Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman
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The figure of the female artist was as anomalous in fiction as she was in the visual arts at the turn of the century, and remained largely “invisible” in Rancière’s sense of the term until the onset of the July Monarchy.¹ By the early 1830s, the painter’s atelier had become a popular setting for French fiction and served as a stage for male novelists to rehearse their own artistic vision either through the voice of the painter (in Nodier’s *Le Peintre de Salzbourg*) or more commonly, in contradistinction to the painter, as in the cases of Balzac, the Goncourts, and Zola, among myriad others in the decades to follow.² As I have discussed elsewhere, male authors entered into an unspoken rivalry with the visual arts in the nineteenth century, and the failure of every fictional painter from Balzac’s Frenhofer in 1831 to Zola’s Claude Lantier in 1886 stands as testimony to the revival of Leonardo’s *paragone* and the struggle for representational dominance in the bourgeois marketplace.³ As will become clear in the chapters to follow, while female authors embraced the topos of the painter in the studio, they eschewed the rivalry between the sister arts for a close identification with the visual artist, employing tropes of similarity and solidarity to resist the dominant discourses of difference in the contemporary *Kunstlerroman*.
Writing from the Margins: 

THE FEMALE ROMANTIC POET

For Marceline Desbordes-Valmore (1786–1859), the most acclaimed female poet of the French Romantic era, artistic identity and difference were inex- tricably linked as gender was foregrounded in both her production and her reception. Although many women composed and even published Romantic poetry, Desbordes-Valmore was exceptionally successful, achieving a unique status in the ranks of the male Romantics. The only woman included among Verlaine’s poètes maudits (1884), Desbordes-Valmore was celebrated during her lifetime by Hugo, Vigny, Béranger, Sainte-Beuve, Baudelaire, and Barbey d’Aurevilly, albeit in terms that consistently referred to her gender. Desbordes-Valmore’s first book of poems, Elégies, Marie et romances (1819) appeared a year before Lamartine’s Méditations poétiques (1820) and, argues Barbara Johnson, “could well be considered the starting point of a new style of French lyric poetry. With its personal and emotional tones and its renewal of the elegiac tradition, Elégies, Marie et romances presents many of the characteristics that have come to be associated with Romanticism.” Although Lamartine has since been credited with “fathering” Romantic poetry in France, Johnson posits “It is even possible that readers in 1820 turned to Lamartine as a way of marginal- izing Marceline Desbordes-Valmore,” reflecting “a certain ambivalence toward female power” (628).

This ambivalence was most often manifested in a gendered language of tempered praise that allowed Desbordes-Valmore to be an exceptional woman poet but never an equal to her male confrères. Martin Danahy argues that “in the formation of the literary canon, it is the authors themselves, the canonized, before and perhaps more than the future generations of critics, the canonizers, who divided up the literary genres according to gender roles. The literary canon was thus doubly ‘en-gendered’; its formation results from an aesthetic code predetermined for each genre, but each genre is embodied in a gendered and gendering model that helps to situate its author in the canon.” If the novel had long been “feminized,” poetry remained the most elevated and “masculine” of the literary genres. “A superior female poet,” explains Danahy, “undermined the masculinization of the genre, for she created an anomaly in the categories of power and virility” (388). Thus, Desbordes-Valmore and her work were bracketed by her male peers and categorically considered in terms of their gendered identity: for Vigny she was “the greatest feminine mind of our time”; for Barbey d’Aurevilly, “the ultimate woman of talent” (“la femme la plus femme de talent”); while Hugo allegorized her as “la femme même” and “la poésie même” (“woman herself” and “poetry itself”). Sainte-Beuve, the critic’s critic of the nineteenth century and a long-time friend of Desbordes-Valmore, reflected in
his preface to Poésies de Madame Desbordes-Valmore (1842): “she sang with no other science than the emotion of her heart, by no other means than the natural note.” Later in his Memoirs of Madame Desbordes-Valmore (1869), Sainte-Beuve stressed the female poet’s life of suffering which was expressed in “the heart-rending but always humble and submissive moan of her whom I do not hesitate to call the Mater Dolorosa of poetry” (116). And in Réflexions sur quelques-uns de mes contemporains (1869), Baudelaire’s carefully chosen words epitomize the position of the fraternité des poètes vis-à-vis Desbordes-Valmore: “Mme Desbordes-Valmore was a woman, was always a woman and was only, absolutely a woman; but she was to an extraordinary degree the poetic expression of all of the beauties natural to woman.”

By extensively lauding the “natural” and “feminine” aspects of her poetry and attributing the “artless” verse to “instinct” and “spontaneity,” rather than skill or genius, Baudelaire, Sainte-Beuve, and the Romantic cohort refuse the female poet the status of a true artist, as if the work were excreted rather than crafted by the author. For even as these qualities of natural expression and spontaneous emotion were validated within the Romantic aesthetic (if not entirely by Baudelaire), they were tropes and techniques, vehicles for virtuoso performances more than invitations for real feeling. But perhaps most importantly, by identifying “femininity” with the female poet, the male Romantics could establish difference within the genre, distancing themselves from the feminine while at the same time “colonizing” as Alan Richardson argues, “the conventionally feminine domain of sensibility.” In this sense, Desbordes-Valmore served as Other to the romantic poets, embodying difference (and implicitly inferiority) and allowing them to establish the masculine nature of their own production. Thus, while Desbordes-Valmore was acknowledged as a Romantic, she was nonetheless relegated to the margins of the artistic field. It was, however, from this (arguably Romantic) position at the margins that the female poet asserted her own identity as an artist, reclaiming the feminine for a Romantic aesthetic that could encompass female subjects and poets on equal footing with their male counterparts.

