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Jacques Du Bosc, *L'Honnête Femme: The Respectable Women in Society and the New Collection of Letters and Responses by Contemporary Women*. Sharon Diane Nell and Aurora Wolfgang, ed. and trans. The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series, 31. Toronto: Iter Inc. and the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2014. xviii + 332 pp. Notes, appendix, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-7727-2160-0. <https://crs.ca/publications/ov31/>

Review by Claire Carlin, University of Victoria (British Columbia).

Beginning in 1996, The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe series has made easily available almost 100 works primarily by women, most of which have not been republished since the early modern era. Comparatists, instructors, and students of history owe a debt of gratitude to the original series editors, Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, Jr., and to the three publishers of the series for providing this material, which has been translated from languages as varied as Danish, Dutch, early English, French, German, Italian, Latin, Polish, Russian, Spanish, and Ukrainian.[1] Although specialists in these national literatures would normally prefer scholarly editions in the original language, market realities in the Anglophone world better support translation into modern English, which of course has the added benefit of reaching a wider body of readers while broadening the horizons of specialists to include the entirety of Europe.

Sharon Diane Nell and Aurora Wolfgang have chosen two works by a male author who sought to promote education for women, thereby contributing to the development of “the other voice” in early seventeenth-century France. The decision to retain the French title *L'Honnête Femme* for Jacques Du Bosc's conduct manual was a wise one given the cultural specificity of the notion of *honnêteté* in seventeenth-century France. The concept was much more prevalent when applied to men, and it was above all an aesthetic ideal: the *honnête homme* was the exemplar of social grace in all circumstances. Although this social practice acquired an ethical underpinning during the decades when theories of *honnêteté* were much under discussion from the 1630s (when *L'Honnête Femme* was first published) to the 1670s, the aesthetic dimension dominated. In the 1690 edition of Antoine Furetière's famous *Dictionnaire universel*, the two strains can be seen side by side in the first part of the definition: the *honnête* is that which deserves esteem and praise because it conforms to the dominant moral code while following social decorum. But Furetière quickly moves from this definition hinting at moral rectitude to one based on performance: the *honnête homme* knows how to live well because he has mastered the ways of world, including *galanterie*, another complex model of conduct for men related to courtesy, urbanity, civility—and relations with women (not necessarily, but potentially, sexual).[2] Aesthetics dominate morality in Furetière's definition of the *honnête homme*, but then he gives three examples of treatises that cover not only the behavior of men, but also of women and youngsters—and the example for women is Du Bosc's *Honnête Femme*. [3] The idea of the *honnête femme* is then defined separately by Furetière: she is chaste, modest, and gives others no reason to speak about her [4]. In other words, she should be socially invisible rather than a partner to the *honnête homme*, who occupies the social stage alone.

As Furetière's definition suggests, at the end of the century, Du Bosc's treatise was associated with the definition of the *honnête femme* that valued discretion and self-effacement as necessary female qualities. In their introduction, Nell and Wolfgang prefer to emphasize the progressive nature of Du Bosc's

enterprise, criticizing scholars who “cherry-pick” in highlighting Du Bosc’s conservatism—but the editors are themselves making an interpretive choice in their insistence that his exploration of two sides of a number of topics means that women should “learn from his method to judge for themselves, to weigh for themselves the merit of each position” (p. 9). While it is true that “... Jacques Du Bosc treats women as reasonable and moral beings able to think critically, if educated, and to make moral choices on their own” (p. 1), he consistently encourages restraint on the part of the socially and culturally ambitious. Nell and Wolfgang note that self-control is at the heart of *honnêteté* for both men and women (pp. 6-7), but Du Bosc’s advice to women is imbued with the discourse of warning: against reading novels because they will lead women to debauchery (pp. 53-58), and in chapters not included in their selection, against curiosity, ambition, coquettish behavior, superstition, scandal, passion of any kind, greed—particularly harmful behaviors in women.[5] Despite the subtitle chosen for this translation, *The Respectable Woman in Society* (my emphasis), there are ample indications that Du Bosc wished the virtuous woman to speak up only infrequently and with extreme caution. For example, in “On Conversation,” he notes that “the majority of the fair sex has less trouble speaking well than speaking little, and discretion is more difficult and necessary for them than eloquence” (p. 65). He recommends discretion to men as well (p. 64), but advising his female readers not to overstep the bounds of modesty is a leitmotif of *L’Honnête Femme*.

