

Manning the Margins: Masculinity and Writing in Seventeenth-Century France  
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PART ONE  Civilizing the Margins



## The Chevalier de Méré's Quest for Honnête Masculinity

IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE a concept more central to seventeenth-century French culture and literature than *honnêteté*. This aesthetic, ethical, and social discourse of ideal comportment was the period's most visible form of what Norbert Elias called the "civilizing process," the codification and internalization of constraints on behavior that gave rise to the concepts of "civility" and "civilization."<sup>1</sup> Anything but an emblem of marginality, *honnêteté* aimed to confer cultural distinction and social domination. From its origins in treatises addressed to aspiring courtiers, it became during the course of the century the sociable ideal that allowed polite urban circles to constitute themselves into a prefiguration of the next century's bourgeois public sphere. Throughout the seventeenth century, writers of many different stripes (including many of the most canonical, such as Molière, Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, and La Bruyère) explored the modalities and meanings of this notion, which was not a stable doctrine but rather a fluid and shifting set of principles. For scholars of this period, *honnêteté* has provided a means of examining changing conceptions of the heroic, problems of so-called moralist literature, the relation between civility and literature, the evolving appropriations of ancient Greek and Roman culture, the boundaries between the noble and the nonnoble ethos, the opposition between court and city life, and the aesthetics of writing itself, among others.<sup>2</sup> But amid all the attention given to it, surprisingly little has been made of *honnêteté* as a *gendered* construct. With only a few notable exceptions, critics treat it as an unmarked, quasi-universal notion, even if its preeminent incarnation was the *honnête homme* (roughly, the urbane and honorable man).<sup>3</sup> In some ways, as we will see, this gesture simply reproduces a posture taken by many writers during the seventeenth century, who suggested that the *honnête homme* was somehow a model for both genders. But to approach *honnêteté* in this way is to reinforce the sort of patriarchal logic that equates the unmarked and the universal with the masculine. In

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this chapter, I work against this logic by positing that *honnêteté* was a gendered discourse that sought to undergird masculinist privilege by confronting the relationality and contingency of masculinity.

Although critical attention has focused overwhelmingly on the *honnête homme* (albeit without foregrounding the figure as gendered), from the beginning of its history in the French language, the adjective *honnête* was used to modify both *homme* (man) and *femme* (woman). In his dictionary entry for the adjective *honneste*, for instance, Pierre Richelet cites as examples La Rochefoucauld's famous bon mot: "The *honnête homme* is a man who doesn't boast about anything" and then gives "she is an *honnête femme*."<sup>4</sup> However, the precise qualities denoted by this adjective were hardly the same for men and women, and this tendency was only accentuated by the peculiar interest seventeenth-century writers displayed for this notion. As Jean Mesnard has observed, for both men and women, being *honnête* designated the ability to accommodate others through a balanced dialogue, emphasized the importance of one's merit over one's birth, highlighted one's virtue, and implied more generally an uncommon mastery of the self. But for women, *honnêteté* denoted strict limits on sexuality, an emphasis on moral purity (rather than on masculine courage), and constraints on domestic and public freedom and education. Such characteristics are certainly echoed in an example from Furetière's definition of *honnêteté*, which draws a stark contrast between its feminine and masculine variants. "The *honnêteté* of women is chastity, modesty, decency, and restraint. The *honnêteté* of men is a way of acting appropriately, sincerely, courteously, obligingly and civilly."<sup>5</sup> But while it is true that this period recognized two different ideals of *honnêteté*—one masculine and the other feminine—defining the *honnête homme* was given far and away greater priority. Even a cursory glance at the titles of seventeenth-century conduct manuals (many more of which concern men than women) suggests that setting the standards of *honnête* masculinity was a pressing, even obsessive concern for writers at the time.<sup>6</sup> From Nicolas Faret's *L'Honnête homme ou l'art de plaire à la Cour* (1630) to Jacques Goussault's *Le Portrait d'un honnête homme* (1692), numerous were the volumes that, over the course of the seventeenth century, specifically focused on *honnêteté* as a *masculine* ideal. In sum, the discourse of *honnêteté* was above all a discourse of masculinity.

Many different factors explain why this discourse became prominent at this time: the "civilizing process," sociopolitical reorganization, topical aesthetic questions, and the configuration of the literary field.<sup>7</sup> Although I do not want to diminish the importance of these questions, the central purpose of this chapter is to examine not the *why* but the *how* of *honnête* masculinity.

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Instead of the context that made this discourse possible, my interest here is to read the dynamics of masculinity at work in a group of texts by Antoine Gombaud, chevalier de Méré (1607–84), the foremost theoretician of honnêteté. As the author of the most voluminous writings on the subject, Méré developed in greater detail many of the problems also treated by other writers at the time.<sup>8</sup> Like his contemporaries, the chevalier admitted that honnêteté was an elusive ideal that could never be fully set forth in language. And yet this is precisely what he and others who wrote about honnêteté attempted to do. Méré illustrated this paradox more than any of his contemporaries. The sheer volume of his work suggests an intense struggle to codify the seemingly uncodifiable. What I contend here is that Méré's discursive struggle to define abstract aesthetic qualities is also—and quite centrally—a struggle to define the contours of an ideal masculinity.

Like all proponents of ideal social types, Méré endeavors to set honnête masculinity apart from—and especially *above*—its Others. That is, Méré strives to distinguish the honnête homme from other social types—both masculine and feminine—in a quest to confer on him a exclusive and dominant status. And yet this status was anything but self-evident. As I will argue, within Méré's writings, the honnête homme ideal exists in a tenuous relationship with its Others—the overly ceremonious man, the provincial, the professional bourgeois, the courtier, the warrior, the galant homme, and especially, women. In some ways, the honnête homme is always at risk of resembling these types too closely; but at the same time, he must carefully distance himself from them. My contention is that the dialectic between resemblance and differentiation is a precarious one that leaves the honnête homme on unstable ground. Mastery of this dialectic is the essence of honnête masculinity, but this mastery can only be acquired and maintained by recourse to the *je ne sais quoi*, the (purportedly) inexpressible quality to which the elite appealed so as to preserve its exclusivity.<sup>9</sup>

### DEFINING THE HONNÊTE HOMME

What precisely *is* an honnête homme? To address this question, Méré and his contemporaries relied on a long and varied tradition hailing back most immediately to Castiglione and Montaigne, but ultimately to ancient Greek and Roman thought as well.<sup>10</sup> The ideal of the Greek philosopher in the mold of Socrates or Plato, unquestionably virtuous but also preeminently sociable, is a frequent point of reference for Méré. More specific semantic influences,

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though, are found in an array of ideals from ancient Rome: the Senecan notion of *honestus* (the utmost good deriving from virtue and honor); Quintilian's goal of *urbanus* ("the total absence of all that is incongruous, coarse, unpolished and exotic, whether in thought, language, voice or gesture")<sup>11</sup> and his emphasis on the appearance of a "natural" expression that hides all effort; Cicero's conjunction of *honestum* and *decorum* and his insistence on moderation in all things.<sup>12</sup> In Méré's (and others') appropriation of the classical Greek and Roman *paideia* (the tradition of forming men to achieve perfection and excellence), the overriding consideration was the aesthetic fashioning of the self and in particular the elegant and seductive use of language along the lines of the ideal rhetor conceived by Cicero and especially Quintilian. Of course, these intertexts had been synthesized and reworked by Castiglione and Montaigne, both of whom proposed models that were the immediate precursors of the honnête homme. Castiglione's courtier, preoccupied more with his own refinement than with his service to a prince, gave enormous impetus to the development of conduct literature in sixteenth- and especially seventeenth-century France. More specifically, the courtier's seemingly natural grace, or nonchalance (*sprezzatura*), and verbal seductiveness in conversation were to have the greatest influence on theoreticians of honnêteté.<sup>13</sup> But by the time Méré and his contemporaries were giving form to the honnête homme, Castiglione's model had been extensively filtered and diffused, most notably and prominently by Montaigne. Invoked as the "breviary of honnête people," the *Essais* were a crucial model for the seventeenth century. As Domna Stanton has argued, it was "[Montaigne's] views on professionalism, pedantry, education, and conversation, his brand of stoicism and epicureanism, his comfortable distance from religion and independent attitude toward established codes . . . even more . . . his vision of a select society devoted to the beautification of life, and, above all, his representation of self as art that determined the substance of seventeenth-century honnêteté."<sup>14</sup>

In keeping with the tradition popularized by Montaigne, Méré offers a much less pragmatic vision of the honnête homme than do earlier seventeenth-century theorists, notably Nicolas Faret, who are concerned with the mechanisms for winning favor at court. Instead, Méré concentrates on the means for ensuring an elusive superiority in the vaguely defined realm of *le monde* (society). In this sense, Méré's reflections on honnêteté consecrate a shift away from the traditional signs of aristocratic prestige—birth and rank, or the means of compensating for the lack thereof—toward the more general definition of the honnête homme provided by Bussy-Rabutin: "a refined man

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who knows know to live.”<sup>15</sup> By the end of his life, when some of his most important works were published, Méré's conception of honnêteté was increasingly overshadowed by the dual perspectives of traditional aristocratic reaction (e.g., Joachim Trotti de La Chétardie, *Instructions pour un jeune seigneur ou l'idée d'un galant homme*, 1683) and an increasingly prominent Christian moralist revision (e.g., Armand de Gérard, *Le Caractère de l'honnête homme*, 1682; Jacques Goussault, *Le Portrait de l'honnête homme*, 1689). Yet Méré's conception still constituted the *summum* of the honnête homme as worldly and sociable ideal, key elements of which would be integrated into the eighteenth-century figures of the *libertin galant* and of course the *philosophe*.<sup>16</sup>

From his earliest to his latest writings, Méré was preoccupied above all else with defining what it means to be an honnête homme. In concert with other writers of the time, he sees the happiness of the group as the overriding objective for the honnête homme. “Honnêteté . . . is only to be desired to the extent that it makes those who have it and who approach it happy,” he writes.<sup>17</sup> As a result, there is nothing more important for the honnête homme than “pleasing” his audience, the exclusive circle to which he belongs. A key (even fetishized) notion in seventeenth-century aesthetics, the *art de plaire*—quite literally, the art of captivating, enrapturing, enchanting others<sup>18</sup>—implied, in Méré's understanding, the ability to excel “in all that concerns the beauties and proprieties (*bienséances*) of life” so as to engender “the most perfect and most agreeable interaction among people.” So doing, those striving for honnêteté “spread joy everywhere, and their greatest care is but to deserve esteem and to make themselves loved.”<sup>19</sup> “I believe that one can never be too captivating (*on ne sauroit trop plaire*),” says Méré (*OC*, 2:33).

