Idyllic Spaces: Marriage and Politics in the Montpensier-Motteville Correspondence

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The duchess of Montpensier, also known as “La Grande Mademoiselle,” was a remarkable, independent woman who played a key role during the Fronde; but her rebellious involvement ultimately resulted in a period of prolonged absence from the court. As punishment for her subversive activity, Louis XIV had her banished from Paris to her château at Saint-Fargeau in 1653. During her exile, the duchess occupied herself by writing prose, renovating her home, pursuing leisure activities and working on her memoirs. She also had significant time to reflect on a variety of social questions such as marriage and its inevitable constraints on women. Montpensier was very outspoken about her position regarding marriage and was, in fact, thirty-three, and still single at the time she composed these letters. In particular, she frowned upon the familial obligation of marriage, especially because it deprived women of their power. Her opposition to the cultural practice of selecting a husband demonstrated a critical stance against imposed, loveless marriages, one which smacked of resistance to accepted female role expectations. The duchess, nonetheless, had to eventually emerge from her exile in the country, since her presence was required for a royal event. Therefore, she returned to court in 1660 to celebrate the nuptials of Louis XIV with the Infanta of Spain on the border between Spain and France. It was at this important occasion in Saint-Jean-de-Luz where Montpensier unexpectedly encountered her friend, Madame de Motteville. 1 While awaiting the ceremonial rituals to begin, the duchess contemplated the advantages of the

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solitary life, a subject that she began to discuss in a conversation with Madame de Motteville. The choice to retreat from court was also the catalyst for a project that she intellectually contemplated before putting pen to paper, thus initiating this correspondence. Together, the two women engaged in a fascinating epistolary dialogue in which they discussed their views on solitude, retreat from the court and freedom for women, while envisioning the creation of an idyllic space.

This essay will focus on selected epistles in the Montpensier-Motteville correspondence, consisting of eight letters in Joan DeJean's 2002 bilingual edition. The emphasis, however, will be on the first four missives because the recently translated last four letters deviate from the projected blueprint for this ideal territory. Moreover, these core epistles form a unity in the correspondence because of their philosophical focus on marriage and politics. To begin our discussion, it is important to situate the letters within the historical context of the correspondence, as it serves as a framework for the overarching topic. As will be shown in her missives, Mlle de Montpensier proposes a plan for an alternative community outside of the court, an idyllic space which is inherently progressive, yet quietly subversive in its political tenor. Furthermore, Montpensier’s project for this unique community reveals some fascinating gender reversals, which are directly related to her philosophy of power.

Before looking at the correspondence, it is useful to comment on some of the seminal facts about the lives of these two women. Mlle de Montpensier was one of the richest women in France, mainly because she was the sole heiress of the wealth of her mother, Marie de Montpensier. This important status, in addition to her lineage, augmented her prospect on the marriage market, for Mlle de Montpensier was also the granddaughter of Henri IV and was related to Marie de Medici as well as Marguerite de Valois. Most notably, she was a first cousin to Louis XIV and as a young girl even believed she might be chosen to marry him later in her teens. As Abby Zanger observes, Mlle de Montpensier was renowned at court for her consistency in refusing countless matches. Despite her resistance, Louis XIV, after his own wedding, proposed numerous suitors; but she defiantly turned them all down. Her opposition to the institution of marriage sparked her cousin's anger, and he had her exiled again until she eventually was allowed to return to court in 1664. DeJean includes an interesting postscript to her personal story, as, ironically, the duchess eventually fell in love with an inappropriate suitor, the count of Lauzun, in 1670. But since he was not of

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2 All of the quotes from the letters are taken from DeJean’s Against Marriage.
3 Zanger 341-343.
4 DeJean 14-15.
her class and lacked wealth, the relationship was doomed to failure, not to mention the overt disapproval of the king. To curtail the marriage plan and protect Montpensier’s valuable lands and other financial assets, Louis had Lauzun arrested, and he remained in prison for ten years until Montpensier paid to set him free. As DeJean points out, there was a rumor circulating that Mlle de Montpensier may have secretly married her suitor after his release from prison. To perpetuate the mystery, there are no official documents attesting to the actual union.

