

# Gender, Authenticity, and the Missive Letter in Eighteenth-century France

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Marie-Anne de La Tour,  
Rousseau's Real-Life Julie

Mary McAlpin

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This study examines authorial consciousness in the fifteen-year correspondence between Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his most devoted fan, Marie-Anne de La Tour, who claimed to incarnate his heroine Julie of "La Nouvelle Héloïse". Far from the starry-eyed obsessive she is now assumed to have been, de La Tour was a woman writer eager for fame who pursued her goal of becoming an "author" through the vehicle of a private correspondence with a celebrity. In the eighteenth century, with the vogue for publishing the private in full force, missive letters were accorded great esthetic and publication value. Suspicion of intent to publish by writers of private letters was common, but this awareness has now been lost as the letter form has lost its publication potential. De La Tour's project of creating a publishable "private" correspondence with a famous author raises theoretical issues relevant not only to eighteenth-century studies but also to epistolary studies, reader-response theory, and gender theory. Mary McAlpin is Associate Professor of French and Chair of the French program at the University of Tennessee.

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