman writer has to justify herself in relation to the dominant (i.e. male) discourse that generally excludes women from writing and cultural production. This discourse is in turn part of the complex apparatus of the respective literary field, in which the laws of the publishing market have reigned since the invention of the book in the Renaissance. Following Michel Foucault’s example, the concept of the author can be understood as a
discursive construction that is specific to a particular socio-historical context that varies from country to country and period to period. When it comes to the question of female authorship, as one of the dominant subjects throughout the _querelle des femmes_, we can observe a certain continuity of arguments and apply to the eighteenth century what we could also observe at the end of the nineteenth century in our study _Entre la reconnaissance et l’exclusion_ (‘Between Reconnaissance and Exclusion’):

The positions taken by women writers regarding their position in the literary field, as expressed in their literary works, clearly reflect their position in society, which is, after all, marginal. They thus speak ‘in two voices’, employing a strategy of implicit subversion, a diplomatic rather than combative discourse.

The woman who speaks, and worse still, whoarticulates herself in writing, has to justify herself, defend herself, and fight prejudices about the woman who writes.

France and Italy both have a long tradition of women’s literature, the importance of which varies depending on the period. Italy, for example, saw a considerable presence of women poets during the Renaissance, while France witnessed the clear emergence of women writers from the seventeenth century onwards. The ongoing exchanges and the close relationship between these two literatures, whose actors were part of the (European) Republic of Letters, fully justify a study of emblematic contributions by French and Italian women authors of the eighteenth century, a pivotal period for this debate. These contributions can illustrate the functioning of this discourse, which teeters between defence and affirmation. For France, we will focus on the best-known authors, namely Françoise de Graffigny, Émilie du Châtelet, Anne-Marie du Boccage, Félicité de Genlis, and Germaine de Staël. For Italy, we have chosen Luisa Bergalli Gozzi and Giustiniana Wynne Orsini v. Rosenberg because of their links with the French-speaking world. We will show, through these specific cases, that the discourse of self-representation of women authors is essentially based on three strong points – the denial of authority, the right to fame, and the problem of access to knowledge – none of which are treated the same way by the above-mentioned women authors.

**Françoise de Graffigny and the Denial of Authority**

Françoise de Graffigny (1695–1758), originally from Lorraine, succeeded in making a name for herself in the world of Parisian letters with her epistolary novel _Lettres d’une Péruvienne_, which became a bestseller during the Enlightenment. Her tear-jerking comedy _Cénie_ (1750) is one of the few plays
by a woman playwright to be staged at the Comédie-Française. She also wrote a vast private correspondence, including letters to her friend François-Antoine Devaux,⁹ also from Lorraine, from which the quotation that opens this contribution is taken:

Ah, my God, how wrongly you understand the motive of my work! Do you want to test it? Send someone to tell me what I hope to get out of my two works. I throw them into the fire with all my heart without the slightest regret, and I vow never to write.¹⁰

The novelist’s private correspondence allows us to trace the main stages of the creation of her novel and reveals that, in fact, she wrote more for material reasons than for glory. At the same time, however, she did not want to lose face before her contemporaries and was cautious when it came to possible criticism:

Get this into your head. And that I will never write for my own pleasure or for glory, that I try to do the best I can because at worst, if it is known that I wrote it, I shall have the same self-respect as to not to go out in a stained dress. It does not go any further.¹¹

Françoise de Graffigny refuses the idea that a woman can be an author and claim any authority. The quotation inserted as an introduction – ‘[…] and another thing that will revolt you, is that it is more honourable for a woman to write in prose than in verse. Verse reveals the author, the scholar; prose only shows the witty woman of the world’¹² – is thus well in line with the discourse of sociability of the time, which prescribes (women’s) behaviour in terms of honest sociability and which puts the scholarly woman on trial, something that had taken place since the seventeenth century.¹³ To claim authority and knowledge, the two being closely linked, thus represents an overcoming of social conventions. Françoise de Graffigny seems aware of this and tries to avoid the pitfalls of the world around her and not to violate the rules of good conduct.

The Right to Fame

Authority, glory, and fame in the feminine form were thus problematic in eighteenth-century France. However, not all of Françoise de Graffigny’s colleagues were so reticent about the question of female glory.

For Émilie du Châtelet (1706–1749), physicist, philosopher, and companion of Voltaire, study (understood in the broadest sense) was the only way for women to achieve fame, which in turn was one of the conditions for women’s access to happiness, as she emphasised in her Discours sur le bonheur (‘Discourse on Happiness’) (1779, posthumous):
By this reason of independence, the love of study is of all the passions the one that contributes most to our happiness. In the love of study is a passion from which an elevated soul is never entirely free, that of glory; still, only half of the world can acquire it this way, and it is this very half to whom education deprives the means of it, and renders the taste for it impossible.\textsuperscript{14}

