

Pierre Mignard's *Portrait of Marquise de Maintenon as St. Frances of Rome*:
Rejection of Quietism

In 1693-94, at conferences in Issy, the Catholic church largely condemned Quietism, a Christian philosophy associated with mysticism that encouraged passivity for a deeper connection to God. These conferences were spurred by concerns about a major proponent of Quietism, Jeanne Bouvier de la Motte Guyon (1648-1717), teaching at the Maison royale de Saint-Louis at Saint-Cyr, which was founded and run by the Marquise de Maintenon, Louis XIV's mistress and eventual morganatic wife. Amid great controversy and scandal, Guyon fled the school to avoid imprisonment but was arrested in 1695 and remained confined for eight years. Around 1694, Pierre Mignard painted the *Portrait of Marquise de Maintenon as St. Frances of Rome* [fig. 1]. Neither the exact year that Maintenon began to be concerned by the potential impropriety of advocating Quietism nor the exact year that Mignard painted this portrait can be known, so the question arises: was this portrait inspired by the mystical elements of Quietism or does this work represent an attempt to distance Maintenon from the controversial Guyon?

Mignard's portrait, which is arguably the most iconic and historically well-known representation of Maintenon, represents her in the garb of her patron saint and namesake, St. Frances of Rome. The palatial setting of the scene is not identifiable but suggests Versailles. In the upper left corner, sumptuous drapery has been tied back to reveal a dimly lit, but lavishly decorated, interior room. Drapery drawn back in this way denotes the importance of the represented subject and can also be related to theater, as can the use of a stage-like composition. The floor of inlaid marble and rather simple columnar architectural embellishments contribute to the illusion of a deep recession into a rather shadowed room. On the upper right side, the corner of a frame is clearly distinguishable, but it is unclear if this frame belongs to a painting or

window, as the small portion visible within the frame is indistinct.

In the guise of St. Frances, Maintenon is represented in an opulent golden dress with a distinctive scroll print that is bejeweled at the wrists, corded at the waist, and features a large brooch with a dangling pearl at the neckline. The style of the dress does not seem to be from seventeenth-century France, but instead represents a fanciful interpretation of Renaissance fashion St. Frances was imagined to have worn. Within the pretext of her role as a saint, Maintenon is shown wrapped in a majestic ermine cloak. Seated in an ornate tasseled velvet chair at a table covered by rich cloth, she is shown resting an open book on her left thigh as she leans lightly on the table with her left elbow. On the table, there is a golden hourglass with the top half filled positioned beside two books. In the book held open to the viewer, a verse is illuminated in gold and Maintenon stares out at the viewer clutching her right hand to her chest in surprise. She, as St. Frances, has been taken aback while experiencing a miracle in which the viewer is also participating.

There are actually multiple versions of Mignard's *Portrait of Marquise de Maintenon as St. Frances of Rome*. While the full-length portrait was described earlier, at least two versions of a three-quarter-length portrait are in existence [fig. 2]. These paintings are extremely similar to the full-length portrait, but are not set within a defined architectural interior. Instead, the background is indistinct and neutral, although a bright light source shines from the upper left, perhaps symbolizing the light of God. Thierry Bajou suggests that multiple versions exist because they were originally located in various classrooms at Saint-Cyr.¹ Although he does not clearly expound upon this point, his evidence seems to come from a letter written by Horace Walpole upon visiting Saint-Cyr in the year of Maintenon's death: "Of Madame de Maintenon

¹ Thierry Bajou, *Painting at Versailles, XVIIth Century* (Paris: Buchet – Chastel / Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1998), 266.

we did not see fewer than twenty pictures That in the royal mantle, of which you know I have a copy, is the most repeated.”² Later, Walpole describes observing the students at Saint-Cyr : “In the others, they acted before us the proverbs or conversations written by Madame de Maintenon for their instruction; for she was not only their foundress but their saint, and their adoration of her memory has quite eclipsed the Virgin Mary.”³ This passage suggests not only that more than three copies of this painting used to exist, but also that prints of some type were widely available, even outside of France. The relationship between Maintenon and her students also begins to be elucidated.

