Chapter Eight

LA BRUYÈRE

The first edition of the Caractères appeared in 1688. Seven editions followed, the final one in 1694. By date La Bruyère does not belong to the group of writers under consideration here, whose works were published during the 1660s and 1670s. By tradition, however, he does. More often than not, the author of the Caractères is included in studies devoted to the classical moralists. Such critical flexibility may be explained by the work’s fragmented form, akin to the Pensées and the Maximes, or by La Bruyère’s extensive use of the character portrait, a literary phenomenon dating back to 1650 and to Mlle de Scudéry’s Grand Cyrus. In short, the Caractères are viewed as the culmination of a long-standing social and literary trend, as “a summa of seventeenth-century portraiture, the end-term of a society’s effort to portray, take stock of, and give meaning to itself.”

There are major differences, however, between the Caractères and the works of the moralists studied in this group of essays. Yet, it is only recently that La Bruyère has begun to receive his due as a decidedly un-classical writer. In particular, two studies by Jules Brody have emphasized aspects of La Bruyère’s book that differentiate it
from the works of his predecessors. Brody concentrates on La Bruyère's portrayal of a morally and spiritually empty generation, dedicated to money and social promotion, whose vapid lives the writer captured by a new and extensive use of a vocabulary that stressed the physical, material world: "Si La Bruyère s'obstinait à peindre ses contemporains par le dehors, c'est tout simplement parce que ses contemporains, surtout nobles, ne lui montraient plus autre chose." In support of this view, Brody cites the following passage:

La cour n'est jamais dénuée d'un certain nombre de gens en qui l'usage du monde, la politesse ou la fortune tiennent lieu d'esprit, et suppléent au mérite. Ils savent entrer et sortir; ils se tièrent de la conversation en ne s'y mêlant point; ils plaissent à force de se taire, et se rendent importants par un silence longtemps soutenu, ou tout au plus par quelques monosyllabes; ils payent de mines, d'une inflexion de voix, d'un geste et d'un sourire: ils n'ont pas, si je l'ose dire, deux pouces de profondeur; si vous les enfoncez, vous rencontrez le tuf. ("Cour," 83)

From this perspective the Caractères portray a superficial society, one without moral values, where life has become a routine of purposeless, mechanical repetitions, exemplified best by the courtier, whose movements are never progressive, only repetitive: "Il fera demain ce qu'il fait aujourd'hui et ce qu'il fit hier" ("Ville," 12).

The mood of the Caractères is thus quite different from the works of La Bruyère's predecessors who feared not monotony but emotional chaos, not an empty spirit but an overburdened one. Strongly evident in their works is belief in control of the self, an idea that is most sharply defined perhaps by writers such as Saint-Evremond and Jacques Esprit, but obvious also, for example, in the letters of Mme de Sévigné, who sought to reorder the imperfections of the "raw" relationship through the medium of the written word.

For many of the writers studied here, emotional repose
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is one solution to what they viewed as an upsetting moral climate. Recognizing the limits of Logos in a psychological universe governed by Eros, Mme de Clèves' retreat to the convent is a radical denial of the life forces. Silence and death become her sole means to freedom. Similarly, the Lettres portugaises, though offering the hope of a regained will, nonetheless depict a renouncement that spiritually leads nowhere. Mariane will return only to the embryonic existence she led prior to her encounter with the chevalier. Her victory is Pyrrhic; though she liberates herself from the binds of an unreciprocated love, Mariane is only “free” to return to the shackles imposed by convent life. The “win” over passion is a “loss” of vitality, a retreat into dormancy. But this inert existence, not unlike that of the princesse de Clèves, and perhaps only an intensified form of ataraxia is ultimately seen by Mariane as a desirable alternative to the turmoil of love.

