

Henriette de la Tour du Pin: “Milking” Feminine Identity

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In *Journal d'une Femme de Cinquante Ans*, a gripping account of an aristocratic woman's exile during the French Revolution, la marquise Henriette de la Tour de Pin makes references to milk and milk products that illuminate the construction of feminine identity in post-revolutionary France.¹ That identity provides a useful reference point for understanding other women of her period, notably her friends and contemporaries Germaine de Staël and Claire de Duras. La Tour du Pin began writing the *Journal* in 1820, at the start of the Restoration. The retrospective examination of her life and times begins with her birth in 1770 and continues up to 1815. She died in 1853. Her family belonged to the elevated ranks of the French aristocracy, as did that of her husband Frédéric whom she married in 1787. Both her father and Frédéric's father were put to death by guillotine in April 1794. The *Journal* recounts how the author and her family narrowly escaped from death during the Terror and spent the two years from 1794 to 1796 in exile in the United States, near Albany, New York, where they owned a farm and produced dairy products. When the prescription against émigrés was lifted in 1796, the family returned to France.

In this paper I look at La Tour du Pin's story as confirming the feminist premise that gender, class, and race are inextricably linked. The story that I want to tell most obviously affects gender since women are responsible for lactation and for the production of butter, which history tells us was a traditional feminine occupation: “The art of making butter . . . originated in the home.”² Class enters into the picture in two ways: first, regarding breastfeeding by aristocratic women; and next regarding La Tour du Pin's reputation in post-revolutionary France as an aristocratic farmer in exile during the Revolution. Race concerns La Tour du Pin's purchase of slaves to assist in the operation of the farm. My overall assessment is that La Tour du Pin held progressive views regarding matters of gender, class, and race, as did Duras and Staël, but that her formerly elitist outlook was changed more profoundly by her arduous experiences in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods than that of other women writers.

A number of short sentences in the *Journal* refer to La Tour du Pin's breastfeeding: “On ne me permit pas de le nourrir, comme je le souhaitais, ma santé ayant été trop éprouvée dans les premiers mois de ma grossesse, et ma faiblesse étant encore très grande”; “Je n'osais presque plus sortir. Mon lait se tarissait”; “Le manque de nourriture avait tari mon lait.”

The author had two small children: Humbert, born in 1790, and Séraphine, born in 1793.³ In the case of Humbert, she states: “On ne me permit pas de le nourrir, comme je le souhaitais, ma santé ayant été trop éprouvée dans les premiers mois de ma grossesse, et ma faiblesse étant encore très grande.” The assertion in the active voice of wanting to breastfeed (“je le souhaitais”) is countered by the prohibition against doing so in the passive voice (“On ne me permit pas de le nourrir.”) Although the diagnosis upon which this prohibition was based may seem questionable to us for a young and healthy woman, which she repeatedly stresses that she was, there is no way to know either its veracity or justification at the time.

Matters are more complicated regarding her second child, who was born literally in the shadow of the guillotine. Again we read equivocal statements such as the following: “Je n'osais

presque plus sortir. Mon lait se tarissait.” Ironically, what La Tour du Pin affirms by saying that she is or was a breastfeeder (“mon lait”) is denied in the comment that her milk “se tarissait.” Since La Tour du Pin was in hiding with a female servant from the time of Séraphine’s birth in April 1793, it is conceivable that the servant acted as wet-nurse. Another reference to breastfeeding Séraphine occurs in the context of the family’s crossing the Atlantic Ocean in 1794 on a small boat which contained seven male crew members and the four members of the La Tour du Pin family. The author refers to herself as “nourrice,” and obviously as the only female person on the boat she would have been the one to perform that function. Again, the affirmation of her breastfeeding is coupled with a denial: “Le manque de nourriture avait tari mon lait.” And again, one wonders about the veracity of the claim: in this case, did a seven-month old child need to rely on breast milk for nutrition? Should we take La Tour du Pin’s claim to have wanted to breastfeed her son and to have breastfed her daughter at face value? Perhaps. Although aristocratic women did not commonly breastfeed, there were exceptions and even a fad for a time in the late eighteenth century. (I am grateful to Allan Pasco for his authoritative chapter on the subject in *Sick Heroes* and to him and Lisa Algazi for discussions with me about this topic).

