THE PRECARIOUS LIVES OF WOMEN IN MADAME DE MAINTENON'S DRAMATIC PROVERBS

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In *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler designates precarity as "that politically induced condition in which certain populations [women and other minority groups] suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (33). While modern-day bodies threatened with precarity may engage in meaningful social action through what Butler describes as resistant assemblies (22), early modern women had limited access to the public sphere and few avenues for seeking justice. Laws and religious practices mandated women's subordination to men, while both governmental and extralegal controls over women's sexual and familial lives reinforced patriarchal structures, making them dependent on male authority. As a result, early modern women's bodies were vulnerable to a wide range of abuses: abduction, unwanted pregnancy, domestic violence, forced monasticism, coerced marriage, and sexual assault.

The precarity of young women's lives in seventeenth-century France is poignantly illustrated in the *Proverbes dramatiques* (1690–1701)—a collectionof short dramatic sketches based on French proverbs, written by Madame de Maintenon, the morganatic wife of Louis XIV, for the girls at the boarding school she and the king had founded at Saint-Cyr. Performed exclusively in the classroom, Maintenon's dramatic proverbs were groundbreaking, as they were the first of their kind to engage an all-female audience while offering a perspective centered on women's experiences. Theater offered the Saint-Cyriennes a platform to portray characters who expressed a range of views on gender roles, often conflicting or contradictory, creating a space in which "feminism naturally finds its place" (Horville 213).

Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a useful lens through which to understand the powerful impact these plays had on the Saint-Cyriennes. In her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," Butler argues that gender is not an innate trait but a socially constructed act, enacted through repetitive behaviors and performances. Gender identity is thus performed; each action, gesture, and choice contribute to its constitution. In the context of early modern France, failure to conform to gendered expectations could result in harsh consequences, particularly for women. As Butler notes, "As a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. . . . indeed, those [especially women] who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished"

(273). Through the lens of Butler's theory, the *Proverbes dramatiques* can be understood as an opportunity for the Saint-Cyriennes to rehearse new gender performances, exploring different roles and perspectives that challenged or subverted the rigid expectations imposed upon them.

Building on Butler's framework, this study argues that Maintenon's plays offered her students a unique opportunity to engage with the precarity of their own lives—particularly the limited agency they had within a patriarchal system. The plays allowed them to embody characters in precarious situations, exploring roles that both reflected and questioned the conditions of women's lives in early modern France. By performing and role-playing precarious situations, the Saint-Cyriennes' words were performative, in the sense that J. L. Austin uses this word: their very utterance constituted an action beyond "'just' . . . saying something" (3). In this performative space, the girls at Saint-Cyr could imagine alternative possibilities for themselves, contemplating new gender performances that offered greater autonomy and agency. Through this process, Maintenon used her dramatic pedagogy not only to highlight the vulnerabilities women faced but also to empower her students to resist these precarities by reimagining their roles in society.

This paper examines how Maintenon's *Proverbes* invited the Saint-Cyriennes to explore four key areas of women's precariousness: abduction, male seducers, maternal financial manipulation, and domestic tyranny. I argue that while the proverbs did not offer idealized portrayals of courtship or marriage, they provided a space for the students to critically analyze the risks and rewards of these traditional roles, encouraging them to rethink their futures in ways that in some ways defied societal expectations. By reimagining gender roles through performance, Maintenon helped her students to negotiate and survive a world in which their vulnerability was all too often ignored.

That said, Maintenon's pedagogical approach to these precarities was not merely theoretical; it was deeply informed by her own experiences of vulnerability and survival in a world that offered little support for women. Born into uncertainty and raised in the shadow of financial ruin and familial instability, Maintenon's early experiences with precarity would influence her pedagogy and vision for the Saint-Cyriennes. To better understand the origins of Maintenon's pedagogy, it is essential to look briefly at her own life before she became the influential figure at Versailles.

