

A Woman's Words – From Le Brun-Pindare to Citoyenne Pipelet and Constance, Princesse  
de Salm

Visitors to the Institute of Art in Chicago can see one of the masterpieces of neoclassical artist Jean-Baptiste-François Desoria who was born in Paris in 1758 and died in Cambrai during the 1832 cholera epidemic. Painted around 1797, it shows a young woman in a simple white dress, sitting on a chair, looking out at the viewer. She holds a book in her right hand. Three fingers are on the back cover. One probably marks the page she had reached whilst her thumb must be on the front of the binding. The slim volume is doubtless more than a mere accessory: the sitter apparently interrupted in her reading, “Citoyenne Pipelet,” was gaining fame as a writer at the very time when women poets were under attack.

**The Importance of Being *Constance***

Citizeness Pipelet, who was about 30 at the time the picture was painted, bore the surname of her husband, a doctor. The daughter of Marie-Alexandre de Théis, “Seigneur de la Maladelle”, “Conseiller du Roi, Juge Maître particulier des Eaux, Bois et Forêts de la Ville et Comté de Nantes”, and his wife Anne-Marguerite Quillau, she was born on November 7<sup>th</sup> 1767 in Nantes and baptised Constance-Marie that day in Saint Similien. Her godfather was Claude-François-Michel de Mory Desgravières de Prémont, her second cousin; her godmother was Marie-Michelle Pelletier, the wife of *noble homme* Claude Carrié. Both signed along with her Father.<sup>1</sup> It is striking, in view of the traditions, that “Constance” was apparently neither the

---

<sup>1</sup> Information drawn from the parish records for Saint-Similien, Archives Départementales de Loire-Atlantique 3E109/226 – 1767, f°80 r°. Online version <https://www.archinoe.fr/v2/ad44/visualiseur/registre.html?id=440205754> (view 79) checked on 21 August 2020.

name of the child's godparents nor of other immediate family members. It was to become an important part of her identity as an adult and as an author.

Constance-Marie de Théis' relatives numbered lawyers and doctors who also put pen to paper as *hommes de lettres*—like her Father or her brother, Alexandre de Théis (1765-1842). The signatures on her baptismal certificate show that her background was a literate one. She is said to have received a good education. Her first known work, a “romance” titled *Bouton de Rose*, published in a verse annual in 1788 and later set to music by Louis-Barthélemy Pradher (1782-1843), became famous. As the editor of Félicité de Genlis' memoirs recalls “Toute la France chanta *Bouton de Rose*” (230; vol.6).<sup>2</sup>

In 1789, Constance-Marie de Théis married Jean-Baptiste Pipelet (sometimes Pipelet de Leury), a surgeon from a well-connected family—both his uncle and his father were presidents of the Académie Royale de Chirurgie—and was to publish a study of hernias. From penning an initial “romance” in which a (presumably male) lover addresses the rosebud his beloved wears on her breast, the newlywed madame Pipelet would progress to more visible interventions in the literary sphere.<sup>3</sup> As the biographical dictionary which details her husband's career puts it: “il épousa, en 1789, Mlle Constance de Théis, dont la célébrité comme poète a rejailli sur lui. Ils étaient membres tous les deux du Lycée des Arts. Leur union, n'ayant pas été heureuse, fut dissoute par un divorce, en 1799.” (*Biographie Universelle* 260; vol.15) It is striking that the article appears to imply a link between the couple's marital strife and the wife's literary celebrity. The note in Genlis' memoirs adds: “Bientôt le nom de la femme devint plus célèbre que celui du mari.” (230; vol.6) There were other contemporary cases in which a husband was eclipsed by his wife's renown. One need only think of Germaine de Staël. Though from an

---

<sup>2</sup> This gives the composer's name as “Plantade”, confusing the “romance” with the unrelated “Madame Bouton de Rose ou la Femme du Tonnelier Nocturne”.

<sup>3</sup> On Constance de Salm as a writer v. *Constance de Salm. Varia et Documents*; Seth, “La Femme Auteur”, 2010; Berenguier and (although I have not read it as it is unpublished), Sharif 2014.

entirely different social background than Necker's daughter, Constance Pipelet was to make her marital name famous. She did so by gaining public recognition, not only having her works printed, but also writing a play and reading her poetry to large audiences.

The Revolution liberated the French theatrical scene which had been constrained during the Ancien Régime by restrictions on authorised venues. Relatively few women had seen their works performed. Pipelet's lyric tragedy, *Sapho*, was staged at the Théâtre des Amis de la Patrie in December 1794 to great acclaim with music by Martini—best known nowadays for his setting of Florian's *Plaisir d'Amour*.<sup>4</sup> Recollecting her foray into a public arena, the dramatist, encouraging others to follow suit, wrote this in her subsequent *Épître aux Femmes*:

Moi-même, osant braver les dangers de la scène,  
J'ai marché vers le but où ma main vous entraîne ;  
Moi-même sur Sapho rappelant quelques pleurs,  
J'ai suivi ses leçons et chanté ses douleurs.<sup>5</sup>

It is unsurprising that the dramatist should have chosen the Greek poetess as her subject. Sapho was seen as a possible model for women authors, pitted against Homer as a valid classical authority in a gendered vision of literature which sought to claim legitimacy for both sexes. This is true even though the Sapho depicted in the play is the unhappy lover rather than the writer.

