Early Modern Mothers and Daughters: Passing Wisdom and Wit
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Workshop Summary

This workshop explores the passing of women’s wisdom through the generations, focusing on the iconographic tradition of literate female saints and on the self-image created by the early modern mother-daughter writing team, Madeleine and Catherine des Roches. We consider how medieval and renaissance sacred and secular images depicting female literacy might correspond to mother-daughter humanist teaching, learning, and literary self-representation. In keeping with the conference’s theme, the workshop:

• Addresses time across generations from mother to daughter, and from the medieval “mother” tradition to the renaissance “daughter” life writing
• Addresses commemoration through the narratives of praise and through life writing in the des Roches prefaces
• Addresses periodization by questioning continuity and disruption from the middle ages to the renaissance

Workshop Description

Madeleine des Roches (1520-87) educated her daughter Catherine (1542-1587) to become a humanist and a poet. As Catherine refused offers of marriage, after the death of Madeleine’s husband the two lived alone together for over ten years, and it was in the year of Madeleine’s husband’s death that they began publishing their work (1578). The two women created a humanist circle around them that produced, among other works, a light-hearted volume of poems inspired by a flea on Catherine’s breast, *La Puce de madame des-Roches* (1582), to which they also contributed. The title pages of their collections of poems glory in the relationship: “Madeleine et Catherine Des Roches de Poitiers, mère et fille.” Their three collections are divided into sections of each woman’s work, each prefaced with epistles praising their bond and co-publication.

How might women like the des Roches have conceived of their relationship as mother and daughter, teacher and student, and literary collaborators? What larger cultural forces enabled their writing, and what views of women’s transgenerational teaching and learning might their writing reflect? Deakins, Lockridge, and Sterk emphasize the spread of literacy as central to the emergence of early modern women’s voices, including the education of daughters for new roles (71). Although medieval historian Pamela Sheingorn asserted a shift in visual representation of Saint Anne from her relationship with other women and role in educating the Virgin Mary to her subordination to her husband in the early sixteenth century, we observe continuity in depictions of Anne teaching Mary, and we see portrayals of literacy consistently appearing in the iconography of Mary’s life and other female saints’ lives, particularly in the name saints of the des Roches. We seek to explore whether the des Roches’ writings and the visual tradition represent a continuation through time of the topos of Saint Anne teaching her daughter and of women’s learning as represented in other saints’ lives and at other moments in Mary’s life. Is there something unique to the passing of wit and wisdom through time in the generations when
that passing comes from mother to daughter? What difference does it make when the daughter speaks for herself and writes a commemoration of her mother’s influence, as Catherine des Roches does? This juxtaposition will also allow us to explore larger disciplinary questions about the relationship of visual art and literature and of the value of comparisons across eras and cultures: does the medium change the message? does differing national context render comparison problematic? are the “mother” middle ages and “daughter” renaissance as separate as the renaissance liked to believe?

**Workshop Questions**

We propose three major questions for discussion in working groups:

- When we consider a wider range of data from the visual tradition of female saints’ literacy than Sheingorn does, how does our perception of the tradition change? How might the medieval and renaissance iconography depicting Saint Anne teaching Mary as well as other female saints’ literacy and learning have enabled women like the des Roches to conceive of and authorize their own reading, writing, and teaching?

- Can we challenge Anne R. Larsen’s portrait of the des Roches as defensive and apologetic? In particular, when we consider sonnets that are built around passionate mother-daughter love, how can we complicate Larsen’s depiction of the mother-daughter relationship?

- What is the nature of the mother-daughter relationship that emerges from the visual tradition and the des Roches?

**Preliminary Readings**

- Images of Saint Anne teaching Mary, additional images of Mary’s life and literacy, images of the des Roches’ name saints, and portraits of mothers and daughters
- Madeleine and Catherine des Roches, selected prefaces and poems (in translation)

**Suggested Readings**


EPISTRE AUX DAMES
Si le marbre bien taillé, ou les couleurs du pinceau employé d’une docte main,
nous ont fait connoistre, non la seule beauté du corps, mais encore les
moeurs et complexions de ceux qu’ils ont representez, j’ay pensé que la
parole, vraye image de l’ame, et la voix fuyante arrestée par la plume sur le
papier, donnoit un certain indice, non seulement de la richesse de l’esprit et
de ses sens acquis ou naturels, mais de l’integrité naïve de ceux qui parlent ou
escrivent Pour ceste cause, j’ay voulu en ce petit tableau où je me suis de-
peinte, arrester ma parolle, pour vous asseurer de l’amitié entiere que j’ay tou-
sjours portée à vous (Mesdames) si aucunes de vous daignez lire mes humbles
vers. Et si, m’estant plus charitables, vous m’advisez que le silence, ornement
de la femme, peut couvrir les fautes de la langue et de l’entendement, je re-
spandray qu’il peut bien empescher la honte, mais non pas accroistre l’hon-
neur, aussi que le parler nous separe des animaux sans raison. Au fort j’espre-
re de voz courtoisies que si vous ne me jugez digne d’estime, vous ne penserez
pas que je merite grande reprehension, pource que si c’est peu de mes escrits
pour la valeur, aussi n’est-ce point beaucoup pour la longueur.Ainsi vous me
trouverez aucunelement excusable, mais il vaut mieux que je trouve la fin de
mon epistre assez pres du commencement, de crainte que vous ennuiant pour
sa longueur, elle contredisse à moy-mesme et à vostre désir, de sorte qu’il me
fallust chercher excuse à mon excuse. Adieu mes Dames.

EPISTRE À MA FILLE
Les anciens amateurs de sçavoir
Disoient qu’à Dieu faut rendre le devoir,
Puis au pays, et le tiers au lignage,
Les induisant à force de courage,
Soit quelques fois pour souffrir passion,
Soit pour dompter la forte affection.
Au Seigneur Dieu je porte reverence,
Pour mon pays, je n’ay point de puissance,
Les hommes ont toute l’autorité,
Contre raison et contre l’équité.
Mais envers toy, fille qui m’es si proche,
Ce me seroit un grand blasme et reproche
De te conduire au sentier plus battu,
Veu que ton cuer est né à la vertu.
Il ne suffit pourtant d’estre bien nées,
Le sens acquis nous rend morigenées,
Et le flambeau dans nostre ame allumé,
[DEDICATORY EPISTLE BY MADELEINE DES ROCHES]

EPISTLE TO THE LADIES
If the well-chiseled marble, or the colors of a paintbrush employed by a skilled hand, acquaint us with not only the physical beauty but the manners and traits of those they depict, it is my opinion that the word, true image of the soul, and the fleeting voice recorded by the pen onto paper, give a certain indication not only of the richness of the mind and of its acquired or natural capacities but of the natural integrit of those who speak or write. For this reason, I have wanted, in this little work wherein I have depicted myself, to take the time to assure you of the true friendship which I have always felt for you, my ladies, that is, if some of you deign to read my humble verse.

And if, out of greater charity for me, you advise me that silence, the ornament of woman, can cover errors of the tongue and of understanding, I will answer you that silence may well prevent shame but cannot increase honor, and that speech distinguishes us from the reasonless beasts. At least I count on your courtesy, that if you do not judge me worthy of esteem, you will not think that I should be greatly reprehended, for if the value of my writings is not great, neither is their length. Therefore, you will find me somewhat worthy of excuse; but I had better end my letter near its beginning for fear that by boring you on account of its length, I contradict myself and your wishes, and I must then apologize for my excuse. Adieu, Mesdames.