Madame de Maintenon and Saint-Cyr

Born on November 27, 1635, in a Niort prison, Françoise d'Aubigné faced an uncertain future.[1] Her father, son of the distinguished Huguenot poet Agrippa d'Aubigné, had been imprisoned for conspiring against Cardinal Richelieu. Françoise's father had squandered the family fortune to such a degree that her mother, Jeanne de Cardilhac, could no longer afford to raise her three children. After his release, the family moved to the Caribbean, but her father died unexpectedly, leaving her mother to struggle. After several years of instability, Françoise went to live with her paternal aunt Louise-Artémise de Villette at the

Château de Mursay, where she spent the most stable years of her childhood. But she did not remain there long before Mme de Neuillan, the mother of Françoise's godmother, handed Françoise over to the Ursuline convent in Paris, where the young girl eventually converted to Catholicism.

In Paris, Françoise met the poet Paul Scarron, who offered to pay her dowry in exchange for marriage. She accepted and married him in 1652. Upon Scarron's death in 1660, she befriended Mme de Montespan, Louis XIV's mistress, who helped Françoise secure a position as governess to the king's illegitimate children in 1669. In 1675, she received royal donations that allowed her to purchase the Maintenon estate, and by the 1680s, she had become Louis XIV's favored mistress, surpassing Montespan in influence. In 1683, after Montespan's fall from grace, Maintenon secretly married Louis XIV.

Although Maintenon never had children of her own, she channeled much of her energy into the education of girls. In 1686, she and Louis XIV founded Saint-Cyr, a boarding school dedicated to providing education to 250 girls from modest noble families, many of whom had lost fathers in military service to the crown. At Saint-Cyr, Maintenon and the dames de Saint Louis (the women tasked with teaching) rejected the harsh, prison-like environments typical of convent schools. Instead, Maintenon designed a curriculum that incorporated not only traditional subjects such as catechism, reading, and arithmetic, but also music, the arts, and theater—fields that were often neglected in favor of more conventional, restrictive education for noble girls.[2]

Maintenon developed her program at Saint-Cyr based on François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon's *Traité de l'éducation des filles* (1687). Fénelon criticized the poor education of women, blaming mothers for raising passive, weak daughters through inadequate schooling: "Rien n'est plus négligé que l'éducation des filles. . . . [O]n suppose qu'on doit donner à ce sexe peu d'instruction" (Fénelon 37). While François Poullain de la Barre (1648–1723) advocated for equal education for both sexes in his treatises *De l'égalité des deux sexes* (1673), *De l'éducation des dames* (1674) and *De l'excellence des hommes* (1675), Fénelon called for reforms to better prepare girls for their societal roles but opposed access to higher education. Fénelon stressed maintaining social hierarchy and preparing women to be good mothers, discouraging intellectual ambition or aspirations to become savants. Maintenon embraced his call for reform, adapting it to her own understanding of how education could empower girls to navigate the complexities of their roles in society.

What stands out in Maintenon's curriculum is its emphasis on conversation and eloquence, likely shaped by both Fénelon's ideas, but also her exposure to the salon culture in her youth. Maintenon's *Proverbes dramatiques* are a collection of forty plays illustrating well-known adages that were not stated in the text itself, so that as in traditional salon games, the pupils could then decipher its message, which would in turn lead to a discussion. The plays, intended for classroom reading and not public performance, featured interconnected plots and multiple scenes (ranging from two to nine), that deviated from classical dramaturgy. Servant characters mirror their masters' behavior to reinforce the moral lesson that

actions have consequences, not only for the girls themselves but also for those whose lives might be negatively impacted by poor choices.

Maintenon restructured the school's theatrical program in response to the controversial staging of Racine's *Esther* at Saint-Cyr. The play, performed by the girls for Louis XIV's court between 1689 and 1690, attracted attention but led to controversy. The young performers' charm drew the interest of male courtiers, some of whom pursued romantic advances, leading critics to label the performance "immodest" and "inappropriate" (Offen 120). This shift reflected the broader changes at Saint-Cyr, where public performances were curtailed and the emphasis moved to more private, pedagogical forms of theater. Despite these shifts, the conversations—dialogues composed for the older girls—and the proverbs remained integral to the reshaping the school's theatrical curriculum (Brown 210), offering a more controlled space for role-play and critical reflection.

