

MARIE-GENEVIÈVE-CHARLOTTE THIROUX D'ARCONVILLE

*Selected Philosophical,
Scientific, and
Autobiographical Writings*



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Introduction

The Other Voice

The first published biography of Marie-Geneviève-Charlotte Thiroux d'Arconville (1720–1805) appears in a footnote to an early nineteenth-century work of science by physician Pierre-Henri-Hippolyte Bodard de la Jacopière (1758–1826).¹ In the midst of a discussion of the antiseptic qualities of chamomile, Bodard cites a certain eighteenth-century treatise on putrefaction² and then pauses to reflect at some length on its author.

When I refer to a work on putrefaction with the intention of revealing the author's name, my readers will hardly expect me to name a lady who, throughout her lifetime, preferred to maintain the anonymity of the numerous works with which she enriched the sciences, literature, and history.

Madame Marie-Geneviève-Charlotte Darlus, the wife of Monsieur Louis-Lazare Thiroux d'Arconville, president in the Parlement de Paris, was born on October 17, 1720 and died on December 23, 1805. She was the sister-in-law and the mother of two magistrates whose names evoke every possible virtue: Monsieur Angran d'Alleray, former civil lieutenant, and the late Monsieur Thiroux de Crosne, former Intendant of Rouen.³ She deserves to occupy a distinguished place among the famous women of her era.

Born with a lively imagination and an exceptional love of work, Madame d'Arconville, whose early education was restricted to housewifely duties, soon turned toward the sciences. Having no one but

1. Pierre-Henri-Hippolyte Bodard, *Cours de botanique médicale comparée: ou, Exposé des substances végétales exotiques comparées aux plantes indigènes* (2 vols.; Paris: Méquignon, 1810). The extended comment on d'Arconville quoted here is from the "Discours préliminaire" to this work, at 1:xxvii–xxx.

2. D'Arconville's *Essai pour servir à l'histoire de la putréfaction* (Paris: Chez P. Fr. Didot le jeune, 1766).

3. Denis François Angran d'Alleray (1716–1794) was married to d'Arconville's sister, Marie-Angélique-Catherine Darlus (1724–1802); Marie-Louis Thiroux de Crosne (1736–1794), d'Arconville's eldest son, spent most of his career in Rouen, but is better remembered as the last Lieutenant General of Paris, a position he held from 1785 to 1789; during his tenure he oversaw the closure of the Cimetière des Innocents and the creation of the Paris catacombs, as well as other urban improvements.

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herself to direct her studies, it is fair to say that she was her own creation.⁴

In order to manage her responsibilities and her intellectual occupations, she had arranged her time in order that her family, her friends, her projects, and society each receive their due.

Extreme tact and sensitivity, wit without affectation, knowledge without pedantry, a wonderful way with words and lively expressions, a knack for finding just the right quotation for the circumstance: all led to her being much more sought after than she would have wished. Frivolous in the company of superficial society women, lighthearted with young people, erudite with scholars, she was able to adapt herself to all social occasions.

Her varied and extensive knowledge brought her in contact with the most distinguished scientists of her day, some of whom are still living. Among those who come most immediately to mind are Macquer, Bernard de Jussieu, Anquetil, Poullétier, Lavoisier, Malsherbe, La Curne de Sainte-Pelaye and his brother, and a number of others.⁵

Gifted with great depth of feeling and sense of propriety, she had many friends. No one was ever more worthy of friendship, because no one ever mastered better than she the fine art of obligation. It would be difficult to offer a favor with greater delicacy or grace and without any particular aim; she took so much pleasure in favors rendered that she seemed to wish to persuade recipients that they might dispense with gratitude without appearing ungrateful.

Despite the cruel illness that afflicted her in her final years, she continued to work whenever she found relief from her suffering. At the age of eighty-five, her spirit had retained all its amiability and verve; her imagination had lost none of the liveliness and grace of youth.