Here, the scholar underlines the problem of women’s access to knowledge, which was later taken up by Félicité de Genlis and many others. Indeed, the question of women’s education became particularly virulent during the eighteenth century and was therefore the subject of a number of works devoted to this issue, beginning with Fénélon’s *Traité de l’éducation des filles* (‘Treaty on the Education of Girls’) (1678) and the Marquise de Lambert’s *Avis d’une mère à sa fille* (‘Advice of a Mother to Her Daughter’) (1728).\textsuperscript{15}

The boldness of the physicist’s words, which openly demanded women’s right to glory, was contrasted, many years later, by a certain pessimism on the part of Germaine de Staël (1766–1817), author of the novels *Delphine* (1802) and *Corinne* (1807) and the treatises *De la littérature* (‘On Literature’) (1800) and *De l’Allemagne* (‘On Germany’) (1810/1813):

> Even glory can be reproached to a woman, because there is a contrast between glory and her natural destiny. Austere virtue condemns even the fame of what is good in itself, as a kind of attack on the perfection of modesty. Men of spirit, astonished to find rivals among women, do not know how to judge them, either with the generosity of an adversary, or with the indulgence of a protector; and in this new combat, they follow neither the laws of honour, nor those of kindness.\textsuperscript{16}

By evoking the risk of feminine glory, which causes the death of Corinne, the protagonist of de Staël’s eponymous novel, and which, according to the author, could provoke rivalries and even jealousy among the opposite sex, she in turn inscribes the question of female authorship in the *querelle des femmes*, which then becomes a real power struggle. In this, she joined Olympe de Gouges (1748–1793), a proto-feminist, author of the *Droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (‘Rights of the Woman and the Citizen’) (1791) and of the play *Zamor et Mirza* (1785), in which she expressed her criticism of slavery. Her political engagement led to her execution by guillotine. In the preface to her novel *Mémoires de Madame de Valmont* (1788), she explains the gendered division of roles in society as a result of men’s fear of possible female competition:

> My dearest sisters, It is to you to whom I recommend all the faults that abound in my productions. May I flatter myself that you will have the generosity or the prudence to justify them; or should I not have to fear more rigour from you, more truth than the most austere criticism of our scholars,
who want to invade everything and grant us no right to please. Men maintain that we are fit only to run a household; and that women who tend to the spirit and pretentiously resign themselves to literature are unbearable beings to society: not fulfilling the utilities there, they become a bore. I find that there is some foundation in these different systems, but my feeling is that women can unite the advantages of the mind with the care of the household, even with the virtues of the soul, and the qualities of the heart; to add beauty, the sweetness of character, would be a rare model, I agree: but who can claim perfection?\textsuperscript{17}

The quotation shows that the topos of the learned woman who seeks to please through her knowledge and is immediately considered pedantic was still virulent at the end of the eighteenth century. In addition, there was the concern for the care of the household, which, in an increasingly bourgeois world, fell to the woman. Thus, Olympe de Gouges appealed to female solidarity and generosity when it came to dealing with male networks and overcoming eternal presuppositions:

If I imitate you in this circumstance by revealing our defects, it is to try to correct them. We each have our own faults and qualities. Men are well organised in much the same way, but they are more consistent; they do not have this rivalry of figure, spirit, character, demeanour, costume, which divides us, and which is their amusement, their instruction on our own account. [...] O women, o women of every kind, of every state and rank, become simpler, more modest, and more generous towards one another.\textsuperscript{18}

The proto-feminist denounces here a flaw that still seems to be at stake in debates on gender issues today: the lack of solidarity among women and the lack of women’s networks.

Access to Knowledge

The question of the right to fame is therefore linked to that of access to knowledge. With her work \textit{De l’influence des femmes sur la littérature française} (‘The Influence of Women on French Literature’),\textsuperscript{19} the pedagogue and polygraph author Félicité de Genlis (1746–1830)\textsuperscript{20} joined the long tradition of catalogues by famous women and authors who enjoyed a certain popularity in the eighteenth century:

By publishing collections that bring together, in the manner of Plutarch, a more or less large number of illustrious lives, the ‘philosophers’ and their epigones of the Enlightenment are, however, part of a much earlier tradition
that goes back to Antiquity and whose purpose is not to contradict the dominant sexist ideology, but on the contrary to reinforce it by the exemplification of the exception.  

What applies to most male authors of this kind of work, such as Joseph Delaporte’s *Histoire littéraire des femmes françaises* (‘Literary History of French Women’) (1769), is not necessarily the same for the women who exploited this genre. For example, Félicité de Genlis tries to explain the apparent superiority of men in literary creation by the lack of education of women:

Men of letters have a de facto superiority over women authors that is certainly impossible to ignore or dispute: all the works of women put together are not worth a few beautiful pages by Bossuet, Pascal, a few scenes by Corneille, Racine, Molière, etc.; but it must not be concluded that the organisation of women is inferior to that of men. Genius is composed of all the qualities that are not contested in them, and which women can possess in the highest degree; imagination, sensibility, elevation of the soul. Lack of study and education having at all times kept women away from the literary career [...].

