SPHERES, GENDER, AND SCIENCE IN EARLY MODERN FRANCE:
THE ASTRONOMY LESSON OF THE DUCHESS DU MAINE

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ABSTRACT

Diane Woodin: Spheres, Science, and Gender in Early Modern France: The Astronomy Lesson of the Duchesse du Maine (Under the direction of Mary Sheriff)

Drawing from the significant scholarship regarding women's position in the history of science, this paper examines the portrayal of the Duchesse du Maine (Anne-Louise Bénédicte de Bourbon-Condé, 1676-1753) in her portrait La Leçon d'astronomie de la duchesse du Maine (1705-10), painted by François de Troy. Courtiers such as the Duchesse du Maine, who fostered an environment of spectacle and philosophy at Sceaux, were influential proprietors of art and science. Feminist studies have however shown that women's pursuits, despite their formational role in France's early modern intellectual circles, were circumscribed by mythologies that privileged the male intellect. Here I explore the ways in which the representation of gender, science, and curiosity in La Leçon d'astronomie de la duchesse du Maine contributes to this patroness's articulation of presence and power in a provincial realm that she hoped would rival the court of King Louis XIV at the royal palace in Versailles.
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CHAPTER I.
INTRODUCTION

In her portraits, Anne-Louise Bénédicte de Bourbon-Condé of France (Duchess du Maine, 1676-1753) appears youthful and delicate in size and features; in texts, she is remembered as a princess from the house of Condé, a patroness of festival, and a conspirator against the regency of Louis XV.¹ These descriptions may be deserved. As the “tallest of the dwarfs,” that is the tallest among her sisters, du Maine was petite and never grew to a height above 4’3’’; moreover, she wore plenty of cosmetics throughout her life that would have masked her age.² In 1699 she and her husband purchased Sceaux for the monumental sum of 1.7 million francs, and the duchess sponsored an elaborate fifteen nights of court spectacle and music there in 1715.³ By 1719, the Duc and Duchesse du Maine were imprisoned for their involvement with the Cellamare


² Piepape, A Princess of Strategy,10; Charlotte-Elisabeth, Fragments of original letters, 202.

Conspiracy in which they and other nobles attempted to challenge the regency of the Duke of Orléans by restoring Philip V’s claim to the throne.⁴

As a child of royal lineage, Anne-Louise was raised in the wealth of her father’s estate at Château de Chantilly, where she received instruction in all areas of subject matter with her brother’s tutor until the time of her marriage in 1692.⁵ Although little survives from the pen of Anne-Louise Bénédicte de Bourbon-Condé details of her life are known through the memoirs and letters of others that circulated amongst the courtiers during the reigns of Louis XIV and Louis XV, and also through accounts and publications that stem from the enterprise of poetry and theatre that was maintained at Sceaux.⁶ In biographical accounts drawn from those texts, Charles Augustin Saint-Beuve (French, 1805-1869) and Léonce Marie Gabriel Philpin de Piepape (1911) attribute the duchess’s “fiery spirit” to the legacy of her family. Anne-Louise was raised in the shadow of her revolutionary grandfather Louis II de Bourbon, Prince de Condé and leader of the Frondeurs, and she would have heard tales of the Condé women who passionately and successfully advocated for her grandfather’s restoration after his defeat.⁷

Historical accounts depict the Duchesse du Maine as childish and willful. Her gregarious character, love of playmaking, and poetry circle are counterbalanced with

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⁴ The conspiracy is well-documented, see: Piepape, A Princess of Strategy, 140-47.
⁵ Piepape, A Princess of Strategy, 26.
⁶ These accounts include those of the duchess’s servant Madam de Stael, Saint-Simon, Philippe de Courcillon, Marquis de Dangeau, and Voltaire, among others.
⁷ Anne-Louise lived on the same estate with her grandfather until his death in 1686, at which time she was ten years old. See Piepape, A Princess of Strategy, 26.
tales of excess, tantrums, and wile. Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, the nineteenth-century French literary critic, writes:

The Duchess du Maine was a species of fairy…she deserves to be studied…in her little court at Sceaux, where she comes before us as one of the most extreme and most fantastic productions of the reign of Louis XIV, of the monarchical régime carried to excess.\(^8\)

Referring to Anne-Louise as “the little duchess,” Saint-Beuve lauds her wit even as he discredits her aptitude. For example, he claims, “She…studied astronomy, put her eye to the telescope and microscope, and in fact instructed herself by whim or caprice, without becoming any more enlightened.”\(^9\) Regarding her lack of academic progress, there is little evidence offered to support Saint-Beuve’s conclusion; rather, it is the duchess’s “whim and caprice” that stand as the detractive qualities of her endeavors (as if amateurs have not serviced science and philosophy since antiquity). Saint-Beuve’s position—that she never became any more enlightened, that she never progressed—is an arguable presumption since she was certainly pouring large amounts of time and money into her scientific endeavors. More recent studies of Anne-Louise’s life perpetuate a childish persona; in this vein, art historians Thomas Crow and Julie-Anne Plax have each called attention to the fantasy that underwrote the many spectacles held at Sceaux. Crow and Plax convincingly suggest that Sceaux’s extravagant court activities are laced with nostalgia for the seventeenth-century Grand Siècle; they also tie the feasts and entertainments held at Sceaux to the tradition of the \textit{fête galante} that burgeoned among the elite after the death of Louis XIV in 1715.\(^10\) Yet the portrayal of

\(^8\) Saint-Beuve, \textit{Portraits of the Eighteenth Century}, 95.

\(^9\) Ibid, 98.
the du Maine in her portrait *La Leçon d’astronomie de la duchesse du Maine* (1705-10; figure 1), painted by François de Troy (1645-1730), does not suggest the “frivolity” that has been associated with the aristocratic activities of its time.

De Troy’s portrayal of the Duchesse du Maine’s astronomy lesson, which conflates portraiture and history painting, is atypical in many ways. Both the style and the subject of the artwork suggest that the lens of history—clouded as it is by an aversion to remembering women’s participation in science and academia—has shorn du Maine of her acuity if not her acumen.\(^\text{11}\) Drawing from the significant field of scholarship regarding women’s space in the history of science and art, I intend to explore the ways in which the representation of gender, science, and curiosity in *La Leçon d’astronomie de la duchesse du Maine* contributes to this patroness’s articulation of presence and power in a provincial realm that she hoped would rival the court of King Louis XIV at Versailles. Feminist studies have emerged from a multitude of fields to show that women’s pursuits, despite their formative role in France’s early modern intellectual circles, were circumscribed by mythologies that privileged the male intellect. In an analysis of early modern textual accounts of salon life and education, Erica Harth has articulated the ways in which women’s critical inquiries into science and philosophy flourished in the latter years of the seventeenth century. Harth has also

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\(^{11}\) This oil on canvas painting is currently in the collection of the Musée de l’Ile-de-France in Sceaux, France.
shown that those networks of the French salons became increasingly eclipsed through the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{12} Art historian Mary Sheriff has explained that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries artists produced a limited amount of imagery depicting women reading and such representations are imbued with suspicion and condescension since this leisure activity stimulated the wayward, licentious imagination.\textsuperscript{13} The number of images depicting women engaging in scientific or academic pursuits is even smaller. De Troy’s painting is truly exceptional, as one among only a few of these scenes. Londa Schiebinger’s foundational study \textit{The Mind Has No Sex?} draws from textual accounts, anatomical imagery, and allegorical representations to reformulate women’s scientific contributions. Schiebinger, who is a historian of science, juxtaposes the masking of women’s achievements in France with an evolution of patriarchal “biological” formulations that simplified women’s anatomy against a privileged male prototype.\textsuperscript{14} Harth and Schiebinger have called attention to the many forms of women’s suppression, but they have also done much to reconfigure women’s agency in the early modern period; likewise, Mary Sheriff has defined both

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the presence of “exceptional women” in France and the nuanced boundaries of such representations.\textsuperscript{15}

These feminist studies demonstrate that courtiers, including the Duchesse du Maine, and her environment of spectacle and philosophy at Sceaux, were profoundly influential proprietors of art and science. My investigation addresses the intersection of women’s patronage, art, and learning represented by de Troy’s painting to explore a self-fashioning instated by the Duchess du Maine at Sceaux. My point of inquiry is the extent to which Anne-Louise consciously cultivated her display of gender—a masquerade of femininity in the broadest sense—to buttress her noble status; I suggest that de Troy’s painting formulates an alternate understanding of the duchess even as it valorizes those most feminine signifiers that she is remembered for having “in excess.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} Mary D. Sheriff, \textit{The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996); Sheriff, \textit{Moved by Love}.

\textsuperscript{16} Joan Rivière’s important article, which is psychoanalytic, suggests that femininity is a performance: “The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade’. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing. The capacity for womanliness was there in ibis woman — and one might even say it exists in the most completely homosexual woman — but owing to her conflicts it did not represent her main development and was used far more as a device for avoiding anxiety than as a primary mode of sexual enjoyment.” See: Joan Rivière, “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” in \textit{The International Journal of Psychoanalysis} 10 (1929), 303-313; Charlotte-Elisabeth, \textit{Fragments of original letters}, 201.
CHAPTER II.

