

# What is "Personal" about Sixteenth-century French Women's Personal Writings?

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## ABSTRACT

Sixteenth-century French women's letters, memoirs and journals have been studied by political and social historians. Parts of these documents are also of interest for the study of women's writing. Since the texts have been produced, preserved and transmitted because their writers deal with public activities, definitions which separate the personal from the political, the private from the public cannot be usefully applied to them. Intimate domestic matters such as childcare, a friendship, or a wedding night, have political implications; the women write with personal passion about their political activities, and sometimes analyse their responses to significant experiences.

## RÉSUMÉ

Les lettres, mémoires et journaux des femmes au seizième siècle en France ont servi comme documents de base pour l'histoire politique et sociale. On peut également les lire comme exemples de l'écriture féminine. Puisque ces textes ont été produits, préservés et transmis à cause du rôle public de leur auteure, on ne peut pas y apporter une analyse qui distingue le domaine public du domaine privé ou personnel. Des questions intimes comme la nourrice d'un enfant, une amitié, une nuit de noces, ont une portée politique. D'autre part, ces femmes écrivent avec passion de leur propre engagement politique. Et on peut même parfois y trouver la réaction à un événement qui les a particulièrement marquées.

**T**HE QUESTION ENUNCIATED IN THE TITLE AROSE during collection of material for an anthology of selections from sixteenth-century French women's memoirs, journals and letters.<sup>1</sup> A number of these texts have been preserved and published, mainly in the nineteenth century, and have been used as background material for the study of political history, for understanding the careers of the men with whom the writers were associated and the roles the women themselves played, and, more recently, for the study of social history. These texts are not easily available, and not particularly accessible. There are vast quantities of material, much of it comprehensible only with very detailed understanding of specific historical events. But it seemed that it would be useful for scholars and students interested in women's texts to have access to some of the passages in which these women wrote about themselves; spoke with their own voices, wrote their own lives. The practical problem

is to decide which passages to select as the best reflections of these women's most personal concerns.

The question posited above has implications for our understanding of the texts and what we use them for. The memoirs, journals and letters written by women in this period were written, preserved and transmitted because they were in a sense public texts, and because, for the most part, they were written by important personages, educated, powerful and connected to powerful men. Few of them approach the kind of personal reflections we might find in later periods. For this reason, in reading these documents, the distinctions sometimes made between the personal and the political or between the private and the public are problematic.

We know something about the development of the notion of the self, of what is personal or intimate,

beginning in the Renaissance and continuing through the early modern period.<sup>2</sup> We understand to some extent that private self-definition, or self-fashioning, was accomplished within familial or dynastic and social or political contexts. Nonetheless, this understanding is related mainly to what we know about men's experiences. We are only beginning to study women's strategies of self-knowledge and self-expression in the same periods.<sup>3</sup>

These texts require a definition of the "personal" which is not limited to the private sphere.<sup>4</sup> Is a woman who writes about her children, her family, her home, her illness, her religious faith writing more personally than one who organizes a battle, a political alliance, the freeing of a royal prisoner? To accept the notion of a public space, men's domain, set against a private space, women's domain, is to limit our understanding of what really mattered to the women whose texts we are reading.

It is characteristic of most extant sixteenth-century French women's memoirs and letters that they are public rather than private documents. Louise de Savoie's *Journal* was written at a particularly difficult time, to justify her actions as Regent and those of her son François I. The Protestant queen Jeanne d'Albret's *Mémoires* are a response to specific criticisms of her decision to move to La Rochelle and to take on its defence, and of how she had raised her son, the future Henri IV. Marguerite de Valois wrote her *Mémoires* at a time when she was exiled from the Court in the isolated castle of Usson, and was negotiating her divorce from Henri IV and her return to Paris. The letters of Louise de Savoie, Marguerite de Navarre, Jeanne d'Albret, Catherine de Médicis (eleven large volumes) and even Diane de Poitiers deal with affairs of state and are for the most part official documents, written for practical reasons.