EPISTLE TO MY DAUGHTER
Ancient lovers of wisdom
Said that to God one must do one's duty,
Then to one's country, and finally to one's lineage;
Leading [their listeners] by dint of courage,
Sometimes to endure suffering,
And other times to overcome their strong longings.
I revere Almighty God;
As for my country, I am powerless;
Men have all the authority,
Against reason and against fairness.
But in what concerns you, my daughter who are so dear to me,
I would be subject to great blame and reproach
Were I to lead you down the beaten path,
For your heart is naturally inclined to virtue.
It is not enough, however, to be wellborn;
Acquired knowledge makes us well-mannered,
And the fire burning in our soul,
Sans le sçavoir est bientost consommé.
La lettre sert d'une saincte racine,
Pour le regime, et pour la Medecine:
La lettre peut changer le vitieux,
La lettre accroist le cueur du vertueux,
La lettre est l'art qui prenant la matiere
Luy peut donner sa forme plus entiere.
Ce brief discours sur un tel argument
Soit bien receu de ton entendement,
Ma fille unique, et de moy cher tenue,
Non pour autant que tu en es venue
Et que dans toy je me voy un pourtraict
Du poil, du teint, de la taille, et du traict,
Façon, maintien, parolle, contenance,
Et l'aige seul en fait la difference;
Ny pour nous voir tant semblables de corps,
Ny des esprits les gracieux accords,
Ny ceste douce aymable sympathie,
Qui faict aymer la semblable partie,
N'ont point du tout causé l'entier effect
De mon amour envers toy si parfaict,
Ny les efforts mis en moy par nature,
Ny pour autant qu'és de ma nourriture.
Mais le penser, qu'entre tant de mal-heurs,
De maux, d'ennuis, de peines, de douleurs,
Sujection, tourment, travail, tristesse,
Qui puis treze ans ne m'ont point donne cesse,
Tuy as, enfant, apporçt un cueur fort,
Pour resister au violent effort
Qui m'accabloit, et m'offris d'es enfance
Amour, conseil, support, obeissance.
Le tout puissant à qui j'eu mon recours,
A faict de toy naistre mon seul secours.
Or je ne puis de plus grands benefices
Recompenser tes louables offices,
Que te prier de faire ton devoir
Envers la Muse et le divin scavoire.
"Mais le vray centre et globe de l'estude,
"C'est de donner à vertu habitude,
"Et se vouloir en elle insinuer;"
When deprived of learning is soon consumed.
Letters can be a sacred resource
For one's health, and for medicinal use;
Letters can change the vice-ridden,
Letters can increase the courage of the virtuous,
And letters are the art that give
To matter its most perfect form.
May this brief discourse on such a topic
Find in you a warm welcome,
My only daughter, so precious to me,
Not because you come from me,
And because in you I see my reflection
In hair, complexion, build, and trait,
Manner, bearing, word, countenance,
And only age distinguishes us;
Nor the sight of so great a physical resemblance,
Nor the gracious compatibility of our minds,
Nor this sweet amiable sympathy
That makes us love the one who is like us,
Can fully account for the extent
Of my perfect love for you,
Or the strength that nature has given me,
Or the fact that such strength is my sustenance.
But the thought that amidst so many calamities,
Ills, troubles, sorrows, pains,
Subjection, torment, work, sadness,
Which for thirteen years have given me no respite,
You, child, have shown a strong heart,
Resisting the violent travail
That overwhelmed me, and you have offered me since childhood
Love, counsel, support, and obedience.
The Almighty in whom I took my refuge
Has made you the sole source of my succor.
To reward you for your worthy services
I cannot grant you a greater gift
Than to urge you to do your duty
Toward the Muse and divine learning.
"But the true aim and goal of study
Is to make out of virtue a habit
And to want to become part of it;
O n e

L’habit se fait difficile à muer.
Tu es au temps pour apprendre bien née,
Et sembles être aux Muses inclinée.
Le Ciel te face avoir tant de désir
Des saintes moeurs, le seul juste plaisir,
Et le Démon, qui l’œuvre a commencée,
Guide si bien l’effet de ta pensée,
Que témoin à la postérité
Combien d’honneur tu auras mérité,
Tu sois un jour par vertu immortelle,
Je t’ay toujours souhaitée être telle.

O D E 1

Si mes escris n’ont gravé sur la face
Le sacré nom de l’immortalité,
Je ne l’ay quis

Non plus que mérité,
Si je ne l’ay de faveur ou de grâce.

Je ne descry Neptune en sa tourmente,
Je ne peins pas Jupiter irrité,
Le vase ouvert, la fuite d’équité,
Dont notre terre à bon droit se lamente.

L’enfant venu de Porus et Poenie,
Qu’on dit brûler le plus froid des glaçons,
Se plaît d’ouyr les superbes chansons.
Et je me play d’une basse harmonie.

Mais qui pourroit, chargé de tant de peine,
L’esprit génné de cent mille malheurs,
Voir Apollon reverer les neuf Sœurs,
Et dignement puiser en leur fontaine?

Le Ciel a bien infuz dedans nostre Ame
Les petits feux, principes de vertu:
Mais le chaud est par le froid combatu,
Si un beau bois n’alimente la flamme.

Nature veut la lettre et l’exercice
Pour faire voir un chef-d’oeuvre parfaict,
For such a habit is then difficult to break.  
You are born at an auspicious time for learning,
And you seem inclined to the Muses.  
May Heaven give you such a longing
For saintly living, the only source of just pleasure,
And may the Daemon, who began this work in you,
So well guide your thoughts and actions,
That posterity may know
How much honor you will have merited.
May you some day become immortal through your virtue.
It is thus that I have always wanted you to be.

ODE I

If my writings do not have engraved on their cover
The sacred name of immortality,
Neither have I acquired nor earned that name,
Unless it were by favor or by grace.

I do not depict Neptune in his torments,
Nor do I paint angry Jupiter,
The open vase, the flight of equity,
Which our land rightly laments.

The child of Porus and Penia
Who is said to burn up the coldest of ice,
Delights to hear lofty songs;
Yet I am content with a humbler harmony.

But who, weighed down by so much sorrow,
With mind racked by a hundred thousand misfortunes,
Could ever behold Apollo revere the nine Sisters,
And draw from their fountain in a worthy manner?

Heaven has indeed infused within our Soul
Small sparks, principles of virtue,
But heat is often overcome by cold
If a good supply of wood doesn't feed the flame.

Nature requires that both learning and exercise
Combine to perfect a chef-d'oeuvre;
Elle, bien sage en toutes choses, faict
Ses premiers traits limer à l'artifice.

Noz parens ont de loüables coutumes,
Pour nous tollir l'usage de raison,
De nous tenir closes dans la maison
Et nous donner le fuzeau pour la plume.

Trassant noz pas selon la destinée,
On nous promet liberté et plaisir:
Et nous payons l'obstiné desplaisir,
Portant le dot sous les loix d'Hymenée.

Bientost apres survient une misere
Qui naist en nous d'un desir mutuel,
Accompagné d'un soing continuel,
Qui suit toujours l'entraille de la mere.

Il faut soudain que nous changions l'office
Qui nous pouvoit quelque peu façonner,
Où les marys ne nous feront sonner
Que l'obeir, le soing, et l'avarice.

Quelcun d'entr'eux, ayant fermé la porte
A la vertu, nourrice du sçavoir,
En nous voyant craint de la recevoir
Pource qu'ell' porte habit de nostre sorte.

L'autre reçoit l'esprit de jalousie,
Qui, possesseur d'une chaste beauté,
Au nid d'Amour loge la cruauté,
En bourellant sa propre fantasie.

Pyrrha choisist une claire semence
Pour repeupler le terrestre manoir,
Et Déucal sema le caillou noir,
Dont le Ciel mesme a faict experience.

Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, combien de tolerance
Que je ne veux icy ramentevoir!
She, wise in every way, demands that
Craftsmanship join talent to shape a work of art.\(^{40}\)

Our parents have laudable customs\(^{41}\)
To deprive us of the use of our reason:
They lock us up at home
And hand us the spindle instead of the pen.

Conforming our steps to our [female] destiny,
They promise us liberty and pleasure:
But we reap continuous displeasure,
When we lose our dowry to the laws of Marriage.\(^{42}\)

Then soon after comes a new misery,
Born within us of mutual desire,
Accompanied by those continuous cares
That always burden the mother's womb.

Suddenly we must reorder all those tasks
That fashioned our lives in some way,
For our husbands will harangue us to the tune of
Obedience, hard labor, and stinginess.\(^{40}\)

One such husband, because he closed his door
To virtue, mother of learning,
On seeing us fears to welcome her back
Because she wears the garb of our sex.

Another, filled with jealousy,
Now in possession of a beautiful chaste lady,
Resorts to cruelty in the nest of Love,
Tormenting his own misguided fantasies.

Pyrrha chose a light seed
To repopulate the earth,
But Deucalion sowed black stones
As Heaven itself knows well.\(^{43}\)

My God, my God, how much suffering
I don't care to remember here!
Il me suffit aux hommes faire voir
Combien leurs loix nous font de violence.

Les plus beaux jours de noz vertes années
Semblent les fleurs d’un printemps gracieux,
Pressé d’orage, et de vent pluvieux,
Qui vont borner les courses terminées.

Au temps heureux de ma saison passée,
J'avoy bien l'aile unie à mon costé:
Mais en perdant ma jeune liberté,
Avant le vol ma plume fut cassée.

Je voudroy bien m'arester sur le livre,
Et au papier mes peines souspirer.
Mais quelque soing m’en vient toujours tirer,
Disant qu’il faut ma profession suivre.

L’Agrigentin du sang de Stesichore
A dignement honoré le sçavoir.
Qui envers nous feit semblable devoir,
Pareil miracle on reverroit encore.

Dames, faisons ainsi que l’Amarante
Qui par l’hyver ne pert sa belle fleur:
L’esprit imbu de divine liqueur
Rend par labeur sa force plus luisante.

Pour supporter les maux de nostre vie,
Dieu nous feit part de l’intellect puissant
Pour le reduire à l’intellect agent
Maugré la mort, la fortune, et l’envie.

ODE 3
Heureux fardeau qui aporte
Tant d’honneur; fussé-je forte
Pour chanter d’un ton divin
L’astre clair, dont la lumiere
Est d’esclairer coustumiere
Le rivage Poëtevin.
It is enough if I can make men see
How much their laws do violence to us.

The most beautiful years of our verdant youth
Seem but the flowers of a gracious springtime,
Pressed in by storms and rainy winds,
That halt in the end the course of life.

In the happy moments of my yesteryear,
I bore my wings close by my side:
But, in losing my youthful freedom,
My feathered pen was clipped before I flew.

I so long to spend time with my books
And, sighing, cast my sorrows onto paper.
But some distracting trouble always diverts me,
Claiming that I must pursue a wife’s vocation.

The Agrigentan worthily honored
The learning of the daughters of Stesichorus.
He who would do the same to us
Would bring about a similar miracle.

Ladies, let us live as the amaranth
That does not lose its beautiful flower in winter:
The mind imbued with a divine sap,
Through labor makes its strength shine brightly.

