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MADAME DE PUISIEUX: A PRECURSOR OF FEMINISM

by

Antonette Josepha Merritt

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Madame de Puisieux: A Precursor of Feminism" submitted by Antonette Josepha Merritt in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Madame de Puisieux is the only woman in history who wrote works of the moralist genre for publication. She presents in a captivating manner the problems that women of the eighteenth century faced in their interaction with men. She is honest enough to recognize that both men and women contributed to the unfavorable conditions under which women had to live and witty enough to permit the reader to enjoy her message. She is also able to tell us what changes she proposes in order to remedy the most severe problems she describes. Her ideas regarding the emancipation of women and the enhancement of women's self-concepts were very unusual and even revolutionary in her day but are in line with the feminist ideology of today.

PREFACE

I believe that Madame de Puisieux is a neglected and maligned writer, unknown to most people except to Enlightenment scholars and Diderot biographers who, however, know little about her life, and still less about her works. I believe that Madame de Puisieux' moralist works deserve more attention than they have received in the past for two reasons; first because they shed some light on eighteenth-century society from the perspective of a woman who did not belong to the salon society, second, and most important, because Madame de Puisieux' ideas on education and emancipation of women should be of interest to historians of feminism. My interest in Madame de Puisieux lies in the socio-historical aspects of her moralist works and particularly in the feminist current that runs through these works.

Although I am aware that since the early 1970s French feminist literary critics, such as Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva have concentrated on literary theory, borrowing tools from philosophy, psychology, and linguistics, I believe that their approach to literature is not appropriate to my analysis of Madame de Puisieux' works. I realize that the French theorists regard the Anglo-American

socio-historical approach as an outmoded one, but I think that it is nevertheless suitable for this thesis. Like Janet Todd, I believe that socio-historical criticism is important because of, "its rooted conviction that the subject is women, not the human or the humanist condition in general, not 'Woman', not a part of women like the vagina or the uterus nor an expression of women like sexuality or 'feminine writing'" (Todd 1988: 4). What is of particular interest to me is the experience of a woman, Madame de Puisieux, "who wrote in history and who, ideologically marked and muzzled [...], nevertheless wrote with a voice that has never been sufficiently attended to" (Todd 6-7).

Severely criticized by literary reviewers of her day, such as the Abbé Raynal and Friedrich Melchior Grimm, Madame de Puisieux seems nevertheless to have enjoyed enough popularity during her lifetime to have seen the publication of three editions of *Conseils à une amie*, two editions of *Les Caractères I*, and two editions containing both *Conseils à une amie* and *Les Caractères*. After *Conseils à une amie* appeared in English under another woman's name, Madame de Puisieux, afraid to see *Les Caractères* similarly plagiarized, gave up her anonymity and published an English version of *Les Caractères I*, entitled *Characters: or Reflections on the Manners of the Age* (1751).

In 1769 the Abbé de la Porte devoted a fifty-page

review to Madame de Puisieux' works and in his *Histoire littéraire des femmes françaises* the works of Madame de Puisieux occupy a prominent place next to those of Mesdames Elie de Beaumont and Riccoboni (Laborde 1984: 58-59).

In 1882 a new edition of *Conseils à une amie* appeared with an introduction by E.A. Spoll. The last edition of *Conseils à une amie* was published in 1912 in a modernized version with a preface by Jean de Puisaleine.

It seems obvious that the interest in Madame de Puisieux' works had not waned in the eighteenth century and that in subsequent centuries *Conseils à une amie* at least was considered to be sufficiently interesting to have found its way to new publishing houses. It is therefore surprising that Léon Abensour in *Histoire générale du féminisme des origines à nos jours* (1921) should write about Mesdames de Lambert, de Coicy, and Riccoboni but fail to mention Madame de Puisieux' contributions. In *La Femme et le féminisme avant la Révolution* (1923) he does mention Madame de Puisieulx (sic). However, he refers to her as the author of *La Femme n'est pas inférieure à l'homme* (1750), a work which most scholars believe to be a plagiarised version by Philippe-Florent de Puisieux of Poullain de la Barre's treatises of 1673, 1674 and 1675.

In 1960, Roger Mercier found enough historical value in the works of Madame de Puisieux to quote her eighteen times in *La Réhabilitation de la nature humaine de 1700 à*

1750 (Garnier 1978: 5). Similarly, Robert Mauzi thought highly enough of her works to quote her thirty-one times in *L'Idée du bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée française au XVIIIe siècle* (1965). On the other hand, from a recent French perspective of feminism, Albistur and Armogathe did not see the need to mention Madame de Puisieux in their *Histoire du féminisme français* (1977).

When writing the history of feminism, what seems to be at work, then, is what E.P. Thompson calls "the enormous condescension of posterity" (quoted in Showalter: 11). In other words, over the years Madame de Puisieux' works have suffered from what Germaine Greer calls the "phenomenon of the transience of female literary fame", noting that, "a small group of women have enjoyed dazzling literary prestige during their own lifetimes, only to vanish without trace from the records of posterity" (Quoted in Showalter: 12).

In the preface to *Caractères II* Madame de Puisieux clearly indicates that she had harboured hopes for accolades from the literary establishment of her time. These hopes quickly evaporated when she discovered that the critics attributed the best parts of *Conseils à une amie* and *Les Caractères* to Diderot. Calumny of this kind was not new. In the sixteenth century, the poems of Pernette du Guillet and Louise Labé were attributed to Maurice Scève (Albistur 109-110) and in her research on female

painters of the past Germaine Greer encountered the same phenomenon. She states, "the most wounding and commonest calumny that the woman artist has to bear is that some male artist is the author of her work" (Greer 1979: 100).

What I find surprising, though, is that if Diderot indeed contributed to these works, why did Diderot scholars pay so little attention to them? If, on the other hand, these assertions were false and Madame de Puisieux' writings were original or profound enough to have been attributed to Diderot, why has Madame de Puisieux been neglected for the past two hundred years? Why could she never have been judged on her own merits?

In *Diderot and Madame de Puisieux*, Alice Laborde attempts to set the record straight insofar as Madame de Puisieux' collaboration with Diderot is concerned but she does not examine the inverse relationship. I believe that this would be an interesting study for future research.

My objective in this thesis is to champion the works of a woman whose thinking on the emancipation of her sex was far ahead of her time. Since nothing can be gained by breaking all the rules, she advocates change but not too drastically, moderation being her motto. Thus she presents a two-faced view: revolutionary and conservative at the same time.

I have called Madame de Puisieux a precursor of feminism, both because the term feminism is an anachronism

when applied to the eighteenth century and also because, following in the footsteps of feminists such as Christine de Pisan, and Marie de Gournay, Madame de Puisieux is a precursor of the women who initiated the women's rights movement with which the term feminism generally has come to be associated.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Glen Campbell for his patient guidance through many versions of this thesis and for his constant and friendly encouragement. I would like also to thank the committee members, Pauline Willis and especially Anne McWhir, who read the manuscript, made much-needed corrections and offered helpful suggestions.

DEDICATION

To my husband, *Dwight*

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INTRODUCTION

*Je suis femme, et fâchée de l'être
comme toutes les autres.*

(Les Caractères I: 169)

Who was this woman, Madame de Puisieux, a relatively unknown but nevertheless outspoken critic of the role women were expected to play in eighteenth-century France? Was she a feminist before the world had invented the word? Was she bitter because fame and recognition had eluded her? What were the reasons for her discontent? Above all, how could women possibly be unhappy about their fate in life during the Age of Enlightenment when writers, such as Montesquieu, said that women ruled supreme?

Madame de Puisieux' life story is an enigma. Virtually nothing about her life can be officially documented. There are two police reports dating back to 1749; the first one states, "Madame de Puisieux vient de faire un livre intitulé *Conseils à une amie*. C'est Diderot, son bon ami, qui a fait tout le corps de ce livre" (Quoted in Laborde 1984: 161). The second one refers to the Diderot-Puisieux relationship, "Il est marié et a eu cependant Mme de

Puisieux pour maîtresse pendant assez de temps" (Quoted in Venturi 1967: 379). The next information on record concerns a 2000 pound grant which Madame de Puisieux received from the *Convention* in 1795 (Laborde: 172). No birth, marriage, nor death certificates exist. All other biographical data on this author come from Diderot biographers and from Madame de Puisieux' own works.

Madeleine d'Arsant (sometimes spelled Darsant) was born in Paris in 1720. She comments that since her father died when she was two, "il n'y avait pas d'apparence que la fortune qu'il me laissait devint meilleure" (*Réflexions*: 69). From the age of twelve to seventeen she was in the convent school of Port-Royal in Paris (*Discours préliminaire, Conseils à une amie*, p. III). She married Philippe-Florent de Puisieux, seven years her senior, *avocat au Parlement de Paris*, shortly after leaving school in 1737. Soon afterwards her husband left his profession to become a translator of English, Italian and Latin works. The *Discours préliminaire* of the *Encyclopédie*, of which Diderot was the editor-in-chief, gives credit to "MM. de Puisieux" for aid in the description of several arts. According to Camille Garnier, Madame de Puisieux met and became the mistress of Diderot in 1745 and their affair lasted until Diderot's imprisonment in 1749 (Garnier: 12). Alice Laborde states these years as 1746-1751, based on a comment made by Madame de Puisieux in the preface to *Les*

Caractères II. Philippe-Florent de Puisieux died in 1772 (this date is on record). Madame de Puisieux died in 1798 (Garnier: 10 and Laborde: 172).

Madame de Puisieux' literary works consist of some poetry that was never published, four moralist works, six novels, two contes, one comedy and one pedagogical prospectus.

The books I will be discussing here are the four moralist works: *Conseils à une amie* (1749), *Les Caractères: Pour servir de suite aux Conseils à une Amie* (1750), *Les Caractères, seconde partie II* (1751), *Réflexions et avis sur les défauts et les ridicules à la mode, pour servir de suite aux Conseils à une Amie* (1761). I will also use some pertinent quotations from the comedy *Le Marquis à la mode*¹ (1763).

In this study I have chosen to write about Madame de Puisieux' moralist works because I like this genre. I also like the manner in which she expresses herself. Her tone is captivating and reflects a lively personality. She is ironic, audacious, self-assured, cynical, sarcastic, and witty. Her unexpected turn of phrase, her controversial thoughts and the bluntness with which she sometimes expresses them; all of these have captured my interest. She is at times honest to a fault, showing a lack of delicacy which undoubtedly shocked many readers of her day. In my

¹ These titles will be abbreviated as follows: *Conseils*, *Caractères I* or *II*, *Réflexions*, *Marquis*.

opinion, her straightforwardness is refreshing. She is down-to-earth, realistic, not stuffy, but spontaneous in her outrage, outrageous in her thoughts.

Another and more important reason why I chose her moralist works is that Madame de Puisieux shows her feminist leanings not only in her writings but also by choosing to communicate in this genre. Her writing and publishing activities were daring enough to challenge conventional views of what was appropriate for a woman, but by doing so in this particular genre she encroached upon a domain which had traditionally been considered as a male preserve.

Ironically Madame de Puisieux is known primarily for her first two books, *Conseils*, and *Caractères I*, which she published anonymously under the name of Madame de P****. Although the author, as well as Diderot, vehemently deny this, it was generally believed that Diderot contributed to these works, a belief which accounts, perhaps, for their greater popularity. Madame de Puisieux, flouting convention by publishing her works, actively sought renown for her talents. It is therefore doubly ironic, and sad, that she should have become known to posterity mainly for having been Diderot's mistress.

Ever since 1830, when Angélique de Vandeul gave an unflattering account of Madame de Puisieux in her *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la vie et des ouvrages de*

Diderot par Madame de Vandeul, sa fille, Diderot biographers, influenced by these memoirs, have shed a negative light on Madame de Puisieux' moral character. With the exception of Franco Venturi and Léon Gorny, they are generally unfamiliar with Madame de Puisieux' works. In his biography, *Jeunesse de Diderot* (1939), Venturi throws doubt on Vandeul's interpretation of facts. He also briefly examines Diderot's possible contribution to *Conseils* and *Caractères* (Venturi 1967: 135-141). Similarly, Gorny discredits Vandeul's accounts, devoting nine pages on the analysis of these "facts" and eight pages on Madame de Puisieux role as Diderot's "collaboratrice, inspiratrice ou collègue?" (Gorny 1971: 123-139).

As far as critical studies of Madame de Puisieux' works are concerned, during this century there have been only three which are worthy of note. The first one is Maurice Pellison's "Une Femme moraliste au XVIIIe siècle" (1910). In this article he examines the four moralist works in question. He thought that Madame de Puisieux, even though he judged her to be a minor author, deserved her place in history, if for no other reason than that she was the first woman, after Madame de Lambert, to tackle the *moraliste* genre. Furthermore, he said, considering that most of what we know about women in the eighteenth century concerns "les grandes dames, les actrices et les courtisanes" it is of interest to a social historian to

examine the life and thoughts of a middle class woman. (Pellison: 201-202). His article is a systematic, detailed, unbiased critical analysis of Madame de Puisieux' works.

Pellison believes that Madame de Puisieux could have been a feminist if she had taken up women's defense more often than she did. In addition, he says, while Madame de Puisieux saw clearly what was wrong with society, she was too much inclined to give in to convention. "C'est vers la vie sociale que se tourne Madame de Puisieux, vers une vie qu'elle voudrait pour tous meilleure et plus libre. Elle entrevoit ainsi l'avenir, mais ne se sent pas capable d'aller résolument vers lui et de rompre avec le présent" (Pellison: 217-218).

It is precisely because she sought a better and freer life for women that I consider Madame de Puisieux to be a feminist. In her *Encyclopedia of Feminism* Lisa Tuttle gives several individual definitions of feminism, quoting various authors, because feminism appears to be "a dynamic, constantly changing ideology". Out of all these definitions, the one that seems to be pertinent to my thesis says, "Feminism originates in the perception that there is something wrong with society's treatment of women; it attempts to analyse the reasons for and dimensions of women's oppression, and to achieve women's liberation" (Tuttle 1986: 105).

Since feminism is such an an elastic concept I believe

that it would be useful to state my working definition of this term. In my opinion, a feminist is someone who seeks to liberate women from unnecessary social constraints. More precisely, she is someone who seeks emancipation from male authority, and from women's submissive unthinking acceptance thereof, as well as emancipation from society's rules of conduct that are discriminatory to women. Feminism, then, is the action of writing about women's subordination, thereby seeking to end it.

Referring back to Pellison's comment that Madame de Puisieux was not a feminist because she did not resolutely break with the present and advance toward the future, my interpretation is that she could not afford to always be blunt. Depending on the subject, she might be abrasive or she might be subtle. If she occasionally vacillated in her thoughts, I believe that this should be attributed to the times she lived in. After all, writing subversive literature could result in a *lettre de cachet* and a trip to prison.

Sometimes Madame de Puisieux' message is overlaid with irony, sometimes it is obscured by contradictory thoughts, and sometimes one must read between the lines. For this reason I believe that it is up to the reader to separate the wheat from the chaff, as it were, and to extricate the message that lies hidden beneath the text. The author herself clearly explains that in her day and age:

Tout doit être assaisonné de l'apparence de la galanterie. Il faut dire la vérité, mais il faut l'adoucir avec des pinceaux si légers, que les traits ni les couleurs n'en offensent point. Tout se peut dire: Le ton seul y met des différences. On peut même dire la vérité sous l'apparence du mensonge: c'est ce que font les personnes qui ne veulent pas mentir; mais il faut bien de l'esprit pour rendre les autres les dupes même de sa bonne foi (*Caractères II*: 59).

Thus the message is there for those who are not deceived by appearance and who detect the nuances in tone. In addition, by pointing out the shortcomings of both sexes, she encourages women to do some soul searching and to use their intellect in order to determine how they contribute to the problem of inequality. She clearly puts women on the same plane with men when she affirms: "Je ne reconnais dans une femme d'autre sagesse, que celle qui convient à un honnête homme. La vérité est une pour tout le monde" (*Conseils*: 140). Furthermore, her criticism of the legal and social system is a call for change to the benefit of women.

The most extensive and interesting study to date is a doctoral thesis by Camille Garnier, *Madame de Puisieux: Moraliste et romancière* (1978). It is an instructive analysis of the whole oeuvre of Madame de Puisieux. Garnier considers Madame de Puisieux to be neither a feminist nor a revolutionary but a conservative who nevertheless acknowledges discrimination against women. She mentions that Madame de Puisieux could have been a feminist "si l'amour du repos ne l'avait pas convaincue qu'il ne fallait

jamais troubler l'ordre établi". She also believes that Madame de Puisieux presented a "tableau cinglant" of women who are sometimes victims of the other sex, sometimes of their own vices. Puisieux should have made the connection between women's lives and the attitude of society toward them and expressed this with force, she says. According to Garnier it is this silence which weakens Puisieux's position on a subject that should have been close to her heart (Garnier: 91).

Although I find Garnier's comments of interest, I cannot agree with her position. I believe that she forgets that it is not the function of *moralistes* to think for their readers and spell out their messages. Basically, *moralistes* are psychologists, sociologists, judges of character; their own and others'. They observe the society they live in and pronounce a moral sentence on mankind's behaviour. They are reformers at heart, not preachers. *Moralistes* count on their readers to extract whatever message they find. Moreover, I think that they compliment the readers' intelligence in that they do not tell them exactly what to think or which conclusions to draw.

The last substantial study of Madame de Puisieux is Alice Laborde's *Diderot and Madame de Puisieux* (1984). Laborde's purpose is two-fold: To give a general sketch of Mme de Puisieux' theories on education and on feminism and, in addition, to examine her relationship to Diderot,

placing special emphasis on the extent of their literary collaboration. Unfortunately, Laborde's chapter on feminism is based almost exclusively on *La Femme n'est pas inférieure à l'homme* (1750) which she attributes to Madame de Puisieux. Most critics agree, however, that this pamphlet is simply an earlier English work which was translated by Philippe-Florent de Puisieux. Garnier suggests that the original pamphlet was *Woman not Inferior to Man* (1739) which was possibly written by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (Garnier 1987: 709).

