9. ‘Is it possible that my sister […] has had a baby?’

The Early Years of Marriage as a Transition from Girlhood to Womanhood in the Letters of Three Generations of Orange-Nassau Women

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Abstract
Though marriage and motherhood were acknowledged as markers of the transition from childhood to adulthood for early modern women, many did not experience these events as definitive. Sisters Elisabeth and Charlotte-Brabantine of Orange-Nassau, and Elisabeth’s daughter, Marie de la Tour d’Auvergne, carried girlhood inexperience and uncertainties into their new lives as wives and mothers. Their own letters, and letters written to or about them, offer evidence for, and were an important part of, their passage from youthful, somewhat self-centred uncertainty to confident, outward-looking maturity and involvement in broader political and religious matters.

Keywords: childbirth; Huguenot; letters; marriage; Orange-Nassau; sisters; youth

‘Is it possible that my sister […] has had a baby?’[1] This was the reaction of Charlotte-Brabantine of Orange-Nassau (aged sixteen) when she heard that her sister Elisabeth (aged nineteen) had given birth to her first child. Elisabeth had married Henri de la Tour d’Auvergne, Duke of Bouillon, in

1 Elisabeth to Charlotte-Brabantine, 5 February 1597: ‘Mais est il possible que ma seur Isabelle ait un enfant?’ (Isabelle was a nickname for Elisabeth.) Elisabeth of Orange-Nassau, *Correspondence d’Elisabeth de Nassau 1595–1609*, 15. Subsequently E to CB, Edenassau02; Broomhall, ‘Lettres de Louise-Julienne’, 161. All translations from the French sources are mine.

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February 1595 in his sovereign principality of Sedan. Charlotte-Brabantine and their stepmother Louise de Coligny, who had accompanied Elisabeth to Sedan, were back at home in The Hague. Charlotte-Brabantine's apparently spontaneous exclamation comes to us indirectly, passed on to Elisabeth by her husband, who had been in The Hague in October 1596, when their first child was born. Elisabeth quoted the phrase jokingly back to her sister in a letter, adding that she had indeed had a baby, and that it was already almost as big as she was (Elisabeth was notoriously short in stature).

Charlotte-Brabantine was not questioning the fact that her sister had given birth. Elisabeth had written to her so frequently that she had been able to follow the stages of her sister's pregnancy closely. Rather, Charlotte-Brabantine was expressing amazement that her sister, who was only three years older than she and with whom she had shared a home for fifteen years, had now become a mother. But the birth of little Louise did not mark a definitive change in Elisabeth or in her relationship with her sister, any more than her marriage had. Elisabeth had passed through the official life-stage changes marked by her marriage, her move to her husband's home, and the birth of her first child. However, ongoing through and beyond these official stages was her developing but incomplete sense of herself, and others' sense of her, as a (mostly) self-confident adult woman. In the letters exchanged by three generations of Orange-Nassau women, we can observe the transition from girlhood to womanhood in the early years of marriage for Elisabeth (1577–1642), for her sister Charlotte-Brabantine of Orange Nassau (1580–1631), and for Marie de la Tour d'Auvergne (1601–1665), who was Elisabeth's daughter and became Charlotte-Brabantine's daughter-in-law.

Elisabeth was not unique. Though marriage and motherhood were acknowledged as official markers of the transition from childhood to adulthood for early modern women, many did not experience these events as definitive.[2] Elisabeth, Charlotte-Brabantine, and Marie all carried girlhood inexperience and uncertainties into their new lives as wives and mothers. Only gradually did they (and others) feel that they were mature; only gradually did they begin to act with confidence within their marriages and in the broader political and religious context. Their own letters, and letters written to or about them, are both evidence and an important part of their passage from youthful, somewhat self-centred uncertainty to

2 For example, Stanley Chojnacki observed for Venetian women that '[f]or many women [...] the brusque interruption of adolescence by the uncertainties of youthful marriage could lead through the twists and turns of individual experience to a confident, influential, self-defining widowhood'. Chojnacki, 'Measuring Adulthood', 387.

confident, outward-looking maturity after their marriages and the births of their first children.

'The ages of women', as they are represented in the early modern period in words or in images, were usually limited to three and defined either in biological (virgin/mother/crone) or societal (daughter/wife/widow) terms.[3] Even when additional 'stages' were included, the focus remained on the woman's body and on her relationships with men, rather than on the development of intellectual, emotional, and moral competencies.[4] This external, gendered analysis of women's lives is clearly a simplification that needs to be revised. Barbara Hanawalt has commented that one of the challenges in understanding and defining life stages for women in this period is that '[w]omen's experiences are centered in private space where female culture is preserved by word of mouth rather than by public recording either in official documents or by literate recorders'.[5] This is not entirely true – many of the transitions experienced by women do involve public, recorded events. But the letters exchanged by these Orange-Nassau women offer important access to the 'private space' Hanawalt identifies, and to the women's own experiences of these transitions.

The process of writing and receiving letters was itself a means through which women could develop a sense of their strengths. Dena Goodman's conclusion about one of her eighteenth-century subjects applies equally well to the Orange-Nassau women. Goodman writes that 'the intersubjective space of the correspondence was her construction site, a safe place where a self oriented towards others could be constructed', and that letters 'show us a young woman gaining a sense of self and self-confidence through the practice of writing'.[6] This sense of self and of self-confidence was built not in isolation but through the relationships among correspondents.[7] Letters were equally important in preparing these women for the roles they could play within the Orange-Nassau family network and in the larger world. As Susan Broomhall demonstrates:

3 Wiesner, *Women and Gender*, 41–42.

4 Seidel Menchi, 'Girl and the Hourglass', 41–75.

5 Hanawalt, 'Historical Descriptions and Prescriptions for Adolescence', 349. Hanawalt writes that: 'One hesitates to even put a label on this life stage because the very names for the period are in hot dispute' (341–42). She observes that '[a]dolescence carries with it a sense of becoming rather than a sense of full participation' (343).

