Women and Culture
Roseann Runte

Women as Muse

In mythology, the Muses, nine sisters, daughters of Zeus and Mnémémosyne, preside over the arts. In literature, as in art, the Muse is the genius of poetic inspiration evoked under the traits of woman. Yet the attempt to establish a correspondence between women and evocations of the Muses in the eighteenth century must be approached with caution, for the word "Muse" was part of a euphemistic tradition. Furetière applies a metonymical definition to the term. A penchant for the Muses, he explains, is an inclination for letters, especially poetry. A poet’s lodgings are the abode of the Muses or the Muses’ cabinet. The poet himself is the Muses’ favorite and his creations are the fruits of the Muses.¹ When Voltaire rue his absence from Parisian cultural life, he writes: “I am at present a poor, provincial soul removed from the sources of wit. It is through you that I want to remain in contact with the Muses.”² Thus, the reign of the Muses was that of letters. The metonymical employment of the term was such a common linguistic trait that the establishment of an association with actual women would be tenuous at best and would be the result of psycholinguistic analysis.

The word Muse was employed to signify the arts in contrast to the sciences. Voltaire writes to Bernard that “Newton is not making me give up the Muses . . .” (p. 2:300). Again writing about his studies of Newton, which leave him no time for poetry, Voltaire addresses this wish to Mlle Quinault: “Deign write me in order to return me to the Muses . . .” (p. 1:738).

The Muses may be abstract beings who are totally separate from the women as is evident in this verse by Chénier:

Depart, Muses, depart. Your Art is of no use to me;
What do your laurels mean to me? You permit Camille to flee.
Near her I wanted to have your support.
Depart, Muses, depart, if you can do naught.³

In a similar vein, to compliment authors on their writing, one praised their association with the Muses and named them, male and female alike, students of the Muses. Voltaire offers this title to Helvétius, Frederick II and Mme du Châtelet. However, while both
sexes could be inspired by the Muses, only female artists took on the trappings of the Muses themselves and were, through the extension of the charms of their works, personified as Muses. Voltaire writes to Mme de Genlis:

I read your charming work.
Do you know what is its effect?
One wants to become more familiar
With the Muse who created it.4

Similarly, a comment on Marie-Geneviève Bouliar’s painting identifies her not as a student of the Muses but as a Muse:

The Greeks, that ingenious people,
Who knew how to animate nature with diverse beings,
With nymphs, Muses, and with gods,
If this charming picture had been known by them,
Would have called Bouliar Muse of painting.5

This identification of woman as Muse follows a tradition of the eighteenth century in which artists painted women in the guise of Muses. Examples include Jean-Marc Nattier’s portraits of his wife “dressed in the guise of music” (1737), of Madame*** as Erato (1746), and of Mme Boudrey “as a Muse who sketches” (1753).6 The representation of women garbed as Muse is not extraordinary considering the popularity of costumes and extravagant guises in eighteenth-century portraiture. What is significant is that they chose to see themselves in this role and to communicate their acceptance of this role to the viewer.

In her role as Muse, the woman could provide inspiration for creative activity or be the object of artistic representations. Woman as Muse may thus be active or passive, and in some cases, she filled both roles simultaneously. Mme de Pompadour, for example, was represented in a portrait by Quentin de La Tour. She was the object of the painter’s inspiration. In the painting, she has placed a copy of De l’esprit des lois on the table next to her. She was, thus, actively promoting Montesquieu’s career at the same time.7

The role of women as active instigator of creative activity in the eighteenth century was complex. In general, woman’s role as arbiter of public taste was centered in the salons, and it is not an exaggeration to say that literary and artistic fame and fortune depended on the judgment of women.8 Marmontel wrote in his Mémoires that Mme de Tencin advised him to befriend women, “for, it is through women, she used to say, that one obtains what one wishes from men.”9 The role of patron of the arts was the equivalent of a profession, absorbing the time, energy, talents, and finances of many women. Furthermore, these women wielded considerable power in the Republic of Letters.

