

**Pringy's *Les Differens caracteres des femmes*:  
The Difficult Case of Female Salvation**

by  
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**Introduction**

In 2002, an excerpt from the fifth and sixth chapters of Jeanne-Michelle de Pringy's 1694 *Les Differens caracteres des femmes du siècle* was included in a collection of feminist texts by women writers of the seventeenth century. This inclusion aligns her with authors who were outspoken—at times subversively so—about the social reality women faced, despite the fact that Pringy's position is far less progressive than that of her contemporaries. The reasoning justifying Pringy's presence in the anthology, according to the anthology's editor Colette Winn, is that Pringy's is a subtle but radical form of feminism: "Particulièrement éclairante est encore la déclaration qui suit. Mme de Pringy, comme G. Suchon, a l'air de s'accommoder des règles en vigueur, des limites imparties à la femme, mais sous l'approbation, l'ombre de la révolte se profile déjà" (Winn 17).<sup>1</sup> Beneath Pringy's ostensible instruction to behave within the norm, Winn argues, lie the seeds of a call for women to find their emancipation in their own self-empowerment. Such a reading is certainly warranted in the sense that any text championing women's rights would have been likely to face criticism and rebuke, and not just from those on the *anti* side of the *Querelle des femmes*. Pringy's proto-feminism, like that of her contemporaries, would have had to be indirect and insinuate emancipation without ruffling feathers, justifying a kind of Straussian interpretation of her professed compliance regarding the weakness and moral fragility of women as a mask behind which an actual agenda of female emancipation could be detected by a discerning reader.

Could Mme de Pringy have had such readers in mind? A readership on the lookout for the silhouette of revolt against a backdrop of deference for the doxa? It may be that such an optimistic reading would induce, if not a certain amount of teleological revisionism, at the very least a simplifica-

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<sup>1</sup> Winn's anthology begins with Marie le Gendre's *L'Exercice de l'ame vertueuse* from 1597, and Pringy's text closes the collection. Also included, chronologically, are excerpts from Charlotte de Brachart's *Harengue*, Marguerite de Valois' *Discours docte et subtil*, Suzanne de Nervèse's *Apologie en faveur des femmes*, Jacqueline de Miremont's *Apologie pour les Dames*, Jacquette Guillaume's *Les Dames illustres*, and Gabrielle Suchon's *Traité de la morale et de la politique*.

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tion of the debate surrounding women's place, rights and emancipation in seventeenth century France. I propose a more modest goal: to understand the meaning and import of the *Caracteres* given its complex integration of moralist, theological, and feminist influences. What does this treatise on the various vices of women reveal about the genre of proto-feminist literature at the end of the seventeenth century, and how are we to interpret the fraught path to salvation that Pringy carves out for women?<sup>2</sup> Which of its various complexities and contradictions result from esthetic and philosophical concerns exerted onto the text from the literary landscape out of which it emerged, and which are internal tensions that require resolution on the part of the reader? Finally, what can we learn about the fashioning or conceptualization of female interiority, of the female soul, this emerging fecund realm that would become the central topoi of sentimental fiction in the next century?

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Jeanne-Michelle de Pringy's *Differens caracteres des femmes*, followed in the same volume by *La Description de l'amour propre*, was first anonymously published in 1694.<sup>3</sup> Through her first publication, the public was already familiar with Mme de Pringy's panegyric discourses lauding the military prowess of the King. The attribution of many of her works remains problematic due to the scarcity of biographical information. Literary records indicate that after her *Caracteres* she wrote a half-dozen treatises and religious texts, the novel *Junie, ou les sentimens romains*, and finally the text which accounts for the majority of secondary references to Pringy in academic scholarship, her biography of famed Jesuit preacher Louis Bourdaloue: *La Vie du père Bourdaloue*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The term "proto-feminist" has, with some reservation on the part of certain scholars, come to designate texts addressing feminist concerns before feminism became a political or literary movement. To some extent, many of these "proto-feminist" texts should be considered feminist texts regardless. However, the author whom I analyze here does not share the same goals as either modern feminists or as her outspoken contemporaries, justifying the use of term "proto-feminist."

<sup>3</sup> Pringy would affix her name to the 1699 edition, however the monthly periodical *Le Mercure de France* identified her as the author as early as December 1694.

<sup>4</sup> According to Constant Venesoen, an earlier work, *Les Diférens caracteres de l'amour* (1685) was falsely attributed to Pringy. Venesoen's analysis of the *Mercur*'s announcement of the text convincingly shows that this attribution was highly improbable, as it was supposedly written by an "Auteur [...] de l'Académie Française" (from the *Mercur galant*, November 1684, 310–311). For a more detailed view of Pringy's bibliography, see Venesoen's critical edition of *Les Différens caractères des femmes avec la description de l'amour propre (Edition de 1694)*, Honoré Champion, 2002, 13–26.

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The year 2002 may have seen the re-emergence of Pringy on the academic landscape, but with the exception of Venesoen's critical edition and Pringy's inclusion in Colette Winn's anthology, as far as I can tell, little attention has been given to the *Caracteres*. This is probably due to a variety of reasons, including the familiar marginalization of texts for and about women in the processes of canonization. This was also in part due to timing. The *Caracteres*, whose generic characteristics identify it as in large part a moralist text, was published at the end of the century, well after the majority of moralist productions of the *Grand Siècle*: twenty-four years after the posthumous publication of Pascal's *Pensées*, sixteen years after the definitive edition of La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes* as well as Madame de Sablé's *Maximes*, a decade after the bulk of Saint-Evremond's literary activity, and six years after La Bruyère's *Les Caracteres ou les moeurs de ce siècle*, the apogee of the moralist "genre."<sup>5</sup>

Moralist literature—particularly in the 1670s and 1680s—was timely, tied to oral Salon culture and to high society's definitions of *honnêteté*, *politesse*, and *galanterie*. Literary activity in this milieu was intimately linked to repartee and rhetorical dazzling. Pringy herself was critical and suspicious of the use of eloquence and wit, and despite the strong moralist tone of her work, the esthetic central to moralist literature was at odds with Pringy's didactic ends, which were to favor contemplation and retreat over seduction and imitation. In short, she participated too late in a genre many of whose worldly concerns, moreover, she rejected. This not only detracts from the potential "modernity" of her work,<sup>6</sup> but also makes her text difficult to classify and thus difficult to compare to a particular literary tradition. However, these two difficulties are what make Pringy's text a rich object of study. First because, as I will show, it can be aligned with a particular cluster of other proto-feminist works with which it shares salient characteristics. Secondly, and as scholars have increasingly been showing, focusing on a text's "modernity" or obvious legacy is itself an act of marginalization that does a disservice to a more accurate and true understanding of its import.

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<sup>5</sup> Whether moralist writing is considered a "genre" is up for debate. See Daniel Acke's *Vauvenargues, moraliste* in which he attempts to define this genre he called "la moralistique" (Acke 81–84).

<sup>6</sup> By which I mean anticipating concerns, approaches, strategies or goals that were to be taken up in later incarnations of feminist or moralist literature.

