

Bicanová, Klára

Chevalier de Méré: esprit as light of nature

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2.2 Chevalier de Méré: Esprit as Light of Nature

Chevalier de Méré was born in 1607 in the southwestern France; the exact place of his birth as well as most other facts of his life is unknown. Subsequently, the status assigned to his person by the twentieth-century literary history is rather obscure. One of the few things that seem to be undisputed is that he was a high-living French socialite and essayist. However, today he is far better known for his involvement in a mathematical problem which has given rise to the modern probability theory rather than for his involvement in the high life of the French society or for his literary achievements. An ardent gambler, Méré asked two mathematicians, Pierre Fermat and Blaise Pascal, to provide an explanation of his persistent losses in the game of dice. In computing the odds involved in gambling, their solution to the problem – now usually referred to as chevalier de Méré’s problem or paradox – represents an important contribution to what is today called theory of probability.

Another fact about his life that seems to be certain is that he was connected to the family of Mme de la Bazinière, a wife of the *trésorier de l’Epargne* and was tasked with counselling the couple’s two daughters in matters of social conduct and polite conversation. A frequent visitor to the fashionable salons of the mid-century France, he was one of the key theorists of the concept of *honnêteté* which he presented as a compendium of aesthetic and moral values (charm, naturalness, good taste, and politeness). For Méré *honnêteté* is an ideal of individual excellence, but it is inseparable from aristocratic hegemony. Paradoxically, given that the *honnête homme* is the opposite of the pedant, he often tends to adopt a pedagogical tone. As a salon writer, Méré is known for four *Discours* (1677) and six *Conversations* (1688) concerning charm, wit, and conversation, and six further *Discours*, published posthumously.

2.2.1 The Polite Lexicon: the **je-ne-sais-quoi**, **honnêteté**, and **esprit**

In his writings, Méré repeatedly uses the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to describe the charms of a non-chalant or negligent style in conversation, prose style, and painting alike. He discerns just such a negligent *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the paintings of Apelles, a Greek painter. This air of natural ease, Méré reveals to his reader, hides a subtle artifice:

In all activities [...] one recognizes the masters of the craft by I know not what that is free and easy and always pleasing, but which one can hardly acquire without great practical experience [...] Charms animate correctness in all I have just said but they do so in such a natural manner that they look like a pure present of nature. This is equally true in activities of the mind, such as conversation, where one needs to have the same freedom if one is to make oneself agreeable.⁵⁴ (*Oeuvres complètes* II 121)

Here, Méré echoes ideas of Bouhours who also suggested that in relation to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* the acted ease and air of negligence are vital features. Using strategies not

unlike Machiavelli, Méré himself makes the point repeatedly. According to Richard Scholar, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* “is something of a stylistic tic in his writing” (*The Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi in the Early Modern Europe* 212).

In *Des Agréments*, included in the first series of his *Conversations*, Méré describes the term, which for him is closely connected to the ‘art de plaire’ cultivated by the *honnête homme*, by the following words: “What appeals to me the most, and what one should in my opinion strive after the most in their attempts to please, is the I know not what which can be easily perceived, but not as easily explained [...]”⁵⁵ (*Discours de l’esprit* 95). In another of his *Conversations*, Méré and his fellow correspondent discuss how best to define *honnêteté* (*Oeuvres complètes* I 74). Although it appears in a variety of forms, true *honnêteté* can be instantly recognized by its principal effect: it is pleasing (75). However, recognizing the effects of *honnêteté* and defining the quality itself are two very different things. Méré ends a long speech by recounting his previous conversation on the topic with a lady who combines beauty with a turn of mind that her peers find irresistibly pleasing. As it turns out, she embodies the very quality that she asks him to define:

After all that, a lady of perfect beauty, and with a wit so lovable that even the most beautiful women could not help loving her, asked me what it was to be a *honnête homme*, and a *honnête femme* too, since it amounts to the same thing; and once I had told her what I thought about the matter and she had talked about it with great good sense, she fully admitted that all of that seemed to her necessary of one were to be that about which she was asking, but that there still remained something inexplicable about it which is easier to recognize when one sees it in practice than to say what it is. What she was imagining is something noble, I know not what, which enhances all the fine qualities, which comes from the heart and wit alone, and of which the other things are merely the retinue and trappings.⁵⁶ (*Oeuvres complètes* I 77)

Not only does this quotation confirm what has been said about the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in Bouhours’s theories in the previous subchapter in terms of the nescioquiddity, but also – and more importantly – it brings up several important literary-critical *topoi* that link Méré to Bouhours and the tradition of the salon aesthetics.

