

Esther, Madame de Maintenon and Analogies to Contemporary Life, Theater and Social Media

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The January 26, 1689, performance of Racine's *Esther* at Saint-Cyr was both a success and a sensation. From our perspective, some 335 years later, it is important to understand the distinction. The success is easy to document. First performed for the king and a select audience of courtiers, the performance was repeated five more times in 1689 and another seven times in 1690.¹ Madame de La Fayette, alert to the play's apparent coded references to current court politics and intrigue, declared it a triumph: "The play was better than anything of the kind ever written, the actresses—even playing men—left all the famous ladies of the stage far behind."² Shortly after the premiere, Madame de Sevigny wrote, "I cannot tell you how much I enjoyed this play," and she recalled telling the king, "Sire, I am charmed; what I have seen is beyond words."³

Written at the request of Madame de Maintenon, morganatic wife of Louis XIV, *Esther* was carefully tailored to reinforce the moral curriculum Maintenon hoped to teach at Saint-Cyr, the academy she founded for impoverished girls and young women born to noble families. Drama was central to her pedagogical method, but an earlier performance of Racine's *Andromache*, full of unrequited desires, had touched on themes and passions too agitating for the young women. *Esther*, which brought a reluctant Racine out of retirement as a playwright, was designed to avoid all of that. It was, as Maintenon requested, a biblical drama, "something moral or historical" but without "any love in it."⁴ At least, not the kind of love that would have discomfited an audience well aware that a school full of eligible but impecunious young women was an open invitation to scandal.

But *Esther*, successfully staged with elaborate sets and sumptuous costumes, may also have been *too* successful—which led to it becoming a sensation, subject to scrutiny, gossip and invidious speculations. Those details are harder to tease out and, given the interpersonal complexity and self-reflexive vigilance of court life under Louis XIV, it is not likely that any major cultural offering would have been received with sincere and unanimous approval. The criticism of *Esther* was manifold, from many sources, and it points to the deeper unease with theater, piety, and decorum that coursed through French society during the seventeenth century.

The Mother Superior of Saint-Cyr, Madame Durand, was apparently disturbed by the grandeur of the show, which included three changes of set and costumes, the latter designed by Maintenon herself.⁵ The parish priest of Versailles, Francois Hébert, channeled longstanding anxieties about

¹ Theresa Varney Kennedy. "From Stage to Cloister: Madame de Maintenon's Classroom Drama," *Yale French Studies* 130 (2016). 114.

² Cited in Veronica Buckley. *The Secret Wife of Louis XIV: Françoise d'Aubigné, Madame de Maintenon* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008) 309.

³ Kennedy, "From Stage to Cloister," 113-114.

⁴ Buckley, 308.

⁵ Timothy Pyles. "Bodies of Theology: Racine's *Esther* and *Athalie* as Embodied Theology," *Theater Symposium* 27 (2019). 26.

the morality of theater and fretted that Saint-Cyr would set a bad example for other educational institutions. Works like *Esther*, he declared, should be “banned from all education.” His concern, that schools “instead of producing novices...will produce actresses,” wasn’t just a pithy expression of preference for religious life over secular amusements. It had been less than a half century since Louis XIII formally absolved actors of the charge that their profession was inherently “infamous,” an animus borrowed from Roman law.⁶ In the interval between that declaration and the premiere of *Esther*, lines between religious critics of the theater and advocates for its moral utility had only hardened.

Essential to the sensation sparked by *Esther* and feelings that there was something scandalous about its premiere at Saint-Cyr are what today we might call its relevance. *Esther*, the faithful, beautiful, level-headed Queen who convinces her husband, the Persian King Ahasuerus, to save the Jews from destruction, was seen as a perhaps self-serving cipher for Maintenon herself. The play also seemed to allude to a harem of sexually available young women, the daughters of Zion whom Racine calls “Young and tender flowers, made vulnerable by their plight,” which may have been interpreted as a reference to the actresses and their classmates at Saint-Cyr.⁷ Even Maintenon’s own values, her professed aversion to vanity, display, and self-aggrandizing behavior, were easily detected in Racine’s text. When *Esther*’s uncle, Mardochee (Mordecai), explains the miraculous rise of the young Jewish woman to be Queen of the Persians, he discounts the role played by her charm and beauty: “Be well assured, he made not choice of you/to be a vain and useless shew to Asia, Nor merely to enchant the eyes of men...”⁸ Maintenon’s rivals, critics and enemies would likely have heard flattery to the wife of the French king in those lines.

