

*L'Honnête Femme: The
Respectable Woman in Society
and the New Collection of
Letters and Responses by
Contemporary Women*

JACQUES DU BOSC



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Introduction

The Other Voice

Jacques Du Bosc's conduct manual, *L'Honnête femme* or *The Respectable Woman in Society* (1632–36), and his epistolary collection, *Nouveau recueil de lettres des dames de ce temps* or *New Collection of Letters and Responses by Contemporary Women* (1642), follow in the footsteps of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century writers who brought about a turning point in the centuries long dispute about the worth of women called the *querelle des femmes*. These writers, Marie de Gournay among the most well known, advocate women's access to culture and knowledge, and their works put aside the weary debates surrounding women's superiority or inferiority to men and instead focus on the question of the education of women as integral members of the court and high society.¹ For his part, Jacques Du Bosc treats women as reasonable and moral beings able to think critically, if educated, and to make moral choices on their own, a claim that diverged from the traditional church fathers who argued women needed to obey their rules and seek their guidance. Du Bosc claims, as did François de Sales before him, that pious women did not need to retreat to the convent but could participate fully in secular polite society without endangering their virtue.² This attitude allowed elite women to integrate more fully into the social life of the nation.

Prescribing acceptable social behavior for women was a central preoccupation of seventeenth-century French moralists. During the Renaissance, numerous texts appeared that described social behavior

1. See Linda Timmermans, *L'accès des femmes à la culture sous l'ancien Régime* (Paris: Champion, 2005), 281–88, for a complete discussion of these writers.

2. Du Bosc is an admirer and disciple of François de Sales, who, in his *Introduction à la vie dévote*, first published in 1609, addresses a series of letters to a woman, Philothea, to instruct her on how to reconcile piety with life at court (*Oeuvres* [Paris, 1836], 1:453–564). Both de Sales and Du Bosc argue that piety does not have to be gained at the expense of politeness, civility, and participation in worldly affairs, a significant departure from the traditional misogynistic dogma of the clergy at that time. However, unlike de Sales, who instructs on questions of personal piety, Du Bosc focuses exclusively on manners and morality for women (and, by extension, men) in society.

2 Introduction

for both men and women. Society became less conflict-driven and more “civil” after the wars of religion. The conversation of women was presumed to have a “civilizing” effect on men, or so said Nicolas Faret in his 1630 *L'Honnête homme, ou l'art de plaire à la cour*, who followed in the footsteps of other writers of conduct manuals for men, such as Baldesar Castiglione (*The Book of the Courtier*).³

The seventeenth-century French ideology of *honnêteté*—a then emerging code of conduct related to sociability, urbanity, and politeness—transformed elite French society from a military class to a cultural aristocracy. Women played a key role in this social transformation as both practitioners and enforcers of these new conventions. Whereas critics have studied the *honnête homme* as the embodiment of this new secular social ideal, research into the philosophy shaping the *honnête femme* has been scant at best. Jacques Du Bosc's *L'Honnête femme: The Respectable Woman in Society and the New Collection of Letters and Responses by Contemporary Women*, the first major theorizations of *honnêteté* for women, provide valuable insights into the *honnête femme* for current students and scholars.

In these works, Du Bosc proposes what he calls in part three of *L'Honnête femme* a comprehensive “science for women.” His *honnête femme* is a purely social being free from domestic cares. Thus, Du Bosc focuses his treatise exclusively on the development of women's “intelligence” and “moral judgment.” He proposes a way for elite women to perfect the self for social interaction through the practices of reading, reflection, and conversation. In appealing to women's reason, Du Bosc does not “prescribe laws” for women, as most writers of the period did, but reasons with them, examining the pros and cons of all aspects of social life. Following Montaigne and Marie de Gournay and anticipating Descartes, Du Bosc argues for women's equality with men based on their shared reason and virtue.⁴ As he writes in *L'Honnête femme*, “Reason and virtue, even though they are of one species,

3. Nicolas Faret, *L'Honnête homme, ou l'art de plaire à la cour* (Paris, 1630); Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin, 1967).

4. Rebecca M. Wilkin argues in *Woman, Imagination, and the Search for Truth in Early Modern France* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008) that “the equality of the sexes is not of Cartesian origin” and “that Marie de Gournay drew the idea of equality from her reading of Montaigne's *Essays*” (144).

belong to two sexes. Women cannot renounce this science without renouncing a privilege and an advantage, that they possess as we do, as their birthright.”⁵ Through his principles of *honnêteté*, Du Bosc makes powerful claims for women to participate as equal members of the new cultural elite.

Undoubtedly, Du Bosc appealed to women who held important roles within the emerging public sphere, the Duchesse d’Aiguillon and Madame de Pisieux in particular. Royal women had already been testing which roles they could play in the political realm by serving as regents for sons who were too young to be king. Marie de’ Medici, the mother of Louis XIII, served as regent from 1610 to 1617, whereas Anne of Austria would be regent for her son, Louis XIV, from 1643 to 1651. Anxiety about the behavior of these queen regents spurred Du Bosc to compose *La Femme héroïque* (published in 1645 and dedicated to Anne of Austria) and Pierre Le Moyne, S. J., to write *La Galerie des femmes fortes* (published in 1647 and dedicated to Anne of Austria).⁶

Furthermore, *L’Honnête femme* and *New Collection of Letters and Responses* were written at a pivotal time in the history of women writers in France. The great women writers of the classical age, Madeleine de Scudéry (1607–1701), Madame de Lafayette (1634–1693), and Madame de Sévigné (1626–1696), as well as royal women who dabbled in writing, such as the Duchesse de Montpensier, known as the Grande Mademoiselle (1627–1693), grew up and began to write during the time that works such as *L’Honnête femme* were being published. The ideology within Du Bosc’s works is reflected in the works of these women writers: Scudéry’s *Story of Sappho*, Lafayette’s *Princess of Cleves*, Sévigné’s vast correspondence, and Montpensier’s utopian letters to Madame de Motteville all echo the notions of *honnêteté* prescribed by Du Bosc. Reading and studying Du Bosc’s work will give the reader a greater understanding of the education and motivations of these women writers.