As an author of society theatre and books on education, her reasoning is partly explained by her interest in educational matters, having been a gouverneur of the children of Orléans. While Genlis noted the ‘de facto superiority’ of men of letters, she emphasised the qualities of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women novelists and epistolary writers, and even their superiority over their male counterparts, thus affirming the topos of the novel as a ‘gendered genre’ that has reigned since:

But if too few women (for lack of study and boldness) have written tragedies and poems to equal those of men, they have often surpassed them in several works of another kind. No man has left a collection of familiar letters that can be compared to the Letters of Madame de Sévigné, and those of Madame de Maintenon; the Princess of Cleves, the Peruvian Letters, the Letters of Madame Riccoboni, the last two novels of Madame Cottin are infinitely superior to all those of the French novelists, without excepting those of Marivaux, and even less so to the dull and voluminous works of the Abbé Prévôt [...].

**Self-Affirmation**

Among our examples, only Anne-Marie du Boccage (1710–1802) seems to be free of any apprehension about her status as an author, and she thus
disavows Félicité de Genlis’s conclusions. Originally from Rouen, Anne-Marie du Boccage made a name for herself as a translator of Pope and John Milton and as a playwright, with a tragedy (*Les Amazones* ['The Amazons'], 1749) that was performed eleven times at the Comédie-Française. She also wrote an epic poem (*La Colombiade ou la foi portée au Nouveau Monde* ['The Columbiad, or the Discovery of America'], 1756). She thus owes her fame to works that were both considered noble and virile in her time. Her letters about the journeys she undertook with her husband – to England and Holland in 1750 and to Italy from 1756 to 1758 – constitute one of the most important texts of the viaticum genre written by a woman in the eighteenth century.

In her travel letters, the author speaks little about her husband, but she likes to present herself at official receptions, when she is received by the Pope or in Italian academies. In this way, Anne-Marie du Boccage puts herself on the same scale as her male counterparts who travel and are officially received. Her choice of literary genres and her position as a woman author attest to her desire to secure a place in the European Republic of Letters. In her account of her trip to Italy, the evocation of the cultural heritage of antiquity and Italy thus serves to insert herself into the cultural memory of her time and to claim the status of an immortal author. In her detailed description of her admission to the Academy of Bologna, however, Du Boccage refers to the filiation of her predecessors and thus does not fail to live up to the female solidarity invoked by Olympe de Gouges:

In the afternoon we saw the institute where I have been graciously admitted. My glory is great, there are only three women there, the studious Laura Bassi who teaches physics and gives public lectures in Latin, the famous geometrician Agnesi, retired in a convent in Milan, and the illustrious Neapolitan princess Colombrano. The Marquise du Châtelet, as worthy of being a member as I am not, was a member of this Academy of Sciences, founded by Theodore the Younger, the oldest and richest in Europe.²⁶

The practice of inserting either translations from Greek or poems written by herself into her letters makes her travelogue a literary work that goes beyond a travel guide or chronicle. At all times, Du Boccage asserts her authority as a woman of learning who, unlike most women of her time, had a command of Greek and who spoke of her desire to achieve fame and thus immortality as an author. Implicitly, she even sought to equal the poets of antiquity, portraying herself as a genius when she writes:

The useful desire to live in memory, the most beautiful of all, is best suited to virtuous souls. The greatest men of antiquity, far from concealing their love of glory, said enthusiastically: ‘Let us do something for posterity, if we want it to do something for us.’ Providence allows mediocre minds to
have only moderate desires for immortality, but in distinguished geniuses the hope of success begets heroic deeds, and great deeds in turn give rise to high hopes.27

With regard to Anne-Marie du Boccage’s position as an author, María Isabel Corbí Saéz rightly states: ‘[Du Boccage] is going to compose her own self-portrait, that of a woman of letters fully entitled to her status as an author.’28 Unlike many of her colleagues, Du Boccage felt no need to legitimise herself; instead, she fully displayed her status as a woman scholar.

The Woman of Letters in Italy

As Félicité de Genlis did for French women authors, Luisa Bergalli Gozzi,29 a Venetian translator and author, sought to immortalise the glory of Italian women authors and poets in her anthology of women poets entitled Componimenti poetici delle piu illustri rimatrici di ogni secolo (‘Poetical Compositions of the Most Illustrious Rhymers of All Centuries’) (1726). The work is in line with the feminine Petrarchanism and the anthologies of women poets of the Renaissance, which were very successful at the time.30 Luisa Bergalli Gozzi’s project is partly explained by material necessities. We know that she wrote and translated primarily to earn money and to support her large family.31

The first volume of her anthology contains texts by 112 women poets from antiquity to 1575, while the second, divided into two parts, contains eighty-two women poets who were dead by the time the book was published and fifty-five women poets who were alive. In her preface, Bergalli Gozzi refers to the tradition of this kind of work in Italy when she mentions the Recanati anthology,32 which she, however, wished to complete:

