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In the Shadow of the Sun King: The *Précieuse*

Vanessa Herold

The seventeenth century French salon of the Marquise de Rambouillet played a decisive role in the development of social conduct. Within the Marquise's *chambre bleue*, members set new patterns for behavioral codes by refining the nuances of politeness, gallantry and above all, conversation. Two distinct modes of comportment, *honnêteté* and *préciosité*, evolved from the atmosphere of the blue room. However, their paths branched out in diverging directions. The *honnête homme* became the social ideal whereas the *précieuse* became an object of satire and ridicule. Male writers of the century, including Molière and the Abbé de Pure, mocked the *précieuse*'s imaginative language which clashed with the *honnête homme*'s sober manner. Without any texts from the hand of a woman claiming to be a *précieuse* or to defend her cause, *préciosité*'s legacy fell into the hands of its detractors.

The outpouring of satirical literature about the *précieuse* represented a response to a perceived threat.¹ Writers did not trivialize the *précieuse*'s character solely on the basis of her sex,² but rather on the fear of her challenge to the established political and social order. This article seeks to demonstrate the subversiveness of *préciosité* to a monarch who attempted to build glory on fabricated and artificial acts of distinction. The *précieuse* challenged Louis XIV, the "ultimate sign maker" (*Aristocrat* 129), by undermining his power base. Her discourse constructed new meanings between words and things, signs and referents.³

Louis XIV's self-transformation into the Sun King was contingent upon his subjects accepting his proposed artificial connections between signifier and signified. To stabilize his power, Louis XIV had to be the one who brought into existence images and meanings. At the beginning of Louis' personal rule in 1661, royal forces undertook the task of crushing all elements challenging the king's authority. This year marked the end of the cultural dominance of the salons and the symbolic death of the *précieuses*, both of which had been associated with the Fronde (1648-1653).⁴ Louis XIV never forgot the threat of this civil war to his absolute reign.

In the aftermath of the Fronde, he sought to erase records of this war from the annals of French history, keeping only those facts that would increase his own power (Beasley 92). Official historians under royal authority helped to reduce the menace of the Fronde by ridiculing its participants, which included women.⁵

Despite the ridicule, the Fronde proved that women were capable of taking power into their own hands and revolting against the established laws. The leaders of the Fronde, such as Mme de Longueville, Mme de Châtillon and Mlle de Montpensier, took command, guiding armies into battle. They were joined by numerous other women, forcing their male contemporaries, including Mazarin, to realize that they were a force to be reckoned with during the war.⁶ Pierres Georges Lorrin, A. Lloyd Moote and other recent historians of the Fronde emphasize how close the Fronde came to altering permanently the course of the French monarchy. If the *frondeurs/frondeuses* had succeeded, Louis XIV's absolute rule might have been avoided. Their uprising was a constant reminder to the king of the potential threat of particular sectors of society to the public sphere. To preclude the repetition of the Fronde, Louis attempted to build an impenetrable hierarchy based on ceremonial mechanisms whose meanings he ultimately controlled.

To centralize his power and reduce the prestige of outside forces, Louis embarked on a program of gathering his nobility around him in one community and under one roof. The aristocracy flocked to the most magnificent court in Europe, simply because their personal honor depended on it. The nobles looked to the king for a definition of honorable conduct. Their dependence on Louis XIV turned them into symbolic prisoners. Every deed, gesture and word had to be in accordance with their master's wishes. Norbert Elias points out how the king turned the witnessing of his own private acts, such as that of taking off a nightshirt and putting on a dayshirt, into a privilege distinguishing those present from others (85). The opportunity of holding the king's candle at the *coucher*, or his shirt at the *lever* were purely symbolic distinctions that the *honnêtes gens* equated with honor. In such ceremonies, each participant became defined by his function in relation to others and to the king. Louis did not invent but rather enriched various traditional ceremonies by minute organization, giving each small act a graded prestige value, thereby providing more

outlets for meritorious expressions (85). Based on tradition, the distinguishing signs of honor had a persuasive reality for the aristocrats.