The title page of the dramatic work, first performed on 22 frimaire an 3, reads *Sapho, Tragédie Mêlée de Chants, en Trois Actes et en Vers [...] par la Citoyenne Pipelet, Musique du Citoyen Martini*. For much of her subsequent life, the author was to attempt to re-appropriate her *œuvre* by consolidating an identity which did not give undue prominence to her first husband's name. In 1811, in the *Poésies de Madame la Comtesse de Salm*, which use the title

---

<sup>4</sup> V. Plagnol-Diéval and Dorival.

<sup>5</sup> For the text of the *Épître aux Femmes*, see Seth, "L'Épître aux Femmes: textes et contextes", in: *Constance de Salm. Varia et Documents*, pp.53-63. Here p.62.

and surname the author owed to her second marriage, we read that most of her works published before 1802 “ont paru sous le nom que je portais alors (madame Constance P.)” and that some juvenilia came out under her maiden name, “mon nom de famille (mademoiselle de T.)”. The incompleteness is striking: we are being invited to forget “Pipelet” and “Théis” as markers of the writer’s identity, but invited to remember her Christian name.<sup>6</sup> It no doubt served her well to have been baptised with an augurative forename which fitted the steadfastness of her attitude towards literature. Unusually, some texts published before her divorce are signed “Constance D.T. Pipelet”, giving this first name in full and alluding to her maiden name (“de Théis”). Subsequently she frequently included “Constance” with her title and married surname, “Constance, comtesse de Salm” or even, incorrectly, “Princesse Constance de Salm”: this first name was no less important than any other part of her identity.

### **The last literary “*querelle*” of a quarrelsome century...**

The Revolution, which had initially seemed to offer opportunities for different constituencies to express themselves, developed in ways which stifled women’s liberties and possibilities of expression. The last literary “*querelle*” of the century was arguably the “*querelle des femmes poètes*”<sup>7</sup>—one in which Constance Pipelet played a central part. She was in all probability one of the figures who, perhaps unwittingly, set the sparks flying by her presence on the Parisian literary scene. She also wrote the most memorable text in a wide range of verse

---

<sup>6</sup> The question of women changing names on marrying figures in a review of the *Almanach des Muses* for 1798 in the *Décade* (Jan. 19 1798, p.166). Whilst Pipelet is still referred to under that name, the reviewer also salutes: “Mesd[ames] d’Hautpoul, ci-devant de Beaufort, et Viot, ci-devant de Bourdic, précédemment d’Antremont.” Before adding, regarding the latter poet: “Ces trois noms, portés successivement par la même personne, ont donné lieu à une jolie pièce du C. Hennet, intitulée le *Quiproquo*.”

<sup>7</sup> This important “*querelle*” is not mentioned in the SIEFAR website’s documentation regarding the Ancien Régime “*querelle des femmes*”.

exchanges by men and women setting out their positions. The intellectual skirmish might be construed as a late expression of the “*querelles des femmes*” which surfaced around the *Précieuses* before being resurrected at various stages throughout the Ancien Régime, but this particular quarrel also reflected unease at women’s possible pretensions, in the wake of the changes in political representation, to occupy the public sphere.

The first stage of the “*querelle*” was a poem by an Ancien Régime author who elicited admiration for his serious verse but never got round to producing the great work expected of him. Ponce-Denis Écouchard Le Brun (1729-1807), known as “*Pindare*”, gained fame as the author of witty epigrams poking fun at many contemporaries including women with literary pretensions. One short poem quips: “Églé belle et poète a deux petits travers/ Elle fait son visage et ne fait pas ses vers.”<sup>8</sup> It is thought to be an attack on Fanny de Beauharnais whose novels and poems were often attributed to Dorat. Criticisms of would-be poetesses figure elsewhere in his verse like when he writes on the 1787 *Académie française* competition lauding the heroism of Leopold of Brunswick who drowned apparently whilst attempting to lend assistance to peasants. Another of Le Brun’s undated epigrams may be an attack on Pipelet’s play—particularly considering the proximity of the classical pseudonym (Thaïs) to her maiden name:

Thaïs muse ennuyeuse et fade,

Jamais, comme Sapho, n’eût péri dans les mers :

Et Phaon eût lui seul fait le saut de Leucade

Pour ne pas entendre ses vers. (Jullien 201; vol.2)

No doubt in part as a result of the increased exposure of women poets,<sup>9</sup> Le Brun published a piece in the February 9<sup>th</sup> 1796 issue of a widely-circulated periodical, *La Décade*

---

<sup>8</sup> Several versions circulated with various women’s names.

<sup>9</sup> V. Seth 2012.

*Philosophique, Littéraire et Politique*. This was a progressive publication, close to the intellectuals known as the *idéologues*. The thirty-two octosyllables of *Aux Belles qui Veulent Devenir Poètes* suggests women should not seek immortality through writing but rather the pleasure of living in the moment—a get-out clause figures in the form of a footnote attributed to the author himself: “Ce titre ne peut pas regarder celles qui le sont [*i.e.* sont poètes] en effet.” (Feb 9 1796, 298).

Assuring that women were made for love, Le Brun claims: “L’amour verrait avec colère/  
Une nuit perdue à rimer”.<sup>10</sup> He adds that roses are more charming than solid oaks and doves more loving than intrepid eagles. He encourages women to conform to their roles as wives and mothers:

Laissez-nous la double colline ;  
Régnez à Cythère, à Paphos ;  
En vers tendres, le doux Racine  
A même vaincu les Saphos.  
Le coursier fougueux du Parnasse  
Ne cède qu’aux fils d’Apollon,  
Et se rit de la faible audace  
Des Amazones d’Hélicon. (Ibid.)

