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CHASTITY: A LITERARY AND CULTURAL ICON OF THE FRENCH
SIXTEENTH-CENTURY COURT

by Catherine Mary Hampton

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

1996

ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the Renaissance understanding of the virtue of chastity within the French court, countering the view that the Renaissance courtier perceived chastity to be simply an attribute properly assigned to women as a protective virtue.

From within a context of Renaissance moral paradigms, religious and secular, this study demonstrates how the French nobility championed individual perfectibility and denounced passion, embracing reason as paramount moral virtue and valorizing social codes of conduct as signs of rational activity. The rational control of the body in a social context was perceived to be necessary to the smooth-running of the State, and this control was symbolically represented as 'chastity', being grounded upon principles of self-restraint familiar to women, who were nominally pre-eminent in this area of behaviour. Such an analysis informed the discourse of Perfect Love played out at court, in which a chaste female beloved stood as an icon of universal concord. Through her perfect status she induced a publicly chaste conduct in her lover, whose pursuit was rational and stabilizing to the social milieu. This 'chaste' game was a fiction which had little relevance to private morality, but was concerned with exhibiting chaste harmony to the public gaze. It exalted the female form as an icon of the purified social body, thereby bestowing symbolic control upon woman. This study also explores the extent to which the Renaissance noblewoman was a prisoner of her own corporeal nature within this chaste discourse of love. She was influential by reason of the sexual purity attributed to her, but precariously so, because her very sexuality risked the accusation that her real 'virtue' lay not in her purity, but in her dissimulation of desire.

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BY

CATHERINE MARY HAMPTON

SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM

DEPARTMENT OF FRENCH

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PREFACE

In quotations of French material from early printed books used in this thesis, I have normalized the letters *i* and *u* to *j* and *v* respectively.

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INTRODUCTION

The iconic significance of chastity as a moral virtue for women throughout the medieval period cannot be disputed; nor can it be argued that this fundamental quality is any less highly regarded in the Renaissance. Examined from this perspective, chastity is a female issue and one which is largely negative in its implications: it is a physiological imperative which restricts the freedom of women because of its attendant emphasis upon their presumed corporeal and mental weakness, thereby perpetuating their secondary status within society. I have sought to show that this picture of chastity as a protective virtue surfaces in different guises in sixteenth-century France: while mainstream Catholicism continues to endorse the superior spiritual virtues of celibacy, evangelical and reform movements reaffirm the value of chaste marriage under male headship. Concurrently, secular texts debate rhetorically the contribution of women to the social environment, using biblical and classical argument to defend their often extreme points of view. This *Querelle des Femmes* debate which spans the length of the century influences and is influenced by an emerging set of social mores within the court which also seeks to define the role of woman in the light of contemporary philosophical and political developments.

The courts of Europe find themselves at the centre of profound cultural and intellectual changes during the

sixteenth century; the anthropocentric optimism which characterizes humanist thought, especially in the earlier part of the century, is specifically connected with the rank and power of the Renaissance Prince. I argue in chapters two and three of this work that, though French secular treatises concerned with the pursuit of human dignity generally address the nobleman in his role as servant of the Prince, popular philosophical doctrines which elucidate the superior position of humankind within the universe celebrate a cosmic harmony which is androgynous: specifically, the Neoplatonism of Marsilio Ficino identifies universal forces which can be categorized as either male, female or hermaphrodite. Such arguments, in a popularized form, are used to advance the cause of women at court: the contribution of the female sex, some argued, was seminal, because the quest for human dignity and perfection could not be completed without them.

The socialization of Ficino's aesthetic theories of love is evidence of this tendency to include women in the pattern of social progress. The doctrine of Perfect Love developed in the Italian court described by Baldesar Castiglione, and eagerly adopted in and around the French court, humanized the celestial love which Ficino located at the heart of the universe and transformed it into the likeness of woman: Ficino's Venus, symbol of the divine affection which infused the heavens and the earth alike, assumed the real female form of the refined noblewoman. Characterized by her spiritual purity, this womanly

embodiment of a divine ideal was, above all things, chaste; this, indeed, was the very essence of her beauty, which attracted contemplation from a worthy lover eager to penetrate the celestial truths behind her physical presence.

Through a close study of Maurice Scève's *Délie*, I have traced the outplaying of this metaphysical ideology of love in a fictional human context. This study is a prelude to an examination of the social interpretation of the discourse at the French court; it is intended to illustrate the real quest for spiritual understanding of the impact of human presence which the writers of Perfect Love in its purest form undertook. In writing of *Délie*'s effects upon him and of his own desire for her, Scève not only takes upon himself her mantel of chastity, but transforms it until it also reflects his own sensibilities. This of course sets *Délie* at the mercy of Scève's pen, but the poet has faith in the purifying effects of chaste love and the work aims at an androgynous synthesis of lover and beloved in the text.

Stripped of much of its metaphysical clothing, the socialized version of the Perfect Love discourse enthusiastically adopted by the French court as a means of fashioning a social Utopia is much more equivocal in its treatment of chastity. Here the discourse is constructed as an elaborate game which mixes pragmatism with idealism: the icon of chastity remains a symbol of celestial reason, a

virtue embodied in the beloved and emulated in his own way by her lover, but it is at times little more than a deliberately constructed mask designed simply to hide sexual indiscretion. In other words, in a way not unrelated to the marriage and celibacy paradigms offered by the Church, the Perfect Love discourse puts forward a largely acceptable social code designed to militate against the shame of illicit sexual liaison. Notwithstanding this, the pattern of male chivalrous pursuit directed by female chaste resistance which the discourse promotes is intended to encourage a reign of harmony which goes beyond practical considerations of self-control; once the icon has been remoulded in its more pragmatic form (once the beloved has understood that chastity need not mean refusal, and the lover that his methods of service can be chaste), the public outplaying of the discourse is also celebrated for its divine import and purpose in the manner of its more metaphysical predecessor.

On a grand scale, this is the philosophy which inspires the elaborate Renaissance fêtes which took place at the French court. In these lavish entertainments, the Perfect Love discourse is transformed into an icon of political and social order and irrational *volupté* is graphically defeated by rational, chaste harmony. Critics have traced the political meaning located in the symbolism of the court fête and have noted the extent to which the state is associated with the female form, a mirror to the masculine authoritative power of the ruler Prince. Taking a rather

different angle, I have chosen to explore the paradigmatic impact of the entertainments, enacted by royal and high-ranking courtiers for the benefit of a courtly audience, upon the social order of the court.

I will contend that female refusal, however chaste, to comply with these social affirmations of order through love is presented as unacceptable because it devalues the processes of male chastity (devoted service, public discretion and so on) and thus breaks away from the androgynous model of social harmony which underpins the chastity icon. Though in theory, women are empowered by their propensity to chastity to take the lead in the formation of this model social order, in practice their chastity is only acceptable in conjunction with its masculine partner, and not when it functions independently of this pair bond.

The chastity icon is thus deceptively ambivalent in its benefits towards the female sex which is held to be the natural guardian of the virtue. On the one hand, it has little to do with the moral asceticism preached to women by the Church because it is linked with self-control, not abstinence: to prove the victory of reason over passion, the truly chaste woman, according to the courtly discourse, must not avoid the latter but reshape it and replace it with a chastity which exalts her rational triumph within the world, rather than in opposition to it. On the other hand, the discourse is perceived by many, and especially

men, as a protective measure enabling women to enter into desired sexual unions which honour would otherwise deny them, and to this extent it is tied to notions of shame and sexual frailty which the church had endorsed for centuries. Despite the efforts of writers idealizing the processes of love at court to deny that courtly lovers viewed women in such basic sexual and physiological terms, *mémoires*, letters and reflections of courtiers testify that this was frequently the case.

It is, therefore, my contention that the lady of the court is required to incarnate mutually repellent ideals under the umbrella of chastity: in physiological terms she is, for the sake of honour, to remain pure, whilst in social terms she is not only to appear desirable, but to desire union in order to prove her devotion to androgynous reason. No such confusion of interests besets the male sex, whose so-called 'chaste' conduct allows pragmatism and idealism to sit side by side. An analysis of these essential conflicts of motive and the consequent attempts to overcome them in the aim of preserving the icon in some form is thus an important strand of this thesis. I aim to clarify the extent to which the sexually-egalitarian ethos of the Perfect Love discourse functions as an elaborate fiction exploiting the physical condition of women for the sake of men, but also to explore the liberating benefits of an icon which optimistically celebrates the potential of humankind to restore divine order to the temporal sphere.

I have taken much of my evidence for this thesis from highly stylized literary texts written within the court milieu, and certainly for the attention of a courtly readership. My aim is not, therefore, to give account of the activities of courtiers from an historical perspective (a task which would involve the examination of archive material), but to clarify the ways in which the court, defining itself in textual terms, recorded the complex social machinations that its highly codified, public discourse of love effected.

The texts I examine often echo the influence of dramatic visual spectacle and public display that were a fundamental component of the love game played out at court. The obvious desire, in such texts, to paint even the tensions inherent within the love discourse in a beneficial and reasonable light, is tempered by the apparent honesty of other fictions which elaborate the problematic nature of social interaction between the sexes at court. The relationship between the private and public lives of courtiers and the texts which purport to give account of these is thus a complex one. In observing the divergent pictures of chaste conduct by means of which courtiers professed their supposed devotion to prevailing trends of social organization during the last sixty years of the sixteenth century, I will show how these contrived works collectively reveal a lack of cohesion which points to the ultimate fragility of the chaste discourses and cultural paradigms intended to stabilize the social milieu.

I: A PECULIARLY FEMININE VIRTUE? THEORETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXTS OF CHASTITY AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS UPON THE IDEA OF WOMAN IN THE FRENCH RENAISSANCE

The quality most frequently praised is chastity. Enough could not be said of it as the foundation of womanly worth. Let a woman have chastity, she has all. Let her lack chastity and she has nothing.¹

Pour bien louer un homme, on use beaucoup de termes, de beaucoup de vertus et de qualitez, mais quand on vient à louer une femme on dit que c'est une femme sage cest a dire elle est chaste, comprenant come par excellence sous ce mot toutes les autres vertus.²

The significance of the virtue of chastity to women of the Renaissance, according to these two writers, cannot be overestimated, since it is representative not of one aspect of their persona, but of their whole nature. Obvious physiological considerations of heredity were in part responsible for this concept, for as Signor Ottavino declared in Castiglione's seminal treatise on the lifestyle of the courtier, chastity was imposed upon women 'pour avoir certitude des enfans'.³ This very factor, however, in the history of western cultural attitudes to women, underlay many complex myths relating to female sexual difference which the sixteenth century inherited and modified; myths which derived from biblical and pagan sources concerning the fundamental mysteries of birth, sin and death and their inherent connection to the female form.

Thus the sixteenth century was expanding upon deeply engrained perceptions of gender and sexuality permeating social and civil life when it scrutinized the virtue of chastity according to the theological, moral, philosophical

and social considerations of the day: cultural developments transformed the meaning of the virtue, whilst at the same time belief in the significance of the virtue was itself instrumental in shaping the social order. In order to understand the evolution of chastity within the aristocratic milieu that was the seedbed for these intellectual debates, and where the virtue came to assume iconographic significance, it is necessary to become familiar with the cultural legacy which sixteenth-century thinkers had received, and with how they handled its content. This chapter, therefore, will aim to clarify sixteenth-century reactions to long-standing theories and doctrines relating to gender and sexuality, before examining the popular literary interpretations of these notions.

WOMAN AS SECOND SEX IN THE WESTERN CULTURAL TRADITION

The generic terminology used to describe women in the sixteenth century was generally negative, if not to say damning. Despite the encouraging humanistic ideals which penetrated the male-oriented Renaissance universe, and which were shared by an ever increasing number of intelligent, literate noblewomen, the female sex as an entity remained the subject of prejudice and misconception which dated from the medieval period and before, and which changed little during the course of the sixteenth century. Jean d'Arrerac's treatise, *La Philosophie civile et d'estat*, written as late as 1598, is a prime example of the

belief that the female sex inhabited a more lowly world than the male, tied to primal matter and devoid of spirituality:

Le masle represente Dieu, la femelle la nature: le masle le ciel, et la femelle la terre et les elemans: le masle la forme, et la femelle la matiere: le masle l'unité, et la femelle le deux: le masle l'action, et la femelle la passion: le masle le soleil, et la femelle la Lune: le masle l'ame, et la femelle le corps: et le masle la vertu, et la femelle le vice. Toutes ces representations et images monstrent à l'oeil de combien le masle excelle par dessus la femelle.⁴

These 'representations et images', as d'Arrerac calls them, are in fact a thorough synopsis of the most typical charges levelled against women; many had been common currency since the early Christian period, and are presented here in the popular form of a system of opposites familiar to Renaissance writers from the works of Aristotle and Hippocrates.⁵ Their origins are both theological and philosophical, echoing the sentiments of the Aristotelian corpus, as it related to women, and biblical scholarship relating to key proof texts such as the Genesis creation stories and the subsequent analysis of these in certain of the epistles of Saint Paul.

Modern theological scholarship, in an attempt to account for Eve's culpability in the Genesis narrative, connects the myth to deep-rooted, primeval anxieties surrounding the processes of procreation and childbirth in primitive cultures:

Puzzled by the power of sexual drive and the mysteries of generation and birth, authors in a patriarchal society killed two birds with one stone. They explained the *de facto* existence of evil by indicting woman as its source, and thereby also had both a theological explanation and the justification for maintaining the cultural facts of male dominance and female subservience. [...] This was accomplished by connecting sexual drive and generation with evil. [...] Paradoxically, Eve's primeval duping of Adam guaranteed male hegemony, because Eve's supposed role in causing Adam's downfall was really a tool for intimidation. Every woman became an Eve, indicted as the cause of evil and the corrupter of men and angels.⁶

According to John Phillips, in *Eve: The History of an Idea*, contemporaneous cultures existing alongside the Jewish community saw the same assertion of patriarchal supremacy and consequent subjection of women, while the ancient pagan legend of Pandora familiar to Early Church thinkers reaffirmed the image of woman as the bringer of Evil and source of the loss of human dignity.⁷

The relation of 'every woman' to Eve was reinforced in key New Testament material, notably certain excerpts of the Pauline Epistles (particularly I Corinthians 11. 4-16, I Corinthians 14. 33-35, Ephesians 5. 22-24, and I Timothy 2. 9-15). These writings, together with the Pandora myth and other versions of the Genesis story found in non-scriptural Jewish texts were the sources used by the Church Fathers to clarify the meaning of Genesis 3.⁸ These tended to accentuate the negative impact of the original Eve by comparison; many aspects of the Pandora legend, for example, were redolent of the Eve myth: Eve sins by giving way weakly to the serpent and eating the fruit, Pandora by

becoming curious and opening the jar. Both these actions are sexual metaphors which culminate in the introduction of birth and death into the created order.⁹ Henceforth, the story of Eve's birth from Adam's rib, rather than the former, more sexually-egalitarian creation story (Genesis 1.27), assumes prime importance, and Eve is considered to be duped by the serpent because of weaknesses inherent in her female nature.¹⁰ 'Here we should simply note', explains John Phillips, 'that just as with the story of Pandora, Eve's created assets are considered to be her liabilities.'¹¹

Eve's payment for her sin, outlined in Genesis 3 and rationalized by Paul in the New Testament, denotes its essential sexual nature: she is obliged to perpetuate humankind in a fallen world estranged from the reasoned will of the Creator.¹² Following Paul's example, the Church Fathers focus solely upon Eve's actions and punishment in their attempts to comprehend the nature of human frailty; this focus leads Augustine to conclude that original sin must be transmitted from generation to generation by means of the sexual act, as a result of the lust which Eve introduced into human sexual relations: 'Eve, cursed to bear children rather than blessed with motherhood, was identified with nature, a form of low matter that drags man's soul down the spiritual ladder.'¹³ Woman, then, as the inheritor of Eve's sin, was responsible for the concupiscence which had entered the created order at this point, and as thinkers in the first and second centuries

became certain of Eve's guilt, so the obligation for her to restore some kind of chaste order arose.

Marriage, Augustine contended, was a legitimate means of containing the effects of original sin which had a chaste precedent in the prelapsarian union of Adam and Eve, who were married and capable of producing children by means of copulation which was miraculously free from lust: 'Sex differences were exactly as we know them now. Passions existed but were never aroused contrary to reason, the sex organs moving at the command of the intelligent will, as we today move our hands.'¹⁴ Marriage on earth, an inferior model of this Utopian state, was ordained principally for the purpose of conceiving children (through which Eve/woman could play out the punishment of painful childbirth) and secondly 'to keep humanity from lust [...]; to tame the libido and keep the couple unspotted from the world.'¹⁵

Eve's additional penalty, that of perpetual servitude towards her husband, is also modelled upon her prelapsarian status; commentators generally believed her to be subordinate to Adam in Eden, but willingly and instinctively so, since she was born second and was therefore naturally weaker and less perfect. After the Fall, however, this subjection becomes corrective, a means by which Eve might expiate herself from her heinous crime, as Augustine explains in a commentary on Genesis:

Even before her sin, woman had been made to be ruled by her husband and to be submissive and

subject to him. But [...] the servitude meant in these words [Gen 3:16] denotes a condition similar to that of slavery rather than a bond of love.¹⁶

Furthermore, if a woman does not willingly take on this inferior position of service which is peculiarly feminine, she causes the reign of lust to be perpetuated, since she rejects the divine grace which mitigates her original sin:

God's sentence [in Gen 3:16] gave this [rule] rather to man; and it is not by her nature but rather by her sin (*culpa*) that woman has deserved to have her husband for a master. But except this [sentence] be observed, nature will be further depraved and sin (*culpa*) will be increased.¹⁷

The only alternative to this forced state of subjugation, the Church Fathers held, was the very denial of sexuality itself through absolute virginity, by means of which women might ascetically transcend the corporeal punishments of Eve. Their precedent in this case was Mary, who by the fourth century AD was commonly held to be the redeemer of Eve's primal sin. Mary, the vessel from whom the sinless Christ was born, must herself have been free from the lust which corrupted the created order, the Fathers contended, and, moreover, her purity correlated with popular pagan rites of virginity. Exegetes also compared the Genesis narrative with the birth stories present in Luke's gospel, and found Mary to be obedient where Eve had disobeyed, and to bear her child joyfully (a reference to the Magnificat) while Eve was destined to suffer:

In the first place, the sexual interpretation of the Fall became validated by the doctrine of the virginity of Mary. Paradise is

virginity; the loss of virginity is the fall from grace. Mary's celibacy is her victory; Eve's disobedience is therefore her sexual defeat.¹⁸

Thus the Church Fathers spoke of women being freed from the curse of Eve through Mary, and used Mary as a paradigm for women's behaviour more than they used the didactic, christocentric writings of the Gospels. Mary, through her virginity, obviated the stain of physical procreation and was said to suffer no pain or discomfort during childbirth. She became a symbol of purity which women were encouraged to emulate, and rapidly attained a divine status more complex than that of other virginal goddesses of the pre-christian world. As Marina Warner notes:

The Christian religion broadened the concept of virginity to embrace a fully developed ascetic philosophy. The interpretation of the virgin birth as the moral sanction of the goodness of sexual chastity was the overwhelming and distinctive contribution of the Christian religion to the ancient mythological formula.¹⁹

In fact, then, marriage during the early Christian period was deemed to be infinitely inferior to the states of virginity and chaste widowhood.²⁰ Jerome, in certain of his many letters written to women, explains that widowhood is 'the second degree of chastity', and that 'married women' should 'take their pride in coming next after Virgins.'²¹ He goes on to point out that since Mary's intervention in the created order, the virtue of virginity has been bestowed upon women in greater abundance, that they may counter the consequences of Eve's sin:

Eve continually bore children in travail. But now that a virgin has conceived in the womb a child [...] the fetters of the old curse are broken. Death came through Eve: life has come through Mary. For this reason the gift of virginity has been poured most abundantly upon women, seeing that it was from a woman it began.²²

The message to women of the early Christian period is clear, therefore: though according to the majority of exegetes they are spiritually justified through Christ by the resurrection, they can only experience the effects of grace in a limited capacity in the earthly sphere because of their physicality, through chaste marriage or more fully by means of virginal abstinence. Mary's ability to free woman from the punitive aspects of Eve's sin was a concept ratified by the Church in AD 649, paving the way for ever more elaborate interpretations of the power of virginal chastity in the Middle Ages.²³

The myth of the Virgin Mary became increasingly complex during the medieval period - by the twelfth century the doctrine of the Assumption was widely accepted, and Mary was accorded her place alongside Christ in Heaven, unsullied by death as she was unsullied by conception and childbirth. Instated there, she was said to reign as Queen of Heaven, physically pure and therefore sublimely beautiful. Mother of Christ and of all the living she may have been, but paradoxically she is now also joined to Christ in matrimony in an image which echoes the awaited union of the Saviour with his church prefigured in the Song of Songs.²⁴ Mary is henceforward the Shulamite woman, and

her radiant, sexually-alluring beauty is not disputed. At this time, Bernard of Clairvaux encouraged the use of such overtly sexual vocabulary in a series of mystical sermons which meditate on the possibility of the soul's union with Mary in highly erotic terms: he speaks of the Queen of Heaven as his heavenly lover, whom he desires to kiss, and with whom he can mystically experience physical warmth and security:

This intensely personal love of the Virgin that welled in St. Bernard's heart infused her cult after him with the same highly wrought and intimate sweetness. His eloquence on the Canticle, the Annunciation, and the Assumption mark the fulcrum of devotion to the Virgin in the west.²⁵

This blatant celebration of sexuality, albeit sexuality removed from its usual, lustful environment, both influenced and was influenced by the secular world, where the 'courtly love' lyric also idealized woman and sexual relations. As Marina Warner notes, the joys of sensual pleasure portrayed in many twelfth-century secular texts were not tempered by guilt: adulterous relationships between well-suited lovers were a source of delight, and the female beloved was idolized in this context. By association with this beloved, Mariology made use of a similarly sensual vocabulary in order to express a relationship which was, in fact, fundamentally different from the 'courtly love' ideal because it sought to express imagined union and to force a division between physical and spiritual love (a concept alien to the 'courtly love' tradition).²⁶ Consequentially, 'courtly love' was eventually transformed into the likeness of Mary worship;

by the thirteenth century, the female beloved had become consummately pure, and therefore inaccessible, and poets made their own secular ascetic pilgrimages of the soul in order to venerate her perfect beauty.²⁷ Dante's *Divine Comedy*, written at the end of the thirteenth-century, mirrors this preoccupation with the physical perfection and chastity of a female beloved characteristic of later 'courtly love' poetry; Beatrice is to him a heavenly creature, whose beauty is indicative of her divinity and whose love his means of grace. Their union is a union of souls and of minds, and both remain bodily chaste, for Beatrice is as transcendent as Mary and will eventually come to sit alongside her in heaven.²⁸ At this time, then, the theme of love resounds with the weighty influence of the Marian cult, and the Queen of Heaven is never again so tangibly present in Western European literature.

By contrast, in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, as a result of the Franciscan emphasis upon the virtue of humility, the Virgin began to be linked directly with subservient womanhood for the first time. The obedience of Mary to the ordinance of God as it is recorded in Luke 1.38, was understood to show her passive nature: 'Then Mary said, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."'. The Franciscans saw the virtue of humility primarily in relation to monastic life, but because of its correlation with the subjection in which the female sex was held as the daughter of Eve, it was readily subsumed into the so-called

feminine values of the outside world.²⁹ Humility, like chastity, ceased to be seen as a purely Christian virtue because of its links with the Virgin, who was the perfection of woman as Christ was the perfection of man; instead, it became accepted as a predominantly female quality.

Medieval scholastic theology, quite apart from its preoccupation with the Virgin myth, continued to preach female subservience through the figure of Eve. Theological tracts debated the nature of Eve's sinfulness and the question of whether she or Adam might be more to blame for the Fall. Their conclusions were influenced by an increased knowledge and understanding of pagan texts on physiology and the nature of female sexual difference. Aquinas's formation of a theology of the sexes was informed not only by his Augustinian heritage but also by Aristotelian naturalism. His conviction, echoing that of many Patristic thinkers, that woman only mirrored God 'in a secondary sense' during her earthly existence, was supported by the Aristotelian notion that all women were 'naturally subject', since the birth of females was a defective action of nature:

For the active power in the seed of the male tends to produce something like itself, perfect in masculinity; but the procreation of a female is the result either of the debility of the active power, of some unsuitability of the material, or of some change effected by external circumstances, like the south wind, for example, which is damp.³⁰

In addition, medieval exegetes learned, Aristotle believed the female sex to be an incomplete form of the male, characterized by cold, wet humours while the more noble dry, warm humours naturally inhabited the male form. For the reason that she was seen only as a botched male, woman existed in a state of perpetual longing for completion, an act which was arrived at through sexual union. As a corollary of this, Aristotle saw the female as a creature avid for coitus, insatiably desirous of sexual activity, a wholly negative view exacerbated by his assertion that the female played no active part in reproduction: her body merely acted as a vessel for the generative male semen, so that her energetic sexual appetite could be said to have no beneficial or positive function of itself.³¹ Medieval thinkers also documented a widespread feeling of revulsion toward menstruation, which they found supported in ancient texts: 'The malignity of menses is chronicled [...] in Aristotle, Columella, Pliny and Plutarch'.³²

These medical 'facts' played a significant part in discussions concerned with the place of sex within marriage, which, despite an on-going preference for virginity, continued to be scrutinized during the medieval period. The female propensity for lust suggested both by the Eve myth and by ancient physiological findings generated mistrust of women's fundamental moral character; a wife avid for coitus might never find satisfaction through the marital union, and thus be driven to seek pleasure away from her husband, sinking herself further

into moral depravity as she did so. What then, thinkers and moralists asked, were good grounds for the pursuit of coitus within marriage? Was copulation only permissible if a partner wanted children, or should it also be allowed if a partner burned, in order to prevent the sin of lust?³³ There was certainly some belief in the union's potential to instil chastity by fulfilling legitimately the sexual needs of both partners. This, however, can be linked to a biblical precedent in the Pauline analysis of marital sex in 1 Corinthians 7. 3-4, where Paul stresses the obligation of each marriage partner to satisfy the other's desire, in order to stem the temptations of lust. The notion of mutual consent cannot therefore be seen as an innovative, nor ameliorative attitude to the problem of female physicality. As far as the social and political aspects of marriage were concerned, moreover, women of the medieval period continued to be castigated as inferior and subjugated, while the Marian cult paraded confusing and, often, conflicting paradigms of virginity, sexuality, beauty and motherhood before them in ever more perplexing formulae.

THE NATURE OF FEMININITY IN RENAISSANCE THEOLOGY

Though the idealization of virginity continued into the Renaissance period, the virtue's peculiar redemptive features were also significantly challenged at this time by evangelical and reformist exegetes who found little evidence to support the cult of celibacy in Scripture. The most radical of these theologians dismissed the Mary-based

doctrines of chastity which had developed from tradition rather than biblical fact, and reinstated Eve, redeemed by obedient marriage, as the role model for women and for society.³⁴ Thus the sixteenth century witnessed an oscillation between traditional Catholic doctrine, which persisted in endorsing virginity, evangelical theology, heavily influenced by Italian humanism, which sought to clarify the value of marriage according to biblical precepts, and Protestant theology, according to which marriage was the divinely instated pattern for social order.

Jean Bouchet was a popular and successful moralist whose works continued to be published in the recent decades after 1540.³⁵ He was without doubt a Catholic traditionalist, whose writing echoed the influence of earlier scholastic approaches rather than the humanist tendencies of a contemporary such as Erasmus. *Les triumphes de la noble et amoureuse dame*, written in 1530 and republished up to 1563, praises virginity as the state most abundantly rewarded by God, who rejoices in the physical purity of his brides on earth, and prefers these souls to those who have been blemished by the marriage union:

Il y a double virginité, dist
 Temperance, l'une est gardée à Dieu seulement et
 ceste est la plus belle et agreable à Dieu.
 L'autre est la virginité qu'on garde à son espoux
 temporel pour l'amour de Dieu à ce que l'homme la
 treuve entiere en l'entrée du mariage ordonné pour
 le service de Dieu, et que elle ne soit maculée
 d'aucune impudicité. Le seconde [sic] virginité
 n'est si plaisante à Dieu que la premiere, et ne
 meritent l'aureolle que ont les vierges en

paradis, les jeunes filz ou filles non corrompuz qui ont vouloir d'entrer en mariage, mais ceulx et celles qui gardent leur perpétuelle virginité à Dieu.³⁶

Marriage for Bouchet is clearly a laudable estate, and he castigates 'd'aulcuns aucteurs la follie et desordre | Lesquelz n'ont craint mal dire et detracter | De mariage', which is a 'sainct et sacré' ordonnance.³⁷ However, he remains convinced of the additional benefits of consummate physical purity for the reason that the lustful tendencies of original sin simply relieved by marriage are eradicated altogether by the virgin.

Juan Luis Vivès' *De institutio foeminae christianaе*, translated into French as the *Institution de la femme chrestienne* in 1542, shows similar tendencies.³⁸ Though Vivès was a humanist who corresponded with More, Erasmus and Budé, and was himself a married man, this work also ranks marriage second to virginity because of its links with concupiscence and, indeed, with childbirth. Vivès believes the latter to be a painful ill rather than an improving and desirable condition: one which ties woman to the physical world more than is ideally good for her:

Ne soys curieuse de remplir la maison de Dieu: il y mettra bien ordre sans toy, deust il exciter enfans de pierres. Saches que la malediction ancienne de la sterillité est passée. Maintenant tu as autre loy, en laquelle virginité est preferée à mariage. Pour ce l'Evangile beatifie la sterilité et les mammelles qui n'ont alaicté.³⁹

Such ideas continued to be articulated firmly in much later texts, in spite of the social and spiritual

ramifications of the evangelical and reform movements. The canons of the Council of Trent, which sought to clarify the Catholic Church's doctrinal position with respect to marriage, state clearly that despite the sacramental nature of the union, 'si quelqu'un dit que l'estat matrimonial doit estre preposé à l'estat de virginité ou de continence, et qu'il n'est meilleur ne plus salutaire de demeurer en virginité ou continence et celibat, que de se marier: qu'il soit retranché.'⁴⁰ René Benoist, in the first of three *Petis traictez* on the subject of chastity, reaffirms 'paillardise' as the symptom of original sin which Christ came to eradicate; he places emphasis upon Christ's redemption of humankind's spiritual nature, and shies away from accepting a corresponding redemption of the body and of sexual desire in this life:

Il est bien à noter et pour tousjours retenir [...] que Jesus Christ n'est pas mort pour nous acquerir une liberté charnelle et puissance de vivre sans reprehension et punition en la poursuite de noz concupiscences charnelles et affections desordonnees: ains pour nous mettre en liberté spirituelle.⁴¹

Any sexual activity is flawed, therefore, because the flesh itself can never be wholly sanctified. This is not to say that those who are married cannot be redeemed, Benoist explains, but simply that their redemption is less straightforward and less perfect than that of the virgin:

L'homme donc qui suit seulement la promesse par luy faite au Baptesme peut estre sauvé, mais non point tant facilement, ny aussi tant parfaitement ordinairement, comme ceux qui suyvens le conseil de Jesus Christ se separent et privent volontairement et entierement des choses

lesquelles retirent du plus pur et entier service de Dieu, qui sont les honneurs et grandeurs du monde, [...] et les voluptez et plaisirs de la chair, tant honnestement soyent-ils poursuyvis au salutaire et honneste estat de mariage.⁴²

A treatise by Luis of Grenada, translated into French as *La Grande guide des pescheurs* and published in 1609, declares that the daily battle against sin is in fact a battle of 'chasteté', and that those who succeed in transcending the physical glimpse paradise even during their earthly existence: 'car les vierges en ceste vie commencent à vivre une vie angelique [...]. Car vivre en la chair, sans oeuvre de la chair, c'est une vertu plus angelique qu'humaine.'⁴³

For evangelical and reformist exegetes, an understanding of the self's justification through faith in the resurrection of Christ could alone endow it with the capacity to live a life fixed on heaven whilst on earth. The tradition of the priesthood of all believers established by these theologians rendered the intervention of the saints or Mary on humankind's behalf unnecessary, and abolished the need for a virginal elite restored to perfection merely by means of sexual abstinence. Jean Calvin berates the Catholic Church's efforts to enforce 'virginité perpetuelle' within orders as unacceptable because it is open to abuse (it was common knowledge, and a frequent source of scorn during the first half of the sixteenth century that large numbers of monks failed to keep their vows of chastity), and because it separated men

and women unnaturally from the world in which they could have social and political effect as God's chosen people.⁴⁴

The elect, indeed, were encouraged to pursue their individual paths to righteousness according to their earthly station, released from the deadly effects of sin through the new Adam. In many ways, the sense of freedom generated by this new-found and more personal relationship with God was akin to that experienced by the Early Church recorded in Paul's epistles. Calvin stresses in his *Institution de la Religion Chrestienne* that faith in Christ removes the need for the believer to be made accountable to other people in matters unrelated to faith:

Or puisqu'il est ainsi que les consciences des fidèles, par le privilège de leur liberté qu'elles ont de Jesus Christ, sont délivrées des liens et nécessaires observations des choses lesquelles le Seigneur leur a voulu estre indifférentes, nous concluons qu'elles sont franches et exemptées de la puissance de tous hommes.⁴⁵

The exuberance experienced by the Early Church at being freed from the weight of the Law is relived in the minds of Calvin and other reformers who rejoice in their emancipation from extraneous religious practices and who pledge themselves instead to the law of Christ:

L'autre partie de la liberté Chrestienne, [...], est telle: c'est qu'elle fait que les consciences ne servent point à la Loy comme contraintes par la nécessité de la Loy, mais qu'estans délivrées de la Loy, elles obéissent libéralement à la volonté de Dieu.⁴⁶

Calvin is inspired in his contemplation of Christian liberty by Paul's letter to the Galatians, in which Paul considers the relationship of faith in Christ to the Law, and concludes:

The law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.⁴⁷

The Galatians text is both daring and revolutionary in its total disregard for the Jewish law, and in its picture of a society founded upon equality. Women in such a Utopia can co-exist alongside men through the process of justification, and the stains of Eve's sin appear to be wholly removed. In a sermon on I Cor 11. 4-10 Calvin asserts in similarly ebullient terms the spiritual and social potential of those justified in Christ to reflect the image of God:

Dieu nous a envoyé Jésus-Christ, lequel nous a tellement recueillis sous lui que l'image de Dieu qui avait été effacée par le péché d'Adam est réparée. De cette image il est certain qu'elle compte à toutes femelles aussi bien qu'aux mâles. [...] Bref, nous ne pouvons pas être ni membres de Jésus-Christ, ni enfants de Dieu, sinon à telle condition, qu'il n'y ait plus ni mâle ni femelle, qu'il n'y ait plus un degré de l'un par-dessus l'autre.⁴⁸

However, he makes clear here and elsewhere that this egalitarian harmony is not to become a feature of the social order, but relates uniquely to the spiritual realm

which all may experience inwardly. In imposing this caveat, Calvin is simply rationalizing the tenor of the epistle, which suggests that Adam alone was created in God's image:

Nous voyons que Christ est l'image tresparfaite de Dieu, à laquelle estans faits conformes, nous sommes tellement restaurez, que nous ressemblons à Dieu en vray piété, justice, pureté et intelligence.[...]. Quant à ce que le masle seul est nommé par saint Paul l'image de Dieu, et que la femme est exclue d'un tel honneur (I Cor 11.7) il appert par le fil du texte que cela se restraint à la police terrienne. Or quant à ce que nous traitons maintenant de l'image de Dieu, je pense désja avoir assez prouvé qu'il a son regard à la vie spirituelle et céleste.⁴⁹

In their vision of an egalitarian heaven, and in their departure from the Catholic tendency to view Eve as naturally defective, Protestant theologians found it possible to picture renewed benefits for humankind in the paradigm of the marriage in Eden. Calvin, for example, placed unusual emphasis upon the mutual companionship of Adam and Eve, going as far as to proclaim that the true end of creation, man, was only formed once Eve had been made and that the couple could unite in an androgynous bond. This conclusion, reached through his conflation of the two Genesis creation narratives, and hinging strongly upon the first of these (which traditional Catholic exegesis had largely ignored), is explicated in an analysis of Malachi 2.15:

L'homme ensemble avec la femme sont nommés un selon que Moïse parle: Dieu créa l'homme, il les créa mâle et femelle. Après, qu'il a dit que Dieu créa l'homme, il ajoute pour exposition de dire qu'ils furent créés mâle et femelle: c'est pourquoi en parlant de l'homme, le mâle est comme une moitié, et la femme fait l'autre portion [...]. Quand il est fait mention d'un chacun d'eux

en particulier, l'homme n'est que demi-homme, et la femme semblablement comme la moitié de l'homme [...] parce que les hommes ont été créés afin qu'un chacun eût sa femme, selon cette raison je dis que l'homme et la femme font l'homme tout entier.⁵⁰

As far as Calvin is concerned, then, the union of the marital pair in Eden gives credence to the notion that marriage is God's chosen means of enforcing and perpetuating the social order. In the *Institution* he is adamant that the gift of continence is given to few (and far fewer than the Catholic Church would presume), and that the majority should bow to 'la nécessité de se marier'.⁵¹ He strongly refutes the papist suggestion that marriage is 'une chose profane et pollue',⁵² whilst continuing to link sexual sin with original sin outside of the chaste marriage union. Adultery is condemned as 'maudite devant luy [le Seigneur]', particularly as 'la compagnie de mariage nous est donnée pour remède de nostre nécessité, afin que nous ne laschions la bride à nostre concupiscence.'⁵³

Following Paul's lead, however, Calvin stresses that the mutual volition to satisfy desire must be a condition of the union (I Cor. 7. 3-4); in this instance a husband cannot have dominion over his wife, since 'il n'est pas maître de son corps.'⁵⁴ Thus 'le mari [...] et la femme sont obligés à mutuelle bénévolence [...]. En cet endroit la condition de tous deux est égale, à savoir que tous deux doivent garder foi et loyauté de mariage l'un à l'autre.'⁵⁵ Such an attitude seems to denote a certain reluctance to admit desire into the framework of sanctified human

relations: bodily cravings are not subject to the reason or will, Calvin suggests, and therefore must be satiated, but with as much self-control as possible.⁵⁶

The fact that Calvin sees marriage as a necessary union of two incomplete halves ('que s'ils sont séparés, ils seront comme membres imparfaits d'un corps déchiré'), divinely ordained for the purpose of 'aide et amitié mutuelle', and in order to avoid concupiscence, suggests that he has at the very least recognized a fundamental need for sexual fulfilment for the majority.⁵⁷ There is no tangible link made between 'eros and esteem', and certainly such references to sexual equality as exist are tempered by repeated assertions of woman's subjection in all other areas, but Calvin and other Reformers must certainly be credited with nurturing the value of social and sexual coupledness.⁵⁸ However, Calvin's repeated insistence, again typical of the majority of reformist thinkers, that salvation in the image of God was a spiritual state which did not reflect or alter the social structures advocated for women by the Genesis myth and by St. Paul considerably lessened the impact of the marital paradigm of Eden. He endorses Augustine's and Aquinas' belief in the prelapsarian subordination of Eve, despite his rejection of the notion that she was naturally and physiologically weaker than Adam:

Si l'homme et la femme fussent demeurez en leur intégrité première,[...] l'homme eust eu ceste preeminence jusques en la fin, asçavoir que les femmes eussent esté sujettes aux hommes: non

point d'une servitude contrainte ni forcee, mais elles eussent esté establies en sorte que leur estat eust esté un plein contentement et repos. Mais maintenant il faut qu'elles soyent comme en servitude.⁵⁹

Moreover, though Calvin is at least willing to accept Adam's culpability in the Fall, he repeatedly names Eve as the more guilty party, and women as the inheritors of her greater sin:

Elles sont cause en la personne d'Eve, de la ruine que nous voyons si miserable sur tout le genre humain [...]. Nous sommes maudits de Dieu, nous sommes enfants d'ire, le diable domine sur nous, nous sommes en servitude de mort eternelle, il n'y a que corruption en nostre nature [...]. Et qui est en cause? Les femmes.⁶⁰

Women who marry and have children reduce this burden by adhering to the conditions imposed upon Eve in Genesis: painful childbirth and permanent earthly subjection. In expressing these precepts as a divine requirement for almost all women (aside from the very few called to be celibate), Calvin is again typical of Protestant exegetes in pronouncing that women cannot be fully atoned, save that they accept them obediently:

Si les femmes se soumettent de leur bon gré et en toute patience à ce que Dieu leur commande, et que porte leur estat, c'est un sacrifice qui est agreable à Dieu, et que la malediction qui avoit esté mise sur toutes femmes en la personne d'Eve, est comme aneantie, car Dieu les reçoit en sa grace et en son amour.⁶¹

As a corollary of this, Calvin supports all of the subservient roles for women outlined in the Pauline Epistles, such as her inferiority in the marriage partnership (I Corinthians 11.3 and Ephesians 5.22) and the

necessity of covering her head in church (I Corinthians 11.5-16) and of keeping silent in church (I Corinthians 14.34). Though Calvin interprets Paul's directives as 'indifferent', or theoretically unnecessary for salvation, he refuses any radical move away from them on the grounds of polity, by which he insists that it is in the Church's interest to maintain these customs for the sake of decorum.⁶²

While Calvin's social structures allowed women the possibility of sexual satisfaction and companionship, they also mitigated against individual freedom and responsibility by obliging the majority to take up obediently the yoke of servitude in marriage. To this extent, Calvinist marriage compares unfavourably with Catholic celibacy, where women might at least transcend the earthly burdens of their sex, a prospect which Calvin strongly rebukes as ungodly:

Toute la chasteté que elles [les Nonnains] pretendent, n'est rien envers Dieu, au prix de ce qu'il a ordonné, c'est asçavoir que combien que ce soient choses contemptibles, et qui semblent estre de nulle valeur, qu'une femme ait peine d'adresser son mesnage, de nettoyer les ordures de ses enfans.⁶³

Broadly speaking, then, the solutions to the problems of Eve's sin as Renaissance theology saw them were either chaste transcendence, which many Catholics continued to endorse as the most fulfilling state, or chaste marriage, which brought with it the necessity of male headship, but at least allowed desire to be satiated. Neither view

allowed for the possibility of affirming woman the equal of man in social terms and thus, despite reiterating the spiritual parity of the sexes, the Church's valorization of women in the public domain remained ambivalent. Generally speaking, it was not theology which questioned the social effects of woman's secondary status, but secular literature and, by the sixteenth century, humanist debate and the political credence given to certain female royal figures.

THE NOBLEWOMAN AS PARADIGM? WOMAN IN THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CLIMATE OF THE FRENCH RENAISSANCE

The above theological understandings of femaleness clarified by Renaissance exegetes have their influence upon, and are challenged by an emerging consciousness of national identity and secular political status on the part of the Catholic French court, which had begun to assert a measure of independence from Rome and to parade the significance of its own noble lineage under the jurisdiction of the Very Christian King. This court, shaped by the eclectic humanist and artistic tastes of François I, was to establish its own philosophical credo informed by the emerging Neoplatonic doctrines of the Italian academies, which optimistically affirmed the status and potential of the individual governed by reason. Moulded into a social form, these philosophies offered a new role and significance to high-ranking women who, by virtue of blood and status, were enabled to articulate an independent

voice within this court. Their unique position was, as chapter three will clarify, exploited and defined by a move to give the popular Neoplatonic ethos of the time a social context, an aim achieved by associating its social practice with the game of love.⁶⁴ In turn, the worth of the female sex as a social being was the cause of much hypothetical speculation, both within the court and amongst the literate bourgeoisie who observed its movements, speculation provoked, amongst other things, by the political power wielded by certain noblewomen and by the special function accorded to them by the new love discourse.⁶⁵

Numerous authors exploited the present popularity of this debate, called the *Querelle des Femmes*, which had commenced in the later medieval period and which spanned the Renaissance. In the sixteenth century, the debate expanded to dispute the contribution of women to society in the wake of the new theological interpretations and the aforementioned literary/philosophical developments which queried accepted medieval presumptions and practices towards them, though it did not dispense with traditional pro- and anti-female rhetoric in the process.⁶⁶ Earlier texts, notably the *Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung, had presented pictures of women in characteristic terms of unattainable perfection or base sensuality. The argument for a proper valorization of the female sex which surfaced in sixteenth-century France can also be traced back to Christine de Pisan's lucid defence of women, the *Cité des Dames*, written in the early

fifteenth century, in which the author retaliates strongly against the suggestion that the female sex is by nature inferior, and declares that any lack in the moral or intellectual capacities of women is due to a disadvantage of education alone. Christine sought to undermine the patriarchal discourse which posited women as weak and evil, but could not perceive a means of freeing women from the social implications of male political domination. She concludes that women must find strength in their suffering and be always virtuous, accepting a subservient position in the marriage contract and ensuring that their chastity is preserved outside of marriage in order not to provide the male sex with food for slander. Her *cité* may be a 'psychological defense' against the injustices meted out to her sex, but it cannot be an earthly Utopia.⁶⁷

Few of the texts which contributed to the *Querelle* in the Renaissance emanated from the inner sanctum of the court, although many derived their content from the succinct presentation of the theme in Castiglione's *Courtier*. Here general observations pertaining to the status and worth of women are interspersed with particular references to the role of the *noblewoman*, and the work is often more specific to the rank of nobility than French *Querelle* writers sought to be. The tenor of many of the generic remarks about women to be found in this text, both positive and negative, is echoed by the *Querelle* writers, however, and the thematic strands aired in Castiglione's

work become very familiar. Its treatment of the theme takes place in the context of a debate in which various interlocutors attempt to define the qualities of the ideal court lady. This in turn is to be seen in the context of the wider purpose of the work: the definition of the ideal courtier. The woman described, therefore, is largely seen in relation to the courtier, and generic pictures of the female sex associated with her cannot be divorced from codes of conduct associated uniquely with her noble rank. For this reason, the impact of *The Courtier* will be more fully discussed in chapters three, four, five and six, which deal specifically with the social mores of the court.

The *Querelle* was as much an exercise in rhetoric as a serious attempt to redefine the roles of women in sixteenth-century France; where Castiglione's work had argued from direct experience of a dynamic female force whose very presence raised questions about the traditional categorization of women as secondary creatures, texts read by courtiers but written outside of the court environment were more likely to argue from the point of view of hypothesis rather than encounter. This is not to say that their contribution to the debate was any less relevant to a courtly readership, for, as we shall see in later chapters, public opinion regarding the status of women at court was polarized between an indulgence and celebration of the presence of the female sex and a discontent with their progress and influence.

The subject matter of the *Querelle* was ripe with opportunity for displaying rhetorical prowess: the overriding majority of writers who contributed to the discussion were men, many of whom flaunted their skills of eloquent persuasion by arguing variously from anti-women and pro-women standpoints within the same work. Nicolas Choliere's *La Furieuse et Effroyable Guerre des masles contre les femelles*,⁶⁸ and Jean de Marconville's *De la bonté et mauvaiseté des femmes*,⁶⁹ are two examples of this trend, both polarizing the traditional myths of women as deceptive seducers (inherited from Eve), or paradigms of piety and wisdom (inherited from Mary). Cornelius Agrippa's *De Nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus* is a humanist treatment of the genre, published in 1529, but written and probably translated into French some twenty years earlier, perhaps by the author himself. Agrippa was no stranger to early French Neoplatonism; he engaged in written dialogue with Symphorien Champier, and his eclectic treatise shows the influence of French debaters on the subject of women, including Christine de Pisan, as well as Spanish and Italian sources.⁷⁰

Few of the works I shall go on to mention are written from within the court, but certain of them, such as Agrippa's text, are dedicated to high-ranking court women,⁷¹ and others show the influence of the social machinations of the courtly environment. All are indicative of a wide range of opinions regarding the female sex which

remain a counterpoint to the complex social philosophy which the court undertakes to pursue.

Those who adopted a pro-women stance did not seek to abolish what they saw to be incontrovertible truths about women. That all women were daughters of Eve and sisters of Mary, possessed of cold, wet humours was a fact very largely uncontested by writers and thinkers. Instead, they demonstrated their capacity for rhetoric by re-evaluating these classifications according to the basic theory that these weaknesses in women were in fact strengths, and, moreover, strengths which the male did not possess. Agrippa manipulates the Genesis myth, to argue that if Eve was created after Adam, she must needs be the apotheosis of divine creation, more perfect than Adam because she was created not of the earth like him, but of more supernatural matter: 'C'est pourquoi l'homme est l'oeuvre de la nature, la femme la création de Dieu.'⁷² Women, like Eve, were therefore able to reflect divine beauty in a way that men were not, as the Virgin clearly proved, in whom beauty, purity and chastity were held in delicate balance:

L'Eglise catholique [...] loue la Vierge Marie, mère de Dieu, vierge immaculée, dont le soleil et la lune admirent la beauté et dont le visage remarquable brillait d'une beauté si chaste et si sainte à la fois que, bien qu'elle éblouît tous les yeux et tous les coeurs, jamais un seul homme n'usa à son égard de moyens de séduction ou ne l'offensa du désir même le plus fugitif.⁷³

Agrippa sought not to destroy the Eve myth, by which women were designated the second sex, but to adapt it to

the facts of the Virgin myth, in which he saw the superior qualities of the female sex confirmed. Indeed, he goes as far as to suggest that Mary's perfection is greater even than that of Christ, who took on the form of fallen humanity when he came to earth, while his mother remained enveloped in heavenly purity: 'je veux parler de la bienheureuse Vierge Marie elle-même, qui, s'il est vrai qu'elle fut conçue hors du péché originel, se trouve plus grande que le Christ qui participe, lui, à la nature humaine.'⁷⁴ In the belief that chaste virtue is the superior hallmark of womanhood, he contests misogynist myths of physiology: menstruation, far from being a mark of uncleanness, is a sign of female purity, because in purging themselves of bodily impurities, women become cleaner than men, whose facial hair marks the continual presence of unclean substances in the body. Furthermore, women's virtue is evident in their chaste faithfulness to one husband, and Agrippa cites examples from the Old Testament of Sarah, Rachel and Leah, who accept patiently the ordeal of their husbands taking servant girls as partners in order to preserve the family line. Such patience and passivity is peculiarly feminine, Agrippa suggests, and would not be exhibited by the male sex in similar circumstances. This so-called feminine softness is also responsible for the virtues of liberality and peacefulness, in stark contrast to the war-mongering tendencies of men.

Agrippa adapts the well-known interpretation of Pauline folly to be found in Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, and applies the notion of weakness as a special form of strength to women.⁷⁵ He declares that although women are generally acknowledged to be feeble vessels, they are able to undermine the strength and wisdom of men as no other force can. The examples he gives of this peculiar feminine power may seem to be compromised by the sexually-subversive actions of the women involved; the same Agrippa who so castigated the members of the male sex who 'ont sans cesse à la bouche la malédiction adressée à Eve',⁷⁶ resorts to a similar classification of his heroines as overtly sexual creatures in order to defend his point of view. As if to contradict the mariological principles of chastity and virtue by which he first exonerated the female sex, Agrippa seems to detach these qualities from that of physical beauty, and in so doing suggests that such beauty is alone enough to overcome male supremacy:

Qui fut plus fort que Samson? Une femme a surpassé sa force. Qui fut plus chaste que Loth? Une femme l'a provoqué à l'inceste. Qui fut plus respectueux de ses devoirs envers Dieu que David? Une femme a troublé sa sainteté. Qui fut plus sage que Salomon? Une femme l'a trompé.⁷⁷

In fact, Agrippa uses an argument to defend women's strength which frequently featured in anti-women polemic in order to prove the opposite case: that in their attachment to things sexual and sensual, women were reliving the curse of Eve and showing themselves to be removed from the virtues of reason and spirituality which characterized the

male sex. The women Agrippa refers to not only flout the laws of chaste purity which their sex was supposed to hold sacrosanct, but in doing so must cease to act as reflectors of the divine beauty described earlier in the work as an amalgam of spiritual and physical perfection. Agrippa's approach is perhaps indicative of the fact that, according to humanist terms of academic debate, an honest pleading of the feminist cause was secondary to the expounding of irrefutable rhetorical logic. By contrast, the author ends the work with an astute criticism of the educational and social restrictions placed upon women, and, like Christine de Pisan before him, cites these restrictions as instrumental in perpetuating women's inferiority. He attacks those who presume to curtail the freedom of women, who are equally justified in the eyes of God and to whom He has apportioned a special role:

Mais l'excessive tyrannie des hommes prévalant sur le droit divin et les lois naturelles, la liberté qui fut accordée aux femmes leur est de nos jours interdite par des lois injustes, supprimée par la coutume et l'usage, réduite à néant par l'éducation.⁷⁸

The frames of reference and arguments put forward in Agrippa's work become ubiquitous in the numerous texts which follow in the *Querelle* debate of the sixteenth century. Like Agrippa, other pro-women writers sought to endorse the spiritual equality of women, a fact affirmed theoretically by biblical exegetes, but denied in practice on the grounds of polity and the maintenance of earthly order, by which the continuing subjugation of women

prescribed in Genesis was deemed necessary. Writers therefore chose to re-interpret the Genesis stories more favourably than previous exegesis had allowed. Claude de Taillemont argues from this standpoint, with a courtly readership firmly in mind. His patron is Jeanne d'Albret, and he is imbued both with the Neoplatonism of the Lyon school and the courtly romance tradition of Bembo's *Asolani* and of *Amadis de Gaule*, as well as being familiar with Castiglione's *Courtier*.⁷⁹ In his *Discours des Champs faëz A l'honneur et exaltation de l'Amour des Dames*, Taillemont stresses that women have the same rights to spiritual justification as men, since they are also made in the image of God, and are endowed with a human soul.⁸⁰ He underlines this fundamental equality by reminding the reader that men and women are physically alike, both embodying the same four elements, and both able to demonstrate the basic human properties of feeling and rationality:

Le corps d'un chacun d'eulx, et l'un comme l'autre, est faict et composé des quatre elemens, c'est à savoir de la terre, de l'eau, de l'air, et du feu. Chacun d'eulx participe de chaleur et humeur; et l'un et l'autre ont essence, vie, sentiment et raison.⁸¹

Having appealed to a common humanity which he believes transcends sexual differences, Taillemont proceeds to affirm that the weakened physical position of the female sex is compensated for by greater moral strength. He does so by way of familiar arguments, that if Eve was created second, to be Adam's helpmeet, still she is nobler than him because she was created from flesh and not matter.

Moreover, Eve is forced to weather the temptations of Satan himself, whilst Adam is fooled by the less imposing persuasions of a fellow human. Taillemont joins with many other pro-women thinkers in declaring that the wetter, colder humours said to inhabit the female form give women greater powers of rationality, sensitivity and virtuousness, whilst the hotter, drier humours of the male sex actually render men less spiritual and more prone to lust:

Mais pour venir à la vertu, il est certain [...] que l'appetit desordonné et insatiable desir, auteurs de tous maux et vices, viennent et sont excitez de chaleur naturelle, laquelle ayant les femmes plus tempérée que les hommes, elles sont aussi plus tempérées et moins vicieuses qu'eux.⁸²

François de Billon's *Fort inexpugnable de l'honneur du sexe feminin*, published in 1555 in Paris, joins the move to dismiss both Aristotelian arguments for female deficiency (the botched male theory) and biblical paradigms militating against equal rights for both sexes.⁸³ Billon combines the two schools of thought by citing the first of the Genesis creation narratives: clearly, here, woman is to be seen as equal in status to man, since both are made in God's image. Her sexuality is not deviant, therefore, but has its right and proper place in the natural order, a fact that seems obvious to Billon, since 'l'Homme sans la Femme, ne seroit et n'est que demy fait, parce qu'il n'est pas possible qu'un Homme (pour parfait qu'il soit) sceust engendrer posterité sans son autre moitié qui est sa Compagne collateralle'.⁸⁴ Moreover, Eve fell because God intended

her to, and brought forth a new order by means of which He was able to prove His victory over Satan through Christ, elevating Mary to a position of sublime purity in which all women now participate: 'il ayt pleü au CREATEUR et Juge souverain des Choses nobles, élever la Femme, et Vierge.'⁸⁵ Even Pauline arguments for male headship are defeated by Billon: the head, he declares, is not the most noble part of the anatomy, but the heart, which houses the noble soul and is thus superior to all other bodily parts: 'Par ainsi, la Teste n'étant pas la principale partie de l'essence humaine [...] les Femmes a cete cause, ne furent onc moins parfaites et nobles, que les Hommes'. Moreover, if the female head is to be subsumed into the male head, as Paul suggests, men must consequently be 'testuz et de mauvaise cervelle', and women, correspondingly, 'bonnes et dociles, comme ayans été contraintes, a faute de teste, de retirer leurs Espritz et voluntéz plus pres du coeur et de l'Ame'!⁸⁶ This in turn leads Billon to celebrate feminine virtues of piety, chastity and humility as more worthy than the aggressive actions of men, and to lampoon those who would contend otherwise.

One of few surviving *Querelle* texts written by women, Jacqueline de Miremont's *Apologie pour les dames*, published in 1602, takes up precisely these forms of argument, which are given added authenticity by dint of the author's femaleness. Jacqueline asserts Eve's superiority of virtue, her perfect 'beauté' which is 'le dernier effect de la dextre Celeste', and her more strenuous testing at the hand

of Satan.⁸⁷ At the same time, however, she strives honestly to deal with taxing problems of biblical exegesis posed by this re-reading: Adam must remain Eve's head, but should therefore concentrate upon his duty towards her, and not gloat about his own 'excellence'.⁸⁸ Marriage, correspondingly, should be motivated by chaste love and not by 'la crainte', and Christ's redemption of the fallen world must instigate the immediate restitution of women in the earthly as well as in the spiritual sphere, whereupon their natural and superior tendencies towards virtue will be recognized and celebrated:

Au contraire il [le tout benin pere] promet une mesme
couronne,
 Un mesme rendez vous, voire l'on voit qu'il donne
 Ce privilege heurus au sexe feminin
 D'estre plus à vertu, et moins au vice enclin,
 Où paroist mieus à clair la sage Temperance
 La sainte charité, l'heureuse patience
 Où luit la Chasteté qu'en ce sexe devot
 Qui les plus saintes moeurs monstre avoir en son
lot?⁸⁹

This text and others of its kind applied the skills of rational debate to the realities of social interaction, as we have seen, and found the long-standing theological distinctions relating to the behaviour and moral capacities of the sexes to be ambivalent. Their authors were undoubtedly aware that to suggest the moral superiority of women over men was to contradict the teachings of the Church, and, by implication, to question the subordinate roles that the Church continued to prescribe for women throughout the sixteenth century. This critical approach to Christian dogma must be symptomatic of a significant

increase in vernacular Bible reading within a lay culture that was not confined to the court, and which clashed with theological opinion regarding the status of women just as certain courtly texts did when they postulated a new hierarchy of the sexes based upon Neoplatonic philosophies.

Combining these anti-ecclesiastical views with a belief in Christian justification demanded the type of revised biblical exegesis that Agrippa instigated, in order that the original burden of Eve's sin might be erased. Pro-women writers made use of advanced exegetical skills to demand a greater autonomy for women, by citing both Old Testament and New Testament examples of powerful women such as Deborah, Judith, Esther, Suzanna, and the two Marys, in whom great virtue and remarkable presence of mind were combined. Joachim Blanchon's work, *Le Trophée des dames a la Royne Mere*, written in 1583, describes in detail the valiant actions of no less than twenty Old Testament women, who by their honest chastity overcome all manner of adversity. The author praises Deborah, the Queen of Sheba, the mothers of Samson and Samuel, Hannah, Leah, Rebecca and Rachel for having collectively 'monstré [...] une grande sapience',⁹⁰ and remembers the chaste purity of such characters as Suzanna, whose honesty guarantees her divine strength and salvation:

Susanne aussi, à tous, Myroir d'honesteté,
 Les Babiloniens, taxant sa chasteté,
 La condamnant à tort à estre lapidée
 Le Juge souverain qui juge tout au Ciel,
 Descouvrist l'Innocence, au cry de Daniel,
 Et pour les deux Vielhards fust la peine gardée.⁹¹

Several texts remind readers that it was the women in the Gospel stories who were most loyal and faithful at the time of the crucifixion, and that Mary Magdalene, rather than a disciple, was rewarded for her loyalty by being honoured with the first sighting of the risen Christ. Alexandre de Pont-Aymery is at pains to recall the powerful influence such women have had on theological tradition in his *Paradox apologetique* of 1596, in which the cause of women is imaginatively defended. It is through such spiritual devotion as theirs that the Church is rightly referred to in the feminine:

L'Eglise mesme est comparee à une femme sans macule et sans tache, telle que décrit Salomon la Princesse d'Egypte, figure de l'Eglise. Au nouveau Testament vous y remarquez les trois Maries et la Chananeë, lesquelles furent si constantes en leurs saintes resolutions, que le Saint Esprit, dictateur de l'histoire sacree, les a voulu faire cognoistre à la posterité.⁹²

Such a positive analysis of these biblical women's conduct is sharply at odds with the critique of theologians such as Calvin, who find themselves bound by their belief in the literal authority of the Bible, and feel obliged to accommodate the more radical behaviour of women exhibited within that text to the theological principles of the Pauline Epistles and the Genesis narrative. Thus Calvin does not interpret Mary Magdalene's experience at the moment of Christ's resurrection to be a mark of her own faith and piety, but sees her as a catalyst, chosen by God to punish the doubting disciples for their unbelief:

S. Jean recueille ici plusieurs témoignages par lesquels nous soyons assurés que Jésus-Christ est ressuscité des morts. Mais on pourroit trouver absurde qu'il ne produise pas des témoins plus redevables et suffisants; car il commence son témoignage par une femme. Mais par ce moyen a été accomplie cette sentence: "Dieu choisit ce qui est infirme au monde et ce qui est fou et contemptible afin qu'il confonde et abatte la sagesse, la force et la gloire de la chair" (1Cor. 1:27). [...] Le châtiment est doux et gracieux, quand le Christ renvoie ainsi ses disciples à l'école des femmes, afin qu'il les attire à lui par elles.⁹³

Similarly, while pro-women writers were hailing such strong-willed and pious characters as Deborah to be paradigms of behaviour for all virtuous women, Calvin and other theologians stressed that Deborah's actions were so exceptional that it was most unlikely God would ever employ a woman to lead as she had done again. Moreover, Calvin concluded that Deborah's gifts were alien to the weaker female sex, and that therefore God had endowed her with special powers solely in order to spite the men who had turned away from Him:

Et notons que ç'a esté pour despiter les hommes, voire comme s'il leur vouloit faire ceste ignominie, que nul d'eux ne fust digne d'estre en estat de dignité. Comme s'il faisoit parler les pierres, un tel miracle n'est-il point pour pervertir l'ordre de nature? Ouy: mais c'est la condamnation que Dieu mettra sur les hommes.⁹⁴

Calvin's unwillingness to recognize dynamic virtues in the female sex is never more apparent than here, as J. L. Thompson rightly concludes: 'if the analogy is taken at face value, one will be hard pressed to find a harsher indictment of the natural ineptitude of women in the entire Calvinian corpus.'⁹⁵

Pro-women writers who sought to construct their defence of women upon the solid basis of humanist rhetoric were attracted to the many examples of female strength extant in classical texts. Powerful, independent women of the ancient world became exemplars alongside the aforementioned biblical characters as the court's predilection for mythologizing its prominent members grew more widespread, and again it was those women who combined autonomy with flawless virtue who were sought out for particular praise. Blanchon assures his readers that examples of chaste purity are not only to be found in the Bible, but that chastity is a natural, God-given feature of the female form, present in many varied civilizations:

Si des siecles Gentilz nous voulons mettre en lice,
L'histoire de plusieurs touchant leur Chasteté,
Des Grecz, des Hebrieux, et d'aultres est cothé,
Quel pour la conserver à esté leur Calice.⁹⁶

He proceeds to list examples of classical heroines in whom such sublime virtue is manifest, including Polyxena and Cassandra, the daughters of Priam, Penelope, Dido, Virginia and Lucretia. So intricately is the virtue of purity interwoven with female nature, Blanchon explains, that the peoples of ancient civilizations chose to name their gods after women:

La pronube Junon, et Minerve, et Diane,
Ont receu des Gentilz le nom de Deité,
Pour avoir purement aymé pudicité,
Comme Vesta, Themis et Dryas, et Cyane.
Zenobie, jadis, Royne Palmeriane,
Et Juba Mauritaine, ont heu tel dignité,
Comme Isis en Aegipte heust mesme autorité.
Et Faune, et Biblia en la Terre Toscane.⁹⁷

Such pictures of the dominant female which classical exegetes learned had existed alongside Judaeo-Christian patriarchy inspired many writers to argue for the potential of women in their own society. Paradigms of purity such as Lucretia and Penelope became leitmotifs in pro-women texts, while the notion of spiritual femininity expressed in the form of the female goddess was an attractive addition to the concept of female perfection found in the model of the Virgin.⁹⁸ Pont-Aymery seeks to ratify the idea of the eternal feminine by asserting that both scientists and theologians agree the most noble virtues and graces should be represented by women, and by reminding readers that reason itself, by which men and women reflect God's likeness, is presented as a woman in classical thought: 'La raison mesme, selon Homere, nous est figuree par Minerve, laquelle sortit en armes du cerveau de Jupiter'.⁹⁹

The crux of pro-women writers' defence of women is clearly centred around the notion that, though weaker vessels physically, they possess a compensatory capacity for rationality and virtue superior to that of the male sex, who remain concerned with the more active pursuits of life. Writers claim that these feminine virtues, nominally believed to be more passive, nevertheless retain a specific value and function within society which misogynistic prejudices have sought to nullify, or to re-apportion to men. They therefore seek to redress the balance, to reclaim the qualities of purity, virtue and wisdom for women, and to show that in certain circumstances it is these qualities

which save a wayward society from destruction. The anonymous work, *Exhortation aux dames vertueuses, en laquelle il est démontré le vray poinct d'Honneur*, written at the very end of the sixteenth century, concludes that the pure chastity of women is as vital to the progress of society as the brute strength of men, and notes that in the past the success of great civilizations was dependent upon this virtue:

Je vous diray seulement que ceste Diane, tant celebree, tant honoree en l'antiquité ne signifioit autre chose que l'honneur de la femme. C'estoit en cette Ephese aussi, [...] que la reputation, que le bonheur des Empires, vient autant de la sagesse, et de la pudicité des femmes, que de la prudence et valeur des hommes.[...]. C'est pourquoi toute l'antiquité a tellement honoré la pudicité, qu'elle l'a non seulement mise devant toute autre vertu, mais elle a mesme compris toutes les vertus en elle.¹⁰⁰

According to the arguments of the pro-women lobby, their own society was in error because of its reluctance to accept women into its spiritual and intellectual framework. Writers scrutinized both the moral and social ramifications of this situation, and, in addition to drawing upon idealistic female paradigms from the Bible and from classical sources, several made valid and realistic comparisons between the legal and social status of women in ancient times and that of the present. Pro-women writers had a common belief in the spiritual and intellectual potential of women, and many were astute enough to realize that the legal bonds which kept women in subjugation were held in place by poor educational facilities. Numerous writers followed Agrippa's lead in suggesting that improved

education for women would destroy the myth that they were by nature subordinate. Indeed, many went further to accuse the male sex of creating the myth, and of refusing women access to knowledge in order to perpetuate their own dominance. Even at court, where there was greater indulgence of female learning, arguments for the secondary nature of women's understanding and judgement persisted along the lines of the anti-women rhetoric which was so common in *Querelle* texts. Philibert de Vienne, in *Le Philosophe de Court*, discusses the cardinal virtue of magnanimity, and criticizes men who selfishly monopolize this virtue because they suppose the inferior female sex could not possibly rise to such high intellectual and moral standing:

Un grand argument de l'excellence de ceste vertu est, qu'entre toutes les autres qui sont communes tant aux hommes qu'aux femmes, on fait estre ceste-cy propre à l'homme, et au contraire legereté et inconstance propre à la femme. De laquelle commune opinion se contentent si bien maintz hommes que pour ceste seule cause qu'ilz sont hommes, et non femmes, ilz cuydent estre sages, et desdaignent entendre parler une femme, comme si elle estoit beste brute et irraisonnable, et comme si la raison et la folie estoient naturellement atachées avec le sexe de l'un et de l'autre.¹⁰¹

Alphonse, the third interlocutor in Nicolas de Cholière's *La Furieuse Guerre*, similarly observes that women are denied an active role in public life because men erroneously categorize them as intellectually incompetent:

Ne me contante je pas si vous ne me dictes pourquoy elles sont forbannies de toutes charges publiques, comme si elles estoient incapables de raison, ou qu'elles ne fussent pas d'un mesme

naturel et estoffe avec nous, doüez d'une mesme ame et entendement, capables de tout discours et usage de raison. Pensez vous que cela ne soit despiter nature?¹⁰²

His argument is supported by his awareness of the current favourable political status of certain women: 'il y a plusieurs estats gynocratiques, et où les femmes ont commandé et qui n'ont toutesfois esté delugez par mesadventures'. Many writers made use of a similar defence, and recounted the achievements of the mythical Amazon tribe, and indeed those of present ruling monarchs such as Elizabeth I of England and Catherine de Medici, as proof of women's capabilities:

Que diray je de nostre derniere Regente, et qui de droict doit emporter la perle au dessus des autres, ma très honorée dame Catherine de Medici, laquelle, sur toutes les autres Roynes et meres des Rois de France, s'est montrée la plus admirable en ses faits? laquelle, par ses vertus et bon conseil, a soigneusement élevé trois de nos Rois, à sçavoir: François, second du nom, Charles neufviesme, et le Roy Henri troisesme, à present regnant.¹⁰³

More extreme defenders of the female cause even suggested that the feminine qualities of sensitivity, purity, patience, humility and wisdom made them particularly suited to government, and that nations under female rule would be more peace-loving and tolerant as a result. Pont-Aymery recalls Neoplatonic theories first used by Agrippa, and links the divine beauty of feminine virtues encapsulated in the Virgin and other noble paradigms of womanhood with the physical beauties of the female form:

Il faut aussi dire, que tout ainsi que l'Opale represente la couleur de toutes les

pierres precieuses, que le visage de la femme est la vraye et naïfve figure de toutes les graces celestes et humaines, et que Dieu l'a embellie de ceste perfection sur toutes les autres creatures.¹⁰⁴

He goes on to assert that, since the female form represents the apex of God's creation, the motion of the universe will necessarily revolve around all that is feminine. By rhetorical skill, Pont-Aymery has effectively reversed the axiom upon which western civilization had hitherto subsisted: that of patriarchal supremacy. While biblical exegetes continued to propound the theory that human perfection was more likely to inhabit the male sex, and that women should therefore take their lead from them, Pont-Aymery advised the opposite:

La bonté entre les perfections de l'esprit est la principale, aussi veux-je qu'elle donne fin à mon discours touchant ce sujet, mais ce ne sera pas sans que par icelle je face veoir aux hommes qu'ils ne sont pas bons que par emprunt, et que la totale bonté du monde consiste en la femme, laquelle, à vray dire, est l'ame de l'univers, et le mouvement des benedictions celestes.¹⁰⁵

His extremist viewpoint represents the apex of feminist rhetoric exhibited in the *Querelle*. The presentation of perfect femininity demonstrated in the work through biblical and classical paradigms was absolutely typical of the genre, while its vision of an exclusively feminine Utopia required a more drastic departure from the status quo than many other writers were willing to undertake.

