Chapter One

THE CHEVALIER DE MÈRÈ

THE CHEVALIER DE MÈRÈ IS KNOWN anecdotally as the gentleman who one day in 1653 accompanied Pascal (and the duc de Roannez, their mutual friend) on a coach ride, thereby exposing the great mathematician to a whole new way of thinking, which Pascal would call l'esprit de finesse, and which represented man's intuitive, perceptive side. Although Mèrè describes the ride and ensuing conversation in detail (and readily sheds much favorable light on his own role as philosopher-teacher), the incident tends to overshadow careful, thorough study of Mèrè's works: the Conversations, first published in 1668–69; the Discours, which appeared in 1676–77; the Maximes, sentences et réflexions morales et politiques, published in 1687, and the correspondence.¹

This is not to deny the mutual influence that Pascal and Mèrè may have exerted over each other. Or perhaps the ideas they shared are less a result of direct influence than of the force the age's diverse philosophical currents may have exerted on them simultaneously. In any case, Mèrè's ideas on the two kinds of study needed by man to advance successfully in the world do call to mind Pascal's famous passage on l'esprit de géométrie and l'esprit de finesse:
Il y a deux sortes d’Étude, l’une qui ne cherche que l’Art et les Règles; l’autre qui n’y songe point du tout, et qui n’a pour but que de rencontrer par instinct et par réflexions, ce qui doit plaire en tous les sujets particuliers. S’il fallait se déclarer pour l’une des deux, ce serait à mon sens pour la dernière, et surtout lorsqu’on sait par expérience ou par sentiment, qu’on se connaît à ce qui sied le mieux. Mais l’autre n’est pas à négliger, pourvu qu’on se souvienne toujours que ce qui réussit vaut mieux que les Règles. (2:109)

Like Pascal, moreover, the chevalier was fascinated by mathematics. Gambling interested him for its rewards, perhaps even more so for its elegant retirement into a closed circle, removed from less-refined preoccupations (that is, as the quintessential activity of l’honnête homme), but he was also drawn to the mathematical aspect of the stakes and worked with Pascal at solving various game problems. The idea of order that permeates his writings is perhaps a result of this training; but whatever the reason, Méré, while relying on intuition in structuring his moral universe, also believed firmly in an aesthetics of symmetry and proportion: “Tout ce qu’on fait et tout ce qu’on dit est une espèce d’Architecture: il y faut de la Symmétrie” (2:37). Thus affective reactions, inherently less organized in their original state, demand a constant ordering and structuring, consistent with the chevalier’s emphasis on control.

To achieve his ends, the chevalier de Méré relied on techniques culled both from finesse and géométrie. But once this intellectual kinship with Pascal has been established, Méré tends to become a shadow figure, if not for scholars, at least for the body of students, who become only marginally acquainted with the moralist tradition. There may be an additional reason for passing him by. His works are dry, repetitious, rigid; everything is constrained and measured. Méré’s attention to performance in society runs counter to current belief in movement and free expression. The reader is not likely to find much in his work that is relevant to life as we know it today.

The question then arises whether Méré offered a “rele-
vant" experience to seventeenth-century Frenchmen. His writings clearly did not propose a code of living in reach of "everyman." Méré, building a moral structure whose goal was social perfection, designed for a superior individual constantly in control of himself, was writing for an elite. His ideas had meaning for that social class which earlier in the century had found in the ethics of glory and grandeur appropriate self-definition. The ideal proposed by the chevalier de Méré is directed toward a generation who had discovered the bankruptcy of the morals of heroism. The nobleman's glory and power were hardly significant concepts at a time of weakening political power. Méré's works, published well into the second half of the century, propose the small-scale, reduced code necessary to such a time, the diminishing of stress on *la vraie vertu* reflecting the decreased political power. Henceforth, social perfection will be the new goal.

