

## The feminine voice in the early French novel

Who was Marie de France? Was she of noble descent? A writer 'à gages'? A wife? A mother? We shall probably never know. All we can say about her is that she resided for a while at the court of England in the second half of the 12th century, having come from France, probably from Normandy, and, of course, that she made History: *literary* history, by composing short love stories related to the 'cycle breton', and *women's* history by being the first known French woman novelist. This was a feat, and yet, in a way, it was not all that surprising. For around 1150, in a society which becomes more and more refined, the 'romans de chevalerie', concerned with warfare and therefore male-oriented, tend to be challenged on the literary scene by the 'romans courtois', in which there is more room for love, and a part to play for women. Also, a new 'destinataire' seems to have appeared at that time: the Reader. Solitary reading very slowly comes to coexist with the oral tradition, which implies the existence of more books that fix texts, and thus protect them from being lost forever. One other point has to be underlined: there *was* a system of education, even in early medieval France; limited, one must admit, and more often than not reserved for the nobility, but able to produce extremely erudite men *and* women, like Sainte Bertilla, like Heloise. We have documents proving that, at least in the 13th century, schools open to all, 'les petites écoles', existed in Paris.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, if these conditions made it possible for Marie de France to write, to gain recognition and to have her works transmitted to us, she is the exception, and, until the period we are concerned with here, the feminine voice will be heard only sporadically, with Christine de Pizan or Helisenne de Crenne. From 1550 to 1750, does the situation change? To answer this question, I have selected six French writers of fiction<sup>2</sup> and have tried to work with their similarities as well as their idiosyncrasies, in order to create a general picture without erasing their originality.

The writers concerned are Marguerite de Navarre (author of the *Heptaméron*, 1559) and Madame de Lafayette (famous for her *Princesse de Clèves*, 1678); Marie de Gournay (well known chiefly on account of her connection with Montaigne) and Madeleine de Scudéry (author of novels in the tradition of 'préciosité'); Madame de Villeglé (whose works were read avidly during the 18th century) and Madame de

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Carton 1886, p.28-9.

<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to mention here many other women who wrote successfully and are yet too often neglected, but one may find detailed complementary information in Berriot-Salvadore 1990, and in Timmermans 1993.

Graffigny (who enjoyed a large success with the publication of her *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, 1747). I shall compare these women writers in pairs, the members of each pair having come from similar social backgrounds, in order to demonstrate the evolution of women's writing that took place between the 16th and the 18th century.

### **Marguerite de Navarre and Madame de Lafayette**

Marguerite de Navarre (1492-1549) and Madame de Lafayette (1634-1693) both belong to the high nobility, one as François the First's sister, the other as a 'dame d'honneur' of the queen (Anne d'Autriche), and later as a very close friend and confidante of Henriette Maria, queen of England. Although they are separated by almost a century and a half, they both lived at a refined court where the arts were appreciated and encouraged. Both of them, intelligent and apparently studious children, had received an excellent education: as a matter of fact, a boy's education. Marguerite shared her brother's teachers, and it appears that she took advantage of this opportunity: she learned Latin and Greek, as well as German, Italian and Spanish, and developed a sophisticated appreciation for literature. Would she have had the same access to knowledge had she not had a brother? One may doubt it. At least, that is what Michel François suggests when he states that she grew up in this brother's 'shadow'.<sup>3</sup>

Marie-Madeleine Pioche de La Vergne, the future Madame de Lafayette, was the daughter of an erudite who recognized in her the signs of intellectual curiosity; indeed, she seems to have played the role of the son he did not have. He certainly favoured her over her sisters.<sup>4</sup> He gave her, at home, the best teachers, like Gilles Ménage, and she studied Italian and also Latin – which, surprisingly, had become rarer in an aristocratic girl's education at that time. Like Marguerite de Navarre at the house of her uncle, Jean d'Angoulême, she had books at hand, in her father's library. As the family lived in Paris, where M. Pioche de La Vergne was acquainted with the best of society and with many scholars, the ambitious young woman soon became a 'précieuse accomplie', having acquired both remarkable erudition and perfect social graces.

It would appear that in the settings where these two 'grandes dames' grew up and were to live and write fiction, in the best of conditions a good knowledge of the humanities was accessible, even desirable. The way to use this knowledge, however, had changed. In the 16th century, few women were learned. Nevertheless, if they did manage to become erudite, they seem to have been allowed to express themselves and show their knowledge: they signed their works, took pride and delight in writing, and were admired for it. They could live and support a family with money earned from their writing, like the earlier writer Christine de Pizan, who, even if she found

<sup>3</sup> Cf. François 1960, p.iii.