Changes at Saint-Cyr suggest that the anxieties provoked by *Esther* weren’t a matter of its content or the intent behind its production. Rather, the success of the play had focused attention in the wrong places and unsettled the longstanding tension articulated by Molière between theater’s ability to “correct men’s errors” while simultaneously amusing them.⁹ Racine produced yet another play for Saint-Cyr, the 1691 *Athalie*, which was performed without costumes and without the elaborate stage settings designed for *Esther*. It was also performed privately, for the girl’ edification rather than the court’s amusement. Theater remained integral to education at Saint-Cyr but focused on Maintenon’s more rigorously moralizing classroom dramas and dramatic proverbs—short scenes, like Socratic dialogues, in which the girls enacted conversations about life, morals and proper behavior.¹⁰

The immediate response to *Esther* in French society seems to be a moment of retrenchment, rather than retreat from the idea that theater was a useful moral tool, or at the least, a harmless diversion. The eighteenth century’s most cogent and inventive critic of theater, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, essentially abandoned religious arguments about the morality of writing, producing, and witnessing theatrical entertainments. Rather, he doubted theater’s constructive or instructive power, including catharsis, while acknowledging that it was in many contexts essentially harmless. “I know that the poetic theater claims to...purge the passions in exciting them. But I

⁶ Henry Philips. *The Theater and its Critics in 17th Century France* (Oxford University Press, 1980) 4

⁷ Kennedy, “From Stage to Cloister,” 114-115.

⁸ Racine. *Esther*, Act II Scene 1. From 1803 English translation, Edinburgh.

⁹ Moliere. First Petition Addressed to the King Concerning *Tartuffe*, cited in Moliere, *The Misanthrope and Other Plays* (Penguin, 1959) 104.

¹⁰ Kennedy, “From Stage to Cloister,” 116.

have difficulty understanding this rule. Is it possible that in order to become temperate and prudent we must begin by being intemperate and mad?"¹¹ Theater reenforced preexisting moral conditions, and some communities, such as the city of Geneva, his birthplace and idealized homeland, existed in a prelapsarian innocence of any need for theater as diversion or distraction.

In *Emile*, Rousseau allows theater into his curriculum, but only as a guide to taste, not morality.¹² Yet the pedagogical method advocated by Rousseau in *Emile* is essentially theatrical. Lessons are carefully prepared, staged in particular settings, held back until the student is in a state of perfect susceptibility. They are staged, so as to "engrave" their lessons all the more indelibly on the heart. "I shall begin by moving his imagination. I shall choose the time, the place, and the objects most favorable to the impression I want to make. I shall, so to speak, call all of nature as a witness to our conversations."¹³ Borrowing from both seventeenth-century advocates and critics of the theater, Rousseau confirms the power of theater to bypass mere reason and create indelible impressions. Contemporary advocates for Christian theater essentially echo Rousseau's pedagogical use of theatrical methods ("Never reason in a dry manner with youth," he writes in *Emile*), and his skepticism of dry sermons or "long speeches."¹⁴

In the decades, and centuries, after the premiere of *Esther*, the powerful anti-theatrical sentiments it exacerbated don't disappear, but become a quiet, chronic background anxiety about the medium, mostly inert but with the potential for occasional flare ups. Anti-theatrical tracts published in the United States in the nineteenth century carry forward diluted, vestigial echoes of those anxieties even as theater became a pervasive pastime. The American Tract Society, active in the first half of the nineteenth century, echoed anti-theatrical arguments that would have been familiar to readers of strident anti-theatrical writers Pierre Nicole and Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet two centuries earlier: That theater distracts us from prayer and spiritual endeavor and encourages vice; that attendance is complicity in the degradation of the actors, and the pleasures and sensations elicited by the theater cause disorder in the soul.¹⁵