One of the many distinguishing features of Desbordes-Valmore’s poetry is its dialogic nature. Having begun her artistic life as a highly successful actress, she brought a dramatic sensibility to her poems, vividly engaging with interlocutors and introducing musical, conversational rhythms to her verse. Frequently we find woman speaking to woman—a mother, a daughter, a sister, a friend—though the lover, or absent lover, is also a frequent addressee. Moreover, through her titles, dedications, apostrophes, and allusions, Desbordes-Valmore invoked contemporary authors, including many of what Aimée Boutin has called the “sorority of poets”—Sophie Gay, Amable Tastu, and Elisa Mercœur, among others. Less often examined, however, and perhaps less obvious,
is her dialogue with male poets and authors, in which she responds to their limitations and interdictions in an ironic and often playful but also pointed way. In 1831, following the publication of her three-volume *Poésies complètes de Mme Desbordes-Valmore*, Lamartine penned a 105-line poem, “To Madame Desbordes-Valmore,” in which he distinguished between male and female poetry. Returning to his metaphor of the poet as a boat (made famous in “Le Lac”), he develops a phallic image of the firm mast of the male vessel “vigorously” withstanding the wind and waves of the tempest, for “the vast sea is his empire, / His horizon has nothing but smiles / And the universe lies before him.” Conversely, the female poet is a humble skiff, battered by the waves, its sails shredded by the gales. Lamartine proclaims: “This poor boat, oh Valmore / Is the image of your destiny.” In the guise of a sympathetic tribute to the hardships of her life, Lamartine employs a series of violent images that portray the metaphoric female poet lost at sea, her realm a “foyer flottant” (a floating household), her verses “broken like a glass . . . beneath the feet of fate.”

Desbordes-Valmore’s response appeared in *Les Pleurs* in 1833, the same year she published *L’Atelier d’un peintre*, and in “To M. Alphonse de Lamartine” she masterfully reworks his images so that the storm is not “destin,” but a human construct, for she is “unknown” and “forgotten” (“tout m’ignore ou m’oublie”) and suffering in a polyvalent obscurity that reflects a poetic (“my name is dead before me”) as well as emotional state. Unseen and unheard, the poetic narrator is saved by the “angel” Lamartine whose words bring illumination: “from the heights of his sublime flight / Lamartine threw my name, / As from an invisible peak, / To the boat, on the edge of the abyss, / The heavens, touched, threw a beam of light.”

Skating a fine line between the sincere and the potentially sardonic, Desbordes-Valmore intones:

I am a feeble woman;
I have known only how to love and to suffer;
My poor lyre is my soul,
And you alone uncover the flame
Of a lamp that is going to expire.

Before your hymns of a poet,
At once the words of an angel, alas! and a man,
This uncultivated, incomplete lyre,
Long set aside and silent,
 Barely dares to take a voice.

I am the indigent gleaner
Who, from a few forgotten kernels
Has adorned her thorny sheaf,
When your luminous charity
Pours some pure wheat at my feet.

The obvious tension between this disclaimer and her poetry, between the persona of “faible femme,” silent and meek, and the woman who had already published six volumes in the preceding decade, reveals Desbordes-Valmore’s own strategy of resistance. Implicitly acknowledging the power of the male voice, she also implicitly gestures to his role, as a god-like force (“voix puissante . . . voix d’en haut . . . comme si Dieu m’eût répondu”), in shaping her own reception. In the third stanza above, Desbordes-Valmore’s trope of the female poet as gleaner (glaneuse) who takes the discarded “épis” (ears of wheat) and turns them into a “thorny sheaf” (gerbe épineuse) plays precisely on the movement from épi to épineuse, that is the double sense (in both French and English) of thorny as literally and figuratively prickly, troubling, and barbed. By portraying her poetry (the sheaf of wheat suggesting a sheaf of poems) as vexed and vexing, she recognizes the problematic nature of her creation for poets like Lamartine and his Romantic brethren who seek to delimit her position within the field of cultural production to a prescribed place at the margins.18

Conceding the power of the male poet, Desbordes-Valmore nonetheless refuses his construction of her artistic identity. Recrafting Lamartine’s image of the female poet as a broken vessel smashed upon the shore by the storms of fate, she proposes a poetic persona whose fate is shaped by human and social forces but who can claim a voice (“prendre une voix”) alongside the “Poète” himself. In the final stanza, she addresses Lamartine directly, questioning the very idea of difference so central to his own poem dedicated to her. “But you,” she begins, “whose glory is complete / Beneath its beautiful aegis of flowers, / Poet! Tell the truth, has your powerful light / Stopped many of the tears gathered in your eyes?” Desbordes-Valmore suggests that male or female, in the light of glory or the darkness of obscurity, the nature of the poet is inescapably tied to suffering. Despite his power and her lack thereof, she proposes they are more similar than different, thus claiming her own identity as Poet alongside Lamartine. Including his poem after hers in Les Pleurs, Desbordes-Valmore ensures that they be read as a dialogue, while at the same time subordinating Lamartine’s stanzas to her own.

A similar thematic informs L’Atelier d’un peintre, in which the author recounts the life and death of a female painter in the male studio. This early novel is most often read as a roman à clef based on Desbordes-Valmore’s experiences in her uncle Constant Desbordes’s studio, where she lived and studied with the successful painter on and off between 1819 and 1822.19 Yet, on a more complex level the novel also presents an allegorical portrait of the female
Part I: The Studio

Romantic artist, highlighting the poet’s vision of gender, identity, and difference in the male dominated field of cultural production. While the grounding in real experience is significant, for the accuracy of Desbordes-Valmore's image of the atelier and its inhabitants only adds to its legitimacy, *L’Atelier d’un peintre* is most fruitfully read in dialogue with the already mythic construction of the Romantic artist and the studio found in paintings, novels, and criticism of the period. Her novel challenges some of the most fundamental assumptions of the genre of the contemporary *Kunstlerroman* while at the same presenting an alternative portrait of the Romantic artist as a woman.