Conseils purports to present advice on how to live in society outside the protection of convent walls. It is a "Bréviaire du bon sens", as Jean de Puisaleine, editor of a 1912 edition, calls it. In my opinion, *Conseils* is also Madame de Puisieux' way of reaching out to other women, helping them to adjust positively to the demands of society. In the "Preliminary discours" Madeleine d'Arsant explains how she was given all these guidelines by an older worldly-wise woman who had retired to the convent after the failure of her marriage. Since Madame de Puisieux does not dedicate the book to this mysterious Madame De ***, I believe that she is an imaginary person invented for the convenience of the author.

Caractères I was written ostensibly at the request of a male friend who needed guidance in the education of his son. This father is probably an imaginary figure as well

because Madame de Puisieux forgets to address him after the first fifteen pages. Moreover, most of the observations it contains pertain to society in general as well as to women and have nothing to do with the education of a young boy.

Caractères II is not really a continuation of *Caractères I*. It is not addressed to the same person, it never talks about the education of a son, it is written in a different style, and it discusses moral issues in general.

Réflexions is addressed to a young woman who is about to be married, and continues to this same person after she is married. It rather resembles a one-sided correspondence.

I have divided this thesis into three chapters. Chapter I deals with Madame de Puisieux' views on men. Since women in the eighteenth century achieved public identity only through men, their happiness depended on their relationship with them. Because of this, Madame de Puisieux' opinion of men is intimately linked to her perception of their treatment, and their opinion, of women. For this reason I could not avoid including women in this chapter.

Chapter II deals with Madame de Puisieux' views on women. She is very uncomplimentary toward her own sex, much more so than she is toward men. Since she admits freely that she is a misanthropist, her attitude toward both sexes is not surprising: "Non, je ne hais pas les hommes;

mais je méprise le général" (*Réflexions*: 289).

I have called Chapter III "Equality of the sexes" because I believe that this is what Madame de Puisieux was striving for in her oblique way. Since feminism involves a search for emancipation, I have tried to describe in this final chapter the changes that I think Madame de Puisieux would have wanted.

I believe that it is an indication of Madame de Puisieux feminist leanings that she chose to communicate in the *moraliste* genre, which was almost exclusively man's. In addition, besides suggesting change by her writings, she stood up for women's rights by her actions. For example, when she was sixteen, she refused to marry the wealthy and titled fifty-seven-year-old widower her mother had chosen for her (*Réflexions*: 54). She also boycotted the *Académie* because this institution refused to admit female members to their ranks:

On me proposa un jour d'aller entendre un très beau discours à l'académie: je refusai de paraître dans une assemblée de gens qui n'admettent aucune femme parmi eux; d'autant plus que le mépris qu'ils en font est la cause de cet éloignement. Je suis ennemie de toute affectation; et il me semble que des femmes dans une tribune ont l'air de pies qui vont apprendre à parler (*Réflexions*: 243)

To this statement she added ironically that if men did not consider women intelligent enough to be members, then she could probably not understand what they were talking about (*Réflexions*: 243).

CHAPTER ONE

MADAME DE PUISIEUX' VIEWS ON MEN

Que les hommes sont injustes! Ils nous embarquent dans de fausses démarches, et ils nous blâment de les avoir suivis: ils font des fautes mille fois plus lourdes, et ils les commettent impunément. Voilà, Mademoiselle, leur avantage: tous leurs préjugés sont pour eux, et tous les nôtres sont contre nous.

(Conseils à une amie: 71).

1. INTRODUCTION

Madame de Puisieux said that there had been and, for that matter that there still were, some illustrious people who were worthy of esteem. However, she found that generally speaking "l'homme à le prendre depuis l'âge de la raison n'a presque point d'occasions de montrer ses vertus, et cède presque'à toutes celles de montrer sa faiblesse" (*Reflexions*: 290).

In Madame de Puisieux' opinion, weakness of character was manifest among *les grands*, "rien n'apprend mieux à être vil que de vivre avec les grands" (*Réflexions*: 191) as well as amongst the most enlightened minds in the country. For instance, the author felt that she could not really comment

on the members of the *assemblées académiques* since women were excluded from them. Women see these scholars as no different from other men, she affirmed, except that they are sometimes even more vicious. Judging by their mean, acrimonious fights and by their backbiting, they are fundamentally petty-minded. For these reasons she was convinced that women would be worse off if they emulated these pillars of the community who should have served as examples (*Réflexions*: 290).

2. MEN'S EXPECTATIONS OF WOMEN

2a. Women should not compete with men

Other than expecting virginity and/or chastity, men's expectations of women were extremely low. "Les qualités de l'esprit et de l'âme nous font des amis; mais la beauté nous fait des amants. Les hommes ne deviennent point amoureux d'une femme laide qui a bien de l'esprit (*Conseils*: 62). A woman had to be pretty, charming, and possess some wit but she had to exercise caution in openly displaying her intelligence. The reason, proposed by Louis-Sébastien Mercier, was that men felt threatened by intelligent women:

L'homme redoute toujours dans la femme une supériorité quelconque; il veut qu'elle ne jouisse que de la moitié de son être. Il chérit la modestie de la femme; disons mieux, son humilité, comme le plus beau de tous ses traits; et comme la femme a plus d'esprit naturel que l'homme, celui-ci n'aime point cette facilité de voir, cette pénétration. Il craint qu'elle n'aperçoive en lui tous ses vices et surtout ses défauts (Mercier 1788: 334).

Half of a woman's being is her body, the other half is her mind. If she were a coquette and used her body to flirt with man, he scorned her; if she used her mind, he feared her. He did not exactly want her to be empty-headed but he certainly did not want her to upstage him. She was sternly enjoined to be meek, passive, and dependent.

Because a man did not want to cope with too much intelligence in a woman, the latter who had some knowledge had to hide it for fear of scaring the man away. She constantly had to stroke his ego by making him feel superior. As Virginia Woolf explains it, for centuries women served "as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (Woolf 1928: 37).

Since knowledge was not valued highly, many women did not bother to learn. They worked on their exterior graces rather than on their inner development. Therefore, if women adopted superficial airs, they did so mainly because men felt threatened if they were profound. Some general knowledge and some social graces, like playing a musical instrument, would suffice (*Caractères I*:59). Women, says Madame de Puisieux sarcastically, do not even need to have probity, simply because whatever they do is inconsequential (*Caractères I*: 35).

Qu'entend-t-on donc dans le monde par de la probité? Ce n'est point aux femmes à qui je fais cette question. Elles sont dispensées d'en avoir. Quoi donc! la probité serait-elle inutile aux femmes, ou les femmes ne seraient-elles point faites pour elle? C'est

le premier; car il me semble qu'elles peuvent être tout ce qu'elles veulent, sans conséquence (*Caractères I*: 35).

Men effectively belittled women by trivializing them. How then could women have any self-esteem when the world expected so little of them? All that was required of a woman was that she be a wife and a mother to her husband's children who would carry on his name. She was not allowed to be a person in her own right. She was an appendage to her husband and to her children; someone's wife, someone's mother. Women were the second sex, as Simone de Beauvoir calls them.

When Madame de Puisieux says, "nous portons aux hommes une vénération bien singulière pour n'oser avoir avec eux rien de commun que les défauts" (*Caractères*: 36), she indicates by her use of irony that this admiration is really uncalled for. It is an unjustified admission of defeat on the part of women who have let themselves be intimidated by man's supposed superiority. Some of Madame de Puisieux' statements on men suggest that she considers them nothing more than big children: "Le mensonge et l'infidélité ne doivent jamais se pardonner aux amants, qui sont d'ordinaire comme les enfants qui oublient le quart d'heure d'après les fautes qu'ils ont commises, et dont on ne les a pas fait repentir" (*Conseils*: 91). She seems to be perfectly aware of man's fear, and perhaps respect, for woman by not daring to allow her to compete with his

pitiful strutting-peacock image. She demonstrates this by saying many times that men have power only because women have let them have it. "De tout temps ils ont eu le pouvoir, nous le leur laisserons" (*Caractères II*: V).

Madame de Puisieux believes that women purposely let themselves be dominated just to keep their men happy, knowing all the time that they could take the power if they decided to do so. "L'esprit de domination rend quelquefois l'homme le plus abject heureux; quand il commande à ses enfants, ou à son chien, il est aussi satisfait qu'un général d'armée à la tête de cent mille hommes" (*Caractères II*: 102). Women, who could perfectly well have wrapped men around their little fingers, preferred to let them believe that they had all the authority which their insecurity so desperately craved: "Les femmes aimables auraient eu sur les hommes un empire absolu, mais elles ne veulent pas. Il y en a encore quelques-unes, qui, malgré l'usage, font respecter leur volonté, et elles sont obéies; mais ce n'est pas sans peine qu'elles se distinguent d'avec les autres" (*Caractères II*: 103).

Women have thus given men power but men still feel insecure. "Peut-être ne serions-nous pas fâchées d'égaliser leur savoir, et de ne plus passer pour ignorantes" affirms Madame de Puisieux, but men would continue to call us indiscreet, capricious, frivolous, unfaithful, and unsympathetic, "nous avons cependant le germe de toutes les

vertus qui sont en eux; mais soit défaut d'éducation, soit faiblesse de notre part, ce germe ne produit rien en nous (*Caractères I*: 35). This last remark is one of total abjection and it is difficult to interpret. Is she giving in to men's image of woman? It appears that she has become conditioned by what she has heard repeated over and over again.

Giving men all this power, however, has obviously worked to women's disadvantage. If men have a tendency to behave like treacherous rogues, says the author, it is only because they hold women in low esteem. Women, on the other hand, having had plenty of opportunity to observe man's perfidy, still think they can change him. In fact, they fall into the trap of their own vanity when they believe that they can retain a man whom another woman could not (*Conseils*: 71). Afterwards, they have plenty of time to regret their choice, states the author, for, "Je suis persuadée que de cent commerces galants, il n'y en a pas peut-être dix rompus par la faute des femmes; rien n'est si commun que des hommes infidèles; et peu de femmes ont manqué les premières" (*Conseils*: 88).

Man creates a vicious circle when he is unfaithful because once a woman has been cheated she refuses to suffer that indignity again. Angry at having been lied to, or left for another, believing that she is dishonored at any rate, she begins her own pursuit of pleasure and becomes a

coquette or, worse, a *femme galante*. "La plupart de celles qui ont oublié leur devoir, ont fait les premiers pas par vengeance, et les autres par goût" (*Conseils*: 88). I deduce from these thoughts that Madame de Puisieux, while not excusing women for their behaviour, holds men responsible for enticing women away from their duties and for the ensuing moral corruption of women.

2b. Women should be virtuous

Given the relaxed morals of some women, says Madame de Puisieux, men have a tendency to look down on all women. She feels that they are being unfair when they judge the whole female sex by the conduct of its worst members. Men show nothing but contempt for the women with whom they associate, she states, but they avoid the ones they should respect (*Réflexions*: 22). She complains about "un grand naturaliste du siècle" (probably Buffon) who likens women almost to animals made for man's use. She also complains about the author of *l'Inégalité des Conditions* (Is she referring to Rousseau's *Discours sur les origines et les fondements de l'inégalité* of 1755?). In the author's opinion this man is "l'ennemi le plus cruel de mon sexe, sans être l'ami du sien" (*Réflexions*: 286). These men honour society by their talents, she notes, but they spoil everything by their foul moods. Even if they have good reasons to complain about some women, what does that say about all the others? To hear them talk one would think

that they had been everywhere where women go, followed them in all their occupations, and listened to all their conversations. "Ils prononcent sur elles comme sur des opérations de la nature, ou comme sur une scène d'opéra" (*Réflexions*: 287). Of course, as Dorothy Sayers (1947) remarks, "what is repugnant to every human being is to be reckoned always as a member of a class and not as an individual person" (Sayers: 19).

Then Madame de Puisieux continues her tirade by saying that the *savants*, rather than accusing women of their ridiculous behaviour, attack the very essence of womanhood, when they accuse them of having no virtue.

Les savants non seulement nous refusent les dispositions qui mènent aux grandes choses; mais même ils ne veulent pas nous laisser les vertus qu'on a accordées de tout temps à notre sexe. Ce n'est plus sur moi que doit tomber le ressentiment des femmes; c'est sur les hommes assez malheureux pour jeter leur fiel sur la plus belle partie de la société, et à qui ils doivent tout ce qu'ils sont (*Réflexions*: 288).

Madame de Puisieux speaks here in defense of her sex but she does not elaborate. What, in her opinion, do men owe the female sex? The gift of life? Perhaps she feels, like Camille Paglia, that woman's secret power resides in her body; in its ability to nurture life, as well as to give pleasure or cause pain, for "no man has yet been born, even Jesus himself, who was not spun from a pitiful speck of plasma to a conscious being on the secret loom within a woman's body. That body is the cradle and soft pillow of

woman's love, but it is also the torture rack of nature" (Paglia 1991: 296).

Madame de Puisieux feels that when men try to take away the virtues that have been accorded women since time immemorial they do injustice to womankind, particularly to the many women who are virtuous:

La plupart des hommes ne croient guère à la vertu des femmes, soit qu'ils en jugent sur celles qu'ils ont connues, soit qu'ils méprisent assez mon sexe pour ne le croire pas capable d'insensibilité et de résistance. Il est pourtant certain que la moitié des femmes sont sages, soit par froideur, ce qui n'est pas rare, soit par d'autres motifs [...]. Je conviens qu'il y en a peu qui soient vertueuses pour l'amour seul de la vertu. Mais qu'importe le motif de leur conduite, si elle est bonne? Est-ce à des hommes vicieux à nous juger? (*Réflexions*: 277-278).

Although virtue was praised by many, it seemed to be practised by few. Madame de Puisieux may claim that half of womankind was virtuous, but this still left the other half who was not. After all, she does say elsewhere that: "Jamais les femmes galantes n'ont été plus à la mode et plus méprisées; nous sommes dans le siècle du libertinage et de l'esprit; on connaît à merveille les travers, et cela n'empêche pas de les suivre. Jamais la vertu n'a été plus respectée et si peu goûtée" (*Caractères II*: 119).

It was generally acknowledged that virtue was in short supply in the eighteenth century. In *Le Neveu de Rameau*, Diderot expresses, as does Madame de Puisieux, essentially the same opinion on virtue, or the lack of it:

On loue la vertu, mais on la haït, mais on la fuit, mais elle gèle de froid, et dans ce monde, il faut avoir les pieds chauds [...]. La vertu se fait respecter; et le respect est incommode (Diderot: 78).

For the author of *Conseils*, vice and immoral conduct are the order of the day. And, foreshadowing *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, she says that the greatest conquest lies in the seduction of a virtuous women. The woman is however doomed even before the attempt at conquest begins: If she gives in, she will be left for another, and if she does not, she will be maligned because rejection is not taken kindly by most men (*Conseils*: 73).

It should be noted that in Madame de Puisieux' terminology virtue could mean anything from chastity, to modesty, to gentleness, to humanity, to respecting social customs. So when she says that society expects women to be virtuous she might mean a myriad of qualities, but when she is talking about women's relationships with men, most often chastity, or a sense of propriety is understood.

2c. Double Standards

Invectives against men are scattered throughout Madame de Puisieux' works. I believe that much of her bitterness toward the male sex stems from the double standard that men have set up and perpetuated since time immemorial. Because it favours them, they cling to sexual prejudices knowing full well that they are being unfair. For example, it is an unspoken law that men have greater sexual freedom

than women. Having read Montaigne, Madame de Puisieux clearly found inspiration in his *Essais*.

Montaigne admits that women are incomparably "plus capables et ardentes aux effets de l'amour que nous". Clearly, he continues, it is nothing but a show of bad faith that, having acknowledged this and expounded at length on it, men have imposed continence upon women knowing full well that there is no passion more violent than love. Yet men expect women to resist this passion while they themselves give in to it without remorse. Men know from personal experience how difficult it is to subdue passion, he affirms (cold showers and all), but as far as women are concerned they want them "saines, vigoureuses, en bon point, bien nourries, et chastes ensemble, c'est-à-dire chaudes et froides [...]" (Montaigne 1588: 103-104).

What I understand Madame de Puisieux to say is that man, unhampered by prejudice, does not feel bound to live by the same rules as woman. He expects her to set and uphold the standards of moral conduct but he does not plan to live by these himself. In her book, *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett explains that the idealisation of women was in reality nothing more than a subterfuge by means of which patriarchal societies hid their domination over women. Putting women on a pedestal was their way of paying them homage but it amounted to nothing more than, as I would say bluntly, throwing them a bone. It was a gesture of

grandeur. This is why, contends Millett, "courtly and romantic versions of love are 'grants' which the male concedes out of his total powers". However, by attributing impossible virtues to women, she continues, men "have ended by confining them in a narrow and often remarkably conscribing sphere of behavior" (Millett: 51).

It appears, then, that man could give free range to his basest self, without any fear of reprehension nor of losing his reputation. Meanwhile, women had to be constantly on guard for fear of losing theirs. This is why Madame de Puisieux says that men "jouissent de tout, sans que le préjugé leur gêne [...] ils sont tout ce qu'ils veulent être" (*Réflexions*: 8). When a man wanted a woman he could pursue her with impunity. He could manipulate her into giving up her principles, but when she did he would look down upon her with contempt because she let herself be manipulated. In this way he effectively promoted a double standard where all the rights were his and all the constraints, and the shame, were hers.

