Complaisance and the Question of Autonomy in the French Women Moralists, 1650-1710

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Abstract

This article explores some diverging attitudes towards the character trait of complaisance—the inclination to please others—in the thought of Madeleine de Scudéry, Jeanne-Michelle de Pringy, and Françoise d’Aubigné, Marquise de Maintenon. Complaisance raises questions relevant for the issue of personal autonomy, since striving for the esteem of others inevitably involves the acceptance of dependence on their preferences and judgements. Maintenon regards complaisance as necessary for the workings of a society and, therefore, wholeheartedly accepts dependence as a feature of the human condition, especially of the condition of women. By contrast, specifically female forms of complaisance such as coquetry—behavior calculated to trigger emotional responses without the wish to engage in serious love relations—could add an element of independence from the desires of men. Pringy takes a highly critical stance toward coquetry and brings to light some self-refuting consequences that it may involve. By contrast, Scudéry thinks through the liberating potential of a different kind of female complaisance—a kind that she calls “coquetry of friendship”—, which may avoid the pitfalls of coquetry identified by Pringy.

1. Introduction

The character trait of complaisance—the inclination to please others—figures prominently in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century French moral thought. In contrast to character traits that were unambiguously regarded either as virtuous or as vicious, the categorization of complaisance was highly controversial. A widely shared intuition was that without complaisance life in society would be difficult. Another intuition was that complaisance indicates a conformist state of mind, is inseparable tied to lowly flattery and, at worst, invites contempt.[[1]](#endnote-1) Moreover, while some early modern thinkers treat complaisance as a gender-neutral topic, a specifically gendered type of complaisance became a prominent topic in early modern moral philosophy: the form of complaisance associated with the female character of a “coquette.” A coquette was understood as a woman who behaves in a way calculated to trigger feelings of love without the intention of binding herself to anyone.[[2]](#endnote-2) Like complaisance in general, coquetry is designed to trigger positive emotional responses from others and, in this sense, accepts dependence on others; at the same time, it is also a strategy for remaining independent from others in the sense of avoiding serious commitments. Of course, the term “autonomy” does not occur in the early modern controversy over complaisance and coquetry. But the contrary of autonomy—dependence on the preferences, decisions and judgements of others—is certainly a concept that lies at the heart of this controversy. In this sense, the early modern controversy over complaisance and coquetry can be understood as a controversy over the question of personal autonomy.

In what follows, I will focus on three early modern French women moralists who played a significant role in these debates: Madeleine de Scudéry (1607-1701), Jeanne-Michelle de Pringy,[[3]](#endnote-3) and Françoise d’Aubigné, Marquise de Maintenon (1635-1713). I will focus on these authors because in their writings the difficulties arising from the conflict between the desire to please and the desire to be independent are thought through vividly, with an emphasis on gender issues, and with widely diverging conclusions. Interest in these three women, perhaps, lies not so much in that they had reached definitive, context-independent results but rather that they had thought through some perennial problems within the framework of the society of the *Ancien Régime*. The literary forms of their works, too, are closely linked with the cultural context in which they were active. Scudéry, of course, was one of the leading seventeenth-century novelists, and her novels *Cyrus* and *Clélie* develop around extensive conversations in an idealized setting of Roman antiquity. Some of the texts that she subsequently published as separate conversations about moral issues originate from these novels and are supplemented by further philosophical dialogues.[[4]](#endnote-4) Maintenon, too, uses the dialogue form, but her much shorter and concise dialogues revolve around the educational aspirations of the college at Saint-Cyr that her husband, Louis XIV, founded on her initiative for girls from impoverished noble families.[[5]](#endnote-5) Finally, Pringy uses the literary form of “characters” that goes back to antiquity and has been made popular in early modern France by moralists such as Jean de La Bruyère.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Section 2 will explore some aspects of Madame de Maintenon’s treatment of the role of complaisance in holding together aristocratic society. These aspects will make evident how pervasive the role of complaisance was in early modern France, and at the same time they will indicate how little room for personal independence the prevailing concept of complaisance left especially for women. As Maintenon emphasizes against a variety of objections that she takes into consideration, this is so because complaisance does not reduce to inoffensive ways of speaking but rather involves the readiness to subject one’s own will to the will of others. In her view complaisance is, in a sense still to be explicated, a rational strategy for acting in situations of dependence.

Section 3 uses the work of Jeanne-Michelle de Pringy to illustrate that not all women moralists of the *Ancien Régime* were happy with such an affirmative attitude toward dependence. Pringy was one of the fiercest critics of the form of complaisance characteristic of the female coquette. Her criticism is closely connected with her analysis of female self-love and the pathologies of the economy of esteem that reinforce this vice. Pringy does not have anything commendatory to say about complaisance, and her advice to women is to replace complaisance entirely with virtuous character traits that could give rise to justified esteem. The independence of women from misguided standards of esteem clearly is a crucial concern in Pringy; still, one misses the realism salient in Maintenon’s thought, and also one might ask whether some forms of complaisance—even if Pringy might be right about the pathological forms—may not be able to contribute something positive to achieving greater independence.

