

Madame de Maintenon's "Petits livres secrets"

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

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Natália da Silva Perez 00:25

Hi, my name is Natália da Silva Perez and you are listening to the Privacy Studies Podcast. In this episode, I interview my colleague Lars Cyril Nørgaard. He's a historian of devotional cultures and soon to be assistant professor here at the Faculty of theology at the University of Copenhagen. We will talk about the private devotional practices of Madame de Maintenon. She was Louis XIV's second wife to whom the king was married in secret. Lars will talk to me about the correspondence between Madame de Maintenon, and her spiritual director, Paul Godet des Marais, Bishop of Chartres. Madame de Maintenon made small secret booklets by copying her spiritual director's letters to her. She called these booklets: "Les Petits livres secrets" and Lars will tell us all about them.

Lars Cyril Nørgaard 01:17

My name is Lars Cyril Nørgaard, I'm affiliated to the Center for Privacy Studies in the University of Copenhagen. My research fields are history of books, history of text, and especially French devotional culture in the 17th century. Madame de Maintenon is mostly known as the second wife of Louis XIV. She was married to him secretly, in the sense that the marriage was never officially recognized. That meant that she lived a life at court after the marriage which took place in the fall of 1682, early 1683. She lived a life after that at court as kind of a pariah. She was very, kind of slander followed in her footsteps, it was a very improbable marriage because she was not of any kind of noble standing. So she lived, I would say, a less than pleasant life at the court of the Sun King. She was also known as a very religious lady. She was born in 1635, and died in 1719. That is four years after the king. Legend has it that she was born on the floors of a prison in Niort. We have various various information about her early life, whether that's true or not still remains but it's kind of part of this image of her. You have these ideas of her walking on the harbours begging as a child, which I which are not verified, I think, in any documents but are continually repeated in the literature. There's a very thick layer of kind of myths surrounding her. She had prior as a very young woman been married to the poet, Paul Scarron and had been part of the milieu of the salons in Le Marais. And there she had made a lot of connections. And after Paul Scarron, who was very much her senior, died of ***, he was polio written and could barely walk. But after his

death, she was left with literally no money. So she depended on these contacts she had made at Le Marais, and some of these contacts were also the ones that gained her access to becoming the tutor of these children. So she arrived at court some years before her marriage to the king, where she took on the job of raising the children that the king had with his mistress, Madame de Montespan. And in this process, we don't know exactly how this happened. She also very much gain the favor of Louis. We have letters from for example from Sévigné that states that the king is now meeting with this person constantly everyday etc, etc. So so we don't know exactly how this happened, but she kind of gained a very intimate relationship to Louis while she was still tutoring There are numerous letters in Maintenon's correspondence where she expresses that Montespan has various fits at her and she's very much at her mercy so to speak. Importantly, Maintenon was also Louis' senior, she was actually older than him. So this was also something that kind of in the gender matrix didn't fit well that the king had an elderly woman. She was not really that much older than him, but she kind of became a way to criticize the French King, and you can see this in Dutch material, in all kinds of different materials that are criticizing Louis, that in fact that she is sitting behind him whispering him in the ear. There was a lot of different people who were pursuing this ideology, this kind of catholicization of morals, so to kind of pinpoint Maintenon, and say she was the one who did all this is, in a certain sense too much, she was probably religious. But she was probably not more religious than other people at court. But this idea kind of became a way to, to explain certain things that took place in the last part of Louis reign, for instance, the revocation of the edict of Nantes, which was economically and politically, a very bad decision. So the only way this could be explained in let's say, 19th century history was to kind of blame somebody else. So this myth developed, but it was already in place in her own lifetime. We know that the king when his most trusted ministers passed 1693 there about, that he began to conduct much of his business, if not all of his business from her apartments, which then led to this idea that she had a massive influence on decision making. Of course, in the case of France, we don't have the actual protocols and the material evidence of what was going on in these meetings, we have this much more for instance in Spain, but in France, these things seem to have been destroyed, one could speculate maybe even to kind of support this idea of the king as the individual who makes the decision. So there is no kind of paper trail for his decisions, but suddenly led to the idea that Maintenon had some kind of influence. And this has then been reproduced in later research. There's no doubt that Louis held her in very high regard, and I think sought her advice, I think, I think that's clear, but its precisely how she influenced. There's been this idea that she was very, because of her very religious nature, this kind of very pious, she promoted very pious bishops. But when you then look at who became promoted as bishops in France, it seems pretty much to be the same as before. So it's men from the same kinds of families who are, there all kinds of different reasons why people are appointed Bishops, so I think there's a good deal of ideas about Madame de Maintenon's influence and then I think a lack of solid evidence to corroborate either a very high influence or no influence at all. One of the important things that she did together with the king was to to fund the La

