

## Narrating the Life of a Scandalous Woman: Madame de Saint-Balmon

by  
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At the transitional midpoint of his remarkable biography of Madame de Saint-Balmon, *L'Amazone chrétienne* (1678), Father Jean-Marie de Vernon relates a curious anecdote designed to illustrate the *humeur guerrière* of his subject.<sup>1</sup> In a letter addressed to Saint-Balmon, a provincial governor relates that while in Metz,

il entra dans une boutique pleine de nouveautés et de gentilleses. Ayant marchandé un éventail pour une Dame, un enfant de cinq ans, qui se trouva là, dit hautement: “Achetez-lui une épée, l’usage lui en est plus propre et plus convenable.” Le Gouverneur protestait avoir aussitôt pensé à Madame de Saint-Balmon, à laquelle il avait destiné l’éventail: il lui fit donc présent de l’épée, dont elle se servit incontinent après dans une occasion éclatante et célèbre. (152)

Lest the skeptical reader doubt the authenticity of this story, Vernon appends the following gloss: “Si vous dites que l’enfant parla au hasard, on ne vous démentira pas: mais on vous répartira qu’il ne laissa pas de prononcer une vérité, puisque jamais Cavalier n’a mieux réussi dans les emplois de la guerre que notre Amazone” (152-53). Prefacing the detailed account of Saint-Balmon’s eight years of military activity, this story evokes two salient features of the text that orient my reading—its preoccupation with gender roles and its status as biographical artefact. The anecdote offers an image of *le monde à l’envers* in which quintessential symbols of masculinity and femininity—here the sword and the fan—are reversed.<sup>2</sup> An invitation to suspend harsh judgement of Saint-Balmon, the story challenges adult readers to contemplate the cross-dressed Saint-Balmon from the perspective of the guileless

child, seemingly unbiased by cultural stereotypes, and to question their assumptions about gender distinctions.

Equally important, the biographer's gloss draws our attention to the "art" of biography and to questions of representation. The staged dialogue acts as a *mise en abyme* of the narrational situation, for it figures both readers, who have "expectations about gender that the biography of a woman must both meet and answer ..." (Wagner-Martin 21) and the early modern biographer, who "came to his or her subject with a mind far from neutral or uncommitted, with some fixed ideas both as to what should be written about the subject and the points to be derived therein by the reader . . ." (Mayer and Woolf 4). Biography is therefore never merely "an arrangement of facts" but rather "a narrative, with a point of view" (Middlebrook 159). In the anecdote cited above, the biographer's intervention signals his "point of view," and the interpretive guide he provides ("Si vous dites que l'enfant parla au hasard, on ne vous démentira pas: mais on vous répartira qu'il ne laissa pas de prononcer une vérité.") emblemizes the interpretive nature of the biography itself. As Thomas Heffernan rightly insists, the biographer's tool, language, is not a "neutral matrix for the historical narrative but an interpretive one" (Heffernan 44). Reading biography thus entails remaining mindful of "the permanently problematic dynamic" between extratextual lives and their textual representation (Mayer and Woolf 2).

Wife, mother, and minor literary figure, Alberte-Barbe d'Ernecourt de Saint-Balmon (1607-1660) was best known to her contemporaries as an intrepid, cross-dressed warrior who fought during the Thirty Years War.<sup>3</sup> During the protracted absences of her husband, Saint-Balmon defended her estate in the Lorraine region against incursions of the imperial army and combatted vandals who terrorized local inhabitants. An expert equestrian and military strategist, Saint-Balmon trained her servants to fight, captured prisoners, and was directly responsible for wounding and killing countless men. Despite her masculine attire and demeanor, Louis XIII recognized Saint-Balmon's contributions to the French war effort by offering her a regiment of her own. In one sense, Saint-Balmon was not unlike other noblewomen of the early modern period who participated in war in their capacity as property and