To the reader: As known, to date only two collections of female poets have been published: one of fifty ancient female poets with the exposition by the valuable Domenichi, the other of thirty-five modern female poets, edited by our erudite Teleste Ciparissiano. We thought there was space for a third collection, which would include the authors from both collections and more famous female poets, as well as others worthy of being acknowledged; I do not know what misfortunes have made them almost unknown to the literary Republic. I wanted to take up this honourable endeavour for my double pleasure: first, because I wanted to lead the way in restoring glory and honour to the less famous; second, because I wanted to acquire some compassion for myself. It is indeed true that the name of literate is rarely attributed to us women, because of an old tradition for which women are engaged in every kind of activity except studying; consequently, if by chance some women get to stand out among the others, I believe most men
only acknowledge them out of politeness. But I do not talk with such men, because they are the majority and I do not hope to obtain anything from them, neither applause for women nor compassion for myself. Instead, I want to talk to those few men, those born to think well, as other wise men did; and do not refuse to really value and honour us women, leaving appropriate space to the first stanzas of the fourth canto of Floridoro, Poem by our Moderata Fonte, whom I am happy to include here.³³

She indeed expresses her concern to do justice to the great number of Italian women poets who have fallen into oblivion and to give them a rightful place in the collective memory of the Republic of Letters.

Bergalli Gozzi then quotes lines from one of the best-known poetesses of the Italian Renaissance, the Venetian Moderata Fonte (1555–1592), who was part of the querelle des femmes with her dialogue Il merito delle donne (‘The Merit of Women’) (1600), but who also wrote an epic poem entitled Floridoro (‘Floridoro: A Chivalric Romance’) (1581):

Women of all times were given by Nature
Good judgement and sensibility,
And they are not born to show less wisdom and value,
With their study and occupation, than men.
Why, if they have the same shape,
If their substance is the same,
If women and men receive similar food and talk,
Should they differ in courage or wit?

Also, it is known and has been known for ever that
If any woman put her mind to it,
More than one would have excelled in battles,
And [would have stolen] primacy and fame [of] many men.
And so [it] happens in literature,
And in each enterprise that men practice or debate:
Women have had and [still] have so much success
That there is no point in being jealous of men [...].³⁴

The verses quoted from this epic poem, in which Moderata Fonte sings of women’s literary merits and their intellectual equality with the male sex, serve to support Bergalli Gozzi’s claim to the glory of women poets and the existence of a female literary genealogy. Recourse to a tradition of female poetry in the past thus serves to legitimise her own activity as a woman of letters in a time and place in which female poets were becoming increasingly rare.

Moderata Fonte’s verses refer to the querelle des femmes³⁵ as it is declared in Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso, which is also echoed by Laura Terracina in her
commentary on Ariosto’s masterpiece. In a way similar to the texts in the *querelle*, Bergalli Gozzi then lists examples of literate women to support her argument in favour of a feminine Italian literary tradition. However, she also refers to the modesty of her fellow women, which would have made her undertaking very difficult:

And indeed, we need not leave our Venice to find examples of valiant women who have excelled in the most rigorous studies: Cassandra Fedele, Collaltina Collalta, Lucietta Soranzo, Elena Cornaro Piscopia, and so many more that it would make too long a list: in fact, it is always by accident that the number of famous women does not correspond to that of [famous] men. But, although there are very few female poets, I cannot brag about having collected them all; because the rarity of the books in which the poems of many ancient female poets are published and the invincible modesty of many modern female poets have made this task very difficult.

Modesty, however, is not a characteristic of the Anglo-Venetian Giustinina Wynne (1737–1791). Her work, written entirely in French, includes an occasional poem written for the wedding of the daughter of her ex-lover Andrea Memmo and a report on the stay of the Northern Princes (i.e. the sons of Catherine II of Russia) in Venice. She also gives an original description of Angelo Quirini’s Villa, the Altichiero. In her *Pièces morales et sentimentales* (‘Moral and Sentimental Essays’), she brings together a diverse ensemble of personal reflections. She particularly develops her ideas on the position of women in society and on the relationship between the sexes. She owes her literary fame above all to her novel of manners, *Les Morlaques* (‘The Morlaques’), which is one of the first anthropological novels. Inspired by Alberto Fortis (Voyage en Dalmatie [‘Trip to Dalmatia’, 1774]) and a true story, she recounts the tale of Jella and Jervaz. This story serves as the basis for a detailed description of the morals of the Morlaques, a people from the Dalmatian hinterland, to which she adds Rousseauesque reflections on the advantages of a society in the state of nature. The novel’s originality derives from the author’s combination of Enlightenment ideas as well as ideas that can be considered proto-feminist in the Balkans, a cultural area that received little attention from eighteenth-century thinkers.

