

MME DE SÉVIGNÉ INTERPRETED ACCORDING TO
DE BEAUVOIR'S THEORIES IN
LE DEUXIEME SEXE

By

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ABSTRACT

The original purpose of this essay was to demonstrate that there are certain similarities between the works of women writers which are valid regardless of differences in geographical location or time period. As the paper evolved, it became more of an examination of the work of Mme de Sévigné seen as a prototype of the feminine writer, with Simone de Beauvoir's Le Deuxième Sexe being used as a theoretical base for such a prototype and only a relatively small number of supporting illustrations from other writers. While de Beauvoir's evaluation of certain traits of various feminine writers is rather negative, our approach has often been to reinterpret them more positively and to try to motivate de Beauvoir's negative reaction.

Chapter I contains a resume of Le Deuxième Sexe and particularly of the sections which discuss women's literature, with illustrations from the works of Mme de Sévigné. We attempt to show that de Beauvoir has been co-opted into a masculine viewpoint when she dismisses women's writing as sloppy, self-obsessed, over-abundant in detail and lacking in audacity.

In Chapter II, women's predilection for insisting on the importance of human relationships and interrelationships in general is discussed and interpreted positively, as well as their greater ability to enter into the thoughts and feelings of others, their need to "personalize" the theoretical ideas to which they are exposed, and the greater degree of human orientation (as well as originality and spontaneity) which characterizes their wit.

In Chapter III, we examine women's greater ties to the everyday world, that is, we hear in their letters of their day-to-day pre-occupations and activities, and those of others in their particular society. Naturally the language used in women's writing is likely to be "everyday" as well, characterized by the rhythm and vocabulary of actual conversation. Women's traditional love of nature, which is to be met with here and now,

falls into this category. They are less likely than men to create the fictional surroundings of the historical novel or science fiction. It follows that women are also more likely to be in touch with the rhythm of their bodies, making their literature the repository of proverbs, recipes, home remedies and other folk wisdom.

Chapter IV centers around women's issues, specifically the way in which women relate to and are regarded by their society. Mme de Sévigné admires cultivated women such as Mmes de La Fayette, de Chaulnes, Mlle de Scudéry, but deplores those who, through their frivolity and ignorance, damage the reputation of the sex as a whole. Finally, there is a discussion of the all-important mother-daughter relationship - are Mme de Sévigné and her ilk simply neurotics, as de Beauvoir would have it, or are there more positive aspects to this common feminine preoccupation?

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INTRODUCTION

A famous anecdote is told about George Eliot's novel, The Mill on the Floss: Charles Dickens, on reading it, is said to have exclaimed that the book was excellent, but that its author was a woman. An intriguing story, and one that poses a question: was Dickens merely a good guesser, or are there objective criteria that can be applied? This paper will be an attempt to answer this question: its focus will be empirical, deductive, more than theoretical, inductive. Are there certain genres where women tend to be represented most? Within those genres, are there characteristic orientations, narrative techniques, diction, subject matter, etc., that can be associated with women's writing? Are similarities consistent despite the barriers of culture and time period? Since it would be impossible to compare the writing of all male and female authors, this paper will focus on that of Mme de Sévigné as a prototype for comparison, then contrast it with the works of other women and men.

When we turn to Mme de Sévigné, we see that her literary output can be examined in a variety of contexts. Firstly, there is the temporal context of the seventeenth century. Mme de Sévigné's relatively easy adjustment to widowhood (in spite of her fainting on seeing her husband's murderer for the first time after his death¹); her lack of interest in remarrying despite good offers (such as that of the duc de Luynes²), her insistence on the education of her daughter and granddaughter (III, 482), her lively, varied, at times "showy" style, her familiarity with the works of the sixteenth century Italian authors such as Tasso and Ariosto (as well as Montaigne), all these can be linked with the period of préciosité and the salon, of Louis XIII and the Régence, that of

¹Charles G.S. Williams, Mme de Sévigné, Twayne's World Author Series, No. 596 (Boston: Twayne, 1981), p. 33.

²Mme de Sévigné, Correspondance de Madame de Sévigné. ed. Roger Duchêne (Paris: Gallimard, 1972). Vol. III, p. 224. All further references to this work appear in the text.

Mme de Sévigné's youth. (Her Jansenism and her refusal to accept Descartes' theories of animal machinalism can also be looked at generationally.)

Continuing in this vein, it is obvious that Mme de Sévigné was not the only person of her era to become increasingly Jansenistic, resigned, even somewhat melancholy with the passage of time. Her son Charles, her uncle the seigneur de St. Aubin, her granddaughter-in-law Anne-Marguerite de St. Amans and her best friend Mme de La Fayette all ended their days as religious recluses. Indeed Louis XIV's entire court became increasingly austere under the influence of Madame de Maintenon. (As Madame³ put it "The old hags frighten him with the fires of hell in order to keep him for themselves and prevent him from looking at anyone younger and such enforced piety goes entirely against his nature. It just makes him bad-tempered, and those who have nothing to do with it may pay."⁴) This change is of course reflected in the literature of the period. We move from Corneille's larger-than-life heroes to the passion-tortured souls of Racine and Mme de La Fayette, to the period of Racine's retirement from the theatre altogether on religious grounds (except for Athalie and Esther, produced for the students of St. Cyr) and the religiously-inspired social criticism of Fénelon and La Bruyère. At the same time, the entire French nobility was being ruined with the shift from a land to a money economy caused by the influx of precious metals from the New World. Thus, it is not surprising that Mme de Sévigné's letters move from alternating sprightliness and self-pity to an increasingly philosophical and religious resignation, and financial preoccupations, punctuated by frequent exiles to Brittany. (The aging process is also clearly at work here.)

³Liselotte von der Pfalz (Elisabeth-Charlotte d'Orléans) was the second wife of Monsieur, Louis XIV's only brother. Her correspondence (in German, quoted here in English translation) with her German relatives made her one of the great epistolarians of the "âge classique."

⁴Elisabeth-Charlotte d'Orléans, Letters from Liselotte, trans. and ed. by Maria Kroll (New York: McCall, 1970), p. 57.

A second critical approach would be the psychological; Louise Horowitz' chapter on Mme de Sévigné in Love and Language falls into this category. Here Mme de Sévigné is seen simply as an individual with an obsession. In a comment probably inspired by the letter of April 8, 1671 where Mme de Sévigné refers to kissing "la belle gorge"⁵ of her daughter. Horowitz contends:

The rivalry with M. de Grignan for control over her daughter, the fascination with Mme de Grignan's physical beauty, the references to kisses and embraces far beyond polite convention, point to a situation that seemingly reflects desires of incest and sapphism.⁶

While it is certainly true that most of Mme de Sévigné's friends and companions are widows, "vieilles filles" (she jokes about this "corps de veuves", III, 377) or "harmless" men such as Corbinelli, her uncle the Abbé de Coulanges, Mme de Grignan's clerical brothers-in-law, Cardinal Retz, the happily-married and/or related Mmes de Chaulnes, de Guitaut, de Coulanges, etc., there is not much evidence outside of this one letter to denote Lesbian tendencies, particularly in the generation of précieuses. (On the other hand, it is true that even Mme de La Fayette, who lived autonomously from her husband, had La Rochefoucauld as a "companion", that even Mlle de Scudéry had the faithful Pellison, that as great a précieuse as Julie d'Angennes finally relented and married Montausier, while Mme de Sévigné encouraged no man after her widowhood and, according to Bussy, was rather "cold" in temperament (though this is ambivalent⁷).

⁵ "Pensez-vous que je ne baise point aussi de tout mon coeur vos belles joues et votre belle gorge? (I, 215)

⁶Louise K. Horowitz, Love and Language: A Study of the Classical French Moralists Writers (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1977).

Horowitz makes a better case for a psychological approach when she discusses Mme de Sévigné's compulsion to center her life around her daughter (she quotes the letter of March 24, 1671):

Il n'y a point d'endroit, point de lieu, ni dans la maison, ni dans l'église, ni dans le pays, ni dans le jardin, où je ne vous aie vue; il n'y en a point qui ne me fasse souvenir de quelque chose de quelque manière que ce soit aussi, cela me perce le coeur. Je vous vois; vous m'êtes présente (I, 199).

and her deformation of reality to make it appear that everyone else has this same obsession: "Mme de Sévigné attempted to render her passion a collective one, to give it a sense of social primacy that it did not, could not, have. She sought to extricate her obsession from the strictly individual by endowing it with qualities of communal preoccupation."⁸ To this end, Horowitz quotes the letter of August 30, 1671:

Si je vous disais tous ceux qui vous font des compliments, il faudrait un volume: M. et Mme de Chaulnes, M. de Lavardin, M. le comte des Chapelles, Tonquedec, l'abbé de Montigny, l'évêque de Léon, M. d'Harouys cinq cent mille fois, Jean Fourché Chésières, etc. (I, 335).

⁷Bussy's portrait of his cousin in the Histoire Amoureuse des Gaules describes her as follows:

Elle est d'un tempérament froid, au moins si on en croit son mari: c'est en quoi il avait obligation à l'esprit. A la vérité, elle récompense bien la froideur de son tempérament. Si l'on se rapporte aux actions, la foi conjugale n'a point été violée: si l'on regarde l'intention c'est une autre chose. Pour en parler franchement, je crois que son mari s'est tiré d'affaire devant les hommes, mais je le tiens cocu devant Dieu. (Roger de Bussy-Rabutin, Histoire amoureuse des Gaules, ed. Jean Orieux (Paris: Union Generale d'Editions, 1966), pp. 143-4).

⁸Horowitz, p. 105.

(Such closings are in fact a leitmotiv of the Letters, c.f. III, 377: "Mme de Lavardin me fit hier cent amitiés pour vous, et Mme d'Huxelles, et Mme de Moussy, et Mlle de La Rochefoucauld, que nous avons reçue dans le corps des veuves...Rien ne se peut comparer à l'estime parfaite de toutes ces personnes pour vous.") Cordelier's theory that the Letters were inspired by Mme de Sévigné's subconscious need to be an author could also be classified as psychocritique, while Bernard Bray's contention in L'Art de la lettre amoureuse that the Marquise had only erotic language at her disposal to express the dolors of absence Horowitz calls sociolinguistic criticism.⁹

Thus, there have been many critical approaches to the Letters of Mme de Sévigné, but only recently with the advent of feminist criticism, has there been an attempt to put her in the context of some other women writers.¹⁰ How much of the writing style of a given woman can be attributed to the simple fact of being female is debatable. Yet certain similarities in style, subject, diction and genre may be observed. For example, women have traditionally been noted for their correspondence (Fritz Nies quotes la Bruyère's Les Caractères, Chapter 1: "ce sexe va plus loin que le nôtre dans ce genre d'écrire."¹¹); for keeping journals and diaries (Montherlant in Les Jeunes Filles has sarcastically suggested that a woman's letters are in fact her diary.¹²) Women have been associated with the novel from the days of Mlle de Scudéry. On the other hand, we see few, if any, female writers of adventure stories epic or satire, and comparatively few

⁹Horowitz, p. 94.

¹⁰Examples are Michele Farrel, "Sévigné in the Classical Maternal Tradition", Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature, 13, No. 2 (1986), pp. 27-38, and Donna Stanton "On Female Portraiture in Sévigné's Letters", PFSC, 3, No. 15, 2 (1981), pp. 89-94.

¹¹Fritz Nies, "Un Genre féminin?", Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France, 78, no. 6 (1978), p. 995.

¹²Henry de Montherlant, Romans et oeuvres de fiction non théâtrales, introd. Roger Secrétain, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, No. 136 (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 952.

women poets.¹³ To aid us in our speculations on the possible reasons for these sex-related differences, we will use Simone de Beauvoir's analysis in Le Deuxième Sexe of the role of women throughout the ages.

¹³Nies cites statistics pointing out that in the seventeenth century only 2% of letters published, according to Cioranescu, were by women (as compared to 2% of essays, 2.6% of theatre and poems, 15% of fables). However, this statistic probably means, not that few women wrote interesting letters, but that they were reluctant or unable to publish them (Nies, pp. 995-99).

CHAPTER I

LE DEUXIÈME SEXE:
A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE
INTERPRETATION OF THE LETTERS

In this chapter, we will summarize Le Deuxième Sexe, unfortunately rather lengthy, so that even a summary cannot be short. Some familiarity with de Beauvoir's theories, however, is necessary to understand her views on women's literature, which she considers to be inferior due to what she sees as women's subordinate position in society. Simone de Beauvoir first discusses the physical differences between women and men, including the monthly hormonal changes which tend to make women more emotional, less "rational". She then turns her attention to woman's social role, associating matriarchal society with the period of communal agriculture corresponding to the Stone Age. (During this period, while the men were out hunting, women farmed co-operatively on the land which they owned.) The development of tools in the Bronze Age led to mechanized agriculture in which one farmer could cultivate enough land to feed a number of people, leaving others free to pursue different professions. This mechanized agriculture produced, in turn, the notions of property, inheritance, the role of law - in short, male-dominated society. (The making of tools (melting, bending metal) in itself implies a mastery over nature; mechanized agriculture with its canals, irrigation and so on was also instrumental in the development of mathematics and logic.)

For de Beauvoir, then, men have since prehistoric times been associated with progress, ideas, change, the imposition of thought, the will, on the natural environment¹⁴: "Il n'a pas seulement travaillé à conserver le monde donné; il en a fait éclater les frontières, il a jeté les barres d'un nouvel avenir" (I, p. 83).¹⁵ Women, on the other hand,

¹⁴Simone de Beauvoir, Le Deuxième Sexe. I and II. Collection Idée No. 152-3 (1949 rpt; Paris: Gallimard, 1984), p. 96.

¹⁵ She goes so far as to include rape marriage in this category.

have been associated with cycle and repetition: the cycle of the agricultural seasons, of menstruation, of birth and death. It is to this that they owe their traditionally low status: "C'est en transcendant la Vie par l'Existence que l'homme assure la répétition de la Vie-- par ce dépassement il crée des valeurs qui dévient à la pure répétition toute valeur (I, p. 84). Magic and superstition, powerful in primitive societies and traditionally associated with women, cannot compete in a more "advanced" milieu.

As de Beauvoir moves her discussion into historical times, we see that the déesse-mère (Isis in Egypt, Astarte in Phoenicia, Cybele in Asia Minor, etc.) is gradually supplanted by a male deity:

La religion de la femme était liée au règne de l'agriculture, règne de la durée irréductible, de la contingence du hasard, de l'attente, du mystère; celui de l'homo faber, c'est le règne du temps qu'on peut vaincre comme l'espace, de la nécessité, du projet, de l'action, de la raison...¹⁶

The female goddesses had been worshipped only because men had been slaves of their own fears, accomplices in their own impotence; self-realization implied the dethroning of these female deities.

Under the Greeks even women's reproductive importance was all but taken from her; they believed that it is the father who engenders the child through his sperm, the mother's body merely nourishing this germ. The Romans continued this tendency--whereby women were merely the transmitters of male genes and property. A woman passed on marriage from the control of her father, tutor or father's agnati, to that of her husband. Eventually, as a result of a movement to retain some control by the paternal clan, women achieved a degree of independence: they were allowed to inherit, to be their children's guardians, etc. The institution of a dowry in their own names gave them a certain power

¹⁶De Beauvoir, I, p. 99.

over their husbands because they could threaten divorce. Finally, under Marcus Aurelius they obtained the right to leave their property to their own heirs instead of to the agnati of their father's family; daughters could inherit equally with sons. As de Beauvoir points out, however, with the weakening of woman's traditional family role (she cites such famous examples as Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi), no public role evolved to take its place. Women could not hold political office; to make their feelings known, they could only agitate, demonstrate (for example, for the repeal of the Oppian laws.¹⁷) The power to divorce, to own property and control fertility led to refusal of motherhood, sexual licence and sybaritism. Thus we see female emancipation associated with social disintegration--a pattern that has tended to repeat itself.

In the Middle Ages, for example, with Catholicism and the feudal system at their most powerful, women were at their most oppressed. As both systems began to break down under the onslaught of Renaissance humanism, we see women beginning to achieve more historical and social prominence, whether as rulers (Jeanne d'Aragon, Jeanne de Naples, Isabella d'Este), religious leaders (Ste. Thérèse d'Avila, Catherine de Siena, Jeanne de Chantal) or courtesans (Gaspara Stampa, Louise Labé). By the seventeenth century, with the development of the salon, certain respectable noble and upper middle-class women (Mmes de La Fayette, de Sévigné, Mlle de Scudéry) had found a niche in the "domaine intellectuel". Because they were not engaged in what de Beauvoir calls "la construction du monde", they had the leisure to devote themselves to conversation, arts and letters (although often without education, they managed through reading, private tutors and to the intellectual life of the court to become better informed than many men). Certain women began to play a political role (for example, Henriette d'Angleterre who negotiated the 1670 treaty between France and England; Mme de La Fayette who acted as a liaison between France and Madame Royale of Savoie). De Beauvoir points out,

¹⁷Laws imposed against luxuries during the Second Punic War.

however, that feminine influence was normally indirect (i.e. that of Mme de Maintenon on Louis XIV, of the Princesse des Ursins on Philip V of Spain). She disparages particularly the role of women in the Fronde, for example that of Mlle de Montpensier wanting Louis XIV to be forced to marry her; the Duchess of Longueville dragging La Rochefoucauld into conspiracy because of his infatuation with her. For de Beauvoir the role of women in the Fronde--self-interested, marginal, and frivolous--typifies women's traditional political role. The discussion of the eighteenth century to present is not particularly relevant for our topic. De Beauvoir sums up the history section by re-emphasizing that women have traditionally been less repressed in periods of désagrégation (the Roman decadence, the Italian Renaissance during which there was no strong central authority, the Directoire) but that in these times "elle n'a qu'une liberté négative qui ne trouve à se traduire que par la licence et la dissipation."¹⁸ Traditionally the only women to have "succeeded" have been to a degree "sexless", great religious figures or monarchs, or such "baroque" personages as Joan of Arc, Louise Labé (as opposed to the "objective" grandeur of a Richelieu, Danton or Lenin). In brief, "celles qui ont essayé de le changer (leur sort) ont prétendu non s'enfermer dans leur singularité et la faire triompher mais la surmonter. Quand elles sont intervenues dans le cours du monde, c'est en accord avec les hommes, dans des perspectives masculines."¹⁸ (This last has a definite significance for women's literature--here too women tend to be co-opted into a sharing male point of view. For example, when Shakespeare has Hamlet remark "Frailty, thy name is woman" or when Washington Irving presents Dame Van Winkle as a termagant, there is an implicit assumption that the reader, too, is looking from a masculine point of view. As Jonathan Culler remarks "the hypothesis of the female reader marks the double or divided structure of "experience" in reader-oriented criticism. Much male response criticism conceals this structure...by asserting that readers simply do in fact have a

¹⁸De Beauvoir, I, p. 172.

certain experience. This structure emerges explicitly in a good deal of feminist criticism which takes up the problem that women do not always read or have not always read as women...(and) are led to identify with male characters, against their own interests...^{18A}

The only women de Beauvoir seems really to admire are Mme Curie, the scientist and Rosa Luxembour, the revolutionary, who clearly broke new ground in achieving what had heretofore been accomplished primarily by men. De Beauvoir concludes that feminists desire "que la transcendance l'emporte (la femme) sur l'immanence; elles veulent qu'enfin leur soient accordés les droits abstraits sans la conjugaison desquels la liberté n'est qu'une mystification."¹⁹

In her section on myth, de Beauvoir develops the concept of l'Autre, the Other. She feels that while man has always looked to women for renewal and repose, to be a mirror in which he sees his own reflection, "il rêve de quiétude dans l'inquiétude et d'une plénitude opaque qu'habiterait cependant la conscience."²⁰ While he does not really allow her "la dure exigence d'une reconnaissance réciproque," she represents for him "Nature élevée à la translucidité de conscience."²¹ She is a "pâte molle", but this clay has enough intelligence to be a territory which man can form. (Needless to say, says de Beauvoir, such an attitude must disappear under world socialism when women will be accepted as equals.) While man finds repose in women's "naturalness" as opposed to his (supposed) greater traditionalism, intellectuality, at the same time he fears her "animal" attachments, which remind him of our collective condemnation to death, our physicality; man would prefer to think of himself as being as immortal as the ideas he engenders.

^{18A}Jonathan Culler, "Reading as a Woman", in On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 50-1).

¹⁹De Beauvoir, I, p. 174.

²⁰De Beauvoir, I, p. 189.

²¹De Beauvoir, I, p. 196.

De Beauvoir elaborates for her readers the Freudian and Jungian schema in which men represent conscience, will, transcendence, spirit while women stand for nature, passivity, immanence, the flesh; while man is the sower, the plough, woman is earth, the furrow; man is fire, the heavens, light, and women the grotto, moist, warm and obscure, ready to swallow man up. She is the cavern, the abyss, Hell...de Beauvoir evokes the legend of Orpheus in the Underworld. Male fear of the vagina as a symbol of entrapment must be looked at in this context.

Thus, while man revels in woman's beauty and sensuality, in which he finds repose, he fears and is repelled by other aspects of her greater physicality such as menstruation, pregnancy and death. Her association with obscure, dark forces gives women a rather malevolent mystical power. To this can be traced the menstrual taboos which characterize many primitive societies. The "magical" powers of fecundity ascribed to women produced the sacred prostitution of Aztec and Sumerian society; in other cultures, virginity conferred these powers (cf. the Vestal virgins, the Walkyries, Joan of Arc, etc.). De Beauvoir makes the point that in modern society this "natural" aspect of women is "contained"--women are made up, put into high heels, their hair tinted, etc. Nature is pilloried to adorn her with plumes, feathers, pearls and furs. In this way man's "abstract" money is made tangible, real. At the same time her mystical "powers" are controlled by priests, taboos, the rites of Christianity in which Jesus dominates Mary. Not only is Mary subordinate, she is a virgin, her sensual side having been eliminated in favor of her role as a mother. For de Beauvoir, the myth of the wicked stepmother comes from the idea that in these women, sensuality has not been subordinated to motherhood; similarly adulteresses are punished with particular severity because "*si la femme s'évade de la société, elle retourne à la nature et au démon.*"

De Beauvoir's last point in Mythology is that while men are important, make their contribution to society as individuals (explorers, statesmen, astronauts, poets, etc.) women's importance is collective--they continue the species. Women are traditionally the

audience in public debates--while men are caught up in their individual conflicts, defending certain values or calling them into question, women exemplify society. They form a backdrop in such works as the Decameron, L'Astrée, to use de Beauvoir's examples. (In English literature, the three elderly aunts in Galsworthy's Forsythe Sage come to mind: never themselves leaving Uncle Timothy's house in the Bayswater Road, their role is to pass judgement on any character who strays from social norms.) Montherlant's unpleasant remark in Les Jeunes Filles that if Dante came back to life and went on the lecture circuit, that most women would notice only that his pants were badly pressed, exemplified this idea. Men can be geniuses, soar above the crowd; women typify the norm. As Mme de LaFayette says, "Le caractère d'une femme est de n'avoir rien qui puisse marquer."²² We will return in Chapter Two to this question of women's greater link to society as a whole, man's greater isolation, individuality.

De Beauvoir's section on woman's formation has a more direct bearing on women's literature. She points out that little boys are denied caresses while little girls are cuddled, allowed to remain children: "c'est à cause de la supériorité des garçons qu'il leur est demandé davantage."²³ It is therefore not surprising that (as will be seen in Ch. II and IV particularly) women tend to show more emotion in their writing. De Beauvoir feels that the penis allows the male to exteriorize his body, distance himself from his physicality, which allows him a sense of transcendence and power. Boys affirm the self through fighting and through relatively violent games. They learn to dominate while girls learn to please. For de Beauvoir, even the boyish habit of climbing trees is significant, the concepts of "high" and "low" being associated respectively with dominance and submission. She points out further that in the literature to which French school girls are exposed, the heroes are predominantly male: Perseus, Hercules, David, Achilles,

²²Bernard Pingaud, Mme de La Fayette par elle-même, *Ecrivains de Toujours*, 45 (Paris: éditions du seuil, 1959), p. 44.

²³De Beauvoir, I, p. 295.

Lancelot, Bayard, Napoleon must balance a lone Joan of Arc. In any case, the figure of the Archangel Michael is behind Joan, as is Mordechai with the Biblical Esther. Girls thus do not come to think of themselves as being dominant. Educators and the Church, says de Beauvoir, reinforce this attitude.

Perhaps less applicable today than when Le Deuxième Sexe was published in 1949 is de Beauvoir's contention that young girls enjoy less physical activity than boys, are discouraged from playing sports and the outdoors in favor of such indoor occupation as sewing and reading:

Leurs occupations trop sages n'épuisent pas leur trop-plein d'énergie; elles s'abandonnent à des rêveries moroses et romanesques et perdent le sens du réel: elles se livrent à leurs émotions avec une exaltation désordonnée; faute d'agir elles parlent...elles cherchent une consolation dans des sentiments narcissistes; elles se regardent comme une héroïne de roman...elles supposent qu'elles sont une enfant adoptée, que leurs parents ne sont pas vraiment leurs parents...elles leur attribuent une vie secrète: elles rêvent sur leurs rapports...²⁴

The fact that women are discouraged from physical roughness, fighting, has further significance.

Cette impuissance physique se traduit par une timidité plus générale: elle ne croit pas à une force qu'elle n'a pas expérimentée dans son corps; elle n'ose pas entreprendre, se révolter, inventer: vouée à la docilité, à la résignation, elle ne

²⁴De Beauvoir, I, p. 326.

peut qu'accepter dans la société une place toute faite. Elle prend l'ordre des choses comme donné.²⁵

(It is difficult to discuss this in terms of Mme de Sévigné because we know little about her childhood. Her love of Nature, and the fact that her family often visited the Abbé de Coulanges's priory at Livry, suggest that she spent a good deal of time outdoors as a child. Nonetheless, there is certainly a side of her that is introspective and dreamy.)

De Beauvoir suggests that their lack of physical activity, of the possibility of self-assertion encourages introspection, explaining women's tendency to keep diaries:

La jeune fille parle à son carnet comme elle parlait naguère à ses poupées; c'est un ami, un confident, on l'interpelle comme s'il était une personne. Entre les pages s'inscrit une vérité cachée aux parents, aux camarades, aux professeurs et dont l'auteur s'enivre solitairement.²⁶

She suggests that while young men dream of adventures in which they play an active role, young women prefer the sheer escapism of the marvellous:

L'idée de magie, c'est celle d'une force passive; parce qu'elle est vouée à la passivité et que pourtant elle souhaite le pouvoir, il faut que l'adolescente croie à la magie: à celle de son corps qui réduira les hommes sous son joug, à celle de la destinée en général qui la comblera sans qu'elle ait rien à faire.

