

RIIKKA-MARIA PÖLLÄ



Refashioning  
the Respectable Elite Woman  
in Louis XIV's Paris  
Madame de Sévigné & Ninon de Lenclos

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## ABSTRACT

### *Refashioning the Respectable Elite Woman in Louis XIV's Paris*

*Madame de Sévigné & Ninon de Lenclos*

Riikka-Maria Pöllä

University of Helsinki

This PhD thesis is an analysis of the appearances, material culture and sexuality of the respectable woman, *l'honneste femme*, in Paris under the regime of Louis XIV. Through the examples of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, the study describes how Parisian elite women were able to fashion the ideal of *l'honneste femme* and how reality and ideals were combined in Parisian society. The study is based on the idea that female chastity is not the only key factor when evaluating and refashioning *l'honneste femme* and the 17th century female ideal was composed from different elements: elite status, education, manners, material culture, outer appearance and sexuality; residential area also played a role, especially the quartier of *Le Marais* with its flourishing elite culture. The study shows that *l'honneste femme* was the result of the mastering of all these different layers of elite living. In addition, it notes that the respectable Parisian elite woman could make her own decisions in relation to her lifestyle and self-fashioning. These actions were essential when constructing the entity of *l'honneste femme*.

The aim of the study is to answer the following questions: How did Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos reflect the ideal of the elite culture? How was the notion of a respectable woman constructed? Was this a matter of perfect abstinence as previous scholars claim – or was it rather a performance that required different elements to be fulfilled? If so, what were the essential aspects when refashioning the respectable woman? How did Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos fashion themselves? Did their self-fashioning aim to perform as *honnestes femmes* or did they search for other ways to be

part of the society of *les honnêtes gens*? Most importantly, the study considers why both Marquise de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos were considered *honnêtes femmes* at the end of their lives?

The study, qualitative in nature, is based on a variety of sources. By means of critical close reading the study analyses the letters of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos and their *inventaires après décès* which are key sources. The valuable information these post-mortem inventories offer has not been used properly ever before in studies on *l'honnête femme*. Another prominent source for the study are the Mémoires composed by the contemporaries of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos. Seventeenth-century conduct books such as François de Grenaille's *L'Honnête fille* (1640); Jacques Du Bosc's *L'Honnête femme* (1632); Antoine de Courtin's *Nouveau Traité de la civilité qui se pratique en France parmi les honnêtes gens* (1671); François de Sales' *Introduction à la vie devote* (1641) and Nicolas Venette's *Tableau de l'amour conjugal* (1686) help to understand the female ideal on the theoretical level. Both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos were immortalised in several portraits that were reflections of the *honnête* status. Thus, such visual sources as portraits and gravures have also been analysed and combined with the overall source material and research literature.

The most important notion is that even if the ideal of the elite woman, *l'honnête femme*, had been created mostly by male authors, it was adjustable and adaptable. Furthermore, the study argues that the external signs of *l'honnête femme* played a greater role than previous scholars have assumed. In other words, *l'honnête femme* and her *honnête* performance were created from many different social and personal aspects of which chastity was only one of them. Thus, the study shows how 17th-century Parisian elite women had to be able to uphold simultaneously different status layers of their rank to fulfil the expectations the *Ancien Régime* created for *l'honnête femme*.

Key words: *l'honnête femme*, *honnêteté*, sexuality, material culture, self-fashioning, Paris, seventeenth-century.

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Every journey has its beginning and this one started years ago when Professor Erkki Kouri said to me two words: image and *Madame de Sévigné*. From these two words, a larger idea grew and became this thesis, which embodies not only one but two Parisian elite women, Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos. Their self-confident performances of elite living helped me to construct the entity of the 17th century female ideal, *l'honneste femme*.

Today, after an eventful *voyage*, I would like to express my special appreciation and thanks to my advisor Professor Laura Kolbe: you have been consistent mentor to me. Furthermore, I am indebted to you for the years in your research seminar on European history, believing in me and encouraging my study as well as allowing me to grow as a historian. I would also like to thank Professor Johanna Ilmakunnas for this journey together: your guidance and advice have been irreplaceable; I will always cherish our discussions. Furthermore, your sense of aesthetics and understanding of early modern era elite living have been priceless. Academy Professor Markku Peltonen: I will be forever grateful for your professional comments, your help in sharpening my argument and leading me back on track when I was about to lose my direction. In other words, I am forever grateful to you all as you have supported me to finish my PhD thesis.

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# I

## INTRODUCTION

Dinner and banquet yesterday at M and Mme de Chaulne's, after I had carried out about a thousand duties, visited convents, and been round and about uttering compliments, until finally I was on the verge of exhaustion, and out of my mind as courtly ladies are. [...] Such was our schedule yesterday. I hope with grand passion that I was somewhere else, where I would not receive as many tributes. I totally long for a fast and for quiet. [...] I must go to dinner to M Rennes; it is about continual celebration. Oh, dear Lord, when could I die for hunger and be allowed to be quiet?<sup>1</sup>

In 1674 Madame de Sévigné, *la marquise* known for her good and chaste reputation among the French elite, described her busy Parisian life to her daughter Madame de Grignan. She seemed to be tired but at the same time she emphasised that in social meetings sophistication and polite behaviour was appropriate for her sex and status were inseparable parts of the elite lifestyle. In her letters, it is self-evident that this woman from the Parisian elite did not visit *société*<sup>2</sup> without her outer appearance being polished to perfection.<sup>3</sup> She also

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1 'Dîner, souper en festin chez M. et Mme de Chaulnes, avoir fait mille visites de devoirs et de couvents, aller, venir, complimenter, s'épuiser, devenir tout aliénée, comme une dame d'honneur, c'est ce que nous fîmes hier, ma bonne. Je souhaite avec une grande passion d'être hors ici, où l'on m'honore trop ; je suis extrêmement affamée de jeûne et de silence. [...] Il faut que je dîne chez Monsieur de Rennes ; ce sont des festins continuels. Ah mon Dieu! Quand pourrai-je mourir de faim et me taire' ? Madame de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 7 August 1680. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 1040. If not mentioned otherwise, the translations from French to English in the study are mine.

2 *Société*. An ensemble that is formed by several individuals in which their needs unite. Furetière Tome II 1690.

3 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 6 November

seems to know how necessary it was to fulfil all the different elements of elite living to be able to perform as a 17th century female ideal, *l'honneste femme*.<sup>4</sup> Twenty-one years later in 1695, Madame de Sévigné, a chaste and respectable widow, wrote to her cousin M. de Coulanges:

Corbinelli told me about wonders of the good company of men whom he meets at Mademoiselle de Lenclos' place. Thus, she (Ninon de Lenclos) gathers in her old age, at least if one believes what Mme de Coulanges says, all men and women, but if she had only women [to visit her] nowadays, she had to comfort herself, that she had had men in her better days.<sup>5</sup>

At this time Madame de Sévigné describes the life of the most famous courtesan of the epoch, Ninon de Lenclos. Despite the old courtesan's debauched lifestyle, which lasted for decades, Madame de Sévigné refers to her as Mademoiselle de Lenclos and notes that respectable women were also interested in her company. It is tempting to argue that in the 1690s Mademoiselle de Lenclos had experienced a personal makeover from a debauched courtesan to one of the *honnêtes gens* of the Parisian elite. Thus, it seems plausible that Parisian elite society was able to embrace both a chaste, and virtuous marquise and a courtesan who had lived against the norms and

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1676. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 442; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 5 January 1674 Sévigné Tome I 1972, 656–657; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 July 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 352; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 6 November 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 442.

- 4 In the study, I will always use the form *honneste femme* when referring to respectable woman (cf. Jacques Du Bosc's *L'Honneste femme*, 1632 and the definition *honneste femme* in Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universel*, 1690). Otherwise, the terms *honnête homme*, *honnêtes gens*, *honnêteté* etc. are used if the source does not indicate to use, for example, the form *honneste homme*, *femme honnête*, *honnestes gens*, *honnesteté* etc.
- 5 '[...] Corbinelli me mande des merveilles de la bonne compagnie d'hommes qu'il trouve chez Mlle de Lenclos. Ainsi elle rassemble tout sur ses vieux jours, quoi que dise Mme de Coulanges, et les hommes et les femmes, mais quand elle n'aurait présentement que les femmes, elle devrait se consoler de cet arrangement, ayant eu les hommes dans le bel âge pour plaider'. Mme de Sévigné to Coulanges 22 February 1695. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 1088.

in the end both of them enjoyed the reputation of *l'honneste femme*. How was this possible?

## 1. The problem

This study analyses two elite women: Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos. Furthermore, the study examines how the ideal of *honneste femme* was constructed, what were the essential layers that enabled the fashioning of a respectable woman, and how she was understood. According to Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universel* *l'honneste femme* is not only chaste, modest and prude but she gives no reason to talk about her or suspect her.<sup>6</sup> In *L'Honnête Fille* (1640), François de Grenaille also describes a respectable woman who is indeed humble rather than educated, and takes care of her honour without using it to increase her reputation; he preferred observing the qualities of these beautiful trees and forgetting the leaves. In other words, Grenaille wanted to respect women's greatness, but he particularly loved women's humility.<sup>7</sup> However, Grenaille is describing only the ideal rather than the reality. Furthermore, the rules were not equal as Stephen Greenblatt points out: 'In societies organised around a code of honour, the code normally applies only to those who are worthy of it'.<sup>8</sup> It is not only possible to conclude that the respectable woman should also be worth of honour, but honour was also a means to distinguish oneself from other social groups and emphasise one's personal prestige.<sup>9</sup>

This study employs some specific concepts: *honnêteté* is the most central one and it is inseparable from the notion of *l'honneste femme*. The epoch's man of letters and diplomat, Antoine de Courtin emphasises that *honnêteté* should be preserved '*dans ses paroles, et dans ses actions*'.<sup>10</sup> According to Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universel*, *honnêteté* was bound

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6 *Honneste femme*. Furetière Tome I 1690.

7 Grenaille (1640) 2003, 247.

8 Greenblatt 1980, 50.

9 Elias 2006, 72, 104, 112.

10 Courtin 1728, 15.

to morality and it was also purity of manners, ‘*pureté des mœurs*’.<sup>11</sup> His division into the two sexes was clear: women’s *honnêteté* was about abstinence, about modesty, which was visible especially on girls’ faces.<sup>12</sup> However, *civilité* was an effect of *modestie* also for *honnêtes hommes*.<sup>13</sup> Du Bosc emphasised that reputation also had an important role in the notion of *l’honneste femme*: it was the ornament of a polite life and without it the most glorious actions lacked sparkle.<sup>14</sup> It seems that the 17th century *human ideal* was a complete whole that gradually became the norm. It was prepared in minute detail and one can even speak of a human being as a work of art. This holistic human ideal was framed by definitions of *honnêteté*, and to elite women and men there were partly different rules and expectations, which determined the ideal.

In this context of *honnêteté*, how does female respectability eventually come to be? Earlier scholars have stressed female chastity, decency and abstinence as the most important features of *l’honneste femme*<sup>15</sup> and by doing that they have replicated the content of 17th-century conduct books.<sup>16</sup> Dorothy Anne Liot Backer, in her turn, states that because women were considered volatile, chastity and celibacy were strict prerequisites.<sup>17</sup> Thus, it is interesting to consider Linda A. Pollock’s notion when she refers directly to Laura Gowing and Lyndal Roper: ‘Historians have largely consigned the attainment of honour for women to the realm of sexual

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11 *Honnesteté*. Furetière Tome I 1690. When *honnesteté* comes to a man, he is expected to act justly, politely, honestly and benevolently. Furetière Tome I 1690.

12 *Modestie*. Furetière Tome II 1690.

13 Courtin 1728, 293.

14 Du Bosc 1632, 51. See also, Goldsmith 1988, 145.

15 See, for example, Duchêne 2000, 9, 10. Duchêne 2004, 117. Timmermans 2005, 323, 458–469. Steinberg 2001, 238. Gowing 1996, 225–226. Walker 1996, 235. Note also that according to Habib the appreciation of women had often been based on chastity, or at least some form of it. Habib 2006, 13.

16 *L’Honneste femme* by Jacques Du Bosc; *L’Honnête Fille* by François Grenaille; *Introduction à la vie devote* by François de Sales. See also, Pierre Nicole’s *Essais de Morale* and Liancourt 1698, 10–11.

17 Backer 1974, 30.

chastity'.<sup>18</sup> Pollock also emphasises that: 'An honourable woman was chaste and modest in words, demeanour, and behaviour. Sexual misconduct dishonoured her and shamed her family, especially her husband and father. This model inevitably leads to the portrayal of women as having a largely passive role in the honour culture of early modern Europe'.<sup>19</sup> I concur with their definitions, but, as I have emphasised, by merely understanding the respectable woman's chastity, it is not possible to comprehend the fuller notion of the respectable woman which will be analysed in this study by defining all the different layers that are specified later. Thus, I suggest, it is interesting – and fruitful – to ponder how both a courtesan and a chaste noblewoman can finally achieve the status of a respectable woman.

External signs, like duels, defined the early modern era men's honour,<sup>20</sup> but scholars often see women's honour as something that came purely from the inside. However, Elizabeth C. Goldsmith states, 'As women began to play a more important role in the definition of elite sociability, styles of interaction that advocated for *l'honnête homme* were increasingly those that could be also viewed as appropriate for their female counterparts'.<sup>21</sup> Soile Ylivuori also refreshingly problematises the concept of female chastity and suggests that it can be seen as an intricate scheme of performances.<sup>22</sup> In addition, Ylivuori argues that 'even though female chastity was discursively forcefully promoted by essentialising, internalising, and naturalising it, it was evaluated mainly by external signs which could be easily counterfeited'.<sup>23</sup> I am aware that Ylivuori's as well as Pollock's and Goldsmith's notions mainly concern England during the early modern era. However, this study, in turn, aims to problematise 17th-century French notion of *l'honneste femme* which, I claim,

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18 Pollock 2007, 8.

19 Pollock 2007, 19.

20 See, for example, Peltonen 2003.

21 Goldsmith 1988, 21.

22 Ylivuori 2016.

23 Ylivuori 2015, 191.



was more complex than mere chastity, which was considered a necessary virtue for women of all social classes.<sup>24</sup> Even though the importance of *l'intérieur* was to be distinguished from *l'extérieur*, which was less important,<sup>25</sup> I endeavour to point out that external signs of the French elite had a crucial role in their self-fashioning and performances of *honnêteté*.

In addition, the study will examine the different layers that formed the early modern notion of *l'honneste femme* as evaluated by other *honnêtes gens*. In other words, there was, I claim, a need to create an illusion that negotiated with the requirements placed on the Parisian elite women and that could be fulfilled by careful self-fashioning. Thus, I believe, it is plausible to show, by using examples of a chaste marquise and a successful courtesan, how female sexuality was not the only feature that defined the female ideal. It means that respectability, *honnêteté*, may have been possible to achieve by living contrary to the ideals of absolute chastity. My point of view resonates somewhat with that of Roger Duchêne who has noted that there were women who met certain requirements for *honnêteté* and yet lived immorally.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, Duchêne expresses this idea only in passing and leaves plenty of room for more in-depth analyses of the phenomenon. In this respect, the chastity, *chasteté*<sup>27</sup> of the elite woman seems to be quite a narrow definition for *l'honneste femme*, even though Bertrand Landry claims that Ninon de Lenclos' transformation was only a disguise, along with which he claims that Mademoiselle de Lenclos was never treated as

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24 According to Timmermans, the female ideal, the Virgin Mary determined the ideals that were set for women and that concerned members of all social classes. Timmermans 2005, 466–467. In this study, my decision to use also the term class is supported by David Parker's discussion of 17th-century French society, according to which 'it is perfectly possible and quite fruitful to construct a model of French society based on class'. Parker 2003, 134. See also, Moriarty 2009, 26. Elias, for example, uses the definition 'the nobles as members of the upper class'. Elias 2006, 266.

25 Courtin 1728, 300.

26 Duchêne 2000, 76–77.

27 The Christian virtue and morality which seeks to abandon unauthorised pleasures. *Chasteté*. Furetière Tome I 1690.

an *honneste femme*.<sup>28</sup>

Robert Muchembled states that women's place in society can be determined through matters such as religion, legislation, morality, medicine or education.<sup>29</sup> Roland Mousnier, in turn, argues that in addition to linguistic articulation and manners, inseparable features of the elite were an honorary title, education, ceremonies and entertainment.<sup>30</sup> I agree with all these assertions, but I would like to suggest that there is a lack of definition and therefore add that outer appearances, material culture<sup>31</sup> and sexuality, not only by means of *chasteté*, were also key factors when evaluating the 17th-century female ideal and by combining all these different layers, it is possible to reconstruct *l'honneste femme* as a whole. In other words, in 17th-century France, the female ideal, I claim, was not determined by only one factor, but rather by the sum of many things which were fashioned by the elite women.

Thus, the study seeks to *refashion* the entity of *l'honneste femme* and the focal point of this study is the *self-fashioning* of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos as iconic members of the Parisian elite. The concept of self-fashioning is used together with the verb *to fashion*, which could in turn be replaced by the verb *to perform*. The idea of self-fashioning and fashioning during the early modern era is introduced by

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<sup>28</sup> Landry 2009, 285.

<sup>29</sup> Muchembled 2003, 51. See also, Green 2013, 357.

<sup>30</sup> Mousnier 1978, 179–180. Note also, Whittle and Grittiths's observation that 'A range of activities served to assert gentry status as expressions of wealth and lifestyle [...]: office-holding, travel, sociability involving house-visits, hunting, certain styles of music, the ownership of books, familiarity with the latest advances in knowledge, building large and impressive houses, and well-ordered estates'. Whittle & Grittiths 2012, 208. Smith also emphasises that consumption, food, fashionable dressing, buildings, decoration and furnishing were essential ways to express honor and status. Smith 2002, 44–45. Bohanan states that, for example, both choices of interior decoration and of clothing were essential ways of creating elite identities and the elite's social understanding of themselves. Bohanan 2012, 30–32.

<sup>31</sup> On material culture and its importance for the elite, see Bohanan 2012; DeJean 2009; Pardailhé-Galabrun 1991; Smith 2002.

several scholars<sup>32</sup> as well as the notion of performing.<sup>33</sup> This study uses the basic idea of self-fashioning as a core of the thesis, which, I suggest, will help in analysing the phenomenon of *honneste femme*.

Furthermore, the study is about respectable women who belonged to the aristocratic elite in Paris,<sup>34</sup> women who represented the peak of their social environment. Madame de Sévigné (Paris, 5 February 1626–Grignan, 17 April 1696) and Anne (Ninon) de Lenclos (Paris, 9 January 1623–Paris, 17 October 1705), are closely studied as examples of Parisian elite women and are seen as active agents in their own social context. Throughout this study, the key questions are: How did Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos reflect the ideal of the elite culture? How was the notion of a respectable woman constructed? Was this a matter of perfect abstinence as previous scholars claim – or was it rather a performance that required different elements to be fulfilled? If so, what were the essential aspects when refashioning the respectable woman? How did Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos fashion themselves? Did their self-fashioning aim to perform *honnestes femmes*? Or did they search for other *moyens* to be part of the *société des honnêtes gens*? Most importantly the study shall ponder why both Marquise de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos were considered *honnestes femmes* at the end of their lives? By answering these questions, I believe, it is possible to refashion the layered nature of the female ideal, *l'honneste femme*.

The status of elite women was not static; neither was it out of reach for individuals and their goals. This study aims to understand – and to refashion – the several layers of *l'honneste femme*, such as virtue and sexuality, birth, manners and

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32 See Peter Burke's *Fabrication of Louis XIV* (1994); Philippa Berrys's *Of Chastity and Power: Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen* (1989); Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World; How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (2004) and *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980).

33 For performance as a methodological tool, see, for example, Peake 2015, 78–79; Schechner 2013; Salmesvuori 2014, 133–166; Goffman 1959, 17–76.

34 *Elite*: a select group, a leading minority that is superior in terms of ability or qualities within a large group or society. Nurmi, Rekiaro & Rekiaro 2009, 118.

education, wealth, appearance and residential area, especially the area of Le Marais in Paris with its flourishing residential elite culture. I shall refashion the entity of *l'honneste femme* layer by layer and point out that even though chastity played a crucial role in the ideal of a respectable woman, this alone did not suffice: it was very much about a perfect appearance, which included all different aspects mentioned above. Thus, this study argues that from this integrated whole, the ideal of the French elite woman of the early modern era, *l'honneste femme*, emerged and was rather a combination of external signs than a question of impeccable chastity.

Since this study is partly based on subjective perceptions of *l'honneste femme* and *honnêteté* by contemporaries, can Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos really be used as examples? Although it is a bold decision, I am convinced that it is possible. Their activity and life style choices are not hidden for, they are revealed in their letters and in depictions by their contemporaries. Clearly Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos were not passive individuals without a sense of direction as is apparent from their sexuality, virtue, private lives and enterprises concerning wealth and social position. Even though Madame de Sévigné's own projects, such as her children's marriage plans and her son's professional initiatives were about family affairs, her activity was aimed at sustaining or raising her family's social status. Her activity was also decisive on a more personal level in which her personal self-fashioning played an important role. She lived according to the ideal of a respectable woman and made conscious decisions according to such ideals. In the case of Ninon de Lenclos, her agency meant lifestyle choices, emphasising sophistication, independence, trade and assets accumulation; these were all powerful tools for personal self-fashioning. In other words, agency and self-fashioning of 17th-century Parisian elite women reached beyond family and kin.

A study of two significant women from the sophisticated elite helps answer the research questions by focusing on a specific number of sources. Studying two people from the same era also makes it possible to sketch their relationships to each

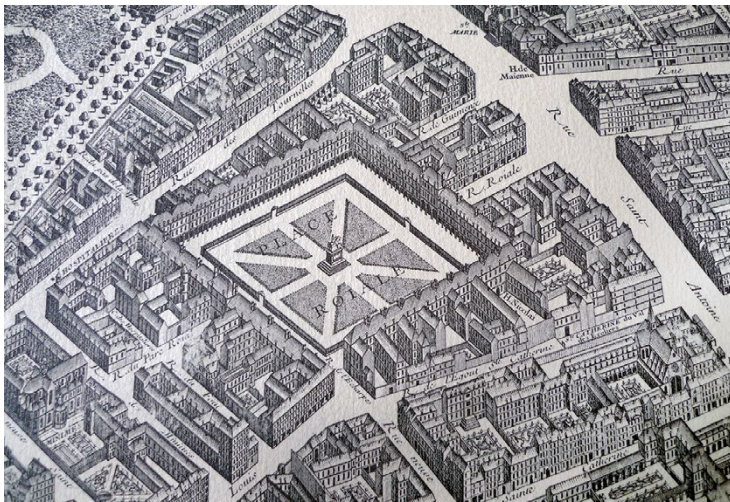


Fig. 1: Le Marais, Paris. Bibliothèque Historique de Paris.

other and to compare to find differences and similarities.<sup>35</sup> The challenge in this study is to form a broader picture of the layers of *l'honneste femme* through two women. I have chosen Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos for several reasons. The way that Madame de Sévigné understood herself as a member of nobility and as well as a chaste *honneste femme*, makes it possible to consider the research question through the female ideal. The social ascent of Ninon de Lenclos from a debauched, yet sophisticated, courtesan to Mademoiselle de Lenclos, an accepted member of the Parisian elite, illuminates the flexibility of 17th century social ideals. Although Madame de Sévigné wished to avoid the company of the courtesan known for open attitudes towards sexuality, the lives of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos did intersect. This occurred through personal relationships<sup>36</sup> as well as through

35 Kinnunen 2014, 177.

36 Ninon de Lenclos was the mistress of Mme de Sévigné's husband Henri de Sévigné and her son Charles de Sévigné. These two women also shared partly the same circle of friends. For example, Françoise d'Aubigné, the future Mme de Maintenon and Louis XIV's other wife (1635–1719), was a friend of both Ninon de Lenclos' and Mme de Sévigné. Mme de Maintenon was also a close friend of Ninon de Lenclos. Saint-Simon Mémoires (1701–1707) Tome II 1983, 637. See also, La Fare 1884, 190. Mme de Sévigné also met Mme de

the close proximity of their homes in Le Marais where they both lived for years. The map of Le Marais (Fig. 1) illustrates how near Place Royal was to Rue des Tournelles, where Ninon de Lenclos lived (Madame de Sévigné first lived on Place Royal and later in *Hôtel Carnavalet*, only a few hundred metres from Rue des Tournelles).

I am convinced that, by analysing these two women, it is possible not only to construct the entity of *l'honneste femme*, but also to prove that the early modern Parisian elite woman was not just a product of society, culture and her family, but she also negotiated with *société* and was able to fashion herself as she desired. In addition, no previous research has drawn similar parallels between Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos as equally magnificent and respected members of the Parisian elite. They appear together in each other's stories, in works that are named after them, and where the emphasis is on their differences rather than the convergences in their stories. This combination illuminates the early modern Parisian elite from a new perspective and provides insight on the elite female self-fashioning of *l'honneste femme*. Furthermore, the study shows the gap between ideals and reality and how flexibly that gap can be viewed.

As a historian, I am very aware that drawing parallels between Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos in a single study creates certain challenges. I am not suggesting that it is possible to make a direct comparison between a marquise and a courtesan. However, by combining the profiles of these two women one creates the prerequisites for a new viewpoint from which to observe and study the female ideal of the Parisian elite. With different starting points, but having used their influence in a shared social circle, these two women offer a unique perspective on how to conform to demands

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Scarron and later Mme de Maintenon several times. See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 25 December 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 403; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 6 January 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 410; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 13 January 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 414; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 March 1680. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 886.

of respectability within the context of the social and sexual norms of the time. Furthermore, their profiles have not been used to consider the layered structure of *l'honneste femme*, or female sexuality as an external feature in the elite woman's self-fashioning. Neither, has Madame de Sévigné's nor Ninon de Lenclos' behaviour been thought of as an active endeavour in self-fashioning a female ideal.

The importance of the sources cannot be overlooked: the broad correspondence that Madame de Sévigné had, along with documents on her assets, such as the *inventaire après décès*, enable the subject areas of this dissertation to be analysed. The case of Ninon de Lenclos is more challenging, and research into her life must be pieced together from a few letters, contemporary depictions and asset documents. However, the source material, relating to both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos offers the opportunity to illuminate the intersection between the ideal of *l'honneste femme*.

## 2. Historiography: previous research on Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos

I have drawn some preliminary ideas for this work from authors writing on the history of women, but mainly the inspiration for using Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos as examples has come from biographies. In addition, there is still a need for a systematic close-reading of the biographies to understand better the entity of a respectable woman and see her solely from the perspective of refashioning the entity of *honneste femme*.

Literature on women has its roots in biographical narratives that depicted exemplary stories, with edifying endings.<sup>37</sup> Later, popular, biographical novels appeared, in

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37 At first these narratives presented elegant women who lived long ago, but since the 15th century the stories were about women from recent history or even contemporaries. Saulnier 2002, 113–114. Note also that the lives of Parisian elite women were narrated already in their lifetime, and as a by-product of the creative process, allegorical depictions of other contemporary elite women also

which the tendency was to romanticise the narratives of elite women. It has, moreover, created a space where fact and fiction are mixed. Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, however, states that in biographies ‘we can study what life perhaps was like; how it is given in different sources; how it was lived, and how it was changed by time and experiences’.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, through biographies it is also possible to delve deeper into the feelings of the person who is studied, because a biography examines a person at close range and over a long period.<sup>39</sup>

In the case of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, over the centuries their stories have been presented very one-dimensionally, consisting mostly of biographical texts whose sources or at least references are sometimes unsubstantiated. The popularisation has generated glorifying interpretations and they have received wide attention particularly in France. Most research and literature has presented Madame de Sévigné as a beautiful girl with a happy, free childhood who was then orphaned and evolved into a chaste and admired person who loves her daughters with an almost oppressively possessive love. The picture of a spiritual woman who developed into an excellent writer of letters has been emphasised, even to the point that 300 years later her letters are read around the world for the version they give of her period and its events.<sup>40</sup>

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appeared (for example Mademoiselle de Scudéry’s *Clélie*). At the same time works emerged in which such women were mocked (for example Roger de Bussy-Rabutin’s *Histoire amoureuse des Gaules*). The stories of the following centuries, depending on the period, either praised (for example A. Bret’s & Douxménil’s biographies of Ninon de Lenclos) or criticised the women at the centre of the 17th century elite.

38 Halldórsdóttir 2014, 150.

39 Hakosalo, Jalaginien, Junila, Kurvinen 2014, 12.

40 See works of the French literary scholar Roger Duchêne *Madame de Sévigné ou la chance d’être femme* (1982), *Naissances d’un écrivain: Madame de Sévigné* (1996) and *Madame de Sévigné* (2002). See also, Baron de Walckenaer *Mémoires touchant la vie et les écrits de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, dame de Bourbilly, marquise de Sévigné* in five volumes (1842–1852); Henriette Celarié *Madame de Sévigné, sa famille et ses amis* (1925); Eugène Mavie *Madame de Sévigné et la médecine de son temps* (1932); Madeleine Saint-Réné Taillandier *Madame de Sévigné et sa fille* (1938); Auguste Bailly *Madame de Sévigné* (1955); Jean Cordelier *Mme de Sévigné par elle-même* (1967); Charles G. S. William *Madame de Sévigné* (1981); Jeanne A. and William T. Ojala *Madame de Sévigné. A Seventeenth-Century Life* (1990) and Yves Pouliquen *Mme de*



However, this study does not concentrate on Madame de Sévigné's unique letter writing skills; she has already been proven to be an exceptional writer of her time: In light of the study, a more interesting and refreshing approach is taken to analyse her letters as reflections of her own agency as a respectable woman inseparable the elite.

With Ninon de Lenclos it is extremely challenging to form a genuine impression of her: it requires a through viewing of the facts, research and a synthesis of the results from different sources and literary works. As a well-known courtesan, Ninon de Lenclos was a legend in her own lifetime<sup>41</sup> – and still is. In narratives, she appears as someone who had to choose between marriage, prostitution (or courtesanship) or the life of a nun.<sup>42</sup> In research and literature she continues to be called ‘*notre dame des amours*’, ‘*manière jolie de fair l’amour*’ and is presented as a sensuous woman but, as Henrik Knif has stated, it has not been possible to write and study her without

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*Sévigné et la médecine de Grand Siècle* (2006).

41 Backer 1974, 212–214.

42 In 1751 the first, rather constricted, biography of Ninon de Lenclos, *Mémoires sur la vie de Mademoiselle de Lenclos* was published by A. Bret. This handwritten version of *Mémoires de Ninon de Lenclos* is located in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. MS Nouvelles acquisitions françaises 9210. Additions are made by A. Bret (Additions aux *Mémoires sur la vie de mademoiselle de Lenclos* par M B.). Thus, the letters or poems are not originals. Nouvelles acquisitions françaises 9210. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Paris. This biography includes several parts which, according to contemporary knowledge, are false. The book also included ‘Ninon’s’ letters to Marquis de Sévigné. The mysterious Douxménil/Douxmésnil also wrote a book, *Mémoires et lettres pour servir à L’histoire de la vie de Mademoiselle de L’Enclos*, first published in 1751. Factual errors and glorification of the courtesan’s personality are characteristic of the early biographies of Ninon de Lenclos. The life of Ninon de Lenclos was studied with great passion by Émile Magne. Duchêne notes that Magne was a good researcher, but he did not examine his sources critically. However, Magne did edit many sources that concern Ninon de Lenclos. Duchêne 1984, 299. Magne’s *Les femmes illustres. Ninon de Lenclos. Portraits et Documents inédits* (1912) includes edited documents of Ninon de Lenclos, and is in this respect an extremely important work. See also, Roger Duchêne *Ninon de Lenclos. La courtesane du Grand Siècle* (1984) and *Ninon de Lenclos ou la manière jolie de faire l’amour* (2000); Mary Roswell *Ninon de Lenclos and her Century* (1923); Claude & Daniele Dufresne *Ninon de Lenclos. ‘La Saint patronne des courtesanes’* (2011); Professor Michel Vergé-Francesch *Ninon de Lenclos. Libertin du Grand Siècle* (2014).

considering the notion of female sexuality in the 17th century.<sup>43</sup> In this study, I argue that a study of Ninon de Lenclos reveals the flexibility of the Parisian elite that considered *l'honneste femme* from a range of perspectives and not merely in terms of absolute chastity. Furthermore, in the case of Ninon de Lenclos, one also must consider the change in her social status.

Regardless of the aforementioned challenges, biographies are indeed fertile for my study; biographical research of history presents the objects of the study as complex, unstable people in a process of continuous change<sup>44</sup> and by using biographies as secondary works together with primary sources and other research literature, they offer guidelines and help in placing the focus on Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos as members of the Parisian elite and deepen an understanding of the entity of *l'honneste femme*. Thus, the examples of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos make it possible to perceive in them some personal turning points, as well as changes and conflicts within the elite and to problematise the notion of a respectable woman.

### 3. Theory and method

The French early modern female and male ideals, *l'honneste femme* and *l'honnête homme*, were holistic images. During the reign of Louis XIV, *honnêtes gens* from the elite were defined by several attributes: birth, education, manners, dress code, material consumption, comportment and sexuality. Gender studies helped me to analyse both the interaction of gender and the body as well as the phenomenon from the viewpoint of the power structures between the sexes. Social history, for its part, has assisted me in examining the implications of class and status. By means of critical close reading, I have been able to perceive the difference between reality and the ideal, a difference that reflects particularly on the position of a 17th-century Parisian elite woman: the ideals and expectations

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43 Knif 2010, 18.

44 Florin 2014, 22.

coexisted, crossed, and occasionally overlapped.

As it has been pointed out, scholars have emphasised the importance of *l'honneste femme*'s chastity. My study, however, highlights the dissonance between theoretical discourses on proper sexual behaviour and the actual sexual practices of the Parisian elite. In the patriarchal society of early modern era France, sexuality had strong gender roles, for women chastity and virtue, at least in theory, were considered absolute commandments.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Robert Muchembled has argued, that the time of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos was the heyday of sexual repression.<sup>46</sup> He adds, however, that the double standards and carnal pleasure were also a fact as well as male projection of female sexual identity.<sup>47</sup> Thus, by examining chaste Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, my case study helps to identify the dissonance between the ideal and the reality. It reveals the delicate nuances that not only separated, but also united chaste marquise and *honneste* courtesan and points out how individuals could make independent choices and negotiate with norms despite the repression.

The study discusses gender and sex, which are inseparable from the thematic of sexuality. Ruth Mazo Karras, for example, emphasises that terms such as *sex*, *gender* and *sexuality* did not exist in the Middle Ages. In addition, medieval people did not distinguish between sex or gender identity.<sup>48</sup> However, gender, sex and sexuality are used as tools and have strongly influenced the examination of *l'honneste femme*. Furthermore, by problematising female chastity and sexuality vis-à-vis women's self-fashioning, it is possible to analyse if these features were highly important or if they were only external signs serving the elite woman's aspirations among her own social milieu. To understand this, it is essential

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45 Du Bosc 1632, Grenaille (1640) 2003, Sales 1641.

46 Muchembled 2008, 101–104.

47 Muchembled 2008, 75–108.

48 Karras 2005, 6. Elliott 2013, 22. At the same time, medieval society was heavily gendered: God was the father, and the Virgin Mary was woman. Woman would submit herself; man would dominate, but men were not understood to be any better than women. Bennett & Karras 2013, 1–2, 5.

to notice how much female sexuality was regulated compared with male sexuality, what kind of economic role women had, how difficult it was for them to receive an education and acquire property and what women's cultural roles were.<sup>49</sup> Joan Kelly Gabol's theory has received criticism for its method and social exclusiveness;<sup>50</sup> however, the aforementioned issues are still relevant in considering the entity of the 17th-century elite woman. In addition, it should be noted that women have always represented otherness.<sup>51</sup> Both secular authorities and the church had traditional beliefs about women's nature and behaviour: woman's position was inferior to that of man, but the church did not imply that more inferior/worse. To the church the matter concerned the order of nature, whereby women were not in principle denied equality or human dignity. The attitude towards women did not change even if the first advancements were made in medicine.<sup>52</sup>

As Judith Butler argues, "sex" is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the "one" becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility'.<sup>53</sup> In Furetière's 1702 dictionary, the term *sexe* defines the human body: *sexe* stood for the part of the body that separates man from woman. Furthermore, the male *sexe* was more powerful than the female. *Sexe* also meant gender. However, there were, for instance, noble girls whose sex had no meaning and the writer had met an elderly lady who had stated that at her age she was sexless. The expression *beau sexe* meant women and girls, who should be treated with respect.<sup>54</sup> Laqueur, in turn, presents a theory of *one-sex-body*, according to which it was not about female or male as biological beings, but rather about maintaining social position and a presumed cultural role.<sup>55</sup>

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49 Kelly-Gabol 1987, 176.

50 Steinberg 2010, 19.

51 Beauvoir 2009 & 2011. Finnish historians Vainio-Korhonen and Kaartinen have noted that womanhood has always been subordinate to manhood in the historical context. Vainio-Korhonen 2012, 199. Kaartinen 2002, 90.

52 Duchêne 2004, 67–68.

53 Butler 1993, 2.

54 Furetière Tome II 1702, 850.

55 Laqueur 1990, 8. Thomas Laqueur's *one-sex-body* could be used for comparison between the male and the female body, but there was no absolute difference: for

The main argument of this study is to investigate female *honnêteté* and its conception as external signs and consider *gender* as a tool to approach the subject. In the 1980s historians specified gender as ‘a culturally constructed, historically changing and often fluid system of differences. [...] gender was an appropriate category of analysis when looking at *all* historical developments, not simply those involving women or the family’.<sup>56</sup> In addition, Joan W. Scott argues that gender has become a useful tool ‘as studies of sex and sexuality have proliferated, for it offers a way of differentiating sexual practice from the social roles assigned to women and men’.<sup>57</sup> Gender differences are obvious when one is considering how women and femininity of the epoch were defined: Somaize associates 17th-century Parisian elite women with beauty, divinity, spirituality, cultivation and intelligence.<sup>58</sup> In conduct books, the elite woman’s outer beauty and appearance coexisted with virtue (*vertu*).<sup>59</sup> In addition, the female ideal and sexuality were bound to external beauty and fertility, which referred to female youth.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, *l’honneste femme* was created in a sphere, where both polite salon manners and popular and fashionable *galanterie*<sup>61</sup> had a crucial meaning, enforcing the status of members of the elite and amplifying gender roles within this social milieu. Therefore, Ylivuori’s notion, from 18th-century England, that politeness also served ‘the construction of gender difference’, is worth noting.<sup>62</sup>

The study also involves the epoch’s notion of female sexuality and the prevailing social values. Thus, it is reasonable

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thousands of years, it had been a common thought that the female and male genitalia were the same, only that a woman’s genitalia were located inside her. Laqueur 1990, 4–8.

56 Wiesner-Hanks 2005, 96. See also, Shepard & Walker 2008, 455.

57 Scott 1986, 1056.

58 Somaize. *Le Grand Dictionnaire des Précieuses*, 1661. Duchêne 2001, 432–548.

59 See, for example, Des Réaux 1906; Du Bosc 1632; Grenaille (1640) 2003; Saint-Évremond Tome I 1725, Tome IV & V 1726; Motteville Tome I & V 1750. See also, La Fayette (1678) 1998.

60 Korhonen 2005, 75–91.

61 See, for example, Liancourt 1698, 10–11. Habib 2006. Beasley 2006, 20.

62 Ylivuori 2015, 35.

to ask, how can historians comprehend what *were* women of the early modern era really like? According to Sara F. Matthews-Grieco, to understand people's actual social and imaginary lives, one must not only understand social circumstances, but also how their bodies were perceived and treated.<sup>63</sup> However, it is challenging to conceive the body of a human in the early modern era: it was frequently starving, it was often subjugated by a life-long labour and it had to fight diseases. In addition to this, women's bodies had to endure childbirth and menopause.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, a woman's body provoked fear in people.<sup>65</sup> The human body had other meanings besides the definitions given by Christianity and the latest development in science, it had a social meaning: the body was also a medium of interaction which is emphasised in polite meetings of the elite. The new restrictions on the body concerned both sexes and gradually, especially in the beginning of the 17th century, there was a prevalent 'rejection' of the body in culture. To accomplish *civilité*, the body's sounds and fluids must be kept away from ears and eyes,<sup>66</sup> but the ideal and reality were completely separate.<sup>67</sup>

It should also be considered that the Parisian elite woman was constructed in relation to other people in her life. Thus, none of the Parisian elite women were free of expectations or rules that came from society and had evolved in the course of centuries.<sup>68</sup> This was particularly the case with sexuality, because the traditional opposition between virgin and whore still persisted. At the same time, a completely different thought evolved: a thought of a self-aware, intelligent woman who could become morally equal with men.<sup>69</sup> However, the 17th-

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63 Matthews-Grieco 1993, 47.

64 Gowing 2003, 2. Note also Rose's notions that histories of the body mostly study 'how bodies are represented and serve as symbols, and how they become the focus of political mobilization'. Rose 2010, 24.

65 Gélis 2005, 18. See also, Gowing 1996, 232.

66 Montandon 1995, 158–159.

67 See, for example, Madame to Duchess of Braunschweig-Lüneburg 1 January 1693. Von der Pfalz (1652–1722) 1984, 80.

68 It was not only men, but also women who participated in constructing this order between the sexes. Kinnunen 2001, 58. Kaartinen, Korhonen 2005, 265.

69 Grenaille (1640) 2003.

century Parisian women of the elite brought forward new models for being a woman, albeit being partly tied to historical tradition.

Since the 1980s historians have focused on the history of sexuality rather than gender.<sup>70</sup> What is the meaning of sexuality in the early modern era? How can historians define the sexuality of the epoch? Some scholars define sexuality as partly a product of society rather than simply a biological feature.<sup>71</sup> Päivi Lappalainen emphasises that sexuality was crucially linked to power relations in society.<sup>72</sup> This, together with procreation, also played a central role in the relations between the sexes.<sup>73</sup> However, Natalie Zemon Davis reminds that all women were not subordinated to all men; there was also a power hierarchy between women: a woman of higher position would dominate those beneath her.<sup>74</sup> The term *sexuality* is somewhat challenging as its current usage did not begin until the early 19th century.<sup>75</sup> In a present-day dictionary, the word *sex* stands for sexual intercourse, sex life in reality and in art, sexual attraction, sex appeal. Sexuality, in turn, stands for the entire pattern of behaviour, emotions, and other things that are based on sex drive.<sup>76</sup> Scott observes that sexuality, like families and households, ‘are all finally, products of changing modes of productions’.<sup>77</sup> In *Sex before Sexuality*, Kim M. Phillips and Barry Reay see the term ‘sexuality’ as problematic, and prefer the term “sex”. They also caution scholars not to use modern terms to describe premodern erotic events.<sup>78</sup> Karras, on the other hand, sees the term “sexuality” as useful in her research on medieval sexuality,<sup>79</sup> and Sylvie Steinberg uses the term *sexualité* when speaking of early

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70 Wiesner-Hanks 2005, 96.

71 Lappalainen 1996, 208. Karras 2005, 5–9. Stearn 2009.

72 Lappalainen 1996, 208.

73 Gowing 2003, 80.

74 Davis 1975, 125. See also, Scott 1986, 1058–1059.

75 Foucault II 1984, 9.

76 Nurmi, Rekiaro I., Rekiaro P. 2009, 445.

77 Scott 1986, 1059.

78 Phillips & Reay 2011, 13–14.

79 Karras 2005, 5–9. Peter N. Stearns also uses the term ‘sexuality’ in his study *Sexuality in World History*. Stearns 2009.

modern sexuality.<sup>80</sup> For my study the term *sexuality* has the required expressiveness and it also helps, as a holistic concept, to picture ways of being, desires and preferences.<sup>81</sup>

Sexual behaviour among 17th-century elite women was not always intended to produce offspring, but included other dimensions, such as emotions, love, lovemaking, seduction and sexual abstinence. Furthermore, women's pleasure, and aversion towards sex, were relevant issues that defined the way sexuality could be understood. Sexual behaviour, in the case of Ninon de Lenclos, was an ensemble of both mental sophistication and physical aspects, including sexual activity. In the case of Madame de Sévigné, it was related to an image – learned or chosen – of how she understood and manifested female sexuality. Sexuality was also connected with outer appearance, not just the physical body and sex; in other words it was also a matter of gender. In the early modern era, the effects of time were considered to have a different significance for men and women: Anu Korhonen states that 'women incarnated time namely because the beauty disappeared'.<sup>82</sup> Thus, a woman was most enchanting when she was young, which was also when she reached the peak of her sex appeal. However, the elite woman did not grow older, did not develop wrinkles, did not suffer from visible maladies as my study will show: *l'honneste femme* retained her youth, which was essentially related to the thought of procreation and sexual attractiveness.

Finally, what makes the virtuous Madame de Sévigné and the courtesan Ninon de Lenclos, who represented two extremes in understanding one's own sexuality, interesting subjects of research? Is it possible to conduct new and fresh research by using these two elite women as examples? The Marquise de Sévigné adapted to and negotiated with the prevalent norms of society, but also used her choices as a vehicle to justify her actions. The courtesan de Lenclos revolted against the epoch's

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80 Steinberg 2010.

81 Karras 2005, 6.

82 Korhonen 2005, 83.



sexual norms for women, but she was eventually able to become part of the Parisian elite as Mademoiselle de Lenclos. A further reason for taking these two women as representative examples in this study is that to these two elite women defining their own sexuality made it possible for them to be somewhat free from the way that women were expected to behave. The sexuality of *l'honneste femme*, and the layered nature of this female ideal, which embodied also sophistication, elite lifestyle and material choices enable the researcher to problematise and contemplate a broader social phenomenon. The study spans the womanhood of elite women, in which both physical and cultural sexuality as well as gender have their essential thematic.

#### 4. Sources

I have examined a wide range of different kinds of primary and printed sources. A new approach to sources and new questions applied to them, will offer, I claim, fruitful soil from which to draw a novel perspective on studying *l'honneste femme* of the Parisian elite. Before plunging deeper into documents that have supported this study, it is worth mentioning that conduct books, estate inventory deeds, letters, *mémoires*, poetry, belles-lettres, plays and *dictionnaires* have been studied using close readings combined with detailed source criticism. Since the respectable woman was also visually represented, information derived from paintings and engravings has also been taken into consideration. The gaps in the sources and biographies have been filled by using further research literature.

The sources that have been used in the study, even documents about assets recall prevailing ideals, attitudes and expectations concerning elite Parisian women. To refashion *l'honneste femme*, to understand the self-fashioning of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, and to see how these two women fit into their contemporary Parisian elite, I have used critical thinking skills in reading the sources, and analysed them in detail.

**The conduct books.** Erasmus (1466–1536) emphasised

that a person's inner, spiritual state is reflected in his or her external decorum.<sup>83</sup> In the 16th century, numerous conduct books on politeness were published in Italy and the notion of human ideals gained unprecedented popularity in France: Castiglione's *Cortegiano*, or *Courtier*, for example, sold very well in France<sup>84</sup> and, according to Muchembled, it had significant impact 'on the social elites'.<sup>85</sup> In the 17th century French society reached a point where cultivated behaviour with its finer nuances was necessary conduct for anyone who aspired to become a member of the ruling elite.<sup>86</sup> In order to add a local touch, the French had their own conduct books, yet Nicolas Faret's *L'Honnête Homme ou l'Art de plaire à la Cour* (1630) owes a lot to Castiglione's work although it does not refer to it.<sup>87</sup> Antoine de Courtin's *Nouveau traité de la civilité qui se pratique en France parmi les honnêtes gens* (1671) were intended above all else to determine the rules on how the nobility should act in social circles. However, Courtin's book was addressed to a broader audience.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, Peter Burke claims that French writers wrote not only to courtiers but also Parisians.<sup>89</sup> Conduct books reached a wide readership throughout the 17th century, and this interest continued until the 18th century. Evidence for this comes from the number of reprinted editions, particularly between 1651 and 1700.<sup>90</sup>

In this study, central works include *L'Honneste femme* (Jacques Du Bosc: 1632) and *L'Honnête Fille* (François

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83 Elias 2000, 49. Erasmus reached a wide readership with this politeness conduct book, *La civilité puerile* (1530). The conduct book's popularity and the pedagogical ideas it contained were responses to an atmosphere in which universal politeness was seen to be preferable behaviour for most people. The guide was meant especially for young men who were *nobles*. Salmi 2005, 111.

84 There were three translations of the book and twenty-three editions between 1537 and 1592, but *Courtier* was even more popular in the 17th-century and in France its peak was in the period 1600–1660. Burke 1995, 63, 117–118.

85 Muchembled 2008, 47.

86 Chartier 1987, 55.

87 Burke 1995, 93.

88 Goldsmith 1988, 22. According to Burke, Courtin was also the most popular writer and his conduct book had its thirteenth reprint by 1700. Burke 1995, 125.

89 Burke 1995, 126.

90 Tikanoja 2009, 31.

Grenaille: 1639–1640). François de Sales (1567–1622, canonized 19 April 1665) cultivated the idea of chastity and the Christian life in his *Introduction à la vie devotte* (1609). This book by the Catholic archbishop of Geneva was a best-seller that went beyond the ecclesiastical borders of this period.<sup>91</sup> Thus, Sales' *Introduction à la vie devotte* and Pierre Nicole's (1625–1695) *Essais de Morale* (1671) outlined the religious ideals required from a perfect individual; they were popular among secular readers for centuries. In the early modern era not only religious but also the medical discourses concerned the female body.<sup>92</sup> Nicolas Venette's (1633–1698) *Tableau de l'amour conjugal* (1686) can be perceived from the early modern doctor's viewpoint on how to think of womanhood and female sexuality. Combining secular and religious texts is essential: only in this way is it possible to understand and to reconstruct the mental context in which *l'honneste femme* was created.

Were such works an innovation? Did Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos live in a society that had created a completely new form of thinking? According to Burke, Marguerite de Valois owned a copy of Courtier and Madame de Pompadour also had it,<sup>93</sup> but it is impossible to say if the protagonists of the study owned this or other conduct books. However, it is more important to notice that epoch's conduct books continued the contemplation of women's ability from previous centuries: there had already been intellectual thinking that defended women prior to the 17th century. Christine de Pizan (1364–1430), astounded by the lack of women's education, stressed women's abilities in her *Livre de la Cité des dames*, even though she accepted a hierarchy based on

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91 Bireley 1999, 178–181. François de Sales' priest, Jean-Baptiste Morven de Bellegard, also wrote *Reflexions sur la politesse des moeurs, avec des maxims pour la société Civile. Suite des reflexions sur la ridicule* (1696 & 1698). This guide gives advice concerning correct behaviour so that a person could avoid ridicule. He also presents women in a very traditional light and provides his thoughts about women's character.

92 Crawford, Gowing 2000, 13.

93 Burke 1995, 128, 149.

gender.<sup>94</sup> However, the early modern image of women and gender roles that oppressed women could clearly be seen particularly in literature.<sup>95</sup> The aforementioned texts and conduct books are, regardless of each writer's ambitions, preferences and values, depictions of their period. The elite women were not free of the definitions given in literature, but neither were they completely subordinate to them. In the cases of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, it is obvious that they were able to read and filter the ideas of womanhood and their sex that were presented in the literature of the time. They adopted the elements they needed and developed themselves in accordance with contemporary thoughts – but also rebelled against prevailing norms.

**Correspondence.** It is self-evident that this study is largely based on the letters of Madame de Sévigné,<sup>96</sup> as well as the letters of Ninon de Lenclos. As source material, letters are both inspiring and challenging. They have been used 'for an increasing range of purposes, both formal and informal, pragmatic and introspective'.<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, it should be

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94 Krueger 2013, 593–600. See also, Garrard 1988, 150 and Winn 2002, 7. The Venetian Lucrezia Marinelli wrote in 1601 *La nobilita et l'eccellenza delle donne, co' diffrettu et mancamenti de gli Huomini*, where she analysed the reasons for men's misogyny, such as vainglory, envy, lack of talent, and contempt generated by sexual frustration. Garrard 1988, 150. See also, Krueger 2013, 602–603. In 1509 Henri-Conreille Agrippa wrote against the prevailing thoughts on women's inferiority. He wrote *La Noblesse et préexcellence du sex féminin* in Latin; there he presented arguments and claims contrary to encyclopaedic knowledge. Agrippa's thoughts were shared by Louis de Serres (1625), who published his *Causes signes et curationes des empêchements de la conception et de la stérilité*, where, after listing the thoughts that doctors and philosophers had expressed on women's inferiority, he stated that the female sex is equal to the male sex. Duchêne 2004, 18–19. See also, Saulnier 2002, 116–117. In the early 17th century, Mademoiselle de Gournay (1565–1645) on women's behalf strongly resisted the prevailing ideas on women's inferiority. She did not accept the idea that women's physical weakness compared with men implied that they had worse manners or character, or less intelligence. Duchêne 2004, 17.

95 Winn 2002, 8–9.

96 Mme de Sévigné's letters raised her to the level of Molière and Mme de La Fayette, because they reflected the natural spirit of classicism, and not the 'façade decoration' typical of Baroque style. Suolahti 1953, VII. In addition, through Mme de Sévigné's letters, it is possible to perceive all the layers of *l'honneste femme*.

97 Daybell 2001, 8.

born in mind that the person writing a letter would add, cut, erase and mould the contents of letters or use them as self-justification. The context of a letter where and when it has been written, should be acknowledged.<sup>98</sup> In addition, the letters could also include spontaneous remarks.<sup>99</sup> In the 17th century, letters were not merely personal, they were read aloud to friends and in gatherings in salons which spread information to a wider audience and Madame de Sévigné may well have had these practices in mind while writing.

Regarding Madame de Sévigné's letters, I have primarily used *Lettres de Madame de Sévigné* Volume I, II and III (La Pléiade), which were edited by Roger Duchêne.<sup>100</sup> It has been noticed that if the letters of nuns are not taken into account, 'the experiences of single women are less well represented in family collections'.<sup>101</sup> In addition, Ninon de Lenclos' correspondence is an excellent example of the problems of source criticism. In this study, I use only letters that scholars have generally accepted as letters written by de Lenclos. For example, in addition to letters to Marquis de Sévigné, correspondence between Marquis de Villarceaux and Ninon de Lenclos, and between Madame de Maintenon and Ninon de Lenclos, made Émile Magne suspicious.<sup>102</sup> However, correspondence between de Lenclos and Saint-Évremond remains trustworthy.<sup>103</sup> These

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98 Daybell 2001, 8.

99 Hammond 2011, 25.

100 Mme de Sévigné's letters to her daughter were first published in 1725. Duchêne 1996, 269. A year later a two-volume publication was released, comprising 134 letters from Mme de Sévigné to her daughter. In March 1734 *Recueil des lettres de Madame la marquise de Sévigné à Madame la comtesse de Grignan sa fille* appeared. This edition was accepted by the family. It consisted of volumes I-IV, and three years later came volume V and VI. Duchêne 1996, 270, 285–286. In 1751 *Recueil de lettres choisies pour servir de suite aux lettres Mme de Sévigné* was published. Duchêne 1996, 293.

101 Daybell 2001, 13.

102 Magne 1912, 226–227. Furthermore, Roger Duchêne rejects the possibility that the letters are authentic. Duchêne 2000, 377. I do not use these letters in my research, because there is no evidence of their real writer. What I do believe is that the relationship that Ninon de Lenclos had with Villarceaux for several years and the social position that Mme de Maintenon later achieved, have possibly inspired some people to forge the letters: Ninon de Lenclos as a famous courtesan was a legend in her lifetime.

103 Saint-Évremond 1725, Tome I & Saint-Évremond Tome I, IV, V and Lenclos,

letters illuminate the world of a woman aging, a world in which a mental and physical transformation can be seen. There are also copies of correspondence that Ninon de Lenclos had with Antoine de Combaud, Chevalier de Méré, and François d'Usson, Marquis de Bonrepaus. These copies can be found in Bibliothèque nationale de France (MS, Nouvelles acquisitions françaises 9210).<sup>104</sup> Even though the letters of Anne de Lenclos are few, they are of particular interest for understanding the position and concepts of a courtesan among the elite.

As this study endeavours to understand the entity of *l'honneste femme*, can letters help in reconstructing it? According to Anu Lahtinen, early modern noble women's letters especially express the way that they defined themselves through family roles, such as sister, daughter, mother and wife.<sup>105</sup> In the letters of Madame de Sévigné, her motherhood stands out, but it takes the form of the love she felt for her daughter rather than as self-understanding about motherhood. The examination of Madame de Sévigné's correspondence also makes it possible to piece together questions and crucial events that concern Ninon de Lenclos. The letters of Ninon de Lenclos, in turn, tell the story of an independent, early modern woman, who had no strong family ties or close male relatives. She was an individual who bound herself to her closest circle which mostly consisted of men. However, it should be considered that the writings of both *la marquise* and the courtesan reflect the culture and norms of the epoch.<sup>106</sup>

**Memoirs.** In many cases, the lives of 17th-century women are known through sensationalizing works most often written by men of the period.<sup>107</sup> The people who wrote of Parisian

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Colombay 1886, 80–138.

104 See also, Duchêne 2000, 384. The copies of the letters and references about their location in the late 19th century are from the book *Correspondance authentique de Ninon de Lenclos: Comprenant un grand nombre de lettres inédites, et suivie de la Coquette vengée, avec une introduction et des notices...* by Émile Colombey (1886).

105 Lahtinen 2007, 21. See also, Daybell 2001, 11. Ylivuori has also noted that in England in the latter half of 18th -century, there was a stronger claim for women to have the home as their primary sphere. Ylivuori 2015, 119.

106 See, for example, Daybell 2001, 3.

107 Knif 2010, 19.

elite women often had their own, personal motives for producing these texts. However, unbiased texts hardly exist, because writers always have their own value systems, ideas, and expectations. Regardless, the early modern Parisian elite woman's status and respectability, *honnêteté*, is partly based on texts that have been left behind by subjective writers. The *mémoires* used in the study, are all except for one, written by men,<sup>108</sup> and thus they reflect the period's picture of women and a society that is constructed by masculine thinking. Moreover, they were portrayals of the people who wrote about them; thus a critical approach must be taken when the *mémoires* are examined, and they must be considered in the context of the overall research literature and sources: The images of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos were partly formed and based on these portrayals but these texts also reflect ideals of the prevailing society.

Among memoirs written by women is Madame de Motteville's (1615–1689) *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire d'Anne d'Autrich épouse de Louis XIII Roi de France* Tome I and V (1750). Its value is in presenting how a noble woman viewed Ninon de Lenclos' position in her epoch.

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108 In 1657 Gédéon Tallemant des Réaux (1619–1692) began to write *Historiettes*, which describes Henry IVs and Louis XII's 'bonne Régeance'. It is a story about people who could be free, without questioning the necessary order. Adam 1960, VII, VIII, X & XXVI. I have used Tallemant des Réaux' *Les historiettes. Mémoires pour servir l'histoire du XVIIe siècle, publiés sur le manuscrit autographe de l'auteur* Tome III. (Delloye 1840); Tallemant Des Réaux Collection des plus belles pages. *Historiettes: Henri IV. – La Reine Marguerite. – Malherbe. – Luynes. – Richelieu. – Louis XIII. – La Fontaine. – La marquise de Rambouillet. – Voiture. – Bassompierre. – Mesdames de Rohan. – Marion de l'Orme. – Pascal. – Madame de Montbazou. – Madame de Sévigné. – Ninon de Lenclos. – Mondory. – Madame de Langrey, etc.* (1906), and *Les Historiettes I.* (1960). His works have been widely used in biographies. I would like to mention here also a few other texts: Roger de Bussy-Rabutin's *Histoire amoureuse de Gaules. Mémoires et réflexions sur les principaux événements du règne de Louis XIV et sur le caractère de ceux qui y ont eu la principale part* (1884) by Marquis de La Fare (1644–1712) contains a portrayal of Ninon de Lenclos. The *mémoires* of Saint-Simon (Louis de Rouvroy, count de Saint-Simon, 1675–1755). *Scènes et Portraits choisis dans les mémoires authentiques du duc de Saint-Simon* Tome I (Hachette, 1900) and *Mémoires 1701–1707* Tome II (Gallimard, 1983) also have value as sources. Both Saint-Évremond's (1614–1703) memoirs and Voltaire's *Œuvres complètes* (Breuchot 1879) contain information on Ninon de Lenclos and their correspondence.

Testaments & *inventaires après décès*. Several documents on ordinary early modern women, have been produced by men and authorities. These documents are also created under rather extreme conditions, which often involved matters to do with conception, childbirth and children outside of marriage.<sup>109</sup> When the respectable elite woman of the early modern era is refashioned, the focus should be elsewhere than on court documents. Even though pregnancies and childbirth played a central role in the respectable woman's life, the understanding of *l'honnête femme* requires rather that the focus should be on documents on a woman's own, private and material life. Whereas registers of birth, marriage, and death supply information on the fertility of married couples and single women,<sup>110</sup> personal documents such as testaments and *inventaires après décès*<sup>111</sup> reveal information based on the choices that the people made during their lives concerning wealth and social status. Thus, I agree with Marcia Pointon, who reasonably assumes 'that the owners themselves played some part in the ways in which their possessions were described for posterity'.<sup>112</sup>

Post-mortem inventories provide access to a person's home room by room, artefact by artefact and to the personal reality near the end of that person's life.<sup>113</sup> Through such documents, the material world of the elite becomes tangible, not only from a practical, but also from a status-related standpoint, which was of utmost significance to the elite.<sup>114</sup> These documents also reveal information about the spaces shared by members of both sexes and how they performed their identities as

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109 Crawford, Gowing 2000, 14.

110 Flandrin 1979, 3.

111 *Inventaires après décès* i.e. estate inventory deeds. These documents have been maintained in Paris, since the 1400s. The estate inventory deed includes both personal property and all 'papers and titles', that is all documents, information addressed to the family, as well as possessions of the deceased. Each item of the deceased was recorded, described in detail and priced. However, often estate inventory deeds minimized the value of the goods by about 25 per cent. Courtin 2011, 38.

112 Pointon 1997, 3.

113 Courtin 2011, 38.

114 French 2013, 209.



men and women. However, even when analysing the written documents one should consider, as Erwing Goffman states, that performance offered to viewers is quite often idealised.<sup>115</sup> In the case of Ninon de Lenclos, the material facts also reveal how her sexuality enabled a social ascent and how an aspiration to adapt the elite lifestyle was manifested with outer signs. In the case of Madame de Sévigné, this concerns more the way in which she maintained her own social position and how she managed this through her outer appearance, material preferences which eventually created her performance. Furthermore, Madame de Sévigné's estate inventory deed illuminates the choices made by a respectable widow; they reveal how Madame de Sévigné, despite her scarce assets after Henri de Sévigné's death, chose to be a widow, allowing her to have control over her own body and to succeed in living a life suitable to her position.

Documents on material facts illuminate status and values giving access to lives of the deceased.<sup>116</sup> The available documents do not give a complete picture of the material consumption of Madame de Sévigné or Ninon de Lenclos, but through them it is possible to perceive their private, material surroundings and its meaning in the construction of the

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<sup>115</sup> Goffman 1959, 35.

<sup>116</sup> French 2013, 208. The *procès-verbal* of Damoiselle de Lenclos is dated the 18 October 1705. Y 13191. Archives nationales. Paris. Magne has edited Ninon de Lenclos' *inventaire après décès*, which is on a continuum that starts from the *procès-verbal*. Magne has determined the place of his document as *Minutes de M Fontana*, notaire à Paris, 10 rue Royale. *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912 202–218. This document cannot be found in Archives nationales, which is the location of *procès-verbal* (Y 13191) and according to speculation this part has been lost in the early 1900s. It is impossible to know who has stolen, sold, bought or destroyed it. Magne has edited this document as well. Magne has erased some parts, and thus his edition is not equal to the original. The official documentation of the seventeenth century indicates spelling conventions the time. All the text in the documents is therefore not significant in terms of the content itself. Magne may have made a decision to leave some text off from his edition. Madame de Sévigné's *inventaire après décès* 18.6.1696. MC/RSS/499 1696, Archives nationales, Paris, is a document, made two months after the marquise's death in Paris, in *Hôtel Carnavalet* (rue Culture Sainte Catherine), where Mme de Sévigné had lived since 1677. It appears that there are pages missing between pages officially 4 and 5. No traces can be found of an estate inventory deed made in Grignan.

respectable woman. One of these documents is Madame de Sévigné's *Contrat de Mariage entre Henri, marquis de Sévigné et Marie de Rabutin-Chantal* (1 August 1644).<sup>117</sup> Its value concerns Madame de Sévigné's life as a young marquise and a married woman. In addition, it reveals her rights in case of widowhood. Besides the fact that Sévigné's marriage was not a complete success, Marquise de Sévigné saved this document, and it is mentioned in her *Inventaire après décès*.<sup>118</sup> Ninon de Lenclos left wills from 7 September 1662<sup>119</sup> and 19 December 1704,<sup>120</sup> that enable the examination and contemplation of the assets at her disposal and how the content of her wills changed over a period of forty years. Unlike Ninon de Lenclos, Madame de Sévigné left no will.<sup>121</sup>

**Paintings.** Like poets painters also contributed to the creation of an image of an enchanting and perfectly polished elite woman. Portraits work as a stimulus that assists memory: In them the deceased are immortalised.<sup>122</sup> Thus, the style and ideals that are reflected in a member of elite become clearer, but not indisputable. Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos differed in their social status, but in their portraits of the period, a viewer can see two women who resembled one another. As the information that the paintings contain can be misleading it should be combined with the overall source material and research literature and this can clarify

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117 MC/RSS/498. Archives nationales. Paris.

118 MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives Nationales. Paris.

119 CV, 752. *Testament d'Anne de Lenclos* 7.9.1662. Archives nationales. Paris. See also, CV, 752. Documents du minutier central (1650–1700) 1960, 216.

120 Ninon de Lenclos' testament was published in 1893 in *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire de Paris* by initiative of Vicomte de Grouchy. Émile Magne says that he managed to get the original document from notary Fontane. Magne compared the original with the copy was made by Grouchy and he found differences. Magne published his edition of Ninon de Lenclos' testament in *Les femmes illustres. Ninon de Lenclos. Portraits et Documents inédits*. Magne in 1912, 195–197. I have compared Magne's edition to Grouchy's: they are otherwise identical, but Grouchy's edition mentions the widow Serriera and Magne's widow Férier. In addition, Vicomte de Grouchy's version describes the sealing of the testament, as well as Anne de Lenclos' signature. *Bulletin de la Société de la histoire de Paris* 1893, 93–94.

121 Duchêne 2002, 538.

122 Fossi 2002, 10.

the difference between the ideal and reality. Art can contain hidden symbols and through it one can approach questions about beauty, a woman herself, prevailing beauty standards, hairstyles and clothing, which were essential for a woman's reputation and controlled social interaction in 17th-century society.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, such external factors, as well as cleanliness, were also markers of a person's status and morality.<sup>124</sup> In other words, the paintings reveal not only smiles and facial features, but also words, by in effect summoning up an endless dialogue.<sup>125</sup> This dialogue is, however, one sided, since it is in the eye of the beholder, the observer. It easily turns into a monologue where the observer reflects on his or her own thoughts and opinions of the portrayed person. Moreover, as Burke states, in the iconographical approach 'the cultural homogeneity of an age' cannot be assumed and the interpretation can be erroneous in regard to social dimension or disregard to social context.<sup>126</sup>

In addition, visual sources also reveal mentalities, values, ideologies and private moments. When analysing portraits or engravings, it is important to remember certain questions: Who are the people in the pictures? Why have these members of the elite been immortalized or portrayed? It is self-evident that the scholar makes subjective notions that may be polysemous and there is always a danger to fall into clichés, but at the same, as I have emphasised, these visual sources cannot be ignored when one is refashioning *l'honneste femme* who was also a visual creature. Moreover, Mieke Bal's notion 'that since viewers bring their own cultural baggage to images, there can be no such thing as a fixed, predetermined, or unified meaning',<sup>127</sup> should be considered seriously when visual sources are analysed. In other words, as a 21<sup>st</sup> century European historian, I have to ask how do I read the representative art of the early modern era? Do I view with the cultural meanings of my epoch, or am

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123 Sternberg 2014, 39–45, 159. See also, Burke 2001, 81.

124 Whittle & Griffiths 2012, 2.

125 Ranum 1986, 211–212.

126 Burke 2001, 40–41.

127 Bal 2001, 71.

I capable of understanding the 17th century viewer?

Several paintings of Madame de Sévigné remain. Madame de Sévigné has been portrayed by Ferdinand II Elle (1612–1689) and Claude Lefèvre (1633–1675). Lefèvre's painting is located in Musée de Carnavalet, which was Madame de Sévigné's residence. One portrait of Madame de Sévigné is located in *château des Rochers*. In addition to paintings, there are several *gravures* of Madame de Sévigné. Several paintings also remain of Ninon de Lenclos.<sup>128</sup> Some of them, however, cannot be considered in all certainty portraits of de Lenclos. One painting from an unknown artist is exhibited in Versailles. A painting by Pierre Mignard (1612–1695) is in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Marseille.

A general picture of the life of the elite, and especially of the role of women, can be seen in the works of the famous artist Abraham Bosse (1604–1676), a sculptor and painter of the Royal Academy, who became one of the finest engravers of the 17th century. I use *gravures* and other paintings as an historical medium to bring depth and visual form to the early modern elite and to ideas on womanhood. These *gravures* and paintings can, however, be misleading especially when examining the aging of elite women, because they do not necessarily represent reality but rather ideals.<sup>129</sup>

**Poetry, plays & belles-lettres.** In early modern France, poetry could be used both to praise or to satirize a person. Thus, it is possible to examine Paris, its elite and Madame de Sévigné or Ninon de Lenclos through poetry.<sup>130</sup> As with poems, so too with plays it is possible to observe conceptions of a female ideal (for example *les précieuses*: Madame de

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128 16th-century Italian painters often represented rich bejewelled courtesans in silk and fine fabrics with gilded embroidery. Norberg 2013, 398. The personality of courtesan de Lenclos' captured in several portraits was part of this continuum.

129 See also, Burke 2001, 30.

130 The Bibliothèque nationale de France contains a poem on de Lenclos by Eubard in which the poet gives a few lines of description of Ninon de Lenclos' residence on rue de Tournelles (Nouvelles acquisitions françaises 22873. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Paris). The poems of Saint-Évremond (Saint-Évremond Tome I 1725 & Saint-Évremond Tome IV 1726) and Scarron (Scarron 1645; Scarron 1663–1664; Scarron (1643–1651) 1947; Scarron (1650–1654) 1960) are also exquisite depictions of the period.

Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos)<sup>131</sup> by means of comedy and parody. Critiques of educated women and of women's wish to be educated, sophisticated and to distance themselves from the traditional female image are enlarged in Molière's satire.<sup>132</sup>

The *belles-lettres* of contemporaries reflect the early modern value system and help to perceive relationships between genders, beliefs of the importance of outer appearance and of the correct behaviour with regard to love and *galanterie*.<sup>133</sup> The most challenging part of the study is to understand and to reconstruct the respectable woman's sexuality through the available sources. In medieval times, there was plenty of written material on sex, and having sex or abstaining from it to a large extent defined a person.<sup>134</sup> As mentioned above, in the early modern era the sources of elite women's sexuality are scarce. Madame de Sévigné and *Princesse Palatine* left behind only a few written traces of how women's sexuality in their time might be characterised. Steinberg also states that in court records there are notes about tragic events, sexual violence against women and badly-ended love affairs. In these cases, she adds, the women of the early modern era had the words to describe the events, but they remained quiet about other matters regarding female sexuality. However, neither can written documents of sexuality in happy 17th century marriages be found nor have women with a liberal attitude to sexuality, such as *coquettes*, courtesans, prostitutes, women who eloped with their lovers and those who challenged the

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131 Somaize's *La Clef du grand Dictionnaire des Précieuses* (1661) & *Le grand dictionnaire des précieuses* (1661). Duchêne 2001. Timmermans notes that Mme de Sévigné was one of the *précieuses*. Timmermans 2005, 109. But according to Fidao-Justiani, Mme de La Fayette or Mme de Sévigné were not *précieuses ridicules*. Fidao-Justiani 1914 (2013), 100.

