

# THE COMPLEAT WOMAN:

## A Seventeenth Century View of Women

by Margaret Belcher

The old spelling of the word complete, C-O-M-P-L-E-A-T, has recently reappeared, if only in a restricted context.(1) When it is used today it is obviously intended to have an archaic ring. It calls to mind in particular a charming seventeenth-century book, The Compleat Angler, which is now being re-published and re-read. The word "compleat" evidently had a certain vogue in Izaak Walton's time. It was used, for example, in 1639, a few years before the publication of Walton's work (in 1653), for an English translation of a French work by Jacques du Bosc, L'Honneste femme, which the English translator entitled The Compleat Woman. (2)

The adjective "compleat" in the title of the English translation did not, however, survive the seventeenth century. Words are subject, like clothes, to changes in fashion! In 1695, an English translation

of L'Honneste femme was published under the title of The Excellent Woman and another appeared in 1753 as The Accomplished Woman. These epithets, as well as the word honneste used in the French title, help to define for readers today the meaning of the adjective "compleat."

It is significant that The Compleat Woman, the first English translation of L'Honneste femme, appeared in London only seven years after the publication in Paris of the French original. Its appearance in a second language, combined with the fact that the original work had already been circulating in France in several editions, provides convincing evidence of the general interest taken at the time in woman's role and conduct in society. The work has also an obvious interest for us in the twentieth century when the role of women in society is again being examined in a self-

conscious way.

For the twentieth-century reader it adds piquancy to this work to learn that its author was not an avant-garde woman feminist, but a male and a cleric. Nor did this point escape the notice of the book's first critics, who intimated that "especially it was not seemly for an Ecclesiastique to treat of such a subject as this . . . and it breeds a suspicion that he hath had more commerce with Women, then suits well with a man of his profession."(3)

The author, the Révérend-Père Jacques du Bosc, was a Franciscan whose reputation as a director of conscience was well established in Paris by the middle of the seventeenth century. Like his more famous contemporary, Saint François de Sales, Du Bosc was interested in the moral problems faced by women in society. Writing at a time when the Counter-Reformation was reaching out to laymen, he attempted to establish a model of respectable and virtuous conduct for women who choose marriage rather than the religious life.

The Abbé Du Bosc wrote two treatises for his women communicants. The earlier of these, L'Honneste femme, was written in three parts, the first appearing in 1632, followed by the second in 1634 and the third in 1636. Then in 1645 there appeared La Femme héroïque, ou les héroïnes comparées avec les héros en toute sorte de vertus,(4) wherein Du Bosc sought models for imitation among the virtuous

women of the past. As the title suggests, the aim of this work was to incite women to virtue by showing them that women are as capable as men of the most heroic morality. The engraved frontispiece of this handsome old volume carries the maxim of Plutarch: La Vertu de l'Homme et de la Femme, n'est qu'une mesme vertu. (Virtue in man and woman is one and the same virtue.) (5) The ancient observation of Plutarch is supported by Du Bosc in a very modern way. He selects eight "matched pairs" from the Old Testament and classical antiquity and establishes in each case that the virtue of the heroine is equivalent, or even superior, to that of the hero. Thus Salome, mother of the seven Machabites, is acclaimed over Abraham, who was prepared to sacrifice his only son and the cultured and devoted Portia over her conspirator husband Brutus.

The more popular of Du Bosc's works, however, remained L'Honneste femme, which had earlier made its way to England. Only the first of its three parts was used for The Compleat Woman. But this constitutes a sufficiently autonomous entity to be worth considering in itself, especially since the translation takes very few liberties with the French text. Because it exerted an influence at the same time in both France and England, it takes on an added significance.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe were enormously preoccupied with social behaviour and manuals of conduct consequently exerted a pervasive

influence, notably Castiglione's Il Cortegiano (1528). A distinction was usually made between the behaviour of men and women (or more precisely, between the conduct of a gentleman and a gentlewoman), but scarcely less attention was given to the one than to the other, especially in the seventeenth century. Magendie's comprehensive study of La Politesse mondaine (6) in seventeenth-century France establishes the prevalence and popularity of these manuals of conduct. A parallel preoccupation with social behaviour, particularly in regard to the conduct of the lover toward his mistress, characterizes the interminable involvements of the early novels--D'Urfé's L'Astrée and its précieux descendants.