<sup>4</sup> An attitude which is found more than once: the most striking example is probably the case of two well known sisters, Madame de Montespan, Louis XIV's mistress, whose spelling was deplorable, and her young sister, Gabrielle de Rochechouart, abbess of Fontevault, an exceptional woman who took the opportunity of studying with Prince Philippe d'Orléans and later at the Abbaye-aux-Bois, and mastered Italian, Spanish, Latin, Greek and Hebrew.

in her situation some oddity that she expresses in *La Mutacion de Fortune*,<sup>5</sup> was exhilarated by it, and not ashamed of it. In a word, around 1550 ‘prodige’ women enjoyed a kind of freedom, and – as Evelynne Berriot-Salvadore shows – at least in a certain class, they ‘ne croient pas «malséant» de s’adonner aux études érudites’.<sup>6</sup> A happy situation which was not to last long. Although Madame de Lafayette was highly respected among intellectuals and was admitted into the royal circle, even esteemed by the Sun King, there was no way for her to publish under her own name a novel like *La Princesse de Clèves*, in spite of its enormous success: it was simply *not* done. Literary production had become a ‘malséant’ activity for a lady.

## Marie de Gournay and Madeleine de Scudéry

Let us now consider a second pair of French writers: Marie le Jars de Gournay (1565-1645) and Madeleine de Scudéry (1607-1701). Both were born into families of the lesser nobility, both were eager to learn, and neither of them ever married. They both occasionally expressed feminist views. They are generally regarded as ‘bas-bleus’. For Marie de Gournay, when she lost her father at the age of twelve, the oldest in a family of six children, living in the castle of a small village in Picardy, with a mother who had no sympathy whatsoever for scholarly curiosity, the future seemed bleak. There were no eminent teachers for her; there was no encouragement for her to study. Marie, though, resisted the traditional female education and secretly studied Latin alone, with a determination one can only admire.<sup>7</sup> When, at the age of 26, she found herself in charge of her two youngest siblings, she went to Paris, ready to make a living from her writing.

As far as Madeleine de Scudéry is concerned, after losing her father at the age of seven, she grew up in Rouen, in the household of her uncle, who made sure she received a good education. She did not show the same hostility as Marie de Gournay towards female activities, but she had a broader intellectual curiosity and was given a chance to learn. In his *Mémoires*, Conrart, secretary of the Académie française, gives us an idea of the wide scope of her knowledge:

L’écriture, l’orthographe, la danse, à dessiner, à peindre, à travailler à l’aiguille, elle apprit tout, et elle devinait d’elle-même ce qu’on ne lui enseignait pas. Comme elle avait une imagination prodigieuse, une excellente mémoire, un jugement exquis, une humeur vive et naturellement portée à savoir tout ce qu’elle voyait faire de curieux et tout ce qu’elle entendait dire de louable, elle apprit d’elle-même les choses qui dépendent de l’agriculture, du jardinage, du ménage, de la campagne, de la cuisine, les causes et les effets

<sup>5</sup> ‘Dont [je] m’ébahis, mais j’éprouvai/ Que [un] vrai homme [je] fus devenu’ (Pizan 1959-1964, v.1360-1361).

<sup>6</sup> Berriot-Salvadore 1990, p.390.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Elyane Dezon-Jones: ‘Peut-être est-ce à cause des difficultés qu’elle rencontra en tant que jeune fille que Marie de Gournay insista de façon si persistante, dans tous ses textes, sur la nécessité de l’éducation des enfants en général et des filles en particulier. Le thème est récurrent à travers toute son oeuvre et inspira ‘la Question Célèbre’: ‘S’il est nécessaire ou non que les filles soient sçavantes, agitée de part et d’autre par Mademoiselle Anna de Schurman, Hollandaise, et le Sr André Rivet, Poitevin’, en 1646’ (Gournay 1988, p.18).

des maladies, la composition d'une infinité de remèdes, de parfums [...]. Elle eut envie de savoir jouer du luth, et elle en prit quelques leçons avec assez de succès. Mais le luth lui demandait trop de temps, et, sans y renoncer, elle aima mieux se tourner particulièrement du côté des occupations de l'esprit. Elle apprit en perfection l'italien, l'espagnol, et son principal plaisir était dans la lecture et dans les conversations choisies dont elle n'était pas dépourvue dans son voisinage.<sup>8</sup>

This list deserves a few comments. First, one notes the absence of Latin. Second, the first series of topics represents a complete ('elle apprit *tout*') but exclusively feminine education. At the same time, the child had permission to learn, although in a disorganized manner, whatever appealed to her: there was no plan of study, and no guidance, but no restraint. Finally, living in Rouen, a city rich in intellectual activities, and among cultivated people, she acquired social polish or 'politesse' which may have been denied to Marie de Gournay.

