

**‘The Unnatural Life at the Writing-Desk’:  
Women’s Writing across the Long Eighteenth Century**  
Voltaire Room, Taylor Institution  
7<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> June 2017

*An exhibition in conjunction with the one-day interdisciplinary conference:  
‘Women, Authorship, and Identity in the Long Eighteenth Century: New Methodologies’  
(Saturday, 17<sup>th</sup> June, Taylor Institution and TORCH)*

Featuring, among others, works by Emilie du Châtelet, Sophie Mereau, Mary Wollstonecraft, Sophie von La Roche, Françoise de Graffigny, and Hannah More.



Exhibition Catalogue  
Raisbeck, Kelsey

Shears

written by Joanna  
Rubin-Detlev and Ben

Centre: Plate from Voltaire, *Eléments de la philosophie de Newton: mis à la portée de tout le monde* (Amsterdam: Jacques Desbordes, 1738). A ray of heavenly light passes through Newton and is reflected by the French translator of the *Principia*, Emilie Du Châtelet, onto her lover Voltaire, who is composing his introduction to Newtonian philosophy.

## Introduction

This exhibition showcases the breadth and interest of women's writing across Europe in the eighteenth century, while at the same time it points to the problems of transmission and reception that have kept this rich legacy hidden for over two centuries. The Age of Enlightenment witnessed a remarkable growth in access to literacy and print culture: both men and women all across the continent had more opportunities than ever before to become participants in the literary process as readers and writers. Gendered stereotypes often limited women's ability or willingness to publish under their own names, but many circumvented or confronted these social norms and attained literary celebrity. Women were associated in particular with the spectacular rise of the novel, and they indeed helped to set the major trends in narrative literature over the century, from Sentimentalism to the Gothic. Alternatively, some wrote in genres like the letter that were not immediately meant for publication, but which allowed women to express themselves, to participate in literary exchange, and perhaps one day to win posthumous fame.

The process of women's entry onto the literary stage occurred unevenly and took different paths in different countries. In France and England, women were prominent published writers already in the seventeenth century and before: Mme de La Fayette, the author of *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), and Aphra Behn, the author of *Orinooko* (1688), can be named as only the most famous. Eighteenth-century French and English women like Françoise de Graffigny, Emilie Du Châtelet, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and Fanny Burney built on that foundation as novelists, playwrights, translators, scientists, and epistolarians. Russia stands at the other end of the spectrum: secular literature itself was only beginning to develop in Russia by the start of the eighteenth century, and we know of no female writers in Russian before the mid-eighteenth century. By the second half of the century, however, a numerically small but thriving literary culture had developed, and Empress Catherine the Great herself led the way for women as a prolific writer of theatre, memoirs, history, and letters. The German states in the eighteenth century experienced drastic growth in the book market—estimates include a three hundred percent increase from the middle to the end of century, as well as the German language developing as a literary language. So-called *schöne Literatur* (*belles lettres*) enjoyed increasing popularity, and women are considered to have contributed to this change. Whilst there was a gendered discourse about the suitability of women for particular literary genres, it was certainly not more unusual for the work of a female dramatist to be performed than that of a male dramatist. Two of the most successful women writers, Benedikte Naubert and Sophie von La Roche, who were associated with popular fiction and didactic novels respectively, produced between them around 90 books.

## Science

Emilie du Châtelet, *Dissertation sur la nature et la propagation du feu* (Paris : Chez Prault, fils, 1744)  
VET.FR.II.B.100

Initially published in 1739, this text is Du Châtelet's answer to the question raised by the *Mercure de France* and the *Gazette de France*: what is fire? A contemporary and admirer of Du Châtelet, Francois-Marie Arouet (better known as Voltaire), worked collaboratively with Du Châtelet on this project; although, whilst Voltaire believed that fire had weight, was subject to gravity, and, as Newton asserted, was matter, Du Châtelet did not think the same. The text has the 'Approbation and Privilege' of the King, and was published in Paris by Prault – this directly tells us that Du Châtelet is being given the seal of approval, because her publisher is the same as Voltaire's, the latter who was one of the most prolific and successful authors of the eighteenth century.

