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Nathalie Freidel, *Le Temps des "écrivaines": L'œuvre pionnière des épistolaires au XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2022. 290 pp. Footnotes, figures, bibliography, and index. €25.00. (pb). ISBN 9-78-2406128236.

Review by Theresa Varney Kennedy, Baylor University.

As Dena Goodman argued, the growing number of women engaged in letter-writing in early modern France were achieving “moments and degrees of autonomy” (p. 1) and developing a “consciousness of themselves as gendered subjects in the modern world” (p. 4). But despite their enormous contribution to the epistolary practice and the recognition which they drew, seventeenth-century *écrivaines* did not see themselves as authors. *Le Temps des "écrivaines"* convincingly argues that the *écrivaines*' contribution to the epistolary genre needs to be reassessed: by appropriating and adapting the writing tool, by building vast networks of communication which, in certain cases, propelled them to the forefront of the cultural and artistic scene, women letter-writers were actively preparing the way for future French women authors. The epistolary practice that these women writers engaged in enabled them to improvise and expand upon skills that colleges instilled in their male pupils—skills that would also allow future women writers to eventually seize author status.

Nathalie Freidel's fresh approach to her study on the *écrivaines* opposes traditional studies on epistolary writing that tend to emphasize male scholarly networks. In her introduction, Freidel identifies three important networks of *écrivaines* in the seventeenth century: the dynasty of letter writers formed by five successive generations of women originating from the House of Orange-Nassau beginning with Louise of Coligny, Princess of Orange-Nassau (1555-1620); the vast epistolary web woven by the great social figures of salon society and the correspondence of brilliant Parisian *salonnières*; and the many sub-groups of letter writers overshadowed by the imposing work of Mme de Sévigné. Freidel argues that these networks enabled women-letter writers to mobilize and bypass male traditions, affirming the woman's ability to excel in the epistolary genre.

*Le Temps des "écrivaines"* is organized into two parts: “Et pourtant, elles écrivent” and “Femmes en réseaux.” In the first chapter of part one, “Des femmes privées d'instruction,” Freidel gives some background on seventeenth-century women's education and how society viewed women's capacity to write. We all remember the scene in the third act of Molière's *L'École des femmes* where Arnolphe has Agnès read the *Maxims of Marriage* in which the seventh maxim forbids an honorable woman from having access to a desk, ink, paper, or pens. For Freidel, Arnolphe (the object of satire in Molière's play) embodies the age-old debate that dominated the early modern

period: should we keep women in ignorance and subjugate them, or do we grant them the right to written expression and the means to exercise it. Despite the fact that some writers and moralists acknowledged a need for improvement in women's education, it still lagged in the seventeenth century. For instance, François Fénelon, author of *Traité de l'éducation des filles* (1687), took exception to what he perceived as a passive approach that did not prepare young upper-class women for the real world. As Anne E. Duggan argues, the traditional watered-down approach towards education for women in the upper classes undoubtedly had been linked to the restructuring of the State; the subjugation of women (limiting their education, their rights to vote or to own property, or controlling marital conditions) helped to ensure the preservation of the elite professional and administrative classes, mainly the high bourgeoisie and the nobility.[1] A young woman of marriageable age often passed directly from her father's house to her husband's house without completing her studies. The subsequent chapters in *Le Temps des "écrivaines"* show how women writers had to find a way to navigate the gaps in their formal education.

In the second chapter of part one, "La leçon des autographes ou la main des épistoliers," Freidel provides some fascinating samples comparing male and female handwriting that date from the seventeenth century. Without drawing on abusive generalizations about women's inexperience in writing, Freidel's striking figures show how spelling, formatting, and writing style can be differentiated according to gender. Men's writing tended to be more polished, ornate, and personalized. On the other hand, women's writing tended to be less formatted and more functional. The author concludes that while male writers exuded confidence due to a higher level of education and skill acquired through the repetition of scholarly exercises, women writers either imitated other models or found creative ways of adapting formal writing protocols to suit their own tastes.

In the section on *usages orthographiques*, Freidel successfully debunks the idea that women were poor spellers. The consensus concerning women's poor spelling in the seventeenth century was clearly a misogynistic and critical response revealing a more complex truth. Freidel arrives at the fascinating conclusion that the inconsistencies in spelling from one writer to the next demonstrate less of a lack of linguistic skill among women than a particularly chaotic moment in the history of spelling. Women writers were simply imitating and recycling the inconsistencies that they saw in others' writing.

The brief but illuminating subsection on the signature explores the various ways in which women approached the choice of signature. Women were able to play on multiple versions of their name using the name of their father rather than their spouse, adding or deleting titles, and by personalizing their first name with an initial. These are some of the many ways women writers could begin to claim author status.