Monique Piettre in *La Condition féminine à travers les âges* states that the mythology of friendship by Mlle de Scudéry with the *Carte du tendre* was a mythology of frustration, a fiction into which women, tied by social codes in unsatisfactory and imposed conjugal bonds, could escape without risking the social condemnation following free union. Simultaneously, Piettre notes the growth of new religious orders, which offered careers for women oriented toward external activity in the late eighteenth century. In the eighteenth century, feminine frustration was somewhat released by a change in morality permitting the "consecration" of amorous liaisons by virtue of their longevity and by an increased activity in the sphere of letters, where a new force, public opinion, was mastered by women. This sovereignty was politically insignificant and led "from silken dress to the scaffold."¹⁰

All of this feminine activity should not be attributed to romantic frustration, and it was not simply an activity undertaken by women to fill their leisure hours to avoid ennui. Voltaire stated that there had been for a long time nine Muses and that healthy criticism should be the tenth.¹¹ Thus, criticism, debate, and, by extension, aid to the artists whose works one admires could be considered artistic activity. The careers of the eighteenth-century women who ran salons, who acted as the arbiters of public taste, and who professionally supported their protégés as much as they were responsible for the success of their individual productions were the careers of artists. Indeed, Mme de Pompadour wielded a brush herself; and most of these women, in addition to veritable volumes of letters, wrote essays, poetry, plays, and novels.¹² They were the colleagues of the artists they aided, and the reason women had the role of obtaining men's election to the Académie and not vice versa was simply because women could not be elected. If women helped men financially and politically, the reverse is also true. Voltaire was forced to go into hiding under an assumed name for a year after writing a letter in favor of Adrienne Lecouvreur, and he supported Corneille's grandniece. Women also helped women. Catherine II supported the artist Vigée-Lebrun for six years.¹³

The manner in which women performed the role of Muse can be divided into three categories: political support, financial aid, and intellectual assistance. The results of women's political activity are difficult to measure. For example, it is not possible to determine definitively if an academician was actually elected due to the support of women. Other factors may have been involved, including the possibility that different women may have simultaneously acted on behalf of different candidates. The women most commonly noted as responsible for the elections of Montesquieu, Marivaux, d'Alembert, Saurin, Watelet, Suard, Marmontel, Duras, Cicé, La Harpe, Chastellux, and Duclos include Mme de Lambert, Mme de Tencin, Mme du Deffand,
Mme Geoffrin, Mlle de Lespinasse, and Mme de Brancas. Women such as the duchesse d’Aiguillon protected the *encyclopédistes*, while others, such as the princesse de Robecq, idled their opponents. Political aid often came through negative acts. For example, Mme de Pompadour had Dupin’s work refuting the *Esprit des lois* withdrawn from circulation. The political aid offered by women was often in the form of introductions. Mme Geoffrin recommended Mozart to Prince von Kaunitz; she also had him play in her salon. The introduction of artists to other artists and the interested public was an invaluable source of aid that cannot be measured. Women provided the public forum in the salon. This public was chosen by them, and the works introduced as well as their eventual reception was orchestrated by the women whose generosity was offset by considerable authority and power.

The financial aid offered creative artists ranges from the ridiculous to the sublime. Mme d’Herbigny supplied Montesquieu with tea from England, while Mmes de Pompadour and du Barry with Marie-Antoinette were responsible for 258 pensions paid to artists and writers. Among the notable authors aided by Mme de Pompadour were Marivaux, Rousseau, and Marmontel, for whom she secured a government office and the editorship of and a pension from the *Mercure*. Catherine the Great’s aid to Diderot amounted to 60,000 livres, but she also helped others, such as Collot-Falconet, whom she supported for twelve years. It is impossible not to mention Mme Geoffrin in this context. Barbara Scott, among others, indicates that “she was in the habit of visiting artists’ homes to see how they were furnished, trying to find out whether, for example, a clock was needed, or a desk, and always hunting out a place for some useful piece of furniture.” She refurbished Diderot’s study, and this act of generosity, in turn, inspired Diderot to write his 1772 pamphlet, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre*. In addition, she purchased sixty-nine paintings and commissioned five works from Hubert Robert and gave an annuity to d’Alembert.