When contrasted with the courtier, the figure who precedes and competes with the honnête homme, the importance of the *art de plaire* is unmistakable. Instead of being guided by his place within a rigid hierarchy, cut off from the rest of society, and forced to cultivate appearances that mask his true intentions, as the courtier must, the honnête homme, in Elena Russo's words, “develops a decentered self that has less as its objective power than pleasure and harmonious coexistence with others. To the quest for success, the honnête homme prefers the quest for happiness—his own—which he can only obtain by assuring that of others.”<sup>20</sup> To be sure, this is an accurate statement of the goals that Méré prescribes for honnêteté when it is contrasted with the ethos of the courtier or the later libertine.<sup>21</sup> But when viewed within the larger dynamic of Méré's oeuvre, the emphasis on the honnête homme's investment in collective happiness and exclusive group identity risks overlooking what is at stake in the *art de plaire*. This is not only because ensuring the happiness of

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others is tantamount to *captivating* them, holding sway over them and thus exerting a power over them. It is also because the honnête homme's interests are not reducible to those of the exclusive group he attempts to win over. Rather, his own honnêteté is paramount, and his obligation to captivate others presupposes a position of dominance. He must have about him "a certain something noble and exquisite (*je ne sçay quoy de noble & d'exquis*) that puts one honnête homme above another" (Letter 6, *L*, 58.). To maintain and display that "certain something" involves an internalized struggle with the self and with others, a struggle that is by and large coded masculine in Méré's writing. In sum, then, the collective ethos of honnêteté is founded upon an agonistic masculine stance within the group (not in spite of, but rather *because* of the *art de plaire*), and this stance requires first of all a struggle within the honnête homme himself.

Scholars have long noted the quest for self-mastery required in honnêteté. Not unlike the ascesis of Stoicism and the Christian ascetic tradition, the honnête homme must give himself to rigorous training, self-discipline, and self-restraint.<sup>22</sup> The end goal is *ataraxia*, a feeling of inner peace and happiness that results from mastering the art of captivating others. With its valorization of pleasure, this doctrine also incorporates Epicureanism, which is amalgamated with Stoicism.<sup>23</sup> Of course, it is highly significant that honnêteté has at its core these two philosophical discourses, which were often used to fashion ideals of masculinity from antiquity through the early modern period. And connected as they are to these discourses, the ethical and aesthetic principles to which Méré's honnête homme aspires are likewise gendered masculine in important ways.

Foremost among these and consistent with the intertextual models Méré reworks (notably Cicero) is his "virtue." "I can conceive of nothing under the heavens that is above honnêteté: it is the quintessence of all the virtues" (*OC*, 3:71), he says. Here as elsewhere, Méré's understanding of virtue is not only that of ethical morality, but also that of the masculine strength and energy denoted by the Italian notion of *virtù*, wisdom leading to control over oneself and thus over fate. But what makes honnêteté the "quintessence of all the virtues" is that it enables one to be well received by "persons of good taste" (*OC*, 3:71). Unlike its meaning in conventional ethics, this virtue is a means to an end and not the end in and of itself; it is a necessary—but not a sufficient—component of honnêteté, which must be supplemented with aesthetic discernment. "One could be a very virtuous man and a very bad honnête homme," Méré contends. "One only needs to be equitable (*juste*) to be a virtuous man, but to be an honnête homme one must know about all sorts of

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*bienséances* and know how to put them into practice" (Letter 110, *L*, 429.). More difficult than the equity required of the "virtuous man" are the knowledge and practice of the *bienséances*, the codes of propriety or social decorum required of the honnête homme.<sup>24</sup> Méré even asserts that virtue is *produced* by the *bienséances*: "to be really virtuous or at least to be so with grace, one must know how to put the *bienséances* into practice, to judge everything soundly, and to favor excellent things over those that are merely mediocre" (Letter 12, *L*, 87–88.). Created by the *bienséances* just as it creates them, virtue has a purpose that is far more aesthetic than ethical. But the point I want to make here is that, by subordinating ethics to aesthetics, Méré also reconceives the wisdom and self-control connoted by virtue (in the sense of *virtù*) as a properly *masculine* mastery of the *bienséances*.

Key to this mastery for Méré was the *justesse* (accuracy or precision) with which the honnête homme was to judge his surroundings, and consequently, his own behavior. "I don't have any other term to explain more clearly this inexpressible wisdom and agility that recognize propriety (*la bien-séance*) everywhere, that do not tolerate letting one do too much or too little for something that needs to be big or small, and that make one feel the bounds one must respect" (*OC*, 1:96), he writes.<sup>25</sup> As this quote makes clear, *justesse* involves the ability to find that elusive middle between excess and lack, a topos of ancient and early modern ethics and aesthetics.<sup>26</sup> The golden mean (*juste milieu*) and the qualities of being moderate (*moderéz*) or temperate (*tempéré*) are central to honnêteté, which "shuns the extremes," as Méré puts it (*OC*, 1:75). The effect one has on others must hit the happy medium, and in order to achieve this end, one must control one's bearing, actions, and language so that they are neither deficient nor excessive. In both instances, hitting the happy medium is very difficult. Of the "temperament" best suited to the honnête homme in conversation, Méré writes that "when things are seen as they are, the effects they produce are recognized quite well, but the right temperament (*le juste temperamment*), which is very dependent upon the subject matter and the occasion, always seems very elusive" (*OC*, 3:146). But as difficult as it is to achieve the golden mean of honnêteté, it is presumably less so for men than for women, even though Méré twice suggests that the qualities of the honnête homme and the honnête femme are the same.<sup>27</sup> In the many discourses of which it was a guiding principle—ethics, civility, medicine, conjugal love, politics, to name but a few—the mean as a goal to which one should aspire applied to both genders. However, a long tradition (harking back to Aristotle) held that men were incomparably better able to achieve the mean than women. By their physical composition, so explained a tradition



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reinforced by humoral medicine in particular, men were more likely to be endowed with reason and moderate self-control, whereas women were given to passion and excess. And beyond medical discussions, the early modern period resounds with the refrain that women were prone to extremes, against which men had to be vigilant in order to set their foreordained examples of moderation and temperance.<sup>28</sup> Since Méré never refutes these cultural presuppositions and since he relies on male role models and constructs an explicitly masculine ideal, it is hardly a stretch to place his doctrine within this misogynist tradition. But even if the *honnête homme* is better able to reach the middle than women, he is still faced with a formidable challenge. The *juste milieu* of *honnête* masculinity is as elusive as it is exclusive.

Achieving the golden mean makes possible yet another crucial feature of the *honnête homme*—the ability to display a seemingly intuitive elegance. In his actions and his judgment, the *honnête homme* was to display an ease and grace that eschewed any suggestion of effort. “I believe . . . that one’s way of living and acting should be free and unhampered and that one should sense nothing forced about it. So, in order to show an extreme grace in the things one does, one must execute them as would an excellent Master. And one’s actions must be precise, unrestrained, elegant (*de bon air*). . . . One must make them appear natural” (*OC*, 2:13–14). At work here is a paradox that can be traced back to Castiglione’s notion of *sprezzatura*, which Méré like others before him reiterates: artifice must pass for nature and effort must appear to be effortless.<sup>29</sup> In other words, if he can *appear* to be a “master” (*maître*), the *honnête homme* will *be* one. Since the primary target for this injunction is men, for Méré as for Castiglione and others, the domination in question concerns first of all that of a *masculine* refinement. In effect, then, Méré and all the early modern invocations of *sprezzatura* simply make explicit—without condemning it—the logic of masculine domination, which seeks to present itself as natural. Still, this self-conscious recognition paradoxically works to cover over contingency by making aesthetic mastery the “natural” sign of masculine dominance.



Faced with a myriad of tautologies and paradoxes, Méré nonetheless asserts the superiority of *honnête* masculinity, and to do so, Méré grants himself the pedagogical role of *maître* (master/teacher) or *gouverneur* (preceptor), a person he recommends for all those who aspire to *honnêteté* (*OC*, 3:71). Obser-

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vations about his contemporaries and commentaries on writings both ancient and modern all form what is intended to be a prescriptive discourse that empowers readers to aspire to honnêteté, and particularly honnête masculinity. In a sense, then, Méré leads by example, demonstrating for his readers the role of *maître*, whose mastery of self and others begins with the emulation of models. "It would be very difficult to perfect oneself in anything at all without referring to the best models," he says (*OC*, 3:71). And yet, emulation is not the only or even primary means to achieve perfection. Rather than concentrating solely on what he *should* be, the aspiring honnête homme must scrupulously study those persons and those traits that are found lacking. "One must have so many rare qualities to become a perfect honnête homme that it is easier to say what one must shun than those things one must observe, and I believe that by avoiding those faults and several others one can make good progress in honnêteté" (Letter 6, *L*, 58.). Repeatedly, Méré bemoans the lack of models for honnêteté. Placing himself in the position of supreme judge, he explains that even Socrates and Julius Caesar, his recurring points of reference, fall short:

I've seen very few people in society or in history who were entirely to my liking. I am only speaking about the qualities of the soul, for the assets of the body may be wished for but should not be revered; but those of the heart and the mind are above all the rest and should be called true greatness (*la véritable grandeur*). And, to my mind, no one surpassed in that respect Socrates and Caesar, who would also be the two men of antiquity I would admire the most if only the first had been a bit less of the Philosopher he was and if the second had been content to become master in the mold of a noble Conqueror. (*OC*, 3:140–41)

Perfection in honnêteté would seem to be impossible. No one has surpassed Socrates and Caesar, and yet even they have shortcomings, which pertain to the very things they are best known for—philosophy and the art of war. If even these honnêtes hommes *avant la lettre* are not entirely pleasing to Méré, presumably no one can be. So, in the end, honnêteté is a never-ending quest for an elusive goal, and honnête masculinity is never entirely achieved. It is a masculinity that is always becoming, never finished. To be sure, as Pierre Bourdieu (among others) has famously noted, masculine domination is by definition elusive: "Everything combines to make the impossible ideal of

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virility the source of an immense vulnerability.”<sup>30</sup> And such domination is always fraught with conflict, external as well as internal.

