

The Third Estate in Saint-Simon's *Mémoires*

by
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Of the 10,000 actors who played their roles before Saint-Simon's piercing gaze, it is not surprising that the majority, and especially the most prominent among them, belong to the two higher orders of the *Ancien Régime*. The bottom rung, the other 97% of the French population, is however present to some extent in the *Mémoires*. A first category constitutes a somewhat ambiguous group, small in gross terms but looming large in Saint-Simon's consciousness, those of recent ennoblement; for him they seem to exist in a purgatory of caste, less than genuinely noble, although bearing official titles and enjoying privileges. In addition to these imperfect aristocrats of Third Estate antecedents, the *Mémoires* present a range of people belonging firmly to the lowest order. Contrary to what one might expect from an arch-conservative defined to a great degree by his class consciousness, Saint-Simon's attitudes towards both these groups are nuanced.

Locating *roturiers* in seventeenth-century Paris and Versailles was as difficult for Saint-Simon, or as easy, as locating the center of the universe for Pascal: they were everywhere, hiding under recent titles they had bought, married or cajoled from the king. It is true that the memorialist's requirements concerning antiquity of nobility were demanding. He snubs the ducal Brissac family, for example, by reporting that the lineage could only be traced back to 1386; "cela," he comments, "ne fait pas une grande origine (Ed. Truc, III, 492)."¹ On this point, as on many others, Saint-Simon's elasticity of vision (Coirault 147),² his way of deforming the real, is revealed: the duke had been engaged for many years in a bitter lawsuit with the Duc de Brissac (over the legacy of a family member: Saint-Simon's half-sister, Duchesse de Brissac), and had grown to hate his adversary. The memorialist practices a similar distortion in regard to the venerability of his own lineage by stressing the family's descent from Charlemagne, "sans contestation quelconque," (I,77) while glossing over the newness of his dukedom, granted to his own father and originally just for life (Ed. Coirault, I, 1190 n. 9).³

Satisfied of his own superior and demanding place at the apex of the aristocratic order, yet with no qualms about the family's recent arrival there, Saint-Simon therefore (or nevertheless) suffered torments when mortal humans, vainly imitating the Creator, attempted to intervene in that order (Brody 189-190). The king is the nemesis in the *Mémoires*. He interferes by favoring his bastard children, by marrying a commoner who had emerged from the earth to "surpasser rapidement les plus hauts cèdres" (II,192), and by filling government posts with *bourgeois*. He had thus established an atmosphere where disorder and confusion--the key concepts in the *Mémoires*, the state against which Saint-Simon is writing--reigned. With a pen eager to retrace ignominious genealogies and to castigate usurpation and derogation in every form, Saint-Simon defends himself and his ideal notion of "haute noblesse," decades after the facts. The language is rich in doubled adjectives that spit out his scorn ("la pleine et parfaite roture" of Voysin, grandson of a clerk, III,192) in expressions of glee (as when lowly origins are revealed in public, I,693), and in insinuations ("on a dit même qu'il [Crozat] avoit été son laquais," V,34). The effrontery of those who usurped titles, a practice becoming more common amidst the *confusion* Saint-Simon evokes, elicits a dark and angry meditation on his milieu: the Comte de Cröy simply changed his title to prince; his wife, a mere heiress from Flanders, promises to become in fact a princess of rank "dans un pays où il n'y a qu'à prétendre et tenir bon pour réussir, à condition toutefois que ce soit contre tout droit, ordre, justice et raison" (V,320).

Marriages crossing the lines between the two estates also contribute to the disorder. Saint-Simon's total dismissal of gross misalliances usually does not require literary embellishment; it suffices to merely state that the Marquis de Mirepoix is the son of a cabaret girl from Alsace (I,642). In other cases, the turn of expression is pithier. We shall pass by the most famous of these inappropriate wives, "cette funeste fée" married to the king, to cite another, a chambermaid, subsequently publicly kept, and finally, "vieille, laide et borgnesse," the Duchesse de Gramont (II,319). Where money was a consideration, Saint-Simon adopts a more ambivalent position. Such marriages are sometimes a necessity, and can be countenanced if dignity and proportion are

maintained. Thus he blames Mme de Sévigné's daughter for her witticism about the marriage of a son with a financier's offspring ("il falloit bien de temps en temps du fumier sur les meilleures terres," II,395), and lauds the modesty and respectfulness of the Crozat's mother-in-law when the financier's daughter becomes a countess (II,780). Thus, too, another revealing silence about certain of his own in-laws. His cherished wife was, in fact, the granddaughter of a financier.