Yet even the author of that tract acknowledged that the arguments might sound "puritanical" to his or her readers. By the twentieth century, the complex theological and psychological arguments mobilized against works like *Esther* essentially disappeared. Today, theatrical scandals, especially those concerning theater produced by and for young people, are centered mainly on content. And the psychological mechanism whereby content causes moral damage is relatively simple-minded compared to seventeenth century arguments about how the mind and body respond to theatrical sensations. Today, theatrical skeptics argue that mere exposure to dangerous material will tempt young people to behave in inappropriate ways. And the material considered dangerous is primarily sexual, motivating reactions and efforts to censor works

¹¹ Jean-Jaques Rousseau. Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre, translated Allan Bloom (Cornell University Press, 1960) 20.

¹² Jean-Jaques Rousseau. *Emile*, translated by Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1979) 344.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 323.

¹⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*. 323. For insight into contemporary Christian theatrical pedagogy, see *Sunrise Magazine*, online "The Importance of Christian Drama as Ministry," June 7, 2016. <https://www.sunrisemagazine.org/blog/post.php?s=2016-06-07-the-importance-of-christian-drama-as-a-ministry>

¹⁵ Tracts of the American Tract Society, Theatrical Exhibitions. Volume IV, No. 130.

including *Rent*, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, *The Laramie Project* and *Indecent*.¹⁶

Off the table and no longer relevant to contemporary discourse is the vast range of other subjects, dangers, and anxieties that stirred seventeenth-century French critics of the medium. There is no broadly accepted idea that theater must be didactic and moral. Outside of undergraduate philosophy seminars, no one spends much time worrying about the inherent dangers of imitation or semblance. There is no particular worry that theater might make young people vulnerable to human foibles such as hypocrisy, vanity and arrogance. The idea that emotions that are too intensely felt might be dangerous is limited mainly to the discourse of mental health.

Nor do advocates of the theater offer a defense approaching the nuance and sophistication of seventeenth-century defenders. Laughter is a sign that comedy has succeeded, but there is little discussion of the inherent moral value of ridicule, as in the anonymous seventeenth-century *Lettre sur la comédie de l'Imposteur*.¹⁷ Catharsis, which Rousseau questioned, is blandly accepted as the principal reason we continue to attend tragedy. Broad defenses of theater emerge when public funding for non-profit theatrical companies is questioned, but they are rarely more substantial than a vague argument that has value beyond mere entertainment because it helps us exercise the muscles of empathy. Theater isn't an arena for moral speculation, but a kind of Peloton class for kindness and social cohesion.

A more compelling analogy to the heated seventeenth-century arguments about theater in France can be found in contemporary anxieties about social media, its erosion of lines between the public and private selves, its exposure of the body to desire, and its enticements to vanity and display. This analogy also offers useful, retrospective insight into some of the more opaque details of the sensation caused by *Esther*. Maintenon's reaction to criticism of *Esther* was not to eliminate drama at Saint-Cyr, but to privatize it. In 1701, she wrote, "You must limit performances to the classroom and never let them be seen by outsider spectators, under any circumstance."¹⁸ There was concern not just with the exposure of the girls' bodies to the male gaze, but to how the spectacle of *Esther* changed the behavior of the girls, who were felt to be more vain and less tractable after their theatrical triumph.

The 17th century reading of this, which reenforces Maintenon's own values, is that *Esther* incited vanity in the young women, encouraging behaviors and traits she associated with the hollow ambitions of court life. We might, today, suggest that the girls' successful performance of a play that enacts female heroism gave them a rare sense of agency in their own lives. This, too, would have aroused deeper seventeenth-century concerns about the role of theater in corrupting actors at the most basic, existential level, the anti-theatrical conviction that by impersonating or inhabiting another person's identity, we lose our own sense of self. We become fixated on things outside of and irrelevant to the more important, inner sense of spiritual wellbeing. Nicole fretted that actors, especially, would be "entirely occupied with external objects, and entirely intoxicated by the madness that we see represented there."¹⁹ Women, especially, were deformed merely by

¹⁶ Natanson, Hannah. The Culture War's Latest Casualty: The High School Musical. *The Washington Post*, May 2, 2023.

