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Introduction: The Woman in the Mirror

THE PROBLEMATICS OF SELFHOOD

At the end of the sixteenth century, Marguerite de Valois wrote to her friend Brantôme that she did not recognize herself in the flattering portrait he had drawn of her in his *Dames illustres*.¹ It made her feel, she said, like a woman whose mirrors had been covered for so long after her husband's death that when she accidentally caught sight of herself in someone else's mirror, she did not know who she was. By insisting on the difference between how she saw herself and how she was portrayed in Brantôme's essay, Valois's letter goes to the heart of the autobiographical act.² It also marks a turning point in the history of women's writing—the moment when a woman explicitly rejected a man's representation of her and insisted on representing herself. The letter to Brantôme was accompanied by her memoirs, the first autobiography by a woman in the French language.³

Prior to this, literary images of women had been drawn for the most part by men, who wrote about them as they believed, or wanted, or feared them to be. They described them as virtuous and good, like the Virgin Mary, or wicked and evil, like Eve. Sometimes they represented them with sexual appetites and an unlimited talent for leading men astray; at other times they placed them on a pedestal as chaste goddesses who should be worshiped on bended knee. These contradictory views of the feminine other inspired the “quarrel about women,” the literary debate about the nature of women that began in the Middle Ages and continued into the seventeenth century, with each side cataloguing the virtues or vices of women to support their contentions.⁴ Although Caroline Bynum believes that medieval women did not necessarily internalize these literary representations of women, but saw themselves first and foremost as *human* beings created in God's image (1987, 296), the fact remains that until the sixteenth century few secular French women actually wrote about the feminine experience from their own perspective.

What is more, the antiwoman faction maligned women so viciously that when they did write about the female experience, they were forced to expend most of their energy refuting their vilifiers. Thus Christine de Pizan's "Epistre au dieu d'Amours" (1399) is a reply to Jean de Meung's attacks in the *Roman de la rose*; and Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron* counters the fictions perpetrated by the misogynist fabliaux and novellas.

There had, of course, been French women writers up to this point. In the twelfth century, there was Marie de France, although nothing is known about her beyond her signature. And at the end of the fourteenth century, there was Christine de Pizan, a learned widow who lived by her pen and produced an impressive oeuvre. The sixteenth century saw a dramatic rise in female authorship: in addition to Marguerite de Navarre, there were Jeanne Flore, Hélienne de Crenne, Louise Labé, Pernelle du Guillet, and the dames des Roches, to name only the most prominent. There is little evidence, however, that their writings had any serious impact on traditional literary representations of women, or on the way women viewed themselves. Certainly it had occurred to none of them to write a book devoted solely to the story of her life.

Given the pervasiveness of masculine representations of women, how did women view themselves when they began to write self-narratives? According to Nussbaum, they inevitably mimicked male definitions of themselves: "[T]heir self-fashionings were bound up in cultural definitions of gender," she writes, "those assumed, prescribed, and embedded in their consciousness" (1988, 154). That being the case, how did they free their self-reflections from the masculine gaze that had heretofore defined, validated, and reified them? How did they answer the question, "Who am I?"

Twenty-five years ago, the answer to these questions would have been relatively simple. In those days, the recovery of women's literary history seemed a very straightforward project. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, it is not at all clear how to approach the self-narratives of women who lived in a time, place, and class so different from ours. My title itself reflects theoretical concerns that were largely ignored a generation ago. The very concept of "selfhood" is more and more problematic, largely because of the influence of postmodern thinkers like Lacan and Foucault, who reject a metaphysics of substance and hold that the self is an illusion produced by discourse.⁵ Lacan defines the self as a fictitious image, like what is seen in a looking glass. Foucault argues that it is an illusion constituted by the dominant discourses of a particular time and place: "Self is a reflexive pronoun . . . but it also conveys the notion of identity. The latter meaning shifts the question from 'What is this self?' to 'What is the plateau on which I shall find my identity?'" (1988, 25). Coherence and

continuity are no longer seen to inhere in personhood, but rather, as Butler puts it, in “socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (1990, 17). Created through language, the self is defined as subjectivity. It comes into being by use of the first-person pronoun, which shifts from speaker to speaker, but *has no reality of its own*.⁶

Such ways of thinking about selfhood make the discussion of self-representation in seventeenth-century France far more vexed than it would once have been. Who or what is being represented in these texts? What kind of identity is constructed in them? The “modern” concept of self, it has been argued, did not come into being until the Enlightenment, when it was born from the revolutionary politics of individualism, defined by Irving Howe as “A claim for space, voice, identity. A claim that man is not the property of kings, lords, or states. A claim for the privilege of opinion, the freedom to refuse definitions imposed from without” (1992, 253). Prior to the eighteenth century, or at least until Descartes, it is said, the individualized sense of self that claimed the right to self-determination did not exist. In that time identification with family or lineage, and the duties implied in that identification, nullified all sense of personal identity or the rights implied in such a concept. In other words, one had no sense of oneself as separate from the group into which one had been born.

I am not entirely convinced, however, that this was as true for early modern women as it supposedly was for their masculine counterparts. For one thing, as I have pondered Howe’s androcentric rhetoric, I have discerned in it an unintentional description of the very texts I am studying here. All of these writers seem to be claiming “space, voice, identity” as well as “the privilege of opinion, the freedom to refuse definitions imposed from without.” Indeed, it seems to me that they are profoundly involved with the *politics* of self. And this is significant, because in Howe’s essay, he, like many others, links such political claims to the creation of a “new,” “modern” way of representing the self that is now called “autobiography.”⁷

I believe that for the writers discussed here, gender, and more precisely femininity, created tensions between the individual and the social structures that moved them in the direction of the “modern” self and “real” autobiography. As I read these texts in which the struggle for identity was played out within the private spaces of feminine lives, it seems to me that an acute awareness of victimization both explains and individualizes them; and that in giving voice to that awareness, these writers took an important step toward the discourse of “selfhood.” And this was so precisely because their claims were not directed against a political entity (the state), but against the very structure from which early modern man supposedly derived his identity (the patriarchal family).

In order to show more specifically why I believe this was so, I want to review briefly how identity was constructed under the ancien régime. For the male aristocrat, puberty conferred the right to enter into the adult world of war and politics and to fulfill the responsibilities to which he had been born. Courtship and marriage were often footnotes to the public life of a *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 her husband's status. In the rare cases in which a woman exercised direct political power, she did so on the basis of marital or maternal status, not on the basis of her own rank or abilities. Marriage, which marked women with a new name and title, cut them off from what they had been before. For women of intelligence and ambition, this led to what we would call today a crisis of identity. Recognizing their lack of political power and their alienation from the public arena, noblewomen had to come to terms with who they were and why. The sense of self emerges in their texts in their awareness of the gap between the person they wanted to be and the prescribed role imposed on them by their gender.

* * *

The problematization of the self is only one hurdle in coming to terms with the implications of postmodern theory for this study. Although it has been half a century since Simone de Beauvoir penned the words "One is not born a woman; one becomes one," in this decade her feminist axiom has been pushed to its logical extreme. Rejecting the age-old assumption that women are necessarily defined as those born with female genitalia, many now maintain that it is not biology but social, psychological, and cultural conditioning that determines gendered behavior; and some even go so far as to question whether it is possible to speak of women as a category, or of a female self. These perceptions intersect with the increased visibility of cross-dressing and transsexualism, which have demonstrated how the boundaries that separate men from women can be blurred, and have suggested that "women" can be created at will by men who have learned to be *feminine*, according to whatever that may entail in a specific context.

As a consequence, the once commonly accepted notion that there are two genders, determined by two biological sexes, has been seriously eroded. What gender is a male who considers himself/herself to be a woman, or a female who considers herself/himself to be a man? The word *female* has been increasingly restricted to the biological components of a woman's

body; and surgical and hormonal procedures have left even that usage open to question. The word *feminine* on the other hand has been stretched to connote not just certain stereotypical traits (frivolousness, narcissism, passivity, nurturance, etc.) but all the outward and visible signs that make a woman seem a woman in the eyes of her society. The theoretical implications of pursuing the constructivist theory of gender to its logical limits are far-reaching. Agreeing with Foucault that the concept of sexuality is in fact a socially-imposed "technology," De Lauretis asserts that gender "is not so bound up with sexual difference" as it is with a "technology of sex" (1987, 2). This concept, she maintains, suggests a way of viewing gender both as representation and self-representation: "the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life" (2). Butler, one of the most widely discussed constructivists, claims that when gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, it becomes necessary to admit that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body, and *woman* and *feminine* a male one (1990, 6).⁸ Queer theory has gone even further, contending that sexuality is as important as gender in determining identity.⁹

The de-essentialization of womanhood has also had political ramifications. Theorists like Denise Riley have insisted that since femininity is determined by culture rather than by birth, women cannot be lumped together in a single, unified, and universal category, independent of race, class, ethnicity, sexual preference, and historical moment. As a result, feminism's original assumption that women are united by patriarchal oppression is now open to question.¹⁰ Attention has been focused on differences between women, rather than on the differences between women and men. Women are no longer identified as "women," but categorized in terms of the positions they occupy in the social spectrum; and a far greater priority has been placed on studying women of color, ethnic minorities, working-class and third-world women, and lesbians.

