

Proposal for International Women's Writing Association (Conference at Falmouth, 2026)

Title: Between Image and Voice: Revolutionary Womanhood and Female Authorship in France, 1789–1848

This article analyses the discrepancy between the representation of women in Revolutionary imagery and texts during the French Revolution (1789–1799) and the textual self-representation and self-understanding of women from and about the same period. By contrasting women's memoirs such as Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's *Souvenirs* (1835–1841) and Madame Roland's *Mémoires* (1793), as well as articles from the French Women's Press (1758–1848), with the symbolic ideas about womanhood and motherhood projected by the Assemblée Nationale in the form of the virtuous "citoyenne", this paper interrogates the tension between gendered political imagination and female authorship.

An early example of ritualised symbolic womanhood within the French regime was the "l'Offrande patriotique" (7 September 1789), during which French female artists and the wives of male artists offered their jewellery to finance the revolutionary treasury. Visual depictions in engravings and textual descriptions in contemporary journalistic accounts frame this event as cohesive and exemplary, with women correctly performing their role within the political order. Other texts, such as a letter by Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun, underline the symbolic importance of this event; while his wife had fled Revolutionary France in order to secure their shared property in Paris, Monsieur Lebrun insisted upon her presence.

Against this monolithic representation of Revolutionary womanhood, women's memoirs and journalistic articles reveal a plurality of voices and lived experiences. It demonstrates how a diverse reading and inclusion of female-written voices can open up political and historical archetypes and stereotypes. It raises questions about the extent to which historical women themselves internalised or criticised the gender roles imposed upon them. This not only deepens our understanding of historical women, but also allows us to rethink their autonomy within restrictive gender expectations. It opens up a discussion about how women are used as symbolic political instruments even today.

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