The Composition, Publication, and Influence of Gilberte Périer's
La Vie de Monsieur Pascal

by

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ABSTRACT

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was a French scientist, mathematician, and religious thinker. *La Vie de Monsieur Pascal*, a memoir of his life written by his sister Gilberte Périer, has served as the primary source for most other biographies. It survives in two versions. The first version was written in 1662 or 1663 and was published for the first time in 1684. The Périer family feared the text’s suppression if published, because, contrary to its evidence, enemies of Jansenism claimed that Pascal had relinquished his Jansenist sympathies just prior to his death. A stolen copy was published in Amsterdam in 1684 without the family’s consent, and no official censure resulted. The text was then reprinted many times. A second version has also survived in manuscript form, and was likely composed by Gilberte in 1669 or 1670, but not published until 1908. The reason it lay dormant for so long is unknown.

It appears that Gilberte’s intention was to show that despite her brother’s worldly successes, he deliberately renounced his gifts in order to pursue a life of simple, child-like faith in God. The primary criticism levied against the historical veracity of her account is that it does not accurately portray Pascal’s life between 1646, the date of his “first conversion,” and his “second conversion” in 1654 (his night of fire). Gilberte stressed that Pascal renounced his scientific pursuits from 1646, whereas the facts of his life as independently known suggest that he remained concerned with these pursuits well past that date. The document has also been criticized as presenting an idealized portrait of Pascal. Scholarly estimations of Pascal from the 17th century to the present day have been formed at least in part by how Gilberte’s text is interpreted.
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for Dana,

because she liked it
INTRODUCTION

In his posthumously published *Pensées* ("thoughts"), Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), the French scientist, mathematician, and thinker into human things, left to us the following comment:

I had spent a long time in the study of the abstract sciences; and the little communication that one can have from them made me disgusted by them. When I began the study of man, I saw that these abstract sciences are not proper to man, and that I was straying more from my condition in penetrating them than others were in ignoring them. I pardoned others for knowing little of them. But I believed I would find at least many companions in the study of man, and that it is the true study which is proper to him. I was mistaken, there are even fewer who study this than [study] geometry. It is only for lack of knowing how to study this that they search into the rest.¹

If the study of "man" is difficult, how much more so the study of a man like Pascal himself—a person of such great intelligence and enigma that he continues to inspire debate three hundred years after his lifetime. One document that has greatly influenced the knowledge and interpretation of Pascal's life, either directly or as a source for other texts, is his sister Gilberte Périer's biography of his life. This work, entitled *La Vie de Monsieur Pascal*, was first published in Amsterdam, without the author's consent, in 1684.

But this text appears little known, and therefore little read, among those interested in Pascal today. Texts, without readers, are inert and lifeless objects. Texts must be read in order to be brought to life. If in fact this text is important to the study of Pascal, it should be brought back again into the living tradition of readers and thinkers where it once held a place. This is the task which this thesis attempts.

¹ Pensée #687 (Lafuma numbering), #144 (Brunschvicg numbering).
In the following pages I will aim to draw together what is known about the text's creation and eventual publication, and to trace its influence from the 17th century to the present time. In doing so it will become evident that many questions remain concerning Gilberte's purpose for composing it, and why it was not published for so many years after it was completed. We will also see that although it was taken up and praised almost immediately by influential thinkers, opinion over the centuries has varied regarding its trustworthiness, and even its fitness as a testament to the life of Blaise Pascal. But despite all of these questions, a recognition emerges that many of the critical debates about Pascal's life find a source, or at least some connection, in this document.

As a study in historical bibliography, there are many important things which lie outside the scope of this thesis, and which it will not address. It will not discuss the question of whether Blaise Pascal is in fact worthy of our attention today, although the value of studying Gilberte's text would clearly rest on the belief that he is. It will not discuss or evaluate his accomplishments or his thought, although a brief outline of these will be given. This thesis will focus on a book, *La Vie de Monsieur Pascal*, and will bring in other concerns only insofar as they are necessary for understanding aspects of this book's creation, publication, and influence.

A note concerning translation: most of the sources I have used for this thesis are French works, and translations provided are my own unless noted otherwise.
Notes concerning citations: some of the works I cite (such as those by Descartes or Voltaire, or Pascal’s own works) are available to the modern reader in numerous editions. For this reason I have provided chapter and/or paragraph numbers, which remain constant from one edition to the next, instead of giving page numbers, which would correspond to one particular edition only and make access to that edition necessary. Citations from Pascal’s Pensees will be given by the relevant pensée numbers according to the two standard numbering systems of Léon Brunschvicg (B#) and Louis Lafuma (L#). All other citations will be given in standard bibliographic format.

The text of La Vie de Monsieur Pascal that I have used for my study is the critical edition provided by Jean Mesnard in his edition of Pascal’s Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1964-).
CHAPTER ONE

The Lives of Blaise and Gilberte Pascal

Many scholarly as well as popular biographies of Blaise Pascal have been written, and a few have been written about Gilberte. I give only a brief outline of their lives in this chapter, as background to the following chapters.

Étienne Pascal, the father of Blaise, Gilberte, and their younger sister Jacqueline, was born in 1588 to a merchant family in the French region of Auvergne. As a young man he studied law in Paris, and eventually settled into an administrative position in government, becoming president of the Cour des Aides, the local taxation court in the capital of Auvergne, Clermont. Étienne was also greatly interested in contemporary mathematics and science, and corresponded with the leading scholars of his day on these subjects. In 1616 he married Antoinette Begon, a woman about whom we know relatively little; she died only ten years later. The portrait of her that was passed to succeeding generations, however, is of a religiously sensitive woman with a particular interest in caring for the poor.²

Gilberte was the oldest of three surviving children born to Étienne and Antoinette. She was born in 1620, with Blaise following in 1623 and Jacqueline in 1625. In 1626 Antoinette died, leaving Étienne alone with the children. In a rather uncommon move for a father of those days, and particularly for one as well off as he, Mr. Pascal decided to raise his children himself, although he did employ a housekeeper who remained with the family for

twenty years. Étienne did not remarry. In addition to his government work and scholarly interests, Étienne occupied himself with the education of his daughters as well as his son: for Marguerite Périer, Gilberte’s daughter, later wrote that Gilberte “had been raised by my grandfather, who, from her tenderest youth, had taken pleasure in teaching her mathematics, philosophy and history.”

From their earliest days the children had unusually close relationships with their father and with one another; this is testified to in many personal letters and other surviving documents.

The family remained in Clermont until 1631 when they settled in a new home in Paris. There Étienne made the acquaintance of such men as the Father Mersenne, who had established in Paris an academy of learning. While yet an adolescent, Blaise would go along with his father Étienne to meetings of the academy. From an early age Blaise showed signs of an extraordinary intellect, and Gilberte devotes the first section of her memoir to examples of his precocity.

The younger sister Jacqueline also showed signs of a remarkable intelligence from an early age. While Blaise’s interest was in mathematics, Jacqueline’s was in poetry. When only thirteen years old, her poetry came to the attention of the Queen of France, as well as the great dramatist Pierre Corneille, and she was invited to the royal court to perform. Later when Étienne fell into disfavour with Cardinal Richelieu over a disagreement about property revenue, and had to flee from Paris for fear of being incarcerated in the Bastille, Jacqueline

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4These are provided in Blaise Pascal, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Jean Mesnard.
was instrumental in persuading the cardinal to issue her father a reprieve. Only a short while later, Mr. Pascal was made tax assessor for Normandy, and the family moved to the city of Rouen in that province in 1640.

In that year Blaise produced his first scientific treatise, entitled *Essai pour les coniques*. This work caused quite a stir, as it had been written by someone only sixteen years old and yet was a solid contribution to the subject. He also began work on an “arithmetical machine” designed to aid his father in his taxation work, and which occupied him for several years. This machine, which could perform basic arithmetical functions of numbers up to eight digits in length, was the precursor to the modern calculator.

In 1641 at the age of twenty-one Gilberte married Florin Périer and settled again in Clermont, where her husband held a government position very similar to her father’s. Florin was also interested in mathematics, participating with Blaise in scientific experiments on several occasions, and eventually publishing several of Blaise’s treatises after the latter’s death. Gilberte and Florin had five children: Étienne, Jacqueline, Marguerite, Louis, and Blaise, and it is Marguerite in particular, outliving her siblings by many years, who contributed

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5René Descartes, when he heard of it however, curiously minimized this achievement by saying, “I do not find it strange that he has offered demonstrations about conics more appropriate than those of the ancients, but other matters related to this subject can be proposed that would scarcely occur to a sixteen-year-old child.” Quoted in Marvin O’Connell, *Blaise Pascal, Reasons of the Heart* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 26. Descartes would have been forty-four when Pascal was sixteen. Perhaps Descartes’ contempt was motivated by an earlier criticism he had received from Blaise’s father regarding his *Dioptrics*. Later, Blaise would levy a heavier criticism of Descartes in the *Pensées*. The two men did meet at least once, in 1647.
much to the family's memory by writing biographies of her mother, of her uncle Blaise, and several other works which also have been preserved.\textsuperscript{6}

It was during their time in Rouen that the Pascal family, including Gilberte, came under the influence of the Abbé of Saint-Cyran, through a local priest named Jean Guillebert. Earlier, while a young man in Paris, Saint-Cyran had become friends with Cornelius Jansen, whose book, \textit{Augustinus}, eventually became the foundational work for the understanding of Christian faith favoured by the Jansenist sect of French Catholicism. By the time the Pascals became acquainted with his teachings, Saint-Cyran was the spiritual director at a convent called Port-Royal, located a short distance outside of Paris, which was fast becoming the focal point for those sympathetic to Jansenist beliefs.

While the precise nature of Jansenism is difficult to define, its emphasis was upon the role of God's grace, rather than human will, in the work of salvation, upon the individual rather than the group, and upon the importance of a rigorous piety which involved a radical separation from "the world." Its theological underpinnings lay in the thought of St. Augustine.\textsuperscript{7} The question of whether Jansenism ought to have been considered as a heretical movement within the Church, a view which the Jesuits vigorously advocated, is still under debate today. The noted Jansenist historian Augustin Gazier, for example, argues that the "Jansenist heresy"


was a fabrication of the Jesuits to deflect attention away from their own power and influence within the Church during that period in history.\(^8\)

In 1646, with the influence of Jean Guillebert and some friends, Blaise underwent what Pascal scholars later referred to as his “first conversion.” Gilberte described this conversion as moving from a position of “respect” for religion to an “ardent and sensitive love.”\(^9\) Within a short while, Blaise had succeeded in convincing his sisters and father of the value of this new way of living, and they too underwent a deepening of their religious faith.

This new-found spirituality had its impact upon each of the siblings in similar but individual ways. Gilberte “quit the world,” her daughter Marguerite later wrote, using a characteristically Jansenist expression, “and all its agreeable things,...and lived in that manner until her death.”\(^10\) Gilberte’s writing and not only her life habits shows evidence of this austerity and simplicity of style which were considered Jansensist virtues.

Marguerite provides a glimpse into one result that her mother’s conversion had upon her as a young child. Gilberte began to dress her and her sister more austerely, in contrast to the prevailing fashions:

> My grandmother had adorned us both with dresses full of golden braids, many ribbons and lace according to the fashion of that time. My mother removed all of this, and dressed us in grey material without lace or ribbons, and forbade our governess to visit or have us let visit two little neighbouring girls the same age,

\(^8\)Gazier argues this thesis in his *Histoire générale du mouvement Janseniste* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1924).


with whom we used to be every day, because these two girls were very adorned.\textsuperscript{11}

If this concern against “worldliness” seems extreme, it must be understood that Jansenism was in large part formed in reaction to the prevailing laxity of established religion. The Pascals and other like-minded Catholics saw evidence of this accommodation to worldliness most notably in the policies and manner of life of the powerful Jesuit order, and considered this “easy piety”\textsuperscript{12} to be a deplorable state of affairs upon which the rise of the “heresy” of Protestantism could in part be blamed. To “seek God alone” was not only a means for reforming Catholicism but for winning heretics back as well, as Pascal amply argued in his \textit{Provincial Letters}. And he was even more strict than his sister in regard to his nieces and nephews, whom he nonetheless greatly loved. Several of his nephews in fact lived with him for a time and he occupied himself with their education.

It appears that Jacqueline progressed more quickly in her new spiritual life than did her siblings. In 1651 Étienne died, and the next year Jacqueline expressed her desire to enter the Port-Royal convent. This decision caused a temporary but deeply upsetting rift between Jacqueline and Blaise, due apparently not only to religious but to financial concerns: Blaise was upset that Jacqueline’s portion of their father’s estate would go out of the family and be taken to Port-Royal as a dowry. Eventually Blaise relented and gave his permission for Jacqueline to enter the convent, a permission which was required by canon law of the nearest


\textsuperscript{12}Easy Piety was actually the title of a book of Jesuit theology. Pascal refers to it in his ninth \textit{Provincial Letter}. 
male relative. Some years later, Marguerite Périer was "miraculously healed" of a fistula in the eye while at Port-Royal, and this event was instrumental to Blaise's reconciliation with his sister and with Port-Royal and the faith it preached.

The nature of Blaise's "spiritual journey" in the years immediately following his first conversion has been cause for much discussion. Outwardly, Blaise's life seems to have remained much the same as before. His scientific work continued: in 1647 he published the results of research which called into question the belief that "nature abhors a vacuum." (This belief had been held by the new Cartesian science as well as the Aristotelian science of medieval scholasticism.) Very soon after, he became engaged in a heated debate on this issue with the Aristotelian scholar Fr. Étienne Noël. Pascal's letters to Noël display a desire to ridicule his opponent and assert his own superiority in the scientific matter at hand. In 1653 Pascal presented several treatises on physics and mathematics, particularly in the area of probability theory. This period of his life has been termed his "worldly period" by some commentators, because of the company he kept (in the salons of high society) and the occupations which he pursued (travel and amusement, as well as science) during these years.

His success in these pursuits, however, could not address a sense of spiritual malaise which seems to have been growing in him. Several of his important written reflections concerning religion belong to these years. At the time of his father's death in 1651, Blaise wrote a particularly moving letter to Gilberte in which he described a religious consolation concerning the acceptance of death. He sought out his younger sister's company at Port-Royal more frequently to talk about religious matters. In letters to Gilberte from this period, Jacqueline described Blaise's spiritual state in this way:
All that I can tell you...is that he is by the mercy of God in a great desire to be all in Him, although he has not yet determined in what sort of life; and...that for a year he has had a great contempt of the world and an almost intolerable disgust for all the people who are in it...

He came to see me and on this visit he opened himself to me in a manner which made me pity, avowing to me that in the midst of his occupations which were so great, and among all the things which could contribute to making him love the world, and to which one had reason to believe him strongly attached, he was in some way solicited to quit all that...by an extreme aversion which he had for the follies and amusements of the world and by the continual reproach which his conscience made to him, he found himself detached from all things in a manner such as he had never had...13

Then, on November 23, 1654, Blaise had his famous “night of fire”, his second conversion experience. No one however knew of it until after his death. At that time, a servant who was going through Blaise’s possessions found a sheet of paper, his mémorial, sewn into the lining of his coat so that he could keep it with him always. It said:

The year of grace 1654
Monday, November 23
...From about 10:30 in the evening until about 12:30.

