
H-France Review Vol. 9 (December 2009), No. 152

E.H. and A.M. Blackmore and Francine Giguère, eds. and trans., *La Rochefoucauld: Collected Maxims and Other Reflections* (Oxford World Classics). Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. lxiv + 354 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. £9.99 U.K., \$13.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-19-280649-9.

Review by Stephen Bold, Boston College.

François, duc de La Rochefoucauld (1613-1680), is known today as the author of the *Maximes*, the classic volume of laconic, sardonic and mordant reflections on man as social beast that is the essence of aristocratic moralist literature. But, as the eldest son of François, the fifth duc de La Rochefoucauld, he was born for greater things: military valor, political power, noble spirit—and, it must be said, he more or less failed in all of these pursuits. In his youth, women and intrigue distracted him from exemplary military service, though he did serve; his political actions were carried out at the summits of power but fell well short of the highest obligations of his class. A companion to the prince de Condé during the Fronde (1648-1653), he perhaps distinguished himself most for the wounds he courageously sustained in battle and for his dalliances with the duchesse de Longueville, Condé's own sister and occasional lover. Like many a frondeur, he resurfaced in Louis XIV's court scarred and shamed, retaining his rank but no illusions about himself or his social class. Published in Holland without his name or authorization in 1663 and then in five corrected and augmented authorized editions (1664-78), the *Maximes* could be called his profession of lost faith.

English translations appeared almost immediately, with provocative titles: John Davies' *Epictetus Junior, or Maxime's of Modern Morality* (1670), based on the unauthorized edition, and then Aphra Behn's *Seneca Unmasked, or Moral Reflections* (1685), a rather free translation recently republished by Irwin Primer (New York: AMS Press, 2001). The *Maximes* were translated again, fairly frequently, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both in straightforward editions and in evocatively named compilations that demonstrate the text's appeal to class sensibilities: e.g. the 1789 edition of Lord Chesterfield's *The Accomplished Gentleman*, which includes the *Maxims* in letters of advice to his son, Lord Burghley's *Gentleman's Pocket Library* (1794) which includes Chesterfield's *Principles of Politeness* alongside La Rochefoucauld's *Moral Reflections*, or Philip Mauro's *Elegant Extracts, or, The Literary Nosegay* (1814). There was even an anonymous 1799 translation set in verse, to facilitate the reader's retention of the Duke's wisdom.

If the perceived practical value of the *Maximes* had faded by the twentieth century, its place in the French literary canon remained strong on both sides of the Channel, as marked by its inclusion in the Oxford World Classics series with Frederick G. Stevens' 1940 translation. Stevens' bilingual edition was a model of British understatement and gentility but was also crafted for a casual but earnestly literate public that is long gone: on the one hand, the brief translator's introduction, focused on the author's biography and moral temperament, suggests his reader came to the text with little knowledge of La Rochefoucauld or the seventeenth century, on the other, this same, clearly cosmopolitan reader would understand when Stevens dared not translate "amour-propre" because of the manifold nuances of the term in French—a sprinkling of French phrases being *de rigueur* in well-wrought English prose, even in the mid-twentieth century. (See Lord Chesterfield's letters to his son for an extreme early

example of this phenomenon.) Nor did Stevens hesitate, in one of only a few notes, to quote three lines of Aristotle in the original without translation, knowing that his reader would certainly understand.

So the new Oxford World Classics edition, by E.H. and A.M. Blackmore and Francine Giguère who share equally translating and editing credits, marks not only a reaffirmation of the Maximes' place in the world literature canon (as defined by Oxford University Press) but also an updating of the assumptions the editors make about their readership. The scholarly apparatus that carries the text to today's reader is ample, informed and professional in its approach. The context described in Blackmore and Giguère's introduction is not simply historical but first and foremost critical and academic, as it presents a clear, precise, well-informed and generally impartial summary of intellectual, social and literary sources and, even more importantly, an informed discussion of editorial and scholarly approaches to the text of the Maximes and to its interpretations, including the most recent twenty-first century scholarship.

The Blackmores and Giguère have taken their editorial role very seriously by emulating the presentation of recent scholarly editions of the Maximes published in France: the definitive 1678 text is clearly distinguished from the maximes supprimées and maximes inédites culled from the Liancourt manuscript or from La Rochefoucauld's correspondence with Jacques Esprit and Mme de Sablé. Furthermore, the main text notes which of the five editions overseen by La Rochefoucauld included each maxim, e.g.: "V: 190 'Only great men can have great faults.' [I-V]," which indicates that this maxim was number 190 in the fifth edition and that it appeared in all five editions. The editors also include important variants (along with their sources) and weigh their choices judiciously, as they explain in a detailed, six-page review of the text's manuscript and editorial histories. The seriousness of this presentation is reminiscent of the rigor found in Harvard University Press's Loeb Classical Library.[1]

The "explanatory notes" consist almost exclusively of references to sources, variants, or related passages within the Maximes. These notes certainly enrich the perspectives offered by the individual réflexion but they also seem to be somewhat of a missed opportunity to concatenate critical discussions within the textual fabric. More puzzling still is the insufficient use of notation alerting the reader to the presence of an endnote on a particular maxim. Asterisks are used in the first pages of the 1678 text but are soon all but abandoned, though they are used more regularly in the later sections of the text (maximes supprimées, maximes inédites, réflexions diverses). Regrettably, much of the textual scholarship furnished by the editors is thus destined to be ignored by any reader unready to remedy this oversight by constant checking of the notes.