It is interesting that Mmes de Sévigné and de Grignan have different attitudes towards the novel:

Je ne veux rien dire sur les goûts de Pauline; je les ai eus avec tant d'autres qui valent mieux que moi que je n'ai qu'à me taire. Il y a

²⁵De Beauvoir, I, p. 376.

²⁶De Beauvoir, I, p. 388.

des exemples des bons et des mauvais effets de ces sortes de lectures. Vous ne les aimez pas; vous avez fort bien réussi. Je les aimais; je n'ai pas trop mal couru ma carrière. Tout est sain aux sains, comme vous dites (III, 757).

However, Mme de Sévigné's interpretation of the effects of reading novels is different from de Beauvoir's:

Pour moi, qui voulais m'appuyer dans mon goût, je trouvais qu'un jeune homme devenait généreux et brave en voyant mes héros, et qu'une fille devenait honnête et sage en lisant Cleopâtre. Quelque fois il y en a qui prennent un peu les choses de travers, mais ces personnes ne feraient peut-être guère mieux, quand elles ne sauraient pas lire (III, 757).

She agrees that men will be inspired to be brave and courageous, but that women will become modest and virtuous, rather than romantic escapists.

For de Beauvoir, female homosexuality is also related to this idea of passivity:

Il y a entre femmes une complicité qui désarme la pudeur...les caresses homosexuelles n'impliquent ni défloration, ni pénétration; elles assouissent l'érotisme clitoridien de l'enfance sans réclamer de nouvelles et inquiétantes métamorphoses.²⁷

De Beauvoir points out that the young girl "a souvent connu avec ses soeurs, avec sa mère, une intimité où la tendresse était subtilement pénétrée de sensualité,"²⁸ an observation that sheds valuable light on the famous letter of April 1671 in which Mme de Sévigné speaks of kissing "la belle gorge" of her daughter, and as a result of which Louise Horowitz goes so far as to suggest Lesbian tendencies.

²⁷De Beauvoir, I, p. 395.

²⁸De Beauvoir, I, p. 395.

De Beauvoir narrates the story of a young girl who kept a diary for three years detailing the progress of a purely imaginary love affair; later on, having moved, the girl wrote the young man in question lengthy letters, never sent, to which she herself wrote the replies. This, too, for de Beauvoir, illustrates women's fear and denial of the real world, their preference for that of the imagination. She includes under this rubric the idea of substitution, sublimation: because women cannot participate fully in the world, they look for a "great man" through whom they can live vicariously. Women have been accused of tempting men through décolleté, sexual teasing; for de Beauvoir, these behavioral patterns, as well as those of constantly keeping men waiting, having affairs with married men, are among the few means at women's disposal for being the person in command of a situation. She puts even kleptomania in this category, apparently more common among women than men:

Prendre des objets sans en avoir le droit, c'est affirmer avec arrogance son autonomie, c'est se poser comme sujet en face des choses volées et de la société qui condamne le vol, c'est refuser l'ordre établi et en défier les gardiens...²⁹

The point de Beauvoir makes in bringing up this idea of (alleged) female passivity is a negative one--instead of discovering radium, helping to bring about world revolution, most women have done very little on the world stage, so instead they fantasized, chattered to their neighbours, kept diaries and wrote letters to occupy their time. Even she admits, however, that women's social disadvantages have had a positive side:

...sa vie intérieure se développe plus profondément que celle de ses frères; elle est plus attentive aux mouvements de son coeur qui deviennent par là plus nuancés, plus divers; elle a plus de sens psychologique que les garçons tournés vers les buts extérieurs.

²⁹De Beauvoir, I, p. 411.

Elle évite les pièges du sérieux et du conformisme. Les mensonges concertés de son entourage la trouvent ironique et clairvoyante.

(This last is certainly descriptive of Mme de Sévigné.) Her letters are infinitely livelier and more playful than those of Charles, Bussy, Corbinelli, etc. Her many evocations of the "dessous des cartes", the amused cynicism with which she views court life, show her to be, indeed, ironic and clairvoyant, for example: in this description of Elisabeth-Charlotte d'Orléans, the niece of the Princesse de Tarente:

Pour sa nièce, elle en parle fort plaisamment. Elle a une violente inclination pour le frère aîné de son époux. Elle ne sait ce que c'est; la tante le sait bien. Nous rîmes de ce mal qu'elle ne connaît point du tout et qu'elle a d'une manière si violente...Elle n'a de sentiment de joie ou de chagrin par rapport à la manière dont elle est bien ou mal en ce lieu-là; elle se soucie peu de ce qui se passe chez elle et s'en sert pour avoir du commerce et pour se plaindre à cet aîné. Je ne vous puis dire combien cette voisine conta tout cela d'original, et confidemment, et plaisamment (II, 1991-2).

She gives as an example Tom and Maggie Tulliver of The Mill on the Floss who represent respectively established principle, conventional morality and a breath of life ("souffle vivant"). De Beauvoir adds that woman's "disponibilité peut engendrer une précieuse faculté de réceptivité; elle se montrera alors dévouée, attentive, compréhensive, aimante."³⁰ Surely this psychological insight, ability to enter into the feelings of others prepares women to be excellent novelists and short story writers. De Beauvoir, however, takes a less positive stance:

Il est rare qu'elle sente en elle une audace créatrice et le plus souvent les techniques qui lui permettraient de s'exprimer lui font

³⁰De Beauvoir, I, p. 419 (2).

défaut; mais dans ses conversations, ses lettres, ses essais littéraires, ses ébauches, il lui arrive de manifester une originale sensibilité.³¹

De Beauvoir would also explain negatively woman's affinity for Nature, seeing it as a function of her having no career or political commitments.

La jeune fille se jette avec ardeur vers les choses, parce qu'elle n'accomplit rien...vide et illimitée, ce qu'elle cherchera à atteindre du sein de son néant, c'est Tout. C'est pourquoi elle vouera un amour singulier à la Nature.

Feminine religious devotion has a similar explanation: "Un grand nombre de jeunes âmes féminines demandaient à Dieu de combler le vide de leur être." Even Mme Roland and Rosa Luxembourg, de Beauvoir's heroines, do not escape criticism: they are accused of a desire for self-obliteration in service to humanity, a "...désir d'absolu qui fit naître en Mme Roland et Rosa Luxembourg la flamme dont s'alimenta leur vie."³² De Beauvoir contends that the unhappy lives of personnages as diverse as Maggie Tulliver and Mme de Charrière were caused by this desire for self-abnegation through service. (Mme de Sévigné did indeed attempt to sublimate her attachment to her daughter in religious devotion, but was only partially successful.)

De Beauvoir explains women's attraction to such soft fabrics as tulle and muslin by suggesting that it is their way of satisfying the universal craving for warm, soft maternal flesh, which men satisfy through women. That is, women can connect directly with Nature while men satisfy this craving through the intermediary of woman. After intercourse, when men want to shower, smoke, become involved in some unrelated activity, women wish to prolong as long as possible the moment of integration,

³¹De Beauvoir, I, p. 421.

³²De Beauvoir, I, p. 424.

reciprocity, fusion. On the one hand, this difference can constitute another motive (besides feminine passivity) for women's attraction to each other: "dans une exacte réciprocité, chacune est à la fois le sujet et l'objet, la souveraine et l'esclave; la dualité est complicité."³³ On the other hand, it can be a reason for difficulties in women's relationships with men: "parfois il la déçoit parce que c'est une femme qu'il cherchait en lui."³⁴ In the "honnête femme", too conventional for an open Lesbian lifestyle, these desires can manifest themselves in "pure but passionate" feminine friendship (as in those of de Sévigné and Mme de La Fayette) or "sous le couvert de la tendance maternelle; quelque fois ils se découvrent avec éclat au cours d'une psychose ou pendant la crise de la ménopause."³⁵

This last has definite implications for Mme de Sévigné at the time of her separation from her daughter. As de Beauvoir says, a propos of feminine friendship:

L'homme et la femme s'intimident du fait qu'ils sont différents
mais entre deux amies, il y a surenchère de larmes et de
convulsions: leur patience à rabâcher reproches et explications est
insatiable. Exigence, récriminations, jalousie, tyrannie, tous ces
fléaux de la vie conjugale se déchaînent sous une forme
exaspérée.³⁶

This last is definitely applicable to Mme de Sévigné's relations with Mmes de Grignan and La Fayette; also to those between Mme de Grignan and Montgobert. For example, Mme de La Fayette writes to Mme de Sévigné in Provence:

Eh bien!...ma belle, qu'avez-vous à crier comme un aigle? Je vous
mande que vous attendiez à juger de moi quand vous serez ici.

³³De Beauvoir, I, pp. 499-500.

³⁴De Beauvoir, I, p. 501.

³⁵De Beauvoir, I, p. 502.

³⁶De Beauvoir, I, p. 505.

Qu'y a-t-il de si terrible à ces paroles: "Mes journées sont remplies?" Il est vrai que Byart est ici, et qu'il fait mes affaires. Mais quand il a couru tout le jour pour mon service, écrirai-je? encore faut-il lui parler...Mais l'après-dîner?--J'ai mal à la tête.-- Mais le matin?--J'y ai mal encore, et je prends des bouillons d'herbes qui m'enivrent...Vos défiances seules composent votre unique défaut, et la seule chose qui peut me déplaire en vous (I, 593).

De Beauvoir feels that under present conditions it is only with other women that women can be themselves: with men they are putting up a façade of charm, coquetry, childishness or austerity. (Of course, she implies this situation will change with the advent of world socialism.)

In Volume II of Le Deuxième Sexe, de Beauvoir discusses women's lives in terms of situation. The first to be discussed is that of the married woman, a term virtually synonymous with "housewife" at the time the book was written. De Beauvoir's thesis is that while men are out in the world "transcending", to use her terminology borrowed from politics, women are at home confined to immanence, passivity. Because they do nothing (in de Beauvoir's view), they express themselves through what they have. Collecting silks, velvets and porcelains also helps satisfy their sensual side. De Beauvoir's concert of housework is interesting: instead of striving for the "good", transcendence (as in Plato's concept of 'arête' excellence), housework simply eliminates the "bad". She suggests that this concept of housework influences women to take a similar, "black-and-white" view of politics. Simplistic political and religious views also result from a tendency to cling to what was learned in childhood, due to a lack of exposure to the outside world.

(One could say that Mmes de Sévigné and de Grignan cling to the religion of their childhood, while men like Charles, Bussy and Corbinelli receive through Classical education and experience in the world, at least an exposure to such philosophies as

hedonism, epicureanism, stoicism, etc., though they often arrive at a final accommodation through the exercise of reason. On the other hand, the two women, without benefit of much education on the subject, read such Catholic philosophers as Pascal and Nicole on their own and work out an accommodation in their own way.)

The more positive aspects of housework for de Beauvoir are marketing, because it is communal (she is thinking of the traditional French system where a woman would visit her neighborhood butcher, fishmonger, baker and so on daily encountering her neighbors in the process, and cooking because of its sensual appeal to the senses of sight, smell, taste and feel.) Indeed, she sees cooking as a sort of magic, an alchemy; drawing flame from wood, transforming raw meat and vegetables into the finished product, jam-making and other preserving in a sense "capture" Nature, "m(et) la vie en bocal". The negative side is that under twentieth century conditions women, to whom a sense of community is so important, are isolated in their individual homes, each performing over and over again work which "ne lui confère pas une autonomie; (...)n'est pas directement utile à la collectivité, (...) ne débouche pas sur l'avenir, (...)ne produit rien."³⁷ De Beauvoir, in any case, sees the feminine desire for community as a weakness; women need each other for support because they are denied transcendence as individuals.

Since women are brought up differently than men, kept segregated from them as children, "elle émerge d'un univers féminin où lui a été inculquée une sagesse féminine, le respect des valeurs féminines."³⁸ She may thus fail to see that man "est...ce qu'il fait (de Beauvoir's emphasis) dans le monde au milieu des autres hommes. Refuser de comprendre le mouvement de sa transcendance, c'est le dénaturer."³⁹ To illustrate this point, de Beauvoir cites the wife in Jouhandeau's Chroniques maritales: "On épouse un

³⁷De Beauvoir, II, p. 70.

³⁸De Beauvoir, II, p. 89.

³⁹De Beauvoir, II, pp. 115.

poète, dit Elise, et quand on est sa femme, ce qu'on remarque d'abord c'est qu'il oublie de tirer la chaîne des cabinets."⁴⁰ In a similar vein Montherlant in Les Jeunes Filles has a woman remark that her husband, despite being an airline pilot, is so childish that elevators make him nervous and he is afraid to reprimand the maid. (To men piloting a fighter plane is brave, to women it is closer to foolhardy.) Clearly, male and female values have been different. It is interesting, however, that de Beauvoir concurs with Montherlant in finding feminine values small-minded and trivial. The cultural brainwashing referred to on p. 9-10 above has doubtless come into play.

Without a career, isolated in her home, dependent on her husband and children as outlets, the married woman is quite likely to become bitter: de Beauvoir cites the famous examples of Mmes de Charrière and Tolstoy. Alternatively, she may carry living vicariously through her husband to exaggerated lengths (pushing him to earn ever more money, to finish or return to university against his will, etc.).

Insofar as Mme de Sévigné is concerned (who admittedly was married for only a short time before being widowed), we see at least one major critic (Jean Cordelier in Mme de Sévigné par elle-même) who subscribes to the theory of feminine letter-writing as compensation for being denied a career. The Correspondance clearly testifies, however, that given the choice, Mme de Sévigné would have remained with her daughter at all times, obviating the need for correspondence altogether. (It is her daughter who is important; the letters are important only as the means by which intimacy may be maintained. Cordelier's theories could perhaps apply to de Sévigné's correspondence with others, but it is to Mme de Grignan that her best letters are written; they are the most emotional, the most sincere.) The letters in any case do not indicate that Mme de Sévigné felt particularly unfulfilled: besides leading an active social life, administering a number of estates, caring for her elderly aunt, providing a home for her

⁴⁰De Beauvoir, II, pp. 115-6.

uncle the Abbé and her cousin, Mlle de Méri, offering her home as a focal point in Paris for such sojourning relatives as her grandson, Louis-Provence, and Mme de Grignan's brothers-in-law, she was active in Mme de Grignan's legal affairs, in promoting the careers, affairs of her sons and her cousin La Trousse.⁴¹

While, as has already been noted, many of Mme de Sévigné's friends were single or widowed as she was, the married women who figure in the Correspondance (Mmes de La Fayette, de Grignan, de Chaulnes) are far from being unfulfilled or oppressed by their husbands. If anything, the opposite is true: M. de La Fayette was relegated to Auvergne and rarely heard about, and the husband of de Sévigné's friend, Mme de La Troche, herself a fixture of the Correspondance, is mentioned only once, when Mme de Grignan is admonished to send a letter of condolence on his death.⁴² Unhappy wives in the Correspondance leave their husbands (e.g. Mme de Monaco, Hortense Mancini, Mme de Coligny⁴³). The only wife to have patiently endured a bad husband seems to have been de Sévigné herself. Admittedly, their circle was too aristocratic and enlightened to be typical, but it is interesting that de Sévigné and her friends do not seem even to know any oppressed wives.⁴⁴ If any group of women fares badly, it is single women: Mlle de Méri becomes an alcoholic, de Sévigné's eldest granddaughter and step-granddaughter are more or less pushed into convents in order to save the money it would have taken to endow them with dowries.

After a discussion of abortion and birth control, both topical in France in the 1940s but unmentionable in the seventeenth century, thus irrelevant to our discussion,

⁴¹Letters to Foucquet were written on behalf of this latter (I, p. 50).

⁴² "Le bonhomme La Troche est mort; écrivez à sa femme, ma chère bonne" (III, 525).

⁴³Bussy's daughter, who leaves her second husband.

⁴⁴The Premier President d'Aix is accused of beating his wife with the flat of his sword because of jealousy over "un jeune homme fort joli", but this is seen simply as being funny (II, 132).

de Beauvoir turns her attention to the condition of motherhood. Again, the idea of transcendence is essential to understanding her position:

La transcendance de l'artisan, de l'homme d'action est habitée par une subjectivité: mais chez la future mère l'opposition sujet/objet s'abolit;...prise aux rets de la nature, elle est plante et bête, une réserve de colloïdes, une couveuse, un oeuf, elle...fait ricaner les jeunes gens parce qu'elle est un être humain, conscience et liberté, qui est devenu un instrument passif de la vie.⁴⁵

In other words, while having a career implies action, achievement, pregnancy is a function of nature over which women have little control--we cannot cause it, or prevent it, even today, with complete reliability; we cannot control such accidents of nature as deformities or multiple births. While many women enjoy being pregnant and multiply their pregnancies because it makes them feel that their life has meaning, that they are a "chaînon dans la chaîne sans fin des générations,"⁴⁶ for de Beauvoir this feeling is illusory:

Car elle ne fait pas vraiment l'enfant: il se fait en elle; sa chair engendre seulement de la chair: elle est incapable de fonder une existence qui aura à se fonder elle-même."⁴⁷

She points out that, logically enough, the women who have the easiest time in pregnancy avoid the flesh/intellect struggle either by giving in and thinking of themselves as flesh ("pondeuses"), or career women who let it interfere as little as possible with their normal occupations.

⁴⁵De Beauvoir, II, p. 156.

⁴⁶De Beauvoir, II, p. 157.

⁴⁷De Beauvoir, II, p. 157.

We have seen that women use babies as a justification for their existence; they can also use them as as type of compensation, an unhealthy situation:

sexuellement elle est frigide ou inassouvie, socialement elle se sent inférieure à l'homme, elle n'a pas de prise sur le monde ni sur l'avenir; elle cherchera à compenser à travers l'enfant toutes ces frustrations.⁴⁸

This excessive preoccupation with the baby can take many forms. Some mothers are capricious, treating the child as a toy or doll. Others try to exercise power over the child as compensation for powerlessness in life's other arenas--this can lead to actual violence, sadistic behavior; or simply to an exaggerated demand for obedience, exclusivity, whereby the child is isolated from other influences. Perhaps Mme de Sévigné's insistence on herself teaching Francoise-Marguerite Italian, her reluctance to let her attend convent schools for any length of time can be explained in this way. The following quote describes quite accurately the Sévigné/Grignan situation:

Souvent aussi la femme ne renonce pas à être récompensée des soins qu'elle donne à l'enfant: elle modèle à travers lui un être imaginaire qui la reconnaîtra avec gratitude pour une mère admirable et en qui elle se reconnaîtra."⁴⁹

It is, of course, frustrating to deal with a being which can affirm itself only by revolting against you, the parent who represents authority.

With a son, the mother can vicariously "transcend":

...les maisons qu'elle n'a pas construites, les pays qu'elle n'a pas explorés, les livres qu'elle n'a pas lus, il les lui donnera. A travers

⁴⁸De Beauvoir, II, p. 182.

⁴⁹De Beauvoir, II, p. 184.

lui elle possédera le monde: mais à condition qu'elle possède son fils.⁵⁰

Herein lies the ambivalence--mothers want to transcend through their sons, and yet want to keep them as perpetual children in order to "possess" them as much as possible. Fortunately, it is easy for sons to escape their mothers' world into that of the masculine camaraderie of sports and school. It is thus with daughters that we see the worst mother-child conflicts being acted out. This was certainly the case in Mme de Sévigné's family--Charles could escape into the army and the demi-monde, while Françoise-Marguerite could not.

As de Beauvoir points out, there are some women sufficiently satisfied with their lives:

pour souhaiter se réincarner en une fille ou du moins pour
l'accueillir sans déception; elles voudront donner à leur enfant les
chances qu'elles ont eues, celles aussi qu'elles n'ont pas eues: elle
lui feront une jeunesse heureuse.⁵¹

She gives Sido, the mother of Colette, as a positive example of such a mother.

Interestingly enough, Mme de Sévigné is given as a negative example:

il se peut que, se dévouant à ce double en qui elle
(Mme de Sévigné) se reconnaît et se dépasse, la mère finisse par
s'aliéner totalement en elle; elle renonce à son moi, son seul souci
est le bonheur de son enfant...(elle devient) importune à celle
qu'elle adore...la fille essaiera avec mauvaise humeur de se
débarasser d'un dévouement tyrannique.⁵²

⁵⁰De Beauvoir, II, p. 188.

⁵¹De Beauvoir, II, p. 189.

⁵²De Beauvoir, II, p. 189-90.

De Beauvoir suggests that women who fuss excessively over their daughters (for example, sleeping in the same room or bed as the daughter until the latter is 15 or 20 years of age) feel guilty over bringing another "victim" into the world. She attributes to mothers' frustrations with their role in life jealousy over the influence on their daughters of husbands, teachers and the mothers of friends. Resentment over daughters going out, making up and increased independence has a similar cause. Excessive involvement with children, for de Beauvoir, then, results from the lack of other outlets for women: her conclusion is that children should be brought up in daycare.

(It is interesting that Mme de Grignan, the busy wife of a provincial governor, fulfilled in marriage, embroiled in legal battles, did indeed elect to place her daughters in convents. Marie-Blanche remained permanently with the Visitandines of Aix, and Pauline too would have been relegated to conventual life even after the Countess' return to Provence in 1688 had not Mme de Sévigné strenuously objected (III, 482). But was this due to a liberated attitude or to expediency or even callousness?)

De Beauvoir next discusses the relation of women to society. She reiterates her point that it is because women traditionally have not been able to express themselves through creative work (they do) that what they are (social rank), as well as what they have (clothes, jewelry) have been inordinately important. Mmes de Sévigné and de Grignan are not entirely exempt from this as we see in the following quote, although it is also a display of wit:

J'ai acheté pour me faire une robe de chambre une étoffe comme votre dernière jupe. Elle est admirable. Il y a un peu de vert, mais le violet domine; en un mot, j'ai succombé. On voulait me la faire doubler de couleur de fou, mais j'ai trouvé que cela avait l'air d'une impénitence finale. Le dessus est la pure fragilité, mais le dessous eut été une volonté déterminée qui m'a paru contre les bonnes moeurs; je me suis jetée dans le taffetas blanc. Ma dépense est

petite. Je méprise la Bretagne, et n'en veux faire que pour la Provence, afin de soutenir la dignité d'une merveille entre deux âges, où vous m'avez élevée (I, 233).

For de Beauvoir, "receiving" is pointless and she paints a bleak picture of it.

Il est de mauvais ton dans une conversation générale de parler des incartades de ses enfants et de ses soucis domestiques. On est donc réduit à des considérations sur le temps, le dernier roman à la mode, quelques idées générales empruntées aux maris...Les Américaines substituent volontiers à la conversation le bridge, ce qui n'est un avantage que pour les femmes qui aiment ce jeu.⁵³

Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, has a different attitude: receiving for her is essential, a sort of gift, a way of bringing people together, breaking their isolation, creating community, harmony.

De Beauvoir points out that the salon can be distinguished from everyday "receiving" in that it has a literary or political orientation. Mme de Sévigné's association with Ménage and the rest of Mme de Rambouillet's circle, with such literary figures as Mme de La Fayette and La Rochefoucauld put her social life into this relatively intellectual category. At Les Rochers, except when her visitors were of the mental calibre of Mme de Chaulnes or the Princesse de Tarente, she preferred reading, whether light or serious, correspondence and walks in her alleys or her woods, to such visitors as Mlle du Plessis or the bourgeois of Vitré. Mme de Grignan, who was forced to entertain the Provençal nobility did indeed find it an expensive, tedious burden.

As de Beauvoir indicates, it is ironic with the strong feminine-social urge that the modern urban woman should be isolated in her home, unlike the traditional peasant woman who did her laundry, brewing, etc., personally. Too, marriage tends to painfully isolate

⁵³De Beauvoir, II, p. 226.

women from their own families (Mme Tolstoy and Colette, like Mme de Grignan, carried on a correspondence with their mother), as did the Princesse de Tarente and her daughter, Madame and her aunt, the Electress Sophia).

One of the most interesting parts of the chapter on society concerns the question of women vis-a-vis other women. "Les amitiés féminines qu'elle parvient à conserver ou à créer seront précieuses à la femme; elles ont un caractère très différent des relations que connaissent les hommes."⁵⁴ According to de Beauvoir, men communicate through ideas, discuss their personal dreams and projects, while women

enfermées dans la généralité de leur destin de femmes, sont unies par une sorte de complicité immanente...Elles ne discutent pas les opinions, elles échangent des confidences et des recettes; elles se liguent pour créer une sorte de contre-univers dont les valeurs l'emportent sur les valeurs mâles; réunies, elles trouvent la force de sécouer leurs chaînes...elles contestent aussi avec ironie la supériorité morale et intellectuelle de leur mari et des hommes en général.⁵⁵

Women's experiences--pregnancy, childbirth, illnesses, the illnesses of children, domestic cares--are transformed into the essential events of human existence; recipes, household hints elevated into an oral science. (This applies, up to a point, with de Sévigné, who can shift with amazing rapidity from the domestic to the literary political.) They work out a certain moral code, the issues of which can be gleaned from the advice columns of women's publications.

⁵⁴De Beauvoir, II, p. 225.

⁵⁵De Beauvoir, II, p. 225.

As de Beauvoir expresses it

La femme sait que le code masculin n'est pas le sien, que l'homme même escompte qu'elle ne l'observe pas, puisqu'il la pousse à l'avortement, à l'adultère, à des fautes, des trahisons, des mensonges qu'il condamne officiellement; elle demande donc aux autres femmes de l'aider à définir une sorte de "loi de milieu", un code moral proprement féminin. Ce n'est pas seulement par malveillance que les femmes commentent et critiquent si longuement les conduites de leurs amies; pour se juger et se conduire elles-mêmes, il leur faut beaucoup plus d'invention morale qu'aux hommes.⁵⁶

Ultimately, however, de Beauvoir views feminine solidarity rather negatively:

...il est rare que la complicité féminine s'élève jusqu'à une véritable amitié; les femmes se sentent plus spontanément solidaires que les hommes mais du sein de cette solidarité ce n'est pas chacune vers l'autre qu'elles se dépassent: ensemble, elles sont tournées vers le monde masculin dont elles souhaitent accaparer les valeurs.⁵⁷

Women, in other words, are comrades only in captivity: liberty comes from the world of men. Since day-to-day living makes husbands and lovers lose this prestige, women's mistaken belief in male superiority leads them to haunt priests and doctors; to take refuge, like young girls, in imaginary affairs, crushes on film stars; or to have adulterous affairs which, by making them feel attractive, confirm their self-worth. (These affairs

⁵⁶De Beauvoir, II, p. 226.

