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Nicholas Paige

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*Some Speculations on Gender and Autobiographical
Authority in Seventeenth-Century French Mysticism*



University of California, Berkeley
1998

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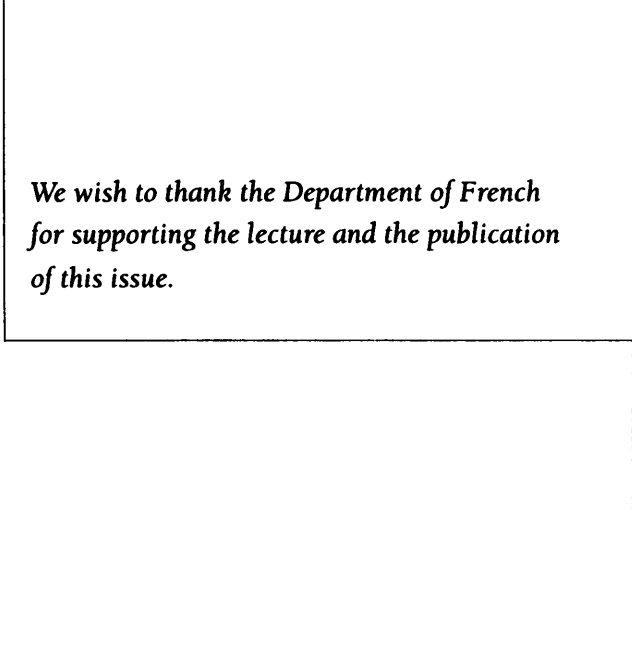
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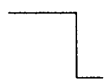
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PREFACE

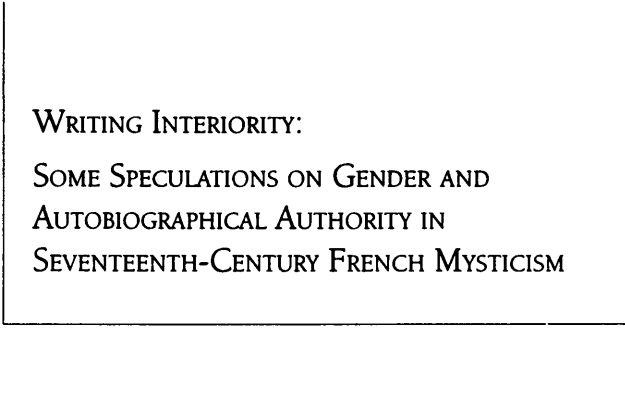
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Editors



WRITING INTERIORITY:
SOME SPECULATIONS ON GENDER AND
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL AUTHORITY IN
SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH MYSTICISM





I apologize for a somewhat unwieldy title. I suppose the reason I wanted to propose “some speculations” instead of definitive remarks on “gender and autobiographical authority in seventeenth-century French mysticism” can be attributed to my very subject today, to wit, the way the material I will be presenting *exceeds* the paradigms we deploy to understand and to master it. And yet this excess, I would maintain, is not quite excessive enough so as to oblige us to throw out all our old paradigms in favor of a new one. Instead, the careful observer is left to speculate on both the suitability and the shortcomings of models that work pretty well yet that can also be very misleading.

What I would like to do, then, is to present some “literary data” pertaining to the composition and dissemination of mystical autobiographical texts within the Catholic Church in the second half of the seventeenth century. My underlying assumption is that only through a detailed understanding of the “materiality” of the autobiographical text—that is, its complexly mediated journey from writer to contemporary reader—can we begin to take the measure of the paradigms commonly used to understand gender relations in the early modern period. Succinctly put, I ask how autobiographical material was gendered, why, and what can this gendering tell us about power, authority, the “cultural capital” of the feminine. But first, what are these “paradigms” to which I have been referring?

In the last ten or so years, the figure of the nun has been reclaimed. No longer are religious women written off, in a Beauvoiresque fashion, as victims of the most patriarchal of institutions, the Church. Instead, due to the efforts of feminist cultural historians especially, signs of religious women’s intellectual activity, many of which had never made it beyond manuscript form, are beginning to trickle into print and to elicit commentary.¹ In retrieving from oblivion some of these forgotten voices of the past, editors and commentators have expressed the hope that in listening to them, we may get a sense of how resilient women’s culture was even at times and in places where patriarchal domination was at its apogee.

Indeed, religious writing seems to promise all the elements of a good drama of gender relations. On the one hand lie the oppressive strictures of the male Church superstructure, buttressed by solemn pronouncements on female duty and vituperative attacks on women as agents of the devil. Frequent witch-burnings (some estimates put them as high as 60,000, though the figure is probably quite a bit lower) only serve to underline the life-or-death stakes of this misogynist discourse. On the other hand, in the face of this oppression, women articulated a hidden resistance in the form of a transgressive mysticism.

The meeting point between masculine oppression and feminine resistance occurred in the act of writing. To control potentially threatening female claims to mystical authority, confessors and spiritual directors demanded written accounts of women's religious experience. These accounts would then help directors do what was called the "discerning of spirits", a process by which experiences were declared either of divine or diabolical origin. If divine, men would appropriate them for the greater glory of the institution; if diabolical, the women would serve as yet one more example of the delusory feminine "imagination."

