

**The Theory and Practice of *Honnêteté* in Jacques Du
Bosc's
L'Honnête femme (1632–36) and *Nouveau recueil de
lettres des dames de ce temps* (1635)**

**by
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By the time the famous writer and courtesan Ninon de Lenclos declared in the late seventeenth century, “Mon Dieu, faites de moi un honnête homme, mais n’en faites jamais une honnête femme,” the definitions of *honnêteté* for women and men had taken on distinctly gendered, and unequal, connotations (qtd. in Duchêne 119). At the end of the century, Antoine Furetière validates this gendered version of *honnêteté* in his *Dictionnaire universel* (1690): “l’*honnêteté* des femmes, c’est la chasteté, la modestie, la pudeur, la retenue, l’*honnêteté* des hommes est une manière d’agir juste, sincère, courtoise, obligeante, civile” (Furetière np). These dissimilarities, however, did not always exist. Noémi Hepp, for example, pinpoints the 1660s as the period in which moralists no longer portrayed women as equal to men in the masculine values of virtue, honor, and courage and began to regard women for their perceived difference from, and complementarity to, men (Hepp 110). *Honnêteté* reflects this split; the predominantly moral definition expressed in the 1630s and 40s highlighted women’s similarities to men whereas the *mondain* ideal of sociability became portrayed as an exclusively masculine type. In contrast, the *honnêtes* women of salon society became ridiculed as “précieuse” for asserting their cultivation and worldliness.¹ Despite the different values placed on men and women for their *honnêteté*, the ideology of *honnêteté* in seventeenth-century French society

¹ Domna Stanton recognizes preciousness as a negative version of *honnêteté*: “*préciosité* (-) and *honnêteté* (+) share the same elitist impulse, the same desire to create a consummately artistic—and of necessity artificial—secondary self designed to exact recognition of superiority through an elaborate strategy of seduction” (Stanton 30).

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had created the need for a common culture between women and men as they cultivated, side-by-side, worldly conversation, different genres of literature, a love of the French language, and a devotion to friendship. Some contemporaries, such as Antoine Gombaud, Chevalier de Méré, a theoretician of worldly conversation, recognized the continued likeness of *honnêtes* men and women, when he stated that “l’un revient à l’autre” (Méré 77). Even La Bruyère, in *Les Caractères*, expressed a desire for women to partake of the positive associations of *honnêteté* associated with men: “Une belle femme qui a les qualités d’un honnête homme est ce qu’il y a au monde d’un commerce plus délicieux: l’on trouve en elle tout le mérite des deux sexes” (La Bruyère 118). Ultimately, women continued to be *honnêtes* in both the moral and *mondain* senses of the word throughout the century; the history of their participation in this ideal, however, did not.

While prevailing critical wisdom today tends to say that only men, not women, were *honnête*, or that women’s *honnêteté* only encompassed their virtue,² some seventeenth-century texts themselves point to a more robust sense of women’s *honnêteté*. Indeed, some would argue that there was more to *honnêteté* than simply sexual virtue, since chastity alone would not suffice to make women good members of worldly society, able to instruct the men who frequented salons. During the first half of the century, and following the arguments of Baldassare Castiglione, Giovanni della Casa, and Michel de Montaigne, Nicolas Faret opens the door for women’s behavior to be qualified as *honnête*, since he discusses women on several occasions in his *L’Honnête homme, ou l’art de plaire à la cour* (1630).³ In this article, we will focus on a

² Roger Duchêne writes that “[l]a chasteté [est] chez la femme la définition même de l’honnêteté” (121).

³ Faret includes several chapters in *L’Honnête homme* which specifically discuss the negative aspects of women’s behavior (“Contre les femmes fardées” [39]; “Que les plus chastes sont souvent les plus sujettes à la médisance” [249]; “Vices odieux en la conversation des Femmes” [251]). Despite this less positive view of feminine characteristics, Faret does contend that women’s virtue is the same as men’s (“Que la vertu des femmes est la mesme que celle des hommes” [243]). Moreover, he discusses at length reasons why men should frequent

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prolific writer situated chronologically between Faret and Furetière: the Franciscan priest Jacques Du Bosc, who published a complementary sequel to Faret's *Honnête homme* in the 1630s: *L'Honnête femme* (1632–36),⁴ which offers a fuller account of women's participation in *honnêteté*. Specifically, we will first show how Du Bosc defines the cultivation of reason and learning as key elements of women's *honnêteté* in *L'Honnête femme*, then examine the depictions of women deploying their judgment socially through correspondence in his *Nouveau Recueil de lettres des dames de ce temps*. Our examination will show a more complicated version of *honnêteté* for women, surpassing the conventionally accepted definition of a chaste, modest woman. We believe it is Du Bosc's version that most powerfully influenced seventeenth-century elite women.

Notwithstanding Faret's comments, the idea of an *honnête* woman was itself controversial during Du Bosc's time; indeed, Colleen Fitzgerald tells us that Du Bosc's contemporaries criticized him for "using *honneste* in the title of his work, for some considered it an exclusively male term" (Fitzgerald, "To Educate or Instruct?" 166).⁵ In *L'Honnête femme*, the first major theorization of *honnêteté* for women, Du Bosc proposes, what he calls in part three of his work, a comprehensive "science for women" which focuses on the development of women's intelligence and moral judgment through the practices of reading,

women ("De la complaisance parmy les femmes" [240]) and why it is necessary to honor and respect them ("Qu'il faut respecter les femmes" [239]; "Raisons pourquoi l'on doit honorer les femmes" [241-42]).

⁴ Since the 1658 edition is the definitive edition (all three volumes with final versions of the essays, all paratextual materials are in their final form [e.g. the dedicatee of volume I is the Duchesse d'Aiguillon rather than Mme de Combalet]), references to *L'Honnête femme* will refer to this edition unless otherwise noted.

⁵ Fitzgerald does not explain this comment but may be referring to Nicolas Perrot d'Ablancourt's equally vague comments in his preface regarding the criticisms of Du Bosc's title (Perrot d'Ablancourt 38, 71).

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conversation, and reflection.⁶ Du Bosc's use of *honnêteté*, then, differs substantially from that of his contemporaries; and the fact that Du Bosc keeps *honnête* in the work's title through its multiple editions suggests strongly that he found the usage to be appropriate. While Du Bosc's work remains largely unknown to scholars today, an obscurity that Jean Mesnard attributes to "the excessive length" of his treatise, Linda Timmermans finds that Du Bosc's ideas in *L'Honnête femme* occupy a special place in the *querelle des femmes*:

Si un rôle de précurseur est quelquefois accordé à Mlle de Gournay [. . .] on attribue le plus souvent au P. Du Boscq le mérite de s'être, le premier, élevé au-dessus des polémiques traditionnelles et d'avoir, dans *L'Honneste Femme* (1632–36), posé les fondements d'une nouvelle problématique, celle de la "science des Dames." (281)

Thus, Du Bosc's approach to *honnêteté* goes beyond questions of morality and *civilité* to articulate questions of women's intellectual cultivation and writing. Indeed, while *L'Honnête femme* provides the argumentation for women's access to knowledge, Du Bosc's companion piece, the *Nouveau recueil de lettres des dames de ce temps* provides examples of the praxis for women to develop *honnêteté*.

The Problem of Definition

Defining the terms *honnête* and *honnêteté* has been a vexing task for scholars of seventeenth-century literature and culture. Not only do the terms have no exact equivalent in English, they refer to a constellation of cultural values and social behaviors that itself remains elusive. As Mesnard notes, for example, the title of Faret's treatise (*L'Honnête homme ou, l'art de plaire à la cour*) was

⁶ Ian Maclean notes that "although *honnête* was at first only chastity for women, its scope did enlarge with Du Bosc's work, however the sense of chastity was never lost for the term connected to women, where it was not part of the *honnête homme*" (122-23).