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Emilie du Châtelet, *Institutions de Physique* (Paris : Chez Prault fils, 1740)  
ZAH.III.B.65

This text has been described as Du Châtelet's 'Magnum Opus on Natural Philosophy' and was first published in 1740. This is the edition presented here. Although this first edition was published anonymously, within two years, the second edition (which is held in the Christ Library in Oxford), was published with Du Châtelet's name. As you can see, the detail of the geometrical diagrams is exquisite, and the spine is recognisably decorated with some gold tooling. The 1742 edition includes Du Châtelet's exchange with Jean-Jacques d'Ortous de Mairan, whose contemporary reaction reveals the extent to which Du Châtelet had produced a text that would stand the test of time, and rebut the critique to which it was necessarily subject in the world of the Republic of Letters.

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Voltaire, *Eléments de la philosophie de Neuton, mis à la portée de tout le monde* (Amsterdam : Jacques Desbordes, 1738)  
V.8.E.3.1738(4)

This is the first edition of the well-known 'Elements of the Philosophy of Newton', in which Voltaire named Du Châtelet co-author. There is a frontispiece that has a very flattering image of Du Châtelet, portraying what has been termed Voltaire's "Minerva of France". This particular edition here unfortunately does not have the famous frontispiece, but instead has one of Voltaire himself. However, this edition does have a note, written by Voltaire, that recognises and celebrates Du Châtelet's contribution to the text: he writes of her that "the solid study that you have offered, based on numerous new discoveries, and the fruit of respectable toil, are what I offer to the public in the name of your glory, in the name of your sex, and in the name of the utility of whoever will want to cultivate reason and enjoy your unencumbered masterpiece."

## Letter Writing

Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné, *Recueil de lettres de Madame la marquise de Sévigné, à Madame la comtesse de Grignan, sa fille...*, 6 vols (Leiden: Frères Verbeek, 1736-1748) VET.FR.II.A.69 (t. 1)

Madame de Sévigné was the premiere letter writer of the eighteenth century, and her letters were the touchstone for epistolary style on both sides of the English Channel and across Europe, admired by everyone from Horace Walpole and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to Voltaire and Catherine the Great. Her letters to her daughter are the best known and have often been regarded as pure, unmediated expressions of maternal tenderness. But in recent decades she has been

recognised instead as a creative writer who cultivated a uniquely engaging epistolary style in keeping with the aesthetic of seventeenth-century *galanterie*. A selection of her letters first appeared alongside those of her cousin, Bussy-Rabutin, she quickly overshadowed him, and the public thirst for unauthorised editions of her letters led her granddaughter to authorise an official *Collection of Letters from the Marquise de Sévigné to her daughter, the Countess de Grignan* (Paris, 1734-37). A further testament to her popularity, this copy is a Dutch reprint of that first official edition.

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*Letters of the Right Honourable Lady M--y W---y M---e; written during her travels in Europe, Asia, and Africa* [...] (London: Thomas Martin, 1790)

824.1 MON 4

Courtesy of the Principal and Fellows of Somerville College

Unlike Madame de Sévigné, who did not contemplate publication, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu carefully prepared her *Turkish Embassy Letters*, as they were known, for print, although they appeared only posthumously in 1763. Designing her letters as a travelogue, she offered a striking and influential image of the Ottoman Empire, advocating among other things the practice of inoculation which existed there but which was only beginning to spread in Europe. Mary Wollstonecraft was only one of many eighteenth-century women who joined Montagu in writing travelogues in epistolary form (*Letters written during a short residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, 1796).