To help us bear the misfortunes of life,
God imparts to us a mighty intellect
That we are to turn into an active force
In spite of death, fortune, and envy.

ODE 3
Happy the burden that brings
Such great honor! Would that I were strong enough
To praise with a heavenly voice
The brilliant sun whose light
Illuminates every day
The riverbanks of Poitiers.
Mais je n'ay pas la puissance
Egalle à la connaissance,
Ainsi que faut le pouvoir;
Si ce que je puis je donne,
Je vous pry qu'on me pardonne
Si je ne fay mon devoir.

Quand par plus claires bucines,
Dames graves et insignes,
Vostre loz sera chanté,
Ne desdaignez pas l'ouvrage
Qui vous porte tesmoignage
De ma bonne volonté.

Au moins, mes Dames, ne faictes
Comme Judée aux prophetes
A eux peculiers donnez;
Les vers que bas je souspire
Sur les fredons de ma lyre,
Ne soyent ainsi guerdonnez.

Quelque langue de Satyre,
Qui tient banque de mesdire,
Dira toujours, il suffit:
Une femme [est]\(^48\) assez sage
Qui file et faict son mesnage;
L'on y fait mieux son profit.

L'autre tient que c'est office
De plus louable exercice
Se lever un peu matin,
Dire mal de sa Cousine,
Quereler à sa voisine,
Ou festier Sainct Martin.

L'autre un peu mieux avisée
Se sent beaucoup plus prise
D'un habit bien etoufée,
D'une belle decoupure,
But my strength is not
Equal to my knowledge,
Lacking power as I do;
If I give what I can,
I beg you to forgive me
If I do not do my duty.

When, to the sound of a more worthy trumpet,
Solemn and illustrious Ladies,
Your honors shall be sung,
Do not disdain this work
That bears witness to you
Of my goodwill.

At least, my Ladies, do not act
As Judah did to the prophets
Who were sent to her,49
The lowly verses that, sighing, I strum
On the strings of my lyre,
Should not be thus rewarded.

Some Satyr's tongue
That loves to mock50
Will emphatically state:
Enough! All a woman needs to know is how
To spin and do her housework;
Such a woman is much more profitable.

Another insists that it is her duty
And a more laudable activity
To get up early each morning,
To speak ill of her Cousin,
Quarrel with her neighbor,
Or celebrate the feast of Saint Martin.51

Yet another, a bit better advised,
Feels much more prized
If she wears a beautiful dress,
Well cut and stitched,
D'un Carquan, d'une dorure,
D'un chaperon bien coiffé.

Mais quelque chose plus digne
A la dame Poïtevine
Que le brave acoutrement:
Jà desjà ell' faict costume
De choisir l'ancre et la plume
Pour l'employer doctement.

Aussi le Ciel qui a cure
De vous, mes Dames, vous jure,
Et ne jure point en vain,
Que vous pourrez de vous-mesme
Vous venger de la mort blesme
Sans mendier l'escrivain.

Le Clain et sa rive mole,
Admirant la docte échole
D'une si douce leçon:
Furiant contre l'envie
Donnera pour jamais vie
Aux vers de vostre façon.

Je vay par un riche Temple
Pour raporter quelque exemple
Des Dames d'exellent pris;
Mais pour le trop d'abondance
Ou pour mon insuffisance
Je n'en ay beaucoup apris.

J'y ay pourtant sçeu apprendre
Comme la mere d'Evandre
Les Arcades gouverna,
Par le moyen des loix sainctes
De religion etraintes
Que sagement leur donna.

On voit par le rond du monde
Le nom de Ceres la blonde
With a necklace besides or some other finery,
And fancy headgear.

But there is something far more worthy
For the lady of Poitiers
Than the gallant garment:
Already she has made it her habit
To choose ink and pen
And to employ these learnedly.

The Heavens, therefore, that take good care
Of you, my Ladies, swear to you,
And do not swear in vain,
That on your own you can
Take revenge on pale Fate
Without having to beg another writer. 52

The river Clain’s peaceful banks,
Home to the learned school 53
That teaches such sweet lessons,
Rages against envy
By granting long life
To the verses you will write. 60

I’ll visit a rich Temple
To bring back some examples
Of Ladies of excellent talent.
But because of its exceeding abundance,
Or on account of my insufficiency,
I have not learned enough about them.

I have, however, learned
How Evander’s mother 54
Governed the Arcadians
By means of sacred laws
Founded on religion
That she wisely gave them.

We see that throughout the world
The name of blond Ceres
De temps en temps refleurir,
Qui garda, tant ell' sçeut faire,
Porte-blez et Legifere,
Corps et ames de perir.

De la grand' Deesse armée,
Le loz et la renommée
Se borne par l'univers;
Moins ne se chante la gloire
Des neuf Filles de Memoire,
Ornement des plus beaux vers.

Celle que la Grece vante
Belle, docte, bien disante,
Qui tant de bon-heur acquit
Le prix qui, grave, la pare,
Porte le nom de Pindare
Qu'en Olympe elle vainquit.

Qui se taira de Camille,
De Tomiris, et de Mille,
Du siecle digne ornement;
Du Nil et de Babylone,
Et de celle dont Ausone
Ecrit veritablement.

Voyez les Dames de France
Qui ce monstre d'ignorance
Ont froissé en tant de pars,
Que leur quittant la carriere
Il saute sur la barriere,
Esloigné de leurs rampars.

Voy, ma fille, ma chere ame,
Fortune, Vertu, et Fame,
Se parer de ce beau nom;
Foy, Esperance, Concorde,
Pieté, Misericorde,
Toutes d'immortel renom.
Flowers time and time again.
Bearer of wheat and Maker of laws,\(^55\)
She kept bodies and souls from perishing
As she knew how to do so well.

The praise and renown
Of the great armed Goddess\(^56\)
Are limited by the universe only;
In equal manner is sung the glory
Of the nine Daughters of Memory,\(^57\)
Who embellish the most beautiful poems.

She of whom Greece boasts,
Beautiful, learned, and well spoken,
Who so happily won
The prize that, solemnly, adorns her,
Bears the name of Pindar
Whom on Olympus she vanquished.\(^58\)

Who can fail to speak of Camilla,\(^59\)
Of Tomyris\(^60\) and of all those
Who were illustrious in their time,
Those from the Nile region and from Babylon,
And her whom
Ausonius praised in his writings.\(^61\)

See the Ladies of France
Who have torn into so many pieces
That monster Ignorance;
Abandoning the playing field to them,
He jumps over the barrier,
And flees from their ramparts.\(^62\)

See, my daughter, my dearest soul,
Fortune, Virtue, and Fame
Are adorned with that beautiful name,\(^63\)
Faith, Hope, Concord,
Piety, and Mercy,
Are all of immortal renown.
EPISTRE A SA MERE

MA MERE, je sçay que vous ensuivant, je pourroy suivre un exemple de vertu suivy de bien peu de personnes; mais pourque je ne puis vous imiter, ny me tirer si promptement de la multitude, à tout le moins en cecy je fuiray la commune façon de la plus grand part de ceux qui escrivent, lesquels ont accoustumé de prier les lecteurs d'avoir leurs oeuvres pour agreables, comme s'ils vouloient par leurs courtisoises mendier les faveurs. Or quant à moy je leur donnerois volontiers licence de penser et dire de mes escrits tout ce que bon leur semblera, mais je croy qu'ils n'ont point besoing de ma permission. S'il y en a qui les reprennent avecques juste occasion, j'essairay de me corriger, tirant profit de leur censure; si quelques-uns en jugent sans avis et discretion, je penserai estre sans discretion et advis de m'arrester à leur jugement. Ils diront peut-estre que je ne devois pas escrire d'amour, que si je suis amoureuse il ne faut pas le dire, que si je ne suis telle il ne faut pas le feindre; je leur répondray à cela, que je ne le suis, ny ne feins de l'estre; car j'escry ce que j'ay pensé, et non pas ce que jay veu en Syncero, lequel je ne connoy que par imagination. Mais comme il est advenu à quelques grands personnages de representer un Roy parfaict, un parfaict orateur, un parfaict courtisan, ainsi aie-je voulu former un parfaict amoureux; et si l'on dit que pour avoir pris exemple de tant d'excellens hommes, je les ay mal ensuyvis, je diray aussi que les Roys, estant personnes publiques, doivent par leurs vertus estre l'ornement de leurs peuples, que les orateurs et courtisans ayant à paroistre devant les grands ont besoing de se pourvoir de toutes perfections qui les facent remarquer des sages et du vulgaire, mais Syncero ne veut plaire qu'à sa dame seulement, que j'ay formée à son patron le plus qu'il m'a esté possible, imitant nostre grand Dieu, lequel apres qu'il eut creé le pere Adam, luy donna une femme semblable à luy.

