

## A FEMINIST VOICE IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT SALON: MADAME DE LAMBERT ON TASTE, SENSIBILITY, AND THE FEMININE MIND\*

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*This essay demonstrates how the early Enlightenment salonnière madame de Lambert advanced a novel feminist intellectual synthesis favoring women's taste and cognition, which hybridized Cartesian (specifically Malebranchian) and honnête thought. Disputing recent interpretations of Enlightenment salonnières that emphasize the constraints of honnêteté on their thought, and those that see Lambert's feminism as misguided in emphasizing gendered sensibility, I analyze Lambert's approach as best serving her needs as an aristocratic woman within elite salon society, and show through contextualized analysis how she deployed honnêteté towards feminist ends. Additionally, the analysis of Malebranche's, Poulain de la Barre's, and Lambert's arguments about the female mind's gendered embodiment illustrates that misrepresenting Cartesianism as necessarily liberatory for women, by reducing it to a rigid substance dualism, erases from view its more complex implications for gender politics in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, especially in the honnête environment of the salons.*

*Honnêteté*, the seventeenth-century French discourse and set of practices revolving around refined aristocratic politeness, pleasing social performance and apparently effortless good taste,<sup>1</sup> has become the dominant framework for understanding salons as social formations from this period into the

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<sup>1</sup> *Honnêteté*, one of whose central tropes was that refined women rightfully arbitrated literature, setting standards of taste and social polish for writers and other salon habitués, was linked to a refined redefinition of nobility and the birth of a self-consciously modern French vernacular literary tradition that newly imagined the polite, worldly intellectual and writer. See C. Lougee, *Le Paradis des Femmes: Women, Salons, and Social Stratification in Seventeenth-Century France* (Princeton, 1976); J.-P. Dens, *L'Honnête homme et la critique*

nineteenth century. Social and cultural historians emphasize its constraints on Enlightenment *salonnières* such as Anne-Thérèse de Marguenat de Courcelles, marquise de Lambert, the subject of this essay, and voice skepticism that these women could pursue serious, independent, or oppositional intellectual agendas.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, feminist historical and literary scholarship continues to rehearse oversimplified depictions of Cartesian rationalist egalitarian feminism (emblemized by François Poulain de la Barre and premised on a purportedly rigid substance dualism), with one well-received study arguing that Lambert's feminism problematically deviated from this tradition.<sup>3</sup> Feminist and salon scholarships have wrongly presented Lambert's feminism as weak or misguided,

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*du gout* (Lexington, KY, 1981); A. Viala, *Naissance de l'écrivain: Sociologie de la littérature à l'âge classique* (Paris, 1985); M. Moriarty, *Taste and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century France* (Cambridge, 1988); C. Chantalat, *A la recherche du goût classique* (Paris, 1992); F. Beasley, *Salons, History, and the Creation of Seventeenth-Century France: Mastering Memory* (Aldershot, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> J. Pekacz, *Conservative Tradition in Pre-Revolutionary France: Parisian Salon Women* (New York, 1999); S. Kale, *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848* (Baltimore, 2004); A. Lilti, *Le monde des salons: Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2005). This scholarship often goes too far in correcting D. Goodman's overemphasis on enlightened salon seriousness in *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, 1994), depicting *salonnières* as frivolous, disempowered, or unable to engage independently in intellectual issues; Pekacz sees *honnêteté* determining women into conservatism, *passim* (on Lambert, see e.g., 91, 106, 134, 206).

<sup>3</sup> L. Steinbrügge charges Lambert with "emotionalizing the female mind," inaccurately contrasting her with Poulain in *The Moral Sex: Woman's Nature in the French Enlightenment*, trans. P. Selwyn (New York, 1995), chap. 1. It has become unquestioned dogma for feminist historians and literary scholars that Poulain denied any gendering of the mind and espoused an unyielding substance dualism, and this has become a metonymic figure for Cartesian philosophy as far as women were concerned; see e.g. K. Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950* (Stanford, 2000), 34; cf. François Poullain de la Barre, *Three Cartesian Feminist Treatises*, trans. V. Bosley, ed. M. Maistre Welch (Chicago, 2002), 47 (edition used for all subsequent references to Poulain's works). (Feminist philosophers have developed a very different body of work critiquing and exploring Cartesian dualism; see R. Wilkin's helpful review and fresh analysis, *Women, Imagination and the Search for Truth in Early Modern France* (Aldershot, 2008), though she too reduces Poulain to substance dualism, 183.) J. Israel's excellent account of Cartesianism's mixed potential for women avoids reducing it to its *res cogitans/res extensa* distinction, but his analysis of Poulain—*Enlightenment Contested* (Oxford, 2006), 572–6—does emphasize substance dualism at the expense of mental gendering. The best recent study of Poulain is S. Stuurman's *François Poulain de la Barre and the Invention of Modern Equality* (Cambridge, MA, 2004). See K. Hamerton, "Malebranche, Taste and Sensibility: The Origins of Sensitive Taste and a Reconsideration of Cartesianism's Feminist Potential," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69 (2008), 535–6.

however, because they do not situate and analyze it within a broader understanding of Cartesianism, sensibility, *honnêteté*, and salon society.<sup>4</sup> Careful, contextualized study of Lambert's thought shows instead that contemporary feminist impulses could make excellent sense within non-dualist formulations, and that *honnêteté* need not limit women's intellectual agency. I will argue that this *honnête salonnière* advanced a novel feminist intellectual synthesis favoring women's cognition, which hybridized Cartesian (specifically Malebranchian) and *honnête* thought, and that she did so because this approach best served her needs within the *honnête* salon society in which she functioned.<sup>5</sup>

Extending intellectual history's rigorously contextualized analyses to the often fugitive writings of salon women can correct reductionist tendencies in viewing *salonnières*. Being "a Cartesian" in Lambert's day, for example, did not necessarily—or even normally—mean that one discounted the mind's embodiment.<sup>6</sup> Cartesian frameworks buttressed feminist and misogynist outlooks, highlighting bodily influence to their own purposes.<sup>7</sup> Lambert fits well within this "big tent" Cartesian tradition, and differences between her and Poulain are caricatured when this is not appreciated. Here I will show how a closer analysis of Lambert's intellectual relationship with one key figure of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century thought leads to a better understanding of this Cartesian woman's *honnête* intervention into the mixed-sex philosophical and aesthetic debates of her day. This figure was Nicolas Malebranche, Cartesian philosopher, honorary member of the Académie des sciences, and Oratorian priest.

I examine Lambert's gendered epistemology and thought on women's taste, as revealed primarily in her *Réflexions nouvelles sur les femmes*, to show how she was carefully reconceiving and rewriting Malebranche's already highly gendered physiologically based Cartesian epistemology from within the social and intellectual vantage points of feminism, *honnêteté*, and her Malebranchian salon.<sup>8</sup> To do so, in part, she drew on elements of Poulain's feminist thought, but not what we celebrate as his sexless-mind position. Rather, Lambert was drawn to

<sup>4</sup> Defenses of Lambert's feminism are similarly flawed: M.-J. Fassiotto, *Madame de Lambert (1647–1733) ou le féminisme moral* (New York, 1984); M. Barth-Cao Danh, *La philosophie cognitive et morale d'Anne-Thérèse de Lambert (1647–1733): La volonté d'être* (New York, 2002); Beasley, *Salons*, 33–9.

<sup>5</sup> I follow Stuurman's definition of early modern feminism in *François Poulain*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> S. James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford, 1997); E. Harth, *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime* (Ithaca, 1992), chap. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Hamerton, "Malebranche"; Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 572–6.

<sup>8</sup> I make no claim to provide a comprehensive contextualization of Lambert, who influenced and was influenced by a multitude of intellectual, social, and cultural individuals and discourses; see R. Marchal, *Madame de Lambert et son milieu* (Oxford, 1991).

those of his claims that were grounded in gendered embodiment and sensibility, and that emphasized the *honnête* values of pleasure, delicacy, and sentiment. Showing that two fellow Cartesians—one a feminist—whose work Lambert knew, were, decades before she wrote, portraying the female mind as sexed because embodied, clears her of the charge of initiating a trend towards sexual differentiation said to depart in nature from (an overly simplified) Cartesian dualistic rationalism.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Lambert’s nuanced position as a *mondaine* intellectual interlocutor of these more famous male Cartesians reveals how complex, meaningful and contingent in their impact for feminism could be the historical interconnections between Cartesian affiliations, sensibility, *honnêteté*, and biologically based theories of gender, as understood and deployed by men and women in the early decades of the eighteenth century. Lambert worked creatively within these cultural parameters, to her own ends. Functioning within the joint opportunities and constraints of *honnêteté*, this *salonnière*, who idealized and personified *honnête* moral virtue and refined politeness, was not circumscribed by *honnête* norms into conservatism, superficiality, fearful detachment from intellectual debate or a silent, trapped, or willing accommodation of the Malebranchian, at times misogynistic, positions of her male guests. Rather, in bonding *honnêteté* with physiological sensibility Lambert revealed a more radical potential for asserting gender equality through *honnêteté*. Her use of *honnête* tropes in emphasizing aspects of Malebranchian physio-psychology and modern theories of sensibility furthered goals that were at once both feminist and *honnête*.

Yet the complexity of Lambert’s feminist retort to Malebranche’s philosophy of mind and her importance as his major feminist interlocutor have been overlooked, although she clearly disagreed with him, and managed an important salon with known Malebranchian links during a period when Malebranche was widely read and known. The recent claim that Lambert “accepts Malebranche’s limitation of female intelligence to matters of taste” is typical.<sup>10</sup> Only Linda Timmermans, to my knowledge, correctly interprets Lambert’s response to Malebranche.<sup>11</sup> With due credit to their many other valuable insights into Lambert’s thought, literary and feminist scholars downplay or overlook her

<sup>9</sup> Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Wilkin, *Women*, 186.