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Françoise de Graffigny, *Lettres d'une Péruvienne. Nouvelle édition augmentée de plusieurs lettres, et d'une introduction à l'histoire*, 2 vols (Paris: Duchesne, 1752)

VET.FR.II.A.2150(1-2)

Telling the story of a Peruvian princess stolen from her homeland by European invaders and who eventually chooses independence over marriage, Françoise de Graffigny's *Letters of a Peruvian Woman* transformed their author from a poor widow, formerly battered by her husband, into an international literary celebrity. First published in 1747, the book was translated into English, German, Italian, Spanish, and Russian in the eighteenth century. Although she was a rare exception, Graffigny nonetheless demonstrates that it was possible for women to achieve financial security and success through their writing in the eighteenth century. She was also a remarkably vivacious and prolific writer of genuine letters that recount in intimate terms the day-to-day life of an intellectual from the provinces trying to make her way in Paris.

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Laurent Angliviel de La Beaumelle, *Lettres de Madame de Maintenon*, 3 vols (Paris: Rollin fils, 1752)

MYLNE.522

Françoise d'Aubigné, marquise de Maintenon, rose from obscure origins to become a highly influential theorist of women's education and Louis XIV's second wife. She excelled in the art of managing her influence at court by letter, and her letters display similar control of style, standing out for their artful raillery—a mode of conversation and epistolary writing much prized in late seventeenth-century France. Her first editor, La Beaumelle, nonetheless followed the usual eighteenth-century habit of rewriting and even inventing the letters he published: the letters shown here, for example, are no longer considered authentic by scholars.

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Sophie Mereau, *Amanda und Eduard: ein Roman in Briefen*, 2 vols (Frankfurt am Main: F. Willmans, 1803)  
VET.GER.III.A.69

One of the first German women to live off her writings, Sophie Mereau played to the Romantic interest in the blurred relationship between author and text when she rewrote her correspondence with her lover Johann Heinrich Kipp as a novel, *Amanda and Eduard: A Novel in Letters*.

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Voltaire and Catherine the Great, *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, 70 vols ([Kehl]: Société littéraire typographique, 1785), LXVII  
V1.1785/2 (67)

The German-born empress of Russia, Catherine the Great (reigned 1762-1796) was a prolific writer of drama, history, memoirs, satirical journalism, and much more. But her letters were her literary masterpiece. A great admirer of Voltaire, she saw their correspondence as an intellectual pleasure, but also an important means of feeding information to Europe's most influential publicist. The posthumous editors of his works clearly viewed her letters as particularly prestigious and set them apart in a separate volume. Catherine was somewhat vexed to see her letters printed without her express permission and demanded that politically dangerous passages be edited out from the published version.

Letter from Joséphine de Beauharnais to Napoleon Bonaparte, 5 Ventôse [24 February 1796]  
Courtesy of Bryan Ward-Perkins and the President and Fellows of Trinity College, Oxford

Translation of the French Text:

*You have stopped coming to see a friend who loves you dearly. You have completely abandoned her. You are very wrong to do so because she is tenderly attached to you. Come tomorrow, Septidi [the seventh day of the ten-day week in the Revolutionary Calendar], to have breakfast with me. I need to see you and chat with you about your interests. Have a good evening, my friend. I embrace you*  
*the widow Beauharnais*

Historians have long debated whether the marriage between Napoleon and his first wife, Joséphine de Beauharnais, resulted from amorous passion or financial and political self-interest. This letter was long known from a facsimile reproduced in [Mademoiselle R. D'Ancemont], *The Historical and unrevealed memoirs of the political and private life of Napoleon Buonaparte* (London: Le Comte Charles D'Og\*\*\*\*, 1819), which perhaps intentionally removed the date from the letter and which omitted the key word 'interests' from the English translation provided. Since the manuscript was for a long time unknown, historians have generally dated it to 28 October 1795. They assume that such negligence on Napoleon's part and the proposed discussion of 'interests' would have taken place several months before the couple's marriage on 9 March 1796. But the actual date on the manuscript is 24 February, i.e. about two weeks before the marriage. Is Joséphine's letter a convincing piece of evidence in favour of the 'self-interest' interpretation of their union? Or is she flirtatiously assuming a pose as an abandoned woman and playfully transmuting their passionate love into a 'chat about his interests'?