### A double influence

That *Les Differens caracteres des femmes du siècle* was re-edited five years after its original publication points to a certain level of popular appeal, yet little is known about Pringy's links to other authors or artistic milieus, and less even about the text's reception.<sup>7</sup> Her name appears most often in the pages of the monthly French gazette, *Le Mercure galant*, which announced both the text's initial publication in 1693 and again its second edition a few months prior to publication. If nothing can definitively be asserted regarding Pringy's readership, we can gather, from the fact that the *Mercure* was instrumental in disseminating (some might say advertising) and thus determining trends and fashions, that Pringy enjoyed some attention for her works. Though we may never know the extent to which the *Caracteres* was given to young girls with the intent of correcting or preventing these vices, Pringy's treatise is unique in comparison to most contemporaneous moral analyses of women by women because of its ostensible pedagogical goal. Whereas moral observations were customarily embedded in a variety of literary forms by Mme de Sablé, Mme de Lafayette, Mme de Villedieu, or Madame de Scudéry, moral prescription is the *Caracteres*' unique goal and unifying principle. This twelve-part text, composed of six vices and six corrective virtues, was written before there was any substantial body of literature about women's education (be it moral or otherwise) that was also directly addressed to them.

Pringy's *Caracteres* is divided into two distinct but interweaving parts: six vices in the form of portraits of women who embody them, followed respectively by a description of each vice's corresponding virtue. The first character to be derided is that of coquettes (*les coquettes*) and it is followed by a praise of modesty (*la modestie*). Next, Pringy criticizes zealots (*les bigotes*), after which she describes true piety (*la piété*). Those obsessed with the superficial display of wit (*les spirituelles*) are paired with a portrait of true knowledge (*la science*). Women consumed by their thriftiness (*les économes*) are urged to follow balance or moderation (*la regle*).

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<sup>7</sup> On the occasion of the death of a certain Mr Villémarechal, the 1705 January issue of *Le Mercure galant* references Pringy as one of the regulars at his Thursday Salon: "Me de Pringi y brilloit beaucoup. Vous sçavez qu'elle a un discernement fort juste pour la découverte des veritez les plus abstraites, & que dans la recherche qu'elle en fait, elle procede avec une précision qui fait juger de la netteté & de la profondeur de son esprit" (258–259). This mention, along with some evidence that she was friends with Louis Bourdaloue's sister, are as of yet the only known references to her worldly connections.

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Women addicted to gambling (*les joüieuses*) should find a cure in occupation (*l'occupation*). And finally women entirely devoted to judicial disputes (*les plaideuses*) are countered by Pringy's description of the pursuit of inner peace (*la paix*).<sup>8</sup>

As this outline suggests, we will see that the *Caracteres*' two major literary influences are moral literature and theological literature. These two didactic traditions intersect at various points, but also compete, as each focuses on opposite concerns: the former revolving around human behavior in society, the latter on God. Further down, unpacking the fraught relationship between the two parts of the text will reveal Pringy's complicated participation in proto-feminism.

#### **The moralist influence: the social aspects of vice**

The sections on vice in the *Caracteres* share unmistakable characteristics with secular mundane moralist literature, among the literary spearheads of the *Grand Siècle*. This included, among others, the writings of Saint-Evremond, Mme de Sablé, La Rochefoucauld, La Fontaine, and La Bruyère, whose famous work shared the same title as Pringy's text. The exploration of human interiority undertaken by the moralists focused on its relationship to social behavior rather than on humans' relationship to God. The moralists were working towards a *universal* definition of man (*qua man*, not *qua species*) through a kind of representatively exhaustive classification of behavior, with varying degrees of systematization.

Pringy's portraits of the vices are indeed an effort at a systematic categorization of the various types of women: coquettes, zealots, *précieuses* (though she never uses the term), misers, gamblers, and meddlers. Moreover, the secular side of her moralism is exhibited in her use of tropes that belong to the collective discourse of the late seventeenth-century moralists. Of course, in this *Siècle Moraliste*, such tropes were not confined to strictly moralist texts. They were part of any discourse that focused on the description and policing of sociability, and discussions of *politesse* or *galanterie* were equally found in texts by La Rochefoucauld and La Fontaine as in those by Molière, Scudéry, Lafayette, and so on. High society and the expectations it produced for its members form the backdrop against

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<sup>8</sup> Her description of *amour-propre*, a second text printed within the same volume, is a unified treatise-like text that thematically repeats this progression of the six character vices. It aims to show that at the heart of each vice is a disordered and excessive self-love, present in all of mankind but magnified to the point of affliction in women due to their inherent weakness. The *Différens caracteres des femmes* is the central focus of this article, and not the ensuing *Description de l'amour propre*.

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which Pringy paints her vices. Human behavior is not the simple exteriorization of inner qualities. The human soul is beset by an unquenchable and perverting self-love, socially manifest in a ubiquitous hypocrisy that it is the moralist's duty to unveil.

Pringy's rhetorical tactics are what most underscore the moralist influence in her treatise. If her portraits always exceed the familiar anecdotal, aphoristic, or even fragmentary nature of the classical moralists, sections of her text have sententious elements. In many passages, she engages in the seductive prosody and flavor of the moralist pique. The examples that follow, taken from the chapters on vice which seem to contain the majority of them, show Pringy's sense of repartee. Many of these excerpts could conceivably belong to a book of maxims:

Une fille à peine commence-t-elle à parler qu'on lui apprend de jolies choses et non pas d'utiles, ses premières démarches sont pour la dance, et sans s'embarrasser d'en faire une femme forte, on en veut faire une fille aimable, et on ne lui montre qu'à plaire sans songer à lui apprendre à vivre. (*Caracteres* 70)<sup>9</sup>

Une fille ne connoît sa religion que par son Cathéchisme, les sciences que par le nom, et toutes les bonnes choses qu'en idées (*Caracteres* 71).

L'orgueil leur fait usurper l'autorité sur des personnes qu'ils ne connoissent pas, la dissimulation leur fait obtenir une approbation qu'ils ne méritent pas, et la cruauté leur fait exercer une tyrannie qui ne se doit pas. (*Caracteres* 77–78)

Une femme effleure les sciences et ne les approfondit jamais. (*Caracteres* 85)

Une femme, à qui la galanterie et la vanité n'ont point touché le cœur, doit appréhender l'intérêt, et il est bien rare qu'elle s'exempte d'aimer les richesses lorsqu'elle méprise l'ambition. (*Caracteres* 92)

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<sup>9</sup> All Pringy quotations are taken from Constant Venesoen's annotated edition, *Les Differens caracteres des femmes avec la description de l'amour propre (Edition de 1694)*, Honoré Champion, 2002. Included in the edition are the 1699 variants. I could not take into account the variants without going beyond the scope of this project, but they are at times revealing and I encourage readers to consider their implications.

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The *Caracteres* are often punctuated by gnomic passages such as these containing rhythmic repetitions, as well as parallel, oppositional, and chiasmus structures. The stylistic similarities with classical moralist texts are striking, and, as in the case of the moralists, lend to her assertions a kind of world-engendering authority.

