Title of workshop: The Ages of Woman: Perceptions of Time and the Life Cycle in Early Modern Litigation and Letters

Abstract:

This seminar will investigate women’s perceptions of time and the life cycle in early modern Italy, England, and France through the use of letters and legal records. The workshop will examine ideas of time and seasons of life expressed by women and men of a range of social statuses, from individuals seeking poor relief and the redress of grievances by England’s ecclesiastical and civil courts to the wife of an Italian merchant and aristocratic women at the court of Louis XIV. The legal documents present a range of “real” voices and opinions about women’s perceptions of time in early modern England, although these voices were mediated by the male officials of the court who recorded them, while excerpts from the letters of Margherita and Francesco Datini, Madame de Sévigné, and Madame de Maintenon present a less institutional and more personal articulation of ideas about time and the ages of women’s lives.

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Workshop Description:
This workshop will investigate what litigation and letters from the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries reveal about the early modern idea of the “ages of woman,” a variation on the traditional expression of the male life cycle contained in the well-known “ages of man” figuration. The ages of man concept, inherited from the ancients, was given perhaps its most memorable early modern expression by Shakespeare’s Jaques in As You Like It, who identifies man’s life as a theatrical production divided into seven “acts”: infant, schoolboy, lover, soldier, justice, old age, and second childhood. The use of early modern documents allows for an exploration of how women understood their course of life, age, and bodies as well as of the public and private means available for women to express these views. An investigation of litigation and letters concerning women’s ideas about time and the life cycle suggests that testimony about time, age, and memory could be mobilized in the hopes of achieving certain legal decisions and that multiple meanings and perceptions of time could coexist in early modern Europe. Archival sources indicate that women were actively engaged in defining and problematizing ideals and realities of the female experience, so this evidence serves as a valuable entry point for a consideration of women's perceptions of time and the female lifecycle.

We propose to study women's senses of time, age, and memory through a range of sources that illuminate the views of individuals drawn from a range of statuses and geographic locations. Our conversation will begin with litigation concerning child marriage (unions arranged among parents and guardians for children under the canonical ages of consent, 12 for girls and 14 for boys) filed in northwest England during the 1560s and 1570s, which serve as an illustration of talk of time in the ecclesiastical courts. Documents generated by the four annual meetings of the English justices of the peace also provide a valuable perspective on time and women’s lives, as indicated by petitions for poor relief submitted to the JPs in the early seventeenth century by wounded soldiers and their families. We will then turn to letters for additional evidence of the “ages of woman.” The correspondence of Margherita and Francesco Datini demonstrates Margherita’s journey from young wife to mature and then aging wife while considering the impact of her inability to conceive and of her combative relationship with her husband on her sense of identity. The letters of Madame de Sévigné and Madame de Maintenon shed light on the seasons and life-stages of noblewomen’s diet and health at the court of Louis XIV. The privileges of their rank included restricted physical activity, a relatively rich diet of animal protein and fat, and access to doctors and cures, which often prolonged their lives well into old age, and their correspondence demonstrates attention to maladies and treatments particular to distinct stages of the lifecycle.

Following a brief introduction of the sources and their contexts, we will begin our discussion with the legal records made available on the conference website, focusing the ways litigants, witnesses, and legal authorities discussed women’s ages and stages in the lifecycle. Small groups will discuss the legal records in order to consider how they comment on women’s perceptions of time and the lifecycle. How does talk of time in legal documents enhance our understanding of early modern gender and social realities?

We will then move to a consideration of the selected correspondence of Margherita and Francesco Datini, Madame de Sévigné, and Madame de Maintenon available online. Small group discussion will focus on perceptions of time as articulated in this early modern correspondence and consider resonance and divergence with the evidence presented by the legal records. We
hope participants will introduce other relevant material from their own research throughout the session, and we will use the conclusion of our conversation to discuss these materials more fully.

Among the questions we will consider are the following: Did women have different approaches to time in different contexts? How were women’s approaches to time different from men’s? How do the descriptions of the passage of time as discussed by those seeking relief or justice indicate the manner in which they perceived time? What relationship existed between time and memory, as viewed by the courts? How are the two types of early modern sources discussed in the workshop similar and dissimilar in the ways in which they discuss time? Court records provide access to a female perspective but through the filter of a male writer, while letters provide a less obstructed view into women’s ideas. How do questions of authorship/recording affect methodological strategies for evaluating the ideas expressed by "female" voices? How might this range of legal and epistolary documents complicate our understanding of women’s private and public voices? What health concerns did women share with other women at various stages of life? Our goal for the group is a consideration of the ways in which words about time, the body, and the life cycle shaped and reflected early modern ideals and realities about women’s lives as individuals and as members of the female sex.

Readings:

Selected transcripts from legal documents housed in the Cheshire Record Office: Cause Papers of the Consistory Court of Chester (EDC 2/8 and 2/9) and Quarter Sessions Files (QJF) (6 pages)

Excerpts from *The Merchant of Prato’s Wife: Margherita Datini and Her World, 1360-1410* (6 pages)

Excerpts from *Lettres de Madame de Maintenon* and Madame de Sévigné, *Correspondence* (6 pages)
Reading Block 1: 
Transcriptions of depositions from lawsuits heard before the Consistory Court of Chester 
(Cheshire Record Office, document classes EDC 2/8 and 2/9)

