



The autograph and its double

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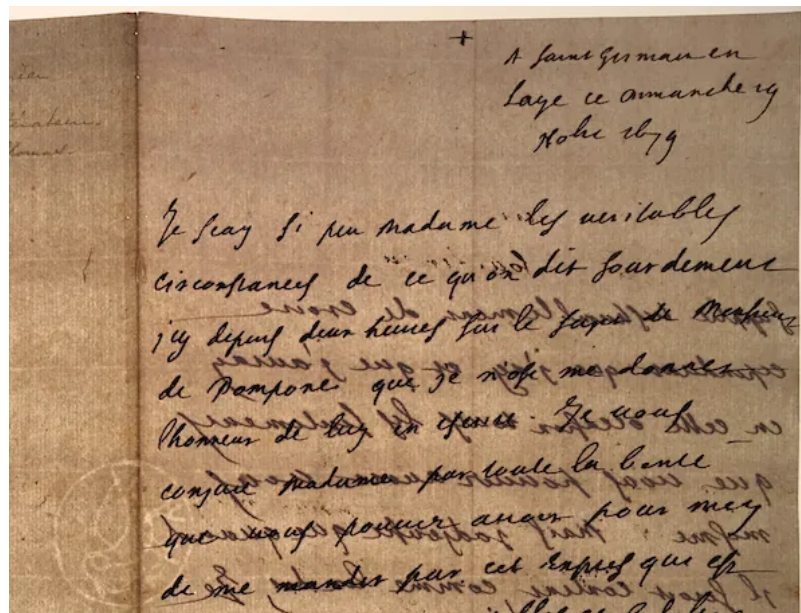
The autograph and its double

VS

As Voltaire once remarked (or was it Winston Churchill?), forgery surely is the world's second-oldest profession. This universal truth is confirmed by the history of French autograph sales, which since their earliest days have been haunted by counterfeits. In his 1836 *Manuel de l'amateur d'autographes*, Pierre-Jules Fontaine interrupted his account of the sale of the collection of the marquis de Bruyères-Chalabre (the first major auction in France featuring a comprehensive private autograph collection) to comment on the peculiar case of a letter by the seventeenth-century writer Paul Pellisson, which was knocked down for a mere 2 francs and 10 centimes:

This price should appear to Messrs. amateurs exorbitantly low, if we did not point out here that this letter was nothing but a duplicate, rather deftly executed; but unfortunately for the forger he had used wove paper!... which was recognized at the time of the sale...

Today's amateurs have the privilege of being able to compare the duplicate and the original, which are both part of the Simon Gratz autograph collection preserved at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Before coming to Philadelphia, they had belonged to the Swiss industrialist Alfred Bovet, whose *outstanding collection* was dispersed in 1884-85. Gratz added the genuine letter to the main series of his collection (250A), which includes ten boxes of "French writers," and relegated the fake one to Box 214 of a secondary series (250B). Seeing both manuscripts next to each other confirms that, were it not for the different type of paper (laid vs. wove), original and copy would be difficult to tell apart.



The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

Information

This entry was posted on December 30, 2019 by [VS](#) in [Autographs](#), [Manuscripts](#) and tagged [Boileau](#), [Correspondence](#), [forgeries](#), [Pellisson](#), [Racine](#).

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Navigation

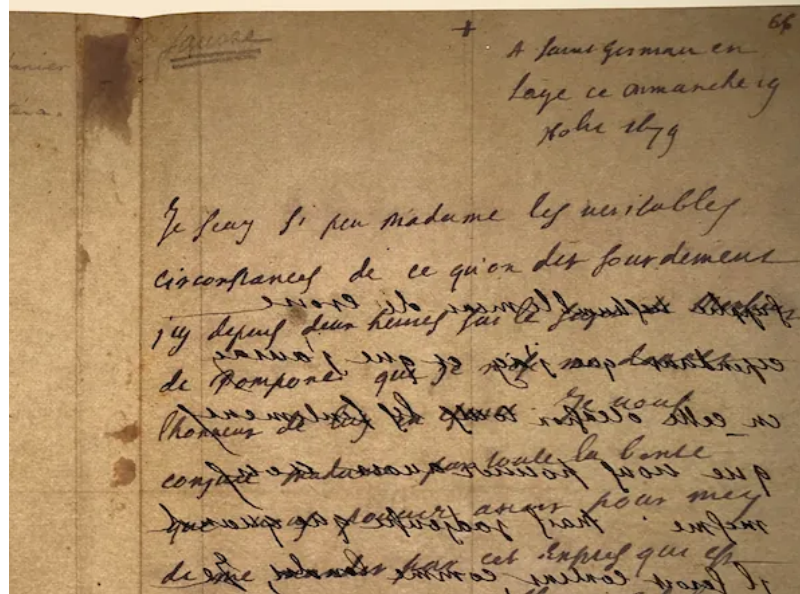
[Previous post](#)

