Morality and Media in 17th Century France: The Collège Mazarin and the Maison Royale de Saint-Louis[1][2]

A powerful premodern woman could draw from a range of archetypes to brand her public image. A queen might build a matronly image as the figurative mother of the nation; a holy woman as a spiritual mystic; a noblewoman as a horse-riding Amazon. Françoise D'Aubigné, or Madame de Maintenon, was not a queen, and so she could not be mother to the nation. Nor did she take monastic vows. (As her father was an equerry, the "Amazon" image might have worked.) Instead, when she became royal mistress, she drew on her earlier role as governess of Louis XIV's children to fashion herself as an educator in the interests of nation and crown. She founded and oversaw the Maison royale de Saint-Louis at Saint-Cyr, which opened for the 1686 school year.

Yet Maintenon was not the only high-ranking representative of the monarchy to consecrate an elite school in the 1680s to serve Bourbon interests.[3] Another was the Cardinal Mazarin (1602–1661), the head minister of Louis XIV, who founded the Collège Mazarin. Louis XIV, along with these two counselors, Mazarin and Maintenon, used education policy to solve two interrelated problems: to integrate newly acquired provinces into the French state both administratively and culturally, and to bolster the impoverished nobility who paid dearly for his military conquests.[4]

By comparing Saint-Cyr with this contemporaneous institution, the Collège Mazarin, we can better understand the aims of the monarchy, as well as the intellectual, social, and political context of elite education out of which so much baroque theater, including Moreau's *Esther*, emerged. The political goals of these two schools, along with Maintenon's image as an educational theorist and practitioner, shed light on the performing arts produced within this pedagogical milieu. To that end, this essay makes two main points: First, Saint-Cyr can be considered as part of a broader trend of the absolutist state attempting to supplant the church as the sponsor of elite education. Second, school theater served as one aspect of moral instruction, a goal around which school curricula and institutional procedures were organized during the pre-Enlightenment.

My first clue that these schools were of comparable status and formed a common educational project was the observation that some families began to send their sons to the Collège Mazarin and their daughters to Saint-Cyr. A fascinating example here is a branch of the Aumale family: the improbably named Scholastique-Florence d'Aumale enrolled in Madame de Maintenon's school in 1732, while her brother Charles-François d'Aumale was sent to the Collège Mazarin in 1734.

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[1] I thank Berin Szoka and Will Schoderbek for their hospitality in Paris, which made the research for this essay possible.

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[3] On Maintenon as a political figure, see: Da Vinha and Grande, *Toute la cour était étonnée*, 12.

[4] On Saint-Cyr in particular, see: Milhet, Lieutenant-colonel, "Saint-Cyr, Haut lieu voué à l'éducation," 99.

Now, the Aumale clan's old noble title conferred status on the family, but they experienced a precarious financial position relative to other chatelains. Louis XIV's own foreign policy may have played a role in draining the family coffers, for nobles across France had depleted their fortunes to fund military regiments for Louis XIV's territorial expansion. The Collège Mazarin and the Maison Royale therefore educated the children of poor nobles of high birth whose fathers either no longer had the resources to hire private tutors or had been killed in action.

The intentions of Mazarin and Maintenon, however, seem to have been more than philanthropic: by extending royal largesse to young nobles, they effectively bought the loyalty of an entire social class who would constitute a future base of political support. The French aristocracy was not a genealogical fact of nature, but instead a class whose identity was shaped through social policy. Consider again the family of young Scholastique-Florence and Charles-François: specifically, their aunt, named Marie-Jeanne d'Aumale. Marie-Jeanne had joined Saint-Cyr as a *demoiselle* in 1690 and, after receiving a comprehensive education, she soon became the private secretary to Madame de Maintenon herself.[5] Marie-Jeanne accompanied Maintenon through life—her journal has become an important source for historians studying the school—as well as through death, for it was she who announced to Maintenon the expiration of the latter's secret husband Louis XIV on the morning of September 1, 1715.[6]

Mazarin had more explicit aims of cultural diplomacy in founding his school. Through those wars of conquest that had cost the nobility so dearly, the so-called Sun King had expanded the Bourbon kingdom and consolidated French control over new territories. The Cardinal Mazarin had helped broker advantageous peace agreements including the Treaty of Münster (1648) and the conference of Pheasant Island (1659), which settled peace with Habsburg Spain in part through the young king's first marriage, to his Spanish princess cousin. To solidify this successful legacy, Mazarin made provisions in his will to found a school serving elite boys—preferably aristocrats, but bourgeois if space allowed.

