

Rage Remembered: Courtship, Marriage, and the Feminine Self in Early Women's Autobiographies

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ABSTRACT

Applying Foucault's perception that autobiography constitutes a "technology of the self," this essay addresses the question of whether a feminine sense of self is constructed in early women's life stories. It examines the rage that pervades narratives of puberty, courtship, and marriage in the autobiographies of Marguerite de Valois, Mademoiselle de Montpensier, and Madame Guyon. Each of these women writes of these transformative moments as identity crises that resulted in the loss of a former self. They tell of feeling diminished because of the role assigned to women in their society. Their helpless anger is eventually channeled, however, into the texts that restage their oppression.

RÉSUMÉ

Se servant du concept de Foucault que l'autobiographie constitue une "technologie du soi," cet essai s'adresse à la question: est-ce que le soi construit dans les autobiographies de femmes de l'Ancien Régime est féminin? Il examine la colère partout présente dans les récits du passage de l'enfance à la vie de femme mariée dans les mémoires de Marguerite de Valois, Mademoiselle de Montpensier, and Madame Guyon. Chacune de ces femmes décrit ces moments de transformation comme une crise d'identité qui aboutit à la perte de celle qu'elles étaient auparavant. Elles racontent leur sens de diminution, résultat du statut de la femme dans leur milieu. Pourtant, leur colère impuissante s'exprime enfin dans ces textes qui dramatisent leur oppression.

THOSE OF US WHO WORK ON EARLY WOMEN'S TEXTS, and especially obscure early women's texts, often feel called upon to justify our work to others and even to ourselves. What is the relevance of such texts and the work we do on them? My own answer to this question has tended to be rather old-fashioned, harking back to the early days of the feminist project of the seventies, when Elaine Showalter called on women to rediscover a literature of their own. In the nineties, however, the post-modernist destabilizing of the concept of self, and indeed of the concept of woman, plus the insistence that feminists use not only gender but race, class, and ethnicity as categories of analysis has made it necessary for me to rethink my premises and methods as I study the writings of little-known, white, French noblewomen.

Working on their autobiographies,¹ I have become increasingly hesitant to try to generalize

about what is common to women or to the way they write. Generalizations about women's writing seem to me to point in the wrong direction, closing off too many avenues of inquiry and essentializing both the text and the reader. I have been searching, therefore, for ways of reading that will open up these texts, and make it possible to explore them without preconceived notions of where they will lead.

One such way of reading is derived from Foucault's theory that the idea of self is constituted through the autobiographical act. He conceptualizes autobiography as a "technology of the self," a process of examination and analysis of past thoughts and deeds that generates the sense of identity or subjectivity that we call the "self." Consequently, the study of autobiographies becomes an effort to trace and map out the "genealogy of the self" (Martin, Gutman, and Hutton). This way of perceiving autobiography has

the advantage of assuming nothing ahead of time. It opens up a space in which to ask, do life stories by early women construct a sense of self that is in some way gendered, and if so, then how, when, and why does this happen?

A second line of inquiry has been suggested to me by Carolyn Heilbrun's statement in *Writing a Woman's Life* that, "above all, what has been forbidden to women is anger" (p. 13), and her subsequent observation that, "if one is not permitted to express anger or even to recognize it within oneself, one is, by simple extension, refused both power and control" (p. 15). Rephrasing Heilbrun's observations about women's anger as a question has prompted me to ask, what is the role of rage in the life stories of seventeenth-century women and what is its relationship to textual self-construction?

These questions have in turn led me to wonder, where in their stories would early women have been most likely to come to terms with issues of feminine identity, or subjectivity, or self-awareness? In this essay, I want to pursue one possible answer by looking at points in the life cycle at which masculine and feminine itineraries diverge dramatically: puberty, courtship, and marriage.

In the Ancien Régime, puberty conferred on the male aristocrat the right to enter into the adult world of war and politics. As for courtship and marriage, they were often footnotes to the public life of the *grand seigneur*. A woman, on the other hand, was defined after puberty in terms of her sexual and procreative functions and excluded from other areas of life. Her public role, if any, was determined by whom she married.² Marriage marked her with a new title (madame) and a different name (her husband's), separating and cutting her off from what she had been before. The transition from girlhood to womanhood, and its corollary courtship and marriage, offer promising sites, therefore, on which to study how a feminine sense of self is constructed in early women's texts.

