

THE INDECENCY OF KNOWLEDGE

by *Madeleine Alcover*

When Molière has Chrysale declare that

"It is not respectable, and for many reasons, for a woman to study and know so many things,"¹

he is merely voicing the almost universal opinion of his day. Where women are concerned, the association of study and lack of respectability is a leitmotif.

It is generally held that the essence of a respectable woman resided wholly in her sense of decency or, to use an expression current at that time, in her modesty. Modesty, however, also meant humility, the two meanings sharing the common notion of self-restraint. *L'honnête femme* (the respectable woman) is thus a being who contains herself, who hides both what she is and what she possesses. As an individual condemned to be cloaked, all her attempts at self-revelation constitute acts of indecency: it was indecent to overexpose her breasts, but more particularly, it was indecent to lust after knowledge and, having acquired it, it was immodest to display it.

It is the sense of decorum and *modesty-humility* in their relationship to knowledge that I propose to analyze here. My basic reference material will be Madeleine de Scudéry's *Le Grand Cyrus*, *Clélie*, and moralistic writings together with *L'éducation des filles* of Fénelon. The former works I take as representative of the *milieu mondain* (worldly milieu) and the latter of the *milieu dévot* (pious milieu). The reasons given for sanctioning modesty and restraint differ according to their respective social groups, but they result in the same imperative: outside the limits of reserve there can be no salvation. We shall see what an obstacle these notions presented to the intellectual and social emancipation of women in the seventeenth century. Poullain de la Barre, with whom I shall conclude my study, was convinced that with the acquisition of knowledge, power would be bestowed upon women. This is why he denounced those restraints responsible for the intellectual amputation of

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woman. Disdainful both of the hierarchy of the sexes and of the social hierarchy, and regarding forms of modesty, true or false (that is, Christian or worldly) as coercive measures, he advocated the unconditional conquest of knowledge in order that his own democratic and feminist ideas might become effective.

The importance of modesty in the seventeenth century explains why Madeleine de Scudéry devoted a chapter of her *Entretiens de Morale* to its treatment. In the social milieu for which she is writing, this attribute, without which dealings with people become unpleasant if not painful, is required of both sexes. She takes care to indicate, however, "that a woman without modesty cannot be agreeable,"² even adding that this virtue is absolutely necessary for ugly women, a statement revealing that in fact there exists a feminine social modesty and a masculine social modesty. Consequently, it is not surprising to find modesty attributed to all the heroines (the "good ones," of course) of *Le Grand Cyrus* and *Clélie*. Conversation being the favorite occupation of these ladies, the following portrait gives a good idea of the perfect *honnête femme*.³

I don't think there ever was a person whose conversation was more charming: because she acts in such a way as always to say exactly what is necessary to amuse those with whom she is speaking. She speaks equally well about everything, while remaining so well within the permissible limits which custom and *bienséance* (decorum) prescribe to Ladies so as not to appear too learned, that one would think from hearing her talk about the most elevated subjects that it is only by simple common sense that she has arrived at any knowledge of them. Her eloquence is admirable yet natural.⁴

This varied knowledge, expressed in so natural a manner, together with the criterion of common sense and *bienséances*, already foreshadow the French Classical aesthetic and set the tone of this fictitious universe steeped in moderation and conformity.

The portrait of Sapho and her *salon*, at the end of *Le Grand Cyrus*, traces the same pattern and fixes its limits. There one can find Madeleine de Scudéry coming to grips with the problem of the *femme savante*, together with her proposed solution. The prohibitions that provide the foundations of her theory, coupled with her refusals to explain these prohibitions or to state them more precisely, reveal a total acceptance of custom that is symptomatic of her conservatism.

Sapho knows "quite well how to write and speak about everything" and she "has taken the pains to educate herself" (*Cyrus*, I, p. 334): her knowledge is not innate but acquired; it is a culture that she deems necessary, as we know from her repeated criticisms of the gross ignorance of certain ladies. This ignorance on the part of many persons of high birth, particularly among women incapable of writing legibly and intelligibly, forms a barrier erected by the immediate environment of those wishing to become educated. Sapho

deplores it when she asserts that "for a woman, the difficulty of knowing something with *bienséance* is not so much founded on what she knows, but rather on what others do not," adding that it is the abnormality of her situation which exposes her to reproach (*Cyrus*, X, p. 397).

But this reserve, attributable to the extremely varied degrees of education, often inversely proportional to the social level, was above all required for another reason: the *bienséance* of the fair sex, which applied equally to the duchess and the lady's companion. Sapho, whose every effort was directed toward observing it, claims "that she almost never talks about anything except *what women should speak about*" (*Cyrus*, X, p. 355). This restriction does not refer to conversations which are licentious in character, absolutely unthinkable in the *salons*, particularly in that of the very modest Sapho, but rather to certain subjects, which she indicated elsewhere.