Background: The transcriptions below are depositions from sixteenth-century lawsuits heard by the Consistory Court of Chester, one of a network of English church courts that served both as a mechanism for the enforcement of morals (through ex officio suits issued from the office of the bishop) and as a forum for dispute resolution involving, among other topics, defamatory speech and contested matrimony and probate (through instance suits instigated by residents of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction). The abundant records from Chester constitute a rich source for the examination of early modern women’s lives, and a considerable body of scholarship exists drawing on the records of defamation suits in particular to discern valuable information about female sexual reputation and agency. The less-examined records of disputes concerning matrimony also illuminate the lived experience of early modern women, especially as witnesses frequently provided evidence about women’s bodies and ages as means of discussing time and the legality of disputed marriage. Because the Church of England did not alter its laws concerning marriage formation until the eighteenth century, valid matrimony could still be established according to the processes of medieval canon law, which required only the utterance of present-tense vows or the creation of a future-tense matrimonial contract followed by sexual intercourse; further, marriages arranged among parents and guardians for children under the canonical ages of consent (12 for girls and 14 for boys) persisted in the diocese of Chester beyond the turn of the seventeenth century. Because of their irregularities, however, these marriages could be the subject of litigation, when, for example, a party espoused under the age of consent sought to refute the union upon attaining the age of majority. The extracts below from child marriage suits filed in the 1560s and 1570s serve as an illustration of talk of time in the church courts. Punctuation and spelling have been modernized to facilitate readability.

General Questions for Consideration:
1. How did female witnesses draw on personal memories to present information concerning age and time?
2. In what ways did witnesses use their perceptions of female bodies as means of marking time and as means of judging the legality of marriage?
3. How did witness testimony demonstrate narrative strategies designed to imbue their evidence concerning time with authority?
4. Are there identifiable differences in the way men and women talked about time and their memories of specific events?

Suit #1: Henry Manley versus Ellen Manley, May 1566 (CRO EDC 2/8, fol. 20r.-22r.)
The testimony here focuses on the age of the plaintiff, Henry Manley, in the attempt to determine when he reached the age of majority (14).

Thomasina Manley, age 40: She says that solemnization of marriage was had & made between the parties at suit in the hall of Poulton in a chamber or chapel there being the house of John
Manley, gentleman, father to the said Henry upon the Monday next after Mid-Lent Sunday two years ago [22 March], the said Henry then being under the age of 13 years. She says that he was born upon the 14 day of May and lacked so much of 13 years of his age as was between the said solemnization of marriage and the 14th day then next following/ And further she says that the said Henry lacking then discretion was married to the said Ellen by procurement of his parents and did not cohabit together with the said Ellen passing 3 days next ensuing after the said solemnization nor never did lie with the said Ellen nor ratified the said marriage by any means since he came to fourteen years.

Katherine Manley of Poulton, age 40: And as concerning the age of the said Henry, she says she well remembers that he was born the Thursday before Whitsunday [12 May] next which coming shall be fifteen years. And she says she remembers his age by the age of some of her own children, and she was his first nurse. And touching the rest she says that the said Henry within 3 or 4 days next after the marriage was sent to school where he remained for the space of 12 months, and she remained at Poulton during the same space, and then the said Henry coming home did signify to his friends that he could not fancy the said Ellen.

Joan Harrison of Ouldford, age 40 or thereabouts: She says that she was servant maid with John Manley, gent, father to the said Henry and that she was taken into his service upon Tuesday in the Whitsunweek next coming. And she says further that Henry Manley was one year old when she came first to serve at Poulton with the said John Manley & she says that she well remembers the year and day by many things, tokens, and especially by her own marriage, whereof she well remembers the time and such & says that the said Henry shall be fifteen years old upon Thursday afore Whit-Sunday next coming.

John Sedgewick of Poulton, 40: He says that Henry Manley is now somewhat above fifteen years as such as since the 14th day of this month instant. He says that he well remembers the time by the death of his own natural father who was buried upon May Day was fifteen years and in May next after the said Henry was borne and further says that John Manley, gent, father to the said Henry was in company together with him when first tidings was brought him of the birth of the said Henry.

Suit #2: Randolph Grasly versus Alice Dampart, December 1567 (CRO EDC 2/8, fol. 126v.-127r.)

_The response of Alice Dampart provides a rare opportunity to hear a narrative provided by a female litigant concerning her own memories and knowledge of age and time._

Personal response of Alice Dampart: She says upon her oath that as it was told and declared unto her, she was privately married in the Chapel of Adlington of the diocese of Chester to the said Randolph when she was about 4 years of age, for she says that she was of so small discretion and age at that time that she cannot remember whether she was married to the said Randolph ever or never. She says that the said Randolph never had part of her body or carnal knowledge with her, neither by any other means or ways did ratify the said pretended matrimony at any time, but when he drew to the age of 13 or 14 years, he departed from the house where she dwelled and for the space of 9 or 10 years now last past never continued in one house with her nor repaired or resorted to her company other than now of late when they both appeared before the court and
when she repaired to his house to see whether he would take her to wife or else refuse her, at which times he showed no sign or token of love to her. And further she says that she supposes him to be somewhat younger then she is.

Suit #3: Anne Walley versus Ralph Rither February 1568 (CRO EDC 2/8, fol. 142r.-142v.)

The testimony of Henry Eaton provides information, corroborated in other suits, about perceptions concerning maturity and the initiation of sexual intercourse.

Henry Eaton of Tarporley: He was present when the said parties were married in Tarporley church about four years now passed as he remembers. He says he was at the said marriage and spent 12 pence at the same, the said Anne being at that time as he heard reported, and as he guessed by view of her body, about 8 years of age and the said Ralph about 11 years as seemed also to him. And further he says that since the said marriage the said parties have not dwelled together nor never that he could ever learn of ever lay together but have continued asunder. And he says that he verily doth believe in his conscience that they never loved together as man and wife nor ever had carnal act for that the said Anne is not yet passing 10 years old at this present.

Suit #4: Jane Tailor versus Thomas Johnson, March 1571 (CRO EDC 2/9, p. 216-18)

The female witnesses are able to refer to memories of their own children’s births to ascertain the age of the defendant.