personnel managers (Neuschel 125). But her steadfast insistence on wearing male attire, even off the battlefield, and her prolonged involvement in armed combat did distinguish her and provoked a scandal of no small proportion.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I examine some of the stakes involved in publishing the life of a scandalous woman at the height of Louis XIV's reign, when the image of the *femme forte* no longer held cultural sway and when, in the aftermath of the Fronde, female warriors were generally denigrated. Rather than read the biography literally, I study the "interpretive" strategies designed to create a coherent and edifying life narrative, one that must simultaneously mitigate the scandal and anxiety provoked by this amazon, whose usurption of the masculine garb and activity contravened natural law and subverted the social hierarchy. Close attention to rhetorical aspects of *L'Amazone chrétienne* also reveals inevitable tensions and contradictions within Vernon's discourse. In this regard, I discuss briefly the representation of the female body as one instance of how the biography works against its own affirmations of Saint-Balmon's unequivocal *bienséance*.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike the Middle Ages, when the Crusades provided "dramatic occasion for female militancy" and gave rise to tournament literature featuring female warriors (Solterer 535), the literary and sociocultural conditions of the 1660s and 1670s would not seem propitious for the publication of a full-length biography of a "man-nish" woman.<sup>6</sup> Biographies of women at this time generally take two forms: compilations of "female worthies," which depict figures from legend or antiquity usually to the exclusion of contemporary women, and portrayals of individual women, usually saints or queens, whose "public positions and potential exemplarity" could justify the narrative of their life (Ffolliott 321). While several *Vies* and *Eloges* of Marie de Medicis and Marguerite de Valois appeared in the first half of the century, the *Mémoires* of Madame de Motteville, which serve as the biography of Anne of Austria, and Lafayette's biography of Henriette d'Angleterre, were not published until the early years of the eighteenth century, after the death of Louis XIV.<sup>7</sup> The seventeenth-century also witnessed the publication of a number of life narratives of Joan of Arc, but by this

time Joan, “l’Amazone de France,” belonged to a distant, and hence unthreatening, past.<sup>8</sup> *L’Amazone chrétienne* occupies a unique place within the corpus of biographical life-writing of this time, for it is perhaps the only biography of a contemporary French woman who was not a queen or queen regent, published during the seventeenth century.

Even more, the biographical project was complicated by the controversial image of the amazon. Scholars generally concur that the female warrior lost status in the last half of the century.<sup>9</sup> Heralded as proof of women’s capacity to govern during Anne of Austria’s regency, the image of the *femme forte*, often figured by classical amazons, became obsolete when Louis XIV began his personal reign in 1660.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the female warrior was anathematized as a result of the seditious acts of certain *frondeuses*, who defied royal authority in pursuit of direct political power and influence (de Payer 16, 134). La Rochefoucauld, himself a *frondeur*, wrote of the Duchess of Longueville, “on l’accusait de fomenter elle seule le désordre, elle se trouverait responsable en plusieurs façons . . . d’allumer une guerre dans la royaume” (*Mémoires*, cited in Pollitzer 220). The masculine attire donned by some of the “Amazons of the Fronde” was the analogue to their usurption of male prerogative to war and politics. Louis XIV never forgot the threat posed to his monarchy during the Fronde: according to Joan DeJean, the king’s “long memory” of the *frondeuses* lead to the exclusion of women from official participation in the public sector for the duration of his reign (121). By the 1660s, when the biography of Saint-Balmon was written, the symbolism of the amazon had undergone a radical transformation: celebrated during the regency, the cross-dressed woman warrior became a subject of ridicule in the era of Sévigné and remained so until the end of the century (Cioranescu 79).<sup>11</sup>

The events of mid-century and the economy of absolutism, then, cast a long shadow over production of amazonian literature, including Vernon’s biography. Never named directly, the *frondeuses* nonetheless inhabit the biography as omnipresent foil to the exemplary Saint-Balmon. To begin with, Vernon takes Saint-Balmon’s transvestism very seriously and addresses it early on in

the first half of the biography, where he gives a roughly chronological account of her life. By transforming Saint-Balmon's cross-dressing into an act of conjugal compliance, the biography disrupts the association between female transvestism and political defiance. Describing the early days of her marriage, Vernon writes: "Il faut remarquer, ici, que la coutume de se travestir lui vint du commandement de son mari, qui l'y contraignit, ainsi qu'à tous les exercices de la guerre et des armes" (21). The emphatic formula (*il faut remarquer...*), used sparingly in the biography, signals the importance attached to this "fact:" her husband not only instigates her cross-dressing but insists on it. Vernon goes on to note that Madame initially demurs at her husband's request: her virtue as well as her desire to avoid unfeminine behavior make her reticent to undertake such activities. Ultimately, however, she must concede to her husband: "elle ne s'y est appliquée que pour obéir à l'autorité d'un époux, qui le voulait absolument" (21). Here the text effectively displaces responsibility for cross-dressing from Saint-Balmon to her husband.<sup>12</sup> She does not initiate unseemly dress and behavior but merely conforms to the Pauline doctrine of wifely submission, which dictates that she obey her husband. This displacement of responsibility for cross-dressing has for secondary effect to blunt the subversive edge of transvestism itself. That is, since as it occurs under the auspices of male authority, cross-dressing might be seen as somewhat less transgressive. On this score, Saint-Balmon's cross-dressing cannot be likened to that of the infamous *frondeuses*, who acted in direct opposition to the authority of the young Louis XIV.