FIRE

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,
not of philosophers and scholars.
Certitude, certitude, sentiment, joy, peace.
God of Jesus-Christ
Deum meum et deum vestrum [My God and your God].
Your God will be my God.
Forgotten of the world and of all outside God.
He is found only by the ways taught in the Gospel.
The greatness of the human soul.
Just Father the world has not known you at all, but I have known you.
Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.
....My God, will you leave me?

May I not be eternally separated from Him.

... This is eternal life, that they know you alone the true God and Him whom you have sent, J. C. [Jesus Christ].

... May I never be separated from Him!

... Renunciation complete and sweet.

What do these notes mean? Not surprisingly, many people have pondered this question since their discovery. Although to study Pascal's religious thought in any depth is outside the scope of this thesis, there are two observations we may make about the mémorial which quickly lead us to some of the broad themes of Pascal's thought, and which may be helpful in understanding the emphases Gilberte appears to make in her biography.

In the first place, Pascal sets apart the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" from the God "of philosophers and scholars." The phrase "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" was the way in which the God of the Hebrew Bible would refer to Himself,14 and so here Pascal is referring to the God of the Bible and of religious faith. What or whoever the "God of the philosophers and scholars" might be, this is not the biblical God. Pascal is therefore indicating that there is some essential distinction between the sphere of religion, and that of science or philosophy. Pascal's thought was concerned with identifying the rightful places which these two separate realms ought to hold in human life.15 Pascal stood alone in considering this question of the rightful provinces of faith and of reason, at the birth of modern science when other thinkers were either content to leave the question unexplored (as Descartes seems to

14 Cf. Exodus 3:6, 15 "I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob...This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations." The Holy Bible. New Revised Standard Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989). Cf. also pensée B#556, L#449, in which Pascal describes this God.

15 See especially pensées B#253, L#183; B#267, L#188; B#272, L#182; B#273, L#173; B#279, L#588; B#282, L#110; and the eighteenth Provincial Letter.
have been) or would respond to it by entirely displacing religion by science (as Spinoza).\textsuperscript{16}

And Pascal’s struggle to find the rightful places of religion and science (or any other pursuit) in his own life becomes a crucial issue in Gilberte’s biography.

In the \textit{mémorial} we also find the phrase, “the greatness of the human soul.” Pascal discusses this view of the human person as uniquely great in the universe in the \textit{Pensées}, where it is held in tension with a view expressing the opposite—the insignificance of human life within the universe—and this duality is one of the best-known aspects of Pascal’s philosophy.

We are trapped between glory and wretchedness, Pascal suggested, our plight is that we are caught between the two abysses of infinity and nothingness.\textsuperscript{17} Religion must speak to this dual condition, and our plight is fully resolved only in Christianity:

The greatnesses and the miseries of man are so visible, that it is necessary that the true religion teaches us that there is a great principle of greatness in man, and that there is a great principle of misery. It must therefore give us reason for these astonishing contrarieties.

It must, to render man happy, show him that there is a God; that one is obliged to love him, that our unique happiness is to be in him, and our unique ill to be separated from him; that it recognize that we are full of shadows which hinder us from knowing and loving him; and that thus our duties obliging us to love God, and our concupiscences turning us from it, we are full of injustice. It must render to us the reason for these oppositions that we have to God and to our own good. It must teach us the remedies for these impotencies, and the means of obtaining these remedies.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16}For Descartes’ ambiguous position on this matter see in particular principles 25 and 76 in his \textit{Principles of Philosophy} and para. 11 in \textit{Discourse on the Method}. Spinoza’s rejection of religious orthodoxy is clearly presented in his \textit{Theologico-Political Treatise}, where he established a “scientific” approach to the reading of Scripture which gave rise to modern biblical criticism. Such criticism may be undertaken by scholars without recourse to a personal and living faith in Scripture as the Word of God.

\textsuperscript{17}Pensée B#72, L#199.

\textsuperscript{18}Pensée B#430, L#149.
It would be necessary for the true religion to teach the greatness, the misery, carry to the esteem and the contempt of self, to love and to hate.19

Although he never actually moved to Port-Royal to join the group of Jansenist men, the solitaires, who by that time maintained a household near the convent, Pascal began to associate with them regularly and identify himself as sympathetic to the group. He became close friends with several of the men there, notably Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, who in later years became the leading spokesmen for Jansenism as a whole. (Arnauld’s sister, Angélique, was of pivotal significance to Jansenism as well: as the convent’s beloved abbess, she revitalized Port-Royal, and it was her invitation to Saint-Cyran to reside at Port-Royal as its spiritual director which caused this convent to become the focal point of Jansenism).

Shortly thereafter, in 1656, Blaise began writing his Lettres écrites à un provincial, known in English as the Provincial Letters. The occasion for these writings was the condemnation of Antoine Arnauld by the doctors of theology at the Sorbonne, and the revocation of his doctorate, due to a book he had published entitled De la fréquente communion. In it Arnauld had condemned the lax attitude toward contrition of which the Jesuits in particular were accused (contrition being the state of heartfelt remorse for one’s sins). The Jesuits were quick to publish a rebuttal. One evening when Arnauld, Pascal, and several of their friends were gathered together, Pascal was encouraged by the group to put his wit and literary skill to the Jansenist defense. Instead of producing a learned treatise (which

19Pensée B#494, L#450. Pascal’s thoughts on the way in which the Christian religion views and influences human life was a subject of much consideration for Friedrich Nietzsche, who saw Pascal as his greatest opponent in his desire to destroy Christianity’s influence. This merits much thought on our part. The relevant sections from Nietzsche’s works are outlined in Brendan Donnellan, “The Only Logical Christian: Nietzsche’s Critique of Pascal” in Studies in Nietzsche and the Judaeo-Christian Tradition, ed. James C. O’Flaherty et al. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1985).
he claimed he could not have written in any case since he had only a lay person's knowledge of theology), Pascal took on the persona of a naive and sincere inquirer, reporting his findings to a friend in the country, perhaps his brother-in-law Florin, and by this engaging method won instant public appeal.

Although Pascal associated with and supported the Jansenist party, it is important to recognize that he remained distinct from them as well, a fact which is often overlooked today. At the very time that he was composing the *Provincial Letters*, for example, which was the work that has most closely identified him with the Jansenists, he was declaring himself to be not one of their party. "I am not of Port-Royal," he explained, in his sixteenth and seventeenth letters. His disagreement with Port-Royal over the question of the Formulary, to be discussed further on, was just one of the ways in which he differed from them: he was also opposed to Cartesianism, which most Port-Royalists appeared eager to embrace.\(^{20}\) That Pascal was a friend to Jansenists is incontrovertible; that he was distinct from them is also evident.

During this time of religious controversy, however, Pascal was also continuing his scientific work. His object of study related to the cycloid, or roulette,\(^{21}\) and he advertised a contest of sorts in which he challenged other scientists to propose solutions to the questions he put forth. Here again, his correspondence with the other scientists displays a sense of arrogance quite far from a humble spirit.


\(^{21}\) A cycloid is a curve traced by a point on the radius of a circle which is rolling through one complete revolution along a straight line in one plane.
His health, which had been deteriorating since 1647, was now intruding upon his ability to work. In 1660 he moved to Clermont to live under his sister's roof for half a year. Later, back in Paris, he created plans for a public transit system, the *carrosse à cinq sols*, which would be his last endeavour before succumbing to his final illness. On June 29, 1662, he moved in again with Gilberte, who was then in Paris, and a few months later, on August 19 he died at the age of thirty-nine.

After his death, his personal papers were collected and published by his family and friends under the simple title of *Pensees*. These were his notes which he had intended to use in writing a treatise to defend the Christian faith against atheists and "libertines." Although the *Provincial Letters* were more widely read in the years following Pascal's death, the *Pensees* grew in influence in the following centuries, and this work is what today confirms the abiding interest in Pascal as a philosophical and religious thinker.

Jacqueline died a year earlier than Blaise, on October 4, 1661, and Gilberte died on April 25, 1687. Outliving her siblings by a quarter-century, Gilberte remained much involved in the fortunes of the Jansenist sect for the rest of her life, as did her husband and children. These fortunes had always been shaky; finally at the beginning of the eighteenth century Louis XIV destroyed the buildings of Port-Royal and scattered the community definitively. The spirit of Jansenism lived on, however, until well into the 20th century: the branch of Catholicism in the Netherlands known as "Old Catholic" traces its lineage from Port-Royal.
The Content of *La Vie*

According to 20th century standards, *La Vie de Monsieur Pascal* is not strictly a biography of the life of Blaise Pascal. It makes only passing references to what one would consider the outward highlights of Pascal's life—his publications, his experiments, his inventions. It does not give due weight to his contributions to science, nor to religion: the great controversies which were waged between Port-Royal and the Catholic establishment are never mentioned—Port-Royal itself is referred to only once in a passing reference to "a very holy and austere house,"--and the *Provincial Letters* are mentioned only briefly as an example of Pascal's "natural eloquence." As well, the text does not treat each period of Pascal's life in equal measure. Gilberte details Pascal's childhood and youth, and then moves quickly from that point toward the last several years of his life, where she again slows her narration.

Instead of a biography proper, then, Gilberte has written what we might call an account of an inner life, the relation of a spiritual journey. In doing so, Gilberte was participating in a new literary form which was gaining popularity in her century: the memoir. Gilberte refers to her work by this name. A memoir was (as it is today) a basically factual but subjective telling of events, written out of the memory and experience of an individual participant. Works in this genre were characterized by an intimate and naive written style, in which the author referred to him- or herself in the first person, and they were not necessarily intended for publication. Particularly when the events or persons being treated were religiously concerned, there was often a deliberate shaping of the narrative in order to better testify to God's workings or to bring a moral or lesson to bear on the reader. While today such works are not consider "histories" of the events which they concern, historians find them
invaluable primary materials for historical study, since they reveal the intimate thoughts and opinions of the people of a time. Even in the 17th century, such writings appear to have been considered often as material to serve in the later writing of a proper history, rather than as history themselves. One such example is Nicolas Fontaine’s *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de Port-Royal*, published in 1736. An 18th century editor of this work provided the following details regarding its historical accuracy:

> As these memoirs were written only long after most of the events they relate, and Mr. Fontaine sought only to recall under the eyes of God the marvels that His grace had wrought, without being encumbered with the succession of facts [or, events], he did not always keep the times in order.

The editor then goes on to say that he therefore has supplied the relevant dates for the events described, as necessary. Another well-known Port-Royal volume, the *Nécrologe de Port-Royal* of 1723, apparently omitted what the authors considered to be “superfluous” in the lives of the people with which it was concerned, but yet claimed that “the whole...is historical.” Writers in this genre therefore seem to have purported to being *faithful* to the facts while remaining *unencumbered* by them, which suggests a rather fine distinction. In any case, it is evident that historical reliability was not the primary concern of such writings, although many of them may have been in fact quite historically accurate.

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Thus Gilbert was able to refer to only those major events which supported her chosen aims, and to emphasize many other minor events, conversations, and anecdotes which would be more illustrative of her brother’s inward journey of faith than outward events would show. Even today, particular emphases and omissions do play a part of any writing of a biography, since every biographer selects what seems most important or what most suits an overall shape for the work. The question to be asked by any critic is not whether the facts and character of a person’s life have been presented selectively, but whether that selection has produced a distorted or even false view of the person. Gilberte’s presentation of her brother’s life has been criticized in this manner, which we shall take a closer look at in the third chapter which treats the influence of the Life.

Since Port-Royal was a great producer of mémoires and vies of its more illustrious members, it is not surprising that Gilberte was asked, as she later said she had been, to write an account of her brother’s life. The fact that she was writing for the community of Port-Royal, and not for general publication, would suggest that she may have written what she believed would please those readers in particular, leaving out what they would not like or be interested in or even simply what they already would have known. In addition to this, it would be natural to assume that Gilberte had her own ideas about the sort of portrait she wished to present to her brother’s friends, and to any others who might read it. When we look at this portrait, it seems clear that she wished to show how her brother was exceptionally gifted with all the potential for worldly success, and yet deliberately relinquished his gifts in

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25 One must also consider that the manner in which Pascal’s family and friends arranged, edited, and even suppressed many of his pensées for publication after his death contributes substantially to this question of what may have been “left out” for these same people, and why.
order to pursue a life of simple, child-like faith in God. It is fitting then, that she focuses on Pascal’s youth, where his genius becomes evident, and then moves to his final years in which his religious devotion peaks.

Gilberte begins by describing Pascal’s precocious childhood. “From the time my brother was old enough that one could speak to him, he showed the signs of a most extraordinary mind,” she says, “by the little repartees that he would make quite apropos, but even more by questions on the nature of things, which would surprise everyone.” She describes her father’s method in undertaking his son’s education as “to hold this child always above his work”; that is, to teach his son progressively only what the boy could be sure to master at each stage. In this way he tried to keep his son’s self-confidence high, a condition which Étienne hoped would provide the fertile ground for future success.

When Blaise was twelve years old, Gilberte relates, a pivotal event occurred in his life. His father had not yet begun to teach him any mathematics, because,

Since [my father] knew that mathematics is a thing which fills and greatly satisfies the mind, he in no way wanted my brother to have any knowledge of it, for fear that this would render him negligent in Latin and the other languages in which he wanted to perfect him. For this reason he shut away all the books that treated of it, and he abstained from speaking of it with his friends in his presence, but this precaution did not hinder the child’s curiosity from being aroused, so that he often prayed my father to teach him mathematics; but he would refuse him, and, proposing this as a recompense, he

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26Gilberte Périer, La Vie de Pascal in Blaise Pascal, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Jean Mesnard, v. 1, p. 571.

27Gilberte Périer, La Vie de Pascal in Blaise Pascal, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Jean Mesnard, v. 1, p. 572.
promised him that as soon as he knew Latin and Greek, he would teach it to him.

My brother, seeing this resistance, asked him one day what this science was, and of what it treated. My father told him that, in general, it was the means of making just figures and of finding the proportions they had among them, and at the same time he prohibited him from speaking more of it or ever thinking about it. But this mind, which could not remain within its bounds, as soon as he had this simple opening, that mathematics gives the means to make figures infallibly just, he began to dream; and, at his hours of recreation, being alone in a room where he was accustomed to divert himself, he would take some carbon and make figures on the tiles, looking for the means, for example, to make a perfectly round circle, a triangle which had three equal sides and angles, and other similar things. He found all this; and then he would look for the proportions these figures had among them. But since my father's care had been so great to hide from him all these things that he did not even know the names, he was constrained to make definitions for himself, and would call a circle a round, a line a bar, and thus the others. After these definitions, he made some axioms and finally some perfect proofs; and as one goes from one to the next in these things, he pushed his research so far that he came to the 32nd proposition in the first book of Euclid.

As he was thus engaged, my father entered into the place where he was without my brother hearing him. [My father] found him so strongly applied that [Blaise] was a long time without noticing his arrival. One cannot say who was the more surprised, the son to see his father because of the express prohibition that he had given him of it, or the father to see his son in the middle of all these things. But the father's surprise was greater when, having asked him what he was doing, he told him that he was looking for the very thing that was the 32nd proposition of the first book of Euclid. My father asked him what had caused him to think of looking for that: he said that it was that he had found some other thing; and on this having again made the same questions of him, he said to him again some other proof that he had done; and finally, by going backward and explaining himself still by these names of rounds and bars, he came to his definitions and axioms.

