

MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ'S LETTERS AND THE FORMATION OF ELITE COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

This article concerns the role played by letters written by Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, Madame de Sévigné (1626–96) to her daughter Françoise-Marguerite de Sévigné, comtesse de Grignan (1646–1705) between 1671 and 1696 in the formation of networks and transnational communities. As the closest form of writing to speech (according to Erasmus), letters were ideally suited to the conversation of friends and familiars, and thus to maintaining and forming networks. Sévigné wrote to maintain intimacy with Grignan in spite of the distance between them, and to launch her in elite society. She drew her into dialogue with her friends, and guided her to exploit networking opportunities. During her lifetime, Sévigné's writing was admired for its combined lightness of touch and seriousness of intent. Following the 1725 posthumous publication of selected epistles, Sévigné's letters were rapidly translated into English and English writers self-consciously imitated and adapted her style to fit their own networking ambitions.

Keywords: Letters; community; gender; emotions; women's writing; print letters; manuscript letters

ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS LETTER WRITERS of the seventeenth-century, Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné or 'Madame de Sévigné', maintained a bi-weekly exchange of letters with her daughter Françoise-Marguerite de Sévigné, comtesse de Grignan, whenever they were apart from 1671 when Grignan moved to Provence with her husband the comte de Grignan, until Sévigné's death in 1696. Their epistolary conversation was shaped by the dependable schedule of the *ordinaires*, a bi-weekly mail service between Paris and the provinces. In 1675, under the ex-Minister of War, Michel le Tellier, *surintendant général des postes* [superintendent general of the post] from 1668 until 1691, the French postal system was being centralized, expanded, regulated, streamlined and made available to all citizens.¹ 'J'attends demain matin de vos lettres, ma très chère; c'est mon unique joie et ma consolation en votre absence' ['I expect letters from you tomorrow, my dearest; they are my one joy and consolation for your absence'], wrote Sévigné on 19 July 1675 in the letter selected for discussion here.² The anticipation of the arrival of a letter from Grignan in the following day's post alleviated Sévigné's distress at being parted from her beloved

daughter. Sévigné had two chief objectives in writing to her daughter: to make the relationship present in her life in an intimate emotional sense; and to maintain and bolster her daughter's position in Parisian society during her absence. To this end, Sévigné relayed spontaneous impressions of her daily life and gossip about society; she advised her daughter to write to particular people at opportune moments; she encouraged the public circulation and discussion of Grignan's letters; and she invited members of her circle to contribute to her letters to her daughter. After her death, Sévigné's letters were published and *les lettres à la Sévigné* became a template for networking, greatly admired, imitated and adapted by people who affected good taste.

The French tradition for women's letter writing that Madame de Sévigné inherited was robust, albeit aristocratic. French women's letters had been in print since the publication of Hélienne de Crenne's humanist collection *Epistres familières et invectives* [*Personal and Invective Letters*] (1539). The publication of women's letters went hand in hand with women's prominence in the fashionable salons of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; *Les Missives de Mesdames des Roches de Poitiers mere et fille* [*Letters of the Mesdames des Roches of Poitiers, Mother and Daughter*] (1586) is an early example.³ Women's letters were also represented in courtly courtesy letter collections popular from the seventeenth century, such as Puget de la Serre's *Le Secrétaire à la mode* [*The Secretary in Fashion*] (1640).⁴ In idealistic terms, Jacques Du Bosc's (or Bosque's) *Nouveau Recueil de lettres des dames de ce temps avec leurs réponses* [translated in 1638 as '*The Secretary of Ladies. Or, A New Collection of Letters and Answers, Composed by Moderne Ladies and Gentlewomen, Collected by Mounsieur Du Bosque*'] (1635) proclaimed women's epistolary prowess to be on a par with men's.⁵ Although women's letters represented only 2% of letters published over the seventeenth century (compared to 15% of short stories), as Roger Dûchene points out, together the postal revolution and print made available to women a quotidian practice of letter writing as a means of relaying the 'truth' of experience, rather than an academic performance based upon classical or humanist precedents.⁶ The influence of the elite feminocentric culture of the salons was felt widely (even beyond France), thanks to the publication of collections of letters, dialogues and other sociable genres, capable of effectively conveying an impression of exchanges conducted in the salons.⁷ Sévigné attended the salon hosted by Madame de Rambouillet between 1620 and 1648. She counted members among her lifelong friends including Madame de La Fayette. Other members published letter collections that promoted women's letters. Whereas Madeleine de Scudéry's *Lettres amoureuses de divers auteurs de ce temps* [*Love Letters by Various Contemporary Authors*] (1641) was proto-feminist, Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac's *Lettres du sieur de Balzac* [*The Letters of Mr Balzac*] (1624) idealized women's achievements in overblown terms. Although the epistolary components of Vincent Voiture's posthumous *Les Œuvres* [*Works*] (1650) seem misogynist to modern sensibilities, the prefaces stress the worthiness of publishing women's letters. These salon-based collections promoted the letter as the genre of elite fashionable networking *par excellence* and proclaimed women's prowess in the art.