### THE OTHERS OF HONNÊTE MASCULINITY

Honnêteté is intrinsically relational: just as the mean cannot be defined without reference to its extremes, so too the honnête homme can only be described by comparison with other people and character types. It is by observing others that the honnête homme is best able to gauge his own thoughts and actions. For Méré, of course, evoking historical examples and “types” makes it possible to prescribe the perfect middle course he envisions for honnêteté. And this relational construction of the honnête homme (the relational component of his ascesis) is precisely what reveals the hegemony of masculinity within the discourse of honnêteté. The comparisons and contrasts Méré makes between the honnête subject and other subject positions privilege the masculine: not only are the majority of his examples (and counterexamples) men, but the consummate final product is a *man*, distinct from other men and from the most honnête of women.

In the relational networks that appear in Méré’s writings, some of the most frequent points of comparison are Alcibiades, Alexander the Great, Augustus, Caesar, and Socrates, and their failings (which Méré details and occasionally invents) are all the more instructive because their accomplishments in so many domains were incontrovertible. But Méré also includes less lofty models. In his “Discours de la vraie Honnêteté” (Discourse on True Honnêteté), for instance, he describes how young men might be prepared to remain captivating in the midst of “people so disagreeable and so naturally inclined to be unpleasant that it is difficult not to be disconcerted in their company”:

One must be prepared for it and seek that noble and steadfast way of acting that does not waver. Heroes of antiquity and even the adventurers of the old romances can be very useful for this purpose. At the very least one almost always finds marks of extreme valor in their deeds. Examples from one’s family are not to be neglected. A father or a relative covered all over with wounds who never hears about a cowardly action or one unworthy of a brave man without roaring like an old lion impresses on a soul that is still young and tender feelings of honor that time can never efface. (*OC*, 3:98)

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Of course, Méré is not recommending that young men aspire to be like the Knights of the Round Table or the battle-wounded, lionlike relative who roars at cowardly actions. Rather, he is interested in the feelings of honor and valor such examples supposedly inspire:

This initial upbringing seems crucial to me, and I believe that the best one for giving a refined manner to young men, no matter what profession they are destined for, is to raise them for the court and for war. Those who are not trained for these, no matter how intelligent and meritorious people find them to be, are felt to be lacking this upbringing in their countenance and actions, and this is always unsuitable for them. (*OC*, 3:98–99)

If the “heroes of antiquity,” the “adventurers of old romances,” and the “examples from one’s family” are excessive as models of actual conduct, they nevertheless provide an “upbringing,” the lack of which is sensed by those who are “in the know.” In the end, Méré prescribes a middle ground between fictional and real-life warriors on the one hand and those untrained in court life and military service on the other.

More often than models to be imitated, Méré uses counterexamples to define the contours of honnête masculinity and reinforce the difficulty of attaining perfection. The honnête homme does not transcend his Others, whether they be models or countermodels. He is never an autonomous subject whose dominance is somehow stable and self-sufficient. Rather, he is very much dependent upon the Others that give meaning to the middle ground of his honnêteté. Méré the *maître* and the honnête homme he imagines must repeatedly, and obsessively, conjure up the excessive and deficient extremes against which the dominance of well-balanced honnêteté is defined.

### COUNTEREXAMPLES

For Méré, certain character types are so completely antithetical to honnête masculinity that rejecting them is an obvious necessity. They are so far removed from the ideal as to be seemingly incompatible and irreconcilable with it. And yet, they are not so distant as to be unintelligible or unuseful for the honnête homme. Using these counterexamples, Méré gives, by negation, greater relief to the ideal he proposes; yet, with them he also identifies significant qualities of honnêteté.

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### *L'homme formaliste*

Few traits are more opposed to *honnêteté* than an excessive attachment to social customs. Méré makes this clear when he writes about the Roman general Scipio (Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus Major, 285–183 B.C.E.): “I find Scipio to be so legalistic (*formaliste*) and tense that I would never have sought him out as a man of good company. There are few occasions in which so much virtue is necessary, and in all other times minds of a human bent are horrified by it” (*OC*, 3:91). It is not Scipio’s virtue that is in question, but rather his interpretation of ethical dictates and social mores. Scipio was, as Méré puts it, *formaliste*, meaning “legalistic” but also referring to a “ceremonious and affected man who desires that others have great respect for him.”<sup>31</sup> Being *formaliste*, then, implied being self-possessed and self-interested, and thus what bothers Méré are the constraints individuals such as Scipio place on others. In contrast to the Roman general, he says, “I would like an *honnête homme* to be more gentle and affable than stern and severe, to enjoy insinuating himself in a way that is enticing and comfortable for all sorts of people, just as Socrates did” (*OC*, 1:91). Associated with *formaliste* are a bitterness and severity that are diametrically opposed to the gentle, gracious, and accommodating demeanor equated with Socrates. On the one hand, rigidity and self-righteousness; on the other, adaptability and altruism.

For all Méré’s protestations to the contrary, though, Scipio still possesses qualities that his ideal *honnête homme* must necessarily have. In a letter to Guez de Balzac, he writes, “If [Scipio] hadn’t been so legalistic and such a meticulous observer of the customs of his country, which betrays a mind of limited breadth, I would count him among the most excellent men” (Letter 66, *L*, 270.). Wishing to include Scipio among the most excellent men and yet unable to do so, Méré cites as a shortcoming something that elsewhere in his oeuvre is an oft repeated, undeniable, even indispensable quality—Scipio was a “meticulous observer of the customs of his country. . . . Propriety requires infinite study; one must observe it incessantly, both in solitude and at court” (*OC*, 3:144). In other words, the *honnête homme* must indeed be a “meticulous observer,” thereby resembling Scipio, albeit only partially, for he must be an observer without being legalistic. Méré makes this clear by stating that “it is not sufficient to know things by rules or instructions; one must try to make them natural so as to practice them easily and gracefully” (*OC*, 3:144). Observation leads to a firm grasp of the “rules” and “instructions” of the *bienséances*, but they are not sufficient in and of themselves. *Honnêteté* re-

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quires that one assimilate this knowledge to the point of making these rules (appear) intuitive.

But there is an irony in Méré's treatment of "rules" and "instructions," for whereas the honnête homme is to eschew Scipio's example—that is, to follow the *bienséances* intuitively and implicitly—the master of honnêteté himself makes this principle into a conscious and explicit rule. The supple, graceful, nearly unrecognizable adherence to propriety has become a blatant rule in its own right, and Méré in effect assumes a persona not unlike Scipio's. However, the honnête homme is supposed to internalize the master's rule so as to avoid Scipio's rigid demeanor. The Roman general's vigilant observation of the *bienséances*, as filtered by Méré, is indeed a model for the honnête homme, but a model to be internalized and not realized in social interaction. As distant as the "legalistic and tense" man is from the nuanced application of rules and instructions, he is not—indeed *cannot* be—rejected. The honnête homme must keep him at the ready within himself as observer and arbiter. But he must also take pains to prevent the Scipio-like inner self from high-jacking the outer persona.

#### *Le provincial*

No one could be more antithetical to either Scipio's rigorous observation of social customs or the honnête homme's "natural" embodiment of them than the closed-minded provincial. An occasional appearance in Méré's oeuvre, the provincial evokes a difference where geographical and spatial distance from Paris and the court expresses a lowly position in the social hierarchy of the *bienséances*. To be sure, antiprovincial sentiment was widespread in seventeenth-century France, but Méré spends little time reiterating this commonplace and instead promotes its obverse. Speaking of eloquence, for instance, he asserts his conviction that "style can never have too much of the court and high society (*le monde*) about it" (*OC*, 3:129). In linguistic as in aesthetic matters, the court and *le monde* are incontrovertible points of reference. But of greater concern to Méré is the facile reliance upon court and worldly fashion (*la mode*):

One should also note that following fashion and going about it elegantly aren't everything. Most important is knowing an infinite number of things that have nothing to do with fashion, by which I mean that they are neither *of* fashion nor *against* it. Rather, some things suc-

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ceed in society and others are not well received. On this depends the great secret for living well and becoming enticing (*agréable*).<sup>32</sup> (*OC*, 3:100)

Rejecting the argument of *The Courtier* and its avatars, Méré does not view life at court as the sine qua non of honnêteté, which emanates not from any particular external locale but from the inner space of the self, and less from social interaction than individual superiority and self-mastery. “When one is even more of an honnête homme in private (*en particulier*) than in public, this is an infallible sign that one is not so in just a mediocre way” (*OC*, 3:93). As a result, the honnête homme is capable of exerting his seductive prowess wherever he finds himself: True honnêteté “is universal, and its manners belong to all the courts from one end of the earth to the other, although they do not belong more to courts than to country retreats (*Deserts*)” (*OC*, 3:93). Going even further, Méré disrupts the aesthetic hierarchy that keeps the provincial at the bottom: “I believe that [honnêteté] is not dependent upon time or place and that he who can succeed in being an honnête homme in his shack would have been so in all the courts of the world” (*OC*, 1:76–77). Hardly someone to be shunned, the lowly country dweller becomes a model for the universality of honnêteté and above all for those at court, and the provincial, ostensibly incompatible with the honnête homme, can become his ultimate embodiment. In the self-reflection that is his self-fashioning, he should put himself in the place of the “honnête homme in his shack” all the better to hold sway at court. Made honnête, the provincial man moves from being rejected to being introjected. And once again, a figure who at first sight is an Other is integrated into the self-image of the honnête homme.