**Balzac and the Female Artist:**

*LA VENDETTA*

In poetry, Lamartine served as Desbordes-Valmore’s primary male interlocutor, but in this novel of 1833 it is Balzac, with whom she had recently become acquainted,\(^\text{20}\) that the poet engages in direct and indirect ways. In the early 1830s, as Balzac began to develop his Realist aesthetic, the painter became the author’s dark Other, manifesting his anxieties of failure in art, life, and love. Three of his early novels—*La Maison du chat qui pelote* (1829), *Sarrasine* (1830), and *Le Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu* (1831)—reprise the *paragone* in their competitive portraits of painters who are blind to the world around them and whose *oeuvres* are ultimately obliterated in violent scenes of destruction, as the written word rises triumphant.\(^\text{21}\) Balzac, ever a barometer of ambient social anxiety, reflected rivalries of gender in his fiction as well. By the end of the Restoration, women’s activism in the social, political, and artistic arenas, coupled with the ideas of sexual freedom and female equality proposed in the Saint-Simonian and Fourierist movements, began to exert pressure on conceptions of gender roles and social structures in France that led in turn to efforts by some to reassert traditional hierarchies. These struggles for power were both reflected and negotiated in contemporary fiction and art: Balzac’s novels manifest the author’s desire to “put women back in their place”\(^\text{22}\) by punishing his “unfeminine” women of learning or ambition with mockery, misery, and even death. Richard Bolster notes that “class war was joined by a war between the sexes” in the French novel after 1830.\(^\text{23}\)

This artistic “war between the sexes” was exacerbated by the increasing influence of female authors and female readers in the literary marketplace. The author of *La Comédie humaine* remarked, “A woman’s novel is a much better speculation on fame than a manly work,”\(^\text{24}\) while his contemporary, Stendhal, concurred, noting: “All the women in France read novels . . . There is scarcely a woman in the provinces who does not read five to six volumes a month, and
many read fifteen or twenty.” This avid female audience frequently turned to female authors publishing novels, serialized fiction, and poetry in ever-increasing numbers during the July Monarchy, and the popularity of women writers presented an unheralded challenge to the male author in his own quest for readership, profit, and prestige. Male authors thus entered into an unspoken rivalry with the growing ranks of female authors, while at the same time working concertedly toward the “masculinization” of what had long been considered a “feminine” genre.

Indeed, as women established their positions in the *champ littéraire* of nineteenth-century France, disrupting ideologies of art and gender, male authors, like male painters, struggled to assert or reclaim their previous positions of cultural dominance by establishing the masculinity of their genre while demonstrating the incompatibility of women, as reproducers, with artistic creation. Both tales of female painters to which I now turn—Balzac’s *La Vendetta* (1830) and Desbordes-Valmore’s *L’Atelier d’un peintre: Scènes de la vie privée* (1833)—highlight the fictional atelier as an overdetermined setting for negotiations of authorial identity as well as painterly, while questions of gender, genre, subject position, and creation are foregrounded in these stories of women, art, and power.

Balzac locates his morality tale of the dangers of female artists within the realm of the resolutely political. The story begins in 1800 with a brief scene depicting the arrival of a Corsican family at the Tuileries, then the entrance to the Louvre. The home to royal painters and the *Académie* since the seventeenth century, the Louvre was also a royal palace and the residence of Napoleon, with whom the Corsicans seek an audience. Recognizing his countrymen, the First Consul offers Bartoloméo di Piombo, his wife, and daughter support and protection in France. This seemingly tangential episode, preceding the action of the story by fifteen years, sets up the affiliation between the émigrés and Napoleon, establishing both their outsider status and the theme of usurpation, for Balzac was a passionate royalist. By opening in the courtyard of the Louvre, the author subtly evokes the Academy and the studios of the “dix-neuf Illustres,” the nineteen artists chosen by the king to inhabit the apartments at the royal palace, their officially sanctioned legitimacy standing in proleptic contrast to the female atelier that will be central to the rest of the narrative. Moreover, this literal juxtaposition of art and politics within the buildings of the Louvre suggests metaphoric connections between the realms of representation and power that will be developed in Balzac’s tale.

The rest of the story unfolds in 1815 in the studio of Servin, a distinguished painter who supports himself by giving lessons to rich young ladies of only the best families but who refuses to teach “young girls who wanted to become artists.” By insisting on girls without ambition, Servin assures his popular-
ity with aristocratic mothers who seek *arts d’agrément* for their marriageable daughters, and his students are trained “to judge paintings at the museum, make a striking portrait, copy an ancient master, and compose a genre scene” (1040). With the fall of Napoleon and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, the studio has been divided between the aristocratic monarchists and the bourgeois Bonapartists. The girls segregate into warring camps within the atelier, in an image of rivalry and discord that contrasts with the scene of amicable harmony in Grandpierre-Deverzy’s Restoration studio (figure 8). Physically staking out different sections of the atelier, the aristocratic Amélie moves the easel of Ginevra di Piombo to a distant corner, ostracizing the beautiful and talented arriviste for her fidelity to the fallen Napoleon who had bestowed wealth, power, and a title upon her father. Ginevra, the most gifted painter in the studio, has aroused the animosity of her classmates both for her politics and for her talents, which set her apart from other women in literal as well as metaphoric ways. Compounding her otherness, the foreign-born *Bonapartiste* has furthermore refused marriage, for “her taste for painting had replaced the passions that ordinarily excite women” (1047). Balzac’s female painter is, from the outset, distanced from other women both physically and temperamentally.

From her position at the back of the atelier, Ginevra’s curiosity is aroused by mysterious sounds emanating from a closet, and, like the wayward students peering out the window of Pujol’s studio, she becomes a voyeur, reversing the gendered structures of vision. Climbing up on a chair, she peeks through a crack in the partition and discovers a sleeping soldier, and thus an active female gaze is directed upon a passive and unknowing male body. Recognizing the imperial eagle on the soldier’s uniform, she realizes that he is a political refugee (*un proscrit*) and the fleeting image that Ginevra retains is “as graceful as that of the Endymion, that she had copied several days earlier” (1051–52). Girodet’s *Le Sommeil d’Endymion* (1791), which Balzac uses as a central image in *Sarrasine* as well, was a revolutionary representation of ephebic heroism. The image of Endymion’s passive androgyny posed a fleeting ideal of masculine beauty that had come, by the onset of the July Monarchy, to signal for Balzac the impotent Romantic rhetoric of the failed Republic and Empire. The painting’s inversion of gender hierarchies, in the boy ravished by the implied gaze of Diana, is echoed by the Realist author in this tale of female art, vision, and ultimately destruction.  

