MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ AND THE PROBLEM OF REALITY AND APPEARANCES

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Robert N. Nicolich

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ABSTRACT

MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ AND THE PROBLEM OF REALITY AND APPEARANCES

By Robert N. Nicolich

Jean Rousset, in studying the French Baroque, has pointed out that the problem of _être_ versus _paraître_, of reality versus appearances, is central to our understanding of the seventeenth century.[1] This study of Madame de Sévigné, then, considers her response to the above problem. It begins with a brief discussion of her participation in _honnête_ society. It observes the discrepancy that occurred between artfully composed, exterior, _honnête_ appearances and an interior _homme de bien_. Madame de Sévigné's reaction to such circumstances is shown to be a dual one.

Since she was highly emotional and often lacked self-control, she found it difficult to present a collected façade to society. She was often indiscreet, and contemporaries like Tallemant de Réaux and Madame de

La Fayette noticed this. In so far as she craved sincerity and openness in the communication of true feeling toward others, she is comparable to Molière's Alceste in Le Misanthrope. In this connection her Alceste-like temptation to withdraw from society when unable to cope with it, is brought out.

Desiring sincerity, she was well-equipped to see beneath the false mask of social appearances. She actually used the term "mask" to indicate the dichotomy of reality and appearances, and even composed her own phrase to convey this idea: "les dessous des cartes."

Her observations, however, did not cause her to alter her life, for she took pleasure in merely discovering reality beneath appearances. On the other hand, she took delight in admiring composed appearances in such people as Fouquet, Pomponne, Madame de Grignan. She could observe them as personnages ostentatoires rather than as personnages intimes and thus could accept the mask of honnêteté. Whereas at the outset she seemed another Alceste, she was also capable of playing the role of the compromising Philinte when faced with the most complicated intrigues.

If she could do so, it was because she was a woman of vast imagination who could avoid logic in life and

take refuge in fantasy by emphasizing appearances over reality. She easily saw greatness and beauty in almost everything about her. She saw great events as spectacles and constantly compared real-life situations with the dramatic, fictional, mythological and imaginative creations of literature. The real and the fictional became confused in her mind and reality became magnificently poetic for her. Her conception of life was an exalted and aesthetic one, made possible by her relatively isolated, unrealistic, aristocratic existence.

However, merely exterior show did not necessarily evoke her admiration. In the most ideal situations, as in the case of Turenne, she looked for a perfect correspondence of outward appearances with an interior reality of the moral order ("il faut être si l'on veut paraître"). Nonetheless, she thereby placed just as much stress on external impressions as on internal reality and her view corresponds to the Cornelian concept of the hero who represents great virtue admirably displayed. Her approach to religion was just as imaginative. The God she envisioned was a God of power, ostentatiously asserting Himself in the surprising and fantastic workings of His Providence.

Madame de Sévigné's contradictory attitude toward Louis XIV now becomes understandable. While she resented his politics and mistresses, she was impressed by his great actions because she was a woman of imagination, in love with spectacle. She was the sort of person who could accept a theatrical existence on the lavish stage which the seventeenth century offered her: magnificent ceremony, sumptuous palaces, a world of wigs which focused its attention on the greatest actor of all: Louis XIV.

[1] La littérature de l'age baroque en France: Circé et le paon (Paris, 1954), p. 226.

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INTRODUCTION

In a fairly recent article on Madame de Sévigné, François Mauriac commented on the sincere declarations of sentiment he found in her Letters. He remarked that she never seems to pretend to possess sentiments she does not really have, and, he interestingly adds that "Le vrai est que ce siècle à perruque est celui où l'homme s'est le moins masqué,"[1] In this statement Mauriac touches on the problem of reality versus appearances, of "being" versus "appearing", of être versus paraître. Studying the French Baroque, Jean Rousset saw this problem as central to the seventeenth century. He said, "Avec le débat de l'être et du paraître, on touche au coeur du XVIIe siècle."[2]

Perhaps François Mauriac has been guilty of too hasty a generalization in judging all the men of a century by what might well be their exceptional contemporaries, the writers who possessed a more penetrating vision capable of piercing beneath a

[1]François Mauriac, "Notre Marquise au Coeur Secret: la Dame au Nez Carré," Figaro Litteraire, January 12, 1957, p. 1.

[2]La littérature de l'age baroque en France: Circé et le paon, (Paris, 1954), p. 226

superficial mask of social existence. The very fact that seventeenth-century man should sport a wig might be much more indicative of a frame of mind quite willing to accept existence on what could be called a "theatrical" level of spectacular appearances. For is not the wig very similar in essence to what we today would consider part of a theatrical wardrobe? Its very purpose was that of ostentation rather than practicality. Moreover, it might be more than a mere coincidence that so many theorists of honnêteté in seventeenth-century France should have devoted great efforts to advocating a highly artificial existence for an honnête homme in society.

Madame de Sévigné's contemporaries were very much concerned with the problem of reality and appearances. Her best friend, Madame de La Fayette, has Madame de Chartres say in her Princesse de Cleves: "Si vous jugez sur les apparences en ce lieu-ci, vous serez souvent trompée: ce qui paraît n'est presque jamais la vérité."[3] Albert Pingaud sees this as a criticism by Madame de La Fayette of contemporary aristocratic

[3]Maris Madeleine Pioche de la Vergne, Comtesse de La Fayette, Romans et Nouvelles, ed. Emile Magne (Paris: Garnier, 1961), p. 265.

society, which because of its narrow, leisurely atmosphere spent its time observing itself. The basic law of this society was "to appear." Having little to do, one observed and was observed by one's neighbor: "Prisonniers d'un théâtre dont ils sont à la fois les acteurs et les spectateurs...les personnages de cette société ne songent qu'à dissimuler leurs intérêts véritables. Chacun cache ce que les autres cherchent à découvrir."[4] We can see this well exemplified in Saint-Simon's description of the court at the death of Monseigneur, the Grand Dauphin. Saint Simon, keeping perfectly composed, observed and pierced through the exterior appearances of each courtier's sorrow in order to estimate true motivations: "il ne fallait qu'avoir des yeux...pour distinguer les intérêts peints sur les visages... ceux-ci tranquilles à eux-mêmes, les autres pénétrés de douleur ou de gravité et d'attention sur eux-mêmes, pour cacher... leur joie."[5] La Rochefoucauld was aware of such things

[4]Bernard Pingaud, Mme de La Fayette par elle-même (Paris, 1959), p. 84.

[5]Louis de Rouvroy, Duc de Saint-Simon, Mémoires, ed. Gonzague Truc, 7 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, Editions de la Pléiade, 1948-1961), III, 818.

when he wrote: "il n'y a presque point d'homme qui veuille, en toutes choses, se laisser voir tel qu'il est.... Au lieu d'être en effet ce qu'ils veulent paraître, ils cherchent à paraître ce qu'ils ne sont pas."[6]

Like other contemporary writers, Madame de Sévigné often reflected on the idea of a false social mask concealing a person's true feelings. Sévigné criticism, however, has tended to consist in studies of a factual, biographical nature, as a consultation of our bibliography will prove. Those few critics who have actually noted Madame de Sévigné's ability to penetrate beneath the mask of appearances have not deemed the subject worthy of prolonged consideration.

The subject, however, demands greater attention, for the contradictions involved in Madame de Sévigné's attitude are of tremendous importance. For example, she criticized the politics of Louis XIV and yet she blindly admired his spectacular generosity to James II of England. She hated the mask of convention that kept her dying aunt from asking her to remain by her bedside

[6]François VI, Duc de La Rochefoucauld, Oeuvres Complètes, ed. L. Martin-Chauffier and Jean Marchand (Paris: Gallimard, Editions de la Pleade, 1957), p. 511.

and yet she admired the composed, "masked" figure of Fouquet during his trial. She took great pleasure in discovering the dichotomy of reality and appearances in what she called "les dessous des cartes," and yet she readily dismissed such thoughts as "folies." How could she have hated hypocrisy and yet assumed the mask of honnête appearances to deal with her arch-enemy, the Bishop of Marseille?

Since the implication of the problem of être and paraître is social, involving man under the observant eyes of his contemporaries, the study we have undertaken here concerns Madame de Sévigné and her contemporaries in an interchangeable audience-performer relationship. She will be looked at both as an observer of and as a performer in seventeenth-century society.

We will begin with a brief discussion of her actual participation in honnête society and we will briefly observe the implications of the term honnêteté as well as the discrepancy that occurred between artfully composed honnête appearances and basic morality. As La Bruyère remarked, "On connait assez qu'un homme de bien est honnête homme; mais il est

plaisant d'imaginer que tout honnête homme n'est pas homme de bien."[7]

However, instead of emphasizing Madame de Sévigné's genius for social life, as has too often been done, we will look at her negative attitude toward the constraint of a social role and her basic unwillingness to subjugate sentiment to reasonable control. We will then view her remarks, first negative, then positive, on social man, and observe her personal descriptions of her own performances before the eyes of society. We shall try to show how, although she was a basically sincere woman, Madame de Sévigné found it necessary to don what she explicitly referred to as the "mask", for existence in what she explicitly conceived of as the "theatrical" world of the formal and restrained creature known as the _honnête homme_. And while her vision beneath external appearances will be seen to be indeed penetrating and her criticism of abuses widespread, she nonetheless will also be seen to possess a lavish imagination and a highly aesthetic vision of life permitting her to relinquish understanding

[7]Jean de La Bruyère, _Les Caractères_, ed. Robert Garapon (Paris: Garnier, 1962), p. 367.

and to accept what we today might too hastily dismiss as a merely artificial, unrealistic mode of existence. In the end, we hope to suggest that this was the type of mentality capable of accepting a theatrical way of life on the magnificent stage which seventeenth-century aristocratic France offered: lavish ceremonies, sumptuous palaces, a world of wigs which focused its gaze towards the Sun King, himself, who was consciously playing the greatest role conceivable as the "roi du théâtre."[8]

[8]Warren Hamilton Lewis, The Splendid Century: Life in the France of Louis XIV, (New York, 1953), p. 5.

I. MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ IN HONNÊTE SOCIETY

In this part of our discussion, we will deal with two things. First, there will be a short presentation of some biographical material on Madame de Sévigné. Using the remarks of some of her contemporaries and the work of some more recent researchers, as well as some general indications which her own letters offer, we will briefly notice how this woman frequented seventeenth-century honnête society in the salons and at court. We will then pass on to a discussion of the theories of honnêteté, emphasizing the stress which was placed on the art of appearing pleasant, to the consequent detriment of a person's true character and spontaneity. It will be observed that, as the century passed, honnête society came to emphasize extreme calculation and self-control in all human dealings, so that life itself acquired a high level of theatrical artificiality. This will bring us, then, to our discussion of whether Madame de Sévigné had the ability to conform to the requirements of such self-conscious, honnête conduct.

Sainte-Beuve, writing about Madame de Sévigné in his Portraits des Femmes, saw her as highly representative of that "société évanouie" of the early reign of Louis XIV.[1]

[1]Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, Oeuvres, ed, Maxime Leroy, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), II, 1002.

While Sainte-Beuve made this judgment on Madame de Sévigné's relationship to the society of her time, almost two centuries after she lived, there exists, nevertheless, ample testimony of her prominence in seventeenth-century French social circles.

Paul Mesnard, in his Notice Biographique sur Madame de Sévigné, based on the lengthy research conducted by Monmerqué and Walckenaer, discusses many of Madame de Sévigné's social activities during her visits to Paris with her husband and during her long widowhood after his death.[2] Mesnard states that she associated with figures such as the Duchesse de Longueville, the Marquise de Sablé, Madame Cornuel, Corneille, Voiture, Benserade, her two teachers Chapelain and Menage, Marigny, the abbé de Montreuil, Saint-Pavin, Retz, La Rochefoucauld, the Duchesse de Sully, Mademoiselle de Montpensier, her dear friend Madame de La Fayette, the Guitauts, the Chaulnes, etc. The gazettes of her day mention her. In 1650 Loret reports in his Muse historique that the Prince d'Harcourt forbade his wife to receive the visits of three

[2] In Vol. 1 of the M. Monmerqué edition of Lettres de Madame de Sévigné, de sa famille et de ses amis, Grands Ecrivains de la France edition, 14 Vols. (Paris, 1862), p. 323. This edition is hereafter referred to as GEF, with volume and page number in parentheses after each citation.

women, Madame de Montglas, the Contesse de Fiesque and Madame de Sévigné, whom he suspected of being "trop guillerettes" (I, 48). Even though this society was, as Mesnard notes, "très-propre, par sa politesse, à former l'esprit", it was also the time of the Fronde when galantry and seduction abounded (I, 57). After the period of mourning which followed the death of her husband in 1651, she returned to Parisian society and was sought after by many suitors, including her own cousin Bussy, the interested Prince de Conti, Fouquet, and the Duc du Lude.[3] In his Muse historique of November 12, 1651, Loret notes her return to Paris from Brittany:

> "Sévigny, veufve [sic] jeune et belle, ...
> Est de retour de la campagne,
> C'est-à-dire de la Bretagne;...
> Vient augmenter dans nos ruelles
> l'agréable nombre des belles.[4]

Sainte-Beuve knew this, for, when speaking of her he said, "elle alla dans le monde, aimée, recherchée, courtiséé, semant autour d'elle des passions malheureuses.."[5]

[3]Gerard-Gailly, Introduction to Sévigné's Letters, I, 26.

[4]Quoted in Antoine Adam's notes to Tallemant des Réaux, Historiettes, 2 vol. (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), II, 1275.

[5]Sainte-Beuve, Oeuvres, II, 994-995.

Valentin Conrart as well as Loret reported some scandalous scenes that took place in her ruelle on June 18 and 20, 1652, between two gentlemen competing for her, Henri de Chabot Rohan and the Marquis de Tonquedec, whose quarrel entailed the necessity of having the arbitrating maréchaux de France assign personal guards to the rivals to restrain any fresh encounters.[6] Yet Bussy, at the height of his frenzied ire against his cousin in the uncomplimentary portrait of her he presented in his Histoire amoureuse des Gaules, actually took pains to maintain explicitly the truth of her spotless reputation and perfect conduct. According to Bussy's report in his Mémoires, she even seems to have managed to have turned Fouquet's amorous intentions into nothing more than a good friendship.[7]

During the early years of the increasingly absolutistic rule of Louis XIV when all the life of a noble would tend more and more to pivot around every action of the King, Madame de Sévigné was to find herself presenting her sixteen-year-old daughter, Marguerite, at court. Mother and daughter were present at young Louis' fêtes galantes in 1663, and Mademoiselle de Sévigné, well-known for her dancing, took part in the royal Ballet des Arts. For her entrée, the poet, Benserade, even wrote special lines.[8]

[6]Mesnard, GEF, I, 58, and Gerard-Gailly, I, 27.

[7]Mesnard, I, 66.

[8]Biographical information in this paragraph and the next comes from Mesnard, I, 94-100.

The ballet was repeated again the following year, and in February, 1664, Marguerite danced in the Ballet des Amours deguisés, in which we find several more lines again written especially for her by Benserade. She played Omphale in his Ballet de la Naissance de Venus, "dansé par Sa Majesté" in 1665. When, in 1668, Louis was losing interest in Mademoiselle de La Vallière and no one was as yet aware of his feelings for Montespan, a certain La Ferrillade tried to make the King's attention fall upon Mademoiselle de Sévigné. In an account written by the abbé de Montigny of the July 18 fête de Versallles, Walckenaer found listed the names of both the mother and daughter as being among those present at a royal supper which was followed by a presentation of Georges Dandin.

As Mesnard states, with Madame de Sévigné and her daughter being so favorably received at court, it would be unlikely that they would not also be found at the same time in the most brilliant of Parisian social circles. While letters from this period are scarce, we nevertheless do have the testimony of Pomponne, writing on February 4, 1665. He tells of a soirée at the splendid Hotel de Nevers at which Madame and Mademoiselle de Sévigné were present in a rather large gathering of people, including

Madame de La Fayette and La Rochefoucauld, who listened to readings by Boileau and Racine. The well-known Du Plessis-Guénégaud family which owned the Hotel de Nevers was actually very close to Madame de Sévigné after the death of her husband and she was often with them at their country estate, the Château de Fresnes. One March 12, 1666 (I, 148-149), in the midst of "une compagnie choisie" including Madame de La Fayette, she wrote a note from Fresnes to Monsieur de Pomponne, and in August of the following year he received a letter from her, written at the same château (I, 150).

Her letters of September 11, 1684, and August 3, 1688, to Mademoiselle de Scudéry attest to her friendship for this woman of society, whose salon she had frequented so much that she deserved to be portrayed by her in la Clélie, and to be mentioned by Somaize in his Dictionnaire des Pretieuses. Both Walckenaer and Mesnard have upheld the common belief that in la Clélie Mademoiselle de Scudéry was really commenting on Madame de Sévigné's social graces when she wrote about "la Princesse Clarinte" whose bearing was so noble that "on connoît, dès le premier instant qu'on la voit, qu'il faut qu'elle soit de haute naissance, qu'elle ait passé toute sa vie dans le monde."[9] It is also significant

[9]Mesnard conveniently reproduces this portrait in GEF, I, 318-321. This particular citation is from p. 319.

that Tallemant des Réaux describes Madame de Sévigné in his Historiettes as "une des plus aimables et des plus honnestes personnes de Paris."[10]

Madame de Sévigné would appear, then, to have been a woman of society, if we rely not only on the work of more recent researchers but also on the testimony of her contemporaries themselves, as well on factual proof found in her own letters. Our next step, then, is to try to get some idea of what society in her time stressed as a positive value, or more precisely, what was implied in the term honnêteté which played such a great role in seventeenth-century social life and which is at the very heart of the problem of reality and appearances with which we are concerned.

The most informative work done on seventeenth-century honnêteté is probably Maurice Magendie's two volume study on La Politesse Mondaine et les théories de l'honnêteté en France, au XVIIe siècle, de 1600 à 1660.[11] It is Magendie's conclusions in the realm of moral values that particularly interest us, as do other conclusive remarks made by Edith Kern as a follow-up to Magendie.[12]

[10]Tallemant des Réaux, Historiettes, ed. Antoine Adam, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), II, 429.

[11](Paris, 1925) Here, we will be specifically referring to I, 305-401.

[12]"L'Honnête Homme: Postscript to a Battle of the Scholars," Romanic Review, LIV, no. 2 (April, 1963).

As Magendie points out, the expression honnête homme does not seem to have come into being in France until 1630 with the publication of Faret's L'Honnête homme ou l'art de plaire à la cour, but before that date the country had already been flooded by treatises on the subject of the proper comportment of a courtisan or mondain. Each such treatise, influenced in one way or another by Castiglione's Cortegiano, expanded and developed an introspective view of truly "polite" living in the upper echelons of society. Stress was placed on the ability to act with grace and with artful nonchalance which would hide any impression of difficulty in the performance of multiple physical exercises. Special value was attached to the ability to mould one's speech in a conversation to the particular requirements of the interlocutor whose esteem one desired to achieve. Cultivation of the arts and letters was considered very beneficial for this purpose. Les bienséances had to be observed, reason had to be obeyed, all excesses had to be avoided, and moderation and discretion were to be maintained. The perfect gentleman would be able to keep himself somewhere between complete affectation and a level of humility which would not be unworthy for him.

The art of dissimulation, then, was recommended as necessary for success at court, a success attained only by a compromise between honest reality and more advantageous appearances.

How concerned seventeenth-century man was with this "art" of living in society is proved by the great number of explicit formulations of theories of _honnêteté_ which appeared during the century. Faret, however, was to be one of those theorists who were to have the greatest amount of influence in France. He is especially important since, as Edith Kern has carefully pointed out, it actually remained for Faret to equate "l'art de plaire à la cour" with _honnêteté_. Of bourgeois origins, he saw no difficulty in placing a preponderant emphasis on religion and on the value of moral virtue as a way of pleasing society. Magendie rightly considers Faret naïve in these respects and asks how he could possibly have believed virtue to be a way of pleasing, especially in a court atmosphere, and even more particularly in the French court of 1630, for he would have to unite perfect complacency with this perfect virtue. The result is that Faret really put _morale_ and _savoir faire_ into conflict, a difficulty which he never managed to resolve,

but which in any case proves that at the beginning of the century an equivalence was seen between l'honnête homme and an homme de bien much in the line of St. Francis de Sales' own ideals. "Les qualités de coeur" still had more importance than those mondaine qualities of esprit and grâce which would later be taken up and finely elaborated by Méré. While Faret's honnête homme was a virtuous courtesan, Méré's honnête homme would really be an homme du monde who would completely subordinate what Faret saw as personal virtue and morals to le monde.

The theory of honnêteté which Méré developed, and which was to have such a great influence on French society during the second half of the century, was founded on an Epicurean concept of personal happiness, a goal to be attained with skill and tact.[13] It was no longer limited to court-life, as Faret's honnête homme had been, and was based on the sole guidance of reason, which would enable the honnête homme to preserve a juste mesure in all things. Magendie detects a double conflict here. Honnêteté, being perfection itself, did indeed imply, besides all those special physical and intellectual

[13]This discussion of Méré is based on Magendie, II, 752-783.

qualities, all moral qualities, as well as those qualities of the sentimental order which render a man capable of loving and feeling for other humans. But, in opposition, Méré extolled an absolute independence of feelings, the avoidance of any sentiment which would dispel the tranquillity of the _honnête homme_. Again, the _honnête homme_ would have to adjust himself to every occasion that might arise, momentarily sacrificing any personal traits of his own intimate being for the purpose of being pleasing to others. Moderation proscribed anything that surpassed a certain mean and it commanded the observation of _la bienséance_, which was the proper relationship, as commonly accepted, of one's actions and words with exterior circumstances. One was forever accomodating oneself to _les gens du monde_. Consequently, the firm moral basis we found in Faret was now lacking, while conformity to the common morality of moderation became the object of _la bienséance_. It is at this point, then, that we see the definite parting of the ways for _l'honnête homme_ and _l'homme de bien_. Méré himself admitted that his _honnête homme_ did not necessarily have to be a really good man, and Magendie even feels that Méré had to be a highly intellectual and analytical egoist to have been able to

advocate such a doctrine of reflection and of deliberate calculation paralyzing the spontaneous movement of the heart.

That Méré's influence on the society of his time was great goes undoubted. He frequented salons such as those of Madame de Sablé, Madame de Longueville, Madame de Maure, the Hotel de Rambouillet, and we know from testimony in the dedicatory preface to Ménage's Observations that he was much sought after by society. In his Conversations avec le Maréchal de Clerambault he tells us that he gave himself the primary task of disseminating by his example, by his conversations and correspondence, that "science du monde" that he had acquired by a life-long dedication to such a study, so that he was a veritable "professeur de bienséances." While his first published work, the above-mentioned Conversations, which date only from 1668, contain the formal exposition of his theories, Magendie sees in Méré's many letters, written as early as 1645, evidence of an already elaborately analyzed theory of honnêteté. And, finally, if we also consider that, while influencing society, Méré himself was probably greatly influenced by that society, we can further conclude that we are right in seeing reflected in his theories the way of thinking of many of his contemporaries.

All that we have been discussing here about honnêteté, seen through its more formal and explicit treatment predominantly in the form of treatises, can also be found in the novels of the period. Indeed, the century saw the roman in this way, as a method of education in honnêteté. The world d'Urfé presented in his Astrée was a perfect picture of that polite mondaine society Madame de Rambouillet was seeking to establish around her in her salon. The heroes of La Calprenède's Cléopâtre, Cassandre, and Faramond transposed the characters of the pastoral Astrée to a supposedly historic and highly adventurous setting, more pleasing to the belligerent generation of the Fronde. But the aim was always politeness and refinement at which the model honnêtes gens who were portrayed in the romans excelled. Mademoiselle de Scudéry's Grand Cyrus and Clélie portrayed still more characters that represented man as he should be in society, as the accomplished homme du monde, actually the product of an imagination engrossed in heroism and honnêteté, but at the same time the product of a penetrating, analyzing mind capable of subtle distinctions and of piercing rather than deeply into the human heart in order to

note, in a carte du Tendre, the subtleties of unconscious sentiments.[14] However, Magendie again asks how the honnêtes gens of the time, desirous of following the lessons of self-consciousness and reflection taught by Mademoiselle de Scudéry, could, in actual life, possibly respect and carry out all the rules and regulations of self-mastery, the continuous surveillance of one's every movement, every word, every gesture, the very affectation of spontaneity itself to the detriment of authentic spontaneity.[15] It is not surprising, then, that reason should have been given such a prominent role in the century, or that a Corneille should have displayed on stage characters of such great self-domination and self-determination, or that Descartes should have published in his Traité des passions an exposition of the joint efforts of the reason and the will in attaining the accomplishment of this self-mastery, of this honnêteté, on the practical level of everyday contact with other humans.

[14]Magendie, II, 636, 688.

[15]Magendie, II, 691.

What we have tried to show here, then, is that the refined man who came to be called honnête homme in the course of the seventeenth century became, as Edith Kern has chosen to summarize Magendie's findings, the aesthetic individual whose every moment of life had been so formed and calculated that life itself became a work of art and acquired the artificiality of a play.[16] And with the passing of the century more and more attention came to be put by society on appearance alone, on the effect, rather than on any internal values responsible for the effect. However, even from the very outset, the theories of the courtisan, and then of the honnête homme, had this germ already present in them, for they established so many rules and regulations on the art of pleasing, of appearing pleasant, that no matter whether man had high moral standards and virtuous excellence to which his appearances conformed, he had to concern himself with showing off this excellence to the best possible advantage. In the end, it required a finely elaborated system in which man became the play-actor in the theatre of society.

Such, then, was the way of thinking and the way of living of the honnête society to which Madame de Sévigné belonged. Our next step will be to investigate whether she was able to conform to such standards.

[16]Kern, "L'Honnête Homme," p. 119

II. HER PLEA FOR SINCERITY

Since, as we have pointed out, honnêteté came to imply extreme self-mastery and calculation in one's conduct in society, we might logically suppose that a woman like Madame de Sévigné would have possessed all the means necessary to practice such an art of dissimulation. However, just a very superficial reading of her letters would immediately indicate the contrary for they leave us with the impression of Madame de Sévigné as a woman of restless energy, impatience, sensitivity and emotion. Such a highly sensitive and emotional personality contrasts sharly with the extreme artificiality of honnête society.

For the purpose of showing this, we will therefore consider some of the more emotional letters she wrote to Madame de Grignan. We will notice her lack of self-control and her interior struggle to conceal her passions or, as she called them, her "foiblesses." We will point out the difference between her and Madame de Grignan in this respect and her inability to apply the counsels of self-mastery offered by Descartes in his Traité des Passions. In society, then, this emotional woman will

appear to have difficulty. She will provide us with examples of her own indiscretion due to her exhuberance, and some of her contemporaries who noticed her shortcomings in practicing perfect honnêteté will be cited. However, this will only prove how basically sincere this woman was for she resented the supression of geniune sentiment for the sake of presenting a composed façade to the public. She, who tended to externalize emotion, especially with tears, will be seen to have appreciated frankness and sincerity and to have criticized the selfish motivation behind shallow, social politeness.