132 For example, Molière's *Précieuses ridicules* (1659) and *Les Femmes savantes* (1672).

133 For example, *La Princesse de Montpensier* (1662), and *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678) by Mme de La Fayette, as well as *Gil Blas; Histoire de Gil Blas de Santilane* (1715–1735) by Alain-René Le Sage provide a fictional image of love and marriage. Charles Sorel's *La description de l'Isle de portraiture et de la ville des portraits* (1659) tells a story of the way that the 17th-century elite desired to appear in portraits according to an ideal and not according to reality.

134 Karras 2005, 28.

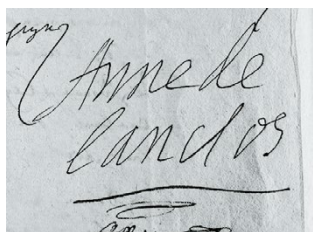
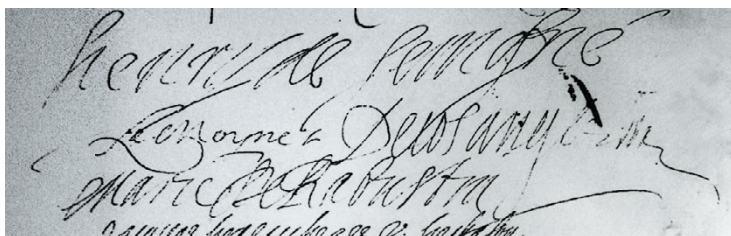



Fig. 2: Testament d'Anne de Lanclos. 7.9.1662. CV, 752. (Archives nationales. Paris). Fig. 3: Contrat de mariage de Henri, marquis de Sévigné et Marie de Rabutin-Chantal 1.8.1644. MC/RSS/498. (Archives nationales. Paris).

sexual morality of their time, spoken of the matter.<sup>135</sup> This is also the case with Ninon de Lenclos whose reputation was – and still is – largely based on her uninhibited sexuality. She too kept completely silent about her amorous activities, as did her lovers, who revealed no details of intimate moments with this known courtesan.<sup>136</sup>

Since the sexuality of elite women is hidden and not described in documents, some pornographic texts provide a portrait of lust, pleasure and the meaning of sex among the literate elite. *L'École des Filles, Ou La Philosophie des Dames* (1655) is a rare example of French 17th century pornography.<sup>137</sup> Whereas conduct books aimed at instructing

<sup>135</sup> Steinberg 2010, 79, 81, 94, 104–106.

<sup>136</sup> Duchêne 2000, 119.

<sup>137</sup> Previously, its authors were assumed to be Jean L'Ange and Michel Millot. Dens 1991, 239. According to Muchembled, it is written by Michel Milot. Muchembled 2008, 91, 103. The book was considered indecent and Claude Le Petit (1638–1662), who had read proofs of the book and who was also behind other publications that were considered indecent, was publicly executed on 1 September 1662. Muchembled 2008, 104–105. DeJean 2002, 90. The

polite and perfectly controlled *honnêtes gens*, *L'École des Filles*, according to Muchembled, provided carnal education dedicated to women's sexuality.<sup>138</sup> Thus, this work as well as *l'Académie des Dames* (1680)<sup>139</sup> and *Venus dans le cloître ou la religieuse en chemise* (1683) depict early modern era sexuality and suggests for its part that sexuality of elite women was not entirely unknown and hidden.

Poems, plays as well as *belles-lettres* depict the dichotomy between ideals and reality and also reveal the writer's own ambitions and desire to represent the surrounding society and its people and phenomena. In addition, it is essential to emphasise that the nature of the sources has an effect on the way I use them. These sources reflect values, attitudes and ideals; thus, they are not unquestionable evidence of the past.

**The spelling of the names.** When I refer to Madame de Sévigné, I use her maiden name Marie de Rabutin-Chantal in discussing the time prior to her marriage with Marquis Henri de Sévigné; for the time after this she is referred as Madame de Sévigné, Marquise de Sévigné or *la marquise*.

Ninon de Lenclos was baptized Anne de Lanclo or Lanclos<sup>140</sup> and the courtesan herself used the form Anne de Lanclos in signatures. I use this original name only when it is necessary for context. The spelling Ninon de Lenclos is already established in modern research and in this study, it gives the impression of a young woman active in her profession. When discussing the elderly Ninon de Lenclos, the name Mademoiselle

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time of the story's publication was also poor: it included the theme of women's emancipation, which aggravated the guardians of morality. Stanton 2014, 21. There are also suspicions that François d'Aubigné (1635–1719), the wife of the poet Paul Scarron, would have been the role model of Fanchon, one of the two main characters. Muchembled 2008, 90–91.

138 Muchembled 2008, 76.

139 This was the first French edition of Nicholas Chorier's (1612–1692) Latin work *Aloisiae Sigææ, Toletanæ, Satyra sotadica de arcanis amoris et Veneris, Aloisia hispanice scripsit, latinitate donavit Joannes Meursius* V. C. In this study, I have used hand written copy in French (1700) that is located in the Finnish National Library.

140 'Le 10e jour de novembre 1620 fut baptisée Anne, fille de noble homme Henry de Lanclo, escuyer de M. de Saint-Luc, de damoiselle Marie Barbe de la Marche [...]'. Registres de Saint-Jean en Grève. Registre 7. Lettre N. (De 1615 à 1624). Lenclos, Colombay 1886, 289.

de Lenclos occurs because her contemporaries also began to use it. The introduction to a 1672 poem of Mademoiselle de Lenclos has '*Sur Anne de Lenclos: vulgairement appelée Ninon*'.<sup>141</sup> Thus, Mademoiselle de Lenclos reflects her more honourable position among the elite.

## 5. Outline of the whole study

This study is divided into four themes: social circumstances, the stage (Paris), sexuality and gilded appearances. In the first theme, I will analyse the nobility, *mariage* and upbringing that together encompass the meaning of education in the lives of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos. The nobility, marriage and upbringing all influenced Madame de Sévigné's and Ninon de Lenclos' self-understanding as women and members of elite and the way they identified with *honnêteté*. In the second theme, the stage, I discuss the meanings of the milieu; the developing Paris of the elite and its *hôtel particuliers*, where the conditions for the ideal were created and realized or resisted. I shall also consider the meaning of material consumption, polite manners and *galanterie* as tools for self-fashioning. Since gender, sex and sexuality strongly defined a respectable elite woman, the third theme examines the early modern era's conceptions of sex, gender and the meaning of fertility and love, which all influenced the elite's self-fashioning. I also aim to understand how *la marquise* and *la courtisane* have adapted and fashioned the expectations of the asexual *honneste femme*. The meaning of lovemaking is examined as well as its effect on the conception of *honnêteté*, despite the lack of sources, which has a strong influence how women's sexuality in the 17th-century can be studied.<sup>142</sup> In order to help create a fuller idea of the respectable woman, the fourth and final theme concerns female beauty and glorious outer appearance, and the way that they reflect a respectable woman and means for self-fashioning. The last theme also

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<sup>141</sup> Epigramme (1672), p. 551. MS. 12618. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Paris.

<sup>142</sup> Steinberg 2010, 79–81, 94.



explores how Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos experienced the old age and the expectations of *honnêteté* placed on old women.

Concerning the time scope of this study in which *l'honnête femme* is studied through two elite women, attention is mainly focused on the adulthood of both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos (1640–1705) when their engagement as sophisticated elite women was meaningful. Furthermore, the roots of sophistication and the female ideal had already evolved during earlier centuries, but when Louis XIV took his place on the throne in 1643, an unforeseen courtly brilliance emerged. It influenced women's salons<sup>143</sup> and Parisian salon culture, which provided the meeting grounds for elite sociability;<sup>144</sup> private *appartements* became *rendez-vous* points where the elite's self-fashioning emerged. In addition, this worldly sophistication and the court's closer relations with Paris increased consumption and the pursuit of elegant luxury;<sup>145</sup> thus, fashion created an efficient mean to express elite status. These developments most likely affected the self-fashioning of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos.

A study that discusses *l'honnête femme* cannot ignore the surrounding society. In Louis XIV's time stricter rules applied to family matters, and this had an effect on women's position. In addition, regardless of the ideal of invariance, the 17th-century French society was in a process of change, and this was reflected in the spheres occupied by Parisian elite women. Changes in France and in French elite women's freedom, which was greater than that in other countries, had an influence on how a new idea of a sophisticated woman was understood. In France, promenades, social leisure, and dance brought women and men together, even though the country was strongly Catholic and in the previous centuries, friendship between

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143 *Salon*: a large, elegant hall, the model for which came from Italy. *Salon*. Furetière Tome II, 1690. *Ruelle*, in turn, reflected the place where ladies received their guests, either on the bed or seated in chairs. *Ruelle*. Furetière Tome II, 1690. Even though the term *salon* was unknown in the 17th century, it is still possible to use it here. Lilti 2005, 61.

144 Bohanan 2012, 85, 101–102. See also, Moriarty 2009, 40–44.

145 See, for example, Boucher 1987, 256.

men and women was not customary.<sup>146</sup> Such behaviour in the 1660s astonished foreigners: surprised Sebastiano Locatelli wrote that it seemed that nothing restricted the freedom of French *femme honnête* who goes out, is left alone with friends, relatives and guests and was not suspected anything; thus, men want to show that they are not jealous monsters.<sup>147</sup> The phenomenon had nothing to do with a highly liberated social process, because Christian ideals always underpinned behaviour. “Women’s new freedom” concerned a very small and privileged elite group. However, the Parisian elite women who benefited from this had completely new opportunities.

The question remains: In what way might the refashioning of the respectable elite woman’s entity bring something new to the field of historical research? The sources on Madame de Sévigné and on Ninon de Lenclos tell the story of two elite women, both of whom took advantage of the opportunities they had. Both women negotiated the social circumstances, and social prospects: Madame de Sévigné as an independent widow and the courtesan Ninon de Lenclos as an unmarried woman with the power to climb the social ladder. They were individuals whose personae attracted a wide range of admirers, and who were active members in Parisian *société*. These two women made choices based on their own desires and beliefs, but they also understood what was expected of them as members of the elite and from this combination it is worthwhile to endeavour to understand their self-fashioning as a female ideal.

Most importantly, it is crucial to refashion the idea of the entity of respectable woman that male authors emphasised,

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<sup>146</sup> Nell & Wolfgang 2014, 20. See also, Dabhoiwala 2012, 182.

<sup>147</sup> Locatelli (1664–1665) 1905, 325. About French early modern women’s freedom see also, Beasley 2006, 19. However, the French elite women’s freedom was not entirely unique in Europe. For example, in the Netherlands women also enjoyed relative freedom of behaviour. Public kissing, talking openly and walking without chaperones were all permissible for Dutch women. This was shocking for foreigners, even for the French, although the unshakable virtue of Dutch married women was emphasised. A young Dutch man was said to be able to sit next to his mistress all night without violating her honour. Schama 1988, 402.

not to mention that the studying the life of women and the changes that took place from a historical perspective is also necessary, so that there is more understanding of the process that has been distorted and even erased 17th-century women's history from the collective memory ever since the *Ancien Régime*.<sup>148</sup> In this respect, it is self-evident that early modern *honneste femme* needs a new kind of scholarly approach and I am convinced that when we understand properly how the entity of respectable woman was constructed, we can also identify social changes and how adjustable and adaptive the entity of *l'honneste femme* was and Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos can be seen as key factors in understanding this phenomenon.

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148 Saulnier 2002, 114.

## II

### SOCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES: CHASTE MARQUISE, DEBAUCHED COURTESAN & ONE *société*

For members of the elite, high social status and noble birth were the cornerstones of their position. These alone were enough to create the status as a remarkable member of the elite, part of the Parisian *société*. Nobility, with its internal hierarchy, was considered immutable and it included a thought, an ideal of an unchangeable society.<sup>149</sup> This belief was supported through the marriage policy of the nobility, for in 17th century France the primary goal was equal marriage concerning the social classes and titles.<sup>150</sup> In addition, according to Hufton, marriage was more a rule than an exception for women, because most women married, although in the upper classes marriage was somewhat less common than in the lower classes.<sup>151</sup> Marriage was both a citizen contract and a political arrangement in which a man would be united with a woman but where feelings had no particular importance. Especially the unions of the high nobility were based more on political relations than sympathy.<sup>152</sup> To many girls, marrying was the only alternative, if one wanted to continue living a secular life and to realize one's sexuality. It concerned, however, the question of wealth. Women were not allowed to work; thus, their livelihood depended on family and the prestige value of their marriage. Men were entitled to the possessions of their wives and children with very few exceptions,<sup>153</sup> but they

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149 Lappalainen 2005, 51. See also, Lahtinen 2007, 26.

150 French honorary titles: *prince, duc, marquis, comte, vicomte, baron, chevalier, écuyer*.

151 Hufton 1993, 26–27.

152 Furetière Tome II 1702, 208.

153 Hanley 1989, 10.

could make the wife the executor of their estates instead of transmitting the family possessions directly to their children.<sup>154</sup> Thus, wealth was one means by which women could gain power, particularly through inheritance.

To Nicolas Faret, the author of *L'Honnête Homme* (1630), the virtue of a respectable person was *grace naturelle*, but if the sophistication was lacking, it was possible, according to him, to improve it in the right environment where it was guided by good examples, and a good education facilitated this.<sup>155</sup> Even though a girl's upbringing directed her towards acceptance of her future roles as wife and mother, an educated and cultivated woman of the elite had the opportunity to realise the respectable woman's ideal in an elite *rendez-vous* and it is possible to see these gatherings as a space where sophisticated elite women created their own space. These elite women had a significant cultural role: their own contribution to, interest in, and enthusiasm for intellectual sophistication made the role of elite women significant. Thus, they had the opportunity, thanks to the high social ranking and possible widowhood – or a successful courtesan – to be detached from the home, utilise available resources and gain a new kind of power which was embodied, on among other occasions, in conversations with equals.<sup>156</sup>

In other words, a respectable elite woman acquired the foundations for her status not only through her birth and rank, but also through her upbringing, education and the values in her family. Thus, in this chapter, I begin by considering the ideals of nobility, along with the related ideals and how the elite woman adapted to them, and this effects on women's self-fashioning. In the second section, I shall demonstrate that childhood and the education which a daughter of an elite family received, had a great impact on a respectable woman's life – or as did living contrary to these ideal. In that

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154 Ranum 2002, 131. Note also that usually a married woman had no right to sell property, to make financial obligations, or to sue someone in a court of law, without a permission from her husband. Tikanoja 2009, 90–91.

155 Faret 1630, 32–33.

156 See, for example, Ranum 2002, 139. Goldsmith 1988, 105.

section, I also examine how Madame de Sévigné's and Ninon de Lenclos' childhood and youth shaped their perception of themselves, their femininity, and the expectations that were set in accordance with their gender. The third section illuminates how marriage strategies or a choice not to marry create a sphere where the elite women's *honnêteté* was created, preserved. The extent to which this influenced the fashioning of respectability is discussed.

## 1. The philosophy of nobility

### High birth and constructing *honneste femme*

High birth or great fortune precede dignity and make it rather detectable.<sup>157</sup>

As La Bruyère states above, high birth was a valuable feature and a noble rank defined its bearers completely, when the 17th-century French nobility were roaming the streets of Paris and making elite *rendez-vous*. Michael Moriarty also argues that many of those who followed *honnêteté* as lifestyle, 'had been placed there by birth',<sup>158</sup> and Grenaille states that *honnêteté* belonged especially to the nobility.<sup>159</sup> It is not unreasonable to say that the idea of nobility defined also the respectable elite woman, as Nicolas Faret emphasises: 'I will be the first one to say that I consider it really important that whoever joins the grand interaction with people, must be a nobleman, and from a family of good reputation'.<sup>160</sup> In other words, the ideal came from the nobility and family of good reputation, even though Faret states that there were people from more modest backgrounds who had done something grand,

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157 'Une grande naissance, ou une grande fortune annonce la mérite & le fait plutôt remarquer'. La Bruyère 1699.

158 Moriarty 2009, 89.

159 Grenaille (1640) 2003.

160 'Je diray premierement qu'il me semble tres necessaire que celui qui veut entrer dans ce grand commerce du monde soit nay Gentilhomme, & d'une maison qui ait quleque bonne marque'. Faret 1630, 7–8.

and had become famous.<sup>161</sup> Furthermore, according to Elias, the starting point of the sociological theory of interdependence emphasises that each person – already from his or her birth – belongs to various nexus of interdependent people.<sup>162</sup> Thus, within the discourse of *l'honneste femme*, it is possible to suggest that the network of interdependence of Parisian elite women frames their actions and choices. Consequently, the life of Parisian elite women was, I claim, determined by social status, gender as well as by their interdependent group and other social ranks remained very distant.

Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, *la marquise* de Sévigné was a pure aristocrat as his father was Celse-Bénigne de Rabutin, *baron* de Chantal and later she married *marquis* de Sévigné.<sup>163</sup> As for Anne (Ninon) de Lenclos, she had been born into a class more loosely associated with aristocracy. According to Douxménil, who wrote Ninon de Lenclos' biography, Anne de Lenclos was by her birth *Demoiselle*. He also emphasised the social status of her parents: Henri de Lenclos was *gentilhomme de Touraine*, and the mother was *Mademoiselle de Raconis, demoiselle de l'Orléanois*.<sup>164</sup> Duchêne stresses quite rightly that this was to confirm Ninon de Lenclos' nobility in the eyes of posterity.<sup>165</sup> Similar to him, Verge-Franceschi emphasises courtesan de Lenclos' nobility which gave her a social status.<sup>166</sup> Thus, it is challenging to

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161 Faret 1630, 8.

162 Elias 2006, 155.

163 See, for example, MC/RSS/498. *Contrat de Mariage entre Henri, marquis de Sévigné and Marie Rabutin-Chantal*. 1.8.1644. Archives nationales. Paris.

164 Douxménil (1751) 1908, 23, 24. The title *gentilhomme* was reserved for noble families who could not claim any other title. Bely 1996, 888. See also, *Gentilhomme*. Furetière Tome I 1690.

165 In addition, in the Touraine region no noble family by the name Lenclos can be found, but in Champagne, in the municipality of Virey-sur-Bar'n area, there is a place called Lenclos. According to official documents, Henri de Lenclos was *écuyer*, which is a title reserved for *gentilhomme*. Duchêne in 2000, 23–24. In addition, Douxménil also emphasises the spiritual education Ninon de Lenclos received by going to church with her mother, and he also connects this with an idea that Ninon always carried literature and poetry with her. Douxménil (1751) 1908, 25. In the middle of the 18th century, a legend was born of a noble girl who was aware of the Christian faith, but did not settle for this, and wanted to read other literature.

166 Verge-Franceschi 2014, 26, 40.

know for sure what was Ninon de Lenclos' honorary title, not to mention that the concept of aristocracy has many nuances and internal hierarchies. However, although she did not belong to court society, her position among the Parisian elite, which partly included courtiers, was unquestionable as the study shall show later. In other words, regardless of differences in birth, both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos were active members in Parisian society. They shared a peer group as well as acquaintances and they were members of the urban elite.<sup>167</sup> Furthermore, in the case of Ninon de Lenclos, Bourdieu's claim, that a person's education, skills, wealth or family *de facto* can sometimes be at odds with his or her manners, use of language, friends, aspirations or lifestyle, features which are usually associated with his or her standing,<sup>168</sup> could be considered.

The nobility had traditionally acquired its social position from honesty, bravery on the battlefield and loyal to their leader. As time went by, their status became guaranteed by birth. In the late 16th century, during the *Guerres de religion*, the nobility was criticised for their anti-intellectualism and the way that this group ignored its internal values.<sup>169</sup> The nobility was divided to those whose status was based on formality, and those whose social position was formed according to how other nobles categorized and appreciated them.<sup>170</sup> Furthermore, it is important to note that the elite and nobility are not perfect synonyms and that the elite itself was divided into many different groups: the courtly elite, the *bourgeois* elite, the urban elite or the officeholding elites.<sup>171</sup> During the rule of Louis XIV, these two social positions began to overlap, so

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167 *The Medieval Aristocracy of Southern Europe Reconsidered: Characteristics and New Perspectives*. Verdon 2015. In 1643 Paul Scarron used the word *élite* in his poem *Adieu aux Mares & à la Place Royale*. Scarron (1643–1651) 1947, 44. Verge-Franceschi uses the word *élite*, but considers that Ninon de Lenclos belonged rather *au cercle nobiliaire* than to the elite. Verge-Franceschi 2014, 41. Despite this my study emphasises the fact that as an intellectual courtesan de Lenclos was part of the 17th-century Parisian elite.

168 Bourdieu 1984, 372–374.

169 Bohanan 2001, 12–13.

170 Lappalainen 2005, 20–21.

171 Bluche & Solnon 1983, 51. Parker 2003 7–11, 37, 41–47.



that it was possible for the non-noble elite to become part of the nobility.<sup>172</sup>

Pierre Nicole stresses that it was not the titles, but *l'amour propre* that united people of the same *société*.<sup>173</sup> However, more than anything else, as Ranum states, being noble was a lifestyle that included among other things style, independence and pleasure.<sup>174</sup> Thus, the philosophy of nobility in 17th-century France was, I suggest, above all else a *mode de vie* that corresponded to certain social expectations. A noble person was someone who lived like a noble person: this may also apply to the idea of *honnêteté*: *personne honnête* acted like *personne honnête*. Nobility – as well as their *honnêteté* – was about being, honour, manners, and in Louis XIV's court this noble lifestyle was made into a form of art – but in this, the performance of *honnêteté*, fashioned by the Parisian elite, was not worse.

The values of the court both in terms of social theatre and of culture spread from the *hôtels* of the courtly nobility to Parisian elite salons.<sup>175</sup> Thus, the Parisian elite could not avoid habits of the court. To a member of the elite it was important not only to be accepted but to be applauded, and it was particularly important to be favoured by members of the royal family. Bussy-Rabutin states contemptuously that Madame de Sévigné had been excited after the queen spoke to her, and that she would speak of this long afterwards in order to gain respect from people of her preference.<sup>176</sup> Madame de Sévigné's avid demeanour was understandable because, as Elias claims, in the court of Louis XIV, the prestige of nobility depended on their position within the court and inside the court hierarchies.<sup>177</sup> In addition, according to Furetière's dictionary, men (and women) of the court should also have

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172 Bluche & Solnon 1983, 62.

173 Nicole Tome 3 1715, 106–108.

174 Ranum 2002, 197.

175 Elias 2006, 87.

176 Bussy-Rabutin 1665, 30.

177 Elias 2006, 88. Thus being at the king's service in even the smallest actions and gestures was a matter of honour to the courtly nobility. Da Vinha 2009, 195.

lived there – or at least have visited there often.<sup>178</sup>

But how did Madame de Sévigné herself define her social status? By analysing her letters, it is evident that she felt herself to be part of the Parisian nobility and the court.<sup>179</sup> Madame de Sévigné was attracted by the noble lifestyle both at Versailles and in Paris<sup>180</sup> and by accepting and admiring the way of life of the court, she accepted the lifestyle that was critiqued, for example, by François de Sales.<sup>181</sup> La Bruyère also points out that ‘in some sense, the most flattering way to criticise a person is to tell him that he does not know the court: this one word gathers in him all possible virtues’.<sup>182</sup> By this, he wishes to point out how devastating the vices at court could be and how damaging they could be to a respectable person’s reputation. However, when referring to La Bruyère’s *Caractères*, one should also consider, as Moriarty states, that La Bruyère’s œuvre is not an inclusive work on *honnêteté*, even though a partial concept of *honnêteté* can be reconstructed from it.<sup>183</sup> However, Madame de Sévigné’s knowledge of the elite lifestyle helped her understand how much was required to be part of the court or a lady in waiting:<sup>184</sup> It was endless work where a person’s own desires and needs had to be ignored. Elite families were full of disdain, jealousy and hate although the family members themselves pretended otherwise<sup>185</sup> and this

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<sup>178</sup> *Cour*. Furetière Tome I 1690.

<sup>179</sup> See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 July 1676. Sévigné Tome II, 351–352; Mme de Sévigné to Guitaut 12 February 1683. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 102; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 2 July 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 346–347; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 12 August 1685. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 228–229.

<sup>180</sup> Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 5 January 1674. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 656; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 2 July 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 346–347. See also, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 12 August 1685. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 228–229.

<sup>181</sup> Sales 1641.

<sup>182</sup> ‘*Le reproche en un sens le plus honorable que l’on puisse faire à un homme, c’est de luy dire qu’il ne sçait pas la Cour ; il n’y a forte de vertus qu’on ne rassemble en luy par ce seul mot*’. La Bruyère 1699, 238.

<sup>183</sup> Moriarty 2009, 143.

<sup>184</sup> Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 5 January 1674. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 656.

<sup>185</sup> Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 24 July 1675. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 14.

masquerade also continued at court. Thus, from here one does not get the impression of an elite woman who defines herself in accordance with the status she had at court: it was certainly important to Madame de Sévigné, but not a priority and she fashioned herself rather as one of the Parisian elite.

According to Elias, in Versailles as among other noble circles an internal control system was in operation: anyone who surpassed their own authority hurt others.<sup>186</sup> The entire French society was based on control, hierarchies and personal status and showing feelings in the court was a sign of weakness.<sup>187</sup> Thus, the best thing to maintain reputation was silence: An illuminating example of the meaning of silence was the pride Madame de Sévigné felt of her daughter who was able to stay silent when required.<sup>188</sup> As a member of the elite, Madame de Sévigné understood, as I believe did Ninon de Lenclos, the importance of not speaking too much when performances between *les égaux* were being played out since the Parisian elite, like the court aristocracy, was dependent on its peers and 'a single unconsidered utterance can have a permanent effect', as Elias states.<sup>189</sup> In other words, the respectable elite woman should not show her emotions or act unreservedly in elite gatherings. Thus, Madame de Sévigné does not criticise courtly manners in her letters as she was in no position to do so. Moreover, she knew about Foquet<sup>190</sup> and understood what it meant at worst to become unpopular in the eyes of the king. Therefore, Madame de Sévigné, who was clever enough to walk a tightrope between her own moral values, ambitions and court life, shows, according to

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186 Elias 2006, 143.

187 Elias 2006, 121.

188 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 4 May 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 499.

189 Elias 2006, 120.

190 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to Pomponne 17 November 1664. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 55–56; Mme de Sévigné to Pomponne 18 November 1664. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 57; Mme de Sévigné to Pomponne 20 November 1664. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 59; Mme de Sévigné to Pomponne 21 November 1664. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 59; Mme de Sévigné to Pomponne 22 November 1664. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 60.

her letters, endless admiration for the royal family.<sup>191</sup>

### *Civilité* and powerful elite

Manners as a performance were an essential part in constructing the respectable woman of the elite and maintaining honour among equals was, indeed, a matter of conduct. However, it was also 'a shared identity', as Ylivuori states.<sup>192</sup> In meetings of members of the nobility and elite, the concept of *civilité*<sup>193</sup> emphasised good behaviour, politeness and agreement. The conduct of gentility enabled *l'honnête homme* to get along with people of different character, such as '*humours bijarres & violances*'.<sup>194</sup> The main concern was the ideals that were strived after rather than the reality in which the members of the elite functioned. In fact, manners were related to family status: in 1690, Furetière's definition of the term *la civilité* was birth related and manifested itself in polite action and conversation among people. It was 'the respectable, wonderful and polite way to act, to share a discussion. The society must be treated with respect. Children must be taught to be polite. Only rural and rude people have no *civilité*'.<sup>195</sup> According to

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191 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to Guitaut 12 February 1683. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 102. Mme de Sévigné's daughter Françoise-Marguerite, *la plus belle fille de France*, also had her share of attention within the court. In May 1664, during the festivities of *Plaisirs de l'Île enchantée*, both Mme de Sévigné and her daughter were placed at the royal table together with fifty-one other people, among whom there was also the king's mistress Mlle de La Vallière. Duchêne does not consider this arrangement particularly significant, but at the same time it gave reason for gossip which was not appreciated by Mlle de Sévigné. Duchêne 2002, 287–288. The possible interest that the king might have in young and beautiful Françoise-Marguerite caused considerable comment. Such events made Mme de Sévigné accept that there was a mistress culture within the court, but she still wanted to find a suitable husband for her daughter.

192 Ylivuori 2015, 15.

193 *Civilité* defined the external relations between people from a cultural and civilised perspective. Montandon 1995, 713. The concept, which was built around *civilité*, had already been adopted in many of the societies where church people had communicated with each other in Latin, then in Italian, and later more often in French. Elias 2000, 47. See also, Pernot 1996, 70.

194 Faret 1630, 169. See also, Smith 2002, 45.

195 *Civilité*. Furetière Tome I 1690. Several terms have been used to describe politeness: *urbanité*, *decorum*, *civilité*, *bienséance*, *honnêteté*, *décence*, *sociabilité*, *politesse*. Pernot 1996, 33. The prevailing culture played a crucial

Donna Bohanan, as the 17th century progressed, upbringing, education, positions, money and the developing society reshaped this change that the nobility underwent.<sup>196</sup> The final result was *l'honnête homme*, a hybrid of old, Christian values and new thoughts, which had gradually formed by refining customs.

To Antoine de Courtin, the first rule of *bienséance*, propriety, was to have good judgement in doing things respectably and properly.<sup>197</sup> According to Furetière's dictionary:

*Bienséance*. [...] gives charm and acceptance. [...] Propriety requires from us responsibilities and civility. The propriety must be maintained in all matters.<sup>198</sup>

Thus, the members of nobility were expected to behave in a way appropriate to their position and a person who lived a sophisticated life never lost his or her temper. *Honnêtes gens* remained polite under all circumstances but there were, however, situations where polite behaviour turned into violence as in duels. Thus, reality and ideals were prone to clash. To understand this ambivalent situation, it is worth mentioning that earlier the primary tasks of the nobility had been politics and warfare. A brutal, masculine, warlike culture was considered vital, and this was also the situation during the reign of Louis XIV. In this, idealized violence associated with the nobility was largely to blame.<sup>199</sup> Although the self-fashioning of the nobility was undergoing a transformation,<sup>200</sup> nevertheless violence was part of the understanding of *honnête* behaviour. In this respect, it is interesting to consider whether it had any influence on elite women. In fact, they could not

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role, and through it also came the dissociation from others. Montandon 1995, 713.

196 Bohanan 2001, 12–13.

197 Courtin 1728, 39.

198 '*Bienséance*. [...] donne la grace, de l'agrément. La bienséance exige de nous plusieurs devoirs & civilitez. Il faut en toutes choses observer les bienséances'. *Bienséance*. Furetière Tome I 1690.

199 Ranum 2002, 195.

200 See, for example, Elias 2006, 256–257.

avoid this cultural habit of *honnête* violence. Madame de Sévigné was very much aware what happened on battlefields and how many lives war claimed. It is also clear that Madame de Sévigné did not glorify war or violence.<sup>201</sup> In addition, elite women saw from a close distance the result of praising violence. For example, both Madame de Sévigné's father and husband supported a violent noble culture,<sup>202</sup> and Ninon de Lenclos' father killed baron de Chaban without giving him a chance to defend himself.<sup>203</sup> Moreover, the elite women socialised with high-ranking officers: in the case of Ninon de Lenclos one of her lovers was the famous Louis de Bourbon, duke d'Enghien (1621–1686), future Condé<sup>204</sup> who had a distinguished *carrière militaire*:

This young duke who won battles;  
 [...]
 Wanting to enjoy the pleasure of his glory,  
 [...]
 As heroes never rest,  
 [...]
 After supper, he did something else;  
 Without knowing if he made sighs,  
 At least I know that he loved his pleasure.<sup>205</sup>

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201 About *Guerre de Holland* (1672–1678) see, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 8 April 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 474–476; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 27 April 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 491; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 April 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 495; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 13 May 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 507. About *Guerre de la Ligue d'Augsbourg* (1688–1697) see, for example, Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 2 September 1688. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 356–357; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 10 April 1691. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 959.

202 Mme de Sévigné's father was a man known for duels, and he died in the fight of Île de Ré in June 1627. Duchêne 2002, 37, 84.

203 Consequently, Henri de Lenclos went in exile. Des Réaux Tome III 1840, 202–203.

204 FR 28168. Lenclos 39214. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Paris. Duc d'Enghien had his honorary title Prince de Condé from 1646 to 1686.

205 'Ce jeune duc qui gagnait des batailles ; [...] Voulant jouir des plaisirs de sa gloire [...], Comme un héros jamais ne se repose [...], Après souper, il faisait autre chose ; Et sans savoirs s'il poussait des soupirs, Je sais au moins qu'il aimait ses plaisirs'. Saint-Evremond Tome I 1725, 113–115.

The most famous courtesan of Paris was yet one more of this duke and officer's conquest, a campaign that gave him much pleasure. This pleasure served a greater and more useful purpose: the company of the courtesan de Lenclos also gave him status and made it clear to a wider audience that nothing was out of reach for this noble man, but it was a trade that benefited both parties. In the light of this study, the important notion is that loose but sophisticated women seemed to be as above the rules as their lovers.<sup>206</sup> A liberal lifestyle was not an option to everyone – nor was it worthwhile – but it is possible to consider that an elegant and refined courtesan would represent particularly to noble men an extravagant luxury item, a badge of triumph in a noble man's collection of trophies. However, these relationships indicate that the same people mixed and mingled in part in Versailles and among the Parisian elite. In other words, as with the court, so too in Paris, a drama was played out, only the stage was different. Whereas Madame de Sévigné was able to enjoy social opportunities offered by the court as well as Paris, but Ninon de Lenclos in this case, who had been excluded from the court, also had her share of the court aristocracy.

Indeed, the relations between *les égaux* constituted *la gloire* of members of the *société*: a person who wanted to be one of the *honnêtes gens* had to earn a favourable opinion from those who had already earned the status and from *les Grands*.<sup>207</sup> Thus, *honnêtes gens* associated continuously with people whose behaviour and 'public image one would like to emulate', as Goldsmith states.<sup>208</sup> However, the situation was fragile: according to Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, the elite was living in a society whose relationships were highly controlled, but uncontrolled on an individual level: in the movement and competition of different societal layers and groups, an

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206 In the previous century, Brantôme had described in *Recueil des dames* (a work that comprises fourteen *discours*) married women, widows, and girls (i.e., virgins) and these women, *Grandes Dames* and courtesans whom Brantôme depicts were above the rules. Daumas 1998, 101.

207 Faret 1630, 89.

208 Goldsmith 1988, 21.

individual could lose his or her status and prestige. For a respectable person, it was not enough to respect oneself, if one was not respected by others.<sup>209</sup> Therefore, it is justifiable to think that members of the elite who visited *chez de Lenclos*<sup>210</sup> would be pleased with Ninon de Lenclos' love affair with a member of the royal Family. Duc d'Enghien's reputation as a military conquerer, as a relative of the Bourbon monarchs and as the lover of young Ninon de Lenclos must have at least partially stabilised her position among the nobility and the elite. It gave her a certain prestige and emphasised her worth as a mistress for *honnêtes hommes*. In this respect, she was not an ordinary prostitute but someone who was sociable desirable, someone worth a *bataille*.

Both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos were among those Parisian elite women who made independent choices concerning marriage, sexuality and performing *honnêteté* and this freed them from the direct domination of noblemen. Furthermore, both women considered men as friends, protectors and helpers and this, I claim, partly ensured their freedom to realise self-fashioning. To Madame de Sévigné, Henri de Sévigné was a husband and protector and her uncle, Monsieur de Coulanges, '*le Bien Bon*' had the role of helper and protector. To Ninon de Lenclos, men were lovers and an opportunity to achieve material and social ascent. At the same time, the men in her life were a form of insurance, for without her friends in the nobility she would have been socially more vulnerable and this could have complicated her prestigious performance as an elite woman.

In order to have an effective reaction from the elite, it was essential that self-fashioning succeeded. Both the urban elite and the nobility were dependent on the success of their practices and on how popular they became.<sup>211</sup> Many activities of the elite, described above, were linked to gaining power. Thus, it is possible to discuss whether the elite and

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209 Melchior-Bonnet 2004, 157–158. Bohanan argues also that 'nobles enjoyed honour and esteem as a result of their function'. Bohanan 2013, 3.

210 Des Réaux 1906, 237–246.

211 See, for example, Lasswell's notions on power. Lasswell 1950, 103.



the nobility created a certain aura of personal power through self-fashioning. This is a notion I would like to apply to the activities of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, namely to what extent was their standing among the elite dependent on support from their *égaux*. According to Harold D. Lasswell, whoever could best utilise the available resources had the most power.<sup>212</sup> If partners of elite women flourished, this certainly had an influence on women's popularity among the elite both in Paris and at court. However, Linda Timmermans emphasises that to early modern misogynists, women's power was detrimental.<sup>213</sup> In addition, both Lefebvre and Farmer suggest that the relationship between elite women and public space was challenged by the notion derived from Greek antiquity that a woman was under a man's control and she had no public role.<sup>214</sup> This tendency was reinforced by Christianity and the Christian notion of women's place in the family and power within a family was in itself closely related to state power in a patriarchal society. However, early modern women's role within the family did not mean complete social exclusion from a broader area of power. Although women's opportunity to use power was limited, they did have power over both men and women of lower status.<sup>215</sup>

The power that the elite and nobility embodied was in itself a multifaced phenomenon, which was not easily attained by behaviour, money, symbols, personality, skills or attitude. In other words, none of these aspects may have been enough on its own but combining them was, I claim, an efficient means to gain power and reach goals. Both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos utilised, in addition to discourse and sophistication, other symbolic forms of expression, typical to the elite, such as signs in external appearance, which will be discussed later, through which they reinforced their own

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212 Lasswell 1950, 3.

213 Timmermans 2005, 26.

214 Lefebvre 2000, 286–287. Farmer 2003, 264. Strasser, in turn, adds that this idea was copied to the 17th century, a period when public space was regarded only as the territory of productive men. Strasser 2004, 8–9.

215 Norton 1996, 10–11. Davis 1975, 125.

position among the elite; thus, they fashioned the ideal elite woman. The letters of Madame de Sévigné are illuminating examples of an elite woman's self-understanding and self-fashioning. As it has been pointed out, Madame de Sévigné associates herself with the elite and with *société*. She saw herself as a noble woman and understood her position and the duties that came with it in the prevailing society. Moreover, she described her own personal feelings as a member of the elite beyond the role of mother in a family. Ninon de Lenclos' letters also illustrate an elite woman, to whom the society of *honnêtes gens* was a natural *milieu* for her performance and existence.<sup>216</sup>

Indeed, through the letters of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, it is possible to form a picture of an independent 17th-century French elite woman whose space was broader than patriarchal society wished to offer. The personal use of power and thoughtful self-fashioning, I claim, was possible to elite women who could rank themselves properly in the society and make the right choices. In the case of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, it was a question of an elite member's own personal use of power, the way they fashioned themselves through their skills, personalities, wealth or the symbolic language. Furthermore, to them, their sexuality, as I point out later, had a crucial role in expressing their status: Madame de Sévigné's celibacy and widowhood, and Ninon de Lenclos' free sexuality, both formed a path to gain power, status and negotiate female position and gender expectations among the elite. Their societal prestige was at their service and was not merely a condition in which a patriarchal society placed them.

The 17th-century French nobility was an ambiguous, social, societal and political group that embodied a particular group of people. Both the courtly nobility of Versailles and the urban elite of Paris, to which also Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos belonged, were different from the

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<sup>216</sup> See, for example, Ninon de Lenclos to Saint-Évremond. Saint-Évremond Tome V 1725, 132-133, 296-298, 428-429.

rural nobility of the provinces. In addition, both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos socialised with people with diverse noble titles and the bourgeoisie. In the 17th century, it was clear that French noblemen and noblewomen, were expected to act as role models. However, the model and the ideal were different from the reality and the highest standards were not always realised when elite women met in Parisian *société*. The *société* itself or the people within it, did not create the elite woman: Educated daughters of elite families began, I suggest, to use social resources to build a durable status among the urban elite. This was a crucial factor when considering the possibilities for later self-fashioning as one of the *honnêtes gens*.

## 2. Marie de Rabutin-Chantal and Anne de Lanclos: Educated daughters of the Parisian elite

*La Marquise* to be and the fledgling courtesan

Don't we have Women, in the convents and in the court, such that they can write about matters of utmost gravity and pain [...].<sup>217</sup>

Even though Timmermans stresses that to many scientists, theologians, jurists, philosophers and doctors, women's intellectual inferiority was an established belief,<sup>218</sup> Du Bosc

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217 'N'aons nous pas des Dames dans les Cloistres & dans la Cour, qui sçavent escrire sur les suiets les plus serieux & plus mal-aisez [...]'. Du Bosc 1658, 119–120.

218 Timmermans 2005, 19. Some thought that this was necessary, even though they did not find any real reason why women should be considered inferior or subordinate to men. Davis 1975, 142. During the Renaissance, the discussion sifted from women's role in the world of marriage and love, towards their need for education: a new literary genre appeared in which *des champions de la supériorité féminine* was the subject. The roots of this topic went back as early as the 13th century. Timmermans 2005, 21. Behind a more broadly offered education was also the motive of the Catholic Church to spread the correct morality and faith. Muchembled 2006, 144–149. For example, in a convent school, such as *Ursulines*, *Filles de Notre-dame*, and *Notre-dame*, there were classes on devoutness and household chores, as well as reading, writing and counting. Ranum 2002, 129. See also, Duchêne 2004, 89–98. The Daughters of



Fig. 4: Madame de Sévigné's birthplace.  
Place Royal, now Place de Voges. Paris.

emphasises above that *l'honneste femme* was an intellectual human being. La Bruyère, in turn, did not accentuate gender where sophistication was concerned; for him *une femme savante* was rather something to admire: 'When knowledge and reason meet in a single person, I no longer ask what sex they are, I admire'.<sup>219</sup> La Bruyère distinguishes sophistication from women's womanhood: to him an educated woman was an asset that had not been used. In light of these comments, it is impossible to examine the respectable elite woman if her sophistication – or education<sup>220</sup> – is ignored even though it

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charity, *Les Filles de la Charité*, also had an important role in girls' education and their education system was used as a model. Sonnet 1993, 121.

219 'Si la science & la sagesse se trouvent unies en un même sujet, je ne m'informe plus du sexe, j'admire'. La Bruyère 1669, 99.

220 Even though elite women of the 17th century did not get an education, *éducation* in the sense that one understands it in the 21st century, it is possible to use this term in this study. See, for example, Duchêne 2004, 102; Duchêne 2002, 62–82; Ojala & Ojala 1990, 23; Whittle & Griffiths 2012, 36, 178; Sonnet 1993, 10–131; Winn 2002, 9; Peake 2015, 55. The term 'education' is also used as an synonym for instruction and *l'access au savoir*. The later term is used by Timmermans. Timmermans 2005. It is also noteworthy that Mme

was limited to a very restricted group of women, to whom belonged members of the secular and the religious elite. Moreover, education and *honnêteté* were linked: Courtin emphasises that *honnêteté* was a mark of a noble person, but a good education was the most visible way for a person to honour *les égaux*.<sup>221</sup> In this context, it is important to ponder how Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos could fashion themselves through the education they received. Thus, in this section I shall offer some preliminary explorations of the foundations that self-fashioning of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos were given.

*Marie de Rabutin-Chantal* was born at Place Royal in Paris on 5 February 1626, and her family background tied her to the elite who lived in the new, sophisticated Parisian plaza (Fig. 4).<sup>222</sup> It is evident that the way she considered herself later was affected by the atmosphere that surrounded her and her family in Place Royal. The future Madame de Sévigné had the privilege of enjoying by birth both a noble title and wealth, yet, her father, Baron de Chantal, died when she was only 18 months old and the mother, Marie de Coulanges, followed her husband when their daughter was seven years old.

Three years before the birth of Marie de Rabutin-Chantal,

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de Sévigné herself used the word *éducation*: '[...] une chose nécessaire à votre éducation'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 6 May 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 283. See also, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 24 May 1690. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 882. Furthermore, girls who were raised as queens were well educated, as were the princesses of France. Cassagnes-Brouquet, Klapisch-Zuber & Steinberg 2010, 32. See also, Klinge, Kolbe, Nevala & Setälä 1990, 20. Duchêne 2004, 102. Margareta de Valois, later the Queen of Navarre (1553–1615), had a good education: she was one of the few elite civilian women of her time who knew Latin. In rich bourgeois families, girls had benefited from the education that was given to their brothers. Lazard 1985, 98. The Salian law, *loi Salique*, however, forbade a woman from being heir to the throne. Cassagnes-Brouquet, Klapisch-Zuber & Steinberg 2010, 31. The spouse of Henry II, Queen Catherine de' Medici, had been raised according to the values of Renaissance humanism and she considered what were the chances that her daughter had to be the ruler should the Salian law be repealed. She considered that her daughter would be an even better ruler than a man would. Catherine de' Medici did not think like *seigneur* de Drusac, who felt that power in a woman's hands was only detrimental. Timmermans 2005, 18.

221 Courtin 1728, 293–294.

222 Duchêne 2002, 651.

Anne (Ninon) de Lenclos, the daughter of Henri de Lenclos and Marie-Barbe de la Marche, was born. She was also *une petite Parisienne* who could not enjoy a solid family life: her father went into exile, and the 9-year-old Ninon remained alone with her impecunious mother.<sup>223</sup> Early modern French society was not merciful towards people with no wealth;<sup>224</sup> thus, it seems likely that social factors contributed to the mother's decision to procure her daughter. However, Ninon de Lenclos' mother was not unique: in 18th century France there were three levels of procurement within a family: some trusted mediators, some forced their daughter to join the *Opéra*, and the third kind handled procure themselves, as was the case with Ninon de Lenclos' mother. Most importantly a common denominator for all three was poverty.<sup>225</sup> It seems clear that Ninon de Lenclos' mother encouraged her daughter to choose the career of a courtesan and by doing this, she influenced Ninon de Lenclos to abandon her *honnêteté*, at least its most emphasised layer, but at the same time she seemed to understand that by this choice she could secure the income of her family, which helped them to maintain a certain elite status. Marie-Barbe de la Marche died in 1643 and by that time a future and career had been established for 20-year-old Ninon de Lenclos whose personality was to be nourished means of her exceptional female sexuality.

Unlike Anne de Lenclos, the young orphaned Marie de Rabutin-Chantal was wealthy and possessed high status: she had both her father's and her mother's inheritance and a few years later she also inherited from her grandparents.<sup>226</sup> Wealth, and status which came with her background, guaranteed her a good starting point among the Parisian elite. The young

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223 Des Réaux mentioned that M. de Lenclos was forced to leave France after the incident. Des Réaux 1906, 237. The Gazette of Théophraste de Renaudot reported 1 January 1633 that M. de Lenclos killed Baron de Chabans in the front of *les Capucins de Marais du Temple* 26 December 1632 in Paris. Renaudot 1634, 8.

224 Duchêne 2000, 45.

225 Kushner 2013, 74–75. Norberg 2013, 403.

226 Lemoine 1926, 96. The grandmother of the Coulanges family died on 12 May 1634, six months after the death of Anne de Lenclos' mother. Duchêne 2002, 48.

orphan stayed with her relatives, as was the custom<sup>227</sup> and her grandmother on her father's side, Jeanne de Chantal, took her into the Coulanges family as she believed that they would always treat the poor orphan nicely.<sup>228</sup> In addition to her grandparents, five of her young uncles, Christophe, Antoine, Louis, Charles, and Alexandre and uncle Phillippe's illegitimate son, Pierre de La Mousse, also resided at the *hôtel*.<sup>229</sup> In Le Marais she became comfortable with the diversity of family life, the presence of different people and a mistresses' culture and its consequences, which were not necessarily severe. On 5 December 1636, grandfather Coulanges died;<sup>230</sup> this event precipitated a family reunion. The future of the 10-year-old Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, a wealthy child, needed careful planning.

In the early modern era, one suitable option for an orphan, Catholic girl of a noble background might have been life at a convent. In the case of Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, this would have been a good opportunity to resolve her situation, especially since her only living grandmother had a strong religious faith and position in the Catholic church. Her grandmother, Jeanne de Chantal, hoped that Marie would have a future in the church<sup>231</sup> but instead of being raised in a convent, among the Coulanges family, Mademoiselle de Rabutin-Chantal had the opportunity to live a secular life, use her imagination, and to develop her verbal skills.<sup>232</sup> Thus, she received the impression that a strong faith in God did not prevent a person from living a life for herself or from also enjoying earthly pleasures. On the other hand, this did not mean that she received a sexually liberated upbringing or that female sexuality had been discussed. Steinberg argues

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227 After the death of Marie de Rabutin-Chantal's father, Baron de Rabutin, the child's guardianship was given to the maternal grandfather of Philippe de Coulanges and the paternal uncle Léonor de Rabutin. Lemoine 1926, 97.

228 Jeanne de Chantal to his brother the Archbishop of Bourges on April 1632. Lettre 18. Saint Chantal Tome I 1823, 37.

229 Duchêne 2002, 49. Duchêne 1995, 17.

230 Duchêne 2002, 50.

231 *Œuvres de saint Chantal*. Lemoine 1926, 109.

232 Duchêne 2002, 54–56.

that sexuality was a subject that was not spoken of in families and there were no words to describe it.<sup>233</sup> It is evident that time spent with the Coulanges family moulded and supported the personality of the future Madame de Sévigné, but in the background, I claim, there was also the influence of Jeanne de Chantal. In the early modern context, a relatively free upbringing concerned Jeanne de Chantal: on 20 April 1637, she wrote that Marie was allowed to do exactly what she wanted and that no one wanted to upset her.<sup>234</sup> By combining all the different influences, she created her own way to fashion herself: a life of sanctity was not a role model for Madame de Sévigné and as this study will point out later, this is seen in many of the choices that she made that were outside the realm of sexuality.

### The results of female education

[...] when the time is right, I will tell you what is in my mind, likewise to aid you to know your own heart, and that of a woman.<sup>235</sup>

The above quotation is from the *Lettres de Ninon de Lenclos au Marquis de Sévigné*, (1750),<sup>236</sup> the son of Madame de Sévigné (Charles). Letters are a direct analysis of love and the relationship between women and men; they are *galants*, they reflect Ninon de Lenclos' tone of social self-esteem<sup>237</sup> and they are philosophical in nature.<sup>238</sup> It is evident that only an educated woman could write these letters. Furthermore, it was common knowledge that Ninon de Lenclos wrote to Charles

233 Steinberg 2010, 88.

234 *Œuvres de saint Chantal*. Lemoine 1926, 116.

235 '[...] dans l'occasion, je vous dirai ma pensée, & je tâcherai de vous aider à connoître votre propre coeur & celui des femmes'. Lettre I. Lenclos 1750, 2.

236 Many editions appeared in the 18th century. In 1751, when they were combined with Ninon's biography by A. Bret, and in 1752, 1754, 1757, 1761, 1763, 1768, 1770, 1771, 1772, 1775, 1776, 1779, and two editions in 1782. Magne 1912, 226.

237 The writer calls Marquis de Sévigné, among other things, '*mon cher enfant*', as her dear child. Lenclos 1750, 9.

238 See, for example, Lettre IX. Lenclos 1750, 24.



de Sévigné and *la marquise* de Sévigné wrote to her daughter on 8 April 1671:

Let us speak a bit about your brother; he has had his moments with Ninon. She (Ninon) is tired of giving love without receiving it. She has requested that she get her letters back. And they have been returned to her.<sup>239</sup>

Although letters did exist, Anne de Lenclos herself never wrote the words given at the beginning of this section.<sup>240</sup> What happened to these letters, mentioned by Madame de Sévigné in 1671, remains a mystery, but by asking for her letters back, Ninon de Lenclos may have wanted to destroy the evidence of her relationship to Charles de Sévigné whose intelligence she did not really respect.<sup>241</sup> The forged letters, however, reveal the immense success that courtesan de Lenclos had among literate people in the 18th century. In addition, those letters indicate, obviously, that Ninon de Lenclos was later considered to be an independent, sophisticated and educated woman of her epoch, a master of the affairs of the heart, someone who was trustworthy and who knew what a woman wanted. Thus, she was given attributes that not only

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239 *'Parlons un peu de votre frère ; il a eu son congé de Ninon. Elle s'est laissée d'aimer sans être aimée. Elle a redemandé ses lettres, on les a rendues [...]'*. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 8 April 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 210.

240 Like the publisher L'Arche, I also believe that Ninon de Lenclos' *Lettres au marquis de Sévigné ou l'art de se faire aimer* (1999) are a forgery. In the foreword by the publisher, there are well grounded suspicions of the authenticity of the letters. Lenclos 1999, 3. Émile Magne states that these letters have been written by Damours, and he mentions that Voltaire associated the letters with the author Crébillon Fils (1707–1777). Magne 1912, 226. Voltaire himself compared these letters to the wine of Orléans, which is marketed as the wine of Bourgogne. Voltaire Tome XXIII 1879, 543. Yet, note also: Ninon de Lenclos' *proces verbal* says that on Wednesday, 21 October 1705 in her apartment at rue de Tournelles there was present: *'[...] en qualité de légataire particulier et universel, noble homme César Bréchet, sieur de Lagrange, avocat en Parlement, conseiller du Roy, pour [...], et Damoiselle Angélique de Raconis, femme du sieur Damours ou Dancourt, capitaine des gardes du roi Portugal, héritières intéressées ou dans la succession, absentes, [...]'*. Y 13191. Archives nationales. Paris. Ninon de Lenclos' letters were published in 1750 by *sieur* Damours.

241 See Chapter III:3.

raised, but also gave her a status of an extraordinary woman. However, a more important question is, how could a woman who was introduced into a debauched lifestyle at a young age have acquired this status? Besides the elite background, it was, indeed, the education,<sup>242</sup> that formed not only young Madame de Sévigné's but also Ninon de Lenclos' self-understanding and helped them to function in Parisian *société* and fashion themselves as members of the elite. They managed in this task even though they lived in society in which archbishop and theologian François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon, the author of *Traité de l'éducation des filles* (1687), thought that a woman was naturally weaker than a man. This, he thought, was not always the case, although it was common and there could be special cases. Overall, woman's weakness was not only mental. Fénelon saw children, regardless of sex, as undefined: Children were born, so to speak, on the same line, but they separated from one another at a certain age. However, he also stated that girls were born deceitful and were naturally inclined to please. This was when the significance of girls' bad education became clear: girls' 'natural' features such as vanity and laziness came to the fore when they grew up to be women.<sup>243</sup>

Thus, it is reasonable to ask what kind of circumstances influenced girls' opportunities for education? Did Fénelon's writings have an effect on Madame de Sévigné's conception of girls' education and *honnête* lifestyle? Madame de Sévigné knew Fénelon, at least by name;<sup>244</sup> she also thought that he was *divin*.<sup>245</sup> Madame de Sévigné was thirty-three years old

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242 In the other European countries, there were also women who were educated and lived contrary to the norms, such as the Italian Baroque master Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1654) who worked as an assistant to her father Orazio Gentileschi and herself painted commissioned works, self-portraits and portraits. She was the first woman in Florence Academy of Art. She also taught and had her own atelier. After she was divorced from her husband who was a Florentine artist, she was free to travel. Garrard 1988, 13–14, 22–23.

243 Fénelon (1687) 1885, 90–109.

244 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 21 August 1689. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 672.

245 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 14 September 1689. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 691.

when Fénelon's book was published, and it would seem likely that Marquise de Sévigné's understanding of girls' education was probably formed earlier. However, it is very plausible to assume that theorists like Fénelon, Du Bosc or Grenaille affected the thinking of members of the elite on women's position, their possibilities for acquiring an education and how female *honnêteté* was understood.

According to Lazard, a liberal father and a sophisticated mother would increase a girl's chances of obtaining an education.<sup>246</sup> Both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos came from families that respected girls' education and contested absolute male dominance in society. Thus, some families of the urban elite wanted to educate their daughters and there was an obvious need for *Maison Royale de Saint-Louis*, a school founded in Saint-Cyr by Louis XIV, at the request of his wife, Madame de Maintenon in 1686.<sup>247</sup> However, Madame de Maintenon wanted to make the girls in her school not only competent matriarchs of the home but also good Catholics and this policy took time and strength away from the intellectual education.<sup>248</sup> Similar to Maintenon's idea of educational content, Pierre Nicole demanded that modesty and moderation be taught to children.<sup>249</sup> He also thought that if girls stayed in the care of uneducated nurses, instead of being guided by instructors, they adopted bad habits, which they then carried over to their own children.<sup>250</sup> However, the Christian, virtue-related education that the girls received in Saint-Cyr did not always succeed in the intended way.<sup>251</sup>

Madame de Sévigné, who was educated at home, seems to have chosen a lifestyle that favoured the pleasures of earthly existence and the amusements of the elite. As a woman of

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246 Lazard 1985, 98

247 This school was meant for girls of noble families from the provinces who had no assets. Bély 1996, 1116–1117. See also, Goldsmith 1988, 66.

248 Fénelon (1687) 1885, 60–95. See also, Duchêne 2004, 101, 104–105. Williams 1981, 21. Winn 2002, 9.

249 Nicole Tome 9 1715, 49.

250 Touboul 2004, 325. See also, Ylivuori 2015, 106.

251 See, for example, Mme de Mainton to Mme de Fontaines 16 September 1691. Maintenon 1935, 528–529.

high sexual morality, she did not, however, consider a life in a convent a good alternative for a girl. When in 1676, Madame de Grignan, Madame de Sévigné's daughter, sent her own fifteen-year-old daughter, Marie-Blanche, to the convent of Saint-Marie in Aix, the girl's grandmother was against the plan. According to her own words, her heart was broken, because, as Madame de Grignan had also stated, Marie-Blanche was about to enter a 'prison'. Madame de Sévigné also wondered, how she herself as a young mother had been able to send her own daughter to such a brutal place, although it was considered an essential part of raising a daughter at that time.<sup>252</sup> Madame de Sévigné does not give any further reasons why she considered the convent to be a brutal option. Nevertheless, in convents young girls not only learned to live a spiritual and chaste life: in addition to an education in faith, according to Steinberg, young girls in the monasteries might also experience sins (*péché*).<sup>253</sup>

It is hard to be sure what kind of education Ninon de Lenclos received or who taught her, but according to Douxménil the young Anne de Lenclos was not an enthusiastic pupil.<sup>254</sup> Ninon de Lenclos entered a convent for the first time in her early twenties after the death of Marie-Barbe de La Marche.<sup>255</sup> This was less to gain an education than a suitable solution for a young woman who was completely without the security of a close family.<sup>256</sup> Duchêne also speculates that this gesture was also to show to society that 'she would never become *une fille perdue*'.<sup>257</sup> His argument is supported by Madame de Motteville who, in the beginning of the year 1644, adds that after Ninon de Lenclos had left the convent, she 'lived retired from life and saw only her close friends'.<sup>258</sup> Indeed, the reasons

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252 Mme de Sévigné's to her daughter Mme de Grignan 6 May 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 283.

253 Steinberg 2010, 90–92.

254 Douxménil 1908, 73–74.

255 Motteville Tome I 1750, 209. See also, a poem of Paul Scarron. Scarron 1663–1664, 407.

256 A document dated 6 June 1650 shows, that Mlle de Lenclos was an only child. LXXXVII, 542. Documents du minutier central (1650–1700) 1960, 215–216.

257 Duchêne 2000, 69.

258 '[...] *vécut fort retirée, ne voyant que ses amis particuliers*'. Motteville Tome I

for the time spent in the convent might have been to preserve Ninon de Lenclos' reputation and self-fashioning rather than to gain educational or spiritual guidance.

The education that these two elite women received in childhood or at a young age was not from religious institutions; as Fénelon states, *une dame de qualité* was able to educate her daughter better than any convent could have done.<sup>259</sup> This was very much the case in the youth of Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, who gained a good education at home. She learned Italian, which she later taught her daughter.<sup>260</sup> She also wanted Madame de Grignan to take care of her daughter Pauline's *esprit et mémoire*.<sup>261</sup> It seems that Madame de Sévigné appreciated the opportunity she received to gain intellectual sophistication and wished to pass it down to her own family. Later in life she was proud that her granddaughter Pauline learned French, unlike so many other girls<sup>262</sup> and she also made sure that her granddaughter read a lot of books, which were good for a young girl's intellectual sophistication. Madame de Sévigné also wanted to discuss with Pauline '*avec amitié et avec confiance*'.<sup>263</sup> She not only wanted to educate her granddaughter, but she also wished to have discussions with her which meant that the young girl could also practise

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1750, 209.

259 '[...] Vous pouvez lui donner une meilleure éducation qu'aucun couvent. Les yeux d'une mère sage, tendre et chrétienne découvrent sans doute ce que d'autres ne peuvent découvrir'. Fénelon (1687) 1885, 140. See also, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 26 October 1688. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 378; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 1 November 1688. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 382; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 1 June 1689. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 607; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 16 November 1689. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 757; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 15 January 1690. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 810.

260 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 4 March 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 177.

261 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 1 November 1680. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 383.

262 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 1 June 1689. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 607.

263 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 26 October 1688. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 378; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 16 November 1689. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 757.

the accomplishments that were needed in the meetings of the *honnête société*.

However, although some women might be able to obtain an education, their opportunities to apply it were still limited. Noble rank and membership in the elite, brought with it possible privileges as an educated woman, but they were restricted.<sup>264</sup> The elite women themselves speculated over this matter and French Marie Meurdrac (1610–1680) wrote in the introduction to her book on chemistry:

[...] I am not the first [woman] who has published something: reason has no gender [...]: our century has seen birth of women who have sufficiency and capability in prose, poetry, languages, philosophy, and even state affairs, no less than what men have.<sup>265</sup>

Indeed, the 17th-century ideal for *l'honnête femme* was Scudéry's Sappho, who never flaunted her sophistication.<sup>266</sup> In other words, the ideal was not to use sophistication for self-fashioning. La Bruyère asks why is it that men are accused of restricting women's sophistication, and what orders or rules prevent women from opening their own eyes to the world and to learn by reading. He considered that women had conditioned themselves not to develop their memory, though he also saw women as physically weaker mainly interested in beauty and partly frivolous.<sup>267</sup> La Bruyère's description, which depicts upper-class women who had the opportunity for an education, reflects the general ideas of the time. He does not, however, take into consideration the limitations that a

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264 For example, the French Academy, which was the official authority in the fields of language and literature, did not approve even the currently most influential women of culture, such as Madeleine de Scudéry, as members, because they were women. Aronson 1978, 20. Tikanoja 2009, 91.

265 '[...] *Je ne suis pas la première qui ait mis quelque chose sous la presse; que les Esprits n'ont point de sexe [...]: que notre siècle a vu naître des femmes qui pour la Prose, la Poésie, les Langues, la Philosophie, & le gouvernement mesme de l'Estat, ne cèdent en rien à la capacité des hommes*'. Meurdrac 1674, avant-propos.

266 Nell, Wolfgang 2014, 18.

267 La Bruyère 1699, 97–98.

patriarchal society placed on women's sophistication: women who received an education were a minority. However, literate elite women, like Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos could refine their intellectual accomplishments, which at best became a means to fashion their status, sophistication and wealth; thus, it seems evident that education was an essential part of Madame de Sévigné's self-understanding – as well as Ninon de Lenclos' – as an elite woman.

### *L'honneste femme* wishes to read

According to Orest Ranum, having the ability to read meant acquiring a special identity, which was free from established, gendered, cultural and social practices.<sup>268</sup> Grenaille states that 'it would be better not to read at all, than always read ridiculous stories'.<sup>269</sup> Furetière warned to accept impression in literature, since it violated public *honnêteté*.<sup>270</sup> Indeed, elite women who were able to read and write had to struggle continuously between the proper moral use of education and self-fashioning as an educated, respectable woman of the elite. This dichotomy is described in Abraham Bosse's gravures *Vierges folles & Vierges sages*. (Fig. 5 & 6) In the first picture, six foolish young women, *vierges folles*, are reading books, but they are not focused. One is holding a guitar, another one admires herself in a mirror, and a third one plays a game of cards. In the other picture, wise young women, *vierges sages*, are focused on what they are reading, probably religious texts. The engravings depict a clear division between good and bad reading: women's literacy was educational only if serious study was applied.

Bosse's engravings also show that women's reading<sup>271</sup> took

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268 Ranum 2002, 130. See also, Chartier 1986, 136–150. However, writing, Ranum argues, became even more serious threat than reading when it was used 'for self-expression or profit'. Ranum 2002, 137. Mademoiselle de Scudéry wrote some of her novels using her brother's name.

269 'Il vaudroit bien mieux ne rien lire, que de lire toujours des histoires ridicules'. Grenaille (1640) 2003, 367.

270 *Honnêteté*. Furetière Tome I 1690.

271 Paintings of the period often depict Parisian women holding a book. Ranum



Fig. 5 & 6: *Vierges folles* & *Vierges sages* (c. 1636) by Abraham Bosse. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

place in urban *hôtel particuliers* emphasising the activity's importance as something that belonged to the elite women's private sphere. Fénelon recommended that girls should read texts in Latin and especially those that included '*de belles images et caractères bien formés*'.<sup>272</sup> Furthermore, reading was an important means of socializing with family members and equals,<sup>273</sup> meaning in practice that it carried out with other women of the same rank or alone. This made reading a very personal matter that reflected elite women's own tastes; moreover, it was outside of patriarchal control. Thus, reading literature became an important activity of the respectable women of the elite: Madame de Sévigné herself loved reading and adored her books. She read memoirs, historical stories, books about morality, poetry and devotions.<sup>274</sup> She despised

2002, 142.

272 Fénelon (1687) 1885, 35.

273 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 September 1680. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 27; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 26 November 1684. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 162.

274 In addition to François de Sales and Pierre Nicole, Mme de Sévigné read e.g. *Traite de la vérité de la religion chrétienne* (1684) by P. Abbadie. Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 13 August 1688. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 347; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 15 August 1688. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 349; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 16 November 1689. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 757; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 4 January 1690. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 797. *Les deux livres de saint Augustin de la Veritable religion et des moeurs de l'Eglise Catholique*. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 January 1690. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 823; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 5 April 1690. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 860. *Traité de piété*, contenant le *Traité de l'oraison perpétuelle* (1675) by J. Hamon. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de



romans and did not want to see such books,<sup>275</sup> though she did acknowledge that some romans were better than the others.<sup>276</sup> She read also *gazettes*,<sup>277</sup> which had a huge impact on the public image of *honnêtes gens*.<sup>278</sup> For Madame de Sévigné it was better to read something than not to read at all, but she emphasised that the 16-year-old Pauline should have read *les fables* and *les histoires par les exemples*,<sup>279</sup> that is to say, stories with good and educational examples.

According to *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lanclos du 21 octobre 1705*, Ninon de Lenclos possessed about sixty *œuvres*.<sup>280</sup> A book was a luxury item in the 17th century and carried a high status. They not only emphasised the importance of courtesan de Lenclos literary sophistication, but her books also illustrated her wealth: the estimated value of her books was 40 *livres*.<sup>281</sup> In other words, not only reading skill but also books along with other extravagances, such as clothes with golden embroidery, decorated carriages, art or fine furniture, represented the visible lifestyle of the upper classes. Books, thus, were a means for self-fashioning. Furthermore, for both Marquise de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, books were, as sources reveal, part of their identity and status and a way of identifying themselves with *honnête société*.

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Grignan 10 July 1689. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 638.

275 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 5 June 1680. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 959.

276 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 16 November 1689. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 757.

277 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 20 September 1675. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 105; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 22 September 1680. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 24; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 24 May 1690. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 882.

278 Goldsmith 1988, 145.

279 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 15 January 1690. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 810.

280 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lanclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 214. By way of comparison Molière had 150 books. Duchêne 2000, 235.

281 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lanclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 214. This sum converted to the present day amounts to approximately 600 euros: One *Livre-Tournois* in 1684 corresponds to 15 euros (in 2002). Tiberghien 2006, 12.

In fact, was literacy and spiritual knowledge enough to uphold an elite position and perform *honnêteté*? Duchêne mentions that educated girls also learned music, dance and manners.<sup>282</sup> The *honnête* elite needed those skills in their gatherings where the perfect performance had to accord with *le lieu où on se rencontre*.<sup>283</sup> In other words, not only verbal expression, but also bodily movements were essential and had to be elaborated. Jukka Sarjala states that ‘in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, music taught people to care for their bodies and affects; it provided an opportunity to practise the way in which one gained the right measure between control and animation’.<sup>284</sup> *La marquise*’s visits to court provide an illuminating example of this as dancing skills had an important role in courtly functions and other festivities.<sup>285</sup> In addition, when Mademoiselle de Scudéry presented her as the character *Clarinte*, her ability to dance was emphasised and described as ‘fabulous’ and this talent charmed everyone who watched her.<sup>286</sup> Ninon de Lenclos, according to des Réaux, danced especially well the Spanish *sarabande*,<sup>287</sup> and played the lute, which made her very famous: thus, she was able to entertain her frequent guests.<sup>288</sup> In light of the examples above and Sarjala’s comment, it is evident that these practical talents were beneficial – even essential – for social life and helped Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos maintain social relationships. These elite women could not have risen to a

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282 Duchêne 2004, 105. See also, Duchêne 2002, 62–63. Sarjala 2001, 39.

283 Courtin 1728, 194.

284 Sarjala 2001, 236.

285 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to Guitaut 12 February 1683. Sévigné Tome III, 102; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 8 February 1690. Sévigné Tome III, 834. In addition, dancing (including ballet) at different courtly festivities was described in various letters of the elite. See, for example, Mme de Fiennes to Bussy-Rabutin 2 February 1673. Bussy-Rabutin Tome II 1858, 215; Mme de Scudéry to Bussy-Rabutin 13 September 1680. Bussy-Rabutin Tome V 1859, 163; Bussy-Rabutin to Duc de saint-Aignan 17 December 1680. Bussy-Rabutin Tome V 1859, 196; Bussy-Rabutin to Mme de Scudéry 18 February 1681. Bussy-Rabutin Tome V 1859, 235.

286 Duchêne 2002, 208–209.

287 Des Réaux 1906, 237.

288 Des Réaux 1960, 142. Ninon de Lenclos’ musicality was praised by several poets and men of letters and Châteauneuf, for example, was among them. Châteauneuf 1725, avertissement.

position among the Parisian elite that they did, if they had not been able to read, write and master other sophisticated social skills. Goffman states, however, that the individual's 'performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behaviour as whole'.<sup>289</sup> An illustrative example was judgement by one's peers: after the king asked Madame de Sévigné to dance, Bussy-Rabutin, for example, saw her behaviour as too eager.<sup>290</sup>

Later, in chapter III, I will discuss at greater length the significance of the salon as a stage for elite women's self-fashioning but for now, it is worth considering how Ninon de Lenclos, only in her early twenties and returning to Paris after one year in a convent, was able to found a salon of her own and combine her education, sophistication and a certain *honnêteté* with the debauched life in Paris. It may be a good start to endeavour to understand the atmosphere of her salon: according to M. Des Maizeaux, it was decorated with everything which was considered *galant* and spiritual within the court.<sup>291</sup> Indeed, according to Saint-Simon, the atmosphere in her salon corresponded to the 17th-century ideal:

No games, no loud laughter, no arguments, no talk of religion or the government: always a lot of intellectuality, and beauty. Knowledge from the past and from the present, news of galantry, and yet without opening the gates to vilification: all that was there was refined, light, well considered, and it formed a conversation which she was able to support with her intellect and with all that she knew how to do all her life, consideration, what a peculiar thing!<sup>292</sup>

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289 Goffman 1959, 35.