Mythology and learning as well as poetry are, in the writer’s view, the preserve of the male of the species... the reference to women writers as warriors armed with laughable efforts at literary courage is a withering one. Constance Pipelet (and others) may have seen the reference to Sapho as a veiled attack on her.

---

<sup>10</sup> Le Brun’s poem was reprinted in the 1797 *Almanach des Muses* and in the posthumous edition of his works (*Œuvres*, pp.368-9; vol.1).

Le Brun's conclusion is formulated in a striking distich. He suggests women should not betray their charms by displaying unseemly pretensions to literary glory: "Voulez-vous ressembler aux Muses?/ Inspirez, mais n'écrivez pas." (Id.) The traditional misogynistic sentiment could have gone unnoticed but, as Christine Planté notes, Le Brun hit a raw nerve: "Il pose là les termes d'une contradiction dans laquelle les femmes poètes ne cesseront de se débattre au cours du siècle suivant" (*Femme Poètes* 24).<sup>11</sup> A series of answers led to a full-blown literary quarrel. The responses were not split along an exclusively gendered line: whilst women claimed the right to write, many men, unlike Le Brun, supported them.

### A quarrel in a periodical

In appearance, this "*querelle*" not only had a starting-date, but an ending one in another issue of the *Décade*. Between these two chronological boundaries, four poets answered. Le Brun reacted within the pages of the same periodical. Among the elements which were underlined in the responses were Le Brun's superiority which was mocked, for instance by Beaufort, who, in a piece published ten days after the inaugural salvo, "À Pindare Le Brun *En Réponse à des Vers Insérés dans la Précédente Décade*", was the first to address the questions raised (*Décade*, Feb. 19 1796, 367):

Pindare, nous dictant ses lois,  
Du haut de la docte colline,  
Nous défend de mêler nos voix  
Aux sons de sa lyre divine.

Directly challenged by the lines she had read, the poetess used her talent to respond and—arguably in a performative manner—to discredit the claims they made, teasingly using mythology to denounce the misogynist's position. She was speaking as a woman for all women

---

<sup>11</sup> See also Planté 1994.

as the first-person plural indicates. The periodical, by including her verse and thereby giving her a similar space to Le Brun, was apparently allowing Beaufort to intervene on an equal footing, thus implicitly showing its open-mindedness at a time when women's place in the public sphere was contracting.

On 10 March, a poem signed “Le Gouvé” but which the poet Legouvé—whose poem, *Le Mérite des Femmes* (1800) would profess great admiration for women whilst confining them to traditional roles—never claimed as his own also presented itself as a response “Au citoyen Le Brun, sur les vers qu’il a adressés aux Belles qui veulent devenir Poètes”. It pleads in favour of women writers and name-checks Deshoulières and four living poetesses: Verdier, Dufrénoy, Dantremont [d’Antremont] and Beaufort herself.

Beaufort's effort passed without answer. Did the addressee deem it unworthy of him to stoop to responding at that stage?<sup>12</sup> Or did the journal's editorial line discourage this? It is all the more noteworthy that the periodical published a response to another participant in the verse debate: Le Brun's “Vers au Citoyen Le Gouvé. En Réponse à Celle qu’il m’a faite dans la Décade, sur les Belles qui Veulent Devenir Poètes” appeared on March 20 with an epigraph from *Les Femmes savantes*. In it the initiator of the literary spat, addressing himself to a man with whom he wishes to claim common ground, concedes that:

Sapho, tant soit peu masculine,  
Vingt fois, avec éclat, dans ses transports divins,

---

<sup>12</sup> There are undated answers from Le Brun to Beaufort in his works. They were not included in the *Décade* or the subsequent *Almanach des Muses* collection of poems marking this exchange of points of view. “À une jolie femme poète, qui me citait le chant de la Fauvette et de Philomèle, pour autoriser son ramage poétique” reminds the unnamed author (clearly Beaufort) that male birds sing and includes inelegant references to a masculine Sapho amongst others. The second, “À Eliza [*sic*] Beaufort”, starts: “Oui! j’en crois votre aimable Lyre;/ Votre cœur est fait pour aimer./ Et votre bouche pour le dire;/ Mais sont-ils faits pour le rimer?” In Le Brun's works—a posthumous publication by his former *Décade* colleague, Ginguené—, the poem immediately precedes “Mon dernier mot sur les femmes poètes”, another of his contributions to the quarrel which was not part of the *Décade* set of texts.

Atteignit le sommet de la double colline. (March 20 1796, 563)

Clearly, we are to believe that the Greek poetess only managed this because she was virile... unlike “nos poètes féminins/ Nos muses de boudoir” (Ibid.) With their lines treated as contraband—they are “*vers clandestins*”—, women poets are shown as having confiscated the male pencil and borrowed rays which do not belong to them. Le Brun suggests they have ghost-writers (“*teinturiers*”) to do their work and ends with an allusion to a familiar source denouncing *femmes savantes*: “Et surtout, croyons-en Molière:/ Redoutons les femmes auteurs.” By answering Legouvé and—apparently—not Beaufort (at least in published form in the columns of the periodical in which his initial attack was published) and by this imperative which groups them as men against women, he is practising as he preaches.

