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“The Honnête Homme and the Art of Pleasing. Politeness and Sociability in French Thought, 1660-1700”

This study deals with the conversation of the ethics of politeness in late 17th-century French high society and especially the ideal of *honnête homme* and the concepts of politeness and sociability in the literary works of François de La Rochefoucauld (1613-1680), Jean de La Bruyère (1645-1696), Jean-Baptiste Morvan de Bellegarde (1648-1734), Madeleine de Scudéry (1607-1701), and the Chevalier de Méré (1607-1684). The *esprit critique* they represented influenced in a decisive way the ideas of politeness and sociability in the milieu of the *cour et la ville*. Besides, they shared a critical view of civility as it appeared in contemporary court society. It is precisely this critical element that has been lacking in the earlier study of “salon literature.”

Recent scholarship on early modern thought is still to a great extent dominated by the interpretations of Norbert Elias. His basic assumption was that courtly manners affected the whole of society during the 17th and 18th centuries without any alternative or parallel norms of manners. This did not leave much room for authenticity or spontaneity outside the rules of propriety or prevailing usages and customs. In this view, *honnête homme* becomes a “product” of the same narcissistic culture of appearance. According to Elias’s critics, such as Daniel Gordon (who has largely been influenced by Jürgen Habermas), Emmanuel Bury and Benedetta Craveri, there was an alternative model of sociability in the 17th-century salons and high society, which constituted an autonomous space parallel to court society described by Elias.

Typical of Habermas’s or Gordon’s approach is to underline the contradiction between vertical and egalitarian communication. While I agree with e.g. Gordon’s critique of Elias, it can still be argued that this kind of approach does not reveal the variety of nuances that were common in contemporary thought. In this thesis, I have distinguished four different interpretations of politeness, whose interrelated meanings have not been much discussed in previous studies. *Courtly civility* seeks to reconcile Christian humility, charity, natural manners, and propriety with demonstrations of loyalty and obedience. In the *Machiavellian interpretation*, acts of politeness are a way of hiding internal motives. *Politeness of the heart*, in its turn, serves “higher” moral values, truth, honesty, and real friendship. *The golden mean* seeks to reconcile authenticity, intellectual autonomy and independent judgement with the role expectations and rules of propriety, i.e. what is considered proper and decent in polite society.
In this study, *société*, or high society, is regarded as a cultural and social space, which, by its distinctive set of cultural values, manners and taste, stood out from the prevailing customs and manners of the court. The *mondain* and moralistic critique among high society was particularly directed towards courtly civility and its Machiavellian interpretation, represented by civility handbooks, which saw politeness as a pure form and as an instrument for diverse expressions of obedience and loyalty.

The conversation of late 17th-century high society was qualitatively different from that of the court. It was based on *intellectual freedom* because the parties encouraged each other in free exchange of ideas within the limits of propriety; it was *symmetrical* because the interlocutors assumed a particular role of politeness and the same rules of conversation; it was *horizontal* because the interlocutors regarded each other as equal partners; it was *complementary* because it sought to engage the conversationalists in reciprocal acts of politeness; and it was *critical* because it underlined the importance of independent judgement and healthy self-criticism. Within the conversations of high society one always attempted to find a *balance*, i.e. conversationalists sought to balance their different viewpoints, so that none of them would be able to dominate the conversation.

Habermas and Gordon deal mostly with the influence that 17th-century *société* and egalitarian conversation had on the formation of an open civil society in the course of 18th century. My study also deals with politeness as a cultural phenomenon, as an art of conversation, an art of living, whose reflections can be seen in various spheres of cultural life, such as contemporary correspondence, plays and views concerning art and aesthetics. Besides criticism, letters, essays, and novels were also intended to serve as instructions for conversation in *société*. Based on Christian and humanist tradition, late 17th-century society literature represents not only change, but also *continuity* in European thought.