A woman should not talk about philosophy; it is unbecoming to her: "in our day, an overly philosophical Lady is not a type to be desired."⁵ A woman does not discuss politics either, and one of her characters smilingly expresses the wish to see proclaimed "an Edict prohibiting the discussion of affairs of state by all those who are not involved in them and especially by all the *Galands* and by all Ladies" (*C.D.S.*, I, p. 262). Lastly a woman does not discuss (argue about) religion: "it is essential to the nature of an *honnête femme* not to tolerate speaking against Religion in her home any more than speaking against modesty [sense of decency]" (*C.M.*, I, p. 496). The reason for this lies in the fact that "the respectable and modest ignorance" of the female forbids "rash judgments on matters so delicate and so important . . . in sum, nothing suits a woman less than adopting the attitude of appearing unconvinced of what she ought to believe" (*C.D.S.*, I, pp. 196-197). Here, as only too often, Madeleine de Scudéry hides behind a tautology, but in the following passage, which deals with the free-thinking woman, the reason for these prohibitions is finally revealed. One now becomes aware that she believes doubt leads to free-thinking, which in turn leads to free-living. Free-thinking, "most blameworthy and very dangerous to men, . . . is even more so to Ladies. In fact," she continued, "an *honnête* free-thinker will not go so far as to steal, betray his friends, or assassinate anyone; but I admit I am convinced that a woman unfortunate enough to have freed herself of religion's just yoke would perhaps have some trouble in not yielding to a very *honnête homme* in love with her who might only request a little clemency of her, for such is the language of the most dangerous of suitors" (*C.M.*, I, pp. 466-467).⁶ Elsewhere she will clearly state that religion is an excellent safeguard for the weaker sex.

Thus Sapho having declared, without giving any details, that "there are certain areas of knowledge into which women must never enter" (*Cyrus*, X, p. 401), I would assume that theology, casuistry, and political science were included among them, in short, anything capable of kindling an idea, however slight, of rebellion.

Besides these forbidden fields of knowledge, there are those which are half-forbidden, those which women "*may know* but must *never admit* to knowing although they may allow it to be guessed" (*Cyrus*, X, pp. 401-402). For example, it is common knowledge that no woman of that period paraded her knowledge of Greek or Latin. Not only did they avoid any display of their knowledge, but in fact they hid to study, as in the cases of Milles de la Vigne and Dupré, among others. As soon as a woman knows slightly more than is necessary to distinguish "a doublet from a pair of breeches," *she hides it as she would a crime*: this expression is a cliché found in the writings of Madeleine de Scudéry as well as of the abbé de Pure or Furetière.

But it is not only knowledge and discourse that are limited; the manner of speech itself is also subject to reservations. To the forbidden and half-forbidden areas of knowledge mentioned above, Sapho adds a third category, which includes those things that one *may know and admit to*, such as foreign languages and literature, which can even be discussed, on condition it be done modestly and in an "unassertive manner . . . which does not shock the *bienséance* of her sex," or, to use another formula: "a woman can possess a thousand kinds of knowledge without overstepping the boundaries of her sex's modesty, provided that she employs them well" (*Cyrus*, X, pp. 402-406).

To make poor use of knowledge is to speak in too firm and too proud a tone of voice, for, as one of her discussants admits, "people question whether or not I deserve the name of woman" (*C.D.S.*, I, p. 240): as can be seen, firmness and pride are masculine characteristics and it is not seemly that the weaker sex raise its voice. Princess Tulie, one of the rare examples in Madeleine de Scudéry's works of a dissident woman, is presented negatively as ambitious, immodest, and argumentative: she is lacking in femininity in the eyes of the author, who moreover imputes to her a disappointment at not being a man.⁷

For related reasons, the *pédante* is added to the criticized category of the argumentative woman. Whereas the cultivated Sapho is constantly praised for her modesty, her antagonist, Damophile, who affects to be *savante*, is characterized by her "impertinent conceitedness." She speaks in a solemn and imperious tone of voice, "as if she were teaching publicly in some famous *Academie*" (*Cyrus*, X, p. 351).⁸ Not only is she always talking about books, but she has even adopted a bookish style: that is, she expresses herself in a decisive and didactic manner and tone that are absolutely contrary to the reserve demanded of her sex. It is important to emphasize that Madeleine de Scudéry was largely responsible for the confusion that developed between the terms *savante* and *pédante*. In the pages just cited, in which Sapho is contrasted with Damophile, there is not a single occurrence of the word *pédante*. Rather the author employs such expressions as "play at being learned" (*faire la savante*), "pass for learned" (*passer pour savante*), and, more serious still, "be learned" (*être savante*). In the last case, what is condemned is not pedantry but knowledge itself. If we bear in mind the existence of forbidden areas of knowledge,

there is no doubt that a *femme savante*, that “dreadful name” (*Cyrus*, X, p. 401), could be what we now term a *pédante*, but she could also simply be a woman who had had the audacity to taste of the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. In the final analysis, Madeleine de Scudéry condemns the transgression of a social code according to which women are required to maintain a high degree of ignorance and, without exception, to appear to have remained in it.

