10. **Power through Print**

The Works of Hélisenne de Crenne

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**Abstract**

Hélisenne de Crenne was one of the first women from beyond the court and the nobility to have her works circulated in print in sixteenth-century France. Although she occupied a potentially marginal position, as an author she accrued power with the appearance of each successive book in print. This power was reflected in the materiality of the books themselves and in her use of paratexts to position the text vis-à-vis its readers. Her final work was printed in folio and dedicated to François I, showing that even an unknown and provincial woman could, through the print circulation of her works, participate in the networks of patronage usually reserved for court writers.

**Keywords:** Hélisenne de Crenne, François I, literature, print culture, female visibility, self-representation

When evaluating female authorship in both manuscript and print in sixteenth-century France, courtly women predominate.¹ It is not difficult to imagine how their greater wealth, higher social status, and participation in the cultural life of the court afforded royal and noble women opportunities for educational and literary development that were beyond the reach of most women, including those from professional families. Although courtly women such as Anne de Graville (c. 1490–c. 1540) and Madeleine de l’Aubespine (1546–1596) wrote, the fact that they did not rely on writing

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¹ For an overview of the practices of scribal and print publication of works by female authors during this period, see Broomhall, esp. chs. 3 and 4. Broomhall points out that the work of over 100 women circulated in print in sixteenth-century France and that many chose print circulation (p. 93).

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for an income meant that their works rarely found their way into print. Indeed, the evidence of surviving editions suggests that, on the whole, print culture and its possibilities for self-representation and self-empowerment were hostile to living female authors in a way that manuscript circulation was not. This was particularly the case in early sixteenth-century Paris, before the 1540s when Lyons became established as a center for the printing of women’s works.²

Where women’s writings did appear in print in Paris in the first half of the sixteenth century, there were generally specific circumstances that mitigated the possibilities for female literary agency and represented female authorship as somehow separate from the living author. In the early decades of the sixteenth century, only historical female authors such as Christine de Pizan (1364–1430) had their texts printed as entire books. Texts by other women, such as Anne de France (1461–1522), appeared in print only posthumously, as was common for royal and noble women who did not rely on their writing for an income. Most frequently, single poems or individual short texts by courtly women writers were included in anthologies, in which writers were often confined by the expectations of strictly codified genres and there was little opportunity to develop an authorial identity.³ Anthologies of this kind demonstrate the slippage between the printed book and the social networks that fostered early modern literary activity, and imply that the same expectations of women’s seemly and chaste behavior were present in print as in real life.

Whilst the favoring of manuscript circulation over print for female authors appears in some ways to be a consequence of the practical circumstances of women writing, all of these instances in which women did make exceptional incursions into the realm of print speak to the cultural reticence in sixteenth-century France to allow women power through self-determined and sustained activity in the circulation of their texts in print. Within this cultural context, it seems all the more remarkable, then, that Hélisenne de Crenne (c. 1510—c. 1560), a woman from rural Picardy, achieved such success in creating an identity as a writer. Hélisenne de Crenne was the pen

² These included the Rymes by Pernette du Guillet (c. 1520–1545), printed in 1545 by Jean de Tournes, who became well known for his promotion of female authors, especially Louise Labé whose Œuvres he printed in 1555.

³ Broomhall has argued that in anthologies female-authored texts were often greatly outnumbered by their male-authored counterparts. The opportunity for an anthology as a whole to be identified as female-authored was therefore limited. In addition, there was often little opportunity to write the female experience in poetic genres such as the tombeau, for example: Broomhall, pp. 186–93.
name of Marguerite Briet, a woman from Abbeville in Picardy about whom relatively little is known. She was the wife of Philippe Fournel de Crenne, whose patronym she took as part of her authorial identity. They had a son named Pierre who, in 1548, was a student in Paris. By the time of her death in 1552, Crenne had separated from her husband and was herself living in Paris. The role of the name Helisène de Crenne has been the subject of much critical discussion. It had multiple connotations in the context of contemporary and classical literature. Christine de Buzon has pointed out that ‘Hélisenne’ evokes four female names frequently included in lists of exempla (Elissa, Helen, Iseult and Polisenne) one of which was a synonym for Dido, who was an enduring focus of Crenne’s works. Furthermore, ‘Hélisenne’ is also a homonym for a heroine of the highly popular romance Amadis de Gaule, the French translation of which was also printed by Denis Janot (fl. 1529–1544) in 1540.

This chapter evaluates the consequences of Crenne’s exceptional position as the only living woman writer to have her works printed in Paris during the first half of the sixteenth century. These texts revolve around the disorder created by an imbalance between reason and sensuality and the perilous position of the woman caught in the throes of an unvirtuous love. Self-representation is constructed as central to her original compositions. These issues are always refracted through specific genres, the consequences of which for the themes and style of Crenne’s writings have yet to be fully explored by scholars, in spite of the considerable critical attention the author has attracted in recent decades. The appearance of critical editions of the Angoysses douloureuses qui procedent d’amours in 1997, the Epistres familières et invectives in 1996 and the Songe in 2007 together with Diane Wood’s 2000 book, the very first monograph devoted to Crenne, represent the culmination of the rediscovery of her writings over the past 40 years. Although her writing was frequently reprinted in the mid-sixteenth century, it fell into obscurity after the final edition of the Œuvres in 1560.