Madame de Puisieux obviously realized that men discriminated against women by assigning them arbitrary roles such as chastity, modesty, and a sense of propriety. Sometimes she would blame men for this injustice, sometimes God: "Cette réflexion est peut-être ce qui m'a le plus chagrinée. La nature, d'ailleurs si juste, si équitable n'a point mis d'égalité entre la peine et les plaisirs: elle

nous a destinées à passer nos plus belles années dans des maux inouis; et pour tout dédommagement elle a mis dans les hommes un empressement pour nous plus ou moins grand" (*Réflexions*: 9).

2d. The Mating Dance

I believe that it was unfair that women should be settled with the burden of either fighting off men, or giving in to them and risking the loss of their reputation. This social custom required that a woman be very circumspect, should she decide to take a lover. As long as she observed the rules of propriety, however, presumably by not giving up her virtue too easily, she could still command a man's respect. His opinion of her and, ultimately, his discretion depended solely on the manner in which she gave in to his advances:

Une femme bien née ne doit jamais sortir des bornes de la pudeur. Sans cette vertu, la plus belle personne tombe dans le mépris. Les hommes mêmes, eux qui détruisent en nous cette vertu, l'aiment, et veulent que nous leur en imposions. Une femme qui donne dans des écarts, est traitée selon la façon dont elle aura cédé (*Conseils*: 84).

There is really nothing new in this sexual dance. For centuries a woman's social conditioning has been such that she must make a man wait before giving in to him, even if she does not feel so inclined. If Madame de Puisieux insists repeatedly that a woman who decides to take a lover must make sure of his integrity, it is because there were so few men in her time who had this virtue. Judging by the

statements she makes, the majority of men appear to be libertines. She states that they were untrustworthy, they gossiped, they lied and they cheated.

Le vice est porté à un si haut point dans le monde, qu'un honnête homme se cache presque d'être vertueux. La sincérité, la bonne foi, la pureté de sentiment, toutes ces choses sont regardées par les jeunes gens comme des vertus antiques, ennemies des plaisirs et de la bonne compagnie. Il faut qu'un homme, pour être à la mode, trompe, fourbe, médise, calomnie toutes les femmes, qu'il en séduise de fort sages, pour les abandonner sans remords, et publier ensuite leurs bontés (*Conseils*: 88-89).

Stroking women's vanity by artful flirtation, man was able to hide his ulterior motives. "L'art de parler finement galanterie, ou de dire des choses obligeantes à une femme, n'est que celui de pallier un mauvais dessein" (*Conseils*: 88). There are very few men who can be trusted, says the author. Among my many male acquaintances I have only known one who deserved my affection and even then, I am not sure that he did not deceive me in something. "Ce n'est pas qu'il ne se rencontre quelque homme exempt des vices dont je viens de vous effrayer; mais qu'ils sont rares!" (*Conseils*: 131).

2e. Libertinage and Infidelity

The frivolous, decadent, lifestyle prevalent in eighteenth-century France emanated from Versailles where the king and the aristocracy set the trend for the rest of society. Paul Hazard comments:

[...] les maîtresses étaient devenues une manière d'institution d'Etat. Maîtresses des rois: parmi toutes celles de Louis XV, Mme de Pompadour. Maîtresses des grands: eh! quoi, s'écriait l'avocat Barbier, sur vingt seigneurs de la cour, il y en a quinze qui vivent avec une autre que leur femme [...]. Maîtresses des philosophes, de tous les philosophes [...]. Comme disait Mlle Quinault: la pudeur n'était qu'une habitude artificielle condamnée par la nature, inventée sans doute par quelque petit nain, bossu, maigre, et contrefait; car on ne songe pas à se cacher quand on est bien (Hazard: 252).

The courtiers' behaviour was soon adopted by the noblesse de robe and subsequently by the bourgeoisie. The latter thirsted after power and class elevation but, lacking the right credentials, had to be content with imitating the aristocrats. Thus the bourgeois could at least give himself the appearance of the nobility. Sophistication, glamour, worldliness, and success with the opposite sex became the final measure of one's worth. Especially in Paris, notes Madame de Puisieux, the pursuit of pleasure is much in vogue, "on y respire un air de dissipation, fatal à ce qu'on appelle belle passion: tout le monde y court après le plaisir, et personne n'aime" (*Réflexions*: 197).

3. MARRIAGE

Most marriages in the upper classes were arranged by parents for the continuation of a name, the conservation of a family, or for financial gain. Instead of being a union of kindred spirits, they were a merger of families. Through such a marriage of convenience an impoverished aristocratic

family could increase its fortune, whereas a rich ambitious bourgeois family could improve its class status. It is not surprising therefore that many spouses remained strangers to one another. They led virtually separate lives and often moved in different circles. Marriage as an institution became quite meaningless and few spouses felt bound to fidelity by the bonds of this union. In her comedy, *Le Marquis à la mode*, Madame de Puisieux offers us a view of how the estrangement between aristocratic spouses affected their lifestyle.

[Ils se font] toujours beaucoup d'honnêtetés, ne se voyant jamais que par hasard. Monsieur va coucher en ville. Madame va jouer de son côté. Monsieur revient le lendemain; il demande des nouvelles de Madame, qui dort ordinairement à cette heure-là. Ils vont à la Comédie, à l'Opéra, chacun avec leurs sociétés; ils ne font pas semblant de se voir. Monsieur part pour Versailles, il est fort étonné de rencontrer en chemin Madame qui en revient. Ils se font en passant une profonde révérence. Au bout de deux ou trois mois, quelquefois ils ont le bonheur de se rencontrer, et de renouveler connaissance, pour recommencer ensuite sur nouveaux frais (*Marquis*: 81).

Madame de Puisieux believes that these marriages of convenience are mainly responsible for the widespread libertinage and the infidelities between spouses. In *La Nouvelle Héloïse* Jean-Jacques Rousseau expresses the same opinion, "comment attendre de part ou d'autre un effet plus honnête d'un lien où le coeur n'a point été consulté? Qui n'épouse que la fortune ou l'état ne doit rien à la personne (Rousseau 1761: 109).

A libertine is the worst sort of husband a woman could

have, states Madame de Puisieux (*Conseils*: 127) because he is incorrigible and heartless (*Caractères II*: 150).

Le libertinage déshonore le coeur et l'esprit, et la mauvaise compagnie y conduit. Il n'est pas possible de conserver de la délicatesse et du goût avec l'habitude de la débauche. Elle corrompt tout. Le souffle des libertins infecte jusqu'à l'air qu'ils respirent [...]. Entraînés par un malheureux naturel et par la mauvaise éducation, ils ne voyent d'abord que des femmes perdues, qui les perdent avec elles. Cette habitude est si forte, qu'elle anéantit dans leurs coeurs tout sentiment de tendresse. Le libertinage est le poison de l'amour (*Caractères II*: 155-156).

Unfortunately, in the Age of Enlightenment there were many such men for this was the "siècle du libertinage et de l'esprit" (*Caractères II*: 119). It was fashionable and sophisticated to be a libertine. Such a man, *un homme à la mode*, owed it to himself, and to his reputation as a great womanizer, to change mistresses frequently. According to Madame de Puisieux, if a libertine married a truly virtuous woman, he would hold her in high esteem, and have great respect for her. At the same time her very virtue would soon make him feel ill at ease, then bore him, and next drive him away from home. He would miss the flattery and excitement of his amorous adventures and he would take up his previous lifestyle once more. (*Réflexions*: 223).

Even if the wife is young and pretty, she cannot count on her husband's faithfulness, states the author. When men get married they have no intention of being faithful. It is not until his daughter is already married that a father

might explain that faithfulness is only a bagatelle and that "c'était à elle à être sage; mais qu'un homme n'avait pas moins d'honneur pour avoir quelque intrigue et aimer les femmes, hors la sienne" (*Conseils*: 121).

Furthermore, infidelity being the norm, a wife has to be prepared to share her husband's affections with another woman, says Madame de Puisieux. She should even count herself lucky "si on ne lui associe pas une créature. Les choses en sont au point qu'on doit presque savoir gré à son époux d'un attachement sortable" (*Conseils*: 105). But to be honest, remarks the author of *Les Caractères*, we women have only ourselves to blame because, "si nous savions nous faire respecter sans nous rendre ennuyeuses, je crois que les hommes ne nous quitteraient pas pour aller chercher des créatures, qu'ils voient d'abord par manière d'acquit, et qui deviennent ensuite les objets de leur attachement et de leur complaisance" (*Caractères I*: 104-105).

What we should do, says Madame de Puisieux, is to stop this nagging and complaining. Making jealous scenes, and running after her husband does not do a woman any good. Instead, it will make him stay away from her. A woman should try to preserve peace at home. She should close her eyes to her husband's infidelities because reproaches and fights only embitter a man, offering him an excuse to be on bad terms with his wife and to start spending money on other women. (*Conseils*: 105).

Ignoring one's husband's dalliances may not seem like much of an emancipation but considering the unappealing alternatives, perhaps it was the wisest course of action a woman could take in those days.

Wives who did not love their husbands were not much bothered by their infidelities, they simply imitated their lifestyles. Some, like Madame d'Epinay, were even encouraged by their husbands to do so: "You ought to enjoy yourself a little. Get around in society, start friendships, be like all women of your age - it's the only way to make me happy, dear", he told her (Lee 1975: 9). Consequently, if wives became as promiscuous as their husbands, men had only themselves to blame, for it was less often that the wife initiated infidelity (*Conseils*: 88).

Others, unable to legally divorce their errant husbands but unwilling to accept the humiliation of living with them, chose to retire to a convent. There, a woman could rebuild her self-esteem and live quietly and respectably away from him.

Madame de Puisieux paints a lopsided picture of unfaithful men and of the women who were driven to infidelity by these men. Were women the only ones who expected love in marriage? It makes one wonder what husbands wanted. Did they really want a woman only as an ornamental fixture, or as a womb for their offspring? I find that hard to believe but unfortunately Madame de

Puisieux does not give us much insight into the psychological make-up of men, except to say that men love in a different way than women:

Les hommes n'aiment pas comme nous: ils nous désirent peut-être plus vivement; mais ils n'ont pas cette délicatesse qui fait nos plus grandes délices, et plus souvent encore nos plus grands malheurs. Ce n'est point de notre coeur qu'ils sont jaloux; ils ne craignent que le partage; ils ne sont amoureux que de la figure: cela est si vrai, que vous les voyez courir après des femmes qui n'ont que de la beauté (*Réflexions*: 137-138).

4. RELIGION

Even though Madeleine de Puisieux spent five years at Port Royal in Paris, she never speaks of the Jansenist tenets of original sin and predestination. Quite the contrary, she clearly states that she does not believe in afterlife (*Caractères II*: 80). In *Conseils*, where she is counseling girls, she still shows a rather conventional attitude toward religion when, in fact, it would appear from subsequent works that her convent education has turned her against the church.

My explanation for this contradictory attitude is that she was extremely cautious in her first book. Writing against religion could mean a prison sentence, which is what happened to Diderot in 1749. However, she threw caution to the winds with *Caractères I*, causing the Abbé Raynal to comment in the *Nouvelles littéraires* of 1751, "La morale de Madame de Puisieux est extrêmement relâchée et elle fait beaucoup de réflexions qui ne font pas honneur à

son coeur. Son ouvrage, dès qu'il parut, révolta les gens qui pensent et qui sentent" (Raynal, in Laborde: 30).

In *Caractères I* Madame de Puisieux says that religion would hamper a boy's career because the ways of the church are not the ways of the world. She warns a father, concerning the education of his son, that religion may be good for salvation but disastrous for advancement in life and detrimental to the development of his mind. In fact, she makes a mockery of religion when she lashes out sarcastically:

Laissez-le avec les préceptes de religion qu'on lui aura donnés. Si par hasard il les conserve, tant mieux pour son salut, tant pis pour son avancement et pour son esprit; on ne fait son chemin dans le monde que par des voies que la religion ne permet guère de suivre; cependant il faut faire son chemin.

Then, taking aim at the bigots, she cannot resist driving home another harpoon, "S'il arrivait qu'il fût stupide, il y aurait encore de la ressource. Les stupides sont ordinairement ou fort dévots, ou fort braves" (*Caractères I*: 9).

With regard to the above quotations, a specialist in the French *moralistes*, Henri Mydlarski, reflects in his article, *Les Moralistes des lumières*: "Madame de Puisieux [...] voit dans toute entreprise de christianisation, elle qui a été élevée au couvent, l'agent par éminence crétinisant des facultés intellectuelles [...]. S'il est avéré que la bravoure, au rebours du courage, n'implique

pas toujours la réflexion et encore moins l'intelligence, l'on conviendra sans doute que la remarque de Madame de Puisieux représente, à l'endroit du croyant, le paradigme de l'insolence et du mépris. Tout est bon chez elle qui ruine, qui imprime à contresens les aspirations et les prétentions de ceux qui sont d'église ou qui se prévalent de leur foi ou du dogme" (Mydlarski: 63). He then illustrates these comments by quoting another one of Madame de Puisieux' paradoxical statements: "La justice et la sensibilité ne sont pas les vertus des dévots, j'en appellerais en vain à leur équité et à leur tendresse" (*Caractères II*: 40).

My explanation for Madame de Puisieux' aversion to religion is that she holds the clergy responsible for the infantilization, or the "crétinisation", of women. Girls had to read devotional and moralistic books, written by the clergy and adapted for the use of young girls. To this effect Madame de Puisieux states, "Les hommes on si mauvaise opinion de l'esprit des femmes, qu'ils nous font des livres à part, des méthodes particulières, comme l'on fait aux enfants des catéchismes à leur portée (*Caractères I*: 162). After Port Royal, Madame de Puisieux was sick of reading "la vie des Saints, la Bible, les Essais de morale, les Sermons" (*Conseils*: 5). She equally discouraged girls from reading Père Quesnel and Pascal's *Lettres Provinciales* (*Conseils*: 19). Furthermore, the church is by nature a

patriarchal institution, run by powerful men, who have no interest in women's emancipation. In fact, the church believes in the superiority of men and preaches that women should obey their husbands.

Of course it is not just in Madame de Puisieux' works that we find this negative attitude toward religion. In the Age of Enlightenment most moralists and philosophers take religion to task. Moreover, states Mydlarski, "les moralistes [...] réclament et proclament, après dix-huit siècles d'asservissement ecclésial et intellectuel, une autonomie profane de la gnose biotique et téléologique - du Savoir par excellence" (Mydlarski: 62).

Influenced by the philosophical works, the educated public turned away from conventional religion and toward natural religion. They wanted to acquire knowledge, devoid of religious overtones. In addition, people no longer wanted to wait for happiness in the hereafter promised by conventional religion; they wanted it then and there.

In the eighteenth century people were not motivated by their moral convictions but by their desire to impress others or to please them. Appearance was everything. "Il n'est donc question à présent que de paraître tout ce que l'on n'est pas, ou de se faire valoir plus qu'on ne vaut" (*Caractères II*: 79). Others' high esteem was deemed essential to the quality of life. Fear of the hereafter was replaced with fear of the here and now. Fear of one's

contemporaries, fear of their gossip, fear of being ridiculed, fear of behaving contrary to the rules of etiquette; *bienséance* being synonymous with class. Above all, people were afraid of losing their reputation. "La réputation est plus précieuse que la vie; on l'a dit, et en voici la preuve: on expose fort bien sa vie pour défendre celle de son ami: mais on n'expose point sa réputation pour défendre la sienne" (*Conseils*: 59). Therefore, rather than worrying about metaphysics and the hereafter, a girl should worry about what people say, states Madame de Puisieux:

Que ce ne soit pas la crainte du diable qui vous empêche de faire le mal; cette menace est un propos de bonne femme ou de Capucin [...]. C'est le respect humain, Mademoiselle, c'est la crainte de ce monde, et non pas de l'autre, [...] qu'il ne faut point perdre de vue (*Conseils*: 139).

What is important to Madame de Puisieux is *repos de l'âme* in this life, not *salut de l'âme* in the next one. She feels that a clear conscience provides people with peace of mind. Knowing that you have done the right thing and that you have nothing to reproach yourself for is one of the greatest sources of happiness, says the author. "Le repos de l'âme est le plus grand des biens après la santé. Sans lui il n'est point de bonheur [...]; souvent avec un bien modique on goûte mieux le repos qu'au sein de l'opulence, qui n'est qu'une source d'inquiétudes" (*Caractères II*: 18).

Robert Mauzi observes that most people in the eighteenth century were concerned with this search for

happiness on earth:

Au XVIIIe siècle, ce n'est plus au nom du salut, mais du bonheur que l'on fait le procès du monde. La seule question est de savoir si l'on a plus de chances d'être heureux parmi la société ou dans la solitude. Si le monde est réputé dangereux pour le bonheur, c'est qu'il est d'abord le domaine du fugace, un scintillement perpétuel, où l'on ne découvre aucun point fixe, où l'on ne peut jamais se reposer en soi (Mauzi 1965: 90).

5. MEN'S OCCUPATIONS

No matter how much man devalued woman, he needed her in his life. The pursuit of women was one of his favorite pastimes, along with his other frivolous occupations, such as hunting, gambling and socializing. His life was so busy and his social schedule so hectic that he ran from one engagement to the next. People in Paris kept up such a frenetic pace that Montesquieu had his Persian character, Rica, comment in the *Lettres Persanes*: "depuis un mois que je suis ici je n'y ai encore vu marcher personne. Il n'y a point de gens au monde qui tirent mieux parti de leur machine que les Français: ils courent; ils volent" (Montesquieu: 55). Consequently, few people devoted their free time to studying, to writing, or to thinking.

Army officers whiled away their leisure hours in frivolous entertainment. When they were not at war, they had a lot of free time on their hands. Thus they might be forced to enjoy years of idleness. If they do not use this time productively it is because they have not been brought up to do so, says Madame de Puisieux. Answering her own

questions regarding the education of boys she remarks: "Qu'enseigne-t-on aux enfants dans les collèges? le latin. Qu'apprennent-ils dans les académies? à monter à cheval, à faire des armes, et à être libertins. Que sont-ils auprès de leurs parents? des hypocrites" (*Caractères II*: 224).