My father was so astonished by the greatness and the power of this genius...by which one could say that in some manner he had invented mathematics.28

I quote this incident at length because it later became one of the contested statements in Gilberte’s document. She appears to have written here deliberately and carefully that her brother, alone at the age of twelve and without any mathematical teaching, arrived at Euclid’s 32nd proposition,29 “inventing mathematics.” This assertion presumably is to demonstrate the extent of the genius which Pascal renounced in his pursuit of a life of faith.

At this point it must be noted that another written account of this incident, composed by a Tallemant des Réaux, gives the story somewhat differently.30 He accounts for Pascal’s progression to the 32nd proposition by stating that Blaise had been reading Euclid secretly during his spare time. It does not appear that Tallement des Réaux was providing this explanation as a way of discrediting Pascal’s abilities, for he goes on to show how Pascal’s genius for mathematics led him to invent his “admirable arithmetical machine.” It is believed that he composed this account between 1652 and 1654, a full ten years before Gilberte undertook her writing. Did Tallement des Réaux’s version represent the sort of stories, distorted but still bearing some resemblance to the truth, which were circulating about Pascal at that time, stories which Gilberte then determined to set straight? Or should we consider his account as the more accurate of the two, and Gilberte’s as an enrichment or embellishment to heighten the impact of her tale? These questions have been debated but not resolved by those commenting upon her text during the last three centuries.

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29 Euclid’s 32nd proposition is that the sum of the angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles.
As we have already learned, Pascal was soon attending the learned conferences of his father's circle, and a few years later produced his *Essai pour les coniques*, "which passed for such a great effort of mind that it was said that since Archimedes nothing had been seen of this strength." Very soon, however, Pascal's health began to suffer, which Gilberte attributes to "these great and continual mental applications in an age so tender." Gilberte provides no diagnosis of these illnesses (and none has been offered definitively since), but emphasizes them heavily from this point on in the text.

At the age of twenty-three Pascal undertook some experiments on the vacuum, but, Gilberte asserts, "this occupation was the last in which he applied his mind for the human sciences." This was the time of Pascal's so-called first conversion. Gilberte does not use this term "conversion," but describes the experience in the following manner:

Immediately after these experiments, and while he was still only twenty-four, the Providence of God having made grow an opportunity which obliged him to read some writings of piety, God enlightened him in such a way by this reading that he understood perfectly that the Christian religion obliges us to live only for God, and to have no other object but him; and this truth seemed to him so evident, so necessary and so useful, that it terminated all his research: in such a way that from that time onward he renounced all other knowledges [in order] to apply himself uniquely to the unique thing which Jesus Christ calls necessary.  

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34 Gilberte Périé, *La Vie de Pascal* in Blaise Pascal, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Jean Mesnard, v. 1, p. 577-8. "The thing which Jesus Christ calls necessary" I suggest is a reference to the following biblical passage: "Now as they went on their way, [Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what
"To live only for God, and to have no other object but him," was the ultimate goal to which a Jansenist understanding of religious faith was directed. In Gilberte's description, Blaise "terminated all his research" immediately upon his first conversion. "From that time onward," she says, "he renounced all other knowledges." She also asserts that his experiments on the vacuum were "the last in which he applied his mind for the human sciences," and that "although he invented the roulette wheel afterward, this in no way contradicts what I say, for he found it without thinking about it," as though by accident. We have seen in the previous section however, that Pascal appears incontrovertibly to have continued his scientific pursuits after his conversion and remain concerned with them. What are we to make then of Gilberte's account? This is in fact the second, and the most important, criticism of Gilberte's work, and will be discussed more fully in chapter three of this thesis.

Gilberte does go on to say several paragraphs later that some time after 1646, Pascal's doctors convinced him to "look as much as he could for opportunities to divert himself," in the hopes that this would relieve his illnesses, and "thus he put himself in the world." 35 Gilberte does not specify, though, what this "being in the world" signified, and passes over it fairly quickly. No where does she suggest that Pascal took up again his scientific activities he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'" — Luke 10:38-42 from The Holy Bible. New Revised Standard Version. I draw attention to this biblical reference to what is needful as opposed to what is a needless distraction or a diversion because this idea is of particular relevance to Pascal's writings.

during this time. She says only that God kept him "from vice" during this period and that eventually Jacqueline persuaded him to quit the world absolutely and all the conversations of the world... He was then about 30 years old, and he was still infirm, and it was since that time that he embraced the manner of life where he was until his death.36

I would suggest that this additional testimony has been much neglected by those scholars who have wanted to discredit Gilberte's document as soon as she made the statement that Pascal "terminated all his research" at the age of twenty-four, at the time of his first conversion. It is true that Gilberte does seem to represent that year as the definitive moment in Pascal's life--her language here is at its most vivid and deliberate. But her account also suggests that the real change in Pascal's life came when he was thirty, when he broke with all his habits [and] changed quarters, and was to stay some time in the country; returning from whence he witnessed so well that he wished to quit the world that the world finally quit him.37

Reactions to the apparent ambiguity of Gilberte's text on this critical question will be examined in chapter three.

On other matters, however, Gilberte's account is much more straightforward. She sheds light on Pascal's understanding of the different human faculties at work in science and in religion, an important theme for Pascal and hence, Pascal scholars: the right place within the human person of each faculty, head and heart, or reason and faith, was one of Pascal's primary concerns. Pascal considered libertines as "people who were in this false principle that

36Gilberte Périer, La Vie de Pascal in Blaise Pascal, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Jean Mesnard, v. 1, p. 582.

37Gilberte Périer, La Vie de Pascal in Blaise Pascal, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Jean Mesnard, v. 1, p. 582.
human reason is above all things, and who did not know the nature of faith." [38] What is the nature of faith? "[Pascal] would say that Holy Scripture was not a science of the mind, but the science of the heart, that it was intelligible only by those who had a right heart, and that all others find in it only obscurities." [39]

The idea of distraction is another significant aspect of Pascal's thought. Gilberte describes Pascal's life after the age of thirty as attempting to rid himself of distraction in the form of his two primary enemies, "pleasure and superfluity." He dismissed his servants, and gave away the carpets in his rooms. He was so anxious to give away his money, Gilberte relates, that on several occasions, he wanted to disburse money that he did not have, and had to take out loans to do so. He became more and more preoccupied with assisting the poor of Paris, and in living like them.

He had a love so great for poverty, that it was always present to him; so that, from the time he wanted to undertake some thing, or someone asked his counsel, the first thought that came to his mind was to see if poverty could be practiced in it. [40]

This desire caused consternation among his family and friends, who considered it excessive. Gilberte relates how her brother admonished her for not being more liberal toward the poor:

He had been exhorting me with great care for four years to consecrate myself to the service of the poor, and to take my children there. And when I would

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tell him that I feared that this would divert me from the care of my family, he would say that it was only a lack of good will and that, as there were diverse degrees in the exercise of this virtue, one could well practice it without doing any harm to domestic occupations. He said that this was the general vocation of Christians, and that no particular sign was necessary to know if one had been called to it because it was certain...  

Blaise was hard on his sister in other ways. He would correct her speech if he thought it “impure,” and was opposed to her demonstrations of affection to her children. In this case, “he told me that they must be made unaccustomed to that, that it could only harm them.” Sometimes he was sharp with her when she was attempting to ease his physical pains. At the same time, however, he showed great compassion toward all sorts of people, providing shelter and employment for an orphaned girl, and allowing a whole family he had just met to share his house even though he was gravely ill. He also became a kind of spiritual director to people who would seek him out at his home in order to discuss their lives with him.

Was he charitable toward acquaintances but rigorous in dealing with his own family? This appears to have been somewhat the case, although he combined his rigour with a love toward them as Gilberte also wishes to make plain. Just before he died he had a great disagreement with Gilberte about wanting to be moved to a hospice for “incurables,” which was almost certainly a frightful establishment, to die there instead of surrounded by the comforts of Gilberte’s home. Gilberte would not agree to this. When he was confronted with the difficulties his excessiveness caused his family, though, Gilberte says that he


would render himself without resistance to the advice that he would be given. The extreme vivacity of his mind rendered him sometimes so impatient that one had trouble satisfying him; but when one would alert him, or he perceived himself, that he had angered someone in his impatience, he would repair that immediately by soft treatment and so many kindnesses that he never lost the love of anyone by that.  

At one point, however, Gilberte records that she felt convinced that in fact Blaise did not love her. When she told her sister what she was thinking, Jacqueline responded with the reassurance that she was mistaken, “that she knew well on the contrary that he had an affection for me as great as I could wish for.”  

It was thus that my sister restored my mind, and I hardly waited to see the proofs of it, for as soon as an occasion was encountered where I had need of help from my brother, he embraced it with so much care and testaments of affection, that I did not have the place to doubt that he loved me much; so that I attributed to the chagrin of his sickness the cold manners in which he would receive the assiduities that I would render to him to relieve his boredom.  

The root of Blaise’s inconsistent behaviour was later revealed in his belief that he should not become “attached” to anyone, and that no one should be attached to him, since this would necessarily distract from the wholehearted pursuit of God and attachment to Him alone, which the Christian must seek instead.  

Gilberte devotes a great deal of her account to describing Pascal’s various physical ailments. The ineptitude of 17th century medicine is painful even to read about, and must

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46See Pascal’s pensée B#471, L#396. The pensée is quoted verbatim in Gilberte’s text.
have been so much more so to endure. Pascal was required to “purge,” to drink strange concoctions, and to follow other ineffective or likely injurious remedies. Doubtless the rigour which he imposed upon himself, in “renouncing all pleasure and all superfluity” only added to his discomforts. Gilberte does not shrink from telling us that he even went so far as to “take an iron belt full of points...and when some thought of vanity came to him, or he took some pleasure” he would lash himself with it. Like many religious persons, he considered physical suffering to be uniquely valuable to the spiritual life. Gilberte quotes him as saying:

Do not complain of me; sickness is the natural state of Christians, because one is by that as one should be, in the suffering of ills, in the privation of all the goods and of all the pleasures of the senses, exempt from all the passions which work during the course of life, without ambition, without avarice, and in the continual expectation of death. Is it not thus that Christians ought to spend their lives? And is it not a great happiness when one finds oneself by necessity in the state that one is obliged to be, and that one has nothing else to do but submit to it humbly and peacefully? This is why I do not ask anything else from you than to pray God that he give me this grace.

One of Pascal’s shorter works, Prière pour le bon usage des maladies, is an expansion of this theme.

Pascal also appeared to know when he was close to death, although his family and his doctors disbelieved him. He begged Gilberte to send for the priest so that he could receive his last rites, and she was thankful that she did since he died within twenty-four hours of her doing so. His last words as Gilberte records them are, “May God never abandon me!” These are words similar to those with which he ended his mémorial as well.

47Gilberte Périer, La Vie de Pascal in Blaise Pascal, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Jean Mesnard, v. 1, p. 584.
48Gilberte Périer, La Vie de Pascal in Blaise Pascal, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Jean Mesnard, v. 1, p. 599.
In summary, Gilberte’s work emphasizes the following themes: Pascal’s evident intelligence from an early age, the immediate re-orientation of his life goals from the time of his first conversion, his subsequent desire to reduce the distractions caused by “pleasure and superfluity” in his pursuit of the spiritual life, his acclamation of poverty as salutary for the Christian life, and his painful physical condition to which he submitted without complaint. “He no longer knew any other science than perfection,” Gilberte stated, and

he found a great difference between this and those [sciences, i.e. mathematics, etc.] which had occupied his mind until then; for while his indispositions retarded the progress of those, this [science, i.e. perfection] on the contrary was perfecting him in the same indispositions by the admirable patience with which he suffered them.49

Does Gilberte’s representation of Pascal amount to the portrait of a saint? Although she doesn’t use this word to describe her brother, many critics have suggested that such a view of him was her intention, and imply by this that her description of him is false. We must first consider what we mean by this term. If we consider a saint to be simply an exceptionally devout person, then this would indeed seem an accurate word for the way in which Gilberte has portrayed Pascal, particularly during his final years. Not only Gilberte’s text, but Pascal’s many writings as well would lead one to believe that he was indeed devout and pondered spiritual things deeply.

It may be more helpful to consider saintliness according to the view held by the Jansenist sect. This community emphasized a rigorous self-discipline, a radical separation from the world, and an emphasis on the human need of divine grace. If we consider a

Jansenist “saint” to be someone who strongly desires these qualities in his or her own life, then there is no question that Pascal fits this description, from his own writings and not only from Gilberte’s. The question comes in at the point where we ask: what degree of struggle did Pascal experience in seeking to actually conform his life to these beliefs, and when, if ever, did he achieve this? It is here that some critics charge Gilberte with dissimulating an accurate view of her brother.

The saints of Christian history have believed that self-denial is the primary doorway to salvation. Such self-denial is understood as the voluntary abnegation of one’s being or of one’s interest, and may be summed up in the three typical vows of monasticism, those of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Gilberte’s description of Pascal, and Pascal’s own writings, show much evidence of his desire for self-denial and his struggle against self-love. In the third chapter we will see how this concern becomes a focal point for his interpreters in the centuries after his death.

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50 See Pascal’s pensées B#544, L#460; B#492, L#617; B#100, L#978. It is also interesting to examine the opinion of Diderot and d’Alembert in their Encyclopédie, s.v. “interêt (morale),” and “égoïsme” where they treat Pascal’s ideas on these subjects.
CHAPTER TWO

The Composition of Gilberte’s Vie de Monsieur Pascal

Date of Composition

Several pieces of evidence suggest that Gilberte wrote her first version of the biography very soon after the death of her brother; perhaps even immediately after. In the first place, we have the testimony of her letter to a certain Monsieur Audigier, dated 1682, in which she refers to this writing which she had done “twenty years ago.” It is true that she may not have been talking about twenty years exactly, but simply using this figure as an approximate number. The more significant source we have in determining the date of its composition is from the first edition of Pascal’s Traités de l’Équilibre des Liqueurs et de la Pesanteur de la Masse de l’Air, which was published posthumously in 1663. The preface to this edition, which contained a short account of Blaise’s life, was written by Florin Périer, Gilberte’s husband, and it seems clear that he used her writing as the text from which he worked. Florin obtained the permission to publish this work on April 8, 1663, and it was printed on November 1, 1663. It would seem very probable, then, that Gilberte composed her account between the death of Blaise in August 1662, and November 1663, when the treatise went to print.

51 All statements in this chapter for which no other source is given are based on Jean Mesnard’s edition of Pascal’s Oeuvres complètes, v. 1, p. 539-570.
52 In M.P. Faugère, ed. Lettres, opuscules, et mémoires de Madame Périer, p. 112-4.
53 Florin’s biography of Blaise will be discussed more fully in the following chapter.
We have evidence also that Gilberte composed more than one version of the biography. Two distinct versions are attested to by the extant manuscripts in French archives today. Jean Mesnard has treated the textual criticism of these manuscripts with great mastery in his edition of Pascal’s complete works. Since both of these manuscripts evidently circulated for many years before the first edition was published, this textual criticism poses quite a challenge. I will discuss this criticism only briefly here.