In *Les Femmes Savantes*, Molière displays no originality in his conception of the educated woman. The point of view of the man of quality, Clitandre, is a faithful reproduction of the *mondaine* Scudéry’s views:

And know-it-all women are hardly to my taste.
 I admit that a woman can be enlightened;
 But I object to this shocking craze
 Of becoming *savante* simply to *savante* be
 And I would have her adept at feigning
 Ignorance of those things she does know;
 Lastly, may she hide herself when immersed in study
 And, while possessing knowledge, not allow it to be seen,
 Not to quote authors, indulge in big words,
 Nor to attempt wittiness in her idle chatter.

(I, e, ll. 217-226)

The very ambiguity of the play’s title is directly inherited from *Le Grand Cyrus*: Philaminte, Armande, and Bélise are not once called *pédantes*. In contrast to Magelon and Cathos, who are introduced in the cast of characters as *précieuses ridicules*, the protagonists of *Les Femmes Savantes* are essentially characterized by their family relationships. It seems obvious that for Molière as for Scudéry, the fault lies in being *savante*, and not merely in its affectation. This is well illustrated in Clitandre’s speech quoted above: “This shocking craze/ Of becoming *savante* in order to *savante* be.” It is shocking because women are not meant for that.

Woman’s prime duty, with significant differences due to differences in social milieu, is really to tend the home. Both Molière and Scudéry deplore the idea that *femmes savantes* abandon their traditional role for study. Chrysale, lamenting his burnt supper, echoes Sapho busy with directing the household and criticizing Damophile for having rejected this duty: “Damophile, believing knowledge to be incompatible with family matters, took no part in domestic affairs; but as for Sapho, she took the trouble to inform herself on everything pertaining to correct household management, even the most minute details” (*Cyrus*, X, p. 351). For Molière, as for Scudéry, the ideal of the *honnête femme* consists of a tempering of the two extremes of the excessively learned and the ignorant woman, and this concept necessarily encompasses responsibility for the household.

It is, I believe, important to stress the essentially social origin of their criticism. The fact that Madeleine de Scudéry uses the expression “should not” and not

“cannot” implies that she does not believe in woman’s intellectual incapacity.⁹ Unlike Bouhours, who was a regular visitor in her *salon* and who believed that women, without exception, could not truly be *beaux esprits* (wits) because of their cold and damp temperament,¹⁰ Scudéry subscribes to a theory in which custom has the last word, and this explains her prohibitions, which can be traced to a profound desire for conformity. In adopting this position, she shows that the modesty she advocates is not directly founded on self-deprecation but on a fear of social reprobation. This social view of modesty explains her somewhat paradoxical conduct: on the one hand, she publishes novels filled with categorical expressions like “I insist,” “one must,” “one should,” and considers the novel to be instructive, thus assuming the role of educator confident in her ability; on the other hand, she declines an offer to participate as a judge in a poetry competition, declaring: “For thirty years M. le duc de Montausier has praised me for not acting the *bel esprit* [sic] . . . when my friends show me some work, I do not *pass any judgments*.”¹¹ And it is quite true that she had a reputation for being very modest.

If the *bienséance* of the fair sex is largely responsible for her attitude and that of her heroines, there were other reasons behind this modesty and restraint, this time considerations of caste decorum. Here the *savante-pédante* is no longer condemned as a woman but as one belonging to an inferior rank. In this case, criticism of the *savante* does not differ from that of the *pédant*: they share a common ignorance of good manners and *politesse*, by which is meant refinement and distinction; they lack that delicacy which only an intimate acquaintance with high society can procure.¹² The *honnête homme* is contrasted with the *pédant* as is the aristocrat with the bourgeois; pedantry and plebeianism are a matched pair.¹³ Moreover, if Sapho abhors being called *bel esprit*, it is because the term became popular when bourgeois women began to open *salons*. Father Bouhours, Mme Deshoulières, and La Bruyère attribute the devaluation of the term to its adoption by the bourgeoisie.¹⁴

In addition, the goal proposed for knowledge is an important factor in determining its value: if it is employed for utilitarian monetary ends, it has a market value and is considered *bourgeois*. This concept of utility, which was to undergo so large a development in the very pragmatic and bourgeois Age of the Enlightenment, was disdained by the aristocracy in the seventeenth century. For the latter, knowledge must end in amusement and pleasures, for it is a pastime and not a profit-making endeavor. Sapho very explicitly illustrates the gratuitousness of knowledge so essential to the preservation of her social status when she accuses the courtiers of treating her exclusively as a *bel esprit*; that is of reducing her to a professional writer:

There is nothing more unseemly that being a *bel esprit*, or being treated as such, when one is of noble heart and high birth. For, and I hold this to be fundamental and beyond doubt, as soon as wit sets one apart from the multitude and one acquires the reputation of

possessing more of it than others and when one can write sufficiently well in verse or in prose to be able to write books, this person, if noble, is deprived of half of his nobility and is no longer the equal of another of the same House and Blood who will not stoop to writing. (*Cyrus*, X, p. 366)

For an aristocrat to dedicate himself to the literary profession constitutes a sort of derogation; this explains why a Georges de Scudéry and a Mme de Lafayette, to cite only two examples, so insistently emphasized the completely disinterested and playful nature of their literary creations. Sapho even goes so far as to make the distinction between writing to amuse *oneself* (which she does) and writing to amuse others. She is repelled by the idea of being considered a sort of public entertainer, regardless of the public. Madeleine de Scudéry is an authoress ashamed of that fact.

It is clear that there are numerous motives behind her condemnation of the *femme savante* and her preaching of intellectual modesty: breaches of *politesse* or her sex's *bienséance* and even loss of caste—these are the risks a lady runs in her quest for knowledge. The educational objectives that she established were strictly imposed by custom and high society's code of conduct: ladies must know how to write (for purposes of correspondence) and to speak well (to speak pleasantly) in company. Just as the body is embellished and adorned, so the *mind* is *embellished and adorned*—these are the terms she uses. But her demands extend no further: knowledge is an adornment and, as such, is regulated by decency and fashion. This is why Madeleine de Scudéry lays the essential stress on knowledge as a social matter rather than emphasizing its intellectual or ethical aspects. Her message and example, so important in that period, retarded the intellectual emancipation of women demanded by certain *précieuses* in favor of a *status quo* to which she merely added a few purely decorative elements.¹⁵

Some twenty years after *Le Grand Cyrus*, during that period when Madeleine de Scudéry was undertaking the series of her *Conversations* and *Entretiens*, the abbé Fénelon in his *Education des Filles* proposed a very precise program for instructing girls on the fulfillment of the three functions imposed upon them: "They have a household to oversee, a husband to make happy, children to raise well."¹⁶ If we temporarily overlook the extremely Christian viewpoint of the treatise, we can perceive that this conception is closely related to that of Chrysale. Yet the future archbishop of Cambrai composed it for the use of the duchesse de Beauvillier, whose husband had just been named head of the Conseil des Finances and who, in 1689, was to receive the signal honor of being responsible for the upbringing of the duke de Bourgogne.¹⁷ The *dévo*t point of view coincides in a large measure with the bourgeois point of view, both being linked to a strict moral system. Fénelon was himself conscious of this conjunction and of the problems it raised in such a rigidly hierarchical society.

In his treatise he intends to establish a type of woman, the "strong woman" as he labels her, derived from Greco-Roman antiquity and above all from the Bible: convinced that Solomon's inspiration was divine in nature, he would have taken the "perfect woman" described in the *Proverbs*¹⁸ quite literally were it not for the diversity of customs.

Since he never entertained any doubts whatsoever concerning the inequality of the sexes, the following principle appears at the beginning of the first chapter as an axiom and a premise: "Their bodies *as well as their minds are less strong* and less robust than those of men." The three-fold vocation of woman—spouse, housekeeper, and mother—thus appears to be a vocation sanctioned by natural and divine law, which explains the following interdiction found in the same paragraph: "They must neither govern the State, nor wage war, nor enter into the ministry of sacred things. They can also dispense with certain fields of knowledge pertaining to politics, the military arts, jurisprudence, philosophy, and theology" (*Ed.F.*, p. 480).

A woman so destined will be educated only to be capable of correctly fulfilling her duties, since for the abbé Fénelon all education is functional, as it was in the Middle Ages. And since women bring their property into marriage, it is also suggested that they be taught the rudiments of law, great care being taken to reiterate to them that they are "*incapable* of penetrating the difficult areas" of these matters (*Ed.F.*, p. 536).¹⁹ This womanly incapacity, which in his eyes justifies the unequal distribution of familial and social responsibilities, is the touchstone of feminine modesty. This sex-based inferiority prompts him to comment further that "a girl must only speak when it is truly necessary, and then only with an air of doubt and deference"; as with Scudéry, although for different reasons, self-confidence in speaking is an impertinence and, to an even greater extent than with the authoress, the number of subjects of conversation is strictly limited to that which does not extend beyond "the normal reach of girls" (*Ed.F.*, p. 530). In matters of feminine education, the level is based on the lowest standard.