It is even possible to question the authenticity of these texts, given that they were frequently written by secretaries rather than by the women themselves (as of course can also be the case for men's texts of the same period).<sup>5</sup> And, in fact, the bearer of the letters often carried the real message, which he would deliver orally. But perhaps one can sometimes hear in

these dictated letters a female voice which is authentic because it is oral. I am thinking particularly of the fantastic spelling of some of Catherine de Médicis' secretaries, who appear to have tried to reproduce her Italian accent, but there may be others.<sup>6</sup>

The letters and journals of Protestant women are perhaps more consistent with a modern definition of the personal than are the texts produced by royal ladies. The letters exchanged among Louise de Coligny and members of her family towards the end of the sixteenth century and at the beginning of the seventeenth provide a lively set of family pictures.<sup>7</sup> But this is at least in part because of the Protestant emphasis on marriage and family life as the proper context for religious development and as the foundation of the Protestant community.<sup>8</sup> The *Mémoires* of Charlotte du Plessis Mornay provided for her son, and for posterity, the exemplary image of his father and his mother. The document was preserved for this reason, and is an essential one for our understanding of what the family meant in religious and political as much as in personal terms at this time. As for Charlotte de Bourbon and Louise de Coligny, who were married in turn to William d'Orange, their letters are as political as they are familial. Each of them was actively involved in the affairs of William, during crucial periods of the struggles of the Low Countries against Spanish domination. Their letters indicate that both of them played an important role, keeping William informed when he was in the field, raising money for his campaigns, and negotiating with various parties in his realm.

The *Journal* of the Countess of Sanzay and the *Généalogie* prepared by Jeanne de Laurens are exceptions to the tendency of documents to be public ones.<sup>9</sup> The first is mainly an account of the travel and household purchases of a provincial noblewoman, interesting because it is unique, though not rich in insights into the personality of the compiler. In Jeanne de Laurens' *Généalogie* we find a lively account of the family life of three generations and an admiring portrait of her remarkable mother, though with relatively few and mainly indirect references to the author herself.

The public nature of the majority of these documents is also related to the fact that only rarely did a woman whose letters or journal we possess come to her position in her own right. Most owed their capacity to act and to speak to their relationship with a politically prominent man, whether it was a son, a husband, a brother, or a lover. The writers work within, while extending, the definition of women's role which Louise Labé echoed from Plato: "[...] si nous ne sommes pas faites pour commander, si ne devons nous estre dédaignées pour compagnes tant es affaires domestiques que publiques [...]"<sup>10</sup>

Louise de Savoie, for example, indicated that she would not write about herself in her *Journal*. Its focus is clearly indicated in the following passage describing the birth of her son, to whom she devoted herself throughout her life:

François, par la grâce de Dieu, roi de France et mon César pacifique print la première expérience de la lumière mondaine a Cognac, environ deux heures après midi 1494, le douzième jour de septembre (p. 87, col.1).

Nor did Marguerite de Navarre, François' sister, hesitate to take an active role in the affairs of state and write firmly about them, for she did so with her brother's authorization.

The position of Diane de Poitiers depended entirely on the favour of her royal lover, Henri II. Symbolic of this is a letter written jointly by them to Anne de Montmorency. The italicized passages are in Henri's hand, the others in Diane's.

Monsr, j'é receu les lestres que m'avés escrystes, de quoy je vous mercye byen humblement de la penne que an navés prys, que je pance byen que *vostre travail [est] sy grant que n'avés loysyr de m'escryre de vostre mayn, quy me soufyt de vostre souvenanse, & sepandant le segretère quy achève la moytyé de ma lestre & moy nous recommandons à vostre bonne grâce, & [prions Dieu] vous donner se que nous vous désyrons, set de Vos ansyens & mylleurs amys, Henri, Dianne (March, 1559).*

Even during Henri II's lifetime, Catherine de Médicis sometimes acted and wrote on his behalf and for his benefit. In her role as Regent for her sons and later as Queen Mother she acted and wrote with rather more freedom; she made it clear, however, that she was always acting on behalf of whichever of her sons was king at the time (François II, Charles IX or Henri III) and, in fact, she was not infrequently frustrated in her policies by them, particularly by Henri III.