5. Jacques Du Bosc, *L’Honnête femme* (Paris, 1658), 3:5. All translations of Du Bosc and other French sources are our own unless otherwise noted.

6. Jacques Du Bosc, *La Femme héroïque* (Paris, 1645); Pierre Le Moyne, S.J., *La Galerie des femmes fortes* (Paris, 1647).

Who Was Jacques Du Bosc?

Jacques Du Bosc was a Franciscan priest, a *frère mineur de l'observance* or *Cordelier*, who lived in France during the first half of the seventeenth century (1600–1669).⁷ Very little is known about his life, but we have many indications that he had social and literary ambitions—in addition to his religious career—and he gained a certain measure of success in these arenas. While Du Bosc published prolifically on the religious issues of his day, especially concerning the controversy surrounding the Jansenists (whom he denounced), he also participated in the debates concerning women called the *querelle des femmes*.⁸ Jean Chapelain implies that from around 1630–40 Du Bosc left the religious life and set out to make his living as a writer through royal patronage.⁹ We do know that Du Bosc sought the women of the court to be his benefactresses.¹⁰ He published three volumes of the *Honnête femme* from 1632 to 1636, dedicating volumes 1 and 2 to the Duchesse d'Aiguillon (Richelieu's favorite niece, formerly known as

7. Jean Mesnard, "'Honnête homme' et 'Honnête femme' dans la culture du XVII^e siècle," *Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature* 19, no. 36 (1987): 15–46.

8. Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Paris: Desoer, 1820), 4:1–2; William St. Clair and Irmgard Maassen, *Conduct Literature for Women, 1640–1710* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2002), 1.

9. Jean Chapelain, *Lettres de Jean Chapelain de l'Académie française*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1880), 733, 738.

10. Colleen Fitzgerald questions the notion that Du Bosc had secular ambitions; "Authority in Ancien Régime France: The Understanding of Jacques Du Bosc" (PhD diss., University of Saskatchewan, 1996), 24–25. We are prone to accept, however, Jean Chapelain's assessment that Du Bosc was "defrocked out of debauchery and refrocked out of ambition. He meditates no less than the miter and to put aside the monk" (*Lettres*, 1:738). In another letter, Chapelain describes Du Bosc in 1641 printing up his own panegyric to the powerful Cardinal Richelieu to distribute to the appreciative members of the newly formed Académie Française (*Lettres*, 1:733). In addition, Du Bosc published panegyrics to Louis XIII and Mazarin and maintained friendships with many of the founding members of the Académie Française such as Perrot d'Ablancourt and Olivier Patru, who are said to have written the preface to *L'Honnête femme* which defends Du Bosc's work. Du Bosc's dedications to powerful women of the court and panegyrics to the powerful men of the court strongly suggest he sought patronage based on his secular writings. See also Nicole Mallet, "Aspects, leçons et messages du discours préfaciel: l'exemple de *L'Honnête femme* de Jacques Du Boscq," *Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature* 18, no. 35 (1991): 310.

Madame de Combalet) and volume 3 to Louis XIII's sister, regent of the Duchy of Savoy, Christine of France. In 1635, Du Bosc dedicated the *New Collection of Letters and Responses by Contemporary Women* to Madame de Pisieux, an intimate friend of D'Aiguillon and a lady-in-waiting. Both women frequented the Hôtel de Rambouillet. Later, in 1645, he would offer his third feminocentric text, *La Femme héroïque*, to Anne of Austria.¹¹ It is not surprising, then, that Du Bosc would engage the *querelle des femmes* and show women in a positive light.

Théodore Joran suggests that Du Bosc's popularity might be attributed to his lack of religious moralizing: "It was a pleasant surprise for his contemporaries to meet a *man*, an 'honnête' man, when they expected to find a monk.... He never resorted to arguments of religious doctrine."¹² Unlike the majority of religious thinkers of his time, Du Bosc believes women to be as capable as men in making moral choices, and thus proceeds to reason with them. Du Bosc's forum for engaging in this conversation is the three-volume *L'Honnête femme*.