Assuming that La Tour du Pin may be exaggerating or stretching the truth in these statements, one wonders why she would allege that she was or wanted to breastfeed her children? One reason is personal: in the *Journal* La Tour du Pin consistently presents herself as strong, resourceful, and willing to take on any and all physical chores and challenges. Being able to do the work of servants or other socially inferior individuals was very much in keeping with her real or constructed persona as an empowered if not feminist woman by today’s standard. (I might add that if she did breastfeed I do not imagine her doing so in the attire and affected manner of other aristocratic women depicted nursing their children in paintings at the time such as Jean-Louis Mosnier’s “Mère allaitant son enfant” (1782) and Adélaïde Labille-Guiard’s “Madame Mitoire et ses enfants” (1783).

Another reason for La Tour du Pin’s claim is that talk of breastfeeding constituted what Laura Brace calls “a maternal spectacle” of virtue: a public display in which bodily activities were re-imagined as ethical and in the service of the social order. For an aristocrat escaping from the Terror, the author’s claim to have nursed her daughter was in some cases almost a matter of life and death. When attempting to obtain the certificate of residence that allowed her to remain in hiding in Bordeaux before leaving France, she states that her “homme d’affaires” asked the officials not to keep her waiting because she was a nursing mother. The reaction of the official in charge says much about the civic virtue attributed to breastfeeding at the time: “allant à une armoire, il en tira un joli petit pain blanc et me l’offrit en m’appelant *charmante nourrice*.” (353) On another occasion she is able to get messages hidden in loaves of white bread from her husband, in hiding elsewhere, because the message bearer is told that she is a nursing mother whose doctor had said she could not eat the inferior “pain de section” that was all that was available to others. (331-32) And she also receives additional rations at a time of severe food shortages on the same basis: “Les hommes recevaient une livre de pain, les enfants au-dessous de dix ans une demi-livre seulement. Les nourrices avaient droit à deux livres.” (333)

Claiming to breastfeed may have also been a disguised or unconscious way to claim that she shared the positive republican sentiments associated by Rousseau, Mercier, and others with breastfeeding. As Brace explains, “Rousseau’s fear was that wet nursing was a relationship that was structured by inequality and dependence, self-interest and mercenariness.” (3) In contrast,

maternal breastfeeding created bonds between the child and the mother that served as a model of the attachment that the citizen should form with the nation. Such sentiments would seem compatible with La Tour du Pin's political outlook. She asserts that she and her husband judged the nobility harshly as being out of touch with the people and the times. She blames them for the French Revolution: "Plus j'avance en âge, cependant, plus je considère que la Révolution de 1789 n'a été que le résultat inévitable et, je pourrais même dire, la juste punition des vices des hautes classes, vices portés à un excès tel qu'il devenait infaillible, si on n'avait pas été frappé du plus funeste aveuglement, que l'on serait consumé par le volcan que de ses propres mains on avait allumé."

La Tour du Pin's liberal outlook can also be discovered in her construction of her role as a dairy farmer. This outlook has been obscured, however, by myths that tend to amplify and distort her class affiliation with the aristocracy. In 1803 the celebrated poet Jacques Delille painted a picture of her as an exiled milkmaid in his poem *Le Malheur et la pitié*. (slide 5) Through this picture, La Tour du Pin gained considerable popularity in Parisian salons and became an emblem of the courage displayed by aristocratic women during the French Revolution and their devotion to royalty and family. Interestingly, Delille revealed in the preface that his model of "deux jeunes époux d'une famille distinguée" farming in exile was fabricated and that, only later, did he presumably learn of its basis in reality:

On lira dans ce Chant . . . l'histoire de deux jeunes époux qui, voulant fuir bien loin du spectacle douloureux de leur patrie opprimée et sanglante, se sont établis sur les bords de l'Amazone, y ont porté les arts et les productions de leur patrie, y sont devenus constructeurs, cultivateurs et fermiers. L'Auteur, après avoir lu à un de ses amis cet épisode imaginé par lui, pour donner plus d'intérêt à son ouvrage, apprit avec plaisir que ce récit n'était point une vaine fiction, mais l'histoire réelle de **deux jeunes époux d'une famille distinguée**; seulement le lieu de la scène est différent, et le Poète se trouve avoir placé, dans l'Amérique Méridionale, un fait arrivé dans le Nord de cette partie du Monde.⁴

Within the poem itself, Delille tellingly shifts the empowered feminine perspective of the *Journal* to a masculine one: first, that of a visiting Frenchman (lines 1-2, "Des Français sont ici, s'écria-t-il »), and then to that of her husband (lines 11-13, "Nous sommes journaliers; mon épouse est fermière »).

