

*XXVII – The Heart Needs Constant Employment*

Madame de Sévigné does not agree with me upon the causes of love as I give them. She pretends that many women know it only from its refined side, and that the senses never count for anything in their heart affairs. According to her, although what she calls my “system” should be well founded, it would always be unbecoming in the mouth of a woman, and might become a precedent in morals.

These are assuredly very serious exceptions, Marquis, but are they well grounded? I do not think so. I see with pain, that Madame de Sévigné has not read my letters in the spirit I wrote them. What, I the founder of systems? Truly, she does me too much honor; I have never been serious enough to devise any system. Besides, according to my notion, a system is nothing but a philosophic dream, and therefore does she consider all I have told you as a play of the imagination? In that case, we are very far out of our reckoning. I do not imagine; I depict real objects. I would have one truth acknowledged, and to accomplish that, my purpose is not to surprise the mind; I consult the sentiments. Perhaps she has been struck by the singularity of some of my propositions, which appeared to me so evident that I did not think it worthwhile to maintain them; but is it necessary to make use of a mariner’s compass to develop the greater or less amount of truth in a maxim of gallantry?

Moreover, I have such a horror of formal discussions that I would prefer to agree to anything rather than engage in them. Madame de Sévigné, you say, is acquainted with a number of female metaphysicians – there! there!, I will grant her these exceptions, provided she leaves me the general thesis. I will even admit, if you so desire, that there are certain souls usually styled “privileged,” for I have never heard anybody deny the virtues of temperament. So, I have nothing to say about women of that species. I do not criticize them, nor have I any reproaches to make them; neither do I believe

it my duty to praise them; it is sufficient to congratulate them. However, if you investigate them you will discover the truth of what I have been saying since the commencement of our correspondence: the heart must be occupied with some object. If nature does not incline them in that direction, no one can lead them in the direction of gallantry; their affection merely changes its object. Such a one today appears to be insensible to the emotion of love, only because she has disposed of all that portion of the sentiment she had to give. The Count de Lude, it is said, was not always indifferent to Madame de Sévigné. Her extreme tenderness for Madame Grignan (her daughter), however, occupies her entire time at present.

According to her, I am very much at fault concerning women? In all charity, I should have disguised the defects which I have discovered in my sex, or, if you prefer to have it that way, which my sex have discovered in me.

But, do you really believe, Marquis, that if everything I have said on this subject be made public, the women would be offended? Know them better, Marquis; all of them would find there what is their due. Indeed, to tell them that it is purely a mechanical instinct which inclines them to flirt, would not that put them at their ease? Does it not seem to be restoring to favor that fatality, those expressions of sympathy, which they are so delighted to give as excuses for their mistakes, and in which I have so little faith? Granting that love is the result of reflection, do you not see what a blow you are giving their vanity? You place upon their shoulders the responsibility for their good or bad choice.

One more thrust, Marquis: I am not mistaken when I say that all women would be satisfied with my letters. The female metaphysicians, that is, those women whom Heaven has favored with a fortunate constitution, would take pleasure in recognizing in them their superiority over other women; they would not fail to con-

gratulate themselves upon the delicacy of their own sentiments, and to consider them as works of their own creation. Those whom nature built of less refined material, would without doubt owe me some gratitude, for revealing a secret which was weighing upon them. They have made it a duty to disguise their inclinations, and they are as anxious not to fail in this duty, as they are careful not to lose anything on the pleasure side of the question. Their interest, therefore, is, to have their secret guessed without being compromised. Whoever shall develop their hearts, will not fail to render them an essential service. I am even fully convinced that those women, who at heart profess sentiments more conformable to mine, would be the first to consider it an honor to dispute them. Hence, I would be paying my court to women in two fashions, which would be equally agreeable: In adopting the maxims that flatter their inclinations, and in furnishing them with an occasion to appear refined.

After all, Marquis, do you think it would betray a deep knowledge of women, to believe that they could be offended with the malicious talk I have been giving you about them? Somebody said a long time ago, that women would rather have a little evil said of them, than not be talked about at all. You see therefore, that even supposing that I have written you in the intention with which I am charged, they would be very far from being able to reproach me in the slightest degree.