Du Bosc's work reflects both the "courtier" tradition of the Renaissance with its emphasis on refinement of manners in worldly society and the Christian tradition of personal morality. Indeed Du Bosc would not have separated these two traditions of the "courtly" and the "confessional." His professed purpose is to give women "a more perfect knowledge of the qualities required to form their consciences and minds." (7) But when he proceeds to examine the requisite qualities, he states that "there is nothing more important than knowing how to please and to make yourself liked by others in society." (8) This insistence on the art de plaire (as he called it), as an integral part of the social ideal, characterizes other manuals of the time. The phrase had been

used just two years before the publication of Part I of L'Honneste femme in the title of Nicolas Faret's L'Honneste homme, ou l'Art de plaire a la cour, (9) a work which was to run through 11 editions in the seventeenth century. Moreover, it is a concept that is echoed later in classical poetry and in the classical theatre with its philosophy that art should be both pleasing and instructive.

When used by men and women of the world, the two terms honnêteté and politesse were likely to be confused. But Magendie claims that most of the theorists of honnêteté in the period before the Fronde understood the word honnête in the sense in which we use it today and gave it a preponderantly moral value. This is certainly so in L'Honneste femme, which Du Bosc asked his readers to consider as an Introduction to François de Sales' Introduction to a Devout Life. But Du Bosc also expects his virtuous woman to be socially accomplished. For the theme that runs through L'Honneste femme or The Compleat Woman is the possibility of living a morally "honest" or virtuous life without withdrawing from society or being unaccepted by it. Du Bosc persuades women "that to be vertuous, they have no need to be rigid, and that devotion and civility are in no ways contrary." (10) It is obviously important in his eyes that the practice of virtue be accompanied by a cultivated civility and graciousness of manner. The social concern that helps to shape his model of the "compleat woman" is

also revealed by the importance attached to prudence and to reputation, the public "face" of virtue. Though maintaining that "an honest woman should esteeme vertue more than Reputation," Du Bosc is prepared to recognize "the importance of good fame."<sup>(11)</sup>

Authors of secondary interest to the student of literature are often of primary significance in revealing the ideals and values of their society. Du Bosc strikes a note characteristic of his times when he insists on the compatibility of the social and the virtuous life.

We do not have time to examine in detail the social activities and moral virtues that Du Bosc recommends for the formation of the "compleat woman." However, the chapter headings tell us a good deal: Of Reading; of Conversation; of the pleasant and Melancholy humour; of Reputation; of Inclination to Vertue, and of Devotion; of Chastitie, and Courtesie; of Courage; of Constancie, and Fidelitie; of Prudence, and discretion; of Learned Women; of Habits, and Ornaments; of Beautie; of Curiositie, and Slander; of Cruell, and Pittifull; of a Good Grace; The Dissolute Woman; of Jelousie; of Amitie, and of the Love of Inclination and Election.

It must be remembered that Du Bosc is creating an ideal for an elite social group, and not for what we call today the general public. In that restricted con-

text, he seems to recognize the equality of the sexes and to feel that society often treats women unfairly. He recognizes as an injustice the double standard with regard to marital fidelity and, later, in the second part of his work, he talked about the reciprocal obligation of husband and wife, without which he considers marriage incomplete and even unjust. He also calls it "a tyranny, and a custome, which is no lesse unjust, then old, to reject [women] from the publike government,"<sup>(12)</sup> and later maintains that "women are not onely capable to understand that which is important in affaires and in commerce; but even that also which is subtile and solid in the highest wisdom."<sup>(13)</sup> In short, he envisages no less clearly than the modern feminist a role for women in business, politics and the church, and supports their right to play it. Furthermore, he considers that social productivity could be doubled by giving women the same opportunity as men for occupying themselves usefully.<sup>(14)</sup>

Especially enlightened is the chapter on Learned Women. Du Bosc condemns the attitude epitomized by the Duke of Brittany who married Isabell of Scotland, understanding she had never studied, but imagining "a Woman was learned enough, when shee could put difference between the shirt and doublet of her Husband."<sup>(15)</sup> He sets against this unenlightened Duke, the Emperor Theodosius who married Athenais, "onely because she was learned, and of a good wit."<sup>(16)</sup> The pleasure one takes in a cultured woman's conversation

is contrasted with the torment of conversing "with those women who cannot entertaine you but with the number of their Ducks and Geese, if they be of the Country; and if they be of the City, speake but of Gorgets and Attires of the fashion."(17)

In his image of the "compleat woman" Du Bosc is not content to paint "a Mother of a family, who can command her servants, and who hath the care to comb and dresse her children. Though we blame it not, yet we must confesse, that Musick, History, Philosophy, and other such exercises are more accomodate to our purpose, then those of huswivery."(18) Like Mlle de Gournay, the dauntless seventeenth-century champion of the equality of the sexes,(19) Du Bosc does not question the innate ability of women; he sees their lesser achievements as stemming only from their lack of comparable educational opportunities and maintains stoutly: "Say what they will, they are capable thereof [i.e., of comprehending the sciences and the arts] as well as men."(20) He praises the accomplished women of his own age for their writings on religion and history, for their skill in foreign languages and in their own, only regretting that the "tyranny of custome hath hindred many of them, to publish their works, and to leave their writings to posterity." (21) The difficulties encountered by his contemporary Mlle de Gournay, one of the first women professional writers, illustrate the problems faced by women writers of the time.