L'Honnête femme: The Respectable Woman in Society

A simplistic way to approach Jacques Du Bosc's *L'Honnête femme* is merely to say that it is a conduct manual and Du Bosc wrote it to teach women to be *honnête*; these seemingly simple statements are complicated, however, by the fact that the Franciscan refuses to tell women what to do (although he presents the pros and cons of various options), and the term *honnête*, when applied to seventeenth-century

11. These dedications attest to the influence of royal women at this time and the changing attitudes toward women in power. Europe had already seen the successful reigns of Queen Elizabeth I in England and Catherine de' Medici in France during the sixteenth century. In 1610, Marie de' Medici took power as regent until her son, Louis XIII, could govern in his own right, just as Anne of Austria would do for her son, Louis XIV. Thus, despite Salic law in France, the French had experienced female rule for much of the previous century. Ian Maclean notes that "[a]n account of the works published between 1640 and 1647 indicates the volume and importance of writing in honor of women." Maclean points out that François de Grenaille, a prolific writer who imitated Du Bosc with works such as *L'Honneste fille*, *L'Honneste mariage*, and *L'Honneste veuve*, among others, dedicated many of them to Anne of Austria and to the Grande Mademoiselle. See *Woman Triumphant: Feminism in French Literature, 1610–1632* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 76.

12. Théodore Joran, *Les féministes avant le féminisme* (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1935), 78.

women, was and still is fraught with controversy and multiple meanings. Due to these difficulties, we have retained the French adjective *honnête*, noun *honnêteté*, and expression *honnête femme* in our translation of this text.

What did *honnête* mean in the context of seventeenth-century France? Today, the term *honnête* translates as “honest,” “decent,” “honorable”; however, in the seventeenth century, the term had multiple meanings that evolved over time. Those who have studied seventeenth-century French classicism are familiar with the term *honnête homme*. In Molière’s plays, the *honnête homme* is a character who neatly contrasts with the extreme, “maniacal” person in the play. In other words, he is Chrysalde as opposed to Arnolphe, Cléante as opposed to Orgon. The *honnête homme* may have a bourgeois origin, but he is cultivated, accomplished, and is the model of rational self-restraint. In Michael Moriarty’s words, the *honnête homme* “was the name of an ideal, a set of valorized practices.”¹³ The cultural ideology of *honnêteté* functioned as an emerging code of conduct—related to sociability, urbanity, and politeness—that transformed elite French society from a military class to a cultural aristocracy. After the violent turmoil of the religious wars of the previous century, seventeenth-century society as a whole, and aristocratic members of that society in particular, sought to promote peace and stability through the new ideology of *honnêteté*. According to Roger Chartier, this ideology emphasized the art of self-control for the individual in society:

The process of civilization consists ... above all, in the individual interiorization of prohibitions, which, previously, were imposed from the exterior, in a transformation of the psychic economy which fortifies the mechanisms of self-control exerted on the drives and emotions and causes social constraint to become self-constraint.¹⁴

13. Michael Moriarty, *Taste and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 52.

14. Roger Chartier, “Préface,” in *La société de cour*, by Norbert Elias, trans. Pierre Kamnitzer and Jeanne Etoré (Paris: Flammarion, 1985), xix.

Honnêteté is the name given to this civilizing self-restraint.

When Molière wrote *School for Wives* and *Tartuffe* in the 1660s, Chrysalde and Cléante exemplified what the term *honnête homme* meant, but this was not the meaning of the term thirty years earlier, when Nicolas Faret wrote *L'Honnête homme*, a conduct manual for lower nobility and bourgeois men who wished to become accepted socially in the upper echelons of the French aristocracy. Faret gives concrete, pragmatic instructions to his would-be *honnête homme* of the early 1630s: how he should comport himself with those of higher and lower social class, how he should dress, what he should read, which musical instruments he should learn to play, how he should compose his facial expressions. Faret also strongly advises that his male reader socialize and converse with women, whose conversation he considers to be “the most difficult and the most delicate” of all. Faret’s protégé should avoid court and choose instead to frequent respectable, “honnête” women who assemble in their homes the most brilliant members of Parisian society—in today’s parlance *salonnières* and their *salons*. There, he would be required to regulate his conversation, avoid gossip and blasphemy, and avoid being too opinionated, too melancholy—in short, he would learn to polish his coarse behavior.¹⁵

Jacques Du Bosc may have recognized immediately a fundamental problem with Faret’s suggestion that men who wished to become *honnête* were to frequent *honnête* women. Who instructed women in how to contribute to this civilizing endeavor? Who told women who wished to become accepted socially in the salons how they could do so and remain *honnête*? His response was to publish the first volume of *L'Honnête femme* in 1632, followed by volume two in 1634 and volume three in 1636. This work, an important textual artifact in the *querelle des femmes*, can be considered a best-seller by modern standards.

To date, the only extended exploration of the role of the *honnête femme* is found in Suzanne d’Orssaud’s unpublished 1939 dissertation.¹⁶ Moreover, works on the *honnête homme*, such as

15. Faret, *L'Honnête homme*, 116–18, 191, 228–29, 232–31, 51–52, 220, 226–27, 252–53, respectively.

16. Suzanne D’Orssaud, “L’Honnête femme’ au XVIIe siècle d’après la société et la littérature” (PhD diss., Ratcliff College, 1939).