For the conservative and territorial author, the female artist further represented the traversal of boundaries that can bring social and artistic disaster. When Ginevra meets her soldier, sheltered by the liberal Servin, she assures him that she can take care of him—she is rich, he is poor; she is strong, he is weak, and love blossoms between the clandestine Bonapartists. In an obvious reference to the Napoleonic soldier’s emasculation, on his forearm is a “long, wide
wound made by the blade of a sabre.” When Ginevra sees it unwrapped, “she shivered” and “let forth a moan” while her lover “began to smile” (1058). The young painter returns home to her aging parents (now a baron and a baroness), and announces her decision to marry the penniless soldier. In a continuation of the unhealthy hierarchical inversions of this tale, her adoring and powerful father has been dominated by this brilliant and beautiful daughter. His love for Ginevra has resulted in “a very great ill: Ginevra lived with her father and mother on the basis of an equality that is always fatal” (1068–69). Thus, although her father forbids the union, the female painter ignores his edict, and when it is discovered that her lover is none other than Luigi Porta, the sole survivor of a vendetta carried out by Piombo some fifteen years earlier, Ginevra’s love is redoubled. Rejecting her family for her family’s enemy, in an ironic Romeo and Juliet redux, Ginevra braves her father’s attack with a dagger and marries Luigi. Disowned by her parents, Ginevra and her husband both go to work: she copies paintings, while he copies out manuscripts, his only marketable skill being his elegant handwriting, and for a brief while, their derivative arts prove profitable. But soon the market changes, and both Luigi and Ginevra confront artistic rivals even poorer than they, who will produce copies for even less, leaving the young couple penniless. The final blow comes when the artist gives birth to a son. Entering the more “natural” world of motherhood, her artistic reproductions are replaced by biological reproduction, but it is too late for the impoverished couple. By the end of the tale, the entire family has succumbed, destroyed by the imprudent inversions of familial, artistic, and gender hierarchies.

Balzac presents the female painter only to destroy her, asserting the dominance of male creation. Indeed, the very idea of revenge or retribution found in the title, La Vendetta, linked to feuding families and retaliatory destruction, points to a deep violence motivating the structure of this tale. On a literal level, if Bartoloméo di Piombo’s vendetta on the Porta family ultimately failed to destroy the last son, the Porta family’s own vendetta is indirectly carried out upon the Piombi through the errant daughter who destroys both families equally. On a metaphoric level, Balzac’s own vendetta on his artistic rivals—women and painters—ends with his destruction of the ambitious, transgressive Ginevra who embodies the dangerous, feminizing influence of women’s artistic and literary endeavors. Thus, La Vendetta takes its place alongside La Maison du chat-qui-pelote, Sarrasine, and Le Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu as a concomitant announcement of the young author’s nascent aesthetic and bid for a position within the field of cultural production in post-revolutionary France. With the collapse of political and artistic hierarchies, Balzac’s anxieties are intensified by the perceived collapse of gender hierarchies as well. The theme of the competition between the sister arts is intensified when the sister artist is female,
and here the female painter further stands as a thinly veiled substitute for the disruptive presence of the female author in the *champ littéraire*. Ginevra’s ambitious move into the male world of art, representation, and power brings on her demise in a cathartic move for the author who felt the threat of the “unnatural” female authors who were similarly claiming a voice and an audience in post-revolutionary France. In this double-edged attack on his competition, Balzac conflates women and painters in a single image of failure and destruction. Through tropes of imitation, tracery, reproduction, and childbirth, Balzac highlights the differences of gender and genre that render the female painter a failure while the male author rises triumphant.

**Desbordes-Valmore and the Female Artist:**

*L’ATELIER D’UN PEINTRE*

By titling her novel *L’Atelier d’un peintre: Scènes de la vie privée*, Desbordes-Valmore makes direct reference to Balzac’s own collection of stories, *Scènes de la vie privée* of 1830, a publication that included both *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* and *La Vendetta*. At the same time, her title juxtaposes the world of art with the private sphere, not only promising a tale of the inner workings of the studio and the interior life of the artist but also perhaps hinting at her shift of focus from the public sphere, traditionally gendered male, to the domestic or private sphere, generally associated with the feminine. In her Preface, Desbordes-Valmore announces her strategies for establishing the legitimacy of the female artist in the Romantic atelier, using this paratextual space as what Gérard Genette has called a zone of “transaction” between author and reader. As Genette explains, the preface (like other paratextual matter) serves as “a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy” allowing the author to shape “a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it.”

For Desbordes-Valmore, who writes under her own name and signs the preface as such, these opening pages before the body of text become the site of subtle assertion where the female author claims both authority and her own artistic identity. In marked contrast to Sand and many other contemporary women who wrote under male pseudonyms, disguising themselves in the paratext, Desbordes-Valmore establishes the connection between the fictitious female painter and the real female author from the first sentence, grounding the narrative to follow in first-hand experience. Opening the Preface with the phrase “Ces souvenirs chers” (these precious memories), she enters into a direct dialogue with her reader, and this “transaction,” to use Genette’s phrase, lays the groundwork for an implied reading that locates the source of the “fiction” in the “real,” inviting the audience to interpret her tale in ways that reflect on Desbordes-Valmore’s own career, and those of
her fellow female creators. Significantly, the Preface is further couched in terms that highlight a distinctly Romantic aesthetic and, by extension, a Romantic identity for the female author, whose “souvenirs” are evoked in melancholy terms as “faded flowers” that will elicit “warm tears.”

Thus, where Balzac is at great pains to demonstrate the unnatural status of the female artist in _La Vendetta_, Desbordes-Valmore continues her Preface to _L’Atelier d’un peintre_ by insisting on the natural parallels between women and artists. Mapping the home and the atelier as similar realms of private suffering, she avows “The woman who is born, lives, and dies close to home, the artist who spends his days in solitude [. . .] each have both their despair and their celestial joys.” With an emphasis on literal and figurative interiority, Desbordes-Valmore’s comparison signals the metaphoric importance of space in the narrative to follow, while at the same time underlining the fundamental commonalities between women and artists and foregrounding the very imbrications that male artists sought so anxiously to deny. The “feminine” nature of the Romantic artist—isolated, sensitive, suffering—is naturalized in the female painter from the outset of her novel, much as it is in her poetry. Desbordes-Valmore’s opening salvo thus highlights what was habitually obscured or repressed, disrupting the fixed categories of gender and artistic genius by directly identifying the feminine as embodied in the female with the Romantic artist who can be, within her formulation, just as easily a woman as a man. Turning from lyric poetry to the novel and to the painter’s atelier, Desbordes-Valmore makes the case for a Romantic artistic identity that transcends the differences of gender and genre. Yet difference remains central to _L’Atelier d’un peintre_, as Desbordes-Valmore reflects the position of the female artist in the nineteenth century.