Such is one of the ways, at any rate, that the story of women's writing in the Church can be told. It is, without a doubt, a popular narrative, lining up the players on either side of a textual production that bears testimony to both male institutional discipline and female mystical subversion. Behind this familiar binary of oppression and resistance one can recognize numerous theoretical influences. Michel Foucault's description, in *Histoire de la sexualité*, of a culture of avowal that grants the individual voice only better to subjugate him or her, certainly comes to mind, as do Michel de Certeau's efforts, in *L'invention du quotidien*, to counter the determinism of Foucault's model by emphasizing the subversive potential of everyday practices. Oppression/resistance also must be understood against mysticism's dramatic change of fortunes in the years since Beauvoir analyzed it as yet another form of women's accustomed submission to men.² Lacan and Irigaray, for example, made path-breaking attempts in the 1970s to recast mysticism as

a site of subversion, otherness and *jouissance*, characteristics that the (male) symbolic order strove to repress but that could be reclaimed by radical critique. And with this rehabilitation of mysticism has come a more general reappraisal of convent life not as imprisonment, but as female community. From the cliché of the alienated nun, taught to hate her own sex, we have come round to seeing her as a proud figure, then, of resistance.³


The ready comprehensibility of these narratives, however, is only possible at a price, that of ignoring the material complexities of autobiographical writing in the Church. This is not to say that textual transmission has been totally ignored in the composition of the portrait of the resisting nun. On the contrary, the typical commentary on the writing of religious women notes the numerous opportunities for “male” intervention. But the question posed in these cases is almost always one of authenticity: to what extent does this intervention, conceived of as a corruption of something pure, prevent us from hearing what women “really said”? Even a scholar as meticulous as Caroline Bynum sees fit simply to bracket the whole problem of transmission and to confer some measure of authenticity upon women’s texts [“My essays are all undergirded by the conviction that we do hear creative female voices—not just merely literary genres or male superegos—speaking from the past” (19)].⁴ Establishing a definitive text is impossible, but the voice of resistance speaks clearly over the parasitic din of oppression—so states the typical prefatory remark on methodology.

On the rare occasions in which materiality is invoked by scholars of religious women, it is only by way of confirming the same axiomatic view of gender relations that had been, in fact, the point of departure for the inquiry. Take for example Kathleen Ross’s *The Baroque Narrative of Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora: A New World Paradise*.⁵ Sigüenza’s *Parayso occidental* (1684), contemporaneous with and in many ways similar to the French texts I will be discussing shortly, was written to commemorate the 100th anniversary of a Mexican convent. Ross analyzes the way in which Sigüenza composes his history largely through the appropriation of first-person autobiographical texts by women of the convent. Sigüenza

incorporates these texts into his own, by paraphrase, by direct quotation, and by acts of ventriloquism by which he speaks through the nun's own "I." Ross reads Sigüenza's commentary as intrinsically foreign to the female-authored material he is presenting, an elaborate effort "to declare paternal control over an unruly female text" (128).

Although Ross's treatment does move us beyond the simple resurrection of an "authentic" voice, the oppression/resistance model governing this consideration ultimately just helps us see more women locked in struggle with the forces of male institutionalization. Yet the strange patchwork of the *Parayso occidental* might be read more productively as the result of cultural changes specific to the second half of the seventeenth century, changes that helped to forge modern conceptions of gender, subjectivity and writing. Why were female-authored convent narratives so central to Sigüenza's commemoration? Why and how did he quote them, and how might this quotation relate to questions of gender and authority? Was this (male) interest necessarily so diametrically opposed to the interests—in both senses of the word—of women? Why so much press for convents in the first place—what was it in the late seventeenth century that could be responsible for this interest in the previously private, anonymous lives of religious women? Although Sigüenza himself is not part of the present inquiry, these questions are.

To the non-specialist, hagiography might seem to represent the nec plus ultra of generic stability: the genre's subject is trapped in a web of exemplarity, his or her life patterned on those of previous saints or, ultimately, on that of Jesus. Hagiography's "emplotments," to borrow Hayden White's term, are readily readable—martyrdom, conversion, renunciation, retreat, apostolic mission. Far from archetypal or simply "traditional," however, hagiographic practice in seventeenth-century France was undergoing major changes in the face of what can be called the imperative of interiority: if hagiography had been a place of miracles and exemplary acts, it would have to become one where the reader could discover what made the subject tick.



Foremost among the developments transforming the hagiographic landscape was a shift in the subject chosen for biographical investigation. Briefly, one no longer needed to be canonized or to have been long-dead in order to have one's life written and published. This change resulted in the appearance of hundreds of religious biographies, no longer quite "hagiography" in the truest sense, for official saints were no longer involved, merely those seen as pious or exemplary. This popularized and "non-canonical" hagiography was linked to another significant change, regarding gender: much more than in hagiography proper, the subjects of this new religious biography were women, sometimes the noble superiors of the richest convents and sometimes laywomen, but most often sisters from or founders of one of the many new congregations popping up across France since the beginning of the century. Of the numerous factors contributing to the explosion of biographies of women, the most salient—and the one that sets them apart from most biographies of men—is their concern with the depiction of the "interior" of the subject, that is, the mystic experiences of the nun in question. Phenomena such as visions constituted just such experience, and "interior" biography took it as the main criteria of distinction, the very mark of a subject's worth.

Now, the vogue for biographies of women mystics, as well as the insistence on women as paragons of interiority, needs to be understood against a gendered division of labor: women "experienced"; men wrote about that experience. To a large extent, fascination with women's spirituality was founded upon one of the most enduring religious topoi of the early modern period, what Michel de Certeau, who theorized the split between oral and written culture as one of the foundations of modernity, has called the topos of the "enlightened illiterate" ['illettré éclairé'].⁶ Widespread were accounts of meetings, invariably represented as moments of conversion, between knowledgeable but spiritually-dead theologians and poor, unknown illiterates who spoke of the actual *experience* of God. The whole point of interiority was that it had to be located among those who had never been "contaminated" by text-

based theology. Women were privileged representatives of this oral “Other”. As Linda Timmermans has emphasized, the poor rural illiterate servant with an interior—and words—of gold was much more likely to be a woman than a man (615-17).