Let me add in parentheses that I do not intend to study for now the problem of what constitutes self-

hood.³ First, because the subject is too complex to enter into here; and second, because instead of starting off with a preconceived definition, I am still in the process of studying what kind of "selfhood" emerges in these texts. As a result, I must beg the reader's indulgence for using the word "self," its compounds and synonyms, such as subjectivity, identity, etc., when I have not made it altogether clear what I am talking about. Until now, I simply have not been able to figure out any way of avoiding this.

The three examples I will analyze all tell of an experience related to puberty, courtship, or marriage that resulted in a crisis of identity. I will argue that in each case the writer constructs self-awareness in her text by comparing the person she had been before – that is, a lost self of which she had not been fully conscious – with the more self-conscious person she became.

My first example is from the *Mémoires* of Marguerite de Valois (1552-1615), the daughter of Henri II and Catherine de Médicis. They were written around 1600 while the author was shut up in the desolate castle of Usson.⁴ She had been consigned there by her husband Henri IV, who eventually divorced her and married Marie de Médicis. The passage in question tells of her bitter disappointment when her brother, the future Henri III, invited her to become his political ally and then backed away after he noticed that her budding charms were beginning to attract suitors.

Marguerite carefully marks this passage as a coming-of-age narrative. "Ce langage me fust fort nouveau, pour avoir jusques alors vescu sans dessein, ne pensant qu'à danser ou aller à la chasse, n'ayant mesme la curiosité de m'habiller ne paroistre belle, pour n'estre encore en l'âge de telle ambition" (p. 45). She calls attention to the fact that she was still too young to be concerned with what she wore or how she looked, underlining the importance of physical appearance to the adult woman, and defining puberty, by implication, as the process that changes the child who does not care about her looks into the woman who wants to be beautiful. Unaware at that time, however, of these feminine ways of being an adult,

Marguerite's response to her brother's proposal was ungendered, based only on her assessment of her abilities.

Peu s'en fallut que je ne lui respondisse comme Moïse à Dieu en la vision du buisson: "Que suis-je moy? Envoye celuy que tu dois envoyer." Toutesfois trouvant en moy ce que je ne pensois pas qui y fust, des puissances excitées par l'object de ses parolles, qui auparavant m'estoit incognues, [...] revenant en moi de ce premier estonnement, ces parolles me pleurent, et me sembla a l'instant que j'estois transformée, et que j'estois devenue quelque chose de plus que je n'avois esté jusques alors. Tellement que je commençay à prendre confiance de moy-mesme (p. 45).

She discovers and accepts a new identity – active participant in politics. Her question, "Que suis-je moy?" is, of course, the essential question in the process of self-examination. The fact that she uses it to compare her experience to Moses's revelation at the burning bush conveys the significance of this moment for her and the inflated sense of her own importance that it aroused.

Had she been a boy, this sudden discovery of her desire and talent for court intrigue would have been the first step toward a lifetime devoted to affairs of state. Since she was a girl, however, growing up turned out to signify something completely different. Henri noticed she was blossoming into a beautiful woman and changed his mind, out of fear that she might betray his secrets to a suitor: "[Henri] dit que je devenois belle, et que monsieur de Guyse me vouloit rechercher, et que ses oncles aspireroient à me le faire espouser; que si je venois à y avoir de l'affection, il seroit à craindre que je luy découvrisse tout" (p. 47).⁵

This sudden reversal of her fortunes caused her to become so distraught that she developed a fever and nearly died, but having been commanded to say nothing, she was forced to contain her rage behind clenched teeth, able to express her resentment toward her brother only by sighs: "Moy, qui avois par commandement la bouche fermée, ne respondois que par souspirs à son hypocrisie, comme Burrus feit à Neron,

lequel mourust par le poison que ce tyran luy avoit fait donner" (p. 49).