Through the circulation of her works in print, Crenne makes an implicit challenge to contemporary gender norms that constructed women as silent and relegated women from beyond the court to obscurity. Crenne is noteworthy for publishing without the protection of a longstanding patron and not having access to the networks of a powerful husband or male relative that were the pathway to print for so many women writers

4 See, for example, Buzon’s extensive discussion in Crenne, 1997, pp. 20–29, which is taken up in Wood, pp. 57–66.
5 Crenne, 1997, p. 22.
in the early modern period. We have no record of Crenne participating in court life, nor do the dedications of her works suggest that she relied upon patronage in court circles as a significant source of income to support her writing. Indeed, because Crenne is described in legal documents of the period as owning properties jointly with her husband, we can assume that she enjoyed independent wealth that, at least partly, funded her writing activities. However, given that it was Janot and not Crenne who requests the privileges of all of the first editions of her works, it seems likely that it was he, and not Crenne, who financed the publication of the books. We can glean from the privilege to the Songe that Janot was preoccupied, even worried, by the potential financial risks that printing this text entailed, as he asks in good faith for a privilege of three years rather than the more standard two years in order to see a return on the capital tied up in printing the work. Although the popularity of her corpus suggests that they were also read at court, more typical readers of Crenne might have been Gilbert de Hodic and his wife Geneviève Bureau, whom Lyndan Warner describes as ‘on the lower to middle rungs of the ladder to dignity above the wealthy merchants but below the officers in the sovereign courts’. Two copies of Crenne’s Epistres familières et invectives were found in Gilbert’s library when an inventory was taken in 1549.

A number of questions arise regarding the appearance and success of Crenne’s works in print: to what extent did their publication result from strategies of empowerment adopted by the author in resisting cultural norms that usually prevented living women from circulating their works in print? What were the characteristics of this empowerment? What kinds of power resulted from it? Given the collaborative nature of the printing process in the early modern period, how was this power enabled or undermined by the printer she worked with?

In order to explore these questions further, I will position myself as a Foucauldian feminist and use Michel Foucault’s theory of the ‘microphysics

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6 Broomhall has established that two of the most important factors for printers choosing female-authored works were family connections to powerful men, and first-hand experience of events of particular contemporary importance (p. 98).

7 Broomhall has noted, ‘Only her 1541 translation, Eneydes, is dedicated to a specific patron, Francis I. This does not suggest that she had a well-developed circle of court patrons. However, Crenne’s independent wealth and lack of contact with the French royal court left her free to explore her own choice of literary themes’ (p. 137).


9 Warner, p. 43.
of power’ as a conceptual framework by which to analyse Crenne’s power as an author. For Foucault, power is not the exclusive preserve of a particular social class, but a diffuse and dynamic network that encompasses many more possible positions and relationships. Power is not an inherent property of a structure, whether bodily or social; it accrues through the adoption of strategies, dispositions, manoeuvres, techniques, and functions. It is not possessed, but rather exists in a complex network of relationships that are always in tension with each other. Domination is not the privilege of the dominant class, or a cultural elite such as the court, but is the cumulative and global effect of the adoption of strategic positions that may also be manifested in, and reinforced by, those who are dominated. Power, then, is always productive, for both the dominant and the dominated.

Foucault’s definition of power has received a mixed reception from feminist theorists. This is largely, but not exclusively, related to its failure to acknowledge gender as a category of difference when elaborating the operation of power. Ultimately, if power is not possessed by men, then this also counters central tenets of feminist thought, such as the view that women are oppressed by power illegitimately held by men. In this chapter, I align myself with the approaches of feminist scholars who have brought Foucault’s theories into productive dialogue with female acts of resistance to norms. In particular, I follow Margaret McLaren’s analysis of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who used the gender norm of the mother to oppose the repressive Argentinian government of the 1970s and 1980s. I will show that by adopting Foucault’s more fluid and dynamic definition of power, we can open up Crenne’s career to the possibility that the author used the print circulation of her works to empower herself. This empowerment, I