Nonetheless, when read alongside another sort of conduct literature, the thirty or so treatises on Catholic marriage published from the 1630s on, *L’Honnête Femme* appears enlightened in its insistence on the importance of reading and writing for women’s moral and intellectual development. The marriage manuals, written by clergymen like Du Bosc, a Franciscan, call upon a plethora of examples from antiquity, the Bible, and the writings of the church fathers, many of which warn women about the perils of social intercourse. *L’Honnête Femme* follows this model, even as it allows that education and thoughtful self-expression can help women navigate the dangerous waters of the elite society into which they must enter in order to fulfill their social role. Du Bosc is certainly progressive in this vein as he joins other Catholic writers who believe that educated women are far less likely to commit moral errors. The social purchase of this argument was well illustrated in Molière’s *School for Wives* in 1662; Nell and Wolfgang argue persuasively that Du Bosc was an important contributor to popularizing this view three decades earlier when he published volume one of *L’Honnête Femme* in 1632, volume two in 1634, and volume three in 1636. The work was a bestseller, “published fifty times between ... 1632 and the early eighteenth century” with significant revisions to the 1658 edition, and seventeenth-century translations into English, Dutch, and Italian (pp. 34-35).

The editors imply that this success and shared themes demonstrate an ideological convergence between Du Bosc’s works and those of women writers who were publishing with increasing frequency from the 1640s onward. They cite the philosophical writings of De Sablé, Deshoulières, De la Sablière, De la Vallière, and Maintenon studied by John J. Conley in *The Suspicion of Virtue*[6] along with popular novels by women writers such as Scudéry and Lafayette (pp. 3, 17-18, 21-23), all of which address polite behavior in elite society, the female capacity for friendship, the varieties of love, and the nature of virtue. Although these thematic parallels are undeniable, in the case of the novelists there are important differences with Du Bosc that are not mentioned. *L’Honnête Femme* never provides an explicit discussion of the salon culture prevalent in Paris by the 1630s, and which according to Nell and Wolfgang, Du Bosc prepares women to enter. The editors forge links between *L’Honnête Femme* and, for example, Madeleine de Scudéry’s *Artamène, ou le grand Cyrus* (p. 17-18), her *Clélie* (p. 21), and Lafayette’s *La Princesse de Clèves* (p. 23), but these novels portray vibrant social situations and moral dilemmas through dialogue and character development, while Du Bosc dispenses his advice in abstract terms then illustrates it with anecdotes from ancient times that fall well short of the impact of fiction that dares to explore the passions and ways of being for independent women, outside marriage or the convent. His virulent criticism of the genre would certainly apply to the novels cited.

Despite his aversion to fiction, Du Bosc comes closer to its communicative power in the *New Collection of Letters and Responses by Contemporary Women* (1635). Nell and Wolfgang perform a valuable service in providing good evidence that these ninety-six letters (the last third of their volume) were in fact written by Du Bosc himself in an effort to provide “a model for the writing woman and an implicit call for women to write” (p. 26), offering “a practical application of the general concepts found in *L’Honnête Femme*” (p. 27). The editors base their attribution of the letters to Du Bosc on their own research but also on remarks by Michèle Longino, who finds suspicious the “unity of tone, only one subject addressed in each letter, uniformity of length, and a steady rhythm of exchange with each letter neatly succeeded by a response.”[7] Nell and Wolfgang do not cite the rest of Longino’s remarks about the content of the *New Collection of Letters*, however: “Even more suspect are some of the sentiments represented as expressed by women. ... Even if Du Bosc’s [*sic*] letters are authentic (which seems highly doubtful), they contain not merely pointed lessons on penning letters but maxims reflecting and reinforcing standard seventeenth-century ideology on women and their place.” The example from the letters furnished by Longino “tacitly prescribes affection, friendship, and faithfulness for writing women and encodes eloquence, rhetoric, and wisdom as unseemly qualities in their letters.” Longino concludes that the *New Collection of Letters* comes down to “... the manufacturing of anonymous ‘women’s’ letters by a man articulating in the guise of women’s voices a male code of comportment for women.”[8] As Nell and Wolfgang admit, “Despite Du Bosc’s arguments in favor of women writing, the fact that the letters are written by anonymous women demonstrates his ambivalence about advocating that women actually publish their works” (p. 28). On the one hand, Du Bosc holds enlightened views on women’s capacity for moral perfection and thus for deep friendship where tradition considered women incapable of either, and the letters illustrate this potential. On the other hand, containment of women’s ambition and wariness about their social performance is just as present in the *New Collection of Letters* as in *L’Honnête Femme*.

