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Anne Le Fèvre Dacier in America

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Anecdota

Rare texts and images from early modern France

Anne Le Fèvre Dacier in America

VS

The summer of 1720 in France brought not only an outbreak of bubonic plague in Marseille and the economically disastrous bursting of John Law's Mississippi bubble, but also the death of the classical scholar and translator Anne Le Fèvre Dacier. The daughter of Tanneguy Le Fèvre (an illustrious professor of Greek) and the wife of André Dacier (her father's favorite student), "Madame Dacier" enjoyed international fame and was considered "the Learnedst Woman in Europe."¹ On the occasion of the tercentenary of Anne's passing, here are some autograph letters found in American collections that illustrate her life and literary achievements.

Only about 25 letters written by Anne Le Fèvre Dacier are known to have survived, to which can be added a similar number of letters by her husband. Most of them are part of two sustained correspondences that bookend her career: with the scholar and cleric Pierre-Daniel Huet in the years 1673-1681, and with the Protestant pastor David Martin during the final decade of her life.

After the untimely death of her father in 1672, Anne Le Fèvre moved from Saumur to Paris where she benefited from the support and advice of Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630-1721), a central figure of the literary and intellectual circles in the reign of Louis XIV. As assistant tutor to the *Dauphin* (the king's son and heir apparent), Huet oversaw a publishing enterprise whose name would become proverbial, the series of classical editions *Ad usum Delphini*. Le Fèvre was the only female scholar recruited for the project and went on to produce four volumes, more than any other contributor. Important details of her collaboration are revealed in the letters she wrote to Huet, discussing a variety of practical and financial issues. Most of these letters (which at one point belonged to the infamous book-thief Guglielmo Libri) are today kept in the Biblioteca Laurenziana in Florence, but several others were sold separately in the nineteenth century and are now preserved in Paris, Brussels – and Philadelphia.

Prior posts on this blog already presented a few rarities from the prodigious autograph collection that the Philadelphia lawyer Simon Gratz deeded in 1917 to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. A lifelong, meticulous collector, Gratz acquired not just one but two letters by Anne Le Fèvre – one for his series of "French Authors," another for a smaller set of "Notable European Women." The former, which had come from the [collection of Swiss industrialist Alfred Bovet](#), was published in 1933 by Harvard professor Richmond Laurin Hawkins, but seems to have gone unnoticed by later scholars.² This undated letter must have been written in March 1680, as in it Le Fèvre informs Huet of a last-minute production delay affecting the presentation at court of her edition of *Dictys Cretensis*, her second contribution to the series of Delphin classics. The second letter, which Simon Gratz bought in 1886 from the autograph dealer Eugène Charavay (for 40 francs, or \$7.85), has remained altogether unpublished:

Information

This entry was posted on August 11, 2020 by VS in [Autographs](#), [Biography](#), [Correspondence](#).

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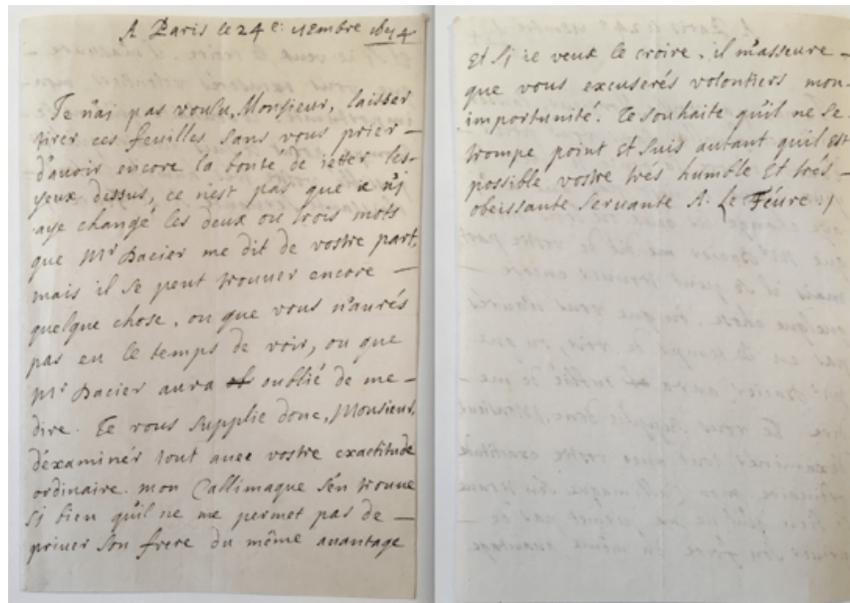
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The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia
(click to enlarge)