When these men, or boys, as the case might be, were away from their wives or their parents, they were devoted only to filling their empty hours as agreeably as they possibly could.

Qu'est-ce que cette oisiveté qui semble attachée à leur état? Qu'ils se reposent des fatigues qu'ils ont essuyées: j'y consens: mais que ce ne soit pas pendant vingt ans de suite. Faut-il qu'après s'être montrés des hommes pendant deux ou trois campagnes, ils achèvent leur vie au rang des femmes; car ils en sont là. Les femmes passent leurs jours à leurs toilettes et au jeu, et les officiers avec elles (*Caractères I*: 151).

For this reason, Madame de Puisieux tells the father she is counseling to bring his son home whenever he is not on duty. Also, a father should take his son out of school as soon as possible if he is to make his career in the military service. Once he is in the service he will have enough free time available to continue his studies on his own. Therefore, "Personne ne devrait être plus ignorant qu'un jeune officier, ni plus instruit qu'un officier qui a du service" (*Caractères I*: 7). In fact, the author criticizes the army for basing the officers' promotion on seniority rather than on advanced education.

Thus, an officer's free time should be used in study

and in taking instruction from his father. To that effect Madame de Puisieux gives the following advice to a father:

Rappelez votre fils auprès de vous, toutes les fois que son devoir ne le retiendra pas ailleurs. S'il a des dispositions pour les sciences, surtout pour celles qui ont rapport à son état, cultivez-les avec soin. C'est un grand bonheur pour un jeune homme de qualité d'être propre à quelque chose. Cela l'approchera des grands, qui sont presque tous ignorants, et qui n'ont d'autres moyens de ne le point paraître, que d'avoir auprès d'eux des gens qui ne le soient pas (*Caractères I: 7-8*).

Clearly implied here is that if the *grands* are ignorant, it is because they are too arrogant to do something about it. By implication, the aristocrats are not good for anything. They prefer to hire others to think for them and to manage their affairs while they dissipate their fortunes at court and with women, bringing their families to ruin. Unfortunately, in his works on *la Population*, the author (undoubtedly Montesquieu) omitted this vast and important subject, even though he forcefully denounced misalliances, complains Madame de Puisieux, questioning his motives.

Aurait-il voulu ménager un vice malheureusement trop commun, celui de la dissipation avec les femmes? Dans son chapitre du *Luxe*, il n'a parlé que des sottes dépenses de la vanité, et pas un mot des familles ruinées, des maisons détruites, des trésors dissipés, des terres en décret, des biens abandonnés, des millions dissipés en chicanes, de tous les maux de la prodigalité pour des gens qui, en se ruinant, ne mettent pas souvent à leur aise les objets de leur passion (*Réflexions: 262-263*).

Madame de Puisieux believes that each class has its

prerogatives. As such the nobility provides us with heroes, she says, while the middle class furnishes the writers and scholars:

Que la bravoure et la fierté soient l'appanage des gens de naissance; que les talents et les autres mérites soient le partage de ceux qui semblaient être nés pour être ignorés. Permettons à ceux qui ont des noms connus de s'en contenter, et laissons aux autres le soin de faire sortir et connaître les leurs (*Caractères I*: 152)

Foreshadowing the revolution, she voices her concern that the nobility has outlived its usefulness. "Je ne vois à tout ceci qu'une chose à craindre; c'est que l'avantage ne soit du côté des derniers: tant de gens de rien s'illustrent, tant de grands s'obscurcissent, que l'esprit pourrait bien à la fin s'élever sur les ruines de la noblesse (*Caractères I*: 152).

It is Madame de Puisieux' firm conviction that, "Il faut être utile à la société" (*Réflexions*: 202). She has several ways of expressing this feeling: "Les gens qui ne sont bons que pour eux, sont à mon sens de fort sottes gens. Il faut un peu vivre pour les autres, et ne jamais tromper ceux qui nous ont confié leur bonheur, qu'en surpassant leur attente" (*Conseils*: 135). She also takes this opportunity to drive another harpoon into the body of established religion, "L'essentiel de la société est de se rendre nécessaire, et de l'être. Quiconque n'est bon à rien, peut se faire Chartreux, s'il est libre" (*Caractères II*: 180).

Considering the above remarks, together with the observation which follows, I conclude that, by Madame de Puisieux' standards, the hard working middle class was useful to society, whereas the officers, and the aristocracy, were not. Their idleness encouraged them to spend too much time on libertinage. Men's libertinage degraded women, and women in turn debased themselves.

Les grandes maisons fournissent des héros, parce qu'il ne faut que du courage pour le devenir; les familles mitoyennes donnent des citoyens. Ceux-ci se rendent nécessaires à la patrie par leur capacité" (*Caractères II*: 111),

6. CONCLUSION

According to Madame de Puisieux, the double standard that men live by is repugnant. In order to obtain the emancipation of women, the author urges men's cooperation. Rather than dragging women down to their level, they ought to elevate themselves to the standard of morality that virtuous women live by. If men want to see women as human beings they must begin by treating them with respect.

CHAPTER TWO

MADAME DE PUISIEUX' VIEWS ON WOMEN

La plupart des femmes n'étant faites que pour boire, manger, dormir, mettre des enfants au monde, jouer, tromper leurs amants, leurs maris, leurs directeurs, et médire de leurs semblables, ces maximes leur sont inutiles: je ne leur indique aucun moyen pour se conduire là-dessus; mais celles qui voudront, ou qui pourront entendre ce que je leur dis dans cet ouvrage, en tireront le parti qui leur conviendra.

(Conseils à une amie: XI)

1. INTRODUCTION

It is my contention that, being a woman herself, Madame de Puisieux felt somehow involved with the reputation of women and with their fate as a group. Also, having an intimate knowledge of the female condition, she was in a better position to counsel them than were men. By the same token, I believe that she felt they needed to be criticized for foolish behaviour that gave men reasons to ridicule them. She said that one had to be honest and sincere but without "cette sincérité farouche, qui porte à déclamer sans ménagement contre les défauts d'autrui, mais de celle qui donne la juste mesure des choses, qui ne sait ni exagérer, ni déprimer, qui est l'image de la droiture du

coeur, et de la justesse de l'esprit" (*Caractères II*: 57).

Unfortunately, in her criticism of women she did not follow her own advice and her lack of subtlety alienated many women. She found it strange that women should feel offended by her remarks because she felt that she had only attacked their superficial faults, not their basic values. "Je n'ai attaqué que leurs ridicules, dont j'ai ma bonne part", she exclaims (*Réflexions*: 287).

2. WAYS IN WHICH WOMEN SUPPORT MEN'S WITHHOLDING OF EQUALITY

2a. Préjugés

Although Madame de Puisieux feels indignant about the double standards that have been established by men, she feels that women would be ill advised to ignore all the *préjugés*. She believes that women simply cannot afford to openly flout convention without risking their reputation, which to Madame de Puisieux is all important. In this she is very conservative. Society dictates that women be virtuous. They are also expected to be feminine, i.e. modest, pure, delicate and gracious. If women were to relinquish all of these very feminine characteristics it would work to the detriment of their image. Since a woman's happiness depends on her good name in society, the author feels that if a woman ceases to be virtuous she ought at least to act as though she were. "On ne peut être heureuse sans au moins l'apparence de la vertu; et l'étude d'une

femme qui cesse d'être vertueuse, doit être de le paraître" (*Conseils*: 68). Woman is thus encouraged to subterfuge, or to hypocrisy, to support the *préjugés* because to do otherwise would have been tantamount to social suicide.

2b. Ridicules à la mode

Sometimes Madame de Puisieux shows a lack of compassion or sympathy for women, as when she belittles the *vapeurs*, a condition which was quite serious for some women. She treats this phenomenon as just another manifestation of fashionable behaviour. Perhaps this is all it was for some society women who may have faked fainting spells as a way to attract attention to themselves. It is in line with Madame de Puisieux' character to have no tolerance for these charlatans. In her impatience with them she shows a lack of sympathy for those who may have truly suffered from a psychosomatic disorder. Conversely, she could have spoken out with force against the prevailing fashion of wearing tight corsets. These contraptions left women feeling weak and breathless, leading them to faint easily. As we will see, in *Réflexions* the author does talk about the tortures of wearing corsets.

It should be understood that Madame de Puisieux generally brings to light only that behaviour which is ridiculous. Her observations do not apply to all people but only to those who have exaggerated characteristics.

Les femmes prennent des ridicules, comme des modes. Il y a des temps, où il est du bel air d'avoir des vapeurs; un autre, où il est de mode de faire les

délicates; un autre temps, où on affecte une santé forte. Ne donnez point dans ces travers. Si vous êtes malade, plaignez-vous; et si vous vous portez bien, ne refusez pas à vos amis la satisfaction de vous voir en bonne santé (*Conseils*: 56).

In the upper echelons of society it was believed that a woman made herself look ridiculous if she showed affection for her husband in public. Only a *bourgeoise* would have such bad taste. As Montesquieu testifies in the *Lettres persanes* this same *préjugé* holds true for men: "Ici un mari qui aime sa femme est un homme qui n'a pas assez de mérite pour se faire aimer d'une autre" (Montesquieu: 99). Conjugal love was considered by contemporary society as "un ridicule et une sorte de faiblesse indigne des personnes bien nées" (Goncourt 1882, XV: 239). Madame de Puisieux believes that love for her husband is a virtue of which a woman should be proud. To act as though she does not love him, simply because it is fashionable to do so, is worthy of ridicule. A woman should place herself above this sort of *préjugé*. By showing that she loves her husband she honours him; by showing contempt for him she encourages other men to make shameful propositions:

Ne rougissez jamais, Mademoiselle, de montrer des vertus qui ne sont point d'usage; elles n'en sont pas moins les fruits d'un heureux naturel; et, dans l'esprit des personnes sensées, elles ne font pas moins d'honneur à celles qui les possèdent (*Conseils*: 56-57).

Madame de Puisieux also had a dislike for women who pretended to be interested in the sciences. Appearance

motivated them, rather than the subject matter for which they had only a superficial interest. The author takes such women to task for their pseudo-scientific airs:

Madame de *** s'est fait peindre avec tous les attributs des muses, et elle ne sait rien; mais le public est persuadé qu'une femme entourée de sphères, de compas, d'équerres et de livres, doit être une savante. Sa parente est peinte en flore, et sa physionomie noble et fine annonce autant d'esprit que les attributs, dont Madame de *** est entourée, affichent de talents. Était-ce du respect qu'elle attendait de cette affectation, ou des hommages?

She then answers her own question by this sarcastic statement: "Le respect n'est dû qu'aux grandes dignités ou au mérite sublime: quant aux hommages, une femme aimable simplement ne doit en attendre que de sa beauté" (*Réflexions*: 85-86).

Madame de Puisieux' reasons for criticizing these women precede by eleven years the more detailed explanation in *Essai sur le Caractère, les mœurs et l'esprit des femmes dans les différents siècles* (1772) by Antoine-Léonard Thomas:

Les femmes, sans se donner même aucune peine, doivent être plus instruites; mais fidèles à leur plan, elles ne cherchent les lumières, que comme une parure de l'esprit. En apprenant, elles veulent plaire plutôt que savoir, et amuser plutôt que s'instruire (Thomas: 81).

Thomas argues that during the sixteenth century women wanted to learn because of their enthusiasm for knowledge in itself, and they studied for their own contentment.

Their sincere taste for learning was a reflection of the spirit of their time. It fed on itself, even in solitude. In the eighteenth century, on the other hand, women's studying emanated less from a desire to learn than from "une coquetterie d'esprit; et comme sur tous les objets, un luxe, plus de représentation que de richesse" (Thomas: 82).

Appearance was valued highly over real richness of spirit. This same subject comes up over and over again because to the individual living in eighteenth-century France *paraître* was more important than *être*. Madame de Puisieux, however, abhors charlatans. She constantly criticizes behaviour that is superficial and meant only to impress. She does not only criticize but she also proposes the remedy that people find themselves some satisfactory and relaxing pastime. She is against mindless activities, such as gambling and flirting, but encourages occupations that provide food for thought, such as literature, writing and study, or those that supply stimulation to the imagination, such as music and painting. She knows that people simply cannot spend their lives just being virtuous: "Il faut à la vertu des délassements, ou bien elle ennuie. Heureux qui peut cultiver les beaux arts en liberté" (*Ridicules*: 153). Those who are free to cultivate the fine arts are doubly lucky because they do not need anyone to amuse them,

Un des plus grands bonheurs, c'est de savoir se suffire à soi-même. La vie est remplie de moments vides; il faut s'en épargner autant que l'on peut et

le vrai moyen c'est de savoir les remplir" (*Conseils*: 15).

Madame de Puisieux believes that, regardless of what it is, as long as people do something that brings them satisfaction, they will not feel bored and, more importantly, "les chagrins s'éloignent d'un esprit appliqué" (*Réflexions*: 152). She feels that it is extremely important that people start this learning process early in life because "l'esprit produit à quarante ans, mais ne se cultive plus" (*Caractères II*: 112). During youth, when the mind is most alert and receptive to new ideas, a person must lay the foundations for later contentment in life.

Acquérir des connaissances, c'est avancer vers l'avenir; c'est prévenir l'âge où l'on se dégoûte des choses qui ne remplissent point le coeur, et qui n'ornent pas l'esprit (*Caractères I*: 8).

3. WAYS IN WHICH WOMEN ACT TO SHOW LACK OF EQUALITY

3a. Lack of virtue

In the eighteenth century virtue was linked by some with social expectations, or "préjugés". In his chapter on "Bonheur et Vertu", Mauzi explains: "Sur la définition de la vertu, le siècle est unanime. Elle consiste à accorder un avantage au bonheur d'autrui sur notre bonheur propre. Elle désigne exclusivement une aptitude sociale" (Mauzi: 580).

Although Madame de Puisieux does put a high value on pleasing others ("On ne naît pas pour soi seul. Nous sommes

faits pour les autres, et les autres pour nous" [*Conseils*: 69], I see her as too much of a realist to believe in total altruism. As far as she is concerned, our first responsibility is toward ourselves, for it is only when we feel happy that we can start thinking about others' happiness. This is why she says, "procurer de la satisfaction aux autres aux dépens de la sienne, cela est d'une grande bonté, pour ne pas dire pis: la première personne à qui nous devons, c'est nous-mêmes: nos amis viennent après" (*Caractères I*: 57).

In *Conseils*, Madame de Puisieux acknowledges reading Madame de Lambert's works. She seems to share many of the latter's views on virtue but there are some that she considers to be outdated, others that go against good judgement, and yet others that, in 1749, are impractical; humility being one of them:

Je ne suis pas tout à fait de l'avis de Madame la Marquise de Lambert, qui veut qu'une femme, dont les désordres ont éclaté, paraisse d'un air humilié. Je ne sais si elle aurait raison à présent de recommander l'humilité: cette vertu n'est plus d'usage; et si toutes les femmes, qui ont eu des aventures, avaient l'air humble, on verrait bien des yeux baissés. Je pense qu'elles feront mieux de cesser d'être folles, et de conserver le même air qu'elles avaient auparavant (*Conseils*: 129).

A woman would do better to change her behavior or else she should brave ridicule by carrying her head high. Acting proudly, she will shame others into thinking that the rumours they have heard about her must have been false,

asserts Madame de Puissieux (*Conseils*: 32). Consequently, "prêchera qui voudra l'humilité", she reiterates, "cette vertu est proscrire chez moi et chez bien d'autres. Je ne la trouve propre qu'à avilir, qu'à inspirer le mépris, qu'à faire tomber dans l'oubli les qualités brillantes que l'on pourrait avoir", concluding poignantly: "Soyez modeste; mais point d'humilité; c'est la manie des idiots" (*Conseils*: 99-100).

For Madame de Puisieux then, some virtues, or *préjugés*, are outdated and it makes no sense to keep them. Others are current, but they do not make any sense either. Most of the rules of conduct have been respected for generations and the author believes that women would be wise to observe most of these *préjugés*. However, they should not do so blindly. Rather, they should examine them and accept only those customs that make sense. Unfortunately, she adds, few people have the intelligence to distinguish good from bad *préjugés*. Women in particular tend to throw out the good with the bad. "Les femmes, pour qui il semble qu'ils ont tous été faits, se défont souvent de ceux qui nuisent à leurs plaisirs; et cela, avec une facilité qui doit faire honte à la philosophie des hommes. S'il y a de l'esprit à se mettre au-dessus de quelques *préjugés*, il y a de l'impudence, et peut-être de l'hypocrisie, à les braver tous" (*Conseils*: 69-70).

Pudeur is a virtue that is practically born with us,

states Madame de Puisieux. Because it is so important, girls learn it from an early age (*Conseils*: 69). She insists that this virtue be respected (*Caractères II*: 170). If it was to a woman's credit to observe decent conduct in the past, there is no reason to believe that it would not be so now, she asserts. If a woman lets herself be influenced by the fashion of the moment, and deliberately throws this *préjugé* overboard, she lacks good judgement. "Les femmes qui, sans réflexion, donnent dans les travers, sont plus à plaindre qu'à blâmer, puisqu'elles sont entraînées par leur penchant vicieux: mais commettre les fautes de sang froid, ou se moquer de ce qu'on en dira, c'est le comble de la sottise ou de l'indignité" adds the author of *Réflexions* (123-124).

"Les hommes nous refusent tant de choses, qu'il est bien juste que nous gardions au moins les vertus dominantes de notre sexe, qui sont la douceur et l'humanité", writes Madame de Puisieux. Other than these, she believes that modesty and "pudeur" are "les plus beaux attributs de notre sexe. Sans modestie dans les discours, on devient insupportable aux autres" (*Conseils*: 82).