This is one of the questions discussed more than once in Madeleine de Scudéry’s novels and dialogues. Section 4 will take her distinction between detrimental forms of complaisance and what she calls “complaisance honnête” as a vantage point. In particular, it will explore the sense in which Scudéry connects rational complaisance to the concept of *honnêteté* that has led to controversial interpretations among her commentators. Contrary to one interpretation, I will argue that *honnêteté*, for Scudéry, does not reduce to acting according to the norms of gallant life; contrary to an alternative interpretation, I will argue that Scudéry also does not reduce *honnêteté* to acting according to the moral norms of paternal authority. The latter point becomes clear in her exploration of a possible positive form of female coquetry—a form that she calls “coquetry of friendship.”

2. Maintenon on Complaisance and Dependence

Maintenon regards complaisance as one of the conditions of living in society: “To be fit for Society … requires Complaisance, good Nature, and good Manners” (Maintenon 1758, 2). She describes a woman fit for society as follows:

She has a proper Share of Wit, is sweet temper’d [*douce*], obliging [*complaisante*], conformable to the Dispositions of others, willing to engage in any Diversion with her Companions, tho’ not perhaps suitable to her Taste; […] she listens attentively to what is said to her, and doth not intrude upon the Attention of others, by talking too long at a Time […]; she never enquires into what doth not concern her, is never angry, and doth not repeat what appears displeasing to another; she commends what deserves Praise, and is silent with Respect to any Error she discovers […]. (Ibid., 3)

Thus, for Maintenon complaisance does not reduce to saying nice things; rather, it also involves emotional self-control, the readiness to do what is favorable for upholding the esteem of others and, most of all, the readiness to subordinate the own will to the will of others, both in matters of what others want her to do and what others want her to know.

In Maintenon’s dialogues, the concept of complaisance is part of a field of concepts such as respect (*égard*) and affability (*douceur*), which exhibit similar structures. As she characterizes it, respect is an attitude that includes the readiness to accommodate oneself to the tastes and preferences of others, no matter how bizarre these tastes and preferences may seem to be (ibid., 31). For instance, accommodating oneself to the taste of others includes being attentive to musical and literary performances in which one takes no interest (ibid., 32). Also the concept of affability (*douceur*) denotes this readiness to cut back on one’s own convictions readily, as illustrated by the following description of a woman exemplifying this quality:

I have seen this Conduct practised by a Lady of extraordinary good Sense, but somewhat prejudiced in Favour of her own Opinion; she argued with a Vivacity natural to her, intermixed with a little Conceit, and it was visible she thought herself properly qualified to convince her Antagonist; notwithstanding which, she suddenly yielded to the Force of a well-grounded Argument, was at once herself convinced, and acknowledged frankly, she had been to blame. (Ibid., 66-67)

Affability thus brings with it the readiness to give up on a controversy on the occasion of the first strong argument of the opponent—certainly a good strategy to secure sympathy but also a strategy that precludes the formulation of well-founded rejoinders. This is why it is not surprising to see that Maintenon is aware of the high degree of dependence that the ideal of complaisance and affability brings with it for women:

[W]e are not always Mistresses of ourselves to regulate our Conduct by Reason, and we are sometimes obliged to espouse a Cause, which Reason would not approve; we depend on the Will of others; a Husband might be apt to be too profuse in his Expences, without considering the Damage he thereby sustains in his Fortune; and a Mother sends us abroad into the World, when Reason, if consulted, might perhaps advise Retirement. (Ibid., 8)

Accepting dependence on the power of husbands and parents also determines the sense in which complaisance can be understood as rational: “[R]eason draws Advantages from every Circumstance, and in the Instances you have selected, it will be found to comply with the Dispositions of those on whom it depends […]” (ibid.). Thus, the kind of reason connected with complaisance is a kind of instrumental reason that seeks the best results by adapting to conditions of dependence.

In fact, dependence is a topic to which Maintenon has devoted a dialogue of its own. In this dialogue, students who are about to graduate from Saint-Cyr, the college for girls from impoverished noble families founded on Maintenon’s initiative in 1684, have an exchange with a more experienced lady, and in the course of the conversation the students’ expectation that they will have much more personal liberties after having graduated from college is crushed by the confrontation with the realities of aristocratic life. For instance, the widely accepted convention that unmarried young women have to be accompanied by a chamber maid when they go to public places makes it necessary to accommodate oneself to the needs of the servant (ibid., 76). Likewise, the convention that unmarried young women have to be accompanied on private visits by a friend of the mother makes it necessary to accommodate oneself to the plans of friends of the family (ibid.). The convention of not dining without the father implies a lot of waiting, and the complicated nature of an aristocratic household implies dependence on the services of household employees (ibid.). Even worse, being part of an aristocratic society depends on the precarious status of being a favorite of high-ranking personalities (ibid., 77). And the often contested economic situation of noble families implies a dependence on legal experts (ibid., 78). Maintenon uses these considerations to substantiate a general point, namely, “[t]hat even Men depend upon one another, and Women much more so; our Sex is weak, and requires Assistance and Protection, and this is so evidently apparent, that we dare not live in a House by ourselves” (ibid.).

