

LA ROCHEFOUCAULD'S MAXIMS AND SALON SOCIETY

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Abstract

The challenge of understanding La Rochefoucauld's maxims remains incomplete without comprehending the conception of seventeenth-century social milieu especially Salon culture which inspired the duke to write this work. La Rochefoucauld's work in many ways may be considered the quintessential expression of salon conversation. His writing combines the semantic préciosité of the earlier salons with the emphasis on moral characteristic and permeates the interest in different personalities of social life. The attention that seems to have been devoted to the conversation in this century is astonishing. This paper attempts to study how much the Salon society has inspired the author. It also looks into the ideological traits of La Rochefoucauld's thought.

Keywords: challenge, maxims, culture, semantic etc

The challenge of understanding La Rochefoucauld's maxims remains incomplete without comprehending the conception of seventeenth-century social milieu especially Salon culture which inspired the duke to write this work. La Rochefoucauld's literary carrier is closely associated with the scholarly and philosophical pursuits of Mme Sablé and worldly interests of the Mme de la Fayette's entourage. In Mme Sablé's salon, La Rochefoucauld first acquired the need to write sentences and it is here that his thought took on the Jansenist cast. Later on, in Mme de la Fayette's salon, he revised his own work, adding new maxims and changing or eliminating others. It is here he read history for diversion and collaborated in the writing of Princesse de Clèves. In different ways, both salons reflect the realistic appraisal of life that appear in the La Rochefoucauld's works, the appraisal that is far removed from the romanticized Neo-Stoicism of the early years of the seventeenth century. The ideas, the interests and the influence of these salons complete La Rochefoucauld's evolution from the courtly veteran of the Fronde The Fronde was a series of civil wars in France between 1648 and 1653 to the disabused author of the Maximus and the Reflexions diverse.

In many ways, La Rochefoucauld's work may be considered the quintessential expression of salon conversation. His writing combines the semantic préciosité The French literary style called preciosite arose in the seventeenth century from the lively conversations and playful word games of the witty and educated intellectual ladies who frequented salons of Catherine de Vivonne, marquise de Rambouillet of the earlier salons with the emphasis on moral characteristic and permeates the interest in different personalities of social life. The attention that seems to have been devoted to the conversation in this century is astonishing. The French Academy itself was of a conversational grouping of men who knew and understood their language and talked about Fronde. Even Carte de Tendre and Mlle de Sunday's portraits in the Grand Cyrus were parlor games before they became published works. Jansenism was a semantic phenomenon as well as religious and quasi-political one. Indeed the refusal to sign the Formulary was based on legalistic quarrel on the meaning of words The refusal of the Jansenists to sign the Formulary was based on the claim that the five condemned propositions were not actually stated in the Augustinus.

Salon society as a whole moved from the drawing room to the confessional with little change in pace and personnel and in Mme de Sablé's salon where theology was as expert as cuisine, election and redemption were served up with the soup. According to Rapin, if Mme de Sevigné is to be believed, the religious conversation went on in the bedroom under the unlikely circumstances. Letters were written to be read aloud and were an extension of the conversational art. They furnished the conversational meat of the salons and their function was so intensely social that they were seldom thought of as private matters. The speed with which good words, gossip and literary judgments circulated would put to shame modern communication methods. Literary portraits were borrowed, copied and passed from hand to

hand and letters and billets spread the news when the conversation did not and Mme de Maintenon's growing influence with the King was common knowledge in Mme de la Fayette's salon before it spread in the court circles.

Mme de Sevigné and her friends seem to have read an enormous amount. Even the famous garden scene in the *Princesse de Clèves* was the subject of considerable correspondence, discussion, and critical speculation, Social conversations abounded in discourses, dialogues, discussions, conversations. Books were read aloud and one has to only review the titles of published works to realize the extent to which literary production was an integral part of social conversation. Conversation, friendship, and love were the three activities of the time both as topics of discussion and as focal points in the lives of honest men who frequented the salons. For the seventeenth century, the conversational art was synonymous with social commerce per se. A considerable amount of thought was given to the ideal of friendship. La Rochefoucauld's *De la confidence* in the *Reflexions* and the epigrams on friendship in the *Maximus* furnish proof of his interest in this subject.

There was little place for steadfast and disinterested friendship or for trust and integrity during this period of shifting loyalties between Fronde and competitive arrivisme at court. The characters of *Astrée* and the honest people of this period tended to talk about their friendship rather than to exercise it. They tended to talk passion as well. With the exception of Victorian England and not since medieval times has the *Commerce des femmes* Commerce of women been so hedged around by a sanitary cordon of verbal indirection and it is no wonder that La Rochefoucauld's surgical autopsy of psychological love was shocking to his contemporaries. Love was a more useful commodity than friendship and at Versailles success depended more on amorous liaisons than on friendship.