This functional education concerns not only the female sex but also social rank. It is known that in this period, marriages were almost always limited to couples of the same class (*order*) and even of the same "stratum":²⁰ a girl destined to live in the country will not receive the same education as one destined to live in the city, and a bourgeoisie will be raised (trained) in a manner different from a girl of high birth, particularly as regards luxury and fashion. Fénelon severely criticizes the misconduct that results from an ambition to rise above one's social rank. Behind the figure of the abbé, one can sense the presence of the son of the marquis de Fénelon, and thus this Christian education reveals itself to be a caste education as well: the bourgeois must keep to his place.²¹ Yet it is not a *mondaine* education: novels, because of their frivolousness, are banished from the program, and foreign languages—Spanish and Italian—are discouraged because of their uselessness. Nothing

better illustrates the discrepancy between the worlds of Fénelon and Scudéry than this emphasis on pragmatism: later in his *Télémaque* utility and simplicity, safeguards against luxury, constitute for him the criteria of a good society, for "good taste means adapting to things according to their degree of usefulness" (*Ed. F.*, p. 530). Thus to the modesty required of a girl as a function of her sex is added that imposed on her by social rank, and Fénelon does all in his power to stifle her slightest desire to escape the destiny to which she is reduced.

These two reasons are complemented by a third, of a religious nature. This is the one Fénelon stressed the most, and undoubtedly the circumstances of the French religious situation partially explain his decision to proceed in such a manner.

Humility being required of all Christians because they are sinful creatures, it is understandable that Fénelon speaks of self-mistrust several times (*Ed. F.*, pp. 525 and 529; and *Avis*, p. 549). This mistrust is related both to the body and to the mind, and it is interesting to observe that he was concerned with the latter as much, if not more, than with the former. Calvinism and the development of Jansenism were, in his eyes, two examples of prideful contestation, from which it is necessary at all costs to protect Catholics and particularly women, naturally beguiled by novelty.²² Mistrust of one's mind is the surest method of resisting desires of "presumptuous criticism and indiscreet reformation." Now this presumption innate in all creatures corrupted by Satan's pride is most particularly the characteristic of the *bel esprit*. Consequently he exhorts governesses as follows: "do not allow her to discuss matters of theology, since this might seriously endanger her faith. *All is lost* if she loses her taste for domestic duties" (*Avis*, p. 550). *Bel esprit* being here defined essentially as a critical mind, it is easy to see the danger it constitutes for the Catholic faith, founded on the Church tradition that the girl must blindly accept, and the menace it represents to her social role no less traditionally imposed and blindly accepted. To teach girls to distrust themselves becomes the safest guarantee of the *status quo*, both religious and social.

The vehemence with which Fénelon speaks of *bel esprit* shows that he perceived it to be the greatest stumbling block for a girl, and one can say without distorting his thought that it constituted a crime greater than indecency: pardon can be granted a creature who has sinned against the flesh, but it is well known that the only unforgivable sin in the Catholic doctrine is one "against the mind"; that is, a revolt against divine authority. For lack of a word to describe so abominable a transgression, however, he is reduced to assigning the indecent woman and the *savante* to the same level, charging the *bel esprit* with *indecenty* (*Avis*, pp. 549 and 550). He even invented the interesting expression *pudeur sur la science* (sense of decency in knowledge).²³

Despite certain differences, the positions of Fénelon and Scudéry coincide. All is lost if a woman takes it into her head to discuss and to argue: it is the

road to dishonor. But whereas Scudéry, cultivated, aristocratic, and *mondaine*, thought that concern with decorum could of itself ensure the maintenance of socio-political institutions, Fénelon, who belongs to the class of the clergy in which spiritual advising and directing had virtually reached perfection, stresses self-mistrust, which instills in a directed and totally guided woman nothing but the conviction that she is inferior and incapable. This explains why he denounces the false modesty in which those "who are capable of study" cloak themselves. The following quotation, wherein he superficially coordinates propositions actually related causally, illustrates very well that modesty, ignorance, lack of curiosity, and submissiveness are one and the same thing: "implant in their minds . . . a true modesty and a great contempt for contestation" (*Ed. F.*, p. 487).

This distinction between "false modesty," or worldly modesty, and "true modesty," which is, in fact, Christian humility construed in a more or less rigorous way, is also found in La Bruyère, who makes a distinction between modesty, an "outward virtue," and humility, an "inward sentiment which debases man in his own eyes."²⁴ As for the abbé Du Bosc, in his chapter of *L'Honneste Femme* which deals with humility, he goes so far as to differentiate five kinds: stupid, forced, worldly, moral, and Christian. No quarter is given here either for worldly humility, which is a "sham humility."²⁵ Compared with these three authors, Madeleine de Scudéry's ideas on modesty, despite the fact that she devotes an entire chapter to it, reveal the superficiality of her approach. In her case we are in fact dealing with a modesty of decorum, the only kind, in this privileged aristocratic milieu, which could possibly be reconciled with fame, good breeding, and the socio-political institutions.