In *Languages of Art*, Nelson Goodman posits that a painting’s message is not analogically coded; that is, the artwork signifies but its meanings are polyvalent.\(^{17}\) While a contemporary “reading” of the image is always (already) inflected by anachronism, implications of the painter and patron may nevertheless be excavated from the object to offer information about the relationship between the duchess, power, and her pursuit of scientific philosophy in the early eighteenth-century. As the early modern academician Roger de Piles writes in his treatise on painting, “Language indeed is wanting but everything speaks in a good picture.”\(^ {18}\)

The depiction of the astronomy lesson is unique amongst the surviving portraits of the duchess because it shows her as a student. While the hand of the artist mitigates any of the patroness’s self-fashioning, the many unique qualities of this painting’s style and representation attest to the singularity of its subject—the duchess, the person who glows brighter than any other in the picture. De Troy depicts a spacious room occupied by the duchess, her tutor Malezieu, and Abbé Genest who enters through a doorway on the left. In the foreground, the duchess and her tutor are seated at a desk with a red tablecloth. On the table there is a writing set, a large book, rulers, and an armillary


\(^{18}\) Roger de Piles, *The art of painting, with the lives and characters of above 300 of the most eminent painters: containing a complete treatise of painting...* (London, 1744), 18.
sphere. A celestial globe stands next to the duchess at just about table height. The expansive checkered floor interlocks the components of the setting, and its measured grid pushes to the background where a parted curtain reveals the filled bookshelves of a glowing library. Light is often a trope of knowledge and here the luster of du Maine’s shining crème and blue gown, in conjunction with her pale skin, blends into the whiteness of the book pages so that her space is also the luminescent center. Hand gestures trace from the figure in the passageway to the tutor, and then to the Duchesse who opens her hand to the globe by her side. At the heart of this compositional triangle, framed by the gestures and locked gazes of tutor and student, stands the golden orb of the small armillary sphere. The location of this object at the center of the painting underscores its importance, raises curiosity in the viewer. Indeed, the doubled motif of the planetary bodies insists that the knowledge of these figures extends beyond the bounds of the room, the world, and the breaches of the imagination—it solicits conversation.

A courtier’s social position was inextricably connected to discourse and reputation. In this mode, De Troy’s portrait establishes the duchess within the influential social constellation of the two other figures within the painting: her tutor Nicolas Malezieu—a renowned philosopher of the period—and the official poet of her court, Abbé Genest.19 Explaining the complexities of similar households’ social networks, historian Sharon Kettering has shown that elite European women in the early modern period exerted power from the social “periphery” of political centers. Kettering

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explains that personages in the woman’s patronage included priests and lawyers who could in turn gain clout in governmental politics. Artists and philosophers also aggrandized women’s connections to state proceedings because these men traveled between the spaces of the salons, which were largely run by women, and the exclusively male academic societies that were entwined with national affairs. As Schiebinger has explained,

While women maneuvered to ensure the election of their candidate to the Académie Royale des Sciences, they were powerless to bring about their own election. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, salonières served as patrons to young men, not to young women.

Voltaire and Fontenelle, who frequented Anne-Louise’s own salon, toured internationally as well. In this vein, Malezieu was a member of the Académie des Sciences and the Académie Française.

The painting explicitly conveys an intimate scholarly connection between du Maine and her tutor. Malezieu’s body language suggests that he is fully invested in the lesson that he is providing for the duchess, and her gestures reciprocate his. Leaning slightly forward towards his student, Malezieu holds the pointer finger of his right hand between the thumb and index finger of his left hand. While Malezieu’s arms are closed in front of him, his student opens the pose as she points to the book-page with her right finger. Moreover, her gesture to the terrestrial globe beside the table assumes the same


21 Schiebinger, The Mind has No Sex, 22-3.

22 Ibid, 32.

23 Brême, Francois De Troy, 56.
form as that made by Malezieu’s left hand. *La Leçon d’astronomie de la duchesse du Maine* situates Anne-Louise within the male-centered dominion of academia; indeed, she is one woman amongst two men but the pantomime conveys her ability to speak the language of science, a language of men. Abbé Genest bears witness to this in the painting as he focuses his lens on her desk. The audience assumes Genest’s position as they too approach a scene depicted *in medias res*, and survey the room only to fixate on the beaming figure of Anne-Louise.

Portraiture exerts a materialized form of “power from the periphery” from its place of display. 24 Little is known regarding the artwork’s commission or where it may have hung; however, it is likely that *La Leçon d’astronomie de la duchesse du Maine* was seen by many people because the Duke and Duchess du Maine entertained King Louis XIV and the court society for weeks or months at a time. As Erica Harth has explained, the courtier’s early modern home was not a “private” space; because in the elite strata neither sex worked, engagements of all kinds occurred at one’s residence. Even personal spaces such as women’s bedrooms and bathrooms were at times open to houseguests and residents. 25 Between the combined numbers of guests and attendants, populations at chateaux such as Sceaux could reach into the hundreds. Noble women like the Duchesse du Maine presided over this extensive retinue, and images of the duchess would remind Sceaux’s entourage of their patroness. In an “imagined

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community” bound by culture and discourse, one’s acts of patronage communicated power and social position.26

Commissioning François de Troy would have also indicated the Duc and Duchesse du Maine’s royal connections. There is considerably less scholarship about De Troy’s oeuvre than those of other early modern court artists, such as Nicolas de Largillierre and Hyacinth Rigaud. Yet Jean Cailleux has explained that these men were peers and competitors of De Troy; like those artists, he represented the king and his family a number of times.27 De Troy was moreover an instructor at the prestigious, nationally sponsored Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. Attempting to account for the lack of scholarly attention paid to De Troy, Cailleux argues on the basis of style, signature, and chronology that many of De Troy’s paintings have been wrongfully attributed to Largillierre, in the case of Portrait Group of Louis XIV and his Family (1710-1720), or De Troy’s son Jean-François. Still other works—known through engravings—are lost.28 Court painters were discussed amongst members of the nobility; thus, to have one’s likeness rendered by an artist such as De Troy was an affirmation of

26 I am loosely using this phrase, coined by Benedict Anderson in regard to national communities, to describe the affinity—he calls it the “horizontal comradeship”—of class that were implicit amongst members of the elite court who may or may not have maintained contact with one another, see: Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities (New York: Verso, 2006).


28 Cailleux, “Some Family and Group Portraits by Francois de Troy (1645-1730),” xiii. The questioned painting, Portrait Group of Louis XIV and his Family, is part of the Wallace Collection, in London. See also: Brême, Francois De Troy, 56.
status, one that would have been disseminated via the many avenues of conversation and contact. Letters of the period show that women referred to their new commissions from the portraitist that they hired. When the Marquise de Sévigné notes the arrival of a work by De Troy in her correspondence of 1680, for example, it is clear from the text that she has been continually relaying details of the painting’s progress: “Le portrait de madame la dauphine est arrivé; il est très médiocrement beau. On loue son esprit, ses dents, sa taille; c’est où De Troy n’a pas trouvé à s’exercer.” Regardless of whether or not Sévigné liked the portrait, its arrival provided her with an opportunity to bolster her social relationships and demonstrate her own authoritative eye.

As a portrait, the depiction of the astronomy lesson implies a moment of time when the painted subject—Anne-Louise—commands the attention of artist, spectator, and—of course—art historian. A “likeness” compels the viewer to question what is and what is not accurate about the portrayal. Sévigné criticizes De Troy in her passage from 1680 (about twenty years before the artist becomes affiliated with the Duchess du Maine) but the marquise’s critique of the painting seems to be of secondary importance to her primary concern, which is to convey splendid features of madame la dauphine. Moreover, Sévigné’s letter demonstrates that portraits functioned as a touchstone from which courtiers could establish characteristics of one another. Portraitists effectively facilitated the patron’s ability to recreate her/his own portrait through language or, if necessary, a second commission. One imagines that discussions similar to Sévigné’s surrounded De Troy’s images of du Maine; indeed, Anne-Louise may have sparked

29 “The portrait of madam the dauphine arrived; it is of mediocre quality. One loses her spirit, her teeth, her size [grandeur]; that is what De Troy [has not been able to convey].” Marquise de Sévigné, Correspondance T. 2, 1675-1680 (Paris, Gallimard, 1974), 776.
some commentaries herself.

Images such as De Troy’s portrayal could also work positively; A. P. F. Robert-Dumesnil, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, attributes De Troy’s popularity as a portraitist to the artist’s ability to improve any women’s beauty. De Troy’s depiction of the duchess in the astronomy lesson shares many of the conventions associated with court portraiture during the reign of Louis XIV. A comparison between du Maine’s portrait and De Troy’s painting of Mademoiselle de Blois (Marie-Anne de Bourbon, Princesse de Conti; c.1690) shows that du Maine’s appearance is not much different from the renowned beauty of Mademoiselle de Blois that Sévigné lauds in her letters (figure 3). They each have fair complexions with bright cheeks, delicate features, and hair piled high atop their head with two ringlets released onto the forehead. Piepape mourns this similarity as he tries to write a modern portrait of the duchess:

All the portraits of the day are taken up with the elaborate costumes…How seldom do they show us the physiognomy…we gaze at them and they speak to us only of the sumptuousness of their attire and of dazzling jewels.

Artifice of all kinds—expensive costume and jewelry, rouged cheeks and paled skin, and the complicated “Louis XIV coiffure”—indicated a sitter’s privileged status.