Matters did not end there. La Chabeaussière’s nine lines *Au Poète Le Brun sur sa Petite Guerre avec les Femmes Auteurs* (*Décade*, March 30, 49) include a man-to-man warning within a poem whose title implicitly ridicules the whole kerfuffle:

En armant le courroux de nos femmes auteurs,  
Crains d’imiter en tout le chancre de la Thrace,  
Le Brun! c’est bien son art que ta voix nous retrace;  
Ne nous rappelle pas sa fin et ses malheurs.

La Chabeaussière’s lines suggest that behind women *poets*, the attack was on all women authors and, implicitly, as Pipelet herself understood, on all women creators. He also intimates that Le Brun might be Orpheus, but he was setting himself up to be torn to shreds metaphorically because of his position.

After the publication on 19 April of a pseudonymous poem, possibly by Eusèbe Salverte,<sup>13</sup> a member of the Lycée Républicain and later of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, the *Décade* (April 19, 171) included the following footnote:

Nous avons reçu des départements plusieurs pièces de vers sur le même sujet. Nous nous bornons à donner celle-ci, afin de ne pas ramener trop souvent nos lecteurs sur cette dispute, qui a commencé par les intéresser, mais qui pourrait finir par les ennuyer. (*Note des Auteurs de la Décade*).

This was obviously an invitation to potential collaborators to stop sending in verse. The reference to poems being received from the “*départements*” suggests the debate had generated considerable interest—with the time-lag involved in getting copies of the periodical to the more remote parts of France and answers back to Paris explaining that it had been drawn out over several months. It was also a way of saying that the “*dispute*”, to use the term chosen by the editor, was closed. The “Réponse à Le Brun”, meant to complete the set, was a satisfying conclusion: it appeared to suggest that everything had revolved around the one author’s point of view. He had expressed his ideas (several times) but they had been countered by a variety of respondents. It also seemed to indicate that the forward-thinking team at the *Décade* was prepared to end on a note in favour of women and offer a form of resolution. The poem begins with this stanza:

Quelle aveugle erreur en ce jour,  
Sans pitié, voudrait interdire  
Le droit de célébrer l’amour  
Au sexe charmant qui l’inspire ? (Ibid.)

---

<sup>13</sup> See the reference to Labouïsse-Rochefort’s identification of “d’Algèbra”, the signatory, quoted by M. Sharif, “L’Encre Sied Mal aux Doigts de Rose”, p.128.

The poet goes on to pay homage to Molière's take on the *Femme savantes*, but also to mention La Suze and Deshoulières favourably, along with Émilie du Châtelet—a woman celebrated for talents beyond literature. It ends with a gallant compliment to a living poet, Beaufort, who thus seems to be an implicit winner: she was one of the people—indeed the very first person—who had answered Le Brun. It also abolishes the impossibility of being both a desirable woman and a writer, which Le Brun had set out in his verse. These are the closing lines:

Auteurs sublimes! j'aurais tort  
De vouloir vous suivre au Parnasse;  
Mais si j'y choisissais ma place,  
Ce serait aux pieds de *Beaufort*. (Ibid. 172)

Whatever the staff at the *Décade* thought (or may have hoped), the quarrel was not over. Le Brun must have been piqued as he penned “Mon Dernier Mot sur les Femmes-Poètes, En Réponse aux Vers de La Chabeaussière, qui Disait à propos d’Orphée: Le Brun, c’est bien son art que ta voix nous retrace;/ Ne nous rappelle point sa fin et ses malheurs.” Returning to mythological tradition, and keen to have the last word in the spat, he suggested anew that it was entirely inappropriate for women to write. Their tutelary figure was the goddess of love.

Jamais Vénus sur un triste pupitre,  
Ne griffonna la romance ou l’épître.  
[...] L’encre sied mal aux doigts de rose. (*Décade*, April 29 1796, 236)

The poet mentioned La Suze, a dead poetess, to condemn her works as boring and, addressing his reflections to any woman tempted to take up a pen, he praised stereotypical gender roles, this time addressing a single “*Belle*” with literary ambitions, rather than “*Belles*” in general as in his first piece:

Belle qu’agite encore une gloire inquiète,

La nature vous crie : Il est des soins plus doux !

Soyez épouse et mère, au lieu d'être poète !

L'enfance, qui vous tend les bras,

Vous demande un lait pur et non l'eau d'Hippocrène.

Ah ! tarisse à jamais la poétique veine,

Plutôt qu'un sein pressé de ses doigts délicats !

Que le hochet fasse taire la lyre ;

De l'amour maternel savourez le délire. (Ibid.)

A footnote stressed how important the whole debate was to Le Brun. He felt he owed women, whom he adored, the truth, he claims. He quotes a famous misogynist in support of his attitude remarking that Rousseau who wanted his character Émile to be happy “se garda bien de faire de sa divine Sophie une *femme poète*.” (Ibid. 235) Was this really the last word in the “*querelle*”?