Beaucoup diront volontiers que je ne devoy point escrire de quelque sujet que ce soit, mesme en ce temps que nous voyons tant de Poëtes en la France. Je ne veux faire autre responce à ce propos là, sinon qu'il y a bien assez d'hommes qui escrivent, mais peu de filles se meslent d'un tel exercice, et j'ay tousjours désiré d'estre du nombre de peu; non pas que j'aye tant d'estime de moy que de me vouloir paragonner aux plus excellentes non plus qu'aux moindres: car je ne veux juger de moy ny par audace, ny par vilité de cuer. Au moins je ne me sentiray point coupable d'avoir perdu beaucoup de temps à composer un si petit ouvrage que cettuy-cy, pource que je n'y ay jamais employé d'heures, forcelles que les autres filles mettent à visiter les compagnies pour estre veües de leurs plus gentils serviteurs, desirant qu'ils puissent devenir dignes chantres de leurs beautez, encore qu'elles ayent bien la puissance de se chanter elles-mesmes. Toutesfois elles dedaignent de s'y prendre,
MOTHER, I know that in emulating you, I shall be able to follow an example of virtue matched by very few. But because I can neither imitate you nor elevate myself so easily above the common crowd, at the very least I'll not follow the normal way of the majority of those who write. That is, I'll not ask my readers to find my works agreeable, as if I could by such courtesies beg for their favors. Now, as far as I'm concerned, I'll freely give them permission to think and say whatever they like of my writings, but I don't believe they need my permission. If there are some who justly feel that there is room for improvement, I'll try to correct what I've written and take advantage of their critique. If others judge my work to be without sense or discretion, I'd be without discretion or sense in paying attention to them. Perhaps my readers will say that I should not have written about love, that if I am in love I must not say so, and if I am not, I should not pretend to be. To this I'll answer that I neither am in love nor pretend to be. For in Sincero I write what I have thought, not what I have actually seen, since I know him only through my imagination. But just as it has happened that certain great writers have represented a perfect king, a perfect orator, or a perfect courtier, so I have tried to fashion a perfect lover. And if some say that I have fallen short of the examples set by so many excellent men, I shall respond that kings, being public persons, must through their virtues be the ornament of their people, that orators and courtiers, having to appear before the great, need to outfit themselves with every kind of perfection, thus enabling them to be distinguished by both the wise and the common man. But Sincero wishes only to please his lady, whom I have fashioned to conform to him as much as was possible. In this way I have imitated our great God who, after He created father Adam, gave him a wife resembling him.

Many will likely say that I shouldn't have written about anything at all, especially in these days when we see so many writers in France. All I wish to say to this is that whereas there are plenty of men who write, there are few women who get involved in such an exercise, and I've always desired to be counted among the few. It's not that I judge myself so highly that I'd want to compare myself to the most excellent of women, or to the least; I don't wish to judge myself with either presumption or baseness of heart. However, I will at least not feel guilty for having wasted a lot of time composing a work as little as this one, since the time I spent working on it is the time other girls spend with their most obliging suitors, desiring these men to become worthy acclamers of their beauty, even though they're quite capable of lauding their own beauty themselves. Nevertheless they disdain all attempts to do so, thus exemplifying (it seems to me) the attitude of Zosimus, who judged Roman
approvant (ce croi-je) l’opinion de Zinzime qui ne pouvoit estimer les Gentils-hommes Romains pour estre bien instruits en la musique à sauter et voltiger, pour que les seigneurs de Turquie faisoient faire tels exercises à leurs esclaves. Ainsi quelques-unes des Damoiselles de ce temps, sans vouloir prendre la peine d’escrire, se contentent de faire composer leurs serfs, attisant mille flammes amoureuses dans leurs cueurs, par la vertu desquelles ils deviennent Poètes mieux que s’ils avoient beu toute l’onde sacrée de la fontaine des Muses.

Mais quant à moy, qui n’ay jamais faict aveu d’aucun serviteur, et qui ne pense point meriter que les hommes se doivent asservir pour mon service, j’ay bien voulu suivre l’advis de la fille de Cleomenes qui reprenoit les Ambassadeurs Persans, dont ils se faisoient accoustrer par des Gentils-hommes, comme s’ils n’eussent point eu de mains. Aussi je m’estimerois indigne de ce peu de graces que Dieu m’a donné par vostre moyen (ma mere) si de moy-mesme je n’essaïois de les faire paroistre; ce n’est pas que j’espere me tracer avec la plume une vie plus durable que celle que je tien de Lachesis; aussi n’ay-je point quitté pour elle mes pelotons, ny laissé de mettre en oeuvre la laine, la soye, et l’or quand il en a esté besoing, ou que vous me l’avez commandé. J’ay seulement pensé de vous montrer comme j’employe le temps de ma plus grande oisiveté, et vous supplie humblement (ma mere) de recevoir ces petits escrits qui vous en rendront tesmoignage; si vous en trouvez quelques-uns qui soient assez bien nez, avouez-les s’il vous plaist pour voz nepveux, et ceux qui ne vous seront agradables, punissez-les à l’exemple de Jacob qui condemna la famille d’Isachar pour obeir à ses autres enfans.

SONETS DE SINCERO À CHARITE

Madame, voz beautez si parfaitem ent belles
Sont nées dans le Ciel. Mais pource que les Dieux
Vous alloient regardant d’un oeil trop curieux,
Brulant dans la clarté de vos flames jumelles,
Jupiter, prevoyant les diverses querelles
Qui pourroient advenir aux Citoyens des Cieux,
Vous feit venir icy , doux paradis des yeux
Qui peuvent contempler voz graces immortelles.
Et maintenant les Dieux, iritez contre nous,
Espris du feu d’amour, et d’un ardant courroux,
Mesme de Jupiter deffient le tonnerre,
Et nous vont menaçant de mill’ et mille morts.
Mais il faut bravement soutenir leurs efforts
Pour garder le tresor du Ciel et de la terre.
gentlemen less than praiseworthy for their skills in music and dance because the lords of Turkey made their slaves do such things. In the same way some of the ladies of our time, without wishing to take the trouble to write, are content to make their serfs compose in their stead. They kindle a thousand amorous flames in the hearts of their suitors, by virtue of which these men become even better poets than if they had drunk all the sacred water of the fountain of the Muses.

But as far as I’m concerned, since I have never admitted to having a suitor, nor think that I merit that men be made slaves in my service, I have willingly followed the advice of Cleomenes’ daughter, who rebuked the Persian ambassadors for letting themselves be dressed by the gentlemen of their retinue as if they had no hands of their own. Therefore I would judge myself unworthy of the few talents God has given me on account of you (my Mother) if I did not put them to good use. It is not that I hope to trace with the pen a more lengthy life than the one I hold from Lachesis, thus I have not abandoned my clews of string for the pen, nor have I stopped working with wool, silk, and gold thread when they have been needed, or when you have asked me to. I have only thought of showing you how I employ my idle time, and humbly beseech you (my Mother) to receive this little collection of writings that bears witness to you; if you find some of them well enough conceived, please acknowledge them as your very own progeny, and those that you do not find agreeable, punish them in the same way Jacob condemned the family of Issachar to serve his other children.

SONNETS BY SINCERO TO CHARITE

My lady, your beauty, so perfectly lovely,
Was born in Heaven. But because the gods
Were watching you with too curious a gaze,
As they burned in the light of your twin flames,
Jupiter, foreseeing the many quarrels
That might break out among Heaven’s Citizens,
Had you sent here, a sweet paradise for eyes
That now can contemplate your immortal graces.

But now the gods, irritated at us,
Seized by the fire of love and by a scorching wrath,
Defy even Jupiter’s thunder,
And threaten us with a thousand deaths.
Yet we must bravely withstand their threats
To protect Heaven and earth’s new treasure.
becility of these little Beasts could be compared to the intellectual prowess seen in us men daily. And besides, by giving them permission to read anything they like, you are giving them license to do whatever they want.

PLACIDE I agree, but since they are guided by good books, they won’t want to do anything unreasonable.

SEVERE As if reason could be found in them!

PLACIDE Those who have even a little reason
Make it flourish through Learning,
But reason soon abdicates
To the evils brought about by Ignorance.

Whether Women seem foolish or wise to you, I think that we should allow them to read, so that the foolish ones can become a bit less foolish, and the wise ones even wiser, thanks to books which are very necessary for them if only to keep them at home alone where they would remain otherwise idle.\footnote{A common argument in pedagogical and feminist treatises on women’s education.}

SEVERE O what misfortune it is to see a learned Woman!\footnote{“Femme savante” in the original.}

PLACIDE Oh? What’s that? Please explain.

SEVERE Why, she’s a monster!

PLACIDE Quite the contrary, learned women are often the most excellent things in the world. You see, monsters are not always proof that Nature has made a mistake, but rather they show how great her power is. Iocasie’s “monstrous” Beauty, Grace, Virtue, and Learning gained her admiration among men, and gave her the means necessary to live without them her entire life, forever remaining a virgin.\footnote{Iocasie is unknown to me.}

SEVERE Indeed! I’d be delighted if all learned women remained unattached, and I will never advise Men to go looking for them.

PLACIDE Now tell me, Lord Severe, are you happily married?

SEVERE About as unhappily as could be.

PLACIDE And is your wife learned?

SEVERE Oh no, she is but a fat beast, who does not know how to honor her husband, or how to manage her household, which is the only thing I want her to learn—not how to spend time with books. She needs no other Instructor but my voice.
PLACIDE Indeed, but as you say, you have been taking the trouble to persuade her to do these things for quite some time, and you have not made much progress; so either your labors are fruitless or your complaints are false.

SEVERE My complaints are not false, but Women are very much so, as I find daily.