31 Brême, Francois De Troy, 129.

32 Piepape, A Princess of Strategy, 27.

33 Ibid, 27.

The clothes worn by the princesses of the blood, as markers of personal differentiation, are distinctive but the hairstyle is similarly done in nearly all of the portraits. Moreover, in a discussion of fashion during the *ancien régime* Daniel Roche notes, “Only the nobilities who enjoyed royal pensions and gifts…like the princes of the blood, Orléans, Condé, Conti and the legitimized children” could afford such attire.\(^{35}\)

By signifying her dual role as a patron and a subject, *La Leçon d’astronomie de la duchesse du Maine* further correlates the duchess with the lineage of influential patronesses and salonières who played hostess to the leading academy members of their time. In this regard, Sévigné’s disenchantment did not damage De Troy’s career. Art historian Dominique Brême explains that De Troy met the king’s mistress Madam de Montespan through Charles LeBrun (first-painter to King Louis XIV), and she in turn hired De Troy to paint her son the Duke du Maine in the 1680s. De Troy began painting portraits of the courtiers at Sceaux after the Duke and Duchess were married in 1692. While he was in their commission, he also served as director of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture from 1708 to 1711.\(^{36}\) Attesting to De Troy’s close relationship with Sceaux, Brême has shown that De Troy included himself amongst the large-scale group portrait *The Feast of Dido and Aeneas* (1702, figure 2), which represents the du Maine family in allegorical costume with at least fifty of Sceaux’s courtiers.\(^{37}\) De Troy’s hand visualized a connection amongst members of du Maine’s court; for

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\(^{35}\) Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing*, 96.


\(^{37}\) Brême, *Francois De Troy*, 62.
example, surviving portraits of Malezieu (1713), the duke (1692, 1715), and the duchess (1690) underscore their appearances in *The Feast of Dido and Aeneas* where Anne-Louise reigns as the Queen of Carthage.

The network of reifying portraits testifies to De Troy’s instrumental role in Anne-Louise’s articulation of social relationships; however, he was not the only artist in her commission. Du Maine appears as Cleopatra, for example, in Pierre Gobert’s portrait of 1690 (figure 4). Questioning the “art-historical logic embedded in the study of portraiture” that privileges the creativity of portraitists, Kathleen Nicholson has addressed the complicated relations among the sitter, artist, and the finished object. Through an examination of two portraits by J.-M. Nattier of Marie-Anne de Bourbon-Condé (1685-1766, niece of the Duchesse du Maine), Nicholson argues that “the paintings demonstrate canny ways that a public identity—and traditions in portraiture—could be amended to serve one’s social persona.”

Nicholson suggests that the patronage of different portraitists evidences “a willingness to experiment.” The variety that emerges from the different artists may additionally be interpreted as an elaboration of the sitter’s desired self-fashioning; that is, the common characteristics among the depictions insist on her physical and personal attributes.

The paintings by De Troy and Gobert correlate the duchess with the infamous women of history, thus reiterating du Maine as an incarnation of those patronesses. The

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paintings showcase moments well before the narratives’ tragic conclusions when Dido and Cleopatra appear glorified before their peers at banquets. In De Troy’s painting, for example, Dido has just welcomed her beau Aeneas. Cleopatra, seeking to provide a more illustrious banquet than Alexander, has yet to dissolve the priceless pearl that will secure her bet. Mary Hamer, writing on Cleopatra’s Banquet by Tiepolo, has described the “cognitive impasse” that this scene with Cleopatra presents: “The act she is engaged in is patently fabulous, a gesture of the boldest extravagance…pearls do not dissolve in vinegar. The ‘demonstration’ she is in the act of giving does not compute.” Du Maine stands with the pearl in one hand ready to sacrifice it, but the fact that it will not dissolve indicates to the viewer that she still has the object. Power, in each of these scenes, is explicitly with the heroine. In this vein, Brême has noted that even the Duke du Maine cannot be separated from the throngs at the banquet surrounding the duchess, who is in repose on a chaise lounge.

The duchess’s royal aspirations after the death of Louis XIV are well-documented, but even before the Cellamare Conspiracy she created her own whimsical Medieval retinue in 1705, which she named l’Ordre de Mouche-à-Meille. Anne-Louise enacted her reign over the society with naming ceremonies and grand theatrical spectacles that Malezieu, Genest and the poet G.A. Chaulieu in turn documented in the

40 Mary Hamer, Signs of Cleopatra (New York: Routledge, 1993), 68.

41 Brême, Francois De Troy, 62.

publication *Les Divertissements de Sceaux* (1712). In *La Leçon d’astronomie*, Anne-Louise sits regally in a high-backed chair as if enthroned by its red velvet material and the rich brocade of the gold-trimmed tablecloth: she is receiving an education fit for a king.

Hanging at the periphery of the quotidian and the extravagant, *La Leçon d’astronomie de la duchesse du Maine* acts as a public document of the duchess’s philosophic pursuits. Yet De Troy uses a distinctive visual vocabulary. While it is a portrait of Malezieu the tutor, Abbé Genest the poet, and—above all—the Duchess du Maine the salonière, De Troy renders the scene in the grand manner; that is, he uses a classicizing vocabulary that is typically seen in allegorical history painting. From the opposing harmony of color in the figures’ embellished robes, to the “use of yellow and blue to draw the eye,” and “the grand gusto” evident in the lavish swirl of brush strokes that hallmark this painter’s style, the compositional devices stem painting correspond to Roger de Piles’s influential treatise on painting. De Piles encouraged artists to emulate the classical approach that the “genius” of Renaissance painters, such as Raphael and Poussin, brought to fruition. Likewise, Charles LeBrun established a hierarchy of painting types in the mid-seventeenth century: history painting held the pinnacle of importance, followed next by portraiture, and then genre. The conflation of portrait and allegory in this painting therefore adulates the subject by increasing the worth of object itself without sacrificing the identity of Anne-Louise. By painting in the manner of “the ancients” De Troy bridges nature and artifice; in effect, he elevates the quotidian to a poetic event worthy of exegesis—a point that the poet’s presence underscores.

CHAPTER III.
THE PUBLIC BODY, THE INVISIBLE MIND

Portraits of Body and of Mind

Regardless of whether the conflation of history and portrait conventions stems from the inspiration of De Troy or du Maine, the repeated attention to the duchess affirms a connection between the unique stylistic elements and the court at Sceaux that was a hub of theater and Cartesian philosophy. Brême has twice grouped The Feast of Dido and Aeneas and La Leçon d’astronomie de la duchesse du Maine together in his surveys of De Troy’s work because they feature this unusual juxtaposition of history and portrait conventions. I also see a dialogue emerge between the paintings that Brême has paired. The Feast of Dido and Aeneas, which predates the portrait of Malezieu and Anne-Louise by a couple of years, is more typically allegorical since the representation narrates Dido’s mythic reception of Aeneas. The lesson, by contrast, becomes the narrative subject of the later painting. Despite such differences, De Troy represents the duchess in similar ways from canvas to canvas. In each of the portrayals she wears the same white gown that is trimmed with gold and dips into a v-neck at her bodice; moreover, her attire—unlike that of the men—is contemporary to fashions of the early eighteenth century. The modern articulation of the women’s dress may correlate with eighteenth-century traditions but it also extends the depiction’s narrative

45 Brême, François De Troy, 62. Also in Musée des beaux-arts and Musée des Augustins. Visages du Grand Siècle, 250.
time-space beyond the pictorial frame. That is, the duchess’s richly garmented body bonds the mythology and teachings to her present world, highlighting her figure as a fulcrum of potential agency rather than a past event.

Yet the scenes convey different facets of du Maine’s achievements; indeed, the contrasts posed by the pair make the earlier work a useful foil for the comparatively demure portrayal of the tutorial. The representation of the feast highlights the body of Anne-Louise while the later portrait implicates her mind; in effect, she appears as a public patroness icon—the “Queen Bee”—in one rendition and a Cartesian student in the other. De Troy paints the duchess in partial deshabille in *The Feast of Dido and Aeneas*, for example, whereas she is fully clothed in the lesson. By roughly dividing *The Feast of Dido and Aeneas* between a space of men on the left and a space of women on the right, the compositional arrangement of the banquet formulates an engendered divide. This division acccents Anne-Louise’s feminine splendor because her relaxed posture and elaborate dress distinguish her from the attendants. Many figures gaze around the fabricated palace scene but the duchess looks in the direction of Aeneas, who meets her look and leans in conversation onto the table between them. In addition to du Maine’s coy gaze to Aeneas, an adulterous invocation veiled by the guise of the staged mythological scene, glimpses of exposed skin—her arm, her breast, her foot—accentuate her sensuality. Gossamer sheaths of fabric flow into the foreground where Anne-Louise’s surviving children are shown. Brême has identified the two babes shown in the nurse’s lap as the prince de Dombes (Louis-Auguste de Bourbon, 1700-1755) and the comte d’Eu (Louis-Charles de Bourbon, 1701-1755) and he notes that the portrayal
of their infancy is appropriate to the painting’s date of 1702. The appearance of the nurse befits du Maine’s noble status even as the children are linked to their mother’s presence by the brushwork of the cascading golden blanket. The duchess turns to the banquet, where Sceaux has been transformed into a new Carthage that is adorned by golden flatware, feasting, musicians, and art. The presentation of the crown underscores this royal fete, further signifying the relationship between power and patronage embodied by Anne-Louise. At nearly twice the size of La Leçon d’astronomie, the scene is meant to impress the viewer with De Troy’s talent and the duchess’s patronage; in this vein, the canvas was exhibited to favorable views in Paris at the Salon of 1704.