## Female Virtue and Behaviour

Sophie von La Roche, *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim*, 2 vols (Bern: Beat Ludwig Walther, 1773) (Tr. 'The Story of Miss Sophie von Sternheim')

First published in 1771 by Sophie von La Roche's former fiancé Christoph Martin Wieland, *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* is considered one of the first epistolary novels in German, a genre that attracted women writers in the eighteenth century. It was undoubtedly influenced by Samuel Richardson's novels, and in particular by *Clarissa*. Its plot follows the familiar line of female virtue in peril: how a young middle-class woman is pursued by an aristocratic seducer. Yet *Sternheim* ends with a utopian combination of middle-class virtue (embodied by the titular Sophie) and the landed aristocracy (Lord Seymour). *Sternheim* was immensely popular at the time and is written in the mode of *Empfindsamkeit* (sensibility), which promoted the repression of the passions in favour of moderate emotions.

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Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel, *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber*, in *Sämmtliche Werke*, 14 vols (Berlin: Reimer, 1828-1839) (Tr. 'On the Civil Improvement of Women') VET.GER.III.B.479 (Bd.5/6)

Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel the Elder (1741-96) was a satirical writer and proponent of the *Aufklärung* (German Enlightenment), and has garnered attention for his proto-feminist treatises *Über die Ehe* (On Marriage) and *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber*, 1792). In the latter, Hippel, following Rousseau to an extent, pursues the anthropological question of how men came to gain dominance over women (for Rousseau, this was a question of how man gained dominance over man). Hippel's argument is that excluding women from the public sphere is tantamount to slowing the development of civilisation.

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Fanny Burney, *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress. By the Author of Evelina*, 5th edn, 5 vols (London: T. Payne and Son, 1786)

825.1 BUR 5

Courtesy of the Principal and Fellows of Somerville College

First published in 1782, *Cecilia* was Fanny Burney's second novel; like her first, *Evelina*, it was an immense success, selling out within three months of its first publication. It won her widespread recognition as an author from other eighteenth-century luminaries like Samuel Johnson and Edmund Burke. Social commentary was an important feature of Burney's work, and this scene from the second chapter is no exception, focusing as it does on an argument about maxims of behaviour.

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Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, 3rd edn (London: J. Johnson, 1796)

V:J5e:6

Courtesy of the Principal and Fellows of Somerville College

Exceptionally famous as a feminist heroine today, Mary Wollstonecraft's first book was an educational treatise: *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: with Reflections on Female Conduct in the more important Duties of Life* (1787). The importance of education to Wollstonecraft's thinking is very clear in her most famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In these pages of the Introduction to her work, for example, Wollstonecraft points to women's current behaviour as

both a product of poor education and an impediment to general recognition of their intellectual capacities.

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Stéphanie de Genlis, *Adèle et Théodore, ou Lettres sur l'éducation*, 3 vols (Paris: M. Lambert & F.J. Baudouin, 1782)  
VET.FR.II.B.1966 (v. 1)

This immensely popular educational treatise in the form of an epistolary novel was translated in a wide variety of European languages, including English, Spanish, Dutch, Italian, Polish, and Russian. Responses to it can be found in the works of Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft, among many others. Governess to members of the French royal family, Madame de Genlis puts forward a theory of education for both girls and boys. She suggests that girls read not only Voltaire, Rousseau, Homer, Milton, and Shakespeare, but also female writers, including Madame de Sévigné, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and Françoise de Graffigny.

