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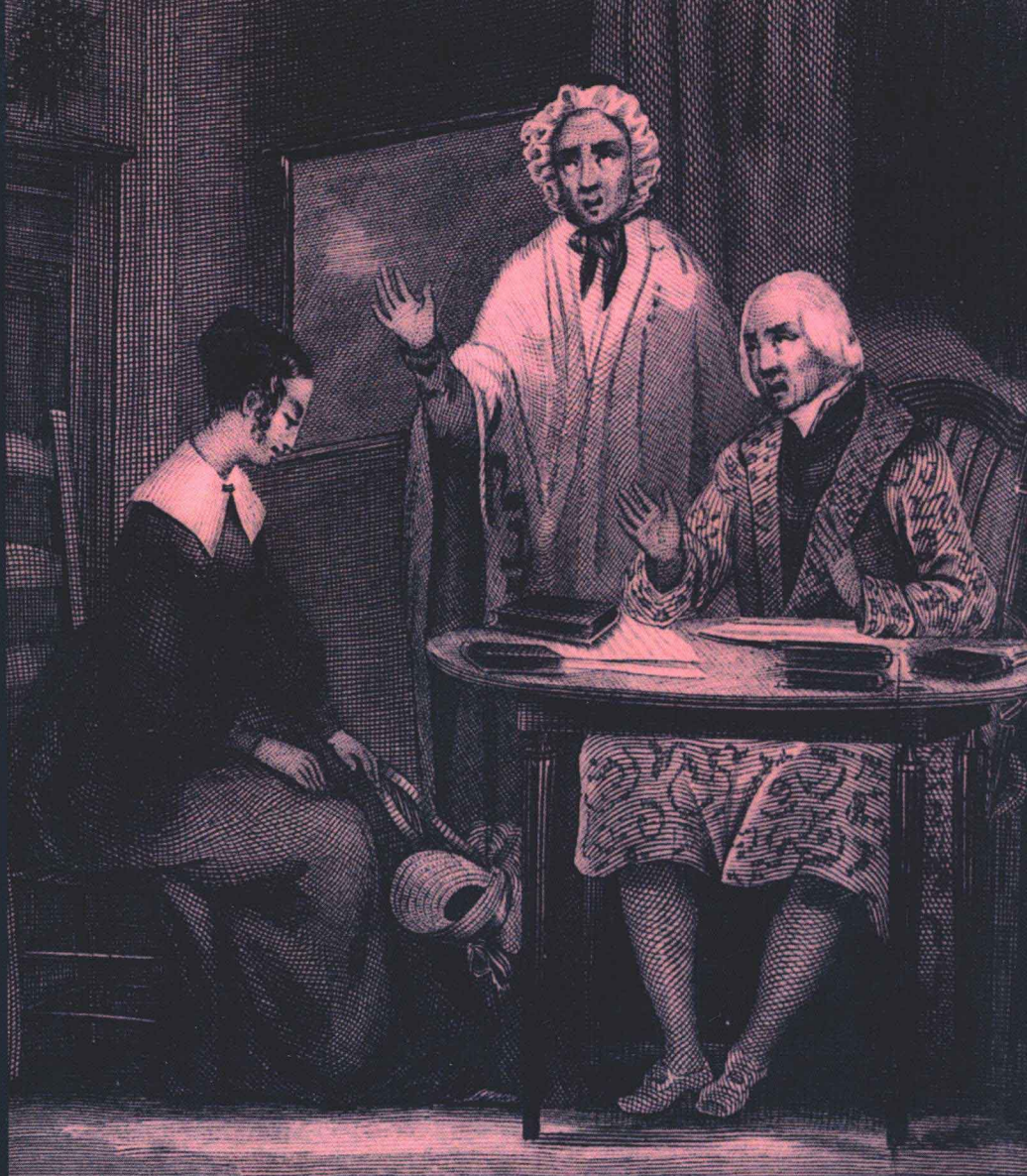