Further examples would be Charlotte de Bourbon and Louise de Coligny, mentioned above. Louise de Coligny was clearly aware of and emboldened as well by the fact that she was the daughter of the Protestant leader Gaspar de Coligny. Charlotte de Bourbon's writings reveal her extraordinary accomplishments and independence (abbess at the age of 17 or 18, she fled from her convent soon after, married William and bore him six daughters, and played an important role at his side in the politics of the Low Countries). All the same, she devoted a very large part of her correspondence to trying to regain the approval of her Catholic father, the Duc de Montpensier.<sup>11</sup> Charlotte du Plessis Mornay's confidence in writing her *Mémoires* is a consequence of her goal, which was to provide for her son an account of his father's actions so that he would grow "en craincte et amour de Dieu" (p.4).

Jeanne d'Albret differs from the others in that she acted and wrote on her own behalf as well as on that of her son. She wrote her *Mémoires* to respond to critics and to defend her right to independent, considered, and effective action:

[...] me semble vous avoir assez fait entendre quels combats j'ay soustenu pour demeurer ferme en ma première entreprise de faire le voyage que j'ai fait. Ce que j'ay bien voulu desclarer par le menu pour aller au devant et fermer la bouche à ceux qui m'accuseroyent de m'estre précipitée en ceste cause à yeux fermez, comme il y a eu quelque mal-avisé escrivain, lequel [...] dict [...] que ledict Admiral [Gaspard de Coligny] par artifice surprenant l'imbécilité d'une femme et d'un jeune prince [son fils, le futur Henri IV] [...] leur a fait lever les armes [...] Et en ce que j'en ay escript cy-dessus sera suffisante preuve de ceste menterie

sottement inventée. Je ne m'amuseray à ce dédaigneux épithète d'imbécilité de femme, car si je vouloy icy entreprendre la défence de mon sexe, j'aye assez de raison et d'exemples [...] pour luy monstrier qu'il a abusé du terme et ceste endroit-là (p. 91).

Marguerite de Valois also chose to speak for herself, to correct the image left of her activities by Brantôme. Instead of basing his information on second-hand and frequently malicious reports, she thought he would prefer to read her own account: "[...] j'estime que vous recevray plaisir d'en avoir les memoires de qui peut le mieux savoir, et de qui a plus d'intérêt à la vérité de la description du sujet" (p. 36). The role that she described herself as playing is that of loyal counsellor and supporter to her husband Henri de Navarre and her brother, his sometime ally, François d'Alençon.

In general, these were women whose access to public action and to public speech, in the form of letters and *Mémoires*, came to them through a personal relationship with a man. As well, for them activities which might appear thoroughly "domestic" often had political implications. For example, we have letters from both the queen, Catherine de Médicis, and the royal mistress, Diane de Poitiers, in which they are concerned about the wet nurse who has been engaged for Catherine's son. They give us information about what was seen to be important in choosing a wet nurse – character, which was said to be transmitted with the milk, or good health, which is the most important consideration for both Catherine and Diane. Catherine wrote to her children's governess:

[...] j'ay veu ce que m'avez escript de la nourrice de mon filz d'Orléans que je croy est honneste et bien condicionnée, mais nous n'avons pas tant affaire de sa suffisance et de ses vertus, comme nous avons qu'elle soit bonne nourrice, ce que l'on voit bien qui n'est point, car mon dict filz continue trop à ce trouver mal, parquoy [...] je vous prie [...] qu'elle luy soit changée, car, pour sa prudence et sagesse, son laict n'en est pas meilleur, on le voit par expérience.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, we know that they are writing about the future Charles IX, never in good health, who died at the age of twenty-three.