10 I borrow the term ‘Foucauldian feminist’ from Sawicki, p. 13.
11 ‘Or l’étude de cette microphysique suppose que le pouvoir qui s’exerce [sur le corps] ne soit pas conçu comme une propriété, mais comme une stratégie, que ses effets de domination ne soient pas attribués à une “appropriation”, mais à des dispositions, à des manoeuvres, à des techniques, à des fonctionnements; qu’on déchiffre en lui plutôt un réseau de relations toujours tendues, toujours en activité plutôt qu’un privilège qu’on pourrait déténir; qu’on lui donne pour modèle la bataille perpétuelle plutôt que le contrat qui opère une cession ou la conquête qui s’empare d’un domaine. Il faut en somme admettre que ce pouvoir s’exerce plutôt qu’il ne se possède, qu’il n’est pas le “privilège” acquis ou conserve de la classe dominante, mais l’effet d’ensemble de ses positions stratégiques — effet que manifeste et parfois reconduit la position de ceux qui sont dominés’, Foucault, p. 31.
12 On these and other problematic aspects of Foucault’s theories for feminism, see Ramazanoglu.
13 For further case studies exploring the usefulness of Foucault’s theories for feminist thought see, for example, Taylor and Vintges.
14 See McLaren, pp. 221–23.
will argue, resulted from the numerous productive ways in which Crenne used her status as a woman to challenge the general curtailment of women’s voices in print in early sixteenth-century France. I will demonstrate that, by understanding power as dynamic rather than static, and accumulated rather than possessed, as feminist scholars we can circumvent the very male-dominated structures that restrict the visibility of women in social constructions, such as the court, and instead create flexible models of interpretation whose boundaries are more permeable to female historical figures.

**Developing an Authorial Persona in Print**

One of the principal ways in which Crenne’s publications differ from those of other women writers in the first half of the sixteenth century is how she develops an authorial persona across her works. This was particularly innovative and ambitious given the popularity at the time of including only short pieces by women writers in anthologies where male-authored works predominated. Crenne’s first work, the *Angoysses douloureuses*, an autobiographical fiction in the form of a prose novel that told the story of the unchaste love of the married heroine Helisenne for a younger man, was her most frequently reprinted text in sixteenth-century France. It was followed the very next year by the *Epistres familieres et invectives*, a collection of personal and invective letters, which demonstrated to the reading public the author’s knowledge of the themes and techniques of humanist writing and provided her with a generically acceptable way of advancing challenging ideas as a female author. The *Songe*, an allegorical dream sequence on the nature of virtue and vice, further developed the ideas of love and the relationships between the sexes, and appeared in 1540.

Like the first editions of Crenne’s other works, her final book was printed by Janot in Paris. It represented a break with the author’s previous works in a number of significant ways. Firstly, it was a translation rather than an original composition. It therefore represented something of a departure from the first three works that had all been situated within the same fictional universe. However, the reading public’s taste for vernacular translations had grown during the reign of François I (1515–1545). The choice of text, the

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16 On this point see Marshall, pp. 45–54.
first four books of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, also mitigated the potential commercial risks of this change. Not only was it a key humanist text with the potential for popular appeal, it also allowed Crenne to explore the experiences of a tragic heroine overwhelmed by an ill-fated love, from the distinctive viewpoint of a female translator.17 The same scenario had been the central focus of much of her first and most successful work.18 The market for a male-authored translation of the *Aeneid* had been tested by the publication of the translation by Octavien de Saint Gelais (1468–1502) by Antoine Vérard (fl. 1485–1512) in 1509. This translation of the whole work was reprinted five times and remained the most widely circulated translation until 1547. All of the previous editions of Crenne’s texts had appeared in octavo format but, in contrast to this, the *Eneydes* was printed in folio format in 1541. Books in folio projected a greater sense of permanence. They also provided a wide margin suitable for note-taking but lacked the portability of their octavo counterparts, which by the 1530s had become firmly associated with reading for leisure.19 This may suggest that Janot was hoping to target a more scholarly readership with the translation than had been the case for the works attributed solely to Crenne. Perhaps reflecting the change in scale of this larger format, the *Eneydes* were decorated with a different range of woodcuts than were the first three works.20

In addition, the *Eneydes* was the only work to be dedicated by the author to an individual. The popular *Angoysses dououreuses* had based its appeal on a claimed readership of compassionate but learned women. Crenne does not repeat this explicit appeal to a female readership in either the *Epistres* or the *Songe*. In the former she claims to have gathered together her letters for ungendered readers (‘lecteurs’, ‘gentilz espritz’, ‘gens prudens’).21 In the preface to the *Songe*, Crenne talks of ‘noble readers’.22 This may reflect a growing confidence in addressing readers of both sexes, a view certainly reinforced