⁵⁷De Beauvoir, II, p. 229.

are also a means of affirming their personal liberty.) This applies, up to a point, with de Sévigné; as will be seen in Chapter IV; while she at times seems to defend women against the disdain of men, at others she views herself and her daughter as exceptions to the general rule of feminine frivolousness.

The problems of aging are worse for unoccupied bourgeois women and those workers who have relied on pleasing men through their feminine charm--it often causes a desperate attempt to hold onto these vanishing charms. Women in middle age are at their sexual peak. Sometimes they become demanding of their husband, or find a lover, or return to the practice of masturbation. De Beauvoir's most surprising assertion, with implications for the relationship of Mmes de Sévigné and de Grignan, is that these heightened sexual feelings are sometimes brought to bear on daughters. She gives us an example of the case history of a middle-aged woman who takes a lover who is then attracted to the woman's daughter; the woman agrees to a marriage between the young people because of an unadmitted but very strong sexual attraction to her daughter. (This raises the ongoing controversy of whether Mme de Sévigné was always obsessed with her daughter or whether it came on during middle age.)

According to de Beauvoir:

La femme sur qui pèse une tradition de décence et d'honnêteté ne va pas toujours jusqu'aux actes. Mais ses rêves se peuplent de fantômes érotiques qu'elle suscite aussi pendant la veille; elle manifeste à ses enfants une tendresse exaltée et sensuelle, elle nourrit à propos de son fils des obsessions incestueuses, elle tombe secrètement amoureuse d'un jeune homme après l'autre...

L'ambivalence de ses désirs et de ses craintes engendre une anxiété qui parfois provoque des névroses: elle scandalise alors

ses proches par des conduites bizarres qui ne font en vérité que traduire sa vie imaginaire.⁵⁸

Thus, it is at menopause that the coquette or dissipated woman becomes a dévôte, or even a prey for strange sects or charlatans. This is one explanation for such transition as Mme de Sévigné's increasing Jansenism, the quietism of Mme de Guyon, Mme de Maran's conversion.

Active ou contemplative, son attitude s'accompagne de fiévreuses exaltations...elle est convertie à l'amour, à la vie à Dieu, à l'art, à l'humanité; dans ces entités, elle se perd et se magnifie (I, 669).

This exaltation alternates (due to causes both psychological and physiological) with periods of depression, jealousy, even paranoia.

Finally, the mature woman resigns herself to becoming old; this resignation is often accompanied by an attempt to justify an otherwise meaningless life through her children. With a son the mother's situation is ambivalent: she wants him to achieve, but not to harm himself through his efforts to do so; to come back from war decorated, but intact.

Même si elle approuve en principe les entreprises de son fils, elle est déchirée par une contradiction analogue à celle qui torture l'amoureuse...elle ne règne sur l'homme en souveraine que si cette chair qu'elle a engendrée est pour lui le bien suprême: il n'a pas le droit de détruire cette oeuvre qu'elle a accomplie dans la souffrance.⁵⁹

The fact that the giving of life is seen as the highest possible achievement can lead to jealousy and degradation of daughters-in-law. (This was not the case with

⁵⁸De Beauvoir, II, p. 282.

⁵⁹De Beauvoir, II, p. 292.

Mme de Sévigné because it was with her daughter, rather than with her son, that she was obsessed. With her daughter-in-law she was friendly, but no more.)

With a daughter the mother's need to justify her life takes a different form. Instead of a god, in her daughter she sees a double. By keeping her daughter to as great an extent as possible a perpetual child, the mother can justify her own continued existence. This can take the form of refusing to allow daughters to be courted, to marry. If they do marry, the daughters of such a mother are often prone to miscarriage, to being unable to nurse: "Malheureuses, isolées, elle trouveront un refuge dans les bras souverains de leur mère." In the event that a child is produced, the grandmother takes charge of it as much as possible. (This is not an entirely implausible explanation for Mme de Grignan's failed first pregnancy and Mme de Sévigné's initial role in Marie-Blanche's upbringing.) Similarly, a propos of M. de Grignan's role as governor of Provence, the possessor of a château:

La mère qui s'identifie passionément à sa fille...se choisira elle-même un gendre conforme à ce mari rêvé qu'elle n'a pas eu; à travers sa fille, elle assouvira ses vieux désirs de richesse, de succès et de gloire.⁶⁰

A woman without children may take young lovers (cf. Mme de Warens) or protégés: "la dévote réunit autour d'elle des filles spirituelles; la femme galante devient maquerelle."⁶¹ Nephews, nieces, godchildren, the children, the children of friends may serve as adoptive children. The woman without children may choose simply to kill time:

...avec l'aiguille ou le crochet, la femme tisse tristement le néant même de ses jours. L'aquarelle, la musique, la lecture, ont tout joué le même rôle; la femme désœuvrée n'essaie pas en s'y

⁶⁰De Beauvoir, II, p. 296. This last is also extremely applicable to Fontane's Effi Briest.

⁶¹De Beauvoir, II, p. 294.

adonnant d'élargir sa prise sur le monde, mais seulement de se désennuyer.⁶²

Instead of living through her children, the older woman may choose to lead the life of a mondaine: by attending every wedding, every funeral, running a salon (à la Mme Verdurin), she lives on the successes and enterprises of others. Community work then also serves to fill the void in her life. This could be another motivation for Mme de Sévigné's active social life, besides that of wishing to find favor with her daughter by reporting to the latter everything that she has been missing.

Most applicable of all to Mme de Sévigné is de Beauvoir's final commentary on the older woman. She feels that it is the older woman, generally a widow, who attains a certain lucidity:

elles se mettent enfin à regarder le monde avec leurs propres yeux;
elles se rendent compte qu'elles ont été toute leur vie dupées et
mystifiées; lucides, méfiantes, elles atteignent souvent un
savoureux cynisme.⁶³

Examples are Mme de Sévigné's reaction to the death of her niece's husband

Ma nièce de Bussy, c'est-à-dire de Coligny, est veuve; son mari est mort à l'armée de Mme de Schomberg, d'une horrible fièvre. La maréchale de Schomberg veut que je l'y mène après dîner. Cette affligée ne l'est point du tout; elle dit qu'elle ne le connaissait point et qu'elle avait toujours souhaitée d'être veuve. Il lui laisse tout son bien, de sorte que cette femme aura quinze ou seize mille livres de rente...(II, 336).

⁶²De Beauvoir, II, p. 300.

⁶³De Beauvoir, II, p. 303.

and to the marriage of Mlle de La Ferté:

Mme de Chaulnes me mena hier à la noce de Mme de La Ferté. J'y fus à cause de Mme de Mirepoix, mais elle n'y était pas. Ils sont déjà comme brouillés, et la veille on disputait encore parce que l'argent comptant n'était pas encore arrivé. J'y trouvai le marié, et cette enfant de douze ans, qui est toute disproportionnée à ce roi d'Ethiopie. C'est un mariage tellement improuvé que je crois qu'on ne verra plus la mère. La duchesse de La Ferté leur tombera sur les bras; elle l'a bien compté ainsi. Elle dit qu'elle s'est épuisée, qu'elle n'a plus que dix mille livres de rente, qu'elle a voulu un gendre pour elle, qu'elle s'est marié à son gendre, et ne finit point de parler sur ce ton...Tout cela fait prévoir la douceur de cette alliance (III, 478).

But this clear-sightedness, because it is not used to transform the world, is useless:

"Amusée ou amère, la sagesse de la vieille femme demeure encore toute négative: elle est contestation, accusation, refus; elle est stérile."⁶⁴

Near the end of Vol. II of Le Deuxième Sexe we find de Beauvoir's evaluation of feminine literature. The purpose of this rather lengthy expose of her views on the condition of women generally has been to facilitate understanding of her strong views on this subject. De Beauvoir feels that women's literature has been inferior to that of men because of women's inferior social position. Literature, for de Beauvoir, has to be, above all, useful: it must teach a lesson which will help to produce a more politically-acceptable world as in Sartre's Les Séquestrés d'Altona (which teaches that torture is wrong, even in war) or Camus' L'Etranger (which teaches that religion, filial sentiment are

⁶⁴De Beauvoir, II, p. 305.

simply bourgeois conventions, inauthentiques, and that the thinker forges his own truth).

The writings of women, on the contrary, are for her too subjective:

...bavarde et écrivassière (,) elle s'épanche en conversation, en lettres, en journaux intimes. Il suffit qu'elle ait un peu d'ambition, la voilà rédigeant ses mémoires, transposant sa biographie en roman, exhalant ses sentiments dans des poèmes.⁶⁵

A woman decides to write "à seule fin de remplir le vide de ses journées", or to compensate for reaching menopause. De Beauvoir makes a more valid point when she suggests that women writers are often mediocre because they lack a "formation sérieuse", a proper educational background (not applicable to de Sévigné or to such contemporaries as Mlle de Scudéry or Mme de La Fayette); also, their techniques have not been honed through persistence

n'ayant jamais éprouvé dans sa vie l'austère nécessité d'une discipline elle ne sera pas capable d'un effort soutenu et persévérant, elle ne s'astreindra pas à acquérir une solide technique.⁶⁶

Interestingly, while de Beauvoir is willing to exempt Colette from general rule of female mediocrity (because she earned her living by writing):

...sa plume a été souvent son gagne-pain et elle en a exigé le travail soigné qu'un bon artisan exige de son outil; de Claudine à la Naissance du jour, l'amateur est devenue professionnelle.⁶⁷

She does not exempt other professional female authors on this basis because they are "popular". De Beauvoir considers that most women do not take their writing with

⁶⁵De Beauvoir, II, p. 466.

⁶⁶De Beauvoir, II, p. 467.

⁶⁷De Beauvoir, II, p. 468.

sufficient seriousness: "...elles croient que leur mérites viennent d'une grâce qui les habite et n'imaginent pas que la valuer puisse se conquérir" (p. 468). Their writing seduces, they feel, in the same way as their faces, their figures.

...elles supposent que d'une manière analogue il suffit pour s'exprimer de montrer ce qu'on est; au lieu d'élaborer leur oeuvre par un travail réfléchi, elles font confiance à leur spontanéité...elles tentent leur chance, le succès viendra ou ne viendra pas.⁶⁸

De Beauvoir is sceptical of the famous feminine spontaneity:

c'est un don précieux que de savoir pêcher en soi pour les ramener à la surface du langage des impressions toutes vives; on admire en Colette une spontanéité qui ne se rencontre chez aucun écrivain masculin; mais--bien que ces deux termes semblent jurer ensemble--il s'agit chez elle d'une spontanéité réfléchie: elle refuse certains de ses apports pour n'en accepter d'autres qu'à bon escient (p. 469).

While she finds that women's point of view tends to be less objective than that of men less universal, more "personal", she attributes this to narcissism:

Au lieu de se donner généreusement à l'oeuvre qu'elle entreprend, la femme trop souvent la considère comme un simple ornement de sa vie; le livre et le tableau ne sont qu'un intermédiaire inessentiel lui permettant d'exhiber publiquement cette essentielle réalité - sa propre personne. Aussi est-ce sa personne qui est le principal--

⁶⁸De Beauvoir, II, p. 468.

parfois l'unique--sujet qui l'intéresse; Mme Vigée-Lebrun ne se lasse pas de fixer sur ses toiles sa souriante maternité (p. 470).

De Beauvoir denigrates as trivial the feminine attention to detail:

...même si elle parle des thèmes généraux, la femme écrivain parlera encore d'elle; on ne peut lire telles chroniques théâtrales sans être renseignés sur la taille et la corpulence de leur auteur, sur la couleur de ses cheveux et les particularités de son caractère (p. 470).

She also reproaches women writers with stylistic timidity; they lack the audacity of a Gérard de Nerval, of a Poe

Il est naturel que la femme essaie d'échapper de ce mode où souvent elle se sent méconnue et incomprise; ce qui est regrettable, c'est qu'elle n'ose pas alors les audacieuses envolées d'un Gérard de Nerval, d'un Poe...L'écrivain original, tant qu'il n'est pas mort, est toujours scandaleux; la nouveauté inquiète et indispose; la femme est encore étonnée et flattée d'être admise dans le monde de la pensée, de l'art, qui est un monde masculin: elle s'y tient bien sage, elle n'ose pas déranger, explorer, exploser...elle rappelle qu'elle est femme par quelques grâces minaudières et préciosités bien choisies; ainsi excellera-t-elle à rédiger des "best-sellers"; mais il ne faut pas compter sur elle pour s'aventurer sur des chemins inédits (p. 471).

The explanation she offers for this phenomenon is interesting and bears directly on Mme de Sévigné:

Ce n'est pas que les femmes dans leurs conduites, leurs sentiments, manquent d'originalité: il en est de si singulières qu'il faut les enfermer, dans l'ensemble, beaucoup d'entre elles sont plus

baroques, plus excentriques que les hommes dont elle refuse les disciplines. Mais c'est dans leur vie, leur conversation, leur correspondance (my emphasis) qu'elles font passer leur bizarre génie; si elles s'essaient à écrire, elles se sentent écrasées par l'univers de la culture parce que c'est un univers d'hommes: elles ne font que balbutier (pp. 471-2).

Women who try to enter this masculine universe face other problems:

...la femme qui choisit de raisonner, de s'exprimer selon des techniques masculines aura à coeur d'étouffer une singularité dont elle se défie...elle imitera la rigueur, la vigueur virile. Elle pourra devenir une excellente théoricienne, acquérir une solide talent; mais elle se sera imposé de répudier tout ce qu'il y avait en elle de "différent".⁶⁹

De Beauvoir's final judgement is rather harsh: "Il y a des femmes qui sont folles et il y a des femmes de talent: aucune n'a cette folie dans le talent qu'on appelle le génie".^{69A}

Most particularly condemned by de Beauvoir is the bourgeoise writer, who, instead of striving to elevate the lot of her fellow women, has accepted for herself and for those of her class, a privileged place in male-dominated society:

...il y en a bien entendu un grand nombre qui acceptent la société même telle qu'elle est; elles sont par excellence les chantres de la bourgeoisie puis qu'elles représentent dans cette classe menacée l'élément le plus conservateur...elles orchestrent la mystification destinée à persuader les femmes de "rester femmes"; vieilles maisons, parcs et potagers, aieules pittoresques, enfants mutins,

⁶⁹De Beauvoir, II, p. 472.

^{69A}De Beauvoir, II, p. 472.

lessive, confitures, fêtes de famille, toilettes, salons, bals, épouses douloureuses mais exemplaires, beauté du dévouement et du sacrifice, menues peines et grandes joies de l'amour conjugal, rêves de jeunesse, mûre résignation.⁷⁰

The female novelists of England, France, America, Canada and Scandinavia have squeezed these themes dry: "elles y ont gagné de la gloire et de l'argent mais n'ont certes pas enrichi notre vision du monde".⁷¹

De Beauvoir has greater respect for those women writers who have called into question an unjust society; she calls this a "littérature de réindication."

George Eliot a puisé dans sa révolte une vision à la fois minutieuse et dramatique de l'Angleterre victorienne; cependant, comme Virginia Woolf le fait remarquer, Jane Austen, les soeurs Bronte, George Eliot ont dû dépenser négativement tant d'énergie pour se libérer des contraintes extérieures qu'elles arrivent un peu essouffées à ce stade où les écrivains masculins de grande envergure prennent le départ; il ne leur reste plus assez de force pour profiter de leur victoire et rompre toutes les amarres: par exemple, on ne trouve pas chez elles l'ironie, la désinvolture d'un Stendhal, ni sa tranquille sincérité (p. 473).

She continues with this train of thought to make a controversial point:

Elles (the female authors referred to above) n'ont pas eu l'expérience d'un Dostoevski, d'un Tolstoi; c'est pourquoi le beau livre qu'est Middlemarch n'égale pas Guerre et Paix; les Hauts de

⁷⁰De Beauvoir, II, pp. 472-3.

⁷¹De Beauvoir, II, p. 473.

Hurlevent malgré leur grandeur n'ont pas la portée des Frères Karamazov (p. 473).

She switches to the world of art to make a similar point concerning Van Gogh:

Comment Van Gogh aurait-il pu naître femme? Une femme n'aurait pas été envoyée en mission dans le Borinage, elle n'aurait pas senti la misère des hommes comme son propre crime, elle n'aurait donc jamais peint les tournesols de Van Gogh. Sans compter que le genre de vie du peintre--la solitude d'Arles, la fréquentation des cafés, des bordels, tout ce qui alimentait l'art de Van Gogh en alimentant sa sensibilité--lui eût été interdit.^{70B}

While it is true that women have not normally seen combat or frequented bordellos, does this mean that their works are of lesser importance? Or is it simply that male critics have set the standard for what is considered first-rate and that women have been unconsciously co-opted into sharing this debatable point of view?

To return to Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, et al, de Beauvoir specifies why she considers the masculine works superior:

La lucidité...est une conquête dont elles (les femmes auteur) se satisfont un peu trop vite...Quand elles ont écarté les voiles d'illusion et de mensonge, elles croient avoir assez fait: cependant, cette audace négative nous laisse encore devant une énigme; car la vérité même est ambiguïté, abîme, mystère: après avoir indiqué sa présence, il faudrait la penser, la recréer (p. 474).

In other words, while women make excellent reporters--"Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, Dorothy Parker, Katherine Mansfield ont évoqué de manière aigüe et nuancée des individus, des climats et des civilisations"--(p. 475), they do not take what de Beauvoir is

⁷²De Beauvoir, II, p. 479.

the necessary next step, that of challenging the world as it currently exists, in order to postulate a new and better one. It is true that Tolstoy in Anna Karenina, for example, is constantly speculating on what future Russian society will be like, how the problems of the class struggle, male/female relations will be resolved. To facilitate this speculation, the protagonist, Levin, is cast as a sort of amateur philosopher. It is also arguable that the chapters in which Levin fulminates at length about a return to communal agriculture inspired by the spirit of primitive Christianity and similar unworkable notions lack the vitality of those in which the problems of men's and women's financial and social relations are acted out by the Anna Karenina/Vronsky, Mangle, Kitty/Levin and Dolly/Oblonsky couples.

The Brothers Karamazov illustrates de Beauvoir's point perhaps more conclusively: everything--religion, filial feeling, feminine fidelity--is challenged in this iconoclastic work, but Dostoyevsky is able to successfully integrate his social criticism into the body of his novels and novellas, for example, by couching them in heavy satire. In The Friend of the Family, the ridiculous Foma Fomitch teaches the peasants French and wishes them to dream of elegant, rather than vulgar, subjects and so on. This makes the point that while the peasants will have to be brought into the twentieth century somehow, the intelligentsia are too much in their ivory tower to be able to effectuate this:

"I wonder, Pavel Semyonitch, (Foma) went on, "what all our contemporary writers, poets, learned men and thinkers are about. How is it that they pay no attention to what songs are being sung by the Russian people and to what songs they are dancing? What have the Pushkins, the Lermontovs, the Borozdins been about all this time? I wonder at them. The people dance the Kamarinsky, the apotheosis of drunkenness, while they sing of forget-me-nots!

Why don't they write poems of a more moral tone for popular use...? It's a social question.⁷³

To conclude, de Beauvoir concedes that women are excellent observers, which includes the observation of their own feelings:

...elles ont souvent décrit avec bonheur leur vie intérieure, leur expérience, leur univers; attachées à la substance secrète des objets, fascinées par la singularité de leurs propres sensations, elles livrent leur expérience toute chaude à travers des adjectifs savoureux, des images charnelles.⁷⁴

They excel particularly at descriptions of Nature:

...pour la jeune fille, pour la femme qui n'a pas tout à fait abdiqué, la nature représente ce que la femme elle-même représente pour l'homme: soi-même et sa négation, un royaume et un lieu d'exil; elle est tout sous la figure de l'autre. C'est en parlant des landes ou des potagers que la romancière nous révélera le plus intimement son expérience et ses rêves.^{74A}

However, this affinity for description and the description of nature is not carried far enough:

Il en est beaucoup qui enferment les miracles de la sève et des saisons dans des pots, des vases, des plates-bandes; d'autres sans emprisonner les plantes et les bêtes essaient cependant de se les approprier par l'amour attentif qu'elles leur portent: ainsi Colette

⁷³Fyodor Dostoyevsky, "The Friend of the Family", in The Short Novels of Dostoyevsky, trans. Constance Garnett, introd. Thomas Mann (New York: Dial, 1945), pp. 693-4.

⁷⁴De Beauvoir, II, p. 475.

^{74A}De Beauvoir, II, p. 475.

ou Katherine Mansfield; très rares sont celles qui abordent la nature dans sa liberté inhumaine, qui tentent d'en déchiffrer les significations étrangères et qui se perdent enfin de s'unir à cette présence autre...A plus forte raison peut-on compter sur les doigts d'une main les femmes qui ont traversé le donné, à la recherche de sa dimension secrète: Emily Bronte a interrogé la mort, Virginia Woolf, la vie, et Katherine Mansfield parfois...la contingence quotidienne et la souffrance.^{74B}

De Beauvoir's explanation for this phenomenon is women's inferior social position:

Aucune femme n'a écrit Le Procès, Moby Dick, Ulysse ou Les Sept Piliers de la Sagesse. Elles ne contestent pas la condition humaine parce qu'elles commencent à peine à pouvoir intégralement l'assumer.^{74C}

The danger here is in equating women's different style of writing with inferiority. It is arbitrary, after all, to suggest that all good writers must be rebels, iconoclasts. For de Beauvoir, when women are "equal", their oeuvre will be indistinguishable from that of men. Is this a likely prospect? The rest of this essay will help to answer this question.

^{74B}De Beauvoir, II, p. 475-6.

^{74C}De Beauvoir, II, p. 476.

CHAPTER II

HUMAN ORIENTATION IN THE LETTERS

As we have seen, human relationships--the idea of "connexion" as Michel Mercier puts it--are all important in women's writing. As will be seen in Mme de Sévigné's Correspondance, men, women and children (as well as Nature) are for women part of a harmonious whole. Various aspects of this central fact will be examined in the course of this chapter.

Firstly, Mme de Sévigné, as is evident through the Correspondance, is a social person, although she makes a conscious effort to be solitary and contemplative as an aid to enriching her spiritual life. Livry, her uncle the Abbé de Coulange's country priory, is often used as a place of spiritual retreat--it is there that the Marquise retires after the Countess' first and most traumatic departure for Provence. As she ages, this religiously-inspired solitary streak comes increasingly to the fore--the Marquise is reluctant to accompany the Chaulnes to Vannes in 1688, preferring the retirement of Les Rochers (III, 651)--culminating in her final illness, as this letter from the Comte de Grignan to Moulceau (a family friend) after the Marquise's death testifies:

...ce qui est encore plus digne de notre admiration que de nos regrets, c'est une femme forte. Elle a envisagé, dès les premiers jours de sa maladie, la mort, avec une fermeté et une soumission étonnantes. Cette femme si tendre et si faible pour tout ce qu'elle aimait n'a trouvé que du courage et de la religion, quand elle a cru ne devoir songer qu'à elle (my emphasis). Nous avons dû remarquer, par l'usage qu'elle a su faire des bonnes provision qu'elle avait amassées, de quelle utilité et de quelle importance il est de se remplir l'esprit de bonnes choses, et de ces saintes lecture pour

lesquelles Mme de Sévigné avait une avidité surprenante...(III, 1689).

(One could ask oneself if this solitariness does not result from the Marquise's being co-opted, at the time of her death, into the masculine, abstract, "system" of religion.)

When the company is of Mme de Sévigné's own choosing, however (i.e. her daughter and grandchildren, her Grignan in-laws, her Paris friends, rather than her Brittany connections with whom she is depressed in any case from being so far away from her daughter) Mme de Sévigné becomes intensely social; many of her letters show this mondaine side of her personality. She is also intensely interested--as what woman is not--in the relationships of others. Charles' love affairs, those of Louis XIV and the royal mistresses and those of various other court and aristocratic personalities are exhaustively described in the Letters, e.g. apropos of Louis-Provence "Votre enfant était chez Mlles de Castelnau. Il y a une cadette qui est toute jolie, toute charmante; votre fils l'a trouvée à son gré et laisse l'aînée à Sanzei (III, 467).

Another aspect of this feminine interest in others, desire for community, interaction, going back to primitive times when men hunted while women farmed communally, is their greater ability to identify with, to put themselves in the place of others. Mme de Sévigné is no exception to this rule, identifying intensely with her daughter, picturing every step of her journeys, imagining her surroundings at Grignan until she (the Marquise) can see them for herself, etc.

The feminine orientation toward other human beings and their interrelationships means that in order to be understood, theoretical statements need to be personalized, i.e. applied to the self or to friends and acquaintances in some way. The struggles of the Marquise and her daughter to assimilate their favourite religious writers are an example of this.

World events, too, are looked at in this personal way: wars are important if they affect Mme de Sévigné's son, grandson or Mme de Grignan's brothers-in-law, or if they

delay the Countess in Provence. The need to elect a new Pope is important because it means MM. de Chaulnes and de Coulanges will have to travel to Rome; the selection of Cardinal Ottoboni as Alexander VIII is good because he esteems Mmes de Chaulnes and de Kerman, Mme de Sévigné's friends.

Finally, women's wit tends, as well, to be more personalized. Instead of a series of satires in the manner of Juvenal or Boileau, we see in Mme de Sévigné personalized nicknames, personifications and metaphors. When figurative language is used, for example when the Chevalier de Grignan's gout is described at one point as a mouse running up and down his frame, it is the Chevalier and his suffering that are the principal topic and not the clever figure. Mme de Sévigné's wit is never aloof from human beings and the human condition, but rather a "celebration of life".

The first category under this heading is simply interpersonality, human relationships. One could criticize the selection of this category by asking rhetorically whether all fiction, letters and biography do not, by definition, involve such interrelationship among characters. The best response to be made is that, while such writing does necessarily involve characters, in women's literature such characters are much less likely to be subordinated to some sort of abstract idea or schema.

Dickens and Balzac are perhaps the best illustrations of this relative subordination of personality to an abstraction. Bleak House is a study of the abuses of the legal system, Oliver Twist of the abuses of the social welfare system, Hard Times of the abuses of Utilitarianism. Similarly, Balzac's works are a defense of monarchism (most explicit in Les Chouans) and, in their detailed examination of its faults, a critique of industrialization under capitalism. This attitude is ubiquitous in his oeuvre: even in a novella such as Le Curé de Tours, the sympathetic characters such as the old-guard Mme de Listomere and her circle who try to help Birotteau are aristocrats. This whole man-versus-capitalism struggle is part of Balzac's social Darwinism; stronger characters,

inevitably destroy weaker ones, such as Père Goriot; environment produces certain inalienable effects.