As the king transformed himself into Louis le Grand, he turned his palace into a stage for his guests. In this setting, Louis encouraged competition for prestige among the members of the *noblesse d'épée* and *noblesse de robe* to turn them away from competition for royal power, thereby preventing the possibility of another Fronde.⁷ The new social style that formed at the court was reminiscent of the patterns of politeness designed by the Marquise de Rambouillet. However the extravagant fancies of the *précieuses* and their verbal excesses, developed during what Dorothy Backer terms as the "precious decade" (1654-1661), were to be left behind. The new ideal was the courtier who never became excited about anything. La Rochefoucauld defines the model: "Le vrai honnête homme est celui qui ne se pique de rien" (#203). The *juste milieu* expelled the excitement and lavishness of *préciosité*. Anything overdone, excessive or overflowing was not considered honorable, unless of course it was promoted by the king himself. Only Louis XIV could be dazzling. The moment when one overstepped his boundaries, such as Fouquet who built himself a palace grander than the king's, the individual was ridiculed or disgraced and, in Fouquet's case, imprisoned in 1661.

The king kept his nobles busy with mastering various social codes such as those of conversation. At the court, conversation became the primary vehicle for displaying one's being honorably. While speaking, one had to control gestures, facial expressions and body movements since every signifier was used as an expression of honor. According to Nicolas Faret, who wrote the first important work on *honnêteté*, *L'Honnête homme ou l'art de plaire à la cour* (1630), "L'une des plus importantes et des plus universelles maximes que l'on doit suivre en ce commerce, est de modérer ses passions..." (68). A person needed to discipline his body and his emotions in order not to lose his rank among his peers. Everything had to be calculated, including outbursts; any explosions revealing the true feelings of the person were perceived as signs of weakness. Thus, those seeking to enhance their social status had to master an artful behavior that appeared artless.

The deliberate artificiality of the *précieuse's* language and behavior defied the golden rule of appearing natural. Baudeau de

Somaize, a writer and self-proclaimed historian of these women, provides us insight into their character. The *précieuse*, he writes in his *Dictionnaire des précieuses* (1661), must possess *esprit*. But, he asks, are all women with wit or intelligence *précieuse*?

[Je] réponds à cette demande que non, et que ce sont seulement celles qui se meslent d'écrire ou de corriger ce que les autres écrivent, celles qui font leur principal de la lecture des romans, et sur tout celles qui inventent des façons de parler bizarres par leur nouveauté et extraordinaires dans leurs significations. (23)

For Somaize, the *précieuses* were truly learned and cultivated women, who knew as much about books as the authors they met. The fact that they spoke in a notorious language attracted attention and criticism.

In particular René Bary, a theoretician of social conduct, scrutinized the *précieuse's* style in a mocking tone. In his *Réflexions sur la politesse des mœurs* (1664), Bary contrasts the polite conduct of the honorable woman with the excessive comportment of the *précieuse*:

Il y a une grande différence entre la véritable politesse, & les petites façons que les Précieuses affectent, pour se donner un air de distinction. Leurs grimaces étudiées, leurs minauderies, cette fausse délicatesse, dont elles se parent, font rire les personnes raisonnables. (7)

Bary attacks the desire of the *précieuse* to distinguish herself through 'studied grimaces' in order to be superior in the eyes of others. The overt display of artifice, according to the precepts of *honnêteté*, connoted affectation. Unlike the *honnêtes hommes/femmes* who tried to hide their artifice, the *précieuse* willingly exposed it which made "reasonable people" laugh (7, translation mine).

In order to prevent women from deviating from the social ideal, courtesy literature or "how-to books" explained to women the proper ways to interact in social situations. Jacques du Bosc's *Honnête femme* (1632), for example, argued for the need for women to be educated in conversational rhetoric. However, he warned his readers of the difficulty of choosing the correct models to follow:

Comme il n'y a rien de plus important aux Dames, que de savoir choisir de bons Esprits pour la Conversation, et de bons Livres

pour la lecture, aussi n'y a-t-il rien de plus difficile, parce qu'il y a tant de mauvaises qui ressemblent aux bonnes. (28)

A woman had to carefully cultivate her connections in order to protect herself from the "mauvaises" influences of the *non-honnêtes gens*. It was as if the *honnête femme* were allowed neither to be ignorant nor to be learned. From this perspective, a woman's education needed to be supervised and controlled. Even though male advocates of female education, such as du Bosc, recognized woman's intellectual capacities and her fitness for non-domestic roles, they desired to control her learning. The *honnête femme* acquiesced to rigid formality, while the *précieuse* constructed her own rules.