Indeed, some of the century’s best-known names in spirituality were fascinated (often to the embarrassment of the Church establishment) by women who, although cow-shepherds or peasants, were seen as being especially close to God.⁷ But however much men tried to valorize this spirituality, writing remained in their hands. The myth of the enlightened illiterate confined women to a purely oral teaching which men then made the basis of their own textual spirituality. The words of a Marie des Vallées (a well-known demoniac-turned-mystic), for instance, left no traces, though Jean Eudes, under her influence, wrote prolifically and was eventually canonized. The apparent valorization of women’s experience turned thus quickly into an appropriation, in that their teaching disappeared behind the writing of the men they had supposedly transformed.

The enthusiasm for the figure of the enlightened illiterate enables us to understand, at least in part, why there were so many biographies of religious women in seventeenth-century France.⁸ Via biography, those who possessed the authority to write—men—would make women’s experience, in all its authenticity, available to the public. For many men in the Church, nuns were nearly as far from the world of theological speculation as cow-herds and much closer at hand, for priests not only heard their confessions, they also met with nuns to discuss their spiritual progress. And it was thanks to the information provided by note-taking spiritual directors that the aspiring biographer could turn mystic experience into writing and make interiority readable.

In metaphorical terms, it was in spiritual direction that the subject opened up her interior—“découvrir son intérieur” is the phrase used by so many biographers.⁹ Biography itself seems to have been founded on this same metaphor; the biographer reenacts the exposure of the interior by allowing the reader to listen in

on the intimate exchanges of spiritual direction. Letters exchanged between a nun and her director, for instance, are touted as giving “l'idée la plus juste que l'on puisse prendre de [son] intérieur admirable” [‘the most exact idea of her admirable interior that one can have’]* (*Vie de la Mère Anne Marie Clément*, 122). The indefinite “on” [‘one’] here allows the slippage from director to biographer to reader. All three gaze at the nun’s interior from an analogous position. In another *Life* that I will be taking here as one of my prime examples, Mathieu Bourdin tells us of Madeleine Vigneron’s letters being written not for her director, but for us, the readers of her biography, “afin que nous en eussions plus de lumière, et que l'on ne pût rien désirer davantage pour son entière connaissance” [‘so that we might have more light, and want no more in order to know her totally’] (np, my emphasis).¹⁰ Vigneron’s interior life, Bourdin says, is thus faithfully manifested, “aussi clairement que si nous avions lu dans la conscience de cette bonne âme.” [‘as clearly as if we had read in this good soul’s conscience’]. Biographers put their readers in the place of the man who was privy to the unveiling of the subject.

Besides the voyeuristic pleasure of exposing the religious woman’s interior, biographers made another, similar, promise—to make the oracle-like subject speak to us. Enlightened illiteracy valorized the voice of the mystic over the writing of the professional ecclesiastic. Hence, biographical subjects are portrayed as voices so authoritative that the directed takes on the role of director. Yet as I have stressed, this dynamic still leaves writing to men: *their* pens note the experience of the female mystic. As in the case of visual exposure, the biographer repeats oral disclosure, claiming to make audible, via his text, the subject’s voice. Consider, for example, Alexandre Piny’s segue to a quotation by Marie-Madeleine de la Très-Sainte Trinité: “[O]n ne saurait mieux juger de ses sentiments intérieurs qu’en l’écoutant et l’entendant parler elle-même, selon la maxime de cet Ancien, *Loquere ut te Videam*, parle afin que je te voie” [‘One can best judge her interior feelings in listening to her speak herself, according to the maxim of that Ancient, speak

* All translations, deliberately literal, are my own.

that I may see you'] (401). Piny's sententious invocation of Socrates in order to justify the disclosure of his subject tellingly combines the verbal ("parle") and the visual ("afin que je te voie"). These oracles had become a double object of attention, as biographers both mimicked their voices and promised to reveal their most hidden interiors.¹¹

Examples of this type of rhetoric, in which women assume the double and complementary role of object of the penetrating gaze and object of unveiling writing, could be multiplied many times over. Metaphorically, interiority was verbal and visual, and as long as this was the case, "being interior" ("être intérieur," a favorite devotional locution of the time) could only mean being the object of male writing. And yet what I'd now like to show is how, under cover of the verbal and the visual, the metaphors of interiority in religious biography were changing: writing could never be only the affair of male observers of experience. Rather, it was always already bound up with interiority. To be interior was also to write; and writing was a mark of interiority. The experiencing subject was also a producer of texts, and it was only these texts that permitted interiority to be read. When Claudine Moine, a lay mystic, writes to her director at the end of a spiritual relation: "J'ai rendu mon âme visible à vos yeux," ['I've made my soul visible to your eyes'], this visibility is achieved precisely in the autobiographical act. Behind the topos of enlightened illiteracy lay a fascination glossed over by Piny's "parle afin que je te voie"—a fascination with the *writing* subject.

