

The Portrait as Text: Two Depictions of Madame de Saint-Balmon (1607-1660)¹

Carmeta Abbott
University of
St. Jerome's College

ABSTRACT

Not only do we possess a lengthy biography with many details of the military career of Saint-Balmon, but two important paintings depict her on horseback surrounded by scenes of her martial victories. We will examine how both male biographers, the painter and the writer, although sympathetic and even enthusiastic about their subject, tend to minimize her military accomplishments and to undervalue the active role played by Saint-Balmon as protector of her people.

RÉSUMÉ

Il existe de Saint-Balmon non seulement une importante biographie qui foisonne de détails sur sa carrière militaire mais aussi une riche iconographie dont deux tableaux où elle paraît en cavalière entourée de quelques-uns de ses combats. Dans cette étude, nous examinerons comment le discours masculin, et de la biographie et de l'image visuelle, tend à apprivoiser le phénomène de la femme forte qu'était Saint-Balmon.

THE SUBJECT OF THE PORTRAITS TO BE DISCUSSED IN this article, Alberte-Barbe d'Ermeccourt, known as Madame de Saint-Balmon, was a talented woman playwright and poet; one of the three plays attributed to her, *Les Jumeaux Martirs*, was published in Paris in 1650 and 1651.² She was born, lived and died in Neuville-en-Verdunois on the frontier between France and the independent duchy of Lorraine. Although of noble birth she never lived at court, preferring to manage the family estates inherited from her father. In so doing, she became a local heroine, known for brave military exploits undertaken to protect her people during the Thirty Years War. A lay member of the Franciscan order, she was a pious woman whose name was associated with the devotion of Notre-Dame de Benoîtevaux.

The fact that Saint-Balmon is virtually unknown today is all the more extraordinary because there exists so much information about her. We possess a long, detailed biography, entitled *l'Amazone chrétienne ou les aventures de Madame de S. Balmon*, published eighteen years after her death and based on accounts of people who had known her,³ in addition

to references to her in memoirs and other contemporary writings.⁴ We also have a number of portraits; two of these, by an important artist of the 17th century, Claude Deruet, bear a rich and anecdotal iconography in addition to her likeness.

The narration of a number of separate events on one canvas was a well-known practice in medieval art. The narrative mode continued to some extent into early modern times in two ideologically charged forms: the *ex-voto* which occasionally depicts two moments (that of the donor's devotion and that of the event being commemorated) and the battle scene, which places persons in such a way as to present a significant turning point in an important battle as well as the (chronologically subsequent) triumphant presence of the victor, usually portrayed in the foreground.⁵ Both portraits of Saint-Balmon perpetuate this earlier narrative tradition in two modes in which it was known to the 17th century. There is no question that such paintings were intended to be "read," the message being in both genres an ideological one. No element in such representations is innocent; all are charged with meaning, tied to representational



Claude Deruet, Madame de Saint-Balmont, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nancy.

conventions well-known to artist and “readers.” This paper will examine two portraits of Saint-Balmon with the intention of deciphering both the biographical story to be read in each case and the meaning to be attributed to any differences between the two.

Claude Deruet (or de Ruet), originally from Lorraine, studied with Tempesta in Rome prior to becoming an official court painter for Henri II, duc de Lorraine. A prolific artist, he completed more than 1,000 paintings, including secular and religious subjects, historical scenes, allegories and portraits; his works were commissioned by distinguished clients, including Anne of Austria, Louis XIII and Richelieu (Pariset, 1952, pp. 153-172 and 1956, pp. 97-114).

The “texts” that are the subjects of this biographical reading are two equestrian portraits of Saint-Balmon by Deruet executed during her lifetime and now in museums in Nancy.⁶ Corroborating testimony will be drawn from the biography by Jean-Marie Vernon, the royal privilege for which was obtained the week following the death of Saint-Balmon in 1660. After a brief consideration of the smaller portrait, dated by Pariset to around 1640 (Pariset, 1952, p. 161), we will turn to the larger portrait which we will discuss in detail.