Within the boundaries of the salon culture, the *précieuse* had the freedom to talk and express knowledge. In Michel de Pure's novel *La Prétieuse ou le mystère des ruelles* (1656-7), freedom signified the opportunity to display learning. Agathonte recommends a male friend, Philonime, to socialize with Eulalie, a woman of wit, to improve his poetry: "Eulalie, qui véritablement a autant d'esprit que personne du monde; [...] a encore une certaine grace à tourner ces imaginations, et à leur donner corps et expression, que l'on ne peut l'entendre sans l'admirer" (9-10). In the *précieux* circles of de Pure's fictional text, the learned lady did not have to hide her knowledge. Rather, poets and writers desired to earn her approval.

In the reality of the age of absolutism however, the honorable and chaste woman agreed to give up her freedom and succumb to authority. Power for a woman now resided in support for the king. It was to the king's good fortune when certain *précieux* writers, such as Madeleine de Scudéry, replaced the *précieuse* pen for an *honnête* one. When Louis XIV granted Scudéry a royal pension in 1683, suddenly her works were no longer dedicated to illustrious women, but to the Sun King. Before the influence of Louis, Scudéry's earlier works, such as *Le Grand Cyrus*, portrayed the adventures of quasi-mythical *frondeurs* in exotic settings thrown in a jumble of episodes. She filled her story with portraits of her friends, including herself as Sapho, a character who advocated a number of archetypal "feminist" causes, including the idea of not marrying. In *Le Grand Cyrus*, Sapho retires to the *pays des Sauromates*, a utopia

where she remains unmarried with her lover, whom she dominates completely.

In contrast to her earlier "feminist" stance, Scudéry's last works were in line with the spirit of the age of Louis. In "De l'expérience," for example, Anacrise and Célinte debate about life in the *chambre bleue* versus that under the reign of Louis. Anacrise claims that she enjoys to hear old stories about the blue room: "J'écoute avec plaisir ce qu'étaient l'Hôtel de Rambouillet où tout ce qu'il y avait de grand, de brave, de savant, de galant, de poli, et de vertueux se trouvait." Célinte disagrees because she believes that nothing could equal the gay life under the present monarch: "ce que fait Louis le Grand m'occupe si agréablement et j'en ai l'esprit si rempli, qui je ne m'informe point de ce qui s'est fait avant lui..." (129). Evidently, Célinte did not choose the path of subversion, just like her author who willingly chose to succumb to absolute rule rather than promote the liberty of the salons. Instead of building up the myth of Sapho, Scudéry concentrated on patronizing the myth of Louis XIV.

Along with Scudéry, Molière worked in the king's favor. In keeping with the absolutism of the political reign, the classical authors were encouraged to become absolutists of taste (Backer 166). To them the *précieuse* language was obscure and farfetched. A *précieuse* did not say for example, "Asseyez-vous, s'il vous plaît." According to Molière's *Les Précieuses ridicules*, a precious lady said, "Contentez, s'il vous plaît, l'envie que ce siege a de vous embrasser" (sc. IX). Even though Molière's play is a comedy and intentionally exaggerated, his creation is not an "*invention gratuite*" explains Roger Lathuillère: "Elle [la préciosité] repose sur des faits de langues véritables" ("*Langue*" 246). The characters of Molière speak the language of subversion. Molière iterates the *précieuses'* deviation when the maid exclaims that she cannot understand the monstrous speech of Cathos and Magdelon: "...il faut parler chrétien, si vous voulez que je vous entende" (sc. VI).

The *précieuse's* words appeared obscure because she used the non-material, abstract realm to describe material things. For instance, fingernails were referred to as "le plaisir innocent de la chair," jealousy "la mere des soupçons" and almanac "le mémoire de l'avenir" (Somaize Ij, l, xlii). Through poetic style in everyday conversation, the *précieuse* transformed language into a complicated puzzle. By playfully twisting into knots her discourse, she

invented more elegant ways of avoiding the unpleasant realities beyond words. Pregnancy became a word too dreadful to utter. It was for her "le mal d'amour permis" (Somaize xlix). Her substitution of concrete, material phrases for abstract periphrases showed that words did not have a natural attachment to the idea they signified. Through the altering of signs, she created her own unique perception of life and unveiled the artifice of "universal" signs, such as superiority and grandeur, in ways that the *honnête homme* never dared to do.