Like Mlle de Montpensier, Françoise Bertaut de Motteville was single at the time of their correspondence; however, she had been married off at the age of 18 to a rich magistrate, Nicolas Langois, le sieur de Motteville. Unfortunately, there was a striking age disparity between them. He was in his nineties, and so it was not surprising that after two years of marriage he died, leaving Madame de Motteville a widow. Since she did not have children, she was not entitled to his assets. Nevertheless, the Queen Mother, Anne of Austria, invited her to court to serve as one of her ladies-in-waiting, where she remained until the death of the queen. Although the two friends did not share the same social status, they both understood the politics of what Zanger calls the marriage plot and its consequences for women as a commodity in a male dominated market. As shown in her Mémoires, the duchess also shows an avid interest in the political implications of marriage for women. In her analysis of Montpensier’s Mémoires, Faith Beasley notes that Montpensier was not only skeptical about the institution, but did not wish to place herself in the position of being a marriage pawn for men. As Montpensier writes, “As one will see, from everything I have written in these memoirs, I had no desire to marry, unless it was to find the glory that would accord with my birth” (120). Beasley also posits that Montpensier encouraged women to develop their own sense of power, mainly through reason (121). To reinforce this aspect, one may add the observation that the two friends had significant experience in watching countless marital intrigues played out at court. The complexity of these nuptial melodramas fueled their fascination with the relationship between power and politics. In her role as Montpensier’s interlocutor, Madame de Motteville not only shares a mutual interest in these issues, but appears rational and discerning in penning her responses to Montpensier’s plans. At times, she offers subtle objections and introspective thoughts on

5  DeJean 16-17.
6  Zanger 342-343.
the topic of marriage, while carefully pointing out potential flaws in her friend’s project for her ideal community.

We begin our study with the first letter penned in 1660. The reader is immediately aware of the intention of Montpensier’s opening epistle, which is to lay out the foundation for her idyllic realm. It is her fragmented recollection of the original conversation with her friend about the advantages of living in seclusion that constitutes the catalyst for the letters. As one of the key aspects of epistolary writing in the seventeenth century, Montpensier mimics a spoken conversational style in transferring their previous conversation to text, which, in turn, imparts a lively quality in her writing. It is as if the two women were actually occupying the same space and talking to one another in a spirited dialogue about the advantages of pursuing the solitary life. The duchess immediately states that her community would prefer “qu’il n’y eût point de gens mariés et que ce fussent toutes personnes veuves, ou qui eussent renoncé à ce sacrament” (I, 28). At the same time, she does not exclude men from entering the community, as she believes that both sexes are important to maintain the pleasurable art of conversation.

She then turns to how her ideal community would be constructed, thus establishing the groundwork for the organization of this alternative space. Although Mlle de Montpensier was not writing during an abundant period for utopias and did not create a fictional narrative of a fantastic journey as in so many utopias of the day, her vision of this ideal space points to some important resemblances with characteristics found in literary utopias. For instance, the very notion of a utopia was identified with the creation of a nowhere, imaginary area. This space not only evoked the idea of equality between the sexes, but was governed on a political level by laws emphasizing order, clarity and control. As Frank and Fritzie Manuel observe, utopias actually elevated the social status of women, freeing them from their role dictated by the patriarchal structure of society. Angelika Bammer has compared male and female utopias from a modern perspective, stating that male utopias tend to be structured around an escape from liberty, whereas women’s idealized spaces represent a means by which one can attain freedom. Indeed, Mlle de Montpensier demonstrates all of these traits in devising her laws against the institution of marriage in her

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idealized territory, while shifting the power solely into the hands of female leadership.

Mlle de Montpensier's plan for her perfect kingdom envisions simple structures where each individual would choose how he or she would build a house. She also provides a description of the landscape by stating her preference for wooded areas with a view of water. Within this dense space, she believes each occupant should be able to cultivate his or her own garden to produce the necessary food sources to ensure the community’s autonomy. She also considers the importance of fostering social communication amongst the inhabitants to promote harmony and good will. Curiously, she suggests a blend of the old world, horseback, with more contemporary means of transportation such as carriages as with the nobility in Paris. The aristocratic context of her own life further influences her plan, mainly with the importance of sociability, as she advocates a combination of intellectual and leisure activities such as building individual libraries, reading, poetry, music, and a game known as “mail.” Here, DeJean mentions in a note that this game dated back to the sixteenth century and was similar to croquet or boules (I, 30). Interestingly, Montpensier notes that this game is important because the citizens must strive for health of the mind and body, a concept evoking the Renaissance ideology of Michel de Montaigne and François Rabelais.