This school, the Collège Mazarin, soon became known as the Collège des Quatre-Nations, for its student body was drawn from four territorial acquisitions: former Italian and Savoyard lands, parts of Alsace and Franche-Comté (conquered after Mazarin's death), Flanders (Artois, Luxembourg), and Roussillon (Sardinian lands). While Louis XIV's military architect Sébastien Le Prestre, Marquis of Vauban, secured these new frontier provinces through an "iron wall" of fortresses spaced along the border, the monarchy also turned to the cultural integration of these provinces through elite education.

The Collège Mazarin opened two years after Saint-Cyr, in 1688, with the aim of subordinating local elites and transforming them into loyal servants of the French state. The school offered full scholarships to sixty boys from the nobility of those four regions. With its palatial building designed by architect Louis Le Vau, its cutting-edge Cartesian philosophy curriculum, and its relatively high professorial salaries, it became almost immediately the most desirable collège, or elite classical high school, affiliated with the University of Paris.[7] (The complex still stands: situated directly across the Pont des Arts from the Louvre, it currently houses the Bibliothèque Mazarine as well as the five academies, including the Académie Française, of the Institut de France.)

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[5] Bryant, *Queen of Versailles*, 8.

[6] D'Aumale, "Marie Jeanne D'aumale"; Aumale, *Les Cahiers*; Bourrilly, "Souvenirs sur Madame de Maintenon."

Cardinal Mazarin had hoped, as the school's founding charter enumerated, that "…all these Provinces would become French by their own Inclination as much as they currently are by His Majesty's domination."[8] They could do so by providing opportunities for acquiring wealth and status through service to the monarchy. Over time, the school became quite successful at integrating students into state administration, thereby consolidating the modern borders of metropolitan France. One boy from Besançon in Franche-Comté, Claude-Antoine Bocquet de Courbouzon (1682–1762), attended the late Cardinal's school in Paris and subsequently became a French magistrate.[9] (Indeed, over time, Saint-Cyr also began to function more like the Collège Mazarin by admitting girls from far-flung recently conquered provinces in order to integrate them into French society.[10]) Other students came from the more central areas of Normandy or Ile-de-France and traveled the frontiers of the kingdom, like the aforementioned Charles-François d'Aumale.[11] After studying mathematics in school, Charles-François became the engineer-in-chief overseeing the citadel of Besançon and later rebuilt the citadel of Saint-Tropez as director of fortifications of Provence.

Mazarin wanted more for these youth than successful careers in the French administration. The monarchy also had to teach provincial elites to adopt French "*mœurs et coutumes,*" which we might translate as "customs and mores," "moral behavior," or even simply "culture." Students at the school learned virtuous manners by studying models worthy of emulation from Latin classics and Christian morality, as well as by attending chapel as a class. One regent (professor) at the school, Nicolas Theru, explained in the preface to the textbook he wrote and used, "In having this little Work printed, we had no other design but to instruct young people in their duties, to train them in piety, and to distance them from evil;" scripture would "inspire in young people wisdom, piety, the fear of God, the love of virtue, and the fright of vice" and make "an excellent protective against the corruption of the world…"[12] Schoolmasters tried to maintain airtight control over the urban popular and elite literary cultures—including theater, literature, and music—to which students were exposed.