Sévigné was a prolific letter writer who corresponded with a large cohort of familiars. She wrote to maintain friendships and networks during the regular absences

necessitated by the peripatetic lifestyle of her set. She was perpetually on the move between Paris, Versailles, family properties in the country, the homes of friends and family, the spa and other recreational destinations. Her letters have been celebrated for their spontaneous and natural style. As the first English translator emphasized, Sévigné wrote with 'ease' exemplifying the many 'graces', 'natural beauty' and the 'softer Affections which make the true Excellency of Female Life'.⁸ She was a versatile writer who adapted her style and content to her audience. She reported the trial of the Superintendent of Finances, Simon Fouquet, for maladministration of public money to her friend the politician Simon Arnould, marquis de Pomponne; she wrote witty friendship letters to her cousin, Roger Bussy-Rabutin, and joking light-hearted letters to her son, Charles de Sévigné.⁹ She is most famous for her intensely passionate letters to her daughter, Grignan. In them she expressed her overriding concern to influence her daughter and son-in-law and attempted to guide her daughter in positioning herself advantageously in society. Sévigné's letters to her daughter have been described variously as 'morbidity, unreasonably possessive' and 'excessive', but these psychological assessments of her prose fail to consider the correspondence within the traditions of feminine epistolary rhetoric she inherited and manipulated.¹⁰

The terms of Sévigné's reception were set from the first printed edition, published posthumously with a prefatory letter written by Sévigné's granddaughter, Pauline de Grignan, marquise de Simiane. We can see this in the wording of the first English translation; Simiane writes that readers

will see here a Mother, who writes to her Daughter all that she thinks, and in the same Manner as she thinks it, without in the least imagining, that her Letters would ever fall into any other Hands but hers. Her Stile, tho' negligent and sometimes without Connexion, is yet so agreeable and so natural, that I cannot but believe it will be infinitely entertaining to such Readers who have a good Taste and a Knowledge of the World.¹¹

She attributed the naturalness of Sévigné's style to the fact that she did not write for publication: 'As these Letters were only designed to pass through the hands of these two Ladies, they did not disguise by any Cypher, or any borrowed Names'.¹² Her prediction that the accidental charm of Sévigné's style would appeal to discerning readers was accurate. Within a couple of years of publication, the impact was palpable in the letters of those who affected good taste, including Voltaire.¹³ The off-hand 'negligence', or naturalness, highlighted here, was not new, however. It had its origins in the classical concept of *diligens negligens* associated with Cicero and then idealized as key to the cultured aristocratic mien by the Italian Renaissance humanist Baldassarre Castiglione (*Il cortegiano* [*The Courtier*], 1528) and modelled in humanist letters by the Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus (and others).¹⁴ Sévigné leaves clues about her awareness of earlier epistolary traditions when she praises the writing of her correspondents, and discusses what makes a good letter, in her effort to encourage Grignan to write more.

Sévigné's stated preference for informal affective conversational dialogue in letters echoes key concepts in classical and humanist letters. Erasmus, for example, stressed that a letter should 'resemble a conversation between friends [and] favour simplicity,

frankness, humour, and wit'.¹⁵ Accordingly Sévigné presents her letters as though the words had tumbled directly onto the page, unsorted and unpremeditated; as she opens a letter to her daughter 'Voici une terrible causerie, ma pauvre bonne' ['Here comes a terrible lot of chatter, my poor dear'].¹⁶ In another she declares that 'la contrainte serait trop grande d'étouffer toutes ses pensées. Il faut entrer dans l'état naturel où l'on est, en répondant à une chose qui vous tient au cœur' ['it would be too much of a constraint to stifle all one's thoughts. We must submit to our nature and respond to anything that touches our heart'].¹⁷ She repeatedly describes a good letter as a natural reflection of the writer, 'si franche et si sincère' ['so open and sincere'].¹⁸ Like Erasmus, Sévigné emphasizes that judgement rather than convention should determine the contents of a letter; she explains 'Je crois aussi qu'il n'y a rien qu'il faille entièrement bannir de la conversation, et qu'il faut que le jugement et les occasions y fassent entrer tour à tour ce qui est le plus à propos' ['I think too that nothing should be banished altogether from conversation and that judgement and the way events occur should introduce in turn what is most important'].¹⁹ Following Cicero, she emphasizes that she is impelled by passion to write, and that her letters maintain treasured intimacies and thereby defy the tyrannies of distance.²⁰ She asks Grignan:

Et moi, ma pauvre bonne, que pensez-vous que je fasse? Vous aimer, penser à vous, m'attendrir à tout moment plus que je ne voudrais, m'occuper de vos affaires, m'inquiéter de ce que vous pensez, sentir vos ennuis et vos peines, les vouloir souffrir pour vous [...].²¹

[And what do you think I am doing, my poor dear? Loving you, thinking of you, giving way to emotion at every turn more than I would like, concerning myself with your affairs, worrying about what you think, feeling your sufferings and pains, wanting to suffer them for you if possible [...].]²²

In this regard, as others have noted, in Sévigné's letters, *amicitia*, the classical language of epistolary friendship she adapts, particularly in its emphasis upon unmediated immediacy of feeling, resembles *amor*, the discourse of love.

Sévigné's letters document the life of a devout Roman Catholic woman networked in elite circles. Not only did she have a very close relationship with her uncle, the abbé Christophe de Coulanges, she seems to have had a priest as a member of her household who travelled with her as she moved around the country. Her religious commitment is relevant to understanding her letters. She references Blaise Pascal's *Lettres provinciales* [*Provincial Letters*] (1656–57) and the works of her grandmother, Jeanne-Françoise Frémyot de Chantal. Both were associated with post-Tridentine religious reform. Her grandmother was an adherent of François de Sales whose *Introduction à la vie dévote* [*Introduction to a Devout Life*] (1609) advocated Roman Catholic humility and poverty in terms that did not challenge aristocratic wealth or display. In 1610 Chantal and Sales established the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary.²³ Jacques Du Bosc underscored the relevance of Sales's teaching for aristocratic women in his *Nouveau Recueil de lettres des dames de ce temps*.²⁴ Sévigné herself was committed to Jansenism, an anticlerical theology that argued for predestination. And this underpinned her place in Parisian networks. Her good friend and

correspondent Simon Arnould d'Andilly, marquis de Pomponne, was a member of a prominent Jansenist family. Sévigné cited the Jansenist theologian Pierre Nicole's *Essais de morale* [*Moral Essays*] (1672) in her letters and urged her daughter to read it. She also referenced the *Lettres provinciales*, Pascal's popular Jansenist critique of Jesuit moral casuistry. Both Pascal and Du Bosc used epistolary form to model religious sociability, demonstrating how a devout life could be realized in conversation, that is, in society, rather than by religious withdrawal. Sévigné adapted this ethos in her own letters.

'Devinez d'où je vous écris, ma bonne; c'est de M. de Pomponne. Vous vous en apercevrez par petit mot que Mme de Vins vous mettra ici' ['Guess where I am writing from, my dear. From M. de Pomponne's house. You will see I am there from the little note Mme de Vins will enclose'].²⁵ Thus begins the letter Madame de Sévigné wrote to her daughter from Paris on 19 July 1675. This opening bubbles with the freshness and spontaneity for which her letters are famed. She writes as though she were relaying her thoughts in a careless and unprepared fashion as she would in a face-to-face conversation with her daughter. Closer inspection, however, reveals a careful design. It is no accident that Sévigné wrote to her daughter from the home of Simon Arnould, marquis de Pomponne. Pomponne and Sévigné were old friends who had been corresponding since the days when they frequented the Hôtel de Rambouillet salon (that is, prior to 1648 when the salon desisted). Pomponne fell out of favour with Louis XIV and went into exile from 1662–65, but he recovered his political standing after the King invited him to return to Paris in 1665 and by 1671 he was Foreign Minister. In short Pomponne had become a man of influence and Sévigné wanted to interest him in her daughter, in the hope that he would help to secure her son-in-law a position in Paris.²⁶ In deploying feminine charm to influence a man of power, Sévigné behaved as generations of women before her had done. She did so by epistolary means, not simply by directly soliciting or offering favours. Her approach to networking was more literary than that. Honouring the salon ethos dear to both parties, she developed techniques of drawing men of influence such as Pomponne into her letters to her daughter. In a 1673 letter to Grignan, she describes sharing her daughter's letters with Pomponne, and inviting him to admire her fine epistolary style and perceptive engagement with current affairs. She concludes: 'M. de Pomponne a très bien compris ce que nous souhaitons de lui, en cas qu'il vienne un courier, et le fera sans doute' ['Pomponne understood perfectly what we would like him to do if a letter comes, and he will do it no doubt']. She continues 'De vous conter tout ce qui s'est dit d'agréable et d'obligeant pour vous, et quelles aimables conversations on a avec ce ministre, tout le papier de mon portefeuille n'y suffirait pas' ['All the paper in my portfolio would not suffice for telling you all the pleasant and kind things said about you and what delightful conversations I have had with the minister'].²⁷ Pomponne did support his old friend Sévigné in her efforts to persuade her daughter of the necessity of returning to Paris and represented her son-in-law, the marquis de Grignan, in the royal councils.²⁸ This is the background to the pleasure Madame de Sévigné took in reporting that she was writing from Pomponne's house in July 1675.