Whereas the small portrait was probably intended – as such portraits frequently were – for a member of Saint-Balmon’s immediate family, the art historian H.

Stein states that the large portrait was painted for a noble friend and neighbour of Saint-Balmon, de Riocourt (Thieme 6: 101). Riocourt may well have been one of the friends of Saint-Balmon, mentioned by the biographer, who sent a large painting to Anne of Austria, “dans lequel l’Amazone était représentée au milieu de quelques-uns de ses combats” (Vernon, 1873, p. 72) and it is likely that this refers to the larger portrait which we are examining. The difference between these two ultimate recipients of the paintings is not, as shall be discussed later, without significance

and is reflected in differing emphases in each portrait.

In the smaller painting, 77 x 89 cm in dimensions, Saint-Balmon is on horseback, the horse rearing in a position chosen to display the rider’s control of her mount. She is dressed in male clothing with a sword at her side and carries a ceremonial lance. Above her and in the top left hand corner, surrounded by clouds, is a seated Minerva bearing the symbols of victory: the palm and laurel wreath. Immediately overhead, three Cupids bear emblems: a wreath of flowers, a laurel wreath and a book, on which is written:



Claude Deruet, Madame de Saint-Baslemont, Musée Historique Lorrain, Nancy. Photo: G. Mangin.

"musique/poésie." In the right top corner is a winged Fame, also surrounded by clouds, blowing on two trumpets adorned with heraldic banners depicting the arms of Saint-Balmon, and supported by two additional Cupids. Beneath the feet of the horse, in the foreground, is a grassy hillock with flowers and a small dog.

Behind the large figure, in a sweeping landscape dominated by two identifiable *châteaux* and a burning building, the artist has depicted, with the attention to realistic detail of an accomplished miniaturist, a myriad of human figures engaged in armed skirmishes, each suggestive of the triumphs of Saint-Balmon in battle.

The second, monumental portrait measures 3.65 m x 3.25 m; it is large by any standards and its size alone witnesses to the importance of the person being portrayed. While the general disposition of elements is similar, there are, as shall be shown, significant variations in the anecdotal elements represented. Once again, the equestrian figure of Saint-Balmon occupies the centre foreground; the background depicts some of the same buildings, though they are proportionately smaller, and the groupings of human figures are engaged in less obviously military activities. Beneath the figure of horse and rider, in the foreground, banners and armour are assembled in a trophy-like arrangement in place of the grassy hillock and little dog.

An obvious change is the figure in the top left corner where, in place of Minerva, there is now a representation of the Virgin and Child. This variant makes a statement regarding Saint-Balmon's piety by referring to that time when she housed in the chapel of her *château* at Neuville a statue of the Virgin and Child in order to save it from the ravages of war. After the statue was returned to its original chapel at Benoîtevaux, a great pilgrimage took place in 1642 in which the faithful came in great numbers to pay homage not only to the Virgin but to Saint-Balmon for her act of religious devotion. The statue and the long line of pilgrims walking to the chapel at Benoîtevaux appear only in the larger painting. In addition to the ideological statement made regarding

her devotional orthodoxy, it is this change in the composition of the painting highlighting Saint-Balmon's connection with Benoîtevaux which suggests that the smaller painting antedates the larger one.

Other non-martial incidents are depicted which do not appear in the smaller painting. For example, the arrival of a closed carriage signals a visit by an exalted personage of the court, as well as visually establishing Saint-Balmon's relationship to the French court. According to Vernon, many important people called on her, but perhaps the most noteworthy was the French governor at Verdun, M. de Feuquières, who was sent by Louis XIII to offer Saint-Balmon the command of a royal company of Cavalrymen and an Infantry.⁷

While most of the figures are men, women predominate in the grouping on the lower left of the painting. Here Saint-Balmon is depicted on foot, standing beside a group of women, who appear to be playing on musical instruments, reading or talking. This visual element is evocative of a salon of the period and is both a recognition of Saint-Balmon's considerable musical and literary accomplishments, and an affirmation of her more traditionally feminine qualities revealed in these activities.⁸

Because the human figures remain relatively small in this larger painting, more space is allotted to trees and woods and this, in turn, renders the landscape relatively darker, focusing attention more on the central figure. The background is lighter around Saint-Balmon, and the depiction of Fame, surrounded by slightly darker clouds, takes up proportionately less space; these factors bring the portrait of Saint-Balmon more into the foreground. There is a greater balance between Fame and the Virgin and Child than between Fame and Minerva and this also serves to frame Saint-Balmon.