Emmanuel Bury's *Littérature et politesse: l'invention de l'honnête homme (1580–1750)* and Domna Stanton's *The Aristocrat as Art: A Study of the Honnête Homme and the Dandy in Seventeenth- and Nineteenth-Century Literature* understandably address only briefly the role of women in the ideology of *honnêteté*.¹⁷ While critical wisdom today tends to conclude that only men, not women, were *honnête*, or that women's *honnêteté* encompassed only their sexual virtue, Du Bosc's work points to a more robust sense of women's *honnêteté* that focuses on the development of women's intelligence and moral judgment through the practices of reading, conversation, and reflection.¹⁸ While Du Bosc's work remains largely unknown to today's scholars, an obscurity that Jean Mesnard attributes to "the excessive length" of his treatise, Linda Timmermans finds that Du Bosc's ideas in *L'Honnête femme* occupy a special place in the *querelle des femmes*: "If the role of precursor is sometimes accorded to Mlle de Gournay ... one attributes to P. Du Boscq the merit of being the first to have raised his arguments above the traditional debates and to have in *L'Honnête femme* ... laid the foundation of a new debate, that of 'women's knowledge.'"¹⁹

It is crucial to understand Du Bosc's audience and method. His dedicatory epistles address two elite women—the Duchesse d'Aiguillon and Christine of France—but his essays are to be read by would-be society women. His *honnête femme* is not "a mother of a family who knows how to give orders to her servants and who must comb her children's hair" ("On Learned Women"), but rather a woman who wishes to "succeed in society and to deserve the title of

17. Domna Stanton, *The Aristocrat as Art: A Study of the Honnête Homme and the Dandy in Seventeenth- and Nineteenth-Century Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); Emmanuel Bury, *Littérature et politesse: l'invention de l'honnête homme (1580–1750)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996). Bury dedicates less than three pages to Du Bosc's *Honnête femme* and only briefly mentions *salonnières* such as Des Loges, D'Auchy, Scudéry, and Rambouillet (75–77).

18. Roger Duchêne writes that "chastity [is] the very definition of *honnêteté* for women"; "Honnêteté et sexualité," in *Destins et enjeux du XVIIe siècle*, ed. Yves-Marie Bercé et al. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985), 119–30. Maclean notes that "although *honnête* was at first only chastity for women, its scope did enlarge with Du Bosc's work; however the sense of chastity was never lost for the term connected to women, where it was not part of the *honnête homme*" (*Woman Triumphant*, 122–23).

19. Timmermans, *L'accès des femmes*, 281.

Honnête femme” (“To the Reader”). She must therefore be equipped with both social and intellectual tools. Rather than giving her rules to follow, Du Bosc’s essays explore two sides of a number of topics, for example, marriage versus celibacy, reading versus not reading, being “complaisant” or sociable versus being melancholic and withdrawn. In Du Bosc’s words, he “only offer[s] general lessons that can be of use to men and women [and] refuse[s] to go into detailed instructions, as the common people would prefer.” Like Montaigne, Du Bosc prefers “a well-formed rather than a well-filled brain”: women are to learn from his method to judge for themselves, to weigh for themselves the merit of each position.²⁰ Since it is possible, however, to cherry-pick practically any viewpoint from *L’Honnête femme*, Du Bosc’s method has led some critics to interpret this text as misogynistic and to conflate his views with those of more conservative writers, such as François de Grenaille.²¹

Another tool for women is provided by examples and stories from writers of the past that Du Bosc has digested and screened. These examples come from classical antiquity, writings of the church fathers, and the Bible. It is possible that Du Bosc read all of these sources in full, but he may also have had recourse to a commonplace book or *florilegia*, which reproduced selections of famous writings in a kind of anthology.²² While he does advocate discrimination and choice in selecting reading materials, he also advises reading *his* book, which can take the place of reading many books, and indeed, as we shall see below, *L’Honnête femme* may be seen, mirroring this possible source for material, as a kind of commonplace book in which “flowers of wisdom” from antiquity and Christian texts appear within an edifying

20. Michel de Montaigne, “On Educating Children,” in *The Complete Essays*, trans. and ed. M. A. Screech, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 2003), 168. All citations of Montaigne refer to this translation and edition unless otherwise noted.

21. See for example, Michèle Cohen, *Fashioning Masculinity: National Identity and Language in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1996), 19.

22. Fitzgerald states that “[a]fter being ordained, [Du Bosc] received his bachelor of Theology degree from the Sorbonne, with which the Cordeliers were traditionally associated.” Little is known, however, about the details of Du Bosc’s life—Fitzgerald does not cite her source for this information—and we have not found evidence that he actually received a theology degree from the Sorbonne (“Authority in Ancien Régime France,” 23).

and thought-provoking context.²³ The *honnête femme* can use his examples to make decisions, and it will also furnish her with topics to talk about in society.

For this translation of *L'Honnête femme*, we have selected essays that feature three overlapping themes: (1) women's learning, study, and judgment; (2) her virtue; and (3) her social and affective behavior. Du Bosc revised and added to his essays particularly over the course of the 1630s. Included in our translation are all paratexts (dedicatory epistles, notices, etc.) that were written by Du Bosc. We do not include prefatory materials by other writers (such as the Nicolas Perrot d'Ablancourt preface that first appeared in 1633 or the poems by Du Bosc's friends that precede the essays in the first edition [1634] of part two).²⁴ We selected the 1658 edition for the translation because it includes the final version of all essays and at least one paratext ("To Women") that did not appear in editions of the 1630s.

Women's Learning, Study, and Judgment

A key passage begins "On Reading and a Few Remarks about How to Read This Book," the first essay in the second edition of *L'Honnête femme*, one of the pieces Du Bosc added when he reworked the first volume of his book:

There is nothing truer than this: reading, conversation, and reflection are the three most beautiful and useful things in the world. Through reading, we speak with the dead, through conversation we speak with the living, and through reflection we speak with ourselves.