The role of men of the robe in promoting the mingling of the second and third estates merits special attention. Saint-Simon correctly intuited that the judicial corps was gaining ground against his own caste, and fought this encroachment with arguments that required the assumption of the superiority of the distant past over the more recent one. A long digression on the matter in Volume IV leads to this conclusion:

Avec cette démonstration, comment se peut-il entendre qu'une cour de justice qui, par son essence, n'est ni du premier ni du second ordre, et qui n'est établie que pour juger les causes des particuliers, puisse être le premier corps de l'Etat? (IV,550)

Saint-Simon's complaints about the robe's pretensions touch on the same headings as his other attacks on mingled orders. The robe is guilty of usurpation, as when brothers of provincial *présidents à mortier* add "marquis de" to their bourgeois family names. Saint-Simon's ironical comment about this "friandise": "c'est un apanage apparemment comme Orléans l'est du frère du Roi" (II, 56). Genealogies where the robe dominates often culminate in descendants who are reduced by Saint-Simon's terrible "IL était peu de chose" or worse, "IL n'était rien." Robe people are bold, showing up to pay respects after Monseigneur's death (III,865), or finding the means to "percer partout et d'être du plus grande monde" (VI,288). They, too, marry needy bluebloods and become, for example, "cette noble duchesse" (III,429).

This atmosphere of socialclimbing and hybridizing, and the memorialist's violent reaction to it, suggest several comments and qualifications. First, Saint-Simon's denigration of recent ennoblements is clearly a prejudice, shared to a lesser degree by his fellow great nobles, but

with no legal foundation. One paid taxes or one did not. As François Bluche demonstrates in the case of Louis XIV's secretaries of state, these men were bona fide nobles, if recently so, before being named to their posts, and several in fact were not named, having held *survivances* since the preceding century.⁴ Secondly, in spite of his detailed knowledge of genealogies, Saint-Simon made serious mistakes about the status of certain families (e.g., the La Salle line, IV,78). Thirdly, as was evident in his position on misalliances, the manner of the guilty affects his reaction. Fourthly, if rank matters in Saint-Simon's eyes, so also does merit. The portraits of Ducasse, ex-pirate and scion of Bayonne ham-sellers (II,270; IV,8-9; IV,673-4) are a good illustration. The duke objects strongly to Ducasse's being named to the Spanish order of the Golden Fleece, because of his origins, but has only praise for his achievements in the navy. Saint-Simon is probably not given sufficient credit for his wholly admirable castigation of incompetence. Finally, he is inconsistent. Several close friends in life, and presented as such in the *Mémoires*, bore the freshest of titles, chief among them the Chancelier Pontchartrain, the Duchesse de Chevreuse and the Duchesse de Beauvilliers, both daughters of Colbert.⁵ Their rank is reported without the emotional terminology that marks his comments about persons he dislikes. Numerous other unimpressive genealogies, of a variety that precludes generalization, are presented without passion. Perhaps a portion of Saint-Simon's eulogy of the Duc de Bourgogne, lines which patently project his own values, best states his own nuanced code:

Gracieux partout, plein d'attention au rang, à la naissance, à l'âge, à l'acquis de chacun, choses depuis si longtemps honnies et confondues avec le plus vil peuple de la cour; régulier à rendre à chacune de ces choses ce qui leur étoit dû de politesse..." (III,972).

In Volume V, Saint-Simon states two principles of selection for portraits in the *Mémoires*: "J'ai répandu ... les caractères des personnages de tous états ... pour la nécessité ou la curiosité de les bien connoître" (V,227). It is this curiosity, Saint-Simon's inexhaustible inquisitiveness, which explains the presence of various obituaries of members of the Third Estate. The three pages on Ninon

de Lenclos end thus with an explanation, almost an apology that is sincere, if not stylistically very felicitous: "La singularité unique de ce personnage m'a fait étendre sur elle" (II,516).

A distinction between the two overlapping worlds of upper-class Paris and Versailles is occasionally noted (e.g., Mme Herwart, IV,50), but in no way does their meeting on a social level automatically elicit criticism from the duke. A case in point is Savary (I,630), a wealthy, Epicurean Parisian. Saint-Simon's barb in this account is aimed not at the many high-born friends of Savary, but rather at the person who was apparently responsible for his murder and someone who is often scorned in the *Mémoires*, "un très vilain petit homme," the king's brother.