Anna Tomkin, widow, of Malpas, 40: She says that she was present when marriage was solemnized between the said parties in Tilston church about Michaelmas Day [September 29] two years ago upon a Sunday in the presence of diverse worshipful and many others. She says that the said Jane was above 11 years of age and under 12 as the mother of the said Jane told her the day of the said marriage, and for the age of the said Thomas, she says that he was at the time of the said solemnization 11 years old and as much more as from Lent until the said Michaelmas and is this Lent 14 years of age. She says that she hath known the said Thomas since immediately after he was born and gave him suck and was a near neighbor to his father & mother and hath a daughter called Margaret that was born about Hallowtide [1 November] next before the birth of the said Thomas which was at the same time of the year now last 14 years of age.

Alice Yardley, widow, of Malpas, 50: She was at that time of Thomas’s birth great bellied with a daughter that was borne at Lamas [1 August] after and called Margaret & shall be 14 years of age at Lamas next.

Reading Block 2:

Transcription from a selection of documents pertaining to the poor relief of English soldiers and their families. Cheshire Record Office (CRO) Cheshire County Quarter Sessions Files (QJF). CRO, QJF 31/2 65; CRO, QJF 42/2 35; CRO, QJF 45/3 101.

Background: Each county of England held meetings of the local justices of the peace to deal with non-felony offenses, hear pleas for various types of charity (although they did not make up the sole institution responsible for its distribution), ensure that other officers (such as constables and high constables) performed their duties properly, regulate interpersonal conflicts via the issuance of bonds of recognizance, guarantee the maintenance of the county infrastructure, and
adhere to other administrative tasks at the county level of governance. The JPs, members of the local gentry appointed to their office by the monarch, presided over these Quarter Sessions. Four times annually, once per law term (Hilary/Epiphany, Easter, Trinity/Midsummer, and Michaelmas), the county held such meetings, thus giving them the name Quarter Sessions. The collection of records generated by these meetings proves fruitful for a range of early modern studies, including poor relief.

The documents below pertain to a particular type of poor relief that developed in the late sixteenth century—caring for soldiers wounded in service to the crown who returned to England without the ability to work for a living or the means to care for themselves. In 1594 Parliament enacted legislation to deal with the problem, ordering that the JPs manage a fund for the relief of soldiers and sailors from which they doled out aid to those they deemed deserving. When an injured (or otherwise unable to work) soldier returned to England, his commanding officer was responsible for signing a passport which allowed him to travel back to the county of his impressment or previous place of residence, where he was supposed to receive his relief. In addition, the man would have documentation of his required relief. These letters or petitions would be delivered to the treasurer for the relief of soldiers and sailors, one of the county’s JPs. On occasion, a member of the soldier’s family would request relief, as is the case with Alice Watson (see below). Her letter explains her impoverished state as a result of her husband’s service, but because he was not injured, the statute did not require the JPs to provide her with any assistance. Spelling and punctuation have been modernized to improve readability.

Questions to Consider:
1.) How do the descriptions of the passage of time as discussed by the people below indicate the manner in which they perceived time?
2.) How might the discussion of time have helped a petitioner establish his or her credibility? What is the relationship, if any, between time and memory, as viewed by the courts?
3.) The latter two documents are obviously written by and on behalf of men. However, these men likely had families and dependents, thus meaning that their words had impact on the lives of women. How do their discussions of time compare with that of Alice Watson? Do we see distinctions between the genders, or is it likely that the patterns of discussion were universal?

CRO, QJF 31/2 65 20 July 1620
To the Right Worshipfuls, her majesty’s Justices at the Quarter Sessions held at Nantwich, Whereas Right Worshipfuls John Watson, my husband, being a very poor man, at or about the feast day of St. Michael the Archangel last past [29 September 1619], was pressed to serve in his majesty’s service in Ireland, and is yet in his highness’s service, to my knowledge, being taken out of Stapeley within this county. By reason whereas I am impoverished, having a little child and nothing to relieve ourselves with, but occasioned through poverty to mortgage and sell all my apparel, and whatsoever I have and brought to seek relief of well-disposed people. In consideration whereof, I humbly beseech your good worshipships (the promise considered) to take or

set down some order whereby I may be better able to maintain and bring up my poor child, or some way to do for me for his relief (being no way able to maintain or bring it up). And in your good worships’ so doing, you shall not only do a good and charitable deed, but also bind me continually to pray to God for your good worships’ prosperous and good success in all things. Your good worships’ continual and poor orator, Alice Watson.

CRO, QJF 42/2 35 (1613)
Forasmuch as we are informed by this bearer Robert Buckley, servant to Sir Randall Mainwaring, knight: That about four years since, he bought a pension of fifty shillings per annum during the life of one Arthur Buckley, uncle to the said Robert, and gave him in gross sum for it twenty marks. Now the said Arthur, being married in Sussex in a town called Battle, whereunto the Lord Montagus, and with all being a maimed man and far unfit to travel. This bearer hath been forced and that very lately either to get him down into this country or to send for a certificate. Otherwise the Treasurers would not pay the same. Which certificate in fetching thence cost this bearer full thirty shillings. So now in respect of his twenty marks already paid, and that the said pensioner is so far of as also that the said bearer hath done good service in Ireland before the peace time there, he doth humbly pray that this small pension may be granted by patent unto himself. Otherwise if he be enforced once a year to send for the pensioner or a certificate, it were as good for him to lose the whole. Which he prayeth we will duly consider of and to put our hands to this certificate to give allowance for the drawing of his patent. Dated the 12th of July 1613.

We have conferred hereunto for long as the said pension shall be unrevoked, as well as our hands at this present Sessions the 13th of Julo 1613.
Thomas Smith, Thomas Honrest, Richard Willraham, Thomas Belise, George Cotton
Richard Lee, William Leavsage, Francis Starky

CRO, QJF 45/3 101 (1616)
To the right worshipful his majesty’s Justices of the Peace within the county of Chester at the general sessions of the peace held for the said county at Middlewich the 15th of October 1616.