Those of Madame de Sévigné's letters which most reveal the emotional aspect of her character are perhaps those written to her daughter in February, 1671, just after the first heartbreaking separation when Madame de Grignan left Paris for the long voyage southward to join her husband in Provence. The letter of February sixth, for example, is profoundly touching, opening with "J'ai beau chercher ma chère fille, je ne la trouve plus, et tous les pas qu'elle fait l'eloignent de moi."[1] The letter continues by showing us a pitiable Madame de Sévigné going about Paris in search of comfort, "toujours

[1]Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, Marquise de Sévigné, Lettres, ed. Emile Gérard-Gailly, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, Editions de la Pléiade, 1953-57), I, 189. All subsequent references to these letters will be made in my text itself, directly after each citation.

pleurant et toujours mourant : il me sembloit qu'on m'arrachoit le coeur et l'âme." First she went to the convent of the Sisters of the Visitation ("j'y passai jusqu'à cinq heures sans cesser de sangloter : toutes mes pensées me faisoient mourir"(I, 189)), then to Madame de Lafayette's, then home to an empty house, a sleepless night, another afternoon with Madame de La Troche in the gardens of the Arsenal, home again to renewed tears over the receipt of her daughter's first letter. This was to be only the beginning of much emotional suffering for her and of the long series of letters to her daughter which are frank confessions of a mother's love, or, more truthfully, of this mother's passion and even obsession and fixation on a daughter whom she loved very sincerely, as she said, "plus que ma vie" (I, 251).

Time was neither to ease the sufferings nor diminish the anguish of the initial and subsequent separations. The letters are filled with lengthy protestations of motherly affection. Through each group of letters corresponding to each separation of mother and daughter we can actually trace a veritable lifetime history of the ups and downs of Madame de Sévigné's emotional life.

Every year, for example, she would remember the anniversary date of her daugher's last departure, and she would become melancholic.[2] As Madame de Sévigné herself explained, her sentiments and "manières d'aimer... sont d'une étoffe au-dessus du commun et même de ce qu'on estime le plus" (I, 707). This would certainly seem to be the case: emotions and sentiments somewhat above the ordinary so that certain critics have even taken to seeing in her traits of deep psychological abnormality, noting, for example, instances when she says, "je vous aime si passionnement, que je ne pense pas qu'on puisse aller plus loin" (I, 785).

What is of special interest to us, however, is the interior struggle going on within the mother, whose passion for her distant daughter was too much for her to conceal. For example, when writing in 1689 to "solemnize" the previous year's separation, after a detailed description of her tender sentiments she concluded with:

[2]See, for example, the letters of February 4, 1672 (I, 470) and February 5, 1674 (I, 704) which remember the 1671 separation. On May 24, 1676 (II, 106) she remembers the 1675 separation at Fontainebleau, and on September 11, 1680 (II, 843) she remembers the 1679 separation. The 1688 departure of Madame de Grignan is remembered on October 2, 1689 (III, 554).

"Voilà ce que je sens et ce que je vous dis, ma chère bonne, sans le vouloir..." (III, 554). The insertion of "sans le vouloir" is important since it would seem to indicate her efforts to curb the expression of her emotions, efforts which would be of no avail, and which would be linked, by contrast, with her own need for openness and sincerity. This need is indicated here by her insertion of "ce que je sens" before "ce que je vous dis," which suggests that she really considered speech as the candid expression of feelings.

In the first year of separation from her daughter, Madame de Sévigné was subject to the overwhelming illusion that she was no longer loved by her, so much so that she believed it, as she says, "parce que je me trouvois, pour des gens que je haïssois, comme il me sembloit que vous étiez pour moi...Dans ces moments, ma bonne, il faut que je vous dise toute ma foiblesse" (I, 258). This "foiblesse", demonstrated by a woman so often considered solely from the brilliant social façade she presented to the world, is important. It crops up time and time again. For example, after terminating her first visit to Provence she confessed an increase in both her motherly love and sadness with

a result that: "il m'en prend des saisissements, et la nuit et le jour, dont je ne suis point du tout la maîtresse. Je demande pardon à votre philosophie de vous faire voir tant de foiblesse" (I, 752). When, at Christmas of 1688, she finally received another overdue letter from Madame de Grignan, all too distracting from her own Midnight Mass devotions, she could not resist reading it before going off to Church: "Il me fut impossible de m'en empêcher." (III, 289). Indeed, she seems to have been incapable of constraint, often admitting that "la contrainte seroit trop grande d'étouffer toutes mes pensées" (I, 215), so that often a detailed description she would have liked to have avoided relating became "une radoterie que je ne puis éviter" (I, 539) until she had "bien contenté le desir que j'avois de conter (I, 541).

One thing especially noticeable in all these citations is the rather submissive attitude assumed by Madame de Sévigné in making sincere avowals of her sentiments. She asked pardon of Madame de Grignan for these admissions (I, 752), excused them by insisting on an unyielding forcefulness which caused her to "have" to write them (I, 258; I, 539), and she even said, "Je m'en repens, et voudrois ne l'avoir pas fait" (I, 316),

going on to explain that she was "naturelle", and "quand mon coeur est en presse, je ne puis m'empêcher de me plaindre à ceux que j'aime bien : il faut pardonner ces sortes de foiblesses" (I, 316). Elsewhere, she willingly gave her "foiblesse" the name of "folie" and told Madame de Grignan, "J'ai été dans une inquiétude que je vous permets de nommer ridicule." (II, 676).

What, then, really seems to have been at issue here, is Madame de Grignan's "philosophie," her method of controlling her emotions so as to preserve the tranquil and socially acceptable façade so necessary for persons like her in such high places as the governorship of Provence. That she was of a temperament rather different from that of her mother has often been discussed, and much as been said of her rational outlook of life which was the result of her being steeped in the theories of Cartesian philosophy.[3] We see this when, in 1673, writing to Bussy-Rabutin from Grignan, Corbinelli included a note in Madame de Sévigné's letter discussing the provincial ennuis he had avoided and the pleasure he had derived from studying and discussing Descartes'

[3]See, for example, Auguste Bailly, Madame de Sévigné (Paris, 1955), p. 292.

philosophy with Madame de Grignan "qui [la] sait à miracle, et en parle divinement" (I, 604). In her letters to her daughter Madame de Sévigné would often refer to Descartes as "votre père,"[4] and, in turn, she would note her own incapacity to deal with abstract metaphysics, "car je suis grossière comme votre frère : les choses abstraites vous sont naturelles, et nous sont contraires" (II, 737). She always considered her own "grossière ignorance" in contrast to her philosophizing daughter, and, conscious of her strictly emotional nature, she took such special care once to mention her making "un grand usage de notre raison et de notre raisonnement" (II, 848) that we can readily grasp the unhabitual nature of such rational application on her part.

What seems to have been of primary concern for her in Descartes, however, was his Traité des Passions de l'Ame, of 1649, which contained most of those counsels that were to comprise Madame de Grignan's method of reaction to life's situations, a reaction called her

[4]See also II, 481, 614, 624, 722, 734, 749, 779, 815.

"philosophie", so greatly admired by her mother (II, 141-142). From what we have seen so far of Madame de Sévigné's temperament we do not have to guess how some of the articles of the Traité must have struck her, as for example, article 50: "il n'y a point d'âme si faible qu'elle ne puisse, étant bien conduite, acquérir un pouvoir absolu sur ses passions."[5] It is very doubtful that she would have agreed, after all her struggles, with Descartes' assurance of the possibility of acquiring "un empire tres absolu" (p. 722) over one's passions. For example, he so nicely reasoned that since animals can be made to control themselves, it is more than evident that man can be made to control himself, as well, and with less effort. Madame de Sévigné must have especially felt the brunt of that "foiblesse," which she so constantly pleaded, when she heard Descartes' statement to the effect that those persons whose wills could with natural ease overcome passion "ont sans doute les âmes les plus fortes" while "les âmes les plus faibles de toutes" are those whose wills are continually

[5]René Descartes Les Passions de l'âme in Oeuvres et Lettres, ed. André Bridoux (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), p, 721 hereafter cited directly in my text.

carried along by the passions, "lesquelles, étant souvent contraires les unes aux autres, la tirent tour à tour à leur parti et...mettent l'âme au plus déplorable état qu'elle puisse être" (p. 720). How much meaning and force do some of Madame de Sévigné's exclamations really have, when seen in this light, as when in April, 1672, she wrote, "c'est donc ainsi que vous voulez que l'on soit, c'est-à-dire dans une profonde tranquillité : ô l'heureux état! mais que je suis loin d'en sentir les douceurs! (I, 521). Madame de Grignan's "philosophie" was all well and good in print, of course, but things would not be so simple when Madame de Sévigné would try to put such a "philosophie" into practice.

Early in June, 1675, we read in the letters about a scene that had taken place between the mother and daughter that previous May: "je ne puis jamais oublier cette bouffée de philosophie que vous me vîntes souffler ici la veille de votre départ." Of course, Madame de Sévigné would try to apply her daughter's stern advice to control her emotions: "j'en profite autant que je puis; mais j'ai une si grande habitude à être foible, que, malgré vos bonnes leçons, je succombe souvent." (I, 729). Again and again she repeated statements such as: "Vous me dites des merveilles de la conduite qu'il

faut avoir pour se gouverner..." (I, 732), or "il faut tacher de calmer et de posseder un peu son âme" (I, 747). However, this calm or "repos" would never come to her for she was simply not the type to remain tranquil for a very long period of time. Very rightly, she once described herself as "un coeur trop sensible, un tempérament trop vif..." (II, 776). Aware of her exhuberance, she vainly attempted to restrain her spontaneous reactions and smother her natural sentiment according to the "Cartesian method." In the end, however, she was forced to resign herself to "un coeur aussi dénué de philosophie que le mien" (I, 789). If she dabbled in the formal presentations of the theories of controlling the passions it was, as she said, because "je veux apprendre cette science comme l'hombre, non pas pour jouer, mais pour voir jouer" (II, 142).

It is natural, then, that this emotional and somewhat uncontrollable woman should have had some difficulty in her dealings with other humans, particularly with regard to discretion. From certain statements made by Madame de Sévigné in response to her daughter's letters, we can conclude that Madame de Grignan had actually accused her mother of a certain amount of indiscretion. For example, the letter of June 9, 1680,

opens with " 'Méchante bonne maman!' C'est ce que vous disoit Pauline, et c'est ce que vous me dites, ma très chère...C'est qu'effectivement vous ne me croyez pas assez discrète" (II, 733). From what she went on to say, it would appear that she had been talking to too many people about family affairs, for she protested that "l'amitié ni l'intérêt sensible ne me font point confier, à d'autres qu'à la famille, ce qui doit être secret." (II, 733). Already in 1672 she had assured Madame de Grignan not to fear for any secrets confided to her mother: "J'ai trop de respect ou, pour mieux dire, de tendresse, pour ne pas conserver ce que vous me confieriez." Out of motherly love, and a consequent fear of displeasing her daughter, she claimed that there would result a "crainte des reproches qu'on se pourroit faire à soi-meme" which was necessary enough "pour fermer la bouche" (I, 561).

However, there were many incidents when Madame de Sévigné neither closed her mouth nor controlled her pen and got herself into trouble with people. Early in 1680 she had complained in writing to Monsieur de Grignan's uncle, the Archbishop of Arles, about his nephew's excessive expenditures. The letter

somehow fell into Monsieur de Grignan's hands, and he became terribly annoyed at his meddling mother-in-law. This brought on a flurry of reasonings on her part as to why she had done the rash act: "Je comprends que M. de Grignan est un peu en colère contre moi...Mais je ne trouve pas qu'il y eût beaucoup de mal à parler confidemment à Monsieur l'Archevêque d 'une peine qui nous est commune" (II, 559). In 1689, this same Archbishop had requested for his nephew, the Coadjuteur, a position of commandeur des ordres du Roi a request which Madame de Sévigné confessed to be "sotte au dernier point," and which she seemed to find necessary to follow up by a strong declaration: "Au mom de Dieu, ne croyez point que je dise jamais un mot là-dessus; j'aimerois mieux mourir" (III, 301). She even dared here to consider discretion one as of her "petites perfections" (III, 301).

However, we have only to look at her two months later, when she was victorious after one of those lengthy procès which the Grignan's were always involved in, and in which she always took such active part. With the Chevalier de Grignan, Rochon, his homme d'affaires,

and Vaille, her own homme d'affaires, she was outside the judges' doors awaiting the triumphal verdict. She writes that when it finally came, "nos coeurs ont été épanouis; ma joie vouloit briller." We can certainly imagine how enthusiastic she must have been for it merited a severe scolding: "Monsieur le Chevalier m'a grondée; il m'a dit qu'il ne me mèneroit plus avec lui, si je ne savois me taire: c'est sa menace" (III, 385). But this was not enough for her expansive nature. She still continued: "J'ai voulu parler un peu haut, d'un air de triomphe," and Monsieur le Chevalier admonished her again, saying, "qui ne savoit point dissimuler, ne savoit point régner" (III, 385).

Madame de Sévigné, however, is not alone in recording for us some of those instances when she lacked tact. Her own contemporaries seem to have sensed her weaknesses and even while lavishly complimenting her in their literary portraits, they found themselves at times obliged to use certain indirect turns of phrase to conceal what they might really have disapproved of in her.

One of Madame de Sévigné's most outspoken critics is Tallemant des Réaux. He actually gives to her spontaneity and sincere enthusiasm the disapproving classification of "bruskness" for he says, "Elle est brusque et ne peut se tenir de dire ce qu'elle croit joly, quoyque assez souvent ce soient des choses un peu gaillardes."[6] He even recounts that on one occasion when she had been given a note and asked not to show it to anyone, "Elle laissa passer quelques jours, puis le monstra en disant: 'Si je l'eusse couvé plus long-temps il fust devenu poulet:'"

In 1661, in his Grand disctionnaire historique des Pretieuses, Somaize wrote about Madame de Sévigné under the name Sophronie. He very noticeably mentioned that "son esprit est vif et enjoué, et elle est plus propre à la joye qu'au chagrin."[7] That he should have mentioned her natural adaptability to joy

[6]This and the following quotation are from Tallemant, Historiettes, I, 429.

[7]The three portraits of Madame de Sévigné by Somaize, Madame de La Fayette, and Mademoiselle de Scudéry have been reproduced conveniently in "Notes de la Notice Biographique sur Madame de Sévigné," by Paul Mesnard in the GEF edition of the Lettres, I, 318-323. All further references to these portraits will be made directly in my text.

rather than sadness is particularly striking when we notice that both Madame de La Fayette and Mademoiselle de Scudéry have also made note of this characteristic. Madame de La Fayette who wrote her portrait under the pen name of "un inconnu", probably in 1659 (GEF, I, 321-322), states: "Enfin, la joye est l'état véritable de votre âme, et le chagrin vous est plus contraire qu'à qui que ce soit" (GEF, I, 321-322). These statements do not necessarily have to imply that Madame de Sévigné was considered as especially gay or continually happy. In fact, they suggest that while her capacity for joy was indeed great, the very opposite, a lack of it, must have certainly left her sorely wounded, and in a mournful state.

It is precisely the portrait by Mademoiselle de Scudéry, published in 1657 in her Clélie under the name of "la Princesse Clarinte", that confirms this opinion by going one step further in revealing a rather surprising bit of reality behind the perhaps seemingly superficial impressions recorded at times by the portrayers. Mademoiselle de Scudéry notes that Madame de Sévigné herself "avoue pourtant qu'elle

est quelquefois sujette à quelques petits chagrins sans raison," and that "ils lui font faire trêve avec la jois pour trois on quatre heures seulement" (GEF, I, 319). Mademoiselle de Scudéry does go on to explain, however, that "ces chagrins sont si petits et passent si vite, qu'il n'y a presque qu'elle qui s'en aperçoive." Now, when taken in the general tone of the rest of the most flattering descriptions of Madame de Sévigné's laudable qualities this short passage stands out, for it immediately succeeds a long series of positively-oriented compliments. The initial "Elle avoue pourtant..." closing with "petits chagrins...seulement...si petits...passent si vite... il n'y a presque qu'elle" (underlinings my own) seem more like excuses or attempts at ameliorating what could possibly have been considered somewhat of a defect in the eyes of society.

There are, however, still other dubious spots in the portrait, one being where Mademoiselle de Scudéry's clever turn of phrase both starts with and concludes on a highly complimentary tone about Sévigné's "rares qualités...voix douce, juste et charmante" and her singing "en personne de condition", but notes however that this is achieved "quoiqu'elle

chante d'une maniere passionnée" (underlining is my own). And still another sentence seems to link up with this last potential disapproval of a certain lack of external composure on Sévigné's part, for again Scudéry notes that "quoiqu'elle ne soit pas de ces belles immobiles qui n'ont point d'action," all of her "petites façons...ne sont qu'un pur effet de la vivacité de son esprit."

Finally, there is one more statement by Madame de La Fayette which is of interest to us here, for it is more explicit on the subject of Madame de Sévigné's lack of composure than are the remarks which Mademoiselle de Scudéry couched in highly complimentary terms. Madame de La Fayette, of course, praises Sévigné's "coeur...si généreux, si bien fait et si fidèle." But this heart seems to have been so open that people actually could not believe its sincerity: "des gens vous soupçonnent de ne le montrer pas toujours tel qu'il est" (GEF, I, 322). And Madame de La Fayette goes on to discuss openly Sévigné's imprudence in being too frank: "mais, au contraire, vous êtes si accoutumée à n'y rien sentir qui ne vous soit honorable, que même vous y laissez voir

quelquefois, ce que la prudence vous obligeroit de cacher" (GEF, I, 322). Madame de Sévigné does indeed seem to have been aware of this, for she once playfully admitted to her cousin Bussy, "C'est un assez beau miracle que nos fonds soient bons, sans nous demander des dehors fort reguliers" (I, 168).

Such a remark proves how sincere a woman Madame de Sévigné actually was. And it is perhaps this sincerity, which Madame de Sévigné conveyed in her letters, which is responsible for having attracted so many readers to her over the centuries. For example, despite all the conventional forms of expressing love, in writing to Madame de Grignan she skillfully managed, by clever rewording or by a simple variety of her uses of the different forms themselves, to achieve a tone of sincerity in her protestations of motherly love. She was fully aware, however, of the frequent abuse these expressions were subject to. When she chose to conclude her letter of May 10, 1676 with the simple phrase, "je vous embrasse de tout mon coeur" (II, 92), she found it necessary to add, "je suis fâchée que l'on ait profané cette façon de parler; sans cela elle seroit digne d'expliquer de

quelle façon je vous aime" (II, 92). Here, we can see a commentary by Madame de Sévigné on the polite language of her time, an indication of how much true meaning had become separated from the form of the polite phrase.

How much value she attached to true sentiment and to its communication, especially to someone well-loved, appears in a letter dated December 1, 1679, written in response to another letter in which Madame de Grignan had only most reluctantly conveyed to her mother the news of her little son's illness. Madame de Sévigné found this reluctance inconceivable, asking, "le moyen de cacher une telle chose?" (II, 523). In a genuinely frank statement she declared, "Je haïrois cette dissimulation extrême, et la plume me tomberoit des mains." (II, 523). How would one be able to find anything else to speak of in such a time of sorrow, with the heart so engrossed in this one preoccupation? "Pour moi, j'en serois incapable, et j'honore tant la communication des sentiments à ceux qu'on aime, que je ne penserois jamaois à épargner une inquiétude, au préjudice de la consolation que je trouverais à faire part de ma peine à quelqu'un que j'aimerois." (II, 523). And she very correctly added the remark: "n'est ce pas là le vrai

commerce de l'amitié? Ah! oui, ce l'est, et je n'en connois point d'autre" (II, 523).

Still another significant comment on sincerity was made by her in relation to her daugher's philosophie, her ability at self-control and constraint in everyday life. We have already pointed out how she tried to follow the lessons of composure her daughter preached to her, to be "dans...une profonde tranquillité : ô l'heureux état!" (I, 521). But she saw the danger in the suppression of true emotion, and even while admiring such an ability, she exclaimed, "vous me faites peur de le souhaiter" (I, 521). She foresaw with fright that her daughter might receive her most coldly upon her arrival at Grignan, controlling any externalization of her real joy at having her mother with her: "tout d'un coup, alors que je vous aimerai le plus tendrement, je vous trouverai toute froide et toute resposée...ne venez pas me donner de cette lethargie" (I, 521). She feared she would regret having made such a long trip, if she were received with emotional "glaces" on the part of her daughter.

Almost thirteen years later, when Madame de Grignan would be sending her a letter full of "mille douceurs" in remembrance of her mother and the Abbé de Coulanges,

she would return again to this same discussion. She unhesitatingly praised the value of sentiment over reason, of coeur over esprit: "quoi que vous ayez voulu dire autrefois à la lousange de l'esprit qui veut contrefaire [le coeur], il manque, il se trompe, il broche à tout moment..." (III, 79). She generalized in declaring openly that "les gens éclairés par leur coeur n'y sauroient etre trompés. Vive donc ce qui vient de ce lieu...!" (III, 79).

This last exlamation was a loud cheer for the supremacy of emotion over reason. Actually, she often tended to externalize emotion, and her tears are proof of this. For example, from among many other similar occasions, we can cite her at a performance of Esther in tears over the beauty of the songs adopted from the Psalms, which were "d'une beauté qu'on ne soutient pas sans larmes" (III, 351). Luili's new Libera in his Miserere sung at the funeral service of the Chanceller Séquier produced the same effect, and she noticed that "tous les yeux étoient pleins de larmes" (I, 541). When she saw Ariane, a tragedy by Thomas Corneille, which she thought dull, she nonetheless reported that with the arrival of the great Chamomeslé, "tout le monde est ravi; et l'on pleure de son désespoir" (I, 507).

When Françoise de Lorraine, cousin of Madame de Grignan, took the veil at Montmartre, the ceremony in which her long hair was cut made the new nun resemble a sacrificial victim, a veritable lamb before the shearer, and Madame de Sévigné was evidently struck by one special aspect in the report she received of the ceremony: "On dit que cela faisoit pleurer tout le monde" (II, 159). Quinault and Lulli's opera, Roland, was to produce the same effect with its "endroits qui vous feront pleurer" (III, 48).

Tears abounded especially in her accounts of great deaths and funerals. The shocking news of the surprisingly sudden death of the Queen of Spain, niece of Louis XIV, brought the following report of externalized emotion: "Madame crioit les hauts cris; le Roi en sortit tout en larmes" (III, 352). Her series of letters on the death of Turenne is filled with report upon report of tearful scenes. The letter of August 2, 1675, tells of both the Cardinal de Bouillon's "deux jours ... dans des pleurs et des cris continuels" and of the official reporter to the court coming directly from the battlefield "toujours... baigné de larmes" (I, 783). Monsieur d' Harouys, she related, "pleuroit hier à chaudes larmes (I, 790),

and Monsieur de Saint-Hilaire, despite his having lost an arm with the same canon-shot that killed Turenne, "se met à crier et à pleurer cette grande perte [de Turenne]," while La Rochefoucauld "pleure lui-même, en admirant la noblesse de ce sentiment" (I, 798). How could we omit the scene at Turenne's own home when Madame de Sévigné went there for a visit of condolence: "ses valets de chambre, ses laquais, ses pages, ses trompettes, tout étoit fondu en larmes et faisoit fondre les autres" (I, 833)? The most touching of all the details which she described at the private family burial of Turenne at Saint-Denis was that, "Il y avoit entre autres un petit page qui devenoit fontaine" (I, 839).

This focus of attention on weeping is indeed strange for her time, for we have but to look at what other writers, like La Bruyère, for instance, have said on this subject. La Bruyère actually made an issue of the fact that this contemporaries were ashamed to weep at a tragic play, whereas they would not in the least consider restraining immoderate laughter, which could be considered much more vulgar in the long run. He asked, "D'où vient que l'on rit si librement au théâtre, et que l'on a honté d'y

pleurer?"[8] And he actually answered his question perfectly in the course of another question which exposed the men of his era who were most unwilling, in general, to show their tender feelings: "Est-ce une peine que l'on sent à laisser voir que l'on est tendre, et à marquer quelque faiblesse..." If we can rely on La Bruyère, then, who was writing more broadly for society, while Madame de Sévigné was writing more personally for her daughter, we can say that, Madame de Sévigné appears as an exception among some of her less open contemporaries.

Actually, on the practical, everyday level, we can detect that she was irked by those people around her whom she loved and admired but were not open and frank with her. The Chevalier de Grignan seems to have been one of them. One day he excluded her from some dealings he had with Monsieur de Lamoignon over Grignan affairs. Considering the interest she took in such matters, she admitted that "cela me fit un petit chagrin". This, and the following avowal of

[8] Jean de La Bruyère, Les Caractères ou les Moeurs de ce siècle, ed. Robert Garapon (Paris: Garnier, 1962), p. 85. The following quote is also from the same page.

"soulagement" at being able to tell it to tell it to Madame de Grignan, reveal how deeply she was hurt at his hiding things from her. Two days later she made use of expressions such as "dehors" and "appearances" to relate what had happened: "tous ces dehors et toutes ces apparences de Monsieur le Chevalier, qui m'avoient choquée avec raison, cachoient un fond aussi bon que le vôtre..." (III, 371).

Mademoiselle de Méré, her cousin, seems to have been still another person who upset Madame de Sévigné in the same manner, for Sévigné actually remarked with surprise about her ability to be so uncommunicative. Her cousin was a very extravagant person, forever changing her residences as well as her opinions. In 1680 she was moving, again, with such deliberateness that Madame de Sévigné noted, "Que l'on peut croire qu'elle en est content, quoiqu' elle ne le dise point" (II, 890). And that this unwillingness to speak openly was foreign to Madame de Sévigné is evident in her next remark: "C'est une plaisant étude que celle des manières différentes de chacun." (II, 890).

But one problem in particular, in which this frankness of hers is especially involved, is the

portrait of Cardinal de Retz (attributed to La Rochefoucauld) which she sent to her daughter with the letter of June 19, 1675. In view of the well-known fact that she so adored Retz, the idea that she could have allowed herself to be pleased with this apparently merciless criticism has been a cause of consternation for many a scholar. Harriet Ray Allentuch has shown that there is not a word of reproach for Retz in Sévigné's correspondence despite the fact that Retz was of dubious reputation - a "cavalier cardinal" who while flirting with treason "dreamed of being a seventeenth-century Catiline"[9] Mrs. Allentuch has indicated an article in which André Bertière maintains that the portrait in its final form did not appear as severe to Madame de Sévigné as it does now to us, for in her constant efforts to reconcile her friends with one another Madame de Sévigné had managed to get La Rouchefoucauld to temper his previous scathing comments on Retz, which had been much more malicious.

[9]Harriet Ray Allentuch, Madame de Sévigné: A Portrait in Letters (Baltimore, 1963), p. 32. See also her note no. 56 on this page referring to André Bertière, "Le portrait de Retz par La Rochefoucauld," Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France, LIX (juillet-septembre 1959), 313-341.