### The “*querelle*” beyond the *Décade*

The man who started the quarrel did not give up immediately. Indeed volume III of Le Brun's works contains a handful of poems he wrote to respond to the answers addressed to him by several poets<sup>14</sup>—Many would have remained unknown to the majority of readers until the posthumous 1811 edition. Clearly, for him at least, the set of texts published by the periodical do not tell the whole story. The “*querelle*” made waves. The different pieces the *Décade* had printed were included in the 1797 *Almanach des Muses*, a much read annual,<sup>15</sup> and the ripples

---

<sup>14</sup> The index to the volume lists “L'Exception, à madame de \*\*\*, sur les Femmes Poètes”, “Réponse à M. Legouvé”, “Quatrain sur un Vers du Même”, “À une Jolie Femme Poète”, “Sur quelques Vers de la Pièce de M. Legouvé”, “À Moi, sur le Même Sujet”, “À Eliza Beaufort”, “Mon Dernier Mot sur les Femmes Poètes” and “À un Lecteur poli et bienveillant, sur un Vers de *mon dernier Mot*”.

<sup>15</sup> Sharif (“L'encre sied mal”, p.129) indicates that the poems were included in the *Annales de la République Française*, an VII.

continued to be propagated. No doubt some of the authors who had apparently sent in poems which the *Décade* had declined to print sought to circulate them through other media. It is not my intention to look at all the verse relating to the quarrel, some of which referred directly to Le Brun's first shot across the bows, but briefly to present the way in which one subsequent poem, not included in the original series, came to epitomise the exchange.

Constance Pipelet, whose *Sapho* had been extremely successful, penned what is not presented directly as an answer to Le Brun, but as an *Épître aux Femmes*. This shifts the debate and the spotlight, away from the male poet who had sparked the dispute, to shine it on women<sup>16</sup> in an attempt to empower them as the opening clearly shows (*Épître aux Femmes* 52):

Ô femmes, c'est pour vous que j'accorde ma lyre!  
Ô femmes, c'est pour vous qu'en mon brûlant délire,  
D'un usage orgueilleux bravant les vains efforts,  
Je laisse enfin ma voix exprimer mes transports.

Refusing to see herself as exceptional, the speaker calls upon them to rise up and be creative thus going beyond the specific case of women writers denounced in the original text in the series. The poem also provides retorts to specific reproaches and comments made by Le Brun and others (*Ibid.* 57):

Mais déjà mille voix ont blâmé notre audace ;  
On s'étonne, on murmure, on s'agite, on menace ;  
On veut nous arracher la plume et les pinceaux ;  
Chacun a contre nous sa chanson, ses bons mots.

---

<sup>16</sup> Vincent Campenon's poem intervening belatedly in the debate has the same title (*Décade*, June 8 1798).

Amongst the criticisms alluded to are the image of the woman's ghostwriter: "L'autre, vain par système et jaloux par métier,/ Dit d'un air dédaigneux : *Elle a son teinturier.*" (Id.) There is also a long discussion of woman's position as wife and mother.

Published under the name "Constance D.T. Pipelet", which gives the author's sex but also her individual identity as more than Dr Pipelet's wife, the *Épître aux Femmes* presents itself as circumstantial and a direct reaction to the climate if we are to believe the prefatory note in an 1811 edition: "Mon Lecteur s'apercevra facilement que j'ai été inspirée par cette ardeur et cet enthousiasme qu'élèvent dans les âmes vives et sensibles la conviction de ce qu'elles valent, et la juste douleur de se voir méconnues." (Salm 1811, 10) Whilst Le Brun sought to defend his views by patronising references to mythology and Molière, Pipelet was attempting to do something else but, she admits, "dans la chaleur d'un procès dans lequel j'étais juge et partie, j'ai pu mettre un peu de passion dans mon plaidoyer, et ne présenter quelquefois la question que sous le point de vue qui lui était le plus avantageux" (Ibid.). Before quoting Juvenal and Boileau as examples of writers whose attitude she has followed, she claims that *raisonnement* and *sentiment* were her guides in selecting arguments to convince her reader.

What does the 1797 poem show? With the epigraph: "La colère suffit, et vaut un Apollon." (*Épître aux Femmes* 53), drawn from Boileau's first *Satire*, the author is apparently claiming indignation rather than more noble grounds for her reaction—and possibly playing on Le Brun's affirmation that Love would be angry were a woman to spend a night writing verse. Both in her avowed attempt to rise above cheap jibes and seek means by which reason could defend women and their creativity, and in her reference to wrath, she is going beyond traditional gendered behavioural expectations and, in her bold stance, clearly courting hostility. She in fact borrows something of the warrior rhetoric characteristic of many revolutionary songs: "Les temps sont arrivés, la raison vous appelle:/Femmes, réveillez-vous, et soyez dignes d'elle." (Ibid. 54) is not so different to the beginning of *La Marseillaise* (1792): "Allons enfants de la

patrie,/ Le jour de gloire est arrivé” which then leads on to the celebrated refrain “Aux armes citoyens,/ Formez des bataillons etc.” or to the ambiance of *Le Chant du départ* (1794), another revolutionary “hymn” taught to schoolchildren from generation to generation:

La République nous appelle  
Sachons vaincre ou sachons périr  
Un Français doit vivre pour elle  
Pour elle un Français doit mourir.

Women were, in a sense, being called to arms and invited to revolt in turn. Although it failed to have the effect Pipelet certainly hoped it would on her contemporaries, the *Épître aux femmes* is the only one of the texts associated with the “*querelle*” to have had more than passing exposure to the public. This is due in part to its poetic quality, but in part also to the way in which its author orchestrated its survival as a literary piece, turning it into the cornerstone of a slightly different “*querelle*” than the one the editors of the *Décade* had included in their pages.

