

Madame Curie,

What's in a Name?

The opportunity to write to you directly presented itself quite unexpectedly. But as soon as it did, I knew that I had been given a unique chance to ask you something I had been curious about for a long time. The thing is, it concerns another letter. Without boring you with unnecessary details of my own work, suffice perhaps to say that because I am currently in the process of writing a paper on the *enveloppe Soleau*, the idea of composing a letter about a letter while being immersed in the material culture of an envelope just proved irresistible. Perhaps you never met M. Soleau in person, but I am fairly sure you must have been familiar with his patented invention; “Mode de protection et de timbrage à date des documents, dessins, etc., tenus secrets,” from October 28, 1910. Designed to carry duplicate proof of anteriority in almost any intellectual creation to the Director of the *l'Institut national de la propriété industrielle*, Eugene Soleau's two-compartment envelope prefigured quite prominently in the heated discussions on scientific property you partook in as member of *La Commission Internationale de Coopération Intellectuelle*. Knowing something about your involvement in the *Commission* and your commitment to questions regarding scientific priority and authority I would have expected you to have taken a keen interest in the *enveloppe Soleau*.

As much as I would love to hear more about your views on the envelope in respect to the *droit de savants*, I am writing about something quite different (but come to think of it, distantly related nonetheless). A few years ago, when doing research for a book in which you play an important role, I found a letter in your archive that intrigued me. By “your archive,” I am referring to the *Pierre et Marie Curie Papiers* (NAF 18365-18517) at the *Bibliothèque National de France* (BnF). Surely, you always knew that after you were gone there would be an archive, even a museum devoted to your life and work, the contents collected, indexed and then consulted by researchers like me. Perhaps your feelings were somewhat conflicted about this, and rather than see some of the traces you and your husband left behind end up in archives and museums, you decided to spring-clean them away. Be that as it may. But after spending a few years in your presence (metaphorically speaking) I came to think of you as someone quite savvy in the art of self-fashioning yourself for posterity. Speculation, of course. I am more convinced that you could not have imagined this archive being migrated from the reading rooms of the BnF into a digital library called Gallica. Now, it would take far too long to try and explain the whole digital-thing to you, but the upshot is that I live at a time when your letters, notebooks and articles can be accessed and read by anyone, anywhere, without having to

go to Paris. I think we can both agree that anything that keeps you away from Paris is a bad thing, but at the same time there is something quite wonderful about being able to carry your complete correspondance with Missy Brown Meloney in my bag. That is what I do on my iPad. iPad? Sort of a portable screen, I guess, in which there is almost infite space for documents. Remember when you met Paul Otlet in Brussels? 1923, I think. Not sure if the idea had struck him at the time or if he shared it with you, but only a few years later and much before his time he predicted that in the future we would read from something very similar as the screen I just described to you. He was right, you know. I wonder what you made of him? He was certainly impressed by your interest in bibliography, but somehow I have always suspected that he was a bit too visionary for your taste.

So, what I have inside my portable screen are several hundred letters exchanged between you and Missy Brown Meloney, including the one from the summer of 1932, where you ask your friend to destroy most of the letters you had sent her. I am so grateful that she did not. Or that there were duplicates that outlasted both of you. It remains something of a mystery to me why you would suggest she erase most of your exchanges in the first place. Forgive me for being unconvinced by your description of yourself as very reserved in feeling, at least not as an argument for obliterating more than a decade-long correspondance. The only thing I can think of is that because you had to police your own image so carefully, and were subjected to so much slander in the press, you were overly sensitive to what could be gleaned from some of the letters. It must have been extremely tiring to sustain such vigilance. But the fact remains, we are lucky the extensive correspondance between you and Meloney survives, and for several reasons. First, because it gives depth to the mainstream perception of you, which, let us face it, can only be described as quite one-dimensional. But the letters to Meloney reveal a more complex and multi-dimensional you, and that is a good thing, believe me. And while there is no shortage of books dedicated to you and your achievements, you might be surprised to learn that basically nothing has been written about Meloney. She did something remarkable for you and your laboratory, and it manifested itself in a personal friendship but also in a very real moral and economical backing of your research. Fingers crossed that someone will discover Meloney and give her her due as editor and networker.

But I am digressing. Back to the reason why I am writing to you in the first place. Even if many letters have been digitized, there are still those that have not. During a visit to the “old” BnF (there is now a new one, you know, quite a distance from the one you would remember), doing research for the book I mentioned earlier I was working my way through the general category “Lettres reçues.” Finding myself at NAF 18447 (cote) * LXXXIII Coch-

Czernyszova, I had no reason to suspect that this part of the alphabet would contain something exceptional. But it did.

