

Religion, Ethics, and History in the  
French Long Seventeenth Century /  
La Religion, la morale, et l'histoire à  
l'âge classique

William Brooks  
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(eds)

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MEDIEVAL AND  
EARLY MODERN  
FRENCH STUDIES **3**

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WILLIAM BROOKS AND RAINER ZAISER

## From Bawdy to Devotional

Emerging from the exhilarating innovations of the Renaissance, blending into the reforming energies of the Enlightenment, the French long seventeenth century – *l'âge classique* – was riven by the tensions between those who were advocating, seeking, preaching, and consolidating the very perfection that others were questioning, criticising, and rejecting. In June 2006, over one hundred delegates from eight countries met, at St Catherine's College Oxford, for a conference hosted by the Society for Seventeenth-Century French Studies that united its own members with those of the Société d'Etude du XVIIe Siècle, the Centre Méridional de Rencontres sur le XVIIe Siècle, the Société d'Etude du XVIe Siècle, the Centre International de Rencontres sur le XVIIe Siècle, and the North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature. The conference, entitled 'Modernités/Modernities', focused on the two-hundred year period roughly from the middle of the sixteenth century to the middle of the eighteenth.

Nearly one hundred papers were given. Twenty of the best, covering religion, ethics, history, and language, were selected to form the present volume, while a further nineteen, covering theatre, fiction, and poetry, appear in a companion volume.

In their different ways, all the great scientists and philosophers called into question old religious certainties, yet, as Georges Molinié makes clear in a *tour de force* of pithy observations and pointers towards further study, what marks out the modern is not so much this restless activity as the concomitant stirrings of a realisation that there is something better to strive for. Whilst Alain Cantillon uses the telling example of Pascal and our apprehension of his persona to explore how modernity may be viewed as the constant re-evaluation of the present, Richard Sörman examines a salient aspect of his thinking that is paradigmatic in this context: how, in the *Pensées*, Pascal locates the

significance of our actions in the effects that they aspire to produce. If there is a paradox to be perceived in the fact that his scepticism about the human capacity for understanding recalls the outlook of two apparently very different commentators, La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère, there is none in the seriousness of the contrast Sörman explores between the motivation of authority and the motivation of purpose. Pragma, one might say, is threatening to dislodge dogma.

Turning to Pascal's most tenacious censurer, a thoughtful account by Síoira Pierse shows Voltaire suggesting that truth is merely one element of many that comprise the narrative of history. A convenient precept, all the better to enable this giant of historiography to produce influential Macaulay-like judgements, fashioned by his own prejudices, that depend in no small measure on which particular facts he chooses to emphasise and how he goes about doing so. There is no question, certainly, of his deferring Bossuet-like to God, and perhaps it is in the *siècle de François-Marie Arouet* that pragma completes its triumph; but would he have been discomfited by the persuasive and contrary demonstration offered here by Christian Belin and Marie-Madeleine Fragonard? Focusing on a very different kind of enterprise that largely covers an earlier period, they show that truth is both a modern concept and a demonstrably timeless one, 'toujours plus ancienne que toute antiquité, toujours plus jeune que la moindre innovation'.

If, in this oscillation between truth and reason, between authority and intention, the great thinkers come to inconveniently (but stimulatingly) varied conclusions, it is hardly surprising that the ordinary man and woman – and the not so ordinary – experienced this crucial time in historical France as one in which the need for sure moral guidance was paramount. Thus, Pauline Chaduc avers, it was a golden age for the directors of conscience as their art became both more focused and more institutionalised, distancing itself from that older practice, the hearing of confession. Moreover, the direction of conscience was to spawn a literature all of its own, awareness of which has passed into the interstices of our modern apprehension of early modern culture even though little of it achieved more than a toehold in that tiresome nineteenth-century construct, the French literary canon. As prospect begins to excel retrospection, the director of conscience becomes as

essential and as central a figure as the confessor, the best mocking efforts of a Boileau or a Molière notwithstanding.

They were not all Tartuffes. Neither were they all men. The prominence and role of women in the two hundred-year period covered by this book looks different through the wrong end of the twenty-first century telescope, but at the risk of exciting feminist scorn, we would say that the revolution began here, just as it was stalled, and stalled for a century or so, by *the Révolution*. Bertrand Landry, who notes that there were recognised female directors of conscience, analyses and revealingly contextualises two women who found themselves confronted with the challenge even though they did not seek it. St Jeanne de Chantal's relations with her wayward son reveal instructive parallels with the role of her granddaughter – that son's daughter – the worldly, Jansenist-leaning Mme de Sévigné, who likewise had to come to terms with her own son's behaviour and proffer practical and moral advice whether it was appreciated or not. Into the bargain, let this be a corrective, should any still be needed, to the hoary notion that all calls upon the famous correspondent's maternal love and devotion were made by Charles de Sévigné's even more self-regarding sister. It took the sinister involvement of Ninon de Lenclos, no less, and the memory of his own father, for Charles to achieve a *rapprochement* with his mother; but achieve it, he did.

