French Women and the Age of Enlightenment

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The Memorialists

The memoir, broadly defined as autobiographical literature, is a highly self-conscious text. Somehow it seems more at home in our century than it does among the mannered, artificial constraints of eighteenth-century society. Yet the changing social order, culminating with the Revolution, provided a rich milieu for the memoir to flourish. Georges Gusdorf, whose 1975 article in the Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France is considered seminal to an understanding of autobiography as a genre, wrote that the author of such a work "tries hard to discover that center of equilibrium beyond the peace where peace can be found even in the midst of war. Thus, autobiography justifies itself as a compensatory effort during critical periods of history."1

But while autofascination is accepted with curiosity in our time, the eighteenth century presented a whole range of obstacles to the memorialist, from the bias against overpersonalization to the question of credibility. For the women who wrote memoirs, the hurdles were higher. One's own reputation and the social standing of one's husband and family could be jeopardized, for instance, by the kind of implicit criticism of women's lot that many of the memoirs contain. To publish such a work was, in effect, to defy conventional expectations. It is this fact that distinguishes women's memoirs from the mainstream of the tradition and makes them, individually and as a whole, a political act. This distinction is important because of the part women's memoirs will play in the definition of women's literature as they cross the boundaries separating historical from autobiographical writing.

One technical question merits consideration, though, before exploring the implications of the memorialists' act; namely, in what way can memoir be considered autobiography, and how does it relate to confessional literature?

In narrowly defined terms, the memoir concerned itself with history, was often anecdotal, and held the presence of the first person narrator as a mere formality. Yves Coirault, in an article entitled "Autobiographies et mémoires (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles)," proposed the name égographie for this type of writing, which usually emphasized the author's importance as a politically and socially well-connected man.2
Confessions, on the other hand, were intensely personal documents wherein the first person narrator became not only the subject of the book but its object as well, the historical backdrop, a mere curiosity. While Montaigne had offered the public a daringly personal record of his life and thoughts in 1680, the mainstream of confessional literature was pietistic until the publication of Rousseau’s Confessions in 1782. This work opened up new possibilities for writers of what has now come to be called autobiographical. As Gusdorf explained, “That is the moment at which the autobiography venture rises up to distinguish itself from literature.”

Inspired by Rousseau, women like Mme d’Epinay and Mme Roland wrote about their lives and the historical events they were part of in a way that joined confessional writing to historical memoir.

But the act of publishing, for an eighteenth-century woman, entailed a great deal of risk. Society was unkind to women who tried to make professional lives for themselves. Memoir writing was particularly problematic, since the personal nature of the work not only exposed the writer to scandal as “writer” but also often laid bare the more intimate details of her life to public scrutiny and rumor. A sample count of the 860-odd memoirs, histories, and correspondences listed in the Répertoire général des ouvrages modernes relatifs au dix-huitième siècle français (1715-1789) shows that only about five percent were written by women.

All things considered, therefore, those women who wrote memoirs obviously felt compelled to do so. Why? Two possible motivations emerge: the need for self-justification and a desire to be incorporated in the historical record. It would be unrealistic to polarize the writers between these two considerations, but they do cover the spectrum in varying degrees ranging from, for example, Mme Campan’s account of her service to the Revolution to Mme d’Epinay’s description of her relationships with the men she loved.

This latter example of memoir writing presents a curious paradox for the author. If her life was already the subject of rumor, explaining her conduct in print might only exacerbate the situation. Women like Mme d’Epinay felt it was a risk worth taking. Her memoirs, not published until 1818 but written much earlier, demonstrate a kind of sensibilité that was uniquely eighteenth-century, when a kind of chaste love or worship from afar was the apogée of virtue. But with Mme d’Epinay, one explores a wider expanse of moral terrain, where taking a lover becomes less an issue than one’s choice of lover. Of particular importance in Mme d’Epinay’s memoirs is the fact that the actual moral dilemma surrounding infidelity is openly debated and virtue is consequently redefined. As one critic put it, “Scandal was thus accepted; but, justified or not, this acceptance did not rule out a debate on the practical considerations of feminine virtue.”

