

Madame de Sévigné, *Letters*  
quoted in O'Faolain & Martines (eds.),  
Not in God's Image: Women in History, pp. 239-240

*Madame de Sévigné's letters are famous in social and literary history, and in quoting them we may appear to depart from our policy of concentrating on more ordinary women. The following extracts deal, however, with a very ordinary fear common to all women throughout the centuries, when childbirth was a hazard and contraception was either little known or largely ineffective. Another letter writer, a Protestant doctor, Guy Patin, in a letter written about eleven years earlier, tells how he had heard that 'six hundred women have confessed [to their confessors] that they had destroyed the fruit of their wombs'. Madame de Sévigné's daughter, Madame de Grignan, married in 1669, had already had one child and one miscarriage, and was pregnant again. Her mother saw the beginnings of a pattern which she did not like.*

27 April, 1671. I don't like hearing of your listlessness; I am like scandalmongers, and I always believe the worst. This is what I was afraid of. My dear child, if this misfortune should be confirmed, take good care of yourself.

6 May. I send a thousand kisses to Grignan in spite of his misdoings; I beg him at least, since he has caused the harm to cause the cure, that is, that he should take every care for your health. Let him be master of that as you must be mistress of everything else.

18 May. I accept what M. de Grignan says. Ah, my dear Count, I believe you; there is no one who would not have done what you have had them in your place. . . . Consider, however, that the youth, the beauty, the health, the gaiety, and the life of a woman you love can all be destroyed by frequent occurrences of the pain you make [her] suffer.

12 July . . . bring your pregnancy to a happy end and after that, if M. de Grignan loves you and has not undertaken to kill you, I know well what he will do—or rather what he will not do.

18 October. Listen, M. le Comte, I am talking to you. I shall return your charm with bluntness. You take pleasure from your labors: instead of pitying my daughter you merely laugh; it is clear enough that you don't know what it is like to give birth. But listen, I have a piece of news for you which is that if, after this son, you do not let her rest a while, I shall believe you don't love her, and that you don't love me either; I shan't come to Provence. Your swallows may summon me in vain . . . and I was forgetting this: I shall take your wife from you. Do you imagine I gave her to you so that you might kill her, so that you might destroy her health, her beauty, and her youth? This is no laughing matter. At the right time and place I shall ask you this favor on my knees . . . providing that I don't come to find a woman who is pregnant and again pregnant and all the time pregnant. . . .

21 October. How your belly weighs on me, my poor darling.  
6 January, 1672. Your thinness kills me: Ah, where is the time when you used to eat the head of one woodcock per day and were dying with the fear of being too fat? If you get pregnant at this point, you may be sure that you will never get over it as long as you live. M. de Grignan is crowing too loud! He is hankering. If he succumbs to the temptation, don't believe he loves you. When one truly loves, one loves everything, and a beauty like yours which gives no trouble is not something to forget. If M. de Grignan destroys it, you may take it as proven that his affection is not of sterling quality.

6 January. I want to warn you of something which I shall uphold in your husband's presence and in yours. It is that if, after your periods start again, you as much as think of making love with M. de Grignan, you may consider yourself already pregnant and if one of your midwives tells you differently, then your husband has bribed her. After giving you this advice, I shall say no more. [Madame de Sévigné, *Letters*]:]