What has often been overlooked, however, is the manner in which Madame de Sévigné introduced the portrait to her daughter. While one can see in her statements an attempt to excuse the harshness of the portrait, her words are quite familiar to us when looked at in light of her desire for sincerity, for she gives us still another insight into the refined life of seventeenth-century society. Of course, she evidently had to excuse the portrait of Retz by saying that "celui qui l'a fait n'est pas son intime ami" (I, 742). La Rochefoucauld had not intended to show it to Retz or anyone else. But that she should even have to point this out is surprising, for it thereby suggests that if a portrait were written to be seen by the person described in it, it would be completely different, highly complimentary and hypocritical. She found it necessary to stress the fact that La Rochefoucauld "n'a point pretendu le [Retz] louer" (I, 740). However, the more revealing explanation on her part had yet to come: "On est si lassé de louanges en face, qu'il y a du ragoût à pouvoir être assuré qu'on n'a pas eu dessein de vous faire plaisir, et que voilà ce qu'on dit quand on dit la vérité toute nue, toute naïve" (I, 742). To

maintain that such a statement is simply an excuse for a disastrously critical portrait would be to overlook the fact that it reveals that Madame de Sévigné, herself, had to be very conscious, and probably also very weary of superficial and deceiving "louanges en face."

At the wedding of Mademoiselle de Louvois, Madame de Sévigné was indignant at the insincerity of much of society's politeness, for it touched her in her most delicate spot, that is, people were not sincerely willing to linger long enough to hear about Madame de Grignan, even when it was they who asked about her in order to appear polite. It is worth seeing how she described the occasion as a "tourbillon, la dissipation, les demandes sans réponses les compliments sans savoir ce que l'on dit, les civilités sans savoir à qui l'on parle" (II, 517). In the midst of what she described as a magnificently splendid confusion of the French peerage, "il sortit quelques questions de votre santé, où, ne m'étant pas assez pressée de répondre, ceux qui les faisoient sont demeurés dans l'ignorance et dans l'indifférence de ce qui en est: <u>ô vanité des vanités</u>!" (II, 517-8). This closing exclamation is extremely strong. It is the same phrase from

Ecclesiasticus chosen by Bossuet as the theme for his Oraison Funèbre de Henriette-Anne d'Angleterre.[10] Just as Bossuet used the exclamation to underscore his ideas of the nothingness of man and the futility of human desires, so did Madame de Sévigné thereby emphasize what she saw as vain, human behavior, motivated solely by the base desire to present to the world a polite, social image of the self.

To conclude, then, we have seen Madame de Sévigné's emotional nature, her lack of self-mastery and honnête composure and her consequent repugnance at suppressing true sentiment for insincere but polite social conduct. It will not be surprising, then, if we can now draw certain parallels between her and the character of Alceste in Molière's Misanthrope.

[10] Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, Oeuvres, ed. Abbé Velat and Yvonne Champailler (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1961), pp. 83-105.

III. MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ AS ANOTHER ALCESTE

Saint-Beuve has wanted to compare Madame de Sévigné to the soubrette in Molière's comedies, for he says, "il ya de la Dorine dans Madame de Sévigné, une Dorine du beau monde et de la meilleure compagnie."[1] While he does also note that her vivacity is "pleine de sens et de sel", in light of what we have been discussing concerning Madame de Sévigné's desire for sincerity in human contacts, we can compare her to Alceste in Molière's Misanthrope. It is in this play that the problem of honnêteté and sincerity is put into the clearest light for the century for it is Alceste who is trying to prove the priority of true sentiment over artificial dissimulation. While Alceste is a man of impolite, brusque manners and a man of great extremes who falls into redicule in front of the honnête homme (Philinte) of the period, he is nonetheless a man of high moral standards, for whom the word honnêteté still retains the implications of true virtue which it had when it began to be used popularly by men like Faret. We can see this, for example, when he accuses the fourbe of being

[1]Sainte-Beuve, Causeries du Lundi, 16 vols. (Paris: 1849), I, 53.

so unjust and shrewd in certain cases where positions are being disputed, that, "...s'il est, par la brigue, un rang à disputer, / Sur le plus honnête homme on le voit l'emporter."[2] Alceste, simple and integrally honest, desires that

> Le fond de notre coeur dans nos discours se montre;
> Que ce soit lui qui parle, et que nos sentiments
> Ne se masquent jamais sous de vains compliments
> (p. 44).

Philinte, however, the typical honnête homme in the style of Méré, who is continually preoccupied with all the things the stylized honnête homme watches for, such as les bienséances, is displeased at the austere quality of Alceste's honor. Philinte maintains that "Il est bon de cacher ce qu'on a dans le coeur" (p. 44), and asks, "Serait-il à propos et de la bienséance/ De dire à mille gens tout ce que d'eux l'on pense?" (p. 44).

All he emphasizes is the social value of a "vertu traitable: (p. 46) and the usefulness of reason in guiding the honnête homme in his observation of les bienséances: "La parfaite raison fuit toute extremité ..." (p. 46). Good honnête homme that he is, self-

[2]Le Misanthrope, II, 46 in Oeuvres Complètes de Molière, ed. Maurice Rat (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléïade, 1956), 2 vols. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in my text.

composed to the very end, he admits, that, while every so often he might notice as many as a hundred single injustices every day, he would never dream of letting his annoyance over this be seen in him by his contemporaries: "Mais quoiqu'à chaque pas je puisse voir paraître,/En courroux, comme vous, on ne me voit point être" (p. 46). He even admits that he has learned to manipulate his innermost being to prevent his feelings from disturbing his mask in front of these unjust men: "J'accoutume mon âme à souffrir ce qu'ils font" (p. 46). And just like Madame de Grignan, whose ability of self control Madame de Sévigné so admired but admitted defeat at attaining, Philinte tells Alceste, "Mon flegme est philosophe autant que votre bile" (p. 46).

It is significant, then, that Eliante should describe Alceste as an exception for his century. She says,

> Et la sincérité dont son âme se pique
> A quelque chose en soi de noble et d'héroïque
> C'est une vertue rare au siècle d'aujourd' hui,
> (p. 86).

And it is even more significant that this man of great morals should have to withdraw from the society

of his contemporaries: "Je vais sortir d'un gouffre où triomphent les vices,/ Et chercher sur la terre un endroit écarté..." (p. 110).

From what we have said in our previous chapter on Madame de Sévigné's desire for sincerity and on her contemporaries' comments on her openness, there is little doubt that she would have agreed with Alceste's statement proclaiming that our sentiments should not be masked under vain compliments. We have but to repeat her own declaration, that "les gens éclairés par leur coeur [ne]...sauroient être trompés," a statement which she concluded with a cheer for the primacy of sentiment over reason: "Vive donc ce qui vient [du coeur]!" (III, 79). However, what we want to emphasize here is that element of her character which flirted with the temptation to withdraw from society, a temptation to which Alceste yielded.

The seventeenth century was a period which emphasized the social value of man to its utmost. Art, itself, was so much a part of society that an artist, quite unlike his latter-day equivalent, would scarcely presume to consider himself alienated. As La Rochefoucault stated it, "il serait inutile de dire

combien la société est nécessaire aux hommes: tous la desirent et tous la cherchent..."[3] "[Le] plus grand bien de la vie humaine, c'est-à-dire [les] douceurs de la société,"[4] was how Bossuet put it in his Oraison Funèbre for the Prince de Condé. Yet, interestingly enough, Madame de Sévigné did not resent withdrawal from her equals. She, who was so loquacious that she could at times consider herself "l'aigle de la conversation" (I, 536), did not seem to resent her long periods of residence at her quiet château in Brittany. Even while in Paris, she was in the habit of withdrawing to the restful atmosphere of the family estate at Livry in the shadow of the abbey of the same name. In 1657, Mademoiselle de Scudéry had already remarked, in a surprised tone which suggests the exceptional, that "quand il le faut, elle [Madame de Sévigné] se passe du monde et de la cour, et se divertit à la campagne avec autant de tranquillité que si elle étoit née dans les bois" (GEF, I, 320). And what was all the more surprising for Mademoiselle de Scudéry was, in her

[3]François VI de La Rochefoucauld, "Réflexions Diverses," in Oeuvres Complètes, ed. L. Martin-Chauffier and Jean Marchand (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1957), p. 508.

[4]Bossuet, Oeuvres, p. 200.

very words, that "en effet elle en revient aussi belle, aussi gai et aussi propre que si elle n'avoit bougé d'Erice [Paris]" (GEF, I, 320). Obviously, beauty and gaiety seem to have been considered by Mademoiselle de Scudéry as synonymous with life in society alone, and Madame de Sévigné was to be admired for being able to preserve her social graces during provincial sojourns.

Actually, Madame de Sévigné seems to have greatly desired the peace her withdrawal brought her, despite the fact that it was imposed on her by financial needs. Only later in life, when she especially desired to be with Madame de Grignan did her solitude become sad, but even then she still preferred it to the folly of the great bustling gatherings at Rennes for the convening of the Breton Estates or for the arrival of her friend and neighbor, the Princesse de Tarente. We have several accounts of these events from different periods of her correspondenee, something which proves that her basically negative attitude toward great social events did not change after 1671, when she started writing to her daughter.

We have seen above what she said in this vein about the wedding of Mademoiselle de Louvois in 1679 (II, 517-8). Already in 1671, when the Breton Estates met at Vitré, she lamented her being deprived of her "pauvre solitude" (I, 358), and wanted her week at Vitré to be already ended, "afin de quitter généreusement tous les honneurs de ce monde et de jouir de moi-même aux Rochers" (I, 358). She expressed annoyance at the ridiculousness of many of the provincial "civilités", but she also recorded her laughing at them with a good number of people Madame de Grignan knew and who were old friends (I, 358). What she was tired of was the game of politeness which life in society required. She betrayed this in a self-conscious comment on her over-anxious responses to questions people asked about Madame de Grignan: "Je crois toujours que c'est qu'on voit mes pensées au travers de mon corps-de-jupe" (I, 357). As the week at Vitré wore on, she actually appreciated the true intentions of the honors accorded her, the "bonté des dames de ce pays," but she admitted her weariness of having to respond properly to them: "Je ne m'en accommoderois

pas...avec toute ma civilité et ma douceur" (I, 360). Back at Les Rochers for a breath of air, she was transported with joy: "j'ai besoin de me rafraîchir, j'ai besoin de me taire" (I, 364). Madame de Chaulnes, wife of the Governor of Brittany, suddenly appeared there, too, for a moment of peace before returning to the still-continuing Estates, and she had to leave as quickly as she arrived, "plus fachée sans doute du rôle ennuyeux qu'elle alloit reprendre" (I, 367). Very reluctantly, Madame de Sévigné had to follow close behind her friend in order to help her maintain the role which her position in Breton society required her to fulfill, but at the end of the Estates she admitted that "la compagnie est belle et bonne; mais c'est avec une grande joie qu'on se sépare" (I, 371).

Nine years later, when the Princesse de Tarente arrived in Brittany, Madame de Sévigné's reaction was quite the same to the great reception given for her at Rennes, but the assembly ("ce tourbillon") was all the more difficult to content with, as she explains, "comme il étoit plus resserré, il en étoit plus violent" (II, 815). Writing from Rennes she expressed a violent desire to be in her peaceful

woods: "l'on m'honore trop : je suis extrêmement affamée de jeune et de silence. Je n'ai pas beaucoup d'esprit... (II, 810).

But it was in the series of letters written during her last stay with her now married son at Les Rochers in 1689-1690 that Madame de Sévigné repeated over and over again expressions and phrases such as "Les Rochers sont tranquilles" (III, 491); or, "Je fais toujours ici...la vie douce et tranquille...: une entiere liberté..." (III, 464): or, "Nous sommes ici dans un parfait et profound repos, une paix, un silence..." (III, 455). In a letter dated August 21, 1689, she even used the image of the religious hermit, writing that a visitor named Revée, the King's lieutenant général in Brittany, was pleased with Les Rochers, her "desert" (III, 511). But she assured her daughter that she was not really becoming withdrawn from the world because of the number of her visitors: "Ne craignez point que je devienne anachorète" (III, 512). The trip she had undertaken through Brittany in 1689, before arriving at Les Rochers, had been begun in the company of the Chaulnes, who were magnificently received at Rennes. Madame de Sévigné, now sixty-three years of

age, could not refrain from writing openly: "cette vie me tourmente trop, il est trop question de moi, on ne se peut cacher, cela tue" (III, 491). And that she was tired of being terribly polite and accommodating, of always offering a pleasant countenance to the innumerable flattering compliments she received, is clearly seen even before the arrival at Rennes, when after already six weeks in the company of the Madame de Chaulnes she openly admired this woman's stamina in facing her husband's colleagues with a smile. It is significant that Madame de Sévigné reverted here to the theatrical image of a "character" on stage with which she compared Madame de Chaulnes' conduct all across the province: "[Elle] s'acquitte divinement de tous les personnages que la Providence lui fait faire" (III, 443). Divine Providence had put the woman into a certain station in life. To conform to it, she had to play her part, her "role," by being the perfect <u>honnête femme</u>, adaptable to all situations and all people. And, in general, it is this ability to adapt that Madame de Sévigné did not seem to posses. For while Madame de Chaulnes stayed in Rennes and resisted all the social

pressures exerted on her, Madame de Sévigné sought refuge in solitude in the quiet woods at Les Rochers.

Her reaction to society just after her daughter's 1671 departure is still something else we must briefly deal with, for it, too, is revealing. In 1664, during the Fouquet trial, she had literally expressed what her sentiments were towards others at moments of great tension and anxiety. She would seek out only those people with whom she could feel the common bond of a similar emotion: "Je ne puis voir ni souffrir que ces gens avec qui j'en puis parler, et qui sont dans les mêmes sentiments que moi" (I, 135). In the same manner, on February 4, 1671, after Madame de Grignan had literally abandoned her in Paris, she visited Madame de Lafayette who was mourning the death of a "soeur religieuse" and was consequently "comme je la pouvois desirer" (I, 189). She spent the following afternoon of February 5, being consoled by Madame de La Troche in the gardens of the Arsenal and she would revert to the select company of this woman after her daugher's hasty departure in June, 1677. Writing "chez la bonne Troche" she would add, "[son] amitié est chiarmante [sic] : nulle autre ne m'étoit propre" (II, 263).

She knew very well that she could not depend on society to listen to her sorrow or to sympathize with her. She could seek out only those persons whom she deemed worthy of understanding her: "Peu de gens sont dignes de comprendre ce que je sens; j'ai cherché ceux qui sont de ce petit nombre, et j'ai évité les autres" (I, 195). There were few women like her friend Madame de Villars, of whom she could say: "elle entre bien dans mes sentiments" (I, 192). The others, she very shrewdly noticed, were slyly trying to distract her from thinking about Madame de Grignan, and in expressing this, she reverted to the <u>être-paraître</u> concept of deceitful appearances. She said that she had not yet seen these people, "qui veulent, disent-ils, me divertir; parce qu'en paroles couvertes, c'est vouloir m'empêcher de penser à vous, et cela m'offense" (I, 196). Thus, in 1671, she could appreciate only those women with whom she could weep openly over her loneliness, without any social constraint.

In 1679, another separation from her daughter occasioned her to withdraw awhile from society with her friend Corbinelli, "qui connoît trop le coeur

humain pour n'avoir pas respecté ma douleur" (II, 442). This statement and the one which follows it, certainly say as much about other people as they do about Corbinelli, for Madame de Sévigné very much resented having to repress her grief in order to offer a dignified impression to people. Corbinelli, instead, "l'a laissée faire; et comme un bon ami il n'a point essayé sottement de me faire taire" ((I, 442). Only an unbearable sot, therefore, tries to manipulate the very tender movements of the human heart.

As we have noticed, Madame de Sévigné admired the "merveilles de conduite" her daughter taught her "pour se gouverner dans ces occasions" (I, 732). She desperately tried to practice the rules of conduct so as to be able to frequent society despite her sorrow: "Je suis dans le train de mes amies, je vais, je viens" (I, 732). But her best moments were those when she actually spoke openly of her sorrow, for rather than suppress it, she would appreciate being able to relieve the pain with tears; "quelques larmes me font un soulagement nompareil" (I, 732). But this, she once very frankly admitted, could not be done before people, especially people wearing social

"masks." She would have to remain apart: "Je sais les lieux où je puis me donner cette liberté" (I, 732).

Here, then, we have indicated that Madame de Sévigné would have been in agreement with Alceste's remarks on the insincerity of his century. But, even more important, we have shown how, like Alceste, Madame de Sévigné was tempted to withdraw from the society of her contemporaries. Mademoiselle de Scudéry was quite surprised at the pleasure Madame de Sévigné took in residing in the provinces. We have seen how, after 1671, Madame de Sévigné maintained a negative attitude towards great social gatherings where she would have had to be incessantly on her guard to maintain a polite social façade. In her periods of great sadness she deliberately chose the select company of an understanding friend, or chose to give vent to her emotions in solitude, rather than to have to suppress her feelings by presenting a composed image of herself in society. All in all, this temptation to withdraw was quite Alceste-like, and it was something shocking for seventeenth-century man who, like Bossuet, tended to praise "les douceurs de la société" (Oeuvres, p. 200).

IV. "LES DESSOUS DES CARTES" : REALITY BENEATH THE "MASK" OF APPEARANCES

In Act I, Scene 1 of Le Misanthrope, Alceste demands "que nos sentiments/Ne se masquent jamais sous de vains compliments" (p. 44). What we want to emphasize here is his use of the image of the mask - the mask of social convention which conceals true sentiment and hampers authenticity in human relations. This image is important because Madame de Sévigné was quite aware of the necessity of seeing reality "masked" beneath deceiving appearances. She actually used the image of the mask to express the dichotomy of appearances and reality.

Her first occasion to mention the term "mask", came in 1672. She was on the verge of departing on her first and much desired trip to Grignan where she was to be reunited with her daughter. She had not seen her since the sad separation of February 4, 1671, and had to keep postponing her departure because of the fatal illness of Madame de La Trousse, her aunt.[1] The letter of July 2 to Madame de Grignan related that Madame de La Trousse, already half-detached from

[1]Madame de La Trousse was also the sister of the Abbé de Coulanges with whom Madame de Sévigné was to make the trip to Grignan.

this earthly life because of her moribund state, understood Sévigné's reasons for wanting to depart for Provence: "Elle me donne congé...Cela touche sensiblement" (I, 563). Madame de Sévigné was still determined to depart and to leave her aunt "à demi morte," an idea which was already beginning to bring her remorse. Nonetheless, her anxiety to leave was so great that in her next letter of June 6, she again happily repeated, concerning her aunt, "Elle nous chasse tous, comme je vous ai déjà dit" (I, 565).

But Madame de Sévigné did not leave, and the letter of June 24, written from the sick-room of the dying woman, was a revelation of the truth of the aunt's sentiments. Madame de Sévigné now described this woman as "desséchée". She wrote, "Les os lui percent la peau...elle a perdu la parole" (I, 576). Given up by the doctors, and no longer feeling any pain "parce qu'il n'y a plus rien à consumer," Madame de La Trousse turned to her niece and her brother. With outstretched hand, she told them of the extreme consolation she was receiving from their presence at her bedside during her last moments. Madame de Sévigné recalled perfectly that "il y a trois semaines qu'elle nous donna à tous

congé, parce qu'elle avoit encore un reste de cérémonie" (I, 576). While the "ceremonies" of life were still being observed, the reality of her death was concealed. But, as Madame de Sévigné now reported, "présentement le masque est ôté" and Madame de La Trousse could confess her relief at having these people still beside her. And finally, in a comment on life and death, Madame de Sévigné was to compare life with the theatrical genre of "comedy", a comparison which was intended to show how man, by his shallow actions, turned life into a superficial "comedy" of "masked" existence. She said, "Cela nous creva le coeur, et nous fit voir qu'on joue longtemps la comédie et qu'à la mort on dit la vérité" (I, 576). Death alone removes the mask and reveals the true feelings that lie behind it.

Another occasion for her to use the idea of the mask came, for example, in 1689, in reference to the Duc de Schomberg, who had been a maréchal de France in 1675, but, being Protestant, had had to emigrate to Germany and finally to Holland. Here, he went into the service of the Price of Orange who was responsible for the deposition of King James II of England, whom

Louis XIV supported. In her letter to Bussy dated December 9, 1688, Madame de Sévigné had already shown surprise at how Schomberg, the "ungrateful" former French maréchal, could possibly be attached to the Prince of Orange, "le plus grand ennemi de tous les rois [de France] dont il [Schomberg] a reçu de si grands bienfaits, et qu'il avoit servis avec tant de réputation" (III, 268). On January 12, 1689, then, when she had found out that Schomberg's son had received certain hereditary rights from the Prince, as payment for service, she exclaimed: "M. de Schomberg est général des armes en Hollande, à la place de ce prince, et son fils a la survivance : voilà le masque bien levé" (III, 316).

That Madame de Sévigné always remained sensitive to the problem of the false "mask" of society is revealed by a letter from Grignan to her cousin, Coulanges, dated June 19, 1695, less than a year before her death the following April. It would appear that her cousin had written to her about an affair he had attended where he had seen entering "de certaines gens annoncés sous de grands noms." (III, 885). Madame de Sévigné greatly admired a very significant remark, reportedly made by a certain Monsieur de Poissy,

concerning these people unworthy of bearing grand titles and names: "Ah! masques, je vous connois" (III, 885). She, instead ("moi qui hais mortellement les grands noms sur de petits sujets"), would have liked to have been the person to have exclaimed this. Very sarcastically, she added, "J'admire l'humilité de ceux qui veulent bien...porter [les grands noms]", for if these people were really humble they would not bear such great titles. "Il les refuseroient, s'ils avoient l'esprit de faire réflexion à ce que leur coûte l'explication de ces beaux noms, et comme elle tombe tout en outrage sur leurs pauvres petits noms." (III, 885). As she continued, it is very interesting to note that she adopted the image of the proud peacock to satirize these people, the very image which has most recently been used to characterize the ostentatious character of the whole period.[2] These people who took upon themselves great names would have avoided so much ridicule of their own unworthiness, had they been more humble in the first place and never

[2]Jean Rousset, La Littérature de l'Age Baroque en France : Circé et le Paon (Paris, 1954).

attracted any attention, for "l'on ne penseroit pas s'ils n'avoient point voulu prendre les plumes du paon, qui leur conviennent si peu" (III, 885). It is at this point that we find Madame de Sévigné striking out against abuses rampant during her century. She hoped that Poissy's exclamation, "Masque, je vous connois!" (III, 886), might serve to correct infringements on honesty and sincerity. She would have liked to see everyone go about in healthy fear of having his mask removed by someone. As a result, she felt that people might be more inclined towards humility and self-effacement.

For this reason, then, she enjoyed all of the serious reading she did of writers like Nicole, for they satisfied her yearning for open truthfulness. In 1671 she wrote: "Ce qu'il dit de l'orgueil et de l'amour-propre qui se trouve dans toutes les disputes, et que l'on couvre du beau hom de l'amour de la vérité est une chose qui me ravit. Enfin ce traité [dans les Essais de morale] est fait pour bien du monde..." (I, 414). And in this moralizing aspect, she also mentioned Moliere, who by his satire "a corrigé tant de ridicules" (III, 886).

Madame de Sévigné, however, composed her own special phrase to express the often deceiving character of appearances--"les dessous des cartes"--and in respect to this, critics have often noted, in passing, her ability to discern between appearances and reality. However, it seems that none of them have really tried either to look deeply into this aspect of hers or to fit it into her general conception of life.

On July 24, 1675, Madame de Sévigné wrote about her visit to Pomponne, where together with Monsieur and Madame de Pomponne, Madame de Vins, and Monsieur d'Hacqueville, she passed a whole day in most lively conversation. A favorite topic was "les dessous des cartes" (I, 708). As she says, they tried to discover the other unexposed side "de toutes les choses que nous croyons voir, et que nous ne voyons point, tout ce qui se passe dans les familles, où nous trouverions de la haine, de la jalousie, de la rage, du mépris, au lieu de toutes les belles choses qu'on met au-dessus du panier et qui passent pour des vérités" (I, 768). The image of the basket is most striking, for in the use of this single word Madame de Sévigné conjures up the picture of a housewife at a market placing her most

respectable groceries on the top of her basket, displaying perhaps even several chicken heads (as we can see in many an old print), which, however, have no chickens attached to them, They are simply useful in giving the gossiping neighbors a false impression of the quality of the food the housewife sets before her family. But rather than the panier, the expression "les dessous des cartes" is the one that is more important here. It offers us the image of playing-cards face down on a table. These are cards which present to us their backs, all similar in their well-designed looks, each hiding behind its outward appearances an individual reality--the unexpected ace that can capture our king if we only expose our card by turning it face up on the table. As Madame de Sévigné extended this image into the world of everyday reality, into the very "game" of life itself, she said, "de la plupart des choses que nous croyons voir, on nous détromperoit" (I, 768). In the very way she explained it, we can see a criticism of contemporary society taking shape. She was most consciously aware of the deception of practically everything we see and take for granted in life. "Vous pensez donc que cela est

ainsi dans une maison; vous pensez que l'on s'adore en cet endroit-là; tenez, voyez : on s'y hait jusqu' à la fureur, et ainsi de tout le reste" (I, 768). Events themselves do not escape deceiving us, for while we might think an event to be the result of a certain cause, we would only need to see "les dessous des cartes" to realize that it is all the contrary of what we think to be true.

This, for example, is splendidly illustrated by Madame de Sévigné in a letter she wrote two weeks after the letter we have just been citing. She devoted herself to telling Madame de Grignan the latest gossip on the relationship of Madame de Montespan with Madame de Maintenon who, slowly but surely, was winning the affections of Louis XIV away from Montespan. This had already been going on for a period of two years. What had appeared to be a "belle amitié" between the two women had been for this length of time "une véritable aversion" (I, 792). This news, of course, was reported in quite the same terms we have been referring to : "Je veux, ma bonne, vous faire voir un petit dessous de cartes qui vous surprendra" (I, 792). Two weeks later Madame de Sévigné had additional information to report on the Montespan-Maintenon affair,

and we again find her stressing those deceiving appearances. She very shrewdly observed that Maintenon's friends were hard at work trying to conceal the truth, and "voyant que le dessous des cartes se voit, ils affectent fort d'en rire et de tourner cela en ridicule" (I, 819). It is on this occasion that we can see somewhat of a lampoon in Madame de Sévigné's subsequent comment. For, in the face of the disguised efforts of Maintenon's friends to distract onlookers from the truth, she explicitly refused to be held responsible for reporting anything besides what she had discovered two weeks earlier, As she said, one can never be sure "dans un tel pays." And the rest of the narration can be looked at as a disapproving commentary of Montespan's behavior due to the very way in which Sévigné chose to express it: Montespan was "en robe de chambre" actually playing with the Queen, "la dame du château". The Queen had to find herself all too fortunate even to be received by her King, and was "souvent...chassée par un clin d'oeil qu'on fait à la femme de chambre" (I, 820).

But what is really singular, is Madame de Sévigné's reaction to this ability of hers to see clearly behind the mask which society deceivingly presented to her.

She nonetheless remained relatively undisturbed by her observations. Here, in the case of Montespan, we find her avoiding any openly hostile statements. We do know that to have said anything malicious about the King's behavior with his mistresses would have been highly dangerous because of the censure of the mails. But while Madame de Sévigné seems to have restrained herself in reporting about Montespan, she seems to have delighted in just the ability to discover "les dessous des cartes." This simple delight appears very sincere on her part. We do not find many indications that she seriously attempted to go far beyond the facts of her discoveries.

