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Writing Life: Paper as Symbol and Commodity in the Letters of the Marquise de Sévigné

Kathleen Kasten

The late seventeenth century in France witnessed an important moment in the development of letter-writing and in the evolution of an epistolary culture. The advent of a postal service, coupled with a fascination for the communicative and affective value of correspondence, combined to create a cultural fascination with epistolary expression. Scholars have studied early modern letter-writing from the perspective of postal history as well as the role of letters in the creation of the modern self. Additionally, studies of the materiality of correspondence have focused on the design and functionality of the desks that would be known as *secrétaires* in the eighteenth century, as well as the *écritoires* that preceded them. The material culture of writing, including the paper on which letters were written, is particularly evident in the letters of the Marquise de Sévigné. References to paper (*papier*) in the Sévigné correspondence offer an important perspective on a crucial aspect of the material culture of virtually every kind of information technology during the early modern period, and one that was an integral component of epistolarity. The study of paper as a material commodity and as a culturally-- and symbolically-- charged element of letter-writing reveals this early modern corpus as an invaluable source for a cultural and affective study of epistolary usages of paper.

2. Definition of Corpus

The voluminous correspondence of Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, Marquise de Sévigné, is highly revelatory of seventeenth-century epistolary practice in France. From the 1640s until her death in 1696, the Marquise wrote extensively to her family and friends, particularly to her daughter, the Comtesse de Grignan. Her letters are replete with information regarding the events that she witnessed, the people that she frequented, and the material details of her daily life. Considered by many scholars to be the consummate mother figure of the seventeenth century, the Marquise de Sévigné created a corpus that marries the quotidian with the affective. Most importantly, she makes use of the objects of her time and milieu in order to treat the more ephemeral themes of love, connection, and communication. Her references to paper demonstrate the role of this material object as a symbol of the affective and intellectual process of writing letters. This kind of awareness imbues paper with a cultural significance which both reinforces and transcends its status as a material commodity.

3. Early Modern French Epistolarity

The letters of the Marquise de Sévigné and their exploitation of the symbolic potential of paper are best understood as part of the larger epistolary tradition that was operational during the early modern period. An early, and ultimately influential, example of the epistolary genre in France was the anonymously published *Lettres d'une religieuse portugaise* (1669), which was long thought to be the genuine letters of a Portuguese nun writing to her absent French lover. Though most critics now believe the collection to be a work of fiction, the ambiguity of its compilation and its longstanding cultural status as authentic letters make it emblematic of the curiosity and empathy that letters came to inspire (Goldstein n.p.). In addition to the sequels to the *Lettres portugaises* that were published after 1669, many other collections of supposed letters appeared in France. The evolution of the material culture of writing that took place during the seventeenth century allows us to examine the changes in how people thought about writing, and about committing their lives, thoughts, and actions to paper. The eighteenth century was the golden age of French letter-writing and epistolary fiction; nevertheless, this cultural and literary movement had its roots in the seventeenth century.

Of course, these novels owed their presence on the literary scene to the epistolary progress of the previous one hundred years. The second half of the seventeenth century inaugurated a fascinating era in the history of the epistolary tradition. By the middle of the seventeenth century, letter-writing was gaining momentum both as a form of practical communication and as a means of establishing and maintaining a social network. Postal systems began to develop throughout France in the 1640s, allowing writers of letters to send their words to distant parts of the country, and to be sure of the precise day that they would reach their destination (Duchêne 205-207). As communication through letters became increasingly practical, letter-writing gained new cultural importance in the daily lives of French people. What it meant to write a letter also began to evolve. For centuries during the middle Ages, letters had been written according to a highly stylized code that made them more formal than personal. During the Renaissance, the situation began to change. Prominent humanists experimented with existing models of letter-writing, giving rise to letters that privileged friendship and other personal content above medieval rhetoric. In a break from the classical, Ciceronian model of letter-writing, these *lettres familières* were written in a more conversational style (Diaz 10, 16; Duchêne 39).

