

## Lettres de Femmes / Femmes de Lettres

### 1180 Marie de France

[**Marie de France** is the first identified woman of letters in the history of French literature. Very little is known about her life or even her true name, outside of a brief reference in the introduction to her book of fables, where she writes, “*My name is Marie. I am from France.*” The excerpt we have chosen to represent is taken from the prologue to her collection of *lais*, short Breton folk tales in verse. Here, she exhorts her readers to avoid worldly temptations by using their God-given talents to create a great work.]

*At the end of this text,  
Written in the French language,  
I name myself, for posterity,  
Marie is my name, I am from France...*

*I name myself for posterity...*

*I name myself for posterity...*

*For posterity... I name myself...*

To those whom God has given the science and art of words must not keep silent nor hide, but rather show themselves with all their heart. When a beautiful work finds a large audience, it is in its first blossom; when it is universally praised, its flowers are in full bloom...

The ancient philosophers knew it well. They were deeply convinced that the more time one spends on a work, the better it is, and the better one keeps oneself away from sin. Whoever wishes to guard himself from vice should dedicate himself to study and to completing a difficult task; that is how one will stay away from vice and save oneself from terrible suffering [...]

In your honor, noble king, who are brave and gallant, saluted by joy, and in whose heart everything that is good takes root; I have endeavored to put together a collection of stories in verse. How many nights did I sacrifice to compose these verses! I knew in my heart that I wished to offer them to you as a gift. If it pleases you to accept them, you will fill me with great joy, and I shall be forever happy. Do not think me prideful if I dare to offer them to you. Listen now, as I begin...

### 1405 Christine de Pizan

[When **Christine de Pisan** (1363-c.1434) lost her husband to a sudden illness, she turned to writing as a means of financial support for herself and her children. In addition to hundreds of love ballads that she wrote on commission, Christine composed a number of texts that criticized the blatant misogyny of the literary canon at the time. In her letter to the queen of France, she laments the horrors of her country torn apart by war, and she urges the queen, as a woman and as a mother, to intervene where men have failed. Christine's last surviving work is a poem dedicated to the heroism of Joan of Arc, completed a mere three years before Joan was burned at the stake as a heretic.]

To whom will she tell her pain,  
The girl who has no friends?

The girl who has no friends,  
How does she live?  
She sleeps neither day nor night  
She is always awake.  
Love awakens her  
And keeps her from sleep.

To whom will she tell her pain,  
The girl who has no friends?

Majestic, powerful and revered sovereign, my Lady Isabeau, Queen of France by the grade of God.

Most noble, powerful and revered Queen,

I beg Your Great Majesty not to disdain nor dismiss the mournful voice of Her wretched servant Chrstitine, but rather that She condescend to listen to these words, written out of a sincere desire only to do what is good. No doubt you must believe that such an unworthy and ignorant person as myself should not get involved in such serious affairs. However, it is only normal that a person who is suffering from some kind of pain will instinctively seek a remedy: this is true for those who are ill who will do anything to be cured, or even the hungry who run after food—in this way, pain always seeks its remedy. This is why I beg you, Most Noble Lady, not to be surprised that it is You to whom I turn. As everyone believes and says, you may be the remedy and the sovereign medicine that will cure our kingdom, which is today so afflicted, so gravely wounded, and getting worse...

Alas, Noble Queen! Where might we seek pity, charity, clemency, and goodness, if these are not to be found in a Great Princess. Since these virtues are part of a woman's nature, we should expect them all the more from a great lady, because God has granted her greater gifts,

Oh Noble Queen, I do not wish to upset you with my words, but I must tell you that a wise and virtuous queen must be both mother and advocate to all her subjects. God knows that no mother, lest her heart be made of stone, would be so cold as to sit back and watch as her children massacre each other, killing and tearing each other apart!

Indeed if there were a princess with a heart so hardened by sin that not even God or such terrible miseries could affect her, she should keep in mind that the wheel of Fortune turns quickly and can reverse the course of her life in an instant.

