

ARTICLE

Marriage Narratives and the *Code Civil* in Nineteenth-Century French Women's Memoirs

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SUMMARY

This is a study of marriage narratives in memoirs written by women of the French nobility after the First Empire, whose autobiographies cover the period ranging from the last years of the *Ancient Regime* to the revolution of 1848. In their writings on matrimony and domesticity, memoirists never mention by name the *Code civil* of 1804 and its repressive statutes that culminated in the 1816 abolition of divorce. But a close examination of two very different marriage narratives, by the comtesse de Boigne and the comtesse d'Agoult, reveals the powerful impact of the Napoleonic marriage laws on the memoirists' personal accomplishments and social station, and on their conjugal "disengagement."

KEYWORDS: Marriage, divorce, *Code Civil*, memoirs, Marie d'Agoult, comtesse de Boigne

For several decades after the fall of the First Empire, women of the French aristocracy took to writing their memoirs in large numbers—an unprecedented trend, according to the duchesse de Maillé (1785–1851), herself a memoirist, who complained in her journal entry of May 1830: "nous sommes inondés de mémoires" (313). These autobiographers, most of them non-professional writers, were particularly affected by the changes that the Revolution and the ensuing regimes had brought to their domestic environment and their social networks. By creating a personal writing space, disconnected from the larger (and perhaps intimidating) literary institutions, they felt at liberty to express their discontent and disillusionment in a social order that they no longer regarded as sufficiently beneficial to them, both as women and as members of the elite classes. Writing without the need or the desire to be published—their memoirs were almost all published posthumously—gave them the privacy they needed to voice critical opinions of their governments and their contemporaries that their sense of decorum and propriety would not have allowed in other venues.

The Tyranny of Marriage

In their portrait galleries and in the many anecdotes they tell regarding monarchs and other famous men and women, the memoirists invariably give Napoleon the prominent position of most detested political figure. The emperor was consistently described as a narrow-minded tyrant, especially when it came to matrimony and family affairs, a topic which is widely discussed in post-revolutionary women's memoirs. According to Mme de Rémusat (1780–1821), a memoirist who had lived at his court, Napoleon was the most tyrannical of husbands (155), and he was known in aristocratic circles for encouraging forced marriages, starting with his own stepdaughter, Hortense de Beauharnais (1783–1837), who recounts in her own memoirs how the emperor bullied her into

marrying his brother (76–84). Several memoirists recall Napoleon’s habit of imposing arranged marriages, which the comtesse de Boigne (1783–1866) called “a family inquisition” (1: 280). But such anecdotes have a narrative function beyond their political purpose in women’s personal writings: they are used to create contrast with the memoirist’s own experience of matrimony, in which marriage is no longer associated with coercion and duress, but with a strong sense of agency. Perhaps with the exception of the comtesse d’Agoult (1805–1876), every memoirist draws a portrait of a determined and discerning younger self, in charge of her own decisions and in control of her destiny.

The marquise de la Tour du Pin (1770–1853), the rare memoirist who claims conjugal bliss, takes all the credit for the success of her marriage: “je bénis le ciel de ma décision, en écrivant ces lignes, à soixante et onze ans, après avoir été sa compagne pendant cinquante années” (71). The comtesse Merlin (1789–1852) is also quite pleased with her marriage to Napoleon’s military envoy to Spain (264–271), a brilliant diplomatic move for which *she* takes all the credit. Less fortunate, the duchesse de Dino (1793–1862), after being misled by her mother into a marriage she didn’t want, still manages to stand her ground. If she cannot choose her future husband, she will choose the terms of their relationship, which she makes quite clear to her future husband: “Je cède au désir de ma mère sans répugnance à la vérité, mais avec la plus parfaite indifférence pour vous” (250). The comtesse de Boigne will offer the same non-commitment to her fiancé and the same affirmation of complete detachment. Free will seems to be the *leitmotif* that connects all marriage narratives. In their matrimonial strategies, be it active acceptance or passive resistance, the larger story is the empowerment of the self.

But at the heart of marriage narratives is a profound contradiction: what is the meaning of the free choice memoirists allege to have exercised when they were facing the inevitability of marriage? A closer reading of matrimonial anecdotes also shows that for many women authors, marriage was often the disastrous result of parental incompetence, or worse, deception. And there is sometimes a sense of discouragement, even hopelessness in the marriage narratives, which seems quite disconnected from the assertiveness and resolve claimed by the memoirists. But they thrived on this paradox, often alternating between resignation and rebellion.