The above-mentioned issues with the notes notwithstanding, the editorial work devoted to this presentation of La Rochefoucauld's text is first rate and entirely unrivaled among English language editions. It is also the most complete, as it is the first to include the Réflexions diverses, an essential complement to any thoughtful reading of the maxims themselves. If the reader is not linguistically prepared to approach the Maximes in one of the available French editions, (especially Truchet's Garnier or La Fond's Folio editions), s/he will be deprived neither of a basic critical framework within which to understand the work nor, especially, of a serious, scholarly presentation of the text.

As for the new translation, it is intelligent and accurate but, on the whole, less fluid and less literary than some other available translations, especially its clearest rival, Leonard Tancock's English only Penguin edition (1959), and also Constantine FitzGibbon's 1957 version published by Wingate.

Translating La Rochefoucauld is, as Tancock has observed, a "deceptively easy-looking" task.[2] The inventory of "passions" from which this moral cocktail is brewed is fairly limited, as is the basic vocabulary mobilized in its service. The process of discovery seems largely combinatorial, frequently based on a small number of formal computations analyzed and catalogued by critics from Gustave Lanson and Arthur-Hermann Fink to Jacques Truchet and Roland Barthes.[3] For Barthes, in

particular, the forms of La Rochefoucauld's thought--especially the restrictive *n'est que*--are inseparable from the content of his ideas.[4] Jonathan Culler, too, has demonstrated the fundamentally linguistic nature of La Rochefoucauldian paradox and, in particular, his play on the varying senses of apparently stable terms.[5]

As Tancock did before them, the Blackmores and Giguère state a basic difficulty as premise for their translation project: the challenge of choosing a single English word to translate key French words in the original. For example, Blackmore and Giguère note as problematic the word *honnête* which relates either to honor or honesty (and even this is only the beginning of the possibilities). Similarly for "amour-propre," the term we have seen Stevens leave untranslated, Tancock used "self-love and, occasionally, self-interest and resisted the temptation to go in for elegant variation." [6] Clearly, providing a changing array of translations for a given term risks losing the thread of La Rochefoucauld's winding thought and obscuring a degree of paradox that comes from the interplay of the maxims. But the determination to stick to one translation throughout has its own costs. Some of these are noted by Culler: polyvalent terms in French are unlikely to have the same set of meanings as their English "equivalents." [7] Likewise, English terms chosen for their semantic adequacy may not be compatible syntactically with the context of the French original, or may pose another stylistic infelicity. Clearly, a perfect solution to this problem is almost impossible. But it does seem important to describe some of the strengths and shortcomings of Blackmore and Giguère's choices and their rigorist approach.

Some of their translations strike me as jarring, though this may be a matter of idiolects or of British vs. American dialects. La Rochefoucauld's *finesse* (e.g. V: 124-127) is regularly translated as "cunning," a term that seems to suggest more malevolence and less charm than the original (Tancock, for example, uses "cleverness," "clever subtlety," "ruse," or "intrigue."); *grossier* becomes "uncouth" and *être grossier*, the lumbering "uncouthness" in V: 129 (Tancock suggests "crude."); *l'esprit de travers* (V: 318 and V: 502) is conveyed as "waywardness" (Tancock: "wrongheadedness").

Similarly, certain terms are a bit "over-translated": *Les violences qu'on se fait...* (V: 381) suffers in the translation, "The self-inflicted injuries we undergo..." (Tancock is satisfied with, "The efforts we make..."); the explanatory note justifying the translation of *ennui* as "heartache" ("here used primarily in its older, more intense sense ('anguish'), though with a further suggestion of the modern meaning 'boredom'," p. 295) does not clearly justify the following translation: "If we carefully consider the various results of heartache, we shall find that it causes more failures of duty than self-interest does" (V: 172). At other times, more caution about archaic usage might have been useful: *générosité* and *inclination* are key terms in, respectively, the seventeenth-century literature of heroism and love, meaning "magnanimity, nobility, honor" and "strong emotional attraction," senses that may well have been at play in V: 246 ("What seems to be generosity [FitzGibbon: 'nobility of mind'] is often merely a disguised form of ambition, which disdains small interests in order to pursue great ones.") and V: 252 ("It is as usual to see changes of taste as it is unusual to see changes of inclination.") The term "grands" which closes V:246 seems to call out for a noble idea and the possible sensuality of "goûts" leads me toward "physical attraction," though this reading is not clear and is not reflected in any other translation I have seen. Nonetheless, the translators do not account for the problematic nature of these words, as they tried to do with *ennui*.