This passage is an account, therefore, of two identity crises: the first crisis resulted in awareness of an ambitious self, eager, ready, and able to play a role in public life; and the second crisis resulted in the realization that her gender would prevent her from playing that role. The anger she was not allowed to express undoubtedly imprinted this episode on her memory and caused her to assign a crucial significance to it in her text. Thus, the impotent silence forced on her is broken at the scene of writing, as she remembers her anger and communicates it to her readers.

As the reader will learn, this anecdote is emblematic of the rest of her story. Soon after her illness, her mother hastily marries her off to her cousin Henri de Navarre, despite her protestations that she is a Catholic and does not want a Protestant husband. This marriage increases her distance from political power by making her an outsider to both the royal family and her husband's followers. It is clear from the rest of her memoirs that, although she always longed to play an important role and magnified the bit parts she did play, Marguerite de Valois was consigned to the sidelines of history.

My next example is from the memoirs of Mademoiselle de Montpensier, better-known as La Grande Mademoiselle (1627-1693).⁶ Woven through her long, worldly account of life at the court of her cousin, Louis XIV, is the saga of her search for an "establishment," a brilliant marriage that would be worthy of a woman who was not only the granddaughter of Henri IV but the richest woman in France. I want to look at two passages that suggest the connections in her text between anger, self-awareness, and this search for a husband. The first refers to an aborted project to marry her to the emperor and tells of her realization that the court had no serious intention of arranging the match she so ardently desired. What made her anger so painful, she writes, was that she had no way of expressing it.

[...] qu'ils ne m'avoient fait voir de belles apparences à cet établissement que pour m'entretenir d'un vain espoir; qu'ils n'avoient en effet jamais travaillé aux moyens d'en faire réussir le dessein. Quoique je fusse persuadée que ces gens-là n'agissoient point de bonne foi, je ne laissai pas d'être sensiblement saisie de colère contre la cour, et c'étoit un ressentiment qui me faisoit d'autant plus de peine que je n'avois pas moyen d'en donner des effets (1, 88).

There is a decided similarity between Montpensier's reaction to what she sees as a betrayal and Marguerite's reaction to her brother's perfidy. They both tell of how they were forced to repress their rage and remain silent after they had been prevented from becoming what they passionately desired to be. In Montpensier's case, however, the anger at those who had stood in the way of her accession to what was, after all, the only form of grandeur available to her would eventually cause her to try to take charge of her destiny.

In the second passage, she tells of how, when she was over forty and still single, she decided to arrange her own marriage and chose as her "object" the courtier Lauzun. She wrote this passage seven years after the king had forbidden the match and sent her erstwhile fiancé to prison. Looking back on her failed attempt to change the direction of her life, Montpensier recalls how one day, alone in her room, she sat reflecting on her existence:

Je raisonnois en moi-même (car je n'en parlai à personne) et je me disois: "Ce n'est point une pensée vague; il faut qu'elle ait quelque objet;" et je ne trouvai point qui c'étoit. Je cherchois, je songeois et je ne le trouvois point. Enfin, après m'être inquiétée quelques jours, je m'aperçus que c'étoit M. de Lauzun que j'aimois, qui s'étoit glissé dans mon coeur: je le regardois comme le plus honnête homme du monde, et le plus agréable, et que rien ne manquoit à mon bonheur que d'avoir un mari fait comme lui, que j'aimerois fort et qui m'aimeroit aussi; que jamais personne ne m'avoit témoigné d'amitié; qu'il falloit une fois en sa vie goûter la douceur de se voir aimée de quelqu'un, qui valût la peine que l'on l'aimât [...] J'étois ravie d'être toute seule dans ma chambre; je me faisois

un plan de ce que je pouvois faire pour lui, [...] [***] [Je pensois à] l'obligation qu'il m'auroit; combien cela me seroit glorieux; ceux qui me loueroient; ceux qui me blâmeroient; la douceur de demeurer en mon pays, où il y avoit si peu de gens au-dessus de moi, qui me devoit guérir du regret que je pourrois avoir de n'être pas reine dans des pays étrangers, dont les rois n'étoient pas faits comme M. de Lauzun. Pour les souverains, je trouvois que d'être sujet d'un aussi grand roi que le nôtre valoit bien les souverains. Enfin je me disois un jour tout ce qui me pouvoit donner tout le gré imaginable dans la pensée que j'avois: j'en trouvois à ôter l'espérance à mes héritiers d'avoir mon bien et de souhaiter ma mort, qui étoit bien grand (2, 247-48).