17 For an overview of the publication of early French translations of Virgil’s *Aeneid* see Worth-Stylianou.
18 On the similarities of the *Angoysses dououreuses* and the *Eneydes* see Wood, pp. 135–51.
19 As Richardson explains: ‘A folio was a bulky object, to be consulted in one place, while an octavo or smaller format allowed one to slip a book in one’s pocket and carry it around, consulting it where and when one wanted, for study or in moments of leisure and it could be cheaper if a smaller typeface allowed economies in the amount of paper used’ (p. 125).
20 Re-use of woodcuts was common in sixteenth-century French printing and a number of them had been repeated across the *Angoysses dououreuses*, the *Epistres familiaires et inventives* and the *Songe*, which added to the coherence of these volumes. For an overview of the practice of reusing woodcuts see Rothstein, pp. 85–94.
by the Epistres, in which both men and women appear as inscribed readers within the texts. For her final work, Crenne chose to associate her authorial persona with the king, François I. In addressing the monarch, Crenne may be utilizing her growing power and authority. Alternatively, the dedication may reflect her aspiration to have her texts circulate in courtly circles, even if this was not in reality the case. Lastly, but not insignificantly, the Eneydes was the only one of Crenne’s works never to be reprinted.23

Crenne’s reputation as an author transcended these first appearances in print, however, as the publication of new editions suggest that her works enjoyed commercial success in the libraires of Paris and Lyons beyond Janot’s own shop.24 The Angoisses douloureuses was printed in Lyons by Denis de Harsy (fl. 1522 onwards) as early as 1539 (in violation of the privilege held by Janot and therefore undated on the title page), and Pierre Sergent also printed a new edition in Paris in 1541. From 1543, Crenne’s three original compositions were printed in the much smaller sextodecimo format by Charles l’Angelier (fl. 1543–1563) in Paris under the title of Œuvres. These collected works were the first to be printed in the French language by a living author and claimed on their title page to be an improved version of the original text that had been ‘newly printed by the order of the said Lady’.25 From 1551, a version with spelling revised by Claude Colet formed the basis of an edition printed by Étienne Grouleau (fl. 1551–1563).26 Colet claimed that he revised the spelling of Crenne’s works after two young women had asked him for guidance on reading the text after a dinner at their home.

Although ultimately Janot may have controlled the speed with which the first editions of Crenne’s works appeared in print, her texts were carefully positioned so as to maximize their appeal to the book-buying public. The way in which Crenne’s texts circulated initially as single works with the author’s name clearly identified on the title page suggests that this gendered

23 I note, as do Ehrling and Karlsson, that the Eneydes is the only of Crenne’s works not yet to have been edited by modern scholars (Ehrling and Karlsson, p. 271). This reflects the importance of ‘originality’ to modern-day scholars who are less keen to study translations than original compositions. Doubtless the scarcity of surviving copies of the work has impeded its study as well. Surviving copies are held in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, site de l’Arsenal; Geneva, Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire; and Berlin, Staatsbibliothek.
24 For a discussion of the potential commercial opportunities afforded by women’s writing in early modern France, see Chang, esp. Ch. 1.
25 ‘Le tout mieulx que par cy devant redigées au vray, et imprimées nouvellement par le commandement de ladicte Dame’, Crenne, 1543, title page. This volume of collected works did not include the woodcut illustrations of Janot’s first editions.
authorial identity was valuable to the marketing of those works. This was distinct from the ways in which the majority of women writers in sixteenth-century France saw their texts appear in print — in anthologies where their authorial status was eclipsed by male-dominated material and literary contexts in which their works were circulated.

The sense of cohesion across Crenne’s four works went beyond the literary and intellectual to encompass likely patterns of production and consumption. The fact that Janot mentioned both the *Epistres familiaires* and the *Songe* in the privilege to the former, for example, demonstrates that there was a degree of forward-planning in the appearance of Crenne’s works in print. We can speculate that they may have been produced according to a pre-established timetable agreed between the author and her printer-collaborator, which was designed to maximize sales. This is consistent with the appearance of other women authors’ works in print in sixteenth-century France, which tended to be grouped in a concentrated time period as if the purchase of one text created a market demand for another.

Taken together, this outline of the print publication of Crenne’s works offers us numerous insights into the possibilities for discursive, literary, and creative agency available to her as a woman writer in 1530s France. They show us that an apparent choice to circulate one’s writings in print was possible, although rare, for a woman writer. Once printed, if their success with the book-buying public was established, works would then be printed and read in centers beyond the capital. The appearance of Crenne’s works in rapid succession suggests that she viewed writing as a sustained and structured activity. Although rare amongst women writers of her time, Crenne seems to have sought recognition as a writer as her primary occupation. Evidence for this is found in the fact that the most commercially successful of Crenne’s works was the first printed. The *Angoisses douloureuses* differs from its intertexts in constructing the act of reading rather than the act of writing as central to the progression of the plot. This is true in the passing of the letters

27 Chang has argued that there are, in fact, two narrators to the *Angoisses douloureuses* (‘de Crenne’ and ‘Dame Helisenne’) and that these multiple authorial personas compete with, and undermine, each other (pp. 139–74). For a reply to this see Bromilow, 2013.