Finally, the text's darkness also aligns her with the moralist tradition. The *Caracteres* pulsate with pessimism, with the dark realization that human sociability is in its very nature corrupt, and that if there is any salvation from vice, it lies in the recognition of this ubiquitous corruption, in self-abnegation and retreat. Despite the edifying and didactic aim of the treatise, it more often than not conveys hopelessness rather than guidance, not only for those seeking out their own salvation but also for those readers who may have been or might now be in search of a redemptive description of female nature.<sup>10</sup>

#### **A corrective theology**

Pringy's pessimism is also a function of the theological influences at work in her text, and is most felt in the irreconcilability of the work's dual didactic function: moral (social or worldly) and theological. As Constant Venesoen shows in his annotations of the *Caracteres*, Pringy's writing is infused with traces of her pious readings. She makes numerous allusions to passages from the Bible (particularly in the section dedicated to piety), and adapts—at times to the point of plagiarism—the religious doctrines of the most influential theologians and orators, notably Sénault, but also Bérulle, de Sales, Bossuet, and of course Louis Bourdaloue. In contrast with the vices, which are mostly descriptive, her virtues are prescriptive and their didacticism often carries the heavy (and at times fanatical) tone of sermons and religious treatises. And while her theological influences are overtly Jesuit, her exhortations seem to carry Jansenist undertones. Often berating women's "superbe" (an archaic term meaning hubris), Pringy does not tire of reminding her readers that true piety means humility to the point of abjection, and that to combat *amour-propre* one must combat any

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<sup>10</sup> "Mon dessein étant de concourir à la perfection de celles dont je décris les véritables Caracteres," begins her Preface, "j'ai crû les dédomager de la peine qu'elles auront à se reconnoître dans un Portrait qui leur ressemble, par les moyens que je leur donne de corriger leurs défauts" (*Caracteres* 69). Thus, unlike the classical moralists whose profound pessimism is emphasized by the fact that their prescriptive contribution to moral conduct is merely implied in the immoral counter-examples, Pringy, taking her cue from religious sermons and treatises, actually provides concrete solutions to combat vice. In other words, the presentation of the text explicitly seems to promise education and redemption.

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inclination for self-love that so easily slips into complacency. “Le même zèle qui l’élève [le cœur de l’homme] à Dieu par amour, qui l’unit au prochain par charité, l’abaisse aussi jusqu’à lui-même par une humilité profonde, et lui fait voir le néant et le peché qui lui sont propres” (*Caracteres* 84), writes Pringy in her description of piety.

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Pringy’s text is a hybrid of two approaches that are at once in contradiction and inextricably linked. Part moralist treatise, part theological exhortation, on the one hand the text promises to edify women and on the other does so in ways that seem demoralizing and debasing (certainly from the perspective of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader). And yet one of the major differences between Pringy’s treatise and the forms of discourse that it brings together is that, though it is at times a universal discourse, it is also self-consciously a text about and for women. The *Caracteres* have as their subject the analysis and correction of human nature, but adapted to the needs and idiosyncrasies of women, written from the perspective of a woman. As such, it must inevitably be understood in the context of the *Querelle des femmes*, in which it participates.

The presence of Pringy in Winn’s survey of feminist texts remains rather surprising when one examines the entirety of the *Caracteres*. Extracted from the others, the single chapter on erudition (“La Science”) that Winn chose to incorporate in her anthology is indeed a less damning prescription for women than Pringy’s chapters on the other corrective virtues. Yet, overall, Pringy’s heavy theological perspective espouses her century’s most reactionary and repressive views on women.

Women are described as limited by their physical and mental nature and thus unsuited for a variety of jobs, an idea that Pringy inserts in her description of *la science* aimed at encouraging women to seek out true knowledge: “Et si les hommes sont destinez à des emplois laborieux pour lesquels il faut de la science et de l’application, les femmes que l’usage a exclües de ces emplois avec justice, leur delicatesses ne permettant pas qu’elles en pussent soustenir le poids, ne sont pas exclües de l’érudition” (*Caracteres* 89). Women are vain and fickle: “La galanterie est un goût du monde et des plaisirs en général, et cet esprit de bagatelle naît avec le sexe” (*Caracteres* 70). They are excessive, superficial, prone to idleness, and essentially vulnerable to the effects of *amour-propre*, as in this passage from the beginning of “Les Bigotes:” “Les hommes l’ont [la fausse devotion] quelquefois par de grandes raisons de fortune, mais les femmes l’ont Presque touÿjours par orgüeil et par amour propre” (*Caracteres* 76).

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Pringy does not merely replicate the commonplace observations on the inferiority of women that underlie texts such as Fénelon's *Traité de l'éducation des filles* (1687), but develops the consequences of failing to recognize and contain the foibles of the feminine soul.<sup>11</sup> The most salient example connecting Pringy's appraisal of women to the late seventeenth-century zeitgeist remains the striking similarities between her *Caracteres* and Nicolas Boileau's *Satire X*.<sup>12</sup>

Still, Pringy would not have been alone had she chosen a less repressive approach to her moralist treatise. When the *Caracteres* appeared in 1694, the century was no stranger to feminist protestations emerging in France as well as in England. Marie de Gournay had written *L'Égalité des Hommes et des Femmes* in 1622. Jacqueline Guillaume had published *Les Dames illustres: où, par bonnes et fortes Raisons, il se prouve que le Sexe féminin surpasse en toute Sorte de Genre le Sexe masculin* in 1665. Poullain de la Barre consecutively—and anonymously—had put forth treatises on the equality of men and women and on women's education (*De l'Égalité des deux sexes, discours physique et moral où l'on voit l'importance de se défaire des préjugés; De l'Éducation des dames pour la conduite de l'esprit dans les sciences et dans les mœurs; De l'Excellence des hommes contre l'égalité des sexes*, respectively published in 1673, 1674, and 1675). Bathsua Makin in England had written *An Essay To Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen* in 1673. Also in England, the same year as Pringy's *Caracteres*, Mary Astell wrote *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest*

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<sup>11</sup> "Les femmes ont d'ordinaire l'esprit encore plus faible et plus curieux que les hommes; aussi n'est-il point à propos de les engager dans des études dont elles pourraient s'entêter: elles ne doivent ni gouverner l'état, ni faire la guerre, ni entrer dans le ministère des choses sacrées; ainsi, elles peuvent se passer de certaines connaissances étendues qui appartiennent à la politique, à l'art militaire, à la jurisprudence, à la philosophie et à la théologie. La plupart même des arts mécaniques ne leur conviennent pas: elles sont faites pour des exercices modérés" (*Traité de l'éducation des filles* 3–4). With the important exception of the reference to theology and philosophy, Fénelon's notions about women's flaws are also deployed throughout Pringy's text, not as the starting point for finding other avenues of excellence (as it is for Fénelon, who goes on to praise them for their domestic capabilities) but as the justification for their moral weakness and passage into vice.

<sup>12</sup> The choice and progression of character vices in Pringy's *Caracteres* are almost identical to those Boileau's *Satire X*, starting with the coquettes and ending with the "plaideuses." As Venesoen points out, Boileau wrote his satire of women 30 years prior to its publication, but refrained from publishing it until 1694, the year the *Caracteres* were published. Given the lack of biographical information on Pringy, there is little to explain this uncanny similarity, except perhaps to suggest that this had become a meme circulating among men and women of letters.