So here, then, lies my first point: something else lurks beneath a rhetoric that seems to give itself so easily to description by any of a number of all-too-familiar models for understanding gender and power. Women are objects of the male gaze: their bodies are the desired object of scrutiny, of visual dissection, or else the slate on which men inscribe their own desires, their own power. Woman stands in for the unknown, the divine Other, the logos around which male writing gravitates. Subversive female mysticism is recuperated by the male establishment, systematized, made safe; the other is made same. I do indeed believe that these scenarios are

partially operable here, but only partially. What, however, might they hide from view?

What I find most intriguing about this common rhetoric of uncovering, of penetration, of oracular wisdom captured by the observer's pen, is its inherent instability, its tendency to undo the very oppositions on which it seems to be founded: the oral and the written, female and male. Vision, as many historians have stressed, may be the preferred instrument of knowledge and control in the early modern period, and biographers do pay it homage. But if we can bracket for a moment commonplaces of scopophilia and panoptism, we cannot help but remark that this new cultural obsession links writing to subjectivity and to knowledge much more intimately than sight or speech. It is this association that I would like to explore in more detail.


A few examples of the construction of the subject as a locus of both experience and writing (the one implying the other) are in order. Note, for example, how the following passage, lifted from the Sorbonne's approbation of the aforementioned biography by Mathieu Bourdin of Madeleine Vignerón, denigrates the spoken in favor of the written: Vignerón's director, it says, "ne voulut pas seulement l'entendre parler de son intérieur pour le bien connaître, mais le lui faire écrire pour l'observer, et le faire observer plus exactement, tout ce qui s'y lirait étant sans artifice." ["Her director wanted not only to hear her speak of her interior so that he might know it, but also to make her write it so that he might observe it, and observe it more precisely, given that everything read there would be without artifice']. Observation of the subject remains imperfect unless the subject's words be written. Naturally, then, the rhetorical gaze here is that of a *reader* ("tout ce qui s'y lirait"), not of a *voyeur*. The subject is a text she writes herself. And this is why reading the writing is, in the words of Bourdin I've already quoted, tantamount to having "lu dans la conscience de cette bonne âme."

This association between interiority and writing made for a particular insistence in these biographies on the physical state of

the paper that holds the subject's precious writing. The half-obliterated traces of the nun's experience are retrieved from hiding places in her cell or surreptitiously saved from the fire to which she had consigned them. "On trouva dans sa Chambre un morceau de papier à demi déchiré, où ses paroles étaient écrites de sa main" ['In her room was found a half-torn piece of paper where the following words were written in her own hand'] (Piny 219); "[Le discours] qui suit a été trouvé écrit de sa main parmi de vieux papiers" ['The following statement was found written in her own hand among some old papers'] (Vernon 210). This hand is a phantomatic presence in the biographies of the period, a presence of which the reader is constantly reminded. Behind the metaphors of the gaze that expose the biographical subject lies, rather, an obsession with reading the subject writing—instead of scopophilia, autobiographiphilia, if you will. The autobiographer's hand has replaced the voice of the enlightened illiterate.

Certainly, this conversion of the object of writing into the writing subject is not alone cause to jettison the old oppression/ resistance hypothesis. Foucault, especially, has insisted on the trap of "self-expression" (writing as internalized discipline and control, etc.). Nevertheless, if it can *also* be considered an instrument of subjection, the autobiographiphilia which was slipping into the cultural unconscious had concrete implications regarding the gendering of writing and the gender of authors: it could only but start to destabilize the male monopoly on print. For biography was authenticated via the incorporation of the papers that so enthralled. Metonymically, via quotation, it had to bear the traces of the subject-author's "hand."

Prior to the second half of the seventeenth century, quotation in works of hagiography was certainly not unknown. Yet a change in the relationship between male biographer and female subject can be deduced from the intrusion of a typographical invention that is the most visible marker of literary proprietorship—quotation marks.¹² Quotation marks, but also italics, parentheses, brackets, side notes: all appeared in various configurations as a way of letting the reader know precisely when the subject was speaking—



or rather writing—for herself. Space limitations keep me from presenting the details of the gradual recognition of quotation's capacity to guarantee the authenticity of the biographical work. What I would like to stress for the purposes of the present argument is that the very logic that made the biographer quote a little—the odd scrap of paper, letters to a spiritual director—could end up upsetting his position entirely. Bourdin's *Life* of Madeleine Vigneron provides a visually arresting example of how the impetus behind quotation, namely, that the authority of words depended on who wrote them, if pushed to its logical limits, could but drive biographers into an increasingly liminal position *inside* their own works. Bourdin does not use quotation marks for the simple reason that the *Life* is almost entirely of Vigneron's own composition. On the rare occasions that the biographer does intervene, his words are set in smaller, indented type (see illustration). The choice to put his words into smaller type could hardly illustrate more unequivocally his secondary enunciative status with respect to Vigneron. What we have here then is a shift in the relationship between gender, writing and authority: the male ecclesiastic giving official written form to the utterances of a woman has become a “cutter and paster” of texts whose authority is dependent on a bare minimum of his own intervention.

Although Bourdin's strategy was exceptionally striking, the basic shift in authority underlying it can be read in the trends dictating the composition of the day's most popular biographies—though in fact we would be nearly justified in calling them autobiographies. It is the biographer's *apparent disappearance* that is to assure the authority of the work. That is, the biographer paradoxically calls attention to his presence in order to assert his absence. His nullity is the mark of his excellence. A ghost of his former self, the biographer continues to haunt *Lives*, but writing is no longer his privilege. He remains only to note sources or to tell of how faithfully the printed volume corresponds to the original texts. Protestations to this effect are too common for me to list.