- 1 "Des Français sont ici, s'écria-t-il soudain;
- 2 "Je verrai des Français!" il dit, suit son chemin;
- 3 Il approche, il arrive auprès d'un humble hospice;
- 4 Il entre, **il aperçoit une belle génisse:**
- 5 Une femme charmante, assise à ses côtés,**
- 6 Exprimait de son lait les ruisseaux argentés;**
- 7 Avec un air de nymphe, un habit de bergère,
- 8 Un maintien distingué sous sa robe légère;
- 9 Tout l'étonne: **du lys son teint à la fraîcheur,**
- 10 Du lait qu'elle exprimait ses mains ont la blancheur.**

- 11 “Nous sommes journaliers; mon épouse est fermière.
 12 “Le laitage du soir et celui du matin
 13 “Nous paraissent plus doux présentés par sa main.⁵

One of the striking features of these lines is the aristocratic note struck by the word “lys” in line 9. Another is the slippage in lines 4-6, and 10, between woman and cow as milk producers brought about by the proximity of the phrases “génisse” and “femme charmante.” As a result, the phrase “exprimait de son lait les ruisseaux argentés” seems to pertain to the milk production of both the animal and the woman, both of whom stand together on the “nature” side of the nature/culture binary according to phallogocentric accounts of women’s nature.

The illustration that the 1989 *Mercure de France* edition chose to insert in their edition of the *Journal* reinforces the masculinist slant of the Delille poem but also adds elements that distort La Tour du Pin’s racial views and experience. Women, children, animals, and presumably racially inferior individuals such as Indians are the ones involved in milk production. The illustrator places the inferior cows, the producers of the milk that is sold, in the background. Given her superior social status in relation to the other elements in the illustration—the farm, farm implements, cows, child, and Indian—she is a towering presence, whose height is equaled only by several large trees. And although she wears an apron and is dressed in simple attire, her hair, delicate appearance, and graceful gestures reveal that she is no lowly milkmaid. Her lowered eyes indicate her demure feminine demeanor; and her distance from both the cows and the Indian suggest that she exists in a protected space that less elevated creatures do not enter. Also in keeping with her social position, the bowl of milk appears to be offered to the Indian as an act of benevolence, not as an object to be purchased.

It is also interesting to note the contrast between the woman and the other human beings in the illustration. Whereas she is unquestionably feminine, the gender of both the child and the Indian is less obvious. The child, who must be Humbert at age four at the time, is attired in what appears to be a dress. The Indian, seen from behind, could be a woman as much as a man. Such an interpretation would give to the entire illustration a feminine overtone: cows, woman, child, Indian, all are involved in the feminine world of milk production.

I would argue that the “non-dit” of the illustration featuring the seated Indian is the fact that La Tour du Pin was a slave owner and that the production of milk on her farm was made possible by her efforts combined with those of her four slaves. The illustrator undoubtedly chose to avoid the uncomfortable existence of slaves on the La Tour du Pin farm by adding the less controversial presence of native Americans, who do play a role in the *Journal*. Delille similarly erases the slavery issue when he quotes La Tour du Pin’s husband as saying “mon épouse est fermière.” He misleadingly suggests that she alone or primarily was milking and tending to their eight cows and then making butter. In fact, black and white workers played complementary roles. She reports that the slaves did the milking, and she removed the cream. Twice a week when they made butter, a black man operated the crank, “cette besogne étant trop pénible pour une femme. Tout le reste du travail du beurre, et il était encore assez fatigant, m’incombait.” In addition, she served as what could best be described as a marketer of butter:

Mon beurre avait pris une grande vogue. Je l’arrangeais soigneusement en petits pains, avec un moule à notre chiffre, et le plaçais coquettement dans un panier bien propre, sur

une serviette fine. C'était à qui en achèterait. Nous avions huit vaches bien nourries, et notre beurre ne se ressentissait de l'hiver. Ma crème était toujours fraîche. Cela me valait tous les jours pas mal d'argent.