The moralists grouped in this study, seeking to perfect an “outer self” capable of controlling erotic energy, established a distance between the emotive and the rational parts of the personality. To give in to the disorganizing life of passion meant renouncing psychological and social equilibrium. The age’s hero, not surprisingly, was l’honnête homme, the incarnation of the controlled, aesthetic ideal. There is an urgency in these writers’ works to reform the raw stuff of emotion, to harmonize the individual with the social, to tranquilize both. In this context alienation implies a loss of reason and control to the unconscious, spontaneous force of love.

Alienation is also, of course, a theme in the Caractères. Loss of reason is still implied, for the machine-like existence of the “characters” is totally antithetical to rational, reflective behavior. But the threat is different from the one perceived by the preceding generation, originating not in love but in the mindless pursuit of money and social status. The problem is no longer one of attempting to control the disorganizing but energy-charged love force. Instead, the Caractères portray a silly, petty, often grotesque universe
where if emotions (other than financial gain and social climbing) have been checked, the resulting society is no better off for it. Love per se is not a problem for La Bruyère, who did not fear the violent eruption of spontaneous emotion. Rather, the society he saw about him had become so depersonalized, its members so superficial, that the passions could pose relatively little threat. They are dismantled in the Caractères, but not through a morale devoted to control. Indeed, they seem merely to fade in a non-committed society of moral lightweights, where love is yet one more superficial emotion confirming man’s and society’s mediocrity.

La Bruyère’s pronouncements on love appear in two contiguous chapters, “Des Femmes” and “Du Coeur.” Although neither chapter deals exclusively with the problem, love is at least the underlying force of the section on women; it is only one among many emotions described in “Du Coeur.” (The seventeenth-century connotation of “heart” was highly inclusive, suggesting all non-reflective, spontaneous reactions.) “Des Femmes” is far more acerbic than “Du Coeur,” and at least superficially is reminiscent of the close alliance Jacques Esprit established between the burden of love and womankind. One of the few critics to discuss in detail La Bruyère’s views on love, René Jasinski, has detected a Christian stance in the Caractères, whereby the moralist comes close to portraying woman as a creature of perdition. If “Du Coeur” is more subdued, believes Jasinski, it is because the element of female irrationality is absent. Although this distinction is valid, Jasinski fails to stress the component of grotesque absurdity in La Bruyère’s portraits of female behavior, which separates the Caractères from the rigorous mood of Esprit’s La Fausseté des vertus humaines. Nevertheless, “Des Femmes” offers a more bitter portrayal of love than “Du Coeur,” which is, as Jasinski has correctly perceived, a basically male-oriented chapter.

Woven through both chapters are themes dear to the French moralists of the preceding decades. As in the writ-
ings of Pascal and La Rochefoucauld, love is pitted against ambition: "Les hommes commencent par l'amour, finissent par l'ambition, et ne se trouvent souvent dans une assiette plus tranquille que lorsqu'ils meurent" ("Coeur," 76). In the Caractères ambition is generally believed to last longer than love, and, in fact, is often one of life's constants: "Le cas n'arrive guère où l'on puisse dire: 'J'étais ambitieux'; ou on ne l'est point, ou on l'est toujours; mais le temps vient où l'on avoue que l'on a aimé" ("Coeur," 75). This follows closely both La Rochefoucauld—"On passe souvent de l'amour à l'ambition, mais on ne revient guère de l'ambition à l'amour" (Max. 490)—and Pascal, in the Discours sur les passions de l'amour—"Qu'une vie est heureuse quand elle commence par l'amour et qu'elle finit par l'ambition! Si j'avais à en choisir une, je prendrais celle-là. Tant que l'on a du feu, l'on est aimable, mais ce feu s'étant, il se perd. Alors, que la place est belle et grande pour l'ambition!" 6