The extent of intellectual assistance provided by women to artists is unfathomable. They were, at times, responsible for the artists’ choice of subject, approach, or style. They provided models. For example, Marivaux attempted to reproduce images of the salon in his novels and plays. E. J. H. Greene observes that the salon model in Marivaux’s works extended beyond the replication of character, setting, and style of conversation to tone: “There is [in *La Voiture embourbée*] an insistence on the heart which is perhaps an awkward attempt to strike what he [Marivaux] considered to be the tone of Mme de Lambert.” The salon was also the subject of paintings, such as *L’Assemblée au salon* by Lavreince and later engraved by Dechevauxviller. The same subject
provided a negative inspiration. Gresset’s *Le Méchant* mocks Mme de Forcalquier’s green chamber. Similarly, women themselves were viewed in differing manners by artists. Mme Geoffrin was painted by both Nattier and Chardin in youth and in maturity. Perhaps a better illustration would be Mme de Tencin, who was “a divine angel” for Montesquieu and “the beautiful and wicked Canoness” for Diderot. Nanette was “beautiful as an angel,” according to Diderot, and “a haranguing harpy” in the eyes of Rousseau. It would be impossible to measure the indirect influence of these women on the works of these writers. Even when she was subject, the exact role of the woman is difficult to ascertain. When d’Alembert wrote a book on vaccination, Mlle de Lespinasse, marked by smallpox, is said to have been his inspiration. Diderot’s essays on blindness were inspired by the memory of Mélanie, the daughter of Mme de Salignac; however, she died at the age of twenty-two, some sixteen years before Diderot composed the *Additions à la lettre sur les aveugles*. Thus, while surely women did inspire these works and others, it is questionable where memory and imagination begin and where the woman herself played a key role. Indeed, Silvia’s performances of Marivaux’s roles inspired Marivaux and other authors to write for her and artists to portray her in painting. Yet was it Silvia the woman, Silvia the actress in a role, or the charm of Marivaux’s production that inspired the work? The sketch by Watteau de Lille and the engraving by Buquoy of Suzanne sending an answer to Figaro’s letter is a concrete extension of this problem; it was the literary character here that was portrayed, not the woman. There are real women and imaginary women. The perception of the woman by the artist may or may not be related to the original. Indeed, the imaginary woman could precede the original. When Rousseau first saw Mme d’Houdetot, he recognized in her the realization of his dream, his Julie. While the identification of the dream with reality appears to be diametrically opposed to the creation of a dream based on reality, the creative process may be similar. In *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Danceny writes to Mme de Merteuil that he began composing a letter to forget her, to distract himself:

> Unfortunately, when the days are so long, and one is so unoccupied, one dreams, one builds castles in Spain, one creates his own daydream, little by little the imagination becomes exalted: one wishes to beautify his work, one gathers together all which can please, one arrives at last at perfection; and as soon as one achieves it, the portrait leads back to the model, and one is astounded to see that all the time one had only been dreaming of you.