Maison Royale de Saint-Louis at Saint-Cyr which was a school for the education of daughters from the lesser nobility, you can say. The institute dedicated educational institute opened in 1686. This was a religious institution it started out as what in France is known as a secular house, but was turned slowly into a regular monastery submitted to the rule of St. Augustine. So there is a big context for Maintenon's religious life. She also had an apartment at this institute, there was a chapel at Versailles, she was committed to kind of the everyday rhythm of court. So how are we to imagine her exercising her religious life and here I think it's important to mention the Bishop of Chartres, Paul Godet de Marais who was Maintenon's spiritual director. We know that he wrote a lot of letters to Maintenon we also know a little bit about what she wrote to him, but the letters of Godet de Marais to Maintenon are in the excess of 300, they only exist in copies, he was the spiritual director of Maintenon from 1689 until 1709, so, almost 20 years. Now, he would send her letters as is normal in sort of spiritual correspondence. We can infer from his letters that he was answering something that is called "reddition de compte". So that is kind of an accounting. So what seems to be the cases and Maintenon was giving a monthly account of herself of her spiritual state of her, what she was experiencing and Godet de Marais was then responding to this in letters. This seems to be kind of the back and forth of the spiritual dialogue. He also authored longer texts which were also monthly and dealt with a specific vice or virtue. So this kind of gives you the kind of the structure of the dialogue and the dialogue between director and the directed. We also have preserved at Versailles and at the Bibliothèque Nationale some small booklets of Maintenon, which are in her hand and when she has copied material by far the most entries in these small books are from the bishop, Chartres Godet de Marais. So she was copying his letters that she received, presumably to store, to keep them. But I would argue also to kind of accommodate or make his words into her own. I think it was kind of a devotional practice. And I think there are various things that point us in that direction. One material mark of this is that that each book is allocated to a month. So inside each booklet, you will find letters, they are chronologically ordered, but you will find letters from the entire period 1689, 1693, 1697, 1701. But what binds these letters together is that they're all written in the same month, May, April, etc. So I think this is because that she was actually creating her own kind of prayer books. So they mimic the cycle of the church here. So these copies of letters were actually kind of templates for her, when she was doing her devotional exercises in church, you can more or less find certain passages in Godet de Marais letters where he's saying that she should do this, that she should copy the letters and use them to pray, etc. etc. Much more than merely compiling letters, she was actually creating a kind of a unity in the letters. Now it doesn't seem that she was copying all of the letters. And it also seems that some letters were actually not addressed to her or were addressed to the ladies at Saint-Cyr. But she kind of took them over and made her own versions. And you can see when comparing them that she's changed the grammar, she's left certain passages out, etc, etc. From a historical point of view, I think it makes good sense that she was not only copying, in the sense that we might copy something, she was copying something so as to in writing make these words from a figure of authority into her own, we have from memoirs and