Jean Starobinski, in an article on La Rochefoucauld but which applies with equal force to Méré, formulates the transition that has occurred: "C'est dans le champ social lui-même, c'est dans le commerce quotidien que les valeurs esthétiques vont se substituer aux imperatifs moraux et prendre à leur tour valeur d'imperatifs. L'existence trouvera sa règle dans la loi qui gouverne le rapport harmonieux des formes et des fictions: il faudra apprendre à plaire, à cultiver les agréments, à trouver les airs et les manières."³

The acknowledgment that the old rules no longer compose an operable force engenders an alternative moral structure: *l'honnêteté.* Méré's writings are faithfully devoted to the formulation of this idea. His conversations with the maréchal de Clérambault, in their structure alone, especially reflect the preoccupation with refinement and style as they fluctuate between two activities: conversing and gambling, recourse to the latter being the primary interrupting force in the flow of words. It is not only a leisured world that emerges but a facile one, alternating between gentlemanly conversation and *le jeu.*

The emphasis on refined elegance, on manner and cor-
rect form, demanded an ideal civilization to serve as an example to the seventeenth-century nobility. Mérel chose one way beyond the time and space of classical France: ancient Greece. The portrait, not surprisingly, is of a fictitious Greece, heavily romanticized and obviously removed from any historical accuracy. The chevalier offers a superb glorification of a refined, elegant civilization, superior in manners and conduct to any other. He frequently alludes, it is true, to heroes and heroism, but he does not use these terms as Corneille did. Gone are the sublime pride, the heroic stances, the princely declamations, for Heroism is now refinement, and the Hero is he who conquers not violently, but "d'une manière qui plaise" (1:52).

The core of Mérel's work, L'honnêteté, was not a new subject, having already been analyzed by writers as eminent as Chapelain and Balzac. Mérel's direct predecessor was Faret, who, in his L'Honneste Homme, published in 1630, sought to establish a code of behavior for aristocratic man at court. But the chevalier's definition went further than his predecessors', and his own involvement with the ideal is more intense. He both enlarged and deepened the concept, separating it from more limited notions of courtly conduct and social gallantry. L'honnêteté for Mérel was an active force—"il faut qu'elle agisse et qu'elle gouverne" (1:55)—not a decoration. It was the essence of the individual and "la quintessence de toutes les vertus" (3:71). All this is very vague, and deliberately so, for the assumption was that the elite circle for whom these words were intended could reach behind the imprecision. The ideal was not accessible to all—in fact, was never meant to be—but rather had meaning for a certain few seeking to maintain, for themselves and the society that surrounded and observed them, their superior status. Mérel was intent upon establishing a moral code, one to be deciphered by the maréchal de Clérambault and a few others, but clearly restricted in its accessibility. Nothing has really changed, the "essence" of nobility has remained
THE CHEVALIER DE MÉRÉ

intact; but with the shift from ethical to aesthetic criteria, success may be more attainable, failure less traumatic.

L'honnêteté for the chevalier de Méré takes precedence over any rival demands, which explains why love, spontaneous and uncontrollable, finds little place in his moral universe. He believed that l'honnêteté was a complete moral system requiring total commitment: “La considération de ce qui est honnête, et de ce qui ne l'est pas, doit faire toute l'étude, et toute la conduite de notre vie” (Réf., 7). A sharply penetrating and discerning mind was also necessary. Emphasis throughout Méré's works is on conscious, reasoned behavior; the passions must be kept in check: “Pour être sage, il faut que l'esprit et la raison soumettent le coeur, et pour être méchant, il faut que le cœur domine la raison et l'esprit” (Réf., 262). Although this dichotomy is expressed in rather unsophisticated terms (and surely deliberately so)—the mind is “good,” and the heart is “bad”—it does convey the chevalier’s fundamental view of life. The spontaneous irrationality of passion is alien to his ideal, which, though not excluding love, nonetheless makes room only for an ascetic, untroubling amour honnête.

The preeminence of l'honnêteté is never in doubt. Portrayed as solid, durable, and eminently worthy in every way, the ideal contrasts with the evanescent passions:

L'honnêteté se montre si agréable à toute sorte de jour, qu'elle mérite bien qu'on la cherche; et quand on la trouve, et qu'on ne la perd point de vue, on ne manque jamais de l'acquérir. Ayons-la toujours devant les yeux, et si nos passions nous veulent détourner de ce qu'elle nous ordonne, reboutons-les sévèrement. . . Nous y sentirons d'abord quelque contrainte, mais elle ne sera pas longue, et puis à considérer nos plus sensibles contentements, ils s'en vont bien vite, à peu près comme un songe agréable. (3:88)

The passions, and the pleasure they procure, are seen as a mere dream; l'honnêteté appears as an enduring, even permanent, force. The ephemeral quality that Méré accords to love refers not only to time. He perceives love as an illu-
sion when contrasted with the moral firmness of l'honnêteté.