I guess I do not have to tell you what it feels like to know that you are on to something, that you have stumbled across something really interesting. It does not really matter if you came to it by chance or by dogged perseverance. The laboratory and the library may be worlds apart, as distant from one another as the methods of “hard science” are to the historical approach of the humanities, but I am convinced that the scent of the chase is the same. So, I first realized that I was looking at something exceptional because of where the letter in question was found. Curiously enough, there was no addressee on the letterhead of the four-page long missive, dated early 1934. The sender is a J.L. Riquès, but for whatever reason, the letter is not placed in any R-folder, but in the Cochin-Czernyszova one. The unknown recipient, clearly not you, but someone close enough to the sender to be spoken to as “tu” (perhaps Irène or even Frédéric?), had turned to Riquès for advice regarding the potential confusion of the Curie name. And then, when I understood that Riquès had been approached to investigate if there was any way for your heirs to oppose M. Alfred Curie’s use of his name to facilitate the sale of THO RADIA, I knew the reason for having the letter under C. *Alfred Curie*.

Was there something in particular that made you want to explore the possibility of legal action against the man who shared your famous surname? After all, the cosmetics range of THO RADIA had been a reality for many years. From my perspective, it is fascinating to think that he made his business on radium and radioactivity being a commercial pull rather than push. Was it the fact that you knew you were ill and needed to implement protective measures vis-à-vis your name and legacy? Your preoccupation with heritage and control of radium was a longstanding one, I am thinking only of the marriage contract between Irène and Frédéric..... As someone who had been working a long time on your celebrity status, I had inadvertently come across proof that by the end of your life the name Curie was being constructed as a brand.

Of course, in a sense you had been a brand or at least a full-blown international celebrity for more than thirty years. But even if your celebrity status and fame can be traced back to the first Nobel in 1903, during the 1930s I have a feeling that the commodity form Marie Curie reaches a new level. Very few scientists experienced what you in *Pierre Curie* referred to as the “burden” of fame, at least not on the scale and intensity you did. There really was only one person with whom you could share the experience of “not being able to make a move without having it take on global significance.” Albert Einstein. You might be interested to know that your friend makes a regular appearance on *Forbes* annual tally of top-earning dead celebrities. A few years ago, he pulled in a respectable \$10 million to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the owner of his intellectual property.

I am curious about the confusion you seem to have worried about concerning the Curie name. Did Alfred really pose a threat to the value of the name Curie? Judging by the influx of letters you received asking for your autograph in the 1930s, your name and your signature was increasingly becoming seen as a commodity. Impressed by the ingenuity shown by some in order to persuade you to part with a signature on a letter or a photo, I was even more impressed with some of your strategies in deflecting such appeals. Remember Charles Eugene Claghorn's request for an autograph for a paralyzed boy? Claghorn did his best to appeal to your motherly instincts, but I think maybe you saw through the whole thing. There was no paralyzed boy, just an avid autograph hunter. I wish I could have seen his face when he received what you *did* send him: *Le Radium. Le Vingt-cinquième anniversaire de la découverte du radium 1898-1923*. Not sure if he appreciated a copy of the book published on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the discovery of radium. But I get it. You needed help in stemming the tide of requests that were coming your way and wanted to send a message. No wonder you asked Meloney's help in ascertaining the best use of your time and name.

Of course, your married name followed you through your entire career, and I know how much work you sometimes had to do in order to protect it. The true value of the Curie name was incalculable and had to be defended. You and your husband were the first in a scientific dynasty. But as your legal counsel pointed out in his letter, sending a public message disassociating yourself from your quack namesake risked putting a dangerous weapon in Alfred Curie's hands and would not get you the result you wanted. And you would have known all about what the press was capable of from your experiences in 1911. During that *annus horribilis* your name had been attacked by your enemies and defended by your friends in five duels. Perhaps you would be pleased to know that a century later, these duels have mostly been forgotten. I guess at the time this was exactly what you wanted.

I can understand the frustration of having to share the name Curie, but the unfortunate truth was that Alfred too had a right to use his own name freely. On the other hand, you probably appreciated Riquès telling your proxy of the recent judgement in *la première chambre du tribunal de la Seine* involving another famous French scientist's name—Pasteur—which concluded that while the use of one's personal name to commercial ends was allowed, "one cannot use the name in such a way that it is susceptible to create prejudicial confusion to other person's interests, **even when these are simply moral.**" Riquès added the final words in red.

Although the conclusion after the four-page long letter was that a process was a distinct possibility, I found no indication that you or your children took this matter any further. You would not have known it, of course, but you had only six more months to live, and however much you wanted to defend the

Curie name from the confusion of radioactive cosmetics, there were other pressing matters to attend to.

Speaking of names. Not sure what you would make of the fact that you are now always referred to as Marie Skłodowska Curie, your polish name having been “reinstated” a while back.

I have enjoyed writing this letter, but one should not extend one’s welcome too long. Perhaps you stopped reading early on, perhaps you stayed on to the end. I hope so. Let me know what happened with the possible legal action, will you? And please, take your time responding. There is no rush writing back. I know how busy you must be.

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