Situating her story within the discourses of the atelier past and present, Desbordes-Valmore’s Preface exploits the vocabulary of mystical initiation and arcana so common to the fictional and historical accounts of artists’ lives published during the July Monarchy. Eschewing the distance of a neutral narrator, however, her Preface identifies the work to follow as the “precious memories” of “a woman who found herself initiated into such mysteries . . . of this little known life” (7–8), establishing both the author’s and, by extension, her protagonist’s membership in the artistic elite. Desbordes-Valmore thus indicates that it will be a woman who will translate and interpret for the reader the secret life of the atelier and, like Howitt to follow, claims the role of a female Virgil. Otherness, an existence apart requiring explanation and illumination, is located not necessarily in gender but rather in artistic identity.

She concludes the Preface by continuing to consolidate not only the author and her character, but also their respective arts. In a traditional disclaimer of authority that asserts precisely what it purports to deny, Desbordes-Valmore professes: “Unskilled in the art of the novelist, she can only present, in a frame
that will emphasize them, the touching riches of the subject that she wants to paint” (9). This parallel between writing and painting, and between the female author and her fictional female painter, reveals a sympathy for and identification with the sister art of painting not found in Balzac’s agonistic narratives in his Scènes de la vie privée, nor indeed in many male-authored tales of visual artists published during the period. Desbordes-Valmore thus signals to the reader, who may expect an opposition between the positions of the author and the fictitious painter, that her story will reflect a kinship, rather than a rivalry, between the sister arts and sister artists. Here, the difficulties facing the female painter will reflect the author’s own struggles for legitimacy and expression in the masculinist world of Romantic poetry, while her more idealistic vision of cooperation rather than competition between genders and genres reveals the poet’s hopes for all creators. As she shifts from the engaged first-person voice of the Preface to the more neutral third-person of the body of the narrative, these themes of female artistic identity, Romanticism, and collectivity will be developed in ways that allow the reader, thus primed by the Preface, to recognize Desbordes-Valmore’s challenge to the mythos of Romantic masculinity.

The story begins in the painter’s studio with the young artist, Ondine, who lives and studies with her uncle Léonard. In the opening lines of the tale, the master addresses his niece, “Du talent, mademoiselle, du talent!” (13), linking the ideas of women, art, and talent from the outset. In this predominantly masculine milieu, Ondine is immediately identified as a member of the artistic community; in keeping with the construction of Romantic identity, she is continually lost in “éternelles rêveries” (10). In contrast to the political and hierarchical rivalries that marked Balzac’s exclusive, all-female studio, Léonard’s inclusive studio is open to rich and poor alike, and Desbordes-Valmore creates an artistic world of male and female painters where “a spirit of concord and equality reigned.” The very concept of equality, at the core of the crisis in La Vendetta, will conversely be posited as an ideal in this tale of a female artist. By extension, there is equality rather than hierarchy established between words and images. Ondine is a writer as well as a painter who composes letters to her sister throughout the tale, both for herself and for her uncle. In an early exchange, he says to his niece, “Read me this draft; I wouldn’t mind seeing once again (revoir) what I was thinking then; every year our ideas change as much as our faces do. A letter is the portrait of the soul that paints itself there the day it is written” (17). Once again linking her own craft and that of her character, Desbordes-Valmore asks us to see the poet as painter and the painter as poet, rendering concrete the Romantic fraternité des arts as she constructs a collective identity that includes women and men, painters and poets under the title of Artist.

The metaphor of family is central to the narrative, but in ways that again offer a contrast to Balzac’s image of the riven relations of La Vendetta.
Desbordes-Valmore extends the intimacy of Ondine and her uncle to artists in general. Members of a race apart, “a nation distinct from all others” (23), artists have their own language, gestures, and group identity; when two painters meet on the street, even as strangers they will recognize each other as “their family, their sublime, their humble family” (24). Significantly, Desbordes-Valmore chooses the inclusive term, famille, over the restrictive fraternité, subtly shifting the metaphor of artistic relations from an exclusively male cohort to one that embraces male and female alike. While Ondine’s presence in the atelier as the niece of the master reflects the reality of many women’s training, the studio itself functions as a family (rather than a brotherhood) in which the female painter is, at least initially, included. In the larger senses of the words, fraternité and egalité, linked to revolutionary ideals within the French collective consciousness, are privileged here as values that pertain not simply to male citoyens but to all.

Léonard’s atelier is located in the ruins of a convent, a powerful reminder of revolution that invokes the popular Romantic image of art as a religion as well. At the same time, the combination of two powerfully symbolic spaces—the convent gesturing to female spirituality and retreat, the studio denoting male artistic creation—creates a hybrid realm of inspiration shared by male and female acolytes. Desbordes-Valmore’s description of the atelier, located in the upper reaches of the crumbling building and reached only by ladder, functions on both a literal and a symbolic level, in keeping with the conventions of the genre. Revealing the identity of its inhabitants, the crowded studio is full of sketches, plaster casts, and easels, its damp walls decorated with two sacred images: a portrait of Raphael and one of M. Léonard’s mother, a painting which resembles Ondine, thus foregrounding her own potential as both artistic and maternal creator. Surrounding the paintings of the two progenitors of the artist are “casts of hands, Mercury’s winged feet, the arms of a child molded from life, a skull, and a frame with butterflies” (24). These hands and feet reflect the nature of an art based on both direct observation of the real (“les mains modèles”) and the mythic (“les pieds ailés du Mercure”), while the child and the skull summon forth the birth and deaths that will take place in the atelier in the course of the story. “Le cadre aux papillons” is an image of ephemeral beauty captured in art, yet at the same time reflecting curtailed freedom and death. It is worth noting that these images also render concrete central themes in Desbordes-Valmore’s own poetry, which focused on birth, death, fragmentation, the body, and nature.

