Male or Female? Gender and the Family Record in Early Modern France

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"Domestic" or "ordinary writing" often suggests writing by women, at least for sociologists and anthropologists who study daily life in the modern world. In the early modern era, however, the head of the household – typically, the man of the house – kept the family records (livre de raison) and controlled the transmission of family memory to descendants. Domestic writing was thus a function of masculine and paternal power. Greater levels of male literacy under the Old Regime also tended to make writing men's work. Nonetheless, women did keep domestic records in rare cases, usually for brief periods. These women were not truly "authors" because they had no "literary" intentions; they might better be called "scribes" – écrivants, scribes or scripteurs – if there were feminine versions of these terms in French. The difficulty in labeling them should not, however, prevent us from studying these women who wrote their lives, noting down family events, domestic accounts, and the large and small incidents of everyday life. This essay begins by describing the male norms of domestic writing in the early modern period. I

then examine the conditions under which women might assume the role of family writer; solitude, in particular, was common to these women. Finally, I will analyze examples of these female-authored texts in order to understand what distinguishes women's writing of ordinary life.

**Male control of the family record**

Everyman who wants to
Manage his house well
Should learn above all
To keep a household account.²

The family record is a genre of ordinary life in which the head of the household offers a reckoning of the family's history, sometimes on bad paper in small notebooks and at other times in fine bound volumes. "Livre de raison" derives from the Latin *ratio* or reckoning, and in these records the head of the family makes himself accountable to his lineage, noting down everything to be remembered from one generation to the next. The records include internal family events: births, marriages, deaths, and financial transactions such as sales, purchases, and rentals that affect family fortunes. They also mention external events that shape the wider community: ice storms, epidemics, soldiers on the march, etc. These fragments of ordinary life usually ended up on the bonfire or in a trash heap, but those that survive in various archives help us understand the practices of daily life of men and women from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries.³ This essay

³ Examples of these family records are held in the Archives nationales [hereafter AN] (see especially the recent inventory of series AB XIX) and in municipal and departmental archives (especially series

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focuses on one particular practice – writing – without which these records would not exist.

Domestic writing was men's work, and only exceptionally do we find women keeping family records. According to a fifteenth-century Tuscan proverb, "talking is for women, doing is for men," and a similar division of labor operated in the French social imaginary where "the oral vernacular was feminine while written, hegemonic French was masculine." The writers in my study were mostly urban, usually merchants, landowners, or middle-rank officers; they participated in urban affairs, often as consuls, and they were both literate and numerate. On the whole they were eldest sons; in Languedocian tradition, the eldest son (aïnat) took over his father's record-keeping duties. The eldest son really entered his majority with his father's death when he became the head of the family and inherited not only goods, but also his father's coat of arms, profession, municipal offices, confraternity membership and, crucially, the actual and symbolic power vested in family record keeping. Transmission from father to son was the basic principle of family records:

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J, B, and E) and in the holdings of some learned societies such as the Société des lettres, sciences, et arts de l'Aveyron.


6 On his death-bed, a father might authorize his eldest son to continue his records: Klapisch-Zuber, La Maison, 29.

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This book, my son, was written so that you should know the family's affairs as I handled them in my lifetime. . . . Read it occasionally. A virtuous man ought to learn about his ancestors' conduct, either to imitate it or to learn from their faults. You will have only good examples to follow because in our family, our fathers have always enjoyed public approbation, something that one ought to seek above wealth.\textsuperscript{7}

Men wrote concisely and covered the page densely, with a thrifty concern to use every bit of paper. Their text fills up the margin and leaves no space between lines, and every inch of paper is dedicated to the family record. Chronology was not always their primary concern. Events jostle one another out of order, as in the merchant Raymond d'Austry's text in which the minor events of daily life interrupt his account of the actions of the Catholic League. Austry, like many others, wrote wherever there was space, filling up his pages in an order that was not always strictly chronological.\textsuperscript{8} Blank spaces left for one purpose might later be filled for another. For instance, a writer might leave space below the record of a birth in order to fill in later the events of that child's life: education, marriage, perhaps death. Eventually, however, something entirely different might take over that space next to the child's birth. Although most entries were short and required only a few lines to record a birth or a death, some events seemed to demand more space.