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simply translated as *The Honest Man* (19). *L'Honnête femme*, however, elicited more nuanced translations in England: *The Compleat Woman* (1639), *The Accomplished Woman* (1656), and *The Excellent Woman* (1692). Yet, Faret's *honnêteté*, far from merely designating an ethical position, was a complex notion involving sociability and seductiveness (Cohen 14). That is, in Michael Moriarty's words, it "was the name of an ideal, a set of valorized practices" (52). The cultural ideology of *honnêteté* functioned as an emerging code of conduct—related to sociability, urbanity and politeness—that transformed elite French society from a military class to a cultural aristocracy. After the violent turmoil of the religious wars of the previous century, seventeenth-century society as a whole and aristocratic members of that society in particular sought to promote peace and stability through the new ideology of *honnêteté*. According to Roger Chartier, this ideology emphasized the art of self-control for the individual in society:

Le procès de civilisation consiste [. . .] dans l'intériorisation individuelle des prohibitions qui, auparavant, étaient imposées de l'extérieur, dans une transformation de l'économie psychique qui fortifie les mécanismes de l'autocontrôle exercé sur les pulsions et émotions et fait passer de la contrainte sociale [Gesellschaftliche Zwang] à l'autocrainte [Selbstzwang]. (xix)

Honnêteté is the name given to this civilizing self-restraint.

Michele Cohen, among others, points out that elite women, who played a key role in this social transformation, were often portrayed as the civilizers of men uninitiated in the ways of polite society (15). The idea that this "civilizing function" serves as women's chief contribution to *honnêteté* has become an oft-repeated commonplace in scholarship on the seventeenth-century. For example, Maurice Magendie, in his two-volume opus *La Politesse mondaine et les théories de l'honnêteté en France au XVIIe siècle, de 1600 à 1660* asserts that women's requirement that men sublimate their sexual drive into more refined, polite behaviors constituted their sole contribution to *honnêteté*. He writes:

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Rien ne peut mieux polir les mœurs des hommes, qu'un commerce suivi avec les dames, à la condition qu'ils cherchent en elle autre chose que la satisfaction matérielle de leurs désirs. [. . .] Ils tâchent de les gagner par l'aisance aimable des manières, l'agrément des paroles, la délicatesse des sentiments [. . .] . (1: 88)

Does women's own *honnêteté* consist then only of the "aisance aimable des manières, l'agrément des paroles, la délicatesse des sentiments"? And if, in fact, it encompasses more than chaste and delicate feelings, does women's *honnêteté* rise to the same level of accomplishment and courtly honor as men's? This last question further complicates scholarship; to Cohen, for example, the terms *honnête homme* and *honnête femme* do not parallel each other: "for women, the ideal of *honnêteté* was inextricably bound up with religion and morality, while for men it was a secular social ideal which ... was related not so much to virtue as to honour" (19). Similarly, Roger Duchêne insists: "Dans une société qui distribue aux hommes et aux femmes des rôles différents, l'honnêteté ne peut être la même chez les deux sexes" (120) More recently, Lewis C. Seifert argues in *Manning the Margins: Masculinity and Writing in Seventeenth-Century France* that *honnêteté* is a "gendered construct" for men alone and that modern critics, like many seventeenth-century writers, have mistakenly assumed it to be "a model for both genders" (21). Mesnard, however, takes the opposite view, basing his opinion on Du Bosc's notion of *honnêteté* in his claim that the ideal of *honnêteté* in the seventeenth century "s'est défini parallèlement pour l'homme et pour la femme, et [. . .] les deux modèles sont superposables" (15-16). To Mesnard, psychological and social differences might account for differences between the *honnête homme* and the *honnête femme*, but not only are both possible, they are necessary to each other.

Aside from these remarks by Mesnard, Duchêne, Seifert, and Cohen, and although scholars have widely studied the *honnête homme* as the embodiment of this new secular social ideal, research into the ideology shaping the *honnête femme* has been scant at best. An initial search of the MLA Bibliography, for

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example, brings up only three articles relating to the French “honnête femme,” while sixty-five appear addressing different aspects of the “honnête homme.” To date, the only extended exploration of the role of the *honnête femme* is found in Suzanne d’Orssaud’s unpublished 1939 thesis, “‘L’Honnête femme’ au XVIIe siècle d’après la société et la littérature” (D’Orssaud). Moreover, works such as Emmanuel Bury’s *Littérature et politesse: L’invention de l’honnête homme (1580–1750)* and Domna Stanton’s *The Aristocrat as Art: A Study of the Honnête Homme and the Dandy in Seventeenth- and Nineteenth-Century Literature* treat the role of women in the ideology of *honnêteté* in the most cursory manner.⁷ Even Magendie’s extensive study on *politesse* does not address the *honnête femme* as an agent in her own right; rather, it shows how the *honnête homme* should interact with ladies in high society. Magendie concludes that women’s influence on men consisted of enforcing their upright morals. He asks:

[L]es femmes avaient-elles, en général, des mœurs assez épurées, pour exercer sur les hommes une action salubre? Evidemment oui, puisqu’en fait cette heureuse influence a existé, et a largement contribué aux progrès de la politesse. Les femmes ont toujours été, par nature et par éducation, plus retenues que les hommes. (1: 101)

Thus, Magendie upholds Furetière’s definition of the *honnête femme* as a woman who is reserved, chaste, and moral, and justifies this view through a primarily essentialist reading.

Given the lack of critical questioning on the role of the *honnête femme*, it is unfortunate that more scholars do not study Du Bosc’s work, and that when it is studied, it is sometimes misread. Cohen interprets *L’Honnête femme* as having a misogynistic message and conflates Du Bosc’s views with those of the much more

⁷ Bury dedicates less than three pages to Du Bosc’s *Honnête femme* and only briefly mentions salonnières such as Des Loges, D’Auchy, Scudéry, and Rambouillet (75-77).

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conservative François de Grenaille (19). William St. Clair and Irmgard Maasen, however, interpret Du Bosc's views more generously: the Franciscan points to ancient authorities (e.g., Plutarch and Seneca) rather than Scripture, praises rather than satirizes women, transforms their "intelligent conversation [. . .] from a penalized vanity into a desirable accomplishment," and above all, following ancient sources such as Plutarch, attributes "masculine" virtues of courage, constancy and prudence to women (4). St. Clair and Maasen write that

[t]his argument is a familiar move from the traditional defense and praise of women in the Renaissance *querelle des femmes*, but while in that rhetorical context it is usually restricted to a few exceptional cases, it contains, at least potentially, the seeds for a much more revolutionary notion of gender equality. (4)

Carolyn Lougee cites Du Bosc in emphasizing this potential in his writing and points to his broader vision for women as integral members of social society. Du Bosc

lamented the assignment of household tasks to women; it was "a tyranny and a custom no less unjust than it is old to eject them from public and private governance as if they were capable only of spinning their distaffs. Their mind is suited to more exalted deeds." (22)⁸

While *L'Honnête femme* by itself offers an invaluable complication of our understanding of the role of women in seventeenth-century France, it is not Du Bosc's only feminocentric work: *Nouveau recueil de lettres des dames de ce temps* first published in 1635 and *La Femme héroïque ou les héroïnes comparées avec les héros en toute sortes de vertus* in 1645.⁹

⁸ Here, Lougee translates a citation from the essay "De la prudence et de la discretion" from the 1632 edition.