Women’s memoirs are full of long passages discussing betrothals, wedding arrangements, marriage contracts, negotiations, and alliances. Overall, the authors seem to be more interested in discussing their “entry” into matrimony than any exit strategies they may have conceived when married life was no longer desirable or acceptable. The 1816 abolition of divorce had obviously made any possibility of ending a marriage legally impossible. Without exception, in my sample of a dozen memoirists, the older women who had married before the turn of the nineteenth century did not take advantage of the 1792 law legalizing divorce, and likewise, none of the younger women filed for legal separation when that became an option after 1816. They simply stayed away from the court system altogether and pursued other venues to end their unions, in the *Ancien-Régime* tradition of private settlements. Among the writers born between 1770 and 1805 whose memoirs I have consulted, almost half had separated from their husbands, and yet few were willing to discuss such arrangements in their writings. In the repressive context of the *Code civil* of 1804, at a time when women had lost most of their legal rights, it is quite understandable that memoirists, who initiated separations from their husbands in numbers nearing our own divorce rate, would exercise great discretion when writing about their domestic arrangements, even in the privacy of

their journals. They were, after all, at the mercy of the court, had their husbands sought any legal action against them.

Memoirists don't even acknowledge the existence of the 1804 *Code civil* in their writings, nor do they refer directly to the judicial system that Napoleon had put in place. Marie d'Agoult did write a long chapter on divorce in her 1847 *Essai sur la liberté* (128–146), but stayed clear of direct references to the *Code civil* in her memoirs. The duchesse de Maillé makes an oblique allusion to the no-divorce law, but only to advocate resignation: “On ne saurait empêcher le mariage d'être une chaîne, mais si l'on cherche à l'éviter ou à la briser, on perd ces avantages et l'on ne saurait avoir complètement ceux de la liberté” (234). This statement, written in 1832, speaks to the powerlessness of women facing indissoluble marriages, and the duchesse clearly understood how the Restoration, while giving her back some of the lost privileges of her caste, had implemented a truly repressive secular order whose legitimacy was grounded not in the monarchy but in the revolutionary *Code civil*. In the preface of her *Souvenirs*, she describes “l'inaction à laquelle me condamnait ma condition de femme” (1) in almost the same terms as Marie d'Agoult who, many years later, wrote in the preface to her own memoirs: “Ma naissance et mon sexe ne m'ayant point appelée à jouer un rôle actif dans la politique” (30).

The *Code civil* had definitely been detrimental to women of the nobility by restricting their rights as persons, and their memoirs reflect their hostility toward a system that had removed them from the public sphere. But our memoirists' social advantages gave them the means to go on long touristic journeys; most were experienced travelers who found great comfort and inspiration in their voyages, which they discuss in their memoirs. Their texts are full of spatial metaphors that connote a desire to cross borders, to discover new horizons, and to escape confinement. Longing to regain some “altitude,” they position themselves at a window looking out: the duchesse de Maillé claims to be “à la fenêtre du premier étage pour voir et juger cet imposant spectacle dont j'étais appelée à être le témoin” (1). Mme de Boigne also mentions “de quelles fenêtres je me suis trouvée assister aux spectacles que je tenterai de décrire” (1: 152), and the comtesse Dash (1804–1872), a prolific novelist and memoirist of the 1830s, enjoys her vantage point from the second floor window, “moi qui n'étais pas derrière le rideau” (3: 171).

Memoirists may have had an eye on the world to see and judge, but they remained unwilling to divulge much of their private or domestic lives, and in that respect they remained “behind the curtain.” The comtesse de Boigne and the comtesse d'Agoult, born twenty-four years apart, are quite remarkable in this respect because they wrote extensively, although not always in full disclosure, of their marital tribulations. Both were highly educated women, Mme de Boigne in the *Ancien-Régime* tradition, and Marie d'Agoult in the era of post-revolutionary regime changes. In very different ways, and for different reasons, Mme de Boigne, a royalist and fervent supporter of the Orleanist regime, and the comtesse d'Agoult, a militant republican with socialist ideals, were both deeply affected by the marriage laws of their time. The accounts they give of their conjugal “disengagement,” when read in the context of the legal system of early nineteenth-century France, reveal a hidden world of complex issues, such as abuse, abandonment, and exclusion.