**Documents relating to the first version**

The first version, written in 1662 or 1663, as has been suggested, was passed by hand among the family and friends of the Périers. Gilberte expressed concern that it was being copied against her intention, even that it had been “stolen” from her. The extant manuscripts of this first version are:

a) The manuscript \( F \), published for the first time by Prosper Faugère in 1845, in his work entitled *Lettres, opuscules et mémoires de Madame Périer et de Jacqueline, soeurs de Pascal, et de Marguerite Périer, sa nièce* (Paris: Vaton, 1845). This manuscript is now in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, *fonds franc*, no. 25080; formerly the *fonds de l’Oratoire*, no. 226. Mesnard suggests that this is an inferior manuscript, created sometime after 1697 but before 1702, and copied actually from the *editio princeps* (first edition) published in Amsterdam in 1684.

b) The manuscript \( G \), published by Augustin Gazier in 1898 in an article in the *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France* and again in an edition of the *Pensées* in 1907. This

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54 This and the following letter names for the manuscripts have been designated by Jean Mesnard.
manuscript almost certainly came from the archives of Port-Royal and was copied sometime between 1682 and 1684.

c) The manuscript $P$, given to Mesnard by a Monsieur Parcé, and which appears more similar to $G$ than to any of the others. It may date from before 1682, and was found in a 19th century collection of manuscripts.

d) The manuscript $A$, from the Musée Calvet, Avignon, no. 1875, receuil $A$. It was almost certainly transferred to this museum from the Périer family archives, and was copied between 1674 and 1678.

e) The manuscript $O$, in the Bibliothèque municipale d'Orléans, no. 1139. Copied between 1668 and 1674, it seems most closely related to manuscript $A$ and likely was copied from the same source.

f) The manuscript $H$, described but not published by Louis Lafuma in 1960, from the collection of M.G. Haumont, receuil $A2$. It also seems to have been originally in the Périer family archives, and was copied around 1677.

In addition, the first printed edition of the Life, about which more will be said later, belongs to this group. Each of these manuscripts, as well as the editio princeps of 1684, contain relatively small differences, which make them distinct from one another but still evidently part of the same large family, reaching back to one source document. Due to one larger textual difference, however, this family is divisible into two sub-families: the printed edition and manuscript $F$ form one sub-family, and the other five manuscripts form the other.

55 See Blaise Pascal, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Jean Mesnard, v. 1, p. 546, 574. A variation in wording occurs in several sentences at this point, although the sense remains equivalent.
with $H$ standing on its own. These groupings were determined by Mesnard based on his scrutiny of the copying errors, seemingly intentional alterations, handwriting or determination of the copyists, and type and date of paper used. In addition, Mesnard suggests that evidence of the grouping $G-P$ is seen in $A-O$, creating a hierarchical structure. This may be demonstrated schematically in the following manner:
Manuscripts of the First Version

Subfamily of F and printed editions

Original MS 1662-1663 (no longer extant)

O (Orléans) 1668-1674

A (Avignon) 1674-1678 From Périer archives

G (Gazier) 1682-1684 from Port-Royal

P (Parcé) Before 1682

H (Haumont) 1677 From Périer Archives
All in all, $H$ is considered the most accurate copy, with $P$ as second most. It should be noted that each of these five manuscripts seems to have been copied before 1684, the date of the first printed edition which presumably would have made hand copying less desirable from that point on. None of these manuscripts, it would appear, were used as a source in the printing of the first edition in Amsterdam. The manuscript source for this printing is unknown.

Mesnard suggests furthermore that all of the early published editions of the *Life* were prepared based on the first printed edition, with modifications but without recourse to any manuscripts. A diagram of these publications are as follows:
Early Published Editions

Original MS
1662-1663
(No longer extant)

Editio princeps
Wolfgang
Amsterdam, 1684

Faugère MS
1697-1702
published 1845

Desprez
Paris, 1686

Schouten
Cologne, 1698

Roux & Chize
Lyon, 1687

Wolfgang
Amsterdam, 1758
(influence of Desprez evident)

1702
1714
1715
1725
1734
1748
1761
1700
1699
1701
Documents relating to the second version

The second version of the work is attested to by one manuscript only, named by Mesnard as another Faugère manuscript (although not published by him), given by Faugère to the Bibliothèque Mazarine, no. 4546. This version is longer than the first, and the content which it shares with the first version is notably re-arranged. This version was published for the first time by Léon Brunschvicg in 1908 in his edition of Pascal’s complete works. In 1950, Louis Lafuma noted that Brunschvicg had left unpublished, whether knowingly or not, one section of this manuscript, and so he published this section in his edition of Pascal’s Discours sur les passions de l’amour, in that year. His edition of the Pensées, in 1951, included this complete version.

In a letter dated 1682, Gilberte stated that she wished to re-write her biography again, and so it is not surprising that this second version exists, although it does surprise us that it is attested to by one document only. Mesnard is of the opinion that we cannot doubt the validity of this document, since the style of writing is clearly Gilberte’s, and the extra information it contains is too personal and precise to have been known by another author. The date of this version is more difficult to determine, but it would seem that it was completed between 1664 and 1670. The lower date is suggested by the fact that Gilberte’s husband did not use it in his preface of 1663, and the upper date is fixed by the mention of it in a letter dated September 13, 1670. Mesnard suggests that the version was most likely written in 1669 or 1670, when the editio princeps of the Pensées was being prepared, perhaps with a view to co-publication. The date of the extant manuscript itself is placed toward the end of the 18th century.
There is no reason to suppose that Gilberte did not redact yet another version after that date, but we have no manuscript or published text which gives substance to this possibility.

The Publication of *La Vie de Monsieur Pascal*

**Barriers to Publication**

As has been mentioned, Gilberte claimed that she did not originally intend that her work would be published, and expected only that it would be passed among friends and family. The thought of publication, when it did arise within the family, appears to have faced one significant barrier which I suggest accounts for the long delay before the first published edition appeared in 1684, which in fact appeared without the family’s fore-knowledge and consent. This barrier was the infamous story of Pascal’s supposed deathbed recantation from Jansenism. As much as the true story can be determined, it appears that the local parish priest, Fr. Paul Beurrier, who administered Pascal’s last rites, was persuaded into signing a document stating that in his last years Pascal had separated himself from his Jansenist friends. In his *Mémoires*, Beurrier later described how the archbishop of Paris, Hardouin de Péréfixe, summoned him to ask whether it was true that Pascal had died without receiving the sacraments and in an “unchristian” manner. In fact, the archbishop said, some people were even talking of removing his tomb from the parish church! We do not know whether in fact any of these stories were actually circulating, but by them the archbishop succeeded in

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obtaining from the priest what he desired: for Fr. Beurrier, wishing anxiously then to re-establish Pascal’s Catholic standing since otherwise he would have been guilty of giving the sacraments to a heretic, replied that Pascal, far from being a heretic, had said during his last days that he was in disagreement with the Port-Royal community. (Since the Jansenists were considered by many to be heretical, this statement vouched for Pascal’s orthodoxy.) This Declaration, as it became known, was dated January 7, 1665, prepared by the archbishop and signed by Beurrier:

[Beurrier] had known the said Sieur Pascal six weeks before his death; that he had confessed him several times, and administered the holy Viaticum and the Holy Sacrament of Extreme Unction; and that in all the conversation which he had with him during his illness, he remarked that his sentiments were always strongly orthodox, and perfectly in submission to the Church and to our Holy Father the Pope. Moreover he testified to him in a familiar conversation, that he had previously got caught up with the party of these [Jansenist] men, but that for two years he had withdrawn from them, because he had remarked that they went too far in matters of Grace, and that they appeared to have less submission than they owed to our Holy Father the Pope...  

This news was greeted with delight by enemies of Jansenism who quickly spread it throughout Paris and even reported it to the Pope. The Périer family, and numerous of Pascal’s friends, were confounded by this turn of events, for Fr. Beurrier was an acquaintance from whom they did not expect any falseness but neither could they reconcile his words with their intimate knowledge of Pascal. Pierre Nicole responded first, suggesting that the “disagreement” between Pascal and the Port-Royal community to which Father Beurrier had referred must have in fact concerned the signing of the Formulary, an important incident in the history of Port-Royal, and about which Pascal was angry at his fellow Jansenists for being

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too willing to appear in submission to the Catholic authorities. Gilberte herself wrote to Father Beurrier, in order to "enlighten [him] with the truth about everything." She wrote politely, suggesting that Fr. Beurrier had been honestly mistaken in what he had understood Pascal to have said. She too surmised that the misunderstanding had arisen from the affair of the Formulary, about which Pascal

had a love and an extraordinary zeal for truth and for sincerity [that] he could not keep himself from complaining to all his friends, using even strong words, as to say that he was angry to have engaged himself so far in the affairs of these men, and other similar words, which made some think that he spoke completely otherwise than what he wished to say. However it is certain...that he never doubted the sincerity of their faith, and never suspected of them any error against the faith; but that he believed that the tenderness that they had for the religious of Port-Royal, and the fear of seeing them exposed to all the perils which menaced them, carried them to consent to [the Formulary] to save the house....Sir, I believe that having the honour to be known by you just as I am, you will do me the justice of believing that I am not capable of advancing a fact of this importance against the truth. There are a hundred honourable people and from all sorts of conditions who can tell you the same thing...that my brother accused these men of no heretical sentiment, but only of being relaxed in their expressions...I assure you that these contestations never altered the charity between these men and my brother. Mr. Arnauld came to see him during his illness, and made all sorts of professions of friendship to him....and I can assure you of this, because my brother always had the grace to live with me without any reserve, and to communicate to me the most secret sentiments of his heart. Thus, Sir, I supplicate you very humbly to have the bounty to go over in your memory all the words that my brother spoke to you, and you will see that, whatever consequence you have drawn...may be completely just because of the expressions he used, nonetheless he intended you to understand the contrary...58

Several other letters were sent back and forth between Beurrier, the archbishop, the Périers, and other concerned parties during the following years. Finally on June 12, 1671, Fr.

Beurrier wrote to Gilberte, expressing his dismay at inadvertently causing such grief to the memory of Pascal:

It is true, Madame, that when I spoke to [the archbishop] I believed in good faith that [Pascal] had made me understand what I put in my Declaration ... I have well recognized that his words could have had another sense than that which I gave them: as also I believed that the subject of their disagreement was completely different from what I had imagined. There, Madame, is all that I will say to you of this Declaration, which I wish with all my heart I never had given, for it did not conform to the truth of his sentiments, and it has been abused against my intention...to decry people for whom I have much esteem.  

When he realized the damage, he attempted to correct it, but only after the death of Péréfixe—his letter to Gilberte is dated six months afterward. Evidently the priest did not feel at liberty to express his regret until that time. Although the Périer family received this letter and doubtless publicized it widely, the affair was already many years old and the damage had already been done.

When the first edition of the Pensees was being prepared, the archbishop declared to the bookseller Desprez that Fr. Beurrier’s Declaration should be printed together with it. The Périer family and the larger Port-Royal community, thus already fearing that the Pensees would suffer from this affair, certainly did not want to antagonize the Catholic authorities any more by bringing out at the same time a biography which would stir up the matter afresh. Besides, it was quite unlikely that such a work would be given the privilège it required in order to achieve a legal publication. For this reason, the first hints of the Périer family’s plans


60 Beurrier’s honest opinion regarding Pascal’s last words is still questioned today. See for example the comments made by the Roman Catholic Monsignor Ronald Knox, in his introduction to Jean Mesnard, Pascal: His Life and Works, trans. by G.S. Fraser (London: Harvill, 1952), p. x.
to have the biography published are from documents dated after the archbishop’s death in 1671. The first edition of Pascal’s *Pensees*, which came out in 1670, did not include Gilberte’s work, but contained a shorter preface relating to the life of Pascal which was written by Étienne Périer, Gilberte’s son.

The affair of the Beurrier Declaration is generally believed to be the cause for the long delay in publishing Gilberte’s work. Other arguments for the delay, namely that Gilberte’s account was not truthful or appreciated by those who had known Pascal, have been put forward by her critics, and these questions will be raised in chapter three.

**Attempts at Publication**

The publication of the work was suggested almost immediately to the family by some people who, as Gilberte stated, believed that “the public would be edified by reading it.” Repeatedly, her writing seems to have been praised both for its content and its style. The first to make an offer for it was Antoine-Roger de Bridieu, the archdeacon of Beauvais, who wrote in 1671 to Florin Périer suggesting that with “a few minor corrections” this “beautiful and edifying” work could be made ready. He also mentioned that someone from his shop had apparently run off with a copy, and so the thing should be done immediately in order to anticipate any possible unauthorized version.61 Perhaps the Périers had been approached earlier and had refused the idea of publication, for Mr. Bridieu seems to have thought it necessary to add this story of its being stolen (whether true or not!) as a strong incentive.

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Florin Périer must have written a negative reply, and Brideau respected the family's wishes. Jean Mesnard has suggested the manuscripts of the A-O sub-family as being those collected by Bridieu in 1671 with the intention of publishing from them.

Gilberte had obtained a privilège to publish her Life as early as 1673, which was valid for ten years, but this may not mean that she had intended to publish the work then, or ever. Privilèges were necessary for legal publication, but they also served as copyright protection to hinder others from publishing the same work. Gilberte may have registered her right to publish only in order to keep others from doing so. At least, this is the reason she gives in her letter to Audigier in 1682.

The matter did eventually arise within the small circle of friends and family. The printer closely linked to this circle, Guillaume Desprez, suggested that the Life might be printed with the second edition of the Pensées which was being prepared. On March 8, 1677, Gilberte's sons Louis and Blaise, who were then studying in Paris, conveyed to their mother in Clermont that they had put the question to Blaise's former friends Antoine Arnauld, Pierre Nicole, and the Duke of Roannez, among others, but these men had decided that the time was not yet right to attempt publication, since the controversy regarding Pascal's supposed recantation had not yet subsided, and the book might even be suppressed. Perhaps at some future date, they suggested, the Life could be published, along with an addition prepared by Gilberte which would treat the story of his death in detail. As well, her sons added that [Lives] have become so common that they are regarded with indifference enough, because it is imagined by everyone that families publish them only by a kind of ambition and vanity,
and finally, they suggested that the work in its present form would not satisfy the curiosity of those who would read it, who would want more sensational details concerning the controversies surrounding the *Provinciales*, and other events.\(^{62}\)

Gilberte seems to have acquiesced in these opinions, for the second edition of the *Pensees* proceeded in 1678 without the *Life* being published with it. Desprez's *privilège* for the book, however, was registered for both the *Pensees* as well as *La Vie*, on August 25, 1677.

Finally in 1682, a Clermont historian named Jacques Audigier suggested again to the Périer family that an edition of *La Vie* be published, along with an article which he would compose concerning the true story of Pascal's deathbed statements. Gilberte's reply was firm. Since this letter is a significant source for many details which I have given already, I believe it is worth quoting in full at this point:

I was very surprised, Sir, to learn that a small memoir that I wrote, twenty years ago, about some particularities of the life of my brother, and which was stolen from me at that time, having fallen into your hands, you have had the thought of having it printed. I am persuaded, Sir, that being friends as we have been for so long, you have not believed to disoblige me in this. Thus I have not desisted to tell you yourself of my sentiments, knowing well that as soon as you know them, you will change your mind. It is a small work that I made for my family and for some particular friends who had asked me for it. However, as against my intention several copies of it were made, it often happened that persons who knew me and others who did not know me, having believed that the public would be edified by this reading, took the same design as you: but neither one nor the other having wanted to do it without my participation, I prayed them to dispense with this trouble, because if I wanted this piece to appear, I would do it myself and I would put it in another state than it is. Thus no one has yet done it. But as I saw that I was often in this danger, I obtained a most ample *privilège* to serve me when I would want to

print this work in the manner in which it must be, or by this to hinder it being
done against my liking and intention. I am assured, Sir, that I will have need of
nothing against you and that you would well wish to leave me the mistress of a
good which belongs to me by so many titles. Someone has also conveyed to
me that you had the design to join to it a preface in which you would speak of
the thing which is founded on a noise which is extremely contrary to the truth,
and about which I see well that you are not informed.