"Des Femmes," however, brings a new dimension to the love-ambition dichotomy. In "Du Coeur" La Bruyère views the problem with a good deal of resignation, establishing an equilibrium between two passions that, although they are the cause of substantial unease, are not truly destructive. The tone is quite different in the chapter on women, where female ambition is explicitly portrayed as troublesome: "Il est étonnant de voir dans le coeur de certaines femmes quelque chose de plus vif et de plus fort que l'amour pour les hommes, je veux dire l'ambition et le jeu: de telles femmes rendent les hommes chastes; elles n'ont de leur sexe que les habits" ("Femmes," 52). In the catalogue of female horrors compiled by Bruyère, there is a passion still more disquieting (for the male) than love: ambition. Significantly, however, the latter is a socially related emotion. What the moralist appears to fear most is not love's upsetting spontaneity but rather the adoption by the female of male-type, specifically social, behavior. The alienating power of love diminishes here, as estrangement from the self is characterized as closely related to societal standards.
La Bruyère is perhaps most conventional in his praise of friendship. Not surprisingly, in “Des Femmes,” the love-friendship division is posed in terms of male-female characteristics: “Les femmes vont plus loin en amour que la plupart des hommes; mais les hommes l'emportent sur elles en amitié” (“Femmes,” 55). When friendship is described in “Du Coeur,” it figures as a rare but highly prized quality, much as in the writings of La Rochefoucauld and Saint-Evremond. Pure friendship is harder to achieve than love—“Il est plus ordinaire de voir un amour extrême qu'une parfaite amitié” (“Coeur,” 6)—and the two passions are mutually exclusive—“L'amour et l'amitié s'excluent l'un l'autre” (“Coeur,” 7). There is little new here, and La Bruyère seems to be making a concerted effort to be faithful to classical ideas and ideals.

On the other hand, La Bruyère’s deference to the tradition of praising simplicity and naturalness engenders new thinking. The early parts of “Des Femmes” concentrate on the value of simplicity in women, with La Bruyère rejecting artificiality of all types. This theme had been particularly well developed by the chevalier de Méré, with whom the author of the Caractères is in ready agreement:

Il y a dans quelques femmes une grandeur artificielle, attachée au mouvement des yeux, à un air de tête, aux façons de marcher, et qui ne va pas plus loin; un esprit éblouissant qui impose, et que l'on n'estime que parce qu'il n'est pas approfondi. Il y a dans quelques autres une grandeur simple, naturelle, indépendante du geste et de la démarche, qui a sa source dans le coeur, et qui est comme une suite de leur haute naissance; un mérite paisible, mais solide, accompagné de mille vertus qu'elles ne peuvent couvrir de toute leur modestie, qui échappent, et qui se montrent à ceux qui ont des yeux. (“Femmes,” 2)

The intensity of La Bruyère’s criticism, however, distinguishes his views from similar ones in other moralists’ works. Women who use too much makeup not only fail to please; they are horrible—“Je leur prononce, de la part de tous les hommes ou de la plus grande partie, que le blanc et le rouge les rend affreuses et dégoûtantes; que le rouge seul les vieillit
et les déguise; qu’ils haïssent autant à les voir avec de la céruse sur le visage, qu’avec de fausses dents en la bouche, et des boules de cire dans les mâchoires” (“Femmes,” 6). Older women, La Bruyère writes in the following reflection, are “disfigured” by such attentions. Thus females who fail to conform to certain standards of beauty are grotesque and distorted. If La Bruyère is repulsed by such women, as Jasinski believes, his tone reflects, nevertheless, a well-tempered horror. He sees the situation as nonsensical and irrational, but also as comical. His descriptions provoke a feeling similar to that produced by carnival distorting mirrors. One is simultaneously horrified and amused by the grotesque images they produce.