First, Méré identifies *esprit* as one of the two sources of the noble *je-ne-sais-quoi* which characterizes *honnêteté*. I already pointed out in the previous chapter that the equality of sexes with regard to *honnêteté* has been contested by Nicholas Hammond. While the traditional view of the modern literary history is that women of the French salons took a great part in the process of cultivating the conduct and forms of polite expression and in fact initialized the whole movement, there are signs in the form of textual evidence suggesting that Hammond’s relatively isolated voice may be right. Second, the connection and contrast between heart and mind mentioned in the last sentence is a dynamic dichotomy which I attended to in the previous chapter, and would like to expand it with respect to Méré’s ideas pertaining to taste. Third, the excess of wit (not mentioned in the above passage directly but closely connected to the heart-mind dichotomy) provides another link between the theories of Bouhours and Méré as both consider the issue and its implications in their writings. I will explore these topics in

the following section of this subchapter in my analysis of one of his first four *Conversations* titled *Discours de l'esprit*.

2.2.2 *Discours de l'Esprit*: The Polite Society versus Nature

In the *discourse*, which has a form of a letter to a noble lady, Méré's main purpose is to explain to the anonymous Madame which features constitute *esprit* and how to recognize it in a person of a quality. The critic presents a gradually developing, if slightly sketchy, ideas on the term which cross over the borders of philosophy, aesthetics, literature, psychology as well as history. This exposition is framed by the account of a tour of historical figures, hailing both from the ancient history (Homer, Socrates, Caesar, August and Cleopatra) and a more recent one (Louis XI, Henri IV, Cardinal Richelieu), assigning *esprit* to some (Socrates, Henri IV) while denying it to others (August, Cleopatra).

Women and esprit

Regarding accessibility of *esprit* to women, Méré shares a view which is rather similar to that of Bouhours. However, he is putting it across in a less direct manner, presumably because he is writing to a lady. The fact that the addressee is a woman is made clear at the very beginning of the epistle as Méré begins it by amicably reprimanding the lady for being overmodest:

It seems to me, Madam, that you love modesty more than you should and despite that I find that sometimes you allow yourself to be withdrawn from it. The cause for this may lie in that you have not considered what modesty is and that you think that the more one demean oneself, the more modest one is.⁵⁷ (*Discours de l'Esprit* 1)

Méré concludes that “this virtue [...] consists of perfect balance”⁵⁸ and suggests that modesty and *esprit* do not necessarily exclude one another (*ibid.*).

Why could you not be in agreement concerning the rare qualities of your own wit, you whose deeds are good and whose need for communion so slight, that even if you were less beautiful than you are, you would never cease to be the loveliest person in the whole world?⁵⁹ (*ibid.*)

The criticism turns into panegyric once Méré starts persuading the lady that those qualities of her person which she herself regards as the least attractive are in fact those that make her exceptional and admirable: “You converse in a simple manner, you do not say pretty words or sweet things; you withdraw yourself from judging, you make decisions for your own person only, and when you come back from a theatre, you usually have nothing good or bad to say about it”⁶⁰ (*Discours de l'Esprit* 2).

Although the praise of the lady's qualities is amassed throughout the letter, it is worth noting that it is a praise of a certain kind only. Indeed, women are always judged according to the criteria of appearance and modesty, as opposed to men, who are valued on the basis of their courage, learning and wit: "This man, they say, has wit, but he is not learned; this one has much wit, but he has no knowledge of the ways of the world; this woman is beautiful, but there is no brilliance in her, and this woman is very pretty, but her features are not regular enough"⁶¹ (4). The qualities of courage, beauty or education are seen as inferior to the quality of wit; those who possess it stand above all others: "The most courageous men are not always the best judges of courage, and the most beautiful women are often bad judges of beauty, but people who have much wit, are able to discern those who do well even in the least important aspects of their lives"⁶² (11).

If, after all, wit is acknowledged as a quality a woman can come to possess, there are still obstacles between her and the full-fledged respect. The impediments are recounted by Méré as something other people claim ("There is another way of talking which is frequently to be seen" (6)), in a rather straightforward manner: "I must admit that you have enough wit but do not have any judgment"⁶³ (6). Méré himself seems not to support this claim as he explains that "to have *esprit* and to judge well is almost the same thing"⁶⁴ (*ibid.*). However, nowhere in the letter does he clearly dissociate himself from this point of view which seems to be in a direct opposition to the view of the modern scholars on the social status of women in the seventeenth-century France. For example, Jolanta Pekacz contends that "women occupied a special place as experts in matters of taste in seventeenth-century France" and she goes on to claim that "[t]hey were often perceived as superior judges, primarily due to their lack of formal education. The lack of education made women's intuition unspoiled, their taste "natural," and their imagination sharper than men's" ("The Salonnières and the Philosophes in Old Regime France: The Authority of Aesthetic Judgment' 281).

