Anne-Thérèse de Lambert on Aging and Self-Esteem

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This article studies Madame de Lambert’s early eighteenth-century views on aging, and especially the aging of women, by contextualizing them in a twofold way: (1) It understands them as a response to La Rochefoucauld’s scepticism concerning aging, women, and the aging of women. (2) It understands them as being closely connected to a long series of scattered remarks concerning esteem, self-esteem, and *honnêteté* in Lambert’s moral essays. While La Rochefoucauld describes aging as a decline of intellectual, emotional and physical powers and is suspicious of the mechanisms of esteem and self-esteem, Lambert develops a view of aging as offering the chance to become more independent from the judgment of others, especially the chance for women to become more independent from the judgment of men. As she argues, aging offers women the possibility to cultivate genuinely estimable intellectual and emotional qualities that attract the justified esteem essential for a stable friendship, as well as the opportunity to develop a form of self-esteem that is based on respect for one’s own capacities of judgment.

Sometime during the early modern period, a change in the attitude toward aging took place. Generally, this change could be described as a shift from seeing old age as a time of wisdom and collected experience to seeing old age as a time of decay not only of physical but also of mental and emotional powers. While this development certainly was complex and extended over a long period, one crucial moment could be seen in rejection of Stoic ethics in François de La Rochefoucauld’s *Maxims* (1664). It is a crucial moment because, of all philosophical traditions in the West, and still highly influential in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe, Stoic moral philosophy perhaps held the highest view of the moral value of old age. Unsurprisingly, La Rochefoucauld’s attempt at unmasking Stoicism as hiding deep despair behind a mask of serene tranquillity—emblematically expressed in the frontispiece of the first three editions of his *Maxims*[[1]](#endnote-1)—came with an extremely negative view of the nature of old age. Since this view strongly resonates with negative views on aging prevalent in the present-day Western world, the question of how La Rochefoucauld’s devaluation of aging could be countered is of persisting interest.

La Rochefoucauld’s pessimism about aging was not universally shared at the turn from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. An example of a more optimistic portrayal of aging can be found in one of the moral essays by Anne-Thérèse de Marguenat de Courcelles, Marquise de Lambert (1647-1733).[[2]](#endnote-2) Lambert’s essay on aging was published posthumously in 1747 but probably dates back to the first decade of the eighteenth century when Lambert was at the centre of a *salon* frequented by luminaries such as Fontenelle, Montesquieu, Saint-Evremont and Marivaux. Lambert’s *salon* is about as famous and well-researched as d’Holbach’s *côterie*.[[3]](#endnote-3) However, I will not discuss here her personal relations with the members with her contemporaries; rather, I will use a comparison with a thinker of the generation before her, who is part of her more remote intellectual context—La Rochefoucauld (1613-1680)—to bring out what is distinctive about her views on aging. In contrast to Lambert’s relation to other thinkers such as Pierre Nicole and Nicolas Malebranche,[[4]](#endnote-4) her relation to La Rochefoucauld has never been discussed in detail. This will be the task of the present paper.

Recently, Lambert’s essay on aging has come to light as the topic of a chapter in Joan Hinde Stewart’s study of gender and aging in early modern France.[[5]](#endnote-5) Stewart has outlined some central aspects of Lambert’s essay, such as the idea that what offers consolation in old age is virtuous life,[[6]](#endnote-6) the practice of religion and the Christian ideal of resignation.[[7]](#endnote-7) She also emphasizes the gendered and biographic aspects of Lambert’s treatment of aging. As she puts it, Lambert “understands that a woman’s youth and middle age are related to the quality of her final years.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Also, Stewart notes that Lambert mentions La Rochefoucauld occasionally,[[9]](#endnote-9) and that Lambert takes up La Rochefoucauld’s insight that we arrive at each age of our life insufficiently prepared.[[10]](#endnote-10) Stewart briefly describes Lambert’s use of this thought as being “inspired by La Rochefoucauld but transposed to the feminine.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

How can the relevant transposition to the feminine be characterized? The answer presumably will have to be complex since Lambert touches upon other issues that are prominent in La Rochefoucauld, such as the role of esteem and self-esteem in human life and the distinction between *honnête hommes* and *honnête femmes*. Moreover, her treatment of these issues diverges substantially from his views, partly because she defends Stoic intuitions concerning moral self-perfection and character traits that give raise to a natural right of being esteemed, thereby suggesting that her attitude to La Rochefoucauld’s remarks on aging involve more than merely a transformation into a gendered context. I will begin with Lambert’s and La Rochefoucauld’s respective views on the workings of esteem and self-esteem, then examine their respective views on the ambiguous concept of *honnêteté* that could plausibly figure in an explication of the nature of justified esteem and self-esteem, and finally explore the relevance of these issues for their diverging views on aging.

Complaisance, Esteem and Self-Esteem

In her moral essays, Lambert says a number of quite conventionally-sounding things about the necessity of securing esteem through complaisant behaviour. For instance, she admonishes her son that “with regard to those on whom you depend, the first merit is to please.”[[12]](#endnote-12) The relevant sense of “merit” is explicated in the economic metaphor of “price”: “In subordinate employments, one maintains one’s position only by knowing how to please; as soon as one neglects oneself, one is of a very low price.”[[13]](#endnote-13) This remark indicates that there is a mutual dependence between being esteemed and having self-esteem: Self-esteem is a condition for being esteemed, and the desire for being esteemed is a strong motivation for upholding self-esteem. Lambert’s recommendations concerning complaisance thus express an insight into the role of esteem and self-esteem for becoming a member of society.