<sup>11</sup> L. Timmermans, *L'accès des femmes à la culture (1598–1715): Un débat d'idées de Saint François de Sales à la Marquise de Lambert* (Paris, 1993), 170, n. 243. Timmermans rightly notes that Lambert drew upon Pascal’s notion of *esprit de finesse* (*Pensées*, no. 1) to counter Malebranche, but does not further explore Lambert’s position, which went beyond this tradition, nor her reconciliation of the physiology of sensibility with her *honnête* feminism, as I do here. Also see Lougee, *Paradis*, 31–2.

pushing back against him,<sup>12</sup> portray her as departing from an overly simplified Cartesian rationalist tradition rather than situate her within its full complexity,<sup>13</sup> or anachronistically deny her physiological essentialism, the recognition of which causes them considerable discomfort.<sup>14</sup>

And yet the contributions of feminist literary scholars have been invaluable to our understanding of early modern women's thought, by developing sophisticated interpretations of aristocratic women's publishing strategies and showing how deep, often oppositional, engagement with philosophical and social issues was veiled in early modern women's writings, buried in non-scholastic genres, camouflaged in fictional form or by the kind of playful style Lambert herself employed.<sup>15</sup> If intellectual historians followed this lead, being more attentive to salon women's ideas and the literary and rhetorical forms with which they expressed them, they could advance the historical understanding of these *honnête* women, while doing greater justice to ephemeral, scanty, or nontraditional intellectual-history sources. Cultivating sensitivity to salon women's rhetorical strategies and maneuvers, and to their intellectual affiliations and divergences (however muted by *honnête* decorum), would correct presumptions that *honnête* style transparently reveals pro-absolutist values or limited intellectual engagement (readings not usually applied to the writings of *honnête* men who frequented salons).<sup>16</sup> We would then better comprehend these women's relationships with various Enlightenment currents; be better placed to clarify the evolving, complex, and unfixed nature of the influence of *honnêteté* over them qua *salonnières*; and perhaps gain an enhanced understanding of how *honnêteté* may or may not have inhibited, or fostered, salon intellectual culture more generally. This kind of intellectual history could yield a more nuanced assessment of salon women's intellectual potential, positions, activities,

<sup>12</sup> *Madame de Lambert: Oeuvres*, ed. R. Grandroute (Paris, 1990), 8, 244–5, n. 23 (all references to Lambert's published writings here refer to this edition unless otherwise indicated and are cited in the text where possible; if not otherwise indicated, citations will refer to the *Réflexions nouvelles sur les femmes* (RN)); Marchal, *Lambert*, 148–9; Fassiotto, *Lambert*, 56–7; Beasley, *Salons*, 36 (leading to further misreadings; Wilkin, *Women*, 186).

<sup>13</sup> Steinbrügge, *Moral Sex*, 11–13, 18–20; Barth-Cao Danh, *Philosophie Cognitive*, 28.

<sup>14</sup> Beasley, *Salons*, 37; Steinbrügge, *Moral Sex*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Harth, *Cartesian Women*, 82–3; J. DeJean, *Tender Geographies: Women and the Origins of the Novel in France* (New York, 1991), has been especially influential. Historical and philosophical work in this light includes C. Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton, 2001); J. Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France* (Ithaca, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Pekacz, *Conservative Tradition*. Lilti, *Le monde des salons*, 117, 408, 410, allows male writers “intellectual autonomy . . . through adhesion to the values of the social elites” that constrained women’s “intellectual ambition,” 408.

and interventions, while enriching our growing understanding of the impact of social location and gender identity in particular Enlightenment debates, as these were lived and thought through.

Such an approach reveals that although Lambert never directly stated what came to be an essentially materialist position about women's leadership in taste, and never took on Malebranche more than obliquely, she was no more intellectually constrained by *honnêteté* than was Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, who deployed its polite conventions to frame the emerging discourse of an early eighteenth-century scientific culture seeking respect and status and to solidify its newly prominent Academic niche, while containing its disputes over calculus and cosmology.<sup>17</sup> When Lambert made disclaimers about being led astray to sow flowers on the altar of Love (236–7) or invoked authorial modesty, we should no more read these at face value than when assessing other protective strategies used by provocative Old Regime authors—like Fontenelle—who wished to avoid trouble with the censors or in polite society.<sup>18</sup> Their gender, and often their rank, were additional but not insurmountable constraints on salon women, like those faced by other writers; all had to maneuver, negotiate their expression, and find ways to further their individual goals. The Old Regime *salonnière*, in short, should no more be reduced to *honnête politesse*, than should Diderot to the quest for funding the *Encyclopédie*.

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<sup>17</sup> J. B. Shank, “Neither Natural Philosophy, Nor Science, Nor Literature—Gender, Writing, and the Pursuit of Nature in Fontenelle’s *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes habités*,” in J. Zinsser, ed., *Men, Women, and the Birthing of Modern Science* (DeKalb, IL, 2005), 86–110; J. B. Shank, *The Newton Wars and the Beginning of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago, 2008), 64; *idem*, “Before Voltaire: Newton and the Making of Mathematical Physics in France, 1680–1715” (unpublished MS which I am grateful to Shank for sharing with me), chap. 3.

<sup>18</sup> N. Gelbart, introduction to Fontenelle, *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds*, trans. H. A. Hargreaves (Berkeley, 1990); cf. J. Zinsser, “Entrepreneur of the ‘Republic of Letters’: Emilie de Breteuil, Marquise Du Châtelet, and Bernard Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees*,” *French Historical Studies* 25 (2002), 620–21. Modest self-deprecation is a constant trope with Lambert, which she tended to invoke disingenuously before asserting her opinion, e.g., undated letter to Buffier in *Oeuvres de Madame la Marquise de Lambert, avec un abrégé de sa vie*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1748), 262: “Can you imagine [*Songez-vous*] . . . that I am only a woman, whose intelligence [*esprit*], if I had any, would be always constrained by customs; and that it must hide beneath the veil of the proprieties? But, after having paid the tribute that my Sex owes to modesty, I will tell you that . . .” Note the way Lambert deployed verb moods, an interrogative, and the verb *songer* with its overtones of dreaming, to strategic effect here. Cf. Marchal, *Lambert*, 161, 167–77, on her attempts to obscure her authorship and construct an aristocratic myth about her writing (which has effectively obscured its serious intent). Certainly, her chosen public was her habitués, but these were handpicked, influential individuals.

Moreover, *honnête* style, for Lambert, Fontenelle, and many others, was a tool at least as much as a restraint. Polite refinement, lightness and playful presentation were distinguishing stylistic features of those who, like them, identified as Moderns in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, in a deliberate quest to differentiate themselves from what they portrayed as a stodgy, pedantic Republic of Letters and a misogynist Ancient party. Seriousness and playfulness were intimately intertwined in early Enlightenment writings and in the Enlightenment salons, with a mingled balance of these qualities ideally cultivated by both sexes.<sup>19</sup> Seeking to cultivate the polite public by enveloping the serious in the *honnête* and pleasurable was a deliberate and considered tactic in the early Enlightenment strategy of Lambert's neo-precious salon.<sup>20</sup> Fontenelle, Antoine Houdar de la Motte, the abbé Jean-Paul Bignon, Montesquieu, Marivaux, and other members of this "forum for an ambitious project whose goal was to effect a collaboration between the feminine and *mondain* public, academic institutions, and certain influential political milieus, towards the triumph of modern ideas," wielded the seductive arms of a new *préciosité* for their own pleasure and to win this public's approbation.<sup>21</sup> *Honnête, précieuse* playfulness deliberately fused with serious philosophical ideas, graciously escorting them

<sup>19</sup> E. Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment: Taste, Politics, and Authorship in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, 2007); J. DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (Chicago, 1997). Emile du Châtelet used the conventionally gendered trope about making knowledge pleasant and understandable to Maupertuis in 1734: "You sow the flowers on the path where others find only brambles, your imagination knows how to embellish the driest materials without diminishing their accuracy or . . . precision." Quoted in J. Zinsser, "Mentors, the Marquise du Châtelet and Historical Memory," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society* 61 (2007), 94.

<sup>20</sup> On the *nouvelle préciosité* (marked by neologisms, stylistic hybridity, and "philosophical gaiety") of the writers of Lambert's "at once serious and precious" salon, see F. Deloffre, *Marivaux et le Marivaudage: une préciosité nouvelle*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1967), *passim*, quot. 16, 21; Marchal, *Lambert*. Cf. Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment*, for an analysis of the *goût moderne*.

<sup>21</sup> Marchal, *Lambert*, 211, and *passim*, e.g. 157, 161, 222 ff., 243–4, 583 ff., 750–51; see Shank, "Neither Natural Philosophy, Nor Science," and cf. his analysis of the program of the Académie des sciences reformers (especially Fontenelle and Bignon) in the 1690s in *Before Voltaire*, chap. 3. On the *honnête politesse* of Fontenelle, Bignon, and Mairan in the Académie, and Lambert's influence in this regard, see E. Badinter, *Les passions intellectuelles*, vol. 1, *Désirs de gloire (1735–1751)* (Paris, 1999), 23 ff. Lambert's portrait of Maine eulogizes the desired combination of Pascalian qualities: "a profound, precise, methodical and logical intellect [*esprit profond, géométrique & conséquent*], a refined delicate intelligence [*esprit*], luminous with all the charms of the imagination . . . this joy which animates everything, this playfulness which in no way rejects seriousness," *Lettres de Monsieur de la Motte . . .* (n.p., 1754), 18–19; also on the serious-playful tone of Lambert's and Maine's Sceaux gatherings, see the abbé Leblanc's comments here, xii–xiii.

to the receptive attention of a polite public, just as the modern aesthetics of *galanterie*, sentiment, and pleasure of early eighteenth-century music, theatre, decoration, painting, and architecture expressed aristocratic resistance to or disdain for absolutist power mechanics and even social conventions about rank and gender, a similarly oblique yet legible approach designed to protect the composer, artist or noble commissioner of a Parisian *hotel*.<sup>22</sup>

In Lambert's case, the privately circulated manuscript essay playfully and delicately expressed feminist disagreement with certain members of a Malebranchian circle with scientific and masculine egos at stake, while balancing aristocratic, feminine, and religious proprieties. I am skeptical that Lambert was exceptional or the last among eighteenth-century salon women in mastering such delicately oppositional communication. Closer study of other salon women's intellectual relationships and rhetoric may well reveal more of the complexities of their thought, if we are sensitive to the situatedness of their ideas and language within the many streams of Enlightenment philosophy and science as well as the particular conventions of *honnête* social formations like salons. More such analyses should be attempted before drawing further conclusions about "the Old Regime *salonnière*" as a category.