Vernon reiterates Monsieur de Saint-Balmon's crucial role in determining his wife's unconventional behavior in a later chapter, immediately preceding the battle narratives. Anticipating readers who might judge her behavior "vicious" and even "criminal," Vernon counters that the instruction and training she received *from her husband* augmented Saint-Balmon's "natural penchant" for military endeavors (141-142). Once again, the biographer shifts blame away from Madame de Saint-Balmon, casting her instead as a model Christian wife. Equally important in this regard, Vernon foregrounds the purely charitable ends served by Saint-Balmon's cross-dressing: "Alberte d'Ernecourt ne s'habillait point en Cava-

lier pour perdre, mais pour sauver; non point pour nuire à quelqu'un, mais pour être utile à tout le monde" (144). By juxtaposing the terms *perdre* and *nuire*, on the one hand, and *sauver* and *être utile* on the other, the text establishes a moral hierarchy that exalts Saint-Balmon and tacitly impugns the amazons of the Fronde, who dressed as men to undermine and elude royal authority.

Other textual effects highlight differences between Saint-Balmon and popular perception of the *frondeuses*. To the political disorder they fomented, the biography implicitly contrasts the order that prevails within Saint-Balmon's domestic sphere and the surrounding villages she protected. Vernon repeatedly praises Saint-Balmon's skillful management of all aspects of her estate, including oversight of a large staff. To the nefarious influence exerted by certain *frondeuses*, Vernon juxtaposes Saint-Balmon's edifying presence and her moral and spiritual leadership: "Sa dévotion, qui réglait fort bien la conduite de sa personne, s'étendait aussi sur tous ses domestiques. . . . La paix y régnait, sans aucune apparence de trouble" (67). Indeed so powerful is her moral guidance that a wayward pastor abandons his mistress of twenty years only upon the exhortations of Saint-Balmon (117). Moreover, in opposition to the perceived self-interest of the *frondeuses*—their amorous and selfish motives—Vernon frequently asserts the "parfait désintéressement" (183) of Saint-Balmon who acted exclusively to protect the well-being of others without regard to her own comfort or advantage: "Cette conduite de la dame dont nous parlons est d'autant plus remarquable, que sa magnificence était nette de tout intérêt, et sans autre vue que celle de bien faire. Cette remarque ne saurait être assez répétée" (58). Such claims constitute a leitmotiv in *L'Amazone chrétienne* and together form a portrait of exemplary Christian womanhood consonant with the epideictic function of early modern biography. Yet such allusions are so numerous that they must point to a more profound concern than biographical convention. The implicit contrast between the generosity, prudence, and moral rectitude of the Christian Amazon, on the one hand, and the self-interest, recklessness and lubricity of the amazons of the Fronde, on the other, provides an alternative to the lense of scandal through which readers might otherwise view Saint-Balmon.<sup>13</sup>

Even more compelling in this regard are recurrent affirmations of Saint-Balmon's loyalty to France, which form a refrain as ubiquitous as assertions of her moral and social integrity. They follow a highly consistent pattern: descriptions of her military activity are always coupled with declarations of her service and fidelity to the French crown: "... elle commandait ses troupes en personne, s'estimant heureuse de trouver occasion pour servir sa Majesté Très-Chrétienne" (148); "Son cœur, néanmoins, a toujours été Français, et ses armes ont toujours été dévouées au service de la France" (158). Such allegiance is all the more remarkable, the biographer intimates, because it comes at the price of political dissension between Saint-Balmon and her husband, who served Charles IV, duc de Lorraine, and fought against the French:

Elle s'attacha singulièrement au service de la France, laissant aller son mari dans le parti des Impériaux et des Lorrains, bien qu'il fit ses efforts pour l'obliger à le suivre. Les intérêts de Sa Majesté Très-Chrétienne lui ont toujours été très considérables, pour la justice qu'elle y reconnaissait, et par son affection naturelle envers les Français.... (145-46)

Many more passages like these could be cited; taken as a whole they depict Saint-Balmon as the embodiment of unwavering loyalty to the French monarch. Yet it is important to scrutinize this rhetorical emphasis as ideological rather than descriptive, as indicative of the perceived need to reassure readers that Saint-Balmon had nothing of a *frondeuse*. The research of Saint-Balmon's most recent biographer, Micheline Cuénin, lends support to this claim. She argues that Saint-Balmon's loyalties were far less absolute than Vernon portrays them (*La Dernière des Amazones* 124). It seems clear, then, that the biographer strives to rationalize Saint-Balmon's scandalous behavior by arguing that the ends (defending French interests) justify the means (usurpation of masculine attire and arms).