This topic is further developed in her remarks about politeness. She understands politeness not just as an observation of external forms but also as a way of expressing esteem: “True politeness is modest and, since it seeks to please, it knows that the means to be successful in this are to make felt that one does not prefer oneself to others, and that one gives them the first rank in our esteem.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Explicating the sense in which politeness seeks to please others, she notes: “[Politeness] makes their good qualities be valued; it lets them feel that it recognises their superiority: When you know how to elevate them, they will let you be valued in turn; they will give you the place that you are ready to cede to them; this is the interest of their self-love.”[[15]](#endnote-15) This passage articulates some empirical observations concerning the workings of esteem that are cast in quasi-economic terms: (1) the result of the actions described is characterized in terms of being valued; (2) what takes place is a kind of exchange in the sense that one person does something that is favourable for the esteem of another person, and that this course of action is reciprocated; (3) the reciprocation does not take place out of gratitude but rather out of rational self-interest of the person who reciprocates; (4) if this result has been calculated by the first person, also the politeness of the first person can be regarded as pursuing rational self-interest, in two ways: both by avoiding the resentment caused by expressing an overly high self-esteem, and by profiting from what others are doing to enhance the esteem in which we are held.

Still there is something puzzling about Lambert’s remarks about politeness and esteem, since in La Rochefoucauld the everyday workings of esteem and self-esteem have come under severe attack. No-one could seriously write about these matters at the turn from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century without at least implicitly taking La Rochefoucauld’s scepticism into consideration. Lambert clearly had his scepticism in mind because she quotes, approvingly, one of his observations in this field, namely, that what others find ridiculous is often experienced to be much more dishonouring than what they find immoral.[[16]](#endnote-16) Lambert also explicates what is disturbing about this observation: Standards of what is ridiculous are entirely arbitrary.[[17]](#endnote-17) By implication, if the economy of esteem induces us to want more strongly to avoid appearing ridiculous than to avoid appearing immoral, it is highly questionable whether the desire for being esteemed even under normal circumstances is a strong motivation for virtuous action.

La Rochefoucauld’s *Maxims* are interspersed with a long series of remarks concerning distorted mechanisms of esteem and self-esteem, and it will be useful to recall some of them here. Some of the distortions that he diagnoses have to do with the self-image that most people cultivate. For instance, he suggests that pride is equal in everyone[[18]](#endnote-18) (hence, since presumably not everyone has achievement that justify being proud of to the same degree, most people suffer from an inflated self-image). As he notes, one cannot plausibly complain about being deceived by others because one is often satisfied with self-deception.[[19]](#endnote-19) This is also why he takes disillusioning others about their merit to be a bad service.[[20]](#endnote-20) Some other distortions that he sees have to do with how we seek to obtain esteem from others. As he points out, our desire for esteem leads us to manipulative strategies: For instance, in order to become established, one does everything to appear to be established.[[21]](#endnote-21) Similarly, he remarks that the price that we put upon ourselves causes the deference of others much more efficiently than family ties or merit (thereby suggesting that it is exactly an inflated self-image that secures the esteem of others).[[22]](#endnote-22) A further kind of distortion has to do with the question of whether expressions of esteem can be taken at face value. La Rochefoucauld has doubts. For instance, he takes esteem for the merit of our friends to be proportional to the satisfaction that they give us.[[23]](#endnote-23) Likewise, he observes that we usually praise wholeheartedly only those who admire us.[[24]](#endnote-24) What is more, he notes that expressing esteem for others often expresses only esteem for our own sentiments[[25]](#endnote-25) and for our own equity and discernment.[[26]](#endnote-26) Also, approval of newcomers is often an expression of envying those who are established.[[27]](#endnote-27)

This is certainly a gloomy view of the role of esteem and self-esteem in human life, but it will be easy enough to think of particular examples where La Rochefoucauld’s diagnoses fit in a striking way. Lambert shares much of his sceptical outlook concerning the mechanisms of esteem. A series of her remarks emphasizes things that go wrong with the economy of esteem. One problem concerns the kind of glory that the powerful seek: “They invest everything in external signs, and in splendour. Their dignity weighs heavy on others and humiliates them …”[[28]](#endnote-28) Another problem concerns the inability of powerful positions to generate genuine esteem: “Titles and positions of dignity are not the bonds that unite us to humans, nor what attracts them to us … One only seeks to recompense oneself for the reverence that one is forced to pay to their position …”[[29]](#endnote-29) A further problem concerns the high degree of dependence that the striving for reputation brings with it: “When one aspires to make a great reputation for oneself, one always depends on the opinion of others. It is difficult to attain honors through services, if fashions and friends don’t render them of value.”[[30]](#endnote-30)