Women's Writing in Nineteenth-Century France

Alison Finch

WOMEN'S WRITING IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

ALISON FINCH

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521631860

First published 2000
This digitally printed first paperback version 2006

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Finch, Alison.
Women's writing in nineteenth-century France / Alison Finch.
p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in French: 65)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 63186 6 (hardback)
1. French literature – Women authors – History and criticism.
2. French literature – 19th century – History and criticism.
3. Women and literature – France.
I. Title: Women's writing in 19th century France.
II. Title. III. Series.
PQ149.F66 2000
840.9'9287'09034–dc21 99–052348

ISBN-13 978-0-521-63186-0 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-63186-6 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-02454-9 paperback
ISBN-10 0-521-02454-4 paperback

This is the most complete critical survey to date of women's literature in nineteenth-century France. Alison Finch's wide-ranging analysis of some sixty writers reflects the rich diversity of a century that begins with Mme de Staël's cosmopolitanism and ends with Rachilde's perverse eroticism. Finch's study brings out the contribution not only of major figures like George Sand but also of many other talented and important writers who have been unjustly neglected, including Flora Tristan, Claire de Duras and Delphine de Girardin. Her account opens new perspectives on the interchange between male and female authors and on women's literary traditions during the period. She discusses popular and serious writing: fiction, verse, drama, memoirs, journalism, feminist polemic, historiography, travelogues, children's tales, religious and political thought – often brave, innovative texts linked to women's social and legal status in an oppressive society. Extensive reference features include bibliographical guides to texts and writers.

ALISON FINCH is Reader in French at the University of Oxford and Fellow of Merton College, Oxford. She is the author of *Proust's Additions: The Making of 'A la recherche du temps perdu'* (1977), *Stendhal: La Chartreuse de Parme* (1984) and *Concordance de Stendhal* (1991). She also co-edited *Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry* (1982).

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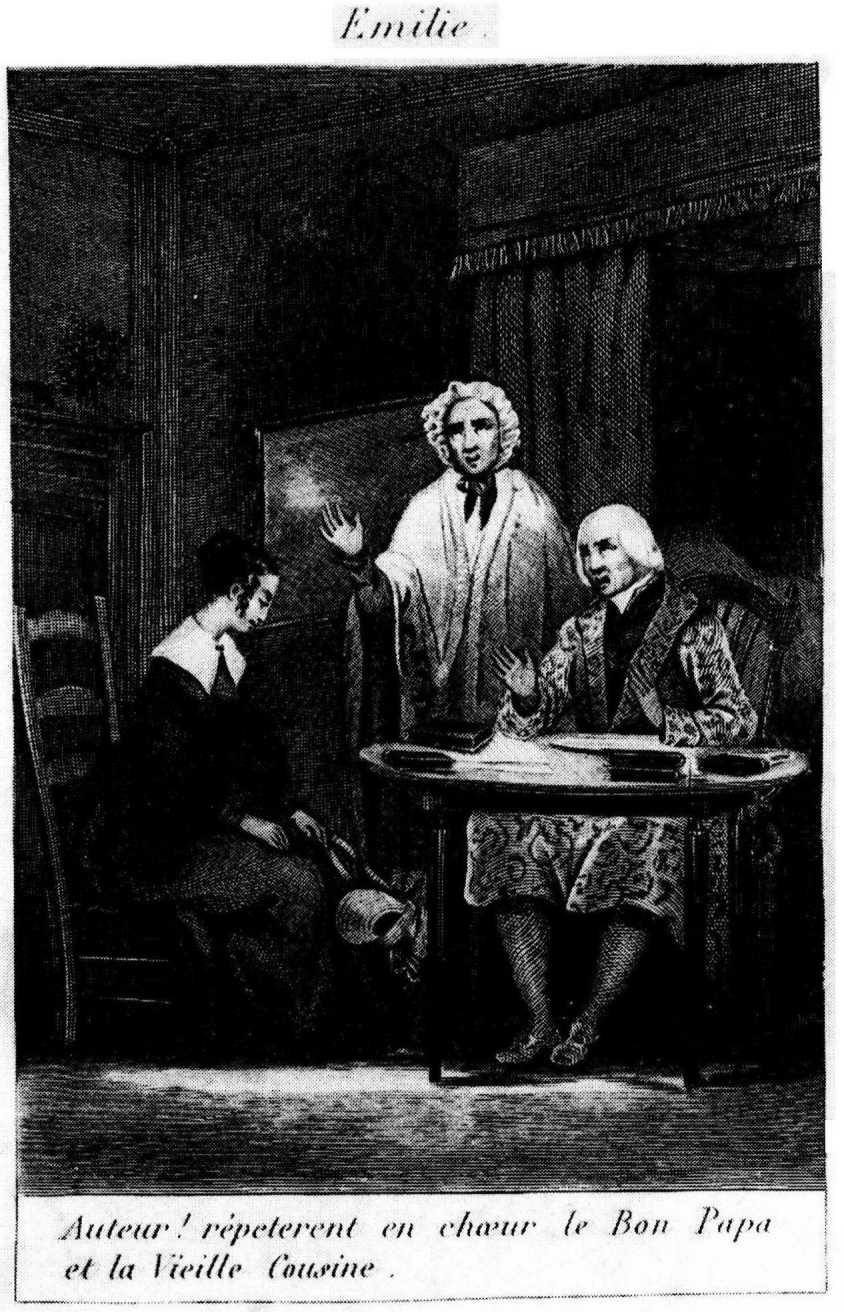