In her *Pièces morales et sentimentales*, the author explains her vision of the female author to her niece by way of introduction. In contrast to her French counterparts, Wynne considers the activity of women authors to be in some ways ‘outside of the competition’. Because of their small numbers, women authors did not need to worry about rivalry or competition and would be looked upon kindly by their colleagues. Thus, Wynne expresses her surprise that women do not take more advantage of this to attract more attention:
'Do you write, Aunt?' – 'No doubt, my dear.' – 'Dare I ask you what you are writing about?' – 'I am beginning a preface.' – 'A preface! So you have written a book?' – 'No: but don’t let that surprise you.' – 'You will at least have a subject ready.' A subject? That is emphatic, my dear, and moreover unnecessary. Show me an author who sticks to the subject he proposes, or who fulfils it? I have none, and that is what pleases me most. The freedom of ideas is a gift of nature, in which all men participate, but which few of them know how to make the most of: even in this our sex can act more freely than the other. There is a libertinism of the mind, as well as of the heart: and a woman is permitted to indulge in the former with complete safety, because she does not excite jealousy, and thereby produces no disorder in society. A woman with a beautiful mind is regarded in the world as a will of the wisp, which shines without burning, and which can stop at any point without damaging anything. It is the competition of opinions that causes rivalries: there will never be as many women as there are men competing for a reputation. If a woman manages to write, all prejudices are in her favour: the bad is passable; the good is sublime. I am astonished by how women entirely neglect this happy kind of fame, from which their self-esteem would derive great help.'

The positions taken by the two Venetian authors require more precise contextualisation. The Venetian literary landscape of the second half of the eighteenth century was marked by a certain feeling of rivalry with the predominance of literary and philosophical productions from beyond the Alps. The novel genre was far from dominant in Italy, where, until the beginning of the twentieth century, works of poetry dominated the literary market. Women who published and actively participated in the Venetian literary market, which was still of great importance in the eighteenth century, were rare. The tendency to glorify the past, particularly Petrarchan poetry, as Bergalli Gozzi did, was a common strategy to remedy a feeling of inferiority to France felt by many Italian intellectuals of the time. Wynne’s literary production, on the contrary, is situated halfway between these two cultures. On the one hand, she was part of that Venetian intellectual space where female activity in the field of literature was rather limited to journalism or translation, as the examples of Elisabetta Caminer Turra, director of the Giornale Enciclopedico (‘Encyclopaedic Journal’), or Luisa Bergalli Gozzi demonstrate. On the other hand, through the choice of literary genres, namely the novel, and the language, Wynne is part of the French context. Halfway between two cultures, a figure like Giustiniana Wynne is an exception and therefore enjoys a certain amount of freedom.

The discursive formation of women’s authorship in France and Italy during the Enlightenment is thus embedded in a specific context of literary and intellectual history. As women’s participation in the literary field in the two countries did not evolve in the same way, the dominant discourse about the woman
of letters varies according to the context. However, the self-representations of women writers are always part of the *querelle des femmes*, which is about women's access to knowledge, and access to knowledge is, in turn, intrinsically linked to access to fame and power. In general, women, who were well aware of their position within the literary field, played with the topos of modesty and implemented strategies of legitimisation. Their self-representations are thus linked to questions of behavioural patterns and sociability. The recourse to a feminine literary tradition, which both Félicité de Genlis and Luisa Bergalli Gozzi claim, thus serves to reinforce authority and to justify their own literary activities. Moreover, the Venetian literary market had recognised since the Renaissance the impact of female readership and the literary production of women. In the eighteenth century, in the absence of Italian women authors, French translations and pseudo-memoirs of fictional women authors were published. A quotation from a preface to a novel by Pietro Chiari, a polygraph author of this genre of novels, is emblematic in this respect:

Today’s booksellers only sell novels, and I must therefore only write novels if I want to write books that sell – write, Madame, the memoirs of your life yourself if you want to enrich the printing presses with a book that makes your fortune.\(^{44}\)

The self-portrait of the woman author in the eighteenth century, at least in France and Italy, was therefore not only ideological and sociological but also economic. Women, like Françoise de Graffigny and Luisa Bergalli Gozzi, were not only ‘witty women of the world’, as Graffigny claims, but often also professional writers who chose to become writers to earn a living. Moreover, the difference between the auctorial situations of French and Italian women writers, namely the prudence of eighteenth-century women writers, which was particularly evident in France and which was contrasted by a certain recklessness on the part of Italian women, was in fact echoed in the historiography of national literatures that developed in the nineteenth century.

Thus, at the time of the unification of Italy (Risorgimento) around 1860, Italian critics liked to recall the tradition of women poets and authors as a sign of the modernity of the young nation:

However, Italian criticism at the end of the century shows a certain acceptance of women’s writing. In fact, the discourse about female authors is now considered a part of the process of forming Italy’s national identity, affirming the modernity and progress that this young nation has made in education and culture.\(^{45}\)

In France, on the contrary, during the same period, the opposite evolution can be observed, as Joan DeJean has pointed out:
It was at the end of the eighteenth century that a great oblivion began. A few decades were enough to erase a long cultural tradition. With a few exceptions, women who had once been considered equal to male authors ceased to exist. They did not fall into oblivion, as is often said: literary history decided to erase their names from its lists, declaring their oblivion.\textsuperscript{46}

The self-representation of women writers as a response to a dominant discourse conditioned by the marginalisation of women in the respective literary fields thus staggers between the claim to fame and its rejection, which is no doubt often strategic. Although the authors’ situations were affected by their individual conditions, they all seem to have been aware of their exceptional status, which is reflected in the collective discourse and in literary historiography.
Notes


4. ‘Selon le concept du “discours” de Michel Foucault, le concept de “l’auteur” peut être compris comme une construction dicursive qui varie selon les époques et les groupes sociaux régnants. Le discours au sujet de la femme auteur s’inscrit ainsi dans la longue Querelle des femmes, qui repose sur “l’ordre du discours” réglant le rapport entre les sexes’ (‘According to Michel Foucault’s concept of “discourse”, the concept of the “author” can be understood as a discursive construction that varies according to the times and the social groups in power. The discourse about the woman author is thus part of the long Querelle des femmes, which is based on the “order of discourse” regulating the relationship between the sexes’) (Rotraud von Kulessa, Entre la reconnaissance et l’exclusion. La position de l’autrice dans le champ littéraire en France et en Italie à l’époque 1900, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2011, 157).