This tone dominates much of what La Bruyère has to say on women and love. Both “Des Femmes” and “Du Coeur,” for example, stress that love is an involuntary force, spontaneously erupting with no forewarning: “L’amour nait brusquement, sans autre réflexion, par tempérament ou par faiblesse; un trait de beauté nous fixe, nous détermine” (“Coeur,” 3). Highly reminiscent of Mme de Lafayette’s unvarying emphasis on the spontaneous immediacy of love, La Bruyère’s maxims and reflections are equally unvarying in their diagnosis of an uncontrolled and uncontrollable force. But there is, as usual, a qualitative difference between the two chapters. What in “Coeur,” 3, is a generalized statement, faithful to the classical tradition, becomes in “Des Femmes” an exposition of women’s highly bizarre inclinations in love matters: “A juger de cette femme par sa beauté, sa jeunesse, sa fierté et ses dédaux, il n’y a personne qui doute que ce ne soit un héros qui doive un jour la charmer. Son choix est fait: c’est un petit monstre qui manque d’esprit” (“Femmes,” 27). The rapidity and the totality of the woman’s decision, translated stylistically by the very brief “Son choix est fait,” heightens its incomprehensibility. This quality of troublesome, inexplicable (at least to the male moralist) behavior adds to a general sense of female irrationality. In “Du Coeur” “un trait de beauté nous fixe, nous détermine”; in the chapter on women, the determining trait is more often
the grotesque or the bizarre: “Est-ce en vue du secret, ou par un goût hypocondre, que cette femme aime un valet, cette autre un moine, et Dorinne son médecin?” (“Femmes,” 32).

The association of the female with irrational behavior was hardly a new theme for the era. Jacques Esprit, for one, placed the burden and guilt of loving directly on woman; but despite this strong bias in *La Fausseté des vertus humaines*, he allowed her some dignity by offering a means of salvation: rigorous self-control. There is very little dignity in “Des Femmes,” no hope that the language of reason and self-control can tame the unpredictability of female behavior. For La Bruyère women’s nature is hopelessly unreasoning, but this irrationality primarily takes the form of the grotesque and the absurd.

The consequences of such a shift are radical. Reading through “Des Femmes” and “Du Coeur,” one may detect an implicit, but very strong, psychological freedom on the moralist’s part. Although it is true that women are painted as irrational and seductive creatures, the portraits’ tone reduces the menace considerably. Dorinne, who loves her doctor; Lélie, who worships only actors, musicians, and dancers; and Lise, who cannot stop making up; all are very silly, unreasonable women. Their absurdities, however, are individualistic and idiosyncratic. Such portraiture sharply distinguishes La Bruyère from his predecessors, who exposed what they perceived as the typical, universal dangers of l’amour-passion. In this shift from the universal to the individually idiosyncratic, love is not seen as an alienating force in itself. The potential for disruption does exist, of course, in individual whim and caprice that threaten to dismantle stable, traditional social values. But even these whims are portrayed as more ludicrous than fearsome. Many females are real “characters,” to be sure, but nothing worse than that. Women may, moreover, be controlled by their confesseurs and directeurs (fools though they may be); but this dependent method of regulation would not have been acceptable to Jacques Esprit, Mme de Lafayette, or la religieuse portugaise, who demanded inner, self-directed guidance.
The *Caractères*, then, convey a sense of diminished danger. This mood may be achieved by what appears to be a deliberate reconstruction of a classical motif. Adopting a theme that had preoccupied La Rochefoucauld, the author of the *Caractères* refers extensively to the end of love. Thus in “Du Coeur,” the third reflection, which refers to love’s beginning—“L’amour naît brusquement”—is followed immediately by one alluding to its end—“Le temps, qui fortifie les amitiés, affaiblit l’amour (“Coeur,” 4). There is no transition here; the period between beginning and end is ignored or curtailed, thereby creating an impression of love’s rapid disintegration. The moment of love always seems to have passed in the *Caractères*:

Ceux qui s’aiment d’abord avec la plus violente passion contribuent bientôt chacun de leur part à s’aimer moins, et ensuite à ne s’aimer plus. Qui, d’un homme ou d’une femme, met davantage du sien dans cette rupture, il n’est pas aisé de le décider. Les femmes accusent les hommes d’être volages, et les hommes disent qu’elles sont légères. (“Coeur,” 17)