### *L'homme de métier*

Alongside the provincial, men who foreground their professional activities—especially those of nonnoble birth—are likewise alienated from honnêteté, and Méré considers them all to be of the same cloth. Of the faults the honnête homme must never display are the “uncouth and un noble manner” and more precisely the “manners (*air*) that reek of the tribunal, the bourgeoisie, the provinces, and serious matters” (Letter 6, *L*, 57). Besides provincials, then, lawyers, merchants, financiers—in short, all those whose social identity is defined by their profession—are doomed to fail at honnêteté. For Méré, the honnête homme transcends any one particular profes-

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sion, art, craft, or trade. With a knowledge that is quasi-universal in scope but unspecialized in practice, his primary objective is decidedly nonutilitarian. As a group, *honnêtes gens* (honnête people) “have hardly any other goal than to spread joy everywhere, and their greatest care inclines only toward meriting esteem and making themselves loved. . . . Thus, being an honnête homme is not an occupation, and if someone were to ask me what honnêteté consists of, I would say that it is nothing other than excelling in everything that concerns the *agréments* and the *bienséances* of life” (*OC*, 3:70). A nonprofession, being an honnête homme is in fact closely allied—although not identical—with the aristocrat at court. Suggesting that the term can be traced to the French court of the past, Méré makes this connection quite explicit: “There have always been certain lazy men without occupations (*certaines Faineans sans métier*) but who were not without merit and who only dreamed of living well and presenting themselves elegantly. It is perhaps from these sorts of people that came this so very essential word” (*OC*, 3:70). By linking the honnête homme to the “lazy men without occupations,” Méré reasserts aristocratic privilege.<sup>33</sup> But his is not a defense of the aristocracy in a collective sense. Instead, like all theorists of honnêteté, Méré sets out the parameters for an elect within the aristocracy; in short, an aristocracy within an aristocracy.

However, the primary condition for admission into this elite of the elite is not birth, but *le mérite*, a position that inverts the period's dominant understanding of aristocracy and harks back to earlier definitions.<sup>34</sup> And thus, at least theoretically, nonnobles too are eligible for admission into the body of *honnêtes gens*. But ultimately, Méré maintains that both birth and education are required for honnêteté, even if what he means by “birth” is less than straightforwardly obvious:

I've sometimes seen it debated whether this ever so rare quality comes principally from a fortunate birth or from an excellent upbringing, and I believe that in order to acquire it in its perfection nature must contribute to it, and art, as in everything else, must complete what nature has begun. The heart must be noble and the mind docile, and then they must be put onto the right paths. (*OC*, 3:70)

Clearly, the honnête homme is born with a propensity toward excellence, but this propensity must be cultivated. Nature requires nurture. However, by figuring nature as the heart, Méré dodges the question about whether “fortunate birth” is indeed aristocratic birth. A topos of ancien régime political



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symbolism, the nobility of the heart was considered to be an ideal for the highest born, but was not denied to those of nonnoble birth.<sup>35</sup> Whether the heart in question is exclusively noble or not and whether or not “noble” is synonymous with “aristocratic” or instead signifies “excellent,” the crux of the issue remains the acquisition of *honnêteté* through learning. But since this learning had to be concealed as such and instead presented as innate and intuitive, the notion of a superior aristocracy is not at all subverted, but rather displaced, as Michael Moriarty has argued.<sup>36</sup> From the perspective of masculine subject formation, though, the possibility that the man of lower birth might come to resemble the man of a higher station has a cautionary function for the latter. Since the true *honnête homme* avoids all signs of a specialized occupation and, further, any suggestion of work, he is in effect tantamount to a landowner, or *rentier*.<sup>37</sup> To avoid being confused with or surpassed by a man of lower rank requires extra vigilance and redoubled efforts so as to conceal the process of learning that was necessarily involved in becoming *honnête*. By evoking as he does the “uncouth and un noble manner” of the lawyer and the bourgeois, then, Méré reminds his aspiring *honnête homme* of his own vulnerable position. He cannot simply rely on birth; he must *demonstrate* his superiority. A counterexample to be rejected, the professional man is still part of the *honnête homme*, a figure he must paradoxically keep in view in order to keep it at a distance.

## MODELS

If the *honnête homme* must paradoxically remain closer to his countermodels than it would at first seem, the opposite is true of the relation to his models. From all appearances, he is closely associated with the courtier, the military hero, and the *galant homme*, each of whom embodies important qualities of *honnêteté*. And yet Méré goes to great pains to draw distinctions that seem minimal at first but quickly become crucial. In other words, his *honnête homme* creates a distance where one is difficult to discern. Not unlike a skillful painter, then, he must manipulate perspectives in order to bring closer what is far away and to distance what is in the foreground. But in this dizzying *trompe l'oeil*, the *honnête homme*, unlike the painter, never finishes his creation. The perspectives are always in danger of being misperceived by the *honnête masculine subject* and being all too accurately viewed by what Méré calls “le grand monde,” an imagined elite that sits in judgment of *honnêteté*.

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*Le courtisan*

Of all the models of honnêteté, the courtier is perhaps the most obvious. In the speculative genealogy Méré sketches for the honnête homme at the beginning of "De la vraie Honnêteté," for instance, he immediately evokes court life as the prefiguration of honnêteté (*OC*, 3:70). But rather than the person of the ideal courtier, he focuses on the court as an assembly of men and women that exudes an "air," a manner of acting, speaking, and living that is superior to all others and that, consequently, must be imitated.<sup>38</sup> Spending time at court and being well received by its inhabitants are highly advantageous, according to Méré, and success at court is a goal to be sought after.<sup>39</sup> If the honnête homme has a "talent for society (*le monde*)," he says, "he will be highest at court, at least for his reputation" (*OC*, 3:152). The court is a goal and a destination because it is a superlative judge whose approbation is success in and of itself. Thus when Méré entertains the question of how to instill in young men the "refined manner" (*le bon air*), it is hardly surprising that he proposes the model of the court (*OC*, 3:99).

But he must also see *through* and *beyond* the court, and he must not equate honnêteté with the existence of the courtier. Indeed, there is a profound ambivalence toward this site and this figure in much of Méré's writing, so much so, in fact, that critics have often argued his brand of honnêteté is incommensurable with the court.<sup>40</sup> Méré recognizes that it is insufficient as a model: "Most people are persuaded that to be an honnête homme it is sufficient to see the court. . . . Those who only judge things as they are practiced in a court, however great it may be, do not recognize all that is good and bad. And the most enlightened who do not go beyond this only have a mind of limited breadth" (*OC*, 3:73). While he sees the court as "the most suitable place for perfecting oneself in the *agréments* and *bienséance*," he insists that success among "the most honnête men and the most galant Ladies at court" requires something more, namely reflection on what is most appropriate for any particular occasion (*OC*, 2:27). Arduous deliberation about aesthetic matters and not slavish observation of court fashion is what is required.<sup>41</sup> He cannot simply rely on the model provided by the court, but must seek out *le grand monde*, a sort of "supercourt." Speaking of the court of France, he intones:

This court, although the most beautiful and perhaps the greatest on earth, still has its faults and limits. But *le grand monde* that extends everywhere is more perfect and, as a result, for those ways of living

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and acting that one likes, one must treat the court and *le grand monde* separately and not be unaware that the court, either by custom or by whim, sometimes approves things that *le grand monde* would not tolerate. Whoever wants to judge things of *le grand monde* and even those of the court must ascertain what the most honnête people of all the courts, if they were assembled together, would say about them in order to recognize their true value. (*OC*, 2:111)

*Le grand monde* is a standard that the honnête homme must imagine based on what the “most honnête people of all the courts” would dictate. In the midst of the real court he must act as if he were in a court that is more perfect because universally elite. If it is true, as Moriarty insists, that honnêteté supports a “feudal-absolutist” ideology and the “real social authority” of the court,<sup>42</sup> it is also true that the honnête homme must not let himself be bound by the examples he witnesses in the actual court of France. Modeling himself at least initially on the courtier, the honnête homme seeks to become an idealized but real courtier by viewing the real through the ideal and by using the ideal to create a distance from the real.

### *Le conquérant*

Closely allied with the courtier—and often one and the same person—is the warrior. Much scholarship has rehearsed the mixed fortunes of the warrior aristocracy in early modern France.<sup>43</sup> While it now appears that scholars (especially literary scholars) have long exaggerated the “emasculatation” of the nobility and specifically the obsolescence of their military roles during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it is generally accepted that the high nobility underwent a process of “curialization.” Even if this process did not (always) reduce nobles to utter passivity, it was nonetheless marked not only by allegiance to the king, but also by increased attention to codes of behavior. Méré’s honnête homme illustrates the tensions of this class, at once a courtly nobility and a warrior aristocracy, by taking the conqueror as a model for what is an aesthetic and a worldly ideal.

