Prescribing Gender: The Letter Book in Early Modern France

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In sixteenth-century Europe, regular epistolary exchanges were a feature of the new cultural practices of the Renaissance that reached across elite society. This Renaissance fascination with classical and contemporary letters produced a new print genre: the letter book or letter collection. As Judith Henderson has argued, humanists used the genre to flaunt their erudition and literary skill and to promote their careers as scribes and secretaries in the service of princes and kings. In their quest for literary renown, they heavily revised, embellished, and sometimes even “faked” so-called missive letters (that is, letters that had actually been sent) to enhance the literary quality and broaden the social appeal of their collections. The early modern letter book thus is a fascinating artifact of the public world of courtly culture and Renaissance humanism. Although its authors and intended audience were overwhelmingly male, its prescriptive impulses were directed toward elites of both sexes. As James Daybell has recently suggested...
letter books and letter-writing manuals “furnished individuals with a language of subordination” that structured social relations early modern society.⁴ Within the family itself, Daybell argues, the act of writing letters fostered “the formation of habits of submissiveness” that in turn “shaped wider attitudes toward authority.”⁵ This paper explores the ways in vernacular French letter books echoed the vigorous debate over the sexual parameters of Renaissance humanism and learning, contesting and perpetuating conventional models of patriarchal authority, domestic morality and gender performance within marriage.

**French Letter Books**

By the sixteenth century, French humanists had claimed the letter book as their own.⁶ Writers of both sexes were attracted to the domain. Using the elegant pen name of Hélisenne de Crenne, Margarite Briet enjoyed the distinction of publishing the first truly French letter book, *Les épistres familières et invectives de ma dame Hélisenne.*⁷ By the time of its publication in 1539, Crenne was already the celebrated author of a best-selling chivalric romance, *The Torments of Love,* as well as an aspiring humanist scholar. As the title suggests, Crenne’s book was divided into two parts. Of the eighteen letters in the collection, thirteen can properly be called *familières,* while the last five are polemical diatribes against the male literary establishment.⁸ All can be read as a thinly veiled critique of her own arranged marriage at a very young age to a country squire and the limitations imposed by social convention upon her own literary aspirations. As Diane Wood has persuasively argued, the polemical, proto-feminist tenor of

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⁵ Daybell, “Gender and Obedience,” 51.
Crenne’s letter book ultimately limited its appeal among humanists, even though it went through eight editions between 1539 and 1560.9

Late in the sixteenth century, the famous mother-daughter duo of Madeleine and Catherine des Roches also produced three volumes of letters, poetry, dialogues and Latin translations widely praised in humanist circles.10 In a letter to Nicholas Pithou, however, Étienne Pasquier privately expressed his concerns over the unconventional life style of the younger des Roches, who chose to remain at her mother’s side to privilege their extraordinary literary partnership rather than marry. As “the last of her clan,” Pasquier took pains to point out that Catherine’s unconventional choice disrupted not only the natural laws of female reproduction but also the dynastic succession of an honorable family.11 Although Pasquier never circulated this letter publically nor published it in his own renowned letter book,12 the des Roches were profoundly aware of contemporary censure and responded to it. Much more successfully than Crenne, Larsen argues, they practiced the art of “subversive conformity,” publishing works that seemingly reinforced “the familiar prototype of the Good Wife” while undermining many of its fundamental presumptions.13

Despite the signal efforts of Crenne and the des Roches, it was male secretaries and humanists who monopolized the publication of the letter books and letter-writing manuals that proliferated in the age of courtliness, sociability


12 Among the many editions available, see Étienne Pasquier, Lettres familières, ed. Dorothy Thickett (Geneva: Droz, 1974). In Pasquier’s letter book women appear only infrequently as the authors or recipients of the model missives in the collection, often as patrons or patron’s wives rather than the “absent friends” to whom “familiar” letters were usually sent. One exception is his correspondence with Madame de Marillac-Ferrières, the widow of his close friend, Guillaume de Marillac, seigneur de Ferrière, intendant and contrôleur général of finances until his death in 1573. Pasquier praises Ferrière for her ability to evoke compassion with her descriptions of the tremendous weight of motherhood and widowhood, gendering her rhetorical skills in the language of maternity and marriage.

and civility. Perhaps the most influential letter writing manual of the sixteenth century was Étienne du Tronchet’s *Lettres missives et familières*, published in 1569. Du Tronchet’s appointment as scribe-secretary to the Queen Mother, Catherine de Medici, lent his publications on epistolary practice a certain weight and authority, especially among the courtly elites and aspiring office-seekers who were his target audience. Inventories of noble libraries testify to the popularity of du Tronchet’s collection, which went through twenty-six editions between 1569 and 1623. In the first part of the text, the royal scribe laid out the general precepts of humanist letter writing followed by a series of model letters, 239 in all, written to or by some eighty-odd correspondents, the majority of them men of the robe and sword positioned to aid him in his quest for literary fame and immortality.

