

LAROCHEFOUCAULD, DUC DE LA

Duc de Larocheffoucauld, man and public figure. Francois VI, duc de la Rochefoucauld, Prince de Marillac (1613-1680), was a nobleman of military expertise, social sophistication, and high literary skill, who has left us, in his *Maxims*, memoirs, and letters, an unsurpassed characterization of the world of the *honnête homme*, the commendably generous and self-aware gentleman, who became the admirable human norm for cultured society in seventeenth century France, and who was the correction from against which Moliere proceeded to portray the multiple distorted figures who are the stock of his brilliant satirical drama. De la Rochefoucauld chiseled in his maxims with sharp edged accuracy, neither sentimental nor judgmental, and set a standard we still look up to.

Public life of de la Rochefoucauld. De la Rochefoucauld was born into the higher nobility, at a time when there was major royal conflict, in France, concerning the attitude of the King toward the nobility; some wanting a rapprochement, others feeling that the Monarchy should remain strictly for the people as a whole, and not for the nobility. It was in the light of this conflict, especially, that de la Rochefoucauld appeared on the national scene as an exemplar of the finest nobleman. He was well educated, highly trained in military tactic and warfare—which was in fact for much of his life a career—an expert at hunting, the etiquette of life at court, and in the arts of public converse, especially in high society. We must think that from this matrix of public exposures and skills, de la Rochefoucauld sharpened his eye for human nature and its limitations.

The Duke as power player. Apart from service in a number of military campaigns—against Spain, with his monarchy in Flanders, and in several internal French conflicts—de la Rochefoucauld found himself drawn into the vortex of French social politics, which in this period involved the jockeying for power of competing Ministers of State, like the Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin, who deployed their own armies, and competed in openly secular contravention of their churchly roles. Larocheffoucauld's tough and impartial views, of such conflicts, were clearly the breeding ground for his 'honnête homme' perspective onto human nature. His work of greatest importance to us is the *Maximes* (1665)

The Maxims of Larocheffoucauld. The perspective from which Moliere satirizes, and toward which the elite of seventeenth century France strove, is perfectly crystallized in the views of man deployed in the *Maxims* of Larocheffoucauld.

*Our virtues are most frequently but vices in disguise.
What we term virtues are often but a mass of various actions and divers interests, which fortune or our own industry manage to arrange; and it is not always from valour or from chastity that men are brave, and women chaste.
Self-love is the greatest of all flatterers.*

Reading

Primary source reading

Maxims, de la Rochefoucauld, tr. Tancock, 1959.

Secondary source reading

Moriarty, M. *Early Modern French Thought: The Age of Suspicion*, 2003.

Further reading

Viala, A., *La naissance de l'écrivain sociologue de la littérature à l'âge classique*, 1985.

Original language reading

Bury, Emmanuel, *Littérature et politique, l'invention de l'honneur homme, 1580-1750*, 1996.

Suggested paper topics

Is de la Rochefoucauld an original thinker or simply a sharp observer with a sense of literary style? What is involved in social observation which leads to maxims? Is the writing of de la Rochefoucauld reminiscent of that of Moliere, or even Montaigne?

Do you find de la Rochefoucauld cynical, or just 'accurate'? Is the intention of his 'maximes' to inspire us or teach us? Or is it to make us take pleasure in looking down on ourselves? What is the psychology at work in this kind of writing?

Excerpt http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Fran%C3%A7ois_de_La_Rochefoucauld

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What we term virtues are often but a mass of various actions and divers interests, which fortune or our own industry manage to arrange; and it is not always from valour or from chastity that men are brave, and women chaste.

Self-love is the greatest of all flatterers.

Passion often renders the most clever man a fool, and even sometimes renders the most foolish man clever.

The passions are the only advocates which always persuade. They are a natural art, the rules of which are infallible; and the simplest man with passion will be more persuasive than the most eloquent without.

In the human heart there is a perpetual generation of passions, such that the ruin of one is almost always the foundation of another

We should not be upset that others hide the truth from us, when we hide it so often from ourselves.