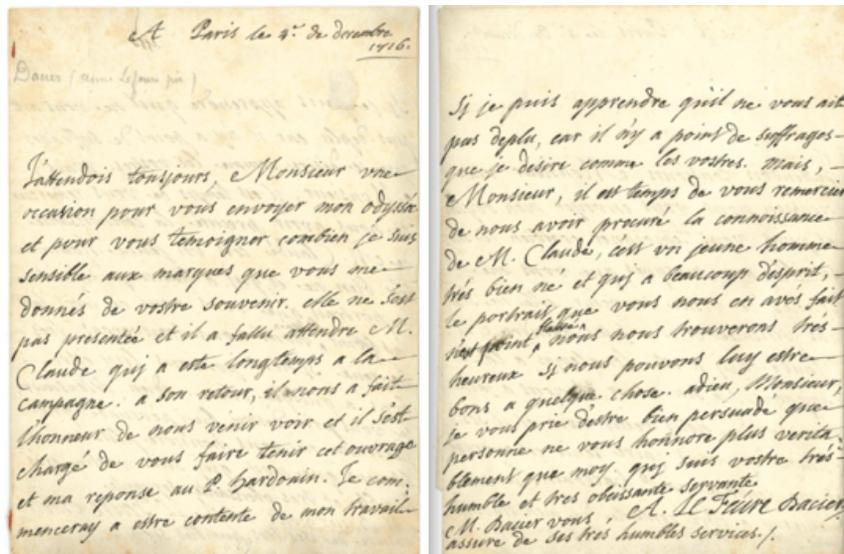
Dated September 24, 1674, this letter shows Anne Le Fèvre finalizing her first publication, an annotated edition (*in usum serenissimi Delphini*) of Florus' *Epitome* of Roman history. She sends the latest proofs to her mentor and begs him to examine everything with his "customary exactitude," just as he had already done for her edition of the poems of Callimachus (a personal project of hers which appeared in March 1675, with a dedication to Huet). The letter contains Le Fèvre's first mention of "Mr Dacier," who passed Huet's corrections on to her; the two had probably moved to Paris together, but did not marry until nine years later. Presented as the work of *Anna Tanaquilli Fabri Filia* (Anne, daughter of Tanneguy Le Fèvre), the book left the presses eight weeks after the date of this letter and immediately established her scholarly reputation.



Department of Special Collections, Princeton University Library
(click to enlarge)

Over the following decades, Madame Dacier gradually shifted her focus from critical editions to French translations (in prose, with extensive commentary) of Greek and Latin poets and playwrights: Anacreon, Sappho, Plautus, Aristophanes, Terence, and, finally, Homer. Her translations of the *Iliad* (1711) and the *Odyssey* (1716) were landmarks in the European reception of Homer and led to a resurgence of the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. Dacier’s Homeric period coincides with that of her correspondence with David Martin (1639-1721), a Protestant minister who had met Anne and André in 1685, just before the religious question separated them: whereas the Daciers decided to convert to Catholicism, Martin left France and took refuge in Utrecht, where he went on to author biblical commentaries and theological treatises. In January 1712, he got back in touch with Madame Dacier to express his admiration for her *Iliad* and to discuss various points of erudition. The ensuing correspondence, which also included André Dacier, is preserved for the most part at Leiden University Library³ – but in this case, too, a couple of individual letters found their way to America, specifically Bowdoin College and Princeton University.