The main part of the letter includes a reference to the pastoral life, recalling Honoré d’Urfé’s bucolic utopia, Forez. Other key similarities include role reversal, for women in Forez are cast in a superior role in which they rely on their ability to analyze their views on love. Ian Maclean observes in *L’Astrée* that “this reversal is essentially feminist in inspiration and expression, for women are raised to the level of men and men reduced to that of women” (166). Maclean adds that other male attributes are transferred to women such as resolution, an independent mind, and the ability to initiate decisions and actions. Similar to d’Urfé’s pastoral paradise, the duchess envisions maintaining herds of sheep with shepherds and shepherdesses to take care of them, but she deviates from d’Urfé’s Forez on a romantic level. For instance, she would replicate these pastoral aspects, but introduce some key modifications: “qu’on imitât quelquefois ce qu’on a lu dans *L’Astrée* sans toutefois faire l’amour, car cela ne me plaît point” (I, 30). In this case, the fundamental deviation from d’Urfé’s utopia can be explained by Montpensier’s rejection of love and courtship in her idyllic space. Another important distinction can be identified here because d’Urfé’s

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artistocratic readers were attracted to the imaginary pastoral ambiance of Forez, offering escape from the pressures of life at court. In sharp contrast, Montpensier replaces the imaginary kingdom with a more realistic plan for her ideal community, substituting the pursuit of amorous play with the enduring bond of friendship amongst the citizens.

The final part of this first letter concentrates on the philosophical quest for happiness. For the duchess, happiness is linked to the practice of Christianity, however, only if a citizen seeks spirituality. Therefore, she outlines a plan to include a convent of Carmelites in their wilderness or “désert” (I, 32). These theologians would live apart as hermits, but offer sermons to those who wished to participate. Regarding religion, Montpensier emphasizes the importance of preferences for each inhabitant, revealing an interesting political implication. In contrast to the absolute power of her cousin, Montpensier in her first epistle provides several examples of personal choices for the citizens such as how they construct their homes, embrace Christianity and even how they choose their leisure activities. Here, the duchess seems to envision a more moderate approach to executing her power. As DeJean puts it, Montpensier’s approach to governing “would be kinder and gentler than her cousin’s monarchy” (17). As the next exchange will show, this idea becomes more focused in the ensuing epistolary discussion. The first letter concludes with a sustained emphasis on religion, for Montpensier proposes that their community include a hospital to not only serve the less privileged, but also to assist in aiding the poor and feeding children. In essence, the altruistic tenor of the last few lines underscores the importance of leading a moral life.

If Montpensier’s theory of governance points to a quiet subversion of absolute power, the form of this correspondence also reinforces the underlying current of feminine dissidence. In particular, the structure of this correspondence is an epistolary dialogue in which Madame de Motteville composes her responses to these initial plans for Montpensier’s community. Moreover, the fact that the two engage in a dialogue about marriage and politics points to a plurality of female voices in concert, thus signifying a subtle subversion of the very notion of Louis’s absolutism. But this other notion of “feminocentric power” is veiled behind the imaginary space of Montpensier’s envisioned community, which reduces any overt threat from the established patriarchal order.13 Interestingly, Madame de Motteville opens her letter, the second one in the correspondence, with an allusion to the political organization of the projected community. She begins by approving Montpensier’s plan for this utopia, for she, too, believes in the