The seventeenth century witnessed the culmination of this evolution, as letters transformed into more personal documents that privileged the expression of sentiment over erudition, which Roger Duchêne calls *lettres galantes*. Madeleine de Scudéry famously describes this kind of letter in her 1660 novel *Clélie*. *Lettres personnelles* took the emphasis on sentimentality even further, and were often written as love letters. These new kinds of letters were described in the numerous letter-writing manuals published during the seventeenth century. These manuals not only influenced the ways in which people wrote their letters, they also conditioned ideas about what it meant to write a letter (Duchêne 111-113). Roger Chartier has observed that Antoine Furetière's 1690 *Dictionnaire universel* records the assimilation of these books into the definition of the word *secrétaire*, which had previously referred to the scribes to whom letters were dictated (61-62). The availability of letter-writing manuals permitted the writing of letters by non-professionals, and the creation of personal letters. This kind of letter-writing, combined with the movement toward a less-structured, more spontaneous writing style in letters, privileged the recording of individual sentiment and experience. Describing the situation of letter-writing at the end of the seventeenth century, Brigitte Diaz has observed:

A la fin du siècle, on n'attend plus des lettres la perfection bien calibrée d'une composition rhétorique impeccable, mais on y apprécie tout au contraire les failles, les soufflés et les suspens d'une parole simplement humaine. C'est alors que la lettre se revendique clairement comme un << miroir de l'âme >>, selon une métaphore aussi emblématique que convenue, déjà présente chez Démétrius. (10)

Not quite autobiography, letter-writing was, nevertheless, becoming a genre that lent itself to the writing of the self. Useful for communication as well as life writing, letters seemed to have gained momentum in French culture. The transition from professional letter writers to private individuals who maintained a network of correspondents marked a cultural shift toward the kind of everyday epistolarity that was reflected in the use and design of the material culture of writing. In the case of the Sévigné correspondence, the insistence on personal communication and affectivity sometimes finds its expression in references to the material reality of paper. A reading of Sévigné's usage of paper as a variable symbol of communication, writing, or even of the solidity and substance of the human being is predicated upon an understanding of the role of paper as a material commodity in early modern France.

4. From Rags to Riches: *La papeterie*

The notion of papermaking during the early modern era evokes an industry, a craft, and a foundational element of contemporary information technology. As Dard Hunter has observed, paper existed in Asia for centuries before becoming a commodity in Europe. Nevertheless, by the end of the early modern period, Europe was considered to have attained mastery of the craft of making paper. In the *Encyclopédie* article, “Papier,” Louis de Jaucourt writes (1751-1765):

Enfin l’Europe en se civilisant a trouvé l’art ingénieux de faire du *papier* avec du vieux linge de chanvre ou de lin, & depuis le tems de cette découverte, on a tellement perfectionné cette fabrique du *papier* de chiffons, qu’il ne reste plus rien à desirer à cet égard. (11: 846-847)

Writing more than half a century after the death of the Marquise de Sévigné, Jaucourt observes the economic and cultural importance of papermaking. Though paper was itself the medium that made the monumental *Encyclopédie* possible, the article also acknowledges paper as a technological advance. Paper’s expense and the literacy required to use it rendered paper a significant acquisition as well as a lucrative industry. The confluence of craft and manufacturing led to the production of high-quality paper for printing as well as for writing. (Gaskell 57-60).

Paper was an integral part of French life as a component of books and letter-writing. It was also part of a larger economic and industrial context, and was linked to other processes and substances common to life during this period. Papermaking required rags, which represented the final phase of life of clothing and household linens. Animal fat was used to make paper receptive to ink. This animal grease was sometimes obtained from artisans who made parchment. Paper was then sold to individuals and to printers, entering the cultural and intellectual life of France (Goussier 11: 842). The cyclical, interconnected aspect of papermaking is emblemized by a poem written by an anonymous eighteenth-century author, probably in England:

Rags make paper,
Paper makes money,
Money makes banks,
Banks make loans,
Loans make beggars,
Beggars make **Rags**. (Cited in Hunter, 1957, epigraph)

These lines underscore the role of paper as an expensive product, as well as its participation in a larger economy of wealth, commodities, and risk. In the 1742 edition of his commerce dictionary, Jacques Savary des Bruslons describes an idiomatic usage of the word *papier* which speaks to its role as a commodity:

On dit du bon papier, pour dire des Billets, Promesses, Obligations, &c. bien exigibles, & où il n’y a rien à perdre ; & mauvais papier, quand il n’y a pas d’apparence d’en recevoir facilement & exactement le paiement. (3: 697)

This expression privileges the stability of paper as a medium of exchange, particularly for economic purposes, rendering it a metonymy for the text it transmits. The perceived permanence and stability of paper is a trope that the Marquise de Sévigné exploits in her correspondence as a way to describe and discuss the character of a given individual. This type of analysis of paper prioritizes its role as a conduit over its physical integrity as an object. In reality, the economic value of paper lay in both its literal form and its cultural and symbolic inflections.

5. The Correspondence of the Marquise de Sévigné

The Marquise’s extensive correspondence is characterized by numerous references to the material objects that surrounded her daily life and the life of her correspondents. Her references to paper are particularly evocative because they

speak to the very heart of the ability to compose and send letters. These references may be divided into interrelated, thematic categories. The first concerns occurrences of paper that engage with the idiomatic meanings of the word and the ways in which it had entered the French vernacular by the late seventeenth century. Other instances focus on paper as a product that makes writing possible, but whose scarcity conditions the length and format of letters. The most evocative category of references to paper focuses on the ability of paper to convey the emotions of the writer of a letter, and the ways in which the act of writing demonstrates affection for the recipient. Letters permitted the expression of a person's thoughts in a way that fostered the development of what Brigitte Diaz calls *intimité*, a term that was applied to emotional relationships during the seventeenth century. The growth of letter-writing, and even of memoir writing, privileged individual experience over group experience, and allowed an ever broader swath of French society to embrace their own histories (Amelang 12-16). Contemporary dictionaries catalog both literal and idiomatic usages of paper, and authorize a study of the Marquise's use of language with regard to this term.

6. Meanings of Paper

Though many period dictionaries offer definitions of paper as a physical object, some also provide idiomatic usages of paper (*papier*) that hint at its cultural underpinnings. The 1694 first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* includes the following entry for *Papier*:

On dit prov. *Le papier souffre tout*, pour dire, Qu'on escrit sur le papier tout ce qu'on veut [...] On dit, *Estre dans les papiers de quelqu'un*, pour dire, Luy devoir de l'argent [...] On dit en matiere de procez, *Papier volant un papier qui n'est pas en forme, qui ne fait point de foy en Justice*.

These idiomatic usages of *papier* allude to three important aspects of paper as a metaphorical concept. First, paper is viewed as a repository for thought, one with the personified ability to receive and hold information. This definition is very close to the relationship between the letter-writer and her paper, which will serve as a vessel for her words. In the second idiomatic usage, paper represents the creation of a record. Third, paper is a legal concept capable of inspiring confidence or mistrust. This usage conflates the words and meaning of legal documents with the medium by which they are conveyed. Though this usage speaks to legal matters, it is also useful when considering paper used in letter-writing. Words committed to paper are subject to analysis and doubt, just as the authenticity of a letter lies at the very heart of its practical and affective power.

Antoine Furetière's *Dictionnaire universel* (1701 edition) also contains several idiomatic usages of *papier* that suggest the ability of this product to play a symbolic role in textual production. It repeats in similar words the usages given regarding *papier volant* and its uselessness in juridical matters, as well as the concept of paper as a metonymy for paper money, or for debt kept in written record. The emphasis is on the ambivalent nature of paper as both a guarantor of truth and an information storage technology that inevitably divorces object from meaning. Though the Sévigné letters treat paper in more individual terms, there is still a degree of engagement with the concept of information storage, as well as the symbolic "weight" of paper and its contents.