Unfortunately, "pudeur chez les femmes et la bonne foi chez les hommes" have practically disappeared from the society we live in, states the author (*Caractères II*: 79). For example, there even used to be a "ton de la pudeur" from which women were not allowed to deviate, but she does

not know what happened to it, "à moins qu'il ne se soit réfugié aux Ursulines, et chez les filles de Sainte Marie". Then she adds sarcastically, "Qu'il y reste; on n'en a plus que faire dans le monde. Nos moeurs demandent un autre langage" (*Caractères I*: 46).

Not only had *pudeur* disappeared from society, but virtue in general was given short shrift. Its lack being deplored, it was commented only in its absence. When a girl gets married, observes Madame de Puisieux, it is assumed that she is virtuous. She is complimented on all her external attributes, such as her looks and her dowry. The moral rectitude of a virtuous woman is never mentioned, but if a woman has a past of dissoluteness it may lead to a very public outcry. If she brings no other dowry to the marriage than her good conduct she is not a good catch, "aussi n'y a-t-il guère d'hommes assez courageux pour épouser la vertu toute nue; elle jette trop peu d'éclat dans le siècle où nous vivons" (*Conseils*: 133).

If Madame Puisieux constantly praises and recommends virtue, it is because she believes that the rewards are worth the sacrifices. Virtue is its own reward; it leaves a person with a good reputation, a clear conscience, serenity, and peace of mind. Vice, on the other hand, is its own tyrant. (*Caractères II*: 5).

On est toujours dédommée des sacrifices que l'on fait à la vertu; on jouit d'une vie pure et tranquille. La plus tendre émotion n'est pas à comparer à la paix de l'âme: tous les plaisirs que nous procurent nos passions satisfaites, n'ont jamais

valu le repos d'une personne qui n'est attachée qu'à ses devoirs (*Conseils*: 74).

Even though I have recommended virtue hundreds of times, says Madame de Puisieux, I have also recommended moderation many times. Moderation is worthy even in virtue. Those who carry virtue to an extreme are insufferable to themselves and to others. Therefore, "n'allez pas attacher à ce mot une foule d'idées puériles et ridicules. Je ne reconnais dans une femme d'autre sagesse que celle qui convient à un honnête homme. La vérité est une pour tout le monde, pourquoi n'en serait-il pas ainsi pour la vertu!" (*Conseils*: 140).

I have discovered something interesting, says the author, and that is that nobody envies virtue in a person. People are envious of beauty, of talent, of wit, of knowledge; but not at all of virtue. Can it be that virtue does not count for anything anymore, she wonders? (*Caractères I*: 47). A man would rather have more *esprit* but he never asks to be more *généreux*; a woman wants to have the eyes and the teeth of so-and-so, but not at all her modesty. Then she adds very ironically: "Je vois ce que c'est; on n'envie que ce qu'on n'a pas, et tous les hommes ont de la générosité, et toutes les femmes de la modestie. Il n'y a que beaucoup d'esprit qui manque quelquefois aux uns, et de belles dents et de beaux yeux aux autres" (*Caractères I*: 47-48). Clearly, unless everyone is already

virtuous, nothing is further from people's mind than virtue!

What advantage can a woman expect of her virtue? exclaims Madame de Puisieux sarcastically. High praise? A lot of good that will do her! "Je doute que la plupart soient tentées de quitter leur façon de vivre, pour courir après une réputation qui les gêne" (*Réflexions*: 245). Clearly, for some women, virtue and consequently their reputations, were practically a matter of life and death whereas for others, virtue was merely an obstacle in their pursuit of pleasure. This is why the author affirms that: "La vertu est tout et n'est rien: elle est tout pour ceux qui la chérissent, et rien pour ceux qui ne l'ont pas" (*Caractères I*: 36).

As stated in the first chapter, virtue appears to be held in high esteem, but virtuous behaviour was practised less than it was preached. Most people do not even want to be called virtuous, says Madame de Puisieux. For instance, many women are more worried about their beauty than they are about their reputation. They prefer people to think that they are having an affair, or more than one, rather than that they be considered virtuous (*Réflexions*: 253).

I think that the reason for this was women's vanity. Being virtuous was almost synonymous with being ugly, at least judging by Montesquieu's commentary: "Ce n'est pas qu'il n'y ait des dames vertueuses [...]. Mais elles

étaient toutes si laides qu'il faut être un saint pour ne pas haïr la vertu" (Montesquieu: 99). Of course, since most men are attracted only to beautiful women, the ugly ones are little exposed to temptation and must perforce remain virtuous.

Parisian women observe the *préjugés* only to give themselves the appearance of decency, not because they believe in their intrinsic value, says the author of *Réflexions*: "toute la décence consiste à respecter les préjugés: elle n'est point dans les principes ni dans les mœurs". As long as a woman is dressed according to the latest fashion, has a carriage, and goes to the theatre accompanied by a chaperone, that is sufficient. "Ses intrigues connues de tout le monde, ne sont rien, pourvu qu'elles ne blessent point les préjugés" (*Réflexions*: 11).

One of these *préjugés* is that, if a woman takes a lover, she should choose one who will elevate her in the eyes of others. The fact that she has an affair is not scandalous, but her choice of lover might be. In *La Femme au XVIIIe siècle*, the brothers Goncourt illustrate their observations on this subject by quoting Madame de Puisieux. However, they neither acknowledge the author nor the title of her work. In fact, they refer to the book rather contemptuously: "Un amant ne déshonore plus, le choix seul de l'amant excuse ou compromet. Là-dessus écoutez un petit livre, une espèce de conseiller moral écrit par une femme:

Le monde parle. Madame a-t-elle un amant? L'on demande

quel est-il? Alors la réputation d'une femme dépend de la réponse que l'on va faire. Je vous le répète encore, dans le siècle où nous vivons, ce n'est pas tant notre attachement qui nous déshonore que l'objet.

This quotation was taken from *Conseils*: 109. The Goncourts then continue to explain that: "Ce train des mœurs est accepté par toute la société. L'adultère trouve partout la complicité, partout l'impunité, partout le sourire avec lequel le mari lui pardonne" (Goncourt XV: 242).

I would like to comment here that adultery was not as universally accepted as the brothers Goncourt would like us to believe. Their generalization is somewhat exaggerated. Moreover, in quoting Madame de Puisieux, they take some license in making it sound as though she fully condones adultery. This is not the case. Madame de Puisieux is a realist and she accepts that a woman's temptations are sometimes greater than her sense of duty and propriety. This is why she counsels: if you must be unfaithful, at least make sure that it is with a man whom you can trust to be discreet. Be sure also that he shares your tastes, your sentiments and your inclinations, otherwise you will be preparing yourself for a lot of sorrow (*Conseils*: 109).

Qu'une femme est malheureuse, à mon sens, si elle joint aux remords de s'être écartée de ses devoirs, la honte d'avoir fait un mauvais choix! Car, ne vous y trompez pas, Mademoiselle, si quelque chose pouvait justifier la passion d'une femme, ce serait le mérite de l'objet. Quelle excuse peut-elle donner de ses attachements avec un homme sans honneur, sans esprit, sans caractère, qui n'a eu pour plaire à ses yeux qu'un peu de figure et beaucoup de suffisance? (*Conseils*: 108-109).

However, even though she fully understands the draw of passion, Madame de Puisieux warns against giving in to it. Showing the reverse side of the coin, she points out that, in the final analysis, a liaison brings nothing but sadness:

Voyons cependant s'il est des moyens d'éviter un engagement; car ce serait, sans contredit, le plus sûr pour être heureuse. L'amour traîne après lui les chagrins, les craintes, les regrets, sans compter que l'on passe la moitié de sa vie dans le trouble et dans l'agitation (*Conseils*: 110).

3b. Vices, scandalmongering, and envy

While she shows compassion and understanding for the weakness of a woman in love, Madame de Puisieux has no sympathy for the *femme galante*. Such a woman shows a severe lack of judgement. "Une fille qui n'a que des charmes pour tout mérite, n'a que deux partis à prendre; l'un d'être excessivement sage, l'autre de donner sans ménagement dans la galanterie. Il ne faut point d'esprit pour conquérir beaucoup d'amants, et pour en changer souvent", she says disdainfully, adding that, "mais il en faut plus que beaucoup de femmes n'en ont, pour en fixer un" (*Conseils*: 28). For Madame de Puisieux the behaviour of the *femmes galantes* is a destructive aberration in woman's conduct. To fall in love with someone other than one's husband is one thing, but to change lovers constantly is an indecency that degrades womankind. It is not surprising therefore that she heavily censures the conduct of the *femmes galantes*.

Une femme qui a eu une intrigue, risque sa réputation, et ne la perd pas toujours; mais celle qui en a eu plusieurs, est déshonorée: celles qui successivement quittent un amant pour en reprendre un autre, et qui passent leur vie dans la galanterie, sont faites pour être la honte et l'opprobre de notre sexe (*Conseils*: 86).

It appears that Madame de Puisieux classifies unfaithful women in three categories: those who have had one affair are redeemable; those who have had several are the foolish kind because they have thrown caution to the winds and damaged their reputations; the last kind -- totally depraved *femmes galantes* -- are the worst.

For the second kind, the ones who have had several affairs, Madame de Puisieux shows some understanding by acknowledging that their youth made them act foolishly. The age of reason comes too late for them, she asserts, and early years which should be the time for reflection are the ones when they think the least (*Conseils*: 112). "On suit aveuglément ce qui plaît d'abord; et on se repent à loisir des engagements contractés à la hâte (*Conseils*: 67).

Women show little moral character when they throw themselves into an affair without thinking about the consequences, without examining whether this could be a lasting relationship, and without determining whether their character is compatible with the man's. How do they expect friendship or love to last when their characters are totally opposed? wonders Madame de Puisieux. Because of these women's thoughtless behaviour, however, "on reproche

à notre sexe la légèreté et l'inconstance" (*Conseils*: 66).

Judging by Madame de Puisieux' statements, the third kind of woman, the *femme galante*, seems to belong mainly to the higher echelons of society; the aristocracy.

Dans le grand monde, on ne médit plus; la galanterie est devenue un vice d'usage, comme de mettre du rouge. L'une et l'autre gêne un peu la réputation, et le visage d'une femme: mais dans la suite cela revient au même (*Réflexions*: 293).

As indicated earlier, love for one's spouse was considered to be plebeian by the upper classes. In those circles, adultery was the norm while fidelity was the exception. In the *Lettres persanes* Montesquieu comments: "Ici un mari qui voudrait seul posséder sa femme serait regardé comme un perturbateur de la joie publique et comme un insensé qui voudrait jouir de la lumière du soleil à l'exclusion des autres hommes" (Montesquieu: 99).

Léon Abensour offers two explanations for the widespread adultery: "Nulle communauté de vie conjugale n'existait et d'autre part, la toute puissance des usages mondains non moins que le désir de jouer un rôle à la Cour en approchant intimement les puissants du jour y poussait celles même que leur froideur ou leur honnêteté naturelles en eût écartée" (Abensour: 76). He then takes two quotations from the memoirs of the Marquis d'Argenson who writes that all this adultery led to widespread venereal disease. Madame de Puisieux, although referring to sickness, and even death, as a result of debauchery, never

dared call the sickness by its name.

"A la Cour, toutes celles qui ne sont pas dévotes sont des p... ou des m..."

"Toute cette vie serait bien jolie si la v... ne s'en mêlait si promptement, ce qui rend toutes ces belles dames horribles, de sorte qu'en trois années elles passent d'être la fleur des pois à devenir d'infâmes gratte-culs et leur race sont de petits rabougris" (d'Argenson, quoted in Abensour: 77).

Having heard just about everything women did not do, or did do too much of, one might wonder how eighteenth-century Parisian women actually spent their days. Here is the typical schedule that Madame de Puisieux has drawn up for one of them,

Elle se lève plus ou moins tard: la matinée se passe à donner quelques ordres dans sa maison, et à une toilette qui ne rend pas plus jolie pour être très longue: deux heures sonnent; elle se met à table, dîne froidement; après le dîner, elle fait un triste *reversi* ou un ennuyeux piquet; le soir, elle va à l'opéra ou aux Boulevards, revient souper, joue souvent après souper, et se couche. Voilà la vie ordinaire des femmes de Paris (*Réflexions*: 206).

This insipid lifestyle, which seems to consist mainly of gambling, leads Madame de Puisieux to comment sarcastically: "La plupart des femmes boivent, mangent, dorment, jouent, grondent, commandent chez elles: elles n'y sont donc pas tout à fait en visite? (*Conseils*: 138). According to Madame de Puisieux one should gamble only when one cannot avoid it. She is totally opposed to the card games that were so fashionable because they kept women away from their families. Furthermore, women became addicted to gambling. The author says that gambling leads a woman to

neglect her health, her reputation, her peace of mind, and her family. She blames this passion not so much on the women as on their education. If they had learned to appreciate reading at an early age, or to occupy themselves fruitfully with something that would instruct while entertaining them, they would not now busy themselves with this frivolous pastime, she states (*Conseils*: 55).

Besides keeping them away from their duties as wives and mothers, gambling also makes them love money and "rien n'est si vil que cet attachement" (*Conseils*: 56). I would advise men not to gamble with women, states Madame de Puisieux because, first of all they play badly, and secondly they cheat. Furthermore, some women lead men on to let them win by making promises which they claim not to remember afterwards. Thus they make men lose considerable amounts of money which men might just as well give to them outright without all the false pretenses, adds the author sarcastically.

Les hommes, qui ont leurs raisons pour perdre au jeu avec les femmes, feraient donc beaucoup mieux de leur ouvrir leur bourse sans cette formalité: ils s'épargneraient de la mauvaise humeur et de l'ennui, et sauraient beaucoup plus tôt à quoi s'en tenir. (*Caractères I*: 160).

All the women say they play because they do not know what else to do with their time and men follow the same logic, says the author of *Caractères I*. I do not follow their reasoning, she adds, because I never play and yet I am never bored. She explains that she likes innocent

pleasures, such as reading, writing, walking, listening to music and conversing with friends. These occupations fill her days and leave her no regrets (*Caractères I*: 162). Besides, she continues, I am afraid of gossipmongers and "les joueuses médissent volontiers" (*Caractères I*: 161). Madame de Puisieux' advice here as in other cases is: "Acquérez des connaissances; elles guérissent de la médisance et de l'indiscrétion" (*Conseil*: 52).

If women had any sense, says Madame de Puisieux, they would compliment in others those qualities that they themselves possess; they could thus be lacking in modesty without appearing to be immodest (*Caractères II*: 94). Praising others to be eligible for praise is much wiser than the backbiting that women let themselves in for. The author thinks that the primary source of women's envy is vanity combined with a lack of education. If they had access to a better education it would raise their self-esteem and they would not need to be envious of other women.

Qu'on analyse bien le coeur des femmes, on y trouvera un fonds inépuisable de coquetterie. Elles veulent plaire; elles craignent jusqu'à l'idée de rivalité, et détestent tout ce qui peut leur faire manquer leur objet (*Réflexions*: 18).

Consequently, Madame de Puisieux does not trust women. She feels that they are so envious of each other that they would do almost anything to destroy one another's reputation. In this dog-eat-dog world everyone seeks to

gain an advantage over the other in order to look better herself. If you could avoid women altogether, this would be the best, she says, but one has family, and one has to pay and receive visits. So then, try to get to know the ones you have to see regularly, but do not confide in any one of them, especially in matters of the heart. Try never to say anything that displeases women; do not show them what you think; do not treat their friends nor their lovers favorably. With all of these precautions, she continues sardonically, you will still have a hard time to salvage your reputation. Women will not cease to tear you apart until you are old and ugly and you do not represent a threat to them anymore (*Conseils*: 29).

Le sang à Paris est laid; les femmes cependant y sont coquettes et galantes. Je le leur passe; mais non pas de se détester entr'elles, comme elles font toutes; et d'être jalouses du moindre avantage ... Les femmes ne sont bonnes que pour une chose, et ce n'est pas pour vivre en société. Elles feront donc bien de ne se voir qu'aux spectacles et au jeu (*Caractères I*: 20-21).

Madame de Puisieux is definitely trying to get back at some Parisian ladies with this last remark. It is not clear what she means precisely, but I can guess. The comment is most certainly meant as an insult to the women who offended her pride when she played the clavichord and showed them her paintings. They gave her poisonous praise at times and were condescending at other times without any reason other than envy. Fortunately, she says, men are more indulgent toward women than we are with our own kind (*Caractères I*:

20-21). Because any advantage is bad, "la rivalité sur les talents est aussi forte que sur la beauté" (*Réflexions*: 266). On reflection she came to realize that women are afraid to compliment one another because they feel that it would take something away from themselves: "L'envie ou la honte nous ferme la bouche, quand il s'agit d'exalter nos semblables, et surtout celles que nous sentons valoir mieux que nous. Les hommes ont un peu plus d'équité" (*Conseils*: 50).

Indeed, men are lucky enough to be praised by their equals when they deserve it, she comments, while we have to depend on men to be praised. For this reason, she adds cynically: "C'est notre coutume de nous consoler des injustices de notre sexe, par l'admiration et par l'estime de l'autre" (*Caractères I*: 22).

4. OLD AGE

4a. Planning one's future

In the eighteenth century, old age arrived very rapidly for women, states Chaussinand-Nogaret. A woman would be in her late thirties and then, all of a sudden, she would be twenty years older. "Comme le dit malicieusement Mercier, la quadragénaire n'existe pas: on a trente ou soixante ans" (Chaussinand-Nogaret: 145). Madame de Puisieux believes that women who try to make new conquests at the age of forty succeed only in making themselves look ridiculous. Instead of being so

pretentious, she states, they should try to preserve the conquests they have made. "Les graces séduisantes dans la jeunesse deviennent minauderies dans l'arrière saison. Un peu d'esprit, de l'égalité, de la douceur dans la société; voilà les seules ressources pour être agréable, quand la beauté est sur le retour" (*Réflexions*: 57-58).