28 On this point see Ellinghausen, esp. Ch. 1.


30 Broomhall has noted also, with respect to Jeanne de Flore, that there is a pattern of women’s writings appearing in print in concentrated bursts, suggesting that a market could be found, but that long-term interest could not be sustained (p. 123).
between Helisenne and her lover Guenelic and also in the way that his friend Quezinstra recuperates the manuscript of the book from beside Helisenne’s body and gives it to Mercury who has it read by the Gods. Jupiter’s opinion that the text should be printed in Paris prefigures how the text will be consumed by readers as a printed book and authorizes its distribution in this medium.

Her other works followed in quick succession, seemingly to capitalize on readers’ interest in the *Angoysses douloureuses*. This was especially likely concerning the *Epistres familières et invectives* and *Songe*, which were situated in the same fictional universe as the first work. It is easy to imagine that the enjoyment of the first book, a relatively racy tale of adulterous love, fueled readers’ enthusiasm to purchase the second and third. This is one way in which the form and content of her works overlapped with likely patterns of consumption. With the appearance of each subsequent book the author developed and consolidated her discursive power; as her reputation grew, Crenne displayed increasing confidence in addressing male and female readers.

### The Female Voice and Exemplarity

The success of Crenne’s works in print was, then, at least partly self-determined and the female author actively sought ways to maximize her discursive agency which were both innovative and remarkable at the time. An author who was well-versed in both contemporary and classical literature, Crenne resisted the norms of sixteenth-century literary culture which sought to silence women, by identifying narratives where the addition of the woman’s perspective offered new insights into the text’s themes. This was a common feature of works by female authors. In the *Angoysses douloureuses*, Crenne re-works male-authored intertexts to create an autobiographical fiction in which the identity of the protagonist and that of the author are deliberately merged. Whereas in the *Fiametta* by Giovanni

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31 According to Wood, the first two works ‘were intended to be read together, as complements’. She adds that ‘the volumes [the *Angoysses douloureuses*, the *Epistres* and the *Songe*] were undoubtedly displayed side by side in Denis Janot’s shop in the rue Neuve Nostre Dame and in his stall in the Galerie des Marchands of the Palais de Justice, Deuxième Pilier. The complementary nature of these works becomes even more obvious in the 1543 edition when the novel, letters, and allegorical dream sequence appear in the same volume, printed by Charles Langelier. Subsequent sixteenth-century editions recognized the self-referentiality of the three works by continuing to publish them together’ (p. 79).

32 As Janet Smarr has remarked: ‘all of Helisenne’s works [...] deal with the problems caused by passion and the relations between the sexes and do so in an interconnected manner’ (p. 140).
Boccaccio (1313–1345), for example, the reader is aware that they are reading a female protagonist’s voice ventriloquized through the male narrator, Crenne creates the impression of the authentic narrative by implying that the authorial persona, Dame Helisenne, is recounting her own story. The illicit nature of the love affair adds to the strong sense of identification with the narrator that the reader feels in response to a story that has been dedicated to their moral improvement.33

In the Epistres familières et invectives, Crenne uses the form of the letter to craft correspondence between the narrator Helisenne and a variety of male and female recipients. In the Epistres familières, she draws on works such as the De conscribendis epistolis by Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) which had been circulating since 1522 and included chapters on the letter of consolation, of asking and giving advice, and the invective letter.34 Within this adaptation of the humanist letter, Helisenne demonstrates publicly her ability to console, counsel, and advise her acquaintances, all of whom are presented as her correspondents. In the Epistres invectives, Crenne takes advantage of the acceptability of the letter form as a means of communication for women to advance her most challenging ideas, defending herself against detractors, accusing her husband of misogyny, and defending the female sex against his attacks. She also writes two letters defending literary women and, in particular, her own writings from the criticism of an individual reader-correspondent, and of the readers in a fictional town named Icuoc. She skilfully uses the slippage between the letter and the oration to ‘voice’ ideas in print. She also exploits the possibility of using letter form to stage a confrontation of ideas in which the letter is the only link with the correspondent whose ideas are being challenged.35

Hélisenne de Crenne presents herself as an example for readers, especially female readers, to follow. Although she starts the Angoysses douloureuses with the conventional claim of the inadequacy of her writing owing to her weak mental and physical state, this should be seen as an apologia for the act of having one’s works printed.36 In the dedication of the work to the inclusive and broad category of ‘all honest women’, it is the narrator’s wish

33 Here, and throughout Crenne’s first three works, the narrator doubles as ‘the person both in need of moral advice and able to offer it’, Smarr, p. 141.
34 Nash describes the De conscribendis epistolis as ‘un ouvrage très important pour Crenne […] que personne jusqu’ici n’a rapproché’, Crenne, 1996, p. 24.
35 According to Smarr, ‘letter writing was more acceptable for women than participation in public gatherings or face-to-face meetings with men’ (p. 153).
36 The dedication in the Angoysses douloureuses to ‘toutes honnestes dames’ twice evokes the frailty of Dame Helisenne’s hand as it traces across the page: ‘cela me cause une douleur qui
that in reading the text they use the heroine's own experience as a counter example and thereby avoid the agonies of unchaste love themselves:

O dear ladies, when I consider that in seeing how I was caught, you will be able to avoid the dangerous snares of love, by resisting love from the outset, without persisting in amorous thoughts\[37\]

Crenne further legitimizes the project of circulating her exemplary text in print by disrupting the conventional relationship between printing and unchasteness. She achieves this by representing the project of printing the book for the learned people of Paris as authorized by the Gods and therefore divinely ordained. The printed book is further valorized over manuscript circulation by the representation of letters exchanged between the lovers as a means to advance their love affair. This destabilizes the conventional hierarchy between scribal publication as limited and chaste, and print publication as more accessible and unvirtuous.