My brother never retracted and never had the need to do so, having in
all his life only the most pure and most Catholic of sentiments; and the
declaration upon which this calumny is founded gives not one word of
retraction. I have an authentic copy of it which was sent to me by the
archbishop of Paris, and the one who gave this declaration has had much
displeasure from the abuse that has been made of it. He recognized himself
that he made a mistake, having taken the words of my brother in a sense
contrary to that which they had. These are the proper terms that he used in his
letters which he gave me the honour of writing on this subject, and which he
permitted me to show to everyone, and even to render them publicly if that
were necessary. But as he is still alive and in Paris, you can assure yourself of
it. His own testimony will be of stronger weight that mine; he is a man of great
enough consideration in the world and in his [monastic] order to be believed. I
refer you to him. I supplicate you once more, Sir, to wish to receive it from
him. I hope that you will not refuse me this grace, and that you will oblige me
in this more and more, as I have always been, to you and your whole family,
Sir, your, etc.

G. Pascal.

If it happens, Sir, that my letter comes too late and that there is
something begun on the press, I supplicate you to do me the grace of stopping
everything.⁶³

First and Later Editions

This was the final attempt which we know of to have the work published with
Gilberte’s consent. Two years later, the first published edition, prepared from a manuscript of
the first version Gilberte had written twenty two years previously, was published in 1684

⁶³From the text in M.P. Faugère, ed. Lettres, opuscules, et mémoires de Madame Périé, p. 112-4.
along with an edition of the *Pensées*, by an Amsterdam bookseller named Abraham Wolfgang, and without the knowledge or consent of Gilberte or her family. This edition contained nothing about the controversy of the pretended retraction, and the fears about official censure appeared to be unfounded since there was no reaction from the authorities. Its favourable reception was likely aided by a review of it by Pierre Bayle published in that year, in his *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres*, about which more will be said in the next chapter.

The Périer family archive does reveal that Arnauld, Nicole and Roannez, among others, gave the family signed depositions, all dated 1684, which denied the Beurrier affair, as it was known, and this may suggest that an edition to which these depositions might be affixed was perhaps being prepared for publication at the time that the one in Amsterdam appeared. Or, perhaps these depositions were made immediately after the Amsterdam edition appeared, as a safeguard by the family in case the Beurrier affair should erupt again because of it.

When no reaction occurred, Desprez reprinted the Dutch edition in Paris in 1686, and that was followed in 1687 by the editions of booksellers Roux and Chize in Lyon. Since Gilberte had not seen or approved the copy which was originally used by Wolfgang, and then repeated by the other publishers, the first several editions printed were full of errors. If an authorized version had been printed first instead, and then copied by the other printers, the text would not have suffered as much. The addition which had been planned, treating the last sentiments of Pascal, was never printed either. Gilberte died three years after the book's first appearance in Amsterdam, and we do not have any letters or other records to tell us of her reaction. It is likely that the appearance of the book upset her greatly, given that she had desired so strongly to control its publication.
A year after Gilberte’s death, Antoine Arnauld suggested in a letter to Louis Périer that he re-write and enlarge his mother’s work, but no record of such a project survives, if in fact it was ever undertaken.

The first attempt for a “corrected” text came from a printer Nicolas Schouten, of Cologne (Mesnard suggests that both his name and city may have been fictional), in 1698. This printer prepared a new text and published it along with the Provincial Letters. Unfortunately, it appears that he did not make use of any early manuscript to determine what the corrections might be, but made changes which he believed to be improvements by his own authority. In a similar manner, Claude Chize of Lyon published an edition in 1699 without apparent recourse to any manuscript version.

In 1702, Guillaume Desprez reworked his original edition apparently also without recourse to any manuscript version, and further editions of it as a preface to the Pensées appeared in 1714, 1715, 1725, 1734, 1748, and finally 1761. It should be noted that in all the Schouten, Chize, and Desprez editions the changes were numerous but very minor. Mostly they attempted to correct what they believed were copying or printing errors, or at the most, slight improvements of style. None of these printers can be accused of changing or rearranging the real substance of Gilberte’s work, which may be proved by comparing their publications with the early manuscripts to which we have access today.

The most recent edition of Gilberte’s biography, along with a companion biography she wrote about the life of her sister Jacqueline (which, in contrast to the biography of Blaise, was not first published until 1751), has been published in 1994 by La Table Ronde in Paris,
edited by Alain Couprie. Mr. Couprie has used the manuscript Haumont, along with Mésnard's corrections.

**English Translations**

A mere four years after its first printing in Amsterdam, The *Life of Pascal* appeared in English as a preface to the first English edition of Pascal's *Pensées*, in 1688. This work, entitled *Monsieur Pascall's Thoughts, Meditations, and Prayers, Touching Matters Moral and Divine, As they were found in his Papers after his Death*, was prepared by one Joseph Walker of London, and was financed by Jacob Tonson. Little is known about Walker, except that he was a translator of several French works and a Protestant. Like many of Pascal's popularizers in England, his underlying motivation in translating Pascal's works was to reveal the political danger which the Jesuits were believed to constitute in England at this time, a motivation which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.\(^{64}\)

We do not know which source Walker used for his translation of *The Life*, although it seems evident that he used the Port-Royal edition (the first) for the *Pensées*. He admitted that his translation was not particularly good, and apologized for his lack of skill. The Walker edition did not see a second printing. In 1704 another Englishman, Basil Kennett, produced a new translation of the *Pensées*, which became the standard version of the 18th century. Gilberte's *Life* was not included in it.

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\(^{64}\)Information regarding the early English editions of the *Life* has been drawn from John Barker, *Strange Contrarieties: Pascal in England during the Age of Reason* (Montreal: McGill-Queens, 1975).
Her work was not available in English again until 1723, when it was published as *The Life of the Celebrated Monsieur Pascal, Collected from the Writings of Madame Périer, his Sister*, by Edward Jesup. The Preface to the Reader referred to Gilberte “who was as nearly allied to [Pascal] in Genius, as she was in Blood,” and to her work as being written in “a plain, easy, and familiar Style (which is surely the best Style that a Biographer can make Use of).”

Finally, the *Life* was published in English in a new translation of the *Provincial Letters* in 1744, prepared by a William Andrews, who wanted to be known only by his initials. Like those translators before him, Andrews mentioned his desire to work against the influence of Jesuits in England as the most pressing reason for his efforts. There has been no English edition since 1744.

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CHAPTER THREE

The Influence of *La Vie*

This chapter will explore the significance that Gilberte’s text has had upon the interpretations of her brother’s life which were formed in the centuries following his death. Since the second version of Gilberte’s *Life* was not published until 1908, it is the influence of the first version which we will be considering. Its influence may be traced through a vast number of works which have been written from 1684 to the present. An exhaustive survey cannot be made in this chapter, and so I will discuss here only some, and I hope to capture the most significant, of the diverse and interesting documents which witness to the influence of *La Vie*.

The estimation of Gilberte’s work has risen and fallen along with the estimation of Pascal himself, which will be made clearer in the following pages. In those cases where negative criticism of Gilberte’s document has been made, one issue has been that Gilberte’s biography was more “hagiographical” than factual: that she attempted to represent Pascal as a saint, or at least as more pious than perhaps he truly was. As we have already seen, perhaps some of this criticism has resulted simply from overlooking the genre in which Gilberte was writing, although even Marie-Thérèse Hipp, in her study of the 17th century memoir, singles out Gilberte’s text as being particularly prone to “idealization.”67 In any case, scholars who have viewed Gilberte’s document in this way point to the inconsistencies between her description of him and other facts of his life which are independently known, such as his

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“worldly period,” which Gilberte glosses over, and his heated debates with other scientists which Gilberte does not refer to but says instead that Pascal “never had any passion for reputation.” Instead of learning these less noble things about him in the Life, her critics argue, we hear only of his virtues. This criticism was only exacerbated by the resounding praise which her text had first received in the decades following its appearance, as being a testament to the piety of Pascal. This praise would change to abuse by the end of the 18th century.

The second issue (which may be simply the most crucial instance of the first issue) is the question of Pascal’s loyalties or state of mind between 1646, the date of his “first conversion,” and 1654, his “second conversion.” If he in fact did not renounce his scientific pursuits from the time of his first conversion in 1646, as Gilberte says he did, are there other statements which she makes that misrepresent or falsify the story of her brother’s life? In some cases, scholars have rejected her work almost entirely upon this one sentence in her document, that from 1646 “he terminated all his research.” Most other scholars, though, have not wanted to dismiss her document for this reason only and have found her still their best source for knowledge of Pascal’s life.

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68 Gilberte does appear to view Pascal’s “worldly period” as a period of backsliding from the spiritual life, and many other writers have assumed this as well. But I wonder whether instead Pascal had a definite purpose for his occupations during these years, which was in keeping with his growing religious convictions. He may have undertaken “worldly pursuits” expressly in order to “study man” better, and gone on to use this knowledge to great effect in his later writings.

69 Gilberte Périer, La Vie de Pascal in Blaise Pascal, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Jean Mesnard, v. 1, p. 576.
The wide acceptance which Gilberte’s text had within the Port-Royal community is amply documented. Perhaps the greatest evidence of this is that *La Vie* formed the prefatory material for almost all Port-Royal editions of Pascal’s work, well into the 18th century, as was shown in the preceding chapter. As well, Gilberte’s text formed the basis for the entry on Pascal in the *Nécrologe de Port-Royal*, a volume intended as a final summation of the lives of members and friends of Port-Royal after the community’s dispersal.\(^{70}\) Her account, then, appears to have been wholly satisfactory to what became in fact almost a “cult” around the memory of Pascal among Port-Royalists. Similarly, the more recent Jansenist scholar Augustin Gazier did not raise any questions about the text’s validity in his discussion of it in 1904.\(^{71}\)

As such, there is little here that is unexpected or which raises questions for our study, and thus, we will focus on other sources. We will consider now the influence of Gilberte’s text first upon the writings of her own family members: her husband, her son, and her daughter, and then continue in a chronological order, starting with Pierre Bayle’s response to the *Life* immediately after its publication in 1684, and moving forward through the centuries to reach its standing among scholars of Pascal today.


Family Sources

In assessing the following documents, we must bear in mind the likelihood that family members, whatever they may privately have thought of the value or accuracy of Gilberte’s text, would have held back from expressing criticism out of deference toward her. We do not know the extent to which they supported Gilberte’s account, but their writings provide points of useful comparison.

Florin Périer’s *Préface des Traités de l'équilibre des liqueurs et de la pesanteur de la masse de l'air*, published 1663.\(^2\)

Pascal carried out the experiments upon which these treatises were based in 1647-8, and composed the treatises themselves in 1653-4, although Florin’s preface suggests that they were written in 1651. This discrepancy may suggest that Florin was not careful with his dates, which may cast into doubt other details as well. Florin states that Pascal had recognized “the vanity and the nothingness” of his scientific pursuits “more than ten years before his death,” which would refer to the year 1652, when he was twenty-nine or thirty. As we have seen, Gilberte emphasized the year 1646 instead, although she later adds that at the age of thirty another re-orientation of his life occurred. Florin appears to be suggesting that the decisive re-orientation away from science occurred at that later date, which is against the emphases of Gilberte, but more in keeping with the facts of Pascal’s life as we know them.

We do find overwhelming support for Gilberte’s text in Florin’s, however. His preface reproduces some of the early passages of her text, by paraphrase and at times by direct

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quotation, although he does not refer to her by name as his source. In addition, Florin makes
the remark, echoing the very words of Gilberte, that although Blaise produced his treatise on
the cycloid after having supposedly abandoned his scientific pursuits, "this is not contrary to
what I say, because he found all of what it contains as by accident and without applying
himself to it."

Étienne Périers preface to the Port-Royal (first) edition of the Pensées, 1669 or 1670.73

In this document Étienne takes a position similar to his father's regarding the time that
Pascal's conversion occurred, and against the emphases of his mother Gilberte. The preface
which Étienne composed for the first edition of Pascal's Pensées begins immediately with
these words:

Pascal, having quitted very young the study of mathematics, physics, and the
other profane sciences, in which he had made such great progress, began, near
the thirtieth year of his age, to apply himself to more serious and lofty things,
and to devote himself uniquely, as much as his health could permit him, to the
study of the Scriptures, the Fathers, and Christian morality.

Like his father, Étienne is not explicitly contradicting his mother's chronology, but bringing it
closer to what may have been more accurate, at least as outward events seemed to show.

Étienne Périers then goes on to discuss Pascal's Pensées, but returns at the end of his
preface to a description of Pascal's life. His mother's influence predominates in many details,
and in several long passages Étienne Périers quotes her text verbatim. Regarding Pascal's
conversion, though, Étienne presents a significantly different picture. He writes:

clxxx-cxcix.
But finally, after having thus passed his youth in occupations and diversions which appear innocent enough in the eyes of the world, God touched him in such a way, that he made him understand perfectly that the Christian religion obliges to live only for Him, and to have no other object but Him. And this truth appeared to him so evident, so useful and so necessary, that it made him resolve to withdraw himself; and to free himself bit by bit from all the attachments which he had in the world to be able to apply himself uniquely to it.

If we compare this paragraph with Gilberte’s own, the changes Étienne has made become evident. Gilberte had stated:

Immediately after these experiences, and while he was still only twenty-four, the Providence of God having made grow an opportunity which obliged him to read some writings of piety, God enlightened him in such a way by this reading that he understood perfectly that the Christian religion obliges us to live only for God, and to have no other object but him; and this truth seemed to him to evident, so necessary and so useful, that it terminated all his research: in such a way that from that time onward he renounced all other knowledges to apply himself uniquely to the unique thing which Jesus Christ calls necessary.

Where Gilberte stated that at the age of twenty-four, Pascal “terminated all his research” and “from that time onward renounced all other knowledges,” Étienne suggests instead that at that time Pascal only “resolved to withdraw himself, and to free himself bit by bit from all the attachments which he had in the world.” Étienne goes on to say,

This desire of retreat, and of leading a more Christian and regulated life, came to him when he was still very young; and it carried him from that time to quit entirely the study of the profane sciences to apply himself only to those which could contribute to his salvation and that of others. But the continual sicknesses which came to him turned him for some time from his design, and hindered him from being able to execute it earlier than at the age of thirty.74

Although Étienne says that this resolve “carried [Pascal] from that time to entirely quit the study of the profane sciences to apply himself only to those which could contribute to his

74 Blaise Pascal, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Brunschvicg, v. 12, p. cxcvii.
salvation,” he leaves the suggestion open that this was a process which may have taken some years. He also adds the explanation that Pascal’s “continual sicknesses which came to him turned him for some time from his design, and hindered him from being able to execute it earlier than at the age of thirty.” Notably absent is any idea of a radical change in Pascal’s life, until the age of thirty. At this point, Étienne Périer takes up his mother’s text again, saying that Pascal began

to break off all of a sudden all his habits. He changed quarters, and then retired to the country, where he stayed for some time; from where, returning, he witnessed so well that he wanted to quit the world that the world finally quit him.\textsuperscript{75}

Étienne Périer does appear, though, to have been in strict agreement with all the other emphases which Gilberte brings to bear in her text, such as Pascal’s love of poverty, his patience in suffering, and his desire to avoid all “pleasure and superfluity.” It appears also that he supported Gilberte’s account of Pascal’s discovery of Euclid’s 32nd proposition, when he alludes to “the strange and surprising way in which he learned [geometry and mathematics] at the age of eleven or twelve.”