These changes in the way feminists theorize about women have had important effects on this study. The most conspicuous is my decision to include the memoirs of a man who misrepresented himself as a woman by cross-dressing. But there are many others. For instance, I use the words "woman" and "women," to designate those who think of themselves and are thought of by others as women. I use the word "feminine" to refer to their gender, by which I mean the learned behavior, seeming evidence of secondary sex characteristics, and dress codes used to assign gender to women. The word "female" refers to inborn biological characteristics, as opposed to gender signifiers that can be constructed. I have also tried to

avoid generalizing about “woman” or “women.” I regard gender and sexuality in these texts as historically constructed both by the ideology of the time and place *and* by the writers themselves, to the extent that by the act of self-representation they resist and subvert received ideas.

In addition, I have looked carefully at the significance of class in these texts. Dewald states that the nobility constituted about 1 percent of the total French population and that “the wealthiest and most articulate nobles, those most closely attached to Paris and the royal court, those most intent on giving written form to their experiences and concerns” represented an even smaller percentage (1993, 1). This fact is often mentioned in passing, but it is seldom pursued. To leave the matter there, however, says both too much and too little about the issue of class. On one hand, it draws attention to the fact that women writers benefited from class privilege in the ancien régime, but, on the other, it overlooks the fact that their male counterparts were just as privileged and had to overcome far fewer obstacles than they. What needs to be done, therefore, is to explore the intersections of class and gender in these early noblewomen’s texts.

TEXT AND CONTEXT

Class is more than a sign of privilege. It is the key to specific and particular constructions of femininity. In some ways, the very concept of gender was reserved to the upper classes under the ancien régime. The attributes of femininity were conflated with the idea of being “ladylike,” thus making gender identity an indicator of social status. This is demonstrated dramatically by the fact that chambermen often helped French ladies with their toilettes, showing that from the aristocratic point of view, a servant did not have to be taken seriously as a man.¹¹

What is more, gender ideology for upper-class French women was to all intents and purposes a form of racism. In the twentieth century, race is associated with color and geographical origin, but in the seventeenth century it denoted “blood.”¹² The social dominance of the great families was supported by the belief that merit was not acquired by conditioning or education but transmitted at birth, via the family bloodline. This meant that the inferior status of the lower classes was genetically predetermined and, as Ronzeaud points out, ruled out any possibility of improving on one’s birth through education or personal experience (1988, 356). The aristocratic order rested on property and political rights passed down from father to son. “Nobles could view their behavior and their political powers as reflections of the world’s natural order,” writes Dewald; “they could view individual

qualities and choices as reflections of the family's qualities and needs. To see links between the biological and the social inspired intellectual and moral assurance" (1993, 2).

Wealth and power, as well as the moral and intellectual self-assurance of the upper classes, were transmitted through the male line. The quintessence of this concept was the Salic law, which at the end of the sixteenth century had placed the Bourbon dynasty on the throne and disinherited Marguerite, the last of the Valois. Under its tenets, women were reduced to passive transmitters of royal blood, which they legitimated by their chastity. In addition, according to Schalk, in the seventeenth century nobility became even more closely linked to birth than it had been in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, when it had been validated to some extent by military prowess. Schalk suggests that the absolute monarchy encouraged this emphasis on heredity because it helped to maintain order over unruly noblemen who resorted too frequently to the sword.¹³

It follows that women's autonomy diminished as they became pawns in the battle to retain rank or gain ascendancy. And those women who resisted being used as objects of exchange would have been viewed as a threat to the system. In 1556, Henri II had issued an edict making it illegal to contract a marriage without parental consent. From then on, the legal position of women, and especially their right to choose a mate, had declined.¹⁴ According to Collins, this decline was a direct response to "the threat women posed to the existing patriarchal economic and social systems" (1989, 467); and, he adds, the mercantile bourgeoisie and the masculine nobility were united in the effort to assure "continued male dominance of public society by using the state to restrict women's legal rights" (470).

In other words, the texts studied here were *produced* within in a milieu whose ideology of gender was not only class-specific but inextricably linked to an economy that used women to obtain money or social position. If they were allowed to enjoy some of the benefits of their noble status, they were nonetheless a means to an end for those in power. In some ways, consequently, they had less autonomy than women of the lower and lower-middle classes, who often worked or engaged in trade and achieved thereby a certain amount of economic independence. Of course, working women also encountered hostility and prejudice in the exercise of their functions, especially if they stepped out of traditional roles; and then as now, they earned far less than did their male counterparts (Gibson 1989, 112–13).¹⁵ Nevertheless, because of the upper class's obsession with birth and blood, the lives of these women were controlled to an extraordinary degree by patriarchal power. This power is in evidence throughout these self-narratives, so much so that without understanding the laws and customs under which

they lived, one cannot fully comprehend the significance of certain episodes.

The rules and rituals of female conduct were enforced by the paterfamilias. Legally a girl could not be married before the age of twelve, but contracts were often signed earlier, the two spouses being separated until the wife reached puberty. Richelieu's niece was married at thirteen to the Grand Condé, and was made to wear wobbly high heels so that she would appear taller at the ceremony. Hortense Mancini was fifteen when her uncle, Cardinal Mazarin, awarded her and his fortune to the man who later wanted to pull his daughters' teeth to safeguard their chastity. Sometimes children were affianced at birth. Nor was it rare to celebrate marriages in which the bride and groom barely knew each other. Guyon's father made her sign her marriage contract without telling her what it was. At forty-four Perrault married a girl of eighteen after a single interview. A Mademoiselle de Mayrian, aged fifteen, met her fiancé for the first time while still in a convent school—three days before their marriage (Piettre 1974, 227).

Fathers and husbands had legal control of wives' and children's property, and could enjoy the revenue it produced. This right could be forfeited only in cases of profligacy, when a wife could sue for separation of goods, but not for civil divorce. Women could not go to court without their husband's permission, except in cases of marital cruelty. The law permitted men to discipline wives and children either by physical punishment or by consigning them to correctional institutions. Unmarried women were considered minors until they were twenty-five, and then they remained under the tutelage of their closest male relative. Even rich heiresses could not claim autonomy or control their destinies. Only widows enjoyed any real freedom from masculine control, for they were their children's guardians and could dispose of their husband's property as they saw fit.¹⁶ The patriarchal-monarchical structures controlling women were supported by church and state, kinship systems, and communal units, all of which exerted moral and social pressure to reinforce women's compliance. "When we are born, we are not only slaves of our parents, who dispose of us as they see fit," bemoans Tullie in Scudéry's *Clélie*, "but we are [slaves] of custom and propriety, because as soon as we are capable of reasoning and discernment, we are told that we must submit ourselves to convention."¹⁷

Ideology and discourse caused women to internalize attitudes towards femininity that were essential to the racist and classist concerns of the French upper classes. One of these was the doctrine of the "good woman"—the chaste, obedient, long-suffering wife. Women's "virtue" was evaluated almost entirely on the basis of sexual conduct. This meant that unlike men, who were praised for glorious words and deeds, women were judged on

what they did not do. As Hortense Mancini put it in her memoirs, “a woman’s honor lies in not getting herself talked about” (1965, 32). And by the same token, women were nearly always discredited on the basis of licentious behavior, real or supposed. The result was that silence reigned about many aspects of women’s lives, either in the belief that they held little worthy of writing about, or that if they were noteworthy, it was for the wrong reasons, and the less said about it, the better.