6 Goodman, *Becoming a Woman*, 268, 310.

7 As Natalie Zemon Davis has demonstrated, in early modern France 'virtually all the occasions for talking or writing about the self involved a relationship […] especially with one's family and lineage'. Davis, 'Boundaries', 53.

> For women, letters were particularly critical to their family identity because letters were the principal forum in which they could exchange personal and political news, impose their views and perspectives, and cement their memory in the minds of relatives on whom they might one day need to rely.[8]

The letters written by, to, and about Elisabeth, Charlotte-Brabantine, and Marie are part of a much larger Orange-Nassau family correspondence, which has long been identified as a rich source for the study of family relations, of exchanges of medical information, of expressions of emotions, of female patronage, of women's informal yet essential roles in political events, and, most recently, of gender, power, and dynasty.[9]

Elisabeth, Charlotte-Brabantine, and Marie were members of this important transnational, multi-generational, Calvinist family network, based in the United Provinces of the Netherlands with links to several Protestant German states, to France, and to England. Elisabeth and Charlotte-Brabantine were two of the six daughters of William 'The Silent' of Orange-Nassau (1533–1584) and his third wife, Charlotte de Bourbon-Montpensier (1546–1582). After Charlotte's death in 1582, and William's assassination in 1584, the young sisters were cared for by William's fourth wife, Louise de Coligny (1555–1620). She saw to it that they were prepared for the advantageous marriages she would arrange for them. They learned reading, writing, basic arithmetic, and appropriate foreign languages.[10] They did needlework and learned to dance. And they participated in the carefully cultivated epistolary network through which Louise de Coligny exercised her influence.[11] Louise continued her stepdaughters' education through the letters she wrote to them after they left to be married, and the sisters followed her example in their correspondence with each other and with their own children.[12]

Two of the sisters, Catherine-Belgica and Flandrine, left to be raised by relatives; Louise-Julienne (1576–1644), Elisabeth, Charlotte-Brabantine, and

8 Broomhall, 'Letters Make the Family', 44.

9 See especially Broomhall and Van Gent, *Gender, Power and Identity*; Broomhall, 'Letters Make the Family'; Broomhall, *Women's Medical Work*; Broomhall and Van Gent, 'Corresponding Affections'; Couchman, '"Give birth quickly"'; Pascal, 'Princesses épistolières'.

10 Berriot-Salvadore, *Les Femmes*, 136–37; see E to CB, 4 June 1596, Edenassau02, 11.

11 See Couchman, '"Give birth quickly"'; Broomhall, 'Letters Make the Family'.

12 See Goodman, *Becoming a Woman*, 76: 'Through correspondence, the mother would remain involved in her daughter's education, even as her daughter learned how to function on her own in the world. At the same time, she would learn through practice one of the most important skills she would need as an adult: how to write a letter and maintain a correspondence'.

Amélie (1581–1657) remained with Louise. When Louise-Julienne married Frederick IV, Elector of the Palatinate in 1593, at the age of seventeen, she took Amélie with her to Heidelberg. Elisabeth was the next to marry. The last to leave was Charlotte-Brabantine; she married Claude, Duke of La Trémoille (1566–1604) in 1598, and moved to his residence at Thouars. Through their letters, the sisters remained just as bonded during their later lives as they had been as young girls. They supported each other through complex and difficult family and political situations involving their husbands and their adult children, as well as sharing news of health, children, friends, deaths, remedies, and fashions over many decades. The children from all these marriages figure prominently, and charmingly, in their mothers' correspondence. Elisabeth and Charlotte-Brabantine began discussing a marriage between Charlotte-Brabantine's son Henri de la Trémoille (1598–1674) and Elisabeth's daughter Marie de la Tour d'Auvergne while the children were still infants, and they were actively involved in the life of the young couple after their marriage in 1619.

The Orange-Nassau family, and the families into which the girls married, were caught up in the political and religious struggles of the time. They shared the dismay of many Protestants at Henri IV's conversion and perceived favouring of his former Catholic enemies. Eventually reconciled with the King, the French families participated in the crafting and acceptance of the Edict of Nantes, and later in the struggles between Louis XIII and his mother, Marie de Medicis, and in the Fronde. The German side of the family was equally caught up in Protestant–Catholic tensions of the Thirty Years War. Thus, the new husbands were frequently called away for military service or to court for political reasons, leaving their wives to fend for themselves. In later years, the women often negotiated on behalf of their husbands and sons as well as for themselves.