PLACIDE You are deserving of this evil that befalls you, since the cure is within your grasp, but you do not want to take hold of it. Ischomachus’s Wife would teach yours to do her duty if you had her read Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus*. 97

SEVERE Hee, hee, if I found her in similar circumstances, I would let her know that her hand must reach only for the distaff and never for a book.

PLACIDE Each of these activities assists the other. Pallas practiced them both. 98

SEVERE These are silly myths. Women must never study.

PLACIDE Why do you so hate the innocent Muses? And who set you about trying to drive them from your chamber, from your table, from your fireside, seeing as how they cost nothing and offer instead numerous benefits?

SEVERE I know that books are absolutely useless to Women.

PLACIDE As they are to Men.

SEVERE You’re making fun of me. Will women study Theology, stand at the pulpit, preach a sermon to the people, and earn benefits? 99

PLACIDE No, but they will learn God’s Word, because it orders Wives to obey their husbands, just as in Genesis. 100 And when they have children, it will be much easier for them to bring them up in the fear of God, of their Fathers, and of themselves. 101 In fact, they will be happily guided by the precepts of virtue, which are the richest benefices one can acquire.

SEVERE I would prefer to have a simple Wife, rather than one

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98. Pallas Athena is the goddess of wisdom and the domestic arts.

99. Common feature of the Catholic polemic against Reformed women who dared to reason on Scripture.

100. Genesis 3:16.

101. 1 Timothy 2:15.
with wily opinions. After learning what you would have them learn, they would judge themselves too strong.

PLACIDE Simpleminded women of feeble understanding resemble these thin clouds which, for fear of disappearing, flee the Star of day, or if it shines through them, no trace of its rays is left. But as a thick cloud absorbs the light of the Sun and then reflects outward and intensifies the beautiful face that illumines it, so the prudent Woman, who strengthens her mind with the discourses of moral Philosophy, humbly receives the image her Husband wishes to give her, so that his beloved portrait always appears in her thoughts, words, and all her actions.¹⁰²

SEVERE You speak such marvels that I permit my Wife and daughters to read the Holy Scriptures, provided they read nothing else.

PLACIDE I tell you that all subjects are necessary for them, just as they are for us.

SEVERE Oh don't tell me they should study law?!¹⁰³

PLACIDE They must not be ignorant of it.

SEVERE Ah ha! You've ruined everything, Placide. Your lack of judgment will cause me to take back what I just said and forbid on account of their foolishness that which I would have permitted because of my affection for you.

PLACIDE And will you reprimand the people of God for being judged by Deborah?¹⁰⁴

SEVERE I speak not of Hebrew Law, but rather of Roman Law.¹⁰⁵

PLACIDE All right then, must a woman to please her husband renounce the Velleien Law without understanding it?¹⁰⁶ You are aware,


¹⁰³. A widespread opinion. Montaigne rejects the idea that women can be “intent on rhetoric, astrology, logic, and similar drugs, so vain and useless for their needs.” The Complete Essays of Montaigne, trans. and ed. Donald W. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 3.3, 624.

¹⁰⁴. Deborah, prophetess and judge in Israel, thirteenth century BCE, emblem of the valiant woman. See Judges 4–5.

¹⁰⁵. Beginning in the sixteenth century, the return of Roman law reinforced the inequality of the sexes to the benefit of men since it imposed the potestas patris, which demanded the absolute obedience of the wife and the children.

¹⁰⁶. Women engaged to be married and ignorant of the law often renounced in their marriage contract the Roman law of the Senatus Consul Velleien which protected them from all solicitation from the husband or an indebted child to sell their property. The author critiques husbands who take advantage of the ignorance of their wives.
aren't you, that those in this country who have wealthy Wives let them know that they can give their furnishings and acquired goods, with a third of their inheritance, to their surviving husband, since customary law permits it? Men profess three types of learning, which they then practice: Theology, Jurisprudence, and Medicine. I am of the opinion that you should also teach women the means by which to cure sickness, so that they hold all areas in common with us. The one who was the disciple of the scholar Herophilus demonstrated that she learned medicine for the benefit of others.¹⁰⁷ There are still today women who help their young children, comfort their neighbors, and cure their servants through the use of certain domestic remedies that experience makes known to them.

SEVERE Women who know so many beautiful things are often vainglorious; they disdain their husbands and make fools of them. As I learned the other day from a tapestry, which was hung on the fireplace of Achariste, my neighbor. There was in the middle of the piece a pompous Woman, sitting on a throne, holding a pen in her hand and a book under her feet, around the tapestry was written:

When a Woman knows how to speak well
And makes a profession of writing,
She disdains all Authors
Who of the arts were inventors.

Nothing pleases her, everyone makes her angry,
Always pensive she is brooding over
Some word of great weight,
Which she marks with her fingers.

She says her Mother is crazy,
Her Father has nothing good to say,
Her Brother knows nothing useful,
Her Sister will never learn a thing.

If her neighbor is somewhat beautiful,
She is nothing compared to her,
Whose grace and knowledge
Surpass all that can be seen.

When she is married,
She claims to be wise

¹⁰⁷. An allusion to Agnodice, legendary Greek heroine who was the first to disobey the law that prohibited women from practicing medicine. See Catherine des Roches's narrative poem Agnodice (see chap. 2).
In governing her household much better
Than the most ancient of Men.
So flee the learned Woman,\textsuperscript{108}
Rather seek one with nothing in her mind,
The former will only scorn you,
While the latter will let herself be ruled.

There you have it, Placide, that is what I’ve learned, and it seems to me
worthy of note.

PLACIDE So now you carefully welcome the smoky authorities
found on chimney curtains?
SEVERE Must one not learn wherever possible?
PLACIDE One must look for truth whenever possible; but what
you recount is an error that reason and experience show to be such.
SEVERE Experience shows that Women who exceed the Com-
mon lot do not love their husbands very much.
PLACIDE I will take as an example two excellent Roman women,
Emponina and Arria,\textsuperscript{109} who, being unwilling to outlive their husbands,
courageously followed them to death.
SEVERE It would be difficult to find such women these days.
PLACIDE Yes, because by forbidding them to read books, you
keep from their sight examples that could inspire them to feel this
equally deep affection for you.
SEVERE But those women who are able to do so often want to
speak, and I get angry when there’s so much cackle.
PLACIDE I remember hearing my Daughter Pasithée sing a song
she had written for a young Man who had the same words for Women
as you do, stating that Silence must seal their mouths. The song goes
like this:

I believe that Silence
Is a mere shadow of true distinction,
While discreet Eloquence
Is the light of true understanding.
When a graceful word
Which knows how to devise skillfully,

\textsuperscript{108} “Femme savante” in the original.
\textsuperscript{109} Emponina, a Roman matron devoted to her husband (Plutarch, \textit{Love Stories}, \textit{Moralia}
10.613a–b); Arria, wife of Caecina Paetus, killed herself when she was unable to save her husband,
a prisoner in the revolt of Camillus Scribonianus (Pliny, \textit{Epistles} 3.16; Martial, 1.13).
Can in a virtuous life
Legitimize all things,
Ladies who wish to live well,
Desiring to learn and understand,
Seek out virtue and books,
And marry their actions to learning.

If these examples seem natural
And have any persuasive power,
If they take hold of the one who contemplates them,
Leading them by means of a gentle law:

See the sons of Cornelia,\(^{110}\)
Who render their name immortal,
By following the Philosophy
Of such a rare maternal example.

And look at Cleobulina,\(^{111}\)
Who wisely persuades
Her Father to show himself worthy
Of such a rich government.

See faithful Portia,\(^{112}\)
Collection of all the virtues,
Who in death as in life,
Wished to follow her dear Brutus.

Now you know that Ladies
Are worthy of philosophizing,
Seeing such a number of Women
Triumph in the midst of men.

If still, kind sir, you persist
In this common misjudgment,
May some thoroughly foolish Mistress

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111. Daughter of Cleobulus, one of the Seven Wise Men of ancient Greece, who thought that girls should be educated. Cleobulina (her other name is Eumetis) was renowned for her intelligence. See Diogenes Laertius, *Cleobulus*, Lives 1; Plutarch, *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men*, Moralia 2.148c–e; Vives, *Education of a Christian Woman*, 66.

Soon run away with your heart.
    May all that you do for her
Be it serving her, pleading, or shouting,
Never succeed in pleasing her,
Nor in freeing you from her grasp.

You see, Lord Severe, the kind of punishment that noble Women demand of those who have injured them.

SEVERE Truly, they've had their revenge on me; for I'm bound head and foot to a foolish woman, who incessantly rebukes me.

PLACIDE Cure the both of you: drive the anger from your spirit, and the ignorance from hers.

SEVERE I'm afraid that after studying, she would want to order me around.

PLACIDE Precepts of Marriage and Virtuous Deeds of Women will teach her to obey you.¹¹³

SEVERE Being cleverer, I am afraid she would deceive me.

PLACIDE What deception could she use on you that would not also be harmful to her? Knowing the worth of honor, she'll fear the shame that such conduct would bring. Moreover, you know that idle thoughts cause lascivious wills. And Women who give themselves over to study will be neither lascivious nor idle. After finding out what books teach with neither anger nor flattery (for they are masters who teach very candidly), they endeavor to fulfill their duties to their husbands, their households, their families, and their parents, remaining humble, modest, and dutiful to all that belongs to them. They have no time for immodest behavior.