For example, to return to those people at Pomponne who spent a day discussing deceiving appearances, we find Madame de Sévigné gayly referring to the topic of their conversation as a simple "folie", a "divertissement". In her exact words it was as follows: "Je souhaitai un cabinet tout tapissé de dessous de cartes au lieu de tableaux; cette folie nous mena bien loin, et nous divertit fort" (I, 768). Her tone is indeed one of playful <u>badinage</u> that critics have often delighted in seeing in her letters. At

the end of the same paragraph she repeated the idea that this account of hers was a simple "bagatelle". She said that even while the causes of certain events might be quite the contrary of what we actually expect, "le petit démon qui nous tireroit le rideau nous diverteroit extremement" (I, 768). In the end, even the Montespan-Maintenon struggle for royal favor was reported in such terms. She very seriously noticed that one does not often actually understand reality as it is: "C'est quand je dis qu'il ya un fil de manqué; et l'on voit clair guand on voit le dessous des cartes" (I, 792). But a light-hearted refrain came to dispel much of the seriousness we might have felt in the above, when she added, "c'est la plus jolie chose du monde" (I, 793).

"Les dessous des cartes" was, perhaps, to lead her somewhat deeper into things with the passage of time. Five years later she did some serious thinking along these lines. It concerned the wedding of the son of Madame de Lavardin to Louise-Anne de Noailles, a daughter-in-law with whom Madame de Lavardin could not possibly get along. Sévigné wrote that the mother-in-law, her friend, had written "qu'elle est contente," but she herself added, "je vois que non" (II, 838). It was evident to her from the fact that

the two women were not living under the same roof. Furthermore, a certain Madame de Mouci had convinced Madame de Lavardin that this match was the most advantageous one for her son--an advice which broke her heart but had to be taken. To this, Madame de Sévigné added, "elle ne se plaindra point, mais pourra bien étouffer : je vois leurs coeurs" (II, 737). Again, she could see beneath the assumed appearances of happiness, and she readily expressed herself in these terms: "Je vois un dessous de cartes funeste" "II, 737). Monsieur de Lavardin would find himself hopelessly entangled by his love for his mother and her incompatibility with the new daughter-in-law. He was being sacrificed for the sake of advancing his noble name and his family through a profitable marriage, and Madame de Sévigné knew that "quand je serois à cette noce, je n'y verrois pas plus clair" (II, 737). While writing this from her woods at Les Rochers, she was extremely reflective and consequently made a very penetrating statement for her century: namely, that "personne n'est content dans ce monde : <u>ce que tu vois de l'homme n'est pas l'homme</u>, cela se voit partout," (II, 737).

This is certainly a very severe observation, especially for a period like the seventeenth century, which was devoted to lavish and brilliant external display. We cannot help seeing Madame de Sévigné's resemblance on this point to La Rochefoucauld, for example, whom she knew quite well. Nevertheless, she was not the type of person to change her manner of living completely as a result of a more penetrating observation of reality. She actually admitted this, herself, and on the subject of the Lavardin wedding she altered her tone from serious to playful. She was willing to relinquish understanding and to keep from pushing the point too far. This attitude will be more than evident in what we shall have to say about her religion. Considering her daughter as a philosophe imbued with Cartesianiam, she said, "Si j'avois quelqu'un pour m'aider à philosopher, je pense que je deviendrois une de vos écolières, mais je ne rêve que comme on faisoit du temps que le coeur étoit à gauche" (II, 737). This last phrase abruptly terminated her moments of severe reflection which had come to an end on the topic. The simple phrase, "écolière.. [qui] rêve", playfully removed the feeling of grave earnestness, which reflection had produced, and she was free to write on another, less serious subject.

It is evident, therefore, that Madame de Sévigné easily perceived reality behind what she called the "mask" or "les dessous des cartes". However, she would not permit herself to dwell for long on her discoveries. Her attitude did not remain a very serious one. As we shall eventually see, it was easy for her to abandon the role of Alceste, when necessity demanded it, for the role of Philinte, the compromiser.

V. APPEARANCES OVER REALITY

From what has been said so far, it would seem that Madame de Sévigné could not adapt to society. Such a statement, however, would entail a deformation of her total personality, and would be just as misleading as the belief that she was extremely social. Our purpose here, then, will be to examine the opposite side of Madame de Sévigné's character, the side which admired paraître over être and which placed less stress on the importance of sincerity. As we shall see, Madame de Sévigné's position would seem to lie somewhere in between paraître and être, or rather, we could more forcefully say that she was often caught in a dilemma between the two.

An excellent example of this is the announcement of the engagement of the Grande Mademoiselle with Monsieur de Lauzun, a man of lower aristocratic rank. Louis XIV refused to grant permission for their marriage, even after Lauzun had already received from Mademoiselle a host of new titles and honors. These would make him distinguished enough to be mentioned in a formal marriage contract with her. The cancellation of the engagement came as a surprise to all of the court, and the two figures of Lauzun and

Mademoiselle can almost be said to represent the two sides of Madame de Sévigné's character. On the one hand, there was the emotional character of Mademoiselle, who seems to become almost ridiculous in Madame de Sévigné's description of her: "Pour Mademoiselle, suivant son humeur, elle éclata en pleurs, en cris, en douleurs violentes, en plaintes excessives; et tout le jour elle n'a [sic] pas sorti de son lit..." (I, 183). Yet, at the same time, this woman of extremes, in whom Madame de Sévigné detects ridicule, is rendered almost tragic by the account of Madame de Sévigné's visit to her. Madame de Sévigné very sympathetically noted that Mademoiselle, who lacked all prudence in handling the affair, was very happy to have someone around to whom she could open her heart, because "son coeur étoit trop plein" (I, 186). This last comment which portrays Mademoiselle in a very human way, dispels the foolish impressions of her we might have been forming in our minds. While she had formerly seemed like a child, pouting at not being granted her wish, her tearful exclamations now, on "quelle cruelle prudence!", make her so extremely human and tragic. Madame de Sévigné, herself touched, visited her in this state three times and noted that

that Mademoiselle correctly sensed that she was "une personne qui sentoit ses douleurs; elle ne s'est pas trompée." (I, 186). Madame de Sévigné even admitted that on this occasion she found certain sentiments "qu'on ne sent guère pour des personnes d'un tel rang." However, she asked Coulanges (to whom this letter was addressed) to keep what she had written a secret between himself and his wife, "car vous jugez bien que cette causerie seroit entièrement riducule avic d'autres" (I, 186). She was aware that Mademoiselle's extravagant conduct appeared ridiculous to the normal, composed <u>honnête homme</u>.

On the other hand, in sharp contrast to the emotional Mademoiselle, there was Lauzun, and Madame de Sévigné very deliberately took the trouble twice to describe with admiration his magnificent behavior in the face of great disappointment. He received the bad news "avec tout le respect, toute la soumission, toute la fermeté, et tout le désespoir que méritoit une si grande chute" (I, 183). She used the theatrical image of the performer when she said that "Monsieur de Lauzun a joué son personnage en perfection." (I, 184). His courage and his sorrow, "mêlée d'un profond respect..., l'ont fait admirer de tout le monde" (I, 184).

It is significant, then, that although Madame de Sévigné sympathized with Mademoiselle, she chose to admire Lauzun, just as her contemporaries admired him. This reveals how much stress she did place, after all, on appearances. As Starobinski or Rousset would say, she observed him as if he were a "personnage ostentatoire."[1]

She was not primarily concerned with what could be considered his personnage intime--the real, thinking and feeling Lauzun. Rather, her interest was in the external impression made by his behavior. She looked at the image of him which she saw reflected in the observant eyes of the court spectators.

Since she was able to look at Lauzun in this manner, we can now turn to the other side of Madame de Sévigné. She no longer appears to us as the woman of absolute sincerity, but as a woman willing to accept the mask of honnêteté. We can begin by examining this in the series of letters Madame de Sévigné wrote to Monsieur de Pomponne, from November 17 to the end of December, 1664, during and after the Fouquet trial. The letters reveal just what attitude she admired in a person standing before the eyes of society at every moment.

[1] Jean Starobinski, "Sur Corneille," in L'Oeil vivant (Paris, 1961), p. 63. Rousset, Circé et le paon, p. 217.

By way of background, it must first be mentioned that historians, in general, have not found Fouquet to be as blameless as Madame de Sévigné portrays him.[2] When Mazarin raised him to the position of surintendant des finances in 1653 he was confronted with a system of finances that was in most part corrupt. However, he succeeded quite well in getting both urgently needed funds for the crown and a great deal of personal prestige for himself. He shrewdly manipulated this system, using any means possible to attain his desired end. Mazarin was not actually unaware of Fouquet's lack of scruples, either. Through his ability Fouquet succeeded in amassing an immense personal fortune, and it appears that he made use of government funds for this purpose. This was all the more displeasing to Louis, who saw Fouquet as a rival of his glory and had him arrested and brought to trial.

That Madame de Sévigné was not unaware of certain dishonesties of which Fouquet might have been guilty is shown, for example, in her letter of November 17, when she paraphrased him as saying before his judges that

[2]For example, see Auguste Bailly, Le règne de Louis XIV (Paris, 1946), p. 34-37, 80-88.

"souvent on faisoit des choses par autorité, que quelquefois on ne trouvoit pas justes quand on y avoit fait réflexion" (I, 120). We can see this, too, five days later, when she noted in reference to a special interrogation that "ce ne soit un des endroits de son affaire le plus glissant" (I, 124). Madame de Sévigné's friendship with Fouquet had been very close. She showed a great attachment to the old friend in whose disgrace she had been unjustly implicated through the discovery of some of her letters in one of his cassettes. Therefore, she very easily brushed aside any moral concern on her part.

Her letters on the trial contain almost nothing but admiration for his conduct under pressure. Actually, she seems to have placed great stress on the need for reporting such details. These letters are full of numerous observations on how well Fouquet chose his words: "Monsieur Foucquet a été interrogé ce matin sur le marc d'or; il y a très-bien répondu" (I, 123), and on the affair of the pension des gabelles, "M. Foucquet a très-bien répondu" (I, 120). This preoccupation of hers seems to have been but an extension of her major preoccupation over the wonderfully calm and composed honnête façade the surintendant was offering the world.

Along this line Madame de Sévigné very carefully told Pomponne that "ceux qui aiment M. Foucquet trouvent cette tranquillité admirable, je suis de ce nombre" (I, 123). On the other hand, "les autres disent que c'est une affectation : voilà le monde" (I, 123). Fouquet's enemies, using the truth for their purposes, could well apply the pejorative word "affectation" to his composed behavior, while his friends saw his controlled reactions as something admirable. His tranquillity was actually for all purposes a studied art, the application of which was most in conformity with the dictionary meaning of "studied pretense" given for the word "affectation." This is proved most clearly in a letter written only two days earlier than the one just quoted, in which Madame de Sévigné reported that Fouquet had requested one of his friends to have the judges' verdict made known to him in prison by a secret means, by a "voie enchantée," as she called it. He then could prepare himself to receive with utmost composure the actual verdict when it would be announced to him. She indirectly paraphrased his own words when she wrote: "pourvu qu'il ait une demi-heure à se préparer, il est capable de recevoir sans émotion tout

le pis qu'on lui puisse apprendre" (I, 122). This is certainly "studied pretence", except that perhaps after numerous applications of this art of self-composure, one could become capable of manipulating the very movements of the human heart.

This constant concern with appearances recurs again and again in a way that proves to us that it played a very important part in Madame de Sévigné's mental orientation and her outlook on man among his equals. On December 2, she noted how Fouquet spoke "si admirablement bien, que plusieurs n'ont pu s'empêcher de l'admirer" (I, 132). When at a certain moment he accurately defined a "crime d'Etat", much to the consternation of Chancelier Séguier, "Toute la France a su et admiré cette réponse" (I, 136). And during the most crucial and tense moments of deliberation over the verdict, while all of Paris was agitated over the latest events, she wrote, "c'est une chose divine que la résignation et la fermeté de notre cher malheureux...il faudroit faire des volumes à sa louange" (I, 141).

The emphasis Madame de Sévigné put on the art of self-domination, that noteworthy characteristic of the <u>honnête homme</u>, is especially seen on occasions

when Fouquet actually lost his temper. On December 2, she had in some way explained the reason for his usually perfect comportment when she quoted the words of Monsieur Renard to her on Fouquet: "Il faut avouer que cet homme est incomparable; il n'a jamais si bien parlé dans le parlement, il se possède mieux qu'il n'a jamais fait" (I, 132). Se posseder stands out here, but Fouquet's veritable explosion was to come on at least two occasions.

One occasion came on December 4, when "notre pauvre ami étoit échauffe, et n'étoit pas tout à fait le maître de son émotion...[Il] a très-bien dit, mais avec chaleur et colère" (I, 134). Madame de Sévigné's whole tone seems to change here from one of intense admiration to one of condescending pity, betrayed by her use of both the expression "pauvre ami" and of the "mais." This suggests that one's words can be basically sound and good, but that their ever-so-important effect (which she was on the lookout for) can be destroyed by tones of anger. This, of course, is nothing really new in human psychology but the extraordinary emphasis given to this concern in these thirteen letters, which we possess on Fouquet, is something quite special.

Again, on November 21, Fouquet lost his patience, and she said with concern, "il l'a un peu trop témoigné, a respondu avec un air et une hauteur qui out déplu. Il se corrigera, car cette manière n'est pas bonne" (I, 124). It is interesting that as a way of expessing Fouquet's impatient answer she should choose the term "trop témoigné," for these very words imply that her primary concern rested not on the fact of his impatience itself, but rather on his behavior which betrayed and revealed it, that "manière" which was displeasing.

A judge named Pressort, who did not seem to have been able to open his mouth without "emportement" (I, 137), was the special object of her hostility. On December 17, she noted that he spoke for four hours "avec tant de véhémence, tant de chaleur, tant d'emportement, tant de rage, que plusieurs des juges en étoient scandalisés, et l'on croit que cette furie peut faire plus de bien que de mal à notre pauvre ami" (I, 139). The very fact that one might speak in an excited manner was so distasteful to the seventeenth century that the outcome of a trial could be determined by the side which acted with the most reasoned moderation.

Olivier d'Ormesson, the rapporteur de la commission at the trial, is an interesting figure. That he was Madame de Sévigné's ally is well-known, and it would naturally be expected of her to say some rather complimentary things about him. What she said about him, then, in this approving manner is highly indicative of what she definitely admired in a good man. For example, when he recapitulated the proceedings in a very fair and unprejudiced manner she said that "il a parlé avec une netteté, une intelligence et une capacité extraordinaire" that his enemies attempted to quiet him with interruptions (I, 137). His verdict, while rather severe, was that Fouquet be exiled rather than executed as his enemies wanted him to be. Madame de Sévigné immediately declared, "M. d'Ormesson a couronné par là sa réputation" (I, 138). In her following letter she went on to describe the "estime extraordinaire" he acquired by his judgment, so well expressed with such eloquence and agrément that "jamais homme de sa profession n'a eu une plus belle occasion de se faire paroître" (I, 139). What emphasis she puts on reputation, estime, and finally paroître is more than

evident here. The world of appearances is given primary consideration in her mind, and it is all immensely magnified, especially when in the end she is able to say that Monsieur d'Ormesson could have exposed himself to every kind of praise, but, with most commendable modesty, after having shown off so ostensibly, he assumed a contrary attitude and "il s'est caché avec soin" (I, 139). It would not be unfitting to cite here a remark on such moderation made by La Rochefoucauld, which would very well accentuate the pleasure Madame de Sévigné took in reporting Monsieur d'Ormesson's brilliance and modesty under the specific terms she used. La Rochefoucauld says, "enfin la modération des hommes dans leur plus haute élévation est un désir de paraître plus grands que leur fortune" (Maxim 18, Pléiade ed., p. 409). In light of this, we can say that Madame de Sévigné was not satisfied with admiring Monsieur d'Ormesson's brilliant speech. Instead, she chose to look at his supposed modesty as the perfect touch which gloriously magnified his brilliance. While La Rochefoucauld would have called it "un désir de paraître plus grand que [sa] fortune," Madame de

Sévigné was only concerned here with le paraître in the positive sense. She ignored the pejorative, selfish, psychological motivations of d'Ormesson's behavior.

We can say, then, that the world of human beings was often seen by her in view of effects, the effect of a brilliant display of appearances before other humans who could admire and esteem the reputation one had acquired in a splendid and spectacular manner.

Another interesting personality was Simon Arnauld de Pomponne, to whom Madame de Sévigné had addressed the letters on Fouquet. He had become Louis XIV's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in 1671, but on November 18, 1679, he was disgraced at the hands of Colbert, just after Madame de Sévigné had been visiting his family at Pomponne. In her letter to Madame de Grignan on the 29th of that month she described a visit she made to him with Madame de Coulanges after his disgrace. She first mentioned that a "ministre de cette humeur, avec une facilité d'esprit et une bonté comme la sienne est une chose si rare" (II, 516). Little wonder, then, that this docile man would be able to present himself so well before her despite his sorrow. Madame de Sévigné

remarked, "je fus...touchée de le voir entrer avec cette mine aimable, sans tristesse, sans abattement" (II, 516). That she should report this is quite surprising, for in her preceding letters describing the actual day of disgrace, she told of all the sorrow that filled the Pomponne family, their poor finances and dreary future. Her first visit to the family just after they had received the bad news presented a "spectacle douloureux" (II, 509), with the women in tears and a Monsieur de Pomponne who embraced her "sans pouvoir pronouncer une parole" (II, 509). What a change we have now a week later when this man seems to have recollected himself! A description in the letter just cited had been limited to five sorrowful words. It became two letters later, a complete turn-about, a veritable paragraph-long laudation on the tranquillity of this man whom we really suspect to be still quite saddened. The truth is revealed in his opening words to Madame de Coulanges: "il la loua de s'être souvenue d'un malheureux." (II, 516). But what so charmed Madame de Sévigné was that "il ne s'arrêta point longtemps sur ce chapitre." Good <u>honnête</u> <u>homme</u> that he was, he would render himself pleasing by the use of that wonderful art of

conversation, which would not contain any mournful, displeasing tones. Instead of talking about his troubles, he passed to other, lighter subjects, "qui pouvoient former une conversation; il la rendit agréable comme autrefois, sans affectation pourtant d'être qai, et d'une manière si noble, si naturelle, et si précisément mêlée et composée de tout ce qu'il falloit pour attirer notre admiration" (II, 516). Madame de Sévigné expressed the extreme subtleties involved in his ability to present a carefully worked, agreeable exterior to society with such words as "manière...melée et composée" and "tout ce qu'il fallait pour attirer...admiration." This is evident further in the same passage under discussion in which she included the statement that she instinctively felt like helping these poor people: "je leur rends des soins si naturellement, que je me retiens, de peur que le vrai n'eût l'air d'une affectation et d'une fausse générosité : ils sont contents de moi" (II, 516). Such a statement shows how much appearance-oriented these people actually were. A simple spontaneous gesture of kindness could be so easily mistaken for something contrived that this gesture itself had to appear genuine. We have here the very affectation

of spontaneity itself to the detriment of true spontaneity. It is more than evident that we are in the realm of the Chevalier de Méré's <u>honnête homme</u> who calculated and composed his every action to appear pleasing to society.

However, we can go still another step further in saying that the century placed the borderline between naturalness and affectation much more into the territory of what we today would consider pure and simple affectation or studied pretence. The very word "naturel" as used by the century is suspect. While Madame de Sévigné in our last citation used it to indicate true feelings, we find her using it elsewhere in a somewhat artificial sense, in reference to letters, which are really compositions for which one uses art. Madame de Sévigné reports that in letter writing one finds one's mind "embarrassé de mille pensées différentes". This mental confusion does not at all transfer itself to paper. The letter which results is "nette et naturelle"-- "naturelle" logically signifying the <u>appearances</u> or impression of naturalness or of true spontaneity. In actuality this had to be somewhat altered by the very transfer of thought into written language.

"Naturel", for her, can be expressed paradoxically as "unnatural naturalness", That she was aware of this possibility, is proved by her playful reference in the following terms to her daughter's artificial but natural-looking make-up: "Vos cheveux frisés naturellement avec le fer, poudrés naturellement avec une livre de poudre, du rouge naturel : cela est plaisant" (I, 500). And to think that this is precisely what Madame de Grignan herself called "négligence"!

The same thing can be discerned in her statement about Pomponne speaking "sans affectation pourtant d'être gai" (II, 516). He might not have affected gaiety itself but his whole attitude in front of the two ladies was especially assumed for their benefit, especially in the light of what we have been discussing. Actually, his perfectly polite and polished behavior, in contrast to the horrid reality of the most trying circumstances he found himself in, was a thousand times more eloquent for Madame de Sévigné than any loud lamentations or breast-beating on his part would have been. His conversation, of such noble manner to attract admiration, resulted in that "il

n'eut pas de peine à l'attirer, et même nos soupirs. Enfin, nous l'allons revoir,...si parfait, comme nous l'avons vu autrefois" (II, 516). Again, certain words belie an awareness on her part of a conscious intention behind his assumed attitude, for while we have seen that she noted that his manner of conversing had everything it needed (tout ce qu'il falloit) to attract admiration, she now says, in fact, that it did succeed in this without much difficulty ("il n'eut pas de peine"). It was, then, paradoxically, a type of "affected unaffectedness," for Madame de Sévigné could very easily have said in simpler terms something like, "we admired his ability to converse." Had she done so, however, she would have failed in communicating to Madame de Grignan those subtle and complex contrivances, the "manières composées" of the human façade which intrigued them as much as it did the whole century, a century that had managed to develop such a finely worked theory of the artificial, social man, for actual use on the practical level of human intercourse.

And, here too, Madame de Sévigné certainly did not refrain from literally using the special expression, honnête homme, in this context: "Enfin il [Pomponne] ne sera plus que le plus honnête homme du monde" (II, 516). Her general concept of the artificial honnête homme which Pomponne represented, would seem to coincide with that concept of honnêteté developed through the second half of the century.

Pomponne was not to remain master of his emotion. Two months later, on February 5, 1680, he presented himself before Louis XIV at Saint-Germain. Madame de Sévigné's tone of admiration, was to change as well. Of course, she would never condemn her unfortunate friend's weakness, but by her badly concealed efforts at excuse we can detect her displeasure at having to report the truth. The day of the visit, she tells us, was "bien triste" (II, 601). Monsieur de Pomponne "craignoit fort cette journée...Il étoit saisi" (II, 601). He completely submitted himself to Louis' power. Louis in turn, knew very well how to treat his victim with the utmost courtesy and mercy now that the dirty work of dismissal had been completed.

This royal benevolence resulted in that "M. de Pomponne ne put retenir quelques larmes en lui parlant du malheur qu'il avoit eu de lui déplaire" (II, 602). We emphasize here the words "ne put", Pomponne's inability to control his tears, those "marques de foiblesse qu'il espéroit que Sa Majesté lui pardonneroit" (II, 602). In turn, she noted how Louis received these tears which "venoient d'un si bon fonds." But while Pomponne's innermost feelings were genuine enough, neither Madame de Sévigné nor Pomponne would have wanted Louis to be aware of the depths of personal sorrow caused by the disgrace. In a second paragraph we find Madame de Sévigné obliged to continue a more detailed series of excuses for Pomponne's weakness: Pomponne "eût bien voulu paroître plus ferme, il étoit au désespoir, mais il ne fut pas le maître de son émotion." And how much she, too, while commiserating with this man, realized the importance of the self-controlled façade. becomes evident in a last comment: "C'est la seule occasion où il ait paru trop touché" (II, 602). It suggests that what happened only once was really a <u>faux pas</u> or a crack in the façade that would never be seen again.

Other occasions also provided Madame de Sévigné with the same opportunity to admire a composed and dignified figure, either standing calmly in the midst of confusion or bravely bearing great sorrow. For example, when the French army was thought to have crossed the river Yssel, a branch of the Rhine, in 1672, she especially enjoyed reporting that in the midst of the confusion the Prince de Condé had crossed the river "trois ou quatre fois en bateau, tout paisiblement, donnant ses ordres partout avec ce sang-froid et cette valeur divine que vous connoissez" (I, 570). As a result of wounds received in this battle, La Rochefoucauld's oldest son, the Prince de Marsillac, died. Madame de Sévigné made special note of the fact that La Rochefoucauld received the news in her presence, as if no one should have been there at a time of such grief for a man who did not desire to show his emotion. He could not help being "très vivement affligé," and, as a result, she noted that "ses larmes ont coulé du fond du coeur, et sa fermeté l'a empêché d'éclater" (I, 570).

It is in such a context that we can see how Madame de Sévigné was thinking when on March 15, 1680, she

described the scene at La Rochefoucauld's bedside in the last days of his illness. His son, the Chevalier de Marsillac, had arrived at midnight "comblé de douleur amère," and, she seriously notes, "il fut longtemps à se faire un visage et une contenance" (II, 645). The whole narration is striking. Filled with grief, the Chevalier calmly entered the death room, talked to his father, and while "on fut persuadé que le dedans étoit troublé...il n'en parut rien, et il oublia de lui parler de sa maladie." Then, in a sudden turnabout, after an amazing display of self-control, the Chevalier left the room and took off his "mask" of composure to give vent to his emotions: "[il] ressortit pour crever" (II, 645).

The seventeenth century, which elaborated the refined theory of the <u>honnête homme</u>, made a strict art out of social behavior and regulated actions, emotions, and responses to the highest degree in every circumstance. Madame de Sévigné's outlook was also oriented in this direction, as we have noted, and we have clear proof of it in a letter to Madame de Grignan in which she reproached her daughter for constantly undervaluating herself. She wrote a long

list of her daugher's best characteristics which, interestingly enough, are almost all involved in the area of human relations and the successful manipulation of people. While Marguerite had among other things "du jugement, du discernement," she also possessed "de l'habileté, de l'insinuation, du dessein..., de la prudence, de la conduite, de la fermeté, de la présence d'esprit, de l'éloquence, et le don de vous faire aimer quand il vous plaît" (II, 735). And she summed it all up as follows: "pour tout dire en un mot, vous avez le fond pour être tout ce que vous voudrez" (II, 735). To be able to assume any posture which a given situation might require was obviously of great value to Madame de Sévigné. She seemed convinced that with clever conduct, regulated by a sharp presence of mind, someone like her daughter could discern the most fruitful means of making herself loved at any given moment by almost any given person.

From the foregoing, then, we can conclude that Madame de Sévigné, while confessing a lack of perfect self-restraint, was influenced by the <u>honnête</u> social ideal of her time for she subscribed to its basic tenets. She admired Fouquet, Pamponne, Olivier d'Ormesson, La Rochefoucauld, the Chevalier de Marcillac

and her own daughter. She observed them as individuals presenting themselves to others, as _personnages ostentatoires_ rather than as _personnages intimes_ with feelings and emotions. This proves that she was easily impressed by appearances despite her plea for frankness and candidness in human relations.