The final chapter in part one "Un genre qui n'en finit pas d'échapper aux femmes" addresses the fact that the difficulties women letter-writers encountered were not just due to the material conditions of writing and lack of formal education. They were also constrained because letter-writing was a theoretical art dating back to Antiquity. Stemming from a humanist cultural and rhetorical tradition, the epistolary genre in the seventeenth century excluded many women writers. Women writers who dared to write and engage in the epistolary genre needed to feel authorized by women predecessors. Just as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the female artist must begin by "seeking a female precursor" who "proves

by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible.”[2] For instance, when Mlle de Montpellier undertook to write her *Mémoires*, she drew inspiration from the work of Marguerite de Valois. Others, such as Madeleine de Scudéry and her entourage, managed to navigate this strong rhetorical tradition by promoting a more “natural eloquence” that opposed savant eloquence by way of other forms, such as the conversation (p. 100). By reversing the agreed order and revising the traditional epistolary recipe, writers such as Madeleine de Scudéry invited her contemporaries to rise above their lack of formal training in rhetorical knowledge to take up the pen and appropriate a genre (i.e., conversations) where their talent could shine through.

The second part of this study entitled “Femmes en réseaux” focuses on the female networks of letter-writers in seventeenth-century France. The first chapter in part two, “une dynastie d’épistolières,” is a fascinating exploration of the life and epistolary contributions of Louise de Coligny, Princess of Orange (1555-1620), and her descendants. Even though she was one of the first and most famous epistolary writers, Louise de Coligny is not well known to all seventeenth-century scholars. I enjoyed learning more about her. She managed to maintain ties with her Protestant family despite the large number of members, the geographical distance, and religious differences. She was a *femme forte*, whose entire existence was marked by her family’s struggle to defend its religion. She herself survived the Saint-Barthélémy massacre where her father and her husband were assassinated. She was incredibly prolific with her correspondence, representing several hundred letters composed between 1573 and 1620. Freidel’s striking analysis of Louise de Coligny’s correspondence highlights the princess’s mastery of rhetoric and diplomacy in communicating with the most powerful members of her distinguished family—many of whom were on opposing sides of the religious war.

The second chapter in part two, “Réseaux de sociabilité et rayonnement féminin” focuses on letter writers who emerged from the salon. Just as Linda Timmermans attests in *L’accès des femmes à la culture*, as long as letter-writing remained a simple pastime for women, the professional male writers did not feel too alarmed: “l’absence supposée de prétention littéraire faisait de la lettre un genre, non seulement acceptable, mais même tout à fait convenable aux femmes.”[4] But as soon as more serious writers appeared on the scene (Mme de Sablé, Mme des Loges, Mme de Rambouillet, Madeleine de Scudéry, just to name a few discussed in this chapter), the male professional writers suddenly became interested in their epistolary writing, and even surprised by their female counterparts’ talents. Freidel argues that this change in perception of women writers coincides with a kind of social mobility that women gained by way of their association with the salon. The salon offered these women letter-writers an alternative environment in which they could thrive as writers—and eventually as authors.

The last chapter in part two entitled “Satellites Sévignéens” focuses on Mme de Sévigné’s immense network of letter-writers. Freidel argues that the extent of her social network, the people with whom she associated, and the social circles to which she had access went far beyond that of Mme de Sablé and other *salonnières*. Mme de Sévigné didn’t need to hold a salon. She went everywhere and corresponded with all the well-known seventeenth-century figures. She and her many associates exchanged, borrowed, and imitated each other’s epistolary rhetoric until they had finally created a writing practice that would earn them the same respect as their male contemporaries. Freidel shows how the many exchanges that Mme de Sévigné had with well-traveled and well-connected individuals “se poursuit ensuite dans les lettres qui font entendre les voix des unes et des autres,” creating the polyphony that so characterized her writing style (p.

217). Freidel's thorough analyses of Mme de Sévigné's letters show how she and her entourage engaged in non-traditional topics that went beyond news about family, friends, and society. Mme de Sévigné did not hesitate to give her opinions on politics or religion. As such, she utterly upended the traditional role of women's writing by approaching an intellectual area traditionally marked as masculine. At the end of this chapter, Freidel makes the all-important point that the *écrivaines'* success (in part) was due to their ability to write and engage with male contemporaries. Freidel notes that in choosing to engage with male writers, writers such as Mme de Sévigné may have risked criticism, but they also gave themselves the opportunity to prove that they could write on the same level as their male contemporaries—and that they were just as capable.

*Le Temps des "écrivaines"* is a delightful and informative read. It is brilliantly laid out, well-researched, and eloquently written. The footnotes are thorough, and the figures and examples are enlightening. This book is a must-read for any student or scholar working in the combined fields of French literature and women's and gender studies. Freidel's study attests to the many obstacles that French women writers have had to overcome to claim authorship in the male-dominated world of letters in France.

#### NOTES

[1] Anne E. Duggan, *Salonnières, Furies, and Fairies: The Politics of gender and cultural change in Absolutist France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), p.34.

[2] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, second edition (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 49.

[3] Dena Goodman, *Becoming a woman in the Age of Letters* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009).

[4] Linda Timmermans, *L'accès des femmes à la culture sous l'ancien Régime* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008), p. 192.

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