13 DeJean 17.
importance of living a simpler life, one which offers a purer existence in contrast to the corruption of city life. She then turns to the political structure of the community by elaborating on the power structure: “je ne m’étonne pas de ce que sans y penser vous vous êtes établie notre Souveraine” (II, 36). Here, there is an intertextual reference to another literary utopia, which undoubtedly inspired Montpensier’s vision. Specifically, the allusion recalls Scudéry’s post-Fronde feminist kingdom, or the land of the Sauromates. As DeJean explains, “it is a domain governed by a queen, in which courts of love both regulate the economy of desire and give legal status to unions outside of marriage” (49). With regards to Montpensier, the juncture of resemblance revolves around the erasure of a patriarchal figure, which is replaced by the duchess, acting as the representation of matriarchal power. Once again, Motteville’s use of the word “sovereign” points to subtle feminine dissidence, as Louis is written out and Montpensier appropriates his power in this imaginary, idyllic space. Éva Pósfay offers an insightful reading of Beasley’s interpretation of Montpensier’s view of power in her Mémoires. As Pósfay puts it, “Mademoiselle réécrit l’histoire à partir d’une perspective utopique matriarcale qui la dote d’un pouvoir politique parallèle, voire supérieur à celui de Louis XIV” Beasley also posits that Montpensier’s creation of a powerful matriarchal figure in her Mémoires shows that she crosses gender boundaries (124). Indeed, the duchess in her epistles not only blurs gender boundaries, but chooses to reverse gender roles by appropriating masculine dominance. This idea is further buttressed by the complete absence of any men in this idyllic land who exercise power. On the contrary, Mlle de Montpensier upholds singlehandedly the leadership role in her community. Interestingly, Madame de Motteville even contrasts Montpensier’s virtuous leadership to the widespread debauchery and corruption in the Greek and Roman Empires. Once again, there is a subtle appropriation of the patriarchal model, reinforced by the substitution of the moral perfection of their savvy feminine sovereign for male leadership. Motteville elaborates on the unique kind of power and leadership that her friend would provide, as she deftly guides her subjects onto the path leading to wisdom and virtue in this newly coined term for this idyllic community, the Republic (II, 39). It is important to consider the allusion to Plato’s Republic, especially the political implications. For Plato, the idea of governance in his ideal society also elevated the status of women, mainly as philosophers committed to the application of reason in their capacity to


rule. As Natalie Bluestone explains, “Socrates proposed an ideal society in which superior men and women would rule together equally” (3). Although Mlle de Montpensier does not share her power with a man, she, nonetheless, mirrors the Platonic concept as a “philosopher queen.”

In the remaining part of this second letter, Motteville shifts her tone from highlighting the moral qualities of her queen offering her own perspective on the philosophical advantages of leading a solitary life in a pastoral setting. While she concurs with the previous ideas outlined in Montpensier’s first letter, she emphasizes the spiritual benefit of this unique kind of lifestyle:

[...] nous croyons que la longue habitude à la vie solitaire nous fera acquérir ce que vous possédez naturellement, nous donnera de l’esprit et de la lumière, nous élèvera l’âme à la contemplation des choses célestes et nous rendra dignes d’être gouvernées par la plus grande princesse du monde! (II, 36).

In addition, Motteville also insists on the importance of freedom, a key term linked to the success of this Republic. With this example, she seems to prefigure a vision of a pre-eighteenth-century model. According to her, “la liberté gouvernée par la raison et la justice ferait un de nos plus sensibles plaisirs” (II, 38). Although Motteville concurs with the majority of her friend’s proposed ideas, she, nonetheless, quietly expresses her disapproval regarding the duchess’s refusal of marriage in her kingdom. In fact, she considers Montpensier’s interdiction of marriage unrealistic, mainly because it would be impossible to prevent gallantry. As she describes it, “La politesse que vous introduisez parmi vos solitaires sujets me fait craindre qu’ils n’aient l’esprit gallant” (II, 38). On a political level, it is possible to interpret Motteville’s reservation about Montpensier’s marriage ban as a veiled, gentle warning not to abuse her power because she might find herself espousing a form of “feminine” absolutism. Here again, Montpensier’s governance unveils a reversal of the gender roles; but there is also an unexpected paradox in which she ostensibly reverts to her cousin’s patriarchal model. At the same time, she seems to shift her executive power into a matriarchal configuration, emphasizing a feminist stance. It is as if her plan sketched out on paper revealed a form of transvestism in her writing, an alternative expression of feminine and masculine signifiers, or a form of intersexuality. In any case, Motteville softens her objection by advocating

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the idea of choice for the citizens: “je souhaite qu’elles soient sages par leur choix et qu’elles fuient plutôt par inclination que par la défense que vous leur en feriez” (II, 40).