Du Bosc has the seventeenth-century concept of culture as the development of body, mind and soul and the formation of his ideal woman corresponds rather closely to the ideas and actual education of such distinguished women of his century as Mlle de Scudéry and Mme de la Fayette. Though there is a real ambivalence in the attitude that Du Bosc expresses in this social document, (he can protest that we are wronging women when we take away their right to knowledge, and at the same time wish for them "the three perfections that Socrates desired in his disciples, Discretion, Silence, and Modesty,"(22) because they have "lesse trouble to speake well, then to say little,"(23) and "can keep nothing secret,"(24)) this is none the less a refreshing re-statement of the essential humanity that we must concede to women as well as to men.

The combination of Christian values and social graces that characterizes Du Bosc's "compleat woman" is a humanistic ideal. It would be interesting to compare his views with those held by the Christian humanists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. When we examine the ideals of that later age mirrored in the writings of such secondary authors as Etienne Lamy and Gabriel d'Azambuja who gave popular lectures on women at the end of the nineteenth century in France, we find paradoxically a less enlightened concept of the "woman of tomorrow."(25) By comparison, it is a rather modern view that

## Du Bosc takes in his seventeenth-century study of the "compleat woman."

### NOTES

1. For example, *Saturday Night* (July-August 1976) referred to David Annesley as having had "the compleat Canadian experience."
2. Jacques du Bosc, *The Compleat Woman* . . . now faithfully translated into English, by N.M. (London, 1639). The English translation uses the second edition of *L'Honneste Femme* (Paris, 1633). I have not been able to discover the identity of the translator. My references refer to the facsimile edition of *The Compleat Woman* published by the Da Capo Press (Amsterdam and New York, 1968). Note that there was also a *Compleat Gentleman* (1622) written by Henry Peacham, who for many years remained an authority on polite conduct.
3. *Ibid.*, Preface, B verso.
4. In 2 vols., (Paris, 1645).
5. This maxim was also cited by Nicholas Faret, *L'Honneste homme, ou l'Art de plaire a la cour* (Paris, 1630), p. 243. Du Bosc had also used it before in Part 3 of *L'Honneste femme* (Paris, 1636), p. 7.
6. Maurice Magendie, *La Politesse mondaine et les théories de l'honnêteté en France au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, de 1600 à 1630* (Genève, 1970; réimpression de l'édition de Paris, 1925).
7. *L'Honneste femme*, Part 2 (Paris, 1634). From the *Avertissement*: ". . . une plus parfaite connoissance des qualitez requises pour former leur Conscience et leur Esprit."
8. *Ibid.*, p. 1. ". . . qu'il n'y rien de plus important que de sçavoir l'Art de plaire, et de se faire aimer dans les Compagnies."
9. Faret, *op. cit.* Translated into English in 1632 as *The Honest Man or the Art to Please in Court*.
10. *The Compleat Woman*, Epistle Dedicatory, [p. ii].
11. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
12. *Ibid.*, "Of Prudence and Discretion," p. 18. [Beginning with the chapter "Of Courage," the pages are renumbered again from 1. Reference gives the title of the chapter and the page.]
13. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
14. *L'Honneste Femme*, Part 3, p. 177.
15. *The Compleat Woman*, "Of Learned Women," p. 23.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
19. Marie le Jars de Gournay (1565-1645), author of *Egalité des hommes et des femmes* (1622) and of *Grief des dames* (1626).
20. *The Compleat Woman*, "Of Learned Women," p. 28.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
22. *Ibid.*, "Of Conversation," p. 18.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
25. Etienne Lamy, *La femme de demain* (Paris, 1901). In this work is included an essay on "Les Femmes et le savoir," first delivered as a lecture at Besançon. Lamy makes an eloquent plea for the education of women, but he appeals to them to learn for the sake of their sons, husbands and brothers, who can perhaps be rescued from their false doctrines and irreligion by Christian women. Even more patronizing in defining woman's role in terms of man's is the treatise by Gabriel d'Azambuja, *Ce que le Christianisme a fait pour la femme* (Paris, 1899). Azambuja makes a pompous statement of what the Christian church has done for women. Christianity, and particularly Catholicism, have given women a way of life in the church if they prefer not to marry, and have protected married women from polygamy and divorce. Women need this special protection since the fragility of their beauty (their principal strength), leaves them less well equipped to cope with life than men with their relatively durable physical strength and material productivity (p. 21). Furthermore, since the Church teaches that married women "se doivent à leur mari, même lorsqu'elles n'ont pas d'enfants" (p. 53), their ability to make other contributions to society is obviously limited!