The acceptance of dependence is also built into Maintenon’s concept of what she calls a “honnête femme” (ibid., 81; 96). In fact, while the corresponding term “honnête homme” is ubiquitous in the French literature and philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (see Magendie 1925; Bury 1996), her dialogues contain some of the relatively few occurrences of the term “honnête femme.” And while the diverging meanings of “honnête homme” have found extensive attention from commentators, there is only very little work on the meanings of “honnête femme”. Alison Turner argues that *honnêteté* in the sense of gallantry—“the desire to please without subservience, courtesy with a dash of boldness in it”—is only something for men (Turner 1966, 167). She notes that in Pierre Corneille’s play *Polyeucte* (1643) one finds a diverging conception of *honnêteté* that expresses a specifically female role model. According to her reading of Corneille, the demands of obedience and the demands of honor do not always coincide, and Corneille’s figure of Pauline derives its dramatic potential from her resolution to protect her feeling of honor, where the demands of honor and obedience conflict (ibid., 169). Turner describes the character of Pauline in Corneille’s tragedy *Polyeucte* as follows:

Two of the strongest qualities in Pauline’s character are her sense of obedience or duty to father and husband and her sense of her moral reputation or *gloire*. […] If there is a distinction to be found between the *honnête homme* and the *honnête femme*, it would seem to lie in the emphasis given to these particular aspects of *honnêteté*; in the woman, because of her dependence on man’s protection, the stress on obedience and duty must of necessity be far greater. (Ibid., 167)

In this sense, the concept of *honnête femme* seems to involve an acquiescence with a high degree of dependence on men.

Maintenon’s treatment of the concept of *honnête femme* falls fully into this pattern. In her dialogue on *gloire*, one finds a conception of honor that is bound to moral virtues such as courage, fidelity and gratefulness, and Maintenon is unambiguous that such a conception of honor should guide the behavior not only of men but also of women (Maintenon 1758, 23-24). At the same time, she develops a disturbingly affirmative attitude toward dependence. In her dialogue on marriage, the bewildering claim that the best husbands are those who are tyrannous is discussed as follows:

*Sophia.* Why do you imagine all men are Tyrants?

*Lucinda*. Because the Duties of Wife are tyrannical, and a Husband, however indulgent he may be, will insist on your being a good Wife [*honnête femme*]. […]

*Melissa*. In what then do you suppose the Duty of a good Wife [*honnête épouse*] consists?

*Chariclea*. In neglecting herself, and studying only the Good of her Family. (Ibid., 81)[[7]](#endnote-7)

As is explained later on in the dialogue, forgetting oneself involves complaisance in the sense of cutting back on one’s own will:

A good Wife [*honnête femme*] rises early, that she may have the more Time for her Business, she begins the Day with Prayer, she gives Orders to her Servants, looks after her Children, takes Care of their Education, prepares herself to receive Gentlemen, whom her Husband sometimes brings Home with him to Dinner, who perhaps are not very agreeable to her Liking ; she is herself the best Servant she has about her in getting every Thing ready; when Dinner is over, she stays with the Company against her will […]. (Ibid., 81-82)

Maintenon’s acceptance of female dependence also plays a central role in her characterization of the role of religiously grounded virtue. This becomes clear when, in her dialogue on self-love, she discusses the question of whether young girls should act out of the desire for being praised or out of love for virtue. The intuition that the desire for being praised inspires many virtuous actions is weighed against the intuition that love for virtue is too rarely what motivates action (ibid., 24-26). The central question turns out to be: “[W]ould you not have us careful to please, and seek the Esteem of those on whom we depend?” (ibid., 15). This question triggers a series of remarks. First, acting on this desire should not be hindered, but nevertheless it would be commendable to act “on a more substantial View” (ibid.): “[W]hat is Morality, when it has not Religion for its Basis? You are, I see, still resolved to gain only the good Opinion of Men, and that alone will never constitute our Happiness” (ibid.). This thought leads Maintenon to a strange conclusion that combines the acceptance of dependence in acting with the idea that moral virtue could provide an independent source of self-esteem:

You will never be in Pain to Procure the Good-Will of Men; your Conscience will justify you in doing your Duty;—if Men approve your Actions, their Approbation is welcome; if not, you may console yourself, being still certain of obtaining those Praises which have no End. […] You may be careful of your own Happiness, and indulge every innocent Enjoyment, and then you will be sure that you have not exceeded the proper Bounds of this Self-Esteem, while you continue to act in a State of Dependence [*lorsque vous agirez avec dépendance*]. (Ibid., 16; translation modified)

Thus, Maintenon regards piety-based morality as an independent source for upholding a positive self-image in the face of adversity, but not as a source for acting independently of the will of men. All that she acknowledged on the level of action is a certain restraining function of what conscience demands. Or to put it differently: conscience keeps acting from a dependent position within the boundaries of religiously inspired virtue. Evidently, this is something very different from acting independently of the will of others.