290 Bussy-Rabutin 1665, 30.

291 The opinion of M Des Maizeaux (the author of Saint-Évremond's biographe). Saint-Évremond Tome I 1725, 38–39.

292 '*Jamais ni jeu, ni ris élevé, ni disputes, ni propos de religion ou du gouvernement; beaucoup d'esprit et fort orné, des nouvelles anciennes et modernes, des nouvelles galanterie, et toutefois sans ouvrir la porte à la médisance; tout y était délicat, léger, mesuré, et formait les conversations, qu'elle sut soutenir par son*

With his allegorical depictions, Saint-Simon praises the courtesan de Lenclos and her salon without reserve. It is noteworthy, that many male authors of *Mémoires* were admirers of Ninon de Lenclos, not to mention the fact that their works were also written at a late point in time and the information in them was based on memories and rumours. These works, such as the one of Saint-Simon's, are of course written from a male perspective and often represent the debauched lifestyle of the courtesan in finer terms than the facts might warrant. However, with this caveat in mind, the depiction may nevertheless be partly true: Ninon de Lenclos had to know how to create a space and an atmosphere that corresponded to both the sophistication of *honnêtes gens* and the taste of the period. Only then could the courtesan create a career for herself that lasted throughout her life. In other words, not only by means of self-fashioning or an intention to be one of the *honnêtes gens* but also financial motives led her to find her way in men's company. However, with the support of the achieved financial benefits, Ninon de Lenclos could rise from an oppressed position to an independent state at the age of twenty-five. Thus, without her education and sophistication, it might have been impossible for her to have achieved this status. Indeed, Ninon de Lenclos was exceptional: in the following century, only a few courtesans had either education or notable brilliance.<sup>293</sup> She managed to combine sexuality and knowledge in a time when both were male domains. In addition, Magne argues that women had admired Ninon de Lenclos.<sup>294</sup> I see it as the opposite: The young Ninon de Lenclos was held in contempt by respectable women.<sup>295</sup> Whereas young Madame de Sévigné was accepted

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*esprit et par tout ce qu'elle savit faits tout âge, la considération, chose étrange!*  
Saint-Simon (1701–1707) Tome II 1983, 637.

293 Kushner 2013, 167.

294 Magne 1912, 56.

295 After Ninon de Lenclos' exit from the convent in 1644, Mme de Motteville continues her description of the situation: '*Je n'osai plus l'aller voir, parce qu'en parlant d'elle à la Reine, & lui demandant en grace qu'elle ne trouvât pas mauvais que je l'allasse voir, cette Princesse m'avoit répondu froidement que je suis libre, & que j'en pouvois user comme je voudrois. Je lui dis, en lui baisant la main, que je la voulois pas être pour faire jamais aucune chose qui pût lui*

by *honneste femmes* and *honnêtes hommes*, Ninon de Lenclos made herself an important figure among Parisian elite men at the beginning and the time she spent with her lovers cost her the appreciation of other women, especially those who were called *honnestes femmes*. This occurred after Madame de Coulon learned of the arrangements between her husband and Ninon de Lenclos.<sup>296</sup> This forced her to fight for her status among *honnêtes gens*, but as it will be pointed out later, her choices bore fruit and she managed to avoid most crucial pitfalls and improve her image.

To sum up, some elite women, like Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, had, I suggest, the skill to master their education and sophistication to assure their position among Parisian *société*. The education of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, and their choices among the elite, enabled their partial detachment from traditional female roles and helped them to carry out their self-fashioning among *honnêtes gens*. The case of Ninon de Lenclos also implies that Parisian elite circles were not unattainable, although living counter to ideals did partially limit her status. Along with sophistication, a good marriage was, of course, an obvious way to gain both noble prestige and *honnêteté*. However, was it the goal for Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos in the end or did it matter that much after all?

### 3. To marry or not to marry?

#### The prestige marriage contract

Pierre Nicole, an advocate of Christian morals, emphasises the significance of marriage as a Christian union that should have had nothing to do with carnal or human desires.<sup>297</sup> This, however, conflicted with prevailing social norms in which the union between a man and a woman served material

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déplaire [...]. Je m'engageai à la reine de ne la plus voir'. Motteville Tome I 1750, 210.

296 Des Réaux 1906, 238.

297 Nicole Tome 9 1715, 270–271.

purposes.<sup>298</sup> Parisian elite women also had a degree of influence due to French legislation; from a European perspective, they had relatively broad inheritance rights. The reigns of Marie de Medici, and Anne of Austria had also favoured women at court<sup>299</sup> but what in particular was the situation for Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos? Did they conform to the values concerning marriage and family or did they find another way to fashion *honnêteté* through their own efforts? To answer these questions, special emphasis is laid in this section on the role of marriage as a sub-category of *honnêteté*.

For French women of this time matters of rank were of considerable importance. An honorary title was handed down from generation to generation and was inherited from the father. Thus, even if a wife came from a less prestigious family, this would not alter the social position of the couple's children. Parents tried to arrange for their children to marry as advantageously as possible, and when they succeeded, they were content.<sup>300</sup> It was also common to sign a contract in which a woman with a large dowry would marry above her rank. In marriage, which was partly a matter of trade between status and wealth, the woman acquired the status of the husband's family.<sup>301</sup> In marrying Baron de Rabutin-Chantal, Madame de Sévigné's mother, Marie de Coulanges, who came from a rich family which did not have a long and magnificent background,<sup>302</sup> had married a man above her rank. This social ascent through marriage would also favour their daughter: after it was decided that the convent life was out of the question, Marie de Rabutin-Chantal married Marquis de Sévigné, who had a higher title than she had.<sup>303</sup> Through this

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298 Pelous 1980, 99.

299 Diefendorf 2004, 16–18.

300 Mme de Sévigné wrote that Mme de La Fayette was pleased with her son's marriage, which was *si grande & honorable*. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 28 December 1689. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 791.

301 Le Roy Ladurie 2001, 184.

302 Coulanges family is a good example of the social transition during the *Ancien Régime*. Lemoine 1926, 31–41. Duchêne 2002, 29.

303 MC/RSS/498. *Contrat de Mariage entre Henri, marquis de Sévigné and Marie Rabutin-Chantal*. 1.8.1644. Archives nationales. Paris. Henri de Sévigné's was *'seigneur des Rochers, de la Haye, Torcé, de Burron, Plessis-Tréal, la Baudière,*

contract, 18-year-old Marie de Rabutin-Chantal succeeded in raising prestige of her family as well as her own status.<sup>304</sup>

In this context, the advantageousness of a marriage was measured by means of its prestige. Madame de Chantal, Marie de Rabutin-Chantal's grandmother, wrote delightedly to her daughter about the alliance she had arranged for her with Monsieur de Toulangeon, a man fifteen years senior:<sup>305</sup> 'Indeed, I am very proud that your parents and I have arranged this marriage without you: wise people rule this way'.<sup>306</sup> Fifteen years was not a huge age difference: Françoise d'Aubigné, the future Madame de Maintenon, married the poet Paul Scarron (*écuyer*, 1610–1660) who suffered from physical pains and bodily deformities, on 4 April 1652.<sup>307</sup> He was twenty-five years older than his wife, Françoise d'Aubigné, who was described as very beautiful.<sup>308</sup> Thus, marriage could bring opportunities to realise goals that would have otherwise been unattainable.<sup>309</sup> The example of Françoise d'Aubigné may not be applicable to the marriage of Madame de Sévigné; however, the union with Marquis de Sévigné was beneficial for her in several ways. Furthermore, besides the social prestige of Henri de Sévigné,<sup>310</sup> he was according to his contemporaries

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Baudegast et autres lieux [...]'. MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris.

304 Social aspirations for ever higher titles ultimately lead to a situation where the highest ranking women had difficulties in finding a spouse, especially since families rarely permitted their daughters to marry below their title. Le Roy Ladurie 2001, 190–191.

305 Dulong 1969, 27.

306 'Certes je suis bien contente que ce soient vos parents et moi qui ayons fait ce mariage sans vous : c'est ainsi que se gouvernent les sages'. Jeanne de Chantal to her daughter Mlle de Chantal in 1622. Saint Chantal Tome I 1823, 169.

307 MC/RSS/495. *Contrat de mariage entre Paul Scarron et Françoise d'Aubigné* 4.4.1652. Archives nationales. Paris.

308 In *Clélie* young Mme de Scarron is exceptionally beautiful and charming Lyrian. Kyyrö 1949, 11.

309 'La place de madame de Maintenon est unique dans la monde; il n'y a jamais eu, et il n'y en aura jamais'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 27 September 1684. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 143.

310 Marquis Henri de Sévigné had a good name, came from a good family and was a member of the military nobility (*noblesse d'épée*). He had a fine reputation as a soldier, but not very many assets. Sévigné was from an old, Breton noble family, although it had no French noble title. When the use of titles became customary, the head of the family was referred to as 'baron'. Henri de Sévigné

handsome and attractive<sup>311</sup> and the young Marie de Rabutin-Chantal could consider herself lucky in this respect.

Henri de Sévigné, in turn, married an attractive wealthy young woman who came from a noble family on her father's side. In approximately 1644 Jean Noret painted Madame de Sévigné's portrait (Fig. 27), which depicts a picture of a young, noble, fashionably dressed young woman with a neat hairstyle. Indeed, in the portrait, the viewer sees a pure fresh woman in whom the sensitivity of her face and gestures combines with a pleasant physique and the whiteness of her skin shows she has kept out of the sun's rays, as a young member of the elite should do. In other words, the portrait shows Marie de Rabutin-Chantal as an attractive young woman on the eve her marriage who meets the period's criteria for the perfect beauty of *l'honneste femme*; thus, she could satisfy her husband in domains other than money. Marie de Rabutin-Chantal was also a virgin, the most important feature of an unmarried woman in the early modern era.<sup>312</sup> Thus, on 4 August 1644, not only the perfect beauty of the epoch but also wealthy Marie de Rabutin-Chantal married the handsome and prestigious Marquis de Sévigné at the church of Saint-Gervais in a night-time ceremony.<sup>313</sup> Thus, the daughter of a baron gained higher societal prestige, a significant factor in one's self-fashioning in *société*. However, Madame de Sévigné would later explain to her cousin Bussy-Rabutin how high her husband's social status was:

I know that you have formed down the picture which you have of me from the time I married a nobleman from Breton, a man who has made an honourable alliance

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was the first in the family to be called marquis; this also made Marie Rabutin-Chantal the first Marquise de Sévigné. Duchêne 2002, 96.

311 According to Charles de Sévigné his own charm was due to his father, Henri de Sévigné. Charles de Sévigné December 1675. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 178. See also, Magne 1922, 105.

312 Sales 1641, 359–360. Duchêne 2000, 48. Schulte van Kessel 1993, 142.

313 The meaning of this evening ceremony was to make both the woman and the man more fertile. Only a few years later the church forbade these ceremonies, stating that they were heathen. Duchêne 2002, 85.



with the families of Vassé and Rabutin. Perhaps this is not correct, my dear cousin. [...] three hundred and fifty years of knighthood, with a few occasions when our fathers have been gallant in the wars of Brittany, and very well known in history, and sometimes stayed in their own circles as Bretonians; sometimes (they have had) plenty of possessions, sometimes moderately, but they have always been fine and great allies.<sup>314</sup>

Roger de Bussy-Rabutin's attitude towards the marriage of his cousin Marie de Rabutin-Chantal reflects a characteristic notion of this time that in marriage the spouses' titles should be equal. Marie de Rabutin-Chantal's marriage to Henri de Sévigné seems to have concerned Count de Bussy-Rabutin, who might have considered the marriage as unfavourable to his precious cousin, despite the fact, that Madame de Sévigné's marriage did not reduce her societal status.

*Honnête mariage: fidelity and heirs. Perhaps happiness?*

The primary purpose of marriage was to produce heirs<sup>315</sup> and this was a principle accepted by both the church and the state.<sup>316</sup> There was also the notion of a virginal marriage following the example of Mary and Joseph<sup>317</sup> so chastity could be maintained in marriage.<sup>318</sup> However, female sexuality and having sex were not self-evident matters to Madame de Sévigné even though she fulfilled her marital duties and secured the continuation of the bloodline, giving birth in Paris

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314 'Je sais que vous avez mis au bas du portrait que vous avez de moi, que j'ai été mariée à un gentilhomme breton, honoré des alliances de Vassé et de Rabutin. Cela n'est pas juste, mon cher cousin. [...] trois cents cinquante ans de chevalerie ; les pèresquelquesfois considérables dans les guerres de Bretagne, et bien marqués dans l'histoire ; quelque fois retirés chez eux comme des Bretons ; quelque fois de grands biens, quelquesfois de médiocres ; mais toujours de bonnes et de grandes alliances'. Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 4 December 1668. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 105–106.

315 Sales 1641, 335. See also, Steinberg 2010, 97.

316 Matthews-Giego 2005, 187.

317 Noonan 1965, 277.

318 *Chasteté*. Furetière Tome I 1690.

to a daughter, Françoise-Marguerite, on 1 October 1646, and to a son, Charles, on 12 March 1648 in Rochers.

Madame de Sévigné clearly understood the prestige and societal meaning of a good marriage and later she wished to make sure that her daughter had a socially advantageous union. *La Marquise* was therefore pleased to report to Bussy-Rabutin that her daughter, *la plus belle fille de France* was united with one of the most *honnêtes hommes du royaume*, a wealthy man with a fine background.<sup>319</sup> In reality Madame de Sévigné was facing a familiar situation: It was not only the beauty of Françoise-Marguerite de Sévigné that was tempting. François, Count de Grignan (1632–1714), wanted to marry Madame de Sévigné's daughter because he needed to maintain his elite lifestyle and money was required for his castles, lands and his position as lieutenant general of Languedoc. Françoise-Marguerite brought to the marriage parents' inheritance, namely, 400,000 *livres*, of which the contract stated that half was to be paid at once.<sup>320</sup> The dowry of the future Madame de Grignan was more than that of women of the highest position, which was usually a sum between 36,000 and 300,000 *livres*. Dowries in the higher social ranks were very seldom less than 20,000 *livres*.<sup>321</sup> The size of the dowry and the financial burden on Madame de Sévigné is well described by the fact that when Liselote von der Pfalz married the

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319 Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 4 December 1668. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 105. Despite high social status, Monsieur de Grignan was in debt, like many others in his position. During his lifetime, he could not improve his financial situation and he died indebted. Duchêne's comment. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 944. François Adhémar de Monteil de Grignan, Duke de Grignan was lieutenant-general and acting governor. His Provençal family was very 'old and distinguished'. Bohanan 2001, 99. Mme de Sévigné was pleased about forthcoming marriage because Monsieur de Grignan had great status, was wealthy and a gentleman. Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 7 January 1669. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 110. Monsieur de Grignan was also a real *honnête homme*. Bussy-Rabutin agreed with his cousin in many ways but was concerned that Monsieur de Grignan had been married twice before. According to Bussy-Rabutin, Monsieur de Grignan used women '*autant que d'habits, ou du moins de carrosses*'. Bussy-Rabutin to Mme de Sévigné 8 December 1668. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 106–107. Bussy-Rabutin does not mention that two previous wives of M. de Grignan were deceased.

320 Duchêne 2002, 291–293.

321 Mousnier 1978, 178–179.

Duke of Orléans (*Monsieur*), her dowry was 64,000 *livres*.<sup>322</sup> The final marriage contract with the 36-year-old Count de Grignan (15 September 1632–20 December 1714) and the 22-year-old Mademoiselle de Sévigné (10 October 1646–13 August 1705) was signed on 29 January 1669.<sup>323</sup> Again, the young wife improved her social status and the husband his financial benefits to fashion his and his family's prestige among other *honnêtes gens*.

Even though Madame de Sévigné had had to justify to her cousin the financial circumstances of her daughter's husband, she was content with their marriage: 'At last the sweetest girl in France is getting married, perhaps not with the world's most handsome boy, but with *un des plus honnêtes hommes du royaume* [...]'.<sup>324</sup> Thus, one can say that Madame de Sévigné accepted the marriage as a means to establish *l'honnête* lifestyle. In other words, it was the *honnêteté* of the marriage and the accompanying status that were the most significant matters. However, although her daughter's marriage served Madame de Sévigné's familial ambitions, it also caused some personal turbulence in Madame de Sévigné's life: Françoise-Marguerite's birth had been a turning point in the life of Madame de Sévigné and after she had moved into the *château de Grignan*, Françoise-Marguerite became the object of Madame de Sévigné's extreme love, care and longing. To Madame de Sévigné, letters from her daughter were sorrows, joys, her whole life; her daughter became the centre and cause of everything.<sup>325</sup>

Although marriage as an institution encountered criticism during this time,<sup>326</sup> neither women nor men could overlook the great significance and role that marriage had in society.

322 *Marriage*. Von der Pfalz (1652–1722) 1984, 5.

323 LI, 380. Documents du Minutier Central (1650–1700) 1960, 196.

324 'C'est qu'enfin la plus jolie fille de France épouse, non pas le plus joli garçon, mais un des plus honnêtes hommes du royaume [...]'. Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 4 December 1668. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 105.

325 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 26 May 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 301; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 26 November 1684. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 160.

326 See, for example, Mme de Maintenon to Abbé de Gobelin 14 July 1674. Maintenon 1757, 5. La Bruyère 1699, 108.

Although Méré states that ‘there are only a few *honnêtes femmes* who do not hate their husbands, and a few *honnêtes gens* who do not neglect their wives’,<sup>327</sup> happiness within a marriage, and loving one’s spouse, were, however, possible in the early modern era.<sup>328</sup> The young Madame de Sévigné seemed content immediately after her marriage. Olivier Le Fèvre d’Ormesson wrote in his *Journal*, on 4 August 1644: ‘After dinner I met with Madame de Sévigné, who was very glad [...]’.<sup>329</sup> However, it is almost impossible to say how she felt as a young wife: in her letters, Madame de Sévigné remains almost completely silent about her marriage, and she mentions nothing personal about her husband. She wrote only a few comments that refer to Henri de Sévigné: Madame de Sévigné told her daughter about the relationship between Ninon de Lenclos and both Henri de Sévigné and Charles de Sévigné: ‘she (Ninon) spoiled your father’;<sup>330</sup> later that same year, she joked about cheating husbands.<sup>331</sup> At this point, it had been twenty years since Henri de Sévigné had died. Although Madame de Sévigné speaks nothing of her relationship with her husband, a few comments make it possible to perceive that Henri de Sévigné’s infidelity and lifestyle had left a mark on the Marquise. Love affairs were common, but, according to Madame de Motteville, too many of them or *la légèreté* of relationships were not a real merit even for man of the elite.<sup>332</sup> Thus, *la marquise*’s wish to behave like an *honnête personne* and a faithful spouse was not regarded as only a wife’s duty: it concerned both men and women.

Some elite women refused to marry, but at the same time some of them continued to have an active sexlife and by doing

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327 ‘Il y a peu d’honnêtes-femmes qui ne haïssent leurs maris, & peu d’honnêtes-gens qui ne négligent leur femme’. Méré 1682, 175.

328 ‘Elle (Mme de Grignan) aime tant son mari [...]’. Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 7 May 1670. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 121. See also, Flandrin 1979, 165.

329 ‘L’après-dînée je fus voir madame de Sévigné qui était fort gaie [...]’. Olivier Le Fèvre d’Ormesson 4 August 1644. Lemoine 1926, 214–215.

330 ‘[...] Elle (Ninon) avait gâté son père’. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 13 March 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 185.

331 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 28 October 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 372.

332 Motteville Tome I 1750, 202–203.

so they partly questioned the notion of female *honnêteté*. For example, Ninon de Lenclos' contemporary, the courtesan Marion de Lorme,<sup>333</sup> made the choice not to marry, although according to des Réaux, her father would have been prepared to pay 25,000 *écus* if his daughter had married.<sup>334</sup> As a wealthy woman, her choice to be a courtesan and to decline marriage were personal choices and a means by which she could express her sexuality freely. It is also important to remember that socially high ranking families not only in the 17th century but throughout history had tried to get their daughters into the king's bed. This, after all, was a shortcut to social ascent and wealth.

Ninon de Lenclos seems to have wanted to avoid marriage. Her desire to separate herself from the prevailing norms and traditional gender roles, as well as her family background, made her choice possibly even easier, although this forced her into cruel social competition to gain prestige and respectable status. However, judging from letters that are put in her name, she is presumed to have thought that she had been married three times.<sup>335</sup> In these letters, published after Ninon de Lenclos' death, the conventional image of the courtesan from that time is given: even without official matrimony, there was a desire to see her as a woman who in her own mind submitted herself to the demands of society. In addition, it gave her the prestige required to be seen as one of the *honnêtes gens*.

However, in the eyes of society, Ninon de Lenclos was not married. She had hardly been married in her own mind either. At most, she might have thought that she had psychologically committed herself to one man at a time. She had chosen to live a sexually liberated life as a woman, regardless of prevailing sexual norms. Furthermore, it is also important to note that

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333 Several books mention that Marion de Lorme and Ninon de Lenclos knew each other. See, for example, Dufresne 2011, 15. The *Mémoires de Chavagnac* mention Marion de Lorme as a friend of Ninon de Lenclos. Chavagnac 1700, 49. Duchêne, in turn, points out that none of these two women's contemporaries mention their friendship. Duchêne 2000, 367. Even though they had common lovers, it does not mean that they knew each other.

334 Des Réaux 1906, 180.

335 Lenclos 1750, 30.

if she ever thought of getting married, she would have been obliged to find a husband who showed no concern about her amoral past. Irrespective of her choices or perhaps because of them, Ninon de Lenclos as an unmarried courtesan managed to surround herself with a group of people who admired her. She wanted to fashion herself as sophisticated, independent women of the elite, but at the same time she was ready to give up a certain amount of respectability. This was a bold choice at the time of patriarchal order and among the elite who breathed and lived through their peer's judgement and acceptance. However, I would suggest, that ultimately by her peculiar life style, Ninon de Lenclos managed to raise her social status without needing the prestige that a husband might have brought. In addition, if she had married a man of lower prestige, the circles that were attracted to de Lenclos as an unmarried courtesan, might have been closed to her. Indeed, her later position as one of the *honnêtes gens* was raised through her own choices and through her connections with the nobility and the elite.

Whereas Madame de Sévigné was an honourable chaste wife, widow and mother, Ninon de Lenclos was a courtesan who challenged that on which Madame de Sévigné's idea on honour and womanhood was based. Despite they were connected not only by sophistication and social rank, but also by the elite lifestyle that flourished in Paris. In other words, the stage for their self-fashioning was the same and it was the developing city of Paris.

### III

#### THE MOST IMPORTANT STAGE: PARIS, ITS *hôtels* & THE ELITE *Parisienne's* SELF-FASHIONING

A random pile of houses,  
 Droppings everywhere in the streets,  
 Bridges, churches, palaces, prisons,  
 More or less well equipped boutiques,  
 [...]  
 Prudes, *filles perdues*,  
 Murders and deceptions,  
 Penmen with crooked fingers,  
 Fine looking penniless people,  
 Men, afraid of the sergeant,  
 Boasters who always tremble,  
 Pages, lawyers, nightly thieves,  
 Carriages, horses, and tremendous noise,  
 Paris: How does it seem to you?<sup>336</sup>

According to Scarron's description above, Paris was full of contrasts; the whole gamut of life was there. Paris in the 17th century was the capital of culture and the fashionable urban elite that had begun to form in the Middle Ages when the nobility started to settle in the cities.<sup>337</sup> Ylivuori states

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336 'Un amas confus de maison, Des crottes dans toutes les rues, Ponts, églises, palais, prisons, Boutiques bien ou mal pourvues, [...], Des prudes, des filles perdues, Des meurtres et des trahisons, Des gens de plume main crochues, Maint poudré qui n'a pas d'argent, Mais homme qui craint le sergent, Maint fanfaron qui toujours tremble, Pages, laquais, voleurs de nuit, Carrosses, chevaux et grand bruit, C'est là Paris: que vous en semble?' Scarron. (1650-1654) 1960, 136.

337 Verdon 2015, *The Medieval Aristocracy of Southern Europe Reconsidered: Characteristics and New Perspectives*.

that in 18th-century England ‘the town itself became a scene of sociability – a stage on which rituals of politeness were performed by the actors that constituted polite society’. The 17th century French intellectual and civilized life needed a framework and a stage for its performance and self-fashioning of *les honnêtes gens*; thus, Paris was the place to be.<sup>338</sup> In other words, for the urban, Parisian elite the City was, I suggest, the most important stage for their self-fashioning.

Furthermore, Paris embodied magnificent carefully decorated hôtels that offered suitable space for the prestigious performance of the elite. Thus, the *maisons* of the elite were, as Elias points out, a means to joint appearance and rank; thus, prestige values triumphed over practicality.<sup>339</sup> Similarly to Elias, Aurélie Chatenet-Calyste also states that a *hôtel particulier*, such as a mansion or a *château* that resided in the countryside, was an indicator of the power and status of its resident, as well as how neatly she or he had settled in her or his own social class.<sup>340</sup> An illuminating example of the meaning of a splendid residence is Madame de Sévigné herself who was enchanted by the dignity and magnificence that the beautiful *château* de Grignan exemplified.<sup>341</sup> Furthermore, Richard A. Goldthwaite argues that in Italy, splendour was ‘the complement of magnificence, being the logical extension of magnificence into the private world. Whereas magnificence is manifested in public architecture, splendour expresses itself in the elegance and refinement [...] within buildings’.<sup>342</sup> Furthermore, Bohanan argues that since the period of the Renaissance, interior decoration defined European elites strongly.<sup>343</sup> Thus, this chapter shall suggest that decoration

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338 Furthermore, seventeenth-century Paris was a model for all cities throughout the country and it was the headquarters and centre of religion, politics, administration, science, civilisation or economics. Pardailhé-Galabrun 1991, 214. See also, Mousnier 1978, 1–2. Cowan 2007, 28–29.

339 Elias 2006, 62–72.

340 Chatenet-Calyste 2015, 179. See also, Goldsmith 1988, 88–90.

341 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 28 June 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 279–280. See also, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 21 June 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 277.

342 Goldthwaite 1993, 249.

343 Bohanan 2012, 30.



and furnishing inside 17th century Parisian *hôtels* reveals how member of the elite wanted to emphasise and express their status and *honnête* lifestyle. To understand Madame de Sévigné's and Ninon de Lenclos' position among the Parisian elite, their private spaces must be analysed by studying their post-mortem inventories. I do not wish to suggest that the previous researches or biographies have been insufficient, but in this study, information of estate inventory deeds of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, offer essential source material to understand and illuminate their social status and the elite ideal through their material choices, particularly, if I consider French's notion that each acquisition of an artefact reflected its buyer.<sup>344</sup>

The chapter begins with an introduction to this developing Paris, particularly the district of Le Marais, where both chaste elite women and debauched women lived. This is a central factor in an attempt to understand the social sphere of the elite women and meaning of their *honnêteté*. The second section also discusses whether Madame de Sévigné's and Ninon de Lenclos' apartments were suitable for fashioning the *honnête* lifestyle of the elite. As it has been emphasised, Paris and Le Marais, like the court, were public stages where the *l'honnête homme* and *l'honnête femme* had their own performances. Private space also became a personal arena in which a person from the elite was able to express his or her uniqueness.

The following three sections study the more personal and intimate level of the elite women. The public sphere of life and the private, personal life lay side by side, as shown in the active Parisian life of elite women such as Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos. The study suggests that *honnête femme* was a creation of several different layers of life in which the 'stage' (Paris itself), *appartements*, *hôtels* and polite behaviour (including *galanterie*) that took place in urban milieu were all inseparable, leading to my investigation of the meaning of manners and respectability. I show that Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos embodied respectability through their

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344 French 2013, 197.

behaviour, and consider whether they challenged prevailing ideals of gender roles.

The chapter pose the following questions: What kind of surroundings did Paris offer in which *les honnêtes gens* could perform? In what ways did the material culture of Madame de Sévigné's and Ninon de Lenclos' homes indicate their wish to perform as elite women? How did these two women use their private space to fashion themselves? How did the elite woman's polite behaviour reflect her *honnêteté*? The final two sections of this chapter examine the meaning that polite and fashionable behaviour, practised in perfectly polished environments, had in the concept of *honnêteté*.

## 1. The two faces of the enchanting Le Marais of the elite: *honnêtes femmes* and debauched women

### *Une Isle enchantée?*

Verbal ordinance of the Queen, whose piety was extremely offended, not only by the scandalous life [...]; but also [...] general *rendez-vous* which all *seigneurs* of the court had *chez elle* every day and where they carried out debauchery, *libertinage* and impiety, the most enormous insolence that one can imagine.<sup>345</sup>

In March 1656, Ninon de Lenclos was charged with debauchery and blasphemy and regardless of her established position in Paris, was arrested and transported to the Madelonnettes Convent by order of the Queen mother, Anne of Austria.<sup>346</sup> The 17th-century French society had strengthened its morality and in this respect there was nothing unexpected about the arrest of courtesan de Lenclos. In the

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345 '[...] ordonnance verbale de la reine, dont la piété se trouvait extrêmement offensée non seulement de la vie scandaleuse [...]; mais encore [...] le rendez-vous général que tous les seigneurs de la cour se donnaient chez elle tous les jours, et où ils établissaient la débauche, le libertinage et l'impiété, au plus haut degré d'insolence que l'on puisse imaginer'. MS 10277. fo 39-40. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Paris. The Queen's ordinance to arrest Ninon de Lenclos.

346 MS 10277. fo 40. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Paris.

background lay a broader campaign to purge Paris of its courtesans and prostitutes. In July 1657, Claude Le Petit wrote the poem ‘*Adieu des filles de joie de la ville de Paris*’ in which he gave some details about these developments in which some *demoiselles du Marais* found themselves exiled to distant islands.<sup>347</sup> Nevertheless Ninon de Lenclos although briefly imprisoned in *Les Madelonettes*, avoided conviction and public punishment.<sup>348</sup>

Earlier Ninon de Lenclos scholars and biographers have speculated on the reasons behind her arrest;<sup>349</sup> however, this study approaches the situation from another angle. It is more important and fresh, I suggest, to ponder how the city considered *honnêtes gens* and debauched women who lived alongside each other and partly shared the same *société*, as the previous chapter has pointed out. In this context, it is evident that being an educated daughter of a *gentilhomme* does not completely explain the status that Ninon de Lenclos managed to establish over the years. Thus, this section argues that Parisian *société* created a stage on which the right kind of performance ensured one’s secured position among *les honnêtes gens*. Furthermore, the cohabitation of vices and respectability in Le Marais is an illuminating example how the ideal and reality shared the same public spaces, in which the apparent differences between the elite and the lower classes became obscure.

Paris and Le Marais had begun to develop after Henry IV arrived at the capital in March 1594. The king aimed to restore Paris as a great and more comfortable city<sup>350</sup> by creating new plazas, Place Dauphine and Place Royal; the latter located in Le Marais, which became an important site for the urban elite.<sup>351</sup> Paris became more regal, more luxurious

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347 Claude Le Petit et la Muse de la cour (1er septembre–28 octobre 1657). Le Petit 1922, 59–62.

348 Duchêne 2000, 196–197.

349 See also, Vergé-Franceschi 2014, 230–231, 234. Dufresne 2011, 81–82. Dulong 1969, 190.

350 Ranum 2002, 87–93.

351 DeJean 2014, 46. After the French revolution the name Place Royal was changed to Place des Vosges.

and more suitable for the elite: the developing city was like *un pays de Romans* where all the inhabitants were Gods or Kings, as Corneille put it,<sup>352</sup> and in this Le Marais became a beautiful and respectable *quartier*.<sup>353</sup> However, in order to appreciate the meaning of Paris not only as the capital, but also in relation to the realm as a whole, one has to understand the different social layers that the city offered. The Paris of Louis XIV was not merely an ideological stage, it was a physical place where the elite women lived, functioned, and influenced, but most importantly it formed a set for a respectable woman to appear and be evaluated.

Since the 1620s and 1630s, families of high-ranking nobility and administrative nobility (*noblesse de robe*) began to move to Le Marais and a magnificent social scene developed in the 17th century.<sup>354</sup> The development of the area is also an illuminating example how members of the elite needed one another's company to enforce their status and *honnêteté*. They were unable to fashion themselves if they were without an audience or without interaction with their equals.<sup>355</sup> The Parisian *hôtel particuliers* created a perfect stage for a status-conscious elite, as Bohanan states: 'For the French, no longer was social performance focused on the village, the community, the town; now the audience was limited more to small groups of similarly situated individuals [...]'.<sup>356</sup> In Paris a salon culture developed and flourished becoming the centre where the elite of France met and practised their *honnête* performance. On the contrary, Molière viewed the Parisian elite of this time with

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352 DORANTE: '*Paris semble à mes yeux un pays de Romans, l'y croyois ce matin voir une Isle enchantée, le la laissay deserte, & la trouve habitée, Quelque Amphion nouveau sans l'ayde des maçons. En superbes Palais a changé ses buissons*'. GERONTE: '*Paris voit tous les iours de ces Metamorphoses, Dedans le pré aux Clercs tu verras mesmes choses, Et l'Vniuers ne peut rien voir d'égal. A ce que tu verras vers le Palais Royal. Toute une ville entière avec pompe bastie. Semble d'un vieux fossé par miracle sortie, Et nous fait presumer, à ses superbes toits, Que tous ses habitants font de Dieux, ou de Roys. [...]*'. Corneille's play *Le Menteur* (1644). Corneille 1644 II:5, 39–40.

353 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to Coulanges 1 December 1690. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 952.

354 Bély 1996, 790.

355 See Goldsmith 1988, 105.

356 Bohanan 2012, 90.

irony and satirised a culture that placed too much emphasis on good manners, intellect and good taste.<sup>357</sup>

As a residential area said a lot about a person and his or her status,<sup>358</sup> members of the elite should carefully consider their address. Scarron wrote in his poem *Adieu aux Marasts & à la Place Royal* the most prestigious and beautiful plaza of the elite was Place Royal<sup>359</sup> This area suited the Parisian elite, in which their performance of lifestyle and exceptionality, destined for an audience of their equals and as a sign of distinction from lower ranks was an essential matter. Even though the districts around Le Marais and Louvre were sites for charming manners, polite engagement and respectability, this did not reveal the whole truth of the city. Although the sophisticated district of Le Marais was a magnificent place for the city's elite women, it was also Ninon de Lenclos', *Ninon la débauchée*'s,<sup>360</sup> sphere of life. Thus, this quarter, and the changes that took place within it, along with the limitations and freedoms it gave, had an essential meaning in the lives of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, and their lives were inextricably intertwined with the events and changes in them. Furthermore, Le Marais represented the debauched side of a developing city in which prostitution was rife; thus, Paris was not only a centre of *honnête* behaviour, it was also a centre of vice.

### Lovely Parisian vices

One sees *Coquettes*, but one sees also  
*honnêtes femmes*.<sup>361</sup>

Close to Place Royal was rue des Tournelles, a street for *galantes* in which the house of courtesan Ninon de Lenclos

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357 See, for example, *Les Précieuses ridicules*, Molière 1660.

358 Chatenet-Calyste 2015, 185.

359 *Adieu aux Marasts & à la Place Royal*. Scarron 1645, 7.

360 Sanguin de Saint-Pavin 1861, 113.

361 'On voit des *Coquettes*, mais on voit aussi d'*honnêtes femmes*'. Grenaille (1640), 2003, 139.

was located. She moved to this *hôtel* in 1654 when the contract of the apartment on rue de Richelieu ended.<sup>362</sup> According to Duchêne, Ninon de Lenclos' move to rue de Tournelles in addition to its prestige value meant to her a sense of security and intimacy.<sup>363</sup> Ninon de Lenclos was not a lower-class woman, but she was a courtesan who had not only to find her position among *les honnêtes gens*, but also to struggle not to fall among those women who had nothing to do with *honnêteté*. Furthermore, Le Marais was not a remarkably large area and the circles of the elite were small, so that to those who wished to build a reputation for *honnêteté*, the physical proximity of elite people was very apparent.

In May 1611, Pierre de l'Estoile (1546–1611) wrote: 'Reputation of Paris [...] is today so bad that we have strong reasons to suspect the chastity of a woman or a girl who has sojourned there awhile'.<sup>364</sup> Like l'Estoile, La Bruyère also seems to consider Parisian women disreputable and attention seekers: 'When hearing the clattering sound of carriage by her doorstep, a Parisian woman sparkles with delight and kindness toward the person in [the carriage], even if that person is unknown to her [...]'.<sup>365</sup> Yet, how debauched was Paris in the early modern era? Previous scholars have pointed out that beside the requirement of chaste female *honnêteté*, there was a noticeable demand for ordinary prostitutes, whose estimated number was from 10,000 to 40,000 women or about 10–15 per cent of the adult population in the mid-18th century.<sup>366</sup> The history of prostitution in Paris had started long before.<sup>367</sup> In

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362 CXXI, 27. Documents du minutier central (1650–1700) 1960, 216.

363 Duchêne 2000, 238.

364 '*La réputation de Paris [...] est aujourd'hui si mauvaise qu'on doute fort de la chasteté d'une femme ou d'une fille qui y aura quelque temps séjourné*'. L'Estoile 1880, 112.

365 '*Une femme de Ville entend-elle le brouissement d'un carosse qui s'arreste à sa porte, elle petille de goût & complaisance pour quiconque est dedans sans le connoître [...]*'. La Bruyère 1699, 231.

366 Norberg 1993, 458. Due to the general concern about deteriorating morals, prostitutes and *femmes folles* (as with Jews), were isolated from the overall population. Miller <http://inha.revues.org/566>, 2.

367 Sexually transmitted diseases appeared in France in the 1490s and as prostitutes were suspected, officials began to introduce laws that helped send 'badly behaved' women to hospitals and convents. Strayer 1992, 129. In a ruling

the 17th century, the fight against prostitution became intense, together with the nurturing of respectable behaviour. The fear of venereal diseases, particularly of syphilis and gonorrhoea, led to public punishments (*accubussade*) for prostitutes, including drowning, whipping, and imprisonment.<sup>368</sup> On 20 April 1684, Louis XIV gave the order that police lieutenants had full authority regarding prostitutes, increasing their vulnerability and leaving them legally defenceless.<sup>369</sup> It was also easier to use power in matters of sexual morality and demographic cleansing, and to direct it towards the weakest members of society, whose support groups were non-existent. However, neither prostitutes nor courtesans disappeared from Paris.

Daumas notes that whereas women were either for sale, or were faithful wives, men were able to freely indulge their desires.<sup>370</sup> This dichotomy offered Parisian elite men an opportunity to perform *honnête* life while at the same time, they could fulfil their sexual needs. It is evident that Ninon de Lenclos' success related to this development, in which vice and the exchange of sex for money was desirable and commonplace or – even public. The vices of seemingly *honnête* Paris also had publicity value as Étienne Jauraut's *La Conduite des filles de joie* painting from 1755 suggests by depicting the transportation of prostitutes to the hospital of Salpêtrière. The issue of Parisian prostitutes was kept in people's minds through art and poetry: 'the problem of vices' was not only shameful, it was also interesting. Thus, I suggest,

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of Parliament in Paris in 1494, all prostitutes had to leave the city. Parent-Duchalet Tome II 1837, 49. After 1557, a new attempt was made to clear the streets of Paris, while renting apartments to other than respectable people was prohibited. Sauval 1883, 84. In 1560, Charles IX forbade brothels, but during the Wars of Religion, there was a renaissance in debauchery and prostitution. Miller <http://inha.revues.org/566>, 2, 5.

368 Strayer 1992, 129.

369 Norberg 1993, 465. The same order stated that all prostitutes along with their pimps would be shut away in a place especially designed for them, namely the hospital of Salpêtrière, which was a combination of prison, hospital and punishment room (*maison de force*). There women were expected to live a disciplined life praying and working under the control of 26 supervisors. Strayer 1992, 133.

370 Daumas 1998, 159.

an exceptional woman like Ninon de Lenclos could adjust these carnal needs to serve her status and performance. In other words, Paris was a stage where the virtuous *honneste femme* and the reprehensible prostitutes, the debauched woman and the sophisticated courtesan, could live in a certain harmony in close proximity and mingle, their mutual needs sustaining each other.

It is self-evident that Madame de Sévigné did not have to struggle for her status as an inseparable and *honnête* member of the Le Marais' elite, but how did this small elite circle react to courtesans who realized the elite life style? What was Ninon de Lenclos' position among the Parisian elite? Was she a derelict? As Michel Vergé-Franceschi points out the young Ninon de Lenclos did not have the social position of common prostitute,<sup>371</sup> but her lifestyle was indubitable disrespectful and even socially indefensible, while at the same time she fashioned herself as one of the elite among respectable people. How could she secure her a position in Parisian society?

Not every lover of Ninon was necessarily a member of the highest nobility or elite, but many of them had a prestigious social position.<sup>372</sup> Thus, one could endeavour to understand the phenomenon of Ninon de Lenclos by considering her talent to surround herself with powerful Parisian men or nobles who could secure her status. However, not only noblemen, but also Christina, Queen of Sweden, were interested in Ninon de Lenclos' persona. It is possible that the queen saw some of her own features in the courtesan: Madame de Motteville described the queen as a person who was associated with the most frequently portrayed women of antiquity, who had the wisdom of the most highly learned men and who

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<sup>371</sup> Vergé-Franceschi 2014, 255.

<sup>372</sup> Among them were people such as François-Louis de Mornay, Marquis de Villarcieux; Henri, Marquis de Sévigné (1623–1651); Charles, Baron (later Marquis) de Sévigné (1648–1713); Count de Miossens (1614–1676); Count, later Field marshall de Choiseul (1632–1711); Duke de la Rochefoucauld (1613–1680); Baron de Gourville (1625–1703); Pécourt, 'a well-known dancer'; the Swedish Field marshall, *marchal de Suède*; Louis de Bourbon, the young Condé (1621–1686). FR 28168. Lenclos 39214. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Paris. See also, Saint-Simon *Mémoires* (1701–1707) Tome II 1983, 637.



was considered to possess heroic virtues.<sup>373</sup> Thus, Queen Christina and Ninon de Lenclos were both connected by a way of life, which was opposite to society's expectations of women and by the wish to distinguish themselves from their gender. According to de Motteville, Ninon de Lenclos was the only woman whom Christina met and to whom she showed respect.<sup>374</sup> By her favour, Queen Christina, a ruler of high birth and authority, raised, it seems, the courtesan to a higher level of value than other women. Furthermore, Queen Christina's interest in courtesan de Lenclos spread widely: Madame de Motteville also wrote that on her journey to Italy, the Swedish queen announced that she wanted to meet: 'Demoiselle, who was called Ninon, famous for her vices, her libertarianism and the beauty of her intellect'.<sup>375</sup> The actions of the Queen, who was a devout Catholic, may have, I believe, suggested to the Parisian elite that a woman's *esprit* could be more important than absolute female chastity.

This attraction, that *honnêtes hommes* and Queen Christina felt towards Ninon de Lenclos, may explain various fortunate turns in de Lenclos' life: according to the *Mémoires* of Tallemant des Réaux, Boisrobert claims that Ninon wrote to him that she was treated well during her imprisonment in the Madelonettes Convent.<sup>376</sup> Was this true? Ninon de Lenclos was a known figure and attracted interest. Her charm together with the epoch's double standards might have had an impact so

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373 Motteville Tome I 1750, 380.

374 Motteville Tome V 1750, 218.

375 'Une demoiselle qu'on appelloit Ninon, célèbre par son vice, par son libertinage, & la beauté de son esprit'. Motteville Tome V 1750, 218. See also, *Mémoires sur la vie de Ninon de Lenclos* par A. Bret. Lenclos 1920, 66. According to Duchêne, the imprisoned courtesan and Christine met in the convent of Lagny in October 1656. It is often assumed that Ninon was released when Queen Christina requested this in a letter, but this seems uncertain: a letter of this sort may have been seen as mere provocation in the French court. Duchêne 2000, 211. On the other hand, Antoine Adam, who has compiled and commented on Tallemant des Réaux's *Historiettes*, refers to the *Journal* by the Villiers brothers. In a publication from May 1657 there is a mention that Ninon de Lenclos had been released from the convent on the intervention of Queen Christina. Des Réaux 1960, 1071. This intervention did not necessarily mean a direct plea for release through a letter.

376 Des Réaux Tome III 1840, 163.

that her conditions while imprisoned were comfortable. This meant, I believe, that she succeeded in creating a performance of *honnêteté* and fashioned herself as an elite woman who deserved respectable treatment even when imprisoned in a convent. After the Madelonnettes, Ninon de Lenclos was transferred to the convent at Lagny.<sup>377</sup>

After the captivity, did the debauched but sophisticated courtesan lose her position in Paris? Did her imprisonment affect her reputation among the elite? Was she respectable enough to be worthy of visits from *honnêtes gens* or was she only one of the Parisian curiosities? In the spring of 1657, Ninon de Lenclos returned to Paris,<sup>378</sup> her friends and admirers offered her support. Imprisonment might have reduced her social sphere, but instead, it is evident that Ninon de Lenclos had the ability to create the kind of friendships that would not have been permanent if they had only relied on her erotic services. Later, Saint-Évremond wrote in her letter to Ninon de Lenclos a poem in which he described the way that the courtesan was considered airy in love, and confident and sincere in friendship. To her lovers, she offered the love of Venus, but to her friends only virtues.<sup>379</sup>

Courtesan de Lenclos' position reflects the Parisian elite's perception of morality and decency: the elite was able to accept vices if they were disguised behind a certain degree of *honnêteté*. It seems evident that there were double standards that defined a woman, her honour, her social position, the female chastity of the epoch and the reality: courtesan de Lenclos' imprisonment and successful release also indicate that. Indeed, I suggest, it was possible to combine external *honnêteté* with vices. Furthermore, Ninon de Lenclos had managed to fashion herself as someone *prestigieuse* who did belong to Parisian society. In addition, in France, the social situation was also favourable for women who did not wish

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377 See, for example, des Réaux 1906, 245. Lagny is located 30 kilometres from Paris.

378 Vergé-Franceschi 2014, 239.

379 Saint-Évremond to Ninon de Lenclos in 1686. Saint-Évremond Tome IV 1726, 143.

to embrace the image of a chaste and humble *femme*. In this context, it is not surprising that the chaste Madame de Sévigné and the unchaste Ninon de Lenclos both had a position and a shared circle of friends among the Parisian elite and nobility. Moreover, the 17th-century *Parisienne*, the Parisian *galante* woman, became popular: she was more beautiful, more seductive, and more sophisticated than women of other cities. As Joan DeJean states, Parisian love, like the women of Paris, was in a class of its own.<sup>380</sup> Seventeenth-century Parisian women acquired a reputation that separated them completely from other women in Europe. Other places might have beautiful and charming women, but developments in France, especially those in the capital gave its elite women – even those who lived counter to the ideal of *l'honneste femme* – a special glamour and allure.

The following section turns from juxtaposition of Parisian *honnêteté* and vices to private *appartements* of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos. I shall study how these dwellings reflect the ideal and *honnêteté* of the elite and how the décor of the residence served self-fashioning.

## 2. *Chez elle*. At her home

### Seeking for intimacy

To be in everyone's hands, to find oneself in print, to be the pastime of every province in the form of a book, in which these things cause injustice beyond repair, to meet in libraries, and who is to blame for this pain?<sup>381</sup>

According to La Bruyère the king lacks the sweetness of private life,<sup>382</sup> but Parisian elite women also had to sacrifice

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380 DeJean 2014, 192.

381 'Être dans les mains de tout le monde, se trouver imprimée, être le livre de divertissement de toutes les provinces, où ces choses-là font un tort irréparable, se rencontrer dans les Bibliothèques, et recevoir cette douleur par qui?' Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 26 July 1668. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 93.

382 La Bruyère 1699, 338.

their private life as reputation and respectability was formed on a public stage. Thus, it is not plausible, I believe, that neither Madame de Sévigné or Ninon de Lenclos could hide themselves away in a pocket of privacy. Ranum states that in a society, in which a mild flavour of chivalry was still there, even *les choses du cœur* became public.<sup>383</sup> Scandals among the elite were also spread in the consciousness of a large crowd and this was a real threat for *les honnêtes gens* who were dependent on their reputation and honour. However, this neither erased the annoyance caused by publicity, nor prevented elite women from seeking privacy. As Madame de Sévigné's letter above shows, she became the object of common and public mockery in *Histoire Amoureuse des Gaules*. Her case was not unique; in the 17th century, women's whims and *caprices* were constrained by masculine desires. Since sexuality and respectability determined the 17th century woman, these subjects could also be used as weapons to hurt a woman's reputation. An illuminating example is Madame de Sévigné herself who had lived a life that was very respectable, and in accordance with the expectations that society had of women, but regardless of this her reputation was stained in public.

Because of Ninon de Lenclos' lifestyle, the courtesan was an easy target for those who wanted to publicly humiliate her. Voltaire mentioned Chapelle, who the courtesan denied meeting, because she could not tolerate drunkards; Chapelle was offended and mocked the courtesan in his poems.<sup>384</sup> Ninon de Lenclos was generally commended when she was alive, but became the object of grotesque rumour after her death concerning her sons, though existing documents only mention one son, which she had with Villarceaux. One of these vulgar stories was about her and Marquis de Gersey's son: the boy is claimed to have committed suicide after having fallen in love with his mother without knowing it.<sup>385</sup> A few years earlier

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383 Ranum 1986, 234.

384 Voltaire Tome XXIII 1879, 511.

385 Douxménil 1908, 57–60. Voltaire also wrote that the eldest son of Ninon de Lenclos and de Villarceaux had committed suicide after he found out that he was in love with his own mother. Voltaire Tome XXIII 1879, 509.

a similar story had been told by Alain-René Le Sage (1735) in *Gil Blas*: young Don Valerio de Luna falls in love with Inesille de Cantarilla, and kills himself when he learns that she is his mother.<sup>386</sup> It seems that the rumours that were attached to Ninon de Lenclos, were even more bizarre after her death. These tales, however, could not destroy her reputation as an intellectual and sophisticated woman among the Parisian elite either before or after her death.

It seems that the thematic of female sexuality and intentional humiliation of reputation reached courtesan de Lenclos' home as well as Madame de Sévigné's whose apartment represented not only nobility and a class-related lifestyle, but also the ideal of a chaste and asexual *honneste femme*. Thus, in a society in which a good reputation played a considerable role and humiliation was part of social theatre, it is plausible to suggest that elite women did seek some privacy, even though it was something new. Privacy was the counterweight to communality and Madame de Sévigné fully aware of the expectations placed upon her class, knew that an elite lifestyle entailed public performance and that privacy was a challenge.<sup>387</sup> Elite women's own residences and *hôtels* were one way to create a private place away from excessive attention and other people's judgement. Post-mortem inventories, moreover, cast a light on the meaning of private spaces, and show that increasingly during this period private and intimate spaces were designed. Furniture design exhibited the private tastes of the owner.<sup>388</sup> Orest Ranum's hypothesis of the intimacy of the past emphasises a person's intimate essence through his or her own functions, feelings, prayers or dreams. Places such as a garden, salon or room or such artefacts as a book, flower or picture were special to a person, through time and place they became something special. Moreover, their meanings could be decoded by other people.<sup>389</sup>

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386 Le Sage 1879, 141–144.

387 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 15 August 1685. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 232.

388 Bohanan 2012, 77. See also, Ariès, Duby 1986, 165.

389 Ranum 1986, 211–212.

On Easter Tuesday in 1671, Madame de Sévigné wrote to her daughter that she had arrived in Livry with the intention of withdrawing from people and commotion (*du monde et du bruit*) until Thursday. The Marquise only wished to be alone, to think and to pray.<sup>390</sup> Madame de Sévigné was religious and she fasted, but from her letters one can read how she needed isolation and peace from time to time. In the apartment in Le Marais and in an animated social environment, this was difficult, even though she was able to withdraw to her room.<sup>391</sup> Furthermore, life in the countryside meant freedom from the obligations of Parisian society and the court. Thus, the time spent in Livry also meant that Madame de Sévigné could cultivate herself and later use these skills in social meetings in the urban environment of Paris. Furthermore, studying her inner self in intimate writings, isolation and an ascetic lifestyle bringing pleasure and personal taste were all means of self-fashioning.

Private *hôtels* themselves were complex venues where variety of gatherings of *honnêtes gens* occurred: they were central places at times of birth, marriage, and death. In addition, the extravagance of *maisons* was described and admired.<sup>392</sup> This public depiction helped to build an image of the perfect elite lifestyle associated with visits from guests, dinners and meetings among peers and friends. In other words, residents of *hôtel* were not closed into their own, private world and the interaction between them and their guests from the outside world also spread information about what took place there; thus, the reputation of the resident was shaped and made it public. In the *hôtels*, as at the court, events were not private. They were the topics of conversation and provided models for elite behaviour. Therefore, it is not surprising that

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390 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 24 March 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 199. See also, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 2 November 1679. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 728.

391 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 24 December 1688. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 444.

392 Mme de Sévigné, for example, admired Mme de La Fayette's *maison* during the time of Mme de La Fayette's son's marriage. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 28 December 1689. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 790.

Madame de Sévigné, who sometimes wanted to hide from social demands, frequently describes in her correspondence the events, parties and people of *société*.<sup>393</sup>

### Perfect appartements for *honnêtes femmes*

How was the life of the new *hôtels* of Le Marais formed? What was the elite woman's position vis-à-vis her household? In 1637, Paris and its surrounding areas contained about 23,000 to 24,000 houses<sup>394</sup> and during the reign of Louis XIV, Paris was five times the size of Lyon, the next largest town in France.<sup>395</sup> Moreover, the elite family played an important role in the *honnête* lifestyle, yet, the families of the early modern era elite and their households also consisted of servants, who were under the command of the head of the family.<sup>396</sup> Many of them were women: wet nurses, housekeepers, chambermaids and housemaids; they became closely acquainted with the woman of the house.<sup>397</sup> In *Hôtel Carnavalet*, in addition to Madame de Sévigné, Charles de Sévigné and the Abbé de Coulanges, and Madame and Monsieur de Grignan who spent long periods of time in the residence, there were also her *filles* (lady's maids) living there.<sup>398</sup>

Thus, *bienséance*, propriety, was not only visible in the way that elite members lived or furnished their homes, but also in the servants who worked in them.<sup>399</sup> The servants revealed details about the *monsieur* and *madame* of a household; they were also connected to the family's wealth and status

393 Sévigné Tome I 1972, Sévigné Tome II 1974, Sévigné Tome III 1978.

394 *Mémoires des intendants sur l'état des généralités dressés pour l'instruction du duc de Bourgogne* 1881, 656. It was also possible to have many people working in Royal projects: for example, in August 1684 22,000 men and 6,000 horses were required every day in Versailles. In May 1685, 36,000 men worked on the worksite. Tiberghien 2006, 12.

395 Around 1700 about 520,000 people inhabited capital. Nassiet 2006, 10, 16. In the wake of the French Revolution, this number was about 600,000. Marseille 2002, 610.

396 Flandrin 1979, 5. See also, Elias 2006, 50–51.

397 Thiollier 1998, 108.

398 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 12 October 1677. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 567.

399 Courtin 1728, 129. See also, Liancourt 1698, 90–91.

and played an important role as intimate members of the household. Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos lived alone and they were both responsible for decisions that affected the family's *honnêteté*. Ninon de Lenclos' bequests are, indeed, an illuminating example of this: she did not have a family connected by blood. Although it is plausible that her relationship with Marquis de Villarceaux, which lasted a few years, and the residency in the Marquis' estate, *domaine de Villarceaux*, can be seen as a relationship that corresponded to the concept of a family, her 'family' was rather the employees who formed her household. In her testament from 1704 she mentions Nielle Emero and the widow Ferrier, whom she regards somewhat as her family (*un peu ma parente*).<sup>400</sup> The bequests made express her appreciation for her staff. A testament from 1662 allocates 300 *livres* for her *laquais*, 400 *livres* and her *garde-robe* for her maid, Mademoiselle de Marchand (*estant prés d'elle*), and all her furniture and apartments for her *légataire universel* Alexandre d'Elbene, seigneur de la Motte.<sup>401</sup> In a testament from 1704, Anne de Lanclos left her male servant (*valet*), La Pierre 3000 *francs*, her chambermaid 2000 *francs*, and her maids, Margueritte 200 *francs*, and Catherine 60 *livres*. The sister Marie Provaut got 60 *livres* to organize Anne de Lanclos' funeral. She also asked M. Arouet that her servants would be fed for six weeks.<sup>402</sup> Even though Ninon de Lenclos had a highly critical outlook on religion, she exhibited both care for her fellow humans and propriety toward members of her household.

Madame de Sévigné, for her part, believed that charity was one of the duties of the elite. Not all wealthy women of the elite followed this rule: on 3 February 1695, Madame de Sévigné wrote to Madame de Coulanges about the death of Madame de Meckelbourg. Even though the Marquise and Meckelbourg

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<sup>400</sup> They both inherited 2,500 *livres* and Nielle Emero could also choose *deux robes les plus neuves* and *une jupe*. The widow Ferrier could have *une robe* and *une jupe*. *Testament d'Anne de Lanclos 19 décembre 1704*. Magne 1912, 196–197.

<sup>401</sup> CV, 752. *Testament d'Anne de Lanclos* 7.9.1662. Archives nationales. Paris.

<sup>402</sup> *Testament d'Anne de Lanclos 19 décembre 1704*. Magne 1912, 196.



had been close friends, she could not accept the meanness and greed of her deceased friend. It was also difficult for Madame de Sévigné to understand why Madame de Meckelbourg had stored riches in her home and left nothing to her servants or to poor people.<sup>403</sup> Madame de Sévigné condemned this conduct, and she reproached Meckelbourg's behaviour in no uncertain terms. To her, propriety and charity were important and natural. In this way, she also demonstrated that she was worthy of her own social status. It seems that for Madame de Sévigné or Ninon de Lenclos, *bienséance* as a form of taking care of their employees was part of their self-fashioning as members of the Parisian elite. In other words, *honnêteté* inside households was not only a question of material choices, it also encompassed a larger unity that included several functions of *hôtel particuliers* and *châteaux*.<sup>404</sup>

However, as Bohanan has pointed out that in early modern era French society money and material choices were important factors to gain both honour and esteem.<sup>405</sup> After the Peace Treaty of Nijmegen was made (1678), France was able to enjoy a prosperous era, which was reflected in the architecture and art of this period. This was a time when comfort became fashionable, as seen in clothing as well as interior design.<sup>406</sup> And a city, Paris in the seventeenth century created a favourable environment for consumption and procurement of goods and members of the elite were able to use their homes to create environments that pleased them and corresponded to their personal preferences, as well as reflecting, respectability, cultural goals and the good taste of the occupants. 'You can see that good taste has not vanished

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403 Mme de Sévigné to Mme de Coulanges 3 February 1695. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 1081. Pierre Nicole also stresses the meaning of charity (*la charité*). Nicole Tome 5 1715, 133–134. His thoughts may have had an influence on Mme de Sévigné's thinking in this matter. Ninon de Lenclos' testament (1662) allocates 300 livres for *les pauvres*. CV, 752. *Testament d'Anne de Lanclos* 7.9.1662. Archives nationales. Paris.

404 Courtin, for example, gives instructions how to treat visitors (*ceux qui nous visitent*), how apartments and beds should be cleaned, how the valets and horses of the guests should be accommodated etc. Courtin 1728, 208–226.

405 Bohanan 2012, 3.

406 DeJean 2009, 26.

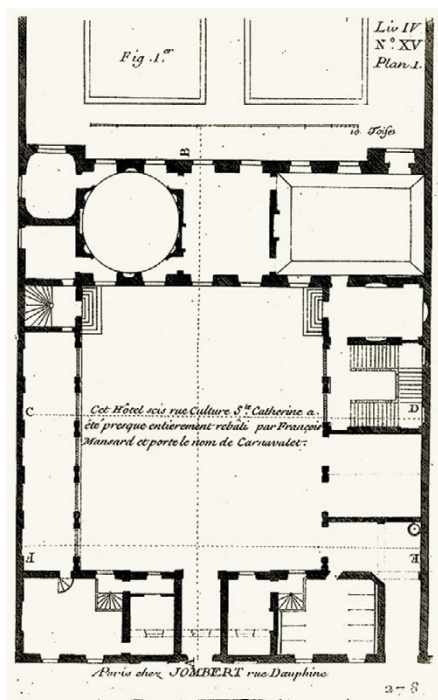


Fig. 7: Plan I, Hôtel Carnavalet (1752).  
Versailles, châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon.  
Agence Photographique de la RMN-Grand Palais.

from France’,<sup>407</sup> states Ninon de Lenclos to Saint-Évremond. Even though it is challenging to define taste,<sup>408</sup> it was a means by which the French elite could shine through and *bienséance*, which affected all of organized society.<sup>409</sup> Indeed, taste and *honnêteté* were inalienable and taste distinguished *les honnêtes gens* from “others” who were below them or threatened their *mode de vie*.<sup>410</sup> Furthermore, Bourdieu

407 ‘Vous voyez que bon goût n’est pas fini en France’. Ninon de Lenclos to Saint-Évremond. Saint-Évremond Tome V 1725, 429.

408 Ilmakunnas & Stobart 2017, 3.

409 Tikanoja 2009, 29. Goldsmith 1988, 8–9. Bohanan 2012, 10. Ilmakunnas & Stobart 2017, 3.

410 Bohanan 2012, 10. See also, Moriarty 2009, 85–89. Ilmakunnas & Stobart 2017, 3–5.

argues, that cultural choices and taste are related closely to a person's social position; thus, taste serves as an cultural characteristic.<sup>411</sup> A taste and luxury could serve the ambitions and goals of the elite, as well as their societal power and performance, the rooms meant for social gatherings reflected through their materials, the owner's taste; his understanding of the importance of a refined and luxurious material culture would come clear to the guests during these meetings.<sup>412</sup>

According to Furetière *un bel appartement* included a hall (*salle*), a room (*chambre*), antechamber and cabinet. There was also a small, heated room in which one sleeps and a parade room (*chambre de parade*).<sup>413</sup> The antechamber itself presented, according to Elias, 'the symbol of good court society in the *Ancien Régime*'.<sup>414</sup> Thus, people living in the *hôtels* functioned in different rooms where the interactions of the elite, not only with their servants, but most importantly with their peers, took place. When considering the concept of *honnêteté* and its fashioning, the space where people of the elite gathered had an important role and it functioned as both a social place and a stage for self-fashioning. In the early modern era household, a single room had many meanings: it could function as a dining room and a bedroom, which did not only function as a place to sleep, but also achieved popularity as a social setting. Post-mortem inventories from the 17th and 18th centuries reveal that the bedroom would have many chairs for guests.<sup>415</sup>

In the districts of Le Marais, île-Saint-Louis, and Faubourg Saint-Germain, great *hôtels* had special rooms that were designed with the purpose of receiving a small group of people who would have conversations. According to Ranum,

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<sup>411</sup> Bourdieu 1984.

<sup>412</sup> Mme de Rambillet, for example, chose blue as the main colour for her *Chambre bleu*. Aronson 1978, 25. Bély 2009, 393. Bohanan 2012, 56–57. She also made alcoves fashionable. Bély 2009, 393. See also, Lilti 2005, 89.

<sup>413</sup> *Chambre*. Furetière Tome I 1690.

<sup>414</sup> Elais 2006, 52.

<sup>415</sup> Pardailhé-Galabrun 1991, 59. See also, MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné 18.6.1696*. Archives nationales. Paris. *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lanclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 202–209.

the idea of such a room, a salon, in which women as well as men would gather to converse, was a new idea and it had its own, gendered dynamics.<sup>416</sup> During the final decades of 17th century, the idea of a *chambre à coucher*, a private bedroom for an individual developed.<sup>417</sup> However, new fashions were not always followed by the elite: in 1676 Madame de Sévigné, for example, chose to sleep in her *petite chambre* because it pleased her, while other options shocked and disconcerted her.<sup>418</sup>

In furnishing their apartments, to what expense were the elite willing to go? When Henri de Sévigné's uncle Renaud-René de Sévigné, married Isabella Péna, the widow of Marc Pioche de La Vergene in December 1650, *le marquis* and *la marquise* de Sévigné were not delighted as they thought the union would weaken the inheritance they would receive.<sup>419</sup> Madame and Monsieur de Sévigné needed all the possible wealth of the family and thus, family arrangements that would reduce opportunities to acquire a luxurious elite lifestyle, did not please them. An illuminating example of the importance of wealth and status for the Sévigné is shown as they spent 1,520 *livres* on silk fabric and other textiles for decoration materials.<sup>420</sup> Thus, money, the beautification of furnishings and luxury items were all significant in helping maintain a class-specific and *honnête* lifestyle. In this context, it seems that Madame de Sévigné followed the rules of the *honnête* lifestyle of the secular elite, even though she loved Pierre Nicole, who disapproved of the embellishments of art and justly claimed that *gens du monde* did not like anything else

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416 Ranum 2002, 141.

417 DeJean 2009, 165–167.

418 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 26 May 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 302.

419 Duchêne 2002, 125.

420 XIX, 442. Documents du minutier central (1650–1700) 1960, 330. This economically intimidating marriage became, ultimately, an important relationship for Mme de Sévigné. She formed a strong and enduring friendship with Isabella Péna's daughter, Marie-Madeleine Pioche de La Vergé alias the future Mme de La Fayette; this friendship lasted to the end of her life. Duchêne 2002, 125.

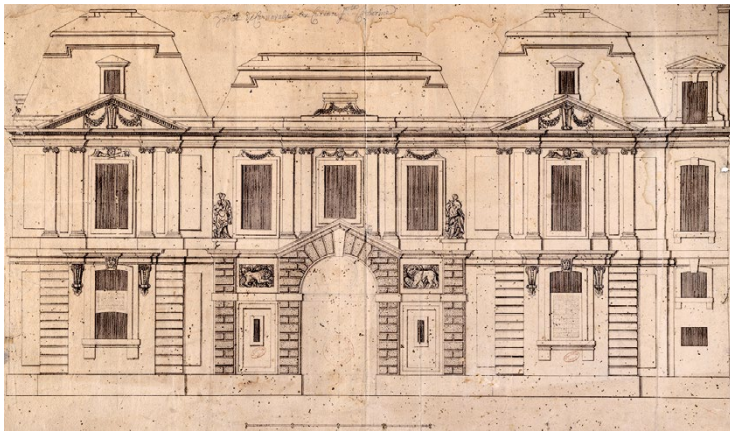


Fig. 8: Hôtel Carnavalet 17th century.  
Bibliothèque de l'Institut, Paris.  
Agence Photographique de la RMN-Grand Palais.

than works of men (*les ouvrages des hommes*).<sup>421</sup>

After 1677, when Marquise de Sévigné moved to *Hôtel Carnavalet*, located on rue Sainte-Catherine,<sup>422</sup> Marquise de Sévigné did not live far from Ninon de Lenclos' residence on rue des Tournelles. In the spacious *Hôtel Carnavalet* with a *parc* she herself designed, Marquise de Sévigné lived appropriately for a noble person and *honneste femme*.<sup>423</sup> Pierre Nicole preferred the beauties of nature,<sup>424</sup> but in her letter, Madame de Sévigné seems excited to be designing her *jardin*, which would look not only fashionable but man-made.<sup>425</sup> *La marquise* clearly wishes to follow a sense of taste common among the elite, which emphasised the artificial beauty of *jardins*. For example, in La Fayette's garden, which was full

421 Nicole Tome 6 1715, 171.

422 Duchêne 2002, 408. (Nowadays rue de Sévigné and *musée Carnavalet*). According to Duchêne the price of the *hôtel* was valued at 68,000 *livres* in 1694. Duchêne 2000, 238.

423 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 28 October 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 371.

424 Nicole Tome 6 1715, 171.

425 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 28 October 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 371. See also, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 2 May 1689. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 589.

of flowers, everything was perfumed.<sup>426</sup>

In addition to its beautiful and fashionable garden, *Hôtel Carnavalet* had sheds for four sets of carriages, and if required, a fifth shed could be built. The stables had room for eighteen horses.<sup>427</sup> After the death of Madame de Sévigné, the estate inventory deed mentions a carriage (*carosse*) with coat of arms, four windows and an interior made of red velvet.<sup>428</sup> The Marquise probably also had a second coach,<sup>429</sup> in which she travelled to Provence two years before she died. The carriage left in *Hôtel Carnavalet* might have been a lighter brougham used for moving around the city, while another carriage was used for longer journeys. If Madame de Sévigné owned only two carriages, her house and its surroundings had plenty of space for her guests' horses and their goods. Furthermore, carriages were related to domestic travel, which was also an important part of elite living.<sup>430</sup> Thus, Madame de Sévigné's opportunity to travel between Paris, Bretagne and Provence also indicates her status: she was wealthy enough to travel for pleasure, to have a coach, horses, a stage driver and sufficient income to pay for the expenses of her journeys.

Even though Madame de Sévigné had been content with her *petite maison bien jolie* in *rue des Trois-Pavillons*,<sup>431</sup> on 7 October 1677, she wrote to her daughter about her new apartment, which was larger and even more suitable to her status:

[...] Thank God we had *Hôtel Carnavalet*. It is a delightful

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426 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 30 May 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 523.

427 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 12 October 1677. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 567.

428 The carriage's estimated value was 300 livres. MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris.

429 She had '[...] grand carosse de sorte que nous ne sommes nullement pressées'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 16 May 1676. Sévigné Tome II, 291.

430 Whittle, Griffiths 2012, 191.

431 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 April 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 496.

affair: there we have everything [...]. As we cannot get everything we must get along without parquet and the small fashionable fireplaces, but at least we have a beautiful yard, a beautiful garden, and a beautiful district [...].<sup>432</sup>

Madame de Sévigné's letter is, a description of a residence of the elite of Le Marais which was not perfectly furnished, let alone extravagant palace, but together with the district, it offered her a place where she could live according to the elite standards. It is evident that *honnêteté* required some amount of material luxury, but it is also noteworthy that it was not always a matter of decoration or artworks: Madame de Sévigné's letters also reveal that even heating arrangements were a question of fashionable decoration and luxury.<sup>433</sup> Even the most beautiful and fashionable *cheminée* was not useful if there was no firewood; Madame de Sévigné acquired wood from the Baron's estate.<sup>434</sup>

It can be inferred from Madame de Sévigné's letter that she was content with the move she had made although she had been forced to make concessions. A noble position did not guarantee inexhaustible assets or ensured that all wishes could be fulfilled. Status symbols, however, were crucial for the elite who spent a large amount of time, money and effort to acquire them,<sup>435</sup> though such matters were a continuous source of concern and they might even cause conflicts.<sup>436</sup>

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432 '[...] Dieu merci, nous avons l'hôtel Carnavalet. C'est une affaire admirable : nous y tiendrons tous [...]. Comme on n'en peut pas tout avoir, il faut se passer des parquets et des petites cheminées à la mode, mais nous aurons du mois une belle cour, un beau jardin, un beau quartier [...]'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 7 October 1677. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 564. Before moving to *Hôtel Carnavalet*, Sévigné had lived in *rue Courteauwilain* which had proved to be a poor choice. Duchêne's comment. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 1306.

433 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 28 May 1680. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 951; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 3 July 1680. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 997; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 14 July 1680. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 1008; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 28 July 1680. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 1029.

434 MC/RSS/498. *Contrat de Mariage entre Henri, marquis de Sévigné and Marie Rabutin-Chantal* 1 août 1644. Archives nationales. Paris.

435 Sternberg 2014, 3.

436 Sternberg 2014, 1.

Thus, Parisian apartments and their furnishings reflected their resident, creating a framework for the layered notion of *l'honneste femme*.

Madame de Sévigné was interested in decoration and her estate inventory deed reveals that *Hôtel Carnavalet* reflected her fashionable elite taste. According to her letters, it is plausible to suggest that she had been careful to choose perfectly fitting decoration; thus in 1675 she wished to have curtains made of *damas rouge*, which would be *justement notre fait*. *La marquise* knew that embroidered fabrics of satin, damask and velvet coloured red, gold and black were required.<sup>437</sup> Her wooden armchairs were upholstered with velvet and silk fabrics of diverse colours and leather, six chairs had red fabric covering, seat coverings were made of taffeta and a small table was covered with black leather. There were also two tables in *guéridon* style (often circular-top table supported by one or more columns or sculptural or mythological figures).<sup>438</sup>

It is self-evident that Madame de Sévigné's apartment was furnished according to her class, though one novelty, a sofa, was missing, as it was in Ninon de Lenclos' apartment. This piece of furniture represented comfort and true luxury, because it was made from expensive materials.<sup>439</sup> The sofa made its first appearance in 1688,<sup>440</sup> and in 1690 Madame de Sévigné's daughter Madame de Grignan managed to introduce this novelty into the Grignan's castle. Madame de Sévigné enthuses: 'Let us talk about *canapé*. Oh, how beautiful it is! How luxurious! [...] *Voilà*, a furniture worthy of Versailles!' In addition to her admiration, she was zealous to see it.<sup>441</sup> Thus, the status symbols that the elite favoured were not just

437 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 24 July 1675. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 15–16. Bohanan states that under Louis XIV the most popular interior colour was red, but yellow was also a common colour. Bohanan 2012, 59.