The humble petition of Raphe Birch.
Showeth that whereas your said petitioner, being one of the maimed pensionary soldiers within the hundred of Shacklefield in the said county, did about seven years ago and upward, for his better help and maintenance, and for the ease of such his friends as to whom he was chargeable, depart into the Low Countries and there served in the wars, leaving direction with some of his special friends for receipt of his pension, being then forty shillings a year, in hope that the same should be a means to relieve him in his age or extremity, which said pension, being in his absence withheld, whereby his former hope was frustrated. Your said petitioner, in hope to renew the same, was glad to repair back again this last summer. Since whose return it hath pleased your good worships and others, or others his majesty’s Justices of the Peace, upon humble request to thereof and in commiseration of his to take, not only to allow unto him his former accustomed pension, but likewise to augment the sum ten shillings, so now the sum amounts to fifty shillings a year. For which worshipful favor he acknowledges himself ever bound to pray to the Almighty for the health and prosperous estates of your worships and others the said Justices and all yours. And whereas your said petitioner, being a maimed and lame man, and having here no other means in the world to live on, saving the said pension. And having in
the time of his abode in the said Low Countries (which was for the space of seven years at the
time aforesaid, beside a long time spent there formerly in the wars) gained the goodwill and
favor of diverse captains and others, with some of whom he ought remain and have a soldier’s
pay. And by that means, with your worships’ favor and allowance, return his pension for his help
hereafter. He therefore most humbly prays that your worships would be pleased so far to
consider and have respect of his poor estate and to give allowance to any man to whom it shall
seem good unto your worships to receive and keep his said pension of fifty shillings a year until
midsummer come four years. In which meantime your said petitioner would go into the said Low
Countries and there remain for the saving of his pension for his better relief and help in his age
or extremities as aforesaid. And if it shall please God to permit your said petitioner’s life and
return by the said midsummer come four years or within one month then next after. That it would
please your worships to order and appoint that all the money so to be received to his use might
be truly paid unto him together with his said pension of fifty shillings a year. And if he shall not
return as aforesaid, he willingly refers the disposition thereof to your worships’ good pleasures.
Wherein your said petitioner shall ever pray for your good and happy estates both here and
forever hereafter.

To be ordered according to the petitioner.

Reading Block 3:
Thirty-four years of Letter Writing between Margherita and Francesco Datini, as
presented in Ann Crabb, The Merchant of Prato’s Wife: Margherita Datini and Her
World, 1360-1410, University of Michigan Press, 2015, with a brief reference to
Jacques Le Goff on “merchant time”

Francesco Datini, coming from an artisan background in Prato, built up his wealth as a merchant
in Avignon, and returned to Italy to continue his flourishing international business. Margherita
came from an elite but dispossessed Florentine family in political disrepute, living in Avignon at
the time of the marriage. Margherita was 16, and Francesco was nearly 40. They went back to
Italy five years later and lived mostly in Prato and Florence.

Phases of Margherita’s Life

The Young Wife
Francesco to Margherita: “Go to bed in good time and get up in good time [says the man who
habitually stayed up almost all night working]. Don’t leave the gate open if you are not up, and take
good care of everything. . . . Act in such a way that I do not have to be displeased with you. . . . Be
a woman and not a girl, because you will soon be entering your twenty-fifth year [Francesco
himself was nearing 50].”

Margherita took it as an insult when Francesco suggested that her letters were too well done for
her, as a young woman, to have composed them herself, that is, for her to have had the scribe
transmit the exact words she dictated.
“Saving your grace, I never have anyone else compose my letters … You must consider me an inept person [to suggest that.]”

Francesco responded, condescendingly but with humorous intent, that she had convinced him the letters were in her own words: “I am both pleased and displeased. I am very pleased that God has given you so much talent for speaking, but I am displeased because I have a great fear that it is a sign that you are near to death. It is commonly said that when a young person says or does something outside the usual for a person of that age, he is unlikely to live. And since this letter is beyond the usual for a young woman like you who is not accustomed to composing letters, I fear that you are being given the ability to do miraculous things before your imminent death.”

Margherita was not amused. She did not want to be treated with condescension. Noting that she had heretofore written rationally and tried to answer him as best she could, she declared, “But today I will do the opposite: we can communicate in frivolous words, as you seem to want…I have never been a young enough girl to be pleased by them.” She went on, “Note that this letter has been dictated by me,” pressing home her point about her dictation skills.

**Motherhood or lack of it**

A letter from the doctor Maestro Naddino promised (unsuccessfully) to cure Margherita’s infertility. It suggests that Margherita suffered from endometriosis, a condition which is accompanied by severe pain at the time of the menstrual periods. It often leads to infertility, as it did in Margherita’s case. She never became pregnant.

Although often outspoken, Margherita only mentioned the sensitive subject of their childlessness a couple of times in the letters, and she did it for the purpose of encouraging Francesco to be more devout. One time, after Francesco had suffered a loss in business, she told him, “Why is it that in this and other matters you don’t do as you say would do about your children (if you had any): that if God took them away from you, . . . you would accept it without complaint?” Margherita seemed to be suggesting that there had been a conversation during which she had told Francesco that even if they had had children, the children might have died, as several of her sister’s had.

She went on, “If we were to place all our faith in Him and accept what came, we wouldn’t suffer such anxieties. If we thought about death and how little time we have on this earth, we wouldn’t worry as much as we do, and we would allow ourselves to be guided by Him and accept everything that happens.” Even though Margherita emphasized that life was short and full of troubles, her attitude was not entirely negative: “I don’t think there is a man or woman more fortunate than we are, because we have received much bounty from God and are not bowed down by many burdens in this world.”