The human figures in the background are less frequently depicted firing pistols and engaged in hostilities than in the smaller painting. Figures on horseback ride at a gallop or parade in ordered ranks; there is only one scene showing weapons drawn. This suggests that the artist has transferred much of the mili-

tary legend from realistic representation to symbolic depiction in the assembled banners and armour prominent at the bottom of the painting.

Close attention to the background reveals that Saint-Balmon figures at least 20 times in the narrative scenes in the same costume that she is wearing in the large portrait. In the detail she is recognizable by her red and white plumed black hat, white and gold scarf, red trousers, brown leather boots and, usually, her brown horse.

Apart from Saint-Balmon, two other figures recur in the small scenes. In at least eight of these, she is accompanied by another figure on a white horse wearing an embroidered red riding coat with a red and white plumed hat similar to Saint-Balmon's. Another equestrian follower is depicted at least four times, also on a white horse, but wearing more plebeian brown garb and a white sash. These are not the same person, as both are clearly shown in the grouping which occupies the bottom left-hand corner of the picture. One is tempted to identify the red-coated figure on the horse, a nobleman who clearly is represented as an associate of Saint-Balmon, as perhaps the commissioner of the portrait, de Riocourt, or as one of her brothers-in-law M. des Armoises or le chevalier d'Haracourt.

The second recurring figure, whose brown riding coat tells us that he is not of the nobility, is probably her ever-faithful domestic, Manheule, former captain among M. de Saint-Balmon's troops. Saint-Balmon and her husband had different political loyalties; he sided with the duc de Lorraine and the Empire; she remained faithful to the French crown. According to Saint-Balmon's biographer, Manheule chose to remain with his mistress and loyal to France; he is mentioned several times in the accounts of her military exploits as a kind of lieutenant. He rode with her cavalry which consisted of between ten and twenty-five "gentilhommes", any one of whom might have been the author of the "mémoires" of the twenty-five expeditions chronicled in detail between 1636 and 1643 upon which Vernon claims to have based his accounts.⁹ The hundreds of other figures tend not to be repeated and lack this clear differentiation.

Other identifiable topographical and geographical features are depicted in the some 34 distinct visual units which one can identify. Saint-Balmon's *château* at Neuville is depicted on the left; the centre building and the towers are today much as they appear here. The elegant *château* in the centre, about ten kilometers from Neuville, is that of Thillombois as it appeared in the 17th century. Three substantial villages, all with churches, are depicted, and one, Woinville, featuring a burning house, is represented on the right of the background. In addition, three farms are discernable. These buildings and groups of buildings are set in a hilly terrain which features woods, tree-lined ways, grazing pastures, hedged and cultivated fields, orchards and walled gardens. Domestic animals are evident: sheep, cattle, ducks or geese, as well as unsaddled horses.

The portrait is filled with anecdotal scenes, virtually all of which find their parallel narration in Vernon, whose text was, nevertheless, written independently. A number of the episodes depict Saint-Balmon and her followers chasing off would-be thieves of sheep and cattle. In one, Saint-Balmon, accompanied by her faithful, brown-suited follower, chases a group of mounted ruffians who are stealing sheep. The factual accuracy of the depiction is attested in Vernon's biography of Saint-Balmon, where we learn that in the spring of 1637 French soldiers, stealing sheep, were surprised by Saint-Balmon's speedy arrival and were forced to flee, abandoning the sheep (Vernon, 1873, p. 160). Another shows her, accompanied by persons on foot and on horseback, chasing a cavalry group from a herd of horses.