The focus on role-play and performance not only provided a creative outlet but also encouraged the Saint-Cyriennes to think critically about their futures. The curriculum at Saint-Cyr was structured on "teaching girls to become thinking things" (Shapiro 255). Although the school's founders intended to prepare girls for roles as virtuous mothers (Lavallée 40), the reality was different: many girls chose to enter the convent rather than marry. According to Dominique Picco, nearly half of the girls born before 1700 who attended Saint-Cyr chose religious life, with 23% dying during their studies and only 21% marrying—contradicting the school's original goal of producing more exemplary mothers for the state (742). This choice highlights the disconnect between the intended outcome of Maintenon's educational program and the real-world decisions made by the girls it served.

Through their engagement with proverbs and role-playing, the Saint-Cyriennes developed a critical awareness of the risks tied to courtship, marriage, and motherhood. While Maintenon and Louis XIV encouraged marriage over the convent, the proverbs presented a more nuanced view, highlighting the precarities of courtship. One such danger is abduction, which the proverbs use to critique the harmful effects of a mother's financial ambition, often isolating her daughter and exposing her to the threat of forced marriage or the loss of inheritance.

Abduction

The proverbs use the theme of abduction to challenge the stereotype of the *mauvaise mère*, a mother who values financial gain from her daughter's marriage over her emotional well-being, often isolating her to safeguard her chastity (Kennedy 83). Isolation directly contributes to a form of precarity, as it renders the daughter more vulnerable to abduction. In seventeenth-century literature, abduction is often romanticized, but in the proverbs, it is depicted as life-threatening.

For the crime of *rapt de séduction* (abduction by seduction), the royal courts could levy severe penalties, underscoring the precariousness of a woman's social and legal status in this period. Abduction, therefore, was a familial crisis with far-reaching consequences, not only for the abductor, but particularly for the young

woman who risked both her social position and her inheritance (see Menchi 1–30). The mother's failure to protect her daughter from this danger, by either over-isolating her or failing to cultivate meaningful relationships within the household, exacerbates the daughter's precarity.

Proverb 31, "Fermer la porte de l'écurie quand les chevaux sont pris," presents the servile class as an important buffer against the precarity of young women, suggesting that maintaining good relationships with servants—those who have access to critical social information—could significantly reduce the risk of abduction. In this proverb, M. Davranche bribes La Violette, a servant, into helping him seduce Mlle de Romilly. Mme Dupuis, Mlle de Romilly's new governess, observes La Violette's suspicious behavior and reports her findings to Mme de Romilly. Unfortunately, Mme de Romilly doesn't listen to the sound advice of her daughter's governess until it's too late; M. Davranche carries her daughter off before Mme de Romilly has a chance to realize her error.

M. Davranche's manipulation of La Violette to help him abduct Mlle de Romilly illustrates how the precarious position of women could be worsened by betrayal from within the household. Yet, when Mme de Romilly's daughter's fate is sealed, it highlights the lack of agency that mothers often had in these situations—further reinforcing the precarity of their daughters' social and familial futures. Maintenon—who speaks from personal experience in this instance—encourages future *mères de famille* to always heed the wise words of a governess.

The notion of precarity is further explored in Proverb 1, where the contrasting relationships between servants and their mistresses underline the fragile balance of power and trust within a household. Mme de Merville's servant, Catherine (underappreciated by her mistress), voluntarily hands her mistress's daughter over to her abductors. Marie, on the other hand (valued by her mistress), when she is bribed by some people want to marry off her mistress's son to a girl who has nothing, refuses to play a role in it, and immediately informs her mistress about the situation before it is too late. Catherine's betrayal, as opposed to Marie's protective loyalty, reflects how the personal security of young women was often contingent upon the goodwill of others. When a household is fraught with tension or neglect, it is at risk of these kinds of betrayals that destabilize not only the daughter's future but the entire family's social position. Maintenon's advice to future mothers underscores the importance of cultivating a relationship with servants that is based on mutual respect and care to avoid such vulnerabilities.