**Letters Between Husbands and Wives**

It is not surprising that most of the letters in du Tronchet’s collection evoke the world of Castiglione’s *courtier* and the male prerogatives of office-holding and princely patronage. Interspersed in the letter collection, however, are five letters penned to or by the women in his immediate family circle that suggest another more private world and the epistolary and social codes that governed it. The two letters addressed to his daughters, Jacqueline and Marie, clearly delineate the two choices available to honorable women in the sixteenth century: marriage or the convent. The letter to Jacqueline spells out the value of marriage and the qualities she should seek in a husband: “if not abundant in fortune than at least rich in spirit.” This is followed by a long missive to his youngest daughter, Marie, about the benefits of entering religious orders. Du Tronchet’s letter to his wife, Marguerite Perrin, is a veritable catalogue of Christian, wifely virtues. He praises Perrin’s for her religious piety and devotion, calls himself the benefactor of her prayers, and promises to heed her exhortations.

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16 Roger Chartier, et.al, *Correspondence*, 65. Du Tronchet’s early success prompted him to write two other volumes on the epistolary craft, *Finances et thrésor de la plume françoise* (1572) and the aforementioned *Lettres amoureuses* (1575), but neither achieved as widespread renown as the first.
to virtue, pleading the particular weakness of the flesh that tempt the male sex.\textsuperscript{20} The letter thus rehearses Neoplatonic conceptions of gender complementarity, which ennobled women by consigning them to serve as catalysts to male virtue. As du Tronchet concludes his letter, “Don’t be fed up (\textit{marrié}) if under the shadow of your virtue, following you step by step I get as close to your example as I can.”\textsuperscript{21}

The final two family letters in du Tronchet’s letter book, written by his wife and by his sister-in-law, Mademoiselle du Cherué, address the issue of wifely submission and obedience even more directly. His sister-in-law’s letter to a young cousin recently married is a kind of mini-treatise on wifely obedience and household management, replete with biblical references and Latin marginalia emphasizing female passivity, male superiority and authority.\textsuperscript{22} In the margins of the text, for example, du Tronchet includes a quotation in Latin from Horace, famously comparing a young bride to a “new vase that long retains the odor one puts in it.”\textsuperscript{23} Women are thus figured as a \textit{tabula rasa} upon which husbands were free to inscribe their own image. Even though du Cherué stresses that women are free to correct their husbands (indeed it is part of the Neoplatonic mandate), she cautions the new bride to make sure that “neither your commandments nor corrections are too strident or petulant.”\textsuperscript{24} Even the forms of address used by a married couple, she explains, should model the proper relationship between husband and wife, which is that of master and obedient servant. “Sara never called her husband, Abraham,” du Cherué notes, “but rather lord and master.” More ominously, Marguerite Perrin pens a short missive to a so-called “\textit{mal mariée}” in the throes of an abusive relationship, offering the usual bromides about female submission, humoral theory, divine providence, and perseverance.\textsuperscript{25} The formulaic construction of these last two letters suggests that du Tronchet almost certainly had a heavy editorial hand in shaping them. In so doing he perpetrates a kind of patriarchal ventriloquism that confines the female voices in his letter book to the traditional domains of motherhood, marriage and religion. Like the other model letters in the collection, these have been carefully selected and scripted to reinforce exemplary behaviors—in this case early modern ideals of femininity.

Published in the same year as du Tronchet’s \textit{magnum opus}, Gaspar de Saillans’eponymously entitled, \textit{Le Premier livre de Gaspar de Saillans, gentilhomme citoyen de Valence}, addresses a much more modest (but still