After opening her letter of 19 July 1675 with routine pleasantries, Sévigné turns to events in Paris. She describes the religious procession in honour of Sainte Geneviève held to abate a month of heavy rain; she briefly reports news of the army; and she gossips about society figures. Madame de Monaco, she reports, had been seen around Paris '*incognito*' with little regard for 'sa dignité' ['her dignity'].²⁹ Then she turns to the matters closest to her heart: her daughter, and her daughter's letters. She writes:

Je vis hier une de vos lettres à l'abbé de Pontcarré, qui est la plus divine lettre du monde; il n'y a rien qui ne pique et qui ne soit salé. Il en a envoyé une copie à l'Éminence, car l'original est gardé comme la châsse. Vous écrivez très parfaitement bien, je vous en assure.³⁰

[I saw yesterday one of your letters to the abbé de Pontcarré, which is one of the loveliest letters in the world, everything in it is to the point and witty. He has sent a copy to His Eminence, for the original is kept like the shrine. You write quite perfectly I assure you.]³¹

She is delighted to report to her daughter that her superlative letter has been admired, copied and read by members of her network. Sévigné circulates Grignan's private letters to bolster her daughter's position within society during her physical absence.

In her letter of 19 July 1675, Sévigné continues her efforts to draw Pomponne and his milieu into her epistolary dialogue with her daughter and thereby translate an imagined, idealized, and very much desired, social scene into a reality. As foreshadowed in the opening, a paragraph penned by Madame de Vins, Pomponne's sister-in-law, appears towards the end of the letter. In this brief, and rather insubstantial, sociable affirmation of friendship and loyalty, Madame de Vins writes: 'N'allez pas croire que c'est Mme de Sévigné qui est cause que je vous écris. Si je suivais mon inclination, je vous assure, Madame, que vous entendriez souvent parler de moi' ['Don't think it is Mme de Sévigné who is the reason for my writing. If I followed my own heart, I assure you, Madame, that you would often hear about me'].³² This is the language of fashionable courtly epistolary civility, or 'exchange of compliments', popularized by Serre and Du Bosc. And here it serves to fulfill Sévigné's aim to nourish social networks and establish her daughter within society. Ambassador Courtin, the second collaborator, contributes a longer paragraph. In a parodic tone he writes:

Madame votre mère se fait la dernière violence en me cédant la plume. Je l'arrache d'entre ses mains pour vous dire, Madame, que, pour peu qu'il vous reste de bon sens dans un pays où le cerveau dessèche fort aisément, vous l'emploieriez pour revenir à Paris sur la fin d'octobre. Toute la cour, qui n'a subsisté cet hiver qu'aux dépens de Mme de Sévigné, vous conjure, et moi plus que personne, quoique je n'aie pas eu la hardiesse de vous approcher.³³

[Madame your mother is doing herself the utmost violence by yielding the pen to me. I am snatching it from her hands to tell you, Madame, that what little good sense remains to you in a land where the brain easily dries up, you had better use to come back to Paris at the end of October. The whole Court, which only survived last winter thanks to Madame

de Sévigné, entreates you to come, and I more than anyone, although I haven't made so bold as to approach you.]³⁴