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*Interest.* Finally, Gabrielle Suchon, an ex-nun who, like Pringy and Astell, highlighted her investment in theology and religion, wrote two philosophical treatises focusing on the rights of freedom, authority, and education that have been denied to women. Suchon's first text, *Traité de la morale et de la politique*, was published one year prior to Pringy's text.<sup>13</sup>

As there is little in common between many of these earlier proto-feminist writers and Pringy, it is not surprising that in his introduction Constant Venesoen raises the question of "La 'Mysogynie' de Madame de Pringy." Pringy's moralist treatise turns its back on the social realities women faced, concentrating instead on a conservative commitment to restricting women's movements in the social sphere. Where de la Barre, for instance, underscores the qualities that show women's potential for being successful theologians and orators, doctors and lawyers, Pringy chastises her sex for seeking to enter into these professions. She further methodically criticizes each and every possible avenue of action available to women *outside* of the confines of convent life: gallantry (*les coquettes*), erudition (*les spirituelles*), financial management (*les économes*), leisure (*les joïeuses*), and judicial knowledge (*les plaideuses*).<sup>14</sup> Her complete denial of any true accession by women to the kinds of arenas that may have brought them recognition as positive contributors to society leaves very little room for women's fulfillment. Love, charity work, knowledge, the successful management of a household, leisure, and the participation in social justice, are described as always perverted into corrupt impulses.

To de la Barre's and Suchon's Cartesian call for a dismantling of misogynist prejudice based on tradition rather than reflection, Pringy gives damning portraits of women based on hackneyed views of women's vices, platitudes common to both theological morality and the secular *moralistes*. Her critique of women's education is an implicit disparagement of *préciosité* and Salon culture, and therefore not simply of secular, but also of worldly, education.<sup>15</sup> This double rejection (both of *femmes savantes* and

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<sup>13</sup> We could add to this list Charlotte de Crachart's *Harengue* (1604); Marguerite de Valois' *Discours docte et subtil* (1618); the long list of rebuttals to Alexis Trousset's polemical *Alphabet de l'imperfection et malice des femmes... dédié à la plus mauvaise du monde* (1617); Suzanne de Nervèse's *Apologie en faveur des femmes*; and Jacqueline De Miremont's *Apologie pour les Dames*.

<sup>14</sup> Consider Barre's statement that "C'est un plaisir d'entendre une femme qui se mêle de plaider" (Barre 61) and Pringy's chapter against "Les Plaideuses."

<sup>15</sup> "... toute l'érudition ne sçauroit luy plaire sans politesse ; parce que la sagesse et la verité n'est pas son étude, mais la delicatesse et l'usage : et pourveu qu'elle observe une pureté d'expressions qui l'exempte de pecher contre les loix du beau langage, elle se

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*femmes mondaines*) shows the extent to which Pringy's condemnation is both unique and inescapable: to be a *femme mondaine* is to make a mockery of true erudition, since it means paying more attention to fashion than to truth. Yet the accession to a state of erudition (being a *femme savante*) can never be attained, for "c'est ignorer le point de la science parfaite que de se reposer dans le chemin de la vérité..." (*Caracteres* 90).

In this respect, Pringy's conservatism even surpassed that of her contemporaries, for if there was one thing on which feminists, educators, and Counter-Reformation theologians agreed, it was that, as mothers, women were responsible for educating future generations. Pringy does not mention, even in passing, women's role as educators of others, nor any aspect of their familial identity. The women caricatured in her taxonomy of female vice are completely bereft of familial ties. They are never described as wives, daughters, sisters, or mothers. Nor does Pringy offer family as a source of support or strength; aside from the bond a woman should create with Jesus Christ, salvation is a solitary endeavor.<sup>16</sup> Pringy's desire to constrain and isolate women is not only part of her socio-theological agenda, it is also reflected in the fabric of this text, which, mute about women's ties to the various social systems to which they might belong, also cuts them off from any potentially supportive system.

Thus Pringy's participation in proto-feminist literature is more problematic than her inclusion in an anthology on "protestations féminines" would have us believe. Pringy does not share the optimism and extolling rhetoric of many proto-feminists (the most famous being Marie de Gournay, Jacqueline Guillaume, and Poullain de la Barre). Her prose does not sing the praises of women, nor does it point an accusing finger at society's misogyny. It is not a demonstration of the virtues of women, brought to challenge the opinions or ideas of a mixed readership. Pringy's text, which might seem to gladly provide men with the weapons to further in-

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repose du surplus et ne s'embarrasse guere de penser comme une autre pourveu qu'une autre ne parle pas comme elle" (*Caracteres* 85-86). Their emphasis on appearance, on the desire to shine, rather than on the substance of true knowledge, is of course a common criticism of the *précieuses*.

<sup>16</sup> The absence of any reference to marriage should however be considered in the context of the century's complicated relationship to the institution. It was seen as necessary to ensure the survival of estates and wealth, as well as to create political alliances, but as being at odds with personal happiness. Marriages were commonly recognized by moralists, theologians, and women themselves as joyless, trying affairs that challenged men's virtues and attracted further disdain to women. The explicit advocating of celibacy was common in proto-feminist texts, but marriage was condemned by more worldly personalities as well. The trope of the "*mal-mariée*," present in European fiction since the Middle Ages, continued to be a popular theme often discussed in *Salons*.

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culpate the “fair sex,” is in fact not addressed to men at all. “Si je peux inspirer à chaque état le juste sentiment de se blamer, je serai contente” (*Caracteres* 69), she writes in her Preface. True, “voilà la suite d’une jeunesse mal employée, qui n’a eu d’instruction que celle qu’il falloit pour s’aimer davantage et se connoître moins” (*Caracteres* 71). In other words, social institutions have done nothing to discourage women’s natural vanity and self-love. Yet the burden to correct behavior lies on women rather than on society. The text’s aim is to generate self-awareness in its female readers, as well as a realization of their responsibility and their role in their own salvation.

**Metaphysics and proto-feminism**

Pringy shares a few important characteristics with Gabrielle Suchon and Mary Astell, two important (though neglected) participants in the *Querelle des femmes*. Both were philosophers whose works are directly informed by the philosophical debates of their time. Pringy, Suchon, and Astell all published their works in the same couple of years: Suchon, her dense 700-page philosophical text entitled *Traité de la morale et de la politique* in 1693, and the first volume of Astell’s *A serious proposal to the Ladies* in 1694. Though Pringy’s *Caracteres* engages less in philosophical reflections than the other two texts, the three authors share a point of view or attitude regarding the question of women that may have contributed to their relative absence in current scholarship. All three articulate their ideas about women’s emancipation through the lens of salvation. They see it as a *function* of theological and metaphysical discourses, rather than as a result of social ones.

Some critics’ use of the term “proto-feminist” rather than “feminist” for these texts is due to the obvious anachronism that such nomenclature would entail. The prefix “proto” nevertheless does not prepare someone unacquainted with this literature for its telos. Indeed, though all three authors aim to help women, their ultimate goal is neither emancipation nor a fundamental shift in political and social structures that would further include women. Their goal is instead to provide women with the resources to become better Christians and improve their relationship to God. In other words, women’s happiness in this world (be it formulated as freedom, inner peace, moral fortitude or access to education) is inseparable from metaphysical fulfillment arrived at through constant introspection.