⁹ *La Femme héroïque* was later published as *Les Femmes héroïques* in 1659 (Du Bosc, *La Femme héroïque* (1645); Du Bosc, *Les Femmes héroïques* (1659)).

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Written and published at roughly the same time as *L'Honnête femme*, the *Nouveau recueil* is particularly pertinent to the question of women's *honnêteté* in France in the 1630s. At first read, this text appears to be a female response to Faret's *Recueil de lettres nouvelles* (1627), a collection of courtly letters written by professional male writers such as Guez de Balzac, François le Métel de Boisrobert, and Faret. However, more than mere response, the *Nouveau recueil* stages correspondences between *honnêtes* women that, we argue, enact the theory of women's *honnêteté* that Du Bosc spells out in *L'Honnête femme*. That is, in order to be properly understood, *L'Honnête femme* and the *Nouveau recueil* should be read in tandem, as theory and practice, with each work seen in complement to the other.

Who was Jacques du Bosc?

Jacques du Bosc was a Franciscan priest, a *frère mineur de l'observance* or *Cordelier*, who lived in France during the first half of the seventeenth century (1600–1669) (Mesnard 17). Very little is known about his life, but we have numerous indications that he had social and literary ambitions—in addition to his religious career—and he gained a certain measure of success in these arenas. While Du Bosc published prolifically on the religious issues of his day, especially concerning the controversy surrounding the Jansenists (whom he denounced) (Bayle 625), he also participated in the debates concerning women called the *querelle des femmes* (St. Clair and Maassen 1). Jean Chapelain implies that from 1630–40, Du Bosc left the religious life and set out to make his living as a writer through royal patronage (Chapelain 733, 738). We do know that Du Bosc sought the women of the Court to be his benefactresses.¹⁰ He published three volumes of *L'Honnête femme*

¹⁰ While Colleen Fitzgerald questions the notion that Du Bosc had secular ambitions, we are prone to accept Jean Chapelain's assessment that Du Bosc "se desfroqua par desbauche, et se refroqua par ambition. Il ne médite pas moins qu'une mitre et a mis tout le moine au dehors" (Chapelain 738; Fitzgerald, "Authority" 25). In another letter, Chapelain describes Du Bosc in 1641 printing up his own panegyric to the powerful Cardinal Richelieu to distribute to the appreciative members of the newly formed French Academy (733). In addition,

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from 1632 to 1636, dedicating Volumes 1 and 2 to the Duchesse d'Aiguillon (Richelieu's favorite niece, formerly known as Madame de Combalet) and Volume 3 to Louis XIII's sister, regent of the Duchy of Savoy, Christine of France. In 1635, Du Bosc dedicated the *Nouveau recueil de lettres des dames de ce temps* to Mme de Pisieux, an intimate friend of D'Aiguillon and a lady-in-waiting. Both women frequented the Hôtel de Rambouillet. Later, in 1645, he would offer his third feminocentric text, *La Femme héroïque*, to Anne of Austria.¹¹

It is not surprising, then, that Du Bosc would engage the *querelle des femmes* and show women in a positive light. Du Bosc's unique approach, however, breaks with the long-standing rhetorical polemics of the *querelle* in which an author argues aggressively for the superiority or inferiority of women using examples from the ancients, the Bible, and the Church Fathers. Rather, Du Bosc seems to have taken his cue from Marie de Gournay and her *Égalité des hommes et des femmes* (1622) that moves away from this traditional rhetorical approach and engages real questions of women's education. Du Bosc defends women's equality to men by emphasizing their shared morality and reason.

Du Bosc published panegyrics to Louis XIII and Mazarin and maintained friendships with many of the founding members of the *Académie Française*, such as Perrot d'Ablancourt (the author of the apologetic preface to *L'Honnête femme*) and Olivier Patru. Du Bosc's dedications to powerful women of the court and panegyrics to the powerful men of the court strongly suggest he sought patronage based on his secular writings. See also Nicole Mallet (310).

¹¹ These dedications attest to the influence of royal women at this time and the changing attitudes toward women in power. Europe had already seen the successful reigns of Queen Elizabeth I in England and Catherine de' Medici in France during the sixteenth-century. In 1610, Marie de' Medici took power as regent, until her son, Louis XIII, could govern in his own right, just as Anne of Austria would do for her son, Louis XIV. Thus, despite Salic law in France, the French had experienced female rule for much of the previous century. Ian Maclean notes that: "An account of the works published between 1640 and 1647 indicates the volume and importance of writing in honor of women." Maclean points out that François de Grenaille, a prolific writer who imitated Du Bosc with works such as *L'Honnête fille*, *L'Honnête mariage*, and *L'Honnête veuve*, among others, dedicated many of them to Anne of Austria and to the Grande Mademoiselle (76).

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Moreover, he is an admirer and disciple of François de Sales, who, in his *Introduction à la vie dévote* (1609), addresses a series of letters to a woman, Philothea,¹² to instruct her on how to reconcile piety with life at court.¹³ Both De Sales and Du Bosc argue that piety does not have to be gained at the expense of politeness, civility, and participation in worldly affairs, a significant departure from the traditional misogynistic dogma of the clergy at that time. However, unlike De Sales, who instructs on questions of personal piety, Du Bosc focuses exclusively on manners and morality for women (and, by extension, men) in society. Indeed, Théodore Joran suggests that Du Bosc's popularity might be attributed to his lack of religious moralizing: "Ce fut une surprise agréable pour les contemporains de rencontrer un *homme*, un 'honneste' homme, là où ils s'attendaient à trouver un moine. [. . .] Jamais il ne recourt à des arguments de catéchisme" (78). Unlike the majority of religious thinkers of his time, Du Bosc believes women to be as capable as men of making moral choices, and thus proceeds to reason with them. Du Bosc's forum for engaging in this conversation is the three-volume *L'Honnête femme*.

L'Honnête femme

In the prefatory "Au Lecteur" in the 1632 edition, Du Bosc explained his unorthodox approach to teaching women in *L'Honnête femme*: he wishes "de louer seulement les qualitez qui leur sont nécessaires pour reussir dans les compagnies" but not to "faire des regles aux Dames." Du Bosc anticipated the deep-seated misogyny of his male contemporaries who would reject his method of praising and reasoning with women readers, rather than "giving them rules." He claims those critics will be "poussés de haine, & de vengeance contre cest aymable sexe" to criticize his work rather than "declarer la guerre ouvertement à la plus belle partie du

¹² In real life, Philothea was Mme de Charmoisy, who initiated a correspondence with De Sales in 1602 (Timmermans 407).

¹³ In his Preface to *L'Honnête femme*, Du Bosc's friend Nicolas Perrot d'Ablancourt explains that this work is the "Introduction à l'*Introduction à la vie dévote*" (Perrot d'Ablancourt 74; Du Bosc, *L'Honnête femme* (1658) np).

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monde” (np). Thus, to propose that women think for themselves and even feel pride in their accomplishments was a controversial assertion for the time. Du Bosc’s text must have been fairly controversial, for in the second edition (1633), he included a lengthy Preface (written by his friend, Nicolas Perrot d’Ablancourt) defending his work (Du Bosc 1: np; Perrot d’Ablancourt 33-74). This preface supports the use of praise as the most persuasive way to teach women; moreover, Du Bosc emphasizes, in *L’Honnête femme*, that he is teaching women to think analytically about their moral choices and to act accordingly. He therefore refuses to give explicit instructions to women, because, in his view, they are capable of making good choices on their own:

Je m’étonne pourquoy l’on veut, que les Dames
ayent besoin de leçons si grossieres, ou d’une
conduite si sensible. Il n’y a que les Aveugles qu’on
mene par la main, c’est assez de porter le flambeau
devant ceux qui on la veuë bonne. C’est faire tort à
leur bon esprit ou à leur bon naturel. (1: 25)

By reasoning with women, he argues, we show respect for their reasoning abilities and display our confidence in their conduct. Ultimately, this attitude posed a threat to the Catholic Church, which dictated women’s moral conduct and distrusted women to resolve ethical dilemmas themselves. To sidestep this controversy, Du Bosc claims the secular ground of teaching the respectable society woman, whose love of virtue through *honnêteté* will lead her more readily to become the “pious” woman the Church prescribes.