Finally, Madame de Sévigné pretends that my "system" might become a precedent. Truly, Marquis, I do not understand how, with the justice for which she is noted, she was able to surrender to such an idea. In stripping love, as I have, of everything liable to seduce you, in making it out to be the effect of temperament, caprice, and vanity; in a word, in undeceiving you concerning the metaphysics that lend it grandeur and nobility, is it not evident that I have rendered it less dangerous? Would it not be more dangerous, if, as pretends Madame de Sévigné, it were to be transformed into a virtue? I would willingly compare my sentiments with

those of the celebrated legislator of antiquity, who believed the best means of weakening the power of women over his fellow citizens was to expose their nakedness. But I wish to make one more effort in your favor. Since I am regarded as a woman with a system, it will be better for me to submit to whatever such a fine title exacts. Let us reason, therefore, for a moment upon gallantry according to the method that appertains only to serious matters.

Is love not a passion? Do not very strict minded people pretend that the passions and vices mean the same things? Is vice ever more seductive than when it wears the cloak of virtue? Wherefore in order to corrupt virtuous souls it is sufficient for it to appear in a potential form. This is the form in which the Platonicians deified it. In all ages, in order to justify the passions, it was necessary to apotheosize them. What am I saying? Am I so bold as to play the iconoclast with an accredited superstition? What temerity! Do I not deserve to be persecuted by all women for attacking their favorite cult?

I am sorry for them; it was so lovely, when they felt the movements of love, to be exempt from blushing, to be able even to congratulate themselves, and lay the blame upon the operations of a god. But what had poor humanity done to them? Why misunderstand it and seek for the cause of its weakness in the Heavens? Let us remain on Earth, we shall find it there, and it is its proper home.

In truth, I have never in my letters openly declaimed against love; I have never advised you not to take the blame of it. I was too well persuaded of the uselessness of such advice, but I told you what love is, and I therefore diminished the illusion it would not have failed to create in your mind; I weakened its power over you and experience will justify me.

I am perfectly well aware that a very different use is made of it in the education of females. And what sort of profit is there in the methods employed? The very first step is to deceive them. Their teachers strive to inspire them with as much fear of love as of evil spirits. Men

are depicted as monsters of infidelity and perfidy. Now suppose a gentleman appears who expresses delicate sentiments, whose bearing is modest and respectful? The young woman with whom he converses will believe she has been imposed upon; and as soon as she discovers how much exaggeration there has been, her advisers will lose all credit so far as she is concerned. Interrogate such a young woman, and if she is sincere, you will find that the sentiments the alleged monster has excited in her heart are far from being the sentiments of horror.

They are deceived in another manner also, and the misery of it is, it is almost impossible to avoid it. Infinite care is taken to keep from them the knowledge, to prevent them from having even an idea that they are liable to be attacked by the senses, and that such attacks are the most dangerous of all for them. They are drilled in the idea that they are immaculate spirits – and what happens then? Inasmuch as they have never been forewarned of the species of attacks they must encounter, they are left without defense. They have never mistrusted that their most redoubtable enemy, is the one that has never been mentioned. How then can they be on their guard against him? It is not men they should be taught to fear, but themselves? What could a lover do, if the woman he attacks were not seduced by her own desires?

So, Marquis, when I say to women that the principal cause of their weaknesses is physical, I am far from advising them to follow their inclinations; on the contrary, it is for the purpose of putting them on their guard in that respect. It is saying to the Governor of the citadel, that he will not be attacked at the spot which up to then has been the best fortified; that the most redoubtable assault will not be made by the besiegers, but that he will be betrayed by his own.

In a word, in reducing to their just value, the sentiments to which women attach such high and noble ideas, in enlightening them upon the real object of a lover who pretends to great delicacy and refinement, do you not see that I am interesting their vanity to draw less glory out of the fact of being loved, and their hearts to take less pleasure in loving? Depend upon it, that if it were possible to enlist their vanity in opposition to their inclination to gallantry, their virtue would most assuredly suffer very little.

I have had lovers, but none of them deceived me by any illusions. I could penetrate their motives astonishingly well. I was always persuaded that if whatever was of value from the standpoint of intellect and character, was considered as anything among the reasons that led them to love me, it was only because those qualities stimulated their vanity. They were amorous of me, because I had a beautiful figure, and they possessed the desire. So it came about that they never obtained more than the second place in my heart. I have always conserved for friendship the deference, the constancy, and the respect even, which a sentiment so noble, so worthy deserves in an elevated soul. It has never been possible for me to overcome my distrust for hearts in which love was the principal actor. This weakness degraded them in my eyes; I considered them incompetent to raise their mind up to sentiments of true esteem for a woman for whom they have felt a desire.

You see, therefore, Marquis, that the precedent I draw from my principles is far from being dangerous. All that enlightened minds can find with which to reproach me, will be, perhaps, because I have taken the trouble to demonstrate a truth that they do not consider problematic. But does not your inexperience and your curiosity justify whatever I have written so far, and whatever I may yet write you on this subject?