Less radical pro-women texts of the *Querelle*, of which Claude de Taillemont's *Discours des Champs faëz* might be

said to be representative, most usefully defended the female sex by insisting upon women's fundamental moral, intellectual and spiritual equality with men. This in turn led to valid and realistic criticism of social structures which unjustly perpetuated the myth of female inferiority in these areas, such as the poor educational facilities available for women. In their attempts to expunge the sin of Eve from the female sex, however, writers had naturally gravitated towards Mary, other saintly biblical women and the equally saintly heroines of classical literature. The most fertile ground of arguments for rhetorical proof of female righteousness was the capacity for chastity in woman, which therefore remained her ultimate goal in popular, lay literature, just as it did in theology. This secular picture of chastity as a moral imperative was of the greatest significance to the court in its own development of a social structure based around the Neoplatonic love discourse which purported to valorize women for their ability to counter passionate excess. This more philosophical picture of the role of chastity within the Renaissance universe would accord the noblewoman a certain degree of power which her lower-ranked contemporaries, however chaste, would not enjoy. It remained the case, however, that she derived her perceived strengths from her moral conduct: her sexual reputation, cloaked in Neoplatonic terms, continued to be the source of her virtue.

In the chapters which follow, I aim to show how the moral and physiological aspects of the virtue of chastity which related to women became associated with more ambivalent philosophical interpretations of chaste conduct connected specifically with the outplaying of the Neoplatonic love discourse within the social environment of the court, and more widely with notions of human dignity and rational exploitation of the sensual world which the nobility also pursued. Since these latter interpretations of chastity were theoretical and imaginative, they were seemingly applicable to both sexes, though because of their beauty and intimate understanding of the significance of purity, women were held to take the lead in the practice of being chaste. In this respect, women were symbolically representative of an icon which celebrated social and political dominance and potential; their supposed pre-eminence in this area was, however, constantly threatened by the greater public risk of unchastity which they embodied. In other words, the imaginative, androgynous triumph of chastity as a symbol of harmonious social order was perpetually in danger of being undermined by the so-called corporeal frailty of the female sex. The sharply polarized rhetoric of the *Querelle des Femmes* debate, with its scathing criticism and sublime eulogy of woman, makes abundantly clear the potential incompatibility of the icon and the moral virtue; in the remainder of this thesis, I will seek to examine the effects of this conundrum at the French court.

- 1 Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine of the Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), p.24.
- 2 Anon., *Exhortation aux dames vertueuses, en laquelle il est démontré le vray poinct d'honneur* (Paris: chez Lucas Breyel, 1598), pp.75-76.
- 3 Baldesar Castiglione, *Le Parfait courtisan*, trans. by Gabriel Chappuis (Lyon: Loys Cloquemin, 1580), p.342. This work, written between the years of 1508 and 1518 at the court of Urbino, takes the form of a series of discussions amongst noblemen and women of the author's acquaintance, who attempt to define the attributes most befitting the ideal courtier, and subsequently the ideal court lady. *The Courtier* was enormously popular in France, and was translated several times during the course of the century.
- 4 Jean d'Arrerac, *La Philosophie civile et d'estat* (Bordeaux: S. Millanges, 1598), p.284.
- 5 See Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp.2-4. Maclean explains, in his introduction to the work, that 'from the earliest times, and in the most far-flung cultures, the notion of female has in some sense been opposed to that of male, and aligned with other opposites' (p.2).
- 6 Bernard P. Prusak, 'Woman: Seductive Siren and Source of Sin', in *Religion and Sexism*, ed. by Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), pp.89-116 (p.97).
- 7 John A. Phillips, *Eve: The History of an Idea* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), pp.8-23.
- 8 Ibid., p.16.
- 9 Ibid., p.23.
- 10 Augustine was typical of many patristic exegetes in stressing that Eve personified the lower aspects of the soul.
- 11 Phillips, pp.27 & 35.
- 12 Ibid., p.45.
- 13 Marina Warner, *Alone of all Her Sex. The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Picador, 1985), p.58.
- 14 Jean H. Hagstrum, *Esteem Enlivened by Desire* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.187.

- 15 Ibid., p.184.
- 16 Augustine, *Gen. ad. litt.* 11.37.50 in *John Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah* by J. L. Thompson (Geneva: Droz, 1992), p.137.
- 17 Ibid., p.151.
- 18 Phillips, pp.135.
- 19 Warner, p.48.
- 20 Jean Hagstrum describes an allegorical interpretation of the sower (Matthew 13.23), popular at this time: 'in the exponentially larger harvests that the seed planted in the good ground of the Gospel produces, virgins reap a hundredfold, widows who do not remarry sixtyfold, and married women only thirtyfold.' (p.179)
- 21 Saint Jerome, *Selected Letters*, trans. by F. A. Wright (London: Heinemann, 1933), pp.83 & 91.
- 22 Ibid., p.99.
- 23 See Phillips, p.136.
- 24 The sensual love poetry of the Song of Songs, because of its sexually-explicit nature, had generated this kind of allegorical interpretation from as early as the second century. See, on this subject, *The Song of Songs* by A. Brenner (Sheffield: Jso Press, 1989), p.14.
- 25 Warner, p.130.
- 26 See Hagstrum, pp.200-202, and Warner, pp.134-137. With reference to Bernard of Clairvaux, Warner also notes the conflict inherent in the Christian Church's use of sexual language to express ascetic devotion: 'The antinomy at the crux of Christian thinking lies nakedly exposed in Bernard's use of erotic imagery. For, in his mysticism, one expression of love - carnal desire - disfigures the pristine soul, but another expression of love - the leap of the soul towards God - restores the primal resemblance. But both loves are expressed in the same language [...]. On this tragic tension, Christian discipline flourishes.' (p.129)
- 27 See Warner, p.137: 'Because heaven and earth, soul and body, reason and passion were once again severed and set against each other, the Virgin Mary could become a symbol of the ideal to the poets, artists and practitioners of courtly love.'
- 28 See Hagstrum, pp.236-237, and Warner, pp.161-171.
- 29 Warner, p.184.

- 30 Aristotle, *De generatione animalium*, IV. 2, 766 b 33 in Phillips, p.35.
- 31 Maclean, pp.30-33.
- 32 Ibid., p.39.
- 33 See Hagstrum, pp.215-217.
- 34 Ibid., p.315.
- 35 See the introduction to Jean Bouchet's *Epistres morales et familiares du traverseur*, (Mouton: S. R. Publishers Ltd., 1969) by Jennifer Beard, pp.iii - vi, and the introduction to Bouchet's *Les Triumpes de la noble et amoureuse dame* in *Le Miroir des femmes*: ed. by Luce Guillerm and others, 2 vols (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1983-1984), I: *Moralistes et polémistes au XVIIe siècle* (1983), p.43.
- 36 *Le Miroir de femmes I*, pp.46-47.
- 37 Bouchet, *Epistres morales et familiares du traverseur*, fol. 21v.
- 38 Vivès' original text was written in 1523.
- 39 *Le Miroir des Femmes*, I, p.80. The notion that the reign of Christ had halted the need for women to procreate was one expounded by several of the Church Fathers.
- 40 Gabriel du Preau, *Les decrets et canons, touchant le mariage [...] publiez en la huictieme session du Concile de Trante, [...] l'unziesme jour de novembre 1563*, ed. by Luce Guillerm in *La femme dans la littérature française et les traductions en Français du XVIIe siècle* (Lille: Publications de l'Université de Lille III, 1971), p.293. Marriage was first pronounced a sacrament by the Catholic Church at the Council of Trent.
- 41 René Benoist, *Trois petis traictez fort utiles a toutes personnes qui veulent vivre chastement, tant en religion que dehors* (Paris: La Noue, 1580), fol.6r.
- 42 Ibid., fols 8r-8v.
- 43 Louys de Grenade, *La Grande Guide des pescheurs pour les acheminer a vertu*, trans. by Paul du Mont (Lyon: Pierre Rigaud, 1609), p.759.
- 44 See Jean Calvin, *L'Institution de la Religion Chrestienne*, ed. by J. D. Benoît, 5 vols (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1957-1963), IV: (1961), xiii, pp.283-286. The first French edition of the *Institutes* appeared in 1541; they were subsequently revised several times up to 1560.

- 45 *L'Institution*, III, xix, p.323.
- 46 *Ibid.*, III, xix, p.313.
- 47 Galatians 3. 24-28.
- 48 Jean Calvin, *Sermon XII sur l'Épître aux Corinthiens*, I Cor: 4-10. Op. Calv., t. XLIX, p.726 in *L'Homme et la femme dans la morale calviniste* by André Biéler (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1963), pp.44-45.
- 49 Calvin, *L'Institution*, I, xv, pp.212-213. See also *John Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah*, pp.154-157, where Thompson explains that such an interpretation was to be found in Augustine and other Fathers, and was widely accepted by Protestant exegetes.
- 50 Jean Calvin, *Leçons et expositions sur les douze petits prophètes* (Geneva: 1565) in Biéler, p.38.
- 51 Jean Calvin, *Institutions*, IV, ix, p.283.
- 52 *Sermons de Jean Calvin sur les deux Épîtres de saint Paul à Timothée et sur l'Épître à Tite* (Geneva: Jean Bonnefoy, 1563), p.113 (*Serm.* I Tim. 2.13-15).
- 53 Jean Calvin, *L'Institution*, II, viii, p.171.
- 54 Calvin, *Comm.* Matt. 19.9 in Biéler, p.46.
- 55 Calvin, *Comm.* 1 Cor. 11.11 in Biéler, p.46.
- 56 See the *Institutions*, II, viii, p.173, where Calvin asks that married couples refrain from illicit excess: 'Pourtant ilz (les gens mariez) ne doyvent pas penser que toutes choses leur soyent licites, mais un chacun se doit tenir sobrement avec sa femme, et la femme mutuellement avec son mari, se gouvernans tellement qu'ils ne facent rien contraire à la sainteté du mariage.'
- 57 Calvin, *Comm.* 1 Cor. 11.11, in Biéler, p.46.
- 58 See Hagstrum, p.293.
- 59 Calvin, *Serm.* I Tim. 2. 13-15, pp.107-108.
- 60 Calvin, *Serm.* 1 Tim. 2. 13-15, p.112.
- 61 *Ibid.*, John Thompson notes that 'although the commentators would uniformly deny that a woman's subjection is a basis for her salvation, their words say as much if taken absolutely'. (p.150).
- 62 See Thompson, chapter six: 'Women, Adiaphora, Polity and Change', pp.227-267.
- 63 Calvin, *Serm.* 1 Tim. 2. 13-15, pp.113-114.

- 64 According to this philosophy, the chaste beauty which the noblewoman embodied linked her with an ethereal goodness which elevated her status in the game of love above that of the nobleman. To this extent, this love game was similar to that played out in the medieval courtly tradition, although the practice of the Neoplatonic love discourse was more openly connected with public social mores during the Renaissance.
- 65 See chapter three.
- 66 See M. A. Screech, *The Rabelaisian Marriage* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1958), p.2.
- 67 Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp.105-116. See also Hagstrum, pp.198-199.
- 68 Nicolas Cholières, *La Furieuse et Effroyable Guerre des masles contre les femelles* (Paris: Pierre Chevillot, 1588; repr. in *Raretés bibliographiques*, No.37, Brussels: A Mertens et fils, 1864).
- 69 Jean de Marconville, *De la bonté et mauvaiseté des femmes* (Lyon: Perchon, 1568).
- 70 Cornelius Agrippa, *Sur la noblesse et précellence du sexe féminin*, Edition critique d'après le texte d'Anvers, 1529, annotated by R. Antonioli (Geneva: Droz, 1990), pp.11-19.
- 71 Agrippa's treatise was dedicated to Marguerite de Bourgogne, daughter of the Emperor Charles V.
- 72 Ibid., p.99.
- 73 Ibid., p.101.
- 74 Ibid., p.109.
- 75 See R. Antonioli, *La Noblesse et précellence du sexe féminin*, Edition critique, p.28.
- 76 Ibid., p.119.
- 77 Ibid., p.107. François de Billon mirrors this form of argumentation very closely in *Le Fort inexpugnable de l'honneur du sexe féminin* (Paris: Jean d'Allyer, 1555; repr. Wakefield: S. R. Publishers Ltd., 1970): see fol.7r.
- 78 Agrippa, p.118.
- 79 See the introduction to Claude de Taillemont's *Discours des Champs faëz A l'honneur et exaltation de l'Amour des Dames* by Jean-Claude Arnould (Lyon: chez Michel du Bois, 1553; repr. Geneva: Droz, 1991), pp.7-13.

- 80 Taillemont's defence of virtuous women clearly seeks to discredit the kind of anti-women rhetoric which had surfaced in Castiglione's *Courtier*, and which was particularly damning for noblewomen who sought strenuously to maintain a good reputation at court. The *Discours des Champs faëz* is set in a cloistered environment which resembles that of the court as it is pictured in pastoral romances; it is therefore peopled by righteous women and men who, like Taillemont's fictional self, Philaste, justly defend the female sex against accusations of weakness: 'Et si l'on me dit que vous, et les honnestes et vertueuses qui vous ressemblent, ne se sentent piquées de l'injure des autres, et que la seule vertu, sans aide d'autrui, vous est suffisante armure encontre l'outrageuse langue de voz ennemis, je repon la vulgaire opinion estre tellement depravée, que ce qui est bon luy semble mauvais, et plus-tost condamnera la vertu, que le vice [...]. La guerre [...] est generalement, et sans aucune exception, contre toutes; disans les aucuns d'eulx la femme estre un diable; autres, un esprit maling, un monstre ou bestial estrange. Plusieurs l'appellent saint Michel renversé, tentation diabolique' (p.111).
- 81 Ibid., p.114.
- 82 Ibid., p.125.
- 83 Billon, see above, note 77, fol. 4v. According to the introduction by M. A. Screech, little is known about Billon's background except that he was the secretary of Guillaume du Bellay, Rabelais' patron. (see pp.VII-VIII).
- 84 Billon, fol. 5v.
- 85 Ibid., fols 4v-5r, & fol.68r.
- 86 Ibid., fol.10r.
- 87 Jacqueline de Miremont, *Apologie pour les dames où est monstré la précellence de la femme en toutes actions vertueuses* (Paris: Jean Gesselin, 1602), fols 6v-9v. This work was dedicated to the Countess of Montgommery. For a reading of the feminist impact of the *Apologie*, see Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism*, pp.273-275.
- 88 Miremont, fol. 12v.
- 89 Ibid., fol. 14r.
- 90 Joachim Blanchon, *Le Trophée des dames a la Royne Mere*, in *Les Premieres Oeuvres de Joachim Blanchon, au Tres Chrestien Henri III* (Paris: Thomas Perier, 1583), p.233.

- 91 Ibid., p. 228.
- 92 Alexandre de Pont-Aymery, *Paradox apologetique ou il est fidelement demonstré que la femme est beaucoup plus parfaict que l'homme en toute action de vertu* (Paris: Hubert Velu, 1596), pp.39-40.
- 93 Jean Calvin, *Evangile selon Saint Jean in Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, 8 vols (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1960-1968), II (1968), pp.519 & 528.
- 94 Calvin, *Serm*, 1 Tim. 2.13-15, p.111.
- 95 Thompson, p.182.
- 96 Blanchon, p.230.
- 97 Ibid., p.232.
- 98 The goddess Diana was a ubiquitous symbol of chastity throughout the sixteenth century; see chapters three and five.
- 99 Pont-Aymery, p.9.
- 100 *Exhortation aux dames vertueuses*, pp.73-76.
- 101 Philibert de Vienne, *Le Philosophe de court*, ed. by P.M.Smith (Paris: Estienne Groulleau, 1548; repr. Geneva: Droz, 1990), pp.141-142. The text is a satirical appraisal of the motivations of the courtier who models his behaviour upon the example of the ideal courtier presented in Castiglione's *Courtier*.
- 102 Cholières, p.62.
- 103 Ibid., p.85. The opposite point of view, presented by the dissenter misogynist Nicogene in this text, was an equally common rhetorical argument: 'La legereté, inconstance et fragilité de la femme est telle, qu'il n'y a en elle rien de plus certain que sa propre inconstance.[...] La femme, si elle avoit à tenir la bride du commandement public, elle est si volage, si foible et mal née à telle charge, que ses affections la transporteroient tout à rebours du droict, si bien qu'elle mettroit tout le monde en combustion.' (pp.63-64)
- 104 Pont-Aymery, pp.133-134.
- 105 Ibid., pp.93-94.

II: THE GLORIFICATION OF MAN AND THE PRIVILEGE OF NOBILITY

The Renaissance saw a dramatic change in the way the human race perceived its own worth and purpose. Various attempts were made to redefine the relationship of man to his surroundings, to re-assess his potential for salvation and for justification, and to establish new criteria by which he might measure his contribution to the environment in which he found himself. Seminal to these issues was the movement of ideas away from medieval concepts of a collective humanity, united in its fallen nature and dependent upon grace through the mediation of the Church under the Pope, towards a renewed interest in the dignity and individuality of man gleaned from humanist study.

Briefly, the medieval world picture was one of a highly structured society built around an Augustinian notion of social order, in which hierarchy was said to have been brought about by the Fall and to have remained as a testimony to man's sinful nature. In this respect, medieval society, whilst divided into multi-faceted social functions, remained united in its sinfulness under the spiritual leadership of the Church, and united in accountability to its secular authority.¹ The humanist study of ancient philosophical texts led Renaissance thinkers to review this concept of humankind, and to focus their attention upon the potential of the individual in his or her earthly life. The study of ancient sources revealed a more positive standpoint and the degradation of

humankind's worth, interpreted from Genesis, became less pervasive. 'Man, his soul, his excellence and ultimate happiness occupy a central place in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle,'² and as a result, the Renaissance encapsulated the theme of the glory of man on a scale hitherto unseen, even in Classical times; making of the negative medieval hierarchy a positive, ordered social system in which dignity and virtue were apportioned to all people according to their rank. Notably, the figure of the Renaissance Prince, or King, came to represent the apex of this attempt to glorify man, symbolizing the triumph of the temporal and embodying the divine to such an extent that Papal political, and even spiritual, authority was sometimes challenged as a result.

In many ways, such developments were the domain of *mankind*, to make the distinction between the activities of the two sexes; women had a very particular and limited role to play in the active pursuits of human life, and frequently qualified for discussion only as the 'second sex', a sub-species whose functions were both subordinate and marginal. This chapter aims to show that although women in the Renaissance universe were frequently viewed only as a collective entity and, as such, were burdened with theological and sociological classifications placed upon them in medieval times and before, still the increasing Renaissance preoccupation with human dignity and achievement allowed women of high rank to transcend the limitations of their sex, as the quest for individual

perfection began to supersede collective ideologies based solely on gender.

THE INDIVIDUAL AS MICROCOSM IN THE RENAISSANCE WORLD PICTURE

The *Platonic Theology* of Marsilio Ficino, arguably the most influential consideration of man's potential and destiny in the Renaissance era, was composed at the Florentine Academy at the end of the fifteenth century, and celebrates, by means of the synthesis of Christian doctrine with Platonic philosophy, man's centrality within the universe and his uniquely rational nature. Ficino explicitly associated the Platonic One with the Christian God, and, following Plotinus, 'distinguished the sublimity of God in his transcendence from the goodness of God in his self-bestowing creation.'³ The doctrine of man displayed within his *Platonic Theology* reflected Ficino's conviction in a divinely ordered cosmos and in the value of contemplation as man's ultimate end. His universe was one of ordered hierarchy which reached its zenith in the true oneness of the supreme God and sounded its depths in composite physicality brought about by complete alienation from the spiritual realms. The human soul, Ficino believed, occupied a central position within this hierarchy, and was endowed with free will allowing it to move upwards towards its creator or downwards into base matter. Above the soul lay the angelic and the truly divine, below it the trappings of inferior physicality. Man alone, of all the inhabitants of

the cosmos, was endowed with a universal nature which offered him both the potential for physicality and a taste of the divine, and left him free to choose the path he wished to pursue. This exceptional position gave him an autonomy experienced by no other being except God, and constituted the reason, in Ficino's mind, which led man to yearn to become one with God. In this sense, Ficino's Renaissance man joins with his classical forebears in becoming the microcosm: the earthly creature that, like God, seeks to create, to rule, to have dominion over nature and to be perfect. His dignity and glory arise from his creation in the image of God, and from his rational capacity and will to understand and authenticate that image in himself:

Man is really the vicar of God, since he inhabits and cultivates all elements and is present on earth without being absent from the ether. He uses not only the elements, but also all the animals which belong to the elements, the animals of the earth, of the water, and of the air, for food, convenience, and pleasure, and the higher celestial beings for knowledge and the miracles of magic. Not only does he make use of the animals, he also rules them. [...] Man not only rules the animals by force, he also governs, keeps and teaches them. Universal providence belongs to God, who is the universal cause. Hence man who provides generally for all things, both living and lifeless, is a *kind* of God. Certainly he is the god of the animals, for he makes use of them all, [...]. It is also obvious that he is the god of the elements, for he inhabits and cultivates all of them. Finally, he is the god of all materials for he handles, changes and shapes all of them. He who governs the body in so many and so important ways, and is the vicar of the immortal God, he is no doubt immortal.⁴

For Ficino, the universality of man was inseparable from his immortality. It was clear to the philosopher that man's very knowledge of God revealed his divine status, for in seeking the route of contemplation which Ficino saw as the natural and necessary goal of humanity, man was doing none other than reaching upwards to his maker in a perpetual chain of ascent spanning the whole of his earthly life. Furthermore, the immortal soul, which so often failed in its divine aspirations in the world, could be assured that the glimpses of heaven acquired through righteous living and meditation would continue unabated into eternity. Optimism was therefore a principal hallmark of Ficino's philosophy: it fostered confidence in human endeavour by postulating that through human efforts the path to eternal glory might be laid. Ficino was no Pelagian heretic, however, though his firm belief in self-perfection drove him dangerously close to that state. Like Petrarch before him, he founded his assurance of human dignity upon his Christian conviction in the benevolent love of his Maker, who had both allowed and willed man to gaze upon His face.⁵ In His graciousness, God had endowed man with the rational capacities to seek Him out, and the will to incline towards Him or away from Him. Reason and will were therefore firmly yoked together in Ficino's thought, as the human postulates for knowing the true purpose of life and for attaining ultimate beatitude in God:

Man is a great miracle, a living creature worthy of reverence and adoration, for he knows the genus of the daemons as if he were by nature related to them, and he transforms himself into

God as if he were God himself. [...] What else does the soul seek except to know all things through the intellect and to enjoy them all through the will? In both ways it tries to become all things. [...] To conclude, our soul by means of the intellect and will as by those twin Platonic wings flies toward God, since by means of them it flies toward all things. By means of the intellect it attaches all things to itself; by means of the will, it attaches itself to all things. Thus the soul desires, endeavors, and begins to become God, and makes progress every day.[...] Hence our soul will some time be able to become in a sense all things; and even to become a god.⁶

Conversely, ignorance and pride constituted the tools of man's downfall, and drove him ever further into physical stagnation and undignified regress. Ficino believed 'the average man' to be guilty of such sin, and labelled him 'a monstrous animal, mad and miserable', a prisoner of his own corporeality.⁷

Ficino's pupil at the Florentine Academy, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, pursued the Neoplatonic trends of his master, while attempting a more thorough synthesis of Aristotelianism and Platonism than the former. In his *De Ente et Uno*, of 1491, he expresses profound solidarity with the Aristotelian understanding of the Intellect as a concept existing independently of Being. Pico favoured Aquinas' Aristotelian definition of God as beyond accident or substance, and used such Aristotelian terminology to describe his essentially Neoplatonic beliefs.⁸ Against the mainstream of Renaissance thought, he sought to re-assert the theological potential in Aristotle's writings, and thereby created an ontological perception of man altogether

more radical than Ficino's. In his famous treatise *Of the Dignity of Man*, Pico replaces the Ficinian concept of man's universal nature with a more indeterminate picture of the human condition. He imagines the soul to be wholly unfixed, neither mortal nor immortal, but free to choose sensuality or immortality through its own actions:

He therefore accorded to Man the function of a form not set apart, and a place in the middle of the world, and addressed him thus: 'I have given thee neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself, Adam, to the end that, according to thy longing and according to thy judgment, thou mayest have and possess that abode, that form, and those functions which thou thyself shalt desire. The nature of all other things is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by me: thou, coerced by no necessity, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature in accordance with thine own free will [...]. I have set thee at the world's center, that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world. I have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that thou mayest with greater freedom of choice and with more honor, as though the maker and moulder of thyself, fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are animal; thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms of life, which are divine.'⁹

Like Ficino, Pico recognized that such potential for dignity was bestowed upon man only as a result of the incarnation and grace of Christ. In emphasizing man's ultimate freedom to control both his environment and his destiny, however, he placed even greater weight on the gift of rationality than his mentor. Where Augustine had found sin in man's unwillingness to emulate his Creator, Pico also saw it in the ignorance of the man who chose foolishly

the sensual over the rational. The dignity of the human race was captured by those who harnessed their understanding of the divine to an inclination to become divine. Those who chose wisely to transcend their corporeality would be rewarded with glorification and with the splendour of oneness with God.

Ficino's *Platonic Theology* and Pico's *Of the Dignity of Man* thus represent ambitious and systematic attempts to collate philosophies which testified to man's divine origins and to his universal or self-defining status, and which were consistent with a Christian ontological understanding of the created order. These works stand at the threshold of impassioned support for the dignity and greatness of man to be found in later French Renaissance writers.¹⁰

THE IMPACT OF FLORENTINE NEOPLATONISM UPON THE FRENCH RENAISSANCE

French interest in humanism and Neoplatonism was located largely within the upper echelons of society, which rapidly assimilated the exegetical tools and the language of these two systems as a means for philosophical discovery and debate. The university sector remained relatively distant from these developments; teaching continued to be based around Aristotelian precepts until well into the seventeenth century, and the Sorbonne authorities were certainly suspicious of humanist texts which questioned

scholastic readings of biblical material and proffered new understandings of humankind's role in the cosmic order.¹¹

France's geographical position was instrumental in assuring the success of Neoplatonism. The city of Lyon acted as a major trade centre within Europe and had rapidly imbibed the Italian humanism of its neighbour at the beginning of the sixteenth century; its proximity to Italy and distance from the jurisdiction of the Sorbonne authorities allowed it to retain an intellectual independence and influence throughout the Renaissance period. This, and its emerging reputation as a centre for printing, attracted large numbers of humanist thinkers, including Maurice Scève, François Rabelais, Etienne Dolet and Claude de Taillemont, whose works were published there. Lyon's unique intellectual and political status encouraged the free-flow of ideas between the nobility and court thinkers and the highly literary urban class in the city, and the Neoplatonic philosophy which Lyon thinkers pursued found favour with the French courts on a grand scale. François I and his sister Marguerite de Navarre enthusiastically adopted the doctrines of human dignity and self-perfection which humanists and Neoplatonists disseminated; François instated a new academy for the purpose of humanist study in Paris, the *Collège Royal*, while Marguerite's court at Navarre attracted numerous humanist thinkers from Lyon and beyond, many of whom were regarded as subversive by the university authorities.

Marot, Rabelais, Calvin and others fled to safety in her court.

Thus it was the more intimate intellectual environments of artistic academies and of the courts of Europe that were the seedbeds for the ideologies of human glorification postulated by Ficinian Neoplatonism; from the mid-sixteenth century, Paris became a European centre of excellence for the study of classical language and literature, underpinned by the formation of two further court academies under Charles IX and Henri III, which thereby assured a continuing enthusiasm for Plato and for Neoplatonism in France after 1550.¹² Charles Schmitt, in 'L'Introduction de la philosophie platonicienne dans l'enseignement des universités à la Renaissance' notes:

C'est probablement dans la France du seizième siècle que Platon connut le plus grand succès. [...] Ce fut à Paris, d'ailleurs, que le plus grand nombre d'éditions de Platon fut imprimé, et Paris venait en tête de tous les autres centres européens.¹³

Humanist Study and Religious Change in France

The intellectual effects of this humanist and Neoplatonic trend were felt not only in academic and artistic realms, but also played a crucial role in the formulation of religious thought in the sixteenth century, as we have seen in chapter one. The evangelical and reform movements had their own pervasive effect upon social and political structures, alongside those wrought by secular humanism.

The relationship between the two strands was hardly symbiotic: many reformers remained uninspired by humanism, whilst several humanists divorced their philosophies entirely from religious practice. Humanist techniques of literary exegesis fostered in monasteries, academies and certain universities were nevertheless taken up by many of the most effective biblical exegetes. Moreover, the general movement away from scholastic theology implied in itself a broad rejection of Aristotelian precepts which was often accompanied by a more favourable interpretation of Plato. Peter Matheson's recent study of *Humanism and Reform Movements* records the conjunctive relationship between the two, and asks: 'How can we trace the impact of humanism on reform when the interaction of both is so intimate and constant and subtle?',¹⁴

Within France, Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples was the first prominent evangelical theologian to draw heavily upon Ficino's philosophy (as Erasmus and More had done elsewhere). Like his European counterparts, Lefèvre had assimilated Platonic notions of the self and its social vocation with the expression of these themes in the Pauline epistles and in the Sermon on the Mount; A. H. T. Levi documents Lefèvre's industrious attempts to align Neoplatonic teaching directly with Paul himself, by conjecturing a link between the apostle and the pseudo-Denis.¹⁵ Significantly, the evangelical tradition in which Lefèvre and Erasmus were working questioned the extrinsic nature of religious experience suggested by the

scholastics, and put forward instead a theology which linked spiritual beatitude with moral fulfilment.¹⁶ This necessitated belief in some form of human intrinsic perfectibility, a doctrine which was complicated by implications of heresy: were the evangelicals suggesting that man could perfect himself by works alone, or that grace intervened to bring an individual to perfection? in which case he was not acting from free will. Levi reports that 'there emerges from the Neoplatonist tradition a firm belief in effective free will', and that the evangelicals were therefore bereft of an effective theological structure within which to contain these postulates. Often divorcing themselves from mainstream theological debate, their ideologies were more usually expressed either through satire or by means of the literary creation of imaginary Utopias; each was a powerful influence upon the development of social codes and doctrines within the courts of Europe.¹⁷

Protestant biblical exegesis, meanwhile, was also informed by humanist approaches to textual analysis: Jean Calvin, whose theological views on the subject of women have been discussed, developed his exegetical skills and persuasive argumentation through a humanist training in the interpretation of classical texts. Furthermore, certain of the ideas expressed in Calvin's writing regarding the status of man and his role in the cosmos were not altogether dissimilar from those proffered by the Neoplatonists. In an article considering 'The Doctrine of

Man in Calvin and in Renaissance Neoplatonism', Roy Battenhouse seeks to demonstrate an affinity between Calvinist and humanist doctrine concerning the nature of man, which persisted in spite of Calvin's certain rejection of the notion of intrinsic perfectibility and reliance upon the soteriological mechanisms of grace and election. Battenhouse notes that Calvin's prelapsarian Adam is the perfect Renaissance microcosm, who "in the excellency of his nature truly resembled the excellence of his Creator."¹⁸ God endowed Adam with the capacity for reason which allowed Adam to come to know Him perfectly; Adam was therefore in no need of grace before the Fall, having within himself all that was needed to live harmoniously on earth and "to ascend even to God and eternal felicity."¹⁹ The Fall itself was brought about not through Adam's rejection of grace, but through a failure of the will continually to seek God. As Battenhouse goes on to observe, this 'unbelief, the failure of the heart or choice, is closely associated with a departure from "right reason": once Adam has strayed from belief, his capacity for rationally recognizing God is destroyed.²⁰ Calvin then envisages the demise of man into wanton sensuality, a prisoner to his own instincts and wholly without the divine image originally entrusted to him.

Of course, the link between sensuality (or 'concupiscence', as Calvin refers to it in his commentary *On Genesis*, III.6) and sinfulness was as old as the Genesis creation stories themselves. Battenhouse's contention is,

however, that Renaissance humanism approached the theme in a new and different way. Sensuality for Calvin, as for Ficino and Pico, was no mere misguided delight in depravity, but the appalling exile of the intellect from divine truths. Empty of reason, man becomes animal-like, according to both Calvin and Ficino.²¹ The body, seemingly, is a vessel of corruption, alienating man from the Godhead: Ficino, in the *Platonic Theology*, asserts that 'God and Body are extremes in nature, and absolutely unlike each other.'²² Calvin, meanwhile, states similarly in the *Institutes*, II.xv.4 that the Kingdom of Heaven is "neither terrestrial nor carnal."²³

And yet man is not entirely reduced to a state of corporeal hopelessness. Grace enters the Calvinian world to inspire man to faith and thereby return him to rational contemplation of God. Ficinian Neoplatonism also relies on the influx of grace, although in a more secondary sense, to create in man a natural theology released through reasoned understanding of the world and of the cosmic order. Both schools of thought allowed for the gradual perfection of the soul through transcendence of the corrupt body, followed by the reinvigoration of the human form with spiritually-acquired divine truths.

Calvin believed the doctrine of the immortality of the soul to be apparent in Scripture and in the writings of Plato.²⁴ He applauded the Platonic definition of the soul and its workings as a movement towards Christian truth, and

concludes in the *Institution* I, xv, 6 that Plato has: 'considéré l'image de Dieu en l'âme, les autres sectes attachent tellement à la vie présente toutes les vertus et facultez de l'âme, qu'ils ne luy laissent quasi rien hors du corps'.²⁵ In response to the Platonic theory of reminiscence, contentious to many Christian exegetes because of its suggestion that the soul pre-existed the body, Calvin asserts that:

Combien que Platon se soit abusé, pensant que telle appréhension ne fust qu'une souvenance de ce que l'âme savoit devant qu'estre mise dedans le corps, toutesfois la raison nous contraint de confesser qu'il y a quelque principe de ces choses imprimé en l'entendement de l'homme (II, ii, 14).²⁶

The souls of Calvin's faithful, enlightened by Scripture, would rediscover their true humanity in the image of God, and henceforward begin the gradual process of shedding their corporeal nature. Ficino also affirmed that man's true nature was to be found in the soul, and not in the body; 'knowledge' of divine truth, he asserts in the *Platonic Theology*, 'is nothing else than a spiritual union with some spiritual form.'²⁷

Neither philosopher, however, sought to deny the significance of man's physicality. Man had been made to occupy the sense world in accordance with the design of God, and though sight of that design had been lost in the Fall, it could be reharnessed by the willing soul which yearned for true knowledge. This recapturing of the divine

image equipped enlightened humanity with enormous potential to participate in the creative impetus of God. Ficino celebrates man's universality, and gives to the human soul the title of 'third essence' because of its central position mid-way between the spiritual and sensual worlds. He praises the ability of the immortal human soul to govern the temporal world whilst remaining uncorrupted by it:

This is the nature which immerses itself in mortal things, without itself becoming mortal [...] because, while it rules bodies, it also adheres to that which is divine, it is the mistress of bodies, not their attendant.

This is the greatest wonder in nature. All other things under God are always in themselves of one certain kind of being; this essence is at once all of them. [...] Moreover, that this essence is itself the proper seat of the rational soul is easily seen from the definition of the rational soul as a life which thinks in successive acts, and animates the body in time [...]. This is just the condition of the third essence, for it lives, thinks, and gives life to the body.²⁸

Calvin similarly believed in the 'rational exploitation of the sense world'.²⁹ As Battenhouse notes in reference to the *Institutes* III.x.1-3:

A temperate self-gratification is assumed to be commanded by God. All things are regarded as made for man, that he may use them as reminders for acknowledging God and as means for glorifying Him. [...] The elect are encouraged to master the world, dominate it, bend it to their own religious aim.³⁰

Thus the quest for human perfection at the source of Neoplatonic philosophy extended not only to the doctrines of evangelical humanism during the first half of the sixteenth century, but also to those of Protestant

reformers who exerted their most significant influence after 1550. These most powerful forces in the formation of French Renaissance culture were uniformly confident in the capacity for human reason, when aided by grace, to re-establish the divine image in the temporal sphere. However, Calvin was to criticize the vanity and temporality of certain humanist aspirations, while his own interest in humanism was as a vehicle towards a greater understanding of God for all people, and was therefore less particularly concerned with the social elite of the court.³¹ Indeed, the reform movements in general attracted a much wider audience than the more select humanist academies could hope to reach. Both exhibited a concern for improvements in education, and both advanced new teaching practices within existing schools and colleges. The reform, however, inspired the populace as humanism did not, and was altogether more organized in practical action than its more literary neighbour. The two trends maintained what Peter Matheson identifies as a 'love-hate relationship' throughout the sixteenth century, variously attracting and repelling as their exponents collaborated and disputed.³²

The Importance of Human Dignity in the Emerging Life of the Court

Humanist centres of learning, such as Lyon, and the courts and academies, were at the very centre of cultural and academic development, both religious and secular. To those who occupied the higher echelons of noble and literary

society, the Neoplatonic and humanist doctrine of the dignity of man had particular attractions, for in receptive environments, thirsty for glorification, the doctrines were not merely propounded, but enacted in the behaviour and credos of their inhabitants. Neoplatonism encouraged the pursuit of excellence, and posited the faculties of reason and will as a means to that end. The privileged and the noble were supremely equipped to accomplish the goals of self-perfection and endeavoured enthusiastically to do so. However, the less privileged majority were also assigned roles within the Renaissance world picture, which took account of their lack of education or opportunity. The Augustinian notion of sin as the root cause of social hierarchy was no longer brought into play to justify differences in social status. Where medieval thought had formed an organized picture of world order based upon the effects of sin, Renaissance Platonism substituted a vaguer conception of natural order as a divinely-ordained power in which humanity participated to varying degrees according to rank. Tillyard notes, in *The Elizabethan World Picture*, that 'it was mainly the Platonists who made less tidy and more picturesque a world which in the medieval view had been given a mathematical neatness.'³³

Man's fall was the calamity which forced social hierarchy upon the world, according to the medieval view. In this sense, social differences were entirely unnatural, and no man could be held individually responsible for his state. Be he king or pauper, he was equally susceptible to

sin and had equal tendencies towards morality or depravity, a precept supported by Aristotelian logic.³⁴ The move away from this view of humanity in Renaissance times was conceived by Neoplatonic thinkers, who were inspired by the concept of the Great Chain of Being, devised by Plato in the *Timaeus*. The Platonic capacity to find in every rank of creature an example of the beneficent handywork of the Creator enthused philosophers with the notion of an optimistic dynamism inhabiting all that lived and moved and had being. As the supreme paradigm of the created order, man participated in the chain not only as the most advanced of all physical beings, but because he showed an affinity with divine nature. Man, as Ficino had asserted, was blessed with the gift of reason which allowed him to recognize his place in the chain, and with the free will which permitted him to move upwards in that chain towards God, or downwards towards animalistic matter.

Social hierarchy was thus seen to be the expression of a rationally created and divinely inaugurated natural order. In general terms, the Renaissance perceived a three tier social system, comprising the peasant estate, the Church and the nobility, although throughout the sixteenth century an increasingly well-educated and wealthy element within the bourgeoisie aspired to noble status. Each estate was held to have its own capacities and functions, within the sphere of which the individual was free to choose his or her path to success or failure. The roles for each social stratum, furthermore, were firmly defined, and

movement between groups, though it certainly existed, was frowned upon by the nobility, who sought to preserve their elite and somewhat mystical position. Rather, every condition of humanity was celebrated for its own merits and called upon to excel in its own vocation. Ficino's *Platonic Theology* had set forth an ideal picture of structured social harmony,³⁵ which French observers of social mores appeared to endorse, in which the manual skills of agriculture, building and art are praised for the ways in which they rationally temper matter to their own ends, to reflect the divine image:

Thus man imitates all the works of the divine nature, and perfects, corrects and improves the works of the lower nature. [...] Through his own resourcefulness he produces food, clothes, bedding, shelter, instruments, and weapons. [...] Sometimes, also, the thinking reason acts more seriously, and eager to bring forth its products, leaps forth and visibly shows the power of its genius in the manifold textures of wool and silk and in pictures, sculptures and buildings. [...] Man not only makes use of the elements, but also adorns them, a thing which no animal ever does. How wonderful is the cultivation of the soil all over the earth, how marvelous the construction of buildings and cities, how skillful the control of the waterways.³⁶

Over and above these manual skills, Ficino extols the art of government and the spiritual gifts of poetry, music, astronomy and mathematics. The former demonstrates man's rational capacities of organization: 'Man alone abounds in such a perfection that he first rules himself, something that no animals do, and thereafter rules the family, administers the state, governs nations and rules the whole world.'³⁷ The latter emphasize man's contemplative

qualities, his constant desire to transcend the limitations of the flesh: 'In all these arts the mind of man despises the service of the body, since the mind is able at times and can even now begin to live without the help of the body.'³⁸ Finally, Ficino identifies man's yearning for control of the earth as proof of his divine status:

Thus man wants neither superior, nor equal, and he does not suffer that anything be excluded from his rule. This condition belongs to God only. Hence man desires the condition of God. This can be easily inferred from the fact that many philosophers and princes have sought divine honors for themselves.³⁹

In Ficino's hierarchy of virtuous actions there is clearly an underlying social hierarchy. Manual labourers have a necessary role to play, artists and governors a richer vocation, and the nobility, culminating in the person of the king or emperor, the supreme task of emulating God on earth. French observers of the rank of nobility firmly articulated these privileges and responsibilities in their own assessment of the social fabric, urging, in a vocabulary redolent of Ficino, that the first estate engage with its calling to be perfectly in tune with the divine, and to make that perfection manifest in the world.

THE IDEOLOGY OF FRENCH NOBILITY

During the course of the sixteenth century, and especially from 1550 onwards, the role of the French nobility was

scrutinized and debated ever more intensely, as the correlation between nobility and virtuous action became more strongly pronounced. While Neoplatonic philosophy encouraged personal endeavour and both Neoplatonism and evangelical/reformist theology asserted the impetus upon the individual to seek God and glory, so the nobility believed that their natural affinity with the divine nature drove them on inexorably to such achievements. Indeed, they saw themselves as the heads of a divinely ordained state, bestowing upon the lesser ranks the wisdom of their virtue, in order that its benefits would filter through the populace in necessary progression.

The second half of the sixteenth century saw a number of treatises produced in France concerning the role of the nobility and the issue of social decorum. These applauded the harmony of the Renaissance social system, and sought to clarify the important function of the nobility as administrators and maintainers of that harmony. Pierre de la Primaudaye, in his lengthy observation of French sixteenth century mores, *l'Academie françoise*, concludes that every state should have six major faculties: 'a sçavoir est, Sacrifices, jugemens, armes, richesses, arts, et aliments: ausquelles six chose [sic] et oeuvres sont respondans six manieres de gens, Pasteurs, Magistrats, Nobles, bourgeois, artisans et laboureurs'.⁴⁰ A similar and roughly contemporary treatise, the *Questions diverses* of Louis le Caron, published in 1579, shows an equal desire to celebrate social diversity. The author believes the huge

variety of behaviour incumbent on the different estates of man to be innate and natural:

On peut monstrier par raisons Philosophiques et par exemples, qu'entre les hommes y a grand' difference de moeurs, sans parler des qualités et formes des corps, et que telle diversité leur vient de nature, c'est à dire, des la premiere condition, en laquelle ils naissent.⁴¹

The concept of election was, therefore, of singular importance to the nobility, who claimed for themselves the supreme role of rational administrators of the earth's resources, in the domains of politics, the arts, philosophy, education and social mores. Theirs was the task to perfect man's rational nature; theirs the outward and physical personification of inward and spiritual beauty given by God. Humanist confidence in individual potential was subsumed into a collective aim: triumph and glorification of the nobility. The art of transcendence which Neoplatonism celebrated as worthy became incorporated into all aspects of noble action, and the estate which remained unsullied by common trade came to see its activities, be they military, political, artistic or social, as somehow imbued with spiritual intent and other-worldly significance. This 'cult of nobility', as it certainly became, gained ground apace during the course of the sixteenth century, supported by the dual pillars of Neoplatonic and evangelical/reformist ideals which celebrated individuality and encouraged the pursuit of human dignity. Indeed, these two dimensions of noble society became increasingly confused, as glorification of

the nobility reached unprecedented heights, and spilled over into the deification of its more prominent members. Such tendencies had grown out of Ficinian enthusiasm for man as a creature awash with divine aims and divine potential, 'for men strive, like God, to be recognized as gods. Self-deification has acquired an astonishing aura of piety, perfectly reversing the medieval denunciation of pride.'⁴² However, the visible tenets of honour and *courtoisie*, which served to prove divine excellence in earthly terms, were built upon ambiguous moral precepts of a quasi-religious, but secular nature, and the fine line between Christian religious practice, made manifest in the Very Christian King of France, and secular deification, became blurred. Arlette Jouanna, in her study of the French nobility, underlines the moral epithets attached to noble status:

Les auteurs du XVIIe siècle donnent à l'antinomie noble/ignoble un contenu essentiellement moral; ils aiment à répéter que 'la noblesse, c'est la vertu', en entendant par 'vertu' non seulement la vertu chrétienne, mais aussi et surtout une perfection humaine caractérisée par la générosité, la soif de l'honneur, la libéralité, la courtoisie. Pour eux, le principe hiérarchique de la société doit séparer les meilleurs des moins bons.⁴³

In fact, the French Renaissance witnessed an identity crisis within the nobility even as humanist scholars enthusiastically glorified the unique role of the Prince and his entourage. On the one hand, intellectual expectations of this elite group grew and grew, as rich educational opportunities emerged to aid their decision-

making in the temporal domains of politics and the arts, for which they were assuming increasing responsibility. On the other, however, there remained a strong attachment to a glorious and heroic military past, which had attained a somewhat mythical status. The nobility were celebrated as historical founders of the French nation. Ancestors of the powerful ruling families had borne arms for the sake of France, and the present generation reiterated their right and duty to do the same. The humanist emphasis upon human dignity became mythically associated with the right to bear arms for one's country, and the nobility was frequently identified by this supreme quality. The French Wars of Religion reinvigorated the debate concerning the role of the nobility in this area, for while the leading noble families of France had assumed prominent roles in the conflicts, members of the urban classes and peasants had also shown great heroism, thereby bringing into question the hitherto accepted adage that the nobility exceeded in bravery and courage over the lower estates. Literature addressing the role of the nobility written during the second half of the century largely reflected the desire to retain the nobility as military champions for the sake of national order and decorum. Jean Le Masle, writing in 1580, identifies war as the ultimate symbol of human free will, and sees the origins of nobility in the triumph of those who successfully overcame their adversaries when the Fall first brought dissension into the world:

Lors ceux qui és assaux, batailles, et alarmes,
Se monstroient les plus forts et adextres aux armes,

Furent par dessus tous honorez et prisez,
 Et d'un commun accord les plus autorisez:
 Comme libres et francs de la charge ordinaire
 Que porte sur le dos le plus bas populaire.
 Et deslors chacun d'eux choisit certain blason,
 Affin de remarquer sa race, et sa maison.
 Voila comment jadis, le tiltre de noblesse
 Print l'origine sien, par guerriere proüesse: [...]
 Nobles ils furent dits, comme ceux qui montez
 Sont aux degrez d'honneur, par leur faits meritez,
 Ou bien par la vertu de leurs ayeulx antiques,
 Lesquels, ainsi que Dieux, par actes heroiques
 Reluisoient sur le peuple, et apres le trepas
 L'honneur par eux aquis en oubly n'estoit pas.⁴⁴

Other writers also continued to see military action as the ultimate symbol of noble status. François de l'Alouëte's treatise of 1577, the *Traité des nobles et les vertus dont ils sont formés*, concludes that the nobility forge their identity principally by bearing arms and owning fiefs. He therefore warns noblemen to research their geneology, lest common soldiers attempt to impinge upon the life and position of the nobility, a possibility which he believes to be detrimental to the smooth-running of the Republic. In Alouëte's mind, military heroism is the definitive expression of virtue. His is a conviction in the supreme importance of the State, and he finds honour in the willingness of the nobleman to renounce all things, including his wife and children, in order to defend the country.⁴⁵ L'Alouëte's inventory of noble virtues, therefore, is concerned entirely with temporal, tangible expressions of nobility necessary to protect the State. He lists the importance of staffs and emblems depicting the aspirations of the noble houses of France, hails the right of the nobility to bear arms and the glorious reflection of this in royal orders of chivalry distinct to the nobility,

praises the possession of fiefs among the noble classes and applauds the skills of the nobility in hunting.⁴⁶ David Rivault de Fleurance, writing in 1595, also perceives a direct correlation between noble identity, honour and the bearing of arms: 'Le cours humain, a retenu [...] le Noble à l'honneur et à la gloire de ceste vie. [...] Mais tous peuples n'ont pas mis la gloire et l'honneur de ceste vie en une mesme vertu, encores que la plus grande part l'ait constituee au manient des armes'.⁴⁷

Though the virtue of fortitude remained the most esteemed quality in the nobleman, according to most observers, evidence of military prowess in other ranks had precipitated a re-examination of other social and moral obligations said to be the privilege of the aristocracy. Honour, by the mid-sixteenth century, had ceased to be associated solely with strength, and had also become a matter of social responsibility and outlook.⁴⁸ The nobleman should be equipped not merely with the means to defend his country, but also with the will to perfect his social and spiritual nature in keeping with humanist aspirations of humankind as microcosms of the divine intention. Rabelais painted the perfect picture of the ideal nobleman in his description of the Utopia at Thelema, wherein: 'gens liberaes, bien nez et bien instruictz, conversans en compaignies honnestes, ont par nature un instinct et aguillon, qui tousjours les pousse à faictz vertueux et retire de vice, lequel ilz nommoient honneur.'⁴⁹

The numerous treatises concerning the virtues of social hierarchy which appeared during the second half of the sixteenth century tended to echo this conviction. David Rivault's *Les Estats*, as we have seen, suggests that Nature has set down a path of glory for the nobility to follow: 'Le cours humain, a retenu le Paysan attaché aux necessitez, le Marchant à l'utilité, le Noble à l'honneur et à la gloire de ceste vie'.⁵⁰ Torquato Tasso's treatise, *De la Noblesse*, which was available in translation at the French court, reflects the intimate bond linking virtue and nobility in the form of a discussion between two protagonists, Alcandre and Clidamont. The latter concludes, at various stages in the dialogue, that 'la Noblesse n'est autre chose que la perfection de la forme', and, in addition, that 'cette Noblesse est à mon advis la perfection de l'Ame raisonnable, [...] un je ne sçay quoy qui derive de la Vertu'.⁵¹

French treatises such as these were undoubtedly influenced by Castiglione's *The Courtier*, which acted as a major vehicle for the transmission of secular Neoplatonic theories specifically relating to the office of nobility derived from Ficino and from contemporary Italian humanists. Within the French court, *The Courtier* was a much-used reference book which later works imitated and echoed: Castiglione, like Rabelais, endorses the view that the nobleman should be a well-educated humanist as well as a warrior. He would benefit from having studied Greek and Latin, certain interlocutors argue, and whilst always

prepared to fight ('celuy donc que nous cherchons soit tresfier et rigoureux quand il sera devant les ennemis, et tousjours des premiers') should also be in possession of social graces ('mais en tout autre lieu, qu'il soit humain, modeste et posé').⁵²

Social and spiritual virtues, then, were recognized concomitants of nobility, and it remained the task of court thinkers to survey the means by which these innate gifts might be brought to perfection. Most fundamental to the process was an affinity with the divine intention reflected in nature. Thinkers were aware that if a chasm separated the ethereal noble from the worldly sinner, then Nature who created both must have a dual purpose, endowing humankind with the capacity for passion as well as spiritual tendencies. In the manner of Ficino, they acknowledged a bifurcation in Nature's actions, and saw her benevolence and divine greatness in the beneficent free will she bestowed upon humanity. Nature, then, might inspire the individual to act upon his or her in-born rational tendencies and seek out God in spiritual contemplation, though conversely she might also tempt him or her onto the natural path of the beast, towards physical gratification. Writers enthusiastic for the cause of human perfection were careful to consider the whole range of Nature's possibilities in their efforts to advise the course of action which would lead to virtuous fulfilment for the nobility. In his *Academie Françoise*, Pierre de la Primaudaye observes that:

Quand ils traitent generalement de la Nature, ils en font deux principales especes: l'une spirituelle, intelligible, et immuable principe de mouvement et de repos, ou bien la vertu, cause efficiente et conservatrice de toutes choses: et l'autre sensible, muable et subjecte à generation et corruption, qui regarde toutes choses animees, et qui doivent prendre fin.⁵³

He also concludes that, since Nature is, for noble souls at least, 'l'esprit ou la raison divine, cause efficiente des oeuvres naturelles', the nobility must accept the task of acting as rational stewards of the creative impulse: 'L'homme [...] parfaitement vertueux n'use point d'autres dons que de la nature mesme: mais la raison et l'usage les rendent à leur perfection.'⁵⁴ David Rivault concurs in the opinion that it is the faculty of reason unique to humankind which separates human being from beast:

Il sera tres-bon de nous souvenir, que la nature curieuse, tant [...] d'estre conservee en son entier, parfait et sain Estat, nous a imprimé le desir de l'aise, et le chatouillement des voluptez corporelles, pour nous y licencier aussi immoderément qu'aucun autre animal, si la raison n'agit en nous: laquelle nous y devons tousjours avoir pour guide, si mesme nous desirons y faire le profit et l'intension de la mesme Nature.⁵⁵

In short, if the nobility partook more fully of the divine nature than the lower estates, and in sixteenth-century France philosophers and social commentators generally perceived this to be the case, then rational mastering of the physical world was an essential skill. Boaistuau's *Bref Discours de l'Excellence et Dignité de*

l'Homme, first published in 1558, asserts the correlation between divine creation and human excellence:

C'est donc un grand miracle de nature que l'homme. Lequel combien qu'il soit composé d'une nature mortelle, l'autre toutesfois est celeste, et rememorant les dons de grace de divinité, il mesprise celle qui est terrestre, souspire après le ciel et le regrette, pource que sa meilleure partie sent avoir de là sa propre affinité et naturelle alliance.⁵⁶

A natural propensity to virtue, and the will to put such virtue into practice: these were the prerequisites for the foundation of human perfection, and these two gifts the nobility possessed in abundance. La Primaudaye attributes this factor rather pragmatically to advantages of education and means enjoyed by the nobility: 'Il s'ensuit, que les grands doyvent sur tous autres apprendre la Vertu, et s'estudier à bien vivre, ayans mesmes toutes les commoditez de ce faire, pour le default desquelles la plus part des hommes sont empeschez d'y attaindre'.⁵⁷ Other writers inferred that the noble's predisposition to virtue was a more mystical phenomenon: Noel du Fail declares the nobleman to possess 'un je ne sais quoi d'honneur, naturellement empreint et attaché par-dessus les autres conditions et états, cela provenant d'une générosité et hautesse de sang'.⁵⁸

The Issue of Moral Perfection

Humanist scholars and commentators upon noble action, in their efforts to guide those who sought after virtue and

the glorification of the French nation, re-discovered the impact of the writings of Cicero, whose *De Officiis* considered the contribution of the individual towards the progress of the State.⁵⁹ The work yoked together the philosophical concepts of moral virtue (termed *honestum*), and self-enhancement (*utile*), and celebrated service of the Republic (*utile*) as the ultimate source of glory (*honestum*) for its citizens.⁶⁰ The *De Officiis* clearly recognized the importance of philosophy (known as *otium* or *contemplatio*) to the State, although it postulated the active support of the State through political action as the more usual means of acquiring virtue and renown, and even, on occasion, implied that the interests of the State should take precedence over moral virtues.⁶¹

Humanist scholars were enthused anew by Ciceronian terminology, which appeared to correspond more neatly with the Renaissance view of man as microcosm than scholastic Aristotelianism. Leonardo Bruni's translation of Aristotle into Ciceronian Latin during the early decades of the fifteenth century instigated the move towards a new political and philosophical order by linking the Aristotelian Intellect with Ciceronian *otium*. Contemplation thereby became a component of social and political life, and the pre-excellence of the intellectual virtues advocated within Aristotelian philosophy was thus made subject to the emerging structures of humanist Neoplatonism.⁶²

In the light of such philosophical and political debate provoked by Renaissance humanism, moral philosophy expounded in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and also debated by Cicero was enthusiastically marshalled by French authors of treatises dealing with the subject of noble virtue. Prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude, the cardinal virtues cited in the *De Officiis*, were in turn explored by these authors in instructions to the French nobility. The virtue of fortitude was easily assimilated into the chivalric tradition of military might, and was duly celebrated by certain writers as a superior virtue for noblemen. In general, however, thinkers did not neglect consideration of the other three, more intellectual means of self-perfection, which were in many ways more ambiguous and less overtly masculine in their orientation. As this chapter has previously noted, a strong emphasis upon the natural rationality of the human soul and mind encouraged the nobility in the pursuit of a spiritualized excellence in human affairs. Duty to the State and glorification of self were seen as one and the same action, through which earthly renown and divine beatitude might be reached. Pierre de la Primaudaye explicitly links the aforementioned moral virtues with this noble path to fulfilment:

Ainsi doncques c'est de ceste visve et
 eternelle source, cause de tout bien, qu'il nous
 fault attendre la cognoissance parfaicte de nostre
 devoir, et les fins et moyens d'iceluy executer, à
 la gloire de Dieu, et au bien et profit de nos
 semblables. Puis de ceste generale vertu, et
 fontaine d'honesteté le Devoir, sortent ces
 quatre ruisseaux, appelez vertus morales: la
 Prudence, comme guide des autres, qui sçait ce qui
 est profitable à soy, à autrui et à la Republique:



la Temperance, maistresse de modestie, chasteté, sobriété, et vigilance, et de tout ordre et moyen reiglé en toutes choses: la Force, qui faict l'homme constant, patient, courageux, hardy, et entreprenant choses haultes, grandes, profitables et saintes: et la Justice, qui est lié à la conservation de la société humaine, en rendant à chascun ce qui luy appartient.⁶³

In essence these virtues relate to the elemental conflict between passion and reason, the reign of lust and the reign of grace prominent in the ontology of evangelical and reformist theology as well as that of Ficinian Neoplatonism. Passion, as we have seen earlier, was perceived as a departure from right reason: a condition which disturbed the whole nature of being, rather than a sexual sin alone. Since original sin was generated by lust, however, the vocabulary used to represent chaos was a vocabulary of sexuality: sin was depraved; those who walked the narrow path of right reason were chaste. This terminology was, of course, ancient and prevailed in many different cultures, but its usage in the context of an elite moral system, where it might easily be associated with rank rather than individual moral determination, was particularly discernible in the Renaissance.⁶⁴

The dangers of passion were emphatically laid before the nobility, and yet it was generally supposed that they were essentially equipped to overcome temptation through the simple employment of their innate faculties of reason. As far as Signor Ottaviano, an interlocutor of *The Courtier*, is concerned, temperance is therefore the most significant of the moral virtues because it instates the

rule of reason, by which justice, prudence, and even fortitude must needs be governed. He insists that temperance is not the equivalent of continence, which is 'appellée vertu imparfaite, pource qu'elle ha en soy une partie de l'affection',⁶⁵ but transcends this lesser quality by focusing instead on the cultivation of reason which draws all moral issues to itself: 'la temperance libre de toute peturbation, ressemble au capitaine, lequel [...] destruit, comme un bon prince en la guerre civile, les seditieux ennemis qui sont au dedans, et donne le sceptre et l'entiere domination à la raison.'⁶⁶ French treatise writers echoed this conviction: La Primaudaye demands 'modestie, chasteté, sobrieté, et vigilance' of the nobleman,⁶⁷ and goes on to denounce, in strong terms, 'la tyrannie puissance [sic] de Volupté, ennemie mortelle du regne de la Vertu', calling on French citizens, particularly 'les plus grands, qui devoient servir aux autres d'un exemplaire de toute pudicité' to 'nous orner de pureté, chasteté et integrité'.⁶⁸ Nor was *l'Academie Française* unusual in its prescription of chaste behaviour for the nobleman: David Rivault assures his readers that:

L'homme vertueux par un long exercice de commander à soy-mesme, et à ses passions, les peut rendre obeyssantes à la Raison, et tellement promptes à ses ordonnances, qu'elles n'auront de reste aucune excedente emotion. Si bien que tout ce desir (car j'entens parler du sensuel) est tellement temperé és hommes sages, qu'il y paroît amorty.⁶⁹

Such exhortations towards self-restraint appeal to the nobleman at a moral and pious level which was more usually

reserved for women, for whom the virtue of chastity was a moral imperative. These authors seek, perhaps, to remind the nobleman of his obligation to a mode of behaviour which was not a prerequisite for his sex, but which was nevertheless appropriate to his rank and to the virtue of temperance which he was called to uphold. In an age when certain royal women exhibited noble qualities in the political sphere which could justifiably be compared with those of noblemen at court, moreover, one might question whether there was any correlation between this male expression of self-control and the female ideal of chastity. Could noblewomen who were naturally disposed to be skilled in the art of temperate behaviour be celebrated for their perfection of this important cardinal virtue?

In fact, the large majority of treatises considering nobility were written for noblemen; rarely were the four moral virtues specifically associated with noblewomen, who were instead fed a diet of conduct books which stressed the so-called feminine attributes of chastity, humility, piety and patience.⁷⁰ The presence of significant numbers of high-ranking women who enjoyed a certain amount of political and social prestige, however, assured that chastity at court was more than the moral precept it had always been for all women of every rank.⁷¹ Despite its obvious links with female sexuality, chastity for noblewomen was tangibly associated with the wider issues of rationality, self-control and ordered administration of the physical environment proposed by Neoplatonism, and which

the virtue of temperance also encapsulated. In noblewomen, however, such capacity for rational self-control was often held to be a legacy of the noble line established by their male ancestors; any political and social strength formerly considered to be the domain of the nobleman was theirs only by inheritance, and generally deemed atypical of the female sex.

Though the notion of inherited nobility was forcefully denounced by many sixteenth century thinkers, a strong tradition of family honour amongst the nobility led to the widely accepted belief that, while virtue constituted the the foremost demonstration of noble status, race and ancestry were likely to produce a strong propensity to virtuous action and so ensure nobility of soul as well as rank. Many thinkers were convinced that the mark of nobility became embodied in certain races, thereafter to be passed from generation to generation as an innate quality: 'Ainsi la Noblesse de l'homme vertueux est en son fils comme en son lieu naturel [...] Car les races nobles sont autant de brandons qui esclairent à ceux qui recherchent la vertu'.⁷² There was, moreover, a general consensus that those families with the longest ancestry were likely to be the most virtuous: 'Plus une race est ancienne, et plus elle est noble'.⁷³

These distinctions, one must reiterate, were concerned almost exclusively with male virtue; the majority of treatises maintained that inherited virtue was passed down

through the male line, and even those who accorded women a certain role in the generation of noble races often emphasized the secondary nature of that role: 'si me semble t-il [...] que par la raison naturelle il est démontré, qu'elle [la Noblesse] procede plus de l'homme que de la femme.'⁷⁴ The significance of lineage was, however, felt acutely, particularly in the realms of royalty, for if the principal families of France stood by their ancient reputation, royal blood was a yet more potent indicator of honour and worth. The figure of the Renaissance Prince was beyond reproach, and all those who inherited the seal of royal blood were believed to possess other-worldly virtues befitting their divinely-ordained status: 'La Vertu Royale a je ne sçay quoy, qui va, s'il faut ainsi dire, par dessus l'humanité'.⁷⁵ This elevated concept of royalty had important ramifications for royal women at the French courts. By birth they were attached to an ancestry which was the triumph of the French nation: an ancestry which, some commentators claimed, was longer and thus more glorious even than the line of Israel.⁷⁶ The Renaissance thirst for immortal fame encouraged enthusiasm for such a heritage, and increased a conviction in the natural supremacy of France. Jean de Caumont, writing in 1585, declares:

Il y a plus de douze cent ans, que le pays de France est Noble, et congneu au monde du plus beau nom qui soit au monde: nom qui porte creance au ciel, c'est du nom de TRES CHRESTIEN: ce nom luy a esté baillé selon les proprietéz vertueuses des habitans recogneuz de l'antiquité.⁷⁷

Because of the Salic law, royal women were denied the possibility of attaining the throne of France. Their filial relationship to that throne, however, assured they were uniquely blessed among women, and recognized to have virtues which sprang not from their femininity, but from their blood. A eulogy of Marguerite de Valois is typical of many panegyrics of royal women in celebrating the eminence of her lineage before describing her virtues, as if evidence of the former itself assures her perfection:

Je veux maintenant vous declarer de quel sang elle est yssuë, combien illustre est sa race et ses ancestres: car ce n'est pas peu de gloire de tirer son origine des parens glorieux: et les triomphes des peres redondent tousjours à l'honneur des enfants.⁷⁸

The author's argumentation here represents an interesting departure from the norm: nobility and virtue were generally held to be passed through the male line, and indeed, the writer concedes this has hitherto been the case by stating that Marguerite's qualities are inherited from the 'trionphes des peres'. Now, however, this picture of female royalty herself personifies the formerly masculine virtues of her forefathers, and is praised in masculine terms: 'je veux parler de sa Prudence, de sa Force, de sa Temperance, de sa Liberalité, de sa Magnanimité'.⁷⁹ Unquestionably, these are moral virtues usually associated with male nobility, a fact to which the writer himself attracts the reader's attention in a description of Marguerite's 'liberalité':

Vous estes la plus liberale Princesse qui fut jamais au monde: voire, mais que dis-je? Les femmes ne sont jamais liberales de leur naturel. Ce seroit peu si vous n'aviez surpassé que les Dames anciennes [...]. Vous avez encore surpassé tous les hommes.⁸⁰

The French Renaissance recognized in emerging female figures of royalty the capacity to govern which had formerly been perceived to be a male attribute. Thinkers therefore acknowledged the presence of male strengths in the psyche of royal women, and named them viragos - female beings with masculine souls and intellects. Jean-Claude Margolin reports that Marguerite de Savoie was frequently identified with this phenomenon, noting that the renowned recorder of court life, de Thou, compliments her as "une femme éminente par sa sagesse, son irréprochable vertu et l'énergie d'une âme vraiment virile".⁸¹ As Margolin also explains, the term virago was particularly favoured by humanists such as Erasmus as a means of expressing female perfection, and was thus, despite its allusions to masculinity, a supreme endorsement of honour and virtue for women:

Virago, c'est-à-dire une femme dont les qualités sont comparables à celles d'un homme (au sens plein du mot, celui du *vir*), ce qui, à une époque où les moeurs sociales et familiales, la politique, la religion, l'éducation maintenaient la femme dans un état d'infériorité, est le plus beau compliment qu'on puisse lui faire. Mais ce que la notion érasmiennne de *virago* exprime encore, [...] c'est que cette femme aux vertus dignes de celles d'un homme, n'en demeure pas moins féministe.⁸²

French writers were wont to use the virago allusion in reference to royal women, such as Marguerite de Savoie, Marguerite de Navarre and Marguerite de Valois, who demonstrated both intellectual insight and political stamina. The queen regent, Catherine de Medici, by dint of her political acumen, was frequently praised for her redoubtable authority. Joachim Blanchon hails her courageous achievements in *The Wars of Religion*, and eulogizes her alongside her son and king for having 'r'ameiné, la belle vierge Astrée. | Et d'un sage conseilh aux affaires d'estat, | [...] servy de Patron, dictant tout resultat'.⁸³

Equal Rank: Equal Virtue? Can the Attribute of Chastity be Applied to Both Sexes at Court?