Méré does not dwell on this topic long enough to come to an unequivocal conclusion; subsequently, his opinions of this matter have to be qualified as ambiguous. Instead, he moves on to attempt a more abstract and depersonalized definition of *esprit* which will be the topic of the last two sections of this subchapter.

Esprit: definition and dialectic

The first definition of *esprit* comes after several pages of the letter, and one of its most significant features is its tentativeness; the phrase 'il me semble' ('it seems to me') is used by Méré repeatedly. He sets out to define *esprit* in very broad terms: "It seems to me that *esprit* lies in the ability to understand things, to consider them from all sorts of perspectives, to clearly judge them as well as their value, to discern what one has in common with the other and in what it is different, and to know how to discover the most well-hidden ones"⁶⁵ (10). In accordance with what he claimed about *esprit* in connection to women, Méré defines it as nearly identical with judgment. The definition continues

in similarly general terms when he claims that “[i]t also seems to me that it is an infallible sign that one has wit to know the best means and how to employ them in all which one undertakes”⁶⁶ (10). *Esprit*, then, seems to lie in ways of conduct and achieving one’s goals in general, an idea which is repeated again later in the text: “[...] the best proof that one has wit and knows how to use it is to live well and to conduct oneself in the proper manner”⁶⁷ (12).

After this preliminary demarcation comes a series of negative definitions describing what *esprit* is not: “Wit must not be confused with reason as if they were the same thing, and I find that one can easily be very reasonable and not have more than very little wit.”⁶⁸ (16) Reason is defined by Méré as “a power of soul which is common to both wit and feeling”⁶⁹ (ibid.). Another quality *esprit* should not be mistaken for is talent – a quality of lesser order which one can possess if they are endowed with *esprit*⁷⁰ (17). Méré continues to produce several more signs of *esprit* interestingly, he interchanges the term with intelligence and judgment in the two last instances: “Another sign of *esprit* is when one does not let allow themselves to be fooled by fashion or customs, or when one makes decisions only when one knows what the decision is about [...];”⁷¹ also “[...] it is a good sign of intelligence not to understand what is not intelligible, and yet another sign of good judgment is to reject without reflection a bad ambiguity which is nowadays often valued as witticism”⁷² (18-9). In this last instance, *esprit* becomes synonymous with good judgment as well as good taste as Méré is now operating in the sphere of literature and its appreciation. When Michael Moriarty claims that Méré “constantly stresses the rarity and distinctiveness of good taste, as of *honnêteté*,” a similar claim can be made with regard to *esprit* – for Méré, just like for Bouhours before him, it is a quality one of which most distinctive features is exclusiveness and uniqueness (*The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* 526). Méré goes on to distinguish two kinds of *esprit*. First, there are those among us

[...] who are in minority, [and] understand things in themselves. These have the ability to search the ideas of nature and have invented or perfected the arts and sciences. The other type are those of a more lazy or careless nature who usually never invent anything, but they comprehend what they are told by the inventors, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly.⁷³ (28)

Méré identifies these two types as “inventors” and “those who do not invent”⁷⁴ (ibid.). With respect to the former, more unique, type of *esprit*, he writes that “[...] this first disposition which renders us capable to comprehend, comes to us when we are born, it is a gift from heaven, it is a natural light which cannot be acquired; however, it can be increased, improved, refined, and this is what we call to acquire wit”⁷⁵ (28). Just like taste, then, *esprit* can be trained and cultivated and therefore is related closely to the basic values of polite society. The light metaphor, already present in Bouhours’s conception of *esprit* is crucial for Méré’s theory and represents a repeating image which will again re-appear in writings of the English authors analyzed in the following chapter, most distinctly Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Criticism*. I will now explore the ideas of *esprit* which lie behind this metaphor in the last section of Méré’s *Discours*.

The ultimate metaphor: *Esprit* as natural light

After the introductory account based on the general definition of *esprit*, Méré eventually proceeds to formulate his own theory of the term. In doing so, he draws on the already explored themes of female qualities, defending simplicity which often is mistaken for stupidity – *esprit*'s great nemesis (“stupidity does not loathe *esprit* any less than *esprit* stupidity”⁷⁶). Méré suggests that simplicity, while being somewhat limited in its capacities, should still be appreciated and respected as it

[...] presents itself as sweet, amenable, docile, steady, just, magnanimous, grateful, and a bit suspicious. It does not defy but itself, and when it errs, it loves being informed about the mistake, and tries to correct it. It admires good qualities which it can explain to its own advantage; it would love to see everyone happy. If its light does not reach too far, at least it is pure, and it is well aware of what it wants, and is always prepared to receive it.⁷⁷ (32-3)