Given the peripheral place of literature in the *Mémoires*, it would seem that curiosity is the principle governing the inclusion of a number of bourgeois writers. The paragraphs devoted to the great (Racine, I, 623-5) and the second-rank (the Daciens, VI, 633-4; VII, 259) tend to recount anecdotes, to situate the person on the city/court grill, and to recall, briefly and often vaguely, his or her literary achievements. Social status is mentioned neutrally, if at all; Saint-Simon seems not to have felt these professionals as threats. Nor are clergymen from the Third Estate normally subjected to close social scrutiny. Worldly abbés (Testu, II, 625-6; Alary, VI, 421) move in high circles without comment. Some few clerics who gain high positions without losing their virtue are praised without qualification. They include Godet, bishop of Chartres (III, 314-15) and Vittement (VI, 345-6), who became a tutor of the king on merit alone, "chose bien rare à la cour," and did the even rarer thing of rejecting the offer of a rich abbey, to Saint-Simon's profound admiration. His birth in a humble family is not even mentioned. Others who machinated in order to rise in church and governmental ranks, and who in Saint-Simon's eyes were incompetent and/or *superbes* once in place, might have seen the splendor of their Third Estate origins fully displayed in the *Mémoires* (Dubois, I, 30-31).

Court secretaries often play prominent roles in Saint-Simon's world. Of Millain, secretary of the son of the Prince de Condé, and an important assistant to Saint-Simon and his cohorts in arranging the *lit de justice* that reduced

the royal bastards in rank and power--cause dearest to the duke's heart--we read a compliment underlining once more Saint-Simon's insistence on merit as well as birth: "Millain étoit fort homme d'honneur, de règle et de sens, et par son mérite fort au-dessus de son état" (VI, 89). About Rose, official forger of the king's style and handwriting, Saint-Simon observes: "gai, libre, hardi, volontiers audacieux, mais, à qui ne lui marchait point sur le pied, poli, respectueux, tout à fait en sa place" (I, 821). That this place was near Saint-Simon's, for Rose held one of the numerous and much-coveted *charges* that granted automatically four generations of nobility, is not mentioned. Either the memorialist did not take this form of aristocracy seriously enough to comment on it, or did not resent it as deeply as he did the titles granted by the king for frivolous reasons.⁶ Various other professionals from the Third Estate appear at least briefly. Le Nôtre earns a long eulogy where he is praised for keeping to his proper station (I, 754), but class is not mentioned in stories about less important persons, e.g., the chemist Homburg (V, 135) and a curé who speaks Persian (IV, 631).

The crown's medical personnel occupy in the *Mémoires* a major place that has recently begun to be studied by scholars.⁷ Royal patients, like any other, became dependent on and submissive to their doctors, so that the latter were often held in an esteem and confidence out of proportion to their social standing. A story about the king's brother illustrates this point vividly. Monsieur, rather than offend his elderly first surgeon, who fumbled in surgical procedures, refrained from being bled at all, and died as a result (I, 907). Saint-Simon, with a keen interest in medicine and extensive practice at being ill himself, is sympathetic towards many of the doctors he presents, especially his friend and source of information, the chief surgeon Mareschal.⁸ However, despite his genuine admiration and respect for this surgeon, class distinction is not forgotten. The last element noted in the portrait of Mareschal, and therefore a point of importance, is the surgeon's respectfulness and willingness to keep to his place (II, 190). Again, Saint-Simon makes no mention of the letters of nobility granted Mareschal in 1707 and his acquisition of a title upon purchase of a fief in 1723. In at least two other cases, complimentary accounts mention nothing about a doctor's social status. For Drs. Higgins at

the court of Spain and Helvétius in Paris, perhaps the simple noting of their respectively Irish and Dutch births sufficed to situate them on the social scale. Nor does Saint-Simon think to add a word of comment about the place of someone as lowly as an apothecary, albeit one whom he respects and who is also an informant (Boulduc, III, 1169). Or perhaps the explanation is again that class is not an issue if the person is worthy and unpretentious. For Saint-Simon is not tender towards the *arriviste* doctors. He recounts and ridicules incessant requests of D'Aquin for bishoprics and other favors for family members (I, 106-7), and is scornful of the prominence of Boudin, Monseigneurs' chief doctor, at the court of Meudon (III, 747).