The two sisters, Elisabeth and Charlotte-Brabantine, and their daughter/daughter-in-law Marie gradually took, or rather created, their places within this dynamic network. As the letters show, all three were young and inexperienced when they married and bore their first children. They all married at the age of eighteen; Elisabeth and Marie had their first children at nineteen, Charlotte-Brabantine at eighteen.[13] They depended on earlier relationships and were mentored by more experienced women relatives. All three underwent a period of growth and apprenticeship during the early years of their marriages, leading to a sense of confidence and responsibility

13 Their age at marriage was not unusual for noble families, though it differed from the 'western-European marriage pattern'. See Wiesner, *Women and Gender*, 57.

in their adulthood, when all three would play central roles in the political and religious events of their troubled times. For Elisabeth, we can consult her own letters to her sister Charlotte-Brabantine, as well as letters written about her by their other sisters, especially Louise-Julienne, and by their stepmother, Louise de Coligny. For Charlotte-Brabantine, few of her own letters are extant.[14] Instead, the letters that the sisters' beloved stepmother, Louise de Coligny, wrote to Charlotte-Brabantine provide intimate though indirect access to the early years of Charlotte-Brabantine's own marriage, happier than Elisabeth's but still a process of development. Most of the letters connected with Elisabeth and Charlotte-Brabantine offer intimate, apparently unguarded expressions of emotions, both positive and negative. Marie, too, wrote to Charlotte-Brabantine. Differences in generation and status meant that Marie's letters were appropriately respectful, as she endeavoured to be worthy of her aunt/mother-in-law's esteem. She did not mention any difficulties she might be experiencing. Taken together, these correspondences offer a nuanced understanding of the period early in their marriages when these women were making the transition from girlhood to mature womanhood.

Elisabeth of Orange-Nassau, Duchess of Bouillon

Elisabeth's letters offer the most complex and intimate account of this transitional period. Because she was addressing her sister, Elisabeth could write candidly, with no fear of reproach, and with the expectation that her sister would sympathize with her. For Elisabeth, letters to and from her sisters and her stepmother were a lifeline as she struggled to adapt to a new home and to her husband`s frequent and lengthy absences. The Duke of Bouillon was 22 years older than Elisabeth and deeply involved in French politics. In the early years of their marriage, he was absent more often than he was present: for three months, wrote his young wife, and then for 'centuries'.[15] Elisabeth was initially very unhappy. She wrote that she suffered from 'continual misery', 'fears, apprehensions', 'grief and tears'. 'They preach patience to me', she wrote, but 'I have to suffer in desperation'.[16]

14 Most of the letters considered here were addressed to Charlotte-Brabantine and survive in the archives of the La Trémoille family.

15 '[D]es siècle entiers'. E to CB, 10 Oct. 1595, Edenassau02, 7.

16 '[P]eine continuelles, craintes, apréanssions [...] chagrins et [...] pleurs [...]; l'on me prêche la pasiance [...] il le faut soufrir avec désespoir'. E to CB, 2 Oct. 1595, Edenassau02, 6.

Elisabeth's letters to and from Charlotte-Brabantine allowed her to continue their very close relationship and to reaffirm her own value. She wrote insistently about her love for her sister and frequently asked for demonstrations of her sister's love for her. Elisabeth's first letter begins: 'I have to confess, dear sister, that I've never loved you as much'. She concluded: 'My dear […] love me well and never stop believing […] that I do the same for you. Know that you are always present in my thoughts'.[17] They are so close, Elisabeth exclaimed in another letter, that, even far apart, they fell ill at the same time. She wrote of 'the pleasure I had that you shed tears when you remembered how you left me'.[18] When Elisabeth was particularly depressed, she wrote: 'I always wish I was close to you, or you close to me'.[19] All the sisters missed each other when they moved away. Their sister Louise-Julienne wrote to Charlotte-Brabantine soon after Elisabeth's marriage:

> I know it will have been a difficult separation for you, now that you've left Mme de Buillon, my sister [in Sedan]. I know what it's like from having experienced it [separation from her sisters] myself.[20]

References within Elisabeth's letters show that she also counted on her correspondence with her stepmother, Louise de Coligny.[21] The crucial importance of letters as a means of maintaining Elisabeth's childhood relationships was even more obvious when letters went astray, or when no one was available to carry them: 'Can you believe […] that I'm writing to you without knowing who will carry my letter, which upsets me'.[22] All the Orange-Nassau sisters tried to arrange occasions when they could see each other, though meetings were rare. 'I passionately want to see you', wrote

17 'Il faut que je te confesse, chère seur, que ne t'aime jamais tant'; 'Mon coeur, […] aymés-moy bien et ne perdés point la créance que […] j'an fais […] de mesme'. E to CB, 7 June 1595, Edenassau02, 1–2.

18 '[L]e contantement que j'en reçoy que vous ayés jete des larmes au souvenir que vous avés de m'avoir laisé'. E to CB, 22 Aug. 1595, Edenassau02, 4.

19 '[J]e me souhaitte à toutes les hures près de vous ou vous près de moy'. E to CB, 10 Oct. 1595, Edenassau02, 7.

20 'Je say que ce vous aura est[é] un[e] dure séparasion que celle que vous avez faicte à cest heure avect Madame de Buillon, ma seur. Je say ce que c'est pour l'avoir moy mayme expérimanté'. Louise-Julienne to Charlotte-Brabantine, 13 May 1595 in Louise-Julienne de Nassau, *Correspondance* (1), 13. Subsequently LJ to CB, LJdenassau01.

21 See Elisabeth's mention of 'une fort longue lettre à Madame ma belle-mère'. E to CB, 7 June 1595, Edenassau02, 1.

22 'Figurés-vous […] que je vous escris sans estre assuré qui portera mes lettres, ce quy me fâche'. E to CB, 7 July 1595, Edenassau02, 3.