Here, simplicity is described in terms which are traditionally associated with the feminine qualities and while Méré does not equate it with *esprit* but rather sees it as an ancillary, it is clear that he values this quality very highly. Several pages later, the light analogy is expressed in a most succinct manner when Méré claims that “[w]it is a sort of light [which] creates and reflects all at once”⁷⁸ (41). According to Jacques G. Benay's essay *L'Honnête Homme devant la Nature, ou la philosophie du Chevalier de Méré*, *esprit* in Méré's writings becomes equal with *nature* which

considered in its totality, is a source of light and understanding; it is a reservoir of ideas, and – finally – a homeland of the *esprits purs*. It is a source of light as it emanates sincere and natural reason, as opposed to the social or political reason. Thanks to it a man gets rid of the false clarities which obscure his judgment and ruin his feelings.⁷⁹ (30)

This reading brings Méré closer to the neoclassical admiration of nature; at the same time, however, Benay seems to be suggesting that this nature is of a more complex and spiritual making as he connects it with ‘Metaphysical *esprit*’. Still, the main stress rests on the qualities of sincerity, authenticity of expression and perception: “This natural reason which Méré defines as ‘a gift from heaven’ corresponds to a sort of charm which is ‘l'*esprit métaphysique*,’ superior to all others and whose perception allows those who possess it to discern the harmonies, proportions, and numbers present in nature and *ad infinitum*”⁸⁰ (ibid.) The ‘*esprits métaphysiques*’ are the ones who are capable of access nature and all its precepts, and who “searched in the ideas of nature and invented or perfected the arts and sciences”⁸¹ (Benay 30). The other types of *esprits*, which Méré calls ‘mathematical’ or ‘geometrical’ “do not invent ... they comprehend what the inventors have to say”⁸² (ibid.) The emphasis on the balance between understanding nature in its complexity and entirety on the one hand, and possessing the ability to create on the other, seems to be the red line running not only through the *Discours*, but a unifying thought of Méré's aesthetics. The ‘pure wits’ are those who embody this rare quality and

together they inhabit a pastoral-like ‘patrie lointaine’ far away from the false truths and artifices of the fashionable salons– a society which only the most perfect *honnêtes hommes* are permitted to enter .

According to Benay, this interpretation of Méré’s theory of *esprit* is confirmed by the critic’s growing aversion to the city, its pretentious and over-cultivated way of life, professing sympathy for the simplicity of country: “Do not believe that I am enchanted by Paris or by the Court. It seems to me that I am a citizen of the world, not unlike Socrates; and yet from time to time I turn my eyes towards my home town in the country, and perhaps it is with same tenderness which Cato felt for his homeland”⁸³ (31). Thus, Méré reappraises and reappropriates *esprit*, taking it out of the fashionable *précieuse* salons into the company of those unaffected by the entanglements of *jeux d’esprit*-riddled conversation, discarding along the way both the *précieuse* ideal of delicate artifice as well as the dogmatic neoclassical doctrines. Of course, this radical move on Méré’s part has to be seen in the light of his incoherent and slightly contradictory theories – his aversion to the Court expressed bluntly in the above quotation can be contradicted by his equally keen appraisal of the new Court expressed in the *Discours*. At the same time, the vehement tone of what is clearly more personal piece of writing must be acknowledged as unique within the context of the early modern French ideas on *esprit* and his ideas represent an important body of thought and aesthetic and ideological stance which throws much-needed light on the development of the terms in question. Before exploring theories of wit which were formed on the English side of the channel, I will now look into the ideas on *esprit* of the last proponent of the French literature of the latter part of the seventeenth century, the defender of neoclassical theory, Nicolas Boileau- Despreaux.

2.3 Nicolas Boileau-Despreaux and the Ideal of Neoclassical Esprit

This subchapter further examines the role of *esprit* in the “conspiracy to protect the ineffable,” the element of allusiveness, tentativeness, almost secretiveness, and a feature which can be said to characterize the birth of the French aesthetic thought of the latter part of the seventeenth century (Borgerhoff ix). This feature is shared by *esprit* with the *je-ne-sais-quoi* of Bouhours’s theory of cultural exclusiveness as well as with the *sublime* which is one of the central literary-critical terms of the poetic theory of Nicolas Boileau. I will first introduce Boileau’s critical precepts and then concentrate on his two key works: *Le Traité du sublime*, his translation of the treatise *On the Sublime* by the Greek rhetorician Longinus, and his own critical masterpiece, *L’Art poétique*.*

Le Traité du sublime and *L’Art poétique* were both published in 1674 as a part of Boileau’s two-volume *Œuvres diverses*. They were conceived by the poet as a critical diptych and it is clear that they should be interpreted thus. I will therefore first look into the ways

*) For the sake of simplicity, I will henceforth refer to ‘Longinus’ or Pseudo-Longinus as Longinus.