\textsuperscript{7} Gilbert de Raymond, "Epître à mon fils" (1769), in \textit{Le Livre de raison des Daurée d'Agen (1491-1671), précédé d'une étude sur quelques livres de raison des anciennes familles de l'Agenais}, ed. Georges Tholin (Agen: Veuve Lamy, 1880), 33.

Men generally kept their family records in their study, away from the bustle of the household, at least according to posthumous inventories that specify where *livres de raison* were located. It is difficult to say whether men usually wrote immediately following the events they recorded or later, in retrospect. Sometimes writers appear to be jotting down notes about on-going events that they plan to complete later. In other texts the writer appears to have assembled family papers to consult so that he can compose a careful and complete account of the family's history.

*Women's place in men's writing*

In most family records, women are not authors or narrators but characters who enter the story usually only at the moment of their death. Mothers, wives, and daughters are shadowy figures who rarely participate in any of the family's important decisions. They appear only in retrospect, as the dear departed. François Calvet, for instance, opened his text in 1737 with an homage to his mother who had raised her three children alone following her husband's early death: "I would be most infamously ungracious if I did not tell my successors of the merits of Marguerite-Mathilde Cabassole de Calvet, my mother and if, in informing them of her virtues and her good conduct, I did not add my praise to that of the public." Calvet included several pages of biographical information about his mother before concluding that "the death of such a caring mother obliged me to assume the control of my wealth. You will find, in this notebook, my expenses beginning in the year 1737." Maternal qualities, elaborated along stereotypical lines, feature as examples for the women of the family to

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contemplate and to imitate. *Livres de raison* present wives as modest, sober, prudent, and gentle; as good, thrifty household managers they rule undisputed over domestic space.\(^{10}\) There was nothing innovative about Calvet's view of the woman at the center of family life; it was quite common in educational texts by authors from Erasmus to Madame de Maintenon.\(^{11}\) "A woman ought to have four qualities," ran a common saying of the early seventeenth century: "an honest appearance, careful household management, devotion to the Church, and obedience to her master."\(^{12}\)

Writing about their wives, men focused on similar virtues: Jacques Perrin described his wife Antoinette as "very devout, with excellent judgment," capable of running the household and raising a throng of children. Death in childbirth appears repeatedly and its narrative treatment suggests how devastating it might be to the husband and children left behind. The length and detail of the following account, for instance, indicate the author's very real pain, even though he maintains control over his emotions:

\(^{10}\) For a similar account from a later period, see Amans-Alexis Monteill's discussion of his mother in *Mes Éphémérides* (1857; Paris: Editions du Cardinal, 1997).


In the year fifteen ninety-six the ninth day of the month of July, damoiselle Anthoinette de Coquellet, my wife, passed from life to death through difficult childbirth, having borne, as she told it, a male child for eleven months. He was three hands long and his hand came out first. Because he wiggled he was baptized while still partially in his mother. The surgeons and doctors told me he was three hands long. . . . The child was taken dead from his mother. Fever took his mother suddenly and she died of it. She made a will and made me her general heir; the document has been kept by Maître Estienne Coignac, notary at Bourg de Roudès. GOD pardon her for her sins. Amen. 1596. 9 July.\textsuperscript{13}

Writers' consciousness of human powerlessness in the face of life and death often brought their childbearing wives to the fore of the family record.

Daughters also died, and \textit{livres de raison} commemorated their "wisdom, modesty, and lively spirit," but usually with very little show of emotion; parents submitted to God's will "with regret and inexpressible pain."\textsuperscript{14} Jean-Baptiste Chorlon, president of the court of Guéret, wrote a long account of the death of his daughter Catherine, an Ursuline nun in Limoges. He dwells on the pain he feels at his daughter's death:

\begin{quote}
Sunday the 23 of August of this year [1676] between six and seven o'clock in the morning in the city of Limoges at the convent of St Ursula, my dear well-loved and loveable daughter Catherine Chorlon, aged nineteen years . . . went from this moral life to a happier one on the thirty first day of her illness, which was a continuous and acute fever. Of all my children, she was the one who brought me and from whom I expected the most comfort. Her mind exceeded her sex and
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 321-2.
she was as mature as if she had been forty; she had devoted herself to God for the last three or four years in a manner unusual for her age, and she was preparing to give herself entirely to Him and to take final vows, but she had not yet decided which order she should enter.