SEVERE That I know, for all women who are shamed by their faults are mindless, and only know how to satisfy dishonest feelings. But under the guise of a well-kept chastity, learned women harshly contradict their husbands, if the latter do something these women don't like.

PLACIDE Less than other women, I assure you. If you are around young people, you'll hear it said all the time, "My Father wants it like this, but my Mother doesn't, and she always gets her way." Now these Mothers are really ignorant. You should hear the most lighthearted of them praise themselves, saying, "This house would have been ruined without me, my Husband would have become a knave, my Mother-in-

¹¹³. Works by Plutarch in the Moralia 2, 3.
If a remarkable poet's legend has immortalized Aeneas for having rescued his father and the images of his gods from the flames that were burning Ilion, with how much more reason should the history books of a not ungrateful century make honorable mention of you, my Daughter. For your deep faith shows that you bear in your heart the image of our great God. And by the flight of your pen, without begging for help from anyone else, you have taken the trouble to rescue me from the Cimmerian nights in which ignorance and old age kept me buried. You resemble the green twig which in its youthful grace is cherished by the gentle breeze, lively streams, and the tempered rays of the Sun: and paying for the good it receives by the fertility of its ever-multiplying flowers, it never forgets the old stump that gave it a little formless matter. Even better, the little twig is always scrupulous to hide the stump's defects, and to defend it from the violence of the winds, of thunder, and passing time. Thus, my Daughter, I see you filled with endless love and piety, as you inspire my soul and my heart to some praiseworthy undertaking. It is now the third time that your strength encourages me to speak in public, and I can't help but feel a little frightened as I remember the Mantuan's tale. He relates that the Almighty, after he had punished our first father for

32. Aeneas, surprised in Troy by the Greeks, fled through the burning city carrying old Anchises on his back, his son in his arms, and the city's most sacred gods. See Virgil, Aeneid 2.

33. An extraordinarily bold statement for the time. Women, especially from the gentry, were not to be known for themselves; they were given access to a (limited) education "on grounds that it fostered understanding in marriage and in society," and as Rousseau put it some two centuries latter, "to make themselves more agreeable to the men in their lives." Martine Sonnet, "A Daughter to Educate," in A History of Women in the West, vol. 3: Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes, ed. Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 103, 110.

34. The "winged pen" in Pléiade theory symbolizes the unfettered imagination and intellect.

35. Madeleine's pride in her daughter's intellectual achievement is crystallized in her use of the saying "sans mendier l'aide d'autrui" (without begging for help from anyone else). This invocation to self-help occurs in several instances in which the Des Roches challenge their female contemporaries to use their pens to overcome the destruction of time and death. See Madeleine's ode 3, ll. 52–54 (see chap. 1), and Catherine's Epistle to Her Mother (see chap. 2).

36. The Cimmerians were a mythic people who lived in a land where the sun never shone. Ulysses went there to conjure up the dead and to question the blind Tiresias. See Homer, Odyssey 11.16.

his disobedience and had chased him from the Paradise of delights, 38 made him a tiller of the land, charging him to take care of it, and to grow and multiply. God then went back to heaven, man remained on earth which, newly created by the divine hand, became so fertile that our ancestors, with little trouble, enjoyed its plentiful bounty, in a short time they gave birth to a great number of beautiful children. The Lord, who cared for them, wanted to pay them a more courteous visit than the first time, Adam found out, and advised his wife of the coming of the master. She, knowing how much chastity is the adornment of women, began to think that this fault of not having kept it well enough was somehow connected with the taking of the forbidden fruit. Therefore, seeking to cover up her error, she quickly hid some of her children in the haystack, in the barn, or in the manger. Her other children she took time to wash, get ready, and dress. The Lord promptly shed his glory to take on the form of lowly humanity, which received him in all humility. He looked on these new children with a benign and favorable eye. He bestows on the one the monarchy, on another a fiefdom, and on the third a principality. The mother, now full of joy, calls to her those of her children whom she had not so well prepared. God, whose powerful hand never rests, gave each gifts of understanding, prophecy, oracles, knowledge of how things change and evolve, and universal laws. When she saw this second set of children so well rewarded, Eve quickly pulled the others from their hiding place, hoping that there would still be enough riches for them. But the Lord had already left and did not see the third set of brothers, even though they were no less agreeable than the first. You know, my Daughter, exactly what this tale pertains to; nevertheless if you are resolved to keep going, I’ll say like this Roman: “I am healthy, Brutus!” 39 and I insist that from now on, neither my headaches, nor my stomach pains, nor my recurrent fever will prevent me from going where my desire leads me: because it is your will that I follow you, here I am, my Daughter.

I thank you that in asking me to write on your behalf, 41 you’ve taken possession of my soul, which has been devoted to you for a long time now. Should it please

38. Adam, Genesis 3.
39. This “Roman” is Caius Ligarius who, when sick one day, was visited by Brutus who said to him: “Ah! Ligarius, this is no time to be sick.” Ligarius responded, “But Brutus, if you have in your head some scheme worthy of you, I’ll soon be better.” Plutarch, Brutus, Livres 11.
40. The numbering of the letters follows that in my edition of Les Missives.
41. The Dames des Roches were frequently asked to write poems on behalf of patrons from whom they received monetary or other rewards.
in its favor, seeing that I am as far from hope as I am close to my desire to see you, I humbly beseech you, Monsieur, do not banish from your memory the promise that it pleased you to make to me to take care of my lawsuit.\(^1\) If you don’t care to remember it on my account, for I don’t merit such remembrance, at least do it for your own sake, since you promised. That way you will show to all that you are of one mind, and you will be even more worthy of the excellent traits you’ve received from God, to whom unity is sacred, and in whose favor my Daughter and I humbly greet your graces with unity of thought.

SELECTED LETTERS OF CATHERINE DES ROCHES
DEDICATORY EPISTLE TO MY MOTHER\(^2\)

1

My Mother, as a citizen of this world, I thought I needed to give something in return to my hosts: and so finding myself with these letters in hand, I asked myself to which one of the four elements\(^3\) I should offer them, since it seemed to me that such a light thing as these lines mustn’t enter into the heart of the earth, which is so heavy. Furthermore, their obscurity is not worthy of the sun’s gleaming light. The translucent air would make their shortcomings obvious, and the transparent water would make these seem much bigger. So to whom will I offer these letters, seeing that they are so undesirable that I myself am annoyed at having kept them? But then again, why do I want to repay my debt at the expense of those letters that have already earned the name Missives, and that were sent a long time ago to many persons of honor? And what do I have to fear from their destruction, except what I desire in their favor, that is, that the wet ink and paper, which takes on its color and aspect from wetness, will lend them a chariot to take them into the air. There they will be seen by some who will scorn them even more than I do, and they will then be thrown into the fire which, having purged them and reduced them to ashes, will faithfully return them to the earth. So before they undergo these many changes, my deepest desire is that they may be agreeable to you, Mother, and I humbly beseech you to love them more than their beauty de-

\(^1\) A reference to one of Madeleine’s many lawsuits.

\(^2\) This is the first time that Catherine uses the possessive “ma Mère” instead of “sa Mère” when addressing her mother in a dedicatory epistle, an indication of her own growing authority and literary independence.

\(^3\) That is, air, fire, water, and earth. In what follows, Catherine des Roches offers an extended metaphor on these elements, as she discusses what she ought to do with her letters.
serves, so they don’t go lacking for support. You’ll find among them few ad-
dressed to you, in this fact my happiness is manifest, which does not permit 
you to be far from my presence and even less from my thoughts, which will 
always be close, ready, humble, and devoted to serving you. Mother, I’ll be-
seech God Almighty to make you live longer than me, so that you may re-
semble heaven which, having been created first, must end last.

2 [To an admirer]
The ancients who wrote about the gods that are said to inhabit Mount Olym-
pus were people of great authority, and seeing that human passions were im-
mortal among mortals, they covered such affections with a graceful veil and 
gave them the title of divinities. In the same way you, Monsieur, by thinking 
more highly of me than I deserve, with the favor of your graces honor the 
little worth found in me and hide my imperfections under the pleasant cloud 
of your beautiful writings. But just as Homer and Virgil made a name for 
themselves and are more renowned than Achilles and Aeneas, so your in-
nite virtues, although very generous, reserve more honor for you than praises 
for me. Nevertheless, having received them, I humbly thank you.

6 [To a thankless addressee]
If my counsel, persuasion, and words have been of no use whatever to you, 
you owe me nothing for them, but if they have benefited you in some way, 
how do you figure that you are now discharged of the obligation, which is of 
such a nature that the better one pays it off, the more one owes for it?

13 [To a male addressee, on her tardy reply]
Monsieur, I have more desire than leisure to respond to you, because at the 
same time that your messenger gives me your letters, he waits for mine. There-
fore I humbly beseech you to excuse me if the threads of my letter are poorly 
woven, keep in mind that I worry less about being thought ignorant than 
about being considered too proud on account of my silence which I neither 
want nor ought to use with you, whose graces and virtues I’ll always revere.