Thus, while Mme d’Epinay has prepared a very personal document about her own life choices, she has also provided a defense for the behavior of all women trapped in unhappy lives. To a certain extent, the format of her memoirs, a loosely-constructed novel narrated by a man, her tutor, is perfectly designed to do both. The book’s focus is Mme d’Epinay, transparently disguised as Emilie, who evolves and grows from an insecure child-wife into a serene and loving woman. Her first affair, with M. Franceuil, was a stormy one sprinkled throughout with his infidelities. When she finally worked herself out of it, she was several years older and much less impressionable.

Her second liaison, with Grimm, was a more thoughtful one, inspired by respect and admiration rather than by passion. Grimm apparently effected a major change in Mme d’Epinay’s personality, which, as she describes it prior to meeting him, was conditioned by the attitudes of self-sacrifice and self-denigration that often characterize women’s behavior:

The only mistake that I made with my friends is to have always thought of them before me, and to have catered to their whims, counting myself as worthless. By virtue of this little system, I had as many masters as friends, and I found the secret of making a source of sorrow from friendship, which is perhaps the single compensation for the misfortunes of the human condition. To have a will of my own seemed a crime to me....

It was through Grimm that Mme d’Epinay finally understood the value of emotional independence. She cites from what Grimm wrote to her in one of his letters: “it is entirely up to you to be the happiest and the most desirable creature on earth, provided that you do not put others’ opinions before your own, and that you know how to be self-sufficient.”

Her newfound strength must have made it easier, in a sense, for her to deal with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who came to live at the Hermitage, her country home, in April of 1756 but who left twenty months later under a cloud. Mme d’Epinay may have been infatuated with Rousseau, as some critics have proposed, and her jealousy over his affection for her sister-in-law, Sophie d’Houdetot, may have caused the dissension between them; but considering Rousseau’s personality problem—he has been described as a paranoid egomaniac—Mme d’Epinay was probably not at fault. She portrays herself as the unsuspecting victim of his machinations to drive a wedge between herself and Sophie and to disparage her reputation while professing to be her friend. Their quarrel, of course, became public and may have been partly responsible for the composition of these memoirs.

But whether or not the memoirs were an answer to Rousseau’s accusations against her, Mme d’Epinay’s work serves as a valuable...
The Memorialists

chronicle of one woman's development and as a barometer of many women's dissatisfaction. By the end of her life, Emilie could undoubt-
edly take pride in thinking that she had educated her daughter, against
the objections of her son's tutor, to become a woman of independent
spirit satisfied to define her own lifestyle. As Mme d'Epinay put it at
the end of her memoirs: "I do not claim that others must imitate me:
each does as he or she sees fit, and each is right. What occupies me
principally is to know if I have a right to be content with myself; and if I
am, I believe that others should also be."11

Although Mme d'Epinay certainly was aware that she was to some
extent making history, her memoirs lack the historical resonance
found in the works of some other eighteenth-century memorialists.
These women felt their lives worth telling precisely because of their
nearness to or participation in important events. What they wrote
were neither objective histories nor memoirs in the égographie mode but
histories in which they were active participants.

In a society that allowed to women largely passive roles, what these
women did could only be called revolutionary. Martin Hall, in an
article on women and history, wrote of that period: "History remains
above all the privilege of the male; female participation is passive,
influencing the course of history only in so far as it provokes male
activity. Where this catalytic function is translated into a more active
response, it immediately becomes suspect and liable to censure."12
Against this bias, Mme de Staal-Delaunay, Mme Roland, and Mme
Campan rewrote history to include women.

They did face one major structural problem. While these women felt
that their lives were worthy of consideration because of their
proximity to certain historical events, they did not want to disappear
against that backdrop. A balance was needed between the personal
story to be told and the broader historical drama. In her memoirs,
Mme de Staal-Delaunay cements together the bits and pieces of her
own life with fragments from the life of the duchesse du Maine, in
whose service she spent many years. She uses the history of the duc
Maine family as glue to bind the elements of her own story, and the
reader is not misled on that score, since she begins her memoirs on a
very personal note:

What happened to me was just the reverse of what one sees in romantic
novels, where the heroine, raised as a simple shepherdess, discovers that
she is a princess. I was treated in my childhood as a person of distinction;
and subsequently, I discovered that I was nothing, and that nothing in
the world belonged to me.13

She goes on to describe her convent education and her two great loves,
the marquis de Silly, an adolescent infatuation, and chevalier de Menil,
with whom she fell in love during her confinement in the Bastille. Both men misled and disappointed her.