Women who staked everything in their youth on their beauty and their charms found themselves with no life at all by the time they reached their forties. Because they had become accustomed to define themselves by the attention men lavished on them, with the disappearance of youth they found themselves robbed of their identities. Men did not notice them anymore. Even today, as Susan Brownmiller points out,

Femininity is not something that improves with age, for girlishness, with its innocent modesty, its unthreatening impudence and its promise of ripe sexuality in the rosy future, typifies the feminine principle at its ephemeral best. Women who rely on a feminine strategy as their chief means of survival can do little to stop the roaring tide of maturity as they watch their advantage slip by (Brownmiller 1985: 236).

Because everything about femininity is so closely linked to physical attractiveness, and therefore to age, Brownmiller feels that "femininity fails as a goal" (Brownmiller: 237).

In order to avoid becoming a nonentity, Madame de Puisieux repeatedly stresses the importance of women cultivating their minds. When a woman does not start to prepare for old age early in life, she will find herself without the necessary spiritual sustenance at a time when

she needs it most. Do not lose your time with futile occupations like other women, lectures Madame de Puisieux, "songez que celui de la jeunesse est le seul pour apprendre, et qu'il vient un âge où les plaisirs nous quittent: il faut bien des ressources à une femme, pour la consoler de cet abandon" (*Conseils*: 16).

While a woman is young, her good looks may be all she needs. But as she gets older her friends and inner resources are all she can count on. If she has none, she will see nothing but a very bleak future. Madame de Puisieux gives a lyrical description of the desolation that strikes women to their very souls as they enter middle age:

Hélas! tout est fini pour elles! plus d'hommages si flatteurs pour l'amour propre, plus d'attentions délicates et marquées; elles n'entendent plus autour d'elles que des soupirs d'ennui: elles ne rencontrent que des regards distraits; on leur parle d'un ton glacé; on ne loue plus rien en elles; leurs mains ne sont plus baisées, ni serrées tendrement; comme elles n'inspirent rien, on les néglige; les grâces si touchantes s'éloignent avec la jeunesse. La santé, la fraîcheur et l'enjouement, enfants de l'amour, disparaissent avec elle; il ne reste plus qu'un visage flétri par le temps et par le dépit; on fait des toilettes secrètes qui ne réparent rien; les amours épouvantés d'une chevelure grise, s'envolent en remettant leur bandeau; ah Dieu! quel état! quelle provision de philosophie ne faut-il point avoir pour se consoler d'aussi grandes pertes? est-il possible que notre bonheur dépende d'une fleur si facile à faner? Mais les femmes d'esprit comme les autres, n'entendent pas raison là-dessus, malgré tout ce qui leur reste pour les consoler (*Caractères II*: 17-18).

During youth it may seem too costly to forego pleasure in order to invest in the future. But when a women outlives her beauty her virtuous behaviour is rewarded in

the end, says the author.

Les femmes n'ont qu'un temps fort court pour plaire par les agréments de la figure: Quand une fois elles ont quarante ans, elles ont beau avoir été belles, et l'être encore, les grâces s'éloignent avec la jeunesse, et les amours avec elles [...] et l'on tombe dans la tristesse, à moins qu'on n'ait été assez prudente pour faire un grand fond d'esprit et de talents, qui console des ravages du temps (*Conseils*: 75).

4b. False devoutness

Women who built their life on nothing but their beauty and who lived only for the moment found themselves at the age of forty facing the disappearance of this way of life. Their life was over for all intents and purposes, at least the kind of life they had known up to that point. If they had lived virtuously, they would have no reason to reproach themselves for their behaviour. If they were able to occupy themselves and had built this "grand fond d'esprit" they would be able to reap the benefits at that moment in time. But if not, and having nothing else to fall back onto, they often saw no other recourse than to turn to religion. Filled with dread for the empty future ahead, they turned to devoutness only because they saw no other useful role to fulfill, "Alors leur ressource est souvent une fausse dévotion, dans laquelle par conséquent elles ne peuvent trouver de satisfaction réelle, ni de dédommagement à ce qu'elles n'ont plus", states the author (*Réflexions*: 8).

It is clear that Madame de Puisieux does not have much sympathy for these women because I think that she considers

them to be hypocrites and cowards. In this group are the *coquettes* who, once beautiful, are now old and afraid of the repercussions of their behaviour. When God becomes the last resort, Madame de Puisieux feels that there is no true faith involved. She does not say so but it seems as though she considers a conversion at this late stage in life nothing less than the act of a coward. "La dévotion est l'unique ressource des coquettes, quand elles sont devenues vieilles. Il faut avouer que ces retours vers Dieu sont d'un bel exemple! voilà de belles conversions!", she says ironically, "Dieu devient par là le pis-aller de toutes les femmes qui ne savent plus que faire" (*Conseils*: 57).

If not *coquettes*, devout women are usually the ones who are both ugly and stupid, according to Madame de Puisieux, who feels, quite uncharitably, that "il n'y a que Dieu qui puisse donner quelque consolation aux femmes laides et sottes" (*Conseils*: 27). Others who are pious are the ones who are bored, or those who have been disappointed in love:

C'est ordinairement quand on a vécu vingt ans dans le monde, que l'on a été peu ménagère des plaisirs, et qu'ils sont devenus insipides à force d'en goûter, ou bien que l'on a essayé des violents chagrins, que l'on cherche à se consoler avec Dieu des malheurs que nous ont attiré nos folies (*Conseils*: 22).

5. CONCLUSION

Madame de Puisieux is a self-proclaimed misanthropist. If she is critical of men, she is even more so of women. I

propose that she has higher expectations of the female sex than she has of the other one. She says that men do not deserve to be emulated but neither do women as she clearly points out, "Il est peu de femmes que les autres puissent prendre pour modèles, parce qu'il y en a peu qui méritent d'être imitées" (*Conseils*: 10).

Madame de Puisieux treats women so harshly that one could mistake her for a misogynist. In fact, Camille Garnier perceives the author as such, stating that the general picture which emerges from Madame de Puisieux' works is "un portrait féroce, digne d'un moraliste misogyne" (Garnier: 82).

I must admit that Madame de Puisieux indeed attacks women with a vengeance. I believe that she does so with a specific purpose in mind though. Some women's reprehensible behaviour exasperates her because it reflects badly on each and every one of them. Since she is a *moraliste*, she is fighting a battle for change, using her pen as her weapon. Her treatment of the female sex is meant to confront women with their own idiosyncracies. She wants to help women recognize themselves in the portraits she draws and thus shame them into changing their behaviour.

CHAPTER THREE

EQUALITY OF THE SEXES

Les femmes dépendent de leurs maris ou des bienséances. Il faut s'accoutumer de bonne heure à la dépendance ou elle devient insupportable dans un âge plus avancé. Il est bon de savoir commander, mais il est nécessaire de savoir obéir. Nous ne sommes pas nées pour jouir de notre liberté; les usages s'y opposent.

(Conseils à une amie: 94)

1. INTRODUCTION

One would think, says Madame de Puisieux, that women are slaves only of their whims. But when we examine their condition more closely we will see that they are slaves of much more. In fact, in eighteenth-century France, they were slaves to the *préjugés* and the *bienséances* ("Notre sexe est assujetti à des bienséances; et le bonheur de notre vie dépend de les garder" [*Conseils*: p. 68]), dominated by their parents, and subsequently by their husbands.

2. UPBRINGING AND EDUCATION

One sex is given advantage over the other as a birthright. From the moment a girl is born, it becomes immediately apparent that she is less welcome than a boy would have been. "Nous sommes toujours malheureuses, même

en naissant: on voit paraître sur tous les visages, dès que nous venons au monde, une partie des chagrins que nous devons avoir" (*Réflexions*: 5). Apparently, parents wanted a son and heir but instead of a bundle of joy, they were holding a bundle of sorrow when the newborn was a girl. A boy was an asset; he could carry on the family name. A girl was a burden; she needed a dowry to get married or to go to a convent.

Madame de Puisieux describes that, while still a child, a girl is hemmed into corsets that are meant to make her body more attractive to men. These contraptions restrict all her movements, and torture her body. Eventually, she may have the desired figure but this will be at the expense of her health.

It appears that the unnatural treatment of a woman's body disfigured her bones in such a way as to make her practically unfit for childbirth. Madame de Puisieux says that many women gave birth to children "aussi mal conformés qu'elles" and that others died in childbirth as a result of these corsets (*Réflexions*: 6).

A father would never think of sending his son to a monastery, complains the author, even if his behaviour were so bad as to make him practically unfit for society, but he has no qualms about sending his daughter to a convent if he needs to leave more money to his son. She does not say it, but it is implied that girls did not rate much higher than

cattle, or some other property that could be bartered off in an auction.

Frequently a girl was married off to a man for whom she had no feelings, and who had none for her. If she were indifferent towards her husband, she might fall in love with someone else. If she wanted this love affair to be a lasting relationship, however, she would be preparing all sorts of sorrow for herself. Her lover's absences, his eventual unfaithfulness or sickness would bring her more unhappiness than satisfaction in the end. If she happened to have a jealous husband, he could really make her life miserable (*Réflexions*: 7). "La plupart des maris qui n'aiment pas leurs femmes, sont à peu près de cette humeur: ils les regardent comme un meuble qui leur appartient, et dont ils ne veulent pas qu'on les prive, malgré le peu de cas qu'ils semblent en faire" (*Conseils*: 125). I conclude that they were as possessive of their wives as they were of their dog, their horse, or their real estate.

Madame de Puisieux has given a long list of female grievances but she is quickly done enumerating men's sorrows, for she does not believe they have any.

Les hommes, heureux dès leur naissance, sont reçus dans les familles avec une joie excessive, ou tout au moins avec contentement. Ils deviennent nos maîtres; et j'ai été même quelquefois surprise qu'ils ne fissent pas valoir mieux leur autorité: tant il est vrai qu'ils n'étaient pas faits pour en jouir, et qu'elle n'est en eux qu'un droit usurpé. Ils jouissent de tout, sans que le préjugé les gêne: ils vieillissent sans être de plus mauvaise humeur; ils sont tout ce qu'ils veulent être (*Réflexions*: 8).

2a. Boys' education

In Madame de Puisieux' mind, education was the key to a better life for both men and women. If she could bring parents to realize that their children's superficial education, as well as the parents' poor example, were the underlying causes of many of society's problems, perhaps she could bring the vicious cycle to a stop.

Les enfants naissent presque tous avec un mauvais levain dans le sang, principe de tous les maux dont ils sont accablés dans le cours de leur vie. Ce levain vient de leurs parents, dont les moeurs corrompues ont gâté leur bonne constitution (*Réflexions*: 66).

Because of their promiscuous lives, parents were beset with venereal diseases. This led to the birth of weak and sickly offspring who suffered from congenital defects. Madame de Puisieux says that some children were born with bad blood running through their veins (*Réflexions*: 66). In order to pump some health into these poor weaklings, mothers took them to be fed by strong, healthy wet-nurses. According to the author, these were often stupid, nasty women of lowly background who passed some of their vices and stupidity on to these children along with their milk. The children eventually grew up without ever having learned the first principles of morality. "Ce n'est pas le défaut des jeunes gens de faire des réflexions", she states. What is implied is that parents have the responsibility to show their children how to live by their example and by their teachings. Otherwise, children,

... prennent le chemin qui les mène aux plaisirs ou à leur avancement: toutes les passions ensuite les assiègent, le vice les séduit; ils sont accablés de bonne heure de maladies; ils sont ambitieux; ils voient mauvaise compagnie; ils se ruinent; ils se marient; ils ont des enfants aussi malsains et aussi mal élevés qu'eux; ils meurent enfin sans avoir connu le bonheur (*Réflexions*: 67).

Clearly, if their parents led a life of debauchery, this is the sort of life that children were most likely to imitate. Consequently, it was imperative to make parents aware of their responsibilities.

In school, young boys learn Latin and geometry, says Madame de Puisieux, but they do not learn anything about morality. She feels that first and foremost, boys should have lessons in probity. They should know "ce à quoi les engage la qualité d'homme", she writes, and the sooner the better. Therefore, she invites some "honnête et habile homme à nous faire des éléments de morale à l'usage des enfants" (*Caractères I*: 34).

Later in the century, the same desire for the elaboration of children's books on morality was expressed in the writings of Diderot, Grimm, Helvétius, d'Holbach and Voltaire. Snyders explains that these *philosophes* called for some sort of non-religious catechisms for children. They were to be "des livrets où les premières notions des lois du pays, des devoirs des citoyens fussent consignées" (Diderot 1775 in Snyders 1965: 386). "Dans ces 'catéchismes de probité' ou dans 'ces catéchismes de morale et de politique', les enfants apprendront à connaître à la fois

les lois existantes et leurs devoirs à l'égard de ces lois" (Snyders: 386). The first objective of the *philosophes* was to produce good citizens.

It is not surprising that the young people are not "fort honnêtes gens", says Madame de Puisieux, for they have have never been taught what this entails. Then she adds ironically, "ils seraient, je crois, de fort mauvais humanistes, et de très pitoyables géomètres, si on ne s'y prenait pas mieux pour leur apprendre le latin ou la géométrie". As a consequence, she rails:

Les jeunes gens sont parjures, méchants, menteurs, infidèles, calomniateurs, souvent pis; faute de savoir bien ce qu'il faut être. Cette habitude ne les dispose pas à devenir meilleurs avec le temps [...]. Aussi ils trompent leurs parents, et ils s'en félicitent; ils déshonorent des femmes qui ont été assez simples pour les croire, ou assez sensées pour les refuser, et ils s'en font une espèce de point d'honneur; ils font des dettes qu'ils ne payeront jamais, et ils ne s'en cachent pas; cependant ils se trouvent à l'âge de quarante ans avec la réputation d'une probité soutenue (*Caractères I*: 34-35).

Young boys who are destined for military service should leave school at the age of twelve suggests the author because, as mentioned earlier, in the service they advance less through merit and learning than through seniority. She believes that twelve-year-olds can learn more from their fathers than they can in a school in which they learn dead languages for which they will have no use later on in life and where "ils prennent des principes de religion dont il ne leur reste pas le moindre vestige à dix-huit ans. A vingt-cinq ans tout est effacé" (*Caractères*

I: 7).

The father should study his son's character, try to know him well, and give him all the counseling he needs. He should keep his son close to him and try to become his friend. He should study "ses penchants, pour les diriger; ses passions, pour les modérer; ses goûts, pour les épurer; ses vices, pour l'en corriger; ses qualités pour les faire valoir, et ses défauts, pour les lui faire remarquer". He cannot do any of these important things while the boy is far away in some boarding school. Just like Montaigne, Madame de Puisieux is also against using force because nothing is done well under constraint, the child does not learn to like doing the right thing and, moreover, he starts to hate his master. Punishments do not accomplish anything positive and this is why "l'éducation libérale les proscrit presque entièrement" (*Caractères I: 6*).

2b. Girls' education

The education of girls, much more than that of boys, suffered from serious flaws. Girls had teachers for a multitude of subjects but items of real substance, if taught at all, were not in proportion to the frivolous things they learned. For instance in the bourgeoisie, states Abensour, several teachers come to the house and "même dans une famille de petite bourgeoisie, ces maîtres sont très nombreux: un pour l'écriture, un autre pour la géographie, un pour la danse, un pour la musique, un autre

pour la guitare (Abensour, 1977: 48). As for Madame de Puisieux, when complaining about the indecent elegance of contemporary women, she exclaims tongue-in-cheek: "Je ne sais pourquoi il n'y a pas des [sic] maîtres pour apprendre à se coucher avec grâces sur un canapé, comme on en a qui enseignent à bien porter sa tête et ses bras: ceux-là seraient peut-être aussi nécessaires que les autres" (*Réflexions*: 50).

A girl barely has the time to be a child, says the author: "On nous marie presque enfants. Les premières années sont employées à nous donner des talents qu'une fille de condition ne peut se dispenser d'avoir. A peine a-t-on atteint l'âge de dix-huit ans, qu'on se trouve à la tête d'une maison qu'on ne gouverne point. Le besoin des réflexions arrive longtemps avant l'âge d'en faire; et le temps où l'on en fait, ne vient quelquefois jamais" (*Conseils*: 134). The criticism is veiled but it is there. What Madame de Puisieux implies, I believe, is that girls could very well go without developing those talents but not without learning how to run a household, or how to educate children. These subjects were, however, not on their curriculum. When these girls became mothers they simply sent their children to the same schools they had gone to while they allowed themselves to be swept away by all the pleasurable things that life had to offer.

On s'abandonne au torrent des passions et des plaisirs: on passe quarante ans, sans avoir pensé ni réfléchi: on a des enfants mal élevés; et l'on meurt

n'ayant vécu que pour soi, après avoir fait beaucoup de mal et fort peu de bien (*Conseils*: 134).

Other than religious studies, rather than learning things that would have been useful to girls later in life, they learned to develop their talents; an occupation that was meant to impress and please men. Again, Madame de Puisieux does not say this in so many words but that is my impression. What she does say is, "on nous fait apprendre des choses auxquelles souvent nous n'avons aucune disposition, et que par conséquent nous apprenons toujours mal. Au lieu des principes de vertu, on nous donne des talents, au lieu de véritable pudeur, on ne nous donne que de la décence, qui ne sert tout au plus qu'à tromper les hommes, en cachant nos penchants" (*Réflexions*: 6).

While she is against exaggerated devoutness, Madame de Puisieux, never claims that a girl should not be pious. "Je soutiens même qu'il est absolument essentiel d'avoir de la religion; elle est le fondement de toutes les vertus. Mais je voudrais qu'elle en eût comme un honnête homme, libre de superstitions" (*Conseils*: 23). Essays on morality written by the clergy, like those the author had been required to read, were presumably riddled with superstitious notions.