By his 1658 edition, Du Bosc addresses his female readership directly in his note “Aux Dames” to praise them as the very models of female excellence he describes in his work (1: np). It is clear that by this time, Du Bosc’s notion that women should be educated to participate in elite society was by and large accepted. In fact, French women had taken matters in their own hands by organizing women-centered literary salons; they participated in group writing projects, called salon writing, and even began publishing more

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widely, albeit, for the most part, anonymously or under another name (DeJean 94-97).

While much of the advice found in *L'Honnête femme* cannot be construed as feminist in a modern sense, Du Bosc writes that he respects women's intellect and trusts them to make moral choices when fully informed. In this way, Du Bosc's version of *honnêteté* for women parallels that of Faret for men. Du Bosc makes a key point in the first volume:

[I]l me semble [que *L'Honnête femme*] sera beaucoup plus utile aux Dames, apres que je leur auray montré . . . pourquoy je fay voir la pluspart de mes sujets à deux visages, pourquoy je n'ay donné que des enseignemens generaux, qui peuvent servir aux hommes aussi bien qu'aux femmes, & n'ay pas voulu descendre à de certaines instructions particulieres, que le vulgaire souhaite, pour estre touché plus sensiblement. (1: 21)

This passage shows that Du Bosc's *honnête femme* has a meditative life, is capable of intellectual pursuits, and can make decisions in moral and ethical situations. She is not "une mere de famille qui sçait bien commander à ses servantes, & qui a le soin de peigner ses enfans," nor does she require the instruction that Faret offers in playing the lute and fixing her hair (Du Bosc, *L'Honnête femme* (1658) 1: 116, 1: 27; Faret, *L'Honnête homme* 38–39). Indeed, Du Bosc chastises those who would deprive women of proper learning; he warns:

Leur bon naturel & leur bonne inclination demeurant sans effet, manque de lecture ou de conversation, quand la tyrannie de leurs meres, ou de leurs maris, ou bien quelque autre mal-heur les empesche d'acquérir les belles qualitez dont elles naissent capables. (1: 116)

Rather, a woman needs "exercises" that involve thinking and using her mind, such as in the study of history and philosophy. Du Bosc believes women to be completely capable of learning: "Il n'y a donc rien de si vray, que quand les sciences sont bien conceuës on

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les peut exprimer en quelque langage que ce soit, & que les Dames sont capables de les entendre” (1: 118). Not only are women able to learn, Du Bosc writes, they *need* to learn—in order to become virtuous, and in order to avoid frivolous occupations (3: 23, 3: 175-78). Du Bosc devotes an entire essay to defending the *femmes savantes* or “learned ladies” (1: 113-21), a position that he also supports in his *Femmes héroïques* in which, following Plutarch, he portrays one of his heroic exempla, Portia, as a woman philosopher (Du Bosc, *Les Femmes héroïques* (1659) 213-96). He may advocate study for women, but similar to Scudéry, Du Bosc does not wish women to show their erudition; however, in contrast to Scudéry, Du Bosc explicitly addresses what a woman needs to do to learn to read, write, and think in order to attain the ideal of *honnêteté* which, in Scudéry’s novels, is performed in modesty rather than attained through a process of education (Timmermans 113-14). Moreover, Du Bosc states that one need not look only to antiquity for women with knowledge: he praises the writings of the Vicomtesse d’Auchy, a woman whose literary salon in the 1620s featured Malherbe, and who herself seemed destined for great things until she was forced to leave Paris by her husband in 1609 (Timmermans 71-72). Du Bosc considers Mme d’Auchy’s *Homélies sur Saint Paul*, published in 1634, to be serious intellectual work with a natural, clear and polished style (Timmermans 297):

Elle n’a pas entrepris les endroits les plus faciles, et où il estoit aisé de reüssir: elle a travaillé sur l’Epistre aux Hebreux qui contient, comme chacun sçait, les plus secrets & les plus hauts mysteres de nostre Religion. Cependant dans une matiere si relevée il n’y a rien qui resiste à la force de ce grand esprit, elle marche sur des espines comme un autre feroit sur des fleurs, son style n’a rien ny de forcé ny contraint, il est doux & pompeux tout ensemble, & les plus dégoutez admireront en cét ouvrage ce qu’on trouve rarement dans un mesme Autheur, la clarté, la vigueur, la pointe, & la politesse. Il y a dequoy instruire les

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devots & dequoy satisfaire aux curieux: les sçavants
 & les delicats y trouveront des choses qui meritent
 d'estre considerées avec attention, & tous ceux qui
 ne veulent pas qu'une femme puisse bien escrire,
 confesseront leur erreur apres la lecture de ce livre.
 (1: 120)

Du Bosc describes Mme d'Auchy's writing in terms associated with masculinity in the seventeenth century (Peters 28, 31): rather than embellish her text with flowers and artifice, she forcefully walks on thorns while she writes with clarity, vigor and directness. Interestingly after her return to Paris in the 1630s, Mme d'Auchy was criticized for her "presumption" in naming her weekly gatherings an "académie" which, Linda Timmermans tells us, were "des institutions masculines" (76).

Just as Mme d'Auchy's writings are the result of deep thought and her *académie* the site of intellectual conversation, the development of the practice of reflection forms a key component of Du Bosc's theory of women's *honnêteté*, and he emphasizes this introspection from the very first essay in Part 1 of *L'Honnête femme* ("De la lecture"). In another essay, "De la Naissance et de l'éducation," he writes that knowledge can, in fact, be more valuable than noble birth (2: 225). According to Du Bosc, women *must* read in order to inform their natural reason and introspection, which will then inform their conversation. Just being present at the conversation of others is not sufficient; even though Du Bosc wishes conversation to fulfill the role of "une vivante Escolle," reading offers more perfect knowledge (1: 3). To the Franciscan, then, reading (which he envisions as a solitary occupation) and reflecting on reading, influences whether the *honnête femme* develops a crucial aspect of her interior life—the ability to make good decisions:

[J]e veux que l'entretien des honnestes gens soit
 fort necessaire, & que ce soit une vivante Escolle,
 qui nous anime puissamment en voyant l'exemple
 avec la regle; Toutesfois il me semble, que ceux qui
 se contentent de communiquer avec les sçavants,

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deviendront encore plus parfaits en lisant leurs
oeuvres. (1: 3)

Moreover, when one reads, one is not distracted by surface appearances—one can concentrate on the beauty of the reasoning of the writer and not on the beauty or ugliness of an interlocutor (1: 5).