This passage is reminiscent of Montaigne's "three kinds of social intercourse";²⁵ however, rather than recommending that one should

23. See Maryanne Cline Horowitz, *Seeds of Virtue and Knowledge* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), 103–6.

24. The preface by Ablancourt is available in French. See Nicolas Perrot d'Ablancourt, "La préface de *L'Honnête femme*," in *Lettres et préfaces critiques*, ed. Roger Zuber (Paris: Marcel Didier, 1972), 3–72.

25. See Montaigne, "On Three Kinds of Social Intercourse," in *Complete Essays*, 931–32.

keep company with books and friends—male as well as female—Du Bosc recommends extreme caution, as we shall see, in forming affective relationships with the opposite sex, and adds self-reflection to the mix. Moreover, this passage from “On Reading” encapsulates the overall theme of *L’Honnête femme*: reading, and by extension learning and education, are crucial in training a woman to become *honnête*—to function in social situations, like conversation, and to develop skill in moral and critical thinking (“reflection”), which in turn will keep her respectable. Indeed, to Du Bosc, the *honnête femme* has two dimensions: she must function in society and she must be virtuous. In order to do either of these activities, however, she needs to read and acquire learning.

Unlike noblemen and wealthy bourgeois men of the day, the *honnête femme* did not have the advantage of tutors or schools. Thus books themselves must be her “mute teachers.” Du Bosc does not, however, advocate that she read any and all books: “all books are not excellent . . . since there are some which truly do not deserve to see the light of day, except to be burned, and whose publication, rather than their reading, should be stopped.” She should be cautious: it is better, he says, to read a few good books rather than many. If she initially doubts her own judgment, she should rely on the judgment of those who are more discerning than she: “If women do not trust themselves to choose books well, they should at least follow the counsel of the most knowledgeable and the most virtuous for fear of infecting their minds or corrupting their consciences.”²⁶ Like Montaigne, Du Bosc has a poor opinion of the literature produced in his day, and he absolutely is against novels.²⁷ These are bad books, in his opinion, that inspire vicious thoughts and behaviors in women even though they bring much pleasure. It is not that he is against reading interesting narratives and stories; history and mythology can provide these.

His advice notwithstanding, Du Bosc refuses to give women a specific list of things to read. He does, however, provide strong clues: if the modern reader pays attention to the works to which he refers, not only in “On Reading” but in every essay in *L’Honnête femme*, she will

26. According to Rebecca Wilkin, this recommendation can be traced to Montaigne (*Women, Imagination, and the Search for the Truth*, 190).

27. See Montaigne, “On Educating Children,” in *Complete Essays*, 165.

get a good idea of the kinds of books he has in mind. These works most often come from classical antiquity, but he also includes the Bible and books by church fathers (particularly Saint Jerome). Because Du Bosc does not always state explicitly to which sources he refers, we have endeavored to indicate sources or possible sources in the notes. Modern readers will note many references to Plutarch's *Lives* and *Moralia*, whose influence was pervasive in the seventeenth century, likely due to Jacques Amyot's translations from the 1560s and 70s.²⁸ Du Bosc, like Montaigne in his youth, also has a fondness for Ovid, particularly the *Metamorphoses*, a work available in French translation during the early part of the seventeenth century.²⁹ Du Bosc also refers to other well-known ancient sources such as Livy's *From the Founding of the City*, Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, and other writers from classical antiquity that became popular during the Renaissance.³⁰

Women's Virtue

Reading "good books" has many benefits for women. It is a useful and agreeable activity: it teaches the ignorant, corrects the debauched, and diverts the melancholic. Furthermore, reading and study makes one more agreeable in social situations. In "On Learned Women," Du Bosc states:

Without reading, conversation is nothing but an intolerable tyranny; and it is impossible to converse long without torment with those women who only speak of the number of their sheep, if they are from the

28. See Montaigne's tribute to Amyot, "Work can wait till tomorrow," in *Complete Essays*, 408.

29. See Montaigne, "On Books," in *The Complete Essays*, 460. For an early modern edition of the *Metamorphoses*, see Ovid, *Les Métamorphoses d'Ovide*, trans. N. Renouard (Paris, 1619).

30. As already noted, we do not know whether or not Du Bosc actually read all of the many sources that he cites; it is quite possible that he utilized a *florilegia*. These volumes, which contained a compendium of quotations from ancient sources, were used throughout the Middle Ages and gained renewed popularity in the Renaissance. See B. L. Ulmann, "Tibullus in the Mediaeval *Florilegia*," *Classical Philology* 23, no. 2 (1928): 128; and Horowitz, *Seeds of Virtue and Knowledge*, 103–6.

countryside, or of the latest fashion of collars and skirts,
if they are from the city.