When Jeanne d'Albret responded to an appeal for help from a younger woman friend, who sought to be reconciled with her family, we note a fine example of female friendship. Jeanne offered her refuge and wrote: "[...] je vous feray office de mere en tout ce qui concerne vostre grandeur et contentement [...]" (18 June, 1571). We also recall that the young woman in question was Charlotte de Bourbon, who had just left her convent and declared herself a Protestant.

We have an account of Marguerite de Valois' wedding night (or nearly), August 23 to 24, 1572:

Sur cela le Roy mon mari [Henri de Navarre] qui s'estoit mis au lit, me manda que je m'en allasse coucher; ce que je feis, et trouvay son lit entourné de trente ou quarante huguenots que je ne cognoissois point encore, car il y avait fort peu de temps que j'estois mariée. Toute la nuit ils ne firent que parler de l'accident qui estoit advenu à monsieur l'admiral [Coligny] [...] (p. 57).

The next morning, after a fitful sleep, Marguerite was awakened by a wounded Protestant who sought her protection from what would be called the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre.

Charlotte du Plessis Mornay's account of her courtship and family life certainly had a domestic purpose, as an advice-book for her son, whose early death put an end to her writing. At the same time, it was the public service to the Protestant cause which Charlotte saw as the outcome of the exemplary personal and family life. The dedicatory letter to her son begins, "Mon Filz, Dieu m'est tesmoign que, mesme avant votre naissance, il m'a donné espoir que vous le serviriez [...]" (p. 1).

On the other hand, even during the most political or public of moments, these documents reveal the passionate involvement of their authors. Reading a letter written by Marguerite de Navarre after her return from a mission to the court of Charles V to negotiate the release of her captive brother François I,

we can sense the energy and the effectiveness of her political activities, and the pleasure she found in carrying them out well:

[...] Je vous puis dire que j'ay eu affaire aux plus grans dissimuleurs et gens où il se trouve aussy peu d'honneur qu'il est possible. [...] j'ay mis peyne par tous les moyens qu'il m'a esté possible [...] de sercher la paix, amitié et alliance de l'Empereur pour venir à la délivrance du Roy, et n'ay espargné chose qui se peust ou deust [...] Nous espérons tous les jours la conclusion [...] Le tout est que je laissay le Roy faisant, Dieu mercy, très bonne chère, et commençant bien à se fortifier, ayant délibération de prendre toutes choses comme il plairoit à Dieu les luy envoyer [...].<sup>13</sup>

And we can sense the frustration of Catherine de Médicis as she tried to inculcate in her reluctant third son, Henri III, some taste for authority and an understanding of some of the techniques for exercising it.

[...] luy prie d'entrer en son royaume come un prinse qui ne fust acotuemé de voyre nos fasons déreglée et désordonnée [...] ausi fault qu'il se résolve à cet comensement de tenir ferme pour la joustise et n'estre fasile à donner grâce, car aultrement cet ne se remetré jeamès en son devour: qu'il ne montre pount de hayr personne, mès les aymer tous [...] qu'il monstre que son premyer plésir s'et de fayre ses afeyres et qu'i lé veut fayre et entendre le fond de ses finanses et fayre entre le trésorier de l'épargne [...].<sup>14</sup>

The writers do sometimes talk about their hopes, fears, ambitions and disappointments. Marguerite de

Valois' *Mémoires* provide a particularly fine instance. She writes about her amazed pleasure when her brother, the future Henri III, asked her to be his advocate with her mother Catherine de Médicis while he was away at war, and about her pain and anger when he withdrew his trust soon afterwards on the pretext that she was becoming beautiful and might betray court secrets to a lover. She writes that, at his initial request she found in herself "[...] ce que je ne pensois pas qui y fust, des puissances excitées par l'object de ses paroles qui auparavant m'estoient incognues [...]." When her opportunity to play a useful role was taken away again, she told her mother that she would never forget what her brother had done to her.<sup>15</sup> This is a rare insight into the frustrated political ambitions of a woman who was surely at least as fit to rule as any of her brothers.