The doctrine of the “good woman” relied to a large extent on literary representations. Virtuous women like Lucretia and Griselda were held up to women as examples, and women were taught to shudder at the names of those who strayed from the straight and narrow. Gournay’s early novel *Le Proumenoir* dramatizes how women were taught to fear that the story of their misconduct would be repeated to generations of dutiful daughters: “Shall it be said,” cries the contrite heroine who has eloped with her lover, “that forevermore mothers will use my horrible example to instruct their daughters to avoid evil?”¹⁸

Producing texts that placed themselves at the center of their own narrative was a radical gesture for women who had been taught to remain silent and avoid getting themselves talked about. Furthermore, it must be understood that the very act of writing a work of any magnitude posed practical problems for them. None of these women writers had received much formal education. By the end of the sixteenth century, noblemen’s sons were attending Jesuit *collèges*, which made them, as Brockliss says, “heirs to the intellectual achievements of two thousand years of European history” (1987, 7). Choisy, despite his predilection for wearing feminine garb, attended both a prestigious *collège* and, as a future priest, the university. Bussy-Rabutin writes that he was enrolled in the Jesuit school in Autun at nine, and then in the celebrated Collège de Clermont after the family moved to Paris. “At twelve I was such a good humanist,” he brags, “that when I was thirteen, I was judged strong enough to proceed directly to philosophy, without doing rhetoric” (1857, 5–6). While the minds of upper-class men were being formed on classical lines, upper-class women were prevented, solely on the basis of their gender, from receiving more than the rudiments of book learning. “One may say what one will of the great books of the world,” Madeleine de Scudéry wrote to Bussy-Rabutin, “one must have seen other [books] to profit from it, and I regret every day that I was taught nothing.”¹⁹ Few were as fortunate as Madame de Sévigné and Madame de Lafayette, who were instructed by Ménage, or the future Madame de Maintenon, who was tutored by the chevalier de Méré. More often, women who pursued cultural and intellectual improvement did so on their own initiative and had to overcome many obstacles. Marie de Gournay learned

Greek and Latin by comparing texts in the original with French translations. Valois and Montpensier turned to books during periods of exile and imprisonment, having read almost nothing until then.

Young ladies were either kept at home with their mothers or enrolled for brief periods in convent schools. What they learned there was designed primarily to preserve them from idleness and temptation. The first priority was to acquaint them with church doctrine and to instill in them moral virtues.²⁰ The rest of the curriculum was devoted to genteel accomplishments like music and handiwork. There was no effort to train their minds; and the study of literary works was banned (C. Dulong 1969, 23). The general consensus was that women had no intellectual aptitude anyway, and should not be taught subjects for which they had no use.²¹ There was also concern that the study of history and literature might lead young women astray by exposing them to immoral examples. Throughout the century, education for women was linked to sexual misconduct, and the prowoman faction was forced to counter this prejudice by arguing that it was ignorance and not learning that made women susceptible to vice. As Gournay remarked tartly, "The common man says that in order to be chaste a women should not be clever. . . . But on the contrary, she should become as cunning as possible so that if every man is wicked enough to want to deceive her, no man will be clever enough to do so" (1985, 41 r^o and v^o).²² "Lacking an appropriate institutional and professional position," writes Moriarity, "those women who did become learned inevitably appeared as marginal: as prodigies or freaks, depending on one's point of view" (1988, 39). Even if most men did not share Arnolphe's conviction in Molière's *L'Ecole des femmes* that educated women were more likely to cuckold their husbands, learning was generally perceived as unfeminine. Madame de Maintenon instructed the teachers at Saint-Cyr, the school she founded for poor gentlewomen, that they should avoid inculcating too precise notions of spelling, lest their pupils appear pedantic (Gibson 1989, 273 n. 141).

As a result, many women never learned to spell correctly or write legibly. Mademoiselle de Montpensier's handwriting was so atrocious and her orthography so inaccurate that her father forbade her to send him letters in her own hand. Saint-Evremond was often obliged to assist Hortense Mancini with her correspondence, due to her shaky knowledge of grammar and spelling, for which he gallantly excused her on the ground that such things were beneath her dignity (1927, 2:227). This inability to write correctly had a considerable effect on the production of women's memoirs, for their manuscripts often had to be recopied or even written out for them by men, who did not hesitate to alter the style or even the content of their texts as they saw fit.

Nor were women writers taken seriously in the literary world. Although Marie de Gournay presided in her home over linguistic discussions that would later be pursued by the Académie Française, she was not made a member when Richelieu officially established that august body in 1634. Ironically, the transvestite abbé de Choisy was elected to the Académie in 1687 and became its secretary.

SIGNS OF RESISTANCE

Beneath the seemingly secure hegemony of patriarchal/aristocratic values lay cultural tensions and anxieties, however. The so-called classical age was not a time of monolithic stability but a transitional period during which the old orders were being challenged and replaced.²³ Social historians have pointed out that the growth of capitalism and the rise of industry placed considerable stress on the class structure. "The process by which the forming bourgeoisie developed a new mode of production and a new ideological mode from the old is what characterizes social relations in France at this time," writes Harth (1983, 22). And Dewald argues that these economic changes produced splits not merely between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie but between those French nobles who "participated enthusiastically in many of the most innovative currents in early modern culture" and those who supported "the confident ideology of dynastic continuity" (1993, 2). What has *not* always been acknowledged, however, is the extent to which changing attitudes toward women's place in society were also a cause of social unrest.

In a hierarchical society structured by lineage, the female was a threat to the established order because of her biological capacity to pass the father's name along to illegitimate offspring. As a consequence, the absolute monarchy was under considerable pressure to impose order and unity through the containment of the feminine. Greenberg calls attention to the fact that both Richelieu and Louis XIV warned "of the troublesome, chaotic consequences of allowing women any influence in the politics of the realm" (1992, 5). Particularly telling is this passage from the memoirs of Louis XIV, who wrote to instruct his son in the duties of kingship:

No sooner do you give a woman freedom to speak on important matters, than it is impossible that she will not cause us to weaken. The tenderness we have for them, which makes us appreciate their worst reasons, causes us to fall insensibly into their way of thinking; and their natural weakness, which often causes them to prefer frivolous interests over more solid considerations, nearly always makes them choose the wrong side. (1978, 259)

This warning was not just an expression of the king's subconscious fears, for he knew all too well of what he spoke. The women of his entourage were not given to holding their tongues; and the intervention he feared was not imaginary. He had been surrounded from childhood by strong-minded women who insisted on speaking their minds: his mother, Anne d'Autriche; his sweetheart, Marie Mancini; his mistress, Madame de Montespan; hismorganatic wife, Madame de Maintenon; and last but not least, his sharp-tongued cousin, La Grande Mademoiselle, who had turned the cannons of the Bastille on his troops.

As Lévi-Strauss so astutely admitted, even in a man's world a woman is still a person, and therefore a generator of signs (1969, 496). Under the Bourbon kings, women's place in upper-class society was highly contested, and women frequently and vociferously challenged the ideology that enforced their inferior status. Women's writings, of which these self-narratives constitute an important part, were among the most important signs of resistance to the laws and customs reviewed above. As Joan Kelly argued, "feminism" can be traced back at least to the fourteenth-century, when Christine de Pizan imagined a city-state organized and run by women (1984, 5). In the sixteenth century, Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron* attacked the double standard of sexual conduct that conflated honor with chastity for women, but not for men. By the end of the Renaissance, women's dissident voices were no longer isolated phenomena. They formed a chorus.

Women were becoming more and more aware of themselves *as women*. If, as Bynum argues, medieval women saw themselves first and foremost as members of humanity as it was incarnated by Christ, by the seventeenth century this was no longer the case. They were beginning to view traditional attitudes toward women with impatience. In her 1595 preface to Montaigne's *Essais*, Gournay describes the mocking smiles, jokes, and shrugs that greeted women when they attempted to offer an opinion on a serious subject: "Happy are you, Reader," she exclaims, "if you do not belong to a sex to which is denied all goods . . . in order to offer it, as sole virtue and blessing, the right to be ignorant and to suffer" (1989, 27).²⁴ Valois reacted in the same vein to a derogatory essay by Loryot: "I cannot tolerate the scorn you display for my sex, wanting it to be honored by mankind for its infirmity and weakness; you will pardon me if I say that infirmity and weakness do not engender honor but scorn and pity. And that it is more than apparent that women should be honored by men for their excellence" (Valois 1999, 269–70).²⁵

These protofeminists contended that women were at least equal, if not superior, to men. They argued with increasing vehemence that they should be given greater autonomy and have the right to be educated. During Anne

D'Autriche's regency, there was renewed interest in the question of whether women were fit to reign, and a new crop of prowoman writings appeared, among them Du Bosc's *Femme héroïque* and Le Moyne's *Gallerie des femmes fortes*. Later Poulain de la Barre argued for the education of women in *De l'Égalité des deux sexes*.