Between these two unfortunate affairs stands her service in the home of the duchesse du Maine, her involvement in the Cellamare affair, and her subsequent imprisonment. She entered the service of the duchesse as chambermaid in the spring of 1711; and in her memoirs, she details life at the château de Sceaux, which was rivaled only by Versailles for its brilliance. As entertainment, the duchesse created the grandes nuits of fireworks, theater, dancing, singing and poetry. There were sixteen of these galas in 1714 and 1715, and Mlle Delaunay supervised the writing of the texts and the presentations themselves: “She was truly the ‘soul’ of the nuits. She presided over the writing of scripts and the progress of the performance,” according to Gérard Doscot in an introduction to the memoirs.14

The Cellamare affair, however, was the most important event in Mme de Staal-Delaunay’s life. The duchesse du Maine dreamed of seeing her husband’s power grow. As a legitimized bastard of Louis XIV and the marquise de Montespan, the duc du Maine was seen as a threat by the duc d’Orléans, who held the presidency of the regency council. After a disagreement between them on the question of the Quadruple Alliance among England, France, Austria and Holland, the duc du Maine was stripped of his privileges.

The duchesse decided that the time had come to call upon the allies of the duc du Maine in Spain in the person of Philippe V, grandson of Louis XIV. Through the intervention of the Spanish ambassador to France, the prince de Cellamare, the duc and duchesse du Maine hoped to see the duc d’Orléans removed from power. But the plot was discovered, and everyone connected with the affair was arrested in December of 1718.

From the Bastille, Rose Delaunay protested her innocence. But what had her role actually been? She admits that she volunteered to monitor the du Maine correspondence with the baron de Walef in Spain and to have his letters written and addressed to her.15 As a mere accessory to the affair, she insisted that she understood nothing of what was going on: “I shall refrain from explaining their plan, because I never understood what it was all about.”16 It seems a rather questionable defense, though, since Mme de Staal-Delaunay admits she warned the duchesse that her activities might land her in prison.17 In addition, the author describes a kind of invisible ink with which she was instructed to write between the lines in her letters to Spain.18 Clearly, she was more informed in the matter than she was prepared to admit in her memoirs. In any event, she ended up spending just over a year in the Bastille for her complicity in the affair.

Married off by the duchesse in 1740 to a prominent military man, the duchesse du Maine, Staal-Delaunay’s private life seems strikingly barren. The
class system took its toll on her, as it did on others born into the wrong class who considered themselves gifted and intelligent. While writing a memoir was a way of affirming that her life had meaning, she still felt obliged in these same pages to acknowledge her secondary station in life. Consequently, the book ends on a rather sterile note with a tribute to the duc du Maine at his death.

Mme Roland was not subject to the same social forces. She manages to share the spotlight throughout her memoirs with the events of the French Revolution. This she does by bringing together in the book remembrances of her childhood and adolescence, several short portraits of those closest to her in the republican movement, anecdotes, the details of her arrest and interrogation, and her final thoughts before death. All this is contained in several hundred pages written between the time of her arrest in June 1793 and her execution at the age of thirty-nine on November 8 of the same year.

For Mme Roland, imprisoned with the certainty that she was going to die, writing about the past was a way of escaping from the present. A great deal of description of her early years is devoted to a discussion of her “formation” and her passion for the writings of Plutarch. Stanley Loomis, in *Paris in the Terror*, has called her “self-righteous” for the forceful, almost dogmatic, way in which she defends her ideals. But considering the circumstances under which these memoirs were written, it seems understandable that Mme Roland would have wanted to commit the strength of her convictions to posterity.

From the time of her arrival in Paris in February of 1791, Mme Roland opened her home to the diverse group of republicans who would later split apart and try to destroy one another as Girondins and Montagnards. Brissot, Buzot, and Robespierre all frequented her salon. In the part of her memoirs called “Notice historiques,” Mme Roland describes the deterioration of relations between her husband, as minister of the interior, and Marat, whom she referred to as a “monster.” According to Mme Roland, it was Marat’s greed that was at the root of the quarrel.