In offering this small homage to Madame d'Arconville's memory, I realize that I have perhaps indiscreetly lifted the veil behind which she hid throughout her lifetime, but as I am less attached to her by blood ties than by a profound sense of sincere and unchanging

4. Ironically, Bodard appears to echo the famous self-description of the libertine heroine Mme de Merteuil in Choderlos de Laclos's *Les liaisons dangereuses*, "Je suis mon ouvrage."

5. Pierre-Joseph Macquer (1718–1784), chemist; Bernard de Jussieu (1699–1777), naturalist; François-Paul-Lyon Poullétier de la Salle (1719–1788), chemist; Antoine Lavoisier (1743–1794), chemist; Louis-Pierre Anquetil (1723–1808), historian; Chrétien Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes (1721–1794), statesman and botanist; Jean-Baptiste de La Curne de Sainte-Pelaye (1697–1781), historian.

friendship, I will risk placing a few flowers on her tomb. I will consider myself happy if others who remember her, upon reading these words, are drawn to join their sentiments and regrets to mine.

Bodard—who was d'Arconville's nephew—goes on to provide a complete list of her published works: biographies of the Cardinal Arnaud d'Ossat, Queen Marie de Médicis, and of King François II; several volumes of moral philosophy; original scientific research on the nature of putrefaction; three novels; and numerous scientific and literary translations. Despite her steadfast refusal to be publicly identified as a writer during her lifetime, certain features of Bodard's portrait would perhaps have pleased her: the emphasis on her work ethic, on friendship as the compass needle of her emotional life; and above all, the quiet evocation, in a footnote, of her as someone who had contributed work of lasting scientific value. It is striking that the two men he chose to associate with her, her sister's husband Denis François Angran d'Alleray and her eldest son Louis Thiroux de Crosne, were linked with one of the most profoundly painful days of her life, when both were guillotined at the height of the Terror.

D'Arconville was a woman of deep intellectual curiosity, wide interests, and profound moral and philosophical commitments. During a publishing career that spanned nearly three decades, she produced original work in natural science, moral philosophy, fiction, poetry, and history; she was an accomplished translator of scientific and literary works. She is not a feminist in the conventional contemporary sense. When she writes about women, it is more often than not to criticize their frivolous ways—although she is far more critical of the society that demands such behavior. Her steadfast belief in science and education, her determination to develop her intellect, her constant appeal to liberty, and her corrosive critique of marriage as an oppressive institution, make her very much at home in the tradition of the “other voice.”

D'Arconville deserves our attention because of the extraordinary range of her interests, which few of her contemporaries, male or female, could match, and because of the care and intensity with which she maintained her intellectual independence. A true woman of the Enlightenment in her passionate commitment to scientific and philosophical inquiry, she remained skeptical of the moral claims of many of the philosophes, which she found incoherent. She admired the work of Voltaire and Rousseau, whom she knew personally but found wanting as human beings. Her published work alone would make her worthy of study today. As it turns out, however, her decision in 1783 to cease publication was far from the end of her writing career. During the decade following the French Revolution, aging and infirm, she again turned to writing at the behest of a young relative. Scholars have recently uncovered the manuscripts from that period, long thought to be lost. These final works include thousands of pages of essays of literary criticism,

moral philosophy, and autobiographical writing.⁶ In a series of remarkable texts, she recalls her childhood in vivid detail, recounts the stages of her literary career, and relates her painful experiences and imprisonment during the Revolution. The first part of this volume provides a selection of texts representing the range of d'Arconville's achievements; the second presents her autobiographical writing and other late essays.

Life and Historical Context

D'Arconville lived a life that was in many ways typical of her day and her social class: the daughter of a *fermier général* (a "tax farmer," a royal appointment conferring wealth and privileges), she received a minimal education and was married at age fourteen to Louis-Lazare Thiroux d'Arconville, eight years her senior, a magistrate in the politically influential Paris law court, the Parlement de Paris. She bore three sons and maintained the social connections expected of a woman of her rank. Her religious beliefs were deep, strict, and tinged with a pessimistic Jansenist or Augustinian sensibility. Her family connections thus represent the intersection of economic and political interests that formed the real seat of power in the late Old Regime: families who were not of the old nobility, but who had earned certain hereditary privileges by virtue of administrative or judiciary offices, families who "lived nobly" and maintained an elevated lifestyle, but whose moral and religious convictions were more closely aligned with those of the bourgeoisie.