Another passage on the subject of children comes from 1402, when Margherita, aged forty-two, had passed the age of expecting children. She told Francesco, “God has taken away the possibility of your having sons and now has given you this blow, in order that you detach yourself from this evil world. . . . You are right to feel sad about the [death of the relative’s baby], but you should realize that God does everything for the good of your soul.” Finding consolation in her barrenness, at least by this late date, Margherita ends the passage by saying, “I thank God that I will never have to swallow this bitter pill.”
**Francesco’s illegitimate children**

Nonetheless, Francesco did have children, although not living sons. In early 1387, he impregnated the servant girl Ghirigora in Prato. He found her a husband, as was customary for the mother of a desired child, and recognized the boy as his, although the baby soon died. It is noteworthy that the relationship, too fleeting to be called an affair, occurred while Margherita and Francesco were together in Prato, although Francesco would have had many opportunities for sex when he and Margherita were apart. Perhaps the increasing acrimony between the couple while both were in Prato was a contributing factor.

There are no surviving letters from Francesco to Margherita between April 1386 and February 1388, but Francesco’s letters after that often show irritation with Margherita rather than the affectionate tolerance he had demonstrated before, and Margherita reacted with defensive anger.

At the time of the birth of the baby, Margherita’s brother-in-law Niccolò wrote to Francesco about Margherita, “I think it is not healthy that she is shaken with fever and pains every day, and I fear that having received so many shocks (you understand me), she could die.” Niccolò was referring to the illness with which Margherita responded to the birth of Francesco’s illegitimate baby in September 1387.

Francesco would have another illegitimate child, a daughter, by a slave in 1392. Margherita accepted the girl and brought her up as her own.

**Margherita as stepmother**

Margherita wrote to Francesco that she did not want to go to Florence, because Ginevra, in Prato, had a sore throat and had also fallen and hurt her head. It was necessary that Margherita be there to consult with the doctor about it every day. Also, Francesco knew that Ginevra obeyed no one but Margherita, with whom Ginevra was the best girl there ever was. Others in the household said that when Margherita was not there, Ginevra refused to do as she was told, although Margherita did not believe it. Later the same day, Margherita wrote to tell Francesco that the doctor said neither the sore throat nor the head injury was serious, although Margherita had been fearful about the sore throat. She did not need to tell Francesco that she treated and considered Ginevra as if she were her own, because he already knew it.

**Wifehood as a Profession**

After the end of the relatively affectionate years before 1387, Margherita and Francesco’s relationship had stabilized at a lower level, with Margherita involved in many activities on his behalf. Moralistic writers assumed that a wife’s activities were all done inside the family residence, and a distinction has often been made between women’s private sphere and men’s public sphere. However, the “private” can include not only the internal domestic household but also the ramifications of the domestic that reached outside the household. Francesco’s possessions were so scattered and his mercantile and agricultural responsibilities so varied that they involved Margherita in a broader environment. In fact, it is more accurate to say that a wife was supposed to look after her husband’s interests no matter where her responsibilities took her, as long as propriety was observed. Aside from household management, Margherita participated in agriculture, building, political negotiations, money lending and letter writing. Francesco was clearly in charge
because of his gender, age, and self-made success, and Margherita accepted this distribution of power, just as a loyal employee in a modern company would accept the employer’s authority, while still taking pride in doing well the assigned responsibilities. Margherita had enough scope for action that she can be considered a trusted agent or even “deputy husband.”

However, theirs was not a smooth relationship. Margherita’s core complaint was that Francesco did not show enough appreciation of her hard work. For example, she wrote sarcastically in response to his quibbling, “Your letters comfort me because, you know, when you are here [in Prato] you do as you like, whereas I have your and my own tasks to attend to. . . . However, I would resign myself to everything if only half of what I do were acknowledged.”

When Francesco compared Margherita unfavorably to the wife of the eminent Florentine political figure Guido del Palagio, she shot back: “You tell me that Guido says that his wife has never given him any cause for displeasure. I am sure he is telling the truth, but I believe that he has given her less reason for displeasure than she has given him...It is not that Guido allows himself to be dominated by a woman, since he has authority over an entire city; rather, Guido treats his wife like a lady, not like some innkeeper’s wife. It is fifteen blessed years since I came to Prato, and I have lived as if in an inn, and I don’t think there is a single innkeeper who runs the inn and oversees the building of it at the same time.” (Margherita was referring to the continual stream of visitors and to the continuous construction at the Datini palace)

Time
Francesco often expressed the desire that he and Margherita should lead a better life, more refined and orderly, without all their customary fatigue. Nonetheless, both he and Margherita drove themselves hard. They believed in the importance of saving time, of not waiting around until one task was complete before moving on to the next, only returning to the first task when it was ready to be addressed again. Thus Margherita reminded Francesco, when she thought he was forgetting it, that “the most valuable thing in this world is time and there is no one to whom it is dearer than you.” Margherita valued accuracy in accounts and letter writing. Letters were dated in more or less the modern way, beginning with the birth of Christ, and letters sent and received were listed at the beginning of letters. Perhaps Francesco had been the moving force behind Margherita’s emphasis on hard work and exactitude when she was a young bride, but she was completely in tune with it. Her failure to have children and her need, then, to prove herself in other ways must also be taken into account.

Her attitude toward time was particularly a trait of merchants, as Jacques Le Goff, has pointed out in “Merchant’s Time and the Church’s Time in the Middle Ages,” in *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, University of Chicago Press, 1980. Le Goff notes that from the medieval theological perspective salvation time could not be sold, so charging for the time in making loans was sinful. Time was God’s domain alone. On the other hand, merchant time was measurable. It was also pliable, leaving room for the merchant’s skill to adjust its boundaries for profit. In the medieval centuries, the two kinds of time, Le Goff says, could be brought together only through the Church, through confession and penance.
The Datini and other fourteenth and fifteenth century Italian merchants stretched the boundaries of the acceptable use time, because lending money at interest was common, leaving need for the intervention of religion.