The Comtesse de Boigne: Anatomy of a *Mésalliance*

Adèle d'Osmond's 1798 marriage in London to the général-comte de Boigne was an instant disaster, as she found herself the victim of the same “*mésalliance*” that she had considered so

foolish in others. In her sometimes peremptory style, she had declared: “on ne brave pas impunément les lois et les usages imposés par la société aux différentes classes qui la composent” (1: 174). She claimed with a certain amount of pride that at age sixteen (in reality seventeen), she had negotiated on her own her marriage to Benoît de Boigne, a forty-nine-year-old *parvenu* who, unbeknownst to her, had faked his title but not the colossal fortune he had amassed in India during his military career. The role that she gives herself in this arrangement is probably exaggerated, since it is doubtful that her parents would have had nothing to do with such an important transaction. That the unsuspecting Adèle had married an adventurer disguised as a nobleman is more believable. Monsieur de Boigne, she writes, “me trompa sur tous ses antécédents: sur son nom, sur sa famille, sur son existence passée” (1: 155). The comtesse may be right about her husband’s alleged lies: his humble origins (he was born Leborgne to a merchant family), his previous marriage (and his two children), and the fact that his name and title were made-up¹ were not revealed to her at the time of the marriage proposal.

But the precipitous way in which the whole affair had been carried out—Adèle mentions that the wedding took place twelve days after meeting her fiancé—may explain the strange carelessness on the part of the class-conscious d’Osmonds, who failed to properly vet their future son-in-law. It is also a good indication of the family’s precarious financial situation at the time. Like many of their aristocratic countrymen, the d’Osmonds had fled to England during the French Revolution and had not returned to France, fearing for their safety. But their choice to remain in London’s *émigré* community had dire consequences for them because they were now subject to the punitive laws passed by the revolutionary government against those who did not return: not only would the d’Osmonds face death sentences as traitors, but their properties and assets would be confiscated. At the time of Adèle’s wedding, her parents had been placed on the “*Liste des émigrés*” that made their safe return impossible unless they received a “delisting” from the French authorities. It was not until 1802, when Napoleon started granting amnesty and restitution to the *émigrés*, that Adèle, who as comtesse de Boigne was not affected by her parents’ refugee status, was able to get her whole family off the list.

In this circumstance, Adèle’s betrothal would have been a strategy of survival for her family and not the unfortunate result of a duplicitous scheme by a wealthy general with a forged identity. Whether the comtesse had some knowledge of her future husband’s dubious social status and whether it would have made a difference is impossible to ascertain. As for the comte de Boigne, this marriage presented advantages that he perhaps overestimated: he was purchasing entry into the elite of the *Ancien-Régime* French aristocracy in an effort to validate his bogus title of nobility.² A native of Savoie—he had only become a *de-facto* French citizen after the Revolution—he wanted to settle in Europe after his many years in India, and would have needed the d’Osmonds’ relations—or so he thought—to become fully established in the French high society.

Posing simultaneously as the innocent victim of an adventurer and as a shrewd businesswoman, Mme de Boigne boasts in her memoirs that her marriage was purely a financial transaction meant to save her beloved parents, who were to receive a hefty pension from the comte de Boigne. The marriage is presented as a guarantee of solvency for her entire family, a sacrifice that she was happy to make because “je n’avais qu’une passion dans le cœur, l’amour filial” (1: 153).

Unsurprisingly, madame de Boigne was soon to realize that the transaction that she had so swiftly negotiated required some reciprocity. While she was ready to “remplir les devoirs que j’allais contracter” (1: 155), she felt “exempt” from any conjugal intimacy because she had fully disclosed her purpose to her fiancé, stating that she would never feel any love for him, and he had agreed to this condition. In other words, she was unwilling to fulfill her “devoir conjugal,” the duty of sexual relations, later reinforced by the *Code civil*’s notion of “cohabitation” (article 214). She uses the pages of her memoirs to convince her reader that she, not her husband, was the aggrieved party in the couple’s ensuing discord and the resulting dissolution of their marriage. In a passage that reads like the script of a lawyer’s closing arguments in a divorce proceeding, she first pleads in favor of her young age: she would never have had the “courage” to risk her welfare in this way, had she been a few years older (1: 155). She then centers her arguments on her husband’s fraudulent and dishonest practices, which she contrasts to her own candor and integrity. Finally, she attacks his character: in a comic passage about monsieur de Boigne’s past military exploits, she draws a colorful portrait of her husband as a shady entrepreneur who had “acquired” his incredible wealth from the Indian rulers who were employing him (1: 156).