Attempting to keep students on a virtuous path meant disciplining the ones who strayed, too. Teachers at Mazarin drew up lists of "diligent" and "lazy" students and submitted them to the school's grandmaster. The highest-achieving students might be exempt from submitting their course notes for approval that week, and the top rhetoric student would be awarded a book prize. But a young man drawn into vice—especially a gambling, drinking, or prostitution recidivist—could face expulsion, banishment from Paris, and relegation to his home province. The moral discipline of students extended far beyond the classroom, as schoolmasters sought to delimit students' experiences of pleasure. Faculty worked closely with the police lieutenant general's "*bureau des mœurs*," or vice squad, to clear out the vendors hawking alcoholic *limonade* and sweets away from the school gates and to enforce a ban on neighborhood cafés from selling liquor to students. Their notion of "mores" included other aspects of sensual pleasure as well: what we understand today as gender and sexual diversity. With increasing might through the late 1710s and 1720s, faculty and police worked in concert to close brothels in the neighborhood of the school and to prevent prostitutes from soliciting the young men's pocket money. And this powerful administrative team tracked and denounced so-called "sodomites" to prevent students from being "corrupted" into a "taste for" sexual relations with men.[13] While detailed school disciplinary records were destroyed in the French Revolution, extant sources indicate that faculty confiscated forbidden books that contained irreligious, pornographic, or immature themes. (One group of boys even made a book, unfortunately no longer extant, of adolescent rhymes set to the tunes of their chapel psalms.) By restricting students' access to media, especially print, teachers hoped to prevent the morals of immaculate youths from decaying into those of libertine adults. The results of this moral education at the Collège Mazarin were, as might be expected, mixed: in the cosmopolitan capital, with its increasingly vibrant print culture spreading heterodox ideas and with the many pleasures of urban civil society, teachers could not keep students locked inside the school gates forever—nor could they keep the Enlightenment out.[14]

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[7] Brockliss, "The Moment of No Return: The University of Paris and the Death of Aristotelianism"; Compère, *Les collèges français*; Compère, *Du collège au lycée (1500-1850)*.

[8] "Contrat du fondation son Monseigneur le Cardinal Mazarin du College et Academie des Quatre Nations soubs le titre de Mazarini du 6 Mars 1661," *Collège Mazarin registre des délibérations*, Archives Nationales MM 462 ff1-8. Translation my own; cited in Bernard (2022), 128.

[9] Ferrer, "Claude-Antoine Bocquet de Courbouzon (1682–1762): 'Un Aigle Qui s'Approchait de La Sphère Du Soleil.'" Courbouzon's townhouse today houses liberal arts departments of the Université de Franche-Comté.

[10] Picco, "Origines géographiques des Demoiselles de Saint-Cyr," 119.

[11] Faucompret, *Les pensionnaires du Collège Mazarin ou des quatre nations, 1688–1794*, 235; Unknown, "Répertoire Chronologique d'admissions."

[12] "Preface," Theru, *Instruction des jeunes gens*.

Analogous dynamics played out at the Maison Royale de Saint-Louis in the town of Saint-Cyr. Unlike Cardinal Mazarin, Madame de Maintenon was able to administer her school closely and effectively due in part to the advantage of, well, not being deceased. By many accounts, she took an active role in designing curricula, in visiting classes, and in mentoring the demoiselles and instructors alike. She also wrote on educational philosophy and developed lessons in the form of "dialogues, conversations, lectures, proverbs, maxims, and commentaries."[15]

The purpose of Saint-Cyr, according to the printed school constitution handbook called the *Règle* or *Rule,* was to prepare girls of the impoverished nobility "for the two principle estates of [their] gender": either to remain "excellent virgins for the cloisters," or to become "pious mothers out in the world."[16] Few male educational theorists in the early modern period discussed the importance of women's education.[17] One exception was Archbishop Fénelon, who acted as spiritual mentor to Maintenon until their falling-out over a religious dispute and who may have been inspired by the writings of her grandfather. Fénelon emphasized that a woman's education should help her with "the education of her children…, of the behavior—moral and otherwise—of servants, of the household economy…" And so noblewomen such as those at the Maison Royale needed to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic. According to Fénelon, noblewomen generally needed neither the military arts, nor Latin and rhetoric, nor philosophy and theology.[18] The demoiselles of Saint-Cyr, however, did study theology, astronomy, Latin—and arts including music and dance.[19] After the deaths of their husbands, many women would adopt management of their family estates and businesses in their own names, and they played a recognized role in transmitting virtuous culture to their children.