Prowoman militancy carried over into pictorial representation during the thirties and forties. Noblewomen had themselves painted wearing helmets, armor, shields, and swords.²⁶ They also participated vigorously in equestrian sports and hunting. Many of these *femmes cavaliers* became the Amazons who galloped on horseback across France during the Fronde—commanding troops, inciting citizens to combat, capturing cities, ordering attacks on the royal army. “For nearly six years,” writes DeJean, “they dominated French political life in heroic style, forcing a suspension of the ancien régime’s normal hierarchy of authority. They threw their world upside down, made the early years of Louis XIV’s majority the equivalent of Bakhtin’s carnivalized world, and thereby won by conquest a territory where women could live as men when they chose to. For a brief time, women in effect governed France on major occasions, and those who negotiated with them, from princes to parliamentarians, recognized their authority as legitimate” (1991, 38). The memoirs of the duchesse de Nemours, Madame de la Guette, and Mademoiselle de Montpensier all record this unprecedented moment when women exercised military and political power. At the end of the Fronde, the *femme cavalier* gave way to the *femme docteur* and the *précieuse*: women endowed with a desire for learning and a determination to develop such feminine faculties as *finesse*, *pénétration*, and *vivacité d’esprit* (Maclean 1977, 268–69). And as Harth shows in *Cartesian Women*, some women also displayed interest in science and philosophy, attracted especially by the writings of Descartes and the possibility of debating propositions like “The soul does not have a sex.”²⁷

During the first part of the century, women were already winning greater liberty and social prominence in the assemblies or salons known as *alcôves* or *ruelles*, so called because guests were seated in the spaces around the hostess’s bed.²⁸ As an alternative to the raucous reunions of old comrades-in-arms that passed for court society under Henri IV, noblewomen began to receive select groups of cultivated people in their homes. “The salon emerged in the first half of the seventeenth century as a new, exclusive space for the nurturing of elite culture,” writes Goldsmith. “While most of the habitués of both court and salon preferred to pass freely between both places, the social milieu of the salon was increasingly viewed as the more hospitable environment for perfect sociability” (1988, 6–7).

Madame de Rambouillet’s *chambre bleue* is often credited with being

the first and most famous of the *ruelles*. In point of fact, this seventeenth-century institution was a descendent of the predilection for refined social intercourse that had been introduced by the first Marguerite de Navarre under François I and had become the hallmark of the Valois dynasty.²⁹ Its practice, which Marguerite de Navarre described in the framework of her *Heptaméron*, had been handed down through the women of the line; and her grand-niece, Marguerite de Valois, had managed even in desolate Usson to surround herself with poets, musicians, and philosophers. After Valois's return to Paris in 1605, she invited artists and writers to elegant gatherings that were tacit reminders of what court life would have been had she, and not her ex-husband, acceded to the throne. At these assemblies, Valois was called "Vénus Uranie" and presided over discussions on subjects proposed by her, practices later adopted by the *précieuses*.

After her death, the art of conversation was fostered in more private and intimate settings. The salon of Madame des Loges was the scene of heated discussions on language and literature. In her more humble quarters, Gournay also received the intelligentsia and participated in debates about poetry and linguistic change. Certainly the marquise de Rambouillet, known as "la divine Arthénice," was the most famous salon hostess. Under her guidance, elegant language replaced the earthy gasconisms of Henri's court, and vulgar pastimes gave way to moral and psychological analyses of love.³⁰ After the Fronde, the salon movement shifted to the rue de Beauce, where the novelist Madeleine de Scudéry, known as Sapho, presided over her celebrated *samedis*.

Literature played a crucial role in salon culture. Poets and dramatists were encouraged to read from their works in progress, improvise gallant lyrics, and collaborate on literary projects. From the days of Marguerite de Valois, polite society had been both inspired and influenced by the writings of Honoré d'Urfé. His pastoral novel *L'Astrée*, which recounted interminable love affairs between shepherds and shepherdesses, revived themes of courtly love that still had intense appeal for romance-starved women condemned to loveless marriages. The gentlemen who frequented the *chambre bleue* were expected to treat its ladies like the heroines of fiction, deferring all hope of physical satisfaction. Madame de Rambouillet's daughter Julie imposed a fifteen-year courtship on her suitor Montausier; she finally agreed to marry him as she was approaching forty, and then only because she was pressed to do so by both the queen and the prime minister. The *Guirlande de Julie*, a collection of verses in her honor composed by salon members and luxuriously bound by Montausier stands as a monument to the romantic sensibilities of this milieu. Likewise, the famous *Carte de Tendre* in Scudéry's *Clélie* delicately maps the lover's journey.

All the autobiographers studied here were in one way or another involved in the salon movement. Montpensier frequented the gatherings at both Rambouillet's and Scudéry's, and during her exile in Saint-Fargeau, she re-created the pastimes they had made fashionable.³¹ It was she who edited and published a collection of verbal *portraits*, thus preserving in writing one of *préciosité's* most popular pastimes.³² These *portraits*, in which ladies and gentlemen attempted to recapture their own and their friends' physical and characterological traits, were, of course, highly sophisticated exercises in self-fashioning. Choisy's mother, known as "Célie," belonged to Montpensier's circle and is portrayed in the collection. The social gatherings that her cross-dressed son describes in his memoirs consciously reproduce the atmosphere of the *alcôves* she frequented. Marie Mancini was eulogized by Somaize in his *Dictionnaire des précieuses* under the rubric "Maximiliane." He called her the "perle des précieuses." During her exile in England, her sister Hortense presided over a London salon on the French model, to which she invited distinguished thinkers and writers from both England and France. Even Jeanne Guyon, with her pious, provincial upbringing, was encouraged to acquire the conversational skills prized by *précieuse* society and attended provincial assemblies that emulated the Parisian *alcôves*.

Who constituted the enclave of "precious women" has continued to be the subject of debate. As Stanton states, "The only reality that can be claimed for the *précieuse* is her representation in a body of mid-seventeenth-century texts which are designed to chastise her pervasive faults. She exists only through the prism of comic degradation" (1981, 113). What is certain is that a feminocentric social movement with a literary, intellectual, and prowoman agenda was instigated and directed by upper-class women in the seventeenth century.³³

Dubbed "the Jansenists of love" and mocked as squeamish prudes by satirists like Molière,³⁴ the women known as *précieuses* or *femmes savantes* were the standard-bearers of resistance to women's oppression. Claude Dulong goes so far as to contend that although they belonged to the aristocracy, their influence eventually extended to all women: "It is a well-known and unforgettable fact that in the large cities, hardly 40% of Frenchwomen were capable of signing their name. But it is in the salons that the minority of this minority became an elite; and without this elite, would the mass of others even have been conscious of its lacks and learned to formulate its demands? From whence, in this society made by and for men, could change come, if not from the women themselves?" (1974, 125–26).

By imposing on their suitors long periods of celibacy disguised as obedience to courtly ideals, these latter-day followers of the "belle dame sans

mercy" sought relief from the loveless marriages and perilous pregnancies imposed on them in their milieu. In the *ruelles*, women who had been forced to marry men they hardly knew could engage in platonic flirtations without being suspected of adultery, a crime carrying with it the threat of perpetual reclusion. Unmarried women like Julie de Rambouillet could postpone and perhaps avoid the dangers of child-bearing. To see this behavior as prudish is to ignore the fact that the mortality rate was far higher for women of childbearing age (twenty to thirty-five) than it was for men in the same age bracket (C. Dulong 1974, 84). And here their class imposed a particularly heavy burden on noblewomen. Whereas parish registers show that the majority of seventeenth-century Frenchwomen did not marry until the age of twenty-five, noblewomen were usually married soon after puberty, thus increasing by ten years or so the period of time when they could bear children.³⁵ In addition, the custom of handing their babies over to wet nurses reduced the amount of time between pregnancies.

Madame de Sévigné reflected the thinking of many noblewomen when she wrote to her daughter, "Poor Madame de Béthune is pregnant again. I feel so sorry for her. . . . It is feared that the princesse d'Harcourt is pregnant too" (1972-78, 1:241). "Mme de Soubise is pregnant; she complains about it to her mother, but to no avail" (1:252). Sévigné also pleaded with her son-in-law to exercise abstinence: "Do you think I gave her to you so that you could kill her, destroy her health, her beauty, her youth?" (1:365). Likewise Marie Mancini insisted her husband cease sexual relations because of her conviction that she would not survive another pregnancy.

In *La Précieuse*, the abbé de Pure reports the passionate outburst of a certain Eulalie: "She complains," he writes,

of a youth that is too fecund and too abundant, which has made her a mother, and which exposes her every year to a new burden, to a visible peril, to an important responsibility, to indescribable suffering and a thousand unpleasant consequences. However, one must submit to them and suffer them without saying a word. The thought of duty takes precedence over all others and reproaches you for all the moments of indifference that you may feel. A refusal is a crime; pain, mortification, coldness, and that elevation of an honest person above the material and the brutality of a husband are crimes of state under the tyrannical yoke of marriage. (1938, 1:285)

The institution of marriage itself came under severe fire from the *précieuses*. De Pure describes women denouncing the abuses of marriage, defending divorce, demanding punishment for masculine infidelity, advocating marriages contracted for a year at a time, and claiming the right to

terminate conjugal relations, or even the marriage itself, after the birth of the first child. Although it is not certain whether de Pure was sympathizing with these women or mocking them, *La Précieuse* documents women's growing dissatisfaction with traditional roles.³⁶

Tullie in Scudéry's *Clélie* gives voice to these sentiments. Scudéry herself refused to marry and accepted the "friendship" of her admirer Pellisson only after she had subjected him to a series of trials roughly equivalent to the stations of her *Carte de Tendre*. Another interesting example of antimarriage sentiment is an epistolary exchange between Madame de Motteville and Mademoiselle de Montpensier, in which the latter imagines a utopian community where all the inhabitants would be unmarried, because, she says, "it is marriage that has given men their superiority, and what has made us known as the weaker sex is the dependence to which we have been subjugated, often against our will, for reasons of family, and of which we have been the victims" (Montpensier 1806, 5–6). Motteville, *who had been married at eighteen to a man of eighty*, wrote back that she considered the idea of such a utopia impractical, but that she herself had no desire whatsoever to be married.

