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**John J. Conley**, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002. xi + 222 pp. Appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN 0-8014-4020-3.

Review by David Klinck, University of Windsor.

*The Suspicion of Virtue* is, above all, a study of the inspired participation of five female authors in a renascent catholicism during the second half of the seventeenth century. John Conley believes that gender and religion came together, enabling these women to develop a distinctly female philosophical voice. He decries what he calls “the secularist bias in the construction of the canon of modern philosophy [which] tends to discount works written within a religious framework” (p.15). He wants to ensure that writings of the more overtly religious female authors be included in the literary and philosophical canon. Three of the five women under consideration have always been known for their links to counter-reformation catholicism: Mme. de Sablé for her Jansenism and her association with the nuns of the convent of Port-Royal in Paris; Mlle. de la Vallière, for her membership in the Order of Carmel and the renown she gained as the mystical penitent, Soeur Louise de la Miséricorde; and Mme. de Maintenon, the founder of the École de Saint-Louis de Saint-Cyr at Versailles, who strove to put in practice Fénelon’s vision of a christian education for noblewomen. A fourth, woman, Mme. de la Sablière entered an intensely religious, mystical phase of her life during her final years: the period under consideration in this study. Mme. Deshoulières, the fifth woman, was a materialist follower of Gassendi; nevertheless, her persistent uneasiness concerning what death might hold in store for her suggests that she too possessed a religious sensibility.

Conley argues that women in seventeenth-century France tended to shine in moral philosophy, in keeping with their education and peoples’ expectations of them, and that students of seventeenth-century women’s history should not be troubled by the fact that they did not reach the levels achieved by men in metaphysics and epistemology. He has adopted a postmodern suspiciousness of (feminist) claims concerning the universal nature of human experience and a liking for specificity, in this case gendered specificity. Conley believes that the analysis of the operations of the human mind by these five women in order to reveal the nature of vice and virtue, needs to be paired with the work of the great *moralistes*, including Montaigne, Pascal, and La Rochefoucauld (p.14). Their work complements that of their male counterparts, insofar as they explored the subject of vice and virtue with reference to a distinctly feminine context: the world of conversation which was the domain of educated, elite women.

All five authors addressed the subject of vice and virtue with reference to their experience of the world of the Paris salons, and so the question of the relationship of the salons to educated, elite French women in the second half of the seventeenth century is central. This is a story of five women’s disenchantment with the moral stance of *salonnières*, and their search for authentic female virtue in a shared female experience with religious overtones or even possessing a distinctly religious nature. Other scholars have pointed to the complaints of the time about *salonnières’* “moral libertinism,” but Conley has placed the subject at the centre of his study.[1] The reader first encounters Sablé, and then Deshoulières—the two

women who developed their critiques of salon culture or its intellectual life while still wedded to the institution. Next, Conley introduces the reader to Sablière after she had forsaken the salon for a life of solitude, and then to La Vallière in the process of an agonizing withdrawal from the world of the salons. Finally, we meet Maintenon who was, throughout her life, an implacable foe of the salons. Conley devotes a single chapter to each woman. Lengthy selections from the writings of all the women except Mlle. La Vallière are contained in four appendices.

A convert to Jansenism in 1640, Mme. Madeleine de Sablé (1598-1678) opened her own salon in 1655 in her apartment adjacent to the Jansenist convent of Port-Royal in Paris. Leading Jansenists frequented Sablé's salon, as did one of the most famous of their associates, La Rochefoucauld. Conley argues that in her *Maximes* Sablé developed her own humane and feminine version of the Jansenist perception of a fallen humanity. Sablé appears in the form of an understanding, compassionate observer of salon conversation. *Salonnières*, who supposedly had perfected the art of communication through conversation, were in fact so preoccupied with themselves that they could barely hear each other let alone enter into the feelings of another person. "Everyone is so busy with her passions and her interests," Sablé observes in Maxim 29, "that she always wants to talk about them without ever entering into the passion and interests of those to whom she speaks, although they have the same need to be heard and helped" (p. 36).

Sablé offers the possibility of redemption from this self-created imprisonment through the friendship which women can share with each other, or true virtue. She rejects La Rochefoucauld's dismissal of all friendship as being no more than a mask and a device to advance egoistic interests. "Friendship is a species of virtue," argues Sablé, "which can only be founded upon the esteem of the persons loved." Moreover, friendship requires reciprocity, "because in friendship one cannot ... love without being loved" (p.40).

Mme. Antoinette Deshoulières (1638-1694), a student of the materialism of Lucretius and Gassendi, opened her own salon in 1658 which became known as a meeting place for libertine poets. She was the only one of the five women whose work dates from a period when she was living quite apart from catholicism. (Not until the 1680s, when she was nearing the end of her life and in declining health, did she turn to religion.) She, too, felt the need to communicate, to engage in conversation. In her famous pastoral poems, such as "The Sheep" and "The Birds," she speaks in the second person, to non-human life forms. Virtue appears as a "posture of sympathetic solidarity" with nature (p.63). Human beings should abandon themselves to their instincts and feelings, in the fashion of the animals and birds, so that they too can live in a state of tranquillity and harmony.