438 MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris.

439 DeJean 2009, 12. Pardailhé-Galabrun 1991, 101. Bohanan 2012, 77.

440 DeJean 2009, 124.

441 'Parlons du canapé. Ah! Qu'il est beau! Qu'il est riche! [...] Voilà un meuble digne de Versailles!' Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 24 May 1690. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 883.



products of the court or the Parisian *hôtels*, for the elite of countrycastles were not immune to fashion or novelties.

Although Madame de Sévigné did not have all the most luxurious furniture like a sofa in *Hôtel Carnavalet*, it seems, that she did have everything that made her life comfortable and was suitably for a fashionable elite lifestyle. She had, for example, bed curtains, a hair mattress, several beds, a headrest filled with feathers, a mattress covered with white and blue fabric, two headboards upholstered with red fabric, a bed cover, a vellum folding screen (*quatre feuilles de paravent paysage*), a sideboard decorated with mosaic wood, cupboards, different curtains, some of which had embroidery, and window curtains made of red taffeta.<sup>442</sup> Madame de Sévigné's home had been full of colours and in *Hôtel Carnavalet* most rooms were furnished with different seats, which meant that guests could be received in different rooms. Seating furniture has a particularly important meaning in court and it is possible that the Parisian elite had adopted this custom from the court and introduced it into their homes.<sup>443</sup> Madame de Sévigné had several armchairs (*fauteuil*); in *la salle au rez de chaussée*, in *le cabinet* and in *la chambre de ce laquais*.<sup>444</sup> Typically, armchairs were located in the finest room of the house and they were kept for a guest of high status, to whom it should be offered immediately after his or her arrival. A person of lower status was supposed to sit on a more modest seat than her guest<sup>445</sup> even though armchairs and chairs often did not differ much from each other.<sup>446</sup> It is difficult to know if Madame de Sévigné was pleased with her furnishings or if they indicated

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442 MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris. The most common interior decorating colours were red, green, gold, silver and sometimes white. Courtin 2011, 172.

443 Courtin 2011, 58.

444 MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris. Mme de Sévigné had also several *houes* to cover and protect chairs. MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris.

445 Courtin 1728, 185.

446 Weigert 1962, 131.

her self-fashioning. It is plausible to suggest that she had enough of everything that was sufficient for her taste and her comprehension of the elite lifestyle. Furthermore, it is known that she forbade Madame de Grignan to bring any articles of furniture with her.<sup>447</sup>

The furniture itself was not enough, but with tapestries they together created an exquisite elite dwelling. Madame de Sévigné wrote Madame de Grignan on 20 October 1677 that she had enough tapestries in *Hôtel Carnavalet*.<sup>448</sup> She had, for example, eight tapestries (*tapisserie*) of different sizes that were made of leather with gold embroidery, *plusieurs morceaux de tapisserie de damas oror* and a *petite tapisserie de Bergame*.<sup>449</sup> Tapestries were not decorated with real gold and it was often yellow paint that gave them their golden gleam.<sup>450</sup> These items were not necessarily very valuable, unlike large tapestries, whose price varied between 60 and 30,000 *livres* and these *tapisseries* usually made up a collection of six to eight parts.<sup>451</sup> The most valuable tapestries were hung only on special occasions and were usually stored away.<sup>452</sup> In *Hôtel Carnavalet*, there were also eight high-quality tapestries that portrayed Noah, seven tapestries that

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447 'N'apportez point de meubles, vous en trouverez ; ce n'est pas peine pour le peu qu'il reste à meubler'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 27 October 1677. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 583.

448 Mme de Sévigné asked her daughter not to bring any tapestries to Paris because 'nous trouverons ici tout ce qu'il faut [...]'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 20 October 1677. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 579. See also, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 27 October 1677. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 582.

449 In the state inventory deed the estimated value of these tapestries, which were made of leather with gold embroidery was 40 *livres*. MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris. Although her state inventory deed mentions *tapisserie*, they were most probably the *tenture brodée (brocatelle)* and the *tenture de cuir d'oré* rather than the valuable *teinture de tapisserie*. Courtin 2011, 172–193. The post-mortem inventory of Ninon de Lenclos mentions also 'trois pieces de tapisserie de Flandres à verdure'. The estimated value of tapestries, together with *un rideau de fenestre de toile de coton* is 40 *livres*. *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lanclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 204.

450 Courtin 2011, 172.

451 Courtin 2011, 177.

452 Courtin 2011, 179.

portrayed Psyche, and seven tapestries from Flanders, that portrayed flora.<sup>453</sup> In *la marquise's* estate inventory deed, these more valuable tapestries are marked as in storage (*garde-meuble*).<sup>454</sup> Therefore, Madame de Sévigné's fashionable home was in tune with spiritual themes, figures from Greek mythology, as well as natural subjects. The *Hôtel Carnavalet* had long been empty and there was no need to exhibit the tapestries. The tapestries that Madame de Sévigné owned were not particularly valuable but they embodied aesthetics and luxury, as well as her interest in religion, classical histories and nature; more generally they were indicative of her education. The furnishings in *Hôtel Carnavalet* revealed her interest in religious and secular subjects – as did her lifestyle. Madame de Sévigné's post-mortem inventory gives an impression of a large *hôtel*, but whatever she had taken with her to Provence two years earlier, or what has not been recorded in the inventory, remains unknown; thus, it is impossible to reconstruct the complete splendour of *Hôtel Carnavalet*.

To Madame de Sévigné, her *maison* in Paris was particularly dear when her daughter stayed with her. She anticipated the arrival of her daughter and the time that they would spend together: '[...] We are together, and you love me, my dear child'.<sup>455</sup> In other words, her apartment was not only to create a perfect image of elite status and respectability for her peers, but it was also a place to live an intimate family life. During these periods when her daughter visited her, Madame de Sévigné presented herself as a particularly caring mother who wanted to offer her daughter, Madame de Grignan, a residence that reflected her position and taste.<sup>456</sup> Madame de Grignan's

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453 The estimated value of these tapestries was 1300 livres. MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris.

454 MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris.

455 '[...] Nous serons ensemble, et vous m'aimez, ma chère enfant'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 7 October 1677. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 565.

456 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 12 October 1677. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 567; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 25 October 1679. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 719; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 6 November 1680. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 55; Mme de

*chambre* was located on the lowest floor of the *hôtel*, the *rez-de-chaussé*.<sup>457</sup> The renovation of *Hôtel Carnavalet* was a challenge to Madame de Sévigné and she renovated the walls, the parquet and in 1679 had a new fashionable fireplace made in the place of the old one.<sup>458</sup> The rooms that her daughter used were renovated and prepared for her.<sup>459</sup> Remodelling the *Hôtel Carnavalet* may have been extremely important for Madame de Sévigné for social reasons as Antoine de Courtin emphasises the importance of proper rooms for guests and how the rooms should be used.<sup>460</sup> Madame de Sévigné was a loving mother but most of all she was an inseparable member of the elite, who no doubt wished to fulfil all the requirements of *civilité*, spending a great deal of time and effort to match the standards demanded of the mother of Countess and the mother-in-law of Count de Grignan. In this respect, her renovations also raised her own status as an elite woman. Ultimately, her efforts payed off and the Marquise succeeded to dwell everybody *honnêtement*.<sup>461</sup>

It is self-evident that Madame de Sévigné found nothing more pleasing than living together with her daughter,<sup>462</sup> and Madame de Sévigné made peculiar solutions to arrange the rooms for her daughter, her husband, and herself. Thus, she positioned her daughter's bedroom so that she could enter it through the large hall, whereas her daughter's husband, Monsieur de Grignan, was placed at the back of the hall,

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Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 13 June 1685. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 201; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 2 May 1689. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 589.

457 See also, Duchêne 2002, 476; Duchêne's comment Sévigné Tome II 1974, 1368–1369.

458 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 18 October 1679. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 704.

459 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 25 September 1680. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 27; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 16 October 1680. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 42; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 20 October 1680. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 44.

460 Courtin 1728, 202–203.

461 Mme de Sévigné to Mme de Coulanges 27 October 1677. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 582.

462 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 16 September 1677. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 549.

right across from his wife's room.<sup>463</sup> The arrangement clearly implied that a mother's role closer and more important than that of a husband. Madame de Sévigné might also have wished to reserve for herself the possibility of approaching her daughter at any moment and even making intimacy between the married couple difficult. According to her, respectability did not require constant proximity between husband and wife. However, it is also self-evident that this was not only a question of respectability: Madame de Sévigné did not want her daughter to be continuously pregnant.<sup>464</sup> On the other hand, the society of the early modern era, according to Elias, was so specious that man and wife could have, not only different circles of companions, but also separately placed private apartments.<sup>465</sup>

To *la marquise* de Sévigné her daughter's *chambre* was like a sanctuary when Madame de Grignan was away.<sup>466</sup> In addition, after every break between mother and daughter, it would seem that Madame de Sévigné made sure that *Hôtel Carnavalet* was even better and more comfortable for her daughter. In November 1680, Madame de Sévigné requested the return of her daughter, remarking that waiting for Monsieur de Grignan would take too long.<sup>467</sup> As before, Madame de Sévigné used a lot of time taking care that everything needed in *Hôtel Carnavalet* by her daughter during her visit such as

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463 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 12 October 1677. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 567.

464 Mme de Sévigné to Mme de Grignan 18 May 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 258; Mme de Sévigné to Guitaut 26 January 1683. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 99; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 9 March 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 452.

465 Elias 2006, 54–55.

466 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 11 October 1680. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 365; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 31 March 1694. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 1029.

467 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 6 November 1680. Sévigné Tome III, 1978, 53.

bedlinen, dishes,<sup>468</sup> and servants,<sup>469</sup> would be of good quality. However, not all the required goods could be found in Paris: Madame de Sévigné wanted Monsieur de Grignan to bring pretty and durable towels from Flanders costing nine or ten *francs*. Fifteen or twenty dozens were enough for their needs, thought Madame de Sévigné. Those manufactured in Lyon also suited her taste.<sup>470</sup> Thus, it seems that not all of *la marquise's* decorative choices were associated with maintaining status, since they were sometimes intended merely to please her beloved daughter.

Indeed, the apartment, artefacts, as well as other luxurious items, played their part, I suggest, in forming the ideal of a respectable woman. It should be noticed, however, that the meaning of luxury was different for the 17th century elite than it was for people of the following centuries;<sup>471</sup> for the 17th-century nobility luxury was a necessity.<sup>472</sup> Members of the elite had the opportunity to make their home a place that represented its occupant, his or her status and ambitions,<sup>473</sup> although living according to these ideals was expensive and required tremendous efforts to master all the aspects of elite living.<sup>474</sup> A real financial difference could be detected between

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468 Mme de Sévigné had some fine dishes made of pocelain ([...] *six grandes bouteilles, quatre petites bouteilles, [...] trois gaudets, cinq grandes tasses, cinq petites tasses le tout de pourcelaine* [...]). MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris.

469 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 16 October 1680. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 42.

470 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 22 September 1680. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 22–23.

471 Kaartinen, Montenach, Simonton 2015, 3.

472 Ilmakunnas 2012, 15. Elias 2006, 71. Whittle & Griffiths give an example for the English nobility of this period. If their consumption was considered inadequate, members of the English nobility would lose face and become objects of mockery and laughter among their servants and their peers. Whittle & Griffiths 2012, 14.

473 See, for example, Goldsmith 1988, 88–90.

474 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 6 November 1680. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 53. Duchess of Orléans, who had recently become a widow, wrote in 1701 that her annual pension of 250,000 *francs* was not sufficient to maintain the quality of life that was suitable for a person of her social standing. Von der Pfalz (1652–1722) 1984, 140.

the higher nobility and the lower nobility,<sup>475</sup> but this is not highlighted between Marquise de Sévigné and courtesan de Lenclos; despite their completely different social status, according to their post-mortem inventories their financial status was not as different as one might have thought and both of them succeeded to create a place suitable for their status conscious performance.

## The enchanting kingdom of the courtesan

If we compare courtesan de Lenclos' apartment with respectable *marquise* de Sévigné's *hôtel*, do we find significant differences in decoration? In the 1660s, Ninon de Lenclos was unable to live in the same kind of luxury as the wealthy nobility or bourgeoisie. Rue des Tournelles was not the most exalted street in Paris, nor was it a fine plaza like Place Royal, but de Lenclos was able to live with dignity in her apartment.<sup>476</sup>

A small but comfortable, neat house, which comprises two different residences. In her first residence, she had a very beautiful and large salon, in which she received her guests. [...] In this *salon* there was no tapestries [...] there were portraits of her most important friends, and some paintings by some of the best artists of the period. In this room, there was her desk and library. [...] Way in the back, rather a large cabinet more voluptuously furnished [...] embellished with mirrors and wooden panelling. She had had a fresco painted, the entire story of Psyche on the ceiling, and on the panels, several gallant adventures [...]. It was in this room where she wanted to seclude herself when there was not too big a crowd. This is where she used to play her lute.<sup>477</sup>

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475 Ilmakunnas 2009, 16.

476 Duchêne refers to Ninon de Lenclos' house as described by d'Erbaud's as '*palais médiocre*'. Duchêne 2000, 231–232.

477 '*Maison petite, mais commode et propre et elle contenait deux appartements séparés. Dans son premier appartement, elle avait un fort beau et grand salon où elle recevait ses visites. [...] Ce salon n'avait point de tapisserie, il étoit boisé, avec des fillets d'or ; et l'on y voyoit les portraits de ses principaux amis, et quelques tableaux des plus excellens Peintres de son temps, C'étoit dans*

This description is an excellent example of how reality and fantasy were mixed. Although Ninon de Lenclos lived in an apartment that was furnished according to the fashion of her period, Douxménil was exaggerating. He depicted the courtesan in a luxurious and residence that corresponded to the ideals associated with Lenclos' reputation in the 1750s, such as an interest in books, *galanterie* and collecting exquisite art. By creating an extravagant apartment, the Douxménil was able to create an impression of a house of a courtesan that was suitable for entertaining high-ranking guests. D'Erbaud described Ninon de Lenclos' house in his poem, where he depicted royal parties, hunting and events. On this occasion, the writer does not give a particularly grand impression of the house, which the courtesan had on rue de Tournelles. On the contrary, he implied that a visit from a right kind of person would raise the apartment's value significantly, and would give it a completely new sparkle, which could help make the courtesan's dwelling one of the prettiest houses:

If he ever had the audacity to enter this mediocre palace, where you rule on rue de Tournelles. The house would also become most beautiful, the rotten hallway would be revered, the dim staircase would be lit up, the corridor would bloom with flowers. Like the brilliance of crowns the streets! The room would seem to you as if it had finally been gilded!<sup>478</sup>

After the death of Ninon, a *procès-verbal* was made, in

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*cette pièce qu'étoient son clavessin et sa Bibliothèque. Dans le fond [...] un assez grand cabinet, plus voluptueusement meublé [...]. Orné de glaces et de panneaux de menuiserie ; elle avait fait peindre à fresque, sur le plafond toute l'histoire de Psyché, et sur les panneaux plusieurs aventures des plus galantes [...]. C'était dans ce cabinet qu'elle aimoit à se retirer quand la Compagnie n'étoit pas nombreuse. C'étoit là qu'elle avait coutume de jouer du luth [...].* Douxménil (1751) 1908, 37–38.

478 *'S'il s'avissoit d'entrer jamais, dans le médiocre Palais, où vous regnés dans les Tournelles. La maison aussitôt deviendrait des plus belles. Le vilain vestibule en seroit honoré, l'obscur degré seroit paré. Que des lustres dans les ruelles ! Le cabinet en fin vous parostroit doré !'* Nouvelles acquisitions françaises 22873. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Paris.



which it becomes evident that she had, among other things, several mirrors and pieces of furniture.<sup>479</sup> Especially the first floor was furnished and decorated according to elite taste: Anne de Lenclos' post-mortem inventory mentions, for example, two *lits de repos*, different curtains, some armchairs and writing desks (*bureau*).<sup>480</sup> Furthermore, in three different rooms she had expensive tapestries whose value, with some other decorative items, was approximately 190 *livres*.<sup>481</sup> However, this did not make her home resemble a residence of the wealthiest elite; there was no gold, except as *décor* in some of the furniture,<sup>482</sup> and, it seems, that the furnishing of the second floor was quite modest. Despite some deficiencies in decoration, there were other elements of *décor* that elevated the furnishings: artworks played an important role in reflecting an elite life style.<sup>483</sup> Her estate inventory deed mentions in a *grand salle* four paintings that portray the countryside, five small still lifes of flowers, seven portraits, and one painting picturing Mary, Jesus as a child and Saint John.<sup>484</sup> In a *petite chambre*, there twelve small paintings were found: ten paintings on canvas and two '*en extanples*'.<sup>485</sup> Anne de Lenclos' estate inventory deed does not mention the names of painters and the paintings mentioned are not particularly valuable. Thus, it is impossible to say if these artworks were made by the best artists of the epoch as Douxménil claims. Although Ninon de Lenclos' lifestyle or Douxménil's description<sup>486</sup> could have suggested otherwise, her abode did not have paintings on the subjects of gallantry.

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479 Y 13191. Archives nationales. Paris.

480 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 203–207.

481 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 204, 210 & 213.

482 Duchêne 2000, 234.

483 See, for example, Pointon 1997, 5–7.

484 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 206–207.

485 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 213.

486 Douxménil (1751) 1908, 37–38.

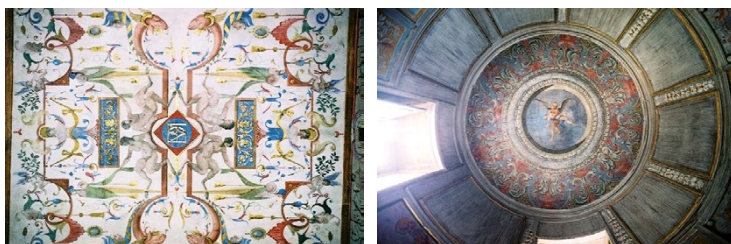


Fig. 9 & 10: Plafond Grotesque – ceiling of Ninon de Lenclos’s room (end of the 16th century) & ceiling of Ninon de Lenclos’s office (beginning of the 17th century). The central motif presents l’enlèvement d’Orithye by Borée, scene from *Métamorphoses* d’Ovide. Manoir de Villarceaux.

Even though paintings and frescos of Ninon de Lenclos’ dwelling in Paris might have been somewhat modest, her room and cabinet *chez* Villarceaux were richly decorated as the photos above suggest. Her estate inventory deed suggests, however, that the furnishing could have been satisfactory for the elite woman. It mentions chairs some of them had gold paint as embellishment, armchairs, tables, several *feuilles de paravans*, curtains made of *taffetas*, drawers, quilts and different mattresses.<sup>487</sup> In addition, Ninon de Lenclos had several beds: In the room of the second floor there not one, but two beds (*une couche*<sup>488</sup> *et une autre petite couche*) and both of them had low pillars (*à bas pilliers*) and the larger bed had two curtains (*de deux rideaux*).<sup>489</sup> A bed is a symbol of patriarchy, but it is also a place for women to give birth to, breastfeed, and nurture a child,<sup>490</sup> and to courtesan de Lenclos it also meant sexuality and the abandonment in part of her respectability.

That there was more than one bed in a single room does raise questions. Did Ninon de Lenclos’ guests sleep with her

487 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 203–210.

488 The word *couche* included the furniture, textiles and bedlinens. Sixty-two per cent of the *couches* are mentioned in the *chambre* and twenty per cent in the *garde-robe*. Courtin 2011, 50.

489 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 208.

490 French 2013, 207–208.

in the same room, but in different beds? Was one of the beds in the bedroom meant for customers or friends, or perhaps for her servant? In the early modern era, a servant, including male servants, might sleep in the same room as the lady of the house.<sup>491</sup> It is plausible that old Mademoiselle de Lenclos needed to have her servants close to her even at night; however, according to Anne de Lenclos' *procès-verbal*, her *filles de chambre* slept in a *grande chambre*.<sup>492</sup> After Madame de Scarron was widowed, there were rumours of a relationship between her and Ninon de Lenclos, and the two of them were claimed to have slept in the same bed for months.<sup>493</sup> Voltaire, for instance, mentioned that Ninon de Lenclos and Françoise d'Aubigné slept together for a few months prior to Mademoiselle d'Aubigné's marriage with Scarron, but only as friends.<sup>494</sup> This custom in itself was nothing special or unusual:<sup>495</sup> Ninon de Lenclos and Françoise d'Aubigné were not, however, so poor that they would have been forced to share the same bed, which was why other motives were suspected in this arrangement.<sup>496</sup> This is true, because Ninon de Lenclos was already living in her rue des Tournelles residence, which had several rooms, and, as mentioned, several beds.<sup>497</sup> La Fare's claim that the two women slept in the same bed might simply reflect a male sexual fantasy about Ninon de Lenclos and Madame de Maintenon. Surrounding Ninon de Lenclos' life with scandal also raised greater interest in her as a courtesan and a sought-after woman who could name her price.

However, it should be remembered that the furniture in de Lenclos' apartment and the placing of the different rooms might have been different when she was younger; what is said in her estate inventory deed is a more accurate description

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491 Flandrin 1979, 97.

492 Y 13191. Archives nationales. Paris.

493 La Fare 1884, 190.

494 Voltaire Tome XXIII 1879, 509.

495 Flandrin 1979, 99.

496 Duchêne 2000, 242.

497 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 202–218.

of her later days. Ninon de Lenclos body was found in *la chambre*.<sup>498</sup> Regardless, it is possible to infer that Ninon de Lenclos did not received guests or arrange gatherings in her bedroom, at least when she was older. The *grande salle* had three functions: receiving guests, dining, and gathering with peers and friends<sup>499</sup> and this space was situated on the first floor in Ninon de Lenclos' apartment. Her post-mortem inventory reveals that the decoration of the *grande salle* was suitable to favour her status; thus, she probably received guests in this room that was furnished with a wooden bed decorated with low pillars (*couche à bas pilliers de bois*), different chairs, armchairs, a *petit lit de repos*, a desk, mirrors, small tapestry *à la turc*, paintings, curtains, a vellum folding screen and a variety of tables. Furthermore, the *grande salle* contained a grill (a fireplace for cooking)<sup>500</sup>

It is evident that furnishings and decorations of Madame de Sévigné's and Ninon de Lenclos' apartments were expensive and they accentuated the difference between the elite and other ranks. The financial differences between the elite and the people who had to work to earn their living were indeed great. By comparison, a family of five in Beauvais reveals that a father, a sewer (*serger*), a mother and three daughters, all spinners (*fileuses*) earned 108 *sols* a week in 1693.<sup>501</sup> Thus, studying Ninon de Lenclos' estate inventory deed points out that the furnishing of her *hôtel* reflects her wealth and embodies taste, money and elite lifestyle, because masterpieces of fine handicraftsmen were reserved for the wealthy.<sup>502</sup> Even though the house of Ninon de Lenclos met the criteria of the elite of her period, her available space or assets were not enough for magnificent receptions for the wealthiest elite or members of the court. However, it is important to consider that the abode of courtesan de Lenclos reflects not only her taste, but her

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498 Y 13191. Archives nationales. Paris.

499 Courtin 2011, 68.

500 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 204–207.

501 Morsa 1987, 772–773.

502 Roche 2000, 189.



Fig. 11: *Le Goût* by Abraham Bosse.  
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours.

*hôtel* is also an example of how commercializing sexuality and living counter to the ideal of a virtuous woman could help her to acquire a pleasant mode of living that embodied wealth and a lifestyle suitable for an elite. Indeed, Courtesan de Lenclos' apartment, I claim, was the stage that was good enough for her performance as a member of the Parisian elite, but it is evident that it was nothing splendid.

#### Private stage for self-fashioning

*Le Goût* by Abraham Bosse (Fig. 11) depicts a polished and fashionable dressed elite couple enjoying a meal in an elegant, perfectly decorated room. Madame herself has great posture, sitting up straight in an armchair while Monsieur looks more relaxed while having a glass of wine. The couple enjoys the benefits of their social rank (as does their dog, with a pearl necklace, who is having her meal at the same time) and servants are ready to fulfil all their desires. As the painting above shows, the private *hôtels* in Paris were also a

stage where the *honnête* lifestyle could be performed. In other words, it was not only the *hôtel*'s decoration that was essential for the members of the elite, the different social events also that took place in the apartments, formal dinners and gatherings among family, friends and neighbours were an essential part of the Parisian way of social interaction.<sup>503</sup> *Les repas* were not insignificant and Antoine de Courtin emphasises the importance of *les repas*, but also serving *du pain et du vin* between the meals.<sup>504</sup> Ideals and reality were, however, different: Ninon de Lenclos, for example, did not follow times of fasting correctly,<sup>505</sup> but Madame de Sévigné seems to have carefully observed the customs of *l'honnête personne*. In her letters, she discusses food and what was served on festive occasions and she admires extravagant dinners, but she also values simplicity.<sup>506</sup> She planned how her daughter would dine in her *antichambre*, which was a large and beautiful screened-off space that would make eating meals a formal occasion.<sup>507</sup>

The *honnête* manner of dining can be seen by examining the silver cutlery<sup>508</sup> of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos. The value of Ninon de Lenclos' silverware (*vaisselle d'argent*)<sup>509</sup> was estimated to be about 2,157 *livres*<sup>510</sup> and her estate inventory deed revealed that she had dining utensils

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503 Pardailhé-Galabrun 1991, 94. See also, Bohanan 2012, 79.

504 Courtin 1728, 212–213.

505 Des Réaux 1906, 241.

506 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 26 April 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 235–236; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 5 August 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 312–316; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 19 February 1690. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 840.

507 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 22 September 1680. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 22.

508 Silver had traditionally been a status symbol and the most expensive dining sets were made of silver. Whittle & Griffiths 2012, 142.

509 The silverware included among other pieces six candleholders (*flambeaux*), a powder compact, dishes, five spoons, five forks, five knife-handles, a dozen dishes and one bed warmer (*bassinoire*). *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 214.

510 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 214–215. The worth of Anne de Lenclos' silverware was about 32,353 euros. One *Livre-Tournois* in 1684 corresponds to 15 euros (in 2002). Tiberghien 2006, 12.

for five.<sup>511</sup> Madame de Sévigné's silverware was broader and more valuable and had an estimated worth of 4,300 *livres*.<sup>512</sup> In Ninon de Lenclos' case, it is possible that the finest dinners, in which silverware was used, had been meant for five people or less. As she had no family, and a setting for friends or a lover could be smaller, but, regardless of that, she had a social need to fashion her elite lifestyle to her guests by offering status-appropriate dinners. Madame de Sévigné, in turn, might have arranged dinners for a significantly larger entourage.<sup>513</sup> Even though the dishes of Madame de Sévigné were about twice the worth of that of the courtesan, both women had fine tableware, which helped them communicate to their guests how high their societal position was as women of Parisian women of elite. It is evident that their silverwares with other furnishing and decoration items emphasised their elite status, detached them from "others" and helped them to perform in an endless game of the Parisian elite that seemed to occupy their every gesture.<sup>514</sup>

As Bosse's *Le Goût* shows, not only valuable tableware, but also food and beverages illuminate how elite status was fashioned. There is very little information about food supplies to Parisian private residences and only the quantity of beverages was more commonly listed.<sup>515</sup> On the day that followed Ninon de Lenclos' death, a *procès-verbal* was made,

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511 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 214.

512 Among other things Mme de Sévigné's silverware included, for example, two oval bowls, two large dishes, four small plates, two dishes for dessert and fruits (*assiettes d'entremets*), 17 spoons, 18 forks and three *esquies* (an elegant carafe with handle and lip. Normally it was used to serve drinking water or to serve scented water to rinse one's fingers and hands after a meal or to serve *de l'eau pour la toilette*. Source: CNRTL). There were also eight candelabums (six *flambeaux*, two *chandeliers*), one sugar bowl, one salt pot, one bed warmer and its cover (*bassinoire avec son couvercle*) and eight knife-handles. MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris.

513 Cf. Mme de Sévigné's estate inventory deed mentions 17 spoons, 18 forks and eight knife-handles. MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris.

514 See also, Elias 2006, 59–65.

515 Pardailhé-Galabrun 1991, 87. Wine was not only stored in cellars, but also in other rooms. Pardailhé-Galabrun 1991, 91.

in which twenty bottles of wine in her cellar are mentioned.<sup>516</sup> On the other hand, the post-mortem inventory of Madame de Sévigné states that her cellar at *Hôtel Carnavalet* is empty.<sup>517</sup> Madame de Sévigné had by then been two years away from her home, so this was not surprising. The elite's social life was strongly associated with wine<sup>518</sup> and food: one can infer from Ninon de Lenclos' estate inventory that her diet included meat, fruits, coffee, as well as spices, in other words food that was primarily reserved for wealthy members of the elite. The inventory mentions a grill, a dish for the processing of apples, a dish for jelly, a mortar and a coffee pot, which were in her kitchen.<sup>519</sup> Des Réaux also mentions that Ninon enjoyed meat together with people from the court, even during fasts.<sup>520</sup> Dishes mentioned in post-mortem inventories and their indication of food and beverage consumption, reveal, not only that Madame de Sévigné's and Ninon de Lenclos' had diet of the elite, but they tell also about everyday life, which seemed to be secure chez Madame de Sévigné and chez Ninon de Lenclos.

Most importantly, it seems that Ninon de Lenclos' life as a courtesan, enabled her to afford to live the pleasant culinary life of the elite, including dining with guests. Women who did not have their own estate that could have produced food had to purchase their own necessities or receive food as gifts. As it has been mentioned Madame de Sévigné had a right to have some food products from *le marquis* de Sévigné's estate, although it is interesting to note that the list of Madame de Sévigné's everyday dishes resembles that of the courtesan de Lenclos. The estate inventory deed made at *Hôtel Carnavalet* does not only help to examine its resident's quality of life, but

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516 Y 13191. Archives nationales. Paris.

517 MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris.

518 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné's description of the festivities of forty *gentilhommes* in Bretagne: 'Tout le Bretagne était ivre ce jour-là'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 19 August 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 235.

519 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 202–203.

520 Des Réaux 1906, 241.



it also reveals the elite *hôtel* that has been abandoned for a long time: equipment meant for serving and cutting meat, a flan pan, a dish for preparing jelly, a marble mortar and other equipment used in the kitchen, were all located in a small room, which was in between the *rez-de-chaussée* and the first floor in the brougham warehouse.<sup>521</sup>

The prevailing morality and politics, according to Ranum, ensured that people's taste was rather uniform, and individualism was often subservient to prevailing norms of order and good taste.<sup>522</sup> Members of the elite were, however, interested in aesthetics for purely decorative reasons and apartments were comfortably furnished, different textiles were used and paintings by proficient artists hung on the walls.<sup>523</sup> An analysis of Madame de Sévigné's and Ninon de Lenclos' post-mortem inventories suggests that their Parisian residences were decorated according to elite taste. In addition, they possessed status symbols and their luxurious culinary life was also essential in the fashioning of elite lifestyle. Even though conspicuous consumption was a means to gain social prestige,<sup>524</sup> Madame de Sévigné<sup>525</sup> and Ninon de Lenclos, by making fashionable, but sensible choices, avoided personal debt, which was not the sign of a respectable person.<sup>526</sup> Elite status entailed some social duties, but otherwise, the widow Madame de Sévigné and courtesan de Leclos, both of whom lived alone, were free to decide upon their own furnishing and interior design. Their consumption of decorative subjects represented their values and was one way to convey the right

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521 MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris.

522 Castan 1986, 67.

523 Pardailhé-Galabrun 1991, 143.

524 See, for example Elias 2006, 74, 79–80.

525 Madame de Sévigné herself wrote in *petits livrets* her expenses from 1689 to 1696. MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris.

526 The Marquise wanted to pay her debts. In 1685, she was almost able to pay off the debts that her late husband had left her. She also advised her daughter not to spend any more, because that would have been against good conduct. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 13 June 1685. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 201. See also, Liancourt 1698, 27.

kind of image to outside spectators.

Thus, I would like to suggest, that both Madame de Sévigné's and Ninon de Lenclos' interior decoration choices were related to their self-fashioning, which emphasised their *honnêteté*, status, virtue and reputation. It is self-evident that Madame de Sévigné's *honnêteté* was reinforced by every choice she made, but Ninon de Lenclos had to compensate for her lack of chastity in every possible way and a status specific apartment as well as the lifestyle conducted in it were means to do that. Courtesan de Lenclos was also motivated to furnish a residence that would satisfy even more demanding customers, for most of her customers and friends were used to an aristocratic lifestyle. Elite women were constantly required to balance the expectations placed upon them, not only in the home but in society at large. New ideas about home and comfort and about female education, questioned old forms of conduct, and created a space for a new kind of respectable elite woman who could express herself in her own private space.

However, a prestigious home did not in itself complete *l'honneste femme's* performance and for the expression of manners was one of the ways in which the elite competed socially and formed notions of the human ideal. The next section examines to what extent elite women's sophisticated gatherings helped them to fashion their *honnêteté*.

### 3. A sophisticated, polite and independent *salonnière*

The well-behaved women of the salons?

A very dull character is one without it.<sup>527</sup>

Moriarty argues that when one is exploring 'women in *honnêteté* discourse', it is appropriate to comprehend social institutions like the salon 'through which the impact of women on the privileged culture chiefly made itself felt'.<sup>528</sup>

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527 'Un caractère bien fade est celui de n'en avoir aucun'. La Bruyère 1699, 133.

528 Moriarty 2009, 40–41.

Parisian elite women were characterized by their literacy and sophistication. However, the basis of an intellectual, polite elite women's culture and influence was founded made in the previous century, but in the 17th century the court of Louis XIV, along with those in developing Paris and especially Le Marais *quartier*, gave voice and décor to fashionable interaction and the formation of respectability.

Habermans argues that early modern Parisian salons were not truly detached from the urban aristocracy of the court. He states that the requirement of *honnêteté* prevented the discussion in the salons from becoming critical and beautiful words (*bon mots*) were not real arguments.<sup>529</sup> However, it should be noted that the Parisian salons were a sovereign territory for sophisticated women from the elite. They were not necessarily free from the influence of the court, or its authority, but there they were free from the influence of home.<sup>530</sup> In addition, according to Goldsmith, '*salon habitués* cultivated the idea that they constituted a kind of ideal elite, which could always close ranks and create a separate reality even when surrounded by a heterogeneous crowd of courtiers'.<sup>531</sup> Woodruff D. Smith, in turn, emphasises the meaning of salons as elite arenas for 'fashion competition' and to gain status<sup>532</sup> both of which are considerably important in order to refashion *l'honnête femme*. Since this study also focuses strongly on the private lives of elite Parisian women, including their self-fashioning and in this respect their self-understanding, the development of the salon as the upper-class woman's functional arena of the epoch is worth noting. Furthermore, the salon culture shaped women's sphere into a more diverse playing field in an urban Parisian environment.<sup>533</sup>

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529 Habermans 1989, 31.

530 In the salons women's influence grew, because of the culture practised there and very much because of their way of expressing themselves literally. Beasley 2006, 175. See also, Goldsmith 1988, 6. Furthermore, Dabhoiwala states that 'at the French court, in its salons, and more generally in the upper echelons of French culture, the status of cultivated women as patrons, intellectuals, and arbiters of male manners came to be considerable'. Dabhoiwala 2012, 182.

531 Goldsmith 1988, 45.

532 Smith 2002, 73-74.

533 See, for example, Lilti 2005, 55.

As Ylivuori argues, when examining *honnêtes gens*' polite gatherings politeness 'was a theatrical portrayal of discursively appointed manners and appearances'.<sup>534</sup> Furthermore, according to Goldsmith, meetings among the elite gave women the opportunity to demonstrate politeness particularly in conversation; these conversations defined salon meetings rather than the space itself. In addition, *salon habitués* demonstrated and comprised a model for the ideal elite.<sup>535</sup> Polite behaviour did not emerge from nowhere, but instead showed the influence of a great body of literature, conduct books and educators. Indeed, *salonnières* were cultivated at an early age and the salons cultivated them even further. Thus, for example, Madame de Sévigné's sophistication was a combination of education, active correspondence, reading, gatherings in salons and meeting other *honnête* people.<sup>536</sup> Vergé-Franceschi also notes justifiably that it was the company that Ninon de Lenclos spent time with that strengthened her *esprit* and intelligence.<sup>537</sup> In addition, according to Sophie Houdard, Ninon de Lenclos did not gravitate towards the other *salonnières*, but preferred to engage with philosophers, musicians and men of intellect.<sup>538</sup>

Most salons were intended merely for *honnêtes femmes* or precious women, but Ninon de Lenclos' salon was also suitable for a *rendez-vous*, which was characterised by sophistication and sexuality. Courtesan de Lenclos' sexuality and vice did not outweigh its cultural significance and as with the other salons, hers was also visited by members of the elite.<sup>539</sup> Furthermore, she was invited to the company of other *salonnières*. Writing to his mother in 1671, Charles de Sévigné mentions that he was accompanied by Mademoiselle

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534 Ylivuori 2015, 95. Smith notes also that the Parisian salon created a stage for status and fashion competition. Smith 2002, 73.

535 Goldsmith 1988, 45, 61.

536 See Chapter II:2. Mme de Sévigné knew Mme de Rambouillet. Chapelain to Mme de Sévigné 16 November 1661. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 54. *La marquise* sometimes paid a visit to Mme de Rambouillet's salon, which was in the Louvre district. Tikanoja 2013, 34. See also, Backer 1974, 108. Ranum 2002, 151.

537 Vergé-Franceschi 2014, 265.

538 Houdard 2010, 1.

539 Des Réaux 1906, 237–246. This is also discussed in Chapter II:2.

de Raymond and in the same company were Ninon de Lenclos and *salonnière* Madame de La Sablière (1636–1693), whose husband had been one of Ninon de Lenclos' first lovers.<sup>540</sup> Yet, none of the women in the company represented the 17th-century ideal of virtuous and respectable woman.<sup>541</sup> In other words, these educated women who accepted living *contre* the ideal of chastity, but had social prestige, did meet in salons. Ninon de Lenclos herself was a combination of an intellectual, educated elite woman, and a socially dubious, working woman from lower rank; nevertheless, it seems that she managed to live both these roles simultaneously, and within the limitations of prevailing social norms. Vice, or living counter to chaste ideal of *l'honnête femme*, were not sufficient, I would like to suggest, to destroy de Lenclos' status among those who visited salons, but how did respectable society view the life of *salonnières*? Did a status of *salonnière* have an effect on how such women were regarded by other members of *société*?

It is self-evident that salon meetings gave an opportunity for elite women to fashion *honnêteté*, sophistication, polite behaviour and show their ability to express themselves with variation and complexity.<sup>542</sup> Moreover, politeness was like standing in front of a mirror: a person would respond to politeness as much as he or she received it from others. It was a game of perfect reciprocity.<sup>543</sup> Elias points out that in a hierarchical society, politeness in communication had a major role, because every gesture was under scrutiny from several people.<sup>544</sup> Simultaneously observation of his or her peers gave a precious tool to function with them.<sup>545</sup> In other words, a respectable woman could not overlook the politeness of the elite and its codes emphasised at the elite meetings. However, according to Antoine de Courtin, manners should be

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540 Charles de Sévigné to his mother Mme de Sévigné in 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 178.

541 Duchêne's comment. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 1012.

542 'Les Femmes d'apresent sont bien loin de ces moeurs, Elles veulent écrire, & devenir Auteurs'. Molière 1672, 30. *Les femmes savantes*. II:7.

543 Melchior-Bonnet 2004, 157–158.

544 Elias 2000, 118.

545 Elias 2006, 116.

natural, not a profession.<sup>546</sup> Elite women were forced to find a balance between themselves, their intellectual sophistication, their fashionable, yet essential manners and their duties which Molière, among others, mocked.<sup>547</sup> La Bruyère, for instance, saw a sophisticated woman more as a ‘beautiful weapon’, something to show rather than use: ‘It is made artistically, finished with finesse, and is exceptionally elegant work; it is an item for a collection, something to show to the curious, but not used [...]’.<sup>548</sup> In other words, the expectations of society and the realm of the elite’s self-fashioning were on a collision course: among the Parisian elite, women were not merely beautiful objects, they were sophisticated individuals with influence yet at the same time they were in danger of being judged. These women had, however, acquired appreciated knowledge, manners and *civilité*, which could all, I suggest, be used as tools to perform *honnêteté*.

Politeness does not always inspire a person into kindness, balance, complacency or gratitude; but at least it gives resemblance and makes a man look outside like he should be interiorly.<sup>549</sup>

Politeness was one way to achieve ideal conduct, but as La Bruyère writes above, it was at least a means to create an impression of it. In Furetière’s dictionary, *politesse*<sup>550</sup> stands for honourable behaviour (*conduit honnête*), *galant* for one’s outer appearance and a pleasant and sensitive way

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546 Courtin 1728, 18–19.

547 See, for example, *Les femmes savantes*. Molière 1672.

548 ‘(Femme savante – belle arme). Elle est ciselée artistement, d’une polissure admirable, & d’un travail fort recherché ; c’est une pièce de cabinet, que l’on montre aux curieux, qui n’est pas usage [...]’. La Bruyère 1669, 98.

549 ‘La politesse n’inspire pas toujours la bonté, l’équité, la complaisance, la gratitude; elle en donne au moins les apparences, & fait paroître l’homme au dehors comme il devoit être interieurement’. La Bruyère 1699, 153.

550 The word *politesse* stems from the Latin *politus*. The term *politezza* first appeared in Renaissance literature. In material matters, it meant ‘cultured’, in attire it meant ‘elegant’. It generally referred to a cultivated, charming, carefully considered style. In French, the word *politesse* was adopted in 1659. Tikanoja 2009, 29–30.

of speaking, writing and acting. *Politesse* implied decency, which manifested itself in words and gestures. Like *civilité*, *politesse* also encompassed the notion of communication as essential for good behaviour, and as a principle.<sup>551</sup> I have emphasised earlier, the beneficial meaning of external factors like decoration and elite lifestyle as a medium to ameliorate elite women's status. However, it is evident that in addition to material choices, polite and perfectly polished elite performance required other means in which polite behaviour was one more tool to construct respectable woman's layered entity. If we consider biographies and sources on Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, it seems very plausible, that they both wished to act politely or even against it. They were well aware that in sophisticated meetings of *société*, where elite women performed, even the slightest comment might be seen as impolite. For this reason, Antoine de Courtin, as a contemporary, emphasises that familiarity of conversation could be shown between *les égaux*, but it should be always *honnête*.<sup>552</sup> As Markku Peltonen states, it was better to be wrong in a polite manner, than to be right in a rude manner.<sup>553</sup>

The sources do not reveal whether Ninon de Lenclos herself got into an unpleasant situation when she offended someone. It seems rather, that her conduct demonstrated the ideal of good behaviour, although her sexual behaviour did not. Ninon de Lenclos, mixed vices with virtues; thus, logically should have been avoided by respectable people.<sup>554</sup> Honourable *honnêtes gens* should have socialized only with people of good reputation;<sup>555</sup> however, despite her somewhat

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551 Furetière Tome II 1702, 553. See also, Elias 2000, 118.

552 Courtin 1728, 296.

553 Peltonen 2003, 167.

554 Aubignac 1677, 31. One should have also avoided the company of people who were self-conscious and decadent. In other words, their lives were a mix of vices and virtues. Aubignac 1677, 32.

555 The friendship between Ninon de Lenclos and Boisrobert had a scandalous flavour: Boisrobert was a pedophile and he had to leave Paris for a while, because he had surrounded himself with too many young boys. Vergé-Franceschi 2014, 230, 232. Homosexuality was condemned and could lead to punishment. It might also be quietly accepted, as in the case of Louis XIV's brother, the duke of Orléans, *Monsieur* who was known for his relationships

rakish company, courtesan de Lenclos managed to create an *honnête* atmosphere in her salon and behave carefully in order to join the elite. Thus, she had better chances of guaranteeing success and embodying the ideal of *civilité* in a way that did not endanger her position. However, it seems that Ninon de Lenclos had a habit of speaking directly, and she did not hide her opinions behind rhetoric: Charles de Sévigné reminded Ninon de Lenclos of his mother, but she respected Madame de Grignan, and considered her fair looking and spiritual.<sup>556</sup> Madame de Sevigne did not like the fact that the courtesan had criticised her son, but she was also terrified of the situation where someone had tried to constrain Ninon de Lenclos' appraisal toward Madame de Grignan, and the courtesan had told the speaker to be quiet.<sup>557</sup> In addition, Ninon de Lenclos called Charles de Sévigné a pumpkin who had rolled in snow (*vraie citrouille fricassée dans la neige*).<sup>558</sup> By doing this, the courtesan challenged some rules of *honnêteté*, according to which a *personne honnête* should not ever ridicule or attack 'les personnes, & particulièrement les personnes encore vivants [...]'.<sup>559</sup>

On the grounds of her letters, it can be said that Madame de Sévigné recognised the meaning of politeness and understood what this implied about the conduct of a respectable woman, but did this undoubtedly respectable woman ever break the rules of polite and *honnête* behaviour? When Madame de

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with boys and men. See, for example, the Duchess of Orléans' letters 26 August 1689 and 16 March 1698. Von der Pfalz (1652–1722) 1984, 65, 106. High-ranking friends and protectors could help to protect homosexuals of their own class from severe punishments. This was the case with the poet, libertine and homosexual, Théophile de Viau, who moved in the same circles as Boisrobert. Adam 1935. See also, Muchembled 2008, 102.

556 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 1 April 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 206.

557 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 1 April 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 206.

558 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 8 April 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 211. The writer of *Lettres de Ninon de Lenclos au Marquis de Sévigné* also emphasises the courtesan's direct way to expressing her thoughts: '*Mon Dieu, que vous avez quelque fois peu d'intelligence! Je le vois à votre lettre : vous m'avez point entendue*'. Lettre IV. De Lenclos 1750, 10.

559 Courtin 1728, 299.



Sévigné felt dishonoured, she was not afraid of being rude and expressing her feelings in writing to her daughter after the incidence.<sup>560</sup> Madame de Sévigné's own behaviour led, at least on one occasion, to a public conflict: on Tuesday, 18 June 1652, there was a confrontation at Madame de Sévigné's residence between Marquis de Tonquedoc and Duke de Rohan.<sup>561</sup> Marquis de Tonquedoc was a friend and admirer of Madame de Sévigné's. As a marquis, though, he ranked below the Duke de Rohan.<sup>562</sup> Duke de Rohan entered when de Tonquedoc was visiting Madame de Sévigné. De Tonquedoc stood up and greeted the duke, but failed to give him his seat or wait for him to find one. The duke became infuriated, and his visit became a short one. By doing this, de Tonquedoc was not only rude but he violated also the concept of *civilité* according to which *personne supérieure* should have been seated in the most prestigious place in the room.<sup>563</sup> The next day Rohan came again to see Madame de Sévigné, but instead of apologising for the previous day's incident, she praised de Tonquedoc's courage. On the Thursday, Duke de Rohan returned to Madame de Sévigné and told Marquis de Tonquedoc to leave, but instead of leaving, de Tonquedoc drew his sword.<sup>564</sup>

The conflict, described above, concerned prestige between *honnêtes hommes* who were ensuring their social importance and who wanted to highlight the social difference between them.<sup>565</sup> Madame de Sévigné, whose mother and daughter,

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560 For example, in September 1675, Mme de Sévigné felt dishonoured. She had met Mlle de Plesis who was '*plus affreuse, plus folle et plus impertinente que jamais*'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 September 1675. Sévigné 1974, 111.

561 Loret (1650–1654) 1857, 257.

562 The Duke de Rohan had received his honorary title *duke* by marriage to Marguerite de Rohan. Originally, he was Henri de Chabot (*gentilhomme*).

563 Courtin 1728, 157.

564 Duchêne 2002, 146.

565 Henri de Chabot, who by marriage became the Duke de Rohan, was at that moment Marquis de Tonquedoc's superior. De Rohan had demanded to be treated in a manner suitable for his present position, but de Tonquedoc refused. In this situation, Mme de Sévigné understated the differences between the different noble titles and she did this by praising de Tonquedoc's behaviour, thus offending the Duke de Rohan. Duchêne 2002, 146.

for example, had also improved her social prestige among the elite through marriage, may have sincerely been able to regard the incident as insignificant, though this was not the case to the duke. The incident became public on the pages of *Muse Historique*. In other words, the event that Madame de Sévigné may have experienced as innocent and exciting, caused a public scandal, although it does not seem to have harmed her reputation as an *honneste femme*. How she felt about the situation, however, remains unclear: only two of her letters remain from that time, and they do not mention it.<sup>566</sup> If Bussy-Rabutin is one to be believed, Madame de Sévigné tried to maintain her reputation by choosing her company and activities carefully.<sup>567</sup> In this context, at uncomfortable moments like this, her spontaneity may have been Madame de Sévigné's way to deal with delicate matters. It would seem overall that she wanted to fashion herself consciously as a respectable and sophisticated woman whose conduct was not in conflict with polite behaviour.

It is self-evident that a respectable, sophisticated woman should avoid troubles with her equals. Both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, I claim, wished their polite behaviour to work as a *moyen* of self-fashioning with the intention of creating the perfectly polished *honneste femme* among the Parisian elite, yet, it seem, by considering the situations described above, that Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos felt themselves to be part of the elite that was able to show real feelings and play with the rules of *honnêteté* in elite gatherings. Silence, modesty and submission were part of the respectable woman's ideal but Madame de Sévigné's and Ninon de Lenclos' cases show that elite women had verbal power and their status allowed them to behave at times contrary to the norms. In other words, elite women had several roles from which they could choose the best option which would suit the situation and serve both self-fashioning

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<sup>566</sup> Sévigné Tome I 1972, 17–18.

<sup>567</sup> Bussy-Rabutin 1665, 29.

and politeness expectations.<sup>568</sup>

## Sophisticated whores

What also connects the incidents described above is that as women both Ninon de Lenclos and Madame de Sévigné stood against male authority and the hierarchy between the sexes. Moreover, they showed that they could be equal with men of the elite. Ninon de Lenclos, a woman living contrary to prevailing morals, additionally positioned herself on the same level as respectable persons. In other words, the behaviour of these two women could be considered a way of self-fashioning among *les égaux* and this is worth noting, since the sophisticated *l'honneste femme* was indeed associated with gendered features. The question of gender was particularly apparent in the way that *les précieuses*, who emphasised both their literary sophistication and polite manners, were defined. On 3 April 1654, René-Renaud de Sévigné, Henri de Sévigné's uncle, wrote to Christine de France:<sup>569</sup> 'In Paris, girls and women have a character that is called *Précieuses*. [...] for whom one has to make a map to navigate their country'.<sup>570</sup> However, in the 1650s, the adjective *précieuse* had not acquired a purely pejorative sense: it was still used as an appreciative and polite term, for example in the letters of Madame de Sévigné, Bussy-Rabutin, and Scarron. Its synonyms, such as beautiful, chaste, wise, *honneste*, reasonable, described a woman, in whom both virtue and intellect were joined.<sup>571</sup>

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568 See, for example, Ylivuori 2015, 123.

569 Christine de France, Christine (1606–1663), the daughter of Henry IV and Marie de Médici.

570 'Il y a une nature de filles et femmes à Paris que l'on nomme *Précieuses*. [...] l'on a fait une carte pour naviguer en leur pays'. René-Renaud de Sévigné to Madame Royale 3 April 1654. Sévigné, Cristine 1911, 246. The term *précieuse* appeared in 1654, when the critique against fashion and ridiculous pretence became amplified. Croix, Queniat 1997, 267.

571 Maître 1999, 40–41. During the reign of Louis XIV, *une femme précieuse*, who was chaste, wise, and elegant, could be *la Précieuse*. If someone said to a woman, '*vous êtes précieuse*', this meant that she was divine, unique. Maître 1999, 45. Furthermore, people like Mme de Maintenon and Fénelon used the term *précieuse* as a synonym for a sophisticated (*savante*) person. Aronson 1986, 384.

The identification of a precious one is not, however, straightforward and clear cut: Furetière's *Dictionnaire* defines *précieuses* as girls and women who had merits, virtue, worldly insight and speech.<sup>572</sup> A *Précieuse* was a girl or a woman who was sophisticated and virtuous, and was conscious of being able to express herself sexually and emotionally in a way that was *honnête*. Despite the positive definition of *précieuse*, satire about women had deep roots in the Gallic tradition<sup>573</sup> as Molière showed in his play, *Les Précieuses ridicules*. For him *précieuses* were flirtatious and affection-seeking women and *préciosité* had a little, if nothing, good to offer:

*L'air précieux* has not alone infected Paris, but has also spread into the countryside as well, and our ridiculous women have sucked in their share of it. In a word, they are a strange mixture of coquetry and affectation.<sup>574</sup>

Both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos were called *précieuses*,<sup>575</sup> but what was their position in this climate of polite behaviour, which both idealized and criticised women? Regardless of the critique that the fashionable new salons received, salons like those run by Rambouillet or Madeleine de Scudéry, were often visited by the same people.<sup>576</sup> Furthermore, whereas Molière laughed at the ridiculous prim women in *Précieuses ridicules* (1659), there was a surge in pioneers who believed in the equality between the sexes and they rejected 'traditional female roles'.<sup>577</sup> In addition, the *précieuses* were a new breed of women who were not passive objects to men's

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572 Furetière Tome II 1690.

573 Duchêne 2001, 195.

574 '*L'air précieux n'a pas seulement infecté Paris, il s'est aussi répandu dans les Provinces & nos Donzel. Les ridicules en ont humé leur bonne part. En un mot c'est un ambigü de Precieuse & de Coquette que leur personne [...]*'. Molière 1660, 4. *Les Précieuses ridicules*. I:1.

575 Somaize mentions Mme de Sévigné as precious, using the name *Sophronie*. Somaize 1661, 15. Note also that Somaize defined Ninon de Lenclos' (*Nidalie/Ligdamise*) as one of the *précieuses*. *La Clef du grand Dictionnaire historique des Prêteuses* mentions Ninon de Lenclos as *Ligdamise*. Somaize 1661, 28.

576 Beasley 2006, 233.

577 Moriarty 2009, 44. Duchêne 2001, 8.

fantasies. These women wanted to express their own feelings, and to form their own image in a public space.<sup>578</sup> Somaize also states that to the *précieuses*, marriage was the end of love, *l'amour fini*.<sup>579</sup> In other words, these sophisticated women turned against marriage and even against love; thus, they were able to hide their sexuality and take control over their own bodies. In this sense, Madame de Sévigné's conception of her own sexuality and abstinence as a personal choice, also fit with the *précieuses'* value system. On 21 October 1671, Madame de Sévigné wrote to her daughter, who was pregnant:

Dear God, *ma bonne*, how I worry about your belly! [...] To be honest, I have learned a lot during the last three years, but I must confess that long before this, the *honnêteté* and *préciosité* of long widowhood had left me in a state of deep unawareness; I am becoming a matron at a glance.<sup>580</sup>

The ideas of female *honnêteté*, femininity, *préciosité*, sophistication and chastity are combined: Duchêne remarks that the word *honnêteté*, which Madame de Sévigné uses in this letter, refers to a respect for appropriateness in particular matters, and *la préciosité* is the knowledge to stay away from certain issues related to marriage and pregnancy as some *précieuses* did.<sup>581</sup> Myriam Maître shares the latter definition of language used in the letter, yet she adds that this distanced widows from sexuality and pregnancy.<sup>582</sup> Timmermans believes that Madame de Sévigné stayed loyal to the idea of *préciosité*, which is manifested in the letters which the Marquise wrote.<sup>583</sup> In light of the observations above, it is plausible to assume

578 Backer 1974, 10, 292.

579 Somaize. *Le grand dictionnaire des précieuses*, 1661. Duchêne 2001, 500. See also, Backer 1974, 17. Aronson 1986, 383. Pelous 1980, 331.

580 'Mon Dieu, *ma bonne*, que votre ventre me pèse! [...] En vérité, j'en ai beaucoup appris depuis trois ans. Mais j'avoue qu'auparavant cela l'honnêteté et la préciosité d'un long veuvage m'avaient laissée dans une profonde ignorance ; je deviens matrone à vue d'œil'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 21 October 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 366–367.

581 Duchêne's comment. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 1180.

582 Maître 1999, 50.

583 Timmermans 2005, 122.

that Madame de Sévigné was not only comfortable with the sophistication of the *précieuses*, but also with abstention from sex and marriage. She probably consciously applied this possibility, which supported her decision to fashion herself as a respectable, sophisticated, and indeed chaste, woman. However, in literary production, the abstinence of women, and the focus on literary and intellectual pursuits, was also criticised. Claude Le Petit wrote *Aux Précieuses (Sonnet)*, in which he calls women honourable courtesans and intellectual whores whose salons are brothels and their pleasure comes from writing.<sup>584</sup> Thus, the writer creates an image of women whose sexuality and intellectuality are combined in a way that insulted not only their sophistication but also their sexual choices.

Duchêne interprets this poem as presenting women as hypocritical, having turned to intellect rather than sexuality. According to him, their bodies deceived them and after they have abandoned men, they end up masturbating.<sup>585</sup> Society at this time indeed emphasise chastity, but, as Le Petit's poem indicates, secular elite women should not abstain from sex or relationships with men. This is stressed in Bussy's *Histoire amoureuse des Gaules*, which described Madame de Sévigné's sexual coldness toward her husband and Somaize also mentions that Madame de Sévigné's home was not a place where love was shown; he mentions that the Marquise could only love members of her own sex,<sup>586</sup> that is to say to other sophisticated women. According to a letter Madame de Sévigné wrote, Ninon de Lenclos considered her behaviour rather simple and naive: '*Elle (Ninon) trouve que votre frère a la simplicité de la colombe; il ressemble à sa mère*'.<sup>587</sup> It seems obvious that in her thirties courtesan de Lenclos did not respect *la marquise's*

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584 Bodel de muses, 'Aux précieuses. Sonnet' in *Œuvres de Claude Le Petit*. Le Petit 1909-1928, 108.

585 Duchêne 2001, 194.

586 '[...] Chez elle, ne produit pas l'amour : car elle n'en a que pour celles de son sexe [...]'. Somaize. *Le grand dictionnaire des précieuses*, 1661. Duchêne 2001, 519.

587 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 1 April 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 206.

chaste behaviour – or her sophistication. Nevertheless, the examination of Madame de Sévigné's correspondence reveals an *honneste femme* who was more than just a chaste woman or a wife: instead she was rather an educated elite woman who made choices to fulfil all the different nuances that were required of the *honnête* elite and for her chaste sophistication was one of the required qualities.

In this section, I have endeavoured to point out that, even though the precious women and their performance of *honnêteté* were mocked and ridiculed, the cultural arena that they had created had an important value in understanding the polite behaviour of Parisian elite women in the early modern era. Furthermore, these women's cultural and intellectual accomplishments were recognised.<sup>588</sup> Polite behaviour, in private meetings or in larger gatherings of *société*, did not alone create a respectable woman *avec l'esprit* and Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos were even able to disregard polite behaviour on some occasions. However, a respectable woman, whose appearance and performance essentially belonged to the urban environment of Paris did consider the meaning of *politesse* and its different forms. Elite women, I suggest, combined sophistication, respectability, and their own personal choices, and used this to defy the prevailing norms and to fashion their status. Thus, for Madame de Sévigné sophisticated and polite chastity were guidelines of polite behaviour,<sup>589</sup> whereas courtesan de Lenclos stood out from uneducated women and *coquettes*, but they both enjoyed the polite *galanterie* of *les honnêtes gens*.

#### 4. *Galanterie*: the noble art of courtship

The beautiful art of *honnête* seduction

In *Les Cinq sens: le Toucher*, an etching by Abraham Bosse,

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<sup>588</sup> Beasley 2007, 100.

<sup>589</sup> See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 8 January 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 217.



Fig. 12: *Les Cinq sens: le Toucher* (1638) by Abraham Bosse.  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

a woman sits in the lap of her *galant* in front of a log-fire in a *hôtel particulier*. The woman and the man are dressed in the fashion of the day, while the man's hat is casually cast on the back of a chair. Through the open window, an urban landscape is visible; the room is furnished with chairs, the bed has been embellished with curtains and the walls are decorated. The details suggest that the lovers are from the wealthy urban elite. The moment is intimate: On the back wall is a painting of Venus and *Cupido*, the woman has raised one leg onto the knee of her lover, her sock has slid down, the skirt reveals her bare knee and the man caresses the woman's chest, where his gaze is fixed. The woman looks elsewhere, but has raised her hand to the man's face: the moment is intimate and the presence of the servant who is preparing the bed for the lover's does not disturb the *galant* couple. The image illustrates 17th-century Parisian elite members' *galant* and fashionable moments that could take place in elite apartments, even though the moralists condemned and some respectable women wanted to avoid that kind of behaviour.



Madame de Montmorency wrote to Bussy-Rabutin reminding him once again that Madame \*\*\*\* did not have *galanterie* at all, but it was her enemies who made her responsible for this wicked act.<sup>590</sup>

It is impossible to tell whether Madame de Sévigné experienced such *galant* moments as the one in Bosse's etching. On the grounds of sources and earlier studies, it is only possible to speculate that when the *galant* Henri de Sévigné spent intimate moments with his wife, they were likely to be dutiful rather than passionate couplings. With Ninon de Lenclos there were certainly several *galant* moments although historians have only been able to speculate about their quantity and quality. Nevertheless, her sexual activity, and her understanding of exquisite love strongly suggest that they may have occurred, even though the sources do not reveal what exactly occurred in her residence. Furthermore, Ninon de Lenclos learned the noble art of seduction at a young age.<sup>591</sup> She refined this skill and combined it with sexuality and education in a cultivated environment. This formed a combination of elegance and *galanterie*, which was suitable for members of the elite. Thus, Ninon de Lenclos was able to go beyond the restraints of chastity, while Madame de Sévigné defined her limits as a chaste *honneste femme*. What was the profound meaning of *galanterie*? How might respectable people in the early modern era have understood it? Most importantly, was it really a means for their self-fashioning?

*Galanterie* played a central role in *savoir-vivre*.<sup>592</sup> According to Alain Montandon, it encompassed elegant psychological as well as physical being.<sup>593</sup> Elias, for instance, argues that along with increasing self-constraint, the notion of romantic love between sexes evolved a more complex meaning embodying ideal and cult as well as 'a real occurrence'.<sup>594</sup> Between 1610

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590 M<sup>me</sup> de Montmorency to Bussy-Rabutin 8 January 1678. Bussy-Rabutin Tome III 1721, 373.

591 Des Réaux 1906, 237.

592 See, for example, Pelous 1980, 195.

593 Montandon 1995, 417.

594 Elias 2006, 261.

and 1627, the novel *L'Astrée* by Honoré d'Urfé was published and this gave real impetus to the analysis of love and emotions. It provided a model for *galanterie* and courtship that also grew to be actively practised by fashionable, sophisticated people.<sup>595</sup> Furthermore, the novel offers insight to French nobility who were experiencing a change from independent noblemen and warriors to representatives of an increasingly centralised power that was held by the king: *L'Astrée* composes a space where aristocratic masquerade takes place and love with its joys and sorrows is the issue to deal with. Moreover, the love described in the novel is ideal, but at the same time it encompasses not only desire but also conscience.<sup>596</sup>

*Galanterie* was another means to compose the elite's polite performance in the 17th century France and Furetière's description of *galanterie* suggests that it was a polite manner of doing or saying something but it meant also love, passion and infatuation. At the same time, he implies that it was possible to find women who had never experienced *galanterie*, but once a woman had it, she had to have more.<sup>597</sup> Furetière defined *galant* in several ways. The word stood for, among other notions, a favourite lover and a person in love who passionately longed for something. *Galant* might have also meant a man with skill, style and a love of danger.<sup>598</sup> In other words, a person like this resembled the ideal man of the court. The *femme galante*, according to Furetière, wanted in her turn to be loved, but for a *coquette* it was enough that she was considered beautiful. To a *femme galante*, passion and pleasure were important, to a *coquette* it was vanity and

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595 *Diana* (1542) by the Spanish author Jorge de Montemayor (1520–1561), was translated into French in 1578. Similarly, *La Galatea* (1584) by Miguel de Cervantés (1547–1616) was translated into French as *Galatée*. In these Spanish novels, a central theme was also honour, loyalty, love, worship of women, and sentimentality. Spanish nomad and chivalric literature was also noticed in the Parisian salons: discussing these works was a popular pastime in hôtel de Rambouillet and the works of Mme de La Fayette and Honoré d'Urfé were both connected to Spanish literature of the same genre. Fréchet & Hernan 2000, 318–320.

596 Elias 2006, 264–265, 268, 274–276.

597 *Galanterie*. Furetière Tome I 1702, 985.

598 Furetière Tome I 1702, 985.

frivolousness.<sup>599</sup> It seems that it was indeed for women *galante* was nearly always implied negative features and in this way *galanterie* among the elite became gendered.

Morvan de Bellegard also remarks that most women have the soul of a *coquette* and that women were naturally fond of *galanterie* and scheming.<sup>600</sup> Somaize, in turn, wrote that the novices of *noblesse spirituelle* (of *précieuses*) had developed an interest in literature and *galanterie* in their idleness: in their kingdom, there was no nobility, but it was only the sciences and *galanterie* that mattered.<sup>601</sup> In addition, Mademoiselle de Scudéry acknowledges in her map of Love, *Carte de Tendre*, that the river of Inclination, *Inclination Fleuve*, was a shortcut to the open, dangerous sea, *La Mer Dangereuse*, and thus to an unknown land, *Terres Inconnues*.<sup>602</sup> In other words, courtship was dangerous, but it seems evident that this could be overlooked, if it gave the opportunity for marriage – or if it served other purposes of the elite.

In novels, a *galant* use of language gave the opportunity to discuss behaviour that would otherwise have been doubtful and indefensible.<sup>603</sup> Furthermore, Pelous claims that *art d'aimer* challenged the homogenous idea of love and suggested something that was more real and satisfying.<sup>604</sup> It is reasonable to assume that both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos knew this genre well. It would seem likely that because of her profession Ninon de Lenclos would be interested in *galant* literature, and that she both read and discussed the subject with her friends and lovers. Madame de Sévigné, for her part, refers in her letters to *l'Astrée* and quotes expressions from it.<sup>605</sup> She knew the works of Mademoiselle de Scudéry and

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599 Furetière Tome I 1702, 984.

600 Morvan de Bellegard 1696, 78.

601 Somaize. *Le grand dictionnaire des précieuses*, 1661. Duchêne 2001, 500.

602 Fraser 2006, 94–95. The *Carte de Tendre* gave hierarchy and structured 'the vocabulary of love'. Ranum 2002, 148.

603 Habib 2006, 164.

604 Pelous 1980, 195.

605 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 8 July 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 552; 19 & 21 May 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 295 & 297; 8 July 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 313; 12 April 1680. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 904; 29 September 1680. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 28.

*Carte de Tendre*.<sup>606</sup> Furthermore, she was a friend of Madame de La Fayette who wrote *La Princesse de Cleves*, a book that Madame de Sévigné loved. Marquise thought that it was ‘*une des plus charmant choses que j’aie jamais lue*’.<sup>607</sup> She also knew *La Princesse de Montpensier* (1662),<sup>608</sup> which Madame de La Fayette published anonymously, a novel in which lovers’ feelings become extreme. The conception of *Honneste Amitié* arose, but, as Jean-Michel Pelous states, it was primarily used to distinguish love from harmful desires.<sup>609</sup>

Why did the elite of the 17th-century need such an idea as *galanterie*? Regardless of the critique that *galanterie* received, love as depicted in the stories of the period reinforced the shield by which the aristocracy guarded themselves from “others”. Furthermore, *galanterie* was about conversation, the right way to put one’s words: through *galanterie* a man changed his animal lusts into the language of love, as Claude Habib states.<sup>610</sup> Thus, people’s basic needs could be masked and this elegant way of seduction could serve *honnêtes gens*’ gender roles to the benefit of both sexes. Elite women also played their role in this process of refining customs and behaviour. As Claude Dulong pointed out, the women of the *Ancien Régime*, who were unable to break out from male control, represented an antithesis to the masculine Gallic culture. These women tried to show that sophistication was not valuable in itself, if there was no respect for women. *Préciosité*,<sup>611</sup> *courtoisie*<sup>612</sup>

606 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 30 May 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 523; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 November 1684. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 164.

607 Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 18 March 1678. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 602.

608 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 16 March 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 459.

609 Pelous 1980, 19.

610 Habib 2006, 163–164.

611 *Préciosité* as a term in satir came to describe the precious, *des précieuses*, not a precious one, *la précieuse*. Maître 1999, 50–51. Pompous and exaggerated precious people were *fausses Précieuses* or *Précieuses ridicules*, as is the case in Molière’s play. Furetière Tome II 1690.

612 In the 17th-century, *courtoisie* meant a charming admittance, *gracieux accueil* and it was associated with courtship toward women. Furetière Tome I 1690. In the early modern era, *courtoisie* was substituted with *civilité*. However, Pernot stresses that the original meanings of *courtoisie* and *civilité* were distinct models of behaviour in terms of their broadness, significance and purposes.

and *galanterie* were all means to fight this brutally masculine culture, even if these customs had not been born solely from women's needs or for such purposes.<sup>613</sup> Through *galanterie*, a form of politeness was realised, in which the expression of love became part of respectable interaction.

After the Fronde, *l'honneste femme* took its position in elite culture permanently and elite culture's crown jewel was *galanterie*.<sup>614</sup> By the 1660s, *galanterie* was the topic and the elite wanted to be *galant* and fashion the ideal form of encounters between the sexes. Bosses's etching *Les Quatre âges de l'homme: L'Adolescence* (1636), in which *Cupido* brings together two members of elite, suggests that gallantry and amorous emotions were only for young people.<sup>615</sup> Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos were in their late thirties and early forties when *galanterie* was the most fashionable. That means that they were already past their youthful prime but it did not mean that the subject did not touch them and especially Ninon de Lenclos had to manage the rules of *galanterie* to be able to hold onto her position among the Parisian elite. In other words, a beautiful elite woman had to stay in tune with this interaction as well as be able to use it as tool of self-fashioning. However, aging Ninon de Lenclos would be without the comforting compensation of having pursued virtue; to lose one's youth and all the benefits of *galanterie* was a frightening thought for a woman, as de Scudéry states:

[...] It has to be terrifying pain, it seems to me, to a woman to know that there will be time when she will lose her beauty, her lover and her reputation. At least, when one has no beauty, no *galant* but one has virtue, then one's conscience is at ease, and that tranquillity of spirit is

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Pernot 1996, 16.

613 Dulong 1969, 12–13.

614 Maître 1999, 580. See also, Lenclos 1920, 67. *Mémoires sur la vie de Ninon de Lenclos* by A. Bret.

615 *Galanterie* was only intended for young people. When elderly people practised it, they made fools of themselves in the eyes of younger people. Gaye. Furetière Tome I 1702, 999.



Fig. 13: *L'Adolescence* (1636) by Abraham Bosse.  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

agreeable enough in itself.<sup>616</sup>

### Refining sentiments: self-fashioning *à la mode*

Within certain limits, having lovers was not harmful to social relations between the sexes and *belles-lettres* illuminate numerous such examples. Pelous argues that the *écrivains gallants* carried out an 'ironic campaign of demystification at the expense of amorous idealism which they judged outdated'.<sup>617</sup> Furthermore, through *galanterie* people could, not only use it for polite self-fashioning, but also rediscover

<sup>616</sup> '[...] ce doit être une effroyable douleur, ce me semble, à une femme de savoir qu'il y aura un temps où elle perdra sa beauté, son amant et sa réputation. Au moins, quand on n'a ni beauté ni galant, et qu'on a de la vertu, on a quelque repos de conscience, cela met une certaine tranquillité dans l'esprit qui est assez agréable'. Mme de Scudéry to Bussy-Rabutin 8 September 1670. Bussy-Rabutin Tome I 1858, 312.