Of course, the comtesse’s class prejudices are quite apparent throughout her memoirs and most particularly when she discusses her husband’s behavior. She saw his uncouth manners, his vulgarities, his use of opium, and his “oriental jealousy” as signs of his plebeian origins and his non-European culture, for which she had great contempt. Monsieur de Boigne belonged to what she called “l’aristocratie de l’argent” (1: 157), which in her view made him a despicable individual. Yet, money was the most important aspect of their relationship, and after thirty years of marriage Mme de Boigne recalled in detail every amount paid and withheld.

But the memoirs allude to a more sinister aspect of the comte de Boigne’s personality: his uncontrollable anger. While she stops short of accusing her husband of domestic violence in her memoirs, her correspondence with her family from a few months into her marriage leaves no doubt that the verbal abuse mentioned in the memoirs had in fact turned more violent. In the numerous letters addressed to her parents during a trip that the couple took to Germany in 1800, Mme de Boigne wrote repeatedly about the threats (1923 ed. 5: 152) and the insults (1923 ed. 5: 169), but also reported a physical assault (1923 ed. 5: 208). In her memoirs, Mme de Boigne only mentions the constant harassment and the use of expletives, “la plus odieuse persecution” (1: 160) for which she continually blamed her husband.

In her letters of 1800, the then 18-year-old Adèle scolds her parents for tolerating her predicament: “Enfin . . . Papa, tu as beau me prêcher la soumission et la résignation, jamais, non jamais je ne m’accoutumerai à un si grand malheur” (1923 ed. 5: 141). Her correspondence is an endless litany of complaints and regrets. But contrary to her parents’ advice, Mme de Boigne did not passively accept her husband’s conduct, and in the very first year of their marriage, she tried to secure an amicable separation. At first, she was allowed to return to her parents’ home (1: 160), but this reprieve was short-lived, and she went back to her husband, yielding to social pressure and more probably to the fear of possible retaliation.

For the next four years before she moved back to France and the couple separated for good, the comtesse de Boigne describes a very busy and lively social life in London, among the *crème* of the English and *émigré* societies, in which she had become “une jolie machine bien harmonisée” (1: 158), reduced by her husband to the role of puppet. But she also describes a life of complete

isolation, imprisoned by M. de Boigne—she uses the term “séquestrée”—in a walled-in space that she compares to “une lanterne magique” (1: 190). This image of life in a world of shadows is one of the powerful metaphors she uses to show marriage as a dehumanizing station for women.

For fourteen years, the Boigne couple lived together and apart in a constant back and forth that the comtesse amusedly recalls: “il m’a quittée *pour toujours* cinq ou six fois” (1: 161). But her efforts to come to an agreement were unsuccessful until 1812, when the comte de Boigne finally agreed to a permanent separation. However, Mme de Boigne was then forced to leave her residence of choice, the castle of Beauregard—originally purchased for the couple by the comte—which had become too expensive, she says, for the allowance that she was receiving from her husband (1: 239). The sale of the property meant a reduced income for her, perhaps a punitive measure on the part of Monsieur de Boigne. In a letter to him dated November 24, 1812, the comtesse alludes to a dispute regarding the amount of her pension and argues that “le revenu que je souhaite que vous me confirmiez n’est pas exagéré . . . Je ne vois pas en quoi j’aurais mérité depuis qu’il fût retranché” (1921 ed. 1: 426). Mme de Boigne did not win this battle, but her reduced income may have been a small price to pay for the “tranquillité” (1: 161) and, more importantly, the freedom that she had so adamantly sought for so many years.