Love dies quickly, and even memories fade—“Les amours meurent par le dégoût, et l’oubli les enterré” (“Coeur,” 32) —for the emotions are inherently limited—“Cesser d’aimer, preuve sensible que l’homme est borné, et que le coeur a ses limites” (“Coeur,” 34). “Coeur,” 17, is similar in theme to one of La Rochefoucauld’s *maximes supprimées*: “Comme on n’est jamais en liberté d’aimer, ou de cesser d’aimer, l’amant ne peut se plaindre avec justice de l’inconstance de sa maîtresse, ni elle de la légèreté de son amant” (62). Both the *Maximes* (particularly the *Maximes supprimées*) and the *Caractères* establish the limits of the will in matters of love; both allude often to love’s inconstancy. And both rely extensively on a vocabulary of sickness to portray the body’s total involvement in *l’amour-passion*. This metaphor, however, changes drastically with La Bruyère.

In both *De l’amour et de la mer* and *De l’amour et de la vie*, La Rochefoucauld seeks to convey the diverse transi-
tions of the love cycle, from the early joys to the final, stagnant depression. In the *Maximes* he proceeds likewise, although the emphasis on the initial stages of love is less prominent. Most of the adages stress the stale end of love, its terminal moments. But whereas La Rochefoucauld chooses to focus on the theme of a decaying, warped spirit, La Bruyère centers immediately on the possibility of healing. If the emphasis in the *Caractères* is on love as sickness, the predominant word is still *guérir*.

The healing process is a ready balm for all suffering: "On guérit comme on se console: on n'a pas dans le coeur de quoi toujours pleurer et toujours aimer" ("Coeur," 34). Even in "Des Femmes," where female irrationality and whim offer the greatest threat of disorienting man, if not of destroying him, recuperation is ever present:

Le caprice est dans les femmes tout proche de la beauté, pour être son contre-poison, et afin qu'elle nuise moins aux hommes, qui n'en guériraient pas sans remède. ("Femmes," 15)

Les femmes s'attachent aux hommes par les faveurs qu'elles leur accordent: les hommes guérissent par ces mêmes faveurs. ("Femmes," 16)

On tire ce bien de la perfidie des femmes, qu'elle guérit de la jalousie. ("Femmes," 25)

In the *Maximes*, however, healing is viewed as a far less reliable force:

Il y a des rechutes dans les maladies de l'âme, comme dans celles du corps. Ce que nous prenons pour notre guérison n'est le plus souvent qu'un relâche ou un changement de mal. (*Max.* 193)

Il y a plusieurs remèdes qui guérissent de l'amour, mais il n'y en a point d'infaillibles. (*Max.* 459)

Where La Rochefoucauld evinces only skepticism toward emotional healing, La Bruyère quickly ushers in total restoration to good health. However, there is in the *Caractères*
a decidedly negative side to this salubrity. The "characters" may be quickly restored since, in terms of the depth of their love, they have never been very "sick." They heal quickly, it is true, but perhaps only because of their moral transience.

Inconstancy (fickleness is probably a more appropriate term) is one form of living adopted by this morally mobile society. Short-lived galanteries abound in the Caractères. Rarely is there a mutually deep exchange; one partner is always playing, play-acting, genuinely free of emotional involvement, and this freedom is achieved without the struggle waged, for example, by Mme de Lafayette's heroines or by la religieuse portugaise:

Il coûte peu aux femmes de dire ce qu'elles ne sentent point: il coûte encore moins aux hommes de dire ce qu'ils sentent. ("Femmes," 66)

Il arrive quelquefois qu'une femme cache à un homme toute la passion qu'elle sent pour lui, pendant que de son côté il feint pour elle toute celle qu'il ne sent pas. ("Femmes," 67)

In a portrait where the elusive style reflects perfectly the story's moral, secretive Glycère feigns faithfulness to her credulous husband, all the while indulging in a quantity of illicit relationships. From passages such as these, there emerges a mood of sham and emptiness. Feeling is so inconsequential that risk is always minimal. Inversely, as the superficial relationships indicate, there is never great depth of feeling. "Aussi bien," concludes Jasinski, "l'expérience prouve-t-elle qu'il [l'amour] donne lieu à des entraînements violents mais souvent sans profondeur vraie, que dans l'immense majorité des cas il s'engage de façon déconcertante, multiplie les inconscèquences et se perd dans la légèreté. La passion de toutes la plus puissante, celle par laquelle s'éprouvent le mieux les caractères, confirme la médiocrité de l'homme."