#### LAMBERT AND HER SALON

Born into the comfortable milieu of the *noblesse de robe* in 1647, beneficiary of an excellent literary and moral education, and a wealthy widow after a 1692 legal victory against her dead husband's military family, the marquise de Lambert opened her Parisian salon in the best *honnête* and *précieuse* tradition late that year or in early 1693. In establishing her salon, it is well known that Lambert idealized the mid-century era of *préciosité* as a golden age and sought to emulate the cultural and moral refinement represented by earlier female paragons of *honnêteté*; she also yearned to discuss and influence serious intellectual matters of public import. Launched in the difficult late reign of Louis XIV, witnessing the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, the Regency's excesses, the collapse of Law's System and the early years of the Enlightenment, the salon's agenda and guest lists were *honnête*, literary, and intellectual. The Modern leaders Fontenelle, whom Lambert likely met between 1687 and 1695, and la Motte, the major Modern antagonist during the Quarrel's last phase over Homer, were the key male figures; other regulars included Bouhours, Boulainvilliers, Fénelon, Claude Buffier, Crébillon père, Montesquieu, Marivaux and Du Bos. Until her death in 1733 (when her

<sup>22</sup> K. Scott, *The Rococo Interior: Decoration and Social Spaces in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, 1995); G. Cowart, *The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV and the Politics of Spectacle* (Chicago, 2008). Also see T. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, 1985), chap. 2.



guests migrated to madame de Tencin's), Lambert's salon seamlessly honored the *précieuse* tradition and was the first of the great Enlightenment salons, "cradle of the *Encyclopédie*."<sup>23</sup>

With its hostess's interests in *la morale* and modern science, and its distinguished and forward-looking guest lists, Lambert's salon became an important forum for the encounter of *honnête* values with the newest theories of psychology, sensibility and aesthetic reception, serious interests of the membership. New publications and the habitués' works-in-progress on these and other subjects were read, discussed, and extracted for the gazettes.<sup>24</sup> Guests and hostess wrote on taste, women's cultural influence, the psychology of pleasure or beauty, or engaged in the Quarrel that shook up received notions of taste and beauty, fostered the development of notions of aesthetic relativism and tolerance, and affected the salon personally, as did Regency transitions and the fallout from Law's System, in which they invested (and lost). Many of their writings, including Lambert's, would circulate before a broader public. One of the important influences on these writings was Malebranche's thought on taste and the female mind.<sup>25</sup>

Lambert, *femme cartésienne* and *dame malebranchiste*, had read Descartes and Malebranche, considered the *Méditations* essential reading for the formation of *honnêtes gens*, and in her *Avis d'une mère à sa fille* recommended the study of "the new" philosophy to her daughter, for "it gives you precision in the mind, untangles your ideas, and teaches you to think justly" (111). Before opening her salon, she had attended the salon of madame de la Sablière, where Cartesian and scientific ideas had been discussed. She owned and cited Malebranche's *De la recherche de la vérité* and had read his *Traité de morale*. One of the great contributions of Roger Marchal's magisterial study of Lambert is to draw attention to Malebranche's importance to the marquise and her milieu; Marchal sees Lambert's thought frequently evincing Malebranchian influence on matters ranging from knowledge

<sup>23</sup> Marchal, *Lambert*: dating of salon, xiv, 62, and of acquaintance with Fontenelle, 209–11; list of habitués, 763–5 (Marchal lists eighty-five, including women writers, an actress, intellectuals and *le grand monde*); salon's *préciosité* and intellectualism, *passim*; salon's anti-absolutist Fenelonian and Malebranchian politics, 235 ff.; S. Delorme, "Le salon de la marquise de Lambert, berceau de *l'Encyclopédie*," in S. Delorme and R. Taton, eds., *L'Encyclopédie et le progrès des sciences et des techniques* (Paris, 1952), 20–24. La Motte was a hatter's son; Fontenelle's father was an obscure parliamentary lawyer from an old robe family of Rouen; his uncles were the Corneille brothers.

<sup>24</sup> Marchal, *Lambert*, for her intellectual and moral formation, 95 ff.; her philosophical and scientific readings, esp. 132–4; protocol of and overlap between the *mardis* and *mercredis*, 213–22.

<sup>25</sup> K. Hamerton, "Women's Taste in the French Enlightenment: From the *Honnête* Model to the Domestic Paradigm, 1674–1762" (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 2002), chap. 2.

acquisition and mental force to political theory.<sup>26</sup> Lambert's interest in Descartes and Malebranche in this period was not unusual. Cartesian influence was omnipresent in her lifetime in educated French circles, and is widely evident in the views of her habitués, including women like the duchesse du Maine, who ran her own Cartesian salon, and Maine's confidante, the baronne de Staal-Delaunay, who attended both gatherings.<sup>27</sup> Malebranche (1638–1715) was “the reigning philosopher of the epoch,” the best-known and most important Cartesian thinker at the time. His work was extraordinarily popular with early eighteenth-century *honnête*, literary, and scientific society, especially during the Regency.<sup>28</sup> “*Honnête* society,” explains Marchal, “appreciated his efforts to clarify the first principles of *la morale* and to adapt the new philosophy to analyses of the human heart.”<sup>29</sup>

While Lambert's reputation as gatekeeper to the Académie française is celebrated, there were also important reciprocal ties between her salon and the Académie des sciences through their overlapping *malebranchiste* membership, which should be better known.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Malebranche's broader influence on

<sup>26</sup> Marchal, *Lambert*, 108, 132, 141, 148–9, 237, n. 101. Further evidence in this *Avis* (AF) of the Cartesian affiliation of her earliest serious writings is in Lambert's linking “*idées . . . nettes et dé mêlées*” to producing clear speech (Madame de Lambert, *Oeuvres*, 131); cf. J. B. Shank “There was No Such Thing as the “Newtonian Revolution,” and the French Initiated It: Eighteenth-Century Mechanics in France before Maupertuis,” *Early Science and Medicine* 9 (2004), 282–5. Grandroute dates the composition of both of Lambert's *Avis* to the 1690s (Madame de Lambert, *Oeuvres*, 34); Marchal to 1688–92 (196). Whether or not Sablière was a supporter of Cartesianism has been disputed, but both women were exposed to Cartesian ideas discussed in Sablière's salon; Sablière owned Malebranche's *De la recherche de la vérité* and Descartes's *Les passions de l'âme*; Conley, *Suspicion*, 77–9, 89; W. Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France* (New York, 1989), 273, n. 147; Harth, *Cartesian Women*, 65.

<sup>27</sup> Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France*, 38; François Azouvi, “Une duchesse cartésienne?” in *La Duchesse du Maine (1676–1753): Une Mécène à la croisée des arts et des siècles* (Brussels, 2003), 155–9.

<sup>28</sup> Bayle, August 1683 *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres*, quoted in G. Rodis-Lewis, *Nicolas Malebranche* (Paris, 1963), 5. Malebranche scholarship is colossal, and Malebranchian affiliation meant different things to different constituencies at different times. For an introduction, see *Oeuvres complètes de Malebranche*, vol. 20, *Malebranche vivant*, ed. André Robinet (Paris, 1967); and Robinet's “Malebranchisme et Régence,” in Centre aixois d'études et de recherches sur le XVIIIe Siècle, *La Régence* (Paris, 1970), 263–75. Shank discerns a “Malebranchian Moment” in the 1690s in “No Such Thing.”

<sup>29</sup> Marchal, *Lambert*, 148; cf. 349.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, on the Académie française, 250 ff.; on ties to the Académie des sciences, 211, 243, 283; cf. on Bignon and Fontenelle in the Académie des inscriptions, 265. A good discussion of Bignon and Fontenelle and their goals in the Académie des sciences is Shank, *Before Voltaire*, chap. 3.

developments in mathematics and physics extended well beyond *géomètres* and *physiciens* through vehicles such as the *Mercure galant*, which pitched mathematical publications to the polite public. This development was fostered by Fontenelle, tireless proponent of Cartesian physics, who began his literary career in Paris with the *Mercure* before becoming a key member of Lambert's salon. In general, the importance of mathematics to mixed-sex *honnête* culture and the fusion of Malebranchian analytic clarity with *honnête* self-cultivation and clear speech were very salient in the 1690s.<sup>31</sup>

Malebranche was the center of arguably the dominant group in the Academy following its 1699 reorganization, when he was brought in as an *honoraire*, along with a critical mass of fellow *malebranchiste* mathematicians which maintained its influence well beyond the Regency.<sup>32</sup> Two powerful *lambertins* – Fontenelle, the Academy's perpetual secretary since 1697, and Bignon, its president since 1691 (and the most influential figure in the Academy admissions process) – led this reform, which placed new emphasis on the public visibility of the academicians' work. Malebranche, Fontenelle, and especially Bignon were all key players in Academic admissions patronage and coalition-building. Fontenelle's new academic *éloges* and annual histories of the academy's work, designed for legibility to the polite public and marked by the precious verbal style of the salon (and apparently subjected to salon vetting and input), publicized Malebranchian physics and mathematics.<sup>33</sup> Bignon, likewise keenly interested in rendering scientific knowledge chic, also presided over the directorship of the *Journal des savants*, the official philosophical and scientific journal (to which Lambert subscribed), itself being reformed in the early decades of the century.<sup>34</sup> The *lambertin malebranchiste* Academicians included the abbés Christophe-Bernard de Bragelonne and Charles-Irénée Castel de Saint-Pierre, two of the

<sup>31</sup> Shank, "No Such Thing." On Fontenelle and the *Mercure*, also see Gelbart in Fontenelle, *Conversations*, xiv–xv; A. Niderst, *Fontenelle* (Paris, 1991), chap. 2. On the *Mercure's* fostering of the new, mixed-sex public for literature, see DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns*; S. Stuurman, "Literary Feminism in Seventeenth-Century Southern France: The Case of Antoinette de Salvan de Saliez," *Journal of Modern History* 71 (1999), 1–27.