Like La Rochefoucauld, Lambert is thus evidently aware of some of the pitfalls of the economy of esteem. Moreover, she takes up (almost verbatim, but without acknowledgement) a thought from La Rochefoucauld when she remarks that merit is the basis of esteem from *gens honnêtes*, while luck is the basis of public esteem.[[31]](#endnote-31) However, unlike La Rochefoucauld, Lambert goes on to argue that esteem is bound to the usefulness of virtue for others: “Because merit turns out to be profitable, they ascribe it to us, not as merit, but as something that is useful for them …”[[32]](#endnote-32) Such a view of estimable personal qualities clearly diverges from La Rochefoucauld’s analysis of virtue as mixtures of vices that cancel out mutually their negative effects.[[33]](#endnote-33) Lambert develops her virtue-based conception of esteem further in her essay on the difference between reputation (*réputation*) and esteem (*considération*). In her view, one acquires a reputation with those who do not know one at a personal level, and usually it is triggered by spectacular actions, almost never by virtuous actions.[[34]](#endnote-34) Such spectacular actions inspire more envy than admiration; and even admiration “is a violent state of mind for most humans and only demands to end.”[[35]](#endnote-35) By contrast, she points out that some personal qualities have effects on others that give rise to sentiments such as admiration or friendship.[[36]](#endnote-36) This is why she holds that only personal merit can give rise to what she calls “esteem of sentiment.”[[37]](#endnote-37) This kind of esteem leads to an enjoyment that is more intensively sensed and more frequently repeated than reputation.[[38]](#endnote-38) From these considerations derives a clear-cut answer to the question of why we should be motivated to prefer esteem over reputation: “personal esteem provides more agreeable experiences to us than birth, riches, even high positions without merit. Nothing is, at the end of the day, as sad as a great lord without virtues, laden with signs of honour and respect, and to whom one makes it felt at every moment that one owes these only to his high standing and nothing to his person.”[[39]](#endnote-39) Thus, while virtue-based esteem is a source of positive experiences because it expresses what others really feel, expression of respect paid to reputation cannot function in this way because it is disconnected from attitudes towards personal qualities.

Lambert’s distinction between reputation and esteem also sheds light on her remarks concerning complaisance. Certainly, she is a realist as to the condition under which careers are made. Still, she is aware of the limited function of the conventional demands of expressing esteem, when she advises her son: “One owes respect to persons of elevated standing; but this is only external respect: one owes esteem and a respect of sentiment to merit … [I]t should not happen that the brilliance of great positions throws you into illusion.”[[40]](#endnote-40) As Lambert explains, the objective of distinguishing external signs of respect from genuinely felt esteem consists in the need to uphold one’s own personal dignity[[41]](#endnote-41)—a concept very different from the status-oriented concept of dignity that occurs in other places in her writings. While she takes such external signs of respect to be indispensable for establishing a position in society, she also takes it to be a self-related duty to avoid illusions concerning the personal qualities of those in high positions. Clearly, however, to validate her distinction between external respect and felt esteem some explication of the nature of estimable qualities needs to be offered.

Esteem and *Honnêteté*

Lambert tackles this task by distinguishing between estimable qualities and agreeable qualities. “Estimable qualities are real and intrinsic to things; and, by the laws of justice, have a natural right to our esteem.”[[42]](#endnote-42) By contrast, qualities that are only agreeable derive from the disposition of our organs and our imagination and are therefore changeable without a change in their object.[[43]](#endnote-43) Of course, speaking of a natural right to something gestured toward the natural law tradition where a right to esteem in fact played a prominent role. However, Lambert is also explicit that her intention is not to write a dissertation,[[44]](#endnote-44) so one would look in vain for an orderly treatment of her attitude toward natural law. Still, as in the natural law tradition, the qualities that give rise to a right to esteem are qualities that, in some sense to be explicated, are naturally good. If one gathers together the scattered hints that Lambert makes about *honnêteté*, she seems to have had a quite substantial conception of these qualities in mind.

Before going into the details of Lambert’s views, recalling some aspects of La Rochefoucauld’s treatment of *honnêteté* will be useful. As La Rochefoucauld notes, one usually gets rewards for the appearance of merit rather than for merit itself.[[45]](#endnote-45) In his view, the wrong *honnêtes gens* are those who disguise their faults to others and to themselves while the true *honnêtes gens* are those who exactly know their faults and admit them.[[46]](#endnote-46) In the sense of not entertaining illusions concerning his own faults, the true *honnête homme* is not conceited.[[47]](#endnote-47) This is why La Rochefoucauld takes it to be a mark of the true *honnête homme* that he wants always to be exposed to the look of *honnêtes gens*.[[48]](#endnote-48) Knowing one’s faults by itself of course does not yet constitute virtue, and accordingly La Rochefoucauld notes that there are persons who find recognition in society, whose whole merit consists in vices that serve in the business of life.[[49]](#endnote-49) In this sense, La Rochefoucauld leans much more toward the side of what Magendie has called the “gallant conception” (*conception mondaine*) of *honnêteté*, in contrast to what Magendie has called the “bourgeois conception.” To put it in a nutshell, the gallant conception is concerned with how to communicate successfully in court society, while the bourgeois conception is concerned with moral virtues, especially virtues connected with family life.[[50]](#endnote-50)

Also with respect to female *honnêteté*, Le Rochefoucauld sheds doubt on its moral nature. As he remarks, the *honnêteté* of women is often the love of their reputation and of their repose.[[51]](#endnote-51) Even worse, he reduces the virtue of women (as well as the braveness of men) to vanity, shame and physiological constitution.[[52]](#endnote-52) Instead of moral qualities, he regards coquetry as a basic characteristic of women, which in some women only is controlled by reason or fear.[[53]](#endnote-53) At the same time, he does not expect much from the rational capacities of women since he believes that the minds of most women serve to fortify their craziness rather than their reason.[[54]](#endnote-54) He also surmises that, in contrast to *honnêtes hommes* who at least know their faults, women suffer from a lack of self-knowledge because they do not know the whole extent of their coquetry.[[55]](#endnote-55) At the same time, he does not regard the life of *honnêtes femmes* to be pleasurable: As he suggests, there are few *honnêtes femmes* who are not tired of their way of living.[[56]](#endnote-56)