The *honnête homme* gave strength to the king's established values when he dismissed innovations in language as an artificial way to gain prestige. Nicolas Faret warned his readers that the *honnête homme's* language had to be to the point and clear: "Or l'excellence des bons mots consiste principalement à estre courts, aigus, clairs, et proferez avec bonne grace..."(86). This idea of clarity was exactly what the *précieuse's* discourse challenged. Somaize goes so far as to state that the *précieuses* were not only embroidering everyday speech but creating a new one: "Leur langage est nouveau, et elles ont condamné toutes les phrases anciennes... il n'y a eu que le seul 'Vous m'entendez bien' et le 'Et cœtera' à qui elle n'ayent rien trouvé à dire" (119).

But contrary to what Somaize has claimed, the *précieuses* did not invent or use new words. The roots of *préciosité* go back to the sixteenth century, according to Julleville's *Histoire de la langue et de la littérature française*. It is an illusion to believe that the *précieuses* created such words and expressions as "air de la cour, bon air, furieusement, mine, ma chère" (771-2). One could easily find a corresponding list during the reign of Henri III. The poetry of the preceding century thus served as a foundation for the speech of the *précieuses*. In particular, the lyrical language of the poets of the Pléiade provided a direction for aspiring imitators. The Pléiade poets were very conscious that they were taking part in a revival of learning, as Grahame Castor suggests in *Pléiade Poetics*: "Only a poet in whom natural 'ardeur et allegresse d'esprit' was backed up by skill in 'art' and by solid learning could hope to produce a work which all posterity would treasure" (45).

Various examples illustrate that the *précieuse* appropriated the sublimities of sixteenth century poetry for her own use in everyday speech. Similar to the Pléiade poet, the *précieuse* spoke in metaphors and in exaggeration in order to capture the attention of

her listeners. Analogous to the poet, she also relied on mythology: a bed, for example, became "l'empire de Morphée"; she used many adverbs: "tendrement, terriblement, fortement"; and played with circumlocution: cheeks were designated as "les throsnes de la pudeur" (Somaize l*j*, lvi, l). Despite this resemblance, the *précieuse* was ridiculed largely in part for her willingness to expose the art contained in her work.

The Pléiade poets, in contrast to the *précieuses*, mastered the techniques of poetic creation so completely that their art seemed invisible. For example, in Ronsard's "Response aux injures et calomnies," he makes the point that the art of true poets was not an art at all to others, such as the versifiers:

Les Poètes gaillars ont artifice à part,
Ils ont un art caché qui ne semble pas art
Aux versificateurs, d'autant qu'il se promeine
D'une libre contrainte où la Muse le meine.
(809-12; 1063)

Genuine art for Ronsard, as for Du Bellay, was concealed art (Castor 48). The poet had not only to be endowed with a certain natural ability, but also a willingness to work hard. Artifice should never show itself. The Pléiade guided its poetic activity with this in mind, just as the *honnête homme* in the seventeenth century led his conduct according to this precept. True art for the poet and the *honnête homme* was a non-art to the uninitiated. In addition to this illusion of naturalness, Pléiade poets, such as Du Bellay, maintained that a work of art should not be a poor rendition of another artist's invention.

The comical representations of the *précieuse* focused on the fact that her speech was commonly seen as a poor imitation of an original source. Molière's pretentious young ladies are constantly dismembering original terms from poetic or dramatic texts (Lathuillère "Préciosité" 137). Magdelon injects a certain phrase out of context when she exclaims to the maid, "Vite, venez nous tendre ici dedans le conseiller des grâces" (sc. VI). This expression for a looking glass reveals Magdelon's desire to have the airs of Parisian sophistication. Fresh from the provinces, she is trying desperately to imitate the fashionable speech. Yet, her effort to create new signifiers is mocked because it appears not only out of context, but unnatural. Her discourse did not represent the "natu-

ral" world portrayed by the Pléiade poets or the *honnêtes gens*. Rather her speech expressed the artificial, yet free world of the salons.