Just as it is a truer sign of charity to give a poor man half a bread in times of famine, than to give him a full loaf in times of plenty, I beg you, in this age of misery, to grant to your people the modest gift of your words and the grace of your sovereign intervention. If you consent to do so, you will satisfy their hunger for peace, you will cure their suffering, and you will be in their prayers. I pray that God, in His infinite goodness, give you the will and strength to respond to this mission, and many others as well; and that when the day comes, he will open for you the gates of heaven.

Written on the fifth of October, in the year of our Lord 1405.  
Your humble and obedient servant,  
Christine.

*[Homage to Joan of Arc, by Christine de Pisan, 1429]*

*The year 1429  
Saw the sun shine again,  
Bringing a new day,  
That we haven't seen  
For many years, as we have been  
In mourning; I am one of these.  
But I no longer grieve over anything,  
As I can see what I have longed for.*

*Jeanne, blessed maiden,  
Will you be forgotten,  
You whom God has so honored  
That you untied the rope  
That bound France so tightly?  
Could you be praised enough  
For having given peace to  
This land, brought low by war.*

*You, Jeanne, born at the right time,  
Blessed be Heaven that created you!  
A maiden sent by God.*

*Sent by a miracle,  
And Divine volition,  
Brought by the angel of God  
To the King, in order to help him;  
Her achievement is no illusion.*

*Hee! What an honor to the female sex!*

*A girl of 16 years  
(Isn't this something quite supernatural?)  
For whom weapons are not heavy  
And for whom the enemy flees.*

*This is something 5000 men could not do!*

*Never has there been such a great force,  
Not with 100 or 1000 men!  
Of our courageous and capable soldiers,  
She is the principal leader.*

*So lower your horns, you English,  
For you will never catch your prey!  
Don't bring your foolish schemes to France!  
You have been check-mated.*

*This is a very beautiful poem written by Christine.*

### 1547 Marguerite de Navarre

[As sister to the French renaissance king, Francis I, **Marguerite de Navarre** (1492-1549), Queen of Navarre, was a highly educated and influential woman. Indeed it was she who negotiated her brother's release after he was captured in battle by the king of Spain. In her extended poem *La Navire (The Ship)*, she mourns the death of her brother, "*the one whom I loved so much.*" Marguerite's best known work is *L'Heptameron*, a collection of clever and often bawdy tales that pit feminine against masculine ideas of virtue. In our excerpt, a ferry-woman uses her wit and guile to outwit two unscrupulous friars who attempt to get the better of her.]

You hid from me the death of the king, but the spirit of God has revealed it to me...

*... I abandon my eyes  
To weep; then upon the paper,  
A bit of my sorrow I shall transcribe,  
This is my mournful endeavor...*

Alas! So unhappy am I,  
That I cannot express my sadness  
Except that it is without hope [...]

So many tears fill my eyes,  
That they cannot see neither earth nor heaven,  
So abundant is their weeping!  
My mouth sighs in every place [...]

I have nothing more than my sad voice  
With which to cry, alone,  
While lamenting the hard absence  
(alas!) of the one whom I loved,  
And whom my heart so faithfully served,  
I have lost his joyful presence.

Madame, there isn't a lady in the company who doesn't have a tear in her eye, out of compassion for your verses. If I do not say something to make everyone laugh, I don't know who will be able to repair the fault I made in making them weep. I offer you the floor, to tell the next story—and if you wish to present yourself as a moral example, I am sure we will all laugh at your malicious folly.

In the port of Coulon, there was a ferry-woman who night and day did nothing except take people from one side of the river to the other. So came aboard two friars who crossed the river alone with her. And because this passage is one of the longest that exists in France, they asked her to make love to them, to which she responded *what she should*.