She also advises girls to keep the religion of their parents, so as to avoid offending them and having to listen to too many embarrassing lectures. Should the girl happen to believe that their religion is the best one of all, so much the better, she says, because then you can live in

innocence and die in peace (*Conseils*: 138). The irony in her last comment convinces me that she does not truly believe what she is saying. As I indicated earlier in the section on men, she is probably afraid to express her real opinion in *Conseils* just yet.

Considering the sort of books that Madame de Puisieux had to read in school, as opposed to all the books that she read after leaving Port Royal, it is obvious that she was an autodidact. The same was true for many other women who wanted to learn something more meaningful or profound than what they were taught in school. Self-education, however, meant that they would have had to interpret totally unfamiliar material as best they could, without anyone to guide them. Studying by oneself, and for oneself, was far from perfect, but it was better than letting one's mind roam aimlessly and living the life of frivolity that many other women led. Contrary to the critics who see Madame de Puisieux as a conformist, who was resigned and willing to accept the superficial role men wanted women to play, my interpretation is that she is far from resigned. I read bitterness in her works, and especially in the following quotation, which is smoothed over somewhat by irony.

Il ne suffit pas d'avoir de l'esprit, il faut savoir s'en servir [...]. Mais connaît-on l'étendue de ses forces? s'est-on mesuré avec prudence? sait-on à quoi s'appliquer? on embrasse hardiment et l'on exécute avec succès. On marche plus surement quand on voit clair, que dans l'obscurité. Les grands hommes auraient été bien petits, s'ils n'avaient eu le bonheur de rencontrer ce qui leur convenait. Il ne faut point se croire universel. C'est se tromper que

de compter être ce que personne n'a point encore été. On peut approcher de la perfection par quelques côtés; mais il en est cent par où elle devient inaccessible. J'ai voulu tout savoir, et je n'ai rien appris qu'imparfaitement; mais il est moins important à une femme qu'à un homme d'aller loin (*Caractères I: 58*).

This last remarks strikes me as being bitter. Greatness and fame were in the realm of possibilities for men; mediocrity and obscurity were almost a certainty for women. Madame de Puisieux was striving for perfection but her limited education presented an obstacle in her pursuit of excellence. Moreover, since most men did not find it important, or even desirable, that women achieved prestige, they were not interested in enlightening them. Anticipating the *encyclopédistes* Fontenelle tried to help women but most others scholars were pedantic men who kept knowledge to themselves. They wrote in Latin, a language which most women had not learned. In order to acquire a better understanding of unfamiliar subjects, self-taught women like Madame de Puisieux had to wait until the publication of the *Encyclopédie*, the popularizer of all knowledge. Until that time, they were kept in the dark.

S'il est permis d'être superficiel, c'est à nous. Il ne nous faut presque des sciences que la signification des mots. Pour les talents, choisissons-en qui fassent notre amusement et celui des autres; donnons-y une application assidue, et tenons-nous-en à quelques-uns, si nous voulons exceller (*Caractères: 59*).

I think that Madame de Puisieux was certainly not one to want to be thought of as frivolous. Therefore, her statement that women are allowed to be superficial is rife

with irony. This is what men think but in fact the author feels that they undervalue women when they allow them only this superficiality and no more. She does not feel honoured in the least by this sort of concession; all the reading and writing she has done testify to this. Undoubtedly she became a *moraliste* because analyzing the workings of the human heart was more important to her, and more accessible, than all the other sciences.

La première de toutes les sciences est celle du monde: qui connaît les hommes, leurs procédés et leurs ridicules, a au moins la moitié du savoir possible: il peut orner son esprit d'autres connaissances, et atteindre à la perfection; mais il pourrait s'en passer (*Caractères II*: 207).

As far as other knowledge is concerned, Madame de Puisieux has a predilection for the development of artistic talents. Throughout her writings she has indicated that she feels it desirable to develop one's natural gifts, such as playing the harpsichord or painting. These occupations are good time fillers; they are ideal for fighting off boredom, or feelings of loneliness, because one cannot always be with the people one likes. She writes, after having explained which books a young girl should read, "vous pouvez d'ailleurs cultiver vos talents; vous savez la musique, vous touchez le clavecin, cela peut servir à votre amusement [...] il vaut mieux être seule, qu'avec des personnes qui ne nous plaisent pas. Les talents chassent

l'ennui" (*Conseils*: 7). These occupations, then, are more than simple pastimes; they are rewards for time spent in more taxing activities.

However, as with other studies, Madame de Puisieux does not recommend dabbling in the arts. She prefers quality over quantity, wanting women to excel in what they do. To be able to do a great many things tolerably well is of little value to the author.

If I had daughters, says Madame de Puisieux, I would keep them constantly occupied. She does not say with what, but having read her previous works, I think that she would have them read the history of their country, *Les Caractères* of La Bruyère, the fables and *contes* of La Fontaine, and the genealogies of the great French families (*Conseils*: 7). The reason she gives for studying these is that "sans l'histoire, la fable, un peu de connaissance des poètes et des philosophes, on reste en chemin dans ses lectures; il y a quantité d'endroits qu'on n'entend pas (*Réflexions*: 50). However, she would not advise young girls to read Crébillon fils, l'Abbé Prévost, nor Marivaux because their works can inflame a girl's imagination. She recommends that girls wait to read those authors until they are already married (*Conseils*: 7). She would also advise them to "garder pour les occasions, votre savoir et les parures de votre esprit" because there are too many women who, when others talk about subjects with which they are unfamiliar,

feel envious and do their best to attack the speaker. "Il y a beaucoup d'esprit à n'en point montrer quelquefois, et surtout à ne pas voir que les autres en manquent" (*Réflexions*: 51).

Furthermore, the essential part of education being the language of one's country, Madame de Puisieux recommends that young girls write a lot. They should also make notes of what they read because "en écrivant on se forme le style; on apprend sa langue, qu'il est honteux de ne pas savoir pour une fille de condition" (*Conseils*: 7). I would reward their progress with some pleasurable occupation, says the author. Again, she does not specify what this is but I presume that it might be painting, singing or playing the harpsichord. Last but not least, she would definitely keep them away from *galanterie*.

Par les occupations multipliées, on les instruit, et on les accoutume à être seules; par les plaisirs, on les encourage; et par l'éloignement à la galanterie, on les rend heureuses, autant que des femmes peuvent l'être. Point de couvent, encore moins d'études frivoles: leur mettre de bonne heure entre les mains d'excellents livres de morale, pour former leurs mœurs, surtout ne les pas gêner pour s'expliquer; et ne les laisser jamais entre les mains des domestiques (*Réflexions*: 225).

She says "heureuses autant que les femmes peuvent l'être" because she does not believe that women were born to be happy; they were born to suffer. "La nature équitable ayant formé les femmes pour souffrir, les a dédommagées par la délicatesse des sens; par conséquent elles sont plus susceptibles de sentir des plaisirs vifs et de peu de

durée" (*Réflexions*: 125).

It requires a tremendous effort on the part of young girls to stay virtuous, suggests Madame de Puisieux, because they have never been told explicitly why this is so important. If they only knew that men might be out only to seduce them and to cheat on them afterwards, it might be easier for them to defend their virtue. But due to their curiosity, their ignorance, and their inexperience, they often see only the positive side of the man with whom they are infatuated. It is not that all men are bad, she states, they make promises with the best of intentions, but they forget them as soon as their passion is spent.

Madame de Puisieux believed that keeping girls ignorant worked to their detriment. She thought that they would not give up their virtue so easily if they knew the consequences of sexual intercourse. But girls were totally ignorant about their biological functions, such as pregnancy and childbirth. If I had had daughters, she asserts, I would have told them, as early in their lives as possible, about the dangers that men can represent to their reputation and their future happiness. Perhaps people would find this risky, she continues, but I have found that the most ignorant girls became "les plus vicieuses et les moins réservées, quand une fois elles avaient goûté des plaisirs". The main reason that they throw away their chance of happiness is their lack of instruction. Instead

of telling them the real reason, mothers, out of some false sense of delicacy, tell them that they would offend God if they listened to a man. The next thing that happens is that:

Il en vient un aimable qui éloigne les scrupules, qui les fait même regarder comme une sottise. Une fille combat pendant un an, après lequel il vient un jour où, lorsque la mère est à confesse, ou au sermon, ou à jouer, une gouvernante à qui on se fie prudemment, introduit l'amant dans la chambre de la jeune personne. Qu'il en arrive des accidents ou non, il n'est pas moins vrai que si la demoiselle eût été plus instruite, sa gouvernante n'eût pas trouvé l'occasion de travailler à sa perte (*Réflexions*: 28-29).

Although Madame de Puisieux never mentions the word virgin, it is clearly implied that a girl who loses her virginity risks her reputation and consequently her chance to get married. When a man promises marriage in the heat of passion, a girl should be leery of such a promise, says the author. Looking at it dispassionately, she explains that it makes more sense for a man to forsake his promise than his happiness. If he kept his word and married the girl in the hope of making her happy, he would be certain only of dishonour and ruin to himself. Her happiness would not be a certainty while he would surely be unhappy for the rest of his life. "Filles, soyez donc sur vos gardes", she warns, "méfiez-vous d'une promesse que la passion arrache, et que le bon sens dispense de tenir. Hommes, n'aventurez point de promesses, ne jurez que de sang froid, et tout en ira mieux" (*Caractères I*: 115).

Interestingly enough, many years after their break-up,

Diderot is of the same opinion as Madame de Puisieux. In order to show that the latter was not paranoid about men's intentions, and also to give a man's viewpoint on this same topic, I will reproduce a section of Diderot's answer to Antoine-Léonard Thomas, which perfectly illustrates Madame de Puisieux' concerns:

La seule chose qu'on leur ait apprise, c'est à bien porter la feuille de figuier qu'elles ont reçue de leur première aïeule. Tout ce qu'on leur a dit et répété dix-huit à dix-neuf ans de suite se réduit à ceci: Ma fille, prenez garde à votre feuille de figuier; votre feuille de figuier va bien, votre feuille de figuier va mal [...]. Que signifie ce mot si légèrement prononcé, si frivolement interprété: *Je vous aime!* Il signifie réellement: "Si vous vouliez me sacrifier votre innocence et vos mœurs; perdre le respect que vous vous portez à vous-même, et que vous obtenez des autres; marcher les yeux baissés dans la société, du moins jusqu'à ce que, par l'habitude du libertinage, vous en ayez acquis l'effronterie; renoncer à tout état honnête; faire mourir vos parents de douleur, et m'accorder un moment de plaisir, je vous en serais vraiment obligé." Mères, lisez ces lignes à vos jeunes filles: c'est, en abrégé, le commentaire de tous les discours flatteurs qu'on leur adressera; et vous ne pouvez les en prévenir de trop bonne heure. On a mis tant d'importance à la galanterie, qu'il semble qu'il ne reste aucune vertu à celle qui a franchi ce pas (Diderot 1772 in Rey: 84).

3. MARRIAGE

Women were enslaved to their parents, then to their husbands, and subsequently to their children. Girls did not seem to complain too much about arranged marriages because they were more eager to get away from constant supervision than worried about the new situation into which they were entering. Diderot explains: "Le moment qui la délivrera du despotisme de ses parents est arrivé. Son imagination

s'ouvre à un avenir plein de chimères; son coeur nage dans une joie secrète. Réjouis-toi bien, malheureuse créature! Le temps aurait sans cesse affaibli la tyrannie que tu quittes, et le temps accroîtra sans cesse la tyrannie sous laquelle tu vas passer" (Diderot, in Thomas 1772: 93). The women were however only fooling themselves. They wanted to be free, they wanted to take charge of their own lives, but they married for all the wrong reasons.

Une fille désire moins un mari que sa liberté: elle pense moins à s'en procurer un, qu'à saisir l'occasion de n'être plus au couvent, ou sous les yeux d'une mère... A voir une fille prendre le premier venu que ses parents lui présentent, on dirait qu'elle ne cherche que le moment de s'échapper de sa captivité (*Réflexions*: 7-8).

Madame de Puisieux thought that this situation was unfair to both men and women: "Rien n'est-il si choquant que le pis-aller. Les hommes le sont de la plupart des femmes. Ils rougiraient d'avoir été acceptés s'ils savaient le motif qui a déterminé pour eux. Combien d'hommes trompés?" (*Caractères I*: 19). Men could be a last resort for girls who wanted to get married, for women who were unhappily married, or for women past their prime and desperate to find a husband. The fact is that without a man, women were nothing. They could not be people in their own right.

On reading Madame de Puisieux carefully, I get the distinct impression that, even though she ostensibly resigns herself to the status quo, she really would like

women to have more control over their individual lives, to get out from under the yoke that tradition has placed upon them. Inspired by Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (74), she writes:

Les hommes ne sont que ce que nous les avons faits; et s'ils ont pris de la supériorité, c'est que nous avons bien voulu la leur laisser prendre. Je ne sais si mon coeur me trompe; mais il me dit qu'ils n'étaient pas destinés à nous imposer la loi; et l'expérience m'apprend qu'ils l'auraient peut-être reçue, si les femmes d'autrefois avaient eu autant de fermeté et de résolution qu'il y en a dans la plupart de celles d'aujourd'hui (Conseils: 95).

Then she adds "mais le joug est donné, il faut s'y soumettre". If Madame de Puisieux accepts the traditional yoke, she does so only because she cannot do otherwise without appearing to take the role of a man. Diderot writes, "On m'a demandé si les femmes étaient faites pour l'amitié. Il y a des femmes qui sont hommes, et des hommes qui sont femmes; et j'avoue que je ne ferai jamais mon ami d'un homme-femme" (Diderot in Thomas: 95). I think Madame de Puisieux would not like to have been seen as an "homme-femme".

Rather than obedience, Madame de Puisieux advocates equality in marriage. She does not want to see submission on either side because, each person having his own duties, both parties are equal. Do not let your husband dominate you, she says on several occasions, because husbands have lost that right by their bad conduct. On the other hand, she also finds it generally in bad taste for a woman to

dominate her husband because it diminishes his stature.

Je ne vous conseille pas cependant de subjuger votre mari; il est presque aussi humiliant d'être la femme d'un homme faible, que d'être l'esclave de son mari. Il faut tâcher de conserver une égale autorité, surtout dans l'intérieur de votre maison, et que vos gens n'entendent jamais ce mot cruel, *je veux, je ne veux pas* (*Réflexions*: 109).

Neither person should be the slave of the other, affirms Madame de Puisieux, but instead there should be flexibility in a marriage. If a man were to marry an intelligent, sensitive woman he could benefit by listening to her advice for it is certain that in some cases a woman's judgement is better than a man's. In those cases he would do well to follow her advice because she has his best interest at heart.

Le plus grand bonheur qui puisse arriver à un jeune homme, c'est que la première personne à laquelle il s'attache, soit une femme d'esprit et de coeur: l'empire qu'elle prend sur lui ne peut tourner qu'à son avantage. C'est un terrible mot qu'un *je le veux* d'une femme aimable; mais quand l'honneur et la raison dictent ses volontés, un honnête homme n'est-il pas trop heureux que nous lui commandions, et de nous obéir (*Caractères I*: 115).

Sometimes Madame de Puisieux wonders, however, whether men and women were made for one another. I think she feels this way because of the constant power struggle between the sexes. Men are so afraid of damaging their concept of manhood that they would rather subdue than obey a woman. Furthermore, man tries to debase woman in order to gain an advantage. In some cases the author does not seem to mind when women stand up for themselves and take the authority,

or try to get even with men, by treating them as their inferiors.

Il y a des femmes qui traitent les hommes comme les Turcs traitent les femmes; ce n'est pas ce qu'elles font de plus mal. Je ne crois pas que nous soyons faites plus pour eux, qu'ils ne sont faits pour nous. Les hommes qui ont étudié notre faiblesse, s'en servent pour nous séduire plus sûrement. (*Conseils*: 86).

According to Madame de Puisieux, the most important event in a girl's life is to get settled in marriage (*Conseils*: 102). Parents do not seem to have their daughters' best interest at heart, however, when they marry them off in a hurry. Apparently, they want to rid themselves of the responsibility for their daughter as soon as possible. In their eagerness to get their daughter settled, they do not give her any time to get to know her intended (*Conseils*: 113). As a result, many girls married men they barely knew and with whom they had no affinities. Often, girls who were still almost children married men who were old enough to be their grandfathers. On their wedding night these girls, who had been brought up to be always very reserved around men, suddenly had to surrender their virginity to a man who was practically a stranger. Madame de Puisieux states, "elles sont forcées d'accorder des faveurs que tels & tels, qu'elles choisissent ensuite, leur paraissent autant en droit d'obtenir" (*Réflexions*: 10).

Even mutual love does not guarantee a husband's faithfulness (*Conseils*: 105), says Madame de Puisieux, but girls would stand a much better chance of a happy marriage

if they were allowed to chose their own husband (*Conseils*: 103-104). She feels that women are less to blame for the incompatibility of marriage partners than men because "il a moins dépendu d'elles de choisir" (*Caractères I*: 37).

It is incomprehensible to Madame de Puisieux, though, that men would throw themselves into such a marriage. They do not seem to realize that it would also be in their best interest to get to know their future wives, she says. In the author's opinion, it is almost indecent to contract a marriage within a week.

Je m' imagine que tous les mariages précipités sont contre les bonnes moeurs et contre toute prudence. Pour moi, si j'étais homme, je ne voudrais jamais épouser en huit jours: outre la crainte d'être trompé, j'aurais encore la répugnance que doit donner naturellement la possession d'un bien qu'on ne connaît pas; j'aurais peut-être aussi la délicatesse de vouloir être aimé; j'aurais enfin toutes les inquiétudes que les longs engagements doivent donner (*Réflexions*: 10).

