

WOMEN WRITERS OF THE FRENCH COURT

Philip Mansel describes the revelations recorded in the memoirs of women at the centre of power in France at some of the most dramatic moments in the nation's history

The artistic glories of the French court from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries are well known: the Sainte Chapelle, Fontainebleau, Versailles and the Louvre speak for themselves. Its literary achievements are less familiar. Yet the French court, more than any other, was a machine for writing. Official accounts of campaigns and festivals poured from the presses of the Imprimerie Royale. For entertainment the king and the royal household commissioned plays by, among others, Molière, Jean Racine and Voltaire – all of whom were also working court officials, as gentilhomme ordinaire (Racine and Voltaire) or valet de chambre-tapissier (Molière) 'du roi'.

The literature of power, however, and memoirs in particular, were the forms of writing most appreciated at the court of France. Independence of spirit or the desire for revenge led courtiers to challenge the official version of events recorded in royal histories. Indeed one of the earliest and most prominent women memoir writers, a servant of Queen Anne of Austria called Madame de Motteville, whose work I used frequently in my life of Louis XIV, claimed that 'the words of kings and their actions are almost always blamed' by courtiers. Courtiers writing in private analysed characters, motives and events without the constant references to God or the king of the official histories.

French memoir writers fulfil Graham Greene's first requirement for a writer, as expressed to V.S. Pritchett in 1948: disloyalty, freedom from accepted opinions and a taste for treason. The pen was, if not mightier than the sword, certainly sharper. While often claiming that they were writing only for their family, publication (if not in Paris, then



in Amsterdam beyond the reach of the French government) was usually the memoir-writer's intention.

The first person to write memoirs in France was called Philippe de Commines. A chamberlain and diplomat of Louis XI who had previously served Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, and was inspired by their rivalry, he wrote in 1489–97 during a period of disgrace at the French court. His memoirs were

published posthumously in 1524–8 and were more influential in France than Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532). By 1643 there had been 120 editions and they had been translated into Italian (the first French book to be so), English, Dutch and German. They were accurate as well as popular. Louis XIV himself would read them and, to show his level of practical skills as part of his education, set a page in type.



Opposite Engraving of Louis XIV, 1670, by Robert Nanteuil. © Yale University, New Haven. **Left** Anne Marie Louise d'Orléans, known as La Grande Mademoiselle, c.1666. **Right** Engraving of Anne of Austria, Queen of France and mother of Louis XIV (1601–66), 1660, by Robert Nanteuil.



Thereafter more memoirs were written in France than in any other country; the first English memoirs were not written until the seventeenth century, by Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the Earl of Clarendon, who had both lived for long periods in France. Not only the influence of Commines, but also the need to justify the writer's acts in the many revolts and conspiracies against the king that devastated France between 1559 and 1659, may explain the popularity of memoirs there. As the historian Albert Sorel later wrote: 'there is no battle lost which cannot be won back on paper.' At their best, these memoirs display a grasp of character, the telling detail, and the dramatic scene, which any novelist would envy. Indeed, while novelists often borrowed scenes from life, memoir writers frequently invented them.

Paris was called the paradise of women, since they were so free there, and nowhere else did so many women write memoirs. Between 1660 and 1690, Louis XIV's older, unmarried first cousin Anne Marie Louise d'Orléans, generally known as La Grande Mademoiselle, was writing her memoirs, at the same time that the king – with the help of his secretaries – was glorifying his power and campaigns in his own. Mademoiselle was trying to assert her independence, and to justify both her rebellion against the crown during the civil wars of 1648–52, known as the Fronde, and her love for a younger courtier called the Comte de Lauzun.

Disillusion was her theme: 'Since the

veil has fallen from my eyes, I have known that all the grandeur, all the vanity and all the pomps and pleasures of the world have been illusions ... we are only actors who play a role in the theatre.' She claimed, as was by then a standard posture: 'I am not trying to be an author, not having enough skill for that, and the role does not suit me in any way.' Little respect for the king is evident in her disabused accounts of his love affairs; she describes the 'familiarity' of Cardinal Mazarin's nieces' manners with the king as 'he did not like ceremonies'; and, later, the removal of sentries to facilitate his access to Madame de Montespan's bedroom, although both were married to someone else. She also describes one of his favourites, the Comte de Guiche, during a ball giving kicks in the bottom to the king's brother, Monsieur, 'qui trouvait tout bon de lui' (who liked everything he did). In 1670, yielding to pressure from the royal family, Louis XIV, having first agreed to her marriage to Lauzun, changed his mind and forbade it. He wept but, according to his cousin, said: 'Kings should satisfy the public' – a form of self-definition which challenges received

ideas about Louis XIV's absolutism.