<sup>617</sup> Pelous 1980, 195.

the real satisfaction of loving and the happiness of love.<sup>618</sup> In Madame de La Fayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*, the husband would control his feelings and give his wife freedom because he understood that he could not force ownership upon his wife. On his deathbed, he only asks her wife not to marry the Duke de Nemours.<sup>619</sup> In the novel *La Princesse de Montpensier*, the Valois court is the stage and its main character's decisions are guided by destructive passion. *Galanterie* makes a count weak when facing his emotions, making him believe in things which he might not otherwise have believed and to surrender himself before the attractiveness of the princess.<sup>620</sup> However, in the end, the princess is abandoned by her volatile and ambitious lover, and dies of sorrow<sup>621</sup> and Domna C. Stanton observes here that the princess got what she deserved, because she behaved inappropriately and gave in to forbidden passion.<sup>622</sup> It is also noteworthy that even though most of the *honnêtes gens*, according to Pelous, consider physical violence an unsuitable form to control a spouse, an adulterous wife could be punished:<sup>623</sup> *le duc* de Ventadour, for example, send his unfaithful wife to a convent, but Madame de Sévigné finds the decision sad.<sup>624</sup> In other words, if elite women engaged in an extramarital love affair, they had to be ready to face the consequences which could severely damage their status among their equals. However, as Madame de Sévigné's reaction shows other women could be compassionate and a question husband's judgment.

Madame de La Fayette's highly popular writings legitimised emotions, formed by great feelings and love. Such feelings justified even seduction although here François de La Rochefoucauld did not agree, stating that seduction

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618 Pelous 1980, 203.

619 La Fayette (1678) 1998.

620 La Fayette 1662, 15.

621 La Fayette 1662. See also, Stanton 2014, 180. Beasley 2006, 290.

622 Stanton 2014, 180.

623 Pelous 1980, 95.

624 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan October 18, 1679. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 707.

contained the least possible amount of love.<sup>625</sup> Madame de La Fayette was a good friend of Madame de Sévigné's<sup>626</sup> and, as mentioned earlier, *la marquise* knew her works well.<sup>627</sup> The Parisian elite found La Fayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* of great interest,<sup>628</sup> although it received criticism from some quarters. Bussy-Rabutin thought that the second part of the novel was not so good, finding it ridiculous that a wife would confess her adulterous feelings to her husband.<sup>629</sup> Madame de Sévigné agreed with her cousin<sup>630</sup> and states: 'our critique of *La Princesse de Clèves* is that of the people of quality who have *l'esprit*'.<sup>631</sup> Corbinelli also concurred with Bussy-Rabutin's critique, which 'unified the taste of all truly *honnêtes gens*'.<sup>632</sup> It is possible that even virtuous Madame de Sévigné accepted the novel's contents and it is tempting to claim, that *galanterie* with a certain amount of *vraie honnêteté*, was acceptable and even necessary for Madame de Sévigné's self-fashioning as a respectable and fashionable elite woman. The relationship between ideals and literature is certainly complex: where conduct books aimed to educate women, and create the image of an ideal woman, novels, in turn, as Ylivuori states 'represent the behavioural values of the society they were written in'.<sup>633</sup>

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625 Maxim 403. La Rochefoucauld 1685, 77.

626 See, for example, Mme de LaFayette to Mme de Sévigné 26 September 1691. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 980; Mme de LaFayette to Mme de Sévigné 24 January 1692. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 985.

627 Mme de Sévigné wrote about Mme de La Fayette's novels *La Princesse de Clèves* and *La Princesse de Montpensier* which she herself was not able to write. See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 16 March 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 459.

628 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 18 March 1678. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 602; Bussy-Rabutin to Mme de Sévigné 22 March 1678. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 603; Bussy-Rabutin to Mme de Sévigné 17 June 1678. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 612; Mme de Coligny to Mme de Sévigné 23 September 1678. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 630; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 6 March 1680. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 860.

629 Bussy-Rabutin to Mme de Sévigné 26 June 1678. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 617.

630 Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 9 August 1678. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 619.

631 '[...] *notre critique de La Princesse de Clèves est de gens de qualité qui ont de l'esprit*'. Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 12 August 1678. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 620.

632 '[...] *rencontré le gout de tous les vrais honnêtes gens*'. Corbinelli to Bussy-Rabutin September 18, 1678. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 627.

633 Ylivuori 2015, 20.



It was not only in her widowhood that Marquise de Sévigné praised *galant* themes in French literature. When young de Sévigné had enjoyed this *galant* forms of politeness that she may have used as a means for self-fashioning à la mode. The newlywed Sévigné family had lived among both the Parisian *société* and in the peaceful countryside of Les Rochers. The young Marquise de Sévigné, who had lived almost her entire life in Le Marais, Paris, spent a couple of her first years of marriage with her husband in the countryside, among people with social prestige. Madame de Sévigné seems to have been joyful, and to have enjoyed *galanterie* after she had married. Duchêne's indication to Guy Autret's letter to d'Hocier (16 September 1645) is an illuminating example that Madame de Sévigné's *galant* nature was known among quite a wide circle of the elite.<sup>634</sup>

Bussy-Rabutin, who, although considering Madame de Sévigné to be sexually cold, nevertheless claims that his cousin wanted to love and be loved by everyone: '[...] She praises to be praised and loves generally all men [...]: between the men, she loves better lover than friend and among lovers better cheerful than sorrowful [...]'.<sup>635</sup> It seems evident, even though Bussy-Rabutin's description is unfair and somewhat cruel, that Madame de Sévigné could entertain herself: she was fascinated by *galanterie*, although her letters give the impression of a woman for whom sexuality was to some extent repugnant; however, it does not mean that she could not enjoy the attention of her peers and use it for her self-fashioning. The young Madame de Sévigné appears during that time to be a young woman searching for pleasures; however, as Steinberg states, the practice of *galanterie* did not automatically mean

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634 'Je ne pense pas qu'il fasse voyage à Paris de deux ou trois mois. Il est occupé ici à donner ordre à ses affaires [...]. Il me montrait hier des missives d'amour et des vers qu'il avait fait pour les plus belles dames de la province, et particulièrement pour Madame de Sévigné, avec les réponses de la même dame, et plus de trois cents vers de sa façon et de son esprit, qui témoignent qu'elle a bon esprit et qu'elle est de très belle humeur'. Guy Autret to d'Hocier September 16, 1645. Duchêne 2002, 110.

635 'Elle donne des louanges pour en recevoir, & aime généralement tous les hommes [...] : entre les hommes elle aime mieux un amant, & parmi les amans les gays que les tristes'. Bussy-Rabutin 1665, 27.

sexual interaction.<sup>636</sup> With Madame de Sévigné, it is unlikely that her *galanterie* ever went beyond the verbal level.

Madame de Sévigné handpicked, I suggest, certain behavioural models and applied them according to her own needs. To her, feeling and showing admiration and abstinence were not mutually exclusive. She functioned within limits where she was able to maintain her respectability and fashion her *honnêteté*. Later she emphasised that she did not present herself as a woman who practiced *galanterie* with her confessor.<sup>637</sup> On the other hand, she showed interest in priests, and she often wrote about Father Bourdaloue.<sup>638</sup> However, she was not unique in this respect, as 17th-century women became fond of men of the faith.<sup>639</sup>

As the Parisian elite performed their *honnêteté*, it is evident that *galanterie* included both the chaste and honourable marquise, and the courtesan who lived counter to chaste respectability. *Galanterie*, however, provoked Madeleine de Scudéry to speak against its manners and customs; she was very content that she did not have the character or spirit so she avoided ‘à ce mal-heure là’.<sup>640</sup> It is self-evident that young Madame de Sévigné did not like Ninon de Lenclos’ *galant* lifestyle and this is common knowledge thanks to her wide correspondence. In Madame de Sévigné’s critique to Ninon de Lenclos, the honourable and virtuous Marquise reflected, mostly likely, her own moral beliefs. Her worldview was totally different from that of the courtesan. Madame de Sévigné distinguished between morally good and dubious elite:

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636 Steinberg 2010, 96.

637 Mme de Sévigné to Mme de Guitaut 26 November 1693. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 1019.

638 Sévigné Tome I 1972, Sévigné Tome II 1974, Sévigné Tome III 1978.

639 ‘[...] si commune à toutes les femmes, d’aimer leur confesseur’. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan January 15, 1674. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 669; Mme de Sévigné to Mme de Guitaut 26 November 1693. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 1019. ‘Si une femme pouvait dire à son Confesseur avec ses autres faiblesses celles qu’elle a pour son Directeur, & le temps qu’elle perd dans son entretien, peut-être luy seroit-il donné pour penitence d’y renoncer’. La Bruyère 1699, 90. See also, Timmermans 2005, 484.

640 Mme de Scudéry to Bussy-Rabutin 8 September 1670. Bussy-Rabutin Tome I 1858, 312.

the Marquise considered the young courtesan de Lenclos, who dogmatised the religion, led young people astray and thus acted against the ideal of *honneste femme*, dangerous.<sup>641</sup> As a mother, the Marquise was also concerned about her son: she did not accept the intimate relationship between Ninon de Lenclos and Madame de Sévigné's son, Charles de Sévigné. As a status-conscious elite woman, Madame de Sévigné's disapproval not only concerned sexual behaviour, but also matters of social disparity. To the Marquise, it was important that her children remained within their social class. At the end of letter, sent 1 April 1671 to Madame de Grignan, Madame de Sévigné stated that both she and Madame de La Fayette struggled to end the connection between Charles de Sévigné and Ninon.<sup>642</sup> One month later Madame de Sévigné had written to her daughter that her brother was under the control of Ninon's 'laws' (*lois*), and that she did not believe that they were good for her son.<sup>643</sup> Behind Madame de Sévigné's critical comments there might have also been the relationship between her own husband Henri de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos. However, Backer suggests that Madame de Sévigné accused her husband more than Ninon de Lenclos for their affair.<sup>644</sup> It seems evident that personal feelings and values directly affected how much *la marquise* commented on Ninon de Lenclos, and how she was seen. Furthermore, it is natural that Madame de Sévigné, who valued chaste respectability, did not want her family to have anything to do with the courtesan: Her value system and social consciousness were based on virtuous *honnêteté* not the principles of dubious *femmes galantes*.

However, *galanterie* strongly influenced the French elite and in 1696 the Duchess of Orléans wrote that if someone in court did not wish to participate in *galanterie*, they

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641 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 1 April 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 206.

642 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 1 April 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 206.

643 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 13 March 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 185.

644 Backer 1974, 214.

would live an isolated life.<sup>645</sup> It was not only concerned with courteousness its codes of behaviour were very seductive. More than just a fashionable vagary, it was seen as elite members' personal choice, a natural part of their identity when they were fashioning themselves and performing in *société*. Hence, I believe that Parisian elite women of the 17th-century had the possibility of creating a sphere where their respectability, gender and sexuality were at the service of their self-fashioning and this combination enabled them to choose partly how they wanted to fashion themselves as members of the elite. It also gave an opportunity to perform their womanhood and gender in order to strengthen their association with elite status.

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645 Von der Pfalz (1652–1722) 1984, 92.

## IV

### THE ASEXUAL AND CHASTE *honneste femme*

In the early centuries of the first millennium, the moderate practice of sex could be seen as healthy, as could physical exercise, laxatives, sweating, or taking a bath.<sup>646</sup> A few hundred years later, in 16th century France, discussions on sexuality reflected war, a brutal culture and a male-centred vision of sex. According to Lawrence D. Kritzman, although a chaste and virtuous woman was a worthy companion for a husband, she was also expected to know at least some of the tricks of whores.<sup>647</sup> However, the further the process of civilisation went, the greater limitations were set on sexuality<sup>648</sup> and sexuality became a problem for both secular and religious authorities.<sup>649</sup> According to Duchêne, female respectability both in court and in villages was associated with virginity,<sup>650</sup> while Jean-Pierre Dens emphasises that a good, chaste reputation was something to pursue and preserve; it was something to be treasured and in this respect the women were more vulnerable than *l'honnête homme*.<sup>651</sup> La Rochefoucauld, however, parodied the thought that women's respectability was nothing more than love of their personal reputation.<sup>652</sup> Indeed, the chaste, respectable wife and the courtesan who made love, formed two extremes of elite's female sexuality.

Sonya O. Rose states that in histories of sexuality, attitudes toward marital sex, prostitution, intimacy between

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646 Weedan 2014, *Sex as Preventative Medicine in Late Medieval Cities*.

647 According to Brantôme (c. 1540–1614), women preferred soldiers to other men and he thought that each man should marry a woman who was 'a bit of a whore'. Kritzman 2011, 192.

648 Muchembled 2008, 101–108. Elias 2000, 153. See also, Matthews-Grieco 1993, 64–76.

649 Matthews-Grieco 1993, 64.

650 Duchêne 2004, 121.

651 Dens 1991, 241.

652 Maxim 205, La Rochefoucauld 1685, 39–40.

individuals and the understanding of women and men as sexual beings ‘incorporate gender as a category of historical analysis’.<sup>653</sup> This chapter embodies different expressions of sexuality and gender; thus, I study *honnêtes femmes* as sexual human beings, although conducts books and *œuvres morales* required that their performances were mostly realized through chastity. Furthermore, I shall suggest that, regardless of gender requirements, among Parisian elite women sexuality and womanhood must be seen as inseparably connected. Although women’s egodocuments, such as letters, are silent about their own sexuality, this was not a sign of the asexual nature of respectable women. Thus, I examine the sexuality of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos by using *belles-lettres*, *Mémoires* of their contemporaries and poems. Indeed, woman’s sexuality and womanhood was associated with myths, fears and obligations; however, female sexuality was – and still is – not only a matter of sexual intercourse, but also, I would like to suggest, a larger issue of female image, women’s capacity to love and to feel, women’s own understanding of sex. Most importantly at this time women’s ability to have offsprings which meant that they were not only passive receivers, but active individuals who gave birth. In other words, in linking both ideals of female chastity and the reality of written works, this chapter endeavours to discover the multi-layered nature of female sexuality, its significance and how its link with elite women’s self-fashioning.

Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos both embodied their sexuality by rebelling against the prevailing customs in their own specific ways based on their values and lifestyle. Thus, in this chapter, I examine, to what extent these two women of the Parisian elite challenged or accepted the prevailing ideals of their time regarding sexuality and the understanding of love, and how the Parisian elite was able to accept two women with extremely different morality and status. I shall also point out how sexuality was present in the life of a respectable woman, and how important the understanding and fashioning

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653 Rose 2010, 24.

of female sexuality, either chaste or more liberal, was in the entity of *l'honneste femme*. In other words, the purpose of this chapter is to explore boundaries that determined both female sexuality and gender roles. Most importantly this chapter discusses the way female sexuality was evaluated by external signs, allowing the elite woman to fashion herself in terms of sexuality and chastity.

## 1. *La Femme*: a 17th century mystery

### *La vraie femme*: enchanting and deceitful

Some women have artificial grandeur, which is related to eye-movement, appearance of the head, style of walking, and stays there [...]. Other women have a simple, natural grandeur independent of gestures and behaviour, such that its source is in the heart, and that is a consequence of their noble birth, a calm but strong merit, and the innumerable virtues that come with it, which they cannot hide [...], and which appear to those who have eyes to see.<sup>654</sup>

Above, Jean de La Bruyère distilled the female affectation and virtues of the period, the features for which the elite women were most frequently rebuked and after which they strove. This study, an analysis of female conduct, endeavours to understand how *la femme*, more precisely an elite woman, was considered and understood. There were many informed interpretations of woman and her character, but the true essence of womanhood and woman's body, remained a great mystery. The female body was a crucial subject in 17th-century thinking and it had a strongly gendered meaning. In Furetière's *Dictionnaire* from

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654 'Il y a dans quelques femmes une grandeur artificielle, attachée au mouvement des yeux, à un air de tête, aux façons de marcher, & qui ne va pas plus loin [...]. Il y a dans quelques autres une grandeur simple, naturelle, indépendante du geste & de la démarche, qui a sa source dans le coeur, & qui est comme une suite de leur haute naissance ; un mérite paisible, mais solide, accompagné de mille vertus qu'elles ne peuvent couvrir [...], & qui se montrent à ceux qui ont des yeux'. La Bruyère 1699, 76–77.

1690, the word *femme* stood for all members of the female sex and more specifically those women who were married: the husband and *femme* were two people in a single chair.<sup>655</sup> The term *femme* was therefore strongly linked to the idea of a woman beside a man, as a wife rather than as an independent individual. A woman was the feminine part of a man, a person who carried a child and gave birth. She was also the one who made a man dream and desire. In the early modern era, a woman was seen more as a bodily, material being and less as a spiritual entity. Furthermore, a woman's body was weak and vulnerable. It was also susceptible to the affections of the mind and fantasy.<sup>656</sup>

In 1591, Jean-Baptiste Porta wrote in his *Physionomie humaine* that women, because of their character, have a moist body, narrow face, straight nose, and small eyes. On a moral level women were timid, bitter and insincere.<sup>657</sup> Male features such as a broad face were seen as a sign of magnanimity, courage and justice. In addition, ugliness was a sign of masculinity.<sup>658</sup> These thoughts on the differences between men and women lasted throughout the 17th-century. When one examines Madame de Sévigné's or Ninon de Lenclos' portraits,<sup>659</sup> it is obvious that neither one of them looks like a timid, acrid or insincere woman. As a matter of fact, the viewer can see two elite women who are self-assured and confident of their position in society. Even though elite women were mostly portrayed as beautiful and their beauty represented the ideal, a woman could also be seen as a monster. Using bodily metaphors, the artist was able to create a visual and ambiguous picture: in an etching by Abraham Bosse, *La vraye femme, la femme* (Fig. 14) is depicted as an irrational, bipartite monster. A woman was able to be, as Stanton states, simultaneously enchanting and deceitful: she had two bodies,

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655 *Femme*. Furetière Tome I 1690.

656 Stanton 2014, 9.

657 The work was republished in 1660. Duchêne 2004, 9. For more detailed information about differences between the sexes, see Steinberg 2001, 175–197.

658 Steinberg 2001, 166.

659 See Chapter V.1.



one animal, one human.<sup>660</sup>

Furthermore, the unclean woman who commands a man and whose body is in a threatening position was a travesty of the gentle, loving and submissive female ideal. A woman should have remembered that she was subservient to her husband and that this was to be respected.<sup>661</sup> However, the noble society of the early modern period included violence, but it was appropriate to men and Madame de Sévigné's husband and Ninon de Lenclos' lovers accepted violence as an inseparable part of being noble and honourable as discussed earlier. Therefore, it is not surprising that violence was common in marriage and a husband's violence against his wife was allowed and even considered necessary.<sup>662</sup> In other words, the kempt woman, who is praying on her knees in the right corner of the Bosse's picture, represented a perfect and humble Christian female ideal. Thus, a woman in *Vraye femme* had two sides; if one was not able to understand woman's true character, it was potentially dangerous and pernicious to the order of society.

Indeed, early modern people's image of their bodies and gendered features was formed in an environment in which patriarchal control was strong. Women could be subordinate to cruel practices by the juridical powers: they could be forced to go through examinations to confirm their pregnancy or virginity and they could be whipped for adultery.<sup>663</sup> In addition, the female body was an efficient means to dishonour and shame woman.<sup>664</sup> In other words, the female body was subordinate to the value system of the 17th-century, the preservation of which was used to justify the power that the authorities had to conduct examinations of the most intimate parts of women's bodies. Topics, that were normally not discussed, had, in the name of chastity, to be proven and dealt with in public.

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660 Stanton 2014, 14.

661 Liancourt 1698, 21. See also, Whittle & Griffiths 2012, 36.

662 Nolde 2005, 309–315.

663 Venette (1686) 1815, 98–110. See also, Gowing 2003, 6. Steinberg 2010, 103. Muchembled 2003, 199.

664 Gowing 1996, 232.



Fig. 14: *La vraie femme* (c. 1635) by Abraham Bosse.  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

In this societal context, what was the female ideal of the epoch? As Christianity played a central role, the model for the perfect *femme* was to be found from its principles. Indeed, Du Bosc warns that one should never wish for a woman who was not devout, because that kind of *femme* was ruthless and impudent.<sup>665</sup> The midwife Louise Boursier, for her part, mistakenly thinking that she was writing from experience, but relying more on ancient traditions and the supposed will of God, wrote about woman's inferiority to men.<sup>666</sup> *Belles-lettres* reinforced the thought of the submissive, chaste, devoted and humble woman.<sup>667</sup> A babbling, outrageous woman was the antithesis of the ideal. Grenaille also emphasises this idea:

665 Du Bosc 1632, 81–82.

666 Duchêne 2004, 14–15.

667 The main character in Alain-René Le Sage's *Gil Blas*, considered the modest and intelligent woman as an ideal, and could not believe that such a woman was able to behave loosely. Le Sage (1715–1735) 1949, 307. See also, Du Bosc 1632, 308.

Many women are talkative, if one considers the amount of their words, but they talk little, if one thinks about the quality. [...] They do not use words to convey their reason, but they misuse it, appearing insane. They bore us with their conversation, when they think that they are charming us.<sup>668</sup>

Not all women, even those of the elite, wanted to break the traditions that were bound to their sex. Jeanne de Schomberg, Duchess de Liancourt, for example, also commented that women were weak and imperfect.<sup>669</sup> She wrote that a woman should be constantly vigilant, and that a woman should not sleep alone in a room, not expose her neck in the presence of servants and not caress her husband too tenderly.<sup>670</sup> The Duchess de Liancourt had a female ideal in which personal leeway for a woman was negligible, reflecting the thought of woman's weakness. In this way, she agreed with the discourse in which a woman was seen as inferior to man and *femmes* were expected to have stay in their subordinate gender roles. A respectable woman was always to be kept busy. While writing to women on chastity, Du Bosc announced that dishonest love is embodied well in those who spend their time in idleness. Such a principle would suggest that chastity would be preserved among precisely those women who did not spend too many hours in corrupting freedom. He concludes this chapter by stating: 'Diane hunts, Pallas studies, but Venus does nothing'.<sup>671</sup> The elite woman was not allowed to work for a profession, but she was expected to keep herself occupied. In other words, by doing something useful, something appropriate for women, *la femme* had less time left for indecent behaviour.

According to Gowing, chastity and abstinence were the

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668 *Plusieurs femmes parlent beaucoup si vous regardez la quantité de leurs paroles, mais elles parlent peu si vous en considérez la qualité. [...] Elles ne se servent pas du langage comme d'un truchement de leur raison, mais elles en abusent pour paraître déraisonnables. Elles nous assomment par leur entretien lors qu'elles croient nous ravir.* Grenaille (1640) 2003, 351.

669 Liancourt 1698, 28.

670 Liancourt 1698, 35, 39–40.

671 Du Bosc 1632, 126.

distinctive features of a good woman, who was passive and thus avoided sin. This passive female image was mighty opposite to active male honour. These female features were, however, negotiable 'for higher status women'.<sup>672</sup> Thus, what did enable some elite women to have more space for their self-fashioning as active but respectable agents? Besides the changes in the 17th-century society, cultivated women were often married to a man with a liberal value system, and a high-ranking social status. These men would have been able to travel, see the world, and visit men of higher rank than their own.<sup>673</sup> Indeed, this was the case with the men who influenced the lives of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos. Madame de Sévigné came from an elite Parisian family that wanted their daughter to be educated. She also married a man who was a liberal and who had a high social status. Ninon de Lenclos' liberal father also wanted his daughter to have a good education which helped the daughter to create a career as a cultivated courtesan; she would not have succeeded with her sexual attractions alone. With this status, she needed no husband, but she was surrounded by men who were mostly elite, cultivated and liberal. Thus, both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos could negotiate with patriarchal society and it is essential to notice that these women's own personalities played a crucial role: they both were unquestionably intelligent women who were able to take advantage of the opportunities provided by their era and this also resonates with the performance of their sexuality.

### The respectable woman and her character

When a woman had created a certain space for her individual performance, what kind of personality would have been favourable for her gender? To a secular woman, a happy character was an asset; a melancholic mind was suitable for the sciences, but too heavy for conversation. Moreover,

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<sup>672</sup> Gowing 1996, 226.

<sup>673</sup> Dulong 1969, 23.

happy characters have more charm and freedom in all that they do and women with a happy character were considered more honest in their goals, less forced.<sup>674</sup> Thus, an *honneste femme* was not expected, according to Du Bosc and Morvan de Bellegard, to be melancholic, inclined to gloominess and a glad, open character served the woman's ideal and behaviour.

It seems that a respectable woman should not be severe. However, Du Bosc remarks that even a beautiful woman, who possessed a happy character, was an object of pity if she had no intellect and *esprit*.<sup>675</sup> To Du Bosc, gladness and sociability in themselves were not bad qualities, it was just that they needed intellect, and the *honneste femme* should have been able to make the right choices. Similarly, Antoine de Courtin called for *l'humour* and said that one should consider *la personne, la chose, le lieu & le temps* before choosing the kind of reaction and this made a person *civil*.<sup>676</sup> Madame de Sévigné is depicted as glad, but de Scudéry's character Clarice, who is based on Ninon de Lenclos, has the character of poets and creative people; that is, she is melancholic.<sup>677</sup> She is, I suggest, associated with masculine features, which had their share in supporting her special status in the division between the sexes: she was more of a man than an inferior woman. Furthermore, Clarice was also associated with features such as loyalty and avoiding conflicts, which were male characteristics.<sup>678</sup> In this way her self-fashioning was successful, as it seems that Ninon de Lenclos herself had wanted to emphasise her image as a person who had rather a grave look on her face.<sup>679</sup> Could this be related to the idea that the most enchanting woman had other than feminine qualities? For La Bruyère, a perfect woman looked feminine on the outside, but she had the mental

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674 Du Bosc 1632, 2–3. Morvan de Bellegard wrote that a young girl should not be serious, severe or prudish like her grandmother. Morvan de Bellegard 1698, 385.

675 Du Bosc 1632, 24–25.

676 Courtin 1728, 111.

677 Duchêne 2000, 217.

678 Duchêne 2000, 217.

679 '[...] J'ai toujours eu la mine grave'. Ninon de Lenclos to Saint-Évremond. Saint-Évremond Tome V 1725, 298.

properties of a man: 'There is nothing more charming than to associate with a beautiful woman who has the good qualities of a good man: she has everything that is best in both sexes'.<sup>680</sup>

How did women consider their sex? In the words of Sven Stolpe, Queen Christine 'despised everything genuinely feminine' nor did she want to adjust to the role of a wife or a mother.<sup>681</sup> Ninon de Lenclos also found the definitions of *l'honnête femme* as foreign. According to Voltaire, Mademoiselle de Lenclos only prayed: 'My God, make me an *honnête homme*, but never an *honnête femme*'.<sup>682</sup> This indicates that she wished to separate herself from her gender, and that she also had a social need to resemble her male guests and thus, she wished to be an *honnête homme*. Later generations wanted to emphasise this feature in her:

If my propositions sometimes seem too reasonable for a woman's, remember what I told you last time. Ever since I have pondered, which one of the two sexes would be better, I have noticed that men have not at all been mistreated in the division of roles, & I am made to be a man.<sup>683</sup>

By emphasising masculinity, I believe some women were able to free themselves from the limitations, that were set against their sex, behaviour and sexuality. This argument is applicable particularly to the cases of Queen Christine and Ninon de Lenclos. By doing this courtesan de Lenclos earned the features

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680 'Une belle femme qui a les qualités d'un honnête homme, est ce qu'il y a au monde d'un commerce plus délicieux ; l'on trouve en elle tout le mérite de deux sexes'. La Bruyère 1699, 81.

681 Klinge, Kolbe, Nevala & Setälä 1990, 98. Despite that *La Clef du grand Dictionnaire historique des Précieuses* refers to the Queen Christina as Clorinde. Somaize 1661, 14. Queen Christina did not fulfil the features of the *précieuses*; Mme de Motteville wrote that Queen Christina was not at all beautiful or feminine. Motteville Tome I 1750, 379. See also, Timmermans 2005, 765.

682 'Mon Dieu, faites-moi un honnête homme, mais jamais une honnête femme'. Voltaire Tome XXIII 1879, 509.

683 'Si mes propos vous paroissent quelque fois trop raisonnés pour une femme, souvenez-vous de ce que je vous disois la dernière fois. Dès que j'ai fait usage de ma raison, je me suis mis en tête d'examiner lequel des deux sexes étoit le mieux partager. J'ai vû que les hommes ne s'étoient point du tout maltraités dans la distribution des rôles, & je me suis fait homme'. Lettre IX. Lenclos 1750, 24.

of the intellectual man and she was partly enabled to perform male *honnêteté*, which was less attached to chaste behaviour. The writer of Ninon de Lenclos' letters to Marquis de Sévigné, underscored the illusion that Ninon had recommended as wife a woman who was stable, full of virtues, and who had principles. For a mistress, it was good to have a woman who was good-looking, had a happy disposition and enjoyed amusement.<sup>684</sup> Yet, the content of this letter was the attempt of later generations to give an image of Ninon de Lenclos as someone more like an *honneste femme* and compatible with a traditional female image. Ninon de Lenclos did finally reach a respectable position, having a sense of self-worth as both a companion and an individual, elite woman. However, considering the sources, it is unlikely that courtesan de Lenclos advocated a traditional female image in any form. Indeed, Ninon was different while she was alive, and she wanted to distance herself from the traditional woman's role, but her way of thinking was not unique. In his characterizations on women, La Bruyère states: 'I have noticed that someone wishes to be a girl, and a daughter-in-law between the ages of thirteen and 22, and after that to become a man'.<sup>685</sup>

Grenaille thought that a girl who had no intellect also had none of the other exquisite features. Girls had, however, the opportunity to rise to the high level of men, but they should imitate men's keen intellect.<sup>686</sup> He does not deny that a girl or a woman was able to rise to the higher level of men, but at the same time, he holds on to the tradition that stressed men's natural superiority. Also to him, the central characteristics of the *honnête fille* are modesty, kindness and abstinence.<sup>687</sup> The value system of society was always present, but virtues could also be seen in those who lived contrary to respectability. In the 17th-century, stories were written of

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684 Ninon 1750, 6, 9.

685 'J'ay vû souhaiter d'être fille, & une belle fille depuis treize ans jusques à vingt-deux ; & après cet âge de devenir un homme'. La Bruyère 1699, 77.

686 Grenaille (1640) 2003, 285. '[...] le seul moyen que les filles ayent d'égaliser la grandeur des hommes, c'est d'imiter le soin qu'ils ont de l'esprit'. Grenaille (1640) 2003, 287.

687 Grenaille (1640) 2003, 289–291.

heroes and heroines, who were described in superlative forms. They were the most enchanting and most influential and such women were described as *divine, illustre, incomparable, celeste & merveilleuse*; that is they were divine, well known, without comparison, heavenly and out of the ordinary.<sup>688</sup> These women were the most respectable, beautiful, gallant and courageous of them all. They had all the necessary accomplishments but lacked any distinguishing features.<sup>689</sup> Using such similes was not uncommon in the 17th-century<sup>690</sup> and the same kind of idealization in poetry could also be found in the poetry of the previous centuries.<sup>691</sup>

Such words of praise were also used to describe Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos. Their positions as elite women were verified through poetry, which emphasised their exquisite features that came to public light and came to define them more than their indiscreet behaviour. In Marigny's poem Madame de Sévigné was delightful, beautiful, and charming. It described a woman whose whole essence captivated her fellow citizens, especially men, but without diminishing her respectability in any way.<sup>692</sup> The poem's description of *la marquise* de Sévigné conformed to the general tendency of the period, in which an honourable elite woman was given high praise. On the other hand, no matter how bound the female ideal was to virtue, it did not stop Saint-Évremond from praising the virtues of his friend in his letter to Ninon de Lenclos: wise and gentle Ninon de Lenclos is compared with ancient legends, her intellect and spirituality make her a woman whose virtues are comparable to those of men.<sup>693</sup> However,

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688 Maître 1999, 40–41.

689 Habib 2006, 103.

690 Beasley 2007, 100.

691 See, for example, Berry 1989 9–37.

692 Marigny's poem (1649). Duchêne 2002, 116. See also, Scarron's poem: '*Bel Ange en deuil qui m'estes apparu, Je suis charmé de vostre veue. Je ne l'aurois pas cru, Que vous eussiez esté de tant d'attraits pourueue : Sont-ils de vostre crû ? Ou, si l'on vous les vend, enseignez-moy la rue Où vous prenez de si charmants attrait, Qui charment de loins & de prés*'. Scarron (1650–1654) 1960, 138.

693 '*L'indulgent et sage nature A formé l'âme de Ninon De la volupté d'Epicure, Et de la vertu de Caton*'. Saint-Évremond Tome IV 1726, 144.



the lived reality could not be washed away. In the 1650s not all members of the elite were ready to accept courtesan de Lenclos' status makeover into an unquestionably respectable woman and according to Duchêne, the praised and admired Ninon de Lenclos could not forget that her past continued to follow her. For most of elite members and the poets, she was still a collector of lovers.<sup>694</sup> Despite this, sexuality was a part of woman and the relations between the sexes. Without women and their bodies, the sexual needs of heterosexual men could not be satisfied—or the family name continued. Chastity and sexuality characterized both Ninon de Lenclos and Madame de Sévigné, and sexuality was indisputably a part of a respectable person's entity, but what exactly did sexuality mean? Most importantly, did elite women have choices when their sexuality and *honnêteté* was evaluated?

## 2. Limits of sexuality and infinity: a chaste wife, an independent widow and an unmarried courtesan

### *Femme libidineuse*

She helped me to undress and lift my shirt up to my shoulders. [...] The more you suffer (she continued), the more you feel pleasure. I can stand it, I said to her, with pleasure I will take all the hits from you. [...] Would you like, she continued, that I shall tie your arms.<sup>695</sup>

Nicholas Chorier's *L'Académie des Dames* portrays women who were not afraid of their sexuality, which involved, according to the writer of the novel, receptiveness to pleasure. These women were adventurous, sexually open minded and ready to lift the veil of modesty. However, at the same time

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694 Duchêne 2000, 182.

695 'Elle m'aida à me déshabiller, et relèva ma chemise sur mes épaules [...] (elle continua) que plus vous souffrirez, plus vous goûterés aussi de plaisir. J'endurerai, lui dis-je, très volontiers, tous les coups, que je recevrai de vous. [...] Voulez-vous bien, continuat-elle, que je vous lie les mains [...]'. Chorier 1700. Finnish National Library. Helsinki.

women were cold, because their genitals were turned inside, unlike men's and this physical disparity made woman an imperfect man.<sup>696</sup> It was difficult to get a cold and wet woman to ignite, but when she did, she burned hot and for a long time.<sup>697</sup> This was a paradox: women were more lustful to begin with, but still it was difficult to 'ignite' them. Overall, women were identified with lust, and forced sex could be praised in courtly literature.<sup>698</sup> Women of the elite formed their understanding of their womanhood and sexuality in this atmosphere, in which the morality of their period was combined with ideas on pregnancy and on sex in marriage.

The traditional expression was *aut maritus aut murus*, meaning that a woman needs either a marriage or a life in a convent.<sup>699</sup> Gowing also stresses gender roles, which were an essential part of marriage,<sup>700</sup> but how did people in the 17th-century, especially the elite women, know what was ideal behaviour? The ideal conduct was taught at home but it seems that *œuvres morales*, which gave directions about the chaste life, were read among the literate elite. Madame de Sévigné has read, for example, Sales's book *Introduction à la vie devoute* and it may have affected her thinking.<sup>701</sup> Sylvie Steinberg has considered that women from religious communities also influenced the virtue of more secular women. It is particularly women with religious conviction, e.g. Jeanne de Chantal, who played a great role in the spread of the 17th-century ideal of chastity.<sup>702</sup> It is also clear that Madame de Sévigné was

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696 Venette (1686) 1815, 23.

697 Phillips & Reay 2011, 54.

698 Phillips & Reay 2011, 10–11. Rape cases rarely went through the criminal justice system and it was difficult to prove a woman's innocence. Crawford, Gowing 2000, 138. See also, Karras 2005, 113. Muchembled 2008, 55.

699 Rapley 1990, 19, 41. Duchêne 2004, 87.

700 Gowing 2003, 9.

701 Mme de Sévigné refers to the preface to *Introduction à la vie dévote* in her letter to her daughter in 1685. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan February 28, 1685. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 187. See also, Duchêne's comment. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 1244. Furthermore, Mme de Sévigné's grandmother, Jeanne Françoise de Chantal (Saint Jeanne de Chantal, canonised on February 16, 1767) founded together with François de Sales the Order of Visitation sisters in 1610.

702 Steinberg 2010, 80.

interested in morality and Christianity,<sup>703</sup> but in earlier studies the impact that Jeanne de Chantal and François de Sales had on Madame de Sévigné's understanding of womanhood and sexuality, has been downplayed and overlooked. In addition, Duchêne claims that Madame de Sévigné had an ironic relationship with the spiritual parenthood (*la parenté spirituelle*) of Jeanne de Chantal and François de Sales.<sup>704</sup>

In this context, it seems evident that Madame de Sévigné understood that under ideal circumstances, sex only took place within marriage, and even then it was not acceptable to practise sex other than for procreation.<sup>705</sup> Sales uses elephants as an example, because they mated only once in every three years with the goal of producing offspring.<sup>706</sup> In forming the idea of perfect female conduct, I agree with Muchembled who has taken under consideration, contrary to Elias, that individual needs and desires can be on a collision course with theoretical norms.<sup>707</sup> Indeed, the ideal and the reality were very different: the 17th-century aim to achieve marital purity was not realized, and extramarital affairs bloomed,<sup>708</sup> although sex was not officially allowed outside of marriage.<sup>709</sup> In addition, sex within marriage was saturated with regulations and restrictions. Extramarital sex was on the list of serious sins, but even more serious forms of this

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703 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan January 13, 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 414.

704 Duchêne 2002, 75. Mme de Sévigné was aware that François de Sales did not practise what he preached, even though he preached moderation and abstinence, all the way from the dining table to the marriage bed. On 1 January 1690, Mme de Sévigné wrote that Field Marshal de Villeroy totally refused to believe that François de Sales had been declared a saint and canonized. This was because he had dined with de Sales about twenty times in Lyon. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 1 January 1690. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 793–794.

705 Sales 1641, 349. See also, Flandrin 1981, 121.

706 Sales 1641, 349.

707 Muchembled 2008, 17.

708 Generally speaking, to the end of the 18th century, there were three forms of regulations concerning sexuality: a pastoral Christianity, civilian law, and practices of canonical justice that had formed within the church. Each defined in its own way what was legal and what was not. Habib 2006, 95. See also, Flandrin 1981, 240–241.

709 Matthews-Grieco 1993, 76. Flandrin 1979, 162–163. Muchembled 2003, 103.

were distinguished, e.g., adultery, marriage without parents' consent, spiritual or bodily incest, sodomy and homosexual relationships.<sup>710</sup> Masturbation,<sup>711</sup> bestiality, oral sex and the use of contraceptive methods were serious sins and considered unnatural.<sup>712</sup>

Directions for avoiding serious sins and conserving both woman's reputation and honour had developed centuries before,<sup>713</sup> indeed classical thinkers from antiquity had a strong influence on several matters of 17th-century life.<sup>714</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that classical legends were repeated, such as the story of Lucretia's suicide in the name of honour after she had been raped by Tarquin, which was discussed with interest during the 17th century. Robert Nunn's examination of Madeleine de Scudéry's works show that she dealt the subject twice.<sup>715</sup> Scudéry's *œuvres* were read among the elite,<sup>716</sup> and elite women must have been aware of the centuries-long

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710 Foucault I 1976, 51–52.

711 That priests preached against the sin of onanism, which can be seen as evidence that it was practised. At the same time, masturbation also served as a method of contraception. Frasier 2006, 85.

712 Phillips & Reay 2011, 18.

713 In the early 15th century, Bernardino of Siena preached that a wife would be better off copulating with her father in a natural way than with her husband in an unnatural way. Similarly, while it was not good for a man to have sex with his mother, but it was considered better for him than to have unnatural sex with his wife. It was preferred that a woman let herself be killed and let a man thus commit adultery, or to mate with a mule. It was believed that by allowing herself to have unnatural sex, a woman committed a mortal sin, as did the man who wanted this in the first place. Phillips & Reay 2011, 18–19. Furthermore, woman's social status and behaviour determined how severe the crime against her was and what kind punishment she might receive. The rape of a prostitute was not necessarily considered as a crime. Vigarello 2001, 24–57.

714 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan September 25, 1680. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 27. Motteville Tome I 1750, 380. Matthews-Grieco 1993, 64. Lefebvre 2000, 286–287. Farmer 2003, 264. Kushner 2013, 7. Sarjala 2001, 57.

715 Bunn remarks that Scudéry and her brother George devoted a speech of Lucretia to her husband Collatinus in *Harangues des femmes illustres* (1642). Later Madeleine de Scudéry wrote about her in *Clélie* (1654–1660), however, in this *œuvre*, Lucretia is described as largely fictional. Bunn 1998, 245. Shakespeare's narrative poem *the Rape of Lucrece* was published in 1594.

716 See, for example, Costar to Mme de Sévigné spring 1658. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 46; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 25 September 1680. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 27; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 November 1684. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 164.

tradition according to which sexual decency was a question of honour and a woman had very little room in the domain of sexuality in which most of sexual behaviour was considered a sin. If a woman wanted to preserve her own and her family's honour, she should behave tactfully. In other words, the ideal was to conserve women's honour and chastity at all costs; this ideal situation was achieved when women were sexually cold.

Premarital virginity was an absolute ideal for women. Especially after the 1550s, marriage was considered the only place in which sexuality could take place. This was a principle accepted by doctors, as well as humanists and church authorities.<sup>717</sup> Regardless of this, according to Duchêne, marriages were established relatively late: the average age of women when they got married was 24, and that of men was 26. In addition, he adds, the vast majority of women were virgins when they were married, or at least they had not been discovered to have had a premarital relationship. All this reflected the strong hold that the Catholic church had on society.<sup>718</sup>

Although virginity was a matter of honour and should not be for sale, this rule was broken with impunity and sometimes without consequences, as the actions of Ninon de Lenclos' mother showed. Since virginity was highly regarded and people's choices in physical behaviour might deviate from ideals, a woman still had the possibility of reconstructing her lost virginity. There were conduct books on how to at least make an impression that virginity was still intact so that one's husband would not be offended. The doctor Nicolas Venette advised how a woman could be tight during intercourse and how a small amount of blood on the sheets was important on the morning after the wedding -night. A few drops of lamb's blood on the sheets was all that was required.<sup>719</sup> Venette also gave instructions on how a girl, who had lost her virginity and secretly given birth, was able to reconstruct her chastity.

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717 Venette (1686) 1815, 94–95. Matthews-Griego 2005, 187.

718 Duchêne 1984, 36.

719 Venette (1686) 1815, 120.

She should be chaste for four or five years before marriage, she should not arouse any sensual imaginings by dancing or speaking or act shamelessly; basically, she was to live in a humble manner. By doing so, her future husband would never doubt her virginity or suspect a lapse in the past.<sup>720</sup>

Since the virginity of the young Ninon de Lenclos was for sale several times, it is quite plausible that she and her mother were aware of these devices. It was certainly worth trying to suggest virginity as then the price could be raised. Elite men were used to exceptionality, no doubt desired that the women they paid for would fulfil their masculine fantasies of purity, innocence and uniqueness. In addition, Duchêne makes the justifiable remark that Venette's advice offered psychological or spiritual virginity to those who needed it.<sup>721</sup> In addition, these pieces of advice and the success of debauched women among *honnêtes gens* heighten the idea of the study that external signs and proper outward behaviour may have had a stronger position in terms of female *honnêteté* than previous scholars have thought.

Virginal behaviour could be exhibited in certain ways, but the expression of affection also should follow guidelines. The documents do not mention the caresses given by women; however, according to Muchembled, prostitutes were willing to fondle genitals with their hands<sup>722</sup> and often elite men's erotic experiments were realized by sexually liberal women. This enabled the courtesan to be personified as someone who provided eroticism.<sup>723</sup> In light of earlier studies, it is plausible that Ninon de Lenclos also provided different types of erotic services. Her reputation as a legendary courtesan who combined sophistication and vices could not have arisen without her being special in both domains, particularly in the latter. Thus, the free manifestation of female sexuality combined with refined sophistication and elite lifestyle was a means to achieve solid status among the *honnêtes gens*,

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720 Venette (1686) 1815, 119.

721 Duchêne 2000, 52.

722 Muchembled 2008, 87.

723 Rosmarin 1972, 269.

especially among *les honnêtes hommes*. Was it, however, enough?

### Childbirth: an issue for both chaste wives and debauched women

The risks and fears that were related to childbirth were known and respectable women and their spouses also resorted to birth control. Women's pregnancies and childbirths were controlled and an inheritance changed so that it only applied to children born within the marriage.<sup>724</sup> According to Matthews-Grieco, population registers provide information on both pregnancies and children born outside marriage in the 17th century. They have also been used to conclude how frequent extramarital sex between partners of the same social class was: children were born before their due time, pregnancies outside of marriage did not always lead to marriage and the number of first children born to married and unmarried women was approximately the same.<sup>725</sup> These phenomena did not mean that sexual conduct prior to marriage or the birth of a child outside marriage did not lead to punitive measures: it was not only the society or church that looked after sexual morality; neighbours, doctors, spouses and a family's children also concerned themselves with the arrival of progeny.<sup>726</sup> However, this did not prevent

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724 Hanley 1989, 15. The French state also saw things similarly to the Romans, in that it should support those fathers who had given it children. It granted pensions to noblemen who had had respectable marriages and during the marriage had produced ten living, or twelve living or dead, children. Hanley 1989, 12.

725 Matthews-Grieco 2005, 174. In 17th-century England the number of children born out of marriage was relatively small. Crawford and Gowing speculate that heterosexual couples had sex without intercourse: young couples who awaited marriage, kissed or practised 'love games' either alone or in front of friends or family. Crawford, Gowing 2000, 138. Muchembled also estimates that masturbation played a significant part in sexuality. Muchembled 2008, 87.

726 Matthews-Grieco 2005, 170. See also, Gowing 2003, 6. Muchembled 2008, 10. In the early modern era, people's bodies were subordinate to the state and the family. Sexual offences were matters for state and church and were subject to public punishments. Gowing 2003, 5. As society increased its control in family matters, so pregnancy and childbirth became matters that concerned official quarters. In 1556, an edict was enacted in which secret marriage, secret pregnancy and secret childbirth were forbidden. If a woman did not carry out

rapes, seduction or the births of illegitimate children, during the *Ancien Régime*.<sup>727</sup> Furthermore, women were not only subordinate to men's or patriarchal power: women too might call each other whores, or drive a woman pregnant with a child conceived outside marriage out of the house, showing complicity with the patriarchy.<sup>728</sup>

In 1648, Ninon de Lenclos left Paris to go to Lyon. According to des Réaux, some of her contemporaries said that Ninon de Lenclos had travelled to Lyon so that she could take care of some *incommodités*. Some suspected that the real reason behind the journey was hidden.<sup>729</sup> Duchêne points out that a medical reason was suspicious, because the medical faculty of Lyon did not have a better reputation than that of Paris at the time. Paris also had places where one could have taken care of one's self completely inconspicuously.<sup>730</sup> Despite Duchêne's notion above, it may be that a pregnancy was the explanation for this trip: Ninon de Lenclos' movements were followed and taking care of a pregnancy somewhere else than Paris would have been easier and in this way, she would have had better chances to preserve her reputation. In any case, her departure was a source of rumours: she was rumoured to have seduced the Cardinal of Lyon, who had somewhat fallen in love (*un peu amoureux*) with her pleasant character (*bel humour*).<sup>731</sup> Although courtesan de Lenclos' moves were much-watched among the Parisian elite, it was possible if she wished to, she could hide herself from the public for months in order to preserve her image.

Even though unmarried, Ninon de Lenclos succeeded in taking care of her condition without much attention, French society did not treat sinners of all social classes equally. Women who did not have a high social status or the support of the liberal elite might face serious punishment if they had sexual

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the duty of notification and gave birth to a dead child without witnesses, she could be convicted as a warning to others. Hanley 1989, 11, 15.

727 Matthews-Griego 2005, 185.

728 Gowing 2003, 10.

729 Des Réaux 1906, 239.

730 Duchêne 2000, 101.

731 Des Réaux 1906, 239.



relationships outside marriage or bore illegitimate children. In 1665, a woman from Lyon was accused of arson. During the investigation, the *mauvaise vie* that she had lived came to light. She was tortured with *une extension un peu violante*. However, she did not give in during the interrogation, because she did not want to be hanged. Instead, she was marked with a lily flower, whipped and exiled.<sup>732</sup>

In this context, Ninon de Lenclos' situation reveals again the crucial dichotomy between debauched women and those who enjoyed the benefits of elite status: courtesan de Lenclos gave birth outside of marriage<sup>733</sup> and this caused her no problems. She was a member of the elite, so she had a group of influential people behind her. Was she able to trust the aid of marquis de Villarceaux? Did she know that her status was secure enough to be the mother of an illegitimate child? It is impossible to say how she felt after the childbirth but she did not abandon or try to hide the child she had by de Villarceaux. She might have secretly ended other possible pregnancies but the son she had with Villarceaux suggests that a courtesan who was part of the elite and had strong social support; thus, she was able to keep an illegitimate child. It is also important to remember that both men and women could be punished for immoral behaviour: in 1684 Nicollas Drout, aged 42, was sentenced to be a galley slave for nine years for sleeping with his wife's daughter.<sup>734</sup> Drout's punishment

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732 Fléchier (1665) 1856, 60–61. In England, unwanted pregnancies also led to girls and women fleeing and/or being excommunicated by the church. For this reason, desperate mothers might kill their babies. Berkowitz 2012, 183.

733 According to Tallemant des Réaux, Ninon de Lenclos and M. de Villarceaux had two children. Des Réaux 1906, 243. No document confirms the existence of another child of de Villarceaux and Ninon de Lenclos. If such a child was born, he or she probably died at a very young age. Duchêne 2000, 172. There was also a rumour that Ninon de Lenclos had children with Albert de Miossens (marshal César-Phoebus de Miossens) and with *chevalier* de Méré. Duchêne 1984, 140. Vergé-Franceschi also mentions a legend according to which courtesan de Lenclos had a child with Jean Coiffier de Ruzé d'Effiat and comte de d'Estrées. Vergé-Franceschi 2014, 320–321. These rumours of Ninon de Lenclos' several illegitimate children suggest that she might have been pregnant more than once. She may have given birth secretly or even have had an abortion.

734 AB283. Archives Policières. Paris.

reveals the prevailing attitude towards incest. However, in the society of the *Ancien Régime*, as Matthews-Grieco states, double standards meant a higher set of expectations for a wife than for a husband.<sup>735</sup>

Physical union between a wife and man was not a requirement for a marriage to be valid, but it made a union permanent. However, marriage in itself was not a guarantee of sex or the constant fulfilment of sexual desires: sex was to be avoided, for example, when the wife was pregnant, when she was menstruating and during the times when she was breastfeeding, because this made her physically undesirable.<sup>736</sup> However, breastfeeding played a crucial role and it was an important matter to be considered among the elite who, like Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, were fed by wet nurses.<sup>737</sup> Paintings like the Virgin Mary nursing baby Jesus (Fig. 17), Roman Charity (Fig. 15)<sup>738</sup>, or *Le future Louis XIV dans les bras de sa nourrice, dame Longuet de la Giraudière* (Fig. 16) indicate that life-sustaining breastfeeding was an essential act which could be portrayed. The importance of this social phenomenon is also emphasised when Madame de Sévigné wanted to make sure that Madame de Grignan's children had a good wet nurse. For Marie-Blanche (1670–1735), Madame de Sévigné finally found a good *nourrice*: 'She is a good countrywoman, without salary, with beautiful teeth, black hair, tanned skin and twenty-four years old. She has had milk for four months, her child is as beautiful as an angel'.<sup>739</sup> In other words, it seems that breastfeeding and understanding its

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735 Matthews-Grieco 2005, 185.

736 Some doctors and some men of the church accepted sex between a married couple during pregnancy. Matthews-Grieco 2005, 187.

737 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 16 March 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 459.

738 In *Roman Charity* (*Caritas romana*) paintings, a woman, Pero, secretly breastfeeds her father, Cimon who is incarcerated and sentenced to death by starvation. This scene, which has incestuous overtones, was popular during the 17th century and both Caravaggio and Rubens depicted it.

739 'C'est une bonne paysanne, sans façon, de belles dents, des cheveux noirs, un teint hale, âgée de vingt-quatre ans. Son lait est quatre mois ; son enfant est beau comme un ange'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 8 April 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 211.



Fig. 15: *Roman Charity* (c. 1612) by Peter Paul Rubens  
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.



Fig. 16: *Le future Louis XIV dans les bras de sa nourrice, dame Longuet de la Giraudière* (c. 1640) by Henri Beaubrun (d'après Charles Beaubrun)-  
Musée de l'Histoire de France. Château de Versailles.



Fig. 17: *Nursing Madonna* (c. 1609) by Artemisia Gentileschi.  
Polo Museale del Lazio, Galleria Spada, Italy

importance was part of the elite women's self-understanding, but most importantly having the best possible wet nurse for a baby of the elite assured also the continuation of the family name.

The birth of a boy is celebrated in most societies and it has often been considered more important than the birth of a girl; a male child was essential for the transfer of a family's property and name.<sup>740</sup> When Charles de Sévigné was born, it was a turning point in the marriage of Madame de Sévigné and Monsieur de Sévigné, for they did not have more heirs. Madame de Sévigné had fulfilled her marital duties and behaved as a respectable wife and it is reasonable to believe that she was the one to end sexual relations between the couple. Not all 17th-century theologians directly encouraged people to completely abstain from sex in marriage, because this might result in the neglect of the sexual needs of one of the spouses.<sup>741</sup> However, Henri de Sévigné seems to have agreed with such an arrangement, but he did not give up sexual activity and found his pleasures elsewhere. Henri de Sévigné liked or – should I say adored – women and lukewarm marital sex probably did not increase his adherence to fidelity. His wife's ultimate refusal of sex was the required justification to pursue other relationships. Madame de Sévigné, however, was an attractive woman and Tallemant des Réaux states that if he had been Henri de Sévigné, he would have preferred his own wife than Madame de Gondran, one of Henri de Sévigné's mistresses.<sup>742</sup> Madame de Sévigné accepted the situation, which was probably not optimal, but was at least satisfactory for both spouses. Although in the early modern era elite men's habit of having mistresses was not accepted in itself, since a man was supposed to behave so that he was not seduced,<sup>743</sup> it is interesting to notice how *les Sévignés* shared two very different ways of expressing an elite lifestyle with

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<sup>740</sup> Hartman 2004, 40–41.

<sup>741</sup> Matthews-Grieco 1993, 71. See also, Duchêne 2004, 228. Lidman 2015, 141–142.

<sup>742</sup> Des Réaux 1906, 233.

<sup>743</sup> Kritzman 2011, 192.

regard to sexuality and they ultimately accepted the habits of both spouses.

In the early modern era, morality, marriage, economic questions and the production of heirs went hand in hand, but this did not mean that all elite women accepted the role of birth givers. Madame de Sévigné, for example, agreed with some of the *précieuses* that a woman was more than merely a productive bowl that a husband may leave whenever he wants to.<sup>744</sup> Thus, elite women relied on abstinence which liberated them from the male dominance accepted by society and from the tradition of childbirth. Abstinence from sex, according to Karras, also formed part of a person's identity<sup>745</sup> and this most probably was the case with Madame de Sévigné. To her, abstinence was not a problem as the sources have proved. Her thoughts might have also been influenced by the belief that the risk of pregnancy increased if a woman enjoyed sex.<sup>746</sup> Marquise de Sévigné felt great repugnance at being pregnant. For her it was more like an 'illness' rather than a blessing and she asks her daughter's husband to leave his wife in peace for a moment. Madame de Sévigné wrote to her daughter on 9 March 1672:

You are an attractive woman without being the least bit pregnant, but you have thoughts about it that make me shiver. Your beauty takes you to extremes, because it is useless to you. You think that it is worthwhile to be pregnant; it is an amusement. This is a good reason. Think, *ma bonne*, for this will destroy you completely, your health and your life. Thus, continue your excellent habit of sleeping separately.<sup>747</sup>

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744 Ojala & Ojala 1990, 37.

745 Karras 2005, 45.

746 Duchêne 2000, 125. See also, Karras 2005, 113, Flandrin 1981, 123.

747 '*Vous êtes une jolie femme de n'être point grosse, mais vous avez sur cela des pensées qui me font trembler. Votre beauté vous jette dans extrémités, parce qu'elle vous est inutile. Vous trouvez qu'il vaut autant être grosse ; c'est un amusement. Voilà une belle raison. Songez, ma bonne, que c'est vous détruire entièrement et votre santé et votre vie. Continuez donc cette bonne coutume de coucher séparément*'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 9 March 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 452.

Flandrin notes that Madame de Sévigné wrote about contraception to her daughter, who did not want more children.<sup>748</sup> However, I would like to suggest that Madame de Sévigné more likely transferred to her daughter her own conceptions of abstinence in marriage and of the unpleasantness of marriage. She was unable to see that closeness between a married couple could also please a woman, and sexuality might exist for other reasons than producing children. At the same time, she was breaking the silence on female sexuality, a silence commonly upheld in the early modern era. On the other hand, Madame de Sévigné accepted her womanhood and was even content with it. She was not too prudent to write of the complexity of female conditions,<sup>749</sup> and was also able to write to her daughter openly about her menopause, or her period between 1676–1677.<sup>750</sup>

Women's fear of pregnancy was nothing new: Erasmus had ironically announced that no woman would have sex with a man if she could understand the dangers of childbirth and the challenges in a child's upbringing.<sup>751</sup> It was normal for a woman to give birth to a first child within a year of getting married, and if the child was not breastfed, a fertile and sexually active woman would be pregnant again within one year.<sup>752</sup> It was a fact that during a long marriage a woman might normally give birth to eight to ten children, or more.<sup>753</sup> Above all, pregnancies were a real risk for a woman's health.

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748 Flandrin 1979, 219.

749 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 6 March 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 177; Mme de Sévigné to Guitaut 7 October 1679. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 698; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 7 February 1680. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 828.

750 Duchêne 2002, 549.

751 Erasmus of Rotterdam (1511) 1996, 19. Women's fear of and repulsion for childbirth did not depend on nationality and was not limited to the persona of Mme de Sévigné. For example, Queen Christine of Sweden was afraid of childbirth, and the Catholic virgin ideal appealed to her. Klinge, Kolbe, Nevala & Setälä 1990, 47. The Englishwoman Mary Grey was also terrified of childbirth. In 1650, on the verge of having her fourth child, she wrote a meditation book, which was a dialogue between the body and the soul on this matter. Crawford, Gowing 2000, 270.

752 Norton 1996, 222. See also, Flandrin 1979, 53.

753 Pouliquen 2006, 116. See also, Flandrin 1979, 53.

Dangers associated with pregnancy and childbirth were real, and the death of a mother or her child, or both, was nothing unusual<sup>754</sup> and every *accouchement* which went well and smoothly was a cause of joy.<sup>755</sup> Madame de Sévigné's reaction was understandable because, for example, Madame de La Fayette's daughter-in-law had had a miscarriage, just a few days after she had helped in delivery and La Fayette announced: '*Il y assez de femmes qui cela arrive*'.<sup>756</sup> Thus, it was not, I suggest, too difficult for respectable women, who did not have a vocabulary for sex, to talk about things that concerned childbirth and its dangers: On the contrary, they supported each other and shared the joys and sorrows of womanhood. Furthermore, prudent *honnêteté* concerning other sexual matters did not prevent respectable women from talking about the results of having sex.

Madame de Sévigné herself did not have tragic experiences when giving birth. She was married for seven years in total and had only two children. This was rare in her era. Madame de Sévigné had married young, so if her husband had lived longer, she might have had more children. On the other hand, two children born during marriage does not necessarily mean that Madame de Sévigné did not have any miscarriages or a child who died very young. This, however, is only speculation, as we lack documentary evidence.<sup>757</sup> Françoise de Sévigné was born in the second year of marriage; Charles was born two years later. According to Pouliquen, Madame de Sévigné's first childbirth went well, even though there was no one present and that is why Monsieur d'Ormesson's mother and wife went

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754 '*Il arrive tant d'accidents aux femmes au couche*'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 2 December 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 385. See also, Flandrin 1979, 53.

755 '*Il m'est impossible, très impossible de vous dire, ma chère fille, la joie que j'ai reçue en ouvrant ce bienheureux paquet qui m'a appris votre heureux accouchement*'. Mme de Sévigné to Mme de Grignan 29 November 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 384.

756 Mme de La Fayette to Mme de Sévigné 19 September 1691. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 980. Mme de Grignan also had a miscarriage in November 1669. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 9 February 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 154. See also, Duchêne's comment. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 989.

757 Duchêne 2002, 608.

to see *la marquise*.<sup>758</sup> This was somewhat strange, because usually a woman in labour received assistance: if no relatives were present, there would be house servants. Moreover, the friends of the woman in labour might be asked to come and assist: Monsieur de Giutaut, for example, had asked Madame de Sévigné to participate when his wife was giving birth to a child;<sup>759</sup> however, Madame de Sévigné was also worried that her daughter might go through childbirth without help.<sup>760</sup> Regardless of the fact that Madame de Sévigné's first childbirth had gone well, it might have left her with some psychological scars, especially as she was alone for the first time in a situation which was burdensome both physically and emotionally.

Getting through childbirth alive was one matter, but some contraceptive methods were also available to prevent such circumstances. They were, above all, beneficial for women and avoiding pregnancy could be recommended in cases when the mother's life had been in real jeopardy, or the birth pains had been more intolerable than usual.<sup>761</sup> Women alone did not have the possibility to control whether or not they became pregnant. Dulong remarks that it is reasonable to assume that both men and women were willing and able to take precautions to prevent pregnancy.<sup>762</sup> It is possible to assume that birth control in the case of Sévigné was partly motivated by sexual renunciation. Was Henri de Sévigné's behaviour a form of respect concerning his own wife's health and her wish to be a respectable woman, was it liberal manners, or was it lack of affection? The most notable remark here, however, is *les Sévigné's* wish to limit the number of their children.

In the 17th century, people were aware of the possibility of *coitus interruptus*.<sup>763</sup> The church did not accept any other

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758 Pouliquen 2006, 117.

759 Mme de Sévigné to M. de Giutaut 1 September 1675. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 107.

760 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 9 August 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 316.

761 Flandrin 1979, 217–218.

762 Dulong 1996, 87.

763 Noonan 1965, 348. Duchêne 2004, 231. Flandrin 1979, 221–223.



form of sex than that which happened within marriage and with the aim of pregnancy. At the same time, the conduct books, which the confessors had written to serve procreation, worked in the opposite direction: couples used them to avoid producing offspring. Apart from interrupted intercourse, there were not many options.<sup>764</sup> Thus, despite the dangers of abortion,<sup>765</sup> women were willing to attempt even dangerous measures, because an illegitimate child would have cost most likely their honour and respectability. For courtesan de Lenclos, pregnancies and childbirth outside the marriage were not only matters of abandoning part of her *honnêteté*, they also affected her activity. It is likely that she also knew how to control sexual intercourse through *coitus interruptus*, but the effects of possible pregnancies on her remain unknown. Sex with a pregnant woman was not recommended, but on the other hand, Ninon de Lenclos broke the myths and beliefs of her time, so to her sexuality was not necessarily excluded during pregnancy. Her sexuality and her body were, even during pregnancy, a medium that provided her livelihood and maintained her standard of living.

How did the elite react to illegitimate children? Were such children another way to destroy a woman's *honnêteté*? Did elite men ever support the mother of their illegitimate child? Tribunals underscored that an unmarried child should be taken care of and the biological father would not have been able to refuse to accept the child.<sup>766</sup> However, recognizing a child was not, as Steinberg states, something that was always done voluntarily.<sup>767</sup> That is why it is remarkable that the 71-year-

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764 'Condoms' were already used in the latter part of the 17th century and were even more commonly used during the following century Fraser 2006, 85. Noonan 1965, 347. Prostitutes and courtesans were also able to use a so-called 'tampon' during intercourse, and for 'internal cleansing' afterwards. Dulong 1996, 86–87.

765 According to des Réaux, courtesan de Lorme took antimony in order to abort her child and he suspects that this is what killed her. Des Réaux 1906, 181. In addition to antimony, women could attempt by consuming various herbs and potions. Since conception was not properly understood, the means were limited. Daphoiwala 2012, 30. Noonan 1965, 349.

766 Steinberg 2009, 129.

767 Steinberg 2009, 136.

old de Villarceaux on 29 March 1690, acknowledged the son he had with his mistress,<sup>768</sup> and took care of him financially. However, the boy was not without parental attention before. In a document that is dated 17 August 1657, Charles de Valliquierville, a friend of Villarceaux, made a donation to Louis de Mornay, the son of Anne de Lenclos and Marquis de Villarceaux.<sup>769</sup> Furthermore, Ninon de Lenclos took care of her son and sent him small amounts of money.<sup>770</sup> On 27 January 1705, Ninon de Lenclos donated 4,000 *livres* from her 7,000 *livres* annuity. In addition, the papers in the remains of Ninon de Lenclos also had a document according to which, on 3 April 1701, Mademoiselle de Lenclos donated to La Boissière Mornay (who signed the document) 6,380 *livres* and three and half *sols*. The arbitrator was Monsieur Arouet, the father of Voltaire, and the money came from Villarceaux's widow.<sup>771</sup> At this point, the documents suggest that Villarceaux's widow had thus accepted her husband's love affair, which had lasted for years, and the fact that he had an illegitimate son with a courtesan, despite the fact that both had caused her much distress.<sup>772</sup> She carried out her husband's arrangements and by so doing she also had to accept the extramarital child of Marquis de Villarceaux and courtesan de Lenclos, at least on the level of actions. Ninon de Lenclos could not blame herself for not taking care of her son: she had not only managed to send him money herself but had also made the father of her child recognise him and take care of him even after his death. This was quite an accomplishment from a courtesan even

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768 Duchêne 2000, 171. See also, Louise de Marillac's case as an illegitimate child. Peake 2015, 53–56. Note also that the king's extramarital children were of regal, divine origin. However, the mother, who merely had the status of mistress, was easy to disgrace and set aside. Bertière 1998, 554.

769 CXII, 332. Documents du minutier central (1650–1700) 1960, 216. Louis de Mornay, chevalier de La Boissière, died on 14 July 1730. His marriage was without issue. Duchêne 2000, 170.

770 See, for example, Ninon de Lenclos' letters to Bonrepos in 1678, 1684, 1685. Lenclos, Colombay 1886, 145–147. Nouvelles acquisitions françaises 9210. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Paris.

771 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 217.

772 Des Réaux 1906, 244.

though it is also evidence of her capability to establish her position among the elite which was once near to her.

### The independent elite women

As has been pointed out, the same questions of children, pregnancies and contraception concerned both chaste married women and courtesans. However, what about the unmarried women? How many women remained unmarried? Most importantly, was that really an option for a respectable woman? In fact, only 5–10 per cent of women of the French nobility remained unmarried. In this respect, France is different from 17th-century England, where 13–15 per cent of noble women were unmarried. The difference can be explained by the fact that France is a Catholic country. If the calculations included noble women who had become nuns, the percentage would be higher than that of England.<sup>773</sup> Living unmarried was not a desired state for an early modern woman. Widowhood, however, gave a woman the option to live as she wished: it freed Madame de Sévigné from the fear of pregnancy and she chose to remain unmarried, which was a commonly accepted decision for a widow. Madame de Sévigné's choice was not unusual, but unusually those widows who did not remarry were older than Madame de Sévigné who was just 25 years old when she became a widow.<sup>774</sup> The news of her husband's death reached Madame de Sévigné while she was in Bretagne.

Six months later, after knight d'Albert killed Cheneville in a duel, his wife seemed disconsolate because of his death; everyone knew about the anger; they thought that her

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773 Kowaleski 1998, 61. Hufton estimates that from 1520 to 1800 around 5–25 per cent of women in their fifties died unmarried. Hufton 1993, 26–27.

774 Age was also central factor: around 80 per cent of widows who were under 30 married again and widows who were 45 or older did not marry again. Beauvalet-Boutouyrie 2001, 166–168. The marriage of Mme de Sévigné ended in the death of marquis de Sévigné, who fought for the honour of his mistress Mme de Gondran, *la Belle Lolo*, on 4 February 1651, against knight d'Albret. Henri de Sévigné was wounded, and died two days later. Duchêne 1995, 25–26. See also, Des Réaux 1906, 235. Magne 1922, 152.

(Madame de Sévigné's) agony was just pretence.<sup>775</sup>

According to Bussy-Rabutin, Madame de Sévigné's reaction to her husband's death was nothing more than pretence. She might well have been angry with her husband before and it is quite likely that she did not necessarily feel that her life ended along with the death of her husband if we consider how she describes her life as a widow in her letters. However, a young widow left alone with two little infants wept and it was likely that her husband's death had moved Madame de Sévigné. According to Tallemant des Réaux, two years after the duel, Madame de Sévigné fainted when she encountered d'Albert.<sup>776</sup> Was this only a charade? Did she just want to make sure that other members of the elite saw her as a good wife and widow? Did she want to fashion herself as a respectable, mourning widow? Was she really emotionally hurt? She could have been sad, but young Madame de Sévigné also had a social need to express her sorrow in public. However, she was now fully able to decide matters concerning her own body: she never married again, and she dedicated her life to her children, particularly to her daughter, and fashioned herself as a chaste widow and inseparable member of the elite.

After her husband's death, Madame de Sévigné's economic situation was partly secured, since the marriage contract between her and the Marquis stated that if the future wife possibly was widowed, she would be entitled to an annuity of 6,000 *livres* and could live in the castle on the Buron's estate and use the land of the estate. After a possible second marriage, the widow was entitled to return to the castle, should she and the Marquis have offspring. The widow also had the right to servants and could use the wood from the Buron estate; she was not entitled to touch ornamental trees.<sup>777</sup> This document

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775 'Six mois après Cheneville fut tué en duel par le Chevallier d'Albert, sa femme parut inconsolable de sa mort, les sujets de la hayr estant connus de tout le monde, on crut que sa douleur n'estoit que grimace [...]'. Bussy-Rabutin 1651, 39.

776 Des Réaux 1906, 236.

777 MC/RSS/498. *Contrat de Mariage entre Henri, marquis de Sévigné and Marie Rabutin-Chantal*. 1.8.1644. Archives nationales. Paris.

does not indicate that she had enough incomes to maintain the perfect lifestyle of the Parisian elite, either in terms of money or status. At the same time, it is evident that the estate in the countryside had an important meaning: it secured everyday goods. Furthermore, it was the ownership of land on which the power of the nobility was based, because the nobility could use it to keep ‘the acquired benefits in their hands’.<sup>778</sup> Ownership of land also secured a basic income for the nobility. In the 17th century, a comfortable urban life also required goods and income from rural castles and the countryside. Madame de Sévigné enjoyed these benefits, whereas Ninon de Lenclos did not have any lands or income from the countryside; thus, she had to acquire everything that a member of the urban elite needed with money or trade.

In the spring of 1651, Madame de Sévigné returned to Paris. After the death of Henri de Sévigné, a meeting of senior members of the family took place in Rennes on 11 March 1651 to decide upon the custody of the children of the Marquise. Madame de Sévigné announced by a proxy that she was prepared to take custody, together with an additional custodian, Count de Montmoron. The Count was the children’s cousin, and the son of Henri de Sévigné’s previous guardian. After two months, Madame de Sévigné received the responsibility for the children’s education and for the property inherited from their father.<sup>779</sup> There is no doubt that Madame de Sévigné loved both of her children, but she had a tremendous longing to be with her daughter. Researchers speak of the strong motherly love of Madame de Sévigné, but this feeling might have partly been a fear of being lonely. Madame de Sévigné had friends, she belonged to the Parisian *société* and she also had duties related to her position. As an elite woman, she had servants and workers in her house. She was not absolutely lonely in the sense that there would

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<sup>778</sup> Whittle & Griffiths 2012, 203. See also, Elias 2006, 49.

<sup>779</sup> Duchêne 2002, 142. The widowed Madame de Sévigné was dedicated to her children, but widows might also have taken care of their grandchildren, their nieces or nephews, or moved in with their children to avoid loneliness. Pardailhé-Galabrun 1991, 34.

not have been many people around her, but at the same time, she was separated from her closest family members.

