

CLAUDINE-ALEXANDRINE GUÉRIN DE TENCIN

Memoirs of the Count of Comminge
and
The Misfortunes of Love



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Introduction

An “Other Voice” of the Eighteenth Century

Immortalized by Diderot as “the beautiful and wicked canonesse,”¹ the salonnière Claudine-Alexandrine Guérin de Tencin (1682–1749) was, remarkably, a forgotten voice of French literature until well into the twentieth century. The revival of interest in Tencin’s work can be credited to Jean Decottignies, whose 1969 edition of *Mémoires du comte de Comminge* drew attention to her novels. And in 1983, Éditions Desjonquères was launched with the publication of a dozen works, including Tencin’s *Le Siège de Calais*, edited by Jean-Pierre Rémy. Since then, her two other finished novels have been published by Desjonquères: a new presentation of *Mémoires du comte de Comminge*, edited by Michel Delon (1996), and *Les Malheurs de l’amour*, edited by Erik Leborgne (2001).

Tencin’s career as a writer of sentimental fiction might have seemed almost anticlimatic after a life of passion and intrigue in the last decades of the Ancien Régime, but her novels were well received by her contemporaries, and the revival of scholarship on her work in the late 1960s was both merited and timely in the era of feminism and political tumult. Until very recently, however, anglophones could read only two of Tencin’s novels in English: the *Mémoires* in Charlotte Lennox’s translation of 1756 (reissued in a critical edition of 2011), and the *Siège de Calais* in a translation of 1740 (reprinted in 1974). Only *Les Malheurs de l’amour* remained inaccessible to English readers—until now, with this first-ever translation, *The Misfortunes of Love*, accompanied by a new presentation of the *Memoirs*.

A rereading of the novels, as well as critical essays on Tencin and her work, has shown that hers is an “other voice” not only in terms of her preference for historical novels (*nouvelles historiques*) but in her understated, classical style, her worldview, and her feminism. There were, moreover, few novels written by women in the first half of the eighteenth century—certainly fewer than in the late seventeenth century, when the “nouvelle historique” became popular. It seemed appropriate, then, to introduce “la belle et scélérate” Tencin to the wider audience of the “Other Voice in Early Modern Europe” series.

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

Denis Diderot, “Entretien entre d’Alembert et Diderot,” in *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*, vol. 2 (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1875), 109: “la belle et scélérate chanoinesse Tencin.” Diderot’s reference to Tencin as a “canonesse” is a sly allusion to her earlier conventual life.

Coming to Writing

Although published anonymously in her lifetime, Tencin's novels drew critical praise, and their success warranted several editions (including translations into German and—by Giacomo Casanova, no less—into Italian). Later in the nineteenth century, interest in her novels waned, and she would be remembered mostly as a historical figure. But what a figure! A significant participant in the great controversies of her time, hostess of one of the most celebrated, long-lasting salons of the Enlightenment, she was as ambitious as any of her male contemporaries.

Although she devoted much of her energy to promoting the political and ecclesiastical career of her brother, Pierre (1680–1758), Tencin had many irons in the fire. She led campaigns to elect several authors to the Académie française, participated in the aesthetic debate over the Ancients versus the Moderns, and supported the adoption in France of Clement XI's papal bull *Unigenitus Dei Filius* (1713), which condemned Jansenist doctrine in the Catholic Church.² Her reputation suffered thereafter as she became the relentless target of libels and satire in Jansenist newspapers and pamphlets, which then found their way into popular song and rumor.

According to biographers Pierre-Maurice Masson and Jean Sareil,³ much of this reputation consisted of lies. Still, there was enough scandal to turn the mill. Born in Grenoble in 1682, Tencin had been placed in the nearby convent of Montfleury at the age of eight, but rebelled against monastic life and left Montfleury in 1708, ten years after having taken her vows. She was eventually released from her vows in 1712. Once out of the convent and living in Paris with with her sister, Madame de Ferriol,⁴ she quickly gained a reputation as a sharp-witted, cultivated socialite who—although never marrying—had liaisons with a number of powerful men. Among the names confirmed by biographers were Philippe d'Orléans (before he served as Regent for Louis XV) and the artillery officer Louis-Camus Destouches, with whom Tencin had a son who would become famous as Jean le Rond d'Alembert. The future mathematician and *philosophe* began his life as an

2. The Jansenist view of Christianity—which took hold primarily in France—emphasized original sin and the innate depravity of a humanity redeemable only through the grace of God, as well as the concept of predestination. Jansenism took its name from the Dutch theologian Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638), whose posthumously-published manuscript explained his theories. Interestingly, the poet Louis Racine, a Jansenist like his playwright father Jean, was a guest at Tencin's salon.