6. The twelve bound manuscript volumes have been acquired by the Morisset Library, University of Ottawa, Department of Archives and Special Collections, Collection Charles-Le Blanc (PQ 2067 .T28 A6 1800). Based on both internal textual evidence and the signs of physical alteration of the manuscript title page, it appears that although the volumes are numbered 1–12, the volume numbered 7 is actually volume 13; the original vol. 7 is missing. It is presumed that the change was made by a nineteenth-century dealer in order to cover the lacuna and make the twelve extant volumes appear to be a complete set: Marie-Laure Girou Swiderski, "Le mystérieux volume VII des *Pensées, réflexions et anecdotes*," paper presented, Colloquium on Mme d'Arconville, Archives and Special Collections, Morisset Library, University of Ottawa, April 18, 2016. For a thematic listing of the contents, see Emilie Joly, "Index thématique des *Pensées, réflexions et anecdotes* de Geneviève Thiroux d'Arconville," in Patrice Bret and Brigitte Van Tiggelen, eds., *Madame d'Arconville, 1720–1805: Une femme de lettres et de sciences au siècle des Lumières* (Paris: Hermann, 2011), 152–58. For a list by volume, see Marc André Bernier and Marie-Laure Girou Swiderski, eds., *Madame d'Arconville, moraliste et chimiste au siècle des Lumières: édition critique* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2016), 221–25. (These tables predate the discovery of the misnumbering of vol. 7.) Following the practice of other scholars, I will refer to the manuscripts as *Pensées, réflexions et anecdotes* (Thoughts, Reflections, and Anecdotes), a title that appears at the head of the later volumes. It is abbreviated henceforth as PRA, with particular volumes referenced as PRA/1, PRA/2, etc.

In certain key respects, however, she was altogether unlike other women of her social group and indeed of her generation. As she tells us in her autobiographical essays, from her earliest years she was an intensely curious child. Their mother having died when she and her sister, Marie Angélique Catherine, were small children, the girls were left to the care of a series of ignorant governesses. The young Geneviève did not learn to read until she was eight years old, and then began devouring books, especially history and literature, while writing poetry, plays, and stories of her own. Marriage put an end to her youthful literary experiments. In a turn reminiscent of that taken by a better-known woman intellectual of the previous generation, Emilie Du Châtelet, she embarked on a systematic plan of self-education following the birth of her three sons.⁷

It appears that sometime in the early 1740s she became sick with smallpox; according to nineteenth-century biographers, the disease scarred her face and led her to withdraw from social life. As she notes in her autobiographical writings, however, she intensely disliked the enforced routine of social visits and family ceremonies; the illness may have furnished the pretext to curtail activities that she found burdensome, the better to concentrate on her intellectual pursuits. She learned English and Italian and studied botany, anatomy, and chemistry at the Jardin du Roi (the present-day Jardin des Plantes), the center for research in the natural sciences. The leading scientists of the day advised her how to set up her own botanical garden on her country estate of Crosne and helped her furnish her laboratory. As she describes them in her later autobiographical essay “About Me,” the greenhouses and gardens at Crosne and her later home in Meudon would remain in her memory not only as places for research and writing, but as a *locus amoenus* of pleasure, peace, and solitude.⁸

D’Arconville’s first published works were literary and scientific translations from English. Her translation of Lord Halifax’s *Advice to a Daughter* appeared in 1756; in 1759, her translations of *The Anatomy of the Humane (sic) Bones* by

7. Gabrielle Emilie Le Tonnelier de Breteuil, marquise Du Châtelet (1706–1749), translator of Newton and author of a wide range of works on philosophy and science. See Judith P. Zinsser, *La dame d’esprit: A Biography of the Marquise Du Châtelet* (New York: Viking, 2006).