14 [To a learned female addressee] Mademoiselle, because you’ve attained the highest level of that admirable 
eloquence which in the past has made the invincible son of Alcmena fa-
mous, I’m not surprised that you deign to imitate him when he voluntarily

84. Achilles, a hero in Homer’s Iliad; Aeneas, protagonist of the Aeneid.
85. A letter of thanks to a woman who has sworn a sainte amitié (sacred friendship) to the author.
86. Alcmena is the mother of Hercules. This is a reference to the legend of the Gallic Hercules used to extol the virtues of eloquence.
À MA MERE (1579)

Je vous fays un present de la vertu supreme,
Depeinte proprement par un Roy tres-parfait,
(Ma mere) et vous offrant cest excellent pourtraict,
C’est vous offrir aussi le pourtraict de vous-mesme.

TO MY MOTHER

Here is a gift of supreme virtue,
Perfectly depicted by an ever so perfect King,
(My mother) and in offering you this excellent portrait,
I am also offering you a portrait of yourself.

A MA FILLE (1583)

MAMIE, je sçay que la reverence, l’amour, et l’honnéte pudeur, ne vous per-
metent étre sans moy au papier des Imprimeurs, et qu’il vous plaît
mieux que je suive mon devoir, mon desir, et ma coutume. Marchons
doncques en cete union qui nous a toujours maintenues, et prions la Divine
puissance, qu’elle vueille guider l’oeuvre, la pensée, et la parole de nous
deux, nous preservant (s’il luy plaît) de toutes calomnies, et du venin de
l’ingrate dent de l’Envie.

TO MY DAUGHTER

LOVE, I know that out of reverence, love, and honorable modesty, you will
not send anything to the printers’ shop without me, and that you would
rather I follow my duty, my desire, and my customary ways. Let us
continue then in that union which has always kept us together, and let us
pray that the Divine Power may always guide us in our work, our thoughts,
and our words, protecting us, if it pleases Him, from all calumny, and from
the venom of un-grateful Envy.

EPISTRE A SA MERE (1583)

MA MERE, vous m’avez animée comme Promethé, l’image de terre que
luy- mêmes forma, et n’est point d’un feu desrobé : car il vous fut donné
des Cieux. Or connoissant que je tiens de vous, non seulement ceste
mortelle vie, mais encore la vie de ma vie, je vous suy partout comme
l’ombre le cors: Et tout ainsi que le cors en ses proportions, ny l’ombre en
son estandue ne sont point veus sans la faveur de la lumiere, ainsi la vive
clarté de vostre entendement nous fait voir par un sentier non gueres
frequenté, où je prie Dieu, MA MERE, que nous puis-
[11vo]
sions trouver

plus d’Oliviers que de Houx. La branche paisible de l’arbre de Pallas nous
est autant necessaire que l’estoit à Enée, le rameau d’or enseigné par
Deiphobe. Je sçay que l’Or, filz de la Terre, fait trou-
ver beaucoup de
credit chez sa mere, mais nous avons aussi les vers dorez du sage Samien
qui demonstre, en ses escris, et recommande ce que vos ad-
mirables vertus
font voir à tous ceux qui vous connoissent. Pource qu’il desire de parler, je
me tairay, MA MERE, apres avoir humblement supplié la bonté divine,
qu’il luy plaise rendre vos jours longs en prospere fortune afin que vous
soiez longtemps sur terre, exemple des graces du Ciel.

EPISTLE TO HER MOTHER

MOTHER, you gave me life as Prometheus did to the earthen image which
he himself formed, and neither was the fire lacking, for that was given to
you by Heaven. Now, knowing that I have received from you not only
this mortal life but the life of my life, I follow you everywhere as the
shadow follows the body. And just as neither the body in all its proportions
nor the shadow in its projection can be seen without the grace of light, so
the brilliant clarity of your mind illumines for us the narrow path where,
MY MOTHER, I hope we will gather more olive branches than holly. The
peace-bearing branch of the tree of Pallas is as necessary to us as was to
Aeneas the golden bough divulged to him by Deiphobus. I know that Gold,
the son of Earth, brings great credit to his mother, but we have the golden
verse of the wise Samian who demonstrates and recommends in his writings
what your admirable virtues make clear to all those who know you. Since
he wishes to speak, I’ll be silent, MY MOTHER, after humbly beseeching
God that it please Him to lengthen and prosper your days so that you may
live a long life, an example of the graces of Heaven.
SONNET 1 (1579)
Le Moteur éternel, de ce grand univers
Commencement et fin, la divine pensée
Qui tient dessous ses pieds la terre balancée,
Et qui au fond du cœur voit les secrets ouvriers,
Reserva en ce temps, amer, dur et divers,
Où semble que l’Astrée est de chacun chassée,
A montrer la vertu du haut Ciel abaissée
Pour ceindre ton beau chef de rameaux toujours vers.
Bien qu’icy nous voyons, Neron et Domitie,
Et qu’un nouveau Breüs ait la terre obscurcie,
Ton honneur grave et saint luist de si clair flambeau,
Que le Siècle est heureux, où tu es descendue
Pour miracle nouveau, car Dieu t’a deffendue
Du vice, de l’oubly, du temps, et du tombeau.

SONNET 1 [TO CATHERINE DES ROCHES]
The eternal Motor, of this immense universe
The beginning and the end, the divine mind
Who holds beneath his feet the earth in its balance
And sees in the recesses of the heart open secrets,
Began, in these bitter, hard, and troubled times
Where Astrea seems to be chased away by all,
To bring down virtue from high heaven
So as to crown your lovely brow with ever-verdant boughs.
Although at present we see the likes of Nero and Domitian,
And a new Briareus obscure the earth,
Your solemn and saintly honor shines with a flame so bright
That the Century in which you came down is pleased,
For as a miraculous new being, God kept you
From vice, neglect, time, and the tomb.

SONNET
Si quelquefois ta gentille jeuness,
Par ses discours naïvement bien faits,
A soulagé le miserable faix
Qui abortif avança ma vieillesse;
Le rhume froid, qui maintenant te blesse
M’en fait payer l’usure à si grand fraicts,
Que je ne sçay (pauvre moy) que je fais,
Tant je ressens ta peine et ma tristesse!
Dea, mon doux soin, reprends un peu ta force,
Ayes pitié de ceste frelle escorce;
Je te suply par ta chaste beauté,
Par ta douceur, par l’amour maternelle,
Par le doux suc tiré de la mamelle,
Et par les flancs qui neuf mois t’ont porté.

SONNET [TO CATHERINE DES ROCHES, ON THE LATTER’S ILLNESS]
If at times your sweet youthful self,
By offering me naturally well-said counsel,
Has lightened the miserable burden
That, abortive, made my old age advance,
The wretched cold that assails you now
Is forcing me to pay up at such great cost [for your advice]
That (poor me) I don’t know what I’m doing,
I feel so much your distress and my sadness!
Good God, my sweet care, recover your strength a little,
Take pity on my frail appearance;
I beseech you by your chaste beauty,
By your gentleness, by [my] maternal love,
By the sweet milk drawn from [my] breast,
And [my] womb which bore you for nine months.
A MA QUENOILLE (Madeleine des Roches, from Les Oeuvres)
Quenoille mon souci, je vous promets et jure
De vous aimer toujours, et jamais ne changer
Votre honneur domestic pour un bien estranger,
Qui erre inconstamment et fort peu de temps dure.
Vous ayant au costé je suis beaucoup
Que si encre et papier se venoient aranger
Tout à l’entour de moy, car pour me revanger
Vous pouvez bien plustost repousser une injure.
Mais quenoille m’amie, il ne faut pas pourtant
Que pour vous estimer, et pour vous aimer tant
Je delaisse du tout c’est’ honneste coutume
D’escrire quelquefois; en escrivant ainsi,
J’escri de voz valeurs, quenoille mon souci,
Ayant dedans la main, le fuzeau, et la plume.

TO MY DISTAFF
Distaff, my care, I promise you and swear
That I’ll love you forever, and never exchange
Your domestic honor for a good which is strange,
And which, inconstant, wanders aimlessly and does not endure.
With you at my side, I am far more secure
Than with ink and paper arrayed all around me,
For, if I needed defending, you would be there,
You are much better at repelling an assault.
But distaff, my love, it is not really necessary,
That in order to value you and love you so,
I abandon entirely that honorable custom
Of writing sometimes; for by writing as I do,
I write of your worth, distaff, my care,
As I hold in my hand my spindle and my pen.

36 (From Les Secondes Oeuvres)
Comme la docte Guerriere
Alla voir dans sa maison
L’inutile filandiere,
Dépourveue de raison.
Et regardant son ouvrage
Feit semblant de l’admirer,
Combien qu’ell’ eut au courage
Desir de le dechirer.
Voiant que cete hautaine
Pour quelque subtilité,
S’osoit comparer Humaine,
A sa haute Deité.
Elle déguisa sa face
Soubz un petit animal,
Que tout le monde dechasse
Comme augure de tout mal.
Ainsi les Muses divines
Se pourroient vanger de nous,
Si nous pensions estre dines
De l’honneur reçeu par vous.