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.}, 127-129.
\item \textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid.}, 129.
\item \textsuperscript{22} \textit{Ibid.}, 135-139.
\item \textsuperscript{23} \textit{Ibid.}, 126.
\item \textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid.}, 136.
\item \textsuperscript{25} \textit{Ibid.},140.
\end{itemize}
entirely conventional) epistolary landscape. The volume contains only seventeen letters between Saillans and his fiancée and later wife, Louise de Bourges and her parents. The letters cover the relatively brief period of their five-month courtship and the first year of their life together as man and wife. In the introduction to the letter book, Saillans, a purveyor of grain and saltpeter to the king's armies, catalogues the events that led up to his third marriage and the casualties that he sustained during the First War of Religion: the loss not only of three homes but also his second wife, Romane de Charrenton, a lawyer's widow. In April 1562 anguished by the despoliation of their homes and Saillans' imprisonment by enemy troops, Carreton fell ill and died. Released from captivity more than a year later, the twice-married and widowed, fifty-some Saillans retired to Lyons where he began his vigorous suit of Louise de Bourges, the youngest daughter of Claude de Bourges, commissioner-general of royal finances in the Piedmont. Despite the uncertainties of war and plague and the obvious differences in age, Saillans and Bourges were engaged on 8 July 1564 and celebrated their nuptials a month later. By September the young bride was writing her husband to tell him that she was pregnant.

The birth of Saillans' son, Jean-François, prompted the first literary yearnings in the former soldier. Although Saillans initially conceived of the project as three separate books on the institution of marriage, only two (published at considerable expense by Saillans himself) ever saw the light of day. In the first volume considered here, Saillans concludes the text with a lengthy digression on the institution of marriage, which spells out an entirely conventional vision of the institution. Husbands are to be masters of the household; wives their obedient servants. As Saillans admonishes his readers, the husband "remains the sole Lord

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29 On the publication history of the *Premier livre* and its literary impact and qualities, see Vaillancourt, *Lettre familière*, 281-315.
[of the household]” until his death and burial.\textsuperscript{30} These ideals are clearly played out in the correspondence between Saillans and Bourges that precedes it.

Their is a triangular correspondence from the beginning as Louise shares Gaspar’s \textit{billet-doux} with her parents, and they share his letters of intent with their daughter.\textsuperscript{31} Louise may give her blue garter to her intended, but she also faithfully shows all her suitor’s missives to her father. As she explains, “Marriageable young women should not write lightly to men without the knowledge of their father or those to whom they are subject, nor receive any without sharing them with them.”\textsuperscript{32} Louise thus spells out the requisite code of surveillance to which honorable women of good breeding and reputation submit themselves which in turn signals her willingness to submit to her future husband’s mastery and discipline.\textsuperscript{33}

The letters in Saillans’ volume (much like du Tronchet’s) are punctuated by proverbs and adages, drawn from both popular and classical tradition and set apart from the text by italics. What is striking about Saillans’ text, however, is the sense of immediacy of the letters themselves, which possess an authenticity suspiciously lacking in du Tronchet’s family correspondence.\textsuperscript{34} Saillans and de Bourges express their love freely, striking a wide-ranging affective register. Internal references suggest that most of their exchanges were written in their own rather than a scribal hand, a practice which they both interpret as a special sign of devotion and affection in an age when both sexes often relied on secretaries to carry out even the most intimate correspondence.\textsuperscript{35} Nevertheless, their correspondence functions as a kind of apprenticeship (a word de Bourges uses explicitly in her first letter) through which Saillans gradually asserts his authority over his fiancé’s untrained mind as well as untutored body.

\textsuperscript{30} Trahan and Vaillancourt, eds., \textit{Premier livre}, 109.
\textsuperscript{31} Anne Larsen, “La correspondance,” 33-37. Recently ennobled Claude de Bourges possessed two well-appointed town houses as well as the château de Myons. Louise’s mother, Françoise de Mornay, also possessed impeccable credentials and connections through royal service to Catherine de Medici’s household.
\textsuperscript{32} Trahan and Vaillancourt, eds., \textit{Premier livre}, 74.
\textsuperscript{34} Larsen, “La correspondance,” 39, makes the same observation, describing it as the first letter collection to be entirely authentic. In the preface, Saillans apologizes for letters written in the colloquial vein: “in my own cru, my daily speech, nothing tarted up nor polished as you will easily recognize,” Saillans, 24.
\textsuperscript{35} See, for example, Gaspar’s letter of 22 July 1564 in Trahan and Vaillancourt, eds., \textit{Premier livre}, 49; Louise’s letter of 30 July 1564 where she mentions receiving “your letter written in your own hand,” 60; Gaspar’s letter of 8 October 1564, where he writes that the surprise news of de Bourges’ pregnancy “made the quill fall from my hands,” 83.
As Anne Larsen has argued, Louise de Bourges was almost certainly a young woman of no mean accomplishment. In all likelihood, she was educated with her older sister Clémence at the convent of the Desert in Lyons, where the famous poet, Louise Labé, was also interned in her youth.\textsuperscript{36} De Bourges nonetheless presents herself as an awkward and self-conscious writer who must constantly beg her husband’s indulgence because she “cannot satisfy or even approach the quality of your letters that are all elegantly written… because of the inadequacy of my understanding being a new apprentice barely experienced in writing letters and this one being the first that I have ever written.”\textsuperscript{37} Although Louise’s studied deference is a common convention in the Renaissance epistolary tradition, the tenor of her letters and Saillans’ replies also suggest that her protestations are not merely exercises in Renaissance civility. Her humble explanation serves as an important reminder that elite young women may well have been taught to write as well as read in convents but probably had little occasion to exercise the former until they left the convent. As Paule Constant has suggested, writing instruction in the convent curriculum may have been purposefully delayed “until just before entry into the world, when the young girl was being graced with her final talents” in preparation for marriage.\textsuperscript{38} After all letters were an important component of elite marriages, where partners were often separated (as Saillans and de Bourges would be within a few weeks of their nuptials) by the compelling demands of commerce, property and profession.\textsuperscript{39}