For example, Margherita wrote to Francesco that she had posted in the account book what she knew about one Mastriscia’s purchases, noting, “But you did not say whether he should pay in cash and what the term of the loan is. Tell me quickly: Mastriscia says four months; is that true?”

The most striking reference to charging interest, which was usually hidden, was Margherita’s note to the apprentice Fattorino: “Lodovico di Ser Jacopo is to receive fourteen hundred florins for a year at 8 percent, giving the interest in advance.”

Margherita was a devout person who followed the traditional Catholic beliefs. She attached importance to the rosary, to listening to sermons, and to going on pilgrimages. Her fasting during lent during Lent was particularly important to her, as an act of self-mortification and showed her sense of sin.

Francesco expressed anxiety about his sins more directly: “If I had done and do what I should, this would not have happened, but I have done and do what I should not, and I accept the punishment, which comes to one who does what he should not.” God was punishing Francesco for Francesco’s own good, not because Francesco deserved God’s consideration, but because of His mercy.

It is not clear, however, that either Margherita or Francesco thought lending money at interest was among their serious sins.

Reading and Writing
An important part of Margherita’s job was her almost daily correspondence with Francesco when they were apart. For many years, until the mid-1390s, she had his letters read to her and used scribes for sending hers.

She could already read at an elementary level and by June 1395, she was making an effort to improve her skills, leading Francesco to tell her sententiously, “Provide for the family in a way that does you honor, and do not spend so much time reading that you do the other things badly; organize other things well, and when you have finished you can read as much as you want.”

When Francesco complained that Margherita did not write him often enough or fully enough, she responded that she could not do more because she often lacked a scribe. “If I knew how to write,” she explained, “I would do as you say.” She then began to apply herself so that she could improve her rudimentary writing skills, and began sending autograph letters. She taught herself by copying models available, not with formal lessons.

Francesco’s Old Age
Margherita worried that Francesco, past 70, might die without properly taking care of his soul, and she outlined her attitude in a letter written on their return from a year spent in Bologna avoiding the plague.
There were two things that she hoped would shape Francesco’s behavior for the rest of his life, she wrote: acting in a way that acting is pleasing to God, and using the little time remaining to him to work to return to God what God had lent him. By the latter, she meant he could earn a better place in Heaven by building up the charity he had founded, whereas earlier she had criticized his excessive devotion to business.

Elsewhere, she, aged 50, emphasized her own position, again making her points in binary terms, “I take pleasure in two things in this world, that is, to accept with peace what God does to us, and the other is that, for a person who has a family, not to wish for more from them than God grants and to take pleasure in them.”

The couple had become more diplomatic with each other, papering over disagreements. One time, she told Francesco, referring to a contentious matter, “I won’t say more about this, because I would be saying something that does not please you.” Francesco answered her with similar restraint, saying that he would say no more because if he did, he would say something that displeased her. However, they each included phrases elsewhere in the letters indicating that each thought themselves correct.

Reading Block 4:
Seasons and Life-stages of Noble Women’s Diet and Health at the Court of Louis XIV

Background: Women of the court of Louis XIV enjoyed the privileges of their rank which included restricted physical activity, a relatively rich diet of animal protein and fat, and access to doctors and cures. While this medical attention never cured their illnesses, it often prolonged their lives well into “old age.” A study of the letters of Madame de Sévigné, who lived to nearly 70, reveals a person conversant with the health of many nobles at court. Her 1,372 letters that cover half a century (1646-1696) reveal concerns at each stage of her life from her first years as a mother of two children born in 1646 and 1648, and as a young widow beginning in 1651. During this early period of letter writing, she is preoccupied with the physical and spiritual health of the Queen. In later decades (1670s-80s), she turns her attention to medical treatments and cures for her rheumatism, as well as the ongoing health of her daughter, now a mother herself. This period shows a marked increase in references to “maladies” and the piety of those facing death. Scholars often remark that Mme de Sévigné’s attention to her daughter’s wellbeing reveals her possessiveness if not an obsession about her daughter’s diet and activity at moments preceding and following childbirth. What is more striking is how she counsels her daughter when encountering her own or someone else’s bodily weakness (evidenced by fainting and fatigue) within the duties and devotions of wife or widow, mother and courtier, at various stages of life.

A more complex picture emerges when comparing Sevigné’s concerns – full of chatty gossip and motherly advice – with those of other women at court, particularly, Madame de Maintenon (1635-1719), the royal governess and, later, secret wife to Louis XIV. Madame de Maintenon’s worldly and spiritual counsel for the noble maidens at her school in Saint-Cyr provide another point of reference on the ideal environmental and moral conditions fitting for young noble women. Using full-text databases as a tool for research, participants in the workshop will be invited to consider excerpts from a large collection of correspondence, finding where key terms such as “maladie” (which appears 107 times in Mme de Sévigné’s letters) “fièvre” (215 times),
“santé” (938 times) and other terms appear in conjunction with specific life stages, especially girls at menarche, nursing mothers and women at post-menopause.

Questions to consider

1) What health concerns do these women share with other women at various stages of life?
2) How do these noble women discuss their dietary habits and environmental conditions as contributors to certain health conditions?
3) How do their health concerns relate to the moral and spiritual values of quiet suffering and religious steadfastness?

Sources:


Excerpts:


   [Les Rochers, 15 January 1676]

   To Madame de Grignan:

   By dint of talking to me about a stiff neck you have given me one. I can’t move my right side; my dear child, I get those little pains nobody else pities although one never stops moaning. My son falls about with laughter; I shall give him on the nose as soon as I am able. Meanwhile, dear child, I embrace you with my left arm and with all my heart. The frater will be telling you a lot of tall stories. You Queen of Hungary’s water will have cured me before this letter gets to Paris. Good-bye, dear child.