After Roland’s resignation from the post of minister in January 1793 (a post he held from March 1792), he was mercilessly persecuted by the Jacobins led by Marat and Danton, who wanted to silence his accusations of corruption against them. On the evening of May 31, Roland received warning of his imminent arrest and fled the city. His wife, however, chose to remain behind, preferring death to life under what she considered to be a criminal regime: “I prefer to die rather than be witness to the ruin of my country; I shall consider it an honor to be included among the noble victims sacrificed to the murderous fury.”

She was arrested, and the charges against her included sedition because of her association with the Bureau de l’esprit public, the
propaganda organ of the interior ministry. Mme Roland maintains in her memoirs that she had no part in the work of that "Bureau," but Paul de Roux, in his introduction to the memoirs, assumes otherwise: "The opponents of the Interior Minister were exasperated by the activity of his propaganda arm, the renowned Bureau de l'Esprit Public of which Mme Roland was probably the driving force." In addition, observers such as Lamartine insist that Mme Roland was probably one of the revolution's principal ideologues, through her husband's pen: "After dinner, the Girondins listened to the position papers which Roland, aided by his wife, had written up for the Convention concerning the state of the republic." The fact is that in the record she left to posterity she denied her role as an activist in the events of the Revolution. That denial undoubtedly has more to do with social mores than with political realities.

While Mme Roland was a committed republican, Mme Campan's story of her own life and of the Revolution unfolds in the royal palaces of Versailles and the Tuileries through the eyes of a monarchist—a first lady-in-waiting to Marie-Antoinette. The events she narrates from the life of Marie-Antoinette and the Revolution are not presented chronologically; they are more a series of vignettes laced with anecdotes of life at the court. The book is actually divided into two parts. The first half, for the most part, is devoted to a defense of Marie-Antoinette, her politics, her morality, and her manners. Only in the second part of the book does Mme Campan become more of an active participant in her own story. The point of departure for that change is the insurrection of 1789. As the movements of the royal family became increasingly limited, the king and queen naturally depended more upon their attendants to keep them in touch with the outside world. Mme Campan became indispensable to the queen. The services she rendered to the royal family included such things as taking dictation from the king, making an assassination-proof vest for the king to wear on the anniversary of Bastille Day in 1792, and devising a secret code for the queen's correspondence abroad.

But these memoirs become most interesting as they recount the days leading up to the arrest of the royal family. The extraordinary scene of the mobs storming the Tuileries is memorable as Mme Campan details it: Eight hundred Swiss guards were massacred, bodies were strewn everywhere, and blood stained the hems of the palace ladies' gowns as they ran across the courtyard in an attempt to escape. As she fled down a staircase, chased by a group of men, Mme Campan was seized by one of her pursuers.

The narrow staircase impeded the assassins, but I had already felt the dreadful pawing of a hand on my back, grabbing my clothing, when a voice called up from the bottom of the stairs: "... we don't kill women."
was on my knees, my executioner let go of me and said: "Get up, tramp; the nation will spare you." The coarseness of these words did not prevent me from feeling suddenly an inexpressible emotion which sprang as much from a love of life as from the idea that I was going to see my son and all that was dear to me once again. One second before, I had been thinking less about death itself than about the pain I would feel from the sword suspended over my head. One rarely sees death so closely without dying.  

Mme Campan survived the Revolution to write these memoirs under Napoleon. She founded a school for young ladies at Saint-Germain, which became famous for its educational philosophy and for its roll call of celebrated students, among whom were Hortense de Beauharnais, stepdaughter of Napoleon, and Caroline and Pauline Bonaparte, sisters of the emperor. Later, in 1807, she was named director of a new school at Ecouen established by Napoleon. Her task as outlined by him was to prepare the future mothers of France. She set out to do this by offering a broadly based liberal arts education covering writing, arithmetic, history, language, music (especially religious music), all heavily laced with religious and moral instruction.

With the fall of Bonaparte in 1814 and the restoration of the monarchy, Mme Campan fell irreversibly from favor. The new royalists, as Gabrielle Reval notes in her book on Mme Campan, "never forgave her for having served the Usurper." She lived out the rest of her life, until 1822, in near destitution, isolation, and bitterness.