The passions emerge in Méré's works as not only ephemeral but also debasing for man: "La raison distingue l'homme de l'animal, mais la passion le confond avec lui" (Réf., 136). This traditional Christian view is further developed in one important letter, which Méré constructs as a conversation between himself and La Rochefoucauld. The conversation is probably apocryphal, and the ideas those of the chevalier alone. In any case, the letter confirms his belief that physical love is crude and impure, for he is in ready agreement with "La Rochefoucauld": "Je trouve aussi que ces plaisirs sensuels sont grossiers, sujets au dégoût et pas trop à rechercher, à moins que ceux de l'esprit ne s'y mêlent. Le plus sensible est celui de l'amour, mais il passe bien vite si l'esprit n'est de la partie" (Let., 90). Yet another letter explains that physical love alone is morally unsatisfactory, adding that "lorsque les grâces de l'esprit et du bon air accompagnent la beauté du corps, l'amour n'a rien qui dégoûte" (Let., 682).

For Méré the erotic impulse is also wild, uncontrolled, and unpredictable, offering distressing potential for individual alienation. Love contradicts reason and moderation —"La sagesse et l'amour ne s'accordent jamais" (Réf., 143) —and is an inherently destructive force—"L'amour est semblable au feu, il brille et plaît quand on en est éloigné: mais il brûle et consume quand on s'en approche de trop près" (Réf., 144). These reflections, though rather banal, set the tone for Méré's analysis. What concerns him is the disruptive nature of love, its capacity for estranging the "true" self. His fictional characters serve to illustrate this fear: "On aime Armide dans le camp des Chrétiens, parce qu'elle s'y présente douce et composée dans une grande modération, mais quand Renaud la quitte . . . et que dans l'excès de sa colère et de ses regrets elle ne garde plus de mesures, quelle différence d'elle à elle-même" (2:15)?

The "true" self as envisioned by the chevalier may be loosely described as the conscious, reasoning side of man.
Méré's efforts are directed toward dominating and controlling the unreasoning, subconscious layers of the self. His writings frequently reflect an analytical naïveté so strong for one of Méré's general perceptiveness that deliberate, studied ignorance can be the only explanation: "Mais encore, comment se peut-il que l'amour et la haine se trouvent quelquefois à un si haut point dans un même coeur, et qu'on puisse traiter si cruellement des personnes qu'on aime d'un amour extrême" (Let., 674)? This superficial psychology contradicts the perceptions of other classical writers, such as Racine, who explored fully the love-hate dichotomy. Méré, however, categorically rejects what he views as immoral behavior, and his rejection takes the form of suspended belief.

He is blind also to other "anomalies" of love. In one letter to a female correspondent, the chevalier ponders how the superior traits associated with l'honnêteté can fail to engender deep love: "La beauté, l'agrément, l'honnêteté, la bonne mine, les grâces du corps et de l'esprit, ce sont des grands attraits pour se faire aimer; et nous voyons néanmoins que ces belles qualités produisent bien souvent un effet contraire, tant à l'égard des hommes que des femmes" (Let., 672). There follows a long list of "aberrations," which appear to be both historical (Henri II and the duchesse de Valentinois) and fictional ("un grand Seigneur fort bien fait, fort galant," who loved only physically deformed men), and which illustrate the intensity of Méré's stance.

It may be said also that the chevalier feared that love could weaken the male. The Réflexions morales focus on this question in some detail. To support the general statement "L'amour excite le courage quand il est dans la modération, mais sitôt qu'il porte un homme jusque dans la volupté, il le ramolit, bien loin de le rendre vigoureux" (Réf., 170), Méré offers in the following reflection several classic examples of men rendered "soft" by women—Achilles and Polyxena, Antony and Cleopatra. Thus, against a morale of softness, irrationality, and alienation, Méré will
LOVE AND LANGUAGE

propose another vision, l'honnêteté, an ideal that point by point surpasses erotic love.