The congruencies in the duchess’s representation from canvas to canvas underscore Brême’s pairing of the paintings. Whereas Anne-Louise is a proprietress of festivities in one scene, the portrayal of the lesson pictures her as a proprietress of science—a vessel of knowledge. In The Feast of Dido and Aeneas, for example, the figures’ movements follow the gifts and foodstuffs that the guests are passing amongst one another. These gestures foster a rhythm that flows from the left foreground of the canvas, into the figures in the background, and circles towards Aeneas through the body of Anne-Louise (as Dido). Aeneas is not the focal point; his gaze and conversational body language return the viewer to the duchess who welcomes that attention with open arms. The exchange between Anne-Louise and Aeneas is comparable to her expression in La Leçon d’astronomie where she looks directly to the speaker and tilts her head. Also, in each painting she smiles slightly and her wide-eyes underscore her investment.

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46 Brême, Francois De Troy, 62.
47 Cailleux, “Some Family and Group Portraits by Francois de Troy (1645-1730),” ivx.
in the moment. Looking at the images together, the similar stylistic vocabulary and the recurring characters chart a biographical narrative of the duchess that indicates a life of both play and study. Following this common portrayal of her figure, viewers see the scene shift from an exuberant reception hall to an earnest academic foyer. In both pictures the compositional lines direct us to the resplendent Anne-Louise, but in *La Leçon d’astronomie* du Maine sits upright (and fully attired) rather than leisurely reclined as she does in the scene of the banquet. Moreover, the objects of her lesson close the space around her body. Cloistered though the duchess may be by the accoutrements of astronomy, the pictorial composition nevertheless disrupts the possible interpretation of a student’s submission to her teacher. It is as if the darker orbs of the astrolabe and celestial sphere orbit the duchess’s bright figure—as if, with the command of the fingertip, her mind orders the matter around her.

*Cartesian Splits: Mind and Body, Ancients and Moderns, and the Belle Esprit Between*

How can one prove her mind if not through the mechanisms of her body? The central contention of Cartesian dualism maintains that sentience proves one’s existence. Descartes came to this popular conclusion, *cogito ergo sum*—literally “I think, therefore I am”—in his *Discourse on the Method and Principles of Philosophy* (1637). With that treatise the philosopher and mathematician postulated two distinct “substances” connected by the intervention of a divine figure. Physical matter is the substance that interacts with space, in contrast to the mind, which exists as thought.\(^48\) By equating self-

existence with thinking, the philosopher privileges the mind and its potential above the material body.

Dualism pervaded much of the philosophical and scientific discourse of latter seventeenth century and early eighteenth century. Fontenelle, in this regard, demonstrates his debt to Descartes when he uses dualism to uphold the efforts of the eighteenth-century philosophers against the sagacity of the “Ancients.” Maintaining that humanity is made of the same matter despite differences in the time period or even the individual body, Fontenelle insists that the philosophers of old had no advantage over his contemporaries when he writes:

> Nature has between her hands a kind of Clay, which is always the same, which she forms and reforms into a thousand Shapes... And ‘tis ridiculous to fancy that she compos’d *Plato, Demosthenes, or Homer* of a finer Mold, or better prepar’d than the Philosophers, Orators, and Poets of the present time. For tho our Minds are immaterial, I regard here only their Union with the Brain, which is material, and which, according to its various dispositions, produces all the Difference between them.\(^{49}\)

Erica Harth has explained that the “Modern” equation between the intellect and the universal matter of the body—the material “Brain...[that] produces all the difference”—had limited appeal to learned women in the late seventeenth century because it allowed for a sexless mind.\(^{50}\) Indeed, the correlation between Cartesian philosophy and modernity furthers the significance of du Maine’s dress in portraiture. A markedly contemporary ensemble might have signaled the duchess’s association with

\(^{49}\) Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, *Conversations with a lady, on the plurality of worlds. Translated by Mr. Glanvill. The fourth edition. With the addition of a sixth conversation. To which is also added, a discourse concerning the antients and moderns* (London: J. Darby, 1719), 181.

\(^{50}\) Harth, *Cartesian Women*, 81.
the coterie of “maverick” and “unconventional” Cartesian salonières who, as Harth says, “challenged the authority of classical antiquity in philosophy, rhetoric, and literature.”

This painted lesson alludes to du Maine’s Cartesian interests but does not occlude the antique; it implies her reasonable mind but does not suppress her penchant for play. Brême notes that the costumed figures, spotlighting, and minimally furnished room give the image a theatrical aesthetic that compliments the duchess’s love of play-making. Thus this dramatic representation of the duchess in the midst of a scientific conversation with a philosopher and a poet also highlights her reputation as a belle esprit. In other words, she is shown as someone with conceptual and imaginative capabilities. Such an understanding favorably complicates her questionable identification as a précieuse. Although the term is now used to describe both the affected, ornate manner of certain early modern literary works and the people—particularly the salonières—who used that discursive mode, it was gendered and judgmental at the turn of the eighteenth-century. Demonstrating the connotative link

51 Harth, Cartesian Women, 80.

52 Brême, François De Troy, 62.


between préciosité and trivialness, the *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française* (1694) not only defines “précieuse” as a woman who “est affectée dans son air, dans ses manières, et principalement dans son langage” but it also includes “précieuses ridicules” as the primary example of the term’s usage. To be a patroness of divertissements as was the Duchess du Maine, risked an association with the stigma left by the précieuses, such as Madame de Rambouillet (Catherine de Vivonne, 1588-1665), who had been mocked by the literature of Molière and De Pure. Contrary to the nonsense attached to some salonières, Abbé Genest writes of the duchess’s inspirational penchant for clarity and insight in his letter to Madame de Scudéry:

> Madame la Duchesse…[est] très aimable et très cultivé…Elle vous étonnerait dans les jeux d’esprit où elle s’exerce souvent. Sa vivacité et sa pénétration sort a pein croyables…sa présence répand l’allégresse dans tout ce pâis et y attire une affluence de people continue. 

The scholasticism of the *La Leçon d’astronomie* befits the date and subject by conveying a tone of philosophie—not affectation. Poetry and philosophy were not diametrically opposed; indeed, Malezieu and Abbé Genest each published poésie and

55 “A woman who is affected in her air, in her manners, and particularly in her language.” See “Precieuse,” in *Dictionnaire de L’Académie française* (1694), 327. The masculine equivalent—précieux—was also used but it is not definitively attached to “homme” (man) as précieuse is to “femme” (woman). “Précieux, signifie aussi, Affecté, and se dit principalement des manieres & du langage” (Précieux, signifies too, Affected, and it speaks particularly of manners and language). See “Précieux,” in *Dictionnaire de L’Académie française* (1694), 327.

56 *Sheriff, Moved by Love*, 113; *Harth, Cartesian Women*, 34-43.

57 “Madam the Duchess…[is] very kinds and cultivated. She would surprise you with her playful mind that she often [excercises, exerts]. Her vivacity and her discernment [sorit] a [credible] endeavors…her presence [spreads, pours] joy throughout this [pâis] and has a continuous influence over people there.” Abbé Genest, qtd. in Advielle, *Histoire de Sceaux*, 280.
treatises. Yet literary historian Arthur Tilley has noted that by 1708, when Fontenelle published *Éloges des Académiciens*, préciosité was out of vogue for philosophic discussion and “lucid exposition.”58 The hovering figure of Abbé Genest, whose amorous verse epitomizes the style of a précieux, only accentuates the pedagogic tenor of the scene. The poet’s hearty intrusion alludes to the chansons and rondeaux written as odes to the duchess even as his slack posture contrasts with the rigorous scene that he observes through his lens. Bracketed by the doorframe and distanced by the gridlock of checkers on the floor, the abbé witnesses the scene but his demeanor does not seem to be in conversation with the scientific discussion between the pair of bel esprits. This is not to suggest that Abbé Genest’s presence is cursory. The poet and play-write rather signifies the pervasive atmosphere of spectacle and theater in du Maine’s court—he shows that the realm of *The Feast of Dido and Aeneas* has been, for the moment, eclipsed by study.

The painting evidences Anne-Louise’s participation in scientific and philosophical discourses with the Cartesian scholars who, as Schiebinger writes, “flocked to the [salon]...of the Duchess du Maine.”59 Documenting—or staging—this lesson was important because women’s tutelage, “modern” or otherwise, was a private affair. Whereas elsewhere in Europe a limited number of women were admitted to universities, national academies, the Académie Française and the Académie Royale des Sciences were particularly restrictive—they did not admit even the most accomplished,

58 Tilley, “’Préciosité’ after ‘Les Precieuses Ridicules,” 311.
award-winning female scholars. The duchess’s portrayal conveys the improvement of her mind—the essence of her existence—and her boundless potential. In this vein, Descartes encourages his readers to “guide…thoughts in an orderly way by beginning with the objects that simplest and easiest to know and to rise gradually, as if by steps, to the most complex.” Following the Cartesian method of doubt and inquiry, the duchess indicates that she has reached the summation of this lesson by assuming the gestures of her tutor. As evidence of a scholarly productive scene, the compass and protractor lay jumbled together and the quill pen is in the inkwell ready to be taken up and put to use. Moreover, by simultaneously pointing into her book and gesturing to the celestial globe, Du Maine demonstrates her application of the scientific method provided for by the pages at her hand. A look into the luminous library shows that a book is missing from the shelf, so it seems that Anne-Louise is working with but one tome from the extensive collection at her disposal. In other words, the library attests to lessons learned and lessons still to come.