Elisabeth to Charlotte-Brabantine.[23] Failing that, in addition to exchanging letters, they requested each other's portraits and those of their children, promising to hang them in their private rooms where they could see them every day.[24]

Elisabeth longed for news of home but offered rather paltry news of her few visitors and her own activities. She wrote 'nothing at all happens here', except that she had learned not to be afraid of frogs.[25]

> I don't know how to tell you how I pass the time, because I do so many different things. I never miss a sermon, I mean not in the morning or in the afternoon, always in town. […] M. Bours is still here […] I often play cards with him.[26]

She attempted to learn to play the lute but later gave that up. She wrote that:

> When my dear husband isn't here, I'm in no fit state to receive visitors, I'm always suffering and in a bad humour, and it's not right to ask people to come when I'm in such distress. And when he is here, I don't want any other amusements.[27]

Elisabeth's first pregnancy neither raised her spirits nor increased her self-confidence. She reported that she had completely changed: she was 'your sister, the fat lady, and the worst dressed in all of Sedan', and she never danced any more.[28] She was disappointed that her husband was not present for her first delivery: 'I had the saddest delivery ever, far from everyone I love best in the world. Good God, that's cruel'. After the delivery, she was too miserable to receive the traditional visits from neighbouring women

23 '[J]e désire, mais passionément, de vous voir'. E to CB, 5 Feb. 1597, Edenassau02, 15; Broomhall, 'Lettres de Louise-Julienne', 161.

24 E to CB, 10 Oct. 1595, Edenassau02, 8; 25 April 1596, Edenassau02, 11; 5 Feb. 1597, Edenassau02, 16; Broomhall, 'Lettres de Louise-Julienne', 161; March 1597, Edenassau02, 17.

25 'Il ne sy pase rien ycy'. E to CB, 7 July 1595, Edenassau02, 3.

26 'Je ne sais comment je te puis dire à quoy je passe le temps, puisque c'est à tant de diverse chose. Je ne perds pas un prêche, Je dis pas non plus au matin qu'après dîner; et tousjours à le ville. […] Monsieur de Bours ne bouge d'icy. […] Je joue fort souvent à piquet-capot avec luy'. E to CB, 1 Sept. 1595, Edenassau02, 5; Broomhall, 'Lettres de Louise-Julienne', 151.

27 '[Q]uant ce cher mary n'est point ycy, je ne suis propre à avoir de la conpagnie, estant tousjous en paine et de mauvaise humeur. […] Aussy quant il y est, je ne veux point de divertisemens'. E to CB, 7 June 1595, Edenassau02, 2.

28 'Je suis vostre seur, la grose Dondon et la plus mal abillyé qu'il y a en tout Sedan'; 'Je ne danse plus'. E to CB, 4 June 1596, Edenassau02, 11, 12.

('tears kept me company'), and she told her sister that the baby, a girl, wasn't even pretty.[29] She was eventually cheered by the arrival of her husband four months after little 'Lolo's' birth, and began to enjoy the pleasure they both took in playing with her.

During those first years, Elisabeth behaved and sounded more like a child than a woman. She struggled to adapt to radically new circumstances and took little initiative. Elisabeth's experience differed from that of many upper-class women in that, at Sedan, no mother-in-law was present, nor did she have any sisters-in-law or other companions of her own age to keep her company. She seems to have been involved very little, if at all, in the running of her household. When she proudly wrote, 'Believe it or not, you have a sister who is an excellent housewife', she was referring to her ability to sew shirts.[30] One thing did please her though: 'I am well loved by all the people in this town'. People had expected her to be 'a bit of a princess', but they had formed a good opinion of her now that they knew her.[31]

A turning point for Elisabeth was her move from Sedan to another of her husband's properties, Turenne, in February 1597. She was obliged to leave her daughter behind, which was sad because she was beginning to enjoy her. But the prospect of being with her husband was worth the sacrifice.[32] Her arrival at Turenne was something of a triumph. She described the elaborate festivities held for her, beginning with the nobles who came to meet her when she was eighteen leagues away, and culminating in a *mascarade* performed for her in the nearest town. Soon her daughter was sent to join her and became a great delight; anecdotes about naughty little 'Lolo' fill her letters. Elisabeth would give birth to six other children, three more daughters and three sons, none in the sad circumstances that marked Lolo's birth. Most importantly, when Elisabeth's husband was absent, he began to entrust the affairs of his estates to her. We find her travelling to Limeuil, Lanquais, and Montfort, where she was pleased to receive 'homage and gratitude' for her effective interventions.[33]

29 'Certe, j'ay fait des couches aussy tristes qu'il s'en fit jamais, éloignée de tout ce que j'aimais le mieux au monde. Bon dieu, que cela est cruel […] les pleurs m'on tenu compagnie. […] ayme bien ta petite nièce, mais non pas pour ce que l'on vous a dit qu'elle est belle, car elle ne l'est point'. E to CB, 4 Nov. 1596, Edenassau02, 13–14; Broomhall, 'Lettres de Louise-Julienne', 156–58.

30 'Non, vous avés une seur excelente ménagère'. E to CB, 4 June 1596, Edenassau02, 12.

31 '[J]e suis bien aymé de tout le peuple de ceste ville. […] J'estois [depinte comme] du tout coutisanne. […] Ils me trouve tout autre'. E to CB, 1 Sept. 1595, Edenassau02, 5.

32 E to CB, 5 Feb. 1597, Edenassau02, 15; Broomhall, 'Lettres de Louise-Julienne', 162.

33 '[D]es homage et les recongnoissance'. E to CB, 1 Sept. 1598, Edenassau02, 19.