How did Gilberte feel about her son’s representation of Blaise’s conversion? One would think that if she wanted to cling to the interpretation she had invited in her own text, as so many scholars have thought she did, then we might expect her to disapprove strongly of the changes her son made, or perhaps just keep silent. Surprisingly, this does not appear to be the case. In a letter dated April 1, 1670, Gilberte seems to express approval of her son’s work. She mentions that another preface for the \textit{Pensees} had been prepared by M. de la

\textsuperscript{75}Blaise Pascal, \textit{Oeuvres complètes}, ed. Brunschvicg. v. 12, p. excvii.
Chaise, which "did not at all contain the things we wished to say, and contains several things which we did not wish to say," and which then led the family to request Étienne to prepare his preface instead. Gilberte goes on to refer to the "finesse which my son exercised," in the writing of his account.

We have another, stronger, piece of evidence to suggest that Gilberte was not holding tenaciously to her version of how and when Pascal’s conversion occurred—because in her second version of the Life, she modifies her story significantly. This second version, which was not published until the 20th century and was likely unknown to most scholars until then, is in fact much easier to reconcile with the facts established independently concerning this period of Pascal’s life.

In this second version, Gilberte begins by remarking, as she did in her first account, that when Pascal was not yet twenty-four "the Providence of God...obliged him to read some writings of piety," which led him to "terminate all his researches, in such a way that from that time onward he renounced all other knowledges," and then goes on to describe how his doctors recommended that he “put himself in the world,” as a remedy for his physical sufferings. As though against his will, Pascal did so, and

he appeared several times at Court, where people ...remarked that he took on its air and manners with as much ease as if he had been nourished in it all his life...

This was the most poorly used time of his life, although by the mercy of God he was preserved from its vices, finally, it is still the air of the world, which is much different from that of the Gospel. God, who would ask of him a greater perfection, did not wish to leave him there much longer....He was thirty years

old when he resolved to quit these new engagements that he had in the world; he began to change his quarters, and to break off his habits the more, he went to the country, returning after a considerable retreat.77

Why did Gilberte expand on Blaise's period “in the world” in this second version? Did she become convinced that she had made a mistake with her first text, that intentionally or unintentionally she had emphasized and de-emphasized certain periods of Pascal’s life which were now leading to an inaccurate picture of him? If so, what caused her to change her mind about the version she had first written? Had she received criticism? If she had intentionally omitted Pascal’s “worldly period” from her first account, did she come to believe that she could not conceal this omission from her readers? Whatever the case, the existence of this second version is important. Mesnard has suggested that this second version was composed in 1669 or 1670, but since it was not the version published in the centuries following Pascal’s death, few scholars knew of it or worked from it. Almost certainly, however, the Périer family would have been familiar with it from the time it was written. And so Étienne’s preface may not represent such a radical departure from Gilberte as we might otherwise believe.

Marguerite Périer’s Mémoire sur sa famille, composed between 1713 and 1733.78

The first comment Marguerite makes regarding her uncle in this memoir is in the description of the family’s conversion in 1646. She makes the particular point of saying that from that time onward, “Mr. Pascal resolved to abandon the world in order to think on God


78In Blaise Pascal, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Jean Mesnard, v. 1, p. 1077.
only.” Soon afterward in her text, she says, “it is useless to say anything of Mr. Pascal, my uncle, because his life was written by Madame Périer, his sister and my mother.” This would suggest that at the time of this writing Marguerite agreed, or appeared to agree, with her mother’s account wholeheartedly, even to the point of having nothing to add to it.

Most interestingly, Marguerite comments that her own father Florin had a “belt full of points” which he showed her when he thought he was on the point of death, asking her to throw it in the ditch if he died or to give it back to him if he recovered. Presumably he wanted to hide this instrument of bodily mortification from other family members. As we heard from Gilberte’s account, Blaise also made use of this practice, and she discovered this fact only after his death. Marguerite’s information, if it is trustworthy, that Blaise was not the only one in the family to practice this form of self-mortification is a piece of evidence in favour of Gilberte as being less a “hagiographer” of Blaise than some commentators have wished to believe. The extreme rigour which she describes of Pascal was apparently practiced by other Jansenists as well. Marguerite also remarks that after her father’s death the family learned that he had kept a plank in his bed, presumably for the same ascetic purposes.

*Mémoire sur Pascal et sa Famille,* composed by Marguerite sometime after the *Mémoire sur sa Famille,* and before her death in 1733.79

This second document by Marguerite is the more interesting of the two as concerns our object of study, since it details several events in Pascal’s life which Gilberte did not include in either version of the *Life.* It is unclear, and intriguing, why Marguerite wrote this

second document with the new information it provides, after having stated in her earlier work that she had nothing to add to her mother's words.

This text begins immediately with a story of Blaise as a one-year-old child, who fell sick with some strange condition that Étienne and Antoinette Pascal's friends and neighbours believed was the result of a witch's spell. At first the Pascals refused to believe this idea, thinking themselves to be above superstition, but when the witch in fact confessed to her crime and described the available remedy, Étienne immediately did as she directed, and Blaise was cured. The whole story is extreme, and whether it happened in this way or at all, its incredible or embarrassing nature may be the reason that Gilberte left it out of her own record, although Marguerite gives her source for this story as Gilberte herself.  

Regarding the family's conversion in 1646, in this account Marguerite does not say that Blaise abandoned his scientific pursuits immediately. Instead, she comments that until that time all the family's talents had been devoted regrettably to the "human sciences only," which are "nothingness and emptiness," but that upon his conversion Pascal began to "taste and embrace" a different study.

Marguerite makes an important contribution to the question of Pascal's loyalties between 1646 and 1654. Like her mother's account in the second version of the Life, Marguerite states that due to the severity of Pascal's physical illnesses, "caused by the great application which he had given to the sciences," his doctors recommended that he take a

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80 This story is also contained in an anonymous document, given as "a most extraordinary story that Mme Périer recounted to us about her brother," which was in the archives of the Fathers of the Oratory at Clermont. See Blaise Pascal, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Jean Mesnard, v. 1, p. 506-8, and M.P. Faugère, Lettres, opuscules et mémoires de Madame Périer, p. 471-3.
respite from intellectual pursuits. This Pascal did, and he was “no longer occupied by sciences nor by the things of piety,” but “returned to the world, to play and divert himself.”

Marguerite remarks that at the time of his father’s death in 1651, Pascal was still living in this manner. He became interested in finding a wife and a position in society. His conversion occurred while visiting his sister Jacqueline at Port-Royal, at which time he heard a particularly inspiring sermon, which he believed “had been made for him alone” because it was so fitting to his own life. Very soon after, he “determined to break entirely with the world,” and went to spend some time in “the country.” It is only at this point that Marguerite states that Pascal “thus quit the world, and resolved to not occupy himself any longer except with the things of God.”

Marguerite’s account here of the years between 1646 and 1654 is the fullest, and likely the most accurate one that we have, from the point of view that it conforms to external events. We know that after 1646 Pascal did continue to engage himself in his societal occupations, although Marguerite makes it sound that these were of a frivolous nature and did not involve his continued scientific pursuits. In fact, the idea of Pascal’s “worldly period” comes in large part from the information Marguerite provides. Jacqueline’s entrance into Port-Royal in 1652, and Blaise’s subsequent quarrel with her regarding the family estate, are much easier to understand from a “worldly” man such as Marguerite describes him in this period. His “night of fire” and time spent at Port-Royal, where Marguerite states that he heard the life-changing sermon, coincided in 1654, and his time in the country may refer to his retreat at Port-Royal a short while later.
Marguerite echoes the family line concerning Blaise's proposition on the cycloid—that he conceived of the idea by accident, and undertook it only as a distraction from his physical pain—but she adds an explanation for his challenge to the scholarly community regarding it. She states that Pascal was persuaded to issue the contest by his friend Roannez, who suggested that if Pascal wanted atheists to take note of the book on religion which he was preparing, he should first gain their respect by demonstrating his abilities in subjects which they already valued.

**Pierre Bayle**

Immediately following the appearance in Amsterdam of the first published edition of the *Life*, the influential free-thinker Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) considered it noteworthy enough to publish a review in his journal *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* in December, 1684. This strongly favourable review likely set on course the wide acceptance which Gilberte's document received in the next several decades. Bayle described Gilberte's account in this manner:

> A hundred volumes of sermons are not worth this Life, and are much less capable of disarming the impious. The humility, and the extraordinary devotion of Mr. Pascal mortify the libertines more than if one let loose a dozen missionaries on them. Neither can they tell us any longer, that it is only small spirits\(^1\) which have piety, for they can be shown it to be the most advanced in one of the greatest geometers, the most subtle metaphysicians, and the most

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\(^1\)The French word *esprit*, which I have translated here as “spirit,” is one of the most difficult French words to convey into English. Its semantic field is broad, and refers variously to the center of thought, conscience, attitude, or character; to the mind; the soul; as well as “spirit” in all the English uses of the term.
penetrating spirits which has ever been in the world...One does well to publish the example of such a great virtue...\textsuperscript{82}

Bayle very clearly views Gilberte’s text as being didactic; that is, providing an example of virtue so great as to “disarm the impious.” Perhaps these words may be taken to show in what measure Gilberte’s document was interpreted almost immediately in a “hagiographical” light. We should bear in mind, however, that Bayle was reviewing the first publication of \textit{La Vie}, which appeared within a volume of the \textit{Pensées}, not on its own, and so his interpretation was being made in that context. Pascal had hoped to shape his \textit{pensées} into a book which might convert unbelievers to the truths of the Christian religion. I would suggest, therefore, that in his review Bayle is considering Gilberte’s text primarily in the light of its contribution toward her brother’s goal for his \textit{pensées}, more so than rendering any substantial judgement regarding the value, accuracy, or intention of the work in itself. Notwithstanding this, the fact that a scholar of Bayle’s influence endorsed the work so strongly and so quickly after its appearance no doubt greatly influenced its acceptance on much broader grounds than his original endorsement.\textsuperscript{83}

Later, in his \textit{Dictionnaire historique et critique} (1695-96), Bayle included an article on Pascal which became enormously influential in France as well as in England in the following century.\textsuperscript{84} In a short space of text (although his footnotes were voluminous), Bayle succinctly


\textsuperscript{83}Bayle’s apparently high opinion of Pascal, and of Gilberte’s text, is difficult to reconcile with the fact that his own writings were intended primarily to throw religious orthodoxy into doubt. What were his true intentions in praising the \textit{Pensées} and the \textit{Vie} so highly?

\textsuperscript{84}The dictionary appeared in many editions, with the editors of some of the later editions inserting their own or others’ commentary into Bayle’s text. For this thesis I primarily used the English edition.
covered the facts and concerns of Pascal’s life, and in doing so stated clearly that his primary sources were Gilberte’s *Vie de Pascal* and Florin’s preface to the *Traité de l’équilibre des liqueurs*, from which he quoted passages at length. Following Gilberte, Bayle describes Pascal’s intelligence, his abandonment of scientific pursuits, his piety and self-mortification, his patience in illness, and his non-attachment to those around him. Bayle reports the story of Pascal’s childhood discovery of geometry. He also adheres strictly to Gilberte’s account of Pascal’s conversion. He says,

> [Pascal] forsook that study “and all his other enquiries to apply himself to that one thing which Jesus Christ calls necessary.” He was not yet 24 years old, when the reading of some pious books put him upon making this holy resolution.  

and continues a short while later by quoting Gilberte, that:

> “...although he wrote afterward a tract entitled La Roulette, this is no wise contrary to what I say...Having embraced a kind of life, abstracted from the world, at the age of 30 years, he governed himself by this maxim of renouncing all pleasures and superfluity”

Bayle also addresses the question of Pascal’s “last sentiments,” for he comments that,

> It was given out, that in the last days of his sickness he detested that book [the *Provincial Letters*], and that he repented of his having been a Jansenist, but this was found to be false, although it cannot be denied that there was some misunderstanding between him and the gentlemen of Port-Royal.

Evidence of Bayle’s influence upon the knowledge and interpretation of Pascal’s life is wide-spread. As one example among many, it may be noted that the article on Pascal given in second edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica (1777-84) is clearly drawn from Bayle. (The Britannica’s first edition contained no entry on Pascal.)


But as many commentators have noted, Bayle’s articles were strictly orthodox, but his footnotes were subversive. It is here that his scepticism comes to the fore as a commentary upon the articles themselves. In one such footnote, Bayle sums up what he has written about Pascal’s life before moving on to discuss the *Pensées* and *Provincial Letters*, by saying:

If this and the other things I have related be true, it must needs be granted that Mr. Pascal was a prodigy; and if I might be so bold as to make use of the expression, I would call him a paradoxical individuum of humankind.\(^8\)

A new, more troubled, interpretation of Pascal’s life would grow up in the coming century from the tiny seed which Bayle has planted here, in considering Pascal a “paradoxical individuum.” The central movement of Pascal’s life away from science and toward piety, as Gilberte so desired to portray it, will no longer being viewed, by some scholars, simply as an illustrious example of virtue, but as a problem to be examined. Some commentators would resolve this problem by dismissing Gilberte’s document as a pious fraud, and others would hold both Gilberte and Pascal in contempt, to the extent that they believed Gilberte’s document to be accurate. We will see this most strongly in the reactions of the Enlightenment writers. But first, we will consider one example of a writer who seems to have approved whole-heartedly of Gilberte’s text, the writer Jean Racine.

**Jean Racine**

Racine (1639-1699) was one of the most celebrated playwrights and poets of France’s classical age. Orphaned at the age of nine, he went to live with his widowed grandmother at Port-Royal. Racine was educated in Port-Royal’s “little schools,” which were known to

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provide excellent instruction. His interest in the theatre, however, caused him to separate
from the Port-Royalists as a young man, for they disapproved of the theatre as being a
“worldly” pursuit. A religious conversion experience, of which we know little, caused him to
return to the community, and he wrote his *Abrégé de l’histoire de Port-Royal* in 1698. This
work perhaps typifies the approval Gilberte’s text was given among the writers of Port-Royal,
and it contains several distinct echoes of Gilberte’s themes which deserve attention.\(^89\)

Racine describes Jacqueline first as having “renounced early the vain amusements of
the century” and that when she entered the convent Pascal was already

in great sentiments of piety, and for even two or three years, despite the
inclination and prodigious genius that he had for mathematics, he was
disgusted by these speculations so as to no longer apply himself except to the
study of Scripture and the great truths of religion. The knowledge of Port-
Royal and the great examples of piety which he found there hit him extremely.
He resolved to think uniquely only of his salvation. From that time on he
broke off all commerce with the people of the world. He even renounced a
very advantageous marriage which he was on the point of concluding,\(^90\) and
embraced a very austere and very mortified life which he continued until
death.\(^91\)

In this passage we find the familiar terms of “renunciation” (*renonciation*) and
“breaking off” (*rupture*) so characteristically spoken by Gilberte and other people associated
with Port-Royal. Racine describes not only the Pascals, but members of the Arnauld family
and several others, as becoming “disgusted” with their former lives and renouncing “worldly
advantage.” In addition, Racine suggests that Pascal was intrigued to learn more about Port-

\(^89\) It was published in two parts: the first part in Cologne in 1742, and the second in Vienna and Paris
in 1767.