Madame de Motteville’s opposing position on the prohibition against marriage introduces the main topic of discussion in the third letter. Here, Montpensier pens her response to the previous missive, thereby intensifying the tone of the exchange and sparking an animated debate between the two interlocutors. As Montpensier writes, “je suis dans un extrême étonnement lorsque vous me voulez prouver par de vives raisons qu’il est non seulement à propos, mais aussi nécessaire de se marier” (III, 40). At first, the duchess criticizes her friend’s reasoning and then momentarily justifies her superior position by reasserting her power as sovereign. As she puts it, “mon avis doit être le maître des autres” (III, 42). But then she unexpectedly softens her tone, stating that she will prove her point through a series of convincing examples. For instance, she refers to the Marquise de Senecé who supposedly told Montpensier that in the town of Randan in Auvergne no widow ever remarried, young or old, because the late Comtesse de Randan had never remarried; thus all of the widows in Randan chose to model themselves after her admirable character. In her interpretation of this positive custom in the town of Randan, Mlle de Montpensier formulates a moral conclusion in which goodness prevails over human flaws. From this example, Monpensier then applies the lesson of Randan to her own kingdom, viewing herself as a role model of goodness for her subjects. With strong conviction, she expresses her disagreement with Motteville’s objection by declaring that she is not practicing absolutism in her marriage interdiction, mainly because she is tolerant of her people’s opposing views. As she puts it, “j’étendrais ma bonté jusqu’à permettre que ceux qui auraient envie de se marier nous quittassent plutôt que de rendre notre solitude une habitation de gens sujets aux imperfections de la nature” (III, 42). This statement also shows a persuasive strategy in the underlying tone of the letter. In particular, the duchess demonstrates her natural inclination for espousing a moral philosophy, enabling her to make her case to justify her enforcement of the marriage ban.

The moral tone of the letter is sustained in the next part of the third letter in which Mlle de Montpensier considers the interrelated theme of love. At first, she states that her subjects must be willing to renounce personal ambition and self-interest, as they are pitfalls of love. Once again, Montpensier’s goal is to persuade her friend that her position against marriage is justified. To achieve this goal, she constructs a series of feminist arguments that were popular in the salons of the day. For instance, she points to the idea of prioritizing friendship or “l’amitié” over romantic love.
To buttress her argument, she inserts a maxim to forewarn her subjects of the difficulty of transforming friendship into love. As she describes it, “Mais quand il faut changer l’amour en amitié/Que l’âme qui s’y force est digne de pitié!” (III, 44). But at the same time, she believes in relying on the power of freedom to guide her subjects to protect them from marriage. To emphasize the importance of liberty, she states: “La raison et le bon sens seraient notre seul voeu et nos seules obligations” (III, 44). According to the sovereign, friendship is what is reasonable and comfortable, whereas love is characterized as irrational, a veritable state of emotional turmoil. She then considers another entity associated with love: the question of gallantry. Here again, the text reveals that she reverts to her years of acquired social experience in courtly etiquette. For example, she states that gallantry is good if it does not have bad intentions: “cette galanterie générale et sans objet est ce qui se peut permettre parmi nous” (II, 46). This affirmation of the positive side of gallantry is further supported by her praise for men and women who uphold the aristocratic code of honnêteté, especially in their sartorial appearance, refined manner of speaking and courteous behavior. Although she does not delve into the negative connotation of gallantry in this letter, Montpensier views it as a potential danger to a woman’s reputation. According to her, women must conduct themselves impeccably to avoid calumny, or even malice, by men. Montpensier then returns to the main theme of the marriage ban to conclude her argument. This final section of the letter smacks of precious rhetoric, as she emphasizes the battle between the sexes in a candid, rational manner: “ce qui a donné la supériorité aux hommes a été le mariage, et que ce qui nous a fait nommer le sexe fragile a été cette dépendance” (III, 46). She also insists that women must extricate themselves from this form of slavery, for it has contributed to the inequality between the sexes. As she puts it, “Enfin tirons-nous de l’esclavage, qu’il y ait un coin du monde où l’on puisse dire que les femmes sont maîtresses d’elles-mêmes, et qu’elles n’ont pas tous les défauts qu’on leur attribue” (III, 46-48). Here, Pósfay, Beasley and DeJean underscore the influence of the salon debate on la querelle des femmes in Montpensier’s militant criticism of marriage. Moreover, Montpensier envisions a more perfect space for women, one which empowers them. At the same time, she reaffirms her role as the matriarch in this plan for her idyllic territory.