Given the strong social component of modern feminism in its fight against misogynistic social institutions, attitudes, ideologies, jurisdiction and so on, it is not surprising that the metaphysical and religious facets of

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proto-feminist literature are often overlooked by those compiling and annotating anthologies of early feminist literature. However it behooves us to adapt our perspective to accommodate the fact that theology and metaphysics were not considered by proto-feminist writers as a tool of their oppression, represented instead the conditions of possibility of their liberation. Such a shift in critical perspective is already at the center of one anthology of articles about Mary Astell, which focuses on the metaphysico-theological side of her thought. As one contributing scholar put it, “to miss the spiritual orientation here is not only to miss something necessary about pre-enlightenment organization of religion and state, but also to miss something about early feminism” (Achinstein, *Reason, Gender, Faith* 28).<sup>17</sup>

One element common to Pringy, Suchon, and Astell, in addition to the strong theological goal of their texts, is their adoption, with various degrees of transparency and adherence, of a new approach to metaphysics: that of Descartes, whose methods and concept of a two-substance world provided these thinkers with the tools with which to rationally refute prevailing ideas about women.

Descartes had a strong female following and enjoyed conversations with women, whom he found less influenced by prejudice than men. He wrote that he had chosen to compose his *Discours de la méthode* in French rather than Latin so that “les femmes mêmes pussent entendre quelque chose” (*Correspondance* 30). The impact of Descartes on Pringy, Suchon, and Astell can help to explain some of what may seem to modern readers as a contradiction inherent in feminist texts whose telos is not in fact woman, but God. Even while the primary legacy of Cartesian thought for modernity is Descartes’ foundational rationalism—rather than his argument for the existence of God, now given as proof of circular logic—the emphasis he put on the intellect and free will as constitutive of the human

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<sup>17</sup> Though this extends beyond the scope of the present study, further attention should be given to the primary role of theology in women’s quest for happiness and fulfillment in seventeenth century France, particularly given the importance of certain monastic institutions as communities of women. Port-Royal is an important example of this. Now all too easily conflated with Jansenism and the male figures that both defended Cornelius Jansenius’ *L’Augustinus* against papal law, and relied on Port-Royal as a spiritual sanctuary, Port-Royal was first and foremost a successful Abbey for women. Its dismantling and the dispersion of its nuns by Louis XIV in 1709 saw the end of this self-sufficient community of women who valued inner vocation, retreat, and most importantly, a relationship to God free of mediation. For further reading on the subject of Port-Royal, see Laurence Plazenet’s anthology *Port-Royal*, Paris: Flammarion, 2012.

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soul, was (as much for his contemporaries as for him) in line with, and not opposed to, faith.

For Suchon and Astell, the impact of Descartes' dualism on a claim for the intellectual equality of women is probably the most salient influence of rationalism on feminism. By insisting on the duality of two distinct substances—one being Mind, whose property is thought, and the other being Body, whose property is extension—Descartes really implied the first feminist argument to be taken up repeatedly by the proto-feminists: *the mind has no gender*. Gender being tied to the body, the resulting argument is that any deficiencies or shortcomings in women's rational capacities must come not from a deficiency of their minds (the mind as God gave it to humans is perfect) but from the physical, social, political, and historical constraints to which women are subject. Gender inequality, Suchon and Astell remind their readers, is the consequence of prejudice reinforced by custom: "Thus Ignorance and a narrow Education lay the Foundation of Vice, and Imitation and Custom rear it up" writes Astell (27). Women are led to believe by the force of cultural habit that they are limited in their arenas of action, thus are squandering the use of their rational minds. The solution for both Suchon and Astell is to map out the conditions necessary for women to be able to focus inward, and ultimately on God.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For Suchon, this means a very concrete analysis of the deprivations that women face in all aspects of their lives (deprivation of freedom, education, power), and a reasoned demonstration that freedom, rationality, and the ability to express one's will are inalienable rights, gifts given to us by God that it is our duty to cultivate. Among many of the freedoms that Suchon claimed was a woman's ability to choose when, if ever, to enter religious life; serving God can take many forms, and is never successfully achieved through coercion. In England, Descartes was primarily read through the works of Nicolas Malebranche, who sought to synthesize Cartesian rationalism and Augustinian theology in his "vision in God." For Astell, whose engagement with Descartes is politically tied to a defense of the traditional Monarchy and of the Anglican Church against Lockean empiricism and liberalism, providing women with the means to have a religious education will form their capable minds to be able to access God and the one True Religion: the Church of England. In the case of both Astell and Suchon, the importance of viewing the mind as separate from the body has a double consequence. It liberates women from essentializing statements about their capacities, and it restores the body to its just and valued place. The body is not an extension or a translation of the qualities of the mind, but without proper treatment of the person as body, as social subject, the mind is denied the opportunity to fulfill its potential.

**Pringy's dualism : the paradox of didacticism**

Pringy opens her chapter entitled "La Science" with the following statement: "L'Esprit est de tout sexe. L'ame est un être spirituel également capable de ses operations dans les femmes comme dans les hommes" (*Caracteres* 88). The idea mirrors almost exactly what Poullain de la Barre writes, and what both Suchon and Astell imply: namely that separating the mind from the body grants women the paradoxical freedom of being liberated by shedding their womanhood. However Pringy does not fully take advantage of the emancipatory possibilities of such a belief in the rest of her text. Her particular implementation of this dualism highlights instead the *incompatibility* of a socially viable salvation and a metaphysical salvation. Pringy's Cartesianism emerges quickly as a less optimistic, as well as less obvious, influence in the text. Its impact on the text's mechanism is nonetheless crucial. What appears as a philosophical attitude regarding rational methods of inquiry in Suchon and Astell (as well as de la Barre) expresses itself in the *Caracteres'* form rather than in its content. In other words, it is constitutive of the text's dualistic structure.

As I mentioned earlier, the text is clearly demarcated into two types of chapters: embodied vices and descriptions of virtues. The *Caracteres'* separation into vices and virtues is not only spatial: it affects the rhetoric, the images, and even the lexical field of both parts. The term "repos," for instance, that is used throughout the text, has a different connotation depending on what type of chapter it belongs to. Translated as quiet, rest, or peace, it is a sought-after state of being when taken in the context of the vices, because in this case it signifies retreat, extraction from the constant social demands that pervert virtue into vice. In her description of miserly women, Pringy writes "Comme son désir l'inquiète, elle prend moins de repost qu'une autre" (*Caracteres* 96). Or again about gambling women: "Le jeu est une dangereuse passion, quelquefois il fait perdre en un jour, plus qu'on ne peut dépenser en une année, et la maison la plus riche et la mieux réglée ne sçauroit tenir contre la dissipation d'une joëuse, qui pour son plaisir perd son repos..." (*Caracteres* 97). Conversely, in the context of the virtues, "repos" negatively connotes self-satisfaction: one's pursuit of true knowledge, or of a life aligned with the path of Jesus Christ, should be tireless, constant work. In the section on piety Pringy writes: "On ne suit pas le Seigneur en s'arrêtant, c'est une course sans interruption qu'il faut que fasse la volonté, le moindre repos l'éloigne..." (*Caracteres* 83). Or again, in the section on knowledge: "C'est ignorer le point de la

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science parfaite que de se reposer dans le chemin de la vérité...” (*Caracteres* 90).