In a work such as Wuthering Heights, on the contrary, the relationships between Catherine and Heathcliff, Heathcliff and Isabella, Edgar and Catherine, Hindley and Heathcliff are indisputably the subject of the novel; La Princesse de Clèves is dominated by the Nemours-Mme de Clèves-Prince de Clèves triangle, the relationship of Mme de Clèves with her mother, that of the King and his mistress, the Queen and the Vidame de Chartres, the various court cabals. (This is not simply because these novels are love stories--La Jalousie is also about a triangular relationship, but one which is subordinate to Robbe-Grillet's theories of the nouveau roman. Could we imagine a woman writing of a love triangle who never tells us whether the husband's suspicions are real, or of the wife's preference?)

We have seen that for Simone de Beauvoir, women's emphasis in their writing on their personal lives, their relationships, is considered a weakness; for writers like Mme de Sévigné it is a strength. The subject of Mme de Sévigné Correspondance is human relationships par excellence--it is not simply the story of the relationship between mother and daughter, which is a category in itself, but a catalogue of de Sévigné's relations with her family (Charles de Sévigné, his wife Mme de Coulanges, the Abbé, Mlle de Méri, Mme de la Trousse, Bussy), her friends (Mmes de Chaulnes, de La Fayette, de la Trousse, the Princesse de Tarente, d'Hacqueville, Fouquet), her in-laws (the Comte de Grignan and his brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, children from previous marriages), even her enemies (Mme de Mirepoix, Mme d'Acigné, Mme d'Aiguebonne). In short, it is a catalogue of human relationships in general. Every letter narrates what has happened between the mothers' and daughters' mutual acquaintances--the King and Queen, the King and his mistresses, Bussy and his daughter, the latter with her lover, and gives advice as to how Mme de Grignan should interact with her husband, her children, her in-laws, the servants and the Provençaux generally.

In the letter of August 23, 1671, for example, we find Mme de Sévigné at Les Rochers writing to Mme de Grignan in Provence. In the first sentence of the letter, de Sévigné is already displaying her networking skills: "Vous étiez donc avec votre présidente de Charmes quand vous m'avez écrit! Son mari était intime ami de Mme Foucquet, dis-je-bien?" (I, p. 329) (Of course such a question is also indicative of Mme de Sévigné's intense desire to know and share everything in her daughter's life.) The mother then goes on to give news of the persons in her own current life "Le pauvre La Mousse a eu mal aux dents..." (I, p. 328). While Mme de Sévigné is able to tolerate "solitude", which for a seventeenth century aristocrat means being left "alone" with a houseful of servants and an estate full of peasants ("Ne craignez point pour moi l'ennui que me peut donner la solitude" (I, p. 328)), she is currently enjoying a visit: "Mme de Chaulnes, Mlle de Murinais, Mme Fourché et une fille de Nantes fort bien faite vinrent ici jeudi" (I, p. 329). Mme de Chaulnes is exhausted and falls asleep on de Sévigné's bed--no matter: "Nous (de Sévigné and the other ladies) causons toujours" (I, p. 329). Later, the ladies go for a walk in the woods where Mme de Sévigné draws Mme de Chaulnes into discussing her years in Rome during her husband's ambassadorship there and "par quelle aventure elle avait épousé Mme de Chaulnes, car je cherche toujours à ne me point ennuyer" (I, p. 329). Mme de Sévigné promises to return to visit by staying for a week in Vitré with the Chaulnes.

The discussion then turns to de Sévigné's news from Mme de La Fayette in Paris concerning M. de La Rochefoucauld and his son, before moving back to life at Grignan.

Vous avez présentement le prince Adhémar. J'ai reçu sa dernière lettre; dites-le-lui et l'embrassez pour moi. Vous avez à mon compte, cinq ou six Grignan. C'est un bonheur, comme vous dites, qu'ils soient tous aimables et d'une bonne société, sans cela ils feraient l'ennui de votre vie, au lieu qu'ils en font la douceur et le plaisir (I, pp. 324-30).

In further news, Marie-Blanche will have to be taken from Sucy to the home of Mme de La Trousse because of an outbreak of measles, which will upset her nurse; de Sévigné commiserates with de Grignan that Mme de Senneterre will soon be leaving Provence for Paris (but does Mme de Grignan really want to trade places?). M. de Chesières, an uncle, is visiting Les Rochers; Mme de Sévigné is relieved that M. de Grignan's fever is better.

One could argue that letters are by definition an exchange of news about people and that it is thus not surprising that women excel at them (as de Beauvoir admits, as does La Bruyère). In fact, the tone of many masculine letters bears little resemblance to the folksy note struck by de Sévigné. Those of Voiture and Balzac are basically gallant or intellectual tours de force; Oscar Wilde's letters from his American tour of the 1880s are little but a travelogue, and Alberto Moravia's from 1930s America consist of political commentary and business discussions. The letters of Mme de Sévigné certainly demonstrate her natural wit and excellent education from time to time with puns and literary allusion (as will be seen in Chapter III); she describes her travels and, at times, discusses financial and business transactions, but these never predominate over her central preoccupation with other human beings and specifically Mme de Grignan.

In the letter of December 15, 1673, Mme de Sévigné is in Paris, far from the rusticity and comparative isolation of Les Rochers. After an initial discussion of business matters (Mme de Sévigné is rallying such Paris connections as Pomponne, d'Hacqueville and Brancas to back up M. de Grignan in his political battles), the bulk of the letter is human-oriented. Mme de Grignan is solicited, as always, to travel to Paris; Charles is expected back from the wars at any moment; Mme de Sévigné has just spent an enjoyable evening with "Monsieur le Duc, M. de La Rochefoucauld, Mme de Thianges, Mme de La Fayette, Mme de Coulanges, l'abbé Têtu, M. de Marsillac, Guilleragues, chez

Gourville" (I, p. 640), where they listened to the Poétique of Despréaux, a "chef d'oeuvre". Then the conversation turns frankly to court gossip:

M. de La Rochefoucauld n'a point d'autre faveur que celle de son fils, qui est très bien placé. Il entra l'autre jour, comme je vous l'ai déjà mandé, à une musique chez Mme de Montespan. On le fait asseoir; le moyen de ne pas le faire? Cela n'est rien du tout.

Mme de La Fayette voit Mme de Montespan un quart d'heure quand elle va, en un mois, une fois à St. Germain, il me ne paraît pas que ce soit là une faveur...Le Chevalier de Vendôme a demandé quartier de plaisanterie à M. de Vivonne, qui ne s'épuisait point sur l'horreur qu'il avait de se battre; l'accommodement s'est fait, et on n'en parle plus...Mme de La Vallière ne parle plus d'aucune retraite; c'est assez de l'avoir dit. Sa femme de chambre s'est jetée à ses pieds pour l'en empêcher; peut-on résister à cela? (I, pp. 640-1).

If we compare this with, for example, Voiture's "Lettre de la berne", we find that, while the latter is very witty, no one is referred to in any detail except Voiture himself:

...Ce que je puis vous dire, Mademoiselle, c'est que jamais personne ne fût si haut que moi, et que je ne croyais pas que la fortune me dût jamais tant élever. A tous coups, ils me perdaient de vue et m'envoyaient plus haut que les aigles ne peuvent monter...Une des choses qui m'effrayait autant était que, lorsque j'étais bien haut et que je regardais en bas, la couverture me paraissait si petite q'il me semblait impossible que je retombasse dedans, et je vous avoue que cela me donnait quelque émotion...⁷⁵

⁷⁵Albert Schinz and Helen King, Editors. Seventeenth Century French Readings (New York: Holt, 1915), p. 60).

In the letter of July 31, 1675, Mme de Sévigné underlines the importance of human interaction when she commiserates with her daughter and son-in-law on their having no one with whom to discuss the death of Turenne: "Je vous plains de n'avoir personne à qui parler de cette grande nouvelle; il est naturel de communiquer tout ce qu'on pense là-dessus" (II, p. 28). This brings us to a sub-heading within this category, Mme de Sévigné's insistence on the human rather than the official side of history:

On vint éveiller M. de Reims à cinq heures du matin pour lui dire que M. de Turenne avait été tué. Il demanda si l'armée était défaite. On lui dit que non. Il gronda qu'on l'eût éveillé, appela son valet coquin, fit retirer son rideau, et se rendormit. Adieu, mon enfant, que voulez-vous que je vous dise (II, p. 51)?

In the letter of August 22, 1675, we find

La royauté est établie au delà de ce que vous pouvez vous imaginer. On ne se lève plus, et on ne regarde personne. L'autre jour, une pauvre mère tout en pleurs, qui a perdu le plus joli garçon du monde, demandait sa charge à sa majesté. Elle passa. Ensuite, et tout à genoux, cette pauvre Mme de Froulai se traîna à ses pieds, lui demandant avec des cris et des sanglots qu'elle eût pitié d'elle. Elle passa sans s'arrêter (II, p. 69).⁷⁶

On the subject of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, Mme de Sévigné sometimes gives details of the political fights, military campaigns, etc., but is more interested in the

⁷⁶Mme de Sévigné is often critical of the "powers-that-be" (for example of Colbert in the Fouquet affair), partly no doubt as a result of her connection (through the de Sévignés) with Retz, and with other Frondistes. In line with de Beauvoir's criticisms, however, this dissatisfaction is never translated into any sort of political activism (cf. de Beauvoir's comments that women find politics an inevitable force, like the weather). It is true that direct political criticism could never have been committed to the mails because of government censorship.

psychological interplay among characters, the impact of the exiled King and Queen on the personnages at the French court:⁷⁷

Pour la fuite du roi, il paraît que le prince d'Orange l'a bien voulue. Il l'envoya à Exester, où il voulait aller. Il était fort bien gardé par le devant de sa maison et toutes les portes de derrière ouvertes. Le prince n'a point voulu faire périr son beau-père. Il est dans Londres à la place du roi sans en prendre le nom, ne voulant que rétablir une religion qu'il croit bonne, et maintenir les lois du pays, sans qu'il en coûte une goutte de sang. Voila l'envers tout juste de ce que nous pensions de lui; ce sont des points de vue fort différents (III, pp. 465-6)...

Mais parlons du roi et de la reine d'Angleterre; c'est quelque chose de si extraordinaire d'avoir là cette cour qu'on s'en entretient sans cesse. On tâche de régler les rangs afin de faire vie qui dure avec des gens si loin d'être rétablis...Le roi d'Angleterre ne donne point la main à Monseigneur et ne le reconduit pas. La reine n'a point baisé Monsieur, qui en boude...Elle a été voir Madame la Dauphine qui est malade, et qui l'a reçue dans son lit. On ne s'assied point en Angleterre; je crois que les duchesses feront avec elle à la mode de France, comme avec sa belle-mere. On est fort occupé de cette nouvelle cour (III, p. 471).

⁷⁷In 1688, James II of England, a Catholic, perceived to be imposing his religion on a Protestant country, was deposed in favor of his daughter and son-in-law, Mary Stuart and William of Orange, the current rulers of the Netherlands. James, his wife, Mary of Modena and their infant son (later the Old Pretender) eventually escaped and sought refuge with Louis XIV in Paris, where a court was established for them at St. Germain-en-Laye.

We have seen that women's literature tends to deal with interpersonal relations rather than with adventure or abstract issues. The next category in Chapter II, that of "otherness", emphasizes women's propensity in their literature for entering into the thoughts and feelings of others, often putting these sentiments before their own. Michel Mercier ascribes the following traits to the heroine of a feminine novel "...la vie intérieure, la conscience professionnelle, le sens de l'autre." The "villainess" of the feminine novel is described as possessing "la gloire, un égoïsme sans scrupule, une volonté de parvenir".⁷⁸ Self-centered, egotistical women (Miss Ingram in Jane Eyre, Rosamond in Middlemarch, Edmee in Chéri) are never seen positively by women.

Mercier offers a convincing reply to de Beauvoir's contention that women writers spend altogether too much time talking about themselves and their feelings (p. 470):

Partir de soi pour retrouver l'autre--offrir et se dévoiler comme
beauté qui susciterait l'amour--au centre de son propos est satisfait
un besoin d'échanges fondamental--il n'est de peinture de soi que
ne soit un don et ne demande la nécessité d'un retour (p. 307).

Solitude for women writers is negative:

...la solitude est perversion: être seul, c'est se sentir vulnérable,
et sentir les autres dans leur éloignement invulnérables. Il faut les
rejoindre et plus qu'une trop discrète tendresse, le mal infligé
devient le recours par où s'affirmer à autrui.

Thus, while the male bildungsroman (Young Werther, Le Père Goriot) involves the affirmation of the self, the female equivalent (Carson, Mercier, Carson MacCullers, Iris Murdoch, Jean Rhys and Nathalie Sarraute) involves situating the self successfully in relation to others. It is perhaps for this reason, rather than inadequate feminine education, as de Beauvoir would have it, that we have seen no feminine Napoleon (as in

⁷⁸Michel Mercier, Le Roman féminin (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1976), p. 13.

the Mémoires de Ste. Hélène) or Dostoevsky. Mercier further points out that when men do idolize another being, that being is an abstraction such as the Beatrice of the Divina Commedia--Dante scarcely knew the actual Beatrice--and/or the motivation for the idolization is sexual (cf. the Julies of Rousseau and Lamartine) rather than the affection between a mother and daughter, as with de Sévigné, or between two sisters as in Pride and Prejudice.

When we examine the letters of Mme de Sévigné, we see that she is ready to enter into the feelings of others such as Bussy, Fouquet, the Chaulnes, Guitaut ("Mon Dieu, que je vous plains, mon pauvre Monsieur, et que je suis bien plus propre qu'un autre à sentir vos peines! Hélas! je passe ma vie à trembler pour la santé de ma fille..."(II, p. 896). Lauzun ("Ce pauvre Lauzun, ne vous fait-il pas grande pitié de n'avoir plus à faire son trou? ne croyez-vous pas bien qu'il se cassera la tête contre la muraille?" (II, p. 25) and the Abbé de Coulanges

...je n'espère pas pouvoir aller à Grignan, quelque envie que j'en aie. Le bon Abbé n'y veut plus aller; il a mille affaires ici, et craint le climat. Je n'ai pas trouvé dans mon traité de la reconnaissance que je le pusse quitter dans l'âge où il est, ne pouvant douter que cette séparation ne lui arrachât le coeur et l'âme" (II, p. 262).

However, this "other orientation" is carried farthest in de Sévigné's relationship with her daughter. Mme de Sévigné lives for her daughter and would die for her, follows her mentally at Grignan and at every stage of her various journeys:

Toutes vos affaires et les moindre de vos intérêts sont au premier rang de tout ce qui me touche. Je suis tres fâchée que vous ayez été importunée de votre M. de Castellane, noir comme une taupe, et tout le reste. Il me semble que je vois votre désespoir: dès

qu'on a un pouce de terre, on connaît ces sortes de visites (II, p. 426).

Je penserai continuellement à vous, sans que je puisse jamais rien oublier de ce qui vous regarde...Ma seule consolation, en attendant que je vous voie, sera de recevoir de vos lettres, vous écrire et vous servir, si je le puis (I, p. 606).

She shares Mme de Grignan's worries about her children (for example on the subject of Louis-Provence's deficient build, his military participation) and her Grignan in-laws

En vérité, ma chère Comtesse, vous avez raison de dire que je ne suis pas indifférente à cet enfant et à vos affaires. Ce n'est pas même s'y intéresser, ni les partager; c'est y être tout entière par-dessus la tête (III, p. 690).

...votre lettre du 18...m'apprend l'arrivée de M. le Chevalier avec un mauvais visage, ne se soutenant point du tout, une poitrine malade. Savez-vous ce que j'ai fait en lisant cette lettre? j'ai pleuré comme vous tous, car je ne soutiens pas une telle idée, et j'y prends un intérêt sensible, comme si j'étais de la vraie famille (III, pp. 632-3).

Her greatest concern, is consistently reserved for Mme de Grignan's health and finances:

Mais votre santé, voilà ce qui me tue. Je crains que vous ne dormiez pas, et qu'en fin vous ne tombiez malade; vous ne me dites rien là-dessus, mais je n'en ai pas moins d'inquiétude...(I, p. 609).

On dit que la première chose que M. de Chaulnes avait fait le lendemain de l'exaltation, c'a été de rendre Avignon. Mon Dieu! ma fille, que cette pensée me trouble et me touche! C'est ma

seule peine, et elle ne peut être mieux fondée que sur l'état où vous allez être. Quand je pense et parle sur ce sujet, ce sont mes véritables affaires, je n'en connais point d'autres (III, p. 740).

Is this concern for others the sort of thing de Beauvoir has in mind when she speaks of feminine self-abnegation, of women living vicariously through others because of a lack of meaningful occupation? Or is this a rejection of the masculine values of solitude in favor of the feminine values of connection? Certainly at times Mme de Sévigné approaches de Beauvoir's image of the importunate, demanding mother:

Aimez, aimez votre fille, c'est la plus raisonnable et la plus jolie chose du monde, mais aimez aussi toujours votre chère maman, qui est plus à vous qu'à elle-même (III, p. 400).

Le chevalier de Mirabeau a conté ici de quelle manière vous aviez été touchée de mon mal, et comme en six heures de chagrin votre beau visage fut méconnaissable. Vous pouvez penser, mon cher enfant, combien je suis touchée de ces marques naturelles et incontestable de votre tendresse (II, pp. 264-5).

We will end this section with a quote from Lord Chesterfield. We note that, whereas Mmes de Sévigné and de Grignan share concern for various relatives and friends, share their financial worries and even study together long-distance by reading the same authors at the same time and comparing their reactions (cf. Josephus, Nicole, Tacitus), Lord Chesterfield sees his son as his oeuvre--no element of reciprocity exists at all:

The best authors are always the severest critics of their own works; they revise, correct, file and polish them, till they think they have brought them to perfection. Considering you as my work...I examine narrowly into the least inaccuracy or inelegancy,

in order to correct, not to expose them and that their work may be perfect at least.⁷⁹

The next idea to be examined is that of subjectivity: that is, according to de Beauvoir, women tend to consider all events in terms of their personal experience, the experience of others that has been related to them, rather than according to a certain system of thought, whether Aristotelian, Augustinian, Marxist, etc.

Récusant les principes logiques, les impératifs moraux, sceptique devant les lois de la nature, la femme n'a pas le sens de l'universel; le monde lui apparaît comme un ensemble confus de cas singuliers; c'est pourquoi elle croit plus facilement aux ragots d'une voisine qu'à un exposé scientifique; sans doute elle respecte le livre imprimé, mais ce respect glisse au long des pages écrites sans en accrocher le contenu: au contraire l'anecdote racontée par un inconnu dans un queue ou dans un salon revêt aussitôt une écrasante autorité...elle ne connaît pas le critérium de la vraisemblance; seule l'expérience immédiate emporte sa conviction; sa propre expérience ou celle d'autrui, dès qu'il l'affirme avec assez de force (pp. 333-4).

We would have to modify this idea somewhat in order to apply it to Mme de Sévigné, an educated, intelligent woman. While she undoubtedly reads such theorists as Nicole, Pascal, St. Augustine, among others, in order to make what she has read relevant to her it must be applied to her personal experience. For example, when Mme de Grignan visits La Garde, Mme de Sévigné comments:

Vous nous direz comme vous vous y trouvez et comme cette pauvre substance qui pense, et qui pense si vivement, aura pu conserver sa

⁷⁹Philip Stanhope, Lord Chesterfield, Letters written by Lord Chesterfield to his Son, ed. Charles Sayle (London: Walter Scott, 1890), p. 204.

machine si belle et si délicate dans un bon état pendant qu'elle était si agitée; vous en faites une différence que votre père n'a point faite (III, p. 377).

Descartes believed that the cause of deregulation to the body ("machine") was sadness (in this case Mme de Grignan's worries about her son at the siege of Philisbourg). In spite of this and her voyage, Mme de Grignan's health has not succumbed to this mental stress ("vous en faites la différence"). We see that Mme de Sévigné does not discuss the theories of Descartes in the abstract, but relates them to her direct experience, i.e. her daughter's health.

In June 1676, Mme de Sévigné is returning to Paris from Vichy after having been unable to arrange for a rendezvous with her daughter. She writes that if only they were together:

...vous m'expliqueriez ces ridicules qui viennent des défauts de l'âme; je crois deviner à peu près. Je suis toujours d'accord de mettre au premier rang de bon ou de mauvais tout ce qui vient de ce côté-là; le reste me paraît supportable, et quelque fois de considération. C'est en leur faveur qu'on doit pardonner tout; c'est un fonds qui vous console, et qui vous paie magnifiquement, et ce n'est que par la crainte que ce fonds ne soit altéré qu'on est blessé de la plupart des choses. Et quand on est assuré de ce côté, le coeur est à son aise (II, p. 326).

This is an adaptation of the "psychologie cartésienne du généreux"; it means that the Comte de Grignan's faults do not come from defects in his soul. "...Le généreux peut faillir, mais par suite d'une erreur d'autant plus excusable s'il sait aimer; on ne peut en revanche rien espérer de qui n'a pas l'âme noble" (I, p. 1248). We see from this passage

that Mme de Grignan, as well as her mother, personalizes what she has read and applies it to her own experience.⁸⁰

Similarly, world events are significant to Mme de Sévigné only when they can be related to herself in some way. She is not especially interested in these events in a global sense: we never see her analyze why France and Germany, France and England, Poland and Turkey should be at war in the sense of causes or long-term effects. The defeat of Turkey is significant because the Polish king is married to Mlle d'Arquien, whom she and her daughter know:

Il y a une nouvelle de l'Europe qui m'est entrée dans la tête; je vais vous la mander contre mon ordinaire.⁸¹ Vous savez, ma bonne, la mort du roi de Pologne. Le grand maréchal, mari de Mlle d'Arquien, est à la tête d'une armée contre les Turcs. Il a gagné une bataille, si pleine et si entière, qu'il est demeurée quinze mille Turcs sur la place. Il a pris deux bassas...Voilà une nouvelle qui m'a plu, et j'ai jugé qu'elle vous plairait aussi (I, pp. 646-7).

⁸⁰It could be argued from certain allusions in the Correspondance (III, p. 600) that Mme de Grignan and Mlle Descartes do in fact exchange letters on the subject of Descartes theory of colors, of whether such sensations are indeed divinely inspired. However, it would appear from the notes of Duchêne (III, p. 1479, n. 4) that Mlle Descartes reiterates her uncle's position, while Mme de Grignan explains the theories of Rohault on this subject which reconcile those of Descartes with Catholicism, i.e. there is no original discussion on the subject from the two women. In any case, Mme de Sévigné's only interest in this whole subject and in Mlle Descartes is subjective--seeing Mlle Descartes and discussing cartesianism in her letters to her daughter is a way of thinking herself closer to the latter. (From Mme de Grignan's point of view, it is more in terms of the struggle of the mother-daughter relationship that this situation must be viewed: Mme de Grignan is pressured by her mother to write to Mlle Descartes, just as she is pressured to write to the Princesse de Tarente, Mmes de La Trouche, de La Fayette and so on.)

⁸¹Note (Duchêne, notes, I, p. 1371) "Alors que les Gazettes font toujours une large place aux pays étrangers, Mme de Sévigné n'en parle en effet presque jamais. L'exception s'explique parce qu'elle connaît Mlle d'Arquien et par l'influence française en Pologne".

Her attitude is the same towards the politics of Denmark--it is interesting that Count Griffenfeld tried to stage a coup and failed because he is in love with the Princess of Tarente's daughter. Love and courtship is within Mme de Sévigné's experience. Too, she sees the Princess regularly, has read some of Mlle de la Trémouille's letters, and the situation is of interest to her old friend Pomponne:

Vous ai-je mandé que ce favori de Danemark, amoureux
romanesquement de la princesse, est prisonnier, et qu'on lui fait
son procès? Il avait un petit dessein seulement; c'était de se faire
roi et de détrôner son maître et son bienfaiteur. M. de Pomponne
m'en parlait l'autre jour comme d'un Cromwell (II, p. 292).

On the whole, however, the attempt to depose the King of Denmark is, to Mme de Sévigné, a bagatelle, something to fill in idle moments, while such relatively minor phenomena as the reluctance of the Assemblée of Provence to elect as syndic the candidate of M. de Grignan's choice are seen as earth-shatteringly important.⁸²

Mme de Sévigné's attitude toward the Fouquet affair is equally subjective: Fouquet is a friend, fellow précieux and frondiste who has done favors for her cousin La Trousse, so his version of events is the right one. She does not even begin to examine the issues such as whether Fouquet took commission from the fermiers of the gabelles (salt tax), whether he profited from the farming-out taxation system under assumed names, etc.⁸³

Finally, in 1689, Mme de Sévigné writes:

Je demande pardon à Dieu, mais le retour de M. de Lavardin me
donne une grande joie. Je comprends tout le plaisir que vous fait

⁸²Mme de Sévigné is actually refused absolution because of her hate for the leader of the opposing faction, M. de Marseille (I, p. 646).

⁸³Mme de Sévigné's other views on the Fouquet affair could be classed under "otherness"--she is concerned about the effect on Fouquet's elderly mother who is to be exiled and separated from her remaining children, on his wife who is not to be allowed to accompany Fouquet to prison at Pignerol, on his faithful servants from whom he is also to be separated and so on.

Avignon. C'est la Providence qui vous fait un tel secours (III, p. 610).

Mme de Sévigné does not care that M. de Lavardin has failed in his diplomatic mission and that relations between France and the Pope are disturbed, but only that the Grignans' financial position will be improved.

Women's spontaneity, originality is the last topic under the heading "human orientation". That is, because woman's wit springs more from her immediate mood or surroundings, her involvement with other people, and less from theoretical or intellectual training, it appears to be more original than male wittiness. Simone de Beauvoir, while she recognizes this originality, denigrates it as having little value (pp. 39-40 above); women do not use their originality to produce literary masterpieces, but "only" in their lives, conversations and letters. Only Colette is excepted from this general condemnation because as a professional author she has achieved, through editing and polishing, a "spontanéité réfléchie" (p. 469).