3. Pringy on the Self-Refuting Nature of Coquetry

Not all women of aristocratic society in the *Ancien Régime* accepted acting from such a dependent position, and one strategy of carving out a space of personal liberty is often associated with the figure of the “coquette,” to which Jeanne-Michelle de Pringy and Madelaine de Scudéry have devoted detailed considerations. Pringy provides an analysis of what exactly may be problematic about coquetry, and thereby brings to light problematic sides of complaisance that are hardly discussed by Maintenon. I will deal with Pringy’s view in this section and then turn to Scudéry in the following section.

 What exactly makes a woman a “coquette”? One characteristic mentioned by Pringy is the wish to fulfill sensual needs or “to satisfie the sensitive part, without consulting what duty and reason can allege to the contrary; their principal care and study is to satisfie and caress the predominant Passion, and to make the Mind an Instrument, and privy to these irregularities of the Heart” ([Pringy] 1696, 5). This passage suggests an antagonism between reason and passion—a dichotomy that in fact plays an important role in Pringy’s thought. But Pringy’s characterization of the “coquette” goes beyond invoking such an antagonism and also includes the wish to please:

[H]er whole time is taken up with how to please, and her greatest *Elogium* is to be very critical in such Maxims. This is the usual product of *Juvenile* years ill imploy’d, which has no other Instruction but Self-love, and to be very little acquainted with it self, it piles up a Ground-work of perfection to the gust of Self-love […]. (Ibid., 3)

Moreover, she takes the form that the desire to please takes in the *Coquette* to be self-refuting:

There is no extreme but a *Coquette* will plunge her self into: She’s prodigal in her Disbursement, and penurious in her Parcimony; for Vertue being at so great a distance, the Golden Mean can never be found out; if she’s Amorous, though the Fit never lasts long, she’s for that instant just Distracted. […] And the Union of all these affrighting qualities may seem to please when accompany’d with so much Assiduity, yet a complaisant carriage can never so far seduce men to make them Slaves to a false Merit; but in requital the Woman pays dear for the Law which she imposes, and as the Love which inspires her is made up of Interest […], the fruit of this Familiarity is the ruin of the Fortune of the Man, and eclipses the Honour of the Woman. (Ibid., 6-7)

 The wish to please and its self-refuting nature are topics that are discussed in more detail in Pringy’s analysis of self-love, to which she devotes an appendix. There, she sets out “to describe this *Passion* in the Female Sex” (ibid., 73), and as the passage from the essay on the “coquette” indicates, she has many critical things to say about self-love. Her view is not that this passion is different in women than in men; still, she believes that it is particularly predominant in women. She describes the occasions that give rise to expressions of self-love and the effects brought about by them as mutually reinforcing: “On such an Occasion Effects nourish the cause, this *Self-love* produces wicked sentiments, which produce a thousand unjust and unreasonable actions. Now these unreasonable actions by turns retain the Soul inslav’d to these Sentiments, which return in course to their primitive source and Original […]” (ibid., 91). What kind of sentiments and actions does she have in mind? Consider the following passage:

How should she be capable of Deliberation, or worthy of Trust, if her softness won’t suffer her to keep it a secret for those she professes most kindness, nor undauntedly maintain the Truth to the faces of such she is afraid of, indeed this is an evident proof of self Love in the fair Sex. […] [W]e can’t frame our mind into such a Heroick Temper to speak our minds candidly of others, and we abscond that esteem our Friend has for us, when he unbosomes a swelling Secret. […] She flatters her self, (though without any Reason) that much glory will accrue by her Indiscretion, and much Benefit and advantage by a Complaisant carriage and Deportment […]. (Ibid., 90-91)

Thus, one pattern of action deriving from self-love is the reluctance to tell the truth. Another is the incapacity to keep secrets. Both patterns are clearly connected with the wish to please that plays a central role in Pringy’s characterization of the “coquette”: Not telling the truth is meant to avoid displeasing others, chatting about secrets is meant to please others. Obviously, breaking secrets is bound to destroy the esteem that friends held for the one to whom they confided their secrets. Nor will the calculation prove to be reliable that pleasing others will compensate this loss with higher esteem from others.