Unlike those of Scudéry, the writings of Poullain de la Barre, the only seventeenth-century feminist in the modern sense of the word, do not reflect the viewpoint of the privileged classes. This difference between the two is of the utmost importance, accounting for the rather modest success of his *Egalité des deux Sexes* (1673), if one is to judge by the near absence of commentary it provoked, despite its radicalism. Poullain's readers were few in number.²⁶ The author had fully understood that emancipation must be included in any authentic education of women. Men did not want this emancipation, however, ladies of high society did not care about it, and bourgeois women did not even suspect its existence. Thus Poullain only interested a limited world composed of enlightened men and a handful of women who either considered knowledge as something other than adornment or were actually or potentially in rebellion against the *status quo*. There is no doubt that he was aware of it and that he wrote for the "happy few."

The emancipation he supports begins with the denunciation of inequality, as is indicated in his complete title: *De L'Egalité des deux Sexes, discours physique et moral, où l'on voit l'importance de se défaire des préjugés.*²⁷ Disclaiming the medieval arguments in favor of women found in other works

of the century, which were easily refutable by others just as medieval, he proceeds by the light of the new philosophy, Cartesianism, and for the first time subjects the problem to a critical examination; that is, by questioning tradition and authority. Whereas Madeleine de Scudéry never falters in her adherence to the *bienséances* and custom and Fénelon sanctifies woman's alienation in the name of the Church, Poullain, unreservedly using the method prescribed by Descartes, dares to confront the general opinion of his time by denying that modesty and the sense of decency are natural: for him they are aspects of culture and more specifically notions invented to serve repressive ends.²⁸

The first point he intends to establish is the equality of the sexes. For him the historical examples of "illustrious women" are not mere exceptions, as Bouhours and more or less everyone else thought, but illustrations of a natural capacity equal to that of men: clearly a question of one's point of view, since the same facts are absolutely antithetically interpreted by two different perspectives, one sexist and the other not. Thus to account for the tiny number of "great" women, he uses cultural and historical explanations. Poullain's theory is historical, and whether it be a question of political authority or masculine authority, legitimized usurpation explains inequality. Echoing Althusius and foreshadowing the Rousseau of the *Discours sur l'Inégalité*, he denounces the role of force in the origination and maintenance of socio-political institutions, and to generalize his theory he applies it to the relationship between the two sexes. It is this socio-historical approach, in which the notion of becoming replaces that of being, that explains Simone de Beauvoir's admiration for Poullain, whom she quoted in *Le Deuxième Sexe*.

The scriptural texts used to refute Poullain do not daunt him. Like Spinoza (whom I believe he had read), he emphasizes the relative and historical aspect of the Old Testament and declines to find any universal precepts in it.²⁹ Thus Solomon's perfect woman was good in Solomon's time, nothing more. That women are suited only to raising children and keeping house is therefore a prejudice, created and maintained in existence by a patriarchal and sexist type of society.³⁰

With equality of the sexes postulated as a principle, he grants to women as well as to men "the same rights to truth"; that is, he claims for women the right to knowledge and proposes to provide them with a method and principles in his *Education des dames* (1674). Not only are they permitted to learn everything, including theology and moral guidance,³¹ but the cultivation of that critical mind dear to Descartes is strongly urged on them. We can gauge the audacity of the following quotation by recalling that Scudéry and Fénelon criticized strength in women and by remembering that France was then governed by an absolute monarch: "Observe all, look at all, and listen to all without scruple. Examine all, reason upon all. . . . You have an intellect; use it

and sacrifice it blindly to no one."³² This statement prefigures both Diderot's tone and his terminology in the *Encyclopedie's Prospectus*.

Armed with their intellect and confident of their natural capabilities, women will then be easily convinced that they can control their own destiny. Elsewhere he states: "Since your peace of mind and *your happiness* are at stake, do not pay heed to anyone else in these matters"(Ed. D., p. 314). This reference to happiness is innovative, for while there was continued insistence on the wife's daily duty to make her husband happy, no one cared about hers: was she not on earth *for* man, as had been asserted in the Middle Ages and as Rousseau was to reaffirm in *Emile* (Book V)?

It can readily be surmised that in this radical revolt against custom, modesty plays no part. Not only is it no longer well founded, but its existence is explained politically. Poullain correctly judged the situation in realizing that it constituted the basis of all authoritative systems. The following passage from Poullain, a woman's statement, offers a remarkable parallel with the most radical texts of our day:

There is, in my opinion, nothing more pernicious than *false humility*. It *bastardizes* the mind. It *robs* one of courage and strength. It *stifles* our enthusiasm and *maintains* us in a state of unworthy indifference and languor. It renders us *incapable* in all our endeavors and its sole purpose is to make one receptive to policies whose *acceptance depends on blind submission*. (Ed.D., p. 147)³³

Self-mistrust forms the basis for submission; self-appreciation leads to confrontation, or even revolt. "All is lost" Fénelon said, in condemning *bel esprit* in the name of authority. All is to be gained, Poullain proposes in the name of a humanism whose unique representative he is in this period.