For not only is l'honnêteté durable, whereas passion is perceived as ephemeral, what further distinguishes the chevalier's goal is its capacity for engendering happiness:

L'honnêteté me semble la chose du monde la plus aimable, et les personnes de bon sens ne mettent pas en doute, que nous ne la devons aimer, que parce qu'elle nous rend heureux: Car la félicité, comme on sait, est la dernière fin des choses, que nous entreprenons. Ainsi tout ce qui n'y contribue en rien, quoique l'on s'en imagine quelque apparence honnête, c'est toujours une fausse honnêteté. . . . Car à bien examiner toutes les vertus, elles ne sont pas à rechercher que de cela seulement, qu'elles peuvent servir à notre bonheur. (3:99)

Méré also emphasizes the relationship between l'honnêteté and happiness in his correspondence: “Tout ce qui ne peut contribuer à nous rendre la vie agréable, ce doit compter pour rien; l'honnêteté même qu'on estime tant, n'est à souhaiter que parce qu'elle rend heureux ceux qui l'ont et ceux qui l'approchent” (Let., 318). Méré stresses happiness because he seeks to dismantle another ideal, la vraie vertu, that prevailed earlier in the century. Happiness was never the goal of la vraie vertu, which strove instead for loftiness and integrity even at the expense of life itself.

Unlike l'honnêteté, however, love is directly associated with suffering—“Qui commence à aimer, doit se préparer à souffrir” (Réf., 138)—and with despair—“L'affection dégénère facilement en désespoir sitôt qu'elle n'a plus d'espérance; elle veut tout perdre, quand elle ne peut rien gagner” (Réf., 137). Indeed, in those letters that appear free of the galanteries that color much of the correspondence, Méré is genuinely pained by love’s disappointments:

En effet je trouve que je m'engage extrêmement, et d'abord je ne croyais pas que cela dût aller si loin . . . j'avais bien quelque pressentiment que je courais plus de hasard auprès de vous que je n'avais fait partout ailleurs; mais parce que
j'avais vu beaucoup d'occasions où je m'étais sauvé des plus grands dangers sans blessure ou du moins sans blessure mortelle, je me faisais trop à ma fortune, et pour dire le vrai, j'étais bien imprudent de ne pas craindre d'être si souvent tête-à-tête avec vous dans les Tuileries. (Let., 171-72)

It is not the intention here to explore Méré's motivations, and the above passage may or may not express genuine emotional anguish. Whether the words are "sincere" is not germane, for, in any case, they correspond perfectly to the general tenor of Méré's writings: love is associated with emotional wounds, with suffering, and is rarely the beneficiary of the "positive thinking" reserved for l'honnêteté.

There is, however, yet one more important characteristic of l'honnêteté: the quest for aesthetic perfection. This artistic element sharply distinguishes Méré's ideal from the naturalness of love. Critics have detected an artificial quality to l'honnêteté, as formulated by the chevalier; but significantly, the artificial in his works is linked closely with art. Theater metaphors are prominent, frequently in relation to the chevalier's ideal man: "Le personnage d'un honnête homme s'étend partout; il se doit transformer par la souplesse du génie, comme l'occasion le demande" (3:157). Méré thinks in terms of audiences, of society as a "watching" public. Thus his honnête homme must never fail to captivate and seduce.

In what may seem initially paradoxical, and in contradiction to the artistic imagery, Méré portrays l'honnête homme as a completely natural figure. His person must be unaffected and unadorned. For l'honnête femme, makeup and fancy dress are rejected as masks of the natural self. Pedantry is attacked as a cover-up for true knowledge, as is brilliance that lacks depth:

Mais les gens faits, et qui jugent bien, n'aiment pas les choses de monstre, et qui parent beaucoup, quand elles ne sont que de peu de valeur. Celles qui n'ont guère d'éclat,
et qui sont de grand prix, leur plaisent. Cela se remarque en tout, et même en ce qui concerne l'esprit et les pensées. Car si ces sortes de choses semblent fort belles, et qu'elles ne soient belles qu'en apparence, elles dégoûtent tout aussitôt, et celles qui le sont sans le paraître, plus on les considère, plus on les trouve à son gré. C'est qu'elles sont belles sans être parées, et qu'on y découvre de temps en temps des grâces secrètes, qu'on n'avait pas aperçues. (1:56)

Méré had a penchant for all in life that is secret, undetected, below the surface. “Ces beautés secrètes” form an integral part of his aesthetics, contrasting with the seduction of surface attractions.