Learning to self-regulate is important because Du Bosc refuses to give women “certaines instructions particulieres, que le vulgaire souhaite” (1: 21); rather, he expects women to develop their capacity to judge so that they can make good choices. Nevertheless, the Franciscan does spend some time discussing what the *honnête femme* should and should not read. He sees the works of the ancients as particularly useful, and he is also fond of mythology: because he finds these tales diverse and pleasurable, Du Bosc demonstrates his own powers of judgment in the examples that he includes and his analysis of these examples (1: 9, 1: 22). After telling the tale of the rape of Europa, for example, Du Bosc gives us the moral of the story: “Voila ce qui en arrive quand on jouë avec les bestes, lors qu’on est plus libre, ou plus familiere avec des stupides qu’avec des bons esprits” (1: 83). Indeed, his own arguments might be seen as examples of the sort of reasoning in which he wants his readers to engage. Typically, Du Bosc presents both sides of an argument and then ends by advocating moderation. In the case of reading, for example, he begins by encouraging the practice; then restricts the activity severely (citing St. Jerome, who advocated reading only one book), explaining that it is better to read fewer books of quality than read many books indiscriminately; then forbids women from reading novels; and then ends with a recommendation to read *his* book (1: 1, 1: 7, 1: 11, 1: 36). The *honnête femme* will reason, judge, consciously decide which books to read, and if she cannot, she should follow the advice of those of superior judgment (1: 7, 1: 20).

The *honnête femme* also uses self-regulation in conversation, an activity that, as noted above, Du Bosc links strongly to reading: “La lecture et la conversation sont absolument necessaires pour rendre l’esprit & l’humeur agreables” (1: 115). Because Du Bosc expresses contradictory viewpoints (in the interests of teaching

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self-regulation), he does write that “je pense que plusieurs feroient un assez grand miracle, si elles se pouvoient seulement taire par discretion, autant de fois que la Vierge a parlé, & si elles abusoient aussi rarement de la parole qu’elle s’en est servie” (1: 36). Contrary to the way that Cohen interprets this statement, Du Bosc does not recommend “that women should model themselves on the Virgin Mary, who spoke only five times in her lifetime” (Cohen 30). Rather, as he explains in the same essay, Du Bosc advises that women should regulate their speech and always show the restraint and discretion associated with the Virgin Mary: “Il ne faut pas toutesfois s’imaginer que j’ay dessein d’oster l’usage de la parole, au lieu de la regler: Je n’aurois pas bonne grace, de vouloir composer la Conversation de personnes muëttes” (1: 32). Women should reflect before speaking, and while women who have studied sometimes talk too much, reading and studying are prerequisites of being able to participate in conversation appropriately (1: 32, 1: 44-45): for, without study,

la Conversation n’est qu’une insupportable tyrannie: & il est impossible sans se mettre à la gesne, de demeurer long-temps avec celles qui ne vous peuvent entretenir que du nombre de leurs moutons si elles sont de la campagne, ou si elles sont de la ville, qui ne parlent que de collets et de juppes à la mode. (1: 116)

Because of her judgment, knowledge and skill, the *honnête femme* is good-humored, comfortable and appropriate in society where she demonstrates *complaisance*, or agreeableness. Although he does not list physical attributes, poses, or facial expressions (as Faret does regarding the behavior of men in society), Du Bosc states that the *honnête femme* comports herself gracefully in public (1: 144).¹⁴

Affective relationships serve as another area in which the *honnête femme* uses her judgment. In a chapter in which the

¹⁴ Colleen Fitzgerald views graceful behavior as the essential characteristic of Du Bosc’s *honnête femme* (Fitzgerald, “Authority” 109-62).

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Franciscan used the terms *amitié* and *amour* somewhat interchangeably and that calls to mind *avant la lettre* the Scudérian “*Carte de tendre*”, Du Bosc explores two extremes: *amitié par élection* and *amitié par inclination*, the “two eyes” of love (1: 168). As one might expect, Du Bosc feels that *amitié par inclination* is dangerous: it can be fatal, it is inexorable and is, above all, pleasurable (1: 169)—“Quoy qu’on feigne, tout ce qui vient de là nous est agreable”—while it incapacitates our reason (1: 170).¹⁵ Yet, Du Bosc points out that Jesus himself loved one of his disciples more tenderly than the others (a reference to the disciple John) and it is the most natural and most noble feeling (1: 187). Without inclination, love cannot last (1: 174); however, inclination is blind and *amitié par élection*, a more judicious feeling based on knowledge (*connaissance*), does not lead to unhappiness. Du Bosc writes, “Ne vaut-il donc pas mieux aymer pour des qualitez aymables que nous voyons, que pour une inclination qui nous est cachée ...?” (1: 177). He concludes by saying that we need to “regulate” the two and to find a balance between *inclination* and *élection* (1: 183).

Du Bosc insists a woman’s *complaisance* does not contravene Christian ideas about appropriate female behavior (1: 80). Indeed, the *honnête femme* must be as scrupulously virtuous as she is modest and natural. To Du Bosc, virtue constitutes not only a Christian quality but also a secular one: “C’est assez d’estre bon Courtisan pour estre devot: On ne peut maintenant observer les loix de la Police, en violant celles du Christianisme” (1: 73). To avoid vice, the *honnête femme* should avoid vicious people and she should keep busy (1: 39, 1: 87). She exists as the opposite of Du Bosc’s negative examples: scandalous, debauched and coquettish women. While she should value virtue more than reputation, her behavior should not give rise to gossip and scandal (1: 168, 1: 171). Du Bosc concerns himself very much with appearance: he

¹⁵ Domna Stanton writes: “The tendency to substitute for the more primitive, energetic emotions a small set of consummately civilized signs finds its clearest demonstration in discussion of love. Passionate love had no place in a system predicated on total control over internal feelings; Faret states in no uncertain terms that the smitten can have no use for his precepts” (135).

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cites the example of the appearance of vice in the relationship of Socrates to Alcibiades:

Je veux que Socrate n'aimast le jeune Alcibiade qu'avec toute sorte d'honneur, & que son affection ne fut point contraire à sa Philosophie; neantmoins le faisant coucher toutes les nuits avec luy, il devoit au moins mesnager son entrée et sa sortie, afin d'oster le sujet à ceux qui le voyoient revenir au matin, de prendre le temps & le lieu de cette visite pour une occasion de médisance. (1: 67)

The kind of love that Socrates felt for Alcibiades is regrettable, Du Bosc notes; even more regrettable, however, is that the philosopher was indiscreet and this appearance of vice enabled his neighbors to talk about him.¹⁶

Du Bosc posits that because of her judgment—gained through the complementary activities of reading, learning, and conversing with others—the *honnête femme* can make her own choices:

Le secours des lettres fortifie les meilleures inclinations, & ceux qui se persuadent que la lecture des livres est une escole pour apprendre à faire le mal avec adresse, auroient meilleure grace de croire que les Dames y trouvent plus de moyens de se corriger que de se corrompre. (1: 115)

Anticipating his later *Femme héroïque*, he attributes heroic virtue to the *honnête femme*, although he does mention the fragility of her virtue (3: 188). She does not need a spiritual guide, for, through learning and knowledge, she can guide herself morally and understand better the consequences of her actions.

¹⁶ As Domna C. Stanton and Lewis C. Seifert note, Socrates and Alcibiades were regarded as positive models for the *honnête homme* in the seventeenth century (Stanton 22; Seifert 30, 48); moreover, it is to be noted that several letters in the *Nouveau recueil* address the relationships between women, in particular, which feelings are appropriate for women to have for other women and which feelings one may express. See in particular, letter and response 20 in the *Nouveau recueil*.

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From Theory to Practice: The *Nouveau recueil de lettres des dames de ce temps*

From the very first edition of the *Honnête Femme* in 1632, and in many other prefaces afterwards, Du Bosc personified his text as a woman; in his dedication to Christine of France, for example, he wrote:

Voicy l'Honneste Femme qui vient rendre ses hommages à vostre Altesse royale, & luy donner ce qu'elle a de plus précieux, en luy dédiant ses dernières pensées. Ce n'est point une Affetée, qui vient vous entretenir de Miroirs ou de Parfums: sa conversation n'a rien que de sérieux & d'important, soit pour la haine du vice ou pour l'amour de la vertu. (3: np).