Widowed at twenty-five, Mme de Sévigné suffered a fate that was not unusual in an era as violent as it was cultured; but it was in marrying that she had acquired the worldly status expected of women in general. Claire Carlin's innovative investigation into the discourse on marriage is rich, revealing, and shocking in the most positive of senses. Taking into account such diverse issues as anatomical thought and misogyny, and deriving evidence from the *Satyre ménippée* and a list of the qualities to be brought by both partners, Carlin shows that the notion of reciprocity in marriage had emerged by the seventeenth century, though it seemed bravely modern and even utopian. Some of the qualities traditionally expected of one sex begin to be expected of both, and there is a noticeable shift away from the sarcastic to the serious-minded amongst even those thinkers who maintained a more cautious attitude to marriage and, in particular, women.

As Carlin further reminds us, the notion of reciprocity was also a reversion to the ideals of antiquity; and, to coin a phrase, there is nothing new under the sun. In this spirit, as Pamela Park demonstrates, Fénelon, preoccupied as he was with the central role he sought to accord to piety in the interior self of the Christian wishing to make a good life, would not have taken exception to the advice and guidance given three-quarters of a century earlier by Jeanne de Chantal; yet, in seeking to advocate the adoption of the extraordinary rather than the comfortable, here was a man fully prepared to accommodate the need to question and examine. It is this modern quality, indeed, that brings his method, if not the entirety of his vision, startlingly close to that of a very different seeker after truth and accuracy, Fénelon's near contemporary Pierre Bayle. In a wide-ranging discussion of the latter's struggle against the propagation of error, Corinne Bayerl identifies Bayle's views on primitive atheism as an example of the same outlook and approach, and notwithstanding his belief that 'ethical and responsible scholarship [...] should operate at the level of available documents in order to separate truth from error', it is clear that Bayle really was a member of the same modern club as Fénelon. So were Voltaire and Pascal.

Likewise, in another field of endeavour, Guy Snaith shows just how the modern architect of the equally modern but, alas, unfinished Winchester Palace, the innovative Sir Christopher Wren, was deeply indebted to the French architects of the middle of the century – and lived long enough to see himself go out of fashion in his turn. Thus does the modern become the *passé*, until the *passé* becomes the modern once more. Indeed, students of the history of thought would do well to acknowledge that the forward-looking authors of the Enlightenment had no contemporary monopoly in their devotion to rigour and accuracy; neither had they invented it. Transporting us back into the sixteenth century and using the particular example of La Popelinière, Isabelle Lachance shows in her multi-faceted contribution that the search for such qualities, including the gradual realisation of the importance of using and specifying reliable sources, was under way before even the seventeenth century dawned.

In the august company of those who advocated devotion and those for whom the good life lay, rather, in the search for and expres-

sion of scientific truth, it comes as no surprise that this collection engages with a number of written guides or manuals, albeit of some rather different kinds. Some appear in Claire Carlin's contribution, discussed above. Another, this time associated with travel, different cultures and the apprehension of virtue, is the *Sonnets franc-comtois*, a work in which Christine McCall Probes sees a kind of pre-echo of the modern in its openness towards globalisation, whilst a guide of a very different kind is studied by Russell Ganim, who uses it to show that pornography is as much an anti-modern construct as a modern one. *L'Ecole des filles*, a manual of sexual behaviour that comprises dialogues between women, harks back thematically and stylistically over one hundred years to Aretino's notorious text, *The Ways*. In a context in which much erotic literature in the interim had been essentially a reaction against the Petrarchian or Ronsardian ideal of the beautiful and inaccessible woman, the more subtle *Ecole des filles* bridges a gap that had developed between that ideal and its obscene counterbalance.

That text is also humorous, and humour is again inevitably part of the subject in Hugh Roberts's study of Bruscambille. Less expected in such a context, perhaps, is the influence of anatomical thought, but Roberts shows how well established it was becoming even in the most popular parts of the popular imagination. Bruscambille's 'Prologue de la Teste' is a text that transcends its scatological and obscene aspects and forces the reader to think. From the physical, one might say, to the metaphysical in one bound. One wonders, naturally, whether the rowdy theatre audiences the prologue was designed to calm were as thoughtful as they were biddable, but the fact that so many of this *farceur's* prologues have survived in printed form demonstrates that they were much more than occasional pieces. Roberts's view that they defy rigid compartmentalisation into low and high culture also accords very neatly with Ganim's observation that 'projects of the highest and lowest order [demonstrate] that the cultural registers separating supposedly "sophisticated" and "base" art were not as wide as they are today'. Another of the characteristics of modernity is its inclusiveness. Paul Scott also shows how apparent levity can contain weightier challenges when he studies the abbé Thiers, whose ribaldry and pernicketyness have been the major reasons why he has remained in the consciousness of early modern specialists. Whether his eccen-