5. ‘Les prises de positions des femmes de lettres au sujet de leur position dans le champ littéraire, telles qu’elles se manifestent dans leurs ouvrages littéraires, reflètent clairement de leur position dans la société qui est, somme toute, marginale. Elles parlent alors “à double voix”, employant une stratégie de subversion implicite, un discours plutôt diplomatique que combatif’ (Ibid., 211).


7. For Françoise de Graffigny, see the entry in SIEFAR [online], <http://siefar.org/dictionnaire/fr/Fran%C3%A7oise_de_Graffigny_d%27Issembourg_d%27Happencourt>.


11. ‘Mets-toi donc bien cela dans la tête. Et que je n’écrirai jamais pour mon plaisir ny pour la gloire, que je tâche de faire le mieux qu’il m’est possible parce qu’au pis-aller, si on sait que c’est de moi, j’ai l’amour-propre là-dessus pareil à ne pas aller dans le monde avec une robe tachée. Il ne va pas plus loin’ (Graffigny to Devaux, August 13, 1745, in von Klessa, ‘Françoise de Graffigny, et la genèse’, 65). 

12. ‘[…], et une autre chose qui va te révolter, c’est qu’il est plus honnête à une femme d’écrire en prose qu’en vers. Les vers affichent l’auteur, la savante; la prose ne dit que la femme du monde qui a de l’esprit’ (Graffigny to Devaux, August 15, 1751, in von Klessa, ‘Françoise de Graffigny, et la genèse’, 68). 


16. ‘La gloire même peut être reprochée à une femme, parce qu’il y a contrastes entre la gloire et sa destinée naturelle. L’austère vertu condamne jusqu’à la célébrité de ce qui est bien en soi, comme portant une sorte d’atteinte à la perfection de la modestie. Les hommes d’esprit, étonnés de rencontrer des rivaux parmi les femmes, ne savent les juger, ni avec la générosité d’un adversaire, ni avec l’indulgence d’un protecteur; et dans ce combat nouveau, ils ne suivent ni les lois de l’honneur, ni celles de la bonté’ (Germaine de Staël, Gengembre and Goldzink (eds.), De la littérature, Paris, Garnier Flammarion, 1991, 339). 

17. ‘Mes très chères sœurs, C’est à vous à qui je recommande tous les défauts qui fourmillent mes productions. Puis-je me flatter que vous voudrez bien avoir la générosité ou la prudence de les justifier; ou n’aurais-je point à craindre de votre part plus de rigueur, plus de vérité que la critique la plus austère de nos savants, qui veulent tout envahir, et ne nous accordent le droit de plaire. Les hommes soutiennent que nous ne sommes propres exactement qu’à conduire un ménage; et que les femmes qui tendent à l’esprit, et se livrent avec prétention à la littérature, sont des êtres insupportables à la société: n’y remplissant pas les utilités elles en deviennent l’ennui. Je trouve qu’il y a quelque fondement dans ces différents systèmes, mais mon sentiment est que les femmes peuvent réunir les avantages de l’esprit avec les soins du ménage, même avec les vertus de l’amour, et les qualités du cœur; y joindre la beauté, la douceur du caractère, serait un modèle rare, j’en conviens: mais qui peut prétendre à la perfection?’ (Olympe de Gouges, ‘Mémoires de Madame de Valmont (1788), Préface pour les dames ou le portrait des femmes’, in Raymond Trousson (ed.), Romans de femmes, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1996, 489). 

18. ‘Si je vous imite dans cette circonstance, en dévoilant nos défauts, c’est pour essayer de les corriger. Chacune avons les nôtres, nos travers, et nos qualités. Les hommes sont bien organisés à peu près de même, mais ils sont plus conséquents; ils n’ont pas cette rivalité de figure, d’esprit, de caractère, de maintien, de costume, qui nous divise, et qui fait leur amusement, leur instruction sur notre propre compte. […] O femmes, o femmes de quelque espèce, de quelque état de quelque rang que vous soyzez, devenez plus simples, plus modestes, et plus généreuses les unes vers les autres’ (Ibid., 490–491). 

19. The full title of De l’influence des femmes sur la littérature française is as follows: De l’influence des femmes sur la littérature française, comme protectrices des lettres et comme auteurs,
ou précis de l'histoire des femmes françaises les plus célèbres ("The influence of women on French literature, as protectors of letters and as authors, or on the history of the most famous French women").