It is perhaps this rhetorical move that gave DuBosc the idea to imagine a work in the female voice, a correspondence from *honnête* woman to *honnête* woman in which elite society women perform the ideals of *honnêteté* through writing, as DuBosc imagined them. This very early example of women's letters in seventeenth-century France, pays homage to women's burgeoning presence on the cultural and literary scene.

In Du Bosc's view, reading and conversation served as central components of *honnêteté* for women. To demonstrate that he advocated expanding intellectual possibilities further for women, Du Bosc wrote and published his *Nouveau recueil de lettres des dames de ce temps* (1635) while completing Volume 3 of *L'Honnête femme* (1636), thereby adding letter-writing to the practice of *honnêteté* for women. Already by the 1630s, one can read praise of women's letter-writing in the correspondences of men of letters.¹⁷ Clearly, many educated women in the

¹⁷ For example, in Faret's *Recueil de lettres nouvelles*, the *salonnières* Mesdames de Rambouillet and Des Loges are privileged interlocutors; however, the letters that women write are not included in Faret's anthology despite the fact that M. de Conac acknowledges to Des Loges: "je ne cognois point d'homme qui escrive à l'esgal de vous" (Faret, *Recueil de lettres nouvelles* 2: 166).

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seventeenth-century wrote letters that men admired; they were simply not published out of consideration for *bienséance*, or decorum. In his correspondence, for example, Chapelain heartily praises the letters of Mesdames des Loges and Sablé, while Balzac applauds those of Mme de Liancourt (Chapelain 504-05). Further, Tallemant des Réaux wrote of Marguerite Vion, Mme de Saintot, the witty former actress who frequented the salon of Mme d'Auchy: "Enfin, elle parvint à faire de belles lettres; on en a vu des volumes entiers, écrits à la main, courir les rues" (2: 273). Thus, women's letters did circulate in society in the early part of the century, only through more informal channels than did men's letters. On the whole, however, Janet Altman writes, "epistolarians of the seventeenth century [. . .] are almost all men, and most of them are members of the Académie Française, which received its official letters of patent from Richelieu in 1635" (35). Of the few letter collections by women published in the seventeenth century, Altman includes Du Bosc's *Nouveau recueil*. It is unclear if she does so because she believes Du Bosc's claim that these letters are authentically written by women, or because they are unusual samples of women's letters. Ironically, Du Bosc's *Nouveau recueil* shares its first date of publication—1635—with the creation of the all-male Académie Française, perhaps an indication of just how innovative or unusual his publication must have been (Altman 42-43).

By publishing model letters by fictional "accomplished" women who enact his conception of *honnêteté*, Du Bosc not only encourages women to write their own letters, but shows women how to fashion themselves as *honnêtes* in and through letters. As Elizabeth Goldsmith reminds us, in the seventeenth century "writing [was] an extension of worldly talk" (2). Du Bosc targets elite worldly women, who might frequent the Court, salons, or socialize in *le monde*. His letters offer women a practical application of the general concepts found in *L'Honnête femme*. Indeed, Du Bosc's *Nouveau recueil* serves as a companion piece to his conduct manual; without the theoretical context of *L'Honnête femme* the choice of letter topics in *Nouveau recueil* appears arbitrary and unconnected. Read in context, however, they

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illustrate how real women might conduct themselves according to the principles of *honnêteté* in a wide variety of social situations, predominantly in relation to other women. In addition, Du Bosc shows us women using their powers of reason to judge the world and act morally.

In his foreword to the *Nouveau recueil*, Du Bosc assures the reader that these letters should not shock, since they conform to notions of *bienséance*. Moreover, he tells us, letter-writing simply extends a woman's ability to "faire un compliment;" these letters are neither "Traitez" nor "Harangues," nor "grands discours," that is, public and male genres of writing. Moreover, while some people have objected to women writing out of ignorance or envy, Du Bosc claims, this collection will change their minds: if some women have published on important matters of religion and morality (such as Mme d'Auchy), why shouldn't women write good letters, too?¹⁸

The *Nouveau recueil* shows us a group of women friends writing to each other to reaffirm their connections to each other despite the geographical spaces that separate them; in Letter 1, for example, a woman writes to her friend who has been away in the country for two months to coax her to return because her women friends sorely miss her in Paris (1-7). Letters in the *Nouveau recueil* are signed only "Madame" or "Mademoiselle," and very few proper names identify people mentioned in the letters themselves. On the whole, it is unclear how many women are a part of this writing group, or if there are indeed several groups, and no identifiable personalities emerge through the style or content of the letters. The reader knows only that the collection stages the correspondence of a dense network of women devoted to writing

¹⁸ To the extent that Du Bosc elaborates the roles of reading, conversation, and reflection as essential activities to the *honnête femme*, he remains largely silent on the role of writing in his new "science of women." As we pointed out above, the exception is Du Bosc's praise of Mme d'Auchy's writing. We believe Du Bosc forges a link between women and letter writing based on his belief that men and women are equally capable of many virtues. If men, even if they are professional writers, can write courtly letters, as in Faret's collection, so can women.

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each other. Thus, the reader is left with much confusion about who these women writers actually are and must instead focus exclusively on their words. In this series of 96 letters, the overwhelming majority are written by women to other women (only five are written to men); the first thirty-four letters are coupled with a response to the initial letter (except in two cases) and Letters 35 to 65 stand alone with no response included.

The talented ladies of Du Bosc's new collection display the utmost modesty about their own social abilities while singing the praises of those of their friends and acquaintances as "accomplies" and possessing "rares qualitez." In justifying women's writing as an extension of their ability to "faire un compliment," Du Bosc positions women as members of polite society who, like men, depend on social networks for political and social advancement. Thus, it is not surprising that these letters reflect the language of patronage found in contemporary correspondences. The courtier's art of flattery does indeed dominate the collection, demonstrating many eloquent ways for women to praise each other (241-43, 430-33, 479-86, 494-97). The letters do far more than compliment, however; they demonstrate how to negotiate properly elite social relationships through correspondence. Just like the professional male writers of Faret's *Recueil de lettres nouvelles* who extol the virtues of important dignitaries, Du Bosc's letter-writers adopt the conventions of the courtly letter and the language of patronage. Further, while published courtly letters were written by men to other men, Sharon Kettering reminds us that "French noblewomen exercised a considerable amount of patronage power" too (818). As noted above, Du Bosc sought female patronage for his writing, especially that of the Duchesse d'Aiguillon who served as a generous patron to writers such as Marie de Gournay, Pierre Corneille, Vincent Voiture, George de Scudéry, and Molière, and took care of Richelieu's charitable endeavors. She became what A. Bonneau-Avenant terms the Cardinal's "ministère des libéralités et des aumônes" (224).

Letter-writing as a tool to gain patronage would certainly have been a socially acceptable activity for women since it could improve one's family's social standing. The letters of the *Nouveau*

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recueil are replete with the language and topoi found in published courtly letters of the time. “The words of friendship, loyalty, zeal, esteem, and affection are repeated over and over in the correspondences of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France,” Kettering writes of patron/client relations (*Patrons* 12). Moreover, patrons and clients often used the language of personal friendship and affection to characterize their bond, hiding conflict and inequality behind an ideal image of amity; while “the formal rhetoric of clientage was the language of master and servant,” it eventually became “the language of courtesy” (Kettering, *Patrons* 15). One can certainly see this tension in Letter and Response 4 of the *Nouveau Recueil*, when two ladies debate the etiquette of using “Je vous aime” in a letter to a woman who is both socially superior and yet presumably a friend (48-66).