A scene to the right shows her accompanied by one other horseman on a white horse, galloping to the rescue of a group on foot who have been surrounded by cavalry. Vernon tells us that in May 1636 some of her followers were surrounded by the famous brigands known as "Cravates"; she rode through gunfire to rally her troops, and this manoeuvre resulted in the flight of the enemy.

Still another depicts her charging up a hill, with the red-coated follower, her cavalry and infantry, towards a group near a windmill. Vernon tells us that

Manheule was guarding cattle in September 1638 "auprès d'un moulin à vent" when he was attacked by forty men on horseback. Saint-Balmon's arrival sent the aggressors fleeing, leaving two of their number dead (Vernon, 1873, p. 188).

The incident on the right involving the burning building probably refers to a famous all night march along narrow, dangerous tracks through St. Mihiel to Woinville where Saint-Balmon attacked the "Cravates" at dawn. According to Saint-Balmon, who also wrote an account of this outing, it was not an unqualified success for she started from Neuville with 120 men, but half of them deserted under the cover of night. In Woinville, she divided her troops, some to attack from the front and some from the rear of the building. One of her troops disobeyed orders and fired on the man who came to the door, thereby alerting the enemy and reducing the benefits of the surprise attack.¹⁰ She and Manheule entered the building, but her other men became frightened by the gunfire and hand-to-hand combat and failed to follow. She and Manheule then set straw and the building on fire in an attempt to chase the enemy outside. In the end she took seven prisoners but many "Cravates" escaped, including the leader, LaRoche. She lost two men and she herself was wounded, sustaining a bullet wound in the throat and a sword wound in the hand. Ten of the enemy were killed, and Saint-Balmon captured twenty firearms, eighteen swords and a "quantité de bonnets fourrés" (Vernon, 1873, p. 199).

In another scene Saint-Balmon appears to be leading a company on foot away from the *château* in the upper right of the background, either following or in pursuit of a group on horseback. This episode may refer to the incident in July 1637 when Saint-Balmon and her followers came to the rescue of Sieur de Montalent, the French governor of Bar-le-Duc, and his troops. "De fait, elles eurent toute l'obligation de leur délivrance à la Cavalière d'Ernecourt, qui arriva fort heureusement pour les sauver" (Vernon, 1873, p. 163). Vernon reports that the defeated troops took revenge by killing several women in the parish of Neuville.

In an attempt to rid the countryside of "Cravates," Saint-Balmon sent among them one of her servants, Voerge, as a spy. The subterfuge was effective and in August 1638, Saint-Balmon captured several prisoners. Five others escaped, including their leader, "qui se sauva vers Saint-Hilaire, où l'Amazone le pour-suivit tellement, et d'un si grand courage, qu'il fut obligé de descendre de son cheval, afin d'entrer dans la forêt, où il se cacha" (Vernon, 1873, p. 175). In the lower right of the portrait, Saint-Balmon has come upon a lone dismounted figure who appears to be hiding in the woods; nearby are two other horses and riders, and the red-coated figure is leading a horse from the woods towards Saint-Balmon. This animal might be one of the three or four horses which were abandoned by the enemy in their flight.

One scene seems to show Saint-Balmon and a companion pursuing a group on horseback. This may refer to the party of "Cravates" who stole a large number of horses belonging to a farmer and insisted on a substantial ransom for their return. Saint-Balmon, in a strategic move, divided her troops, cut off the "Cravates" escape route with one unit and led the other in flushing the enemy out of the woods: "Elle sortit à cheval, et les pressa d'une telle furie, qu'ils ne purent avoir recours qu'à une fuite honteuse et précipitée" (Vernon, 1873, pp. 184-5). Of the seven prisoners she took, all were condemned for theft and murder; one was hanged in Verdun and the others were sent into the French army.

In August 1638, Saint-Balmon captured a Cravate leader, La Chasse, and took him to Bar-le-Duc where he was tried and hanged. The priest who was present at his death reported that La Chasse had claimed: "Une femme m'a fait la loi: je ne dois plus vivre après cet affront" (Vernon, 1873, p. 181).