In its rejection of all that was animalistic and irrational in human behaviour, the virtue of chastity conformed entirely to the philosophical and theological principles of Neoplatonic humanism so important to the French Renaissance, and was thus, in contrasting aspects, as desirable an attribute to the Renaissance man as to the Renaissance woman. The burdens of the virtue were not equally shared, however, with noblemen often eschewing its sexual consequences (since continence was not, for them, the ultimate consideration), and women attempting to align its social demonstration with a protection of their sexual reputation. Thus, while there was no conflict between the sexual and social aspects of the virtue for women, male-oriented treatises revealed an obvious confusion between

esthetic humanist ideals of temperance and the need to display qualities of strength and courage, which often included sexual pursuit and conquest, reminiscent of earlier chivalric eras. These aspects of the virtue of fortitude continued to constitute virtuous action, and remained a significant hallmark of male noble identity in the French Renaissance world. Ruth Kelso sees this emphasis upon the physical demonstration of power amongst noblemen as a pre-Christian characteristic, bearing little relation to the conventional moral behaviour demanded both of noblewomen and of the lower estates:

The moral ideal for the lady is essentially Christian [...] as that for the gentlemen is essentially pagan. For him the ideal is self-expansion and realization [...]. All his virtues are turned to ensure his pre-eminence, enhance his authority. [...] For the lady the direct opposite is prescribed. The eminently Christian virtues of chastity, humility, piety, and patience under suffering and wrong, are the necessary virtues.⁸⁴

The world of the nobleman, despite its obvious military ethos, cannot be so easily categorized, for as we have seen, the courtier was ideally to be concerned with issues of chastity and humility as well as those of chivalrous valour. Indeed, precisely because of the relative lack of importance of these more passive qualities in the eyes of most courtiers, certain writers were at pains to stress their significance and to scrutinize their meaning. Those who criticized noblemen did not, by and large, attack their actions on the battlefield, but in the more refined areas of social and political decorum; it seemed, according to

critical observers of the court, that some noblemen were failing to live up to their spiritual responsibilities, whilst concentrating erroneously upon their temporal reputation. Many texts sought to remind the nobility that honour was neither inherited nor bought, but achieved through virtuous action alone. Jean de Caumont is highly condemnatory of those who believe and behave otherwise:

Je sçay qu'il y a une Noblesse perverse,
Noblesse serpentine, Noblesse bastarde, vilaine,
degenereuse, prevaricatrice, blasphematrice,
n'ayant rien du bien de noblesse que l'origine de
la race, ayant tous les effets contraires aux
effets de vraye noblesse.⁸⁵

True nobility, to borrow de Caumont's phrase, rests upon faithful enactment of the three other moral virtues, in harmony with the virtue of fortitude which noblemen unquestionably possessed. In reality, however, a dichotomy persisted between aspiration and action in the male camp: temperance, justice and prudence were moral attributes which frequently came into conflict with sanctioned doctrines of pursuit and indifferent attitudes to social responsibility. In his ironic description of the virtue of justice, Philibert de Vienne makes an important distinction between civil law and moral duty: 'Il y a une Justice legale, et une morale'.⁸⁶ The former, which involves the formation of contracts to facilitate trade and the distribution of titles and offices to worthy citizens, is clearly a feature of the male-oriented world of government. The latter, his corrupt courtier reveals almost in spite of himself, should consist in 'une ferme et assurée volonté

de donner et faire à chacun ce qui luy appartient'.⁸⁷ Jean de Caumont takes this line of argument further, and suggests that the principal role of the nobleman is to demonstrate Christian humility and charity towards those whom he has been called to serve:

Des le premier concours des hommes en société civile, les nobles ont esté separez d'avec le rang du commun peuple, et colloquez plus eminent d'honneur, comme en un estage plus hault, pour avoir secouru les affligez, [...] pour avoir repoulsé les injures, et chassé le mal de leur provinces [...] et causé tout bien possible en la société humaine.⁸⁸

This philosophy of reciprocal justice for all, to be instigated by the nobility out of Christian love for a neighbour, is strongly redolent of the virtues of piety and humility traditionally prescribed for women as a consequence of their devotion to chaste living. Ruth Kelso notes that humility 'was claimed to belong pre-eminently to women for their devotion to religious exercises, [...] and their piety and charity for the poor.'⁸⁹ Chivalric skills were applauded and accepted by the majority of men and women at court, but such excesses as the practice of duelling, an increasingly common feature of court etiquette in the second half of the century, were perceived by many to be barbaric infractions of the cardinal virtues. Still on the subject of justice, Philibert de Vienne ironically parodies the brutal enthusiasm of the nobleman who would maim or kill an opponent out of a misplaced sense of honour; this tendency is symptomatic of a social code which has lost its purpose:

Quant aux crimes et delictz, on a accoustumé de garder ceste distinction: ceux qui se commettent par armes, quels qu'ilz soient, sont excusables, souvent louables, par ce qu'ordinairement celuy qui les fait, ou il defend sa personne, ou son honneur, ou il estoit irrité, et a tousjours quelques semblables couvertures sous lesquelles la verité des delitz est cachée, en sorte que nous ne la voyons pas. [...] Et ne peult-on si peu blecer l'honneur d'un Gentilhomme, ou autre Courtisan, qu'il n'y gise un combat [...], tellement que pour un desmentir il est permis et peult-on justement tuer un homme, car vanité et menterie est la plus grande playe que l'on sçauroit point faire à nostre honneur. [...] L'honneur et la reputation sont la fin de nostre vertu, sans lesquelz nostre vertu ne seroit rien.⁹⁰

Male honour, because of its primitive links with notions of strength and conquest, was always in danger of becoming little more than a quest for physical dominance, as critical observers of court mores warned repeatedly. Moreover, when the behaviour of noblemen was thus deconstructed, it seemed to many that the more ostensibly Christian passive virtues recommended for women were in fact desirable models for both sexes. Those who supported the pro-women arguments in the *Querelle* debate, as we have seen, had sought to fracture the myth of male moral superiority for this reason: Alexandre de Pont-Aymery, in defence of the female psyche, points out that:

Aussi les Cours souveraines et subalternes ne sont remplies que du perpetuel tumulte des hommes, lesquels font naistre injurieusement des scandales à leurs semblables en chose de si peu d'estoffe que la modestie des femmes en a honte, et leur courage la desdaigne.⁹¹

Marguerite de Navarre, in her trenchant examination of court philosophy and social mores, *L'Heptaméron*, relates this propensity for physical violence in the male sex to a lack of self-control and a tendency towards sensuality which she believes to be ungodly. Through Parlamente she contests that:

Ung homme qui se venge de son ennemy et le tue pour ung desmentir en est estimé plus gentil compaignon; aussi est-il quant il en ayme une douzaine aveq sa femme. Mais l'honneur des femmes a autre fondement: c'est douceur, patience et chasteté.⁹²

In this criticism of male standards, Marguerite implicitly suggests that those of her sex are more human, and even, perhaps, more worthy of glorification since they adhere more closely to the moral premises of Neoplatonism and Christianity which the French court supposedly endorsed:

Je sçay bien, ce dist Parlamente, que nous avons tous besoing de la grace de Dieu, pour ce que nous sommes tous encloz en peché; si est-ce que noz tentations ne sont pareilles aux vostres, et si nous pechons par orgueil, nul tiers n'en a dommage, ny nostre corps et noz mains n'en demeurent souillés. Mais vostre plaisir gist à deshonorer les femmes, et vostre honneur à tuer les hommes en guerre: qui sont deux pointtz formellement contraires à la loy de Dieu.⁹³

It is the presence of such worthy paradigms of honesty in the female sex at court that leads François Billon to link the virtue of temperance intimately with that of feminine chastity: noblemen can excel in this virtue if they follow the chaste social code laid down by their female counterparts; in other words, the moral law which

most benefits court society is feminine, and prescribed by women:

O Don des Cieux, honneste Contenance Femenine, comment tu es a present, plus que jamais, guerroyée et cautelement suyvye. O Source de toute Honnesteté, qui seule donnes a tes Ennemys propres, le ply seant de civile Grace: [...] Qui est celluy, O Ames amoureuses [...], Qui est celluy qui se soit jamais peü vantet a bon droit, d'avoir acquis la vertu de Temperance (l'une des Cardinalles) par laquelle l'homme se va peu a peu mesurant en ses actions, tant au boire, au manger, qu'au parler, sinon la vertu de la Femme?⁹⁴

Billon is speaking specifically of the relationship between a nobleman and his chaste beloved when he advocates that the former follow the lead of the latter, and indeed in the context of the game of love few would have disputed the natural pre-eminence of the noblewoman.⁹⁵ That game, however, was not to be played out in private at the French Renaissance court: sexual conduct had become the stuff of social politics, and in the formulation of an ideal social order chastity did indeed emerge as a most powerful icon. This is not to say that the majority of men ever endorsed notions of sexual purity: as we have said, this protective aspect of chastity remained a female virtue for obvious physiological reasons. The *icon* of chastity, however, embraced the far wider concepts of rationality, self-control and ordered social conduct advocated in Neoplatonic philosophy which, like the virtue of temperance, resonated with long-standing female moral attributes and seemed to echo the language of restraint familiar to women. The absence of chaste thinking in the soul, Neoplatonists

warned, left man bereft of his immortal status, animal-like and at the mercy of base passions which 'ne sont qu'affections et inclinations prises de nostre volonté corrompue par les aiguillons et allechemens de la chair, repugnantes du tout à la divinité de la nature raisonnable de l'ame, et qui l'attachent (dict Platon) au corps par le clou de volupté'.⁹⁶

Chaste thinking, then, if not chaste action, was synonymous with the rational faculties of the human soul and mind. The ability to master the passionate side of the soul through the employment of reason and will was in itself a purifying act through which human failings were washed away. This fundamental recognition of the importance of chaste conduct for both sexes seemed to allow for large discrepancies in actual behavioural patterns: women practised physical chastity, men espoused the virtues of conquest. Though these two frequently conflicted, they were united theoretically in the overriding Renaissance quest for human dignity. Chastity practised by women in such an environment was no mere act of self-control. Rather, this virtue became the hallmark of noble status for women: an icon which stated God-given superiority over the lower orders of society, and which was recognized and respected by noblemen and noblewomen alike.

It has been noted that, while the chivalric virtues required of noblemen were restricted entirely to their class, the virtue of chastity was a necessary attribute for

all women, irrespective of rank, and that, therefore, noblewomen possessed an affinity with the lower estates which their male counterparts did not have (a fact which in the eyes of some proved their subordination).⁹⁷ This is undoubtedly true at a very basic level: Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron* relates several stories of peasant and bourgeois women admirably defending their honour against the advances of unworthy males. However, though the women in these tales receive the heart-felt admiration of the female *devisantes*, their stories principally serve a moralistic purpose, to remind the ladies of court that if a character such as the *muletierre d'Amboyse*, of the second story, seeks to preserve her chastity at all costs, how much more should they, for whom the virtue has so many more important ramifications, guard their honour. Oisille, the story-teller, concludes:

Voilà, mes dames, une histoire véritable qui doit bien augmenter le cœur à garder ceste belle vertu de chasteté. Et, nous, qui sommes de bonnes maisons, devrions mourir de honte de sentir en nostre cœur la mondanité, pour laquelle éviter une pauvre mulletierre n'a point crainct une si cruelle mort. [...] Et souvent [Dieu] eslit les choses basses, pour confondre celles que le monde estime haultes et honorables.⁹⁸

As a Christian principle, chastity was a virtue demanded of all estates, and particularly of all women; as an icon, it belonged firmly to the domain of the noble class, where it also became symbolic of honour, and social harmony and perfection. Thus, while all women were encouraged to be chaste, the acquisition of a chaste reputation for the

noblewoman was indispensable, as Louis de Caron concludes in his *Questions diverses*:

La louange de Panthee femme d'Abradate, de laquelle escrit Xenophon, de Lucrece et Arrie Romaines et autres renommes pour leurs chastetez, merite d'estre celebree, pour exciter les autres femmes, principalement les grands [sic] Dames à les imiter: car le propre element de la femme est la chasteté, hors de laquelle si elle pense vivre, elle sera ferue comme un oyseau enfermé dans la cage, qui est privé de la liberté de l'air son naturel element.⁹⁹

In these closing paragraphs the moral imperative to be chaste, especially important to the noblewoman, becomes assumed into a move to present the consequent social effects of these efforts to remain physically pure (humility, patience and so on) as worthy qualities desirable to the State. In presuming a link between sexuality and social order, pro-women writers postulate the potentially stabilizing influence of a socio/sexual discourse which takes its lead from the chaste obligations of women. The elevation of chastity to a social icon, as a consequence, is intimately linked with the love discourse spoken at court, which itself becomes a highly public discourse intended to reflect the reign of order and harmony in the processes of social interaction. The nobleman is not only to prove himself pre-eminent in the political sphere, by accruing wealth and managing his natural environment, but also in the social and spiritual domains, by demonstrating his understanding of divine love

in a human context. In promoting this view of noble perfection, the love discourse has at its heart an idealized and sanctified view of woman as the initiator of the divine intention in the human soul. The chaste woman becomes a very powerful, and yet also problematic, icon by this means.

- 1 Arlette Jouanna, *Ordre social, mythes et hiérarchies dans la France du XVIe siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1977), pp.102-104.
- 2 Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and its Sources* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p.170.
- 3 William Kerrigan and Gorgon Braden, *The Idea of the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p.106.
- 4 Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, trans. by Josephine L. Burroughs, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 5 (1944), 227-239, (p.234).
- 5 See Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, 2 vols (London: Constable, 1970), I, pp.191-196. Petrarch's opusculum on *The Dignity of Man* was written in c.1357. Trinkaus notes that this work was 'a model of the humanist conception of man.' (p.195).
- 6 *Platonic Theology*, pp. 236 & 238.
- 7 Paul Oskar Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1964), p.294.
- 8 See Joseph Moreau, 'Concordance d'Aristote et de Platon' in *Platon et Aristote à la Renaissance*, 16e Colloque International de Tours (Paris: J. Vrin, 1976), pp.45-58.
- 9 Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Of the Dignity of Man*, trans. by Elizabeth Forbes, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 9 (1948), 347-354 (p.348).
- 10 See Lionello Sozzi, 'La Dignitas hominis dans la littérature française de la Renaissance', in *Humanism in France*, ed. by A. H. T. Levi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970), pp.176-198.
- 11 The Gallic zeal for Neoplatonic humanism meant that the French universities could not remain entirely untouched by this intellectual movement. Certain universities, therefore, did admit a limited amount of Neoplatonic teaching within their curricula: Adrien Turnèbe, professor of Greek at the newly-founded Collège Royal, lectured on Plato at the university of Paris from 1547, and was later joined by other experts, including Henri Estienne and his son Robert, Jean Dorat, Etienne Dolet, Pierre de la Ramée and Denys Lambin. See Charles B. Schmitt, 'L'Introduction de la philosophie platonicienne dans l'enseignement des universités à la Renaissance', in *Platon et Aristote à la Renaissance*, pp.93-104 (pp.96-97).

- 12 Ibid., pp.96-98.
- 13 Ibid., pp.95-96.
- 14 Peter Matheson, 'Humanism and Reform Movements', in *The Impact of Humanism on Western Europe*, ed. by Anthony Goodman and Angus MacKay (London: Longman, 1990), pp.23-42 (p.23).
- 15 A. H. T. Levi, 'The Neoplatonic Calculus', in *Humanism in France*, pp.229-248 (p.232). Here Levi also explains that 'the achievement of the evangelical humanists was to anchor the advanced values vehicled by the Platonist tradition in the Pauline epistles and the sermon on the mount. The Neoplatonist vogue in sixteenth-century France is certainly not unconnected with the central concerns of evangelical humanism.'
- 16 This theological approach had been inherited from Ficino, whose precise goal was to 'harmonize human and religious concepts of love through a clarified integration of Platonism and Christianity' and which, Irving Singer believes, instigated 'a reformation within Catholicism almost as fundamental as Luther's reformation from without.' See Singer, *The Nature of Love*, 3 vols, II: *Courtly and Romantic*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.166.
- 17 Levi, pp.233-236. Rabelais' abbey at Thelema in *Gargantua* is the most obvious example of a French Utopia created to express these ideas.
- 18 Roy W. Battenhouse, 'The Doctrine of Man in Calvin and in Renaissance Platonism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 9 (1948), 447-471 (p.454).
- 19 Ibid., p.454.
- 20 Ibid., p.456.
- 21 Ibid., pp,462-463, note 78.
- 22 *Platonic Theology*, p.228.
- 23 Battenhouse, p.460.
- 24 Ibid., p.459.
- 25 Nicole Malet-Yvonnet, 'Les Références à Platon dans l'*Institution de la Religion Chrétienne de Calvin*', in *Platon et Aristote à la Renaissance*, 16e Colloque International de Tours, pp.391-402 (p.392).
- 26 Ibid., p.394.
- 27 *Platonic Theology*, p.232.

- 28 Ibid., p.231.
- 29 Battenhouse, p.466.
- 30 Ibid., pp.466-467.
- 31 Calvin nevertheless corresponded with a significant number of courtiers, many of whom were women. See *Lettres de Jean Calvin*, ed. by Jules Bonnet (Paris: Ch. Meyrueis et Compagne, 1854) for examples of these.
- 32 Matheson, p.42.
- 33 E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1943), p.41.
- 34 Jouanna, p.103.
- 35 See Singer, where he explains that 'in Ficino, [...] all love originates in God's love for his creation, particularly man, whose nature impels him to love God as the source of his being and to love everything else that conduces to loving God. [...] A proper love of things and persons in the world is *itself* a love for God. The Christian goal on earth now becomes the ability to love "God in everything."' (p.167).
- 36 *Platonic Theology*, pp.233-234.
- 37 Ibid., p.235.
- 38 Ibid., p.235.
- 39 Ibid., pp.238-239.
- 40 Pierre de la Primaudaye, *Academie françoise, en laquelle il est traitté de l'institution des Moeurs et de ce qui concerne le bien et heureusement vivre en tous estats et conditions: Par les preceptes de la doctrine, et les exemples de la vie des anciens sages, et hommes illustres* (Paris: Chaudiere, 1580), fol.352v. This is one of many works, all very similar in style and content, written in the second half of the century, which aim both to analyse and to celebrate the structure of French Renaissance society. This particular treatise, in common with several others, broaches the subject in the form of a discussion, here between four characters. Typical themes include an examination of the nature of man, an analysis of the rational and irrational properties of the human condition, the identification of the nobility as the class responsible for perfecting human action, and a debate concerning the duties of the nobility, through which such perfection might be reached. Pierre de la Primaudaye was, in fact, a Protestant writer in the service of Henri III's brother, the duc d'Anjou. His fictional academy, according to Frances Yates, mirrors closely the

- Catholic Palace Academy which engaged in moral and intellectual debate within the French court, and indeed 'probably did more to spread the knowledge of Henri III's academic movement outside France than any other work.' See Yates, *The French Academies of the Sixteenth Century* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1947), p.124.
- 41 Louis le Caron, *Questions diverses et discours* (Paris: chez Vincent Norment, 1579), fol. 85v.
- 42 Kerrigan and Braden, p.114.
- 43 Jouanna, p.116.
- 44 Jean Le Masle Angevin, *Discours, traittant de la noblesse, et de son origine, à François de Belleforest, Gentil-homme Commingeois*, in *Les Nouvelles Recreations poetiques* (Paris: Jean Poupy, 1580), fols 12r-12v.
- 45 François de l'Alouëte, *Traité des Nobles et des vertus dont ils sont formés* (Paris: Guillaume de la Nouë, 1577), fol. 36v.
- 46 Ibid. fols 37-62.
- 47 David Rivault, Sieur de Fleurance, *Les Estats, esquels il est discoursu du Prince, du Noble et du tiers Estat* (Lyon: B. Rigaud, 1595), pp.211-212.
- 48 See *La Catégorie de l'honneste dans la culture du XVIIe siècle* (Saint-Etienne: Université de Saint-Etienne, 1985) for a detailed analysis of the meaning of 'honnesteté' within the French court. In his 'L'"Honneste" dans les "Amours" de Ronsard', pp.179-191, Gabriel Perouse notes that the word is used to refer to the nobleman warrior, but also designates an attitude '"conforme à la bienséance"' (p.191).
- 49 François Rabelais, *Gargantua*, ed. by Ruth Calder and M. A. Screech (Geneva: Droz, 1970), p.189.
- 50 Rivault, p.211.
- 51 Torquato Tasso, *De La Noblesse*, trans. by I. Baudoin (Paris: Auguste Courbé, 1633), pp.81-87. The work was available to the French court in 1584 in a tranlation by La Borderie (Paris: A. l'Angelier).
- 52 Castiglione, *Le Parfait Courtisan*, p.46.
- 53 La Primaudaye, fol. 82v.
- 54 Ibid., fols. 82v-83r.
- 55 Rivault, pp.261-262.

- 56 Pierre Boaistuau, *Bref Discours de l'excellence et dignité de l'Homme* (Paris: 1558; repr. Geneva: Droz, 1982), p.66.
- 57 La Primaudaye, fol. 85v.
- 58 Noel du Fail, *Mémoires recueillis et extraits des plus nobles et solonnels arrêts du Parlement de Bretagne* (Rennes: J. du Clos, 1579), in *Ordre social, mythes et hiérarchies*, p.36.
- 59 Richard Tuck, 'Humanism and Political Thought', in *The Impact of Humanism on Western Europe*, pp.43-65 (pp.48-49).
- 60 Ibid., p.44.
- 61 Ibid., pp.44-45.
- 62 Ibid., p.52.
- 63 La Primaudaye, fol. 46r-46v.
- 64 The interlocutors of Castiglione's *Courtier* thus affirm the need for moral virtues, that the nobleman might learn how to act according to reason: 'l'ignorance est tousjours la chose par laquelle l'appetit vainc et surmonte la raison, et ne peut onques la vraye science estre surmontee par l'affection, laquelle vient du corps et non pas de l'esprit: mais si elle est bien conduite et gouvernee par la raison, elle devient une vertu: autrement, elle devient vice.' (p.545)
- 65 Ibid., p.544.
- 66 Ibid., p.547.
- 67 La Primaudaye, fol. 46r.
- 68 Ibid., fols 112v & 117r-117v.
- 69 Rivault, pp.262-263.
- 70 See chapter six, pp.339-347.
- 71 In particular, the Neoplatonist doctrine of Perfect Love much in vogue in the French Renaissance court emphasized the divine qualities embodied in the chaste beauty of an ideal female beloved; see chapters three, four and five for a detailed exposition of this doctrine and its interpretation at the French court.
- 72 Rivault, p.270.
- 73 Tasso, p.451.
- 74 Ibid., p.289.

- 75 Ibid., p.258.
- 76 Jacques Corbin, *La Royne Marguerite, ou sont descrites la noblesse, la grandeur de ceste grande Princesse, sa beauté, ses vertus* (Paris: Jean Berion, 1605), p.34.
- 77 Jean de Caumont, *De la vertu de noblesse* (Paris: par Frederic Morel, 1585), fol. 13r.
- 78 Corbin, pp.18-19.
- 79 Ibid., p.161.
- 80 Ibid., pp.225-226.
- 81 Jean-Claude Margolin, 'Une Princesse d'inspiration érasmiennne: Marguerite de France, duchesse de Berry, puis de Savoie', in *Culture et pouvoir au temps de la Renaissance*, ed. by Louis Terreaux (Geneva: Slatkine, 1978), pp.155-183 (p.155).
- 82 Ibid., p.155.
- 83 Joachim Blanchon, *Le Trophee des dames à la Royne Mere*, p.242.
- 84 Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance*, p.36.
- 85 Caumont, fol. 6r.
- 86 Philibert de Vienne, *Le Philosophe de Court*, p.112.
- 87 Ibid., p.111.
- 88 Caumont, fol. 5v.
- 89 Kelso, p.26.
- 90 Vienne, pp.118-119.
- 91 Pont-Aymery, *Paradox apologique*, p.56.
- 92 Marguerite de Navarre, *L'Heptaméron* (Paris: Garnier, 1957), p.301. Though this is an early work, dating from the 1540s, it is consistently forward-looking in its honest assessment of the private lives of courtiers.
- 93 Ibid., p.221.
- 94 François de Billon, *Le Fort inexpugnable de l'honneur du sexe Femenin*, fols 66v-67r.
- 95 See chapters three and four for more information on Renaissance codes of love and their interpretation of the chastity ideal.

96 La Primaudaye, fol. 15r-15v.

97 See Kelso, p.36.

98 *L'Heptaméron*, p.21.

99 Le Caron, fol.69r.

III: THE METAPHYSICS OF CHASTITY

The Renaissance preoccupation with ideals of human perfectibility and glorification of human endeavour provided an impetus for the exploration of the nature of human identity and relationships. Humanist theories of self-awareness and transcendent potential did not merely remould the relationship of the individual to the world in an existential sense, but encouraged a radical reassessment of the role of society and social interaction amongst the literate noble classes who aspired to realize the truths of humanist doctrine.

THE PERFECT DISCOURSE OF LOVE: ITALIAN RENAISSANCE MODELS OF HUMAN AFFECTION AND THEIR COURTLY APPLICATION

The fundamental tenet of Renaissance anthropocentric optimism was the celebration of humankind as creatures uniquely fashioned in the image of God, microcosms of the divine intention, each one 'a kind of God', to return to the central theme of Ficino's *Platonic Theology*.¹ This new-found conviction that the logos of God was directly accessible to the human mind and soul, a fact confirmed to the Christian through the grace of Christ's incarnation, raised the significance of human action and being to unprecedented heights. Philosophers and theologians alike were united in the assertion that it was the love of God which made such a relation between truth and being possible, since in His goodness the Creator had allowed

himself to become created in Christ, so that He might henceforward firmly and willingly be identified with the machinations of the human sphere. They thus, as we have seen, affirmed the potential for knowledge of God through rational understanding of the nature of divine love. Man, the 'vicar of the immortal God',² and 'crowned [...] with glory and honor' by Him,³ might begin to discern these truths in the temporal world, inspired by the presence of God in the created order and in human individuals made in His image.

According to humanist theories of self-perfection, knowledge of the cosmic truths behind the perceptible world held the key to transcendence of that world and hence to the possibility of realizing the divine intention within the temporal sphere. The role of Ficinian Neoplatonism in stimulating this pursuit of the divine via the human, and indeed in shaping French Renaissance thought along these lines, cannot be underestimated. A.H.T. Levi, in 'The Neoplatonic Calculus', declares Neoplatonism to be a thematic 'thread' running through the century and linking diverse theories of human dignity through its central tenet of divine revelation made effective through human experience. Levi notes that Neoplatonism forms the language of 'intellectual articulation' through which the French Renaissance expressed a 'new sensibility' towards the place of humanity within the world. Of course, 'Neoplatonism develops, changes, and is exploited in different fashions in different interests. [...] But in the end the mainstream

of the French Renaissance found it a powerful and flexible instrument for performing a series of different but interrelated functions'.⁴

Ficinian Neoplatonism, convinced of the interaction of the divine with the secular, was able readily to transpose the notion of divine revelation to the domain of human society and relations. Ficino's *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, also known as the *Convito* or the *De Amore*, explores the philosophical impact of celestial love upon the human environment and defines a system whereby man can come to know God through the manifold expressions of that love to be found in the earthly sphere. For this reason, there are close thematic ties between the *De Amore* and Ficino's religious treatises; indeed, Erwin Panofsky remarks that when Ficino furnished a friend with a copy of his *Symposium* he also included a copy of the *De Christiana Religione*, explaining in an accompanying letter: 'Herewith I send you the *Amor* as promised; but also I send the *Religio*, to make you see that my love is religious, and my religion amatory.'⁵

The *Symposium* was translated into French in its entirety twice during the sixteenth century,⁶ though its influence on French culture was yet more pervasive through texts such as Castiglione's *Courtier* which appropriated the philosophical language of the work and applied this to more aesthetic questions of love and ethics of social interaction.⁷ Ficino's initial philosophical standpoint,

however, valorized the Platonic belief in the inherent compatibility of beauty and goodness, as a means of linking man's physical nature with his innate spiritual tendencies. Henceforth the attractiveness of the body, and any consequential desire that might spring from man's rational appraisal of it, might be seen as a healthy veneration of the handiwork of the Creator God, who had created such a vessel to house the wondrous soul. Such a doctrine could not but disturb traditional Christian mistrust of the body, but Ficino, aware of this dilemma, confidently asserted the value of the physical form as a stepping stone towards the divine.⁸ Beauty, then, became the recognizable outward sign of the soul's virtue otherwise invisible to human eyes:

Nous ne voyons point l'âme et pourtant nous ne voyons pas sa beauté: mais nous voyons le corps qui est image et ombre de l'âme, de sorte que, tirant conjecture de cette image, nous estimons qu'en un beau corps soit une âme belle: et de là vient que nous enseignons plus volontiers aux plus beaux.⁹

Physical desire henceforward might become an admissible and even laudable facet of human affection, provided that it be directed towards the idea of beauty in the beloved, and not towards sensual gratification. Ficino explicitly states that 'Quand nous disons amour, entendez le desir de Beauté',¹⁰ and specifies that this beauty is both chaste and honourable because it is none other than the earthly manifestation of heavenly harmony, and thus the antithesis of temporal, sinful sensuality:

Elle [Beauté] est une certaine tempérance: et s'ensuit que l'Amour n'appete autres choses, sinon celles qui sont tempérées, modestes et honorables. Ainsi les plaisirs du goust et du touchement qui sont volupté, c'est-à-dire plaisirs tant vehemens et furieux qu'ils chassent l'entendement de son propre estat et repos, et pertroublent l'homme, tant s'en faut que l'Amour les désire, que plustôt il les a en abomination.¹¹

The honest lover therefore contemplates the physical attributes of the beloved in order to be drawn into his soul: the body, far from being an object of temporal delight, becomes a symbol of eternal truths in which he can participate through chaste approach (by employing the nobler senses of sight and hearing). Whilst fallen man is tempted by 'la rage vénérienne [...] à l'intempérance' which induces spiritual death,¹² the lover who espouses chastity is thrown by the sight of the beloved into rational assessment of the spiritual truths behind his immediate presence: 'la principale action d'Amour est de Penser'.¹³

The rational soul gradually becomes aware that the beauty of the other emanates from the transcendent beauty of God Himself, filtered through the angelic realms to the human sphere, where it is manifested in manifold different virtues and qualities. In order to experience fully the wonder of God he has understood in the beauty of the beloved, the lover has to lose all concept of self, and, rather in the manner of the Christian seeking spiritual rebirth, give himself entirely to the beloved, to be reborn as the object of his desire. When the lovers' desire is

mutual, then each soul is successfully reborn in the other, and, enriched, can begin its ascent to beatitude joined in spiritual union with its partner:

Unique est seulement la mort en l'amour réciproque: les Resurrections sont deux, parce que qui ayme, il meurt une fois en soi quand il s'abandonne. Et soudain il resuscite en l'aymé, quand l'aymé le reçoit avecques un penser ardent.¹⁴

It must be stressed at this point that Ficino, like Plato, saw the ability to perceive and study beauty in this way to be a male attribute, though one which he immediately sought to distance from any implications of homosexuality. Irving Singer, writing in *The Nature of Love*, explains that:

Like Plato in the *Laws*, Ficino condemns sexual activity between men as the worst kind of bestiality. He clearly wishes to limit the reciprocity of love to the masculine friendship that presumably existed in the Platonic Academy he himself established in Florence. Like-minded men would experience mutual affection based upon their ability to appreciate the beauties of mind, person, soul and body that they find in each other's company.¹⁵

The ascetic response to beauty and desire advocated by Ficino must, therefore, be seen in this context and cannot simply be regarded as evidence of Neoplatonism's ultimate discarding of the body. On the contrary, Ficino's system, as we have said, valorized the terrestrial world precisely because of its fundamental link with the divine, and man's physical nature because it alone could make concrete the creative impetus of God. Ficino and Pico express these

possibilities by locating reason as a faculty unique to man, which can be influenced both by the divine intellect (or mind according to Ficinian terminology), and by the physical environment in which he finds himself. Both the celestial and terrestrial realms, therefore, are infused with the love of the creator and can be beneficial to man, a concept which Ficino portrays with reference to two different Venuses, or loves. The first, or celestial Venus is the more important since she embodies the celestial beauty experienced by those lovers who attain the beatitude of spiritual union. The second earthly, or natural Venus dwells 'in the realm of the Cosmic Soul' and is 'a particularized image of the primary beauty, no longer divorced from, but realized in the corporeal world.'¹⁶ Each love is good in its own way, and although that of the earthly Venus is a necessary prelude to the divine love her celestial counterpart offers, Ficino in no way castigates those who do not progress to this more advanced state. Such lovers are merely enjoying the visual pleasures of *amor vulgaris*, and even procreation in this context cannot be frowned upon, because it is an attempt to perpetuate the cosmic beauty found in the physical form.¹⁷

For those who successfully make the leap from the 'visible and particular to the intelligible and universal' in matters of love, the issue of corporeality remains, but can be accommodated within the divine pattern by means of reason which, once enlightened, can be governed by recollections of the celestial intellect and thereby

perfect the earthly sphere.¹⁸ Irving Singer reports that 'Ficino and his followers minimize the split between a love of spiritual beauty and a desire to generate it on earth by suggesting that the greatest lover is capable of both', and that Pico, for example, 'uses the image of two-faced Janus to describe "celestial souls" who are able to live in the body as well as in the mind, using both in a way that reveals that each type of Venus is good.'¹⁹ In fact, then, although contemplation and transcendence remain the ultimate goals of the most Perfect lover, the subsequent embodiment of the celestial vision in terrestrial actions constitutes a worthy response to the image of beauty, and should be venerated as such. Singer again observes that few instances in human civilization have been as obsessed with physical beauty as the Renaissance, in architecture, art, sculpture as well as in social and literary expositions of love, and that Ficinian Neoplatonism is at once a cause and expression of this, since Ficino refuses to acknowledge any conflict between love of a material object and love of God.²⁰ The only possible obstacle to the celestial vision is lust, a 'bestial love' which destroys right reason and distances man from God by preventing him from properly evaluating beauty.²¹ A chaste respect for form and matter, indeed a chaste enjoyment of the body is thus postulated by Ficino as a means to divine ends, a fact which leads A. H. T. Levi to conclude that:

The commentary on the *Symposium* is perhaps chiefly remembered for its boldness as the original *trattato d'amore* and first treatise on love formally to reconcile a love which was

presented as morally enriching, and indeed religiously perfective, with a love based on instinct and not exclusive of physical intercourse.²²

It was only with the composition of Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi di Amore*, in c.1505, that these Neoplatonist precepts were debated in the context of heterosexual love. Ebreo, a Portuguese Jew who came to settle in Italy in 1492, was more obviously influenced by Pico than Ficino, sharing the former's enthusiasm for reconciling Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, which he then sought to harmonize with Jewish doctrine.²³ 1551 saw the production of two French translations of Ebreo's *Dialoghi*, in which Filone, the lover, and Sofia, his loved one, seek to define the true nature of love. The work was a popular source of debate for theorists of love in France, who were attracted by Ebreo's synthesis of Aristotelian naturalism, which yoked the body and soul firmly together, and Neoplatonist tendencies to condemn lust but affirm desire as the means of ascending to higher felicity. Furthermore, the work's literary format, its intricate and detailed exploration of the courtship between two lovers separated by conflicting ideologies, stimulated French writers also inspired by the philosophical relationship of divine love to an earthly, social counterpart.

As their names suggest, the two protagonists, Filone and Sofia, represent respectively instinctive affection and the intellectual pursuit of love in its purest, divine form. The former is experiential, characterized by desire

and the quest for satisfaction, and the latter cerebral, contented, peaceful.²⁴ Sofia, then, is persuaded that love cannot co-exist with desire, arguing that love is all-satisfying and all-embracing, leaving no room for unrequited wants or needs. Contemplation, in her mind, transcends the physical completely: the rational soul basks in the light and warmth of the divine having first shunned the weaknesses of the body, and she cannot accept Filone's initial postulate that his 'cognoissance' of her 'cause [...] amour et desir',²⁵ because the ecstasies of such desire conflict with the calm reason she associates with love.²⁶

In many ways, Sofia prefigures the inspirational female beloved figures of later French Neoplatonising love literature which occur not only in the idealized love poetry of the mid-sixteenth century, but also in popular texts appealing to the social ethos of the court, such as the courtly romance *Amadis de Gaule*.²⁷ Her ascetic stance, by means of which she tempers Filone's advances, is recognized to be superior because, in terms of the Neoplatonic hierarchy Ebreo adopts, her reason tends exclusively towards the divine, whilst Filone's is constantly drawn in the direction of the lower corporeal elements.²⁸ Filone never refutes Sofia's arguments, agreeing that 'contemplation requires an utter rejection of all earthly things and that this alone is the source of man's highest felicity.'²⁹ Indeed, his tendency to unchastity, a familiar attribute of the male beloved in

literary presentations of courtship, is at times a source of frustration and anguish, a 'pernicious and raging prison' which induces spiritual death,³⁰ and which he knows he must rationalize:

Il est bien vray que, qui divertit soy-même à un amour lascif et vilain qui naist d'appétition charnelle, non confirmé par raison de merites de la chose aimée, est un arbre qui produit fruits veneneux, demonstrant quelque douceur en l'écorce: mais cet amour esleu de Raison se convertit en grand suavité, non seulement en l'appétition charnelle, mais en la Pensee spirituelle.³¹

Filone is, however, also persuaded that physical objects and desires have their place in the divine order precisely because God made humankind physical beings and introduced man to a corporeal environment which prompts him, in the present, to live in perpetual hope of the divine. Just as God retains his non-material essence whilst yet distributing Himself throughout the created order, so the soul which has attained the beatitude of divine contemplation is obliged to reflect its experience in its own corporeal world, however reluctant it might be to rejoin the body. Such superior souls:

[...] attach themselves to our body solely out of love and service of the sovereign Creator of the world, bringing life and intellectual understanding and divine light from the eternal upper world to the corruptible lower world, so that even this lowest part of the world might not be deprived of divine grace and eternal life, and so that every part of this great living Universe may share in that life and intelligence which He is entirely.³²

Here Ebreo relates Neoplatonic philosophy to his own Hebrew background to argue that rational use of the body is a divine imperative, and he supports this point of view by asserting that Moses saw God whilst still in his human, corporeal form.³³ In conclusion, Ebreo cannot perceive a healthy means of contemplation (which he believes to be man's ultimate end) without consideration of the body, in the same way as Ficino is constantly unable to reject divinely created corporeality because the body itself remains a symbol and means of grace.³⁴ Ebreo, like Ficino, thus demands of his lover the ability to transcend the physical and to resist its irrational sensuality in order that he may then inject the corporeal world with a new understanding of the Creator's will. The knowledge Filone has of Sofia's divine essence in the first instance must be galvanized and deepened by means of love and desire for greater love, in an endless cycle in which she must finally participate, so that, united in physical and spiritual affection, they might together 's'unir au bien' desired by God.³⁵

A. H. T. Levi contends that Ebreo's efforts to connect 'love which was instinctively based' with 'that which was spiritually perfective' aligns him more closely with Ficino's intended ideology than Castiglione and Pietro Bembo, who also made use of the Neoplatonic love discourse in the early part of the sixteenth century, but placed greater emphasis upon its ascetic dimension.³⁶ In fact, Bembo's definition of love recorded in the fourth and final

book of the *Courtier* echoes closely the language of Ficino and Ebreo:

Je dy donc que selon la definition des sages anciens, amour n'est autre chose qu'un certain desir de jouir de la beauté, et pource que le desir n'appete sinon les choses congneues, il faut que la congnoissance precede tousjours le desir, lequel naturellement veut le bien, mais de soy est aveugle, et ne le congnoist pas.³⁷

Familiar, too, are the cardinal's attempts to differentiate between the irrational and divine aspects of man's corporeal nature: he too champions the benefits of the enlightened soul, illuminated by celestial beauty, who thereby 'maistrise sa nature materielle, et par sa lumiere surmonte les tenebres du corps.'³⁸ Bembo cites love as an ascetic activity, and dwells heavily upon the benefits of contemplation without placing corresponding emphasis upon the benefits of the contemplative experience in the material world as Ebreo does: his panegyric of love ends with an ecstatic celebration of transcendent beatitude:

L'ame estant esprise du saint feu de vray amour divine, vole pour s'unir avec la nature angelique: et non seulement abandonne du tout les sens, mais n'a plus affair du discours de la raison, laquelle transformee en ange, entend toutes les choses intelligibles, et sans voile ou nue aucune, voit l'ample et spacieuse mer de la pure beauté divine.³⁹

However, Bembo does admit sensuality into his equation, by means of the kiss, which he appropriates as a spiritual activity:

La dame, pour complaire à son amant bon, [...] peut aussi à juste raison et sans blasme venir jusques au baiser: ce qu'en l'amour sensuel n'est permis, [...] mais l'amant raisonnable congnoist, que nonobstant que la bouche soit une partie du corps, par icelle est donnée issuë aux parolles (qui sont interpretées de l'ame) [...] Et pour cete cause, il prend plaisir de joindre sa bouche avec celle de la dame aymee, par le baiser, non pour estre émeu à aucun desir deshonneste, mais pource qu'il sent que cete liaison est ouvrir le chemin aux ames, lesquelles attirées du desir, l'une de l'autre, se coulent et meslent alternativement au corps l'une de l'autre, de maniere que chacun d'eux ha deux ames.⁴⁰

More interestingly, perhaps, Bembo also excuses sensuality in young men as a natural, if not desirable by-product of love, which can be incorporated into the divine aim if it is the result of a rational intent to please and serve a lady. This appears to be a concession instigated by social ritual encouraged at court, a corollary of the public efforts the male courtier was required to make in wooing a lady, which interlocutors agreed to be a necessary skill in the formation of his character:

J'estime que les jeunes gens qui forcent leurs appetits et ayment avec raison, soient divins, ainsi j'excuse ceux qui se laissent vaincre par l'amour sensuel [...] pourveu qu'en iceluy ils demonstrent une gentillesse, courtoisie, valeur et les autres nobles qualitez que ces Seigneurs ont dit.⁴¹

Indeed, it is this 'socialization' of the Neoplatonic precepts postulated by Ficino and Ebreo which constitutes Castiglione's principal and most significant contribution to the Perfect Love tradition. Beauty is clearly and unequivocally 'feminized' in the *Courtier* ('il me semble', declares the Magnifico, 'que la beauté est plus

necessaire en elle [la femme] qu'au Courtisan') and necessarily the courtship procedures undertaken by the courtier in response to such beauty also assume a quasi-divine significance:

Car si la beauté, l'esprit, la bonté, le sçavoir, la modestie et tant d'autres vertueuses qualitez que nous avons donnees à la Dame, sont cause de l'amour du Courtisan, en son endroit, la fin de ceste amour sera aussi necessairement vertueuse: et [...] la noblesse, la valeur aux armes, le sçavoir des lettres, de la musique, la gentillesse, les bonnes graces tant au parler qu'à converser, sont les moyens par lesquels le Courtisan gangnera l'amitié de ceste dame.⁴²

THE DISCOURSE OF PERFECT LOVE IN RENAISSANCE FRANCE

It was doubtless this endorsement of the value of physical presence and interaction which led to the widespread appropriation of this philosophy by the elite who peopled the courts of Europe, and indeed Florentine Neoplatonism was much more popular in this environment than it ever was in the traditional milieu for philosophical debate: the universities. French Neoplatonists who followed Castiglione combined his belief in civilized social interaction as a means of spiritual and moral fulfilment with their own reading of Ficinian Neoplatonism and its derivatives, as well as of Plato's works in their original form. Many of these writers were connected to the French court, and more particularly to the court of Marguerite de Navarre, who enthusiastically endorsed their Neoplatonising approach to both spiritual love and its social counterpart. The metaphysics of love which they postulate certainly cannot

be divorced from a courtly environment, for their theories are concerned with an elite, refined group capable of comprehending the intellectual rigours of Ficinian love and able to embody its principles.

Antoine Héroët, a writer in the service of Marguerite de Navarre who enjoyed considerable popularity at court, was the most notable of several authors who debated the social role of love in a series of texts collectively known as the *Querelle des Amyes*. These works, written in the early 1540s in response to Castiglione's *Courtier*, and largely for the attention of a court audience, consider the positive and negative implications of an emerging social culture, the mores of which were couched in a Neoplatonic vocabulary and imbued with transcendent significance.⁴³ Héroët's *Parfaicte Amye*, of 1542, immediately announces her love to be divinely ordained: 'si divin fut son commencement [d'amour], | Entretenu je l'ay divinement', and claims to be more virtuous than fickle women because she has been called to a higher understanding of love.⁴⁴ She goes on to explain that divine love, or beauty, has bestowed upon her soul the capacity to love honourably during its earthly existence by enabling it to remember its own pre-existing divine state. This passage echoes Ficino and Ebreo in its depiction of the willing soul raising itself up to beatitude by contemplating itself in love in order to bring the vision of the divine back to the earthly environment where it must be embodied. Here the *Parfaicte Amye* celebrates the fact that the body thus

invigorated with spiritual love is a positive vessel,
devoid of sensual weaknesses:

Nostre ame crainct qu'estant au corps liée,
Par son oubly du beau soit oubliée.
Puis tout soudain par sa reconnoissance
Elle s'asseure, et entre en esperance,
Puis que d'ung tel soubvenir est saysie,
Que beaulté la preesleue et choisie
A s'eslever; si commence d'entendre
Combien de perte elle fist, de descendre,
Veult refrener toutes passions vaines,
Use d'amour et de beaultés humaines,
Pour ung degré propre à plus haulte attente.
Ainsi (disoit) [l'amy] l'ame au corps est
contente.⁴⁵

Héroët clarifies the theme of election to honourable love in an earlier work, *L'Androgyne de Platon*, in which its meaning is palpably social as well as spiritual. The work, a re-writing of the Androgyne myth conceived in Plato's *Symposium*, was first presented to the then King, François I, in 1536, and subsequently appeared in print in 1542. It celebrates a rational and divinely-instated love as the exclusive property of a privileged elect, who hold sway over lesser mortals, 'ceulx qui sont yssuz | De deux mortelz, [...] | Qui simplement de tous temps simples furent', because they originate from those 'raisonnables bestes', androgyne creatures who once occupied the celestial world. Though these elect creatures have been forced to endure the indignity of exile from their spiritual haven, and have had to bear the agonies of separation whilst on earth, they remain intimately attached to the divine, and will inevitably find their lost other halves after assiduous searching:

Après aussi, que les recouvremens
 Nous avons faicts par divers changemens,
 Et chascun vient à la recongnissance
 De sa moytié par longue experience,
 Soudain toute autre alliance s'oublie,
 Et le vray neud deslié se relie.⁴⁶

The resultant union, Héroët confides, will invigorate the chosen lovers with that tangible sensation of the divine-on-earth promised by prophets and seers:

Et qu'ainsi soit, vous voyez, que les sages,
 Nous ont souvent figurés es images,
 Pour nous donner entiere remembrance
 De nous, dont plus n'avons de souvenance,
 Nous montrans l'ame en ceste terre immonde
 L'amour divin, par celuy de ce monde,
 Comme verrons en la descouverteure
 De nostre double estrange creature.⁴⁷

The implicit associations that can, and would have been made between Héroët's rational elect and the virtuous noblemen and women of the French court are underlined in a contemporary work by Almanque Papillon. *Le Nouvel Amour*, published in 1543, shows the royal family and associated nobility to be the sole heirs of Perfect Love. Almanque's tale sees Cupid extol the virtues of a great King, so talented and honorable that he deserves to partake of the immortality of the gods. Cupid thus decides to reward his greatness with the gift of Perfect Love:

Car le voyant digne d'estre amoureux,
 Je le vouluz faire en amour heureux:
 Non pas heureux en cest amour vulgaire,
 Dont il ne sort plaisir, que pour desplaire:
 Mais d'une amour, telle que nul Romant
 N'en ha escrit: qui faict aymer l'Amant
 D'une maniere, et si bonne amytié,
 Qu'à peine on peult en croire la moytié.⁴⁸

As Cupid has decreed, the King is shortly overwhelmed with love for a beautiful and intelligent lady, who returns his affections honourably:

Or quand ce Roy, et la douce pucelle,
Eurent senti la nouvelle estincelle
Miraculeuse, et non accoustumee,
D'un chaste feu tellement allumee
Dedens leur coeur, se prindrent à louer
L'honneste amour, et à desadvouer,
Et detester l'effect, au sien contraire.⁴⁹

The god of love is so taken with the pleasure and well-being he has generated that he announces to Venus his intention of passing this gift of chaste affection to all lovers, in order that he might be glorified rather than slighted by those on earth. Venus recoils in horror at the thought of chastity overpowering desire, and declares the human race is doomed to perish if passion is erased:

Si chaste amour regne tant seulement
Sur les humains, il fault consequemment
Par laps de temps, que le Monde perisse,
Car elle n'est à Nature propice,
Qui ne pourroit, sans moy, avoir lignage,
Hors, ou suyvant, la loy de mariage.⁵⁰

She declares her intention to counter-attack by encouraging the female sex to adopt the active, and hitherto masculine role of pursuit in love:

Je feray donc, conclusion en somme,
Que desormais la femme prira l'homme:
L'homme ha assez exercé cest office
De la prier, et offrir son service. [...]
Je n'ay pas peur que l'homme la refuse,
Car je seray en tous deux tant infuse,
Qu'à la requeste il se consentira,

Dont ma douceur plus grande sentira.
 Certaine suis, que l'homme auroit vergongne,
 De refuser à se mettre en besongne,
 Au moins s'il est brave, jeune, et mignon,
 Pour se monstrier lors gentil compaignon,
 Quand il verra supplier, à grand zele,
 Quelque elegante, et belle Damoyselle.⁵¹

Jupiter finally intervenes in this conflict, to assert that Cupid and Venus should remain united in order that procreation continue. Cupid's gift of love to the worthy King, however, is not only acceptable, but is an intended reward from the heavens and orchestrated by Jupiter himself, as he tells the god of love:

Mais n'ayez pas telle presumption,
 Que cela soit de vostre invention:
 Car ce feu là, dedens eux espandu,
 Cest un saint feu, d'icy hault descendu:
 A estimer ne vous fault autre tiltre,
 Fors que pour moy en fustes le ministre.⁵²

Jupiter's subsequent resolution of the in-fighting between Venus and Cupid-turned-chaste is of interest. He suggests that chaste love is a royal right, and that it may also be experienced by those who earnestly seek to emulate royal virtue. Cupid is thus instructed:

Gardez vous donc, et bien y advisez,
 Que ce bon heur ne prodigalisez:
 Car je ne vueil qu'à la faveur Royale,
 Autre personne humaine soit egale:
 Bien vous permetz, qu'aux hommes vertueux,
 (Non feminins, molz, et voluptueux)
 Qui par vertu, et fortz exploitz de guerre,
 Sont tresardans de nom, et gloire acquerre,
 En ce grand Roy prendre exemple taschant,
 Vous ottroyez privilege, approachant
 De cestuy là: et quelques autres Dames,
 Que congnoistrez nobles de corps, et d'ames,
 Ou la vertu richement thesaurise,
 Parquoy honneur les ayme, et favorise,
 Quand se vouldront en amour resjouyr,

De ce bon heur puissent aussi jouyr.⁵³

Jupiter, it seems, is on the side of the active, dynamic nobleman who proves his worth through military prowess, and indeed his mandate to Venus bears out this conclusion. He warns her that, in these circumstances (in other words, within the noble circles where chaste love reigns), it is right and proper for a lady to be served by a man, and, equally, for a lady to devote herself solely to one *serviteur*:

Gardez vous bien aussi, en ces endroitz,
De violer de la femme les droitz,
Desquelz elle ha bonne prescription,
Que l'homme yra par supplication
Au faict d'amours, pour faire une maistresse:
Car plus y ha en luy de hardiesse,
Et moins de honte: et plus patiemment
Peult endurer le long reculement:
Et le refus, il prend pour assurance
De parvenir, ou il ha esperance. [...]
Bien il permet à la femme un Amy:
Qu'il fault aymer du tout, non à demy:
Amour ne veult point estre divisé,
Mais en un lieu seul aymé, et prisé.⁵⁴

Almanque, through Jupiter, has effectively carved an image of noble social relations based firmly upon the principles of masculine pursuit and feminine resistance, organized under the umbrella of chastity, or 'amour honneste'. Of crucial significance here is the apparent assumption that chastity is not merely a feminine virtue, but a rational quality which in fact demands that noblemen be 'non feminins' and 'fortz exploitz de guerre', as we have seen.⁵⁵ Moreover, the love which can grow in this privileged environment is not incompatible with sensual

pleasure of itself, but with the notion of passionate excess. Almanque describes this love as;

Une amour qui point ne diminue,
 Mais tousjours croist, par honneur maintenue;
 Et le plaisir, la joye, et volupté,
 Qui d'elle vient, c'est toute honnesteté.⁵⁶

The concept of rational 'volupté' here described is not, in fact, an uncommon feature, even of early Neoplatonic works such as *Le Nouvel Amour*. Antoine Héroët's most well-known opus, *La Parfaicte Amye*, which was published collectively with the other most prominent *Querelle des Amyes* texts in 1542, acknowledges the pleasure found in physical contact to be an honourable demonstration of spiritual love, if that love is indeed 'l'amitié, qui est du ciel venue'⁵⁷:

Or s'il advient quelque foys en la vie
 Que l'ame estant en tel estat ravie,
 Les corps voisins comme morts delaissés,
 D'amour et non d'aultre chose pressés,
 Sans y penser se mettent à leur ayse,
 Que la main touche, ou que la bouche baise,
 Cela n'est pas pour deshonneur compté:
 C'est un instinct de naive bonté.⁵⁸

As Christine Hill has pointed out in her introduction to the work, it does not seem that the *Parfaicte Amye* ever sought any sexual consummation in love; she refers to the sexual act as 'l'ouvrage | En soy remply de laydeur et d'oultrage', and repeatedly emphasizes the spiritual origins of her ideal union.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, in the third book of the poem, she does consider the nature of *volupté*,

and celebrates the procreative urge that allows the human race to experience life and love:

Volupté, dont nostre terre humaine
 En nous semant par nature fut pleine,
 Ung naturel appetit ressuscite,
 Et d'ung commun instinct tous nous invite
 A travailler et à s'esvertuer,
 Pour les humains croistre et perpetuer.
 Si volupté tout le monde maintient,
 Si volupté d'amour son pere vient,
 Ne devons nous à l'amour, comme autheur
 De nostre vie et vray mediateur,
 Sacrifier? et tous, femmes et hommes,
 Le mercier de ce que par luy sommes?⁶⁰

This moment, a fairly transitory one within the context of the work, which simply provides the Parfaicte Amye with a further opportunity to praise the precious nature of love, is nevertheless significant. It establishes a link in the mind of the author between love and procreation (a link which Papillon had also identified in his pairing of Venus and Cupid), which is seemingly at odds with other sixteenth-century views on this subject. Not the least of these was that love was not generally held to be compatible with the married state (the Parfaicte Amye curses arranged marriages and the misery they induce),⁶¹ and yet, in the sixteenth century, marriage is undoubtedly the only legitimate environment in which procreation may take place. This curious anomaly is, perhaps, further evidence of the efforts of thinkers to find spiritual meaning in the physical, corporeal world. Certainly, a significant number of texts written at this time praise in theory the creative sexual impulse, and in practice endorse the life-enhancing qualities of rationally-tempered sensual pleasures,

thereby giving the lie to the common perception of chastity as a solely ascetic virtue.

On this theme, Héroët's poem *Douleur et Volupté* advocates, in the form of a plea from a lover to his lady, the experience of a self-controlled *volupté* as a means of guarding against sensual excess and consequent chaos in love, which he terms 'Cupido l'ocieux'.⁶² As in the *Parfaicte Amye*, it seems clear that Héroët is not proposing sexual consummation as the lovers' ultimate goal, but some lesser form of sensual pleasure: he speaks of *volupté* as a necessary component in the game of love, which one should enjoy as such:

[...] non pour en abuser
Ne pour le temps en joye se consumer,
Ains seulement pour non s'accoustumer
A trop d'amour jamais ne succumber.⁶³

Moreover, such sensual satisfaction is the prerogative of humankind by design (and all true lovers are aware of this). God made man physical and to love physically as well as spiritually; a moderate participation in the sensual world is therefore desired by the Creator:

Pour acquerir le repoz que je loue,
Fault q'un chacun de Volupté se joue;
Puisque l'homme est nommé jeu des dieux,
Jouer se doit en jeu non odieux
A son facteur, qui veult, comme il doit, estre
Aymé sur tous et recongneu pour maistre,
Ce que jamais de celuy ne seroit
Qui en amour ne s'exerciteroit;
Car n'aymant rien, on vient à tant aymer
Qu'on ne veult dieu que l'amour estymer.
Le point du tout ou trop aymer est vice;
Mais s'en jouer et prendre en exercice,
Ce sont vertuz et mediocritéz;

Fuir ne fault que les extremytéz.⁶⁴

Always to be tempered by rational judgement, Héroët's love is intended to be satisfying and life-enhancing for both lovers, whilst yet remaining acceptably chaste, for without chastity the finely-balanced union of flesh and spirit is clearly destroyed by lust. In the 1540s and 1550s in France, when the physical and spiritual properties of love and the beloved were tentatively combined by Neoplatonist writers, chastity held the key to synthesis of body and soul because it made the physical world subject to reasoned control. With the birth of a Neoplatonic language of love in France came the birth of chastity as a social icon: the symbolic maintainer of divine order, form and knowledge which allowed for the body to be valorized and celebrated.

Chastity the Dispeller of Chaos

The prelapsarian origins of chastity postulated both in the orthodox Christian tradition and in Ficinian Neoplatonism provided writers with several possible paradigms for the new order of love which they wished to see created in the human sphere. Héroët's use of the Platonic androgyne myth, for example, proved immensely popular in France, and remained a powerful symbol of Perfect Love and cultured human relations throughout the century, to such an extent, in fact, that the Eden myth was relegated to a markedly

inferior position in metaphysical considerations of ideal love and society.

A certain number of writers seeking to define true love did, however, base their definitions upon biblical precepts. François Habert, in his poem *Le Temple de Chasteté* of 1549, dedicated to 'Vierges et femmes chastes', explores the paradisaical, chaste existence of the biblical pair through the mouth of the goddess Chastity, who admits to her temple all honest lovers seeking the path of true human affection. Chastity explains to a naïve but honourable lover who has crossed her threshold that in Eden their rational, flawless chastity brought Adam and Eve to the apex of human dignity, and indeed carried them beyond to the status of earthly gods:

Car il [Dieu] l'avoit créé pur, sans malice
 [l'homme],
Et sans peché originel, ou vice,
Chaste de corps, D'esprit encores mieulx
Dont luy et Eve estoient alors comme Dieux
Gardant ce Temple ou je pren mon repos.⁶⁵

The fall, however, destroyed their paradise and led the world into a state of imperfect love, established by the unchaste behaviour of Esau and perpetuated by the illegitimacy of his children:

Donc par Adam et sa temerité
Hommes pecheurs le saint Temple oublierent,
Et les esdictz celestes violerent,
Qui sont compris en la dilection
De chaste amour, loing de corruption,
Et les enfants d'Esau interdict,
Pour denigrer de Chasteté l'edict,
Ont commencé pollution enorme

Qui tant le corps comme l'esprit difforme.⁶⁶

Habert proceeds to dwell upon the sinful ramifications of the fall, and duly advocates marriage lived out within the context of pious Christian faith as the means for restitution. Such an overtly Christian standpoint, as we have said, was untypical of works on the theme of Perfect Love written around the time of the *Querelle des Amyes*. Of those texts which placed the Neoplatonic love doctrine in the context of marriage (itself an unusual trait), Paul Angier's *L'Honneste Amant* (1544) is more representative. Angier's work retains an emphasis upon the necessity for inspired rationality in matters of love which is characteristic of French Neoplatonism: in his struggle against the ruses of Cupid, the Honneste Amant puts on an armour of reason, claiming that the god of love can have no hold over him while Pallas is his guard:

Il (Cupid) s'est souvent efforcé d'approcher
 Apres de moy, et sur moy décocher
 Ses traicts poignans, mais par la diligence
 De Pallas ay eu vray intelligence,
 De ses dessains, de ses conceptions:
 Et ay fuy ses grands deceptions.⁶⁷

It is his powers of reason that lead the Honneste Amant to choose a lover who is 'de chasteté entièrement avare',⁶⁸ and to seal the union in chaste wedlock:

De telle amour dedens noz deux coeurs nee,
 Nous recreoit le hault Dieu Hymenee,
 A celle fin que nostre affection,
 Toute adonnee à telle passion,
 De Cupido ne fust point convertie

En folle amour ne par luy pervertie.⁶⁹

The harmony of their chaste affection is not merely reflected in the lives of the Honneste Amant and his lady, but can instil a wider sense of cosmic order into human affairs. The Honneste Amant alerts the Contr'ameye of Charles Fontaine's poem, a worshipper of Cupid,⁷⁰ to the possibility of reclaiming a Golden Age peace through Perfect Love:

Ainsi voyla la grand similitude
 D'entre ton Dieu Contr'ameye trop rude,
 Et Astrea ensemblement contraires,
 Ainsi que deux eternalz adversaires,
 Desquelz l'un veult toute equité defendre,
 Et l'autre droict, et les justes offendre:
 Desquelz l'un veult à nul faire aucun tort,
 Et l'autre amour s'estudie plus fort,
 Et amplement employe sa puissance,
 A faire à tous tort et grieve nuysance.
 Ce dernier c'est le cruel Cupido,
 Lequel jadis ha faict mourir Dido:
 Qui des bons veult l'honneur exterminer,
 Et sur les grands par pecher dominer.⁷¹

Outside of the aegis of the Pléiade, later minor works continue to make use of a Neoplatonic vocabulary of transcendence in their efforts to equate chaste love with universal harmony. Jean de la Jessée, for example, in his *Premieres Oeuvres francoyses* of 1583, speaks of 'honneste amour' as a cosmic power, able to unleash peace and justice in abundance:

C'est ce Seigneur de paix, et de repos,
 Qui debrouilla les membres du Chaos,
 Esprit infus dans ceste grand'machine:
 Seul il l'agite, et maintient, et regist,
 En luy grandeur, concorde, et grace gist:
 Amour est donc une chose divine.⁷²

The seat of this power is the loved one, who comes to embody all that is order and peace through her chastity, uniting her humanity with divine love until the two are one and the same:

Son chaste feu (d'amour) qui purge noz esprits,
M'a tellement d'une Maistresse épris,
Qu'escgalle force en eus je considere:
Les Cieus benins, et la Nature encor,
(Parantz communs) n'ont un plus cher tresor;
Elle, et Amour, sont aussi Soeur, et Frere.⁷³

La Jessée's progression from an idealized view of the impact of 'honneste amour' to one based on a personal encounter of love in an individual in the above stanzas is significant. He readily acknowledges the unseen power of love as a source of goodness, but when that love becomes incarnate, and therefore tangible to him in the form of his beloved, it acquires presence and radiates as a potent life force. Thus the chastity of an individual comes to be seen as a form of divine energy: full of transcendent potential to transform in the earthly sphere.

THE CHASTE DISCOURSE OF LOVE: MAURICE SCEVE'S *DELIE*

Maurice Scève's *Délie* might be said to represent the most systematic attempt by a French Renaissance poet to capture the paradox of earthly divinity embodied in the female beloved. First published in 1544, the *Délie* was actually written outside of the court, within the Lyonesse literary circles inspired by Neoplatonic humanism. Many of those who

participated in the humanist debate in Lyon also had dealings with the court,⁷⁴ and Scève himself was clearly read by those at court interested in the spread of Neoplatonic theories: Marguerite de Navarre includes several of his poems in the 1547 edition of her own poetry collection, *Les Marguerites*.⁷⁵ The *Délie*, then, a seminal work in the development of the Neoplatonic love lyric in France, can, and indeed needs to be read in the context of the erudite, elite environment in which it was clearly written, an environment unique in France to Lyon and to the French court at this time.

Délie herself, the female beloved to whom Scève devotes 449 dizains, is a paragon of virtue whose perfections reach divine proportions, and who, rather like Ebreo's Sofia, incarnates the Neoplatonic Idea of love in its purest form, and is therefore a mysteriously spiritual, yet physically imposing influence upon the poet's psyche. Inasmuch as *Délie* straddles the celestial and earthly realms, her very essence is chastity; as Joan Buhmann has observed in an article examining the nature of cosmic harmony in the work, *Délie* can be likened to Venus in both her celestial and terrestrial forms, by her frequent association with the three Graces, who infuse the earth with divine qualities and inspire humanity to contemplate the divine.⁷⁶ Numerous dizains consider the influence of *Délie*'s immortal chastity upon a fallen, chaotic world with which she contrasts, and to which she brings hope through her physical presence:

A contempler si merveilleux spectacle,
 Tu anoblis la mienne indignité[,]
 Pour estre toy de ce Siecle miracle,
 Restant merveille a toute eternité,
 Ou la Clemence en sa benignité,
 Revere a soy Chasteté Presidente
 Si hault au ciel de l'honneur residente,
 Que tout aigu d'oeil vif n'y peult venir.⁷⁷

This human face of chaste harmony exists, in the mind of the poet, to bring order to the troubled world in which they live:

Toy seule as fait, que ce vil Siecle avare,
 Et aveuglé de tout sain jugement,
 Contre l'utile ardemment se prepare
 Pour l'esbranler a meilleur changement:
 Et plus ne hayt l'honneste estrangement,
 Commençant jà a cherir la vertu.
 Aussi par toy ce grand Monstre abatu,
 Qui l'Univers de son odeur infecte,
 T'adorera soubz tes pieds combatu,
 Comme qui es entre toutes parfaicte.⁷⁸

Scève spends considerable time in picturing *Délie* as intermediary between the celestial and the sensual; the theme of divine incarnation is paraded before the reader in different guises, through a richly varied vocabulary which resonates with both Christian and pagan allegory. Cynthia Skenazi, in a work which seeks to demonstrate the extent to which Scève exploited the language of evangelical humanism in the *Délie*, declares the above dizain echoes a text from St. Paul's epistle to the Romans, and therefore pronounces *Délie* to be a quasi-Christian redeemer.⁷⁹ Joan Bahlmann, however, believes *Délie's* virtue in this same dizain to be suggestive of the Graces, who are specifically linked with her awe-inspiring righteousness in other dizains, where

they affirm her 'transforming power of virtue'.⁸⁰ Délie is often Astraea-like, sharing her heavenly nature with the earthly goddess of harmony and similarly bringing peace to the world, and to the poet within it:

Tes doigtz tirantz non le doulx son des cordes,
 Mais des haultz cieulx l'Angelique harmonie,
 Tiennent encor en telle symphonie,
 Et tellement les oreilles concordes,
 Que paix, et guerre ensemble tu accordes
 En ce concert, que lors je concevoys.⁸¹

Scève makes frequent use of light imagery to convey the sense in which Délie illuminates both his own emotion and intellect, and also the social environment in which the lovers find themselves. Again his metaphors are rich and varied: if the sinful and ignorant world is bathed in the darkness of unknowing - a 'Terre tenebreuse' as Scève describes it in D319 - then Délie is the light which guides: 'Produicte fust au plus cler ascendant | De toute estoille a nous mortelz heureuse'.⁸² She is akin to the moon not because she is changeable: she does not wax and wane; rather Délie is 'Comme Diane au Ciel',⁸³ chaste and perfect: a goddess who can triumph over the night of chaos in which Scève finds himself:

Mais s'il advient, qu'entre plusieurs quelqu'un
 Te die: Dame, ou ton Amant se oblye,
 Ou de la Lune il fainct ce nom Délie
 Pour te monstrer, comme elle, estre muable:
 Soit loing de toy tel nom vituperable,
 Et vienne à qui un tel mal nous procure.
 Car je te cele en ce surnom louable,
 Pource qu'en moy tu luys la nuict obscure.⁸⁴

As Skenazi remarks, however, such a picture of divinity overcoming darkness is also to be found in the Christian tradition, particularly in the Psalms and in the New Testament epistles.⁸⁵ Délie is certainly a complex redeemer, and her numerous associations with Diana reinforce this complexity, for quite apart from her role in the Christian exegetical equation, the many faces of Diana which she incarnates reveal her effect upon the poet to be disturbing as well as comforting, confusing as well as instructing. Essentially, Délie is not a faceless redeemer: she is not, like Christ, male, celibate and therefore without sexual influence in the eyes of the poet, but embodies femininity. It is because of his human response to her sexuality that Scève cannot feel unequivocally enriched by Délie's divinity, and these two essential components of her nature are therefore well represented by the symbolism of Diana, since the latter is, in the words of Dorothy Coleman, 'one of the richest and most chameleon-like figures in Ancient mythology', able to suggest both chaste purity by her virginal stance, but also sensuality by her bewitching power over Pan and Endymion and her associations with Hecate.⁸⁶

Thus, though the poet is thus happy to be 'dessous la sauvegarde | De ceste tienne, et unique lumiere' which he knows can lead him on towards spiritual enlightenment,⁸⁷ his joy is often punctuated with feelings of inadequacy before the sheer physicality of Délie, as in D376, where he pictures himself as the shadow of her light-invested form,

impossibly transfixed by the paradox of her celestial, yet corporeal presence:

Tu es le corps, Dame, et je suis ton ombre,
 Qui en ce mien continuel silence
 Me fais mouvoir, non comme Hecate l'Umbre,
 Par ennuyeuse, et grande violence,
 Mais par pouvoir de ta haulte excellence,
 En me movant au doux contournement
 De tous tes faictz, et plus soubdainement,
 Que lon ne veoit l'ombre suyvre le corps.⁸⁸

The *Délie* is concerned with the mastering of chaos through reason and love, and more particularly through the intervention of the divine into these human, earthly faculties. Scève is not, ultimately, able to avoid the dilemma of *Délie's* physicality, and indeed the essence of the work is to be found in the detail of his journey towards an understanding of the whole of *Délie's* nature, physical and spiritual, and of his own response to that nature. His own painful self-examination, and in turn his judgement upon society, is governed by an intrinsic belief in natural order established by reason which is typical of his age, and which he believes *Délie* incarnates. Beyond his struggling, therefore, is a conviction in the immortal and eternal nature of his cause: in his own mind, the virtues he sees personified in *Délie*, bound together by her divinely human chastity, cannot but lead him to the celestial vision.⁸⁹

The Poet's Angst: a Literary Journey from Ignorance to Self-Awareness through Pursuit of the Other.

