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978-0-521-14244-1 - Two French Moralists: La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyere

Odette de Mourgues

Excerpt

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[More information](#)

I

TENTATIVE APPROACHES

There is no simple approach to the *Maximes*. Everyone studying the work is tempted to suspect previous criticism of having chosen the wrong angle. It may be, as was convincingly stated in a recent book on La Rochefoucauld, that, whatever the amount of scholarship devoted to the elucidation of his writings, we still lack the evidence which would enable us to read them with full understanding.¹ It is probably a good thing that we should go on circling round the work trying in different ways to get nearer to a clear and accurate appreciation of La Rochefoucauld's thought and art. But it is very possible that all the converging efforts to illuminate the text will inevitably leave it with some blurred outlines and a few inscrutable features.

The architectural pattern of the *Maximes* escapes us. We cannot even guess what it might have been. La Rochefoucauld in different 'Avis au Lecteur' apologised for an absence of method and logical order in the grouping of the maxims but did little to remedy the apparent disorder of the work. Now and then we find a succession of several maxims bearing on the same subject, as a sign perhaps of a coalescing process which remained too fragmentary even to suggest the possibility of a homogeneous whole. Comparisons between the successive editions of the work, critical commentaries on the link between the *Maximes* and the *Réflexions Diverses*, have thrown some interesting light on La Rochefoucauld's creative technique and on a certain evolution in the scope of his work.² But in fact we tend to read La Rochefoucauld's writings en bloc. Their very fragmentation allows us to group the *Maximes*

¹ See W. G. Moore's Introduction to his book *La Rochefoucauld, his Mind and Art*, Oxford, 1969.

² Among the scholars who have been concerned with the genesis of the *Maximes* I can mention here only J. Truchet in his introduction to his edition of the *Maximes*, W. G. Moore in chapters 2 and 3 of his book (op. cit.) and Amelia Bruzzi (*La Formazione delle 'Maximes' di La Rochefoucauld attraverso le edizioni originali*, Bologna, Pàtron, 1968).

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[More information](#)

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Supprimées and the *Maximes Posthumes* round the main bulk of the maxims contained in the 1668 edition and to complete the architectural ensemble by the *Réflexions Diverses* in the same way as we preserve the artificial unity of a building while flanking it with two wings and adding a few larger rooms at the back, over the buried traces of former constructions; with the *Maximes* the substructure being of course constituted by the chronological strata provided by the variants of the first editions.¹ Within this convenient arrangement we have to accept a state of disorder which was perhaps intended, can be partially accounted for and even justified. We shall not find a systematic study of man in La Rochefoucauld.

But he gives us a study of man, and the word moralist may help us as a starting-point. If we take the word with its French connotation, it should at least limit the sphere of La Rochefoucauld's comments on the human condition. The French moralist studies man within the world of nature and reason in a non-metaphysical, non-religious way. Moreover he is not a *moralisateur* and has no system of ethics to propound. He is content to examine man's behaviour (including man's moral attitudes) as it is, with some kind of clear-sighted objectivity. To view the *Maximes* as the work of a *moraliste* appears a sensible assumption. It also fits in with some general features of French classicism, with the tidy, if oversimplified, picture we have of a 'two-truth world' in which religion and philosophy were left to the specialists like Pascal or Bossuet while the purely literary works – Molière's comedies, Racine's tragedies, La Fontaine's *Fables*, *La Princesse de Clèves* – were focussed on what man can know of himself and of society without any supernatural explanation. There is certainly an affinity between La Rochefoucauld and La Fontaine: the latter praised the *Maximes* for being a faithful mirror of man's true features.² Admittedly, in a number of maxims La Rochefoucauld refers specifically to God, but all the critics who have

¹ Dominique Secretan's edition of La Rochefoucauld (*Réflexions ou Sentences et Maximes Morales, Réflexions Diverses*, T.L.F., Genève, Paris, 1967), which gives the variants of previous editions under each maxim, adopts a pattern which corresponds very well to this 'architectural' reconstruction.

² 'L'homme et son image', *Fables*, I, xi.

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[More information](#)

TENTATIVE APPROACHES

commented on the changes made from one edition to another have noted that he removed those maxims as if he was aiming at a *laïcisation* of his picture of man.