He replaces the common criticisms of *femmes savantes* with praise, and instead of charging them with impertinence and indecency, he, in contrast, discerns high merit and stately courage in their actions: "They have had to surmount the indolence in which their sex is raised and to abjure the pleasures and idleness to which they have been reduced, to overcome certain public obstacles which separate them from study, and to put themselves above the erroneous conceptions that the average man has of *savantes*" (Eg.S., p. 60).

In this period, only the heroines of l'abbé de Pure's *La Pretieuse* formulate ideas so opposed to tradition. Didascalie, for example, after having declared that she wants "to work for her sex's liberty" and to sacrifice "her life, her concern and her work to the reparation of this wrong, and to the destruction of this frightful servitude" and after having made it clear that for this what is sufficient is "to dare and to will," reveals that she has created a sort of society in which women strive to speak and write well. But "this audacious flight by which the mind was brought to examine beautiful things and to *apprehend them through their true causes*" draws the criticism of women faithful to tradition who "passed off the care with which they spoke as pedantry."³⁴ This quote, one of the few in which the word "pedantry" is applied to women,

confirms that the *savante* is disparaged not so much for affectation as for questioning the roles assigned to women by their respective milieux. A "bourgeoise," whose concept of an *honnête femme* is that of one confined to the household, considers the woman who speaks well in company as a *pédante*. A lady who speaks well considers the woman who discusses what woman never should as a *savante*, and an abbé accuses a Christian woman who attempts to replace utter docility with a desire to understand of being a *bel esprit*. From one milieu to the next, the more or less narrow notion is identical: the *savante*, the *pédante*, and the *bel esprit* are trouble-mongers or, to use the words of the period, *frondeuses* (political and social connotation) and/or *esprits forts* (religious and moral connotation).

We have arrived at a better understanding of how Madeleine de Scudéry could write that it is uniqueness which lays one open to blame, and how Fénelon could continually limit girls' ambitions to the common level of their companions: what is in question is not so much alleged modesty as the refusal to grant woman a unique existence. Modesty is an effective way of making them accept a more or less shared fate "merited" for reasons of gender and whose variations are imposed by the different social milieux. Originality and perfectibility are considered to be masculine by their very nature, and Poullain amply emphasized that not only was the path to glory closed to women but also that they were only educated "in order to remove their desire to perfect themselves, as we have perfected ourselves, by depriving them of the means" (*Eg.S.*, p. 213).

The social reprobation, a veritable repression, to which the *precieuses*, the *femmes savantes*, and the *beaux esprits* fell victim shows that he assessed the situation correctly. Nonetheless, it is for these inquisitive women and these budding rebels that, by encouraging self-esteem and the rejection of false modesty, he opened the way to authentic knowledge, founded on a critical use of the mind and culminating in moral autonomy, and therefore happiness.

NOTES

This paper was translated from the original French by Carol Mossman.

1. *Les Femmes Savantes*, II, 9, lines 571-572. Throughout this paper, the terms in italics are mine. The same is true of the brackets in the quotations. This and all other quotations are translations of original French references.

2. *Entretiens de Morale* (Paris, 1692), I, pp. 12 and 9. Henceforth all mentions of this title will be abbreviated to *E.M.*

3. Magendie's study is well worth consulting: *La Politesse Mondaine et les théories de l'honnêteté en France, au XVIIème siècle, de 1600 à 1660* (Paris, 1925).

4. *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus* (Slatkine reprints, 1973), vol. III, pp. 634-635.

5. *Conversations morales* (Paris, 1686), vol. I, p. 412. Abbreviated hereafter as *C.M.*

6. Note this traditional tendency toward putting a woman who is simply indecent on the same level as a thief and assassin, in fact a complete scoundrel. Moreover, if there exist *libertins honnêtes*, one can only find *libertines malhonnêtes*.

7. *Clélie, Histoire romaine* (Slatkine reprints, 1973), vol. I, pp. 861-863 and 874-884. In a recent article entitled "La belle et la bête, ou la femme et le pédant dans l'univers romanesque du XVII^{ème} siècle," *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* (May-August 1977), Mme Noémi Hepp writes in concluding a study devoted essentially to the satirical novel: "But are the *précieuses* really women? In terms of the novel, the only answer is no" (p. 575).

8. *Impertinent* then carried the meaning (derived from Latin) of *unsuitable*.

9. The following passage clearly illustrates this point as well as modesty's role: "After which this Ambassador d'Amasis having plunged them into the most elevated of subjects, they commenced to define Time, Light, Truth: and to speak of Death, Fate, and the Gods so that these three princesses, who, not wanting to take part in the conversation out of *modesty* (although the Princesse de Corinthe and the Princesse Eumetis *could speak of such things*) retired. . . ." (*Cyrus*, IX, p. 373).