In addition to criticizing short-sighted mothers who mistreated their potential allies, Maintenon also criticizes mothers who isolate their daughters, thus compounding their vulnerability. Proverb 20, "L'eau qui coule vaut mieux que celle qui croupit," contrasting the behavior of two young girls, Clotilde and Émilie, offers a stark critique of isolation as a breeding ground for precarity. While Clotilde enjoys embroidering, dancing, reading books, and receiving visitors, Émilie isolates herself and stays in her room to daydream. Émilie's self-imposed seclusion, which leaves her unprotected from the advances of a man seeking to abduct her, illustrates how isolation—meant to safeguard her chastity—increases her exposure to exploitation. The isolation of young women was often rooted in

the belief that it would protect them from making a misalliance, but in this case, it leads to abduction and the loss of autonomy.

Male Seducers

Throughout the proverbs, Maintenon underscores the importance of caution, particularly in relation to men, and warns women against the societal expectation that they must constantly seek male approval. In a letter to one of the dames de Saint Louis dated August 14, 1696, she writes: "Je vous ai dit dans d'autres temps que vous ne pouviez trop inspirer aux Demoiselles la crainte des hommes, que ce sont nos ennemis, qu'ils ne cherchent qu'à nous ravir ce que nous avons de plus précieux, qui est notre réputation" (*Lettres* 705). This repeated caution reflects the precariousness of a woman's position in a society that defines her value almost entirely through her reputation. Maintenon stresses that women must be vigilant to avoid situations that could lead to the same types of ruin that the victims in the proverbs face. This warning echoes the cautionary tales in *La Princesse de Clèves*, where Mme de Chartres advises her daughter to be "impervious to amorous advances that could bring about her downfall" (Longino 78), situating both the proverbs and the novel within the broader discourse on the social precariousness of women.

Indeed, in a society that judged girls more severely than men, the slightest compromise in their reputation could drastically alter their social and economic prospects. The young women at Saint-Cyr were particularly vulnerable to this precariousness, as their futures depended on their ability to navigate social pitfalls while preserving their reputations. For example, in proverb 10, "Qui prend s'engage," Hortense, a recent graduate of Saint-Cyr, becomes entangled in the consequences of her interactions with Mme de Méranie, a friend of her mother who encourages the young girl to accept expensive gifts from a certain admirer, M. de Mérinval. The gifts she receives from M. de Mérinval initially appear to be harmless, but they entrap her in a morally precarious situation when the suitor believes that his gifts have created a debt of gratitude, leading him to attempt a forced entry into her home. Hortense's realization that her actions have placed her reputation in jeopardy underscores how precarious the social and moral position of young women could be, especially when navigating male attention.

Similarly, proverb 32, "La tricherie en revient à son maître," highlights the dangers of male influence on the lives of young women, not only through the actions of dangerous suitors but also through corrupting maternal figures like Mme Amony. Mme Amony's encouragement to her daughter to reject female friendship in favor of spending time with a man is a direct path toward moral and social danger, echoing the precariousness that Maintenon identifies in her own teachings.[3] This proverb demonstrates that male friendship is, in fact, more dangerous than female friendship. M. Destiral's advice to Mlle Amony to disregard her mother's authority and religious values reveals how male influence undermines a young woman's stability, social cohesion, and sense of security, both within her family and society at large.

Maintenon's own mentor, Fénelon, cautioned: "Dans le choix des divertissements, il faut éviter toutes les sociétés suspectes. Point de garçons avec les filles" (52), reinforcing the idea that women's social vulnerabilities—especially in their interactions with men—were a central concern in maintaining their moral and social security. This advice underscores the precariousness women faced, where their associations and actions were constantly scrutinized and could easily jeopardize their reputations, positioning them as socially and morally fragile figures within the larger structure of society.

Stingy Mothers

Throughout the proverbs, Maintenon critiques the practice of mothers making financial arrangements for their daughters without consulting them, reflecting the precarious social position of women in the seventeenth century, when their futures were often determined by such arrangements. Marriage was not only an emotional decision, but also a crucial economic and social transaction, particularly for young women and their families. In this context, financial instability—whether through poorly chosen matches or the exploitation of daughters for financial gain—was a key source of precarity. As Suzanne Desan notes, "Families used their children's marriages as a means of forging social and economic alliances. . . . Aristocratic parents were quick to exert pressure on their children" (3–4). In such a system, daughters were often treated as commodities, and their precarious futures were directly tied to their ability to secure favorable marriages.