While a certain amount of independence was available to women of a particular class, what prevailed above all was a profound sense of powerlessness, both social and political. It is true that, to a degree, the institution of the salon offered women a certain control over cultural and literary tastes, but this was actually an illusory power, one of form rather than substance. In fact, eighteenth-century women were at the mercy of male-dominated social institutions such as marriage and the family in much the same way as their sisters before them. One study described their predicament:

An astonishing contradiction in the eighteenth century juxtaposed a freedom of social behavior with the total dependency that was women’s lot. On one hand, there was a greater participation for women in social activities—according to class, obviously—and on the other hand, a very clear oppression of women by men in order to preserve their power.

Marriages were still arranged, and women passed from father to husband through the intercession of the priest. Mme de Staal-Delaunay’s description of her own marriage, arranged by the duchesse du Maine, probably reflects how a great many women felt as they were being literally led to the altar: "The contract was drawn up,
including the pension which the duc du Maine awarded me upon my release from prison. The duchesse du Maine provided me with the proper clothing. The victim, bound and decorated, was sadly led to the altar. . . ."27

Once married, women were frequently subjected to physical abuse, often beginning the wedding night itself. Mme Roland recalls the shock of her marriage night: "my little trials and tribulations convinced me that I could endure the greatest suffering without crying out. The first night of marriage overturned all pretentions that I had harbored until then. . . ."28 Where physical violence was absent, there were still a husband's infidelities to contend with. Mme d'Epinay was very much in love with her husband when she married, but the reality of his unfaithfulness early in the relationship was extremely difficult for her to bear. She scolded him and was silenced; "I want to be free and no questions asked" was his only response.29 Many women found themselves similarly diminished.

Evolving responses to such institutionalized oppression was no easy matter. The only alternative to marriage itself, for most women, was the convent, and it was a kind of prison. But even a woman as cosmopolitan as Mme Roland admits she found herself so disillusioned with her married life that she often longed for the company of women in a society free of men: "There also predominates a certain something, amiable, ingenuous, graceful, which belongs only to the gentleness of women, to the innocence of their frolicking as they make merry among themselves, far from the company of the opposite sex, which always makes them more somber when it does not make them delirious."30 Divorce was a rare possibility, and becoming a runaway wife was only slightly more feasible. Husbands could appeal to the king for reinstatement of their conjugal rights, making the wife a fugitive from the law. Legal separation, sanctioned by the king, was the only effective alternative, and it was difficult to obtain.

So the issue demanded public debate. The double standard, condoning extramarital affairs for men while prohibiting that same conduct for women, came under attack by Mme d'Epinay. Her memoirs are crisscrossed by women such as her sister-in-law, Mme de Jolly, and her friend, Mlle d'Ette, who do not hesitate to discuss their love affairs and to justify them. Mlle d'Ette even advocates that the newly wed Mme d'Epinay take a lover herself to rival her husband's lifestyle. The naïve twenty-three-year-old Mme d'Epinay protests, "people will gossip and my reputation will be ruined."31 To which her friend calmly replies in an expression of the new philosophy, "Where did you get that idea? Firstly, is there a woman about whom people do not gossip? Besides, it is only fickleness, or a bad choice, or as I already told you,
indiscretion, which can blacken a woman’s reputation.”

Obviously, discretion and good taste are the keys to this new morality, advocating a kind of limited sexual freedom for women.

Caught in the trap of a bad marriage, a woman who was afraid to test the limits of her freedom might dream that motherhood would satisfy her needs. But for upper- and middle-class eighteenth-century women, child rearing was an unfulfilled and unfulfilling role. It was considered socially unacceptable for a woman of means to nurse her infants and raise her children at home. Wet nurses in neighboring villages were employed to keep the children until they were old enough for some sort of informal schooling. In this way, access to even limited power within the family structure, through influence on the children, was denied to women.

Then, Jean-Jacques Rousseau published La Nouvelle Héloïse and Emile. To a modern reader, Rousseau’s ideas seem sexist. But for the eighteenth-century woman, he represented a break with the past, advocating love rather than autonomous marriage, maternal child rearing rather than wet-nursing, and a broader education for girls destined to mold them as intelligent wives and mothers. His ideas were enormously popular.