<sup>32</sup> Robinet, "Malebranchisme," 271; Marchal, *Lambert*, 243; Badinter, *Les passions intellectuelles*, vol. 1, chap. 1; Shank, *Newton Wars*, 37–9; A. Robinet, "Le groupe malebranchiste introducteur du calcul infinitésimal en France," *Revue d'histoire des sciences et de leurs applications* 13 (1960), 287–308.

<sup>33</sup> D. Sturdy, *Science and Social Status: The Members of the Académie des Sciences, 1666–1750* (Woodbridge, 1995), 244; Shank, *Before Voltaire*, chap. 3; *idem*, *Newton Wars*, 39; *idem*, "No Such Thing," 286 ff.; Marchal, *Lambert*, 243, 750; R. Marchal, *Fontenelle à l'aube des Lumières* (Paris, 1997), 204; Deloffre, *Marivaux*, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Shank, *Before Voltaire*, chap. 3; Marchal, *Lambert*, 133.

most influential *lambertins*;<sup>35</sup> Jean-Jacques Dortous de Mairan, Malebranche's mathematics student from 1698 to 1702 and protégé, and eventually Fontenelle's successor as Academy secretary (equally faithful to his public-outreach project);<sup>36</sup> and the Modern abbé and *géomètre* Jean Terrasson.<sup>37</sup> Institutional and personal ties of friendship, patronage, intellectual exchange, and instruction connected this "Malebranche circle," which introduced and began to use the infinitesimal calculus in France, to each other and to this dominant intellectual figure. Coming and going in various overlapping networks, as habitués *chez* Lambert they formed the salon's scientific Malebranchian core, while Montesquieu, Bignon, Terrasson, and the abbé Nicolas-Hubert de Mongault were also connected through their Oratorian educations. Their welcoming hostess, fellow *malebranchiste*, was no mathematician but sought the same precise insights into truth and mental force as did they and Malebranche.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, Lambert used Malebranchian psychology against him to argue for women's special access to this truth-attaining mental force. Accordingly, I focus neither on mathematics nor on the other more studied areas of Malebranche's *oeuvre*, but on his treatment of taste and his gendered epistemology. These areas of his thought were important enough to Lambert to take on; here we can delve deeper into an important aspect of her *malebranchisme*. There is evidence of Malebranchian influence on the writings of the *lambertins* in these areas as well.<sup>39</sup>

## MALEBRANCHE ON FEMININE AND EFFEMINATE MINDS

Malebranche's importance to contemporary thought on taste and gender has not been well understood. These aspects of his thought are found in his best-known work, *De la recherche de la vérité*, his multifaceted consideration of the mind and of epistemological and cultural blocks to avoiding error and attaining truth. There he attacked taste, considered as a function of the senses and the imagination; all three by definition meant falseness and error in Malebranche's ascetic epistemology. In an intrinsically gendered critique, he dismissed taste as a bodily distraction hindering reason and clear perception. Although Malebranche

<sup>35</sup> Marchal, *Lambert*, 243, where he argues that Bragelonne would have discussed Malebranche's works with Lambert; Robinet, "Malebranchisme," 271; Robinet, ed., *Malebranche vivant*, 170; Sturdy, *Science and Social Status*, 427.

<sup>36</sup> Zinsser, "Mentors," 97; Marchal, *Lambert*, 243; Sturdy, *Science and Social Status*, 356, 421, 427.

<sup>37</sup> Rodis-Lewis, *Malebranche*, 335; Marchal, *Lambert*, 243; Sturdy, *Science and Social Status*, 387 (Terrasson was at first given the unusual title of assistant to Fontenelle), 427.

<sup>38</sup> See Marchal, *Lambert*, 149; Shank, "No Such Thing," 283–4.

<sup>39</sup> Hamerton, "Women's Taste," chap. 2.

acknowledged women's dominant cultural role in the salons and over literature, he irrevocably linked this to denying them intellectual prominence and rational capabilities, by classifying these salon activities, the literary domain, and taste itself as superficial and misleading. This analysis has almost been lost to us within his magnum opus, whose concerns extended far beyond those habits of *mondain* and *honnête* society targeted in his treatment of taste. Yet Malebranche's mechanistic theory of the faculty and his gendered psychology more generally were influential on the *lambertins* and beyond.

Malebranche developed an extensive mechanical explanation of taste and its variability in terms of the strength, consistency, and moisture content of cerebral fibers, differentiated by age and sex, and the amount, quality, and activity of animal spirits in the blood, which fluctuated due to climate, food, and alcohol intake and internal nervous stimulation. This was by far the most complex modern physiological explanation for taste to date, and its basis in embodiment was meant to undermine *mondain* beliefs about the standards and mysteriousness of taste, a faculty portrayed in *honnête* discourse as invariably dissociated from bodily function, and immediately and effortlessly in accord with reason. Malebranche deliberately undermined taste by linking it to body and brain, specifically to female and effeminate bodies and brains, and by physiologically explaining its fluctuations and variations. His gendering of taste and the imagination importantly departed from Descartes in *Les passions de l'âme*, reminding us (along with Poulain's and Lambert's different spins on what they and Malebranche agreed were women's more sensitive brains) of the potential for wide-open Cartesian interpretation of Descartes.<sup>40</sup>

One year after Poulain's (falsely emblematic) proclamation that "the mind has no sex," Malebranche proclaimed the female mind, embodied in the brain, to be negatively affected by the sexed body, making women less-than-rational creatures of their dominating and dissembling taste, imagination, and senses.<sup>41</sup> He was, in fact, joining Poulain in gendering sensibility, but to a different end. The "delicacy" of women's "brain fibers," declared Malebranche, made them especially receptive to sensory impressions, giving

them great understanding of everything that strikes the senses. It is for women to set fashions, judge language, discern elegance and good manners. They have more knowledge, skill, and finesse than men in these matters. Everything that depends upon taste is within their area of competence.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Wilkin, *Women*, 187–8; Shank, *Newton Wars*, 46–7. See Hamerton, "Malebranche," upon which this section draws, for a full discussion of Malebranche's theories of taste, including his gendered departure from Descartes.

<sup>41</sup> Poullain, *Three Treatises*, 82.

In consequence, however, women were “normally . . . incapable of penetrating to truths that are slightly difficult to discover” and of “abstract” thought. Superficial thinkers distracted by

a trifle . . . , the style and not the reality of things suffices to occupy their minds to capacity; because insignificant things produce great motions in the delicate fibers of their brains, these things necessarily excite great and vivid feelings in their souls, completely occupying it.<sup>42</sup>

In spite of disclaimers about women being so little taken seriously they could never hinder the quest for truth, Malebranche displayed obvious anger at salon women’s abilities to make and break the reputations of writers and thinkers based on what he considered superficial matters of taste and manners, and not the validity of men’s ideas. He was caustic about “effeminate” men with “soft minds” who also judged by taste and appearance, dissuaded by “the dirty and ragged collar” instead of using reason to understand “the philosophical or reflective manner of speaking” and “elegant demonstrations” of a speaker.<sup>43</sup> Although he attacked several cultural contexts that disrupted the search for truth (including the authority of classical authors and the milieu of pedantic scholarship), Malebranche’s critique of taste was largely situated within this disgruntled analysis of the literary and intellectual influence of elite, mixed-sex *honnête* salon and court society. Here the philosopher was pushing back against the softening effects on the Republic of Letters of sexual mingling and of the new breed of intellectuals’ cultivation of the polite public, which were ushering in the Enlightenment in the late seventeenth century.<sup>44</sup>

## LAMBERT’S *HONNÊTE* AND FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE LEISURED FEMININE MIND

### Lambert’s feminist and *honnête* repudiation of Malebranche

These assaults on superficial taste, women’s cognitive capabilities, their *honnête* influence, and the men they softened did not go unnoticed by Lambert. The latter,

<sup>42</sup> N. Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*, trans. and ed. T. Lennon and P. Olscamp (Cambridge, 1997), 130. Beasley, *Salons*, 36, entirely overlooks Malebranche’s critique.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 131, 155–6, 80.

<sup>44</sup> A. Goldgar, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680–1750* (New Haven, 1995); A. Shelford, *Transforming the Republic of Letters: Pierre-Daniel Muet and European Intellectual Life, 1650–1720* (Rochester, NY, 2007). See A. La Vopa, “Sexless Minds at Work and at Play: Poullain de la Barre and the Origins of Early Modern Feminism,” *Representations* 109 (2010), 57–94, for a nuanced discussion of class, status, and gender relations in polite milieux, which considers altering depictions of the masculinity of intellectual labor. I am grateful to La Vopa for sharing this MS with me in advance of publication.

perhaps feeling rebuked for many of the things she held dear, by a philosopher many of whose moral values she shared, possibly felt the need to justify her values for her own Christian peace of mind.<sup>45</sup> For although she frequently warned against worldly pleasures and dissipation, her *honnête* stance was deliberately moderate, compared to Malebranche's. Lambert recognized the need to balance worldly duties with solitary spiritual obligations, and was consciously receptive to pleasure and sensibility as necessary for happiness, while aware of their dangers (*AF*, 105–6). Undoubtedly, Lambert's feminist sensibilities and *honnête* investment in the cultural practices which Malebranche disparaged factored into her decision to counter him with a spirited defense of the property of taste, women's literary activities, their way of thinking, and their tasteful leadership—all central premises of *honnêteté*. This she accomplished in her *Réflexions nouvelles sur les femmes*, likely written during the Regency (1715–23).<sup>46</sup> But above all, Lambert's anger at views like Malebranche's over women's intellectual capacities motivated this writing. Correspondence between Lambert, Maine and la Motte reveals that such misogynist judgments had been aired in Lambert's salon by "the abbé Mongault and members of his sect" and that "for long" Lambert felt she owed "vengeance to our sex against you other Scholars" espousing such opinions.<sup>47</sup> The *Réflexions* was this vengeance; of the English translation (from the flawed unauthorized edition) lacking the sections censuring men's restrictions on women's learning, Lambert lamented, "The manuscript on women is so disfigured that one can't know what it is; they've removed the beginning and the ending which explain why it was written."<sup>48</sup>

In the *Réflexions*, Lambert grafted modern Malebranchian scientific epistemology onto the *honnête* and feminist tradition that praised women's

<sup>45</sup> See Hamerton, "Malebranche," 550.