Courtin's exaggerated mock courtesy imitates the discourse of the fashionable salon letter writers, exemplified by Balzac and Voiture. He claims he must close at Sévigné's insistence. Madame de Sévigné's 19 July 1675 letter is a sophisticated adaptation of epistolary form. In it she strives to maintain an emotional dialogue with Grignan and to realize her long-term plan of establishing her in Parisian socio-political networks. Through the conversational immediacy of her prose, she encourages her daughter to imagine herself present at Pomponne's house. At the same time, she prompted her friends to view her daughter as a member of the 'in' crowd and invited them to write segments within her letters to her daughter. She showed them Grignan's letters and encouraged them to read and praise them; and then reported their responses to her daughter. Thus, Sévigné developed an intertextual multi-voiced epistolary style designed to insinuate her daughter into her social world and develop the networks and allegiances that would make her daughter's daily presence in her life a reality.

Although Sévigné counted a number of published authors amongst her friends and was celebrated as a letter writer during her own life (she was present when her letters were read out at salon meetings), there is no concrete evidence that she wrote letters with an eye to publication.³⁵ Sévigné's letters were not published in her lifetime, but they have been in print consistently since the late-seventeenth century. During the early-eighteenth century, Sévigné's granddaughter, Pauline de Grignan, marquise de Simiane (1674–1737) employed an editor to produce a definitive version of her œuvre. It was published to great acclaim in 1725 and other volumes followed. Simiane was an intrusive editor, who excluded letters concerning family matters, expunged passages and rewrote others. In the prefatory letter addressed to her cousin, Bussy, Simiane describes shaping the correspondence for publication: 'The Remainder appeared to me too much mingled with domestic Affairs: But this Remainder is not less beautiful than what I have sent you; and I almost regret the Concealment of it'.³⁶ Acknowledging that the publication of Sévigné's letters without her daughter's replies left gaps in the narrative, Simiane toyed with the idea of a subsequent edition that would include Grignan's letters, but this never eventuated.³⁷ Afterwards Simiane destroyed the originals in her possession (both sides of the correspondence).

In England Sévigné's letters were received with welcome arms; elite readers perceived an unstudied prose that exuded good taste. This fitted the ethos articulated by Anthony Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury, that 'the best of our modern conversations are apt to run chiefly upon trifles' and that 'rational discourses (especially those of a deeper speculation) have lost their credit, and are in disgrace because of their formality'.³⁸ In June 1726, a year after their publication in France, Sévigné's letters became available in London. That month Lady Mary Wortley Montagu wrote to her sister Lady Mar:

The last pleasure that fell my way was Madam Sevigny's Letters; very pretty they are, but I assert without the least vanity that mine will be full as entertaining 40 years hence. I advise you therefore to put none of 'em to the use of Waste paper.³⁹

The publication of Sévigné's private letters gave dignity and *gravitas* to women's epistolary discourse and reading them made Montagu reflect upon the legacy of her own letter writing.

The anonymous translator of the 1727 English edition of Sévigné's letters acknowledged that his dedicatee had already read the letters in French, as many educated English people had, but this edition ensured that the collection was read more widely. The 1727 English edition is a hybrid of French and English editorial conventions. Like prior translations of French women's letters into English, such as Ierome Hainhofer's 1638 *The Secretary of Ladies*, a translation of Du Bosc's *Nouveau Recueil de lettres des dames de ce temps*, this is signalled through the frontispiece and multiple dedications, some written for the translation and others for the original French edition. In the French tradition Sévigné's name and social position were crucial to the publication. Accordingly, the title page reads: *Letters of Madame de Rabutin Chantal, Marchioness de Seigne to the Comtess de Grignan, her Daughter*. This open acknowledgement of authorship sits in juxtaposition with the English translator's dedication to 'the Right Honourable, The Lady ***' signed anonymously 'Your Ladyship's most Obedient Humble Servant'. English ladies of quality were wary of print and if they embraced it, they did so under the cover of anonymity.⁴⁰ Stressing the letter writer's identity, the translator predicts:

It is easy to foresee, that the celebrated Productions of a Lady of the Rank and Character of Madame de Seigne, will be frequently made a Subject of Discourse in the best Company; and that a Turn of Wit so new and peculiar, which will be rightly tasted by few, will be often admired.⁴¹

In the preface Sévigné's cousin, Monsieur de Bussy, provides details of her family pedigree and biography.