Furthermore, an overarching exemplary model is present in the works in a more diffuse manner: that of the virtuous and erudite woman engaged in the acts of reading and writing. This is an obvious theme in the *Epistres familières et invectives*, where Crenne draws attention to the act of reading and writing the letters in order to emphasize the materiality of the epistolary exchange. She also displays her knowledge of classical *exempla*, and, through the form of the letter she links exemplary models to the lives of her correspondents and readers. In the *Songe*, the narrator contextualizes the reading of her own work by describing the reading of the Scriptures that is an established part of the reader’s life. She wakes from her dream poised to write the dialogues in which she has taken part, thus displaying, however briefly, the writing process to the reader. This *exemplum* of the learned woman exceeds any single text, to encompass the author figure as well as her books. It reveals that the aspiration to educate the reading public came hand-in-hand with self-fashioning.

Thus, we can understand that Crenne intended a civic purpose for her writing.\[38\] This aligns Crenne’s aspirations for her writing to those of a group of sixteenth-century English poets whom Richard Helgerson has called

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\[38\] See Helgerson, esp. ch. 1.
the 'laureates': professional poets who ascribed a usefulness and timeless quality to their writing in order to erase either the purely commercial ends or amateurish origins of their printed works. This aspect of her work achieves its fullest expression in the *Enéides*, in the dedication to François I. Although works were frequently dedicated to the king, this dedication, along with the folio format of the book, one of only three works to be printed by Janot in this large format in his active years, mark Crenne as a significant author relative to others published by that printer. As Janot would become official printer to François I in 1543, this edition was perhaps a convenient way to display the quality of his printed books to the king. In the dedication, Crenne describes how the inadequacies of her writing and the monarch's erudition had long prevented her from acting on her desire to translate the work that she had planned to complete with him in mind. She explains that he will notice that she has made some additions to the second book in the form of a description of the death of Hector, from whom she claims François is descended, reflecting the literary myth, widespread in late medieval and Renaissance France, that the nation was founded by Hector's son Astyanax. Crenne describes how the virtuous Hector was killed by the treachery of Achilles, who prevailed in spite of his inferior skill at arms. Crenne's own commentary on Homer intrudes here, and again during her presentation of his narrative in Book Two, as she questions the credibility of his account. She claims that Homer was mistaken in favoring the Greeks, as Hector's superlative chivalry meant that he could only have been killed by Achilles through treacherous means. This denigration of Homer and praise of Hector compounded the effect of the four different accounts of Hector's death by supplementing the Virgilian source text with a prehistory of the Kingdom of France. In the dedication, she states her preference for the eyewitness accounts of Dictys Cretensis and Dares Phrygius over Homer's which was written after the fall of Troy. Thus, not only does the comparison with Hector serve to flatter François and ultimately France, but the inclusion of the multiple accounts of Hector's death shows Crenne to be capable of a scholarly rigor and critical judgment rivalling, or exceeding, that of her male counterparts. Through her self-representation as an example for readers to follow, the development of the exemplary model of the reading and

39 Janot would become official printer to François I in 1543.
40 For Wood 'the text contains two simultaneous layers of erudition, Renaissance humanism with its desire to spread the classics overlaid with medieval scholarship and subjectivity' (p. 136).
41 Wood describes how, for example, Crenne's fourth source, Guyon de Coulomne, is not mentioned by Jean Lemaire de Belges in his *Illustrations de Gaule et singularités de Troye*; its inclusion in Crenne's work is a result of her thorough research (p. 141).
writing woman, and her aspiration to rewrite the mythological prehistory of France, Crenne demonstrates the civic purpose that drives her writing, simultaneously foregrounding the shift in her power from the discursive sphere to the domain of practical application.

Visualizing Female Authorial Power

Whilst we can consider the printed book as an agent of the author's power, we must also acknowledge that control of the production process usually resided with the printer and the artisans in his workshop. In this case, as all of the privileges of Crenne's works were made out to the printer rather than the author, we would assume that Janot controlled format, typography, illustrations, and the use of woodcut initials, for example. Of course, Crenne may have played a part in these aspects of book production. In addition, the choice of woodcuts, fonts, and decorated initials was limited to those in the printer's stock. It was even possible for the mise en page to provide alternative interpretations and meanings beyond those suggested by the words of the text itself.\(^4^2\) The author's self-empowerment was in constant tension with the practical and commercial constraints governing the work of the printers who were partners in disseminating the text.