People who get married without knowing one another cannot possibly have a close relationship, says Madame de Puisieux (*Conseils*: 102). Couples marry with insouciance as though they can break their marriage vows as soon as they discover that they do not like the outcome of their commitment. It is also a mistake to suppose, as parents do, that love will come later, because "l'amour ne naît point du sein de l'indifférence" (*Conseils*: 113). Even couples who loved one another before marriage often hate each other afterwards (*Conseils*: 113). That is ordinarily the effect marriage has on couples, she affirms. Another effect of

marriage is that it results in "lassitude et ennui" (*Caractères II*: 163). These sweeping statements make me wonder if Madame de Puisieux would recommend free love and perhaps the abolishment of marriage altogether. If so, she was born two hundred years too soon!

According to Madame de Puisieux, mutual indifference, lassitude and boredom caused the widespread infidelity of her times. She notes that despite firm resolutions of constancy before marriage, women found out only afterwards how difficult it was to resist temptation. Especially when they did not love their husbands, they needed a lot of courage and virtue not to follow the example of others (*Conseils*: 102).

Madame de Puisieux wonders if the mutual dislike of spouses accounts for the lack of children among famous families. Even the children they have are born with congenital defects, she says. "Il n'y a plus que les femmes de province, et à Paris les femmes du commun qui aient beaucoup d'enfants, et qui les fassent sains et bien conformés. Dans les maisons titrées, à peine voit-on un rejeton sur la santé de qui on puisse compter" (*Caractères I*: 155). For this reason she believes that Montesquieu was right when he advocated divorce. It would be more advantageous to the state if these marriages were dissolved, she affirms, so that more compatible partnerships could be formed. I suppose that she did not

dare to say in *Caractères I* that these sickly children were the result of a life of debauchery. She did however allude to this much more clearly in *Réflexions*.

Madame de Puisieux also complains about the treatment received by children born out of wedlock; they can be useful to the state, and yet the state totally ignores their rights. When a man fathers children out of wedlock he cannot marry their mother without dishonoring himself. Even when he loves his children he must leave them "dans le néant, exposées à des affronts continuels, et couverts d'une tache d'infamie" (*Caractères II*: 171). By scornfully rejecting these children the state commits a crime against humanity, she argues. Is it not true that a wife who gives birth to a child that is not her husband's perpetrates a theft that nobody thinks to retribute? she asks, implying that in reality this child is just as illegitimate as the child born out of wedlock. "Si les hommes pensaient sérieusement, ils sentiraient à combien d'injustices ces lois mêmes qu'ils ont établies, donnent lieu; elles qui forcent un mari à prendre soin d'un enfant, qu'il sait sûrement ne pas lui appartenir, et qui contraignent un père tendre à méconnaître ses propres enfants" (*Réflexions*: 172). She believes that the state should change the laws by allowing the father to legally recognize his children or that society should permit him to marry his mistress without bringing dishonour to the family.

4. LIBERTY

It is clear from Madame de Puisieux' writings that she could understand why men would ridicule women. The fact was that women, through their own actions, contributed to men's negative opinion of them. As Madame de Puisieux explains it, women who had to make a choice between love and respect invariably chose love. "A présent il est question de savoir si les femmes doivent préférer l'avantage d'être respectées, à celui d'être aimées" (*Conseils*: 100). "Il ne faut pas être trop aimé pour être respecté. L'amour et la vénération ne vont point ensemble; la tendresse introduit la familiarité et la confiance, et chasse la contrainte et le respect" (*Caractères I*: 61). This being the case, I believe that, in the hurried, frenetic, society these women were living in, they felt that they could not afford to withhold their sexual favours to gain respect. I would also say that, given the fierce competition, women preferred to "catch a man", as it were, rather than seeing him go to someone else who would give him what he wanted. Madame de Puisieux affirms: "les femmes ont choisi: elles ont donné la préférence à la tendresse", then she adds sarcastically, "elles n'en sont pas à la vérité fort respectées; mais en revanche, elles sont aimées d'une façon tout-à-fait incommode" (*Caractères I* 61).

Formerly, says the author nostalgically, things moved at a slow and graceful pace. In the age of Henri IV, the

ladies were courted for a long time. In those days "tout portait dans leurs coeurs une volupté douce, qui chassait la vertu par degrés; c'est plutôt fait à présent", adds the author laconically, "on l'éloigne d'abord" (*Caractères II*: 119). "Les femmes se sont accoutumées peu à peu à une sorte de liberté qui n'est pas fort respectueuse, mais dont elles s'accommodent faute de mieux" (*Caractères II*: 117).

I think that "for lack of better" is the key term here. It would appear that for eighteenth-century French women, any kind of freedom was preferable to none. In this case, however, living in compliance with the old *préjugés* would have served them better because it would have preserved their reputation. By giving up their virtue so easily, women devalued themselves because men did not appreciate that which was given to them so freely. Partially as a result of this, men no longer appreciated nor respected women. "Combien ne perdent-elles pas d'avoir rendu les hommes si peu complaisants", says Madame de Puisieux, "ils rougissent presque de paraître avec elles, et à l'exception d'une main qu'ils leur tendent d'un air nonchalant; elles ont à peine une attention de leur part" (*Caractères II*: 118).

Some women let their sentiments rule over reason, others preferred sexual freedom over respect, and yet others let their behaviour be dictated by ambition. They wanted so desperately to improve their social position that

they were willing to debase themselves to achieve this goal. "Pour vouloir s'élever au dessus des autres, on est souvent obligé de faire des démarches qui rabaissent au-dessous d'eux et de soi-même", states the author (*Conseils*: 53). Speaking about a woman who is *galante* and ambitious Madame de Puisieux says, quoting Madame de Villeglé, "Elle se déhonore pour des honneurs" (*Réflexions*: 73).

Since the rewards for virtuous behaviour were so far down the road and social advancement seemed to be within reach, it was not surprising that social climbers should be willing to sacrifice virtue to obtain advancement. Women simply cannot advance on their merits alone, states the author:

Une belle femme fort sage reste avec sa vertu, et la fortune avec laquelle elle est née; veut-elle l'augmenter? ce n'est qu'au moyen d'un sacrifice que les femmes galantes connaissent bien. On nous a ôté tous les moyens de nous élever avec décence: il ne nous en reste qu'un qui même en nous élevant, nous avilit, et nous rend les dernières des femmes (*Caractères II*: 228).

In the eighteenth century a man could climb the social ladder more easily than a woman. For example, he might advance in the army, or he could buy his way into the *noblesse de robe*. A woman had very few avenues open to her. She might improve her position in society by marrying above her station, but Madame de Puisieux felt that this was not advisable. She believed that happiness in marriage could be achieved, other conditions being equal, only if people were from the same class.

Il faut, autant que l'on peut, ne point se mésallier: l'assortiment des conditions est presque aussi essentiel que la conformité des inclinations. Les filles qui épousent des hommes fort au-dessous d'elles, s'avilissent et se mettent dans l'occasion de leur faire sentir plus d'une fois leur supériorité. Celles qui se marient à des hommes fort au-dessus, courent les mêmes risques, et sont souvent méprisées (*Conseils*: 115).

Also, if a husband felt ashamed of his wife he could send her off to his country estate or take her to one of the provinces where nobody would notice that she was of lower birth (*Conseils*: 115 and *Marquis* 82). If not through marriage, a woman could pull herself up by the coat tails of some important man by becoming his mistress.

"Il y a plus d'un chemin qui mène à la fortune", says Madame de Puisieux, "mais un seul conduit aux vertus; c'est celui de la sagesse. On ne risque pas de rencontrer de foule sur cette route; mais qu'importe, pourvu qu'on y arrive" (*Caractères II*: 167). These were strange times when innocent, harmless, occupations like writing by women were reviled and ridiculed by society. The injustice of it is so frustrating to Madame de Puisieux that she exclaims: "Toutes les vertus de notre sexe ne nous mènent à rien: tous les chemins à la fortune nous sont fermés, hors celui de l'infamie" (*Réflexions*: 21). Women were supposed to remain silent and subdued and if they did not, they had to pay the price:

Craignez le ridicule de faire parler de vous. Il y a longtemps que l'on a dit que la femme de bonne réputation est celle dont on ne parle point, et cela est toujours vrai. Il est si difficile d'être louée de tout le monde, qu'il faut renoncer à l'envie d'être

connue, ou s'exposer à cent sortes d'observations malignes. On fait parler de ses talents et de son esprit, mais c'est toujours aux dépens de sa réputation (*Conseils*: 11).

In the eighteenth century, before publishing anything, writers had to submit their manuscript to the king's censor. Thus, freedom of expression for both men and women did not exist, but women were even more hampered in their writing than men because no one wanted them to write, especially not moralist works. This was considered to be totally outside of their area of knowledge:

Une femme d'esprit jugera d'un roman, d'une pièce de théâtre; et parlera musique, bal, fêtes, galanteries, sentiments, caractères, modes, ridicules; tout cela est de son ressort: mais elle doit s'en tenir là. S'il lui prenait en fantaisie de moraliser à ving-cinq ans, je lui conseillerais de faire ses réflexions avec des gens assez sensés pour ne pas y trouver à redire (*Conseils*: 14).

The author resented the fact that men tried to exclude women from what they considered to be their domain. They did not want to hear women speak intelligently, and neither did they want them to stand up for themselves by writing. Therefore, when Madame de Puisieux published her first book, they criticized her severely. Perhaps she was also ridiculed, which is one of the worst things to happen to a fledgling writer. It was perhaps men's insecurity which manifested itself in this way but it was the worst kind of reaction a woman could cope with if she were an aspiring writer. It would damage her fragile ego and undermine her self-esteem. Madame de Puisieux retorted by writing in the

preface to her subsequent book that men, instead of trying to listen to women, or even to appreciate their efforts, were trying to silence them:

Bien loin d'encourager les dames à faire honneur à leur patrie par des ouvrages d'esprit, on parviendra à les renfermer dans les bornes du silence, et de la timidité attachée à mon sexe. Les Français si portés aux sciences et aux talents ne peuvent pas se résoudre à les admirer, et à les reconnaître que dans les hommes. D'où naît une si basse rivalité? Craignent-ils que nous les surpassions? Qu'ils se rassurent: de tout temps ils ont eu le pouvoir, nous le leur laisserons. En revanche nous possédons des avantages qu'ils n'auront jamais [...]. Nous sommes plus équitables qu'eux (*Caractères II: V*).

Mercier's explanation of male antagonism toward women writers makes me think that he felt men were somewhat fearful of women starting to speak for themselves and showing signs of independence:

Dès que les femmes publient leurs ouvrages, elles ont d'abord contre elles la plus grande partie de leur sexe, et bientôt presque tous les hommes. L'homme aimera toujours mieux la beauté d'une femme que son esprit; car tout le monde peut jouir de celui-ci. L'homme voudra bien que la femme possède assez d'esprit pour l'entendre, mais point qu'elle s'élève trop, jusqu'à vouloir rivaliser avec lui et montrer égalité de talent (Mercier: 335).

Obviously men felt more at ease with a beautiful woman than with a female writer. They were not used to women writers and the unfamiliar is automatically feared. A woman had to be self-confident and strong enough to be able to stand up to their rejection.

Sometimes the injustice of being the second sex seems to have worn down Madame de Puisieux just enough so that she would even declaim in defence of women; an action that

was considered to be unseemly at that time, according to Abensour (390). In *Conseils* she states that courage is "une vertu des hommes, qui élève les femmes qui la possèdent, au-dessus de leur sexe", and that women who had had exceptional courage in the past had been immortalized for it. "Nous vivons dans un siècle, où il n'est guère possible à une femme d'en montrer ailleurs que dans le sein de sa famille", she added (*Conseils*: 65).

In *Réflexions*, she embellishes this subject, elaborating on the courage, merits, and sacrifices of exceptional women of her day: "il est peut-être plus rare de trouver des hommes vraiment grands, que des femmes ornées des plus grandes vertus". There are women whose conduct is so incomparable that men could never hope to equal it, those who have contributed so much more to their families' well-being than the most courageous man could ever hope to accomplish. She elaborates at length on all the sacrifices these women have made, finishing on a note of outrage:

Les femmes ne sont-elles pas de la même pâte? et quelques langues que l'on apprend de plus aux hommes, peuvent-elles faire la différence qu'ils mettent entre nous et eux, et changent-elles les heureuses dispositions qui peuvent être dans les femmes? Si elles avaient les mêmes points de vue; que l'on ne leur eût pas ôté tout sujet d'émulation, on les verrait peut-être se disputer l'honneur d'égaliser ceux qui en font si peu de cas, et peut-être même de les surpasser (*Réflexions*: 232).

5. CONCLUSION

The first steps toward equality of the sexes should be a restructuring of children's education in order to change behaviour and opinions of future generations. Furthermore, if men were to treat women as adults rather than as unemancipated children, this would contribute tremendously toward raising women's self-esteem. A woman who had a positive idea of her self-worth would not need to let herself be carried away by the fashions of the moment. This, in turn, would take away some of men's major reasons to criticize women.

CONCLUSION

*J'écris encore, mais c'est avec une nonchalance qui
prouve bien que je ne suis plus encouragée par rien.
Dix ouvrages de moi n'ont pas été suffisants pour
faire revenir le public qui ne sait pas lire, de la
ridicule prévention, qu'une femme ne sait pas penser.*

(Réflexions: 299)

I will now answer the question asked in the introduction, "How could women possibly be unhappy about their fate in life during the Age of Enlightenment when writers, such as Montesquieu, said that women ruled supreme?" The ladies at court ruled supreme indeed; they influenced important political decisions as well as artists' careers. Aristocratic ladies, and wives of wealthy financiers, did not publish their own writings but they opened their salons to male writers. They used their influence to promote their protégés' careers and to have them appointed as members of the academy. Women like Madame de Puisieux, however, had no one to further their careers. She did not belong to the salon society. She might have belonged, at best, to the *petite noblesse* but it is more likely that she was a middle-class woman (Laborde 31).

Madame de Puisieux firmly believed that education was

the key to female emancipation and improved status. Her education in Port Royal indicates that convents prepared girls better for being nuns than for living outside of the convent walls. The devotional and moralistic books, combined with the other subjects girls studied, reflected male perceptions of female roles and activities. Girls' education was shallow, not aimed at arousing interest, imparting knowledge or being put to practical use. She proposed that this be changed to reflect future needs.

She recommended that new books on morality, independent of theology, be written for the use of boys and girls, replacing the existing devotional and moralistic literature. She wanted school curricula changed for both sexes. If girls' education were more equal to boys' and if the double standard of morality were eliminated, boys would learn to respect girls. Therefore, equal standards for both sexes should be established.

Parents should begin by setting the example. They should treat each other with respect and their lifestyle should be exemplary as well. Furthermore, they should become active participants in their children's education rather than leaving this important matter in the hands of uneducated governesses and inadequate schools.

Women tended to look to marriage as the goal and ultimate purpose of their lives. Marriage was their road to freedom, to love and happiness; the justification of their

existence. Wives expected their husbands to be faithful to them but instead, they often found unfaithfulness and loneliness in marriage. Husbands had totally different expectations of marriage. They expected to continue their lives as though they were still single. It seems as though they were either unwilling or unable to satisfy women's needs and expectations. Marital infidelity led to venereal disease and to the dissolution of families.

C'est de l'infidélité que naît le désordre dans les familles; c'est de l'infidélité que vient la perte de la santé, de l'honneur, et quelquefois celle de la vie; l'infidélité a produit plus de mal que tous les autres vices ensemble c'est à quoi on ne pense guère quand on contracte des engagements; on s'imagine qu'on y tiendra; mais l'on revient de cette prévention, à mesure que les occasions d'y manquer se présentent (*Caractères II*: 12).

If marriage was to survive as an institution, compatibility between marriage partners was an essential ingredient. Madame de Puisieux believed that young people should be allowed to choose their mates without parental intervention. Sharing of interests, together with sexual attraction, should be the major factors in the selection of a mate. She wanted to eliminate the notion that a woman owed obedience to her husband. Her ideal of marriage as a partnership on as nearly equal a basis as possible, corresponds to the modern feminist ideology of equality between the sexes.

Madame de Puisieux had certainly no intention nor desire to take men's place. Although she never wrote of the

advantages women had over men, I think that she actually liked being a woman; she liked to be feminine, graceful, and admired when she looked her best. She liked the attention that men bestowed upon women. Men, such as Diderot, believed that women were mysterious creatures and Madame de Puisieux undoubtedly liked the power that this belief gave women over men. She wanted more than superficial admiration though; she sought sexual equality. She wanted to be considered as the intellectual equal of men. She wanted men to recognize that women were capable of rational thought. She wanted the freedom to think for herself and to express her opinions without being judged on her sex.

Not wanting to throw all the blame for women's problems on men, Madame de Puisieux criticized women severely. If women did not take responsibility for their actions, they did not deserve respect; they needed to earn it. She wanted women to have dignity, self-confidence, and self-esteem because a woman who has these qualities commands respect.

I think that Madame de Puisieux was a feminist long before the word feminism became a popular term. Scholars who write on the subject of feminism agree that there were feminists in the eighteenth century, but no feminism, since women did not make any concerted efforts to become emancipated. Considering how jealous women were of each

other, it is not surprising that there should have been no women's movement. It took a revolution to bring them together in a common cause!

By addressing *Conseils* and *Réflexions* specifically to women, I believe that Madame de Puisieux was trying to create a feeling of sisterhood. Because women were so distrustful of her intentions, however, she was unable to instill a sense of community in them. Neither could she persuade them to, "overcome group self-hatred, the animosity that many women [felt] for others of their sex as a result of isolation, competition for male attention, and belief in female inferiority" (Register: 172). Thus, when Madame de Puisieux says that people did not know how to read, I suggest that they misinterpreted her works. They took her writings at face-value without questioning their true intent.

The groundwork for feminism was laid hundreds of years ago and, in my opinion, Madame de Puisieux was a clear contributor to laying these foundations. She was one of the,

forgotten poets who paved the ways and tamed the natural savagery of the tongue. For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice (Woolf: 66).

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