In addition to giving women something to talk about, reading helps women develop intellectually, which they are just as capable of doing as men: “No matter what one says, women are as capable as men, and if they sometimes do not pursue the knowledge that they could claim, it is more out of modesty or consideration than weakness.” Women should not rely on the circumstances of their birth to guarantee their success, if they are high-born, or to limit them in what they can do, if they are not. Whereas a Platonist might value birth, or nature, over education, or art, Du Bosc maintains that women should not depend on the chance of their birth but should perfect it with study. In “On Birth and Education,” he cites Plutarch to strengthen his argument: “We cannot reach perfection in virtue or in science, [Plutarch] says, without nature, reason, and practice. Nature gives ability; reason shows us the rules; and practice gives us exercise to acquire facility and habit.” This intellectual development which results from practice equips women to develop good judgment and make good decisions, which, in turn, render them virtuous. By “virtuous,” Du Bosc does not mean merely “chaste”: he is writing in the early 1630s, just prior to the heyday of “generous” heroines, such as Corneille’s *Chimène*, and just ten years prior to the “veritable outpouring of portrait books of women referred to as ‘illustrious,’ ‘generous,’ ‘heroic,’ or ‘strong,’” as well as the appearance of real-life amazons such as *Mademoiselle de Montpensier* and *Barbe d’Ernancourt*.³¹

For this reason, Du Bosc advocates in “On the True Science of the *Honnête femme*” that women study moral philosophy, which will render them firmer in their beliefs, more virtuous, and more stoic.³² Indeed, studying moral philosophy is necessary for both men and women, according to Du Bosc:

31. Joan DeJean, *Tender Geographies: Women and the Origin of the Novel in France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 28.

32. On women’s education in general and access to philosophy in particular, see John J. Conley, S.J., *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), 2–13.

If men are wrong not to study it enough, women are even more so not to study it at all, since they are required, like men, to know the difference between good and evil, and to live according to moral reason. They must aspire, I say, to the same perfection and to the same happiness since they have the same laws to follow, the same illnesses to cure, and the same soul to instruct.... [S]ince [women] have the same need for moral virtues and have no less inclination for them, we are wrong to ask them to practice them while denying them the knowledge of it.

In this important essay from part three of *L'Honnête femme*, Du Bosc demonstrates the interdependency of study, judgment, and virtuous behavior. He attacks the notion that women are incapable of understanding philosophic works but yet are expected to behave virtuously. He advocates giving women the tools necessary to be virtuous:

[Men who do not want women to study] want women to sail through the most treacherous seas on a leaky raft, so to speak, and to protect themselves from the storm with a bit of plank or only by floating on some remaining debris, while men only sail in well-equipped ships and study all that is required to master the art of navigation for fear of shipwrecks.

Furthermore, Du Bosc contends that the study of moral philosophy will help women deal with adversity and quotes Seneca's letter of consolation to his mother, Helvia, to bolster his argument. Even though Helvia was elderly, remarks Du Bosc, Seneca advises her to turn to study: even a "light ... acquaintance" with moral texts will be beneficial.³³

In "On the True Science of the *Honnête femme*," Du Bosc demonstrates his esteem for ancient writers: he quotes many times from ancient Roman and Greek sources (the majority of the footnotes in

33. See Seneca, "To Helvia on Consolation," in *Moral Essays*, vol. 2, trans. John W. Basore (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1932), 477–79.

this essay are from classical antiquity). Moreover, it is to be noted that the Franciscan priest does not see the study of classical texts as incompatible with Christian teachings.³⁴

Virtues such as strength of character and a stoic outlook are discussed at length in other essays as well. In “On Courage,” Du Bosc tells the stories of Theoxena, Megisto, Iphigenia, and Lucretia to illustrate that women are “greatly inclined” to “true courage.” Some of these courageous women from antiquity have been criticized, he notes, because they committed suicide; men in similar predicaments have not been criticized. As another example of women’s courage, he cites the three Marys at the cross:

whatever slanderers invent to disparage women, we must admit that women are more unyielding in their intentions than men. At least we learn this from the Holy Scripture that when more affection and courage in the service of God was needed: one saw three Marys at the foot of the cross, where there was only one disciple.

In “On the Contempt for and Fear of Death,” Du Bosc continues to advocate stoicism in the face of death and recalls again letters of consolation by ancient writers such as Seneca and Plutarch, while at the same time evoking more explicitly those of Saint Jerome. In his letter to Marcella, for example, Saint Jerome writes that Blesilla, a woman who has just died, had already in a sense been dead—she “was bound fast in the close wrappings of riches”—but now Jesus has raised her to eternal life and “now she feasts with the Lord.”³⁵ Similarly, Du Bosc states:

By closing our physical eyes, [death] removes the blindfold from those of our soul which can see nothing clearly in this life, which are deceived most often by

34. In this regard, Du Bosc follows Renaissance humanists such as Leonardo Bruni who advocated the study of “pagan” literature. See Horowitz, *Seeds of Virtue and Knowledge*, 99.

35. Jerome, *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, trans. F. A. Wright (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933), 161.

the senses, which, in that state, can only judge earthly events through the veil of contingency. While joined to the body, the soul can only see the terribly shameful object of its hopes as a riddle, can only have a false image of itself, and can only see itself as an unfamiliar form.

Life on earth is an illusion, in other words, while death brings about new clarity and an authentic heavenly life. It is to be noted that in the *New Collection of Letters*, Du Bosc's women letter-writers write to console their female interlocutors and recommend stoic acceptance and courage rather than giving in to unrelenting grief.³⁶

Du Bosc connects both marriage and living a celibate life with courage and virtue. In "On Marriage and Celibacy," he writes, "[M]arriage is not contrary to the repose of life or to the practice of the most heroic virtues.... [I]t inspires in us the most noble designs that can serve as examples and ornaments to our posterity." Marriage can lead to virtue, but there are many examples of unhappy marriages; in this regard, Du Bosc cites Cicero's and Socrates's marriages. On the other hand, an example of a happy marriage is that of Pompey and Cornelia. When Pompey was defeated by Julius Caesar, Cornelia showed more concern for her husband than for herself.