Yet these protestations were not merely an empty rhetorical gesture, assuming such a thing exists. If the biographer becomes

quoy prosternée aux pieds de votre divine Majesté, je prie votre cour céleste de m'obtenir le pardon de mes desobeissances: c'est à vous, ô sainte Vierge que je m'adresse particulièrement, comme étant la mere de tous les fidelles, qui sont vos treschers enfans, & dont vous entreprenez le salut avec tant de soin & d'affection; j'espere maintenant de votre bonté une singuliere assistance dans une entreprise qui est absolument au dessus de mes forces.

Elle explique ensuite la peine où elle s'est trouvée avant que de commencer, & comment elle a reçu de nôtre Seigneur le commandement d'écrire.

J'avois eu souvent la pensée d'écrire les graces particulieres que j'avois reçues de Dieu: mais je l'avois toujors traitée de tentation, dans la croyance que la chose m'étoit absolument impossible: (C'est ce qu'elle appelle rebellion, & résistance à la volonté de Dieu) mais enfin j'ay été contrainte de l'executer: car après avoir reçu par l'espace d'un an plusieurs avertissemens, que je devois être bientôt chargée d'une croix fort pesante, & ne pouvant m'imaginer de quelle nature elle pourroit être; durant que je me dispoisois par prieres & mortifications à la recevoir avec courage, sentant pour lors mon cœur consummé d'une langueur d'amour pour mon Jesus; il me fut annoncé que cette croix

editor, it is of little wonder that biography itself starts to take on the character of an “edition,” in the sense of an edition of so-and-so’s works. Bourdin’s biography, for instance, was in fact only part of a much longer work, *La Vie et conduite spirituelle de la Damoiselle Madeleine Vignerou*, which consists of: 1) the *Life*, composed almost exclusively of Vignerou’s own autobiographical narratives, 2) the contents of her journal, 3) Christ’s instructions for Vignerou as he dictated them to her, and 4) Vignerou’s letters. Much more than a biography, this is Vignerou’s *Oeuvres complètes*.¹³

Still more importantly, the involvement of men in women’s writing extended beyond the publication of previously existing works. In their enthusiasm over interior words, men helped create texts where none had been before, and they were able to encourage this writing because of a significant “coincidence”: the spiritual director and the biographer were very often one and the same person.¹⁴ The biographer/director was engaged in asking for autobiographical texts with the full knowledge that he would subsequently be able to put them into print circulation.

The history of directors taking dictation and subsequently working it into a biography goes back at least to Raimondo of Capua, director and biographer of Catherine of Sienna († 1380); much the same relationship governed the production of many of the seventeenth-century biographies quoted above. The obsession with writing, however, was strong enough so that mere stenography would not suffice to produce the desired effect of interiority; the subject had to be coaxed into writing herself, in view of publication. The relationship between Raphaël de la Vierge Marie and Jeanne Perraud is telling in this regard. Writing in the “Avertissement” of his biography of Perraud, Raphaël first seems to subscribe to the enlightened illiterate model, a model which, again, attributes writing to the male ecclesiastic. Here, then, the director is portrayed as transcriber of Perraud’s marvelous speech: “C’est donc avec ce soin, et cette circonspection qu’il [son directeur] écrivit de temps en temps les plus belles choses et les grâces les plus rares qu’il remarquait en cette fille, ou qu’il apprenait de sa bouche dans le Tribunal de la Confession, et dans les entretiens

particuliers avec elle.” [‘Thus with this care and circumspection he wrote down from time to time the most beautiful things and the rarest favors that he noticed in this girl, or that he learned from her mouth during confession, and in the private meetings he had with her’]. The “entretien” of spiritual direction is the space in which the oral treasures of the woman mystic (coming from her “bouche”) are transformed with care into writing (“il écrivit”). Yet Raphaël sets up the male/writing-female/orality dichotomy only to collapse it. In the following sentence, he transforms the oral authority of an enlightened illiterate into writing and authorship: “Outre cela, quand il lui commandait d’écrire elle-même les lumières et les grâces qu’elle avait reçues, à mesure qu’elles lui étaient arrivées, il ne faisait jamais semblant que ce fut à dessein de lui faire composer sa propre vie, mais seulement comme s’il les voulait examiner.” [‘Moreover, when he ordered her to write herself the illuminations and the favors she had received as they happened, he never let on that this was to have her compose her own *Life*, but rather as if he wanted to examine them’]. Here, one can see how what was normally conceived of as the role of the examiner has been emptied of its censoring content. It remains only as an alibi for what has become the most important function of spiritual direction, a space in which women may surreptitiously be made to become authors. The director *pretends* to be an inquisitor (“comme s’il les voulait examiner”) only to better permit women to take up the pen and do what had been, and indeed still seemed, an impropriety—“composer sa propre vie.”

Moreover, Raphaël has been doing some pretending of his own, for he is none other than this crafty director of whom he writes, here and elsewhere, in the third person. Why this secrecy? Why didn’t so many of the biographers I have been referring to—Bourdin, Piny, among many others—identify themselves as the directors of the women they were writing about, when the fact would seem to speak for the authenticity of the information they were providing? Clearly, these overlapping roles created a classic conflict of interest. Directors, even the most sympathetic, when confronted with an aspirant claiming mystical experience, were

supposed to do the work of “discerning spirits.” Indeed, it is this disciplinary function that blinds adherents of the oppression/resistance scenario to a more telling conclusion: far from policing an experience that existed independently of the director/aspirant relationship, directors were doing everything they could to excite that experience, to generate texts around it, and to assure its conservation and dissemination in print. Conversely, it was precisely those directors who disapproved of mysticism who were most mistrustful of writing (Poutrin 124).¹⁵ (And I’ll have to skip examples of how some biographers criticized the new—and what was for them pernicious—custom of peppering *Lives* with the words and/or writings of women religious.)