The vulnerability of young women is highlighted by Jesuit priest Thomas Le Blanc, who explained that it was particularly the obedient, submissive daughters who often suffered the most in such arrangements. He notes: « Il est plus facile, mais plus périlleux, de faire consentir les filles à un mariage désavantageux et désagréable. La crainte et la vergogne leur ferment le cœur et la bouche : et ne leur permettent pas d'expliquer leurs désirs ny leurs aversions » (19). This statement illustrates how women's voices were often silenced by the fear and shame that came with defying parental authority, leaving them vulnerable to the economic and social consequences of mismatched marriages. Such dynamics made young women deeply precarious, as their choices were dictated by family interests rather than personal preference.

In proverb 4, "Entre deux selles, la derrière par terre," Maintenon condemns the practice of mothers, like the Marquise de Saint-Clair, who treat marriage as an auction, conducting multiple marriage negotiations to secure the best financial offer for their daughters. This behavior not only commodifies the young women involved but also leaves them in a state of precarious uncertainty, where their futures are shaped by the outcome of these transactions. The Marquise's eventual exposure and the subsequent cancellation of all marriage proposals reveal how quickly such fragile arrangements can unravel, leaving the daughters in a position of social and economic instability.

Similarly, in proverb 8, "Ils s'entendent tous, comme larrons en foire," Maintenon criticizes mothers like Mme Desgranges, who prioritize their own financial interests over the well-being of their daughters. Mme Desgranges's refusal to arrange a marriage for her daughter because of the cost of the dowry

and ceremony reveals a maternal disregard for the daughter's precarious social and financial future. Instead of securing a marriage that could provide stability, Mme Desgranges seeks to preserve her own wealth, thus perpetuating her daughter's precarious position.

However, Maintenon also provides a counterpoint in proverb 24, "On ne perd rien pour attendre," where she offers young women a path toward greater agency in navigating the precariousness of marriage. In this proverb, Mlle de Ménars, who marries the first suitor who asks for her hand and later regrets her decision, is foil to Mlle de Mareuil, who waits for the perfect suitor to come along. Mlle de Mareuil resists her mother's pressure to marry hastily, choosing instead to wait for a more desirable match:

> MLLE DE MAREUIL. Il vaut mieux n'en point avoir que d'en prendre un mauvais [établissement].
> MME DE MAREUIL. On dira que personne n'a voulu de vous.
> MLLE DE MAREUIL. Je ne fais point dépendre mon bonheur de l'opinion des autres ; et puisque vous me permettez de dire la mienne, je crois qu'il ne faut rien précipiter dans une affaire d'où dépend tout le reste de la vie.
> MME DE MAREUIL. Mais, vous vieillissez tous les jours !
> MLLE DE MAREUIL. J'en serai plus raisonnable, et celui qui me voudra aussi. (209)[4]

Her decision to wait, while unconventional for the time, reflects Maintenon's belief that young women should be given the autonomy to choose a marriage based on respect and compatibility, rather than financial necessity. Mlle de Mareuil's eventual success in finding a marriage where she does not have to pay a dowry is portrayed as an example of the kind of agency that can protect young women from the risks and vulnerabilities associated with transactional marriage.

In this sense, Maintenon's advice also highlights the precariousness of early marriages, particularly for girls who were not adequately prepared for the responsibilities of household management or who faced the dangers of early pregnancy (Gibson 46, 70).[5] By delaying marriage until the age of twenty, Maintenon sought to protect the Saint-Cyriennes from the physical and social risks associated with marriage at a young age, offering them a more secure path toward adulthood. This approach can be seen as a form of resistance against the social structures that perpetuated women's precarity by treating them as pawns in family alliances and economic transactions.