Madame de Motteville’s lengthy fourth letter reveals a lively discussion of questions related to love and marriage. It is particularly interesting to consider her response to Montpensier’s proposed marriage ban. Once again,

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18 DeJean provides a clear explanation of the various meanings of gallantry. See the note on p. 39.
she begins by acknowledging her respect and admiration for their sovereign leader. There is also an internal echo in the dialogue, as Motteville's fourth missive mimics Montpensier's rhetoric by including her moral and philosophical stance on the notion of liberty. Like the duchess, Motteville subscribes to the idea of freedom, a concept she embraced after she lost her husband. There is, however, a curious contrast to the ideal of freedom, one which reveals another subtle objection to her friend's interdiction of marriage. Initially, Madame de Motteville seems to veil her disagreement with Montpensier by reaffirming key ideas discussed in previous epistles such as the importance of virtue, reason and order to assure a peaceful environment in this ideal space for the citizens, but then she delves into the opposing notion of tyranny. It is this sharp opposition between freedom and tyranny that ostensibly structures the core of her argument throughout this exchange. Adopting Montpensier's militant rhetoric, Motteville suggests that male tyranny has contributed to the cultural perception that women are the weaker sex (IV, 50). Here, Motteville builds her attack on men, which also mirrors Montpensier's previous “precious” criticism of the opposing gender in the concluding part of the third letter. Motteville's writing style reveals a curious resemblance to Montpensier's, as she shows her own experience in navigating aristocratic etiquette by taking a philosophical stance to expose the dangerous ways in which men manipulate conversation, especially to woo women. As she writes, “Ils cachent sous ces beaux mots d'adoration, de respect, et de passion les armes dont ils offensent la gloire de celles qu'ils paraissent estimer, et qu'ils méprisent en effet[.] Elles souffrent par leurs trahisons de violentes douleurs, et l'amour légitime par la froideur de son poison les prive souvent de bonheur” (IV, 50). Motteville then formulates her own kind of moral maxim, highlighting the fact that only fools are duped by the idea of equating love with pleasurable emotions. To her way of thinking, affairs of the heart only cause pain. Motteville also echoes Montpensier in recasting these observations about love into truths to further reflect on the problem of gender inequity. In observing how men are socially conditioned to dominate women, she reveals a feminist, rational perspective: “je sais qu'ils les ont faites injustes à notre égard et trop avantageuses pour eux, ils usurpent sur le commandement de la mer et de la terre, les sciences, la valeur, la puissance” (IV, 50). If men attempt to control everything under the guise of their inherent tyrannical rights, Motteville also asserts that there is no real basis to justify their dictatorial role. In fact, she wonders just how they acquired their predisposition toward tyranny. To buttress her position, she relies on historical examples of formidable, virtuous women who governed empires, commanded armies, or were renowned for their intellectual prowess. She acknowledges the
political savvy of women such as Isabella of Castilo, Elizabeth of England and Catherine de Médicis, while expressing her admiration for the sharp minds of Elizabeth of Bohemia, Madame de Bressac and, most notably, Mlle de Scudéry. By citing these noteworthy, historical figures, Motteville emphasizes her point that there are countless examples of wise and glorious women.

In the next section of this fourth letter, Motteville praises the potential for perfection that women innately possess. Although she concurs with the duchess in recognizing the inequality between the sexes and the power system, Motteville changes the tone of her missive as she considers other aspects identified with the complex subject of tyranny. She begins by raising the point again that men allowed in their utopia would not only bring corruption, but undoubtedly participate in gallantry. Motteville's rationale is based on the example that not everyone can follow her sovereign's example by living a virtuous life, highlighting the reality that the less perfect would inevitably succumb to love. She endeavors to convey to her friend that it is to her advantage as a sovereign to accept the less perfect, mainly as she embodies the ideal of moral perfection for her subjects. Motteville imitates Montpensier's previous argument pertaining to the positive and negative aspects of love, while introducing a variant in which she focuses on the psychological flaws of the queen's subjects. In fact, Motteville structures her contention around the idea of human weakness to subtly persuade her sovereign to practice tolerance, especially since her subjects are not as strong as she. According to her, women's most common weaknesses are vanity, pride and even idleness, which recalls La Roche-soucauld's negative view of human nature in his famous Maximes. In some instances, she observes that a woman's desire to attain glory is predicated on her beauty and her ability to receive praise from others. To correct these human weaknesses, Motteville stresses again that their queen serves as an inspirational role model. Through this philosophical reflection on human flaws, Motteville takes a stand for the weak, hoping to convince Montpensier to protect these citizens to assure the overall well-being of the kingdom. Moreover, it is possible to read Motteville's lengthy diatribe on tolerance as part of a gentle, but nonetheless persuasive, strategy to ensure the successful enforcement of the laws and freedom in the queen's ideal territory. At the same time, Motteville's veiled intention may be to forewarn her friend to tread carefully to avoid espousing tyranny by banning legitimate love, or marriage, in her idyllic space.