The dichotomy of mind and matter of the seventeenth century when it came in contact with the refinement of *preciosité* was to make *esprit* mind a special virtue while the physical self was confined to outer darkness. *Esprit* was a prerequisite of the salon society where valor had been the virtue of the epic age. To a great extent, the salons remained aristocratic but they opened their doors to men who claimed aristocracy of mind and wit. The regulars of the house like Jacques *Esprit*, Jean Corbinelli, Segrails were frequently counted on to serve up the specialty of the house. Unlike *Esprit* who is not dynamic, Corbinelli was endowed with a many-faceted mind and he could be counted on to keep the conversation going, to contribute to any kind of letters written and to draw his religious and classical training without playing the pendant. He served as Mme de Sevigné's resident arbiter and would seem to have been a welcome addition in Mme de la Fayette's house. He probably exemplifies like any other seventeenth-century personality what La Rochefoucauld had in mind when he talked about the necessity of more than one type of *esprit*. Segrails performed much the same function for Mme de la Fayette that Corbinelli did for Mme de Sevigné and Mme de Lesdiguière's house.

Whatever their quality of wit, the conversational specialists helped to enhance the reputation and the fame of the particular salon they belonged to as glory had served to confirm the valorous acts of a heroic age. The difference between the two is subtle though the two terms first appeared in tandem during a first part of the century.

After 1661, the former came to replace the latter. Many maxims of La Rochefoucauld devoted to esteem, to praise, to slander are one way or the other concerned with fame. Fame is a social accolade conferred by words rather than a reflection of a reputation confirmed by deeds. It is more consonant with honesty than with heroism. It was but one of the words for which the social beings of the seventeenth-century salon lived. They were ruled and confined by words and the understanding of the key concepts that these words represented is vital to an understanding of La Rochefoucauld's thought and of his art. In the latter part of the seventeenth century, words would assume importance when in any society, social commerce and polite conversation flourish and when actions and accomplishments took to the backseat. In one sense, seventeenth-century thought revolves around the gaze. Much has been written about the tyranny of l'oeil vivant active gaze and the omnipresence of gaze in the Corneille's plays, in the novels and memoirs of the time and in the social life as well.

It is nevertheless in relation to certain concepts that the regulars of salon society judged themselves and their world. Many of the words they used and connotative content were peculiar to the time in which La Rochefoucauld wrote. This is true of harmony, tale, verisimilitude, good manners, righteousness, consent and repose. It is particularly true of honesty and the whole concept of role, a concept that remained in force long after the heroism dwindled. The honest people of salon seemed to have felt the compelling necessity to bring order out of the chaos of Renaissance thought by the systematic imposition of rules that would define and limit with words almost all aspects of life, that would fix the self and man's relationship with others in an orderly manner, that would provide a yardstick to measure aesthetics as these applied to the self and to society as well as art. Harmony, which for the Baroque had been mysterious, became synonymous with order and clarity. In the era of Louis IV, words were powerful.

They could and did send men into perpetual exile and at Versailles, careers, as well as reputations, were made or broken according to Sun king's choice of communication with the intimate circle. Both the court and salons were closed worlds controlled by words. It is no accident that the plot of the Princesse de Clèves hinges on the impacts of portraits and gazes like that of Astrée in which words continued to create a separate reality is concerned with the past, was considered as history in the Aristotelian sense. What was written down became accepted as truth no matter how far it was removed from the truth. It is for this reason Mme de la Fayette thought of the Princesse de Clèves in terms of memories rather than as a novel. Racine was attached to more verisimilitude than the truth itself. The same concept permeated

the social life of the time. The relationship between Mme de la Fayette and La Rochefoucauld is a particular case. What the actual relationship might have been being less important than that of what was written and confirmed via letters of the time. Once again it was not the truth that mattered but what was written, not the vrai truth but verisimilitude. The distinction between look-alike and verisimilitude, as two terms were used in the seventeenth century, is a subtle but significant one. Where look alike indicates an appearance divorced from reality and it is more often than not a pejorative term, verisimilitude is presumed to be an authentic representation of reality rather than a deceptive play. In theory, verisimilitude reflects inner truth more real than surface reality. Often the vraisemblance likelihood of the seventeenth century tended to obscure and replace the truth because of the varied reasons. It is closely linked to the intense social form of life of the time.

Further, French classicists presented themselves to the public as imitators of certain classical writers which indicate two essential features of classicism: impersonality and formalism or conformity to rules. As for the first one, the classicists avoided giving the impression that they were anyway writing about themselves, their lives and their experiences or ideas. As for the second, the classicists were of the opinion that rules were justifiable and necessary as ancient works of literature had provided mankind with universally valid literary models which in turn made them classify rigorously literary genres like tragedy, epic, lyrical poetry, comedy and applied to them a set of rules. Above all. The classicists were conscious of the fact that their works should be respectful of reason, naturalness, good breeding, and morality. However, the real rule of rules which the classicist was never oblivious of was that it was for the writer to ensure the enjoyment that the public derives after reading the work. To a classicist, the public is very important and it is what is universally accepted and respected and the feature of good breeding does not permit the writer to puzzle, offend or shock the public by questioning the institutional or dogmatic forms. This also explains the stylistic efforts made by the writers to express so clearly and boldly as to be intelligible immediately even if the deeper meaning could be probed and fathomed through a prolonged study. La Rochefoucauld's manner of presenting the truth in the aphoristic style is such that the public though understands it at surface level, could sense the deeper meaning gradually only.

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