The *précieuses* also advocated what seemed on the surface a less drastic way of improving women's lot within marriage. Inspired by popular romantic fiction, they encouraged the idea that *inclination*, that is to say, an attraction based on manners, looks, and personal merit, was a better foundation for marriage than lineage. Such a point of view represented an insidious threat to the established order, for it was fundamentally incompatible with the aristocratic view of marriage. Lougee's study of the effects of salon culture on marriage patterns provides statistical evidence that women who frequented salons frequently married outside their social bracket, thus causing long-lasting modifications in the social structure. Lougee argues that opposition to the *précieuses* and the public role they exercised in the salons was related to fear of the way the old rules governing social stratification were being eroded. The salons "propagated a vision of an expanded aristocracy open to those who acquired any of numerous forms of prominence," she writes; "they celebrated ennoblement, arguing the superiority of acquired nobility over inherited nobility, and with this social vision praised women as a social force which promoted the integration of new individuals into the elite" (1976, 41). It is also worthy of note that their insistence on education contained within it the seeds of opposition to a class system in which merit was linked to aristocratic birth rather than to personal attainments. "Salons acted as a kind of social laboratory, where nobles and non-nobles alike proposed to discover new definitions of what it meant to be 'naturally' superior," writes Goldsmith (1988, 8–9).

In other words, *préciosité* not only worked against the exploitation of women within marriage; it subverted the aristocratic order that arranged marriages on the basis of lineage. Its counterideology was instrumental in breaking down old barriers between the classes by advocating marriage based on merit rather than on blood. It even went so far as to defend misalliances between rich commoners and impoverished aristocrats, especially if they were based on romantic love. So great was the impact of these ideas that at one point even the young Louis XIV was nearly persuaded to ignore his royal duty and marry the totally unsuitable Marie Mancini. Likewise, Montpensier made the radical decision to marry Lauzun on the basis of his admirable qualities, and in spite of his social inferiority.

Thus consciousness raised by the profeminist conversations of the *ruelles* activated opposition to the institutions that deprived women of autonomy. Women learned to think thoughts not connected to their domestic roles, and to question their traditional function in society. These assemblies also functioned as centers of education for women. They not only imparted a model of social conduct based on verbal skills, they instilled analytical habits of thought and stimulated the practice of reading and writing. This in turn created a demand for writing by, for, and about women. The Amazonian women who had dreamed of military power during the Fronde turned, during Louis XIV's reign, to writing as a form of social and political expression; and memoirs were ideally suited to their agenda. DeJean has shown how the novels of seventeenth-century Frenchwomen grew out of the politics of salon culture.³⁷ But just as important, and in some ways more so, was the production of woman-authored autobiography.

POLITICS AND POETICS: THEORIES OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

Self-representation became widespread in the Renaissance as personal accomplishments acquired significance and recognition. Gusdorf gives various explanations as to why at this particular moment people were inspired to write their life stories: the birth of historical consciousness, belief in progress and individual responsibility, increased social mobility due to the breakdown of the old feudal structures, a new sense of human intellectual capacities due to scientific discoveries, the humanist secularization of thought, and greater faith in the power of the human mind and its capacity for reason, as well as renewed interest in classical models of life-writing like Plutarch's *Lives*. Discussing these explanations of the rise of autobiography, Sidonie Smith cautions, however, that literary historians like Gusdorf have been speaking of a new concept of *man*, which construes the autobio-

graphical subject as always male and delineates autobiography as “public narratives men write for each other as they lay claim to an immortal place within the phallic order” (S. Smith 1987, 26). Smith goes on to argue that, by contrast, early women’s “life script” imposed silence on them. As a result, early modern women, “suspended between culturally constructed categories of male and female selfhood,” created texts that slipped between “ideology and subjectivity . . . conformity and resistance” (41).

French women’s lives certainly did not follow the scenarios that dominated early life-writing in their country, nor did their texts observe the rules that defined it. Indeed, French secular autobiography emerged from particularly masculinist concerns.³⁸ Descended from Caesar’s commentaries on the Gallic Wars and the medieval court chronicles of Joinville, Villehardouin, Froissart, and Commines, they concentrated on the military, diplomatic, and political accomplishments of the *noblesse d’épée*.³⁹ “When I went out into the world,” writes Bussy-Rabutin, “my first and greatest desire was to become an *honnête homme* and to attain great honors in war. To this end, I tried as much as I possibly could to frequent *honnêtes gens*; and when my father enrolled me in the army, I wrote down my campaigns in order to retain what had happened in them” (1857, 3). If personal recollections were included, they were generally limited to eyewitness accounts of historical events. The self-reflections of the essayist Montaigne, who took himself as the subject of his work, meditating on his personal strengths and weaknesses and revealing intimate details of his existence, were seen by his contemporaries as useless, childish, and vain.⁴⁰ According to Lejeune, it was widely believed, even in the nineteenth century, that autobiography, with its emphasis on the personal, was not suited to the French temperament (1971, 15). He cites the *Grand Dictionnaire universel* of 1866, where one reads, “Very few French memoirs merit the name of *autobiography*. It is more an English and American genre. In France, no matter how high an opinion one has of oneself when one transmits one’s personal memories to posterity, one always tends to write more about the lives of others than about one’s own.”

As Fumaroli states, these early *mémoires* were produced almost exclusively by the aristocracy (1979, 27). Their authors were intent on providing what they saw as truthful versions of what they had done and eyewitness accounts of the events they had lived through. Underlying this project, however, was their resentment that as members of the feudal aristocracy, they had been cheated of their rightful place in an increasingly centralized monarchy administered by bourgeois civil servants. Many of them, like Monluc, had seen their services go unrewarded, or had been unjustly punished. Writing memoirs became a means of setting the record

straight and defending traditional feudal values against social change.⁴¹ They also used them to justify themselves to posterity, especially their descendants, drawing parallels between their actions and those of past heroes.⁴² This tendency toward nostalgia for a bygone era reached its apogee in the memoirs of Saint-Simon, who chronicled the progressive dilution of the royal line by Louis XIV's illegitimate offspring.

For such men, the question of lineage was of prime importance.⁴³ They were obsessed with family and the desire to transmit its values and virtues from generation to generation. Many of them addressed their texts to (male) progeny, whom they sought to inspire by their example. "Memoirs play first and foremost the role of transmitting the paternal model," writes Hennequin, "of encouraging imitation of the father's or grandfather's virtues. In the feudal context of the beginning of the century, it is even the virtues and values of the entire line that must be transmitted" (1979, 89–90).⁴⁴ Bertière expresses much the same idea: "Memoirs appear to be at the same time a monument erected on the domestic altar to remind descendants of their ancestor's virtues and an account book, in the original sense of the word, to which are consigned the rights of the clan to the sovereign's honors and favors" (1977, 21).

As Marin shows, implicit in such endeavors was a subversive critique of royal power. This is dramatically illustrated in Pellisson's "Project for the History of Louis XIV," in which the author specifically excluded journals and memoirs as source material for an official history of the reign. Pellisson wrote, "History overlooks many circumstances that journals and Memoirs report. . . . But in compensation, when it is a question of the Master and of an informative example of his value, firmness, and great sense, of which our King has given us a thousand, history lifts and makes the most of many little things about actions and principal persons that journals and Memoirs are accustomed to neglect. History puts all the great things it encounters in a better light through a nobler and more composed style, which encloses a lot in a little space with no wasted words" (qtd. in Marin 1988, 40–41).⁴⁵

Pellisson's project was submitted to Colbert around 1670, and won his approval. Boileau and Racine, who also served as Louis XIV's official historiographers, continued to follow the principles he had laid down. Memoirs were thus excluded from the official history, according to Marin, because by their very nature they undermined the myth of the king as the universal subject from whom all history emanates. Texts written in the first person "imply, by definition, a reference to a subject who writes *his* history—the history of what has happened *to him* and that of which he has been spectator, witness, or actor," writes Marin (1988, 47). In other words, by

their use of the narrative “I,” memoirs refuted the ideology of the absolute monarch and suggested the possibility of a narrative of events differing from, or even contradicting, the official version.⁴⁶

If, however, men’s memoirs threatened the myth of the absolute monarch’s infallibility by calling into question his status as the universal subject, the destabilizing power of women’s memoirs was even greater; for they called into question not only the foundations of the monarchy but the phallogocentric ideology ratified in both history *and* men’s memoirs. In a symbolic sense, moreover, they threatened the king’s hegemony by contesting the silencing of women implicit in the Salic law.