In many ways, then, these texts are not particularly personal, and we may hope that others more like those of Jeanne de Laurens may be discovered. The ones we have are public documents rather than private ones, at least for the most part, and even in those which are more private, such as the correspondence among Louise de Coligny and her children and stepchildren, we would not have them if the participants had not been important for other reasons. These few examples do indicate, I think, that even the public voices of early modern women are worth hearing and analysing, and that what can be described as most personal about these women are the ways in which they conducted their public roles with intelligence and passion, and the ways in which they wrote about these roles and about themselves.

## NOTES

1. The published versions of the works considered here are listed in References. The project, undertaken with Helje Porre and Marie-France Silver, Glendon College, York University, Toronto, also includes seventeenth- and eighteenth-century texts. Letters which were intended for publication as polemical texts (*L'Épître... de Marie Dentières*) or as examples of the epistolary genre (*Les Lettres familières et invectives... d'Hélisenne de Crenne, Les Missives... de Madeleine et Catherine des Roches*) are not considered here.
2. See Greenblatt, pp. 2-3. For Greenblatt, "an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process [...]" is directly associated with a feeling of displacement with reference to "a stable, inherited social world" (p. 7).
3. See, for example, Cholakian, 1991. She proposes (p. 5) to read texts written by women in early modern France "[...] both as autobiographies and as palimpsests, texts in which the pre-existing male narratives have been written over."
4. See Elstain, 1982 and especially 1981, pp. 18-19; also Kyle.
5. See Berriot-Salvadore, p. 394. "Le rôle politique des princesses de la Renaissance a suffisamment été mis en lumière sans doute par l'étude des correspondances dont il est parfois plus difficile, d'un point de vue littéraire, de tirer un enseignement; une Marguerite d'Autriche, une Catherine de Médicis, une Jeanne d'Albret ne sont souvent auteurs que du para[grap]he qu'elles apposent à une lettre composée par un secrétaire." See also Note 16 on this same page.
6. An example of Catherine de Médicis' Italian accent: "Mon compère, j'é reseu à nuyt vostre letre par le quele é antandeu coman Madame la gran metrese et acuchée, de quoye j'é été bien ayse, quant j'é veu que me mandyé que je le tynse vostre figle, car je avès grant peur de ne le tenyr poynt [...]" Letter to the Connetable Anne de Montmorency, August, 1536.
7. See Berriot-Salvadore, pp. 134-156 and 481-501.
8. See Marshall, pp. 2-4. Marshall discusses the exemplary role that the Protestant minister's wife was expected to play, at the expense of her personal development.
9. For Jeanne de Laurens, see Berriot-Salvadore, pp. 179-185.
10. Louise Labé, "Épître à AMCDBL." I have adopted the spelling of the editions consulted.
11. Several letters, including those dated September, 1576 to her brother, February 21, 1577 to her father (he did not reply), and August 12, 1579 to her brother.
12. Catherine de Médicis to the governess of her and Henri II's children, 25 May, 1551. Diane de Poitiers to the same governess, 3 June, 1551. "[...] je suys très aise, & mesmes de ce que Monsr d'Orléans se trouve bien d'avoir changé de nourisse. Il me semble qu'on luy devoit avoir plus toust ousté celle qu'il avoit voyant que son laict ne luy estoit bon [...]"
13. To the Chancelier d'Alençon, Jean de Brinon, 15 January, 1525.
14. In almost every letter, and by the accumulated force of her correspondence, Catherine de Médicis reveals her passion for the political life. In her "Mémoire pour montrer à monsieur le Roy [Henri III] mon fils" (8 Aug., 1574), written on the return of Henri III from Poland to become king of France after Charles IX's death, she gives him lessons in government.
15. Marguerite de Valois, *Mémoires*, pp. 47-48; see also Cholakian, 1993.

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