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[13] See chapter 2 of Bernard, "Administering Morals."

[14] On the relationship between collège faculty and the Enlightenment, see: Noguès, *Une archéologie du corps enseignant*; on the school experiences of future Enlightenment philosophers, see: Ben Messaoud, "Un professeur de D'Alembert"; Ben Messaoud, "Les 'Observations' de Crevier Sur 'L'Esprit Des Lois.'"

[15] Bryant, *Queen of Versailles*, 74; Maintenon, *Comment la sagesse vient aux filles*.

[16] Maintenon, Brinon, and Maison royale de Saint-Louis, *Regle et constitutions de Saint-Cyr*. Translation my own.

[17] Grell and Ramière de Fortanier, *L'éducation des jeunes filles nobles en Europe*, 7.

The *demoiselles* would accomplish this latter goal through pious exercises, catechism and religious instruction—and labor, so they might be accustomed to work. The institution's proscriptive *Règle* or *Rule* imposed austerity in architecture just as in morals. Of the school interiors, the *Rule* forbade alterations to a style of renunciation, stripped bare: "Do not suffer the least ornament," it wrote; "let all exude poverty and simplicity."[20] Maintenon exhibited similar austerity in the Attic rhetorical style in which she had the *demoiselles* taught, a simple approach with no extraneous words.[21] By practicing silence and modesty, and by distancing themselves from the temptations of court, girls could cultivate a spiritual form of ego-death, or "*la mort à soy-même*."[22] For, as the *Rule* warns: "You are at the gates of Versailles, exposed to the most violent temptations."[23] Whereas the Collège Mazarin regents and governors demonstrated near-constant worry about the possibility that young boys would become corrupted into urban vices, Maintenon and her teachers fretted about the exposure of girls to the habits of the nearby royal court at Versailles.

Maintenon was one to know, for she traveled frequently between the court and her school where, in the estimation of historian Mark Bryant, she spent two to three days per week. The three-mile journey from the royal stables to the school could have been made in well under an hour by coach, and there were numerous connections between the school and Versailles from the very start. Jean Racine and Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, both literary giants and royal historiographers, edited the school *Constitutions* for typographical errors.[24] Maintenon's protégé Michel Chamillart, the school's chief finance officer, became the comptroller of finances for the kingdom in 1699. And the king himself would pray in the school chapel on Sundays, if he visited.[25] Balancing the advantages of proximity to court with the dangers it posed, the school brought together the monarchy's foreign policy with court society. However, the goals of state educational policy and the all-too-human drives of courtiers sometimes came into conflict. Indeed, these collided spectacularly during performances of *Esther*.

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[18] Fénelon, Traité de l'éducation des filles, ch. 11 "Instruction des femmes sur leurs devoirs," cited in Grell and Ramière de Fortanier, 23. Translation my own.

[19] Bryant, *Queen of Versailles*, 74.

[20] Maintenon, Brinon, and Maison royale de Saint-Louis, *Regle et constitutions de Saint-Cyr*, 28.

[21] Boiron, "Mme de Maintenon, Professeure de Stylistique."

[22] Maintenon, Brinon, and Maison royale de Saint-Louis, *Regle et constitutions de Saint-Cyr*, 44. (This theme is often repeated, and fits Maintenon's austerity: due to the inconveniences of marriage, Maintenon advised her students elsewhere that young women must "forget their selves": Maintenon, *Comment la sagesse vient aux filles*, 45.

[23] Maintenon, Brinon, and Maison royale de Saint-Louis, *Regle et constitutions de Saint-Cyr*, 44.

[24] Piéjus, "Racine, Mme de Maintenon et Saint-Cyr," 48.

[25] Bryant, *Queen of Versailles*, 21; 73–74.