Among the conquerors of antiquity cited by Méré (Alcibiades, Alexander the Great, and Pompey, among others), it is Caesar who garners the most admiration. In the portrait that concludes *Les Conversations*, Caesar is presented as “the greatest man in the world . . . as much for the wonders of his life and destiny as for the greatness of his genius and virtue” (*OC*, 1:88). Granted, Caesar’s grandeur is not tied to his military success alone, yet his superiority

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stems from being one of the “masters of the world” (*OC*, 1:89), which was made possible by his conquests. A “surprising conqueror” (*conquerant admirable*), Caesar did not view war as an end in itself, but rather as a means to gaining the upper hand: “although he was so great in war, he did not love it so much for itself but rather as a means of putting himself above everything” (*OC*, 1:90). In the end, his superiority as a general was the result of his superiority as a person. Of his character, Méré notes that Caesar was born with two “violent passions: glory and love” (*OC*, 1:89) and that he was generous, grateful, proud, and forgiving (*OC*, 1:90). Of his physical appearance, Méré writes admiringly that he was “tall, of a graceful and handsome stature and a healthy countenance,” that he was “skilled in all the techniques of combat and a good horseman,” and that he had “a white and sharp complexion, black, fiery, and keen eyes” (*OC*, 1:90). He was destined to greatness, so much so in fact that what would wear others down had quite the opposite effect on him: “It is said . . . that he kept his health by neglecting it and that by dint of training he made himself indefatigable” (*OC*, 1:90). Virtuous, handsome, a pillar of strength, Caesar was also a master of aesthetic taste, especially in the sartorial domain: “He loved beautiful clothes, and his attire always made him stand out, principally on a day of battle” (*OC*, 1:91).

Most remarkable of all is the way Caesar conjoined seemingly antithetical qualities: “I would not be surprised by the extreme bravery of a brute who knows neither pleasure nor pain and who does not know the difference between being dead or alive. But for a man with such a perceptive and refined temperament and such a subtle and great intelligence, that seems very rare to me” (*OC*, 1:91). No matter how unusual it is to combine bravery with perspicacity, refinement, subtlety, and intelligence, doing so is crucial for the honnête homme, who is far less concerned with winning on the battlefield and much more with winning the hearts and minds of those he encounters in all other walks of life. That Méré prefers the verb *gagner* (to win) over *vaincre* (to conquer) when speaking of the honnête homme as conqueror is significant, as Stanton has observed.<sup>44</sup> It underscores just how much the military hero can indeed provide a model of assertiveness and domination for the honnête homme so long as those qualities are expressed as refined seduction. Applying the lessons of Caesar to realms other than war, he must master the art of sending mixed signals, in short, the art of the oxymoron. Thus, when in the company of women, the honnête can never be too “brazen” (*hardi*) “provided one is no less modest” (*OC*, 3:160). In conversation, he must display gentleness *and* piquancy, soften disagreeable subjects, and state things indirectly (*OC*, 1:62, 2:125–26). Bent on conquest, he conceals his utilitarian

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telos in a refined demeanor that appears to be its opposite, all the more so because it was equated with the “feminine.” Being sensitive, suave, subtle, gentle, and indirect, among other things, were all qualities that men were presumed to learn and perfect in the company of women. The *honnête homme* was to resemble the conqueror insofar as he was a “surprising conqueror” in the mold of Caesar, whose model he was to assimilate by inflecting it with what would appear to be its antithesis. His “feminized” demeanor distances him from the uncouth warrior, and his persuasive, self-assertive goals differentiate him from women. But in order to acquire such “feminine” traits he must come to terms with yet another model.

### *Le galant homme*

Just as closely related to the *honnête homme* as the courtier and the warrior is the *galant homme*. In a multifarious body of mid-seventeenth-century writing, the *galant homme* was the masculine manifestation of *galanterie*, an ideal of comportment and sociability.<sup>45</sup> As we will see in the next chapter, although *galanterie* and *galant/e* could have pejorative meanings, the most prominent of which denoted transgressive amorous relationships, these words also had positive meanings, which many seventeenth-century writers attempted to highlight. While the adjective *galant* could refer to professional competence, it was primarily linked to the notions of urbanity, politeness, and courtliness and was often seen as overlapping *honnêteté*. Unlike his contemporaries and consistent with his own rigorous definition of *honnêteté*, Méré, though, draws a distinction between the two by deploying a series of binaries, such as playful/serious, surface/depth, and worldly/retiring. “It seems to me,” says the Chevalier in *Les Conversations*, “that a *galant homme* is a fixture in social settings and certain *agrèments* are found in him that an *honnête homme* does not always have. But those of an *honnête homme* are very profound, even though he makes himself less visible in society” (*OC*, 1:18). To these binaries he adds another: “the *galant homme* is more outgoing and the *honnête homme* more reserved” (*OC*, 3:140). Ultimately, however, *galanterie* is fleeting, whereas *honnêteté* is eternal: “the status of *galant homme*, which captivates young men, passes like a flower or a dream. . . . But if someone is loved because he is an *honnête homme*, he will always be loved” (*OC*, 1:18).

All things considered, it is clear that the *honnête homme* is superior to the *galant homme*; and yet, like all binaries, the two form a signifying relationship with each other. Nearly identical and virtually indistinguishable, they

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still have respective differences that set them apart. Among these are the inherent risks of galanterie, which is subject to “true” and “false” iterations. “Ordinarily galanterie is false,” writes Méré (*OC*, 2:43). Prone to superficiality if not hypocrisy, galanterie must instead be “natural,” come from the heart, and be practiced with “dexterity” (*adresse*) and “wit” (*esprit*) in an refined and uncommon way (*OC*, 2:43). If the components of galanterie bear a striking resemblance to honnêteté, so too does its principal objective: “it must captivate people who know how to judge, for the goal of galanterie is to captivate and, what’s more, with a surprising twist. And when it does not captivate at all, we can conclude that it is false” (*OC*, 2:43). Distinguishing between true and false galanterie and, especially, practicing the true form requires the ability to appeal to the select few. Like honnêteté, galanterie is reducible to an *art de plaire*.

Yet, galanterie remains distinct from honnêteté, and the honnête homme must learn to adopt the persona of a galant homme when it serves his interests, and specifically with women. “One derives great advantage from being able to be one and the other as one deems appropriate, and I have seen honnête men be very awkward with the Ladies and who did not know how to engage in conversation with them even though they had things of good sense to tell them” (*OC*, 1:20), explains the Chevalier of *Les Conversations*. The honnête homme should not *become* a galant homme, rather he should extend himself *into* galanterie (he should be “one *and* the other”). Speaking in idealistic terms, the Chevalier explains that “a galant homme is nothing other than an honnête homme who is more scintillating and lighthearted than he is ordinarily and who knows how to come across well in everything” (*OC*, 1:20). The honnête homme combines the solidity and durability of honnêteté with the outward, seductive graces of galanterie.

### BETWEEN HETEROSOCIAL AND HOMOSOCIAL EXCHANGE

Among all the models of honnêteté, women are just as significant as the courtier, the warrior, and the galant homme. Through pleasurable interaction with women, the honnête homme seeks to acquire many of the qualities they (supposedly) possess innately—refined manners, good taste, and grace. But the relationship between the honnête homme and women is both more complicated and more vexed than that with the courtier, the conqueror, or the galant homme. These latter are, on the whole, static and largely abstract models who can be emulated and assimilated without personal exchange.

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Women, however, are dynamic and for the most part concrete models with whom the *honnête homme* must have sustained contact. But interaction with women is not straightforward, and it is not the only type of required or even desired social interaction for the *honnête homme*. In fact, Méré situates his *honnête homme* ambiguously between two types of exchange—male-female (heterosocial) and male-male (homosocial). As I will argue, this ambiguity is heightened by the conflicting heterosocial and homosocial *desires* that Méré, at different moments in his writing, posits as crucial for men aspiring to *honnêteté*. Further still, Méré’s *honnête homme* confirms Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s assertion that the heterosocial and the homosocial exist on continuums with *heterosexual* and *homosexual* desires respectively. The uncertain place the *honnête homme* occupies in relation to these desires reveals some of the destabilizing roles of femininity and sexuality within *honnête* masculinity.

Fundamental to *honnêteté* is what Stanton has called the “‘female’ principle,” the refined manners and speech that women were deemed to possess innately.<sup>46</sup> Reiterating a commonplace of early modern conduct literature that can be traced back to Petrarch, if not the medieval courtly ideal of *courtisie*, Méré asserts that to acquire “feminine” refinement a man must be or act as if he were a courtly lover. Motivated by desire, he will seek to please his beloved in every possible way and so doing will learn the *art* of captivating—not only his beloved, but all those whom he encounters. “[He] who accustoms himself to the ways [of the Ladies],” says Méré, “finds that the desire to acquire their good graces forces him to take on a more insinuating manner and renders him altogether different, for it is from love that most of the truest *agréments* are born” (*OC*, 3:75). “Imagine how much a young man who falls in love with a woman who is knowledgeable about what is fitting socially and who knows how to put it into practice can become an *honnête homme* with her. For love naturally bestows ingenious means for captivating the person whom we love. And if this Lady discerns everything justly, only exquisite merit and noble manners can win her over” (*OC*, 2:80). In this scheme, then, male heterosexual desire is channeled into a “civilizing” function: the desire for the (judicious) female object is simultaneously desire for her most prized qualities. The *honnête homme* seeks to possess his beloved and to resemble her—to possess her by resembling her.

What men desire to possess is women’s ability to captivate others. “Ordinarily men do not have as much grace in their actions as women do, and . . . women have a finer knowledge than men about doing things well, either because the capacity to captivate others comes more naturally to them or because sensing that it’s their specialty, they make it their occupation from

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childhood on" (*OC*, 1:18). Endowed with the gift of captivating, women are, after Méré himself, the supreme arbiters of honnêteté. Thus, men must make every effort to captivate women in order to captivate *like* women. In their presence, as the Mareschal tells the Chevalier in a conversation, the honnête homme must master "refined manners, sparkling and lighthearted conversation, an agreeable and somewhat flattering deference, that inexplicable spiciness and that deftness at being playful with women without making them feel awkward, that practice of *le grand monde* that envelopes everything, that bold and modest practice that has nothing lowly nor malicious about it, only things that have the scent of honnêteté" (*OC*, 1:20). If he is able to manage all of this, then, the honnête homme is sure to be captivating to women. However, the Mareschal warns, "one must remember that the more these sorts of things are pleasing when well executed, the more they disgust when they are not" (*OC*, 1:20). It is not just a matter of engaging in the "things that have the scent of honnêteté," it is also necessary to do those things *well*. Even then, according to the Chevalier, "this very scintillating way of living" (*cette façon de vivre si brillante*) should only be displayed sparingly: "Most women do not like it much; at the very least one can be sure that so much éclat and eagerness will tire them in the long run" (*OC*, 1:20–21). Captivating women requires a delicate balance between excess and lack that women themselves are best able to discern, so men must cede to the judgment of women while seeking to emulate their *art de plaire*.