VI. MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ IN THE ROLE OF PHILINTE

At the beginning of our study, Madame de Sévigné appeared to us as incapable of constraint, a hopeless victim of her motherly love. However, we shall now see that when she was faced with the most complicated intrigues and had to extricate herself from the most demanding of situations, she was able to pull all of her forces together for she was certainly not ignorant of the art of dissimulation. In her own words she said, "je sais comme il faut ménager aux autres ce que nous avous dans la tête" (II, 196). Indeed, in practice she was often able to assume the role of the dissimulator and the Philinte-like compromiser.

A number of critics have wanted to see in Madame de Sévigné's ability to deal tactfully with people a reflection on her kindheartedness and her own spirit of reconcilation which shunned quarrels. Harriet Ray Allentuch has most recently seen this and ascribed it to a basic desire in her to compel affection (Allentuch, 142-144). While this fact must certainly be taken into

account, such considerations have, in the past, often fallen into extremely sentimental idealizations of Madame de Sévigné's great and generous heart, against which still other critics have very forcefully rebelled, like Jean Choleau, who with only the most ironical of intentions saw fit to entitle his book Le Grand coeur de Madame de Sévigné.[1] The world of reality at the time when Madame de Sévigné was writing was the highly social and extremely complex noble world which had come more and more under the domination of an absolute ruler. It was a system which any aristocrat desirous not only of advancement but simply of existence would eventually have to contend with. Madame de Sévigné would have to compromise to keep herself and her family existing in this society.

This is more than evident in her letter of August 19, 1675. To replace the loss of Turenne, Louis XIV had nominated eight new maréchaux de France, an event which had aroused the whole court since these

[1](Vitré: Unvaniez Arvor, 1959).

men now claimed the privilege of being addressed no longer as "monsieur" but as "monseigneur." Most noblemen, including Monsieur de Grignan, were unwilling to accord this honor to their former equals. In order to assist her son-in-law, who found it necessary to correspond with the new Maréchal de Vivonne, Madame de Sévigné agreed to write the letter for him, and she said, "j' y ficherois un monseigneur en faveur de son nom. Pour les autres [maréchaux], il faut chicaner comme Beuvron et Lavardin : ils font écrire leurs soeurs, leurs mères...et ils évitent la décision" (I, 810).

"Chicaner" was the perfect word for it, and Madame de Sévigné does not appear to have been very much above using such tricky strategems. In a letter to Bussy in 1681 she again referred to this problem of addressing the new maréchaux, and she wrote a scathing commentary on the political situation in contemporary France. She said, "Non, rien ne se décide en France, tout se tourne en chicane et en prétentions" (II, 901). Her next sentence, however, betrays her reaction to the situation, for she would nonetheless submit to the

necessity "de chicaner", using all the "pull" available in time of need. For this purpose she advised "que les plus sages évitent de se faire des ennemis, ou de perdre leur amis" (II, 901). Thus, when the Bishop of Marseille very cruelly undertook to mention Monsieur de Grignan's "paresse naturelle" in front of Louis XIV, the Marquis de Charost intervened in his defense, and Madame de Sévigné repeated this same idea of the necessity of useful friends, saying, with reference to Charost, "Voilà de ces gens que je trouve toujours qu'il faut aimer et instruire" (I, 480). Friends were often seriously considered from a solely utilitarian point of view, and once in writing to Bussy that he should preserve his old friends, she reminded him of his children's need for a father's friends in high places, "dont le secours peut leur être nécessaire en l'état où ils sont" (II, 900).

Even in handling her very best and closest friends we find Madame de Sévigné manoeuvering. In 1690, after she had already been away from Paris a year, she planned to head directly southward to Grignan,

without first returning to Paris where Madame de La Fayette and Madame de Lavardin were hoping to see her. Despite her friendship for them, she would not alter her decision, but she wrote to her daughter that "je veux avoir un procédé honnête avec elles, et sincère, et faire valoir la raison de mes affaires, d'une manière qui ne paroisse pas me moquer d'elles et changer tout d'un coup, si vous alliez à Paris" (III, 757). What she was really doing was concealing from the two friends the truth of her still intense desire to see her daughter for, after all, "on ne meurt point de l'absence de ses amies" (III, 751), while one can possibly suspect that Madame de Sévigné could die from the absence of her "chère fille." If, instead, Madame de Grignan were suddenly to come to Paris, her mother would be close behind her, a reversal of action with unpleasant implcations for the two friends. Thus, the news of her present inability to return to Paris was a "dureté que je veux éviter, quoique vraie, et ménager un peu mieux des amies si aimables et qui présentement et actuellement sont toutes occupées des vos affaires" (III, 757). Madame de Sévigné wanted to be careful

with the two ladies, and her separation of sincerity itself from "un procédé honnête" is quite remarkable, since the latter, equivalent to "ménagement", would seem to concern itself somewhat more with appearances, with the manner itself of handling friends as opposed to the intentions expressed by these motions and manners. Although her intentions may have undoubtedly been sincere, this reveals an extraordinary amount of preoccupation with appearances, with the impression sincerity itself would make under the very "appearances" of sincerity: "le ménagement et l'honnête procédé que je veux avoir avec des amies qui...meritent d'être aimées et traitées sincèrement" (III, 758, underlings are my own). This might at first seem to be a contrived distinction on our part, but it is here that we find a clue to the way of life of a whole century, one that made such a dichotomy out of l'être and le paraître. For what other reason would Madame de Sévigné have been so careful as to take all the precautions necessary in order not to let any unforseen reversal of plans "appear" as a mockery of her friends? As La Rochefoucauld said, "Dans toutes les professions, chacun affecte une mine et un extérieur, pour paraître

ce qu'il veut qu'on le croie : ainsi on peut dire que le monde n'est composé que de mines" (Maxime 256, Pléiade ed., p. 442).

This becomes much clearer, if we cite still other instances when Madame de Sévigné observed the être - paraître dichotomy and acted accordingly. For example, we find her saying the following about Madame de Vins, sister-in-law of Pomponne: "Madame de Vins me parut hier fort tendre pour vous, ma fille, c'est-à-dire à sa mode; mais sa mode est bonne : il ne me parut aucun interligne à tout ce qu'elle disoit" (I, 750). Or again (two weeks earlier), about the same woman: "je vis hier Madame de Vins, qui reçut très-agréablement...ce que vous dites de sa tendresse : elle avoue que ce jour-là elle ne fut pas interligne" (I, 734). What surprising admissions these are, first on the part of Madame de Vins who acknowledged the possibility of an expression of friendship on her part as capable of having other implications, and then on the part of Madame de Sévigné who very congenially proceeded to analyze for credibility, at the next encounter, Madame de Vins' same expression of friendship. Madame de Sévigné, interestingly enough,

made no other comment than the one quoted, and passed, apparently unperturbed, to other matters.

Again, we have the case of the baron d'Oppède, premier président de Provence who came to congratulate Madame de Grignan after the birth of Marie-Blanche. Madame de Sévigné said that she had never seen "de si grandes apparences d'une véritable amitié" (I, 175), a statement in which the word "apparence" could easily have been omitted, were she not so concerned with the possible gap between appearances and reality. Only nine days later she reported another visit from d'Oppède, and again she was seemingly concerned with the appearances: "on ne peut témoigner plus d'honnêteté, ni prendre plus d'intérêt à ce qui vous touche...il nous a parlé le plus franchement et le mieux du monde..." (I, 178). It is evident that she was closely observing this man in order to be able to send diplomatic advice on how to handle him to Monsieur de Grignan for she wrote, "on ne connoit d'abord les hommes que par les paroles, il faut les croire jusqu'à ce que les actions les détruisent" (I, 178). Appearances, then, are such that we find outselves obliged to rely on them.

Madame de Sévigné's long and stormy relationship with the Bishop of Marseille offers us an excellent example of how she behaved and thought in crucial situations in which she had to assume a mask of polite appearances. Her dealings with the Bishop were mostly concerned with the interest she took in Grignan affairs, for, relying on her common sense, she frequently gave wise counsel to Monsieur de Grignan who willingly heeded the advice of his mother-in-law. The difficulties which Monsieur de Grignan faced in Provence were caused by the fact that he was only lieutenant général of the province, substituting for a governor who was still a child. Consequently, when he was assigned to the province, the two men who shared control of the parlement, the Baron d'Oppède and Monsieur de Forbin-Janson, Bishop of Marseille, were unwilling to relinquish to him their control of the assembly. While Monsieur d'Oppède eventually recognized Monsieur de Grignan's authority, the Bishop remained stubborn and unyielding. When the Bishop was put in contact with Madame de Sévigné, she wrote to her daughter that she had cordially answered his letter in a way "si franche et si sincère et conforme à cette amitié que vous vous êtes jurés" (I, 252). But this "amitié" is

really explained by a paradoxical turn of phrase Madame de Sévigné claimed to have found in Tacitus, an "amitié...'dont la dissimulation est le lien, et votre intérêt le fondement'" (I, 252). Madame de Sévigné's response was, again, "J'entre donc dans ce sentiment, et je l'approuve, puisqu'il le faut" (I, 252). Her letter to the Bishop, then, "si franche et si sincère", was to present nothing but an appearance of natural frankness especially assumed for the sake of furthering her daughter's interests with this formidable opponent.

In further complications with the secretary of Monsieur de Vendôme, Governor of Provence, Madame de Sévigné advised that her son-in-law be "le solliciteur du secrétaire du gouverneur : autrement il paroîtroit que ce qu'a offert...[Monsieur de Grignan] ne seroit que des paroles" (I, 252). This tactic, however, was for the intention of keeping Monsieur de Grignan from the obligation of having to make certain payments to the secretary the following year. And, as if this were not enough, some more manoeuvering would be needed with the Bishop: "il faut aussi captiver

Monsieur de Marseille, et lui faire croire qu'il est de vos amis" (I, 252). Actions with double intentions, appearances, some deception, all is approved of as part of the game of life: "J'approve la conduite que vous voulez avoir avec lui; je vois bien qu'elle est nécessaire" (I, 252).

On June 7, 1671 she wrote to her daughter again, in keeping with what we have already noticed concerning the Bishop, "Continuez l'amitié sincère qui est entre vous..." (I, 304). But the phrase "amitié sincère" certainly stands out here, because it is followed by "ne levez point le masque" (I, 304). Of course, the "masque" is that of"dissimulation", but her very use of a word indicating a concealment of true, underlying hatred shows that this "amitié" was not really "sincère" but was simply the outward appearances of an "amitié sincère". That the ideas of a false mask of friendship and sincere friendship should have been paradoxically related by her is not at all strange, for she was actually playing the "game" of politics, and a very important "game" at that, in a society where the very term <u>honnêteté</u>, which had been chosen as its epithet, had become bankrupt.[2]

[2]Edith Kern, "L'Honnête Homme," p. 118.

At the end of January, 1673, while she was at Grignan, Madame de Sévigné payed a visit to Marseille, where the Bishop received her in the most spectacular manner possible, while at the same time he was blocking an allotment of funds which Monsieur de Grignan had requested for the many mail expenses he had incurred in official business. In the midst of the magnificent public welcome Madame de Sévigné noted that the population of Marseille was "cent mille âmes." However, when she wondered "combien il y en a de belles" (I, 600), she was probably thinking of the crafty Bishop. In general, she was not one to trust any provençal, preferring her open Bretons to these sly southerners: "J'aime nos Bretons; ils sentent un peu le vin; mais votre fleur d'orange ne cache pas de si bons coeurs" (I, 382). Critics have often quoted a well-known phrase of hers, found in her second letter from Marseille: "poignarder et embrasser, ce sont des manières" (I, 601), but this has led to the exclusion of more complete explanatory sentences preceding and following it: "J'admire plus que jamais de donner avec tant d'ostentation les choses du dehors, de refuser en particulier ce qui tient au coeur" (I, 600-1).

In this statement, where the seventeenth-century use of "admirer" could often express surprise rather than actual admiration, Madame de Sévigné remarked at how human actions do not often correspond to the realm of true feeling. But while she had been seeing behind the façade, she too had been putting on her own appearances of honnête comportement: "on voudroit m'avoir ôté l'esprit; car au milieu de mes honnêtetés on voit que je vois" (I, 601). In this instance she would have reacted with laughter for the whole affair had comic potentials: "Je crois qu'on [l'évêque] riroit avec moi, si on l'osoit; tout est de carême-prenant" (I, 601).

Madame de Sévigné seems to have been quite an expert at assuming honnête appearances, and she particularly enjoyed playing a role and observing others playing a role designed to conceal true feelings. For example, when one of her former suitors, the Duc de Lude, had a serious attack of gout at Saint-Germain, all of his lady friends, including Madame de Sévigné, were in anxiety. With great pleasure, however, she reported to her daughter that "l'on jouait si bien, et l'on cachoit cette tristesse si habilement, qu'elle ne paroissoit point du tout; et l'on se livroit, pour

mieux tromper, au martyre insupportable d'être à la cour, d'être belle et parée" (II, 629). Life itself therefore, seems to have been made a mascarade, and it is not strange, then, that Madame de Sévigné was aware of the affinities of such situations with theatrical play acting.

A masterpiece of self-conscious acting on her part came in 1689 with her report on an excursion to Saint Cyr with Madame de Coulanges to see Racine's Esther. In her description of the play our attention is drawn just as much to the audience as to the play itself. First she described the seating arrangement, noting that the maréchal de Bellefonds came to sit "par choix" beside her. But it is really the next comment that is extremely interesting: "Nous écoutâmes, le maréchal et moi, cette tragédie avec une attention qui fut remarquée, et de certaines louanges sourdes et bien placées, qui n'étoient peut-être pas sous les fontages de toutes les dames" (III, 350-351). She reminds us of those famous, puritanical ladies described by Uranie in scene three of Molière's Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes, who were "plus chastes des oreilles que de tout le reste du corps" and who

affected all sorts of "mines" during a presentation of the Ecole des Femmes.[3] We find Madame de Sévigné assuming somewhat the same "mines," of another type and for another purpose, to be sure, but obviously with skill, for she accompanied the acting of Esther on stage with a certain number of studied actions on her part, her "louanges sourdes" and "bien placées" which would draw attention to her as a spectator. We might well ask where the separation between theatrical appearances and reality took place, if it did at all. She finally got around to describing the "excès de l'agrément" of Esther, a perfect "rapport de la musique..." etc., but she had to interject again the role of the spectator: "on est attentif, et on n'a point d'autre peine que celle de voir finir une si aimable pièce" (III, 351). She returned to writing about the play, "tout y est simple..." etc., only to end by saying that the beauty of the play was such that "on ne [la] soutient pas sans larmes." Once again she mentioned "l'attention" as the best sign of

[3] Oeuvres Complètes de Molière, Pléiade ed., I, 529.

approval one could give to the play, but this apparently neutral statement gains much when we consider that her attention was, as she had previous said, "remarquée," since she had accompanied it with select vocal "louanges."

Madame de Sévigné seems to have been extremely self-conscious during all of this, and it is apparent that she was aiming for special effects, for the maréchal de Bellefonds jumped up to tell the King how fortunate he was to have been seated near a woman "qui étoit bien digne d'avoir vu Esther" (III, 351). How else would her worthiness have been known, had she not been ostentatious about it? Of course, she took the pains to remark that Louis "eut quelque plaisir de voir mes sincères admirations sans bruit et sans éclat" (III, 351), but we must suppose that "sans bruit et sans éclat" refers, more precisely, to a tasteful way of making just the right amount of vocal "bruit" in order to be noticed. Louis, on one of those rare occasions, favored Madame de Sévigné by speaking to her personally. She knew that all eyes were fixed on her for she was extremely self-conscious,

and took great care to arrange a skillful reply for the king. She notes that her composure was such that she answered him "sans m'étonner," and just how much she considered herself as a performer before the eyes of the court (her audience) is revealed by her remark: "(le Roi) me laissa l'objet de l'envie" (III, 351).

In Madame de Sévigné's letters, there frequently recurs this view of the individual as a performer staging a show for society. For example, in 1673, there was a dispute between Monsieur de Grignan and the Bishop of Marseille over the candidates for the position of procureur of Provence. When Louis XIV settled the dispute by royal decree Madame de Sévigné noted, concerning Monsieur de Grignan, "il a joué son rôle divinement" (I, 659). And, including again his brother, the Coadjuteur, and Madame de Grignan, she added, "Enfin vous avez fait tous trois vos personnages en perfection."

Again, a year earlier, we find her observing one of her contemporaries performing a certain role for society. Her observation is quite amusing for she

noticed the comic potentials in such situations. In this case, the Princesse de Conti had died, and, at a gathering at Madame de Longueville's house, Madame de Brissac seemed inconsolable over the late Princesse. However, as Madame de Sévigné writes, "par malheur le comte de Guiche se mit à causer avec elle [Madame de Brissac]; elle oublia son rôle, aussi bien que celui du désespoir le jour de la mort; car il falloit en un certain endroit qu'elle eût perdu connoissance; elle l'oublia, et reconnut fort bien des gens qui entroient" (I, 478).

This use of terminology which was derived from the theatre clearly reveals Madame de Sévigné's awareness of the implications of the theories of the artificial <u>honnête homme</u> we have discussed. She was definitely aware of the fact that all too many refined manners and courtesies were nothing but external appearances carefully assumed for the purpose of giving to others a pleasing impression of oneself. How important, then, does the simple word "paru" become in her statements, such as the one she made during the Fouquet trial when the inimical Chancelier Séguier went four times to the Church of Sainte Marie

to venerate tearfully the relics of Saint Francis de Sales: "Il...parut pendant ces quatre visites si touché du desir de son salut...qu'une plus fine que la [mère] supérieure y auroit été trompée" (I, 126). She endowed his lavish display of piety with the theatrical category of "comédie", for she could not reconcile piety with his hostile, uncharitable actions.

Madame de Sévigné, being so much a part of such a society, could not help having to submit to its ways and to adopt its tactics. In the process, then, her use of the term <u>honnête</u> ran the gamut of all its possible implications. It could indicate polished <u>honnêtes</u> appearances, intentionally and somewhat dishonestly assumed for a cause, as when Madame de Grignan wrote a calculated letter over which her mother could exclaim, "je n'ai jamais rien vu de si honnête et de si politique" (I, 566). It could convey an idea of moral integrity: "si honnêtes gens que vous l'êtes" (I, 630) and in whose conduct "la droiture et la sincérité sont en usage" (I, 477). Or, she could confuse both of these implications of <u>honnêteté</u>, as when she paradoxically advised her son, who was simultaneously involved in love affairs with

both Ninon and la Champmeslé, "que c'étoit une vilaine trahison et basse et indigne d'un homme de qualité, et que même dans les choses malhonnêtes, il y avoit de l'honnêteté à observer" (I, 266).

The practical compromise Madame de Sévigné managed to make between sincere sentiment and the politeness which social etiquette required is perhaps best exemplified in her lengthy advice to her daughter on the proper response she should make to Cardinal de Retz's not too beautiful gift of a cassolette. She was convinced the Cardinal's intentions were good. Therefore, these intentions had to be respected. But, at the same time, shrewd and careful ménagement would have to be observed in writing a note of thanks: "Songez...que celui qui vous...donne [la cassolette], l'a crue très-belle et très-précieuse, et en cette qualité il vous en fait un présent d'amitié;... il faut toujours regarder à l'intention et régler par là notre reconnoissance" (I, 794). Her intentions were surely among the best, but such studied detail and lengthy exposition of otherwise merely practical advice reveals a great preoccupation with both ideal truthfulness and the imperatives of social etiquette.

For this reason, we are not surprised to find her also advising that "il faut dans une fête un visage qui ne gâte point la beauté de la décoration; et quand on n'en a point, il faut en emprunter, ou n'y point aller" (III, 94). The mask must be accepted if one wants to go out into society. And so, after the successful outcome of one of her daugher's legal cases, after having sollicited all the judges, it was her duty to appear as grateful as possible: "Nous avons remercié tous nos juges quand ils sont sortis, variant, chacun de nôtre côté, notre reconnoissance en vingt façons" (III, 386).

In conclusion, her own attitude in the face of society was explicitly summed up one day in 1689, when she answered a letter in which Madame de Grignan had considered the boldness of youth. Youth is rash and brazen. It sees no obstacles, but sees all things as possible. The situation changes, however, with maturity: "On trouve qu'on a besoin de tout le monde; on a un procès, il faut solliciter, il faut se familiariser, il faut vivre avec les vivants, il faut rétrécir son esprit d'un côté et l'ouvrir de l'autre..."

(III, 451).[4] Madame de Sévigné's philosophie was, then, in short, "il faut vivre avec les vivants." And this is precisely what Moliere's Philinte answers to Alceste's grievances against humanity and to his anger over the falseness of men: "Mais est-ce une raison que leur peu d'équité/ Pour vouloir se tirer de leur société?" (V. iii, 1559-60). In this respect, then, Madame de Sévigné resembles Philinte, the compromiser. Whereas the frank Alceste demands that "Le fond de notre coeur dans nos discours se montre" the moderate Philinte sensibly replies,

[4]Another proof of this attitude of hers can be seen in her observations on volume one of the Essais by Nicole, who counselled indifference to human estime and worldly approbation: "Il est vrai que c'est une perfection un peu au-dessus de l'humanité, que l'indifférence qu'il veut de nous pour l'estime ou l'approbation du Monde" (I, 412). She knew she was incapable of applying this advice but she still enjoyed listening to its fundamental idealism. She added in her following letter, "je crois...qu'il faut un peu de grace, et que la philosophie seule ne suffit pas." (I, 413). In the end, however, she saw the fallacy of Nicole's own argument concerning Des Moyens de conserver la paix avec les hommes, which implied the social value of accommodating one's self to all men: "Il nous met à un si haut point la paix et l'union avec le prochain, et nous conseille de l'acquérir aux dépends de tant de choses, qu'il n' y a pas moyen après cela d'être indifférente sur ce... [que notre prochain] pense de nous" (I, 413-414).

> Il est bon de cacher ce qu'on a dans le coeur.
> Serait-il à propos et de la bienséance
> De dire à mille gens tout ce que d'eux l'on pense? (p. 44)

Like Alceste, Madame de Sévigné desired sincerity and truthfulness. She was often incapable of controlling the movements of her heart. Yet, in the end, she admired Madame de Grignan for her self-control, praised Pomponne's poised resistance against despair, and exalted Fouquet's composure, that, had she said anything about le Misanthrope it would undoubtedly have been against Alceste. When it became a question of advancing or simply surviving in the small world of aristocratic, seventeenth-century society, Madame de Sévigné knew very well how to don the mask of honnête dissimulation. She gave shrewd advice to Monsieur de Grignan concerning his provincial government, and when confronted with her arch-enemy, the Bishop of Marseille, she conducted herself perfectly. She knew how to choose words, how to arrange them with art, how to aim for special effects. She displayed extreme self-conscious concern with exterior appearances and impressions, and could use her own "attention" as a means of drawing attention to herself. All of this

suggests a conception of man as living life at a very high level of a paradoxical "studied naturalness", which risks turning into artificiality when the very act of watching a play requires watchfulness of one's self, when going into court-circles, looking beautiful and composed, is exactly what one does when one is in terrible anxiety over the fate of a former suitor.

Finally, while we have used two of Molière's characters, Alceste and Philinte, to represent two sides of Madame de Sévigné's often contradictory response to the problem of <u>être</u> and <u>paraître</u>, it would be more appropriate to compare her with Molière, himself. Since both Alceste and Philinte can be looked at as representing two aspects of their creator, it can be said that through an honest Alceste Molière sought to condemn the abuses and moral laxity he observed around him in society. However, he nonetheless chose to permit this high-minded character to go to extremes and to appear rediculous, while a well-mannered, polished, but compromising Philinte apparently seems to be the victor. The outcome is ambiguous, and in this way it can be said that Molière avoided having to state bluntly what his philosophy of life might

have been. He avoided making an open declaration of something that, perhaps, might have offended his illustrious protector, Louis XIV, who was responsible for the whole of French seventeenth-century social order. In the same way, since non-conformity was unthinkable, in order to survive in such a closed, aristocratic society, Madame de Sévigné had to have resourse to duplicity. The Alceste in her had, at times, to yield to the Philinte. Yet it never yielded completely, and the two managed to exist side by side, By this duplicity, then, does Madame de Sévigné most resemble Molière.

VII. A SOLUTION IN AESTHETICS

The fact that an honest, individualistic Madame de Sévigné compromised with society, should not necessarily imply that she was a person living "in bad faith." Such a compromise did not actually result from a severe violation of her conscience. Despite her yearning for authenticity, it seems to have been easy for her to accept the fact that life in society demanded honnêteté. And, if she accepted honnêteté, it was because she could easily overlook reality and accept appearances. It will now become evident that this was all made possible by her vast imagination. She was a highly idealistic person who yearned for things magnificent, sublime, and transcending, and who, as a result, could easily accept the unreal.

Lanson once said that the essential characteristic of Madame de Sévigné was her great imagination.[1] That she herself was aware of her capacity to appreciate those things which especially stirred her imaginative

[1]Gustave Lanson, Histoire de la Littérature Française, remaniée et complétée pour la période 1850-1950 par Paul Tuffrau. (Paris, 1963), p. 486.

faculty was revealed one day in 1671, when at forty-four years of age she confessed a child-like love for the fantastic adventures related by La Calprenède in his long roman, Cléopâtre, of admittedly poor style: "Je trouve...qu'il est détestable, et je ne laisse pas de m'y prendre comme à de la glu. La beauté des sentiments, la violence des passions, la grandeur des événements, et le succes miraculeux de leur redoutable épée tout cela m'entraîne comme une petite fille" (I, 332). Philip E. Arsenault has remarked on the great amount of serious reading Madame de Sévigné did, for she absorbed histories, biographies, and memoires.[2] But from her own comments on these works we can suspect that she looked on them from a rather imaginative point of view, for, notwithstanding their apparent seriousness, they supplied her with much-enjoyed excitement and adventure.

Just as she loved La Calprenède's Cléopâtre for "les grands coups d'épée de l'invincible Artaban" (I, 327) and for the sentiments described, "d'une

[2]Philip Elwyn Arsenault, The Literary Opinions of Madame de Sévigné, unpubl. diss. (Princeton, 1959), p. 93.

perfection qui remplit mon idée sur les belles âmes" (I, 334), she devoured the Histoire des Croisades of the Jesuit historian Louis Maimbourg, despite his notoriously bad style (I, 853). She was especially moved by the character of Judas Macchabeus, and she said of him: "c'étoit un grand héros" (I, 873). When her daughter wrote that she was being lax in her own reading of Tacitus, Madame de Sévigné asked, "Laisserez-vous Germanicus au milieu de ses conquêtes?" (I, 331). From this, we can see how much she was fascinated by great men and their deeds, and it is not surprising that she should have proclaimed "divine" a certain Histoire de Tertullien et d'Origène, published under the pen-name of le Sieur de La Mothe (I, 855). From the poetic heroes of Tasso's Jerusalem Delivered she went to Maimboug's Croisades without difficulty: "L' Histoire des Croisades est très belle, surtout à ceux qui ont lu le Tasse, et qui revoient leurs vieux amis en prose et en histoire" (I, 855). And from here it was easy for her to proceed to French history: "je suis dans l'Histoire de France; les croisades m'y ont jetée" (I, 903).