Scève's literary presentation of his love for Délie, though often beset by confusion and tension, nevertheless shows a fundamental clarity of vision: the poet is clearly convinced of Délie's capacity to bring order and meaning to his life, and of his consequent need to render the effects of her love in his verse. The principal issue of the *Délie*, therefore, is not any question of Délie's value: she is without dispute 'object de plus haulte vertu'; nor is it a scrutiny of the poet's own devotion in love: he is irrevocably committed to feelings of attraction which he cannot control, since Délie 'me contrainct quelque mal, que je sente, | Et vueille, ou non, a mon contraire aymer.'⁹⁰ Rather, the *Délie* is a journey of the mind, and more particularly of the literary mind towards an understanding of the impact of human presence and of the powers of an individual, microcosm of the divine, to lead another on to a greater and more complete perception of his own divine purpose, in harmony with the ordered will of the Creator God.

The intrinsic religiosity of such a journey, which one might even call a pilgrimage, should not be overlooked. As we have seen, the development of the doctrine of Perfect Love within France must certainly be viewed in the context of evangelical humanism which encouraged an interior

religion based upon the unique relationship of the individual soul with God. The basic premise of the Perfect Love doctrine, that instinctive human affection, the most fundamental of all human loves, might illuminate the soul with fresh revelations of the nature of God, had its own links with Christian fulfilment. Those early Neoplatonists, such as Scève, who stood at the threshold of mainstream acceptance of Neoplatonist doctrine and symbolism within France clearly believed the contemplation of their loved one had religious implications. Indeed, there is at times a striking resemblance between Scève's attempts to quantify his love for Délie and the Christian journey towards enlightenment undertaken by Marguerite de Navarre in her contemplative verse. Both struggle to come to terms with powerful forces of perfection, both experience feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness before such perfection, both feel paradoxically uplifted and yet frustrated at their own self-image, and both are overcome by moments of supreme elation as they believe they have understood and become one with the divine nature.

Any suggestion that the powers of Perfect Love alone could extend to the realms of Christian beatitude might be thought to smack strongly of heresy in the climate of religious unrest that was the backdrop to sixteenth-century cultural development in France. Marguerite de Navarre herself, in the *Heptaméron*, which dealt in detail with the social and moral implications of the Perfect Love code at

court, explicitly cites Christian faith as the only true means of experiencing the beatific vision:

Mais quand il [le parfaict aman] congnoist, par plus grande experience, que ès choses territoires n'y a perfection ne felicité, desire chercher le facteur et la source d'icelles. Toutesfois, si Dieu ne luy ouvre l'oeil de la foy, seroit en danger de devenir, d'un ignorant, ung infidele philosophe; car foy seulement peult monstrier et faire recevoir le bien que l'homme charnel et animal ne peult entendre.⁹¹

The Christianity of noblemen and women at court was, however, widely assumed, and thus those eager to quantify noble virtue were generally more concerned to add other, secular qualities to this supposed basis. As we have seen in chapter two, in Arlette Jouanna's examination of the philosophy of nobility, the 'vertu' at the root of noble behaviour itself came to constitute 'non seulement la vertu chrétienne, mais aussi et surtout une perfection humaine caractérisée par la générosité, la soif de l'honneur, la libéralité, la courtoisie.'⁹² Neoplatonic philosophy, socialized by Castiglione, had encouraged, if not created, a mood of confidence in the capacity of humanity to interact with the divine in all aspects of life, and in doing so reduced the ministrations of Christianity to a mere component of the experiential move towards divine perfection which the nobility, above all others, sought to undertake.

In metaphysical terms, the boundaries between Christian and Perfect Loves were similarly blurred by Ficinian

Neoplatonism, and to this extent true Perfect Love was for many a humanist exploration of faith. If grace was the gift of election in a theological sense, the subsequent gift of election to the secular world was reason: not merely the common consciousness which allowed humankind to recognize its own free will, but a superior, divinely instated gift given only to the deserving elect, by which they might choose to unite themselves with the cosmic order. Perfect Lovers, if their love was true, belonged unequivocally to this elect, and found themselves called to pursue the divine essence in each other through this superior reason. Thus Scève recalls in D412 his own calling to the contemplative life, a calling which he resolves in active adoration of Délie rather than in cloistered devotion, affirming that his chosen path itself constitutes a religious pilgrimage leading him from ignorance to heavenly virtue:

Mont costoyant le Fleuve, et la Cité,
 Perdant ma veue en longue prospective,
 Combien m'as tu, mais combien incité
 A vivre en toy vie contemplative?
 Ou toutesfoys mon coeur par oeuvre active
 Avec les yeulx leve au Ciel la pensée
 Hors du soucy d'ire, et dueil dispensée
 Pour admirer la paix, qui me tesmoigne
 Celle vertu lassus recompensée,
 Qui du Vulgaire, aumoins ce peu, m'esloingne.⁹³

The comfort of Délie's divine presence is transitory, however, because she also terrifies the poet by the impossibility of her physical and spiritual perfection: the exhilaration he feels in her company is punctuated by moments of guilt and self-doubt, when his beloved appears

to stand before him as judge, and his very life depends upon her clemency. This contrast in her nature is graphically depicted in D22, where Scève makes splendid use of the ambiguous characteristics proper to Délie/Diana:

Comme Hecaté tu me feras errer
 Et vif, et mort cent ans parmy les Umbres:
 Comme Diane au Ciel me reserrer,
 D'ou descendis en ces mortelz encombres:
 Comme regnante aux infernalles umbres
 Amoindriras, ou accroistriras mes peines.
 Mais comme Lune infuse dans mes veines
 Celle tu fus, es, et seras DELIE,
 Qu'Amour à joint a mes pensées vaines
 Si fort, que Mort jamais ne l'en deslie.⁹⁴

Délie's spirit/body harmony is thus both awe-inspiring and terrifying for Scève, who is painfully aware that this woman/goddess is at once the source of his suffering and his salvation. There are tangible resonances of the Christian cycle of sin, grace and restitution in his liturgy: compare Marguerite de Navarre's elation on experiencing an influx of divine grace in the *Miroir de l'ame pecheresse*:

Vraiment mon Dieu, mon ame est bien gastée,
 Estre par vous de tel bien appastée:
 Et de laisser le plaisir de la terre
 Pour l'infiny, la ou est paix sans guerre.
 Je m'esbahis, que tout soubdainement
 Elle ne sort de son entendement.⁹⁵

Such celebrations of the cleansing effect of grace are inevitably interspersed with moments of crisis, when the weight of its own sin and the fear of final judgement overwhelms the soul. And yet, as Marguerite so clearly perceives in Chanson 24 of her *Chansons spirituelles*, that

same judge of humanity is also its saviour: a tension within the divine form which the human mind can only strive to understand:

Vray Dieu, qui réconfortera
Ma povre âme; et qui l'ostera
De la peur d'estre condamnée?

Si son Enfer elle peult voir
Et son péché appercevoir
Justement se tiendra damnée; [...]

Qui la délivra du corps
De ceste mort, où sera lors
En trouble et douleur amenée? [...]

Ce sera Grâce purement
De Dieu par Christ, son vray amant,
Qui pour luy l'a prédestinée. [...]

La douceur gousterà d'aymer
Après avoir gousté l'amer.
O heureuse et digne journée!⁹⁶

Délie undertakes a similar role to that of Christ, administering grace by her 'divine presence' (D62) just as the Son of God did by assuming human form. Scève never sets his adoration of Délie in any explicitly Christian framework, preferring to allude to this theme with clouded references to her divinity and saving power. Yet there is a sense in which the philosophy of Perfect Love filled a need to bridge the gap between ontological and social aspects of religious expression: the powerful concept of God made manifest in the Other and accessible through rational contemplation of the Other was clearly an attractive addition to the highly theological and often dogmatic religious structures of the day. Joachim du Bellay, the most overtly Christian of all the Pléiade poets, in Sonnet

112 of his collection *L'Olive*, openly assimilates the elect of Perfect Love with the Christian elect, and the supremely elected Christ in particular:

Dedans le clos des occultes Idées,
 Au grand troupeau des ames immortelles
 Le Prevoyant a choisi les plus belles,
 Pour estre à luy par luymesme guidées.

Lors peu à peu devers le ciel quindées
 Dessus l'engin de leurs divines aeles
 Vellent au seing des beautez eternelles,
 Ou elle' sont de tout vice emondées.

Le Juste seul ses eleuz justifie
 Les reanime en leur premiere vie,
 Et à son Filz les faict quasi egaulx.⁹⁷

Even Marguerite de Navarre, whose faith is largely shaped by a rigorous Pauline evangelicalism, admits the intrinsically Christian merits in loving one's neighbour before oneself, and in coming to know God more fully through such earthly encounters with love. Through her central mouthpiece in the *Heptaméron*, Parlamente, she asserts: "Encores ay-je une opinion, [...], que jamais homme n'aymera parfaitement Dieu, qu'il n'ait parfaitement aymé quelque creature en ce monde."⁹⁸ And for others less concerned with the intricacies of Christian salvation, the issue of self-perfection concerned not so much a painful examination of the sinful human soul and its destiny in Christ, but the question of how the elected soul might align itself more completely with the rational tendencies of the Godhead in this world, through human achievement and, indeed, through human love.

Maurice Scève, to return to the theme of the *Délie*, portrays in vivid and often agonizing terms the life and death struggle to understand the divine in his beloved's human form and, more particularly, the nature of his own rational response to it. Scève is aware of his elected status; of his calling to a meaningful relationship with his loved one in accordance with the divine impetus which set in motion her very being, and instigated his love for her:

Qui d'Amour fut par sa voulenté pere
A plus grand bien, et non a fin sinistre,
M'a reservé voulant qu'a tous appere
Que j'ay esté de son vouloir ministre.⁹⁹

The poet's own subtitle to his work, '*Souffrir non Souffrir*' affirms that pain is as omnipresent as pleasure, and, moreover, that the two go hand in hand in the quest for *Délie*'s immortal essence. Scève's intermittent malaise, which encroaches fatefully upon every blissful celebration of her beauty and charm, is born of incomprehension. His approach to *Délie* the text is cerebral: a rational, analytical approach which he erroneously believes corresponds to the celestial virtue his beloved incarnates. Time and again, one is persuaded to conclude, he mistakingly assumes that ascetic, transcendent chastity, the stuff of the celestial Venus (rather than her terrestrial double), is the essence of *Délie*'s nature, and that he must respond in kind, either by expunging his own experience of physical desire, or by rationalizing its validity through his verse. Thus the poet declares, in D28:

Meilleur, ô Coeur, m'est d'avoir chaste esté
 En si pudique, et hault contentement:
 Et abhorrir pour vil contemnement
 Le bien, qu'Amour (Amour lassif) conseille.¹⁰⁰

Scève repeatedly affirms himself to be a seeker after truth and felicity, a 'plus grand bien' (D441) which he perceives instinctively in *Délie*, but can hardly begin to define. This 'bien' is, at times, clearly spiritual, as in D384, where the poet traces his love along an ascetic *via negativa*:

Je m'exterme, et en si grand hayne
 De mes deffaultz j'aspire a la merveille
 D'un si hault bien, que d'une mesme alaine
 A mon labeur le jour, et la nuict veille.¹⁰¹

Elsewhere, however, 'le bien' would appear to suggest the hope of physical affection, which enthuses the poet with the idea of spirit - body harmony:

Le Vespre obscur a tous le jour clouit
 Pour ouvrir l'Aulbe aux limites de la flamme:
 Car mon desir par ta parole ouyt,
 Qu'en te donnant a moy, tu m'estois Dame.
 Lors je sentis distiler en mon ame
 Le bien du bien, qui tout aultre surmonte.
 Et neantmoins, asses loing de mon compte,
 Pitié te fait tendrement proferer
 Ce doulx nenny, qui flamboyant de honte,
 Me promet plus qu'onc n'osay esperer.¹⁰²

For much of the *Délie*, however, these visions prove impractical and unhelpful because they are halfway measures: they do not solve the enigma of *Délie*'s corporeal/celestial perfection, relying instead upon Scève's sublimation of his own emotions through the text,

or upon dreams of future fulfilment. Scève never doubts that Délie can save him from spiritual death, but is aware that he surrenders his soul to her at the expense of his intellect while he fails to capture her impact upon him effectively in his verse:

Morte esperance au giron de pitié,
 Mouroit le jour de ma fatalité,
 Si le lyen de sainte amytié
 Ne m'eust retrainct a immortalité:
 Non qu'en moy soit si haulte qualité,
 Que l'immortel d'elle se rassasie.
 Mais le grillet, jalouse fantasie,
 Qui sans cesser chante tout ce, qu'il cuyde,
 Et la pensée, et l'Ame ayant saisie,
 Me laisse vif a ma douce homicide.¹⁰³

It is, I believe, because of the intimate connection in Scève's own mind between celestial chastity and rational order that his feelings of desire appear so cataclysmic. The poet holds on to the ideals of chaste control and reason because he firmly believes these to be the God-given means by which he must pursue the path of enlightenment; any rejection of them, consequently, induces spiritual death in his eyes:

Vouloir tousjours, ou le povoir est moindre,
 Que la fortune, et tousjours persister
 Sans au devoir de la raison se joindre,
 Contre lequel on ne peult resister,
 Seroit ce pas au danger assister,
 Et fabriquer sa declination?¹⁰⁴

Yet confusion continues to haunt Scève, because of the disarming naturalness of desire. His suppression of this emotion thus frequently appears artificial, and even reluctant:

Amour me presse, et me force de suyvre
 Ce, qu'il me jure estre pour mon meilleur.
 Et la Raison me dit, que le poursuyvre
 Communement est suyvi de malheur.

Celluy desjà, m'esloingnant de douleur,
 De toy m'asseure, et ceste me desgouste,
 Qui jour et nuict devant les yeulx me boute
 Le lieu, l'honneur, et la froide saison.
 Dont pour t'oster, et moy, d'un si grande doubte,
 Fuyant Amour, je suivray la Raison.¹⁰⁵

His pain and guilt are made all the more acute by the knowledge that he, the elected lover and writer, fails to rationalize the desire that threatens his bid for chaste affection; the more he strives, the less he achieves in this area, for desire can resist all attempts at control:

Peu s'en falloit, encores peu s'en fault,
 Que la Raison asses mollement tendre
 Ne prenne, apres long spasme, grand deffault,
 Tant foible veult contre le Sens contendre.
 Lequel voulant ses grandz forces estendre
 (Aydé d'Amour) la vainct tout oultrément.
 Ne pouvant donc le convaincre aultrement,
 Je luy complais un peu, puis l'adoulcis
 De propos saintz. Mais quoy? plus
 Je l'amollis, et plus je l'endurcis.¹⁰⁶ tendrement

Striving in his own strength to understand his desire, Scève is unable to govern its effects. Indeed he is positively blinded by his own frailties to the divine essence in Délie, even as his elected soul tends instinctively towards this goal. Seemingly irreconcilable conflict between Perfect Love and desire ensues:

Amour ardent, et Cupido bandé,
 Enfantz jumeaulx de toy, mere Cypris,
 Ont dessus moy leur pouvoir desbandé,
 De l'un vaincu, et de l'aulture surpris.
 Par le flambeau de celluy je fus pris

En doulx feu chaste, et plus, que vie, aymable.
 Mais de cestuy la poincte inexorable
 M'incite, et poinct au tourment, ou je suis
 Par un desir sans fin insatiable
 Tout aveuglé au bien, que je poursuis.¹⁰⁷

This spiritual blindness of the soul, which persists in spite of the divine gifts of grace and election bestowed upon it, roots the human form firmly in corporeal mortality. Marguerite de Navarre describes her often short-sighted understanding of God in similar terms of sensual deficiency in her *Miroir de l'ame pecheresse*. Just as Scève, in dizains 6 to 14, speaks of the confusion of his own senses before the great perfection of Délie, so Marguerite finds herself a victim of ignorant 'cuyder' which renders her senses incapable of defining or assimilating the divine:

Si je cuyde regarder pour le mieulx,
 Une branche me vient fermer les yeulx.
 En ma bouche tombe, quand veulx parler,
 Le fruict par trop amer à avaller.
 Si pour ouyr mon esperit s'esveille,
 Force feuilles entrent en mon oreille:
 Aussi mon néz est tout bouché de fleurs.
 Voyla comment en peine, criz, et pleurs
 En terre gist sans clairté ne lumiere
 Ma paovre ame, esclave, et prisonniere,
 Les piedz liéz par concupiescence,
 Et les deux bras par son accoustumance.¹⁰⁸

Marguerite's means of restitution is her re-recognition of the value of grace, which, once accepted, brings illumination to the soul and allows it to move gradually and positively towards its goal in God:

Mais sa grace, que ne puis meriter,
 Qui poeut de mort chascun resusciter,
 Par sa clairté ma tenebre illumine:

Et sa vertu, qui ma faulte examine,
 Rompant du tout le voile d'ignorance,
 Me donne au vray bien claire intelligence
 Que c'est de moy, et qui en moy demeure.¹⁰⁹
 Et ou je suis, et pour quoy je labeure.

For Scève there is no single moment of spiritual rebirth. The poet's recovery of the divine begins when he perceives his own reason, like Délie's chaste virtue, to be capable of mediating between the celestial and terrestrial worlds, and therefore open to the influence of both.¹¹⁰ He has often been paralysed by a fear of failure up to this point:

Je le conçois en mon entendement
 Plus, que par l'oeil comprendre je ne puis
 Le parfaict d'elle, ou mon contentement
 A sceu fonder le fort de ses appuyz:
 Dessus lequel je me pourmaine, et puis
 Je tremble tout de doubte combatu.¹¹¹

Now, however, he acknowledges that 'Amour [...] rendit | Vexation, qui donne entendement.'¹¹² This painful process of enlightenment is described in detail in dizains 179-184, where Scève traces the conflict between his flesh and spirit. His decision in D179 once and for all to renounce affection in the cause of reason is unconvincing; clearly he enjoys the pleasures that love brings, and is reluctant to abandon them.¹¹³ In D180 Scève admits to himself that his determined pursuit of reason in fact draws him closer to the desire that he flees, paradoxically forcing him to recognize that this desire is in fact more potent than reason itself:

Quand pied a pied la Raison je costoye,

Et pas a pas j'observe ses sentiers,
 Elle me tourne en une mesme voye
 Vers ce, que plus je fuiroys volentiers.
 Mais ses effectz en leur oblique entiers
 Tendent tousjours a celle droicte sente,
 Qui plusieursfoys du jugement s'absente,
 Faignant du miel estre le goust amer:
 Puis me contrainct quelque mal, que je sente,
 Et vueille, ou non, a mon contraire aymer.¹¹⁴

Though the result of this probing into his own subconscious is a tortuous and seemingly interminable struggle between reason and desire,¹¹⁵ Scève, in a brief moment of lucidity, has in fact allowed the former to be influenced by the latter, and in doing so, redirects his intellectual energies towards a synthesis of the corporeal and the celestial. In a very useful summary of this development, Cynthia Skenazi explains:

Les facultés rationnelles sont prises dans le cercle de leur propre raisonnement et reconnaissent elles-mêmes leur vulnérabilité. [...] C'est donc, de manière paradoxale, par le refus du raisonnement que la raison démontre sa vraie grandeur et sa capacité de raisonner: en renonçant à considérer le sentiment amoureux comme un objet de savoir rationnel, l'amant adopte la seule attitude 'raisonnable' possible.¹¹⁶

Scève's path to a divine vision of love thus finally becomes clearer only when he ceases to regard his desire as a curse over which he can have no control. His persistent tendency to distinguish Cupid's influence from the spiritualized intentions of chaste love brings disharmony which is entirely contrary to Délie's essence, and therefore to the divine love he has been elected to serve. By dissolving Cupid into the core elements of that divine

love, however, Scève unearths a force that is both beneficent and controllable:

Pourroit donc bien (non que je le demande)
 Un Dieu causer ce vivre tant amer?
 Tant de travaux en une erreur si grande,
 Ou nous vivons librement pour aymer?
 O ce seroit grandement blasphemer
 Contre les Dieux, pur intellect des Cieulx.
 Amour si saint, et non point vicieux,
 Du temps nous pousse a eternité telle,
 Que de la Terre au Ciel delicieux
 Nous oste a Mort pour la vie immortelle.¹¹⁷

In attaching himself to the power of instinct, Scève finally arrives at a unified vision of Délie which immediately brings order to his hitherto fractured world of sense and spirit, since 'for Scève the love poet, disorder is always the dilemma of being able to perceive only sensuousness ("forme sensible"), on the one hand, or only spirituality ("idée"), on the other hand, in the love object.'¹¹⁸ Furthermore, his reappropriation of desire to the Perfect Love mould represents the logical fulfilment of Neoplatonic philosophy concerning chastity and the glorification of the Renaissance body. He successfully celebrates a 'love which was instinctively based and [...] spiritually perfective',¹¹⁹ and his best verse rejoices in the wonder of Délie's immortal essence apparent through her physical perfection, and not in spite of it.

Scève thus comes to recognize that his desire is a natural and reasonable response to the beauty he perceives in Délie. This more complete understanding is accompanied by a renewed conviction in the sanctity of Délie's

spiritual/corporeal essence, and in the immortal status of their union strengthened by his new-found chaste response. In D233 he is able honestly to declare that his lover's superb beauty enthralles him not merely for its own ethereal sake, but because Délie administers her corporeal excellence so well through her chastity:

Contour des yeulx, et pourfile du né,
 Et le relief de sa vermeille bouche
 N'est point le plus en moy bien fortuné,
 Qui si au vif jusques au coeur me touche:
 Mais la naïfve, et assurée touche,
 Ou je m'espreuve en toute affection,
 C'est que je voy soubz sa discretion
 La chasteté conjointe avec beaulté,
 Qui m'endurcit en la perfection,
 Du Dyamant de sa grand' loyaulté.¹²⁰

Scève's periodic ability to assimilate desire and instinct into his quest for the eternal truths of Délie and of their love affords him moments of blissful liberation from his guilt and pain. Délie's presence is no longer an obstacle to his understanding: rather, he believes he has come to see the full extent of her divine nature. Indeed, the harmonious unity of corporeal and spiritual perfection evident in her form, who is 'De corps tresbelle et d'ame bellissime', reflects the divine order of the cosmos: 'Comme plaisir, et gloire a l'Univers', and inspires in Scève

[...] tel contentement,
 Que du desir est ma joye remplie,
 La voyant l'oeil, aussi l'entendement,
 Parfaicte au corps, et en l'ame accomplie'.¹²¹

The triumphant conclusion to the work, in which Scève celebrates the eternal gifts of 'ardeur' and 'vertu' in love, reaffirms his belief in the sanctity of reasoned chastity, by which the body is not neglected but venerated as the outward symbol of the immortal faculties of the soul: the seat of human dignity nurtured upon the gift of divine love:

Flamme si sainte en son cler durera,
Tousjours luyante en publique apparence,
Tant que ce Monde en soy demeurera,
Et qu'on aura Amour en reverence.
Aussi je voy bien peu de difference
Entre l'ardeur, qui noz coeurs poursuyvra,
Et la vertu, qui vive nous suyvra
Oultre le Ciel amplement long, et large.¹²²

A Female Response to the *Délie* Icon: Pernette du Guillet's

Rymes

The relationship between poetic, intellectual virtue and social, spiritual perfection which Scève postulates in the *Délie* is affirmed in the poetic writing of Pernette du Guillet, now widely regarded as the inspiration behind Scève's text.¹²³ Pernette's small collection of *Rymes* is thus held to reflect her love for the poet, and indeed certain poems appear to be direct responses to dizains found in the *Délie*.¹²⁴ Pernette, treated as subject by Scève, in turn employs his creative appreciation of her as a tool with which to fashion her own poetic expression of love. She explores the literary means by which he has created her, and underlines the parity between the mediating chastity accredited to her, through which she

straddles the earthly and celestial realms, and Scève's own chaste text:

Esprit celeste, et des Dieux transformé
 En corps mortel transmis en ce bas Monde,
 A Apollo peulx estre conformé,
 Pour la vertu, dont es la source, et l'onde.
 Ton eloquence, avecques ta faconde,
 Et hault sçavoir, auquel tu es appris,
 Demonstre assez le bien en toy compris:
 Car en douceur ta plume tant fluante
 A merité d'emporter gloire, et prys,
 Voyant ta veine en hault stille affluante.¹²⁵

She gives thanks to God for having elected her to love 'un qui est haultement en ses escriptz divins',¹²⁶ declares she is 'ravie' by Scève's 'sçavoir',¹²⁷ and requests that he impart to her his extensive poetic wisdom, so that her own verse might virtuously record her most profound impressions of him:

Par ce dizain clerement je m'accuse
 De ne sçavoir tes vertus honorer,
 Fors du vouloir, qui est bien maigre excuse:
 Mais qui pourroit par escript decorer
 Ce qui de soy se peult faire adorer?
 Je ne dy pas, si j'avois ton pouvoir,
 Qu'à m'acquiter ne feisse mon devoir,
 A tout le moins du bien que tu m'advoues.
 Preste moy donc ton eloquent sçavoir
 Pour te louer ainsi, que tu me loues!¹²⁸

Pernette declares in true Neoplatonist vein that she flees the malign influence 'du bas sçavoir, qui tient la creature' and seeks 'l'amytié, que les Dieux m'ont donnée': that is, the 'amytié' of Perfect Love.¹²⁹ However, she acknowledges that it is through Scève's poetic creativity that she finds herself beginning this process of transformation, since Scève has unearthed her divine

essence through the body of the text, thereby forcing her to re-examine her human status:

Puis qu'il t'a pleu de me faire congnoistre,
 Et par ta main, le VICE A SE MUER,
 Je tascheray faire en moy ce bien croistre,
 Qui seul en toy me pourra transmuer:
 C'est à sçavoir de tant m'esvertuer
 Que congnoistras, que par esgal office
 Je fuiray loing d'ignorance le vice,
 Puis que desir de me transmuer as
 De noire en blanche, et par si hault service
 En mon erreur CE VICE MUERAS.¹³⁰

Throughout the course of the *Rymes* Pernette appears to accept her role of chastity ascribed to her within the confines of Perfect Love more easily than Scève does in the *Délie*. Her fear of blind ignorance is less induced by unacceptable feelings of desire than by her intellectual ignorance as a poet, and it in this area that she seeks to be educated by her master. Her understanding of instinctive love, meanwhile, is considerably more complete than Scève's: she harnesses desire to virtue, removing it thereby from the ignominy of lust, and pronounces it good:

Car quand Amour à Vertu est uny,
 Le cueur conçoit un desir infiny,
 Qui tousjours desire
 Tout bien hault et saint.¹³¹

She thus takes unabashed pleasure in the sensual aspects of love because they are subject to the control of chastity:

O bien heureuse envie,
 Qui pour un si hault bien m'a hors de moy ravie.
 Ne pleures plus, Amour: car à toy je suis
 tenue,
 Veu que par ton moyen Vertu chassa la nue,

Qui me garda long temps de me congnoistre nue,
 Et frustrée du bien,
 Lequel, en le goustant, j'ayme, Dieu sçait
 combien.
 Ainsi toute aveuglée en tes lyens je vins,
 Et tu me mis es mains, où heureuse devins.
 D'un qui est haultement en ses escriptz divins,
 Comme de mon [sic], severe,
 Et chaste tellement que chascun l'en revere.¹³²

Clearly, then, chastity is celebrated by Pernette as a means of rationally administering the body in accordance with Neoplatonic precepts of celestial/terrestrial harmony; it is thus only tangentially connected with the moral asceticism prescribed for women in response to religious dictates; as T. Anthony Perry concludes, Pernette believes she has attained 'a high level of chastity ([...] in the sense of mastery of desire rather than of mere sensuality).'¹³³ Thus she and Scève embark upon a symbiotic relationship which is truly androgynous: Pernette, who is in Scève's eyes the 'object de plus haulte vertu', teaches him the joys of chaste affection, while Scève becomes the teacher of poetic virtue by the example of his 'eloquence [...] et hault sçavoir'. Each text grows to become an amalgamation of these two chaste ideals, balancing the development of poetic art with a progression towards a more enlightened perception of instinctive, affectionate love.

There is, furthermore, a sense in which the chaste parameters of the text permit a daring exploration of the passions which also inspire its writers: for within the context of the text, reason which gives birth to the written word controls the unpredictable environment of

love. Thus when Scève has finally attained the beatific state of higher reason, he can explore every facet of the physical desire and spiritual adoration which comprise his love for Délie. This includes, on occasion, celebrating her life-giving touch and his own physical joy in her presence:

Asses plus long, qu'un Siecle Platonique,
 Me fut le moys, que sans toy suis esté:
 Mais quand ton front je revy pacifique,
 Sejour treshault de toute honnesteté,
 Ou l'empire est du conseil arresté
 Mes songes lors je creus estre devins.
 Car en mon corps: mon ame tu revins,
 Sentant ses mains, mains celestement blanches,
 Avec leurs bras mortellement divins
 L'un coronner mon col, l'aulture mes hanches.¹³⁴

Pernette's splendid reworking of the Diana and Acteon myth explores even more intimately the relationship of love and desire to the text. Here Pernette sees herself as muse, filled with desire for her poet-lover and trusting in the chastity of his poetic intentions as they walk together by the fountain:

Combien de fois ay-je en moy souhaicté
 Me rencontrer sur la chaleur d'esté
 Tout au plus pres de la clere fontaine,
 Où mon desir avec cil se pourmaine,
 Qui exercite en sa philosophie
 Son gent esprit, duquel tant je me fie
 Que ne craindrois, sans aucune maignie,
 De me trouver seule en sa compaignie:
 Que dy-je: seule? ains bien accompagnée
 D'honnesteté, que Vertu a gagnée
 A Apollo, Muses, et Nymphes maintes,
 Ne s'adonnantz qu'à toutes oeuvres saintes.¹³⁵

In her dream she displays her physical love before him, leaping nude into the fountain and beckoning him with a song. Pernette the poet is in control in this fantasy,

tempting her lover with the idea of sensual pleasure but rebuking him at the final moment with her chaste stance:

Je le lairrois hardyement approcher:
Et s'il vouloit, tant soit peu, me toucher,
Lui gecterois (pour le moins) ma main pleine
De la pure eau de la clere fontaine,
Lui gectant droict aux yeulx, ou à la face.¹³⁶

For an instant he is a slave to her poetic whims as she ascribes herself as Diana triumphing over Acteon: temporarily she emasculates his creative urges by ensnaring him in her own fictitious state:

O qu'alors eust l'onde telle efficace
De le pouvoir en Acteon muer,
Non toutefois pour le faire tuer,
Et devorer à ses chiens, comme Cerf:
Mais que de moy se sentist estre serf,
Et serviteur transformé tellement
Qu'ainsi cuydast en son entendement,
Tant que Dyane en eust sur moy envie,
De luy avoir sa puissance ravie.¹³⁷

And yet Pernette knows that her lover's poetic talents are God-given, the source of his virtue, and always honourable. She therefore consents to relinquish her hold over him and return him to the muses, trusting that he will be true to her in his verse:

Laissez le aller, qu'Apollo je n'irrite,
Le remplissant de Deité profonde,
Pour contre moy susciter tout le Monde,
Lequel un jour par ses escriptz s'attend
D'estre avec moy et heureux, et content.¹³⁸

The beloved principles of reasoned control are thus applied to the text by Pernette, who succeeds both in

displaying her own desire and chaste control of it, and finally in equating her imagined corporeal fury with the substance of the written word, which, as we have already seen, she believes to be well served by her lover in his elected role as poet. The moral and spiritual essence of the text is sacrosanct here: like the human form it is clearly dependent upon divine intervention for its eternal qualities. If Délie is to Scève the source of 'Graces du Ciel infuses',¹³⁹ Scève is to Pernette, by dint of his 'meslé sçavoir [...] l'excellence | De toute grace exquise, pour avoir | Tous dons des Cieulx en pleine jouyssance.'¹⁴⁰

The metaphysical properties attributable to the act of Perfect Love thus valorize lover and beloved equally; the relationships between Scève and Délie, and between Pernette and Scève are truly androgynous because each lover/beloved bestows equal meaning upon the other (as we have seen, Scève, for example, only makes progress in his understanding of Délie's nature when he perceives his literary intellect and her divine beauty to be of comparable worth). This highly idealized and highly individual portrayal of the Perfect Love discourse by Scève is uniquely concerned with the psychological tensions involved in human interaction. Rarely, if ever, are these tensions dissolved by details of social practicalities; though the work was not written from within the court, it does not record images of social interaction which might set it apart from this environment. Rather, Scève seeks to

understand at a metaphysical and psychological level, and from a highly literary point of view, the dilemmas of Perfect Love which were treated in a more socialized form at the French court. His work is thus an indispensable guide to the inner tensions posed by the discourse, spiritual tensions borne of the court's Neoplatonising tendencies which evangelicals such as Marguerite de Navarre, using rather different formulae, also sought to assess. In the macrocosm of the court, meanwhile, the discourse of necessity assumed a diluted, socialized form, and practical considerations of maintaining order and honour by means of a publicly-stated chaste devotion to love and to social harmony were the order of the day.

- 1 Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, p.234.
- 2 Ibid., p.234.
- 3 Psalm 8. 5.
- 4 A.H.T. Levi, 'The Neoplatonist Calculus', in *Humanism in France*, ed. by A.H.T. Levi, pp.245-246.
- 5 Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp.140-141.
- 6 See Jean Festugière's *La Philosophie de l'amour de Marsile Ficin* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1941), from where I have taken all subsequent French quotations of the *Symposium*, rendered by Guy Le Fèvre de la Borderie (*Discours de l'honneste amour, sur le Banquet de Platon* (Paris: Lucas Breyel, 1578)).
- 7 See Panofsky, pp.146-147.
- 8 See Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love*, vol.2, p.168.
- 9 Ficino, *Commentaire sur le Banquet* in Festugière, p.32.
- 10 Ibid., p.30.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid., p.38.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Singer, p.175.
- 16 Panofsky, p.142.
- 17 See Panofsky, pp.136-144, and Singer, pp.170-173.
- 18 See Panofsky, p.143.
- 19 Singer, p.173. Pico's commentary on love is in fact a commentary on a poetic rewording of Ficino's *De Amore* by Girolamo Benivieni. Entitled *Commenta Sopra una Canzona de Amore*, it was translated into French in 1588 by Gabriel Chappuys.
- 20 Singer, pp.169-170.
- 21 Panofsky, p.144.
- 22 Levi, 'The Neoplatonist Calculus', p.237.
- 23 Festugière, p.54. Note that Ebreo's work was not

published until 1535.

- 24 See T. Anthony Perry, *Erotic Spirituality: The Integrative Tradition from Leone Ebreo to John Donne* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1980), pp.25-26 & p.28.
- 25 Denys Sauvage, *Philosophie d'amour de M. Léon Hébreu. Traduicte d'Italien en François par le Seigneur du Parc Champenois* (Lyon: 1551), in Festugière, p.55.
- 26 *Erotic Spirituality*, pp.13 & 27.
- 27 See chapter four for more information on *Amadis* and its impact upon the French court.
- 28 *Erotic Spirituality*, pp.25, 27 & 30.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p.27.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp.30-31.
- 31 Festugière, p.56.
- 32 *Erotic Spirituality*, p.33.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p.33.
- 34 See Singer, pp.169-170: 'one constantly detects his [Ficino's] reluctance to give up earthly pleasures for the sake of spiritual values that may be inimical to them. Ficino's philosophy is inclusive: he is unwilling to deny the goods of this world in order to exalt those of the next. Though they still belong to a hierarchy of importance, each shows forth divinity in its own way.'
- 35 Festugière, pp.56-58.
- 36 Levi, 'The Neoplatonist Calculus', p.238.
- 37 Baldesar Castiglione, *Le Parfait Courtisan*, p.615.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p.631.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p.649.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p.640.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p.622.
- 42 *Ibid.*, pp.368 & 483. I have made use of Erwin Panofsky's terminology in describing Castiglione's Neoplatonism as 'socialized' and 'feminized'; see p.147 of *Studies in Iconology*.
- 43 See Ferdinand Gohin's introduction to Antoine Héroët's *Oeuvres poétiques* (Paris: Droz, 1943), pp.xxi-xxv.

- 44 Antoine Héroët, *La Parfaicte Amye*, ed. by Christine Hill (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1981), pp.5 & 9.
- 45 Ibid., p.27.
- 46 Antoine Héroët, *L'Androgyne de Platon* in *Opuscules d'amour*, ed. by M. A. Screech (Lyon: Jean de Tournes, 1547; repr. Wakefield: S. R. Publishers Ltd., 1970), pp.75-85.
- 47 Ibid., p.81.
- 48 Almanque Papillon, *Le Nouvel Amour*, in *Opuscules d'amour*, p.244.
- 49 Ibid., p.248.
- 50 Ibid., p.257.
- 51 Ibid., pp.260-261.
- 52 Ibid., p.266.
- 53 Ibid., p.266.
- 54 Ibid., pp.267-268.
- 55 Ibid., p.266.
- 56 Ibid., p.244.
- 57 *La Parfaicte Amye*, p.5.
- 58 Ibid., p.18. This belief in the acceptability of sensuality in love which is true and honourable derives from Bembo's eulogy of the kiss in Castiglione. Note also that Ficino had reclassified voluptas 'as a noble passion', considering the image of passionate love to be a powerful means of conveying the idea of divine ecstasy. See Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), pp.68-70.
- 59 *La Parfaicte Amye*, p.32 (see also Introduction p.xx).
- 60 Ibid., pp.32-33.
- 61 Ibid., p.11, lines 327-340.
- 62 Héroët, *Douleur et Volupté*, in *Oeuvres Poétiques* p.134. See also T. Anthony Perry's examination of this poem in *Erotic Spirituality*, pp.70-71.
- 63 Ibid., p.134.
- 64 Ibid., p.136.

- 65 François Habert, *Le Temple de Chasteté* (Paris: Michel Fezandat, 1549), fol. Aiiii + 2v.
- 66 Ibid., fols Aiiii + 2v - Aiiii + 3r.
- 67 Paul Angier, *L'Honneste Amant* (1544) in *Opuscules d'Amour*, p.202.
- 68 Ibid., p.203.
- 69 Ibid., pp.203-204.
- 70 See Charles Fontaine, *La Contr'ame de court* in *Opuscules d'amour*, pp.151-200. In fact, though La Contr'ame worships Cupid, she defines Cupid as the god of honest affection, and clearly does not perceive him to be symbolic of passionate love as Angiers does. Angiers' distinction between Cupid and Astraea is thus rather artificial in this case. In fact, this confusion in the definition of Cupid was not uncommon. Just as Ficino had defined a beneficent earthly Venus, so some writers used Cupid as the symbol of good earthly love. Other writers attempted to distinguish between good and lustful Cupid by suggesting that Venus had two sons: Eros and Anteros, the former lustful and the latter chaste. Panofsky explains that this interpretation of the classical Anteros ('the son either of Venus or Nemesis') is wrong: the god's original role 'had been to assure reciprocity in amorous relations'; Renaissance Platonists were wont, however, to turn 'the God of Mutual Love into a personification of virtuous purity' (see *Studies in Iconology*, p.126).
- 71 Angier, p.233.
- 72 Jean de la Jessée, *Stanses de l'honneste amour* in *Premieres Oeuvres françoyses*, 2 vols (Anvers: Plantin, 1583), II, p.1041.
- 73 Ibid., p.1041.
- 74 Ian McFarlane, Introduction to *The 'Délie' of Maurice Scève* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p.7.
- 75 See *Erotic Spirituality*, p.37.
- 76 Joan A. Buhlmann, 'The Three Graces: Cosmic Harmony in Scève's *Délie*', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 44 (1982), 53-63 (pp.57-59).
- 77 *Délie*, p.172 (D97).
- 78 Ibid., pp.127-128 (D15).
- 79 Cythia Skenazi, *Maurice Scève et la pensée chrétienne* (Geneva: Droz, 1992), p.36. In her introduction to

this work, Skenazi seeks to establish the significance of the evangelical discourse at the time when Scève was writing, and asserts that contemporary readers would have recognized allusions to biblical texts, as well as allusions to pagan myths (see pp.9-14).

- 80 Bahlmann, p.59. Other dizains which associate Délie with the Graces include Ds 4, 127, 149, 182 and 303. Bahlmann also observes that the image of the Graces is echoed in the poet's description of Délie's 'Grace et Vertu' (see pp.53-54).
- 81 *Délie*, p.227 (D196).
- 82 *Ibid.*, p.292.
- 83 *Ibid.*, p.130 (D22).
- 84 *Ibid.*, p.150 (D59).
- 85 Skenazi, pp.36-37.
- 86 Dorothy Gabe Coleman, *Maurice Scève: Poet of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.118.
- 87 *Délie*, p.132 (D24).
- 88 *Ibid.*, p.325.
- 89 See *ibid.*, p.130 (D22), quoted on p.165 of this chapter.
- 90 *Ibid.*, p.218 (D180).
- 91 *L'Heptaméron*, p.152.
- 92 Arlette Jouanna, *Ordre social, mythes et hiérarchies dans la France du XVIe siècle*, p.116.
- 93 *Délie*, p.345 (D412). In his introduction to the *Délie*, McFarlane reports that 'there is evidence to show that he [Scève] was "addictus Deo" and that he took the first steps towards Holy Orders.' (p.6)
- 94 *Délie*, p.130. See Dorothy Coleman's article, 'Scève's choice of the name "Délie"', *French Studies*, 18 (1964), 1-16 (pp.10-11) for a detailed analysis of the mythological allusions in this dizain.
- 95 Marguerite de Navarre, *Le Miroir de l'ame pecheresse*, ed. by Renja Salminen (Helsinki: Suomalainen Fiedakatemia, 1979), p.175.
- 96 Marguerite de Navarre, *Chansons spirituelles*, ed. by George Dottin (Geneva: Droz, 1971), pp.63-64.

- 97 Joachim du Bellay, *L'Olive*, 112; see 'The Poetic Treatment of a Platonic-Christian Theme', by Leo Spitzer, *Comparative Literature*, 6 (1954), 193-217 (p.200).
- 98 *L'Heptaméron*, p.151.
- 99 *Délie*, p.361 (D441).
- 100 *Ibid.*, p.134.
- 101 *Ibid.*, p.330.
- 102 *Ibid.*, p.192 (D133). See also Maurice Staub's consideration of Scève's uses of 'le bien' in *Le Curieux Desir* (Geneva: Droz, 1967), pp.44-47.
- 103 *Délie*, p.203 (D153).
- 104 *Ibid.*, p.365 (D448).
- 105 *Ibid.*, p.217 (D179).
- 106 *Ibid.*, pp.349-350 (D420).
- 107 *Ibid.*, p.238 (D217).
- 108 *Le Miroir de l'ame pecheresse*, pp.167-168. See Gary Ferguson, *Mirroring Belief: Marguerite de Navarre's Devotional Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992) pp.38-40 for an analysis of the imagery Marguerite uses in this passage: 'The image identifies man's fallen nature, rooted in sin, with the tree of sin and works as an anti-image of the well-known biblical image of Christ as the vine and his followers as the branches [...]. Each of the senses is thus shown to be obstructed in its false efforts to employ itself for the good'.
- 109 *Le Miroir de l'ame pecheresse*, p.168.
- 110 This perception is in keeping with the doctrine of Ficinian Neoplatonism, which defines the human soul, or reason, as a unique faculty, lying at the midpoint of the celestial and terrestrial universe, and able to interact with matter and with spirit. See Panofsky, pp.132-139.
- 111 *Délie*, p.242 (D226).
- 112 *Ibid.*, p.169 (D94).
- 113 *Ibid.*, p.217.
- 114 *Ibid.*, p.218. D184 (p.219) reiterates this theme, in sombre terms:
'Refrenez donc, mes yeulx, vostre deluge:

Car ce mien feu, maulgré vous, reluira.
 Et le laissant a l'extreme refuge,
 Me destruisant, en moy se destraira.'

- 115 Scève's intellect battles with potentially conflicting desire and reason in D181. In D182, meanwhile, Délie's heavenly nature, which he associates with the capacity for right reason, returns to haunt him. (see pp.218-219).
- 116 Skenazi, pp.89 & 93.
- 117 *Délie*, p.361 (D442).
- 118 Jerry C. Nash, *The Love Aesthetics of Maurice Scève* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.45.
- 119 Levi, 'The Neoplatonist Calculus', p.238.
- 120 *Délie*, p.246.
- 121 *Ibid.*, p.351 (D424).
- 122 *Ibid.*, p.365 (D449).
- 123 See Victor E. Graham's introduction to Pernette du Guillet's *Rymes* (Geneva: Droz, 1968), p.xiv.
- 124 The most well-known instance of this is Pernette's *Epigramme XIII* (p.21), which is a response to Scève's D136 (*Délie*, p.193).
- 125 Pernette du Guillet, *Rymes*, p.11. See also 'Pernette du Guillet's Poetry of Love and Desire' by T. Anthony Perry, in *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 35 (1973), pp.259-271 (p.259).
- 126 *Rymes*, p.54.
- 127 *Ibid.*, p.27.
- 128 *Ibid.*, p.13.
- 129 *Ibid.*, p.51.
- 130 *Ibid.*, p.12.
- 131 *Ibid.*, p.73.
- 132 *Ibid.*, p.54. See 'Pernette du Guillet's Poetry of Love and Desire', pp.263-264.
- 133 *Ibid.*, p.267.
- 134 *Délie*, p.320 (D367). When Scève is confident in the righteousness of his instinctive love, he is happy to make physical contact with Délie, knowing this to be 'honneste' and acceptable, even if, as in D309

(p.287), Délie ultimately refuses to comply with his demands:

'Plus pour esbat, que non pour me douloir
De tousjours estre en passions brulantes,
Je contentois mon obstiné vouloir:
Mais je sentis ses deux mains bataillantes,
Qui s'opposoient aux miennes travaillantes,
Pour mettre a fin leur honneste desir.'

- 135 *Rymes*, p.58.
136 *Ibid.*, p.59.
137 *Ibid.*, p.59.
138 *Ibid.*, p.60.
139 *Délie*, p.218 (D182).
140 *Rymes*, p.10.

THE TRIUMPH OF THE ICON: PART ONE

IV: CHASTITY AND THE SOCIAL BODY: A NEW ORDER

THE TRIUMPHANT UNION OF CHASTITY AND SENSUALITY AT COURT

The metaphysics of Perfect Love elucidated by Scève and other early French Neoplatonists had of necessity to be translated into a workable social code in order to have an influence upon court mores. Castiglione's *Courtier*, and the French interpretation of its ideology in the *Querelle des Amyes* debate, had begun the process of 'socializing' the philosophy, and, as we have seen, relied heavily upon the concept of elected virtue as the vehicle for its propagation. In the light of many sixteenth-century treatises addressing the issue of noble birth and the contrasting roles of the sexes called to this high estate, social relations at court from the 1540s to the turn of the century were clearly not simply categorized in terms of feminine chaste refusal/restraint and masculine lust/desire, although this polarization of virtue was certainly suggested by some. Nevertheless, it is undeniably the case that, in symbolic terms, chastity and desire were the twin axes upon which social intercourse rotated: the transcendent properties of tempered desire had been amply ratified in the philosophical explorations of Ficino, Pico and Ebreo, and duly endorsed by French Neoplatonists. The court, in turn, was increasingly stimulated by the possibility of promoting a model of ordered socio-sexual

relations which took account of physical presence, whilst maintaining a contact with the divine befitting the noble status of all concerned.

The Neoplatonic framework in which such theories developed had at its core, as we have seen in chapters two and three of this work, the notion of divine love as the beneficent bestower of social and sexual diversity. This celebration of the heavenly through the tangible, physical world of the body was fundamental to Neoplatonism, and yet this philosophy did not hesitate to condemn the excesses of passion as the product of devil rather than deity. What, then, constituted excess in this area, and how did the court distance itself from the image of destructive physicality that would jeopardize its supposed divine origins?

The answer to this question lies precisely in the nobility's definition of itself as a race apart. The notion of election, common to the Christian and to the Perfect Lover,¹ was also at the heart of the nobleman's perceived right to bear arms, for example, and instilled noble courtiers with a superior sense of virtue.² Just as this apparently secular form of election by birthright was readily assimilated with Christian justification, so it was also grafted onto the concept of the elect in Perfect Love terms. Scève's climactic union of desire and chastity, inspired by the transcendent beauty of his *Délie*, permits him the rewards of spiritual ecstasy because he has

struggled with, and overcome his passionate, irrational self. In his place, the courtier might claim to be naturally predisposed to triumph over passion, and thereby likely to encounter the divine in any relationship he might choose to pursue.

Sensual pleasure was not therefore anathema to the courtier who sought to conduct himself according to the precepts of Perfect Love; indeed the rational *volupté* celebrated by Héroët, Scève and others became deeply engrained within the fabric of court society, which appropriated Neoplatonic terminology to express the necessity for union between the sensual and spiritual aspects of life.

As we have seen in chapter three, Ficino's reading of Plato gave account of two Venuses: one terrestrial, expressing the divine order of nature, and the other celestial, symbolic of the heavenly love at the origins of the universe. Communication between these two loves was only possible through discord, both Ficino and Pico contended, because celestial love, or concord, was of itself complete (this is Sofia's understanding of cosmic love in Ebreo's *Dialoghi*).³ Pico represented the necessary union of concord and discord with reference to Plutarch's interpretation from ancient texts of the coupling of Mars and Venus, which produced the goddess Harmony, who held her parents' contradictory natures in balance. In an essay *On*

the General Nature of Beauty his Neoplatonist reading of this allegory is made clear:

But Empedocles spoke more perfectly when he introduced discord not by itself but together with concord as the origin of all things, understanding by discord the variety of elements of which they are composed, and by concord their union; and therefore he said that only in God is there no discord because in him there is no union of diverse elements, but his unity is simple, without any composition. And since in the constitution of created things it is necessary that the union overcomes the strife (otherwise the thing would perish because its elements would fall apart) - for this reason it is said by the poets that Venus loves Mars, because Beauty, which we will call Venus, cannot subsist without contrariety; and that Venus tames and mitigates Mars, because the tempering power restrains and overcomes the strife and hate which persists between the contrary elements. [...] And if Mars were always subordinated to Venus, that is, the contrariety of the component elements to their due proportion, nothing would ever perish.⁴

The tale of the birth of Harmony was swiftly seized upon and reproduced by Renaissance poets and artists, for if the metaphysical ideals of thinkers were satisfied by this allegory, so, crucially, were the growing endeavours to establish a social harmony which would take account of the day to day activities of courtiers. Harmony did indeed have an advantageous parentage from this point of view: the rational alliance of martial strength and physical/spiritual beauty suggested by the myth could easily be read in terms of social ritual; aforementioned texts have stressed the importance of the masculine ideal of fortitude, and the corresponding feminine icons of beauty and goodness.⁵ The weight of emphasis placed upon the physical beauty of women at court and the chivalrous

might of noblemen, upon masculine desire pursued through valour and feminine chastity defended by rational resistance, led to the widespread celebration of a social harmony which seemingly blended chastity and desire.

Chaste Venus was incontrovertibly at the centre of the French Renaissance vision of social order: the formula of male pursuit and female conditioned response relied upon the expectation of some sensual contact: this was built into the very language of social interaction between the sexes. And though the metaphysical goal of the reasonable love which chaste Venus postulated was that of spiritual beatitude, a oneness with the goddess in her celestial form, the terrestrial satisfaction of reasoned *volupté* was itself a justifiable aim, as we have seen in chapter three. To this end, furthermore, the Neoplatonist picture of a good earthly Venus was heavily supplemented by the medieval tradition, which had perceived two Venuses within earthly love: one lustful, and the other 'legitimate, sacramental, natural, and in harmony with cosmic law'.⁶ Boccaccio examines the nature of these two Venuses in an analysis of his own *Teseida*, hailing good Venus to personify 'legitimate desire'; medieval commentators on the *Aeneid* link good Venus with the world soul, and even with *Astraea*, who returns divine order to the planet.⁷ As Edgar Wind has observed, the Venus-Virgo image found in the *Aeneid* was in turn an important proof text for Renaissance Neoplatonists, who 'thought they had found a fine poetical confirmation for their doctrine of the union of Chastity

and Love.'⁸ The fusion of these two apparent opposites at the French court, then, was typical of the Renaissance move towards a perceptible harmony of body and spirit, so accepted that love pursued by rational and honest means became the currency of social interaction, and a mark of social status.

The androgynous model of social relations represented by the Mars - Venus union was thus applauded by noblemen and women alike for the balancing harmony it induced. Cesare says as much in *The Courtier*, as he explains to those present that the beauty of women renders men more reasonable and more efficient in the art of war:

Qui est ce qui ne sçait que sans les femmes on ne peut recevoir contentement ou satisfaction aucune en toute ceste nostre vie? laquelle sans elles seroit rustique, privee de toute douceur, et plus rude que celle des bestes sauvages? [...] Et si nous voulons bien considerer la verité, nous congnoissons pareillement que touchant la congnoissance des choses grandes elles ne desvoyent les entendemens, ains les y esveillent: elles encouragent les hommes en la guerre, et les rendent hardiz sur tout. Et certainement il est impossible, qu'au coeur de l'homme auquel soit entree une fois la flamme d'amour, regne jamais pusilanimité.⁹

Dagoucin, in Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron*, believes similarly that the virtues of men and those of women must needs be held in delicate balance in order for noble honour to be maintained:

Si nous pensions les dames sans amour, nous voudrions estre sans vie. J'entends de ceux qui ne vivent que pour l'acquérir; et encores qu'ilz n'y adviennent, l'esperance les soustient et leur

faict faire mille choses honorables jusques ad ce que la vieillesse change ces honnestes passions en autres peynes. Mais qui penseroit que les dames n'aymassent point, il faudroit, en lieu d'hommes d'armes, faire des marchans; et en lieu d'acquérir honneur, ne penser que à amasser du bien.¹⁰

The court ostensibly endorsed this ideology, and conceived of itself as an environment in which mutual admiration and respect between the sexes would lead indubitably to the creation of perfect androgyne pairs, harmonious and desirable social units. The Magnifico, speaking of courtship, explains this principle to his listeners in *The Courtier*:

Je ne veux pas [...] que madame de Cour retranche l'esperance de toutes choses, mais bien des deshonestes, que le Courtisan estant si sage et courtois comme ces gentilhommes l'ont formé, n'esperera seulement, mais aussi ne les desirera en sorte quelconque. Car si la beauté, les moeurs, l'esprit, la bonté, le sçavoir, la modestie et tant d'autres vertueuses qualitez que nous avons donnees à la Dame, sont cause de l'amour du Courtisan, [...] la fin de ceste amour sera aussi necessairement vertueuse.¹¹

The rational conciliation of masculine pursuit and feminine beauty was therefore accepted as axiomatic amongst noble courtiers who, by virtue of their rank, were deemed to be the source of every human perfection. Virtuous ladies would respond enthusiastically to the manifest prowess of their male suitors, while honourable noblemen would sanction the chaste beauty of their loved ones by allowing themselves to be guided in the pursuit of transcendent chastity. Oisille sings the praises of the sublime harmony which noblemen can experience through such relationships in the *Heptaméron*:

'ceulx qui ayment femmes belles, honnestes et vertueuses, ont tel contentement à les veoir et à les oyr parler; et ont l'esperit si contant, que la chair est appaisée de tous ses desirs.'¹² Héroët's *Description d'une femme de bien*, a contemporaneous text, explains that, moreover, noblewomen regard masculine pursuit as a means of authenticating their own virtue, and skilfully temper the advances of their suitors to their own chaste values:

Sur ce, disons que l'homme scait comprendre
Ce qu'elle veult et forcer la coustume
Que par nature elle a de se deffendre.
Si du combat se saulve, l'on présume
Que l'honneur seul la garde de se rendre.¹³

Writers throughout the course of the century endorsed the practice of reciprocal adoration through love as a means of eulogizing social and spiritual election amongst the nobility. Due appreciation of recognized noble virtues by both sexes would be followed, according to the ideal, by harmonious union in every case. Cyre Foucault, who wrote his *Image du Vray Amant - discours tiré de Platon* as late as 1597, reminds his lady that Perfect Love 'arrive infailliblement lors que deux jeunes personnes bien nées, et d'un bon naturel, s'entr'aiment uniquement d'une Amour mutuelle.'¹⁴

The Chivalric Model of Socio-Sexual Relations: Amadis de Gaule

The extreme popularity during the sixteenth century of Chivalric romances which dramatized the social formulae of love testified to their importance amongst courtiers; the genre was, indeed, more widely read than any other, aside from devotional literature, in many European countries.¹⁵ In France, *Amadis de Gaule* was by far the most popular of the chivalric cycles; the work had its origins in early sixteenth-century Spain (the earliest surviving edition of the initial four books of the cycle was published in 1508), and was introduced to the French court by François I, who read *Amadis* whilst in captivity in Spain, and requested Nicholas de Herberay, Seigneur des Essarts, to translate it on his return.¹⁶ The court demonstrated a patriotic interest in *Amadis*, taking the *Gaule* of the title to refer to France, and often relating episodes within the cycle to prominent people and events at court.¹⁷ In an *Ode au Seigneur des Essars sur le discours de son Amadis*, for example, Du Bellay declares that:

Si de ce brave sujet
On goute bien l'artifice
On y verra le project
De maint royal edifice:
Qui tesmoigne le grand heur
De la Française grandeur.¹⁸

He proceeds to praise the work for its civilizing influence and its vivid portrayal of 'toutes noz affections, |

L'honneur, la vertu, le vice, | La paix, la guerre', and particularly the 'sainte ardeur' of 'amour'.¹⁹

John O'Connor asserts that 'there is little doubt that in the sixteenth century *Amadis de Gaule* was read principally as a book of love.'²⁰ In chivalric terms, war and conquest were an integral feature of love: knights fought for their ladies, and thereby proved themselves worthy of honour, and of their ladies' trust. The task of the lady, meanwhile, was to 'attend to her beauty and remain worth fighting for.'²¹ Much of the cycle was therefore given over to detailed descriptions of battle scenes and acts of courage on the part of the most noble knights.

The theme of love in the work was expressed in terms both of spiritualized Neoplatonism and blatant sexual desire: a cocktail which intrigued the court, and reflected its own increasing inclinations towards a pragmatic, sensually-satisfying philosophy of social interaction:

Amadis also did its bit toward fostering at court an interest in neo-Platonic love. Diane de Poitiers, whose intimacy with Henry was piously cloaked under the name of friendship, was hardly averse to a demonstration, albeit fictional, that a lady and her knight might enjoy a relationship wholly spiritual. Since several books of *Amadis* stress such liaisons, French ladies and gentlemen must have perused them with more than passing interest.²²

Noble courtiers in *Amadis* were always loyal to their lovers, and noble ladies guarded their honour fiercely.

Much emphasis was placed upon the theme of election to love, and correspondingly upon the image of the androgyne as the symbol of genuine, divinely-willed union. The path to such sublime union was often an arduous one: noblemen and women were subjected to Cupid's testing, and required to resist any tendencies towards irrational passion, that they might find themselves in the presence of their chosen other halves, when finally they came to meet, unsullied, and able to give themselves physically and spiritually to each other. Thus Amadis' mother, the beautiful princess Elisenne, 'par si long temps, en sa fleur et plus grande jeunesse, requise de tant de haulx princes et grans seigneurs s'estoit deffendue, pour demourer en liberte de pucelle'.²³ Yet, on meeting the equally noble Perion de Gaule for the first time, she is overwhelmed by a love more powerful than her capacity to resist, and he too is overcome with emotion:

Amour adonc estoit en embusce qui par long temps avoit assailly ceste jeune princesse sans l'avoir sçeu vaincre: mais il la veit tant au descouvert, qu'à l'heure presente la peult atteindre si au vif, qu'il s'en fait dela en avant vainqueur: Mesme du Roy Perion qui ne pensoit qu'à son honneste recueil, lors qu'il jecta l'oeil sur ma dame Elisene, et elle sur luy, si que par ce regard la chaste et sainte vie accoustumée à ceste princesse n'eut povoir de la garantir, qu'elle ne feust frappée d'increable et extreme amour de ce jeune Roy, et au semblable luy d'elle.²⁴

Elisenne herself remarks to her confidante Dariolette that this love seems blessed, since she is suited so well to her loved one, and he to her: 'ne vous semble il que la fortune me soit autant favorable qu'à luy? car si je suis belle,

n'est il l'un des plus parfaictz que l'on sçache, soit de personne, bonne grace ou hardiesse?'.²⁵

Secrecy was of the essence in these unions, which, while divinely augured, were ever open to the criticism of a prying society. Dariolette sees to it that her mistress's honour is maintained 'soubz le manteau de mariaige',²⁶ a necessary precaution, since Amadis is the product of the union. As Micheline Cuenin explains in her notes to this text, the liaison is consecrated through Perion's solemn promise to marry Elisenne when he returns from combat, so that 'Dieu n'y povoit estre aulcunement offensé' by the physical consummation of their love.²⁷ Nevertheless, the Princess is concerned for her reputation, and sends the child away like Moses, in a water-tight basket, to be found by a Scottish nobleman sailing towards Denmark, where Amadis will, henceforward, be brought up.

In turn Amadis de Gaule reaches the age where he must be initiated into the rituals of love, and he is therefore appointed by the Queen of Denmark to serve the princess Oriane, his equal in age and in social standing. Inevitably his love for her is returned, and they embark upon the familiar path towards a union grounded upon mutual respect for rank and virtue, as the author explains when the pair find themselves together on an impromptu nocturnal meeting:

Si ilz furent bien aises, il ne s'en fault enquerir: car tous les contentemens du monde ne sont qu'ennuy en comparaison de celuy qu'ilz receurent de s'entrevoir. Et sans point de doubte,

ilz en avoient tous deux raison: car oultre la nourriture qu'ilz avoient prise ensemble dès leur jeune aage, et leur premiere amytié, continuée par la souvenance et bonne opinion qu'ilz avoient tousjours eue l'ung de l'aultre, leur beaulté estoit si grande, que quand ilz ne se fussent jamais entreveuz que lors, si avoient ilz cause de s'entreaymer.²⁸

As a matter of course, and in response to the other's beauty, each lover must needs experience the pull of desire, though desire born not of blind passion, but of reasoned appreciation, and ordered in accordance with the rules of social decorum. Oriane rebukes Amadis for his impetuosity and passionate lack of control, and reminds him that 'ayant [...] à nous entrevoir souvent, et en publicque, cela ne pourroit servir sinon à descouvrir ce que nous vouldrions estre incongneu, dont trop de mal nous pourroit advenir, et pour le moins empescher ce que nous desirons le plus.'²⁹ At no time does Oriane show herself to feel threatened by Amadis' hotheaded behaviour, however; nor does Amadis suggest that he would ever contravene the code of respect for his lady's wishes. Oriane's principal concern is that his passion might endanger their secret liaison, and thereby hinder the fruition of 'ce que nous desirons le plus', which she describes in pointed Neoplatonic terms as 'ce où gist la felicité, la cognoissance dequoy unit et eslieve les espritz jusques au ciel.'³⁰

This is a statement shrouded in ambiguity; Amadis clearly understands it to be a promise of forthcoming physical consummation of his desire, begging Oriane to reveal to him

'quand elle [la journée] sera.'³¹ Oriane, in reply, maintains her vocabulary of transcendence, and draws Amadis' attention to the fact that 'elle [la journée] est desja commencée, mais vostre oeil esblouy ne la voit point', as if to reinforce the necessity that their love possess a spiritual identity.³²

Oriane's faculties of resistance to the temptations of irrational passion, and her obvious will to conform to the social demands of order and secrecy, affirm her virtue and honour before the reader, and before Amadis himself. Henceforward, in the presence of her lover, Oriane has no need of chastity as a protective virtue, since she has proved herself worthy of Amadis in positive terms, and since he has agreed to honour the chaste terms of her virtue by seeking to safeguard her reputation. In chapter XXXVI she therefore acquiesces, and willingly gives way to physical union, seen now as the logical fulfilment of Perfect Love, when she is alone with him: 'Ainsi demeura Amadis seul avec sa dame, tant plein de grand aise (pour le bien qu'elle luy avoit octroyé, qui estoit la perfection de ce qu'il eust sceu desirer) qu'il ne pavoit oster l'oeil de dessus d'elle'.³³ In this idyllic environment, Oriane's capitulation is shown categorically to be good and right. There is an acknowledged threat of criticism from the outside world: this is an action 'qui aux hommes sembleroit mal fait', but 'devant Dieu' no guilt is necessary and the joy of the occasion is repeatedly emphasized.³⁴ Desire is celebrated in this courtly haven as

the prerequisite to ecstatic union; after the event, each lover gladly admits the extent of their longing for the other, and their suffering is testimony to the dignity of the vocation they have finally fulfilled:

Ha combien de comptes luy fait alors Oriane des peines qu'elle avoit souffertes attendant ce jour, luy confessant des particularitez que aultre qu'elle et son desir n'avoit encores entendues. Combien aussi de choses luy dit Amadis pour luy tesmoigner son contentement, et l'asseurer de sa perpetuelle foy, tenant tous les travaux qu'il avoit soufferts pour bien heureulx, et trop bien recompensez.³⁵

There is no sense, therefore, in which the noble readership of *Amadis* was intended to see this demonstration of love between two main protagonists as anything other than honourable and chaste. While Neoplatonic ideals of ascetic spirituality did not remain entirely uncorrupted, the Neoplatonic notion of harmony was fervently pursued, and the social model of the androgyne endorsed. Predestined for each other by noble birth and favourable election, Amadis and Oriane accept the the roles established for them within the code of ideal love; neither presumes to look upon the other as anything less than an equal partner, neither presumes to doubt the other's integrity. In this environment, the masculine code of pursuit is characterized by valour, and not by aggressivity, and the feminine code of chastity coloured by spiritual transcendence, not shame-induced resistance.

In allowing their perfect lovers to consummate their desires physically, the authors of *Amadis* did not seek to minimize the burden of chastity upon their heroines. Though sexual affection between lovers was not, for the most part, legitimized through public marriage (noble liaisons remained a closely guarded secret at all times), consummation followed a long period of testing in which loyalty and integrity was proven. In this world of ideal love, chastity to the point of rejection of a worthy suitor was condemned, but it remained a necessary prelude to spiritual and physical union between loyal lovers.³⁶ The beatific harmony of these noble liaisons, in which the lady was perceived to have nothing to fear from her suitor, was sharply contrasted with the threat of ignorance and malice emanating from outside of the court, or outside of the community which practised perfect love. In the face of these threats, the noble lady did well to clothe herself with the mantle of protective chastity to guard against loss of virtue, and in doing so subjected herself to testing far greater than that which any noble suitor would dare to impose upon her.

The popularity of the *Amadis* tales throughout the sixteenth century and beyond testifies to a genuine and widespread interest at the French court in perfecting social relations. Secrecy and tact may have been the watchwords for serious and worthy *serviteurs*, but as in *Amadis* the game of love certainly had a public face, and as the cult of social perfection grew in stature at court, so

any courtier worthy of the name would perceive participation in the public game to be a social requirement. Pierre de Bourdeille, seigneur de Brantôme, revealed remarkable insights into this heavily codified world of court mores in *Les Dames galantes*, an amusing and anecdotal account of the game of love in its many guises, witnessed by the former servant of the duc d'Alençon.³⁷ On the subject of secrecy in love Brantôme declares:

Une opinion en amour ay-je veu tenir à plusieurs: qu'un amour secret ne vaut rien, s'il n'est un peu manifeste, sinon à tous, pour le moins à ses plus privez amis; et, si à tous il ne se peut dire, pour le moins que le manifeste s'en face, ou par monstres ou par faveurs, ou de livrées et couleurs, ou actes chevalleresques, comme courremens de bagues, tournois, masquarades, combats à la barrière, voire à ceux de bon escient quand on est à la guerre; certes, le contentement en est tres-grand en soy.³⁸

Pierre de Dampmartin, in his assessment of court mores, *La Fortune de la cour*, written towards the end of the sixteenth century in the form of a conversation between the author and the Sieur de Bussy, the notorious lover of Marguerite de Valois, suggests that the public demonstration of love is a social prerequisite for the nobleman who wishes to appear refined and socially capable: 'Que si l'on n'estoit point d'humeur à se laisser toucher d'un veritable amour, il en falloit feindre pour ne point sembler un rustique et peu courtois nourry parmy la plus basse lie du peuple.'³⁹

Of course, the court accepted into the public arena only those aspects of the courtship process which appeared socially acceptable, which were desirable to behold. From the earliest exponents of Perfect Love mentioned in the previous chapter to later and more cynical observers of court decorum such as Brantôme, all affirmed chivalry to be an important symbol of masculine worth in love, and one which might legitimately lead to a public display of allegiance through the sporting of trinkets, medals and ribbons indicating that a gentleman was serving a particular lady. For noblewomen, however, any public acceptance of love was fraught with danger, and the lady of the court was generally advised not to act, but simply to react in this area; in other words, her role was to receive the service of suitors, to adjudge for herself the merit of these, to commit herself chastely and with propriety to one of them if she so desired, but never to be seen to undertake the role of pursuit in love herself.