10. This was the theory of the Sieur de la Chambre in *L'Art de connoître les hommes* (Paris, 1659) and the basis of Bouhours's statement. Nonetheless, there are some exceptions: "There are those who have none of their sex's imperfections where the mind is concerned and to which, it would seem, nature has given a particular temperament" (*Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène*, Paris, 1920, p. 192). On the contrary, Poullain de la Barre attacks le Sieur de la Chambre in *De l'Excellence des hommes contre "l'Egalité des sexes"* (Paris, 1675), pp. 135-144. Henceforth this title will be abbreviated to *De l'Exc.*

11. Rathery and Boutron, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry, sa vie et sa correspondance* (Paris, 1873), p. 302.

12. For more information, see Bouhours's previously mentioned essay on the *bel esprit*, in which *politesse* and discernment are considered to be of foremost importance.

13. This can be explained by the social origin of the *pédant*, who was a schoolmaster (original meaning).

14. Bouhours, *Entretiens*, p. 150; Mme Deshoulières in her *Epître chagrine*; and La Bruyère who, in his *Caractères*, makes a distinction between the true *bel esprit* and the false one "which brings the mind down to the popular level" ("Des jugements," p. 20); *Cydias* is typically a false *bel esprit*, "in a word, a combination of the *pédant* and the *précieux*, made to be admired by the bourgeoisie and provincial people" (*ibid.*, "De la société et de la conversation," p. 75).

15. M. Alain Niderst's conclusions on *Madeleine de Scudéry, Paul Pellisson et leur monde* (Paris, 1976) regarding this novelist are relatively indulgent. It is unfortunate that M. Niderst was unconvincing: to have succeeded, he should have taken the trouble to support his somewhat hastily-drawn assertions.

16. *De l'Education des Filles*, followed by *Avis à une dame de qualité sur l'éducation de sa fille* (*Oeuvres*, Paris, 1858), vol. III, p. 481. Hereafter abbreviated to *Ed.F* and *Avis*.

17. See Fénelon's December 28, 1685, letter to the duchess: The treaty was completed by then, but it was not to be published until 1687. The duke and the duchess were extremely pious; cf. *Correspondance de Fénelon*, ed. J. Orcibal (Paris, 1972—), vols. II and III.

18. *Proverbs* 31: 10-31.

19. As for very rich girls of high birth, they were instructed in the duties and rights related to property of noblemen (*Ed.F.*, p. 537).

20. Roland Mousnier has authoritatively confirmed this in his recent work, *La stratification sociale à Paris aux XVII^{ème} et XVIII^{ème} siècles: l'échantillon de 1634, 1635, 1636* (Paris, 1976).

21. These remarks of Fénelon (*Ed.F.*, p. 527) are somewhat amusing, since before her marriage the duchess was of bourgeois origin. Only because of the high administrative position of her father Colbert was she able to marry a duke. The instances of feminine "hypergamy" were not scarce, but an aristocrat like Fénelon could only deplore the situation.

22. An allusion to the Calvinists on p. 516 and to Jansenism in the *Avis*, p. 550.

23. "As far as possible, constrain their minds to within the average limits; and teach them that their sex must have a sense of decency concerning knowledge nearly as delicate as that which inspires horror of vice" (*Ed.F.*, p. 512). Ascoli affirmed that Mme de Lambert adopted this expression ("Essai sur l'histoire des idées féministes en France du XVIème siècle à la Révolution," *Revue de Synthèse historique* 13 (1906): 25-27 and 161-184.

24. *Caractères*, "De l'homme," p. 69.

25. *L'Honneste Femme* (Rouen, 1643), Part III, p. 229.

26. Thus in 1675 he himself wrote *De l'Excellence des hommes contre l'Egalité des Sexes*, "a refutation of his first book which was followed by a refutation of the refutation. As for re-éditions of *l'Egalité des sexes*, M. Bernard cites those of 1676, 1679, 1690, and 1692, all in Paris. ("Education des femmes et féminisme chez Poullain de la Barre (1647-1723)," *Revue de Marseille*, 1er trimestre 1972, pp. 117-127). It is questionable whether these are actually reprints: a careful examination of them should resolve the problem definitively.

27. Paris, 1673. Abbreviated hereafter as *Eg.S.*

28. "It is sincerely believed that a sense of decency is natural and more so for women than for men. . . . The sense of decency is nothing more than the fear of being held in contempt by men by doing or saying something before them which it does not please them to approve" (*De l'Exc.*, p. 284). His opinions on modesty will be seen later.

29. "The Judaic laws were National for the most part. This is to say they were based on the spirit and the customs of the people for whom they were made" (*De l'Exc.*, p. 67).

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 269-271.

31. *Eg.S.*, pp. 134-135.

32. *De l'Education des dames pour la conduite de l'esprit dans les sciences et dans les moeurs. Entretiens* (Paris, 1674), p. 311. Abbreviated hereafter to *Ed. D.*

33. Descartes makes a distinction between virtuous and vicious humility: the latter is a lack of free will, self-confidence, and self-sufficiency which he called baseness. The former, called *générosité*, is exactly the opposite.

34. *La Prêteuse ou le Mystère des ruelles* (Paris, 1938), vol. II, pp. 268-276.