It is as if, then, against all expectations, the “othering” of female mystics on the part of biographers led to something more interesting than recuperation by a male elite. It had paradoxical and totally practical consequences: significant amounts of writing by religious women were for the first time being printed. I’d like to offer just a bit more evidence in order to suggest that these consequences were more far-reaching still, for although most religious biographies were published by men, demand was sufficiently great and the field sufficiently diverse as to embrace the work of women too. If interior lives were not to fall into oblivion, prefaces stated, women as well as men would have to be part of the biographical enterprise.

The second half of the seventeenth century saw the beginnings of an erosion in the gendered authorship of “official” biographies—that is, texts appearing with the royal privilege and approbations from Church doctors. On the one hand, there were simply more lives considered worthy of interest than men to write them up. Many collective biographies attest to this. One of the earliest, which is in fact more a collection of primary documents than a synthesis, appeared in 1666: *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Alix Le Clerc*. When no biographer could be found to shape Le Clerc’s autobiographical narrative and various memoirs on the founding of her Congrégation de Notre-Dame, her co-sisters wrote a dedi-

catory epistle and a preface, and published the works as they were.¹⁶

A few women made it beyond this kind of collective enterprise as the century wore on, but the change was incremental, as women moved from the role of researchers and archivists to that of recognized biographers. One example will have to suffice to illustrate how the voice of the female biographer came to do without a male persona. At the beginning of the half-century that marks the advent of interiorized *Lives* of women, authorship remained male, even if the bulk of the writing was attributable to a woman. Marie-Madeleine de Mauroy's biographical work on Françoise des Séraphins had appeared in 1665 (with new editions in 1669 and 1671) in an anonymous, but clearly male-authored volume. If the biographer takes pains to indicate how little he has added to the work that was entrusted to him for publication, the female source is nonetheless not named. But by 1680, when Mauroy completes her biography of Élisabeth de l'enfant Jésus, the male authorial presence is bypassed altogether. In the work's preface, the reader learns that "pour satisfaire aux désirs pressants de plusieurs personnes de piété," ['to satisfy the insistent desire of many pious persons'], Mauroy and her sisters are "forced" to break the silence in which they had resolved to live, and to write themselves (1-2). In other words, whereas a male voice seems necessary to present the material in 1665, fifteen years later the voice is clearly that of a woman. Later still, in Jacques Quétif and Jacques Échard's bibliography of the Dominican orders (published in 1719-21 but actually composed at the end of the seventeenth century), the initial male paternity is ignored, and Mauroy is listed as the author of both volumes.¹⁷ This one example (and there are others) suggests that as the century progressed, women could increasingly be recognized as biographers in their own right. Unfortunately, time constraints today keep me from adding examples, or even from exploring how biographical works by women about women reveal a familiar predilection for uncovering interiors via writing, for their works, as much as those of their male counterparts, promise to make visible the secret recesses of the soul that the subject would prefer to keep hidden. I would like, rather, to save my last few

minutes for teasing out what I hold to be the import of this material.

Once the intricacies of biographical production in the seventeenth century are taken into account, the phenomenon of male-authored *Lives* of women starts to acquire a significance that the familiar oppression/resistance model did not allow us to perceive. The first implication concerns the process by which religious women acquired an incremental access to print, eroding a male monopoly on religious teaching. Each citation of women's writing was, after all, a mini catechism (a catechism of experience) delivered by a woman. This is why many biographers had to bend over backwards to explain why such citation did not violate Pauline restrictions on women's role within the Church. If the sanctioning male voice remains a presence in most biographies that use female-authored material, the crucial fact to be remembered is that this material was nonetheless appearing in print. This publicity would have been impossible without the involvement of men, whose pervasive voice might well be viewed as a transitional strategy for opening up new roles to women within an existing institution. Indeed, I hope to have shown how this voice diminished as women's writing took on more authority. Such a strategy is not an anomaly: it runs parallel to that of the men who helped women found the many congregations that sought to relax the total separation of nuns and the secular world.¹⁸ Gender relations in certain parts of the Church, then, might be better understood by a model emphasizing collaboration rather than the oppression/resistance dyad I took as my target at the outset.¹⁹

Nevertheless, if this conclusion as to women's increasing influence within the Church fits the data better than narratives of opposition and subversion, it would be scant progress indeed if we were to stop there, content with a happy-end snapshot of men and women working together for the modernization of a reactionary institution. Here too the scenario would be simplified to the point of obscuring the most intriguing aspects of this "coming to writing." One such aspect involves how, in the seventeenth-century devotional landscape, women seem to have moved from the

object to the subject position as their relationship to writing changed. First the oracular objects of male writing, women became writers in their own right. I am most intrigued by this flip-flop, because it was to all appearances neither precisely a subversion nor a revolution, but a fairly seamless, if paradoxical passage. Metaphors of observation and discovery, orality and listening, place men in the subject position. Yet it is through these same metaphors that biographers manifest the desire to read the writing woman, thereby abdicating that very position of mastery. For if the interiorized individual is to be investigated, observed, and understood by another, by the logic of interiority itself, this undertaking must be initiated “from the inside.” Writing *about* women, in this case at least, turned into writing *by* women. Men could not continually ascribe virtues of interiority, of experience, to women without eventually desiring that women write for themselves. By definition, a culture of feminized interiority was also one of women’s autobiography. Male desire for female interiority, no matter how “othering” or even “scopophilic” it seems at times, made it possible for women to write and sign biographies, for Madeleine Vigneron and others to write their own *Lives*, and for all these women to help define just what it means to be “modern”: to speak from experience, to have depths to uncover, to write autobiography.