Fritz Nies, in his article "Un genre féminin", cites from a series of seventeenth century authors (Cotin, La Bruyère) who concur with the idea of feminine originality in the letter. Bussy-Rabutin, for example, likes "quelquefois de la négligence dans les expressions et surtout dans les lettres qu'écrivent les dames" (II, pp. 612-3). As Nies says of Mme de Sévigné: "C'est sous le même jour que la correspondance sévignéenne apparaît aux contemporains aussi bien qu'à l'épistolière elle-même: "naturel" et "aisance", "négligence" "absence de recherche" et "bagatelles" sont des mots-clés qui constamment servent à caractériser ces lettres tant admirées."⁸⁴

Nies, however, contests the female letter-writer's greater originality. For him, this "originality" is simply a function of the seventeenth century épistolière's aristocratic background and less rigorous education. Women did not work at their style because

⁸⁴Nies, RHLF, p. 1000.

"effort et travail étaient le propre des bourgeois et du peuple"; display of knowledge and too exact an observation of the rules of rhetoric were "l'apanage de robins et de pédants".⁸⁵ Nies claims that feminists (Cixous, Gagnon, Leclerc) who paint a picture of feminine writing as naive, spontaneous and disordered are deceiving themselves, now that "la grande majorité de nos étudiants de lettres (est) de sexe féminin".⁸⁶

In other words, Nies feels that any differences between men's and women's writing should disappear as women become more educated, just as de Beauvoir feels such differences will disappear under socialism and Virginia Woolf with economic equality. Nonetheless, the fact remains that in the second half of the twentieth century, well-educated women like Sylvia Plath were still corresponding with their mothers, women like Atwood, Laurence and Munro were still writing of women's relationships with their mothers, stepmothers and daughters, their emotions and the role of women, while using offbeat humor.

An examination of the life of Mme de Sévigné supports Nies' theory up to a point. She was indeed educated to a great extent by being given the run of her great-uncle Fremyot's library,⁸⁷ (as was Virginia Woolf of her father's⁸⁸). She was given training in singing, dancing and riding, but there is no mention of a tutor in philosophy; Williams feels Chapelain and Ménage played a "polishing" role. This view of Mme de Sévigné's life is supported by the fact that she was reluctant to leave Françoise-Marguerite in a convent for any length of time, preferring to educate her at home herself; and by her opposition to Pauline's being convent-educated. She recommends that Pauline be taught at home by her

⁸⁵Nies, RHLF, p. 1002.

⁸⁶Nies, RHLF, p. 1003.

⁸⁷Williams, p. 21.

⁸⁸Susan Rubinow Gorky, Virginia Woolf, Twayne's English Author Series, No. 243 (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), p. 17.

mother and La Garde, primarily by reading good books, that is history (Davila, Guichardino--III, p. 808), books on religion and the history of the Church (L'Abbadie--III, p. 482). Italian poetry (Tasso, Guarini--III, p. 757), Corneille's plays (III, p. 592) and from the Classics, stories such as Ovid's Metamorphoses (III, p. 381) and biography (Flequier's Life of Theodosius, III, p. 808). This casts a great deal of light on Mme de Sévigné's own reading.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Mme de Sévigné, who was never made to do the "exercices strictement réglementés"⁸⁹ on which a classical education was based does not imitate classical satire (like Boileau or Pope), classical epic (like Voiture or Milton) or parody classical style (in the manner of Fielding). Instead she relies on nicknames and puns, parodies of contemporary writers and personifications (but not satire which, according to her portrait in Somaize's Grand Dictionnaire des Précieuses, she hated).⁹⁰

Mme de Sévigné is a great user of amusing and/or endearing nicknames. Mme de La Trouche, her long-time friend, is referred to as "la Trochanire", Charles, when he injures his leg becomes "M. le Clopineux" (II, p. 432), M. de Grignan, for obvious reasons is "le Matou", Louis-Provence "le minet", the Grignan step-daughters "les Grignettes", Pauline, "Paulinotte". The helpful Abbé de Coulanges, on whose financial advice the Marquise depends, becomes "le Bien Bon", the handsome chevalier de Grignan is "le bel abbé" or "le plus beau des abbés", Mlle du Plessis who is afflicted with a squint, becomes, in uncharitable moments, "la Biglesse", a peasant girl of whom Mme de Sévigné is fond becomes "la petite personne". Bussy-Rabutin, the father of daughters only by his first wife, is referred to in 1647 as "le beau faiseur de filles" (I, p. 7). We are indebted to Fritz Nies for pointing out that Mme de Sévigné invents literally hundreds of these expressions,

⁸⁹Nies, RHLF, p. 1001.

⁹⁰Williams, p. 36.

called hapax (i.e., they are not found outside of the Correspondance).⁹¹ She also modifies words which do not become part of nicknames, for example in the following quote which underlines delightfully the fact that Mlle de Blois is a small child:

Mlle de Blois est un chef-d'oeuvre; le Roi et tout le monde en est ravi. Elle vint au milieu du bal dire à Mme de Richelieu:
 "Madame, ne sauriez-vous me dire si le Roi est content de moi?"
 Elle passe près de Mme de Montespan et lui dit: "Madame, vous ne regardez pas aujourd'hui vos amies." Enfin, avec de petites chosettes sorties de sa belle bouche, elle enchante par son esprit, sans qu'on croie qu'on on puisse avoir davantage (I, p. 675).

Also under the rubric of nicknames are the two women's coded names for court and political personalities, with their obvious references to physical or moral qualities, such as le Brouillard (Brancas?), le Dégel (Mme de Maintenon), la Feuille (Mme de Coulanges), l'Orage (Le Tellier) Quanto or Quantova (Mme de Montespan), le Pantoufle (Mme de Forbin-Soliers), Petit (Colbert), la dame du château (Queen Marie-Thérèse).

Another favorite technique is the pun or play on words, the replacement of the expected with the unexpected. For example, Mme de Sévigné refers to dining at the Lavardins as "aller en Bavardin" (I, p. 232). From the expression "en plein hiver" or "en plein été" she innovates: "Enfin, ma bonne, me voilà en pleins Etats; sans cela, les Etats seraient en plein Rochers" (I, p. 319).

Related to this are the Marquise's adaptations of quotes from contemporary authors (already referred to on p. 63 above). For example, upon arising at dawn after a sleepless night she writes "Car que faire en un lit, à moins que l'on ne dorme?" (I, p. 610), an

⁹¹Fritz Nies, "Quelques aspects lexicaux des Lettres de Madame de Sévigné", Revue Marseille, 95 (1973), p. 15.

adaptation of La Fontaine's "Car que faire en un gîte, à moins que l'on ne songe?" in "Le Lièvre et les Grenouilles" (Book II, fable XIV). Similarly in September 1675, she writes:

Je n'ai plus rien à dire. Qu'on me mène aux Rochers, je
ne veux plus écrire; Allons, l'Abbé, c'est fait (II, p. 97).

a parody of Polyeucte (IV, iv).

Qu'on me mène à la mort, je n'ai plus rien à dire;
Allons, gardes, c'est fait (II, p. 977).

What is significant here is that Mme de Sévigné's wit revolves around her contact with various personalities. She enjoys visiting Mme de Lavardin and catching up on gossip; attending the Etats is part of the politics of her relationship with M. and Mme de Chaulnes, who do her various favors (such as free rides to Les Rochers in their carriage, III, p. 651; attempts to further Charles' political career). Her sleepless nights are caused by worry about her daughter (in this case on having left her after a year of being together at Grignan, her concerns about becoming further distanced from her by travelling to Les Rochers.) The Marquise's concerns about her daughter's health are the principal leitmotiv of the Correspondance.

Wittiness, then, showing off one's literary acquirements is subordinate in the Letters to these human-oriented considerations. Set pieces such as the "lettre de foins", "lettre des chevaliers", etc., form a relatively small part of the corpus of the Letters. It is important to note also that the "witty" letters in the more conventional sense of the word go to correspondents such as Bussy, Coulanges and Ménage, whose sex tends to cause these letters to be governed by the laws of gallantry, as evidenced in the following example to Bussy from Vichy:

Vous faites bien de me faire des compliments sur votre retour, car
je crois que je serai plus aise de vous revoir que vous ne sauriez
être de me retrouver. Dans cette espérance, je vais avaler mes
verres d'eau deux à deux, afin d'être bientôt à Paris, où je vous

embrasse par avance...On n'ose écrire ici; cela fait mourir. C'est pourquoi je finis, afin de vous conserver une cousine qui vous aime fort (II, p. 301).

Nies points out, in this context, that the 69% of the Letters addressed to Mme de Grignan contain 84% of the Correspondance's neologisms and 85% of its "new"proverbs, i.e. those that appear for the first time in Mme de Sévigné. The 12% of the letters addressed to Bussy contain 6% of such locutions, the second lowest ratio, ahead only of Ménage. Between Mme de Grignan and Bussy, the ratio of original elements descends from the Guitauts through the Coulanges, Moulceau and Pomponne. Since Guitaut died in 1685 and M. de Coulanges was often away from home, many of the Marquise's letters are in fact addressed to Mmes Guitaut and Coulanges alone, making it appear that the degree of originality is greatest when both the sender and receiver of the letter are female.⁹² (Nies attributes these differences to differences in the correspondents' degree of intimacy with Mme de Sévigné, which is not particularly convincing, and to editing on the part of Bussy.⁹³)

Also on the subject of differences in male and female wittiness, it is significant that of all the letter-writers quoted by Duchêne in the Correspondance, the one whose style most closely resembles Mme de Sévigné's is that of Mme de Coulanges, the only other woman to be cited at any length:

M. de Coulanges arriva hier de Saint-Martin et de Versailles, mais c'est chez Mme de Louvois qu'il est descendu: à tout seigneur, tout honneur. Je comprends fort bien que l'on s'accommode d'un mari qui a plusieurs femmes; j'en souhaiterais encore une ou deux comme Mme de Louvois à M. de Coulanges. Le maréchal de

⁹²Nies, Revue Marseille, pp. 15-6.

⁹³Nies, Revue Marseille, pp. 15-6.

Villeroy prêta hier le serment, et prit le baton ensuite... Les femmes courent après Mlle de Lenclos, comme d'autres gens y couraient autrefois; le moyen de ne pas hair la vieillesse après un tel exemple? (III, pp. 1084-5).

The resemblance comes from the use of proverbs, the insistence on physical detail rather than abstract thought, a concern with social ritual and with the position of women (here the loss of masculine attention caused by the aging process) and in the sense of humor.

The predominance of human relationships in women's witticisms is evident in the following parody where Mme de Grignan borders on sacrilege in adapting the New Testament to her situation with her mother:

Vraiment, ma chère bonne...je ne suis point encore accoutumée a ne vous point voir parmi nous. Vous êtes si vive au milieu de nos coeurs, et toutes nos actions, nos pensées roulent si fort sur vous, et comme vous disiez, ma chère bonne, nous sommes tellement assemblées en votre nom, que nous ne pouvons souffrir de ne plus voir entrer cette chère bonne, que nous aimons si passionément (III, p. 440).

The centering of Mme de Sévigné's wit around personality does not imply a dearth of the usual variety of literary devices. Not lacking in the Correspondance, of course, are such figurative devices as alliteration⁹⁴, oxymoron⁹⁵ and hyperbole⁹⁶.

⁹⁴Example: Tout le monde dit la guerre: cependant d'Hacqueville mande qu'il y a encore des parieurs pour la paix (I, p. 605).

⁹⁵Example: Mon fils me mande que les ennemis ont été longtemps fort près d'eux. M. de Schombert s'est approché; ils se sont reculés. Il s'est encore approché; ils se sont encore reculés. Enfin, ils sont à six lieues, et bientôt à douze. Je n'ai jamais vu de si bons ennemis; je les aime tendrement (II, p. 395).

⁹⁶Example: Ma très chère bonne, je ne puis jamais vous dire assez combien je vous aime (I, p. 668).

Most interesting, however, are what could be classified simply as the unexpected, as when the Marquise writes in January 1674, "J'embrasse tout autant de Grignan qu'il y a autour de vous" (I, p. 676). On the subject of Descartes' philosophy, she writes:

Ils (La Mousse and Corbinelli) ont entrepris de me rendre capable d'entendre ce qu'ils disent, j'en serai ravie, afin de n'être point comme une sottre bête quand ils vous tiendront ici. Je leur dis que je veux apprendre cette science comme l'homme, non pas pour jouer, mais pour voir jouer (II, p. 339).

On Pauline de Grignan's nose, she personifies:

Ce petit nez est une belle pièce à retrouver chez vous. Je trouve plaisant que les nez des Grignan aient voulu permettre que celui-là, et n'aient pas voulu entendre parler du vôtre. C'eût été bien plus tôt fait, mais ils ont eu peur des extrémités, et n'ont pas craint cette modification (II, p. 479).

When we examine figurative language in other woman authors, we find a similarly high degree of originality combined with emphasis on social intercourse:

Mr. Casaubon seemed even unconscious that trivialities existed, and never handed round that small-talk of heavy men which is as acceptable as stale bride-cake brought forth with an odor of cupboard.⁹⁷

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Sitting opposite (Mr. Tansley) could (Lily) not see, as in an x-ray photograph, the ribs and thigh bones of the young man's desire to impress himself lying dark in the midst of his flesh--that thin mist

⁹⁷George Eliot, Middlemarch, introd. Gordon S. Haight (1872; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), p. 24.

which convention had laid over his burning desire to break into the conversation.⁹⁸

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I imagined the expression on my mother's face as I loomed down the aisle in white satin with this tiny foreign man slung over my arm like a purse.⁹⁹

⁹⁸Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse (1927; rpt., Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1974), p. 110.

⁹⁹Margaret Atwood, Lady Oracle (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1976), p. 290.

CHAPTER III

EVERYDAY ORIENTATION IN THE LETTERS

"Everydayness", that is the relatively greater importance attributed by women writers to the here and now, rather than to theory (cf. Genette, Barthes, Marx, Cicero, etc.), evocations of the past (cf. Scott, Dumas) or conjectures about the future (cf. writers of science fiction) is the subject of this chapter. Simone de Beauvoir has noted that women make excellent reporters, excelling at describing a certain time period or the atmosphere of a certain place.¹⁰⁰ In Le Deuxième Sexe she criticizes this tendency to show the world as it is: for her, all writers should be "engagé", should be teaching a lesson. Perceptions of a given society (China in the 1920s, Spain in the 1930s in the case of Malraux) should be subordinate to this "lesson" (in Malraux' case a socialistic one; in Mauriac's a religious one).

As we have seen in Chapter II, however, women's greater openness to the ideas and feelings of others makes them particularly reluctant to impose their ideas across the board; at the same time their relatively subjective worldview makes them less receptive to the imposition of theoretical viewpoints on themselves. Colette, for example, speaks with humor of the politician who would have her "élargir (moi, je disais "borner") ma vie à quelque grande idée qui m'eût servi quasi de religion, de dignité, d'inspiration."¹⁰¹ Similarly, Jane Austen reacts with laughter to the suggestion that she write a history of the Royal House of Cobourg, and counsels her niece, a budding author, to avoid following her characters to Ireland, a land with whose customs she is not familiar.

Mme de Sévigné is typical of women writers, then, in writing of what she knows-- Provence, Brittany, Livry, Paris and points in between in terms of space; her own epoch,

¹⁰⁰De Beauvoir, p. 475.

¹⁰¹Mercier, p. 156.

which comes down to us through her descriptions of fashion, health care, travel, court and home life, in terms of time. (One could argue that letter-writing is a realistic genre by definition; perhaps this is why women are well-represented in it.) On the other hand, we see that with masculine writers such as Voiture (already cited), Montesquieu (Lettres persanes) or Dr. Johnson (Rasselas), letters are relatively more likely to fall into the category of fiction. Similarly, when we read masculine accounts of seventeenth-century life such as those of Retz and St. Simon, we hear of wars and politics, and comparatively little of the personal lives, day-to-day routines of the protagonists.

Since women are more likely to write of day-to-day events, their language also tends to be more everyday, that is, natural and conversational in tone, rather than rhetorical or abstract. Women, as close observers, tend to excel at reproducing dialect and personal idiom. Mme de Sévigné is an excellent example of this tendency.

Nature is also a part of the here and now. As de Beauvoir suggests, women's reproductive role ties her more firmly to her physicality than her male counterpart; pregnancy can thus in some instances lead to a struggle between the cerebral and the physical sides of her persona. Mme de Sévigné is a good example of a woman who has achieved a balance between these two opposing forces; her understanding of art, music, literature and the issues of the day do nothing to disturb her love of Nature in all its manifestations, her intuitive understanding of her own bodily rhythms. Nor does her excellent education impede her ties to the culture of the day; while her written French is usually correct, she knows and uses "popular" words from the "langue parlée", as well as regional and dialect expressions.

The first category in this chapter may be called "everyday life". That is, women's literature tends to be based, more than men's, on the events of day-to-day existence. As de Beauvoir points out, historical epics such as War and Peace, The Three Musketeers, The Man in the Iron Mask were written by men and involved such extraordinary occurrences as mysterious political prisoners and the Napoleonic conquest of Russia. This essay would

postulate that, while women's literary ability is in no way inferior to men's, women have traditionally shone in the depiction of more mundane events (for example, Colette's Cheri is gradually persuaded to leave his older mistress to make a mariage de convenance, which makes him miserably unhappy; the widow Etienne in La Mare au Diable protects the honor of a young woman from his village, who becomes his second wife; Mrs. Rawlings in Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen" for unknown reasons becomes unable to tolerate social intercourse, withdraws from family and friends, and finally kills herself.)

In cases where women have written historical fiction, as in the cases of Mme de La Fayette, Mlle de Scudéry, their books have, in fact, described contemporary mores--La Princesse de Cleves really describes the court of Louis XIV far more than that of Henri II. Similarly, Mlle de Scudéry's novels reflect the préciosité of her day--(Both are more interested in psychological truth than historicity--Woolf would say that they were forced to write in a masculine genre.) As de Beauvoir has pointed out, though she meant it negatively, women are good observers, good reporters. (The works of Austen and Eliot, like the letters of Mme de Sévigné, are veritable snapshots of their epochs and their circles. Jane Austen never so much as mentions the Napoleonic wars which were occurring throughout her literary career.) As de Beauvoir says, what is important for women is what they have personally experienced, or been told as having been someone else's experience, not a theory.

Simone de Beauvoir, as we have seen, denigrates feminine attention to the everyday, citing Elise in the Chroniques maritales who is incapable of appreciating her husband's "poetic qualities" (pp. 22-3 above), and accusing women's writing of a lack of audacity (p. 39 above). Mme de Sévigné's letters would tend to disprove de Beauvoir's and Woolf's contention that great literature can result only from world travel and experience of life's seamier side (to which in any case de Sévigné received exposure through Charles' and her husband's involvement with Ninon; Charles' affair with La Champsmele). In this century, Colette has written from the feminine point of view about the demi-monde; this does not

make her the first important woman writer. Mme de Sévigné's travels between Paris, Brittany and Provence enable her to see the contrast between urban and rural, northern and southern; servants and tradesmen ensure that she is exposed to all ranks of life beside her own, without leaving certain familiar milieux.¹⁰² It is women's writing that we are most likely to reference to current fads, trends and lifestyles. For example, Bharati Mukherjee in "A Father" refers to Alkaseltzer, Gas. X, Sinutab, K-Mart and artificial insemination.¹⁰³ In the same way, we learn from Mme de Sévigné contemporary trends in dress, hairstyling, landscaping (cf. her improvements at Les Rochers) and social mores (Charles' affairs and her reactions to the custom of obtaining wedding "compliments" from all extended family members.)

Turning to the Letters, then, while certain passages discuss what is in a sense trivial, they are valuable for the light they shed on people's lives in that period, for example the well-known ongoing discussion of the "coiffure à la paysanne".

Je fus voir l'autre jour cette duchesse de Ventaudour; elle était belle comme un ange. Mme de Nevers y vint, coiffée à faire rire; il faut m'en croire, car vous savez comme j'aime la mode. La Martin l'avait bretaudée par plaisir, comme un patron de mode excessive. Elle avait donc tous les cheveux coupés sur la tête et frisés naturellement par cent papillotes qui lui font souffrir toute la nuit mort et passion. Tout cela fait une petite tête de cour ronde, sans nulle chose par les côtés...le Roi et les dames sensées en pâment de rire. Elles en sont encore à cette jolie coiffure que

¹⁰²The manservants Hébert Pilois and La Mousse are referred to often, as are Marie, Hélène and "la petite personne"; as for tradespeople, Mme de Sévigné speaks of la Robinette the midwife (c.f. I, p. 133), la Martin the hairdresser (I, p. 190), Georget the shoemaker (I, p. 215), leasing a boat from a batelier (II, p. 110), etc.

¹⁰³Bharati Mukherjee, "A Father", in Darkness (Markham, Ontario: Penguin, 1985), pp. 59-73).

Montgobert sait si bien: les boucles renversées, voilà tout. Elles se divertissent à voir outrer cette mode jusqu'à la folie (I, p. 190).

Most typical of Mme de Sévigné, however, is a simple evocation of the events of day-to-day existence, for example in her description of her return from taking the waters at Vichy.

Enfin nous arrivâmes ici. Je trouvai à ma porte Mmes de Villars, de Saint-Geran, d'Heudicourt, qui me demandèrent quand j'arriverais; elles ne venaient que pour cela. Un moment après, M. de La Rochefoucauld, Mme de La Sablière par hasard, les Coulanges, Sanzei, d'Hacqueville. Voilà qui est fait. Nous suions tous à grosses gouttes; jamais les thermomètres ne se sont trouvés à un tel exercice. Il y a presse dans la rivière. Mme de Coulanges dit qu'on ne s'y baigne plus que par billets à cause de l'extrême confusion. Pour moi, qui suis en train de suer, je ne finis pas et je change fort bien trois fois de chemise en un jour...J'ai célébré les eaux salutaires de Vichy...la maréchale d'Estrées et moi, nous entreprenons de confondre Bourbon (II, p. 330).

For those that would argue that letters necessarily relate the events of day-to-day existence, we have only to compare the letters of de Sévigné with those of La Mousse, Corbinelli or Bussy

Non credo che domani se in Italia si stabilisce una dittatura poniamo di destra, inglesi e americani protesterebbero. Basterebbe che il dittatore facesse ciò che scioccamente Mussolini non fece: si rendesse conto delle possibilità reali della nazione italiana e stringesse un accordo di larvata sudditanza con le potenze occidentali. In tal caso nessuno potrebbe più far cadere la

dittatura, fosse essa più sanguinaria di quella di Franco o più stupida di quella di Antonescu.¹⁰⁴

As Mme de Sévigné ages, the folksy note struck earlier in the Letters in the description of such scenes as that of the infant Marie-Blanche nursing (I, p. 212) continues but de Sévigné's companion is now the similarly aging and gout-afflicted Chevalier de Grignan:

Monsieur le Chevalier et moi nous nous cherchons si naturellement que vous ne devez pas douter, ma chère bonne, que cette petite chambre ne soit ma demeure ordinaire, mais vous nous y manquez toujours, et d'une manière fort sensible. Vos portraits qui sont autour de nous, ne nous consolent pas. Il nous faut notre chère Comtesse, que nous ne trouvons plus, et sur cela, les yeux rougissent; tout est perdu. L'honneur même d'être servie la première, en prenant du café, m'afflige au lieu de me consoler, tant mon coeur est peu sensible aux grandeurs de ce monde. Nous mangeons ensemble; nous sommes dans une parfaite intelligence...Enfin c'est ma destinée que cette petite chambre; il n'y en a point où vous puissiez être plus parfaitement aimée et estimée, pour ne pas dire honorée.

A literary subcategory to this category of everydayness involves Mme de Sévigné's use of allusion--it is contemporary rather than classical. Several times she refers to a comic scene as being "digne de Molière" (I, p. 263), for example like Tartuffe (I, p. 288). Charles' amorous adventures with La Champsmêlé (I, p. 211). There are numerous quotations from this author and even the occasional pastiche (M. Magalotti is described as "un homme, enfin un homme qui vous porte deux paires de souliers de Georget" (I, p. 215).

¹⁰⁴Alberto Moravia and Giuseppe Prezzolini, Lettere (Milano: Rusconi, 1982), p. 42.

In Volume II, p. 97, we find parodies from Corneille's Polyeucte and from Quinault's Cadmus et Hermione. Ariosto and Tasso are also great favorites, with quotations appearing throughout the correspondence. Classical references tend to be cursory: for example, in Volume III, p. 428, James II, of Great Britain's daughter Mary is referred to as "une Tullie", i.e. a betrayer of her father. Corbinelli, on the other hand, quotes whole sentences in Latin (i.e. III, p. 546): the works of contemporaries such as St. Amant, Malherbe, Tristan l'Hermite are full of classical references.

This difference results in part, of course, from the differences in the sexes' education at the time, but is perhaps a function of women's greater attachment, noted by de Beauvoir, to the here and now, reflected in their preponderant involvement in the peace and environmental movement. Too, women wish above all in their writings to communicate, to be understood--this is one reason why they have been more likely to write letters than poetry. We see few women in such movements as *marinisme*, *le Parnasse*, where style dominates over content.¹⁰⁵

The next category, conversation, contains the ideas of interpersonalit, everydayness and communication. The concept of "conversation" is present in the Letters at two levels; general and specific. At this level, the whole Correspondance is a substitute for actual conversation. We continuously read such expressions as "Je cause avec vous, cela me fait plaisir..." (I, p. 271), "Voilà bien de la conversation, car c'est ainsi qu'on peut appeler nos lettres" (III, p. 386) and "...parlons de Grignan. Parlons de ces freres qui reviennent toujours au gîte" (III, p. 659). One is reminded of Todorov's

¹⁰⁵De Beauvoir explains this phenomenon aptly:

...elles ont souvent décrit avec bonheur leur vie intérieure, leur univers;...leur vocabulaire est d'ordinaire plus remarquable que leur syntaxe parce qu'elles s'intéressent aux choses, plutôt qu'à leurs rapports; elle ne visent pas une élégance abstraite mais en revanche leurs mots parlent aux sens (de Beauvoir, II, p. 475).

definition of the letter in Littérature et signification as being intermediate between contact and non-contact, a sort of partial contact. As Elizabeth Goldsmith says

In her letters to her daughter, Mme de Sévigné's painful awareness of Mme de Grignan's absence always involves a sense of the partial, discontinuous quality of their new system of communication. What she now is able to perceive of her addressee is limited to intermittent messages, pieces of information that reach her, moreover, only according to the displaced and artificial chronology of postal delivery. The process of epistolary exchange, thus, automatically creates for itself a fictional temporal sequence, dislocated from the ongoing experience of events in each interlocutor's life.¹⁰⁶

Goldsmith goes on:

In order to effectively sustain written communication, then Mme de Sévigné must reconstitute and represent her addressee by paraphrasing or quoting obsolete messages in her own response; she must both read and re-write messages she receives to maintain a dynamic exchange.¹⁰⁷

We find examples of this, for example, when Mme de Grignan has described her impressions of the Jewish community of Avignon:

Quelle misérable et ridicule représentation de ce temple
admirable, de cette arche si précieuse, de ces lois si respectées!
Encore est-ce quelque chose que ces rouleaux ressemblent à notre

¹⁰⁶Elizabeth Goldsmith, "Proust on Mme de Sévigné's Letters: Some Aspects of Epistolary Writing", Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature, Vol. 8, No. 15(2) (1981), p. 120.