Marguerite de Navarre astutely perceived, at a comparatively early stage in the history of Neoplatonising Love at the French court, that the public face of love was to become as significant as the private for women: her presumed alter-ego, Parlamente, ruefully observes that: 'l'honneur d'une femme est aussi bien mys en dispute, pour aymer par vertu, comme par vice, veu que l'on ne se prent que ad ce que l'on voyt.'⁴⁰ It is for this reason, amongst others, that Marguerite recommends that sexual activity be kept firmly within the confines of marriage, and demands an

impeccable private life of noblewomen. Many more women, however, willed female chastity, made manifest in symbols of beauty and goodness, to be an outward sign of social harmony by its very assimilation with the aforementioned masculine virtues of chivalry. And if that assimilation was often to incorporate physical, as well as spiritual union, as the *Amadis* cycle would seem to suggest, there had to be a degree of complicity between the masculine territory of pursuit and the feminine world of chaste response, on the public stage as well as in the bedroom.

Amadis de Gaule was an indispensable model to the court of how such conciliation should take place. It presented the image of a society engaged in the pursuit of both disciplined order and pleasure, in which chastity never precluded the satisfaction of desire, as long as that desire was pursued patiently and honourably. Oriane's display of chaste composure, and her eventual submission to Amadis after his integrity and valour have been proven, became a model for many noblewomen. Chastity itself, in the light of such paradigms, loosed itself from the restrictive bonds of sexual abstinence, and instead became linked with notions of rational choice: a virtue of self-control which demanded not self-denial but the carefully-considered selection of the most worthy suitor.

This hallowed position of decision-maker in matters of love had long been the prerogative of noblewomen, and continued to play an important role in sixteenth century

rituals of courtship. Not for most women were the high ideals of Marguerite de Navarre's *Parlamente*, who insists that the court lady render herself entirely out of reach of masculine advances by cutting herself off from any protestations of love:

Au commencement une femme ne doit jamais faire semblant d'entendre où l'homme veult venir, ny encores, quant il le declaire, de le povoir croire; mais, quant il vient à en jurer bien fort, il me semble qu'il est plus honneste aux dames de le laisser en ce beau chemyn, que d'aller jusques à la vallée.⁴¹

The public reception of suitors by noblewomen was, rather, a social institution actively encouraged and widely practised by the majority. Eliane Viennot observes, in her study of Marguerite de Valois, that this tradition of courtship outside of marriage was a pragmatic means of instilling social order and was celebrated for its civilizing influence:

Dès la fin du XVe siècle, en effet, s'est généralisée à la cour de France une coutume selon laquelle toute femme bien née doit avoir plusieurs galants qui la courtisent, au vu et au su de son mari, tandis que tout gentilhomme qui se respecte doit 'servir' une ou plusieurs 'maîtresses', au vu et au su de son épouse. Cette institution, reconnue pour son efficacité et souvent saluée pour ses vertus civilisatrices, correspond à la nécessité de canaliser et de socialiser l'énergie sexuelle.⁴²

The convention was, in fact, so institutionalized that parents often sought out suitable mistresses for their sons: a phenomenon to which the Vicomte de Turenne makes reference in his *Mémoires*:

L'on avoit en ce temps-là [1565-1568] une coutume; qu'il était messéant aux jeunes gens de bonne maison s'ils n'avaient une maîtresse, laquelle ne se choisissait par eux et moins [encore] par leur affection, mais, ou elles étaient données par quelques parents ou supérieurs, ou elles-mêmes choisissaient ceux de qui elles voulaient estre servies.⁴³

According to Viennot, the practice of organised mistress-taking involved all manner of liaisons, from the sensual to the purely platonic, though outwardly courtship remained ordered and deferential at all times:

Ces alliances officielles peuvent évidemment cacher toutes sortes de relations, de la tendresse à la liaison pure et simple, en passant par la 'couverture' (fausse inclination servant à en masquer une autre), mais la règle est claire: rien ne doit se savoir afin que l'honneur de tous soit respecté et que l'ordre règne.⁴⁴

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising to note that chastity was not as abhorrent to the male sex as may often have seemed the case; many noblemen were willing to allow their tactics of pursuit to be tempered by the resplendent beauty of the Venuses they worshipped in the quest for a 'harmony' which would satisfy each party both publicly and privately. Chaste decorum entered the masculine camp, not, of course, as an icon of passive resistance, but as part of an active strategy of pursuit identified with the superlative masculine virtues of courage and valour. As we have seen in the Magnifico's portrayal of ideal courtship, 'la noblesse' and 'la valeur aux armes' sit alongside the qualities of 'le sçavoir des

lettres, de la musique, la gentillesse, les bonnes graces tant au parler qu'à converser' for the ideal courtier, eager to win his lady's affections.⁴⁵ These gentler virtues, which complement the militaristic image of the nobleman, can perhaps be said to illustrate the extent to which a chaste, self-controlled approach to courtship had become a necessary part of the masculine social vocabulary.

If the perfect nobleman was active in these strategies of seduction, the court lady exerted her influence by judiciously observing and choosing the best of those suitors presented to her. Chastity was at once her sword and shield in this activity: the wise noblewoman would seek at all times to protect herself from unfavourable advances for the sake of her reputation, but she also wielded the power incisively to distinguish between suitors, and to commit the responsibility for her reputation to the strongest contender for her honour. Brantôme cites the example of certain noblewomen who willingly yield to the most worthy of those men who serve them, and who perceive submission under these circumstances to be acceptable, and even desirable:

Disent plus (au moins aucunes de nos dames), que ceste loi d'honneur n'est que pour celles qui n'ayment point et qui n'ont fait d'amys honnestes, ausquelles est tres-malseant et vituperable d'aller abandonner la chasteté de leur corps comme si c'estoient quelques courtizanes; mais celles qui ayment, et qui ont fait des amys bien choysys, ceste loy ne leur prohibe nullement qu'elles ne leur assistent en les foeuz qui les bruslent, et ne leur donnent de quoy pour estaindre; et que c'est proprement donner la vie à un qui la

demande, se monstrant en cela begnines, et nullement barbares ny cruelles.⁴⁶

Many noblewomen, it seems, in no way regarded such action as an indication of lasciviousness, but as a skilful and legitimate employment of the virtue of chastity in the service of rational courtship. Brantôme records the discourse of a 'belle dame' who tries to persuade a younger court lady that her chastity is a tool to be used discerningly, and in order to favour only the most worthy courtiers:

Bien est-il vray que nostre chasteté est semblable à un tresor, lequel on doit espargner en choses basses; mais, pour choses hautes et grandes, il le faut despenser à largesse, et sans espargne. Tout de mesmes faut-il faire part de nostre chasteté, laquelle on doit eslargir aux personnes de merite et vertu, et de souffrance, et la denier à ceux qui sont viles, de nulle valeur et de peu de besoin.⁴⁷

This lady is confident that her sex can play an equal role in the pursuit of pleasure in love, and that such pleasure can be attained without damage to her chastity, providing that she behave rationally, and that she commit herself only to the best. By adhering to, and endorsing the codified ritual put in place to inject an aura of morality and dignity into sexual relations, she preserves her honour, authenticates her noble status, and can yet enjoy in fullest measure the union promised in the androgyne model. This altogether more pragmatic face of the androgyne is certainly far removed from the beatific visions of Perfect Love described by Scève and Héroët, and yet it is

evidence of a practical equality in love which took account of the real tendencies of court behaviour.

The ultimate confirmation of the desirability of the chastity icon across the court can be seen in texts written by men which outline the need for their own sex to promote and endorse this virtue amongst their lovers, and, indeed, amongst all noblewomen. Brantôme rather humorously devotes the *sixième discours* of *Les Dames galantes*, entitled 'Sur ce qu'il ne faut jamais parler mal des dames et la consequence qui en vient', to this issue, and states unequivocally at the very beginning that 'on ne doit jamais offenser l'honneur des dames, et surtout les grandes. Je parle autant de ceux qui en reçoivent des jouissances comme de ceux qui ne peuvent taster de la venaison et la descrient.'⁴⁸

Brantôme appears to argue that the chastity of noblewomen must be revered, irrespective of their actual behaviour, a paradox which he treats with a good deal of flippancy, but which is nevertheless symptomatic of the mood of the time, when discretion really was a social necessity, particularly for those noblemen who served high-ranking ladies.⁴⁹ He observes that 'ces belles et honnestes dames qui font l'amour [...] ne veulent estre offensées ny escandalisées des paroles de personne [...]. Bref, elles le veulent bien faire, mais non pas qu'on en parle', and is highly critical of Louis XI of France because 'il avoit tres-mauvaise opinion des femmes, et ne les croyoit toutes

chastes.'⁵⁰ Pierre de Dampmartin's dialogue *La Fortune de la cour*, presents a similar view of the honourable nobleman as a self-interested character who nevertheless assumes responsibility for his lady's reputation. Both Dampmartin and Brantôme recognize the imperative amongst noblemen to win mistresses for the sake of honour, and accept their consequential desire for public acknowledgement of liaisons. Both writers, too, seek to reconcile this attitude with the rather conflicting ordinance that the nobleman safeguard the honour of his lady, and both address the problem by looking to the example of the king. Dampmartin affirms the royal precedent of mistress-taking by celebrating the long tradition of love-making within the French line: 'L'amour a tousjours voulu regner icy dessus les Roys; et les Roys l'ont permis parce qu'en recompense il leur faisoit part de ses delices'.⁵¹ Brantôme, in similar vein, recalls that François I frowned heavily upon any gentleman who neglected to take a mistress: 'J'ay ouy conter à aucuns qu'il vouloit fort que les honnestes gentilhommes de sa cour ne fussent jamais sans des maistresses; et s'ils n'en faisoient il les estimoit des fats et des sots'.⁵²

Dampmartin locates the nobleman's duty to uphold secrecy in matters of love within the virtue of temperance, and duly applauds the efforts of certain kings to hide their mistresses as evidence of their honourable intentions in this area. He records particularly the example of Charles VII, who, he explains, constructed the Château de

Beauté for his mistress, in order to be able to visit her secretly.⁵³ Brantôme, equally complimentary, cites the example of Henri II, who, he declares, refused to tolerate slander towards any court lady, whilst showing himself to be a paragon of honour in his own liaisons:

Or, le roy Henry aimoit aussi bien les bons contes comme les rois ses predecesseurs, mais il ne vouloit point que les dames en fussent scandalisées ny divulguées; si bien que luy, qui estoit d'assez amoureuse complexion, quand il alloit voir les dames, y alloit le plus caché et le plus couvert qu'il pouvoit, afin qu'elles fussent hors de soupçon et diffame.⁵⁴

Brantôme's accounts, which usually tend towards the licentious, certainly do not attempt to persuade or coerce courtly readers into believing that the most noble gentlemen among their number would deny themselves physical pleasure for the sake of chaste decorum: asceticism is rarely presented as a virtue, for either sex, in this narrative. And if the evidence of modern scholars is to be believed, the majority of courtiers were of similar opinion. Jacqueline Boucher, in two seminal works examining life at court under the reign of Henri III, records that, in this environment 'les rencontres sensuelles, plus que les liaisons de longue durée, [...] y étaient choses courantes',⁵⁵ and that consequently 'les plus réalistes des théoriciens d'un amour policé admettaient des relations physiques mesurées.'⁵⁶ This is not to say that asceticism did not have its place within the icon's wide and varied scope: sexual purity and marital fidelity were qualities enthusiastically celebrated in certain circumstances

(particularly in the case of high ranking noblewomen), as we shall see in chapter six of this work. Nevertheless, any examination of the chastity icon's signification at the French court must make the leap from the pure idealism of a Maurice Scève to the gritty pragmatism of a Brantôme, and will find amidst these extremes a court greedy for both the spiritual elevation and the sensual satisfaction which these respective authors encapsulate.

This instinctive ambition for a synthesis of physical and celestial properties is clearly demonstrated in the celebrations of royal marriages at the French Renaissance court: no union was more artificially contrived, and yet those who eulogized such events spoke of desire perfectly harmonized with intuitive love, to an audience receptive to such fictions. Were these publicly-styled relationships, dramatized according to the artistic and literary paradigms of the day, intended to confirm the social and political benefits of ordered, instinctive affection?

THE ROYAL MARRIAGE: A PERFECT AND LEGITIMATE UNION

Jean Hagstrum, speaking in general terms of love and marriage during the Renaissance in *Esteem Enlivened by Desire*, declares that:

In the Renaissance powerful forces were striving as never before to bring together into one relationship both the love that makes and the love that perfects. And even the more ambitious - and certainly risky - aim of redirecting 'wanton' love in such a way that it was relieved of [...its]

traditional implication of corruption and baseness without losing its sensual charm was a major cultural undertaking.⁵⁷

As Hagstrum also observes, procreation was habitually kept separate from ideals of perfection through love during the sixteenth century. This tendency was particularly prevalent within court circles, where arranged marriages, it was readily acknowledged, existed solely for the purposes of furthering a noble line, and gave no occasion for the spiritual and emotional delights of Perfect Love. Given this state of affairs, Hagstrum's thesis may appear improbable, and yet, as we have seen even in early Neoplatonist texts, rational *volupté*, procreation and Perfect Love were celebrated concurrently at times, albeit often in rather abstract, theoretical, or fictitious terms.

The ideal of a social union which was not only spiritually, but also physically perfective through the act of procreation was both potent and enticing for Renaissance artists and thinkers, though, for the reasons outlined above, such union tended to be an imaginative symbol, rather than a tangible reflection of the state of marriage at court. Except, that is, in the case of royal marriages, which were necessarily highly publicized events, and thus provided poets with the opportunity to conflate fantasy and reality by injecting the values of Perfect Love into a union organized for political gain. Neither the court, nor the poets who eulogized these marriages were under any illusions: all were aware such unions were born of

political circumstance and not romantic inclination. However, it became de rigueur to celebrate these events in terms of idealized, sentimental affection: 'Il s'agit de chanter un succès diplomatique qui est en même temps qu'une promesse de paix et d'abondance, une idylle d'amour.'⁵⁸

That Perfect Love was symbolically applied to royal marriages in this way is indicative of the popularity of the icon of rational human affection at court, and of the civilizing properties it was hailed to possess. Writ large, the marriage pact was yet another example of the celestial union of Venus and Mars, in which Mars the noble bringer of strife was pacified by a concordant wedding and the divine love to be found there. Writers of the epithalamia and pastorals which celebrated these events were therefore not averse to making specific reference to the political motivation behind them. Numerous eulogies written in honour of the marriages of Marguerite de France with Philippe de Savoie and Elizabeth of France with Philip of Spain, which took place in 1559 as a condition of the Cateau-Cambrésis treaty between France, Spain and the Netherlands, praised the peace symbolized in these weddings and also the new-found political alliance which would strengthen the European resolve against the Moors. In Du Bellay's *Epithalame*, Mercury is heard to declare:

Pour dechasser la Bellonne,
Et sa troppe felonne,
Bannie pour jamais,
Des Dieux la prevoyance
Gardoit ceste alliance,
Instrument de la paix:

A fin qu'avec l'Espagne
 La France s'accompagne,
 Pour, d'un commun accord,
 D'Europe, Asie, Afrique,
 L'adversaire publique
 Repousser dans son fort.

Car si ces deux grands Princes
 Unissent leurs provinces
 D'un accord mutuel,
 Pour chasser vers le More,
 Ou bien loing soubz l'Aurore,
 Le Barbare cruel:

Quel Roy, quelle puissance
 Soustiendra la vaillance
 De deux Roys si fameux?⁵⁹

François de Belleforest is of similar opinion in his *Epithalame sur le mariage de tresillustre [...] Philippe d'Autriche*, where he expresses the hope that the 'nopces porte-paix' will encourage the forces of Christendom against the Muslims, and urges that any children produced by the marital union be recruited to this end.⁶⁰

With the cause of peace in mind, Amadis Jamyn's *Epithalame, pour le Roy et la Royne de Navarre* is built solely around the symbolism of the Mars-Venus union, and the author takes care to explain the meaning of this image to his readers, lest they be unaware of its cosmic implications:

Mars est des simples corps la premiere discorde,
 Venus des simples corps la premiere concorde:
 Car la Haine et la Paix joignent les elemens,
 L'un à l'autre attachez par leurs enchainemens:
 Soyons joints entre nous d'une chaisne semblable.
 'La Haine corrompt tout, mais la Paix amiable
 'Compose toute chose: aussi rien ne pourroit
 De nouveau s'engendrer si le vieil ne mourait.
 Car telles sont les loix qu'à toute créature
 Par mutuelle guerre a donné la Nature,

A fin que tout soudain que l'un va delaisant
 Les liens de la vie, un autre aille naissant:
 Et qu'apres derechef, la Paix d'un nouveau pache,
 Appaisant ceste guerre, ensemble les r'atache. [...]
 Ceste certaine loy seulement n'est donnee
 Aux corps, mais aux esprits elle fut ordonnee
 Par un pareil accord: de là naissent les moeurs
 Et l'ordre constant du changement des coeurs.
 La Nature y commande, et l'Art apres ensagne,
 Pour justement regir Raison les accompagne,
 Si bien qu'ores la guerre à l'impourveu survient,
 Separant les mains, or' la Paix les retient.⁶¹

Jamyn makes the point quite clearly that, within the God-given natural order of things, Venus is never called to destroy Mars, but merely to temper his more irrational urges; the art of war is not to be seen as evil of itself, but only when employed fallaciously or selfishly. The Mars-Venus symbol remained serviceable, therefore, as a specific frame of reference for the marital couple themselves, who, in the minds of poets, personified the divine pair. Chivalry and courage being the hallmarks of the worthy nobleman, the groom was often hailed to be a second Mars, with a history of valiant exploits, and who would serve his country willingly at any moment. Belleforest applauds the duke of Savoy as 'Philippe, qui du dieu Mars | Feit ouyr en plusieurs pars, | Les trompettes chante-alarmes,'⁶² and again as 'un second Mars de nostre aage'.⁶³

The brides-to-be were correspondingly adorned as chaste, celestial Venuses by poets: they approach the altar as virgins, and hence spiritually pure, and radiate a sublime beauty which confirms their divine origins. Elisabeth de Valois is, in Belleforest's words: 'la plus belle | Que la France cognoisse, Ysabeau la pucelle',⁶⁴

while Du Bellay praises the 'la chasteté sainte' displayed upon the 'visage peinte' of Marguerite de Savoie.⁶⁵ The virtue of the bride sanctions the union: she is pronounced the equal of her valiant husband-to-be by her excellence in this area; Du Bellay, for example, affirms that the 'vierge' Marguerite de Savoie 'estoit digne, | Pour sa valeur insigne, | D'avoir ce seond Mars'.⁶⁶ The chaste bride is the source of concord to which the bridegroom conforms; she prepares him for the harmony of the nuptial bedroom, led by the chaste Venus who upholds her and justifies her.

Venus is most commonly associated with Hymen in these celebration poems, and is characteristically called upon to lead the virgin bride to the chaste but pleasurable consummation of her marital vows. In his *Chant pastoral sur les nopces de Monseigneur Charles duc de Lorraine, et Madame Claude fille II du Roy*, Ronsard implores Hymenée to:

Ameine avecques toy la Cyprienne sainte,
De sa belle ceinture au travers du corps ceinte,
Et son fils Cupidon avec l'arc en la main,
Pour se cacher es yeux du jeune enfant Lorrain.⁶⁷

Of course, the court's enthusiasm for these unions to produce children and heirs accounts partly for this incitement to marital felicity: Dorat, for example, rejoices in the possibility of the alliance between Henri de Lorraine and Catherine de Clèves creating 'Princes portans de Rois la marque au front', or 'enfants aians semblance | A pere et mere, ayeules et ayeux, | Masles de

coeur, femelles de beaux yeulx.'⁶⁸ However, great weight in these celebratory works is also placed upon the ideal of mutual pleasure in love-making: the wedding night is an opportunity for a spiritual union to be both ratified and enhanced by a physical demonstration of love. Chaste Venus is on hand to support the nervous bride, who is unaware of the delights which the gods have prepared for her:

De ce saint mariage
 Tout sinistre presage
 Soit écarté bien loing,
 Puis que de ceste heureuse
 Douce nuit amoureuse
 Le ciel a pris le soing.
 O Hymen Hymenee,
 O nuit bien fortunee.

La chaste Cytheree
 Y vienne ceincturee,
 Et les petits Amours
 Y volettent sans cesse
 Autour de la Princesse,
 En mille et mille tours.⁶⁹

Moreover, she inspires the bridegroom alongside the bride, for she is present not only in feminine beauty but also, alongside Mars, in the harmonious union of male and female. Thus husband and wife alike are instructed:

Cependant consommez
 Vos nopces ordonnées,
 Et les feuz allumez,
 De voz amours bien nées:
 La chaste Cyprienne
 Ayant son Ceste ceint,
 Avec ses Graces vienne
 Amye à l'oeuvre saint.
 O Hymen Hymenée:
 Hymen Hymenée.⁷⁰

Remy Belleau is more picturesque in his instructions to the nuptial pair: in a language of rustic innocence the nymphs in his *Epithalame* instruct Claude de France and Charles de Lorraine in the natural delectation of love:

Or sus, la nuict est ja close,
L'avancourière est au ciel,
Sur cette bouche declose,
Il vous fault cuillir le miel,
Il vous faut doucement joindre
A ce tetin, nouvellet,
Comme un bouton verdelet,
Qui ne fait ores que poindre.[...]

Ainsi l'Estoille qui guide
Les petis Amours dorez,
Avec Hymen, qui preside
A ces festins honorez,
Vous appelle, et vous convie,
Tous deux au col vous saisir,
Pour savourer le plaisir,
Le plus dous de nostre vie.⁷¹

In his *Chant Pastoral*, celebrating this same union, Ronsard, like Belleau, does not shy from illustrating the sexual felicity of the young couple, here presented from the point of view of the male lover actively seeking to explore the physical properties of his new bride:

Heureux sera celuy qui aura toute pleine
Sa bouche de son ris, et de sa douce haleine,
Et de ses doux baisers qui passent en odeur,
Des prez les myeux fleuris, la plus gentille fleur.
Heureux qui dans ses bras pressera toute nue
Cette Nymphé aux beaux yeux du sang des Dieux venue,
Qui hardi tatera ses tetins verdelets,
Qui semblent deux boutons encores nouvelets:
Heureux qui pres la sienne alongera sa hanche,
Qui baisera son front, et sa belle main blanche,
Et qui demeslera fil à fil ses cheveux,
Follatrant toutte nuict, et faisant mille jeux:
Il prira que la nuict dure cent nuicts encore,
Ou bien que de cent jours ne s'esveille l'Aurore,
Afin que paresseux long temps puisse couvrir
Ses amours dans le lict, et point ne se lever.⁷²

Such attention to detail, and desire to express frankly the delights of sensuality, is not so far removed from the popular fantasies of *Amadis* which so titillated the court: compare, for example, the passage which describes the first coupling of Amadis and Oriane in the opening book of the series:

Mais enfin, étant au pourpoint et à son aise, si ses mains avaient été lentes en leur office de le désarmer, tout le reste de ses membres ne l'était point, car il n'y avait celui qui ne fût son devoir: le coeur était ravi en pensée, l'oeil en contemplation de l'infinie beauté, la bouche au baiser et le bras à l'embrasser [...]. La Princesse [...], comme endormie, [...] avait, pour le chaud, laissé sa gorge découverte, et montrait deux petites boules d'albâtre vif, le plus blanc et le plus doucement respirant que Nature fit jamais.⁷³

It was, perhaps, natural enough that poets and artists should celebrate the pleasures of physical union where convention and public morality permitted; as we have seen hitherto, the body and things corporeal occupied an important place within the Renaissance psyche. The systematic attempts made by writers to assimilate, in publicly instituted unions, love with sex, spiritual with physical pleasure, outside of the aegis of procreation, is more remarkable, for this appears to reflect the penetration of the androgyne model found in popular works such as *Amadis* to the very zenith of the Renaissance social structure. Love, desire and reason are condoned in these celebratory works, and, though the imagery used within them is somewhat formulaic and commonplace, it demonstrates a

eagerness to fuse the practical, political consequences of union with its spiritual, pleasure-bearing qualities; as such, the royal marriage both mirrored and inspired the inclinations of the court around it.

THE COURT FETE: CHASTITY OF THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL BODY

Cross-dressing and the Cross-fertilization of Virtue

That perfect androgyne, the royal couple united through marriage, becomes, in Renaissance France, a powerful political and social unit, perhaps because it symbolically represents a union of male and female elements in the figurehead of the state. The same political desire for male/female synthesis is evident in pictures of androgyny associated with the kings of France: the most well-known example of this trend is an androgynous portrait of François I, dated c.1545, in which 'the king is shown as a bearded female warrior, symbolizing allegorically his power and perfection as a fusion of composite qualities.'⁷⁴ The painting is accompanied by a verse of poetry which both explains the allegorical picture, and at the same time enhances the eulogy of the king:

O France heureuse, honore donc la face
De ton grand roi qui surpasse Nature:
Car l'honorant tu sers en même place
Minerve, Mars, Diane, Amour, Mercure.⁷⁵

A subsequent engraving of this figure, this time represented as Henri II, appears on a medal made in 1552.⁷⁶

Given these precedents of combining feminine and masculine traits in the idea of kingship, it is, perhaps, less remarkable than one might suppose to find Ronsard imploring Charles IX to be chaste as well as valiant during the Fontainebleau fêtes of 1564:

C'est toy Charles de qui l'honneur
 Dont sur le front la grace est paincte
 Emplira la France de bonheur
 Et les Roys estrangers de craincte.
 Croys doncq et d'une majesté
 Monstre toy le filz de ton Pere,
 Et porte au front la Chasteté
 Qui reluyt aux yeulx de ta Mere.⁷⁷

It is worth noting that the chastity prescribed here is not the temperate, restrained masculine model according to which the courtier would flatter and support his lady's aspirations to be chaste, but the fully-fledged feminized virtue, handed down from mother to son, with its roots in purity and notions of divine beauty. Thus the poet goes on:

Ainsi te nourrissant parmy
 Les vertus de ta Mere sage,
 Tu auras le Ciel pour amy
 Et la Terre pour heritage.⁷⁸

Three years later, in a cartel devoted to the future Henri III, Desportes also seeks to conjoin aspects of feminine (and therefore celestial) beauty with more typical masculine attributes. He achieves this synthesis by relating Henri to Achilles, who, in his womanly disguise,

radiated feminine beauty, but when discovered to be male went on to become the most noble warrior of his time:

Ainsi ceste beauté qu'on voit en vous reluire
 Vous faict comme celeste à bon droict admirer;
 Amour dedans vos yeux s'est venu retirer,
 Et de là droit aux coeurs mille fleches il tire. [...]
 Et serez comme Achille au milieu des allarmes,
 Foudroyant les plus forts, tuant et renversant;
 Et, tout ainsi qu'un ours se fait voye en passant,
 Vous passerez par tout par la force des armes.
 Heureux en qui le ciel ces deux thresors assemble,
 Qu'il ait la face belle, et le coeur genereux!
 Vous, l'honneur plus parfait des guerriers amoureux,
 Nous faites voir encor Mars et Venus ensemble.⁷⁹

These royal pictures of androgyny represent a passion for union of male and female vital elements, seen as the key to political and social triumph. How, then, might the courtier emulate this harmonious ideal in his own, less perfect and less complete sphere? He must, the fêtes seem to dictate, ally himself to the chaste faculties of his lady by persuading her to seek union with him. Indeed, the tenor of so many masquerades and cartels is quite insistent: order is disrupted, and the gods angered, if this union is not effected. In a tournament written for the Bayonne fêtes of 1565, known as the *Tournament of Diverses Nations*, the curious presence of certain 'female' knights heralds, it seems, an unusually egalitarian battle of the sexes: they are introduced by a dwarf who describes them as 'Sept Dames, qui n'ont moins aux armes de vaillance, | Qu'en parfaite beauté de pris et d'excellence' and declares they have come 'Afin que leurs valeurs [...] | Tesmoignent à chascun que vertueuses Dames | Peuvent gagner le pris de l'amour et des armes.'⁸⁰ However, it soon transpires that

the female troupe consists of men cross-dressed, led by the duc d'Anjou in the guise of an Amazon woman. They hail themselves to be a truly androgynous band, fully equipped with the finest virtues of both sexes:

Nous venons de Gaulle, et six Dames nous sommes,
 Dames, quant est au corps, et, quant au courage, hommes;
 Hommes, quant à la force, et, quant au reste, Dames;
 Dames, quant aux façons, et hommes, quant aux armes:
 Pour vous dire en un mot, nous sommes tous les deux,
 Et ne sommes que l'un par le vouloir des Dieux.⁸¹

At one level this image, like the androgynous portraits of kingship outlined earlier, endorses chastity as a universal precept, and thereby also elevates the status of noblewomen who have sought to bring this virtue to perfection. Jacqueline Boucher has put forward the thesis that this cross-dressing:

[...] redonnait prestige à la femme en lui reconnaissant des aptitudes guerrières et en rendant la chasteté honorable chez les combattants, alors qu'on ne voyait ordinairement en elle qu'une vertu convenant au sexe faible. Le personnage fabuleux de l'Amazone réunissait deux vertus habituellement séparées.⁸²

However, it seems clear that the combattants believed their military skills to be masculine attributes, and when they proceed to explain that they have been transformed into the physical likeness of women by the gods because of the pain they suffered at the hands of their own lovers, we learn that their androgyny is temporary, and perhaps even incomplete. Thus the knights recall their abortive attempts to woo proud and stubborn ladies:

Et puis ayans atteint l'aage, que la jeunesse
 Employe volontiers à se choisir maistresse,
 Chacun de nous se mit à en faire choix d'une,
 Ainsi que nous guida l'amoureuse fortune.
 Mais, hélas! tant s'en faut qu'ell' nous ait adressez
 En lieu, où nos travaux fussent recompensez,
 Qu'au lieu de nous donner des maistresses traitables,
 Elle nous en donna qui estoient indomptables,
 Qui portoyent bien aux yeux une humble contenance,
 Mais au dedans du cueur ce n'estoit qu'arrogance,
 Que desdain, que mepris, qu'orgueil, desloyauté,
 Et ne portoyent au cueur, rien que cruauté.⁸³

They tell of how the gods took pity on them, and transformed them into the likeness of women in order to free them from frustrated desire, not by expunging their need for reciprocated love, but by disguising them so that they might approach the opposite sex unnoticed, and therefore unhindered:

Ilz veulent, quant au corps, que vous demeuriez femmes,
 Pour temperer l'ardeur de vos ardentes flammes,
 Et vous donner moyen plus seur de frequenter
 Vos Dames privement, et vos maux leur conter,
 Demeurant toutesfois en vos cueurs un vouloir
 De les servir tousjours avec entier devoir,
 Avecques tout respect, avec perseverance,
 Avecques ferme foy, avec quelque esperance
 Que pourrez estre un jour de vos maux delivrez.⁸⁴

Finally, the adventures of these transvestite lovers are made subject to a political agenda: when Elizabeth of Spain and Catherine de Medici have united their two countries 'd'un lien amoureux' (as is now the case), the gods will grant Elizabeth the power to convert any hatred 'en amour mutuelle', and the lovers will find themselves transformed:

Et pource enquerez vous du temps qu'il reviendra:
 Car lors chacun de vous sa forme reprendra:
 Et pour jamais sera quite et franc des rigueurs,

Que ce tyran d'Amour livre à ses serviteurs.⁸⁵

Thus, while these androgynous creatures seemingly celebrate a fusion of masculine and feminine virtues, the tenor of their speeches is one of reproach for the cold-hearted women who through their inertia have forced them to take on this state. Better, it is suggested, that those women had reciprocated the honourable intentions of their suitors in the first place, and in the best of all possible worlds, where Elizabeth and Catherine have orchestrated political and social harmony, the natural order of male approach and female response will be restored.

Of course, these cartels are supposed to be seen, at least in part, as a metaphor for the political union between France and Spain which was the principal aim of the Bayonne festivities: when the state, Spain, responds to the endeavours of the French envoys who have pursued peace, political harmony will be restored and the two nations, amalgamated, will go from strength to strength. Much has been made, by Frances Yates, Roy Strong and others,⁸⁶ of the political implications of such images and scenarios outplayed at the major French fêtes of the sixteenth century and my aim is not to consider detailed allusions to specific political events as they have done. Rather, I am interested in the interplay between Renaissance perceptions of the roles of the sexes in society and the role of the state as a political body. The sheer preponderance of cartels, masquerades and playlets devoted to the theme of

love at these fêtes indicates at once an eagerness to perfect social/sexual graces in the service of harmony and, at a more profound level, a tendency to affiliate such graces with political skills.

As Philippa Berry has observed, it is due to the widespread credence given to Neoplatonic philosophy that a link was forged between the experiences of the social body and of the body politic, for if Perfect love empowered the lover to become acquainted with the divine through the material world, political ambition was similarly founded upon the aims of recreating divine harmony in the earthly sphere. It is for this reason that 'when Petrarchan and Neoplatonic attitudes were assimilated by the aesthetic ideologies of French and English Renaissance absolutism, the female beloved was closely associated with the mystical body of the Renaissance state'.⁸⁷ Berry has traced this development back to medieval and Renaissance trends which allied the feminine with wisdom and with Prelapsarian perfection on the one hand (as a result of Christian and Neoplatonic tendencies to idealize beauty and chastity), but which also perceived the female body in its temporal, sensual form to mediate between the spiritual and material worlds. These factors led to the female lover, and, consequentially, the state, being represented not only by goddesses of wisdom, but also by Diana who encapsulates both purity and desire:

As a bestower of wisdom she [the idealized female beloved] was most often connected with the

Roman goddess Minerva or Pallas Athena in the Renaissance; but her links with an unfallen natural world, and her position as an object of desire, were paralleled not by Minerva but by Diana.⁸⁸

It is therefore Diana, according to Berry, who captures the imagination of French thinkers as a potent symbol of the state, and, by extension, of the powers of the ruling monarch:

The ruler's metamorphosis from ordinary man into demi-god, which in religious terms was symbolized by the ritual of anointment at his coronation, was often implicitly attributed in French Renaissance literature and art to the transforming powers of a Diana-like beloved. [...] In France, the male ruler was represented as a type of Petrarchan or Neoplatonic lover, [...]. Diana was used to relate the monarch's private emotional, sexual, and spiritual identity to his [...] political role and to his [...] 'kingdom' - which in this context might justly be termed a 'queendom', in so far as it was gendered feminine.⁸⁹

The aforementioned androgynous portrait of François I (which includes an allusion to Diana), the imaginative iconography attached to Henri II's mistress Diane de Poitiers (of which more later), and the later variations on the Diana model associated with other mistresses and queens up to and including the reign of Henri IV certainly support Berry's thesis.⁹⁰ However, it seems to me that the court fêtes, much like the epithalamia we have examined earlier, portray feminine chastity not so much in terms of Diana as of chaste Venus. The reason for this becomes apparent when we note, as Berry has done, that chastity as Diana tends to symbolize sexuality which is latent, but

which remains inactive.⁹¹ While it is perhaps true to say that, according to the purest forms of Petrarchan and Neoplatonic thinking, 'the female object [...] was defined as unequivocally chaste',⁹² certain strands of Neoplatonism allowed for, and even encouraged some consummation of physical desire.⁹³ Moreover, as we have observed in the first half of this chapter, the court was used to, and actively encouraged, codified behaviour based upon Neoplatonic principles which tended towards physical consummation of love, authenticated by means of chaste self-control. A sonnet by Etienne Jodelle, thought to be dedicated to the newly-married Catherine de Clermont, demonstrates this point of differentiation between the model of Diana and that of chaste Venus:

Encor que toy, Diane, à Diane tu sois
 Pareille en traicts, en grace, en majesté céleste,
 En coeur, et hault, et chaste, et presqu'en tout le
reste
 Fors qu'en l'austerité des virginales loix:

La riche et rare fleur, qu'en tout ton corps tu vois,
 Ton en-bon-point, ta grace, et ta vigueur arreste,
 Que puis qu'un autre Hymen a desnoué ton ceste
 Virginal, en veuvage envieillir tu ne dois.

Que donc l'an nouveau t'offre un espous qui contente
 De tes valeurs la France, et d'amours ton attente:
 D'un tel voeu je t'estrene, et si ton nom si bien

Ne te convient alors, toy qui n'es pas moins belle
 Que Venus, pren son nom, et le meslant au tien
 Fay donc que Dione ensemble et Diane on t'appelle.⁹⁴

It is clear from the negative portrayal of inactive, unresponsive female sexuality in the aforementioned Bayonne cartel that feminine refusal to engage with masculine desire is perceived to be subversive, be it at a political

or social level. Court society does not wish feminine chastity to be pursued to the point of denial, but seeks to affiliate that chastity to active, male virtues, to create a complementary union.⁹⁵ Masculine desire, therefore, is dependent upon feminine cooperation; universal discord, symbolised by Mars the warrior, may perform a worthy function, but can only reach its zenith when tempered by the concord of Venus. In short, the feminine dictates and controls, and must therefore be persuaded to comply;⁹⁶ and those that lent their artistic weight to the creation of the court fêtes were elaborate masters of persuasion in this matter.

Early evidence of the court's enthusiasm for chaste Venus can be found in Mellin de Saint Gelais' cartels and masquerades. In a celebration of the marriage of the Marquis d'Albeuf in 1551, Saint Gelais eulogises Venus as:

Celle qui faict les coeurs se ressentir
 Du feu celeste et point ne consentir
 A bas desir qui empesche et retarde
 Le bien supreme où la vertu regarde.⁹⁷

He goes on to encourage worthy knights to emulate Mars and fight to prove themselves champions of chaste, rather than fickle love, so that they may receive the favours of honourable ladies. Subsequently, in a strongly-worded poem for the attention of Catherine de Medici, Saint Gelais laments the worship of the cerebral Minerva over the more sensual Venus which the queen herself has instigated:

Vous avez grand' Troppe divertie
 De son honneur qui par vous se reserve
 A la severe, importune Minerve
 Et rejectez de vostre suite grande
 Qui la [la belle Cypris] reclame et luy veut faire
 offrande.⁹⁸

He warns Catherine that:

[...] les restrictions
 Que contre Amour Pallas vous a faict faire
 Sont pour le monde abolir et desfaire,
 Et n'est raison que pour sa Tirannie
 Le filz soit Serf et la mere bannie,
 [...] Oster VENUS de liberte
 Seroit oster du monde la clairte,
 Clairte qui est cause et l'ornement
 De tout le bien qu'enclost le firmament.⁹⁹

Finally, in order that harmony be reinstated, Saint Gelais urges the most beautiful ladies of the court to listen to the gods, to forget Minerva and to undertake to 'unir le plaisir à l'honneur | Qui d'Amour vraye est juste guerdonneur'.¹⁰⁰ He is, in short, keen to denigrate the ethereal chastity of the goddess of wisdom: it is the more approachable, dynamic Venus who attracts and who, he believes, invigorates the social environment of the court.

Chastity and Political Order: Do Women have a Voice in the Renaissance Court Fête?

The fêtes which took place at Fontainebleau and Bayonne preach the harmony of chastity and desire with a fervent enthusiasm, though largely from a masculine point of view. Since it was the intention that the king and the duc d'Anjou participate in many of the cartels and masquerades,

it is not surprising that writers were preoccupied with generating active and dynamic roles for the male lover, chiefly at the expense of their female counterparts, who were generally relegated to the passive status of 'damsels in distress' or frigid temptresses. Several times during the course of these fêtes, the king and his brother are called upon to lead the rescue of ladies wrongfully imprisoned, and whose only evident virtues appear to be their beauty and ability to resist the advances of their evil captors:

(Sire) nous sommes deux damoiselles yssues
 Du sang divin des dieux, desquelz avions receues
 Tant de graces, d'esprit et de rares beaultez
 Qu'en nous on pouvoit veoir de leurs divinitez
 Le plus beau et meilleur, et sembloit qu'en partage
 Nous eussions eu du Ciel un si grand avantage:
 Mais ces grandes beaultez, ces tresors precieulx
 Bien que ce soit un don et des dieux et des cieulx
 Sont l'instrumentz des maulx où nous sommes detenues.¹⁰¹

To guard one's chastity, to the point of death if necessary, in such odious circumstances, might constitute an heroic victory of sorts for the ladies in question, but it was nevertheless regarded as axiomatic that a noblewoman should resist the advances of a lower-ranking villain. There is, therefore, no sense in which these women demonstrate a level of virtue comparable with that of their male colleagues; they have no opportunity to flaunt a chastity which tempers and rationalizes the desires of an equal-ranking nobleman and are, instead, portrayed as victims in need of male support.

The *Mascarade de Monseigneur le Duc de Longueville*, which took place during the Bayonne festivities and included a number of poems written by Jean-Antoine de Baïf, presents an even more subversive view of women as frigid temptresses, unwilling to respond to the courtship of the most worthy male suitors. The scene for this lampooning of unresponsive ladies is one in which knights, led by the duc de Nemours, sought to defend a castle against the onslaught of various troops of knights led by other prominent noblemen. The castle 'represented the temporary triumph of Bellona over Peace', and could not be penetrated except by the king, in accordance with an ancient prophecy.¹⁰² The knights under de Longueville were singled out for particular mention because of their sufferings in love. They were, we are told, 'convertiz et transformez en rochers, pour avoir esté trop constants et fermes serviteurs de six cruelles et ingrates Dames, lesquelles pareillement avoyent esté converties en six arbres d'Orengiers, pour punition de leur cruauté et ingratitude.'¹⁰³

A masquerade follows, whereupon a beautiful fairy enters and explains the mysterious transformations which she has wrought, as actors representing the orange trees and the rocks take up their positions upon the stage. Again the women bear the brunt of vitriolic criticism:

Ces arbres que voyez, jadis six Damoyelles
 Belles, mais fierement contre l'Amour rebelles,
 Enflerent, à leur dam, leur coeurs hautains et fiers
 D'extrême cruauté contre six Chevaliers,

Six gentils Chevaliers vouez à leur servage,
 Des deux pars obstinez en leur ferme courage:
 Eux à les bien aimer, elles à les haïr:
 Elles à les tuer, eux à leur obeïr.¹⁰⁴

The men, meanwhile, have been transformed into rocks because they petitioned the gods to release them from their ladies' cruelty:

Après indignes torts et cruelles injures,
 Qu'ils souffroyent tous les jours, [...]
 Ils furent exaucez: loin de mort et de vie
 Avec leur sentiment leur douleur assopie
 Cessa dans ces rochers.¹⁰⁵

These events takes place under the watchful eye of the god of love himself, who has positioned himself in the centre of the action on a resplendent chariot, and who, we are told, is 'auteur de ces transformations.'¹⁰⁶ As a reminder of their failings, the ladies-as-trees are forced to bear the fruits of Venus, and thereby to carry the burdens of bitter sweet love, which they now understand flowers only through reciprocation, but which they have forfeited the right to enjoy:

De ces arbres sacrez à l'Amour et sa mere,
 Le fruict retient l'aigreur de leur douceur amere,
 Le teint de nos cheveux: des fueilles la verueur
 Tesmoignent leurs beautez en leur prime vigueur.

Pour avoir desdagné ceux qui nous ont aimées,
 Dames, en Orangiers nous fusmes tranformées.
 Les champs ne sont ingrats à ceux-là qui les sement,
 Amour merite amour, aimez ceux qui vous aiment.¹⁰⁷

The tribulations of love are given a political context: this unhealthy incompatibility of desires is the product of a chaotic universe, in which harmony has temporarily given

way to discord. This situation is about to be righted by the pact between France and Spain, but, significantly, it is only the knights who will benefit from this change of fortune. Thus the women-as-trees wait optimistically for their own salvation:

Nous ne pouvons nous dire estre mortes ni vives:
 Mais l'espoir gist en nous qu'une Royne d'Espagne,
 Si sa benigne main de sa faveur nous dagne,
 Un jour restablira nos figures naïfves.¹⁰⁸

However, they are later told by the fairy that they are not to be a part of the general restitution of order:

Nymphes, par vos fiertez à jamais soyez arbres:
 Chevaliers, pour un temps reposez dans ces marbres,
 Y reposent aussi vos desirs amoureux,
 Pour ressusciter sous un sort plus heureux,
 Quand la paix respandra sur l'Espagne et la France
 Le bon heur, le bon fruict d'eternelle alliance, [...]
 Là vous recontrerez moins rigoureuses Dames,
 Pour rechauffer voz cueurs d'autres plus douces
 flammes.¹⁰⁹

Thus the defiant female lovers are to be forever estranged from the excellence of chaste union with their suitors in the newly-acquired order. Instead, that honour will go to more conscientious women who are amenable to engaging themselves within the androgyne formula:

O qu'heureuses seront
 Celles qui de ces preux maistresses se verront!
 Amour icy present d'estreincte mutuelle
 Joindra leurs cueurs unis en foy perpetuelle.
 Qui leur oster l'honneur folement pretendra,
 Et l'honneur et la vie à ces preux il rendra.¹¹⁰

Finally, in additional verses penned by Baïf, but which are absent from the *Recueil des choses notables qui ont esté faites à Bayonne* text, the fruits of the orange trees are presented to prominent ladies of the court, bearing inscriptions. These inscriptions leave us in no doubt as to the principal message of the *Mascarade*: that of the worthiness of desire honed by chastity over and above any renunciation of the physical world:

La pomme que je vous presente,
 Si vous plaist la considerer,
 Au vray mon amour represente.
 Dont le guerdon j'ose esperer. [...]
 Elle est faitte de forme ronde,
 Témoignant la perfection
 Du desir, dont mon coeur abonde,
 Et de ma ronde affection. [...]
 A vous des belles la plus belle
 Offrant la pomme de beauté,
 Oseray-je attendre pour elle
 De vous le pris de loyauté?¹¹¹

And such perfected desire, Baïf reminds his audience, is, in political terms, the means of acquiring lasting peace:

Royne, de sagesse et douceur,
 Recevez (je ne suis Discorde)
 Ce beau fruit d'or, le gage seur
 D'éternelle paix et concorde.¹¹²

This cartel thus reiterates the attractions of an androgynous social discourse which harmoniously blends feminine and masculine ideals; consequently, it allows feminine virtues to be eulogized only as long as they show themselves to be compatible with male virtues of fortitude and courage. Outside of this context, however, as we have seen, chaste resistance in women is not so much revered as

condemned for its indifference to the social order; gynocratic dominance was a threat which the love discourses played out in public always sought to counter.

Having explored the social and political implications of the chastity icon for and through the male-centred world of the tournament, we are able to turn to other forms of artistic expression current in the sixteenth century which made more varied use of feminine imagery and, indeed, of women as 'actors' on stage. The considerable rise in importance of pagan mythologies in the context of the court fêtes during the century accounts, to a certain extent, for this phenomenon, as does the extreme popularity of dance at the time: women were called upon more frequently to perform in ballets, and to take on the roles of female mythological personages in masquerades. Furthermore, political circumstance was clearly central to the formulation of plots for court entertainments, and as royal women were perceived to fulfil more prominent roles, so they were more strikingly represented by writers and poets.

These three conditions were instrumental in the production of three small ballets at the end of the century (1592-1593) in Pau and Tours. The ballets were performed at the court of Catherine de Bourbon, sister of Henri IV, by the princess herself and members of her entourage. As Margaret McGowan elucidates in *L'Art du ballet de cour en*

France, political wranglings between Henri and his sister surrounding the issue of whom she should marry inspired two of the three ballets, while the third consists of a thinly-veiled allusion to the conflict of interests between the Bourbons and Spain.¹¹³ In the introduction to his edition of the ballets, Raymond Ritter suggests that they may have been written by Catherine de Parthenay, dame de Rohan, an erudite woman who was a member of Catherine de Bourbon's inner circle, and whose children were cast in several of the original roles.¹¹⁴ Certainly, Catherine de Parthenay, like other close acquaintances of the princess, would have been aware of her involvement with her cousin the comte de Soissons, of his decision to leave the king's army to join her in Béarn, and of Henri's displeasure at this potential union, which he forbade in 1592, summoning Catherine to Tours in order to keep watch over her movements.¹¹⁵

Love, and its consequent political implications for the princess, is thus the theme of the ballets played in August 1592 and March 1593. The former, presented to Catherine in Pau, incorporates some elements of chivalry inspired by the tournament tradition, but these are overshadowed by the use of mythological symbolism to examine the moral issues of love and marriage from a female point of view. The knights of Béarn commence the action by declaring that their princess's excellence surpasses that of any would-be suitor, and that she should therefore remain celibate and single. The French knights contend, however, that while Catherine's excellence cannot be doubted, she should seek

to join herself to a worthy husband with whom she can share and develop her many virtues.¹¹⁶ Combat ensues, in which the French knights emerge triumphant; yet, their victory is not, in itself, decisive, for at that moment Mercury descends from the heavens to intercede on behalf of Jupiter, who intends to establish his own vision of order according to a different agenda. Chivalry, it seems, cannot and should not provide a lasting solution to the question of marriage:

Or, mon pere craignant que la lame neutriere
 Ne prive quelqu'un d'eux de la douce lumiere,
 Joint qu'il n'appartient pas à un homme mortel
 D'enchaîner dans les ceps d'un hasardeux duel
 Son arrest eternel, m'a faict descendre
 Pour vous faire par moy tout son vouloir entendre.
 Doncques, pour un petit, mettez les armes bas.
 O valeureux héros, finissez vos debatz,
 Car ce n'est pas à vous que la charge est commise
 De pouvoir mettre à fin une telle entreprise.¹¹⁷

Instead, Mercury calls upon the nymphs of Diana, symbols of Catherine's own chaste presence and, at a higher level, of universal concord, to attempt to rid Cupid of his weapons and blindfold in a contest (to be represented in the form of a dance). If Cupid has the victory, however, Diana will be obliged to relent, and Catherine must accede to marriage:

Et si après, Madame
 Eschauffera son coeur d'une divine flame
 Afin que le flambeau d'un hymen bien heureux
 Luy baille pour mary quelqu'un des demy-dieux
 Du royaume Gaulois. Par ainsy voz querelles
 Seront mises à fin par ces chastes pucelles.¹¹⁸

Cupid, as expected, is victorious, but Diana remains symbolically instrumental in the establishment of the new order, since, Mercury warns, the god of love is powerless to act unless Catherine agrees to share her chaste virtues with him:

Or, bien qu'il ait dompté l'air, les cieux et la terre,
 Qu'il ait mis soubz son joug le maistre du tonnerre,
 Si n'est-il prou puissant pour brusler votre coeur
 D'un brandon chaleureux, d'une amoureuse ardeur
 Il ne vous peut dompter s'il n'emprunte la flame
 Dedans vos yeux divins pour vous brusler, Madame. [...]
 Madame, il vous requiert de le vouloir loger
 Dedans voz yeux divins, et dans vostre poitrine
 Cacher les chastes feuz de sa torche divine.¹¹⁹

As in the Fontainebleau and Bayonne festivities, the ultimate goal of this masquerade is to propose that reasonable desire should not be annihilated in favour of consummate purity, but honed by a still more reasonable chastity until tangible perfection is attained in the earthly sphere:

Il [Amour] veut tant seulement, caché dedans voz yeux,
 Vous choisir pour mary un Prince valeureux,
 Jeune, heureux et hardy, qui ait sa renommée
 Par ses braves exploits en mille lieux semée, [...]
 Afin que jointe à luy par un saint mariage,
 Vous y pussiez passer le reste de vostre aage
 En cent mille plaisirs, et qu'au bout de quatre ans,
 Bear vous puisse voir mere de quatre enfans,
 Qui, quelque jour, parmy les effects de Bellonne,
 Courageux soustiendront la royale couronne,
 Et pour le grand Henry, rare honneur de noz roys,
 Iront reconquister le sceptre navarroys.¹²⁰

Unlike certain of those fêtes, however, this ballet does not seek to amplify the potentially negative aspects of chastity: there is no suggestion that this virtue might

tend towards fragility or frigidity; rather, Catherine is encouraged to use her virtue as a dynamic tool with which to shape her own destiny in accordance with that of Navarre and of France. Certainly, the real political machinations behind the masquerade left the princess powerless to forge her own future and ultimately forced to endure a marriage arranged by her brother which she did not desire. Nevertheless, the ballet itself seems optimistically to suggest the possibility of choice even as it seeks to persuade Catherine that she must marry for the sake of her country; the work ends with Diana's nymphs enthusiastically offering their chaste weapons to Cupid:

Amour, servez-vous de nox arcs
 Pour armer vostre main divine,
 Car seulement ces chastes dards
 Pourront blesser nostre poitrine. [...]

Amour, armez vostre costé
 Des traicts de la chaste Deesse,
 Car icy, sans la chasteté,
 Vaine seroit vostre prouesse.

And Cupid accepts joyfully the prospect of aligning himself with the virtues Diana proffers, so that he, like chaste Venus, may be both active and rational in his approach to love:

Mais puisqu'ores je suis armé de chasteté,
 Que j'ay joint au pouvoir de ma grand'deité
 La force et le secours de la chaste Deesse,
 J'entreprends librement ce combat glorieux.¹²¹

Furthermore, 'l'union divine' which will result from this amalgamation of chastity and desire will be one

characterized by equality: Catherine's worthy husband ('ce grand Prince | Que la François Province | Vous destine pour espoux') will merge with her to form 'une Androgine', and by their joint efforts, alongside those of the king, France and Béarn (and, by implication, Catholic and Protestant) will be reunited in peace.¹²²

The Ballet Comique de la Royne : a Triumph of Reasonable Desire

The fundamental struggle between passion and reason, harmony and decay was thus, as we have seen, regularly condensed into chivalric formulae and discourses on love: the world of *Amadis*, triumphantly recreated in public at tournaments and masquerades, fed the court's hunger for images of social perfection. The magnificent *Balet Comique de la Royne*, written for the marriage of the Duc de Joyeuse in 1581, transcends these themes and endeavours to examine the elemental conflict between good and evil in terms of symbolic mythology, and it is for this reason that it provides an indispensable window into the credos behind the conduct advocated at the fêtes examined up to this point.

The *Balet Comique* represents the struggle between passion and reason in the form of an elaborate contest between Circe, symbol of universal mutability, and Minerva, goddess of wisdom. The Circe allegory was well known to the creator of the *Balet*, as Roy Strong explains, through Natale Conti's mythological manual, the *Mythologiae*, where:

Circe, the daughter of Perseus and the Sun, lured men to vice, to a life of the passions that transformed them into beasts. This enchantress thus represented the passions: lasciviousness, drunkenness, cruelty, avarice, ambition, all the vices to which men, devoid of the guidance of reason, are drawn. The action was to be a moral struggle of Virtue versus Vice, of the vanquishing of Vice by the triumph of Reason and the Rational Soul.¹²³

It is noticeable from the very beginning of the ballet that Circe's subversive powers are associated with her capacity to arouse desire; she is represented as a lascivious Venus who ensnares men by her bewitching beauty:

Ce n'estoit une femme: une qui l'air respire
N'a point tant de beauté, et si n'a point tant d'ire.
Dans ses yeux égarez un soleil reluisoit,
Yeux où l'Amour caché ses traits d'or aiguisoit,
Son teint estoit de lys et de pourpre de rose:
Mais sous tant de beauté la poison estoit close
Du miel, qui de sa bouche en paroles couloit
Pour amorcer le coeur de ceux qu'elle vouloit.¹²⁴

Indeed, Circe herself, when first she speaks through the knight who has escaped her grasp to return to the court and report what he has seen, invites her victims in incantatory tones to submit to the unassailable influence of Cupid:

Arreste, Chevalier, ne crain point, et t'approche,
Et si tu n'as le coeur faict de bois ou de roche,
Cede sans resister, cede aux loix de ce Dieu,
De cest archer ailé qui domine en tout lieu,
A qui (peut estre) en vain tu ferois resistance:
Car il domte les Dieuz sujets à sa puissance,
Ainsi que maintenant ses traicts aigus je sens,
Et de tes yeux vaincuë à toy seul je me rens.¹²⁵

The knight goes on to recount that Circe inhabits a walled garden, full of sensual delights which she suggests

are the key to fulfilment and happiness; he recalls how he followed her in: 'car il n'est plus puissant lien | Que l'apprehension des plaisirs et du bien.'¹²⁶ The deceptive beauty of the garden signifies that it is intended to be viewed as a false earthly paradise, in opposition to the genuine restitution of a Golden Age harmony inaugurated under the King of France.¹²⁷ A. Bartlett Giametti's work, *The Earthly Paradise and the Renaissance Epic*, examines the symbolic significance of the garden in this area, and concludes that while 'the technique of associating the earthly paradise [...] with a secular or allegorical garden is a favorite device of Renaissance poets' those gardens are ultimately 'condemned as false in spite of (or perhaps partly because of) their metaphorical relationship with the earthly paradise. They are condemned, [...] by the laws of Christianity'.¹²⁸ Bartlett's detailed study of the importance of the garden in Tasso's Christian epic, *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1575),¹²⁹ reveals several common elements with the *Balet Comique*; in Tasso's work the sorceress Armida inhabits a walled garden exuding natural beauty, and in which she transforms men into creatures. Circe too, according to the escaped knight, changes those she has captured within her garden into animals. Moreover, Tasso's knight is lured into the garden by the sensual temptation of Armida's natural beauty, which ultimately turns out to be false (she is the symbol of artificial nature).¹³⁰ In the same way, Circe is ultimately corrupt and corrupting, though her garden appears to invite men to

rejoice in the sublimity of the natural world and its gifts.

The garden allegory itself would therefore have been familiar to many watchers of this ballet from its use in epics and pastoral works; they would have been prepared to expect a monumental clash between a mutant, defiant nature and the rationalized order of a Golden Age world. Furthermore, the presence of this garden of delights breathes complexity into what might have been a straightforward battle between evil and good: Jupiter's confident assertion that

Tant de mortels en monstres enchantez,
Nymphes et Dieux que Circe a surmontez,
Doivent reprendre une forme plus belle
Quand ils auront retrouvé la raison.¹³¹

belies the intricacy of the contest, for the ballet does not seek to defeat desire, but to condemn its uses outside of the aegis of reason. Circe's garden, in the final analysis, is not obliterated; instead its creator and all that is in it is made subject to those seats of rationality, the King and Queen of France.¹³²

Contemporaneous interpretations of the Circe fable, provided by Beaujoyeux at the end of his edition of the *Balet Comique*, are instrumental in clarifying the perception of desire, in the work and in current philosophical thought, as a necessary and indispensable aspect of the human soul. Sieur Gordon, in his explanation

of the fable, declares: 'le desir aux uns est l'instrument de salut: et aux autres l'instrument de perdition et ruine.'¹³³ This, he observes, is because desire, used in harmony with reason, can push men on to perform good works in the world, even if its consequence is also to drive irrational men to destruction. Circe herself symbolizes this duality since by her beauty she incarnates eternal as well as bewitching elements:

Il ne sera pas hors de raison de prendre la Circé pour le desir en general qui regne et domine sur tout ce qui a vie et est meslé de la divinité et du sensible, et fait ses effects bien differens, et mene les uns à la vertu, et les autres au vice. [...] Le desir esmeut à la vertu ceux qui par l'aide divine y sont preparez: et au contraire, le desir rend ceux qui sont destituez de bonne inclination et institution, serfs et esclaves du vice. La demeure de Circé est en un palais magnifique et en belle assiete, le bastiment beau, doré, et reluysant: Ce qui signifie que le desir ne peut estre esmeu sans apparence de beauté, soit vraye, soit faulse. [...] L'exercice et occupation de ceste Circé est à [...] faire des ouvrages immortels, semblables à ceux que font les deesses: [...] les ouvrages signifient les actes vertueux qui se font par ceux qui sont esmeus par le desir de gloire, bonne renomnee et immortalité.¹³⁴

Circe's equal capacity to bring about disharmony, signified by her tendency to change men into beasts, symbolically represents her affiliation to the cyclical world of nature, in which discord is necessary for eternal regeneration: 'On dit qu'elle changeoit les hommes en formes monstrueuses et diverses: pour ce que la corruption d'une chose, est la generation de l'autre qui renaist, mais non pas en sa premiere forme.'¹³⁵ This perpetual attraction and repulsion of concordant and discordant elements which

thinkers believed to be at the centre of human growth towards dignity is a theme enunciated at the heart of the ballet itself, by a chorus of singers, accompanied by incantatory *musique mesurée*:

Vertu en l'ame immortelle demeure,
 Il faut qu'en bref toute autre chose meure,
 Pourtant le vice aus vertus se combat:
 Nature fit ses lois irrevocables,
 Par le discord les elemens sont stables,
 Mesmes l'amour s'engendre du debat.¹³⁶

The higher aspirations of the soul in the world advanced here, and which the *Balet Comique* endeavours to dramatize, are less tangible than the ambitions of love and war enacted at the tournaments, masquerades and ballets previously examined. As a corollary of this, the role apportioned to the virtue of chastity in fêtes devoted to the aim of rationalizing love may be more palpable, and we have seen that the discordant 'debat' which gives rise to 'amour' in such fêtes is ideally resolved and fulfilled in chaste reciprocal affection. However, as the previously quoted chorus suggests, 'l'amour' is merely one manifestation of the eternal struggle between man and nature which is played out on the stage of the *Balet Comique*, and as the significance of desire is broadened to encompass this cosmic theme, so the virtue of chastity similarly expands to occupy centre place in the quest for divine harmony.

The role of Minerva in this quest is pivotal: all attempts to overcome Circe prior to her intervention are

abortive, and the enchantress makes it clear that she fears no deity other than the chaste goddess of wisdom: 'Seule de tous les Dieux je crains ceste Minerve, | Les hommes de mes arts elle seule preserve.'¹³⁷ Mercury, god of eloquence and creativity ('Les sciences, les arts, les villes sont à moy, | Et avec les thresors je donne l'eloquence') has no success against Circe due to his 'variable et leger' nature, which may always tend towards irrationality: she has no trouble subjugating him:

Mercure vagabond, muable et insensé,
De soudain mouvement deçà delà poussé,
Sans choisis et sans conseil est foible et sans puissance,
Si Pallas ne luy donne advis et assurance.¹³⁸

Minerva later confirms that Mercury represents the world of feelings, which are:

Freres ailez au dos, plus legers que les vents,
Incertains comme luy, muables et volages,
Qui poussent çà et là le desir des courages,
D'imaginations menant la volonté
Tantost à la vertu, tantost à volupté.¹³⁹

Even Jupiter poses no threat to Circe, she firmly believes, since she has more than once been able to control him through his tendencies to lust:

Je vous peux, s'il me plaist, je vous peux resister.
Dy moy qui te changea tant de fois, Jupiter,
En aigle et en toreau, en satyre et en cygne.

Rather, it is Jupiter's alliance with Minerva and with the King of France which, she is aware, may prove her undoing:

Je vous resisteray: que si la destinee
 A de ma verge d'or la force terminee,
 Ce n'est en ta faveur, Jupiter, ne le croy:
 Et si quelqu'un bien tost doit triompher de moy,
 C'est ce Roy des François .¹⁴⁰

Notably, in the ensuing battle to overwhelm Circe, it is Minerva's rational, chaste powers, always resistant to lascivious desire, which rob her wand of its efficacy and, in conjunction with the king, bring about the final defeat.¹⁴¹

The goddess of reason makes her entrance into the drama comparatively late on, but the attempts made by other forces up to this point to suppress Circe's advances all tend towards the forceful arrival of Minerva. The aquatic gods, Glaucus and Tethys, and accompanying sirens, tritons and naiads initiate efforts to halt the insidious progress of Circe and to instate the King and Queen of France as rulers of a new, divine order. Having failed in their endeavours, their cause is taken up by the satyrs and dryads of the woods, and their mistress, the chaste Diana. One of Diana's nymphs, Opis, searches out Pan, symbol of universal nature, who epitomizes the aspirations of the physical world to establish order. However, even Pan, the 'grand Tout, who 'par ordre sçais l'univers disposer', finds his powers are limited without the aid of the virtues that reason brings.¹⁴² Thus the moral virtues, eternal human qualities, make their appearance following Pan, declare themselves harbingers of golden age prosperity, and call for Pallas to complete the installation of the new

order by descending to stand alongside the king.¹⁴³ At this, Minerva makes her splendid entrance on a magnificent chariot and pledges her allegiance to the throne.¹⁴⁴

In order to make the conquering forces complete, Minerva in turn calls upon Jupiter to descend. Interestingly, this is not because he is needed to complete the defeat of Circe, for Minerva knows that she alone is empowered to do this, but simply because he is the father and creator of the universe and has a right to be present as the harmony he intended for the world is reinstated:

Je sçay que je pouvois seule sans t'appeller,
Seure de la victoire, en ce combat aller,
D'une targe d'acier double sept fois, armee,
Qui du poil venimeux de Meduse est semee: [...]
Mais ce faict est aux Dieux et aux hommes commun,
Et tu es, Jupiter, droicturier à chacun. [...]
Tu as de l'univers tout seul pris la defense,
Et celuy commettroit indignement offense,
Presumptueux d'orgueil, qui te voudroit aider,
Comme si tu n'estois puissant pour le garder.¹⁴⁵

Minerva's pre-eminence (and, by association, that of the king) is thereby made explicit, and it simply remains for her to muster the forces of Pan in her service, which she does without difficulty, for he has been waiting to join his powers to hers.¹⁴⁶ At this point, the assimilation of the physical world into the divine order is made complete: 'Enfin, l'alliance conclue à l'acte III entre Pan et Minerve marque aussi la correspondance entre le macrocosme et le microcosme humain'.¹⁴⁷ Finally, Circe is easily defeated and all those she transformed into beasts returned

to their human forms; and Minerva and Jupiter prostrate themselves before the king and queen in humble service.

That the audience should make the link between Pallas and Louise de Lorraine, and Jupiter and Henri, is explicit from the text; the king of France is as majestic and powerful a force on earth as Jupiter is in Olympus, and indeed, perhaps, even more so. His wife, meanwhile, does not merely rest in the shadow of his glory, but asserts through the figure of Minerva her contribution to the order of the State, and her participation in the final ballet confirms the restitution of the Golden Age under the royal couple. Like the epithalamia examined earlier, this text establishes a union of male and female elements as the symbolic means of progress for the nation; it affirms the fundamental quest for social harmony to be realized through an androgynous pair bond rather than through a solely male paradigm. Margaret McGowan's summary of the *Balet Comique's* signification is apt:

Pour combattre le pouvoir de Circé il fallait non seulement les Vertus, l'éloquence de Mercure, mais la raison de Minerve et la puissance de Jupiter et du roi. Si l'on interprète le spectacle de cette façon, les figures géométriques du Grand Ballet représentent les vérités éternelles atteintes par l'homme quand il sait bien contrôler et diriger son désir.¹⁴⁸

Moreover, the affirmation of Minerva/Louise's rational self-control authenticates chastity as *the* virtue by which the human environment should be managed because of its overriding concern to suppress irrational *volupté* in every

area of life: 'la raison assistee de l'aide divine est le seul et unique moyen qui refrene le desir des voluptez'.¹⁴⁹ Divested of this virtue, the *Balet Comique* demonstrates, even noble strength is fruitless; metaphorically speaking, Mars must indeed be conjoined with chaste Venus in order for right reason to flourish; the feminine must sit alongside the masculine if fundamental human dignity is to be assured.

This postulate is at the centre of the precious public behaviour which surrounded the private sexual mores of courtiers: there is certainly a sense in which the game of love, dependent upon the mutual reciprocation of desire, strives to be sexually egalitarian, and the oft-repeated image of harmony in this context is an attempt to encourage this ideal. The Perfect Love discourse is, however, moulded by the individuals who were obliged to make use of it; it is subject to query and debate throughout the century, and changes shape and emphasis accordingly. The chaste relations which the discourse nourished are the major preoccupation of those who wrote of the intricacies of social interaction at the French court; though interpretations of their meaning differed widely, they remained the yardstick against which civilized social intercourse was measured throughout the century.

- 1 See chapters one and three, respectively.
- 2 See chapter two, p.90ff.
- 3 See chapter three, pp.135-136.
- 4 Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Commento*, II, vi, quoted in *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* by Edgar Wind, pp.88-89. See also pp.53-80, for an exposition of the notion of Blind Cupid as a symbol of transcendence in Renaissance Neoplatonism.
- 5 See the aforementioned descriptions of the King and his lover in Almanque's poem.
- 6 George Economou, 'The Two Venuses and Courtly Love', in *In Pursuit of Perfection*, ed. By Joan M. Ferrante and George Economou (New York: Kennikat Press, 1975), pp.17-49 (p.20).
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp.19-22.
- 8 Wind, p.77.
- 9 Castiglione, *Le Courtisan*, pp.465-466.
- 10 *L'Heptaméron*, p.419.
- 11 Castiglione, pp.482-483.
- 12 *L'Heptaméron*, p.382.
- 13 Antoine Héroët, *Description d'une femme de bien* in *Oeuvres poétiques*, p.140.
- 14 Cyre Foucault, *Les Epistres amoureuses d'Aristenet tournées de Grec en François par C. F. [...] avec l'Image du vray Amant. Discours tiré de Platon* (Poictiers: 1597; repr. Paris: Liseux, 1876), p.189.
- 15 John O'Connor, *Amadis de Gaule and its Influence on Elizabethan Literature*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970), p.3.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p.13.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p.10-14.
- 18 Joachim Du Bellay, *Oeuvres poétiques*, III (Paris: Droz, 1912), p.170.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp.176-177.
- 20 O'Connor, p.43.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p.80.