Seen from the perspective of La Rochefoucauld’s suspicions, the concept of *honnêteté* seems to be most unpromising to explicate the notion of intrinsically estimable qualities. This is why it is interesting to see that Lambert’s conception of *honnêteté* diverges markedly from La Rochefoucauld’s. Her treatment of *honnêteté* does not reduce to what Katherine Hamerton in her study of Lambert’s response to Malebranche’s theory of imagination characterizes as “the seventeenth-century French discourse and set of practices revolving around refined aristocratic politeness, pleasing social performance and apparently effortless good taste.”[[57]](#endnote-57) Christophe Losfeld goes beyond this characterization by pointing out that Lambert associates with *honnêteté* also Christian character traits such as the acceptance of Divine order and acts of charity for the poor.[[58]](#endnote-58) Yet, Lambert’s conception of *honnêteté* is even richer and comprises a range of substantial virtues. As she maintains, *honnêteté* “consists in stepping back from one’s own rights and in respecting the rights of others.”[[59]](#endnote-59) Moreover, as she describes it, *honnêteté* is connected with virtues, such as refraining from revenge[[60]](#endnote-60) and fulfilling the laws of humanity.[[61]](#endnote-61) For instance, she takes extreme differences of social standing to be contrary to the laws of humanity: “In an empire where reason would reign, everything would be equal, and one will give distinctions only to virtue.”[[62]](#endnote-62) Also, Lambert understands *honnêteté* as an antidote against the natural love of domination.[[63]](#endnote-63) In addition, *honnêteté* has esteem-related aspects: “[T]he honest person praises on the right occasion; it is someone who experiences more pleasure in rendering justice than in augmenting his reputation by diminishing that of others.”[[64]](#endnote-64) This is why the duty of avoiding rash judgments and of applying equity and justice in judgements concerning reputation is described as an aspect of *honnêteté*.[[65]](#endnote-65) Fulfilling the duties of judgmental justice also involves developing a reflective attitude toward one’s own self-esteem; this is why *honnêteté* demands reflection upon one’s own weaknesses.[[66]](#endnote-66) And generally, she connects *honnêteté* with the demands of justice:

Self-love is a preference of oneself over others, *honnêteté* is a preference of others over oneself. One distinguishes two kinds of self-love: one natural, legitimate, and regulated by justice and reason; the other vicious and corrupted. We are our first object; and we arrive at justice only through reflection … To love oneself as one should, is to love virtue …[[67]](#endnote-67)

Now it should become clear why Lambert believes that *honnêteté* characterizes intrinsic qualities that “by the laws of justice, have a natural right to our esteem.” They are intrinsic qualities that respect the rights of others—not only the rights deriving from positive law but also the rights the follow from the demands of reason (a characterization of natural rights that goes back to Cicero[[68]](#endnote-68) and is common in the early modern natural law tradition)—and express a readiness to do justice to others—not only in the legal sense but also in the sense of judgmental justice as to matters of esteem (again, a prominent topic in early modern natural law theory[[69]](#endnote-69)). This is how her conception of *honnêteté* explicates the sense in which esteem is bound to what is useful to others: The virtues connected with *honnêteté* are esteemed not because they are meritorious but rather because they respect the fundamental needs of others—their rights and their desire for being esteemed. They give rise to a natural right to esteem because they exemplify a kind of natural goodness—goodness that consists in respecting needs that are natural for humans.

The conception of virtue-based esteem also explains why Lambert is far from rejecting the desire to be esteemed as a valuable motivation for moral action: “[O]ne should not reject the sentiment of fame; it is the most certain help that we have for virtue; but the question is to choose the good kind of fame.”[[70]](#endnote-70) On the contrary, only the personal qualities that give rise to genuine esteem can function as a bond of society: “Only the qualities of the heart enter into commerce: the mind does not bind us to others.”[[71]](#endnote-71) She also offers an explanation for this view: “One is estimable only through the heart and one is happy only through the heart because our happiness depends only on the way of sensing.”[[72]](#endnote-72) Those who disregard this insight act, without realizing it, against their own rational self-interest, in two respects: First, they disregard their interest in true friendship: “It is an effect of the disorder of humans to become blind to their true interests. Wisdom and truth, by enlightening us, make our self-love more able and teach us that it is in our true interest to attach ourselves to virtue and that virtue brings with itself the sweet pleasures of friendship.”[[73]](#endnote-73) And second, they disregard their interest in a good relation to themselves: “The foundation of happiness lies in the peace of the soul, and in the secret testimony of conscience. By the word ‘conscience’, I understand this inner sentiment of a fine honour that assures you that you have nothing to reproach yourself about.” [[74]](#endnote-74)