3. See Pierre-Maurice Masson, *Madame de Tencin (1682–1749)* (Paris: Hachette, 1909; rpt. Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1970), and Jean Sareil, *Les Tencin: Histoire d'une famille au dix-huitième siècle, d'après de nombreux documents inédits* (Geneva: Droz, 1970).

4. Marie-Angélique de Ferriol (1674–1736), whose husband was the receiver-general for the Dauphin of France at the time of their wedding; Sareil, 18. Marie-Angélique took into her household the four-year-old child Charlotte Aïssé, who would later become a celebrated beauty and letter-writer and whose surname resembles that of the young Eugénie in *The Misfortunes of Love*.

infant left on the steps of the Church of Saint-Jean-le-Rond (after which he was named), abandoned there by his mother and never acknowledged by her—although Destouches arranged to have him raised by a glazier’s wife, and supported him financially throughout his life.

Among the other men linked to Tencin were Viscount Bolingbroke (who had escaped to France after the failure of the Jacobite cause in Britain), the poet Matthew Prior, the cardinal Guillaume Dubois—and a tall, handsome soldier named Charles La Fresnais, who committed suicide in her Paris home in 1726 while the house was bustling with guests, leaving behind a note accusing her of infidelity and of causing his financial ruin. The latter accusation, although likely a case of sour grapes due to his own financial ineptitude, led to a faulty, politically-charged investigation that landed Tencin in the Bastille (where Voltaire happened to be in residence) for almost two months before being formally acquitted.

Tencin and her brother had earlier been allied with John Law, the Scottish-born economist who created a private centralized bank in France—based on the sale of stock from investments in Mississippi—in order to save the country from bankruptcy. The Tencins profited greatly from this venture (Claudine-Alexandrine herself launched a short-lived investment brokerage of her own on rue Quincampoix in 1719) before its spectacular failure led to soaring food prices, riots in the streets, and the collapse of France’s *Banque Générale* in 1720.

The ambitions of Pierre Tencin, to whom Claudine devoted herself and through whom she lived vicariously, led him to be named Archbishop of Embrun by Louis XV in 1724. He eventually rose to the rank of cardinal in 1739, but never—despite his sister’s relentless efforts—to the political post he so coveted: that of the king’s chief minister, a position already being capably fulfilled by Cardinal André-Hercule Fleury (who in fact succeeded in repairing the financial damage done by John Law). When James Stuart, the exiled “Old Pretender” to the thrones of England and Scotland, nominated Pierre to the College of Cardinals in 1728, Fleury vetoed the nomination in the interests of maintaining peace with Britain.⁵ Claudine’s activities on behalf of her brother and the anti-Jansenist cause were also monitored closely by Fleury, who ordered her into exile from Paris in 1730 and forced her to stay out of political and religious matters.

Although Tencin would return to Paris some time later on conditions imposed by Fleury, her brief exile—coupled with La Fresnais’s suicide—led her to pursue a more intellectual life, if not necessarily a subdued one. Having been a regular guest at the much-admired salon of the Marquise de Lambert,⁶ she went on to host her own salon after Lambert’s death, inheriting most of the *philosophes*

5. See Edward Gregg, “Monarchs Without a Crown,” in *Royal and Republican Sovereignty in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Memory of Ragnhild Hatton*, edited by Robert Oresko, G.C. Gibbs, and H.M. Scott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 404–6.

6. Anne-Thérèse de Marguenat de Courcelles (1647–1733), Marquise de Lambert.

on Lambert's guest list, including Fontenelle, Marivaux, Montesquieu, Piron, Duclos, Mirabaud, Mairan, Réaumur, and Astruc, among others.