In this jumble of readings the real and the fictional became confused, but in the confusion, the real became magnificently poetic for the mind of Madame de Sévigné. Josephus' siege of Jersusalem received the following acclaim: "tout est beau, tout est grand; cette lecture est magnifique" (I, 902). Or again, "il faut que vous avouiez qu'il y a une grandeur et une dignité dans cette histoire, qui ne se trouve en nulle autre" (II, 13). Her comment on the history of the taking of Constantinople by Mahomet II was that "cet événement est grand, et si singulier, si brillant, si extraordinaire, qu'on en est enlevé" (III, 603). Beauty, greatness, magnificence, dignity, are what she saw in these works, historic and imaginative alike, and thrilled by fantastic displays of heroism and nobility she was overjoyed at finding some actual Grignan ancestors mentioned in Maimbourg's Croisades. A certain Adhémar, she noted, had been "un grandissime seigneur il ya six cents ans." Another Castellane "faisoit une grande figure" over five hundred years before (I, 900-901). And it is important that she should have used the expression "grande figure" because that is precisely what she desired to make

out of the Comte de Grignan by comparing him to his Adhémar ancestor. "Il étoit aimé comme vous," she told him, and recounted a most fantastic story concerning his death: "Sa mort mit en deuil une armée de trois cent mille hommes, et fit pleurer tous les princes chrétiens" (I, 900). Madame de Sévigné was not disturbed by the fact that the details of this fabulous historical narrative might have been exaggerated. She looked, instead, upon all these things as truly great and magnificent and did not hesitate even to look upon contemporary reality in much the same way.

A significant example is to be found in a letter she wrote in 1677, when Madame de Grignan in Provence made a trip to see a girl who had been so suddenly struck dead by a bolt of lightning that she seemed still quite alive: "Cette petite fille toute morte, sans qu'il y paroisse,...me paroît une chose bien étonnante," she commented (II, 338). She then admitted that "j'aime toutes les choses extraordinaires" (II, 338). This was a spectacularly different way of dying and she was fascinated. But it led to another statement which we want to emphasize here, because of its unique outlook which is expressive in general of much of Madame de Sévigné. It concerned the thunder

heard over the château of Grignan, a vast and imposing building set on top of a rocky elevation, with a huge terrace overlooking the hilly, château-studded, surrounding terrain, circumscribed in the distance by huge, snow-capped mountains. The setting was impressive and Madame de Sévigné remarked: "Vos tonnerres sont bons à Grignan: ils ont un éclat et une majesté au-dessus de tous les autres...C'est un Jupiter tonnant" (II, 339). That she should have seen majesty and magnificence in thunder is noteworthy, and it is even more so, if we consider her comparison of its almost supra-natural qualities to a divinity, to Jupiter, the mythological symbol of royal power itself. We shall see in our next chapter that for these very reasons of spectacular majesty and magnificence she admired Louis XIV. No matter what she disliked in Louis' character or politics, she was taken in by his majesty, and harsh reality became forgotten within the grandeur and splendor that surrounded it.

This characteristic of Madame de Sévigné to see magnificence and greatness all about her can be called poetic, in the widest sense of the word, signifying that exercise of her fancy or imagination continuously

directed towards seeing in things the beautiful and the lofty, and most often even the sublime. In this sense, then, can we also say that she was profoundly idealistic, for while, as we have pointed out, she had the vision to penetrate to the reality beneath the artificial mask of society, in the end she chose to relinquish understanding and penetration for the benefit of enjoying the spectacle which appearances, magnified several times, offered.

Indeed, the word "spectacle" was most often used by her. The death of her aunt, for example, was described in such terms, that is, as "un spectacle triste et dévot tout ensemble" (I, 522). She exclaimed over Madame de Grignan's attention to her health, "Quel spectacle charmant de vous voir appliquée à votre santé" (II, 510). Her visit to the recently disgraced Pomponne was "un spectacle douloureux" (II, 509). What thrilled her in Bossuet's Oraison Funèbre for the Prince de Condé was his comparison of Condé with Turenne and the "grand spectacle qu'il présente des deux grands hommes que Dieu a donnés au Roi" (III, 158).

Her concept of great moments as "spectacles" was but a step in the direction of seeing much of life's actions as theatrical, and this, too, we have already

pointed out, as for example in connection with her derogatory references to the "comedy" at court over the Montespan-Maintenon struggle for favor. Most of the court, she explained, desired "un changement de théâtre" (II, 195). And the withdrawal of Madame de Soubise from Versailles, the result of her vain and immoderate desires to become a lady-in-waiting, found Madame de Sévigné comparing herself to a spectator of a comic court: "Elle se cache...et cette parfaite solitude, ne nous plaît pas, à nous autres spectateurs" (II, 574).

However, her use of theatrical references acquired much more distinction in her adaptation of them to more serious instances. It reveals, actually, how profoundly sensitive Madame de Sévigné was to a type of theatrical outlook on life, for many events acquired in her mind more solemn and imposing proportions by being seen within such a framework. She was serious when she wrote about the rheumatism, which afflicted her in 1675-1676, as being comparable to a play: "Je vous assure qu'un rhumatisme est une des belles pièces qu'on puisse avoir: j'ai un grand respect pour lui; il a son commencement, son augmentation, son période et sa fin" (II, 34). An even more profound

statement bore this same sort of comparison when the King of England was made to flee his country before the forces of William of Orange: "Voilà de si grands événements, qu'il n'est pas aisé d'en comprendre le dénouement" (III, 305). And on this occasion she even extended the comparison into a world-view in which man himself was made a spectator of the Will of God: "Cette même Providence qui règle tout, démêlera tout; nous sommes ici les spectateurs très aveugles et très ignorants" (III, 305).

Terms of a distinct theatrical flavor crop up again and again in the letters. When the English Queen reached Boulogne before her husband, she remained there in continuous tears and prayers, with Louis XIV himself worried over King James' fate. To this news, Madame de Sévigné concluded: "Voilà une grande scène" (III, 295). And in another letter she again referred to the presence of William of Orange in London in the same terms: "tout le monde se fait une affaire particulière de cette grande scène (III, 297). A trip she took to Versailles was for her still another "changement de scène" (II, 153), and when she witnessed the magnificent but sad royal supper at

Saint-Germain she wrote, "J'ai donc vu cette scène" (I, 692). All of the dramatic possibilities of the engagement between the Prince de Conti and Mademoiselle de Blois were reported by her in what was described still again as a "petite scène" (II, 545). Her mind was so oriented towards the theatrical that since she would refer to "scènes" she could naturally also refer to Grignan as "le théâtre où j'ai le plus d'attention, quoiqu'il ne soit pas le plus important de l'Europe" (III, 476). Grignan affairs were even referred to as plays with full plots in which she, too, had a dramtic role as "témoin de tous ces dénouements...je ne puis faire d'autre personnage que de souhaiter et de tenir les mains élevées vers le ciel" (III, 49). But Madame de Grignan was really the central character on this stage and was chided by her mother for going about informally dressed or "costumed" while pregnant, in an untidy and dreary black cape, which was "bien ennuyeuse pour les spectateurs" (I, 312).

Madame de Sévigné's imagination did not stop here with seeing just the theatrical or dramatic possibilities of life itself. She seems to have been constantly making comparisons between real-life

situations and the fictional, mythological and imaginative creations of literature. And, in the process, reality itself became magnified and glorified many times over, as when she used the figure of Andromaque in reference to the Comtesse de Guiche, recently widowed and in black mourning-dress, who was nonetheless present at a lavish supper at Saint-Germain. The economy of means Madame de Sévigné used, and the dramatic forcefulness which this simple reference attained, eliminating all explanation, is amazing: "La comtesse de Guiche...est au diner, quoique Andromaque; la Reine l'a voulu" (I, 692). When in 1671 Madame de Ludres was one of three women bitten by a dog and sent to Dieppe for the traditional cure by three plunges into the frigid ocean, Madame de Sévigné saw in her another Andromeda tied to a rock and exposed as prey to a monster from which the Comte de Tréville, another Perseus on his winged horse, Pegasus, would save her: "Ne trouvez-vous point, ma bonne, que Ludres ressemble à Andromède? Pour moi, je la vois attachée au rocher, et Tréville sur un cheval ailé, qui tue le monstre" (I, 22). And, extending this image to Mademoiselle d'Houdancourt who

was to marry the ugly and debauched Duc de Ventadour, she exclaimed, "Je craindrois plus ce monstre que celui d'Andromède" (I, 223).

By the very same means, the quarters being prepared at the Hôtel Carnavalet for the arrival of Madame de Grignan were not simple rooms, but a veritable Carthage under construction, with Madame de Grignan, by implication, nothing less than a Queen Dido (II, 824). Madame de Montespan, building her "enchanted" palace of Clagny, was also compared to Dido. She was "la belle si occupée des ouvrages et des enchantements que l'on fait pour elle, que pour moi je me représente Didon qui fait bâtir Carthage" (I, 739). But Clagny itself was comparable to the enchanted palace of Armida which distracted the hero Rinaldo in Tasso's Jerusalem Delivered (I, 792). Another Carthage was the vast work Madame de Sévigné had undertaken in the laying out of her gardens and woods at Les Rochers (II, 748). Even the Bishop of Marseille, French Ambassador to Poland in 1675, was made a latter-day Archbishop Turpin at the side of his Roland, the King of Poland: "On nous dépeint ici Monsieur de Marseille l'épée à la main, aux côtés du roi de Pologne, ayant eu deux chevaux tués

sous lui, et donnant la chasse aux Tartares, comme l'archevêque Turpin la donnoit aux Sarrasins" (I, 895). The Princesse de Tarente, her neighbor at Les Rochers, was comparable to a Nymphe, for she wrote of her: La princesse éclaire ces bois comme la nymphe Galatée" (II, 862). The concerted efforts which Madame de Sévigné had exerted in getting an army post of guidon for her son Charles were "nos folies de don Quichotte" (I, 819). When a poor trimmings-dealer, who had found himself unable to pay his taxes and had been dispossessed, attempted in his fury to murder his wife and four children, Madame de Sévigné could think of nothing less important than Josephus and the famine during the siege of Jerusalem. She spoke almost as if she, too, had been in Jerusalem during those days: "depuis le siège de Jérusalem, il ne s'est point vu une telle fureur" (I, 879). And finally, when in 1689, Louis XIV was gathering his armies she exclaimed, "jamais roi de France ne s'est vu trois cent mille hommes sur pied; il n'y avoit que les rois de Perse" (III, 361). In this way Louis XIV became for her a new Cyrus the Great.

For Madame de Sévigné persons and events took on spectacular proportions, and the division between fantasy and reality easily disappeared. She enjoyed explaining things by their almost unreal and incredible characteristics, as if they were so fantastic that we should only expect to find them in the imaginary world of the novel. The Prince de Conti and Mademoiselle de Blois "s'aiment comme dans les romans" (II, 544), she said, but these were not the only people she saw comparable to heroes and heroines found in romances. The Chevalier de Grignan, for example, was also "plus beau qu'un héros de roman, digne d'être l'image du premier tome" (I, 269), and Madame de Grignan's description of the magnificent receptions she was given in Provence was "admirable...je crois lire un joli roman, dont l'héroine m'est extrêmement chère" (I, 548). When Madame de Grignan sent word that she feared she was expecting the birth of a daughter instead of a much longed-for male heir, Madame de Sévigné's imagination set to work at making the new baby a sort of female Moses: "je vous aiderai à l'exposer sur le Rhône dans un petit panier de jonc, et puis elle abordera dans quelque royaume où sa beauté sera le sujet d'un roman" (I, 355). And when

the King and Queen of England set up an exiled court at Saint-Germain, she declared, "Ils m'ont fait souvenir d'abord de mes chers romans" (III, 330).

In fact, the whole episode of the escape of James II and his Queen to France, aided by the undaunted Lauzun, fascinated Madame de Sévigné. In letter after letter she explicitly referred to its "romantic"(in the sense of romance) character. Her letter of December 24, 1688, reported that James II had entrusted his wife and the tiny Prince of Wales to Lauzun. He escorted them down the stormy Thames in an open boat to a common yacht which passed inconspicuously among the Dutch warships. The precious cargo then arrived at the haven of France. How right she was when she closed her report with "Voilà le premier tome du roman" (III, 289). It was she who was to write the story of King James' escape, impressed as she was by Lauzun's "jolie action," "grande hardiesse," and by "ce grand événement", in general (III, 289). She was shocked, later, when Lauzun returned to Versailles unrewarded for his bravery. She said, "on lui a ôté le romanesque et le merveilleux de son aventure" (III, 318). In another letter she disappointedly added, "Il est tout simplement

revenu à la cour, et son action n'a rien de si extraordinaire; on en avoit d'abord composé un fort joli roman" (III, 319). But she had one more chance to indulge in the extraordinary and the highly imaginative, for, when James II left France, King Louis gave him his own armor. In her rapture she commented, "nos romans ne faisoient rien de plus galant" (III, 360), and she let her imagination soar with visions of fantastic, epic heroes, of whom Louis was obviously a reincarnation: "voilà donc...le casque, la cuirasse de Renaud, d'Amadis, et de tous nos paladins les plus célèbres; je n'ai pas voulu dire d' Hector, car il étoit malheureux" (III, 360).

"Romanesque" was her word, then, for the signing of what was to be only a provisional Peace of Poland. The Polish King, Sobieski, was described as "ce héros, à la tête de quinze mille hommes, entouré de deux sent mille, [qui] les a forcés, l'épée à la main, de signer la traité" (II, 253). Again, this made her think of her novels: "depuis Calprenède on n'avoit rien vu de pareil" (II, 253). The governor of the Provençal town of Orange, in revolt against Monsieur de Grignan, was an "homme romanesque" in the midst of his rather small but well-defended

ville-forte (I, 637). Another Provençal gentleman named Barbantane was esteemed by her as "un des plus braves hommes du monde, d' une valeur romanesque" (I, 674). And evidently one of the reasons for which she adored the Princesse de Tarente was that, as she revealed, "Elle a un style romanesque dans ce qu'elle conte" (I, 882). News came from the Danish court of the rivalry of two nobles for the hand of Mademoiselle de la Trémouille. When war broke out against Sweden, these two rivals were on the battlefield "se piquant de faire des actions romanesques pour plaire à la princesse" (I, 866). And again Madame de Sévigné referred to these happenings as if they were actually the matter of a romance, adding, "Voilà le premier tome; je vous en manderai la suite" (I, 866). Even in a letter she wrote to Du Plessis, she asked, "Vous me ferez à loisir un second tome de vos aventures" (III, 550).

Madame de Sévigné, it is evident, clearly thought of reality in terms of the dramatic and the poetic, in terms of the fantastic, adventurous literature she devoured, and her statements are frank avowals of this. Her next step was to see practically everyone in terms of the hero and heroine. It is

important that we point out how often she did this, for it, too, reveals the spectacular proportions she thought in, and betrays a yearning on her part for the sublime and the magnificent. Even, as we shall see, for the transcending.

To use once again the example of King Louis' favors to James II of England we can note how she saw his great generosity as "bontés héroïques" (III, 337). In the same way she related how Achille de Harlay, then procureur général, had willingly given up to his creditors a parcel of land he had received as a gift. He had felt it unjust to leave his creditors without the money they had given to him in all good faith. Her comment was: "cela est héroïque...je ne connois point une plus belle...âme" (I, 879). She saw supreme heroism in the trip a pregnant Madame de Guitaut undertook, travelling down the treacherous Rhone to join her husband at Lyon. Madame de Sévigné extolled her courage, declaring, "Tout de bon, cela est héroïque, on ne peut trop l'admirer" (I, 751). When Madame de Grignan expressed her preoccupation with her mother's health, Madame de Sévigné again answered, "vous ne perdez rien de vos héroïques et tendres sentiments" (III, 44). By 1690, Grignan finances were in a

frightful state but the Count nonetheless had to maintain a lavish château. Madame de Sévigné once again used the image of a theatre to dramatize the great part her daughter was playing in all of this. She wanted to pass "derrière le rideau et de vous faire venir sur le théâtre" (III, 738). "Votre rôle est héroïque," she declared for Madame de Grignan, who seemed like a saint and a pagan hero at one and the same time in her mother's eyes: "Ma bonne, quelle force Dieu vous a donnée! Vous me faites souvenir d' Horace, qui sépara ses ennemis pour les combattre séparément" (III, 738). Horace's action was the equivalent of Madame de Grignan's Christian patience, a statement which her mother openly avowed as "tellement au-dessus de ma portée, que je joins l'admiration à la part que mon cœur m'y fait prendre" (III, 738). And, even better, Madame de Grignan managed to mask the horrid reality of her sorry financial and legal state, undertaking with ease "des conversations plaisantes qui feroient croire que vous êtes toute libre" (III, 738). This won greater admiring exclamations from her mother who heaped her praises together in a most exhuberant manner: "voilà ...ce qui est très miraculeux, très admirable, très

estimable; et c'est aussi ce que j'admire et que je loue sans cesse..." (III, 738).

Madame de Sévigné saw heroism everywhere, for she never hesitated to admire a different, extraordinary action. Without the slightest uncertainty she could greatly amplify its merit. When Retz went off on his religious retreat from the world, she was extremely moved and wrote, "Il nous paroît que son courage est infini" (I, 748). She proclaimed that "son âme est d'un ordre si supérieur, qu'il ne falloit pas attendre une fin de lui toute commune, comme des autres hommes" (I, 729). He had lived by a rule which commanded him "de faire toujours ce qu'il y a de plus grand et de plus héroïque." The effort exerted by Masnau, a man at the Fouquet trial, who despite severe pain from nephritis put in an appearance at the courtroom, was described as another "action héroïque" (I, 141). A certain Madame de Mouci exemplified a "personnage héroïque" (II, 737), and the Chevalier de Grignan, ailing with gout, was a "pauvre héros" (III, 211). She spoke in magnificent terms of La Rochefoucauld mourning the death of his son: "il est au premier rang de ce que j'ai jamais

vu de courage, de mérite, de tendresse et de raison" (I, 575). It was common for Madame de Sévigné to speak in such superlatives. Even the famous poisoner, Madame Voisin, was recorded by her as having been courageous at the stake, and as having presented herself heroically to her executioners (II, 618). She was also overwhelmingly impressed by the servants of the Cardinal de Retz who blindly clung to their master's house after he had retreated from the world: "C'est une chose héroïque que les sentiments de ces gens-là," she said, "Ils préfèrent l'honneur de ne le point quitter aux meilleures conditions de la cour" (I, 747). She would go to his house literally to admire them: "quoique je ne puisse entrer dans cette maison sans douleur, les domestiques qui y étoient encore m'y faisoient passer pour les admirer" (I, 748). "On ne peut les entendre sans admirer leur affection," she said (I, 747-748), and she actually took pleasure in the spectacularly dramatic possibilities of the sudden illness of one servant, striken on the very eve of the Cardinal's departure, and carried off by death in nine days: "Le pauvre Peau a mieux fait encor, il est mort" (I, 748). What better moment could a faithful servant have chosen to die than at the departure of his beloved master?

The letters of Madame de Sévigné reveal a woman who was accustomed to looking out on the world in great and magnificent perspectives. Her letters abound with such adjectives as grand and beau. For example, the Breton Estates at Vitré were classified as "une très-belle, très-grande et très-magnifique assembleé (I, 377). In an earlier letter she had also said, "Les grandeurs de province sont ici dans leur lustre; de sort que l'autre jour la beauté de la charge de Madame de Grignan fut admirée et enviée" (I, 372). When her daughter wrote about the château of Grignan itself, it was represented with "un air de grandeur et une magnificence dont je suis enchantée" (I, 317), and about Madame de Grignan she added, "En vérité, c'est un grand plaisir que d'être, comme vous êtes, une véritable grande dame" (I, 318). In reference to a former governor of Provence, she had the chance to admire "son beau gouvernement..., toutes ces belles villes,...si grandes, si considérables" (III, 457).

Her daughter was not singular in this general glorification. We find Madame de Sévigné exclaiming over Turenne's nephew, the Duc de Lorges, who conducted

himself magnificently in battle just after his uncle's death: "c'est une gloire bien complète pour M. de Lorges" (I, 796). His brave conduct after having his horse shot from out and under him was further described as "une si belle action" (I, 796). Saint-Hilaire, responsible for having stopped Turenne at the very spot where he was to meet his death by canon-fire, reminded her of a Roman hero: "Ecoutez, je vous prie, ma bonne, une chose qui me paroît belle: il me semble que je lis l'histoire romaine" (I, 798). Saint-Hilaire lost his arm with the same shot which finished off Turenne. Then he immediately admonished his own son not to weep over him but over the great general. In one of the most spectacularly unselfish acts, oblivious of his own lost arm, he proceeded to mourn Turenne. Madame de Sévigné added, "M. de La Rochefoucauld pleure lui-même, en admirant la noblesse de ce sentiment" (I, 798). And Mademoiselle de la Vallière, taking her vows on entering the Carmelite cloister, "fit donc cette action, cette belle et courageuse personne, comme toutes les autres de sa vie, d'une manière noble et chamante" (I, 728). Madame de Sévigné was highly impressed by all such actions, and she unhesitatingly extolled them and

magnified their value with certain constantly recurring terms. An adjective like beau appears under such disparate circumstances as : "ce beau gouvernement [de Bretagne]" (III, 587); "cette belle compagnie à cheval" (Her grandson's regiment) (III, 298); Fléchier's Vie de Théodose as "une si belle vie" (III, 605); and even her newly resumed correspondance to Bussy which she called, "cette belle action" (I, 159).

This profoundly idealistic outlook which craved to see the great and good in things was firmly rooted in the ideology of the aristocratic nobility of which Madame de Sévigné was a part. So much of what she exalted--majesty, heroism, greatness--were considered the attributes of nobility itself. The composition of this elevated and closed aristocratic society was such that it permitted her to exhibit a system of values far above what she would have considered an ordinary level. We have already cited her avowal of a predilection for "toutes les choses extra-ordinaires" (II, 338). The word "extraordinary" in its fullest literal significance of "being beyond and exceeding the common order" is the best word to characterize her outlook on life, so deeply aristocratic.

In a letter to her cousin Bussy, dated 1668, she discussed a family genealogy Bussy was writing. She expressed her pride at being a member of the aristocracy through an especially important lineage. She said, "Il y a plaisir d'étaler une bonne chevalerie, quand on y est obligé" (I, 158), While the twentieth century might condemn her for her ancestor-worship, she could in all justice exhibit her moderate pride in that nobility on which her era placed such great emphasis. When, in 1685, Bussy sent her a copy of the completed genealogy, she was pleased with the obscure origins of her family, since the most distant ancestor that could be cited had lived over five hundred years before. By then, the family had become already powerful and an imposingly noble one: "Ce commencement de maison me plaît fort.... Il y a peu de gens qui puissent trouver une si belle tête" (III, 96). Her enthusiasm and feeling of aristocratic well-being was revealed in still another statement to Bussy: "J'en suis charmée, et touchée d'une véritable joie que vous ayez au moins tiré de vos malheurs... la connoissance de ce que vous êtes" (III, 96). She was fully aware of her nobility, not only on the Rabutin side but also through marriage to the Sévignés, whose ancestors she listed when all the Breton nobles

were legally obliged to prove their descent: "ceux qui...ont le plus [de noblesse], ont pris plaisir de se servir de cette occasion pour étaler leur marchandise. Voici la nôtre" (I, 160).

This woman, then, who was of such an extraordinary background and who was living a life relatively isolated from the common lot, could often very easily indulge in the basic idealism of noble values. Madame de Sévígné was far removed from what we today would consider practical everyday reality. Thus, she would permit herself to concentrate on the most refined things of life, to center her attention on the highest social spheres, and to revel in a somewhat imaginary, fictitious order of things. The aristocractic life, already enormously exalted by the very distinction it made between the noble and the common man, became for Madame de Sévigné even more elevated into an artistically-fashioned and highly aesthetic form of existence.

The most candid statements she made concerning nobility and all its trappings came in 1689, while Madame de Grignan was being lavishly received at Avignon, "toute à la grande, toute brillante" (III, 457).

She looked upon the privileges of nobility as having been bestowed by God, and she felt secure in a moderate enjoyment of such distinctions: "en vérité, il n'est pas naturel de ne point aimer quelquefois des places qui sont au-dessus des autres" (III, 457). "Cela est...dans l' ordre de Dieu," she maintained. "Je comprends que Dieu vous ayant donné la...place, avec tous les agréments, toutes les distinctions, et les marques de confiance que vous avez encore, en vérité il n'y auroit pas de raison ni de sincérité à trouver que c'est la plus ridicule et la plus désagréable chose du Monde" (III, 457). And, in another letter on the same reception at Avignon, she discussed the special distinction of the cordon bleu Louis XIV had bestowed on certain nobles, including the Grignans. She began her letter with a succession of exclamations on the beauty of the ceremonies and of the martial music, "cette manière de vous saluer si belle et si respectueuse; la bonne mine de M. de Grignan...si à propos..." (III, 462-463). She admitted that the trappings of nobility were properly on display at such occasions: "Voilà justement la place des cordons bleus: "C'est

pour cela qu'ils sont faits" (III, 463). Nobility, she felt, had the perfect right to display their wealth, power, and aristocratic bearing. The use of adornment to accentuate such display was wonderful: "ces sortes de parures sont justement faites pour les gens de la naissance et de la dignité de M. de Grignan." Of course, it had to be done with taste and care: "L'ostentation des personnes modestes n'offense point l'orgeuil des autres: c'est que ce n'est point de l'ostentation ni de l'orgueil, et qu'on fait justice au vrai mérite" (III, 463). In this quote Madame de Sévígné dwelled on the negative aspect of "ostentation," which connotes the vain, ambitious showing off of something calculated to win admiration. Instead, we must insist on a more noble aspect, that of pomp, the opposite of that which in ostentation is considered arrogant. It is in this aura of pomp that Madame de Sévigné looked at life. We can see her as she described herself in 1675, in a small boat on the Loire, arriving by night at the Lavardin château at Nantes, being received by the Marquis de Lavardin and many other nobles, all carrying torches. "Du milieu de la rivière cette scène étoit

admirable," she said, but the self-assurance and self-admiration of her succeeding comment is important: "elle donna une grande idée de moi à mes bateliers" (I, 855). She exhibited the same playful desire for personal display when she wrote: "la poste m'attend, comme si j'étois gouvernante du Maine, et je prends plaisir de la faire attendre, par grandeur" (I, 430).