What Lambert has in mind, though, is certainly not a retreat into a purely private world of moral sentiments. To be sure, she is highly critical of an education that reduces to teaching the techniques of complaisance: “Nothing is … as badly understood as the education that one gives to young persons. One destines them to please; one gives them lessons only in how to be agreeable; one fortifies their self-love …”[[75]](#endnote-75) But she is realistic enough to see that being virtuous is not possible without the desire to be esteemed: “You owe to yourself the testimony that you are an honourable person. Nevertheless, one must not abandon public approbation since from the contempt of reputation arises the contempt of virtue.”[[76]](#endnote-76) This is why she recommends a combination of virtue and complaisance: “Graces without merit do not please for a long time, and merit without graces can make itself esteemed without touching; it is therefore required that women have an amiable merit, that they join graces to virtues.”[[77]](#endnote-77) And, as she explicates, the relevant sense of virtue involves the moral aspects of *honnêteté*, while the relevant sense of grace involves emotions and sentiments without which esteem of sentiment could not create social bonds: “An *honnête femme* has the virtues of men, friendship, probity, fidelity to one’s duties; an amiable woman must not only have exterior graces but also not abandon the graces of the heart and the sentiment.”[[78]](#endnote-78) Interestingly, Lambert contrasts this character ideal with the figure of a coquette.[[79]](#endnote-79) Although she acknowledges that it is most difficult to overcome the role model of being a coquette, her considerations concerning *honnêteté* and the role of sentiment in approving intrinsically estimable qualities indicates the outlines of a female role model that is a genuine alternative to a life style focused on external attractiveness.

Aging, Self-Esteem and Self-Respect

Obviously, Lambert’s considerations concerning esteem, self-esteem and *honnêteté* can be applied to earlier periods of life, and in fact she makes extensive use of them in the advice that she gives to her son and to her daughter. Still, these considerations have a particular relevance for her treatment of old age. Again, the contrast with La Rochefoucauld will help to make clear what is distinctive about her views. According to La Rochefoucauld, in aging, one gets crazier and wiser.[[80]](#endnote-80) This is why he takes old fools to be more foolish than young fools.[[81]](#endnote-81) In particular, this holds for intellectual powers. As he puts it, the faults of the mind augment with aging as do the wrinkles of the face.[[82]](#endnote-82) Moreover, he believes that they do so in a predictable way, since the first approach of old age exhibits where the body and the mind will fail.[[83]](#endnote-83) Something analogous holds for emotional powers. For instance, he believes that getting more vivacious in old age is close to craziness.[[84]](#endnote-84) Likewise, he believes that the passions of youth are not less detrimental for well-being than the insensitivity of old age.[[85]](#endnote-85) Generally, he believes that old age prohibits all pleasures[[86]](#endnote-86) and that, in the old age of love and life, one lives only for suffering.[[87]](#endnote-87) What is worse, old people are vulnerable to appearing ridiculous (the greatest danger for the esteem in which they are held) simply by forgetting that they are no longer lovable.[[88]](#endnote-88) La Rochefoucauld wraps up these considerations in the insight that few people know how to be old.[[89]](#endnote-89)

La Rochefoucauld’s remarks are not just the result of observing the phenomena of aging but that they also are connected with his sceptical treatment of esteem and self-esteem. His conception of virtue as a lucky mixture of mutually inhibiting vices sheds doubt on the idea that there are any personal qualities that are estimable for moral reasons. This is why he also doubts that, in old age, one finds any sincere commitment to morality. For instance, he surmises that old men would like to give bad examples if they only could.[[90]](#endnote-90) Likewise, in line with his thought that there is rarely a genuinely moral aspect to female *honnêteté*, he assumes that there are few women whose merit persists longer than their beauty.[[91]](#endnote-91) And in line with his thought that coquetry is the basic character trait of women, he does not expect that friendship could offer anything to aging women since he conjectures that women find friendship boring after having known the pleasures of love.[[92]](#endnote-92) Hence, his insistence on old age as a time of intellectual and emotional decay can be seen as a result of his scepticism concerning the idea that self-cultivation could produce genuinely estimable personal qualities.

Lambert is certainly not blind to the problems that aging brings with it:

Everyone fears old age; one regards it as an age exposed to pain and sorrow, where all pleasures disappear. Each of us is losing by advancing in age, and women more than men. Since all their merit consists in externally agreeable features, and since time destroys those, they find themselves absolutely destitute; for there are few women whose merit endures longer than their beauty.[[93]](#endnote-93)

This passage ends with an unacknowledged borrowing from La Rochefoucauld; likewise, the following passage begins with another such borrowing: “We arrive at each age of life without knowing how to behave nor how to enjoy it; when it is over, we see the use we could have made of it; but since regrets are useless if they do not serve to improve ourselves, let us see how we can take profit of the time that remains for us.”[[94]](#endnote-94) However, as to the first borrowing, Lambert clearly articulates a conception of merit that is not her own. This should be obvious if one compares the conception of merit in the sense of what is externally agreeable with the moral aspects of her conception of *honnêteté*. As to the second borrowing, Lambert’s remark follows a remark on the role that education plays for women:

As to women, in all ages one abandons them to themselves; one neglects their education in their youth; later in life, one deprives them of the support and foundation for old age; also, most women live without attention and without returning to themselves; in youth, they are vain and distracted; and in old age, they are weak and deserted.[[95]](#endnote-95)

Therefore, in Lambert, being unprepared for old age is not, as in La Rochefoucauld, seen as an insight into unchangeable facts concerning the human condition; rather, it is a specifically gendered insight into the outcome of distorted educational practices. Also, Lambert adds to her borrowing from La Rochefoucauld something that is entirely absent from the *Maxims*: the advice to use the remaining time well—a clear indication that she takes it to be possible for women to respond to some of the problems of old age.