<sup>46</sup> Also known as the *Métaphysique d'amour*. Lambert had sent a manuscript (with undated letter) to the abbé Choisy (d. 1724) of her salon; the first unauthorized edition (1727) appears to have been from this copy, found amongst Choisy's papers. On the dating and the history of editions of the MS see Marchal, *Lambert*, 165, 171, 174–7, 196; Granderoute, ed., *Madame de Lambert: Oeuvres*, 205–11.

<sup>47</sup> La Motte wrote of Mongault's "unpardonable capital errors" and "bad principles"; Maine wrote that she did not think that it would be so easy to destroy this "heresy" "as Madame de Lambert claims"; *Lettres de . . . la Motte*, 14, 16–19, 23–7. (On a speculative note, perhaps Mongault's Oratorian education led him to invoke Malebranche's authority on the subject of women in the salon.) Mongault, preceptor to the duc de Chartres (eldest son of the duc d'Orléans) and Greek and Latin translator, joined the Académie française in 1718. See Granderoute and Marchal on the multiple other textual influences evident in the *Réflexions*.

<sup>48</sup> Granderoute, ed., *Madame de Lambert: Oeuvres*, 211; Lambert to Saint-Hyacinthe, 29 July 1729, quoted in Marchal, *Lambert*, 176; also see 194 on the women novelists Lambert was defending.

cultural contributions. Using the new physio-psychology, she supported the central premise of *honnêteté* which she so valued, in which taste was a key quality that helped justify women's critical participation in the polite literary public and their cultural leadership in the salons. With women's sensibility, taste, and imagination as the lynchpins, this psychologically modern epistemology supported her traditional (by the 1720s) notions of aristocratic women's cultural leadership and influence, fusing with her own *précieuse* feminism and sensibilities. Her feminist *honnête* epistemology of sensibility also buttressed and shielded her claims for women's educational access and intellectual equality.

Fairly early in the *Réflexions*, Lambert, rather unusually, footnoted Malebranche, describing him as a "very respectable author" who "accords to the fair sex all the pleasures of the imagination: 'That which is of taste is,' he says, 'within their province, and they are judges of the perfection of language.'" Dryly concluding, "The advantage is not mediocre" (219), she subsequently elaborated on taste's nature and vast purview:

Taste is of a great extent; it gives finesse to the mind, and makes you perceive vividly and promptly, with no cost to reason, everything that is to be seen in each thing. This is what Montaigne was trying to say when he assured that women have an "*esprit primesautier*." In the heart, taste gives delicate feelings, and in the commerce of the world, a certain attentive politeness, which teaches us how to manage the *amour-propre* of those with whom we live . . . taste depends on two things, a very delicate sentiment in the heart, and a great justice in the mind. We must therefore avow that men do not know the greatness of the offering they make to the ladies, when they accord them the spirit of taste (220–21).

In her earlier *Avis d'une mère à sa fille*, Lambert, emphatic on the importance of managing and conserving tastes and pleasures, had testified to taste's importance for human happiness (105–6), arguing, "We must economize our tastes; we hold to life only through them" (106). And in her *Réflexions sur le goût*, she noted, "Taste has an extensive empire, for it extends over everything" (241).<sup>49</sup> Taste, then, for Lambert, was no trivial property, and inasmuch as she had just invoked Malebranche, her claims on taste's behalf which followed in her essay on women must be read, at least partly, as an explicit defense of *honnête* values in opposition to Malebranchian asceticism.

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<sup>49</sup> Abbreviated as *RG*. This short essay, published posthumously in her 1747 *Oeuvres*, echoes and occasionally varies and adds to the *RN*'s passages on taste. Marchal suggests it was written earlier (*Lambert*, 374); Granderoute calls it a "partial repetition" of one paragraph of the *RN* (*Madame de Lambert: Oeuvres*, 211). It contains an almost identical sentence, not found in the pre-1724 *RN*, to one in Lambert's 20 Sept. 1726 letter to la Motte, and so it seems more probable that it was written after the *RN*. See below.



As such, her targeted audience (chosen habitués<sup>50</sup>) would have understood them, recognizing Lambert's invocation of Malebranchian authority (while eliding his negative cognitive ramifications) for the disingenuous maneuver it was. More than likely, Malebranche's ideas had been placed on the salon agenda and mooted, at least sometimes, when women or taste were discussed. This is supported on several levels. In the early modern French salons, writings in progress were jointly read, discussed and modified, and we have explicit testimonials that communal writing was the case, at least sometimes, in Lambert's gatherings.<sup>51</sup> Lambert's obvious knowledge of the *Recherche's* passages on taste is clear enough. Equally clear are this group's shared interest in taste, psychology, physio-psychology, and women's social influence, as evinced in its published writings and in correspondence attesting to such discussions;<sup>52</sup> its Malebranchian culture, members, and contacts;<sup>53</sup> Malebranchian influence in their own writings on taste;<sup>54</sup> and Lambert's influence over the discussion agenda and sharing of the *Réflexions* manuscript with some of her circle.<sup>55</sup> So although Lambert passed over them upon mentioning Malebranche, his derogatory conclusions on the epistemological limitations of the female intellect would thus have leaped to her circle's minds. Well-understood *honnête* conventions made her understated exposition comprehensible, but Malebranche's attack, her text reveals, was at stake. Three paragraphs after invoking him, she depicted a now gallantly unnamed opponent clearly enough: "Those who attack women have claimed that the action of the mind, which consists in considering an object, is much less perfect in women, because the sentiment which dominates them distracts and carries them along" (221). With her target, Malebranche (and fellow travelers like Mongault), clear to her habitués, Lambert moved on to demolish his arguments.

Her praise for women's taste was, then, part of a more extensive feminist epistemology responding to misogynist deployments of the sensibility and

<sup>50</sup> Marchal, *Lambert*, 161–7; see n. 46.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 161–2, 217–20.

<sup>52</sup> The *Lettres de . . . la Motte* include Lambert relating Maine's analysis and physiology of taste to la Motte (20 Sept. 1726), 17. This correspondence between the three began with a letter of Maine's being read in Lambert's salon, and it is not improbable that this letter of Lambert's was likewise read out at some point there too (at its writing, Lambert was at Sceaux, where she also could have aired it; numerous guests attended both gatherings, and in all events, it gives the tone of her group's discussions and interests). See Hamerton, "Women's Taste," chap. 2; cf. Marchal, *Lambert*, 218–19, on the salon's self-image as tribunal of *le bon goût*.

<sup>53</sup> During the visit discussed above, Maine made knowledgeable reference to Malebranche in an undated letter to la Motte: *Lettres de . . . la Motte*, 20.

<sup>54</sup> Hamerton, "Women's Taste," chap. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Marchal, *Lambert*, 217 ff.; see n. 46.

sentiment so important to *honnête* culture. In the *Réflexions*, Lambert attributed women's cognitive, communicative and tasteful superiority to feminine sentiment and imagination, and sensibility became the lynchpin of a gendered psychology whose conclusions were the polar opposite of Malebranche's. Sensibility was so important within Lambert's thought that she later would go so far as to explicitly revise the cogito, "I am, however, a sensitive being. I feel, therefore I am: there you have the demonstration of my existence."<sup>56</sup>

Lambert reversed Malebranche's conclusions by arguing that heightened feminine sentiment provides a faster and more accurate route to truth than laborious reason alone. In her *honnête* epistemology of the leisured feminine mind, which closely echoed *honnête* dogma on the instantaneous and labor-free judgments of taste<sup>57</sup> (recall that she had just described taste as enabling a holistic discernment costing reason nothing), she took on the Malebranchian claim that women's minds are too distracted by sentiment to be able to focus attentively on the truth. "Attention is necessary, it gives birth to enlightenment, so to speak, draws together the ideas of the mind, and makes them all at once accessible," she acknowledged, "but in women, ideas offer themselves up of their own accord, and arrange themselves more by sentiment than by reflection: nature reasons for them, and spares them all the costs." Far from harming the understanding, sentiment "furnishes new spirits, which illuminate in such a manner that ideas present themselves more vividly, more clearly and in a more disentangled manner, and for proof of what I say, all the passions are eloquent" (221). This declaration directly contradicted Malebranche's argument that women, with their softer cerebral fibers, were dominated by the superficial senses and imagination and could not access their reason to penetrate to truth. Lambert here brilliantly appropriated to her purposes the Cartesian language of clear and distinct ideas and the increasingly important and favored property of sentiment, even invoking the animal spirits, whose presence was heightened during times of extreme emotion, and which were central to Malebranchian physio-psychology, to subvert his arguments. For Malebranche, who had carefully specified that some women might not have delicate brain fibers and that different combinations of fibers and animal spirit levels and activity could result in "strong, constant women" and "feeble, inconstant men," had concluded that "most women's and some men's [brain fibers] remain extremely delicate throughout their lives," and therefore

<sup>56</sup> Lambert to la Motte, undated but during the same 1726 visit discussed in n. 52 above (probably October), *Lettres de... la Motte*, 28. Marchal, *Lambert*, 195, argues for a chronological progression from rationalism towards a greater emphasis on sensibility in her work.