In the letters exchanged between Gaspar and his younger wife, it is clear that teaching Louise the Renaissance art of writing letters is a central feature of her transformation into a good wife and helpmate. Even after they are man and wife, Louise continues her coy protestations of epistolary innocence, asking Saillans to be kind concerning her “naïve and natural language” and pledging to take as much pleasure in studying the book of rhetoric that he has given her as in learning her household responsibilities. As Louise dutifully notes, she conceives of both as an exercise of wifely submission and underscores that her greatest desire is “to submit my heart, my will and my thoughts to your heart alone.”\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{36} Larsen, “La correspondance,” 33-4, 42-3.
\textsuperscript{37} Tranhan and Vaillancourt, eds., Premier livre, 59.
\textsuperscript{39} On the importance of letters in French aristocratic society, see Kristen Neuschel, “From the Written Word to the Paper Chase? The Documentation of Noble Life in the Sixteenth Century,” Historical reflections/Reflexions historiques no. 2, 27(2007): 201-18; on female letter writers specifically, see Jane Couchman, “Give birth quickly and then send us your good husband: Informal Political Influence in the Letters of Louise de Coligny,” in Women’s Letters Across Europe, 1400-1700: Form and Persuasion, eds. Jane Couchman and Ann Crabb (Ashgate, 2005), 164-84, as well as the other chapters in the volume.
\textsuperscript{40} Trahan and Vaillancourt, eds., Premier livre, 74.
The physical discipline of writing is thus part of whole series of practices by which she submits all her faculties to her husband's authority.

Gaspar's return missive praises the "good heart and spirit" that Louise has applied to her lessons while chiding her (albeit in a teasing tone) for her lack of discipline in his absence. "As for the doubt that you have that your letters are not properly rhetorical [rhetoriquées]," he writes indulgently, "I only perceive that you have changed to another style of writing than when I was there (par délà)." Louise suggests in turn that his presence will reinforce his mastery of her letter-writing regimen. As she writes, "And if at your return (which may be shortly God willing) you find that I have forgotten some point that you have taught me, I will protest that you have been such a good master to teach me such things and in reminding me of the first lessons that you gave me, you will be content with yourself." Throughout this epistolary banter, their respective roles are clarified: he is the teacher and she is his admiring student.

Gaspar's letter following Louise's announcement of her pregnancy suggests the ways in which the tension between physical difficulties of maternity and physical demands and discipline of writing also accentuated gender performance within marriage. In her letter of 30 September 1564, Louise mentions that she is pregnant with their first child. In reply Sallans teases her that perhaps she is faking her pregnancy to hasten his return, adding that perhaps it is the fear of disturbing her belly by writing ("peur de fouler votre ventre en écrivant") rather than the lack of discipline explains the infrequency of her correspondence with him. Concerned about the physical demands of her pregnancy, he urges her to dress in loose clothes and take care of herself. Sallans' tender admonitions echo deeply embedded cultural anxieties about the competing demands of literary production and reproduction in Old Regime France. Into the eighteenth century French writing manuals, especially those geared toward a female readership, emphasized that too much writing could harm and even deform a healthy woman's body and spirit unless gender-specific postures were scrupulously followed. The dangers that sartorial and epistolary conventions presented to women were, of course, magnified in a pregnant woman who could threaten the fetus and family line with too much writing as well as stylish court dress. In Sallans' warnings then we can also read his own lineage anxieties about Louise's fulfillment of her reproductive responsibilities.