What did they do with their education? They both became writers and devoted some of their writings to feminist declarations: Marie de Gournay with *L'égalité des hommes et des femmes* (1622) and *Le grief des dames* (1626), Madeleine de Scudéry, in a more diffuse manner, especially in *Les femmes illustres* (1642), and more specifically in her 'Harangue de Sapho à Erinne'. They both wrote fiction too: as a matter of fact, *Clélie* (1654-1660), by Madeleine de Scudéry, one of the most popular books of the whole century. But they were also financially and socially more vulnerable, for they needed money to live on, and they were spinsters. Marie stood up for herself, signed her books, courageously faced aggressive and derogatory comments. Madeleine also had to suffer a few cruel remarks. She hid her talents behind her brother's name. Differences in temperaments do not explain totally the divergences in behaviour. Once again, times had changed and altered the freedom and working conditions for the writing woman.

### Madame de Villedieu and Madame de Graffigny

Madame de Villedieu (1640?-1683) and Madame de Graffigny (1694-1758) form the final pair. Madame de Villedieu was a contemporary of Lafayette and Scudéry. By birth, both Villedieu and Graffigny belonged to the same class, the lesser gentry, like Gournay and Scudéry. But fate gave them a very different approach to knowledge. Although we do not know much about their respective childhoods, it is safe to say that their education was very neglected indeed. They must have somehow learned the rudiments, but nothing more; Madame de Villedieu tells us: 'Il y a longtemps que j'ai protesté qu'un peu de génie me tenait lieu d'étude et que l'usage du monde poli est ma plus grande science'.<sup>9</sup> If they did not care to give her a good education, her parents did give her contacts in high society. An alert and active child, as attested by the poet Vincent Voiture, a neighbour of the family, she was more attracted by

<sup>8</sup> Desplantes/Pouthier 1970, p.53-4.

<sup>9</sup> *Portrait des faiblesses humaines*, in: Villedieu 1721, vol.I, p.302.

movement and social activities than by solitary studies and abstract speculations. At the age of sixteen, she lived on her own, which was quite unusual. Bright and curious, she observed, listened and learned. But more than anything else, she was independent and daring – even seen as scandalous in her love life – and always ready for new experiments.

Madame de Graffigny does not comment herself on her education. But one only has to read the first note of hers that has been preserved, written before 1718 (but after her marriage), to realize that she was not well educated in her youth. Later on, though, she lived in Lunéville, close to the ducal family of Lorraine, and in the familiarity of the local intelligentsia. Through her contacts with these scholars and artists Madame de Graffigny acquired a late but broad education, and a good training in discussing and judging. She became the cultivated and witty woman who was appreciated by Voltaire, and shortly afterwards by many scholars, writers and artists in Paris.

These two self-taught women share another experience: Madame de Villedieu was abandoned by the man who had given her a ‘promesse de mariage’, and Madame de Graffigny was a battered wife, as a result of which she applied for separation. In the course of time, finding money to survive became a real problem for each of them, as we see them so often waiting for a pension, promised and due but always late. So they both wrote, to the delight of their editors, for the many novels of Madame de Villedieu as well as the unique one of Madame de Graffigny, *Les lettres d'une Péruvienne*, were received with enthusiasm, reprinted many times and translated into foreign languages. They did not feel humiliated to receive payment for their work, and at the same time they enjoyed the thrill of writing easily and naturally, as was the case for Madame de Villedieu, or of polishing a piece of art to perfection, as did Madame de Graffigny: her correspondence shows, day after day, the anguish and the joys of the artist. Asked what he thought was the chief motive for her to write *Les lettres d'une Péruvienne*, Alan Dainard, the chief editor of the correspondence of Madame de Graffigny did not hesitate a second: ‘After correcting, judging and helping so many others, she had to show she was able to write something good on her own’?<sup>10</sup>