No one challenged the fact that women were to be dependent on men, but women such as Mlle d’Espinassy in her 1764 Essai sur l’éducation des demoiselles urged a more comprehensive liberal arts education for girls. The trend caught on, and between 1785 and 1791, about 150 volumes appeared, directed at the new market of home education for women; books on travel, history, morality, astronomy, the arts, and domestic medicine abounded. Mme Campan played a significant role in the movement to institutionalize these educational innovations through her school for girls at Saint-Germain, which opened in 1794. The curriculum consisted of religion, history, literature, grammar, mathematics, natural science, astronomy, physics and chemistry. As progressive as this program may appear to have been, it should be remembered that these girls were being groomed for a traditional role. As one critic wrote: “The originality of this education is that while appealing to strict methods and a rigorous discipline, it never loses sight of its objective, which is to turn out seductive women.”

Naturally, the limitations of that role became less and less acceptable to women as their access to power increased; but in the eighteenth century, expressions of dissatisfaction were still restricted. The basic problem for women was a political one, in that the preservation of the monarchy and, with it, the existing social order went hand in hand with women’s oppression. Restif de La Bretonne, who admired the discipline of an autocracy, characterized the political situation with the
following analogy: "The Royalty, which, whatever else one might say, was conceived on the model of a patriarchal family, is nothing other than an artificial marriage of the nation and the Ruler to whom she submits, not as a slave, but as a legitimate wife." Mme Roland saw women's problems in political terms, and when the Académie de Besançon proposed a paper entitled "Comment l'éducation des femmes pouvait contribuer à rendre les hommes meilleurs," she introduced into it her ideas on the need for massive social change.

I recall that in wanting to treat this subject, I felt that it was absurd to establish a mode of education bearing no relationship to the general morality, which depended upon the government; and that it would not do to claim the reform of one sex by the other. Rather, it would be better to improve everyone's lot with good laws. Thus, I explained how, it seemed to me, women ought to be; but I added that they could not become that way until things changed.

Among the women discussed here, class discrimination probably touched no one more directly than Mme de Staal-Delaunay, who spent much of her life in the service of the duchesse du Maine. She had a strong sense of her own worth and no satisfaction at all in the fact that she was destined for servitude. A verbal self-portrait she composed for Mme du Deffand expresses her unhappiness: "Love of liberty is her dominant passion; and a very unfortunate one for her, since the greater part of her life has been spent in servitude: in fact, her condition has always been intolerable for her, despite its unexpected benefits." In the works of both Mme de Staal-Delaunay and Mme Roland, there is an acknowledgment, but never an acceptance, of the superior position of the upper classes. Even in her teen-age years, Mme Roland resented society's complete disregard for merit in favor of birth: "I could not hide the fact that I was more worthy than Mlle d'Hannaches whose forty years and bloodline did not convey the aptitude to write a common-sense letter which was readable; I considered the world unfair and all social institutions unjust."

To this oppression, society's answer as a whole was the Revolution itself. Women began to see the possibility of more freedom within the new order. On the eve of the Revolution, women's rights, in the broadest sense, first became an issue. It was a time of enthusiasm, and many liberal thinkers among the philosophes put forward programs for incorporating women into the ruling establishment. Condorcet, for example, in 1787, in his Essai sur les assemblées provinciales, "clearly demanded the right, for a woman who held property, to have a seat in these assemblies." And so it continued up through the famous insurrection of July 14, 1789, when women fought alongside men. On October 5, 1789, four thousand women marched on the National Assembly. But as Maîté Albistur wrote in Histoire du féminisme français: these insurrections do not prove advantageous for them. To the
contrary, the picture of these fighting women will imprint itself on ‘the collective imagination’ and, by inspiring fear, will provoke a male reaction.”39 And the reaction did come. On October 20, 1793, by order of the Convention, all women’s clubs were shut down. By 1795, the Convention had forbid housewives from gathering in the streets in groups of more than five.40 The years of exuberance were over and women found themselves deceived and disappointed.