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60 It is clear that women at this time were writing both philosophical and poetic texts, and attempting to join the Académie. Denied prize-holders and noted intellects included, for example, Madam de Scudery and Madam Dacier. See Schiebinger, The Mind has No Sex, 22-3.

CHAPTER IV.
THE ALLEGORICAL, THE INDIVIDUAL, AND THE WOMAN BETWEEN

Conventions and Precedents: An Image-Repertoire

Du Maine risked the ridicule attached to her learned female contemporaries by establishing herself as the hostess of a Cartesian salon and as a woman of inquiry. Attesting to the problem that women’s education posed for the patriarchal order, Harth has discussed how the “cautionary literature masquerading as ‘philosophy for the ladies’”—including Molière’s satire "Femmes Savantes" (1672) and Gerard’s patronizing "Philosophie des gens sans cour" (1680)—emerged in the latter 1600s as a response to the cartésiennes. These volumes argued that woman should turn their focus to the moral philosophies of “piety, domestic arts, and maternal virtues.” Anne-Louise would have been familiar with this polemic. In the 1690s, just after her marriage to the Duke du Maine, the duchess stayed with Madam de Maintenon, who established a school for girls at her chateau in Saint Cyr. Maintenon’s educational pamphlets laud the knowledge one gains by spiritual faith over that gained by reason.

To avoid the unfavorable label of pendant or savant, a femme d’esprit would have to give her display of intelligence social appeal. Slipping as the image does

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62 Harth, Cartesian Women, 141.

63 Madam de Maintenon, The ladies monitor: or, instructions for the fair sex. Written in French by the celebrated Madam de Maintenon, for the use of the young ladies of St. Cyr; and now first translated into English by Mr. Rollos (London: printed for J. Staples, J. Cooke and J. Coote, 1758), 11-20.
between tropes of the ancient and modern, history painting and portraiture, scholasticism and preciosity, it breeches the categories that both guide and limit its interpretation. Such ambiguity befits a scene of modern—hence potentially transgressive—scholarship. De Troy doubtless appreciated the many ways in which an image could signify. The polyvalence of the spheres—astrolabe and the celestial globe—that engage ideas of scientific exploration and royal dominance, also protract to the scientific allegories embodied by Astronomy, Astronomy’s muse Urania, and Physics. These figures and their attributes were well used in the Early Modern period to specify abstract ideas for the viewer; for example, “assiduity,” “innocence,” “liberal arts,” and “symmetry,” all have anthropomorphic forms. Although the allegories do not provide an exact model for Du Maine’s image, all three are commonly characterized as women with celestial globes and/or armillary spheres nearby, and many carry a compass and a book. Eustache Le Sueur (1616-1655), who was a founding member of the Académie, paints Uranie as a woman in classical garb crowned with a halo of stars and tracing her compass across a celestial globe (Uranie, Paris: musée du Louvre; figure 5). George Richardson’s later eighteenth-century revision of Cesar Ripa’s Iconologia (1600) portrays Urania and Polyhymnia, the muse of poetry, on the same page (figure 6). Taken together, these representations contain many of the objects surrounding the duchess in her astronomy lesson. Again, Urania contemplates an armillary sphere, while Polyhymnia holds an open book and makes the same gesture as Anne-Louise. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the themes of poetry and science are

also hybridized in *La Leçon d’astronomie*, where the duchess assumes the role of a muse for the poet, the philosopher, and the painter.

As the many derivations of the allegories and Ripa’s *Iconologia* suggest, the depictions were subject to transformation—and so was their meaning. In Sheriff’s discussion of the relationship between female allegorical figures and women’s self-representation, she maintains that the established icons provided women “a sort of paradise wherein the idealized female body can take on a role not thought natural to real women, and women can find in these ideal bodies a veil for their true ambitions.”66 As an example, Sheriff addresses the frontispiece for Emilie du Châtelet’s *Institutions de physique* (1740, figure 7). Du Châtelet’s vivacious self-presentation—gloriously naked but for a wrapping of clouds—underscores her task in unveiling knowledge to her reader and, as Schiebinger has also discussed, visually associates her work with the lineage of Descartes, Newton, and Copernicus whose portraits hang just above the rays of light extending from her palm.67 In this framework, the highly regarded scientist and philosopher herself assumes the personification of naked Truth so that, as Sheriff writes, “[her] ‘real’ position as a scientist and philosopher is made acceptable by…giving her a

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65 George Richardson, trans., *Iconology; or, a collection of emblematical figures; containing four hundred and twenty-four remarkable subjects, moral and instructive*; ... *The figures are engraved ... with explanations from classical authorities* (London: printed for the author by G. Scott, 1779), 22.


familiar female role.” Shown as Anne-Louise is with the emblematic scientific instruments, she too conveys (albeit much more modestly) an association with the transcendent allegories that doubly “familiarizes” and empowers her guise as a student. Yet du Maine’s portrayal hails the celestial and its attendant muses in more general terms than du Châtelet’s assumption of truth. Personally signified by her rouged cheeks and her tiny figure, it is du Maine who is the unclouded referent.

As evidenced by early modern portraiture and surviving texts, personal identifications with both allegorical and historical figures were ripe for cultivation in the eighteenth century (as they are today). In this vein, De Troy’s depiction refers to the established feminine allegories and connects the duchess’s actions to a long-standing visual tradition. Following in the trajectory of the learned seventeenth-century cartésiennes, the majestic air of the tutorial is also comparable with an oil painting of Queen Christina that was originally situated at Chantilly—the home estate of the duchess’s ancestors. Anne-Louise and her contemporaries were familiar with tales of Queen Christina and Elisabeth of Bohemia (Princess Palatine, or “the Greek” 1618-1680) who had connections with the court of King Louis XI and were remembered for their philosophical relationship with Descartes. Descartes dedicated his Principles of Philosophy to Elisabeth, for example, and he spent his last year in Sweden at the behest of Queen Christina. The queen’s noble abdication of the throne (legend holds that she made this decision to allow time for her flourishing interests in philosophy and Catholicism) was another legendary act, after which she traveled to Italy where she

continued her extensive patronage of the arts and sciences. I imagine that Christina’s story had a certain appeal to Anne-Louise’s interests and her royal aspirations. Indeed, Voltaire’s association with the Duchesse du Maine and the thinkers who frequented her court (including the Marquise du Châtelet-Laumont, with whom he had a close relationship) may have informed his high regard for the queen. The precedent set by Elisabeth and Christina made them guiding stars for someone like Anne-Louise who repeatedly cast herself as a lumière in the social constellations of the court and the académie—a Cartesian queen.

Similarities between De Troy’s painting and *Queen Christina and Her Court* by Louis Michel Dumesnil (1663-1739) allude to du Maine’s Cartesian lineage even as they reflect the allegorical tradition previously discussed (figure 8). While it is difficult to establish a direct relationship between the paintings, Dumesnil’s work is roughly contemporary to *La Leçon d’astronomie* and it shows the queen with the Duchesse du Maine’s grandfather, Louis II de Bourbon (Prince of Condé, or the “Great Condé”).

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69 In Italy Queen Christina built an extensive collection that included works by Bernini and Tessin. Her connection to France was further established when she, with Mazarin, attempted to insert herself as the ruler of Naples. See Lillian H. Zirpolo, “Christina’s Patronage of Bernini: The Mirror of Truth Revealed by Time,” 39.

70 Voltaire became better equated with du Maine during her later years at Sceaux; for example, he wrote much of *Zadig* while he stayed there, hiding from authorities.

71 Louis Michel Dumesnil, c.1700-1739 (Versailles: châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon). The image and its attendant information, including the provenance and a description, is available from the database *Joconde: the Catalogue des Collections des Musées de France*. Accessible online: [http://www.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/joconde/fr/pres.htm](http://www.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/joconde/fr/pres.htm). Benezit lists several painters named Louis Michel Dumesnil, all active in at the Académie de St. Luc in Paris from 1700-1762; it is unclear which identity may be attributed to the artist that I discuss. See: Benezit, *Dictionary of Artists IV* (Paris: Gründ, 2006), 1320.
Beside the queen, the noblesse in the modest black gown is most likely the pious Elisabeth of Bohemia, who was known for her piety and became an abbess in 1667. However, Christina—like du Maine—is the radiant subject of the painting. Christina and Descartes address matters of science around a square table with their contemporaries; as in Du Maine’s lesson, the table is draped with a red velvet cloth and strewn with geometric instruments (figure 9, detail). Descartes, standing disheveled beside Christina, calls attention to a problem on the page before him while the queen signals her knowledge through the positioning of her hand. The common gestures suggest that du Maine’s relationship with Malezieu parallels Christina’s notorious (if shortened) relationship with Descartes. Moreover, an armillary sphere is prominently situated in the foreground of the painting. Tucked in the skirts of the table that seem to extend from the queen’s body, the iconic instrument references the iconography of the celestial allegories and further relates the image of du Maine with the representation of Christina.

