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*Kerver's Widow and Female Printers in the Sixteenth Century*  
Darrah Culp

During the early sixteenth century, Thielman Kerver was an exemplary bookseller and printer of many Books of Hours manuscripts sold throughout Europe. When he died in 1522, his business was taken over by his wife, Yolande Bonhomme, who became one of the most notable female printers of sixteenth-century France.

Yolande Bonhomme was no stranger to the book printing business, as her father Pasquiar Bonhomme was a well-known printer at the University of Paris,<sup>1</sup> giving Yolande the skills and abilities to continue her husband's business with her sons. She specialized in the publishing of Books of Hours and became the first woman to publish a [Bible](#). The printing profession at this time was dominated by men who were printing books for other men to use. Some books were used at universities and monasteries, two of the most common places for men to educate themselves, while in contrast Books of Hours were printed for private use.

In sixteenth-century France, widows were the only women allowed to run or own businesses. They would do this until they re-married and their new husbands took over the business. "...Widows of booksellers, printers, and bookbinders may continue to run the bookshop, printing workshop, and bindery..." a regulation in 1618 stated.<sup>2</sup> This regulation and others were overseen by the guild system in France. Yolande Bonhomme and other female printers such as Charlotte Guillard belonged to printing guilds in Paris, France, after they had

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<sup>1</sup> Davidson, "Unseen Hands: Yolande Bonhomme."

<sup>2</sup> Garamond.

both taken over the businesses of their deceased husbands and continued to produce manuscripts.<sup>4</sup>

How would they differentiate their work from that of their late husbands? It was common for them to publish manuscripts using the formula, “widow of \_\_\_\_\_.”<sup>5</sup> Not every widow followed that rule, however. Women that had grown up with fathers in the printing profession sometimes used their own maiden names to publish works. Both Yolande Bonhomme and Charlotte Guillard did this, publishing their Bibles and Books of Hours under their maiden names.<sup>6</sup> Though technically attached to a male publishing figure, using their maiden names allowed women to claim the identity they held before they married. This was a strategy to forge an identity for themselves that was more than an extension of their late husbands’ successes and reputations.

The printing profession also provided an outlet for working class women to gain literacy. By working in these printing shops, they would be surrounded by words and ideas that not only taught them how to read, but also instructed them in their content.<sup>7</sup> The success Charlotte Guillard had in business and ownership most likely meant that some women were more educated in marketing, finance, and other aspects of business than previously led to believe.<sup>8</sup> After the death of her second husband, Charlotte Guillard published works in a number of areas, including religion, civil law, and science.<sup>9</sup> These women learned to perfect their copying and publishing skills to a level of mastery, and some art historians later mistook the female printers’ works for

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<sup>4</sup> Beech, p., 345

<sup>5</sup> Broomhall, p. 54.

<sup>6</sup> Broomhall, p.54.

<sup>7</sup> Broomhall, p. 53.

<sup>8</sup> Beech, p. 356.

<sup>9</sup> Beech, p. 348.

those belonging to their husbands. Though publishing under her own name, Yolande Bonhomme continued to use Thielman Kerver's trademark, the unicorn.<sup>10</sup> She used the unicorn trademark as a continuance of his legacy and as a representation of the business he had worked to build and she had maintained. This preserved their legacies past her death in 1577 and left Yolande at an equal standing with her husband in the history of printing.

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<sup>10</sup> Eric White, "She Took the Fruit Thereof: Yolande Bonhomme and her Bible", Southern Methodist University Bridwell Library, 2014, <https://blog.smu.edu/bridwell/2014/07/15/she-took-of-the-fruit-thereof-yolande-bonhomme-and-her-bible/>

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