- 22 Ibid., p.14.
- 23 Nicholas de Herberay, *Le Premier Livre d'Amadis de Gaule* (Paris: 1540; repr. Paris: Hachette, 1918), p.13. See also Micheline Cuenin's analysis of the birth of love between Perion and Elisenne in *L'Idéologie amoureuse en France (1540-1627)* (Paris: Aux Amateurs de Livres, 1987), p.13.
- 24 Herberay, pp.4-5.
- 25 Ibid., p.11.
- 26 Ibid., p.14.
- 27 Ibid., p.16. Cuenin provides a useful footnote which clarifies the position of French ecclesiastical and civil law on this point: 'L'Eglise accordait presque de valeur de sacrement aux promesses de mariage solennelles: Périon engagé ici "sa foi de Roi". Pour s'en dédire, il fallait plaider devant les tribunaux ecclésiastiques [...]. Elisenne ne se sent donc nullement coupable sur le plan religieux, mais elle a à redouter la colère des siens, pour s'être passée de leur consentement (point que le droit français va bientôt considérer comme condition *sine qua non* de la validité d'un mariage) et la réprobation de l'opinion publique pour sa conduite.' (p.13 bis)
- 28 Herberay, p.173.
- 29 Ibid., p.176.
- 30 Ibid., pp.176-177.
- 31 Ibid., p.178.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Herberay, *Le Premier Livre d'Amadis de Gaule*, 1548 edition, quoted in *Le Miroir des Femmes*, 2 vols, II (1984), p.69.
- 34 Ibid., p.69.
- 35 Ibid., p.70.
- 36 O'Connor, pp.80-81.
- 37 Pierre de Bourdeille, Seigneur de Brantôme, *Les Dames galantes* (Paris: Garnier, 1955). Brantôme was well acquainted with several members of the royal family, and particularly with Marguerite de Valois, whom he eulogized in his *Vies des dames illustres*.
- 38 Brantôme, p.312.
- 39 Pierre de Dampmartin, *La Fortune de la cour*, in *Memoires*

de Marguerite de Valois (Liège: chez Jean François Broncart, 1713), p.272.

- 40 *L'Heptaméron*, p.418.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p.115.
- 42 Eliane Viennot, *Marguerite de Valois: Histoire d'une femme, histoire d'un mythe* (Paris: Payot, 1993), pp.60-61. Both Viennot and Jacqueline Boucher, in her *Société et mentalités autour de Henri III* (Lille: Atelier Réproduction des Thèses, Université de Lille, 1981), assert that at court women were always significantly in the minority (Viennot claims that the court is a 'milieu qui comporte cinq à dix fois plus d'hommes que de femmes'. [p.61]) Boucher contends that women were almost entirely absent from the king's court, while even at the houses of the royal queens they only counted for an average of 20 to 25 percent of the population. (pp.153-157). If accurate, such demographic accounts of the French court might contribute in no small measure to a clearer understanding of the social mores of the time; more work needs to be undertaken in this area, however, before any conclusions can be drawn.
- 43 Henri de la Tour d'Auvergne, vicomte de Turenne, *Mémoires* (Paris: Guyot Frères, 1839), in *Marguerite de Valois* by Viennot, p.414.
- 44 Viennot, p.61.
- 45 Castiglione, p.483.
- 46 Brantôme, p.335.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p.99.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p.291.
- 49 In the first book of the *Dames galantes*, Brantôme describes the vengeance taken by husbands upon wives who had been unfaithful; in many cases this involved the husband killing his wife, and often his wife's lover as well (see p.14, for example). These acts of vengeance are corroborated by Marguerite de Navarre in *L'Heptaméron*, which also gives a frank and bleak account of the court's social mores in this area (see, for example, novella XXXII, pp.242-246).
- 50 Brantôme, pp.291-292.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p.370.
- 52 Brantôme, p.298.
- 53 Dampmartin, pp.368-369.

- 54 Brantôme, p.305.
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- 59 Joachim Du Bellay, *Epithalame sur le mariage de Tresillustre Prince Philibert Emanuel Duc de Savoye et Tresillustre Princesse Marguerite de France soeur unique du Roy et Duchesse de Berry*, in *Oeuvres Poétiques*, V, pp.222-223.
- 60 François de Belleforest, *Epithalame sur le mariage de tresillustre [...] Philippe d'Autriche, Roy des Espagnes, [...]. Et de Madame Elizabeth, fille aînée du Treschrestien et tousjours victorieux Roy Henry second de ce nom* (Paris: A Briere, 1559), fols. 17v-18r.
- 61 Amadis Jamyn, *Epithalame, Pour le Roy et la Royne de Navarre*, in *Premières Poésies et livre premier*, ed. by S. Carrington (Geneva: Droz, 1973), pp.205-206.
- 62 Belleforest, *Epithalame sur le mariage de tresillustre [...] Philippe d'Autriche*, fol. 17v.
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- 64 Belleforest, *Chant pastoral sur les nopces de tresillustres Princes et Princesses, Philippe d'Autriche, Roy des Espagnes, et ma Dame Elizabeth fille aînée du Roy Treschrestien Et de Monseigneur Philibert Emanuel duc de Savoye, [...] avec ma Dame Marguerite fille et soeur des Treschrestiens Roys, François premier, et Henry second de ce nom* (Paris: Annet Brière, 1559), fols 10r-10v.
- 65 Du Bellay, *Epithalame sur le Mariage de Tresillustre Prince Philibert Emanuel Duc de Savoye et Tresillustre Princesse Marguerite de France*, p.210.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p.219.
- 67 Pierre de Ronsard, *Chant pastoral sur les nopces de Monseigneur Charles duc de Lorraine, et Madame Claude fille II du Roy* in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by P. Laumonier, 20 vols (Paris: Droz, 1937), IX, pp.90-91.

- 68 Jean Dorat, *Epithalame ou Chant Nuptial sur le mariage de tres-illustres Prince et Princesse Henri de Lorraine Duc de Guyse et Caterine de Cleves Contesse d'Eu*, in *Oeuvres de Jean Dorat*, ed. Marty-Laveaux (Geneva: Slatkine, 1965), p.61.
- 69 Du Bellay, *Epithalame sur le Mariage de Tresillustre Prince Philibert Emanuel Duc de Savoye et Tresillustre Princesse Marguerite de France*, p.216.
- 70 Ronsard, *Epithalame d'Antoine de Bourbon et Jeanne d'Albret*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, I, p.15.
- 71 Remy Belleau, *Epithalame sur le mariage de Monseigneur le duc de Lorraine, et de Madame Claude Fille du Roy* (Paris: André Wechsel, 1559), pp.12-13.
- 72 Ronsard, *Chant pastoral*, IX, pp.96-97.
- 73 *Le Premier Livre d'Amadis de Gaule*, in *L'Idéologie amoureuse* by Micheline Cuenin, p.21.
- 74 Jerome Schwartz, 'Aspects of Androgyny in the Renaissance' in *Human Sexuality in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. by D. Radcliffe-Umstead (Pittsburgh: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies; University of Pittsburgh, 1978), pp.121-131 (p.124). Schwartz notes that Françoise Bardon dates the painting at c.1545.
- 75 Wind, p.214.
- 76 This medal is pictured and described in *Les Médailleurs français du XVe siècle au milieu du XVIIe siècle* by F. Mazarolle, 3 vols (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902), I, pp.xxxix & xl; II, p.24; III, pl.VII. The medal shows 'la Victoire et la Paix soutenant une couronne de laurier au-dessus de la tête d'Henri II debout, vêtu à l'antique' (II, p.24).
- 77 Pierre de Ronsard, *Les Sereines représentées au canal du jardin de Monseigneur D'Orleans à Fontainebleau* in *The Royal Tour of France*, ed. by Victor E. Graham & W. McAllister Johnson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), p.150. This text can also be found in the Laumonier edition of Ronsard's *Oeuvres complètes*, XIII, pp.236-239.
- 78 *Ibid.*, p.151.
- 79 Philippe Desportes, *Pour Monseigneur le Duc d'Anjou* in *Cartels et masquarades, epitaphes*, ed. by Victor E.Graham (Geneva: Droz, 1958), p.31.
- 80 Anon., 'Cartel' from *Recueil des choses notables qui ont esté faites à Bayonne, à l'entreveuë du Roy*

Treschrestien Charles neuvieme de ce nom, et la Royne sa treshonorée mere, avec la Royne Catholique sa soeur (Paris: Vascozan, 1566), quoted in *The Royal Tour*, pp.334-335.

- 81 Ibid., p.338.
- 82 *Société et mentalités autour de Henri III*, p.1112.
- 83 'Cartel' from *Recueil des choses notables qui ont esté faites à Bayonne*, in *The Royal Tour*, p.338.
- 84 Ibid., pp.339-340.
- 85 Ibid., p.341.
- 86 See: Frances Yates, *The French Academies of the Sixteenth Century*; Yates, *Astraea* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975); Jean Jacquot, *Les Fêtes de la Renaissance*, 3 vols (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1973), I; Roy Strong, *Art and Power* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1984); Strong, *Splendour at Court* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1973).
- 87 Philippa Berry, *Of Chastity and Power: Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p.37. I have made use of Berry's terminology on the occasions when I have described the noblewoman represented in the discourse of Perfect Love as the 'chaste female beloved' (see p.4).
- 88 Ibid., p.10.
- 89 Ibid., pp.39 & 41.
- 90 See Françoise Bardon's *Diane de Poitiers et le mythe de Diane* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963) for examples of the ways in which iconography relating to Diana permeated Renaissance France. Both Marie de Medici and Gabrielle d'Estrées were represented as Diana in art inspired by the original Diane de Poitiers iconography.
- 91 Berry, p.18.
- 92 Ibid.
- 93 See chapter three for an analysis of different aspects of Neoplatonic thought on this subject.
- 94 Etienne Jodelle, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Enea Balmas, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), I, p.368.
- 95 See Berry, p.18: autonomous female chastity is regarded with suspicion and concern by the male lover.

- 96 Pierre Brinon, for example, observes with some satisfaction in *Le Triomphe des dames* (Rouen: Jean Osmont, 1599), that woman possesses 'le loisir (en tant qu'elle est recherchée et sollicitée) d'élire ce qui luy est propre, et de l'entretenir avec mesme avantage (car elle tient tousjours une forme de Seigneurie sur l'homme)' (pp.298-299).
- 97 Mellin de Saint Gelais, *Pour la partie qui fut faicte en armes aux nopces du Marquis d'Albeuf à Blois* in *Oeuvres Poétiques françaises*, ed. by Donald Stone (Paris: Société des Textes Français Modernes, 1993), p.29.
- 98 *Ibid.*, *A la Royne*, in *Oeuvres Poétiques françaises*, p.88.
- 99 *Ibid.*, p.89.
- 100 *Ibid.*, p.90.
- 101 Cartel by Ronsard (cf. *Oeuvres complètes*, XVIII, 341-3) from *Le recueil des Triumphees et Magnificences qui ont estez faictes au Logis de Monseigneur le Duc Dorleans, frere du Roy, estant à Fontainebleau qui fait le Lundy gras dernièrement xiiii jour de Fevrier*, printed in *The Royal Tour*, p.167.
- 102 See *Recueil des choses notables qui ont esté faites à Bayonne* in *The Royal Tour*, pp.38-39, & 343.
- 103 *Ibid.*, p.344.
- 104 *Ibid.*, p.351.
- 105 *Ibid.*
- 106 *Ibid.*, p.349.
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- 108 *Ibid.*, pp.347-348.
- 109 *Ibid.*, p.351.
- 110 *Ibid.*, p.352.
- 111 Jean-Antoine de Baïf, *La Mascarade de Monseigneur le Duc de Longueville, à Bayonne* in *Euvres en Rime de Jan Antoine de Baïf*, ed. by Marty-Laveaux, 2 vols (Geneva: Slatkine, 1965), I, pp.340-341.
- 112 *Ibid.*, p.339.
- 113 Margaret McGowan, *L'Art du ballet de cour en France (1581-1643)* (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1963), pp.55-59.

- 114 Catherine de Parthenay, *Dame de Rohan, Ballets allégoriques en vers 1592-1593*, ed. by Raymond Ritter (Paris: Champion, 1927), pp.xii-xvi.
- 115 *L'Art du ballet de cour*, pp.55-56.
- 116 *Ballets allégoriques en vers*, pp.3-9.
- 117 *Ibid.*, p.10.
- 118 *Ibid.*, p.11.
- 119 *Ibid.*, p.13.
- 120 *Ibid.*, p.13.
- 121 *Ibid.*, pp.15-16.
- 122 *Ibid.*, p.17. For a more detailed examination of the political aspects of this ballet, see Margaret McGowan, *L'Art du ballet de cour*, p.57.
- 123 Roy Strong, *Art and Power*, pp.119-120.
- 124 Balthazar de Beaujoyeulx, *Le Balet Comique* (Paris: Adrian le Roy, 1582; repr. New York: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1982), fol. 8r.
- 125 *Ibid.*, fols 8r-8v.
- 126 *Ibid.*, fol. 8v.
- 127 *Ibid.*, fol. 9r.
- 128 A. Bartlett Giamatti, *The Earthly Paradise and the Renaissance Epic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p.64.
- 129 This work was translated into French by Jean du Vignau as *La Délivrance de Hiérusalem* (Paris: chez N. Gilles, 1595).
- 130 Bartlett Giamatti, p.190.
- 131 *Le Balet Comique*, fol. 52r.
- 132 *Ibid.*, fols 54v-55r.
- 133 *Autre Allegorie de la Circé, selon l'opinion du Sieur Gordon, Escçois, gentilhomme de la Chambre du Roy* in *Le Balet Comique*, fol. 75r.
- 134 *Ibid.*, fols 74v-75r.
- 135 *Allegorie de la Circé, que Natalis Comes a retiré des commentaires des poetes Grecs* in *Le Balet Comique*, fol. 74r.

- 136 *Le Balet Comique*, fols 45v-47r.
- 137 *Ibid.*, fol. 26r.
- 138 *Ibid.*, fols 24r & 26r.
- 139 *Ibid.*, fol. 47v.
- 140 *Ibid.*, fols 54r-54v.
- 141 *Ibid.*, fol. 54v.
- 142 *Ibid.*, fols 39v & 53r.
- 143 *Ibid.*, fol. 44r.
- 144 *Ibid.*, fols 44r-48r.
- 145 *Ibid.*, fol. 48v.
- 146 *Ibid.*, fols 53r-53v.
- 147 C. Delmas, '"Le Balet Comique de la Reine" (1581): structure et signification', *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre*, 22 (1970), 142-156, (p.151).
- 148 McGowan, *L'Art du ballet de cour*, p.47.
- 149 *Le Balet Comique*, fol.75v. See also the references to Renaissance Neoplatonic philosophy in chapters 2 and 3.

THE TRIUMPH OF THE ICON: PART TWO

V: CHASTITY AND THE TRIUMPH OF THE INDIVIDUAL

We have seen, in the *Balet Comique*, how a chaste stewardship of the self and of one's environment was perceived to be instrumental in assuring the harmonious progress of humankind. We have also observed that in works considering the social relations of individuals, however fictitious and hyperbolic these may have been, there were evident attempts to unify and rationalize the ambitions of lovers in a common discourse which relied heavily upon the notion of chaste reciprocity. This chapter aims to examine the varied interpretation of such codes of conduct by individuals and groups of individuals who sought to present their own understandings of a divinely instated order in relation to those codes put in place to guide them.

UTOPIAN CHASTITY: THE ALLIANCE OF MARRIAGE AND LOVE

For the majority at the French court during the sixteenth century, the union of love with marriage belonged to the sympathetic texts which eulogized royal weddings in fantastic terms, and not to their own situations. The cloak and dagger secrecy of the illicit relationships in *Amadis* were much more in keeping with the court's own experience of love, where the subject of marriage was rarely linked with the pleasures of romance and sexual fulfilment.¹ On the contrary, numerous tragic tales portrayed the abortive

efforts of Perfect Lovers to marry;² furthermore, neither the *Heptaméron* nor Brantôme's chronicles, significant indicators of the social mood of the court over the middle decades of the period, presented marriage and love as likely bedfellows, alluding instead to the friction which beset the marriage contract.³ However, by the middle of the century, a certain number of secular works for the attention of court audiences addressed these issues in relation to the principles of Neoplatonic love which the court held dear. Such texts posited the notion, both through rhetorical debate and through the construction of imaginary worlds which mirrored the environment of the court, that the individual should be free to find his or her ideal (or, in Neoplatonic terms, predestined) partner and then to marry him or her. It is perhaps significant that many of these works were composed by writers who remained socially apart from the court itself; this distance may have permitted them a degree of optimistic idealism which those in the heart of the complex social machinations of the court did not share.

The theme of ideal love and marriage, though it remained a minor part of the huge literary output which considered socio-sexual relations within a courtly environment, was nevertheless influenced by evangelical, reformist and counter-reformation texts which celebrated chaste marriage as the ideal and virtuous vehicle for the expression of reasoned desire.⁴ In equating the theological benefits of marriage as they were then

understood with Neoplatonic principles of Perfect Love, furthermore, some writers created an optimistic picture of ideal union based upon the androgyne model which was therefore more egalitarian than most Christian exegetes would allow, while being publicly and openly acceptable, because legitimate, in an environment such as the court. Claude de Taillemont, a Lyonese writer of the mid-sixteenth century, castigates any marital commitment which is not based upon mutual respect, or 'conformité de moeurs', and upon love, for two people can scarcely become one flesh as God has commanded if they do not love each other.⁵ His guidelines for marriage are constructed from a synthesis of Christian and Neoplatonic ideals, rejecting social constraint and promoting nuptial equality. Though they are presented in a setting which clearly mimicks a courtly environment, where, as in the *Heptaméron*, civilized discussions on the subject of love are the order of the day, these are rules which the court would not heed, and yet they are an attractive extension of the perfect social relations postulated in the Perfect Love discourse.

François Belleforest's *La Pyrenee*, published in 1571 and the first real French contribution to the pastoral genre which had grown up in Spain and Italy during the first half of the century, presents a Utopian, natural world peopled by noble shepherds and shepherdesses which deliberately imitates that of the court, and thereby seeks to perfect the latter.⁶ Belleforest, like Taillemont, never wrote from the inner circle of the court. He was a

professional writer who had certain, limited contact with the nobility and with prestigious court writers, but who never enjoyed the sustained patronage of the court.⁷ Rather, he reflects in his writing the most popular trends of courtly literature: he translates the *Histoires tragiques* of Bandello, familiarizes himself with the style of *Amadis* and the *Heptaméron*,⁸ and, in *La Pyrenee*, imitates the ideals of Neoplatonic love made popular both in these works, and in the pastoral genre exemplified by Montmayor's *Diana* and Sannazaro's *Arcadia*.⁹ Belleforest seems to have harboured the ambition to provide a paradigm for perfect chaste relations for some time, as he confesses in the dedicatory epistle to a fellow author and friend:

Vous sçavez qu'il a long temps que je bastissois un mont Pyrenéen, pour estre celuy qui a nourry mon enfance, et que traitant l'amour en iceluy, je fais Cupidon si chaste, que Venus rougiroit de honte d'aprocher d'une chose si modeste.¹⁰

As in *Amadis*, mutual love between Belleforest's honourable shepherds and shepherdesses flourishes with comparative ease, and each half of an androgyne pair can rely on the other to behave nobly in love, as would befit any noble individual in the rarified world of the court. The love which blossoms between the *bergere* Galatée and the *berger* Philarete, for example, is certainly subject to scrutiny on the part of both parties, and yet an eloquent and mutual appreciation leaves the reader sure they will come to serve each other. Philarete muses on whether his kiss with Galatée, which happened seven years earlier, can

now lead to true love, since he has suffered in love before; but he rapidly reminds himself of 'la courtoisie de la belle, laquelle pour estre bien nee et nourrie entre les demi-dieux François ne pouvoit estre autre que courtoisie affable'.¹¹ Following this, he swiftly moves to the conclusion that the *bergere* is highly compatible with his own background: 'D'autre part Philarete eslevé noblement, nourry en grandeur et jadis chery des deesses se promettoit encor pareille grace du Ciel, qu'il avoit senty par les fertiles plaines voisines de sa Pyrene'.¹² For her part, Galatée has to decide whether her devotion to Diana is compatible with loving another, but she too concludes:

Diane en chasteté
 A nulle autre seconde
 Et à nulle en beauté
 Quelle que fust au monde:
 Ayma, mais ça esté
 D'un Amour pur & munde. [...]

Jayme le vertueux,
 Qui mon honneur caresse,
 Je hay le vicieux
 Qui poursuit la molesse
 D'un corps voluptueux
 A qui nul bien s'adresse.

C'est pourquoy j'ay fait chois
 De cest amant fidelle:
 Car tel je le cognois,
 Et de nature telle
 Qu'il ayme mieux cent foyes
 La mort, que la cautelle.¹³

As rapidly becomes clear through sequences of similar tales, Belleforest's pastoral world is one where Perfect Love may flourish unhindered, for the very fabric of his society is woven according to the principles of shared desire between those of like mind. The threat of refusal by

any party, such as was aired in the masquerades of the Bayonne and Fontainebleau fêtes, is all but removed from this environment because the majority appreciates the benefits of reciprocal chaste affection and is aware that the social order accords with the divine pattern when love is treated properly:

L'Amour qui vainc les contre-affections des qualitez esmeues au corps commun de la nature est aussi celuy, lequel cause l'ordre, la beauté et accomplissement de ce qui est juste, beau et parfait en l'univers. Et voila pourquoy les anciens ont fait l'Amour, l'un des dieux les plus grans et premiers de tous les autres, [...] a cause que l'union des elements ne procede que d'iceluy, et la vie des hommes ne peut subsister, que par ce que cest Amour inspire et influe en noz pensees.¹⁴

What is more, the social order is itself permitted to share in the fullest measure the fruits of reasoned desire through the public institution of marriage, which it proclaims as the natural end of chaste affection, and which can guarantee fulfilment for every individual who chooses to love, whilst at the same time strengthening the community in a common bond of ambition to discover the divine through human union:

Si tu contemples la fin de l'Amour, je te confesseray veritablement que c'est la liaison non seulement de deux volonte, qui se fait par le desir, et par l'opinion que ont les parties l'une de l'autre esmeue, par vertu, et apparence exterieure du bien caché dans l'esprit, ains encor par l'alliance et conjunction des moities desunies, qui sont en l'exterieur. Mais comment cela? Non comme les brutes, et bestes sans raison, ains suivant la loy de raison, et ordonnée par les celestes que les sages pasteurs ont appellé mariage, car hors de luy nulle conjunction n'est honeste ny licite.¹⁵

Such a Utopian state, in which love and marriage are defined as the ultimate goals of society, capable themselves of assuring political order because they link that which is naturally pleasurable with that which is divinely good, is also depicted in a collection of rhyming tales by François Habert. *Les Metamorphoses de Cupido*, published in 1561, is a translation of a neo-Latin poem by Brizardus,¹⁶ and presents a series of scenarios in which the god of love disguises himself in various forms so as to enter unnoticed the lives of different lovers and ensure that they be united. The *Troisiesme Metamorphose* is central to an understanding of the stories: it portrays a conflict between Diana and Cupid, in which the god of love tries, and fails, to dominate the only deity who has not come under his sway. Diana traps Cupid, who is disguised as a stag, and having suffered too long at her hands, he vows never again to attempt to thwart her:

Il n'a depuis onc voulu se venter
 Qu'il eust pouvoir de Diane tenter,
 Ne de ses Seurs la troupe révéree
 Qui par vertus est tousjours assuree,
 Et proposa qu'aux hommes de sçavoir
 Il ne viendroit jamais guerre mouvoir,
 Reconnoissant que les personnes sages
 De folle amour evitent les passages.¹⁷

In a conclusion to the tales, Habert provides his readers, addressed as 'Nobles Seigneurs, dames, et Damoyelles', with an additional moral interpretation of the above story as if to suggest that the whole work should be read as a quest for chastely perfective love:

Quand vous lirez Amour mué en Cerf,
 Et par Diane ainsi captif et serf,
 C'est pour monstrier que ce follastre Dieu
 N'ha point de cours ou chasteté ha lieu. [...]

Quand il se mue en verre, en plume, en rien,
 C'est pour monstrier qu'en de Monde terrien
 L'humaine amour est de peu de durée,
 Si elle n'est chastement procurée.¹⁸

The majority of love stories presented in the text conclude in marriage, which is seen as the natural end to chaste affection just as in *La Pyrenée*. Here, however, with one notable exception, we are not removed from a court setting but nominally placed within it; the protagonists are not 'simple' shepherds but high ranking ladies and gentlemen from imaginary noble families.¹⁹ Because of this, Habert introduces a Utopian aspect to his backdrop which is largely absent from Belleforest's work: that of parental consent to marriage based upon love. This consent is generally made possible because in Habert's ideal society lovers are perfectly suited in rank and worth and thus present no obstacle to their parent's ambitions to perpetuate their noble lineage. The first tale, for example, describes the love between the two central characters in terms of their social eligibility and offers no significant account of their innermost feelings for each other:

Ceste Gismonde en graces renommée,
 D'un Gentilhomme estoit fort bien aymée
 Qui l'appétoit en conjugal lien.
 C'estoit le beau Paris Italien,
 Noble, et extraict de parens sans reproche.²⁰

When Paris's father sees Cupid working in the couple, he proceeds to bless their marriage, which subsequently benefits all concerned:

Il [Cupid] les lia, et d'un desir egal
 Les fait entrer dans le lict conjugal,
 Et en liesse amplement fortunée
 Les deux amans eurent belle lignée.²¹

This happy bond between nature and nurture which pushes noble offspring to concur instinctively with their parents' wishes is attractive because it allows affection to be willingly reciprocated without fear of reproach. Thus, in the tale of love between Hector and Florence, the former is able to propose spontaneously to his lover, sure of his parents' blessing:

Je te supply, d'affection égale
 Entrons nous deux en la foy conjugale.
 Si de nous deux sont unis les accords,
 Point noz parents n'y mettront de discours.²²

In the sixteenth *metamorphose*, perhaps more strikingly, a father is shown to respect his daughter's individual freedom to choose her husband because he is persuaded she will not make a bad choice.²³

Habert's world is idealized to such an extent that very little discord penetrates the common enthusiasm for rational love. Belleforest, however, allows his characters to experience a modicum of disharmony in order that their love be further perfected. There is never any threat of chaos in *La Pyrenée*, but couples do occasionally disagree,

and two dissenting protagonists, Misogine and Drion, stand outside of the circle of marriage supporters to provide the latter with the opportunity to prove their case by demonstration and rational argument.

The principal source of debate in the work is the issue of equality between lovers, and subsequently of the roles that each partner should seek to fulfil. As in *Amadis*, women take the lead in guiding their partners towards a divinely perfective chaste affection: their role is to resist chastely the approaches of eager suitors until they may virtuously commit themselves to their predestined other halves.²⁴ They also temper their lovers' often too eager desire until an acceptable harmony between sense and spirit can be reached. The nymph Pyrene thus rebukes her lover Sylvain for dwelling too intensely upon her physical presence:

Je pense te voyant ainsi tourmenté pour mon absence, qu'il y a quelque cas en toy, que souhaite plus que ne requiert le devoir et honnesteté: et qu'ainsi ayment plus ce qui est extérieur, et qui à l'oeil du corps semble estre le plus beau, oublois celle naïve beauté qui est en l'ame, et de laquelle doit seulement proceder et naistre l'Amour, veu que ce desir qui sort de la partie sensuelle, tant s'en fault que merite le nom d'Amour, que s'unissant aux apetits des brutaux, il amortit la raison en l'homme et le separe des actions vertueuses de l'ame.²⁵

This apportioning of responsibility is the principal source of concern for the male protagonists, who fear loss of freedom may be an inevitable consequence. Drion and Misogine are particularly adamant on this point; the former

pours scorn upon any man who allows himself to be ensnared by love: 'Et vrayment il fait beau veoir un homme né en liberté, créé pour commander, et ayant puissance sur tout autre animant s'assotter apres une folastre'.²⁶ Misogine goes further, to suggest that, in order to protect themselves, men should keep women in a state of subjection which is theirs by nature.²⁷ Indeed, even Philarete, in a moment of passionate fury, curses Galatée and all women as the source of male servitude and confusion:

Ne pense point que les femmes ayent pris essence pour autre effet en ce monde, que pour chastier la gaillardise trop grande de noz conceptions, et affin d'abolir les loix justes de nostre liberté mal pour nous garde, et simplement observee.²⁸

That such disharmony is soon dispelled and happy order restored is due, at least in part, to the fact that the women in this text are given a voice with which to examine these accusations. Galatee's amusingly sarcastic reply to Philarete's diatribe, in which she feigns culpability ('Non, non, Philarete, [...] je consens que toute imperfection procede de nostre sexe'), eventually brings about reconciliation because it instigates healthy debate, as the shepherd is later willing to admit:

Ne trouve donc plus estrange d'ouir noz complaints, [...] car ce sont les premices de nostre constance, et la pierre de touche qui esprouve l'or de nostre fermeté, vainquants en nous les desirs effrenez de l'apetit sensuel.²⁹

Further on, in response to Misogine's suggestions of female servitude, Galatee threatens him and all males with gynocratic dominance:

Or est il vray, quoy qu'on nous dise serves, et sujettes des hommes par le lien de mariage, que nous avons par instinct de nature plus de puissance sur l'homme, que vous n'avez sur nous par la loy que tyranniquement vous usurpez sur nous.³⁰

This stance is, of course, condemned as inappropriate to marriage, where equality must reign, and Galatee asserts that she was vocalizing a response to male disloyalty in her statement rather than seriously advocating a non-egalitarian point of view. Such strong words, from the mouth of a female protagonist, confirm the genuine quest for mutual satisfaction which is the end of the marital union Belleforest prescribes. This must thrive upon the different, but equal responsibilities of each partner, for the benefit of both and of the wider community:

Ce n'est pas ainsi que je conclus mon dire, car parlant de vostre tyrannie je ne la refere point a la loy du mariage, laquelle ne nous fait point serves, mais plustost compaignes et ayans esgalle puissance sur vous, que vous avez sur nous.³¹

DISHARMONY RECLAIMED: RONSARD AND THE UTOPIAN TEXT

The scenes of egalitarian, optimistic bliss which pepper the pages of the aforementioned pastoral work and so many others in its style could not be further removed from the

anguished struggle between the poet and his beloved wrought in the pages of Ronsard's *Sonets pour Helene*. Ronsard ultimately rejects the simplified dualism of spirit and flesh which Belleforest's Neoplatonism implies, and undermines the very premises of chaste control and rational courtship central to the court's interpretation of Perfect Love. Though he makes use of a Neoplatonic vocabulary of transcendence to represent Helene on occasion, he finds it necessary to rebuke his lady for believing that such a vocabulary could correspond to any kind of real, lived experience. Thus in one breath the poet refers to Helene in ethereal terms reminiscent of Scève's *Délie*:

Lors que le Ciel te fist, il rompit la modelle
 Des Vertuz, comme un peintre efface son tableau,
 Et quand il veut refaire une image du Beau,
 Il te va retracer pour en faire une telle.
 Tu apportas d'enhaut la forme la plus belle,
 Pour paroistre en ce monde un miracle nouveau,
 Que couleur, ny outil, ny plume, ny cerveau
 Ne scauroient egaler, tant tu es immortelle.³²

While in another he criticizes the aloofness which she derives from her spiritual stance:

En choisissant l'esprit vous estes mal-apprise,
 Qui refusez les corps, à mon gré le meilleur:
 De l'un en l'esprouvant on cognoist la valeur,
 L'autre n'est rien que vent, que songe et que
 feintise. [...]
 Aimez l'esprit, Madame, est aimer la sottise.
 Entre les courtisans, afin de les braver,
 Il faut en disputant Trimegiste approuver,
 Et de ce grand Platon n'estre point ignorante.
 Mais moy je ne suis bercé de telle vanité,
 Un discours fantastiq' ma raison ne contante:
 Je n'aime point le faux, j'aime la verité.³³

In part, this collection of sonnets can be read as a criticism of the overtly precious behaviour which had grown out of the Perfect Love discourse at the French court in the second half of the sixteenth century, where public affirmations of chastity frequently bore little relation to private realities. Ronsard rails against a fashionable discourse which he perceives to be a misrepresentation of genuine human experience and emotion in love, and which he finds personally repellent. It would, however, be too simple to read the *Sonets pour Helene* in terms of a binary opposition of sensibilities, the poet preferring the flesh and his beloved the spirit: Ronsard was not bewitched into loving by the superior virtue of his lady, only to find himself deceived by her beauty. Rather, it seems, he willingly embarked upon the service of a very high ranking noblewoman who, he must have known from the outset, would be likely to refuse his more passionate advances, announcing in the first sonnet of the collection:

Vous seule me plaisez: j'ay par election,
Et non à la volée aimé votre jeunesse:
Aussi je prins en gré toute ma passion.
Je suis de ma fortune autheur, je le confesse:³⁴

Moreover, Ronsard makes considerable reference to Helene's virtue as the quality which invigorated his love for her ('La vertu m'a conduit en telle affection'),³⁵ and while such a statement could initially be regarded as a Petrarchan platitude, the poet's subsequent cross-examination of this virtue suggests a more complex motivation for his poetic involvement with Mme de Surgeres.

The key to Ronsard's motives in tackling again the subject of love, though he believes he is too old for this and knows he will suffer, is, perhaps, in his perception of himself as 'auteur' of his own fortune: he establishes himself as both the orchestrator and writer of his own turmoil and elation. Subsequently he asserts that he took up the challenge of eulogizing Helene, proffered to him by Cupid, because he knew his poetic virtue would be enhanced by serving a lady of such high reputation. Eager to hone his skills on such rich subject-matter, Ronsard is confident that this is the means by which he can produce sublime verse:

De Myrthe et de Laurier feuille à feuille enserrez
 Helene entrelassant une belle Couronne,
 M'appella par mon nom: Voyla que je vous donne,
 De moy seule, Ronsard, l'escrivain vous serez.
 Amour qui l'escoutoit, de ses traicts acerez
 Me pousse Helene au coeur, et son Chantre m'ordonne:
 Qu'un sujet si fertile vostre plume n'estonne:
 Plus l'argument est grand, plus Cygne vous mourrez.
 Ainsi me dist Amour, me frappant de ses ailes:
 Son arc fist un grand bruit, les feuilles eternelles
 Du Myrthe je senty sur mon chef tressaillir.
 Adieu, Muses, Adieu, vostre faveur me laisse:
 Helene est mon Parnasse: ayant telle Maistresse,
 Le Laurier est à moy, je ne scaurois faillir.³⁶

Helene, then, is no mere Petrarchan beauty for Ronsard, and the reader is scarcely convinced by his sporadic claims to be overwhelmed by her transcendent chastity, partly because of his frequent contradiction of these Neoplatonic themes in sonnets which celebrate sensuality for its own sake, but more specifically because of his efforts to cast Helene as an individual, with strikingly human traits,

rather than a distant form of perfection to which he must aspire. Her conduct, as he portrays it, is typical of a high-ranking lady concerned with preserving a reputation for chaste virtue: Helene refuses the poet on the grounds that she does not involve herself in matters of love because they are repugnant to her:

Ce n'est (ce me dis-tu) le remors de la loy
 Qui me fait t'éconduire, ou la honte, ou la crainte,
 Ny la frayeur des Dieux, ou telle autre contrainte,
 C'est qu'en tes passetemps plaisir je ne reçoÿ.
 D'une extrême froideur tout mon corps se compose,
 Je n'aime point Venus, j'abhorre telle chose,
 Et les presens d'Amour me sont une poison.³⁷

Helene exhorts Ronsard to love elsewhere because of her indifference (*Sonets pour Helene* XXII, pp.305-306), and yet he also records her giving him passionate words of encouragement (*Amours Diverses* XLII) and enjoying the attentions of other, younger men (*Sonets pour Helene* XI, pp.205-206). Thus he is frustrated in his role of pursuer when Helene asserts that she takes seriously doctrines of chastity which are anathema to him, and which, he suggests, obstruct her own pleasure as well as his:

Cest honneur, ceste loy sont noms pleins d'imposture,
 Que vous alleguez tant, faussement inventez
 De noz peres resveurs, par lesquels vous osez
 Et forcez les presens les meilleurs de Nature.
 Vous trompez vostre sexe, et luy faites injure:
 La coustume vous pipe, et du faux vous domptez
 Voz plaisirs, voz desirs, vous et voz voluptez,
 Sous l'ombre d'une sottte et vaine couverture.³⁸

These contrary aspects of Helene's character seem endlessly to fascinate the poet; it is as if he finds them

interesting facets of the virtue she personifies. In sonnet XVIII of book 2, for example, Ronsard juxtaposes praise of Helene's moral goodness: her chastity, beauty and piety, with two distinctly social virtues: 'La crainte de mal-faire, et la peur d'infamie'.³⁹ The sonnet is an excellent example of the extent to which moral and social virtues have become synthesized and even conflated in the latter stages of the sixteenth century: the preoccupation with reputation suggested by the second list of virtues is a public necessity which assures the preservation of the moral virtues first mentioned. Paradoxically, the poet may be inspired by Helene's innate goodness, but is forced to recognize the social skills which allow her to maintain such a virtuous standing, even as these militate against his own desires and needs. The fact that he names her Pandora in the final line of the sonnet alludes to her ambiguous effect upon him; she is the mystical bringer of gifts which charm him, and yet these gifts are double-edged, since they increase his desire whilst denying him the possibility of fulfilment.

That Ronsard should choose to investigate Helene's character and his response to it in these terms is perhaps symptomatic of a desire to subvert the conventional Petrarchan eulogies of female beauty, but, more importantly, it represents the vehicle by means of which his own poetic virtue can shine. The issue of his poetic reputation is an *idée fixe* which resonates throughout the collection, and this leitmotif is in turn bound up with an

acute awareness of encroaching old age. Ronsard upholds his unassailable position as master of his text at repeated intervals, asserting before Helene that he has the power to create and recreate her in the eyes of the world through the written word, the effect of which is more enduring than any social accolade:

Tu as pour tes vertuz en mes vers un honneur,
 Qui malgré le tombeau suivra ta renommee.
 Les Dames de ce temps n'envient ta beauté,
 Mais ton nom tant de fois par les Muses chanté,
 Qui languiroit d'oubly, si je ne t'eusse aimee.⁴⁰

In a more vitriolic attack on his lover, Ronsard accuses Helene of selfishly engineering a love affair in which he is obliged to serenade her, while she offers nothing in return, put off, he thinks, by his age:

Puis qu'elle est tout hyver, toute la mesme glace,
 Toute neige, et son coeur tout armé de glaçons,
 Qui ne m'aime sinon pour avoir mes chansons,
 Pourquoi suis-je si fol que je ne m'en delace?
 Dequoy me sert son nom, sa grandeur et sa race,
 Que d'honneste servage, et de belles prisons.
 Maistresse, je n'ay pas les cheveux si grisons,
 Qu'une autre de bon coeur ne prenne vostre place.

[...]

Amour, qui est enfant, ne cele verité.
 Vous n'etes si superbe, ou si riche en beauté,
 Qu'il faille desdaigner un bon coeur qui vous aime.
 R'entrer en mon Avril desormais je ne puis:
 Aimez moy, s'il vous plaist, grison comme je suis,
 Et je vous aimeray quand vous serez de mesme.⁴¹

Similarly, in sonnet XLIX of book one, the poet bemoans Helene's indifference, both to his suffering and to his creative output produced in her honour:

Vous aurez en mes vers un immortel renom:
 Pour n'avoir rien de vous la recompense est grande.⁴²

Despite the strength of feeling demonstrated in such sonnets as the above, Helene is clearly more than a passive sapper of the poet's vital forces as he claims here. We have already witnessed Ronsard's initial declaration that he bore the yoke of love willingly, and subsequently, in support of this theme, he confesses a need for love to breathe life into otherwise stagnant verse; in short, he admits that in a creative sense it benefits him to be a slave of Cupid. Moreover, Ronsard reiterates that, for the cause of his verse, he could have chosen no better subject matter than the noble Helene, whose previously denounced 'grandeur et [...] race' now appears to be an active ingredient in his recipe for success:

Ah! belle liberté, qui me servois d'escorte,
 Quand le pied me portoit où libre je voulois!
 Ah, que je te regrette! hélas, combien de fois
 Ay-je rompu le joug, que malgré moy je porte!
 Puis je l'ay r'attaché, estant nay de la sorte
 Que sans aimer je suis et du plomb et du bois:
 Quand je suis amoureux, j'ay l'esprit et la vois,
 L'invention meilleure, et la Muse la plus forte.
 Il me faut donc aimer pour avoir bon esprit,
 Afin de concevoir des enfans par escrit,
 Pour allonger mon nom aux despens de ma peine.
 Quel sujet plus fertile sçauroy-je mieux choisir
 Que le sujet qui fut d'Homere le plaisir,
 Ceste toute divine et vertueuse Heleine?⁴³

Helene's status and virtue contribute to an imposing physical presence which can overwhelm the poet; a situation which, on several occasions, is associated with a fictional state of sterility and inertia on his part, during which he declares he is unable to write:

Je sens une douceur à conter impossible,
 Dont ravy je jouys par le bien du penser,
 Qu'homme ne peut escrire, ou langue prononcer,
 Quand je baise la main contre Amour invincible.

Contemplant tes beaux rais, ma pauvre ame possible
 En se pasmant se perd: lors je sens amasser
 Un sang froid sur mon coeur, qui garde de passer
 Mes esprits, et je reste une image insensible.

Voila que peut ta main et ton oeil, où les traits
 D'Amour sont si ferrez, si chauds et si espais
 Au regard Medusin, qui en rocher me mue.⁴⁴

Ronsard testifies frequently to this condition of intellectual and physical paralysis before Helene's beauty; like Scève's *Délie*, Helene is pictured as a tyrannical goddess, disturbing the poet's equilibrium by her immortal yet corporeal perfection.⁴⁵ A madrigal speaks of 'la beauté qui me nuit' which causes the poet to lose the power of speech; overcome, he is unable to articulate his experience and therefore, it seems, he is irredeemably ensnared in an enigma of his own making:

Je vous aime, et sçay bien que mon mal est fatal:
 Le coeur le dit assez, mais la langue est muette.⁴⁶

Ronsard is happy to play upon the notion of his defeat at the hands of love and to establish Helene as an all-powerful beloved, just as he was happy to explore the notion of her passive indifference to his work. Now she is the cruel bystander who does nothing to alleviate his suffering, now the temptress who swallows him up through her bewitching beauty.⁴⁷ In particular, the poet makes repeated reference to the surrendering of his reason and will, the most common of several fictions which suggest his

helplessness and propensity for suffering for his art and love.⁴⁸

In the final analysis, however, this suffering is grist to the poetic mill, because it is clear that the poet's first allegiance is to his verse.⁴⁹ Helene is a suitable subject, therefore, not simply because of her physical beauty, but precisely because of her status and intellect: the social and verbal manifestations of her virtue are perhaps more significant to Ronsard, and more delightfully challenging to express, than simple Petrarchan qualities:

Tu es seule mon coeur, mon sang et ma Deesse,
 Tom oeil est le filé et le RÉ bienheureux,
 Qui prend tant seulement les hommes genereux,
 Et se prendre des sots jamais il ne se laisse.
 Aussi honneur, vertu, prevoyance et sagesse
 Logent en ton esprit, lequel rend amoureux
 Tous ceux, qui de nature ont un coeur desireux
 D'honorer les beautez d'une docte Maistresse.⁵⁰

Thus while Ronsard may find Helene's actual approach to love distasteful, and her determination never to remove her public mask of chastity in his honour dishonest: ('vrayment c'est aimer comme on fait à la Court, | Où le feu contrefait ne rend qu'une fumée'),⁵¹ these qualities render her a complex figure who stimulates thought and, ultimately, induces a clarity of vision which transports him to a higher plain of understanding:

Ton esprit, en parlant, à moy se descouvrit,
 Et ce-pendant Amour l'entendement m'ouvrit
 Pour te faire à mes yeux un miracle apparoistre.⁵²

The substitution of ecstatic revelation for reason is thus a profitable enterprise for the writer who is obliged by love to think and finally to write.⁵³ And similarly, Helene's chastity is reinvigorated in the service of the pen, as a virtue linked with wisdom which can inspire heightened intellectual activity in the poet. Helene has, temporarily at least, united with the Muses, the 'Chaste troupe Pierienne' as Ronsard's source of poetic virtue,⁵⁴ and it seems, therefore, that at the higher level of the text, her chaste wisdom is reflected in a chaste control of his own.

This symbiotic relationship between writer and love-object which ultimately engenders the text is wonderfully portrayed in sonnet XLVII of the *Amours Diverses*.⁵⁵ Helene's chaste beauty and upright virtue, her 'belle colonne', is the basis and heart of Ronsard's poetic growth, symbolically represented in the crown of ivy which he presents to his beloved. In a mock surrender to Helene, 'vous triomphez de moy', Ronsard captures the strength of her grip upon his imagination, and yet the 'lhierre' which is symbolic of his poetic conquest of her will 'coule et se glisse à l'entour | Des arbres et des murs' and will 'serre, embrasse et environne' until inevitably it obscures the column entirely. Then Helene's chastity, like the poet's desire, will be engulfed within the text, which alone stands firm in its evergreen immortality.

CHASTITY AND THE LANGUAGE OF MYSTICISM: A SPIRITUAL UTOPIA

The triumph of the text, and of the poet who by divine inspiration and insight breathed life onto the page was a concept rarely questioned by the court in which those poets lived and worked; the iconic language which they spoke reflected contemporary social values and expectations in a manner attractive to the narcissistic interests of so many courtiers, as Ronsard appeared well aware. The power of words was therefore seldom debunked, except by those whose lifestyle embodied a different agenda from that of the self-orientated cult of perfection which the court encouraged; by those who, by choice or circumstance, were marginalized from that cult in action.

Women poets involved with the court in the sixteenth century do not contribute extensively to perpetuating established social discourses on the subjects of love and human relations in their verse. Propriety certainly prevented them from doing this: few women dared to espouse a vocabulary of desire, since their public selves were not supposed to bear witness to this 'masculine' quality. Boxed into a passive dialogue of chaste response through the social discourses of Neoplatonic love, it is through a vocabulary of transcendence that women poets frequently vocalized their deepest longings. This is not to say that religious poetry of the time written by women is straightforwardly concerned with sublimated sexual desire, since the mystical verse which many wrote fell into

a long-sanctioned tradition, according to which images of sexual union represented the desired union of the soul with God.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, at the same time it is difficult to divorce the suppression of public manifestations of desire and emotional need, coupled with an exaggerated exhortation to piety, from a tendency towards introspection and a heightened spiritual outlook in some women born into this background. Thus, in examining the later religious poetry of Marguerite de Navarre and certain of Anne de Marquetz' *Sonets* and *chansons*, I am particularly interested by the issue of these authors' femaleness, and in how this impinges upon aspects of their writing which may appear, on the surface, to be traditional explorations of the soul's relationship with God.⁵⁷

The chaste self-control with which Ronsard masters his text and ensures his own fame is certainly not that which Anne de Marquetz and Marguerite de Navarre apply to their writing. For them, the text has no intrinsic merit, and the self derives no virtue from its creation. Rather, their chastity is conjoined with humility by which they recognize the written word to be an inadequate tool for mirroring the beauty of God, and their own minds to be ill-equipped for the task of depicting that beauty. Anne de Marquetz entitles a sonnet *Complaincte de ne pouvoir si bien dire en louant Dieu que les poètes font sur quelque vain subject*, and laments that the writers of secular verse succeed in eloquence where she fails:

Mais c'est grand cas, que tout gentil poëte,
 Sur un subject de plaisir seulement,
 Ha tant de grace et dict si proprement
 Que son oeuvre est excellemment bien faicte:
 Et la mienne est si manque et imperfaicte,
 Bien que j'ay pris pour mon seul argument
 Cil que contient en soy divinement
 Toute beauté excellente et parfaicte.
 Ha! (mon Dieu) c'est que je suis trop indigne
 Pour un subject si rare et precieux,
 Joint que je n'ay ceste eloquence insigne,
 Ny ces beaux dons qu'un Poete ha des cieux,
 Pour louer telle perfection,
 Selon mon coeur et mon affection.⁵⁸

Here Anne de Marquetz draws specific comparison between her work and an established (male) canon of secular verse, much in the same way as Pernette Du Guillet does when she contrasts her work with that of Scève.⁵⁹ Of course, her attempts at self-effacement are used to draw attention to the fact that she is working within different parameters to these poets, and to persuade her readership that however amenable a secular subject is to eloquent description, the same cannot be said of God. Thus, though her deference, if we compare it to that of Pernette, may be thought to be a product of her femaleness, it is, of course, impossible to establish whether her hesitancy is attributable to her sex or to her subject-matter.

Similarly, Marguerite, in an early work, taps sanctioned sources, well-used by male writers, when she humbles herself to the point of execrating her own text, which scarcely represents the God she seeks:

Moy doncques ver de terre moins que rien
 Chienne morte pourriture de fiens
 Cesser doy bien, parler de l'altitude
 De ceste amour: mais trop d'ingratitude

Seroit en moy, si n'eusse riens escript,
Satisfaisant à trop meilleur Esprit.⁶⁰

Robert Cottrell, in an article discussing 'The Poetics of Transparency in Evangelical Discourse', describes how Lefèvre d'Étaples, heavily influenced by Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius and the medieval mystics as well as the Christian Neoplatonism of Ficino, 'distinguished between secular and Christian eloquence'.⁶¹ He and other Evangelicals 'tended [...] to equate the plain, clear style with the theological virtue of humility, the effacement of Self and of human pride before the divine Logos.'⁶² Marguerite's interest in Lefèvre's writings and her desire to annihilate her earthly self reflected in her poetry, as in the example above, is testimony to his influence. Can we then speak of the simplicity she craves and reproduces in her work as a specifically female attribute? The male Amy who speaks authoritatively in *Les Prisons* declares simplicity to be at the heart of all writing about God, praising those 'Qui prennent Dieu pour la force et la lyme | De leur sçavoir et leur simple parler'.⁶³ As in the case of Anne de Marquetz, therefore, it is difficult to disentangle textual methodology from words and themes arising from female sexual difference.

It may be of greater significance, then, to examine the ideology Marguerite expresses in the light of her social status, if we are to define its femaleness. It is noticeable that she does not equate herself with the self-confidence and pride which the secular world would

apportion to her rank, and in her self-deprecation appears to align her life with that of the spiritually minded ascetic, rather than with that of the nobleman certain of his election to virtuous deeds. In other words, Marguerite suppresses the self-assured model of the virago commonly bestowed upon royal women whose educational background far exceeded the norms for their sex, and asserts instead the traditional feminine virtues of piety, humility and chastity. Her deliberate simplicity of language, in contrast with the 'rhetoric' of the secular court which erroneously tempts the Amy in *Les Prisons*, can thus be said to be a feature of her femaleness inasmuch as it accords with those aforementioned feminine virtues. She is fond of familiar formulae as vessels for her message, as in the *Chansons spirituelles*, where she re-writes popular songs with devotional lyrics, alternating scriptural quotations with a discourse of love taken from the Neoplatonic tradition and with contemporary turns of phrase. This mixture of styles creates an impression of spontaneity which eludes logical analysis and acts as an anti-rhetorical device which seeks to persuade the reader of the simple truths behind the text.⁶⁴ It involves effacement of the self and of the written word before the ineffable goodness of God, which is Marguerite's only incentive to write.

At its most intensely spiritual, in the *Chansons spirituelles* and *Les Prisons*, Marguerite's writing shows instinctive efforts to transcend ratiocinative structures

altogether;⁶⁵ like the Ravie in *Mont de Marsan*, her soul moves beyond the discursive medium of speech at these moments to sing of the elation it finds in communion with God.⁶⁶ Cottrell has shown, in a study of the first *Chanson spirituelle*, how Marguerite follows a complaint about the limitations of language with references to her soul's sighing and sobbing, and concludes: 'Marguerite asserts that her *chansons* are not linguistic structures at all. They rely not on the artificial code of language and textuality but on the natural code of tears, sighs and sobs. Weeping is the non-linguistic discourse of the heart.'⁶⁷ In the same way, repeated allusions to 'natural' family relationships infuse Marguerite's descriptions of the soul's relationship with God, as in *Chanson 34*, when she recreates herself as sister, mother, daughter, lover in response to His forgiving love.⁶⁸ Here it is not merely the soul, feminine in French, who finds her/itself accepted, but the female persona behind it, in a deeply personal way. The art of writing itself disappears behind the almost tangible sensual satisfaction of spiritual union, where Marguerite, divested of the apparels of textual virtuosity, can reach out through her poetry towards the inexpressible security of God.

The disunity of secular and sacred

Like Ronsard, Marguerite is an acute observer of the flaws and inadequacies of the social environment in which she moves, albeit from rather different motives than his. She,

too, is concerned with the artifice of the Perfect Love discourse and of the fêtes and tournaments which embellished them; she, too, is aware of the power of appearance and of the court's tendency towards dissimulation. The journey of the Amy in *Les Prisons* is thus beset by dilemmas generated by his social milieu, which fools him at every turn into believing his life is complete. Firstly, it is love which bewitches the Amy, then avarice and hypocrisy overcome him, and finally the temptations of knowledge cause him to stumble before he realizes the source of his error. A discovery of the true nature of love is central to his rehabilitation: misplaced desire not only causes him to end his relationship with his lover, but destroys his ability to participate meaningfully in his social environment and destroys a proper appreciation of human intellect and achievement. Divine love, made known to the Amy in book three, reveals the radical alternatives to these secular failings, and gives him the possibility of restoring his human relationships in accordance with the divine intention; this, according to Marguerite's theology, is the only means by which worldly rituals and traditions can be redeemed.

Thus in book one the Amy's misplaced desire for his lover has encouraged him erroneously to retreat from the world; like those that Circe has ensnared, he has wandered into a false earthly paradise which seems to offer the means for his salvation:

[...] mon oeil, mon oreille et mon cueur
 Ceste prison ne toute sa rigueur
 N'estimerent tant que je fiz jadis,
 Fors ung plaisant terrestre paradis.
 Ouyr et veoir fut mon salut, ma vie,
 [Ma passion] en qui estoit ravie
 [Ma liberté], jusques à ne sentir
 Le mal duquel j'estoys tousjours martir.
 Et ce mal là, dedans le cueur planté,
 M'estoit pour lors souveraine santé.⁶⁹

Significantly, l'Amy refuses to allow daylight into his prison, believing the light of his love to be sustenance enough for his spiritual and emotional needs. Thereby he sows the seeds of his own destruction, for darkness has blinded him to the truth, a fact eventually revealed to him by the sudden intervention of God, whose coming 'ne fut jamais à ma requeste' and proves to him that his beloved, like Circe, took pleasure in capturing his soul, and, in his absence, sets traps for other willing victims:

Lors, contre ma coustume,
 J'entray au lieu et grand et spacieux
 Où je vous viz, m'Amye, de mes yeulx,
 Des vostres faire, à moy non, mais ailleurs,⁷⁰
 Les tours que j'ay de vous tenuz meilleurs.

The truth, the Amy now believes, is that Perfect Love itself is fed by pretence and deception:

Car bien celer - quelque cas qu'il advienne,
 Ou quelque mal que ung vray amant soustienne -
 C'est le seul poinct qui faict entretenir
 Parfaicte amour.⁷¹

This negative experience propels him into the world, determined never again to be sequestered by love. Instead he throws his desire into the public arena and turns his

attention to the task of acquiring pleasure and renown by adopting the lifestyle of the libertine courtier:

Tant que l'amour dura, chaste je fuz,
De tous plaisirs vilains faisant refuz,
Pour ressembler à ung qui comme ung ange
[Ne se tenoit] de la mortelle fange.
Las! ceste amour tant pure estoit durable
Si vostre cueur n'eust esté variable;
Variable est, parquoy je varieray.
Mais toutesfoys je ne me marieray
Ny ne seray jamais lyé de femme,
Soit pour espouse, ou pour maistresse ou dame;
Mais je useray de toutes à loysir,
Sans nul travail, pour y prendre plaisir.⁷²

This pleasure is to be achieved through certain prescribed social rituals: chivalry and arms and the finer arts of dance and music at the fêtes which functioned as an elaborate backdrop for courtship and sensual gratification:

J'entray au lieu où ung tresgrand festin
L'on prepara, [...]
Masques, mommons, farces et comedies
Entrent lors, dont furent estourdies,
Tant de haulx boys que du bruyt, mes aureilles,
D'ouyr ainsi musiques non pareilles.
Mais le plus beau qui fust en ce teatre
C'estoit de veoir, [non] ymaige de plastre,
Mais des dames vives la compaignye,
De grans beaultez et de vertuz garnye.⁷³

Eventually the Amy becomes so consumed by passion that he is motivated not by beauty but by lust:

Car sans amour, ny nulle election,
Puys çà, puys là, suyvant la passion,
L'aveugle fol, qui telle vie meyne,
Dit la plus layde estre la belle Helayne.⁷⁴

He has succumbed entirely to the hypocrisy of the court, painted here in the blackest of terms by Marguerite;

the Amy, once guilty only of loving excessively, has become trapped in a ritual of servility and ambition which, for a time, corrupts him completely. It is clear at this point that Marguerite does not espouse the popular view of Perfect Love as a stepping stone to transcendence;⁷⁵ for her, the soul, however chaste, is pinned too thoroughly to the flesh unless it has been wholly redeemed by grace, and even then it is apt to fall again into a state of corporeal misery. Love of God must precede true love of man, Marguerite contends, or it is ill-founded and, like the first love of the Amy, liable to collapse. Anne de Marquetz, too, meditates on the dichotomy between flesh and spirit which renders unchaste any other love but that of the soul for God:

Pourroit-il estre une plus vive flamme,
 Plus sainte et chaste et plus proche des cieux,
 Que celle la qui d'un feu gracieux
 Brusle mon coeur, et embrase mon ame?
 Mais cest' amour qui tellement m'enflamme,
 N'est cestuy-là qui se bande les yeux:
 Car il est doux, l'autre est malgracieux:
 Il est honneste, et l'autre est trop infame.⁷⁶

There is no mention, in Anne's sonnets, of a mitigating human love which espouses divine virtue, no Anteros to combat the irrational flames of passionate desire. Both she and Marguerite undercut completely the mood of anthropocentric optimism supporting the social virtues of the court, seeming often to dwell unduly heavily upon its vices, and to advocate an extreme ascetic lifestyle in their place:

Pour estre bien vray Chrestien
 Il fault à Christ estre semblable,
 Renoncer tout bien terrien
 Et tout honneur qui est damnable,
 Et la Dame belle et jolye,
 Et plaisir qui la chair esmeult;
 Laisser biens, honneurs et amye:
 Il ne fait pas le tour qui veult.⁷⁷

The rejection of a socially chaste discourse of love in favour of a spiritually chaste one has its roots in a Christocentric theology which denies human nature any intrinsic righteousness. Marguerite particularly espouses such a theology in her later works, where she approaches 'the Protestant conception of justification as [...] alien.'⁷⁸ As far as she is concerned, therefore, the body cannot be said to house the energy and capacity for perfection often imputed to it by humanist thinkers: it is corrupt until grace intervenes to redeem it. Marguerite's sole ground for optimism is the possibility that grace may penetrate the sinner's heart and lead him/her to fulfilment in the world. This is the message she would bring to those whose power lies firmly in the temporal sphere: male figures, largely, who, perhaps, are less likely to perceive the vanity of their actions than women marginalized from political activity. Thus Wisdom, the 'femme heureuse et sage' persuades the hunter of *Chanson 6* who, transformed by the faith she has encouraged him to find, speaks out in turn to warn 'Empereurs, Roys, Princes, Seigneurs' that 'vostre plaisir n'est que vent; | Laissez comme moy ce malheur'.⁷⁹

Grace as Marguerite perceives it is a dynamic and powerful tool by which God, through Christ, can justify the sinner and every aspect of his/her life. With this fact in mind, on rare occasions, she does admit that human Perfect Love, whilst remaining a lesser love than that of God for the soul, may yet reflect the intentions of the divine maker. Thus in one of her final works, *La Distinction du vray amour*, Marguerite seeks to explore the possibility for a Christocentric relationship beyond that of the individual soul and God, between two individuals engaged in a mutually beneficial journey towards Christ in each other. This God-centred human affection is represented in terms of Cupid redeemed: divested of his wings and arrows, he has become the innocent face of love, childlike, naked and pure.⁸⁰ He, by grace transformed, can rescue from death the human body, which of itself 'vist trop bestiallement', and render it 'vray homme'. Under these circumstances, contends the female beloved, articulator of divine wisdom throughout the poem, love of another need not be based upon sexual desire, but upon love of God, and she endeavours to convince her unbelieving suitor that her love of him is motivated by the divine spark she finds within him:

Si j'ayme Amour, qui est ce que vous estes,
 Et sans lequel vous estes pis que rien,
 Qui vous separe et difere des bestes,
 Est ce le tort si grand que je vous tiens?
 J'ayme Celluy où consistent tous biens,
 Et n'ayme point le corps du corps visible,
 Qui sans amour n'est que chair insensible.⁸¹

Her love may seem demanding ('Vous l'appellez cruel [amour], et moy aussi: | S'il est cruel, certes je le veux estre, | Car je ne veux avoir autre soucy, | [...] que de suivre ung tel maistre'),⁸² but it is free from shame, and is indeed liberating for those who willingly accept its challenge, since it alone can restore fallen relationships to a state of righteousness in the here and now:

Pere n'y a, amy, frere ny seur,
 Qui sans Amour se peult tel renommer;
 Mais quant Amour vient leurs cueurs alumer
 De son doulx feu, rend les parens amis,
 Dont plusieurs ont leur vie et leur corps mis
 Pour louer amis remplis de cest Amour.⁸³

The beloved refuses her suitor's offers of service until she can be sure that the higher love she seeks will not compete with Cupid in him:

Vous et Amour l'un l'autre ne ressemble.
 Vous estes deux, et prendre n'en veulx qu'un,
 Mais quant tous deux serez venuz ensemble,
 Ung seul vouloir sera mis en commun.⁸⁴

Finally, by her prompting, his eyes are opened to the fact that his corporeally-based self must die in order that divine love might reign within, and that he may possess 'l'amitié naïve' which she already has. The sudden realization that the wisdom of the woman who guides him is no more a facet of her own self than his sinful desire, but grace working within her, equips the suitor with the confidence to embark upon his own journey of faith in her company:

Mais c'est Amour qui eust de vous victoire.
 Pour vous, en luy mesmes à soy me tire,
 Donc son desir, non plus le mien, desire.
 Vaincu je suis de luy et m'y consens,
 Car heureux suis, veu que je puis [vous] dire,
 Qu'en nous deux rien, fors luy, je n'ayme et sens.⁸⁵

A selfless, God-centred love such as this renders Cupid redeemed an aspect of Christ himself, which is perhaps why the Amy of *Les Prisons* relates the details of his divine discovery to the beloved he had rejected at the end of the first book, in the hope that, as a result of their initial affection, she might grow to discover the Perfect Love of God.⁸⁶ After all, as the Amy admitted, his love for his beloved, though flawed by idolatry, was chaste at that time: such a relationship, if aided by grace, had the potential to flourish. It seems, in short, that where grace abounds the Cupid of the old order can be reborn as Christ the lover in the new.⁸⁷ Furthermore, those who have understood the real impact of Perfect Love through grace are enabled to bridge the gap between the secular and the sacred when they articulate its discourse, for here chaste lovers can be as Christ to each other, a manifestation of God in the world,⁸⁸ while Christ himself, at a higher level, is also the chaste lover of every individual saved soul. This certainty can give renewed vigour to the mystical ascent of the soul, which is now enabled to recount in terms of the Perfect Love union its oneness with God, having experienced the full significance of that union in a justified human relationship.⁸⁹

The Utopian Union of the Soul and God

Despite the possibility of retrieving Christ through relationships in the world, Marguerite de Navarre and Anne de Marquetz are more attracted to the mystic and ascetic contemplation of the soul's perfect union with God. Such contemplation, as we have previously noted, commonly takes the form of meditation upon the theme of love, in which God the sublime Perfect Lover calls the willing soul to himself in a gesture of acceptance and even of desire. This last point is important, for the desire for union embodied in the mystic discourse is a two-way process, just as it is in a justified Perfect Love relationship in the world. As the soul reaches out for consummation of love with her heavenly husband ('Qui me donnera des aisles pour voler | Plus vistement que tout oiseau de proie, | Afin que j'aïlle au lieu d'heur et de joye | Mon doux espoux saintement accoller?',⁹⁰), so God longs for the souls of the faithful to yield to him in marriage:

Venez, embrassez moy, mon troupeau, mon Eglise,
 Mes Esluz humbles et doux, desquelz fais à ma guise,
 Car vous, uniz en moy, estes la mesme chouse;
 Je seray vostre Espoux, vous tout un, mon Espouse:
 Venez au vray repos où sera endormie
 Entre mes bras toujours mon Espouse et amye.⁹¹

For both writers, this sanctioned vocabulary of desire seems to take on a particularly personal dimension because of their femaleness. Not only does the image of the feminine soul, and, for that matter, the masculine lover-

God, suggest a relationship which engages female sexuality in a particularly meaningful way, but the vocabulary of mysticism itself bypasses dogmatic expressions of faith and its public practice (carried out by a male priest), concentrating instead upon an internal, spiritual honing of the relationship between the soul and God, not unlike the task of perfecting spiritual virtue which the noblewoman in any Perfect Love couple would be required to carry out.

At the same time, however, this heavenly form of Perfect Love reveals itself to be more liberating than its earthly counterpart for the female soul, since she is able to vocalize her desire for union in a passionate, unfettered way, unhindered by worldly considerations of honour and propriety. Christ the noble *chevallier* tempts her more potently than any earthly lover,⁹² but she is able to submit without resistance; indeed, her virtue will be enhanced by her yielding, and the joy of this possibility is immediately evident:

Seigneur, quand viendra le jour
 Tant désiré,
 Que je seray par amour
 A vous tiré,
 Et que l'union sera
 Telle entre nous
 Que l'espouse on nommera
 Comme l'espoux? [...]

Si de vostre bouche puy
 Estre baisé,
 Je seray de tous ennuys
 Bien appaisé:
 Baisez moy, acolez moy,
 Mon Tout en tous.⁹³

That Marguerite also expresses her new-found euphoric state of bliss in terms of other familial images: sister, mother, daughter, as well as that of lover, also seems to denote a sense of domestic well-being and security which, one might speculate, may have been absent from her personal life, and which certainly seem to connect with her female identity and needs.⁹⁴ Similarly, Anne de Marquetz devotes considerable attention to exploring aspects of the life of the Virgin: her sinlessness, which also includes her physical perfection (Anne describes her as 'une creature | Excellente en toute beauté, | Comme un chef d'oeuvre de nature'), her humility and her chaste motherhood, which she depicts in particularly ebullient terms:

O la joye immortelle
 Que la vierge eut alors
 Qu'elle sceut la nouvelle
 Qu'en son treschaste corps
 Se vouloit faire humain
 Le haut Dieu souverain.⁹⁵

Anne and Marguerite's obvious predilection for images and symbols from their religious heritage which reflect aspects of their own cultural and personal experiences as women is not surprising in one sense, since they are both writing intensely personal verse. Precisely this honest and open response to their environment surprises at another level, however, inasmuch as their poetry undercuts the well-established, optimistic assessment of humankind's spiritual status provided by the majority of poets working in and around the court. It is, of course, part of the nature of religious writing that authors should eschew the

values the world around them holds dear, and Marguerite and Anne are not alone in their condemnation of sinful society. As highly articulate women of noble birth, however, who to a greater or lesser extent interacted with the court community, their work provides an interesting counterpoint to that of many male court poets, not simply because of their gender, but because they question the ultimate significance of the structures and discourses within which those poets worked.

TRIUMPHS OF THE ICON? DIANE DE POITIERS ET MARGUERITE DE VALOIS

Given the extent of the dissimulation which accompanied the discourse of Perfect Love at the French court, and the fact that chastity came increasingly to be seen as a social virtue of proper self-management within this environment, it is not startling to find women praised for this virtue irrespective of their private behaviour. However, even the most cynical and hedonistic of court observers were wont to insist upon the necessity for discretion for women in this domain, and many were also fervent in their support of consummate chastity within marriage for royal women whose reputations, by dint of their public roles, were considerably more open to scrutiny.⁹⁶ Diane de Poitiers and Marguerite de Valois defied both these dictates inasmuch as their deviant sexual conduct was paraded in the public

arena, and yet these women were the subjects of iconographic treatment, much of which was centred around images of chastity and honour the court knew to be literally untrue.