But these two friars, unshamed indeed, decided to take her by force, and, if she complained, to throw her in the river. The ferry-woman — as sage and refined as the friars were crazy and malicious — said to them both, “I am more gracious (*free of charge*) than I seem. So I beg that you at least allow me two things: may one after the other take his pleasure of me. Now you both need to decide which one would like to be the first. The friars thought her request quite just, and the younger of the two decided the older should be the first. And, approaching a small island the ferry-woman said to the younger, “Say your prayers here and wait for me until I have finished with your older friend on another island.” The young friar jumped enthusiastically onto the small island and waited for her return. The ferry-woman took the older one to another island across the way, and, as they approached, she pretended to tie her boat onto a tree at the island’s edge and said to the old friar, “My friend, go find a suitable place for us to be together.” The old man hobbled off the boat in search of the best place to lie. As soon as she saw him ashore, she pushed her boat with one swift kick and paddled away from shore into the river as quickly as she could, leaving the two friars stranded in the desert, yelling as loudly as she could: “Hah! By my faith, it would be better to be thrown in the river than to sleep with two friars!”

**1678 Madame de Lafayette**

[**Madame de Lafayette** (1634-1693) is considered by many as the first modern novelist of France. Her historical fiction *La Princesse de Clèves* tells the story of a young noblewoman who struggles to maintain her virtue in a world where romantic intrigues, arranged marriages, and social ambitions rule the day. In the most famous scene from this novel, the young heroine makes an unprecedented confession (*aveu*) to her husband, that she may have feelings for another man. This confession leads to the subsequent death of her husband and to the woman's ultimate rejection of court life. The following is the most famous scene from the novel, known as *l'aveu* or "the confession:"]

Very well, Monsieur, I shall make a confession to you the likes of which no woman has ever made to her husband; but the innocence of my conduct and of my intentions give me the strength to do so. It is true that I have a reason to distance myself from Court, and that I wish to avoid the perils that sometimes afflict people of my age. I have never shown the slightest sign of weakness, and I would have no fear to do so if you would simply allow me to retire from Court, or if my mother were still alive advise me. However dangerous my choice might be, I am happy to make it because it will allow me to remain worthy as your wife. I beg your forgiveness for any feelings I have that might displease you, but know that I will never displease you by my actions. Just imagine how much love and esteem a woman must have for her husband in order to do what I have just done. Advise me, have pity on me, and love me still, if you can.

### 1693 Madame de Sévigné

[Although **Madame de Sévigné** (1626-1696) did not produce a work of fiction as such, she was celebrated in her lifetime for perfecting the art of writing letters, which were copied and circulated among the salon circles of her time. In this excerpt, she grieves over the loss of her close friend, Madame de Lafayette (see above), who died after suffering a number of gastric complications, which Sévigné describes in some detail.]

You were well aware of all the worth of Mme de LaFayette, either from your own knowledge or from me or your friends. On that you could not overestimate. She was worthy to be one of your friends, and I was only too happy to be loved by her for a very considerable time. We never had the slightest cloud in our friendship. Long habit had never accustomed me to her worth, and the taste was always keen and new. I did all sorts of things for her simply out of love, without the obligation friendship entails. I was sure also that I was her most tender consolation and it was the same for forty years; that is an extraordinary time, but it is the foundation of our true friendship. For the past to years her infirmities had been very serious. I always defended her, for people said she was absurd to refuse to go out. She was mortally depressed—how absurd also! Isn't she the most fortunate woman in the world? She admitted that, too, but I said to these people who were so hasty in their judgements, "Mme de Lafayette wa not absurd," and I stuck to that. Alas, Madame, the poor woman is now all too justified; it needed her death to prove that she was right both to stay at home and to be depressed. She had one kidney quite useless and the other *pullulant*; you can hardly stir abroad in that condition. She had two polypuses in her heart and the point of the heart wasted; wasn't that enough to give her those depressions she complained about. Her bowels were hard and distended with wind, and a colic was always giving her trouble, That was the condition of this poor woman who used to say, "One day they will find out..." and they have found it all out. So Madame, she was right during her lifetime and right after her death, and never was she without that wonderful reason which was her outstanding quality.