¹⁰⁷Goldsmith, p. 122.

arrêt de Toulouse car je vous assure que je ne l'ai jamais regardé qu'avec respect, mais d'où vient cette puanteur qui confond tous les parfums?...Enfin, ma bonne, je me trouve poussée très inutilement à vous reparler de tout ce que vous m'avez conté, et peut-être très ennuyeusement pour vous, mais je me suis laissée emporter au plaisir de me renouveler à moi-même toutes ces aimables idées et qui vous font comme un remerciement du soin et de l'amitié qui vous a obligée de m'en faire part (III, p. 626).

or, in the course of her trip around Brittany with M. and Mme de Chaulnes

Hélas! vous craignez pour moi la solitude et le repos, ma chère bonne? Qui vous a dit que cette vie turbulente me soit meilleure? mais elle finira (III, p. 657).

Goldsmith suggests that de Sévigné's conception of the exchange of letters between her and Mme de Grignan as a dialogue is the reason why she insists on such regularity in the exchange (each wrote two or three times per week, varying with changes in the postal service), made detailed arrangements for receiving de Grignan's letters in the event that she (Mme de Sévigné) was travelling, and bitterly lamented unreceived letters which disrupted the conversational rhythm, for example when she first arrives in Brittany in 1671:

Je comptais recevoir vendredi deux de vos lettres à la fois; et comment se peut-il que je n'en aie seulement pas une? Ah! ma fille, de quelque endroit que vienne ce retardement, je ne puis vous dire ce qu'il me fait souffrir. J'ai mal dormi ces deux nuits passées. J'ai renvoyé deux fois à Vitré pour chercher à m'amuser de quelque espérance, mais c'est inutilement...Adieu. Je suis chagrine, je suis de mauvaise compagnie. Quand j'aurai reçu de vos lettres, la parole me reviendra (I, p. 272).

Goldsmith points out that, while a correspondence can be a conversation of sorts, the interlocutor is absent, which can have a liberating effect, as in the case of love letters. In Mme de Sévigné's case, this relative freedom from inhibition is expressed most notably in the continual admonitions to her daughter not to become pregnant, and to her son-in-law not to cause pregnancy.

It is important to note that this idea of the letter-as-dialogue is not present to the same extent when Mme de Sévigné writes to others. Her correspondence with Bussy, for example, is much more sporadic and more conventional, made up to a large extent of gallantry, witty exchanges and compliments; her son-in-law is actually forbidden to reply to her because of Mme de Grignan's jealousy ("Si je vous écris souvent, vous n'avez oublié que c'est à condition que vous ne me ferez point de réponse", I, p. 130; "Adieu, mon très cher; je vous défends de m'écrire, mais je vous conjure de m'aimer" I, p. 132). The correspondence-conversation occurs between women, for example between Sylvia Plath and her mother in the Letters Home.

Interestingly; Simone de Beauvoir refers to her career as a teacher in a girls' school, in similar terms: "Quant à mes cours, je les faisais avec goût: c'était des conversations d'individu à individu plutôt qu'un travail."¹⁰⁸

At the specific level, women have always been noted for their conversational abilities, Simone de Beauvoir considering that it has been an outlet for talents which have had no other way of expressing themselves (p. 40 above). It is, therefore, not surprising that this ability manifests itself in women's literature. The novels of the Brontës, Jane Austen, Colette, George Eliot, among others, are built around conversation--entire chapters of Middlemarch are written almost wholly in dialogue. Through conversation,

¹⁰⁸Claude Francis, Editor. Simone de Beauvoir et le cours du monde (Paris: Klincksieck, 1978), p. 13).

character is revealed, for example in this exchange between Mr. Knightley and Mr. Woodhouse in Emma:

"It is very kind of you, Mr. Knightley, to come out at this late hour to call upon us. I am afraid you must have had a shocking walk."

"Not at all sir. It is a beautiful, moonlight night; and so mild that I must draw back from your great fire."

"But you must have found it very damp and dirty. I wish you may not catch cold."

"Dirty, sir! Look at my shoes. Not a speck on them."¹⁰⁹

Clearly, Mr. Woodhouse is a benevolent hypochondriac, while Mr. Knightley is direct and manly.

Male authors, on the other hand, like Balzac and Stendhal, tend to use conversation less because their viewpoint tends to be less affectionate, more impersonal:

Les pensionnaires, internes et externes, arrivèrent les uns après les autres, en se souhaitant mutuellement le bonjour et se disant de ces riens qui constituent, chez certaines classes parisiennes, un esprit drolatique dans lequel la bêtise entre comme élément principal, et dont le mérite consiste particulièrement dans le geste ou la prononciation. Cette espèce d'argot varie continuellement...¹¹⁰

When quotation marks do make their appearance, they are more likely to designate a monologue in men's literature than in women's. For example, Mme de Langeais gives a

¹⁰⁹Jane Austen, Emma, introd. Lionel Trilling (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 5.

¹¹⁰Honoré de Balzac, Le Père Goriot (1834: rpt. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), p. 64.

two-page long speech on Goriot's background ("Oui, ce Moriot a été président de sa section pendant la Revolution; il...¹¹¹) which is virtually indistinguishable from narrative. In the next monologue ("Eh bien! monsieur de Rastignac, traitez ce monde comme il mérite de l'être. Vous voulez parvenir, je vous aiderai..., p. 87-9).¹¹² Mme de Beauséant seems to be a mouthpiece for Balzac as much as an independent character; the tone of the monologue is not conversational but declamatory.

Women, on the other hand, excel at capturing accents and personal idiom. As has already been stated, women are accurate observers of their milieu. Thus, Ethel Rosenberg captures the underlying Yiddish syntax in the speech of her Jewish immigrants:

"I wouldn't stay long. I'm going right home..."

"But for lunch you'll stay, Tante...You'll have maybe a glass
tea till lunch, Tante!"

"Let be tea."¹¹³

We see this same phenomenon in Mme de Sévigné when she records the conversation of Mme de Ludres: "Ah, Jésus! matame te Crignan, l'étrance sose t'être zettée toute nue tans la mer" (I, p. 84); "Ah! pour matame te Grignan, elle est atorable" (I, p.233)). She also mentions taking delight in the fact that Mlle du Plessis' sister-in-law speaks with a Gascon accent in the middle of Brittany (Mme de Grignan, similarly enjoys the Paris accent of Mlle de La Guette, the daughter of a neighbor in Sucy who now lived in a convent at Aix, (I, p. 281)).

Generally speaking, Mme de Sévigné likes to tell anecdotes in conversation form:

Voici des plaisanteries. Mme de Rambures et Mme de Buzanval se querellaient pour douze pistoles; la Buzanval, lassée, lui dit: "Ce

¹¹¹Balzac, pp. 86-87.

¹¹²Balzac, pp. 87-9.

¹¹³Ethel Rosenberg, "Aunt Esther's Galoshes" in *A Treasury of Jewish Humor*, ed. Nathan Asubel (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 325-6.

n'est pas la peine de tant disputer, je vous les quitte. ---Ah! madame, dit l'autre, cela est bon pour vous, qui avez des amants qui vous donnent de l'argent. ---Madame, dit la Buzanval, je ne suis pas obligée de vous dire ce qui en est mais je sais bien que, quand j'entrai il y a dix ans dans le monde, vous en donniez déjà aux vôtres (I, pp. 611-2).

Il faut que je vous dise un mot de Mme de Coulanges qui me fit rire et me parut plaisant. M. de Barillon est ravi de retrouver toutes ses vieilles amies; il est souvent chez Mme de La Fayette, et chez Mme de Coulanges. Il disait à cette dernière, l'autre jour: "Ah! madame, que votre raison me plaît! j'y viendrai bien les soirs, quand je serai las de ma famille. ---Monsieur, lui dit-elle, je vous attends demain." Cela partit plus vite qu'un trait, et nous en rîmes tous plus ou moins (III, p. 481).

Supporting the theory that relating conversation is a general feminine trait, we see a similar tendency in the writing of Mme de la Troche

Mme de Crussol vint lundi à saint-Germain, coiffée à la mode. Elle alla au coucher de la Reine et lui dit: "Ah! madame, Votre Majesté a donc pris notre coiffure? ---Votre coiffure, madame? lui repliqua la Reine. Je vous assure que je ne veux point prendre votre coiffure; je me suis fait couper les cheveux parce que le Roi les trouve mieux ainsi, mais ce n'est point pour prendre votre coiffure" (I, p. 195).

as well as in that of Mme de La Fayette and Mme de Grignan:

Le mariage s'est fait de cette manière: les pères, au coin du feu, contant les perfections de leurs enfants, M. De Saint-Agnan dit:

"Nous devrions unir deux personnes si dignes l'une de l'autre. ---Je le veux, dit Sanguin, touchez là" (II, p. 1380).

These related conversations never appear in the letters of Corbinelli, M. de Grignan, Coulanges, Bussy, etc.

In Volume III, we find the better part of a letter related in dialogue form:

Je pars demain à la pointe du jour, avec M. et Mme de Chaulnes, pour un voyage de quinze jours. Voici, ma chère enfant, comme cela s'est fait. M. de Chaulnes me dit: "Madame, vous devriez venir avec nous à Vannes, voir le Premier Président. Il vous a fait des civilités depuis que vous êtes dans la province; c'est une espèce de devoir à une femme de qualité." Je n'entendis point cela. Je lui dis: "Monsieur, je meurs d'envie de m'en aller à mes Rochers, dans un repos dont on a besoin quand on sort d'ici, et que vous seul pouvez me faire quitter." Cela demeure. Le lendemain, Mme de Chaulnes me dit tout bas à table: "Ma chère gouvernante, vous devriez venir avec nous...Je lui répondis...Madame, vous n'avez point besoin de moi...(III, p. 651).

Also very engaging are the imaginary dialogues between Mme de Sévigné and M. de Chaulnes acting as the génie of Mme de Grignan:

Il assure que vous êtes son bon génie, qu'il vous parle toujours, et vous entend. L'autre jour, il me dit: "Pourquoi touchez-vous à votre tête, ma mère? Vous y avez mal?" Je l'entends, et je lui reponds: "Non, ma fille, point du tout." Cela nous fait un jeu, et un souvenir continuel de l'amitié que vous avez pour moi (III, p. 658).

We have seen in Le Deuxième Sexe (pp. 44-5 above) that a love of nature is central to women's writing, although de Beauvoir finds this love "bourgeois" in that it does not

seek to change the human condition, but rather accepts what is. (Indeed, Colette's statement "I cannot interest myself in anything that is not life"¹¹⁴ applies equally to de Sévigné). Nature has occupied a less crucial position, generally speaking, in the works of men, with the exception of the Romantics (Le Père Goriot and Le Curé de Tours contain no nature descriptions; even the fact that it is raining at the beginning of the latter is mentioned only to underline the inconvenience of the abbe's having been locked out.)

If we attempt to differentiate between the Romantic writers' and poets' love of nature and that of women writers, we could say that the former love it from the outside, as it were, while women's love causes them to be integrated with Nature, in harmony with Her. Flaubert's nature descriptions, for example, exist at least in part for stylistic reasons, to create a certain literary effect, to employ artistic metaphors, as in:

Les jours qu'il faisait beau, elle descendait dans le jardin. La rosée avait laissé sur les choux des guipures d'argent avec de longs fils clairs qui s'étendaient de l'un à l'autre. On n'entendait pas d'oiseaux, tout semblait dormir, l'espallier couvert de paille et la vigne comme un grand serpent malade sous le chaperon du mur, où l'on voyait, en s'approchant, se traîner des cloportes à pattes nombreuses.¹¹⁵

In Wordsworth's "Daffodils", the poetic image of the flowers that "flash upon the inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude" is at least as important as the flowers themselves.

¹¹⁴Colette, My Mother's House and Sido, introd. Roger Senhouse (Paris, La Maison de Claudine, 1922; Sido, 1929; rpt. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1953), p. 1.

¹¹⁵Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary, introd. Jacques Suffel (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1979), p. 97.

In female authors, on the other hand, Nature and humans are more likely to be integrated into a sensuous whole. (Colette refers to the garden of her childhood home as "light, scents, birds and bees in perfect harmony."¹¹⁶

In "My Mother and Morals", we make the acquaintance of Madame St. Albin:

She resembled George Sand and all her movements bore the stamp of a certain gypsy majesty. Her warm tawny eyes reflected the sunshine and the green trees, and in my infancy I had been suckled at her abundant, swarthy breast, on a day when my mother jestingly offered her white breast to a little St. Albin of my age...Mme St. Albin gave forth a heavy dark aroma, the incense of her frizzy hair and suntanned arms.¹¹⁷

It is not surprising that, like Colette's mother, Mme de St. Albin loves Nature, but with a love that is the opposite of detached:

...she arrived bearing her usual spoils of gossip, her sheaves of green oats, poppies and cornflowers, and early foxgloves from the stony combs. A transparent jade-green spinner-caterpillar hung from its silken thread beneath Madame St. Albin's ear, and the poplars had bestowed a beard of silver pollen on her sunburnt chin that was moist with perspiration.¹¹⁸

We find the same affinity with Nature in Austen, Eliot, even Simone de Beauvoir:

Je respirai l'odeur de l'herbe fraîchement tondue, je marchai dans le parc de Bagatelle, éblouie par la profusion des paquerettes et des jonquilles, et des arbres fruitiers en fleur...Je lus Homère au

¹¹⁶Colette, p. 24.

¹¹⁷Colette, p. 114.

¹¹⁸Colette, p. 115.

bord d'une rivière; des ondées légères et le soleil, par grandes vagues, caressaient le feuillage bruissant. Quel chagrin, me demandais-je, pourrait résister à la beauté du monde? Jacques¹¹⁹, après tout, n'avait pas plus d'importance qu'un des arbres de ce jardin (p. 317).¹²⁰

In the letters of Mme de Sévigné, we find an awareness of Nature on three levels. Firstly, there is an appreciation of nature's beauty. Certain lyrical passages are well-known

Je reviens encore à vous, ma bonne, pour vous dire que si vous avez envie de savoir en détail ce que c'est qu'un printemps, il faut venir à moi. Je n'en connaissais moi-même que la superficie; j'en examine cette année jusqu'aux premiers petits commencements. Que pensez-vous donc que ce soit que la couleur des arbres depuis huit jours? Répondez. Vous allez dire: "Du vert." Point du tout, c'est du rouge. Ce sont de petits boutons, tout prêts à partir, qui font un vrai rouge, et puis ils poussent tous une petite feuille, et comme c'est inégalement, cela fait un mélange trop joli de vert et de rouge (III, p. 867).

but it is important to make the point that this awareness of nature was a constant in Mme de Sévigné's life, whatever the season and wherever she happens to be. From Les Rochers she writes:

Mes petits arbres sont d'une beauté surprenante. Pilois les élève jusqu'aux nues avec une probité admirable. Tout de bon, rien n'est si beau que ces allées que vous avez vu naître... (I, pp. 262-3).

¹¹⁹A cousin of whom the youthful de Beauvoir was enamored.

¹²⁰Simone de Beauvoir, Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), p. 317.

From Vichy:

Je vais être seule, et j'en suis fort aise. Pourvu qu'on ne m'ôte le pays charmant, la rivière d'Allier, mille petits bois des ruisseaux, des prairies des moutons, des chèvres, des paysannes qui dansent la bourrée dans les champs, je consens de dire adieu à tout le reste; le pays seul me guérirait (II, p. 308).

We note that, like Colette and de Beauvoir, this appreciation is not limited to the sense of sight:

Nous faisons ici, ma chère Comtesse, la vie que je vous ai représentée. Il fait un temps charmant; nous sommes tellement parfumés, les soirs, de jasmins et de fleurs d'orange que, par cet endroit, je crois être en Provence (III, p. 634).

At another level, Mme de Sévigné and women writers in general seem more aware than their male counterparts of the physical functions of the body. Mme de Sévigné does not hesitate, for example, to speak of menstruation:

Il est aujourd'hui le 6 de mars; je vous conjure de me mander comme vous vous portez. Si vous vous portez bien, vous êtes malade, mais si vous êtes malade, vous vous portez bien. Je souhaite, ma fille, que vous soyez malade, afin que vous ayez de la santé au moins pour quelque temps...(I, p. 177).

of pregnancy, nursing:

...pour la petite, je la mis dès dimanche entre les mains de l'autre nourrice. Ce fut un plaisir de la voir téter; elle n'avait jamais tété de cette sorte. Sa nourrice avait peu de lait; celle-ci en a comme une vache (I, p. 212).

and of menopause:

Les dérèglements sont tous réglés, et c'est pour finir cet adieu et faire une dernière lessive que l'on m'a principalement envoyée, et je trouve qu'il y a de la raison; c'est comme si je renouvelais un bail de vie et de santé (II, p. 303).

It could be argued that this physical emphasis is possible because de Sévigné wrote letters to her daughter rather than a literary work consciously destined for publication; however, we do not see such intimate physical references in, for example, the letters of Lord Chesterfield to his son. De Beauvoir in her memoirs describes in great detail her first menstruation; Colette is deeply affected by her sister's pregnancy ("the sight of my sister, distorted and grown heavy, filled me with...embarrassment and disgust."¹²¹ Our conclusion must be that while men in the course of their lives also reach sexual maturity, engender children, these events are less central to their life experience, judging by the literature each sex has produced.

Finally, the Correspondance of Mme de Sévigné is filled with references to the animal world, to such creatures as fleas ("Mandez-moi comme vous en êtes dans votre château, et si vous n'êtes point accablée des petites bêtes dont vous n'avez rien senti jusqu'à présent" (I, p. 292)), dogs

...je vois entrer un valet de chambre avec une petite maison de chien tout parfumé, d'une beauté extraordinaire, des oreilles, des soies, une haleine douce, petite comme Sylphide, blondin comme un blondin; jamais je ne fus plus étonnée et plus embarrassée (II, p. 159).

and birds ("On entend déjà les fauvettes, les mésanges, les roitelets, et un petite commencement de bruit et d'air du printemps...") (III, p. 828).

¹²¹Colette, p. 84.

De Sévigné also makes use of animals in a figurative sense. While in Aesop, La Fontaine, the Brothers Grimm animals speak and act as humans, in Mme de Sévigné it is humans who are given animal qualities, indicating a greater recognition and acceptance of our animal links (for example, the Comte de Grignan is referred to as "le matou", the marquis as "le minet"; Mme de Sévigné herself "mange (son) avoine tristement" (III, p. 371), the Comte wishing to re-establish sexual relations with his wife after the birth of Louis-Provence, "commence a gratter du pied" (I, 411). Finally, in discussing La Garde's¹²² impending marriage, de Sévigné comments:

Il faut que M. de La Garde ait de bonnes raisons pour se porter à l'extrémité de s'atteler avec quelqu'un. Je le croyais libre, et sautant et courant dans un pré, mais enfin il faut venir au timon et se mettre sous le joug comme les autres (II, p. 294).

According to Simone de Beauvoir, as we have seen women have traditionally been linked to the instinctive, the physical, the cyclical--menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, the rhythm of the seasons--rather than the conceptual, the linearly progressive (forging new tools, designing, irrigation, systems, canals). (The Correspondance, for example, refers to Pauline de Grignan's instinctive ability to forecast the weather:

(M. de Grignan) est bien heureux d'avoir eu de la pluie, et M. le Chevalier de Grignan bien malheureux en gageure. Pauline doit faire ses affaires avec lui pour l'habileté qu'elle a de connaître quand le ciel veut donner de la pluie ou non; à force de gagner des pièces de trente sols, elle fera une bourse fort considérable (III, p. 918).

As a consequence, in de Beauvoir's estimation, women have traditionally placed greatest trust in what has been actually experienced, whether personally or through the relations

¹²²A cousin of M. de Grignan.

of another, than in any organized system of thoughts. Women's experience-based values, transmitted orally, have, in fact, formed a sort of counter "system" to the masculine, legal, religious or philosophical codes, as has been discussed above (cf. p. 31).

It is, therefore, not surprising that women's writing, more in touch with the day-to-day experience of its readers, more conversational in tone, more everyday in vocabulary, should be more "popular" though this tendency is derided by de Beauvoir as being unintellectual.

Mme de Sévigné, for example, though well-educated and acquainted with many of the most brilliant people of her day, does not disdain such popular expressions as "jeter son coussinet", meaning to reserve one's spot. Speaking of the marriage of Mlle de La Ferté and M. de Mirepoix, she writes:

J'ai été voir Mme de Puy-du-Fou sur ce mariage...Mme la duchesse de La Ferté, tenant sa fille par la main, fort jolie, et sa petite soeur des mêmes couleurs, Mme la duchesse d'Aumont, M. de Mirepoix...faisai(ent) un contraste merveilleux... La duchesse a toujours voulu M. de Mirepoix; elle y a jeté son coussinet, et, après avoir su assez en l'air que la proposition avait été reçue, elle en a parlé au Roi...(III, pp. 469-70).

Fritz Nies in his article "Quelques aspects lexicaux des Lettres de Mme de Sévigné" in fact establishes that the Correspondance of Mme de Sévigné was an important vehicle for the introduction of "spoken" and "regional" expressions into the written language; he cites to prove his point such Provençal words as accouchade, pétoffes, chevaux frust and pichon, recorded for the first time in the Correspondance.¹²³

One of Mme de Sévigné's most salient characteristics is a solid common sense which she illustrates with very concrete examples taken from daily life. For example, returning

¹²³Nies, Revue Marseille, p. 16.

home from Vichy in the summer of 1676 without her daughter, she philosophizes about her sadness in the following way:

Je veux sortir de cette tristesse par un souvenir qui me revient d'un homme qui me parlait en Bretagne de l'avarice d'un certain prêtre; (et il me disait fort naturellement: "Enfin, madame c'est un homme qui mange de la merluche toute sa vie pour manger du saumon après sa mort." Je trouvai cela plaisant, et) j'en fais l'application à tout heure. Les devoirs, les considérations nous font manger de la merluche toute notre vie pour manger du saumon après notre mort (III, pp. 317-320).

Her own and her daughter's sleepless nights from excessive worry are made figurative with the image of a "pot au feu" kept constantly boiling: the word "oille" is used to worry about one cause and "consommé" to worry about several (I, p. 597).

Perhaps the favorite feminine method of expressing their everyday, physically-based folk wisdom is through proverbs. Virginia Woolf feels that proverbs and ballads were often the creation of women denied other outlets:

I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman. It was a woman...who made the ballads and the folk-songs, crooning them to her children; beguiling her spinning with them, or the length of the winter's night.¹²⁴

It is interesting that Lord Chesterfield, on the other hand, denigrates these expressions:

There is...an awkwardness of expression and words most carefully to be avoided such as...old sayings, and common proverbs; which are so many proofs of having kept bad and low company. For

¹²⁴Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929), p. 85

example if, instead of sayings that tastes are different, and that every man has his own peculiar one, you should let off a proverb, and say, That what is one man's meat is another man's poison...everybody would be persuaded that you had never kept company with anybody above footmen and housemaids.¹²⁵

Mme de Sévigné, while equally aristocratic, is a great user of proverbs. There are a number of instances where hers has been the first recorded use of a specific proverb, such as Tous les chemins vont à Rome, Il n'est si bonne compagnie qui ne se sépare, Ce qui est différé n'est pas perdu, and Bon jeu, bon argent.¹²⁶ As Nies points out, these proverbs often serve to illustrate the marquise's emotional state: "...tous chemins vont à Rome" is followed by "c'est à dire tout me va droit au coeur" (I, p. 370). Similarly, "...je n'ai point trouvé que le proverbe fût vrai pour moi d'avoir la robe selon le froid; je n'ai point de robe pour ce froid-là" (I, p. 315), that is, for the "cold" of her separation from Mme de Grignan. Other proverbs used include "Bon jour, bonne oeuvre" on the occasion of her return from Provence in 1673 (I, p. 610) and "Rien ne fait mieux voir que les hommes se rencontrent" based on the saying "Seules les montagnes ne se rencontrent pas" (III, p. 686), on the occasion of the Duc de Chaulnes passing through Grignan on the way to Rome. She speaks of the marriage of Mlle de La Ferté, twelve years old at the time, as putting "tant de charettes devant les boeufs" (III, p. 470).

Mme de Sévigné also cites folk verse related to the elements, the seasons, such as "Quand octobre prend sa fin / La Toussaint est au matin" (II, p. 566), equivalent to such English expression as "Red sky at morning / Sailor take warning".

¹²⁵Chesterfield, p. 11.

¹²⁶Nies, Revue Marseille, p. 16.

De Sévigné refers in her letters to such "popular" games as colin-maillard (III, p. 680) and enjoys the regional folk dances of Burgundy and Brittany, which clearly go back to a pre-Christian culture:

Il est venu des demoiselles du pays avec une flûte, qui ont dansé la bourrée dans la perfection; c'est ici où les Bohémiennes puisent leurs agréments. Elles font des dégognades où les curés trouvent un peu à redire (II, p. 297).

Before leaving this subject, it must be pointed out that evidences of folk culture are equally popular with other women writers; they are to be found on virtually every page of the letters of Madame. For example, on the issues of whether the Bourbon or Hapsburg candidate is the rightful King of Spain, she cites "He who has the bride is the groom".¹²⁷ Mrs. Hackbutt in Middlemarch uses the expression "Pride must have a fall" regarding Bulstrode (p. 545).¹²⁸ Similarly, Lydgate and Bulstrode are said to "have always been hand in glove" (p. 496).¹²⁹ and Mary Garth is described as "just the sort of beautiful creature that is imprisoned with ogres in fairy tales (p. 102).¹³⁰ Lastly, who could forget George Sand's stories inspired by the folk culture of Berry?

The other main area where Mme de Sévigné displays her links to the popular culture is that of medicine, health care. Her commonsensical, down-to-earth approach to life based on awareness of physical realities is especially well illustrated by her attitude toward doctors. She shows little enthusiasm for bleeding and purging, the most common

¹²⁷Elizabeth Charlotte d'Orléans, A Woman's Life in the Court of the Sun King: Letters of Liselotte von der Pfalz, 1652 - 1722, introd. and trans. by Elborg Foster (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins 1984), p. 153.