Though she would never be as politically involved as her stepmother or her sister Charlotte-Brabantine, Elisabeth's evolving role is evident in letters she wrote between 1602 and 1605, during a period of dangerous hostility between her husband and Henri IV. Writing to Charlotte-Brabantine in December 1605, she explained that her husband, with a fine sense of the kind of role a woman could play, had decided to send her to court to represent him for an exchange of formal assurances relating to the support of the Protestant strongholds for the King:

> He was thinking of sending me to tell the King what was happening, because I'd show more submission and more openness and affection, so that I would be the one to whom they would give the power to receive the assurances from the King, and I would give my husband's assurances to him.[34]

A woman could display 'submission […] openness and affection' in situations where a man could not do so without losing honour, an understanding used frequently by the Orange-Nassau women. Although this mission did not take place, the incident shows that her husband had confidence in her ability to negotiate on his behalf. Elisabeth herself was now much more confident of her abilities as a wife, a mother, and even in political matters.

Charlotte-Brabantine of Orange-Nassau, Duchess of La Trémoille

For Elisabeth, some 125 letters are extant; very few of Charlotte-Brabantine's letters have survived, most written to her husband. Our understanding of her experiences during the early years of her marriage comes indirectly from the letters she received from her stepmother Louise de Coligny, from her sister Elisabeth, and, to a lesser extent, from her other sisters. The first few years of Charlotte-Brabantine's marriage appear to have been much happier than Elisabeth's. Still, Charlotte-Brabantine sometimes appeared unsure of herself, and she had much to learn about how she could play a more public role. She too benefitted from advice and encouragement from her sisters and her stepmother. When her sisters and her stepmother wrote

34 'Il [son mari] inclina à me le [son voyage à la cour à elle] faire faire pour tesmoigner au Roy et plus de submition plus de franchise et d'afection de fasson que je serois celle à quy ils donneront le pouvoir de recevoir les sûretés du Roy et luy porterois celle de mon Monsieur'. E to CB, 12 Dec. 1605, Edenassau02, 71.

to support her through her first pregnancy and the birth of her first child, they often seemed to treat her more like a child than an adult woman. Over the years, Louise de Coligny offered her the benefit of her own political experience, but it wasn't until after her husband's premature death that Charlotte-Brabantine came fully into her own.

According to Evelyne Berriot-Salvadore, when Charlotte-Brabantine's marriage was arranged, Claude de la Trémoille, who was not in good health, had wanted to marry simply to provide heirs, and surprised himself by falling in love with his young wife.[35] Her older sister, Louise-Julienne, wrote to congratulate her: 'Madame my sister, I can't tell you how happy I am […] that you now enjoy the love of a very worthy husband […] and that you were welcomed by all his servants and subjects with much delight'.[36] Charlotte-Brabantine was pregnant almost immediately. Louise de Coligny thought she knew the precise date of conception: 'I'm sure it was that day when we had such a nice breakfast on your bed'.[37] Whether accurate or not, this illustrates the exceptionally intimate relationship between Charlotte-Brabantine and her stepmother that continued after her marriage.

Charlotte-Brabantine's was a much happier pregnancy than Elisabeth's, too. Charlotte-Brabantine's stepmother and her husband busied themselves in Paris purchasing what the new baby would need. Elisabeth now took on the role of experienced older sister and mentor, writing: 'I can't wait to hear how your fat belly is doing. […] I'm sending my recipes [for remedies] […] I felt much better for them, and I want you to feel better too'. Elisabeth was pleased to hear from a friend who had visited Charlotte-Brabantine that 'she had never seen such a healthy pregnant woman'.[38] Everyone was interested in the details of Charlotte-Brabantine's health and well-being. Elisabeth wrote: 'M. Louis […] told Bonne [the Bouillon's doctor] that my husband told him that you feel discomfort in your breasts because they are

35 Berriot-Salvadore, *Les Femmes*, 139. See Broomhall, 'Letters Make the Family', 41–43 for an account of the negotiations that preceded this marriage.

36 'Madame ma seur, il me seroit inposible de vous exprimer le contantement que j'ay reçu d'antandre […] que possédés à ceste heure l'amytié d'un très digne mari […] et que vous avez esté receu de tous ses serviteur et subiet avec beaucoup d'alégresse'. LJ to CB, 14 May 1598, LJdenassau01, 18.

37 'Pour certain je crois que c'est du jour où nous déjeunâmes si bien sur votre lit'. Louise de Coligny to Charlotte-Brabantine, 31 Dec. 1598, *Correspondance de Louise de Coligny*, 145. Subsequently LC to CB, Marchegay.

38 'Il me tarde bien de savoir comme ce gros ventre se porte. […] Je vous envoie mes recettes […] je m'en suis fort bien trouvée, et désire que vous en fassiés de mesme'. '[E]lle n'a jamais veu femme grose se porter sy bien'. E to CB, 18 Oct. 1598. Edenassau02, 20; Broomhall, 'Lettres de Louise-Julienne', 168.

very hard, so he [Bonne] has sent some very simple recipes'.[39] And after the birth Elisabeth reassured her sister:

> I asked Bonne what he thought of the food you're giving to my little nephew. He finds it quite different from what was given to my daughter, but he doesn't criticize it: different people, different humours. I heard that M. de Vendôme was fed that way, and he's fine.[40]