In another scene Saint-Balmon gallops up a hill, with the same companions, to a position behind foot soldiers who are shooting at an infantry group wearing her colours. This could refer to an incident in June 1643 when 24 French *mousquetaires* from Verdun were attacked by 40 enemy soldiers between Neuville and Chaumont. Saint-Balmon and 10 or 12 followers

rode out to see what was going on, thus giving time for the Verdun infantry to hide in the "fossés qui sont proches du grand chemin" (Vernon, 1873, p. 228).

In other scenes, Saint-Balmon's martial prowess is shown as having been used in pious ways, in active, although not apparently conflictual, situations. She rides with her red-coated companion and cavalry towards a man who salutes her under a tree behind which a Franciscan monk, identifiable by his brown cassock and hood, prays on his knees. Saint-Balmon came upon Père Cordelier who had been robbed of his horse as she was en route to Commercy in March 1641. She tries to recover his horse "cependant le Cordelier priait Dieu à genoux, au pied d'un arbre, pour le bon succès des prétentions de sa libératrice" (Vernon, 1873, p. 214).

Both portraits thus depict a woman engaged in para-military activity in the area surrounding her home, in encounters with both individuals and groups. Much of the activity seems to involve Saint-Balmon, depicted as a leader, with a small group of faithful cavalry and, occasionally, infantry, in conflict with small cavalry groups who are frequently engaged in theft of livestock.

The message of the small portrait is clearly related to her military and patriotic renown, and presents Saint-Balmon in a role traditionally held by men. The message conveyed is unambiguous: the person depicted has put aside her female role for one which society did not normally allow. The reference of the anecdotal background figures is entirely to armed skirmishes. In this portrait, the artist, in selecting from the available biographical facts only elements which tell the story of the military leader, in portraying Saint-Balmon as the heroic, faithful protector of her territory, has effectively made an ideological statement which could not have been widely acceptable.

The large portrait, on the other hand, conveys a bivalent message which melds the traditional attributes of the male warrior and the piety, civilized non-violence and courtly behaviour believed to be natural

to noblewomen. Saint-Balmon is presented, on the one hand, as a military heroine: the trophy suggests victory in war, against a formal army, as represented by the armour and especially the banners or flags which are on the ground. On the other hand, the representation of the Virgin and Child, evoking a traditional *ex-voto*, links her and the exploits depicted to a religious theme and suggests her devotion to the Virgin who inspired and fostered the victories referred to. In the smaller portrait, the focus is on the central figure as a victorious warrior with background scenes, such as smoke from recently fired pistols and armed hostilities, reinforcing this univocal message. In the larger one, in the background scenes which include non-martial activities such as the pilgrimage and the outdoor "salon" scene, the focus has subtly shifted to feminine attributes, piety and courtliness, which intersect with courage in her person. All these reinforce the bivalent message of the larger painting.

While the large portrait of Saint-Balmon painted by Deruet, like the small one and like the Vernon biography, recounts "facts" of the life of the heroine which attest independently to her activities, the choice of detail of Deruet's larger painting reworks, in a striking way, the traditional portrait of the victorious general so as to tell a more ideologically correct story, one more in keeping with the expectations of society and just as consistent with the biographical "facts." The heroine is now portrayed in the more acceptable mode of non-aggression and benevolence: she is an instrument in the service of God and humankind. Where the smaller portrait, probably meant for a member of Saint-Balmon's family, could afford to represent her in what was a socially deviant manner, the wealthy patrons who commissioned the second portrait, possibly for the Queen of France, were evidently eager that Saint-Balmon be shown as a woman who could appropriate a male role without giving up more characteristically female behaviour. Our contrasting readings of these two "texts" underline graphically the importance of the attention which must be paid to the presence of ideological factors in the interpretation of any text, in any medium.