¹²⁸Eliot, p. 545.

¹²⁹Eliot, p. 496.

¹³⁰Eliot, p. 102.

medical interventions of her day, as is shown in the following extract concerning the Dauphine:

...Il y a des fêtes continuelles à Versailles, hormis de l'accouchement de Mme la Dauphine, car les médecins, ne pouvant lui faire d'autre mal, se sont si bien mécomptés qu'ils l'ont saignée dans la fin du troisième mois, et dans le huitième, tant ils sont enragés de vouloir toujours faire quelque chose (III, p. 87).

In another letter, perhaps because it concerns her own grandson, she is even more explicit:

...Ni saignée, ni médecine, rien du tout, ma fille, à moins que vous ne vouliez lui ôter un bon appétit, un doux sommeil, un sang reposé, une grande vigueur dans les fatigues, voilà ce qu'un médecin pourrait lui ôter, si nous le mettions entre ses mains (III, p. 426).

An additional illustration describing an illness of Mme de Coulanges is interesting because of its links to the medical criticisms of Molière, Mme de Sévigné's contemporary:

Nous craignons demain le redoublement de Mme de Coulanges, parce que c'est celui qui figure avec celui qui emporte cette pauvre fille. (Beaujeu, la demoiselle de Mme de Coulanges.) En vérité, c'est une terrible maladie. Mais ayant vu de quelle façon les médecins font saigner rudement une pauvre personne et sachant que je n'ai point de veines, je déclarai hier...que si je meurs jamais, je le prierai de m'amener M. Sanguin dès le commencement; j'y suis très résolue.¹³¹ Il n'y a qu'à voir ces messieurs pour ne vouloir jamais les mettre en possession de son corps; c'est de l'arrière-main qu'ils ont tué Beaujeu. J'ai pensé vingt fois à Molière depuis que je

¹³¹II, 432, note 3: "Médecin...et ennemi de la saignée."

vois tout ceci. Cependant j'espère que cette pauvre femme échappera malgré leurs mauvais traitements (II, p. 406).

Whereas Moliere simply satirized doctors' pedantry, Mme de Sévigné offers alternate health-care suggestions based on common sense and the natural rhythms of the body. To her daughter, who has been living "dans un grand mouvement", she suggests "...dormez, dormez, prenez des bouillons" (III, p. 619). She herself relies on these kitchen remedies: "Je prends des bouillons de veau... Je suis dans une très parfaite santé. (III, p. 375); as does Mlle de Méri:

J'ai appris encore hier que rien n'est si bon que l'eau de poulet, et que Mme de Fresnay s'en est bien trouvée. Mlle de Méri est plus habile par son propre experience qu'un médecin qui se porte bien par la sienne; elle doit vous écrire et m'envoyer son billet (II, p. 461).

To cure her rheumatism in 1671, the marquise uses garden herbs:

Je vous apprendrai donc que, ne sachant plus que faire pour mes mains, Dieu m'a envoyé M. de Villebrune, qui est très bon médecin. Il m'a conseillé de les faire suer et tout à l'heure¹³² je l'ai fait sur la fumée de beaucoup d'herbes fines; je suis assurée que ce remède est le meilleur et que cette transpiration est la plus salubre (II, p. 254).

Mme de Sévigné also does not look down on patent medicines such as the "eau de la reine d'Hongrie" referred to regularly. Similarly, on leaving for Brittany in 1675, she writes:

Je porte une infinité de remèdes bon ou mauvais, mais surtout il n'y en a pas un qui n'ait son patron et qui ne soit la médecine de

¹³²La position de la lune et du soleil tenait une grande place dans la médecine populaire (II, p. 254, note 2).

mes voisins. J'espère que cette boutique me sera fort inutile, car je me porte extrêmement bien (II, p. 93).

Mme de Tarente, her Brittany neighbor, shares this belief in popular medicine:

Mme de Tarente m'a donné d'une essence qui l'a guérie de vapeurs bien pires que les miennes. On en met deux gouttes dans le premier breuvage qu'un boit à table, quinze jours durant, et cela guérit entièrement. Elle en conte des expériences qui ont assez de l'air de celles de la comédie du Médecin forcé, mais je les crois toutes, et j'en prendrais présentement sans que je ferais scrupule de me servir d'un remède si admirable quand je n'en ai nul besoin (II, p. 137).

Before leaving the subject of women's attitude toward their links with popular health, we may note that Madame's attitude as expressed in her Correspondance is very similar to Mme de Sévigné's:

It has become the fashion here to complain about the air; the Princesse de Conti does not want to go out at all and never takes a walk, and neither does Mme d'Orléans; they are forever having purges, bleedings, acidulous water, and baths; and what is really exquisite is that they all keep ooohing and aahing about my good health. I tell them everyday that if I were to live as they do, I would be even sicker than they are, and also that I am healthy because I do not use any medicines and get a lot of fresh air and exercise. But they simply do not want to believe it.¹³³

¹³³Orléans, ed. Forster, pp. 163-4.

She also uses folk verses:

Seeing that everything has turned green now and the weather warm
one can sing what the little boys used to sing on the hill at
Heidelberg: "Strew strew straw / it's summer time, hurrah: / Lean
days are here again / the farmers scrape the barrel / and when they
scrape the barrel / may God send us a fruitful year / Strew, strew
straw / it's summer time, hurrah." These are pretty verses, which
will teach the nosy ones who read our letters a lot and make them
wise and learned (Forster, p. 166).¹³⁴

¹³⁴Orléans, ed. Forster, p. 166.

CHAPTER IV

WOMEN'S ISSUES IN THE LETTERS

In the following chapter we shall examine what may loosely be called "women's issues", that is, the position of women in society, the nature of their influence on husbands, children, other women and finally on society at large, which is implicit in the oeuvre of virtually all women writers. Clearly this is too big a topic to deal with comprehensively: for example, because Mme de Sévigné wrote in the seventeenth century, she never speaks directly of contraception, abortion, sexual aberrations, in the manner of de Beauvoir or such modern novelists as Roy and Lawrence (though a Lesbian relationship is perhaps implied between the poetess, Mme Deshoulières and the object of the poetry, Mlle de la Charce, a literary "vieille fille"). She writes at length about the dangers of too many pregnancies (not unexpectedly for a précieuse) but presumably limiting them is to be achieved through abstinence:

Vous voyez bien, ma bonne, que je vous écris, comme à une femme qui sera dans son vingt-deux ou vingt-troisième jour de couche. Je commence même à croire qu'il est temps de faire souvenir M. de Grignan de la parole qu'il m'a donnée. Enfin songez que voici la troisième fois que vous accouchez au mois de novembre; ce sera au mois de septembre cette fois si vous ne le gouvernez... Ne serait-il point au désespoir, s'il vous aime, d'être cause que tous les ans vous souffriez un pareil supplice? Ne craint-il point, à la fin, de vous perdre? Après toutes ces bonnes raisons, je n'ai plus rien à dire, sinon que, par ma foi, je n'irai pas en Provence si vous êtes grosse; je souhaite que ce lui soit une menace (I, p. 386).

The Marquise certainly speaks at length of marital relationships, liaisons, separations (divorce, of course, did not exist in Catholic France) of the role of women in

public life: of Queen Marie-Thérèse, who takes refuge in religious devotion and gambling from the King's philandering; the Dauphine, who takes to hunting as a relief from the boredom of court life (II, p. 944) of the Grande Mademoiselle who is forced to remain unmarried for political reasons, of the various royal mistresses and their jockeying for power--in short of women whose lives are controlled, to their detriment, by a male-dominated status quo. (Exceptions to this are Mme de Maintenon, who is able to manipulate the system to her own advantage, and the exiled Queen of England, Mary of Modena, who receives perhaps the highest marks as a female public figure, cf. III, p. 475).

Of course, Mme de Sévigné deals extensively (if not consciously) with the various relations involving women in private life: women as wives (Mmes de Grignan, de Mazarin, de Sanzei, de Caderousse, de Chaulnes) as daughter (herself and her daughter, the Princesse de Tarente and Mlle de la Trémouille, Mme de Grignan and Pauline, Bussy and Mme de Coligny) as friend and confidante to men (Mme de La Fayette and La Rochefoucauld, herself and men such as Pomponne and Guitaut) to women (herself and Mmes de La Fayette, de la Troche, de Lavardin, de Chaulnes), as lovers (Charles and Ninon, La Champsmêlé, Mme de Bagnols; Mme de Coligny and La Rivière, the Princesse de la Trémouille and her Danish aspirants) as nurse and protectress (herself and the Abbé de Coulanges, Mme de La Trousse, Mlle de Méri, Corbinelli) as mistress (herself and Marie, Hélène, the "petite personne"; Mme de Grignan and Montgobert) even as neighbor (Mlle du Plessis, the Princesse of Tarente).

Of all these different roles, only the mother-daughter relationship, so central to the Correspondance, can be discussed here in detail. A discussion of Mme de Sévigné's conception of the role of women in her society follows.

Simone de Beauvoir in Le Deuxième Sexe paints a bleak picture of motherhood, and of the mother-daughter relationship¹³⁵ In any case, de Beauvoir feels that mothers

¹³⁵Is this because, as is seen in Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée, it was difficult for her and her peers to identify with their own convent-bred, conservative mothers?

importune their daughters because of a lack of more worthwhile things to do with their time (de Beauvoir, II, p. 189). Too, daughters are the only people, once sons have grown out of infancy, whom mothers can supervise, dominate, although as de Beauvoir points out, "ce qui l'agace, c'est qu'elle n'a aucune supériorité à opposer à un enfant de 11 à 12 ans (de Beauvoir, II, p. 192). Insecurity makes mothers jealous of teachers, husbands, the mothers of their daughters' friends, anyone who might have influence over their daughters. Often a virtual state of war subsists between the two. De Beauvoir points out the contradictions between the roles of mother, spouse and housekeeper (de Beauvoir, II, p. 202).

Mme de Sévigné is used by de Beauvoir as an example of this negative type of motherhood (p. 27 above). De Beauvoir's solution--to remove children from the care of their mothers altogether:

Il serait évidemment souhaitable pour le bien de l'enfant que sa mère fût une personne complète et non mutilée, une femme qui trouve dans son travail, dans son rapport à la collectivité, un accomplissement de soi qu'elle ne chercherait pas à atteindre tyranniquement à travers lui; et il serait souhaitable aussi qu'il soit abandonné à ses parents infiniment moins qu'il ne l'est à présent, que ses études, ses distractions se déroulent au milieu d'autres enfants, sous le contrôle d'adultes qui n'auraient avec lui que des liens impersonnels et purs (p. 199).

This sort of idea seems to have been widespread in de Beauvoir's time. Montherlant writes, for example, in the late 1930s: "Costals...était convaincu...de la détestable influence qu'ont en general les mères sur les enfants, opinion partagée par un grand

nombre d'éducateurs et des moralistes, mais qu'ils n'osent avouer tout haut, crainte de choquer les idées reçues, toujours exquisement galantes".¹³⁶

Women's literature, on the other hand, contains examples of idealized mothers and mother/daughter relationships. Examples are those of Colette and Sido, of Madame and her aunt, the Electress Sophia of Hanover. Those of Aurelia and Sylvia Plath, of Bette Davis and her daughter, are more equivalent to de Beauvoir's conception of de Grignan/de Sévigné relationship, of an adoring and demanding mother whose daughter is ambivalent or frankly hostile. How can we resolve this apparent contradiction?

Perhaps these varying interpretations have come about because, as has been noted above (p. 53) women seem to identify with others more than men, so naturally the mother-daughter relationship, where both parties are female, will show a high degree of mutual identification. If the mother is relatively healthy psychologically and satisfied with her life (as were Sido and the Electress Sophia), the results of this mutual identification will be positive; if the mother is neurotic, as in the case of Bette Davis, the results will be more negative (power struggles with the daughter and later her husband, disputes over the amount of time to be spent together and so forth). It is not surprising that Sido and the Electress were happily married, while Davis, the senior Plath and Mme de Sévigné were single parents whose marriages had not been particularly successful.

To do justice to Mme de Sévigné, while the early letters display a certain tension culminating in the sometimes acrimonious exchanges of 1677-9, after this a harmonious mutual affection was attained. (This was no doubt the result of the lessening of the emotional upheavals that had been caused by the Marquise's menopause, and by her increasing religious resignation after her 1680 "conversion" to Jansenism, actually more the deepening of a tendency already present in the Marquise's spirit.) Thus, de Beauvoir's

¹³⁶Montherlant, p. 990.

vision of the Grignan-Sévigné relationship as one of hostility and bickering would seem to be based on an incomplete sampling of the letters.

Turning to the Correspondance, we see the "otherness" referred to in Chapter II carried to its logical extreme. Mme de Sévigné identifies with her daughter to the point of "sharing" her pregnancies: "Mon Dieu, ma bonne, que votre ventre me pèse, et que vous n'êtes pas seule qu'il fait étouffer!" (I, p. 366). She can never hear enough about her daughter:

C'est un extrême plaisir pour moi que de savoir de vos nouvelles, mais il me semble que je n'en sais jamais assez; vous coupez court sur votre chapitre, et ce n'est point ainsi qu'il faut faire avec ceux que l'on aime beaucoup...(II, p. 251).

Parlez-moi de vos balcons et de votre terrasse, des meubles de ma chambre, et enfin toujours de vous; ce vous m'est plus cher que mon moi, et cela revient toujours à la même chose (II, p. 318).

Mme de Sévigné's obsession with her daughter is involuntary, beyond her control--the expression of it cannot always be repressed:

Il y a demain un an, ma chère bonne, que je ne vous ai entendue parler, et que je vous quittai à Charenton. Mon Dieu, que ce jour est présent à ma mémoire! Et que je souhaite d'en retrouver un autre qui soit marqué par vous revoir, ma chère enfant, et vous retrouver, et vous embrasser de tout mon coeur, et m'attacher à vous pour jamais, et finir ma vie avec celle qui l'a occupée tout entière par l'agitation et l'attention et par la sensibilité que donne une tendresse toute vive, toute pleine d'une inclination et d'un si véritable attachment qu'il a rempli mon coeur et toute ma vie. Voilà ce que je sens et ce que je vous dis, ma chère bonne, sans le

vouloir et en solennisant tristement ce bout de l'an de notre
séparation (III, p. 713).

While she identifies with Grignan's concerns for her own children: "Ah! ma fille, que je comprends parfaitement vos larmes quand vous vous représentez ce petit garçon à la tête de sa compagnie, et tout ce qui peut arriver de bonheur et de malheur à cette place!" (III, p. 475), she reiterates that no relationship can be closer than that of mother and daughter--her grandchildren can never replace Mme de Grignan in the Marquise's affections:

J'embrasse de tout mon coeur M. de Grignan et mes petits-enfants,
mais vous, ma bonne, je suis à vous par-dessus toutes les choses.
Vous savez combien je suis loin de la radoterie qui fait passer
violemment l'amour maternelle aux petits-enfants; la mienne est
demeurée tout court au premier étage, et je n'aime ce petit peuple
que pour l'amour de vous (II, p. 77).

The same prioritization applies to Mme de Sévigné's relationship with her son: Charles is not allowed to read the more intimate parts of his sister's letters:

Mon fils est à Rennes, d'hier, avec sa noblesse, mais quand il serait
ici, il ne voit jamais, de vos lettres ni des miennes, que les endroits
que je lui montre; cela est sur ce pied-là. Ainsi, ma chère bonne,
contez-moi un peu vos dépenses et vos pertes d'Avignon, si
Mlle d'Alérac vous tourmente, si Mlle de Grignan est pour quelque
sorte de temps à Gif, si le coadjuteur aura l'honneur de la requête
civile...(III, p. 627).

The "mother"-daughter relationship is also privileged in Madame's correspondence: She writes to her aunt:

I am truly sorry to hear that you have nothing better to amuse
yourself with than my old letters. While papa was still alive, you

won't find anything but praise for Monsieur; I didn't want His Grace to find out the real state of affairs. When you were here, I didn't hide anything from you (Kroll, p. 77).¹³⁷

It is not surprising, given Mme de Sévigné's obsession with her daughter (attributed by Harriet Allentuch to the loss of her father, grandparents and especially mother as a child),¹³⁸ that Mme de Sévigné delights in narrating examples to her daughter of mother-daughter closeness in others. Of the newly-arrived Dauphine she writes:

Madame la Dauphine est une merveille d'esprit, de raison et de bonne éducation. Elle parle fort souvent de sa mère avec beaucoup de tendresse, et dit qu'elle lui doit tout son bonheur par le soin qu'elle a eu de la bien élever (II, pp. 901-2).

Of Mme de Montlouet:

Mme de Montlouet a la petite vérole. Les regrets de sa fille sont in-finis; la mère est au désespoir aussi de ce que sa fille ne veut pas la quitter pour aller prendre l'air, comme on lui ordonne. Pour de l'esprit, je pense qu'elles n'en ont pas du plus fin, mais pour des sentiments, ma belle, c'est tout comme chez nous, et aussi tendres, et aussi naturels (II, p. 19).

Of Mme de Dreux:

Mme de Dreux sortit hier de prison...Cette pauvre femme a été un an dans une chambre où le jour ne venait que d'un petit trou d'en haut, sans nouvelles, sans consolation. Sa mère, qui l'aimait très passionnément, qui était encore assez jeune et bien faite, et

¹³⁷Orléans, ed. Kroll, p. 77.

¹³⁸Harrieth R. Allentuch, "Setting Feelings to Words: Language and Emotion in the Letters of Mme de Sévigné", Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature, Vol. XV, No. 28 (1988), pp. 239-44.

qu'elle aimait aussi, mourut, il y a deux mois, de la douleur de voir sa fille en cet état. Mme de Dreux, à qui on ne l'avait point dit, fut reçue hier à bras ouverts de son mari et de toute sa famille, qui l'allèrent prendre à cette chambre de l'Arsenal. Ses premières paroles furent: "Et où est ma mère? et d'où vient qu'elle n'est pas ici?" M. de Dreux lui dit qu'elle l'attendait chez elle. Elle ne put sentir la joie de sa liberté et demandait toujours ce qu'avait sa mère...Elle arrive chez elle: "Quoi? je ne vois point ma mère! Quoi? je ne l'entends point!" Elle monta avec précipitation. On ne savait que lui dire; tout le monde pleurait. Elle courait dans sa chambre, elle l'appelait. Enfin un père célestin, son confesseur, parut et lui dit qu'elle ne la trouverait point, qu'elle ne la verrait que dans le ciel, qu'il fallait se résoudre à la volonté de Dieu. Cette pauvre femme s'évanouit, et ne revint que pour faire des cris et des plaintes qui faisaient fendre le coeur, disant que c'étaient elle et la vue de son malheur qui l'avaient tuée...Le petit Coulanges...nous conta tout ceci hier au soir...j'en pleurai sans pouvoir m'en empêcher (II, pp. 910-1).

As has been mentioned above, there is also a negative side to the mother-daughter relationship which can be illustrated through the Correspondance of Mme de Sévigné, involving a desire to domineer over the daughter and, after her marriage, competition and conflict with the son-in-law. In Mme de Sévigné's case, as has been noted, this conflict is more or less resolved by the Marquise's religious "conversion" of 1680. In the earlier years of the Correspondance, however, perhaps because Madame de Sévigné was still becoming accustomed to sharing her daughter, we see rather excessive interference from time to time on Mme de Sévigné's part in the Grignan's marriage and lives, notably in the

Marquise's constant urging of Mme de Grignan to return to Paris. For example, in November 1676, she writes:

Je ne vous parlerai plus de votre départ. Vous dites qu'il dépend de Dieu et de moi. Pour de ma volonté et de mes décisions, vous n'en pouvez pas douter. Il est donc question, présentement, de celles de Dieu, et de la vôtre, ma bonne. Ne lui donnez point la torture; suivez librement votre coeur et même votre raison. Vous êtes toute raisonnable, vous m'aimez, vous voyez mieux que moi ce que vous voulez et ce que vous pouvez, et les choses dont vous êtes blessée. C'est à vous à décider librement, car je suis assurée que M. de Grignan et Monsieur l'Archévêque consentiront à tout ce que vous voudrez (II, p. 437).

The Marquise implies that it is entirely up to Mme de Grignan whether or not she should travel to Paris, and even that the journey is the "reasonable" course of action, and that which should be the choice of Grignan's heart. Yet, it is clear from other letters (c.f. II, p. 445, note 4) that Mme de Sévigné knows perfectly well (through the family connection with Pomponne, Secretary of State) that a crucial money vote is upcoming in the Provençal Assembly in support of which Mme de Grignan's lobbying may be necessary. She is thus deliberately putting Mme de Grignan in the difficult position of choosing between her duties toward her mother and those incumbent on the wife of a provincial governor.

Another area where Mme de Sévigné interferes in no uncertain terms is that of the de Grignan's sex life:

Je veux aussi vous avertir d'une chose que je soutiendrai en face de votre mari et de vous. C'est que si, après être purgée, vous avez seulement la pensée (c'est bien peu) de coucher avec M. de Grignan, comptez que vous êtes grosse. Et si quelqu'une de

vos matrones dit le contraire, elle sera corrompue par votre époux.

Après cet avis, je n'ai plus rien à dire (I, p. 413).

This last could be interpreted as legitimate concern for her daughter's health, but it would also seem to be motivated at least in part by a sort of jealousy of M. de Grignan's hold over his wife, of his power almost literally of life and death over her, of her willingness to sacrifice herself to his family's interests.

From time to time in the early Correspondance the Marquise is openly critical of her son-in-law. In the following example, it is important to note that she is commiserating with her daughter, who has herself been complaining about the Count's spendthrift habits

La rage de M. de Grignan pour emprunter, et pour des tableaux et des meubles, est une chose qui serait entièrement incroyable si on ne la voyait. Comment cela se peut-il accorder avec la naissance, sa gloire, et l'amitié qu'il vous doit? Croit-il ne point abuser de votre patience, et qu'elle soit intarissable? N'a-t-il point pitié de vous? Qu'avez-vous fait pour être misérable et abîmée? Et il croit que nous croirons qu'il vous aime! Ah, la plaisante amitié! Comptez sur la mienne, ma chère enfant, qui assurément ne vous manquera jamais. Epreuvez-la dans l'excès de votre douleur, et jetez-vous dans des bras qui vous seront toujours ouverts...C'est ici que vous êtes véritablement aimée (II, p. 20).

While Mme de Grignan refers to her love for her mother as her finest quality in a letter to Bussy:

Je vous remercie d'avoir pensé en moi pour me plaindre du mal de ma mère. Je suis très contente que vous connaissiez combien mon coeur est pénétré de tout ce qui lui arrive. Il me semble que c'est

mon meilleur endroit, et je suis bien aise que vous, dont je veux avoir l'estime, ne l'ignoriez pas (I, p. 698).

she makes it clear where her loyalties lie in the event of a choice:

Eh, mon Dieu! ne viendra-t-il pas une année où je puisse voir mon mari sans quitter ma mère? En vérité, je le souhaiterais fort, mais quand il faut choisir, je ne balance pas à suivre mon très cher Comte, que j'aime et que j'embrasse de tout mon coeur (II, p. 607, note 4).

The early Correspondance also contains examples of mother-daughter tension quite independent of the Comte de Grignan and the Comtesse's divided loyalties which he causes, particularly in the difficult period of 1677-9:

Ma bonne, je ne vous ferai plus de questions. Comment! "En trois mots, les chevaux sont maigres, ma dent branle, le précepteur a les écrouelles." Cela est épouvantable. On ferait fort bien trois dragons de ces trois réponses, surtout de la seconde. Je ne vous demande point, après cela, si votre montre va bien; vous me diriez qu'elle est rompue (II, p. 581).

J'ai mal dormi. Vous m'accablâtes hier au soir; je n'ai pu supporter votre injustice. Je vois plus que les autres toutes les qualités admirables que Dieu vous a données. J'admire votre courage, votre conduite; je suis persuadée du fonds de l'amitié que vous avez pour moi. Toutes ces vérités sont établies dans le monde et plus encore chez mes amies...Vous m'accusez aussi de parler à des personnes à qui je ne dis jamais rien de ce qu'il ne faut point dire. Vous me faites, sur cela, une injustice trop criante; vous donnez trop à vos préventions. Quand elles sont établies, la

raison et la vérité n'entrent plus chez vous. Je disais cela uniquement à Monsieur le Chevalier...vous m'accusez de trouver ma fille toute imparfaite, toute pleine de défauts...c'est au contraire de vous trouver trop dure sur mes défauts dont je me plains... Mais je me porte fort bien, et prendrai du café, ma bonne, si vous le voulez bien (II, pp. 665-6).

As times goes on, a certain harmony is achieved. In 1689, speaking of the proposition of Mmes de Chaulnes, de Lavardin and de La Fayette to lend her money to return to Paris from Les Rochers, and of her temptation to take up the offer if Mme de Grignan were in town, she writes:

Voilà, ma chère enfant, de quoi je m'entretiens, et de quoi je subsiste, et de quoi je ne veux pas vous parler et dont je parle, en vous regardant comme la douceur et la consolation de la fin de ma vie. Dieu et sa Providence sur tout! (III, pp. 753-4).

Mme de Sévigné still loves her daughter, but putting God first helps reconcile her to M. de Grignan's coming first with her daughter. She accepts that Mme de Grignan is the "soul" of Grignan¹³⁹, and chooses increasingly to spend her time with her at her château, rather than insisting on the Grignans' coming to Paris. (The increasing financial worries of both women also precipitate this course--neither can afford to spend her time in Paris. One suspects that Mme de Sévigné would have retired to Grignan earlier, in any case, had it not been for her responsibilities to her La Trousse relatives, to her uncle the Abbé de Coulanges, and to her son.)

The newfound harmony between the two women is characterized by Mme de Sévigné's increasing interest in fostering the relationship between

¹³⁹Conduisez-vous, gouvernez-vous, si vous aimez votre cher fils, votre maison, votre mari, votre maman, vos frères. Enfin vous êtes l'âme et le ressort de tout cela (III, 417).

Mme de Grignan and her own daughter: does de Sévigné realize that, as she will soon be dead, she must disinterestedly foster a woman-to-woman relationship that Grignan will continue to be able to count on? On the occasion of Mme de Grignan's return to Provence after nearly eight years in Paris, Mme de Sévigné writes:

Vous me faites un joli portrait de Pauline; je la reconnais...Elle vous adore, et au milieu de la joie de vous voir, sa soumission à vos volontés, si vous voulez qu'elle vous quitte, me fait une pitié et une peine extrêmes, et j'admire le pouvoir qu'elle a sur elle. Pour moi, je jouirais de cette jolie petite société, qui vous doit faire un amusement et une occupation. Je la ferais travailler, lire de bonnes choses, mais point trop simples; je raisonnerais avec elle, je verrais de quoi elle est capable, et je lui parlerais avec amitié et avec confiance...Enfin j'en jouirais, et ne me ferais point le martyre, au milieu de tous ceux dont la vie est pleine, de m'ôter cette consolation (III, p. 378).

