



Center for the History of Women Philosophers and Scientists  
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## *Virtue* in Madeleine de Souvré, Marquise de Sablé (1599–1678)

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In her collections of *maximes*, Madeleine de Souvré, Marquise de Sablé explores moral psychology, especially the nature of virtue and vice. Like other skeptical and Jansenist members of her salon, Madame de Sablé critiques apparent moral virtue as a mask of vice. External expressions of justice and charity are often the outcropping of hidden pride, which calculates apparently benevolent actions toward others on the basis of favors granted in the past or possible advantages in the future. Irreducible self-interest taints even the most apparently altruistic gestures.

At court the machinations of self-interest disguised as virtuous conduct become virulent. Ambitious courtiers routinely use the rhetoric of loyalty, praise, and gratitude to pry away financial favors and coveted posts from potentates susceptible to flattery.

The salon itself is a privileged setting for the masquerade of egotistical vices disguised as the virtues of politeness. While salon conversation often appears to be a respectful dialogue of equals, it is in fact the occasion for each participant to make herself the center of attention as the one with the greatest wit and the most perceptive ideas. Despite the semblance of mutual goodwill, it is vanity which governs the salon script.

Unlike her fellow salon member La Rochefoucauld, Sablé does not contend that all virtues are the masks of vice. She insists that love and friendship constitute an area where authentic virtue can flourish and where one can avoid moral deception. Similarly, the virtue of faith, rooted in revelation and grace, can give the believer access to a religious truth exempt from error and self-interested manipulation.

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