Self-love also leads to an impairment of the ability to judge justly about oneself: “That Justice which she pleads for in other matters, she won’t hear of in her own; and when she thinks by examining, to regulate the Affair, she runs a risque of disordering it so much the more, because that *Self-love* blinds her Reflections […]” (ibid., 80). Similarly, self-love leads to an inability to do justice to others:

This is the pernicious Consequence of *Self-love* which must be own’d to be a Cardinal evil which includes all the rest. […] [F]or seeing Justice is so necessary for all conditions, it cannot subsist where *Self-love* erects its Throne, for she always takes Pleasures part, without considering that submission which the body owes to the mind, and those indispensible Obligations we are liable unto in such cases to do violence to our inferior Appetites, that we may be just. (Ibid., 91-92)

Pringy identifies the problem that, in the long run, complaisance may be unsuitable to secure genuine esteem from others:

This is the dire misfortune which attends them, quickness of Apprehension makes them inconstant; a solid Judgment takes the greater delight in Mischief, if penetrating the more Satyrical, and more visible Defects renders them the more contemptible, which they obtain for the guerdon and reward of their over-weening and imaginary Merit. We esteem them, as much as they love, that is, for a Moment. Beauty surprizes, Wit is very pleasing in Conversation, but then such defects shock the noblest Disposition. (Ibid., 5-6)

 Still, we do not have an explanation for why Pringy believes that unjustified self-love and self-esteem are more pressing problems for women than for men. Why is it that women encounter more profound obstacles to pursuing their interests? As we have seen, her answer has to do with the difficulties of reaching realistic self-esteem. But the problem of self-knowledge, for her, is closely connected with gender roles. In her view, these are by no means vices devoid of a social basis. For instance, she emphasizes the role that the response of others has in the vice of avarice: “[T]he fair Sex are but too prone to that sort of Avarice which *Self-love* produces; men are valu’d according to the Figure they make in the World, and abundance of Self is the key of their Esteem […]” (ibid., 94). Likewise, complaisance is driven by the wish to submit one’s will to those who are admired for their wealth: “to obtain the Esteem of such persons whom the World reputes to be so, and this in prospect of securing or advancing their Reputation, being sensible that Esteem depends from the voice of those whom Opulence makes men caress and admire […]” (ibid., 93-94). Thus, misguided self-esteem, for Pringy, is not just a matter of female *self*-deception. Rather, it is shaped through what other people erroneously value, both for themselves and when they pass judgments of esteem about others. As her remarks indicate, she takes the standards according to which such judgments are formed to be specifically male. Thus, in her view, complaisant behavior is not just a spontaneous female vice but rather responds to these male standards for esteeming others.

 Analyzing the mechanisms that stand behind the communicative strategies of the coquette in this way makes clear how problematic the dependence that expresses itself in some forms of complaisance actually is. No wonder, then, that the advice that Pringy gives women is to abandon complaisance altogether and to replace it through the pursuit of virtue:

[A]nd through Inclination, Education and Custom, three strong Links seem to render such a change allmost impossible, the relish of good would return again, Religion and Honour would not be unsuccessful, and the unspeakable satisfaction of being well thought on, would return in the lieu of Complacency. For Virtue will have due Honour paid it where ever it appears, whether Wisdom preserves it inviolable, or Reason on account of its Amability be captivated by it, in all places it will allways obtain a venerable Esteem and Regard. (Ibid., 7)

Unlike for Maintenon, for Pringy virtue and piety thus are not motivations that could regulate acting from a dependent position; rather, she sees them as alternatives to complaisance—as alternatives that could fulfil the desire for being esteemed much better than coquetry, which carries the risk of being disesteemed in the long run. Still, what one may miss here is a sense of the demands of social conventions which will make a life without complaisance extremely demanding; one also may miss a sense for the liberating side of coquetry—namely, the possibility of developing a pleasant social life without having to accept the dependencies that arise out of the search for lasting relationships. Isn’t there any way of developing a view of complaisance that is both bound to the demands of virtue and compatible with a sphere of personal autonomy that goes beyond the independence of individual conscience? A look into the work of Madeleine de Scudéry might be instructive here.

4. Scudéry on Complaisance and “Coquetry of Friendship”

Scudéry deals with complaisance in one of her dialogues from the second part of the third volume of *Clélie* (Scudéry 1657). This dialogue is re-published and supplemented with a dialogue on the distinction between flattery and complaisance in her *Conversations sur divers sujets* (1680). Scudéry there uses the term “honnête complaisance” (Scudéry 1680, 281), thereby raising the question of the sense in which she connects complaisance with *honnêteté*. Donna Stanton places Scudéry’s treatment of complaisance in the context of *honnêteté* understood as encompassing the ideals of aristocratic life (Stanton 1980, 133-134). Similarly, Jörn Steigerwald suggests that Scudéry’s talk of “honnête complaisance” relates “exclusively to court society such that only contexts decide about the necessity and possibility of complaisance” (Steigerwald 2011, 124). In his view, what matters for Scudéry is to figure out how the potential of complaisance can be realized most fully in the context of gallant life (ibid., 124; 127). There is a good reason for such an interpretation: What prompts the dialogue is the observation that exaggerated or clumsy complaisance has an effect contrary to the intended one. However, although Scudéry is one of the first authorities concerning matters of gallantry, arguably her treatment of *honnêteté* does not reduce to an analysis of how the effects of certain communicative strategies within a particular social context can be calculated rationally.