Tencin turned to writing late in life, publishing the *Memoirs of the Count of Comminge* in 1735 at age fifty-three. *The Siege of Calais*, an historical novel loosely based on Edward III's fourteenth-century siege of that city, appeared four years later. After another hiatus, she published *The Misfortunes of Love* (1747) and began a fourth novel, *Anecdotes of the Court and Reign of Edward II of England*, left unfinished at her death in 1749 but later completed by Anne-Louise Elie de Beaumont and published in 1766.⁷ The first three were successes, and despite anonymous publication (common for authors of this period), only those in her inner circle knew that she had authored them.⁸ Critical reviews of Tencin's work focused mainly on her style, which Voltaire praised in a letter to Mademoiselle Quinault: "I am currently reading *Le Siège de Calais* ... [and] finding a pure and natural style for which I have been searching a long time."⁹ In *Le pour et contre*, despite his disappointment about the *Memoirs'* implausible ending, Abbé Prévost agrees with the "unanimous public opinion" that the novel was well written, praising Tencin's style as spirited, elegant, refined, and pure.¹⁰ According to Decottignies, Tencin's style lived up to the ideal described by Fontenelle in his *Réflexions sur la poétique*: "A single brush stroke brings to mind a vivid idea ... conversations ... gather in a minimum of words everything that is most apt to touch the heart."¹¹

Tencin chose to write in a genre known today as the feminine historical novel, which originated in 1678 with Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette's *La Princesse*

7. A fifth novel, *Histoire d'une religieuse écrite par elle-même* (*The Story of a Nun, Written by Herself*) which appeared in a 1786 volume of the *Bibliothèque universelle des romans* was mistakenly attributed to Tencin. Franco Piva attributes it to Jean-François de Bastide: "Sull'attribuzione dell'*Histoire d'une religieuse écrite par elle-même*," *Quaderni di lingue e letteratura straniera*, no. 22 (1997): 121–39.

8. Some have attributed authorship of the novels to Tencin's nephew, Antoine de Ferriol de Pont-de-Veyle, a name which appears on the eighteenth-century English translations; Masson, however, shows convincingly that Pont-de-Veyle could not have written them, based on his own very different style. Montesquieu, a regular in Tencin's salon and a close friend, confirmed after her death that she was indeed the author of the novels. See Masson, 131–33.

9. "Je lis actuellement *le Siège de Calais*; j'y trouve un style pur et naturel que je cherchais depuis longtemps." Letter to Mademoiselle Quinault, in Brussels, July 27, 1739, in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, Vol. 35 (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1880), 306.

10. Abbé Prévost, *Œuvres de Prévost*. Vol. 7 (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1978), 499.

11. "Un seul trait vous porte dans l'esprit une idée vive ... Les conversations ... rassemblent en fort peu d'espace tout ce qui étoit fait pour aller au cœur." Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, "Lettre sur *Éléonore d'Yvrée, ou les Malheurs de l'Amour*, petit Roman de Mademoiselle Bernard, imprimé pour la première fois en 1687," in *Œuvres*, vol. 11 (Paris: Saillant, 1766), 230, as quoted by Jean Decottignies in his introduction to *Mémoires du Comte de Comminge* (Lille: Librairie René Giard, 1969), 38–39.

de Clèves.¹² More precisely, it was the “historical novel of gallantry,” a story of the danger of passion among the nobility at a time of arranged marriages, when women without dowries often ended up in convents at a tender age—like Tencin herself.¹³ Given her sharp wit and impudence, for which her letters provide ample evidence, one would imagine her the author of satire or, as several critics have remarked, of picaresque stories like those of Voltaire, Lesage, Mouhy, or Crébillon fils.¹⁴ Given her colorful life too, one would expect some of her adventures to show up in her fiction; as Masson remarks: “[i]t seems almost impossible that the memories of such a gripping reality did not find their way into her imagination, and that for her the novel did not serve as an adaptation, more or less unconscious, of her past.” However, Masson warns us, “such are the needs of the romantic reader, accustomed to seeing literature as life traced on paper.”¹⁵ Instead, Tencin’s novels are highly sentimental stories about the misfortunes of love that take place in settings anticipating romanticism, even at times the gloom of the Gothic novel.

The novels of the feminine historical tradition, as Shirley Jones has shown, are characterized by the rigorous moral virtue of their heroines, although they sometimes eschew literary propriety, or *bienséance*, in their depiction of moral weakness and, occasionally, bourgeois or peasant characters.¹⁶ Others associated with this school were the Countess d’Aulnoy and Marie-Catherine de Villedieu, as well as Catherine Bernard, the niece of Thomas and Pierre Corneille and a cousin of Fontenelle.¹⁷ Better known for her tragedies, Bernard also wrote a novel whose title Tencin would borrow for her second novel: *Les Malheurs de l’amour*. Bernard’s *Malheurs* was one of two short works written in the vein of La Fayette’s *Princess de Clèves*, and indeed La Fayette remained the touchstone for the feminine historical novel. As one critic wrote in the *Spectateur français* in 1805, La Fayette “had the merit of having reformed the novel as a genre. She was the

12. *La Princesse de Clèves* was the third novel by Madame de La Fayette (1634–93), and the last to be published in her lifetime.