## 1791 Olympe de Gouges

[**Olympe de Gouges** (1748-1793) was an active participant in the pre-revolutionary salons of Paris, and she wrote on a number of controversial topics, such as the liberation of slaves, the right of divorce, and the promotion of women to civic life. She welcomed the ideals of the Revolution with great hope, but she became quickly disillusioned when she realized that the new *Declaration of the Rights of Man* did not guarantee any rights for women. She was guillotined in 1793 after she openly criticized the leaders of the first republic.]

Mothers, daughters, sisters--representatives of the nation, demand to be constituted into a national assembly. The representatives of the French people, organized as a National Assembly believing that the ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the rights of man are the sole cause of public calamities and of the corruption of governments, have determined to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, unalienable, and sacred rights of man. Considering that ignorance, neglect, or contempt for the rights of woman are the sole causes of public misfortunes and governmental corruption, they have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of woman: Therefore the National Assembly recognizes and proclaims, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights of man and of the citizen:

Therefore the sex that is superior in beauty as in courage, needed in maternal sufferings, recognizes and declares, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights of woman and the citizeness.

ARTICLE I: Woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on common utility.

ARTICLE X: No one should be disturbed for his fundamental opinions; woman has the right to mount the scaffold, so she should have the right equally to mount the rostrum, provided that these manifestations do not trouble public order as established by law.

ARTICLE XVI: A society in which the observance of the law is not assured, nor the separation of powers defined, has no constitution at all.

Women, wake up; the tocsin of reason sounds throughout the universe; recognize your rights. The powerful empire of nature is no longer surrounded by prejudice, fanaticism, superstition, and lies. The torch of truth has dispersed all the clouds of folly and usurpation. Enslaved man has multiplied his force and needs yours to break his chains. Having become free, he has become unjust toward his companion. Oh women! Women, when will you cease to be blind? What advantages have you gathered in the Revolution? A scorn more marked, a disdain more conspicuous. During the centuries of corruption you only reigned over the weakness of men. Your empire is destroyed; what is left to you then? Firm belief in the injustices of men. The reclaiming of your patrimony founded on the wise decrees of nature; why should you fear such a beautiful enterprise? . . . Whatever the barriers set up against you, it is in your power to overcome them; you only have to

want it. Let us pass now to the appalling account of what you have been in society; and since national education is an issue at this moment, let us see if our wise legislators will think sanely about the education of women.

## 1886 Camille Claudel

[**Camille Claudel** (1864-1943) was successively the student, model, confidante, and lover of the celebrated sculptor Auguste Rodin. By the early twentieth century, her works gained commercial and critical success; however, around 1905, she began to suffer from severe fits of depression and paranoia. In 1913 she was committed to a mental asylum, and she remained interned until her death thirty years later. In this undated letter addressed to her younger brother, the catholic writer Paul Claudel, she blames her imprisonment on Rodin and a patriarchal conspiracy.]

Dear Paul,

Today, March 3, is the anniversary of my captivity. It has been 17 years since Rodin and the art merchants sent me to do penitence in a madhouse. After stealing my entire life's work, to complete their sinister plot, they forced me to spend years in a prison. It is they who should be behind bars. Well done! all those millionnaires throwing themselves at a defenseless artist! Because it is true that all those gentlemen who collaborated in this nice affair are millionnaires 40 times over.

It seems that my little studio, my few furnishings and tools crafted by my own hands; my poor little household still excited their greed! All the imagination, the feeling, and the spontaneity of one developed mind was closed to them, mindless blockheads eternally shut off from the light. They needed someone to show them, as they said "we are using a madwoman to find our subjects."

Perhaps there are some who would have the guts and decency to compensate in some small way the wretched woman whose genius they exploited: no! a madhouse! not even the right to my own home...

[I have to write in secret, and I do not know what I will do to mail this letter. The woman who usually does me this favor (in exchange for greasing her palm) is ill. The others would denounce me to the director, like a criminal. I tell you, Paul, it is true that your sister is in prison. In prison, with madwomen who spend the whole day screaming and making faces, and who are completely incapable of putting together three sensible words. For nearly twenty years, this is how they have been treating an innocent woman.]