This is exactly the project that Lambert pursues, although at first the project is presented in rather defensive terms: “I help myself with my reflections; and because I approach the age where everything eludes us, I would like to retrieve in my reason the value of the things I lose.”[[96]](#endnote-96) But reading on, it becomes clear that it is not only an insight into what is lost in old age that Lambert seeks: “Let us examine the duties of old age, the respect and the decency that are due to this age, and let us recognise also the advantages that one can derive from it, in order to enjoy it.”[[97]](#endnote-97) In particular, she does not reduce the duties of old age to other-related duties but also includes self-related duties.[[98]](#endnote-98)

Her conception of duties of old age are meant to offer a solution to some of the problems that aging brings with it especially for women. One such problem concerns reputation: “[I]n the life of women, there comes crisis: it is the conduct that they observe and the side they take that gives the final form of their reputation and on which the tranquillity of their lives depends.”[[99]](#endnote-99) As she explains, this is so because in the course of aging seducing charm disappears, which is why aging women are judged with full rigor.[[100]](#endnote-100) This is why one of the duties of old age consists in avoiding circumstances that will lead to negative judgments and seeking circumstances that will lead to positive judgments. Somewhat disconcertingly for present-day readers, Lambert recommends to aging women a kind of withdrawal to private life. As she argues, participating in activities like going to the theatre (whose predominant function for mundane socializing in the eighteenth century is well documented[[101]](#endnote-101)) is detrimental for the self-esteem of aging women: “The advantages of the mind have a hard stand among brilliant young people; they will make you feel too much what you have lost, nothing is more suitable than being at home; self-love suffers less there than elsewhere.”[[102]](#endnote-102) However, as her emphasis on showing the advantages of the mind indicates, what she recommends is not a withdrawal from all contact with other humans but rather a kind of sociability that is favourable for upholding self-esteem. Hence, her recommendation can be understood as exemplifying the demands of duties to oneself. What she has in mind is the need to find a setting where intellectual and moral virtues come to the fore while the loss of physical attractiveness will be felt less vividly.

Lambert describes the ensuing relation to the self as an instance of self-respect. For instance, she ascribes the following (probably fictitious) quotation to a “great man”: “Withdraw yourself into yourself; but prepare yourself to receive yourself well; fear shame and cultivate respect for yourself: cease to love yourself and learn how to respect yourself.”[[103]](#endnote-103) She regards the withdrawal from public places such as the theatre as an instance of duties to oneself which one should fulfil “out of a feeling of dignity for yourself, because one must live respectfully with oneself.”[[104]](#endnote-104) This, of course, raises the question in which sense Lambert is using the notion of self-respect. The follow passage may give a hint:

The last age liberates us from the tyranny of opinion. When one is young, one only dreams of living in the idea of someone else; one must establish one’s reputation and create for oneself an honourable place in the imagination of others, and be happy even in their idea; our happiness is not at all real, it is not ourselves whom we consult but others. In a different age, we turn to ourselves, and this return has its sweetness, we begin to consult ourselves, and to believe ourselves; we escape chance and illusion; men have lost their right to deceive us; we have learnt to know them, and to know ourselves, in order to profit from our mistakes that instruct us as much as those of others; we begin to see our error to have made so much of men; they often teach us to our detriment to count on nothing, their infidelities set us free …[[105]](#endnote-105)

Here, old age—and in particular, the old age of women—is seen as a period when the overly strong dependence of self-esteem on the opinion of others—and, in particular, the opinion of men—can find an end. Lambert is clear that the kind of self-knowledge attainable in this way is not always flattering, as when self-reflection leads to insight into previous mistakes and present folly. But instead of pursuing the goal of cultivating acts of high self-evaluations, something different can be reached, namely, reliance on one’s own judgement that is based both on experience and on the insight into previous mistakes.

What makes such a form of esteem attractive is that it comes with an increased reliance on one’s own judgement, increased self-knowledge, increased independence from the judgements and values of others and increased capability of following the demands of one’s own conscience. Lambert’s concept of “living respectfully with one-self” indicates that what she has in mind is not only self-esteem in the sense of acts of positive self-evaluation; more fundamentally, it is a kind of relation to oneself that is responsive to one’s own capabilities and needs. This is why friendship in old age can replace the youthful search for momentary pleasure through an entirely different function: the mutual reaffirmation of virtuous character traits that can contribute to the stability of these traits. In friendship of this kind, the dependence on others is not eliminated but rather channelled into a form where the judgement of others can always be checked against the demands of one’s own conscience. This increased sense of reliance upon oneself thus characterizes aging well, and especially for women it implies an increased independence from male criteria for female attractiveness.

Self-Esteem and Aging Well

As La Rochefoucauld’s pessimism about aging is connected with his diagnosis of the pathologies of esteem and self-esteem, so is Lambert’s optimism about aging connected with her conception of justified esteem and self-esteem. It is not so much that the two thinkers differ with respect to their insights into the problems of esteem and aging; rather, they take fundamentally different attitudes to these problems—La Rochefoucauld an attitude that interprets virtuous behaviour to be largely the result of physiology, chance, and the mutual balancing of vices, Lambert an attitude that understands virtuous behaviour to be largely the result of self-cultivation. What gives plausibility to her conviction that self-cultivation is possible is her view that there are personal qualities that are genuinely useful for others because they respect their fundamental rights and needs. These are the qualities that, in her view, give rise to a natural right to esteem. On the basis of her conception of what is morally good, Lambert can thus formulate a distinction between qualities that are only pleasant and qualities that are estimable. With this distinction in hand, it makes sense for her to ask whether aging may not bring with itself an increase in moral perfection and the ensuing benefits of enhanced social relations and enhanced relations to oneself. Living a virtuous life, in her view, solves some of the problems of aging because it offers a new source for satisfying some deep human needs: the needs for justified esteem and justified self-esteem. Through the opportunities for self-cultivation that it offers, aging opens up the possibility to rely more strongly on one’s own judgment and thereby to become more independent from the judgement of others. While in Lambert’s view moral virtue is exactly the same for women and men, aging brings specific advantages for women. If aging women manage to live respectfully with themselves, this implies that the dependence on the expectations of men loses much of its grip. Nothing could be farther away from La Rochefoucauld’s pessimism than Lambert’s perspective of old age as a liberating period of life.