Claude de la Trémoille was present for the delivery. Louise de Coligny's overwhelming joy was again expressed in somewhat infantilizing terms: 'My daughter, a son! I weep for joy. […] I'm dying to see this little grandson, and how you hold him in your little hands'.[41] Louise-Julienne also wrote to express her delight in 'your happy delivery', adding: 'Dear sister, I have to tell you that you've won the prize over all of us for having been the first to have a son'.[42]

In the summer of 1599, when Charlotte-Brabantine was pregnant with her second child, Louise de Coligny still seemed to be treating her more as a child than as a young woman. Louise wrote:

> Isn't there some way that you can come to Sully for your second delivery? I'd be able to look after you, but I don't dare hope, I want it so much. In any case, if you were a good daughter/girl [*fille*], you would do this for your mother who loves and cherishes you with her whole heart.[43]

39 'Monsieur Louis […] mande à Bonne que Monsieur mon mary luy a dit que vous resentiés de l'incomodité de vos tétin pour estre fors durs de façon quy luy mande des remaides fort aysés'. Both Louis and Bonne were doctors. E to CB, 1 Sept. 1598, Edenassau02, 19.

40 'J'ay demandé à Bonne ce qu'il luy sembloit de la nourriture que vous donnés au petit neveu. Il la trouve bien différente de celle que l'on a donnée à ma petite, mais il ne la blâme pas pour cela : autant de personne, autant d'humeurs. J'ay ouï dire que Monsieur de Vendôme a été nourry comme cela, quy s'en porte bien'. E to CB, 20 March 1599, Edenassau02, 22. ('Monsieur de Vendôme' was Henri IV's legitimated son with his mistress Gabrielle d'Estreés; then, as now, royal behaviour was both fascinating and influential.)

41 'Ma fille, un fils! J'en pleur de joie […] Je meurs d'envie de voir ce petit-fils, et comment vos petits mains le manient'. LC to CB, 31 Dec. 1598, Marchegay, 145; see also Couchman, 'Lettres de Louise de Coligny', 118–19.

42 '[V]ostre heureux accouchement. […] Il faut chère seur que je vous die que vous avez emporté le pris sur nous toutes d'avoir faict un fils le premier'. LJ to CB, Jan. 1599, LJdenassau01, 19.

43 'N'y auroit-il point de moyen que vous puissiez venir faire vos secondes couches à Sully, là où je vous irois servir de garde, mais je ne me l'ose promettre, tant je le désir; et toutesfois, si vous étiez bonne fille vous donneriez ce moyen-là à votre mère qui vous aime et vous chérit de toutes ses affections'. LC to CB, July 1599, Marchegay, 157.

And when Charlotte-Brabantine's daughter was born, Louise wrote: 'So you've given me a granddaughter! Good Lord, how pretty I imagine she is, and you too brave for writing so soon after such pain'.[44] Even three years after her marriage, Louise's tone still seems more suitable for a child:

> My dear daughter […] no one in the world could love, esteem, cherish and honour you more than your Maman, who kisses your hands a hundred times, and my little sweetheart, and my pretty little ones.[45]

Though there was ample evidence that Claude de la Trémoille loved her deeply, Charlotte-Brabantine felt insecure about her husband's fidelity, especially when he was away at court. She worried when she didn't hear from him often enough. Louise de Coligny had to write several times to reassure her: 'What makes me love him most is the extreme love he has for you, for it's clear that he's passionately in love with you. I'm surprised that you say that you haven't had letters from him for such a long time'.[46] 'I think you are the luckiest woman in the world, for you have one of the noblest gentlemen in the world, who loves you perfectly'.[47] Perhaps Charlotte-Brabantine's premonitions of abandonment were at a deeper level. Claude de la Trémoille would die in 1604 at the age of 38.

We can observe, too, how Louise de Coligny continued the education she had been offering to her stepdaughter before her marriage. Louise was working to effect the reconciliation of Bouillon and La Trémoille with Henri IV. Both were prominent among the Protestant nobles who had withdrawn their support for Henri after his conversion to Catholicism. Louise coached Charlotte-Brabantine about how to use her influence with her husband to promote his reconciliation with the King. Louise's first extant letter to her stepdaughter, written in November 1598, accompanied one that she sent to the Duke. She wrote from the court:

44 'Vous m'avez fait une petite fille! Mon Dieu que j'imagine qu'elle est belle, et vous trop brave d'avoir écrit soudain après avoir eu tant de mal'. LC to CB, second week of Dec. 1599, Marchegay, 166.

45 'Ma chère fille […] rien au monde ne vous peut davantage aimer, chérir et honorer que fait votre maman, qui vous baise cent mille fois les mains, et à mon petit coeur et mes petites mignonnes'. LC to CB, 25 July 1601, Marchegay, 186.

46 'Ce qui me le fait aimer le plus c'est l'extrême amour qu'il vous porte; car c'est chose certaine qu'il est passionnément amoureux de vous. Je m'étonne que vous dites qu'il y a si longtemps que vous n'avez eu de ses lettres'. LC to CB, 29 Oct. 1599, Marchegay, 164; Couchman, 'Lettres de Louise de Coligny', 122.

47 'Je […] vous estime la plus heureuse femme du monde, car vous avez un des plus honnêtes hommes du monde, de qui vous êtes parfaitement aimée'. LC to CB, Dec. 1599, Marchegay, 167.