More reflective and less self-centred are the memoirs of one of Mademoiselle's correspondents, Madame de Motteville. She came from the minor nobility and served as one of the four premières femmes de chambre of the Queen, Anne of Austria, widow of Louis XIII and mother of Louis XIV. It was a post which gave her greater intimacy, although lesser status, than a lady-in-waiting: in England she would have been called a dresser or woman of the bedchamber (as Mrs Masham was to Queen Anne). Her marriage to a wealthy octogenarian had lasted only two years before he died in 1641. There were no children.

Thereafter her emotions were, as far as is known, centred on the queen. In her opinion Anne of Austria was both a great beauty and a great monarch, worthy of ranking with the most famous in history. Motteville wrote her memoirs 'to repay the honour she has done me by introducing me to her intimacy', and claimed she was always looking for the exact truth when describing events and characters. She recalled of the queen: 'I have never



Rosline de Suedois's 1828 engraving, of Marie Antoinette, after painting by Elisabeth Vigée Lebrun, c.1778. © National Trust Collections.

in my life known a person less avid for glory or applause', despite the repeated humiliations she suffered during the revolts of the Fronde. When she had told her mistress she was writing her memoirs, the queen expressed not indignation, but the desire not to be praised more than she deserved: 'I was constrained to promise her seriously that I would tell the truth as much against her as in her favour.' Her love for the queen did not stop Motteville calling Mazarin – the queen's chief minister and probably her lover – a rogue whose 'friponnerie' (dishonesty) was the main cause of the revolts of the Fronde.

For Motteville, as for Mademoiselle, the court was not only a power centre but also a market. 'The household of kings is like a great marketplace where it is

During the Revolution the shock of exile and shadow of the guillotine added astringency to the style of women's court memoirs

necessary to go for the needs of daily life', including pensions, rewards, jobs and news. It was also a theatre of emotions and an education in how to control them. Like Mademoiselle, she tells stories about Louis XIV's affairs: his 'violent passion' for Marie Mancini, his love for Louise de la Vallière, and the attempts of a discarded favourite, the Comtesse de Soissons, to alert the queen about his feelings for Louise. Of the Comtesse de Soissons – one of Mazarin's nieces – Motteville wrote: 'no longer being able to please the king herself, she wanted to keep his favour by all the ways her ambition could inspire in her ... ambition, love and jealousy, the three great passions in the soul, did a lot of work in her own soul.' Like Mademoiselle, she depicts Louis XIV as weaker, more emotional and less awesome than his reputation suggests, describing him begging the queen's forgiveness on his knees and in tears, and being manipulated by the Comtesse de Soissons. The king, she wrote, was 'not always wise nor always just'. Motteville also said, unjustly: he 'was so avid for glory that he did not want to leave even the crumbs to the queen his mother; he wanted everything for himself'.

Motteville had a courtier's view of history. She believed that public events were driven by personal feelings. The Fronde had been fuelled by popular hatred of taxation, royal absolutism and the hyper-corrupt Mazarin. But for the terrible

warning – as most Frenchmen considered it – of England, where Charles I was executed in January 1649, the movement might have become more revolutionary. But in Madame de Motteville's view it was caused by the private ambitions of a few great nobles. Some 'great movements in the world which destroy or establish empires' were in reality due to the 'secret intrigues of a few people', she wrote. Some were women, such as the Duchesse de Longueville or the Princesse Palatine, Anne de Gonzague, described by Motteville as the honour of her sex, adroit, intelligent, capable of winning the confidence of all sides. For Motteville obedience to 'the supreme and unique power of kings' was part of the divine order. Kings shared the power of God. The people, by contrast, was 'a wild beast which never grew tame'. She was horrified by the barricades the people erected throughout Paris on 26 August 1648 in what she saw as a crazed attempt to seize power, and by their insistence on filing through the king's bedroom on 9 February 1651 and drawing his bed curtains to check he had not fled Paris. According to her, they were converted by the sight of the sleeping 12-year-old and, 'recovering their feelings of love, gave him a thousand blessings'.