St. Frances of Rome (1384-1440) was a born to a wealthy family and married well, but is known for sacrificing her wealth and devoting her life to helping the poor. She founded an association of oblates attached to the Church of Santa Maria Nuova in Rome that was not cloistered, but instead consisted of women like her who rejected lives of excessive wealth and gaiety and instead embraced prayer and helping those in need. Within the varied accounts of the saint’s life, she is usually described as having practiced abstinence with her husband’s consent. Beyond charity and chastity, St. Frances was also known for her miracles and mystical visions. One story involving a miracle seems clearly connected to the way in which Mignard has represented Maintenon as St. Frances of Rome in this portrait:

The Boy comes and telleth her, *Madam, my Master sendeth for you*; and without any Reply she shuts her Primmer, riseth from mass, and was at home as soon as the Messenger. Having satisfied her Husband, she retireth herself and resuming her Primmer, beginneth again the Verse in which she had been interrupted; but before she had ended it, she was called upon the second Time, and then again the third and the fourth Time; for so often she had begun, and not ended one Verse. But when she came to open her Book the fifth Time, she found the said Verse written in golden Letters. And the Apostle St. *Paul* told her afterwards that her good Angel had writ it in Gold, to let her understand the

² Horace Walpole, *Letters of Horace Walpole*, ed. Charles Duke Yonge, vol. 2 (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1890),112. I have found multiple versions of this letter in which there are slight difference in the language.

³ *Ibid.*, 113.

Merit of Obedience.⁴

The actual book in which this miracle is believed to have occurred was located in Rome at a church dedicated to St. Frances; Bajou suggests that Mignard could have seen this book during his extensive travel in Italy.⁵ As there are no existing documents relating to the commissioning of this portrait, it is interesting to consider to whom the conceptualization of the subject matter should be attributed. While a case could be made for Mignard suggesting this subject matter after having possibly seen the miraculous book in Rome, the didactic nature of the portrait and the fact that the controversy concerning Madame Guyon was almost surely concurrent with its creation suggest that Maintenon likely chose the subject and had a specific reason for doing so.

In order to understand Maintenon's reasoning, it is necessary to be aware of information about the school at Saint-Cyr and Madame Guyon's views concerning quietism. After having been forcibly converted from Protestantism to Catholicism at a convent as a young girl, John J. Conley, who recently translated Maintenon's *Dialogues and Addresses*, suggests that she had "a lifelong disdain for convent education."⁶ Maintenon later opened her school for daughters of impoverished nobility at Saint-Cyr in response to her own experience of being educated in a convent. Conley suggests that there were three eras at Maintenon's school at Saint-Cyr: the "'worldly' era" (1686-89), the "'mystical' era" (1690-97), and the "'normal' era"

⁴ Pedro de Ribadeneira, *Lives of Saints, with other Feasts of the Year, According to the Roman Calendar*, trans. W. P. Esq., part 1, 2nd ed. (London: B. S., 1730), 214.

⁵ Bajou, 266. I have been unable to discover whether this book is still in existence. It would seem that it should be at the Tor de' Specchi Monastery, which is the home of the Oblates of St. Frances of Rome, but it does not seem to be publicized.

⁶ Madame de Maintenon, *Dialogues and Addresses*, ed. and trans. John J. Conley, S. J. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 3. He also discusses Madame de Maintenon in John J. Conley, S.J., *Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002). John J. Conley is one of the few recent researchers who seems to be attempting to break away from the fictionalization that surrounds Madame de Maintenon's legacy. There is also a more recently published account of Madame de Maintenon written by Virginia Buckley, but due to scandal surrounding the apparently unintentional fictionalization of book, it will not be cited here.