What comes through most powerfully in Conley's analysis of Deshoulières, however, is her sense of the absence of humility and tranquillity in human society. Vice appears in the form of masculine, Cartesian instrumental reason and the liking for subjecting nature to the human will. "Let's not flatter ourselves," she writes in her idyll, "The Stream," with reference to humankind's treatment of other types of life, "we are their tyrants rather than their kings." "Why do we torture you?," she asks, the water, "why do we reverse the order of nature by forcing you to spring into the air" (p.62)? Deshoulières herself, however, seems to have been no more at peace than the people she saw around her. Her libertine skepticism concerning the immortality of the soul led to anxiety, and a morbid preoccupation with death, suggestive of a religious sensibility. It is a point Conley could have developed more fully. One can feel the chill when she writes that in contrast to the flowers who "die in order to relive," "when once we cease to be, ... it's forever... We only see an unclear future beyond death" (p.59).

In his chapter on Mme. Marguerite de la Sablière (1640-1693) Conley abruptly shifts the reader away from women who were still *salonnières* to the consideration of a woman who had turned her back on the salons and had begun to cultivate the severest piety. Sablière, a member of the Parisian Huguenot elite during most of her life, gained a reputation for having the most brilliant salon of her day. In 1680, following a failed marriage and then a failed love affair, Sablière converted to catholicism and withdrew

from salon society. She spent the rest of her days, leading a solitary existence as a devout penitent fashioning her own form of Augustinian spirituality, until her death in 1693.

Conley focuses on two works dating from the final six years of her life: her *Maximes chrétiennes* and *Pensées chrétiennes*. Like Sablé, Sablière used the genre of the maxim to explore human behaviour, including the working of the inner mind,” except that Sablière’s harsh Augustinianism led her to view with suspicion all forms of human activity, outer as well as inner, except for an unquestioning and unqualified submission of one’s will to that of God. She exhorts her readers to separate themselves “from the world and in a certain manner from ourselves, in order to hear God in retreat.” The true believer “must be suspicious of brilliant virtues. It is only the love of humiliation which the demon cannot turn into a trap” (p.85).

Sablière’s ideal of communion sets her apart from the other four women, because it leaves no place for dialogue or conversation with God or anyone else. There is also a serious question as to whether it can translate into the exercise of virtue. Conley admits that Sablière does not successfully reconcile freedom and necessity. Her puritanical insistence, with regard to everyday behaviour, that people be held fully responsible for their moral failings sat side by side with her belief that people were utterly dependent upon God’s action (p.94). Conley notes that charity, which for Sablière was the supreme virtue and provided the motive for all moral action, was considered by her to be a divine gift given to some but not to others (p.86). Then there is the problem that for Sablière the virtuousness of an action was determined solely by the intent of the person performing the act, not by the act itself, nor the circumstances in which it took place, nor its consequences (95).

Conley next turns to Mlle. Louise-Françoise de la Vallière who, like Sablière, forsook the world of the salon for a religious life spent in quest of spirituality. During much of the 1660s, when she was the mistress of Louis XIV, La Vallière participated enthusiastically in the life of the royal court and the Paris salons. Beginning in 1670, however, after she had ceased to be Louis’ favourite and following a spiritual crisis and near-fatal illness, she moved away from the *mondaine* world towards that of the cloister. In 1675 she took her final vows as a member of the Order of Carmel and spent her remaining years in the Carmelite convent in Paris. Conley focuses his attention upon La Vallière’s highly successful *Réflexions sur la miséricorde de Dieu*, composed in 1671 just after she had recovered from her illness and as she was beginning to withdraw from the world. It is written in the form of prayers, or addresses to God overheard by the reader.

The chapter on La Vallière contains the clearest statement in the book of Conley’s belief that he is dealing with female *moralistes* who fashioned an ethic specifically with women’s experiences in mind, especially educated, aristocratic women’s experience of social intercourse through conversation. The “moral ideal celebrated by the *Réflexions*,” Conley writes, “is not the universal virtuous agent; it is the gendered saint, related to God through irreducible sexual difference, who supplants the equally gendered types of the salonnière and the courtesan” (p.98). La Vallière converted her own life-story of sin and redemption into a gendered story for and about women; she fashioned her own self in the form of “a composite persona of every redeemed woman who witnesses to God’s mercy qua woman” (p.98). She did this by merging her voice with the voices of several women who appear in the Gospels encountering Christ; most important of these was Saint Mary Magdalene, the former prostitute who had become in Counter-Reformation culture, “the archetype of the female public penitent with a history of sexual transgression” (p.107).