7. Paper as Substance

On two occasions, the Marquise de Sévigné makes explicit reference to paper, particularly wet paper, as a metaphor for weakness. Following her son's disastrous affair with the notorious courtesan Ninon de l'Enclos, Sévigné writes to her daughter on 22 April 1671:

Ninon l'a quitté. Il était malheureux quand elle l'aimait ; il est au désespoir de n'en être plus aimé, et d'autant plus qu'elle n'en parle pas avec beaucoup d'estime : « C'est une âme de bouillie, dit-elle, c'est un corps de

papier mouillé, un cœur de citrouille fricassé dans de la neige ». (Sévigné I: 228)

The words that Sévigné reports are not her own, though she considers them sufficiently vivid to quote them verbatim to her daughter. Interestingly, the Marquise is able to maintain a certain degree of objectivity with regard to this situation, particularly since Ninon is reported to have been the mistress of Sévigné's own late husband. Nevertheless, the comparison between wet paper and a human body is both unflattering and extremely vivid, particularly to the eyes of one who is reading a letter and holding a piece of paper in her hands. The letter itself is an implicit statement of the communicative power of paper; the evocation of paper's vulnerability to moisture and its disagreeable state when wet underscores its ultimate changeability.

Years later, in a letter written 6 March 1680, Sévigné returns to the metaphor of wet paper, this time as a description of ill health, and in a way that lacks the disdain inherent in the statement made by Mademoiselle de l'Enclos. Following an illness of the Comtesse de Grignan, Sévigné writes:

Je vous prie, ma chère mignonne, de ne point abuser de votre petite santé. Songez que vous n'êtes point guérie et que vous ne la serez qu'au cas que vous vouliez suivre avec fidélité et persévérance, les conseils de M. de La Rouvière, que vous estimez. Ne serez- vous point trop aise de vous retrouver en santé ? Est-il un plus solide bonheur ? N'est-ce pas un plaisir de n'être plus une personne de papier mouillé, être fatiguée de tout, être sujette au temps ? (Sévigné II: 860-861)

Throughout their decades-long correspondence, the Marquise regularly expresses her concern for the health of her daughter. In this letter, she echoes the language used in disgust by Ninon de L'Enclos. Indeed, she provides further information about how this expression can be interpreted: as a general lassitude and lack of interest in the world around us.

The expression, "du papier mouillé" is found in several dictionaries published around the turn of the eighteenth century. Interestingly, the term is associated with entries for fabric, not for paper. Furetière includes the idiomatic usage: "On dit d'un méchant drap qui se déchire aisément, que ce n'est que du *papier*, du *papier mouillé*" (1701, vol. 2, non-paginated). This exact phrase also appears in the 1762 edition of Berthelin's *Abrégé du dictionnaire universel françois et latin, vulgairement appelé dictionnaire de Trévoux* (5: 743). The same reference to *papier mouillé* is found in the 1735 revised edition of Le Roux' *Dictionnaire comique, satyrique, critique, burlesque, libre et proverbial* (444) and in the *Dictionnaire des proverbes françois*, edited by Georges de Backer (1710, n.p.). The fact that wet paper is correlated to fabric is deeply logical given the role of rags in the creation of paper. The decades-long tradition of including this phrase in dictionaries suggests that it may have been a fairly stable idiomatic usage of *papier*. Sévigné's own usages are separated by decades, though this is not conclusive given the fact that not all of her letters are extant. Her application of this expression to a person's character, rather than a corrupted fabric, is interesting, though not conclusively innovative. It does, however, reinforce the quotidian nature of paper, as well as the ways in which its materiality may be exploited for symbolic purpose.

8. Paper as Tool

In the same way, Sévigné uses paper as a way of discussing the volume and physical size of correspondence, even to the point of hyperbole. Always quick to underscore the regard in which she and her entourage held the Comtesse de Grignan, Sévigné often tells her daughter of conversations of which she has been the subject. Writing on 8 December 1673, Sévigné is enthusiastic: "De vous dire tout ce qui s'est dit d'agréable et d'obligeant pour vous, et quelles aimables conversations on a avec ce ministre, tout le papier de mon portefeuille n'y suffirait pas" (1: 636). Writing to her daughter in Provence, Sévigné often adopts the role of journalist. In this instance,

she reports the echoes of her daughter's own reputation among people in Paris whom she rarely sees. By using paper as a stand-in for the written word, the Marquise quantifies both her daughter's reputation and, by extension, the degree of detail with which she would record it. This usage also establishes a link between the quantity of paper used in the correspondence and the affective intent that it carries, a trope that is common to many of the Marquise's references to paper.