She seems to have taken considerable care in composing this passage. At the point indicated by the asterisks above, a flyleaf was inserted into the autograph manuscript, indicating that she not only considered it important enough to revise, but that she was not altogether sure how to present or justify this crucial decision:

qui lui donnerait une grande élévation; mais je trouvois que le mérite qu'il avoit pour la soutenir étoit encore au-dessus de tout ce que je pourrois faire. Je me flattois agréablement dans ces pensées et j'étois ravie de voir par l'estime qu'il avoit dans le monde, que je ne voyois point tout ce que je dis par préoccupation; mais que c'étoit la vérité. Je me persuadois et je me souvenois de certains vers de Corneille [...]. On ne sauroit mieux dire sur la prédestination des mariages ou la prévision de Dieu, qu'ils disent, et on peut trouver là une très bonne morale et en faire des méditations; assurément que j'y ai souvent pensé à l'église. Ils sont aussi les plus galants et les plus tendres du monde; mais à toute chose on y donne le tour que l'on veut, et c'est selon que notre coeur est tourné que nous donnons le tour aux choses. J'ai bien à rendre grâce à Dieu des dispositions qu'il a données au mien et de la manière dont il l'a fait (2, 247-48).

While in the first draft she tells of "reasoning" about her feelings and working out a plan for the future, in the insertion she introduces the idea of a divine providence that "predestines" marriages. Her need to amplify and reinterpret her decision demon-

strates how the self is textually constructed in the subjective process of remembering thoughts that have either been forgotten or not totally understood.

Montpensier writes of how she decided to stop being a woman who depended on others for her “establishment,” and to become the establisher of a man. She would not marry a king, but a man of her own choosing; and she would not base her choice on his rank or titles but on his merits. It is important to realize just how shocking such ideas were for a woman of her time and class. It was unheard of for any woman to initiate and arrange her own marriage. And as a royal princess, La Grande Mademoiselle was under an even greater obligation to comply with the decisions made for her by her family. What is more, she had always taken for granted her caste’s belief that blood was more important than character. Consequently, her determination to marry a man beneath her in rank for the simple reason that he *deserved* it represented a major step away from the values that defined who she was.⁷

She reconstructs her decision to marry Lauzun around a moment of self-recognition, when she saw herself as emotionally deprived, never having enjoyed true friendship or love: “que jamais personne ne m’avoit témoigné d’amitié; qu’il falloit une fois en sa vie goûter la douceur de se voir aimée de quelqu’un, qui valût la peine que l’on l’aimât.” It is this recognition that leads her to reject her former submissiveness and try to take control of her life.

This move clearly has political implications. It is directed against the members of the royal family, who had frustrated her desires and ambitions, and were now waiting impatiently to inherit her money. It would not only procure for her the satisfaction of being loved; it would enable her to divert her fortune away from her legitimate heirs. In fact, she makes it clear that for her this was the clinching argument – “j’en trouvois à ôter l’espérance a mes héritiers d’avoir mon bien et de souhaiter ma mort, qui étoit bien grand.”

Of the three examples, it is in Montpensier’s text that the awareness of herself as an oppressed and

victimized subject emerges most clearly. She portrays herself in the process of rejecting family, upbringing, and gender, reinventing herself as a rebellious dissident, who at last finds an outlet for her repressed anger at being forced to live a life over which she has no control.

I must add that she too was ultimately frustrated in her attempt to construct an existence outside the limits of femininity. What she did not know when she wrote this was that the king would eventually force her to give most of her property to his illegitimate son in return for Lauzun’s release from prison; and that when her long-lost fiancé did return, he would turn out to be a colossal boor!