Being a widow and mother of two children was also an economic question: in spite of incomes from the Buron estate, she was a widow, whose husband had left her in economic distress.<sup>780</sup> In her letter *la marquise* asked Bussy-Rabutin how on earth he thinks that she could find ‘*douze ou quinze-mille francs?*’<sup>781</sup> She had a network of supporting people<sup>782</sup> and had been wealthy when she was young, but now she was not rich, considering her social status.<sup>783</sup> By comparing the estate inventory deed of Madame de Sévigné’s mother Marie de Coulanges<sup>784</sup> to that of Madame de Sévigné, one can observe that the mother’s document is more than twice as long. In addition, poorly managed financial matters, her daughter’s dowry, along with her son’s debts, which had to be settled, caused financial distress.<sup>785</sup> Whereas children might provide economic security to poor families,<sup>786</sup> to Madame de Sévigné they were a great expense, which seem to have been overwhelming at times. In light of her economic situation, Madame de Sévigné’s motives for remaining widow were not

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780 Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 2 September 1687. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 312. Widowhood could often be accompanied by poverty and this might be one reason why only 14 per cent of widows in this period remained unmarried. Duchêne 2004, 256. From 1650 to 1679 with women who married at the age of 15 to 45-years, 33 per cent of their first marriages lasted less than 10 years, 24.1 per cent of marriages from 10 to 19 years, 18.1 per cent of marriages from 20 to 29 years and 24.8 per cent of marriages more than 30 years. Comparable numbers from 1680 to 1699 were 24.5 per cent, 26.8 per cent, 21.5 per cent and 27.2 per cent. Beauvalet-Boutouyrie 2001, 149.

781 Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 28 August 1668. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 100. *La marquise*’s financial situation continued to be difficult: see, for example, Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 2 September 1687. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 312; Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 13 October 1687. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 332.

782 Her uncle Abbé de Coulanges particularly looked after the marquise’s affairs after the death of Henri de Sévigné. Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 2 September 1687. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 312. See also, Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 13 October 1687. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 332.

783 Duchêne 2002, 522.

784 MC/RSS/497. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Coulanges 9 Novembre 1633*. Archives nationales. Paris.

785 Duchêne 2002, 507.

786 Flandrin 1979, 59.

financial. Even though Madame de Sévigné made huge efforts to pay off her husband's debts, her daughter's marriage drew her into a new spiral of loans<sup>787</sup> and eventually into debt.<sup>788</sup> The daughter's dowry alone, along with the lieutenant's position, bought for Charles de Sévigné in 1678, cost her 350,000 *livres*.<sup>789</sup> On 22 February 1690, Madame de Sévigné wrote to her daughter about her anguish over debt, not knowing how to clear herself from it.<sup>790</sup> She clearly felt concerned about her economic situation, which was not rare for members of the elite. A new marriage would no doubt have improved her economic situation, but she did not see this as an option. Madame de Sévigné's financial situation remained difficult until 1695 when she received an inheritance from Madame de Meckelbourg and with the help of these riches (*richesse*) – as she called it – she no longer had to count her money. To use her own words, she now had the chance to die without debt.<sup>791</sup>

Given Madame de Sévigné's financial situation, her choice to remain widow, although not an unusual choice, was certainly courageous. On the plus side, it was an opportunity to be independent and enabled her to use her newfound personal power. Widowhood, after all, entailed certain privileges that a married woman lacked.<sup>792</sup> In Madame de Sévigné's case, she began to take responsibility for both the estates and her children's lives. 17th-century French elite women as a whole, not just elite widows, did in fact have certain opportunities to decide their own affairs. In this, upbringing and sophistication

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787 For example, Mme de Sévigné had to borrow money from Antoine (Isaac) Michon 20,000 *livres* January 26, 1669 and Guillaume de Haroyes 120,000 *livres* 15 February 1669. LI, 380. Documents du Minutier Central (1650–1700) 1960, 340–341.

788 Duchêne 2002, 305.

789 Duchêne 2002, 305, 307. Mme de Sévigné had to borrow money to supply her daughter's dowry. The 120,000 *livres* lent by Guillaume de Harouys (in February 1669). The dowry was paid in three parts: the first payment was 25 January 1670 and the other two came later. LI, 330. Documents du minutier central (1650–1700) 1960, 341.

790 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 22 January 1690. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 816.

791 Mme de Sévigné to Mme de Coulages 3 February 1695. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 1083.

792 Beauvalet-Boutouyrie 2001, 181–240, 271–310. Norton 1996, 10.

played a part. As Goldsmith points out, certain books were like guides for Madame de Sévigné and she read them more than once.<sup>793</sup> *La marquise* seemed to be particularly fond of *Essais de morale* by the theologian Pierre Nicole (1625–1695).<sup>794</sup> She wanted to have this work by her side at all times, just like vinegar should be kept within reach for people who fainted easily.<sup>795</sup> Such works supported her in her middle age, but moral conduct books and works on devoutness were not unknown to her when she was younger. She had, for example, read Sales' *Introduction à la vie devote* at an early age, a work that glorified widowhood; having a status of widow, she knew was a way of showing that one was chaste and virtuous. By refusing to marry again, a widow would not only respect the memory of her dead husband but she would, according to Sales, demonstrate strength of mind. In addition, a respectable life as a widow was a means to regain female virtue lost in marriage.<sup>796</sup>

It seems highly probable that the teachings of Jeanne de Chantal and François de Sales, along with other books on Christian morality, influenced Madame de Sévigné's way of thinking: the negative outlook on sexuality was the strongest and most stressed aspect of these teachings. In *Introduction à la vie devote*, a widow is advised to remain in this state and to care for her children should they need help.<sup>797</sup> In this respect,

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793 Goldsmith 1988, 127.

794 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 21 June 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 276; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 15 July 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 296; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 20 September 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 349; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 1 November 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 374; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 16 November 1689. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 757.

795 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 16 September 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 349.

796 Sales 1641, 351–359. Widows also had time to do Christian work among the poor and the sick. Stanton 2014, 19. See also, Peake 2015. Mme de Sévigné's grandmother, Jeanne de Chantal took this opportunity after becoming a widow and the nun Louise de Marillac did the same. However, this was not a sensible alternative for all widows. To Mme de Sévigné, the role of a nun was out of the question after her husband had died. To her, a secular but Christian life of moderation was the only true option even as widow.

797 Sales 1641, 356.



Madame de Sévigné behaved like an exemplary widow and represented Sales' perfect ideal of *honnêteté*. However, as this study has already pointed, and shall also develop further with respect to beauty, Madame de Sévigné did not follow *morale chrétienne* in detail; it seems, I claim, that she gathered suitable instructions for female chastity, but otherwise she followed secular principles concerning her performance of *honnêteté*. An illuminating example of the ideal is provided by Sales' instructions for dealing with the pleasures of earthly existence. For him the respectable widow did not seek admiration or flattery. She did not find herself perfumed and all dressed up at balls, because by doing this she was a widow only in her body, but dead in her soul.<sup>798</sup>

Thus, it seems evident that as a widow Madame de Sévigné did not represent Sales' perfect ideal of a Christian widow. She enjoyed her earthly pleasures, selecting the advice on a virtuous woman's behaviour which she found most suitable for herself, such as keeping one's body chaste and taking care of one's children. However, as she wanted to perform as a fashionable elite woman, she enjoyed parties, dressed fashionably and admired luxury. She did not feel that earthly pleasures were in conflict with her *honnêteté*, although she felt this way about sexuality.

Sexual self-determination, widowhood or remaining unmarried were not options for the majority of French women, although for the wealthy women of the elite it was also an opportunity. Both Ninon de Lenclos and Madame de Sévigné had the economic opportunity to stay in the position of an unmarried woman or a widow. In Madame de Sévigné's case, it is also possible to understand her choice by analysing her personal beliefs, as discussed earlier. She seems to have even enjoyed her new status. In other words, maintaining the status of the respectable widow was a sum of several things, not just a decision based on a single matter. Yet marriage, which also took away some of the control that a woman has

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798 Sales 1641, 354.

over her own body, gave security and authority.<sup>799</sup> Marriage provided financial security, and it changed a woman's status, but it was not a necessity only for women. For widowed men who had small children or low income, a new marriage was usually a necessity.<sup>800</sup> Marriage has been emphasised as a guarantee for women's chaste reputation and as a foundation of social security. However, procreation, controlling assets and stabilising bonds between families, were also essential for men. For 17th-century Parisian elite women, marriage was not the only option available for securing status. Their right to self-determination over their own bodies was more extensive than that of women from other social classes. Furthermore, there was an interest in love and passion, which played its part in determining and fashioning the womanhood of the elite and the relations between the sexes.

### 3. The sentimental and *honnête* elite: love and passion

#### *Le plaisir d'être aimée*

Women often think that they love, even when they don't. The excitement of an adventure, the rush of emotion that *la galanterie* causes. The natural flair for the pleasure to be loved, and the difficulty of refusal, make them believe that they are possessed by passion, even if they are only engaging in coquetry.<sup>801</sup>

In the 16th century, the glorification of adulterous love had changed into accolades for marriage and chastity.<sup>802</sup> In addition, according to Nelle and Wolfgang, Du Bosc associated love and

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799 Gowing 2003, 81.

800 Pardailhé-Galabrun 1991, 35.

801 '*Les femmes croient souvent aimer encore qu'elles n'aiment pas. L'occupation d'une irrigue, l'émotion d'esprit que donne la galanterie. La pense naturelle au plaisir d'être aimée, & la peine de refuser leur persuadent qu'elles sont de la passion lors qu'elles n'ont que de la coquetterie*'. Maxim 277. La Rochefoucauld 1685, 56–57.

802 Cassagnes-Brouquet, Klapisch-Zuber & Steinberg 2010, 30.

friendship with the Renaissance idea of *civilité*.<sup>803</sup> According to Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, in the seventeenth century the passion of the heart was considered to give people their own special identity. To a person in the early modern era, the human body was hot, one's essence was determined through the quality and quantity of body heat. The origin of this heat was in the heart, where a flame, passion, gave people their special identity. In addition to love, passion could drive one to crime, heroic actions and sexual pleasures. Education, faith, purgatory or condemnation from one's community did not have the force to control feelings. The people of this age lived in the middle of a paradox: without controlling one's feelings one could lose social position, but without feelings and passion there was no experience.<sup>804</sup> Thus, polite and controlled *honnêtes gens* and demand to experience and transmit their sentiments created need to throw the normative blanket away; thus, love and passion were another *moyen* of self-fashioning among the elite.

In this section, I will explore why and how elite women functioned in this system that emphasised love and passion and what significance these concepts had among *les honnêtes gens* and how they fashioned it. First, it is self-evident that both Ninon de Lenclos and Madame de Sévigné loved passionately. The former loved Monsieur de Villarceaux, the latter her daughter. However, they did not love more or less than other women of the elite of their period. Love and passion were not matters of civil status; they were felt among virgins, wives, widows and courtesans. Nor were these emotions gender-related as they included both men and women of the elite. Young people, of course, were particularly affected. Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universel* from 1690 defined love as follows: 'Love: the passion of the soul, it makes us love someone or something'.<sup>805</sup> 'Love: [...] a violent passion, whose character

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803 Nelle, Wolfgang 2014, 19.

804 Ranum 1986, 234.

805 'Amour. Passion de l'ame qui nous fait aimer quelque personne, ou quelque chose'. Furetière Tome I 1690.

inspires young people to coalesce in it, regardless of sex'.<sup>806</sup> Love was part of the soul's movements; it made someone love somebody or something, in other words a person could love another person or something that was not human like goods. Love in marriage was a perfect form of friendship, *parfait amitié*. It was a divine love that united two souls who walked the earthly path.<sup>807</sup>

According to Korhonen, early modern people's emotional life was no more faint or underrated than the emotional life of people of our time.<sup>808</sup> However, Amy M. Schmitter argues rightly that it is difficult to find writings on the emotions from the early modern era; furthermore, 'seventeenth century philosophers favoured talk of 'passion' and 'affect', while their eighteenth century counterparts made increasing use of 'sentiment'.<sup>809</sup> However, Claude Dulong states that the 'contemporaries of Corneille or Mme de La Fayette did not love any better or worse than the rest, but they bestowed a primary importance upon love: they made it their ideal and an object of their research'.<sup>810</sup> I am inclined to agree with Dulong: the 17th-century elite regarded love, its understanding, and its expression, as an important and central means for their self-understanding and thus it could also be used for self-fashioning. Therefore, the 17th century was a period, or better still, an era, that paid attention to how love was approached by *honnêtes gens*. Love played an increasingly important role in relations among the elite and it could be seen in court, their gatherings and the literature of the era. It was an inseparable part of both the spoken and the written culture. As Korhonen states, early modern love and feelings had a social context and they were dependent on the prevailing culture.<sup>811</sup> In addition, love became a topic *par excellence*, as

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806 'Amour, se dit principalement de cette violence passion que la nature inspire aux jeunes gens de divers sexes pour se joindre'. Furetière Tome I 1690.

807 Foisil 1986, 254.

808 Korhonen 2000, 68.

809 Schmitter 2014.

810 Dulong 1969, 9.

811 Korhonen 2002, 57–59, 69. Note also: 'Vivre sans aimer n'est pas vivre, & l'on vit seulement quand on aime [...]'. Maxim 131. Le Boulanger 1669, second



Fig. 18: Couple amoureux by de Humbelot.

*L'Amour et l'esprit Gaulois. A travers l'histoire de XVe au XXe siècle Tome II, 87.*

Habib points out, even though it gradually became artificial and outworn.<sup>812</sup> It was the members of the elite rather than lower ranks who had the time to feel, show and talk about love in this way.

Following a model set by the Italians, the French had rediscovered Plato and Petrarch, as well as the female cult and ideal love,<sup>813</sup> but at the same time love was not a matter of equality, which was not compatible with the early modern understanding of societal stability.<sup>814</sup> In other words, the admiration and love of women had two sides: on the one hand, they were admired, loved and praised, but at the same time, they were belittled by sexual enchainment and rigid

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partie 105.

812 Habib 2006, 139. Love had also been a central and important topic in elite discourse during the previous centuries. Dante, for example, had introduced a new idea of the beloved woman at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Berry 1989, 18–21.

813 Dulong 1969, 13.

814 Korhonen 2000, 68.

ideas on the differences between women and men. *Couple Amoureux* (above) portrays members of the urban elite and an ideal gendered love. The man is sitting beside the woman actively, playing the lute and gazing at the woman; the woman is concentrated on reading and she is not looking at the man. The same kind of ideal is described in Madame de La Fayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*: a woman lies passively on her bed and blushes beautifully. Duke de Nemours, who is timid because of genuine love, sits beside her.<sup>815</sup> In addition to the explicit and clear gender roles, real feelings can be seen in both works represented in an elegant way: love inspires virtuous action. When love was a combination of beauty and goodness, the woman's role was to be tender, submissive and lovable, while a man should love her reciprocally.<sup>816</sup> In addition, a woman, according to Madame de Motteville, was to behave and look like she was worth the love of a man, and to make a man want to pursue her. A man should die of love before a woman, not die of shame.<sup>817</sup> Furthermore, perfect love was associated with the *personne toute parfaite*.<sup>818</sup> That is to say, that only human ideals were able to love and be loved. In this context, it is evident that both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos were worthy of the love of a man: they were feminine, attractive and lovable even though they refused to submit to male power. In addition, they fashioned themselves as human ideals and both were able to love and cherish people who were the most important to them.

Love was an influential matter for elite women. Through it they received a certain influence and it protected them from being the object of male desires. However, a wife who really loved her husband did not show anything other than admiration and she hid other possible feelings. Madame de Sévigné praised her daughter for being able to hold her peace in matters that concerned her husband, Monsieur de Grignan.

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815 La Fayette (1678) 1998, 87.

816 Korhonen 2000, 66–67.

817 Motteville Tome I 1750, 379.

818 Le Boulanger 1669, première partie 101.

It was the sign 'of love and compliance'.<sup>819</sup> As Madame de Sévigné's comment and her own conduct during her marriage with her unfaithful husband shows, through marriage, love and feelings found a socially acceptable form and both genders played their own role, which was accepted by the patriarchal world. Despite the fashionable *galanterie*, the emphasis on the significance of love and the mistress culture, unfaithful love was judged as it was in the Middle Ages.<sup>820</sup>

One of the first works to discuss courtly love and the aristocratic *savoir-vivre* theme was *Tractatus de amore* (*Traité de l'amour courtois*) from the late 12th century, written by André Le Chapelain. He wanted to stress that love came from true affection and it could not be suppressed with money. One should avoid visiting courtesans, searching for love *chez elles*, because debauched women would never give anything, not even love, without receiving something in return. Furthermore, the lewdness of courtesans was also much viler than the luxury and charm that were publicly sold. Even if a courtesan fell in love with a man, this would be destructive for him and no one should become closely acquainted with the courtesan's technique of love.<sup>821</sup> As the virtuous love was emphasised, women should, according to Liancourt, associate themselves only with women of utmost virtue.<sup>822</sup> A courtesan's love was considered disastrous; thus, it is not surprising that Madame de Sévigné and Madame de La Fayette did not consider the company of courtesan de Lenclos favourable, as mentioned earlier. Moral scorn, disdain and aversion were directed at love offered by debauched women. Ninon de Lenclos, for her part, practised her profession in a situation where the love that she had to offer was desired, competed over and adored, but according to the official viewpoint, she should be ostracized by respectable people.

What was the virtuous Madame de Sévigné's love like? It

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819 '[...] de l'amitié et de la complaisance'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 4 May 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 499.

820 Cassagnes-Brouquet, Klapisch-Zuber & Steinberg 2010, 24.

821 Le Chapelain (1100-l.) 1974, 143-149.

822 Liancourt 1698, 33.

was, I claim, a feeling that she channelled into her daughter. For her, loving a daughter was ‘the most reasonable and the prettiest thing in the world’.<sup>823</sup> Madame de Sévigné’s love for her daughter was unconditional, and she felt exceptional tenderness towards her. To Madame de Sévigné, Madame de Grignan was the most important of all her relationships.<sup>824</sup> She also wished to know and be sure that her daughter felt the same way about her.<sup>825</sup> When Madame de Grignan left Paris in September 1679, Madame de Sévigné experienced tremendous suffering.<sup>826</sup> For an elite woman during this period life was not a matter of being excluded from culture, or to feel oneself oppressed. To them, life was an opportunity to give one’s share to society, both as a social being and as a human.<sup>827</sup> At the same time her goal was to fashion herself through emotions that did not offend the idea of *honnêteté*.

Madame de Sévigné, however, was suspected of having forbidden feelings. Her extreme love for her daughter had features that some quarters suspected as bordering on the physical: it was said that she felt as if she was filled with her daughter and she could hardly think of anything else anymore, or that she wanted to kiss the beautiful neck of Françoise. According to Duchêne, this does not imply that Madame de Sévigné was conscious of any incestuous feelings for her daughter.<sup>828</sup> Duchêne’s claim is not directly supported by sources, but it can refer to Madame de Sévigné’s Christian view of life and endless emphasising of female chastity. That Madame de Sévigné acted as if she was romantically in love<sup>829</sup> might have been somewhat agonizing to her

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823 ‘[...] *la plus raisonnable et la plus jolie chose du monde*’. Mme de Sévigné encouraged Mme de Grignan to love her daughter Pauline. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 17 November 1688. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 400.

824 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 26 November 1684. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 160.

825 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 May 1675. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 717.

826 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 13 September 1679. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 673–674.

827 Koivunen 1995, 57–58. Kinnunen 2001, 58.

828 Duchêne 2002, 437.

829 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 5 October



daughter, who was married, had several children and a life of her own into which her mother intruded with an intense force. It is possible that Madame de Sévigné's relationship with her daughter compensated for a lack of other close and intimate relationships. She directed all her love at Madame de Grignan, which did not leave time to direct her love towards the opposite sex. Regardless of this, it seems that, like many other parents, Madame de Sévigné felt a love for her child which was natural and platonic and had no physical implications: she was a real *honneste femme* who did not want to ruin her reputation. She was, however, aware of that kind of behaviour. *La marquise* knew, for example, Racine's *Iphigénie* (1674),<sup>830</sup> which dramatizes Clytemnestra's obsessive fantasy about the violated body of her daughter. Clytemnestra is even ready to die at the hands of her daughter so that their special relationship could be recovered.<sup>831</sup>

Madame de Sévigné's love and affection for her child was not completely unknown,<sup>832</sup> although it was exceptionally strong. As has been pointed out, Ninon de Lenclos also took care of and loved her son and suffered some anxiety on his account.<sup>833</sup> As a courtesan, she could not dedicate herself solely to her son, but despite this, it is evident that she clearly showed a mother's -love. There are earlier writings about deep mother-son relationships, but after 1660, texts appeared in which an intimate and emotional relationship between mothers and daughters was discussed.<sup>834</sup> As Madame de Sévigné's and Ninon de Lenclos' examples show, parents became attached to their children and loved them. It was seen as natural that a parent would die before her child,<sup>835</sup>

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1673. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 593.

830 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 September 1675. Sévigné 1974, III.

831 Stanton 2014, 158.

832 According to Furetière's dictionnaire it was natural to love his wife and child. Aimer. Furetière Tome I 1690. See also, Vainio-Korhonen 2012, 54.

833 See Ninon de Lenclos to Bonrepos in 1685. Lenclos, Colombay 1886, 147. Nouvelles acquisitions françaises 9210. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Paris.

834 Stanton 2014, 158.

835 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 10 January 1680. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 789. The death of the child also touched parents and they

despite the fact that child mortality was commonplace.<sup>836</sup> Their maternal behaviour also emphasises that loving and caring for children, was a natural part of elite women's self-understanding and *bienséance*. At least some elite women, a child or children were not an undefined necessity or simply the products of marital duty. Doubtless, elite women themselves were pleased to be loved and profited from the opportunities provided; however, the concept of love also included children of elite women: Madame de Sévigné's son Charles de Sévigné, daughter Françoise de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos' son Louis de Mornay were all worthy of love and very much loved by their elite, Parisian mothers.

### Flaming passions

Passions are powerful feelings; they can take over the mind and alter the one who experiences them.<sup>837</sup> According to Jean-Claude Kaufmann, especially in the 16th and 17th centuries, there was a strong philosophical interest in passion and passions were categorised in order to understand them more fully.<sup>838</sup> Passion, however, could have a negative connotation, as Weisser states,<sup>839</sup> but how did members of the 17th century elite feel passion and was it thought to be a feeling that was specific to the elite?

Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universel* defined *passion* as a moral element causing unease in the soul and manifesting itself in expressed emotions. There were many different types of passions, such as pleasure, pain, love, hate, greed<sup>840</sup> and some of these were more dangerous than others.<sup>841</sup> In addition,

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suffered greatly: 'Mme de Coëtquen venait de recevoir la nouvelle de la mort de sa petite fille; elle s'était évanouie. [...] mais son mari est inconsolable'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 19 August 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 235.

836 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 19 August 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 235. See also, Flandrin 1979, 53, 179. Haycock 2008, 9.

837 Schoenfeldt 2004, 50.

838 Kaufmann 2011, 41–42. See also, Schmitter 2014. Schoenfeldt 2004, 50–53.

839 Weisser 2013, 249.

840 *Passion*. Furetière Tome II 1690.

841 Nicole Tome 3 1715, 53.

passions left a trace in the human body and a doctor would be able to recognise the signs.<sup>842</sup> It was better not have too much temperament and have a soul that either did not feel any passion or was above it.<sup>843</sup> Although individuals should be able to control their emotions<sup>844</sup> and avoid excessive passions, the ideal and reality did not always meet. Weisser, for example, notices that in early modern England ‘social stimuli provoked emotional responses’.<sup>845</sup> As Madame de Sévigné’s letter below shows and Morvan de Bellegard states at the moment of death, even cultivated people behaved without self-control,<sup>846</sup> even though it was considered a merit for respectable people to express grief in an understated manner.<sup>847</sup> *La marquise* describes the elite’s emotional reactions which were roused by the death of the princess of Conti:

The Princess of Conti died [...] without uttering a single comprehensible word. [...] They thought that she was regaining consciousness, but she said nothing more, and died screaming loudly in the middle of a convulsion, which made her sink her fingers in the arm of a woman who was holding her. It is impossible to describe the sorrow of the people who were in the room. [...] Mme de Gêvres fainted, Mme de Brissac screamed and threw herself on the floor. [...] In short, the sorrow is shared. The king looked moved [...].<sup>848</sup>

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842 Desjardins 2000, 2–3. See also, Sarjala 2001 64–65.

843 Courtin 1728, 109. See also, Ylivuori 2015, 160–161.

844 It is important to remember, however, that emotion is a modern term that one should be wary of imposing on the past because it includes social sanctions and performances. Weisser 2013, 250. Furthermore, the Renaissance words *passion* and *affection* describe most closely ‘approximated what we call emotions’. Paster, Rowe & Floyd-Wilson 2004, 2.

845 In her study Weisser emphasises social stimuli, which results in illness. Weisser 2013, 248.

846 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 1 July 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 544–545.

847 Morvan de Bellegard 1698, 176.

848 ‘Pour Mme la princesse de Conti, elle mourut [...] sans aucune connaissance, ni sans avoir jamais dit une seule parole de bon sens. [...] On croyait que son esprit allât revenir, mais elle n’en disait pas davantage. Elle exira en faisant un grand cri, et au milieu d’une convulsion qui lui fit imprimer ses doigts dans les bras d’une femme qui la tenait. La désolation de sa chambre ne se peut

Evidently, grief provoked passions that altered behaviour of members of the elite, but as Madame de Sévigné states 'one who evinces too much, evinces nothing'.<sup>849</sup> Even though *la marquise* de Sévigné could not remember who had pronounced these words,<sup>850</sup> her notions indicates, that emotions should be expressed discreetly to make them suitable and understandable among *les égaux*. As Rosenwein claims, emotions were creating 'groups in which people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value – or devalue – the same or related emotions'.<sup>851</sup>

Emotions and passions could be considered as a means to fashion the elite identity and status; furthermore, passions were also felt in situations that embodied gender roles. Ojala and Ojala state that Bussy-Rabutin had, for example, paid court to his cousin, even before Madame de Sévigné's husband had died,<sup>852</sup> and it seems that young Madame de Sévigné was ready to play the game: She had responded to him with letters that contained *galanterie*.<sup>853</sup> The situation, however, became ugly: Bussy-Rabutin transferred his own repressed desires into an offensive, public, literary presentation. Madame de Sévigné was aware of her husband's mistresses, but in Bussy-Rabutin's *Histoire amoureuse de Gaules*, the publication of the intimate relationship between Ninon de Lenclos and Henri de Sévigné could not avoid hurting Madame de Sévigné. In his satirical 'history', her respectability and virtuous female sexuality are questioned. Bussy-Rabutin did add a few admiring words in his mocking text, but he also combined it with his own fantasy of Madame de Sévigné as a mistress:

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*représenter. [...] Mme de Longueville et Mme Gamaches pleuraient de tout leur coeur. La Gèvres avait pris le parti des évanouissements. [...] Enfin la douleur est universelle. Le Roi a paru touché [...]'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 5 February 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 431.*

849 '[...] qui prouve trop ne prouve rien [...]'. Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 5 February 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 431.

850 Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 5 February 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 431.

851 Rosenwein 2006, 2.

852 Ojala & Ojala 1990, 53.

853 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 15 March 1648. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 7. See also, Duchêne's comment. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 836.

One day then, Cheneville (marquis de Sévigné) told me that the previous night had been the most pleasant one not only of his life, but also of the life of the woman that he had been with: 'You better believe that it was not with your cousin; it was with Ninon'—'Too bad for you, I replied, my cousin is a thousand times better than she is, and I am convinced that if she were not your wife, she would be your mistress'.—'This could very well be the case,' was his answer.<sup>854</sup>

In 1668, Madame de Sévigné wrote to Bussy and said that they were close, of the same blood, and that they pleased and loved each other. She added that she had read this cruel description and has been mocked for it. She identified things there, but her emotion was misunderstood. Regardless of everything else, it is notable that Madame de Sévigné was able to give her cousin the acknowledgment that the text was well written.<sup>855</sup> This book, however, not only made the elite laugh, it also caused a scandal, and Bussy-Rabutin was imprisoned in April 1665 by order of the king.<sup>856</sup> Passion, whether it was a doomed love affair, affection between a parent and a child or the strong attachment felt by members of the same family, had the potential to be cruel, selfish, hurtful, but the result depended on the parties themselves. As a respectable woman, Madame de Sévigné was able to rise above the situation, put her feelings aside and be capable of forgiveness.

La Rochefoucauld, according to Dulong, accepted the beautiful forms of passion, which to him implied greatness of soul.<sup>857</sup> How did Ninon de Lenclos experience passion? Was it full of desires that fed love or did her pleasure vanish?<sup>858</sup>

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854 'Un jour donc Cheneville m'avoit dit qu'il avoit passé la veille la plus agréable nuit du monde, non seulement pour luy, mais aussy pour la dame avec qu'il l'avoit passée, Vous pouvez croire, que ce n'est pas avec vôtre cousine ; c'est avec Ninon. – Tant pis pour vous, luy dis-je, ma Cousine vaut mille fois mieux, & je suis assuré que si elle n'estoit votre femme, elle seroit votre maîtresse : Cela pourroit bien estre me respondit il'. Bussy-Rabutin 1665, 34.

855 Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 26 July 1668. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 92–93.

856 Duchêne 2002, 273. See also, Goldsmith 1988, 78–80.

857 Dulong 1969, 93.

858 Suzanne: 'Le plaisir passe, mon enfant, il est vari; mais le desir en revient, &

Was it sincere or did it turn out to be an ambitious game after all? According to des Réaux, to Ninon de Lenclos, a relationship that lasted three months felt like an eternity.<sup>859</sup> It seems that she emphasised passion preferring short-lived even at times tempestuous relationships and shunned boredom. As the writer of *Lettres de Ninon de Lenclos au marquis de Sévigné* states, agreement in a relationship killed love, making passion disappear. This led to depression, exhaustion and dislike, which finally destroyed the relationship.<sup>860</sup>

Yet, were these short and passionate relationships only a means for gaining income or were they more of self-fashioning her independent position among *les honnêtes gens*, especially vis-à-vis the respectable women? In 1669, according to Saint-Évremond, Ninon de Lenclos had been loved by the most honourable people in the world (*des plus honnêtes gens du monde*). He also adds that the courtesan had loved for so long that she did not want to miss any pleasure, but only enough so that it did not result in a disgust resulting from jaded passion.<sup>861</sup> It is tempting to believe that to Ninon de Lenclos, loving and being loved were a matter of balancing between the different emotions of pleasures, enjoyment and disgust. Furthermore, it seems that she turned her brief relationships into a performance that served her needs and goals. In addition, her greatest love may well have partly served her self-fashioning; as Verge-Franceschi has suggested,<sup>862</sup> Ninon de Lenclos' greatest love was probably marquis de Villarceaux. This relationship with *le marquis* which lasted several years seems to have been more than just a *caprice*. The long relationship between courtesan de Lenclos and Marquis de Villarceaux was nothing unforeseen, for the early modern elite were able to turn a blind eye to a loved one or spouse having an intimate relationship with someone else. Without questioning courtesan de Lenclos' real feelings, one

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*c'est ce qui nourrit l'amour*'. *L'École des Filles* (1655) 1775, 92.

859 Des Réaux 1906, 240.

860 Lenclos 1750, 87.

861 Saint-Évremond to Ninon de Lenclos in 1669. Lenclos, Colombey 1886, 89.

862 Verge-Franceschi 2014, 321. See also, Des Réaux 1906, 243.

could assume that this seemingly long relationship with the marquis, whose social status was higher than her own, may have been also a way to avoid and be released from several short-term relationships that made her lifestyle closer to those of prostitutes. Furthermore, this relationship gave her some social prestige; thus, the passion between the lovers was a motivation that helped the courtesan to achieve a comfortable and secure life for a while.

Saint-Évremond praised love, but also warned of the risks that accompany it.<sup>863</sup> As he was a friend of Ninon de Lenclos, she must have been aware of the opinions of this sceptical thinker. An illuminating example of flaming passion is the shared company of the courtesan, which caused jealousy. According to des Réaux, when the desires of Marquis de Villarceaux, *dans sa grand passion*, to speak with Ninon de Lenclos, were not fulfilled, he became ill. Des Réaux continues that Marquis de Villarceaux did not recover until Ninon de Lenclos shaved her head and spent eight nights in bed with him.<sup>864</sup> It is not important whether the story is true or false, the most significant point is that *les honnêtes gens* wanted to see, feel and experience *le grand passion* and used this feeling to emphasise their own individuality. It was a part of their identity and their *moyen* for self-fashioning; as members of the elite, passion gave them reason to do things and express their feelings. In addition, as the relationship between Charles de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos came to an end, the presence of Charles de Sévigné irritated other men who visited Ninon. They were suspected of being more than friends.<sup>865</sup> Yet, it seems that courtesan de Lenclos was able to deal with these sensitive situations without causing scandals. Instead, these moments were marked by her strong individualism and her self-fashioning. In this way, her debatable actions served

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863 Rosmarin 1972, 263, 266.

864 Des Réaux 1906, 243. Magne also argues that marquis de Villarceaux suffered because of the courtesan. Magne 1912, 108.

865 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 27 April 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 237. See also, Scarron's poem *Adieu aux Marests & à la Place Royal*: '[...] *Tant est vrai que fille (Ninon de Lenclos) trop belle, N'engendre jamais que querelle* [...]'. Scarron (1643–1651) 1947, 49.

her own purposes and she managed to veil them with polite and sophisticated behaviour. However, it is apparent that for courtesan de Lenclos, love and passions were one way to manage as a courtesan and it was also a fruitful source of self-fashioning. She managed to mould a philosophy of passions by which – or despite which – she was appreciated and achieved a great success; thus, she secured her life as a courtesan. Therefore, I would like to suggest that courtesan de Lenclos tried to find a balance between loving, performing passions and the risks it brought with it. She seemed to avoid the risks but transform passions into a powerful means for self-fashioning.

However, as along with *galanterie*, love and passion were intended only for young members of the elite. The emphasis on external beauty, which will be discussed later, meant that an older woman should not feel love, or at least she should not show it. Anne Thérèse de Lambert wrote in her work *Traité de la viellesse* (1700–1705), that a woman should deny her feelings of love, not just when she was younger, but especially when she was old.<sup>866</sup> This idea was not a novelty<sup>867</sup> and La Bruyère has similar notions about the unnaturalness of an elderly person falling in love.<sup>868</sup> The same attitude was repeated by Madame de Sévigné herself when she received treatment for her rheumatism in Vichy; there she had met the elderly Madame de Baroir, who had had a stroke and spoke with a stutter.<sup>869</sup> Madame de Sévigné's comments on Madame de Baroir support the idea about a ridiculous old woman, whose ugliness, love of finery and foolishness in matters of love took away thoughts of pity; she could even be ostracized and detestable. At the same time, Madame de Sévigné, in reinforcing the notion that passionate old women

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866 Lambert 1748, 169.

867 *The Praise of Folly* (*Stultitiae Laus* 1511) by Erasmus, for example, presents an old, sexually active woman who falls in love as a person at whom everyone laughs. Erasmus of Rotterdam (1511) 1996, 43.

868 'C'est une grande dissormité dans la nature qu'un viellard amoureux'. La Bruyère 1699, 410.

869 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 4 June 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 309.



are contemptible is making herself complicit in patriarchal misogyny:

[...] One pities her, but one then sees her as ugly, ageing, dressed in *bel air*, wearing small, decorated bonnets, and when one thinks that after twenty years as a widow she accidentally fell in love with a certain M. de La Baroir, who was in love with someone else, which was a public secret, and that the madame gave him all her possessions, and that the man has never slept with her, except for a quarter of an hour to authenticate the deed of gift, and then crudely drove her away from him (my what a sentence), therefore, when one thinks about all of this, there is a strong desire to spit in her face.<sup>870</sup>

However, old age did not diminish an old woman's right to feel completely. In 1700, in a poem addressed to Ninon, Saint-Évremond wished his old friend another thirty years of love and philosophy.<sup>871</sup> Given Ninon de Lenclos' age, these were empty phrases, but they do not reduce the appreciation that Saint-Évremond felt for the former courtesan and her ability –or her right– to have emotions. To him, his old friend was still worthy of love and philosophy. Furthermore, fourteen years earlier, Saint-Évremond had written that Ninon de Lenclos' life was very famous, it would be famous till the end and she should never utter the word old, but to use the word love even more powerfully.<sup>872</sup>

As the *œuvres* of Madame de La Fayette have pointed to earlier, embodying love, passions and desires was an essential part of polite interaction between *les égaux*. The sentiments

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870 '[...] elle fait pitié. Mais quand on la voit laide, point jeune, habillée du bel air, avec des petits bonnets à double carillon, et qu'on songe de plus qu'après vingt-deux ans de veuvage, elle s'est amourachée de M. de La Baroire qui en aimait une autre à la vue de public, à qui elle a donné tout son bien, et qui n'a jamais couché qu'un quart d'heure avec elle pour fixer les donations, et qui l'a chassée de chez lui outrageusement (voici une grande période), mais quand on songe à tout cela, on a extrêmement envie de lui cracher au nez'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 4 June 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 309.

871 Saint-Évremond to Ninon de Lenclos. Saint-Évremond Tome V 1725, 493.

872 Saint-Évremond to Ninon de Lenclos. Saint-Évremond Tome IV 1725, 116.

were to be evaluated, and they would be visible to spectators. Passion felt in love went from sensitive to intense; it was not a smooth, direct continuum of emotions, rather it was a combination of many passions, that the elite exclusively knew and fashioned. In other words, love, as well as passion, was a feeling that belonged particularly to the elite and they worked, like many other perfectly performed virtues, as a medium for the elite to stand out from the masses and as a tool for the self-fashioning of the ideal. In addition, one can also consider that a flipside of passion was violence, such as duels,<sup>873</sup> and men close to Ninon de Lenclos or Madame de Sévigné were no exceptions in this respect, despite this, passion and love continued on their triumphant way during the 17th century. Love and passion, expressed in terms of strong and meaningful feelings among the *honnête* elite of the early modern era France were not so far from making love.

#### 4. *La manière jolie de faire l'amour.* For courtesans only?

##### Creating an *honnête* courtesan

Even though Muchembled states that ‘repression was a fact’ in the 17th-century, I agree with him as he rightfully adds that it was not, however, immutable and those protected by powerful people were often spared.<sup>874</sup> The court as an environment was gendered and its internal dynamics was largely governed by Louis XIV’s practice of keeping mistresses; and the court of Louis XIV became the centre for all possible amusements and non-marital love affairs.<sup>875</sup> The court contained everything from relatively innocent romances to relationships that were publicly condemned by the king and queen and also by *les honnêtes gens*. The letters of Von der Pfalz, the duchess of

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873 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 23 January 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 147.

874 Muchembled 2008, 102.

875 Da Vinha 2009, 195. See also, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 11 September 1675. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 99.

Orléans, give an impression of the lechery that went on within the court.<sup>876</sup> Thus, while sex and lechery were common among *les honnêtes gens*, chastity was expected of elite women or at least the appearance of chastity. In this situation, it is self-evident that respectable people did make love; thus, it is reasonable to ask if was there any other ways than chaste behaviour to be used as a medium for *honnêteté*'s fashioning?

The beautiful and charming Ninon,  
 Who one cannot say no to,  
 Since she is the one to decide  
 Such is the authority  
 That everywhere she conquers a young one,  
 With regard to spirit she has beauty.<sup>877</sup>

Courtesan de Lenclos followed certain criteria to make her lovers satisfied by letting them believe that they had a special status; however, as we have seen, she also wanted to be the one to decide how long the relationship lasted. She controlled whom she accepted or wanted as a lover and what she did with these men. In this way, she rose from being a passive woman to a decisive agent. Paul Scarron's poem above reinforces this impression. The courtesan in the poem is a person who acted against the early modern humble and obedient female ideal. In this respect, how did Parisian elite circles in the early modern era comprehend a sexually liberal woman? Was a sophisticated, but sexually uninhibited woman enabled to self-fashion herself as one of the *honnête* elite? Furthermore, how was the virtuous elite women's ability to savour their sexuality discussed and if so, in what way? Was sexuality only mentioned in relation to courtesans? In this section I shall ponder these questions in order to analyse elite women's sexual self-understanding.

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876 See, for example, Von der Pfalz (1652–1722) 1984, 65, 87, 106–107.

877 'Belle & charmante Ninon, A laquelle jamais on ne respondra non, Pour quoy que ce soit qu'elle ordonne Tant est grande l'autorité Que s'acquiert en tous lieux une jeune personne, quant avec de l'esprit elle a de la beauté'. Scarron 1645, 64.

When courtesan de Lenclos learned that Marquis de Villarceaux, her most precious lover, and Françoise d'Aubigné, Madame de Scarron at that time, had had an affair she gave no appearance of being concerned. According to Marquis de La Fare, they became the best of friends,<sup>878</sup> La Fare gives an impression of two women to whom the mistress culture was common and it had no effect on the women's personal relationship. Marquis de Villarceaux's *château* contains a painting of a semi-naked woman (Fig. 19). The portrait evokes eroticism and an intimate relationship between two people. The woman in the picture has covered only the lower part of her body and sits in legs astride position; one of her legs is placed somewhat higher than the other. She is calm and confident. She has a seductive expression; she stares directly at the viewer without shame, as if calling her lover back to her. The painting has been considered evidence for a relationship between Marquis de Villarceaux and Françoise d'Aubigné. On the other hand, the woman in the picture strongly resembles Ninon de Lenclos.<sup>879</sup>

Ultimately, the identity of the woman in the painting is not what is most important. Paintings of naked female figures have often been associated with the goddess of beauty and love.<sup>880</sup> As in Bal's analysis of Rembrandt's *Danaë* (1636),<sup>881</sup> it is possible to view a naked female body and a secret moment in a bedroom and Bal states that the captured moment of *Danaë* is a visual story of Western culture.<sup>882</sup> The painting in de Villarceaux's *château* unites Bal's idea and whoever is immortalized in this painting; it tells more about enchanting female sexuality, the male viewer's fantasies and eroticism than the women portrayed in them. Furthermore, the semi-nude female figure in the *château de Villarceaux* resembles in many ways other Venus paintings. It is not unique and is similar to

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878 La Fare 1884, 190.

879 Frasier 2006, 156. Duchêne 2000, 377.

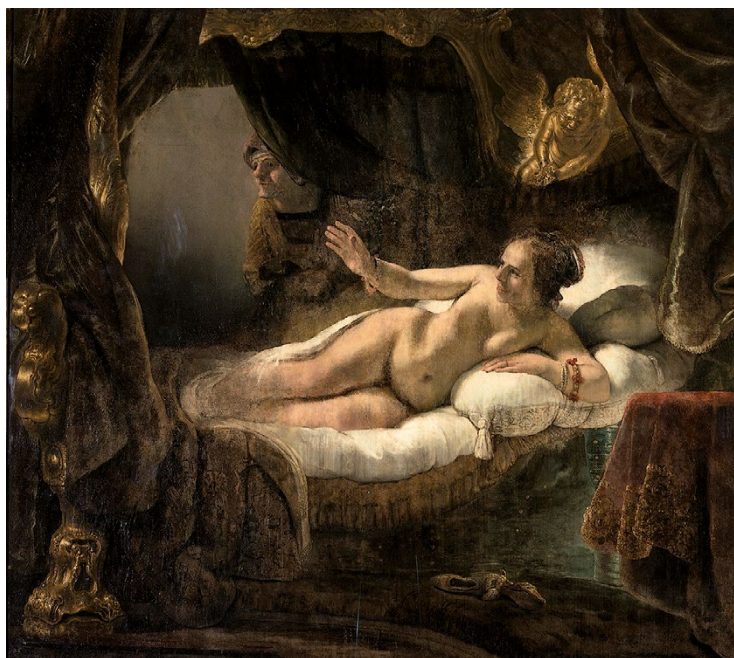
880 Salin 2006, 92.

881 Danaë is from Greek mythology: King Acrisius shut her up in a bronze chamber, however, Zeus desired her, and came to Danaë in the form of golden rain.

882 Bal 2001, 80.



*Fig. 19: Françoise d'Aubigné (?) Château de Villarceaux.*



*Fig. 20: Danaë (1636) by Rembrandt.  
Photograph: Hermitage Museum, St Petesburg.*

G. E. Schröder's (1684–1750) *Liggande Venus* and Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538) although it does not refer directly to Venus mythology.

A brief look at the paintings already shows, early modern female sexuality is a thought-provoking topic. Naked, open-minded women who also desired men's attention and touch were praised. In this light, it is not surprising that elite prostitution has a long history and conducting a sexual relationship with a supported woman has been a sign of men's wealth, power and status for centuries.<sup>883</sup> In the Italian Renaissance, when *honnêtes femmes* were unable to associate freely with men, the model of courtesan, *prostituée honnête*, was developed. These women did not acquire their *honnêteté* from their behaviour in the domain of sexuality, but from good manners and sophistication; this was a way of combining beauty and intelligence. People began to use the term courtesan for these women who paid visits to court. Gradually, these gatherings became arenas of debauchery.<sup>884</sup> In regard to the roles of king's mistresses' or favourites' role, they went beyond the merely sexual, for the position also entailed economic benefits and power.<sup>885</sup> In all these double standards thrived and are epitomized by the Duchess of Orléans writing in 1686 that the king considered himself devout, as he was no longer sleeping with young women.<sup>886</sup>

Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universel* from 1690 defined a courtesan thus: 'Courtesan. *Un peu honneste* term used to describe a supported person who makes her living by making

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883 Kushner 2013, 6. The trade that was based on elite men's and lower class women's sexual interaction and was associated with a groomed outward appearance and polished verbal interaction, can also be found in Greek and Roman antiquity. Kushner 2013, 7.

884 Duchêne 2000, 76–77. A hierarchy among women who sold themselves was a novelty, because in the Middle Ages all prostitutes were considered to be alike. This changed as the urban elite grew. Men who belonged to this elite wanted to pay for a woman suitable to their position, someone who even had an air of upper class sophistication. Norberg 2013, 398.

885 Bertièrre 1998, 554. Louis XIV had about ten women in his life who were his favourites, and as royal mistresses had the chance to be a superstar for at least a time. Bertièrre 1998, 16, 550.

886 Von der Pfalz (1652–1722) 1984, 52.

love'.<sup>887</sup> *Prostitution* stood for the abandonment of a woman's honour, and an outrageous life and conduct.<sup>888</sup> Similarly, the verb *prostituer* stood for the abandonment of the body and of respectability for the sake of pleasure. A lewd and lustful woman, whores (*se prostituer*) with everyone.<sup>889</sup> According to the definition of her century, Ninon de Lenclos was more a courtesan than a prostitute, though at the same time her behaviour was seen as uncontrolled and disgraceful; in addition, she was also a woman who had abandoned her body and respectability for pleasures. Indeed, she alternated between two unvirtuous ways of life, but she did not see all paying customers as ordinary prostitutes did and her favours included others besides sex. Ninon de Lenclos was undoubtedly an able, sophisticated and educated woman. She chose her company, but as a young woman, she did not have the option to be an *honnête femme*. Although she could fashion some external features of *honnêteté*, she was more like an *prostituée honnête* in her youth.

Did Ninon de Lenclos take the profession of courtesan for granted? Did she consider that life as a courtesan would mean abandoning her *honnêteté* or did she believe that *honnêteté* was merely an outward performance and a matter of self-fashioning? When she began her career, she could not know whether her story would be a short one, or whether, surrounded by an endless crowd of admirers she would finally become a legend. The sources here tell us little, but although they do not say that she enjoyed her profession, they do not imply that she hated it. One would imagine that as time went by, she enjoyed her position and her life as an independent woman capable of choosing the men with whom she associated with, not to mention the accompanying wealth and status.

It is impossible to say who was Ninon de Lenclos' first lover, but arguably a more important question is how old she was at that time. Even though the first biographies on Ninon

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887 'Courtisane. Terme un peu honneste pour nommer une personne entretenüe qui gagne sa vie à faire l'amour'. Furetière Tome I 1690.

888 *Prostitution*. Furetière Tome II 1690.

889 *Prostituer*. Furetière Tome II 1690.

de Lenclos, which were written in the 18th century, dated her birth year between 1615 and 1616, as Duchêne notes, there are no notes of a child of Henri de Lenclos from these years.<sup>890</sup> A document dated 17 October 1705, mentions that Anne de Lenclos died at the age of ninety, or approximately that age.<sup>891</sup> Duchêne, however, does not believe that she was born in the 1610s.<sup>892</sup> On 10 November 1620, Saint-Jean en Grève's register contains an entry concerning the baptism of a girl named Anne; a daughter of nobleman Henri de Lenclos and demoiselle Marie-Barbe de la Marche;<sup>893</sup> but Duchêne suspects that this baby girl is the wrong Anne de Lenclos (Ninon). He believed that the baptized girl was Ninon's sister, who had died. It is reasonable to assume that Anne, Ninon de Lenclos, was born three years later, in 1623. Duchêne bases this argument on a notary's document that is dated on 7 August 1670, in which it is said that Anne de Lenclos is 47 years old, and that she was baptised on 9 January 1623.<sup>894</sup> As he has studied Anne de Lenclos' age, Duchêne states, that Ninon de Lenclos was 18 years old, when Jean Coulon, a parliamentary adviser, paid her 'compliments'.<sup>895</sup> Dufresne, in turn, considers it possible that Ninon de Lenclos' mother had told Jean de Coulon, that he had been the first to be

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890 Duchêne 2000, 23.

891 *'Le 17e jour d'octobre 1705, Anne Delanclos, fille majeure, est décédée, rue des Tournelles. Âgée de quatre-vingt-dix ans ou environ [...]'*. Registres de la paroisse Saint-Paul. Registre 166: Lettre S. (1703–1705). Lenclos, Colombay 1886, 293. See also, Duchêne 2000, 26.

892 Duchêne 2000, 26.

893 Registres de Saint-Jean en Grève. Registre 7: Lettre N. (1615–1624). Lenclos, Colombay 1886, 289. See also, Duchêne 2000, 25.

894 Duchêne 2000, 26. In the 17th century, it was a common custom to baptize two children of the same parents with the same name, particularly when one of the children had died. Children were also baptized immediately after birth, or on the following day. In this light, Duchêne considers it likely that 9 January 1623 was the real birthday of Anne de Lenclos, and that she was a so-called substitute for little Anne who was born three years earlier, and who had died as an infant. Duchêne 2000, 26. 1623 is also substantiated as Ninon's year of birth in a letter that Ninon de Lenclos received from Saint-Évremond in 1669. Saint-Évremond states that his friend was probably content after she found out that she was three years younger than previously thought. Lenclos, Colombay 1886, 91. Duchêne also relies on this letter. Duchêne 2000, 27. See also, Vergé-Franceschi 2014, 17.

895 Duchêne 2000, 45, 365.



with Ninon in order to gain a larger compensation for her daughter's 'virginity'.<sup>896</sup> Dulong, in turn, states that Ninon de Lenclos had previously had one or two lovers.<sup>897</sup> Tallemant des Réaux wrote that Saint-Étienne (Charles-Claude de Beaumont) had been Ninon de Lenclos' first lover.<sup>898</sup> Voltaire mentions Cardinal de Richelieu (1585–1642) as Ninon de Lenclos' first love, who gave the courtesan an annuity of 2,000 *livres*.<sup>899</sup>

The question remains about how old Ninon de Lenclos was when she had her first love affairs? Each of these stories is characterized by the thought that Ninon de Lenclos had her first sexual experiences at 'an appropriate age': she was, however, left alone with her mother when she was around 10 years old,<sup>900</sup> *bien petite* as des Réaux states,<sup>901</sup> and their financial situation was poor at that time. As we have seen, her mother Marie Barbe de la Marche played a central role here. Ninon de Lenclos' mother must have been aware that by becoming a mistress of the right kind of influential man, she had the opportunity for social ascent. In addition, Vergé-Franceschi argues that the story of Diane de Poitiers must have been familiar to her, because Madeleine de La Marche, the sister of Ninon de Lenclos' mother, lived with her husband in the *château d'Anet*, which had become property of Diane de Poitiers.<sup>902</sup>

In 1781 in the *Jardin des Tuileries*, 114 prostitutes with ages ranging from 8 to 66 years, were arrested.<sup>903</sup> In

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896 Dufresne 2011, 16.

897 Dulong 1996, 85.

898 Des Réaux 1906, 237.

899 Voltaire Tome XXIII 1879, 507. According to Voltaire, Richelieu's relationship would prove costly to his heirs: an annuity lasting 65 years would have amounted to 130,000 *livres*. However, it seems likely that Voltaire fabricated this story, because it is not mentioned by any of his predecessors. Duchêne 2000, 27.

900 Duchêne 2000, 41.

901 Des Réaux 1906, 237.

902 Vergé-Franceschi 2014, 95. See also, Magne 1912, 56–57.

903 M 721. Archives nationales. Paris. In the seventeenth century prostitutes operated in parks, streets or offered their services through windows or on above the street. Nordberg 2013, 403. Later in 1762 there were about 52,000 prostitutes in Paris. Parent-Duchalet Tome I 1837, 29–30. This was a high figure when compared to the overall population of Paris. Over twenty years later in 1789 there were an estimated 30,000 prostitutes. Strayer 1992, 131.

this light, it is also possible to assume that prostitutes had a wide age range in the previous century and it would not be surprising if Ninon de Lenclos had her first experiences at a very young age: Ninon de Lenclos may have been forced into sexual encounters with men as a child. One cannot state without fail the precise starting point of her sexually active career, but Duchêne assumes that Ninon de Lenclos was the object of pimping at a young age, which probably traumatised her. Duchêne takes a psychological approach arguing that de Lenclos' loss of her father led her to search for a substitute both physically and psychologically and suggests that her mental and physical disappointments possibly led to her notable turnover of lovers.<sup>904</sup> Houdard states that Ninon de Lenclos 'loved, ceased to love, remained loyal to her friends, even bought loves, [and] accepted to be paid for [...]'.<sup>905</sup> Throughout these speculations, scholars and writers of this epoch have emphasised Ninon de Lenclos' extreme need to love. However, as Knif has pointed out, a typical feature of Duchêne's works, as with many other biographers is that the social context is not sufficiently taken into consideration.<sup>906</sup> Such biographers tend to romanticize and interpret history from an overly modern perspective. Since there is a lack of sources produced by Ninon de Lenclos herself, one must be wary of imagining traumas when possibly no traumas existed.

Certainly, Ninon de Lenclos changed lovers quite frequently and wanted to be the one who ended the relationship,<sup>907</sup> but it seems that scholars have not considered sufficiently that Ninon de Lenclos' behaviour and choices could be related to the fact that she just wanted to maintain a specific lifestyle and status. According to des Réaux, Ninon de Lenclos divided lovers into three categories: *martyrs*, *payeurs*, and *favoris*.<sup>908</sup> Ninon de Lenclos never completely denied intimate moments

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904 Duchêne 2000, 122.

905 Houdard 2010, 20.

906 Knif 2010, 18.

907 Des Réaux 1906, 238. Chavagnac also mentions also that Ninon de Lenclos changed lovers quite frequently. Chavagnac 1700, 49.

908 Des Réaux 1906, 239.

with ‘payers’, but she decided the length of the affair: Henri de Sévigné and Antoine de Rambuillet were her lovers for only three months.<sup>909</sup> As she wanted to achieve a comfortable elite lifestyle, she was financially forced to give certain advantages to the payers, forcing hers to act more like a prostitute and submitting her body and her intellectual capacity to her clients’ desires and wishes. The ‘martyrs’, were like the payers, in that they could only hope to one day become *favoris*. According to Duchêne, Ninon de Lenclos did not completely deny martyrs amorous opportunities, but she let them wait.<sup>910</sup> It seems that Ninon de Lenclos divided and ruled: she acted like an autocrat of her private, exciting kingdom.

Even though Duchêne speculates about the traumas the courtesan suffered, he also claims that Ninon de Lenclos was content after the first experiences of pretty words and easy money.<sup>911</sup> However, as it has been pointed out, it is impossible to refer to the young Ninon de Lenclos’ feelings about these experiences, but one wonders how a young girl, a child almost, would have been satisfied and happy after sexual experiments with older men? I would like to suggest, however, that Ninon de Lenclos’ first career steps at a young age may have affected how she understood her womanhood and how she began to fashion herself as a sophisticated courtesan. The first occasions were possibly not her choices and were forced upon her: she and her mother, after all, needed money and since marriage was not an option, she had to make her career profitable. Moreover, if the career of courtesan de Lenclos is considered, it is evident that she was able to perform her lovemaking and she had determination to achieve better lifestyle and status. In addition, it seems that she had a strong self-control; she was able to regulate the services she offered, to make them more diverse, and avoid boredom.<sup>912</sup> Indeed the lovemaking of a good, competent, attractive woman had strong financial potential, yet, it seems that her attraction to money, material

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909 Des Réaux 1906, 238.

910 Duchêne 2000, 111. See also, Des Réaux 1906, 239.

911 Duchêne 2000, 53.

912 Backer 1974, 216.

culture and the elite lifestyle could have turned into a dangerous way of living, which was in sharp contrast to the ideal of *l'honneste femme*. That is why it seems somewhat surprising that she managed to fashion herself as a woman who, in the end, had an unquestionable position among *les honnêtes gens*.

It is evident that young Ninon de Lenclos' liberal sexuality was against all the instructions of conduct books and *œuvres morales* for *honnêtes filles*. That is why, it is important to discuss other aspects that could have helped her to build an *honnête* lifestyle. As it has been emphasised, money and wealth played a crucial role among the elite and one cannot undervalue its meaning in de Lenclos' life. It is apparent that her profession did not 'hurt' her reputation too severely and it even helped her to build a specific *mode de vie*. According to des Réaux, Coulon paid Ninon 500 *livres* a month, for eight or nine years, up until 1650.<sup>913</sup> This meant 6,000 *livres* a year, which was enough to provide her security. Even though courtesan de Lenclos had expenses,<sup>914</sup> this sum paid by Coulon alone was extensive: it was ten times larger than the sum that a school teacher (*maître d'école*) would receive and the pension that Racine received from the king in 1664 was just 600 *livres* a year. According to Madame de Maintenon in 1678, a yearly income of 4,000 *livres* would very well provide for a family with eight children and a dozen servants. She also stated that 12,000 *livres* were enough for a life of luxury; it was enough to invest 3,000 *livres* in the home, in games and in spectacles,<sup>915</sup> but although Ninon de Lenclos would have lived a comfortable life on Coulon's support alone, a higher elite lifestyle required a lot more income.

Madame de Sévigné had debt, but she had a right to both an estate and to residences, and she could live like a marquise until the very end. Ninon de Lenclos, in turn, lived by herself and she had to ensure that she retained her lifestyle. It is self-

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913 Des Réaux 1906, 238.

914 For example, the *loyer annuel* of her *appartement* in rue de Richelieu was 500 *livres*. CXXI, 27. Documents du minutier central (1650–1700) 1960, 216.

915 Duchêne 2000, 77.

evident that old age did not alter her financial status and this is when Ninon de Lenclos' case becomes even more interesting: Knif argues that courtesan de Lenclos lived her life without worrying about her future or about old age.<sup>916</sup> However, I agree with Duchêne that Ninon de Lenclos consciously took care of her possessions and preserved her status and elite lifestyle until the very end.<sup>917</sup> The material possessions of Ninon de Lenclos, and the annuity contracts that she had made, clearly indicate a woman who took care of her future and her quality of life. Her income accumulated even in middle age: on 17 October 1670, Anne de Lenclos bought an 8,333 *livres*' annuity with 1,000 *livres*.<sup>918</sup> On 16 October 1671, Count de Roye, *Messire* Frédéric Charles de Roye de la Rochefoucault and his wife Dame Ysabelle de Durasfort made a contract on an annuity (*constitution de rente viagère*) with Mademoiselle de Lenclos, who paid them 13,000 *livres* in silver and she was guaranteed an annuity of 1,200 *livres*' until her death.<sup>919</sup> After making this contract, Ninon de Lenclos lived for another 34 years, so the investment was profitable for her. Because of these contracts, Ninon de Lenclos' annual income was guaranteed and they secured a quality of life befitting a member of the elite until her death.

However, it is reasonable to ask if all Ninon de Lenclos' actions were to gain fortune and to ameliorate her status and *mode de vie* among the elite? Most importantly, how could courtesan de Lenclos live in a way that she wished? It seems that as a young woman, Ninon de Lenclos resembled more a woman who could simply be paid for her services, and whose social status and morality were questionable, yet, I agree with Duchêne, that she distinguished herself from women who simply sold themselves to any client.<sup>920</sup> Courtesan de Lenclos

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916 Knif 2010, 20.

917 Duchêne 2000, 296–298.

918 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 216.

919 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 216, 219. See also, XCII, 203. Documents du minutier central (1650–1700) 1960, 217.

920 Duchêne 2000, 113.

did not leave any written evidence of her lifeplans or goals when she actively practised her profession but scholars and memoirs writers have emphasised that to Ninon de Lenclos, lovemaking and physical connection were intimately related to a spiritual bond and interest. She did not surrender to anyone who was simply willing to pay and she put an end to a relationship once it ceased to interest her. Voltaire wrote that not all Ninon de Lenclos' lovers were happy clients; in other words, they left with a feeling of unfulfillment.<sup>921</sup> In addition, she spent time with people of noble rank and such people did not recognise that the force of ordinary law applied them. Thus, it was possible for her to live her life both as a courtesan and as a *Grande Dame*.<sup>922</sup> Houdard also discusses Ninon de Lenclos' opportunities for functioning a man's world, where her thoughts spread beyond her salon through letters as well as art. Ninon de Lenclos was able to exchange information for pleasure: she was not a *coquette* or a 'woman of trade', but she did make her sexualized body and herself a source of information.<sup>923</sup> Magne, in turn, argues that the men of Ninon de Lenclos' time agreed to everything that the courtesan wanted, because they hoped to acquire their share.<sup>924</sup> However, lovemaking and sharing both her sophistication and her literary knowledge do not alone explain her vision and success among elite men and her later social ascent as a respectable woman. Ninon de Lenclos was able to make people trust her and she made herself interesting and, in particular, useful to her admirers:

[...] Her way of conversation was charming, unselfish, accurate, mysterious, true to the last word [...] one could say that she was virtuous and full of integrity. She often helped her friends, with money and loans, because of them she was allowed to be a part of important matters, (she) kept deposits of money with confidence, and she kept

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921 Voltaire Tome XXIII 1879, 508.

922 Duchêne 2000, 115.

923 Houdard 2010, 2, 18.

924 Magne 1912, 56.

significant secrets that were confided to her. All this formed a reputation, and esteem certainly exceptional.<sup>925</sup>

The memoirs of Saint-Simon, which were about Ninon de Lenclos, are written in the same year she died (1705). This was long after Ninon de Lenclos received more disapproval than praise. In Saint-Simon's work, the personality of Ninon de Lenclos was associated with features that the traditional mindset considered to only belong to men, such as the ability to keep secrets.<sup>926</sup> In addition, Chavagnac announced that the courtesan was loyal to her lover to the last moment.<sup>927</sup> Although Duchêne argues that Ninon de Lenclos herself contributed on Chavagnac's *Mémoires* and began to create a legend,<sup>928</sup> Chavagnac or Saint-Simon cannot be completely inaccurate: Ninon de Lenclos would not have been able to maintain her position if she had not possessed at least some of the features that others admired. She understood, I suggest, very clearly that sex was something that could be bought from other women in Paris. In addition, as Kushner states, by her activity, Ninon de Lenclos also made the idea of a mistress-courtesan popular.<sup>929</sup> Ninon de Lenclos would seem to have had some skill in maintaining her own place in society and would not accept 'payers' who did not please her. This situation was different from that of many in the same profession. Ninon de Lenclos' former loves often became her friends. Furthermore, she was able to discuss with men; she not only offered bodily pleasures, but also made herself one

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925 '[...] sa conversation était charmante, désintéressée, fidèle, secrète, sûre au dernier point [...], on pouvait dire qu'elle était vertueuse et plein en de probité. Elle a souvent secouru ses amis, d'argent et de crédit, est entrée pour eux dans des choses importantes, a gardé très fidèlement des dépôts d'argent et des secrets considérables qui lui étaient confiés. Tout cela lui acquit de la réputation, et une considération tout à fait singulière'. Saint-Simon *Mémoires* (1701-1707) Tome II 1983, 637.

926 Compare the idea that it was not recommended to tell significant secrets to women because they were unable to control their heart or tongues. Morvan de Bellegard 1698, 329.

927 Chavagnac 1700, 49.

928 Duchêne 2000, 335.

929 Kushner 2013, 167.

who could be at the level of men, one of the *honnêtes hommes*.

Norberg argues that Ninon de Lenclos, like other courtesans and prostitutes, used her body to challenge male dominance and the patriarchal order.<sup>930</sup> She did not only critique, I claim, the social order that placed her sex in an inferior position, she also participated in that order as an independent woman who was able to act and use her *mise en scène* as a stage for her spectacle and self-fashioning. She made herself different, unusual and that mode of behaviour began at an early age. Ninon de Lenclos made herself into a brand, one that was interesting and desirable, even though Magne argues that her uniqueness as a woman was not something that all men could understand.<sup>931</sup>

### The literal elite and *la manière jolie d'avoir plaisir*

Whereas the elite widow or married woman may have hidden or dispensed with their sexuality completely, an elite courtesan might well make her sexuality a necessity. Ninon de Lenclos made her lovemaking and sexuality something for men to pursue, because to win over Ninon would take considerable skill and a strong display of affection.<sup>932</sup> Thus, the courtesan increased her attractiveness and value. The time that courtesan de Lenclos spent imprisoned in the Madeleonnottes' convent did not eliminate people's interest in her. Later there were various rumours about how Ninon's imprisonment had even caused hysteria. Des Réaux wrote in his memoir that because of the courtesan's imprisonment, all *galants* (men) in the court wanted to burn the convent, which made it necessary to put on a watch throughout the night. Another rumour cautioned about the *cavaliers* in the neighbouring building, who would have climbed over the wall of the convent.<sup>933</sup> When Ninon de Lenclos was transferred to the convent at Lagny, *l'Epée Royale* was required to restrain the people who wanted to

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930 Norberg 1993, 459.

931 Magne 1912, 56.

932 Duchêne 1984, 14.

933 Des Réaux 1906, 245.



see her.<sup>934</sup> It is very unlikely that the story told by Tallemant des Réaux is completely accurate. However, it is possible that the status and publicity that Ninon had acquired through her performance as an exceptional courtesan stimulated a general interest bordering on fanatical hysteria that went beyond just the individual emotions of her lovers.

It is evident that in the 17th-century Paris, there was a demand for sexual practises and exploration of erotic ecstasy.<sup>935</sup> People's interest in sex was not only expressed through an interest in prostitutes and courtesans, but also in a fascination with literature on sex, which was also within the reach of educated elite women. Moral literature that emphasised virtue and chastity, lived side by side with another reality through which a fuller spectrum of human sexuality opened. As in the Renaissance era, educated Europeans rediscovered the Greek and Roman classics, the eroticism in Ovid and the indecent verses of Martial and Juvenal appealed to more and more people. Especially men were interested in and fascinated by the direct descriptions of sex that could be found in ancient texts, which were presented in minute detail. However, this literature was difficult to access before printing technology developed, after which these private pieces of eroticism became a public pleasure. The first pornographic editions were addressed to the upper classes and suited their tastes.<sup>936</sup> Thus, particularly the direct depiction of female sexuality and women's pleasure in *belles-lettres* provided an opportunity to problematise the official story which authorities told of 17th-century women's sexuality. They also reveal that there were words to describe female sexuality, pleasure and lust. In other words, women of the elite were also able to feel, read about and discuss their sexuality, needs and desires.

If courtesans allowed themselves to give and receive

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934 Des Réaux 1906, 245.

935 Muchembled 2008, 75–108. See also, Chapter III:1.

936 Berkowitz 2012, 193. In the late 1580s, the first western work appeared which was completely dedicated to sex. Daumas 1998, 11. In addition, during the Fronde, literary censorship lost some of its efficiency and the interest in the controversial genre increased. DeJean 2002, 57.

sexual pleasures, in what ways did members of the *honnête* elite desire each other? Did a respectable woman make love? This is difficult to answer because the sources, produced by elite women themselves, as has been emphasised, are silent. Therefore, answers have to be uncovered using literary texts. The notion of male phallocentricity had to be altered, since ‘wild’, primitive virility was in the 17th century seen as a product of culture, not as natural, and women were seen as more associated with love and sensuality.<sup>937</sup> In addition, the depiction of erotic caresses of women’s bodies was changed and it was regarded as actions that excite a man and satisfy a woman.<sup>938</sup>

This new genre, which emphasised female sexuality, was intended for a female readership and among such works was the short story *L’École des filles* (1655), in which the experienced Suzanne teaches Fanchon about the secrets of eroticism and the human body.<sup>939</sup> The book names, for example, different parts of the male and female body and gives advice on how to caress them.<sup>940</sup> In addition, man’s and woman’s sexuality is described as ancient and living, passionate, aiming at pleasure.<sup>941</sup> The book covered subjects about which respectable women kept silent and for which they did not have words. Fanchon prudely announces, however, that she is ashamed to think about all the positions and ways in which she had had sex with Robinet, the son of a shopkeeper. She did not want the boy to tell anyone what he had done with her.<sup>942</sup> At the end of the story, Suzanne returns to Fanchon’s bourgeois home and discusses what Fanchon has learned during her time with Robinet. However, the author encourages behaviour in accordance with prevailing moral rules concerning propriety, *bienséance* and respectability, *honnêteté*.<sup>943</sup> In other words, lust, sexual pleasures and satisfaction should be disguised

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937 Kritzman 2011, 208.

938 DeJean 2002, 72.

939 *L’École des filles* (1655) 1775.

940 *L’École des filles* (1655) 1775, 11–12, 16.

941 *L’École des filles* (1655) 1775, 42–45.

942 *L’École des filles* (1655) 1775, 72.

943 Dens 1991, 241.

behind the existing values and morals, but the story has a bourgeois ending: marriage looms in the future.<sup>944</sup>

Another erotic book on female desires is *L'Académie des dames*.<sup>945</sup> This is a work of seven chapters in which Tullie, 19-year-old and already married, instructs the 15-year-old, soon-to-be-married Octavie in what a married woman requires in a sexual sense.<sup>946</sup> The first four chapters discuss heterosexual passion, which is depicted in detail, and in which pleasure is important. After this, sexual specialities become more frequent, including roleplay, anal sex, sadism and group sex.<sup>947</sup> Similarly *Venus dans le cloître ou la religieuse en chemise* describes how an older and more experienced nun instructs a younger nun in the secrets of sex.<sup>948</sup> By reading these *œuvres*, it is possible to assume, I suggest, that the elite's sexuality—including female sexuality—could also be diverse, passionate, lustful and open-minded. Indeed, outspoken and overt literature on sexuality gave the words, and created sensuous and lustful images that may have been unknown especially to a respectable woman. In addition, the erotic *œuvres* created a reality different from that of conduct books and *œuvres morales*. *L'École des filles*, *Venus dans le cloître* and *L'Académie des dames* may have simply described fantasies and offered a masculine vision of female pleasure,<sup>949</sup> but at the same time they stress the dichotomy between the chaste ideal and reality among literate, sexual human beings including elite women.

There is no evidence that either Madame de Sévigné or Ninon de Lenclos read erotic literature, but both had certainly access to this genre. Furthermore, *L'École des filles* drew attention: reissues were published in 1667, 1668, 1671 and 1686.<sup>950</sup> At the very least, Madame de Sévigné knew about

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944 DeJean 2002, 70.

945 Its manuscript was in Latin and its original title is *Aloisiae Sigææ, Toletanæ, Satyra sotadica de arcanis amoris et Veneris, Aloisia hispanice scripsit, latinitate donavit Joannes Meursius V. C.* This indicates that the *œuvre* was addressed to the learned elite.

946 Robinson 2009, 62–63.

947 Chorier 1700. Finnish National Library. Helsinki.

948 *Venus dans le cloître ou la religieuse en chemise* 1737.