Two years later, on 17 September 1675, Sévigné again uses paper as a way of materializing the act of communicating with her daughter through letters. In one of many instances in which the Marquise composes her letter while away from home, she writes to her daughter that, "Je n'ai point de quoi vous écrire ; c'est le papier de l'hôtesse qui me force de finir" (2: 102). Once again, the equation of letters with the paper that makes them possible becomes a way of addressing both the material form of letters, as well as the constraints that a lack of materials places on their composition. The fact that Sévigné includes such material considerations in her correspondence, albeit rarely, is a valuable facet of her work for the modern historian. It is also an important aspect of the conversational tone of her letters, in which she invites her interlocutor to share in the redaction of her missive.

9. Affective Content of Paper

The Sévigné correspondence is characterized by the emotional connection that moved the Marquise to write so often to her daughter, as well as the contemporary emphasis on personal letters. The Marquise exploits paper as a way of discussing the engagement between reader and letter, as well as the immediacy of the letter itself. By focusing on the sight, scent, texture, and length of letters, she privileges the paper letter as an extension of its writer, and a reading experience that functions as a surrogate for the writer's presence. In a humorous letter written 19 August 1671, the Marquise addresses the subject of perfumed paper:

Vous me dites fort plaisamment l'état où vous met mon papier parfumé. Ceux qui vous voient lire mes lettres croient que je vous apprendis que je suis morte, et ne se figurent point que ce soit une moindre nouvelle. Il s'en faut peu que je ne me corrige de la manière que vous l'avez imaginé ; j'irai toujours dans les excès pour ce qui vous sera bon et qui dépendra de moi. J'avais déjà pensé que mon papier pourrait vous faire mal, mais d'en changer; je commence dès aujourd'hui, et vous n'avez plus à vous défendre que de la puanteur. (1: 324)

This passage is an excellent example of Sévigné's epistolary voice, not to mention a tantalizing glimpse into the materiality of the letters that she exchanged with the Comtesse de Grignan. Because none of the Comtesse's letters are extant, readers must infer her responses from the writings of her mother. It is clear here that the scented paper is objectionable to her, as has been noted by Roger Duchêne (Sévigné 1: 324, note 4). Nevertheless, the smell is still an important element of the reading experience of such a letter, and one that is intrinsically linked to the paper on which the letter is written. Indeed, scented paper makes an additional appearance in the early letters exchanged between Sévigné and her daughter, in a letter dated 3 February 1672:

Je vous enverrai du papier ; assurément il m'en reviendra une partie. Ce serait une belle épargne de le retenir dès ici, puisqu'aussi bien vous me le renverrez ; voilà une belle pensée ! Mais, ma bonne, quand il aura passé par vos mains, il me sera d'un prix inestimable. Jugez-en par l'amitié que vous avez pour mes lettres, et mettez encore quelque chose par-dessus. Voilà de la poudre pour les parfumer ; je n'ai point senti la mauvaise senteur des vôtres. Je ne sens que le plaisir à les lire, et le désespoir de les perdre. (1: 429-430)

The Marquise offers to send paper, a worthy gift given the habitual expense of this product, as has been discussed above. This is especially appropriate given Sévigné's

great interest in corresponding with her daughter, and functions as a metonymy for the letters that she hopes to receive in the future. Her description of the paper hinges on the senses of smell and touch, as she insists upon both the scent of the paper and the increase in its value after being touched by the Comtesse de Grignan. The notion that mailed letters can conserve and transfer a residue of their writers is an inherently tactile approach to the understanding of the role of paper in epistolary practice and exegesis.

The passage quoted above also uses paper as a way to discuss the flow of letters and Sévigné's eagerness for correspondence. In another letter, dated 5 February 1672, she again discusses paper that she is sending to her daughter:

Je vous envoie quatre rames de papier ; vous savez à quelle condition. J'espère en revoir la plus grande partie entre ci et Pâques. (1: 432)

Once again, Sévigné positions paper as an emotional commodity that forms the backbone of her correspondence with the Comtesse de Grignan. By imposing a date limit for the Comtesse's replies, even in jest, she also helps to underscore the rhythm of their epistolary exchange that is so often at issue throughout the extant Sévigné letters. The Marquise writes regularly, a fact which may be established by looking at the surviving letters, even accounting for the fact that many have probably been lost. She often mentions her assiduity and exempts her daughter from following the same program. Nevertheless, the gift of paper provides an opportunity to comically reinforce her desire for continued correspondence. She exploits the material imperative of paper in order to treat the more ephemeral concept of pace.