The comtesse de Boigne never mentioned in her memoirs or even in her correspondence any possible recourse to judicial arbitration. But between 1804 and 1816, after the Boignes had settled in France, divorce was still a possibility, and the couple could have easily invoked article 233 of the *Code civil* to obtain a divorce by mutual consent. In fact, the law was extremely liberal, based only on the couple’s will to discontinue “la vie commune.” Conjugal violence was somewhat acknowledged in the *Code civil* after 1804, although the obedience class of article 213 was no protection for abused women. But the comtesse de Boigne could have used article 231 had she wanted to file a fault divorce against her husband, “pour excès, sévices ou injures graves, de l’un d’eux envers l’autre.” But divorce simply did not exist in her social circles or in her aristocratic, Catholic environment. In her memoirs, she does mention talk of an annulment in Rome, but only to dismiss it as something extravagant and simply ridiculous (1: 160).

The long chapter that she devotes to her marriage starts with a caveat: she will not speak about what she calls “le roman de ma vie” (1: 152), an interesting expression that gives her story a sort of literary quality, perhaps because her revelations are quite scandalous, especially her many references to her husband’s abusive behavior. Her use of narrative devices such as anecdotal digressions and her extremely entertaining practice of irony allow her to distance herself from her subject and present it as a stylized manner, a sort of fictional rendition of her life. But this also gives her the ability to be more forthcoming than she admits: she creates a strong case against her spouse, presents her arguments, and speaks as the victimized party. In her marriage narrative, she becomes the plaintiff, not in a court of law, but in the imaginary tribunal of her future readers to whom she dedicates her memoirs.

Marie d’Agoult: “A Life of One’s Own”

In the preface of her memoirs, the comtesse d’Agoult speaks of the one compelling reason for writing one’s autobiography, being a woman: “la voix qui parlait à ma conscience changeait d’accent. Elle trouvait dans mon sexe une raison décisive de parler” (1: 30). By far the most independent and modern of all memoirists, Marie d’Agoult describes herself as “une femme [qui]

s'est fait à elle-même sa vie" (1: 30), a sentence structure that, in its very unusual grammar, encircles the subject and the object in one instance of complete self-sufficiency: a "life of one's own." But even as she claimed to live outside of the "règle commune" (1: 30), and cognizant of her marginal status, Marie d'Agoult, for all her courage and her uncompromising candor, was unable to complete her memoirs: she left a fragmented and often redacted narrative, in sharp contrast to Mme de Boigne's fluid and organized prose.

While Marie d'Agoult was also in a loveless marriage and separated from her husband, she was in a very different situation from madame de Boigne's. Born into a prominent and wealthy aristocratic family of the privileged Faubourg Saint-Germain, Marie de Flavigny married the comte d'Agoult, in 1827, an irreversible decision that she was to regret until the end of her days: "Depuis le jour de mon mariage, je n'avais pas eu une heure de joie" (1: 292), she writes. In May 1835, she left her husband and their daughter Claire and eloped to Switzerland with the Hungarian composer Franz Liszt, with whom she would have three other children. Their liaison ended in 1839, and Marie d'Agoult came back to Paris alone, defeated, unable to return to her previous life, and having lost guardianship of her children. She was facing incredible adversity in a society where she never truly regained her place after her public disgrace and her painful breakup with Liszt. But her will to write about this love affair, to express "le douloureux secret de mes luttes intérieures" (1: 30), was countered by her fear of indiscretion, scandal, and even score-settling.

We know from Philippe Lejeune's detailed study of her journal and correspondence, "Pourquoi Marie d'Agoult n'a pas publié ses Mémoires," that the memoirist started her autobiographical project as early as 1846 and worked at it for the next two decades (108) in another stark contrast with Mme de Boigne, who says she wrote her memoirs "de premier jet" (1: 11) and was done with her writing by 1843. While Marie d'Agoult was agonizing over her memoirs, another autobiographer, Georges Sand, was writing *Histoire de ma vie*, which was published in 1854. In just a few sentences, Sand was able to sweep aside the story of her own estrangement from her husband and the ensuing legal separation, unwilling to indulge in any type of confession à la Rousseau. Lejeune calls this strategy "une immense dérobade" (*Genesis* 27). And Marie d'Agoult, perhaps demoralized by Sand's impeccable image control, amazed, probably, by her former friend's avoidance of important issues, left an unfinished and fragmented text, of which, says Lejeune, no manuscript remains (102).

The comtesse d'Agoult carefully analyzed, as did the comtesse de Boigne before her, the carelessness that led to her marriage, but contrary to the older memoirist, she never contemplated any domestic compromise. While Mme de Boigne accepted marriage as a business arrangement, Marie d'Agoult could only understand conjugal ties grounded in reciprocal affection and desire. Mme de Boigne's *Ancien-Régime* notion that love and marriage were two distinct ideas was not shared by Marie d'Agoult, and there was certainly a generational difference in their individual expectations and beliefs.