13. See Pierre-Jean Rémy’s discussion of the “nouvelle historique” and “nouvelle historique et galante” in his introduction to *Le Siège de Calais* (Paris: Desjonquères, 1983), xv.

14. Voltaire’s magnum opus *Candide* (1759) was written in the picaresque tradition of works such as Alain-René Lesage’s classic *Gil Blas* (1715); Charles de Fieux de Mouhy and Claude-Prosper Jolyot Crébillon the younger also wrote in this vein.

15. “Il nous semble même presque impossible que les souvenirs d’une réalité si prenante ne se soient pas imposés à son imagination, et que le roman n’ait pas été chez elle une transposition, plus ou moins inconsciente, de son passé. Ce sont là besoins de lecteur romantique, habitué à prendre la littérature comme un décalque de la vie.” Masson, 130.

16. Shirley Jones, “Madame de Tencin: An Eighteenth-Century Woman Novelist,” in *Woman and Society in Eighteenth-Century France: Essays in Honour of John Stevenson Spink*, ed. Eva Jacobs et al. (London: Athlone Press, 1979), 210.

17. Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville, Baroness d’Aulnoy (1650–1705), Marie-Catherine de Villedieu (1640–83), and Catherine Bernard (1662–1712).

first who, in her ingenious stories full of real sensibility, replaced adventures with sentiment and substituted chimeric beings with men such as they are.”¹⁸

Although Tencin takes up the tradition of the “misfortunes of virtue,” her novels differ from those of her predecessors in the degree to which they subvert social and religious norms. The immorality portrayed is not that of the heroines but the men or women who exploit them, whether for material or sexual reasons. The *Memoirs* were particularly subversive in terms of religion, considering Adélaïde’s quasi-blasphemous deathbed confession: “Far from feeling thankful that [Comminge] was on the path to salvation, I blasphemed the Lord for having taken him from me. . . . I watched as an angry God pressed him with the weight of his almighty hand. I believed that the love that I bore even to the foot of altars had drawn divine vengeance on the object of that love” (*Memoirs*, 60).¹⁹

Still, the question posed by Jones continues to puzzle readers today: “why did women novelists, including Mme de Tencin, writing in the 1730s, choose to cling to a musty historical décor when the novel was beginning to emancipate itself from the shackles of classical aesthetics and adopt a more immediate view of reality?”²⁰ Jones offers three possible explanations. First, *history* had become a literary subgenre which women could exploit without risk to their reputation; one must remember that in the 1730s the novel was still very much a maligned, unproven genre (compared to theater and verse), and women were less likely than their male counterparts to venture into a picaresque realism so removed from the aesthetic norms of *bienséance*. Second, the role of historical novelist gave women an instrument of revenge, as it were, for the limits placed on their sex; they now had the opportunity to rewrite history. Third, the frequent choice of settings of these novels, in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, brought with it the ethos of chivalry and chivalric love, which La Fayette and her followers “sought to extol.” And taking into account the belief, “current at that time, that the Middle Ages were also a period of gloom and violence, one readily understands its appeal for exponents of the sentimental novel.”²¹ This is arguably the most convincing of the reasons for Tencin’s choice of an outdated genre; the temporal setting lent itself well to a feminine sensibility, one which the quasi-realism of Lesage, Mouhy,

18. “Sur les Œuvres de Mmes de la Fayette et de Tencin,” *Spectateur français au dix-neuvième siècle*, vol. 2 (1805), 637: “Madame de la Fayette a le mérite d’avoir réformé le genre des romans. Elle est la première qui, dans ses fictions ingénieuses et pleines d’une sensibilité vraie, ait mis les sentimens à la place des aventures, et substitué à des êtres chimériques, les hommes tels qu’ils sont.”

19. *Mémoires*, 173 and 178: “loin de benir le Seigneur de l’avoir mis dans la voie sainte, je blasphemai contre lui de me l’avoir ôté. . . . je vis Dieu irrité appesantir sa main toute puissante sur lui; je crus que cet amour que je portais jusqu’aux pieds des autels, avait attiré la vengeance celeste sur celui qui en était l’objet.” All French quotations in the notes are taken from the first edition (1735) of the *Mémoires* (hereafter cited as “*Mémoires*”).

20. Jones, 211.

21. Jones, 212.