In the first of many references to real painters of the post-revolutionary period, Léonard’s upstairs neighbor and artistic hero is the proto-Romantic Girodet, who also haunts Balzac’s artistic novels of the period. In Desbordes-Valmore’s tale (as in Balzac’s), Girodet is an absent presence, but if he is evoked
in almost entirely negative ways *chez* Balzac as a model of fetishistic failure, he serves as a more benign, if mystified, force here. In a striking early conversation between Ondine and her uncle, they discuss Girodet’s *Scène de Délie* of 1806. An epic image which won the Prix Décennie in 1810 (defeating David’s *Rape of the Sabine Women*), the *Scene of a Deluge* portrays a man burdened by the weight of the generations. With his father clinging to his back, the central figure grasps his wife’s outstretched arm as she teeters on the brink of the precipice below him, children clutching her from both sides. The vertical composition emphasizes the taut energy of the straining muscles of husband and wife, while the latter seems fated to plunge into the roiling waves below. While Léonard praises its brilliance, Ondine offers up a critique not of the aesthetics but of the narrative that simultaneously elides the importance of the female figure and her emotion. The young painter objects to the composition that privileges the father over the spouse, who is sacrificed by a husband who “is no longer worried about his wife.” Symbolically, Girodet’s composition, as it is evoked here, reflects the patriarchal orientation of both art and society, fixated on the past while the future, embodied by the mother and her children, slip from the hero’s grasp into the void. The contorted female figure, whose expression is echoed by another woman floating in the water below, is rendered strange by Ondine, who observes that she “doesn’t show a single sign of emotion or suffering . . . the calm of this mother surprises me.” Her uncle’s response: “It is that she is first of all a mother, my dear” (32–33), reveals the ideologies of art, culture, and gender of the period that posited female identity in a naturalized maternal stoicism and sacrifice. While Desbordes-Valmore’s poetry frequently focuses on the themes of motherhood, suffering, and loss, both her verse and her novel offer forth a female subjectivity entirely absent not only from Girodet’s canvas but also from Romantic art and literature in general. Ondine’s objection to the great painter’s subordination of the woman’s emotion to her husband’s draws the reader’s attention to the shaping force of gendered subject position in both the production and consumption of art. As both a mother and an artist, Desbordes-Valmore seeks to reverse the structure of the allegorical sacrifice and embrace a future freed of the burden of the patriarchal past.

Aesthetically, Ondine prefers the more contemporary Prud’hon (closely linked to Constance Mayer, a leading female painter of the day) because “his paintings delight my eyes and it seems to me there is something sad that speaks from their depths” (29). But even more than in the images of these revered painters and their manufactured emotion, she finds beauty in “a smooth pebble on the water’s edge, a festoon of lilac escaping the walls of the boulevard, a sheep walking down the road” (34). Ondine’s aesthetic preference of nature over great men and their creations delineates a Romantic taste available equally to
both genders. Embracing the direct experience and observation of nature over a more mediated appreciation of history, myth, and human drama, Ondine and Desbordes-Valmore privilege an art that can also be made by women and the uninitiated. Unlike history painting, dependent on academic training and extensive knowledge of privileged discourses, Romantic scenes of natural beauty are accessible to anyone with talent, imagination, and feeling. Again, Desbordes-Valmore closely links the female artist to a Romantic aesthetic, but in contradistinction to her critics, who saw in the woman poet a different (and inferior) sensibility, here Ondine’s “natural” predilections are those of a more generalized, “masculine” Romanticism.

The only female member of a male atelier, Ondine shares little with the vicious female dilettantes of La Vendetta who were deliberately screened for professional ambition, and here the heroine secretly dreams of glory and “future recognition” (38). Although she hides her hopes from her uncle and fellow students, Desbordes-Valmore’s heroine identifies her real-life role model as the enormously successful Hortense Lescot. The female painter, whose name “is on everyone’s lips” at the Salon and whose tableaux were attracting “the eyes and souls of the swirling crowds” brings both hope and pride to the young artist, for Lescot “had just inscribed a woman’s name among the prize winners of the French school” (39–40). One of the best-known women artists of her time, Hortense Haudebourt-Lescot (1784–1845) exhibited more than 100 paintings to great acclaim at the Salon from 1810–40, and was awarded a first-class medal in 1828 (see chapter 4). Like Desbordes-Valmore, who began her artistic career as an actress, Haudebourt-Lescot started out as a dancer, and each attracted the praise and support of the famous composer, André Grétry; both married relatively late and hyphenated their names to reflect their own noms de famille as well as their husband’s patronyms; and each carved a place for herself in a male dominated field of artistic expression. For Ondine, Lescot serves as inspiration and role model, creating a virtual community while at the same time counterbalancing Girodet and Raphael in the story’s own structure of artistic genealogies, much in the spirit of Capet’s 1808 portrait of Labille-Guiard at work. When Ondine is alone in her corner of the studio, the memory of the female artist’s triumph at the Salon encourages and inspires her “as she searches the past for some counsel to support her vague hopes for the future” (40).

It is emblematic of Desbordes-Valmore’s desire to highlight the viability of a woman’s success in the art world that Lescot’s name is frequently mentioned throughout her tale. But beyond her renown, Lescot serves as an important referent in Desbordes-Valmore’s novel at a number of other levels. For indeed, if we may consider L’Atelier d’un peintre a verbal self-portrait, Haudebourt-Lescot’s groundbreaking Self-Portrait of 1825 (figure 17) stands as a visual inter-text for both Desbordes-Valmore’s own project and that of her female painter,
Ondine. Although women artists like Vigée-Lebrun and Kauffman frequently incorporated reference to the Old Masters in their autoportraits, they usually alluded to female subjects of the past, taking care to highlight their own beauty as well as accomplishment. In her 1825 painting, Lescot turns to the Old Masters as well, but in a radical departure from her foremothers, crafts her own portrait of the artist as a middle-aged woman directly after the male model. Thus, where Vigée-Lebrun’s alluring Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat (c. 1763) playfully alludes to Rubens’s painting of Susanna Luden, the Chapeau de Paille (1620–25), Lescot chooses Raphael’s image of Baldassare Castiglione of 1515 as her inspiration, a painting that was also copied by Rembrandt for his own self-portrait. She opens up a dialogue with the present and the past by necessitating a comparison between the female painter and the male artist, rather than his female subject. Moreover, the very question of the copy, and of originality, is at once foregrounded and obviated, for by placing herself within a long tradition of artistic quotations and intertexts, Lescot posits herself as a modern-day Dibutades tracing the images of her male predecessors, who traced those before them. This subdued but confident portrait echoes Raphael’s muted palette and the solemn gaze of Castiglione, while highlighting Lescot’s intellectual and artistic status rather than her beauty. In choosing the author of The Courtier (1528) as her primary visual referent, Lescot invokes a book that gives voice to women as well as men, while also alluding to her own unprecedented success in Italy (see chapter 4).