Picking up this account again further on in his text, Jean-Baptiste Chorllon relates his daughter’s agony:

The sisters tried to dissuade me from entering because of the redness and poison that covered her and because of the danger to me in approaching her, but having seen my resolution and my earnest prayers [they permitted me to enter] the convent with the said sister Druilletes and entering the sickroom of my daughter, who was still almost constantly delirious with few spells of reprieve, I saw her and found her completely changed and disfigured such that I would hardly have recognized her. Her gaze wandered, with one eye closed and the other one rolled up, and she was weeping. Her face was colorless, with sunken cheeks, twisted mouth, blackened lips, her voice broken and completely changed. She did not recognize me and did not want to speak to me.¹⁵

Chorllon's expression of a father's love for his daughter is striking. He most regretted not keeping his daughter at home because mothers, wives and daughters belonged in the domestic sphere. Etienne Perin, bourgeois of Rodez, justified his view of the proper domestic order by drawing on his knowledge of the classics; in the middle of his livre de raison he noted "Thucydides and, later, Plutarch said that the woman who deserves the most praise is the one whose fame is restricted to the walls of her house."¹⁶ Eulogies made this distinction clear: praise for men


¹⁶ Mouysset, "Six personnages," 238.
concerned public qualities like their probity, while praise for women focused on maternal and housewifely qualities.\textsuperscript{17}

Family records contain no ambiguity about masculine and feminine roles; rather, they present complementary political and domestic virtues that harmonize within the family. One writer after another assures his successors that his family lived up to this harmonious archetype.

**The exceptional woman: families without men**

In the midst of this chorus of male-authored family records, we occasionally hear female voices; from time to time a woman steps out of the passive role of a character in the family story to assume the position of narrator. These women take the authorial place of their father or husband, sometimes holding that place until their sons are old enough to keep family records. Female-authored *livres de raison* are always exceptional: women keep house, but men keep the books, and women clearly lacked the authorial and financial authority to keep family records until at least the second half of the eighteenth century. Temporarily and in exceptional circumstances, however, a woman might become the head of the household and maintain the family records. Although single women usually remained under paternal guardianship, an unmarried woman might manage her own household. Married women might find themselves left in charge of family affairs by an absent husband.

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\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 228. Writing of his father Jean, who died in 1590, Etienne Perrin described him as "a complete, upright, and incorruptible man . . . who would not have wavered from his duty or his right . . . . He sought to accommodate everyone without promise of recompense, which earned him the friendship of his fellow citizens. Thus at his funeral the city provided six torches each bearing the arms of the city and carried by a citizen."
Widows often did their best to manage family property in order to pass it on to a young son as soon as he reached his majority. Finally, nuns often kept collective *livres de raison*, but these remain outside the scope of this essay because their writing took place outside of the family context.

Very few single women kept records because almost all unmarried women lived under their father's authority and therefore had no need to keep their own accounts.\(^{18}\) Agnès Caudron was thus an exceptional woman; at the turn of the nineteenth century she owned and managed the large estate of the chateau of Lastours in the Cahors, and divided her time between Flanders and Quercy. Her matter-of-fact writing sounds nothing like the romantic effusions of her near-contemporary, Eugénie de Guérin: "1 August 1807, I, Agnès Caudron gave Pierre Cansé of Pech de Labade a pair of cows . . . for which we will split the profits. In exchange Cansé promises to represent my interests whenever I ask. One of the cows was five years old; the other three and the two together are worth one hundred ten livres."\(^{19}\) Agnès Caudron reveals herself as a hard-working woman, supervising the fields and the vines, collecting her rents and offering her alms. Her text also preserves traces of her

\(^{18}\) In *Buddenbrooks*, Thomas Mann depicts Tony, the daughter of the house, illicitly inscribing in the family records the decision that would transform her life: "Tony looked a long time at her name and at the blank space next it. Then, suddenly . . . she clutched the pen, plunged it rather than dipped it into the ink, and wrote . . . her hot head bent far over her shoulder . . . Bethrothed, on Sept. 22, 1845, to Herr Bendix Grünlisch, Merchant, of Hamburg." Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, H. T. Lowe-Porter, trans. (1901; New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 123.