949 See, for example, Muchembled 2008, 91.

950 Muchembled 2008, 104.



Fig. 21: *Venus dans le cloître ou la Religieuse en chemise* (Édition 1737).

*L'École des filles*: Bussy-Rabutin wrote to his cousin on 19 November 1687, that this book had been found in the room of Madame la Dauphine's *filles d'honneur*,<sup>951</sup> leading to the king discharging the maids in January 1688.<sup>952</sup> Madame de Sévigné replied to Bussy-Rabutin on 2 December 1687, but she does not comment on the commotion that the erotic story caused in court.<sup>953</sup> The answer may be simple: Steinberg has noticed that women were not expected to be aware of sexual relationships, and were not allowed to discuss them. Furthermore, silence concerning sexuality was an efficient vehicle of power, which was used for constraining women, not only in matters of procreation and chastity, but also matters concerning the social order.<sup>954</sup> Thus, as Madame la Dauphine's *filles d'honneur*, Madame de Sévigné probably knew about the contents of sexual literature, but she kept silent about it. Ninon de Lenclos was, undoubtedly, a master of eroticism by profession. Thus, it would not be unimaginable if they—or at least courtesan de Lenclos—had explored this genre: The circle of acquaintances that courtesan de Lenclos had was a liberal elite that was interested in literature and for professional

951 Bussy-Rabutin to Mme de Sévigné 19 November 1687. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 335.

952 Duchêne's comment. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 1308.

953 Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 2 December 1687. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 338–339.

954 Steinberg 2010, 100, 106.

reasons she needed to be aware of passion, desires, satisfaction and perversions. Although it is fair to assume that the educated courtesan would have familiarised herself with literature on this subject, knowledge of this genre or its specific contents did not mean that it would have been discussed in letters between *honnêtes gens*. This seems to be a sensible practice: it did not leave any evidence of unfavourable behaviour.

The literary depiction of sex was found not only in fiction, but also in stories that came from personal experiences. As mentioned earlier, courtesan de Lenclos' sexual life remained unknown, however, it is clear that she was able to create a service that was desirable and she was pursued by many people of the elite. She offered the company of a respectable woman, but in a sexual domain that did not follow the ideal of *l'honnête femme*. However, Ninon de Lenclos was appreciated by her partners and succeeded in the difficult task of maintaining their respect after the affair was over. Paradoxically, the repressed sexuality of the virtuous Madame de Sévigné became the target of public humiliation. There is no information on her personal desires or wishes, except for the fact that she was claimed to have been sexually frigid:

She has a cold disposition, at least according to her late husband. [...]. All her warmth is in her spirituality. In the name of truth, it compensates for the coldness in her character. If one trusts her deeds, marital trust has not been broken, but if one considers intentions, it is a completely different matter.<sup>955</sup>

Somaize, in turn, wrote on Madame de Sévigné: 'She has no love for others other than members of her own sex, and is content with giving men her respect, [...]'.<sup>956</sup> Madame de

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955 'Elle est d'un tempérament froid, au moins si l'on en croit feu son mary. [...] Tout sa chaleur est à l'Esprit, à la vérité, elle récompense bien la froideur son tempérament. Si l'on s'en rapporte aux actions, la foi conjugale n'a point esté Violée ; si l'on regarde l'intention, c'est une autre chose'. Bussy-Rabutin 1665, 28.

956 '[...] elle n'en (amour) a que pour celles de son sexe, et se contente de donner son estime aux hommes'. Somaize *Le grand dictionnaire des précieuses*, 1661.

Sévigné was aware of these accusations against her and she defended herself in a letter that she sent to Bussy-Rabutin on 6 July 1670:

Oh, my dear cousin, I have no enemies. My life is complete [...]. I have a good reputation. My friends like me; others pay no attention that I even exist. I am no longer young, or attractive; people do not envy me. [...].<sup>957</sup>

Duchêne argues that in 1670 the 44-year-old Madame de Sévigné wanted to pretend that she agreed with the common opinion on woman's sexuality and abandoning gallantry. Thus, her choice was to fashion herself as a chaste and sexually indifferent *l'honneste femme*; this decision saved her good name, even though she was spoken of at times in less than admirable tones.<sup>958</sup> In other words, to Madame de Sévigné, marriage, motherhood and abstinence were natural conditions for her self-fashioning.<sup>959</sup> However, it may be that she never enjoyed her sexuality, but she still performed according to the expectations placed on her position and her sex and carried out her marital duties, even though when she eventually became pregnant, she was not happy with the condition. Whether Madame de Sévigné as a young widow longed for the intimacy of another partner can only be conjectured. She never suggested as much and merely stated later that her husband left her in an abyss.<sup>960</sup> This might well mean the sorrow and lowliness that she would have felt at her husband's death, but

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Duchêne 2001, 519.

957 'Hélas! Mon cousin, je n'ai point d'ennemis. Ma vie est tout unie [...]. J'ai une bonne réputation. Mes amis m'aiment; les autres ne songent pas que je sois au monde. Je ne suis plus ni jeune ni jolie; on ne m'envie point'. Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 6 July 1670. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 127.

958 Duchêne 2002, 312.

959 The sensational announcement that Bussy-Rabutin made about the Marquise's sexual frigidity, or the all-consuming love she felt for her daughter, were not, according to the Ojalas, the factors that stopped the Marquise from throwing herself into adventures with her admirers. The Ojalas find that Mme de Sévigné's behaviour accords with her sensibility, sense of duty and desire to preserve the reputation of the Sévigné family. Ojala & Ojala 1990, 77.

960 Mme de Sévigné to Bussy-Rabutin 13 November 1687. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 332.

at the same time, I would like to suggest, she might have been relieved, because as a widow, she was free from observing and enduring Henri de Sévigné's adulterous lifestyle, which was not in accordance with her own values and her understanding of *honnêteté*.

Furthermore, when facing criticism, Madame de Sévigné defended her choices and made it very clear that she was an *honneste femme*, not a *femme galante*. If Madame de Sévigné ever thought about intimate matters, she did not do it in a literary form or in the presence of many people. From her own stand point, she made a wise decision not to speak of her feelings and desires as a woman, because her letters were read by others, and her life was of interest to a wider audience: after her husband's death, her return from Les Rochers was reported. Young, beautiful, and chaste as a European turtle dove, as *Muse historique* put it, she had returned to Paris.<sup>961</sup> Thus, the widowed Madame de Sévigné's respectability was not questioned. Thus, it is possible to suggest that her self-fashioning as a chaste elite woman from the beginning was a perfect starting point for a polished performance as a Parisian widow. In addition, she was given more attributes, such as youth and beauty, which defined and reinforced her image as an *honneste femme*.

Compared with chaste women, de Lenclos as a sexually liberal courtesan had some advantages: she was able to show her dissatisfaction. Because a couple's sex life was quite likely under the man's control, no respectable woman, due to her modesty, had the chance to tell her husband how good he had been or how miserably he had failed in bed, but courtesans were able to use their power by evaluating the sexual prowess of their customers. They had verbal power, which made it possible for even a soldier to lose.<sup>962</sup> When visiting prostitutes,

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961 'Cévigny, veufe jeune et belle, Comme une chaste tourterelle. Ayant, d'un coeur triste et mary. Lamenté monsieur son mary, Est de retour de la campagne, C'est-à dire de la Bretagne, Et, Malgré ses sombres atours, Qui semblent ternir ses beaux jours, Vient augmenter dans nos ruelles. L'agréable nombre des belles'. 19 November 1651. Loret (1650-1654) 1857, 179.

962 Duchêne 2000, 88. During the Fronde revolt, pamphlets were sent out in which courtesans complained that they had less work, and they included satirical

men knew that they might be criticised and mocked, but the company of such women still tempted them. Men's sexual needs cannot be the only reason for this; indeed, courtesans fascinated both men and women in the aristocracy.

The lovemaking of courtesans also had an educational aspect, which could have been beneficial for respectable married women as well. Courtesans could teach an inexperienced youth to make love. Chavagnac announces, in his *Mémoires*, how Ninon de Lenclos utilised her education and experiences. He emphasises how men of the court sent their sons to be instructed, after which they would be able to make love and express themselves in an exquisite way. According to the writer, the way in which the courtesan taught men how to make love, was in *la manière jolie*.<sup>963</sup> Thus, Ninon de Lenclos, the master of *faire l'amour* was given a status as a woman with the opportunity to tell *honnêtes hommes* how to make love; thus, the hierarchy between women and men was overcome, and she changed from being a passive recipient into someone who could give orders. In addition, men were able to apply the skills they had learned in the marriage bed: as Steinberg states, when wives ignored sexuality, men became teachers, because as men they were expected to have some knowledge about sexuality.<sup>964</sup> Henri de Sévigné was one of the courtesan de Lenclos' lovers, even though the relationship did not last very long; it is possible that he learned something about woman's pleasure. Did he bring any knowledge he may have learned into *les Sévignés* bed? Was Madame de Sévigné ever able to enjoy that? It is impossible to say. The sources suggest that Madame de Sévigné might have refused to feel sexual pleasure, but she may also have accustomed herself to live without it,

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comments on the royal forces and on Cardinal Mazarin. Norberg 2013, 399.

963 Chavagnac 1700, 49. See also, '*Faites l'amour comme je vous ai conseillé de le faire. Que ce ne soit point pour vous ce qu'on appelle une passion, mais un amusement*'. Lettre IX. Lenclos 1750, 24–25. See also, poem of Saint-Pavin's (poète libertin, 1600?–1670): '*Tous les blondins chez moy vont à l'escole, Pour faire leur salut, Je veux sauver Duras, Dangeau, Briolle. Et c'est là tout mon but. [...] Je fais penitence, moy. Je fais penitence*'. Sanguine de Saint-Pavin 1861, 116.

964 Steinberg 2010, 100.



or she had no knowledge of female orgasm, even though she might have desired it. It is feasible to suggest that, in her case, chastity and ignorance of sexual pleasures were indeed part of her understanding of *honneste femme*.

However, in spite of the fact that women's sexual pleasure and their will to make love are hidden in silence, as Madame de Sévigné's example has indicated, in *L'École des filles*, the message is that women themselves were responsible for their own bodies and sexuality: women were, indeed, capable of experiencing sexual pleasure, even without a man.<sup>965</sup> The book gives advice on how a lover can give sexual pleasure to his or her beloved.<sup>966</sup> Furthermore, Doctor Venette noted, a woman's clitoris was known and changes in it were associated with arousal and love, *l'amour y envoie des esprits*.<sup>967</sup> Thus, some doctors understood women's capacity to feel sexual pleasure and a real lover was able to take this into consideration. Lovemaking, and sex that gives pleasure to members of both sexes, were a part of a courtesan's services, but perhaps even behind chastity's fashioning, pleasure was also accepted as part of sexual interaction among the *honnête* elite as Don Gil Blas states in Le Sage's novel: 'As a virtuous woman, Dorotea made a pleasure out of her duty, and by knowing my attempts to follow all her wishes, she soon got used to me [...]'.<sup>968</sup> In other words, woman's pleasure was both sensitive and clear and an honourable man was to avoid a situation in which a virtuous woman felt humiliated: He should instead act so that a woman was able to feel pleasure in surrendering to him.

Scholars may interpret strict moral discourse as a narration of reality, but on this point, it seems clear that for the early modern elite, a respectable woman's pleasure was not a complete or forbidden mystery. Furthermore, I agree with Muchembled who argues that nothing proves that women changed and suddenly became sexually passive in the 17th-

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965 DeJean 2002, 77.

966 *L'École des Filles* (1655) 1775.

967 Venette (1686) 1815, 28.

968 Le Sage (1715-1735) 1949, 858-859.

century.<sup>969</sup> Nevertheless, there was a distinct distance between a courtesan, to whom pleasure was real and achievable and other women. However, lovemaking, *faire l'amour*, and the intellect with which was associated raised the status of the courtesan even among respected men:

One sees no longer hundreds of sparkles  
How Ninon appears today  
She, although she has a cunt  
Is placed among hommes illustres.<sup>970</sup>

Whereas sexual behaviour seemingly separated the chaste respectable woman from a sophisticated courtesan, elite style, outward appearance and the messages that it sent to other people, united them. Hierarchies and interpersonal discourse together with elite women's own choices determined how their performance of *honnêteté* was understood. Performances are constructed from the mental images that people have when they process all the possible information and messages they receive and both female sexuality and its manifestations created conceptions that came together with a wide range of moral values, ideas of manhood and womanhood and established ways and associations. In other words, perceptions are subjective interpretations and are accompanied by errors and imprecisions or are based on a limited amount of data. These ideas of female sexuality in the early modern patriarchal society largely determined how the ideal was understood, and how it affected the entire image of a person and the image may not have been easy to change. However, as the case of Ninon de Lenclos shows, it could be possible. It is evident that Madame de Sévigné's and Ninon de Lenclos' personal opinions about female sexuality and its fashioning differed, but their sophistication, codes and behaviour were similar not to mention their fashionable style.

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969 Muchembled 2008, 100.

970 'On ne reverra de cent lustres. Ce que montre aujourd'hui Ninon. Qui s'est mise en dépit du con. Au nombre des hommes illustres'. Epigramme (1672), p. 551. Fonds Français 12618. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Paris.

V  
GILDED APPEARANCE:  
A REQUIREMENT BUT NOT REALITY

This study has already discovered that the choices that concerned Madame de Sévigné's and Ninon de Lenclos' femininity, sexuality and their lifestyle in *hôtels* and residential areas had an essential role in determining the attributes of *l'honneste femme*. In this respect, it is important to ponder how essential the gilded appearance was in fashioning the perfect elite woman. Goffman states that 'it is sometimes convenient to divide the stimuli which make up personal front<sup>971</sup> into "appearance" and "manner," according to the function performed by the information that these stimuli convey'. Furthermore, he continues that appearance may relate to 'the performer's social statuses' and 'the individual's temporary ritual state' in his or her social activity which may be either personal or refer to a wider life-cycle.<sup>972</sup>

According to Pierre Nicole, beauty was nothing other than merely an image.<sup>973</sup> Furetière's dictionary also describes beauty more as a construct of imagination rather than reality.<sup>974</sup> However, *la beauté*, I claim, had a more profound meaning among the elite of the early modern era. Moreover, I agree with Ylivuori who argues rightfully that 'beauty can be viewed as a sort of interaction that illustrates practically all the problematic issues that revolve around the polite spectacle, gendered gaze, visibility and publicity'.<sup>975</sup> In addition, elite women's groomed outward appearance did not make them

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971 According to Goffman personal front may refer, for example, to rank posture, speech, sex, age, size, looks, clothing and bodily gestures. Goffman 1959, 24.

972 Goffman 1959, 24.

973 Nicole Tome 6 1715, 181.

974 *Beauté*. Furetière Tome I 1690.

975 Ylivuori 2015, 87.

mere ornaments, because it had a broader meaning<sup>976</sup> and as Elizabeth Wilson and Amy de la Haye have emphasised, dress had both political and moral meanings.<sup>977</sup> In other words, it is self-evident that a person's glorious outward presentation, which consisted of clothes, reflecting not only fashion, but also propriety or lack of restraint. Jewellery, hairstyle, and make-up were also significant in the interactions between the members of elite.

The whole outward appearance of an elite woman demonstrated her status and gave the finishing touch to her performance, which took the form of a visual presentation; a groomed appearance was a sign of respect for other members of the *société*. Moreover, external and spiritual beauty was connected: one reflected the other and the result was a perfect, respectable woman of the elite. Georges Vigarello states that beautiful features, which were given to certain people, together with appearance and manners, were essential at the court.<sup>978</sup> It should also be considered that the outward appearance of a chaste woman and a courtesan who embodied her sexuality, did not differ from each other in paintings or literary descriptions of that time.

In this chapter, I endeavour to point out that an elite woman could not ignore the expectations the society in regard to her outward appearance. For an intelligent, elegant and cultivated woman, beauty was by far one of her most important features. A respectable woman of the elite, who had achieved the approval of her peers, was the enchanting heroine of portraits, someone with glimmering silk clothes, lace cuffs and curled hair. Her skin was smooth and white, but her cheeks were rouged. The first section endeavours to examine the hidden – yet visual – meaning of elite women's portraits, which achieve both simultaneity and sensuous ease, matters that are not possible to perceive in written sources. The following two sections will examine how important outward

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976 Cassagnes-Brouquet, Klapisch-Zuber & Steinberg 2010, 35–36.

977 Wilson & de la Haye 1999, 1. See also, Smith 2002, 44.

978 Vigarello 2004, 9.

appearance and its understanding were in a respectable woman's entity. I shall also consider the efficiency of external beauty as a tool for self-fashioning and performance. In this chapter, the finishing touches to Madame de Sévigné's and Ninon de Lenclos' entire performance are evaluated. The final section examines how their outward appearance, which was depicted as perfect and as immutable, in accordance with the ideal of a respectable elite woman, withstood the impact of time. Was the aging of elite women a severe matter – or was it rather one step closer to creating the perfect and immortal *honneste femme*?

## 1. The Parisian women of the elite in the portraits

### A portrait: A reflection of status

[...] They wanted their portraits to show what they performed, not what they actually were.<sup>979</sup>

Despite Sorel's observation concerning idealization in portraits, he admits that portraits had an important position among the Parisian elite, and every *bon esprit* wanted to have one.<sup>980</sup> A portrait painting began to develop in the 16th century, leading to increased support for this form of social advertisement. Portrait was not originally meant to resemble the physical appearance of its model, but rather to communicate certain social signals, which connected people of the same social class.<sup>981</sup> The nobility and the higher social classes had portraits painted as signs of the continuity of their dynasties; it was also a sign that justified their position.<sup>982</sup> Thus, a portrait was more than just a picture, it was an illusion created by

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979 '[...] Ils vouloient tous que leur Portrait fust fait sur ce qu'ils paroissent estre, non pas sur ce qu'ils estoient effectivement'. Sorel 1659, 23.

980 Sorel 1659, 3.

981 Melchior-Bonnet 2004, 160.

982 Visage du Grand siècle 1997, 16. During the life of Louis XIV, two hundred portraits and seven hundreds etchings were made of him. Visage du Grand siècle 1997, 75.

the artist.<sup>983</sup> Marcia Pointon justifiably states, that ‘vivid and tangible access to the players on a stage’ through portraits was not a straightforward or simple matter.<sup>984</sup> Indeed, portraits are complex sources, but at the same time they provide a window into the elite woman’s personality and status.

Without presenting a detailed discussion of the delicate iconography of portraits, I will make a few remarks on the silent world of paintings to help construct the respectable women’s entity. In portraits, a member of the elite was usually presented as favourably as possible, showing his social status, characteristic features, and existence as an *honnête personne*.<sup>985</sup> According to Melchior-Bonnet, the outfit, posture and implied social meanings made a portrayed person a member of a community,<sup>986</sup> though some considered that portraits were only suitable only for young women.<sup>987</sup> As Madame de Sévigné’s and Ninon de Lenclos’ estate inventory deeds have revealed, neither of them was an art collector,<sup>988</sup> but both of them were immortalized in several portraits.

The *honnête femme* or a courtesan needed to have external signs that reinforced her social status: through portraits, her position became clear and she could be evaluated and examined by others. A portrait also revealed the characteristics that were associated to a person or through which a person wished to be known. It was not just the face, or the captured gestures, but also the clothing that was an important element in communication. Even though *external* features were essential in describing and understanding *honnêteté*, *honnêtes*

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983 See also, Cavalli-Björkman, Karlson, Olausen, Sidén, Snickare & Söderlind 2002, 10. Pointon 1997, 176.

984 Pointon 1997, 176.

985 Visage du Grand siècle 1997, 16, 22.

986 Melchior-Bonnet 2004, 160. See also, Salin 2006, 66.

987 Visage du Grand siècle 1997, 23.

988 For example, *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos* mentions that de Lenclos owned ‘douze petits tableaux, sçavoir dix peints sur toile et deux en extanples de différentes grandeurs représentant divers personnages et paysages prise et estimé le tout ensemble dans leur bordures de bois doré huit livres, cy’. *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 213. Mme de Sévigné’s estate inventory deed does not mention paintings. MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris.

*gens* were, according to Antoine de Courtin, offended more if their *internal* features were insulted.<sup>989</sup>

In light of this study, I would like to suggest that 17th-century Parisian women of the elite expressed themselves and their individual characteristics, even though they embodied their social status in accordance with the demands of their own group. In other words, elite women were in many ways a homogenous group; they were individuals, but they had the freedom to emphasise their personalities. Sources suggest that Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos understood the meaning of *l'honnête* lifestyle, but both emphasised their individual personalities by careful self-fashioning, which was, I suggest, a careful combination of ideals and their own agency. As previous chapters have pointed out, they both made it very clear what they stood for and how they wanted to be seen as elite women. As a person's need for reinforcement in the social sphere, literary descriptions and portraits performed the required function and the value of such description rose through paintings.<sup>990</sup> Portraits were reflections of *honnête* status, but they were also substitutes for absent loved ones. Madame de Sévigné, for example, had several portraits made of her daughter, although her letters suggest that they could not console her.<sup>991</sup>

Both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos were introduced in literary presentations, where they might be eulogized or criticised, and their praised external features were immortalized in several portraits. It is important to consider, however, Mieke Bal's notion that '[...] visual artists may borrow motifs without borrowing the meaning'.<sup>992</sup> Thus, portraits cannot always be easily interpreted, but since external signs give meaning to the person depicted, it was important to avoid negative connotations. Paintings of Madame de Sévigné

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989 Courtin 1728, 300.

990 Melchior-Bonnet 2004, 160.

991 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 6 October 1688. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 362; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 24 December 1688. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 444.

992 Bal 2001, 68.

and of Ninon de Lenclos, like other portraits of the elite, present a quiet world full of meanings, and sedately follow the period's beauty standards. Their portraits convey to the viewer a message about their personality, wealth, social status and silently reflect the ideas and values which they, or the artist, wished to communicate. A respectable woman was given a meaning through these representations, which combined inner *honnêteté* with fashionably dressed and coiffed elite appearance. Thus, the portrayed elite woman could fashion herself by exhibiting her status and rank.

### Picturing perfect and respectable beauty

What constituted beauty in these representations? Why were Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos to be among the beauties of their epoch? Physical traits played an important role, and portraits revealed these features and at times idealized them. The face was significant and was considered to captivate the viewer. According to La Bruyère, a beautiful face was the most enchanting vision that one could ever see<sup>993</sup> and Furetière's dictionary suggests that the Virgin Mary's face represented perfection; it was perfect to be painted and perfect for *honnêtes gens*.<sup>994</sup>

It was not only the shape of the face, but the skin and its colour: beautifully white, fresh, lily-toned skin was something worth mentioning<sup>995</sup> and poets sang about women whose skin had the colour of milk.<sup>996</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that these features were highlighted in the portrayals of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos. They were both depicted as having a fashionably fair and smooth skin with the wrinkles of an aging skin removed; they were forever young, timeless beauties who captured attention of viewers.

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993 'Un beau visage est le plus beau de tous les spectacles [...]'. La Bruyère 1699, 80.

994 *Visage*. Furetière II 1690.

995 Porter R., Porter D. 1988, 55. See also, Mme de Sévigné's comment '*Pour la marquise de Castelnau, elle est blanche, fraîche et consolée*'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 5 January 1674. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 656.

996 Melchior-Bonnet 2004, 229. Matthews-Grieco 1993, 64.



In addition to perfect skin, well-formed teeth were essential.<sup>997</sup> When, for example, Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville (1650–1705), Baroness d’Alnoy, described an ugly woman, particular mention was made of the fact that she had lost her teeth.<sup>998</sup> The elite understood the significance of good teeth: The new coiffure *à la mode*, which uncovered the full face, led Madame de Sévigné to worry about women’s teeth which were consequently in sight.<sup>999</sup> In 1690 she was, however, delighted to announce that she still had all her teeth left.<sup>1000</sup> Saint-Évremond states that the face and teeth of the elderly Ninon de Lenclos were in good shape.<sup>1001</sup> A. Bret also mentions that Ninon de Lenclos was not missing any teeth even at an old age and that she retained the glow in her eyes almost completely.<sup>1002</sup> Both teeth and eyes, therefore, played an important role in an understanding of external beauty.<sup>1003</sup> However, the dichotomy between beauty ideals and reality was evident: Louis XIV, who, for example, suffered from recurring abscesses in his gums, and in 1685 had all his teeth pulled out,<sup>1004</sup> was always depicted as handsome and healthy in his portraits. Inevitably, the loss of teeth would change the shape of the face, but as Sorel notes, portraits presented to the viewers some features that were not real.<sup>1005</sup> The *honnêtes femmes*’s appearance in paintings was like that of the king: nothing was depicted that would harm the image of her face

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997 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 15 April 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 220. Da Vinha 2009, 107. Porter R., Porter D. 1988, 54.

998 Aulnoy 1785, 2.

999 This new coiffure was, however, appropriate only for young women. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 21 March 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 194–195.

1000 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 19 February 1690. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 840.

1001 Saint-Évremond to Ninon de Lenclos. Saint-Évremond Tome V 1726, 145.

1002 Lenclos 1920, 98. Ninon de Lenclos’ eyesight was failing and it seems that she wore reading glasses (*lunettes*). Ninon de Lenclos to Saint-Évremond. Saint-Évremond Tome V 1725, 298.

1003 Porter R., Porter D. 1988, 54. Mme de Sévigné also mentions that even though *maréchale de La Meilleraye* had lost weight without that ‘*son teint, ni ses yeux, ni ses lèvres en soient moins bien*’. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 July 1676. Sévigné Tome II, 351.

1004 Da Vinha 2009, 107.

1005 Sorel 1659, 19.

or body. Thus, it is difficult to deduce whether Madame de Sévigné or Ninon de Lenclos did in fact have blemishes in later life.

In addition to “natural features”, paintings, *portraits littéraires* and as Madame de Sévigné’s remarks also point out, beautiful hair and dressed coiffures, such as the *hurlupée*-coiffure and changes in hair fashion, were discussed.<sup>1006</sup> Furthermore, Madame de Sévigné proposed to ‘*coiffer une poupée*’ so that Madame de Grignan would see the coiffure, which was, according to *la marquise*, made for her daughter.<sup>1007</sup> Therefore, it is interesting to ponder why Ninon de Lenclos, whose hair in portraits is beautifully fashionable, was claimed to have shaved her head (c. 1652). Tallemant des Réaux mentions that it was the courtesan’s way to show her love and devotion to de Villarceaux.<sup>1008</sup> Verge-Franceschi states that it was related to the custom that debauched women had to sacrifice their hair to God.<sup>1009</sup> If Ninon de Lenclos did this, it would seem to indicate that she wished to adopt a more respectable lifestyle. It is self-evident that her beautiful and fashionable appearance was crucial to her, but this change in appearance would indicate an altered condition in which external beauty would be replaced by a more respectable status. Elite women were, indeed, aware of the fact that some external defects could be compensated for with other forms of physical and spiritual pleasantness. Madame de Sévigné, for example, may not have considered some noble women to be perfectly beautiful, but she found other compensating features.<sup>1010</sup>

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1006 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 18 March 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 190; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 21 March 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 194–195; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 1 April 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 206; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 7 September 1677. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 545; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 November 1684. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 164; Mme de Sévigné to Chaulnes 15 May 1691. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 966.

1007 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 21 March 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 194–195.

1008 Des Réaux 1906, 243.

1009 Verge-Franceschi cites évêque de Marseille, Mr. Étienne de Puget’s reglement (approved 9 June 1665): ‘*Filles repeties (doivent) faire à Dieu sacrifice de leurs cheveux [...]*’. Verge-Franceschi 2014, 321.

1010 ‘[...] Car il y a quelque chose à son (la Dauphine) nez et à son front qui est

Artistic representation was also used to express the same feelings that a respectable person endeavoured to express with his or her behaviour and gestures. Le Brun emphasises passion, which arose from the movement of the soul and caused the movements of the body.<sup>1011</sup> Thus, the soul was connected to each part of the body<sup>1012</sup> and artists tried to capture these movements of the soul in their works. In a portrait by Louis Ferdinand Elle the Younger, the corners of Ninon de Lenclos' mouth are turned upward in a slight smile and her gaze rests on the viewer. The body is in a static position, but the fabric of the dress has fallen from her shoulder. The viewer is presented with a woman who is self-confident and dressed with the poise of elite. By revealing the shoulders and breasts of Ninon de Lenclos, the artist no doubt intended to emphasise her sensuality, although she is dressed in a manner of a member of the high aristocracy. Art could represent a portrait of a courtesan in which sexuality and selling oneself was romanticised and partly dignified. In other words, sexuality could be fashionable and in such paintings a courtesan did not stand out from the *honneste femme*.

Women of the elite understood the beauty ideal, their own beauty and outward appearance expressed in detail and this self-understanding should also be evident in the portraits. A portrait was an artist's work, but it was not always able to capture and communicate the image that the model desired. Madame de Sévigné, for example, was not completely content with one of her portraits. She wrote to her daughter 7 August

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*trop long, à propotion du reste; cela fait un mauvais effet d'abord. Mais on dit qu'elle a si bonne grâce, de si beaux bras, de si belles mains, une si belle taille, une si belle gorge, de si belle dents, de si beaux cheveux, et tant d'esprit et de bonté, caressant sans être fade, familière avec dignité, enfin tant de manières propres à charmer, qu'il faut lui pardonner ce premier coup d'oeil'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 13 March 1680. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 870; '[...] Je vis Madame La Dauphine, dont la laideur n'est point du tout choquante ni désagréable. Son visage lui sied mal, mais son esprit lui sied parfaitement bien. Elle ne fait pas une action, elle ne dit pas une parole qu'on ne voie qu'elle en a beaucoup'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 March 1680. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 886.*

1011 Le Brun 1698, 4.

1012 Le Brun 1698, 6.



Fig. 22: *Ninon de Lenclos* (17th century) by Louis Ferdinand Elle the Younger. *Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon*.  
Agence Photographique de la RMN-Grand Palais.

1675: 'He (Monsieur de Peruis) is excited about your portrait. I would like mine to be less vulgar; it does not look at all suitable for being regarded pleasantly or tenderly'.<sup>1013</sup> Despite

<sup>1013</sup> 'Il est ravi de votre portrait. Je voudrais que le mien fût un peu moins rustaud ; il ne me paraît point propre à être regardé agréablement, ni tendrement'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 7 August 1675. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 37. According to Duchêne, the Marquise's reaction refers to one of the most famous portraits of Mme de Sévigné which has been thought to be Mignard's work. However, Duchêne states in *Bulletin des Amis de Carnavalet* (1971) that M. Wilhelm presents very good arguments why the painting was by Claude

of her disappointment, portraits of Madame de Sévigné were generally applauded. For example, a portrait of Madame de Sévigné by Lefèvre reveals, according to Jacques Wilhelm, a woman whose face has an elegant and vibrant expression. The fabrics are carefully disposed, the colours are harmonious: the white tones of the clothes, the light brown nuances of the hair, the rosy glow of the skin.<sup>1014</sup>

Madame de Sévigné's portrait also prompted Ménage to write an Italian sonnet (*Aegidii Menagii poemata*, 1658) according to which the painting of Madame de Sévigné made her alive. To Ménage, *la marquise's* portrait was so enchanting that everyone who came to see it was able to see how the Marquise breathed and spoke. The Madame de Sévigné of the poem was not only beautiful but also loving. Ménage felt that he owed a debt to the artist because he doubled his pleasure and his treasure by painting such a charming portrait.<sup>1015</sup> Both Madame de Sévigné's disappointment with her portrait and Ménage's artistic praise indicate, I suggest, that the painting was viewed and evaluated by several members of the elite. As this case indicates, art was an efficient means of self-fashioning and the pictured member of the elite wanted it to be as perfect as possible.

Moreover, portraits were not only reflections of a person's outward appearance, ideals or inner qualities, they were also intrinsic status symbols that revealed a person's financial prosperity. In March 1666, Pierre Mignard<sup>1016</sup> was paid 300

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Lefèvre. Duchêne's comment. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 1097.

1014 Bulletin du Musée Carnavalet 1968. Jacques Wilhelm: *Un portrait de Madame de Sévigné...*, 4.

1015 'La voici, c'est elle ; que chacun vienne la voir. Dans cette toile vivante elle parle et respire ; Ces beaux yeux, elle les tourne tantôt à droite, tantôt à gauche, Là où l'Amour lance ses traits cruels. Voici la main amoureuse et belle Qui prend tout cœur et la traîne selon son plaisir ; Voici la bouche pour laquelle tout cœur soupire, Tant elle rit suavement, et suavement elle parle. Oh! Combien je te dois, gentil peintre! Grâce à toi, double est mon bien, double est mon trésor. A ton pinceau je veux consacrer ma plume'. French translation by Bernard de Montgolfier. Wilhelm 1968, 6. However, Jacques Wilhelm did not think that Ménage's poem refers to this Lefèvre's painting. Bulletin du Musée Carnavalet 1968. Wilhelm 1968, 4.

1016 In the 1800s, it was thought that Pierre Mignard was the greatest portrait painter of his time. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he had his name on



*Fig 23: Madame de Sévigné (1665) by Claude Lefèvre.  
Hôtel Carnavalet, Paris.  
Agence Photographique de la RMN-Grand Palais.*

*livres* for the king's portrait, and in 1670, Lefèvre earned 1,000 *livres* for four paintings of the queen and crown prince. In 1674, the king ordered two additional portraits of himself

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thousands of paintings. Wilhelm 1968, 3. The painting mentioned in Mme de Sévigné's letter to Mme de Grignan (7 August 1675) has previously been considered as Mignard's painting. The portrait is now believed to be the work of Claude Lefèvre.

from Mignard. For these, the artist received 6,600 *livres*.<sup>1017</sup> The status and position of the person represented clearly affected the price of the painting.<sup>1018</sup> Naturally, a portrait of the king was the most expensive type, but the portraits ordered by Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos had been expensive even although it is impossible to give an exact figure. In other words, these portraits not only reflected their beauty and external features, they also symbolised elite status and wealth that were essential to building an elite identity through the art.

However, the identity of the painters or the existence of portraits in the possession of those who were portrayed is uncertain, because family portraits are not usually mentioned in testaments or post-mortem inventories.<sup>1019</sup> This is also the case with Ninon de Lenclos: neither her testament from 1704 nor her estate inventory deed from 1705 mention her own portraits.<sup>1020</sup> Madame de Sévigné was depicted in several portraits, as was the custom in wealthy families. Yet only one, a portrait by Noret is still in the *château des Rochers*.<sup>1021</sup> Nevertheless, it has been possible to piece together the lives of two Parisian elite women based on surviving portraits, in which the imperishable beauty, the ideals and essence associated with the 17th-century elite are immortalized.

It is not only through portraits, but also in literary depictions, *portraits littéraires*<sup>1022</sup> that these perfect representatives of the elite are outlined. Mademoiselle de Scudéry depicts Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos in *Clélie*. Her portrayals combine the style of the period's poets as well as the annalists in that the characters are described as perfect. As the character Clarice, Ninon is represented as one

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1017 Visage du Grand siècle 1997, 157.

1018 Visage du Grand siècle 1997, 158.

1019 Wilhelm 1968, 6.

1020 Testament d'Anne de Lenclos 19 décembre 1704. Magne 1912, 196–197. Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705. Magne 1912, 202–218.

1021 Wilhelm 1968, 6.

1022 The idea in *portraits littéraires* was to describe people in a literary form, and thus 'make the invisible visible, or show how the body reflects the soul'. Tikanoja 2009, 101.

of the world's most charming characters with a special *esprit* and disposition. She is able to please everyone and is loved by the most respectable people of the court; *les plus honnêtes gens de la cour*.<sup>1023</sup> She has an attractive figure, a round face, a pleasant mouth, rosy lips, black, glowing, humorous eyes, and hair of the most beautiful auburn colour ever seen.<sup>1024</sup> In *Clélie* (1658) she is described as if she was a maiden in the full blossom of youth, but in reality Ninon de Lenclos was 35 years old at this time, approaching an advanced age for a 17th-century woman.

Madame de Sévigné was also past thirty when Mademoiselle de Scudéry presented her as the character Clarinte<sup>1025</sup> with blonde hair, incredibly white skin, the most beautiful lips in the world, blue eyes, a neck of exceptional form and a glowing persona.<sup>1026</sup> *Clélie* diffused the knowledge of Madame de Sévigné's enchanting character and looks, not just to the court, but also into the provinces<sup>1027</sup> – as it did for Ninon de Lenclos. However, contrary to *portraits littéraires*, in art portraits, Ninon de Lenclos' hair is dark and her face is oval. The portraits of Madame de Sévigné reveal, in turn, a woman whose hair is light brown and her neck appears short. In other words, both art portraits and literary descriptions illustrate women whose representations match the period's ideals of a respectable woman's outward appearance and prevailing beauty standards.

However, there were people who did not wish to give the crown of beauty queen to all women who were acknowledged to be beautiful. The Grande Mademoiselle, for example, presented *précieuses* in her *Divers Portraits*. Earlier, precious women had been described as young and attractive, but now

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1023 Duchêne 2000, 218.

1024 Duchêne 2000, 214.

1025 Costar to Mme de Sévigné spring 1658. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 46.

1026 Duchêne 2002, 208–209. According to Somaize, Mme de Sévigné was '*blonde, et a une blancheur qui répond admirablement à la beauté de ses cheveux. Les traits de son visage sont déliés, son teint est uni, et tout cela ensemble compose une des plus agréables femmes d'Athènes [...]*'. Somaize. *Le grand dictionnaire des précieuses*, 1661. Duchêne 2001, 519

1027 Costar to Mme de Sévigné spring 1658. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 46.



the Grande Mademoiselle depicts them as old and repulsive spinsters.<sup>1028</sup> This work, however, did not amuse the French elite. Overwhelmingly, during this time sources focusing on beauty issues see the sacred preserve of respectable women. It was not possible to describe them as ugly because they had been acknowledged to be beautiful. If one did so, one offended *honnêteté* and in effect broke the rules of social custom.

Both visual and verbal descriptions accentuated the beautiful features of the elite. Through the literary depictions the properties of elite women came across as mental images, but through portraits they gained a more concrete form, and were within reach visually. Portraits and *portraits littéraires*, I claim, had their undeniable worth and meaning. In this respect, French elite women were able to fashion themselves through their appearance which gave them the everyday essence as women of the elite, and finished a whole process which formed a respectable woman.

## 2. Style and *comportement parfait*

### Fashionable and *honnêtes Parisiennes*

*Mode*, more precisely, a habit of dressing which is adopted from the court. The French changed their *mode* every day. Foreigners follow French *mode*, with the exception of the Spanish, who never change their mode. The most insane people create it.<sup>1029</sup>

Furetière emphasises his contemporaries' effusive fascination with *mode*, and 17th-century France's position as a bellwether with regard to style. As Jennifer M. Jones argues, fashion's whims were related to Frenchness rather than

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<sup>1028</sup> Duchêne 2001, 169, 194.

<sup>1029</sup> 'Mode, se dite plus particulièrement des manières de s'habiller suivant l'usage reçu à la Cour. Les François changent tous les jours de mode. Les étrangers suivent la mode des François, à la réserve des Espagnols, qui ne changent jamais de mode. Les plus extravagants sont ceux qui inventent la mode'. Furetière Tome II 1690.

to the differences between the sexes, and *la mode* was an indication of ‘class and privilege’.<sup>1030</sup> Kathrine L. French states justifiably that clothes are an ancient innovation, but fashion itself is not.<sup>1031</sup> Ylivuori, in turn, argues that ‘[...] assuming identities through dressing in the early modern period was not simply a masquerade-like external play with superficial roles, but instead involved deeper questions of personal identity’.<sup>1032</sup> Since the body was perceived as a mirror of the soul, clothing also rose to play an important role in the world of *savoir-vivre*,<sup>1033</sup> and according to Melchior-Bonnet, clothing united people, whereas the body separated them.<sup>1034</sup> Outward appearance, together with elegant behaviour, was the basis of respectability. A first appearance with a new person was significant, and the positive attention of a new person was pursued using external signs such as lace, ribbons and fine materials;<sup>1035</sup> choosing them was a careful task.<sup>1036</sup> A groomed and gilded appearance also conveyed the notion that a person valued other people. Du Bosc emphasises that as with words were well-chosen in a conversation, clothing was also expected to suit the occasion.<sup>1037</sup> Considering the high social status of *la marquise* and the courtesan, it is unlikely that Madame de Sévigné or Ninon de Lenclos would not have paid attention to these facts when preparing themselves to receive the guests or to pay a visit in *la société*. For them a carefully prepared outlook was a powerful means of self-fashioning.

Fashion was not a private matter and, as DeJean claims, dressing developed new dimensions: it was there to be seen by everyone when members of the elite promenaded on the

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<sup>1030</sup> Jones 2004, 37.

<sup>1031</sup> French 2013, 198. See also, for example, Castiglione (1528) 1690, 184–87.

<sup>1032</sup> Ylivuori 2015, 143.

<sup>1033</sup> Courtin 1728, Du Bosc 1632, Grenaille 1640.

<sup>1034</sup> Melchior-Bonnet 2004, 157–158.

<sup>1035</sup> Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 6 November 1676. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 442; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 13 June 1685. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 202. See also, Melchior-Bonnet 2004, 157–158. Jones 2004, 21.

<sup>1036</sup> Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 21 August 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 374.

<sup>1037</sup> Du Bosc 1632, 301.



Fig. 24: *La Mode triomphant en la Place du Change*.  
Bibliothèque nationale en France.

streets of Paris.<sup>1038</sup> To understand better the situation among the Parisian elite and their interest in fashion, it is noteworthy that 17th-century Paris was a centre of fashion, and the city's women were the most chic in Europe. Sebastiano Locatelli was confused about the finished appearance of Parisian women of the 1660s: their clothes, hair, and jewellery were, to the mind of the Italian traveller, majestic.<sup>1039</sup> Vigarello points out that even though the engraving *La Mode triomphant en la Place du Change*, 1650 (Fig. 24) mocks a materialized art in the centre of cities, it validates the fact that *la mode*, trade, personal comportment and *la civilité* had established their place among the elite.<sup>1040</sup>

Personal taste and the way it was performed was to be judged, praised and evaluated by *les égaux* and this was a fact

<sup>1038</sup> DeJean 2014, 144.

<sup>1039</sup> Locatelli (1664–1665) 1905, 325. In 1673, Donneau de Visé, an author and publisher, who established the magazine *Mercure Galant*, considered that France was the empire of the world's fashion, *l'empire de la mode*. DeJean 2014, 167.

<sup>1040</sup> Vigarello 2004, 59.

that neither Madame de Sévigné nor Ninon de Lenclos could ignore. Their self-conscious performances as members of the elite forced them to create a perfect outward identity that they or artist who created literary and pictorial depictions could have been fashioned or – even manipulated. This is related to the idea that luxury and property, including the consumption of clothing and jewellery, were a part of identity.<sup>1041</sup> As I have pointed in *Chez elle* (Chapter III:2), both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos struggled to create a private space, a Parisian *appartement* that was suitable for the members of the elite. The same need to create perfect look of one of the elite's *honnêtes gens* can be pointed to when one examines their consumption of clothes and jewellery. In this respect, it was a great advantage that they both lived in Paris, the 17th-century capital of fashion, elegance, luxury and consumption.

How should a respectable woman consider her clothing? In the Middle Ages, clothes defined gender and societal status and revealed one's conviction, pride or humility. It was possible to use clothes to create new identities and a *personne* was also able to hide behind them.<sup>1042</sup> Among the 17th-century elite, both men and women were also expected to restrain themselves in that their clothing, like their hairstyles,<sup>1043</sup> should be in accord with a person's age, gender, and social position.<sup>1044</sup> Pierre Nicole accentuates that 'nothing is more difficult for *filles et aux femmes du monde* than to remain in exact *modestie* with regard to their habits'.<sup>1045</sup> To him habits were only rags that the devil had given to human with the purpose of disguising his innocence.<sup>1046</sup> Grenaille, in turn, reminds us of the meaning of Christian morality and moderation in clothing: an *honneste fille* should not bedeck

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1041 Chatenet-Calyste 2015, 181. See also, Mousnier 1978, 179.

1042 French 2013, 201, 203.

1043 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 8 April 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 213.

1044 Courtin 1728, 127. François de Sales also emphasises that besides the demand for modesty, contemporary standards required that clothing was appropriate to the occasion, one's age and status. Sales 1641, 282.

1045 Nicole Tome 5 1715, 203.

1046 Nicole Tome 13 1715, 207.

herself too much; furthermore, someone who had chosen not to marry should not appear as if she was married or was looking for a husband.<sup>1047</sup> He adds that a *coquette* who decorated herself had abandoned God and virginity as she had dressed too elaborately.<sup>1048</sup> Like Grenaille, François de Sales stresses moderation in clothing: a wife should beautify herself only if her husband wants her to.<sup>1049</sup> In addition, propriety, *bienséance*, should prevent members of the elite from laughing at the clothing of their equals, but all overly extravagant clothing could become the object of open ridicule.<sup>1050</sup>

Regardless of the ideal of moderation and opprobrium that over-extravagant personal adornment could cause, it is evident, on the basis of her letters, that Madame de Sévigné loved clothing; ‘what a weakness I have for fashion’ she announced,<sup>1051</sup> and this included both women’s and men’s fashions.<sup>1052</sup> Her interest in *la mode* did not make her less *honnête*; on the contrary, it gave her stronger link to *société*. For the elite 17th-century French fashion was characterised by glamour, extravagance, colour and opulence; this was emphasised in festivities at court<sup>1053</sup> where fashion was largely created. Antoine de Courtin gave the advice to at least know someone who visited the court if one was not able to do that oneself.<sup>1054</sup> Thus, a person could avoid the uncomfortable feeling of being unfashionable. He emphasises that a person should not only follow the fashions at court, but express above all ‘*de l’esprit, & de la vertu*’.<sup>1055</sup>

Indeed, the everyday dress code at court was extravagant

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1047 Grenaille (1640) 2003, 462.

1048 Grenaille (1640) 2003, 471.

1049 Sales 1641, 282.

1050 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 5 January 1674. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 656–657.

1051 ‘[...] *quelque faiblesse que j’ai pour les modes*’. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 19 August 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 324.

1052 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 31 May 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 262; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 19 August 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 324; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 13 June 1685. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 202.

1053 Sternberg 2014, 39. See also, Weigert 1962, 144–145.

1054 Courtin 1728, 126–127. See also, Faret 1630, 88–89.

1055 Courtin 1728, 127.

and even more so during festivities. Madame de Sévigné's presentation at court added sartorial pressure. As a woman of the elite, she wanted to blend in with the court and yet also stand out favourably. The courtly culture inevitably encouraged consumption and constantly created new needs for the elite.<sup>1056</sup> Ninon de Lenclos, for her part, had a social necessity to look like a fashionable *honneste femme* of her epoch. For a courtesan, dressing and paying attention to outward appearance, or splendour in living, was not only a question of respectability, it was also a factor that partly secured her income and attached her to circle of the *honnêtes gens*. It is noteworthy that the clothing of 16th and 17th-century courtesans was different from the that of courtesans in earlier centuries;<sup>1057</sup> thus, the appearance of women who sold themselves at this time exhibited wealth and a secure social position, albeit a questionable one.

Consumption related to clothes was divided in military nobility, *noblesse de l'épée* and administrative nobility, *noblesse de la robe*, and between women and men. Clothing, as well as other material consumption of the elite, was gendered: a woman's wardrobe was twice as costly as a man's and particularly the military nobility and the nobility that visited the court consumed fashion.<sup>1058</sup> Some members of the elite could spend huge amounts on luxury items or on clothing. Indeed, clothing was an important means of self-fashioning and it seems very likely that Madame de Sévigné or Ninon de Lenclos had all that was required to emphasise perfectly polished elite outer appearance. It is possible that they might have also bought garments simply for the pleasure of owning, using or wearing them. Their consumption habits were relatively moderate<sup>1059</sup> and according to Madame de

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<sup>1056</sup> Chatenet-Calyste 2015, 174. See also, Goldsmith 1988, 61.

<sup>1057</sup> From 1386, women who lived a so-called dissolute life were forbidden under threat of penalty to dress like respectable women. During the 15th century, the outfits of wealthy prostitutes already bespoke of their status: they dressed in silk and decorated the trains of their dresses with the skins of Siberian chipmunk or pine marten. Sauval 1883, 61–63.

<sup>1058</sup> Roche 1989, 97–98. See also, Whittle & Griffiths 2012, 151.

<sup>1059</sup> Mme de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos avoided, for example, personal debt

Sévigné's letters or Ninon de Lenclos's estate inventory deed neither of them succumbed, I suggest, to overstatements regarding their toilette. Nevertheless, they both could fashion themselves as tasteful members of the elite. It would seem that the elite purchased a lot in one fell swoop, as evidenced by Madame de Sévigné and some other ladies who chose as wide range of items when they had an appointment with *couturier & marchande de tissus*, Madame Lemoine.<sup>1060</sup>

In 1678, during the golden age of costumes and outfits among the court and the nobility, the Parisian *Mercure Galant*—magazine reported on fashion and described a new sense of relaxation about clothing. According to this magazine, people were not now wearing courtly outfits except on ceremonial occasions.<sup>1061</sup> However, there were some “must haves” for elite women and one of them was a *manteau*. The *manteau* was in fashion for decades and Duchess of Orléans wrote in 1721, that even though she personally did not like the *manteau*, she had to wear a *manteau* in order not to appear ridiculous.<sup>1062</sup>

A *manteau* was a full-length, coat-like outfit, that was worn on top of a skirt with a tight bodice and broad a hemline. The hemline was raised up at the sides and at the back, so that the underskirt or lining's fabric with its embroidery was shown (Fig. 25). By the 1680s, this novelty was a woman's basic outfit, which was sold by the Parisian seller, Gautier.<sup>1063</sup> Since Madame de Sévigné's state inventory deed mentions nothing about clothes, it is impossible to reconstruct completely the wardrobe which she owned. She knew, however, the

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even though they fashioned elite lifestyle. See Chapter II:4.

1060 'Nous avons pris un très beau manteau, une belle jupe, de la toile d'or et d'argent pour une toilette, et de quoi faire un corps de jupe, la dentelle pour la jupe, la toilette, une petite pour les sachets, pour les coiffes noires. Les souliers, la perruque, les rubans, tout sera admirablement beau'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 21 August 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 375. According to Duchêne, Mme de Sévigné chose 'la toile du dessus, d'or et d'argent, et la dentelle pour la toile dessous. She also chose une petite dentelle pour les sachets, sorte de cousins, et pour les coiffes noires ou dessus de coiffes'. Duchêne's comment. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 1276.

1061 DeJean 2009, 190. See also, Boucher 1987, 256.

1062 Von der Pfalz (1652–1722) 1984, 272.

1063 DeJean 2009, 190. *Manteau* was mentioned first time in *Mercure Galant* in 1678. DeJean 2009, 190.

aforementioned seller<sup>1064</sup> and in August 1676 she wrote ‘[...] we bought a very beautiful *manteau* [...]’.<sup>1065</sup> Furthermore, she followed fashion and paid attention to what was appropriate in clothing. In this light, it is very likely that she also followed this fashion fad, and obtained this garment as she knew what *société* expected concerning female attire.

Two-dimensional images, prints and paintings are problematic evidence of 17th-century habits.<sup>1066</sup> The Ninon de Lenclos we see in the portraits could be considered as a representative of the elite woman down to every last detail. In a portrait by Louis Ferdinand Elle the Younger, the courtesan’s dress has a bodice, on top of which there is a cloth that is attached between the breasts with a brooch decorated with pearls. Fashionable elite women’s luxurious dresses meant robes in which the top part was open, revealing the neckline and a woman’s breasts as much as possible. In portraits both by Ferdinand Elle the Younger and Pierre Mignard, Ninon de Lenclos’ shoulders are bare and the broad neckline reveals her breasts in a sensuous way. This revealing style of clothing was meant to attract men’s attention and it stayed in fashion throughout the 17th century.<sup>1067</sup> Bold, but somehow tasteful, the fashion was not recommended for a respectable woman.<sup>1068</sup> When we compare the portraits of Ninon de Lenclos with Lefèvre’s portrait of Madame de Sévigné it is noticeable that although the neckline is more modest, the style is still fashionable. *La marquise* de Sévigné was virtuous, but as an elite woman should be, she was also *à la mode*.

In Mignard’s painting, courtesan de Lenclos is seated, almost resting, in a dark blue dress and it is interesting to ponder why she is wearing mainly blue. Blue is a colour that can be seen in various 17th-century paintings of the French

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1064 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 13 June 1685. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 202.

1065 ‘[...] *Nous avons pris un très beau manteu* [...]’. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 21 August 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 375.

1066 See, for example, Breward 1995, 77.

1067 Ribeiro 1986, 82.

1068 Liancourt 1698, 40–41.





Fig. 25: *Déshabillé d'hyver* (1678) by La Pautre (d'après Berain).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

royal family,<sup>1069</sup> but similarly many paintings of the Virgin Mary represent her wearing a blue robe as a sign of her spirituality.<sup>1070</sup> As fashioning the layers of an elite woman was a careful performance, it seems plausible to believe that Ninon de Lenclos paid attention to every detail of her dress especially in portraits that were visual evidence of her status and character.

Although Ninon de Lenclos outwardly represented the *honneste femmes*, certain curiosities of behaviour were associated with her and according to des Réaux, she used to dress like a man.<sup>1071</sup> Did Ninon de Lenclos as a legendary

<sup>1069</sup> See, for example, Louis XIV (1701) by Hyacinthe Riagaud; Marie-Theresa of Austria by Charles Beaubrun; Louis-Auguste de Bourbon (c. 1685) by François de Troy.

<sup>1070</sup> Berry 1989, 28.

<sup>1071</sup> Des Réaux 1906, 239.

courtesan wished to have a man's power and defy the prevailing gender roles in this way? Was courtesan de Lenclos' behaviour so different from that of other women of her epoch? Could the vices of the courtesan be seen as adventures and virtues, that were not completely detached from the idea of *honnêteté*? According to visual sources, Ninon de Lenclos seemed outwardly to be a perfect woman. Cross-dressing was, however, not unheard of. Madame de Sévigné, for example, describes a dance spectacle in which a man was dressed as a woman and one could see his '*fort belles jambs*'.<sup>1072</sup> In addition, noble women worn men's clothes during wartime<sup>1073</sup> and these women were admired rather than despised.<sup>1074</sup> On the other hand, during the Middle Ages a woman dressed in man's clothing was seen as defiant, as though by wearing men's clothing she was adopting men's rights, such as power, freedom of mobility and authority.<sup>1075</sup> Steinberg also stresses that during the *Ancien Régime* cross-dressing was an act to punishable by law.<sup>1076</sup> If Ninon de Lenclos ever dressed as man, it might have been, I suggest, just for entertainment rather than a serious attempt to fashion and strengthen her status as one of the *honnêtes hommes*.

Along with the portraits, the source material also suggests that Ninon de Lenclos' attire did not differ from those of other elite women, such as Madame de Sévigné's. When Mademoiselle de Lenclos died at the age 82, she left behind an up-to-date wardrobe. As the years had passed, the impecunious Ninon de Lenclos gathered property and adopted a refined outward appearance suitable for the elite and for the *honneste femme*. Her profession also meant

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1072 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 26 May 26 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 302.

1073 Steinberg 2001, 213. See also, Ranum 2002, 150.

1074 'Ladite dame, à ce qu'on dit, Avoit un masculin habit [...] Mais que la beauté du fardeau Rendit encore cent fois plus beau. Je croy que la belle guerrière eût mieux aimé coche ou litière ; [...] Et par-tout ses charmes vainqueurs Ouvroient les portes et les cœurs'. Loret 1857-1891, 168.

1075 French 2013, 201, 203. Even though men's and women's clothes differed, nevertheless women's fashionable riding dresses (and wigs), for example, took their inspiration from men's riding habits. Arnold 1999, 16-17.

1076 Steinberg 2001, VIII.



Fig. 26: *Ninon de Lenclos* by Pierre de Mignard.  
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Marseille.

being on display and associating with high-ranking elite, and this required immaculate grooming and a fashionable wardrobe. The wardrobe on the second floor of Ninon de Lenclos' *appartement* contained, among other clothing, two fashionable *manteaux*; one was made of taffeta and a *petit* was made of satin embroidered with flowers (*de satin blanc à fleurs prise*). There were also skirts that were made of taffeta, satin, embroidered satin and damask, scarves, white linen sleeves accessorized with lace of Malines, bonnets, a dressing gown accessorized with lace, an underskirt and a corset covered with black satin.<sup>1077</sup> The corset at this time was more than just a garment; it was a status symbol linked to courtly fashion and associated with careful self-presentation.<sup>1078</sup> The estate inventory estimates that together with some bedlinen, the value of the wardrobe's contents is 129 *livres*, which is three times the value of Mademoiselle de Lenclos' book collection.

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<sup>1077</sup> *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*.  
Magne 1912, 211–214.

<sup>1078</sup> Roche 1989, 124.

In addition, another smaller room contained more of her clothes, worth 60 *livres*.<sup>1079</sup>

Dress was the most expensive piece of the female garde-robe<sup>1080</sup> and Ninon de Lenclos owned at least five colourful dresses or gowns (*robe de chambre*) that were lined with taffeta.<sup>1081</sup> According to Roche's calculations based on the inventories, in 1700, the contents of a hundred noble women's wardrobes reveal that each of them owned a skirt, sixteen owned a dress, ninety-one had a *manteau*, forty-six an apron, three a coat, twelve a cape (*palatine*), sixteen a pair of shoes and fifty-three a corset (*corps*).<sup>1082</sup> In comparison to this, Ninon de Lenclos' wardrobe was positively luxurious.<sup>1083</sup> The clothes that are mentioned in Mademoiselle de Lenclos' estate inventory deed put her on the level of nobility and create an image of a woman who was both wealthy and elegant. Ninon de Lenclos' choice of clothing ensured that her outward appearance was equivalent to that of the *honnêtes gens*. That coupled with her intellectual sophistication meant that her inner sophistication and outer being were represented in harmony. In this her *honnêteté* was equal to that of any respectable woman.

Clothing and a perfectly polished appearance, which united elite women, separated them from those who wanted to highlight their devoutness. On the 5th January 1674, Madame de Sévigné wrote: '[...] Madame de Thianges does not use *rouge* anymore and she covers her throat. It is almost impossible to recognise her in that disguise'.<sup>1084</sup> Madame de

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1079 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lanclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 211–214.

1080 Baulant 2006, 10.

1081 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lanclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 211, 213–214.

1082 Roche 1989, 123.

1083 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lanclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 210–213.

1084 '[...] Mme de Thianges ne met plus de rouge et cache sa gorge, vous avez peine à la reconnaître avec ce déguisement'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 5 January 1674. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 655. In 1674, *la marquise* wrote that she did not like the shabby outward appearance of la Marans, who was also a *dévote*. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 15 January 1674. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 669.

Thiangès had been fashionable, but after she had become *dévot*e, she did not want to wear outfits that would have revealed too much bare skin. Her example is illuminating: it reveals how clothing, as well as make-up, was one way for the elite women to fashion themselves. Just as devout women like les filles de la Charité and Louise de Marillac emphasised their status and values by wearing black clothing,<sup>1085</sup> so too secular Parisian elite women used fashion as a way of performing the female ideals of their peers.

Aging did not erase elite women's concern or social need to look beautiful, elegant, fashionable and respectable. Whereas the young *honneste femme* had to remember to avoid incomplete clothing, the older ones had to avoid excess.<sup>1086</sup> Even in the face of death an elite woman would wish to ensure that her outward appearance was as tidy as possible.<sup>1087</sup> Aged 45, Madame de Sévigné obtained a very enchanting dress (*robe de chambre*), where there was a touch of green, though violet was the main colour. The dress was of a generous size, as was the one that had been purchased for her daughter. A dress the colour of fire had been suggested, but the Marquise considered that immoral.<sup>1088</sup> Her reaction shows that colours had meaning and she wanted to follow good taste and the principles of *honnêteté*. To the Marquise the *couleur de feu* might have been too closely connected with red, and in this respect, she might have thought that the colour of fire resembled too much red and its associations with the sexual impulse,<sup>1089</sup> even though strong colours were in fashion.<sup>1090</sup> However, aged 58, Madame de Sévigné, who

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1085 Peake 2015.

1086 Du Bosc 1632, 299.

1087 Mme de Sévigné reports that her dying aunt sat tidily in her chair: '[...] avec sa robe de chambre, sa cornette, une coiffe noir par-dessus'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 24 June 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 539.

1088 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 24 April 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 233. In the same letter, the Marquise makes the practical remark that the dress was not expensive.

1089 Berry 1989, 28.

1090 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 5 January 1674 Sévigné Tome I 1972, 656–657; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 6 November 1676. Sévigné Tome II, 442. See also, La Pautre Berain's *Déshabillé*

was having dinner with *la princesse*, was wearing a colourful dress: '*une bonne robe de chambre bien chaude [...] fort jolie, et cette juppe violette, or et argent [...]*'.<sup>1091</sup> Colours like gold and silver played an important part in a respectable woman's – even an aged woman's – garde-robes,<sup>1092</sup> and of course an elite woman should not appear at elite meetings wearing an old dress:

My request to you is to enquire of Mme de Chaulnes what kind of summer dress I shall need in order to pay her a visit in Rennes. [...] I have one of taffeta silk with brown spots, whose cuffs and hems are trimmed with silver fabric. But I believe this is not fashionable anymore, and I should not wish to appear ridiculous in Rennes, where all is magnificent.<sup>1093</sup>

Nevertheless, it would be easy for a viewer to be misled by the gilded appearance and layered dresses. Outwardly, the elite covered themselves with clothes, which reflected their *honnêteté*, their gender and status. Although the hems in women's dresses covered their ankles and legs, protected by stockings, underneath the layers of fabric, no underwear was used, which meant that sexual access was unimpeded.<sup>1094</sup> Regardless of the necessity to be chaste, women's outfits left room for the manifestation of sexuality in other ways besides necklines. Fashion in itself made it easier to have sex and it allocated women to a position in which their bodies were

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*d'hiver* (1678) above. Weigert 1962, 14. *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lanclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 211–214.

1091 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 November 1684. Sévigné Tome III, 164.

1092 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 21 August 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 375. See also, *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lanclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 211–212.

1093 '*Je vous prie aussi de consulter Mme de Chaulnes pour l'habit d'été qu'il me faut pour l'aller voir à Rennes. [...] J'ai un habit de taffetas brun piqué, avec des campanes d'argent aux manches un peu relevées, et au bas de la jupe, mais je crois que ce n'est plus la mode, et il ne se faut pas jouer être ridicule à Rennes où tout est magnifique*'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 13 June 1685. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 202.

1094 Muchembled 2008, 87.

partly unprotected, despite their clothes.

A perfect, respectable outfit:  
a combination of embellishments

A perfect outfit was not executed without *embellissements*. In 16th-century Italy the beginning of the fashion of placing jewellery directly against the skin, in order to further accentuate a woman's beauty, was begun. Jewellery could be worn against the skin of a broad neckline and droplet-shaped pearl earrings were in fashion throughout the 17th century. Pearl necklaces, like other pearl jewellery, such as brooches, were in fashion and they could be used to adorn hairstyles;<sup>1095</sup> symbolically pearls represented purity, humility and harmony.<sup>1096</sup> In other words, jewellery not only gave finishing touches to one's appearance, but it also had symbolic value.

Colourful jewellery was also popular in Louis XIV's Paris, and their colours were emphasised by enamelling.<sup>1097</sup> Society women used jewellery to fashion themselves fully aware that their outward appearance would be observed and discussed. Madame de Sévigné describes how the triumphant beauty of *maréchale de La Meilleraye* was not only a question of clothing, but also a perfect combination of a coiffure of a thousand curls (*de mille boucles*), black ribbons and pearls.<sup>1098</sup> Thus, personal adornment with precious stones was one further means to fashion status and identity for members of the elite. However, women's personal embellishments combined with exquisite clothing underlined the tensions between the sexes.<sup>1099</sup>

Both Ninon de Lenclos and Madame de Sévigné were depicted wearing both pearl and enamelled jewellery. In portraits of Madame de Sévigné painted by Noret (Fig. 27)

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<sup>1095</sup> Tamminen 2014, 74.

<sup>1096</sup> Tillander-Godenhjelm 2014, 81. See also, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 21 March 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 195.

<sup>1097</sup> Tamminen 2014, 74. Expensive jewels could, of course, be replaced by fake ones. Boucher 1987, 256. DeJean 2014, 163.

<sup>1098</sup> Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 July 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 352.

<sup>1099</sup> Pointon 2009, 19.

and Lefèbvre (see Chapter V:1), the Marquise is wearing a pearl necklace and the bodice of her dress is decorated with enamelled gemstones and pearl brooches. In Lefèbvre's portrait pearls and enamelled gemstones embellish her sleeve. In Louis Ferdinand Elle the Younger's portrait of Ninon de Lenclos, she wears a pearl necklace, a brooch made of pearls, and an enamelled gemstone is attached to the bodice of her dress. The pearls also decorate Lenclos' hair, which has been curled according to fashion. In Mignard's painting, Ninon de Lenclos has large droplet-shaped pearl earrings, a pearl necklace, and a round enamelled gemstone framed by pearls on her sleeve. In these portraits, we see two elite women whose jewellery reminds us of their status, wealth and style. Once again, the respectable *marquise* and the courtesan both resemble members of the elite; in other words, their outward appearance is respectable in every detail.

However, the jewellery worn by these two women poses a few problems. In Anne de Lanclos' *inventaire après décès*, no reference is made to jewellery. Although pearl jewels were expensive, de Lenclos could have afforded them and it is likely that her lovers would have given her jewels as gifts. Did Ninon de Lenclos borrow her jewellery for portraits; have they perhaps been later sold later; were they given away before she died, or were they simply not mentioned when the inventory was made? Unfortunately, we can only speculate about these questions for only visual sources suggest that she owned *bijoux*. In the case of Madame de Sévigné, some of her rings and other jewellery are mentioned in her marriage contract: in the case of death, Henri de Sévigné would have had his wife's clothes, rings, jewellery, carriage and horses, which were worth 10,000 *livres*.<sup>1100</sup> In addition to visual sources, Madame de Sévigné's letters confirm that genuine gemstones were part of her understanding of what constituted an elite and she wrote about sending money to her daughter for the

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<sup>1100</sup> MC/RSS/498. *Contrat de Mariage entre Henri, marquis de Sévigné and Marie Rabutin-Chantal*. 1.8.1644. Archives nationales. Paris.





*Fig. 27: Marie de Rabutin-Chantal (c. 1644) by Jean Nocret  
Château des Rochers, ville de Vitré.*

purpose of purchasing rubies.<sup>1101</sup> In her letters from 1671 she also mentioned a diamond recut for a ring that she gave to her daughter.<sup>1102</sup> By doing so, she also ensured that her daughter had visible signs of an *honnête* appearance. However, the estate inventory deed made in *Hôtel Carnavalet*, Paris, makes no references to jewellery. Given that respectable women of 17th century French society were considered incomplete without jewellery, we can only speculate about what happened to the jewels that had been seen in the paintings of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos.

Fashion and style were double-edged swords. As with the manners of the women of the elite, so too their outward appearance became an object of satirical critique. Clothing was viewed as trickery, and for the 17th-century woman to succeed in her cunning, she needed a disguise.<sup>1103</sup> Extravagance and periodic excess, often seen in the activity and self-presentation of the elite, were questioned. This lifestyle included duties, but like any lifestyle based on status, it required assets. In addition to questions of morality and conscience, this matter made fashionable appearance challenging. On the other hand, *les honnêtes gens* could use outward signs to achieve a goal and maintain, raise – or lose – his or her social position. In this respect, it was better for the respectable woman to aspire to a perfect outward appearance and be an unquestionable *belle* of her *époque* rather than being virtuous, ugly and humble. The following section discusses this dilemma and endeavours to understand the meaning of female beauty in the context of *honnêteté*.

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1101 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 13 June 1685. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 202.

1102 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 2 February 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 149; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 9 February 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 151.

1103 Ribeiro 1986, 93.

### 3. Mirrors reflecting vain women or respectable belles?

*Je suis belle, pomponnée – et oui, honnête!*

[...] Many virtues and perfections of spirit are as necessary to a woman as to a man. [...] I think that beauty is more necessary to her than to a man of the court, because a woman is lacking a lot if she is not beautiful.<sup>1104</sup>

Writing in the early sixteenth century, Castiglione stresses the difference between a man and a woman: man could be plain, but a woman could not. Thus, if a male courtier was less than handsome this did not directly decrease his qualities as a man. In other words, the criteria of beauty and ugliness were uniting factors of status, but they also separated, and furthered discrimination. Beauty was considered a feminine attribute, which meant that ugly women were seen as masculine, prompting Mademoiselle de Scudéry asked the well-founded question; why a man was allowed to be ugly, but a woman not.<sup>1105</sup>

Perfect beauty was essential and a bright mind radiated from a beautiful face; in the 16th century, beauty was generally seen as a sign of moral goodness. However, as the Porters note, the 17th century ideal was a healthy beauty, but this was often covered over by artificial beauty among the elite.<sup>1106</sup> Grenaille, for one, condemned make-up. According to him, an *honneste fille* wearing make-up was no longer able to see God, and God was no longer able to see her, because the *honneste fille* did not resemble the being she was created.<sup>1107</sup> However, Grenaille adds, respectability, *honnêteté*, did not survive, unless the body was also cared for. A groomed appearance made respectability

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<sup>1104</sup> '[...] Il y a des vertus & des perfections d'esprit autant nécessaires à la femme qu'à l'homme. [...] La beauté luy est plus nécessaire qu'au Courtesan; parce qu'on peut dire qu'il manque beaucoup à une femme, quand elle n'est point belle'. Castiglione (1528) 1690, 305–306.

<sup>1105</sup> Aronson 1978, 128.

<sup>1106</sup> Porter R., Porter D. 1988, 54.

<sup>1107</sup> Grenaille (1640) 2003, 474. See also, Liancourt 1698, 41.

visible.<sup>1108</sup>

In the 17th century it was not considered essential to wash the whole body and it would not even have been possible without great efforts. Even though, as Madame de Sévigné's case has shown, an *honnête* elite woman would have servants, firewood and so on to fulfil her needs for cleanliness if necessary; however, bathing was rare as were bathing facilities.<sup>1109</sup> Although washing was not part of the everyday routine, it was considered important to keep clean those parts of the body that could be seen by others. Cleanliness was a part of propriety, *bienséance*, and through a smart appearance, a person's virtues and intelligence could be recognised.<sup>1110</sup> Antoine de Courtin enforces this idea when he states:

Cleanliness is an important part of propriety [...] it makes a person's virtue and mind known.<sup>1111</sup>

[...] Because it (tidiness) replaces what is missing. [...] The head is clean, and the eyes and teeth, whose neglect ruins the mouth & contaminates those whom we speak to; likewise, the hands & even the feet [...], the nails should be clipped.<sup>1112</sup>

By examining the sources, it seems evident that for members of the elite, the image of looking clean and tidy had significance. Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos were no doubt aware of the meaning of cleanliness, ablutions and being scented.<sup>1113</sup> Marquise de Sévigné had three and Ninon

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1108 Grenaille (1640) 2003, 452.

1109 DeJean 2009, 67–68.

1110 Da Vinha 2009, 105. See also, Liancourt 1698, 41.

1111 'La Propreté fait une grande partie de la bienséance [...] à faire connoître la vertu & l'esprit'. Courtin 1728, 124.

1112 '[...] Avec cela, il faut avoir soin de se tenir la tête nette, les yeux & les dents, dont la négligence gâte la bouche & infecte ceux à qui nous parlons; les mains aussi, & mêmes les pieds [...], ayant soin de couper les ongles'. Courtin 1728, 129–130.

1113 It plausible to assume that Mme de Sévigné used perfumes: she had, for example, scented a letter addressed to her daughter. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 19 August 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 324. Scented

de Lenclos two silver *esguieres/léguierres* that were used to serve scented water to rinse one's fingers and hands after a meal, or to serve *de l'eau pour la toilette*.<sup>1114</sup> Furthermore, as a professional whose occupation involved intimate contact, Ninon de Lenclos even had, I suggest, an obligation to be attractive, clean, and fragrant. Madame de Sévigné, however, took showers and baths to advance her health, rather than solely to clean herself.<sup>1115</sup> For her, ablutions maintained propriety, *bienséance*, but also helped her cope with the pains of rheumatism.