Conley just touches on the subject of La Vallière’s confession to God and her readers of her distinctly female forms of sexual transgression: fornication as a courtesan and having given birth to four children out of wedlock. He presents La Vallière’s criticism of the conversation of the salons in greater detail. La Vallière complained that *salonnières* used “words which attack the very soul of our neighbours, which laughingly dissect their faults, and which make them appear ridiculous” (p.116). Such people were bent

upon “destroying ... [other peoples’] lives, their honor, their possessions” (p.116). “I will flee with horror,” she vows, “all these evil people who parade their libertinism, who boast of their vices.... Whatever attraction I may have for their minds or for their persons, I will faithfully ... distance myself ... from business and friendship with them” (p.110-111).

La Vallière forsook the conversation of the salon for conversation, through prayer, with God; a model for other women to follow. The compassion which Sablé felt for her fellow *salonnières* as well as Sablé’s ideal of intimate, personal friendship surface in La Vallière’s *Réflexions*, in the form of her belief that God has shown her mercy and befriended her. La Vallière’s relationship to God, in which her heart is filled with a “faithful and fervent love” is more human, more comprehensible than that of Sablière (p.115). Moreover, La Vallière leaves an opening for the true believer, the truly virtuous woman to display compassion and friendship in everyday life, possible even in the everyday life of the salons.

With the Marquise de Maintenon (1635-1719) we encounter the educated, aristocratic woman who rejected salon culture and put forward as an alternative the ideal of the aristocratic, rural household under the supervision of a pious housewife with a sound, practical education. In addition to being Louis XIV’s second wife, Maintenon was the founder (in 1686) of the prestigious Royal Institute of Saint-Louis at Saint-Cyr dedicated to educating aristocratic girls according to Maintenon’s ideal of christian female virtue.

Maintenon’s understanding of feminine virtue appears in her *Entretiens* and *Instructions* based upon talks she gave to the faculty and students, as well as dramatic productions intended for performance by the pupils. Her talks, like her plays, usually took the form conversations, between Maintenon herself and female interlocutors, or in the case of the case of her plays, between female characters. Etiquette was extremely important. In her address, *Sur la politesse*, Maintenon introduced her pupils to some of the basic rules governing conversation. “Don’t speak familiarly to each other. Don’t use nicknames,” she tells them, and, “speak good French and do not invent thousands of words that ...do not correspond to proper usage” (p.143). Mastering the literary and scientific culture of the salons and the city was to be avoided.

In her dialogue, “Sur le bon esprit,” Maintenon has Célestine, the defender of salon culture, say to Augustine the proponent of rural, christian domestic ideology: “I just don’t understand what pleasure you can take in being with people who know neither history nor current events nor literature. What value is there in women who are so absorbed by housekeeping that they don’t even know the differences among an elegy, an ode, and a lyric poem” (p.153)? But in the end Célestine is made to undermine her position when she reveals herself to be contemptuous of worthy but very ordinary, rural housewives, and when she reveals that she can not distinguish between sound and specious learning. Maintenon prizes the virtues of temperance and fortitude above all others, in keeping with what was really a bourgeois and rather narrow ideal of feminine domesticity.

Professor Conley has developed an interesting argument about the existence of female *moralistes* with a distinctly feminine approach to ethics, and it is to be hoped that he continues his investigations. It would be helpful if we had a better sense of the context in which these criticisms of the salon took shape and the direction in which they were leading. The subject of Cartesianism appears here and there throughout the book, and Conley indicates in his accounts of Deshoulières and Sablière that there was opposition to Descartes’ mechanistic theory of nature. So the reader would like to know where these five women stood with reference to Descartes’ philosophy. The salons were not truly sites of depravity as so many of their critics claimed. The gendered system of values associated with *honnêteté* and the aristocratic culture of honour in seventeenth-century France provided a set of norms and expectations by which salon people could judge each other and everyone else could judge them.[2] Carolyn Lougee’s argument concerning the tension within aristocratic salon society as a result of the presence of so many wives of lesser social backgrounds who felt compelled to prove their superiority, should help to make

sense of the complaints about the behaviour of *salonnières* to which Conley has pointed.[3] Perhaps what set the women in this study at odds with the world of the salon was a desire to distance themselves from the predominance of a male culture.

#### NOTES

[1] On the subject of the criticism of the “moral libertinism” of the salons see Carolyn C. Lougee, *Le Paradis des Femmes: Women, Salons, and Social Stratification in Seventeenth-Century France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976); and Linda Timmermans, *L'Accès des femmes à la culture (1598-1715)* (Paris: Éditions Champion, 1993).

[2] Concerning the ideas of *honnêteté* and their effect upon the seventeenth-century Parisian salons see Jolanta T. Pekacz, *Conservative Tradition in Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

[3] Lougee, *Le Paradis des femmes*, pp. 168-170.

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