   From Charles de Sévigné:

   No, I am not laughing; as Mother tells you I am, but as her complaint is nothing that can give the slightest anxiety, one commiserates with her pains an amuses her in bed, in fact does one’s best to give her relief. I think you will rely on me and the good Abbé over anything to do with a health so precious to us all. So set your mind at rest about this, little sister, for we shall certainly be better by the time you begin to worry (pp. 180-81).

   [Les Rochers, 26 January 1676]

   To Madame de Grignon:

   My hands are still swollen, dear child, but let that convince you of the end of all the rheumatism; which has steadily diminished since the attack we mentioned on the ninth day of my illness.

   Dictated to Charles de Sévigné by his mother:

   So it is true that since that sweating following the other little ones, I have been free of fever and pain except what comes from exhaustion from the rheumatism. You know what it means to me to be lying on my back for sixteen days without being able to change my position. I am tucked away in my little alcove where I have been very snug and perfectly looked after. I wish my
secretary were not my own son at this moment so that I could tell you what he has been up to in all this. This complaint has been very rife hereabouts, and those who have avoided pneumonia have been victims, but to tell you the truth I didn’t think this universal law applied to me; never was woman more humiliated or treated more out of keeping with her temperament. If I had made good use of all I have gone through I wouldn’t have lost everything (I ought perhaps to be envied), but I am impatient and don’t see how one can exist with no feet, no legs, no hamstrings and no hands. You must forgive this letter and put it down to the natural self-centeredness of a sick person. I shan’t go over it again and in a few days we shall be in a state to write just like anybody else. […]

*Added by Charles de Sévigné:*

I have nothing to add, dear sister, except that the good Abbé and I have had an argument. He says that Mother’s writing, such as it is, was necessary to reassure you. I maintain that it is more likely to scare you to death, and that you would have paid us the honour of relying on us for news of Mother’s health, and our account would have dispelled your anxieties. That is what I think about it, for I don’t imagine you would suspect me of being so hardened as to write witticisms when I was upset by something terrible. Let me know what you think so as to settle our argument (pp. 181-82).

[Les Rochers, 29 January 1676]

*To Madame de Grignan:*

*Dictated to Charles de Sévigné by his mother*

You will think it funny, my dear, that I am cured, with no temperature or pain left, and that nevertheless I shall not write to you myself, but it is for that very reason that I can’t write. My pains have given way to swelling, so that this poor right hand of mine is no use for scribbling as in days past. It is just a bit more inconvenience that won’t last long. I am at present getting over the aches caused by a fortnight in bed and am beginning to walk about in my room. I am gaining strength. This is no unpleasant state of affairs, so please don’t worry yourself just when we are feeling appreciably happier. I have read your two letters, which are heavenly. You paint me delightful pictures, and if ever I can get my hand to work I shall answer. Meanwhile you know that with me you lose nothing either of the charm of your correspondence or of the affection you show. One of the greatest joys of my recovery has been the anxiety it will relieve you of. You ought not to have any more now, as we have told you everything with exact truth, and at present we are enjoying the delights of convalescence. I embrace you, dear child, with all my heart. So does the Bien Bon.

*From Charles de Sévigné:*

And for me, little sister, you know I am sparing no pains. I have nothing to say today of my own, apart from the extreme joy I feel that we have done with complications (p. 183).

[Les Rochers, 2 February 1676]

*From Charles de Sévigné, dictated by his mother:*

Guess, my child, what is the one thing in the world which comes quickest and goes away slowest, which bring you to nearest to convalescence and takes you furthest away, which takes you within a touch of the most pleasant state in the world and does the most to prevent your enjoying it, which gives you the highest hopes in the world and defers them longest. Can’t you
guess? You give in? It’s rheumatism. For twenty-three days I have been laid up with it and since the fourteenth I have had no temperature or pain; and then in this blessed state, thinking I am able to walk, which is all I wish, I find myself swollen in every quarter, feet, legs, hands, arms; and this swelling, which is called my recovery, and it is indeed, is the whole cause of my impatience and would be of my virtue if I were good. However, I think that it’s now all right and that I shall be able to walk in two days’ time. Larmechin gives me to hope: O che spero! I am getting from all sides letters from Paris rejoicing in my good health and rightly. I purged myself once with M. Delorme’s powder, which worked wonders, and I’m going to take some more; it is the proper remedy for all these sorts of afflictions. After that I am promised eternal health, God willing! The first step I shall take will be to go to Paris. So please, my dear child, calm your worries, you know well we have always written truthfully. Before sealing this packet I shall ask my clumsy hand whether it will kindly permit me to write you a couple of words. I don’t think it will, perhaps it will in two hours’ time.

Good-bye my beautiful beloved. I urge you all to respect with fear and trembling what is called rheumatism—it seems to me that at present I have nothing more important to recommend. Here comes your frater, who has been cursing you for a week because in Paris you were against M. Delorme’s remedy.

From Charles de Sévigné:

If Mother had followed this fellow’s treatment and had taken his powder once a month as he wanted her to, she would not have developed this illness, which is only due to a frightful excess of humours. But it was like wanting to murder Mother to advise her to try a pinch of it. And yet this most dreadful remedy, the very mention of which makes people tremble, which is made of antimony, a kind of emetic, purges much more gently than a glass of water from a spring, doesn’t give the slightest griping or pain and has no other effect than to make your head clear and alert, capable of composing verse if you put yourself to it. Yet she mustn’t take any: “Can you be serious, brother, to administer antimony to Mother? All she needs is a diet and a little senna tea once a month.” That is what you said.

Good-bye little sister. I am furious when I think that we could have avoided this illness with this remedy, which restores health so quickly whatever Mother’s impatience may make her say. Mother exclaims, “Ah, my children, how foolish you are to imagine that an illness can be driven out! Must not God’s Providence run its course? Can we do anything but obey it?” That is very Christian, but let us always take a little of M. Delorme’s powder just in case (pp. 184-85).