<sup>57</sup> Hamerton, "Malebranche," 542; Dens, *L'Honnête homme*; Moriarty, *Taste and Ideology*; Chantalat, *A la recherche*.

that most women were usually cognitively weak.<sup>58</sup> Although Lambert did not address female brain matter, by invoking the heightened presence of the spirits in women's minds she could argue for women's cognitive superiority from within Malebranche's physio-psychological framework.<sup>59</sup> She was also correcting some of his logical lapses in discussing the workings of the spirits, and while invoking their traditional connection to the passions, referenced a more persuasive and pleasant way of reaching truth over thorny reasoning.<sup>60</sup>

In Lambert's analysis, the body's input clarifies, eases and speeds access to truth, and, without reasoning's "costs," is favored over long, unpleasantly laborious contemplation. This is a remarkable inversion by an aristocratic lady of the reigning mind-body hierarchy that so informed contemporary political theory and justifications of corporate society and privilege, which associated bodily labor with vile status, one Lambert managed by focusing on sensibility's effortless immediacy and by imagining a subtle physiological hierarchy (see below).<sup>61</sup> Without needing to name him again, Lambert explicitly denied Malebranche's basic premise that women's sensibility blocked their access to truth, claiming, "We proceed as surely towards the truth by the force and warmth of the sentiments as by the extent and justice of reasonings, and through them we always arrive more quickly at the end in question than through *les connaissances*" (221). Sentiment, not reason, was here paving the faster, smoother, better-lit path to truth and mental clarity. Far from muddying up women's cognition, sentiment gave them a distinct advantage: "in women, ideas offer themselves up of their own accord, and arrange themselves more by sentiment than by reflection: nature reasons for them, and spares them all the costs." Critically, this was an *honnête* advantage, for

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<sup>58</sup> Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*, 130–31.

<sup>59</sup> In French, the passage reads, "Je ne crois donc pas que le sentiment nuise à l'entendement: il fournit de nouveaux esprits, qui illuminent de manière que les idées se présentent plus vives, plus nettes et plus démêlées; et pour preuve de ce que je dis, toutes les passions sont éloquentes" (221). Without an understanding of this context, Lambert's meaning has been lost in translation. Beasley (*Salons*, 37) translates *esprits* as "insights"; E. McNiven Hine's translation, *New Reflections on Women by the Marchionesse de Lambert* (New York, 1995), 40, completely obscures the passage. Animal spirits were frequently abbreviated by contemporary (French and English) writers to spirits (Malebranche wrote *esprits animaux* or *esprits*), and were regularly invoked to explain the passions, as by Lambert here. Russo discusses the spirits and this type of immediate judgment of sentiment in *Styles of Enlightenment*, 142–5. See n. 81.

<sup>60</sup> Hamerton, "Malebranche," 552; see James, *Passion and Action*, 215 ff.; cf. Shank, "Neither Natural Philosophy, Nor Science," 102–4.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. the valorizing of the beautiful female body in seventeenth-century Neoplatonism; Lougee, *Paradis*, 34–40.

it was aristocratically effortless, instinctual, and innately refined, sparing women reasoning's costs.<sup>62</sup>

As such, its strategic component should be appreciated, for this argument would let women efficiently present intelligent observations and reasoned judgments as natural and effortless, with no whiff of the *femme savante*, laboring over books, calculations, or reasoning. Although Lambert herself, protector and organizer of a tightly focused *bureau d'esprit*, was given to attentive reflection, writing, and meditative withdrawal from worldly frivolities, this is little to be guessed at in this presentation which effectively veiled women's cognition with the attractive mantle of leisure, sentiment and sociability. Her *honnête* claim that women could achieve reason and clear and distinct ideas, grounded in sentiment in deliberate opposition to the base labor of reasoning, was a fine anti-pedantic rebuke both to those who denied women reason and to others who critiqued their intellectual interventions as exceeding the bounds of femininity or their social rank. Lambert maneuvered deftly, using the tropes of *honnêteté* and scientific ideas of sensibility to assert a feminist cognitive equality, and to protect that cognitive power from counterattack as too manly or pedantic. Her *honnête* strategy of grounding her intellectual feminism in effortless sensibility, not in the laborious reasonings of the unsexed mind, helped her legitimize women's "innocent" (214) intellectual contributions to salon society, their studies, and their writings, without exposing them to the damning charge of pedantry.

### Deploying sensibility: an aristocratic and human quality

This feminist epistemological intervention can only be appreciated if we bypass contemporary academic or feminist distrust of essentialism and contextualize Lambert's choice to repudiate Malebranche by valorizing the sensibility and sentiment he had accorded them. Her preference to embrace qualities that for Malebranche undermined women's intellectual abilities, instead of espousing an equally plausible Cartesian feminism founded on the unsexed mind, made sense for her as an *honnête* feminist who had experienced the cultural rehabilitation of physiologically based sensibility and sentiment that took place over the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. These decades of *crise de conscience* saw the rise to prominence of an all-encompassing discourse of sensibility, a

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment*, 142 ff. Cf. the abbé Morellet's and his friends' frequent and *honnête* eulogizing descriptions of him as "lazy," discussed in D. Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670–1789* (Princeton, 1994), 141–5; La Vopa, "Sexless Minds," on the *honnête* repudiation of conversational models smacking of labor; and Fontenelle's famous disclaimer reassuring his *mondain* audience that the kind of mental attentiveness needed to understand his *Entretiens* was the same as that needed to read the *Princesse de Clèves*.

“complete rewriting of the language of the emotions, the most extensive such revision ever accomplished in modern times.”<sup>63</sup> The *honnête* and scientific embrace of organic affective sensibility were changes to which Malebranche remained (increasingly marginally) resistant. But this was an entirely convincing way of understanding human nature for *honnête* society, which Lambert and others wholeheartedly adopted. So much so that by 1719, the *lambertin* Du Bos, in his seminal *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, was easily embracing sensibility as a universal human quality, arguing that the only purpose of art was to touch the heart, pleasing through feeling. While classical theorists had also valued art’s ability to prompt emotion, they had linked this to reason, downplaying any physical element of sensibility; but for Du Bos, such pleasures were not rational but explicitly and completely grounded in organically based sensibility.<sup>64</sup> That he could theorize aesthetic pleasure in terms of an irrational but valorized sensibility indicates a major cultural shift in attitudes over the previous several decades. This shift made possible, plausible, and desirable the embrace of physiological sensibility by an aristocratic and *mondaine* theorist of taste like Lambert, whose mature ideas about such matters were formed in this period.

While Malebranche continued to distrust and repudiate taste, the imagination, and the senses in his several revisions of the *Recherche* between 1674 and 1712, physiological affective sensibility had fast become the conceptual beneficiary of a changing outlook on human nature.<sup>65</sup> In *mondain* discourse from the mid-seventeenth century, sensibility had come to be seen as necessary to the *honnête homme*, whose compassionate acts could otherwise be suspiciously regarded as inauthentic.<sup>66</sup> Sensibility was here configured as a highly elite quality, as in Madeleine de Scudéry’s definition of tenderness in *Clélie* (1660–61) as “a

<sup>63</sup> DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns*, 78; J. Spink, “‘Sentiment’, ‘sensible’, ‘sensibilité’: les mots, les idées, d’après les ‘moralistes’ français et britanniques du début du dix-huitième siècle,” *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* 20 (1977), 33–46; J. Mesnard, “Le classicisme français et l’expression de la sensibilité,” in R. Popperwell, ed., *Expression, Communication and Experience in Literature and Language* (London, 1973), 28–37; F. Baasner, “The Changing Meaning of ‘Sensibilité’: 1654 till 1704,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 15 (1986), 77–96; G. S. Rousseau, “Nerves, Spirits, and Fibres: Towards Defining the Origins of Sensibility,” in R. F. Brissenden and J. C. Eade, eds., *Studies in the Eighteenth Century, III* (Toronto, 1976), 137–57.

<sup>64</sup> Abbé Du Bos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (Paris, 1993); Chantalat, *A la recherche*. On Malebranche’s influence on Du Bos, which should at least partly be sited within Lambert’s salon, see Hamerton, “Malebranche.”

<sup>65</sup> See Hamerton, “Malebranche,” 540–41; James, *Passion and Action*, chap. 5.

<sup>66</sup> This was part of a broader anti-stoic reaction; see Baasner, “Changing Meaning”; Mesnard, “Classicisme.” Cf. Gordon’s discussion of ideals of *douceur* for the gentleman in this period, outside of the court context, in *Citizens*, 116–26.

certain sensibility of the heart, which is hardly ever found supremely, except in individuals who have a noble soul, virtuous indications and a well-turned mind; and which makes it so that when they feel friendship, they feel it sincerely and ardently.”<sup>67</sup> Similarly, a 1680 “Description de l’honnête-homme” stated that he “fulfils all duties; he is a good subject, a good husband, a good father, a good friend, a good citizen, a good master; he is indulgent, humane, helpful and sensitive to the misfortunes of others.”<sup>68</sup> As early as 1704 in the abbé Gamaches’s *Système du Coeur*, this aristocratic sensibility was being universalized as a socially indispensable human quality, while retaining its cachet of refinement and excellence. Gamaches described sensibility as the quality which places and maintains us “in the dispositions where we must be for the interests of society,” and portrayed reason as dependent upon sensibility:

It is [sensibility] as we see, which makes the firmest link of society, which aids us in our duties; without it we would never be able to be sure of fulfilling them, and if reason did not borrow its aid, it would hopelessly wish to involve itself in our conduct,<sup>69</sup>

he declared. Sensibility as indicator of man’s innate sociability, foundation of society and virtuous behavior, and necessary support of reason, would become the received Enlightenment (and Revolutionary) view, one Lambert explicitly promoted in the *Réflexions*, where, having already noted women’s greater sensibility, she argued,

Sensibility is a disposition of the soul which it is advantageous to find in other people. You can have neither humanity nor generosity without sensibility. One sole feeling, one sole movement of the heart has more credit with the soul than all the maxims of the philosophers. Sensibility aids the mind and serves virtue.