### Constructing the “*querelle*” retrospectively

Pipelet’s *Épître* was given several public readings, in particular at the Lycée républicain and the Lycée des étrangers and published in periodicals or collections (including the 1798 *Almanach des Muses*)<sup>17</sup> as well as two separate editions (Desenne 1797 in-18 and in-16).<sup>18</sup> Several other poems by and/or about women writers or creative artists came out during the final years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The quarrel appeared to die down. Some women authors seemed to have given up ground, like Beaufort—who now signed “Mme de Beaufort d’Hautpoul”—in a

---

<sup>17</sup> A review of the 1798 *Almanach des Muses* salutes Pipelet’s “style soutenu et en général soigneusement travaillé” and remarks on the pleasure of finding the poem and other pieces by the same hand in the annual (*Décade*, Jan. 19 1798, p.165). Her name precedes that of two other women writers “qui soutiennent avec Mad. Pipelet l’honneur de leur sexe sur le Parnasse”, Beaufort d’Hautpoul and Viot (previously Bourdic/d’Antremont).

<sup>18</sup> The announcement of the publication by Desenne of a “*jolie édition*” in-18 priced at *12 sous* indicates the poem was met with great applause at the two Lycée readings.

poem published by the *Almanach des Muses* in 1808 (262). Showing that every woman's cause was her cause too, she maintained that "Les Muses sont sœurs et ne sont point rivales," but she also dedicated lines to her knitting whilst acknowledging that it would not bring her fame. She appears to indicate that the world of letters is in turmoil and that if one is not a male writer, one is better elsewhere:

Puisqu'il faut s'armer et se craindre sans cesse,

Parnasse, adieu; je vais te fuir:

À d'utiles réseaux je borne mon adresse;

Et j'aime mieux tricoter... que haïr.

Adopting a conciliatory tone, another author whose verse had appeared in the *Almanach des Muses*, just as Le Brun launched his attack on her sex, Adélaïde Dufrénoy, in her poem "Le Bonheur Inattendu. Élégie Adressée à Sa Majesté la Reine de Naples, en lui Offrant un Exemplaire de mes Opuscules," published in the 1810 *Almanach des Muses* (97-99) shows the woman as poet with a "*muse vraiment femme*," but one who can only deal with certain themes:

La noble Muse de l'Histoire

Seule a le droit brillant de chanter tes hauts faits.

C'est à nos Pindares français

Qu'il sied de consacrer les pompes triomphales.

Dufrénoy was apparently rendering unto Le Brun-Pindare the legacy of the Greek heroic poet Pindarus and withdrawing any personal pretention to heroic verse.

Constance Pipelet was having none of that. After her second marriage, in 1802, to the *comte de Salm* (who would become a Prince in 1816), she wrote various works, contributing to the public debate on questions like the independence of creative writers or legal dispositions regarding adultery. In 1811, Didot brought out the *Poésies de Mme la Comtesse de Salm*. The volume reclaimed the poems she had published under her previous name, including the *Épître*

*aux Femmes* which was given a particularly important place. It also came out precisely in the same year as the works of the late Le Brun (1729-1807) though whether Salm saw this as more than a mere coincidence I do not know. One thing which is clear is that in this and subsequent editions of her works she would use the *Épître aux Femmes* to rewrite the history of the “*querelle*”. Paradoxically, the text she gives is a revised one: “Je l’ai [l’*Épître*] publiée en 1797, dans un moment où quelques circonstances littéraires avaient redonné une nouvelle force à ce genre de discussions, et je ne l’offre de nouveau au public, qu’après l’avoir revue et corrigée avec soin”. (in Seth, *L’Épître*, 52) This at once stresses the topicality of the poem and extracts it from a particular context.

In the 1842 edition of her collected works (iii-iv; vol.1), the then *Princesse* de Salm contextualises the piece for her later readers and appears to suggest that public debate, at the time at which the poem was written, focused on what, to many contemporaries, probably appeared to be mundane questions:

On s’occupait vivement alors de la discussion sur les femmes auteurs, qui en est le sujet, et qui était en quelque sorte nouvelle; elle éveillait tous les genres d’amour-propre, elle agitait, divisait même la société, et semblait porter l’esprit de parti jusque dans la littérature.

Ma première intention avait été de n’y prendre aucune part; mais il me devint bientôt impossible de ne pas défendre une cause qui était aussi la mienne, et je fis en peu de jours cette *Épître*, que je lus dans plusieurs sociétés littéraires dont j’étais membre, et qui, par l’effet qu’elle y produisit, et, j’ose le dire, par la force et la vérité des sentiments qui me l’avaient inspirée, termina en quelque sorte cette fâcheuse discussion.

The poem itself shows awareness of a “*querelle*” as it was happening. The presentation offered here, nearly half a century later, includes two essential elements. The author is said to have been an involuntary participant in the “*querelle*”, one who only reacted when she felt this

to be unavoidable because of her position and public pressure. Her poem, apparently written in haste “*en peu de jours*”, is described as the decisive piece in the debate, the one which shaped it memorably by delivering the final answer. Whilst up until then different authors had been engaging in dialogues or sparring matches, Pipelet’s text apparently rendered any further discussion superfluous. The “*querelle des femmes poètes*”, launched by a man denouncing women writers, was thus, the reader is led to believe, fittingly brought to an end by a woman writer, but one who went beyond the mere task of answering him.