This reading is supported by her distinction between different kinds of complaisance. Most relevant for our present concern, there is one kind that she calls “self-minded complaisance” (*complaisance intéressé*). She characterizes the practitioners of this kind of complaisance as people “who have a Complaisance that is Foreign to ’em; and who only approve of all you do, that you may comply with them in all they have a mind to” (Scudéry 1683, 149). This is the context in which flattery can become operative. As she explains it, flattery takes its origin in distorted self-images both of the flatterer and the flatteree: “Those who love to be flattered, esteem ’emselves too much. Flatterers commonly become so, in that being very sensible they have neither Vertue nor Merit sufficient to please or acquire Credit without the help of Flattery, and we may say, they have an ill Opinion, both of themselves and others” (ibid., 158). Scudéry sees the flattery-oriented kind of complaisance negatively. Someone who practices such a communicative strategy “never warns his friends of the faults they commit during their good fortune; but if they fall, he is the first to insult over their Calamities, that he may render himself grateful to those who succeed ’em” (ibid., 160). What characterizes such complaisant persons thus is a lack of fidelity: “[O]ne of the most dangerous Complaisances of all […] is that which applauds Detraction and which, very far from defending innocence, suffers it to be basely and unjustly oppress’d. […] [T]hose who are professedly Complaisant, flatter those they see, and abandon those that are absent” (ibid., 153-154). In Scudéry’s view, there is something self-refuting about this kind of complaisance: “Flatterers […] are afraid, that others should please more than themselves; and ’tis properly in their hearts, that Jealousie may be found without Affection” (ibid., 160). Due to the lack of the capacity for affection, they are incapable of friendship (ibid., 158). What is more, Scudéry regards this kind of complaisance as an expression of a certain kind of dependence: “We ought certainly to look upon Flattery, as a Slave that is ever low, cokesing and depending on Fortune” (ibid., 161).

As Scudéry makes clear, there is another kind of complaisance that is bound to virtue: “Complaisance of the *honnêtes gens* is easie to be discern’d when we take notice of it. It has never any particular interest; it aims in general at the *Convenience* of the world … There cannot be peculiar Rules for it. Judgment and Vertue must prescribe its Laws” (ibid., 164, translation modified). Limiting complaisance in this way to the demands of virtue implies that the realm of complaisance is limited to indifferent matters (ibid., 150). However, being complaisant in indifferent matters is described as having a specifically moral value: “Sometimes submitting one’s pleasure to that of others, and a thousand other little things, which without offending reason, and going against justice, serve effectually to meliorate Mankind. And indeed Complaisance can sometimes disarm Anger, appease Fury, and restore Tranquility to an irritated Spirit” (ibid., 155).

Thus, the question is no so much whether or not Scudéry binds *complaisance* *honnête* to intellectual and moral virtue but rather what her conception of justice and reason amounts to. In fact, with respect to Scudéry, Magendie has taken a line of interpretation very similar to the line taken by Turner with respect to Corneille. According to Magendie, it would be a misinterpretation to read *Cyrus* as a portrayal of the actual workings of seventeenth-century French aristocracy.[[8]](#endnote-8) Magendie gives the following characterization of Scudéry’s view of female *honnêteté*:

The women in *Cyrus* and *Clélie* have mastered themselves, and do not let themselves be carried away by the heart or the impulses of the senses; they are obedient to reason, to well-being, and they demand that their lovers submit to it, too […]. They jealously preserve their reputation of honor, their *gloire* […]. Virtue is an essential element of this merit. The young girls accept in a docile manner the choice of their parents. (Magendie 1925, 652; my translation)

Yet, although this interpretation is supported by a tight net of references, reducing Scudéry’s conception of *honnêteté* to the aspects that Magendie mentions overlooks Scudéry’s lasting fascination with the topic of coquetry. To be sure, by itself coquetry is part of the gallant life; but Scudéry’s considerations concerning *complaisance honnête* certainly could be read as putting moral limits on permissible coquetry. As we will see, the conjecture that the moral conception of *honnêteté* is highly relevant here is fully borne out in Scudéry’s early discussion of coquetry in *Cyrus*.