These two distinct halves of the text can to some extent be superimposed onto (and thus explained by) the previously described dichotomy between social moralism and religious moralism. As the list of section titles shows (Les Coquettes/La Modestie; Les Bigotes/La Piété; Les Spirituelles/La Science; etc.), the *Caracteres* bears the influence of two antithetical attitudes towards moral discourse. The vices are corporeal character types that are attached to bodies (social bodies, gendered bodies). They are inseparable from the particular social—and particularly female—being that incarnates them. The virtues, by contrast, are placeless, sexless ideals. The religious language that pulsates in them to the rhythm of religious sermons highlights the virtues as concepts presented to the reader, as objects of contemplation rather than as examples to follow. They are objects for the rational mind and can only be arrived at through the operations of the soul (judgment, imagination), and not through observation. They belong to the metaphysical world of ideas, and not to the world of extended substances. In Cartesian terms, truth, which is attained through intellectual certainty, cannot be of the body, but must be a function of the mind. Pringy’s refusal to provide imitable examples for her readers is thus an adaptation of the Cartesian tenet, though hers is not only a metaphysical question but an ethical one. For her, only moral perfections are the objects worthy of the soul’s judgments. It is noteworthy that her text is based on a value judgment absent from Descartes but pervasive in theology: vice is intertwined with the body; virtue transcends it.

Pringy’s decision to deny her readers virtuous examples is thus a deliberate consequence of this dualism, and her reticence to paint virtue through the use of concrete specimens, the way she does for the vices, is evident even before the beginning of the text proper, as early as the Dedication and Preface of the *Caracteres*.

The goal of the preface is to establish the *Caracteres*’ nature as an intended moral guide for women. The preface reads, referencing the unfavorable descriptions with which Pringy will begin her portraits:

J’espere que ces premieres démarches leur feront sentir le plaisir de la perfection, les éloigneront de l’Amour propre que je dépeins, et leur donneront le goût pour la sagesse. (*Caracteres* 69)

The first step in Pringy’s didactic method is to put off her readers to such a degree that they will seek perfection, hungry for it as an antidote to the

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vices they have just seen described, in which they may or may not recognize themselves. The second step, the correction, reveals the exact nature of Pringy's method. Dedicating her *Caracteres* to La Princesse Madame d'Orléans,<sup>19</sup> Duchesse de Nemours who is glorified as a paragon of virtue, Pringy announces women's foibles with ease, but seems tongue-tied when it comes to depicting any virtue. In the dedication, she writes:

Je suis bien-heureuse de commencer à marquer à Vôte  
Altesse mon profond respect, en publiant que vous êtes  
digne de celui de tout le monde, et je ne sçauois trop  
m'applaudir d'avoir trouvé l'occasion de vous apprendre en  
public la vénération que j'ai toujours eue en particulier  
pour V.A. (*Caracteres* 67)

Yet despite this promise of a public laudation, a few lines later she continues:

Je craindrois cependant, Madame, en parlant de vos  
vertus, que vôtre modestie ne s'allarma(st) contre la vérité,  
et que vous me fissiez le juste reproche d'en avoir trop peu  
dit, par rapport à ce qui en est, et trop dit par rapport à ce  
que vous voulez qu'on en die. (*Caracteres* 68)

Pringy will say nothing more about these virtues to which she alludes: the Duchesse de Nemours may incarnate virtue, but it escapes description, as though the very act of describing might soil virtue's perfections by giving it body. Hidden behind the rhetoric of familiar praise present in all the literary dedications of the seventeenth century, Pringy's refusal to expound upon the very virtues she seeks to inspire in her readers places the text, from its inception, in a difficult relationship to its own didacticism. She is not going to provide her readers with imitable examples. She will not lead her readers to virtue through emulation.

This initial refusal helps to frame the paradoxical position Pringy will take with regard to the dualist model. For Suchon and Astell, rhetorically divesting women of their corporeal shackle enables them to reveal women's rational mind, the same mind they share with men. But they also recognize that women, as women, are caught in the tethers imposed upon

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<sup>19</sup> The Duchesse de Nemours (1625–1707), born Marie d'Orléans-Longueville, had for a long time been a patron to women writers, particularly those who wrote about inequalities between the sexes. She was also known for helping women who had suffered from forced marriages or neglectful husbands. She herself, after the death of her mother, was disinherited and then married against her will by her father and stepmother, who wished to favor their own children.

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them by the misconceptions of popular opinion, that they are fettered by the law, and hobbled by their lack of education. To exalt women's rational mind, very concrete and real changes have to be implemented in the lives of women, hence Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* that outlines the creation of an educational establishment for women.

Pringy seems to take a hardline Cartesian approach to this issue. To embody virtue would be a travesty of it. It would mean trapping virtue in the attributes of the wrong substance. Had Pringy described virtuous characters instead of concepts, had she expounded upon the Duchess de Nemours' virtue, her readers would not be exhorted to contemplate virtue as an idea to be judged by the soul, but would be forced to perceive the virtue in its embodied form. Vice described is vice perceived through imagination, and imagination is not any more reliable in the quest for the truth than are our senses. On the contrary, throughout the text imagination is portrayed as a source of misconception. Pringy writes:

Voilà l'usage des femmes spirituelles. Une grande idée d'esprit qu'elles ont dans l'imagination. Ce n'est point une connoissance, une regle, ni un sçavoir, c'est une idée ; c'est à dire une spacieuse étendue qui comprend toutes les grandes choses. Un vaste lieu en elle-mêmes, où elles imaginent voir l'assemblage de toutes les différentes beautez de l'esprit. Elle font un mélange confus de tout ce qu'elles sçavent, et cet amas, de sciences imparfaites, remplit leur cœur aussi injustement que leur esprit.  
(*Caracteres* 86)

Since our senses are fallible, it is no wonder that vice, malleable like Descartes' piece of wax, could trick us into appearing as a virtue. In Pringy's text, the vices are plural (*les coquettes, les bigotes*, and so on) as they do not have one self-evident manifestation, but instead their essence is incarnation. Virtue, however, contemplated in its purest form—that is, as a virtue rather than as the sum of the actions of a virtuous character—appears clearly and distinctly to us through our contemplation of it. Thus what she offers to her female readers is not “La Modeste” but “La Modestie,” “La Piété” rather than “La Pieuse” (and certainly not “Les Pieuses”).

Perhaps the biggest difference between Pringy's approach and that of the other two proto-feminists is that Suchon and Astell focus by and large on the external constraints that affect women's choices. Pringy zeroes in on something that significantly complicates her aim: women's own sins. In order to lift the shackles imposed upon women by virtue of their being

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women, Pringy has to combat part of women themselves. The enemy is within, not without. In her text, women are encouraged to engage in a constant self-criticism that could have, on the surface, imitated the self-abnegation prescribed to men by the most pessimistic Christian faiths of the time. Yet part of Pringy's dualistic structure reveals that her pessimism is not simply due to theological beliefs about our role in our own salvation, but is caused by the impossibility of actually locating the site of femininity, an impossibility that permeates all reflections pertaining to the *Querelle des Femmes*. Is it in the body or in the mind? Female interiority for Pringy is corrupted by imagination. It takes the place of an ideal interiority, a pure mind capable of perceiving truth. The question of the emancipation of woman, not yet formulated as such, pivots around a concept of a feminine interiority to be either celebrated or trained into a more universal concept of humanity as directed towards God.