The discursive mix of clientage and courtesy pervades the *Nouveau Recueil*, in which the *épistolière* swears obedience to her “Maîtresse,” “Amie,” and even “Deesse.” The letters reiterate offers of service and acknowledge debts of obligation. Invoking terms used to describe the favors bestowed by a patron upon a client, Du Bosc’s writers make frequent reference to “favors and kindnesses.” Of equal import are the letters expressing concern for losing a friend’s or a patron’s good graces. The missives themselves serve to strengthen social bonds during prolonged absences by keeping the friend present in the memory of her benefactor. Independent of their content, letters may act as a form of flattery or favor: in letter 28, a gentlewoman vows to “publier” how generous her friend has been (Du Bosc, *Nouveau recueil* 344-49).

If letter writing is a new cultural ritual for women, it is perhaps not surprising that the anonymous correspondents of the *Nouveau recueil* express frequent anxiety about the appropriateness of their epistolary practices and their wish not to inconvenience their correspondents. Within the letters, the women fret about whether sending a letter will be seen as an imposition or a gift; whether they can demand letters of others; or whether they should despair over the lack of news from a good friend. In fact, many of the women try to gauge just how often to write others. Letter 5, for

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example, is entitled: “Elle tesmoigne la crainte qu’elle a de luy desplaire, & dit qu’elle a peur d’estre ingrate, si elle escrit rarement; ou si elle escrit souvent, d’estre importune” (67).¹⁹ The exchange of letters is pregnant with meaning. Some writers fear that not receiving letters means that one is forgotten or has fallen from a friend’s good graces; others excuse their friends for their tardy responses. One writer sees letters compensating for a friend’s absence; while another fears that if her letters please too much, her friend will stay away to prolong their epistolary exchange (279-86).

These fictional women frequently express the concern that their letters may not be eloquent enough to please. While a pose of modesty was necessary for women displaying their social skills, letter writing, as a new medium of communication used to cement the bonds of friendship or patronage, must have genuinely made many women nervous as they attempted to ingratiate themselves to others. In letter 5, a lady writes:

J’advoüe librement que je ne sçay pas faire de bonnes Lettres: mais je pense qu’il vaut mieux avoir de l’affection pour rendre du service, que de l’éloquence pour l’offrir. Et qu’importe-t’il en cette occasion de violer les Loix de la Rethorique, pourveu qu’on observe celles de l’Amitié? (69)

Her correspondent offers her friend reassurance, and counters with her own modest stance: “je ne voy personne qui s’exprime de meilleure grace; & si vous n’estes pas satisfaite de vos discours ou de vos escrits, croyez que vous estes toute seule de vostre sentiment.” (75). Du Bosc’s letters, then, provide not only models of women who write letters, but also provide the language that justifies their writing.

In addition to eloquence, Du Bosc expects the gentlewoman to be able to judge for herself and reason gracefully with others. Indeed the first fifty-six of ninety-six letters are paired letters and

¹⁹ The verbe *importuner* and its variants, such as *importunité*, occur forty-seven times in the *Nouveau recueil*.

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responses which debate two sides of an issue. The two perspectives are left open-ended; no correct stance emerges. As we have seen, arguing the pros and cons of an issue was a favorite technique of Du Bosc in the *L'Honnête femme* as well. The ladies of this collection debate questions such as whether one is less troubled to be stupid or wise (letter and response 2); whether it is just for a young man to marry an older woman (letter and response 3); whether one should entertain the company of free thinkers (letter and response 10); or whether a woman should be learned (letter and response 12) (17-31, 32-47, 130-160, 178-189, respectively). Other discussions revolve around questions of social judgment such as what is the appropriate kind of company to keep (letter and response 16); how to judge a good book (letter 60); how to judge a friend (letter and response 1); or whether it is preferable to live in the country, city, or at Court (letter and response 8, letter 7, letter and response 31) (225-240, 559-562, 1-16, 101-8, 87-94, 370-388, respectively).

In the *Nouveau Recueil*, *honnêteté* comes to define a new social identity for women in which conversation serves as their main occupation and preoccupation. Conversation is a key term in the letters; “conversation” and “entretien” appear forty-four times in the ninety-six letters. In a set of letters, for example, a group of Parisian women write to entreat their friend who is living “entre des Barbares” to return to Paris for fear she might become accustomed to “solitude” (letter 1); in the response, she assures her friends that this would be impossible because, she notes, “je suis en un païs sauvage, où il n’y a point de conversation, que je n’appelle un supplice ...” (response 1). She desires to return to the good company of her female coterie of “tant de Dames excellentes” who are “tres-accomplies” (response 1) (3,11-13) . Throughout the collection, the women correspondents lament the loss of each other’s “conversation”; they desperately seek a reunion with their female companions, as in letter 42, in which the letter writer reminisces about “ce Cabinet Celeste” where her friend reigned with “avec autant de Majesté qu’une Reine sur son Trône de gloire” (456).

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At the same time that these women find each others' companionship indispensable, they fret about how to avoid unrefined visitors. Numerous letters allude to the difficulty of socializing with others who do not share their social practices. Reading, writing, and reflection come into conflict with the traditional rules of civility and conformity for women. The *épistolière* in letter 48 writes from the country: "Si je sçavois bien parler, ou bien escrire, j'aurois des qualitez qui n'y sont point en usage, & qui ne me seroient pas seulement inutiles, mais dangereuses" (490). The imperative to conform may make it dangerous for a learned woman to display the qualities admired by her friends in Paris. Another woman, in letter 7, writing from the country, vows to read and reflect in solitude rather than to play the role of gracious hostess to the "petits Messieurs" who talk at her incessantly (91). She reasons these men are worse than bad books, for at least one can put down a bad book when it gets tiresome. In the response, Du Bosc offers a corrective to this desire to withdraw from society to the company of books. Her friend reminds her she must take care of her reputation by avoiding public scandal or disapproval. She must endure her guests to maintain her good reputation. Moreover, Du Bosc softens the elitist stance toward the unsophisticated provincials when the letter writers' friend reminds her that while these people may lack polish, their affection is well intentioned; indeed, she would prefer "une Franchise un peu rude, qu'une feinte avec toutes les douceurs du monde" (95-96). In letter 55, a lady confesses that her friends' letters are a lifeline when she resides in the country; they serve as an "antidote" to the undesirable conversations of "ces petits Messieurs de Lieures" (528). The contrast of the cultured ladies to the uneducated folk constitutes these "accomplished" women as an elite group as much as a persecuted one.

Indeed, Du Bosc makes the case for the value of this new *honnête femme* who possesses learning, virtue, and judgment. Letter 3 describes the outrage of a woman who finds it unfair that her friend, Belinde is passed over by the handsome, young Lydian

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for a woman who is “ny belle, ny riche, ny jeune” (33).²⁰ The “païs des Monstres” is no longer in Africa, she writes, but can be found in the extravagances of Paris (32). In response, her friend defends the young Lydian’s decision to marry the older, more experienced, Numanté, for she possess the two qualities without which all others are meaningless: “esprit” and “vertu” (43). She writes about Numanté:

Sa conversation est agreable & utile, il deviendra honnête homme en sa compagnie; & si les autres Dames cessent d’estre Maitresses apres leurs nopces, celle-cy commencera de l’estre apres les siennes. (43-44)

Thus, virtuous women with experience and learning make good wives and equal companions to their husbands, as Du Bosc argued earlier in *L’Honnête femme*.²¹

While he offers an overwhelmingly positive portrait of women’s conversation in the *Nouveau Recueil*, some of Du Bosc’s letter writers nonetheless highlight the danger for women of interjecting too much learning into their conversation. While letter 12 defends women who study, the correspondent in the response cautions:

²⁰ In volume 2 of his *Recueil de lettres nouvelles*, Nicolas Faret includes three passionate letters from Godeau to a much different Bellinde, one who is cruel, unfaithful and coquettish (2: 114-35).