The chastity icon has shown itself to be almost infinitely malleable in the hands of poets, thinkers and artists, and certainly the political circumstances of both women encouraged the production of eulogizing texts in which a vocabulary of transcendent chastity was serviceable as a form of flattery. However, it seems to me that the portrayal of these women as chaste is, on occasion, more than a sycophantic gesture on the part of writers, and signifies a specific social and political role. Unlike other prominent contemporary female royal figures, Diane de Poitiers and Marguerite de Valois cannot be depicted as sexually pure, and any references to their chastity must therefore be coloured by the suggestion of desire and desirability. As we have seen in the example of the court fêtes, these features need not necessarily be seen as negative attributes, since desire could be harnessed as a means of channelling divine energy provided that it was directed rationally.⁹⁷ Thus, rather than endorse rigorous models of chastity as Catherine de Medici, Marguerite de Navarre, Marguerite de Savoie, Louise de Lorraine and Marie de Medici did, Diane de Poitiers and Marguerite de Valois model themselves, and are modelled according to the example of the female beloved in the Perfect Love union. This allows them to be celebrated for their sensuality, physical

beauty and desirability, virtues which suggest dynamic transcendent properties according to the Perfect Love code. In his *Ode* to Diane de Poitiers, Ronsard juxtaposes a eulogy of Diane's desirability with praise of her chastity, asserting:

Qu'el' passeroit en chasteté Lucesse,
Et en beauté cette Helene de Grece,
Qu'elle prendroit d'un seul trait de ses yeus,
Les coeurs ravis des hommes et des Dieus.⁹⁸

Similarly, in his representation of the young Marguerite de Valois as *La Charite*, Ronsard presents the princess as a rival to Venus, whose beautiful lips produce 'ris et [...] parolles | Fortes assez pour les hommes charmer', while her modesty remains safely guarded by 'Honneur et Chasteté'.⁹⁹

Of course, these oxymoronic images of chastity and desire are a familiar feature of the Perfect Love discourse, where the physical properties of the beloved combine with her virtue to mediate between the supernatural and terrestrial worlds for the benefit of an initiated male suitor.¹⁰⁰ In the case of Diane de Poitiers, the king himself is the recipient of these gifts, a fact which renders Diane's relationship with him divinely-inspired in the eyes of some observers. Du Bellay, for example, declares:

La garde des provinces
Est en la main des Dieux,
Et l'image des Princes
Est peincte dans les cieux:
Dieu tourne à son plaisir
Les Rois et leur desir. [...]

Heureux est celuy donques
 Qui en peult approcher,
 Et plus heureux quiconques
 Leur est aymable et cher.
 Les cieux, dés qu'il fut né,
 Cest heur luy ont donné. [...]

La vertueuse grace,
 Et l'honneur plus qu'humain
 Escript sur vostre face
 D'une divine main,
 De ce Roy tant exquis
 Le coeur vous ont acquis.¹⁰¹

It is this royal licence which gives Diana and her supporters leave to exploit the numerous facets of the Perfect Love beloved to the full: Diane's iconography incorporates a triptych of images portraying her variously as Minerva/wisdom, Venus/love and Diana/chastity. The mythological versatility of the Diana goddess icon aids in the production of this composite figure,¹⁰² which neatly assimilates sensuality and moral purity, as Françoise Bardon has noted in her seminal study of the royal favourite:

Celle-ci est unique; après le siècle de Diane de Poitiers, on ne retrouvera pas la trinité Diane, Vénus, Minerve que la dame d'Anet a si magistralement incarnée. [...] Diane de Poitiers marque l'instant où, en France, les subtilités et les complications mythographiques coexistent avec les prestiges d'une gloire toute mythologique. [...] Ainsi s'explique qu'au temps de Diane de Poitiers le thème de Diane soit le thème allégorique par excellence: il groupe trois entités fondamentales: la chasteté, l'amour et la sagesse.¹⁰³

Bardon is one amongst many critics who have observed that the mythological associations of Diane's goddess-namesake were intended to set her apart from the rank and file of

royal mistresses;¹⁰⁴ indeed, she succeeded in this aim to such an extent that some observers would insist upon her consummate chastity.¹⁰⁵

While Marguerite de Valois was far from being able to claim any royal endorsement for her sensual reputation, she was celebrated amongst her supporters for a similar range of virtues: she was, as we shall see, much fêted as a woman of letters, and her affirmation of a Neoplatonist approach to matters of love was as well-known as her reputation for sexual misdemeanour. Many of those who sought to praise her, therefore, made efforts to conjoin her physical and spiritual natures. Jaques Corbin's panegyric of the Queen, published in 1605 in honour of her return to Paris, turns Marguerite's reputation for sensuality to his (and her) advantage, as Marie-Madelaine Fragonard observes in an article on the work, by situating Marguerite's beauty above that of various beauties of antiquity, including Cleopatra, who were actually icons of sensuality.¹⁰⁶ Marguerite is more sensually alluring than these, but as chaste as she is desirable: Marguerite 'les surpasse toutes en beauté, et qui d'ailleurs à plus qu'elles ceste belle vertu de chasteté et de pudicité qui la faict reluire comme un Soleil entre des Estoilles.'¹⁰⁷ Her physical qualities, Corbin is proud to declare, would bewitch not only 'les princes plus vaillans' but angels as well, were they able to feel desire, and he insists upon the error of those who would separate body from soul when, in the case of Marguerite, one enhances the other: 'Quel est celuy qui

voudra blasmer la beauté du corps, pour reduire toute la beauté à la seule ame! qu'il regarde donc que l'ame est la beauté du corps comme le corps est la maison de l'ame'.¹⁰⁸

The icon of chastity as it was applied to Diane de Poitiers and Marguerite de Valois is often vastly different to that virtue which testified to the purity of other leading women, for whom beauty and desirability were simply figurative symbols of transcendent qualities, rather than dynamic tools employed to preserve their status as female beloved. Both Marguerite and Diane, it is certain, were skilful manipulators of the Perfect Love vocabulary, and used it in order to strengthen and protect their own positions within their relationships and in the socio-political climate in which they moved.

Manipulation of the Perfect Love discourse

Diane de Poitiers was eager to adopt the mystical qualities attributable to the chaste beloved as her own for the sake of her reputation, as well as to enhance the standing of Henri. It is said that she consented to make him her lover whilst he was still the dauphin in order to strengthen his somewhat weak position at court, and was the controlling force in the relationship that followed.¹⁰⁹ She was aware of his enthusiasm for chivalry and encouraged this: he sported her black and white colours in tournaments until his death. Furthermore, the Amadis-style discourse which Diane appropriated for her relationship with the king

constituted an icon of chivalrous respectability which was useful to both of them. Du Bellay, speaking through Diane de Poitiers in a poem dedicated to the favourite, emphasizes the chaste nature of the love she bestows upon the monarch, which is 'tout bon' and 'tout beau', not 'aveugle et volage'. In another poem, he celebrates her abilities to nurture so many virtues in Henri, who is 'le plus chevalereux, | Le plus sage et le plus heureux' as well as 'constant' in her company.¹¹⁰

Marguerite de Valois was as aware as Diane de Poitiers of the need to generate a public image of propriety in her relationships. To this end, she actively encouraged the public reception of the discourse of *amour honneste* at the court in Nérac, where, according to Sully, she was responsible for replacing bellicose attitudes with an enthusiasm for love and the civilizing behaviour that accompanied it: "'On n'oyoit plus parler d'armes; mais seulement de dames et d'amours. Nous devînmes [...] tout à fait courtisans et faisant l'amoureux comme les autres, ne nous amusans tous à autre chose qu'à rire, danser et courir la bague"'.¹¹¹

Marguerite herself, in her *Mémoires*, is proud to recall that at that time (1579-1582) "'nostre cour estoit belle et si plaisante, que nous n'envions point celle de France"'.¹¹² According to d'Aubigné, who was later to take issue with the immorality which he believed to be latent in Marguerite's theories of love at court, the Queen sought to

render the processes of courtship more public, convinced of the potential for the Perfect Love discourse to instil order and *honesteté* into social relations:

Elle apprit au roi son mari qu'un cavalier estoit sans âme quand il estoit sans amour, et l'exercice qu'elle en faisoit n'estoit nullement caché, voulant par là que la publique profession sentist quelque vertu et que le secret fust la marque du vice.¹¹³

She was certainly successful in this area, making use of a strongly Neoplatonic vocabulary in her relationships, as letters to Jacques de Harlay, sieur de Champvallou testify.¹¹⁴ Guy Le Fevre de la Borderie alludes to Marguerite's Neoplatonic persuasions in his acknowledgements prefacing the *Discours sur le banquet de Platon*, one of a number of philosophical treatises presented to her around the time of her rule at Nérac. Here the poet claims the erudite Queen sets an example to all French readers of proper self-management in the art of love, in accordance with the divine will. Marguerite's own preference for the "plus douces et savoureuses viandes de l'ame" will persuade the ignorant to reject "l'Amour vulgaire" in favour of "l'honneste et saint Amour". Furthermore, La Borderie goes on, this is a task ordained by God and nature: "A cela Dieu, la raison, la bonne nature et l'Amour mesme vous invite, | Par l'Amant, l'Aymé, l'Amour mesme | Qui est le Dieu unique en trois".¹¹⁵

It seems the Queen was a remarkably charismatic influence on the poets who courted her company,

particularly at Nérac. An article considering the literary life of this court during Marguerite's reign presents the discovery of a manuscript, corresponding to a work cited in the Queen's library catalogue under the title: *Les Amours de la Reine*, which appears to be her album, into which she copied various works of the prominent poets who served her, as well as several pieces of which she may have been the author.¹¹⁶ The collection makes it plain that Marguerite encouraged her own deification, and was accordingly worshipped under various icons, the most popular of which included the pearl, a play on her name; the sun, a powerful symbol more usually connected with male figures but often associated with Marguerite's eyes; and Pallas or Minerva, a mark of her thirst for learning.¹¹⁷ Her efforts to transform the code of love at Nérac were applauded by poets, according to the album, who sung of the Utopian effects of her Neoplatonic discourse:

Et vous qui avez sceu par voz louables faicts
Oster à Mars sa rage et ses guerres mutines
Serés à l'advenir nommée dans noz himnes
La deesse d'amour, de concorde et de paix.¹¹⁸

Other poets willingly engaged themselves in support of Marguerite's illicit extra-marital relationships, several speaking on behalf of the Queen or of her lovers in their verse. Desporte's *Les Amours d'Hippolyte*, for example, is likely to have been written to reflect Bussy d'Amboise's love for Marguerite, and certain sonnets speak intimately of their relationship.¹¹⁹ Eugénie Droz also cites the appearance in the album of Guy du Faur de

Pibrac's *Dialogue de Flore et de Lysis*, written to comfort the Queen following the untimely death of Bussy.

Jacqueline Boucher believes Marguerite's attempts to cultivate an aura of civilized respectability about her own illicit relationships indicate her awareness of the social necessity to preserve a facade of chastity.¹²⁰ The Queen does not, for example, make any specific reference to her love affairs in her *Mémoires*, though there is a fairly detailed account of the circumstances under which she came to frequent the company of Bussy d'Amboise which points to her fondness for him.¹²¹ Moreover, the *Mémoires* end in 1582, and thus avoid consideration of her later relationship with Champvallon, which was likely to have been common knowledge at court.

Marguerite, Boucher claims, naïvely assumed that by denying any impropriety in her liaisons her reputation would remain intact, and erroneously supposed that because of her superiority of rank within her marriage, she could behave as irresponsibly as her husband without attracting criticism.¹²² Clearly this was not so, and though throughout her life her adamant endorsement of Neoplatonic ideology had a broad intellectual and social impact, it failed to convince the court that the Queen of Navarre was truly honourable in that aspect of female social mores that overwhelmed all others: her chastity. In short, her royal status could not legitimize the deviant relationships she enjoyed as her father had succeeded in legitimizing

publicly his own illicit liaison with the Duchesse de Valentinois.

Political influence and royal patronage

The myth of Diane de Poitiers's chastity promulgated by artists and writers extended to the appropriation of her icon as a symbol of political stability and rational judgement, when the French court took account of the tremendous power to influence the monarch which she wielded. Olivier de Magny makes plain the impact of Diane's reign in an *Ode* written in honour of the royal favourite, in which he attributes her authority to her remarkable wisdom:

Du tyge de noz Rois, Dame, vous descendez,
 Vous obtenez des Roys ce que vous demandez,
 Vous estes riche ayant la ducale coronne
 Qui d'un reply d'honneur vostre chef environne, [...]

Des faveurs qu'à bon droit du Roy vous recevez,
 User non abuser doucement vous scavez,
 Et bien que ses faveurs à vous seule il adresse,
 Si les départez vous d'une meure sagesse
 A mil et mil encore.¹²³

Naturally, the possibility of achieving royal patronage was a highly influential factor in the generation of the largely flattering iconography lavished upon Diane by numerous court poets and artists. To this end, she was also associated with Minerva and, more commonly, with the lunar sister of Apollo. Poets often jostled these allusions with flattering references to Anet, itself a metonymy of her power of influence over the King, in the hope of attracting

her loyalty; Ronsard admits as much in a sonnet frankly courting Diane's support:

Seray-je seul vivant en France de vostre age,
 Sans chanter vostre nom si craint et si puissant?
 Diray-je point l'honneur de vostre beau Croissant?
 Feray-je point pour vous quelque'immortel ouvrage?
 Ne rendra point Anet quelque beau tesmoignage
 Qu'autrefois j'ay vescu en vous obeyssant?¹²⁴

Similarly, Du Bellay alternates praise for Diane de Poitiers's virtue with allusions to her mythical association with the Muses: she is firstly the political darling of 'La bienheureuse France' and subsequently the 'fille de Latonne' who shines over 'les soeurs Parnassiennes' with a 'chaste lumiere' as 'Soeur de l'autre flambeau | Du monde le plus beau.'¹²⁵

Diane, thus, is sometimes, like the moon goddess, a speculum of the King's light for poets, who see her wisdom ultimately deriving from his divine source, whilst at others she is the controlling force with a unique influence over the monarch. It is, of course, impossible to separate her brilliant guidance and support of Henri from her authentication by him, and for this reason it is usual to see her presented iconographically in relation to him or to the realm.¹²⁶ The political influence of Marguerite de Valois was rather more ambivalent, since her devotion to her husband and to protestantism were often believed to be uncertain, while her allegiance to the crown was also questioned because of her union with Henri de Navarre. Estranged for significant portions of her life from the

throne of France, she failed, often, to be taken as seriously as she would have liked in the political sphere, and yet her reign at Nérac was founded upon an intellectually-stimulating basis which aroused the enthusiasm and support of poets and thinkers.

From the time of her marriage and especially during the subsequent move to Nérac in 1578, Marguerite's popularity amongst poets is closely bound up with her emerging role as patron of the arts. She was celebrated under the name of Uranie, muse and protector of virtuous love, from the earliest period of her marriage: Du Bartas' *L'Uranie* or *Muse celeste*, dating from 1574 and forming part of the *Muse chrestienne* dedicated to the Queen, describes the muse/Marguerite as 'quinte-essence de l'ame' who 'fai que le Poete | Se surmontant soi-mesme, enfonce un haut discours, | Qui divin, par l'oreille attire les plus sours'.¹²⁷ Marguerite assumes the dual persona of chaste Venus/Minerva in the eyes of supporting writers; depictions of her legendary beauty are often juxtaposed with references to her intellect. Brantôme begins his later eulogy of the Queen with numerous allusions to her superlative physical charms, so enchanting 'qu'on la prendra tousjours pour une déesse du ciel, plus que pour une princesse de la terre', before proceeding to recount details of the 'belle ame, qui est si bien logée en si beau corps'. Her enjoyment of 'lettres' and 'la lecture' render her, in his opinion, 'la princesse, voire la dame qui soit au monde la plus eloquente et la mieux disante, qui a le

plus bel air de parler, et le plus agréable qu'on sçauroit voir.'¹²⁸

During the course of her life, Marguerite asserted an intellectual independence from her husband, surrounding herself with prominent Neoplatonist thinkers with whom she could discourse and debate, and demanding the same intellectual commitment of the writers who served her.¹²⁹ The period from 1586-1594, during which the Queen was imprisoned at Usson, was a particularly rich era of intellectual advancement; according to Brantôme, she read extensively and diversely at this time.¹³⁰ Marguerite strengthened her reputation as Minerva by her determination to create a kind of philosophical academy at Usson; to this end she invited musicians, philosophers and clerics to her court, was taught by them and invited publication under her jurisdiction. Both philosophical works, such as Scipion Du Pleix's *Corps de philosophie*, and theological ones, including Antoine La Pujade's *Oeuvres chrestiennes*, were a product of this period. Aside from a genuine devotion to learning, this culturally rich environment was unquestionably also a political symbol of Marguerite's continuing contribution to the Valois heritage despite her exile, and a means of securing a reputation for virtue which had been damaged by sexual misdemeanour in the past.¹³¹

Marguerite's role as Minerva/Pallas was instrumental in securing her a position of respect within the French court

when she returned to Paris in 1605 following her divorce from Henri IV. This, and the fact that she was now the only surviving heir of the Valois dynasty, jointly assured her the praise of writers reflecting upon her official entrance into the city and upon her amicable reception by the King and his wife, Marie de Medici. Garnier, for example, refers to her as 'la sage, docte et belle MARGUERITE, Le fleuron des VALOIS' in *La Reception de la Reyne Marguerite par leurs Majestez*. He goes on to compare the trinity of royal figures present to gods and goddesses of the Olympiad; Henri rivals Jupiter, Marie Juno, and Marguerite Pallas, a combination which inspires Apollo and is sure to stimulate the pens of poets at court.¹³² Jaques Corbin calls upon Paris to rejoice at the return of this 'si grande Minerve', who brings to the city arts, sciences and the virtue of liberality, and who thereby banishes ignorance and sedition: 'faisons de nouveaux festons pour l'heureux retour, pour l'heureuse venuë de nostre Royne Marguerite, qui rameine en France les Arts, les Sciences, les Vertus.'¹³³ He, like Garnier, also ascribes France's new-found strength to the trinitarian union of the Valois and Bourbon dynasties in an interesting image which reflects Marguerite's intellectual and social independence: France, he declares, is now so great that it is ruled by 'trois Soleils et la Lune encores du grand Soleil'. He goes on to list these as:

Le soleil de vaillance, le grand Mars de
 proüesse qui est conjoint avec la Diane, la plus
 chaste de la terre: Le Soleil de beauté, le Soleil

de vertu, vous ma tres-honorée Princesse; et
encores ce jeune Soleil Levant, mon Dauphin.¹³⁴

While Marie, as Diana, reflects the magnificence of the king, Marguerite, according to Corbin, personifies the traditionally male image of the sun, and stands alongside Henri and the Dauphin rather than in their shadow. Her capacity to achieve this independent recognition derived from her intellectual and political capabilities, which were able to distinguish themselves from the moral ambivalence of her private relationships. In the years preceding her return to the capital, Marguerite had skilfully negotiated the financial support of the crown to live independently, and effectively to create a court of her own. By agreeing to leave her legacy to the dauphin, she had assured the king and the French court of her devotion to the Bourbon dynasty, whilst at the same time implicating herself in the political future of France.¹³⁵ Having secured a legitimate position and role in Paris, Marguerite sought to resume the tradition of patronage of the arts for which her family was famed, and which the Louvre no longer undertook on such a scale.¹³⁶ This was a political gesture as much as an intellectual one, but motivated by genuine interest in literature, architecture, philosophy and theology which earned the respect of the court and perhaps encouraged greater tolerance of the love affairs she continued to pursue with younger men (though by all accounts these were conducted with more sagacity than in former times.)¹³⁷

More than any other woman of her time, Marguerite incarnated publicly an oxymoronic icon of simultaneous chastity and passionate excess. Following her installation into the hôtel de Sens, she went on to establish a court along the lines of that at Nérac, where love, philosophy, music and poetry were the order of the day, and swiftly won for herself the title 'Vénus-Uranie'.¹³⁸ Even towards the end of her life, a thirst for knowledge and capacity for ratiocination regarded as an ethereal attribute, and by which she became intellectually chaste, jostled with desire and desirability rooted in her corporeality, a feature depicted in the Diana/Venus metaphor of the Perfect love beloved. She was, perhaps, the natural inheritor of Diane de Poitiers's legacy by her instinctive inclinations to manipulate the Perfect Love discourse publicly for her own ends, but she also succeeded in transcending the social ramifications of the discourse altogether by rendering it a facet of her intellectual pursuits. By this means, she was able to detach herself from associations with any male figure and shine in her own element as an endorser of eternal, intellectual truths.

The extreme popularity of the chastity icon at court highlighted in chapters four and five, and the remarkable fluidity of its application, confirm the extent to which the social discourse of Perfect Love informed the outlook of courtiers, whether they believed it to be a beneficial language or not. Clearly the flexibility of the icon, its

ability to express in a variety of contexts the fundamental anthropocentric optimism which infused the Renaissance sensibility, was a major cause of its prevalence and success. This diversity of meaning behind the chaste code of love was at the same time, however, a significant factor in the icon's ultimate collapse, for, as we have seen, the epithet of chaste virtue had many varied meanings. The discourse of love itself relied for its success upon a massive meeting of minds or collusion of interests amongst courtiers: in order to engender a social harmony, its meaning had to be understood in the same way by lovers and beloveds alike. This indeed is the message of the Bayonne festivities and of the popular literature such as *Amadis de Gaule* which inspired them: these reject the disharmony of beloveds who refuse to respond to the courtship of their worthy lovers and applaud instead the concord of the couples who celebrate ideal love.

The impossibility of this paradigm in the real world of the court is articulated by numerous writers and thinkers, who accordingly reinterpret the code to suit their own requirements and aspirations. Such individual attempts to preserve the reign of reason and chaste control undermine the icon of chastity precisely because they are not uniform and because they presume to question the ideal. As the icon splinters, so it inevitably becomes less cohesive, and immediately the premises of social harmony built around it are under threat.

- 1 See Hagstrum, *Esteem Enlivened by Desire*, p.307.
- 2 See chapter 6, pp.343-350.
- 3 As we have seen, Brantôme makes reference to the violent recriminations which often followed affairs in the *premier discours* of the *Dames galantes* (pp.3-142). In this section he also playfully suggests that most women have affairs, whatever their husbands' character (pp.90-91), and describes how an older husband at court encouraged his wife to find a lover and to have children, since he was old and impotent (pp.97-98). In the *Heptaméron*, meanwhile, Nomerfide remarks that 'le plaisir n'est pas commung ny accoustumé que une femme de [...] grande maison espouse ung gentil homme serviteur par amour.' (p.278).
- 4 See chapter 1, pp.33-35.
- 5 Claude de Taillemont, *Disours des Champs faëz*, p.137.
- 6 As Maxime Gaunt notes in his edition of *La Pastorale amoureuse* and *La Pyrenee*, the latter was influenced by Sanazar's *Arcadia* and, more profoundly, by Montmeyer's *La Diana*, though the work has its own distinguishing features, such as the realism of the characters. See François de Belleforest, *La Pastorale amoureuse, La Pyrenee*, ed. by Maxime Gaume (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 1980), pp.15-16.
- 7 Michel Simonin, *Vivre de sa plume au XVIIe siècle ou la carrière de François de Belleforest* (Geneva: Droz, 1992). See especially the conclusion to this work, pp.223-231.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp.228-229.
- 9 See Maxime Gaume, Introduction to *La Pyrenee*, pp.19-20.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp.136-137.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.168.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp.174-175.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p.281.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p.294.
- 16 N. Brizardus, *Metamorphoses amoris* (Paris: 1556).
- 17 François Habert, *Les Metamorphoses de Cupido, fils de la déesse Cythérée: qui se mua en diverses formes, contenuës en la page suyvante* (Paris: Jacques Kerver,

- 1561), fols 15r-22v.
- 18 Ibid., fols 99r-99v.
- 19 Ibid., See fols 80v-83r, in which Habert does present a pastoral tale because, it is suggested, Cupid also wishes to demonstrate his control over rustic life, where people are less complex.
- 20 Ibid., fol. 6v.
- 21 Ibid., fol. 8r.
- 22 Ibid., fol. 36r.
- 23 Ibid., fol. 94v.
- 24 *La Pyrenée*, p.384.
- 25 Ibid., p.158.
- 26 Ibid., p.261.
- 27 Ibid., p.365.
- 28 Ibid., p.197.
- 29 Ibid., pp.197 & 206.
- 30 Ibid., p.367.
- 31 Ibid., p.368.
- 32 Pierre de Ronsard, *Oeuvres complètes*, XVII, p.275.
- 33 Ibid., p.230. See also sonnet XXV, pp.266-267, on the same theme.
- 34 Ibid., p.195.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid., pp.277-278.
- 37 See Isidore Silver, 'Ronsard's Ethical Thought', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 24 (1962), 88-117 & 339-374 (p.345).
- 38 Ronsard, *Oeuvres complètes*, XVII, pp.266-267.
- 39 Ibid., p.261.
- 40 Ibid., p.285.
- 41 Ibid., p.307.
- 42 Ibid., p.240.

- 43 Ibid., pp.282-283.
- 44 Ibid., pp.242-243.
- 45 See chapter three, pp.161-175.
- 46 Ronsard, *Oeuvres complètes*, XVII, p.241.
- 47 See, for example, *ibid.*, p.227, sonnet XXXIX.
- 48 Ibid., p.207, sonnet XIII, is typical of a large number of sonnets in which Ronsard sets up a contest between reason and love, in which love always is always victorious.
- 49 To this extent, Ronsard contrasts with Scève, who is more concerned with Délie's immortal nature, which he clearly believes exists independently of the text. Dorothy Coleman makes this point clearly in *Maurice Scève: Poet of Love*, where she states that: 'Unlike the Pléiade, who promised to make their loved ones immortal through their own verse, Scève assigns to love itself the power of conferring immortality [...]. In particular he is concerned with the fame of Délie herself and only secondarily with the immortality of their love.' (p.183)
- 50 Ibid., p.251, *Anagramme*. Note that in the 1587 version of the text, line 5 became 'L'honneur, la chasteté, la vertu, la sagesse'.
- 51 Ibid., p.241.
- 52 Ibid., p.205.
- 53 See, for example, *ibid.*, p.234, sonnet XLVII.
- 54 Pierre de Ronsard, *Ode aux Muses, à Venus, aux Graces aux Ninfes, et aux Faunes* in *Oeuvres complètes*, VII, p.108.
- 55 Ronsard, *Oeuvres complètes*, XVII, p.327.
- 56 The sensual love poetry of the Song of Songs, because of its sexually-explicit nature, had generated this kind of allegorical interpretation from as early as the second century. See, on this subject, *The Song of Songs* by A. Brenner, p.14.
- 57 Anne de Marquetz was a nun at Poissy, a convent which had strong connections with the court and a reputation as a centre of learning. Anne de Marquetz' poetry and her devoted approach to study was praised by Ronsard and Dorat (see Madeleine Lazard, *Images littéraires de la femme à la Renaissance* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985), pp.67-68). Much of her poetry was published posthumously, but a translation of *Les Divines Poesies de Marc Antoine*

- Flaminius* appears in 1569 with a selection of verse by Anne herself. Within this work, she includes a dedication to Marguerite de Valois, which suggests that the two had met at Poissy, where Marguerite had encouraged Anne to publish her work. See *Les Divines Poesies de Marc Antoine Flaminius: Avec plusieurs sonnets et cantiques, ou chansons spirituelles pour louer Dieu* (Paris: Nicolas Deniseau, 1569), fol. aii r - fol. aiii v.
- 58 Anne de Marquetz, pp.65-66.
- 59 See chapter 3, p.171.
- 60 Marguerite de Navarre, *Le Miroir de l'ame pecheresse*, pp.212-213.
- 61 Robert D.Cottrell, 'The Poetics of Transparency in Evangelical Discourse: Marot, Briçonnet, Marguerite de Navarre, Héroët', in *Lapidary Inscriptions. Renaissance Essays for Donald Stone*, ed. by Barbara C. Bowen and Jerry C. Nash (Lexington: French Forum, 1991), pp.33-44, (p.35).
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Marguerite de Navarre, *Les Prisons*, ed. by Simone Glasson (Geneva: Droz, 1978), p.176.
- 64 See the introduction to the *Chansons spirituelles* (Geneva: Droz, 1971) by Georges Dottin, pp.XI-XVII, pp.XLIII-LXVI. Dottin concludes that the *Chansons spirituelles* demonstrate 'éloquence qui refuse l'éloquence, style qui refuse le style' (p.LXVI).
- 65 See Robert D. Cottrell, *The Grammar of Silence: A Reading of Marguerite de Navarre's Poetry* (Washington D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), pp.196-197.
- 66 Marguerite de Navarre, *Les Dernières Poésies*, ed. by Abel Lefranc (Paris: Armand Colin, 1896), pp.93-118.
- 67 *The Grammar of Silence*, p.196-197.
- 68 *Chansons spirituelles*, pp.93-96:
 'En luy retrouve père et mère,
 Enfans, cousins, parens, amis,
 Parfaict amy, mary et frère,
 Dont en soy seul son cueur a mis.' (p.93)
- 69 *Les Prisons*, p.78.
- 70 Ibid., p.89.
- 71 Ibid., p.95.
- 72 Ibid., p.108.

- 73 Ibid., pp.106-107.
- 74 Ibid., p.118.
- 75 See chapter three, pp.127-141.
- 76 Anne de Marquetz, p.53.
- 77 *Chansons spirituelles*, p.75.
- 78 Gary Ferguson, *Mirroring Belief: Marguerite de Navarre's Devotional Poetry*, p.45.
- 79 *Chansons spirituelles*, p.20.
- 80 Marguerite de Navarre, *La Distinction du vray amour par dixains* in *Les Dernières Poésies*, p.302.
- 81 Ibid., p.305, dizain IX.
- 82 Ibid., p.307, dizain XIII.
- 83 Ibid., pp.307-308, dizain XIV. Marguerite's belief in the redemption of the body through Christ is summed up clearly in *Les Prisons*, p.240, lines 3150-3157, where the Amy reflects upon his own beatific experience of the love of God:
 'Tu viz de luy [ce Tout], et tout en luy te renges;
 En luy tu as le sçavoir, les sciences,
 Et voys à clair le fonds des consciences;
 En luy tu as puyssance et magesté,
 Parquoy le mal est de toy rejecté.
 Là bien estoit sans contradiciton [sic]
 Sans sentir plus la malediction
 Qui rend la chair à la vertu rebelle.' (p.240)
- 84 *La Distinction du vray amour*, p.310, dizain XX.
- 85 Ibid., p.311, dizain XXII.
- 86 At the beginning of book three, the Amy implores his beloved to 'escoutez ce discours' because his own more perfect understanding of God has increased his desire for his Amye to know the truth. Furthermore, the Amy links his increasingly intimate relationship with God with a Perfect Love relationship, as if he is keen to apply the grace he has found to the human sphere of love:
 'Montant plus hault à la perfection,
 Plus je descendz à ceste affection
 Qui est de Dieu tresfort recommandée
 Et de l'Amour à l'amant demandée,
 Et plus vertu rend mon esprit contant;
 Mon desir croist de trop plus ou autant
 Veoir par vertu contant le vostre esprit.'
 (p.135)

- 87 See, for example, *Epistre IIII* in the second volume of the *Marguerites*, p.67, where Marguerite describes Cupid, symbol of the flesh, transmuting into the love of Christ when he comes of age: wingless and arrowless. Anne de Marquetz uses a similar image in the second of her 'Sonets de l'Amour Divin' in *Les Divines Poesies*, p.53:
 'L'amour divin, qui mon esprit transporte,
 Tant excellent, tant gracieux et beau,
 C'est un amour ou Cupidon nouveau
 Dont la puissance est admirable et forte.'
- 88 See *The Grammar of Silence*, p.257, for an exposition of this theme as it appears in *Les Prisons*. Cottrell notes that when the Amy is experiencing rapturous communion with God in book three, he realizes that Christ has always been with him, and was therefore present in his liaison with his beloved: 'The love he thought he shared with Amye was in fact a sign of the love he shares with Christ.' Note also that in book three of *Les Prisons* (p.241, lines 3200-3206), Marguerite declares a person redeemed by grace to become God-like even during his/her earthly existence:
 'En sa justice et nature premiere
 L'homme est remis; car joint par cest Esprit
 A Rien, à mort, à croix en Jesuchrist,
 Et fait en luy Rien, mort, crucifié,
 Aussy en luy il est deifié,
 Uny au Tout et au souverain Bien
 Pour estre fait aveques Jesus Rien.'
- 89 This is the tenor of Parlamente's remarks about Perfect Love in the *Heptaméron*, pp.151-152, when she declares:
 'Encores ay-je une opinion [...] que jamais homme n'aymera parfaitement Dieu, qu'il n'ait parfaitement aymé quelque creature en ce monde', tempered by the strongly-worded caveat that 'si Dieu ne luy ouvre l'oeil de foy, seroit en danger de devenir, d'un ignorant, ung infidele philosophe'.
- 90 Anne de Marquetz, p.79.
- 91 *Chansons spirituelles*, p.25.
- 92 Marguerite de Navarre, *Miroir de Jhesus Christ crucifié*, ed. by Lucia Fontanella (Alexandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 1984), p.34:
 'O chevallier ramply de hardiesse,
 tu couvre icy ta vertu, ta prouesse
 Soubz impuissance.'
- 93 *Chansons spirituelles*, pp.50-51.
- 94 For one of many possible examples of Marguerite's use of familial terminology, see above, note 68.
- 95 Anne de Marquetz, pp.42 & 45.

- 96 See Brantôme, *Les Dames galantes*, pp.369-403. See also chapter 6 of thesis, pp.369-378.
- 97 See pp.252-253 of chapter 4.
- 98 Pierre de Ronsard, *A Diane de Poitiers Duchesse de Valentinois - Ode* in *Oeuvres complètes*, VII, p.83.
- 99 Pierre de Ronsard, *La Charite* in *Oeuvres complètes*, XVII, pp.169-170.
- 100 See Philippa Berry, *Of Chastity and Power*, p.2.
- 101 Joachim Du Bellay, *A Madame Diane de Poictiers* in *Oeuvres poétiques*, V, pp.367-369. See also *A ladicte dame*, pp.378-379.
- 102 See Edouard Bourciez, *Les Moeurs polies et la littérature de cour sous Henri II* (Paris: Hachette, 1886), pp.185-186.
- 103 Françoise Bardon, *Diane de Poitiers et le mythe de Diane*, pp.102-103. See also p.152.
- 104 *Ibid.*, p.50.
- 105 Helen W. Henderson, *Dianne de Poytiers* (London: Methuen, 1928), p.217.
- 106 Marie-Madeleine Fragonard, 'La Reine Marguerite au rang des Illustres', in *Marguerite de France Reine de Navarre et son temps*, ed. by Madeleine Lazard and J. Cubelier de Beynac (Agen: Centre Matteo Bandello d'Agen, 1994), pp.193-202 (pp.200-201).
- 107 Jaques Corbin, *La Royne Marguerite - ou sont descrites la noblesse, la grandeur de ceste grande Princesse, sa beauté, ses vertus* (Paris: Jean Berion, 1605), p.86.
- 108 Corbin, cited by Marie-Madeleine Fragonard, pp.200-201.
- 109 See Henderson, p.103.
- 110 Joachim du Bellay, *Oeuvres poétiques*, V, pp.389 & 380.
- 111 Eugénie Droz, 'La Reine Marguerite de Navarre et la vie littéraire à la cour de Nérac (1579-1582)', *Bulletin de la Société des Bibliophiles de Guyenne*, 80 (1964), 77-120 (p.79).
- 112 *Ibid.*, p.79.
- 113 Agrippa d'Aubigné, *Histoire Universelle*, V, quoted in 'Meutrière Venus', *Marguerite de Valois dans l'oeuvre d'Agrippa d'Aubigné*, by Jean-Raymond Fanlo, in *Marguerite de France, Reine de Navarre et son temps*, pp.181-192 (p.184).

- 114 In one letter to Champvallon, Marguerite explains the basic principles of Neoplatonic affection: 'L'âme est seule l'homme, qui étant liée avec le corps, ces deux sens lui suffisent, la vue et l'ouïe, pour contenter son désir, qui, tout différent des appétits du corps, se sent son plaisir d'autant retranché que l'on s'adhère aux autres [sens] - qui ne peuvent être causes d'amour, puisqu'ils ne sont désirs de beauté (car l'amour n'est autre chose).' See Eliane Viennot, *Marguerite de Valois*, p.149. See also chapter 6 of this thesis, pp.379-382.
- 115 See Catherine Magnien-Simonin, 'La Jeune Marguerite des poètes', in *Marguerite de France Reine de Navarre et son temps*, pp.135-154 (p.151).
- 116 Eugénie Droz, 'La Reine Marguerite de Navarre et la vie littéraire à la cour de Nérac (1579-1582)'.
- 117 Remy Belleau famously dedicated to Marguerite a poem entitled 'La Perle', which compares the natural beauty of the pearl to the Queen's virtue and 'chastes honneurs'. See *Oeuvres complètes 3 vols*, ed. by A. Gouverneur (Paris: A. Gouverneur, 1867), III, pp.58-63. Amadis Jamyn also makes use of this image, declaring the sight of Marguerite to inspire thoughts of 'mille perles' and 'Mille et mille vertus'; see *Premières poésies et livre premier*, p.201. Eugénie Droz reveals that Marguerite was particularly fond of the sun icon when it was connected with her eyes and with the Neoplatonic theme of transcendence, as in this anonymous example from the album (p.106): 'Tout ce qu'on voit de saint, de luisant et de grace,
Et tout ce que les dieux assemblent de beauté
Au front de mon soleil resplendant sa clarté,
J'en reconnois icy les rayons sur ta face.'
- 118 Eugénie Droz, p.105 (poem by the protestant poet Jean de Rivason).
- 119 See Jacques Lavaud, *Philippe Desportes: Un poète de cour au temps des derniers Valois* (Paris: Droz, 1936) pp.165-167, and Philippe Desportes, *Les Amours d'Hippolyte*, ed. by Victor E. Graham (Geneva: Droz, 1960), p.113, sonnet LXI.
- 120 Jacqueline Boucher, 'Le double concept du mariage de Marguerite de France, propos et comportement', in *Marguerite de France Reine de Navarre et son temps*, pp.81-98 (pp.94-95).
- 121 Marguerite de Valois, *Mémoires*, ed. by Ludovic Lalanne (Paris: Jannet, 1858).

- 122 Jacqueline Boucher, 'Le double concept du mariage de Marguerite de France', p.98. See also chapter 6, pp.378-382.
- 123 Olivier de Magny, *Les Odes*, ed. by P. Blanchemain (Lyon: N. Scheuring, 1876), pp.175-176.
- 124 Ronsard, *Oeuvres complètes*, VII, p.296.
- 125 See Du Bellay, *Oeuvres poétiques*, V, pp.369-371.
- 126 Diane participated figuratively in the royal entries made by Catherine and Henri into Lyon, Rouen and Paris, such was the power the royal favourite wielded at this time. She is mentioned by name in the Paris entry, and alluded to in the form of a dramatized spectacle at Lyon. For more information pertaining to these festivities, see Margaret McGowan's edition of *L'Entrée de Henri II à Rouen 1550* (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, n.d.), and *La Magnificence de la superbe et triumpante entree de la noble et antique cité de Lyon faicte au Treschrestien Roy de France Henry deuxiesme de ce Nom, Et à la Royne Catherine son Espouse le XXIII de Septembre M.DXLVIII* (Lyon: Georges Guigue, 1927), p.65. Diane also acted as 'gouvernante' of the royal children, a role depicted in François Clouet's famous *Diane au bain*. In an article discussing this work, Salomon Reinach remarks that Diane was likely to have commissioned it, in order to show herself 'en sa double qualité de favorite royale et de gardienne zélée des enfants royaux.' See Reinach, 'Diane de Poitiers et Gabrielle d'Estrées', *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, 12 (1920), pp.157-180 (p.168).
- 127 Eugénie Droz, p.111.
- 128 Brantôme, *Vies des dames illustres françoises et étrangères*, ed. by Louis Moland (Paris: Garnier, n.d.), pp.180 & 198.
- 129 This intellectual stringency is suggested in *La Ruelle mal-assortie* (Paris: Auguste Aubry, 1855), a play thought to have been written by Marguerite during her enforced stay at Usson in the 1590s. The principal character, Uranie, directs her suitor: 'vous feriez mieux d'employer le temps à lire Marius Equicola, Leon Hebreu, ou les oeuvres de nos Poètes, qu'en l'entretien de ces coquettes qui parlent toujours, et ne disent rien qui vaille.' (p.10)
- 130 See Brantôme, *Vies des dames illustres*, pp.237-238: 'Elle est fort curieuse de recouvrer tous les beaux livres nouveaux qui se composent, tant en lettres saintes qu'humaines'.
- 131 See Evelyne Berriot-Salvadore, 'Le temps des malheurs,

le temps de la philosophie: Marguerite et la vulgarisation des sciences', in *Marguerite de France Reine de Navarre et son temps*, pp.255-267 (pp.258-260).

- 132 Cl. Garnier, *La Reception de la Reyne Marguerite par leurs Majestez* (Paris: François Huey, 1605), pp.3-5.
- 133 Jaques Corbin, *La Royne Marguerite*, p.278.
- 134 Ibid., p.286.
- 135 Viennot, p.202.
- 136 See Berriot-Salvadore, p.261.
- 137 See Viennot, pp.210-211.
- 138 Viennot, pp.220-221.

VI: CHASTITY AS A SOCIAL DISCOURSE: THE PARADOX OF THE
CHASTITY CODE AT COURT AND THE BEGINNINGS OF ICONOCLASM

SOCIAL OR MORAL VIRTUE? THE PHYSIOLOGICAL IMPERATIVE TO BE
CHASTE AND ITS EFFECT UPON THE CHASTE DISCOURSE OF LOVE

The Perfect Love discourse, we have seen in chapters four and five, strongly asserted a fundamental spiritual and intellectual equality between the sexes; its very practice relied upon the compatibility of male and female in these areas, and to this extent its social philosophy was significantly different to the political structures of the day, which largely militated against equality. Debates which considered the efficacy of Perfect Love in establishing socio-sexual harmony were therefore wont to question whether its premises of equal status amongst the sexes in this respect were ill-founded. Castiglione's *Courtier* comprehensively presents the discord impinging upon the social practice of Perfect Love which arose when courtiers focused upon the physical and political nature of sexual difference: did not men and women respond to different stimuli, and act according to different criteria in matters of love, noblemen asked, and did this not render the discourse ineffectual?

Frequent attacks upon the physical weaknesses of the female sex by certain of the *Courtier's* interlocutors provoke the champions of women to defend them by emphasizing the gifts that they, though sexually different,

can legitimately share with men. Magnifico Giuliano thus confidently asserts: 'je dis que les femmes peuvent entendre toutes les choses mesmes que peuvent entendre les hommes, et que là où penetre l'entendement de l'un, peut penetrer aussi l'entendement de l'autre.'¹ He systematically dismisses the conception of woman as an inferior, botched male, a thesis symptomatic of extreme negative perceptions of female sexuality which had profound ramifications, even within the intellectually rigorous environment of the court; he celebrates instead the natural equality and interdependence of the sexes which Neoplatonic Love postulated, exalting the bisexuality of the divine mind and its mirroring throughout created matter:

Il est bien vray que l'intention de nature est de faire et produire tousjours les choses plus parfaites, et pourtant veut elle produire l'homme en son espece, mais non pas le masle plustost que la femelle: car tant s'en fault que si elle produisoit tousjours le masle, elle seroit une chose imparfaite, pource que ny plus ny moins que du corps et de l'ame se fait un composé plus noble que leurs parties, qui est l'homme: ainsi par la compagnie du masle et de la femelle se fait un composé qui conserve l'espece humaine, sans lequel les parties seroient destruites: et pourtant la nature joint tousjours ensemble le masle et la femelle, et ne peut estre l'un sans l'autre: [...]. Et pource qu'un sexe seul demonstre une imperfection, les anciens Theologiens attribuent l'un et l'autre à Dieu.²

The problem with such a defence, optimistic as it seeks to appear, is that a belief in beneficent diversity did not necessarily guarantee a belief in sexual equality; Calvin hailed women as the spiritual equals of men, and even acclaimed their femaleness to be a gift of God, without

permitting them the social rights of the male sex;³ Ficino celebrated the divine wonder of procreation and birth, but believed the passionate act of conception to be tainted by sin, a flawed activity when compared with the contemplative virtues he encouraged in men.⁴ Neoplatonic Love postulated the control of passion through reason. However, any suggestion that passion could be overcome entirely was false, and courtiers were aware of this even as they absorbed and mimicked the optimistic language of the Perfect Love discourse articulated in texts such as *Amadis de Gaule*. Though the discourse was publicly endorsed by the majority, it was merely a means of ensuring social stability for some, who did not believe that desire could be rationalized in the private confines of the bedroom, where suppressed passion inevitably ran its course. Where this was the case, the lascivious tendencies of the female sex were not disproved by the Perfect Love discourse, but merely dissimulated: chastity was a publicly-required prevarication and no more than that.

The tendency to associate the corporeal attributes of the female sex with the transcendent beauty of Neoplatonism complicated the chastity icon yet further: while women were unable to detach their spiritual and moral selves from their physical condition, their virtue was apt to be regarded as an obligation and not an engagement of their own free will, which in turn jeopardized their status in the androgyne equation of Perfect Love. Signor Gaspare puts forward this common belief in *The Courtier*:

Si elles se gardent aucunesfois de satisfaire à leurs desirs, elles le font pour la crainte de la honte, et non pour n'estre de trespronte volonté: Et pour ceste cause les hommes leur ont imposé, la crainte d'infamie, pour une bride qui les retient quasi par force en ceste vertu, sans laquelle, pour dire le vray, elles ne seroient beaucoup à estimer.⁵

Gaspare does not entirely dismiss the significance of chastity as a higher virtue: in men who have been 'fort continens de leur propre volonté, et non de honte ou de peur d'estre chastiez' this quality is laudable, and of much greater worth than the protective chastity of women, who nevertheless 'sont dignes de grande louange' for successfully remaining continent.⁶

While chastity for men was a matter of choice, and of secondary consideration in the pursuit of honour, this mandatory feminine virtue was rife with paradoxes for the lady of the court. Her chastity was undoubtedly a protective virtue, and as such highlighted her inherent vulnerability and frailty as a member of the second sex; and yet it was often hailed as the most potent symbol of divine presence, and brought her eloquent praise from devoted lovers and metaphysical eulogy from poets inspired by the impact of her essence, physical and spiritual, upon the world in which she moved. These sharply polarized views of the female sex were coexistent at court, as the microcosmic community of Castiglione's *The Courtier* confirms. Signor Ottaviano Fregoso happily endorses Gaspare's perception of the imperfection of women,

concluding the virtue of chastity to be imposed upon them merely 'pour avoir certitude des enfans'.⁷ Pietro Bembo, meanwhile, is moved to argue that the Neoplatonic association of beauty and goodness inclines women to a supremely high level of moral virtue, which can only be distorted by unrestrained masculine desire:

La beauté est le vray trofee de la victoire de l'ame, quand avec la vertu divine elle maistrise la nature materielle, et par sa lumiere surmonte les tenebres du corps. Il ne faut donc pas dire que la beauté rende les femmes superbes ou cruelles, [...] aussi ne doivent estre imputees ou atribuees aux belles femmes ces inimitiez, meutres et destructions, dont les appetits immoderez des hommes, sont cause. Je ne veux pas nier qu'au monde ne se puissent bien trouver de belles femmes impudiques: mais je dy que la beauté ne les incline pas à l'impudicité, ains les en retire et les induit à la voye des vertueuses moeurs, par la liaison de la beauté avec la bonté.⁸

The court witnessed a powerful tension between the exaltation of the female body as the chaste object of transcendent adoration, and the castigation of that body as a weakened vessel, a threat to order, were it not for the imposition of the virtue of chastity upon it. Women forced into the public demonstration of chaste beauty in order to maintain their honour struggled to make this virtue their own on the spiritual level postulated by Neoplatonism, but in doing so could not avoid endorsing the perceived view of their own femininity as weak, unstable and in need of strict control. Thus the Utopian aspirations of Perfect Love, which supported the notion of chastity as a universal

ideal in theory, were less liberating in practice for the female sex:

Ainsi convient-il sans doute de nuancer les affirmations qui voient dans le néo-platonisme l'occasion pour la femme d'une promotion réelle. [...] L'importance accordée aux relations amoureuses limitait à l'extrême l'autonomie concédée à la femme. Celle-ci reste l'objet du discours masculin et ne doit son importance qu'à l'effet d'écho qu'elle produit. De plus, l'image flatteuse qu'on lui propose d'elle-même lui enlève toute possibilité de refus: présentée comme belle, vertueuse, sage et modeste, elle ne pourra que tenter de s'identifier à ce modèle.⁹

Women had no alternative but to comply with the transcendent chastity model put before them because their physicality made them vulnerable; they were obliged to be chaste for the sake of their dignity and yet risked opprobrium because of their chastity in the eyes of those who perceived the virtue to be a smoke-screen disguising lustful tendencies. An unblemished reputation in the public eye was the only way of assuring that suggestions of misplaced desire could not be substantiated; those who were discovered to have sinned merely confirmed the certainty of feminine sexual weakness:

Les femmes [...] ont besoin [de la discrétion] lorsqu'elles se lancent dans une relation extraconjugale, craignant par-dessus tout la perte de leur honneur et de leur réputation. Les notions sont alors éminemment sociales. La réputation de la femme n'est pas compromise parce qu'elle éprouve de l'amour pour un autre que son mari, mais lorsque la consommation charnelle est avérée: si les amants sont découverts, si l'amant s'est vanté, si l'on l'a vu sortir de la chambre de sa belle... L'opprobre et, dans bien des cas, la répression peuvent alors s'abattre, avec l'assentiment de tous.¹⁰

Clearly this protective aspect of the icon was important to retain for reasons of practical necessity: family honour was at stake if illegitimacy could be proven. Curiously, however, the need for a public affirmation of purity, and the consequent preoccupation with female reputation in matters of love, became confused with less pure features of the courtship ritual. A woman whose reputation for purity was assured could be celibate or faithful to her husband, but she could also be skilled in the art of dissimulation, rational in her approach to love and discerning in her choice of suitor. In this complex social environment, where discourses overlapped, an icon of physical purity could also suggest the presence of Eros to some observers. As we have seen, the art of sustaining a good reputation was itself a mark of social perfection, whatever the truth behind the mask, and even the most honourable of courtiers were forced to bow to the convention of dissimulation: a fact which the anonymous author of a typical late sixteenth-century treatise on feminine honour emphasizes:

Ignorés vous que de l'opinion, vient la reputation, et de la reputation l'honneur: non vous l'ignorez pas, et sçavez bien que l'opinion est plus souvent fausse que veritable [...] toutesfois cest la baze, c'est le rocher et le solide fondement de cest atome que vous appelez honneur.¹¹

This potential for confusion which arises when a noblewoman's reputation, rightly or wrongly, is challenged,

is constantly paraded before women at court in conduct books and in popular literature. The classical and biblical paradigms so often invoked in support of feminine chastity, Lucretia and Suzanna, provided the models for contemporary affirmations of the virtue; women prepared to sacrifice their very lives for their chastity were portrayed as heroines, and the female body was flagrantly linked with spiritual perfection in a cruel parody of the Perfect Love discourse. Those who sinned, or who were thought to have sinned through lust, could not escape the physical consequences of the crime because of their femininity; spiritually they were irredeemable while the corporeal evidence of their sin remained.

The genre of the tragic tale, made popular by Boaistuau's, and subsequently by Belleforest's, translation of Bandello's *Histoires tragiques*, frequently centres upon sexual crimes, such as rape, adultery and incest, often perpetrated against an innocent noblewoman who is then forced to bear the guilt of an involuntary transgression.¹² It is interesting to note that in their original version, such tales are punctuated with other light-hearted stories based upon farce or amusing erotic adventure. These are not included in Belleforest's editions, which freely translate the original to give it a strongly moralistic bias intended to have a didactic effect upon its (particularly female) readership.¹³

Tales advocating consummate chastity, even to the point of self-sacrifice, became extremely popular in the second half of the sixteenth century, inspired by the moralizing efforts of the Counter-Reformation. Evidence of this trend does, however, emerge earlier, in 1553, with the appearance of Claude de Taillemont's *Discours des Champs faëz*, which includes an example of one such tragic tale.¹⁴ Among the principal traits of the story, Jean-Claude Arnould, in his introduction to the work, identifies those of 'la noblesse et la perfection initiale des protagonistes' and 'le sacrifice de la victime innocente et sa sépulture, la fin indigne du coupable.'¹⁵ The genre, characterized by these hallmarks, was taken up by other French authors following the success of the *Histoires tragiques*: Jacques Yver's *Le Printemps*, for example, was first published in 1572 and republished several times up to 1618; Benigne Poissenot published his *Nouvelles Histoires tragiques* in 1586.

Yver's tales show a conscious attempt to juxtapose the Neoplatonic tendencies of the heroine and her suitor with the wanton lust of a male aggressor belonging either to an inferior social rank or to a social structure antipathetic to the courtly code of Perfect Love. Frequently, the principal protagonists sustain minor difficulties within their own relationships, only to find these exacerbated by the ill-fated appearance of an aggressor, by whose hand the petty jealousies and disputes which beset them are transformed into tragic scenarios which can only be resolved through death. The first tale highlights the

dilemma of a noble couple, separated by the trials of love, who are reunited in Rhodes. The heroine, Perfide, is captured by a Turkish emperor, Soliman, in whose service her lover, Eraste, is employed. Honourable at the outset, Soliman allows the couple to marry, but on the day of the wedding, seeing Perfide at her most beautiful, he is overcome with lust and kills her lover so that he might have her for his own. At this point, the reader understands the true meaning of her tragic name: her beauty is 'perfidé' because it provokes violent behaviour in those unaccustomed to its spiritual worth; that which signified transcendence to her noble lover engenders lust in the mind of the ignorant emperor. In her desire to remain chaste and loyal to her dead lover, Perfide instantly kills herself to safeguard her honour, an action which provokes penitence on the part of the emperor, who constructs a splendid tomb in memory of the loyal lovers.¹⁶

The second tale deals with the violent crime of rape. Fleurie, the daughter of a wealthy family, is attacked by Pontifre, a worker at the family home, and finds herself pregnant as a result. Pontifre's sinful actions are seen to be the result of his incapacity to perceive Fleurie's chastity as anything more than a protective virtue, induced by shame, and therefore hiding a ready desire for physical union:

Les filles, elles sont bien aises d'estre aimées, s'estimans aimables, et neantmoins la vergongne fondée sur je ne sçay quelle opinion d'honneur, ne leur permet d'accorder ce que plus

elles desirent: qui fait que volontiers elles voudroient qu'on les forçast, pour de la prendre couverture à leur consentement. De quoy l'exemple d'une Médée, d'une Hélène, d'une Ariadne, et mille millions d'autres (qui se sont faites ravoir) portent tesmoignage.¹⁷

Fleurie is made drunk by Pontifre so that he might rape her, and as a result she remembers nothing of the attack, believing her pregnancy to be the product of some divine vengeance. Her noble long-standing lover, Herman, is distraught at Fleurie's loss of honour, and begins to doubt the Neoplatonic principles of love he had been taught to observe, concluding regretfully that he had mistaken his lover's beauty for a sign of virtue: 'La belle femme ressemble à l'Hermite, de qui on estime tant la peau, et le corps n'en vaut rien: tellement qu'il y a si grande inimitié entre beauté et bonté, que jamais l'une ne demeure avec l'autre en une maison.'¹⁸ The truth is eventually revealed, and Fleurie's inner beauty restored. She is conscious, however, that her honour has been irreparably tainted, and kills herself in order to reclaim her purity: 'Voicy, voicy l'heure (mon ame) que vous avez vengeance de ce meschant corps, donnant certain tesmoignage que avec luy mon chaste esprit n'a point esté violé, ains s'est gardé pur et net jusques au bout.'¹⁹ Inevitably, her predestined other half, Herman, though married elsewhere, falls dead when he hears the outcome of Fleurie's tragic situation, and the reader is comforted by the final episode, in which the children of the two lovers are married and perpetuate their parents' memories.

Without exception, chastity in these tales is presented as an heroic virtue, and one in which feminine resolve and integrity are eulogized. The heroines distinguish themselves from the illicit, passionate natures of their pursuers by exhibiting a spiritualized view of love, and by demonstrating a positive chastity which exceeds the preventative measures of shame and shows itself to be founded upon a transcendent vision of harmony. Taillemont's tragic heroine, Laurine, pledged by a binding trothplight to her lover Leontin, but obliged to marry the evil Sador because her lover has broken their bond, resolves to die not merely to preserve her physical honour, but in order to 'delaisser à toute âme amoureuse, et pour jamais, exemple de vraye et constante amitié.'²⁰ Clarinde, the victim of Yver's third tale, accepts her undeserved death, the result of accidental poisoning, with grace, believing it to liberate her from the burden of maintaining her honour in a corrupt world:

Si j'ay quelque cause d'accuser ma destinée,
qui m'a adjournée ceste triste fin en la premiere
fleur de ma jeunesse, j'ay bien d'autre part
dequoy remercier le Ciel qui m'a esté si bening et
favorable, que d'abrevier un long martyre (auquel
l'amour me preparoit) par une brefve mort.²¹

She looks forward instead to lasting fulfilment in love in the next life, a beatitude promised to her in the Perfect Love discourse, and where her 'chastes desirs' cannot be threatened.

These sanitized portrayals of chastity as a social virtue perfected by women, but attractive and desirable to men, were products of a systematic effort not merely to idealize the aspirations of the court, but to diffuse negative facets of social behaviour antipathetic to the desirable reign of harmony throughout lower or less worthy estates of society. Shame, or the protective face of chastity, would scarcely be a necessary quality for the lady of the court, or so these works imply, were it not for the threat of the outsider who fails to comprehend the social code, and imposes his unnatural desires upon an unfortunate noblewoman. Yver's Fleurie is a typical unwitting casualty of this sort, a victim of the ignorant Pontifre's self-confessed misconceptions towards women, who eventually sacrifices her life in absolution of his sin.

Death is victorious, according to these works, and easily accomplishable for the noblewoman who is more concerned with the spirit than with the flesh, and who in turn becomes a paradigm of right social behaviour for those around her. Essentially, the sexual sin of a masculine, non-noble aggressor is compensated for by feminine sacrifice: through no fault of her own, the noblewoman becomes embroiled in deviant behaviour which necessitates a drastic response. In many cases, loyal male lovers are involved in acts of atonement, and themselves meet death participating in the struggle for purity and honour in love. It is, however, the women who inevitably remain the principal targets of illicit male corruption because of

their intrinsic sexual vulnerability and who are encouraged to renounce all in the name of chastity because they bear the physical scars of lost virtue. Their high moral stance is bought by a surrendering of their physical selves to the retrograde image of a weaker, subversive body. In Yver's first tale, the male storyteller, who has named his female protagonist Perfide in order to infer her guilt, explicitly blames her excessive beauty for the demise of her lover and herself in the discussion that follows his narration:

La seconde fois fut que ces deux Amans estans par la faveur celeste miraculeusement ralliez, et jouyssans contre toute esperance du bien le plus désiré, [...] ils furent desalliez par la faute de la trop belle espousee, qui pour trop avoir pleu au Roy, et approché le feu trop pres des allumettes, fut cause de la perte de son Eraste, et de la sienne propre apres, quand tenant bon en son Chasteau, pour amender sa faute, elle prefera courageusement l'honneur à la vie.²²

For displaying such an opinion the narrator is strongly rebuked by the women in the company, who declare 'nous excuserons la beauté de Perfide pour blasmer les desordonnez desirs du Barbare'.²³ A debate ensues, in which it is concluded to be inappropriate to remove women from public life in order to safeguard their reputation. Rather, they must take upon themselves the responsibility of chastity to ensure that their beauty harms neither themselves nor others: 'La chasteté, non pas le masque doit garder la beauté.'²⁴ In short, theirs is the duty to protect a natural frailty which, despite their noble, elected status, might still invoke disharmony and chaos in the presence of those unable to recognize their desire for

order and honour. Within the fantastic world of the court tale, the threat to harmony induced by feminine beauty comes only from ignorant, non-noble masculine forces, whilst the honourable nobleman nurtures and protects the chastity of his lady. In the real world of the court however, the threat to feminine propriety also comes from within the inner sanctuary of the nobility, where temperate chastity is nominally the goal of rational social relations. Thus feminine beauty, even in this rarified environment, remains a potential source of chaos as well as one of harmony, and feminine chastity a simple protective measure as well as a transcendent virtue.

The Masculine Understanding of the Virtue of Chastity

As we have seen in chapter four of this work, there was considerable public support for the idea of female chastity within the French court. The language of Perfect Love was the currency of social interaction, spoken by men and women alike, and accordingly the ordered courtship of the nobleman, with its emphasis not only upon chivalrous acts but upon the gentler virtues outlined in Castiglione's picture of the ideal courtier, became chaste in certain respects.²⁵ This public sharing of the burden of chastity was certainly effective in providing a civilized structure in which sexual relations might take place; it did not, however, erase the deeply entrenched perceptions of sexual difference amongst the sexes. As far as physical passions

were concerned, many men and women believed each others' needs to contrast, and even to conflict with their own.

The language of Perfect Love naturally incorporated a certain level of difference into the roles it prescribed for noble men and women: while the latter were held up as paradigms of physical and spiritual beauty, and sources of a chastity which was transcendent, literature and art propagated the image of the former as galant pursuers, exhibiting chastity by their self-controlled, deferential courtship of their lady. Chaste pursuit, for the most part, was undertaken in the expectation of sexual fulfilment, and in this respect there was a natural progression from public deference to private union for the nobleman. Chastity for the noblewoman was inevitably more complex: her public self had to deny her private aspirations, if aspirations she had; her language of love, named transcendent by her lover, was inescapably intended to protect her physical self as well.

Since the dimension of protective chastity was naturally absent from the masculine moral vocabulary, there was little emphasis placed upon the concept of duty in this area, although, as the *Magnifico*, of Castiglione's *Courtier*, points out, a sense of compulsion to be chaste in men would undoubtedly improve the moral climate at court:

Mais dites moy, pourquoy n'a esté ordonné,
qu'es hommes la vie dissolue, soit aussi infame et
deshonneste qu'és femmes, attendu que s'ils sont
naturellement plus vertueux et de plus grande

valeur, plus aisement aussi peuvent ils se maintenir en ceste vertu de continence, et les enfans ne plus ne moins seroient certains; car encores que les femmes fussent lascifves, pourveu que les hommes fussent continens et ne consentissent à la lubricité des femmes, elles ne pourroient engendrer d'elles mesmes, sans ayde d'autruy. Mais si vous voulez dire la verité, vous congnoissez bien que de nostre autorité nous avons usurpé une licence, par laquelle nous voulons que mesmes pechez soient en nous treslegers, meritans aucunefois louange, et ne puissent estre assez chastiez es femmes, sinon avec une mort ignominieuse, ou à tout le moins par une perpetuelle infamie.²⁶

The Magnifico's sparring partner, Signor Gaspare, refuses to be drawn on this issue, and absolves his own sex of any moral obligation to chastity on the grounds that it is socially acceptable for men to behave otherwise:

Je ne nye pas que les hommes n'aient prins un peu de liberté, et ce pource qu'ils sçavent que selon l'opinion d'un chacun, la vie dissoluë ne leur cause si grande infamie, comme aux femmes, lesquelles pour l'imbecillité du sexe, sont beaucoup plus enclines aux appetits sensuels que les hommes.²⁷

In practical terms, chastity could certainly be regarded as 'optional' for the male sex, and its connections to an ascetic moral code were anathema to most noblemen. In order to maintain social harmony it was practised by proxy, as a female virtue worthy of male support (in the words of the Magnifico 'il n'y a homme tant languard et insolent qui n'ait reverence et respect à celles qui sont estimees honnestes'²⁸), and most noblemen colluded with their beloveds to support their chaste public personae. To this extent, noblemen were not averse to eulogizing the chastity of their own sex, though this was

rare, according to their own interpretation of the virtue. Several writers drew upon the example of Scipio: Guevara, whose popular handbook of court etiquette, translated into French as *Le Favori de Court* in 1557, recounts the tale:

Et de mesme lisons nous, que durant le siege de Carthage, fut présenté à Scipion une fort belle et jeune damoiselle Numidiene, que lon avoit prinse prisonniere, avec laquelle il ne voulut seulement avoir participation charnelle, mais encor la mettant en pleniere liberté, la maria fort richement et honnorablement.²⁹

Guevara goes on to credit men who are careful to 'abstenir, et totalement fuir ce pernicious vice de la chair' with 'grande sagesse', and discusses the conflict between flesh and spirit in a language which echoes the purest strands of Neoplatonism.³⁰ Soon, however, the writer reveals his beliefs to be motivated by pragmatic self-interest rather than ascetic idealism: if men are to be chaste, it is in order to avoid being trapped, as Solomon and David were, by dangerous women, and Guevara identifies 'folles et deshonestes femmes' as the present threat to social order.³¹ The wise nobleman, he observes, judiciously chooses 'une seule amie', presumably of honourable intention, and ceases to look elsewhere, mindful of the fact that 'mieus luy seroit de n'avoir onques esté né, plustôt que d'avoir conversation et pratique à tant de folles femmes.'³² Any deviant behaviour will necessarily provoke conflict with the prince whom the worthy nobleman is called to serve, and the foolish nobleman who thus

jeopardizes the social harmony of the court cannot hope to remain popular for long:

Peu se trouvent aujourd'huy en ce monde de Rois, Princes, Seigneurs, Prelats, et Chevaliers si deshonestes et vitieus qu'ils n'ayent for cher et en reconmendation grande de tenir en leurs maisons serviteurs vertueus, honnestes et bien conditionnez. Tellement qu'impossible sera au favori qui voudra vivre deshonestement qu'il puisse longuement durer en la faveur et credit de son Prince, seigneur et maitre.³³

Guevara's ideal society, like that of Yver's tragic tales, is presented as an essentially harmonious environment, in which smooth-running social order can only be disrupted by the infiltration of malicious antagonists who remain indifferent to the social code: here the 'folles et deshonestes femmes' and foolish men who are captivated by them. Guevara, like Yver, shies away from the possibility of lasting social disharmony within the court, believing the ideal of chaste decorum to emanate from the highest level, the Prince, and to be maintained by all those worthy of serving him. His is a Utopian world which favours and seeks to benefit the nobleman by not imposing upon him the morally stringent demands of ascetic chastity, but simply requiring him to live within the accepted social parameters in matters of love.

As if to illustrate the practical significance of chastity to the male sex, Hircan, a male devisant in the *Heptaméron* who is, by his own admission, a womanizer, relates to his fellow listeners the story of a young man

who proved himself 'chaste et patient avecq la beaulté, l'amour, le temps et le loisir des femmes'.³⁴ The young man is tested by his would-be lover, who firstly asks him to lie in bed with her without succumbing to temptation, and secondly tricks him into going to bed with her maid, in order to see if he proves 'la grandeur et fermeté de son amour' by resisting her.³⁵ The young man passes the test admirably, and is thereafter so highly esteemed by his lady that she begs his forgiveness for her harshness and gives herself wholly to him: 'depuis ceste heure-là, sans empeschement ne fascherye, il eut la fruition telle qu'il la pouvoit desirer.'³⁶

Hircan's champion of chastity is, in the final analysis, unchaste, by the stringently ascetic standards of the *Heptaméron*: Parlamente, in a later discussion with Nomerfide, makes it clear that a chaste reputation is only awarded to those women who resist for ever the temptation of sexual fulfilment:

Comment! dist Parlamente; tenez-vous une femme quicte de son honneur, quant elle se laisse aller, mais qu'elle ait usé deux ou trois foys de refus? [...] L'on ne doit point faire cas d'une femme si elle ne tient ferme jusques au bout.³⁷

Such an attitude was strict, and, as Brantôme's accounts of the sexual mores of certain noblewomen suggest, open to dispute amongst the ladies of the court. The fact remains, however, that this ideal of consummate chastity was one which the noblewoman had to project in the public arena,

irrespective of her private activities. The hero of Hircan's tale has no such need for asceticism or dissimulation: his chastity is a measure of his devoted pursuit of his lady, and sexual satisfaction is the expected reward for his efforts. Indeed, far from assuring sexual purity, masculine chastity is perceived to be an effective means of achieving sexual fulfilment, as Hircan himself has admitted in an earlier discussion: 'oncques homme qui aymast parfaitement, ou qui fust aymé d'une dame, ne failloit d'en avoir bonne yssue, s'il a faict la poursuite comme il appartient.'³⁸ Hircan declares the young man's actions to be motivated by 'la force de l'amour', which encourages him to behave with sincerity and honour towards his lady and forces him to exercise restraint. His behaviour is by no means universally approved, and several of Hircan's male companions criticize the young man for his reluctance to take his lady by force instead of pandering to her whims.³⁹ Nevertheless, there is a certain respect for the young man's self-controlled approach towards the woman he loves, an approach which is strongly reminiscent of the chivalric courtship rituals displayed in *Amadis de Gaule*, and which, like those rituals, brings lasting fulfilment for the honourable pursuer.