> Dear daughter, I'm sending you this letter so that M. de la Trémoille will understand even better from the letter I'm sending to him what the King's intentions are. His presence here will be a very great advantage to him. In the name of God, advise him to come.[48]

Six weeks later, still at court, Louise wrote: 'Give birth quickly and then send us your good husband'.[49] Charlotte-Brabantine would benefit throughout her life from the lessons in political strategy Louise was offering. Later, during the conflict between Marie de Medicis and Louis XIII, Louise sent Charlotte-Brabantine a teasing compliment: 'I hear that you've become a stateswoman, and that you're working on the peace conference'.[50] Especially after her husband's premature death, she remained a key participant in the defence of her fellow-Huguenots and her extended family.

Marie de la Tour d'Auvergne, Duchess of La Trémoille

The marriage of Marie de la Tour d'Auvergne, daughter of Elisabeth of Orange-Nassau and the Duke of Bouillon, to her cousin Henri de la Trémoille, son of Charlotte-Brabantine of Orange-Nassau and the Duke of La Trémoille, had been planned when the children were infants. As a child, Marie wrote charming letters to her aunt and future mother-in-law, Charlotte-Brabantine, and when she was seven years old, her mother Elisabeth was already referring to her as Henri's 'little wife'.[51] But in 1618, when Charlotte-Brabantine was eager for the marriage to take place, Elisabeth hesitated. She wrote: 'our affairs don't permit us to marry our daughter so soon. […] I think there are several strong reasons that should make you want to wait until he [Henri] is a bit older before you arrange his marriage'.[52] Henri was 20, Marie was seventeen. Elisabeth carefully explained that she, too, wanted this marriage

48 'Chère fille, […] j'ai estimé devoir vous envoyer celui-ci [ce valet, porteur de la lettre], afin que M. de la Trémoille fût d'autant plus éclairci, par la lettre que je lui envoie, de l'intention du Roy. Sa présence ici lui servira plus que chose du monde. Au nom de Dieu, conseillez-lui d'y venir'. LC to CB, about 4 Nov. 1598, Marchegay, 140.

49 '[A]ccouchez vitement et puis nous envoyez votre bon mari'. LC to CB, about 15 Dec. 1598, Marchegay, 144; see Couchman '"Give birth quickly"'.

50 'J'apprends que vous êtes femme d'État et que vous êtes employée à la conférence de paix'. LC to CB, 18 March 1616, Marchegay, 298.

51 Marie de la Tour D'Auvergne (MTA) to CB, 16 April 1607, Edenassau02, 86; 'sa petite femme'. E to CB, 13 July 1608, Edenassau02, 135.

52 'Nos afaires ne nous permettent que nous puissions sy tost marier nostre fille […] je croy qu'il y a force raisons et bien fortes quy vous doivent faire désirer de luy voir un peu plus d'âge

to take place, but did not want to interfere if Charlotte-Brabantine could find a better match for her son.[53] Nonetheless, the marriage was celebrated at Sedan a year later, on 19 February 1619.

As in her mother's case, Marie's husband left almost immediately after their wedding. The tensions between Louis XIII and his mother Marie de Medicis had broken out into open warfare. Henri de la Trémoille had chosen what turned out to be the losing side in the conflict, against very strong advice from his mother. He supported the Queen Mother, earning the hostility of the King and putting his family's honour and property in danger. But, unlike her mother, Marie was still in her childhood home when her husband departed; she spent the first nine months of her marriage there, and little changed in her life. She wrote frequently to her new mother-in-law, Charlotte-Brabantine. She seems, initially, to have been motivated mainly by a desire to remain in Charlotte-Brabantine's 'good graces' and to express her affection and respect.[54]

Marie appears to have understood her mother-in-law's involvement in the current political manoeuvring, and her efforts to reassure the King of her family's loyalty. Marie tried, mostly in vain, to collect information that might be of use to Charlotte-Brabantine in her negotiations: 'I would like, Madame, to know some news worth telling you about, but the place where we are offers very little', she wrote, and later in the same letter: 'I'm very uncomfortable, Madame, when I bother you with this petty news, which isn't worth your knowing'.[55] In other letters, she reiterated: 'Nothing at all happens here, Madame, that is worth telling you'.[56] Marie's expressions of humility, her protests that she was unworthy of the esteem her mother-in-law expressed, go beyond epistolary conventions. She went so far as to write that she would be distressed to cause Charlotte-Brabantine any inconvenience, even that of having to reply to Marie's letters.[57] She reported on dinners,

devant que de le marier'. E to CB, 15 Jan. 1618, *Correspondance d'Elisabeth de Nassau* 1610–1618, 90. Subsequently E to CB, Edenassau03.

53 E to CB, 26 Feb. 1618, Edenassau03, 91.

54 This was, of course, one of the principal motivations for letter-writing at the time.

55 'Je désirerois, Madame, savoir quelque nouvelles digne de vous mender, mais le lieu où nous sommes en fournit fort peu'. 'Je suis bien marrye, Madame, de vous importuner des chestive nouvelle et qui ne méritten point d'estre seue de vous'. Marie to Charlotte-Brabantine, 21 Feb. 1619. *Correspondance de Marie de la Tour D'Auvergne* 1619–1628, 38–39. Subsequently MTA to CB, Mariedelatour01.

56 'Il ne se fait rien du monde icy, Madame, qui mérite de vous estre mendé'. MTA to CB, March 1619, Mariedelatour01, 39.