Among the most difficult words to translate from classical French to modern English is *esprit*. And here there is a rigid allegiance to "mind" and "intelligence" that pushes meaning (to say nothing of style) to the breaking point. In a maxim reminiscent of Pascal, La Rochefoucauld writes: *L'esprit est toujours la dupe du cœur* (V: 102), which is translated by Blackmore and Giguère as "The mind is always deceived by the heart." This is a perfectly good translation, though Tancock's "The head is always fooled by the heart" seems more natural. But this is minor. The question becomes more urgent in the translation of the sixteenth of the *réflexions diverses* entitled "De la différence des esprits." The very title of this essay seems to warn us about the multi-faceted nature of "esprit" but the same English word "mind" is used to

translate each occurrence of esprit in the first nine paragraphs. In the tenth, La Rochefoucauld introduces the notion of bel esprit which is translated as “wit.” And each occurrence of esprit (preceded or not by bel) in the next four paragraphs is translated as “wit,” as well. But why here, why now? A number of the maxims would seem to require this translation, too, but “mind” or “intelligence” is always used. Surprisingly, the translators include an explanatory note for a striking formulation—*On peut être sot avec beaucoup d’esprit, et on peut n’être pas sot avec peu d’esprit* (p. 240, where “wit” translates esprit)—pointing the reader to V: 456, *On est quelquefois un sot avec de l’esprit, mais on le l’est jamais avec du jugement*, where esprit has been translated as “intelligence.” It is not clear if the translators are suggesting a nuance in the two ideas or if they take “intelligence” and “wit” to be synonymous. This perhaps relatively small point may, nevertheless, remind many Blackmore and Giguère’s readers of the end of Patrice Leconte’s film *Ridicule*, where the difficulty of translating French esprit into British humor is pondered. And this may, indeed, be the crux of the matter.

La Rochefoucauld’s *Maximes* are not (only) discourse; they are (also) performance. Their kinship to poetry has not gone unnoticed: in his rich overview of the question of the maxim as form, Philip Lewis has evoked both, for example, the rhythmic qualities of the form (using the analyses of Fink and Sister Mary Zeller) and the poetic function that this form reveals, i.e., “the focus on the message for its own sake.”[8] Little is as daunting for the translator as the recreation of poetry between languages. Blackmore and Giguère’s translations frequently struggle with the poetic meter of the original text. In many of the maxims, the *pointe* is produced by a finishing on a strong (iambic or anapestic) accentual phrase: e.g. *La faiblesse est plus opposée à la vertu que le vice* (V: 445) which loses its punch when translated, “Weakness is more opposed to virtue than vice is.” The weaker ending “vice is” could have been avoided by an (anapestic) inversion: “is vice”; or by the (iambic) ellipsis of the original: “than vice.” A fair number of these translations similarly fall a bit flat by using weak final words (is, are, does, it, us) that sacrifice rhythm for syntactical simplicity or clarity. There are cases, however, where Blackmore and Giguère have preserved the *pointe* even as they transform its syntax, as with chiasmus they add to V:473: *Quelque rare que soit le véritable amour, il l’est encore moins la véritable amitié*; “However rare true love may be, true friendship is even rarer.”

I would like to point out another debatable choice made by the translators on a difficult point of comparative French and English syntax: what to do with La Rochefoucauld’s use of impersonals *on*, *il*, and *ce*. Although they do not do so in all cases, the Blackmore and Giguère occasionally translate these terms as “you” (e.g., V: 245 and 343). Though keeping the impersonal formulation can seem stilted (“one...”) or vague (“it...”) in English, the recourse to “you” violates an essential, gnomic principle at the heart of La Rochefoucauld’s project, if we are to believe his original *avis au lecteur* (as quoted on the back cover of the Oxford translation): “The reader’s best policy is to assume that none of these maxims is directed at him, and that he is the sole exception ... After that, I guarantee that he will be the first to subscribe to them.”

In sum, this new edition of La Rochefoucauld’s *Maximes*, with its imperfections, is a serious work of scholarship that may not bring the original totally to life in English but remains fundamentally faithful to its source. Scholars, whether in comparative literature or in cultural or intellectual history, will reap a rich bounty from the hard work evident in this new edition. Readers wanting primarily to taste the piquancy of La Rochefoucauld’s *Maximes* may be less satisfied but will certainly be well nourished.

NOTES

[1] I have noted only one small but regrettable editing error: in the bibliography, La Rochefoucauld’s work is systematically identified as the *Réflexions* [sic] *diverses*.

[2] Leonard Tancock, trans., *Maxims* (London and Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1959), 20.

[3] Jean Starobinski, "La Rochefoucauld et les morales substitutives," *Nouvelle Revue Française* 14 (July-August 1966): 16-34 and 211-29.

[4] Barthes, "La Rochefoucauld: Réflexion ou sentences et maximes." In *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, edited by Éric Marty (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994), 1339-40.

[5] Jonathan Culler, "Paradox and the Language of Morals in La Rochefoucauld," *Modern Language Review* 68.1 (1973): 28-39.

[6] Tancock, 20.

[7] Culler, 30.

[8] Philip E. Lewis, *La Rochefoucauld: the art of abstraction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 176.

Stephen Bold
Boston College
bold@bc.edu

Copyright © 2009 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172