## Theatre

Charlotte von Stein, *Dramen*, ed. Susanne Kord (Hildesheim: Olms, 1998) (facsimile) EP.667.A.10

Charlotte von Stein (1742-1827), a lady-in-waiting at the court of Weimar, has featured in literary history primarily in association with Goethe. She is variously considered his close friend, muse – and in the more sensationalist readings – his lover. But she also wrote several dramas, only one of which, *Die Zwey Emilien* (The Two Emilies), was published during her lifetime. The comedy *Neues Freibeitssystem oder die Verschwörung gegen die Liebe* ('New System of Freedom or the Conspiracy Against Love', 1798), which explores the social construction of gender, is an interesting example of editorial practices. It was first published by von Stein's grandson Felix von Stein in 1867, but in an edited form that reduced the original five acts to four. The drama was re-published with further editorial amendments by Franz Ulbrich, who based his edition on the 1867 publication, rather than on the original text.

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Hannah More, *The works of Hannah More*, 18 vols (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1818-19)  
Courtesy of the Principal and Fellows of Somerville College

Known primarily as a philanthropist and religious writer, Hannah More became acquainted with the Bluestocking Circle in London in the 1770s, which allowed her in part to pursue her theatrical ambitions. Although he initially rejected More's attempt to solicit his patronage, the actor and theatre manager David Garrick was tireless in mentoring her and aiding her burgeoning career as a playwright. He produced two of her plays (*The Inflexible Captive*, *Percy*) and was involved in the writing of *Percy* and *The Fatal Falsehood*. When first staged in 1777, More's tragedy *Percy* was a tremendous success, but More's next play, *The Fatal Falsehood* (1779), first performed a few months after Garrick's death, was such a failure that More never wrote for the stage again.

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Françoise de Graffigny, *Cénie* ([Munich?]: [n.p.], [after 1755])  
VET.FR.II.A.1988

*Cénie* was a sensational success when it was first performed at the Comédie Française in 1750. The plot hinges on a mother-daughter relationship and, like Graffigny's epistolary novel *Lettres d'une péruvienne*, focuses on a woman's struggle to decide her own fate. In its form, it was a powerful contribution to the developing genre of the sentimental drama, soon to be theorised by Denis Diderot. A great lover of theatre, Graffigny wrote several more plays, including special commissions to be performed by the children of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria. Probably published in Germany, this edition attests to the success of Graffigny's plays abroad.

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Catherine the Great and others, *Théâtre de l'Hermitage de Catherine II, impératrice de Russie*, 2 vols (Paris: F. Buisson, Year 7 [1798])  
VET.FR.II.B.1412 (v. 1)

Elite women wrote and performed in private theatricals all across eighteenth-century Europe, from Elizabeth, Countess Harcourt, in Oxfordshire to Marie Antoinette at Versailles. Catherine the Great in Russia did not perform herself, but she wrote extensively for the public and the private stage. In 1787-1788, she led her courtiers and some foreign diplomats in composing a series of theatrical works (largely proverb plays, but also larger works), which were then performed by a French troupe of actors in the recently-built Hermitage theatre in her palace in St Petersburg. She oversaw the first edition of the plays in 1788, distributing the very small print run only to those who had contributed to the collection. One of the participants, the then French ambassador LouisPhilippe de Ségur, then republished the work after her death. This volume is the curious result of publishing a relic of *ancien régime* culture in Revolutionary France: a particularly inaccurate engraving of the Empress faces a title page using the Revolutionary calendar but prominently crediting a foreign princess as the lead author.

## Translation

Dorothea von Schlegel, Friedrich von Schlegel (tr.), Madame de Staël, *Corinna, oder, Italien*, 4 vols (Berlin: Unger, 1807)  
FINCH.D.51-54

Madame de Staël is best known as an agent of Franco-German cultural transfer in *De l'Allemagne* (1813), but her novel *Corinne, ou l'Italie*, was enormously popular upon its original publication in 1807: between 1807 and 1810, fourteen editions or pirated editions were printed in France, Germany, England, and Switzerland. It bears clear autobiographical allusions to Staël herself – for which it is often criticised –, with a self-confident protagonist who places her own development as an individual over social rules and moral conventions. The German translation was produced by Dorothea Schlegel, herself a writer as well as a translator, but it was published under the name of her husband, Friedrich Schlegel.