\(^{19}\) "Livre de raison d'Agnès Caudron" (1797-1845), Archives départementales du Lot, 28 J 1/3, f. 360. This is the only *livre de raison* written by a woman currently inventoried in the Archives du Lot.
leisure; between records of wool sales and stock taking she attaches receipts for book purchases. Madame de Sévigné, Walter Scott, Manon Lescaut, the last of the Mohicans, and historical figures from William the Conqueror to Margaret of Anjou occupied the spare time of this provincial woman who apparently lived alone among her peasants in a world that the Revolution seemed to have bypassed.

Women left on their own by a husband in royal service, especially the army, were much more likely to write. Their husbands entrusted them with family affairs so if, for instance, he left debts behind, she had the tricky task of meeting his creditors. If he were on military service, however, she could defer all payments until his return. Madeleine de Porcellets, Countess of Rochefort, near Avignon, was well aware of this possibility, and frequently put off her spendthrift husband’s creditors with documents attesting to his military service.\(^{20}\) She noted these episodes along with all of the other events of daily life in order to provide her husband, André de Brancas, with a full accounting upon his return. Like Angès Caudron, Madeleine was constantly busy: issuing orders, supervising crops, organizing and improving landholdings, going to the Beaucaire fair, visiting friends and relatives, fulfilling her religious duties, supervising her son’s education. Her days were full, and her husband’s financial difficulties added to her burdens:

All day I was busy arranging the furniture and after lunch several local notables visited. In the evening I heard about M David d’Arles’ suit and they ordered me to pay one hundred écus, but I told them that my husband was on royal service.

\(^{20}\) These documents, or lettres d’état, were established in the seventeenth century to facilitate noble military service; they temporarily protected anyone in royal service from civil litigation.
She barely had time to think, except that it was hard to ignore the fact that she rarely heard from André de Brancas, Count of Rochefort, her thoughtless husband who left her to fend for herself, with not enough money and too many creditors.

Widows' writings are often the most dramatic; their records suggest both their grief and their lack of preparation for their new role as head of household. Thus Jeanne Le Duc, wife of the head of the salt depot (grenier à sel) in Châlons in Champagne, wrote in 1661: "I live as a widow with five children and no help from anyone in the most piteous state to which a woman can be reduced after thirty years of happiness." These texts often start with the devastating death of a husband; thus Madame Boucharel, member of a Protestant family in Tonneins in the Agenais, opened her livre de raison with a statement of her loss that is both moving and awkward: "19 April 1682 God visited me and took from me Monsieur Boucharel, and he was buried behind the pigeon coop 25 April." Marguerite-Mathilde de Cabassole, widow of Michel-Antoine Calvet, a magistrate of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, also opened her text in 1718 with a statement of her grief:

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21 "Journal de Madeleine de Porcellets, comtesse de Rochefort" 3 June 1689) in Ribbe, Une Grande Dame, 354-5.
22 Ribbe, Une Grande Dame, 259.
23 "Livre de raison de dame Boucharel" in Deux Livres de raison de l'Agenais, suivis d'autres registres domestiques, ed. Philippe Tamizy de la Roque (Paris: A. Picard, 1893), X, 73. The editor notes that Bouchard's manuscript was found in a rag picker's basket.
My husband died 12 October of this year 1718 through the most grievous of accidents; he was so unfortunate as to drown in the Rhome while returning from our land at Maynargues. The whole family went there together and at half past five in the evening the sad event happened because of the boatman's recklessness. The boat struck the post of a landing and sank immediately with all of us on board. M Calvet was drowned at once; my oldest son, Jacques-Marie Calvet, who was only five years and five months old, was happily saved by the other boatman. God preserved me from this danger, even though I was about five months pregnant with my daughter, Marie-Thérèse Calvet. Imagine my piteous state then and for some time afterward, having lost a husband whom I loved as I ought and especially to have lost him in such a way.24

For Marguerite-Mathilde, recounting her loss in detail was a means not only to express her grief, but also to justify her assumption of the male role as author of the family record. She immediately followed her account of her husband's death with a discussion of business affairs that suggests her determination to rise to the occasion and face her new responsibilities. In their grief, widows had to learn to stand up for themselves. Recognizing this lesson, Mme Boucharel in Tonneins recorded her ill treatment by members of her family: "My brother-in-law Boucharel owes me two écus that I overpaid him. I have lost them because of his bad faith. He won't give them to me."25 The widow's role as head of the family was always accidental, and she wrote in order to withstand the pressures of her husband's death, to continue his work, and to preserve his property for his heirs.