(beginning in 1698).⁷ The first era was primarily influenced by Maintenon's marriage to Paul Scarron and her resulting familiarity with contemporary intellectual salons. Initially, Maintenon incorporated subjects not usually associated with the education of girls of this class. Cultural education was given attention and the girls were exposed to plays, concerts, dancing, painting, and singing. The girls who emerged from the school during this period, however, apparently did not live up to Maintenon's expectations so she eventually deemphasized these cultural subjects and attempted to incorporate a greater focus on spirituality and piety.

Eventually, the school came under the influence of Madame Guyon and initially, Maintenon supported Guyon's methods strongly. Guyon's teachings encouraged a personal relationship with God and promoted the idea of pure love of Him.⁸ While Guyon was known to have engaged in charitable works, she tended to emphasize submission to God's will as the path to salvation, rather than focusing on service. Elements of mysticism also exist within her belief system, as she seemed to have dreams that she felt were granted by God. Guyon also insisted on the primacy of God over the monarch, and in an article concerning Guyon, Catharine Randall explains how Guyon's role as an "unsubmissive," "powerful woman" who was "a-hierarchical" represented a threat to the French monarchical, religious, and social establishments.⁹ Maintenon was likely attracted to Quietism because of its simple austerity and the emphasis it placed on spirituality, but Randall does not engage with Maintenon's peculiar position as supporter of Guyon and morganatic wife to Louis XIV. However, it seems likely that once learning of controversy involving Quietism and Guyon, a swift and sudden change in Maintenon's opinions would have been appropriate, as Maintenon surely would not have wanted to risk her position or

⁷ Maintenon, 7-8.

⁸ Catharine Randall, "Loosening the Stays: Madame Guyon's Quietist Opposition to Absolutism," *Mystics Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (March 2000): 12-13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

reputation. Conley explains that spiritual illusion had become problematic at the school, and “pupils who barely understood the Decalogue boasted of their experiences of mystical marriage.”¹⁰ This must have placed Maintenon in an extremely difficult position between a spiritual philosophy she had once supported and the reality that Quietism was too subversive and she had yet again failed her students. Therefore, she enacted various methods to eliminate Quietism from Saint-Cyr including having Guyon arrested in 1695. Seen in this context, it becomes clear that Pierre Mignard’s *Portrait of Marquise de Maintenon as St. Frances of Rome* is doubtless in conversation with these scandalous events.

This subject matter is extremely unusual within the context of seventeenth-century French portraits, especially considering the person represented. While a number of other portraits from the court of Louis XIV that represented women in the guise of saints or other religious figures may have at one time existed, surviving examples are not common. However, one such portrait in the collection at Versailles is the *Portrait of Isabelle de Ludres as Mary Magdalen* [fig. 3]. As the title states, Isabelle, a short-lived mistress to Louis XIV, is shown in the guise of Mary Magdalen, who was a popular saint during this period in France. Representations of the Magdalen from this time tend to emphasize her attractiveness and eventual repentance and reform. Despite the religious nature of this portrait, the subject seems appropriate for a mistress to Louis XIV. The way in which Isabelle, in the guise of Mary Magdalen, is represented seems auspicious; instead of emphasizing her religiosity or piety, Isabelle’s beauty is the primary focus and the religious subject matter seems entirely secondary.

A related type that is much more common to this period shows women in the guise of mythological figures. This trend was extremely prevalent and, while the subjects are generally

¹⁰ Maintenon, 8.

innately different than that of Mignard's *Portrait of Marquise de Maintenon as St. Frances of Rome*, a number of issues unify these two types. Both are portraits of one person represented as someone else, thereby leading to complex questions concerning identity. In these paintings, women are often shown as personifications of ideal characteristics, in the guise of mythological or historical figures, or are shown with either personifications or mythological figures as attributes. An example of the latter is the *Portrait of Madame de Montespan*, which has also been attributed to Mignard [fig. 4].¹¹ In this painting, an oval portrait is being held up by the three Graces as two Cupids adorn the portrait with a garland of beautiful flowers. The presence of the three Graces and Cupids, often shown as the handmaidens of Venus and her attendants, respectively, reveals that this painting puts forth Madame de Montespan as an embodiment of the goddess of love. Shown in this way, Madame de Montespan unifies both love, represented by the cupids, and the ideal virtues personified by the three Graces. This type of portrait was extremely popular among women in the court of Louis XIV. A multitude of contemporary examples of this type at one time existed, both by Mignard and numerous other artists.