Motteville's masterpiece is her description of the death of the queen, a scene comparable to the finest moments in better-known memoirs such as those of the Duc de Saint-Simon or François-René de Chateaubriand. She spares no details of the Queen's cancer, gangrene, ulcers and abscesses. During the first stages of his mother's cancer in April 1663, Louis XIV had visited her eight or ten times a day. Other witnesses confirm that he rose earlier than usual, was present in her bedroom at all consultations, treatments and bleedings (the usual seventeenth-century treatment for all illnesses), devoted most of the day to her, and at night would send messengers to obtain the latest news. Three years later, in the final stages, he slept fully dressed on a mattress at the foot of his mother's bed. 'He helped her always with unbelievable application, he helped to change her bed, and served her better and more adroitly than all her women.' Praise indeed since one of them, Madame de Motteville, is writing. She also recalls the king saying of his dying mother to the daughter of

another première femme de chambre, Madame de Beauvais: 'look how beautiful she is. I have never seen her looking so beautiful.' Clearly his mother was one of the loves of his life.

After the queen's final confession and communion, her bedroom overflowed with people crying, or reading works of piety. She begged her sons and daughters-in-law to love each other 'for love of me'. When told that she was leaving an earthly for a heavenly crown, she said that she had always considered her earthly crown 'as mud'. Louis XIV wept 'furiously' and fainted. She died on 20 January 1666. Having finished her memoirs, Motteville followed her mistress to the grave 23 years later. The first edition of her memoirs was published in Amsterdam in 1728; the most recent in Paris in 2003.

Later traumas in France would produce even more memoirs. Over 3,300 memoirs covering the years from 1780 to 1830, with the changes from monarchy to republic to Empire and back to monarchy again, have been published so far. In his youth Honoré de Balzac was one of many 'teinturiers' or ghosts of such memoirs: he was, for example, author or part-author of the memoirs of one of his mistresses, Laure Junot, Duchesse d'Abrantes. In 1831 Chateaubriand, whose memoirs are among the greatest of all, lamented: 'There is nobody who has not become, at least for 24 hours, a personage who does not consider himself obliged to give the world an account of the influence which he has exerted over the universe.'

Some of the best court memoirs continued to be written by women. During the Revolution the shock of exile and the shadow of the guillotine added astringency to their style. Madame Campan, for example, another première femme de chambre de la reine – in this case of Marie Antoinette – may have been inspired to write by her predecessor, Madame de Motteville. The memoirs of Marie Antoinette's favourite portrait painter, Madame Vigée Lebrun, are particularly vivid about her years as an emigrée, during which she painted her way from court to court across Europe.

The most original of these memoirs are those by the Comtesse de Boigne and the Marquise de la Tour du Pin. Their accounts of the impact of the public dramas between 1780 to 1830 – some of



Lucie Dillon, Marquise de la Tour du Pin (1770–1853).

whose principal actors they knew well – on their private lives are enhanced by the outsider edge and double identity, which they derived from their exile in England and their Jacobite blood. Both the mother of the Comtesse de Boigne and the father of the Marquise de la Tour du Pin descended from the famous Irish Jacobite family of Dillon (although some said that the former was 'a false Dillon').

The Comtesse de Boigne deserves an English biography as compelling as Caroline Moorehead's of Madame de la Tour du Pin, *Dancing to the Precipice* (2009). The financial support (stipulated in their marriage contract) of her husband, General Count de Boigne, who had made a fortune fighting for the Maratha empire in India, had saved the Comtesse's family from poverty during her exile in London. Back in Paris, however, she froze her husband out of her life. The general retreated to the town where he had been born, Chambery, and died there alone in 1830. In Paris, however, his fortune helped his wife to run a brilliant salon for 60 years.

Both Madame de la Tour du Pin and Madame de Boigne were royalists, and fought the revolution better with their pens than their relations did with their swords. Like those of Madame de Motteville, their memoirs can be as revealing about women's power, freedom and happiness, or lack of them, and about the dramas of their times, as the most detailed works of research. ●