The most successful female painter of her generation, she was awarded government commissions, was widely reproduced in prints and engravings, and was the sole female artist to be included in François-Joseph Heim’s Charles X Distributing Prizes to Artists at the Salon of 1824. Yet despite her success, Lescot was not unaware of her contested position within the male-dominated field, and she encodes her own assertion of professional status in this autoportrait. Eschewing the fashionable finery of an earlier generation of women painters, she wears the artist’s beret, like Rembrandt before her, and even more audaciously includes a gold chain around her neck, the mark of artistic favor conferred by a monarch, traditionally dated back to Titian. Though Lescot had not earned the right to the chain, neither had Rembrandt, and she engages in a self-conscious creation of artistic identity that plays off of female accoutrements—hats and jewelry—recrafting them into symbols of her position in the male champ artistique.

Desbordes-Valmore was engaged in similar negotiations for recognition in the male dominated field of literature, and Haudebourt-Lescot’s successful reworking of the male model is echoed in the author’s dialogue with Balzac’s contemporary fiction and Romantic poetry in general. While La Vendetta is the most obvious intertext, it is not incidental that she chose a female painter whose name homophonously echoes that of the courtesan-model, Catherine
Figure 17
Hortense Haudebourg-Lescot, Self-Portrait, 1825. Oil on canvas. 74 x 60 cm. Photo credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.
Lescault, from his *Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu*. In this influential story of 1831, the response to the anxieties aroused by female artists in the marketplace takes on an even more aggressive/repressive form. If Balzac’s Ginevra is condemned to death in *La Vendetta* after she has entered the public sphere as a painter, she has nonetheless enjoyed some small success as an artist before her undoing. In the *Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu*, the female painter is erased entirely, as the gifted Lescot is transformed into the absent Lescault, reduced to the passive subject of an impossible painting, rather than the active agent of art. Hortense Lescot, the most significant woman artist of the July Monarchy, is metamorphosed in Balzac’s *Pygmalion* redux into a naked courtesan destroyed by the male painter, Frenhofer, who buries her form beneath a wall of paint and later burns the canvas. Catherine Lescault is a woman who is not a woman, but an illegible representation; she is a woman in the atelier who is given neither voice nor ultimately form, metaphorically negating the representational power of her corporeal artistic counterpart.

For Desbordes-Valmore, well aware of Balzac’s attitudes toward women artists of every genre, *L’Atelier d’un artiste* serves as a corrective counter-discourse to these misogynistic fantasies. By providing a narrative that validates the lives and productions of female painters, both real and fictitious, while simultaneously demonstrating the talents of a female author, she works within and against the dominant structures. Much like Haudebourt-Lescot, Desbordes-Valmore provides readers and viewers new ways of seeing the female artist. By the same token, Desbordes-Valmore gives life to the model in her uncle’s atelier in a way that deliberately counterbalances the one-dimensional Gillette and the non-dimensional Catherine Lescault in *Le Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu*. In *L’Atelier d’un peintre*, the model’s body is real, rather than ideal, and in a self-conscious subversion of the dominant tropes of art and creation, in a chapter entitled “Le modèle,” it is the model who is pregnant and gives birth to an illegitimate child after she is abandoned by her artist lover. The childbirth metaphor for the production of art, although popular with the Romantics, may be traced back to Plato’s *Symposium* and turns on the image of the mind as womb. Gaining currency in the early modern period with Shakespeare and Sydney (who represents the poet as “great with child to speake”), the trope of intellectual generation as a form of male procreation became a dominant metaphor for creation by the end of the eighteenth century as genius was increasingly associated with virility and male sexual energies. Significantly, the metaphor establishes a distinction between creation and reproduction that imagines an exclusively male form of production and reflects, in Susan Stanford Friedman’s formulation, the “fundamental binary oppositions of patriarchal ideology between word and flesh, creativity and procreativity, mind and body.” Thus, paradoxically, the trope of childbirth carried the negative associations of “base” reproduction when
linked with women, yet carried positive valences of genius for Romantic male creators when talking or theorizing about their own (male) artistic production. For Desbordes-Valmore, who frequently wrote of motherhood and maternity in her poetry, the image was understood in its most literal terms as confessional or autobiographical, while also suggesting metaphoric resonances of artistic creation. As Friedman notes, for a female author, the childbirth metaphor can constitute a self-conscious challenge to male authors, demonstrating “not only a ‘marked’ discourse distinct from phallogocentric male use of the same metaphor but also a subversive inscription of woman’s (pro)creativity” (74).

In *L'Atelier d'un peintre*, Desbordes-Valmore reclaims the trope and its reality for women, who are equally capable of giving birth to art as inspiration (the model), making art (the artist, Ondine), and giving birth to children (the model and Ondine’s sister). Negating the reductive essentialism of woman as imitator/man as creator, Desbordes-Valmore asserts woman’s multiple capacities of creation and procreation while placing them on a plane of equal value. Upon discovering that her sister is pregnant, Ondine muses “the steady soul hatches masterpieces. My sister! Where will I paint mine?” (95). Desbordes-Valmore’s desire to demonstrate that a woman could be an artist and a mother, as well as an artist or a mother, was by no means unique, and it is not coincidental that the author’s own daughter was named Ondine, thus conflating the novel, as artistic creation, with her maternal creation. Countering the popularity of male interpretations of Dibutades and the co-opting of maternity into a masculine trope, painters such as Vigée-Lebrun and Constance Mayer celebrated motherhood in their own artistic creations, reflecting what Griselda Pollock has called “the desire for some way to acknowledge and speak of the maternal in all its ambivalence and structural centrality to the dramas of the subject [and] the narratives of culture.” Here, the poet renowned for her maternal themes and imagery answers the dominant artistic discourses with literal and figurative sisters giving birth to children and paintings without hierarchical distinction and providing a counter-discourse to the dominant ideologies where, as Friedman notes “maternity and creativity have appeared to be mutually exclusive to women writers” (75).