tricity was genuine or affected – and Scott provides a perceptive evaluation – Thiers is a telling example of someone who, at a less exalted level than the Bishop of Cambrai in the conventional mainstream of the Catholic church, could give vein to trenchant criticisms of the policies of Louis XIV when the gilt was beginning to rub off the image of the Sun King. The adoption of an eccentric persona in order to enable him to articulate the politically unwise, and even the unthinkable, does indeed seem to place him in a small company of commentators such as the abbé Boileau and the notorious abbé de Choisy who seem to have adopted the same strategy. One of the abbé Boileau's quaint obsessions, the subject of a mildly sarcastic comment by Thiers, was his habit of giving extremely full bibliographical references when quoting from the work of others, so perhaps he was not so eccentric, after all. Bayle would surely have approved; and so would La Popelinière.

Whether eccentric or not, the preoccupation with appearances, or at least the illusion of appearances, is as timeless as it is modern. In her astute presentation of Montaigne 'in counterpoint to' Castiglione, Susannah Carson reveals much about the rules of the game for struggling second-tier courtiers who, lacking blue-blood nobility, had to manufacture their prestige through the cultivation of simulation. To affect unaffectedness, no less. Satisfyingly, Carson rounds off her study by looking at how these attitudes changed, or did not change, in the course of the next century or so.

Of course, no study of the modernity of the early modern would be complete without explicit reference to the *querelles* that opposed the apologists for the ancient and for the modern. Every specialist of the period can point to an example that shows the tensions coming to the surface in umpteen ways and long before the moment, at the end of January 1687, when Charles Perrault read to the Académie française his poem in praise of the modern. For Mathilde Bombart, the notion of modernity – and therewith, its challenge to the guardians of conservative culture – was prominent sixty years before, in the work of Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac, a name which predictably occurs elsewhere too in this volume and its companion. Bombart places the origins of the notion of modernity in Balzac's *Lettres* of 1624; but, wherever it belongs, the tension between it and the forces of reaction



both implicates and necessitates the French language itself. In the specific context of legal oratory, Dianne Dutton focuses on the quest for an orator greater than Cicero or Demosthenes, the ‘querelle de l’éloquence judiciaire’ which just as surely opposed the modern and the ancient. It may well be that an oppressive state is a *sine qua non* if great oratory is to flourish, and Patru thought there were good modern orators; but then, he would have been an unapologetic modern. By the end of the seventeenth century, it was generally accepted that there was no great modern legal orator, but there was little agreement on why that might be so. Oratory, after all, as everyone knows, had some supreme practitioners in the church.

Bravely starting with some notorious lines by Victor Hugo, who for all his aspirations to modernity could never quite shake off the opprobrium of being a great author, Claudine Nédélec locates, analyses, and discusses the impact of the *querelle* on the French language, and the impact of the French language on the *querelle*: the *querelle* of the dictionaries, no less. The last word? Surely not; but not many books include Bruscombille alongside Pascal, pornography as well as architecture, the pursuit of artifice as well as the pursuit of truth, historiography from the sixteenth century to Voltaire, anatomical thought from the matrimonial via the boudoir to the public stage, and a healthy dose of discussions around the importance of language. This diversity is inevitable in a period which saw not only progress, but also the establishment of the consciousness that progress can be made, is being made, and will continue to be made. In no sense does this require the rejection of old certainties, but it does allow them to be questioned and constantly re-evaluated in the context of new aspirations. It is this fusion of aspirations with such a diversity of forward-looking activity that forms the essence of modernity.

Encouraged by the editors, all the authors trod the fine line between attenuating the oral character of their conference papers and eliminating it altogether, and we believe the results are as lively as they are informative. Our contributors also took into account the discussions, debates, amplifications, and challenges that they provoked. Next, a panel of fifteen international specialists assisted the editors by rigor-

ously reviewing all the submissions. (It goes without saying that those who also contributed were not involved in evaluating their own work.) The panel could and did decline certain submissions and could and did call for further adjustments to those that were accepted, before they were finalised for inclusion. To all these colleagues – Faith Beasley, David Eick, Emma Gilby, Elizabeth Goldsmith, Laurence Grove, Nicholas Hammond, Richard Maber, Michael Moriarty, Richard Parish, Noël Peacock, Henry Phillips, Matthew Senior, Guy Snaith, Thomas Worcester, and Amy Wygant – the Editors express their profound gratitude. They also wish, on behalf of all the contributors, to thank the Society for Seventeenth-Century French Studies and the North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature for financial help with the cost of publication.