¹⁷ Julie Prest. "Failed Seductions and the Female Spectator: Pleasure and Polemic in the *Lettre sur la comédie de l'Imposteur*." *Yale French Studies* 130 (2016) 16.

¹⁸ Kennedy, "From Stage to Cloister," 116.

¹⁹ From the *Traité de la comédie*, cited in Philips, *The Theater and its Critics in 17th Century France*. 117.

acting with confidence before an audience. To go onstage, wrote Pierre Coustel, a woman must “fortify [herself] against the restraint, so decorous and so natural to [her] sex, in order to be able to speak with confidence.”²⁰

Contemporary anxiety about social media, both religious and secular criticism, reproduces many of the same fears. We inhabit identities that are not our own; we fixate on extraneous things; we fashion public selves from values and desires extraneous to our authentic sense of self. Just as seventeenth-century critics of drama argued that to impersonate sinful behavior, an actor had to recall and reexperience earlier instances of actual sin, today, we fear the power of social media to retraumatize young people as it keeps them in proximity to a perpetual memory of earlier injuries or traumas.²¹ Religious arguments about social media replicate the familiar seventeenth-century fear about time and salvation: “If you are spending all your time on social media, you are, at best, wasting time you could be using to serve God,” writes the author of a Christian blog post, “Should Christians use Social Media? Does Social Media Lead to Sin?”²² They also replicate seventeenth-century arguments about the dangers of court life, including the temptation to gossip and coquetry.

Social media has quantified what would have been, in seventeenth-century court life, more arcane and indeterminate ways of measuring social status and influence. But that has only reinforced its power to replicate many of the social dynamics from which Maintenon sought to defend her charges, the students at Saint-Cyr. We wear masks, place ourselves on display, seek validation from the desire of others, pander to their desires, and sacrifice the peace of solitude for pursuits that bring no meaning to our lives. The psychological cost of all of this is presaged in the words of one of Maintenon’s own interlocutors, Madame Duceaux, from the spiritual proverbs: “One needs always to dissimulate, to appear sad if the king is, even when one is not; to express joy if it’s expected, although one is full of sorrow...to speak contrary to one’s opinion, to conform to theirs, to indulge all of their passions; to sacrifice sleep, health and often one’s conscience.”²³

It’s difficult, reading *Esther* in the twenty-first century, to understand how it could have been a subject of controversy. The mistake, of course, is to look at its themes, characters or content. The danger wasn’t the subject or the treatment, but rather the invitation it offered the Saint-Cyriennes to develop one of the fundamental tools of social life, the ability to fashion their own identities. Seventeenth-century arguments against theater were religiously motivated, but those arguments intersected closely with what may have been even deeper fears about public life, truth, selfhood, authenticity and identity. What was at stake was reality itself—our ability to distinguish the real from the feigned—a fear that feels strikingly contemporary today. A seventeenth-century visitor to twenty-first-century society might be bewildered: How did a democratic, pluralistic society create technology that so effectively encourages hierarchy, status and the alienation of life lived perpetually at court?

²⁰ Cited in Philips, *The Theater and its Critics in 17th Century France*. 186.

²¹ There is a wide discourse on the power of social media to shape identity, confuse our sense of values and traumatize and retraumatize susceptible individuals. For 17th century arguments about sin and memory, see Philips, 186. For contemporary concerns, see for example Paula Durlofsky, *Logged on and Stressed Out* and Nausicaa Renner, “How Social Media Shapes our Identity,” *The New Yorker*, August 8, 2019.

²² “Should Christians use Social Media? Does Social Media Lead to Sin,” from www.412teens.org
<https://412teens.org/gna/should-Christians-use-social-media.php>

²³ Kennedy, “From Stage to Cloister.” 118.

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