This brings me to a second observation, regarding how the cultural obsession with autobiography both *cuts* gender lines and *cuts across* them. Although I haven’t been able to demonstrate this here, the experiencing, interiorized writing subject is mainly gendered female, and yet this gendering seems to have been done by both men and women. The origins of the autobiographical mindset that pervades these biographies—the mania for uncovering the secret depths of the subject through her own writing—seem to elude “essentialist” attribution. Were men imitating a fundamentally female conception of interiority, writing, and experience? Were women taking up (and perhaps refining) the biographical technique of men? These are tempting questions, but if we cannot answer them, it is not because of a lack of data, but because this

cultural obsession had such wide appeal as to blur “male” and “female” communities. Both men and women played up and played into the concept of female interiority and writing.

Ultimately, this obsession would come to mean that being modern, for men as much as for women, involved taking the “feminine” as a model for subjectivity in general, as men too, obeying the imperative of interiority, would be expected to pour out their inner lives onto paper. This phenomenon was still rare in the seventeenth century, but it would become quite evident in the Enlightenment. When Rousseau prefaces his *Confessions* with a dismissal of previous autobiographical writing by men such as Montaigne and Cardano, this is to better locate authentic writing of the interior as a province of the feminine. The closest rival of the man (Rousseau) who would make the ideal of interiority so central to our culture is, naturally, a nun: “jamais la dévote la plus craintive ne fit un meilleur examen de conscience que celui auquel je me prépare; jamais elle ne déploya plus scrupuleusement à son confesseur tous les replis de son âme que je vais déployer tous ceux de la mienne au public” [‘Never has the most fearing pious woman made a better self-examination that the one I am preparing myself for; never has she more scrupulously uncovered before her director the innermost recesses of her soul than I will uncover mine before the public’] (1153).²⁰ As the case of Rousseau demonstrates, anyone, man or woman, can “be interior.” (Note Rousseau’s point, however, that somehow men can, in fact, do it better: he aims to appropriate the interior as a model for *male* subjectivity.)

Back in the seventeenth century, however, interiority and autobiography were still embedded in a feminization which stubbornly overran the biological sex of biographers and biographical subjects. This slippage undermines the scenarios of oppression and resistance (of necessity based on biological sex) which have dominated consideration of devotional literature. If I have cast this feminization as an “obsession,” it has been to emphasize the way in which these new cultural ideals, although initially couched in a rhetoric of male desire for female interiority, spread and acquire a cultural resonance that continually hampers efforts to draw lines

between the communities and interests of men and women even as it begs us to try to draw them. At once “othering” and “empowering,” the obsession provides an opportunity for the Foucauldian to observe disapprovingly the birth of our “culture of avowal” and for theorists of the gaze to denounce the objectification of women; an opportunity for the feminist historian to document a productive and influential cultural community, for the partisans of a middle ground to applaud collaboration and, yes, even a chance for the adepts of oppression and resistance to round up the usual male suspects. An obsession this widespread and historically important can hardly be expected to be free of such ironies and reversals, all the more because, as we are often reminded, gender seems to have an affinity for being “bent” each time that “real bodies” reassert themselves.

By a strange twist of fate, the flurry of scholarship on the resistance of the nun may be merely the most recent of these ironic reversals. As much as autobiographical writing in the seventeenth century occupied the place of the feminine, he who transmitted that writing and proclaimed its value was often a man. And so it is that those who strive today to retrieve the authentic voices of women past reenact the move made by so many male biographers of three centuries ago. In our continued enthusiasm over the authority of women’s written personal experience, we are as much the descendants of Mathieu Bourdin as Madeleine Vigneron. Given this fact, future cultural historians would do well to identify at least as much with male ecclesiastics as with the “resisting” nun, for we follow in their footsteps, and read with their eyes.

FOOTNOTES

1. Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau's anthology of New World convent writing, *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Works*, was a harbinger of increasing interest in making such texts accessible. In France, the "Atopia" collection published by Jérôme Millon has done likewise for many long out-of-print unpublished works by or about women. The exhumation continues. The new "Other Voice" series from the University of Chicago Press, to give just one example, has recently included the autobiography of Cecilia Ferrazi, a Venetian laywoman who aspired to holiness.

2. See the chapter "La mystique" in *Le Deuxième sexe II*, 508-17. Of course, since the Enlightenment nuns had represented something of a paragon of feminine victimhood—as in Diderot's *La religieuse*, for example.

3. For sample narratives of resistance and community, see Arenal and Schlau (*Untold Sisters*), McNamara, Smith and Taylor, and Wiethaus. The attraction of arguments based on resistance has influenced scholarship in quarters other than feminist, of course. See, for instance, Jonathan Dollimore, who has noted, and critiqued, the prevalence of the "subversion-containment debate" (17) in Shakespearian studies.

4. The fascination with "voices from the past" is not at all exclusively feminist: it extends, for example, to Annales-type historians listening to and reproducing documents as if they were Rabelais's famous *paroles gelées*. See Carrard, 121-33.

5. For another example from the early modern Hispanic domain, see Myers.

6. My gendered reading of enlightened illiteracy would not have been possible without Certeau's brilliant treatment of the topos in the chapter "L'illettré éclairé" of the *Fable Mystique*, 280-329.