[Paris, Wednesday 30 September 1676]

To Madame Grignan:

I am lying, it’s only Tuesday, but all the same I am beginning my letter to reply to yours and tell you about Mme de Coulanges, and I shall finish tomorrow, which really will be Wednesday.

It’s the fourteenth day of Mme de Coulanges’s illness. The doctors won’t answer for her yet because she still has a temperature, and in her continual delirium they have reason to fear moving her; also she hasn’t been purged because of the hemorrhoids that are extremely painful. However, as the recurrences get less serious there is every hope that all will be well. This morning they wanted to get her to take an emetic, but she was so unreasonable that she wouldn’t pay attention to the pleadings of her doctors and all her friends on the necessity for this remedy. She was forced to swallow five or six miserable sips, which didn’t do half what was wanted, and these wretched hemorrhoids prevent their going on tomorrow. As for Beaujeu, she was really
dead and the emetic resuscitated her; it is not as easy to die as you think. It looks to me, my dear, as if you want to be anxious about my being in the feverish air of this house. So I tell you that I am perfectly well and that Mme de Coulanges is extremely glad and desirous of my presence. I am in the sickroom or in the garden, I come and go and talk to all sorts of people, I walk about and don’t breathe in feverish air. So don’t worry at all about me.

I have looked into the nice little remedy you suggest; it is admirable. Could you have been cruel enough not to use it until I had? Could you have written it down without laughing? I laughed most heartily. The convenience, suitability, simplicity, and familiar nature of this remedy, the number of ladies who use it without one’s knowing, all that part, my dear is priceless. I love the cause with all my heart but will spare you from reading about it when you realize how little I need it. I was advised also to suggest that you use four of them along the child’s back; when you approve of this advice for him I will begin to see what I shall have to do (pp. 206-07).

[Paris, 15 March 1680]

To Madame de Grignan:

I am very much afraid that this time we are going to lose M. de La Rochefoucauld. He still has a high temperature and yesterday he received Our Lord. But his state of mind is worth admiring. He is quite at peace with his conscience; that is all done with. The question is the illness and death of his neighbor. He is hardly affected by it and not upset. He hears the arguments of the doctors in front of him, Frère Ange and the Englishman, in quite a detached manner, without so to speak condescending to express his own opinion. I come back to the line: Trop au-dessous de lui pour y prêter l’esprit.* He did not see Mme. De La Fayette yesterday morning because she was crying and he was receiving the Sacrament, but he sent for news of her at noon. Believe me, my dear, he hasn’t written reflections all his life to no purpose. So he has drawn near to his last moments, and there is nothing new or strange in them for him (p. 244).

[Paris, Sunday 17 March 1680, the day after de La Rochefoucauld’s death]

To Madame de Grignan:

All this sadness has stirred me and shown me the horror of separations. My heart is full of heaviness, and more than ever I beg you on my knees and in tears not to keep putting off the remedies M. de la Rouvière wants you to take and without which you can’t get better. You are satisfied just to know about them, they are a standby, they are kept in a box, but your blood is getting no better and you often have pains in the chest. Yet you are content to know about the remedies and won’t take them. And when you do decide to, my dearest, alas, perhaps your illness will be too far advanced. How can you possibly give me this bitter and continual grief? Are you afraid of getting well? Don’t M. de la Rouvière and M. de Grignan mean anything to you?

And as for you, M. de Grignan, aren’t you being cruel to take her to Marseilles and perhaps further still? Can you calmly make her rush about with you? Alas, you know how she needs rest, so how can you let her risk such fatigues? I beg you, through your affection for me, to explain this behavior. Are you perfectly happy about her health, and wish for nothing better? Would to God it were so! I have noticed that you used to talk about her dear health; now you have given up mentioning it and I see you are taking her about (p. 247)


On the 27 May 1681, in regards to a trip to visit the Duc du Maine she wrote: “I am half the weight I was since I left…, if I don’t come back soon I will become skinny (*étiquette*).”

On 29 May 1684, writing from Valenciennes: “I have lost weight on this trip, so much so that I am making others fat.”

Later that year, on 16 July, she notes the opposite effect: “I am getting a little fat, but this suits me much better in my old age than illness (*l’étisie*).”

“I’ve had vapors all my life” (12 August 1702). On October 4 of the same year, she complains that she takes too many remedies.

On 4 June 1705, she begins her day with a visit to Maréchal the royal surgeon.

In 1707, she claims, “I am seventy years old and I drink only water.”

On 27 April 1705, she complains, “If I live too long in the King’s chambers, I will become a paralytic. None of the doors or windows close, and I am beaten by the wind which makes me think of the tropical storms of America […] I have a rheumatism in my head if not throughout my body.

Like many inhabitants of Versailles, Madame de Maintenon complained of migraines, hemorrhoids, rheumatism, fevers, and car sickness. In 1680, Mme. de Sévigné remarked how often she had a cold.

When writing to her brother of her infirmities on 15 December 1679, she stated, “I have no idea what doctors are doing, and I have only been healthy when I stopped taking cures.”

On 12 August 1702, Madame de Maintenon shared her remedy against the vapors, in thinking of Philippe V, aware of his diversions: “I hoped that the active army life would do his vapors well. There isn’t a condition less dangerous for one’s health, but never more annoying for one’s frame of mind and all that follows. It’s never something to hear about, it’s spoken of as little as possible, and it’s something that only goes away with movement and by getting fresh air. It is a malady that at its worst takes over, and just as it gets the best of you, you are resigned to sorrow which shuts you in. I could write books on this, as I’ve had the vapors all my life. But I assure you that I’ve never seen anyone able to overcome it by the force of their goodwill; on the contrary, I’ve seen many times men crying bitterly and wanting to throw themselves from the window (this without exaggeration), only to be feeling just fine an hour later, when they force themselves to go walk or take some other pleasant pastime.”