The subversive implications of these memoirs has been largely ignored, however, because they are seldom included in discussions of the genre. Their relative obscurity corroborates Sidonie Smith’s assertion that “the contributions of women to the genre have traditionally been perceived as forms of contamination, illegitimacies, threats to the purity of the canon of autobiography itself; and their works, defined as anomalous, are set aside in separate chapters, at ends of chapters” (1987, 43). The canonical definition of early French memoirs is based on the life-writings of men who viewed digressions into private life as lapses for which the author should apologize to his reader.⁴⁷ Self-narratives that did not adhere to this view of life-writing were excluded from the canon and their importance dismissed.

Nonetheless, early Frenchwomen’s self-narratives made significant contributions to the development of autobiography and comprise a considerable corpus. Prior to the memoirs of Valois, there had been several shorter works: Anne de Beaujeu’s *Les Enseignements d’Anne de France à sa fille Suzanne de Bourbon* (1504), Louise de Savoie’s *Journal* (1522), and Jeanne d’Albret’s, *Mémoires et poésies* (1572). Nor was Valois the only woman of her time to write about herself. In the memoirs devoted largely to her husband’s career, the Huguenot Madame de Mornay provided a hair-raising record of her escape during the St. Bartholomew’s massacres. Marie de Gournay offered a brief verse account of her life in her *Copie de la Vie de la Demoiselle de Gournay*.⁴⁸ She also recounted her battle to gain recognition as a writer in her “Apologie pour celle qui escrit,”⁴⁹ and described her association with Montaigne in her 1595 preface to his *Essais*.

The seventeenth-century corpus of women’s memoirs is not limited to those studied here. The Fronde inspired not only the memoirs of Mlle. de Montpensier but those of Madame de la Guette and the duchesse de Nemours. Not only Marie Mancini, Louis XIV’s first love, but Louise de la Vallière, his mistress, wrote about their lives. Women memoirists who devoted themselves to writing royal women’s biographies—Madame de Motteville, Madame de Lafayette, and Madame de Caylus—wove their own stories

into their texts. And women were also, of course, prolific contributors to the subgenre of spiritual autobiography.

Scholars of seventeenth-century autobiography often minimize the importance of women's memoirs, however, because the masculine prototype has dominated attempts to define the genre. Retz, considered its greatest practitioner, wrote about himself as a public figure. He did not engage in introspection. In consequence, scholars like Bertière dismiss early women's autobiographical writing because in them the private individual "indiscreetly invades the narration and in telling about herself forgets to tell about history." He sees this as a "quite feminine weakness," citing Marguerite de Valois and La Grande Mademoiselle as examples. "Only those works whose accounts are heavily weighted toward history seem to us to merit truly the name of memoirs," he concludes (1977, 403). Bertière's insistence that memoirs should concentrate on public and historical concerns is typical of definitions that trivialize feminine contributions to the genre.

On the other hand, theorists of autobiography like Lejeune tend to situate its origin in the eighteenth century and to hold up Rousseau as its ideal practitioner. "Autobiography appeared in the second half of the eighteenth century," Lejeune writes, "at the same time in most of the countries in Europe" (1971, 63). Although he does caution against attributing its invention solely to Rousseau, he maintains that it was Rousseau who "realized in a single stroke nearly all the virtualities. He wrote in the *Confessions* not only the first of the autobiographies, historically, since the *Confessions* were composed between 1762 and 1770, but probably the most daring of those written in relation to the civilization of the period" (65).⁵⁰

Only a few scholars have discerned in seventeenth-century women's life-writing the determination to go beyond the generic limits of memoirs and explore a new form of self-representation. At the end of his essay situating memoirs at the "crossroads" of history, autobiography, and the novel, Fumaroli speaks briefly of the importance of two variant genres—the spiritual confession and what he calls "worldly memoirs." Démoris assimilates women's memoirs to the novel, but in so doing calls into question their veracity. Hipp also relates them to the novel, suggesting that they are better understood by observing them "de l'intérieur" than by attempting to impose on them a lexicographical definition (1976, 23). Only Beasley has seen their political and historical implications and argued that they revise and enlarge the masculinist concept of history in order to show that particular events lay behind it.⁵¹

In fact, the very existence of personal and private matters in women's memoirs constitutes a political statement on behalf of those whose lives

were deemed unimportant to history. This is what a critic like Voltaire failed to comprehend when he dismissed Montpensier's memoirs as the writings of "a woman preoccupied with herself" rather than of a "princess who witnessed important events" (1957, 1189). In this view, she does not provide the "right" kind of information, because the life of a "princess" can be of no importance in and of itself. Yet the text he branded as inferior was in fact the meticulously documented record of the political marginalization of a member of the royal family because of her gender.

Voltaire and his followers judge women's memoirs on the basis of what Watson calls the "*bios* component." "*Bios*," writes Watson, "is not synonymous with identity, but signals the significance of a life within authorized traditions of representing lives in Western culture. The delineation of actions signifying greatness in Plutarch's *Lives*, for example, indicates the monumental public stature of 'the great'" (1993, 58). It is this concept of life-writing, she argues, that has caused the autobiographical canon to be limited to those who are "white, male, and highly literate—and to the metaphysical aspiration of that culture itself, whose achievement was to produce a universalizing, transcendent subject memorialized by life writing in metaphors of stasis and permanence" (59). Watson's critical perspective is shared by many theorists working today in the field of women's autobiography.⁵² Earlier in this chapter, I reflected on how theoretical debates about selfhood and gender have shaped this study. I shall end it by suggesting how these self-narratives relate to current discussions about what constitutes autobiography, and especially what constitutes the difference of the texts I study here.

The spectacular growth of autobiographical theory has caused one recent anthologist to claim that autobiography now occupies the position held during the time of high New Criticism by the poem (Folkenflik 1993, 11). I shall not attempt to review in depth the huge and ever-growing mass of theorizing about a genre that seems to defy all attempts to define it.⁵³ Such summaries are already plentiful. As Watson says, "It has become a critical topos to begin discussions of the theory of autobiography by rehearsing the changing positions assumed by critics over the last three decades" (1993, 57). I will simply make a few points that are germane to this analysis.

The postmodern debates about selfhood and gender have profoundly modified critical attitudes toward women's autobiography. Early attempts to found a poetics on the basis of women's difference have largely been abandoned. The argument that women's self-narratives display some recognizable difference—a greater sense of connectedness, or a less individualistic sense of self—have not only proved impossible to verify, they have now been called into question because of their essentialist stereotyping.⁵⁴

On the other hand, increased attention has been paid to autobiographies that reject conventional approaches and forms, especially those by women who are not heterosexual, white, Western European, or middle class. Leigh Gilmore, Françoise Lionnet, Sidonie Smith, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Julia Watson, to mention some prominent examples, have used postcolonialist critiques of Eurocentric culture to show how the self-narratives of such women resist and subvert canonical ideas about what constitutes a life that is worth narrating and what constitutes an acceptable model for telling a life story. They view autobiography as a genre constantly reinventing itself by resisting the boundaries imposed on it by established discourses. The focus of the discussion has therefore shifted away from defining what women's autobiography is to concentrate on the political implications of women's autobiographical acts. As Gilmore argues, "[T]he incoherence in the category can be used to further a feminist theory of autobiographical production" (1994, 13). "Autobiographics"—a term Gilmore uses to denote the writing of autobiography—"avoids the terminal questions of genre and close delimitation and offers a way, instead, to ask: Where is the autobiographical? What constitutes its representation?" (13).

On the surface, the writers analyzed by Gilmore et al. have nothing in common with those I am studying. But these theorists' refusal to define autobiography narrowly according to a generic formula makes it possible to see more clearly what these early French autobiographers accomplished. By demonstrating how autobiographical writing validates the life stories of the disenfranchised, these theorists suggest that certain self-narratives have a common basis across time, space, and social class, by dint of their marginal and subversive relationship to the dominant discourses of their milieu.

Like the minority and third-world women analyzed by postmodern feminists, the autobiographers I study here did not conform to the prevailing rules of life-writing. They challenged the presupposition that the only life worth recording was that of a "great man." Furthermore, they portrayed themselves as *they* saw themselves, and as they wanted to be seen, tacitly countering the stereotypical representations that reduced the feminine to sexual and procreative functions. Refusing to perform only as signs in a social structure that perpetuated itself through the exchange of women, they fashioned self-narratives that staked the claim to identity on their own terms. This is why I think it is important that feminist critics give these texts the same attention they are giving to the writings of marginalized women, rather than ignoring them as canonical critics have done for so long.

THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

These autobiographical writings departed from the preoccupations and norms of masculine memoirs, improvising new scenarios that filled in the gaps between women's lives and the narrow preoccupations of the genre. This was due in large part to the way men and women lived in upper-class France. Aside from a brief interlude during the Fronde, women (and those like Choisy who embraced a feminine lifestyle) were barred from engaging directly in politics.⁵⁵ As Marguerite de Valois discovered, even when a woman wanted to write about her role in public events, her marginalization forced her to write as an outsider or to concentrate on the personal aspects of court life.

Yet these writers chose to write about lives that did not conform to accepted ideas of what made a life worth writing about. And this, I believe was largely due to the growing sense of feminine identity and prowoman attitudes that emerged from the salon movement. The qualities of mind and the topics of conversation cultivated in the *ruelles* inspired women to reflect on their lives. What is more, the *précieuses*' predilection for romantic fiction inspired them to see their lives as narratives, to identify the turning points of their existence, and to explore and analyze their emotions. The passionate encounters and happy endings they found in novels made them rebel against sacrificing their health, their ambitions, and their personal desires to the demands of their fathers and husbands. The gap between their sense of themselves as heroines and their inferior status in the family impelled them to explain and justify themselves, in the hope that their readers would perceive their merits. In writing about their lives, they were not only coming to terms with who they were, they were refusing to submit silently to the constraints that femininity imposed on them.

These texts record how the conflict between the patriarchal code and the protofeminist attitudes propagated in the *ruelles* was played out in individual lives. And it is here, I believe, that the sense of self-worth instilled in women by the salon movement intersected with the ideology of class that identified them as members of the privileged aristocracy. Confronting the disparity between what their birth should have entitled them to, and what, in fact, it deprived them of, they were no longer willing to be consigned to silence and invisibility. Contemplating the constraints imposed on them by womanhood, they were aroused to recount their struggle to fashion identities that resisted the feminine stereotypes of their class.

Accordingly, they situated the roots of personhood in the experiences

of childhood (a phase of existence that men memoirists almost never described). They delved into their relationships with parents and siblings, the physical and psychological changes of adolescence, and the pivotal significance of marriage. Abandoning the pursuit of history that characterized masculine memoirs, they turned from the public sector to the private, creating a new kind of life-writing—in which the author's self is differentiated from the expectations of society and in which she represents herself as *she* sees herself, and not as *others* see her.

Notes

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1. Brantôme called his two sets of *discours* on women simply *Des Dames*. Later editors separated them into two volumes: *Les Dames illustres* and *Les Dames galantes*. My citations are taken from the 1991 Pléiade edition edited by Vaucheret.

2. I will refer to women writers by their family name. See DeJean 1991, 2–3 for a justification of this practice. In his review of her *Tender Geographies*, Ranum concurs: “[T]he persistent reference to women writers with their marks of respect (not onomastics) such as ‘Mlle’ de Scudéry or ‘Madame’ [de] Villedieu is, as DeJean observes, clear evidence of the prevailing sexism of the academicians” (1992, 815).

3. I am using the word “autobiography” in its broadest sense: a written account of the author’s life. I will not be using it in the sense defined by Lejeune in *Le Pacte autobiographique* and later rejected by him as inadequate. A more complete discussion of my position on the question of what constitutes “autobiography” follows.

4. The best-known example of the antiwoman position is found in Rabelais’s *Tiers* and *Quart Livres*. For a summary of the “Quarrel,” see McLeod 1991; also see Grieco 1991.

5. For a summary of this issue as it relates to women’s self-representation, see S. Smith 1993, 1–23.

6. See Benveniste 1971, 218.

7. The word was first used in English in the nineteenth century and was subsequently translated into French. Although his early attempts at defining “autobiography” have been frequently contested, Lejeune reflects mainstream critical thinking about the genre when he writes that the word designated a new reality for which the existing word “memoirs” was no longer adequate. This new reality came into being, he asserts, in the middle of the eighteenth century, when people began to publish the story of their own “personalities” (1971, 10).

8. For discussions of this position, pro and con, see B. Martin 1988, Flax 1992, and Modleski 1991.

9. See Weed and Schor 1997.

10. See Claridge and Langland’s analysis of how both men and women participate in patriarchy (1990, 3–21).

11. This is comparable to Spelman’s analysis of gender as constructed by class in Aristotle. “Slaves are without gender,” she writes, “because, for Aristotle’s purposes, their

sex doesn't matter. In any world in which for some people sex is made to matter—positively for males, negatively for females—then it also matters a lot if your sex doesn't matter" (1988, 55).

12. See Hendricks and Parker 1994, 5–6 for a discussion of the instability of the term "race" in early modern Europe.

13. "In the sixteenth century, except for some glorification of the ancientness of some individual upper-class families, the only really strong emphasis on birth and blood had been for the families of the kings, in order to separate, for instance, the princes of the blood from the peers. From the early seventeenth century on, then, nobility as a collective social group had joined the monarchy in becoming a hereditary entity" (Schalk 1986, 145).

14. See Gouesse 1985, 9–15.

15. For an extensive discussion of women and work in seventeenth-century France, see Gibson 1989, 97–140. See also Collins 1989 and Davis 1975, 69–74.

16. See Traer 1980, 15–16, and Maclean 1977, 17.

17. See Boursier 1987, 265.

18. Gournay 1985, 20v^o–21r^o. See Bauschatz 1990.

19. Bussy 1858, 3:362 (21 January 1671). Cited in Duchêne 1982, 148.

20. See Viguerie 1985, 29–30.

21. See Duchêne 1982, 78.

22. For the names of others who supported learning for women as a means of combating immorality, see Maclean 1977, 54–57.

23. For critiques of the idea that seventeenth-century France was a monolithic society, see Apostolides (1988, 100) and Mettam (1988, 5).

24. Gournay later incorporated this passage into her "Grief des Dames." See Schiff 1978, 89–91.

25. Valois's letter to Loryot was published as *discours docte et subtile* in his *Fleurs des secrets moraux* (Paris, 1614). It was a reply to his essay, ironically entitled "Pourquoi le sexe féminin est fort honoré de l'homme." See Valois 1999, 252–86.

26. See plates in Maclean 1977 between pages 208 and 209.

27. Harth 1992 admits that there was, nonetheless, a gap between learned women and their masculine counterparts. Although they attended the feminocentric salons, they were excluded from the more learned academies and conferences. Furthermore, their erudition tended to be acquired and disseminated orally rather than in writing.

28. Supposedly Madame de Rambouillet suffered greatly from the cold and received in bed in order to keep warm. Backer sees symbolic significance in the *précieuses'* predilection for receiving in bed. "These ladies found a whole new environment of expressive artifice in the little intimate alcove, screened from the public, hard to get into unless you played the lady's game" (1974, 169). She also points out that much of a woman's life was associated with the bed and that it dramatized her womanly functions and her frailty, as well as proclaiming that one of these functions was being denied (170).

29. The roots of the feminocentric salon culture can be traced back still further. Roelker (1972) argues that Louis XI's daughter Anne de Beaujeu (1460–1522) supervised the education of younger women at a "court school," instilling in them good manners, refined tastes, and virtuous behavior. Marguerite de Navarre's mother, Louise de Savoie, was Anne's protégée.

30. Goldsmith shows that the subject of conversation dominated conduct books for men and women in this century. Du Bosc's *L'Honnête Femme* (1633–36), Grenaille's *L'Honnête Fille* (1639–40) and *L'Honnête Veuve* (1640) argued that women should be trained

in conversational rhetoric if for no other reason than to protect their virtue against the verbal onslaughts of would-be seducers! (Goldsmith 1988, 20–21). Madame de Maintenon likewise urged her pupils at Saint-Cyr to practice “economy, restraint, and a systematic suspicion of other speakers” (Goldsmith 1988, 71).

31. See Garapon 1993, 98. See also my introduction in Montpensier 1999, 18–22.

32. Published as *Divers Portraits* in 1659.

33. For a concurring view, see François 1987, 117–23.

34. Stanton contends that they were ridiculed as “ugly or frustrated, sexual fake or deviant” because they voiced hostility to love and marriage (1981, 134). In *Les Précieuses ridicules*, Molière attributes to his two silly heroines the idea that marriage is “quite shocking” and has one of them exclaim, “How can one bear the thought of sleeping with a man who is completely nude?” In a lesser-known play, *La Princesse d’Elide*, he likewise has a woman say that a husband and death are the same thing. Armande in *Les Femmes savantes* considers marriage a “vulgar design,” the very thought of which nauseates her. Her “philosophy” has made her reject the idea of being enslaved to a man’s laws. Accordingly, she has refused her suitor Clitandre’s proposal of marriage but offered to retain him as a suffering admirer. Today Molière’s mockery is better known than the lives and writings of historical seventeenth-century women. As Stanton argues, his virulence stands as proof of the fear generated by the threat of *préciosité* to the traditional structure of society.