The comtesse d'Agoult did not subscribe to other memoirists' pragmatic and fatalistic idea that marriage is a "necessary chain," as the duchesse de Maillé had suggested. She had a very idealized view of marriage as a free and concerted expression of love, a just and equal union, which she hoped would become reality, "quand la révolution qui s'est faite chez nous dans les idées s'accomplira dans les mœurs." (1: 284). Without ever mentioning the abolition of divorce in the *Code civil*, she discussed its crippling and deleterious effects when such irrevocable

commitments are “imposés à l’inexpérience et à la faiblesse” (1: 285). She goes even further in her memoirs when she denounces marriage as an obstacle to the expression of true passion: she contemplates a future when “women like Marie” and “men like Franz” would be able to fully live their extraordinary lives “sans brisements, sans perversion de l’ordre établi,” in other words, without the criminalization of adultery (1: 285). She suggests, with remarkable insight, that the deep misunderstanding between men and women in marriage is rooted in their cultural and social inequality (1: 285). But while she condemns arranged marriages, which she compares to horse-trading (1: 174), she stops short of openly arguing in favor of divorce in her memoirs. Marie d’Agoult, the only writer of her time to outspokenly discuss such forbidden topics as the disaster of conjugal sex in loveless marriages, or the irreparable trauma of unwanted pregnancies (2: 66), is also quite unwilling to fully discuss her own personal and legal predicament. Philippe Lejeune mentions her cover-ups, her omissions, her vagueness regarding aspects of her life that she was unwilling to disclose. But he also cites her deep and genuine search for truth in her autobiographical writings (117).

In her memoirs, Marie d’Agoult mentions her rather extraordinary social status: she is living outside the law, “hors de la loi” (2: 11). What she means is that by leaving her husband she was in defiance of article 214 (title V) of the *Code civil*, which states “spouses mutually oblige themselves to a community of living,” and was facing an automatic jail sentence of up to two years (article 298) had she been convicted of adultery. While she examines her relationship with Liszt at length in part 3 of her memoirs, titled “La passion,” she almost never talks about the three children born during their four years together. They are simply absent from her reflections. Only once does she openly mention her relationship with her children, in the preface of part 4 of her memoirs, when she discusses the reason for not returning to her husband, after the breakup with the musician: “Je ne voulais pas éloigner de moi les enfants qui m’étaient nés dans des conditions où, selon la légalité française, je ne pouvais rien être pour eux” (2: 14). At the very end of her memoirs, she also alludes to the very painful loss of her children, “ôtés violemment” (2: 36) because she could not be their legal guardian and given to another woman.³ The legal text to which she is referring is title VII of the *Code civil*, “Of Laws Relating to Parentage.” She discussed this issue, but in a different venue and under a different name, her masculine *nom de plume*, Daniel Stern, in her *Essai sur la liberté*, first published in 1846.

In that essay’s chapter on the indissolubility of marriage, which she sees as a tool of oppression and enslavement by a “criminal legislation” (133), Marie d’Agoult debates the *Code civil*’s law on filiation and the “ignominious” article on paternity (138). The actual text of article 312 of title VII is short and forbidding: “L’enfant conçu pendant le mariage, a pour père le mari”; an infant conceived during marriage claims the husband as his father, without any possibility for the husband to disavow a child, even, says article 313, “for cause of adultery.” Had Marie d’Agoult claimed to be the mother of Liszt’s three children, the comte d’Agoult would have been the putative father. Only by registering their children of “unknown mother”⁴ could Liszt be acknowledged as the “natural” father and the children take his name (which they did). The law was against Marie d’Agoult on two counts, since article 335 of the *Code civil*, in the chapter on “Enfants naturels,” stipulates that acknowledgment of natural children shall not take place for the benefit of children “nés d’un commerce incestueux ou adultérin.”