When Du Bosc published the first editions of *L’Honnête Femme* and the *New Collection of Letters* in the 1630s, his project was original and represented a step forward for the conception of women’s contribution to society and culture, but this was much less true as the century went on. The fact that *L’Honnête Femme* in particular continued to sell into the eighteenth century is not necessarily an indication that his thought was considered progressive. A survey of moralizing writing about women shows that by the 1670s, there was a backlash against the publishing success of women writers with increased critiques of female authorship and of the comportment of women in salons and other social gatherings.[9] Nell and Wolfgang summarize well the problem presented by texts like Du Bosc’s: “... the term *honnête*, when applied to seventeenth-century women, was and still is fraught with controversy and multiple meanings” (p. 5-6).

Making Du Bosc’s work easily accessible to an English-speaking audience interested in early modern studies is a worthy enterprise. Nell and Wolfgang note that this is not a full critical edition, but they do include all of the paratexts written by Du Bosc from all available editions as well as an appendix with the complete tables of contents of the editions of the 1630s and 1658. The translation is fluid and agreeable to read while retaining a seventeenth-century flavor. The notes on language and proper names that accompany the translation are helpful and very well done. The bibliography includes Du Bosc’s sources from Antiquity, along with Renaissance and seventeenth-century works as well as modern scholarship cited in the Introduction and notes. While it is true that relatively little scholarly work has been done on the *honnête femme* as a category and on Du Bosc’s work in particular, and the bibliography captures most of it, there are a few fundamental books on the notions of *honnêteté*, *galanterie*, *préciosité*, women’s writing, and salon culture whose inclusion might have led the editors to a slightly different perspective on Du Bosc’s contribution.[10]

NOTES

[1] The University of Chicago Press published the series between 1996 and 2010, followed by the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies at the University of Toronto in partnership with the online publisher Iter: Gateway to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The series will as of 2015 be co-published by Iter and the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.

[2] “*Honneste: adj. m. & f. Ce qui merite de l’estime, de la louange, à cause qu’il est raisonnable, selon les bonnes mœurs. On le dit premierement de l’homme de bien, du galant homme, qui a pris l’air du monde, qui sçait vivre.*” Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel, contenant généralement tous les mots françois tant vieux que modernes, et les termes de toutes les sciences et des arts* (The Hague: A. and R Leers, 1690). The list of exemplary theoretical works on *honnêteté* chosen by Furetière (see note 3) implies that *mœurs* here means both social practice and moral rules. Furetière’s definition contains and illustrates the tensions inherent in *honnêteté*, the subject of scholarly debate since the seventeenth century and still ongoing.

[3] “*Faret a fait un livre de l’honneste homme, le Pere du Bosc un de l’honneste femme; Grenaille un de l’honneste fille & de l’honneste garçon, qui contiennent des instructions pour ces personnes-là.*”

[4] “*Honneste femme, se dit particulièrement de celle qui est chaste, prude & modeste, qui ne donne aucune occasion de parler d’elle, ni même de la soupçonner.*”

[5] The 1658 edition is around 600 pages long, so selecting certain chapters to include in the volume under review is understandable: seven out of eighteen in part one, four out of ten in part two, and one out of twelve in part three.

[6] John J. Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002).

[7] Michèle Longino (Farrell), *Performing Motherhood: The Sévigné Correspondence* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1991), pp. 37-38.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

[9] Claire Carlin, “Perfect Harmony: Love and Marriage in Early Modern Pedagogy,” in *The Art of Instruction: Essays on Pedagogy and Literature in 17th-Century France*, ed. Anne M. Birberick (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 201-24.

[10] For example, Erica Harth, *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992); Myriam Dufour-Maître, *Les Précieuses: Naissance des femmes de lettres au XVII^e siècle* (1999; Reprint, Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008); Delphine Denis, *Le parnasse galant: Institution d’une catégorie littéraire au XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001); Faith Beasley, *Salons, History, and the Creation of 17th-Century France: Mastering Memory* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006). Given several references to François de Grenaille’s *L’honnête fille*, it is surprising that the excellent edition by Alain Vizier (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2003) is not mentioned.

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