Recent Posts

[The autograph and its double](#)
[Bussy-Rabutin's Book of Hours](#)
[The birth and beginnings of Madame d'Aulnoy](#)
[More Madame d'Aulnoy](#)
[Barnett redivivus](#)
[Les Contes des fées](#)
[Marie-Madeleine Perrault \(1674-1701\)](#)
[Rubens and the King of France](#)
[Only in Lyon](#)
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Counterfeit artists soon learned to avoid such material blunders and to use period-appropriate paper. The master in this domain was undoubtedly Félix-Bastien Feuillet (1798-1887), whose manifold activities are familiar to connoisseurs but deserve to be more widely known. Feuillet, a tanner's son who styled himself "de Conches" (based on his mother's maiden name), was a lifelong employee of the French ministry of foreign affairs, rising up the ranks to the position of chief of protocol and introducer of ambassadors during the Second Empire. An eloquent art historian and self-proclaimed *curieux*, he was the most voracious and celebrated manuscript collector of his generation, although he saw his reputation attacked by allegations of theft and forgery. In the 1860s especially, he was publicly accused of fabricating numerous letters by Marie Antoinette and her entourage. His contemporaries were apparently less aware of the fact that, since the 1840s at least, he also excelled at producing fake autographs of seventeenth-century French writers, in particular the great "classic" poets La Fontaine, Boileau, and Racine.¹



Feuillet de Conches by Nadar (Bibliothèque nationale de France / Gallica)

The Simon Gratz collection includes at least two of Feuillet's fakes, both acquired and filed as authentic pieces. A 4-page letter from Racine to Boileau is a close imitation of the original kept since 1756 in the French national library, as part of the Racine papers donated by the writer's youngest son ([Manuscrits Français 12886](#)). Unlike the copyist of the Pellisson letter, Feuillet did not attempt to produce a perfect facsimile, because this manuscript was supposed to be a draft or a copy in Racine's own hand, existing in addition to the missive received by Boileau. If one accepts this premise, the duplicate (which first appeared on the market in 1845) is executed so well that it can easily appear to be genuine.²

*Jean Racine
1639-1699
Général de France
dramatiste & poète.*

A Fontainebleau le 3.^e Octobre

Votre ancien laquais dont j'ay oublié le nom m'a
fait grand plaisir ce matin en m'apprenant de vos
nouvelles. A ce que je voy vous estes dans une fort grande
solitude a Auteuil, et vous n'en parlez point. Est il
possible que vous puissiez estre si long temps seul, et ne
point faire du tout de vers. Je m'attens qu'à mon retour

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page 200

A Fontainebleau le 3.^e Octobre 1692

*A Boileau
travaillant à la Satyre Des femmes.*

Votre ancien laquais dont j'ay oublié le
nom m'a fait grand plaisir ce matin en
m'apprenant de vos nouvelles. A ce que je voy
vous estes dans une fort grande solitude a Auteuil,
et vous n'en parlez point. Est il possible que
vous puissiez estre si long temps seul, et ne point
faire du tout de vers. Je m'attens qu'à mon

Bibliothèque nationale de France / Gallica

A Boileau letter in the Gratz collection (addressed to the Jesuit Pierre-Joseph Thoulrier) surely comes from the same source but illustrates a different strategy. In this case Feuillet did not have access to the manuscript and instead worked from a printed edition where a large chunk of the letter is quoted. The original did not surface until 1970, at the sale of the collection of an anonymous amateur (possibly the actor Sacha Guitry). The reproduction in the auction catalog allows us not only to compare Boileau's handwriting with Feuillet's simulacrum, but also to discover passages that had been omitted from the edition and were therefore also missing from the forgery.

vostra college a l'heure que vous me marquerez Le
droit du jeu pourtant seroit que j'allasse moi mesme
vous dire tout cela chés vous, mais comme je ne
saurais presque plus marcher qu'on ne me soutienne
et qu'il faut monter les degres de votre escalier pour
avoir le plaisir de vous entretenir, je crois que le
meilleur est de vous voir chés moi Adieu mon très
Reverend Pere Croies que je sens comme je dois les