\(^90\) Racine, and Marguerite Périer, as cited earlier in this chapter, appear to be the primary sources for
the belief that Pascal became interested in a possible marriage engagement at one point in his life.

Royal when he discovered that the sisters there were "above interest" in matters concerning financial gain. This "excited his curiosity." Racine describes Pascal's death in terms similar to Gilberte:

He was only thirty-nine years old, but, although still young, his great austerities and his continual application to the most lofty things had so worn him out that one can say that he died of old age.\(^92\)

He also thinks it important to remark upon the Beurrier affair:

It was publicized at the end of his life that [Pascal] had broken off all commerce with the men of Port-Royal, because he did not find them, they said, submitted enough to the constitutions; and they cited on this the testimony of the parish priest of Saint-Étienne du Mont, who had administered him the last sacraments in his sickness.

The truth is that a bit before his death, Mr. Pascal had some dispute with Mr. Arnauld on the subject of the constitutions; but, far from claiming that one ought to submit blindly to the constitutions, he found on the contrary that they submitted to them too much... These two great men wrote to each other on this, but without going beyond the bounds of charity, and without hurting the least in the world the mutual esteem by which they were tied, and which they kept until the last breath. Mr. Pascal died in the arms of Mr. de Sainte-Marthe, intimate friend of Mr. Arnauld, and one of the most zealous defenders of the religious of Port-Royal.\(^93\)

\(^92\)Jean Racine, *Abrégé de l'histoire de Port-Royal*, p. 153. The 19th century social scientist Alexis de Tocqueville may have borrowed this idea from Racine that Pascal "died of old age" at mid-life: "If Pascal had had nothing in view beyond some great gain, or even if he had been stimulated by the love of fame alone, I cannot conceive that he would have been able, as able he was, to rally all the powers of his mind to discover the most hidden secrets of the Creator. When I see him, if one may put it so, tearing his soul free from the cares of this life so as to stake the whole of it on this quest, and prematurely breaking the ties which bound him to the flesh, so that he died of old age before he was forty, I stand amazed, and understand that no ordinary cause was at work in such an extraordinary effort." *Democracy in America*, translated by George Lawrence and edited by J.P. Mayer (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 461.

\(^93\)Jean Racine, *Abrégé de l'histoire de Port-Royal*, p. 154.
Racine goes on then to describe how Fr. Beurrier was mistaken by some of Pascal’s statements before his death, following the same argument exactly which Gilberte put forth in the letters we have studied in the second chapter of this thesis.

All in all, the same emphases are present in Gilberte’s and Racine’s histories: Pascal’s renunciation of worldly success and interests, his attachment to poverty, his asceticism, his illness caused by his “continual mental applications,” and his pursuit of salvation as the one, unique object of his life. In addition, Racine attempts to lay to rest the rumours concerning the sentiments in which Pascal died.

Influence upon English thought

As was noted in chapter two, interest in Pascal’s life and works was lively among the English during the 17th and 18th centuries. The first appearance of Gilberte’s text in English came in 1688, within an edition of Pascal’s *Pensees*, translated by Joseph Walker. In his dedication of the book to Robert Boyle, Walker comments most interestingly that

I dare not assure the World that the Account here given us of Monsieur Pascall’s Life and Works, are a Lively and Perfect Representation of him; on the contrary, having seriously consider’d the Solidity and Design of his Book, in most parts of it, I am rather apt to believe, there are many Strokes and Alterations made by other Hands, through that which some call *pia fraus*, that were never intended by him, had he liv’d to have seen his own Works finish’d.  

Although in the first sentence quoted, Walker questions whether the “Life” as well as the “Works” of Pascal have been lively and perfectly represented, from this point onward it appears he is speaking of the accuracy of the Works (the *Pensees*) exclusively. It does seem,  

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94 John Barker, *Strange Contrarieties*, p. 73.
however, that Walker is posing here in some measure the question of the trustworthiness of
Gilberte’s biography. Walker will not be the first to level the charge of “pia fraus,” or pious
fraud, against Gilberte and the Port-Royal community, in their representation of Blaise Pascal.

The knowledge of Pascal’s life held by English writers was evidently influenced by
Gilberte, either through her own document directly, or by way of Pierre Bayle’s dictionary.
John Locke (1632-1704) made use of a reference in Gilberte’s Life to Pascal’s exceptional
Locke wrote, “It is reported of that prodigy of parts, Monsieur Pascal, that till the decay of his
health had impaired his memory, he forgot nothing of what he had done, read, or thought.”95
Gilberte’s words had been: “He had such an excellent memory that he often said he had never
fogotten the things he wanted to retain.”

Alexander Pope (1688-1744) and Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) made use of the story
of Pascal’s discovery of Euclid’s geometry for their own amusement, in their Memoirs of the
Extraordinary Life, Works, and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus. The character Martinus’
“disposition to mathematics was discovered very early,” but instead of having him draw with
chalk on the floor, as Gilberte had described Pascal, they had Martinus “drawing parallel lines
on his bread and butter, and intersecting them at equal angles.”96 Such a reference suggests
that the story of Pascal’s childhood precocity was well-enough known for Pope and Swift’s
readers to recognize the allusion. Another notable English writer to refer to Gilberte’s text

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95 Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Book 2, ch. 10, para. 9.
96 Alexander Pope, et al., Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works, and Discoveries of Martinus
Scriblerus, ed. Charles Kirby-Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 107. The work was first
published in 1741, although likely written several decades earlier.
was Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), and the knowledge of it also crossed the Atlantic, as can be seen from a reference by Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), the New England religious revivalist.

Among these disparate writers who made reference to Pascal, and to Gilberte's view of his life, several themes seem to emerge which we may consider at this point. The first concerns England's political situation, and the second, the rise of a new understanding of religion, that of Deism.

**Politics**

With the translation of the *Provincial Letters* into English, which occurred in only a matter of months after their publication in France, Protestants in England quickly adopted Pascal as an ally in their struggle against the threat they perceived in the Jesuits, and in Catholicism more generally, within their own country during this period. This hostility had arisen a century earlier during the reign of Elizabeth I, when the pope issued a bull of excommunication against her and released her subjects from their loyalty, even going so far as to state that anyone who achieved her assassination would not be guilty of murder. In 1678, a supposed "popish plot" was publicized by the Protestant Titus Oates, who claimed that Catholic interests were intent upon murdering Charles II. The plot was never substantiated, but it did much to incite public opinion against the influence of the Catholic Church in

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England, at the very time that Pascal's *Provincial Letters* were being read in that country.99 Despite the fact that Pascal himself emphasized his faithful allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church, English Protestants found him too useful to reject him on this basis, and seemed content to overlook or minimize the fact although it remained a troublesome one which they could not completely ignore. The characteristic approach may be seen, for example, in the statement made by Joseph Walker, the translator of Gilberte's text in 1688, who referred to Pascal's "purity of life and zeal, according to what he could discern through the mists of superstition" (that is, the superstition of Roman Catholicism). In any case, Pascal's *Letters* reminded the reader of the Jesuits' "foreign-ness" to things English as well as French,100 and of their willingness ultimately to permit even murder within their ethical system, if it could be shown to have been done with the "right intention."101 The Puritan Richard Baxter (1615-
1691) was one of many Englishmen to use Pascal specifically in this way. In his *Key for Catholics, to Open the Jugling of the Jesuits*, which he published in 1659 and dedicated to Cromwell, Baxter asked, “What need we fuller proof than the Jansenian hath given us in his Mysterie of Jesuitism?” wherein Pascal had shown “what accommodations they have for him that hath a mind to murder his adversary.”

Pascal’s life and works were used politically in other causes as well. When the Protestant bishop George Berkeley (1685-1753) wrote in 1712 his *Passive Obedience or The Christian Doctrine of not Resisting the Supreme Power*, to dispel the rumour of his disloyalty to the Crown, he footnoted a reference made by Gilberte regarding Pascal’s own political beliefs. Berkeley quotes from Gilberte’s text, saying,

“He (Mr. Pascal) used to say he had as great an abhorrence of rebellion as of murder, or robbing on the way, and that there was nothing more shocking to his nature. --Vie de M. Pascal, p. 44.”

Pascal had expressed these opinions in the context of the civil turmoil known as *La Fronde* with which Paris was occupied between 1648-52. Men such as Berkeley, however, applied his words to their own purposes without apparent scruple.

**Religion**

The 18th century has become known as “the Age of Enlightenment,” or “the Age of Reason,” in the English-speaking world, and in French as the “the Age of Lights.” Voltaire

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102 Quoted in John Barker, *Strange Contrarieties*, p. 15.
104 Pseudonym of François-Marie Arouet.
(1694-1778), one of the Enlightenment's leading proponents, described this "light" simply by stating, "What light has arisen upon Europe? ...It is the light of common sense."\(^{105}\)

As part of this larger cultural movement which permeated all areas of life, religious thought was fundamentally transformed, in a movement away from what had until that time been orthodox religion, and toward a new outlook given the name of "deism." The central ideas in this movement were that religion ought to concern itself solely with ethics, the betterment of human life; that the miraculous elements of religion are vestiges of an earlier more superstitious time and should be eradicated; that religion may be understood and explained reasonably without recourse to divine revelation; and that God's role within the world is that of a once creative power but no longer an active participant.

In light of these new ideas, Pascal's life as represented by Gilberte soon became used as an almost prime example of what one might call "religion gone wrong": of a promising life which became pathetically derailed by too much consideration of another world, and too little consideration of this one. Perhaps the first evidence of this interpretation of his life comes from an article written for the *Spectator* magazine issued July 13, 1711, where the author commented that perhaps if Pascal had not practiced such severity towards himself, he would not have died in middle age. This statement was reproduced on the title page of the 18th century's most influential English edition of the *Pensées*, edited by Basil Kennett, and was often repeated:

Monsieur Pascal, in his most excellent discourse of the misery of man, tells us, that all our endeavours after greatness proceed from nothing but a desire of

being surrounded by a multitude of persons and affairs that may hinder us from looking into our selves, which is a view we cannot bear. Had that incomparable person Monsieur Pascal been a little more indulgent to himself, the world might probably have enjoy’d him much longer.106

Pascal’s view of the human person became almost a horror among many thinkers, culminating with Voltaire’s description of Pascal as a “sublime misanthropist” in his Letters Concerning the English Nation.107

The Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776), who spent time in France and was much involved with French deists such as Voltaire, shows evidence of knowing Gilberte’s description of Pascal in his short treatise, A Dialogue. In this discussion regarding the foundations of human morality, Hume argues that “religious superstition,” as opposed to ethical reasoning, leads people to do all sorts of unexplainable things. “When men depart from the maxims of common reason,” Hume says, no one can answer for what will please or displease them. They are in a different element from the rest of humankind.108 He described Pascal in the following way:

The aim of Pascal was to keep a perpetual sense of his dependence before his eyes, and never to forget his numberless wants and infirmities....[He] made constant profession of humility and abasement, of the contempt and hatred of himself; and endeavoured to attain these supposed virtues, as far as they are attainable....[The austerities of Pascal] were embraced merely for their own sake, and in order to suffer as much as possible....The saint refused himself the

106 Reproduced in John Barker, Strange Contrarieties, p. 95.
107 See Voltaire’s 25th letter in his Letters Concerning the English Nation (also known as Philosophical Letters). Voltaire also published “remarks” on Pascal’s Pensées, in 1728, 1743, and 1778, and wrote the foreword for Condorcet’s Éloge de Blaise Pascal and edition of Pascal’s Pensées in 1776. See Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire, v. 1 (Paris: Dalibon, 1825). See also the encyclopedists’ opinion of Pascal’s journey from science to piety in their Encyclopédie, s.v. “géomètre.”
most innocent [pleasures], even in private... [he] endeavoured to be absolutely indifferent towards his nearest relations, and to love and speak well of his enemies.... the most ridiculous superstitions directed Pascal's faith and practice; and an extreme contempt of this life, in comparison of the future, was the chief foundation of his conduct.\footnote{David Hume, \textit{A Dialogue}, in \textit{The Philosophical Works}, v.4, p. 304-5.}

Such a view of Pascal soon filtered down to the ordinary levels of society. An English doctor, Thomas Percival, contributed the following impressions, where again material originating with Gilberte can easily be recognized:

I am inclined to believe, that the celebrated M. Paschal laboured under a species of insanity, towards the conclusion of his life. This very extraordinary man discovered the most astonishing marks of genius in his childhood; and his progress in science was so rapid, that at the age of sixteen, he wrote an excellent treatise of Conic Sections. He possessed such a capacious and retentive memory, that he is said “never to have forgotten any thing which he had learned.” ...But it is related, by the editor of his \textit{Thoughts on Religion and other Subjects}, “that it pleased God so to touch his heart, as to let him perfectly understand, that the Christian religion obligeth us to live for God only, and to propose to ourselves no other object.” In consequence of this persuasion, he renounced all the pursuits of knowledge, and practiced the most severe and rigorous mortifications; living in the greatest penury, and refusing every indulgence, which was not absolutely necessary for the support of life. It appears from some of his pious meditations, that this resolution of mind proceeded from the visitation of sickness.\footnote{Thomas Percival, \textit{Miscellaneous Observations on the Influence of Habit and Association}, quoted in John Barker, \textit{Strange Contrarieties}, p. 160.}

\textbf{Condorcet}

Condorcet\footnote{His full name was Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet. He died in prison in the aftermath of the Revolution.} (1734-1797) was one of the great proponents of the French Enlightenment. Like Pascal, he had a mathematical background, and in fact both men for a
time had concentrated their attention on probability theory. Condorcet’s most influential writing was his *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain*, which he published in 1795. This work was an argument for the unlimited progress of humankind toward perfection, which included a belief in the unlimited progress of the human mind toward ultimate knowledge. The differences between these beliefs and those which Pascal had held were great. When we add to this the fact that Condorcet held the Christian faith in violent contempt, it is not surprising that at some point he would turn his attention upon Pascal directly.

Condorcet’s *Éloge de Blaise Pascal* was written to replace Gilberte’s text. “This elegy,” he stated, “appears to me to paint the genius and the character of Pascal far better than his life written by Madame Périer.” Condorcet makes his opinion of *La Vie* clear in his first paragraph, saying,

> The enthusiasm which inspires the writings of this illustrious man made me desire to know his person. I wanted to read what his sister, his friends, wrote of him, and I saw, with indignation, that they seemed to affect to tell about his life only what he had done [that was] unworthy of him.