A celibate life can also lead to virtue and achievement:

Let us look to [celibate] women who excelled in the arts, like the Muses; or in conquest, like the Amazons; or in prophesy, like the Sybils; or in virtue and religion as the vestals did. Did they not all renounce the constraints of marriage as a mode of life that greatly reduces the freedom necessary for distinguished virtues and noble enterprises?

Several women correspondents in the *New Collection of Letters* decide to enter the convent. In Letter 15, the writer decides to follow her friend and become a nun: "Perhaps you will say to me that by following her into religion I will not be renouncing the world but rather

36. See, for example, *New Collection of Letters*, Letters 29 and 56 in the present volume.

seeking the world where it is not, that it is an effect of friendship and not of devotion, and that to follow her into the cloisters is not to seek God there, but Lucinda.” Not only does Du Bosc portray the passionate friendship between these two women as praiseworthy and virtuous, but, as he indicates in the quotation above from *L'Honnête femme*, choosing a life of celibacy within the convent bestows a freedom that one does not enjoy in the world. The writer of Letter 15 concludes: “A constraint-filled beginning can be followed by a liberating evolution.”

Women's Social and Affective Behavior

In addition to gaining courage and virtue, the *honnête femme* should be able to function well in social situations and be discerning in her affective relationships, skills which will be of particular importance in the *New Collection of Letters*. As we have seen, reading is absolutely necessary for women to be able to converse in an acceptable way; however, functioning in society—while important—is fraught with danger and difficulty. Du Bosc's comments regarding the social performance of women in “On Conversation” paint two divergent pictures. A woman who speaks too much or too indiscriminately will be known for her “babble, imprudence, and impudence.” Moreover, if she makes a public show of her learning, she will be “importunate” in society. Du Bosc advocates that women regulate their conversation and emulate Socrates's disciples in their “discretion, silence, and modesty.” These two types of women prefigure Madeleine de Scudéry's Sapho and her polar opposite, Damophile, both of whom will appear twenty years later in the tenth volume of *Artamène, ou le grand Cyrus*. Like Du Bosc's “importunate” woman who immodestly displays her learning and “report[s] everything, including the marginalia, pages, dates, and other superfluous matter” of the books she has read, Damophile

always used big words that she pronounced haughtily in a solemn tone, even though she talked of trifles.... [She] didn't only talk like a book; she also talked constantly about books, citing authors no one had ever heard of in everyday conversation as if she were discoursing in public at some renowned university.

Sapho, on the other hand, is the model of discretion and modesty:

Her conversation is so natural and easy, so charming, that in general conversation she is never heard to say anything but what someone untutored, but of large understanding, might say. Knowledgeable people know perfectly well that Nature alone cannot have opened her mind without study, but Sapho so desires to behave as befits her sex that she almost never speaks of anything that is not deemed suitable for ladies. Only to her particular friends does she acknowledge her learning.³⁷

Scudéry's Sapho is a model *honnête femme*: although all her friends know how learned she is, she never makes a public show of her knowledge, nor does she ever annoy social groups with "importunate" conversation.³⁸ Du Bosc may advocate study for women, but similar to Scudéry, he does not wish women to show their erudition; however, in contrast to Scudéry, Du Bosc explicitly addresses what a woman needs to do to learn to read, write, and think in order to attain the ideal of *honnêteté* which, in Scudéry's novels, is performed in modesty rather than attained through a process of education.

In "On Having a Cheerful and a Melancholic Temperament," Du Bosc moves beyond conversation to discuss the advantages and pitfalls of a woman being, on the one hand, outgoing and pleasing in public and being, on the other, withdrawn and pensive — topics he will discuss again in "On Chastity and Complaisance" and "On Having a Complaisant Temperament." A woman may reflect and be seen as wise, but if she is too withdrawn, she may become melancholic to the point of not being able to act. On the other hand, if she is outgoing, her cheerful temperament may be taken as a "sign of frivolity or lack of judgment." She might endanger her reputation and virtue because women with cheerful temperaments "change their passions incessantly and adapt to anything that comes their way." Du Bosc does

37. Madeleine de Scudéry, *The Story of Sapho*, ed. and trans. Karen Newman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 23 and 16 respectively.

38. For a discussion of Madeleine de Scudéry herself as an *honnête femme*, see D'Orssaud, "L'Honnête femme' au XVIIe siècle," 158–59.

not see a social and ready-to-please “complaisant” temperament, however, as contrary to chaste virtue: “It is reasonable to join these two beautiful qualities [chastity and complaisance] together in order to reduce them to a single perfect temperament.” Like Molière’s Elmire in *Tartuffe*, a later example of an *honnête femme*, according to D’Orssaud, women must learn to moderate these two tendencies: “since God himself loved one of his disciples more tenderly than the others, we can have particular inclinations without offending chastity, which does not forbid passions, but which rules and moderates them.”³⁹

As in the case of complaisance, Du Bosc discusses the pros and cons of friendship in “On Friendship, Love Due to Inclination, and Love Due to Choice.” To Du Bosc, “love due to inclination” and “love due to choice” constitute what he calls the “two eyes” of love. His thoughts on love and friendship recall Renaissance notions of civility. On the one hand, we are reminded of the affective passion that Montaigne explains in his essay “De l’amitié,” translated by Donald Frame as “Of Friendship” and by M. A. Screech more descriptively as “On Affectionate Relationships.”⁴⁰ The “loving friendship” that Montaigne feels for his friend, Etienne de la Boétie, anticipates the passionate friendships that occur between women in some letters in Du Bosc’s *New Collection of Letters*.⁴¹ Montaigne’s introspective, personal notion of friendship roughly corresponds to what Du Bosc will call “love due to inclination.”

