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Madame de Maintenon, *Dialogues and Addresses*. Edited and translated by John J. Conley, S.J. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004. xxxiii + 177 pp. Introduction, notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-50241-4; \$22.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-226-50242-2.

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The life of Madame de Maintenon (1635-1719) sounds more like fiction than history. Born in the prison of Niort, later abandoned by her father and forced to beg in the streets, Françoise d'Aubigné would make an astounding ascent from a childhood as a penniless orphan to become the Marquise de Maintenon, secret wife and influential advisor to King Louis XIV. Shortly after her marriage to the king, Maintenon focused her considerable talents on establishing a boarding school for impoverished aristocratic girls, the Maison royale de Saint Louis at Saint-Cyr. She directed the school from its founding in 1686 until her death. Her academy achieved renown and became a model for elite women's education throughout Europe.

John J. Conley's new edition of Madame de Maintenon's *Dialogues and Addresses* makes the pedagogical writings of this remarkable woman available to students and teachers in a format convenient for use in undergraduate classrooms. The writings presented in this volume represent three different components of Maintenon's pedagogy at Saint-Cyr: 1) moral dialogues that she wrote for her female students to enact in class, 2) addresses that she delivered to the students on various ethical, practical, and religious issues, and 3) addresses that she delivered to the faculty outlining their role at the school. Translated into an accessible if appropriately formal English, Maintenon's writings convey the values that she inculcated in generations of Saint-Cyr students concerning women's proper role in society. They also detail the challenges and constraints facing even girls born into the aristocracy. Maintenon rejected both the convent education then typical for elite girls and the humanistic education commonly used in boys' schools. Instead, she developed a curriculum that focused on moral formation, the cultivation of piety, and the practical preparation of these young women for lives as wives of the provincial nobility.

In dialogues on topics such as "On Piety," "On the Necessity of Dependence," and "On Privilege," scripted characters advocate different positions on issues like the role of religion in women's everyday life or proper relations between noble women and those of different social status. In addresses entitled "Of avoiding the occasions of sin" and "Against religious innovation," Maintenon lectures her students on the dangers awaiting them in society and on the necessity of obedience to the Catholic Church of Rome. Since Maintenon's writings deliberately present a variety of viewpoints on a range of topics, they can be used to expose students not only to the history of women, but also to broader social, political, and religious debates taking place in late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century France. Even in her dialogues, however, Maintenon's intended message is never ambiguous. Influenced by her one-time friend and spiritual advisor François de Fénelon, whose *Traité de l'éducation des filles* was published in 1687, Maintenon urged the girls of Saint-Cyr to reject polite society and to embrace domesticity.[1] She taught them to resign themselves to conformity with the social expectations facing young women in their straightened circumstances, namely a life defined by gender as one of dependence, submission, and tireless work caring for others.

To convince the girls to submit to their fate with strength and grace, Maintenon employs a surprisingly harsh realism. The girls are confronted with the drawbacks of married life, single life, and life in the convent so that they can make an informed choice among these limited options. One of her characters

announces that “even the best husbands tend to act like tyrants,” while another warns that society shuns women who breach convention (pp. 63, 58). Girls who desire a life of independence are taught that “[w]e have nothing but misery when we refuse to accept our state in life” (p. 62). Her morality tales warn of the slippery slope from innocent flirtation with a man to loss of one’s virtue and death by a botched abortion. Piety is the touchstone of the girls’ education, “the only thing that can help us endure the burdens of life” (p. 65).

Although the early curriculum of Saint-Cyr emphasized achievement in arts and literature, with students performing Racine’s *Esther* in 1689 to great acclaim, Maintenon later rejected this “worldly” approach. According to her reformed curriculum, Saint-Cyr students were explicitly discouraged from “external accomplishments” like foreign languages or advanced mathematics or science (p. 140). Students were lectured on politeness, civility, and other virtues proper for girls of their social stature, but they were not taught the arts of letter writing or conversation that might serve them well in society. In their place, girls were taught thrift, hard work, and the basic skills necessary for household management. Strict censorship was imposed at the school. Maintenon banned all profane books, which she categorized as not only novels, but as any book that was not explicitly religious or that did not have a specific usefulness for these girls’ lives. Not a single sheet of paper was to be allowed onto the grounds without approval (p. 152). “[D]on’t fill your pupils’ minds with a lot of books,” she instructed the teachers at Saint-Cyr, “Flood them with the spirit and the counsels of Our Lord” (p. 146).

One of Conley’s goals in this volume is to rehabilitate the reputation of Mme de Maintenon, who from her entry into the king’s inner circle has been someone people have loved to hate. Maintenon, whose intense religious devotion set her apart from many at court, has been represented as a religious fanatic who urged the persecution of Protestants and Catholic dissidents, and as a plotting, hypocritical schemer. “Piety,” the Duc de Saint-Simon wrote in his famously harsh portrayal of the royal mistress, “was, indeed, her greatest asset; she used it to maintain herself upon the heights and, above all, as a means to power, which was her life’s ambition, to which she would gladly have sacrificed all else.”[2] As Conley explains, both her controversial life and her “conservative” approach to women’s social role have meant that her writings have not garnered the scholarly attention that other prominent women writers of the time have recently received (p. 12).