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August Wilhelm Schlegel, Ludwig Tieck, Dorothea Tieck (tr.), *Shakspeare's dramatische Werke*, 12 vols (Berlin: Reimer, 1843-44)  
VET.GER.III.A.827



Ludwig Tieck's and August Wilhelm Schlegel's translation of Shakespeare's works is still considered one of the seminal editions of Shakespeare in the German language. Schlegel's and Tieck's intentions were to render Shakespeare as faithfully as possible, whilst giving a sense of the poetic genius of the original. Schlegel translated seventeen of the plays between 1791 and 1810, and thereafter the responsibility to complete the edition fell on Ludwig Tieck, who in turn passed on the translation work to his daughter, Dorothea, among others. Although Dorothea remains uncredited, she was responsible for the German translations of *Macbeth* and *Cymbeline*.

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Anne Dacier (tr.), *L'Iliade d'Homere, : traduite en françois, avec des remarques*, 3 vols (Paris : Rigaud, 1711)  
MONTGOMERY.7.A.11, v. 1

Anne Lefèvre Dacier (1654-1720), whose father and husband were both scholars, was herself a respected scholar and translator from Classical languages. Dacier translated into French Anacreon, Sappho, Plautus, the complete plays of Terence, and two of Aristophanes' plays. She is best remembered for her prose translation of Homer's *Iliad*, which Alexander Pope used in preparing his own translation of Homer. Dacier actively engaged in the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*: in her introduction to the prose translation of the *Iliad* (on display here), she defends Homer on the grounds of taste and the *Iliad* for its moral and aesthetic beauty.

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Benedikte Naubert, *Herman of Unna: a series of adventures of the fifteenth century, in which the proceedings of the secret tribunal under the emperors Winceslaus and Sigismond are delineated*, 2 vols (Dublin: William Porter, 1794)  
FIEDLER.J.3375.01

Jean-Nicholas-Étienne de Bock (tr.), Benedikte Naubert, *Hermann d'Unna, ou aventures arrivées au commencement du quinzieme siecle, dans les temps où le Tribunal secret avoit sa plus grande influence*, 2 vols (Metz: Claude Lamort, Lausanne Durand l'aîné, 1792)  
MYLNE.707 (v.2)

Benedikte Naubert (1756-1819) was one of the first professional female authors in Germany. Her work has been overlooked in literary history on account of having been considered 'trivial', but recently her *oeuvre* has been recognised for its importance in the development of the historical novel and fairy tale as literary genres. *Hermann von Unna* ('Hermann of Unna', 1788) is one of the first German Gothic novels to be translated into English in 1794 and was adapted for the stage at Covent Garden in 1795. Naubert draws on the German *Vehmgericht* (Vehmic courts) of the Middle Ages to explore the fears ignited by the French Revolution of secret tribunals and conspiracy theories. French and English translations here offer a glimpse of the work's popularity, and the introduction to the English edition praises the novel's historical fidelity.

## Portrait Gallery



Fanny Burney

by Edward Francisco Burney  
oil on canvas, circa 1784-1785 NPG 2634

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Joséphine Bonaparte (née Marie Joséphe Rose Tascher de la Pagerie, formerly de Beauharnais)

probably by Friedrich Weber, after Guillaume Guillon-Lethière

stipple engraving, mid 19th century  
NPG D38701

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Marie, Marquise de Sévigné (née de Rabutin-Chantal)

by William Marshall Craig, after Unknown artist  
stipple engraving, early 19th century

NPG D23525

© National Portrait Gallery, London



Mary Wollstonecraft

by John Opie oil on  
canvas, circa 1797  
NPG 1237

© National Portrait Gallery, London

Hannah More

by Henry William Pickersgill  
oil on canvas, 1822 NPG  
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Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

by Achille Devéria, printed by François Le  
Villain, published by Edward Bull, published by  
Edward Churton, after Christian Friedrich  
Zincke  
hand-coloured lithograph, 1830s  
NPG D34619

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