36 [To admirers of the Dames des Roches]
When the learned Warrior
Went to pay a visit to
The useless weaver,
Deprived of reason,
She looked upon her work
And pretended to admire it,
Even though she felt in her heart
The desire to rip it apart.
Seeing that this arrogant girl,
For some subtle reason,
Dared to compare her mere Humanity
To her high Divinity,
She covered her [Arachne’s] face
Beneath the features of a small animal,
That everyone chases away
For fear of it as a harbinger of evil.
Thus the divine Muses
Might avenge themselves,
If we thought ourselves worthy
Of the honor you bestow upon us.
Madeleine des Roches, *Les Oeuvres*

cites women who “Shine among us like another sun
A sun of Virtues which have no equal,
The sign of holy piety and chastity.” Naming Hulda, Deborah

Madeleine des Roches, *Les Oeuvres*

XXXIII

Whether our knowledge be a recalling
Of what is in Heaven, pre-supposed by us,
Or whether nature has disposed the brain to be well-grounded
To receive into itself the divine influence,

Or whether we might be a field appropriate for all sowing
Which proceeds from the unadorned or well-composed,
Or whether indeed heaven has a treasure laid down
In a subject which it sees worthy of its power,

If time (oh painful passion)
Overcomes memory and comprehension,
Then beauty is destroyed by the thread of years passing.

But your beauty of manners, your spirit, your knowledge,
Gifts of Heaven made admirable to see in you,
With the passing of years acquire more grace.

Catherine des Roches, Preface to “Tobias,” *Les Oeuvres* p. 349

In the Tobias you will “see the constancy of an old man and of a young woman
which you will receive, if it pleases you my mother, as a true mirror to well
represent yours [constancy].”

Madeleine des Roches, *Les Missives*

2 To Catherine
I see the splendor of your living beauty,
The immortal amaranth of great Cytherea,
I hear of the chaste, girdled Venus,
When I read in your handsome forehead honor and goodness.

I look to your spirit for divinity,
The branch of Phoebus, and revered Pallas,
And your clear voice, sweetly admired, is

The chain with which Hercules drew many people.

I know that your virtues have the victory of years
And that my poems cannot hope for so much glory
Such a subject I sing too basely,

But the one who could praise your angelic face
Or your heavenly voice, or your divine grace,
That one would have the art and understanding of a God.

3 To Catherine
Everything one sees in the master of Plato,
Seeking the effects of the first causes
To transform the argument in a hundred Metamorphoses
By the ring of Gyges and the helmet of Pluto,

Thus you set me free from the hand of Clotho;
By your admired verses that are more beautiful than any other things
You make cold winter into springtime and roses
And in your golden words you change my surroundings.

[Larsen suggests that the original here means decorative elements in a drawing
room.]

You speak so well to men about exquisite virtues,
Who, honoring to the point of envying the learning you have acquired,
See heavenly clarity in your verses.

Don't you see that Phoebus cherishes and embraces them?
Calliope, seeing the perfection of your grace,
Hangs them on the sacred altar of immortality.

4 To Catherine
I love more than ever my solitary life,
I love more than ever its sweet liberty,
I love more than ever what I have given birth to,
I love my young secretary

I love more than ever having nothing opposed,
I love more than ever honor and goodness.
I love more than ever grace and beauty.
I love more than ever an agreeable silence.
I love more than ever a discourse of leisure,
I love more than ever a praiseworthy pleasure,
I love more than ever the well-understanding lady.

I love more than ever the work of the Nine Sisters,
And of the holy discussions with the best sweetmesses
Which demonstrate the effect of your sweet emblem.

5 To Catherine
To sing the perfection of your ornamented soul,
And crown your head with greening branches,
It would take the God of Light's voice and accents
Worthy of the virtue of your re-gilded age.

You invoke the Muse, and the Muse honors your call,
Knowing how powerful her effects are because of you.
I, faulty in spirit, in discourse, and in sense,
Am afraid to even whisper your name, which our France adores.

If you are willing that I should fulfill my duty to you
[Larsen glosses this as “to take under her protection
the work which she is going to edit with her daughter’]
Give me your spirit, your grace, and your learning:
And then I will sing your supreme praises.

My speech, feathered with your holy grandeur,
Will make your divine splendor seen
As far as the Euphrates and the Nile, the Danube and the Ganges.

Madeleine des Roches, Les Missives
7
I love, I admire, esteem, honor and prize
This lovely desire in your ardent heart,
Which makes your heart beloved for knowledge
Favoring the most exquisite virtue.

I have revered your well-taught Muse
Which makes you the most esteemed in the holy choir,
The most soulful lyre of Orpheus too
For which Apollo concedes to your enterprise.

But I most love your innocent bountifulness,
Modest shame and great goodness,
Which makes you agreeable to all eyes.

Sound, the Muse, educated speech,
Are only a wind that vanishes in the air,
While virtue last forever.

Catherine des Roches, Les Missives, “La Ravissement de Proserpine”

From Book I

Ceres had one shy daughter at home, 189
Unique in lineage, virtues, and beauty,
Lucina wisely thought that another childbirth
Wouldn't serve this divine ornament well,
Proserpina, whose value surpassed a great number.
Her body was no sooner seen to follow a shadow
Than her Mother followed her in thought and on foot 195
Accommodating herself to her daughter's childish sports.
And so one would often see the little heifer
Gathered up by her mother to wheedle her to charm her heart.

. . . Immortal Ceres 265
Thinking she had found a faithful country
To guard her Daughter well, left her there in trust
Then, her mind a bit at rest,
Without fear she went to see the Phrygian country.

. . . Oh, to how many places 283
Did the soon-desolated Mother make her eyes fly
Instead of to her pleasure [her daughter!] Already Sicily
Through a furtive look seems to have been lessened.
Poverty already, predicting her unhappiness,
Has spoiled its complexion with a rivulet of tears.
Saying: “God save you, o desirable land,
Land more agreeable to me than the heavens,
Guard, I beg of you, the pleasure of my blood,
And the beloved reward of the labor of my body.
For your worthy praise, if you guard my Daughter,
You will always see your country fertile. . . “
For this great time
Proserpina sang with an adorable grace,
And for her absent Mother she wove, in vain,
With laborious art and an educated hand,
An admirable web.

From Book II

The first light had hardly been possible to see
In the skin of Thetis that served it as a mirror
And the not-yet-whole day lances through the trembling waves
Its agreeable ardor, and errant flames
Move towards azure, when a youthful desire
Incites Proserpina to take her pleasure
In the nearby thickets, where cunning Cytherea
Had stretched her nets. The advice of her Mother
Left her head entirely: Fate wanted it so.
The gong beat three times, and the door cried out,
Predicting unhappiness for the obstinate Daughter.

Proserpina is ravished, and seems half dead
On the breast of her ravisher who rejoices to have taken her.
She wants to force her delicate hands
Toward freeing her, but her efforts are in vain.
Summoning her spirits, in a lamentable voice
She implores her sisters: the redoubtable virgin
Uncovers her Gorgon [the aegis], and the Nymph of the woods
Wants to make him feel the arrows from her quiver,
Not ceding to her uncle; one sees these two maidens
Moved by another maiden, and protesting to save
Their innocent sister from his cruel arms,
And to punish grievously the importunate ravisher
Who is like a lion having taken a heifer
Sole honor of its herd, at the moment when, through its malice,
Destroying all her body from one side to the other,
Exercising towards her the same cruelty,
He mocks the wrath of her shepherds; he rejoices.

[Diana tells Proserpina:]
“...For this great time
Who would be able to console your secret unhappiness.
Alas, who condemns you to such great regret?
Widowed from all pleasures, losing your lovely face,
I quit my bow, the tracks, the nets, the hunt.
..."

...Me, I will make my lament
Grieving for your beauty: the temple of Delos
Will hear me sigh for the loss of such a good.”

Meanwhile Proserpina, stolen, is in the chariot,
Her hair flies in the wind; her desolated soul
Makes her say these words: “Alas! Why did Fate
Hold me condemned to such a piteous end?
O father, too cruel! Hurl your burning thunder,
So that my body, which is yours, is consumed into powder.
Who are wholly lacking fatherly love,
Depriving me of the light of day forever.

...“O motherly counsel I so wrongly mistook!
Alas! My Mother! Help me! Run from Phrygia,
Run to help your ravished Daughter.
Don't let me be deprived of heavenly light,
Guard, if you can, my precious liberty.
Whether on Ida the boxwood surrounds you
With a terrifying noise, or indeed whether the air resounds
With a Phrygian song, or whether care no longer pulls you here,
That you be not near me, your own blood; appease the fury
Of the squinting ravisher, and rescue my life.”

That inhuman man, forced by the graces of her eyes,
Which even in tears resembled two rainy Suns,
Dragging a great sigh up from his first love,
He heavily wipes the eyes of this sweet light,
Saying with a humble voice, “Soften your sorrows,
Proserpina, my soul, and think of your worth,
Having received from me the favorable Scepter [of the underworld]
And no longer think of yourself as miserable.”
St. Anne teaching the Virgin, Spanish, 15th century, Lisbon Museum (?)
St. Anne with the Virgin and Child, about 1520-30 (Netherlands; oak)
Follower of Robert Campin (1376/9-1444), Virgin and Child before a Firescreen, ca. 1440
Jean de Beer and workshop, The Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints (incl. Catherine with book and sword), about 1515-20
Gottfried Bernhard Göz (1708-1774), St. Catharine of Siena with instruments of the passion
Master of the female half-lengths (active in Antwerp 1st half of the 16th century), A woman as the Magdelen, writing a letter at a table in an interior
Cornelis de Zeeuw, Family of Hendrick van den Broucke, ca. 1564
MUSÉE ROYAL D'ANVERS — Marie de Deckere, seconde femme de Gilles de Smidt, père, et une de leurs filles, par Adrien Key.

229, G. H. Ed., A.