And yet, for all of their advantages, women are not models the honnête homme can appropriate wholesale. Women may be able to discern the pleasing "middle" to which he aspires, they may be able to please more easily than he can, and they may be able to inspire in him those qualities most needed to succeed in honnêteté. But they do not possess the honnête mean because they are burdened by the corporeal. Again and again, Méré gives examples of women's obsession with their physical beauty, which in his view is founded on the superficial and the ephemeral. Thus, to describe the difference between the *beau* and the *agréable*, he writes:

The Ladies who dream more of becoming beautiful (*belles*) than enticing (*agréables*) are poorly advised. When this happens, it is the worst possible way of making themselves loved for the long term. For as soon as one possesses something beautiful, usually one does not value it as much. . . . But it is not so with something enticing. Indeed, when one loves a woman because she is beautiful, this love sometimes passes very quickly. But when true and profound *agréments* are the



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cause of affection, one does not turn away from it in that fashion.  
(*OC*, 2:37–38)

The materiality of physical beauty, to which women seem to be drawn, does not lead to the lasting pleasure and happiness that are the ultimate goals of *honnêteté*. Only the “true and profound *agréments*,” which transcend the corporeal, offer such hope. Overall, in Méré’s writings, women are to the *honnête* (masculine) “middle” what beauty is to the *agréments*. They approximate it, but remain distinct from it.

### The Honnête Homme as Courtly Lover

In spite of these shortcomings, the *honnête homme* must still seek out women, and to do so, he must adopt the stance of a courtly lover by enacting two general principles of *honnêteté*. He must first of all engage in social exchange and welcome the rivalry that ensues. For Méré, individual merit, no matter how superlative, can only blossom into an excellent reputation by contact with others, albeit a select happy few. Withdrawing from society is not an option for the aspiring *honnête homme*, for only through social exchange (*le commerce du monde*) can he demonstrate that he is able to “live well and . . . comport himself gracefully, by his speech and his actions” (*OC*, 3:142). However, social exchange generates envy, which must in turn be instrumentalized for one’s own benefit. When conversing with others, for instance, “one cannot give enough thought to saying only what people one esteems the most would want to have said, and in the same way. In this consists the greatest secret of communicating with grace” (*OC*, 3:132). Knowing how to inspire envy in others is the key to graceful interaction, verbal and otherwise. At the same time, inspiring envy requires the ability to imagine oneself in a triangularized web of rivalry if one’s attention is directed to a specific person, and all the more so if the person is of the opposite sex:

He who only thinks of making himself enticing to the woman who captivates him, even if he is good looking and a very galant homme, is still not assured of winning her over, because she does not want to love someone who is loved by no one (for an example in those things can go a long way) or because someone else has taken the initiative, or finally because her inclination leads her to other thoughts. What I say about men can be observed in women. They are the same feelings.  
(*OC*, 2:25–26)

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Being graced with advantages all one's own is no guarantee of success in the *art de plaire*. The honnête homme (and the honnête femme as well) must take into account his (her) rivals. If how one should react depends on the reason for the object's resistance, it is nonetheless clear that the subject (the honnête homme or femme) must be desired by others and that she or he is in a struggle with rivals for the affections of the beloved. Through this insight, Méré recognizes the fundamental truth of the theory of mimetic desire proposed by René Girard and revised by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, namely that "the bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent."<sup>47</sup> Desire for the beloved is not only indissociable from the envy of rivals, but requires it. Contrary to what Méré affirms in the passage just quoted, however, there is not a symmetry between the honnête homme and the honnête femme. Throughout his writings, the courtly lover wooing his beloved is in fact the preponderant model of desire.

The other principle of honnêteté apparent in the courtly lover scheme is that, for both women and men, heterosocial is preferable to homosocial interaction. Deprived of the company of women, men among themselves become overly direct—"without affectation and without ceremony" (*sans manière et sans façon*)—and too narrowly focused on their ambition (*OC*, 3:74). When confined to all-female groups, Méré contends, women are prone to boredom, jealousy, and vicious backbiting (Letter 146, *L*, 535–36.). In what appears at first glance to be a perfectly symmetrical complementarity, each gender serves as a "civilizing" regulator for the other. Heterosociality would seem to save each gender from its purportedly innate impediments to honnêteté. Yet, indirectly and allusively, Méré suggests still another reason for the superiority of heterosociality: it guards against the ambiguously erotic potential of homosociality. "Galant compliments (*les tendresses galantes*) are out of place (*pas dans leur place*) between one man and another or one woman and another. They are too affected" (*OC*, 3:75). Beyond the supposed reason for this proscription—affectation—the expression "tendresses galantes," with its simultaneously amorous and sociable connotations in seventeenth-century usage, evokes the decidedly homosexual. Men paying "galant compliments" to other men and women to other women—what would be honnête homosociality—are "out of place" because of the proximity to same-sex desire. This homoerotic potential is made even more explicit in a variant of this observation that ends with a traditional Latin proverb condemning excessive flattery: "Displays of affection (*caresses*) are appropriate between a man and a woman and between a woman and a man; but from a man to another man, it is as if *asinus asinum fricat* [the donkey rubs against the

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donkey]" ("Divers," 1925: 72). By using the Latin proverb to condemn compliments between men, Méré transforms a commentary on flattery to one about the gender of the flatterers. Through this proverb, male homosocial compliments are equated with the evocative metaphorical image of the two donkeys, whose physicality becomes the consequence of a man showering another man with compliments. Even if it is disguised by the animal proverb, the specter of the homosexual is evoked by the homosocial. To avoid being equated with homoerotically suggestive donkeylike behavior, men must keep their "galant compliments" and their "displays of affection" within the bounds of heterosocial and heterosexual desire.<sup>48</sup>

But all the while insisting on the merits of heterosociality, Méré actually undermines his occasional suggestions that men and women stand in a symmetrical relationship to each other. More often, women are described as having a utilitarian function for the *honnête homme*. Stanton has observed that "[women] are not inaccessible subjects to which the *honnête homme* slavishly submits, but to the contrary, objects used in the elaboration of his own poetic text" (139). To be sure, women are the arbiters and pedagogues of good taste in polite (heterosocial) company. As the Chevalier in Méré's *Conversations* asserts, women have

a finesse of the mind (*une délicatesse d'esprit*) that is not so common among men. I have even observed that in many places and throughout the social ranks ordinarily men do not have as much grace in what they do as women, and that women have a more exquisite understanding of how to do things well. . . . Consequently one is never entirely an *honnête homme* . . . unless the Ladies have had their say. (*OC*, 1:17–18)

And yet women, as social actors, play a lesser role than do men. "The role of a man is of greater breadth than a woman's. A man has to extricate himself from quarrels, be a good judge of things, be enticing, know society, be witty, etc." ("Divers," 1924: 494). By virtue of succeeding in the masculine social sphere (extricating himself from disputes, knowing *le monde*), a man seemingly takes what are otherwise "feminine" qualities (being enticing and witty) to a higher, more expansive level. When judged against this standard, it is perhaps not surprising that Méré is said never to have seen a woman whose demeanor totally satisfied him ("Divers," 1924: 494). Nor is it surprising that he contradicts his own advice that the *honnête homme* take his cue from women by liberally dispensing advice to his female correspondents. With the women in his own life, Méré was clearly the master of *honnêteté*.<sup>49</sup>

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With more social power and thus greater sociable prowess, men have an asymmetrical advantage over women.<sup>50</sup> But in order to acquire “feminine” refinement, the honnête homme must still interact with women, albeit in ways that conceal his dominance as the submissiveness required of a courtly lover. With the objective of insinuating—as opposed to forcing—himself into women’s company (“s’insinuer parmi les Dames” [*OC*, 3:157]), the honnête homme must adopt a resolutely theatrical frame of mind. Hence, although he is fully capable of being lighthearted and outgoing, Méré contends that “a modest and restrained air . . . seems to me to be more appropriate for insinuating oneself among the Ladies, who are concerned about their reputations” (*OC*, 3:157). Being modest and holding back even though he has much to offer, the honnête homme is able to be all things in all situations. By contrast, it seems, women *are* the qualities they exemplify. They are not actors on the social stage; they are, quite simply, themselves. If the honnête homme is the master of appearances, women are nothing more and nothing less than *being*. Thus, the apparent complementarity of honnête heterosocial exchanges is in fact rooted in a radical asymmetry between men and women. The honnête homme qua courtly lover and the honnête femme qua beloved are not equal. But as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has famously established, heterosexual erotic triangles are never symmetrical.<sup>51</sup>

### Homosociality

This, however, is not the only asymmetry in Méré’s vision of honnête masculinity and femininity. For all of his theoretical pronouncements in favor of heterosociality (and against homosociality), there are many positive examples of male homosociality throughout his writings. The most prominent of these is found in Méré’s first published work, *Les Conversations* (1668), a series of six conversations between a Mareschal and a Chevalier about the best course of education to offer a young prince (who is none other than the Dauphin) so as to instill in him the final goal of honnêteté. At the same time, between themselves, the Mareschal and the Chevalier (who is also the narrator) illustrate this goal by their own example. Their exchanges are marked by numerous mutual compliments through which the two interlocutors present themselves as masters of honnêteté.<sup>52</sup>