But the efforts to clothe Saint-Balmon in the apparel of Christian womanhood and French loyalty in order to redress the scandal

of her life succeed only partially, for the representation of the female body ultimately confounds the grammar of sexual identity. The biographer's first and only encounter with Saint-Balmon's body takes place synecdochically, through her blood.<sup>14</sup> Vernon describes how he came across Saint-Balmon's profession of faith and membership in the *Tiers-Ordre* of Saint-Francis, the lay branch of the Franciscans. This document drew his attention because Saint-Balmon had signed it in her own blood. Judging by Vernon's reaction to this discovery, this must have been an exceptional practice, and it determined his decision to write the biography (60-61).

Saint-Balmon's body becomes a focal point in the second half of the biography, which provides a scrupulous account of the battles, skirmishes and ambushes she led. The text offers vivid descriptions of her physical trauma: she endured multiple pistol wounds to her head and appendages; she suffered blows from swords, lost her hearing, and bore permanent scars. She was perpetually plagued by "douleurs corporelles," but rather than shrink from threats to her physical safety, she embraced them: "ses forces lui revinrent en combattant... il lui fallait susciter des occasions de combattre, parce que le désir de s'opposer aux désordres . . . la rendit entièrement vigoureuse" (234-35). Indeed, she was vigorous enough to overpower her opponents and, when necessary, to kill them. In surmounting the infirmity and *mollesse* associated with the female sex and acquiring male-associated physical strength, Saint-Balmon resembles any number of extraordinary amazons celebrated in Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* and in the *femme forte* literature of mid-century.

But Saint-Balmon was not the archetypal virgin-warrior, like Joan of Arc. She was, in fact, three times a mother. Her maternal body, then, did not possess the protective powers mythically associated with virginity. According to Nancy Huston,

Virginity is seen as an invisible armor, and the hymen as a shield designed to protect both the body and soul of the young girl. Once it has been pierced, once she has succumbed to this first paradigmatic

wound, all other wounds become possible. The deflowered female body is irremediably permeable, irreversibly vulnerable. (Huston 129)

This notion underpins the belief in the fundamental incompatibility between “the act of giving birth” and “the act of dealing death” and explains why motherhood is seen to deprive women of the capacity to fight (Huston 128). The representation of Saint-Balmon’s body defies this myth of incompatibility and gives lie to the fiction of woman’s vulnerability. Indeed the period of Saint-Balmon’s young motherhood overlaps with that of her active military engagement. In the biography, maternal imagery occupies a secondary, if no less striking, place. Vernon writes that Saint-Balmon “répand le sang et fait des carnages” (137), and yet her own blood, shed on the battlefield, is described as “un doux lait,” which nurtures and sustains the entire community under her protection. Her “maternal heart” metaphorically “bleeds” at the death of her son (107). Her body is irrefutably double—quintessentially feminine because it has fulfilled its generative capacities and undeniably masculine in its physical prowess, strength, and lethal force. Rather than attenuate the sexual doubleness of the female biographical subject, the text amplifies it by multiplying the scenes that stage the body. Instead of reconciling the opposition between the maternal and the warlike, the biography represents it in all its troubling inconsistency and ambiguity.

Ultimately, Saint-Balmon fails to embody any one of the common female archetypes of the early modern period. She is neither an “engulfing Amazon” or a “nurturing Virgin” (Montrose 77). In one sense, then, the biography records and produces a narrative of female impropriety. Perhaps to understand what enables this representation of scandalous femininity, we must reconsider an omnipresent figure of the biography, the king. Saint-Balmon defies her husband and supports French claims in the disputed Lorraine region. Symbolically, the king’s authority supercedes that of the husband; the king is thus *absolute*, constructed textually as ultimate arbiter and phallic subject. Only such absolute royal power can countenance the actions of a figure normally associated with social disintegration and political chaos. The life narrative of the

scandalous Saint-Balmon becomes legible and indeed “palatable” in part because it upholds a conception of the monarchy wholly consistent with that created by the architects of absolutism.<sup>15</sup> From another perspective, the biography suggests that a certain amount of scandal, here in the form of challenges to female *bienséance*, could be tolerated when it occurred in the service of the monarch.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The persistent fascination with Saint-Balmon is undeniable. An abridged version of Vernon’s text appeared in the eighteenth century, and the original version was reprinted with an introduction and historical notes in 1873. In 1973, two abbots, using the pseudonyms Georges Darne and Jean Leduc, wrote a fictionalized account of her life, *Madame de Saint Balmon: L’Amazone chrétienne, Roman historique*. More recently, Micheline Cuénin authored a new biography of Saint-Balmon, *La Dernière des Amazones* (1992), which draws extensively upon archival sources in the Lorraine region as well as Vernon’s biography.