#### **Impossible salvation**

Earlier, I stated that through her vices Pringy systematically attacks the range of social activities associated with, or available to, women. There is one social sphere in which women were deeply and necessarily involved that Pringy seems to ignore: the family. Pringy's text does not make any mention of women's familial responsibilities as mothers, nor even as wives, daughters, or sisters. Even though it is in keeping with most moralist texts, which rarely point their scrutinizing gaze towards interactions within the family, the omission is curious given the didactic goal of the text. It could be interpreted in two ways. First, it serves to discourage women from turning to external structures as a source of support, as a morally positive influence, or as a source of fulfillment. The relationship to God and thus the path to spiritual fulfillment is a solitary experience, and Pringy's textual strategy is to isolate women from these external structures.<sup>20</sup>

Second, it implies that in the case of familial bonds, there is no vice to be unveiled, for family relationships do not "count" as social relationships.

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<sup>20</sup> Venesoen hypothesizes that Pringy was educated either at Port-Royal, or more likely, at Saint-Cyr. Both schools advocated forging an individual and unique relationship to God through direct reading of the scriptures and contemplation. Saint-Cyr in particular became known for its ties to Madame de Guyon, who brought Quietism (and thus controversy) to the school. Quietism encouraged complete passivity, silent prayer—so as to be as receptive as possible to God's grace—and complete retreat from the world, which included participation in pious actions. The similarities with Quietism in Pringy's text are fairly salient.

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This is relevant because imbedded in the fabric of Pringy's text, particularly in her use of examples, is the recurrent idea that the locus of women's sin *is* their sociability. It is by default sinful to be social. Vice is inherent to sociability the way original sin is inherent at birth:

Une femme élevée avec de bons principes, née avec [de] bonnes inclinations, qui cependant veut se conserver la liberté d'une société agréable, et la réserve d'une sagesse entière, ne trouve qu'un moyen pour y parvenir ; c'est l'hypocrisie qui lui fait trouver un accord pour concilier Dieu et le monde, et pour satisfaire son amour propre sans blesser la dévotion. (*Caractères* 76–77)

Hypocrisy is the inevitable price to be paid for any attempt, be it well-intentioned or not, to conciliate God and the world, self-interest and devotion. The use of chiasmus in the sentence creates a syllogism: God is to devotion as the World is to *amour-propre*. The pitfall of sociability is that it leads to an idolatry of the self.

Sociability's sinfulness is the first idea of the text, established in the very first vice that Pringy describes; coquetry is first and foremost a broken social relationship, a flawed mode of sociability (in this case, seduction). To underscore her point, Pringy does not describe a static coquette, stilled for the portrait, but coquettes in action:

On les estime autant qu'elles aiment, pour un moment.  
La beauté nous arrête, l'esprit nous fixe et les défauts nous chassent. Mille agréments les font chercher, mille raisons les font fuir. La volupté fait qu'on y retourne, et la sagesse fait qu'on n'y reste pas et qu'on leur parle toujours avec plus de flatterie que d'attachement. (*Caractères* 72)

This is not so much a portrait as it is a scene depicting a (failed) social interaction, presumably with the intent of demonstrating to the coquette the error of her calculations. What is primarily coquettes' sin? That they exist in and for social interaction; that they are a blur of superficial relations; that they exist *only* socially. This is not only evident in the frenzied rhythm and contradictory movements that characterize coquettes' world ("for a moment," "arrests us (...) entraps us (...) chase us away," "search," "retreat," "return," etc.), but it is also supported by the accompanying virtue. Had Pringy intended to valorize a kind of ideal love (platonic, for instance) over coquetry, the corrective virtue might have been "l'estime" (respect). The corrective virtue that accompanies coquetry, however, is modesty, which calls for the woman to retreat into

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herself, rather than for her to reform her social desire. Coquetry, the first vice, is the sin of sociability.

In a similar move, the *bigotes*' sin is framed in terms of the social, and not of false devotion, since their zealotry most profoundly affects the social relationships around them. It is significant that Pringy here focuses less on the effects of false devotion on the salvation of women's souls than on the repercussions of false devotion on a woman's performance of devotion in the world:

Voilà l'exercice des devotes du temps, la recherche des emplois qui leur assujettissent le plus de malheureux, et qui les élèvent au dessus d'une conduite ordinaire. Le soin de cacher leur dessein, afin de parvenir plus aisément à leurs projets, et de s'exprimer en termes humbles pour se faire estimer davantage, et l'application continuelle à supposer des crimes à ceux qui ont du malheur, et à nourrir de larmes et d'ignominie ceux que la providence leur envoie pour les nourrir de pain. (*Caracteres* 79)

The consequences of this vice are social, not spiritual. The social expression, or the exteriorization of religious devotion, is charity, but in Pringy's vision, "voilà l'exercice des devotes du temps." She does not distinguish between good charity and bad charity, or even between authentic charity and hypocritical charity (good actions with sinful motives), but says that *any* charity is inevitably corrupted: thus the corrective virtue is piety, not charity. It is not a call to better perform pious acts, but to reform the self.

The social aspect of the vice is repeated for all of the vices. The *spirituelles* are, like coquettes and zealots, sinful in that they limit themselves to the social dimension of their endeavor, to the play and associations of words in accordance with the rules of salon eloquence rather than with the organization of ideas in accordance to logic, wisdom, and the search for truth. And at the forefront of Pringy's attack on misers, gamblers, and litigious women is her condemnation of these women's deplorable attachment to the vain echoes of social life: money devoid of the value of things it is capable of acquiring (since misers do not buy), busyness without accomplishments, and engagement with superfluous legal proceedings. Pringy's text recognizes women's desperate efforts to participate *in* the world, but only insofar as these efforts are ultimately perverted.

Pringy's aim, by giving her readers abstract notions to contemplate rather than embodied portraits of virtues to perceive, is to help extract them from the very arena that is participating in their spiritual bankruptcy.