'"An author!" her grandpapa and old cousin chorused after her.' (From *Emilie ou la jeune fille auteur*, by Sophie Ulliac-Trémadeure, 1837.)

For Sam and Jess

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Note on the texts

Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. Spelling in quotations has been modernized (e.g. 'talens' has been changed to 'talents'); italics and ellipses are mine unless otherwise indicated. Original dates of publication are given in my discussion and in the Appendices; dates in note-references and the Bibliography are those of the editions used.

Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Merton College and the Faculty of Modern Languages, Oxford, for generous grants towards the costs of my research; Nick Pollard of the Ashmolean Museum for help with illustrations; David Thomas of the Taylor Institution Library and Deborah Quare of St Hugh's College Library, Oxford, for kindness that went well beyond the call of duty; Margaret Topping and Peter Dylewski for their excellent practical assistance; and all those whom I consulted en route: Jennifer Birkett, Elizabeth Fallaize, Robert Gildea, Bill Howarth, Dorothy Knowles, Wendy Mercer, Naomi Schor and Clive Scott. I am particularly grateful to the readers enlisted by Cambridge University Press for their invaluable advice at key stages, and to my editors Linda Bree, Kate Brett and Micky Sheringham for their encouragement and patience. Finally, for his support during the whole project, I owe a quite special debt to my husband Malcolm Bowie – a committed feminist in word and deed.

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CHAPTER I

Prejudice and reassessment

Since the early 1970s, with the growth of women's movements and university-based 'women's studies', publishers and critics have been looking again at women's writing in nineteenth-century France. Major figures such as Germaine de Staël, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore and George Sand had not entirely disappeared from view: some of their works remained in print, and were discussed by a few academics or more sporadically by biographers.[1] But they did not appear on university syllabuses, and almost all the others had been forgotten.[2] However, in the last thirty years the publishing houses 'des femmes' and Maspero have republished several hitherto 'buried' nineteenth-century texts by women; Madeleine Ambrière, in a recent literary history of the century, cites some thirty-five female authors; and scholars have written new studies of Staël, Desbordes-Valmore and Sand, incorporated other women writers into discussions of key nineteenth-century literary issues, and compiled women's biobibliographies.[3]

Important though these works have been, it has been difficult for them to give a sense of what women writers were doing in the century as a whole. Either they focus on one author; or the coverage is restricted to one theme, one genre or one part of the century; or the information about nineteenth-century France comes as part of a compendium in which writers of different periods and countries are briefly presented in alphabetical order.[4] A few essays assessing women's writing across the century do exist, but so far there has been no book-length survey.[5] Some such survey is, however, needed: the nineteenth century saw an explosion in women's writing.[6] They contributed to the culture at all levels, with not only novels, verse and drama, but also memoirs, political tracts, histories, literary criticism, advice-books, translations and opera libretti; many were hugely popular at the time. Julie de Krüdener's *Valérie*, first published

in 1803, continued to be re-issued right through the century, the last edition appearing in 1898; Gyp's *Autour du mariage*, published in 1883, reached its ninety-fourth edition in 1899.[7] This book, then, aims to go some way towards filling the gap. My discussion and appendices between them cover about ninety widely read writers; I have picked out those who seemed most likely to give a sense of both general currents and the variety of individual temperaments.[8]