“The persuasion of the heart is above that of the mind,” she declared, for nature had so designed our imaginations and hearts to control our conduct (221).<sup>70</sup> In this period Du Bos likewise made the point that “nature wished to place in [the human heart] this so prompt and so sudden sensibility, as the first foundation of society.”<sup>71</sup> Clearly, *le monde* was easily embracing sensibility as the primary human social bond and foundation for taste by the time Lambert wrote the *Réflexions*.

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<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Baasner, “Changing Meaning,” 80.

<sup>68</sup> Mitton, quoted in *ibid.*, 85.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 89; Spink, “Sentiment.”

<sup>70</sup> Here, Lambert sounded very like Malebranche on the dominating persuasion of the senses and imagination, though epistemologically unworried by what had so disturbed him; see Hamerton, “Malebranche,” 545.

<sup>71</sup> Du Bos, *Réflexions*, 13.

By this point, sensibility and sentiment were widely attributed to mechanical movements or influences of the spirits, whether in “the organs” or in the nervous and cerebral fibers. Various members of Lambert’s salon were espousing such theories of sensibility and taste, without Malebranche’s anxiety.<sup>72</sup> Lambert, an admirer of women writers such as Scudéry and Lafayette who had helped launch sensibility’s vogue, like her making it their study, surely found great appeal in its aristocratic origins and cachet and its new broadly human focus, in accord with her circle’s hopes for a more compassionate regenerated government weaned away from absolutist excesses.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, her choice to defend against Malebranche’s attacks by embracing the contemporary physiological theories that explained sensibility allowed her to make *honnête* claims about women’s great importance to modern civilization that rested on seemingly solid physiologically established refined female sensitivity. *Honnête* theorists had always emphasized women’s heightened abilities at pleasing conversation, delicacy, and refined, gentle feeling; for Lambert to embrace the physiological origins of these abilities made perfect sense in this early eighteenth-century scientific climate.

### Employing Poulain

In espousing physiological sensibility as the foundation for a feminist Cartesian epistemology, Lambert also seems to have drawn on the feminist writings of Poulain.<sup>74</sup> Poulain’s take on sensibility in his 1673 *On the Equality of the Two Sexes* provides additional evidence that Cartesian feminists pursued their goals by other than dualist means, and further explains why Lambert did not attack Malebranche’s misogynistic epistemology with the Cartesian critique of the unsexed mind or confront him on other logical grounds – both available options.<sup>75</sup> All three Cartesians argued that the mind was sexed and *sensible* in its cerebral incarnation, but Lambert identified with Poulain’s interpretation of what this meant for female cognition and was likely drawn to him because of his sympathies with *honnêteté*.<sup>76</sup>

Poulain is invariably taken to epitomize the notion that Cartesian feminism was based on the unsexed mind. But although he did famously claim that “the

<sup>72</sup> Hamerton, “Women’s Taste,” chap. 2.

<sup>73</sup> Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment*, 144, notes that Marivaux has Marianne describing her sensibility in aristocratic terms; this was in the 1730s.

<sup>74</sup> E. McNiven Hine, “The Woman Question in Early Eighteenth Century French Literature: The Influence of François Poulain de la Barre,” in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 116 (Oxford, 1973), 65–79; Marchal, 489.

<sup>75</sup> Hamerton, “Malebranche,” 552.

<sup>76</sup> See La Vopa, “Sexless Minds.”

mind has no sex,” his was no deracinated rationalism. Some aspects of his feminism tapped into other and earlier feminist seventeenth-century discourses, including their *honnête* variants, as when he wrote on women’s beauty or delicacy. Those of his feminist arguments that referred to women’s minds and bodies were not limited to mind–body separation. Not only did he emphasize anatomical or physiological *identity* between the sexes as a rationale for equality,<sup>77</sup> but he also invoked women’s physiologically based *superiority* of sensitivity. He thus called attention to the “natural attributes” of a woman’s “lively mind” to explain women’s superior mental qualities—rapid and accurate perception, “discernment and correct thinking,” “imagination, memory, and brilliance”—and eloquent, fluent speech.<sup>78</sup> Women’s sense organs, he commented, “are usually more sensitive, which is an advantage.”<sup>79</sup> Moreover, he asserted,

We cannot dispute that those men who are most coarse and heavy are usually stupid, and that, on the contrary, the more delicately built are always the cleverest. Experience is too widespread and uniform for me to have to appeal to reason to argue further,

contended this famous debunker of prejudice, who then concluded, “Therefore, since the fair sex is of a more delicate disposition than ourselves, women would be sure to be at least our equals if only they applied themselves to studying.”<sup>80</sup> Citing women’s “high, lofty, wide foreheads . . . normally a sign of imagination and intelligence,” and “verve and . . . good memories,” Poullain claimed,

All this means that their brain is constituted in such a way as to receive even faint and almost imperceptible impressions of objects that escape people of a different disposition, and it is easily able to retain these impressions and recall them to mind whenever they are needed.

The warmth that accompanies this disposition brings it about that objects make a more lively impression on a woman’s mind, which then takes them in and examines them more acutely and develops the images they leave as it pleases. From this it follows that those who have a great deal of imagination and can look at things more efficiently and from more vantage points are ingenious and inventive, and find out more after a single glance than others after long contemplation. They are able to give an account of things in a pleasant and persuasive way . . .<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Poullain, *Three Treatises*, 83, 86, 91, 100, 101–2.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 100–1. Such warmth was typically understood in this period in relation to the activity of the animal spirits and “fermentation of the blood.” See Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*, 91–2, 95; James, *Passion and Action*, 98.



Poulain even spoke of women's great facility in conversation—due to “their bodies [being] formed by their distinctive temperament so that they preserve a clear impression of objects they have seen,” their effortless recall, expressive facility, ability “to summon up their ideas at the slightest pretext” and “insightful minds [that] allow them to make connections easily”—as “the only link that binds people together in society.”<sup>82</sup> The parallels to Lambert's arguments are clear.

Certainly, Cartesian desexed rationality bore promise for women, and situating reason in the unsexed mind was appealing to some seventeenth- and eighteenth-century feminists. However, we need to recognize that for women, the claim, recognition, or appearance of this kind of rationality always came with the very real danger of those women's cognitive acts being branded masculine, desexed, or pedantic; these were the standard critiques deployed against women who appeared too intellectual for men's comfort, such as the Hellenist Anne Dacier, still being attacked decades after her death. Lambert was acutely aware of this threat, particularly barbed for aristocratic women.<sup>83</sup> One person's clear and distinct reasoning was another's bearded pedantry, and it was thus tricky to invoke the unsexed mind to justify women's cultural role in the salons; *honnête* women's minds were *supposed* to be sexed. The embodied sensibility that Cartesian epistemology did *not* ignore, on the other hand, had enormous potential for synergistic overlap with *honnête* values, once the problem of bodily vileness was solved through sensibility's rehabilitation. Thus to *honnête* feminists it came to be at least as compelling as, or more compelling than, dualistic rationalism alone, as Poulain and Lambert show. Tapping into this to make her case against Malebranche for women's cognitive and sensitive superiority, Lambert was seeking to avoid risking the irreparable loss of the leisured feminine mind.

### Remaining *honnête*

Lambert's *honnête* deployment of sensibility, justifying women's emotional insights, cultural leadership, and immediacy of judgments, ingeniously repudiated Malebranche. Still, the latent relativism inherent in physiological sensibility presented a major challenge to her *honnête* beliefs. For as much as she valued sentiment and sensibility, embracing them as explanatory mechanisms for taste complicated her understanding of the latter, requiring that she reconcile her belief in superior feminine taste and in *honnête* aesthetic standards more

<sup>82</sup> Poulain, *Three Treatises*, 113.

<sup>83</sup> See Lambert's feminist praise of Dacier, undated letter to Buffier in *Oeuvres de . . . Lambert*, vol. 1, 259–60.

generally, with this new, highly variable, psychology of sensibility. How did she circumvent this tension?

Just like Malebranche, Lambert presented “arbitrary and variable” taste as a function of organically based reception, emphasizing the dynamic nature of the relationship between receptive individuals and the objects surrounding them.<sup>84</sup> “Nothing is fixed when it comes to tastes,” she declared, “everything comes from the disposition of the organs and from the relationship which is found between them and objects” (220).<sup>85</sup> She distinguished between “agreeable” qualities (judged by taste), and “estimable” ones, “real and . . . intrinsic to objects” (judged by reason) (223).<sup>86</sup> She further explained,

The agreeable qualities, which shake the soul, and which give such sweet impressions, are not at all real nor proper to the object; they are due to the disposition of our organs and to the power of our imagination. This is so true that the same object does not make the same impressions on all men; and that often our sentiments change, without anything having changed in the object. The exterior qualities cannot be lovable by themselves; they are so only because of the dispositions which they find in us. (223–4)<sup>87</sup>

The view that taste was changeable and situated in the body’s sensitive organs was supported by taste’s ineffability: “what makes us believe that taste comes more from sentiment than from the intellect [*esprit*] is that one cannot give a reason for one’s tastes, because we do not know why we feel” (220).<sup>88</sup>

In spite of organic uncertainty and variability, Lambert did not abandon the *honnête* belief in standards of taste, maintaining, “As there is in each thing only one sole truth, . . . there is only one good taste in each thing, without which nothing can please to a certain degree,” and echoing the *honnête* chevalier de

<sup>84</sup> RG, 240.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. RG, 239.

<sup>86</sup> “The justice of taste judges that which is called pleasurable [attractiveness; *agrément*]” (RN, 220; cf. RG, 240); “taste has for its object the agreeable [*l’agréable*]” (RG, 240); “the justice of sense [*justesse de sens*] has for its object the truth . . . this justice comes from good sense and right reason” (RG, 240).