20. For Félicité de Genlis, see the entry in SIEFAR [online], <http://siefar.org/dictionnaire/fr/St%C3%A9phanie-Ducrest_de_Saint-Aubin>.


22. See the list following the article by Nicole Pellegrin, 'Le polygraphe philogynie', 76–79.

23. "Les hommes de lettres ont sur les femmes auteurs une supériorité de fait qu'il est assurément impossible de méconnaître et de contester: tous les ouvrages de femmes rassemblés ne valent pas quelques belles pages de Bossuet, de Pascal, quelques scènes de Corneille, de Racine, de Molière, etc.; mais il n'en faut pas conclure que l'organisation des femmes soit inférieure à celle des hommes. Le génie se compose de toutes les qualités qu'on ne leur conteste pas, et qu'elles peuvent posséder au plus haut degré; l'imagination, la sensibilité, l'élévation de l'âme. Le manque d'étude et l'éducation ayant dans tous les temps écarté les femmes de la carrière littéraire, [...]' (Félicité de Genlis, De l'influence des femmes sur la littérature française, comme protectrices des lettres et comme auteurs, ou précis de l'histoire des femmes françaises les plus célèbres, Paris, Maradan, 1811, iii).

24. "Mais si trop peu de femmes (faute d'études et d'hardiesse) ont fait des tragédies et des poèmes pour avoir pu s'égaler aux hommes à cet égard, elles les ont souvent surpassés dans plusieurs ouvrages d'un autre genre. Aucun homme n'a laissé un recueil de lettres familières que l'on puisse comparer aux Lettres de madame de Sévigné, et à celles de Madame de Maintenon; la Princesse de Clèves, les Lettres Péruviennes, les Lettres de madame Riccoboni, les deux derniers romans de madame Cottin sont infiniment supérieurs à tous ceux des romanciers français, sans en excepter ceux de Marivaux, et moins encore les ennuyeux et volumineux ouvrages de l'abbé Prévôt [...]" (Ibid., vii).


26. "L'après-midi nous vîmes l'institut où l'on m'a fait la grâce de m'admettre. Ma gloire est grande, il n'y a que trois femmes, la studieuse Laura Bassi qui y professe la physique dont elle donne des cours publics en latin, la fameuse géomètre Agnesi, retirée dans un couvent à Milan et l'illustre princesse Colombrano, napolitaine. La marquise du Châtelet, aussi digne d'en être que je le suis peu, était de cette Académie des Sciences, fondée par Théodore le Jeune, la plus ancienne, la plus riche de l'Europe' (Anne-Marie du Boccage, Lettres sur l'Italie, Receuil des œuvres complètes de Mme du Boccage, vol. 3, Lyon, Périsse, 1770, 127).

27. "Le désir utile de vivre dans la mémoire, le plus beau de tous, convient surtout aux âmes vertueuses. Les plus grands hommes de l'antiquité, loin de dissimuler leur amour pour la gloire, disaient avec enthousiasme: "Faisons quelque chose pour la postérité, si nous voulons qu'elle fasse quelque chose pour nous." La providence permet que les esprits médiocres n'aient que des désirs modérés de l'immortalité, mais dans les génies distingués, l'espoir du succès engendre les faits héroïques, et les grandes actions font naître à leur tour les hautes espérances' (Ibid., 213).
28. ‘[Du Boccage] va composer son autoportrait, celui d’une femme de lettres revendiquant de plein-droit son statut d’auteure’ (María Isabel Corbí Saéz, ‘Genre épistolaire et auto-portrait chez Anne-Marie Di Boccage: Plaidoyer pour le statut de femme auteur’, in Ángeles Sirvent Ramos et al. (eds.), *Femmes auteurs du 18e siècle*, Paris, Champion, 2016, 153). See also ibid., 155: ‘Par ailleurs, consciente de la portée de ses lettres et désireuse de les placer aux côtés de celles de ses amis philosophes, ainsi que nous le verrons plus loin, elle insiste sur le fait que ce n’est qu’à un certain âge que l’individu a suffisamment de connaissances et d’expériences pour pouvoir faire des réflexions intéressantes sur les pays visités’ ('Furthermore, aware of the significance of her letters and wishing to place them alongside those of her philosopher friends, as we shall see later, she insists that it is only at a certain age that the individual has sufficient knowledge and experience to be able to make interesting reflections on the countries visited’).