When we look at the mother-daughter, mother-in-law, son-in-law relationship in others, we can also find a negative, as well as a positive, side. Bette Davis, for example, expounds on the mother-in-law, son-in-law conflict as follows:

I am not sure if it is fear or jealousy that makes a son-in-law feel threatened if his wife and her mother have a close relationship. Once when I was invited to dinner, I expressed delight in a meal B.D. had prepared. The next day B.D. asked me not to ever compliment her in front of her husband...¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰Bette Davis and Michael Herskowitz, This 'n' That (1987, rpt. New York: Berkley, 1988), p. 122.

Certainly Davis' description of her first night without her daughter strikes a chord in the reader of the Correspondance:

The night after the wedding I returned home in a daze, with no "father of the bride" to console me. I have never up to then, or since, felt so alone. I couldn't sleep. I spent the night stretched out on my huge chaise lounge in the living room, chain smoking, looking off into space. B.D. has always been a noisy, chatty person, just like her mother. She filled whatever room she was in with energy. She would come bursting home after a date to tell me all about it. She will never come home again any night. She was a married lady, with her own life to live. Her husband was now her priority, which is as it should be. I miss B.D. every day of my life. I always will.¹⁴¹

To conclude, while Simone de Beauvoir describes accurately the hostile relationship between many mothers and daughters, the same tendency toward mutual identification which produces negative or ambivalent results can also produce positive ones. Specifically, it is unfair of de Beauvoir to use Mmes de Sévigné and de Grignan as an example of a negative mother-daughter relationship as an equilibrium was eventually reached, characterized by religious resignation on the part of the Marquise, and an acceptance of the role of the Count:

Monsieur le Comte, en vérité il me fallait ce que vous m'avez écrit. Vous moquez-vous d'être paresseux pour m'écrire. Avez-vous oublié que c'est à vous que je me prendrais de tous les maux de la bise, et que vous êtes chargé du soin de cette santé, qui nous est si extrêmement chère?...Vous faites très bien de demander, et

¹⁴¹Davis, p. 117.

encore mieux d'obtenir, les bouillons et le lait; cette poitrine échauffée en a grand besoin. C'est donc à vous que je la recommande, puisque c'est vous qui y prenez tant d'intérêt, et qui vous chargez de tous les événements (II, p. 718).

Women's position in society, their role vis-a-vis men, each other, the question of feminine solidarity is common to virtually all women writers; indeed, how could it be otherwise? As underdogs, women's writing is inevitably imbued with anxiety over their relations with the dominant male, just as black writers (for example James Baldwin, Eldridge Cleaver, Richard Wright) have tended to focus on blacks' relations with the white majority. (A much smaller proportion of male and white writers have concerned themselves with these issues.) This feminine interest in women's role may be expressed both explicitly and implicitly.

In Le Deuxième Sexe, Simone de Beauvoir speaks of a feminine "counter-universe" where feminine values reign--where life's essential events are childbirth, pregnancy, illness, household cares; where recipes and household hints are the "sciences" to be passed down from generation to generation, where moral issues are debated in women's magazine advice columns, where women lend each other support in the pursuit of men.

...elles nient la domination sexuelle de l'homme en se confiant les unes aux autres leur frigidité, en raillant cyniquement les appétits de leur mâle, ou sa maladresse; elles contestent avec ironie la supériorité morale et intellectuelle de leur mari et des hommes en général. Elles confrontent leurs expériences; grossesses, accouchements, maladies deviennent les événements essentiels de l'histoire humaine. Leur travail n'est pas une technique: en se transmettant des recettes de cuisine, de ménage, elles lui donnent la dignité d'une science secrète fondée sur des traditions orales. Parfois elles examinent ensemble des problèmes moraux. Les

"petites correspondance", des journaux féminins donnent un bon échantillon de ces échanges; on n'imagine guère de "courrier des coeurs" réservé à des hommes; ils se rencontrent dans le monde qui est leur monde; tandis que les femmes ont à définir, mesurer, explorer leur propre domaine; elles se communiquent surtout des conseils de beauté, des recettes de cuisine et de tricot, et elles demandent des avis; à travers leur goût du bavardage et de l'exhibition, on sent parfois percer de vraies angoisses (p. 226).

De Beauvoir sees this feminine world as being on the whole negative, frivolous:

Le monde mâle est dur, il a des arêtes tranchantes, les voix y sont trop sonores, les lumières trop crues, les contacts rudes. Après des autres femmes, la femme est derrière le décor; elle fourbit ses armes, elle ne combat pas; elle combine sa toilette, invente un maquillage, prépare ses ruses: elle traîne en pantoufles et en peignoir dans les coulisses avant de monter sur la scène; elle aime cette atmosphère tiède, douce, détendue (pp. 226-7).

Women's cohesion for her is circumstantial, a function of their shared oppression, success being achieved through appropriating that of a man (whether father, son, lover or husband). Men are the people who actually accomplish things in their own right; other women are, in this sense, rivals. (One could argue that men, too, achieve a sort of camaraderie in masculine environments such as the army, sports teams, private schools, which can turn into rivalry over a member of the opposite sex; the difference is that no one suggests that men wish to live vicariously through the sought-after women.)

Michel Mercier, in a more modern perspective, also opposes the male notion of arriver--"prendre, conquérir, vaincre, avoir"¹⁴²--with a feminine idea of harmony,

¹⁴²Mercier, p. 13.

collectivity, of mutual aid rather than the success of one person at the expense of another, which is reflected in their literature.

...l'héroïne, à la différence des héros des mythes, n'accomplit rien de mémorable: rien n'est brisé de l'ordre social et familial, rien n'est demandé qu'une reconnaissance d'une personne qui s'accomplit, reconnue dans le mariage et s'inscrit ainsi dans la chaîne des générations. Elle ne demande pas de bouleversement, mais la réforme d'un monde trop souvent cruel.¹⁴³

Marriage becomes a blending rather than a subordination, reflective of a natural social order. It is:

cette reconnaissance confiante de deux êtres l'un par l'autre, existences réciproquement consacrées, personnes enfin à part entière, corps et âmes fondus au-delà des corps seuls, dont l'entente n'est que le reflet ou l'amorce d'une harmonie d'un autre "ordre"...le mariage (est) une institution respectable si elle est rendue telle par la qualité de ses membres et de leurs rapports--, l'amour est harmonie quand il jaillit de la communauté que forment les amants.¹⁴⁴

Thus, for Mercier, while men view life more individually and women more collectively, this is seen positively rather than negatively. (A political example of this sort of feminine attitude would be the formation of the Anglican Church under Elizabeth I, a compromise which could be universally endorsed.)

When we turn to Mme de Sévigné's writings, we see definite examples of Mercier's notion of the feminine desire for togetherness, harmony, closely related to the ideas of

¹⁴³Mercier, p. 65.

¹⁴⁴Mercier, p. 51.

interpersonality and otherness discussed above. (Mme de Sévigné is in general social and empathetic.) The Marquise wants always to be in harmony with her daughter, and to this end adopts the Grignans en masse. She is extremely supportive of M. de Grignan, working on his behalf against the Forbin-Janson family, his Provençal rivals, and against MM. de Mirepoix and d'Aiguebonne during their legal battles with the de Grignan clan. She opposes her son-in-law only when she perceives her daughter to be at risk (through excessive pregnancy, M. de Grignan's financial recklessness, etc.). Within her own family, she bends over backwards to settle, in her lifetime, the distribution of her estate to preclude future quarrels between Charles and the de Grignans. The acrimonious tone of Charles' letters during the tense period surrounding the negotiations for his marriage

Vous dites encore que M. de Mauron a outragé ma soeur. C'est sur cela, ma tres chère Madame, que je suis très persuadé que c'est pour rire que vous parlez ainsi. Pour vous le faire comprendre, reprenons un peu vos paroles. Ma soeur est outragée. Que lui a-t-on fait? On lui a proposé de prendre pour cent mille francs une terre qui est estimée par vous-même quarante mille écus; voilà un furieux outrage. Quoi? dans le temps que tout mon bien est estimé le denier trente, que nous faisons nos partages sur ce pied-là, que je n'ai pas un sou marqué de bien que sur ce pied-là, ma soeur est outragée de ce qu'on lui propose de prendre une terre, qui ne fait que le tiers de son bien, au denier vingt-cinq? (III, p. 123).

changes to one of filial and fraternal devotion, as we see at the time of his mother's death.

Quand il serait vrai qu'il y aurait eu dans son coeur (that is, Mme de Sévigné's) quelque chose de plus tendre pour vous que pour moi, croyez-vous, en bonne foi, ma très chère soeur, que je puisse trouver mauvais qu'on vous trouve plus aimable que moi? Et ma

fortune, soit faute de bonheur, soit faute de mérite, s'est-elle tournée de manière à bien encourager à me faire des biens de surérogation? Jouissez tranquillement de ce que vous tenez de la bonté de ma mère. Quand j'y pourrais donner atteinte, ce qui me fait horreur à penser, et que j'en aurais des moyens aussi présents qu'ils seraient difficiles à trouver, je me regarderais comme un monstre si j'en pouvais avoir la moindre intention. ...Si je pouvais souhaiter d'être plus riche, ce serait par rapport à vous et à vos enfants. Nous ne nous battons jamais qu'à force d'amitié et d'honnêteté (III, pp. 1694-4).

Mme de Sévigné herself describes for us her role as mediator in the quarrels between the Abbé de Coulanges, her uncle, and her cousin Mlle de Méri:

Le Bien Bon a quelque fois des disputes avec Mlle de Méri. Mais savez-vous ce qui les cause? C'est assurément l'exactitude de l'Abbé, beaucoup plus que l'intérêt, mais quand l'arithmétique est offensée, et que la règle de deux et deux font quatre est blessée en quelque chose, le bon Abbé est hors de lui. C'est son humeur, il le faut prendre sur ce pied-là. D'un autre côté, Mlle de Méri a un style tout différent. Quand par esprit ou par raison elle soutient un parti, elle ne finit plus. Elle le pousse; il se sent suffoqué par un torrent de paroles...En même temps, je me mets en campagne. Je vais à l'un, je vais à l'autre, je fais un peu comme le cuisinier de la comédie, mais je finis mieux, car on en rit. Et au bout du compte, que le lendemain Mlle de Méri retourne au bon Abbé et lui demande son avis bonnement, il le lui donnera... Je vous réponds toujours d'une chose, c'est qu'il n'y aura qu'à rire de leurs disputes tant que j'en serai témoin (II, pp. 7-8).

Mme de Sévigné's letters are also a good illustration of de Beauvoir's idea of a separate feminine world of feminine values. As has been stated above (p. 31), de Beauvoir finds that a great part of feminine gossip about other women is actually an attempt to formulate some sort of alternative code of behavior. Some of the more "gossipy" parts of the Correspondance could undoubtedly be placed in this category. Mme de Sévigné criticizes feminine religious hypocrisy, for example in Mmes de Marans and de La Vallière:

Je veux parler aussi de Mme la duchesse de La Vallière. La pauvre personne a tiré jusqu'à la lie de tout; elle n'a pas voulu perdre un adieu ni une larme. Elle est aux Carmélites, ou, huit jours durant, elle a vu ses enfants et toute la cour, c'est-à-dire ce qui en reste. Elle a fait couper ses beaux cheveux, mais elle a gardé deux belles boucles sur le front. Elle caquète et dit merveilles; elle assure qu'elle est ravie d'être dans une solitude...Elle nous fait souvenir de ce que nous disait...Mme de La Fayette, après avoir été deux jours à Rueil, que pour elle, elle s'accommoderait parfaitement bien de la campagne (I, p. 695).

Closely related to this are her criticisms of feminine insincerity in love, for example that of Mme de Bagnols who is having an affair with Charles in 1677 and whose hackneyed style, full of précieuse clichés the Marquise has just quoted:

Voilà en l'air ce que j'ai attrapé, et voilà à quel style votre pauvre frère est condamné de faire réponse trois fois la semaine. Ma bonne, cela est cruel, je vous assure. Voyez quelle gageure ces pauvres personnes se sont engagées de soutenir. C'est un martyre; ils me font pitié. Le pauvre garçon y succomberait sans la consolation qu'il trouve en moi. Vous perdez bien de n'être pas à portée de cette confidence. Ma mignonne, j'écris ceci hors-

d'oeuvre, pour vous divertir en vous donannt une idée de cet aimable commerce. Je vous conjure de brûler ces deux feuilles...Songez que vous aurez cette sincère et naturelle créature; il ne faut qu'un malheur (II, p. 502).

Also criticized are those women who are unable to accept the aging process gracefully, and those who foist themselves on unwilling men. The Marquise writes from Vichy during her "cure" in 1676

Nous avons ici une Mme de La Baroire qui bredouille d'une apoplexie; elle fait pitié. Mais quand on la voit laide, point jeune, habillée du bel air, avec des petits bonnets à double carillon, et qu'on songe de plus qu'après vingt-deux ans de veuvage, elle s'est amourachée de M. de La Baroire qui en aimait une autre à la vue du public, à qui elle a donné tout son bien, et qui n'a jamais couché qu'un quart d'heure avec elle pour fixer les donations, et qui l'a chassée de chez lui outrageusement (voici une grande période), mais quand on songe à tout cela, on a extrêmement envie de lui cracher au nez (II, p. 309).

and from Les Rochers in 1690

Mme de La Fayette me mande deux mariages qui ne font pas d'honneur à notre sexe. Cette présidente, si gorgiase, veuve depuis dix mois, s'est amourachée d'un homme de vingt ans, fils di Cormaillon. Elle lui a donné six mille livres de rente et quatre-vingt mille francs, et l'a épousé... Voilà ce qu'a fait cette folle...(III, pp. 851-2).

All these criticisms would seem to support Simone de Beauvoir's contention: as women are outside the hypocritical abstract masculine legal, political and moral codes, the one valid value for them is a very personal integrity, based on sincerity (the key value

in La Princesse de Clèves) and self-respect. When men in the Correspondance are insincere, for example, Charles de Sévigné,¹⁴⁵ the Marquise and her circle seem less critical--is this because a lower standard of personal behavior in males is taken for granted?

Where women fall short of men, in Mme de Sévigné's opinion, is in the intellectual domain. She is against Pauline's being sent to a convent because the nuns are ignorant:

Vous m'étonnez de Pauline. Ah! ma fille, gardez-la auprès de vous, ne croyez point qu'un couvent puisse redresser une éducation, ni sur le sujet de la religion, que nos soeurs ne savent guère, ni sur les autres choses. Vous ferez bien mieux à Grignan, quand vous aurez le temps de vous appliquer (III, p. 482).

She wishes Pauline to be her mother's secretary in order that her French may become better than most other women's:

Pauline est trop heureuse, ma chère enfant, d'être votre secrétaire. Elle apprend à penser, à tourner ses pensées en voyant comme vous lui faites tourner les vôtres. Elle apprend la langue française, que la plupart des femmes ne savent pas; vous prenez la peine de lui expliquer des mots qu'elle n'entendrait jamais (III, p. 607).

¹⁴⁵I, p. 580. Votre fils est amoureux comme un perdu de Mlle de Poussay; il n'aspire qu'à être aussi transi que La Fare. M. de La Rochefoucauld dit que l'ambition de Sévigné est de mourir d'un amour qu'il n'a pas, car nous ne le tenons pas du bois dont on fait les fortes passions.

II, p. 713. Votre pigeon est aux Rochers comme un ermite, se promenant dans ses bois...Il avait envie d'être amoureux d'une Mlle de La Coste...Mon fils vous parle, vous apostrophe, vous adore, ne peut plus vivre sans son pigeon; il n'y a personne qui n'y fût trompé. Pour moi, je crois son amitié fort bonne, pourvu qu'on la connaisse pour être tout ce qu'il en sait; peut-on lui demander davantage?

On the subject of Provençal women's custom of being buried with their hair elaborately coiffed, she comments "Mon Dieu! ma chère fille, que vos femmes sont sottes, vivantes et mortes!" (III, p. 427).

The Marquise seems to realize, however, that this situation is due not to something inherent in women but to deficiencies in their education: she and her friends and relatives, all well-educated, are an exception to this general rule of feminine ignorance and frivolity. Of her daughter she writes "Corbinelli est hors de lui de trouver une tête de femme fait comme la vôtre" (II, p. 330); "Mme de Lavardin est toujours entêtée de votre vrai mérite et du peu de cas que vos faites de votre beauté qui est l'écueil de toutes les femmes" (III, p. 363).¹⁴⁶ One day when the Chevalier de Grignan is entertaining male visitors:

tout d'un coup voilà Mme la duchesse d'Elbeuf et
Mme Le Coigneux, sa cousine; je tremblais que le Chevalier ne fût
fâché. Il ne le fut point du tout; elle mena la parole si bien, si
vigoureusement, si capablement qu'il en fut ravi pour une demi-
heure (III, p. 425).

Mme de Kerman (a Breton friend of the Chaulnes) is described as "une fort aimable personne...Elle est fort loin de l'ignorance des femmes; elle a bien des lumières, et les augmente tous les jours par les bonnes lectures" (III, p. 581).

Donna Stanton in "On Female Portraiture in de Sévigné's Lettres", on the other hand, attributes these comments about women to de Sévigné's misogyny, a perpetuation of the phallographic attitudes toward women, which dominate western discourse from the Bible on".¹⁴⁷ According to Stanton, de Sévigné ascribes to the seventeenth century

¹⁴⁶Duchêne notes (III, p. 363, note 1): Mme de Montmorency écrivait au contraire à Bussy dès le 14 juillet 1678: "Je rencontrais l'autre jour Mme de Sévigné, en vérité encore belle. On dit que Mme de Grignan ne l'est plus et qu'elle va partir sa beauté avec un si grand regret que cela la fera mourir."

¹⁴⁷Stanton, p. 91.

idea whereby the "femme faible", the devout wife/mother/widow is the norm; the exception is the "femme forte", a masculine creation having its roots in "the Marian tradition, which depicts the Virgin as a heroic warrior leading armies to conquer on the battlefield...the sexual immaculateness of abstinence of la femme forte is closely connected to her virilization in literary texts".¹⁴⁸

However, since the women Mme de Sévigné admires and "excepts" are as likely to be primarily wives and mothers (Mmes de Grignan, de Kerman, d'Elbeuf, de Sévigné herself) as "career women" (for example Mlle de Scudéry, Mme de La Fayette, Mme de Deshouillères, all well-known authors), Stanton's criticisms would not seem well-founded. The interest the Marquise takes in the education of her daughter as a young girl, of Pauline and of "la petite personne" would seem to prove that in her view a cultivated feminine mind could be fostered in any woman through education. The problem was that most women in her day did not receive such an education.

Returning to the issue of feminine solidarity, there is evidence in the Correspondance of the age-old female solidarity in the face of pregnancy and childbirth. Mme de Coulanges writes in April 1673, after the Countess has narrowly escaped death giving birth to a stillborn child, "c'est une barbarie que de souhaiter des enfants...Je souhaite, plus que je ne l'espère qu'elle ne soit jamais exposée à de pareils accidents" (I, p. 579).¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸Stanton, p. 92.

¹⁴⁹Bussy on the contrary is much more philosophical on this subject. During a subsequent pregnancy he writes:

"Comment vous portez-vous de votre grossesse, Madame, et du mal de madame votre mère?...Voilà ce que c'est d'avoir des maris et des mères; si on n'avait pas tout cela, on ne serait pas exposé à tant de déplaisirs, mais d'un autre côté on n'aurait pas toutes les douceurs qu'on a (I, p. 697).

The Marquise demonstrates feminine solidarity across class lines when she removes a servant, Marie, from the latter's stepfather who has become infatuated with her:

Il me semble que je vois un de ces petits Amours, qui sont si bien dépeints dans le prologue de l'Aminte, qui se cachent et qui demeurent dans les forêts. Je crois, pour son honneur, que celui-là visait à Marie. Mais le plus juste s'abuse; il a tiré sur la jardinière, et le mal est incurable...Pour moi, j'en suis occupée, et j'emmène Marie, afin de ne point couper l'herbe sous le pied de sa mère (I, p. 526).

As a final proof of feminine solidarity, one would postulate that the degree of intimacy in the Correspondance between Mme de Sévigné and her female friends should be greater than that with her male friends. Unfortunately, virtually none of the Marquise's letters to Mmes de La Fayette, de La Troche, de Lavardin or de Coulanges have been preserved.¹⁵⁰ However, this letter from Mme de La Fayette establishes that the intimacy between these two women, friends for fifty years, was great:

...je n'ai repos ni nuit ni jour, ni dans le corps, ni dans l'esprit; je ne suis plus une personne, ni par l'un, ni par l'autre. Je pémis à vue d'oeil; il faut finir, quand il plaît à Dieu, et j'y suis soumise...Croyez, ma très chère, que vous êtes la personne du monde que j'ai le plus véritablement aimée (III, p. 985).

With M. de Coulanges, her first cousin and whom she knew literally from birth, the Marquise on the contrary never goes beyond a joking tone:

Mon cher Coulanges, hélas! vous avez la goutte au pied, au coude, au genou; cette douleur n'aura pas grand chemin à faire pour tenir toute votre petite personne. Quoi? Vous criez! vous vous plaignez!

¹⁵⁰Mme de Guitaut was not really a close friend.

vous ne dormez plus! vous ne mangez plus! vous ne buvez plus! vous ne chantez plus! vous ne riez plus! Quoi? la joie et vous, ce n'est plus la même chose! Cette pensée me fait pleurer, mais pendant que je pleure, vous êtes guéri; je l'espère, et je le souhaite...(III, p. 967).

As for Bussy, also a relative and whom the Marquise has known from youth, if not from childhood, he is always complaining of her not replying to his letters and when she writes in April 1694 to Mme de Guitaut; "J'ai perdu mes deux premières amies, Mme de La Fayette et Mme de Lavardin; j'en laisse encore ici que j'aime et que j'estime, mais comme ce n'est pas à ce degré, et qu'elles en ont d'autres que moi, je les quitte avec un regret supportable" (III, pp. 1040-1), there is no mention of Bussy who has died in the same period.¹⁵¹

Thus, we see that Mme de Sévigné is keenly interested in how women are viewed in society, is pleased when the behavior of individuals reflects well on the sex and embarrassed when the opposite occurs. Her comments on such behavior are not inconsistent with de Beauvoir's suggestion that such gossip attempts to formulate an appropriate standard of feminine behavior. De Sévigné's great intimacies, in and out of her family, are reserved for other women; a certain feminine solidarity extends as far as her servants and those of her daughter.¹⁵²

When we turn to other authors, we also find concern with women's role, their position in society. What man would or could have written any of the Bronte sisters', Virginia Woolf's, Jane Austen's, George Sand's or Mrs. Gaskell's novels?

¹⁵¹Bussy, however, is very fond of the Marquise ("...je finirai cette lettre par vous dire, ma chère cousine, que personne ne vous aime plus chèrement que je fais" (III, p. 985). The conclusion would seem to be that while men, due to women's "otherness", tend to feel closest to women (for example Charles to his mother, wife, sister and niece) women also are likely to feel closest to other women.

¹⁵²Mme de Sévigné corresponds at a quite intimate level with her daughter's various "dames de compagnie" (such as Martillac, Montgobert, la Pythie).

Madame, on the question of women's financial and legal position, writes: "I pity the Raugrave children¹⁵⁴ from the bottom of my heart. I wish with all my soul that I could help them...But I'm told I have no rights at all, and that Monsieur, as maître de la communauté, is its sole lord and master, and can use it as he pleases. To my mind this is absurd".¹⁵⁴ Bharati Mukherjee speaks of women's role as an Indian context: "Beauty teaches humility and responsibility in the culture I came from. By marrying well, I could have seen to the education of my poorer cousins".¹⁵⁵

The issue of women's role is central to George Eliot's work. In the following quote she describes her heroine's growing disenchantment with her self-appointed role as Mr. Casaubon's protegee and begs the question, "What is a wife's role?"

The duties of her married life, contemplated as so great beforehand, seemed to be shrinking with the furniture and the white vapour-walled landscape. The clear heights where she expected to walk in full communion had become difficult to see even in her imagination; the delicious repose of the soul on a complete superior had been shaken into uneasy effort and alarmed with dim presentiment. When would the days begin of that active wifely devotion which was to strengthen her husband's life and exalt her own?¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³Her half-siblings.

¹⁵⁴Orléans, ed. Kroll, p. 44.

¹⁵⁵Mukherjee, p. 132.

¹⁵⁶Eliot, p. 202.

Eliot is equally critical of the wife who is too little self-sacrificing: implying that she favors some sort of in-between position:

...Lydgate told himself that it was ten times harder for Rosamond than for him: he had a life away from home, and constant appeals to his activity on behalf of others. He wished to excuse everything in her if he could--but it was inevitable that in that excusing mood he should think of her as if she were an animal of another and feebler species. Nevertheless she had mastered him.¹⁵⁷

Finally, on the subject of feminine solidarity, Austin comments: "Emma doubted whether she had not transgressed the duty of woman by woman, in betraying her suspicions of Jane Fairfax' feelings to Frank Churchill".¹⁵⁸ Nora Ephron's Rachel Samstat, on the other hand, perhaps because her husband is having an affair, has "long since ceased to believe in the existence of that mythical sisterly loyalty women are alleged to feel toward one another".¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷Eliot, p. 489.

¹⁵⁸Austen, p. 178.

¹⁵⁹Nora Ephron, Heartburn (New York: Pocket Books, 1983), p. 190.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this essay has been to demonstrate that Simone de Beauvoir's theories on women's writing are often unfair, and that her negative judgements (i.e. that women writers are garrulous, self-obsessed, bogged down by detail, stuck in their time periods) can generally be given a more positive interpretation. Specifically, this paper has tried to show that as women's opinions and judgements are taken more seriously by society, a "feminization" of the standard by which literature is to be judged has also taken place.

As the end of this paper has now been reached, it would perhaps be of interest to note some of the areas on which it would have been interesting to elaborate had time and space permitted, for example the misinterpretation of women writers at the hands of male critics, and an exploration of differences in masculine and feminine writing at a more "popular" level, for example in newspaper comic strips.

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