Was the *laïcisation* altogether possible? For some readers and commentators the *Maximes* should be read against a background of philosophical influences (Epicureanism for instance) or religious preoccupations (Augustinianism and Jansenism). We are thus led towards a slightly different meaning of the term moralist which is no longer incompatible with ethico-religious concerns, something much nearer to the meaning of the English word, the elasticity of which entitles one to speak of 'Christian moralists' without being guilty of using a self-contradictory expression. It is with this meaning in mind that A. Levi wrote his illuminating study of the French Moralists,¹ and included La Rochefoucauld in the chapter 'The need for grace', side by side with Pascal. Even if, like myself, one would not consider La Rochefoucauld a Christian moralist, it might be rash to dismiss altogether the religious background to the *Maximes*; it may prove relevant to some of the difficulties we shall meet in the elucidation of the work.

From theology to drawing-room pastimes, from the eminently serious to the pleasantly frivolous: why not begin in those salons where the first maxims were formulated? The exchange of letters between Madame de Sablé and La Rochefoucauld discussing the maxims is just one step removed from the conversations in the salon. We conjure up the atmosphere of witty exchanges of epigrams between friends belonging to the same intimate set of sophisticated men and women, the pleasurable competition in finding the brilliant formula, the unexpected paradox, as a conclusion or a starting-point to a debate on a general topic. Discussing fine shades of feeling, points of morals or behaviour was a long-established tradition in the salons, going back to the first *précieuses*. Here the limitations to the scope of the maxims would be firmly set by the requirements of polite society, whose very existence rests on conventions. How far can criticism of the human condition

¹ *French Moralists*, Oxford, 1964.

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[More information](#)

LA ROCHEFOUCAULD

go when the golden rule is not to upset, where the dose of reality, of truth, must be tactfully calculated? If we overstress the link between the *Maximes* and the salon will it not be tantamount to considering them as drawing-room entertainment and a warning not to take them too seriously? In fact to a number of readers they have appeared little more than a clever literary exercise. On the other hand that assessment is no longer tenable as soon as one realises the depth of probing implied in some of the maxims and the upsetting nature of the work. We know that the author's friends were made uneasy, were even shocked. It seems obvious that La Rochefoucauld's investigations had taken him into the kind of austere country where the searching mind is necessarily and painfully alone.

We should not, however, go too far in minimising the importance of social life. No one can fail to notice that a number of maxims or *réflexions* deal specifically with questions of social behaviour, (for instance, with what makes a man agreeable or boring in polite circles) or overlook the long sections in the *Réflexions Diverses*, 'De la société', 'De l'air et des manières', 'De la conversation'. Besides, if we stop thinking of the salon as a procrustean bed imposing its limitations on the creative process of a writer, we realise that there is no incompatibility between the artificial, often frivolous, at times silly, *vie de salon* and a serious interest in human problems. Does the quality of experience depend on the milieu where it collects its material? We may even wonder, when reading Proust and spending so many hours in the Verdurin salon or at parties in the *hôtel de Guermantes*, whether social life is not, for the right kind of observer, the best way of perceiving the ambiguity of human relations, the discrepancies between cause and effect and the subjectivity of one's personal reactions. Nowhere else, perhaps, can the discerning mind so clearly distinguish the many layers hidden beneath the utterance of a value-judgement or beneath the unquestioned respect for a convention. This multiplicity of layers is reflected in the *Maximes* and constitutes one more difficulty in our

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[More information](#)

TENTATIVE APPROACHES

understanding of the work. We easily notice the element of verticality, the movement which goes from the superficial appearance to what lies underneath. But not all the maxims seize human experience at the same depth. For instance, all the observations concerning women remain very near the surface, at the level of what was traditionally and socially expected or not expected from the female sex, probably because there introspection was impossible. Certain concepts, the idea of *honnêteté* among others, are sometimes examined in connexion with manners, but also in other maxims with reference to the deeper strata of our moral self. These variations in the level of experience chosen for each maxim may to a certain extent account for the impression of fragmentation or the apparent contradictions to be found in the work.