31. See von Kulessa, ‘Between patronage and professional writing’.


33. ‘A chi legge: Due sole, siccome è noto, state fin’ ora, essendo le Raccolte di Rimatrici una di Antiche al num. di 50. dal buon Domenichi esposta, l’altra di Moderne al num. di 35. data in luce, per attenzione del nostro Eruditissimo Teleste Ciparissiano, e veggendosi esserci campo per una terza, che in unire le Autrici, e della prima, e della seconda, ne abbracciasse ancora tant’ altre di famose, e tant’ altre degne di esserlo, nè so per qual loro mala sorte poco meno, che incognite alla Repubblica letteraria; desiderio mi prese di voler io tale onorata fatica intraprendere: per due cagioni in questo appagando me stessa, l’ una perchè così apro la strada, onde ritornar possa gloria, ed onore alle men conosciute, e l’altra perchè mi lusingo di acquistare a me ancora un qualche compatimento. Vero è, che a motivo di vecchia costumanza, per la qual’ altro, che agli studj vengono le Donne applicate, questo nome di letterata così poco ad esse noi si conforma, che se anche per avventura molte giungono a distinguersi dalle altre, il più degli Uomini, a mio credere s’intende di confessarlo per solo tratto di gentilezza; ma con questi io non parlo; che come sono la maggior parte così appunto sono quelli dai quali ne applauso per esse, nè compatimento per me non mi curo di riscuotere; ma bensì con quei pochi io parlo, che nati per pensar bene, fanno, siccome fecero tant’ altri savj; e non isdegnano all’occasione di veramente pregare, ed onorare noi altre Donne; degno loco lasciando alle prime stanze del 4. canto del Floridoro Poema della nostra Moderata Fonte, che mi piace di qui rapportare’ (Luisa Bergalli Gozzi, *Componimenti poetici delle più illustri rimatrici di ogni secolo*, part 1, Venice, Antonio Mora, 1726, n.p.).
34. ‘Le Donne in ogni età fù da Natura / Di gran giudizio e d’animo dotate, / Nè men atte a mostrare con studio e cura / Senno e valor degli Uomini son nate. / E perché, se comune è la figura, / Se non son le sostanze variate, / S’hanno simile un cibo e un parlare, denno / Differente aver poi l’ardire e il senno? / Sempre s’è visto e vede, pur che alcuna / Donna v’ abbia voluto il pensiero porre, / Nella milizì riuscì più d’una, / E il pregio, e il grido a molti uomini torre. / E così nelle lettere, e in ciascuna / Impresa, che l’ uomo pratica, e discorre / Le Donne si buon frutto han fatto e fanno, / Che gli uomini a invidiar punto non hanno […’] (ibid., n.p.).

35. The Venetian author Moderata Fonte was also part of the querelle des femmes with her dialogue Il merito delle donne (‘The Merit of Women’) (1600).


37. ‘Ed in fatti senza partirci dalla nostra Venezia per esempi di valorose Donne, anche negli studj più gravi riuscite, abbiamo una Cassandra Fedele, una Collaltina Collalta, una Lucietta Soranzo, un’ Elena Cornaro Piscopia, e tant’ altre ancora delle quali troppo lungo sarebbe il farne raccontò, essendo sempre accidente, se il numero delle Donne famose a quello degli Uomini non corrisponde. Ma quantunque nella Poesia ancora moltissime non sieno state, io però non mi vanto di tutte, tutte averle raccolte; poiché la rarità degli esemplari ne’ quali vanno pressere le Rime di qualche antica, e la modestia invincibile di molte moderne questo tanto mi ha reso difficile’ (Bergalli Gozzi, Componimenti poetici, n.p.).

38. Giustiniana Wynne, À André Memmo Chevalier de l’Étoile d’or et procurateur de St Marc, à l’occasion du mariage de sa fille aînée avec Louis Mocenigo, Venice, Stamperia Giuseppe Rosa, 1787.


43. “Vous écrivez, ma tante ?” – “Sans doute, ma chère petite.” – “Oserois-je vous demander le sujet qui vous occupe ?” – “Je commence une préface.” – “Une préface ! vous avez donc écrit un livre ?” – “Non: mais que cela ne vous étonne point.” – “Vous aurez du moins un sujet tout prêt.” – “Un sujet ? C'est emphatique, ma chère, et d’ailleurs inutile. Quel est l’auteur qui se tienne à la rigueur au sujet qu’il se propose, ou qui le remplisse ? Je n’en ais aucun, et c’est ce qui me plaît le plus. La liberté des idées est un don de la nature, auquel tous les hommes participent, mais que peu parmi eux savent mettre à profit: même en cela notre sexe peut agir plus librement que l’autre. Il y a un libertinage d’esprit, comme de cœur: et il est permis à une femme de se livrer en toute sûreté au premier, parce qu’elle n’excite point de jalousie, et ne produis par là aucun désordre dans la société. Une femme bel esprit est regardé dans le monde comme un feu follet, qui brille sans brûler, et qui peut s’arrêter à tout sans rien endommager. C’est le concours des opinions qui cause les rivalités: il n’y aura jamais autant de femmes qu’il se trouve d’hommes en concurrence d’une réputation. Une femme s’arrange-t-elle pour écrire, toutes les préventions sont en sa faveur: le mauvais est passable; le bon est sublime. Je m’étonne comment elles négligent entièrement cet heureux genre de renommée, dont leur amour propre tirerait de grands secours’” (Wynne, Pièces morales et sentimentales, 2–3).

44. ‘I libraj oggidì vendono che romanzi, ed io non devo pertanto scrivere che soli romanzi, se scriver voglio de’ libri, che sieno venduti, […] Scrivete adunque, madama, voi stessa