The poets at Sceaux also generated a relationship between the women. Genest, for example, fixes the duchess within the constellation of the royal scholars and positions her as the most luminous character within that spectrum in his Divertissements de Sceaux (1712):

Il faut me prêter le secours…De vos touchants et marveilleux discours… vôtre noble eloquence, vôtre discernment, vôtre vivacité, de vos raisonmens la

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72 This painting is now in Versailles, châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon. The image and its attendant information, including the provenance and a description, are available from the database Joconde: the Catalogue des Collections des Musées de France. Accessible online: <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/joconde/fr/pres.htm>
73 Descartes’s stay in Sweden with Queen Christina was the subject of a “Relation” by his niece Catherine Descartes (also a Cartesian scholar), “Relation de la mort de M. Descartes, Le Philosophe.” See Harth, Cartesian Women, 96.
Genest correlates the language of scholarship and learning with du Maine; however, he also consistently pairs statements of her intelligence with markers of eighteenth-century (modern) femininity. Anne-Louise’s beauty, her speech, or her “esprit” renders her brighter than her predecessors, even as it moderates—or normativizes—her knowledge. This moderation seems to parallel what *La Leçon d’astronomie* does visually through its allegorical and historical allusions.

Such distinctions suggest that gender was a constructed performance in the eighteenth-century court. The continuum provided by the demure attire of (the presumed) Elisabeth and the luxurious dress of the queen in *Queen Christina and Her Court* underscores the fabrication of Anne-Louise’s appearance in her role as student—her cheeks the brightest, her lips the reddest, and her gold-trimmed dress the most resplendent. Since mythology has maintained Christina’s apathetic regard of fashion and personal vanity, it is noteworthy that Dumesnil accentuates her femininity when he imag[in]es the Condé’s encounter with the great philosophers. Her femininity is in

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bright contrast with the men around her who wear the darker fabrics, which was typical during the reign of Louis XIV. Slight details also distinguish some of the personages. Descartes is somewhat scruffy, for example, while the Grand Condé has the narrow visage that appears in his several seventeenth-century portraits. The queen, however, sits in luxurious pastel fabrics, and her rich garments are lined with fur. Her golden coiffeur, her dangling earrings, her low-dipped gown, and her royal posture further imply the crown the queen renounced. Dumesnil’s portrayal of Christina differs from some other depictions of her in masculine attire astride as horse; indeed, here she seems to have more in common with Le Sueur’s bright depiction of Uranie than she does with her contemporary cartésienne, Elisabeth.

In contrast to the feminine image of Christina that Dumesnil constructs, art historian Paula Rea Radisich has shown that a correlation with the queen was something to be deferred for Lovisa Ulrike of Sweden, an eighteenth-century aspiring philosophe. Radisich explains, “When Voltiare, seeking to flatter, called Lovisa Ulrike a ‘new Christina,’ she politely, but emphatically resisted the moniker.” Hypothesizing that Ulrike’s response was an effect of Queen Christina’s consciously masculine masquerade, Radisich notes that the Encyclopédie describes the infamous queen and

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77 Roche, A Culture of Clothing, 125-128.

78 These include works by Justus van Egmont, Nicolas de le Viuex Poilly, and Charles Antoine Coysevox, which are now in the digital image collections from the musée Condé (Chantilly) and the musée de Louvre (Paris). See Joconde: the Catalogue des Collections des Musees de France.


cartésienne as someone who “willingly renounced the grace of her own [sex]” by “affecting the virtues of our [male] sex.”

If the portrayal Anne-Louise does indeed hail the Swedish queen, it hails her most opulent—most feminine—form.

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CHAPTER V.
THE CURIOUS BODY AND THE PLAYFUL FEMININE

Too oft is curiosity
The cause of fatal woe.
A secret that may harmful be,
Why should we seek to know?
It is a weakness of womankind,
For witness the first created,
From whom Pandora was designed,
And Psyche imitated. 82

Arbitrating the Curious: La Duchesse du Maine and Curiosity

Even the armillary sphere’s decorous form allied with femininity in the
eighteenth century. The authors of the Encyclopédie explain that the “Latins” associated
its shape with an arm decorated with jewelry:

Sphere armillaire ou artificielle….On l'appelle ainsi parce qu'elle est composée
d'un nombre de bandes, ou anneaux de cuivre ou d'autre matiere, appelés par les
Latins armilla, à-cause de la ressemblance qu'ils ont avec des bracelets ou
anneaux. 83

Nelson Goodman argues that representation is a method of categorization and
classification that aids the development of metaphor by forcing the disparate categories


83 “Armillary sphere or artificial sphere…It is called such because it is composed of a number of bands, or rings of copper or another material, called armilla by the Latins, because of the resemblance that it has with bracelets or rings.” Diderot and d’Alembert. “Sphere armillaire,” in Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers (ARTFL Project, The University of Chicago: 2001).
of objects in one space and style.\textsuperscript{84} This painting shifts between at least two systems of metaphor regarding the woman: the portrayal of an ideal student and the duchess as the patroness of Sceaux. The armillary sphere (or \textit{sphere artificielle}) fits each of these ideas. In one system, she is attentive and disciplined; she welcomes her tutor’s comment with a small smile, and she glows. In another, du Maine—as form within the painting—is associated with the objects around her. From Goodman’s explanation of schemata, or a collection of labels organized by logic, the instruments of science may be correlated with the duchess’s acts of patronage and her orchestration of imaginative spectacles.\textsuperscript{85}

That is, as the armillary sphere “représente les différans cercles de la sphere dans leur ordre naturel, et qui sert à donner une idée de l’usage, et de la position de chacun d’eux, & à résoudre différans problèmes qui y ont rapport,” Anne-Louise brings order to Sceaux, establishing a position for each \textit{philosophe} and \textit{bel esprit} that solicits her aid to the sciences.\textsuperscript{86} In this vein, the history of the object, through its Ptolemic and Copernican permutations, situates the lesson of the duchess within a tradition of classical inquiry even as it recalls Urania.\textsuperscript{87}

Tapping into quite a different history of iconic women, however, the tale of “The Green Serpent” by Marie Catherine le Jumelle de Barneville (Baronne d’Aulnoy, c. 1650-1705) warns its female readers against acting upon their inquisitiveness. In the passage cited above, the narrator reminds her readers of the problematic consequences

\textsuperscript{84} Nelson Goodman, \textit{Language of Art}, 69, 33.
\textsuperscript{85} Diderot and d’Alembert, “Sphere armillaire.”

\textsuperscript{86} The armillary sphere “represents the different orbits of the sphere in their natural order, and it gives an idea…of the position of each one of them.” Ibid, “Sphere armillaire.”

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid, “Sphere armillaire.”
that followed Pandora and Psyche when, seeking to know, they opened the boxes forbidden to them and wrought havoc on their surroundings. Du Maine did not heed such admonitions in her pursuits or her passions: the inventory of her possessions at the time of her death included *curios* from around the world and a sundry of the most expensive scientific objects of her day. Marc Favreau explains the duchess’s collections at Sceaux and Paris included two telescopes, seven microscopes, one magic lantern that projected images onto the surrounding walls, four world maps, and an assortment of celestial and terrestrial globes.  

The extensive collection of maps and lenses aligns du Maine with the “scientific ladies of the eighteenth century” that, as Mary Hamer has described, “dedicated themselves in the greatest numbers to those branches of inquiry that involved instrumentally enhanced vision;” ladies “did the looking.”

The sixteenth-century voyages of discovery and exploration, dependant upon the emerging sciences of astronomy, geography, and botany exacerbated the equation between science, philosophy, and political dominance. The collection of ‘*curios,*’ the patronage of tutorships, and the formulation of royal societies have been regarded as

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88 Marc Favreau. “L’inventaire après décès de la duchesse du Maine: Etudes at commentaries,” in *La Duchesse du Maine: Une mécène à la croisée des arts et des siècles,* ed. Catherine Cessac (Brussels: University of Brussels, 2003), 62-4. It is interesting to note that Favreau, drawing from her collection, offers du Maine as an amateur physicist without reservation; it is only recently that others who draw from her performances have begun to venture the same. See: Catherine Cessac, ed. *La duchesse du Maine: Une mécène à la croisée des arts et des siècles* (Brussels: University of Brussels, 2003).