In her memoirs, little remains of Marie d’Agoult’s powerful arguments against the *Code civil*’s matrimonial laws but a deep sense of loss. Which brings us to the question of self-

censorship, a frequent issue not only in Marie d'Agoult's memoirs but also in other autobiographical writings, which can be best explained by the very nature of the genre and by its objective. Memoirs and autobiographies are not essays; they do not try to convince the reader or to educate him. They are not a register of grievances; they are written much less to reveal than to repair, which Mme de Boigne perfectly understood when she called her memoirs "ravaudage" (1: 11), a term used in needlework to mean *mending*. This healing property of autobiographical writing is quite apparent in a couple of episodes of Marie d'Agoult's memoirs. In one, three teenagers ("two blond girls" and their brother) make a brief appearance. They have no names and no parentage. The reader gets no clue that these are Marie d'Agoult's children, whose civil status has been translated into literary anonymity, but their mere presence is given as a source of well-being and maternal bliss (2: 40). In another instance, the memoirist does mention her son by name, Daniel: "C'était le nom que j'avais donné à l'un de mes enfants" she writes (2: 32), not using the word "son" but "children," a more generic term that is also more inclusive since it refers to her daughters as well. The narrative moment is significant because it recounts the creation of Marie d'Agoult's pseudonym, Daniel Stern, in a lively dialogue with her mentor and editor of her newspaper articles, Émile de Girardin. It is about finding a new identity that would divorce the memoirist from her "état civil" and free her from her husband's name:

Vous n'avez pas signé, me dit M. de Girardin. – Mais non. – Il faut signer. – Je ne peux pas. – Pourquoi ? – Je ne peux pas disposer d'un nom qui ne m'appartient pas à moi seule . . . – Eh bien alors, prenez un pseudonyme. – Lequel ? – Essayez un nom, me dit-il. – Il y avait là sur la table mon buvard et un crayon. Je pris machinalement le crayon et j'écrivis *Daniel*. (2: 32)

This naming ceremony serves two purposes: Marie d'Agoult can finally acknowledge her son as her own while removing both the putative and the legal fathers, and she also reverses the naming process, taking for herself the masculine name of her son and associating him with a surname—"Stern"—from her mother's German heritage. With the creation of a literary civil status, the memoirist replaces the patriarchal order of the *Code civil* with a matrilineal filiation. In this emotionally charged onomastic episode, one of the most important moments in her literary life, Marie d'Agoult has literally transformed the unspoken birthing of her children, forced by the *Code civil* into secrecy and obscurity, into the radiant and jubilant coming to life of a woman writer reconciled with her "illegitimate" maternity.

Like Marie d'Agoult's personal writings, nineteenth-century women's memoirs are often incomplete or fragmented texts, sometimes compromised by deletions and corrections made posthumously by publishers and family members. To fill the gaps, other personal texts such as letters or essays must be weaved into the memoirs as a sort of intertextual *reconstruction* by the reader. Marie d'Agoult's *Essai sur la liberté*, for instance, adds a layer of meaning to her personal marriage narrative. It also underscores, by contrast, her propensity to "expurgate" her memoirs. But the autobiographer, says Lejeune in her defense, "est requis par l'attention aiguë qu'il porte au réel, dans une attitude de recherche de la vérité, et, souvent, retenu par l'engagement social que représentera la publication de son texte" (*Genesis* 37). The *Code civil* is that reality that both the comtesse de Boigne and Marie d'Agoult had to confront in their marriage narratives, discreetly and sometimes evasively, but always in search of veracity. Memoirs, warns Marie d'Agoult, are not written in pursuit of reality, but of truthfulness: "tout sera comme un extrait de la vérité, à l'usage des méditatifs, bien plutôt qu'au goût des curieux" (1: 291).

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Notes

¹ “Boigne” was the English pronunciation of the name Leborgne. The comte de Boigne modified the spelling of his name while he was stationed in Luknow, India. In 1788, he married his first wife in New Delhi, according to traditional Muslim rites, and later repudiated her in order to marry Adèle d’Osmond.

² The général de Boigne was made “comte” by the king of Piedmont-Sardinia in 1816. The son he had with his first wife was given his father’s name and inherited his title.

³ She fails to mention that it was Liszt’s decision to take her children away from her. The children were placed in the care of the musician’s new companion, the princess of Sayn-Wittgenstein. D’Agoult refers to her only as the children’s “chosen” mother (2: 37).

⁴ This was done when Daniel, Marie d’Agoult’s only son, was born in 1839. For the birth of the two daughters she had with Liszt, the comtesse used an assumed name (Dupêchez 120).