In fact, the mediocrity of love is the basic theme of the two chapters. If there is no longer a need to harmonize,
to tranquilize, the emotions, it is because depth of feeling, and hence emotional risk, is forceably excluded in a switching and swapping society: "Un ancien galant tient à si peu de chose, qu'il cède à un nouveau mari; et celui-ci dure si peu, qu'un nouveau galant qui survient lui rend le change" ("Femmes," 19). What has destroyed the society of the Caractères is not love, not the suffering and disorientation associated with it, but rather a lifestyle of material acquisition, engendering, in turn, a loss of moral purpose and commitment.

In such a world a writer will construct a reflection stylistically based on accumulation, but which thematically conveys a moral vacuum: "Une femme inconstante est celle qui n'aime plus; une légère, celle qui déjà en aime un autre; une volatile, celle qui ne sait si elle aime et ce qu'elle aime; une indifférente, celle qui n'aime rien" ("Femmes," 24). The degree of verbal accumulation is in inverse proportion to the aphorism's theme of emptiness. Characterization, moreover, relies upon a network of division and distinction. During the classical period, as Michel Foucault has shown, distinction was the principal method for classifying in the natural sciences—"L'identité et ce qui la marque se définissent par le résidu des différences. Un animal ou une plante n'est pas ce qu'indique—ou trahit—le stigmate qu'on découvre imprimé en lui; il est ce que ne sont pas les autres; il n'existe en lui-même qu'à la limite de ce qui s'en distingue." La Bruyère, in "Femmes," 24, utilizes this principle. But the fine distinctions he makes are only among degrees of spiritual and moral emptiness. The author of the Caractères is dividing and distinguishing in a void.

La Bruyère's firm insistence on the hollow nature of society characterizes his work and separates him from the writers of the 1660s and 1670s. Those moralists had clearly posed the opposition between self and society, and, in favor of the latter, had sought to control the unreasoning, spontaneous side of man. In the Caractères there is an emotional and spiritual vacuum because the moralist no longer perceives the need to battle for some overriding value, more
essential than any individual's claims. Jules Brody has suggested that La Bruyère intuitively discerned the final days not only of the noble class but also of la noblesse—"la noblesse comme témoignage d'une valeur sociale et morale non-négociable, d'une valeur à proprement parler métaphysique." For the chevalier de Méré, perhaps the most ardent defender of the faith, l'honnêteté—the moral system devoted to the preservation of those values—was prized above all else. In La Bruyère's universe there is no struggle to preserve an ideal, and the steady degradation of l'honnête homme is one outstanding mark of this metaphysical shift. In a series of short reflections, La Bruyère places l'honnête homme ever closer to the pejorative habile homme, while increasingly distinguishing him from the exemplary homme de bien:

L'honnête homme tient le milieu entre l'habile homme et l'homme de bien, quoique dans une distance inégale de ces deux extrêmes.

La distance qu'il y a de l'honnête homme à l'habile homme s'affaiblit de jour à autre, et est sur le point de disparaître.

L'habile homme est celui qui cache ses passions, qui entend ses intérêts, qui y sacrifie beaucoup de choses, qui a su acquérir du bien ou en conserver.

L'honnête homme est celui qui ne vole pas sur les grands chemins, et qui ne tue personne, dont les vices enfin ne sont pas scandaleux.

On connait assez qu'un homme de bien est honnête homme; mais il est plaisant d'imaginer que tout honnête homme n'est pas homme de bien.

L'homme de bien est celui qui n'est ni un saint ni un dévot, et qui s'est borné à n'avoir que de la vertu. ("Jugements," 55)

In this social universe, l'honnête homme, by virtue of his close association with l'habile homme, has become an acquirer, an accumulator. Méré's gentlemanly ideal has been tarnished in a world rapidly moving toward domination by the bourgeoisie.