Erich Auerbach, in his study subtitled The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, has pointed out that in the tragedies of Racine we find a most refined, tragic personage unknown to antiquity. In him appear neither the everyday aspects of common actions nor "creatural characteristics."[3] This tragic personage is greatly exalted, completely conscious of his princely rank, unconcerned with the practical aspects of his actual function of rulership, and isolated in a sublime, tragic "posture." And, we can say, this same extraordinary, exalted and isolated conception of reality is present in Madame de Sévigné. It is present, however, somewhat less strongly than

[3]Mimesis (Princeton, 1953), pp. 370-394.

it is in Racine, since life is only too real and the most powerful imagination cannot make life completely artificial. The letters, after all, were primarily a form of everyday communication and would necessarily have to convey some harsh reality. Nonetheless, the comparison between the theatrical world of Racine and the world of Madame de Sévigné is interesting, because it shows that the interpretation we have offered of Madame de Sévigné in terms of the theatre is a valid one. It shows that Madame de Sévigné's exalted vision of life was commonly found in the theatre of her time, and, inversely, it suggests that the gigantic heroes of the stage were not that much removed from what Madame de Sévigné would imaginatively have liked to consider exalted, everyday existence. For this reason, then, she could make certain statements which have merited for her severe judgments from critics in our own century. We are much less willing to accept today, the imaginative in everyday reality. We are inclined to dismiss such an aesthetic outlook as being highly unrealistic. The most notable of her statements in this respect is contained in her description of Madame Voisin on the day of execution: "A cinq heures on la lia; et

avec une torche à la main, elle parut dans le tombereau, habillée de blanc: c'est une sorte d'habit pour être brûlée" (II, 617). This last phrase, which reveals the most frivolous of curiosities, "what one wears on the way to the stake," seems indifferently cruel. It cannot be understood in its proper sense unless we realize to what extent Madame de Sévigné treated all reality as a form of theatre.

We must not, however, get the false impression that Madame de Sévigné's admiration of unrealistic, theatrical display was always accompanied by her approval of merely shallow, exterior show. It must immediately be pointed out that, more often than not, she tried to discover a perfect coinciding of the exterior image of appearances with an interior reality of the moral order. It will be noted that when she affirmed the Grignans' every right to the ostentatious trappings of nobility, she tried to see this right as established on a sound moral foundation: she said that through external display, "on fait justice au vrai mérite" (III, 463), and she sincerely believed that the Grignans possessed this "vraie mérite." We have already seen how much she was attracted by

virtue when she remarked about Retz's "âme...d'un ordre si supérieur" (I, 729). Indeed, one day in 1675, she remarked to her daughter, "j'admire combien nous estimons les vertus morales" (I, 861). What brought this on was a remark about Monsieur d'Harouys, her cousin, in whom she saw an "esprit supérieur à toutes les choses qui font l'occupation des autres, cette humeur douce et bienfaisante, cette âme... grande" (I, 861). He was, she thought, a veritable model for kings. It is important that while she delighted in observing this man as he appeared to her, she hoped, nonetheless, to find beneath the externals--beneath his "humeur douce" a solid moral basis which was his "grande âme." Consequently, we must insist that Madame de Sévigné placed much importance on both moral values and the external effects they created. In fact, whenever she referred to the hero and talked about things heroic, she was just as concerned with the internal, moral order as she was with externally fantastic acts. This attitude is summed up in her statements about those books in she first became acquainted with the adventurous heroes she admired. La Calprenède's Cléopâtre was one of these, and she very enthusiastically said: "Il y a d'horribles

endroits dans Cleópâtre; mais il y en a de beaux, et la droite vertu est bien dans son trône" (I, 355). Eighteen years later her attitude was unchanged, and she still saw moral excellence exemplified in the literature she read: "je trouvois qu'un jeune homme devenoit généreux et brave en voyant mes héros, et qu'une fille devenoit honnête et sage en lisant Cleópâtre" (III, 598).

Madame de Sévigné's remarks at the death of Turenne best describe all that we have been saying here, for they prove that she did not look upon paraître as something shallow. Of all the great men she ever wrote about, Turenne was the one to whom she devoted the greatest number of letters and the longest, most explicit, laudatory comments. Her first letter of July 31, 1675, related the death of Turenne by canon-fire. He had been "le plus grand capitaine" and "le plus honnête homme du monde" and during the last three months of his life he had observed "une conduite toute miraculeuse." His life, admired by truly religious men, was crowned by the last and most glorious day of his death (I, 780). In her letter of August 6, she added: "Il meurt au milieu de sa gloire. Sa réputation ne pouvait plus augmenter" (I, 786).

She saw the full dramatic value of the sudden, unexpected, and glorius death on the battlefield, which was the surest way for the hero to attract the general attention and admiration his last moments deserved. "Quelquefois, à force de vivre, l'étoile pâlit," she said. "Il est plus sûr de couper dans le vif, principalement pour les héros, dont toutes les actions sont si observées" (I, 786). In letter after letter she described the most dramatic consequences of his death; the cries of the army, the effect of the news on Paris, on the court, the passage of his body through towns and villages on its way to Saint-Denis, and the tearful funeral services there at which she was present. All of these details were concerned with the external impression made by the hero on those observing him, in life and in death. As she said, his actions had been "si observées (I, 786).

Nevertheless, what really impressed Madame de Sévigné was the magnificent example of moral integrity this man left. If we can believe her, no one questioned the spiritual state of his soul: "il n'est pas tombé dans la tête d'aucun dévot qu'elle ne fût pas en bon état: on ne sauroit comprendre que le mal

et le péché pussent être dans son coeur" (I, 805). In fact, she heard explicitly from Turenne's nephew, the Cardinal de Bouillon, that he had been free of all mortal sin (I, 801). So she proceeded to extol and admire this man and she heaped her praises one upon another: "l'innocence de ses moeurs, la pureté de ses intentions, son humilité éloignée de tout sort d'affectation, la solide gloire dont il étoit plein, sans faste et sans ostentation, aimant la vertu pour elle-même, sans se soucier de l'approbation des hommes: une charité généreuse et chrétienne" (I, 805-806). These praises, while so concerned with interior reality, that is, with Turenne's great virtue, are just as concerned with the external impression made by his moral perfection. At one and the same time Madame de Sévigné pierced to the very heart of his intimate being by praising the purity of his intentions, and yet when she mentioned his "solide gloire," she was gaping in admiration at the brilliant external effect his virtue was creating. Obviously, she was unaware of the contradiction she made when she proclaimed that this man, full of <u>gloire</u>, was unconcerned with the approbation of others. In order

to exist, gloire required the admiring eyes of other men. The splendid radiance given off by Turenne's moral perfection would have been useless had there not been the admiring eyes of people like Madame de Sévigné to reflect this radiance back onto Turenne, to make him glorieux. As Descartes defined it in his Traité des passions de l'âme, the very existence of a person's "gloire" depended on others, for "[la] gloire est une espèce de joie fondée sur l'amour qu'on a pour soi-même, et qui vient de l'opinion ou de l'espérance qu'on a d'être loué par quelques autres" (Oeuvres, p. 791). By contrast, then, when Madame de Sévigné wrote that Turenne loved virtue "sans se soucier de l'approbation des hommes," she was undoubtedly thinking of the traditional Christian, ascetic ideal of self-effacing humility. This tradition stressed perfection through good works done unobserved, and saw hypocrisy in the almsgiver who blew his trumpet on the street corner to attract the attention of other men to his good deeds. When she wrote about Turenne's gloire, she was unconsciously projecting onto him what can be commonly called Cornelian heroic values. Starobinski put it so well

in his essay, L'Oeil Vivant, when he said,

> Le héros de Corneille a pour témoin l'univers. Il se sait et se veut exposé aux yeux de tous les peuples et de tous les siècles. Il appelle sur lui les regards du monde; il s'y offre, admirable, éblouissant. Dans chacun de ses mouvements, le héros cornélien entend faire voir quel il est... et il reconquiert, dans le regard étonné de l'univers, une existence désormais transfigurée par la gloire. A travers ce regard, tout lui est rendu au centuple (p. 71).

It is apparent that in such respects, Madame de Sévigné's conception of the hero tended to be like Corneille's. She could not be satisfied with inconspicuous greatness. It had to be displayed and admired by everyone. This is made evident by the fact that she first remarked on Turenne's "charité généreuse et chrétienne," and then proceeded to describe his great gesture of having furnished a needy English regiment with supplies at his own expense. "Vous ai-je pas conté comme il rhabilla ce régiment anglois (il lui en coûta quatorze mille francs), et resta sans argent?" (I, 806). Such a statement shows that she placed just as much emphasis on the grand, magnificent gesture as on the actual virtue of charity which let itself be spectacularly seen. Here, then, is the perfect correspondence of interior reality and

external appearances, the perfect identification of <u>être</u> with <u>paraître</u>. As Madame de Sévigné went on to say in another letter, "rien n'est bon que d'avoir une belle et bonne âme: on la voit en toute chose comme au travers d'un coeur de cristal...Il faut être, il faut être, si l'on veut paroître" (I, 848). She demanded, by virtue of her open sincerity, that there be a correspondence between inner and exterior dignity and greatness; between the impression one gives to society and the reality behind that impression. But by her statement, "il faut être, si l'on veut paraître," she equated <u>être</u> and <u>paraître</u>, and placed just as much stress on appearances, as on the reality underlying the appearances. In fact, the magnificent appearances of virtue on display could have, for Madame de Sévigné, the inestimable value of confirming the greatness of that virtue which would otherwise remain hidden. By such exteriorization, interior reality could, in a sense, acquire an objective, exterior existence of its own. We can apply to Madame de Sévigné's vision of the spectacular virtuous hero what Starobinski says about Corneille's heroes who dazzle their observers by their greatness: "Loin d'être trompeur cet éblouissement consacre l'essence

et la valeur vraie des êtres admirables. L'oeil ébloui est le témoin d'une grandeur insurpassé" (p. 72).

Unfortunately, the world was much too full of people like the hypocritical Bishop of Marseille. So, when Madame de Sévigné found a good man like Turenne, she lavished upon him praise after praise, and ended with a glorification -- a sort of apotheosis -- of his soul which she saw as having gone directly to heaven to be with God Himself: "nul dévot ne s'est advisé de douter que Dieu ne l'eût reçue à bras ouverts" (I, 806). Or again, "une telle âme est bien digne du ciel; elle venoit trop droit de Dieu pour n'y pas retourner" (I, 801). The reason why Madame de Sévigné preferred the strong-willed heroes of Corneille to the conscience-torn heroes of Racine has now become evident. As Jean Rousset stated it, the Cornelian hero is "un personnage d'ostentation".[4] He is the exceptional, exalted being, "à l'âme forte," who offers himself as a spectacle to the public.[5]

[4]Circé et le paon, p. 217.

[5]Paul Bénichou, Morales du Grand Siecle (Paris, 1948), p. 16.

Madame de Sévigné, who glorified Turenne, saw in these heroes the idealization of her many aspirations. As a woman of great sincerity she longed for exceptional moral virtue. As a woman of great imagination she could yield to the seduction of splendid appearances. In the Cornelian hero she found the perfect conformity of appearances to reality. She saw his virtuous, spectacular <u>être</u> of magnificent proportions offering to its viewers an equally grand image of itself. Such display appealed to her much more than the tragic spectacle of Racine's characters. They are refined and exalted, but, as Starobinski says, for the Racinian hero "Être vu n'implique pas la gloire, mais la honte. Tel qu'il se montre, dans son impulsion passionnée, le héros racinien ne peut ni s'approuver lui-même, ni être reconnu par ses rivaux" (p. 73). Paul Bénichou is quite right in pointing out the significance of Madame de Sévigné's statement: "Vive donc notre vieil ami Corneille!" (I, 498).[6] Her use of "vieil," Bénichou says, referred not only to the early dates of Corneille's works but also to an older form of moral inspiration which she saw in him. Such inspiration was based on an optimistic confidence in the power of the human will. It pre-dated the spread of pessimistic,

[6]Cited by Bénichou, p. 14.

scrupulous, soul-searching Jansenism which would undermine human self-assurance. It must be noted along with Henri Busson that Madame de Sévigné was attracted to Jansenism.[7] However, in this respect, G. Santini makes an interesting reflection on Madame de Sévigné's interest in the writings of Jansenists like Nicole, and sees her interest as a psychological aspiration toward moral perfection, which her own weak temperament craved to imitate.[8] Thus, the theatrical heroes of Corneille and the moral tenets of Nicole's Essais, although of somewhat different inspiration, came together in Madame de Sévigné's readings as representative of those great and heroic virtues which she so admired. One day, in 1671, she commented on Nicole, admitting the impossibility of fulfilling his counsels but confessing blind admiration for such

[7]Henri Busson, La Religion des Classiques, 1660-1685 (Paris, 1948).

[8]G. Santini, ed. Lettere, by Madame de Sévigné (Napoli: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1960), p. 26. Santini's precise statement is that Jansenism expressed for her "la sua aspirazione alla fortezza e alla perfezione morale cui contrastava la fondamentale e consapevole debolezza del suo temperamento."

idealistic perfection: "Il est vrai que c'est une perfection un peu au-dessus de l'humanité, que l'indifférence qu'il veut de nous pour l'estime ou l'improbation du monde" (I, 412). And she added, "mais quoique dans l'exécution on se trouve faible, c'est pourtant un plaisir que de méditer avec lui,"

Here we find a highly idealistic Madame de Sévigné, aspiring after transcending values far surpassing the common order. For this reason did she adore the heroic, and for this reason, as well, did she end up admiring Racine's Esther, In her description of Esther she reveals to us all of her immense aspirations, aspirations which, as we can now see, were ultimately for the divine: "La sainte Écriture est suivie exactement dans cette pièce; tout est beau, tout est grand, tout est traité avec dignité" (III, 341). The letter reporting her presence at a performance of the play itself contained the following comment: "tout y est innocent, tout y est sublime et touchant: cette fidélité de l'histoire sainte donne du respect" (III, 351). In this description the word "sublime" is noteworthy, the direction of Madame de Sévigné's thought was quite similar In the case of the many sermons she took so

much pleasure in. One particular passage on a sermon, given by Bourdaloue in 1675 in honor of Notre-Dame, contains a transcending movement which probably equals Madame de Sévigné's own ecstasy and her aroused religious aspirations: "[le sermon] transporta tout le monde; il étoit d'une force qu'il faisoit trembler les courtisans, et jamais un prédicateur évangélique n'a prêché si hautement et si généreusement les vérités chrétiennes...cela fut poussé au point de la plus haute perfection, et certains endroits furent poussés comme les auroit poussés l'apôtre saint Paul" (I, 705-706). She spoke in exactly the same ecstatic manner when she spoke of Corneille's "divines et sublimes beautés qui nous transportent." She censured Racine's early works because she saw in them "rien de parfaitement beau, rien qui enlève, point de ces tirades de Corneille qui font frissonner" (I, 498).

Her aspiration for the transcendent, evident in these passages which heap sublime adjectives one upon another, was naturally to be very much a part of her

religiousness.[9] Having seen how idealistic Madame de Sévigné was, we cannot pass over the final and most conclusive ideal--her Faith--by which she placed all of her trust in Divine Providence.[10] For faced with the problem of the Divine and the Eternal, she did not hesitate to embrace blindly the Supernatural. She saw the Will of God at work in all the pleasures and sorrows of life.

We have already pointed out how incapable of understanding Cartesianism she felt herself to be and how much a woman of emotion and imagination she was instead. We can add that even what she said of her admiration for the intellectual game of chess proves this. For chess was for Madame de Sévigné, "le plus raisonnable de tous les jeux" (II, 600), but turned out to be too

[9]Many critics have discussed this subject. See, for example, Busson, Religion des Classiques; especially Yvonne Pirat, Madame de Sévigné (Paris, 1959), a revised edition of her earlier La petite-fille d'une grande sainte: Madame de Sévigné, sa spiritualité (Avignon, 1931), and Cécile Gazier, Madame de Sévigné (Paris, 1933).

[10]Here, again, many a critic has dwelled on the possible Jansenistic implications of her trust in Providence. We limit ourselves to the position of Providence in the topic under discussion.

much for her mind to cope with. She felt "la misère et les bornes de l'esprit" and her "imbécillité" (II, 625). Her approach to religion was not intellectual. She was greatly impressed by the writings of Saint Augustine and Saint Paul. When the great problems raised during the century, such as grace, predestination, and infant baptism faced her, she preferred to answer as she felt Saint Augustine had, by saying, "je n'en sais rien" (II, 784). Immediately she relinquished understanding and threw herself blindly upon the mercy of God (III, 739), preferring, in the face of Jansenistic predestination, to insist upon the Will of God rather than on the intricacies and nuances of the problem itself. She maintained that "puisqu'il [Dieu] l'a voulu ainsi, cela est fort bien, et rien ne pouvoit être mieux, sa volonté étant assurément la règle et la justice" (II, 784). She agreed we might form in our minds a very harsh image of God if we stop to consider the possibility of salvation being limited to the few. But, she repeated, neither Saint Augustine nor Saint Paul made any contrived efforts to improve this image of the Creator: "Ils ne marchandent point à dire que Dieu dispose de ses créatures, comme le potier....

Ils ne sont point en peine de faire des compliments pour sauver sa justice...et après tout, que doit-il (Dieu) aux hommes?" (II, 779). The God she envisioned was a God of power. She insisted that for God to be really God, He had to be almighty and supreme. He had to dominate man; no casuist should be able to trifle with the workings of Divine Will. She insisted, "[je] me représente Dieu comme Dieu, comme un maître, comme un souverain créateur et auteur de l'univers, et comme un être très-parfait (II, 779)." And she extended the comparison she had made between man's life and the almost unreal world of the stage, when she saw man as nothing but a blind and ignorant spectator of the workings of Providence (III, 305). For Madame de Sévigné, it was through the working of Providence that God manifested himself to the world and asserted His authority and supremacy. This powerful God appealed to the imaginative element in her. Especially after 1680, when she had what Busson calls a religious crisis, almost every letter she wrote contained some mention of the Divine Will.[11] Even

[11] La Religion des Classiques, p. 37.

before this date, for example, while Madame de Sévigné was at Pomponne, she saw the Secretary of State leave for Paris. She was unaware of the fact that he was no longer a Minister, but a simple man in disgrace. Her reaction was far from despair. She asked, "Croyez-vous que toutes ces conduites soient jetées au hasard?" (II, 530), and, answering her own question, she insisted: "Non, non, gardez-vous-en bien; c'est Dieu qui conduit tout, et dont les desseins sont toujours adorables, quoiqu'ils nous soient amers et inconnus" (II, 530). When Madame de Grignan was deeply concerned over her husband's affairs, her mother consoled her with: "Au nom de Dieu, soutenez-vous, et croyez que les arrangements de la Providence sont quelquefois bien contraires à ce que nous pensons" (I, 738). When Madame de Sévigné's aunt was dying on eve of the long-awaited departure for Grignan, she again optimistically exlaimed, "Que dites-vous des arrangements des choses de ce monde? Pour moi je les admire" (I, 518). And during the siege of Limbourg in June, 1675, she completely abandoned herself to the Will of God saying, "il faut tout abandonner à la Providence" (I, 744).

God, then, was at the simmit of her system of great values. Just as she poeticized reality by comparing people with literary heroes, by seeing everywhere the dramatic and the spectacular, by looking out onto the world in vast and magnificent perspectives, she saw Divine Providence at work in one of the greatest world-visions possible. This was the climax of all of her immense aspirations, aspirations due to a deep feeling of religion and piety.

To conclude, we have seen that the sincere Madame de Sévigné, who was able to compromise with society, was able to do so without feeling that she was violating her conscience. She could very easily relinquish her understanding and enjoy the magnificent appearances offered her. This was possible because she was a woman of vast imagination. She adored great and sublime things such as the magnificent figures of noble heroes whom she met in her readings. She easily extended the realm of fiction into the realm of reality, and, in the confusion that followed, reality became beautifully poetic for her. She saw existence itself as something theatrical. Every moment of life became

aesthetic. Persons and events took on fantastic qualities. Her letters are filled with adjectives like grand and beau. Being a member of the aristocracy, she could indulge in such fantasy, for she was spared constant contact with harsh reality. However, we must not assume that the pleasure she took in spectacle was simply a product of her fancy. In the most ideal situation she sought a correspondence between reality and appearances, between great virtue and magnificent display. She saw this in Turenne, in the great heroes of Corneille's plays, and to an extent, in Jansenistic writings on moral perfection. She was highly idealistic, and she aspired after transcending values far surpassing the common order. She found the perfect fulfillment of such aspirations in religion, and she placed God at the head of her system of great values. This God was, for her, a God of power, who manifested Himself in the workings of His Providence. She was but a humble, admiring spectator, as she had been a spectator in the theatre of life where her contemporaries--the Grignans, Fouquet, Pomponne--were playing.

VIII. HER VIEW OF LOUIS XIV: SYNTHESIS OF HER ATTITUDES

The problem of reality and appearances, as it presented itself to Madame de Sévigné, and her double reaction to it, is well exemplified by her attitudes toward Louis XIV. In the letters we find both criticism and admiration of the King, and it is impossible to proclaim Madame de Sévigné either a severe critic or an abject idolater of the monarchy. She was both. If we have understood the two aspects of Madame de Sévigné's character, the Alceste in her that could nonetheless yield to the Philinte, we will be able to understand her double, contradictory, reaction to Louis XIV.

The French historian, Auguste Bailly, who is also one of Madame de Sévigné's most recent biographers, noted in his book on Le Règne de Louis XIV[1] that when the royal armies crossed the Rhine in June 1672, in a spot least defended by the Dutch, the slight combat which followed was needlessly caused by the impetuous Duc de Longueville who fell upon the already fleeing

[1](Paris, 1946), p. 151.

enemy and managed thereby to get himself killed. What took place then, was more of a scuffle than an all out combat, but in Paris the crossing of the Rhine was celebrated as one of the most fantastic and successful military ventures of all time, a feat of arms unequalled by Caesar himself. Auguste Bailly maintains that Madame de Sévigné was probably much more exact in a statement to her daughter when she said that had it not been for Longueville's impulsiveness the Dutch would have been driven back without bloodshed.

That Madame de Sévigné did not let herself fall into the general enthusiasm for Louis' bravura is partly explained by her all too real feelings over the death of the duc de Longueville and of the other nobles whose families she knew, and by her fear for her own son's peril in the battle. But that this crossing did not ellicit in her any extravagant praise for Louis XIV is significant for another reason. It would prove that Harriet Allentuch has noted, that there is hardly any basis for the "myth" that Madame de Sévigné was one of the "herd of abject idolaters encircling Louis XIV" (p. 128).

Perhaps one of the most important passages noted by critics desirous of pointing out that she did not blindly adore the King is one that appears in her letter of June 13, 1685.[2] The religious order of the Minims in Provence had dedicated a thesis to Louis in which, she says, it clearly appeared that God Himself was but a copy of the King. Boussuet saw this thesis and openly disapproved of it. But it is interesting to note how precisely Madame de Sévigné described the situation: "Monsieur de Meaux...l'a montrée au Roi, disant que sa Majesté ne doit pas la souffrir. Il a été de cet avis: on l'a renvoyée en Sorbonne pour juger: elle a dit qu'il la falloit supprimer" (III, 78). Two things stand out in the passage: first, that Bossuet seems only to have suggested to Louis that the thesis was unsound and, secondly, that the final decision as to whether the thesis could be sound or not rested on the King himself. While Bossuet was the man of the Church, more capable of actually deciding on such matters, the short statement that His Majesty "a été de cet avis"

[2]See, for example, Gaston Boissier, Madame de Sévigné (Paris, 1919), p. 158.

suggests, negatively, that if Louis had not been "de cet avis", the theological error in the thesis would have been left standing. By her very manner of phrasing her statement Madame de Sévigné unconsciously revealed how much a part of her was the traditional monarchic outlook of the time. In her following sentence, however, she openly stated her discontent over such adulation of the King. She used an expression that leads us to believe that she was already greatly annoyed at a situation which placed a King immediately after God in power, authority, and glory: "Trop est trop: je n'eusse jamais soupçonné des Minimes d'en venir à cette extremité" (III, 78).

That she should often have left her frequent descriptions of the King without further comments of a critical nature, goes without saying in a period when the mails were not safe, when Louvois, the surintendant général des postes himself, had to take the most lavish precautions to prevent the interception of his own private letters through those very mails for which he had guaranteed secrecy.[3] But the descriptions

[3]Eugene Vaille, Histoire Générale des Postes Françaises, Vol. IV; Louvois, Surintendant Général des Postes (Paris, 1951), pp. 123-125.

of Louis XIV which we find in Madame de Sévigné's Letters are often very eloquent in betraying her feelings towards the King for the picture she offers us of him from time to time is not exactly complimentary.

In the early series of letters we have from the period of Fouquet's trial in 1664, a time when Madame de Sévigné was apparently at court with Marguerite and therefore closer to the young Louis XIV, we find important references to him. An especially well-known one is found in her letter of December 1. She related that one day the King, who was dabbling in poetry, asked the Maréchal de Gramont whether he liked a certain madrigal which he himself had found unpleasing. Thinking that the way was open for safe, unfavorable criticism, the Maréchal promptly declared the madrigal "le plus sot et le plus ridicule" that he had ever read (I, 131). The King led him on even further, making him declare "que celui qui l'a fait est bien fat." Only then did Louis chose to admit that it was he who had composed the madrigal. Madame de Sévígné concluded: "Pour moi, qui aime toujours à faire des reflexions, je voudrois qui le Roi en fit là-dessus, et qu'il jugeât par là combien il est loin de connoître jamais la vérité" (I, 132).

How clear her insight was into the intrigues at court is revealed in the above statement made at a time she seemed anxious to exhonerate the person of the King. Her letter of December 11, 1664, related certain injustices in the Fouquet affair, which she was sure Louis' ministers had presented before him in quite an unfavorable manner: "N'êtes-vous point désespéré qu'on fasse entendre les choses de cette façon-là à un prince qui aimeroit la justice et la vérité s'il les connoissoit?" (I, 138). That at his royal lever he should declare Fouquet a dangerous man was explained by her in this manner: "voilà ce qu'on lui met dans la tête" (I, 138). Her confidence in Louis was shaken when eleven days later, in reference to him, she impetuously quoted a line from Vergil, which asked whether anger could enter into the hearts of the "Gods." She had to deny it: "De telles vengeances rudes et basses ne sauroint partir d'un coeur comme celui de notre maître. On se sert de son nom, et on le profane" (I, 145). But, only eight more days later, after she had actually observed Louis at a court ballet, she limited herself to hoping against hope for the liberation of Fouquet, since Louis was now comparable to the character Goffredo in Tasso's

Jerusalem Delivered, for he suddently appeared as immovable, inspiring more fear than hope by his "rigida sembianza". "Cependant je me garde bien de me décourager" (I, 147), she insisted, without any grounds whatsoever for her hope.

By 1672, she saw the King in a different light. We shall have to cite but one example of her many passive descriptions of the King's behavior. What makes these passages so interesting is the fact that they are apparently presented to us in such an impartial fashion. However, it is evident that Madame de Sévigné was deliberately illusive and playful, and we can detect in small details what she was really thinking. We can look at her letter dated June 13, 1672. The King had granted Monsieur de Laurière the position of Sénéchal of Poitou on the request of his brother-in-law, Monsieur de Montausier, only to discover that the Comte de Matha actually deserved the position, an hereditary one in his family. Louis then undertook to promise Laurière another post, if he relinquished his present one, but all the King received in turn was a letter from Montausier telling of Laurière's impossibility to resign, since he had

already accepted "les compliments dans la province." The King, Montausier suggested, could give another position to Matha. Madame de Sévigné continued: "Le Roi fut piqué, et se mordant les lèvres: 'Eh bien! dit il, je la lui laisse pour trois ans; mais je la donne ensuite pour toujours au petit Matha'" (I, 569). The detail "se mordant les lèvres" gives a good visual image of the anger Louis had inside him over these brazen nobles, an anger which he unpityingly expressed by his punhishment of their boldness. And that Madame de Sévigné fully sensed his treachery is hinted at in her next remark, addressed distinctly to the Comte de Grignan, who was related to Montausier, but who depended on the King's good graces to succeed in his own position. Her statement echoes like a "beware!": "C'étoit à M. de Grignan que je devois mander ceci" (I, 569).