<sup>2</sup> Referring to the fan as “ce papillon de la femme” in his study of the feminine accouterments in the *ancien régime*, Victor Du Bled claims that the fan is “par excellence une arme de coquetterie, le sceptre et le bouclier de la beauté, le confident de toutes les pudeurs et de toutes les malices féminines” (296).

<sup>3</sup> Saint-Balmon’s name figured on lists of women authors until the middle of the nineteenth century (Abbott and Fournier 25).

<sup>4</sup> Allusions to this scandal occur throughout the biography and take two forms: instances in which Vernon records the reactions of Saint-Balmon’s peers and those in which the biographer clearly anticipates unfavorable *reader* response. One compelling measure of the scandal surrounding Saint-Balmon is found in an anecdote about her young son’s death. Although he died from smallpox, family members held Saint-Balmon—and by implication her transgressive behavior—responsible for his death (110).

<sup>5</sup> This essay is part of a longer work-in-progress that examines gender and biography in *L'Amazone chrétienne*.

<sup>6</sup> Vernon wrote, “elle ne tenait rien de la femme” (141). Tallemant des Réaux writes of Saint-Balmon, “elle a la voix et la mine d’un homme,” and he concludes his description with “[e]lle est un peu gesticulante; mais elle est si souvent homme qu’il ne faut pas s’en estonner” (597). In his *Mémoires*, l’abbé Arnauld, who, unlike Vernon and Tallemant, actually met Saint-Balmon, likewise commented on her lack of feminine demeanor, noting that it was “amusing” to see how ill at ease she was in women’s clothing (cited in Petitot 167). Such comments reveal to an extraordinary degree the “permeability” of the category Woman in the seventeenth century.

<sup>7</sup> *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire d’Anne d’Autriche* and *Histoire de Mme Henriette d’Angleterre* were published respectively in 1723 and 1720, although Lafayette’s *Histoire* probably circulated in manuscript form (Beasley 130). Faith Beasley recognizes the generic ambiguity of Lafayette’s text when she describes its “complex status” (131). She nonetheless characterizes *Histoire de Mme Henriette d’Angleterre*, along with *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire d’Anne d’Autriche*, as “nonfictional biography” (131). A note on terminology: prior to the eighteenth century, when the word *biographie* first appears in French, the word *vie* generally designates biographical life-writing (e.g., Hilarion de Coste’s *Les Eloges et Vies des reines, princesses, dames et damoiselles illustres* [1630] and Brantôme’s *Vies des Dames illustres* [1665]).

<sup>8</sup> See Marina Warner’s exhaustive study of Joan which includes a meticulous account of her trial and execution as well as a comprehensive analysis of the subsequent transformations and appropriations of her story.

<sup>9</sup> See notably Cuénin (“La femme et la guerre”), DeJean, Hepp, and Mueller. Timmermans touches on this subject as well when she discusses “la mutation de l’idéal féminin après la Fronde” (247).

<sup>10</sup> See Ian Maclean for an analysis of *femme forte* literature (1630-1550) and of the ways in which the image of the amazon was rehabilitated to show that a queen could hold power.

<sup>11</sup> In the preface to his play *Bradamante* (1695), Thomas Corneille notes that the subject of the female warrior “s’est éloigné de nos mœurs” (cited in Cuénin “Bradamante” 39).

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Wise draws a similar conclusion (286).

<sup>13</sup> The very title of the biography, *L’Amazone chrétienne*, foreshadows Vernon’s systemic program to “reinterpret” the scandalous Saint-Balmon by likening her to other amazons known for their “piety and patriotism” (Maclean 86). Maclean points out that the term *amazone chrestienne*, “linking pagan and Christian virtues,” appears frequently in *femme forte* literature (82).

<sup>14</sup> Vernon never met Saint-Balmon, who died before he undertook his project, but he claims repeatedly to have interviewed many “témoins oculaires.”

<sup>15</sup> Wise notes likewise, “. . . Vernon’s image of an ideal national subject/wife echoes some of the King’s strategies for creating a centralized nation” (299-300 n 12).

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