In Baldesar Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* and Nicolas Faret’s *L’Honnête homme*, friendship can be a pragmatic tool for social success. Castiglione’s and Faret’s ideas of “civility” roughly correspond to what Du Bosc will term “love due to choice.” Castiglione and Faret advocate a carefully chosen social relationship with a social function, a relationship that Montaigne calls a “common” type of friendship.⁴² Faret advises choosing friends who know the court and who can help one become integrated in this difficult milieu. Choosing friends must

39. On Molière’s Elmire, see D’Orssaud, “L’Honnête femme’ au XVIIe siècle,” 132.

40. Michel de Montaigne, “Of Friendship,” in *The Complete Works*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1958), 164–76; Montaigne, “On Affectionate Relationships,” in *Complete Essays*, trans. Screech, 205–19.

41. Montaigne, “On Affectionate Relationships,” in *Complete Essays*, 208.

42. *Ibid.*, 215.

involve discernment and care. Castiglione's Pietro Bembo states that "[i]n contracting ... intimate friendships ... it certainly seems to me that one ought to be extremely careful, not only because of the question of enhancing or damaging one's reputation but because nowadays there are very few true friends to be found."⁴³

Friendship in the Renaissance did not include women. Castiglione and Faret discuss the rules of courting between the sexes, but friendship is exclusively for men. Montaigne concurs when he writes, "[T]here is no example yet of woman attaining to [friendship] and by the common agreement of the Ancient schools of philosophy she is excluded from it."⁴⁴ According to Cicero (one of Du Bosc's sources), as Marianne Legault puts it, "woman, a being incapable of virtue does not have the excellence of soul required to experience this moral perfection."⁴⁵ In *L'Honnête femme*, Du Bosc argues the contrary: he eschews the ancient model of an exclusive "perfect friendship" based on male virtue and only available to men. According to Du Bosc, within court society, women can exist as virtuous beings able to use their reason to navigate all kinds of relationships and moral dilemmas, including friendship. And as women become central players in French elite society, especially within lettered communities and salons, the question of female friendships takes on greater importance and relevance.

In the opening to his essay "On Friendship," Du Bosc begins by acknowledging women's special capacity for friendship, or "this divine quality for which women have made themselves so commendable in all times." As Castiglione and Faret do for men, Du Bosc warns women about the need to choose appropriate friends in society, for, he writes, "if we do not know how to recognize who is worthy of being loved, imprudent passions" lead to "our greatest misfortunes." Thus, since Du Bosc conceives of this "passion" as "influenc[ing] all the others," he argues that one cannot "use too much care and prudence to determine if the person we esteem at first as worthy of friendship is not, in reality, worthy of aversion and hate."

43. Castiglione, *Book of the Courtier*, 137.

44. Montaigne, "On Affectionate Relationships," in *Complete Essays*, 210.

45. Marianne Legault, *Narrations déviantes: l'intimité entre femmes dans l'imaginaire français du dix-septième siècle* (Quebec: Presses l'Université Laval, 2008), 21.

As a priest, Du Bosc feels that “friendship due to inclination” is dangerous: it can be fatal, it is inexorable, and can be a *coup de foudre*. He writes, “No matter what we pretend, everything from inclination pleases us” and it incapacitates our reason. However, without inclination, love cannot last; at the same time, inclination is blind and “friendship due to choice,” a more discerning feeling based on knowledge, does not lead to unhappiness. Du Bosc writes, “Is it therefore not better to love due to the amiable qualities that we see than due to an inclination that is hidden from us?” To avoid a poor choice, “long experience must precede true friendship, otherwise many regrets may follow an ill-considered choice.” Du Bosc concludes by urging women to “regulate” the two and let choice guide their inclination.

While retaining many Renaissance ideas about friendship, Du Bosc radically breaks from male forebears such as Montaigne, Castiglione, and Faret, first, in his belief in women’s capacity for virtue and moral perfection, which he argues for in *L’Honnête femme*, and second, in his portrayal of loving relationships between women, which he depicts in his *New Collection of Letters*. Du Bosc’s works create an opening in which feminist writers such as Scudéry can engage the question of women’s friendships, something that, as Legault has argued in her work on female intimacy, was strikingly absent in the works of most seventeenth-century writers. It is possible, however, to see in Du Bosc’s exploration of “love due to inclination” and “love due to choice” a precursor to Scudéry’s discussion of inclination versus gratitude and esteem in *Clélie*. Scudéry’s heroine explains that while tender friendship can develop from inclination, an unruly emotion can quicken the pace from acquaintance to tender friend but can also lead to dangerous territory. On the other hand, tender friendship can result as well from esteem and gratitude, both of the latter based on rational choice due to the virtuous behavior of the potential friend.⁴⁶ In any case, friendship between women becomes important during the second half of the seventeenth century, especially among the *précieuses*. Of particular note here, Du Bosc explores his vision of female friendship through pairs of letters that women exchange in the *New Collection of Letters*.

46. DeJean, *Tender Geographies*, 87–88.