The difficulties I have so far mentioned are closely related to what is perhaps the central obstacle to a satisfactory approach to the *Maximes*: the elusive meaning of some of the words. Not that we lack methodical studies of La Rochefoucauld's style. Vocabulary, grammar, even spelling have been carefully examined. The excellent modern editions we possess have glossaries or abundant footnotes and warn us whenever the connotation of a word has altered since the seventeenth century.

Moreover, according to the scholars who have commented on La Rochefoucauld's diction, we should expect him to have used *le mot juste*. 'Quant à la justesse des mots, au goût sévère, au rapport avec l'idée. . . il [La Rochefoucauld] demeure un modèle achevé.'¹ This judgement of Henri Regnier, who devoted so much time and patience to a *Lexique de la langue de La Rochefoucauld*, is echoed with even stronger emphasis in a more recent work on the style of the *Maximes*.² I am not altogether happy about the expression 'le mot juste' especially when it suggests, as in the above quotation, the complete and

¹ *Lexique de la langue de La Rochefoucauld*, avec une introduction grammaticale, in *Oeuvres de La Rochefoucauld*, 'Collection des Grands Ecrivains de France', Tome III, Part II, p. iv, ed. D. L. Gilbert, J. Gourdault, A. et H. Regnier, Paris, 1888-93.

² Sister M. F. Zeller, *New Aspects of Style in the Maxims of La Rochefoucauld*, Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 1954.

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[More information](#)

LA ROCHEFOUCAULD

unambiguous identity between word and idea. One may also suspect that some of the qualities ascribed to the style of the *Maximes*, in the way they are formulated, derive from a number of assumptions concerning French classicism which might well be questioned.

We have often been told that the evolution of the language and of its cultural background during the seventeenth century provided the classicists with a fitting tool for the creation of literary masterpieces. I wonder. The problem is too large to be properly considered here,¹ but one might venture to say that the greatest achievement of the French classicists was their successful struggle with a language which was in itself very inadequate for their purpose, and that we owe masterpieces to what was in fact a linguistic crisis and, more particularly, a constant battle against the 'je ne sais quoi'. The neutrality and transparency of the language, the dangerous expansion of possible meanings in an abstract noun, the devaluation in the evocative power of imagery set difficult problems for the writer. We know how La Fontaine could overcome the almost impossible task of writing poetry only by elaborating a subtle network of words taken from different traditions and reacting upon one another so as to create in the *Fables* exquisite variations in the semantic field. Another solution was to take the neutrality of the language as the very basis of a literary technique. Few words would be necessary, as their connotation, their intellectual and affective value would depend entirely on the context. Racinian tragedy presents the tightest possible contextual fabric, and the interdependence of its various elements gives to the most inert or imprecise term effective sharpness and explosive power. A great orator like Bossuet could take advantage of the vagueness in the import of a word and paradoxically create the strongest emotive effect

¹ A certain evolution of language from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century has been analysed by Michel Foucault in *Les Mots et les Choses*, N.R.F., 1966. His comments are remarkable and fascinating, but I am not sure that they help us very much with the problem of language as a literary tool. For a different opinion see J. Culler's article: 'Paradox and the language of morals in La Rochefoucauld' in *Modern Language Review*, January, 1973, pp. 28-39, in which he bases most of his interesting analyses on Foucault.

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[More information](#)

TENTATIVE APPROACHES

out of the very impotence of the language, when referring to the decaying state of our body after death as ‘un je ne sais quoi qui n’a plus de nom dans aucune langue’. In a different way the flexibility of the vocabulary could be used for dialectical purposes and allow Pascal to write his famous aphorism – for some a strikingly convincing conceit and for others a specious play on words – ‘le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point’.

What of La Rochefoucauld? In a way one might think that the characteristics of the seventeenth-century language were well suited to the literary form he had chosen, if we admit that the success of a maxim rests on the wide range of meaning within the narrow limits of a brief sentence. In that case the expanding power of connotation latent in word might be turned to advantage in increasing the wealth of suggestions created by the maxim.