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faute a la porte de votre College a l'heure que vous me-
marquerés. Le droit du jeu pourtant seroit que j'allasse moi
mesme vous dire tout cela chei vous mais comme je ne sau-
rois presque plus marcher qu'on ne me soutienne, et qu'il
faudroit vraisemblablement monter les degres de votre
escalier pour avoir le ~~bonheur~~ plaisir de vous entretenir
Je croi que le meilleur est de nous voir chei moi. Je vous
renvoie l'excellent Commentaire de Quinte Curce que
vous m'avez mis entre les mains. Il m'a paru merveil-
leux et j'y ay appris beaucoup de choses que j'ignois. Adieu
mon tres reverend Pere. Croiez que je suis comme je doi

Précieux Autographes composant la collection d'un amateur (Hôtel Drouot, June 1,
1970)

Another Boileau counterfeit by Feuillet – a 3-page letter to Racine documenting his progress with the *Satire on women* – can be found in the very midst of the Racine papers at the BnF, without any explanation concerning its nature. On the letter itself, a note seemingly in Boileau's hand ("Recopié pour Mr Brossette") is meant to suggest that the poet himself had prepared a copy for his friend and future editor Claude Brossette, which would thus explain the existence of multiple autographs. But the forger misunderstood the sequence of paragraphs in the original, leading to a strangely jumbled text. For several decades in the nineteenth century, this was the only version of the letter in the collection, until in 1878 the authentic manuscript returned to the library. Had Feuillet, who is known to have borrowed these papers in 1844-45, purloined the original and substituted his copy to mask the theft? Whatever the circumstances, the librarians dutifully preserved the fake (f. 121-122) and supplemented it with the newly recovered original (f. 122 bis-ter).

122
A Aubert 4^e Octobre 122 bis

vous écris avant hier si a la hâte que je ne sai si vous aurés bien
reçu ce que je vous écris. C'est ce qui m'oblige a vous recrire aujour-
d'hui. Madame Racine vient d'arriver chei moi qui s'engage
a vous faire tenir ma lettre. La chère de M^{lle} De Lorges est très amable.

pag. 190.

A Aubert 4^e Octobre 126

de Boileau
travaillant à la satire des femmes

Je vous écris avant hier si a la hâte que je ne sai si vous aurés bien
reçu ce que je vous écris. C'est ce qui m'oblige a vous recrire
aujour d'hui. Madame Racine vient d'arriver chei moi qui s'engage
a vous faire tenir ma lettre. La chère de M^{lle} De Lorges est très grande

Bibliothèque nationale de France

Feuillet de Conches' enduring and troubling legacy, then, is that autograph letters are not necessarily unique and sometimes exist as twins. In addition to creating these deceptive duplicates, Feuillet also fabricated countless manuscripts of poems by Boileau, Racine, and La Fontaine as well as a number of spurious letters, some of which made their way into modern critical editions. Highly effective and successful in his day, when it catered perfectly to the burgeoning autograph market, his work survives in many

major libraries and private collections in Europe and the USA. Identifying and analyzing Feuillet's productions, and assessing the impact of this extraordinary collector, forger, and thief on the preservation, transmission, and alteration of the French literary heritage remains a challenging and open-ended task.

Volker Schröder

December 30, 2019

Footnotes

1. For earlier treatments of Feuillet as a forger, see Suzanne D'Huart, "Feuillet de Conches, roi des faussaires," *L'Histoire* 79 (juin 1985), p. 92-93, and Vèrène de Diesbach-Soultrait, "Un faussaire hors pair," *Six Siècles de littérature française: XVIIe siècle. Bibliothèque de Jean Bonna*, Genève: Droz, 2010, vol. 2, p. 189-195 (on a poem by La Fontaine and a letter by Racine). To my knowledge, Feuillet's counterfeits of Boileau have never been studied; several French autograph experts, from Raoul Bonnet to Thierry Bodin, have long been aware of their existence.
 2. A similar duplicate is preserved in the Morgan Library ([Racine to Boileau, August 6, 1693; MA 355](#)); it was initially acquired as a genuine autograph before being recognized as "a later copy." An [authentic letter from Racine to Boileau](#) is part of the Charles Roberts autograph collection at Haverford College.
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