Ultimately, the widow's obligation to write was only temporary; she was merely a conduit between her dead husband and their young son. Once her son grew up, she

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24 Ribbe, Une Grande Dame, 265-6.
handed over the business of writing to him. Marie de Pérols, left a widow by the death of her husband Gaillard d'Imbert in 1711, kept the family records until she handed them over to her son Denis, who wrote on the cover: "**Livre de raison** in which I, Denis d'Imbert, Sieur de Barry, will record all the business which it pleases God that I shall have. Begun the 26th October 1697 by my late father and continued by my mother until 25 June 1735." Upon Denis' death in 1759 his wife, Marguerite de Corneillan, took up the pen and, like her mother-in-law nearly half a century earlier, met her late husband's obligations.\(^{26}\)

These exceptional women who kept family records shared the experience of being alone. As Michelle Perrot notes, "solitude is a relationship: to time, to places, to other people and to oneself."\(^{27}\) Living alone, whether they chose it or not, freed these women to manage their own homes, but also made them responsible for keeping their books in order.

**Characterizing women's writing**

The most obvious characteristic of women's records of daily life is their rarity. "The difficulty of women's history," Michelle Perrot notes in her eloquently-titled *Les Femmes et les silences de l'Histoire*, "is that women's presence, whether in public or in private, is so often erased."\(^{28}\) The public sphere belongs to men, and although women pervade the private sphere, they leave few traces, and,

\(^{26}\) "Livre de raison de Denys d'Imbert du Barry" (Puylaurens, 1697-1771), Archives départementales du Tarn, 1 J 461-2.


indeed, they often clean up after themselves. Perrot advises historians to turn to private archives:

Certainly we find women expressing themselves more freely in private documents and, in some cases, women as the guardians of family memory actually compose the archive. There is a vast body of women's writings – *livres de raison* where they keep their household accounts, family correspondences that they maintained, diaries that both confessors and, later, teachers, recommended to girls as a technique of developing self-control. But all we have today are odd pieces rescued from destruction that merely suggest the size and breadth of the original archive.  

Perrot's optimistic and nineteenth-century estimate of the extent of women's private documents, however, needs to be revised downwards for the Old Regime. An average departmental archive may contain a hundred early modern *livres de raison*, of which women will have written perhaps two or three. Charles de Ribbes, a nineteenth-century scholar of family records, regretted "that few women in the past were inspired to compose similar documents. Imagine what these queens of the household, angels of the hearth, could and should have told us about the family life, customs, and virtues that made good citizens and good Christians in this era of faith!" We should remember, however, that the "angel of the hearth" did not have the same access to literate culture as her husband. According to Jean-Louis Vivès' 1523 *De l'Institution de la femme chrétienne*, girls' education was often "omitted" altogether,

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and by 1762 when Jean-Jacques Rousseau published *Emile*, it existed entirely to serve male interests. Moreover, the early modern division of domestic roles distinguished women as housekeepers from men as bookkeepers; ultimately, men were accountable for the family's goods. This division of household responsibilities changed rapidly beginning in the nineteenth century, in part because of growing female literacy, and the modern gendering of household work continues to occupy historians and anthropologists today. Daniel Fabre acknowledges that

writing was predominantly a male activity because it belonged in public spaces. . . . Writing did not enter private homes and daily lives where women would have access to it until it was quite widespread among the male population. Even then, practices of writing reflect gendered hierarchies: men keep the tax returns, the papers for major purchases like homes and cars, and . . . certain kinds of writing remain "masculine" like figuring the racing odds in the margin of the daily paper.

Finally, we can attribute the rarity of women's domestic writing to the invisibility of their solitary lives under the Old Regime. History leaves out single women, Arlette Farge and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber argue:

The single woman exists in history's blind spot. The marginalized, the deviant and the insane finally have their own histories, but not single women. They do not show up in hospitals or prisons. They are a sort of silent social residue, and we are so accustomed to not seeing them that the occasional glimpses that we catch of them in rural or urban

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33 Fabre, "Introduction," 17.
There are many reasons why women's domestic writing is so rare, and the odds are stacked against the scholar seeking to analyze it. We have to allow the quality of the texts we do have to compensate for their small number.