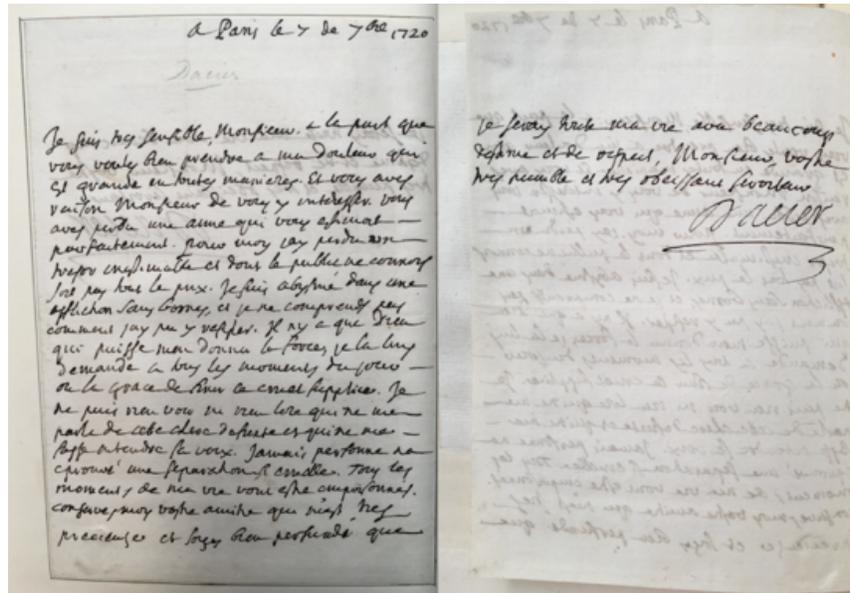
A letter from Anne Dacier to David Martin, which had appeared in French auction sales in 1861 and 1927, was thus bought by Charles H. Livingston, professor of French at Bowdoin College from 1921 to 1957. After his death, Livingston’s widow (and Wellesley professor) Françoise Ruet donated his [collection of 800 French autographs](#) to the college library. In this letter, dated December 4, 1716, Madame Dacier explains that she has given a copy of “my *Odyssey*” to young “M. Claude” (a relative and foster-son of David Martin), who will take care of getting the book into her correspondent’s hands. She complemented the gift with a copy of “my reply to Father Hardouin” – that is *Homère défendu contre l’Apologie du P. Hardouin*, a 220-page rebuttal of an eccentric interpretation of the *Iliad* by the distinguished Jesuit Jean Hardouin.



Courtesy of the George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine (click to enlarge)

This renewed defense of her revered Homer was the last book written by Madame Dacier. Her and André’s letters to David Martin record her increasing infirmities, and on August 17, 1720, she died in the apartment that the couple occupied in the Louvre. Three weeks later, the widower wrote to Martin to thank him for his condolences and express the extent of his pain:

I am plunged in an affliction without limits, and I cannot fathom how I have been able to resist it. God alone can give me the needed strength, I ask him for it every moment of the day, or for the grace to end this cruel torture. Whatever I see or read speaks to me of this beloved deceased and makes me hear her voice. Never has anyone suffered so cruel a separation.



Department of Special Collections, Princeton University Library
(click to enlarge)

Sealed with black wax, this letter appeared in 1833 at an auction in London and was acquired by John Wild, an English wine merchant and early autograph collector. In 1951, Wild's collection was purchased en bloc by Princeton graduate and bibliophile Robert H. Taylor, who then gave it to the library of his alma mater. As for André Dacier, with God's and his friends' help he surmounted his grief enough to plan a second marriage but died before concluding this project, two years after his wife. Of Anne and André's children, two had predeceased them as youths, while the third lived a long life in a convent. Three hundred years after the Daciers' deaths, there are thus no direct descendants left; their writings, however, still remain.

Volker Schröder

August 11, 2020

Footnotes

1. Martin Lister, *A Journey to Paris in the Year 1698*, London: Jacob Tonson, 1699, p. 76.
2. *Newly Discovered French Letters of the Seventeenth, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Richmond Laurin Hawkins, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1933, p. 12-13. Both Philadelphia letters are absent from Catherine Volpillac-Auger's edition of "[Lettres dauphines](#)" (in *La Collection Ad usum Delphini*, Grenoble: ELLUG, 2000), which presents twelve letters from Anne Le Fèvre to Pierre-Daniel Huet. Seven of these letters were first published in 1879 by Charles Henry (on the basis of a nineteenth-century copy kept at the Bibliothèque nationale de France), the five others in 1894 by Léon G.

Pélessier (from the autographs preserved in Florence).

3. The collection in Leiden (BPL 293: B) includes five letters by Madame Dacier and eight by her husband, as well as drafts of two letters by David Martin. An annotated transcription of these letters (except those by André Dacier) is available on the [website](#) created by Eliane Itti, author of *Madame Dacier, femme savante du Grand Siècle* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012). For an English-language introduction, see Fern Farnham, *Madame Dacier, Scholar and Humanist* (Monterey: Angel Press, 1976).



Bibliothèque nationale de France / Gallica

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