This is a result of considerable historical interest since it documents how Lambert’s eclectic and undogmatic defence of some Stoic intuitions can be successfully used to counter some of the devastating consequences of La Rochefoucauld’s rejection of everything connected with the Stoic tradition. However, it also may be result of considerable contemporary interest. Of course, it would go far beyond the scope of the present paper to give even a brief overview of recent feminist and/or philosophical work on aging. But some of the relevance of Lambert’s thought may become evident if it is contrasted with an excellent overview that Toni Calasanti, Kathleen Slevin and Neal King have offered. Their article covers the feminist literature on aging from the early 1970s to the mid-2000s,[[106]](#endnote-106) and although some time has passed since it was published, it still seems to be instructive because some the themes identified there reoccur in more recent publications. As Calasanti, Slevin and King point out, the most extensive part of the literature is concerned with the aging body, covering issues in sexuality after the menopause, questions raised by plastic surgery and problems posed by giving and receiving care. Certainly, compared with this part of the literature, Lambert seems to be outdated. For instance, Stewart rightly warns readers against entertaining exaggerated expectations. In particular, she documents that Lambert does not claim for women the right to love in old age.[[107]](#endnote-107) Yet, Calasanti, Slevin and King also highlight the emergence of a growing field of studies on age relations. Many of these studies focus on the development of power relations during the process of growing older, ranging from an impaired access to the labour market to diminishing status and authority. Very few studies examine advantages that aging women may have over aging men (for instance, stronger support networks of aging women[[108]](#endnote-108)); and it seem extremely difficult to find studies that consider the possible advantages that aging women could have over the young or middle-aged.

As Calasanti, Slevin and King suggest, the fact that there is little that is positive in contemporary thought about aging may be the result of the widely accepted view that aging well consists mainly in upholding patterns of consumption characteristic of affluent middle-aged persons. This view inevitably brings with it a cultural devaluation of the elderly because they will be less and less well able to cope with the standards of the life of the middle-aged.[[109]](#endnote-109) From this perspective, it is not surprising that studies of age relations regard aging mainly from the perspective of a loss of power. It is here, I think, that Lambert’s account of aging could add something significant to the contemporary debate since she does not regard aging well as a matter of keeping up with the younger as long as possible. Rather, she maintains that aging well requires building up social relations that involve a degree of independence from the need of securing the esteem of others that is characteristic of earlier biographic periods. What is more, she suggests that aging well also requires building up relations to the self that become possible through the decrease of dependence on the esteem of others. For this reason, she sees aging not only from the perspective of decreasing bodily faculties and diminishing social power; rather, she sees aging as also offering the possibility for building up friendships of increased depth and for developing increased self-respect and self-esteem. This seems to be a view that still could be thought-provoking.