My third example is from *La Vie de Madame Guyon*.⁸ Its author, Jeanne Guyon (1648-1717), won notoriety and opprobrium for mystical writings that were condemned as “Quietist” and was incarcerated for many years in the Bastille. She probably composed this passage in 1688, while she was under house arrest in a Visitandine convent. In it she describes the painful transformation she underwent after her marriage at age fifteen to a man twenty-two years her senior. This marriage was arranged without her knowledge or consent, and she was made to sign the marriage contract without being told what it was.

Guyon’s account of how she felt when she found herself a virtual prisoner in an alien household conveys dramatically the sense of being split off after marriage from the person she had been before and forced to become someone else. She writes that when she arrived in her new home she saw at once that it was very different from the old one. She found herself forced to change, to “lose” the good manners and accomplishments that she had learned in her father’s house.

J’avais plus de quinze ans quand je fus mariée, je courais la seizième année. Mon étonnement augmenta beaucoup lorsque je vis qu’il fallait que je perdisse ce que j’avais acquis avec tant de peine. Chez mon père il fallait vivre avec beaucoup de politesse, parler juste, tout ce que je disais y étoit applaudi et relevé, là on ne m’écoutait que pour me contredire et pour me blâmer. Si je parlais bien, ils

disaient que c'était pour leur faire leçon; s'il venait quelqu'un, et que l'on mit une question sur le tapis, au lieu que mon père me faisait parler, là si je voulais dire mon sentiment, on disait que c'était pour contester, et l'on me faisait taire honteusement et ils me querellaient depuis le matin jusqu'au soir. On portait mon mari à en faire autant, qui n'y avait que trop de disposition (p. 53).

Significantly, what separated the old from the new was the ability to speak. Looking back on a girlhood that suddenly appeared utopian in comparison with life in the Guyon household, she recalls how she had formerly been the center of attention. She had been educated to conduct herself properly, speak correctly, and participate intelligently in discussions. Now, however, her husband, and especially his mother, contradicted and criticized her constantly.

Before long, she lost all sense of the person she had been. Her natural vivacity was extinguished, and she was reduced to an imbecilic stammerer, who did not dare to speak for fear of calling down her tormenters' wrath: "elle [la belle-mère] trouva le secret d'éteindre la vivacité de mon esprit et de me faire devenir toute bête; en sorte qu'on ne me reconnaissait plus. Ceux qui ne m'avaient point vue auparavant disaient: 'Quoi! est-ce là cette personne qui passait pour avoir de l'esprit? elle ne sait pas dire deux mots: c'est une belle image'" (p. 55). She appeared so stupid that her friends did not recognize her and people who had never met her could not believe she had once been witty and charming.

Writing about her life as an act of obedience to a spiritual director, Guyon apologizes several times for casting her husband and his mother in such an uncharitable light: "J'aurais peine à vous écrire de ces sortes de choses, qui ne se peuvent faire sans blesser la charité, si vous n'aviez défendu de rien omettre, et si vous ne m'aviez pas commandé absolument d'expliquer toutes choses, et de mettre toutes les particularités" (p. 53). Her disclaimers confirm Heilbrun's insight into how difficult it has been historically for women to express anger. At the moment of writing, Guyon is still uneasy about writing about what was done to her. But it is impossible for her to conceal the rage that seethes under this stirring account of how

she was brainwashed into silence. At one point, she admits, she even contemplated cutting out her own tongue:

"Un jour, outrée de douleur (il n'y avait que six mois que j'étais mariée), je pris un couteau étant seule pour me couper la langue, afin de n'être plus obligée de parler à des personnes qui ne me faisaient parler que pour avoir matière de se mettre en colère. J'aurais fait cette opération extravagante si vous ne m'aviez arrêtée tout court, ô mon Dieu, et si vous ne m'aviez fait voir ma folie" (pp. 57-58).

By staging in narrative what she disavows in her pious discourse, she forges a textual resistance to her culture's oppression of women.

In Guyon's case, as in those of Marguerite de Valois and Mlle de Montpensier, self-awareness involves comparing a lost self, which had been only imperfectly perceived at the time it existed, with another self that came into being during a crisis of identity. Selfhood is thus constructed on the threshold that separates the new self from the old.