35. See Gouesse 1985, 16.

36. Richmond maintains that de Pure was in fact attacking the effeminate gallantry and pedantry that replaced the old “virile and heroic values” after the Fronde, and satirizing the “ascendance of woman on the social and literary life of the 1650s” (1977, 83). François disagrees (1987, 105–6).

37. DeJean writes, “[T]he fictional forms devised by seventeenth-century women writers were both feminocentric and the product of an ideology that sought to promote equality between the sexes.” Moreover, “feminist ideas played a crucial role in . . . the evolution of political activity undertaken by seventeenth-century women and the intellectual bond repeatedly forged in this activity between the making of history and the making of literature” (1991, 5–6).

38. I shall have more to say about spiritual autobiography, which traced its origins back to Augustine of Hippo, in the chapter on Jeanne Guyon.

39. Fumaroli situates the birth of the genre between 1555 and 1570 (1979, 26). According to Bertièrre, no French text was designated as *Mémoires* prior to the fifteenth century (1977, 14). At the beginning of the Renaissance, the term was used to distinguish between unpolished accounts of plain facts and the *grande histoire* of the humanists. Early examples include Guillaume du Bellay’s memoirs, which recount military history under François I, Pierre Matthieu’s *Histoire des derniers troubles de France*, Jean de Serres’s *Mémoires des guerres civiles et des derniers troubles de France*, Du Haillon’s *De l’estat et succes des affaires de France*, and Monluc’s *Commentaires*. See Knecht 1989 for a discussion of memoirs as military record in the texts of Florange, du Bellay, Monluc, Jean de Tavannes, de la Noue, and d’Aubigné. See Davies 1991, 8–15 for a discussion of historical biography included in the category of memoirs.

40. This criticism inspired Gournay’s passionate defense of his practices in her 1595 preface to the *Essais*.

41. Bertièrre writes that memoirs narrating the Wars of Religion depict the confrontation between feudal and royal power, whereas those composed after the Fronde betray the knowledge that the battle was over and the feudal aristocracy had lost (1977, 31).

42. Lesne-Jaffro 1993 discusses this aspect of the memoirs of Bussy, Campion, and Arnould.

43. See Karro 1993 for an analysis of memoirists' efforts to attach their texts to medieval/feudal traditions.

44. Watts concurs: "[O]ne of the main objects of the exercise was to *give account*, to set the record straight, to defend the individual's and the family's name in the eyes of posterity" (1975, 267). According to Ariès, memoirs were an "educational message" bequeathed from father to son (1979, 13). Fumaroli cites the duc de Bouillon, who desired "to perpetuate the honor and virtue of our race" (1971, 23). He also quotes Jean de Tavannes: "I write out of duty to our father and [his] precepts to you, my family" (24). See also Fumaroli's introduction to Henri de Campion's memoirs.

45. For the complete text, see Marin 1988, 39–41. He quotes Paul Pellisson-Fontanier, *Œuvres diverses* (Paris, 1735), 2:323–28.

46. See Davies 1991 on the role of propaganda in early biographical memoirs.

47. According to Georges May, the word *mémoires* may refer to three types of text: the narrative of external events in which the author was an active participant; the narrative of external events in which the author was a passive observer; and the narrative of the author's life in its most personal aspects. Modern usage, he observes, tends to define the first two as *mémoires* and the third as *autobiographie*. The difference between the two genres lies, therefore, in the extent to which the author/narrator reveals the private and intimate side of his or her character. Interestingly, May illustrates these classifications with two triads—one consisting of men authors (Joinville, Retz, and Rousseau) and the other of women authors (Motteville, Montpensier, and George Sand) (May 1979, 123).

48. See Dezon-Jones 1988, 137–39. This brief third-person account of Gournay's life was probably composed in 1616 for James I of England in the mistaken belief that he had requested it. It was published for the first time in *L'Ombre de la Demoiselle de Gournay*, 1626.

49. The *Apologie* appeared in *L'Ombre de la demoiselle de Gournay* (1626) and, with minor revisions, in *Les Advis et presens de la demoiselle de Gournay* (1634; 1641).

50. Of the women studied here, only Guyon is listed in Lejeune's repertory of early autobiographical texts (1971, 112). See also Huntington Williams: "The emphasis on the individual self is one aspect of a wide-ranging secularization that emerges in the eighteenth century. . . . If God underwrites individual existence for the Christian autobiographer, personal identity in modern autobiography is thought to be 'natural.' This is a major change, and one of its effects, broadly defined, is that personal value and moral sense no longer have their source in a transcendent 'outside,' in God or in Scripture. . . . I take Rousseau as exemplary for modern, Romantic autobiography, not just because he occupies a pivotal position historically, but also because he attempts to construct his personal identity primarily in his own writings" (1983, 3).

51. For a general survey of feminist work on seventeenth-century French literature, see Jensen 1991.

52. See, for example, Trinh T. Minh-ha 1989, S. Smith 1987, Gilmore 1994, and Lionnet 1989.

53. Georges May refuses to offer a definition of the genre, stating, "Experience seems to indicate that the moment has not yet come to formulate a precise, complete, and universally accepted definition of autobiography; and it is somewhat for that reason that this book disobeys the rule that insists one should begin by defining what one is talking about" (1979, 11). For mainstream attempts at such a definition, see Gusdorf 1980, Lejeune (1971, 1975),

Pascal 1960, Olney 1980, Spengemann 1980, Bruss 1976, Weintraub 1978, Fleishman 1983, Eakin 1985. For a summary of the history of autobiographical theory, see Folkenflik 1993, 1–17.

54. Such attempts were often based on Chodorow's theories of feminine development. Jelinek, one of the first to study the subject, writes that women's autobiographies are characterized by "Personal subject matter and disjunctive style" (1986, 17). Jelinek hypothesizes that the "disjunctive forms" she sees as typical of women's life-writing serve "a protective function, a way of obscuring the lack of a retrospective, coherent, and holistic sense of self; just as the linear, unidimensional life studies by men may—also unconsciously—protect them from their vulnerable inner selves as they delineate what society expects of them, a life centered around a career" (188). Many theoreticians also see the autobiographical act as invested with a different signification for women, because of their problematic status as "a 'subject' of/in discourse" (Hewitt 1990, 4). Sidonie Smith argues in her *Poetics* that because autobiography has signified men's "embeddedness in the phallic order" (1987, 39), women do not have an "autobiographical self" in the sense that men do: "That situating of the autobiographer in two universes of discourse accounts for the poetics of women's autobiography and grounds its difference" (50). For a rigorous critique of theories of feminine difference in autobiography, see the introduction to Stanton 1987.

55. The only exception to this was when the king's mother was named regent during his minority, a circumstance that occurred three times between 1550 and 1660, and that served to destabilize the rule that women should not participate in politics.

CHAPTER 2. MARGUERITE DE VALOIS

1. See Viennot 1992. Viennot bases her argument that Valois was not the author of this text on its stylistic dissimilarities to her other writings, and on the fact that it was never attributed to her during her own lifetime. Others continue, however, to ascribe the *Ruelle* to her. See, for instance, Tetel 1994. Cazaux's edition includes the *Ruelle*, which he describes as "a charming satire of herself by Marguerite" (Valois 1971, 27).

2. In any case, d'Aubigné, a Protestant, vilified her in his *Histoire universelle*.

3. See Viennot 1993, 243–47. See also Dubois 1994.

4. See Viennot 1993, 263–70.

5. She cites Marguerite's letters to Champvallon as proof (Viennot, 1992, 86).

6. The colloquium on Valois was held in Agen in 1991. See Lazard and Beynac 1994.

7. See Viennot 1993, 186.

8. See Viennot 1993, 185, 429 nn. 9 and 10.

9. Castarède seems to concur (1994, 51).

10. A reedition had appeared in 1649, only four years before Montpensier began her memoirs. See Garapon 1993, 101.

11. Pellisson 1653, 481. See Viennot 1993, 263.

12. See Mariéjol 1970, 318.

13. Viennot comes to the same conclusion in Viennot 1995.

14. Schrenck divides Brantôme's *discours* on Valois into three parts: the panegyric to her beauty, the reflections on the Salic law, and a summary of her generosity and artistic tastes (1991, 185).

15. For a study of Brantôme's panegyric, see also Vaucheret 1994 and Supple 1994.