It would seem that dreams take their inspiration from reality and that they therefore represent a composite of all perceptions. Thus, any woman in a novel, poem, play or painting would have a relationship,
however indirect, with a real woman, even if her representation were inspired by a painting based on a description found in a novel. Mlle de Scudéry wrote concerning her portrait executed by the artist Nanteuil:

Nanteuil, on portraying my likeness
Demonstrated the power of his heavenly art.
I hate my eyes in my mirror,
I love them in his painting.25

If the women portrayed had trouble recognizing themselves, so did their contemporaries. With the passage of time, the difficulty increases. Robert Shackleton, for example, cannot determine if it was the duchesse d’Aiguillon or Mme Geoffrin who inspired Palissot to create the character of Cydalise in Les Philosophes.26 Similarly, Mlle de Clermont or Mme de Grave might have provided the inspiration for Montesquieu’s Temple de Cnide. Jeannette Gauffrion Rosso adds: “Mademoiselle de Charolais, according to Montesquieu himself, is said to have provided the inspiration for Arsace et Isménie, that ‘novel’ of conjugal love in the Orient, to use the author’s expression. It is not, on the other hand, impossible to deduce that he wrote it thinking as well of his own wife.”27 Even when a work is dedicated to a woman or when the author leaves an indication of source of inspiration, the information is not always reliable.

While it is often difficult to recognize the woman as source of inspiration from her portrait, it is also perplexing to determine the exact role she played in the creative process. When Montesquieu writes to Mme de Tencin “You are the little mother of my book,” what does he mean?28 What does Voltaire mean when he writes to Mme du Maine?

My patroness, your protégé must tell your Highness that I followed to the letter all the advice which she honored me. She will never know how much Cicero and Caesar were thereby improved. Those two gentlemen would have taken your advice if they had lived during your time. I just read Rome sauëte: the section [s] which your Most Serene Highness embellished created a prodigious effect.29

Was Montesquieu merely grateful to Mme de Tencin for having bought two hundred copies of his work to present at court? Was Voltaire merely purchasing his pardon from Mme du Maine, whom he had angered by inviting 500 people to view La Prude when it was performed at her home?

Related to the question of the influence exerted by women on artistic creation is the manner in which they were perceived. Chaulieu gave Mme de Staël the name Doris and Diderot’s Mme de La Carlière the name Morphysé. It was a common practice for male authors to give their Muses Greek names, the names of goddesses, and poetic names
chosen for their assonance or literary association. Yet, in the eighteenth century, these women were also named "mama," "little mother," or "little sister." Tenderness rather than passion is evoked by the attribution of such terms. These names evoke roles in the family, not in society at large. It appears that authors sought the intimacy of the family but were obliged to seek in the family circle names for the roles woman played outside. Men could be associated with a professional occupation, but women had no assigned roles other than those within the family. Therefore, their intimate family role was projected outward to a more public theatre.

This follows the development of eighteenth-century salon life:

One no longer received guests in the bedroom while one was still in bed, a common practice in the Grand Siècle when the bedroom was one of the most important of the house. In its social function the bedroom was replaced by the boudoir, while new rooms were devised for new life: the private study and, later on in the century, the permanent living room. Paralleling the opening up of the architectural structure came an expansion of women's role. When women left their niche, they brought with them their definition, which was entirely associated with the role they played in the home and no longer appropriate.

Seventeenth-century women mapped out new horizons with the Carte du tendre. In turn, these became new confinements. Eighteenth-century women had no map or social guide. No longer were they content to recline gracefully in beds and be described allegorically as flowers. Instead, they pursued activities previously reserved for men. This is reflected in their portraits. They are nearly always active. Even when asleep, the signs of activity are prominent. Mme Greuze, for example, is pictured nodding over an open book, embroidery frame on her feet, glasses and pen on the table. Like their seventeenth-century predecessors, eighteenth-century women were frequently pictured as goddesses but as active goddesses, who were teachers, propagandists of vaccination, participants in social functions, etc.

In the sixteenth century, women were most often portrayed as surrounded by rosy-cheeked cherubs and clouds. In the seventeenth century, they were put on pedestals. In the eighteenth century, however, it was less a case of the woman being deified than one of the goddess being humanized. Goddesses were seen walking among mortals, taking tea, and getting bathed, dressed or otherwise. They were pictured with imperfections. In Watteau’s painting, The Swing, the woman seated on the moving swing has lost her shoe in the passion of the moment. This activity and humanity coincide with the theory that in a world without sin the distance between man and god was eliminated. Eighteenth-century gardens were liberally sprinkled with statues of deities. They were not objects of reverence,
rather they were prized for their decorative value. They dotted the walkways as did humans. In Bouilliard and Dupréel’s etching of Schall’s painting of the bathing lady, it is not certain which figures are statues and which women.34 All are in the water. Were they in a temple, the deduction would be that the women were deified. Since the goddesses are being treated to the same bath as the women, it would seem that they are being humanized.