The very first conversation between the Mareschal and the Chevalier underscores in striking fashion Méré’s ambivalence toward heterosociality. When, after dinner, a group of women decide to play card games, the Mareschal and the Chevalier opt instead to retire to a different room for pri-

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vate conversation. The Mareschal opens the dialogue by expressing his desire to learn things from the Chevalier, so as to resemble an unnamed lady: "I am cherishing even the slightest things you tell me about Socrates, and I hope that one of these days I will be heard citing the divine Plato, following the example of a Lady who is very witty and who enjoys speaking about everything" (*OC*, 1:9). From the Mareschal's self-avowed wish to emulate the Lady, the conversation shifts to women, their supposed "finesse of mind" (*délicatesse d'esprit*) (*OC*, 1:18) and its potentially formative effect on the honnête homme. The focus changes, then, from the Lady as the object of desire and emulation to women as the object of discourse. And with this shift, the two male interlocutors stake out their own distance from—and mastery over—women. After rejecting those who claim that women are incapable of intelligence, the two men discuss whether it is better to expose the young prince to "lighthearted women" or "clever women" (*OC*, 1:17). Finally, they outline the qualities necessary for "winning them over" and especially the difficulty of achieving that goal. "Most often," claims the Chevalier, "one begins badly with them because one does not realize that they are won over in the same ways that we are and that they are likewise lost in similar ways" (*OC*, 1:21). In the midst of their musings about the shortcomings of men's seductive powers, the women who had been playing cards ask the two speakers to mediate a dispute that had arisen among them. The Mareschal seems to welcome the opportunity, commenting: "This could not have happened more fortuitously . . . and we could not have done better than to have opened at that very moment the chapter on the Ladies. For if we want to keep them all from complaining, we need to muster everything possible to judge them" (*OC*, 1:21). If, initially, the rationale for considering women was for the young prince's benefit, in the end their discussion benefits themselves. After describing and praising women's "good sense," "finesse of mind," and "grace" (*OC*, 1:17–18), the two men use this knowledge to enhance their position vis-à-vis women. The heterosocial/heterosexual desire expressed in these moments of male homosocial exchange enhances the two men's asymmetrical advantage over women.

At times, though, women's role in the cultivation of honnêteté is almost entirely obscured and attributed instead to male homosocial desire. One example is found in an account of a trip Méré and a male friend purportedly took with Pascal. At the beginning of the journey, they found Pascal to be "a great mathematician who knew nothing more . . . who had neither good taste nor feeling" (*OC*, 2:86). But after several days of patient listening and self-critique, Pascal began to resemble his honnête travel companions: "He said

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almost nothing that was not good and that we would not have wanted to say ourselves. Frankly, he had come a very long way. And, to tell the truth, the joy he showed us at having taken on a completely different frame of mind was so visible that I do not think it possible to feel a greater one" (*OC*, 2:87). This transformation was not effected by the heterosexual desire to possess and thus emulate women, but rather by Pascal's careful and methodical observation of the two men with whom he was traveling. (After two or three days, Méré notes, "He was somewhat distrustful of his feelings, and limiting himself to listening or asking questions so as to understand the subjects that came up, he had notebooks that he pulled out occasionally to write down some comments" [*OC*, 2:87.]). The homosocial context nonetheless allowed Pascal to blossom into the honnête homme that his mathematical mind-set had heretofore prevented him from becoming. So successful was he that his models came to wish that *they* had uttered the things their informal pupil said. The bond of envy and desire that inspires Pascal to emulate Méré and his friend in the first place comes full circle.<sup>53</sup>

Extending this logic further, Méré even intimates that honnêteté is compatible not only with male homosociality, but with male same-sex desire as well. If only allusively and by reference to historical personages, he displays a consciousness of the continuum that exists between the homosocial construction of honnêteté and male homosexual desire. Of course, this consciousness does not necessarily indicate enthusiasm on his part, but it does at least reveal his understanding of this link. His manuscript *Divers propos*, for instance, contains several statements about sodomy. Sometimes cited as an example of "bad tendencies" ("Divers," 1922: 92, 1925: 433), it is also recognized to be part and parcel of the "things that are done": among the types of questions posed by ignorant and stupid people, he cites "How can he like boys?" ("Divers," 1922: 90). The *Divers propos* also contain numerous passages that defend Théophile de Viau's works. Thanks to a trial at the end of his life, Théophile had an established reputation as a sodomite, and he remained a controversial figure throughout the seventeenth century.<sup>54</sup> Although Méré does not overlook what he considers to be his improprieties—both stylistic and personal ("I am aware of what was bad about him" ["Divers," 1923: 526.], he states, doubtless referring to sodomy)—he also contends that Théophile's works appeal to the *honnêtes gens* ("Divers," 1923: 84) and, further, that the author was one of only two men from the time of Louis XIII he would have liked to have met, precisely because he possessed "something excellent" ["Divers," 1923: 526].<sup>55</sup>

A similarly allusive recognition of the compatibility of honnêteté and

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male same-sex desire can be detected in the praise Méré offers for Alcibiades. Known as Socrates' *eromenos* (younger male partner of an older man [*erastes*] in ancient Greece), Alcibiades famously addresses a passionate hymn of love to him in Plato's *Symposium*. It is precisely this discourse that Méré cites as an example of the "style of the *honnêtes gens*" (*OC*, 3:116). And he is even more explicit in his praise when he quotes Cornelius Nepos's assessment of Alcibiades: "I assure you . . . that I have noticed nothing in his speech or his actions that did not please me greatly and that of all the men I know he is the one I would most like to resemble." Agreeing, Méré adds: "Perhaps . . . he would not be a bad model for young men to imitate, for with such beautiful qualities he was still very brave. He had to have had, as one says, that galant manner, in which so few people succeed" (*OC*, 2:42–43). Granted, if Alcibiades is a model to be emulated it is not because of his love for Socrates. Yet that love, and Méré's oblique allusion to it, do not disqualify him as a paradigmatic *honnête homme*.

### A Confluence of Desires

Méré's consciousness of the continuum between homosociality and male homosexual desire is most explicit in a letter from his published correspondence (Letter 195) that is all the more fascinating because it illustrates how male homosociality, heterosociality, and heterosexual desire all contribute to *honnêteté* and, further, how Méré's *theoretical* preference for *heterosociality* can be reconciled with his *illustrations* of male *homosociality*. Writing to an unidentified woman, Méré begins with a historical litany of "extraordinary events . . . that have been observed concerning love" including a "great lord" who tires of women and pursues only men; a Roman empress who desires only whipped and beaten slaves and gladiators; Henri II, who falls in love with his father's mistress, Mme de Valentinois; a prince who murders the woman he loves above all others; and Seleucus, who divorces his wife so that his son-in-law can marry her. But most of the letter is devoted to an anecdote whose veracity Méré guarantees by what may be a self-reference ("a quite unusual adventure to which I can attest as if I had had it myself" [*L*, 676.]). He then tells of a husband and wife whom he knew well. Each was remarkable, but not without faults. The wife was as appealing for her physical appearance as she was for her mind, yet she was overly severe and reserved.<sup>56</sup> The husband was even more attractive than his wife, in fact, more perfect and captivating than anything painted by Apelles or Mignard, says Méré. Endowed as well with a keen mind, he had but two failings: "His constitution

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seemed to be too delicate, and . . . he captivated certain men more than a man should wish to" (*L*, 677). In addition to the wife's severe reserve and the husband's "constitution," the couple had been married so young, explains Méré, "they had become accustomed to giving each other nothing more than children's hugs" (*L*, 677).

The anecdote then turns to the remedy the couple finds for their individual failings and their inability to consummate their marriage, which is nothing other than a *ménage à trois*. The husband had a close friend from whom he kept no secrets and was rarely separated (*L*, 678) and for whom the wife developed a "tendre inclination" she was unable to extinguish. When the husband noticed this state of affairs, he approached his friend, who in turn acknowledged his feelings for the wife and proposed to cut off contact with both of them. But the husband immediately rebuffed this suggestion and instead declared his devotion to his friend: "Could you live without me? I swear to you on our friendship that I would abandon Helen and Cleopatra to follow you to the end of the world" (*L*, 679). He then offered to share his wife with his friend, an offer that both his friend and his wife eventually accepted. In the end, declares Méré, "It would be very difficult to conceive the extent of the happiness they had achieved" (*L*, 681). Happiness, indeed: the wife overcame her severity and her reserve, and the friend retained his friendship with the husband all the while pursuing his feelings for the wife. What the husband derived from this arrangement is explained in particular detail. When he initially made his offer to the friend, he disclosed that he could only desire his wife by conjuring up the image of his friend and his wife together: "I assure you as well that I only have pleasure with her by imagining that you hold her in your arms and that without this sweet and alluring sort of rivalry I would not be moved by her any more than by a beautiful statue. I want, I implore you to consent that all will be common among the three of us" (*L*, 680). By imaging his friend as rival—by using his friend's desire for his wife as proxy—the husband in turn is able to "enjoy" (*avoir plaisir avec*) his wife.