What was the nature of the force at work to undo what the Revolution had promised women? Men’s unique and private access to history had been breached by women. Now, that chasm had to be reopened and women distanced once and for all. Gloire was the code word. A woman’s reputation or gloire depended on her anonymity. As Patricia Meyer Spacks explains, gloire for men was palpable triumph by courage, inventiveness, enterprise, and intelligence; for women, it was a sort of triumph by being “good,” which was undramatic and passive.41 Therefore, any woman who chose to become a public figure was a pariah in her own time and had to trust posterity to vindicate her. Mme Roland understood the pressures and wrote in 1793:

Never did I have the slightest temptation to become a writer; I saw very early that a woman who won this title lost a lot more than she gained. Men do not respect her at all and other women criticize her; if her works are bad, she is made fun of, and rightly so; if they are good, the credit is taken from her. If society is forced to acknowledge that she is, in fact, the author, it so dissects her character, her morals, her conduct and her talents that her intellectual prowess is diminished by the dazzle of her defects.42

Yet Mme Roland did write, and what is clear from her memoirs is that she, like most other women of her time, felt strictly bound by a role that was considered “appropriate” behavior. During her trial, she insisted in the Projet de défense au tribunal that she acted within these boundaries: “I followed the progress of the Revolution with fervor, but I never exceeded the limits imposed upon me by gender.”43

Broadly speaking, enforced anonymity for women was another way that men controlled the political and social hierarchy. The penalty for violating this code of conduct could be violent. Eugène Crépet suggests that Mme Roland was executed not for her politics but for her visibility: “Mme Roland’s irremissible crime is that of confronting head-on by her example one of the most stubborn prejudices in the French psyche—that stupid and deadly prejudice which precludes for women all ideas and attitudes having to do with public service.”44

To exercise control over one’s private life, to cultivate a public persona, both of these avenues were blocked for the eighteenth-century woman. Writing became a way of satisfying the need for power on several levels. Psychologically, it promoted a sense of
sisterhood in the face of fear, isolation, and feelings of inferiority and hopelessness. Channels of communication were opened in which the act of writing itself took on a special significance, according to Patricia Meyer Spacks: "What is striking in the work of virtually all women writing about themselves, in the present and in the past, is the degree to which writing is itself a solution to their most pressing problems... Writing for publication, at once a private and a public act, demands self-expression and implies communication."45

On an equally important level, writing offered a world of experiences that could be ordered, even manipulated, by women who lacked that power in their daily lives—a kind of vicarious powerbrokering that must have been satisfying for both writer and reader. As Spacks explains it, "writing, moreover, declares the possibility of at least retrospective control over experience—that control which women in their lives so often lack."46 Within the framework of this last observation, the memoir assumes particular importance. As a quasi-historical document, involving real people and real events, it gives its authors control, not over a fictitious world, but over real life, albeit retrospectively.

Finally, on a philosophical level, the memoir provided as rich a ground as possible at the time for the subtle advocacy of social and political reform. These women writers were not banner wavers, nor were they, or could they have been, overtly championing women’s issues. That language, not to mention that concept, is the product of a later time. What they did do, however, is risk public censure to describe their own lives. And it is between the lines of the memoirs that their frustrations and their dreams can be read.

NOTES

6. According to Eugène Despois, in an article entitled "Les Mémoires de Madame d'Epinay," an illegitimate son born from this affair became the bishop of Soissons under Napoleon (Revue nationale et étrangère, 13,[1863];171-181).
8. Ibid., p. 12
9. Ibid., pp. 84-85.
10. Ibid., pp. 145-146.
11. Ibid., pp. 123-125.
15. Ibid., p. 114.
16. Ibid., p. 115.
17. Ibid., p. 116.
18. Ibid., p. 114.
21. Ibid., p. 42.
22. Ibid., p. 21.
27. Mme de Staal-Delaunay, p. 230.
28. Mme Roland, p. 256.
30. Mme Roland, p. 247.
32. Ibid.
33. Reval, p. 188.
35. Mme Roland, p. 327.
36. Mme de Staal-Delaunay, p. 221.
37. Mme Roland, p. 246.
40. Abensour, p. 84.
42. Mme Roland, p. 304.
43. Mme Roland, p. 371.