As we descend the ladder to ranks where there was virtually no chance of pretension to a change of estate, references to origins and class become rarer. Exceptions are the principal valets, personages in the court, whose positions were lucrative and venal. Several of these servant-administrators merit portraits in the *Mémoires*, where their sense of station, appropriate or usurpative, is emphasized. Bontemps, Louis XIV's principal valet for 50 years, a holdover from his father's court that Saint-Simon admired so greatly, was "respectueux et tout à fait à sa place" (I, 827), and Moreau, principal valet of the Duc de Bourgogne, was "fort au-dessus de son état sans se méconnoître" (III, 1172). In the other direction, Nyert is called, in addition to a dangerous monkey, an "affranchi," because of his excessive familiarity with the king (VI, 358). Joyeux theoretically served Monseigneur, but in reality was a personage with whom the Dauphin "se mesuroit fort, et avec qui sa cour intérieure étoit en grand ménagement et fort en contrainte" (II, 587). As for the hordes of lesser servants who move in the background of the *Mémoires*, there are glimpses of their activities, their *mœurs*, and their feelings. They often end up resembling their employers (for example those of Mme de Maintenon, IV, 1049). They notice the king's decline, but do not dare to speak of it (IV, 879). The lowest often find themselves presiding over the final departures of their masters and mistresses. They keep watch over Monseigneur's infectious corpse (III, 826) and desert the dying Duc de Vendôme, stealing his mattress and coverlet from under him (IV, 35-6). It is probably that the mentions in all these stories of

"les derniers des valets" are literary superlatives chosen by Saint-Simon to emphasize the reduction of the great to a final nothingness. In an affinity with Saint-Simon, servants also observe and comment. They revolt occasionally against impossible masters, who, as it happens, are always enemies of Saint-Simon (e.g., the Princesse d'Harcourt, II, 135). They spread the story about the Duc d'Orléans being the poisoner of the Dauphin and Dauphine (IV, 311). They applaud, along with the guests in the salon, when they hear the story of a scoundrel bested (VI, 368). And in that masterfully told scene where Louis greets the news that the Duchesse de Bourgogne has had a miscarriage with an outburst of relief that now he may travel as he wants, it is the workers present who underline the monstrosity of his egoism: "Chacun demeura stupéfait; jusqu'aux gens des bâtiments et aux jardiniers demeurèrent immobiles" (II, 1007-8). These few samples cannot properly define the place of servants in the *Mémoires*, a subject that does not seem to have been studied in any detail, but at least they can demonstrate the comprehensive view of a memorialist who notices even the invisible people, and his artistry in placing them for literary effect.

Beyond the confines of Versailles were the humble, who appear *en masse* at different points of the *Mémoires*. Saint-Simon has been criticized for evoking the populace only when it is in revolt and for paying only summary attention to suffering (d'Astier 77-78, 136). As will be seen, the first accusation is based on an inaccurate view of the *peuple* in the *Mémoires*; and of the second, it should be remembered how few writers paid the lowest and largest class any heed at all. Saint-Simon's *Lettre anonyme au roi* stands with that of Fénelon and with Vauban's book on the *dîme* as exceptional efforts. In Saint-Simon's case, the letter is supplemented by several hundred passages in the *Mémoires* where the lowest segment of the Third Estate appears.⁹ These texts reveal the varied contours in his perception of the masses. Volume I includes several affectionate reminiscences of common soldiers known during his early campaigns. The gulf between the orders is nonetheless evident when a handful of noble victims merit obituaries several pages in length, while the thirty thousand infantrymen killed are dismissed in only two lines (I, 97-9). At the other end of the *Mémoires*, compassion for the soldiery again surfaces, in a statement reporting the

effects of inflation on servicemen, "cette partie de l'Etat, si importante, si répandue, si nombreuse, plus que jamais tourmentée et réduite sous la servitude des bureaux" (VII, 388). The whole country appears thus, in the account of the terrible winter of 1709-10: "On ne peut comprendre la désolation de cette ruine générale" (III, 83). Which, and this seems to be Saint-Simon's point in his long account, was greatly exacerbated by individual greed and the king's bickering with the Parliaments. The human being after the fall, the true subject of Saint-Simon's history, is certainly apparent in these stories of individual evil causing massive ills. The human being attempting to redeem himself also emerges against the same backdrop. Almsgiving, as in this same account (87-8), is a recurring theme in the *Mémoires*.