10. Letter-writing and Wellness

The speed with which letters could be sent and received during the late seventeenth century is a topic that has been amply treated in the scholarly literature on the history of the French postal system. In the context of the Sévigné correspondence, it is often a topic that is linked to the lifestyle, or even the health, of the correspondents. Later letters written by the Marquise discuss her own health in the context of her continued writing, stressing the relationship between letter-writing and fatigue, and lamenting the limits imposed on her by those around her. At the end of a letter to the Comtesse de Grignan dated 15 October 1677 the Marquise writes:

Adieu, ma bonne, adieu, tous mes chers Grignan et *Grignanés*. Je vous aime et vous honore; aimez-moi un peu. On m'ôte mon écritoire, mon papier, ma table, mon siège. (2: 576)

The Marquise lists the objects that make her letters possible: her *écritoire* (a sort of pencil case that could be large enough to provide a writing surface) her paper, her table, and her chair. The lines quoted above are not only useful from a historical perspective, but demonstrate how the material culture of writing could be made to function as a rhetorical device. The Marquise, ever careful to make her daughter aware of how much she values her correspondence, exploits the inventory of the objects that she uses to write in order to create a comedic picture of the lengths to which someone must go to keep her from writing. Occurring at the end of a long letter, this passage may be the result of social pressure to stop writing and join the people around her in their evening entertainment. By removing her paper, among other objects, "they" have ensured that she will end her letter, even if it is not by choice.

The removal of writing instruments, particularly paper, is related to the conservation of health in a letter written 4 April 1689. Warning her daughter of the dangers of too much writing, Sévigné observes:

Vous êtes malade, ma chère enfant [...] elle vous fait une grande douleur quand vous voulez lire et surtout écrire, et qu'elle vous laisse en repos dès que vous l'y laissez et que vous quittez ces exercices violentes, car ils le sont [...] Quand je vous vois écrire sur de grand papier, il me semble que je vous vois montée sur vos grands chevaux. C'est un grand divertissement

pour moi ; vous galopez sur le bon pied, je l'avoue, mais vous allez trop loin et je ne puis souffrir les conséquences. (3: 567)

This rather dire characterization of the writing process invests paper used for the composition of letters with new meaning. Equating large-format paper with spirited horses, Sévigné uses a vital piece of the material culture of writing as a way to dissuade her daughter from the kinds of activities likely to aggravate her headaches, such as reading and writing. Though she valued their correspondence very highly, she valued her daughter more. By focusing on paper, the Marquise emphasizes the interaction between writer and letter in a way that envisages the Comtesse de Grignan involved in an exhilarating and dangerous activity. She demonstrates the affectivity of correspondence as it may be seen in the blank spaces between letters, in the composition process itself.

11. Coda

A study of the role of paper in the correspondence of the Marquise de Sévigné would be incomplete without considering the role of paper in a writing process that evokes the sort of non-project undertaken by the Marquise. Her letters contain numerous injunctions against the preservation of her letters, and it is worth noting that few letters written to her have survived in the original. Intended to be both ephemeral and connective, the Sévigné letters acquire intention through this very lack of desire to be archived. Instead, the letters represent an effort to catalog and communicate the events, feelings, and thoughts of a life lived away from her daughter, among other correspondents (Sévigné 3: 77, note). In a 1681 letter to her cousin, the Comte de Bussy-Rabutin, she writes: "On se trouve fort soulagé quand on a mis sur une feuille de papier tout ce qu'on a sur le cœur" (3: 77). In the context of a correspondence that was never meant to be published, the cathartic importance given to paper reinforces both the immediacy of the act of writing letters, as well as the power of paper to give fixity to the transient thoughts of heart and mind.

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