Domestic Tyranny

Throughout the proverbs, Maintenon emphasizes the precariousness of marriage for women, often likening it to a form of slavery, where a woman's autonomy and well-being are sacrificed to a husband's tyrannical authority. She warns the Saint-Cyriennes against the dangers of surrendering themselves to the power of husbands who dominate, control, and dictate their lives in ways that leave them vulnerable to both emotional and physical abuse. This sense of vulnerability is deeply tied to the patriarchy, in which women's identities and

futures were frequently subordinated to the authority of male figures, especially husbands.

In his treatises, Poullain de la Barre criticizes male tyranny, arguing that a husband's authority, when based on custom rather than on reason, is unjust and inhumane. He states that, "All other authority [besides that of reason] between them [a husband and his wife] is tyrannical and usurpatory" (277), a perspective that aligns with Maintenon's cautionary messages in the proverbs, which frequently critique husbands who act as tyrants over their wives. For example, in proverb 7, "Bon cheval de trompette ne s'effraye point du bruit," Maintenon discourages young women from acquiescing to husbands who seek to dominate them. In this proverb, M. de Mauvieux forces his wife to move to a distant province. Mme de Solignac's advice to her daughter, Mme de Mauvieux, to stand up to her controlling husband is ultimately undermined by the socio-political reality: the husband's power is legitimized by royal decree. M. de Fremilly, a friend of the family, reminds Mme de Solignac that her daughter's husband is her "master" and that any effort to intervene is futile (99). Here, Maintenon underscores the systemic nature of male dominance and the deep precarity women experience when they find themselves under the thumb of such tyranny. Marriage, in this context, becomes a potential prison for women, where any effort to resist or reclaim personal agency seems futile against the backdrop of absolute male authority.

In proverb 35, "Où la chèvre est liée, il faut qu'elle broute," Maintenon illustrates the regrets of women who make rash decisions and find themselves trapped by their own decisions: Mme de Choin becomes an unhappy nun and Mme de Mercour an unhappy wife. Mme de Mercour, who marries a wealthy but tyrannical man, represents the precariousness of marrying for financial security without considering the broader consequences for one's autonomy and well-being. Upon realizing her mistake, Mme de Mercour appeals to her friend for guidance, but the friend's advice—"Il est le maître; les lois sont contre vous, et vous n'avez point d'autre parti à prendre qu'à vouloir ce qui lui plaira" (293)—reinforces the legal and social forces that work against a woman's ability to assert herself.[6] Maintenon's use of this proverb speaks to the harsh realities of women's lives in a patriarchal society, where their security is precariously tied to the whims of their husbands, and their ability to exert control over their own lives is often obstructed by entrenched norms and laws. This proverb likewise speaks to the danger of taking the veil without fully understanding all the implications of that commitment. For Maintenon, each lifestyle had both advantages and disadvantages. Armed with all the necessary information, the Saint-Cyriennes could choose to become "bonnes femmes" or "bonnes religieuses"—a limited choice to say the least,[7] but the proverbs at least made the Saint-Cyriennes better informed to make the decision.

Maintenon's proverbs also challenge women to resist falling into patterns of passive submission. In proverb 23, "Qui se fait brebis, le loup la mange," Maintenon warns the Saint-Cyriennes of the dangers of domestic abuse, as exemplified by Madame Gautier, who allows her husband to dominate her every decision, from buying formal dresses to attending social events. As Maintenon's

mouthpiece, Madame Gautrot tries to convince Madame Gautier to put her foot down occasionally:

> MME GAUTROT. … J'ai épousé un homme qui a de la naissance, du bien et une assez bonne humeur ; mais il faut tenir ferme avec lui, car sans cela il exigerait bien des choses que je ne veux pas faire.
> MME GAUTIER. Comment ! Est-ce que vous résistez à votre mari ?
> MME GAUTROT. Oui, vraiment, je lui résiste : ne résistez-vous point ? (200)

Sadly, Madame Gautier does not heed her friend's advice, and her husband finally forces her to retire to the countryside, where she will never see her friends and family again.