Rather than focusing on Maintenon's beauty or allure, Mignard's *Portrait of Marquise de Maintenon* seems to be primarily concerned with communicating a didactic message concerning religion and morality. The strangeness of this subject was not lost on contemporaries. Cardinal Dubois left the following description in his memoirs:

I paid a visit to a portrait of Madame de Maintenon painted by Mignard; all the Court went there; there is no one sensible enough to withstand the fashion. One was never greeted by anyone at Versailles but with the words: "Have you seen Mignard's

¹¹ Lada Nikolenko, *Pierre Mignard: The Portrait Painter of the Grand Siècle* (München: Nitz Verlag, 1982-3), 73-74. This portrait is also included in the section entitled "The authentic portraits by Pierre Mignard." In her brief discussion of this portrait, Nikolenko reveals that this attribution has been questioned but that she strongly believes it to be correct. The earliest description we have of this portrait comes from Simon P. Monville, *La Vie de Pierre Mignard, Premier peintre du Roy* (Paris: Jean Boudot and Jacques Guerin, 1731), 138. In addition, this portrait was acquired by the Troyes Museum in 1864 as a work by Mignard from the collection of the Orléans family at Château de Belfort.

Sainte-Françoise?” In fact, the painter’s flattery had disguised Madame de Maintenon as a saint, at the risk of the storm of jests which this burlesque involved. Mignard had a remarkable talent, but it did not bear analysis. His colours are marvellously [sic] varied, but one often does not know whether he desired to paint flesh or wood. This portrait, which attracted such a crowd, surpassed even that of Turenne. It was an angelic face, resembling, however, the model, thanks to the water of youth. The defects occurred chiefly in the composition, and the Roman *Sainte-Françoise*, in an ermine-lined mantle, was supremely grotesque. It was said, referring to this mantle, the distinctive mark of royalty, that Madame de Feuquières, Mignard’s daughter, had asked the King if it might figure on the shoulders of Madame de Maintenon?

“Yes,” replied the Monarch, “*Sainte-Françoise* fully deserves it.”

Madame de Feuquières returned to the attack, no doubt at the Maintenon’s instigation, and asked for the Queen’s crown for the portrait.

“It is useless,” said the King; “saints have no need of crowns.”¹²

This account of the painting is interesting for various reasons. First, it suggests a remarkable popularity that provides additional importance to this portrait. Despite the overtly religious subject matter, this portrait still seems to have inspired trends in art and fashion.¹³ In addition, Dubois is surprisingly harsh upon Mignard’s represented textures in this work. The issue of the ermine-lined cloak is also discussed, and, although Dubois suggests that Maintenon manipulated the situation to enable its inclusion (and even tried for the Queen’s crown!), he should not be accepted as an objective observer as he had known ties to Madame de Montespan, Maintenon’s predecessor.

The iconography, depicted text, and overtly religious subject matter are clearly the main elements of this portrait. The hourglass is traditionally associated with the passage of time. Because the hourglass is still full, Bajou convincingly suggests that it can be understood as a symbol of instant deference to God’s will.¹⁴ The text in the opened book, which she has turned

¹² Guillaume Dubois, trans. Ernest Dowson, *Memoirs of Cardinal Dubois* (London: Leonard Smithers and Co., 1899), vol. 1, 160-163. In the passage, “Turenne” refers to a famed commander who achieved military success in both the Fronde, the Dutch War, and was eventually made a Marshal General of France. Dubois suggests that a corresponding pendant representing Louis XIV at one time existed; however, I do yet feel able to suggest that a portrait still exists that matches this description.