Like *La Vendetta*, *L'Atelier d'un peintre* is also a love story, or perhaps a series of love stories. Ondine falls in love with Yorick, a German student introduced to her uncle’s studio by Abel, a young painter based on Abel de Pujol (who would come to direct the female studio portrayed in Grandpierre-Deverzy’s scene (figure 8)). Abel has returned from Rome for love, while his friend Yorick’s perpetual Romantic melancholy owes much to Goethe’s Werther as well as of course to Hamlet. Ondine’s love for Yorick is ultimately evident to everyone but the German artist himself, who pines for Camille, and her uncle, whose ancient and unrequited love for Marianne is the source of his own blinding
sorrow. In keeping with the thematic of collectivity, each of these passions is ill-fated: none of the central characters will find happiness in love, and the mirrored suffering and misunderstanding functions to mutually reinforce their shared status as Romantic artists, male and female alike, condemned to perpetual grief and solitude. Nearly a third of the novel is devoted to Léonard’s story of love and loss, and interpolated within his narrative are those of a curé and a comédien during the Revolution. Desbordes-Valmore gives voice to figures at the margins of society, victims of fate and society outside of the structures of power. As Chantal Bertrand-Jennings notes, this thematic is found in all of Desbordes-Valmore’s fiction, which portrays “children, the elderly, the poor, beggars, the sick, in short the victims, the weak, the humble whom she systematically defends,” anticipating Hugo’s socially engaged Romanticism and Flora Tristan’s pariahs.\textsuperscript{42} But here, as in her later novel, \textit{Domenica} (1843), Desbordes-Valmore focuses on the marginal position of artists who, like women, are voiceless and powerless in the face of social and political hierarchies.

Yorick, as a German, and Ondine, from Flanders, are outsiders in Paris, doubly marginalized by their status as artists and foreigners, and the atelier serves as their home and family. In one of the most critical scenes, Yorick and Ondine, alone in the studio, discuss their work. Where Ginevra’s paintings were never evoked, and she was ultimately condemned to copying the works of others before dying in poverty, Desbordes-Valmore takes great care to give substance and legitimacy to the female painter’s original production, and her tableau of a group of children is the subject of serious consideration and praise from her male counterpart. When her uncle joins them, the three artists in the atelier gathered around a painting recall the highly charged triangulations of Poussin, Porbus, and Frenhofer in the \textit{Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu}. Yet, while the artistic vocabulary echoes Balzac’s earlier insistence on color, light, and life, there is a spirit of cooperation and admiration here that stands in stark contrast to the simmering rivalry between the male painters, while the female is the author, not the subject, of the canvas.

Love in the atelier, an anathema to Balzac, proves no more successful for Desbordes-Valmore’s Ondine. However, in contradistinction to her male counterparts, love is deemed positive and even necessary for Desbordes-Valmore’s female artist, who dies not because love destroys her genius, but rather because without love and fellowship, she cannot create and cannot live. When the other students in her uncle’s studio notice her passion for Yorick they ostracize her. Love introduces difference, and “the dear companions of her studies who treated her as a sister” now see her “with other eyes” and Ondine becomes “the object of the attention and envy of all” (398). Where there was once companionship, there is now jealousy and competition, fragmenting the family of the atelier and ultimately destroying the female painter. Before Yorick’s arrival, “not one [of
the other students] dreamed that she was of a different nature than he himself” (402). But when the students who used to be “her young brothers, careless and confiding,” recognize her passion for the German artist, they abandon her and she “no longer has a single friend among them” (402). With the introduction of love, Ondine becomes embodied as a woman for her fellow rapins, and thus no longer a painter and a friend. The recognition of sexual or gender difference entails exclusion for the female artist, but importantly, reflects neither on her talent nor on her skills, but rather on the perceptions and jealousies of her male cohort. A woman can be a painter and a member of the atelier only as long as gender difference is less important than artistic similarity; once difference is foregrounded, the female artist is excluded from the brotherhood.

Although she feels pushed out of the atelier, she perseveres, for she needs to keep painting as much as she needs to love. When she can take it no more she cries out “I am still your sister . . . But why are you no longer my brothers?” (420). Denied fraternity and ultimately love, Ondine dies a highly Romantic death, a victim not of over-reaching and the dangers of inverting hierarchies, but of an artistic social structure that ultimately isolates and rejects woman-qua-woman once difference is established. The metaphor of the atelier, serving as a synecdoche for the more general field of artistic production, serves to illustrate in spatial terms the marginalization of the female artist—painter, poet, author—in nineteenth-century France and the destructive power of this denial. In a letter written on her deathbed, Ondine invokes her sister, an absent presence throughout the novel, lamenting “My sister! I am searching for you . . . I am alone, alone in myself” (437). Although she has lived and died in an all-male milieu, the female artist calls out for sisters to take the place of the brothers that have abandoned her. The exceptional woman artist, Desbordes-Valmore suggests, dies alone and only when she is joined by her metaphoric sisters in art will the atelier/artistic field become a place she can survive and thrive.

Taken to the church for her humble funeral by her heartbroken uncle and Yorick, Ondine’s casket is placed by her lover on “le trône funèbre” elevated for the expiation mass to be celebrated the following day—21 January—on the anniversary of the death of Louis XVI. Only too late, Yorick had recognized Ondine’s love for him and his for her; his letter asking for her hand reaches Léonard after her death. Overcome with remorse, he lights every candle in the chapel of the virgin and prays for “expiation.” Finally, in a Werther redux, the German artist pulls out a gun and shoots himself in the head at her burial, falling into the grave upon her casket. Ondine’s apotheosis, where she is elevated to the level of the martyred king, signals her sacrificial status—she is sinned against by society, unlike Ginevra who, in the eyes of her author, has sinned against society. Desbordes-Valmore’s dialogue with Balzac, Lamartine, and the
Romantic *fraternité* of male artists resists the gendered construction of artistic identity that excluded women, demonstrating its pernicious toll on male as well as female artists. Yorick’s suicide, evoking along with Ondine’s death the suicide of Constance Mayer, the talented painter and partner of Prud’hon, demonstrates that not only women will suffer from the repressive ideologies of a phallocentric society.