Conley strives to reinterpret Maintenon as an educational philosopher whose advocacy for women’s education and unusual pedagogical approach reveal feminist concerns. *Dialogues and Addresses* is published as part of the Other Voice in Early Modern Europe series, whose stated objective is to present the “voice of protest” that “battered at the wall of prejudice that encircled women.”[3] Conley concedes that “[d]etecting the ‘other voice’ in such a champion of social convention might appear to be a daunting task” (p. 1). Nevertheless, arguing that Maintenon “constructs an apology for the right of women to their own culture...” he proceeds to cast her as a kind of early cultural feminist (pp. 2, 14). Maintenon’s writings, however, chafe against such a characterization. She rejects egalitarianism, writing that women “are to obey all their lives. . . . God has at all times wished [them] to obey; He created the first woman subjected to the man.”[4] Maintenon wastes little time praising the importance of women’s role in family or society. She discourages independent thought or action, and she prepares her students for two futures: marriage or the convent. Based on the essays in this volume, portraying Maintenon as a profeminist seems only a small step from characterizing Rousseau as a feminist voice based on his educational agenda for Sophy in *Émile*. [5] In fact, Carolyn Lougee, in her study of salon culture, social change, and the seventeenth-century *querelle des femmes*, goes so far as to describe Maintenon’s pedagogy as “antifeminist.”[6]

Maintenon’s very intransigence regarding women’s proper role in society, however, is one reason why her writings can be so useful as a teaching tool. Her voice in the debate on the woman question is

important because she articulates a reformed, woman-focused, and religiously inspired variation on the “dominant” voice. In the face of challenges posed by *salonnières* and feminists, as well as social realignment among French elites, Saint-Cyr presented a kind of call for order within the family and in society more broadly, to be realized through women’s submission to God, king, and husband. [7] Her vision is the kind that I usually find more challenging to communicate convincingly to my twenty-first-century students than those calling for women’s emancipation. In the classroom Maintenon’s *Dialogues* and *Addresses* might be contrasted effectively with the writings of feminists such as Marie de Gournay or François Poullain de la Barre in order to introduce students to the scope of the debate about women in seventeenth-century France. [8]

Maintenon, perhaps the most powerful woman in France at the time, remains a complex and controversial figure. A woman who rose from humble beginnings to the highest ranks, who intervened in contemporary politics and religious conflicts, Maintenon insisted that her students forsake ambition and embrace their station. Given her personal journey, her lectures exude an almost intolerable smugness. This impression is only reinforced as she trumpets her own moral rectitude by regularly citing herself as a positive example of the triumph of virtue. Nonetheless, students of both early modern European history and of gender history will undoubtedly be interested in the vivid portrait Maintenon paints of the desires and concerns of young noble women. Teachers, for their part, can rest assured that Maintenon’s *Dialogues and Addresses* will almost certainly provoke a lively response from her readers.

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## NOTES

[1] François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, *Traité de l’éducation des filles* (Paris: Ch. Delagrave, 1883) available online at <http://humanities.uchicago.edu/ARTFL/ARTFL.html>. Carolyn C. Lougee emphasizes this opposition between polite society and domesticity in her treatment of Fénelon and Maintenon in *Le Paradis des Femmes: Women, Salons, and Social Stratification in Seventeenth-Century France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 171-208; and even more directly in “Noblesse, Domesticity, and Social Reform: The Education of Girls by Fénelon and Saint-Cyr,” *History of Education Quarterly* 14 (1974): 87-113, 95-97.

[2] *Saint-Simon at Versailles*, ed. and trans. Lucy Norton, (New York: Harmony Books, 1980), pp. 240-241.

[3] Series editors Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, Jr., in Maintenon, *Dialogues and Addresses*, p. xxix.

[4] Quoted in Lougee, *Le Paradis des Femmes*, p. 193.

[5] Jean-Jacques Rousseau describes the education of Sophy, his ideal young woman, in book five of the educational treatise *Émile* (London: J. M Dent & Sons Ltd, 1974). Incidentally, Rousseau and Maintenon shared a common influence in Fénelon, as Lougee points out in “Noblesse, Domesticity, and Social Reform,” p. 104. [6] Lougee, *Le Paradis des Femmes*, 173. [7] Lougee identifies Saint-Cyr as the “counterinstitution” to the salons, an example of early aristocratic reform in reaction to the realities of elite social fusion. *Le Paradis des Femmes*, pp. 173-74. [8] English translations of works by these two authors are currently available within The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe series. See Marie le Jars de Gournay, *Apology for the Woman Writing and other works*, ed. and trans. Richard Hillman and Colette Quesnel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and François Poullain de la Barre, *Three Cartesian Feminist Treatises*, ed. and trans. Vivien Bosley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

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