1. See Isabelle Chariatte, “Le frontispiece des *Réflexions ou Sentences et Maximes morales* de La Rochefoucauld: une clé de lecture à plusieurs niveaux”, *Revue d’Histoire Littéraire de la France* 102 (2002), 637-643. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For overviews of Lambert’s thought, see J.-P. Zimmermann, “La morale laique au commencement du XVIIIe siècle. Madame de Lambert.” *Revue d’Histoire Littéraire de la France* 24 (1917), 42-64, 440-466; Jeannette Geffriaud-Rosso, “Madame de Lambert” and “Du salon de Madame de Lambert au ‘Zibaldone’ de Leopardi”, in *Études sur la féminité aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, Pisa: Goliardica, 1984, 67-89 and 93-125; Faith E. Beasley, “Anne-Thérèse de Lambert and the Politics of Taste”, in *Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature* 19 (1992), 337-344; Liselotte Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex. Woman’s Nature in the French Enlightenment*, trans. Pamela E. Selwyn, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, 18-20; Karen Green, *A History of Women’s Political Thought in Europe, 1700-1800*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2014, 64-72. There is a lot of uncertainty concerning the chronology of Lambert’s writings. Emile Boulan dates the two “Avis” around 1700 (*Figures du dix-huitième siècle*, Leiden: Sijthof, 1920, 113). Robert Granderoute dates the *Reflexions sur les femmes* before 1724 (Madame de Lambert, *Oeuvres*, ed. Robert Granderoute, Paris: Honoré Champion, 1990, 208). Due to its easy availability on the Gallica website of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, I will key all references to Lambert’s writings to *Oeuvres complètes de madame la marquise de Lambert, suivies de ses lettres à plusieurs personnages célèbres*, Paris: Léopold Collin, 1808. Translations are my own (with some substantial improvements from one of the referees for *Hypatia*); however, I have consulted with the translation in *The Works of the Marchioness de Lambert*. 2 vols., London: W. Owen, 1769. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. On the intellectual life in Lambert’s salon, see Ellen McNiven Hine, “Mme de Lambert and her Circle: On the Threshold of a New Age”, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 102 (1973), 173-191; Roger Marchal, *Madame de Lambert et son milieu*, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1991; Katharine J. Hamerton, “A Feminist Voice in the Enlightenment Salon: Madme de Lambert on Taste, Sensibility, and the Feminine Mind.” *Modern Intellectual History* 7 (2010), 209-238, esp. 216-220. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Catherine F. Danielou, “‘L’amour-propre éclairé’: Madame de Lambert et Pierre Nicole.” *Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature* 42 (1995), 171-183; Hamerton 2010, 220-238 (on Lambert’s response to Malebranche’s views on female sensibility). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Joan Hinde Stewart, *The Enlightenment of Age. Women, Letters, and Growing Old in Eighteenth-Century France*, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010, ch. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Stewart 2010, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 13-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Lambert 1808, 23; 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 133; see François de La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes*, ed. F. C. Green, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945, Maxim 405. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Stewart 2010, 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Lambert 1808, 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Lambert 1808, 23; see Maxim 333. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Lambert 1808, 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Maxim 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Maxim 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Maxim 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Maxim 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Maxim 399. On La Rochefoucauld’s treatment of merit, see Mildred Galland-Szymkowiak, “Le mérite chez La Rochefoucauld ou l’héroisme de l’honnêteté”, *Revue d’Histoire Littéraire de la France* 102 (2002), 799-811. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Maxim 88. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Maxim 356. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Maxim 143. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Maxim 144. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Maxim 280. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Lambert 1808, 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 211; see Maxim 165. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Lambert 1808, 211. On Lambert’s conception of virtue, see Ginette Kryssing-Berg, “La Marquise de Lambert, ou l’ambivalence de la vertu”, *Revue Romane* 17 (1982), 35-48. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. See Maxims 182; 195. On the historical background of La Rochefoucauld’s analysis of virtue, see Philippe Sellier, “La Rochefoucauld, Pascal, Saint Augustin”, *Revue d’Histoire Littéraire de la France* 69 (1969), 551-575. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Lamberrt 1808, 181. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 210. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., 211. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 213. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 172. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Maxim 166. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Maxim 202. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Maxim 203. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Maxim 206. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Maxim 273. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. See Maurice Magendie, *La politesse mondaine et les théories de l’honnêteté, en France au XVIIe siècle, de 1600 a 1660*. Paris: Alcan, 1925, 386-393, 892-900 (on the gallant conception), 633-675 (on the bourgeois conception). For more recent studies, see Donna D. Stanton, *The Aristocrat as Art: A Study of the Honnête Homme and the Dandy in Seventeenth- and Nineteenth-Century Literature.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1980; Emmanuel Bury, *Littérature et politesse. L’invention de l’honnête homme (1580-1750)*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996; Jörn Steigerwald, *Galanterie. Die Fabrikation einer natürlichen Ethik der höfischen Gesellschaft (1650-1710)*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Maxim 205. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Maxim 220. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Maxims 241; 334. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Maxim 340. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Maxim 332. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Maxim 367. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Hamerton 2010, 209. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Christophe Losfeld, *Politesse, morale et construction sociale. Pour une histoire des traités de comportements (1670-1788)*, Paris: Honoré Champion, 2011, 146. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Lambert 1808, 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid., 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid., 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid., 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid., 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Ibid., 92-93. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Ibid., 94. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid., 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. See, e.g., Cicero, *Philippica*, XI, 12, 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. See Andreas Blank, “Aquinas and Soto on Derogatory Judgment and Noncomparative Justice”, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 29 (2012), 411–427. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Lambert 1808, 95. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Ibid., 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Ibid., 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Ibid., 108. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Ibid., 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Ibid., 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Ibid., 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Ibid., 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Ibid., 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Maxim 210. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. Maxim 444. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. Maxim 112. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. Maxim 222. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. Maxim 416. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. Maxim 341. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. Maxim 461. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. Maxim 430. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. Maxim 408. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. Maxim 423. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. Maxim 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. Maxim 474. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. Maxim 444. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. Lambert 1808, 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. Ibid., 133-134. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
95. Lambert 1808, 133. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
96. Ibid., 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
97. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
98. Ibid., 141. [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
99. Ibid., 137. The moment of biographic crisis is also a central topic in the poems and letters of Lambert’s contemporary, Lady Mary Mortley Montagu (1689-1762); for a detailed analysis, see Sarah Brophy, “Women, Aging, and Gossip in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s letters of the 1720s”, *The Eighteenth Century* 45 (2004), 1-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
100. Lambert 1808, 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
101. See, e.g., William Weber, “L’institution et son public. L’Opéra à Paris et à Londres au XVIIIe siècle”, *Annales* 48 (1993), 1519-1539; James Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, ch. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
102. Lambert 1808, 141. [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
103. Ibid., 153. [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
104. Ibid., 141. [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
105. Ibid., 150. [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
106. Toni Calasanti, Kathleen F. Slevin, and Neal King, “Ageism and Feminism: From ‘Et Cettera’ to Center”, *NWSA Journal* 18 (2006), 13-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
107. Stewart, 2010, 15-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-107)
108. See Judith C. Barker, Joelle Morrow and Linda S. Mitteness, “Gender, Informal Social Support Networks, and Elderly Urban African Americans”, *Journal of Aging Studies* 12 (1998), 1999-222. [↑](#endnote-ref-108)
109. Calasanti, Slevin and King 2006, 20-26. [↑](#endnote-ref-109)