They exploit women and they crush the artist by making her sweat blood! [And Rodin behind them all with his slut. I tell you, it was all perfectly orchestrated—they even included you in their game and you were too naive to suspect anything. You, Louise, Mama, and Papa. Everyone. It was like I had the plague. They spied on me, they sent people to steal my work—over and over again. I wrote you once in the past how they tried to poison me. You keep telling me that God pities the afflicted, that God is good, etc, etc... What kind of God lets an innocent woman rot behind the walls of a madhouse. I don't know what is keeping me from just —

*[Draft of an unfinished letter, undated, around 1930]*

## 1924 Colette

[Most Americans know **Sidonie-Gabrille Colette** (1873-1954) from her celebrated novel *Gigi* (later made into a musical and film), although she composed nearly 50 novels in total. Colette made a career of subverting social expectations, and she played a number of life roles, including author, actress, wife, journalist, lover, nurse, lesbian, and sex-symbol. In this excerpt from *La Maison de Claudine*, the female narrator describes a young girl who defies expectations and fantasizes of becoming a sailor and of traveling around the world.]

She wears a school girl apron from her neck to her knees, and her hair is done up in *poor-girl style*: two braids tied and tucked behind her ears.

What will happen to these hands, where the bramble and the cat left their marks, or these feet, laced up in yellow dried veal skin?

There are days we say the “little one” will be pretty. Today, she is ugly, and she feels on her skin the imminent ugliness that accompanies sweat, finger traces of mud on each cheek, and especially the successive, mimetic resemblances that link her to Jeanne, Sandrine, to Aline the seamstress, the pharmacist’s wife and the *demoiselle* from the postoffice. Because for a very long time today these little girls played the game of: “what shall we be when we grow up?”

-- Me, when I grow up....

Quick to imitate, the girls lack imagination. A kind of resigned wisdom, a villager’s terror from adventure and travel abroad hold back already the young clockmaker’s girl, the corner store daughter, the butcher’s daughter, the cleaner’s daughter, all of them captive to the maternal boutique. There is Jeanne, nonetheless, who declared:

-- Me, I am going to be a coquette!

«Well that, thinks disdainfully Minet-Chéri, that’s child’s play...»

Her turn next, she threw out breathlessly and with a disdainful tone:

-- Me, I am going to be a sailor!

Because she dreams sometimes of being a boy, of wearing pants and a blue beret. But the sea that Minet-Chéri ignores, the boat floating on the crest of waves, the gilded island made of luminous fruits, none of this emerged until much later, only to serve as a background to her blue shirt and beret with a pompom.

-- Me, I am going to be a sailor, and I am going to travel the world!...

### Marguerite Duras - 1984

[Born in French colonial Indochina, **Marguerite Duras** (1914-1996) first arrived in France at age seventeen. Her early years living in relative poverty in south-east Asia strongly influenced her work. She was a prolific writer, producing over six dozen novels, plays, and films. Although she was associated for a time with the writers of the *nouveau roman*, she has never been definitively identified with any one literary school. In this excerpt from her novel *L'Amant* (*The Lover*), the narrator reflects upon the ravages of time on her face, which she has followed with the same interest as reading a book.]

Very early on in my life it was already too late. At eighteen years old it was already too late. Between eighteen and twenty-five my face left on an unimaginable journey. I am not sure if this happens to everyone, I never asked. It seems to me that someone spoke of this passage of time that can strike when one travels across youth and its most celebrated moments. This aging was brutal. I saw it take over my traits one by one, change the relationship that existed between each line, make the eyes bigger, the way of looking more sad, the mouth more definitive, the forehead marked with deep crevices. Instead of being afraid I watched this aging operate on my face with the same interest I would take, for instance, in reading a story. I knew I was not mistaken, that one day this aging would slow down and take a more normal pace. Those people who knew me at seventeen before my travel to France were impressed when they saw me again, two years later, at nineteen. That face, the new one, I kept it. It was my face. Of course it aged some more but relatively less than it should have. I have a face lacerated with dry and deep wrinkles, made of broken skin. It did not give way like certain faces with finer lines, it kept the same outlines but its matter is destroyed. I have a destroyed face.