The retrospective analysis is false in that there were answers to Pipelet, so hers was not the final element. It indicates the importance of the spoken word with the reference to public readings, and traces an implicit link with revolutionary eloquence, suggesting that, even before being published, the text was having considerable impact. This claim is borne out by references to the *Lycée* sessions, including the first mention of the poem within the pages of the *Décade* as a text in which the author at once defends the rights of her sex and encourages women to cultivate the Arts and their intellectual capacities: according to the journalist, it was greatly appreciated at the Lycée Républicain by a wide audience which could hardly resist “la triple influence de la raison, du talent et des grâces”. (Feb. 8 1797, 302)

Depicting the poem as the final word, the one which brought closure—triumphantly for its author—and making public opinion the judge, as Salm’s complete works do, suggests an appropriate balance with a form of *poetic* justice, in every sense of the term: the woman’s lines demonstrating how wrong the querulous misogynist’s claims were and rendering any further such denunciations null and void. It also makes it seem curious that she should have wished to revise the text rather than let it stand in its (theoretically) final(ised) form.

That Pipelet/Salm never reiterated her success and that women’s writing continued to be seen in large measure as illegitimate indicates that whilst this literary skirmish might have ended, the account is over optimistic. The construction offered in hindsight by the author shows

how literary history is made. The paratexts to the successive editions of the poem illustrate the importance of narrative in constructing our vision of a “*querelle*”. It is not the full story for various reasons. Firstly, as already noted, chronology shows that the “*querelle*” had been going on for longer than the note suggests and, indeed, if we are to believe Quérard (416; vol.8), this was not the citizeness’ first contribution to the debate: “Mme Pipelet a aussi fait à ce sujet un assez grand nombre d’épigrammes, qui ont été fort répandues dans la société, mais qu’elle n’a point fait imprimer.”—*scripta manent*, and posterity was not to see every stage. Secondly, of course, there were many other answers to Le Brun or interventions in the debate.

Pipelet, in her subsequent republications of her lines, turns the quarrel into a stand-off between Le Brun, a long-dead rival, and herself, reducing everyone else who intervened into supporting actors not worthy of being mentioned by name. She is implying that she took on a literary giant—and won. Yet when the *Décade* stage occurred, she was not even mentioned and Beaufort was the only woman involved. Indeed just before the initial publication of “Aux Belles qui Veulent devenir Poètes”, the *Décade* included a review of the recently published *Almanach des Muses*. It referred to Le Brun, seen very much as one of the great men of letters of the time, and then praised three women poets, paying particular compliments to Beaufort and to Adélaïde Dufrenoy, before adding: “L’auteur de *Sapho*, la citoyenne Pipelet, a mis dans ses vers élégants et purs, moins de grâces, moins de facilité, moins d’abandon que ses deux rivales.” (*Décade*, Jan. 20 1796, 169) Pipelet may well have been piqued by this review...and pleased that, a year later, the *Décade philosophique* of February 28 1797 (413) gave a favourable review of the *Épître aux femmes* (in what was apparently the first publication in brochure form by Desenne)—at the price of 15 sous. The reviewer, Ginguené, recalls the background: “C’est dans notre journal qu’a été renouvelée depuis assez peu de temps la petite guerre entre les hommes qui ne veulent pas que les femmes soient auteurs, et les femmes qui veulent l’être, ou les hommes qui trouvent bons qu’elles le soient.” Whilst the case had been closed in an earlier issue, he indicates

that it is only fair to allow space to show “avec quelles armes une nouvelle amazone vient de se présenter au combat”. The article stresses the equality between the sexes which Pipelet sets out and summarises much of her argument supporting it with lengthy quotations. By reviewing the publication, the periodical was affording it a different treatment to the other poems which had, in a sense, been pieces in a puzzle: this is an independent literary work. Ginguéné’s conclusion is something of a pirouette: refusing to take sides, he stresses that “si les adversaires de son opinion ne veulent rien changer à la règle générale, [Pipelet] leur prouve du moins et par d’autres productions, et surtout par ce dernier ouvrage, qu’ils doivent, pour être justes, faire une heureuse exception de plus.” (Ibid. 416)

Le Brun had been dead for 35 years when the two volumes of the 75 year-old Salm’s *Œuvres complètes* came out in 1842. The title and her age make the edition seem like what it was to become: the definitive one. It is interesting in that on the one hand it not only stresses that the then citizeness Pipelet’s role was essential in the “*querelle*” but also turns the poem into the essential keystone of her writing, rather for instance than her libretto to the very successful *Sapho* or any of her subsequent works.<sup>19</sup>

Whilst the texts exchanged at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, unlike for instance *L’École des femmes*, central to an earlier “*querelle*” about intellectual legitimacy, were mainly forgotten, more recent scholarship on literature of the revolutionary period and on women writers of the time has led not only to re-evaluating the *Épître aux femmes* and treating it as the most essential of the poems produced, but also to reconsidering Constance de Salm’s oeuvre as a whole. Fittingly, whilst despite what the *Œuvres complètes de la princesse Constance de Salm* claim, her poem did not put an end to the *querelle* there and then, it is now deemed (as its author suggested...) to be the only memorable production and one which clearly showed Le Brun’s

---

<sup>19</sup> *Sapho* was a success when first staged but Pipelet failed to have it performed anew in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. See Dorival.

cause to be doomed!<sup>20</sup> To the literary critic, more than anything else, the different elements, their relationships with each other and the timelines concerned, show that a single “*querelle*” can take on multiple forms and that “*querelles*” are at once conscious engagements of sparring partners and, to a certain extent, a posterior literary construction, by external critics but also sometimes, as here, by participants with vested interests who might take to judging events retrospectively.