7. Jean Eudes, founder of the Congregation of Jesus and Marie, had Marie des Vallées; Charles de Condren, Superior General of the Oratory, had Barbe de Compiègne. Women did not have to be

truly illiterate to serve the topos. By virtue of their being women, they automatically were taken to represent intellectual simplicity. Hence, Marie Rousseau, the educated widow of a wealthy wine merchant, and Jeanne Guyon, whose origins were anything but humble, played the role for Jean-Jacques Olier (founder of the Sulpicians) and Fénelon, respectively.

8. There were other types of biography besides those that arose out of the fascination with women's experience: most men's *Lives*, for example, served the cause of the Counter-Reformation by emphasizing apostolic service to an embattled/victorious Church; *Lives* of women, in addition to stressing mystic gifts, frequently immortalized the founders of one of the many new congregations popping up across France since the beginning of the century, or held nuns up to readers as imitable models of feminine virtue (chastity, obedience, selflessness and so on). The "interiorizing" biographies I deal with here are but a distinctive part of a much larger production.

9. Spiritual direction and confession aimed to anatomize two opposing sides of the same all-too-human coin—grace and sin. The history of spiritual direction is long. Its beginnings are to be found in the nascent monastic practices of the fourth century. In the Middle Ages, the last part of the confession was theoretically reserved for discussion of what the confessant should strive for, as opposed to what the penitent had done wrong. But the vogue for spiritual direction that accompanied the creation of sixteenth-century texts as important (and different) as Teresa's *Life* and Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* was for all intents and purposes a new phenomenon, reaching out beyond monastic walls to the lives of everyday Catholics encouraged to reflect endlessly on their own spiritual progress. On spiritual direction, see Poutrin (101-14).

10. The prefaces I will often be citing were rarely paginated; for economy, in the event a citation is followed by no page number, it can be assumed to have come from the preface.

11. On the concept of male ventriloquism of female voices, see Harvey and Beizer.

12. On the relationship between typography and authorship, see Loewenstein and De Grazia. For further information on the profusion of typographical markers in religious biography and speculations on their significance as to the development of an autobiographical way of reading, see Paige.

13. For further examples of subject-authored material (letters, treatises, and so on) coming into print on the coattails of biography, see *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Anne Marie Clément* (1686) and *La Vie de la Mère Antoinette de Jésus* (1685).

14. According to Poutrin's exhaustive study, approximately one quarter of Spanish book-length biographies were authored by the subject's director (218). I estimate a thorough statistical approach to their French counterparts would reveal a similar proportion.

15. Manuals on confession and spiritual direction especially note how women's writing proliferates when too much stock is put in mystical phenomena. Henri-Marie Boudun, for instance, author of a treatise on mental prayer containing five chapters on spiritual direction, warns priests not to "faire trop grande estime des états extraordinaires." ['hold in too great esteem extraordinary states']. He exhorts his readers specifically to avoid letting *dirigées* "écrire leurs grâces," ['write their experiences'], for "elles sont sujettes à s'y amuser comme à leurs habits" ['they are liable to amuse themselves with such writing like they do with clothes'] (qtd. in Olphe-Galliard *et al.* 1122). Timmermans (469-82) has detailed the various representations of the pitfalls of spiritual direction.

16. Other examples: The authors of the anonymous *Vie de la Mère Antoinette de Jésus* also bypass the traditional male biographer, noting apologetically that even if "[il] n'appartient pas à des filles, qui se doivent plutôt attacher à bien faire qu'à bien dire, de composer des Livres," ['it is not appropriate for girls, who must try to do well rather than talk well, to compose Books'] they could not but give in "aux prières et aux instances, qui nous ont été faites par des personnes très éclairées dans la vie spirituelle, de donner au public [cet] ouvrage." ['to the demands and prayers,

made to us by very spiritually-minded people, that we give this work to the public']. And the sisters of the Visitation of Sainte Marie de Melun felt that the customary brief obituary could never do justice to the life of Anne Marguerite Clément; so after having gathered as much material as possible and searched for a biographer in vain, they worked up the documentation themselves, "dans notre manière simple, et le style de nos lettres circulaires" [in our own simple way, in the style of our obituary letters'] (*Vie d'Anne Marguerite Clément*).

17. Ironically, while Quétif and Échard's bibliography had taken care to list these works under the names of the contributing women, only in particularly clear cases (Jeanne de la Nativité, Mauroy's *Vie d'Élisabeth de l'enfant Jésus*) do documents from our own day do the same. The turning point in attribution may well have come in the nineteenth century, when Étienne Faillot, for example, decided that Charles-Louis de Lantages, who was the anonymous male voice behind Mauroy's work on Françoise des Séraphins, was simply being modest in crediting Mauroy, and that the work was his (Jacques Bertrand, *Bibliothèque sulpicienne*, 96). Similarly, almost wholly autobiographical works such as the *Vie et conduite spirituelle de Madeleine Vigeron* and the *Vie de Marie de l'Incarnation* are classified in catalogs under the names of their male editors, Mathieu Bourdin and Claude Martin.

18. See, on this point, Rapley.

19. In this, my analysis of French biographical production concurs with the conclusion reached by Isabelle Poutrin in her study of Spanish nuns' writing.

20. My conclusions on the gendering of the interiorized, autobiographical subject dovetail with the arguments of Nancy Armstrong and Joan DeJean, who have both sought to show the extent to which the domestic, emotive space of modern subjectivity has been gendered female, and that this gendering was a (contested) political gesture.

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