### Fatou Diome – 2003

[Born in 1968 in Niodor, Senegal, **Fatou Diome** moved to Strasbourg in 1994. She taught at Strasbourg University and worked for FR3 French television. She is an author of a collection of short stories, *La Préférence National* and her first novel, *In the Belly of the Atlantic*. She is currently working on her Ph.D. in French language and literature, completing her Ph.D. thesis on *Le Voyage, les échanges et la formation dans l'œuvre littéraire et cinématographique de Ousmane Sembène*. In her first novel, *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* Diome depicts a young woman who, while watching the 2000 European Cup, reflects on her childhood on the island of Niodor as well as the journey she made to France. She compares life in Europe to sweeter memories of Africa. She admits France has changed her even as she knows her family in Africa still holds different dreams for her future than she does. At the end of the excerpt here the young woman claims that writing is a burning necessity that saves her from exile. She begs the reader to stay awake and keep passing her the wood she needs to stoke the fire of her dreams...]

He runs, tackles, dribbles, strikes, falls, gets up again, carries on running. Faster! But the wind's changed: now the ball's heading straight for Toldo, the Italian goalie, Oh God, do something! I'm not shouting, I'm begging you: if you're the Almighty, do something! Ah, back comes Maldini, his legs knitting up the turf!

In front of the TV, I leap off the sofa and give it a violent kick. Ouch! The table! I wanted to run with the ball, help Maldini get it back, shadow him halfway down the pitch so he could bury it in the back of the opponent's net. But all my kick did was spill my cold tea onto the carpet. [...]

Why am I telling you all this? Because I adore football? Not that much. Why then? Because I am in love with Maldini? No way! I'm not that crazy. I'm not starstruck! I don't crane my neck gazing up at the stars in the sky. My grandma taught me early on how to pick up stars. At night, all you have to do is place a basin of water in the middle of the yard and there they will be at your feet. Try it yourself and you will see: you only need a small dish in the corner of the garden to see twenty-two stars, Maldini among them, chasing round in circles on the turf like rats in a maze. So since I am not writing Maldini a love letter, why am I telling you all this? [...]

It's 29 June, 2000, and I am watching the European Cup. It's Italy versus Holland in the semi-final. My eyes are fixed on the TV but my heart is contemplating other horizons. [...]

It has been nearly ten years since I left the shade of coconut palms. Pounding the pavement, my imprisoned feet recall their former liberty, the caress of warm sand being nipped by crabs, tiny pieces of broken shell, and those stings that only served to remind you of life's presence in the most extreme and hidden places of the body...

Now I tread European ground, my feet sculpted and marked by African earth. One step after another, it's the same movement all humans make, all over the planet. Yet I know my Western walk has nothing in common with the one that took me through the alleys, the beaches, paths and fields of my native land. People walk everywhere, but never towards the same horizon. In Africa, I followed destiny's wake, between chance and infinite hopefulness. In Europe, I walk down the long tunnel of efficiency that leads to well-defined goals. Here, chance plays no part; every step leads to an anticipated result and hope is measured by appetite for the fight. [...] Under the gray European sky [...] I walk on, counting my steps, each one bringing me closer to my dream. But how many kilometers, how many work-filled days and sleepless nights still separate me from that so-called success that my people [...] took for granted [...] the moment I told them I was leaving for France? I walk on, my steps weighed down by their dreams, my head filled with my own. I walk on and have no idea where I'll end up.

Hey you! Don't fall asleep! My head's boiling over! Pass me the wood! This fire needs stoking. Writing is my witch's cauldron; at night I brew up dreams too tough to cook...

### **Epilogue**

*At the end of this text,  
Written in the French language,  
I name myself, for posterity,  
Marie is my name, I am from France...*

*For posterity, I name myself...  
Marie... Christine... Marguerite... Madeleine... Olympe... Camille... Colette...  
Marguerite...Fatou...*