This new woman is not easily apprehended nor comprehended by men. Marivaux’s heroes are overwhelmed by a foot. Diderot favored hands. Laclos’s Valmont viewed women through a keyhole. Women are described through reflection or partially. The whole could not be seized upon or described. The artist attempted to focus on one feature to symbolize the whole. In so doing, he portrayed aspects of incomplete woman.

Another attempt to define the woman, this elusive Muse, was to treat her as a man. Voltaire described Mme du Châtelet to Fawkener as “that lady whom I look upon as a great man . . . She understands Newton, she despises superstition and in short, she makes me happy.” He wrote on another occasion: “I recommend to you Mme du Châtelet and [La Mort de] César; they are two great men.”35 Diderot described Catherine II as “Caesar’s soul with all the seductivity of Cleopatra.”36 Marivaux wrote of Mme de Fécour: “[She] had no feminine qualities. It was even one of her graces to not think of having any.”37 Diderot’s Sophie was “man and woman, when it so pleases him/her,” and he called women in general “creatures as beautiful as Klopstock’s seraphim, as terrible as Milton’s devils.”38 Piron called Mme de Tencin a “woman above many men . . . in case of need, a statesman / And, if necessary, an Amazon.”39 It is Mme d’Houdetot in a masculine riding costume on horseback who first captures Rousseau’s imagination.40

To say that a woman was a man was obviously a form of gallantry, a compliment indicating a changing role for women. It signals the recent date of this change, for a vocabulary was not yet at hand to describe the active woman; the best compliment writers could find for her was to call her a man. This reflects a weakening of stereotypical roles, and it is accompanied by the reverse situation, complimenting a male on his feminine qualities. Diderot, for example, admires Grimm because “To the strength of one of the sexes, he adds the grace and delicacy of the other.”41

Ian Maclean, in his work on feminism in French literature of the seventeenth century traces the image of the heroic woman back to the sixteenth century.42 I suspect that it could be traced to the origins of literature and that the goddess, Athena, the patroness of the hunt, was a “male woman,” as Trousset would have dubbed her. These heroic women, and even Amazons, were androcentric representations
as opposed to gynocentric images. These androcentric images were limited to the baroque period. The classical period reverted to the image of woman as the weak sex. Even the strongest of female characters, like Corneille’s Pauline, were cognizant of their sex and, therefore, their weaknesses. Writers in the pastoral tradition reversed the roles, making women strong and virtuous and men weak and prone to vice. The précieuse, or extension of the femme-docteur, was an image separate from either the heroic or the weak woman.

In the eighteenth century, the pastoral, baroque, and classical traditions all persisted in literature. Examples of each type of heroine can be found. The précieuse, however, developed into the femme-philosophe. Her bedchamber became a salon, a public forum for ideas. She herself became active and took on a masculine role in society. The femme-philosophe combined some of the qualities of the heroic woman and the précieuse. This fusion can be explained, in part, by the changing definition of vice. When evil was philosophically eliminated, vice was lost as a trait, either male or female. The glorification of the image of mother and family in the latter part of the century responded to the eighteenth-century desire for intimacy. This tendency to extol life in the homes as a new virtue may have also been a reaction to the entrance of women into society. In any case, although women attempted to break out of the family circle, they did not succeed in being cast into new roles. They were adopted by the artists they befriended as mothers, sisters, and daughters. Unfortunately, the newfound virtues of motherhood were not projected into the social arena. Rousseau awarded bracelets not to women who nurtured the arts but to women who nursed their children.