In constructing absolute beauty, the elite of Louis XIV's time, used make-up to cover flaws and highlight the most attractive features of the face.<sup>1116</sup> It also created an illusion of purity, as did the white ends of sleeves, cuffs, and lace collars, whose spotless whiteness represented the purity of skin and the body. Make-up, powder and perfume were also useful when one wanted to hide the reality of the body and its imperfect cleanliness.<sup>1117</sup> In other words, the beauty ideal was artificially accentuated among *honnêtes gens* and this caused a counter-reaction in those who believed in Christian virtues and who wanted to emphasise their personal virtues by refusing to adorn themselves: Madame de Motteville writes that Queen Anne of Austria was one of those who dressed without manner extraordinaire, luxe but *avec la soin*. Furthermore, after the death of the king, she quit using rouge, and told *les Dames* to follow her example.<sup>1118</sup>

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letters were part of the 'touchable' feeling between the letter writer and its receiver. Mme de Grignan, however, did not like perfumes. Duchêne's comment. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 1149.

1114 MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris. *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 214. Mme de Sévigné mentions *les bassins* to wash hands at masquerade dinner party in Rochers. Mme de Sévigné's letter to her daughter Mme de Grignan 8 February 1690. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 833.

1115 See, for example, Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 1 June 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 307; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 4 June 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 308–309.

1116 Cochet 1998, 103. Porter R., Porter D. 1988, 55.

1117 Cochet 1993, 103–104.

1118 Motteville Tome I 1750, 216–217.

As printing evolved, literature in which health professionals, *professionnels de santé*, revealed the ‘secrets’ of beauty products. One of the earliest books in this field is *Decoration de l’humaine nature et ornement des dames, compose et extraict de tres excellens docteurs et plus experts medicines* (1533) by André Le Fournier. Later works along this line became even more popular. Louise de Bourgeois (1563–1636), Marie de Medici’s midwife, and spouse to a surgeon-barber, wrote several works on women’s health and pregnancy. In 1635, she issued *Recueil de secrets [...] auquel sont continues ses plus rares experiences pour diverses maladies, principalement des femmes, avec leurs embellissements*, which not only covered taking care of some unpleasant female *maladies* but also addressed women’s beauty.<sup>1119</sup> In her book, Louise de Bourgeois covered all the beauty ideals that have been discussed above. She gave advices about taking care of one’s eyes and teeth (*pour faire la bien blanche colorée et belle*), but she also advised women on how to make their breasts appear ‘firm and small’ (*faire mammelles dures & petites*).<sup>1120</sup> Thus, Louise de Bourgeois’ *œuvre*, like others of its ilk, not only enforced beauty ideals, but also provided remedies and tips for elite women seeking beauty.

How far would elite women go to preserve their beauty? Would respectable woman really be willing to apply a warm placenta (*arrière-faix*) to her face to have a clear and smooth skin?<sup>1121</sup> Was it in fact believed that beauty could be preserved? Along with Bourgeois’ book and Marie Meurdrac’s *La chymie charitable et facile en faveur des dames*, gave detailed instructions for women to advance their health and beauty. In her own words, the instructions were not only meant to sustain, but also to increase, the benefits which women received from nature.<sup>1122</sup> At times, however, brutal procedures were involved in making beauty lotions: *Eau de Chair*, for

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1119 It was reprinted in 1653. Duhl 2009, 102–103.

1120 Bourgeois 1635, 7–25, 152–153, 158–174.

1121 Advice which Louise de Bourgeois gave ‘*pour oster les taches du visage, qui viennent de naissance telles qu’elles soient, ou les noirceurs que le fard a laissé sur le visage*’. Bourgeois 1635, 163.

1122 Meurdrac 1674, avant-propos.

example, which was meant to sustain and advance the beauty of the face, included calf legs, a chicken plucked alive, and four one- or two-day-old puppies boiled alive. This potion was to be smeared on one's face three or four nights a week, and wiped off in the morning.<sup>1123</sup> In Meurdrac's book, there are also instructions on how to bleach the face, prevent wrinkles, and rouge the cheeks, and these consist mostly of vegetable substances and chicken eggs.<sup>1124</sup> Thus, the beauty products of this period were mainly based on beliefs in which a downright cruelty to animals was expected to advance and sustain beauty. The brutal and cruel treatment of living beings did not in itself raise criticism. What was criticised was the use of make-up, which was seen as 'misuse of the nuances of virtues'.<sup>1125</sup>

It is impossible to be sure if Madame de Sévigné or Ninon de Lenclos read these books. Since works on this subject were frequently reprinted, women who were literate and interested in make-up and their own appearance, quite likely had the possibility of obtaining manuals. Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos may well have been among such women. As we see from their portraits, fashionable clothing and other embellishments also included make-up. The fair skin, and the rouged cheeks and lips suggest that both women may well have used beauty products to fashion their *honnêteté*. Ninon de Lenclos' estate inventory deed does mention a silver powder case.<sup>1126</sup> Madame de Sévigné's estate inventory deed at *Hôtel Carnavalet* does not mention any beauty tools or products,<sup>1127</sup> but she might have taken those with her to

1123 Meurdrac 1674, 257–258.

1124 Meurdrac 1674, 270, 294 & 301–302.

1125 Melchior-Bonnet 2004, 229. Not all members of the elite used make-up, even though they might consider it morally dubious. The duchess of Orléans, for example, refused to use white make-up, even though *Monsieur* recommended it. Von der Pfalz (1652–1722) 1984, 184.

1126 *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lenclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 214.

1127 An estate inventory deed made in Paris only mentions only the artefacts that the Marquise left in Paris after she had left the city. The document is incomplete: it mentions nothing about the clothes or jewellery of the deceased (cf. *inventaire après décès d'Anne de Lenclos*; de Lenclos' clothes are mentioned but information on the deceased's jewellery is missing). The final list includes only furniture, silver-ware and papers. MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie*

Provence when she travelled to see her daughter in May 1694. On 17 April 1696, Madame de Sévigné died in what twenty-five years earlier she had called the ‘perfectly beautiful’ (*parfaitement beau*) *château de Grignan*<sup>1128</sup> and it may well be that some possessions disappeared between Madame de Sévigné’s death and the writing of the estate inventory deed in Paris. Furthermore, there is not a perfect and complete estate inventory.<sup>1129</sup> However, a painting of Madame de Sévigné’s room in the *château des Rochers* suggests that she had a vanity table in her *chambre* (Fig. 28).<sup>1130</sup>

Lenclos’ beauty was the subject of a tale by A. Bret, according to which a *Noctambule* (night visitor) came when Ninon de Lenclos was twenty. This unknown guest guaranteed her eternal beauty and victory in all things.<sup>1131</sup> Certainly, in reality Ninon de Lenclos no doubt attempted by artificial means to sustain her attractiveness long as possible, promulgating through self-fashioning an image of never changing beauty. On the other hand, she was a woman of her time, and the opportunities for maintaining this were limited, even for elite women. Tallemant des Réaux wrote that Ninon de Lenclos had not been remarkably beautiful when she had been young, but she was pleasing company: she played the flute, danced well and spent time with the women in Le Marais.<sup>1132</sup> It seems that Ninon de Lenclos’ beauty was partly based on her charming behaviour and it was members of the elite who created the image of a beautiful courtesan. Somaize’s description supports this: according to him, Ninon de Lenclos’ appearance was adequate for the practice of love, but her spirituality was more entrancing than her beauty. The

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*de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné* 18.6.1696. Archives nationales. Paris.

1128 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 21 June 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 277.

1129 See, for example, Baulant 2006, 2.

1130 The painting is from the beginning of the twentieth century, but it presents Mme de Sévigné’s room as it still is in *château des Rochers*. Duchêne 1995, 79. The copy of the painting is included in a musée de Carnavalet publication on Mme de Sévigné from March 1996. Mme de Sévigné’s *nécessaire de toilette* is located in *musée des Rochers-Sévigné*. Musée Carnavalet 1996, 29.

1131 Lenclos 1920, 98.

1132 Des Réaux 1906, 237.





Fig 28: *Chambre de Mme de Sévigné in château des Rochers.*  
*Château des Rochers, ville de Vitry.*

power she held over men was more than physical and no small part of her attraction came from her way with words.<sup>1133</sup> Madame de Sévigné's attractiveness was similar. Somaize describes *la marquise* as a most beautiful woman, but adds it was not just her looks but also her letters and words that were captivating.<sup>1134</sup> In 1678 Madeleine de Scudéry stated that the 52-year-old Madame de Sévigné was always beautiful,<sup>1135</sup> to which Bussy-Rabutin replies that it was her *esprit* that amplified her outward beauty:

1133 'Pour de la beauté. Quoique l'on soit assez instruit qu'elle en a ce qu'il faut pour donner de l'amour, il faut pourtant avouer que son esprit est plus charmant que son visage, et que beaucoup échapperaient de ses fers s'ils ne faisaient que le voir, qui ne s'en pourraient pas défendre s'ils l'entendaient parler, tant il est vrai qu'elle parle bien [...]'. Somaize. *Le grand Dictionnaire des précieuses*, 1661. Duchêne 2001, 501.

1134 '[...] mais, si son visage attire les regards, son esprit charme les oreilles, et engage tous ceux qui l'entendent ou qui lisent ce qu'elle écrit. [...]'. Somaize. *Le grand dictionnaire des précieuses*, 1661. Duchêne 2001, 519.

1135 Mme de Scudéry to Bussy-Rabutin 14 July 1678. Bussy-Rabutin Tome III 172I, 441.

It is not only the good character of Madame de Sévigné that makes her always beautiful; it is also her good *esprit*. I think, when one has this quality to the extent she does, one always appears pleasant.<sup>1136</sup>

In other words, Madame de Sévigné was a perfect combination of external and internal beauty. As Grenaille puts it, this is both desirable and rare: '[...] when inner perfection measures up to the outer, and when a person is perfect in what we see in her, like she is in what we do not see, this is an apparent miracle [...]'.<sup>1137</sup>

Du Bosc writes that beauty was a rare gift given by heaven to earth, and since Plato's day this human brilliance had delighted the soul.<sup>1138</sup> Thus, beauty was not only vanity; it was a gift from God, and from this perspective beauty might be seen as a quality that a good Christian could applaud, but was beauty only a blessing? In fact, perfect female beauty was considered a double-edged sword, and Melchior-Bonnet and Matthews-Grieco point out that according to moralists of the time, beautiful women provoked criminal desires in men.<sup>1139</sup> If a woman was beautiful, those who complimented her wished to deceive her and if she was not beautiful, she was the object of amusement. This is precisely why, according to Du Bosc, it was important for one's own sake to have intelligence and virtue, so that one was able to defend oneself against dangers and disdain.<sup>1140</sup> Beauty, or the lack of it, both brought women challenges and dangers. Thus, both beautiful

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1136 'Ce n'est pas seulement le bon tempérament de Madame de Sévigny qui la fait encore trouver belle, c'est aussi son bon esprit. Je crois que quand on en a autant qu'elle, on paroît toujours agréable'. Bussy-Rabutin letter to Mme de Srudéry 17 July 1678. Bussy-Rabutin Tome III 1721, 442. The Duchess of Orléans writes that inner beauty like kindness, generosity, intelligence and vivacity, was feature that would never fade. Madame to Electress Sophie 29 December 1701. Von der Pfalz 1984, 141.

1137 'Mais quand la perfection interieure respond à l'apparence du dehors, et qu'une personne est parfaitement achevée en ce qu'on voit d'elle, comme ce qu'on ne voit point, c'est un miracle évident [...]'. Grenaille (1640) 2003, 436.

1138 Du Bosc 1632, 265.

1139 Melchior-Bonnet 2004, 229. Matthews-Grieco 1993, 64. Korhonen 2005, 150.

1140 Du Bosc 1632, 275.

and ugly women had to possess features that were propitious and represented *l'honneste femme*, allowing women function in a world where male altruism seemed all too rare. Beauty, moreover, was a matter of chastity. Grenaille reminded his readers that when a man suspects his wife, he does not suspect her beauty, but her virtue. However, men would not be jealous if their women were not *coquettes*. He adds that men are often more controlled by their desires, and thus do not remember their duties and to be men.<sup>1141</sup> Therefore, Grenaille does not thrust the entire responsibility for the challenges caused by a woman's beauty upon women themselves: men's desires also played a part.

### Threats to and conservation of respectable beauty

As it has been emphasised, outward beauty had an essential part in the lives of women who belonged to the Parisian salon circles, yet these women, especially married women, and women with an active sexlife, found it difficult to preserve a beautiful appearance during constant pregnancies. Recurring pregnancies inevitably affected one's outward appearance and some women were ashamed of the changes to their stomach and pregnancy scars, and did not want their husbands to see them.<sup>1142</sup> To help women, Louise de Bourgeois gives some advice about making ointments to smooth out stomach wrinkles (*pomade pour les rides du ventre*).<sup>1143</sup> In addition, after childbirth, rest was one way to try to ensure that a woman still looked young, beautiful and shapely. The queen of France, for example, was entitled to a few weeks' rest in bed after childbirth, although Madame de Sévigné's daughter was on her feet again ten days after labour.<sup>1144</sup> Elite women, it would seem, were very conscious of their bodies, wishing to sustain even those areas that were covered by elegant costumes and were not visible to others. However, not all

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<sup>1141</sup> Grenaille (1640) 2003, 437.

<sup>1142</sup> Venette (1686) 1815, 121.

<sup>1143</sup> Bourgeois 1635, 143–144.

<sup>1144</sup> Fraser 2006, 87.

women close to giving birth adopted what was considered sensible behaviour. Madame de Sévigné, for example, criticised her daughter for lunching at two o'clock during the times she was about to give birth. Unlike the rational Madame de Guitaut, Madame de Grignan did not follow the approved instructions for labour.<sup>1145</sup>

It is not known how pregnancies affected de Lenclos' or whether she suffered from any gynaecological ailments. Living to the remarkable age of 82, she avoided the early death that befell many courtesans and prostitutes of this time. Pregnancy could be fatal. Tallemant des Réaux wrote that when Marion de Lorme died at the age of 39 she was still beautiful and would have been beautiful even at the age of 60, if she had not been constantly pregnant.<sup>1146</sup> It is evident that very few women were left unscathed by the visible marks of childbirth or pregnancies, and elite women were not exceptions. Although the physical changes that motherhood brought were inevitable, it was possible to try to diminish its effects.

The question that might now be raised is a semantic one: should one consider elite women's aging in terms of losing or preserving female beauty or should it be considered more as the acceptable fashioning of a respectable woman's graces? In March 1673, Madame de Sévigné, who was then in her late thirties, visited Versailles. She was as usual complimented on her beauty, even though she had slept only five hours and her 'little' eyes were sore. The marquise announced in a practical her way that it would appear that no one was able to say anything apart from compliments.<sup>1147</sup> Clearly understanding that she was receiving merely empty praise, she must, moreover, have been aware how her illness affected her appearance. Rheumatism caused her legs, feet and arms to swell up,<sup>1148</sup> but most crucially it affected her hands, and by

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1145 Mme de Sévigné to M. de Guitaut 21 September 1675. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 107.

1146 Des Réaux 1906, 181.

1147 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 20 November 1673. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 623.

1148 Charles de Sévigné had to write this letter, which was dictated by her mother. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 3 February 1676. Sévigné

1676, she was no longer able to fold her hands, peel or chop fruit or crack open eggs. However, she could write, comb her hair and dress.<sup>1149</sup> It is almost impossible to understand how *la marquise* experienced her condition: Gowing points out that the 17th-century body was a product of its period's culture, and it is challenging to understand how it felt in different times.<sup>1150</sup> In addition, *la marquise* had lost weight due to her rheumatism and in her own words, she was no longer fat or about to burst (*grosse crevée*).<sup>1151</sup> Although portraits do not reflect a full reality, nevertheless they do not indicate that she was obese at any stage. Obesity was common among the aged elite, owing to a lack or even absence of activity and an over-rich diet. It is also difficult to define the outward changes of Madame de Sévigné's body. She not only suffered the physical pains of illness, but she is also unlikely to have been the perfect belle of the paintings or *portraits littéraires*. Regardless of this, people wanted to see her as attractive, beautiful, charming and young, someone who maintained the ideal of the respectable woman not only on the inside, but also on the outside. In other words, despite all of her physical challenges, Madame de Sévigné was able to fashion herself as an attractive, even perfect, elite woman.

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Tome II 1974, 233.

1149 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 8 July 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 338.

1150 Gowing 2003, 4.

1151 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 8 July 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 339. The Duchess of Orléans wrote in 1698 how shapesly fat she had become. Von der Pfalz (1652–1722) 1984, 110.



Fig. 29: *La Vue, Femme à sa Toilette* (c. 1635) by Abraham Bosse.<sup>1152</sup>  
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours.

Mirrors reflecting the beauty of respectable women,  
not just their vanity

The conduct books and works dedicated to women's beauty partly shared the same principles, although conduct books did condemn artificial beauty. In this context, how did elite women themselves understand their own self-reflections? In the picture created by Abraham Bosse (Fig. 29), an elite woman is carrying out her *toilette* with her servant's assistance. A man's coat and hat are carelessly thrown over an adjacent chair, a dog is scratching at the servant's leg and a pair of woman's slippers are shown on the floor. The atmosphere is calm and comfortable. In the background, a man is looking at the outside world through a telescope, while the woman is

<sup>1152</sup> In many 17th-century paintings, women are portrayed sitting in front of a mirror and grooming themselves. See, for example, *Portrait de femme* by Nicolas Régnier (1630). Courtin 2011, 243.

using the mirror to check what kind of message her polished semblance will send to others.

The differences between genders can clearly be seen in the picture: the woman concentrates on observing herself before two mirrors, whereas the man observes the outside world. The mirror symbolises the woman's interest in herself, whereas the telescope symbolises man's broader outlook on himself and the world. Could this be a stolen moment from Madame de Sévigné's or Ninon de Lenclos' life? It is very likely that they were both in situations like the one shown in Abraham Bosse's etching. Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos both had servants who helped them to get dressed and coiffed and both had mirrors. Madame de Sévigné even had two dogs.<sup>1153</sup>

What made the *toilette* before a mirror so important? Among the Parisian elite it was customary to observe, judge, compare other people's behaviour and receive responses from equals. In addition to other members of elite, mirrors also reflected an image of a perfect woman. According to Melchior-Bonnet, Bussy-Rabutin wrote that his mirror and reputation do not lie, and in private spaces, both *l'honnête homme* and *l'honnête femme* were able to learn polite behaviour and form a picture of themselves that was acceptable in their own view and in the eyes of others.<sup>1154</sup> Furthermore, through a mirror, one could broaden one's self-knowledge and self-control,<sup>1155</sup> and as Gowing points out, without mirrors, a person was dependent on feedback from others, which made a personal matter collective.<sup>1156</sup>

With the help of mirrors, women diverged from Christian virtues.<sup>1157</sup> Instead of being humble Christians, women focused on their reflection in the mirror and their outward beauty, which was, for fashionable elite women, partly artificial. This thinking is connected with ideas according to which women

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1153 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 13 November 1675. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 159.

1154 Melchior-Bonnet 2004, 151, 157.

1155 Korhonen 2010, 89.

1156 Gowing 2003, 6.

1157 Gowing 2003, 6. See also, Korhonen 2010, 75.

should not just be idle and procrastinate, but should do something useful that aims at a high morality. Being conscious of one's own beauty, admiring it, was a sin. Mirrors combined not only beauty, fashion, pride and eroticism but also the material culture of the elite. They were luxury items to own and were linked with ownership. Husbands gave mirrors as presents to their wives, and a mirror, like other luxury items, reflected the wealth and status of its owner.<sup>1158</sup>

Ninon de Lenclos owned several mirrors,<sup>1159</sup> the largest one measured approximately 70x50 centimetres.<sup>1160</sup> In *Hôtel Carnavalet*, Madame de Sévigné had a mirror that was approximately 80 cm in height, a combing mirror (*miroir de toilette*), which was approximately 40 cm in height and 54 cm in width with borders of decorated glass; she also had a combing mirror with *bordure de bois de poire avec ornements*.<sup>1161</sup> In the 17th century the size of mirrors generally varied between 50 and 90 centimetres,<sup>1162</sup> so both women's mirrors were of a standard size. In fact, Madame de Sévigné's and Ninon de Lenclos' mirrors reveal something about their financial situation, for both of them were wealthy enough to buy more than just one mirror. Furthermore, as we have seen, Madame de Sévigné made sure that not only she but all her family reflected the elite lifestyle and not surprisingly she took an interest in her daughter's luxury items. In 1671 *la marquise* wrote to Madame de Grignan, that she could not really see or imagine where her daughter had placed her mirrors.<sup>1163</sup>

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1158 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 13 June 1685. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 201.

1159 According to Lorna Weatherill's research, in 1675, 22 per cent of English households had a mirror. By 1715 the figure was 40 per cent. In 1685, 80 per cent of wealthy households in London had mirror and by 1725, the number was almost 100 per cent. Korhonen 2010, 74. These new luxury items spread throughout Europe during the following two centuries. Korhonen 2010, 70.

1160 '[...] Ving-six poulces de face sur dix-huit de large [...]'. *Inventaire après décès de Damoiselle Anne de Lanclos du 21 octobre 1705*. Magne 1912, 206. 70 poudes is approximately 190 centimetres. Courtin 2011, 242.

1161 MC/RSS/499. *Inventaire après décès de Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné 18.6.1696*. Archives nationales. Paris.

1162 Courtin 2011, 242.

1163 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 21 June 1671. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 277.



What was the societal importance of being a respectable *belle* of the epoch? According to Furetière's dictionary, *les belles* should always be respected,<sup>1164</sup> this definition gives a special status to those women who were *les belles* of the epoch. Female beauty should be natural; according to Grenaille, *honnêtes femmes* actually considered themselves ugly if their charms were only artificial. Their beauty was not a mere enticement but should be apparent in their manners and be embodied in everything they touched.<sup>1165</sup> Indeed, Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos had their own personal interests in maintaining beauty ideals although we should bear in mind Korhonen's claims that women were unable to choose their participation in the prevailing beauty ideology because this was related to other factors that determined women's cultural position.<sup>1166</sup>

Beauty played an inseparable part in the life of elite women who lived around Paris or moved in courtly circles. As Madame de Sévigné wrote, it was a central topic to discuss endlessly a beautiful woman's looks and members of the elite were always talking about the beauty of Madame de Grignan.<sup>1167</sup> However, looks were also a trap that the *honnête femme* should be aware of and she should be sufficiently astute to avoid the pitfalls posed by her looks. Overall, outward beauty, or at least a pleasant nature, was an asset, and through or because of, beauty, a woman had a better chance of succeeding among the elite. Would a less than attractive Ninon de Lenclos have reached the position she finally did? Although she was not *la plus belle fille de France*, like Françoise de Sévigné, Madame de Grignan, she was beautiful enough to be praised by other members of the elite and furthermore, she could fashion herself as beautiful. I suggest that she supplemented

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1164 *Belle*. Furetière Tome I 1690.

1165 'Les honnêtes femmes s'estimeroient en effect bien laides, si toute leur bonne grace estoit simplement artificielle. [...]. Elles n'empruntent pas leurs attraits, elles en prestant à leurs habits et à tout ce qui les touché'. Grenaille (1640) 2003, 435.

1166 Korhonen 2010, 93.

1167 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 8 April 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 475.

her beauty deficiencies with her inner beauty, which was a result of a thoughtful performance. It is important to notice that the dissonance between sexually liberated women was distinct: Courtesan de Lenclos' beauty was worshipped and depicted, whereas for mutilated prostitutes<sup>1168</sup> with venereal disease the realities of life were far grimmer.

Even though conduct books, *œuvres morales* and *honnêtes gens* emphasised inner beauty,<sup>1169</sup> it was indeed a mix of a gilded, perfectly polished outward appearance and a beautiful *esprit* that created a perfect member of the secular elite. As sophisticated women, Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos were, I claim, very much aware how following the rules would affect their self-fashioning as respectable women. Fulfilling beauty ideals was a complicated journey and elite women had to be able to manage both mental and material aspects. In this respect, elite women not only had to be able to understand themselves, they also needed to be fully aware of societal and gender requirements. Thus, I would like to suggest, by uniting inner and external beauty, it was possible to create the beautiful and perfect respectable woman.

Both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos lived to a ripe old age and this also meant that their outward appearance changed over the years. However, as the following section will point out, losing one's visible beauty was not the end. In 1669, Ninon de Lenclos would have been 46, an age at which beauty would be considered gone. She may also have reached her menopause by this time.<sup>1170</sup> Saint-Évremond wrote to his over 40-year-old friend Ninon that the most blooming years of youth had already gone, but she still had a healthy look on

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1168 In a society in which beauty strongly determined a woman's status, the destruction of beauty through mutilation of her nose caused by immoral living was a harsh punishment. Korhonen 2005, 96.

1169 Bussy-Rabutin, for example, wrote: '[...] *ce n'est pas par sa (la comtesse de Gramont) beauté qu'elle en est indigne, mais par sa conduite*'. Bussy-Rabutin to Mme de Scudéry 5 May 1678. Bussy-Rabutin Tome IV 1858, 104.

1170 Utz writes that menopause typically occurs between 45 and 55 years of age. Utz 2011, 144. In the early modern era, a person's life was divided into different stages. The age between 40–65 years was seen as pleasant: it was a period of life in which passion had abated, but the intellect still usually remained bright. Beam 2006, 98–99.

her face, and her mind was pleasant.<sup>1171</sup> This was, according to Saint-Évremond, when Ninon de Lenclos combined her virtues and her charm, whereby a lover would be able to find in her both passion and a friend.<sup>1172</sup>

In the following section of the study, the examples of Ninon de Lenclos and Madame de Sévigné indicate that elite women who lived in the early modern patriarchal society, were conscious of the challenges brought about by age and other related limitations. Although neither of them were subjects to misogynistic criticism about their age, they understood, as will be pointed out, that once this feature, so important to a woman, vanished, it could be compensated for by other virtues. As Saint-Évremond writes to Ninon de Lenclos: ‘When you were young, your body meant something to you, but these days you are only occupied by your *esprit*’.<sup>1173</sup> When beauty faded respectability replaced what the years had erased: ‘If, in old age, beauty no longer appears to be as pleasant, it is enough for her to be respectable, and to have that memory left [...]’.<sup>1174</sup> Thus, especially for Ninon de Lenclos, old age was crucially linked to the whole notion of the respectable woman.

#### 4. Old age. *La Fin*

##### Old and beautiful *honneste femme*

When our beauty disappears, good night to us. Nothing is uglier than an old woman.<sup>1175</sup>

As John Marston wrote in his play *The Malcontent*, an old woman in the 17th century was ugly; she was something

1171 Saint-Évremond apologized for suggesting that her best years were gone. He emphasises, however, that Ninon de Lenclos had written to him that he could. Saint-Évremond to Ninon de Lenclos in 1669. Lenclos, Colombay 1886, 90.

1172 Saint-Évremond to Ninon de Lenclos in 1669. Lenclos, Colombay 1886, 90.

1173 ‘*Le corps vous a été quelque chose dans votre jeunesse ; presentement vous n’êtes occupée que de ce qui regarde l’esprit*’. Saint-Évremond to Ninon de Lenclos. Saint-Évremond Tome V 1725, 451.

1174 ‘*Si dans la vieillesse la beauté ne semble plus agreable, il suffit qu’elle soit honnête, et que sa memoire subsiste aprèz [...]*’. Grenaille (1640) 2003, 439.

1175 John Marston, *The Malcontent* (1603). Stewart 2010, 1.

to reject, something to ridicule. Moreover, an old woman's body was associated with death.<sup>1176</sup> What was the respectable woman's position in this matter? In 1676, the 50-year-old Madame de Sévigné mentioned that she had visited the court and the king had complimented her: 'I greeted the king, as you have taught me to do. He responded by greeting me as if I was young and beautiful [...]'.<sup>1177</sup> Here, Madame de Sévigné paralleled the king's compliment with youth and beauty, even though she was no longer young, smooth-skinned, or the most enchanting belle of the Parisian salons. *La marquise* understood what aging meant for women and it seems that she did not like this stage of life; and in a letter to her daughter in November 1689 she implies that she did not like to age and become uglier.<sup>1178</sup>

Old people's excessive negligence of their outward appearance, or their immoderate primping, highlighted their deteriorated habitus.<sup>1179</sup> At this time it was considered that a woman's old age began when the beauty of her youth vanished: a beautiful fairy-like girl metamorphosed into an ugly crone when her body faltered.<sup>1180</sup> The onset of old age began when a woman could no longer have children. When an old woman's body began to decay, she lost her only fortune. The loss of beauty after several pregnancies and the menopause was visible: calcium deficiency made the teeth fall out, the skin became looser, hair growth increased, and liver spots appeared on the skin.<sup>1181</sup> This together with how much attention women's appearance received created a great contrast between the beautiful and fertile young woman, and the ugly and infertile old woman.

Georges Minois argues that 'societies which indulged in

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1176 Nahoum-Grappe 1993, 98.

1177 'Je saluai le Roi, comme vous me l'avez appris ; il me rendit mon salut, comme si j'avais été jeune et belle'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 July 1676. Sévigné Tome II 1974, 351.

1178 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 29 November 1689. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 767.

1179 La Bruyère 1997, 216.

1180 Minois 1989, 254. Haycock 2008, 17–18.

1181 Korhonen 2005, 83–84. See also, Gowing 2003, 2.

a cult of physical beauty tended to depreciate old age'.<sup>1182</sup> In Italy in the early modern era, for example, women lived longer than men,<sup>1183</sup> but the elite culture glorified women's youth and beauty. In this situation, which praised imperishable beauty of elite women, ageing was not associated with beauty. Aging and physical changes were inseparable issues in an elite woman's life; thus, she had to find a way to maintain status despite a deteriorating outer appearance. An elite woman, who had achieved a certain social status, who had been admired because of her appearance in particular, and who fulfilled the ideal of *l'honneste femme*, could avoid some aspects of the ugliness associated with old age. As the king's politeness indicates, no one spoke of the respectable Madame de Sévigné as an ugly old woman. The same applies to Ninon de Lenclos, who according to A. Bret, was not ugly or repulsive in old age.<sup>1184</sup> Elite women might be able to sustain their attractiveness, but they were not, of course, able to preserve smoothness of skin or eternal youth. In other words, if the elite woman had achieved a certain status among *honnêtes gens* and she had managed to self-fashion herself as one of them, she was likely to be able to maintain this prestige in later years. Voltaire, however, disregarded polite expressions and gave a more realistic picture: he had met the old Mademoiselle de Lenclos when he was a child and he said she had been as dry as a mummy.<sup>1185</sup>

How did women themselves experience their vanishing beauty? The Duchesse of Orléans wrote that for her wrinkles did not mean much, because she had always been ugly, but for those who had been beautiful, like Madame de La Vallière and Madame de Montespan, transformation into an ugly old woman was perceptible.<sup>1186</sup> Ninon de Lenclos wrote to Saint-Évremond that wrinkles were a sign of wisdom.<sup>1187</sup> In

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1182 Minois 1989, 305.

1183 Minois 1989, 292.

1184 Lenclos 1920, 98.

1185 Voltaire Tome XXVI 1879, 384.

1186 Madame to Electress Sophie 29 December 1701. Von der Pfalz 1984, 141.

1187 Ninon de Lenclos to Saint-Évremond. Saint-Évremond Tome V 1726, 70.

other words, although wrinkles destroyed the smoothness of youthful skin, and meant a decrease in sexual attraction, they could be redefined and become emblems of respectability. According to Saint-Évremond, Ninon de Lenclos' aging had a positive effect, because it forced her to realize that her spirit was evolving and becoming increasingly complete every day and he continues that the old Ninon was more intellectual than the young one.<sup>1188</sup> The former courtesan wrote that she was content that her soul was more important to Saint-Évremond than her body.<sup>1189</sup> Ninon de Lenclos was well aware of the decrease in a woman's social value with age and with it the very real fear of social rejection. In her heyday she had combined beauty with intellect, but in old age only intellect was left. As Madame de Lambert wrote, '*femmes galantes*' had more to lose when they aged.<sup>1190</sup>

## The end

*Vieillesse* was, as Furetière describes, the last part of life,<sup>1191</sup> and de Coulanges states bluntly: 'The time of marriages is over. Now begins the time of deaths'.<sup>1192</sup> In a testament from 7 September 1662, Anne de Lenclos, who had more than forty more years to live, thought a lot about death, and about the life after death and asked God to forgive her *faults*, her mistakes, and for Jesus Christ to accept her dying.<sup>1193</sup> Marquise de Sévigné was also afraid of decrepitude<sup>1194</sup> and on 6 March 1672, she wrote to her daughter:

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1188 Saint-Évremond to Ninon de Lenclos. Saint-Évremond Tome V 1726, 145.

1189 Ninon de Lenclos to Saint-Évremond. Saint-Évremond Tome V 1726, 282.

1190 Lambert 1748, 150.

1191 Furetière Tome II 1690.

1192 '*Voilà la chapitre des mariages fini; c'est maintenant celui des morts qui commence*'. Philippe-Emmanuel de Coulanges (Mme de Sévigné's cousin) to Mme de Sévigné 19 March 1696. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 1150.

1193 CV, 752. *Testament d'Anne de Lenclos* 7.9.1662. Archives nationales. Paris. Testament of Anne de Lenclos on 19 December 1704 do not contain any formalities relating to the Christian faith: it lists only the amounts and the issues of her legacy, as well as their heirs. *Testament d'Anne de Lenclos* 19 décembre 1704. Magne 1912, 196–197.

1194 Duchêne 2002, 536. See also, Williams 1981, 119.

You ask me, my dear child, whether I still love life. I admit to you openly that I find poignant worries in it. But I am disgusted by death even more. I think it is so gloomy that all here comes to an end because of it, if I could do back in time, there would be nothing else I would ask for. (...). And how shall I leave? In what way? From what door? When will it be? Under what circumstances? Will I suffer thousands and thousands of aches that make my death desperate? [...] Shall I die in an accident? How will I be with God? How will we be introduced? [...] What can I expect? Am I worthy of paradise? Am I worthy of hell? [...].<sup>1195</sup>

In 1672, Madame de Sévigné had more than twenty more years to live, but evidently she was afraid of death. However, *la marquise* was steady in her faith: to her, the encounter with God, paradise or hell, were real events that came after death. As with questions of chastity, her religious family background and interest in spiritual literature also influenced her concept of life after death. Self-evidently, Madame de Sévigné wanted to live a balanced life in which pain and death were not tragic. However, the elite could use an extreme manner to avoid losing a loved one. In February 1672, the Princess of Conti had a paralytic stroke, but her friends and family did not want to let her go; thus, she was forced to suffer brutal treatment with intention of keeping her alive.<sup>1196</sup> Old age, which led inevitably to death, was ugly, an abominable disease that could

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1195 'Vous me demandez, ma chère enfant, si j'aime toujours bien la vie. Je vous avoue que j'y trouve des chagrins cuisants. Mais je suis encore plus dégoutée de la mort ; je me trouve si malheureuse d'avoir à finir tout ceci par elle, que si je pouvais retourner en arrière, je ne demanderais pas mieux. [...]. Et comment en sortirai-je ? Par où ? Par quelle porte ? Quand sera-ce ? En quelle disposition ? Souffrirai-je mille et mille douleurs, qui me feront mourir désespérée ? [...]. Mourrai-je d'un accident ? Comment serai-je avec Dieu ? Qu'aurai-je à lui présenter ? [...]. Que puis-je espérer ? Suis-je digne du paradis ? Suis-je digne de l'enfer ? [...]'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 16 March 1672. Sévigné I, 458–459.

1196 Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 3 February 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 429; Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 5 February 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 432.

not be treated.<sup>1197</sup> However, praise of the virtues, like those of the Princess of Conti could be emphasised after death:

[...] (The king) seemed to be touched and gave his commemorative speech, and said that the virtues of the deceased had been even more outstanding than her magnificent birth.<sup>1198</sup>

In other words, in death all the faults of the departed were forgotten and his or her status as one of the perfect *honnêtes gens* was raised: Madame de Sévigné died 17 April 1696,<sup>1199</sup> her death was no exception. She was praised when she was alive but her death strengthened her reputation as an important and beautiful member of the elite. Saint-Simon, for one, emphasised her qualities as a sophisticated, virtuous and humble person of the elite or in the other words a perfect *honneste femme*:

Madame de Sévigné, so lovable and such good company, died a while later in Grignan, with her daughter, who was her favourite, though she hardly deserved it. I was one of the friends of her grandchildren, the young Marquis de Grignan. Because of her dignity, her natural elegance, her gentle character, this woman gave these virtues to her conversational partner who lacked them; otherwise she was very pleasant, and she knew so much about a myriad of subjects, without ever wanting to show it off.<sup>1200</sup>

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1197 Lambert 1748, 148. Minois 1989, 237. Haycock 2008, 17. Schäfer 2006, 11–12.

1198 '[...](Le Roi) a paru touché, et a fait son panégyrique en disant qu'elle était considérable plus par sa vertu que par la grandeur de sa fortune'. Mme de Sévigné to her daughter Mme de Grignan 5 February 1672. Sévigné Tome I 1972, 431.

1199 According to Mme de Sévigné's granddaughter, her grandmother died of a long-lasting fever. Duchêne 2002, 538. Porter R., Porter D. 1988, 248, 259. Legend says that the cause of her death was smallpox. Duchêne 2002, 538. It was a common disease in that period. Duchêne 2002, 538. Pouliquen 2006, 21.

1200 'Mme de Sévigné. Si aimable et de si excellente compagnie, mourut quelque temps après à Grignan, chez sa fille, qui étoit son idole et qui le méritoit médiocrement. J'étois fort des amis du jeune marquis de Grignan, son petit-fils. Cette femme par son naissance, ses grâces naturelles, la douceur de son esprit, en



The reputation of followed and admired people of the epoch lived even after their death, as was the case with Madame de Sévigné. In the following century, Horace Walpole, and the Marquise du Deffand (born in the same year that Mme de Sévigné died), named Madame de Sévigné the saint of Livry (*sainte de Livry*). Thus, the memory of Madame de Sévigné was inspired by the thought of her chastity and her perfection, which in reality was not without flaw as this study has suggested. However, Madame de Sévigné had managed to create an image of herself as *l'honneste femme* when she was alive and this image was even strengthened after her death: indeed, the deceased marquise de Sévigné was *l'honneste femme vertueuse*. At the same time, *la marquise* became a role model; Du Deffand, for example, wished to become an equally good writer as Madame de Sévigné.<sup>1201</sup> *La marquise* managed to create a perfect performance of *honnêteté* and to fashion respectability, which, together with her exceptional giftedness as a letter writer, formed the backbone of her memory.

Courtesan de Lenclos lived for nine years after the death of Madame de Sévigné. In 1695, at the age of 72, Ninon de Lenclos' company was still popular, but as Madame de Sévigné wrote in March of that year, her entourage consisted of women rather than men.<sup>1202</sup> A few weeks earlier Madame de Coulanges has written something similar when she noted that now *women* were running after de Lenclos. She also made the well-founded statement that this was a reason not to hate old age.<sup>1203</sup> These notions indicate that something had changed in regard to Ninon de Lenclos' status and it was also safe for women to visit her, without fear of losing their respectability.

When did Ninon de Lenclos become Mademoiselle de Lenclos? According to Duchêne, this was between 1662 and 1670. This claim rests on the way in which Lenclos

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*donnoit par se conversation à qui n'en avoit pas ; extrêmement bonne d'ailleurs, et savoit extrêmement de toutes sortes de choses, sans vouloir jamais paroître savoir rien*. Saint-Simon Tome I 1900, 32.

1201 Stewart 2010, 131–132.

1202 Mme de Sévigné to Coulanges 4 March 1695. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 1088.

1203 Mme de Coulanges to Mme de Sévigné 12 February 1695. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 1085.

was presented on Somaize's *Dictionnaire*, and in the novel *Clélie*.<sup>1204</sup> In 1658, one year after Ninon de Lenclos' return to Paris, Mademoiselle de Scudéry created the character *Clarice*, a laudatory portrayal of Ninon de Lenclos. Scudéry's own behaviour was moral, but she nevertheless took the courtesan's side in her writing.<sup>1205</sup> Furthermore, it is impossible to separate de Lenclos' *plus honneste* transformation without considering changes regarding her lovers. Sanguin de Saint-Pavin claims in his poem that after her first period in the convent in the 1640s, 'Ninon *la desbauchée ne voulant plus faire l'amour* and she was looked for by the most *dévotes de la cour*, who would have believed it?'<sup>1206</sup> However, the real transformation of her so-called debauched lifestyle happened much later, Magne argues that Charles de Sévigné was the courtesan's last lover.<sup>1207</sup> The short relationship between Charles de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos occurred at the beginning of 1671. Des Réaux, in turn, claims that Villarceaux was the last gallant she had.<sup>1208</sup> La Fare, for his part, claims that Ninon de Lenclos had lovers until she was between 50 or 60 years of age.<sup>1209</sup> Thus, it seems that no-one really knows when Ninon de Lenclos put an end to her intimate relationships. She may have carried on her relationships until quite late, but their intensity and frequency decreased. In 1690 she wrote to Monsieur de Bonrepaus:

Believe it, when you are thinking about me, you are not thinking about anyone ungrateful. I was even slightly irritated when I heard that you had been over at Mademoiselle de Scudéry's without also coming here. When there are meetings between the regular people of the

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1204 Duchêne 2000, 275.

1205 Duchêne 2000, 219–220.

1206 '[...] *Ne voulant plus faire l'amour, Se trouve aujourd'hui recherchée Des plus dévotes de la cour, Lustcru*' ? Sanguin de Saint-Pavin 1861, 113.

1207 Magne 1912, 142.

1208 Des Réaux 1906, 242.

1209 Marquis de La Fare also claims that Ninon de Lenclos' lovers had always loved her and her friends were *les plus honnêtes gens de France*. La Fare 1884, 190. See also, Voltaire Tome XXIII 1879, 510. According to La Fare the best company of the epoch wanted to visit Ninon de Lenclos' salon. La Fare 1884, 190. Ninon de Lenclos died when she was 82-years-old.

district (Le Marais), I believe I take precedence. Inform me, when you want me to wait for you here or I can find you somewhere else.<sup>1210</sup>

Vergé-Franceschi believes that this letter to Monsieur de Bonrepaus was an old courtesan's invitation to make love.<sup>1211</sup> Stewart also states that the elderly Ninon de Lenclos was haunted by the image of women as representing feminine beauty, sexual activity and loyal friendship.<sup>1212</sup> In her letter to Saint-Évremond, the ageing courtesan, now Mademoiselle de Lenclos, appeared resentful and asked of her friend what made him think that she would be delighted in seeing young men. The letter attempts to convince him that she had renounced all (men) except her friend<sup>1213</sup> and in this she suggests an image of *l'honneste femme*. Sources like these indicate that Ninon de Lenclos did change at some point and that the old Mademoiselle de Lenclos was not the same as her young self. Thus, I suggest, de Lenclos' letter to Monsieur de Bonrepaus reveals the loneliness of an old woman, who was used to being surrounded by guests and being the centre of attention. What is central here is the desire for company rather than lust and seduction. Now, as an old woman, her situation had changed, though Voltaire paints a picture of the elderly Mademoiselle de Lenclos living a tranquil and pleasant life reading and having comfortable dinners with plenty of friends and a few lovers.<sup>1214</sup>

During the years 1662–1670, Ninon de Lenclos was in her forties, a relatively advanced age for women in the 17th century. Inevitably, the years left signs of ageing, and

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1210 'Quand vous songez à moi, croyez bien que vous ne songez pas à une ingrate. J'avois même quelque petit dépit d'avoir appris que vous étiez venu chez Mademoiselle de Scudéry sans venir ici. Quand l'on est en train de voir les vieilles du quartier, je sens la préférence. Mandez-moi quand vous voulez que je vous attende ici ou que je vous trouve ailleurs'. Ninon de Lenclos's letter to Bonrepaus 1690. Lenclos, Colombay 1886, 150. See also, Nouvelles acquisitions françaises 9210. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Paris.

1211 Vergé-Franceschi 2014, 331.

1212 Stewart 2010, 171.

1213 Ninon de Lenclos to Saint-Évremond. Saint-Évremond Tome V 1725, 428.

1214 Voltaire Tome XXIII 1879, 510.

as time went by Ninon de Lenclos became more *honnête*. Around 1680, Antoine de Gombaud, knight de Méré, wrote to former courtesan that no one thinks better than him about the miracles of Lenclos, and if he could express it publicly, he could add something to the exquisite reputation that she already had.<sup>1215</sup> In other words, the old Ninon de Lenclos was now the respectable Mademoiselle de Lenclos. No longer a collector of lovers, her life style changes had increased her social status along with the more respectable title of Mademoiselle. Furthermore, this suggests that her self-fashioning as a member of the elite had been successful. Ninon de Lenclos had enjoyed the company and admiration of men for decades and men's company and interest had guaranteed her social ascent and long career, but when she was old, she wanted to emphasise her respectability and her indifference to men. Mademoiselle de Lenclos' behaviour now seems to match Morvan de Bellegard's words when he wrote that old women compensated for loss of their evanescent beauty by becoming absorbed in religion and spirituality.<sup>1216</sup>

The central question, however, is still whether Mademoiselle de Lenclos really was *l'honneste femme*, the female ideal of her epoch? It is tempting to argue that in the end she really was. All her life, Ninon de Lenclos had conditioned herself to being one of *les honnêtes gens*. Having reached a high age and although her outward attractiveness had diminished, she had become socially acceptable company also for women. Her strong sexual attractiveness was a thing of the past and she was no longer posed a social threat to respectable women of the elite. As Ninon de Lenclos grew older, she had achieved a state that resembled the ideal of *l'honneste femme* in every detail: people no longer avoided being seen with her or considered her immoral. In February 1696, Coulanges told Madame de Sévigné that 'our lovable Ninon has caught a

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<sup>1215</sup> Chevalier de Méré to Ninon de Lenclos in 1680. *Œuvres de chevalier de Méré* (1692). Lenclos, Colombay 1886, 157. See also, *Nouvelles acquisitions françaises* 9210. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Paris.

<sup>1216</sup> Morvan de Bellegard 1696, 86.

cold'.<sup>1217</sup> In March she wrote about 'our poor Ninon', whose friends were concerned about the Mademoiselle's slight fever and sore throat.<sup>1218</sup> Ninon de Lenclos also needed to make the transition from Ninon to Mademoiselle de Lenclos. Saint-Évremond remarked that the way of life of a former courtesan, a life full of spectators, had to stop:<sup>1219</sup> Ninon de Lenclos' increasing respectability in old age were, it would seem, partly conscious and partly necessary choices she made

The status that Ninon de Lenclos achieved in old age, was partly the result of the support she received from other members of the elite. Saint-Simon, for example, who lived in London for over thirty years (1669–1703), guaranteed that Ninon's good reputation spread outside the borders of France.<sup>1220</sup> Ninon de Lenclos' reputation as a respectable woman also reached the ears of the court, where her life aroused interest and she became somewhat admired and her company even recommended. Liselotte von der Pfalz, the Duchess of Orléans, wrote, on 16 March 1698 to Hannover's Electress Sophie:

I am glad that my story of Ninon managed to amuse you. She has succeeded in living a life that pleases her. No one ever says anything against her, because she is one of Pancrate's (Mme de Maintenon's) best friends, whom she has known for years [...]. The old *Mademoiselle de Lenclos* spends a very chaste life: she says, at least allegedly, that she is never corrected, unless she herself considers what she says to be ridiculous. I did not know that Charles-Louis (Mme de Maintenon's half-brother) knew her. Above all, my son is a good friend of hers, and she (Ninon) is very fond of him. I wish that he (the son) visited her more frequently than his friends: she would give him better, more

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1217 '[...] Notre aimable Ninon a un rhume [...]'. Coulanges to Mme de Sévigné 3 February 1696. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 1141.

1218 Coulanges to Mme de Sévigné 2 March 1696. Sévigné Tome III 1978, 1152.

1219 'Votre vie, ma très-chère, a été trop illustre, pour n'être pas continuée de la même manière jusqu'à la fin'. Saint-Évremond Tome IV 1726, 142.

1220 Vergé-Franceschi 2014, 337.

noble thoughts [...]. Those, who are her friends, commend her, and they say that there is no one more of an *honest homme* than *Mademoiselle de Lenclos*. They claim that she is modest in her customs and conversations [...].<sup>1221</sup>

As Madame's letter above points out, Ninon de Lenclos' miraculous transformation into a respectable woman – even a respectable man – was common knowledge. The ageing *Mademoiselle de Lenclos*, devout woman,<sup>1222</sup> who behaved in a modest way in accordance with the ideal of *l'honnête femme*, who not only received acceptance from other elite women, but she also seems to have changed her own attitude towards women. Indeed, *Mademoiselle de Lenclos* praised Madame de Sandwich and her merits.<sup>1223</sup> In old age, *Mademoiselle de Lenclos* seems to have been benevolent to women who were intelligent, but who also respected her. In addition to Madame de Sandwich, Ninon de Lenclos had a high regard for Madame de Mazarini (Hortense de Mancini) and after her death in July 1699, *Mademoiselle de Lenclos* wrote to Saint-Évremond announcing that she was also touched by Madame de Mazarini's goodness.<sup>1224</sup>

Ninon de Lenclos died on 17 October 1705, with her reason intact, and her mind in an accepting state.<sup>1225</sup> Saint-Simon

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1221 '[...] je suis heureuse que mon histoire de Ninon vous ait un peu divertie. Elle aura beau mener telle vie qu'il lui plaira, on ne lui ira jamais rien, car elle est une des meilleures amies de la Pancerate, qu'elle connaît depuis de longues années [...]. Depuis que Mlle de Lenclos est vieille, elle mène une vie fort honnête ; elle dit, à ce qu'on prétend, que jamais elle ne se serait corrigée, si elle n'avait pas trouvé elle-même la chose ridicule. Je ne sais pas que Charles-Louis l'eût connu. Mon fils surtout est de ses amis, elle l'aime beaucoup. Je voudrais qu'il l'allât voir plus souvent et la fréquentât de préférence à ses bons amis. [...] Ses amis la vantent et ont coutume de dire : 'il n'y a point de plus honnête homme que Mlle de Lenclos'. On prétend qu'elle est fort modeste dans ses manières et ses discours [...]'. Orléans 1880, 193–194. Note also Saint-Pavin's poem. Sanguin de Saint-Pavin 1861, 113.

1222 Saint-Simon (1701–1707) Tome II 1983, 638.

1223 Ninon de Lenclos to Saint-Évremond: '*Madame de Sandwich m'a donné mille plaisirs [...]. Elle a plus d'esprit que toutes les femmes de France, et plus véritable mérite [...]*'. Saint-Évremond Tome V 1725, 459–460.

1224 Ninon de Lenclos to Saint-Évremond. Saint-Évremond Tome V 1725, 470.

1225 Le marquis adds that he had never met a woman whose *esprit* was more charming or more delightful than Ninon de Lenclos. La Fare 1884, 190.

wrote that Mademoiselle de Lenclos' death was news<sup>1226</sup> and 19 October 1705, Marquis Philippe de Courcillon de Dangeau (1638– 1720) mentioned in his *Journal* that Mademoiselle de Lenclos had died. Even at an old age, he wrote, she managed to sustain her intellect and understanding well and for this reason, the elite of Paris had visited her every day.<sup>1227</sup> Ninon de Lenclos may have been a curiosity at Le Marais, a legend. *Un monument historique que l'on visite*, as Vergé-Franceschi expressed.<sup>1228</sup> In other words, the 'vice' associated with Ninon de Lenclos had changed its form; the courtesan had become a historical sight with her former vices forgotten. As Stewart points out, Ninon de Lenclos succeeded in making herself a cultural icon, who interested the following generations after her death.<sup>1229</sup>

Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos lived in close proximity and their lives recurrently intersected in the small circles of the Parisian elite. They died far from each other, having lived their lives in completely different ways, but both women's deaths caused a great sensation and aroused great interest. Their lives may have deviated from each other, but people around them usually knew them both. In the final periods of their lives, both of them found an inner peace and a way of life that was apposite to a respectable woman. When these two women died peacefully in their own beds, the presence or absence of sexuality no longer mattered. It was in fact their successful self-fashioning that ensured respectable memories for both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, and their good reputation in one of France's great centuries survived.

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1226 Saint-Simon (1701–1707) Tome II 1983, 638.

1227 Dangeau 1854–1860, 450.

1228 Vergé-Franceschi 2014, 337.

1229 Stewart 2010, 171.

## VI

### REFASHIONING THE RESPECTABLE WOMAN: CONCLUSIONS

Previous scholars have emphasised chastity as the most crucial element and the synonym of *honnêteté* for the 17th century female ideal. Chastity and asexuality are particularly highlighted in conduct books, in religious *œuvres*, and works meant for *honnêtes femmes* and *honnêtes filles*; *honnêteté* was the definition of chastity, at least in principle. Chastity was primarily urged for young women (virgins), both at court and in villages, but it was also expected to feature in marriage and widowhood. This study argues, however, that chastity and the asexual *honnête femme* were a matter of self-fashioning rather than the sole, absolute and immutable foundation for a respectable woman. As my study progressed, I became convinced that a very fertile way to analyse *l'honnête femme* was to approach her through the layers of her refashioning. The study has shown that it is possible and plausible to argue that the ideal of the respectable woman was constructed from several layers: birth, education, manners, personal wealth, residential area, modes of consumption, and the influence of Parisian elite culture, sexuality and outward appearance. The whole construct of the respectable woman was an image that an elite woman presented in her self-fashioning or in her performance which formed an essential part of the gatherings of Parisian *société*. Furthermore, the study advances the idea of *l'honnête femme* as a human ideal that was mirrored in the surrounding social circle.

A detailed study of two elite women, Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, offered a unique perspective to study the problem of a respectable woman and her relation between reality and ideals. On the grounds of the available sources, it has been possible to piece together a complete and



multifaceted profile of the 17th-century respectable woman. The study argues that both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos fashioned themselves as respectable women, the female ideal of the epoch. It is their own agency and their detailed performance that led them to appear and meet the definitions of *l'honneste femme*.

Madame Sévigné was an exquisite example of *l'honneste femme*. She realized the ideal through sophistication, playing by the social rules of the time, and particularly through her choices concerning female sexuality. She fulfilled the criteria throughout her life and as a widow she chose to be an *honneste femme* rather than a *femme galante*. Her family, sophistication, conversation skills, outward attractiveness, sexual abstinence and elite lifestyle in Paris, in country *châteaux* and at court, made her a respectable woman of her era. She met the demands of the ideal in every way, whereas it took years for Ninon de Lenclos to acquire the image of a respectable woman. Although, I argue that female chastity was mainly represented by external signs, an *honneste femme* could not possibly embody actively practised sexuality as courtesan de Lenclos did: She had to abandon or at least hide her sexuality before reaching the status of *l'honneste femme*. However, Ninon de Lenclos reflects a different side of the ideal–reality dichotomy. Her triumph among the Parisian elite reflects the internal flexibility of the elite and is an illuminating example how a woman's successful self-fashioning could be an efficient way to transform 'indecentcy' into *honnêteté*. In other words, her sophistication, accumulation of wealth, lifestyle and established position among the elite, created the basis for a respectable woman's way of life years before she abandoned her profession.

In the 17th century married women were considered to be under the protection of a male guardian, but this did not exclude the possibility that an elite woman living alone could create her own performance, but in order to do that, having a high social rank was important as the first theme of the study, social circumstances, points out. Madame de Sévigné, a daughter of a baron and a wife of a marquis, highlighted

in her activity both nobility and respectability and her letters revealed them as an important part of her identity. Ninon de Lenclos was undoubtedly a member of the elite, and her lovers and friends from aristocratic and elite circles were loyal to her. She also experienced opposition because her lifestyle choices, which reached its peak in her imprisonment in a convent, but the time that she spent imprisoned did not make her forgotten. On the contrary, as virginity could be reconstructed by spending a certain period of time in a convent and by having a chaste lifestyle, this social reinstatement was, I suggest, part of Ninon de Lenclos' performance of *honnêteté*. At the same time, the impression of vice associated with her sexual behaviour began to fade. It would seem that Ninon de Lenclos' natural as well as learned charm helped her to act counter to respectability and yet still achieve the status of a respectable member of the elite. Partly her social performance was innate, partly it was acquired. Together these qualities made her a woman who could sustain her position among the high-ranking elite throughout her life. Wherever she physically went, she was followed by supporters and admirers.

On the other hand, Madame de Sévigné challenged status and respectability among the elite in a much more sedate manner. She partly accepted the power structures and virtues expected of women, though at the same time she negotiated with them and viewed ironically those who sustained these constructs. She did not have to struggle to be socially acceptable, even though the writings of her cousin Bussy-Rabutin, and the voices that criticised the asexual presence of the precious women appeared. Madame de Sévigné consciously worked towards and sustained the respectable woman's profile, using her sophistication, her social circle, and her knowledge to make choices and to construct an image of a perfect elite woman. In fact, both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos were masters of choosing the right tools to refashion the image of *honneste femme*. Significantly, the elite woman was not just a wife or a mother; she was above all a member of an elite that fashioned herself through external signs. French elite women of the epoch did gain more personal autonomy

and a respectable woman might do more than merely realize the expectations of a patriarchal society.

The study has suggested that *l'honneste femme* was a phenomenon in which existing resources were utilised and this enabled the fashioning of the respectable woman's entity. This was not only a visual manifestation, but also a matter of communication and rhetoric, involving a wide range of semiotic systems. As the performance of the elite women was an endless masquerade, the polished manners played a crucial role. Thus, the study argues that *l'honneste femme* was a performance, in which the subject was a kind of actor whose props were her environment; her spectators and evaluators were primarily other members of the elite. Both Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos mastered the expression of polite and polished behaviour, and were well versed in the noble art of conversation with the peers. Refashioning of *l'honneste femme* and an examination of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos suggest that a respectable woman's *honnêteté* was constructed in a public space and by means of public performance. The social performances of the Parisian elite could be spontaneous but most of the time they were premeditated and aimed at achieving status, honour and reputation. Of course when one's performance is under constant surveillance, there is always a possibility of failure, but it would seem that Madame de Sévigné's or Ninon de Lenclos' self-fashioning failed quite rarely: they managed to achieve the goals they set for themselves and they avoided huge scandals.

Even though the respectable woman was largely constructed in public space and was dependent on public feedback, this did not mean that an elite woman did not wish for privacy. Madame de Sévigné at times required solitude occasionally wishing to escape her public role in Paris and at court. In such moments of social withdrawal, Madame de Sévigné also practised her sophistication in which she formed new ideas on respectability. The position of Ninon de Lenclos, on the other hand, was based on publicity and visitors. She incited and evoked emotions. She was the subject of writing,

she was admired and she was disdained. Her vices, character and intelligence all made her interesting. Ninon de Lenclos aroused passions, and she was never a marginal figure. This study has stressed the idea that Ninon de Lenclos ascended into a position that was unique even among successful courtesans. Her salon and her apartment functioned as a home as well as a space meant for the practice of her profession, which increased the publicity value of the place. Her status followed her where ever she went. The antithesis to this was privacy, a challenge for a woman in her position to gain among *les honnêtes gens*, but sometimes she managed to withdraw to Lyon or to the chateau of her lover, marquis de Villarceaux.

In 17th-century France, the atmosphere was propitious for women's education and this knowledge was expected to serve virtues, but an *honneste femme* was able to combine this with her everyday interests. The study has also addressed the fact that without education a woman had no chances of functioning among the elite or achieving the status of a respectable woman. In the construction of respectable womanhood, education played a crucial part because a woman could use it to function in *société*. In her life as a respectable woman, Madame de Sévigné combined both her knowledge of Christian literature and an interest in secular subjects. From each realm, she selected topics that suited her and through which she controlled her respectability. Ninon de Lenclos, in her turn, made a conscious choice. As an educated woman, she abandoned the moral code and combined her sophistication with her sexuality. As a *courtisane honnête* she created a social space for herself that not only liberated her from marriage and mere prostitution but also created basis of her transformation to *honneste femme*.

The second theme of the study, the stage, turned to the visible display of material wealth that constituted an important part of a respectable woman's social profile. Indeed, it was one such signs that elite status would rest. As this study has shown, material consumption was an inseparable part of an elite woman's respectability and economic factors played a major role: without wealth to sustain the right kind of lifestyle,

it was difficult, if not impossible, to maintain luxurious *hôtel particulier*, a salon, or to participate in society gatherings. *Hôtels particuliers* and *châteaux*, which offered a more intimate stage, were spaces that symbolised the ideal and the status-specific lifestyle. Through private residences, it was also possible to highlight a woman's own personality and private choices: these *espaces* reflect her wealth, preferences and the decisions that she has made. Furthermore, the *hôtels* of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos represented decisions made by two independent Parisian women from the elite. These gendered areas, do not merely represent public space, but they also reflect female privacy and independence.

Madame de Sévigné's economic starting point was, of course, different from that of Ninon de Lenclos. Marie de Rabutin-Chantal was a rich heir, and after her husband's death her status-specific life was still notionally guaranteed. However, sustaining such a lifestyle and supporting children were expensive and Henri de Sévigné's debts caused financial difficulties for his widow, these problems were, nevertheless, overcome and Madame de Sévigné was able to live her entire life with the dignity of the elite – both morally and materially – and she never fell into unrestrained purchases. Ninon de Lenclos, on the other hand, came from an impecunious, yet noble, family. Her profession provided economic security and a certain degree of social status, power and influence. Most importantly, she also understood the meaning and necessity of annuities, but having said that, Ninon de Lenclos lifestyle was modest compared to that of Madame de Sévigné, as seen by two women's estate inventory deeds, although even Madame de Sévigné was not extremely wealthy. The lives of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos also paint a picture of two women who were capable of living alone, of making decisions for themselves and of taking on the huge responsibility of organizing elite lifestyle to ensure their performance.

In the narratives on the virtues of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, abundant lines point out not only their sophistication but also their beauty. The fourth theme of the study, gilded appearances, points out that looks, beauty, and

one's overall appearance had an enormous significance in the Parisian elite circles. These were essential determinants in the construct of the respectable woman. The ideal was an elite woman who was perfect in every way, both internally and externally and who could create a masterpiece out of herself. The elite woman's identity and personality were defined throughout her life by her age, by her character and its nuances, by morality and by her outward appearance. In other words, a member of the Parisian elite acquired her identity from the reflections that she received from other people, but these descriptions also created the notion of a respectable elite woman. *L'honneste femme* was always beautiful and even when aging a respectable woman was never described as old, ugly or wrinkled. Thus, she sustained all the features that were expected of *l'honneste femme* throughout her life. As the examples of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos have suggested, through careful self-fashioning the notion of an ever-lasting respectable beauty could be established. Ninon de Lenclos' case even suggests that a degree of flexibility was allowed concerning the outward appearance of a respectable woman: a woman who had lived counter to morality but otherwise met the demands of respectable womanhood, could still be portrayed in paintings as well as literary works as an *honneste femme*.

Furthermore, everlasting respectable beauty needed to be finished with perfect clothing, an important reflection of status and respectability. Thus, clothing for the 17th-century Parisian elite was not only used to cover one's body: it was also important to express one's identity as a form of communication. It was also part of fashionable manners, part of self-fashioning. Madame de Sévigné wrote a lot about clothes, fashion and the looks of elite women and in her letters, she defined what represented good or bad taste, and was always a proponent of the former. The beautiful and groomed outer appearance of an *honneste femme* reflected her inner state, for outer beauty mirrored the beauty within. The image by which a respectable woman represented herself, was closely linked to her looks, which were to be deliberately calculated. A true

*honneste femme*, for example, would not succumb to excess or indulge in the vulgar falsehood of *coquettes* in clothing and make-up. Furthermore, according to sources used in this study, there was no difference in how Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos embodied their status by means of clothing; both actualize the outward ideal and beauty conceptions. When Marquise de Sévigné and courtesan de Lenclos highlighted their appearance as respectable women outwardly, this did not merely say something about them as women, it also reflected status-specific performance, which was expected to be practised according to good taste defined by the elite and their will to stand out from other ranks.

Most importantly, what was the ultimate meaning of sexuality in a respectable woman's identity? It is evident that the multidimensional and multi-layered performance of the elite woman was crucially connected to the manifestation of female sexuality. Historians have recognised that there was a silence in regard to sexuality, but even though 17th-century women did not publicize their sexuality, it has still been possible to perceive the meaning of sexuality. Traditional, Christian views on sexuality and its manifestations were commonly accepted, but elite women did not always adhere to them and carnal lust as well as women's pleasure had not vanished.

As the study has emphasised, a distinction between Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos was chastity (*chasteté*). The way in which elite women manifested their own sexuality and chastity both separated and united respectable women. 17th-century French society, certain norms about women's and men's roles derived from earlier centuries were still observed, but that elite women also had the opportunity to deviate from these norms which restricted women, and still maintain their respectability. I suggest that women who had education, a good family background, who were economically independent and had mastered detailed self-fashioning were able to make their own decisions regarding their sexuality even though such decisions may well have deviated significantly from the widely accepted norms of society. By analysing the

personalities of Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos, it can be suggested that the lives of Parisian elite women were somewhat flexible and that the question of women's sexuality was not as straightforward as the official societal order in France would have liked to believe – or previous scholars have thought. The emphasis on chastity, for example, was merely a recommended means by which a respectable woman could fashion herself rather than an absolute edict. It seems that a proper use of resources also enabled a woman to have authority and status on an individual level; Parisian elite women would not have been able to achieve their position in *société*, or to have control over their own sexuality, unless they had been able to use their surrounding resources with broad freedom.

An analysis of Madame de Sévigné's letters highlights her silence about female sexuality. She kept almost completely quiet about her marriage with Henri de Sévigné. Nonetheless, it seems likely that she was bitter or disappointed: her silence is broken only by remarks about the husband's infidelity or the debts he left at his death. Thus, she challenged the decisions made by her late husband, and emphasised her own respectability and lifestyle. However, a marriage was practical matter as it ensured the continuance and prestige of the Sévigné family bloodline, through the birth of a male heir, Charles de Sévigné. Madame de Sévigné submitted, adapted, and performed her role as an elite wife and a mother, but ultimately denied her own, active sexuality. Channelling her emotions towards her daughter left less room for love for the other sex. She also strove to transfer her own conceptions of womanhood, pregnancies and beauty, to her daughter. Furthermore, it seems clear that Madame de Sévigné was unable to understand the joys of sex and feared the dangers of pregnancy. I would argue, however, that the negative image which Madame de Sévigné had of sexuality was not only influenced by the fear of pregnancy or of losing beauty. In the background, I suggest, there was also the impact of her family, the influence of Jeanne de Chantal, and the Marquise's personal interest in the period's literature on morality. From



another perspective, sexual abstinence and the right to have exclusive authority over one's body was also a form of power; thus, Madame de Sévigné was able to fashion and secure her status as a respectable woman.

Ninon de Lenclos' managed to turn sophistication into an art form in which sexuality and social virtue merged. Her intellectual seduction was desirable, interesting and less vulgar than ordinary prostitution. However, she was still dependent on men, her payers and providers; by choosing her particular lifestyle, Ninon de Lenclos without the financial security of marriage, used her body as a tool for success, although she took a personal risk. It is plausible that her lifestyle required sacrifices on a level of sexuality but Ninon de Lenclos quite possible enjoyed her lovers such as Marquis de Villarceaux, who meant more to her than other mere providers. Unlike many other early modern era women, Ninon de Lenclos also had the opportunity to enjoy her sexuality as a woman. She was able to discuss the subject and teach her customers to become better lovers. It could be said that Ninon de Lenclos' exquisite company took sexuality, lovemaking and sensuality to a new level. As years went by, she achieved a position that allowed her to use her sexuality in order to gain power and influence. Thus, she was able to help her friends and she proved herself trustworthy and loyal. Ninon de Lenclos had always been an outwardly respectable and well-groomed woman, as well as a sophisticated, intelligent conversationalist, but in later years, her sexual conduct was no longer her most important feature and she took on what could be called a more masculine role. With age her power in the sexual realm decreased, but by this time she had already established her position among the Parisian *société*. Moreover, her more respectable lifestyle which was partly the result of a stable economic position, bound her even more closely to the elite. Thus, together with ageing, abandoning sexuality were crucial factors in constructing the respectable woman's profile for Ninon de Lenclos and then she achieved the acceptance of respectable people even to extent of being called an *honnête homme*. Ultimately, people began to forget her role as courtesan and emphasise even more

her spiritual attractiveness, the nobility of her character and her company, which was even found suitable by the son of Duchess of Orléans.

In her youth, Ninon de Lenclos, I claim, did not even strive after the position of *honneste femme*. Ninon de Lenclos' growth from a courtesan into a respectable woman ultimately changed the rebellious courtesan's values into those of a respectable woman of the elite. For years, Ninon de Lenclos had been active in a largely man's world. The qualities she emphasised were the traditional masculine values of fidelity, loyalty and trustworthiness; combined with sophistication she fashioned them into a vision of herself as a *courtisane honnête*. However, later, she made the explicit choice to be a respectable woman and the ageing Mademoiselle de Lenclos was viewed by *honnêtes gens* with kindness.

The biographies that followed the deaths of Madame de Sévigné and Mademoiselle de Lenclos did not necessarily adhere to the truth in every respect, but from the mixture of truth and fantasy emerged two *honnêtes* legends. Most importantly, was it eventually possible for both a chaste Marquise and a dissolute courtesan to fashion and reach the ideal of respectable woman? The study has put forward the hypotheses of the layered nature of *l'honneste femme*, and that good education, polite manners, gilded appearance, sexuality – not only by means of chastity – and material consumption were the elements necessary in constructing the female ideal within Parisian *société*. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that, even though Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos were mighty opposites in terms of their sexual behaviour, they both achieved that status. Of course, the argument is more applicable to the case of Madame de Sévigné who managed to fashion herself as *l'honneste femme* throughout her life, whereas Mademoiselle de Lenclos only achieved the status at an older age.

Indeed, French society of the period alternated between flexibility and an extremely rigid morality. Respectability and dishonour were continuously being placed together and this combination was shrouded in a veil of virtues.

These circumstances facilitated living as an elite woman and fashioning one's respectability – and this included even those to whom the doors of Versailles remained closed. The study argues that the female ideal of the elite was not cast iron, and through the right kind of self-fashioning social ascent was possible. However, achieving the ideal required that each and every criterion was met. Achieving the status of a respectable woman was not impossible if an otherwise cultivated woman renounced her less than moral ways and continued to fashion an *honnête* lifestyle. Just as a former poet's wife could marry the king of France, so too the sophisticated, cultivated and fashionable marquise and the former courtesan, could both ultimately be able to carry the status of *l'honnête femme*. Regardless of their restrictions and expectations, both the Parisian elite and the French society of the latter part of the 17th century were adaptable. For those elite women, talented enough to take advantage of the opportunities which opened for them, the goal of *honnête femme* in all its complexity could be achieved.

*Two honnêtes legends:  
a sophisticated elite woman and a talented writer.*



Fig. 30: *Molière lisant Tartuffe chez Ninon de Lenclos (1802)* by Nicolas-André Monsiau. Bibliothèque de la Comédie-Français, Paris. Agence Photographique de la RMN-Grand Palais.

penserse quand vous serez bon.  
 de moi, que vous me donnez  
 mille chagrins que vous ne  
 pouvez que me contraindre, ne  
 me puis penser a ce discours sans  
 avoir le Cœur serré, et fondre en  
 larmes, ma chère, vous  
 ignorez bien comme je suis pitié  
 vous si vous ne sçavez que tous  
 les chagrins que me font donner  
 ceux de la boudelle que vous  
 portez, sont plus agréables  
 que tous les plaisirs du monde  
 on vous n'aura point de part  
 si est vrai que je suis quelque  
 chose de l'écriture, ignorant de  
 vous de vos sentiments, depuis  
 de part que vous avez fait  
 d'écouter une si sainte lettre que

Fig. 31: Letter of Madame de Sevigné. Bibliothèque nationale de France.  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Agence Photographique de la RMN-Grand Palais.

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