On the other hand the greater part of the *Maximes* is concerned with psychological investigations which require fine distinctions and therefore an accurate and sensitive instrument. It is irrelevant, of course, to think of the technical terminology which our scientific modern age has at its disposal when it studies the working of the human mind. But we may think of Montaigne. For him only the concrete language could seize the ever moving, ever changing, multicoloured quality of our psychological life. As for the traditional abstract terms expressing the activities of the mind, he could afford to treat them with a certain amount of *désinvolture*: they were just the more fluid elements in the rich context of his explorations.

The amount of concrete language La Rochefoucauld can use is limited to a few conventional images. The problem he faces is the same as the difficulties met by the other classicists but in a much more acute form. Here again, as in Racine, the value of the word, its exact shade of meaning, will depend on the context; but the context given by a single maxim is at times practically non-existent. Should the context be provided by the *Maximes* taken as a whole? Only up to a point if we think of the fragmentation of the work and of the different levels of

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[More information](#)

LA ROCHEFOUCAULD

experience La Rochefoucauld is concerned with. What is more, given the subject of his investigation, some words may not be conveniently neutral and docile. The analysis of man's thoughts, feelings and behaviour had been, particularly in his century, closely linked with questions of Christian dogma or Christian ethics. A word such as 'amour-propre', for instance, will be loaded with theological implications or *a priori* value-judgements.

It is sometimes relatively easy for the reader to distinguish between different connotations given to the same word in different contexts. Let us take for example the term *honnêteté* which I mentioned previously.

Les faux honnêtes gens sont ceux qui déguisent leurs défauts aux autres et à eux-mêmes. Les vrais honnêtes gens sont ceux qui les connaissent parfaitement et les confessent. (202)

Le vrai honnête homme est celui qui ne se pique de rien. (203)

The foot-note by J. Truchet comments, quite rightly I think, that *honnête* in the first maxim has a moral connotation, but in the second refers to the social ideal of the *honnête homme*.

At another level of experience, that concerning women (who, as I have already said, constitute a special category of human beings), the word *honnêteté* assumes a different meaning corresponding to a moral code which applied only to women:

L'honnêteté des femmes est souvent l'amour de leur réputation et de leur repos. (205)

We scarcely need the variants from previous editions to guess that here *honnêteté* means chastity.

Conversely, the context of the maxim and the coupling of two maxims may enable us to perceive and accept a difference of meaning between two words which we might have considered as interchangeable in the seventeenth century.

La politesse de l'esprit consiste à penser des choses honnêtes et délicates. (99)

La galanterie de l'esprit est de dire des choses flatteuses d'une manière agréable. (100)

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

TENTATIVE APPROACHES

The distinction is clear on the whole although we may be side-tracked by the ambiguity of *honnêtes* in maxim 99. If we take it with its moral connotation the distance between *politesse* and *galanterie* will obviously be greater than if it refers to a morally indifferent quality of the civilised man, a sort of intellectual elegance which colours his unspoken thoughts.

This wish to establish graded differences between words belonging to related vocabulary appears several times in the *Maximes*. But the distinctions are not always clear, or seem to be contradicted by other maxims. J. Truchet notes that the opposition between *esprit* and *jugement* stated firmly in two maxims:

Le bon goût vient plus du jugement que de l'esprit. (258)

On est quelquefois un sot avec de l'esprit, mais on ne l'est jamais avec du jugement. (456)

clashes with maxim 97 in which La Rochefoucauld affirms the identity of judgement with *esprit* (On s'est trompé lorsqu'on a cru que l'esprit et le jugement étaient deux choses différentes. Le jugement n'est que la grandeur de la lumière de l'esprit. . .).¹

La Rochefoucauld's contemporaries found the *Maximes* somewhat obscure at times. And modern scholars and critics confess that they do not find all of them perfectly intelligible, although it is worth noting that they are not all puzzled by the same maxims.

To what extent would a comparison with the vocabulary of other writers in the century prove a help? It is difficult to say. The word *finesse* in Pascal is a word of praise, but it has a pejorative connotation in La Rochefoucauld, for whom it signifies a rather low form of cunning (as opposed to *habileté*). On the other hand W. G. Moore is tempted to think that La Rochefoucauld's use of the word *cœur* might be very near the Pascalian implication of 'unconscious decision' (as opposed to *esprit* which is conscious thinking) in some maxims such as

¹ See p. 66, footnote 3.