Given that the success of the *Angoysses douloureuses* would have facilitated Crenne's approach to other printers, we can assume that her relationship with Janot was a good one. This partnership, which lasted for the publication of all four of her works, ensured that the first public appearance of Crenne's texts occurred under the protection of Janot's long-standing and good reputation.\(^4^3\) Janot’s printshop ensured that the name ‘de Crenne’ was emblazoned in a distinctive large roman font across the title pages of all the first editions of her works, ensuring that her authorship enjoyed prominence and visibility. Janot also illustrated the fact of Crenne’s authorship with a number of woodcuts. Although these were not necessarily commissioned specifically to illustrate her works, they suggest that the Janot workshop viewed Crenne

\(^4^2\) Indeed, it was possible for the addition of a woodcut to change the overall interpretation of the text. For an overview of the role of woodcuts in creating meaning in the *Angoysses douloureuses* see Réach-Ngô, pp. 263–74. For a case study of how the insertion of a woodcut modified the meaning of the *Angoysses douloureuses*, see Bromilow, 2012.

\(^4^3\) Broomhall has established that collaboration with a reputable printer was even more important for female authors than for their male counterparts, as to some extent this mitigated the questioning of their virtue provoked by their excursion into the public realm (pp. 112–17).
as an authoritative figure.\textsuperscript{44} This page layout sympathetic to the promotion of the female author was essential in empowering Crenne to maximize the potential of the medium of print for her own self-fashioning as an author.\textsuperscript{45}

A woodcut showing a woman in classical dress holding a book representing female literary creativity featured as the opening image to Books One and Two of the \textit{Angoysses douloureuses}, thereby unmistakably identifying the work as female-authored.\textsuperscript{46} The classical dress, and historical, rather than contemporary, buildings in the background create the impression of timelessness. This was undoubtedly a generic woodcut used by Janot to illustrate many other scenes in addition to Crenne's authorship.\textsuperscript{47} Another striking woodcut was used as the opening woodcut to \textit{Epistres familiaires et invectives}.\textsuperscript{48} It shows a woman seated at a desk handing a letter to a messenger. Although it is also a generic image, used also in the \textit{Angoysses douloureuses}, interestingly this representation gives solid physical presence to the woman writer seated at her carved desk. Her quill in hand, we see the lines of handwriting while the messenger in mid-stride appears at the threshold of the room, the movement of his body suggested by his outstretched hand. Whereas the male figure connotes texts in transmission, the woman at her desk suggests both prestige and permanence. Warner has explained that this woodcut did not first appear in Crenne's works and was used to illustrate a range of texts produced in Janot's workshop from its first use in 1537.\textsuperscript{49} Nevertheless, when it was placed in this context by the compiler of the book, it represents Crenne's authorship, although it may not originally have been commissioned to this end. This is especially the case in the first edition of the \textit{Epistres familiaires et invectives} in which it is the only woodcut. It is worth noting that both these woodcuts have been used on front covers of modern editions and scholarly monographs, owing to their rarity as visual representations of women and books in France in the period.

\textsuperscript{44} On the multiple ways Janot supported Crenne's construction of her own authorial persona, Dame Helisenne, see Bromilow, 2013.
\textsuperscript{45} On the page layout of the \textit{Angoysses douloureuses qui procedent d'amours} see Réach-Ngô, esp. chs. 4 and 5.
\textsuperscript{46} \url{http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k70526g/f9.image.r=helisenne%20de%20crenne} (accessed 11 November 2016).
\textsuperscript{47} Crenne, 1997, pp. 97, 228. It also appears when Guenelic addresses Venus before he and Quezinsstra enter a tournament for which they are ill-prepared (p. 298). Wood describes how this striking image was also used by Gilles Corrozet in his \textit{Hécatomgraphie}. It was accompanied by verses highly critical of the \textit{Angoysses douloureuses} as a self-revelatory, widely distributed narrative (pp. 43–49).
\textsuperscript{48} \url{http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8609511v/f14.image.r=helisenne%20de%20crenne} (accessed 11 November 2016).
\textsuperscript{49} Warner, pp. 21–23.
The frontispiece to the *Eneydes* provides us with another noteworthy image reflecting Crenne’s authorship. It shows a woman kneeling before a monarch and offering him a large book in front of a crowd of courtiers. Sharon Marshall has argued that the woodcuts for the narrative of *Eneydes* are relatively poor quality copies of woodcuts used in an earlier sixteenth-century edition, which remained popular across Europe for the next 50 years. This allows for the possibility that all of the woodcuts for the *Eneydes* were commissioned at the same time, but that for stylistic reasons, Janot preferred to use woodcuts illustrating the diegesis copied from an early sixteenth-century antecedent. By contrast the frontispiece was carved in a much more contemporary style. At the very least, the compiler of the book selected this first woodcut from Janot’s stock to represent Crenne’s authorship. Indeed, it is even possible, given the evidence discussed above of the forward-planning in the printing of Crenne’s texts, that Janot instructed the woodcut artist with the express intention of using it in the *Eneydes*, irrespective of whether it was initially used elsewhere.

