



Knowledge in Madeleine de Souvré, Marquise de Sablé

John J. Conley

Loyola University of Maryland

An avid reader of Montaigne, Madame de Sablé often expresses skepticism concerning human knowledge in her *maximes* and letters. She frequently affirms the Socratic paradox: that the greatest wisdom is to acknowledge one's ignorance. The authentic result of careful study of an issue should lead the noetic agent to recognize the complexity of the issue, the uncertainties involved, and the tentativeness of one's position. Her critique of knowledge often carries a moral censure. Scientific knowledge is worthless if it does not lead the noetic agent to moral self-knowledge and self-correction. Those who are the most stubborn in clinging to their claims of truth are those who possess the least self-knowledge. A longtime participant in Parisian salons, Sablé notes that the capacity to penetrate the mind of another while concealing one's own state of mind constitutes an especially powerful form of interpersonal knowledge. Those who are skilled in such exercises come to dominate others. The quest for knowledge is intimately tied to questions of language. People are more impressed by the style than the substance of a claim to truth. Consequently, they are easily misled into erroneous conclusions by rhetorical skill and diverted from an objective examination of the evidence concerning a particular question. Religion is one area where skepticism is abandoned. A partisan of the Jansenist movement, Sablé insists that one can come to authentic knowledge of God by submission to the truths of revelation guaranteed by divine authority.

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