8. “About Me” (Sur moi); English text below at 216–30. She also describes her preference for rural living in a late essay, “On the Countryside” (Sur la campagne, PRA/6:260–75): “Those who love study are able to give themselves to it entirely, while those who are inclined toward agriculture and botany have vast opportunities to explore and, as Fontenelle puts it, ‘to seize Nature in action.’ Nurseries of exotic trees and greenhouses afford us the means to acquire the knowledge that we seek. We can enjoy the company of friends, without ‘intruders’ interrupting our delightful moments together; in short, life in the countryside is filled with pleasure and freedom, rather than the frustrations and constraints of the city.”

Alexander Monro (primus) and *Chemical Lectures* by Peter Shaw.⁹ She furnished substantive prefaces to both of the scientific treatises, and oversaw the production of the anatomical plates that accompanied the first. These major translations were shortly followed by her first original works: her moralist writings *Pensées et réflexions morales* (Thoughts and Moral Reflections, 1760) and *De l'amitié* (Treatise on Friendship, 1761); further literary translations, another moralist treatise, two novels; and at last, the results of her personal scientific research, her *Essai pour une histoire de la putréfaction* (Treatise on Putrefaction, 1766).¹⁰

D'Arconville experienced a turning point in 1767 with the sudden death of her husband's brother and her closest friend, "my heart's dear love" (*le bien aimé de mon cœur*), François Thiroux d'Espersenne. As she describes in her late essays "The Story of My Writing" and "My Memories," the shock of his death left her profoundly depressed and unable to write.¹¹ At the suggestion of a friend, she turned to dictation in order to begin working again. The new method of composition carried its own difficulties, however: "I dared not pronounce the words that formed in my mind, always convinced that what I was thinking was not worth writing down.... I was advised to renounce all works of the imagination, since they should be written directly by the author, and instead turn to history."¹² She went on to publish three substantial biographies—*Vie du cardinal d'Ossat* (Life of Cardinal d'Ossat), *Vie de Marie de Médicis* (Life of Marie de Médicis), and *Histoire de François II* (History of François II)¹³—as well as a number of literary translations. In 1775 and 1776, she oversaw the publication of a seven-volume edition of her works under the title *Mélanges de littérature, de morale et de physique* (Miscellany of Literature, Moral Philosophy, and Natural Science).¹⁴ Fol-

9. *Avis d'un père à sa fille* ([Paris: Hippolyte-Louis Guérin et Louis-François Delatour], 1756), translation of George Savile, marquess of Halifax (1633–1695), *Advice to a Daughter* (1688); *Traité d'ostéologie* (Paris: Chez Guillaume Cavelier, 1759), translation of Alexander Monro, *The Anatomy of the Humane* (sic) *Bones* (1726); *Leçons de chymie: propres à perfectionner la physique, le commerce et les arts* (Paris: Chez Jean Thomas Herissant, 1759), translation of Peter Shaw, *Chemical Lectures* (1734).

10. *Pensées et réflexions morales sur divers sujets* (Avignon [Paris]: s.n., 1760), henceforth abbreviated as *Pensées*; *De l'amitié* (Amsterdam [Paris], Chez Desaint & Saillant, 1761); *Essai pour servir à l'histoire de la putréfaction* cited above, note 2. For remaining titles, see Bibliography.

11. English texts of "The Story of My Writing" (*Histoire de ma littérature*) and "My Memories" (*Mes souvenirs*) below at pp. 184–96 and pp. 206–13.

12. "The Story of My Writing," p. 191.

13. *Vie du cardinal d'Ossat*, 2 vols. (Paris: Chez Herissant, le fils, 1771), containing the translation of d'Ossat's *Discours sur les effets de la Ligue en France* at 1:1–148; *Vie de Marie de Médicis, princesse de Toscane, reine de France et de Navarre* (Paris: Chez Ruault, libraire, 1774); *Histoire de François II, roi de France et de Navarre*, 2 vols. (Paris: Belin, 1783).

14. *Mélanges de littérature, de morale et de philosophie* (7 vols.; Amsterdam: aux dépens de la Compagnie, 1775–1776). Abbreviated henceforth as *Mélanges de littérature*.