The natural state of things, however, is not always sufficiently commanding. The superior individual—male or female—must strive for perfection, and it is in this effort that the artistic goal is realized: “Sans mentir,” writes Méré to one correspondent, “vous avez eu jusqu'ici trop de confiance aux avantages que la nature vous a donnés: et puisque vous voulez que je vous éclaircisse de tout, sachez que le plus beau naturel est peu de chose à moins qu'on n'aît soin de le perfectionner” (Let., 502). Social man is viewed here as a living work of art, whence the appropriateness of aesthetic standards.

The artistic ideal does not function in a vacuum. Aesthetic perfection is not only an aspect of courtly conduct. For Méré l'honnêteté continually transcended limited notions of aristocratic man at court. If he dwells extensively on aesthetic perfection, it is in large part because of association with the theme of control. L'honnête homme thus becomes a highly complex figure, whose essential posture of sharp observation combined with a possessing style leads to complete domination over his audience: “Nous avons toujours quelque chose qui nous tient au cœur, et nous touche sensiblement: et c'est un grand avantage, que de pénétrer ce faible pour gagner les personnes comme on veut” (3:152).

The type of control he envisions, however, is of a special nature. Domination for Méré means seduction, in both
the broadest connotation and the most sexually limited one. It is, moreover, in the art of language that the chevalier finds the most satisfactory means to successful “penetration,” hence, to control. His letters, as well as the conversations with the maréchal de Clérambault, emphasize that perfection in eloquence is the way to success, whereas the “right” language is also judged essential in the art of sexual seduction. In both cases aesthetic domination of an audience is the primary goal.

As a strictly social concept, free of sexual orientation, Mére’s art consists of winning over others through elegant discourse: “Quand on s’est acquis toutes les qualités qu’on peut souhaiter pour être éloquent, on est assuré de plaire et de persuader, et même de se faire admirer dans tous les sujets agréables” (Let., 371-72). It is significant that the art of pleasing is coupled here with the art of persuasion. L’art de plaire is the basis of Mére’s ideal, but the connotations are complex. L’honnêteté transcends the ideas of “pleasing” associated with gallant behavior and relies upon an aesthetically defined social presence in order to achieve total domination: “Mais je vous puis assurer que l’on ne saurait trop avoir une certaine justesse de langage, qui consiste à se servir des meilleures façons de parler, pour mettre sa pensée dans l’esprit des gens comme on veut qu’elle y soit, ni plus ni moins” (1:15). Elegance and refinement are not meant only to “please”; they are also, perhaps principally for Mére, a sure means to molding and controlling others’ thinking.

When domination is sexualized, skillful use of language is equally essential. In the Conversations Mére shows how indulging in verbal excesses and failing to control language can ruin a suitor’s attempt to please and seduce: “On leur [les femmes] jette son cœur à la tête, et d’abord on leur en dit plus que la vraisemblance ne leur permet d’en croire, et bien souvent plus qu’elles n’en veulent” (1:21). Although Mére explains that seduction of women involves diverse “agrément,” he places particular stress on verbal art. Contrasting Caesar in battle to Caesar
seducing Cleopatra, the chevalier highlights two diverging means for success, but which are equally dependent upon appropriate expression and style.

By far the richest example, however, of the adroit use of language in the art of seduction is detailed in a letter where Méré purports to relate a "friend's" adventures. In this situation a would-be lover, disguised as a family tutor, successfully gains the complete attention of the woman he desires. His method is unusual—mastery of the art of reading aloud—but destined to succeed:

> Il faut donc que je tâche de lui plaire en tirant la quintessence de tous les agréments qui la peuvent toucher par la meilleure maniere de lire; elle consiste à bien prononcer les mots, et d'un ton conforme au sujet du discours, que ma parole la flatte sans l'endormir, qu'elle l'éveille sans la choquer, que j'use d'inflexions pour ne la pas lasser, que je prononce tendrement et d'une voix mourante les choses tendres; mais d'une façon si temperée qu'elle n'y sente rien d'affecte. Je fis en peu de jours tant de progrès en cette étude qu'elle ne se plaisait plus qu'à me faire lire et qu'à s'entretenir avec moi. (Let., 60)