In this proverb, Maintenon advises women to assert some control in their relationships, even if this goes against the normative gender roles of the time. While she did not seek to dismantle the existing hierarchy or question a husband's authority over his wife, she urged women to resist their prescribed role of silent obedience—particularly in the face of tyrannical husbands who dictated their attire, social interactions, and living arrangements. The precariousness of a woman's position within marriage is underscored by the tragic consequences faced by those like Madame Gautier, who fail to push back against domestic oppression.

By encouraging women to stand up for themselves in small, seemingly trivial ways—resisting the tyranny of a husband's control over even their personal dress or social interactions—Maintenon challenges the cultural norm of women's absolute obedience to their husbands. This kind of resistance, though modest by modern feminist standards, was a significant challenge to the patriarchal social order of the seventeenth century. In a context where marriage was both a social contract and a legal institution that left women economically and socially dependent on their husbands, Maintenon's proverbs remind young women of the precariousness they face when they allow their lives to be entirely dictated by the will of a husband.

Conclusion

The theme of precarity is woven throughout Maintenon's proverbs, illustrating the precariousness of women's lives in a patriarchal society, particularly within the institution of marriage. Throughout her counsel to the Saint-Cyriennes, Maintenon highlights the vulnerability that comes with being subject to a husband's unchecked authority, a vulnerability that is deeply rooted in the patriarchy. Her proverbs serve as a cautionary reminder that a woman's security—her emotional, physical, and social well-being—often hinges on her compliance with a system that diminishes her autonomy. Whether through the tyrannical control of a husband, a dangerous suitor, or an overprotective mother, the proverbs paint a bleak picture of the consequences women face when they are unable to navigate or resist the patriarchal order.

Given the precarities of courtship, marriage, and motherhood, it is not surprising that many of the Saint-Cyriennes rejected marriage in exchange for the security and comfort of the religious community. The least precarious option for many young women remained the convent until the mid-eighteenth century. As Barbara R. Woshinsky argues, "the convent offered an alternative for women, a feminine space where they were sometimes able to achieve a degree of agency and autonomy—sheltered, if never wholly free, from the male gaze and male control" (2). The cloister offered women an escape from arranged marriage, and a way for them to continue their studies (Rapley 19).

While any number of factors might account for the Saint-Cyriennes' decision to reject marriage and opt for convent life (including Saint-Cyr's close connection to neighboring religious communities), Maintenon's portrayal of marriage and motherhood did not entice many of them to explore life outside the convent. Although Maintenon sought to send the Saint-Cyriennes out into the world as future *bonnes mères de famille*, rehearsal dresses future habits—in this case, quite literally, as a majority of the Saint-Cyriennes became nuns. Clearly the convent life was a place for women to gain self-affirmation, a form of independence and more importantly, it became a place for women to gain an education. Moreover, convent life—an inclusive, safe space for women—was the only space in which women could safeguard themselves from looming precarity.

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Notes

[1] For biographies in English, see Bryant and Buckley. For a biography in French, see Desprat. For an interesting historical novel, see Chandernagor (available in both English and French). See also Da Vinha and Maral, a collection of essays that recognize the influential political role that Maintenon played at Versailles.

[2] For more information on Saint-Cyr and the dames de Saint-Louis, see the introduction in Faguet. See also Picco, "Les dames de Saint-Louis" and the introduction to the *Proverbes dramatiques* in Gethner and Kennedy.

[3] The idea that women were incapable of true friendship was prevalent throughout the seventeenth century; what is worse, women were often depicted as rivals in literature. For a helpful study on women and friendship, see Legault.

[4] Citations of Maintenon's proverbs refer to Gethner and Kennedy's edition unless otherwise noted.

[5] The marriageable age for girls was twelve and fourteen for boys. In a traditional marriage, a woman gave birth twelve months after marriage and every two years after the first childbirth.

[6] Compare with Maintenon's words in "Avis à Mme La Princesse de Savoie" in *Conseils et instructions*: "Ils sont naturellement tyranniques, et veulent des plaisirs, de la liberté, et que les femmes y renoncent ; ils sont les maîtres : il n'y a qu'à souffrir de bonne grâce" (164).

[7] See Maintenon's letter composed to Mme de Fontaines in 1691 in *Lettres de Madame de Maintenon*, 137.

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