The image stages the moment of the presentation of the book to the monarch at the court. It is a dramatic scene. Placed within the opening lines of the dedication, there can be no doubt in the reader’s mind that the author of this weighty, and beautifully bound, volume is a woman. Her poise evokes a gift that is voluntarily placed in the monarch’s outstretched hand. He is represented in contemporary dress, which is different from the other woodcuts in *Eneydes*, where the images draw more heavily on the medieval tradition. This woodcut is significant in the staging of Crenne’s authorship because it provides a visual representation of the courtly reception of her work. The details of the woman and the monarch’s dress convey a sense of reality that is very different from the other two woodcuts where her authorship is represented as symbolic or confined to the domestic realm. This dramatic image shows the widespread reception of the female author’s work and courtly recognition of her writing. It confirms that Janot had a specific interest in visualizing female authorship;

50 http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k15101304/f15.item.r=helissenne%20de%20crenne (accessed 11 November 2016).
51 Davis has read this as a representation of Crenne’s presentation of the work to François I (p. 96). Wood, however, considers this as another generic image, claiming that this woodcut was first used the previous year to illustrate the *Amadis de Gaule*, newly translated from the Spanish by Nicholas Heberay des Essarts and printed by Janot (pp. 63–64). Rothstein lists only one 1540 edition of the *Amadis de Gaule* (p. 166). I have consulted the 1540 edition of the first book of the *Amadis*; of the fourteen woodcuts included, none matches this one. However, this image is in the same style as the *Amadis* woodcuts, whereas the woodcuts to the *Eneydes* are all in a different style. Therefore, I do not rule out Wood’s hypothesis that this scene was first used elsewhere and was subsequently used by Janot to illustrate different scenes.
52 Marshall, p. 141.
this distinguishes the volume from male-authored works that he published which share many typographical features, such as the first volume of the *Amadis* printed in 1540. The Crenne frontispiece stages the moment when the author’s self-empowerment has resulted in representational power. The printer, with his carefully crafted book in the king’s hands, has succeeded in conveying the quality of his work to the viewer. Janot and Crenne may have had different motivations for wanting to participate vicariously in court life, yet this image conveys the mutual benefit of their partnership.

**Conclusion**

Hélisenne de Crenne adopted numerous strategies that resisted normative discourses aimed at silencing and obscuring women in sixteenth-century French society. Her self-empowerment stemmed from her adoption of a multiplicity of positions: adviser, advisee, example, and counter example. She located her voice in textual precedents that were male-authored, highlighting the previous absence of the female viewpoint in literary paradigms. In her original compositions, Crenne wrote not just as a woman but used the very fact of her gender to deepen the text’s appeal to the female reader. She constructed herself both as needing education, and as having the ability to educate others. To this end she offered herself as an *exemplum* of lived experience, both of the potentially dangerous experience of love, and of the writing (and reading) woman. The overall perspective projected by her texts suggests her aspiration to move beyond simply entertaining the reader to contribute to the common good. This is achieved through her attempt to educate the lay reader, particularly the female reader, whose perceived needs the texts addressed directly. By using exemplary models, especially that of the erudite author herself, Crenne’s works contributed to the education of women.

Crenne’s self-fashioning as an author was informed by contemporary gender politics. She strived to show that she was better read than her male contemporaries. Furthermore, she could create texts that would serve a range of applications in the reader’s own life and perhaps serve as a model for writing in their own lives. Thus, the empowerment of the reader moved beyond the printed page to become a political act of resistance and change. Through their representation as readers, women were inscribed in book culture, making them visible as a group in ways that were both innovative in print and empowering. The success of these ventures relied upon Crenne’s disruption of the association between print publication and unchaste-ness. Although the illicit nature of Hélisenne’s love in the first book of the
Angoysses douloureuses must certainly have had its attractions as reading matter, the project of printing the book for the learned people of Paris is presented as a work of educational merit for readers and one sanctioned by the Gods. This aspiration for the moral and political utility of her writing culminates in the Eneydes, where she supplemented Virgil’s text with four accounts of Hector’s death to propose a culturally and politically expedient view of the prehistory of the kingdom of France. Crenne’s relationship with Janot reinforced her self-representation as an authoritative figure. The compiler of her works included woodcuts portraying female literary creativity in a positive light. The most significant was the frontispiece to the Eneydes, in which Crenne is depicted presenting her work to the king. Through the printed page, albeit not in reality, then, Crenne empowered herself to take part, however vicariously, in the cultural life of the court.

Works cited


About the author

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