To bring out the strengths of her early discussion of coquetry fully, it will be useful to begin with her later, much more skeptical treatment of the same issue in her *Nouvelles Conversations de Morale* (1688).Scudéry there uses the dialogue form to articulate both the attraction of coquetry and the risks that it brings with it for female reputation. Strikingly, much of what goes on in the dialogue makes clear that coquetry in itself cannot be regarded as a vice: at the same time, Scudéry takes the esteem-related risks of coquetry very seriously. This is one of the objections:

[D]oes one not need to have a quite strong inclination to pleasures in general, and to gallantry in particular, not to say exactly to coquetry, in order to put your reputation and your established position at risk as you do? For at the end of the day, […] in this crowd of lovers who chase you and who entertain you, people are quite often a bit jealous of each other and can imagine that you concede more favors to their rivals than to themselves. (Scudéry 1688, 765)[[9]](#endnote-9)

Clarice, the figure in the dialogue who propagates the attraction of coquetry, defends herself: “I do not love to be loved for the sake of loving; I simply want only to please, to amuse myself and to entertain myself though agreeable bagatelles. I do not search for a husband, and it is easy for you to figure out […] that a person to whom one makes the reproach of loving to have so many slaves would not love to have a master” (ibid., 770). Here, the liberating power of coquetry is clearly articulated. Also, the idea that coquetry should be restricted to morally indifferent matters is present. Understood in this way, coquetry unites aspects of the gallant conception of *honnêteté* with aspects of the moral conception, without, however, endorsing any dependency on the power of men.

However, even if the problem of present reputation may be solved by engaging only in morally neutral activities such as poetry and music, there lurks a problem with aging. As one of the figures in the dialogue observes, the coquette overlooks that “within very few years, she will be ridiculous, if she doesn’t change her manners” (ibid., 816). Clarice proposes a solution: “[I]n order not to renounce entirely to my temperament, I make preparations […] to become, if I can, a coquette of friendship as is one of your good friends, who has as great a crowd of friends of all kinds as you say I have of lovers” (ibid., 822). In *Nouvelles Conversations de Morale*,the idea of coquetry of friendship faces two lines of criticism. The first line concerns the nature of complaisance necessary for upholding a large number of friendships: “I would not believe easily that, without a thousand low complaisances, one could attract at one’s home a crowd of friends who have no relation to each other” (ibid., 824). This is certainly a serious point and reminds us of the similar concerns voiced by Pringy. However, it still has to be seen whether this objection is as conclusive as it seems to be on first sight. The second line of criticism concerns the possibility of emotional attachment to a great number of persons: “But do you think […] that the coquette of friendship about whom you speak could truly love those whom she calls her friends?” (ibid., 827). Clarice admits that coquetry of friendship may involve some degree of deceiving others: “One must at least admit … that she acts as if she would love them all perfectly; for she does whatever she can to attract their confidence […]” (ibid.). Such an attitude, however, seems to be contrary to the demands of friendship:

[A] coquette of friendship never corrects herself; on the contrary, experience makes her more skillful and more occupied, because she encounters every day new contenders, new beautiful spirits, new foreigners …; and since it is not possible to suffice to fulfil all the duties of friendship toward so many people, one finds at the end that, due to having so many friends, she does no longer have any. (Ibid., 830-831)

Again, this line of criticism articulates a substantial difficulty for the coquetry of friendship. The dialogue ends quite abruptly, and Clarice takes the defensive stance that, once the years have passed during which coquetry in the usual sense is practicable, she will have to build up serious friendships and to “renounce forever what entertains me presently” (ibid., 840).

Yet, more than thirty years earlier, in the tenth part of *Le Grand Cyrus* (Scudéry 1654), one finds a sustained defense of the idea of coquetry of friendship that offers resources to counter the criticism voiced in *Nouvelles Conversations de Morale*. In *Cyrus*, the figure of Dorinice is described as follows:

[Y]ou must know that this Lady, though never capable of love, nor ever will be as long as she lives, yet is she the greatest fondling in friendship [*Coquette d'amitié*] that is in the world, for she has friends of all sorts, and the wonder is, she gets them every day, and loses none, and does so well keep all such secrets as are instructed to her, that she never injures any, but as far as she is able, is ready to do any service for those whom she hath promised any place in her friendship: Yet […] she hath this particular quality, that she hath set bounds about her heart, beyond the limits of which none whosoever can ever go; for one shall be as high in her favor at three months as they can be in three years. (Scudéry 1653, 178)

Clearly, particular depth of emotional attachment here is not seen as essential for friendship. This is why having friendships with many persons does not seem to involve any psychological impossibility. What is more, although this kind of friendship is characterized as “tender and gallant friendship” (ibid., 180), it is evident that Scudéry also binds it to moral constraints such as the demands of fidelity that require keeping the secrets of friends confidential and generally the demand not to hurt anyone. This is why the complaisance involved in coquetry of friendship need not to be of a morally objectionable sort, and there is no need to generate confidence through the pretense of feelings that are absent. This is why the attitude articulated here is not self-refuting, contrary to what Scudéry’s later take on the question suggests. On the contrary, it is a strategy that allows Dorinice to attract friends of widely diverging characters:

In fact, some of the friends she had were ambitious men who reported to her the success of their endeavors; some of them were coquets, who told her about their intrigues; some of them were unhappy persons who exaggerated their misfortunes to her; some of them were satirical and told her malicious jokes that one can say with a low voice but doesn’t dare to say loudly; some of them were honorable do-nothings who have a thousand secrets to make although they do not have a single one; some of them were lovers who told her a part of their adventures […] (Scudéry 1654, 603)[[10]](#endnote-10)

Dorinice explains why such an *amitié galante* can work without creating problems with jealousy:

[T]he jealousie which it inspires is not of the same nature as that which Love doth cause, but on the contrary, it is a sweet pleasing and ingenious Spirit, which helps discourse, which augments friendship, which is never melancholic, lumpish or sad, and which produceth no other effects but such as make men more courtly, more neat, and more complaisant […]. (Scudéry 1653, 180)

Going one step further, Dorinice not only defends the attractions of coquetry of friendship, she also attacks the illusion standing behind the received view of “serious” friendship. As she argues, restricting friendship to a small number of persons is in danger of becoming joyless. In her view, those who decide to be friends only to a small number of persons “are neither pleasing to themselves nor others: For since they cannot be merry with any but those they love, and since there is but one Phoenix in the world which they can find, certainly they find their diversions very seldom” (ibid.). Contrary to Clarice, Dorinice therefore does not seek this kind of friendship: “Nor do I require that solid friendship which is found in the grave Sages of the world, for they are too cold, too dry, and too tyring melancholick […]” (ibid.). In her view, persons who believe that friendship should be restricted to a small number of persons cannot offer what is most important for creating and upholding friendship: “They neglect all petty Complements and duties of friendship, and are alwaies so serious, that they cannot endure any mirth: yet truly my opinion is, that for the most part it is the triviall Civilities and Complements which make the most friendship; and for great and high Serves they are so rare, as it is impossible they should both beget and nourish friendship” (ibid.).

These considerations indicate that the concept of “serious” friendship may carry with it serious shortcomings: The character traits relevant for such kinds of friendship show themselves only in unusual circumstances that occur rarely, while the same character traits do not contribute much to the pleasures of friendship in normal circumstances. By contrast, being content with a somewhat greater emotional distance can bring great benefits because it gives room to the small pleasures and duties that create and invigorate friendships. If so, coquetry of friendship may turn out to be one of the forms of *complaisance honnête* that offer a viable alternative to the morally suspicious forms of self-minded complaisance. At the same time, coquetry of friendship can be understood as a communicative strategy that secures a sphere of personal autonomy exactly because its very aim is to avoid overly strong obligations in personal relations.

5. Conclusion

Maintenon, Pringy and Scudéry thus represent widely diverging responses to the problems of complaisance and dependence in the *Ancien Régime*. What is common to all three thinkers is a commitment to *honnêteté* that is not restricted to the gallant conception but incorporates elements of a bourgeois, moral conception. However, how the demands of morality relate to complaisance is understood in profoundly different ways. For Maintenon, morality offers an independent source of conscience and self-worth, but the practical relevance of this insight is restricted to guided acting from a dependent position acknowledged by the practices of complaisance. Pringy sees morality and complaisance as antagonistic, but this is the outcome of her exclusive focus on detrimental forms of coquetry that are caused by misguided practices of esteem. Finally, Scudéry combines criticism of immoral forms of complaisance with a conception of “honest complaisance.” Moreover, her conception of coquetry of friendship combines a shrewd insight into both the chances offered by a gallant life and the importance of moral restrictions for building up trust. Coquetry of friendship thus hints at a positive conception of complaisance that is compatible with a sphere of personal autonomy.

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1. For this intuition, see Esprit 1677, 1:197-209. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. On coquetry in eighteenth-century literature, see King and Schlick 2008. The three protagonists of the present article are not dealt with there. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Pringy’s dates are not recorded by any of the specialized libraries holding the original editions of her works. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. On the relation between fiction and moral reflection in Scudéry, see Grande 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Maintenon’s *Conversations*, which during her lifetime circulated only in manuscript form, the first publication was in English translation (Maintenon 1758; for the original text, see Maintenon 1828). Maintenon’s persisting interest is also documented by a recent translation of a selection of her texts into modern English (Maintenon 2007). For the sake of unity of style, the French aristocrats covered in this article will all, wherever possible, speak old-fashioned English here. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Pringy’s text has been published anonymously ([Pringy] 1694; see Blanchard 1929). The work was translated into English twice, first anonymously ([Pringy] 1696)—a publication sometimes wrongly attributed to Mary Astell—, and then by Sir Thomas Browne, published after Browne’s death and wrongly attributed to him on the title page as author ([Pringy] 1705). Since the anonymous translation is terminologically closer to the original, I prefer it here over Browne’s more eloquent version. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The names in the English version of the dialogue differ from the names in the French version. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. As Cousin 1858 has done. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. All translations from this work are my own. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Since the passage is omitted in Scudéry 1653, the translation is my own. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)