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One of her rhetorical tactics to help make possible this extraction is to further de-corporealize the virtues. In addition to inciting women to remove themselves from social activity, she textually erases their gender. While women are clearly the subjects (thematically and grammatically) of the vices, in the chapters dedicated to the virtues, the grammatical subjects often revert to a neutral masculine: it is the heart, the mind, or the soul that feels, acts, or should act. Her text oscillates between female and male gender pronouns, ultimately serving to make the concept of gender itself meaningless. Parsimonious with the terms “man” and “woman,” Pringy will instead insist that the actors in her portrayal of the virtues are parts of the psyche rather than whole people: the mind (*l’esprit*), the soul (*l’âme*) and the heart (*le coeur*) are much more often the agents in this half of the text. The choice of these “organs” is in contradistinction to the inherent social component of the vices (specifically incarnated by women) and indicates the extent to which virtue is intrinsically incompatible with sociability. By choosing to concentrate on humans’ agency in metonymical symbols (the mind, the heart, and the soul) that are not socially readable in the way that a “man” or a “woman” would immediately be, Pringy ensures that virtue exists only for pure entities, unsoiled by the world’s projections of identity.<sup>21</sup>

Mais, quand la foi a succédé au soin de son instruction, qu’il est seur d’avoir trouvé la voie, la vérité et la vie, qu’il goûte une paix merveilleuse que la vérité répand dans son ame, que son cœur rempli de charité n’a plus de mouvemens qui ne le portent à la joye de l’éternité, son esprit se trouve convaincu, son ame est remplie d’onction et la pratique de la vertu devient facile quand l’esprit connoît avec seureté ce qu’il doit, et que le fruit de cette connoissance est le zele de la volonté. (*Caracteres* 81–82)

The use of the subject pronoun “il” introduced at the beginning of this paragraph without any established antecedent is destabilizing for the reader. Obviously Pringy is not referring to men, since they are rarely addressed, except in comparison to women. The exact nature of this “il” is

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<sup>21</sup> The gender-specificity of a couple of Pringy’s virtues is linked to the history of the concepts. Indeed, both *modestie* and *occupation* have a long history in anti-women literature: the two recurrent charges against women in the anti camp of the *Querelle des Femmes* is that women’s sexuality is dangerous, and a bored woman is up to no good. This helps explain that, given Pringy’s incorporation of circulating moralist commonplaces, Pringy addresses herself much more to women throughout those two chapters than in other chapters.

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not explicitly revealed, though through the meaning of the sentence we can infer that it refers to “l’esprit” (the mind). Again, through metonymical association, “l’esprit” comes to represent the entire being, replete with a heart (“son coeur rempli de charité”) and a soul (“son ame est remplie d’onction”), but a consciousness denied of any kind of social readability. These organs, these parts of the psyche, can be conceptualized, but not seen. They are at the core of human identity, and yet referenced as they are, separated from a physical shell, they escape any discrete manifestations of existence.

The effects of this de-corporealization are ambiguous, and point to, as I mentioned in passing earlier, a problematic repercussion of what is ostensibly one of the liberating aspects of dualism: the freedom of dualism is that women are not reduced to their gender. In Pringy’s version, in order for women to improve themselves, to become fulfilled humans, they must divest themselves of any characteristics that define them as women. They must strip themselves of their womanhood. Pringy’s text enacts this repeatedly by condemning all of women’s social identities (sexual, domestic, religious, professional, leisurely), and then by denying them any identificatory relationship to the virtues. The virtues remain ideals that can only be accessed inwardly, through the soul, and not through embodiment.

As the quotation above showed, not just the virtues are disembodied in this half of Pringy’s text. She also works to dissociate the human subject from its body by depicting it through synecdochal representations that have us conceptualize (rather than “perceive”) the subjects of her moralist text. Exemplarity itself is vice because it belongs to the unreliable world of appearance and perception. Though Pringy does punctuate the virtues with sentences distinguishing femininity from masculinity (and the moral consequences of these differences), for the most part she attempts to completely peel virtue away from the gendered body. The genderless organs that I mentioned above, and moreover the absence of any gender (in stark contrast with the spirited attack on women) would seem to indicate, in the lexical choices Pringy makes, that for the most part women can only be saved when their womanhood is stripped away, when they do not appear or live as women. Given the text’s specific address to women, the question a reader might ask Pringy is whether a woman, qua woman, can be saved. To a modern reader, it is perhaps the most disturbingly “anti-feminist” aspect of the text, and more frustratingly, we may never know how this text was received by the readers it intended to influence.

Pringy’s insistence, in the half of the text dedicated to vices, that women often cannot help themselves from acting sinfully because their

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womanhood naturally leads them into vice, induces her to focus on the habit of moral action as a corrective tool. Again, in the Preface she writes: “Et je voudrais que toutes les femmes que je censure par ma description m’aprouvassent par une metamorphose de moeurs...” (*Caracteres* 70). While both the virtues and the human subject are represented as abstract objects to be thought of rather than perceived in their physical incarnations, this practical aspect of Pringy’s didacticism confuses the clean binarity of her dualism. If a woman is in the habit of acting correctly, if she is in the habit of doubting her hubris, for example, or of performing good acts of charity, then “c’est à la constance des oeuvres que la modestie impose ses loix” (*Caracteres* 74). In other words, despite the implicit injunction to contemplation that Pringy’s rhetoric implies, some of her prescriptive directives belong to the realm of *action* and *not* contemplation.

The logic of her text induces a kind of aporia: women are prone to vice and sin because their constitution makes them prefer extroversion (“il est difficile à une femme de ne jamais sortir de soi-même” (*Caracteres* 74), and thus sociability. Sociability is the breeding ground of sin, as it is opposed to an authentic contemplation of God. Yet a corrupt relationship to divinity is described by Pringy as having mostly social repercussions, not spiritual ones. Pringy does not take the opportunity to introduce the concept of grace. Consequently, women are left to their own contemplation without any mention of divine intervention, meaning that their only avenue towards salvation lies either in complete isolation or in the social realm of the habit of good actions.

On the one hand, Pringy’s text respects the distinction between the two substances (mind and body) by doing what it can to keep them separated, and protecting the objects of the mind from being contaminated by the perceptions of the body. On the other hand, Pringy’s text short-circuits any salvation when it sends the reader to the sphere of action for improvement. Salvation must happen on both levels, the text seems to say, in these two spheres that are linked but also constituted as mutually exclusive. Where is woman’s salvation, and thus emancipation, to be found then? Is it in the conditioning of the social body, even though this body is negated throughout her text and rejected for its social readability? Or is salvation to be found inward, in a retreat from the world, a concentrated contemplation of virtue whose purity is safeguarded by its lack of expression? In what sphere should women actualize themselves? In the mind-substance or in the body-substance?

***THE DIFFICULT CASE OF FEMALE SALVATION***

In the end, what seems to emerge in Pringy's text is not so much a form of rebellion, as Winn would have us believe, as much as a conception of emancipation and freedom that both requires self-reliance and is interior. The modernity of her text lies in that it exposes, through its internal tensions, the insolubility at the heart of the question of gender, still relevant today, as to whether or not gender is tied to an essence. In the course of this, something else emerges that has perhaps more influence on the moral aspects of literature than questions of gender ever would: in Pringy's version of the female soul, the relationship between the interior self and the social self is neither one of transparency nor of causality. For Pringy, these two selves coexist, but their link to each other is effectively severed by the text. Pringy's unique type of proto-feminism reflects, in the realm of the moral treatise, what *La Princesse de Clèves* did in the realm of fiction: it shows that henceforth, interior experience has importance beyond the mere exteriorizing of it because it is not its supplement or explanation, but rather the site of an irreducible disjunction between self and world. It is not, I think, a coincidence that the eighteenth century novel increasingly focuses on interior experience and sentiment as a method of fictionalizing moral philosophy and negotiating the complex ways that interiority and action are linked. Furthermore, if the novel does so more than ever from the vantage point of female protagonists, it is because, as Pringy's text shows, the problem of both women's freedom and women's salvation in early-modern French society cannot help but reveal the disconnect between an epistemology based on interior experience and one born out of one's actions in the world.

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