By speaking of “mon beurre” she is talking about what we would today call “self-branding”: putting the butter “en petits pains” with “un moule à notre chiffre,” in “un panier bien propre” and wrapped in “une serviette fine.” This product may well have sold well in the American aristocratic families such as the Schuylers and Van Rensalaërs who befriended the La Tour du Pin and assisted them in their Albany exile. La Tour du Pin was thus not merely a female “reproducer” and source of milk in the home but an empowered “producer” of a saleable product in the world of commerce.

The role as a milkmaid that La Tour du Pin presents herself as playing should not be mythologized or overstated. But nor should her status as a slave owner be misunderstood or simplistically stigmatized. Repeatedly she emphasizes that she never subjected her workers to labor that she was not willing to perform and that, having left her ancien régime world behind her, the life of a slave and a worker became hers. When La Tour du Pin allegedly emancipated her slaves in 1796 (I can find no evidence in the archival records that she did), she reports the following conversation with them:

“Mon mari m'a chargé de vous dire qu'il vous donne la liberté.” En entendant ce mot, nos braves serviteurs furent si stupéfaits qu'ils restèrent quelques secondes sans parole. Puis, se précipitant tous les quatre à genoux à mes pieds, ils s'écrièrent: Is it possible? Do you mean that we are free? Je répondis: Yes, upon my honour, from this moment, as free as I am myself.”

The phrase “as free as I am myself” indicates the shared identity of the slaves and the white woman, who must receive authorization from her husband to dispose of his property. Like the slaves, she exists within a patriarchal system in which freedom is relative, not absolute.

To close, La Tour du Pin has much to tell us about women of her time. Her friends mentioned earlier—Staël and Duras—were sophisticated, influential, intellectual women. Contrasting herself with Staël La Tour du Pin states, “N'ayant jamais eu la moindre prétention à l'esprit, je me bornais à user avec prudence du bon sens dont la Providence m'avait douée.” It is with that common sense that she constructed her feminine identity as a breastfeeder and farmer. Duras and La Tour du Pin both had association with or chose to write about slaves. But only La Tour du Pin worked with and possibly like them, in milking cows and maybe producing milk, as slave mothers did. In her correspondence La Tour du Pin's recounts meeting the real-life Ourika in the salon of Mme de Beauvau, Ourika's benefactress, and being annoyed that Beauvau “ne se lassait pas de voir les bras noirs de cette petite autour de mon col; cela m'ennuyait à mort.” La Tour du Pin may have been a slave owner but it would be a misunderstanding of this statement to think that she was a racist. Regarding race, she was undoubtedly no more or less liberal-minded than Staël or Duras. Although always somewhat the aristocrat by birth and attitude, La Tour du Pin formed an egalitarian feminine identity in her American exile. Blacks were not only the Other for La Tour du Pin. Reaching across race, class, and gender lines, she forged her own precarious self writing through and with theirs. Because we know so little about the many ways

in which women constructed feminine identities in the nineteenth-century, I believe she is a woman we deserve to know better.

¹ References are to Marquise de La Tour du Pin, *Journal d'une femme de cinquante ans 1778-1815* (Paris: Chapelot, 1913).

² <http://www.webexhibits.org/butter/history-dairy.html>. Captured July 22, 2012.

³ Laura Brace mentions the contraceptive effects of lactation. It is possible that if La Tour du Pin did breast feed her rate of conception was affected: her six children were born in 1790, 1793, 1796, 1798, 1800, and 1806. Laura Brace, "Rousseau, Maternity and the Politics of Emptiness," *Polity* 39 (2007): 361-83. <http://hdl.handle.net/2381/1090>

⁴ Jacques Delille, *Malheur et pitié: poème en quatre chants* (London: Dulau, 1803), x.

⁵ Delille, *Malheur et pitié*, 112.