Sévigné's letters, Bussy suggests, reveal the heightened emotional life of a woman who was 'extremely touched with this Loss [of her husband] and To this was added, the Tenderness she had for a Son and a Daughter'.⁴² Then her daughter married 'And this Separation, cruel for so tender a Mother, gave Birth to the following Letters'.⁴³ He presents Grignan, her daughter, and then Simiane, her granddaughter-editor, as the natural inheritors of this 'tender' legacy: Simiane, he declares, is 'the last remaining Branch of the Family of *Rabutin Chantal*, of the House of Sévigné, and of the last marriage of the Comte de Grignan; the Heiress of the good Qualities, and the Estates of these three Houses'.⁴⁴ He writes 'This amiable Daughter, worthy of all the tenderness her Mother has expressed for her in the Letters which compose this Collection was *Françoise de Seigne*'. What he describes here is an affective legacy whose spirit is conveyed in the letters published in the volume. By implication, print readers will also enter the sociable fold.

By the mid-eighteenth century a number of collections of English letters indebted to Sévigné's example had been published. In particular John Boyle, Earl of Orrery's

Remarks upon the Life and Writings of Dr. Jonathan Swift, Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin (1751) was an important work by an author admired for his cultured sensibility. Boyle writes approvingly that Sévigné's letters 'contain nothing, except different scenes of maternal fondness; yet, like a classic, the oftener they are read, the more they are relished'.⁴⁵ In opening, Boyle describes reading his son's letters as an emotional experience undertaken 'not only with the fondness of a father, but the affection of a friend'.⁴⁶ Here Boyle echoes Sévigné's affective mode and makes his homage clear. Significantly, Boyle was an arbiter of good taste, and in presenting his remarks upon Swift in the form of letters to his son in the spirit of Sévigné, he modelled a species of sociable discourse that promoted particular ideas about tasteful affective networked communication between men.

Sévigné's example also shaped private networked communication between women. During the 1750s, while living on the Continent, Mary Wortley Montagu wrote regularly to her daughter, Mary Stuart, Countess of Bute. Her daughter replied infrequently, making Montagu 'quite sick with vexations at the Interruptions of [their] Correspondence'.⁴⁷ Like Sévigné in her letters to Grignan, Montagu urged her daughter to write more regularly and at greater length. She honed her ideas on good letter writing by critiquing published epistolary works, including Boyle's *Remarks*, sent to her by her daughter. She described the author as 'a Poet, a Patriot, a Philosopher, a Physician, a Critic, a complete Scholar, and a most excellent Moralist, shining in private Life as a submissive Son, a tender Father, and zealous Friend'.⁴⁸ Here she attributes to Boyle's style qualities associated with Sévigné's writing, specifically the tenderness and morality 'shining in private Life' made public through publication. However, she questioned his assessment of another contemporary epistolary work (Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke's *Letters on the Study and Use of History*, 1752), declaring that: 'Well turn'd periods and smooth lines [...] serve to adorn, but can never stand in the Place of good sense'. 'Copiousness of words [she continued] is always false Eloquence'.⁴⁹ The principle of tasteful *copia* which she invokes, brought Sévigné to mind. As Montagu perceived, a woman's private letters provided the tasteful affective discourse emulated by men of letters – including Boyle, Bolingbroke and even Voltaire – that underpinned the international cultural network often described as the republic of letters. Implicitly Montagu perceived that the discourse of women's private letters was being co-opted for the purposes of a predominantly masculinist network. She admitted that Sévigné was also prone to *copia* but unlike Boyle and Bolingbroke, 'She is [...] to be excus'd as her Letters were not intended for the Press'.⁵⁰ Sévigné had the genuinely natural style of 'a first rate Author'. Although Sévigné's preoccupations were domestic, intimate and apparently trivial – 'Sometimes tittle tattle of a fine Lady, sometimes that of an old Nurse, all-waies tittle tattle; yet gilt over by airy expressions and a Flowing Style' – Montagu desired precisely this kind of trifling domestic *copia* from her daughter.⁵¹ She assured her: 'You can never want something to say. The Historys of your Nursery, if you had no other subject to write on, would be very acceptable to me'.⁵² By reclaiming Sévigné's authentic epistolary style, Montagu underscored its origins in letters dashed off by an affectionate mother to convey affection to her daughter and lure her back

to Parisian society. Montagu's disavowal of letters written for posterity was disingenuous as she already had a reputation as a writer, her letters and poetry were in circulation and, as she had admitted years earlier to her sister, she foresaw that in time her own letters would be published and imitated.

