

Bicanová, Klára

Official and alternative classical aesthetics: Bouhours, Méré, and Boileau : [introduction]

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2 Official and Alternative Classical Aesthetics: Bouhours, Méré, and Boileau

La vraie éloquence se moque de l'éloquence.

Blaise Pascal, *Les Pensées* (1669)

La confiance fournit plus à la conversation que l'esprit.

François de La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes* (1665)

In this chapter I look at the texts of three French authors – Dominique Bouhours, chevalier de Méré, and Nicolas Boileau – in which theories of *esprit*, its version *bel esprit*, and several other related terms like the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and the *sublime* are expressed. Unlike Boileau's *L'Art poétique*, one of the most well-known texts of the French neoclassicism, both Bouhours's *Les Entretiens d'Artiste et d'Eugène* and *La Manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d'esprit*, and Méré's *Discours de l'esprit* are seriously under-researched and rarely analyzed texts. While these two latter authors' writings belong to the genre of literature of social life, often not distinguishing between the appreciation of artistic, psychological and social values, Boileau's interests are more specifically literature-based. However, even in his theories concerning *esprit* he pursues the ideal of balance between the artistic truthfulness and moral integrity. *Esprit* also appears to have played an important part in the early modern French society's process of self-identification. In particular, the act of defining a term like *esprit*, or the *je-ne-sais-quoi* becomes crucial in determining the culture's ideological positions.

The seventeenth century is usually considered a golden period of French criticism. Boileau, Bouhours and other French critics disparaged the poetry of Italy and Spain, though they drew rather more than they cared to acknowledge from sixteenth-century Italian critics. By the last quarter of the seventeenth century France had assumed a leadership in literary criticism which the rest of Europe, including even Italy, acknowledged (*The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism. The Eighteenth Century* 83). Dogmatic and legislative in tone, the French critics like Boileau, Rapin, and Le Bossu were far away from the technical and philosophic treatment of literary language of the generations of critics to come, but their achievement must be considered seriously as they represent the stage of early modern European criticism in which "a strong tendency among theorists [...] to take over psychological doctrines as a foundation for their views, to displace rhetoric (in its widest acceptance as the "art of writing") from its traditional basis of classical authority and common-sense observation and establish it on properly philosophical foundation" (Stone 22).

Theories of *esprit* in the texts of Boileau, Bouhours and Méré demonstrate that the term serves as a catalyst of this gradual change, partly because it is so flexible in its semantic and contextual usage. Also, tracing its interplay with the already mentioned *je-ne-sais-quoi* and *sublime* will hopefully yield new insights into the ways various streams and doctrines of French neoclassicism interacted and responded to each other. The tensions between them are part of my interest in this chapter, and emphasis on the social dimension of *esprit* is detectable in Bouhours's theories of the *bel esprit*, where the adjective adds an appreciative tone to the expression.

2.1 Dominique Bouhours and Poetic Ideologies of the Bel Esprit

2.1.1 The bel esprit and the je-ne-sais-quoi

Dominique Bouhours was born in 1628 in Paris where he also died in 1702. Although today he is usually remembered as an essayist and neo-classical critic, during his time he was also known in his capacity of Jesuit priest, as he engaged in theological and literary polemic with the Jansenists. For the purpose of my reading of Bouhours, the most important fact is that he was a frequent and influential visitor to the salon of Madeleine de Scudéry, where he made a name as an expert on matters of style and language – this fact is attested by Nicolas Boileau and Jean La Bruyère who considered him a foremost authority in this field and Jean Racine who allegedly sent him *Phèdre* for approval.

When considering the terms of the *bel esprit* and the *je-ne-sais-quoi* which lie at the heart of Bouhours's poetic theory I will be concerned specifically with how these terms were strategically employed by the French author in his discourse of cultural, social, and literary elitism. I do not attempt to separate the literary from the social and cultural sphere in my approach, as I believe this particular period perceived them to be interconnected in a way that defies any clear-cut compartmentalization. In this respect, I agree with Richard Scholar, who points out that “[w]hat is striking about the discourse of art and artistic appreciation in late seventeenth-century France culture is how embedded it is in the discourse of social distinction” (Scholar 199). Authors of this period were used to deploy their social credentials as artists to explain the qualities of their writings; indeed, Bouhours and others talk about these two spheres “as if they were one and the same thing” (ibid.). I also believe that this intertwining of qualities renders the period's literary creative and critical output considerably inaccessible but at the same time it is the reason for its fertility in terms of interpretive possibilities.

Taking into account the nature of the relationship between the literary and the cultural, my approach will therefore posit the two terms as tools of literary and social exquisiteness employed by the members of the polite circles and salons in order to establish and maintain their exclusiveness. In Bouhours's two major critical works, *Les Entretiens d'Artiste et d'Eugène* and *La Manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d'esprit* both the *bel*