²¹ For Du Bosc, women should not be under the tutelage of their husbands. In “Du Mariage et du celibat,” an essay in Volume 2 of *L’Honnête femme*, he describes marriage as a reciprocal responsibility between husband and wife:

Il faut que le devoir soit reciproque, & puis qu’on nomme le mariage un lien, comme il est necessaire que les deux rubans ou les deux cordages, soient entrelassez des deux costez pour faire un noeud: aussi faut-il que l’homme & la femme soient attachez l’un à l’autre par un devoir mutuel, pour rendre la société plus ferme. Si elle n’est reciproque, elle est imparfaite, & mesme injuste. La façon de creer la premiere femme témoigna assez cecy: elle ne fut pas tirée des pieds, ny de la teste, mais du costé: pour monstrier qu’elle ne doit pas estre ny esclave, ny maistresse, mais compagne. (2: 312-13)

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Vous sçavez comment [leur conversation] est importune. [...] Elles résvent, quand elles pensent raisonner. Elles deviennent toutes Memoire, & prennent la peine d'amasser beaucoup de biens, dont elles ne sçavent point l'économie. On a pitié de les voir quelquefois embarrassées: ce ne sont que lambeaux qu'elles dérobent; & ne disent rien avec cette naïveté, sans laquelle les plus riches discours sont importuns. (188-89)

Hence modesty and simplicity in conversation are essential for the *honnête femme*. Women who reason about what they have learned in books are seen as displaying fragments of purloined goods that could never be their own. "Learned women" in letter 53 are called "des Icares de nostre sexe" and "des Nains sur des patins"; these two images suggest the dangers awaiting the incautious woman whose aspirations are too elevated (521). And for those women who find themselves encouraged in their intellectual endeavors, response 12 warns of the danger of accepting the praise of flatterers, for "cependant que la flatterie les loue en particulier, la verité les condamne souvent en public" (189).

In addition to modeling behavior in society regarding knowledge that women have acquired, Du Bosc also provides advice in *L'Honnête femme* and examples of behavior in the *Nouveau recueil* in another area of thorny controversy: that of birth versus merit. Carolyn Lougee writes, in her groundbreaking study *Le Paradis des femmes*, that the elite society of nobles and talented bourgeois that congregated in seventeenth-century salons cultivated a space outside of the Court in which an individual's worth was based, not on their sex or birth, but on their merit.

What set the feminist writers apart was their advocacy of widespread ennoblement. If existing rank did not confer virtue, existing virtue in the feminist view should confer rank. [. . .] The right to ennoblement of all men of achievement was an essential component of the feminist call for change. (42)

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In Volume 2 of *L'Honnête femme*, Du Bosc tackles the question of whether aristocratic birth ("Nature") or education ("Art") decides the quality of a person. While he admits that noble birth provides a great social advantage, he concludes: "La bonne education est donc entierement necessaire à l'un & à l'autre sexe quelque bonne naissance que nous ayons" (2.227). Du Bosc admits, however, that without wealth, neither a person of noble birth nor one of exceptional education will receive the due they deserve (2: 216).

In several letters of the *Nouveau recueil*, Du Bosc addresses the position of the "accomplished" woman who lacks wealth. Significantly, letters 32 and 65 that broach the topic are both addressed to Mademoiselle (only 9 letters in total address a Mademoiselle). In Letter 32, a woman responds to her cultured friend who laments her own lack of wealth. Her friend reassures her that while lady Fortune has been blind to her "qualitez extraordinaires," she should gaze in a mirror to see her exceptional beauty and virtue and be consoled by them (393). The talented, but poor, friend responds: "Je souffre la Pauvreté, mais je ne le desire point" (397). Indeed, she does not disdain riches; rather she believes that no matter how virtuous she is, she will be at a disadvantage in society without it. She writes: "[L]a Vertu des pauvres fait compassion, comme une Belle miserable; & mesme il semble qu'on ne la sçauroit louer sans la plaindre" (399). Letter 65, the closing letter of the *Nouveau Recueil*, reiterates the lesson of Letter 32 that personal merit is a consolation for lack of wealth: "Dans vos plus tristes pensées, un Miroir vous peut servir d'un grand Consolateur: & si vous regardez bien à ce que la Nature vous a donné, vous aurez moins de desplaisir pour ce que la Fortune vous dénie" (582). Du Bosc's accomplished woman attracts the high regard of other talented women who gaze at her with "un autre oeil": that of admiration and respect (585).

Indeed, what sets the *Nouveau Recueil* apart from other epistolary collections is its vision of female solidarity. The *honnête femme* is valued by her women friends for her learning and judgment. The correspondent of the ultimate letter expresses the general attitude of these fictional *épistolières*, promising to emulate and admire her friend of "rares qualitez" and rejecting the

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reactions of other women who envy her friend and consider her competition for men's attention (585). Instead, this writer claims she will look at her friend with that "different eye," a signal, perhaps, that Du Bosc wishes all of his female readers to look upon accomplished women with passionate admiration. A Modern before his time, Du Bosc promoted both a feminocentric space for women and the discursive practices—reading, conversation, letter writing—that would propel them to the center of the literary public sphere for the next century and a half. As Dena Goodman observes, letter-writing brought women into what Habermas called the "rational-critical debate"; that is by writing and reflecting critically women developed a sense of self or subjectivity that allowed them to enter the public sphere (10).

Conclusion

In the debate over *honnêteté*, Cohen and other critics take a negative view of the role of women and the attitude of writers like Du Bosc: "The status of *salon* women was elevated commensurably with their vital role in refining the conversation of the nobleman, but ultimately it was the noble man who benefited and achieved *honnêteté*" (14). However, Du Bosc's two-part work on *honnêteté*, both the theory and practice, itself offers no such half-measure for women. If the *honnête femme* is the equivalent of the salon woman (as Cohen seems to think), it is clear that, contrary to the critics, Du Bosc does not see her primary function as merely producing the *honnête homme*. Rather, he proposes a way for elite women to perfect themselves for social interaction through the practices of reading, reflection, and conversation. Following Montaigne and Marie de Gournay and anticipating Descartes, Du Bosc argued for women's equality with men based on their shared reason and virtue.²² As he wrote in *L'Honnête femme*:

²² Rebecca M. Wilkin argues in *Woman, Imagination and the Search for Truth in Early Modern France* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers, 2008) that "the equality of the sexes is not of Cartesian origin" and "that Marie de Gournay drew the idea of equality from her reading of Montaigne's *Essays*" (144).

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La raison & la vertu sont de deux sexes, quoy qu'elles soient d'une mesme espece. Les Dames ne peuvent renoncer à cette science sans renoncer à un privilege & à un avantage, qu'elles ont aussi bien que nous, par le droit de leur naissance. (3: 5)

Through his principles of *honnêteté*, Du Bosc makes powerful claims for women as equal participants in the new cultural elite. *L'Honnête femme* and *Nouveau recueil* deserve a more prominent place in our understanding of the role of women in the cultural transformations of the early seventeenth century.

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