57 MTA to CB, June 1619, Mariedelatour01, 42.

family visitors, her father's health, nothing of more than social or family interest. A visit from her husband cheered her up, but it was very short.[58]

Marie moved to Thouars in October 1619. However, this did not mark the end of her correspondence with Charlotte-Brabantine. The Dowager Duchess of La Trémoille would often spend many months at a time at court as she attempted to salvage what she could for her son and her family after the defeat of Marie de Medicis and her supporters. Charlotte-Brabantine's correspondence with her daughter-in-law continued, and with it her example of female political involvement. While we have none of the letters Charlotte-Brabantine sent to her daughter-in-law, we can observe in Marie's letters that she was being mentored in much the same way as Louise de Coligny had earlier mentored Charlotte-Brabantine. Marie, too, was introduced to the informal but powerful influence that a woman could exert in the political arena. She was now sending her mother-in-law reports about significant political and religious matters: the construction of a new Protestant temple in Thouars; the deliberations of the assembly at Loudon in response to the re-establishment of the Catholic faith in Bearn; news from Philippe Duplessis-Mornay in Saumur and from other Protestant leaders; Henri de la Trémoille's meetings with his allies; and news of the King's return to Paris.[59] Her reports were quite detailed and show a growing understanding of events. For example, she reported on an important letter from the King to Duplessis-Mornay regarding the decision of the Protestant assembly of Loudon: 'The King told him that he was very pleased with the resolution taken by the assembly, and that from now on his Protestant subjects would be treated no differently than the Catholics'.[60]

When Marie gave birth to her first child, a son, on 17 December 1620, her situation was very different from her mother's first delivery. Though her husband was absent, her mother was there for the birth, and Marie also enjoyed the company of her sister-in-law, Charlotte de la Trémoille, future Countess of Derby, with whom she would later carry on an extensive correspondence.[61] Nonetheless, Marie too appears to have suffered from

58 Late May–early June 1619, Mariedelatour01, 40–43.

59 MTA to CB, Mariedelatour01: 26 Feb. 1620, 48; 14 March 1620, 49; 21 March 1620, 50; 16 March 1620, 51; 6 April 1620, 52; 12 May 1620, 53; 27 July 1620, 54.

60 'Le Roy luy mendoit estre bien fort content de la résolution qu'avoit prize l'assemblée et dorsénavant ses sujets de la Religion seroient traittez sans nulle différance d'avec les Catholiques'. MTA to CB, 6 April 1620, Mariedelatour01, 52.

61 De Witt, *Charlotte de la Trémoille*, iii and 15. The marriage of Marie and Henri 'gave Charlotte a true sister whose affection and devotion would last her whole life'. See also Marlet, *Charlotte de la Trémoille*, 24–26. For their correspondence, see Kmec, *Across the Channel*.

depression after the birth. It was decided that she should return to Sedan in August 1621 to take the waters and be cared for by her parents.

Marie continued her correspondence with Charlotte-Brabantine from Sedan, at least 48 letters between August 1621 and Marie's return to Thouars in December 1622. These were not intimate personal letters. At no point did Marie mention her own physical or emotional health. It's likely that she exchanged letters with Charlotte de la Trémoille as well, perhaps more sisterly and emotionally revealing, but none survive from that period. The letters to her mother-in-law deal with significant current events in which her husband and their families were implicated. They are even longer than the previous ones, written with more confidence. Marie facilitated communication between her father, the Duke of Bouillon, still powerful but now in poor health, and her mother-in-law. Both were significant players in the ongoing Huguenot cause. Marie passed messages back and forth, forwarded critical documents, and offered her own opinions. For example, she wrote in a covering letter to her mother-in-law that she found the advice her father was sending with the same courier to be

> almost entirely marvellously consistent with your feelings, especially in that he judges that the first thing that should be looked into is working on a general accommodation; and that should be done through the Assembly, which should not refuse to make submissions, and should request the pardon that the King asks them to request. But I strongly doubt that they will want to come to that resolution.[62]

On her return to Thouars, and particularly after her mother-in-law's death, Marie would play an even more active role, representing her husband and negotiating on his behalf. Henri de la Trémoille, however, vacillated. At times he would co-operate with the Protestant nobles, but eventually he converted to Catholicism. Like her mother-in-law, Marie worked tirelessly to protect the family's property and honour. She fought and won the battle to have their children raised as Protestants. And, like her mother-in-law, and at least in part thanks to her mentoring, Marie became one of the most

62 '[L]es advis de Monsieur mon père, lesquels je trouve la plus grande partie merveilleusement conformes à vos santimens, particulièrement en ce qu'il juge que la première choze que l'on se doit se mettre devant les yeux, est de travailler à un acomodement général; et cela par le moyen de l'assemblée qui ne doit refuser de faire toute les submissions et demender le pardon que le Roy demende d'elle. C'est à quoy je doutte fort qu'elle se veuille résoudre'. MTA to CB, 21 Sept. 1621, Mariedelatour01, 60.

powerful leaders of the Huguenot cause in the seventeenth century, earning in later life the title 'Queen of the Huguenots'.[63]

Conclusion

Though their experiences differed in many ways, these three women have in common that they did not immediately become, or feel themselves to be, mature women when they married and bore their first children. They felt young and unsure of themselves, and they sometimes acted and were treated as if they were still children. Through their letters, family members, especially women, of their own and of their parents' generations, helped them make their way through what could be a lonely and frightening transition. The older women who mentored them knew particularly well how to exercise informal political power on behalf of their families and their religion. Elisabeth, Charlotte-Brabantine, and Marie all made the transition successfully and went on to have influential careers as adult women, both in their families and in the wider political sphere.

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63 '[R]eine des femmes et filles Huguenotes de France'. André Pineau, 14 Dec. 1646. Cited by Tulot in Mariedelatour01, 15.

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