Of these three autobiographers, Guyon was, in one sense, the most successful in overcoming the annihilation of self imposed by the feminine condition. Determined to find a way to rise above her miserable situation in the Guyon household, she learned to center her thoughts on what she called "the interior," and at length, perfected a method of prayer and meditation that made it possible for her to reinvent herself as an authority on mystical experience.

I began by saying that I have been searching for open-ended and non-essentializing ways of reading early women's autobiographies. I do not therefore want to impose closure with a neat generalization. Nor do I feel authorized to formulate, on the basis of these three isolated passages, an all-encompassing definition of self-construction in early women's texts. I will limit myself, therefore, to summing up what I think these women reveal about their own self-awareness in their reconstructions of how they passed through the crucial phases of puberty, courtship and marriage.

In each case, the writers tell of being diminished or deprived because of the role assigned to women in their society. Re-examining their lives, they represent themselves as all too conscious of the thwarting of their ambitions, the exploitation of their bodies and fortunes, and the crippling of their egos. Their texts are suffused with a sense of helpless anger, which they were forced to repress or internalize, but which they eventually channeled into the narratives that restage their oppression.

NOTES

1. I use the word "autobiography" here in the loosest and most inclusive sense: as the narrative of a life written by the person who lived that life.
2. It is important to remember that when women exercised political power in France, they did so on the basis of their marital and maternal status, not on the basis of their own rank or abilities. Thus Catherine de Médicis, Marie de Médicis, and Anne d'Autriche became regents after the deaths of their husbands and before their sons were old enough to rule; but Marguerite de Valois did not succeed her brothers, although in Brantôme's view at least, she would have been qualified to reign.
3. For instance, see discussions of this problem in Levine and Smith.
4. They were published in 1628 by Charles Chapellain, who wrote, "Que Rome vante tant qu'il luy plaira les commentaires de son premier Empereur, la France a maintenant les Memoires d'une grande Roine qui ne leur cèdent en rien." Their success is attested to by the fact that they were re-edited fifteen times in the seventeenth century, twice in the eighteenth, and six in the nineteenth. In the passage explaining why she decided to write her *Mémoires*, Mademoiselle de Montpensier mentions that she had read them, suggesting a direct filiation between the two works (1,299).
5. Marguerite's supposed admirer was, of course, Henri III's arch-enemy, whom he eventually had assassinated in 1588. Many historians believe Marguerite was indeed involved with Guise. What concerns us here, however, is the way she places the blame for her fall from Henri's favor on the onset of feminine sexuality.
6. Like most memoirs of this period, they were published posthumously, although the large number of manuscript copies suggests that they may have circulated among members of the court. They were written in three installments. Part I, which covers the years 1627 through 1659, was written between 1652 and 1660. Part II, begun August 18, 1677, takes up the story where Part I left off, in May, 1659, and continues it through April, 1676. It was probably broken off around 1680. Part III, which is much shorter than the other two, seems to have been composed in 1688 or 1689, and covers the interval between 1676 and 1686. See my article, "A Re-examination of the Manuscript Versions." A first edition was censored while it was still in press. These *Mémoires* appeared, therefore, only in 1728. Like Marguerite de Valois's, they enjoyed great popularity and were re-edited frequently thereafter. Chéruef was the first, however, to publish the autograph manuscript, rather than the seriously-altered copy made by her secretaries. Although I have cited the 1985 reprinting, the only satisfactory scholarly edition remains Chéruef's, published in 1857-8.
7. Lougee argues that the *noblesse d'épée* was infiltrated during this period by the bourgeoisie and *noblesse de robe*, largely through subversive marriages like the one envisioned by Montpensier.
8. Guyon probably began writing in 1682, under the direction of her spiritual director le père La Combe. She states in the opening paragraph that he rejected this first attempt because it was incomplete. She revised and added to the work in 1688. The last part was composed in Blois, after her release from the Bastille. Before her death, she oversaw the preparation of a manuscript meant for publication and entrusted it to a follower. It appeared in Amsterdam in 1720. The manuscript used for this edition is now in the Bodleian Library of Oxford. For more information on Guyon's life and the composition of her autobiography, see the two works cited by Gondal.

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