---

<sup>20</sup> Along with writings by Geneviève Fraisse and Christine Planté on women writers in France, see e.g. Jean-Noël Pascal 2010: the quarrel around *femmes poètes* “aboutit, essentiellement, à la mise au jour, emphatique et retentissante, de ce texte poétique féministe majeur – et pour tout dire en quelque sorte *inaugural* – qu’est l’*Épître aux Femmes* de Constance Pipelet (1767-1845), solennellement déclamée par elle au Lycée des Arts le 19 juillet 1797 (1<sup>er</sup> thermidor an V) et répandue ensuite comme une traînée de poudre dans le public, au fil de très nombreuses publications dans la presse et en brochures, qui provoqua l’éclosion immédiate d’une petite série d’autres épîtres en vers adressées aux mêmes destinataires ou tournant autour du même sujet.”

Catriona Seth

Works cited

*Almanach des Muses*. Paris, 1797, 1808, 1810.

*Anthologie de la Poésie Française du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. Michel Delon. Gallimard, 1997.

*Anthologie de la Poésie Française*, ed. Catriona Seth *et al.* Gallimard, 2000.

Berenguier, Nadine. “Publish or Perish! Constance de Salm’s Identity Crisis and Unfulfilled Promise”. *Dix-Neuf* 1 (2017), pp.46-68.

Beaufort d’Hautpoul, Anne-Marie. “À mon Tricot”. *Almanach des Muses*. Paris, 1808, p.262.

*Biographie Universelle ou Dictionnaire de Tous les Hommes qui se sont fait remarquer par leurs Écrits, leurs Actions, leurs Talents, leurs Vertus ou leurs Crimes; depuis le Commencement du Monde jusqu’à ce Jour*. Brussels, Ode, 1846.

*Constance de Salm. Varia et Documents, Cahiers Roucher-André Chénier. Études sur la Poésie du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* n°29 (2010).

*Décade Philosophique, Politique et Littéraire (La)*. Paris, 1797-8.<sup>21</sup>

Dorival, Jérôme. “Constance de Salm et la Musique”. *Constance de Salm. Varia et Documents*, pp.135-159.

Dufrénoy, Adélaïde. “Le Bonheur Inattendu. Élégie Adressée à Sa Majesté la Reine de Naples, en lui Offrant un Exemplaire de mes Opuscules”. *Almanach des Muses*, 1810, pp.97-99.

*Femmes Poètes du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Une Anthologie*, ed. Christine Planté. Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1998.

Fraisse, Geneviève. *Opinions de Femmes*. Paris, Côté-Femmes, 1989.

---

<sup>21</sup> *La Décade* included double dating. For simplicity’s sake, we have not used the revolutionary calendar. The run of the periodical is available online via Gallica.

Genlis, Stéphanie-Félicité de. *Mémoires Inédits de Madame la Comtesse de Genlis*. Paris, Ladvocat, 1825.

Jullien, Bernard. *Histoire de la Poésie Française à l'Époque Impériale*. Paris, Paulin, 1844.

Le Brun, Ponce-Denis Écouchard. *Œuvres*, ed. Pierre-Louis Ginguené. Paris, Warée, 1811.

Pascal, Jean-Noël. "Les Muses à l'Assaut du Pinde", *Orages* n°8, 2010.

Pipelet, Constance. *Sapho, Tragédie mêlée de Chants, en Trois Actes et en Vers*. Paris, Chez l'auteur, rue Neuve-des-Bons-Enfants, au coin de celle des Petits-Champs, n°1304. Au Bureau du *Bulletin de Littérature, des Sciences et des Arts*, rue du Croissant, n°16. Et chez tous les marchands de nouveautés.

Plagnol-Diéval, Marie-Emmanuelle. "La Sapho de Constance de Salm: les Raisons d'un Succès". *Constance de Salm. Varia et Documents*, pp.115-134.

Planté, Christine. "Quel Compte donc fais-tu des Femmes". *Romantisme* n°85 (1994), pp.67-78.

Quéraud, Joseph-Marie. *La France Littéraire*. Paris, Firmin Didot, 1836.

Salm, Constance de. *Œuvres complètes*. Paris, Didot & Arthus Bertrand, 1842

Salm, Constance de. *Poésies*. Paris, Didot, 1811.

Seth, Catriona. "Les Muses de l'Almanach. La Poésie au Féminin dans l'*Almanach des Muses*". *Masculin/Féminin dans la Poésie et les Poétiques du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, sous la direction de Christine Planté, Lyon, PUL, 2002, pp.105-119.

Seth, Catriona. "L'Épître aux Femmes: textes et contextes". *Constance de Salm. Varia et Documents*, pp.41-63.

Seth, Catriona. "La Femme Auteur: Stratégie et Paradigmes. Le Cas de Constance de Salm". *La littérature en Bas-Bleus*, ed. Brigitte Louichon & Andrea Del Lungo. Garnier, 2010, pp.195-213.

Sharif, Maryam. “‘L’Encre sied mal aux Doigts de Rose’: la Querelle des Femmes Poètes dans *La Décade Philosophique* (1796-1797)”. *Plume* vol.10, 19 (2014), pp.119-146.

Sharif, Maryam. *Constance de Salm (1767-1845): une Modernité Contradictoire*, D.Phil thesis. Lyon, Université Lumière Lyon 2 (2014), supervised by Christine Planté.