## Overview

In the light of these case studies, let us try to assess the situation of the French female novelist between 1550 and 1750. At a time when the position of the European man (and woman) in the world had been strongly shaken by a series of significant events – I am thinking of the changes brought about by the discoveries of Gutenberg, Columbus, and Copernicus –, roles had to be redistributed, and a new order, in which political, religious and social elements were involved, had to be created. Going back to Aristotle, the question of feminine inferiority, physical, mental and moral, based on biblical and biological considerations, had been periodically debated through the Middle Ages. This old topic picked up new strength in the middle of the 16th

<sup>10</sup> Alan Dainard, personal communication.

century.<sup>11</sup> It did not affect Marguerite de Navarre: she still belonged to the former era, when erudition, limited to convents and courts, was not assigned to a specific sex. Those people who were erudite were usually in positions of power, anyway, and poems or works of fiction, composed by men or, occasionally, by women were very limited in their distribution because they were produced only in the form of manuscripts.

Once printing started to develop, though, it did not take long for the educated elite to realize the power of words:

Et si quelqu'une parvient en tel degré, que de pouvoir mettre ses conceptions par écrit, le faire soigneusement et non dédaigner la gloire, et s'en parer plutôt que de chaînes, anneaux et somptueux habits, lesquels ne pouvons vraiment estimer nôtres que par usage. Mais l'honneur que la science nous procurera sera entièrement nôtre, et ne nous pourra être ôté, ni par finesse de larron, ni force d'ennemis, ni longueur de temps,

writes Louise Labé in 1555. Writing was a marvellous tool that gave one power and authority, glory, independence and eternity. In the course of time, more and more 'bourgeois' and 'bourgeoises' gained access to learning, and I would be tempted to say that it is at this point that a break happened between the amateurs, less jealous of their knowledge, and the professional erudites, the hard-core 'doctes'. With this hardening of positions, it is hardly surprising that there were people who wished to put a stop to these developments. One of the best ways to keep part of the competition away from the new source of power is, of course, to firmly remind women what their function is in life: procreation. We are now at the turn of the century, and we see how and why Marie de Gournay – whose intellectual acuity was recognized by Montaigne, by Justus Lipsius, by Anna Maria van Schurman – and later Madeleine de Scudéry, were to suffer the meanest and lowest verbal attacks, even long after they were dead.<sup>12</sup> They had never married, never had children: they were not real women, and therefore they became a threat to the 'doctes'. Marie de Gournay, still a Renaissance woman, who had an impatient and fiery nature and simply could not understand the reasons behind the new attitudes, never relented. In her *Grief des dames* she denounces the injustice of such treatment:

Bienheureux es-tu, lecteur, si tu n'es point de ce sexe, qu'on interdit de tous les biens, l'interdisant de la liberté: oui, qu'on interdit encore à peu pres, de toutes les vertus, lui

<sup>11</sup> Cf.: 'Le débat médiéval sur l'infériorité de la femme se poursuit et s'amplifie au xv<sup>e</sup> siècle. Il prend un tour aigu dans les années 1540 [...]' (Joukovsky 1995, p.7).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Hermann 1983. Among gratuitous and unacceptable comments written long after Marie de Gournay's death, one can read in Sainte-Beuve's *Nouveaux lundis* (vol.IX) a few laudatory remarks: '[...] cette demoiselle de Gournay qui se voua à lui [i.e. Montaigne], fut sa digne héritière littéraire, son éditeur éclairé, mais qui elle-même, d'une trop verte allure, finit par prendre du poil au menton en vieillissant et par devenir comme le gendarme rébarbatif et suranné de la vieille école et de toute la vieille littérature, – un grotesque, une antique' (quoted in Gournay 1988, p.42), or, even more recently, in Maurice Rat's introduction to Montaigne's *Essais* (1962): 'La première réaction contre Montaigne date de la fin du règne de Louis XIII. Mlle de Gournay, qui eut le tort de vivre trop longtemps, n'y contribua pas peu, en dépit qu'elle en eût, par son attitude agressive et grognon de vieille pédante [...]' (ibid., p.12 note 8). For Scudéry, cf. Boursier 1989.

soustrayant le pouvoir, en la moderation duquel la plupart d'elles se forment; afin de lui constituer pour seule felicité, pour vertus souveraines et seules, ignorer, faire le sot et servir.<sup>13</sup>

Madeleine de Scudéry, on the other hand, like Madame de Lafayette and Madame de Villedieu, was marked by 'préciosité'. She certainly felt the same passionate need as Marie de Gournay or Louise Labé to be heard and to write her name herself in history:

Croyez-moi, Erinne, il vaut mieux donner l'immortalité aux autres, que de la recevoir d'autrui: & trouver sa propre gloire chez soi, que de l'attendre d'ailleurs. [...] si de votre propre main, vous laissez quelques marques de ce que vous êtes, vous vivrez toujours avec honneur, en la mémoire de tous les hommes.<sup>14</sup>

But by the time she started to write, the mixed effects of Richelieu's politics and of the 'précieux' society of the salons had modified the relation of authors, and particularly of women novelists, to their art and to the world. Regulations and institutionalization in the arts as well as in society were slowly taking control of the free intelligence. And while 'préciosité' may very well have given women an important role in the closed world of the 'ruelles', it also imposed all the constraints of 'bienséance', which were an unsuspected but terrible trap. Ironically, Madeleine de Scudéry could hardly find her glory directly in her works even if everybody knew they were hers, as they were always signed by her brother: it would have been shameful for her to officially recognize that she, a noblewoman, took her work so seriously! It would have cast a shadow on her reputation, and of course she could not face this idea. Madame de Lafayette, under comparable influences, reacted in a similar manner. She always insisted on playing the modest woman's game, she borrowed a man's name to publish her novels, and never wrote any public declaration of feminism. One may admit, though, even if some male critics still do not, that she showed out a subversive touch of independence when she suggested, at the end of her *Princesse de Clèves*, that it is always possible to resist.

But it is with Madame de Villedieu that the situation takes a new turn. For one thing, Madame de Villedieu had much less to lose by rejecting the 'bienséances': she did not belong to the establishment, and part of her reputation had been acquired by her non-conformity. Unorthodox but honest, she did not fear public judgement, which gave her a certain freedom. But she was a very modern woman, a woman of small financial means, who was not in a position to play the social game as a writer. Rather, she arrived in an increasingly bourgeois and entrepreneurial world at the right moment to approach publishing as a commercial enterprise. She had a very salable merchandise to offer, and her publisher Barbin, a businessman, wanted it badly. Thus, with Madame de Villedieu, even though she was a contemporary of Madame de Lafayette, there appears a new breed of French woman novelist that already

<sup>13</sup> Gournay 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Scudéry 1642, p.40, Sappho's harangue to Erinne.

announces the 18th century. Her break with the past appears also in her way of writing: while Madame de Lafayette, in spite of the unexpected resistance of her heroine, brought Madame de Clèves' story to her life's end, or even while Guilleragues with *Les lettres portugaises* wrote an epistolary novel and yet managed to respect the classical canon and to close Mariane's adventure by a denouement which, in my opinion, is final, Madame de Villedieu inaugurates the 'extravagant narratives', as Elizabeth MacArthur calls them,<sup>15</sup> by leaving the story open to other possible adventures. Madame de Graffigny was to do just the same: Sylvie in 1671, and Zilia in 1747, reject a marriage which could give them a pleasant existence, and choose to start a new, open and independent life. Of course all the strict rules of classicism would have denied them this right. Madame de Villedieu, like Madame de Graffigny, knows that it is generally easier, if one writes well, to deal directly with a publisher rather than to wait submissively for the approbation of the authorities and to hope for a pension which might never come.

One might think that the battle was over, and that in the commercial era a woman novelist would just have to produce good fiction to gain glory once and forever... Not so. As soon as the restraints of 'préciosité' relaxed, and the male-dominated world that wrote literary history lost a convenient way to control the female voice through the severe rules of 'réputation' and 'bienséances', new arms had to be found. Modern feminist critics<sup>16</sup> have recently noticed that they were found, not only through the old trick of derision, but by simply ignoring women authors: if one just kept a few token women novelists to be mentioned in school textbooks or general works, the others could be discarded. Curiously enough, Marguerite de Navarre, who as a novelist never had to face male control or hostility, or Madeleine de Scudéry and Madame de Lafayette, who more or less felt obliged to submit to this control although they were aware of its unfairness, are always named and often quoted. Yet other women writers have been forgotten or hidden for almost two centuries: not only Gournay, Villedieu and Graffigny, who insisted they had a mind and a point of view of their own, but also a multitude of others whose *works* and sometimes even whose *names* are just being rediscovered. What else did they deserve, if they had not been able to accomplish what women do best: bear children and keep house, and for the rest, leave the field of writing to those to whom it belongs...

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<sup>15</sup> MacArthur 1986.

<sup>16</sup> Some of Joan deJean's and Domna Stanton's essays are very enlightening on this topic.



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