The crossing of the Rhine chronologically followed this letter by only a few days. We have already seen one of her comments on the battle. Another, on June 27, seems a bit more enthusiastic, but her conclusion is so startling that it attracts our immediate interest. First we read, "Cette victoire

est admirable, et fait voir que rien ne peut résister aux forces et à la conduite de Sa Majesté" (I, 578). But this is followed by: "Le plus sûr, c'est de l'honorer et de le craindre, et de n'en parler qu'avec admiration" (I, 578). Honor out of fear is quite the contrary of adulation, and any admiration she would have expressed at this point would be the result of a negative constraint of not daring to say anything else. That Louis was capable and powerful was undeniable. She knew absolutism could not be opposed, so she acquiesced, but she still did not refrain from looking beneath the King's grand appearances. This is attested to by her bold statement concerning the French defeat at Consaarbruck which Louis was trying to conceal by means of moderated and subdued accounts: "Voilà ce que Sa Majesté a dit; mais à Paris on dit et on croit savoir que c'est une vraie déroute" (I, 804). The strength of her affirmation is more than positive in her last phrase: "Toute l'infanterie a été défaite, et la cavalerie en fuite et en désordre" (I, 804).

The death of Turenne, as we noted, made a great impression upon Madame de Sévigné, but what troubled her immensely was that in the midst of the intrigues

of Louis' two mistresses, each struggling to belong alone to the King, the death of the great hero went forgotten: "... à quel point la perte du héros a été promptement oubliée dans cette maison: ç'a été une chose scandaleuse" (I, 793). We can detect how little she esteemed the behavior of these women, when several letters later she found it incessary to affirm that the great and noble soul of Turenne could not be that easily forgotten. She suggested, by contrast, that his goodness was of far greater worth than the bickering of certain lower creatures, and that nonetheless there were still many more ideal-minded people around who could not easily turn away from such an example of great virture. Her precise words were: "Ne croyez point...que son souvenir soit fini..., ce fleuve qui entraîne tout, n'entraine pas sitôt une telle mémoire; elle est consacrée à l'immortalité, et même dans le coeur d'une infinité de gens dont les sentiments sont fixés sur ce sujet" (I, 805).

We have already seen some examples of Madame de Sévigné's reports on the King's mistresses. Phrases such as "Quanto joue en robe de chambre avec la dame du château" (I, 820) cannot be taken as simply passive remarks on royal behavior. Quanto or Quantova was

the code-word she used in the mails for Montespan, and "la dame du château" referred to the Queen sho had to feel herself honored to be in the presence of her husband and his informally-clad mistress. There is an ironic tone underlying these narratives as, for example, in the repetitive ami and amie she uses to signify Louis and Maintenon: "cette belle amitié de Mme de Montespan et de son amie qui voyage est une véritable aversion.... C'est que l'amie est d'un orgueil qui la rend revoltée contre les ordres de l'autre.... On gronde l'ami d'avoir trop d'amitié pour cette glorieuse" (I, 172). The same ironic tone is present when Madame de Sévigné refers to Maintenon's friends as "les amis de l'amie" (I, 792), or when she writes that Maintenon "veut bien être au père [Louis], mais non à la mère [Montespan]" (I, 792). The playfulness and mischievous intent of the code words Madame de Sévigné uses suggest a hidden intention to ridicule and criticize the actions of these personages. It becomes especially evident in another comment she makes just after her visit to Versailles where she saw the Queen's own ladies-in-waiting actually in the service of Montespan at court games, at suppers and concerts. Her surprise is obvious: "Rien n'est caché,

rien n'est secret; les promenades en triomphe: cet air déplairoit encore plus à une femme [Maintenon] qui seroit un peu jalouse; mais tout le monde est content" (I, 792). And while everyone seemed satisfied with this basically corrupt situation, Madame de Sévigné, it appears, was troubled.

A very harsh view of Louis XIV as a cruel and heartless man is glimpsed in a comparatively short paragraph found in her letter of August 21, 1675, dating from the same general period we have so far been discussing. It is remarable that it should follow, in her order of thought, a paragraph on the affair of the new maréchaux which told how Pomponne had heard straight from the King that it was displeasing to him to see the title of Monseigneur refused to men like the Maréchal de Vivonne. Everyone, by royal command, should be prepared to observe the new order of things. We can sense Madame de Sévigné's feelings when she says with trepidation, "La royauté est établie au delà de ce que vous pouvez vous imaginer: on ne se lève plus, et on ne regarde personne" (I, 821). As proof of it she related the following account which, especially in this case, deserves citation in full in

order to appreciate its forcefulness: (The capitalized "Elle" refers to "Sa Majesté")

> L'autre jour, une pauvre mère toute en pleurs, qui a perdu le plus joli garcon du monde, demandoit sa charge à Sa Majesté, Elle passa; ensuite, et toute à genoux, cette pauvre Madame de Froulai se traina à ses pieds, lui demandant avec des cris et des sanglots qu'Elle eût pitié d'elle; Elle passa sans s'arrêter (I, 821).

The sharp contrast of the pitiless King and the pitiable implorer is overwhelming. It is recorded with the utmost restraint, but Madame de Sévigné's use of the adjective "pauvre" conveys an intellectual and emotional evaluation, which directs our own sentiments to the cause of Madame de Froulai.

Critics have not often been wrong in noticing Madame de Sévigné's Frondeur tendencies and they are right in recalling that her husband had actively participated in the Fronde on the side of the revolting nobles, in the company of her cousin, Bussy, and her friend Retz[4]. Indeed, she had a general tendency to bring up past times in comparison to the present system, and it is probably this liberty of the old

[4]See, for example, Mesnard, GEF, I, 73.

nobility which was still in her that made it possible for her to sense that all was not well under Louis XIV. We have just pointed out above how she said, "la royauté est établie au delà de ce que vous pouvez vous imaginer" (I, 821), and this type of statement, which reveals a sort of amazement at the achievements of absolutism, often reappears in the letters. Once, while mentioning that all services rendered to the King outside of Versailles, went unnoticed and unrewarded, she betrayed her yearning for a happier past saying, "c'étoit autrefois le contraire" (II, 563).

In 1689, when the King removed from the Governor of Brittany, the Duc de Chaulnes, the independent right to choose his own <u>députés</u> to Versailles, Madame de Sévigné dashed off an extremely long letter, exposing many of her thoughts on the great centralization taking place in the French government. She revealed her <u>Frondeur</u> tendencies in the terms in which she spoke of the position of grandeur which belonged to the noble aristocrat, but this is not too astonishing, if we consider that Madame de Sévigné was sixty-three years of age by this date and had been brought up with a different outlook on the concept of the aristocracy. Yet, at the same time, it is very interesting to see her observations, for while they are intended for the

support of the noble prerogative, they reveal a criticism of the absolute subjection the foolish nobles themselves had accepted before the person of the King. Madame de Sévigné thereby struck out at a system which, in the long run, she saw as ridiculous.

She started out by paraphrasing the words of the Duc de Chaulnes which convey the idea, again, of what former days were like, words which for this reason interested Madame de Sévigné: "Il nous disoit... qu'il n'étoit plus le maître comme autrefois, qu'il falloit venir un peu montrer son visage à la cour" (III, 586). She next spoke out for the independent rights which belonged historically to the provinces: "Trouvez-vous vien noble et bien juste de se faire un mérite de dégrader ce beau gouvernement?" (III, 587). But then, in portraying the poor, hard-working noble, she implied the very folly of these nobles themselves, who in their blind adulation were basically responsible for the loss of their honors: "Hélas! ces pauvres gouverneurs, que ne font-ils point pour plaire a leur maître? Avec quelle joie avec quel zèle ne courent-ils point à l'hôpital pour son service?" They become self-effacing, to the very detriment of their own health and private interests, and if they want to

act grandly, "faire les rois", "n'est-ce pas pour le service du vrai roi?" (II, 587). In the end she referred once more to the theatrical term, "comedy," for a comparison" "Hélas! ils sont si passionnés pour sa personne, qu'ils ne souhaitent que de quitter ces grands rôles de comédie, pour le venir regarder à Versailles...." (III, 587). Madame de Sévigné took the side of the nobles, but with a certain feeling of futility that makes us feel that she sensed how purposeless were their efforts to please the King, and how ridiculous the noble made himself by his servitude.

It is her letter of March 13, 1680, that contains one of her longest pieces of explicit advice to the Grignans on their relationship to the King and his court. In it, Madame de Sévigné exposed her own awareness of how much the court had changed since the days of her youth, and she set down a statement of policy, very much in keeping with her general attitude towards society which we have already seen.

In this letter her opening phrase suggests her as an observer of change: "Ce n'est plus un pays étranger que la cour, c'est le lieu où il doit être: on est à son devoir, on a une contenance" (II, 639-640).

Only by being at court could one really observe for oneself all the nuances of everyday occurrences. She therefore told her daughter and son-in-law that their reluctance to travel up to Versailles made them appear out-of-date, and as if they belonged to another generation: "je vous prie tous deux de vous mirer et de voir si vous êtes de la vieille cour." Here she actually seems to have been speaking from her own experience and knowledge of the court of earlier days, but it is significant that after a very lengthy encouragement, with assurances of a good reception for them at Versailles, she concluded that, if she were the Grignans, "Je tacherois donc, mes chers enfants, de me mettre en état de venir un peu tâter la Providence, prendre part au bonheur de mes cadets, et vivre avec les vivants" (II, 640). We have already seen elsewhere that to "live among the living," to accept society and politics such as they are, is what she believed in doing on the practical level, and thus it is not surprising if, in the end, in the presence of His Majesty himself, impressionable as she was, she let herself be caught by the royal spell and yielded to the great impression the King made on those who came into his presence.

In his Histore amoureuse Bussy had chided Madame de Sévigné for being so susceptible to the impression the King made on her by dancing with her one evening at Versailles. He maliciously quoted her as over-enthusiastically crying out "Vive le roi!" and saying, "Il faut avouer que le roi a de grandes qualités; je crois qu'il obscurcira la gloire de tous ses predecesseurs."[5] Bussy saw her easy impressionability, and we too can see how susceptible she was to Louis' charm in her letter on Esther. It was after having watched the play that she was singularly honored by the King who came over to her seat to exchange a few words with her. We have already seen elsewhere how much importance she placed on her own attention and reaction to the play, how she studied every one of her movements, and every muffled word of praise which she uttered during the performance. In the exchange she had with His Majesty afterwards she seems extremely respectful. She noted that she responded to his opening words "sans m'étonner," saying, "'Sire, je suis charmée; ce que je sens est au-dessus des paroles'" (III, 351). Her very tone suggests her exultation over the fact that he should have chosen to address her. She succeeded beautifully in conveying

[5]Cited by Mesnard, I, 95.

this when at the very end of their exchange she wrote, "Et puis Sa Majesté s'en alla, et me laissa l'object de l'envie." She followed this by noting that Monsieur le Prince et Madame la Princesse also "vinrent me dire un mot" and Madame de Maintenon, "un éclair." How she bathed in the royal limelight is further seen in her statement: "je répondis à tout, car j'étois en fortune," and later she told the Chevalier de Grignan "tout naivement mes petites prospérités, ne voulant point les cachoter sans savoir pourquoi..." (III, 351).

Beneath all this there seems to lie a feeling of tremendous excitement, and, knowing Madame de Sévigné's exuberance and uncontrollable emotions we can understand why she felt urged to relate her "prospérités...sans savoir pourquoi." She continued in this vein, affirming again, with full assurance to her daughter, that the Chevalier did not find in her "ni une sotte vanité, ni un transport de bourgeoisie: demandez-lui" (II, 352). As a result, we never quite notice, as Auguste Bailly has pointed out, that Louis' words to her amounted to practically nothing in terms of concrete value, for what he had said was simply, "'Madame, je suis assuré que vous avez été content,'" and "'Racine a bien de l'esprit '" (III, 351).

Bailly puts it very well when he says that she seriously gathered up these words of the master, herself insensitive to their meaninglessness, for, "tombés de la bouche royale, ce sont des perles et des diamants."[6]

Madame de Sévigné's admiration for Louis XIV was not limited only to personal contacts she had with him. Although she might have disagreed with his treatment of his subjects, with his mistresses, his provincial politics, his absolutism, she revered him for his great and magnificant gestures, for that "instinct d'une majesté théâtrale", which historians like Bailly have seen in him (p. 96). Every moment of the King's life had acquired a theatrical character, and he had learned to play his role of perfect king and superhuman creature with the utmost skill. He instituted elaborate ritual and ceremony to accompany his most ordinary gesture, and it was to this that Madame de Sévigné was not in the least insensitive. She admired the King's sublime and splendid aspects, for, in his taste for the theatrical, in his possession of the most lavish theatrical accessories available,

[6]Bailly, Le règne de Louis XIV, p. 110. Hereafter, references to this appear directly in my text.

and in his perfect assumption of the grandest and most perfect role conceivable, he might well have been the most honnête homme of his century.

Already, in 1672, in the process of recounting the audience Louis had granted to the Dutch Ambassador, Madame de Sévigné had repeated certain details that seem to have attracted her attention and to have merited her recording them. She notes that in haughtily replying to the ambassador from the little country which he saw as a threat to France, "Le Roi prit la parole,...avec une majesté et une grâce merveilleuse,...." (I, 447). His spectacular gestures appear to have charmed her, and so, when he most magnificently received at court James II, the deposed King of England, Madame de Sévigné filled her letters with descriptions which now bear looking into.

The arrival of James II was to take place at Saint-Germain on the Epiphany (or the Feast of Kings), January 6, 1689. In a letter to Bussy on that day she drew a comparison between the feast and the actual events: "Ce sera justement aujourd'hui la véritable fête des rois, bien agréable pour celui qui protège et qui sert de refuge, et bien triste pour celui qui a grand besoin d'un asile" (III, 305). And her

belief that this event offered: "de grands objects and grands sujets de méditation..." reveals how much Madame de Sévigné admired the characteristic of greatness inherent in the situation, in which the two greatest men of France and England would come together in a scene that would render Louis XIV resplendent in his generosity.

That she saw the essential theatricality of the situation is shown by her wanting to send the Abbé Têtu, who was suffering from insomnia, to Saint-Germain for the distraction which the spectable of the arrival of the new court would offer him: "il cherche des spectacles...en peut-on voir un plus grand et plus digne de faire de grandes diversions?" (III, 310). Her use here of the words grand and digne entail a value judgment which informs us of how much esteem she attached to the extraordinary event, which so aroused her imagination.

It becomes even clearer in a few lines she wrote as introduction to the actual details of the arrival of Their English Majesties, for she compared Louis XIV with the Divine God, Himself, because of the great ostentation of kindness and mercy he made upon receiving

the exiled rulers: "Cependant le Roi fait pour ces Majestés angloises des choses toutes divines; car n'est-ce point être l'image du Tout-Puissant que de soutenir un roi chassé, trahi, abandonné comme il est?" (III, 310). Once again she revealed her awareness of the inherent theatricality of the character of the King and she gave it full approval: "La belle âme du Roi se plaît à jouer ce grand rôle (III, 310). She absorbed every single detail of each of Louis' magnificant gestures and, without excusing her wealth of detail as she had often done elsewhere,[7] she proceeded to relate how the King actually went out in person to receive the Queen and the Prince of Wales, accompanied by his whole court in a spectacular procession of one hundred carriages each drawn by six horses. She carefully remarked that he actually got out of his own carriage for the little Prince of Wales, "et ne voulut pas que ce petit enfant, beau comme un ange, à ce qu'on dit, descendit; il l'embrassa tendrement" (III, 311). We can imagine this touching

[7]See, for example, her long letter describing every detail of the pompes funèbres of the Chancellier Séguier, after which she wrote: "...quelle espèce de lettre est-ce ici? Je pense que je suis folle. A quoi peut servir une si grande narration? Vraiment j'ai bien contenté le desir que j'avois de conter" (I, 541).

scene of the little Prince embraced by the great King, and we can be sure Louis was aware of the spectacular quality of this gesture. Madame de Sévigné then carefully went on to note how he greeted the Queen, put her on his right in his own carriage, introduced her to Monseigneur and Monsieur, had her magnificently served at Saint-Germain, and regaled her with a gift of "six mille louis d'or." All this was repeated again when James II arrived the following day, and again Madame de Sévigné found it necessary to note carefully that Louis anticipated him and went to meet him "au bout de la salle des gardes." The scene was very touching when "le roi d'Angleterre se baissa fort, comme s'il eût voulu embrasser ses genoux; le Roi l'en empêcha et l'embrassa à trois ou quatre reprises fort cordialement" (III, 311).[8]

[8]How much Madame de La Fayette was also sensitive to such grand gesture can be seen in a very similar episode she wrote in her Princesse de Clèves, first published in 1678. The Duke of Alba arrived at the Louvre for his Marriage to Madame: "Le roi attendit lui-même le duc d'Albe à la première porte du Louvre .... Lorsque ce duc fut proche du roi, il voulut lui embrasser les genoux; mais le roi l'en empêcha et le fit marcher à son coté..." (Madame de La Fayette, Romans et Nouvelles, ed. Emile Magne (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1961), p. 342.

Louis left James with something even grander, his palace of Saint-Germain itself, which he could treat as his own home.

How much all of this intrigued her can still be seen in her subsequent letters which show her absorbed in the slightest details of court behavior and the problem of precedence caused by the arrival of the English court (III, 315). When the Queen of England went to Versailles to visit Madame la Dauphine, she took care to specify that, "Le Roi alla la recevoir à son carrosse" and, when she was ready to leave, "le Roi se fit avertir, et la remit dans son carrosse" (III, 319).

But what received even greater admiration from Madame de Sévigné was the departure of the King of England at the end of the following March, when Louis not only offered to James arms for ten thousand men but actually reached the height of magnanimity by granting him his own arms. This splendid gesture brought forth a great deal of applause from Madame de Sévigné whose powerful and easily impressed imagination elaborated it into a fantastic, sublime, and almost unreal deed of the type she found only in the words of a La Calprenède, whom she adored. "Nos romans ne

faisoient rien de plus galant," she said, adding, "Que ne fera point ce roi brave et malheureux avec ces armes toujours victorieuses?" (III, 360). Her imagination, as we have already seen, poetically glorified these arms: "Le voilà donc avec le casque, la cuirasse de Renaud, d"Amadis, et de tous nos paladins les plus célèbres". Her final approbation was summed as follows: "Il n'y a point d'offres de toutes choses que le Roi ne lui ait faites: la générosité, la magnanimité ne passe point plus loin..." (III, 360). When the Chevalier de Grignan returned from Versailles with further news of the departure, it gave her another occasion to write to her daughter, listing in great detail all of the many gifts Louis gave to James: "Il la comblé de toutes choses, et grandes, et petites" (III, 367). The French King's clever and paradoxical goodbye, expressing hope never to see the King of England again, who would only return if he were unable to secure his throne, was followed by Madame de Sévigné's adulant remark: "Peut-on mieux dire?" (III, 367). By her style of heaping up the great names of the virtues, she revealed all her enthusiasm, admiration, and transport. She said, "enfin la générosité, la magnificence, la magnanimité n'on jamais tant paru que dans cette occasion" (III, 367). She was happy to repeat all

of the same in a letter to the Président de Moulceau to whom she wrote on the same day, recounting and relisting the many gifts, and again quoting Louis' remarks, which she closed with an even more elaborate statement: "Rien n'est mieux dit, rien n'est plus juste: jamais la générosité, la magnificence, la magnanimité, n'ont été exercées comme elles l'ont été par Sa Majesté" (III, 369).

So it is that despite the harsh truth of reality which Madame de Sévigné saw at times beneath the spendid façade of the King and his court, she preferred, at other moments, to enjoy the appearances of splendor which the very glory of the King offered her. It is significant that in one of the phrases we have just quoted she should strike up the old theme of <u>être</u> and <u>paraître</u>, and this time place most of her attention on <u>paraître</u>: "la générosité, la magnificence, la magnanimité n'ont jamais tant <u>paru</u>..." (III, 367). As in the case of Turenne, she loved the great virtues, but she appreciated them when they were ostensibly seen. When Louis lavishly displayed such virtures, Madame de Sévigné was more than willing to admit that such appearances corresponded to reality, and she overlooked all of her former criticisms of the King.

It was the characteristic of ostentation and extraordinary display that stirred her imagination and aroused her fancy so that the cruel facts of cold reality easily went forgotten out of delight for the extravagant.

IX. CONCLUSION

In our investigation of Madame de Sévigné's response to the problem of être and paraître we began with the presentation of some biographical material on her. Her contemporaries, more recent researchers, and indications in her letters show that, to all appearances, she was actively engaged in the honnête society of her time. A brief look at the theories of honnêteté showed how, as the seventeenth century passed, this society came to emphasize great calculation and self-control in all human dealings. Life became highly artificial and the term "honnête" lost its original meaning since the exterior honnête homme did not necessarily correspond to an interior homme de bien.

Madame de Sévigné reacted in two ways to this situation. As we can see in her highly emotional letters, she often lacked self-control, She was very exuberant, and, as a result, she was often indiscreet. She tended to externalize emotion in tears. It was difficult for her to present a collected façade to society, and her contemporaries, like Tallemant de Réaux and Madame de La Fayette, noticed this. Madame

de Sévigné was a basically sincere woman. Possessing an open personality, she attached great value to true sentiment and its communication. In this respect we have compared her to Molière's Alceste in Le Misanthrope, and we have also detected in her the Alceste-like temptation to withdraw from society when she felt unable to cope with it.

Such a frank and sincere woman was well-equipped to see beneath the false mask of social appearances. She actually used the term "mask" on certain occasions to indicate the discrepancy between internal reality and exterior impressions. She saw, for example, how the politeness of her dying aunt had been but a "mask" concealing her desire to have her niece and her brother at her bedside. She saw the unworthiness of certain people who ostentatiously bore grand titles and names. She even composed her own phrase to convey the dichotomy of reality and appearances: "les dessous des cartes."

Madame de Sévigné, however, was not the person to alter her life because of her observations. She remained relatively undisturbed, and limited herself to taking pleasure in her discoveries which she called

"folies" and "divertissements". She did not remain completely serious in her reflections. The other side of Madame de Sévigné's character overlooked the stress she often placed on sincerity. She took pleasure in admiring composed appearances in people. In contrast to the temperamental Mademoiselle, she appreciated the controlled Lauzun. She often looked upon people as personnages ostentatoires rather than as thinking and feeling personnages intimes. She could accept the mask of honnêteté. From this point of view she observed Fouquet, Olivier d'Ormesson, Pomponne, La Rochefoucauld, her own daughter. She saw and admired them as individuals presenting themselves to others. Despite her desire for candidness in human relations, she was easily impressed by artificial appearances.

Faced with the most complicated intrigues, Madame de Sévigné, who at the outset had appeared to be another Alceste, was nonetheless capable of playing the role of the compromising Philinte. When necessity demanded it, she was capable of dissimulation. Her word for it was "chicaner". "Il faut vivre avec les vivants," she insited (III, 451). She used shrewd, honnête stratagems in dealing with her friends in what

she still paradoxically considered a "sincere" manner. She handled the crafty Bishop of Marseilles with what she called an "amitié sincère", which was for all purposes a "mask" of friendship. Her description of the performance of Esther presents a masterpiece of self-conscious acting on her part. She often thought of herself and others as performers in the theatre of society and she made frequent use of terminology derived from the theatre.

If Madame de Sévigné who craved sincerity was also able to admire the composed façade of others and could enjoy playing the role of Philinte, it was because she was a woman of vast imagination who could avoid logic in life, and take refuge in fantasy. Her many readings prove this. She loved the romans of La Calprenède, full of exiled and wandering princes, the heroic characters of Tasso's Gerusalemme liberata, Josephus' narrations of the Jewish Wars, the long tirade of Le Cid after his battle with the Moors. She looked upon serious readings such as histories, biographies and memoires from the same imaginative point of view. The real and the fictional became confused in her mind, and the real thereby became magnificently poetic for her. She saw greatness and beauty in almost everything about her. Great events

were considered "spectacles". She constantly compared real-life situations with the dramatic, fictional, mythological and imaginative creations of literature. For example, she looked upon Madame de Montespan building Clagny, Madame de Grignan at Carnavalet and herself at work in the gardens of Les Rochers, as seventeenth-century Queen Didos constructing new Carthages. The letters are filled with words like beau and grand.

This glorified outlook was firmly rooted in the aristocratic ideology. Madame de Sévigné lived a life relatively isolated from the common lot. Moving in the narrowest and highest social spheres she could well afford to indulge in more imaginative things. Hers was an exalted, aesthetic form of existence.

However, we have pointed out that her admiration of unrealistic, dramatic display was not based on merely shallow, exterior show. In the most ideal situations, she saw a perfect correspondence of outward appearances with an interior reality of the moral order. She loved the ostentatious trappings of nobility and, in the case of the Grignans, she saw their right to such ostentation based on a sound moral

foundation: "on fait justice au vrai mérite" (III, 463). As in the case of Turenne, she admired moral excellence spectacularly revealed to the world. By saying, "il faut être, si l'on veut paraître" (I, 848), she placed just as much stress on external impression as on internal reality. She could not be satisfied with inconspicuous greatness. Her view of the hero corresponded to that seen in the plays of Corneille: great virtue given over to universal admiration. For this reason she preferred the gigantic heroes of Corneille to the tragic spectacle of Racine's characters. She saw in Corneille an older, pre-Jansenistic form of moral inspiration. If she was attracted to the Jansenistic writings of authors like Nicole, it was due to her own psychological aspiration toward moral perfection which she saw exemplified in them.

Just as Madame de Sévigné could avoid logic and overlook her desire for sincerity in accepting the polite mask of the compromiser, she did not find it hard to relinquish understanding when she was confronted with the religious problems of her time such as predistination. Her approach to religion was imaginative.

Since she loved to discover the great and the fantastic in things it was natural that she should find fulfillment of this desire in the mysteries of religion. The God she envisioned was a God of power, ostentatiously asserting Himself in the surprising workings of His Providence. What appealed to her in the Divinity was the element of mystery and fantasy which fired her imagination.

The problem of Madame de Sévigné's duplex and contradictory attitude towards Louis XIV which has often puzzled critics now becomes more understandable. As a women of sincerity and moral integrity she resented his politics and his mistresses. But as a woman of imagination, in love with spectacle, she was impressed by his great actions.

Such was Madame de Sévigné, the woman who enjoyed a theatrical existence on the lavish stage which the seventeenth-century offered to her.

Her very vision of the world, while greatly realistic in certain aspects, ended up being one that saw life in highly artificial, illusionistic, superalitive and exalted terms. It was this sort of person who could easily accept the elaborate and fantastic ceremony

of court life, the grand, theatrical setting which was Versailles, the dazzling spectacle of baroque pompes-funèbres, and a highly aesthetic everyday existence for which one donned a finely-studied social mask.

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