To understand why, consider the purpose of school theater. Moral education could be accomplished with both the carrot and the stick, and theater was the carrot. At the end of the year, students in early modern elite schools enjoyed taking a break from their typical studies to perform in a play during the end-of-year festivities for the distribution of prizes to top students.[26] Often, rhetoric faculty at collèges would write their own plays, in the belief that theater could both "please and instruct."[27] As the musicologist Anne Piéjus describes:

> "…[T]he entire collège theater… aims at a certain form of pleasure... Pleasure with a thousand facets for the students, between the satisfaction of surpassing oneself, scholarly emulation, the joy of fully immersing oneself - often under the best conditions - dramatic play, singing, or dancing. This *delectare* [delighting] proceeds from an education of emulation, rooted in the self, in a direct connection with court society."[28]

In this account, pleasure, rather than an end unto itself, served as a vehicle for learning virtue. As père Jouvancy put it in his essential treatise on education, the *Ratio discendi*: "Tragedy must serve to shape mores…."[29] Some characters seem to have been intended as models worthy of virtuous emulation; Esther is a prime example. Badly behaved characters, even at their worst, are useful to think with and against, such as Corneille's wicked Cleopatra.[30] In either case, theater could make a powerful statement—one that operated, I think, on two phenomenological levels at once. First, by performing the plays, students may have felt out what it might be like to embody the virtues and vices of their characters and learn through emulation; second, the noble parents, classmates, and communities of the student-performers could attend the shows, thereby learning moral lessons from their seats in the audience.

Theater was thus a mass medium, and it merited tight control. Maintenon was not just the patron of the two Saint-Cyr tragedies; in 1697, she also famously expelled a troupe of Italian actors from Paris after being caricatured in one of their shows, *La Fausse Prude*.[31] The *Rule* instructed the community at Saint-Cyr: "Avoid curiosity; read only what is given to you by your superiors."[32] And the school constitutions mandated: "Do nothing to attract people through festivals and spectacles ; you are not constituted to sing like canons, nor to do a grand mass that attracts the public…"[33] This austerity hardly sounds like the attitude of a gregarious courtier; these are instead the stipulations of a leader backtracking after scandal.

The shame of Esther's premiere illustrates, scholars have noted, the inescapable anxieties about gender and sexuality that school theater provoked. At boys' collèges, performing school theater posed challenges to the norms of propriety. According to the Jesuit tradition, women should not appear as actresses onstage; to include female characters, then, entailed putting boys in women's dress—not a palatable proposition for every rhetoric instructor. Some schools therefore attempted to write plays without any women at all—which inevitably ended up boring their audiences. Additionally, it was deemed unfitting for schools to depict characters whose tragic suffering was due to love.[34] Under such restrictions, what subjects remained appropriate to perform?

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[26] Faucompret, *Les pensionnaires du Collège Mazarin ou des quatre nations, 1688–1794*.

[27] Piéjus, *Plaire et instruire*.

[28] Piéjus, *Plaire et instruire,* 18; see also: Piéjus, *Le théâtre des demoiselles*.

[29] Jouvancy Ratio discendi, cited in: Prest, *Theatre under Louis XIV*, 45.

[30] Prest, *Theatre under Louis XIV*, chapter 2.

[31] Grande, "Fausse prude ou vraie ingénue: Mme de maintenon et la scène.," 205.

[32] Maintenon, Brinon, and Maison royale de Saint-Louis, *Regle et constitutions de Saint-Cyr*, 48. Translation my own.

[33] Maintenon, Brinon, and Maison royale de Saint-Louis, 29.

There were a few common themes. School theater could treat the dilemmas facing men in war, as well as the homosocial friendships between men. One of the most popular theatrical settings was the Biblical story of David, Jonathan, and Saul: four of the first five years of school theater (as well as a revival of the topic in 1741 and 1745) at the Collège Mazarin treated this subject from various angles, and *Jonathas* by Joseph-François Duché de Vancy was performed at Saint-Cyr in 1699. Not until 1740 did the Collège Mazarin perform a comedy. David and Jonathan had long been considered as paradigmatic examples of Aristotelian "perfect friendship."[35] This category of male affection tapped into compositional elements of courtly opera without contravening rules of propriety.[36] Musicologists have suggested that successive settings of the story of David and Jonathan from the 1680s to the 1720s presented increasingly chaste depictions of intense male friendships. (According to this interpretation, Handel's adaptation *Saul* was most repressed of all in the broader social context of the raids on queer English molly-houses that coincided with the policing of sodomites around the collèges of Paris's Latin Quarter.)[37] The specters of gender deviance and male intimacy haunted these productions.