**From form to content: what makes writing feminine?**

We turn now to the content of family records kept by women to look for specifically female approaches to writing and recording family life. It is tempting, as we look for a feminine style of writing, to posit that female-authored *livres de raison* might be better-ordered, tidier, and more carefully kept, in contrast to those written by men who might be less attentive to the appearance of their text. Dealing in stereotypes gets us nowhere, however, because women's texts are neither better nor worse arranged than their male counterparts. Women's lower levels of literacy probably prevented them from keeping especially neat records. Careful composition and organization ultimately depended on the individual's temperament and mood and could vary widely over time.

There are, however, revealing differences in approaches to record keeping. Most men used their *livres de raison* to keep brief notes about household business like purchases, sales, rent collections, harvests, or loans. Women, however, tended to record a more complete narrative, situating their

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34 Farge and Klapisch-Zuber, 7.
35 Given the small number of female-authored texts, it is not possible to make a quantitative argument, but the sample's geographic and chronological breadth does support qualitative observations.
acts in a wider context of chance encounters and minor expenditures, like this late eighteenth century woman:

Paid to Maurice, goldsmith, on the 4th of this month, for having sized three rings and made a silver lid for the crystal pitcher which I use for tea, 8 livres 10 sous . . .

Paid to Joséphine toward her wages since she entered my employ, a cloak 2 l. 9 s., for earrings 15 l., for floss-silk 13 l. 1 s. 3 denier, for a cambric kerchief 5 l. and for two pairs of shoes 9 l. total 63 l. 10 s. 3 d. In addition, for her to buy a calico apron 4 l. . . .

Paid to the wigmaker for having combed my wig . . . 12 s. 36

On the one hand we have the male writer's detached perspective, which is highly selective and leaves out minor purchases that have no effect on the family wealth. On the other hand we have the woman's immersion in events and her exhaustive and impressionistic recording of detail. In the female-authored livres de raison, worries about money often explain this close attention to detail. This gendered distinction, however, is far from absolute, and there are plenty of counter-examples. With regard to the frequency of entries, women appear generally more regular in their record keeping; their notes are often short, but they appear daily and suggest careful housewifery and a desire to keep the books up to date. Some women's notebooks look rather like the "to do lists" of busy housewives running errands; they seem like the early modern version of the scraps of paper that we lose in our handbags or drop in the street for

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36 "Journal de dépenses d'une jeune veuve anonyme du Bourg Saint-Andéol" (1798-1802) f. 3-9. AN AB XIX 3298 C.
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In our attempt to understand the specificities of women's writing, let us take a brief excursion out of France to look at the Catalan account books composed around 1440 by the widow Sança Ximenis Foix y Cabrera, recently studied by Teresa Vinyoles Vidal. Sança wrote extensively, and her ledgers contain a full account of a woman who managed her own household and estate. We read about the rents she collected, the visits she paid to members of her family, especially other women, and we learn in particular about every penny she spent on food and clothing. We know how she dressed, what she bought at market, what her peasants gave her. We could inventory her cupboard, listing the canned eggplant, the treats prepared for winter, and the distilled water ready for culinary, cosmetic, or medical use. She was preoccupied with health; she recorded prayers and more or less magical invocations and amulets that she used to treat her family's ailments; and we learn when they healed thanks to herbs, rituals, and, especially, divine Providence. Woven into this text and forming a sort of counterpoint to the rhythms of daily life are other kinds of notes: legal references for defending her interests, prayers and even, on a lighter note, a love song. The song is incomplete and not in her handwriting; it could be a written trace of an oral culture, a text mostly learned by heart and transmitted by memory, possibly even among women. Sança noted things down as they came up in conversation, like jotting a recipe down on an odd bit of paper. This distinctive form of written culture, Teresa Vinyoles Vidal argues, was accessible to only a few literate sociologists to find and use in an analysis of everyday life.37

women, but it was different from male writing practices. Sança participated in an oral culture that was common to all women and that literacy allowed her to record in writing. The Tuscan proverb that says "talking is female" suggests an important element of the specificity of women's writing. Women, more than men, seem to record the kinds of information typically transmitted orally. The differences between women's and men's writing are not a matter of form. Rather, they concern content and the choice of what to record. I conclude here with a brief discussion of the divergences between female- and male-authored family records.