Sévigné's letters to her daughter modelled an affective mode of sociability motivated by serious social, religious and political ambitions yet communicated with a lightness of tone. Her aim was not only to communicate with her beloved daughter, but also to establish her within Parisian social and political networks. As her letters reveal, these networks were underpinned by shared religious, political and moral values and were bound together via extension of the standard two-way epistolary dialogue between author and addressee to include other writers and readers. Readers of her published letters recognized the intimate affective dialogue between a fond mother and her beloved daughter as a template for networking among people of taste. Over the course of the eighteenth century, Sévigné's style was readily adapted by writers at the forefront of the Enlightenment and politics. Voltaire, Boyle, Bolingbroke and Montagu admired Sévigné's charming negligence, affectionate tone and light-touch approach. Sévigné's affective mode served to bind people together, the negligence caught people off guard and the ostensible triviality provided a gentle means of initiating discussion of serious intellectual, political or social issues.

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NOTES

¹ Roger Duchêne, 'The Letter: Men's Genre/Women's Practice', in *Women Writers in Pre-Revolutionary France: Strategies of Emancipation*, ed. by Colette H. Winn and Donna Kuizenga, trans. by Donna Kuizenga and Suzanne W. Drolet (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), p. 323. Roland Racevskis, 'Time, Postal Practices, and Daily Life in Mme de Sévigné's Letters', in Roland Racevskis, *Time and Ways of Knowing Under Louis XIV: Molière, Sévigné, Lafayette* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2003), pp. 92–94.

² Madame de Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. Roger Duchêne 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), II, juillet 1675–septembre 1680, p. 11; Madame de Sévigné, *Selected Letters*, ed. by Leonard Tancock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 163.

³ Madeleine and Catherine des Roches, *From Mother and Daughter: Poems, Dialogues and Letters of Les dames des Roches*, ed. and trans. by Anne Larsen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); see also Amanda Eurich, 'Prescribing Gender: The Letter Book in Early Modern France', *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History*, 39 (2011), 1–12.

⁴ See Roger Chartier, 'An Ordinary Kind of Writing: Model Letters and Letter-Writing in Ancien Régime France', in *Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Roger Chartier, Alain Boureau and Cécile Dauphin, trans. by Christopher Woodall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997 [1991]), pp. 1–23.

⁵ See Aurora Wolfgang and Sharon Diane Nell, 'Reclaiming the Works of Early Modern Women: Authorship, Gender and Interpretation in the *Nouveau Recueil de lettres des dames de ce temps*

(1635)', *Intertexts*, 13.1–2 (2009), 1–16; and Diana G. Barnes, *Epistolary Community in Print, 1580–1664* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 73–102.

⁶ Duchêne, 'The Letter', pp. 315–34.

⁷ Janet Altman, 'The Letter Book as a Literary Institution 1539–1789: Toward a Cultural History of Published Correspondence in France', *Yale French Studies*, 71 (1986), 17–62; Roger Chartier, 'Trajectoires et tensions culturelles de l'Ancien Régime', in *Histoire de la France*, ed. by André Burguière and Jacques Revel, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 1993), III, 29–242, cited in Faith E. Beasley, *Salons, History and the Creation of Seventeenth-Century France: Mastering Memory* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 247.

⁸ Anon, 'To the Right Honourable, the Lady ***', in *Letters of Madame de Rabutin Chantal, Marchioness de Sevigne to the Comtess de Grignan, her daughter* (London: N. Blandford, 1727), pp. 6, 10.

⁹ On Madame de Sévigné's report of the trial of Vatel, see Michele Longino Farrell, 'Writing Letters, Telling Tales, Making History: Vatel's Death Told and Retold', *French Review*, 66.2 (December 1992), 229–42.

¹⁰ Leonard Tancock, 'Introduction', in Madame de Sévigné, *Selected Letters*, p. 10, and Domna C. Stanton, 'From the Maternal Metaphor to Metonymy and History: Seventeenth-Century Discourses of Maternity and the Case of Sévigné', in *The Mother in/and French Literature*, ed. by Buford Norman, *French Literature Series* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2000), xxvii, pp. 1–32 (pp. 14–15).

¹¹ 'A letter of Marquise de Simiane to the Comte de Bussy, sent him with the Collection she had made of the Letters of Madame de Sévigné, her Grandmother', in *Letters of Madame Rabutin de Chantal, Marchioness de Sevigne*, p. xx.

¹² 'A letter of Marquise de Simiane to the Comte de Bussy', p. xxi.

¹³ On the uptake of Sévigné's style in France, see Chloe Summers Edmondson, 'Letters "à la Sévigné": A Seventeenth-Century model for the Eighteenth Century', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 54 (2024), 1–21.