Here Méré portrays the erotic domination of an audience through close attention to subtleties of style and form. Perfected, artificial expression replaces natural conversation as a first important step in seducing the woman. It is surely not coincidental that the language Méré's "friend" adopts to recount his little tale is charged with a latent sensuality ("je prononce tendrement et d'une voix mourante les choses tendres"), which communicates the desired goal of seduction. Thus if verbal excess may lead to failure in seducing a woman, careful attention to language may, on the other hand, engender considerable success. The veracity of the above story is of little consequence. Hyperbole may well have come into play. But even if Méré has exaggerated the role of polished language arts, the story still conveys an idea essential to his thinking: the erotic domination of an audience through an aesthetic medium.

What Méré develops is a desexualized portrait of love,
for diverse reasons. There is surely an Epicurean element to his works. In their descriptions of the ideal woman, the Epicureans emphasized both physical charm and a high degree of intelligence. Many passages in the chevalier’s works allude to the importance of intellectual ability in women, and the stress that he places on this talent results, in part, from an attitude that values intelligent discourse. “Ce qui fait principalement que vous plaisez toujours,” writes Méré to a female correspondent, “c’est que vous avez l’esprit fin, avec une extrême justesse à parler, à vous taire, à être douce ou fière, enjouée ou sérieuse, et à prendre dans les moindres choses que vous dites le meilleur ton et le meilleur tour” (2:10).

But if Méré's philosophical ties to Epicureanism are always apparent, they do not sufficiently explain the formulation of his ideal. Maurice Magendie believes that the mondain code, which banished spontaneity and relied heavily upon convention, may have been a reaction against “la sensualité sans esprit mise à la mode par le Vert Galant.”

Méré's strong sense of refinement, his quest for the correct airs, and his close attention to style, and particularly to style in language, do indeed offer an alternative to overemphasis on sensuality. As such, l’honnêteté becomes a form of sublimation.

Perhaps there is another reason, related to the above but sufficiently distinct to warrant mentioning. “La galanterie,” one critic has written, “est un alibi commode. Elle introduit dans la conversation entre hommes et femmes un langage qui, malgré ses conventions, reste un langage amoureux . . . c’est le chemin naturel de la séduction.” Many of Méré's letters to female friends testify to a highly cultivated form of galanterie. (This impression, impossible to prove, results from the cumulative effect of reading a large number of very similar letters to women correspondents.) What the letters, essays, and dialogues convey is that attention to style and language has become a means to achieving emotional independence while still ensuring the success of the game of love.

Both Magendie and Duchène offer meaningful explana-
tions of Méré's goal—the de-sensualizing of love in favor of an aesthetically defined *art de plaire*. Méré does incorporate an ethical standard into his writings. By stating that "il est certain que quand on aime une personne d’un mérite exquis, cet amour remplit d’honnêteté le coeur et l’esprit et donne toujours de plus nobles pensées, que l’affection qu’on a pour une personne ordinaire" (2:81), the chevalier suggests that his ideal is morally superior. But despite the introduction of this ethical standard, Méré still conveys a socialized view of love. As the above passage suggests, love is a means for arriving at the perfection of the self that Méré calls *l’honnêteté*. "C’est de l’amour, que naissent la plupart des vrais agréments" (3:75). This cause-and-effect relation communicates the diminished stress on individual feeling and the heightened stature of pleasability that are the mark of the chevalier de Méré’s works. Within his moral universe, there is little room for the solipsistic spontaneity and intensity of passion. At best, reciprocal *honnêteté* has become the ideal in a world where social perfection is the highest standard.

1. Antoine Gombaud, chevalier de Méré, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Charles-H. Boudhors (Paris: Editions Fernand Roches, 1930); *Maximes, sentences et réflexions morales et politiques* (Paris: 1687); *Lettres* (Paris: 1689). Subsequent references to Méré’s works will appear in the text. For the *Oeuvres complètes* (which include the *Conversations* and the *Discours*) both volume and page number will be given; the *Maximes, sentences et réflexions morales et politiques* will be abbreviated as *Réf.*, and the entry number will appear as the reference; for the *Lettres* the page number will be given.