First, women and men enjoyed different relationships to literate culture. Men regularly garnished their text with Latin and Greek quotations, but this type of intertextual reference does not appear in women's writings. Women writers referred instead to recipes, poems, or songs no doubt heard in passing and recorded on the fly, often inaccurately or incompletely. In other words, women remained much closer to the spoken word. Oral culture is not completely absent from men's texts, but they generally preferred textual sources. Men were the products of an academic culture, which inclined them toward the repetition of information from written sources, either from their school or university days or from more recent reading. Antoine-Jean Solier, for instance, assessing the value of his own writing at the turn of the nineteenth century, quoted Pliny the Elder's insistence "that no book is so bad that it

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38 Teresa Vinyoles Vidal, "La cotidianidad escrita por una mujer del siglo XV," in Mujer y cultura escrita, del mito al siglo XXI, Del Val Gonzalez de la Peña, ed. (Gijon: Ediciones TREA, 2005), 124, 128, 129.
can't do some good." Unequal access to the written word and literate culture distinguished men's and women's writing of daily life until at least the end of the eighteenth century.

Second, male- and female-authored texts differ in their approach to everyday life. Every writer recorded life's essentials, but "essential" meant different things to different writers. It would be simple enough to contrast the austere brevity of some men's texts with the frivolity of some women's writings, like the "spools, plumes, paper and quills, snuff box and chocolate" that Mademoiselle de Chastenay was purchasing and recording in 1757. But what does this shopping list written by a happy and wealthy woman have in common with the notes kept by someone like the Countess of Rochefort, who counted every penny as it went out as payment to creditors or as alms to the poor and who permitted herself just one treat, "having her harpsichord refitted and tuned"? They shared a desire to secure everything in writing, without forgetting anything, losing anything, or leaving anything to chance. Most female writers displayed this attention to detail as if they were trying to fix on the page everything that might otherwise prove ephemeral and might disappear from memory. This attitude is particularly clear among widows, especially those with children for whom they preserved family memory.

Even in families without men, women behaved as if they would eventually have to account for themselves. Anxiety, whether derived from the difficulties of female solitude, fear of financial reversals, a realistic view of life's

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40 "Livre de dépenses de Mademoiselle de Chastenay, 1757-1770" AN T 44.
hazards, or the desire to pass on a patrimony, shaped women's writings. Light-years away from the literate world of men of letters, women wrote in a setting where words were rare and valuable. They did not write just to fill up space, and their voices were more tenuous than men's. They were easily silenced and often interrupted, but they remain essential.

In the period from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century women writing their lives gradually made a larger place for themselves: starting from the account book kept in the absence of a father or husband we eventually reach the diary, which became a space for free and private female expression. Women's writing remained particularly vulnerable to the outside world but also particularly responsive to the fabric of daily life. Even if writing did not come as easily to women, whose education accustomed them to needle and thread rather than pen and ink, they clearly acquired a taste for this originally masculine activity. Madeleine de Porcellets, at home alone with her two children in Rochefort, spent her time writing; she did her accounts then did them over again, wrote letters, and drew up receipts. When her husband returned home and took over the family's affairs she stopped writing. She opened her notebook again briefly to note "9 and 10 November, I found myself greatly out of sorts." After another silence, she recorded a startling confession:

30 May 1690 at Lascours. From 10 November until the 1st of February I was so strongly overcome by melancholy because of the bad state of my affairs that I didn't eat or sleep. I lost a lot of weight and I was in a terrible state. Melancholy isn't good for the body or for the soul. After February it left me so
lethargic that I didn't care about anything unless I forced myself; otherwise I wouldn't have done anything.\textsuperscript{41}

The countess seemed to see her choices as "writing or life," and she had no way to acknowledge the pleasure of that brief period when she had the power to write. The historian reading these words can only regret that André de Brancas was not called away to royal service more often!

Let us hope that when the research currently underway in France on family writing is complete we will have a body of women's writing that will make possible the extensive and detailed study of women writing their lives for which this essay is a mere preview.\textsuperscript{42}

Translated by Kathryn A. Edwards

\textsuperscript{41} Ribbe, \textit{Une Grande Dame}, 390.

\textsuperscript{42} The C. N. R. S. groupe de recherche 2649, directed by Jean-Pierre Bardet and François-Joseph Ruggiu at the Centre Roland Mousnier – Université de Paris IV, has begin a national project to inventory all of the domestic texts (écrits du for privé) available in national and departmental archives. The group includes university researchers, archivists, and members of learned societies; see http://www.ecritsduforprive.fr.

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