This class shift shatters other ideals of the classical gen-
eration as well. The goal of ataraxie has been replaced by the reality of anomie. The “monster” is no longer the untamed force of love, but rather the valueless, machine-like “characters,” guided only by their spiritually barren and trivial vision of social success. There may be, as Jules Brody believes, redemption in La Bruyère’s praise of unpredictability (at least in matters other than love, where the moralist’s tone is far less tolerant). In the Caractères tendencies toward automatic behavior are challenged by man’s desire for change. Nevertheless, there is a large gap between believing that human worth is in unpredictability and asserting that it lies in the individual living at the peak of his physical and psychic energies. In La Bruyère’s book the potential for such vitality is completely undermined by a morale of petty social aggrandizement.

Thus although La Bruyère was writing only a decade or two later than the other moralists grouped in this study, he clearly deviated from the classical age’s emphasis on control and language, on control through the language of reason and the destruction of courtly love myths. The change is radical, signaling a reformed vision of the individual and his society. And yet, despite the diverging moods, the shifting emphasis, there is one strong, common bond between La Bruyère and his immediate predecessors. All ultimately emphasize the social at the expense of the individual.

La Bruyère, perceiving the potentially negative results of a conforming, overmechanized, and status-oriented society, differs from earlier seventeenth-century French moralists, who sought to create an emotional state unthreatening to individual and social order. The society that La Bruyère depicts is far more trivial than the glamorous, overbearing one portrayed by Mme de Lafayette in the early pages of La Princesse de Clèves. But though he may nostalgically regret the loss of individual commitment in a world given over to banal social concerns, La Bruyère, at the same time, is intellectually captivated by society’s hold.

The general direction of social gravitation in the Caractères is toward the monarch, or at least toward the arena
where he presides, the court. In both the provinces and the
city, \textit{la cour} represents the epitome of social success; and
for those already there (the courtiers), proximity to the
monarch is the sign of one's standing. It has long been a
commonplace in La Bruyère scholarship that the chapter on
the sovereign figures at the center of the \textit{Caractères}, there­
by transmitting a strong sense of order and authority that
inherently limit the individual's importance. There is,
moreover, no real challenge to the monarch's authority in
La Bruyère's book. Despite the admittedly trivial nature of
life at the court, the sovereign's command is unquestioned.
That the courtier is frequently ludicrous in his efforts to be
"placed" does not detract from an awareness of the mon­
arch's total control.

With the generation of moralists who preceded La Bru­
yère, social order and authority may sometimes be less ob­
viously prominent. Although strongly evident in writers such
as Mme de Lafayette and Guilleragues, allusions to abso­
lute rule may be perceived less directly in Jacques Esprit's
work or in the writings of the chevalier de Méré. Never­
theless, even when forthright allusions to the monarchy are
shunned, it is impossible to ignore the moral authoritarian­
ism of these works. The repression of individual and highly
intense emotion, the yearning for repose, that dominate the
classical generation's moralist literature parallel the growth
of French absolutism. In La Bruyère's work the need for
repression diminishes, since the individual is no longer a
threat to the social universe portrayed by the moralist.
Instead, the \textit{Caractères} paint a picture of man identifying
totally with society's norms and demands. But this complete
adjustment of goals only serves to strengthen the mood of
authoritarianism. The diminished stress on individual claims
to life in the age's writings, from Saint-Evremond and
Méré up through La Bruyère, suggests an effort toward
containing emotional freedom, an effort that, moreover,
stands in direct opposition to the reality of sexual mores in
the \textit{grand siècle}. It was not, however, reality that the mor­
alists sought to depict. Rather, their works offer the vision,
conscious or unconscious, of that reality controlled in favor of what the age perceived to be as higher ideals.


3. Ibid., p. 168. All references are to the *Caractères*, ed. Robert Garapon (Paris: Garnier, 1962); subsequent references, consisting of chapter and entry number, will be found in the text.