The freedom desired by the *précieuse* pointed not only to a new type of female but to a new type of hierarchy based on self-creation. Michel de Pure emphasizes the idea of an independent *précieuse*: "La Pretieuse n'est point la fille de son pere ny de sa mere; elle n'a ny l'un ny l'autre" (63). The *précieuse* denied owing her status to her family. She considered herself a self-made cultural creation. Most importantly, the idea of a self-made creation effected changes in class ranking. The space of the *précieuses* became a place of social fusion for the old sword nobility, the newer robe nobility and the bourgeois on the basis of intellectual merit, rather than birth.⁸ The social heterogeneity in the female sphere promoted the forging of new elites.

Louis XIV, ironically, also sought a similar forging at his court. While Louis exploited the insecurity of his nobility by providing them with a stage for the expression of their pomposity as *courtiers* at Versailles, he gave the important tasks of government to selected members of the bourgeoisie. However, there existed a large gap between the goals of the redistribution of power at the court and in the salon. The salon gatherings encouraged a democratization of the aristocracy in contrast to the court where the king worked towards an absolute monarchy.

In Louis' world, he was the master holding the key to the power of symbols. Under his rule, one naturally identified prestige and rank with sign, not referent. The *honnête homme* even promoted the king's absolutism by rationalizing arbitrary connections between honor and etiquette. As we have seen, Louis XIV composed skillfully his absolute image. Lurking in the background, the woman's war (the Fronde) had already exposed him to the precarious balance of power between a monarchy and its subjects. In the precious decade following this civil war, the *précieuse*, not the king, held momentarily the unique power of altering signs. The *précieuse's* creative and artificial endeavors for personal freedom were suppressed, however, when they challenged the closed universe of absolutism. By isolating and laughing at any threatening deviation, the reign of Louis crushed individual style in favor of the personal grandeur of the Sun King.

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Notes

¹ On the object of satire as deviant or threat, see Alvin B. Kernan, *The Plot of Satire* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1965); Henri Bergson, *Le Rire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961); Leonard Feinberg, *The Satirist: His Temperament, Motivation and Influence* (Iowa: Iowa State UP, 1963).

² See Domna Stanton's article "The Fiction of *Préciosité* and the Fear of Women." She argues that the *précieuse's* satirical portrayal is retribution for her feminist assertions of power over sex and logos.

³ Although some examples of the *précieuse's* discourse cited in this article are taken from male satirical writing, it is necessary to realize that a satire may distort but cannot create its own object. The authors who ridiculed *préciosité* had to imitate a recognizable manner: her speech. Other examples of the *précieuse's* language cited in this article come from an author who posed as a historian for these women: Antoine Baudeau de Somaize. There is considerable disagreement concerning the degree of satire contained in Somaize's work. I agree with Joan DeJean's perception of Somaize's text as historical instead of solely satirical: his *Dictionnaire* gives us a "brief history of the phenomena" (DeJean 60).

⁴ The uprising of the Fronde, which fermented in the salons headed by women, originated in part with the rebels' desire to limit the influence of Anne of Austria's prime minister, Cardinal Mazarin. Ultimately, the Fronde's challenge to France's legitimate rulers failed. Louis XIV's reign changed course in 1661 because of the death of Mazarin (Beasley 43, DeJean 12).

⁵ Only one official history was commissioned by Colbert: Priolo's *Histoire des dernières guerres* emphasized Mazarin's triumph over the rebels and ridiculed the rebellious nobles. See Orest Ranum, *Artisans of Glory: Writers and Historical Thought in Seventeenth Century France* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1980) 167.

⁶ For example, the Princesse de Condé convinced the citizens of Bordeaux to defend the *frondeurs* against their king; Mme de Longueville organized the uprising in Normandy; The Grande Mademoiselle won the last victory for the *frondeurs* by giving the order for the Bastille cannon to fire on the royalist troops. See Dorothy Backer's chapter entitled "Queen of the Fronde" (141-50).

⁷ During Louis XIV's reign, the nobility functioned on two levels, with the robe being socially inferior to the sword. The *noblesse d'épée* consisted of the old feudal aristocracy (based on birthright) while the *noblesse de robe* included individuals who had been ennobled for their

work, or who had bought their title for money (e.g., magistrates, financial experts, lawyers).

⁸ See Carolyn Lougee's *Le Paradis des Femmes: Women, Salons and Social Stratification in 17th-Century France* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976). She traces the link between merit and rank in the salon.

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