During the long separations they suffered as husband and wife, both Louise and Gaspard acknowledge the importance of letters to their marriage and to the advancement of their family fortunes. In a letter written to Gaspard two months after their wedding, Louise assures her itinerant husband that she thinks

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41 Ibid., 7.
42 Ibid., 81-2.
of him constantly and at night dreams that they are together.\textsuperscript{44} Even so, she reminds him that their letters allow them “to talk and confabulate almost as if we were together and by this means our affairs will go better [se porteront mieux].”\textsuperscript{45} The language of exclusivity that she employs throughout her letters repeatedly mirrors the ideals and expectations of their monogamous union. She assures him that she never has as much pleasure reading letters from other people as his. And when she apologizes for the length of her missives, it is more than a nod to epistolary convention. As Louise writes, “I cannot let go of the pen in my hand because by writing you it seems to me that I am talking to you yourself.”\textsuperscript{46} Her holograph letters are thus another measure of their exclusive conversation and commitment to each other.\textsuperscript{47}

Finally, Louise terminates her impassioned letters with conventional valedictions that restate the presumptions of masculine ownership and female subservience that run through their correspondence. After their marriage, Louise’s letters are sent “from your house [emphasis mine] in Valence”, and she identifies herself in the closing as “your very humble and obedient wife.”\textsuperscript{48} These formulaic valedictions echo tropes of humility and dependence prescribed by letter-writing manuals for both sexes. In her third missive, however, Louise fashions a closing that employs corporeal metaphors of ownership, conflating the physical space of the house to her own body, to entice her itinerant husband home. She implores Saillans to return to the “enclos” of her body over which she promises “you will have all power and authority to open the door of its tight closure as master and lord that you are over all its habitation.”\textsuperscript{49}

The language that de Bourges employs in this passage is particularly telling, since it rehearses the discursive link found in legal and moralistic texts of the period between women’s status as property and ideals of feminine behavior. As Peter Stallybrass has argued, “the enclosed body, the close mouth, the locked house” were, in Renaissance parlance, powerful symbols of idealized female, or even more specifically, wifely performance.\textsuperscript{50} Early modern prescriptive texts that described the female body as a private enclosure tapped into broader political debates concerning seigneurial ownership and authority that underscored

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44} Trahan and Vaillancourt, eds., \textit{Premier livre}, 74-5.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 74.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 75.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Trahan and Vaillancourt, eds., \textit{Premier livre}, 75.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 80.
\end{itemize}
women's legal position as property or chattel. “By constructing the beloved… within the economic discourse of commodities and enclosures,” Stallybrass suggests that early moderns maintained “the distinction between the woman as passive possession (even in adultery) and the man as active agent or merchant.” At the same time, as de Bourges’ overtly sexual language suggests, women could appropriate these images to their own advantage.

Conclusion

Early modern letter writing, both in print and in practice, was a profoundly gendered activity. Despite the achievements of literary women, such as Hélisenne de Crenne and the des Roches, mère et fille, most published letter collections, especially those authored by men, situated female letter writing largely within traditionally feminine spheres of influence—marriage, maternity and religion. As Bernard Bray has argued, early French letter books and writing manuals had much in common with early conduct books. At heart, they were prescriptive, offering various epistolary templates for operating within a highly complex and codified society of orders that rewarded deference and obedience within the family and beyond. By their very nature, however, letter books obscured the realities of female letter writers who often reached beyond hearth and home. As household managers and custodians of family power and influence, elite women engaged in a complex letter-writing network “that legitimated (often explicitly so) intervention outside the domestic realm.” Jane Couchman’s analysis of Louise de Coligny’s extant correspondence reveals that women could craft letters with political, and even literary, shrewdness. Even younger, more naïve writers, such as Louise de Bourges, could manipulate conventions of female weakness to their advantage, using their youth and sexuality to achieve a certain balance of power within the otherwise patriarchal construction of the institution of marriage. As James Daybell’s recent volume on early modern women’s letters suggests, the malleability of epistolary practice as well as the diversity of human relationships means that interpreting “women’s use of overtly submissive or deferential language is, at best, problematic.” Although the Renaissance letter book became yet another vehicle to promote deeply embedded conventions of female subordination, letters written by early

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51 Ibid., 126.
52 Bray, 10-11.
53 Daybell, “Gender, Obedience and Authority,” 57.
modern women reveal a more complex story of conformity, coy manipulation, and on rare occasions, even outright resistance.