89 Mary Hamer, *Signs of Cleopatra,* 76.

90 There is an extensive literature on the phenomenon of ‘*curios,*’ collecting, display. See: R.J.W. Evans, and Alexander Marr, eds, *Curiosity and wonder from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).
statements of personal and national power from which women were restricted. Therefore many historians of art and science have contended that women “embraced the cultivation of science as past-time”—or displayed it as such.\textsuperscript{91} Whether her overwhelming program of science should be termed a “past-time” or a “lifestyle” is perhaps a question of semantics, but the distribution of du Maine’s collection and the multiplicity of its objects evidences that her scientific pursuits were not localized to the spectacles at Sceaux. Such instruments were difficult to produce, made of expensive materials, intricately decorated with illustrations and sculptural flourishes, and often emblazoned with the owner’s crest. Thus they were highly valued by scholars and would have made du Maine’s salon all the more attractive.\textsuperscript{92} Voltaire, for example, clearly expresses the importance he held for the globes that he purchased when he writes, “Abbé Nollet is ruining me…he is a philosopher, he is a man of great merit and the only to furnish my collection of instruments, and it is much easier to find money than to find a man like him.”\textsuperscript{93} It is also evident that the duchess was associated with

\textsuperscript{91} Susan Sheets-Pyenson, “The Role of Women in Eighteenth-Century French Scientific Culture,” in \textit{The Art of Teaching Physics: The Eighteenth-century Demonstration}, eds. Lewis Pyenson and Jean-François Gauvin (Sillery: 2002), 77. Art historian Barbara Maria Stafford has said that elite Frenchman engaged in “a horizontal skimming” of the sciences (to distinguish himself from the “toiling professional,” while French women “were able to engage in creative talk.” See: Barbara Maria Stafford, \textit{Artful Science: Enlightenment Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education} (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT University Press, 1994), 226. See also: Londa Schiebinger, \textit{The Mind has No Sex}, 26.


these items since Abbé Nollet, who was famous for his scientific spectacles in addition to his inventions, presented a celestial globe to Anne-Louise in the 1720s.\textsuperscript{94}

To play a woman in the early modern world meant maintaining the signifiers of nobility and the poetics of conduct. In this section I examine the ways in which the variable connotations of “curiosity” empowered the image of du Maine in \textit{La Leçon d’astronomie}, rendering an emblem of her anomalous body and facilitating her pursuits of sovereignty and mind. Harth explains that an eighteenth-century woman’s appearance as pendant at court could render her monstrous, “literally on show, displayed as curiosity.”\textsuperscript{95} The Duchesse du Maine was a curiosity, but not the monstrous sort. Madeleine de Scudéry’s dedicatory epistle for \textit{Le Grand Cyrus} (1654) provides a compelling incentive for a woman with philosophic interests, a woman like Anne-Louise, to negotiate her self-portrayal; De Scudéry writes:

I would like it said of a person of my sex that she knows a hundred things of which she makes no boast, that her mind is extremely enlightened…but I wouldn’t like it to be said of her that she is a learned lady. It’s not that she who refuses to be dubbed savante can’t know as much and more than she who has been given that terrible name, but that she knows how to make better use of her mind, and that she has learned how to conceal cleverly what the other so inappropriately displays.\textsuperscript{96}

A smart woman will pass; however, a \textit{“femme savante”} (learned woman) suffers a similar fate as a \textit{“précieuse”}—ridicule. De Troy’s painting implies Anne-Louise’s intelligence yet masks its display through the engendered signifiers previously


\textsuperscript{95} Harth, \textit{Cartesian Women}, 86.

discussed; her small size amplifies this “masquerade of femininity.” Sheriff has explained the relationship among imagination, women, and children that was established during the eighteenth century. Drawing from the philosophers Antoine Léonard Thomas and Julien Offray de la Mettrie, she shows that imagination was the realm of women and that reason was the strength of men: “The real world is not sufficient for [women],” Thomas writes, “they love to create an imaginary world; they live in it and embellish it.” The duchess’s child-like appearance and her profiled position contrast to the beckoning glance of Le Sueur’s Uranie, the tantalizing apparition of du Chatelet as truth on Institutions de physique, or Queen Christina’s stare from Queen Christina and Her Court. Since du Maine’s focus remains within the pictorial stage of La Leçon d’astronomie, she does not directly solicit the audience. This frees the viewer to peruse the forms on the canvas. Moreover, the unusual details of the scene and the sweeping harmonies of color encourage her/him to seek out objects and identify them—the barometer in the library, the classical sculpture in the dim background, the lens in Genest’s hand, the different globes—as one might do with any assortment of curiosities. Each figure, as a form in the painting, is on display within that continuum, too; however, it is Anne-Louise who is the curiosity.

The first edition of the Dictionnaire de L’Académie française (1694) describes curiosity (curiosité) as an object of vision or a state of passion that elicits the desire to

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98 Sheriff, Moved by Love, 50.

99 Antoine Léonard Thomas, qtd. in Sheriff, Moved by Love, 50.
learn more; it is “something rare and curious.” Art historians such as Sheriff, Nicholson, and Zirpolo have shown that women who wished to transgress the boundaries of the normative adjusted conventions of representation. Dwarfed by the large and ruddy men and the focus of the room, Anne-Louise is the singular woman, but she is also evidently an exceptional woman. The duchess’s wealth, her patronage of both arts and sciences, and her pursuit of knowledge are qualities evidenced by the painting that convey her unique character. Du Maine’s image transcends the normative by accentuating her abnormally petite frame—her rare and curious body. While curiosity—the desire to “seek to know”—may be the “weakness of womankind,” the duchess’s childish proportions disrupt the term’s negative connotation even as her conspicuous cap of grey hair further complicates her age: she is timeless. In other words, the painting portrays Anne-Louise as a curio rather than her curiosity. Du Maine has already grasped Malezieu’s lesson; in actuality, it is the viewer who seeks out the secrets of the painting.

The Story of the Princess Doll

I do not mean to preclude the look of the duchess; rather, I am suggesting that she embraced her curious body. Anne-Louise’s story demonstrates that the public dramatization of sex and gender was also a bodily expression. Anne-Louise’s marriage at seventeen to Louis Auguste de Bourbon (1692), the legitimatized son of King Louis

100 “Curiosité,” in Dictionnaire de L’Académie française, 1st Ed. (1694), 299.

101 For a discussion on the complexities posed by ‘exceptional women,’” see: Sheriff, The Exceptional Woman, any page.
XIV, transported her from childhood to the publicized demands of high society and court rituals. Yet, before she displayed her willful character at Versailles, her small stature had already correlated her with the role of a child. She and her tiny sisters were called *les poupées du sangue* (dolls of the blood), which illustrates the irrevocable connection between their royal heritage and their bodies. Madam de Maintenon voices the performative embodiment of court culture when, upon taking residence with the Duchesse du Maine after the marriage ceremony, she writes to Madam de Brinon:

> [The duchess] is crushed to death under a mass of gold and jewelry, and her headdress weighs more than she does…I am afraid for my life that she has married too young. I should like to keep her at St. Cyr, dressed like one of the ‘Verts’…there are no austerities like those imposed by society.

Assuming a maternal role, Maintenon speaks to the staging of identity but does not suggest that the social norms may be breached; instead of removing the oppressive headdress, the letter implies that the duchess should take the role of a child and play in the space of St. Cyr overseen by Maintenon.

Anne-Louise did not retreat to Maintenon’s tutelage, of course. On the contrary, she created a social microcosm in her court at Sceaux that revolved around her figure, one that allowed her to fulfill her fantasies and play hostess to some of the greatest scientific and theatrical spectacles of her day. Plax has suggested that Sceaux provided a


104 Du Maine’s biographer also suggests that Louis XIV at times deterred the Duc du Maine from marriage because his handicapped leg made him unsuitable for the role husband. See Piepape, *A Princess of Strategy*, 27.
framework to enact outdated court diversions; she frequently uses the terms “fantasy, “imaginary,” and “play” to describe the agenda of the duchess. In 1714, for example, du Maine performed Racine’s Greek tragedy *Athalie* (1690) at Sceaux, and she and her family acted in the lead roles.

If Louis XIV was the sun in the heliocentric Copernican universe, it is clear that the duchess had little reservation about eclipsing his splendor during the later years of his reign. The duchess’s attractions captured large audiences, some more appreciative than others, that took notice of the lavish spectacles and her leading roles—both as an actress in the plays and as the patroness of the events. Such entertainments were in contrast to the increasingly pious and conservative atmosphere of Versailles. The Duc de Saint-Simon was particularly derisive; in 1707 he wrote scathingly of her playmaking excess in his memoirs:

> Mme du Maine had taken to performing plays with her household and some retired actors. M. du Maine, who dared not oppose her…stood by one of the doors and received company. Apart from the folly of them such entertainments were not cheap.

Maintenon was far more approving, in a letter to the Princesse des Ursins of the same year she writes,

> Madame la Duchesse du Maine is delighting the whole court by the performances…I confess I should never laugh at her…I consider such pleasures

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more harmless and more clever than spoiling one’s health…My only desire…to curtail the expenses.\textsuperscript{109}

For Maintenon, du Maine is naïve—“harmless and clever;” for Saint-Simon, she trumps her husband’s authority with temper-tantrums and obstinacy. Maintenon and Saint-Simon each reference Anne-Louise’s childishness, implicitly connecting her love of playmaking to her small body.