The oblivion into which almost all these writers fell may be provisionally attributed to two interconnected causes. Nineteenth-century France was not uniformly sexist, and – as I shall show – many of these women gained recognition from the male establishment during their lifetimes; but once individuals were dead their works were usually rapidly demoted, either with condescension or with an overt misogyny which 'gallantry' had kept in the background while they were still alive.[9] Once-popular male writers have become obscure too. But the women were subject not just to the natural ebb and flow of literary taste, but to a dismissiveness or vindictiveness that would alone give cause to reassess its objects. They might be posthumously 'praised' in terms which deterred pursuit, as when Théophile Gautier in the 1850s compliments a mother-and-daughter pair of writers for their 'discretion' about their writing (nobody, he says of one of them, ever saw an inkstain on her fingers), and for having been personally 'so superior' to their works.[10] When a late-century publisher reissued the best-selling *Valérie* in 1878, it would seem to have been in his own commercial interests to promote the work: nevertheless he could not refrain from including a preface taken from a dictionary of national biography which claims that no man would have written *Valérie*, a novel based on so little. According to the editor himself, Krüdener's ability to create reverence for the beauties of nature somehow reflects the passing of her own physical beauty; and he notifies even corrigenda with a sneer, observing that the noble lady, despite precautions, has come down to us with large holes in her blue stockings.[11] Although *Valérie* is as representative a Romantic work as Chateaubriand's *René* (1802), and no worse written, such comments cumulatively killed off its reputation. The outstanding case of such relegation is George Sand: internationally acclaimed during her lifetime, her work started to be vilified almost as soon as she died.[12]

The second reason for the belittling of these writers is that they were often seen, both during and after their lives, not as individuals

but as a composite group marked off by their sex. They might be grouped thus to be admired, but since more often the sex was perceived as inferior, wholesale consignment to the shadows was easy. (All 'women-only' approaches, including this book, of course run the same – still necessary – risk.)[13] In the mid-1840s the most influential critic of the century, Sainte-Beuve, published a volume called *Portraits de femmes*, in the preface of which he observes that he thought it more convenient, indeed piquant ('même assez piquant'), to bring together all the sketches of literary women disseminated throughout five volumes of criticism and portraits. He starts with Mme de Sévigné because, he says, it is impossible to try to talk about women without first adjusting one's taste and putting oneself in, as it were, the right mood with this particular writer ('sans se mettre d'abord en goût et comme en humeur par Mme de Sévigné').[14] Baudelaire is even more inclined to denigrate women writers as a collectivity. In an 1852 essay on Poe, he claims that women write far too quickly and abundantly: their style trails and undulates like their clothing.[15] So it goes on: in his *Les Bas-bleus* of 1878 Barbey d'Aurevilly, with impeccable logic, asserts that women never write anything that lasts, and this is only fair, since they were not put into the world to do what we (men) do.[16] In 1929 Jean Larnac published his exceptionally wide-ranging and scholarly *Histoire de la littérature féminine en France*. This work is an odd mixture. Disarmingly, it expresses sympathy with women's struggles for emancipation and equal educational opportunities, and quotes with derision the view that their brains are too small for intellectual work. (The proponent of this view offered to have his own brain posthumously weighed: it turned out to be lighter than the average woman's . . .).[17] But Larnac's conclusions are unremittingly misogynistic. This now looks like mere inconsistency, but it doubtless conveyed to most of his 1930s readers a sense that here was the most balanced account to date of women's writing. If even Larnac was saying of Desbordes-Valmore that no woman writer ever showed less intelligence and that after her women had nothing more to say, or repeating the old chestnut that women writers know only how to depict themselves, their works in effect adding up to one work many times reshaped, then what was the point of pursuing the matter further?[18] Indeed, the standard mid-twentieth-century French literary history by Lagarde and Michard mentions only the famous three, and briefly at that, giving Staël seven pages, Desbordes-Valmore three and Sand