NOTES

1. The paper was written in collaboration with my colleague Hannah Fournier, University of Waterloo, and supported by the MARGOT project. I would also like to thank Jean-Philippe Beaulieu, University of Montreal, and the late G. Stephen Vickers, Professor Emeritus, University of Toronto, for their valuable contributions.
2. With my colleague Hannah Fournier, I am preparing an edition of this play for publication.
3. Published with only the initials identifying the author, L.P.I.M.D.V. (le père Jean-Marie de Vernon). It was republished in the 19th century, with introduction and notes by René Muffat. All references to the biography are to this edition.
4. Pierre Le Moyne opens his *Galerie des Femmes fortes* by asking Fame to give him "Quelque Femme de coeur, dont il se puisse faire./ Un modèle, au portrait [qu'il] ébauche en ces vers." Forty verses follow in which Le Moyne describes and praises "la noble et sage Saint-Balmon" speaking of her "grâce courageuse," her "crainte de Dieu," her freedom from the "filets que tend la Volupté" and stating that in her are combined "Muse guerriere et sçavante Bellonne./ Les arts de la Campagne aux arts du Cabinet" (Le Moyne, pages liminaires).
In her *Mémoires*, Catherine de La Guette reports that some soldiers said to her: "Vous passez, parmi nos troupes, pour la plus généreuse de toutes les femmes; il n'y a personne qui voulût vous faire insulte; et même dans l'armée de Lorraine, on vous appelle la Saint-Balmon de la Brie" (La Guette, p. 80).
5. For illustrations of the *ex-voto* in France at the same period, see Pariset, 1948, p. 115.
6. The smaller one was transferred in 1987 from the Musée Carnavalet to the Musée des Beaux Arts in Nancy. The much larger painting was purchased by the Musée historique lorrain in 1952 from the owners of the *château* d'Aulnoy, once the home of Madame de Saint-Balmon's daughter. A nineteenth-century copy of this large portrait hangs in the *château* de Thillombois, one of the *châteaux* depicted in the painting. The most commonly reproduced of the engravings of Saint-Balmon is based on Deruet's portrait and was made by B. Moncornet in 1645 for Claude Barbe d'Haracourt, Saint-Balmon's daughter.
7. "Le Sieur de Feuquières lui porta cette parole, dont elle remercia très-humblement Sa Majesté, se contentant de ses gens ordinaires. Plusieurs des plus hauts Officiers de nos armées, et autres seigneurs de marque, lui ont rendu visite, et ont contribué à la protection de sa terre et de sa personne" (Vernon, 1873, p. 149).
8. "Son adresse à bien jouer du Luth, à composer en musique, à faire de beaux vers, son inclination à la lecture des bons livres, s'accordaient en elle avec son inclination à la guerre" (Vernon, 1873, p. 145).
9. These "mémoires" have been used in 23 of 57 chapters of the Vernon text.
10. "Madame ayant défendu expressément à ses gens de tirer sur le premier qui ouvrirait la porte, un de ses Gentilshommes ne laissa pas de tirer d'un coup de pistolet un des Cravates, qui vint par la galerie pour sortir dehors" (Vernon, 1873, p. 194).

REFERENCES

- La Guette, Catherine Meudrac de. *Mémoires*. Paris: Henri Jonquières, 1929.
- Le Moyne, Pierre. *Galerie des femmes fortes*. Paris: A. de Sommerville, 1647.
- Pariset, François-Georges. "Claude Deruet." *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* S.4,39 (1952), 153-72.
- . *Georges de la Tour*. Paris: 1948.
- . "Les Amazones de Claude Deruet." *Le Pays Lorrain*, 37 (1956), 97-114.
- Thieme, Ulrich and Felix Becker, eds. *Allgemeines lexikon der bildenden künstler von der antike bis zur gegenwart*. 37 vols. Leipzig: W. Engelmann, 1907-50.
- V[emon], l[e] p[ère] J[ean]-M[arie] d[e]. *L'Amazone chrestienne ou les aventures de Madame de Saint-Balmon [...]*. Paris: Gaspar Metvras, 1678.
- . *L'Amazone chrétienne ou les aventures de Madame de Saint-Balmon*. Ed. René Muffat. Paris: E. de Soye, 1873.