¹⁴ Peter Burke, *The Fortunes of the 'Courtier'* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), p. 11.

¹⁵ Desiderius Erasmus, 'De conscribendis epistolis; On the Writing of Letters', trans. by Charles Fantazzi, in *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974–), xiv; *Literary and Educational Writings*, 3: *De conscribendis epistolis; Formula; De civilitate*, ed. by J. K. Sowards (1985), 1–254 (p. 20).

¹⁶ Sévigné to Grignan, 24 March 1671, *Correspondance*, 1, mars 1646–juillet 1675 (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 199; *Selected Letters*, p. 77.

¹⁷ Sévigné to Grignan, 4 March 1671, *Correspondance*, 1, 176; *Selected Letters*, p. 76.

¹⁸ Sévigné to Grignan, 8 April 1671, *Correspondance*, 1, 213; *Selected Letters* p. 89; see also 8 December 1673, *Correspondance*, 1, 636; *Selected Letters*, p. 151.

¹⁹ Sévigné to Grignan, 24 March 1671, *Correspondance*, 1, 201; *Selected Letters*, p. 79.

²⁰ On the emotionalism of Cicero's letters see Ruth Morello, 'Rumination, Resentment and Repetition: Latin Epistolarity and the Performance of Difficult Emotion', *Emotions and the Letter: A History from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. by Katie Barclay and Diana G. Barnes (London: Bloomsbury, 2025), pp. 23–43.

²¹ Sévigné to Grignan, 1 April 1671, *Correspondance*, 1, 207.

²² Sévigné to Grignan, 1 April 1671, *Selected Letters*, p. 84.

²³ Ruth Manning, 'A Confessor and his Spiritual Child: Francois de Sales, Jeanne de Chantal and the Foundation of the Order of the Visitation', *Past and Present*, Supplement 1 (2006), 101–17.

²⁴ On the English reception of French letters in the 1630s, see Barnes, pp. 73–102; and Lawrence D. Greene, 'French Letters and English Anxiety in the Seventeenth Century', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 66.3–4 (2003), 263–74.

²⁵ Sévigné to Grignan, 19 July 1673, *Correspondance*, II, 10; Sévigné to Grignan, *Selected Letters*, p. 161.

²⁶ See Sévigné to Grignan, 8 December 1673, *Correspondance*, 1, 633–36, esp. p. 636; Sévigné to Grignan, *Selected Letters*, pp. 149–52, esp. p. 151.

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- 28 Frances Mossiker, *Madame de Sévigné: A Life and Letters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 166–69.
- 29 Sévigné to Grignan, 19 July 1675, *Correspondance*, II, 10–11; Sévigné to Grignan, *Selected Letters*, p. 162.
- 30 Sévigné to Grignan, 19 July 1675, *Correspondance*, II, 11.
- 31 Sévigné to Grignan, 19 July 1675, *Selected Letters*, p. 162.
- 32 Sévigné to Grignan, 19 July 1675, *Correspondance*, II, 12; Sévigné to Grignan, 19 July 1675, *Selected Letters*, p. 163.
- 33 Sévigné to Grignan, 19 July 1675, *Correspondance*, II, 12.
- 34 Sévigné to Grignan, 19 July 1675, *Selected Letters*, 163.
- 35 For the critical debate about the degree to which Sévigné wrote for a public, see Janet Gerkin Altman, ‘Women’s Letters in the Public Sphere’, in *Going Public: Women and Publishing in Early Modern France*, ed. by Elizabeth C. Goldsmith and Dena Goodman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 99; Mary McAlpin, *Gender, Authenticity and the Missive Letter in Eighteenth-Century France: Marie-Anne de La Tour, Rousseau’s Real-Life Julie* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2006), pp. 14–15; Catherine R. Montfort, ‘Madame de Sévigné (Marie de Rabutin-Chantal), *Lettres* (1648–1696)’, in *Writings by Pre-Revolutionary French Women: From Marie de France to Elizabeth Vigée-Le Brun*, ed. by Anne R. Larsen and Colette H. Winn (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 329–31. On the importance of the assumption that she did not write for publication, see Montfort, ‘Madame de Sévigné (Marie de Rabutin-Chantal), *Lettres* (1648–1696)’, p. 124, n. 10 and p. 114; on the public reading of her letters at the salon, see Beasley, *Salons*, p. 30.
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- 37 *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.
- 38 Anthony Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury, ‘*Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*’ (London: E. Sanger, 1709), p. 54.
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