In the next part of the epistle, she turns to a related topic associated with a previous theme embedded in Montpensier's third letter, the struggle between friendship and love. Motteville considers the topic of friendship
from a philosophical perspective, underlining the idea that friendship is inherently universal, virtuous and reasonable. In particular, Motteville suggests that from birth people seek to cultivate friendships with people who are close to them, since all human beings are inherently good and possess a personal sense of justice. But, contrary to the moral perfection of their queen, many citizens experience difficulty, through personal life experiences, in following this virtuous path. Here, Motteville points to the passions as one of the seminal examples to show how affairs of the heart can derail an individual from following the moral path in life. When the force of passion usurps reason to control the human heart, it inevitably overshadows virtue to produce torment and pain. According to Motteville, it is the power of emotional disorder which ultimately destroys the innocence of friendship: “il est plus rare de trouver des criminels dans l’amitié que dans l’amour, parce que la raison et l’innocence sont les ordinaires compagnes de l’amitié et que le dérèglement et la trahison sont naturellement celles de l’amour” (IV, 56). Curiously, this part of her letter shows how she reprises Montpensier’s rhetoric in her third letter, thus creating an internal echo in the epistolary dialogue. At the same time, her resounding agreement with Montpensier’s dark view of love as a menacing, irrational emotion stands in stark contrast to introduce one of the fundamental, social principles for their idyllic space. For Motteville, the happiness of the citizens depends on structuring their territory around the concept of a society of friends. Here, Motteville alludes to one of the key traits of a seventeenth-century utopian society, which is undoubtedly influenced by their refined aristocratic skill of subscribing to sociability. As Myriam Yardeni observes, “ce qui importe, c’est leur bon fonctionnement et leur capacité d’assurer le bonheur de l’homme en société” (65). After underscoring the importance of living in social harmony, Motteville seems to retreat from her bold stance by stating that civility and order in the kingdom can only be maintained by following their queen’s model of honor and reason. But then Motteville reaffirms her position by again carefully attempting to persuade her friend why it is in her interest to allow marriage, mainly as a model of moral perfection for the citizens of the kingdom. She even develops a detailed reflection on legitimate love to justify her position, stating that God created this union for noble reasons: “le mariage doit être révéré comme celui qui règle la naissance et les biens de tous les hommes, qu’il établit l’ordre sur la terre et qu’il est le seul lien qui puisse engager l’homme et la femme à s’aimer avec innocence” (IV, 58). It is Motteville’s belief that such a ban would not only destroy legitimate love, but possibly lead to decadence amongst her subjects. By outlawing marriage, these passionate citizens, mainly young men, would inevitably
seek out illicit liaisons to satisfy their desire. Zanger comments on the political ramifications of Montpensier’s mandate: “In so doing, she underscores that a utopia that prohibits marriage is no utopia at all, but just an inversion of the order of things, a substitution of one center of power for another” (353). Zanger’s analysis also points to gender implications. It could be argued that Montpensier is unconsciously switching gender roles in her conviction to prohibit marriage. By proclaiming this policy she seems to appropriate, once again, the absolutist discourse of her cousin, while veiling it under her own feminine form of militant power.

The Montpensier-Motteville correspondence offers a rare look at the duchess’s blueprint for a utopian society. Her vision not only espouses an alternative “feminocentric” philosophy on the interdiction of marriage, but also reveals some fascinating gender reversals within the fabric of the political structure of this idyllic space. It is the dynamic epistolary dialogue between the two friends which reveals a quiet tone of dissidence throughout the correspondence, one that revolves around the ideal image of how the sovereign would execute her matriarchal power. As a ruler, the duchess would not only free women from facing their social fate of nuptial enslavement, but would offer an alternative model based on choice for each citizen regardless of one’s gender. Within the dense, lush forest of this pastoral environment, “La Grande Mademoiselle” reprises her role as a post-Fronde warrior carving out a space for those who seek freedom in a transcendental kingdom where peace prevails and all live by her rules.

Works Cited


Marriage and Politics in the Montpensier-Motteville Correspondence