The elaborate fanfares of costume and music took place in the grand surrounds of Sceaux. Visitors would have recognized that the duchess’s habitation featured the same visual vocabulary as the king’s palace-complex at Versailles—architecture by Claude and Charles Perrault and Antoine Lepautre; paintings by Charles LeBrun; a park designed by André Le Nôtre; and an Orangerie by Jules Hardouin-Mansart. The structures were already in existence when the Duc and Duchesse du Maine purchased Sceaux, but the couple continued the royal aesthetic in the additions that ensued. Art historian Nina Lewallan has proposed that the menagerie commissioned by the duchess in 1720 incorporated an astronomical observatory that referred to the early menagerie at Versailles.\textsuperscript{110} Regardless of whether or not the structure was imbued with the political symbols for which Lewallan makes a compelling case, it certainly attests to du Maine’s investment in elevating science and curiosity. Far from simply parroting Malezieu, as the Marquis de Lassay claims of the duchess,\textsuperscript{111} it seems that she took her lessons with her tutor and synthesized them into creative and empowering activities at a time when

\textsuperscript{109} Maintenon, qtd. in Piepape, \textit{A Princess of Strategy}, 386.
\textsuperscript{111} Piepape, \textit{A Princess of Strategy}, 43.
seeing was the most valued form of learning. This coupling reached its apogee in the weeks of performances during the *Grand Nuits de Sceaux* (1714-15) where, as Catherine Cessac has explained, the drama—thematic enactments of astrology, Egypt, astronomy, comedy, etc.—would extend well into the night. Cessac also notes that in 1715 the last night of *Grand Nuits de Sceaux* took place under a lunar eclipse so that “Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus et Mercure rendent tour a tour un long hommage du Maine.”

Cessac’s discussion underscores du Maine’s centrality within the performances of *Grand Nuits de Sceaux*, as indeed she is center of attention in *La Leçon d’astronomie*. It is the social matrix that accentuates Anne-Louise’s size both within the painting and at Sceaux, rendering it a trope of her identity so that she is the embodiment of her appellation “Nymph de Sceaux.” The duchess reveled in her body “of ten years old;” for her it was a demarcation of eternal youth, femininity, and power. By reclaiming the implications of her status as a *poupée du sangue*, she facilitated both her social influence and learning—desires that were otherwise complicated by her size, sex, and marriage to a barely legitimatized member of the royalty. In ways that were hardly subtle, du Maine fashioned her body into an icon of wealth and leadership. For example, she mapped her figural identity into the slogan for the coterie of “honeybees”


who pledged their loyalty to her in the (barely fictional) *l’ordre de la mouche-à-miel*:

“*Elle est petite aussi, mais elle fait de cruelles blessures.*”\(^{115}\) The mantra was also scripted in Italian on golden medals to commemorate the inauguration of her society.

One side read “*Picolla si, ma fa pur gravi le ferite, 1703*” around a scene with a bee and a hive, while the other side featured her portrait (figure 10).\(^{116}\) Like *La Leçon d’astronomie*, the heavy objects showcased the duchess’s identity as a *poupée du sangue* by hybridizing her body, wealth, and elaborate play.

Du Maine also appeared as Urania in the performances on the fourth night of *Grand Nuits de Sceaux*, which augments the relationship between the allegorical references in De Troy’s painting and du Maine’s court rituals at Sceaux.\(^{117}\) The nighttime festivals postdate De Troy’s painting, which further establishes the painting’s constructive role in Anne-Louise’s self-fashioning. In the tutorial du Maine seems diminutive; however, it is difficult to postulate reasonably that an artist would paint his patron in way that she did not desire. While the duchess rarely appears to dominate the space of her portraits, it is difficult to gage her dimensions when she is the single sitter. For example, the complicated pose du Maine assumes in Pierre Gobert’s portrait (Versailles: châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, figure 11)\(^{118}\) obscures her proportions:

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\(^{115}\) “She is small, but she gives harsh wounds.” See: Advielle, *Histoire de la ville de Sceaux*, 293.


\(^{117}\) Cessac also makes this correlation. See Cessac, “Les Enchantments de Sceaux,” 19.

\(^{118}\) In continuation of the theme addressed early, Gobert’s painting also includes a bust of Cleopatra in the background. This portrait, *Duchesse du Maine*, is a copy after Pierre Gobert (1662-1744) by Phillipe Comairas, 1836. The image and its attendant
her feet tuck into her gown, her arms extend into the left, and she leans slightly to elongate the stretch of her torso and the twist of her neck. The exchange of light and shadow created by the dappling of bright zones on her knees, her chest, and her face additionally complicates the perception of size. It is within the spectrum of others that Anne-Louise stands out (unabashedly) as the smallest in the room. Unlike Gobert, De Troy conveys an ageless scene by highlighting the tropes of du Maine’s small size. Although the duchess should be a woman of about twenty-nine in the painted lesson, she hardly shows her years. Where the fully bloomed wreath of flowers that the duchess holds in Gobert’s painting fosters an allusion between her body and the transient cycles of natural beauty (as well as the countless nobles who were represented with similar wreaths), De Troy associates her figure with antique objects of science that, for centuries, commanded the curiosity of the learned.

*La Lecon d'astronomie* expresses du Maine’s iconic persona through her small body and the signifiers of her court status. By combining the representations of spectacle and inquiry, the painting conveys (but does not state directly) her reason and her indefatigable imagination; her wealth and her power; her body and her mind.

Malezieu and Genest’s large figures call attention to Anne-Louise’s smallness; indeed, the flowing robes make their occupation of space all the more prominent. Yet of the three figures it is du Maine who sits regally poised, fixed on full view for the viewer.

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119 Brême, *François de Troy*, 129.
(who may have been herself), and commanding the attention of all.
I imagine that the Duchesse du Maine appreciated *La Leçon d’astronomie* for both its splendid artifice and the lesson that it depicts. Indeed, the image works decisively against courtiers such as the Marquis de Lassay, who claimed, “the body and mind of Madam la Duchesse…suffered the same fate. They both have the arrested development of a child of twelve…She is still a child, clever it is true, but possessing all of the intolerable characteristics of children.”\(^{120}\) Rather than succumbing to condescension, du Maine claimed her small figure as a characteristic that underscored the singularity of her identity. The duchess reigned over Sceaux, and in this painting she is legitimatized as a patroness of science and spectacle. François De Troy’s portrayal of the Duchesse du Maine in *La Leçon d’astronomie* utilizes the ambiguity of images to depict the multifaceted nature of du Maine’s program at Sceaux. It was a program that mitigated scholarship with ingenuity; moreover, it fashioned her as a woman with powers of mind and of body through repeated cycles of allusion and allegory.

In this vein, the painting fits with portraits of other eighteenth-century French women that show “the individual selfhood and importance of the sitter; that convey her own agency, and in some cases define her in relation not to men, but to other women.”\(^{121}\) At a time when many women of the court were on the outskirts of scientific

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\(^{120}\) Piepape, *A Princess of Strategy*, 383.
philosophy, Anne-Louise was able to create a space that not only harbored the greatest minds of her day but also engaged them in creative enterprises under the auspices of her emblematic persona. Illustrating the du Maine’s identification as a *femme d’esprit*, a woman of reason and imagination, the picture’s blend of classicizing conventions and contemporary portraiture is at once theatrical and documentary. For someone with an interest in Cartesian philosophy, the play of the imaginary is, at the surface, contradictory to the observation by Descartes that fiction can lead one astray:

> Fictitious narratives lead us to imagine the possibility of many events that are impossible…hence it happens that the remainder does not represent the truth, and that such as regulate their conduct by examples drawn from this source, are apt to fall into the extravagances of the knight-erants of romance, and to entertain projects that exceed their powers.¹²²

Yet du Maine’s extravagances, which stemmed from her *esprit*, bolstered her influence in intellectual circles by drawing people to her extraordinary residence to educate and entertain simultaneously. As a seamlessly real and unreal fabrication, the painting operates in both the past and the future: it reminds its viewer of what was (and what might have been) concocted by Anne-Louise—a woman who took on the mythological figure of Urania.

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Figure 1
*La Leçon d’astronomie de la Duchesse du Maine*, 1705-1710
François de Troy (1679-1752)
Oil on canvas, .96 x 1.28 m.
Collection Musée de l’Ile-de-France, domaine de Sceaux
Figure 2
*The Feast of Dido and Aeneaus, 1702*
François de Troy
Oil on canvas, 1.6 x 2.3 m
Location unknown
Figure 3
François de Troy
*Porttrait de Marie-Anne de Bourbon, princess de conti*, 1690-1691
Oil on canvas
Agen, musée des Beaux-Arts
Figure 4
*The Duchess of Maine as Cleopatra*, 1700-50
Pierre Gobert
Oil on canvas, 50 x 39 cm
Musée de France, Versailles; Originally at Jadis au Chateau d’Eu
Figure 5

_Uranie_

Eustache Le Sueur (1616-1655)

160 m. x .74 m.

Paris, musée du Louvre
Figure 6
Plate XXII, “The Muses Polyhymnia, Erato, Terpsichore, and Urania”
From George Richardson’s *Iconology* (London, 1779)
Figure 7
Frontispiece to Emilie du Châtelet’s *Institutions de physique*
Paris, 1740
Figure 8

Christine of Sweden and Her Court, 1700-1750
Louis Michel Dumesnil (France)
Oil on canvas, 97 x 126 cm.
Musée de France, Versailles
Figure 9
Detail of Queen Christina, from *Christine of Sweden and Her Court*
Louis Michel Dumesnil
Oil on canvas, 97 x 126 cm.
Musée de France, Versailles
Figure 10

*Duchesse du Maine*

Phillipe Comairas, 1836 after Pierre Gobert (1662-1744)

Oil on canvas, 1.03 x .71 m.

Versailles, musée national du château et des Trianons
Figure 11
Medal commemorating the Order of the Honey Bees
Drawing of the object by Victor Advielle
Published in *Histoire de la ville de Sceaux*, 1881
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