Saint-Cyr experienced problems of a different nature. In order to practice the musical and theatrical arts that might one day please their future husbands, the *demoiselles* should have found performing in public useful. But putting unmarried girls on display for an audience of leering male courtiers provoked a scandal—out of public embarrassment, certainly. But the incident also represented a pedagogical failure, for the school had failed to protect the integrity of the *demoiselles*'s virtuous femininity.

The incident around the premiere of *Esther* suggests how deeply Maintenon was caught between the competing ideals and mechanics of the school and the court. As a school ultimately aimed at shoring up state power, Saint-Cyr in theory should have exercised tighter control over media, just as the monarchy sought to censor the production of print. It should have liberated young minds through carefully controlling their exposure to free-thinking ideas and keeping the worldly pleasures of court libertines at a remove. Yet the genre of school theater could not break through the paradoxes inherent to its institutional context. As Piéjus continues:

> "The supposed pleasure of performing and of being seen, regularly denounced [by austere religious opponents of school theater]… prompted the greatest caution from schoolmasters aware of possible excesses… all else being equal, cultivating the taste for appearance in an aesthetically regulated framework, as in a tragedy with danced interludes, is nevertheless merely a transposition to the youthful world of courtly spectacles where the princes of blood were seen dancing."[38]

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[34] This paragraph is drawn from: Prest, *Theatre under Louis XIV*.

[35] For example, a Jesuit philosophy teacher at the Collège of Reims interpreted this tradition for his students and readers: Cerisiers, *Ionathas, ou Le vray amy*.

[36] Cowart, *The Triumph of Pleasure*, 126; Henderlight, "Marc-Antoine Charpentier's David et Jonathas," 187.

[37] Henderlight, "Marc-Antoine Charpentier's David et Jonathas"; Psychoyou and Raphaëlle Legrand, "De la sublimation en musique."

[38] Piéjus, *Plaire et instruire*, 18. Translations my own.

The premiere of *Esther* fell victim to a contradiction: at a school founded on a monastic model yet close to Versailles, school theater could not easily serve both the school's pedagogical aims alongside the political aims and social desires of courtiers at the same time.

Maintenon became more conservative in her attitudes to theater in the wake of this show. Nevertheless, she seems to represent the end of a devout generation rather than the start of a new era of moral control. What Handel biographer Victor Schoelcher wrote in relation to the London stage may apply equally to the French court: "But in proportion as religion lost its empire, it adopted severer laws in order to maintain an imposing exterior…"[39] The zeal of school productions belied how easily students might later attend—or even write and perform in—heterodox theater in the city.

This, then, was the great contradiction of collège drama: it taught students not only to appreciate, but also to participate.[40] The generation born in the 1720s and attending such schools as these would break free from the moral strictures of the established absolutist patronage system as the Old Regime of moral tragedy began to falter in the face of urban theater. Writers observed this shift and celebrated it. One young playwright of the next generation, Claude-Pierre Patu, wrote to a friend in 1751:

> "Corneille, Racine, Voltaire, Moliere…? Oh fie, then: these latter are still good for small works. In a secondary position, fine; but to attract a crowd, …long live our lovely moderns."[41]

It was this world of the schools of Maintenon and Mazarin—the moral vision for their students, the social policies of the absolutist monarchy, the attempts at controlling media—against which Enlightenment writers, and their crowds of followers, would soon rebel.

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[39] Schœlcher, *The Life of Handel*, 109.

[40] On popular participation in Enligthenment culture, see: Bell, "For a New Social History of the Enlightenment."

[41] Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France MS 1277 f°227, November 10, 1751.

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