

Classicism, medievalism, and the construction of the woman reader.
Madame de Sévigné as a model reader of narrative fiction

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Women's relationship to classicism, in France as elsewhere, was generally more problematic than was their male counterparts'. Not only were women excluded from the Latin-language education which lay the foundations for the later practice of classicist genres, but the masculine subject-matter of much classicist literature (e.g. political tragedy) had little direct bearing on female experience. While some women did succeed in practising classicism with a female inflection, in other instances women authors departed more radically from classicist models. One need only think, for example, of women's creation of an altogether new genre - the literary fairy tale - that combined luxuriant baroque imagery with pointed, metadiscursive jabs at classicist precedents.

As illustrated by the fairy tale genre, one aspect of women's troubled relation to classicism was their interest in other narrative traditions stemming not from Antiquity, but from France's own medieval past. This interest did not pass unnoticed by contemporary critics, who regularly commented - pejoratively, most often - on women's fondness for chivalric fiction and for "contes de ma mère l'oie". Concentrating on women readers, I question their supposed affinity with medieval narrative traditions during the decades of high classicism (1660s through 1680s). As the most fully documented testimony of a woman's reading during this period, Mme de Sévigné's correspondence will play a central role in my analysis. Her letters indeed display a self-conscious predilection for and identification with medieval(ist) narrative fiction, and specific characters or situations drawn from it. By contrasting her statements on her own reading with contemporary critical discourse on the woman reader, I demonstrate that her letters participate in a larger construction, during the epoch of classicism, of the notion of the woman reader: a woman reader - and by extension, a woman writer - increasingly defined (and limited) by her association with narrative fiction.