¹⁴ Bajou, 266.

toward the viewer to enable us to share in this miracle, states the following, beginning at the top of the page, with a translation on the right, and the illuminated phrase italicized [fig. 5]:

benedicat nos Deus:
et metuant eum omnes
fines terrae.

*Ant. In odorem un-
guentorum tuorum
currimus: adoes-
centulae dilexerunt
te nimis.*

Ant: Benedicta filia.
Canticum trium puerorum:
Benedicite omnia opera
Domini Domino:
laudate et superexal-
tate eum in saecula.

God bless us:
and let all the ends
of the earth fear him.

*Ant. Into the odor
of thy ointments we do
run: young
maidens have loved
thee exceedingly.*

Ant. Though daughter art blessed.
Song of the three children:
All of the works of our Lord
Bless ye our Lord:
praise and extol
him forever.¹⁵

This passage does not seem to be particularly associated with St. Frances and is included in various devotional books. However, when understood as being part of a portrait that would have been studied by young girls, this passage seems a logical choice. However, in terms of our central question, the illuminated text is somewhat ambiguous.

How can the moment depicted in Mignard's portrait be understood within this context? As aforementioned, a miracle is occurring, and Maintenon, in the guise of St. Frances of Rome, is sharing it with the viewers of this portrait. The subject of a miracle is related to Guyon's mystical dreams. The passage of the text that is illuminated, while not particularly associated with St. Frances, is reminiscent of Guyon's emphasis on pure love and abandonment to God's will, as is the golden hourglass symbolizing St. Frances' swift acceptance of God's message. However, St. Frances was widely renowned for her charitable works, which is contrary to Guyon's belief on how to attain grace from God. In addition, the luxurious ermine and jewels of

¹⁵ Glenn Gunhouse, "Officium Beatae Mariae: Ad Laudes (The Office of Our Blessed Lady: At Lauds)," Glenn Gunhouse, <http://www.medievalist.net/hourstxt/home.htm> (accessed Dec 4, 2010). The italics denote which portion of the passage is illuminated in the portrait. The translation of this text came from a website maintained by an art historian.

Maintenon's depicted costume clashes with Guyon's rejection of worldly importance. In addition, the expression of Maintenon's face is exceptionally placid and impassive, especially considering that a miraculous event is supposed to be occurring. In fact, this seems to be an example of correct and proper spirituality that is both restrained and real. The fact that the ermine references her connection to Louis XIV also incorporates an illustration of appropriate simultaneous devotion to both God and the monarch.

A number of other facts reinforce the interpretation of Mignard's portrait as a rejection of Quietism. The number of copies known to exist suggests an attempt to proliferate an image of Maintenon that worked against the controversy in which she found herself involved. As the passage from Walpole suggests, these portraits were still hung at Saint-Cyr at the time of Maintenon's death. Surely if these portraits had been intended as affirmations of her belief in Quietism, Maintenon would have had them removed, repainted, or destroyed after the scandals of the 1690s. Not only did these various copies remain, but also a print of this portrait of Maintenon was made and circulated throughout Europe. This truly suggests that this portrait is directly responding to the controversy surrounding Guyon and Quietism, and that the intended didactic message of acceptable and correct spirituality was primarily constructed by Maintenon herself.

Figures



Figure 1 Pierre Mignard, *Portrait of the Marquise de Maintenon as St. Frances of Rome* (ca. 1694), oil on canvas, 108 x 79.5 cm, Versailles (MV 4268).



Figure 2 Pierre Mignard, *Portrait of the Marquise de Maintenon as St. Frances of Rome* (ca. 1694), oil on canvas, 51 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 37 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches, Versailles (MV 3637).



Figure 3 Unknown artist, *Portrait of Isabelle de Ludres as Mary Magdalen* (c. 1670), Versailles.



Figure 4 Pierre Mignard, *Madame de Montespan* (1668?), oil on canvas, 77 x 57 inches, Troyes Museum.



Figure 5 Detail of Mignard's *Portrait of the Marquise de Maintenon as St. Frances of Rome*

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