“What was unworthy of him” was everything to do with his religious concerns, his asceticism, his excesses. Condorcet footnotes at this point several examples, such as Pascal’s use of the iron belt, his desire to love no one, and his “preference” for sickness, “as though” Condorcet remarks, “the state of a Christian was to be good for nothing.” But in reacting

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113 Condorcet, *Préface to Éloge de Blaise Pascal*, p. 567.

114 Condorcet, *Préface to Éloge de Blaise Pascal*, p. 569.
against all of these things, Condorcet does not question them as facts. He does not take issue
with Gilberte’s truthfulness—but with her tactlessness, as he sees it.\footnote{Condorcet does
115 take issue with Gilberte’s truthfulness at one point, when speaking of Pascal’s
discovery of Euclid’s geometry. While Condorcet seems to accept the story as a whole, he adds that
gilberte “joins to her account some circumstances which have put it into doubt,” although
he does not go on to specify what these circumstances are. See Éloge de Blaise Pascal, p. 582.}
If her brother was
really like this, he implies, she should have had the sense to keep quiet about these things.
Condorcet’s own biography of Pascal is concerned primarily with his scientific and literary
achievements.

If Pascal had been of ordinary intellect or achievement, Enlightenment thinkers would
not have devoted much attention on him. It is true that most of what they had to say about
Pascal was negative, but we should conclude from this not that they thought him insignificant
to their project, but perhaps the very opposite: that he was worth their steady efforts to
demolish him. The facts of his life, as Gilberte declared them to the world, made him
profundely odious to them. These thinkers saw in him a singularly gifted young man, who
had begun to make such a great contribution to the welfare of humankind through his
scientific work, and who could have continued to do so for many more years if he had not
lapsed, as they thought, into self-destructive and deluded religious beliefs which led him to
renounce all of this and took him to an early grave instead. The Enlightenment’s one use for
religion was as an accessory to the betterment of human life; Pascal’s religious vision was of a
radical self-overcoming which has never been understood or subsumed into modern scientific
rationalism. Pascal would not fit into the system. He was “a different element,” as Hume had
described him, or, as Bayle had earlier suggested, “a paradoxical individuum of humankind.” There is a basic incompatibility between the pursuit of “religious self-overcoming” and the pursuit of happiness through human progress such as the Enlightenment championed.

19th and 20th Century Scholarship

“Pascal studies,” in the contemporary sense of an academic field of study, began in the 19th century. This is not to say that serious thought concerning Pascal’s life and writings had not occurred earlier. What was new in the 19th century was the scholarly effort into collaborative research, in this field of study and in the humanities as a whole. Interest in Pascal’s thought was revived, and the paradox of his life came to be considered once again as a subject worthy of reflection.

How have more recent scholars viewed Gilberte’s Life? The status accorded her document rose and fell much in keeping with the status of Pascal himself, and this is because it was the primary document by which opinion concerning Pascal’s personal life was formed. During this period we find scholars turning once again to her text, with the emerging consensus that it was not only satisfactory on the whole (although questionable in some of its particulars) regarding the historical Pascal, but also admirably written and a valuable 17th century document in its own right.

Prosper Faugère can be said to have re-opened the consideration of Gilberte’s Life when he issued a new edition of it in 1845, stating in his foreword that a knowledge of this

text was indispensable to the study of "the biography, character, and even the genius of
Pascal."\textsuperscript{117} As a typical example of the opinion generally held from Faugère's time onward,
we may consider the writings of Victor Giraud, who produced several substantial biographies
of Pascal, among his other works in this area. As an introduction to one of his works, he
reproduces Gilberte's text in its entirety, saying that

The admirable \textit{vie de Pascal} by Mme Périé appeared to us as the best
introduction that one could find to the reading and study of the author of the
\textit{Provinciales} and the \textit{Pensées}.\textsuperscript{118}

Giraud holds Gilberte and her document in the highest esteem, although he considers it
in need of "a few rectifications": the primary one being that "Mme Périé is mistaken when
she states that the first conversion of her brother 'terminated all his researches.' ...The facts
and the texts are positive in this regard."\textsuperscript{119} He also considers Gilberte to have exercised an
"indulgence"\textsuperscript{120} regarding her brother's "worldly period," which I take to mean that he thinks
she passed over this period of Pascal's life without much comment because she wanted to
portray him as being as pious as possible.

As another example of the opinion of contemporary scholarship we may consider Jean
Mesnard. He remarks that "the details of Gilberte's story very rarely contradict the facts
established by objective research,"\textsuperscript{121} and that this research has served only to "add to and
enrich" her account. Specifically regarding the Euclid story, Mesnard comes down on the side

\textsuperscript{117}Faugère, \textit{Lettres, opuscules et mémoires de Madame Périé}, p. 1.
of Gilberte as opposed to those who might wish to discredit her: Gilberte did not say,
Mesnard argues, that Pascal arrived untutored at the 32nd proposition of Euclid after going
through in sequence the earlier thirty-one. This would be impossible. Instead, Gilberte has
stated simply that at the moment when his father interrupted him, Blaise was intent on seeking
that which was Euclid’s 32nd proposition. Mesnard concludes by reminding his readers that

A very small number of axioms and preliminary demonstrations are all that is
necessary for the postulation of this theorem...if one were seeking to minimize
the importance of this anecdote--but there are plenty of similar cases of
precocity in the lives of other mathematicians.\textsuperscript{122}

Mesnard does raise the usual criticisms against Gilberte, saying that
It has been thought of a piece of hagiography, with all the defects of its kind,
silent about weaknesses, exaggerating virtues. The Pascal family wanted to
leave a portrait of their great man that would conform with the Jansenist ideal
of the saintly life. This is the modern explanation of certain palpably mistaken
statements in Gilberte’s work, such as her claim that Pascal abandoned science
after his first conversion.\textsuperscript{123}

Gilberte’s narrative is defaced, at this point, by serious inaccuracies: “...From
this time onwards, he renounced all other sorts of knowledge to apply himself
to the one thing called needful.” This passage is all the more disquieting
because Gilberte, before relating Pascal’s conversion, has described
investigations which he undertook after his conversion.\textsuperscript{124}

As well, he states, Gilberte did not accurately portray Pascal’s appetite for worldly
fame which remained with him throughout his life, or at least until his final few years. His
sometimes dominating or bellicose spirit, quite unlike the Jansenist ideal, is documented in his

\textsuperscript{122}Jean Mesnard, \textit{Pascal: His Life and Works}, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{123}Jean Mesnard, \textit{Pascal: His Life and Works}, p. xiv.
own writings, most notably in his exchanges with various scientists, as has been mentioned earlier in the first chapter of this thesis.

Mesnard's conclusion of Gilberte's intentions are that she, consciously or not, chose to describe a longer period of her brother's life in terms which are strictly accurate only of the final years of his life, the years in fact when Gilberte was most intimate with him. Mesnard suggests that since Gilberte knew her brother at first hand only during the early years of his life, and then in his final years, her information regarding Pascal between the ages of twenty and thirty may have come from not wholly reliable second-hand accounts upon which Gilberte necessarily had to rely. As such, he comments, "it is inevitable that a certain disequilibrium is produced."\textsuperscript{125} Despite this, Mesnard puts his faith overwhelmingly in the substance of Gilberte's document. Other noted Pascal scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries to share in the general opinion of Giraud and Mesnard regarding \textit{La Vie} are Fortunat Strowski, Leon Brunschvicg, Henri Gouhier, and Augustin Gazier, whose own family had deep Jansenist roots.

Against the overwhelming consensus, though, there are a few voices of criticism which we must consider. First, there is the strong denunciation of Gilberte which is found in Jehanne d'Orliac's \textit{Le coeur humain, inhumain, surhumain de Blaise Pascal}, published in 1931. In this work, the author refers to a "Pascal conspiracy" which originated with Gilberte's "false" presentation of her brother:

\cite{Pascal:1931}

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She is at the head of the conspiracy. She had reason, moreover, they all had reason, in view of an effect to produce, a goal to attain, to use the necessary ruses and lies...\textsuperscript{126}

D’Orliac suggests that the sole effect or goal of Gilberte’s biography was to serve the glory of the family and of the Jansenist sect. Furthermore, he says,

One must admire the docility of the readers of this \textit{Vie de Pascal} by his sister. No one, not any one has put it into doubt, which is stupefying. Gilberte was family, and as such, sacred. As such, suspect, and for good reason!...She alone, the family, had an interest in saying or in hiding whatever one knows or does not know of him...\textsuperscript{127}

In these words d’Orliac seems to be arguing that all Pascal scholars before him accepted without question Gilberte’s representation of her brother in her \textit{Vie}. As we have seen, however, questions certainly had been raised about aspects of Gilberte’s text; perhaps d’Orliac means that no one had rejected her text in its entirety, which he is now intent upon doing. In any case, in his book he seeks to present an entirely new, and far less complimentary, view of Pascal. He replaces the established interpretation of Pascal’s life with another, mainly by conjecture and extrapolation from Pascal’s own writings. D’Orliac portrays Pascal as an ambitious, tyrannical, and prideful man, who (among other “scandals” which d’Orliac reveals) fell hopelessly in love with Charlotte Roannez, his friend’s sister.

Perhaps d’Orliac’s representation of Pascal’s character and the events of his life is the more accurate one, but he does not give the reader much better evidence for believing this opinion rather than some other. I would go further to suggest that even if much of d’Orliac’s


\textsuperscript{127}Jehanne d’Orliac, \textit{Le coeur humain, inhumain, surhumain de Blaise Pascal}, p. 12-13.
opinion could be shown to be correct, this would not serve to refute the substance of Gilberte's text. D’Orliac has not made a convincing argument for believing Gilberte to have used "ruses and lies" in presenting her brother’s life in the manner which she did.

Secondly, there is the opinion of Ernest Jovy, in his work *Pascal inédit*, published 1908-12, in which he revives the issue of Pascal’s “last sentiments.” Against Gilberte, Jovy argues that Pascal truly had retracted his Jansenist loyalties just before he died, which “reduces to nothing all the lying assertions of Pascal’s biographers, including Madame Périer, his sister.”128 For this reason also, Jovy argues, Pascal terminated the composition of his *Provincial Letters* as suddenly as he did, because “his sentiments had changed; he no longer had faith in Port-Royal.”129

It is interesting to note, however, that in his efforts to discredit Gilberte he makes use of her account to buttress his arguments—in effect, placing his faith in her account to some degree at least. For example, Jovy argues that since Pascal separated himself from the Jansenist group, they in turn tried to retaliate by keeping him from receiving his last communion, and his evidence for this opinion comes from Gilberte’s text, in which she recounts the opposition Pascal received when he wished to communicate.130

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128 I have not been able to work from Jovy’s own text, but only as it is presented by his opponent Augustin Gazier, in *Les derniers jours de Blaise Pascal* (Paris: Champion, 1911). This quotation is from p. 8 of that work.


Jovy’s argumentative manner is similar to d’Orliac’s. It seems that Jovy’s thesis was not taken up in any serious way by scholars after him, except by those who, in turn, wished to discredit Jovy’s interpretation.

Finally we must consider the lengthy article printed in the *Revue d’histoire ecclésiastique* in 1950,\(^{131}\) which discusses the accuracy of Gilberte’s memoir in detail. This article represents the fairest modern criticism of her work that I have been able to find, for in it the author, Pontien Polman, combines a respect for Gilberte’s text with a recognition of the problems it raises. The author does not, however, discuss the text within a consideration of its genre, a criticism raised by Philippe Sellier at a later date.\(^{132}\)

Polman argues that Gilberte’s biography is a case study for the Jansenist struggle over the self. He begins by outlining his understanding of Jansenist piety, based on Jansenist writings, and then demonstrates the ways in which Gilberte’s biography is “visibly inspired” by such beliefs. In order to portray Pascal as a Jansenist, Polman argues, she had to convey the interpretation that he had “broken definitively” with his worldly interests from the very beginning of his involvement with the Jansenist community. This was necessary to Jansenist theology, although it is more likely the case that he struggled through a long process of withdrawal, finally achieving it only in the last few years of his life. “In fact,” Polman argues, Pascal “never completely extinguished in himself the aspirations of his nature,” and this, given

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the Jansenist mentality, "constitutes for Blaise the tragedy of his life,"133 which Gilberte wished to redeem. Gilberte wanted to produce "a work of edification," rather than "a strictly historical portrait," and so she could not let Pascal be seen as a struggling Jansenist. She chose to sacrifice historical truth instead of abandoning the doctrines to which she was committed. And Polman reminds us that in doing so, she "destined her biography of the 'saint' to those who were well informed" regarding the facts of his life, and they would have been able to mentally fill in the gaps she left.134

But Gilberte was not seeking the glory of Pascal, as other critics have stated. "She had one goal only: to glorify God," Polman argues, and she did not exalt her brother's exceptional gifts except to show the value of his later sacrifice of them.135

And so, according to this thoughtful critic we end with the dilemma that La Vie de Monsieur Pascal is a fundamentally religious work when what we have wanted it to be is an historical record. It is the primary and most influential biography of Pascal that was written, and most of what we know about his life comes from it, and yet it was not written for us for this purpose.

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133 Pontien Polman, "La biographie de Blaise Pascal," p. 110.
134 Pontien Polman, "La biographie de Blaise Pascal," p. 134.
135 Pontien Polman, "La biographie de Blaise Pascal," p. 134.
CONCLUSION

In this thesis we have been concerned with understanding why and how an influential book, Gilberte Périer's *La Vie de Monsieur Pascal*, came into being, and what its value has been for readers of it. We have studied the various questions and problems raised by the text's content and the circumstances of its publication. There are many questions left unanswered.

Regarding the content of the work, the primary questions have centred upon whether Gilberte has accurately portrayed Pascal's conversion from a life devoted to science to a life of Christian piety. The true nature of Pascal's beliefs and activities between the years 1646 and 1654 in particular is still mostly unknown.

The circumstances of the book's publication have also been cause for debate. Some interpreters have viewed the delay between the *Life*’s creation and its publication as an indication of rejection on the part of Pascal’s friends, and perhaps even his family. I have suggested instead that the stronger evidence points to the controversy of Pascal’s supposed recantation from Jansenism as being the primary cause for this delay, along with the reluctance on Gilberte’s part, which is not completely understood, to spread the work beyond her circle of family and friends. The writings of the family members in particular show a high degree of esteem for the substance of Gilberte’s document.

If we are seeking a factual, measured account of Pascal’s life, the text presents us with some significant problems and gaps (but many of the facts of Pascal’s life are indeed there, and corroborated by other evidence). But if we wish to seek to understand Pascal’s religious
vision, and the religion of the Jansenists more generally, it is an extremely valuable work. Gilberte’s text appears centrally concerned with portraying what I have called a “religious self-overcoming” which Pascal, and Gilberte, held in the highest respect.

Gilberte’s biography was used very early by influential authors to gain a knowledge about the events of Pascal’s life, as well as his “inner journey.” Their writings influenced opinions not only about Gilberte’s work, but more importantly about Pascal himself. We have seen that these opinions varied considerably, and were set forth by some of the most influential thinkers of the past several centuries. The estimation of Gilberte’s work has followed the estimation of Pascal himself held among these thinkers.

The study of Pascal remains no less important to thinkers today, as is suggested by the many books and articles which continue to appear on this subject. If Pascal is right, the study of “man”—Pascal, others, and ourselves—is our true and proper occupation. Gilberte Périer’s document remains a valuable source for such study.
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