The Virtue of Chastity and the Notion of Sexual Sin

The reaction of some of the other male *devisants* to Hircan's narrative is indicative of an underlying belief in

the male camp that desire exceeds the boundaries of reason altogether, and should not, therefore, be suppressed by artificial chastity which merely denies the true passionate nature of female sexuality. Given the opportunity, and where his own honour cannot be tainted with accusations of irresponsibility towards his lady, the nobleman should pursue her until his sexual appetite has been gratified:

Il me semble, dist Saffredent, que l'on ne sçauroit faire plus d'honneur à une femme de qui l'on desire telles choses, que de la prendre par force, car il n'y a si petite damoiselle qui ne veuille estre bien long temps priée.⁴⁰

According to this rhetoric, repeatedly asserted by various of the noblemen in the *Heptaméron*, a chasm separated the moral principles of the sexes in the area of sexual mores, and in practical terms this certainly undermined the Perfect Love discourse. Sexual sin, as we have seen in the dramatically tragic tales of Yver and others, constituted a heinous transgression for the noblewoman, whose links with Eve and with corporeal depravity were accented by her very efforts to be chaste. Only at great risk did she allow herself to speak a language of desire for this reason. The heroine of one such tragic tale by Poissenot articulates precisely this dilemma before her anxious lover, who accuses her of indifference towards his efforts to serve her:

Ne pensez, seigneur Floridamus, estre moins aymé de moy, que vous m'aymez, et que je vous doive rien de retour, en la fidelle et loyalle amour, que me portez. Car bien qu'entre nous autres femmes, n'osions si librement descouvrir nos passions, comme vous autres hommes, et que la

honte nous soit plus familiere qu'à vous, si ne laissons nous d'endurer intérieurement autant voire plus que vous.⁴¹

This area of morality scarcely concerned the nobleman; it was not simply that he perceived himself to be above sin: Jacqueline Boucher explains that courtiers of both sexes certainly had a sense of their own sinfulness: 'si l'on péchait largement en milieu de cour, on ne prétendait pas pour autant avoir raison.'⁴² Rather, his religious practice was itself tainted with the superficiality of other social discourses; generally, courtiers 'attachaient beaucoup d'importance à l'accomplissement des rites: leur foi n'était guère intérieure.'⁴³

The Perfect Love discourse itself entailed a fundamental break with Christian doctrine in that it encouraged love, however chaste, outside of the marriage contract, and certain churchmen were wont to criticize the seemingly libertine social mores produced by this arrangement. René Benoist, for example, devotes his *Troisiesme Advertissement to La France, et principalement [...] la Cour*, which he lampoons for its secularization and its delight in the game of love:

Voyla, voyla, pauvre France, où t'ont plongee les Poètes lassifs, Ministres de Cupido, Sathan et de sa paillardise lesquels tu as adorez et embrassez. Voyla le fruict de la Maistrise des femmes paillards, pompeuses et superbes, ennemies de Dieu instrumens des diables et ruines des François. [...] Tu experimentes, ô France, non moins que Roboam, combien il est dangereux de croire et suivre les flateurs, les jeunes imprudens et les femmes libertines et charnelles.⁴⁴

This transgression, in a world of artificially arranged marriages, did not perturb the majority of courtiers; few saw, as Marguerite's Parlamente did, that Christian duty should preclude them from serving another love.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Parlamente's willingness to speak out against the unchristian behaviour she perceives to be a feature of her nobleman friends is unusual in its frankness: 'vostre plaisir gist à deshonorer les femmes, et vostre honneur à tuer les hommes en guerre: qui sont deux pointz formellement contraires à la loy de Dieu.'⁴⁶ More common was a tendency to regard sin as a function of social decorum: it was held to be less significant if it remained hidden. Surprisingly, the virtuous Longarine touches upon this notion when she is reminded by Geburon that, according to the Gospel, committing adultery in the mind is as sinful as committing it in the flesh. Her defence, that 'la bonté de Dieu est si grande, que, sans accusateur, il ne nous jugera point', links the forgiving nature of God with judgement in the human sphere; where propriety is maintained, the processes of confession and redemption can remain private and personal, sparing society the shame of public transgression.⁴⁷ As the century progresses, this preoccupation becomes ever more significant: Boucher observes that in a collection of poetry published in 1604, the future Cardinal du Perron declares, with reference to the sins of the flesh: '"Péché n'est plus péché quand il est bien celé"',⁴⁸ and this indeed appears to have been a principle endorsed by many.

Confessor's handbooks were widely consulted at the French court for their discussion of adultery and of the nature of the sin that would ensue from its practice. A well-known manual, *La Somme des pechez, et le remede d'iceux* by Jean Benedicti, is of particular interest in its treatment of this theme because it suggests that the sin committed in the act of adultery is the more extreme if the effects of the illegal liaison become visible through pregnancy. In other words, according to Benedicti, a woman sins more profoundly than her lover because she alone must bear the social stigma of lost honour:

En matiere d'adultere les femmes offensent plus grievement et plus perilleusement que les hommes, à raison premierement pour le regard du dehonneur et infamie: [...] mais l'homme qui est creé à l'image de Dieu, et qui est le chief de la femme, n'offense - il pas plus grievement? Oui bien *intensivement*, mais non pas *extensivement* [...] c'est à dire, que l'adultere de l'homme n'est pas de si grande estendue, et ne traîne pas tant d'inconveniens apres soy, que celuy de la femme.⁴⁹

Benedicti's elucidation of the 'inconveniens' incurred by women who commit adultery merely reaffirms that which every noblewoman at the French court knew to be true. His contention that their sin is the greater because of their sexuality is, moreover, further evidence of a perceived imbalance in status between men and women which the external social structures played out in the game of Perfect Love sought to discount. Those works which contributed to the anti-women polemic in the *Querelle des*

Femmes debate show clearly that throughout the sixteenth century in France there was a strong body of opinion which continued to regard women, and even noblewomen, as the second sex, hampered by inherent weaknesses which rendered them incapable of fulfilling significant roles in the public arena.⁵⁰ Paradoxically, the spiritual and social equality offered to noblewomen who espoused chastity was, seen in a certain light, the most telling evidence of the presence of such weaknesses.

The androgyne model of course sought to negate these inferences, and its optimistic assessment of male/female relations was so enthusiastically endorsed by the highly contrived courtly literature and entertainment of the time that issues of sexual inequality on religious and physiological grounds were often glossed over. In the minds of individual courtiers, however, these differences exerted subtle but pervasive influences upon socio-sexual relations which undermined the egalitarian ethos of the androgyne. Marguerite de Navarre demonstrates in the *Heptaméron* that male and female courtiers speak different religious languages, each often impenetrable to the other sex. These languages, and the ideology which lay behind them, impinged markedly upon the social rituals of masculine pursuit and feminine beauty, rendering seemingly complementary codes of conduct incompatible at a higher level. It is not simply, in this evangelical work, that Marguerite intervenes to impose religious direction on areas of court life which had none, but that she clarifies that noblemen and noblewomen

conducted their lives according to different, and frequently superficial notions of religious and moral order.

Du Perron's assertion that 'péché n'est plus péché quand il est bien celé' is, for example, a concept which assumes prime importance in the religious rhetoric used by the male devisants in the *Heptaméron*, Dagoucin excepted. As far as they are concerned, public indiscretion is a social sin which must be avoided, while physical union is a natural product of love, a God-given gift which should not be regarded as sinful, or only in a very minor capacity, because it is passionate and therefore beyond the control of reason. Saffredent eloquently defends this point of view with reference to the Gospel of John, declaring that love, and even passion are powerful means by which man can come to know God:

Ung homme bien fort amoureux, quoy qu'il face, ne peult pecher, sinon de peché veniel; car je suis seur que, si l'amour le tient parfaitement lyé, jamais la raison ne sera escoutée ny en son cueur ny en son entendement. [...] Encores je croy que Dieu ne se courrouce point de tel peché, veu que c'est ung degré pour monter à l'amour parfaite de luy, où jamais nul ne monta, qu'il n'ait passé par l'eschelle de l'amour de ce monde. Car saint Jehan dict: Comment aymeriez-vous Dieu, que vous ne voyez point, si vous n'aymez celluy que vous voyez?⁵¹

The male devisants reveal by their stance here and elsewhere that they believe action and involvement, rather than renunciation and resistance, to be virtues acceptable to God. On more than one occasion, they lampoon the

restrictive nature of the codified rituals attached to love as sinful, and call for a return to a prelapsarian harmony in which natural law governed man's affections. Saffredent asks 'est-il plus grande vertu que d'aymer comme Dieu le commande? Il me semble que c'est beaucoup mieulx faict d'aymer une femme comme femme, que d'en ydolatrer plusieurs comme on fait d'une ymaige.'⁵² He pursues the same theme further on in the work, when he paints a scene of prelapsarian bliss, in which 'l'amour [...] estoit si naifve et forte que nulle dissimullation n'y avoit lieu.' He laments that eventually 'l'avarice et le peché vindrent saisir le cueur et l'honneur' and that, consequently, 'ilz en chasserent dehors Dieu et l'amour', leaving 'ypocrisie' in their place. Some women continued to love truly, Saffredent explains, while others were consumed by the 'ypocrisie', which they began to call 'honneur'. The harmony of society was so impaired as a result that 'mesmes celes qui ayment parfaitement, dissimullent, estimant vertu estre vice'. In the present age, only the most astute women understand that 'leur vray honneur gist à monstrier la pudicité du cueur, qui ne doibt vivre que d'amour et non point se honorer du vice de dissimullation.'⁵³

This fable is the most clear exposition of a commonplace and predictable male interpretation of the chaste Perfect Love discourse: that it misrepresents the true lustful tendencies of women, who are therefore hypocrites when they practice it, and that its myth should

be dissolved at every opportunity. Simontault goes on to clarify Saffredent's example: clearly, in the fallen society all now occupy, chaos must be prevented by the universal adoption of certain rules: love must remain 'secrete [...] aux oeilz de ceulx qui en pourroient mal juger, mais claire et congneue au moins aux deux personnes à qui elle touche.'⁵⁴ Hircan similarly upholds the worth of a pragmatic chastity which preserves social harmony, but calls for a willingness to accept desire as a valid facet of the human condition, and one which might be satiated when social dictates permit:

Je suis bien ayse, dist Hircan, d'avoir une femme qui n'est point scandaleuse, comme aussi je ne veulx point estre scandaleux; mais, quant à la chasteté de cueur, je croy qu'elle et moy sommes enfans d'Adam et d'Eve: parquoy, en bien nous mirant, n'aurons besoing de couvrir nostre nudité de feuilles, mais plustost confesser nostre fragilité.⁵⁵

Marguerite's male devisants are thus keen to persuade their female companions that there is no sin where scandal is not involved, and that there is virtue to be found in pursuing the path of natural love. That their preaching falls on deaf ears is not merely the result of feminine pride, as Hircan contends,⁵⁶ but because their ideal of love is essentially incompatible both with the chaste principles of the noblewomen present, and also with their own conceptions of noble feminine virtue. Hircan asserts that he has never found the need to repent of passion: 'Quand est de moy, je m'en suis souventesfois confessé, mais non pas gueres repenty',⁵⁷ and one imagines that he

feels as little responsibility for the potentially shameful consequences of any union as Castiglione's signor Gaspare, who rejoices that 'la vie dissoluë' of men 'ne leur cause de si grande infamie, comme les femmes'.⁵⁸

As we have seen, shame was consistently linked with female chastity throughout the sixteenth century, despite more positive affirmations of the virtue within the Perfect Love discourse; a woman's modesty was, both sexes agreed, her most powerful means of preserving honour:

Le meilleur heritage, et le plus precieuz joyau qu'une feme puisse avoir, est d'estre honteuse. Et la forteresse et defense que Nature a donné à une femme, pour defendre sa reputation, sa chasteté, et son honneur, ç'a esté la honte.⁵⁹

Given that, by common consent, responsibility for guarding against dishonour therefore rested ultimately with the noblewoman, the male case for natural, sin-free love was seemingly tainted with inconsistencies. Certainly, noblemen interpreted chastity to be a means of preserving a public appearance of honour, and saw little correlation between this virtue and private morality: this is the pragmatic chastity which many noblemen desired of their ladies, and to which many ladies acceded. It could not, however, erase the sense of sin which the threat of lost reputation provoked in the minds of most noblewomen. The assertions made by several of Marguerite's male devisants that men and women could be equal partners behind closed doors were flawed for this reason; Hircan's attempt to prove a natural

equality of the sexes, for example, overlooks entirely the very anatomical differences which force the women around him to cling to their chastity:

Nature n'a rien oblyé en elles non plus que en nous; et, pour la contraincte que elles se font de n'oser prendre le plaisir qu'elles desirent, ont changé ce vice en unq plus grand qu'elles tiennent plus honneste. C'est une gloire et cruaulté, par qui elles esperent acquerir nom d'immortalité, et ainsy se gloriffians de resister au vice de la loy de Nature (si Nature est vicieuse), se font [...] semblables aux bestes inhumaines.⁶⁰

This statement is testimony to the profusion of conflicting images relating to female sexuality extant in the minds of courtiers. Though her physiology renders any woman a potential vessel of shame if ever she submits to sexual union, Hircan chooses to present her chastity as a state of mind. Characteristically, he touches on the common notion that the desire which women suppress, to the detriment of their selves and of society, is all the more powerful because of their femaleness, because they have a physical need to satisfy strong sexual urges which their misplaced pride forces them to deny. Brantôme substantiates this view of women as naturally lascivious in his later text, explaining how 'de force belles honnestes dames' suffer death as a result of their resistance to physical desire: 'et tout pour ceste fascheuse continance, dont le principal remede (ce disent les medecins) c'est la cohabitation charnelle'.⁶¹

For most noblewomen, there is an innate attachment to the notion of sexual sin which is crucially absent from the psyche of the archetypal nobleman. This polarization of socio-sexual morality, however unacceptable to many ladies at court, was firmly understood by all, and female courtiers often saved their harshest criticism of sexual misdeeds for their own sex. Thus Parlamente, on hearing the tale of a young prince who regularly visited a monastery in order to hide his liaison with the wife of a lawyer, is prepared to accept that on each occasion: 'peult estre [...] la repentance estoit telle, que le peché luy estoit pardonné.'⁶² A later tale, in which an unfortunate victim of rape accidentally reveals to her friends that she has been deflowered, provokes a much less beneficent response from the female devisants, which in turn moves Geburon to ask: 'quel peché avoit-elle faict? Elle estoit endormye en son lict; il la menassoit de mort et de honte'. Parlamente insists the girl has committed a grave offence in making her shame public, and reminds Geburon that the much-praised Lucretia killed herself to prevent such a scandal: 'quand on a prins grand desplaisir à l'euvre, l'on en prent aussi à la memoire, pour laquelle effacer Lucesse se tua'.⁶³

The shame of sexual consummation, trivialized by those noblemen who sought to persuade their female companions of the sinlessness of hidden union, is seen to be truly abhorrent to the minds of many noblewomen. For them, God is not a compliant fellow-male who tolerates indiscretion and even blesses physical union, as He is to Hircan and others.

Rather, He is a source of perfection which can scarcely be understood in this world, and can only be approached with purity and humility. The scourge of loss of chastity, in the mind of some female *devisantes*, fractures a woman's relationship with God as it fractures her reputation in the outside world, leaving an indelible stain which taints her both spiritually and socially. Ennasuite's contention that infidelity in a woman is a sin which can be forgiven like any other is questioned by Longarine: 'Comment sçauriez-vous amender la honte? [...], car vous sçavez que, quelque chose que puisse faire une femme après ung tel mesfaict, ne sçauroit reparer son honneur?'. Ennasuite retorts with the example of Mary Magdalene, who, she declares, has 'plus d'honneur entre les hommes maintenant, que sa soeur qui estoit vierge'. Longarine's response is of particular interest: she appears not to accept that Mary's sin was wiped away through her relationship with Christ; in her eyes, Mary is praiseworthy for her penitence, which she pursued throughout her life in recognition of her heinous sin: 'Je vous confesse, dist Longarine, qu'elle est louée entre nous de la grande amour qu'elle a portée à Jesus Christ, et de sa grand penitence; mais si luy demeure le nom de *Pecheresse*.'⁶⁴

This particularly brutal view of female sexual transgression persisted throughout the century; it is the underlying motif behind the tragic tales examined earlier; it is the source of the violent acts of revenge for infidelity recounted by Brantôme and by Marguerite.⁶⁵ The

fact that culpability in this area was placed so squarely upon the shoulders of women was extremely problematic, moreover, since, as Castiglione's Gaspare pointed out, the consequent compulsion upon men to be chaste was minimal. Even in the public arena, the chaste approach to courtship required of the nobleman was dangerously linked with an ideology of pursuit and conquest which could easily provoke indiscretion: the risk to many noblewomen who consummated their union sexually was that their lover, eager to gloat, would reveal the truth behind their acts of dissimulation. Such a situation presents to the modern reader a disquieting picture of a society in which women were publicly represented, and therefore potentially misrepresented, by men. Those women who enjoyed a degree of sexual equality in private were deprived of social equality in the public arena, where they depended on their partners, as much as on their own skills of dissimulation, for their reputation:

La plus chaste du monde peut estre tenuë pour la plus lascive, si les deportemens ne sont bien reglez, et la plus folastre pour la plus continence [sic], pourveu qu'elle ayt un amy qui la sçache conduire par la discretion.⁶⁶

ENFORCERS OF A MORALLY CHASTE REGIME? FRENCH ROYAL WOMEN AND THE PUBLIC CALL FOR PURITY

Royal women bore the weight of any sexual imprudence particularly heavily: royal mistress-taking was necessarily

a public affair, and though in principle honourable kings would certainly take care to distance their mistresses from the royal household, these mistresses were nevertheless held in high esteem by the court, and often played a significant role in public life, as we have seen in the case of Diane de Poitiers. Royal women were therefore obliged to be tolerant, and relied heavily upon the discretion and sensitivity of their husbands in order to retain their own dignity in the face of freely-stated competition.

Marguerite de Valois, who jeopardized her own reputation on several occasions by taking a series of lovers, fell victim to her husband's lack of concern in this domain. Henri de Navarre was renowned for his chaotic, unrefined approach to mistress-taking: he cared little for public procedures of courtship and was not much concerned with notions of honour. In 1579, he fell in love with Françoise de Montmorency, known as 'Fosseuse', a member of Marguerite's entourage. Fosseuse, Marguerite recalls in her *Mémoires*, held a powerful influence over the King of Navarre: 'Elle possedoit de sorte le roy mon mary, qu'en peu de temps je le cogneus tout changé. Il s'estrangeoit de moy, il se cachoit, et n'avoit plus ma presence si agreable'.⁶⁷ When Fosseuse fell pregnant, therefore, Henri refused to send her away against her wishes, and even requested his wife to assist at her delivery, which took place at the chateau of Nérac. Marguerite declares she obliged for the sake of the king,

who now feared 'd'un costé qu'elle [Fosseuse] fust découverte, et de l'autre qu'elle fust mal secourue, car il l'aimoit fort'.⁶⁸ She goes on to express her relief that Fosseuse's daughter was stillborn, but regrets that 'on ne peust empescher que ce bruict ne fust semé par tout le chasteau', and that eventually the court in Paris heard of the indignity heaped upon the Queen of Navarre by her husband.⁶⁹

Henri's lack of discretion did not stop there, for when Marguerite returned to Paris on instructions from the king, she was accompanied by Fosseuse, and her husband ordered his wife to defend his lover publicly before the court. Marguerite's reply to her husband's missive reflects her shock that he should wish to compromise further her reputation:

Vous m'écrivez, monsieur, [...] que pour fermer la bouche au roi, aux reines ou à ceux qui m'en parleront, que je leur dise que vous l'aimez, et que je l'aime pour cela; cette réponse serait bonne parlant d'un de vos serviteurs ou servantes, mais de votre maîtresse!⁷⁰

A letter to the King of Navarre regarding this situation, written by Catherine de Medici on 12 June 1582, is strongly condemnatory of what is perceived to be dishonourable and irresponsible behaviour on his part. Catherine's outrage at her son-in-law's misconduct gives some indication of the trust she expects any royal woman to be able to place in her husband: a trust which, she emphasizes, is based on an obvious need to maintain decorum

at court. Thus she expresses shock that the king did not allow his wife to send Fosseuse home when her predicament first became apparent: '[vous] saviés qu'il estoit raisonnable qu'elle [Marguerite] l'envoysiés chés sa mère: chose véritable, que la rèsou le vouloyt, non pas dès l'heure, mais dès qu'elle fut si folle de s'abandonner à vous.'⁷¹ Catherine's attitude to marital relations expressed within the letter is never sentimental and always pragmatic. She does not expect a husband to forego the sensual pleasures of mistress-taking, but is confident in the rights of her rank, and will not tolerate her own reputation, nor that of any French queen, being scarred as a result of infidelity:

Je vous trouve bien le premier [mary] et le seul qui face, après un tel fet advenu, tenir tel langage à sa femme. J'ay eu cet honneur d'avoyr espousé le Roy mon seigneur et le vostre souverain, et de qui aviés espousé la fille: mais la chouse du monde de quoy yl estoit le plus mary, c'estoit quand yl savoit que je seuse de ses nouveles-là; et, quand Madame de Flamin fut grose, yl trouva bon quant on l'envoya, et jeamès ne n'en fait semblant, ny pire visage et moins mauvais langage. [...] Ce n'est pas la façon de traiter les femmes de bien et de tele maison, de les injurier à l'apétit d'une putain publique; car tout le monde, non seulement La France, sait l'enfant qu'ele a fet, [...] Vous estes trop bien né et de la mèsou dont elle est ysue, pour ne savoyr comment devés vivre avec la fille de votre Roy et la seur de celui qui à présant commande à tout ce royaume et à vous.⁷²

Catherine's letter clearly infers that Henri's self-indulgence amounts to an abuse of his power as a monarch and as a husband, and that his honour is tainted as a result. While high-ranking women such as she wielded the

power to criticize, and to pass judgement against such flagrant violation of the social code, they remained at the mercy of masculine discretion because their own honour was the more vulnerable and the more open to reproach. Generally speaking, the demands upon noblewomen to be seen to be chaste grew in proportion to their rank, and much was therefore expected of royal women in terms of sexual morality; they were, after all, paradigms of perfection for their sex as much as the Prince was for his. Royal mistress-taking was, in contrast, a public affair, accommodated entirely within the Perfect Love discourse by writers and perceived to be a natural facet of social interaction. If the most honoured monarchs were lauded for their discretion in this area (or for their efforts to avoid public scandal), their association with women of lower ranks and with no pretensions to noble status was nevertheless acceptable conduct within the public arena.

This rather flexible protocol of male sexual mores, operated by numerous noblemen, had to be tolerated and accommodated within the socio-sexual comportment of the noblewoman; while a high-ranking court lady could reasonably expect loyal service from her lover, she might also be forced to tolerate him seeking sexual gratification elsewhere, and particularly with women of a lower estate. Indeed, this procedure appears to have been such common practice that certain high-ranking women would offer their own servants and maids, either to test their lovers,⁷³ or for their pleasure. Boucher cites a letter of Marguerite de

Valois to the Vicomte de Turenne, written before he became her lover, in which she invites him to enjoy a sexual relationship with certain of her 'filles d'honneur': 'Si vous plaignés la paine d'aler à la court, craignant que les filles i soit [...] trop sugetes, vous trouvesré les miennes avec plus de liberté pour vous anpaicher de vous annuier'.⁷⁴

As we have seen in chapter four, sensuality unquestionably played an important role in the lives of many noblewomen, who, if prudent, could not only enjoy honourable relationships with noblemen of equal rank, but could also enter into sexual liaisons with other, lower-ranked men at court. This latter activity was inevitably more dangerous to their reputation, since such men were not versed in the social code of discretion, and for this reason any liaison of this sort was strongly discouraged. The mere suggestion of love between noblewomen and men of lower estates was enough to provoke disgust and ridicule, and courtiers were at pains to divorce it from publicly acceptable rituals of affection, as Brantôme wryly observes:

J'ay cogneu plusieurs dames qui ont dit pis que pendre des femmes qui aymoient en lieux bas, comme leurs secretaires, valletz de chambre et autres personnes basses, et detestoient devant le monde cest amour plus que poison; et toutesfois elles s'y abandonnoient autant, ou plus, qu'à d'autres.⁷⁵

Royal women found themselves in a uniquely complex position at court, thanks to this aspect of protocol. Their royal lineage guaranteed them a privileged and unequalled status within society, a fact which distanced them from the rest of the nobility both socially and spiritually. Naturally, they were expected to be paragons of feminine virtue: chaste, self-controlled and strong, but because of their unique rank they found themselves somewhat estranged from the ideal of the courtship ritual so popular at court, since few suitors could truthfully be classed their equals, and therefore worthy. Royal women were consequently more restricted in social relations than other high-ranking ladies, and as a result appeared to develop for themselves a stricter code of chastity than their fellow noblewomen, which was endorsed wholeheartedly by the court.

The *Heptaméron* is evidence of an early attempt, on the part of a French Queen, to impose a new and different order upon the socio-sexual mores of the court environment, an order inspired both by the femaleness and by the royal situation of Marguerite de Navarre. Marguerite had astutely perceived that masculine and feminine virtues were mismatched, driven by a conflict of interests between desire and chastity encoded in a language which attempted to hide these discrepancies. She seeks to reveal honestly the true effects of that language, and offers an alternative vocabulary of evangelical Christianity as a means of returning moral virtue to the court. In accordance with this aim, the microcosm she creates stresses healthy

respect for the institution of marriage as a divinely instated ordonnance. The ideal of marriage is well-received by the female devisantes: Oisille enthuses that 'si l'on n'en abuse, je tiens mariage le plus beau et le plus seur estat qui soit au monde'.⁷⁶ Several of the female company suggest that even in the real world, where marriage is subject to abuse, women have a duty to remain faithful to their husbands: Longarine claims 'Les femmes de bien [...] n'ont besoing d'autre chose que de l'amour de leurs mariz, qui seulement les peuvent contenter'.⁷⁷

This call to fidelity comes in the face of repeated evidence of masculine infidelity, and noblewomen are urged on no account to emulate their husbands' behaviour, but to uphold the standards of Christian marriage in a society where few husbands are faithful to their wives 'comme Christ et son Eglise'.⁷⁸ Longarine concludes her tale of a young wife who took a suitor when her husband became unfaithful (nouvelle 15) by suggesting that her behaviour was inappropriate in a 'femme de bien', asserting that for noblewomen 'de tant plus les occasions en sont données grandes, de tant plus se doyvent monstrer vertueuses à resister et vaincre le mal en bien, et non pas rendre mal pour mal'.⁷⁹ Longarine's heroine has not compromised her virtue of chastity by taking a lover (she declares she did no more than kiss him when they were alone together), but the very inclination to look beyond her marriage for pleasure is enough cause for criticism.

Women in Marguerite's Utopia police their own codes of virtue much more strictly than most noblemen, and indeed, more strictly than many noblewomen living in the 'real world' of the French court. This, I believe, has less to do with the fact that the *Heptaméron* is an early work, undoubtedly inspired by Neoplatonic doctrine, than one might expect. Rather, it is, in large part, the result of the author's royal status: of the fact that she occupies a position in society which demands nothing less than chaste perfection. Marguerite imposes her own evangelical direction upon this obligation, but it is culture, as well as faith, which leads her to advocate such high moral virtue for high-ranking and royal women. Her ascetic stance is, suprisingly, applauded in Brantôme's later work, where he follows blistering criticism of proud noblewomen who carefully guard their chastity at all times with a panegyric of the chaste virtues of royal women, including Elizabeth of Spain and Louise de Lorraine.⁸⁰ On the subject of the latter, he proclaims that:

On peut et doit-on louer ceste princesse de beaucoup: car, en son mariage, elle s'est comportée avec le roy son mary aussi sagement, chastement et loyaument que le neu duquel elle fut liée en conjunction avec luy a demeuré tousjours si ferme et indissoluble, qu'on ne l'a jamais trouvé deffait ny delié.⁸¹

He goes on to recount with some admiration that when Louise was advised to seek secretly to become pregnant by someone other than her husband, who was sterile, in order to secure for herself the hallowed position of queen mother in the

event of Henri's death, she refused, 'aymant mieux apuyer sa grandeur sur sa chasteté et vertu que sur une lignée sortie de vice.'⁸²

While Catherine de Medici pursued a similar path of purity throughout her lifetime, pledging her allegiance firmly to her husband, and then to the Crown, rather than courting the pleasures of love, Marguerite de Valois was the scandalous exception to the ascetic reputation established by the sixteenth-century queens of France. Aware that her rank made extra-marital liaisons extremely perilous, she appears to have adopted a masculine determination to pursue sensual and spiritual satisfaction in love, irrespective of the consequences to her good name.

Curiously, Marguerite claimed for herself an equal right to take lovers by asserting her royal position and her divine right to make decisions about her private life which were not open to question, as so many male royal figures were wont to do. She owed the freedom to behave in such a way partly to her husband, who was as indifferent to her liaisons as she was to his,⁸³ and partly to her ancestry, which furnished her with numerous strong male role models. Eliane Viennot, tracing the development of Marguerite's relationship with Bussy, observes that:

La reine de Navarre, toutefois, est dans une position ambiguë. D'abord parce qu'elle ne craint pas la répression: son mari seul est en droit de l'exercer, et il ne le fait pas, un peu par intérêt, beaucoup par indifférence; le sens de l'honneur n'est pas son fort. Dès lors, elle peut

agir selon ses propres penchants, qui ne l'entraînent pas [...] à se cacher. [...] Pourquoi rougir d'un sentiment noble que seule la convention sociale condamne, alors que les poètes le chantent, alors que toute la littérature le porte aux nues, alors que ses père et grandpère l'ont vécu à la face du monde?⁸⁴

However, one senses Catherine de Medici's disgust that her daughter should openly abandon the feminine protocol of a French queen in a letter written by the queen mother to Bellièvre, her representative and advisor in Bearn, in April 1584. She is aware that Marguerite refuses to be critical of her husband's wayward behaviour, in order that she might retain her own freedom to take lovers, and demands that Bellièvre try to put a stop to this unacceptably libertine conduct:

Ausi, je vous pryé luy dyre qu'ele ne fase plus coment ayle fesouyt, de feyr cas de celes à qui yl feyra l'amour; car yl pansera qu'ele souyt byen ayse qu'il ayme aultre chause, afin qu'ele en puyse fayre de mesme.⁸⁵

Marguerite, by all accounts, had no intention of heeding her mother's advice, and pursued her love affairs with great enthusiasm and desire, using the language of Neoplatonic affection to stress the spiritual dimension of the unions into which she entered.⁸⁶ To this extent, she carved for herself a role which was neither wholly masculine, nor entirely feminine within the Perfect Love discourse.⁸⁷ Viennot puts forward the example of Marguerite's relationship with Champvallou, in which, she suggests, the queen apportioned the feminine role of beauty to her lover, and devoted herself to praising him in poetry

and in letters as her 'beau coeur', 'beau tout', 'beau soleil' and 'bel ange, beau miracle de la nature'.⁸⁸ Marguerite, it seems, was keen to fulfil the masculine role of pursuer in this way (Viennot believes she was inspired by the poetic tradition of Petrarch, Scève and Du Bellay),⁸⁹ though she also demanded that her lover learn to praise her in similar fashion.

It would seem that Marguerite strove for a relationship founded upon the principles of absolute equality, in which there was no male or female, only perfect union.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, she sees herself as an impregnator of ideas, sowing in her lover the seeds of Perfect Love as she interprets it, and reminding him that she is in virile possession of the Word, both written and spoken, which guides their love. Catherine Bauschatz speculates that 'Marguerite de Valois, perhaps because of her station, the unusual circumstances of her life [...] does not equate reading and writing only with chastity, silence, and repression', as she believes other women writers of the period do.⁹¹ Marguerite, confident of her superiority in some sense, writes in a letter to Champvallon: 'Que vous soyez ou philosophe ou amoureux, il faut que vous condescendiez à ma raison.'⁹² Her fictional self, Uranie, in *La Ruelle mal-assortie* (a play believed to have been written by the queen during her enforced stay at Usson), reveals a similar urge to control born of a belief in the right to lead which is intimately connected with the power she owes to her rank. She is keen to shape the relationship

with her suitor according to her own Neoplatonic criteria, and is indignant at his attempts to pursue sensual pleasure in spite of her careful tutoring.⁹³ He disobeys her at his peril, she warns him, since she is not in the habit of being crossed: 'mais je suis encore plus sote de m'en soucier, comme si vous en valiez bien la peine, moy sous qui tout flechit, moy coutumiere de donner des loix à qui bon me semble, moy qui n'obeis qu'à moy-mesme.'⁹⁴

Marguerite's relationship with Champvallou was subject to similar conflicts of interest: Champvallou saw in Marguerite's Neoplatonising, spiritual ideals a lack of genuine devotion, while she persisted in reiterating the ethereal nature of their love.⁹⁵ However, the queen shows herself to be no stranger to sensuality in the celebrations of physical pleasure which conclude one of her letters to her lover, and which also end *La Ruelle mal-assortie*. These two passages, rather similar in content, serve, in context, to identify the parallel influences of sensuality and spirituality upon the life of Marguerite, and reveal a middle ground of emotions which the extreme depictions of the queen as whore and as chaste saint common to the period chose to ignore. Her letter to Champvallou ends:

Ainsi, remplie de cette divine et non vulgaire passion, je rends en imagination mille baisers à votre belle bouche, qui seule sera participante au plaisir réservé à l'âme, le méritant pour être l'instrument de tant de belles et dignes louanges où bientôt me puissé-je ravir.⁹⁶

The passage which concludes *La Ruelle* is a more sensuous description of the pleasure of the kiss, in which Uranie wallows in its power to 'ravir':

Aprochez-vous donc mon mignon, car vous estes mieux prest que loin; et puis vous estes plus propre pour satisfaire au goust qu'à l'oüye. Recherchons d'entre un nombre infiny de baisers celui qui sera le plus savoureux pour le continuer. O qu'ils sont doux et bien assaisonez. Cela me ravit, et n'y a si petite partie en moy qui n'y participe, et ou ne furette et n'arrive quelque petite etincelle de volupté.⁹⁷

The ecstasies of the kiss, Marguerite knew, could be recounted in public without shock or shame, though it was certainly unusual that a noblewoman, and particularly a royal woman, should choose to do this. Marguerite was perhaps as ambitious to explore the riches of sensual and spiritual love as her mother was to play a political role, and indeed as Marguerite de Navarre was to penetrate the language of religious beatitude. Each queen addressed the problems of rank and femininity in an exceptional way; each entered a masculine arena as a virago figure without reproducing verbatim a masculine point of view; each moulded a feminine identity linked to an ideal of chastity which was both dignified and liberating. The extreme positions which each queen came to personify, however, rendered all three open to criticism by certain courtiers who expected silence, rather than opinion, of female ruling figures. French noble society, it seems, was not wholly prepared for the sometimes radical contributions of its leading ladies.⁹⁸

THE ANDROGYNE MODEL AND THE INFLUX OF DISHARMONY - A
CONCLUSION

Behind a facade of decorum a multitude of variable social conditions complicated and ultimately destroyed the code of Perfect Love at the sixteenth-century French court. The philosophy of mutual self-giving, respect and devotion which the discourse put forward was undermined at source by a male distaste for chastity, and female obligation to be chaste. According to the pragmatic definitions of the court, the chaste beauty of a noblewoman could not of itself be a mark of transcendence, as metaphysical poets had pictured it, because chastity was a physiological imperative, practised of necessity by any woman who valued her reputation. The lady of the court could only begin to demonstrate any individual moral responsibility, therefore, by being tested in love and allowing herself to be tempted without submitting. By appearing physically desirable, she showed herself worthy of male pursuit, and thereafter was able to practise the virtue of resistance. Héroët describes this bizarre ritual of courtship in his *Description d'une femme de bien*:

Premierement il faut qu'elle soit belle
Et desirable, affin que sa beaulté
Appelle ceulx qui forcent loyaulté,
Qu'on face vers et faictz d'armes pour elle,
Que l'un la loue et l'autre la querelle.
A une layde on ne demande rien,
Nul ne se mect en effort d'estre sien;
Sans la prier, son visaige esconduict;
Et ne se doibt nommer femme de bien,
A qui laydeur a donné saufconduict.⁹⁹

This intimate relationship between masculine pursuit and feminine honour, which forces the noblewoman to be sexually desirable in order to prove her virtuous nature is also acknowledged by Geburon in the *Heptaméron*: 'En bonne foy, [...] je m'esbahys des differentes amours des femmes, et voy bien que celles qui en ont plus d'amour ont plus de vertu, mais celles qui en ont moins, se voulans faindre vertueuses, le dissimulent.'¹⁰⁰

Marguerite de Navarre is one of the earliest writers to perceive the impossibility of the Perfect Love discourse in its social form; the gulf that she depicts between the vocalized aspirations of many of her characters, who seem publicly to endorse the chastity code, and the hidden agendas behind their words, constantly draws the reader's attention to the inconsistency of the jargon spoken by courtiers.¹⁰¹ The world revealed in the *Heptaméron* shows socio-sexual relations to be antagonistic to an extreme and ultimately pessimistic degree. Clearly the development of the Perfect Love discourse over the course of the century did allow for the private, sexually-fulfilling relationships which suited both men and women without proving too disruptive to the social harmony of the court: 'sous l'influence du néo-platonisme et du pétrarquisme', Boucher explains, 'se développa, au sein des élites de la fin du XVIe siècle, la conception de l'amour honnête qui mettait la femme sur un piédestal sans la rendre inaccessible.'¹⁰² However, many who watched the game of

love being played out at court were aware of its fragility. Though emulated by the majority, *Amadis de Gaule* was often criticized for exerting an unfavourable influence upon courtiers, and particularly upon noblewomen. Jacques Tahureau cites the work as a source of affected language and behaviour,¹⁰³ while Brantôme indicts it as a cause of corruption amongst young (unmarried) ladies: 'Je voudrois avoir autant de centaines d'escus comme il y a eu de filles, tant du monde que des relligieuses, qui se sont jeadis esmeues, pollues et depucellées par la lecture des *Amadis de Gaule*.'¹⁰⁴

The discourse was unreliable and open to abuse because, as we have seen, men and women interpreted its meaning differently. Indeed, its effect upon the court community was so pervasive precisely because it could be understood at several different levels: non-physical friendships between men and women and (often short-lived) sexual liaisons were depicted using identical vocabulary and identical icons of virtue. It was Marguerite de Navarre's discernment of this phenomenon, and her graphic portrayal of it in the *Heptaméron*, which ensured that this work proved to be a prophetic observation of the dangers latent in the love code:

Marguerite de Navarre, admet donc que cet amour parfait soit un mot à double et même à triple sens, tantôt riche de multiples exigences morales et philosophiques, tantôt confondu avec le langage ordinaire de la galanterie ou simple intensif propre seulement à distinguer d'une passagère fantaisie l'amour qui s'inscrit dans la durée.¹⁰⁵

The Perfect Love discourse relied heavily upon notions of reciprocity: male pursuit was a response to female beauty, chaste resistance a response to male pursuit, tempered courtship a response to chaste resistance, until finally, according to the example *Amadis* put forward, the female beloved was convinced by her lover's sincerity, and mutually satisfying sexual union was achieved. This ideal pattern was, however, jeopardized whenever either party refused to read the discourse at this pragmatic level and insisted upon an ascetic or spiritualized interpretation of the chastity icon. It was usual for a noblewoman to decline the attentions of a serviteur on these grounds, sometimes through simple lack of interest in her pursuer, sometimes through genuine concern for her reputation. He, typically, would believe sexual union to be justified in private and, unsure whether his beloved's refusal was motivated by uninterest or pride, would persist in asserting her duty to respond to his attentions. Saffredent, for example, echoes the pragmatic principles of *Amadis* when he explains the Perfect Love code:

Mais quant nous sommes à part, où l'amour seul est juge de noz contenancez, nous sçavons très bien qu'elles sont femmes et nous hommes; et à l'heure, le nom de *maistresse* est converti en *amye*, et le nom de *serviteur* en *amy*.¹⁰⁶

His ambitions for sensual fulfilment in a relationship are dependent, he is aware, upon the rituals of public honour being accomplished. He perceives accordingly that once a

good reputation is established, and his service has proved to be worthy, his lady will wish to yield as he has wished to conquer, and he foresees the institution of a new and entirely private harmony based upon real equality in natural love. Brantôme translates the social code of servitude in precisely the same manner, warning women that if they respond to the advances of a serviteur, they are committing themselves to a physical relationship from which they cannot escape:

Il ne faut jamais qu'une dame honneste se mesle d'attirer à soy un gallant gentilhomme, et se laisse servir à luy, si elle ne le contente à la fin selon ses merites et ses services. Il faut qu'elle se propose cela si elle ne veut estre perdue, mesme si elle a à faire à un honneste et gallant homme.¹⁰⁷

These certitudes are heavily based around a doctrine of conformity which was essential to the androgyne model around which Perfect Love was constructed. At its most philosophical the discourse presented the paradigm of eternally predestined lovers, inescapably united by fate and willing to engage in a union which would ensure spiritual and social blessing. In turn these transcendent properties of Neoplatonism lent weight to the imperative for reciprocation in love in its socialized form by implying the intervention of a higher power in the procedure. Serviteurs eager to win their ladies' affections were wont to employ Neoplatonic jargon to strengthen their case: Saffredent admits as much in conversation with Geburon on the subject of courtship:

Geburon [...] vous usez encores des termes, dont nous avons accoustumé tromper les plus fines et d'estre escoutez des plus saiges. Car qui est celle qui nous fermera ses oreilles quant nous commancerons à l'honneur et à la vertu? [...] Nous couvrons nostre diable du plus bel ange que nous pouvons trouver. Et, soubz ceste couverture, avant que d'estre congneuz, recepvons beaucoup de bonnes cheres.¹⁰⁸

Many courtiers less openly cynical than Saffredent remained convinced that if they served a lady who could suitably be deemed their true other half, by dint of her rank and reputation, they would eventually reap the benefits of their efforts in sexual fulfilment. Jean de la Jessée paints an accurate picture of the courtier's ambitions in his *Second Livre de Grasinde*, in which a worthy knight endeavours to serve Grasinde, a married lady of high moral standing. The knight complains that his soul has been trapped by his lady, who welcomes his advances, but is unwilling to commit herself to him physically:

J'eusse pourtant brisé ce lieu qui m'engage,
 Mais depuis qu'on m'eust dit qu'en goustant mon
 langage,
 Tu ne faignois chez toy de priser les discours:
 Des discours je pensay de venir aus amours,
 Des amours aus baisers, des baisers aus blandices,
 Et d'elles aus faveurs: puis des faveurs propices
 A ce rare plaisir, qui meine un pouvre Amant
 Au port tant souhaitté d'entier contantement.¹⁰⁹

La Jessée perceives chastity to be a social virtue in the first instance: resistance for him is a mark of honour in public, while submission in private is a mark of affection and a reward for loyal service. Rigorous pursuit of a lady accordingly becomes a sanctioned ritual within the code of

courtship for the poet, since a discerning lady will look for such marks of devotion before she consents to submit:

La Chasteté de la femme ressemble
 A quelque Fort, qui defendu ne tremble
 Du premier coup, lors que l'Assiegeur caut
 Le çoint, l'affronte, et le bat, et l'assaut.[...]
 Ainsi la Dame accortement rebelle
 Fait tresbien d'estre aussi ferme, que belle,
 Quand on l'aborde, et ne doit à chascun
 Donner espoir d'un butin non-commun.[...]
 [...] elle peut bien aussi
 Flechir parfois sous l'amoureux souçi:
 Mesmes alors que celluy qui l'assiege
 A grand besoing que la douceur allege
 Ses durs travaux, et qu'il l'attire à soy
 Par un long fil et d'humblesse, et de foy.
 Je ne croy pas, faisant en ceste sorte,
 Qu'à la parfin la fortr'esse il n'emporte,
 Si quelque doubte, ou sottte opinion
 D'honneur taché, n'entre en l'affection
 De sa Guerriere [...]
 Encor tousjours ce luy sera grand aise
 D'en choysir un qui dessus tous luy plaise,
 Et qui gaillard se baignant en cest heur,
 Porte le nom de loyal Serviteur.¹¹⁰

All is well with the ritual, as La Jessée makes clear, provided that no 'sotte opinion | D'honneur taché' interferes with the equation. Numerous tales in the *Heptaméron*, however, testify to the fact that submission is less possible, and very often less desirable for court women than male opinion would prefer.¹¹¹ Clearly, then, the intricacies of the social code frequently confounded both sexes, and yet the court persevered with a model of social interaction governed by the processes of masculine pursuit and feminine response. Those who stood outside of this pattern were often subject to ridicule: Dagoucin's spiritual approach to love is received with contempt by the other male *devisants*;¹¹² Brantôme refers to women who

refuse to be drawn into sexual liaisons as 'putes dans l'ame et chastes du corps', and to nuns as 'paouvres relligieuses' who 'si elles avoient liberte (au moins aucunes), se voudroient raffraischir comme les mondaines'.¹¹³ Even victims of the flawed social code, such as Floride in Marguerite de Navarre's tenth novella, continue to adhere to its language: after Amadour has attempted to rape her, she pronounces him 'le plus vertueux du monde' before retiring to a convent to end her days in contemplation.¹¹⁴

An anonymous fictional text written at the end of the century provides an interesting study of the etiquette of courtship and particularly of the perceived role of women in courtship rituals. *Les Chastes Amours d'Helene de Marthes*, published in 1597, examines the fortunes of a young noblewoman entering the service of the Queen of France. Once at court, Helene de Marthes swiftly becomes renowned for her beauty and virtue, and is consequently the object of much attention from eager suitors. Her popularity is short-lived, however, because she uses her chastity not to entice, nor to test worthy noblemen, but as a means of guarding her freedom. Helene shuns the androgyne model completely, refusing to consider marriage, which she regards as 'le joug et servitude des filles',¹¹⁵ and dismissing suitors with a bluntness so devastating that few recover.

The Queen and her parents urge Helene to be more welcoming towards her admirers, while the author of the text warns that 'la severité portoit grand prejudice à sa reputation, pour estre une barriere empeschant le bonheur de quelque riche et honorable alliance.'¹¹⁶ She remains unrepentant, in spite of the arrival of the noble and chivalrous Valentin du Soleil, who is universally admired and devoted to her alone.

Valentin provides Helene with loyal service: he slays a dragon on her father's estate, and returns to court victorious in order to proclaim in her presence that 'l'execution s'en doit referer aux divines graces et beautez dont le ciel vous a esté large donneur, qui m'ont animé à ce desseing'.¹¹⁷ Her fears about marriage and her desires to remain free at court are largely dismissed by Valentin, who echoes the belief of the rest of the court when he assures her that:

Vostre qualité se trouveroit tellement accreuë qu'il y auroit fort peu de Dames de marque qui ne vous cedassent la preference aux bonnes et honorables compagnies, ce que je vous prie, mademoiselle, de mettre en consideration, pour me traiter selon que le requiert ma fidelité.¹¹⁸

As the story progresses, so the author and the main protagonists show themselves to be increasingly antipathetic to Helene's attitude. Her decision to leave the court is greeted with much relief by courtiers, who have come to regard 'sa presence tres pernicieuse en leur cour, où se perdoit plus de jeunesse à son subject que

l'inclemence de la guerre ou contagion n'en eust peu faire deperir.'¹¹⁹ Her reluctance to conform to the standards of the society in which she finds herself is finally regarded not as a mark of obstinacy, but as a one of sinfulness: by the end of the work she has been completely dehumanized by the author, who describes her as a 'desloialle, inhumaine damoiselle surpassant en cruauté les plus enragez tygres de la Lybie, et qui devance en ingratitude les paricides viperes!'¹²⁰

Helene's final rejection of Valentin causes his death, and the court mourns the loss of a courageous nobleman whose honourable service will be missed. Divine vengeance is cast upon the sinner, who is transformed into a wild beast and goes to live in a forest, heaping disgrace and unhappiness upon her parents.¹²¹ Finally, she is hunted down, and her fur used to decorate the garments of courtly men and women in order to remind young lovers to marry well, and to respond without arrogance to the attentions of their other halves.¹²²

This curious tale provides the modern reader with a clear exposition of an obvious flaw within the androgyne model: that the progress of a relationship supposedly divinely-augured could be thwarted at any moment by human indifference or ignorance. *Les Chastes Amours d'Helene de Marthes* is, of course, an exercise in idealism: Helene, like Drion in Belleforest's *La Pyrenee*,¹²³ is a rogue dissenter introduced to provide contrast with the happy

norm of well-ordered, mutually-reciprocated social relations based around the androgyne formula. In this respect, however, the text confirms the extent to which the supposedly female virtue of chastity was attached to the desires and directives of men: though Helene remains perfectly virtuous throughout, her chastity is discounted because, seemingly, it has no purpose and takes no account of the opposite sex. In the final scenes of the work, her beast-like behaviour is synonymous with passionate excess, though she has not given way to passion, but simply refused to adhere to the rules of the Perfect Love game. That game, however, was so tied up with notions of right order, both philosophical and social, that to refuse to take part was to refuse to recognize the dynamic control of chaos by reason, and hence to dismiss the power of reason itself. We have seen this theme emerge strongly during the court fêtes at Fontainebleau and Bayonne; then, as here, it was not men who declined to play the game, but women, and they, like Helene, were rendered impotent because of their lack of commitment.¹²⁴

It is certain that chastity as an icon can be distinguished from chastity as a moral virtue by the tangible bond of the former with the Perfect Love discourse, and therefore with the political, social, spiritual and physical needs of the male sex. For all the authenticity the chaste discourse gave to women, in terms of acclaiming their contribution to the social and spiritual order, it becomes clear that disharmony was

always likely to exist in a code of love which did not value individual freedom. Works such as the *Heptaméron*, Brantôme's discussions and the memoirs and letters of courtiers testify to the real and constant presence of friction; it seems the court could see no better framework for conducting social relations than that afforded by the androgyne model, and yet the impossibility of marrying the cult of perfection with the reality of human frailty was increasingly apparent.

It is interesting to note that, even as the court fêtes of the latter half of the sixteenth century trumpeted the triumphs of androgynous union, there nevertheless remained a body of opinion which saw in these often ambiguous alliances of male and female virtue grounds for mistrust and unease. In contrast with the energetic optimism evident in earlier works which focus more exclusively upon the spiritual merits of androgyny, later works which propagate the Perfect Love discourse acquire a social vein, and, indeed, find themselves in symbiotic relation to refined, even precious modes of behaviour outplayed within the court. The social discourse of love thus acquires a life independently of the text which, rather than directing philosophical understandings of androgyny, has to content itself with either mirroring or criticizing the social order. Ficino's beneficent universal division of labour amongst male, female and hermaphrodite elements within the celestial and terrestrial universe is, as we have seen,

considerably qualified by such eminently social considerations, which are heavily influenced by pragmatic issues of public decency with respect to sexual practice.¹²⁵

Ronsard's *Le Satyre*, written in 1569 and thus a product of the era which also saw the creation of the Fontainebleau and Bayonne festivities, takes up the theme of cross-dressing and cross-fertilization of virtue which the French Renaissance court held dear, but paints it with a rather darker and more subversive hue than those pageants ultimately chose to explore. Ronsard tells the story of Faunus and Iole from Ovid's *Fasti*, but chooses at more than one point to parallel his tale with modes of behaviour illustrative of the court. Thus Iole's dress, reminiscent of the garb of 'noz dames de Blois, | Ou d'Orleans, ou de Tours, ou d'Amboise' rivals the lion-skin and club of her lover Hercules, so that her virtue and social influence is seen to be at least as extensive as his own.¹²⁶ This having been established, Iole's deprecation of her sex in lines 89-98 appears comically disproportionate to her effect upon both Hercules and the watching Faunus: 'Nostre sexe est imbecil, inutil'. She does however state, in a more trenchant remark, that any strength her sex can boast derives uniquely from physical, sexual qualities: 'Nous autres Damoiselles, | N'avons vertu sinon que sembler belles'. She therefore suggests that she exchange clothes with Hercules in order that she might experience the virago power of the 'Amazone premiere'.¹²⁷

Though this cross-dressing appears inappropriate to both parties (Hercules rips his new costume because he is too big for it while Iole buckles under the weight of the lion skin), they persist with the game, and are still wearing their 'habitz monstrueux' at nightfall.¹²⁸ They take refuge in a cave which, Ronsard reveals, is a haven for erotic pleasure, where nymphs stray from the watchful eye of the chaste Diana. The lustful Faunus enters this sanctuary and finding the couple asleep, mistakenly endeavours to rape Hercules in his female guise. This activity provokes horror and Hercules reacts with thoroughly masculine violence towards Faunus, behaviour which underlines the unnaturalness of the satyr's attempted act.¹²⁹ Rapidly Hercules divests himself of the weaker and sexually alluring mask which Iole encouraged him to wear and resumes his more natural role which, according to his lover, consists in being: 'Vif aux combats, [...] | propre pour commander'.¹³⁰

Ronsard follows this re-emergence of Hercule's dominant maleness by subverting any residual celebration of androgyny in a surprisingly terse and serious conclusion. Hercules is not amused but angered by the ramifications of his ambiguous appearance, as we have seen,¹³¹ and the poet likewise asserts defiantly the importance of right order in social and sexual terms by upholding the heterosexual male and female roles enshrined in the marriage contract. He laments the fact that in the present age 'on ne voit plus

qu'un filz resemble au pere', advocates that adultery be punished as Hercules punished Faunus, and indicts women as the cause of this misrule: 'Faute, [...] qu'on ne punist la mere | (Qui se desbauche, et qui honnist sa foy) | Par la rigueur d'une severe loy.'¹³² This discontent stands in sharp contrast to the happy mutual appreciation which exists between the sexes towards the beginning of the work, when Hercules is shown to embody the qualities of the noble warrior, and Iole, we are specifically told, matches his fortitude in sartorial elegance and physical allure. Nevertheless, Iole's apparent discontent with the weaknesses of her sex in lines 89-102 perhaps gives forewarning that the male/female parity suggested previously is highly equivocal and does not take account of a more fundamental order in which men are credited with active power and women with a passive seductiveness. The latter is clearly a threat to the smooth-running social code when it spills over into the shame of illegitimacy, and thus the link between beauty and virtue in women renders their supposed equal status spurious. Their condition is therefore emulated by the male sex at its peril, for who would trade the security of active virtue for the precariousness of sensual advantage?

Returning to the social machinations of the court, the hermaphrodite tendencies of Faunus were echoed in a number of later texts which parodied the sexual behaviour of Henri III and the *mignons* who found favour at his court, including d'Aubigné's *Les Tragiques* and a pamphlet entitled

L'Isle des hermaphrodites, in which the king's reputation for effeminate behaviour is treated with repugnance.¹³³ These and other anti-courtier texts strongly denounce the present lack of distinction between male and female dress, the tendency for men to wear make-up and jewellery, and to sport long and effeminate hairstyles.¹³⁴ The ambiguous cross-dressing of the Amazon women seen at the Bayonne festivities, symbols of an ideal fusion of masculine and feminine desire, would have been more subject to scrutiny at this stage in the century.

The 'cultural revolution' which is responsible for this dramatic change of attitude towards the image and idea of androgyny is one in which increasingly idealism came into conflict with reality.¹³⁵ This dilemma was not simply a product of the tendency to place undue importance upon appearance, rather than actual behaviour at court, but a consequence of remarkable ambiguities in language and terminology which fuelled the collapse of the androgyne formula, even as it appeared to be a harmonizing and unifying influence. Though the social soul, according to the Neoplatonic tradition instigated by Ficino, aimed towards a androgynous union of masculine and feminine virtues, there was never a strong sense of fusion at the French court. While temperance was a virtue of chastity in women, and one of discretion for men, for example, the roles of the two sexes towards each other remained polarized to a degree. French Renaissance society may have admired the ideal of the virago figure and welcomed the

'masculine' strength of some of the prominent royal women of the day, but it was loathe to tolerate any loss of femininity in such women, just as it was intolerant of any nobleman who visibly lacked courage or the willingness to engage in active pursuits.

It almost goes without saying that such a self-referential cult of social perfection was highly vulnerable because it depended so heavily upon mutual appreciation and mutual self-giving.¹³⁶ At the most fundamental social denomination of the couple, these social constructs could easily become deflated, through the unwillingness of one partner to regard the other as his or her equal in worth, or through the simple indifference of one party towards the advances of the other, however authentic and worthy these may be according to the code of love; such factors alone might cause the discourse to fragment and social disorder to ensue. As the century progressed, so the potential for the code to fracture grew: the meaning of the Perfect Love discourse was increasingly subject to scrutiny, and though a public vocabulary of chastity was maintained, equally public examination of the truth behind the code began to reveal a discrepancy between aspiration and reality which could not be balanced indefinitely by a language of ideal love.

This tension between private and public aspects of human affection is recorded by the social anthropologist Niklas Luhmann.¹³⁷ Luhmann contends that ideal love relies

heavily upon the notion that the lover will know not merely his own desire, but also that of his beloved, so that union will benefit the pair both spiritually and physically.¹³⁸ As we have seen, such a postulate colludes with the social code of election to virtuous deeds and therefore perpetuates the expectation that the service of a beloved will automatically be approved and rewarded in an aristocratic environment. Against this ideal, the autonomous potential of the beloved to refuse some or all offers of affection persistently undermines the discourse, so that 'the persons one loves are divested of any immanent perfection; the cult of perfection starts to collapse and the figure of the *cavaliere servente* loses its credibility.'¹³⁹

Though for Luhmann this trend is symptomatic of seventeenth-century developments in the love discourse, the trend was certainly underway in the sixteenth century, a fact which, he makes clear, undermines the very standing of reason as the basis for social interaction and progress: 'As long as love remained an ideal, human beings were characterized by their *reason*. Passion and *plaisir* were subject to its control'.¹⁴⁰ As the Utopian aspects of love were dissolved, so the ability of the social body to control its own environment through rational means was questioned. This in no way affected the moral imperative for women to remain chaste, but it did weaken the impact of chastity as an icon intimately attached to notions of reasoned control. It was the protective moral virtue, and

not its social, androgynous counterpart, which survived the longer.

- 1 Castiglione, p.384.
- 2 Ibid, pp.387-388. This understanding of an androgynous universe emanating from a androgynous divine being can be found in Ficino, who believed the soul to have male, female and hermaphrodite attributes. Interestingly, Ficino adjudged courage to be a masculine virtue and temperance feminine, a division of labour which can hardly have escaped later observers of court mores such as Castiglione. See, on this subject, Jerome Schwartz, 'Aspects of Androgyny in the Renaissance', in *Human Sexuality in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, p.122.
- 3 See chapter one, pp.26-30
- 4 See Singer, II, pp.172-173.
- 5 Castiglione, pp.436-437.
- 6 Ibid. p.438.
- 7 Ibid. p.342.
- 8 Ibid. pp.630-631.
- 9 *Le Miroir des femmes*, I, pp.130-132.
- 10 Eliane Viennot, *Marguerite de Valois*, p.79.
- 11 Anon., *Exhortation auz Dames Vertueuses, en laquelle il est démontré le vray point d'honneur*, p.8.
- 12 Matteo Bandello was an Italian churchman, writer and courtier. He composed the *Histoires tragiques* between 1554 and 1568.
- 13 See *Le Miroir des Femmes*, II, pp.147-148.
- 14 Jean-Claude Arnould, in his critical edition of the work, describes this tale as a 'nouveauté' later to be taken up by such writers as Belleforest and Boaistuau (see p.32).
- 15 Ibid., p.33.
- 16 Jacques Yver, *Le Printemps d'Yver* (Rouen: Nicolas Angot, 1618), fols 33v-77r.
- 17 Ibid., fol. 92v.
- 18 Ibid., fols 101v-102r.
- 19 Ibid., fol.112v.
- 20 Taillemont, p.261.

- 21 Yver, fol. 168r.
- 22 Yver, fol. 71v.
- 23 Ibid., fol. 73v.
- 24 Ibid., fol. 76r.
- 25 See chapter 4, note 45.
- 26 Castiglione, p.435.
- 27 Ibid., p.436.
- 28 Ibid., p.372.
- 29 Antonio de Guevara, *Le Favori de court* (Anvers: Christophe Plantin, 1557), fol. 145r. The original version of this text, *Aviso de Privados y Doctrina de Cortesanos*, was first published in 1539. Guevara, like Castiglione, was an experienced courtier, having served for a long period at the Spanish court. See Pauline M. Smith, *The Anti-Courtier Trend in Sixteenth Century French Literature* (Geneva: Droz, 1966), p.32. Signor Gaspare, in *The Courtier*, also makes use of the example of Scipio in order to prove the capacity of the male sex to be chaste (pp.437-438).
- 30 Guevara, fol. 145v.
- 31 Ibid., fols 146v-147r.
- 32 Ibid., fols 150v-151r.
- 33 Ibid., fol. 148v.
- 34 *L'Heptaméron*, p.141.
- 35 Ibid., p.140.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid., p.379.
- 38 Ibid., p.83.
- 39 Ibid., p.142.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Benigne Poissenot, *Nouvelles Histoires tragiques* (Paris: Guillaume Bichon, 1586), p.116.
- 42 Jacqueline Boucher, *La cour de Henri III*, p.186.
- 43 Ibid., p.176.

- 44 René Benoist, *Troisiesme advertissement à la France, et principalement à la Cour et à la grande ville de Paris, justement divinement punies* (Paris: Guillaume de la Nouë, 1591), pp.22-23.
- 45 *L'Heptaméron*, p.261: "'je ne lairray pas [...] desirer que chascun se contantast de son mary, comme je faictz du mien."'
- 46 *Ibid.*, p.221.
- 47 *Ibid.* Longarine is no doubt alluding to John 8. 1-11, where Jesus encounters the woman accused of adultery. Once he has dismissed her detractors, Jesus asks: 'Has no-one condemned you?', and continues: 'then neither do I condemn you'.
- 48 Jacqueline Boucher, 'Le double concept du mariage de Marguerite de France' in *Marguerite de France, Reine de Navarre et son temps*, p.93.
- 49 Jean Benedicti, *La Somme des pechez, et le remede d'iceux* (Paris: Jerosme de Maruef, 1595), p.118.
- 50 See chapter one of this work, note 103.
- 51 *L'Heptaméron*, pp.264-265.
- 52 *Ibid.*, p.96.
- 53 *Ibid.*, pp.294-295.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p.295.
- 55 *Ibid.*, pp.220-221.
- 56 Hircan accuses the lady of Pampeluna of this sin (N.26, p.220).
- 57 *Ibid.*, p.207.
- 58 See above note 27 and p.352 of this chapter.
- 59 Pierre de la Primaudaye, *L'Academie françoise*, p.248.
- 60 *L'Heptaméron*, p.220.
- 61 *Les Dames galantes*, p.334.
- 62 *L'Heptaméron*, p.207. By common consent, the lover in this tale is thought to be the Queen's brother, François I; this may further clarify her tolerance of his infidelity (see also p.472 of the text).
- 63 *Ibid.*, p.379.
- 64 *Ibid.*, pp.245-246.

- 65 See chapter four, note 49.
- 66 Anon., *Exhortation auz Dames Vertueuses, en laquelle il est demonstré le vray point d'honneur*, pp.31-32.
- 67 Marguerite de Valois, *Mémoires*, p.173.
- 68 Ibid., p.177.
- 69 Ibid., pp.178-179.
- 70 Letter quoted in *Revue rétrospective*, 1 (1838), p.107 (see Eliane Viennot, *Marguerite de Valois*, p.143).
- 71 Catherine de Medici, *Lettres*, ed. by Hector de la Ferrière and Gustave Baguenault de Puchesse, 10 vols (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1880-1909), VIII, p.36.
- 72 Ibid., pp.36-37.
- 73 See *L'Heptaméron*, N.18 (pp.137-142).
- 74 Jacqueline Boucher, *Société et Mentalités autour de Henri III*, p.1314 (according to Boucher's sources, the letter is undated, but is thought to have been written in 1579-1580).
- 75 *Les Dames galantes*, p.444.
- 76 *L'Heptaméron*, p.269.
- 77 Ibid., p.399. See also Parlemeute's similar response to the issue of marital fidelity, p.261.
- 78 Ibid., p.344.
- 79 Ibid., p.128.
- 80 *Les Dames galantes*. See p.130 for Brantôme's criticism of women who are too chaste, and pp.369-403 for his praise of various royal women.
- 81 Ibid., p.398.
- 82 Ibid., p.398.
- 83 Boucher also puts forward the thesis that, since Marguerite's rank was superior to that of her husband, he had little power to prevent her doing as she wished. See 'Le double concept du mariage de Marguerite de France', p.95.
- 84 Viennot, pp.79-80.
- 85 Catherine de Medici, *Lettres*, VIII, p.181.
- 86 See chapter five, p.308.

- 87 Viennot, p.146.
- 88 Ibid., p.146.
- 89 Ibid., p.147.
- 90 Ibid., p.146.
- 91 Catherine M. Bauschatz, "'Plaisir et proffict" in the Reading and Writing of Marguerite de Valois', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 7 (1988), 27-48 (pp.43-44).
- 92 Viennot, p.149.
- 93 In an attempt to counter his 'brutaux desirs', Uranie instructs her suitor that 'l'esprit pourtant est bien plus à aimer [que le corps]; c'est luy qui tient le coeur quand la beauté l'a pris'. See *La Ruelle mal-assortie*, p.13.
- 94 Ibid., p.14.
- 95 Viennot, pp.148-149.
- 96 Ibid., p.149.
- 97 *La Ruelle mal-assortie*, pp.20-21.
- 98 Catherine de Medici's unpopularity with certain sectors of the court came to a head following the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre, for which she received vitriolic criticism, particularly from Protestants such as D'Aubigné, whose poetic work *Les Tragiques* launches an especially vicious attack upon the Queen. Marguerite de Valois' reputation for debauched behaviour grew in the 1570s, with the publication of pamphlets accusing her, amongst other things, of incest. Criticism of the Queen of Navarre became more extreme in the pamphlet *La Divorce Satyrique*, published in 1607 (See Viennot, pp.237-246). Marguerite de Navarre was much less attacked, and the *Heptaméron* continued to be a popular and widely-read work throughout the century. However, some of the ideas and examples presented in the work are criticized by Brantôme (see pp.130 & 338 of *Les Dames galantes*).
- 99 Héroët, *Description d'une femme de bien*, p.139.
- 100 *L'Heptaméron*, p.279.
- 101 A particularly clear example of this dilemma is to be found in the tenth novella, pp.55-85, in the well-known tale of Amadour and Floride. Amadour, seeking to court Floride, swears he will behave honourably towards her. Though Floride believes her suitor to be 'le plus vertueux du monde', she is immediately

suspicious, and admits 'j'ay si grand paour que, soubz voz honnestes propos, il y ayt quelque malice cachée pour decepvoir l'ignorance jointe à ma jeunesse'. Later, when Amadour has attempted to seduce her, Floride asks: 'Et où est l'honneur, [...] que tant de foys vous m'avez presché?', only to find Amadour insisting that 'il n'est possible de plus aymer pour vostre honneur que je faictz'. The story ends on a pessimistic note, as Floride concludes that the love she is seeking 'soit en nul homme' and retires to a convent. The tale emphasizes throughout the incompatibility of masculine and feminine honour, and the confusion between public and private definitions of virtue.

- 102 *La Cour de Henri III*, p.170.
- 103 Jacques Tahureau, *Les Dialogues Non moins profitables que facetieux*, ed. by Max Gauna (Paris: 1565; repr. Geneva: Droz, 1991), pp.45 & 55.
- 104 *Les Dames galantes* p.357.
- 105 Nicole Cazauran, *L'Heptaméron de Marguerite de Navarre* (Paris: Société d'Édition d'Enseignement Supérieur, 1976), p.235.
- 106 *L'Heptaméron*, p.84.
- 107 *Les Dames galantes*, p.78.
- 108 *L'Heptaméron*, p.96. Nicole Cazauran observes, with regard to this attitude, that: 'Ces formules vaguement platonisantes étaient de mise alors dans le langage de la galanterie, sans que personne en fût dupe. [...] Ce n'est pas là changer le sens des mots, mais seulement en user comme des règles d'un jeu, évidentes pour tous les joueurs.' (pp.234-235)
- 109 Jean de la Jessée, *Premières oeuvres françoyses*, II, p.1315.
- 110 *Ibid.*, pp.1229-1230.
- 111 *L'Heptaméron*, pp.174-175.
- 112 *Ibid.*, p.48.
- 113 *Les Dames galantes*, pp.130 & 428.
- 114 *L'Heptaméron*, p.81.
- 115 Anon., *Les Chastes Amours d'Helene de Marthes* (Paris: Matthieu Guillemot, 1597), fol. 32r.
- 116 *Ibid.*, fol. 114v.
- 117 *Ibid.*, fol. 137r.

- 118 Ibid., fols 151v-152r.
- 119 Ibid., fols 154v-155r.
- 120 Ibid., fol. 182v.
- 121 Ibid., fols 190v-191r.
- 122 Ibid., fols 194v-195v.
- 123 Drion, like Helene, perceives Perfect Love to restrict freedom and bring torment to the lover. Unlike Helene, he is finally persuaded, by the example of the other nymphs and shepherds, to curb his cynicism in matters of love.
- 124 During the Bayonne festivities, for example, the cold-hearted women were turned into trees; see chapter four, pp.240-244.
- 125 In an article on 'Aspects of Androgyny in the Renaissance', Jerome Schwartz records changing attitudes during the century towards what he terms 'one of the commonplaces of the age.' The optimism towards androgyny instigated by Ficino is, he contends, reflected in French writing spanning the early and middle sixteenth century, and is symbolized in the androgynous portrait of François I mentioned in chapter four (see p.228). In the latter part of the century, however, Schwartz believes 'androgyny takes on a very different tonality and significance from that given to it by an earlier Renaissance enthusiasm for dreams of Paradise Regained' (see pp.121-125).
- 126 Ronsard, *Le Satyre*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, XV, pp.68-69. See also Ann Moss's *Poetry and Fable* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp.142-148, where the above poem is discussed.
- 127 *Le Satyre*, p.71.
- 128 Ibid., p.73.
- 129 Ibid., p.75.
- 130 Ibid., p.71.
- 131 In Ovid's tale, Hercules and Iole laugh at Faunus' embarrassment. See Moss, p.147.
- 132 *Le Satyre*, p.76.
- 133 Schwartz, p.126. This text was not published until 1605, but clearly refers to the court of Henri III; see Pauline M. Smith, *The Anti-Courtier Trend in Sixteenth Century French Literature*, pp.193.

- 134 For examples of the texts that criticized Henri III and his *mignons* in this way, see Pauline Smith, pp.187-193.
- 135 See Schwartz, p.127.
- 136 I take the term 'self-referential' from Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*, trans. by Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp.29-30. Luhmann relates this term to the codification of the love discourse.
- 137 Ibid.
- 138 Ibid., pp.48-49.
- 139 Ibid., p.50.
- 140 Ibid., p.45.

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