In the eighteenth century, the enigma was a popular word game. A series of clues, often in poetic form, were given, and the auditor had to divine the object, usually an abstract notion such as time. The characteristics of the concept were often puzzling and contradictory. The description of the women who inspired eighteenth-century artists to create works that reflected her image as perceived is similar to the enigma. The different aspects of women may be collected as so many clues. The final response is enigmatic. The word Muse comes from the Greek and means to explain mysteries, according to the Encyclopédie. The seemingly elusive nature of the woman and her image, and of the Muse and her personification is due both to the diversity of forms of representation and the varied characters of the individual women and the artists, as well as to the evolving nature of role and image. It is evident authors living in an age of dictionaries and encyclopedias attempted to classify and understand this new woman. They used the vocabulary at hand and described her role in intimate terms. They pictured her in movement. For the execution of the new
role, however, they offered her the attributes of virtue, thus of masculinity. Women, in turn, accepted this new role and chose to have themselves portrayed as Muse.

Whether the inspiration provided artists was tangible or intangible, political, financial, or poetic, women played an important role in the arts during the eighteenth century. They were active and their portraits show them engaged in a multitude of occupations. The image of women in art reflects their role in society. The Muse, both woman and her image, was a product of the epoch. The range of her activity, "from silken dress to scaffold," is enormous. That women went from one extreme to the other is perhaps but a reflection of the structure of the society; not only was there no vocabulary to describe women pursuing nontraditional roles in manners transcending stereotypical sex models, but there was no real place for women outside the home. For a brief time, then, and in the limited role of Muse, the eighteenth-century woman was both an anachronism and a product of her time, a social enigma and the inspiration for the many attempts at capturing her essence. Subject of both antifeminist tirades and passages of pure feminine adulation, woman as Muse was generous and powerful. She both inspired and fostered the production of some of the most important works of the century. Woman as Muse was, at once, a literary and artistic image and a political and social reality. Both of these roles were inseparably and symbiotically related. This relationship in an artistic and social environment that was itself in a state of flux produced women such as Mmes du Châtelet, du Deffand, de Lambert, de Tencin and Geoffrin. The list is endless, yet each one deserves the title of artist and Muse.

NOTES

1. A comparison of this entry in Antoine Furetière, Dictionnaire universel (1690) with that in the Encyclopédie illustrates the thesis of this article. There is no entry under the heading "Muse" in the Encyclopédie, but there is an entry under "Muses," in the plural. Each individual Muse is named; and more than the domain (music, tragedy, etc.), her characteristics (melancholy, for example) and the attitude in which she was portrayed are emphasized. The Muses were, in a sense, domesticated, removed from their Olympian mountain, where they were cognizant of past, present, and future and placed in an eighteenth-century present. All quotations in the chapter were translated by the author.

2. François Marie Arouet de Voltaire, Correspondance, edited by Th. Bésterman (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), vol. 1, p. 489. Further references to this edition of Voltaire's Correspondance will be noted in the text.


4. Mme la comtesse Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis, Mémoires inédits (Paris: Laflamme, 1825), 1:154-155. I am indebted to Professor Vivian Cameron, Nova
Women as Muse 153

Scotia College of Art and Design, for sharing this reference and the following one with me.


6. Louis Dimier, Les Peintres français au XVIIe siècle, vol. 2 (Paris: Editions G. Van Ost, 1930), index. It is noteworthy that the women were more frequently represented as Muses who draw than as Muses of drawing. This indicates their active contributions.


17. Scott, p. 100.


19. See Goncourts, p. 50. The engraving is also reproduced in the text.


23. McLaughlin, p. 130, n. 6.


27. Geffraud Rosso, p. 66.
29. Rat, p. 105.
32. Drawn by Greuze, engraved by Aliamet, this work, entitled "La philosophie endormie," appears in Goncourt.