At first glance, the threesome described in this letter seems to resolve the ambivalence between heterosociality and homosociality in Méré's other writings. Heterosocial, heterosexual, homosocial, and homosexual desires are all affirmed, and they all lead to the happiness that is the ultimate goal of *honnêteté*. After settling on their arrangement, concludes Méré, "to the utmost of their felicity . . . never have three persons enjoyed more enticing conversation and all of their pleasures were filled with wit" (*L*, 681–82). He further explains that, to endure, this happiness requires not only physical expression but also the "wit" and "refined manner" of *honnêteté*:



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It is true that if the person one loves is but a well-formed idol, the deepest happiness of love begins more pleasurably than it ends. . . .  
But when the graces of wit and a refined manner accompany a beautiful body, love never displeases. A pleasure that passes away is followed by another pleasure, and the more we interact with people who captivate us in this way the more we love them. (*L*, 682)

In this concluding commentary, Méré seems intent on making the point that physical love alone is ephemeral. And yet the example of the husband proves quite the reverse. Possessing an “exquisite mind” (*esprit fin*), he is unable to love his wife physically and, thus, experience lasting pleasure without the mediation of his friend. Thereafter, all three partake of the unrepresentable happiness to which Méré alludes. In the end, such happiness is made possible at once by heterosocial *and* heterosexual desire, and at the same time it subsumes the homosocial desire of the two men and the homosexual desire of at least the husband. However, while the heterosexual takes precedence over the homosexual, it does not negate it (as the ambiguous “that all will be common among the three of us” seems to suggest). Rather, it is necessary so that the heterosocial/heterosexual can emerge and be maintained as such. The happiness of this ménage à trois is rooted first of all in male-male desire and then by extrapolation and projection in male-female desire.

In a broader sense, the solution that allows the husband to desire both his friend *and* his wife foregrounds the wider function of homosocial desire within *honnêteté*. Sedgwick has noted that the exchange of women among men involves considerable risks, and that for a man “success in making this transaction requires a willingness and ability to temporarily risk, or assume, a feminized status. Only the man who can proceed through that stage, *while* remaining in cognitive control of the symbolic system that presides over sexual exchange, will be successful in achieving a relation of mastery to other men.”<sup>57</sup> Seen in this light, the instances of male homosociality throughout Méré’s writings would seem to counteract the risk of being “feminized” or “objectified.” Not only do they establish men’s control of the traffic in women as sexual property and as aesthetic value, these examples also involve men defining or living out that key component of *honnêteté*, a “relation of mastery” to other *honnêtes gens*. Indeed, in several of Méré’s anecdotes (such as the one about Pascal), the exchange of women is circumvented altogether. Amongst themselves, men seemingly reproduce the heterosocial dynamic necessary for the blossoming of *honnêteté*. They are able to exchange those prized “feminine” attributes without the intervention of actual women. With

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or without them, men's quest for honnêteté necessitates a desire to possess those qualities of the "female principle" as they are embodied and enacted by other men.

Still, in Letter 195, the husband's erotic desire for his friend (who is described as being "very much an honnête homme" [*L*, 678.]) is not straightforward and illustrates an exceptional version of the emulation that is imperative for all men in honnêteté. In one sense, Méré envisions an honnêteté that genuinely relies on both heterosociality and homosociality and that seems to put male-female and male-male relations on a equal footing. In another sense, though, the homosocial and the homosexual exist on an uninterrupted progression of influences and desires that reinvigorate and recast the social position of the honnête heterosexual male. It is as if Méré dares to imagine something beyond the masculinist and heterosexist logic of honnête masculinity, but without being able to renounce this logic.

#### THE *je ne sais quoi*

"To become an honnête homme, one can never follow the best models too closely" (*OC*, 3:75), says Méré at the outset of his "Discours de la vraie Honnêteté." But even the "best models" are imperfect in one way or another, as Méré repeatedly and insistently shows. Whatever his model or counter-model, the honnête homme must maintain the distinction between self and other. Thus, it is not difficult to see why Méré resorts to the theatrical metaphor to explain the frame of mind required of the honnête homme. "I am persuaded that in many situations it is useful to consider what one does as a play and to imagine that one is acting a role on stage" (*OC*, 3:158), he says. Taking the theatrical illusion to the next level (by *imagining* that he is an actor), the honnête homme negotiates between his authentic being and his social persona, thus isolating him from the emotional minefields of social exchange.<sup>58</sup> "This thought prevents one from taking things too seriously and, further, affords a freedom of language and actions that one does not have when troubled by fear and anxiety. What I like even more about it is that one is hardly debased at all by disgrace and one is not inflated too much by prosperity" (*OC*, 3:158). Acting on the stage of the world, the honnête homme achieves that goal of classical philosophy, the moderation of the passions, which in turn guarantees his lasting happiness. But this goal ultimately reveals just how little the honnête homme resembles the dramatic actor. Whereas the latter only needs skill (*adresse*), the honnête homme must apply

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both his heart and his mind because “acting in society (*l’action du monde*) always has some true feeling about it and is not a vain appearance like acting on stage” (*OC*, 3:158). No matter how much he distances himself from the roles he plays, then, he cannot help but identify with them. He plays his part with his heart and his mind, and at the same time he keeps an actor’s distance from himself all the better to *be* the role he *plays*.

As if this difficulty were not sufficient, Méré adds yet another. For, the honnête homme, unlike the dramatic actor, must be able to play any role whatsoever. “One sees that actors who are good at certain roles do not succeed at others . . . but the character of an honnête homme encompasses everything. He must transform himself with the agility of his genius as the occasion demands” (*OC*, 3:157). Adaptable to seemingly any situation, the honnête homme is an inimitable actor. Not only must he be able to be self and other at the same time, he must also transform himself at will, as the situation warrants. Méré concedes that this ability is rare: “It is a very rare talent to be a good actor in life. One must have much intelligence and precision to find perfection” (*OC*, 3:157). But this perfection demands something other than the skill acquired by learning and practice. It demands an elusive quality that is unexplainable, ineffable, and quasi-magical.

To confront the difficulties of being a “good actor in life,” the honnête homme must ultimately seek refuge in the quality that goes to the heart of who he is and what he does—the *je ne sais quoi*. The very essence of what honnêteté represents, the *je ne sais quoi* is, in Méré’s words “something inexplicable that is recognized better by seeing it practiced than by explaining it.” It is impossible to capture in words; yet those who see it and those who feel it are convinced of its presence. They *are* so convinced because this quality is “a certain something noble (*je ne sçai quoi de noble*) that enhances all good qualities and that comes only from the heart and the mind. The rest is but its escort and baggage” (*OC*, 1:77). It is, in other words, the quality that assures one will always be captivating. With it, everything else falls into place.<sup>59</sup> But unlike descriptions of the *je ne sais quoi* as a force of nature or a stroke of passion in philosophical discourse, Méré’s usage is a means for a social elite to preserve its hold on distinction and exclude those it deems unworthy of inclusion within its ranks, as Richard Scholar has shown. A “collective fabrication,” the *je ne sais quoi* as Méré evokes it is an “artificial sign of quality” for the *honnête gens*.<sup>60</sup> And in the end, it is a “subtle artifact” rather than “a truly inexplicable occult quality.”<sup>61</sup>

Even so, the appeal to the *je ne sais quoi* complicates Méré’s attempts to codify honnêteté because the *je ne sais quoi* enables the honnête homme to be-

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come so exceptional and so superlative that he paradoxically gains license to transgress, if not redefine the mean as it is commonly perceived. Such is the case in a brief anecdote about the Duke of Buckingham that concludes the "Discours de la conversation" (Discourse on Conversation). On a visit to the French court in 1625, Buckingham attended a ball where "one could hardly imagine a more beautiful and scintillating gathering" and where "there wasn't a single outfit that wasn't fashionable" (*OC*, 2:131). Pushing the envelope of diplomatic protocol, Buckingham appeared "in a Persian outfit with a velours hat completely covered with feathers and jewels, and breeches so tight fitting that they showed not only the whole outline of his legs, which were handsome, but also far above his knees" (*OC*, 2:131–32). Greeted at first with ridicule, the duke succeeded in playing his part and dancing "so elegantly" (*de si bon air*) that mockery quickly gave way to admiration and, as Méré observes, "with his bizarre and astonishing attire he outshone (*effaça*) the French fashion and those who were most galant at court" (*OC*, 2:132). Buckingham's fashion statement triumphed in spite of its audacity (Méré qualifies it as "extremely bold and risky").

Beyond the malleability of the *je ne sais quoi*, Buckingham's example demonstrates the ambiguity between the corporeal and the noncorporeal within honnête masculinity. The duke wins over the French court because of his intangible *bon air*; but at the same time his performance highlights his own body, and tellingly "not only the outline of his legs . . . but also far above his knees." If his *bon air* is primarily a noncorporeal quality, it nonetheless complements and accentuates his male body. Similarly, in Méré's theory of honnêteté, the inexplicable *je ne sais quoi* ensures that the honnête homme either achieves or redefines the golden mean, something the male body alone cannot do. But since men are presumed to have an advantage over all others in honnêteté, the *je ne sais quoi* attempts to attribute a transcendent meaning to their corporeality. The honnête homme's sublime ability to achieve the mean betrays—even as it attempts to remedy—the limits of biological sex. Hegemonic masculinity can never simply appeal to the body but must always employ ideology in order to justify its domination. Or, as Jeffrey Peters has written in an analysis of Boileau's *Art poétique*: "Men are men not because their semiotic design corresponds to a natural essence, but because they artfully—sublimely—are that essence."<sup>62</sup>

In spite of all the writings Méré the *maître* leaves us, in spite of all the rules and maxims he formulates, the essential quality of honnêteté could not be captured in language or rational thought. It was always shifting as the *honnêtes gens* closed ranks to ensure they remained a select few. As a result, the

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necessarily fluid *je ne sais quoi* left the honnête homme with no sure footing, neither among his models nor his countermodels, neither in heterosociality nor in homosociality, neither in the body nor the intangible *bon air*. The honnête homme, like all those in a position of domination, had to submit to the constraints of that position—he had to be dominated by his own domination. Aspiring to the “certain something” that is honnêteté, he had no choice but to strive for what amounted to a ruse, with no certain outcome. Buckingham may have succeeded in the end, but the court’s initial mockery could just as easily have been confirmed as transformed. The ability to define and embody a collective sense of the *je ne sais quoi* was as unexpected for Buckingham as it was rare for the honnête homme. No matter how much he tried to stand apart from and above his Others, the honnête homme had no lasting assurance that his grasp of the *je ne sais quoi* would translate into masculine domination. And he had no guarantee that he would not, in the end, become indistinguishable from his Others.