from other sources, we have descriptions of Maintenon every morning, spending her time either writing these reddition de compte, or making or copying letters and hiding them away. These books were known as: "Les Petits livre secrets" de Madame de Maintenon. So there was this element of secrecy and I would say privacy, that she was expressing her interior in this very personal relationship between her and her director in these books in writing. So I think there is a sense of privacy as something done in writing, but also something that is religious in nature, that this symbolic matrix for the private sphere is religious language. And I would also add, the letters in themselves are then filled with quotations from the Bible from the saints from all this, so there's kind of a doubling that she is copying her director's voice, but this voice is actually speaking in the language of the Bible so its a kind of convoluted self, you could say that comes out at the end here. There are many different kind of layers and layers and layers when she's expressing herself. There is a longer exposition on the virtue of humility, which was actually addressed to one of the ladies at Saint-Cyr, but Maintenon has copied it into one of her small books. In this she has left out the entire kind of opening of the letter because this addresses this lady as: "chère fille" and this would of course, be the wrong way for the bishop to address Maintenon. She would be addressed as madame. So she's kind of left this kind of the epistolary out, and then she's gone directly into the letter itself. Sadly, we don't have all the booklets, so we only have nine booklets in total, and there must have been many more. Together with a French colleague, I'm trying to chase down several others. During my PhD work I thought I had found one but when I actually got the reproduction from an American Library, it turns out that it's probably a fake and it was something that was kind of later fabricated and sold on the book market in Paris as in Maintenon's hand, but clearly it's not. I'm sure that she was also copying letters addressed originally to the ladies at Saint-Cyr. We also know that there are few copies of other ecclesiastic authorities in there that played a role in Maintenon's life. So there are copies from Fénelon and there's copies from a man called Charles Jacques de Brisacier, who was the superior of the foreign mission in Paris. They played a role at Saint-Cyr and especially Fénelon also played a role in Maintenon's religious life, so we know that that there are multiple sources where from she's picking and choosing. Now if she were alone to copy the entirety of Godet de Marais correspondence just to her, that would be in the excess of 350 letters. And some of them are very, very long. And there are certain letters where you can see that there is a sort of editorial process going on. She has a system of abbreviations where she leaves certain things out that she's able to recognize. So the vowels, for instance, in conjugated verbs, she can leave out or she can "Dieu" is always just a big D with a full stop. And there are millions of these kind of seemingly just material shorthands. But I think on a more profound level, she's actually, she's actually the author, she's actually rewriting, in a sense that this is her compositions, I would argue that she made some kind of selection of what touched her the most. And then kind of made her own sample of her directors advice and words. There's kind of a religious, I believe, a religious pre-history to this type of practice. But one should not also be blind for the fact that she's then also seizing a hold of this figure of authority. So she's actually making these words into her own. So there's also

kind of an agency there. So it's not, the relationship between male director and female directed, is not merely a matter of authority and submission, there's also kind of a reversal of roles. And of course, she was the king's wife, she had a very prominent position within society, he could not, the director, Godet de Marais could not speak to her in whatever manner that he wanted. One should also mention, actually, now that we speak of Maintenon's influence on the king and what role she had, that both Godet de Marais and Fénelon actually imagined her very much as possibly influencing the king. So they very much in their letters are kind of indulging in this idea that she could convert Louis. And Godet de Marais, you also, this is kind of also seconded by concrete advice. So try and pray with him once or twice a day, I know that he's not accustomed to this, and he doesn't know a lot about this, but you can maybe try so and so and so and so. So you have this idea from the bishop, that Maintenon was in a very unique position. This is a constant kind of refrain of his spiritual direction, no matter how much adversity you face, you are in such a unique position to bring the king and thereby the nation into a better relationship with God essentially, by making the king more religious. So there is this ideology already in the director's language. My only thing would then be, we shouldn't mistake this level of representation for reality. So whether or not she actually had that influence on the king. I still, I still think the jury's out on that question. We haven't kind of have the smoking gun to say yes, he became very religious. Of course, religion played an increasingly important role in his representation. Louis returned to the figure of St. Louis, which became more and more important, but but whether or not she actually had that influence, I'm, yeah, I'm still keeping that open. The booklets were entered into her will in early October 1709. So that's 10 years before she actually died. That means that she at least considered her practice with these books to be finished in October 1709. And in this entry, they are named "Les petits livres secrets". What is interesting in this then, of course, that Godet de Marais had died in September 1709, literally one month after he was no longer around, she also saw that these books had kind of they were finished, which, at least for me, is kind of a hint at that they were tied to their relationship to one another. The books were donated to the superior at Saint-Cyr. So I'm also a little bit in doubt if they were given personally to this specific woman, or if they were given to the institution as such. But this was in 1709. So so so she actually considered them "secrets". She actually considered them as being secret. But the question is, then how should we translate? How should What is the secret here? What What is it secret in the sense that something that other people shouldn't know? Or is it secret in the sense that something here is private? Is it a normative statement? Or is it a descriptive statement? So is it secret in the sense that there is something potentially dangerous here, something that could kind of be a scandal, or is it that this is more of an intimacy issue, so she's expressing something that belongs to her private sphere, and I think I would offer the latter. It's not juicy. And then and also in the sense if there were these kind of secrets, why then write them down in the first place. If you really want to keep something secret in that kind of normative sense, you shouldn't write it down. But she's writing it down and I think that ties in with the religious practice but also that she is writing herself. She's writing her interior.

Natália da Silva Perez 20:25

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