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Poullain, *Three Treatises*, 115; Hamerton, “Malebranche,” 547–8.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. RG, 239. Lambert explicitly adopted this view over that of taste as harmony between *esprit* and reason; RN, 219–20; RG, 239. Moreover, in the RG, which I suspect incorporates later thinking on taste than the RN (see n. 49 above), she did not choose to adopt the distinction she attributed to Maine between organic taste and artistic taste based on experience, only the latter of which could be reduced to principles; recounted to la Motte, 20 Sept. 1726, *Lettres de . . . la Motte*, 17. Even when Lambert remarked that taste depends both on “a very delicate sentiment in the heart, and on a great justice of the mind” (RN 220; RG, 241) we must remember that the mental accuracy with which she associated taste was always derived from sentiment. Cf. Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment*, 144.

Méré in claiming, “there is . . . a justice of taste, as there is a justice of sense.”<sup>89</sup> Lambert’s physio-psychology, in fact, enabled her to *defend* standards of taste and *avoid* aesthetic relativism, without (in the fine *honnête* tradition) subordinating taste to reason or rules. Rather than rationalizing taste, her solution was the kind of physiologically based hierarchy of sentiment and sensibility that Poulain had deployed in elevating women over men. Emphasizing the areas in which women, by virtue of their natural endowments, excelled, allowed her to reconcile her *honnête* belief in standards of taste with the Malebranchian view that taste was a function of organic constitution. Good taste was, then, not arbitrary per se, but individuals would vary in their ability to attain it, depending not on their reason, but on their natural constitutional endowment of sentiment and sensibility. Women, with their elevated levels of sensibility and active imaginations, were the obvious beneficiaries as judges of taste, as Malebranche himself had stated. That they could excel in taste judgments meant for Lambert (unlike Malebranche) that there were indeed correct judgments of taste to be made. So, although people might possess taste arbitrarily depending on their degree of sensibility (and in this way, taste could be said to be relativistic), a standard of good taste existed that could be attained by those with the appropriate level of refined sentiment, based on their physiological constitution. Such logic was never directly and explicitly expounded by the *honnête* Lambert, who likely wished to avoid any appearance of pedantic oppositionality or outright materialism, but it becomes clear through careful comparison of her claims about sensibility and taste as organically based, about taste as derived from sensibility, about women’s superiority of taste and sensibility, and about the justice of taste. It was also made implicitly, through reference to those who *lacked* the appropriate levels of refined sentiment and who therefore *erred*. Lambert thus said, of taste, “one cannot convince those who make mistakes. As soon as their sentiment does not avert them, you cannot instruct them . . . It is nature which gives it; it is not acquired” (220).<sup>90</sup> You either possessed taste, or you did not; if the latter, your error followed from a lack of natural physiological sensibility.

### Women’s cultural authority

This admission that “one cannot convince those who make mistakes” raises a further potential complication for Lambert’s *honnête* vision. The physiologically based argument that nature doles out differing doses of sensibility and taste implies that *honnête* women might not, after all, be able to model correct tastes to others, which would mean an enormous loss of their purported cultural

<sup>89</sup> RG, 240; RN, 220.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. RG, 240.

influence and leadership in polite salon society. “One can thus draw an intelligent person towards one’s opinion, and one is never sure to draw a sensitive person towards one’s taste: one has no ties, no attractions, to draw him or her towards one,” she admitted.<sup>91</sup> But this issue does not in fact seem to have worried Lambert, for whom it did not call into question elite women’s leadership in taste. She continued to maintain that “delicate society” could “perfect” taste if it were initially present,<sup>92</sup> and she upheld the view that sensitive women, like the imagination itself, had extensive and forceful powers of persuasion through their dominating and pleasing imaginations and sensibility (219, 221–2). In this, she inverted Malebranche’s warnings of just such (false) persuasiveness, recalling Sablière to make the point:

One sole feeling, one sole movement of the heart has more credit with the soul than all the moral judgments of philosophers . . . A lady, who was a model of *agrément*, serves as proof of what I am advancing. One day they asked a man of wit among her friends “what she was doing and what was she thinking in her retreat.” “She has never thought,” he replied, “she only feels.” Everyone who knew her agreed that she was the most seductive person in the world, and that her tastes, or rather her passions, made themselves masters of her imagination and her reason, in such a way that her tastes were always justified by her reason and respected by her friends. No one who knew her ever dared to condemn her except after ceasing to see her, because she was never wrong in company. This proves that nothing is as absolute as the superiority of the mind that comes from sensibility and from the force of the imagination, because persuasion always follows from this. (221–2)

What Lambert was describing here was an immense power of social influence and persuasion through the mental force of the imagination, which could be wielded to important effect in salon society. Sensitive, imaginative, tasteful, forcefully intellectually endowed women could thus exercise dramatic powers of persuasion, as *honnête* discourse had long insisted, over those whose sensibilities were not flawed. The tasteful primacy of these *honnête* women was now figured as a function of their highly active, organically based sensibilities and imaginations. An inability to draw a person toward good taste indicated only that that particular person’s sensitive organs were, sadly, naturally unresponsive and inadequate for the task, and implied nothing negative about the persuasive powers of the *honnête salonnière*—“It is nature which gives it [taste]; it is not acquired”; only “perfect[ed]” by “delicate society” (220).<sup>93</sup> Thus, for Lambert, the *honnête* woman’s cultural role as perfecter of taste through her “delicate society” was not

<sup>91</sup> RG, 239; cf. RN, 220; cf. Lambert to la Motte, 20 Sept. 1726, purportedly recounting Maine’s views, but here in language almost identical to Lambert’s in RN and RG, *Lettres de . . . la Motte*, 17.

<sup>92</sup> RG, 240.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

undermined by her espousal of a materialist psychology which in other hands led towards aesthetic relativism.

Revealingly, Lambert spoke of *honnête* social processes of seductive persuasion and of *perfecting* taste, not of a directly didactic model of women teaching or governing taste. As she described it, the experience of being exposed to a lady's passionate expression of her tastes was seductively pleasurable, able to sweep others up in its emotion. In this view she remained well within the spirit of *honnête* society, whose investment in the *art de plaire* and the communality of taste judgments was traditional, important, and explicit. One envisions a multilateral process of mutually seductive and pleasurable persuasion that would eventually result in the group's ever more refined and polished delicacy of taste, a vision derived from *honnête* discourse and reflecting the Modern and early Enlightenment focus on progress, modernity, and civilization with regard to letters, sociability, and *commodités*.<sup>94</sup> Female figures still played the key role in this communal refinement, with Lambert invoking, in the *Réflexions*, only women (in general, and particular named individuals) as models of taste and intellectual refinement, as well as men's remarks attesting to this (Montaigne, Saint-Evremond, and Malebranche). With the modern physio-psychology of sensibility, imagination, and taste based in the organs and spirits as the foundation for her vision of *honnête* persuasion, Lambert was also building upon earlier and contemporary understandings (including Malebranche's) of the sometimes fraught contamination of the passions, giving her own *honnête* social psychology of this group dynamic.<sup>95</sup> Her vision was entirely positive, though, nicely referencing communal salon judgments with its focus on delicate refinement and the ultimate "perfecting" achieved through such persuasive practice.

In Lambert's thought, the older *honnête* belief in women's superior taste was combined with more recent theories of the imagination and sentiment that grounded feminine taste in sensibility. Spurred by her *honnête* and feminist values to a sophisticated response to Malebranche, this *dame malebranchiste* took what for him had been damning organic evidence of female cognitive inferiority and of the epistemologically misleading nature of sensitive taste, reworking this as further proof of women's tasteful superiority while arguing for effortless feminine cognitive excellence, defending the *honnête* property of taste itself, and justifying women's taste leadership to man. She did all this while reconciling her *honnête* belief in a "justice of taste" with contemporary fluctuating physio-psychology, and while embracing as hopeful for humanity the organic sensibility in which women excelled.

<sup>94</sup> See W. Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600–1800* (New York, 2002).

<sup>95</sup> James, *Passion and Action*, 86, 117–20, 248–9.

## Opposing her guests

Some *lambertins*, like Fontenelle, Montesquieu, and Terrasson, continued to espouse the *honnête* view of cultured women's primacy in taste and manners, invoking their special civilizing and tasteful influence.<sup>96</sup> But a preliminary study of writings on taste by Montesquieu, Du Bos, Terrasson, and Buffier has not revealed that they sought to reconcile physiological sensibility and *honnêteté* as Lambert did (apparently she did not, in this matter, wield the *honnête* persuasion she so idealized). Instead, these men embraced the Malebranchian physiological model of sensitive taste, using organic and mechanical terms and concepts like fibers, organs, temperament, shaking, and lassitude, without Lambert's *honnête* synthesis. They also placed a new emphasis on tolerating organically variable tastes, often embracing the relativism that Lambert still largely avoided. Undoubtedly, Malebranche's physio-psychology was a strong factor in shaping the ideas on taste of these *lambertins*.

We might well find ironic this fostering and transmission of Malebranchian physiological theories of taste within and beyond Lambert's salon. She had created this venue for the commerce of minds as brilliant and influential as those of the *malebranchistes* of the Académie des sciences, Marivaux, Montesquieu, and Du Bos, yet the formulations of her male guests mostly lacked her *honnête* gloss and synthesis. Moreover, Malebranchian psychology would later be deployed to argue against women's influence on French taste. But this irony is not at issue, for I am not arguing that Lambert wielded some kind of facile influence over her guests, but that this *honnête* hostess could and did repudiate Malebranche and the misogynists of her Malebranchian circle like Mongault. Although she did not always persuade, did not choose to emphasize egalitarian rationalism, and would never have adopted a pedantic style of serious disputation, her *honnête* values did not determine her to retire quietly to her corner and seek never to challenge convention. Nor was it Lambert's emphasis on feminine sensibility that should be blamed for leading towards "a devalorization of women."<sup>97</sup> Working within the cultural and intellectual parameters of her time and situation, this *honnête salonnière* and *femme cartésienne* ably and independently asserted her position and agency in the early Enlightenment debates over women's cognition and taste, as she astutely, and even brilliantly, saw fit.

<sup>96</sup> See Hamerton, "Women's Taste," chap. 2; and *idem*, "Malebranche," for fuller discussion of this material.

<sup>97</sup> Steinbrügge, *Moral Sex*, 20.