Saint-Simon shows other faces of the populace for other reasons. This segment of humanity supplies vocabulary terms, always used to denigrate the subject: the Marquise de Charlus dressed like a "crieuse de vieux chapeaux" (VI, 288), Père Tellier is a peasant (IV, 747), the social-climbers often rise from "la lie du peuple." The lowest class also provides vehicles of disguise or projection of psychological truths that Saint-Simon wants to convey, consciously or not. On several occasions he tells of the Parisian *harengères* who visit Monseigneur to show their concern, vulgarly expressed, at the Dauphin's illnesses, and his effusive and kindly reactions are recorded (e.g., III, 809). Likewise, the hated Maréchal de *Villeroy* has the same kind of rapport with "ces ambassadrices" (VI, 614). The inner meaning of these anecdotes is clear: Saint-Simon succeeds, through association, in lowering Monseigneur and the marshal to the level of fishwives. When Saint-Simon writes that Paris and the public had a certain reaction to some event, he is usually implying his own reaction. We can sense, for example, his life-long feeling of endurance and acquiescence to higher powers in the statement about the riots that happened when Law's system exploded: "rien ne branla, ce qui marque bien la bonté et l'obéissance de ce peuple qu'on mettoit à tant et de si étranges épreuves" (VI, 617). An unsettling story where the *peuple* appears in passing also reveals the duke's psyche. During the regency he persuaded the Duc d'Orléans to buy a 136-carat diamond at a time when, as Saint-Simon ingenuously admits, "on avoit tant de peine à subvenir aux nécessités les plus pressantes et qu'il falloit

laisser tant de gens dans la souffrance" (V, 658). This is the Saint-Simon who saw and felt the meaning of forms, in Georges Poisson's words, "ces manifestations extérieures auxquelles il attachait tant de prix... [qui étaient] l'extériorisation de sentiments ou d'actions profondes."¹⁰ He knew the reality of a hungry and miserable population; but that reality faded before the sparkle of a diamond that represented preeminence and rank, his own *raison d'être*.

Because that being had been successfully threatened by the lowest estate, the latter appears in the *Mémoires* at times as a negative force. The generalization is therefore often made that Saint-Simon despised the lower classes. A more correct statement would be that he despised *individuals* in the Third Estate--it is rather his contemporary Voltaire and other *philosophes* who held a whole class (the *peuple*) in contempt. Nor is it really membership in a class that inspires his scorn; it is the desire to change one's God-given place in society and to exercise functions that were beyond one's capabilities, that were culpable. The flaws in this scheme are only too evident to modern eyes: birth does not always grant merit, the partitions between classes had never been and never would be watertight, privilege had become divorced from responsibility. The psychological sources of his values and prejudices qualify equally the very personal vision he writes in the *Mémoires*.¹¹ His commitment to merit as a guiding concept in public and private life, however, needs no qualification at all.

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Notes

¹Future references to this first Pléiade edition (1953-61) will be given in the text. The new edition is not complete at this writing.

²The metaphor is Yves Coirault's.

³See the new edition of the *Mémoires* by Y. Coirault, for a summary of this genealogy.

⁴"L'Origine sociale des Secrétaires d'Etat de Louis XIV (1661-1715)," *Dix-septième siècle*, Nos. 42-3 (1959): 8-22.

⁵Saint-Simon himself, in first aspiring to the hand of the daughter of the Duc de Beauvilliers, would have joined this tainted family.

⁶Saint-Simon was perfectly aware of the ennoblement of these secretaries. One of his goals in the "projets de gouvernement" elaborated with the Duc de Bourgogne was to reduce drastically the number of these secretaries, and to eliminate the privilege of nobility. See Roland Mousnier, "Saint-Simon et les Equilibres sociaux," *Cahiers Saint-Simon*, No. 3 (1975): 14, and Jean-Louis Vergnaud, "De l'âge des services au temps des vanités: la compagnie des conseillers-secrétaires du roi, maison, couronne de France, et de ses finances. Histoire, fonctions et privilèges," *Cahiers Saint-Simon*, No. 14 (1986): 55-70.

⁷*Cahiers Saint-Simon*, No. 11 (1983), is devoted to various medical aspects of the *Mémoires* and includes as well a call for further study by Helene Himelfarb, 3-7.

⁸Paul-Louis Chigot, "Saint-Simon, le bon malade," *Médecine de France*, 206 (1969): 9-17, treats Saint-Simon's generally sympathetic attitude towards the medical world.

⁹The number is given by Pierre Ronzeaud in a commentary on Brody, "Saint-Simon peintre...", 192.

¹⁰The observation is made in reference to the long mourning Saint-Simon observed after the death of his wife (Poison 364).

¹¹Alphonse de Waelhens gives a sustained psychoanalytical interpretation of the *Mémoires* in *Le Duc de Saint-Simon: immuable comme Dieu et d'une suite*

enragée (Brussels: Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, 1981).

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